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At the Change of Shift

I am having trouble getting through. It is one of those ricketty-roulette public-telephones where everything has been shaken and pounded loose. As I dial I am treated to a variety of clacking and buzzing noises. And there is a woman waiting outside, grim lipped under her unrufflable wig, impatiently shuffling from one shoddily slippered foot to the other, hugging her cardigan tails about her lean ribs as though the wind were really cold and the morning sun contained neither warmth nor joy.

Inside, in spite of the kicked-out (or kicked-in) panes of glass it is so close that I am beginning to feel suffocated.

I fear that it is going to be another waiting morning, another wasted morning. Damn relatives, and double-damn those muddling and impecunious. I should never have allowed myself to be talked into coming down. Surely the money should have been enough.

At last I can hear it ringing, and then, wonders, a voice answering faintly: "Hullo, boat sales..., hullo."


The voice shouts, ever more faintly: "Hullo, Hullo, Boat-sales."

Bash button-B. It roars. But no coins come back. They never do. Someone has always rammed paper up the spout. Some suburban financial wizard working his way up via the button-B spouts of the world.

Thump the coin box which has already been thumped loose on its screws. Shake the receiver in which something rattles clacking.

The voice is sounding peevish now. "Hullo. Hullo. Hullo."

It hangs up. Clack... Beep. Beep. Beep... Exactly as it is written in the sign.

The grim woman is glaring through the glass (where it remains kicked neither in nor out) and through me too, it feels, fixing the telephone in her sights as though it were quarry.

I fish for more coins and try again, am treated once more to the full kaleidophonic refrain, then ringing again. This time though—as the telephone people are wont to say, thereby attributing numbers with the gift of language—the number does not answer. Out of pique I imagine.

Let the grim woman try her luck.

I back out, gasping for air, plenty of which is blowing past, a steady wind, cool but not cold, unveeringly from the direction of the sewerage-treatment plant. The adjective "fresh" could only be ascribed to this wind by the weather-bureau people. I gasp again.
Step right up, madam.
Her lips relent enough to reward me with a brusque grimace as she strides forward still hugging her ribs until she gains the snugness of the booth.

Seated back on the bench provided, sheltered from the main force of the wind by the row of shops, I feel actually quite warm with the sun now coming in full under the awnings. Only occasional eddies curl in here swirling grit and paper scraps.

By this time today I had hoped to be well on my way back home again, but yesterday had been entirely eaten away by petty legalities, leaving the boat still to be disposed of today.

Have patience, I console myself. Everything passes.

Gazing out across the common square of parched clay and sparse starved weeds where perhaps an architect had once envisioned that tall trees should flourish out of lush lawns and laughing people should idle gossiping by sparkling fountainsides while watching their children at play, I can see the boat parked ready on its trailer in the street in front of my cousin's house. The immaculate paintwork, fresh varnish, and chrome fittings glisten brilliantly in the morning sun.

Such a shame. Such a waste.

The woman gets through straight away, although she has to shout. Because of the kicked-in (or kicked-out) panes I can hear her every word. "Hullo! Hullo! Police!"

A no-coin call. She has a foreign-european accent.

I wonder if receiving this woman’s call will be the same young constable who had been so obliging this morning when he had shown up so conveniently early to return my cousin's belongings—just the clothes, shoes, wallet, and wristwatch as they were still holding the rifle pending—and had volunteered to help winch the cabin-cruiser up on to the trailer, and who had been on duty that Sunday afternoon—how many long days ago now, five only, I marvel—when my cousin's wife—widow—had called him so desperately from this same phone-box.

"Hullo, police?" the woman shouts. "I am calling to make a complaint."

The constable had seemed such a pleasant, helpful young fellow. My cousin's widow had said the same. She said she never thought she'd be so glad to see a policeman as on that day.

This morning we'd had quite a struggle getting the boat on the trailer on account of the low head-height in the shed, but we'd managed, thanks to the constable's help, and we'd gone carefully so as to be sure we didn't damage the paintwork. As the constable had said, it would be a pity to damage her now after my cousin had gone to so much trouble.

Trouble was right.

The grim woman is yelling into the phone, "... these damn dogs. You will have to do something. There are thousands, all over the place".

And suddenly I can see them. Dogs seem to be everywhere. It is as though suddenly someone had shouted "television antennas" and you had looked up to find them there for the first time in their thousands as though freshly sprouted from the rooftops.

There are dogs of all shapes, sizes, and colours: mooching and snuffling, pissing on posts and on the miserably stunted street-trees, scratching at the sour clay around the roots, sniffing each others genitals, growling, barking, straining, shiver-
ing to shit, scraping their anuses along the pavement, yelping, whining, generally filling in the doggy day between meal and meal, the long day from morning when their masters depart to serve in turn their masters till evening’s slobbering reunion.

“They bark, bark, bark all day”, she barks. “I am a shiftworker. How can I sleep.”

For some reason I cannot keep my eyes away from my cousin’s boat. It is, I suppose, only an ordinary cabin-cruiser much like any other of thousands similar parked on trailers outside any of thousands of similar cottages with picket fences facing suburban streets anywhere else, but this morning in the drab street she stands out as brash and as pretty as a young girl waiting ready: self-conscious, yet self confident.

“And there is another thing” the woman is yelling. “One of these dogs bit my little girl this morning. I want you to come out here and destroy them. Shoot them all.”

My cousin had painted the name, FREEDOM, in flamboyant lettering along the side. His sign-writing is as faultless as the rest of his workmanship.

Perhaps it is his workmanship that distinguishes this craft to me from any other. I know that he had poured his every spare moment into her construction. I had seen something of his efforts at progressive stages during that period on my occasional compulsory business visits to town: first the frames lofted; then set up, each exact, symmetrical; then the sheathing going on, each seam perfect. Embodied in the boat besides his own skills and energy is his own impeccable attention to detail, his own fastidiousness, his own personality.

And now she stands ready on her trailer, painted up, bitts and fairleads all in place, just a few little finishing-off jobs left, almost ready. Such a pity.

The woman in the phone box is still hard at it: “I come home from work every day. My husband goes. Every day the same. Dogs. Dogs. Dogs.”

My cousin’s wife used to say, “That bloody boat is worse than the bloody booze. Always bills, bills, bills. At least you can’t get grog on credit. It’s just as well we’ve got my pay packet coming in. That damn boat down in that damn shed is nothing but a bloody obsession. He comes home from work, he eats, he’s straight away down that shed, bang, bang, bang away like a bloody maniac. I never see him. His boys never see him. What sort of a father is that, I ask you. At least when he was still on the booze we used to see something of him sometimes.”

And so had I: sick, shambling, haggard. He never did have any sense of moderation or propriety, that unfortunate young man.

I recall those two dead-pan boys of this morning’s breakfast table: cornflakes and instant coffee and the trannie tuned to this morning’s musical catastrophies. After the constable had left us it was back to business as usual: the eldest, off to the factory, frowning, saying, “Well, it looks like I’ll never get to see that rifle again”. The youngest, silent, expressionless, filling in the hours before school time fiddling with the construction of yet another intricate model aeroplane, alone in the house after his mother and brother had gone to work, save this morning for me.

To break the musically accompanied silence I had asked him if he intended to take up aviation as a career when he finished his schooling. “No”, he said, “I’m going to work in a bank, Mum says.”
Then I can remember at one time hearing her say that it would be no assembly-line for her youngest, anyway. At least in a bank he'd be able to get the feel of the stuff.

She had decided to go back to work again herself this morning. She couldn't afford to be moping about the house forever, she said, and what's the sense anyway, with the house empty. All the neighbours would be at work. It was like a morgue around this place on a weekday, she said.

Well, she could please herself. She didn't have to go. Surely, if it's only a matter of money, I can afford. But then, again, I didn't want her to feel as though she had to stay. She said she didn't mind going to work. All her friends were at work.

We had tidied up most of the loose ends yesterday. There is only the boat today and I should be able to handle that, surely. That's why I'm here. Business, after all, is my business. I don't mind being of assistance where I can, though I'm glad I was able to manage to beg free of the funeral. I don't like funerals. They seem such an extravagant waste of endeavour and emotion. And my cousin's, from all accounts, was a drearier affair than most.

And I don't like being in town any longer than is absolutely necessary, either. I don't mind admitting city business people are too fast for me. I don't like to have to operate at their pace. I don't have to.

Yesterday had been bad enough. A fatiguing day for both the widow and myself, trudging city streets from one office building to the next: from the dingy to the gaudy, the rowdy to the hushed. To the Registrar's to register; to the Duty office dutifully; to the Insurance office where we were confronted by a sleek youth who murmured, ever so confidentially, that his company were extremely sorry, but, having investigated the widow's claims and all the relevant circumstances, they had finally come to the conclusion that under clause . . . ; to the Finance company whose representative, rotund and reverent, had said that, while he, unctuously, had every sympathy with the widow's plight, that it was his company's policy, they had the right to expect . . . ; to the Social Service Bureau where a brisk young girl-clerk, as brutally efficient as only the handsome young can be, pushed an application form across the counter and requested would we please fill-in all the relevant details: date, place, cause of death . . . relationship to deceased . . . date, place, cause of birth . . . marriage . . . was she the recipient of, had she ever been the recipient of, did she ever intend to become the recipient of . . . did she suffer from, had she ever suffered, did she intend ever to suffer . . . dependants, date, place, cause of . . . any other income previously unstated . . . do you swear . . . sign here . . . sign here . . . thank you, your application will be duly processed . . . we will let you know . . . next please.

It had been a wearying, harrowing day of hard paved streets, stairs, corridors, anonymous doors enclaving anonymous faces; chill glass and stone exteriors and grit eddying wind, carpeted and vinyl interiors, the bland blood heat of torpid offices; ringing aching footfalls, scuffling muffled footfalls; the blare of street noises, the murmur of subdued voices incanting above the proper chatter of typewriter; the swirl and flap of paper scraps in the streets, the correct, contained shuffle of proper paper until my cousin, cold, days buried, is finally stamped certified dead, shriven of his debts, at last a free corpse: FREEDOM.

Such a mess of paper. Such a muddle of a life wasted. Dead intestate; ninety-one cents in his bank-book; voided insurances; debts up to his neck; leaving an inheritance of the jetsam of a foundered life. And the boat.

The boat looks so bright and young. Buoyant and innocent. It is difficult to imagine that she is the product of the hands of such an unhappy young man.
The woman is still on the phone: "... yes, yes. I want you to come out within the next hour. I have just got home. I want some sleep today without those damn dogs barking before the children are back from school and my husband wants his dinner."

She hangs up abruptly, barges out of the phone-box, and, without even bothering to acknowledge my presence, she hurries off, sharp arms hugging her lean ribs, grim lips compressed. Halfway across the square the full force of the wind reaches her and she hunches, hugging herself tighter, driven off before it, hurrying faster, past the sunnily painted boat like a gust of winter without so much as a sidelong glance, off to her house with its picket fence, to her dog-bitten daughter, to sleep catch-as-catch-can amid the daylong din of barking dogs. Anonymous neighbours.

The young policeman had also said that he lived just two streets up and around the corner.

I wonder if he owns a dog, and has a daughter, and lives in a cottage with a picket fence like any other of thousands facing a suburban street anywhere, and if his wife, too, works night-shift at the factory.

This morning he had told me that last Sunday my cousin's had been his second suicide within two hours of coming on duty. Two were unusual, he'd said, but Sunday evenings were ordinarly a bad time for suicides. They can't seem to face the idea of work again on Monday.

He'd seemed so young. Running his hands along the mirror-smooth finish of the paintwork, caressing the boat as though she were a live thing able to respond, he'd said he only wished he had the money himself. He reckoned that it was a pity, though, that my cousin had never finished her. She'd be so much harder to get rid of like this.

And he should know because, as he told me, he has a mate who knows a fellow who works in a boat-sales yard. I have the number here with me, written down.

And he's right, too.

When eventually I do get through to the boat-sales yard and the salesman comes to look over the boat, he says exactly the same thing, almost. While he concedes that my cousin had indeed made a beautiful job of her—he only wished he had the money himself—he says there's not much demand for amateur-built craft nowadays. All fibreglass now, you know.

But he tips me the wink and he says that he has a mate who knows a fellow who might be on the lookout for something this size if only he could get her at the right price.

He says, though, that you would have thought that at least he would have finished her.

My cousin had finished her all right.

Bang!

Back on the grog for a week. Too drunk to get himself to work; sick and haggard, haunting the house night and day. So drunk that his wife had to lock herself in the boys' room to protect herself from his shambling, oppressive presence.

He'd pounded on the door, hissing, threatening hoarsely, slurried: "You'll be sorry!", kicking, sobbing.

This morning his widow had said that one of the main reasons, really, that she didn't want to stay at home today was that she didn't want to be here when the boat was taken away.

I could only accede to her wishes. I had accompanied her to the bus stop and
we had made our farewells there, waiting in the faint chill wind before the sun was properly up.

There hadn’t been much left for us to say.
Then suddenly she’d cried out, “But I feel so guilty!”
She must be exhausted after yesterday.
I’m tired. I don’t sleep well in a strange bed.

Last night, after we’d returned from the city, she’d unlocked the shed to show me the boat. Even in the artificial light of that dusky sanctum you had to admit that the craft shone splendidly. She was as he had left her when he was still working on her: all his keen tools not actually in use racked methodically in their proper places. And the bottles planted. Order and disorder. Such outward fastidiousness, yet such inward chaos.

Running her hand along the mirror smooth paintwork underlining the name, she’d said, “You’d have thought at least he could have finished it”.

It is almost noon by the time the salesman has towed the boat away.
Not bad time, considering everything.
Now that the boat is gone the street and square seem drearier than ever, bereft of any brightness.
The sun bares vertically downward out of a barren sky.
The unyielding, unveering wind hisses monotonously in the sparse weeds and stunted street trees.
The streets seem to be deserted at this time of day, but for a few dogs mooching desultorily, snuffling stale turds and piss stains. They seem too torpid to yelp.
I can see a policecar cruising stealthily down the street toward me.
All the sly dogs must be lying low or dozing.
And now I am free to go.
Flowers perfume under our feet
as streets spring open
& secrets are carried on the wind.

Buildings grow back into trees
& people sink up to their knees
in a forgotten landscape.

Animals roam Insurance Offices
biting the legs of bemused typists
& raising cubs by the water cooler.

Cars are confined to the local Museum
& horses gallop into the Square
stamping in the radiant air.

Deer travel miles on lifts
in order to catch a glimpse of the sea
taking photos to show the deer back home.

A short sighted cat eats a man by mistake
& finds him to his taste.
The craze spreads through the entire race.

The survivors are given a building to live in
& sightseers throw them pieces of meat
for screaming & jumping through hoops.

Unfortunately captivity disturbs the species
& one by one they slowly die.
Such a pity the animals cry.
Sing Says the Earth
How Shall I Sing?

We dig ashes into the earth
from books that we have burnt.
We feed it lime & organic seaweed
that is gathered in sacks
by old women.

Tiny insects are deserting our plot of earth
& making pilgrimages to shrines far away.
Snow clouds whirl through the garden,
a stealth in the air that means
houses are floating one way
& we the other.

Sing says the earth,
how shall I sing when my lungs are plugged
& my veins ebb & flow towards the sea?
& the sea in turn flows with the dreams
of mad Governments.

Our garden is small
& latticed with houses & factories.
We can buy flowers in sunlit shops
& carry them home to our families
like warriors.

Three white birds vanish with a cry.
Sing says the earth,
how shall I sing?
Cold rooms
pipes rasping
choked with mucus
getting up
spitting out icicles.
I can't see the sun now that they've built that great elephant ass of flats next
door, winking at me at night like a ship, at day burying me under its iron shadow,
brandons they call it, a model of town planning, the maximum of people in
the minimum of space, their tidy little cars & tidy little dogs & bathrooms & toilets
& bedrooms all discretely balanced in the architects brains. Which reminds me,
testicles wound up underneath me, nothing this morning, dry horrors, can't stop
guzzling, thinking I'll invent centrally heated seats, sell like chewing gum, make a
million & retire & live in brandon towers with my playmate of the month. So
saying making it with sludge that doesn't go snap, crackle & pop, but just sits
there drowning in stale milk. But the coffee's warm & makes me feel better, even
managing to stop my coughing for a while.
I face the day with something approaching decision.

Out from trees among open space, the cough in my chest has got worse again,
phlegm clogging my lungs, gasp for air, the smog greases up the sky to the west,
the industrial west with great chimneys gently puffing upwards. They say the govt.
should force them to use filtertips but I can't say I believe that'll happen. Great
signs everywhere, all over the country: SMOKING CAUSES CANCER & with
the signs photos of people whose bodies are being hacked to death by the war
of the cells. My uncle had it & he lost half his body before he died, they took out
this & they took out that & still it would pop up elsewhere like poison ivy, flesh
hanging on him in ragged lumps. We went up there to see him, myra & I (I should
say we were still living together then) & he looked like he'd had a huge needle
pushed into his skin & all the blood sucked out. Preparing for death, he'd said,
waving his bible (I should also say uncle was born spitting hallelujahs & amens;
in later years he'd become a mormon & the family avoided him) & grinning in
a line that went from ear to ear, cutting his face in two. He looked like ghandi,
thin & hairless & a bit crazy.
Six of us were at his funeral. He'd always said he wanted no fuss.
Standing here
feeling people
repositories of facts & fantasies
pale balled skin
husked throats.

Others on the path move aside as I pass, blowing hard, my nose begins to dribble
& I can't help but spit pieces of my lungs out, sun lurching over the river & turning
everything a brilliant white. Schoolgirls are on the path, fat round breasts nuzzled
in deathly black, something quite phallic about them.

Last night I dreamt of her, pale lady in a thousand mirrors, naked with one leg
thrust forward in contemplation. & when she moved she laughed. & when she
laughed her whole body convulsed & I wanted to put myself inside her & all she
could do was laugh.

Sex was more important to me then, more than what it was to her. Though men
are always inclined to put too much down to that, she had always told me with
a flick of the mouth.

I came to believe her.

Coming towards the gate I expect her face to meet me, flowing out & filling the
garden. The schoolgirls have disappeared & I'm alone, walking slowly with a few
fat ducks watching me on the river. Perhaps they understand my fear? I cross the
wooden footbridge & crunch up the gravel, listening to my feet squashing down
on the carefully prepared stones. Knocking on the door, same man letting me in,
smiling & calling me sir & saying it's the coldest frost this year and hoping that
everything is working out for me. I immediately wonder how much he knows &
whether they discuss me. A mirror is opposite me on the wall & I stare at my
gaunt reflection.

Dear myra, wanting to reach you for years has changed my feelings. Dead inside
now myra, not caught up with love & wanting to have you anywhere & everywhere,
I can even have other women (as I do you understand). I'll tell about what's
happening behind my chest, the way I'm threatened by this billowing mountain
of phlegm. The man at the door hopes everything is working out but I don't, not
anymore. I pity you & in pitying you pity myself. But dead inside myra, even if
my dreams disturb me.
Poor myra, I really do pity you you know.

They say I can never have any more & I can't have them living with me as I'm
not fit you see. Today I'm going to take them to the zoo & yet my fear is that
something will have insuperably changed from last time because it is true, sooner
or later, they're going to say, why do we have to spend the afternoon with this
creep? Stroking my hair, forgot to comb it when I got up, never much good with
things like that, unlike her.

I've planned everything out all week, getting the alternatives, wet or fine & match-
ing them up on what they might want to do. The only trouble is there's a limit
to what you can do & repetition worries me.
Strange, I've never really noticed how cold it is in here before, everything sinking around me, stairs that climb into the sky & old men's faces on the wall. I huddle in my jacket, wondering what's gone wrong in my pipes. I make them out far above me, myra and the children without him, they're all serious, calm tiny faces. I have a fit of coughing & feel something tearing loose inside.
Repeating
at the bottom
don't worry
like scarred battle cry
over & over.

GARY LANGFORD

The Wrong House

This evening
I found myself in the wrong house
of the wrong street
of the wrong city

I discovered I was married to a woman
with swamp-dark hair
who sang softly & sadly
of loves she had known

I had 3 children who screamed
& floated about my feet

Upon further investigation I discovered
I had a $120 a week job
& was considered reliable & efficient
though not top management material

I remembered the smell of her hair
& body on that night
& the moon drifting
inside her black eyes
as they opened out
into mine

She asked for the words
but they wouldn't come
& I walked out of that house
& into this one
Cream & Salt

"don't touch me . . . no one must ever touch me . . . to die will be an awfully great adventure"—Pan in Barrie's "Peter Pan"

Winsome in velvet
curtains then, they rode
the manic gallop of
the child imagination
to & fro
on props & wires:
professional
children who could fly away
from certainty in cubicles & stalls

Now . . . it's Daylight Saving, but
in other ways also
I blanche my evenings
to some inner suburb—percussive
with lawn-mowers & cicadas,
with snails to silver the brick,
the wail
of carbrakes like mares
    in terror,
    each man
thrashing his bright guernica to voice—
    . . . remember

. . . my father's mother
would toss a cask from hand
to hand to churn
the cream & salt to butter,
with middle finger
missing from the first link,
since her brother—when
a child—told her "Put it
on the axe-block", as he smiled,
held the axe. This did not
hurt her gifts much later
to sew, cook, paint fine landscapes.
However, I'm told she would
at times upbraid her husband for
less painful faults & offer,
rushing out
to wait for the red signal
& stand upon the railway line

. . . in old
Irish blackmail or perhaps
cradle knowledge that the first
shock is not enough.
Meeting Mister Ghosh

My first meeting with Mr Ghosh. A blue-black Georgian muse off Russell Square in a London Autumn of wrinkled brown oak and beech leaves lifted by the cool winds and dashed by frequent rainstorms. I ring the doorbell; Mr Ghosh appears on the threshold of a third-floor flat attired in a pale-blue tropical suit unsuited to the English weather. To compensate he has on two heavy cashmere shawls; he is tall, thin, with a very long jaw, burning black eyes, a panama hat. He is addicted to yellow gloves and a sword-stick purchased from a stall in the Calcutta market, facts well-known to readers of his work, *Saivistic Icons*, whose *succès de scandale* has brought fame if no fortune to K. K. Ghosh. He fixes me with a gaze that amalgamates curiosity, amusement and perhaps scorn. He decided instantly, he told me later, that I more or less passed the test; I had looked expectant, reasonably humble, was plump ("let me have men about me that are ... etc.” etc.) and a ready listener.

You should have seen me earlier carrying my heavy, unfit fourteen stone up the stairs in a large elegant house somewhere near Bond Street Underground Station. With three other men sitting shyly apart after introductions, I am listening to an old Indian gentleman, Doctor Sen, with past connections with several large, ungovernable Indian Universities that he had wisely deserted to return to a Cambridge college sinecure. Decayed now in a splendid way, with a totally bald un­wrinkled head and a lopsided moustache, here he is, addressing us in a gently modulated English voice visited here and there by Indian phonemes; he caresses a protuberant belly clad in a pale pink waistcoat. The fellow next to me is a Cultural attache off to Madras, a bleak Scot with a tic in his cheek under the left eye. "I’m to be Lecturer in Literature and Drama at Mahatma College", I had said. "Indeed!" He looked and sounded vaguely disapproving. My recollection of Sen’s oration was blurred by deafness, the after-effect of Asian influenza. A foreboding there, perhaps. Wasn’t it some sort of grim recital of admonishments, warnings of doom? Much of it I failed to comprehend. It is his style. He darts hither and thither along the map of his rhetoric while we all strive to retain, though half-lost, some of the more lucid pronouncements: “Take toilet paper with you if you travel by train. Ignore beggars and lepers. Respect habits of prudery among the women. Watch out for pickpockets. Buses are overcrowded, but sometimes one has to ride on top of one. If you hit someone “with your motor”, don’t stop but abscond! Do not torment or injure cows. Note that there are seats reserved for women. Avail yourself of a rickshaw should you be trapped in a flooded street. Watch out for deep holes in the streets of Calcutta.” Now reeling from the effects of ‘flu and Doctor Sen, I have progressed to Mr Ghosh who leads me to a table.
and two chairs burdened beneath teetering piles of books and papers. He is engaged in marking papers from some obscure Indian examinations, drinking whisky from a tumbler. He puts a glass in my hand, offers me a cheroot, puts his right leg under his left buttock and swings the left one rhythmically in time with his monologue.

"I intend", Mr Ghosh said, biting vigorously on the black cheroot with which, like betel, his mouth was rarely without, "to turn the jolly place upside down. The department of English will be then truly unknowable, a place of intenses culture and bloody hard work. Drama will start forthwith with yourself and myself in the lead—in double harness. In the jolly lead."

The Mahatma College had, I was told, been the recipient of a monster-sized donation from a millionaire disciple of Mr Ghandi, with instructions that a theatre should be built and equipped. The theatre was built but so far had only been, Ghosh said, "infested with bloody politicians, and with great fat women making absurd speeches about reclamation of prostitutes". Mr Ghosh outlined to me in his high-pitched fluent English, half-strangled by his Bengali accent, his plan for the drama courses and the production of Shakespeare, Molière and Shaw. All these things down to the smallest details are already running furious races in Mr Ghosh’s skull. He shakes my hand, learning that I am unmarried, confeses to a parallel celibacy, and gives me his Calcutta address.

Now follow me to Calcutta. In the January cold, Mr Ghosh, an easily identifi­able figure at the airport with his thinness, his tallness, his pale yellow gloves and famous sword-stick, a bobbing figure with a long neck that keeps emerging at intervals from a huge anonymity of dhotis and saris and punjabis swaying about in the reception lounge beneath gigantic clocks, loudspeakers and hoardings advertising Coca-Cola and Ayurvedic Pharmaceutical products. Once stashed in a taxi with my luggage, fighting off tribes of small begging boys, I am given a grand tour of the great awkward absurdly over-crowded city of dreadful night. The stretch from airport to city is through a desolation of hoardings and small suburbs criss-crossing the sea of rival taxis, bullock carts and rickshaws. Ghosh opens a window and presents a jet of betel juice to the ashen road. The “Maha Nagar” herself, Calcutta, comes up on the screen, a vast bulging seam-burster of a “Maha Nagar,” an amalgam of hurling horn-blowers, screaming trams bearing overloads of clinging commuters, like maggots riding overripe cheeses, tottering crammed buses, jogging rickshaws pulled by lanky boys in tight loin-cloths. The temples and tailors’ shops are all absurdly top-heavy with coloured light-bulbs. In some obscure street-corners, men and women crouch forward in circles and sway and sing. Drums and bells. Mr Ghosh says there is a puja. But Mr Ghosh, the sceptical Brahmoist, has no interest in such things. It makes him oddly useless as a guide. “You must discover for yourself the beauty that is wedded to death in the city of Durga the Mother.”

Ah, Ghosh, mon frère, mon semblable, my bhai, my guru, my master, my good friend! Who else would have sent a taxi for me every day of the week at ten in the morning to fetch me from my down-town apartment to the Mahatma College in North Calcutta, down labyrinths of beggar-infested streets, cobbles spread with excrement and banana skins, through arcades of freshly opening stores where Indians and Chinese chant their morning orisons in dank, stifling interiors? Mr Ghosh, a tall, protective figure, is at my side when I go up to the rostrum to give my first nervous, appalling lecture—on Hamlet or Proust, I forget which—to a dense chattering throng. Girls everywhere: lines of black hair tied back fiercely to a bun at the back, tilaked tall brows, darting bird-like eyes, saris drooping in folds from graceful shoulder to painted sandalled foot. A few males draw an orderly white margin down the page of saris. One or two fanatics there—Maoists, extreme
nationalists, a few relatives of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, with smouldering eyes, others with the fixed unusually serious look of Indian puritans, yet others always smiling, the sensualists or the cynics or the ever-failing students who eyed me in greedy expectation. Is this one our Redeemer?

I had hardly congratulated myself on the peaceful negotiation of the first few weeks in India, having survived inevitable bouts of dysentery and several bemusing encounters with students who begged me literally on their brown bended knees to give them higher grades, when the first crisis of Mr Ghosh's crisis-strewn career—all too short—as the new Professor-Chairman of the English Department erupted. In a staff meeting he talked incessantly while four Indian colleagues (three males, one female) and I (the sole white Aryan) listened, I placidly and admiringly, if occasionally taken aback by his daring, they resentfully and sceptically. Dr Sinha, a large Bengali, with quaking sideburned cheeks and magnificent black hair falling around his shoulders, distinguished romantic poet, authority on Tagore, veteran of the Swaraj struggle, who had punctuated Ghosh's diatribes with snorts and loud throat-raspings, shuffled off his sandals and launched an attack in two languages—sometimes he could deftly mix Bengali and English, employing the Bengali or the English metaphor where killingly more effective—on Mr Ghosh, castigated as "westernized", "false to Bengali traditions", "unethical", "immoral", "unIndian", "unGandhian". The meeting dissolved into a wild cacophonous interchange of fantastic accusations everything from sodomy and forgery to communism and plagiarism. Such lapses from the supposed polite intercourse of academic parleys, replete with insults, denigration and slander, were to become familiar fare; my visitor's virginity was now at an end. Ghosh's recklessness encouraged his isolation from his Indian colleagues. His mastery of the lethal deep-cutting invective of sustained diatribe, sown with subtle innuendo, were difficult to rival in the whole of Bengal, perhaps in the whole of the sub-continent.

After two months of departmental and faculty infighting, in which both Ghosh and I had been by turn insulted, hissed, boycotted and threatened with physical violence (for I had against all my own inclinations become Ghosh's ally), he bursts in upon me in my Park Street flat where I lie sweating on the bed, drinking ice-cold beer beneath a whirring punkah, and invites me to share a night "on the town". An interesting, intense and disquieting introduction to the Calcutta that I had vaguely touched on in my few nightly perambulations is to come. For Krishna Kumar Ghosh is the lord of certain tense ghettos of vice. We start by drinking Indian whisky in an anonymous "boîte" guarded by an enormous Sikh in a green turban tied about his neat tawny head and a cold smile like Alice's Cheshire Cat, that had in it hints of suppressed murderous fury. Now we mount the stone steps of a stinking blackened rickety building, once the extended-family house of a Bengali raja (whose sensual excesses were a legend of the late nineteenth century and the subject of many ribald Bengali songs), where Eurasian prostitutes in the tightest flower-patterned dresses, grinning and talking in fluent English laden with colloquial obscenities of astonishing ripeness, lay bare their hard golden-brown backsides . . .

Once, we penetrated the depths of North Calcutta in the gloom of the acrid smoke of crackers celebrating the Kali Puja, mixed with stinking fog from a tar-laden Hoogly. Ghosh and I, abandoning our taxi near a squat peeled temple and walking noisily over the debris of hundreds of small broken clay bowls, skins of mango fruits, decaying champak petals, reached a courtyard where we saw a six-foot high idol, a vividly colourful grinning black naked goddess, dangling her rosary of white skulls, one fat foot raised, poised over a recumbent doomed but grinning rakshasa. She was haloed with twelve forty-watt electric bulbs. Drums beat and crackers explode in a deafening staccato. Calcutta is having a nervous
breakdown. The splitting headache spreads through the laden atmosphere. Police guards, sweating in shorts and shirts, tapping their long sticks, stop us at the corner of one narrow lane, Ganguli Alley, its walls browned with streaks of betel juice. There is a communal riot in the complex of streets near a Jute factory, or it might have been the Communists, or the Maoists, or the Red Guards, or the unemployed, or the refugees from Pakistan. "Behold", Ghosh intones not without pity. "Yonder some goons are dragging perfectly innocent Muslim grandfathers out of rickshaws on their way home from the mosque, no doubt, and beating the living daylights out of them. Likewise with the Muslims; some fanatical alcohol-hating youths (and a sprinkling of dehumanised women) are lying wait to commit acts of mayhem and sexual rape on families of quite docile Bengali babus on their way back from seeing some dreadfully sentimental and absurd Hindi film. It's a grisly thing to think about, and a great bore."

Mr Ghosh puts a hand on my trembling arm, for the sounds of battering are getting nearer. He laughs.

"Let us take the opportunity of this absurd fracas to solicit refreshment in an adjacent hostelry."

An excuse to sit in the dim house of assignation drinking poor Indian Scotch out of long blue tumblers. Beyond us the noise of the mutual disputation of religious communities or political enemies gathers to a height and then slowly ebbs. Two stones bounce off the black walls. Then a strange silence—before the Kali Puja crackers get going again, adding their timeless ejaculations, mordant comments on the disappearing gangsters.

"What a racket!" Mr Ghosh cried to the ceiling. He drank three whiskies too rapidly. "What a country!" he said.

We threaded our way through streets littered with stones and spent crackers. In Dalhousie Square, near the Post Office, a crowd is dancing about a burning Municipal Tram. Kali's image still hovers drunkenly over the scene.

Can tragedy come in the wake of a double comedy, Shakespeare's and ours? Shakespeare's comedy was _Twelfth Night_, our comedy was our attempt to act it—or rather Ghosh's—for his was a one-man show. He is determined to put the new theatre that had so far heard only the vacuous perorations of decayed politicians to its proper use. I am cast on account of my natural rotundity as Sir Toby Belch, opposite Ghosh himself as Sir Andrew Aguecheek, for which he is ideally suited with his willowy form and oblong melancholy face. Ghosh is also producer, stage-manager and costume-master. We were thus to act out on the boards, roles uncomfortably parallel to our nightly visitations to Nighttown. If Ghosh saw any of the irony of this, he never mentioned it. As a producer he was, needless to say, a relentless tyrant; and his tongue again and again lashed out in multilingual swathes of insult and injury. Male and female budding roscoes wept and collapsed gibbering on the floor, felled by Ghosh's tirades and stunned by his tantrums.

"It is eminently necessary", Ghosh said one day at rehearsal, "that we have a Viola with superb legs—thighs like Whatsername? Betty Grable?" These are fateful words. They lead to an outrage unparalleled in even Ghosh's outrageous career. The word goes round the campus and spreads like a forest fire into the surrounding suburbs, into the very heart of Calcutta. For Ghosh, against all our entreaties for restraint, insists that the candidates for Viola's part should raise their sarees—an exhibition that floods all cheeks with red.

In a series of shock-laden rehearsals, _Twelfth Night or What You Will_ (the subtitle is a generous invitation by the Bard to producers like Ghosh to do their worst) rises from chaos to a resemblance of order. In two staggering, exhausting nights, torn by the sobs of over-nervous actresses, with a Punjabi girl dragged in
as a last minute substitute to don the terribly tight tights that Shushila or Aruna or someone had shrunk in shame from wearing, Ghosh coaxes his rabbits from the hat and there is applause that only just drowns out the sprinkling of catcalls from the more unrelenting of the opposition party. At the end of it all, Ghosh nearly collapses in exhaustion.

I was ill for a week with dengue fever after that. On the last painful day I rose from my bed to stagger into the living room to open a telegram which ran: SERIOUS IN ALIPUR BAPTIST HOSPITAL GHOSH.

With no taxi in sight, I hailed a rickshaw and was carried impatiently but remorselessly over every bump and crack in the roads, still aching from my dengue fever, to the hospital. Poor Ghosh, a stiff bandaged figure in sky-blue pyjamas, was suffering from multiple lacerations, several broken ribs, some concussion and possible internal injuries. He has lost two brown teeth and his voice.

On his way from College by rickshaw, since in the flooded streets in monsoon time taxis were too easily marooned, he had been set upon by a gang of anonymous assailants, tumbled out onto the filthy sidewalk and severely beaten up with sticks. The gory scene was curiously ignored by passers-by. Insane youths calling themselves Red Guards, Black Maoists, or what? had been carrying out depredations all over the city. Ghosh's catastrophe was simply another statistic. When I suggested the ruffians were no doubt Communists he said: "No bloody fear, old boy." He chuckled and then winced with pain. "It was those buggers from Mahatma College—some young teachers and a few fanatic students. Oafs, ignorant of their own culture let alone of Shakespeare. They didn't like the way we insisted on a dekko at the girls' legs. What I did was in the good of the cause, but those fellers wouldn't see that, not if it was written in letters a mile high. Ah, well, the play was the thing, I suppose ...">

So members of Ghosh's family and many of the College staff, friends and foes alike, all flock to his bedside. The family think he will die; they are in expectation of a vast fortune from the sale of his rumoured vast collection of pornographic books. His College enemies come to utter pharisaical words, to stare ghoulishly at the swathed indignant patient. At last a burly Anglo-Indian police Inspector comes to take a statement; he confides that he suspects the Chinese (they were in worse odour than usual as enemies of India at that time) and asks me what it was like "at home" (the "Yewkay") these days. A mere bashing up, however severe, will not kill the mercurial K. K. Ghosh. He is soon up and about on crutches. In fact, too soon. Shortly afterwards he is discovered insulting the Principal of Mahatma College's wife during a wedding reception for the Principal's daughter. A serious error, for her family controlled the purse-strings of the establishment. His contract was terminated by a legal quibble that Ghosh was unable to defeat, through lack of funds to fee lawyers. We drank our last whiskies together. He gave no forwarding address when he left on the 'Up' train to Delhi around about Christmas.

But his disappearance left complications behind. There were the mutterings of colleagues to face, the coolness of Dr Sinha, the new Chairman of the English Department. Had I not after all "aided and abetted the madman K. K. Ghosh?" Was I not a partner in his criminal career inside and outside the campus? Tales of Ghosh's debaucheries were legion and I figured in a minor rôle in every one. Tired of denying them, I would put on a tolerant smile, simulating slandered innocence. Muslim tailor, Mulad Hassan, came with a policeman to demand instant payment for the expensive costumes Ghosh had purchased recklessly for the play, including the yards of silk out of which Hassan had made the outfit he had worn as Sir Andrew, the Punjabi girl's tights and bloomers, and the black habit of a six-foot Sikh engineering student who had played Malvolio.
A week later when my taxi was stuck in a traffic jam in Lower Circular Road, two evil-looking faces looked into the taxi's interior and talked rapidly in Hindustani. When the Sikh driver started to get out threateningly, they disappeared. "What did they want?" I asked. "They said you were a British spy, a friend of another spy, an Indian man called K. K. Ghosh." The Sikh looked at me quizically. Then two nights later I carelessly opened the door of my flat to two buxom Eurasian women, one old and one young, in equally tight and very short dresses that failed to cover the bottom of their knickers. Alas, the young one was spectacularly pregnant. The older one who said she was a Mrs Jean Jones, demanded Ghosh's whereabouts. She had once been a pretty woman and even now had arresting sensory eyes, though I didn't care for the touch of madness about her thickly rouged lips. The pregnant girl was her daughter, for whose obvious condition "your friend, Mr Ghosh, is responsible". I suspected a plot and told them so, whereupon Mrs Jones turned abusive, raising her voice to a shout and employing vulgar expressions like "up the spout" and "in the club". With agony I parted with four hundred rupees and had to promise more.

So that's why I am packing my bags and am off to the Principal to request a "determination of contract" on account of my sickness. I shall say that dengue fever has sapped all my élan vital. Here in my hand is K. K. Ghosh's letter undated postmarked San Francisco. He tells me he is a temporary Assistant Professor of Hindu studies in the University of California, and is thinking of marrying a particularly beautiful black lecturer in Black Studies. (Somehow I cannot see the brahminical Ghosh comfortably abed with this dark mistress.) Mister Ghosh believes that Doctor Sinha was responsible for the disasters that fell upon him in Calcutta, city of the Great Mother Goddess. There is an international conspiracy against Ghosh. He writes:

"Only the other day I was assaulted—physically—by one of those Hare Krishna people outside a Chinese Theatre in Grant Street—merely because I refuted the pacifist philosophy he claimed to derive from Krishna. As any child in India can tell you, Krishna tells Arjuna in the Geeta to clobber the enemy for all his worth and with everything he's got. If he'd had an atom bomb about him, he'd have advised Arjuna to use that. I wrote a letter in much the same vein to Lord B. Russell but he never replied. Your dear friend, K. K. Ghosh."
TERRY TREDREA

Tides

In the thick suburban breathing
crickets revolve on familiar bricks
of monotonous houses, and the afternoon
drifts by like the day-dream of a memory.

In the musty lounge she hears his
sandy boot-steps disturb the kitchen,
she is afraid of his calm eyes
beneath iron eye-brows.

(one day we
we will be one
I love you
soon I am going
to kill you)

Reclining and breathing in her furniture
he tickles the kitten gently/a man
who speaks little and lives together
with his wife alone . . .

She keeps him leashed to the heel of her tongue,
"I have frozen my life for you
I have
frozen my life for
for you I have frozen
my life
for you I
have frozen
my life for you
I"
He floods the house with television.

1. meals 1. fire
2. laundry 2. wood chopped
3. beds made 3. garage

But in bed at night
strange familiar tides
smooth their broken coasts.
Diarrhoea

“Please give, O boundless Giver, to my body the beauty of transparency, the capacity of penetration, sensitivity of feeling and the power-of-immortality...”

St Thomas Aquinas.

Diarrhoea forced me up. Into the grey
Sydney monk’s-morning sprawling with the sound
Five times I’d been up: “Prime” and Terce and None
perhaps. To tell the stages of the night. To Kaomag and Gludin. Grey light. Silent with a city’s reverence for the sun.
Five years I’ve slept through this. Choosing instead the gaudy-neon quicker early-night of 2 and 3 a.m.
five years since Ignatian meditation was grace-and-sleep at once, space to play with age-old forms and tropes: and ancient wisdoms, Cusa, Hilton, Zen. While light seeped through the chapels of the mind, grew through dome to polychrome and cloisonné enamel.
It takes the runs to change the pattern of your life, the shape of early prayer. It takes the runs To change your ur-perceptions, excessive rumbling in the lower gut. To change the iris-coloured light, the geometry of morning.
stomach wog or half-a-dozen oysters
(small) to
make a different day. Or set of day.
A force of dif-
erent hours. Diarrhoea starts off
a different day
with monkish matin sparrows, surge
of calm white
light and ivory-city quiet. A liturgy
quite 'foreign',
quite forgot. Mosaic of the morning.

HAL COLEBATCH

Sailing to Rottnest Island

We clear the smooth bright harbour with the moon. Ahead
the lighted towers of ships and red-eyed tugs are slow
dark crawling dinosaurs in the dark. The easterly blow
has us walking through the spray. Everyone we know is in bed,
which is probably why we are here. On the starboard bow
a fishing-boat's engine burbles. Climbing forrad I shine
a torch up on to the sail. These spring nights
have plenty of wind and waves in them. I wonder how
the moonlight looks to a fish? What a richness of line
and pattern its night ceiling must have! What Elvish lights
of silver skirling on black! Cold spray hisses and slaps
on board, over our bags. Looking at stars we discuss
relativity and Tolkien. It is quite black in front of us.
I find I am frankly scared. We sail off other people's maps.
Mother-in-Law

You always were a cold one.
Everybody said
it was the dour Scot in you
that made you hug
your feelings tight around
you like a plaid.

But oh, the tiger showed
when now and then,
until I learned to hold my tongue,
I dared to criticise
the things you loved
in your cold way.

Because I flashed and spent
my warmth on anyone,
I could not see
that your banked fires
meant to last a Scottish lifetime,
served your winter well.

Too proud to acknowledge
the approach of death,
you, who hated strangers,
turned your head to the wall
to avoid the introduction.

When at last you died,
they sent your books to me.
The Browning and the Shelley,
the Tennyson and Keats
took me by surprise,
who never saw you read.

Was this another colour
that you kept concealed
beneath the Hebridean
homespun that you wore
for public eye?

Beneath the yellowed leaves
I found a crocus flower
tissue-thin with age.
And with a shock of recognition
saw myself at seventeen
holding the same pink flower.
We might have been friends
you and I,
loving as we did
the same man. Keats. Crocuses.
But it rarely ever works that way.

F. SZACINSKI

In Mary Street

The creep of dust, the shove of weed:
this vacant old lot is seen to weep
tears of glass as they take the one
she succoured more than half a century.

Tree-green years are excised, exposing
pocks and scars of once-perfections, soon
brickbat bones will be heaped for picking
over until the Te Deum of decent burial.

Now, squared clean and flagrantly bare,
curetted and furrowed as if for cabbages,
this invincible womb has been bulldozed
into harbouring seeds of a multibirth.
JOHN M. WRIGHT

Each night is a check-up
my mind spruced, unstraying
its breath pure as a wish
childlike
I still smile at the anaesthetist;
he guides me to whiter rooms and
bland-faced men strip off my hopes
like clothes.

F. SZACINSKI

The Following Morning

Again
I have been deceived by canned promises:
night's treacherous fingers scored
this day while still a dream unfolded,
the chair that embraced me yesterday
now seeks to destroy and the jonquils
have stiffened to plastic overnight.
Big-brother Sun, waiting, has caught
me out and pierced with his laser beam.
That stranger, the grey cat, unknowing,
purrs against my amputated limbs.
Dear Marcus,

I was upset when you left, but sadness fades, or so I've found. I remember saying that I'd follow you as soon as I'd set my house in order and climbed a mountain to lose myself in the clouds for a short time. I don't know why I thought all that was necessary.

Tonight I crawled off to one of those ragged parties we used to crash together, for a giggle (remember), and got well and truly sloshed on medicinal cocktails. I don't remember the early part of the evening very clearly; it was after midnight when I finally emerged from my memories of you and had a look around.

I found myself swathed in humidity and incongruous behind my warmed glass of milk and whisky—the perfect sedative for my carbuncled innards. I tried to determine where I was but I could hardly breathe let alone think. Too many people were suspended in that closed, onion-scented, housing commission flat—a solemn slum, all glued and stuck with human sweat to rise and crib against the horizon. Smoke swirl hung like monstrous animated cobwebs, moving to shroud the only illumination—one garish bulb, which hung naked, in the centre of the room—one green and garish bulb, which cast an unhealthy flush and seemed obscene.

A fat man, obscenely fat, (I must have been really sloshed: everything was OBSCENE—what a way to go!), his bulging gut pouring over his one inch belt, his ape's behind welted where his pants struggled to claw at his stiffening appendage, stroked the arm of his green, shrieking bag of charm, whilst his piggy eyes raped the splendour of the young man next to him. The green talons, of the woman seated on the arm of the only chair in the room, pressed into the thighs of a guy called Myre Aldeath, who stood talking to her; he made no indication of any need, but twirling his mind into a furtive knuckle, eyes black as burnt edges of sailcloth, turned away with a shrug, then seated himself, crosslegged, under the green bulb—somehow now alone and disjoint from the others present.

Two young men, in the corner near the refrigerator, were peddling softness. One of them, his enlarged false teeth exposed green in the light, chattering, leant over his companion and undid the final button on his shirt. The woman behind me swore, then farted and tried to arrest any further echo from her guts by picking her gold teeth with the ragged end of a discarded match stick.

Voices smeared at every door, at every window. The conversation, swollen, flooded then faded to an echoing haunt of forced laughter and held tears (best forgotten), then waved again in gossip of the latest temper: they spoke of broken chimney-pots, the faded wedding smile, grandmother's corns, etc., and all the time Vivaldi announced green autumn from the radio-gram.

Everybody needed, or appeared to need, everybody else: except this Myre fellow I mentioned a moment ago. He sat, isolated (by his humour), squat in the
middle of the motley crowd. His eyes, deep in their sockets, echoed pale sunlight entrancing slumbering green leaves (how’s that for poetic expression?) and their black cave constellations were dulled; not glowing with the strange green fire I had seen in them earlier in the evening. They seemed to pretend vanity, poking naked thoughts, weighted and measured. He sat there, and it appeared to me (but don’t forget I was pretty bloody sloshed at this stage), that he was alone and his aloneness deposited irony on me and all the other mind wanderers in the room.

I was damned if I could take my eyes from him; I certainly tried. I looked at the green floor, the green wall, the green people, the green . . . , the green . . . green . . . on every bloody greeny green object in that all-green room; but only for a little while (and little’s the right word to use there), could I keep my gaze from returning to him. He sat there, croslegged, and in that unhealthy green mist and swirling smoke webs, he seemed to float—(you know: as if he were all in a green sea), hang suspended and his balding head hooded his eyes and flooded over those high cheekbones into his beard.

I couldn’t, for the life of me, recall who the “hell” this man reminded me of! Earlier in the evening I’d accepted him as a complete stranger, but later I felt sure we had met before, and I felt fear (I must have been really and truly sloshed out of my ever-lovin’ mind). I knew this fear—it was green fear—I had walked with it before.

Memories flooded back like heavy moths; old dreams, wry in their flirtations, rose again in the sudden consequence of this fear. I saw myself, standing, on the cold concrete block of the fallen pier (you remember—the one down at the end of Glebe Point Road?); the grey/green waters, filthy with bracken sludge and the refuse of churning factories, quested at my feet. The necrous smell rose to meet me, attacked my bleeding stomach, which needed to heave the green bile and rid me of the disgust, the fear, the need to know what had brought me here. I felt the sweat run down between my legs and itch; the hair at the back of my neck draggled damp and my scalp itched; the sweat stream crawled down the cleavage of my breast, collected in a pool held by my brassiere and itched. I believed that if I bent over at that very moment it would pour from me and run and run and . . . and I turned to run, but just then this Myre guy uncrossed his legs, rose and looked at me. Each facial muscle remained immobile, yet in that instant his whole appearance changed. It softened with knowledge that flowed through the green haze in that crowded room, past the forced smiles, over the bridling quotations of Mao Tse Tung and Snedden and Walt Whitman and Whitlam and Percy Turnabout, who runs the corner store, in Toxteth Road, and overcharges on everything but condoms—it flowed on and reached me, and drowned me.

He turned and left. I waded through the green fog and followed him down to the cold concrete block of the fallen pier. He left me standing there and moved into the grey/green waters, filthy with the bracken sludge, and bade me follow, and then I knew. We had met here before, on that cold Taurus night, not so very long ago, when you had left and my living then had seemed a chore; but, at that time, he’d stayed my entrance and made me turn away from what I’d chosen; for he said I hadn’t tasted sap enough, nor repented for not being what I might have been, or found the knowledge that at one moment I might have avoided being born—that I was still too green.

Since then I have died a thousand times each day and a thousand times been born—each dawning brought rebirth; but now, when I least expected it, my real death was offering a lasting friendship—what a laugh!

See you soon Marcus, that Myre Aldeath guy, out there in the grey/green water, tells me it’s time for me to follow you and leave the green, green grass of home.

Marg.
Dead Possum

On the dry leaves, once moon flakes
To her night eyes' dark opals,
Her body's hush is weightless.

They do not bed her down: though
Brittle not one was broken
Under her young heart's halting.

This was her tree, her sheer path
Up to her home's high hollow,
Her starlit climb in secret.

Reaching earth, or leaving it,
She died at the tree's giant foot.
Why know more, why look for scars,

Charred blood, or any killer's
Signature? Her fur that stirs
In dawn's breathing is without

Blemish, her eyes' clarity
Records no terror, her ears
Are the shells of a calm sea.

The black ants draw a veil's shreds
Over her teeth's white shimmer,
Probing her lips' new silence

As if to ask why the dew
Should bring her face a spirit
No longer of use to her,

Or why red dawn should fire her
Pale belly, so over big
In the pregnancy of death
Records, Books and Christmas Crowds

Around me
a thousand coloured stars
warmth from their lights

Inside my head
or outside?
A moments doubt.

Further on
crowds of names
stare out at me, into me,
clamour from their shelves
for my attention
digestion
agreement.

'Biography of an eccentric writer'
who mentally disintegrates
page after page.
Slowly I sink to my knees
sharing his burden.

'In Jail'
I shout along with others
for freedom
bewildered by the 'trapping bars'.

Somebody was right
Books are dangerous.

Noiseless people
crowd around me
not seeing, I hope
my miming lips
singing along with the filled-air sounds
of lost-love-laments.
I grieve.

Outside
cold air slaps my face
I eddy through an out-of-focus crowd,
I don't notice.

In a sea of faces
black sculpted woman
African proud
Her shoreline slows my drifting,
I notice.
In a sea of faces
small, white haired woman
face of incredible wrinkles
bright eyed
under the floppiest of hats
covered by real flowers—
real flowers!

I turn and stare.

PETER LOFTUS

View from Ballarat

Two kids in pink pyjamas
Pick their way across the street
Putting their feet down on the gravel strip
As if the roadway was a bed of coals

A Holden ute with blobs of rust
And blisters of pink undercoat
Rattles past the brick veneers
And one loose spring hits out
At gibbers sprung from last year’s undertow

The television poles probe at the dying light
Sniffing for the next fantastic show

I watch the battered roadway through a grid of blinds
A squad of roses choked by loving care
And one green starving cat
Picking his way across the concrete path

Can you see anything out there
That I can’t find?
Is there some way of dredging up the street
With eyes like post-hole diggers
Breaking through the clay?

Can your fingers resting on the armchair’s hide
Cut down the insolent fences
With a fusillade of brass?
Or is there nothing in the world at all
But those white shadows on the lounge room wall?
Morisset Sunday

This could be a small country town; the same
Isolation and panicky sense of Time
Stagnant yet wasting; the occasional
Passing car to raise dust of discontent
In the mind; and the surrounding bush
Locked in an immemorial cycle.

But, no sheep or wheat town, the hospital
Lies under the afternoon’s sedation
Of midsummer heat retarding thought
And movement. The inhabitants doze
Behind dark verandahs, in brain and nerve
The heat has laid a temporary dullness.

In Ward Nine the senile and the dying
Sprawl in their beds of sweat; at Ward Five
A mongoloid boy coos softly behind
Wire netting; and near Ward Seven
An old woman is taking in washing
But leaves half her life pegged on the line.

She doesn’t even glance at the road out
Or the fields where cows follow each other,
Like all the ambling summers of the past,
Nowhere in particular. Kangaroos browse,
Nimble birds peck at the cow-droppings,
And insects scuffle in this year’s long grass.

What grips the heart here is neither
Heat’s inertia nor earth’s tenacity,
But a treacherous mix of the monstrous
And commonplace; of human suffering
As a mere routine almost out of mind,
Inarticulate and without tears.
Lyricism in Contemporary
Australian Poetry

Over the last twenty years there has been an increasing lyrical richness in Australian poetry. My concern in this essay is to look at the relationship between various kinds of lyricism and the nature of the imaginations from which they spring. Too frequently 'lyrical' is tossed off as a critical term without enough attention being paid to the kind of imaginative stance which produces such poetry. Lyrical moments in poetry—those moments of song—can spring from quite different moods, affirming and denoting different conceptions of the world. Often lyricism is bound up with invocation, to provide a sudden crystallisation of desire:

My wall is loosening; honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

Sometimes it is still, tranquil, reverent (so as to almost re-define these terms), sung in whispers:

Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

This is just the type of lyricism which is musically paralleled in Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, and it is perhaps, of all kinds the most distinctively Romantic, expressing man's awed communion with a vibrant, timeless world. However, lyrical utterance may equally be buoyantly, even aggressively assertive as it so often is in Bruce Dawe's poetry.

But what links all these bursts is a sense of the poet's breaking into something approaching complete openness, untrammelled by posturing or rhetoric. His imagination is entirely unfurled and we have the purest sense of poetry, but not in the classical connotation of the word, for we have the least sense of shaped poetic activity. We perceive the poetry as erupting, simply happening. That is not to say that the genuinely lyrical moments are necessarily uncrafted, but rather that whatever crafting there is comes from the deepest springs of the poet's vision so that we are overwhelmed by the freshness that results—the sense of entire openness:

O to break loose, like the chinook
salmon jumping and falling back,
nosing up to the impossible
stone and bone-crushing waterfall—

The opening lines of Robert Lowell's 'Waking Early Sunday Morning' image spontaneity and in doing this work towards defining the inner texture of response.
Through lyricism the real response is revealed and in this response the speaker's inner state is reflected.

This is fairly close to what happens in Andrew Taylor’s poem ‘the cool change:’

We say: After a hot day the cool change
is like a fresh shower and the spirit stands
renewed and alert despite the summer thunder.
Despite the summer thunder and despite
the jagged fulgurations of dry rage
over the Brighton yacht club and beyond
the enclosed alerted small boat anchorage,
despite the ominous clashings in the trees,
after a hot day and a sea like slate
the cool change comes like mother with light skirts
sweeping the torpid gulls from their malaise.
Like mother with cool drinks the cool change gathers
families out of the titree and the water,
moving with her urgency among hampers,
caressing, hurrying, to her mysterious ends . . .
The cool change sweeps us back into Sunday night,
the long drive home, the children to be fed,
bathed, put to bed. It makes us parents again
Later we think of the sullen sea, the obtuse
and adolescent arrogance of the sun,
the dominant zero, pointless, tyrannous.

The almost clogged rhythm of the first eight lines of the poem develops the tension
which is dispelled with a sudden shock of release in the central lines of the poem
where the effect of the cool change is enacted:

the cool change comes like mother with light skirts
sweeping the torpid gulls from their malaise.

Mood is imaged in that swishing, energetic, purposeful figure of the mother. It is
a complex enough image to contain layers of suggestion; it can contain ambivalence. If the initial sense, borne out by the rhythmic surge, is of the light, clean,
sweeping, salving wash of the cool change, there is also the simultaneous sense
of being under discipline. Like all really fine poetic images, it resolutely defies any
final translation. It has what I would call a quality of dream—the imagination is
liberated, untrammeled by any demand for literal observation. Its ‘truth’ lies in
resonance and ambience, its sense of wholeness, what might be called its ‘syncretistic’ vision.1

Much of the effect of this poem is achieved by balancing two quite different
modes of perception and holding them in tension:

The cool change sweeps us back into Sunday night,
The long drive home, the children to be fed,
bathed, put to bed. It makes us parents again.

Here we are shown what the ‘mother of light skirts’ does to us, what her actual
force in our lives is. It is brutally literal. This is what happens with the cool change
—it brings responsibility, control, return to normalcy and routine. This is what
happens when the first relief is over, when the first cool sensuality and the immediate
of liberation from heat become translated into action. Mother may have light
skirts but she pushes us around, stopping our freedom and placing us firmly in the
temporal world. And the temporal world is meals, drives home, baths, putting

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1 See A. Ehrenzweig, The Hidden Order of Art.

Ehrenzweig adopts Piaget’s term ‘syncretistic’ to describe art which focusses on the whole
rather than the differentiated details which comprise it, thus achieving a more ‘global’ view.
children to bed; it is the world of Sunday night, on the threshold of the week, the
threshold of routine. Against this sense, the poet balances an absolutely unliteral
sense of what has been, what the weekend was, what the hot weather meant:

Later we think of the sullen sea, the obtuse
and adolescent arrogance of the sun,
the dominant zero, pointless, tyrannous.

We realise, of course, that at the time it wasn’t quite like that. It wasn’t nearly so
exciting at the time:

sweeping the torpid gulls from their malaise.

But in retrospect it takes on new colour and, in this sense, is as true as the literal
reality. The sensual force, the almost erotic charge of these lines is a measure of
the revulsion from routine. It images the speaker’s sense of containment and his
sense of that containment issuing from the cool change; the poetry does not pretend
to define ‘the literal reality’ of the hot weather—it defines the ambience felt by
the speaker. Lawrence once pointed out, rather obviously, that no-one will ever
define the sun (except in unsatisfying technical ways).\(^2\) Taylor is not trying to do
anything of this kind; the weather becomes a mood-analogue, almost an ‘objective
correlative’. Looking backwards from a position within routine, the summer
weather comes to be associated with timelessness and rebellion, the arrogance of
adolescence aloof from responsibility and the mundane. This poem can hold two
tenses—\(\text{now and later.}\) It balances excited relief (from the outset containing the
seeds of frustration—those skirts, though light, are presumably voluminous enough
to shroud and stifle the rebellious infant) shading into a matter-of-fact resignation,
and an acceptance of responsibility alongside the later sense of what has been lost.
And this later sense of summer is flavoured with the spice of distance; it has
assumed dreamlike proportions and texture. The sultry weather before the change
is now the radical other, something to be held up against normalcy and exulted in.
The poem says something about memory, about the ways in which we hold out
promises to ourselves, the ways in which we define the past in terms of the present,
the ways in which we always make our judgements from the stance of the moment.

In ‘the cool change’ the weather becomes an analogue for emotion and this is
also the case in Vincent Buckley’s relatively recent poem ‘Christmas Cold’.\(^3\) The
Buckley poem differs in the specificity of the situation it evokes; its lyricism works
more towards the crystallisation of a moment, being more firmly rooted in a fairly
clearly defined situation:

I can’t turn round; I feel
Her eyes look through me through the window,
A white light in the tawny grass,
A south-west wind thrashed on wet gravel.

The room is stifling from the start, but later the intensity of the speaker’s reaction
to the atmosphere is even greater. So overpowering is his response, that he cannot
act—but his feelings are revealed in the depth of his perception of the world beyond
the window:

A white light in the tawny grass,
A south-west wind thrashed on wet gravel.

The kind of intensity he feels is the same kind of intensity to be seen in the world
outside—a peculiarly compelling grey bleakness and force.

\(^2\) D. H. Lawrence, \textit{A Non-Freudian Unconscious}.
\(^3\) \textit{Melbourne University Magazine}, 1970.
Throughout this poem, the evocation of the garden is insistent and quite extraordinarily fresh in comparison with ‘the room’s warmth’. Cold the garden may be, but its vigour and its separateness compel; the speaker would rather be outside than in. Yet the external landscape is as separate and unsociable as the speaker. In some non-paraphraseable way, its grey-green-white chill intensity parallels his own. It is the capacity to separate himself that has kept the speaker whole, if bleak, in the face of the expected response. Vincent Buckley has written of ‘the religious impulse in poetry’ in the following terms and I think they apply pretty well to this poem of his own:

I take it as the impulse to establish the sense of man’s life and his human relationships as being . . . bonded with forces in the universe, which have their chief correlations in his own psychic life and so in at least some of his chief relationships, but which cannot be accounted for in terms of his psychic life, are in some sense superior to him, in some sense govern him, are manifest to him in terms of power and presence, and in some sense require of him adoration, worship, and celebration.4

But, if this definition applies to ‘Christmas Cold’ and to Buckley’s poetry generally, it seems specially minted for Les A. Murray’s poetry.

In his lyrical strain Murray sees man alone in a magnificent, dwarfing (yet fulfilling) natural order:

My quiet uncle
Has spent the whole forenoon sailing a stump-ridden field
Of blady grass and Pleistocene clay never ploughed
Since the world's beginning

('Toward the Imminent Days')

The juxtaposition of ‘the whole forenoon’ and ‘Since the world’s beginning’ creates a feeling of awe at the age of the earth. Its effect is partly comic—the uncle has been working hard—for ‘the whole forenoon’. It has seemed like quite a stretch of time, yet he has in fact altered the surface of the world. But ‘whole’ has another dimension apart from the comic. A ‘whole forenoon’ is a measurable part of a man’s brief life; it is an eye-movement in the life of the land. But the world is not really changed significantly. The central image of the ploughman as sailor makes this clear—only the surface and a foot or two down (how appropriate that image) feels his activity, and it will pass away again in the life of the earth—like a sailing ship or a yacht. Murray’s reverence towards the natural world is sometimes more overt than this but it can still work just as effectively:

This country is my mind. I lift my face
And count my hills, and linger over one

('Evening Alone at Bunyah')

This is a lyricism of the numinous, moving out and away from the world in which men’s relations with other men could ever be pre-eminent. In this poetry, man finds his significance in communion with the physical landscape. It is the natural, untampered-with world that is the setting and basis of Les Murray’s lyrical impulse—the impulse which shapes his best poems. He is a religious poet directly in the line of Wordsworth. The efforts of men are constantly being juxtaposed against timelessness, as they are in the lines from ‘Toward the Imminent Days’ which I have referred to. In ‘Evening Alone at Bunyah’ Murray speaks of a piece of ‘milk-seamed quartz’ picked up from the roadside:

4 V. Buckley, Poetry and the Sacred P.II.
I picked up
A chunk of milk-seamed quartz, thumbed off the clay,
Let the dry light pervade it and collect,
Eliciting shifting gleams, revealing how
The specific strength of a stone fits utterly
Into its form and yet reflects the grain
And tendency of the mother-lode, the mass
Of a vanished rock-sill tipping one small stone
Slightly askew as it weighs upon your palm,
And then I threw it back towards the sun
To thump down on a knoll
Where it may move a foot in a thousand years.

Murray moves from the specific to the infinite in an effortless way. A more sustained instance of this movement can be seen in the early poem ‘Noonday Axeman’ which was printed in his first collection and may well be the best poem he has written. It is an overt expression of Murray’s nature religion—a sung celebration of the stillness and silence, the timeless world held antithetically in the poem against the urban, social, temporal world:

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Noonday silence.
Two miles from here, it is the twentieth century:
Cars on the bitumen, powerlines vaulting the farms.
Here, with my axe, I am chopping into the stillness.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. I pause, roll tobacco,
Twist a cigarette, lick it. All is still.
I lean on my axe. A cloud of fragrant leaves
Hangs over me moveless, pierced everywhere by sky.

The poem develops with the process of chopping down the tree, which is effectively dramatised as an act of communion—‘chopping into the stillness’. Like most acts of communion, it is hushed and reverent; the rhythm is steady and gradual, completely without urgency although it is insistent and engaged. The rhythms are those of unhurried thought and those of the axeman. But the fullness of this engagement with the landscape does not entail the simple clichéd rejection of the city common in versions of the bushman myth and embodied in such figures as Patrick White’s city solicitor in The Tree of Man, Dudley Forsdyke. It is only from some kind of dialectic between the city and the rural landscape, one feels, that the depth of engagement in the best of the Murray poems seems possible:

Though I go to the cities, turning my back on these hills,
For the talk and dazzle of cities, for the sake of belonging
For months and years at a time to the twentieth century

If this image of the city tends towards the commonplace, there is enough commitment in the phrase ‘For months and years at a time’ to save it from being clichéd. This is no stock rejection, but a man really examining his stance in the face of what he sees as two radically different cultures—‘the talk and dazzle’, ‘the silence’. The poem constitutes an attempt to penetrate the silence and it also constitutes, paradoxically, an attempt to master the silence temporarily. The ‘chopping into the stillness’, as well as being a means of entering into communion with the essential ‘soul’ of the land, is also a way of momentarily overcoming the insistent silence—the ‘Unhuman silence’ (not inhuman), at once ultra-human (life-nourishing) and meta-human. The poem is sufficiently subtle to keep this sense of aloneness along-

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The Ilex Tree. This volume, published in 1965, contains poems by Les Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann.
side the sense of communion. Country man has become part of the stillness, he 
does not disrupt it—but he can feel alone in the bush. When the tree is down, every­
thing is the same as before; there is no answer from the bush, it just is. There is 
that sense of dwarfing:

Axe-fall, echo and silence. It will be centuries
Before many men are truly at home in this country,
And yet, there have always been some, in each generation,
There have always been some who could live in the presence of silence.

The sense of reverence in that steadily celebratory lyricism is never lost and the 
poem proceeds to talk of the old men of the country who become subsumed into 
the soil (entering, as it were, into the Body of Christ—the final, ultimate com­
munion), into the stillness, ‘from silence into great silence’. Already during their 
lives they were gradually becoming incorporated into the stillness, making ‘what 
amounts to a breach in the silence’—not a violating breach, but a gap big enough 
to slip into. Finally they had chopped themselves right into the stillness, merging 
indistinguishably with the texture of the land. The ultimate paradox of the poem, 
dramatised in its whole structure, comes in these lines:

and over the racket
Of the rails to hear the echo and the silence.

The stillness and substance of this world is that much greater than anything man 
can make or do—its presence is tangible, but not graspable, not containable. The 
‘chopping into the stillness’ that had gone on before in this region had penetrated 
only as far as the foothills, and that had taken generations. Going to the cities has 
amounted to an admission of failure—‘cities, /You have built against silence’. The 
speaker feels almost guilty about his recurring urge to spend time in the cities— 
the emphasis falls on that word ‘run’. It is almost furtive:

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Dreaming silence.
Though I myself run to the cities, I will forever
Be coming back here to walk, knee-deep in ferns,
Up and away from this metropolitan century.

The prevailing lyricism of ‘Noonday Axeman’ has to do with the sense of discovery 
that comes with the penetration into the stillness, the sense of the land as always 
new despite its changelessness. The speaker re-enacts the land’s discovery each time 
he travels on the up-train:

peering, leaning
Out of the window to see, on far-off ridges
The sky between the trees

It is a celebration in the face of the Absolute, in the face of infinity. Only in 
communion with the land, says the poetry, can the individual be most fully him­
sel. Like lost childhood, one recovers and rediscovers ‘the crush of dry grass 
underfoot, the silence of trees’.

‘Noonday Axeman’ presents the imagination in the rhythms of the imagination, 
which are tuned to the physical rhythm of the chopping. The work of the axeman 
provides his imagination with a focal point and two processes are able to work 
simultaneously. While he is chopping further and further into the tree, he is probing 
further into the nature of his own life and its relation to the landscape—the inter­
action of himself and his ancestors with the land. The poem can at once be as 
specific as the axe-fall and as resonant as the echo which follows it; it moves from 
the specific to the timeless and back again without strain:
Twigs fly, leaves puff and subside. The severed trunk 
Slips off its stump and falls upon its shadow . . .
And then there is no more. The stillness is there
As ever. And I fall to lopping branches.

This inextricable blending of the observant and the reverent characterises Murray's poetry at its best and is certainly rare enough in Australian poetry. Sharply outlined details are swept into the timeless, absorbed into the stillness like the sound of the axe. The poetry contains the sense of a sweep of time; the sense of the vastness of a natural world against which an individual's distinctiveness is etched like a bright detail.

A similar sense of the relationship between the individual and the landscape can be seen in Vincent Buckley's poetry, particularly the better of his early poems:

I was born under a continual
Movement of trees, bred in their gathered light,
In the high scything rhythm, the stopped flight,
The sea-sound urging through the timber wall.

('Borrowing of Trees')

This is, of course, different from 'Noonday Axeman' in its absence of a central dramatic situation from which the ambience develops; it lacks the quality of dramatic immediacy—there is no axeman. That is not to say that the Buckley has a less sure grasp of the physical and particular, but rather that the physical and particular seem secondary to the poem's 'religious' implications. The trees themselves are there all right, but they adumbrate an order of experience which transcends their physical presence, so that their physical presence is subsumed into something greater; they communicate the numinous. As agents of the natural order the trees are capable of awakening a deep response, of changing the possibilities of a human life. Here, again, Buckley's own definition of the 'religious impulse' seems most applicable.

Murray's poetry abounds with a lyricism similar to this, although it is often placed in a more immediate context. He relates further to Buckley in his tendency to mythmaking, so that one sometimes has too strong a sense of a man trying to weave myths out of the material of his life. Buckley has become increasingly able to use that tendency to ask significant questions about the nature of man's relationship with his whole environment and this has accompanied the virtual disappearance of the grand-styled rhetoric that flawed most of the earlier poems and stopped them from asking real questions. Murray has never demonstrated faults of rhetorical mystification to the degree that the Buckley poems of the fifties and very early sixties generally did but, strangely, he is tending more in that direction in his later poems than he ever did in the earlier ones. Much of the poetry in Poems Against Economics celebrates a private world which never really becomes accessible. In Murray's best poems we go with him into church; in the others we wait, rather bored, for the service to finish. When Murray is serious he relates to the world in 'religious' terms; the day-to-day world is seldom able to contain its own significance as it usually does in Bruce Dawe. For Dawe, human relationships and individual actions are the staple of his poetry. The figure, although within the environment, stands out from it in clear focus. In Les Murray's poetry the individual often seems less central than the landscape—sometimes the speaker willingly makes himself seem small, though never insignificant, in the face of the dwarfing natural world. His 'religiousness' has to do with this impulse to drive away from self towards his sense of a transcendent world in which the self might find meaning. Only occasionally in his consciously serious poems does Murray seem directly concerned with human relations, 'Evening Alone at Bunyah' being an instance of
such a poem. When he does focus on human or social relationships it is usually when they point to deeper bonds with the universe, with the natural cycles:

August is time to think
Of facing ploughshares, getting our new boots,
And of the first calves shivering in the grass
Still wet with birth-slime.

This might be called, if somewhat pretentiously, Murray's mystical pastoral lyricism and it is not far removed from these lines which end Vincent Buckley's very good early poem 'Winter Gales':

Winter is bare of silences. And through the leaves
Our walnuts find their dark. A season when the hearts
Of women shrink, and men go before the wind
As the figtrees do, or the pines; for nothing here has walls
To hold the escaping dark continuous wind.

In both these passages there is a more overtly 'religious' reverence than there is in 'Noonday Axeman' or 'Driving Through Sawmill Towns'. The lyricism is somehow more generalised, almost pantheistic. Mystery and awe predominate; there is no place at all for individuality in the people. Both these poems attempt to dramatise a kind of collective consciousness, the sense of humans facing the vastness of the natural world and seasons. It is the sort of thing that we find in the early parts of The Tree of Man where White keeps referring to 'the man' and 'the woman'. The dog doesn't even have a name. But the writing that most closely resembles these two passages and particularly the Buckley is Lawrence's—specifically Lawrence in the early part of The Rainbow (and perhaps also the latter part of St Mawr). What unites all three—the Buckley passage, the Murray, and the Lawrence—is the vision of man's relationship with the active natural forces as the significant shaping force over human beings. Clearly this is more an adumbration than a definition—for instance, Murray's pastoral lyricism often celebrates not so much nature's activity but rather her stillness and timelessness. There is never any doubt, however, about the importance of the presence of the natural world, and the fullness of that presence. One seldom finds in Buckley's earlier poetry (and it is the earlier poetry that is more consistently relevant in this context, much of the more recent writing being concerned mainly with human relationships and social interaction and the impact of mass urban culture on individuality) the same hushed reverence which characterises these lines of Murray's:

clay never ploughed
Since the world's beginning.

The assumption which has shaped this essay is that lyrical passages are often those which reveal most clearly the nature of a poet's imagination. I have been mainly discussing lyricism which focusses awe in the face of a vibrant natural world and which celebrates that natural world as the most important shaping force for a fulfilling human life. I have spoken of this poetry as essentially 'religious' largely because the sharp sense of the particular that so often occurs in, say, Murray's poetry becomes subsumed into a transcendent view of the rural landscape and the final smallness, though never insignificance, of man's place within it. For many of the contemporary Australian poets, however, the backdrop is urban and social. Vincent Buckley's recent sequence Golden Builders, alongside certain poems of Bruce Dawe's provides the clearest instance of lyricism working to image and define spontaneity and freshness; the truly imaginative is juxtaposed against the mundane. There is no sense in Golden Builders or in Dawe's poetry of a tran-
scendent order. If human beings seem somehow weaker here than they do in Murray's poetry, they seem also somehow stronger; they fill the stage:

— I think of the rock-thrower, the glazier's benefactor, raining down meaning from beyond the subdivisions, proclaiming the everlasting evangel of vulnerability — and the suburbs of men shrink to one short street where voices are calling now from point to point: 'Is that you, Frank?'

'Is that you, Les?'

'Is that you, Harry?'

'Is that you, Harry?'

'See anything?'

'Nup...

'Nup...

'Nup...

(Nup...

(Bruce Dawe, 'The Rock-Thrower')
The Davison house at "Folding Hills", Arthur's Creek.
In the 1920’s Frank Dalby Davison wrote the book that made him famous. Most Australians, if they have not read it, have heard of *Manshy*—the story of a red heifer from a mob of scrubber cattle in Queensland, who learned to value freedom above everything. The story of that book is an interesting study of an author’s determination. Davison wrote it first as a magazine story in instalments. It was published in *The Australian*, the magazine that Davison’s father was producing at the time. When the Depression hit him in the 1930’s Davison cut out the instalments, pasted them up, and tried to persuade publishers to print the story as a book. He failed. The publishers would say, “What’s your book about?” “It’s about a cow.” “Well, we don’t want to read about cows.” So Davison recalled his unsuccessful attempts. Eventually he paid a printer in the Sydney suburbs to print *Manshy*. He took home the sheets, folded and stitched them, bound them into books with wallpaper bought at Anthony Hordern’s and tramped the streets selling copies of the work at sixpence a piece, door to door. It was not until the book won the Australian Literature Society’s medal for the best novel of the year that Angus and Robertson agreed to publish it in 1931.

That was the beginning of Davison’s career in writing—a book that took seven years to see the light. But before he died of cancer on his farm twenty-five miles north of Melbourne in 1970 Davison was to tread a much longer and lonelier path and produce the other book that makes his name today. It is a huge novel of 520,000 words, a book that deals with human beings, Sydney-siders, and their sexual expressions of themselves as no other Australian writer has dealt with them, a book that took 22 years to write in the kitchen of his weatherboard farmhouse, “Folding Hills”, at Arthur’s Creek—the novel called *The White Thorntree*.

Maree Davison, the author’s widow, still works “Folding Hills”. Today the big jets come silently from behind the Kinglake mountains and float over the Davison farm, steadying back, pulling their sound after them, waiting in stack to land at Tullamarine International Airport twenty miles away. Maree Davison spares them a glance as the sun slides down their bullet bodies and turns back to lumping bales of hay, cutting the twine, kicking the bales out, tying the twine around her waist so that the cattle will not eat it and die. The cows come threading in across the green hill as they used to do when Frank Dalby Davison was alive. His ashes are scattered not thirty yards away. In the shade of the same tree is the burial place of Sheila, his beloved red setter workdog that dogged his footsteps in the paddocks and oversaw his work on his books.

“There was always the smell of farm dog to accompany the writing of *Thorn-
"tree", says Maree Davison. "Sheila used to settle into that kitchen corner at Frank's elbow as he wrote in the light from the window."

Davison's life up to the time that he bought the Arthur's Creek farm in 1948 had contained the two elements that were to loom large in his later years—writing and the land. After growing up in Gardenvale, Melbourne, Davison left school at twelve to go onto land that his father had bought at Kinglake in the ranges north of Melbourne. He later worked mustering cattle on a station at Bulumwaal in the Gippsland mountains. But when he was fifteen Davison was dragged from this environment to go with his family to America, where in Chicago he learned his father's trade—that of master printer. From that time writing, print and publication were familiar to him. He served with the British cavalry in the Great War; years later he turned his experiences into his classic story of the Australian Light Horse, The Wells of Beersheba.

Davison brought a wife home from England when he returned to the land in western Queensland after the war. It was the next four years that later provided Davison with his material for Manshy and Dusty, although the gathering of literary material was far from Davison's mind at the time. The Queensland venture brought little but grinding physical work. It failed. Davison then joined his father in Sydney, writing and producing The Australian, the magazine in which Manshy first appeared. As an estate agent for a time, and as a special contributor to the Bulletin, he worked on books and short stories. The Second World War saw him working first in Sydney in the Commonwealth Aircraft Department and later in Melbourne on a steady salary for the Department of Labour and National Service. From Sydney he had brought Maree, his second wife, to the house in Albert Street opposite Patrick's Cathedral that saw the first pages of Thorntree written.

"It was a pre-Kinsey book, you must remember", Maree emphasises. "No one in Australia had ever touched that sort of material in that way before." Davison, working all day and writing at night, had a nervous collapse as he pushed on with the early chapters.

Not only Davison's novels, but a number of his best short stories had centred on the land and the natural world—stories like "The Good Herdsman", "Sojourners", and perhaps his finest, "The Road to Yesterday". But others, like "The Woman at the Mill", he realized later, had been a preparation for his long enquiry into the more complex subject matter of The White Thorntree—the world of men and women and their emotional and sexual relationships.

Eventually settled at "Folding Hills" above the timbered gullies that rang with birdsong, Davison milked, fed the pigs, reclaimed the patches of poor ground of the farm for pasture. He had at last the combination of farming and writing that he had sought for years. But he was not a constant writer. "The sap would usually rise in June, July, August", Maree Davison explains. "But once he was started, once he began novelling as we used to say, he became obsessed. He'd put his foot in the pig bucket; he tramped through some fresh cement he'd only just put down—quite oblivious. The footsteps are still there. While he worked round the farm he'd be thinking how he could handle the next section of the book. And the kitchen floor would fill up with his 'snowballs'—he'd write a bad page, tackle it the wrong way, screw it up into a snowball, throw it on the floor to be picked up later and burned in the stove."

The White Thorntree is based on fact, on things that had happened to Davison as a younger man, on things seen, things heard. It was carefully researched for detail. The Mr Justice Edmondson of the novel, for instance—the judge of the Supreme Court who presides over David Munster's trial for acts of gross indecency—is modelled on Mr Justice Barry of the Victorian Supreme Court. Davison sat in on the judge's cases, listened, noted the procedures, found out how a judge feels,
how he relaxes, where he has his lunch, where his gown is kept, and so on.

So Thorntree progressed, with breaks for the weekly trips to Melbourne in the old Holden 'ute to sell the eggs from “Folding Hills”, and the return journey, through “the stations of the Cross” as Davison called them, to pick up bread for the pigs here, mash for the fowls there. A fortnightly visit, too, to see Vance and Nettie Palmer, and the occasional counter-lunch with friends from the English Department at Melbourne University. And in the last years, the more sombre trips to Melbourne for Davison’s cancer treatment.

Maree Davison typed the whole novel as her husband wrote it. “Frank would trust me not to look at what he’d written until he wanted me to”, she says. She lays out the several black manuscript books of the novel she had produced. “We’d argue over some sections. I’d say I thought one part was a bit shaky. He’d say, ‘Hand the bloody thing over!’ and he’d work on it. Frank wrote the foreword to Thorntree dozens of times. I said, ‘It’s too long’. He knew it was. So he grunted and set to shorten it. And he got so sick of writing that clinical, sociological style that at one stage he let go with dozens of pages about Shirley Brighton in Queensland—a glorious romp, full of four-letter words. He really let fly, got great relief from it. He showed it to me. I said: It’s good, but it doesn’t fit. He said: I know, blast it! He didn’t use it of course. He burnt it; a pity I think.”

The White Thorntree emerged as “a tale of human trouble” as Davison knew it had to be; a novel that refused to blink the fact that we, in our sexuality and human relations are complex creatures, that we must, as Davison saw it, work out our own part in a schemeless life, a life that “offers no solutions”. Davison’s detailed knowledge of publishing told him, after all those years of work, that a book of Thorntree’s length would hardly be likely to find a publisher. “I felt myself rather in the position of a man building an ocean liner in a slipway somewhere on the upper reaches of the Darling River, wondering where on earth he was ever to get water to take her to sea”, Davison confessed later. In 1967, with the writing of Thorntree nearly finished, Maree Davison was following close behind, typing up three clean copies—“one for the Mitchell Library, one for the National Library at Canberra, and one for ourselves”. Davison held little hope of getting out even a subscription edition with all the costs and the correspondence involved. Nevertheless he called to see his friend Robert Cugley of the small National Press in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, to get estimates of costs of typesetting, presswork, binding and so on, before trying to publish the book himself through a private printer. “You just can’t turn into the first print shop you come to with a 1000-page novel under your arm and leave it there”, Davison explained. Cugley, a printer very interested in the arts, theatre and creative writing in Australia, read the manuscript and offered more than estimates—he offered to publish Thorntree.

“I can’t recall what I said in reply”, Davison recounted at a dinner to celebrate the appearance of the book in November 1968. “I can only hope that it was something appropriate; for the plain fact is that I couldn’t quite believe it; nor could my wife when I met her later in the day to drive home to our farm. I was not that we disbelieved Bob Cugley; but we needed time to adjust ourselves to the thought that the long haul was at an end.”

So the Thorntree was brought out in the dim printery at the National Press, where the floorboards creak under the weight of tons of printer’s lead, and the light washes in through the plane trees in Lonsdale Street onto stacks of job printing and ranks of seldom-used wooden blocks. A year later, as promised, the first copies were ready, a professional job, cloth and boards, and with a dust-jacket by Clifton Pugh, the artist, a great friend of the Davisons.

Two years later Ure Smith brought out a further edition of the book; its critical reception was good, and Owen Webster brought a television crew from the ABC
Robert Cugley reading proofs at his National Press, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.
to “Folding Hills” to interview Davison. The writer knew that his life’s work was done, knew that he had less than eighteen months to live. ABC cars broke the quiet of the track up to the house, OB vans arrived, technicians and cameramen stalked the farm from 6 o’clock in the morning, getting the feel of the place.

Maree Davison remembers every detail. “It was warm March weather. The TV crew was marvellous. It was a big thing for Frank. And of course the ABC people didn’t realize that they were interviewing a dying man. Anyway, after all the preparations and tests and tea and biscuits Owen Webster and Frank settled down at the side of the house in front of the cameras and talked. They wondered if Frank would be nervous, but once the questions started to flow and he got into it they talked about his boyhood and the Thorntree and it was quite natural. When the hands and feet started to move they knew it was all right ... quite natural and good ...”
Epilogue

We were born tired
already knowing the lassitude of the end
our limbs full of defeated moments
passing each other in the darkness
of low ceiling rooms
the walls of massive rock, abrasive,
indifferent, closing the space.
Unable to imagine futures
in these long medicinal rooms
full of staircases leading nowhere
the telephone ringing—
messages from the departed souls
that can find no rest.
Who will hear our cries outside.
Only the rain falling silently
and the closed doors
marked exit.
It would not surprise me if Raymond Williams' three major works to date—*Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *The Country And The City* (1973)—caused a minor crisis in an English department at an Australian college of advanced education or university in the early years of the next century. One argument in support of such speculation is the unconscionably long time taken for F. R. Leavis to create a fracas in this country. There are arguments, however, against this wild prediction. The first is that by the early years of the next century no English departments will exist—at least as they have been known throughout this century. By that date, history, sociology and mass media studies will have merged with literary study. Arguments about the boundaries of disciplines will be both dull and superfluous. They will be seen as a footnote on the sands of time or at least as a textual emendation to a chapter of academic history. The second argument against my foray into futurology will be the conviction of anti-Marxist literary academics that Williams' year of controversy is likely to be 1984.

If the first paragraph of an article about Williams' latest book, *The Country And The City*, is phrased in terms controversial as this, people who do not, or claim that they cannot, read him may be persuaded to peruse someone writing about him. One has only to mention his name to a group of literary academics to hear tales of woe about trying to grapple with convoluted prose and Marxist jargon. The following article tries to write about Williams; not write like Williams.

In Britain he has been seen by both historians and literary critics as the sort of figure one may choose to place chronologically after, say, T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis if one is writing intellectual or literary critical history that includes the twentieth century. His books form the basis of whole courses that explore his approaches to and selection of other writers. Such degree of concern is not evident in Australia.

Williams has always been irritated by the straight-jackets of academic disciplines when his areas of interest have merged history, media, sociology and literature. When he began to bridge gaps among these areas he needed to be conscious and deliberate. Partly because there is far more interdisciplinary study now in Britain, and to a lesser extent in Australia, the vehement critic of institutional restrictions imposed by neat academic departments may appear to be the victim of changes for which he has been partly responsible. If too much of Williams' scholarship depended on changes that governing bodies can make overnight, he could be seen as a man protesting too much when there is no longer the same urgency as in the recent past.

I want to try to argue that, in the Australian context, this would be a super-

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ficial reason for not taking Williams seriously. The most stringent critics of English departments have moved out of them. They treat them as jokes. They find niches in related areas where they continue to look at literature from perspectives broader than those they were encouraged to develop in English. Good luck to them. There is more interdisciplinary study than ever before—particularly at colleges of advanced education and hopefully at Griffith and Murdoch. Although there are some interdisciplinary courses offered by staff who are financed by English budgets, often there is little discussion between these academics and the more traditional literary critics. They are suspicious of each other. The end result seems to be that the more these interdisciplinary changes occur, the more traditional English departments remain the same. This is unfortunate. Both threatened exclusively literary specialists and victimized or frustrated interdisciplinary aspirants can become equally arrogant. They explain away their cynicism as realism; dismiss those advocating further discussion between different sides as misty-eyed idealists.

If I were convinced that the issues were as simple as this I would not bother to struggle with Williams and then try to write about him. (After all, it is very easy to ignore academics who write about other academics. It can be dismissed as incest. Or it can be suggested that the writer is sadly in need of a few poems or novels.) Williams is particularly relevant to the issue raised because he has produced most of his books as a fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge. He is employed in the English department. It follows that it is not essential to leave English in order to write something worthwhile.

There may come a time when it is no longer necessary to talk about Williams in terms of departments in tertiary institutions. I for one would welcome the day when he becomes passé because of the widespread availability of the very educational processes he has advanced and exemplified. Since this time is not yet approaching, he would seem the perfect intellectual for assisting these hoped-for changes. One could anticipate current reference to him as someone who had advanced analysis beyond narrow lines and yet not succumbed to over-generalization. Unfortunately one would be over-optimistic. It is always possible to lament the fact that other people do not seem to have heard of or been influenced by a writer for whom one has deep respect and to whom one owes a not inconsiderable intellectual debt. It is even possible to sound rather pathetic. It should prove valuable, therefore, to look at representative examples of the reception Williams has received here. Two articles in particular.

The first was written by Gerald Gill and published in the New Left Marxist journal Arena. It is called “Culture: Leavis and Marx”. To argue that the two writers are similar Gill has to ignore most of Leavis’ output and Scrutiny’s avowed anti-Marxism. These factors make Gill’s an inaccurate article. Other factors make it a very revealing article. It was first delivered as a paper to an English seminar at a university. Here Gill made as little reference to Marx as possible. When it was published Marx was added. Is it possible to be less influenced by Marx than a writer adopting this procedure? It is important not to dismiss such behaviour as duplicity or hypocrisy. Gill was trained in a traditional English department. Because of this training he evidently believed that it would be impossible to introduce Marx into the discussion. It is equally likely that if Gill were a classical Liberal he would have felt inhibited about introducing J. S. Mill into the discussion. The important conclusion to draw is that Gill’s training made him feel that it was impolite to mix literature and politics. Moreover, it is extraordinary that his article contains many only partially acknowledged references to Williams’ Culture and Society. It approaches the incredible that an article called “Culture: Leavis and Marx” published in 1971 makes its most analytical points by using Williams. It would appear that Williams is not yet with us in person; his spirit, however, lurks behind the scenes.
The second article is called "A Historian's Comments Upon Culture and Society and The Long Revolution". It is written by Barry Smith and published in the Melbourne Historical Journal. If Gill's case shows how difficult it can be to link other disciplines with literary criticism, Smith's case shows how difficult it can be for historians to read people whom they believe to be literary critics without sounding as if history could only be a body of blunt facts, dates and places. Smith says, in effect, that history is his field and that Williams should leave him to it and return to reading poems, plays and novels. This may be one view of history. It is only one view, however, because there are many contemporary historians who acknowledge that their subject is the complex process of people as they change societies and societies as they change people. With genuine humility these historians never stop trying to understand the feelings of people as they experience political, economic, social, family, demographic and communication changes. They believe literature to be a particular kind of evidence along with other evidence. It is not necessarily more important than other data. But it is different. Its difference is respected.

Smith imports to Williams views that the latter has never countenanced. In turn, he says that Williams has ignored points that can be found in the pages of his books. Of Culture and Society Smith says:

Mr Williams rejects belief in "the organic society" at one point, but nonetheless he constantly infers it in tracing the course of "fragmentation" of society and culture in the nineteenth century.

I would have thought that the specific rejection of Leavis' "organic society" would have been sufficient reason for not being accredited with such a belief. In a footnote directly following this sentence Smith is pleased to find that in 1967 Williams "partially recants" the false history that only Smith thinks that Williams has ever believed. Smith continues by saying that Williams "create[s] a new source of rural alienation in 'rural capitalism', again without any enquiry into recent historical work on the subject". I sincerely hope that after the publication of The Country And The City Barry Smith will refrain from speculating on the research areas of other men who, when they publish the scholarship that has underpinned occasional pieces in The Listener, reveal their profound and long term absorption in the very field of which Smith has pronounced them ignorant.

Smith's prophecies about what Williams could not know anything about bring us directly to the subject matter and methodology of Williams' recent work. Only a person thoroughly versed in both the imaginative literature and the agricultural and demographic history of Britain would be in a position to dismiss the book. It is like and unlike Richard Hoggart's Speaking To Each Other in important ways. It is far more autobiographical than anything else he has written except for the two novels. This makes it similar to The Uses of Literacy and Speaking To Each Other. It is vastly different from Hoggart's second book, however, because it merges the study of literature and history in a country-city framework that naturally includes class from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Hoggart divided his book into two volumes. The first stressed society; the second, literature. Much as I admire and have learned from the first volume, I believe his second volume to be unremarkable because of its delimited area. It contains only superficial connections between literature and other aspects of society. While Williams' study is less well-organized and in its selection of twentieth century writers downright arbitrary, nevertheless the very complex tension and inter-relation between what used to be called literature and society is evident on almost every page. It must have been a fiendishly difficult book to write and on internal evidence its completion has taken half a lifetime.
Although I would never patronize a man of Williams' intellectual stature I want to try to talk about the book more systematically than a simple chronological synopsis allows. At the risk of over-simplifying and being over-selective by categorizing more than Williams does, I hope to clarify Williams' methodologies in my own mind and share his attainments. Throughout the book and persistently in the first half, Williams argues for the existence of rural capitalism in Britain long before industrial capitalism. In the concluding chapters he extends this view to show that predominantly rural colonies controlled from Europe became, in an economic sense, Britain's rural hinterland. It follows, therefore, that while Williams has written specifically about Britain his concerns extend to the current ecological, population and resources crisis which is intimately involved with the Third World. Once Williams has established rural capitalism, or more precisely as he proceeds to establish it, he condemns those kinds of literature that convert rural life into a mystique. On the basis of his historical research he simply declares some literature to be nonsense. On the other hand he recognizes some literature as correct. This approach seems absurdly simplistic. What complicates it, however, is Williams' treatment of Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy. Whereas he endorses the viewpoint of some obscure poets and the novelist Lewis Grassic Gibbon (Lewis Grassic who?) because they agree with his own experiences and views, he knows enough about the social history of Austen's class and about the demographic and agricultural changes of Hardy's region to allow himself to accept the detail of these two writers as authentic historical evidence. For an aesthetic critic Williams degrades them by such use. In fact this treatment is his highest compliment. For Williams aesthetic pyrotechnics never excuse snobbery or the systematic grim exploitation of men by other men. There is another way in which Williams relates literature to other aspects of history. He looks for interplay among various factors. He searches for cause and effect and correlation patterns. When he finds them, he regards them as interesting. A writer's being right or wrong is not as important as Williams' analysis.

One way of seeing these approaches is to note that when Williams decides on whether a writer is historically accurate or not he employs the methodology of most of Culture And Society. There is, however, a different emphasis. Whereas in his first major book he stressed culture he now stresses society. Moreover, when he is less concerned with whether a writer is right or wrong but more preoccupied with his own analysis he uses the sociological methodology of The Long Revolution.

To begin, then, with rural capitalism. There has never been a golden age. There was a feudal age generally in Europe and specifically in Britain. There were kings, lords and serfs. There were castles and armies that protected the serfs who were exploited mercilessly in return for their security. There were no towns. Williams has looked at the various historical arguments advanced to explain the development of towns and concluded that the main reason was their use as centres of finance, administration and marketing for the rural social order. Feudalism gradually changed and would eventually become rural capitalism. The landlords exploited rural workers and tenant farmers. The work was arduous. The hours long. The rents high. The wages low. The weather often inclement. Disease and plague rife.

In the eighteenth century came the morality of improvement. This meant specialized agricultural production for markets. Economically, the feudal aristocracy became rural capitalists, no matter what the trappings of inherited title. Capital was necessary for land improvement and, as Arthur Young recognized towards the end of his life, the final result of improved production was that land resided in fewer hands. That second age of enclosures caused more dispossessed people. Farmers only marginally dominated by lords before because of distance from the country-house were forced into direct contact and submission. Despite the import-
ance of enclosures of both waste and more importantly of open arable fields, it is a mistake, however, not to see pauperism and hundreds and thousands of landless people before the enclosures. Williams has done his research. He has all the figures. The combination of increased productivity and increased poverty was one of the paradoxes of efficient capitalism. The lords who had stolen the people's land now punished the hungry people for stealing the lord's game. It was needed for hunting, after all.

There was nowhere else for the disposed to go but to cities and towns, where they were not welcome. London's local authorities, for instance, tried to exclude the rural riff raff by delimiting the city's area. The authorities were unsuccessful. Speculative builders housed them in unsanitary, labyrinthine, overcrowded alleys. Eighteenth century London was "the astonishing creation of an agrarian and mercantile capitalism, within an aristocratic political order":

It was a case of a capital city drawing the character of an economy and a society into its extraordinary centre: order and chaos both.

It is important to realize, however, that London's disorder was quite different from the systematic and uniformly monotonous new industrial towns that were decisively organized around factories. Here the rural labourer becomes Engels' and Marx's industrial working class, the society of *Culture And Society*.

Williams concedes that the country became less important to Britain throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Agriculture was not less productive; nor were fewer people engaged in its production. The urban population expanded because of improved medicine and, ironically, because of increased agricultural production. At the same time European colonial expansion meant that aspects of the country-house system from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were built on the profits of trade. Distant lands became, in effect, the rural areas of Britain. Unemployed men from urban slums and superfluous landless farmer workers survived by massacring and regimenting the rural poor of subordinated colonies. These poor, who in most cases had practised subsistence agriculture, submitted to the hegemony of urban markets by changing to single crop plantation economies that could hardly have been more vulnerable. Rural underdevelopment, therefore, was the product of urban development. Only revolution such as in China and Cuba has eliminated these inequalities. In many other Third World countries independence has been a political gloss on continued economic exploitation. Williams adds that it has taken well-educated urban socialists too long to recognize that the most revolutionary force in the world over the last forty years has been the so-called rural idiot. (He could have emphasized racial aspects of the above analysis but perhaps that would have involved another volume.)

The British villager is better off now than ever before. He has trains, improved agricultural methods, schools and a vote. Williams says that there is nothing wrong with new production techniques nor with much industrialization. It is the mode of production that is at fault—minority capitalist ownership. The minority treats the majority as objects. Moreover the mode of production is so pervasive in allied services such as transport (private cars) and communications (commercial newspapers and television) that most human relations are only modes of use and consumption. Williams now looks back a generation to the post-war years when extreme subjectivism and existential fatalism dominated European thought. If the ecology crisis has caused Williams to feel more connections with other people he realizes that the important decisions of the future lie in the area of decision itself: in modes of social concern and control.

Many classical writers were farmers. They worked with animals. Their hands blistered or calloused. Their skins and bodies were affected by weather and seasons.
Some were dispossessed by enclosures before Christ. Renaissance literature tended to filter out hard work and long hours from Greek and Roman literature while contriving to use the classics as references. The organic society, that powerful error of British intellectual life, if taken far enough back in time returns to the garden of Eden. There was no need to work in the pre-lapsarian idyll. Labour accompanied sin, death and banishment. Dryads and Sylphs from some of the classics and the Christian Eden seem to have provided inexhaustible delight and diversion for Renaissance writers. Too many references to hard work and grubby animals would have revealed a peasant attitude unsuited to the few educated literary gentlemen.

Williams shows that Crabbe's poetry, for instance, contained some authentic rural experience. Dr Johnson was not satisfied, however; he touched it up with a few classical references. This was more than the snobberies of standard English. It was the deliberate concealment of transitions from feudalism to a bourgeois world. If classical references could continue to permeate English literature, apparently Dr Johnson's view of the world would not be forced to change. Perhaps societal change itself could be delayed or diverted.

The neo-pastoral was the art form correlated with rural capitalism. Its location was the country-house, centre of power, money and exploitation of rural labour. Country life was consciously idealized in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century poetry to hide actual social and economic relations. Williams sees Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" not as the celebration of rural dignity but as an unconscious lament for passing nobility in an age of rural greed. The writers (Jonson and Carew) who shared in country feasts shared only in consumption; not production. The latter was done by tenant farmers who shared the lord's food in what appears to be charity on the lord's part, but what was in fact the fruit of their own labour, mystified by Jonson and Carew into the bounty and order of nature. Historically, both the celebrated rural Penshurst and Saxham owed their patronage of the arts firstly to royal connections and then to powerful positions as country-houses at the centre of rural capitalism.

The sixteenth and seventeenth century poetry that constantly exposed the corruption of town and city and gloried in rural innocence succumbed to a historical stereotype. The country was responsible for the development and characteristics of the towns. Although the morality of improvement caused massive pauperisation and dispossession, it increased productivity. Oliver Goldsmith was wrong, therefore, to believe that human happiness was inextricably linked with the high yields of the old village agriculture and that the historical misery of poverty was connected with or caused by low agricultural productivity. When unhindered by Dr Johnson, Crabbe saw the increasing inequalities of poverty and wealth. He did not see them, however, as social contrasts with interlocked causes and effects. He was morally preoccupied with the care of paupers rather than the causes of pauperism.

In some of the most brilliantly sarcastic paragraphs in the book Williams looks at the eighteenth century notion of landscape. It does not surprise him that the landlord (accompanied by his troupe of poets) has been accredited with the invention of natural beauty. In a very real sense the landlord did invent the landscape of natural beauty because landscape is not the perspective of a rural worker. The new self-conscious observer of landscape was the self-conscious owner. Williams subjects internal histories of landscape gardening, painting, architecture and writing to the scrutiny of general history, thus demonstrating the jejune and antiquarian specialisms of much painstaking scholarship.

He is as strongly opposed to literature filled with archetypes as to criticism overfilled with them. They are thoroughly ahistorical abstractions of individual attributes extended into collective physic or metaphysical mystiques without any
reference to society. Indeed society, without which there can be no language, is seen as an impediment to subterranean springs of a static human condition. Archetypes are the parochial projections of one's own experience onto the rest of the human race by mystical processes without even consulting some other members of the human race in order to discover the accuracy or otherwise of one's projections. For example Williams argues that T. S. Eliot's later poetry shows a symbolic rather than historical association of religious faith with tradition and the rural past.

These are the kinds of treatment of rural life, then, that Williams opposes. When I say that one of the writers whom he singles out for special praise is Stephen Duck it would not surprise me if more than one reader burst into audible laughter. References to writers whom most undergraduates do not hear of in three years of literary study has always been one of the aspects of Williams' work that points to new horizons. I will refer to his views on the well-known Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy after first looking at some relatively unknown figures. Williams praises the authentic early rural poetry of Duck, proving that it is preferable to the windy ecclesiastical verse of his later years, verse that Duck was encouraged to write by men totally ignorant of the farm labour that filled his early work with touch, sound and smell. Williams refers to the neglected poetry of cobbler James Woodhouse, washer-woman Mary Collier and milk-seller Ann Yearsley. He devotes some space to analysis of and commentary on the poetry of cobbler Robert Bloomfield and jack-of-all trades Alexander Somerville. On the evidence that is presented to the reader there would seem no reason to dismiss these people because one has not heard of them. Indeed Williams persuades me that my ignorance is the effect of the snobberies of past centuries.

When Williams informs the reader about the works and concerns of the twentieth century novelist Lewis Grassic Gibbon, it is clear that more than ignorance and snobbery has been involved in the strong possibility that one has not heard of this writer. When Williams compares D. H. Lawrence to Gibbon it is to Lawrence's disadvantage. The latter would not confront the idea and practice of social agencies of change. His rural religious primitivism had no existence in history or society. Lawrence opposed not only trade unions but also education and democracy. Gibbon wrote novels about the importance of the labour movement in improving the lives of exploited people. It is easy to say that Gibbon is not a "good" writer. But are not issues raised in The Country And The City relevant to such decisions? Is not Gibbon's case yet another where only left-wing politics is seen as political?

Williams believes that Jane Austen's novels are a perfect record of her class. It would be wrong to convey the impression that he has ignored characters, scenes and action when he discusses her work. Nevertheless the following passages are conclusions derived from long study and show a remarkable faith in the accuracy of her perceptions.

It is indeed that most difficult world to describe, in English social history: an acquisitive, high bourgeois society at the point of its most evident interlocking with an agrarian capitalism that is itself mediated by inherited titles and by the making of family names.

Again:

She guides her heroines, steadily, to the right marriages. She makes settlements, alone, against all the odds, like some supernatural lawyer, in terms of that exact proportion to moral worth which could assure the continuity of the general formula. [The formula is the correlation of happiness and materialism.]

It is very unusual for Williams to treat writers in this way. His use of Thomas Hardy's novels is equally unusual and revealing.
Williams believes that the essential Hardy is lost if he is seen only as a regional writer. In reality he wrote about the border country between custom and education, work and ideas, love of place and experience of change. There are many times throughout Williams' book where he speaks autobiographically about rural life. Indeed he has allowed himself far more scope for personal revelation here than in any previous work except for the two novels. Now he is close to Hoggart's combination of autobiography and sociology. And it is perhaps in his treatment of Hardy that he reveals most about his own feelings, tensions and loyalties:

Often we know in ourselves, very deeply, how much those educated values, those intellectual pursuits, are needed urgently where custom is stagnation or where old illusions are still repeated as timeless truths. We know especially how much they are needed to understand change—change in the heart of the places where we have lived and worked and grown up.

The ideas, the values, the educated methods are of course made available to us if we get to a place like Christminster: if we are let in as Jude was not. But with the offer, again and again, comes another idea: that the world of everyday work and of ordinary families is inferior, distant; that now we know this world of the mind we can have no respect—and of course no affection—for that other and still familiar world. If we retain an affection, Christminster has a name for it: nostalgia. If we retain respect, Christminster has another name: politics or the even more dreaded 'sociology'.

The remaining type of methodological insight involves Williams' attempt to explain correlation, cause and effect patterns in that difficult area of study which, technically neither literature nor history, draws on both. He finds it particularly revealing that only towards the end of the century of improvement is nature referred to as a lonely and prophetic consolation for lives lacking the warmth of human relationships. Similarly the taste for wildness and the picturesque developed during a century of reclamation, drainage and clearing. One was a reaction against the other. Again in much of Wordsworth's poetry Williams finds feelings of oneness of men and nature abstracted from actual social relationships, ironically embodied in wanderers and lonely beggars. Thus Williams extends the way he viewed Wordsworth in *Culture and Society*. As well as being the product of a reaction against democracy, industrialization, urbanization and capitalism, Wordsworth's structure of feeling included a response to rural dispossession and vastly improved land use.

It would be unusual for most literary scholars, but it is typical of Williams' books that, when considering the literature of cities, he includes Charles Booth's work. He recognises Booth's reduction of the poor to objects of study, his classifying and grading and lack of general ideas about the historical character of society. He says, however, that this kind of literature has been responsible for the replacement of charity by social services and a need for this sort of data has been imposed by the complexity and scale of modern civilisation.

It is only in the last hundred years that literature has come to mean *belles lettres*. The reason why literary academics take so little notice of the social reasons for and consequences of literature may be that novel, short story and poem have less chartable effects than other literary forms. To say that they have no effects, however, seems an odd view. Because Williams has always been interested in what literature does, as well as what it is and why it is written, he has never limited himself to a narrow definition of literature just for the sake of neat courses, disciplines and self-answering sets of questions.
The Obscenity of Pain

Bergman's "Cries & Whispers"

I think I understand why many people dislike Bergman's latest film, *Cries & Whispers*, and I do not want to contest this dislike—matters of taste, after all, are beyond dispute. However, I do want to argue the reason that is often given for this dislike, that the film is too mannered, too thin emotionally because lacking in human feeling, too much in love with pain and death. For these are serious charges, serious enough to discredit the film and to suggest that it is indeed, as these critics assert, a perverse work, one which "breeds dangerous dispositions to life".

Essentially, I believe, the differences over this film arise from the fact that Bergman's sense of reality does not accord with the common sense of things which prevails in our culture, and it is the sense of reality the film generates which I want to explore. For here, as in most works of art, it is not the facts but the values accorded them which matter.

On the surface, the story of *Cries & Whispers* is simple. It takes place at the turn of the century in an old country mansion set in the trees and lawns of its park, and the camera documents its elegant prosperity, dwelling on the furniture, the crystal and silver, the ornaments and curios with which it is filled. Here we meet the three sisters, daughters of the house and the housekeeper, Anna, the faithful family retainer of tradition. But the story itself is far from traditional since it turns not so much on action as on suffering and centres not on the two sisters who are successful in the worldly sense, Karin and Maria, both of whom make socially successful marriages, but on the third sister, Agnes, who has always been less handsome, less successful than the others and who is now dying of cancer. Her talent, it seems, is for suffering, and the film documents this with meticulous and unrelenting accuracy. Indeed, suffering becomes a kind of horizon to the action as a whole and serves as the touchstone of character. Karin and Maria, the two apparently successful sisters, emerge as failures, not merely because the emptiness of their lives becomes apparent as the action proceeds, but rather because they prove helpless to assuage their sister's pain. In contrast, Anna, the maid, emerges as the centre of value since, unlike them, she is able to support Agnes and help her to achieve her painful destiny.

Structurally, too, the action turns on Agnes' suffering, moving not in a linear time sequence but in a series of flash backs which all centre on a return to Agnes and her illness. Karin and Maria, the other two sisters, act as foils to her. Maria the pretty, frivolous sister, has been carrying on an affair with the family doctor attending Agnes. But this relationship, with its mutual self-deception, emphasised in the scene where the two lovers stand in front of the mirror recognising there in
their faces the marks of their own selfishness and dissatisfaction, stands in macabre contrast to the integrity of Agnes—she suffers fiercely, feelingly. Similarly, Karin’s life is barren and hollow whereas Agnes’ is resonant, full of “cries and whispers”. Her story reaches a grim climax in the scene in which, accepting rather than protesting the pain of her life, she masturbates with a piece of glass, confirming as it were the destructive emptiness of her marriage.

It is this obsession with suffering, this preoccupation with the futility of human relationships which provokes the charge of inhumanity against the film, of course. Certainly, it is true that Bergman does seem enamoured of his own mind and its perennial concern with the question of pain, the concern which is manifest in every film he makes. But some of the greatest artists of this century have also turned inwards, preferring self-exploration to their ostensible subjects. What is important, I suggest, is whether or not he fails to sympathise with the human beings he describes, whether he uses them as mere ciphers to spell out his own philosophy or whether, on the contrary, he respects them and their human possibilities.

In my view at least, human beings and their possibilities are central for him. Indeed, his very images reveal his moral values and emotional commitments in a way reminiscent of the medieval morality plays, opening up new dimensions of existence. The characters are lined up as it were, either as affirming or denying the value of love, though his definition of love is very different from, even antagonistic to, the popular one. Hence many people are appalled by the scene in which Bergman seems to manifest his vision of love most dramatically. This is the scene shortly after Agnes’ death in which the dead woman, summoning Karin and Maria, asks them to share her death with her. Unquestionably this is a macabre scene, and Bergman uses all the methods of the horror movie but to ends very different from theirs. Far from wanting to drag her sisters with her into the grave like a kind of Frankenstein, Agnes here seems to me to be offering her sisters the opportunity to learn, as she has done, to share everything with those you love. As in her physical agonies she has borne the pain they are suffering in their loveless marriages and empty, boring lives, so now she calls them to go with her, at least imaginatively, into death. Therefore, instead of exulting in the horror of death as some critics believe he does here, Bergman is actually affirming the strength of love and its ability to triumph over death and pain and the separation they impose.

Here, then, is the crux of the debate. For this scene poses the question of understanding, whether or not the film and the experience it offers derives exclusively from the present evidence of the senses or whether it demands another level of understanding as well. Literally, the scene seems to be preoccupied with death and decay. But it is my contention that it is not to be taken literally. While the evidence of the senses here is the starting point, it is only the starting point; the three sisters and their situation also point beyond themselves. For the whole texture of the film insists that physical pain and death are not the only kinds of suffering, that the worst human suffering is the non-fulfilment and inadequacy of Karin and Maria. In this context Agnes, physically dead, is less lost than they are. She can weep truly, she knows that she needs those she loves and longs to be with them. For her, death is an evil not because it means the end of bodily life but because it separates her from others. In contrast, Karin in particular is dead in life, plunged in the hell Sartre described in “No Exit”, the lovelessness that finds even the presence of others a torture.

This scene, then, is parabolic, and offers a key to the nature of the whole film. Obviously it did not actually occur, what we see is hypothetical: if the dead did return, then Agnes would have done so, for her love is of the kind that will not

“alter when it alteration finds
Or bend with the remover to remove.”
But the fact that Bergman gives what is hypothetical the same status as actual events makes manifest the sense which underlies the entire film, that "reality" embraces more than the evidence of the senses can account for. The action, then, records what Cassirer calls the "symbolic consciousness", all things, human, animate and inanimate appear on the one plane and are all charged with significance. Thus the camera tends to focus on certain objects, like the clocks or the brittleness of the silver and the crystal on the table during the grim dinner Karin eats with her husband, thus investing these images with a hallucinatory power. For, far from taking over the film, the imagery serves to reveal the human predicament of his characters. Sometimes, as in the dinner scene, the external world makes apparent the mood of the characters. At other times, however, it can appear as their antagonist: the constant reference to clocks, for example, sets up the opposition between the tyranny of clock time and the other, inner time in which most of the action is situated.

But what most establishes the symbolic sense seems to me to be Bergman's use of colour, above all the colour of red. In fact, the action seems to float upon a sea of red, each scene dissolving into a wash of this colour from which the next scene subsequently emerges. But red is the colour of blood, of course, and what Bergman seems to be doing here by this means is to draw us into the blood stream of his characters. The walls of the house, too, are predominantly blood red, so that he turns the house into a body as the bodies of the sisters seem also to fuse into one, united in the red which flows from one to the other and into the house.

In effect, then, Cries and Whispers is a kind of stream-of-consciousness film. In it we fall into the consciousness of the protagonists rather as Alice in Wonderland fell into her wonderful rabbit hole and there, too, experience the strange moments of contraction and expansion which are proper to the inner life. In this sense no doubt it is true to say that Bergman's emphasis is literary and philosophical rather than purely cinematic and the feeling of this film reminds me of a novel like Patrick White's The Aunt's Story with its emphasis on the flow of pure consciousness, which Husserl posits in his Phenomenology, of course, and which Henry Miller characterizes in the passage White quotes as the epigram to the central section of his novel:

"Henceforward we walk split into myriad fragments, like an insect with a hundred feet, a centipede with soft-stirring feet that drinks in the atmosphere; we walk with sensitive filaments that drink avidly of past and future and all things melt into music and sorrow; we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness. All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments. The great fragments of maturity."

Similarly Cries & Whispers suggests the dividedness of human lives as it shows the differences between the lives of the three sisters. Even within each of them, too, there is a further fragmentation as their lives split up before us into separate moments of awareness. Agnes' high point of happiness, for instance, is set in high definition against the sombre times of her physical suffering and Karin's bloody act of masturbation contrasts violently with the stiff rigidity of her pose of social completeness. The film's narrative method also emphasises this feeling of fragmentation, as the action swings backwards and forwards in time, juxtaposing past with present, very often with an emphasis on expectation—Maria's sentimental romantic hopes which make her betray both herself and her husband, or Agnes' longing for an end to her suffering.

Expectation or rather the nature of the expectation the film proposes, in fact, seems to me to be the crux of the critical differences over it. On the one hand,
Cries & Whispers is condemned because it offers so little human hope, showing us three characters, all of them suffering with death, apparently the only release. On the other hand, against this view, I believe that it is a film about salvation, that is, about the attainment of one's true status as an individual. True, Bergman has no illusions about human existence. Indeed, he puts the extreme case, the worst that can be: one sister dying of cancer and the other two desperately unhappy, condemned to loveless marriages and the empty, unfulfilled lives of social privilege. But even then, he suggests, happiness and fulfilment is possible and in this life rather than elsewhere. Moreover, this joy is very simply achieved since Agnes' supreme moment on the swing is a matter of opening herself out to the sunshine, the colours of the garden, the movement of the swing and most of all the presence around her of the people she loves. Throughout the film, the characters have been seeking for fulfilment in various ways, in memory, in hope, in orienting their lives towards some other person or project or in concentrating on possession. But here, at the end of the film, Agnes attains this goal merely by accepting the gift of this moment, as she has also accepted her suffering. Moreover, the position of the scene insists this is sufficient and more than sufficient to compensate for the painfulness of the rest of her life.

No doubt there are difficulties for many people in accepting this vision. For most of us, what is real is a matter of external weight and measure whereas the value of Agnes' awareness here is more or less immeasurable since it exists in some inner world of imagination. As Blake remarked,

"The Microscope knows not of this nor the telescope."

but as he also remarked,

"Man cannot know
What passes in his members till period of Space & Time
Reveal the secrets of Eternity: for more extensive
Than any other earthly things are Man's earthly lineaments"

Unfortunately, however, our culture does not have the symbols or artistic forms which provide easy access to this world, and this, I believe, is the reason why Cries & Whispers has been so misunderstood. What Bergman is trying to do is to affirm the possibilities of happiness and the necessity of love in a world of suffering and isolated individuality. But the symbolic forms he uses do not fit the felt tones of the secular, one dimensional, existence of many of his audience, nor are his implications really appropriate to the affluent middle-class world he described in the film. He tries valiantly, of course. For one thing, his choice of a time in which communications were still slow helps to immobilise human action. Unable to reach the doctor, Karin and Maria are rendered all the more helpless before the sufferings of Agnes in her death throes, caught, as it were,

"At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless,
Neither from nor towards; at the still point [where] the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement and do not call it fixity.
Where past and future are gathered"

For another thing, he uses Anna, the maid, to establish a centre of sheer human value. In the scene in which she holds Agnes to her breast, comforting her, she becomes an item of maternal tenderness, and mostly when she appears the camera dwells on the blooming texture of her skin and the solidity of her body. It is this quality, of course, the quality of the goodness of the earth, which flowers finally in

2 Milton, plate 31
3 ibid., plate 23
4 T. S. Eliot, The Four Quartets, "Burnt Norton", II
the scene on the swing, a moment like an Impressionist painting, all green, white and golden.

In this reading, then, the film loses its masochistic implications. Far from being a kind of victim, sacrificed to a notion of redemption that has death as its consequence, Karin appears as an image of triumphant inwardsness. Since despite the apparent disaster of her life, she is able to achieve completeness and joy. No doubt it is a tragic completeness, a tragic joy, yet concerned as we are today to affirm a future in a world which tempts us to despair for humanity, she becomes an emblem of hope.

To repeat, however, the difficulty is that to accept this hope it is necessary also to accept Bergman's preference for the inner as against the external world, and the fact that he chooses the medium of film increases this difficulty. For he wants his audience to doubt the reality of appearances, to stress the "illusion" of 'reality' and the 'reality' of "illusion", whereas film has tended, of course, to put a premium upon the appearances. Consequently, he has to work hard to discredit everything external—the crystal wine glass becomes an instrument of mutilation, the ornamental clock mocks Agnes' suffering and so on, and it is this desire to insult the common sense of things which has earned Bergman his reputation for an excessive distaste for the human and an obsession with violence. But I believe that whatever may be excessive here has a positive, not a negative, implication, like the orgies of primitive people as Eliade characterises them, as the prelude to and the renewal of fertility. These excesses, according to Eliade,

"fulfil a definite and useful role in the economy of the sacred. They break down the barrier between man, society, nature and gods. What was emptied of substance is replenished, what was shattered into fragments becomes one again, what was an isolation merges into the great womb of all things."

Perhaps Cries & Whispers appeals only to those concerned with the sacred, that is to say with some sense of a reality other than man which is both frightening and compelling, since in it Bergman seems to question the worth of the bourgeois values of material possessions, marriage and social position and rejecting them, to appeals to another, inner, dimension. Here, lives may touch and fuse, even if only briefly, one person may bear the burden of another's pain and find joy in despite of external circumstances. Here, too, one brief moment may touch upon timeless and outweigh a lifetime of suffering. These are large claims, of course, though they are the claims made by all the world's great religious traditions. It is the strength of Cries & Whispers, possibly its weakness also, that in it Bergman attempts to substantiate the claims in relation to one particular human situation, a situation, moreover, which seems to reflect the barren emptiness of the culture which relies on external possessions and position. Whether one can accept his solution, that it is necessary to dissolve the "barrier between men, society, nature and gods" is another matter, of course. For my part I can. As far as others are concerned, the sheer imaginative force of his presentation should at least provoke the question whether or not there may be, as Hamlet said, more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy.

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5 M. Eliade, Patterns of Comparative Religion (1958), p. 395
On Being Elected

There are certainly dangers for the successful candidate. Skin-saving equipment is issued at the inauguration: plastic grin guaranteed to last, inflatable ego and in a package marked DO NOT OPEN TILL NEEDED three thimbles and a pea: rely on the ceremonial that men invent to hide small souls. Voluminous files march upon us, Battle of Hastings, circa 1973, twenty years of litigation around a liquor licence.

Already it seems wise to cultivate the right image, resist the scarlet of geraniums asking to be filched from neighbour's garden or sacred municipal dump, nor abandon clippings of couch and clover on vacant lots: but how ensure small sins are not exchanged for big ones?

Must I forget my hate of dogs that foul cities and command more votes than children? Shall I muzzle my poems, no longer spout in public places without a licence, turn a deaf ear to senile Mrs Pratt, pensioner whose footpath has been dug up twice without a reason?

Doubtful swimmer elected on hopes of little people I fight the undertow, try not to panic as the shore fades; certain there will be no kiss of life if I go under only enemies gloating on my dissolving face and friends standing back from contamination.
Judith Wright: Those ‘Aunts in the Close’ and the ‘Remittance Man’

In her early poem ‘Remittance Man’ (included in her first collection, The Moving Image, 1946), Judith Wright causes her hero to recall one aspect of the life left behind in England, his formal and respectable relatives—

The spendthrift, disinherited and graceless, accepted his pittance with an easy air, only surprised he could escape so simply from the pheasant-shooting and the aunts in the close;

(11.1-4).

From there on the poem is largely concerned with Australia, apart from glances back to ‘the country ball’ (1.16), ‘the nursery window’ (1.19) and ‘the squire his brother’ (1.22), who vaguely regrets the reported passing of his younger brother. Most readers of the poem have felt the phrase ‘the aunts in the close’ to be vaguely felicitous, but have left the association there.

Students of idiom in the language have found the phrase euphonic, either formal and Trollopean, or analagous to such allocations as ‘bats in the belfry’ or the more recent Australian title Aunts up the Cross (1965)1, used by Robin Eakin to refer to her aunts and uncles of two earlier generations, whose splendid eccentricities enlightened both the writer’s growing-up and the general scene, as Sydney’s bohemian quarter, King’s Cross, endeavoured to adapt to World War II and to its social aftermath.

However, the actual phrase used by Judith Wright may be shown to not merely sound appropriate to somnolent respectability in some English Cathedral city, but to have for her both a legendary ring and a place in the 19th-Century history of her family and in its surviving documents.2 These last were long familiar to the young girl before she became the writer chronicling in verse and prose the uneasy change from the sensibility of the Old World to that of the New for various of her forebears, and particularly her great-great-grandfather, George Wyndham (1801-1870).

In 1927 Charlotte May Wright (1855-1929), Judith’s grandmother, copied portions of the Dinton-Dalwood letters from the originals and had them printed in a volume3 which she distributed, in generous numbers, to the members of her family. The correspondence which covered a period of 26 years was largely addressed to George Wyndham, the grandfather of the editor of the letters. She describes her own investigations thus—

I have been asked where I obtained these old letters, so I am writing this explanation. I remembered hearing when I was a child (I suppose from my mother) that there was a pillowcase full of old letters put up in the loft over the house at Dalwood. This house had been built in 1828 . . . about 1900, I was speaking to Heathcote Wyndham . . . about the old place and times . . . and I told him what I had heard about the bag of old letters. He went to Dalwood, climbed up in the loft,

1 The English first edition was published by Anthony Blond, while the first Australian edition was from Sun Books, in 1967.
2 Their limited availability was regretted by C. M. H. Clarke in his review of The Generations of Men in Historical Studies, Vol. 9, No. 33, November 1959, p. 106.
3 The full title of this private publication, printed by W. C. Penfold and Co. of Sydney, is Extracts from Dinton-Dalwood Letters from 1827 to 1853. This version runs to 225 pages, but in 1964 there was issued a duplicated edition on 133 quarto sheets of the same material by Dorothy Edith Wilkinson, another great-great-granddaughter of George Wyndham. It contained some additional pages of new material, largely genealogical. All textual references are to the printed book of 1927.
and found the old pillowcase, letters and all. They were in a wonderful state of preservation. (p. 7)

May Wright goes on to stress that she both wrote to England to ‘my dear old Aunt Charlotte Starky’ who was very interested in the letters of the ‘“happy band of young people” who had lived at Dinton in those early days’. She indicates that she would issue the letters as ‘a family chronicle’ and for a more general reason:

I am very glad I have been able to rescue these letters from the destruction that has overtaken so much that was looked upon as precious. I think the letters of the great-aunts who were young girls leading quiet lives in the country are a lesson to those who now look with such contempt on the old-fashioned women. (p. 8)

The point of her observation is justified by the great variety of concerns of these women, the Reform Bill, industrial problems, foreign relations, the style of rural life (this last being a latter day Wiltshire parallel to the East Anglia Paston Letters), religious issues, the family interest in Canada and Australia, the changing face of London, the coronation of Queen Victoria, and a deeply felt concern for land and stock, whether in England or in New South Wales.

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In the 1964 edition of the Dalwood-Dinton Letters there are given a number of genealogical tables of the Wyndham family both in England and in Australia. The East Anglian or earliest history of the family shows a number of significant fifteenth-century links, back to King Edward I, and also with the first Howard Duke of Norfolk. The first certain forebear, John Wymondham (c. 1410-1475) had a grandson, Vice-Admiral Sir Thomas Wymondham, who married Eleanor Scrope. Their youngest son, also Sir Thomas and a vice-admiral, led two trading expeditions to the west coast of Africa and was the first Englishman to sail south of Cape Verde. Another branch of the family, descended from their older son, Sir John, was notable for its Cavalier loyalties, supporting Charles I during the Civil War, while one of Sir John Wymondham’s grandsons, Sir Francis Wyndham of Trent, and a Royalist Commander, sheltered Charles II at Trent during his flight after the battle of Worcester. Another John, four generations after his fifteenth-century namesake, married Florence Wadham, a sister of the founder of Wadham College (thus creating the long running family link with that Oxford College).

A seventh generation Sir John had a son William who was created a baronet by Cromwell, a title confirmed by Charles II. His grandson, Sir William (1688-1740) was a man of considerable ability and a principal leader of opposition in Parliament to Walpole. In his turn, a son of the last-mentioned, Charles, was a Secretary of State and one of the ‘Triumvirate’ administration of George III from 1761 until he died in 1763. An illegitimate son of the heir to Charles, namely George, third earl of Egremont, had assumed the name Wyndham and was created Baron Leconfield in 1859, while his own grandson, George, was to become Secretary for Ireland, 1900-1905, in the Balfour Government. Other notable figures in the major line were: eighth generation William Windam (1750-1810) of Felbrigg Hall, near Cromer, who was Secretary for War 1794-1801 in Pitt’s administration, and for War and the Colonies, 1806-7; eighth generation Sir Thomas, Lord Chancellor of Ireland, 1731-9; and fourteenth generation, Sir Harold Wyndham, a recent Director-General of Education in New South Wales.

Although the family began in the Norfolk areas of Wymondham (pronounced ‘Windham’) and Felbrigg, it acquired estates in the West Country as early as 1528. The first such holding, Orchard Sydenham in Somerset, had its name changed to Orchard Wyndham (near Williton), which has been a principal estate of the family ever since. An eleventh generation Charles, as the second Earl of Egremont under George III, succeeded to a large part of the estates of the Duke of Somerset. Sir Wadham, of the seventh generation, a judge of the King’s
Francis, died in 1867, while the fifth, John, was to be rector of Sutton Manderville, near Tisbury, Wiltshire, from 1840 until his death in 1897.

The family may be seen to be one of proud and ancient lineage, with ties to two ducal families and a considerable record of service in both peace and war. It had been closely associated with nearly a dozen monarchs since Tudor times.

George Wyndham (1801-1870),7 the third son, was born at Dinton House and educated at Harrow and Cambridge, with a view to entering the ministry of the Church of England, like his uncles and his younger brother, but being something of a radical he decided to emigrate and in 1824 he went to Canada, where he travelled with John Galt, secretary of the Canada Company, and a successful novelist. Returning to Europe he went to Italy in 1825. After refusing a post under the British government, whose policy he did not approve, he decided to emigrate to Australia as a farmer. With his wife, Margaret, daughter of John Jay of Brussels, he took a number of stock, including Southdown sheep, and sailed in the *George Horne* in August 1827, reaching Sydney in December. He settled near Branxton in the Hunter River district, naming his property Dalwood, and began experimental farming.

For the first decade his enterprises prospered, but crises in labour and prices in the 1840’s caused him in 1845 to leave Dalwood under a manager, and with his wife and children he set out with horses, cattle and sheep, a few trusted stockmen and a string of covered bullock-waggons to cross the New England Plateau to the Richmond River, to settle first at Keelgyrah,8, near Kyogle, and then near Inverell at a property named Bukkulla. By 1847 prices had risen and the party returned to Dalwood. Although he largely kept out of politics in New South Wales he was a signatory to a petition seeking the importation of coolie labour after transportation to the colony had ceased.

J. Wright, *A.D.B. (loc. cit.)* This matter is referred to on a number of occasions by those writing to Dalwood from England.

The later life of George Wyndham is sketched but lightly in *The Generations of Men*,9 yet it

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6 The seventh William, who never married, lived on to 1950.
8 It was named after the Wiltshire village of Kilgra, according to the life of George Wyndham (*loc. cit.*). It is these Biblical style journeyings which are a major image in the first collection of her poetry.
is clear that he, his son-in-law, Arthur Mackenzie (pp. 9-11, 16, 18, 21), and the hero of the book, his grandson-in-law, Albert Andrew Wright (Judith's grandfather), were all men who were withered by the struggle with the land. This she chronicles particularly in her family history, but more generally in a later essay\(^{10}\)

it was not simply that the external customs and habits of life in civilized Europe had rubbed off in the struggle. Something had left us, had 'died by torture in the country of the mind'.

(\textit{Narasimhaiah, op. cit.}, p. 7)

Clearly, too, all three ancestors, with time's flux, were caught between generations and torn between two worlds, the Englishman by his yearning, the Australians-born by the unreality of their rearing. Although it is said of the last, the following is relevant to all three men

In the years he had spent in that heartbreak­ing stubborn toil, the country had begun to set its mark in his bones. He would never love it for he was of the lost first generation, brought up on stories of a country they had never seen; yet in the fight to master the land, it had in fact begun to master him.

(\textit{op. cit.}, p. 98)

As time passes, the irony of origin is underscored, and George Wyndham and his wife are the only members of the Australian clan who have ever seen England\(^{11}\) (\textit{Generations}, p. 5).

Yet the life of Dalwood still had constant reference to things English, and George and Margaret wrote and received by every English mail long family letters.

(\textit{ibid.})

Yet it was harder and harder to maintain the former traditions. The tale indicates the inevitable change

Now, however, as George and Margaret aged, the alien influence of their adopted country began at last to flood more and more strongly into their lives. It began to loosen old bones, to threaten the house that George had dreamed of as outlasting the generations—a monument to a foreign tradition, a house such as Dinton had been, that great stone mansion in its grove of oaks, with the Adam staircase, the Wyndham portraits... He had built Dalwood with that model in his mind. (p. 5)

As the years take their toll George Wyndham loses his wife and with her the incentive to act as the family arbiter.

He decided to return to England, perhaps to end his days there, where several of his brothers and sisters were still living, though overgrown as he himself was by sons and daughters and old age. But he did not live to board the steamer, dying in Sydney where he had gone to embark. (pp. 5-6)

Thus the assertive rebellious uncle need trouble the much younger Dinton heir no more. The family will go on secure in the knowledge that the Australian-born pose no real threat to the sleepy English-country family.

* * *

This musing over the associations of one well-known poem may be brought together by returning to the aunts Henrietta and Charlotte, whose quiet lives were praised by George Wyndham's grand-daughter, Charlotte May Wright. They are specifically referred to on four occasions in the edited correspondence.

The first occurs in an early piece, in a letter to George Wyndham received from Mary Anne Wyndham and dated 12th October 1828, from 'Dinton'

I am happy to say our Aunts have purchased Mrs. Kneller's house in the Close—I fear they bought it very dear—the large red house opposite the Cathedral. They are now moving, and are quite renovated by having plenty of employment.

(\textit{Extracts from Dinton-Dalwood Letters}, p. 25)

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\(^{10}\) It is entitled 'Australia's Double Aspect' (pp. 1-11) in An Introduction to Australian Literature (1965), ed. C. D. Narasimhaiah. The same essay forms the introduction, pp. xi-xxi, to her \textit{Preoccupations in Australian Poetry} (1965).

\(^{11}\) Although \textit{The Generations of Men} contains a sketch of a remittance man in Hanks, employee at May Downs, his personal tragedy does not involve us in quite the way George Wyndham's does.
This has had a very extraordinary effect on our poor dear Mother, who has now become a great advocate for matrimony, and she frequently amuses her unmarried daughters by the change that has taken place in her opinions.

(Extracts, etc., p. 118)

On 7th September 1843, Ella Wyndham wrote from ‘Boyton’, Heytesbury (south-east of Warminster, Wiltshire), to George and Margaret Wyndham in interesting vein

The Aunts and Uncles are well. I went to Salisbury for a concert last Saturday night, and spent Sunday in the Close with the Aunts, and was well entertained. The concert was vocal, and good. Sunday, I went twice to the Cathedral, and in the afternoon service the Lord Bishop preached on behalf of the Church Missionaries. I thought how interested in the subject with regard to Australia he was himself, and many of the congregation . . .

(Extracts, etc., p. 171).

In the following spring, on 20th April 1844, she was again writing from Boyton with a coda to her epistle—

The ladies of the Close have absolutely visited Aunt Sophie at Bath. I suppose they will also go to Uncle George’s; indeed they are all wonderful old women.

(Extracts, p. 178)

* * *

It is these ladies who were indeed the ‘aunts in the close’ for George Wyndham, whose life had been coarsened by ordeal in the far land. They were still in England, the secure eleventh generation, but his own had been unsettled

it was strange how he, the rebel third son, whose Godwinian ideas, whose Shelleyean dreams had sent him from Dinton’s country conservatism to the new countries to realize them, had altered with the years.

(Generations, p. 5)

In fact, the early wanderings had drained him as they did even more frighteningly his son-in-law, Arthur Mackenzie, and his interest in England had waned from his fiftieth year.

* * *

In another sense, also, the letters of George’s brothers and sisters were for his own children from ‘those English aunts and uncles’. The three married aunts Laetitia (Codrington), Mary Anne (Biggs) and Louisa Anne (Knatchbull) were all dead by 1845, but the unmarried Ella died in 1866 and Charlotte (Starky) lived on till almost the end of Victoria’s reign. George, by thinking of his England (Generations, p. 6) is as much ‘a foreigner . . . in his own house’ (ibid.) as Albert Wright becomes with another ironic twist of time’s mill (p.160).

* * *

While the remittance man of the poem has no more need of exact identification, it is clear that this piece belongs to the early New England cluster of poems, all marked by a special kind of insight, a loving knowledge that comes from associations dear in childhood and youth. The legendary traditions of the family in the unseen West Country of England haunt the mind of the poet, to take permanent form in this poem celebrating all colonial remittance men. The notion of George Wyndham himself as a squire manqué is first defiantly asserted, but later only maintained pathetically. Thus the poem appeals all the more to the senses and the informed imagination for its apposite use of a phrase of legendary association.

Indeed ‘Brother and Sisters’, first published in Meanjin in 1944 and also in The Moving Image, gains further overtones for the knowledge of the familial archetypes which have burned into the poet’s memory.

Judith Wright has spoken of the ‘country that built my heart’ and that country is not merely physical, but embraces the knowledge of her family and the influence of their lives on their surroundings and on their descendants. Yet ‘Remittance Man’ is a poem of all ‘colonial experiencers’, because of the depth of feeling and understanding in the association which it enshrines.

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12 This reference refers to their fourth brother, George Wyndham of Round Hill Grange.
13 The word is used of him in Generations, pp. 3, 6, etc. ‘Now he wore his meticulous clothes of an English squire, walked the hot furrows of his vineyard as though they had been English fields, wrote his regular letters to his sisters and brothers still, dreamed of return.’ (Generations, p. 6)
ANDREW LANSDOWN

Cats

i hate cats.
i realise i shouldn't say it
i know that thousands of cat
lovers will never read another
of my poems;
in fact, i can see them now,
holding a massive campaign
under the leadership of some
cat surgeon—demanding
that i should be doctored
so that i can have
no children to proliferate
cat haters.

but just the same
i hate cats

i could give you good
honest reasons, like,
i'm a bird lover, or,
i hate
the mess they make of trees;
but i don't like kittens
either, 'cause kittens
grow to cats and
i hate cats more than orcs.
BOOKS


The critic, I believe, is for an age where the poet is for all time. There are exceptions, of course, but even the universal critic, a Johnson or a Coleridge, matters in the present for the principles he gives us in assessing the experience of literature we have, in this particular culture with its problems and pre-suppositions. The test of a good critic, then, is his power to illuminate our responses here and now. Not to contemporary works only, of course, but each age must surely read the classics in its own way. The good critic is flexible, a kind of cultural chameleon. He holds his central sense of himself, who he is and what he believes in, but holds them as a result of interplay with his environment. His colours correspond to, even when they contradict, pressures from outside.

In these terms, A. D. Hope, distinguished poet that he is, is not equally distinguished as a critic. True, the essays in *The Cave and the Spring*, reprinted in 1974 offer much to admire—the ease, elegance and wit of his style, the learning borne so lightly, above all the passion which informs the essays. Nevertheless, to my mind, throughout Professor Hope seems to be proclaiming his helplessness to deal with our world. All he can see is negative, “a loss and limitation of consciousness” (p. 4), the “destruction of the landscape of literature by the intrusion of alien and sterile forms of cheap amusement, by exhaustion of the heart and mind, proceeding from a greedy and ignorant exploitation of their resources, and by a poisoning of the atmosphere of belief in which the forms of art breathe and flourish” (p. 2). In many respects, no doubt, this is an accurate description of the contemporary state of things. The difficulty is, however, that the response the critic offers to it is equally negative, private rather than public whereas the disease, like the critic’s claims about it, is public. In fact, Professor Hope reminds me of the tourist complaining that all the other houses and people destroy his holiday. For he seems profoundly intolerant of all views of literature and life but his own. As far as he is concerned, there is only one proper way of looking at the world, a way which, with the great Augustans, Dryden, Swift and Pope, for whom he has such admiration, insists on the primacy of reason and on the ultimate intelligibility of the universe. Not surprisingly, therefore, nearly everything written for the last two centuries is suspect, attempting as it does to adjust to the breakdown—for larger historical reasons—of this Augustan world view. Thus Hope’s refusal to join in this work of adjustment seems quixotic at best.

A passionate belief in value is admirable, even necessary in my view, for proper criticism. But Hope himself puts his finger on the danger inherent in this commitment in his essay on “The Activists”. There he argues that it is dangerous for the artist to set his art to serve ends outside those the work itself creates. Not that he adopts the position of art for art’s sake—one admires the dexterity with which he avoids that pitfall. On the contrary, he sees poetry as “an imitative art in the sense that it signifies things in the world of nature which do or might exist. But it is not merely imitative or representational... A good poem... is like a fine wine. It is made from objects occurring in nature, but it transforms them into something sui generis” (p. 34). This is well said. But it does put his approach as a critic in question: does he treat contemporary works as literature or as evidence of a moral decline he observes in history? “Because writers have the world as their material”, he writes, “they are not isolated from the pressures the world brings to bear on them. Because they are men and citizens they share the problems of men in general” (p. 76). But this, I suggest, is what Hope fails to do. The sense of life expressed in these essays may be civilised, urbane, aesthetically pleasing, but to my mind quite out of tune with the kinds of problems we find today in the kind of world most of us inhabit. For him, the universe is still as it was for Dante, one vast book on every leaf of which we read of the power, goodness and love of the creator and of man’s privileged position. But while I personally accept this view in faith as a Christian, the facts, not merely of contemporary history but even of contemporary physics, clash with this vision. If it is the task of the artist, as Hope says, to provide the “facts
[which] are found nutritive ... because they satisfy a natural need and hunger" (p. 12) then a primary need is the truth, and to most of his readers Hope's truths will seem rather wishfulfilments, products of the "dangerous prevalence of the imagination" which Dr Johnson warned against as the occupational disease of writer and critic alike.

I do not want to be misunderstood. The values Hope is defending are my values and seem to me basic to civilisation. Moreover, I agree with him that their present precariousness points to the breakdown of all that we call "civilisation". What I question is his negative attitude, his refusal to see any signs of hope, to recruit any possible allies to defend the values of intelligence, order and human dignity. His tone is dogmatic, prophetic of doom. Since the seventeenth century he sees the history of literature as a process of degeneration and "things fall apart rapidly and thoroughly" (p. 4) in his view after the end of the eighteenth century. "Just as certain nobility of mind was lost with the passing of epic from the living forms, just as real magnanimity was lost with tragedy, so one by one the attitudes of mind and heart, which made the use and being of the other great forms, died out as they ceased to be practised" (p. 4). A grim picture. But surely also one that is both myopic and dogmatic. Is nothing positive to be said for the efforts of writers, critics, artists and thinkers of all kinds to create new forms, to give shape and significance to a world which may well be as chaotic and painful as Hope asserts? To my mind, his magisterial scorn for these efforts does a disservice to the very cause he seeks to defend.

True, he would argue that the criteria he sets up are the only ones proper for judging literature—intelligibility, lucidity, control. But these standards, developed in response to the qualities of Augustan literature, were already inadequate to assess the first generation of Romantics—necessarily so, on Hope's own premises which call for openness to the specific work and to its particular pressures and goals. Hope, however, is inflexible. Where even a critic like Auden was prepared to concede the obligation to "learn a style from despair", Hope appears as a kind of literary Jacobite, clinging to an old order and a set of presuppositions that will not come again because they no longer correspond to the forces at work in society. The Augustan sense of things, intelligent, elegant, poised, was after all the product of an aristocratic culture intellectually, economically and socially self-sufficient. This culture has ceased to exist unless it is replicated today in totalitarian states like Russia, where the writer and critic celebrate and support the given order and a vision of mechanical rationality. Hope is a fierce enemy of this kind of state, of course, and even more so is his philosophy. His concern for reason derives from his passionate belief in man's need for dignity (though, like Swift, his master, he seems to despair of his power to achieve it: his poems in particular show man as absurd, a creature of passion). Nevertheless I found the essay, "The Three Faces of Love", disturbing. In scholastic fashion he sees the artist's life as a special mode, between the active and the contemplative, making him a special kind of man, and that leads him to argue for the setting up of a kind of third order, Platonic fashion, creative elite, something proper perhaps to a closed society, like Russia's, but which hardly corresponds to the vision of an open society where each individual matters equally.

In effect, these essays reveal an inability to understand or deal with sympathetically the literature and life of the present—and that surely is a sign of failure in a critic. Not that all is loss. Hope takes seriously the critic's duty to attack what he believes to be illiberal and destructive of human value. But mostly he seems to hit out at the wrong targets, those experimenting with language and form, for instance, who may well be making it possible for the arts to survive and continue. The great artist has always been a freelance of spiritual dangers, moving out to explore and open up new territory. Similarly the first class critic needs to be adventurous, flexible, even as he keeps time to his primary task, the defence of value. But for all his apparent robustness, his hard-hitting attacks on what he dislikes, Hope seems afraid, unwilling to move beyond his prepared positions. The eighteenth century, no doubt, is a fine and splendid time, but it is not feasible any more for a critic to take up his residence there. Perhaps Hope's problem lies in his devotion to the language and forms devised then which inhibits him from responding to the present. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, a picture holds him captive and he cannot get outside it, for the inhibition lies in the language, the lan-
guage which seems to repeat the past inexorably. As a result, while he thinks he is tracing the outline of a work's nature, he is merely tracing round the frame through which he looks at it. Which is as much as to say perhaps that Hope is a greater poet than critic.

Finally, it may be that these comments may seem to convict me of that "Activism" Hope attacks, the attitude that prostitutes literary value to social or political ends. On the contrary, however, it is precisely because I believe in the importance of art and in the critic's task to illuminate what is significant and reject the second-rate and meretricious that I question Professor Hope's position. As poet, teacher and critic he is an influential, even imperial figure, and for that reason it seems important to point out that, if it is not that the Emperor has no clothes, at least that they are in need of dry-cleaning. Answers to the problems besetting our culture are not to be found, I suspect, in some unchanging Platonic order of things but rather in strenuous and tough-minded response to the challenges and opportunities that appear within history. True, the temptation to retreat from this effort is strong—but what makes the assurance and fluency of these essays so attractive—but the history of this century has surely warned us of the dangers of trusting too much in any given order of things. In this instance, the danger is that the habit of mind these essays would tend to generate is the habit of mind that might well support a Hitler, a Krushchev or a Richard Nixon.

VERONICA BRADY


The brave new Sydney publishing firm Wild and Woolley has brought out an interesting and memorable collection of pieces on contemporary inner-city life by Vicki Viidikas, author of the poetry collection, Condition Red.

This is a notable and successful collection by the standards of the milieu in which it appears, but it is important to be clear on what it is not. The dust-jacket blurb uses phrases so inappropriate as to verge on the Orwellian. Condition Red is proudly described as "the ultimate paranoid outposts of the romantic agony . . ."). This is possible, but, to use language correctly, Wrappings is a most anti-Romantic book if the term "Romantic" implies some sort of quest for an ideal. The general tone is of a late development of that relentless Social Realism that dominates Australian prose. Wrappings adds up to a series of vignettes on the Pointlessness and Joylessness of existence, most of which peripherally involve some equally Pointless and Joyless aspect of sexual intercourse. Indulgence in drugs makes an occasional superficial variation to the P&J: "And Martin decided to celebrate the cooking venture with a few good pipes of hash. They smoked and laughed and Jane told them about the negroid toads in full living colour detail. They played records and smoked and talked and smoked and lay on the floor and smoked and drank coffee and smoked." The romantic agony it is not.

"In Wrappings the protective layers are torn away from the unmistakably contemporary characters: the dope freak. . . the cocaine dealer. . . they capture realities more surely than any documentary or theoretical approach ever could." The jacket tells us. If these pieces are not documentary, whatever happened to fiction?

Occasionally Miss Viidikas attempts to break out of her realism with a flash of imaginative colour, but how can you go against the weight of a tradition as powerful as that of Australian Social Realism? "On the way back the car glided like a porpoise through streams of traffic" is a brave attempt, but she should look at a porpoise first. Similarly, she should be able to recognise and avoid clichés and inconsistent imagery: "His tongue was inside her mouth like a darting lizard. Yes, she thought, yes, the desire took her like a canoe swirling down a river, a tumbling throbbing avalanche sailing blindly without a course"—all right for Women's Day or even Cleo, perhaps, but hardly the stuff to arrest the decline of prose fiction as a living art.

It is easy to knock any book, especially one whose repetitive themes edge towards self-parody. These stories overall, however, are on a level that merits their being taken and considered seriously. At the very least, they have the enormous virtue of being readable and memorable. There is no doubt that the book has captured a certain aspect of life with grim

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Robert Adamson is, to my mind, one of a handful of really distinctive voices in contemporary Australian poetry; and consequently, it was with considerable interest that I approached *Zimmer's Essay*, written in collaboration by Adamson and the journalist Bruce Hanford. However, it proved—initially at least—something of a disappointment, particularly in the light of Adamson's most recent poetic publication, *Swamp Riddles* (Island Press). It must be asserted right from the outset, then, that *Zimmer's Essay* is a rather confused, unbalanced work, attesting presumably to the writers' lack of experience in the composition of narrative fiction; at the same time, it must be added that it is a most interesting and even exciting work, and quite possibly a significant event in the contemporary course of Australian literature.

Adamson has published three collections to date, the first two being well received and the most recent, *Swamp Riddles*, being to my mind equally impressive. Here is a poet of real vision, vitally concerned with rendering the truth of his total experience, with finding his own meaning, and with communicating and sharing a pervasive, instinctual sense of the world. Through his commitment to language and the integrity of the poetic experience, allied with his sharp critical sense and his characteristic irony, Adamson at his best is able to achieve authentic poetic glimpses into the nature of human experience. Always, as Carl Harrison-Ford (*New Poetry*, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, 1972) has pointed out, "in Adamson, preoccupation with poetry is a vital, energetic, and essentially social process". *Zimmer's Essay* is interesting, then, because not only does it represent his first published essay at prose fiction, but also, it is a continuation of his preoccupation with prison life and its socio-symbolic meaning in human experience.

The publisher's blurb calls *Zimmer's Essay* a "searing documentary novel about prison life". This is both unfortunate and misleading. (The book is, however, beautifully presented.) Rather than a "novel", it is a sequence of fictional and semi-sociological discourses, loosely organized on the basis of the interaction of two characters in terms of prison life. In his introduction, Bruce Hanford says: "For a month the work went so well that Adamson and I reckoned we'd milk Zimmer for more than this little essay on the moth and the flame—we thought we'd get a whole, three-part novel. But by the time we burned Glaister, the psychic cost of doing business with this Zimmer was clearly insupportable." This comment is very revealing as to the central flaw in the work: it is not structured in terms of what it is but of what it might have been, had the writers been sufficiently aware of themselves. Perhaps the very notion of collaboration in literary composition is in question here. Whatever the reason, the work is to my mind most unbalanced and lacking in significant structure. What serves as structure is the passage of Glaister through the fiction to his suicide by burning, combined with a radical critique of the existing penal system; Zimmer as (general) narrator and as a centrally-organizing character moves counterpoint through the work, commenting on both areas of structural focus and providing an important comment in himself. The point is, though, there is no real interaction here, and consequently, both the indictment of the system and the validity of the fiction is enfeebled, losing force on the one...
hand and on the other being left open to question.

The major reason, it seems to me, for the problematic nature of the work is the existence of a fundamental tension in the work itself, a debilitating tension, ultimately destructive, between the demands of art and those of life. I have described its form as a sequence of rather loosely-linked fictional and sociological discourses; it seems to me that this points to the work’s basic failure to make a satisfying artistic statement, fusing the elements of art and life, the fictional and the documentary, and then transcending these to achieve the heightened significance of universal meaning. In a sense, the organization of Zimmer’s Essay is reminiscent of Selby’s Last Exit to Brooklyn; though by no means a great work, Last Exit is still an integrated, unified whole, whose sociological meaning remains powerful and compelling even though it is not presented directly, but rather, obliquely through its fictional representation. The fiction remains paramount; the documentary is both integral to it and achieves a greater significance through it. The failure to achieve a proper integration of the fiction and the documentary in Zimmer’s Essay results both in a flawed structure and an imperfect statement.

Not that Zimmer’s Essay is completely unsuccessful. On the contrary, Adamson and Hanford achieve some rare moments in the course of the work, and often the various sections are far more satisfying when read in isolation. For instance, the first section, “Crime & Self-portraiture”, is to my mind quite successful, despite certain tonal disjunctions, the last few paragraphs achieving an effective balance between the grotesque and the light ironic, and the writing being forceful and integrated. Indeed, the best moments in Zimmer’s Essay are often shot through with a fierce humour, an almost black irony, often arising directly out of the ambivalent sexual culture of prison life as described in the work. The last section, “O Carol”—the title having its own ironic overtones—is also very interesting in this regard.

One of Adamson’s major preoccupations in his poetry is with the nature of the creative process and with the validity and effect of language; to this end, he has often employed language conscious of itself in the act of creating. There are two major instances of this in Zimmer’s Essay, though they are not developed in any way nor integrated in any real sense into the body of the work; the first (pp. 49-50) raises important questions about the nature of the fictional process, while the second (p. 59) relates this process to the technical problems of publication and consequently forces the reader into an involvement with the total process. In addition, there is a surrealist element in these passages which is quite liberating and to my mind adds considerably to the effect of the total experience described in the work: “Any event worth telling swells up like a dream. A Dali piano with twat standing proud and isolated on a long plain miles before a huge black mountain of terrible boredom. When I speak of these objects/events, it seems like they swell into the picture, but behind them is the mountain.” (p. 59) These passages, and a number of other separate parts of the work, contain much promise for further development, and are important in the context of Australian literature, in that it seems to me that we need a body of contemporary fiction that is self-conscious and self-challenging. Although there are dangers certainly in such a fictional mode, there are also great possibilities. Zimmer’s Essay is quite possibly an important work in this regard, at least embryonically.

Apparently Robert Adamson has a novel forthcoming, and it is with particular interest, having read Zimmer’s Essay, that I await its publication. To my mind, Zimmer’s Essay is unsuccessful as a finished artistic statement, but its “failure” is nonetheless impressive. It is quite frankly an experimental work, an experiment with the fictional mode as opposed to the poetic (see the prison poems at the end of Zimmer’s Essay), and exciting in its promise for future development. Zimmer’s Essay needs to be read, I think, by anyone interested in contemporary Australian literature; it cannot be ignored, quite possibly both offering fresh impetus and suggesting another, necessary direction.

W. GREEN
In Transit

Save for what is written here
Nothing was seen to leave this day's cage
Though perhaps tomorrow
The feathers may settle
And the bird may take flight.
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