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WESTERLY
a quarterly review

EDITORS: Bruce Bennett and Peter Cowan

EDITORIAL ADVISORS: Margot Luke, Susan Kobulniczky, Fay Zwicky

CONSULTANTS: Brian Dibble, Anand Haridas

Westerly is published quarterly by the English Department, University of Western Australia, with assistance from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and the Western Australian Literary Fund. The opinions expressed in Westerly are those of individual contributors and not of the Editors or Editorial Advisors.

Correspondence should be addressed to the Editors, Westerly, Department of English, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009 (telephone 380 3838). Unsolicited manuscripts not accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope will not be returned. All manuscripts must show the name and address of the sender and should be typed (double-spaced) on one side of the paper only. Whilst every care is taken of manuscripts, the editors can take no final responsibility for their return; contributors are consequently urged to retain copies of all work submitted. Minimum rates for contributions—poems $7.00; prose pieces $7.00; reviews, articles, $15.00; short stories $30.00. It is stressed that these are minimum rates, based on the fact that very brief contributions in any field are acceptable. In practice the editors aim to pay more, and will discuss payment where required.

Recommended sale price: $2.00 per copy (W.A.).

Eastern States distributors: Australia International Press, 319 High Street, Kew, Victoria 3101 (Phone: 862 1537).

Subscriptions: $8.00 per annum (posted); $15.00 for 2 years (posted). Special student subscription rate: $7.00 per annum (posted). Single copies mailed: $2.40. Subscriptions should be made payable to Westerly, and sent to The Bursar, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009.

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Cover: Edith Trethowan, ‘View from the Back Door’.  
Prints: Western Australian Printmakers of the 1920s and 1930s — A. B. Webb, Edith Trethowan and Beatrice Darbyshire, p. 24 and following.  
Photos: ‘Signs of the 70s’ by Wellington-Kevin Moore, p. 48 and p. 64.
Visible Darkness

She stood at the front door looking through the flyscreen at the day. A big woman with a thirty-year-old face. She would like to have gone to town, walked the hot pavements looking in the windows. It would have been busy, bustling in spite of the February heat. Shops where the cool air rushed icily over your hot body when you walked in. It's too hot for you, he said. I'll get the hose fitting at lunch time, won't take a minute. You stay home in the cool house, he said. Of course it wasn't cool at all. She could have gone to a cinema, Russell need never know. Entertainment for morons, he said. He was probably right. He said, it's too hot for Wendy to walk to school, I'll drop her off on my way to work. She didn't think children noticed the heat that much. I can't remember noticing it in the country. If it was very hot the cows stayed under the trees, but I can't remember complaining myself.

So now another day yawned emptily, without much purpose in it. She sometimes wondered why her days were so long and what other women did to fill theirs. She moved from the front door, kicked off her shoes and padded down the floral carpet on her large feet. Put your shoes on woman. Only a slut gets around at your age in bare feet, he said.

She poured a tumbler of lime juice and carried it with ice squeaking against the glass to the front door again and stood looking across her street where Fullers Road stretched straight out until it disappeared in a blue haze. Wendy's school was in the haze. It was lunch time, she would be in the playground, giggling and talking, exclaiming. Seven was an age for exclaiming. Everything in their lives was an amazing surprise: really, you're kidding! Did she really say that? Gosh, how awful! Their mobile little faces worked overtime. She could do with a few amazing surprises herself.

She sighed, held one side of her skirt and shook the fabric gently to make a draught on her legs. Why are your dresses so shapeless, he said. You have no style, he said. Trickles of sweat ran down from her temples. On days like this nobody moved, you would think they'd all died. Even the dogs and birds were silent. Another trickle was travelling down her spine. The leaves of the gum tree have turned their edges to the sun, they are hiding from the heat, waiting for sunset.

Later she lay on the couch. This whole room was drab somehow. I need a school for useless women. I would emerge from it waving my certificate (in a genteel way of course) showing proficiency in grooming, motherhood, wifehood, flower arranging, sexual behaviour — oh yes, I'd be courtesan, know all the tricks. I can't tell you what to do, he said. Perhaps you're frigid, he said.
She woke with a jerk, the doorbell ringing. A hot fear in her face and neck. She'd overslept, Russell was home from work and here she lay with a sleep-crushed face and bedraggled dress. The bell rang again. It was two men she had not seen before.

"Mrs Press? Your husband at home?"

They had collars and ties, these men, they peered at her through the fly-screen. Later it was clear that she had known straight away who they were, why they were at her door. But at the time she needed to let them play out their roles. She had to listen while they chose the words to tell her what she knew, had always known.

"There has been an accident Mrs Press."

How polite they were. An accident. It was murder! You murdered my baby. You police in your big fast cars. Chasing a criminal, they said. Two little girls at the side of the road—not on the footpath Mrs Press. Oh the shame, the shame of them, not on the footpath. She could see the slight bodies tossed in the air, small brown suitcases covered in labels and stickers flying from their hands . . . There were two of them Mrs Press. Yours was not the only one . . .

Russell was brought home by someone she didn't know. Russell's face was so white, and lined. He looked quite old. She had hoped he would reach out for her, perhaps for a moment need her. But of course there were strangers present. He walked past, didn't look at her.

Her mother was there at some time and her sister Jackie, she was sure of that. They didn't touch her, she couldn't reach them. She supposed they went back to Mungindi which rhymes with cry . . .

There was a happy farmer
Who lived in Mungindi,
He had two horrible daughters
And a horse with one red eye.

Someone had called Dr Barrier. Dr Cecil Barrier. He gave them both Valium. Blessed saviour Valium. Russell didn't speak to her at this time. When they were finally alone together, she didn't know how long it had been, he spoke to her then. It was your fault, he said. You should have collected her from school like other mothers do, he said. But Russell she was seven years . . . Don't make excuses, he said. He looked at her with hate. I'll never forgive you, he said, his thin face long and pressed into angry creases. There were too many things crowding into her throat wanting to be said, that her tongue stumbled over them and she said nothing. But she stared at her husband.

You will leave her room exactly as it was, he said. Don't go in there ever, he said. He looked at an imaginary fleck on his sleeve, fastidiously brushed it off then walked away, out of the house.

It's just the shock, she thought. He thinks that by keeping her room intact he is holding on to Wendy. He'll get over it, I must be patient. She wept then. For her lost clear-eyed girl. For her hugging baby arms. For her lost clear-eyed girl. For her hugging baby arms. For her hugging baby arms. For her hugging baby arms. Soon she knew she was crying for herself and dried her eyes. It would be suitable to cry if she was a dainty female person. But she was hefty, awkward and plain. She cleaned the house instead, from top to bottom, only avoiding Wendy's room.

"Doctor, he thinks it's my fault, he blames me, can't you do something it's been so long. Every day he tells me . . ."

"Hush now, come on now, calm down. You imagine it. No no, you listen to me. At first, well perhaps he did. But that was a natural desire to hit out at something, blame someone. Not now, he doesn't blame you now . . . how could he? He knows how you loved her. No, you imagine it. Try to be warm towards
him, he needs you.” The doctor was putting on weight, she used to think him very attractive. He was still a good looking man but not as he was. “I'm giving you another prescription, an anti-depressant. They can't hurt you. And some more Valium. Things will get better, you must believe that.”

It occurred to her that the doctor need not have visited. He could have put the prescription in the post, after all he must be busy.

Russell didn't speak any more at all. Seldom looked at her either, except that he stood each evening at the door of Wendy's room, his hand on the door-knob and looked at her with hate before disappearing inside and shutting the door. She wondered what he did in there. As the months sidled by she became accustomed to it. It was like living alone except for his washing and cooking. Like having a sullen boarder. On the weekends they managed surprisingly well to avoid each other, so the days stretched into a long grey line. One day she looked at him curiously. Russell, why are you here, she asked. It's Saturday you stupid bitch, he said. She was surprised to know that.

He had moved into the spare room, slept on a camp bed. She worried guiltily that she should have protested, even complained. Hesitantly approached the truth, that she wouldn't care if he slept in the kitchen sink. Perhaps she really was frigid.

She found her old school books and read, intrigued, the things she used to know. Studied the poetry book each day, memorising the verses she wouldn't learn as a child. When things got too depressing she had her new lover Sir Valium. Her golden knight.

One day Russell spoke to her. She had forgotten the sound of his voice and her heart jumped with shock. Do you know, he said, that you talk to yourself now? You're neurotic, he said. You make me sick, he said.

She stood holding the iron up and staring at him in alarm with the smell of sun-dried clothes around her. He went away before she could think of anything to say. She moved from the things she had been scorching and sat down to think. He was right. She was hopeless. He used to help her so much, did so much that she had nothing to do, had no need to exert herself at all. She should have collected Wendy from school, the walk would have been good exercise. But instead she had hidden in the house, afraid to see anyone like the foolish woman she was. And now it had come to this. She cried for a long time, sprawled with her big legs and large feet at awkward angles across the floor, cried with her whole body, making a loud noise like a cow in distress. Afterwards she sniffed a lot, then lumbered to her feet and took five Valium, since she knew it was May, the fifth month.

Dr Barrier was sitting beside her bed when she awoke. “You've been a very naughty girl,” he said, his plump brown face disapproving. “How many did you take?”

“What? What are you talking about?” She sat up, forced herself to smile at him, even laughed. “Goodness you know me better than that! Why all these years you've known me and you think that? I know what happened and it was silly of me...” Surely he wouldn't take them from her, not yet not now.

“. . . well from now on you must count them out each day, then put the bottle away. They should pack these things in foil sheets.”

“I will, I will, I promise. I have a tiny dish, just the thing, I'll keep it on the kitchen bench...” She relaxed as he went away.

A mumbling came from the kitchen. Eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves. Perhaps not... It was cold standing in the passage listening, she wished they would hurry.
be so worried ... satisfied it was unintentional ..."

"... won't talk Doctor, won't let me touch the girl's room ...

"... great worry for you ...

"... hysterical if I go near ... room ...

She climbed back into the bed and lay quietly. Closed her eyes, longed for sleep.

In the morning she sat in the kitchen drinking cup after cup of tea, waiting for something, a thought that kept drifting out of reach. At last she caught it, held it, and now she moved quickly.

Sat at the phone ringing charities. Some child's furniture and clothing must be collected this morning. Rang and rang until one said yes. Spread an old blanket in the girl's room, dragged out the drawers, emptied the cupboards, the wardrobe, pulled down the pictures, the posters. Dust floated all around, coating her. How could there be so much? She was coughing, so intent that she didn't weep until dragging the blanket by its four corners through the house she felt it could be a small body she was moving, a criminal act.

They shuffled out with the furniture, the carpet. She surveyed the now empty echoing room, the bare boards. It will be transformed. When he comes home Wendy's room will have vanished. She picked up her purse and set out to buy paint.

At the shop she saw a classmate of Wendy's. It couldn't be, this girl was easily ten years old. An older sister perhaps. Yet she stares at me across the kitchenware. There's a woman staring too. Dear God, I'm wearing my nightie and brunch coat, old slippers, my hair ... She fled with her paint.

There was a letter in the mailbox. From Jackie. A surprise, a lovely surprise. She made some tea and sat down to read it. Jackie getting married! To Bart? She couldn't believe it. Bart the Fart they called him as kids. The youngest and dopiest of all the stupid boys from the next door farm. A face like an idiot, great swinging gorilla arms. A June bride. Jackie sounded sloppy, she must love him. "We want you to come the Wednesday week before the wedding and stay for a while ..." She stared at the words. Home again. And on the train clickity-clack and on the train clickity-clack and the bottle of rusty water trembling on the carriage wall. She sat reading the letter over and over, so many times, and the day evaporated and it was evening.

Russell looked at her, the old scruffy brunch coat, the scarecrow hair. Looked in the child's room while she waited without breathing. Walked steadily towards her in his neat business suit, stood over her. The only thing that made you a person, he said, was being Wendy's mother. So now you are nothing, he said. I wonder, why are you still alive, he said.

Her excitement as the train slowed into Mungindi was shaking her hands, making her knees and elbows weak. She looked through the window for her mother or Jackie, rushed from the compartment without her case, dashed back, banging herself in the corridor. Stumbled to the platform with bags and parcels, a blanket draped over her back.

"You look like an Indian squaw," Jackie pulled the blanket off.

"It was cold in the train but Oh it doesn't matter." She stared at her dark-eyed sister, at her sharp face, a little sharper now it seemed.

"What were you doing in a second-class carriage, Russ become lousy in his old age?" Jackie had taken her arm and some of the packages, pushed her
towards the gate. She hadn't known, hadn't understood why the carriage seemed different.

At the house she grabbed her dumpy little mother in a bear-hug, held her so hard and long the woman protested: "You're squashing me!" Laughed at the way this daughter gazed at her, and took her hands. "It's alright my dear, I know it's been hard, later you must tell me all about it. Now you'll want some lunch, a rest. Sixteen hours and Jacqueline tells me in a second class... well, never mind, come along."

She never did tell her mother all about it. Up there it seemed nothing, rather infantile and ordinary. When she wept about the wedding present she had forgotten to buy Jackie drove her to the town to get one.

"Jackie? Do you love him?" She looked out at the fields, embarrassed in this role she had given herself.

"Don't be daft Sis." Jackie raced the car along the rutted road. "I'll be getting back some of the land we sold them when Dad died... you needn't look so shocked. I'm 29 now... all those shining heroes we talked about took a detour. It's Bart or no-one... he's not so bad."

She mooned about the farm searching for a lost childhood while her mother and Jackie worked and organized without her. Jackie fixed the velvet dress she had brought to Mungindi but left forgotten in her suitcase. It was not her colour but she loved its wine-deep richness.

Jackie was soon gone with her bumbling farmer to honeymoon in Queensland, now she could talk with her mother. But the days whipped by with the June winds and they sat in the big kitchen and talked of old friends and relatives, rehashed the wedding until suddenly it was time to go home.

She had been lulled by the days at Mungindi, now as she stuffed clothes in her case the panic rose in her chest, threatening to escape from her throat in a scream. Valium soon settled that.

Back home in Sydney she slipped into the old life with hardly a ripple. Dr Barrier called and she talked about the farm, the trees and paddocks, the swollen creek.

"You need to get out more—that trip has done you good. I'll speak to Russell."

It was October and mauve splodges of jacaranda had appeared all over the suburbs when Russell spoke to her. On Saturday, he said, we are going out for the day fishing. We will be leaving, he said, at 7 a.m. You have all day tomorrow to get some food ready, he said. One more thing, he said, I suggest you dress for the occasion. I will not take you in your nightgown, he said.

She bumped and thrashed around in her bedroom for hours that night searching for something to wear on the picnic, writing out lists of what to cook, things to take. Determined to do things properly. Friday turned out to be an unproper day for doing things. I needed more time, she cried, I'm out of practice, and spent the afternoon hiding the evidence, cleaning the oven. She took an extra Valium and raced to the shop for three loaves of bread.

You have spent all day, he said, making sandwiches! And what about some dinner now, he asked. You are useless to man or beast, he said.

On Saturday morning at 6.55 a.m. she carried her baskets to the car, flushed with surprise at being ready. He looked at her. Old white sandshoes over bare feet, a skirt too short. She had washed her hair for the occasion and it floated dryly from her head like a halo of fine straw. She could see he was disgusted.

After driving in silence for three hours he stopped beside a wide river. They transferred the gear to a rowing boat with a motor, and putt-putted up river in
the thin sunlight, travelling for a long time until he saw a place where the bank was flat enough to land. He tied up the boat and pushed her on to the bank, then passed some sandwiches. “Aren’t you coming too?” she asked as the boat moved away. “You haven’t left me a thermos,” she shouted as the boat disappeared from her sight.

She was on a grass patch hemmed in on three sides by rocks and cliffs of clay. She could hear Russell putt-putting away in the distance. I could have brought a book but I thought it would be rude. To read while I was with him. She started to explore her domain, climbed the rocks at the back of her enclosure and stood very high admiring the view. She sang some songs, climbed down and ate a few sandwiches, climbed up again to recite.

‘Out on the wastes of the Never Never’ she bellowed, ‘that’s where the dead men lie!’ Supposing Russell got lost, or drowned. No-one would find her. ‘That’s where the heat-waves dance for ever—that’s where the dead men lie!’ She stopped with her arm flung towards the west, but could remember no more.

After a moment she started again: ‘Hold hard, Ned! Lift me down once more, and lay me in the shade.’ It was too sad to go on with that one. She climbed down and lay at the bank reaching her hands into the water and sucking her fingers. I could exist out here—become a wood nymph perhaps. She rolled over on her back and slept. The cold woke her hours later when a chill wind blew from a clouded sky. She hunched against the rocks waiting and wondering.

The light was dimming when she heard someone calling. Hallo there! they called. Having a read are you, the voice added. It was Russell calling to someone. She climbed to the highest rock and looking over the clay she saw a woman wrapped in a red tartan blanket, wrapped up like a sausage, lying face down reading a book. I didn’t know she was there! We could have become friends. As she watched the figure stood up, a young woman with glasses who looked down towards the river while shaking her red blanket, then turned and climbed the hill.

Now she could see Russell’s head as he struggled at the bank, trying to reach the spot where the tartan reader had been. His shoulders appeared and hands clutching at the grasses. Now his knee was up, he was certainly determined, perhaps he doesn’t know the young woman has gone. He was on all fours now, crouched like an Olympic runner. He looked quite silly. He rose slowly to his feet, a bit wobbly. Then it was as though someone pushed him in the chest. He gave a shout and flung up his arms as he fell backwards. There was a clunk as he vanished from view.

Clunk! He would be annoyed about that, may decide not to try again. She waited on her lookout rock but there was no sign of him. Perhaps he would be coming along in the boat now. She ran down the slope to the water’s edge. This was an outdoor adventure alright. She called ‘Coo-ee’ but there was no reply. Well, not a spoken one. Russell came floating past with the current. He was floating slowly, on his face. As he came closer she could see a fierce red wound on the back of his head. She was glad she couldn’t see his face, it was bound to be angry. He was too far out for her to reach. Besides, what would she do with him? As she watched, his body moved out further into the river and began to sink.

The main thing was to get to the boat and have a cup of tea. If he hadn’t drunk it all. She attacked the clay cliff with great vigour and with a rock managed to make some footholds. When she pulled herself up to the top she saw the boat below and in no time she was in it, a blanket warming her cold white legs, her hands around a fairly hot mug of tea.
Untied, the boat drifted slowly down the river, bringing to mind a rhyme Wendy had taught her about row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream. How Wendy would have loved this adventure.

She had never enjoyed a journey so much. The moon came out now and again and the water lapped lovingly against the boat. She wondered if she would see Russell, but supposed not. She placed the tea mug on the floor, then drew the rug up under her chin and sat gazing straight ahead, her long dry hair blowing behind, her eyes glinting in the reflected light of the moon. She travelled like some Caledonian queen crossing a loch.

She was quite afraid now. Dr Barrier waited for her in the front room. He said it would be better for him to take her than the ambulance but she had never travelled anywhere by ambulance and would like to have known... He meant well. He said “You’re not insane my dear, of course not. It’s just for... a rest.”

It’s foolish to be frightened at my age but I am. I don’t know what they’ll do to me. She wanted to make a good impression, so after throwing out all the food and making the house presentable for whatever would happen to it, she looked for something nice to wear and discovered the wine velvet. She should have shortened it, of course she knew that, but there was no time.

She walked in to Dr Barrier with her bags and stood there, a tall shapeless woman in a crushed velvet evening dress. Her head a badly constructed hayrick from which her kind face gazed uncertainly.

“Well,” she said loudly, “time to be off, eh?” and laughed a big laugh as she didn’t know how to behave in this situation.

Banging the door shut after the doctor she strode down the path then stopped, looking down Fullers Road to the blue misted distance.

“How long has it been now Doctor?”

He was puzzled. “How long...?”

“How long since Wendy died?”

“Why, it’ll be—it’ll be seven years this month.”

She stared, unable at first to comprehend. He should know. The grey hairs, the lines on my face, the wrinkles. Of course. Now when I look in a mirror I see eyes that aren’t mine. But all those years! What happened to them. She felt, sadly, that she had betrayed Wendy by not counting all the days, not measuring all the hours.

He drove down the beach road, turned on to the esplanade and she saw the brilliant dark blue water.

“Oh. How lovely! Could we stop? I haven’t seen the sea for... I don’t know how long!”

He looked at her face. “Would you like to go for a paddle?”

She dashed away, staggering through the deep sand like a poddy calf. He couldn’t keep up with her. He was shouting something but she plunged on, across the hard wet sand now and into the breakers. Ah, so that was it. She had her shoes on. She pulled them off and threw them to him, a stout man puffing on the beach, and turned to the water. She stamped up and down in the shallows, the velvet dragging heavily behind her, refusing to look at him in case it was time to leave.

At last the moment had come. She looked sadly at the Doctor. “Time to go I suppose. Time to go there?” She lifted the sagging dress and walked out of
the water. "I remember a poem," she said. "I can't remember any more of it, I can't get it out of my mind. Perhaps you can help?"

"Try me."

"The wanton troopers riding by
Have shot my fawn, and it will die."

She gathered up her skirt and squeezed the salt water from it.

"No," he said. "I don't know it."

"I can't get it off my mind." She laughed at her foolishness. "Well, perhaps I'll remember. In time."

They trudged across the sand towards the car.

* * *

The nymph complaining for the death of her fawn.—Andrew Marvell.

---

**ISOBEL ROBIN**

**Fat Lady Visiting a Gallery**

Here is a generous room that knows no thin,
A world of Flanders girls, whose nurture warms
Their natures. Coyly cushioned in their skin,
They promise comfort in round-fashioned arms,
Welcoming breasts and amplitude of chin,
And wear with pride their curved and contoured forms.

Dear, ample sisters, shield me in this age
Of slender creatures, boned and spare as trees.
Our frames were drafted on a fuller page
And overflow today's economies.
Great men admired you. Rubens' eyes would gauge
Your beauty surging in full hips and knees.
And when he loved, even in badinage
Would Rembrandt dare call Saskia obese?
Somewhere Under the Smokestacks

(i)

Somewhere under the smokestacks a woman sits. Playing cat's cradle with her legs and arms, her dolly head drooping, holding back ecstasies of light.

Evening bruises the sea and the steelworks and sulphur wastes clap slowly where they wait for an arc of sand to pirouette and delicately in ruffles of jaded cream collapse. In the grey light of her room, the woman fades.

She is probably writing a poem. She is probably worn out from gathering so much light. All day she may have been on the beach where images of migrant ladies from other centuries bubble in the sun. With faded print parasols and cloaks of chintz-frilled sun they fold like wishes into a tiny locket hooked behind thought. Now even the woman's eyes are deepening rockpools.

Glimpses she has snatched of young swimmers and brown sea girls remind her how little she knows that might intrigue them. Haunted by their sophistication, their sleek seal bodies which cannot acknowledge that simply to be there alive is uncertain. She has never been so young.

She is probably fading into a mystery of flesh, blindlit scissor gleams where she has been so briefly overexposed. Underneath the smoky wrap she is stamped Made in a Lilac Garden where kurrawongs lassoo bunyanuts and rivers of perfumed leaves run on evenings slippery with haze, but somewhere under the smokestacks she is sitting now.

(ii)

"But how do you know?" begged the child, because from where she sat hugging the centre of the tartan rug, all she could see was a sky so blue. Her eyes were beginning to sting from looking at it, and trying to find the storm her father was so certain it hid.

He paused and the wheelbarrow full of mown grass tipped drunkenly. "There's cloud far out there," he said. "It'll blow up in the night." And then he grabbed the barrow and sauntered off.

It was so still. Although she lay in bed thinking that not even her eyelid could twitch, she knew later there would be a rattle in the lemon tree. She would have to get up and close the window.

"It will rain later tonight." He always knew. And kept his face so closed that no matter what words he brought out to explain, they were always laid out flat upon the sky like those paper silhouettes of birds which she could hang mysteriously on her felt board: they were quite unlike the full story which hung precarious and wild in the sky, only to glide more easily and smoothly than a breath, out of sight.

So he would draw up his shoulders until they made a kind of saddle on which his head tentatively sat, his eyes would retreat under their lids, and then he
would begin to canter about her, jumping words as if they were of no importance. He would scatter the room with perfectly manoeuvred jokes until, out of breath, his face grew still.

A cough would begin to rattle in his chest. For a moment the horse and rider would sag. She wondered if he would ever move again. And then before the fear could dissolve, he was chucking her under the chin and trotting out of the room.

Tonight, yes, rain. Elizabeth will wake and walk to the place where the window should be. Her hands will scrape rough plaster. The lilac bundling into the room will dissolve, and instead she will find at last the metal clip of a window too modern, and outside not the smell of home, but a foreign, acrid smell. Where her hands reach for the sweet bunches of lilac, little beads of blood.

All night, waiting for wind, the lemon leaves will scrape.

(iii)

On elusive twists of sun, the young sea girls drift. So often from nowhere they appear, exhaled by the first slow sigh of summer, afloat on the rumour of a mirage, their confident faces innocent as fruit, the blush still on.

So often they are wearing white cheesecloth, their tanned madonna faces glazed above a pascha too sweet where the sun melts their dresses un moulding them for all the hungry world to lick. Or they are dangling white cigarettes below the full moons of their eyes, looking out with old smiles for a man to nibble, a sardine to crunch in perfect teeth while dreaming of Somebody Else.

They are too ripe too early, plopped to earth sunsilted, lounging in shops with the sand still glittering between their toes, their tiny ankles like birds taking off above their bored brown sandals. From Botticelli shells they should have bloomed, sun-sea dappled, tangling life like a necklace of shells in their long, hot hair, but blew up from brick veneer and suburban languor.

Now so often they linger by the waves, on the footpaths, in the shops, secure behind slippery smiles, while their mothers run wornout in old fluffy slippers after them. So often Elizabeth sees them alien angels, daughters of miners and factory workers, and at twenty-five, finds herself, displaced, middle-aged. Thrown back to a past that would perplex them, she remembers only a landscape of limbo. Weekend after weekend the silver bullet seesawing through stations scattered like autumnal sneezes from coast to mountains and back to the coast again. She was eighteen then. In and out of classes where she learned the heart can always be squeezed a little bit tighter, and at nights her daddylongleg writing had to shrink to spin its webs. Cockroaches closed her eyes in that hostel giggly with precarious would-be teachers, nurses, and now and then hidden behind bookcovers, strange species of artists.

It was a world of lazy streets of sun. In reminiscences the mosquitoes rattle umbrella trees, the cicadas are blind cocoons in which to weep and the silver bullet no more than a bandage of water unrolling down the window pane. Now the young sea girls tease the other side of her glass, while their fathers trudge from bus-stops, home from the night shift. Under the smoke rosry sky, they wait for futures that can only be mythical.

(iv)

After rain the kurrawongs would gather all the silver light where the sun slipped on itself midslide. And then in liquorice swoops, they would dive and sing.
Standing beside the green slat door, a child could suddenly explode, crumple on the step and study herself—even the innermost skin of an ear was crumpled, blanched silk.

No wonder now in richochets of rainy birthdays Elizabeth finds herself turning like an old kid glove outside in. After rain now, outside her window the cats assemble beside the stormwater drain: she turns on hard, clapping heels from the stray children who drift into view.

"Didn't you know?" she implores her parents, so many miles and years away from her. "Couldn't you see it would be dangerous for me to grow up like that?"

Her father is rubbing brass; her mother sits in silk and pours tea into tender cups. There is a starched linen cloth on the table and a butterscotch cat brickling furtive as a dream through the dusk in the just visible garden. "Why?" she asks. They gaze back in uncomprehending kindness. Hoops of light hang bruised where the kurrawongs have carrello through.

"Your tea is poured, dear," they murmur as one. "Don't let it get cold."

On the beachfront the migrant men are black as burnt toast. They are having family picnics, eating Kentucky Fried Chicken and larking about. The young woman walking towards the rocks warrants a jibe and a consuming glance because she is alone, but that is all. It occurs to her that if she tosses in her mind afterwards the looks and gestures of others then presumably they must do the same with their perception of her. But her mirror casts back only an image of what she is sure she is not, and she cannot really imagine the fall of her hands the way her mouth droops or suddenly twitches in a vulnerable smile... she is too like a ripe orange accidentally dropped. Where the skin has broken and the first ready juice rushed out, she is beginning to feel a little bitter, and withered. Sometimes that is almost reflected back, alone in her room in the middle of the night, when the light flicks on and she catches herself unprepared. "Well, that's life," her mother shrugs. "One has to carry on."

At dinner, between the spinach pie and the strawberry mousse, Max suddenly put down his glass and said: "The trouble is that we all want life to be simple." He eyed the low pool in the glass before continuing. "But you've only got to read what people have been saying for hundreds of years to know that it's not, never can be. That's just a childish wish."

At least once a week he said something like this. Perhaps he hoped someone would contradict, and convince him that it wasn’t true.

"When I was a child," said Virginia, his wife, "I thought everything was so complicated. I could never understand adults, quarrelling and getting bad tempered when I couldn’t see any reason for it. Now at least I understand some of that, so life is simpler. I wouldn't want to be a child again."

She was beginning to clench her teeth. Max took no notice.

"I don't remember things like that," Elizabeth sighed. "Everything seemed so perfect then—oh except for school and things like that." Bringing in the washing and sniffing the daphne with her arms full of sun-sweet sheets, never any doubt that she would wake tomorrow, or sleep tonight. *It will rain later tonight.* If they had troubles, she never knew.

"Children are so protected," Max went on. "When they finally run into the real world, they just want to scurry back home and hide in mother's skirt."

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“But it’s not true of the children around here. They’re so independent, so bored by fifteen that all they want to do is blot themselves out with drugs. They don’t seem to cope any better.”

Elizabeth poured out more wine.

“Ah, but they have lived!” declared Max. “They make mistakes, burn out at twenty if they’re unlucky, but think what they’ve experienced if they survive!”

“Maybe they get so hard,” Virginia murmured as she went into another room to see why her baby was crying, “that they just stop hurting.”

In the windows of his photography studio, Max placed wedding shots of blushing brides against red velvet backdrops, and setup outdoor scenes with the sun surrounding in haloes and little breaths of wind gently rippling the long white dresses.

Later on the beach you could see the same girls, black-eyed and sullen, or pushing strollers and yelling at the children who had just wandered off to investigate the fishy rubbish bins or the flocks of migrant pelicans. In the photos they were mother of pearl newly fished from the sea, sleek and mysteriously glowing under their damp, dappled skin; on the beach (sometimes it was only a month later), they were dry, and flaking.

(vii)

In the tiny rock pools the algae cling to a reflected face. On one cheek dripping, a musty emerald flower, or a bruise. The sea is the colour of Elizabeth’s favourite celadon vase, and the lanky seagrass which is everywhere in salty ribbons tugs as she turns away.

In gusts of folding white the gulls skate into statues, delicately braking on T.V. antennae and chimney tops. Her own feet shear hectically above cold, thin ice.

A young girl and boy slide neat as knives under the water. The gulls calmly clean their wings. As Elizabeth turns away, one foot totters, her arm sweeps out. The couple in the water splash back to the surface, laughing and clasping wet skin. A long shiver through the frozen avalanche of pebbles: her arm drops.

In the tiny rock pool the ripples race after her disintegrating smile (in the last ebb of night the wind breaks free, rain softly whips the air): having put aside one more chance to die under water, she smoulders home.
The afternoon was too cloudy for the beach and he stayed home and worked on the car. He had to do it sooner or later and that was the right day. He had to get it done. The petrol drip near the engine pipe wasn’t healthy.

He took off both carburettors and stripped them for the new washers. Only the rear one dripped but it made sense to do the lot. Some of the old fibre washers crumbled but he matched them all up and fitted them back in order. He checked that the pistons moved easily and bolted the system back together.

He switched on and ran the engine and the drip was still there. Apparently it was leaking down the needle. Tightening the adjusting nut underneath made no difference. He took that carburettor apart again and doubled up a couple of old washers with the new ones, but that only slowed it.

Then he took the piston from the front carburettor and tried that there instead. He put the piston from the rear one in the front. He switched on and this time he couldn’t see a leak. Both swapped pistons fitted. He ran the engine again and this time there was no drip anywhere.

He couldn’t understand it but it worked and that was good enough. He opened both adjusting screws the right distance and balanced the throttle arm. On the other side of the engine he took out the plugs and cleaned them, and filed and opened the gaps a little. He tested the engine again and then closed the bonnet. He took it round the block and it ran so well he wished he had an excuse for a drive somewhere. When he parked he trod on the accelerator a last time just to listen. That was a good day’s work.

He polished the grease off the bonnet and mudguards and the back of the chrome headlights. He scrubbed himself clean and then walked down to the beach to get pies from the corner shop for dinner. On the way back he thought about going to see Helena. If she wasn’t in he’d still have the run there and back. Maybe she’d like to go out somewhere.

He ate the pies and got the keys again. In the street he folded the windscreen flat and screwed it tight. The warm engine started and he switched on the lights in the dusk and headed down round the bay. The road was pretty clear and he was able to take the hill at the south end in top all the way. That showed the difference in power now. He felt a definite need to brag about it.

Past the Junction he turned left into Helena’s street and parked down the hill. Her front door was open and the light was on inside, and he knocked and called. “Who is it?” said Helena.

“Me.”

“Oh, come on in.”
She was on the settee in the living-room, next to the stereo. Records and covers were all over the floor. She was wearing tight jeans and a white T-shirt. A glass was on the small table and a bottle of burgundy about half full was on the floor next to her shoes.

“Sit down,” she said. “Take a seat. I was just looking for another record.”

“What were you just playing?”

“I don’t know, something. Bob Dylan. Highway 61.”

He looked at the records on the carpet. “How about Manfred Mann?”

“No, not him. Not them, at least.”

“Leonard Cohen?” he said.

“No, I played that.”

“Laura Nyro?”

“Maybe. No. No, let’s just sit and talk now you’re here. Would you like some of this?”

“Okay. I’ll get a glass, you stay here.”

Helena relaxed on the cushions. He found a glass in the kitchen and filled it, and refilled hers. They touched glasses. “Here’s looking at you,” he said.

“This was my dinner,” Helena said. “Just this.”

“It doesn’t look very nourishing.”

“No, it’ll be good for me, because I’m trying to lose weight again now. But I couldn’t face cooking anything tonight anyway.”

“What happened?” he said.

“Just work.”

“Tell us about it.”

“Oh, it’s the new woman there. She’s the head of the department. She’s impossible to work with. She’s taken a disliking to me. Can I say that? She’s always watching over me and explaining things, in such a very nice polite way. You know the way.”

“Why doesn’t she like you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know. I think she just thinks I’m silly little Helena, somebody she can be important with. I think it’s a big ego thing with her. But I’m so tired of it already, I just wish I could leave. But if I did I’d only end up at the same sort of place again.”

“How about acting? You said you were getting in that play.”

“Well, I’m not now. They promised it to me but in the end Morris said I wasn’t right for it. That was after all the rehearsals. Most of the rehearsals. And I think Mark fixed it, because he was screwing the girl who got it.”

“I didn’t know that sort of thing really went on,” he said.

“Oh, you don’t know. And now I don’t know what to do about anything. I feel so useless. I feel as if I’m not going anywhere, you know?”

He noticed her glass was empty. He didn’t think it would be a particularly good idea to fill it again.

“Everybody gets like that sometimes,” he said.

“Nothing makes sense any more. Sometimes I don’t even know what I’m doing.”

“You’re doing all right.”

“I’m not doing all right. I keep thinking, what’s the use of it all? I could get more pills at the chemist and that would be end of it.”

He thought maybe acting made her say things like that. “No, don’t be silly,” he said. “You’ve just got to hang on in there.”

“There’s nothing to hang on for.”

“Yes there is. You’ve just got to keep going. You’ve got to keep on figuring out what to do next. That’s all life is.”

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“You don’t know what it’s like,” Helena said. She’d filled the glass and it was half empty again. She was staring at the records on the floor.

“Let’s play something,” he suggested.

“All right.”

“Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young? Déjà Vu?”

“All right.”

He put it on the first side and sat back against the settee with his glass. “Listen to the lyrics,” he said.

“I know, they’re good. I like them.”

Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young sang Carry On. He reached for Helena’s hand and smiled up at her. She smiled and shook her head, but he held her hand through Teach The Children and the next track. She was quite a nice chick. She went on a lot about acting and she probably wouldn’t ever get very far at it, but she was very pretty in a dark slightly overweight way. She was really pretty nice. He stroked her hand.

“Listen,” he said. The record was starting on Helpless.

During the song he let go her hand and slowly moved to the settee. She moved a little to make room. He touched her hands again. They listened to the slow images and chorus. Helena sat up, swaying. She leaned forward and he kissed her. They straightened, lying against one another, kicking aside records on the floor. He moved his hand on her waist.

The start of Woodstock was upbeat and they moved their feet in time with it. When the words came they licked in each other’s mouth. She felt good under the T-shirt. The track finished and the player arm clicked off and they kissed in the quiet for a while.

He put his hand lower. “Do you want to?” he said.

It was because she was drunk. He felt badly about doing it with her that way. At the same time he knew she wanted it and it was necessary. He knew she’d say all right, but he had to ask.

“All right,” she said.

He switched off the stereo and they went into the bedroom. They kissed standing and he helped her strip. She was warm with wine and smooth all over. Her breasts were large but firm. She was fat over her hips. He liked her that way.

She lay on the bed and he dropped his clothes and joined her. He kissed her mouth, her breasts a while and then her belly. He licked her lower, between her thighs, soft on his cheeks, right in. He kept going until her legs tightened round him, and she made little sounds in her throat. This was what she wanted. She wanted somebody to be nice to her and he knew how to do it.

Finally he entered her belly to belly. It was inevitable and not important. Just the same he enjoyed it and she liked it too. He tried to keep it going a long time for them both.

Then they relaxed together. Some of the music was still in his head. He didn’t think he needed to ask how it had been. She still felt soft and warm and now slightly damp and she held him when he moved.

“Do you want to go?” she said.

“No.”

“Will you stay here tonight?”

“All right.”

She pulled up the sheet and cuddled against him. Presently she went to sleep there. He thought of moving away quietly so he could too, but before he could do it he didn’t need to.

In the morning Helena woke first and woke him when she stirred. They made love again in the grey early light.
"Thank you for staying," she said. He felt embarrassed. It was an actress thing to say.

She went in the shower first and she had breakfast ready when he came out. Now she was wearing a long loose dress with flowers and lace. She looked tired but happier.

“How do you feel about things today?” he said.

“Oh, all right.”

Suddenly she sounded tireder. “Not too good,” he said.

“No, I’m all right. I mean, I’m as good as can be expected.”

“I was hoping all that was over now.”

“No, it won’t be over for a while yet. But thanks.”

“I wish I could do something to really help.”

Helena smiled and reached for his hand. “You did all right,” she said.

They had more coffee to finish the pot. “I’d probably better get out from under your feet,” he said.

“If you want to.”

“No, I’d better get home. But I could come round later on, though. We could go for a run in the car. I just got it fixed up yesterday.” He was surprised now at the way he’d let the car slip his mind the night before.

“All right,” Helena said.

He took his time kissing her goodbye at the door. She watched him switch on and warm the engine. She waved when he pulled away and turned uphill.

The car ran well all the way home. He’d never expected to be driving home at that time. He couldn’t get over the way it had turned out.

He was glad he’d made things better for her for a night, anyway. He wished he could have thought of something that would last her longer. Then he thought, there was probably nothing else he could do. Nothing lasted forever. You had to fix things up every now and then. If he could fix her up again that way he’d be happy to do it. It was a lucky thing for both of them.

**SU GRUSZIN**

**Suburban Spring**

Spring is here,
and some bastard next door
is lousing it up with his lawn mower.
Someone else’s cat is chasing our birds
and our dog is chasing their cat.
There are yellow and black
furry caterpillars
crawling around on the kitchen floor,
and there’s a smell of the seashore
in our laundry.
She thought about the house, the way the light flickered over her walking up the drive. The bush which grew over half the drive, it only left enough room to walk up, you couldn't drive a car in. Delicate blue flowers extending out on their stalks. She snapped one off and crushed it, smelling the bruised sweetness on her fingers.

'I want to make love with my little wifie,' Chris murmured sleepily.
'I don't like that.'
'Don't you? Why not?' He nuzzled into her neck.

She grunted, half pleasure, half protest. In her mind she traced the shape of the windows, a curved, almost arched shape. The sort of shape you would usually only see in a church. Two big windows without glass, only flyscreens. One each end of the short wide corridor. It was rather like an indoor verandah. Intersecting it was a long narrow corridor from the front door to the back kitchen. She had walked very carefully on the floorboards, as if not to disturb someone. Rooms and rooms and rooms opening off down the corridor. The house was very still. . . the thread of her thinking was interrupted as Chris became more active in his lovemaking. She tried not to let go of the image of the house.

'Are you sleepy?' he whispered.
'Mmmm sort of. Thinking.'

He swung her on top of him and she lay quiet, face buried into his neck as he stroked her. There were the two big arched windows and then there were some very small ones.

The livingroom was a big room with a fireplace and on either side were two little windows. They were set into the wide brick walls like square portholes, ivy covering the edges of them. The ceiling was high, white plaster with boards criss-crossing to a sort of diamond pattern. Janine and Ron have the same kind of ceiling in their house in Subi. Not quite the same pattern but still . . . and their house looks so nice. They did a good job on it. I said why don't we get an old house like that and do it up. Too much housework for you love, he said, and besides I'm a professional. I'm making enough to be able to afford a new house. My wife deserves the best.

Lynn gave a little sigh, then Chris squeezed her. The neighbours probably reckon I'm a bit funny, she thought. They must have noticed me, probably think I lived there once.
‘Are you still thinking?’

‘Mmm?’ The bougainvillea curved into a little bower with a bed of old cushions underneath. There was a piece of blue silk brocade hanging off it, part of a kimono.

‘Are you thinking about what we were talking about last week?’

Lynn opened her eyes. ‘What?’

‘Darling, I stand by what I said last week, I understand that you might not have enough to do in the daytime. If you want to go to work you have my full permission. I told you I don’t agree with married women working, but if that’s what makes you happy — I want what’s good for you.’

‘I’m not thinking about that.’

‘Oh?’

‘Really. I’d forgotten all about it. I just feel sort of dreamy. I feel very happy with you holding me like this. I’m quite happy to lie with you like this all day.’ She kissed him. The little prickly stubbles on his chin were starting to come through. She rubbed her cheek against them, enjoying the faint rasping sound. She wriggled, laughing as he stroked down her side, wondering for a moment whether to tell him about the house. He would think she was a bit funny too. What was it about the house that pulled her? It made her feel sad really. It was beautiful but nobody else seemed to think so. The Condemned notice was put on the door in October, three months ago.

One of the rooms had glass french doors which opened onto a glassed-in section of the verandah. The light filtering through the undergrowth was pale green, an eerie light. Lynn could imagine a lady sitting there sewing. In the afternoon she would have tea on the verandah. It would be nice and warm in winter, there was a little fireplace too. Next door was an identical room which opened onto the verandah again, this time with a fly screen around it. Perhaps this was the summer room. They must have been very rich. It might have been a house of rich people and lots of servants once upon a time and then it became a boardinghouse. It was big enough for three families, each with children. Then there was the little house and the wash-house at the back. And a little hut behind that. Lynn had gone every second day this week, and each time there was something new to look at.

Chris turned to her and began kissing her again. She struggled to keep a space inside her, not to let go of the image in her head. It was as if he was trying to push to the centre of her, there was nowhere private. Groaning softly, he rocked under her. She floated in the light. It was as if her head and shoulders were in an overgrown bower full of the delicate blue flowers, she was quite detached from her body. Chris felt the same, warm and loving, while her body was only a shell. He was making love to the shell of her. He moaned. She realised with a faint sense of shock that he was satisfied with her like that. He hadn’t noticed any difference.
Free Fall

Every answer
is a kind of death:

Man
become frog
become stone;
earth
from destination
become death.

You can scream
if your shute doesn’t open
or flap
like a plucked fowl
(Icarus
with melted wax)

and trail
your silken noose
(mad with adrenalin)
through trapdoors
a thousand feet deep
five seconds long.

You tear at the tangled web
counting the heartbeats
pumping;
you pull the reserve:
thin as a thumb
it points down.

An exclamation mark
with stop.
Western Australian Printmakers

The work on the following pages is from the exhibition A. B. Webb, Edith Trethowan and Beatrice Darbyshire, Western Australian Printmakers of the 1920s and 1930s, exhibited at the S. H. Ervin Museum and Art Gallery, Sydney, 10 - 29 July, and at Undercroft Gallery, University of Western Australia, 25 September - 31 October, 1979.

A further tour of other Australian galleries is being arranged for 1980.
Beatrice Darbyshire (b. 1901)—“The Road to Balingup” (c. 1939), etching 29.5 x 26 cm. Collection: the artist
A. B. Webb (1887-1944)—“Sunshine and Shadow”, colour woodcut 19 x 23.3 cm
Collection: The Art Gallery of Western Australia (acquired 1927)
Edith Trethowan (1901-1939)—“From Kings Park towards South Perth”, (c. 1928-39)—wood engraving 8.2 x 13.3 cm. Collection: The Art Gallery of Western Australia (presented by Mrs Edna Trethowan, 1978)
Edith Trethowan (1901-1939) — “Fremantle Harbour” (c. 1928-39), wood engraving 10.2 x 11.1 cm. Collection: The Art Gallery of Western Australia (presented by Mrs Edna Trethowan, 1978)
The Life-Song of Dieri

Again the young man lapsed into dream; so slowly awakening.

* * *

Within the centre of a wheel. Within the circle drawn on rock, Dieri, the last initiate, mixes pituri with the ash of wattle leaves. His hand churns while memory untwines, the thread of race. From fathers who carved epics of earth and rock, until Dieri completes the circle-line and tribes return to stone.

Shadows slink under pebbles. Dieri churns, in his blackness, the most potent for being the last. He chews the narcotic mixture until the sky burns. Sandhills sway his vision. The rise and fall of magic rhymes, his airborne mind. The hawk, his brother, circles and slides into the sun, suspended.

The plain stirs from sleep, sound rises through him from earth. Dieri beats his rhythm, first with his feet, then his thighs. Until the body becomes the life-song.

Until, charged with love, he flows.

To what was and what will be born, in times awaited, in dawn remembered, in love. The song slides and falls ... he turned on his side, soaked. Torn from the source of fading sound, grasping at a vision that breaks at his bedside.

* * *

The after work rush in the rain. Human gutters dam up then cross, while mechanical ones stop. I strained to distinguish. But screens of water blurred the talking man, whom no one heard in this crowded bus stop. So I chose to look at my insides which were rotting in a career.

I sent my mother a photograph. She said I was getting thin, around the eyes. Whereas she, I could tell, had fattened her spirit on the olive groves. Barely six months since her return to the homeland. The wounds of twenty-five years' absence had already healed. Except, perhaps, for what she left behind; the wound of birth still gave her pain. In the postscript she mentioned again that art school in her country, that I was only twenty-three. Young enough to be saved. She would pray.

I thought of my mother in Greece, lighting yellow candles in a cathedral of art. Each morning came hooded, in the half-life. Each morning I emerged as a ghost for a replay. Days of black and white. Eke! Ekos! Eeeekosssss ... the sound of an empty tube of paint. Only internal lining. When it dies, it dies in ancient Greek. Or thereabouts. The words do deviate. But so does poetry. There is no deviation in the office days. No poetry in the newspaper game. You win by
rote, say it all in the first paragraph, yet lose by heart. I must be a romantic, too young to persuade.

But always the far side of evening, intense on points of light — the candles I lit, in the temple of the self. Praying for forgiveness, for the sacrilege of wasted time.

Mechanical screams, as regular as traffic lights. Human panic that passes for purpose. My own was long lost, in this perpetual bus stop. I wondered at my chances of recovery.

The blurred man was still talking. I was the only one left. “This is the wettest time of the year,” he seemed to be saying. “The buses are always crowded — sometimes the bus won’t even stop.”

A paper boy called.

“At least the paper helps pass the time,” his voice escaped from layers of newsprint. “Don’t you think?”

Somewhere an ambulance. Was I expected to speak? I could scarcely see him in the dim shelter. Maybe he was not there. I ignored what might not exist. But the voice persisted. “Don’t you think?” I agreed that newspapers had a lot to do with the passage of time.

Yet he repeated, “Don’t you think?” Reading my thoughts, like his newspaper, my wasted time. In this frail light. Impossible. I would light him no candle.

“Of course.”

“Then you can still use your head?” He sounded sly.

“Why, what’s in yours?” I turned to seek his eyes. But he had none, not even a head. He was headless. I asked him who he was.

“A demon.”

I tried to salvage my thoughts. Would the rain never stop?

“Which demon?”

“I am Emptiness. I eat heads, for I want a head for myself. I have not consumed enough and I desire a head like yours.”

I was alone in the shelter, yet the voice would not loosen its hold. So I fought.

“You are blind. Without a head. You can’t see to know what you want.”

Somewhere an ambulance hooting.

“Can see through your feelings.”

“See what.”

“Your state of mind.”

“How can you speak?”

“I am a voice myself, for I have obtained the empty sounds of innumerable men.” The screech of brakes. A string of blasphemies. Agonised. The demon climbed into the ambulance. As it pulled out, I noticed it was empty. Glad it was the demon that went inside.

I tossed my copybook career into the flooded gutter. That was one interview too many. Tired of being a journalist, and so to open another book, at age twenty-three. “Heere beginneth the boke of the mervayles of the world...”

So start walking. Her head safe inside an umbrella. Along the rim flows a geometry of lights, perspectives in the night. Her notebook sails past, drenched and deformed, but freed. It seems she has walked a long way. Yet a considerable distance remains. She moves imperceptibly, an ant on a rooftop, carrying an umbrella as protection from starshine. Otherwise one might well become mad in these peculiar lights, she mumbles ant-like. Now and again she looks out from under her umbrella — as a momentary relief from trudging. But the same nomadic night looks back at her from miles around.

It is impossible to say when, but perhaps she sees a shadow swooping out of the sky. “Ah, a happening!” Thin isolated trees bow humbly as it flaps above
their heads. Her own umbrella flips up and disappears. The shadow, as it
approaches, acquires substance. That of a huge bird with a human head. “A
coochie,” she states simply, as if she knew all along. The coochie lands, feet stuck
out, wings flapping. Somewhat ridiculously, she notices. But the outsized hawk
settles and regards her with its human eyes.

* * *

He stirred in his bed, feeling another’s presence, of someone with him, some-
one close and kind, but not altogether human. He knew the room was empty.
But full of kinship. His eyes closed on a gentler sleep.

* * *

The coochie twinkles at her. She wonders what had become of her umbrella.
So much light. Maybe I am already mad. Which is where I will stay for a while.
For it is not necessary to speak, or even to feel in order to see. That his eyes,
though human, bleed fire. And hers, filled with trust, drink his liquid fire. Renew-
ing her own.

He beats his wings and is at once high across the sky, until he becomes but a
black star entering the still dark dome of the west.

* * *

Seva Pappas woke to the silence of dawn; the only time the city breathed
softly. Out in the balcony the air was chilling but the sky glowed behind rectang-
ular towers. She looked directly into a luminous sea, where primeval colors are
born. Gushing blood and molten gold. The alchemist’s dream, flesh transmutes
to spirit. The spirit of a bird. Its wings soaring. Long feathers, each strand
distinct, the belly of a mushroom. But what kind of bird is this mysterious mush-
room? This question must be asked in the presence of paint.

* * *

Glimpses of charcoal dreams. In afternoons drugged with violets and scents of
the woodheap. The art mistress smiled, “There you are Seva, and what have you
here? A page of charcoal men?”

“Dressed in feathers I found in the garden. But they blew away,” spoke the
schoolgirl with a humming brownness of eyes and hair. The art mistress caught
a note of her own adolescence, but released for it was hers no longer.

“Seva, my dear, what will become of you? You spend the whole afternoon with
primitive charcoal at your lap, while the rest of the class has evolved to creating
planets of paper-mache.”

“Then what will they do, Miss Hawthorne?”

“Lord only knows with fourteen-year-old schoolgirls. They’ll probably blow
the spheres up during science class.”

“Then they will have to begin all over again, with charcoal sticks. So I’m not
that far behind but well ahead,” whispered the girl playfully.

“Quite so, Seva dear, quite so. Next Friday afternoon I will be laying out
clean pieces of paper with crude drawing implements, and we’ll be blessed again
with the second dimension.”

“But I thought you said any dimension was possible in art, Miss Hawthorne?”

“Quite so, Seva, quite so.”

* * *

The flat she still kept from her university days was a utility, from which to
come and go, or sit and think. And now that she have given up her job, she
did a great deal of the latter. Mainly on the balcony which looked down from
the second storey to an avenue of trees. Their arthritic bodies planted in a warp
of bitumen, enacting the yearly miracle of northern forests in a fury of green. For
once to forget the metallic earth.

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Students she knew would pass, call up a greeting and continue to the university library. She was to be seen only at the beginning or end of the day, when the sun cut a sharp angle and revealed the light's texture. Low-lying blades sliced the air, veins of thick honey. The woman measured the effect of these dyes on trees and forms. When a crop of leaves becomes a lantern of mirrors, a man the dwarf of his shadow. Seva became familiar with the anatomy of light, the ambivalence of form.

Sometimes those who knew her would view such watchful permanence with suspicion. Might she not be a little unhinged? Mentally perverse, at the very least. A disease peculiar to locally born foreigners.

"You sit there a lot, every day in fact," they would say, issuing a laugh that expected an explanation, probably rash and embarrassed. But the woman, whom they no longer knew, would simply say, "Yes."

Still others, who knew her only by sight, would have liked to talk. She seemed to have time for that. Time to listen. Their downcast faces showed the long-term effects of the urban winter. The city did not generate human contact, but apologised for it. People were in the habit of saying sorry. Some took it a step further and simply cursed. So it came that between the lessons of light and form, she began to read the faces too.

There was one face that would not be read. It was black and intense. She looked forward to watching this lanky Aboriginal man in a khaki coat. He walked in a slightly erratic manner, his black sheep hair tossing. He carried books.

* * *

A book of Aboriginal songs. The black smiled. He turned the page. A wildman between bookshelves.

"They live today who lived in Dreamtime's dawn."

He turned a few pages more.

"Life's cycle thus: the 'shades' of all
In Dreaming way come from the grave
And travel along their path on earth
To death and Wolgaru; whereon
Their fate adjudged, they wait rebirth.
For tribes may pass, — the 'shades' live on."

He shook his head. White man robs us of our culture. Records it in book form. And may one day return it as cultural studies in a textbook. Bless us!

Yet he appreciated the author's endeavours. His fear of cultural extinction was clothed in irony, but desperate when stripped. For that reason he cultivated himself fully. An oddity, even among many of his own people, who cultivated oblivion.

Long charcoal fingers replaced the book. He was glad he could still rely on memory. That at least one song would be heard and not read.

Who was that lady?

* * *

How to return to that room, where dreams amplify? When the bed creaks to the nerves in his bones. How could he control his head, so very human.

* * *

He placed another red mark on the calendar. Only days remained, the last would make itself known. He remembered how he watched the calendar two years ago, when he was awarded the scholarship to study in the city. Those three months of waiting in the mission, the dust, in the boredom that comes from expectation; the naïve prelude to what he now knew was necessary — a journey in the white wilderness. Among the cold inhabitants, their concrete totems, he
found his own brothers, wandering in a deathlike daze, stumbling occasionally on the remnants of their tribal mind. Dieri, too, stumbled among the broken pieces of his inheritance. But he persisted. Fighting, feeling his way.

* * *

"Seva, why are you hiding away like this? Have you forgotten your friend Gloria?"

Seva managed a smile for the forgotten Gloria, "Come into my den of hiding."

A lot was said but nothing accomplished. Gloria realised there was more than friendship at stake.

"Why Seva?" she returned to her initial cause, "Why do you lock yourself away like this?" She paused, sensing futility, "What's wrong?"

Seva would have choked rather than speak. Was it always necessary to speak? But that she did, innocently, "Nothing's wrong. I'm what's regarded as simple. I'm Greek. If I was born in Greece, I would have been a peasant, growing peppers and milking goats. But I was not. I was born here." And I dislike it, she added silently.

"Come on! Don't tell me that's why you left that good job. 'Cause you were born to milk goats!"

"Not quite."

"So you're on the run?"

Seva looked at her friend, who sought answers, for reasons of her own.

"No, not quite."

"But almost, eh?"

"Thereabouts. But further on."

* * *

He was there, staring up a tree. Books in hand, khaki coat, and windy-wild hair. Seva stood at the entrance to the flats, with the intention of seeing Gloria off. But she preferred to look at him. Fortunately, Philip, a friend from university days, strolled by and spoke to Gloria, giving Seva more time to indulge.

He was so close, but he had a sense of distance, which she dared not cross. Not at this moment, it would be premature. "Law is boring," interfered the voice beside her, "I am boring. Which is why I think of things to amuse myself." Seva could imagine the ineffectual smile that followed Philip's dry words.

She wished the two of them would go away.

"You'd like this one Gloria. There's a party at Mick's on Saturday, why don't you girls come along . . ." They talked on and on. Seva would have left, if it wasn't for him, still standing, watching the tree he had found.

"Seva," Philip's attention turned to the one who had nothing to say, but was obviously preoccupied. "We'll pick you up on Saturday."

"What for?" she returned. "If I go, I'll walk. It's only down the road." The black turned slightly, he had heard. She smiled at the thought of a breakthrough.

* * *

Seva saw him pass a few times, always on the edge of night. Occasionally he raised his hand, as if to hold a thought or sound. But no, it passed, as he passed, this dervish man. Seva Pappas thought of him as such because he seemed capable of a whirling trance. And because he appeared to be experiencing himself so completely. Her images, inherited from another land, served to explain the signs, which in themselves would form images anew.

* * *

On Friday he looked at her. They were introduced. To more, it seemed, than each other.
Tell me, tell me. The word. I want to draw it.

“The word is not spoken, but sung,” he replied, “in a circle.”

* * *

By ten o’clock the party was in two rooms. One dim and musical, the other well lit for those playing cards, their money staked on skills of chance.

“Ah! Seva Pappas! Pull up a chair. Dark ladies bring me luck,” said the host. The players were now four.

“The light’s too bright.”

“Only if you look at it.” The player held her waist. Euphoric, as if there were real diamonds in his hand. “Tonight, my boys, you’ll have to sing for your supper. Tonight, dark lady, we’ll buy the bar.”

* * *

In the night, Dieri walked, singing a throaty tune. The demon’s Emptiness was breaking. His blood surging in ceremony sung between sun and sky, flesh and sand; a ceremony which memory pursued. He looked forward to his release, his woman, his homeland.

* * *

Seva drifted to the other room. Philip was sprawled on the floor, half way out of his mind, and Gloria was chain-smoking, an activity she reserved for disturbing times.

“Seva!” Gloria pounced, “Come sit with me!”

Seva saw that there were forces stirring this night, fiery forces that consumed the susceptible. Gloria’s face, the color of jade beneath furious red locks. Her anger undefined but somehow connected to the static qualities of the people around her. She sought Seva, not so much out of friendship, but her condition. It defied.

“There are nine emperor gods, and one Gloria,” Philip challenged for attention.

“Don’t use my name in vain, Philip.”

“But I have made you the tenth god,” he protested. “You are transformed.”

In his drunken state he was witnessing all kinds of transformations. He too was engulfed by a restless flow. “Even my boredom is transformed,” he said.

The three formed their triangle. So much so that the rest of the room felt it—“the fringe-dwellers.”

For Seva, the party was soon a discarded toy. She strayed outdoors. In a winter garden. A dim song, high in the tree-tops.

She walked towards the entrance gates. He was standing there. The triangle becomes a square. The players are four, framing a circle. The four reduce to pairs. Two transmute to One. They walked side by side. After some time he spoke, unobtrusively,

“You know, by now, which way we are going.”

“Home.”

“Do you mind?”

“I would like that.”

He took hold of her hand. They walked softly. She introduces him to her gallery — weird growing things, fevered, mythical beasts.

“The future is without fences.” he foretells. Curl around me like a long-forgotten song.

* * *
“Where will you go?” she asked of the morning. He sat on the floor, stroking the curves of a painted feather, “You are my lady. What can I say?” They looked at shapes transforming — animals that become gods, gods that are men.

“Your art is never static, Seva, nor you, I suppose.”

“And you, who will go, in search of what?”

“The wisdom ... magic ... that was once mine, so long ago ...” Dieri struggled with the strangeness of what he knew, speaking in broken meanings. “To my tribal land ... my former mind ... I need. So much.”

* * *

There is a point, a splinter of light, the coochie’s twinkling eye, which pierces reality, her factual life. Is a dream. Dreamt by another. And the other, the dreamer, having awakened, re-enters the desertlands. He was not heard of since.

Seva Pappas painted. When she could paint no longer, as would happen spasmodically, she submitted to her mother’s doctors. Like icons, they would smile faintly, patiently. But ever so remote.
Absences

1. THE CHESTERFIELD IN THE WHEAT

Because I did not see the old chair
undone among sheep in the stubble
like old fleece on a thornbush
I am left with its absence
in every field I drive past
as if some flawed scarecrow were leaning
behind to point now, now, waiting to let go my shadow
and set up its hessian shanty again and to sing
loud worksongs to silence.
It will become litter among sheep
it will loll back witless
at true glare, it will be accepted.
Only then I will be driving fast
and not looking, nothing needed, I will be
imprinted
onto the car's vinyl
as if it were my grandfather's chesterfield
as if the paddocks were empty.

2. COORONG SALT PLAINS

Push your arm into the ocean
and it is only salt
climbs out.
Hours later, the taste
clings to hair, to skin.
As water pastes itself
onto the hot breezes
and is sucked away
the salt pans harden
a bitter squint
inventing rocks
that should weep.
3. COCKLEBIDDY SWALLOW CAVE

What do we grow on the flat tablelands? We grow cloudscapes, we grow ways of looking at grasses and succulents for the colour they drag up out of limestone. We grow very terse trees, their shoulders hunched against the wide south air. We grow silences, secrets, we have caves at Cocklebiddy.

Turn around three times you are lost. Stumble around and on the flat without feature this feature — earth uncupping a palm, cupping a dark thing, you are looking down a cave’s orifice. The surface crumbles quite easily, a few boulders, a slide, a curtain of old limestone pillars. Old uprights broken. Things scooped up, things drawing. A dead bat and live swallows circling like bats in the tight amphitheatre.

Not knowing what is inside, we can taste the stale darkness inside, we are a long way in, sitting up here on our haunches gazing at swallows. Some places we crawl back to, even the first time. Dust settled inside the cave way back, but we grin with location, and drive back to the black road — here is a sprig of heath from the cavemouth, fruit tight like a gold bead, a minute cup of sweet between fingers. We drive on into the straight Nullarbor with its thick layers underneath us, busy as swallows. We have grown serious. We have grown frivolous.
4. REHEARSING THE OUIJA

What did we expect? We were in just that year to expect anything (except, perhaps, the unexpected): a young clutter that had made, and performed, its own opera and was gulping for more, loud for it. A fortnight beach camp, then, for brain-storming, voice-scaring, high tuned encounters (there were many); we were on the grape diet (your eyes will clear), we went surfing, racing, we were discovering tensions and each other, we were planning the new performance. One night someone suggested the Ouija, cut out our paper alphabet, numerals, found an old wineglass; we were instructed (who remembered?) to rest a finger, lightly, each. The glass moved. Nonsense strings of letters. Someone called out, invoking the Presence. But I was drowsy, ideas were encounters, I had to rest. Later, one of the lads came in, electric with pressure: “Tom, it’s a dead man, he’s telling his life.” The glass shuddered expelling words quick. “He was a Cedar Getter” they scrambled out his magic history, “Wild cedar country, 1860.” The glass — he ordered, he would lead, hold onto the rim, it was outside, up there, otherwise no rest.

A silly bundle, children in their 20s (some older: me), we reached in, our fingers sustaining, somehow, the thin glass and stumbled into May darkness, cold, black electricity to keep the stars in their distance, spikily. The girls winced with giggles, we rippled — but what possible harm? We were so many. Up the rough path, higher, shoving now among bushes. Then suddenly the glass broke. Quarry’s edge, abrupt precipice.

That was the last time we were excited together; in rehearsal, later, the new opera shattered. What did we expect? Daytime we had all seen that fall. Someone called, invoking the Presence, forgetting its other name: Absence.
JOHN BARNES

The Time was Never Ripe: Some Reflections on Literary Nationalism

In this tentative sketch of the nationalism of the Palmers and their contemporaries, I am, I suppose, seeking to clarify my own position. The studies of David Walker and others such as John Docker have made me realise just how much my own thinking about the question of nationalism has changed over the past twenty years. If challenged, I would have to say that the nationalism of the Palmers no longer seems relevant, and that in their interpretation of what constitutes the strength and central direction of Australian writing the emphasis now seems misplaced. From this viewpoint I want to comment on how what might be called the nationalist stereotype of our literary history took shape, and to throw out a few suggestions about why it seemed so convincing at the time. As my title may have suggested, I see the nationalist writers of Palmer's generation as living in hope and expectation: they had a vision of a future society and literature which was never fulfilled. It is an essential part of my argument today that their hopes and dreams were based on misconceptions and could never be fulfilled. If my argument has substance and is not merely ingenious, then it raises the interesting question: has the nationalist interpretation seriously distorted our sense of the past? Has it affected the reception and recognition of Australian writing? (A more difficult question is how it has affected the creation of literature in this country.)

It will be generally agreed, I think, that Vance Palmer is a significant figure in our cultural history, though he was not a writer of the first rank. It is partly because he was not a writer of great talent and originality that he is so interesting to the cultural historian. He wasn't the sort of writer who creates his own imaginative world by the very strength and individuality of his way of seeing. He was a practised journalist, and often seems to have been most at ease in writing the higher kinds of journalism — book reviews, articles, radio talks. He had a gift for putting things in a clear and easy style, and he probably reached his largest audience through his radio broadcasts rather than his books. And it's not surprising that his non-fiction books — *National Portraits* and *The Legend of the Nineties* — tend to be better known than his fiction. The latter book is, at the one and same time, a personal document, which expresses the central and underlying values that governed Palmer's writing life, and a historical document, the fullest but the least confident of his writings on a period that had come to have a unique meaning for him — and, it could almost be said, a period which he taught us to see. A detailed study of how the concept of the nineties as a special period of Australian literature evolved would be well worth making, and it would show, I think,

From a paper delivered to the Association for the Study of Australian Literature Conference at Monash University, 1978.
that the writing of Palmer and his friends was crucial in fixing the image that has been so widely accepted.

What I want to focus on in *The Legend of the Nineties* is the set of assumptions Palmer makes about the function of literature. In the final chapter he considers the view that the "tradition" of the nineties has been lost. He argues that a "tradition of democratic writing" was formed in the nineties, and that it is "strongly marked in the Australian novel and short story of today". After sketching what he takes to be the chief characteristics of this fiction, Palmer makes his claim for its value:

It is not too much to say that this body of writing, deriving from the literary pioneers of the nineties, has given Australians a clearer conception of their qualities and limitations, and brought some coherence into their social life. More than any political movement toward unity it has made them a people, able to respond to things that touch the national being, even though there still exist the economic divisions of class. This may seem an exaggerated claim when one considers how fully the ironic sentences Lawson wrote as a preface to this first volume could be applied to conditions today, but the effect of any genuine writing is pervasive; it is not limited to those who come into direct contact with it. The influence of Archibald's *Bulletin* cannot be calculated by the number of subscribers it had, and many Australians have had their values shaped and their ways of thought coloured by writers they have never read.

The claim is so large and couched in such general terms that it is almost impossible to deal with. I see it as being less a considered judgment than an expression of faith. Whatever the limitations of this literature, so Palmer argues, it has fulfilled a nation-building role. The nineties "turned the eyes of Australians inward and impelled them to discover themselves and their own country". His final sentence is a qualified affirmation of the "legend" of the nineties, but still an affirmation:

The Australian world has seen a widening of its horizons since those days when it seemed so securely shut in upon itself, but it is certain that without that period of intense self-absorption it could not so quickly have found a voice and an individual vision, acquired a character and a sense of community.

Here, then, is the essence of Palmer's case: in the nineties Australia found its cultural identity, and this was achieved primarily through the literature of the *Bulletin*.

Against that profession of faith I want to set Palmer's first statement on the national function of literature. In 1905 he published his first article — "An Australian National Art", in *Steele Rudd's Magazine*. To the young would-be writer of nineteen, it appeared that little had been achieved in Australian writing. He described the "only really national work that we have produced" as "a few books of stories and sketches by our younger writers", none of whom he named. Like most young writers, he was full of hope for the future:

Even now the national movement is beginning. In each of our cities is arising a little band of writers, who are content to mirror with clearness the life about them. Theirs is the most glorious task ever conceived — the creating of a whole literature. After all we are a very young people, and are only commencing to find out our characteristics.

Now, it isn't fair to call a man to account for what he writes at nineteen, and I'm not wanting to score points by showing that there is a discrepancy between how the immature man in 1905 saw the situation and how the mature man assessed the same period fifty years later. What is most relevant here, I think, is Palmer's
conscious commitment to the notion of “national literature” before he had himself produced any creative work — or, at least, had anything published. He had a clearly worked out theory of what a writer in Australia should be doing:

Art is really man’s interpretation of the inner life of his surroundings, and until the Australian writer can attune his ear to catch the various undertones of our national life, our art must be false and unenduring. There must be no seeing through English spectacles. Our art must be original as our own fauna and flora are original.

What we require in our present development is not so much cultured writers as ardent nationalists. We need men who will bind us together in an indissoluble bond. . . . They must be at one with the purposes and aspirations of the people and their hearts must beat in unison with them . . .

A basic assumption he made was that “our national life finds most perfect expression in the different types of the west.” As it is in the country that “the individuality of a people” is best expressed, then it follows that “the bush for the present must be the mainspring of our national literature”. Perhaps one should underline the phrase: “for the present”.

This, one might say, is also more an expression of faith than an analysis of a situation, and the stress is, naturally enough, on what is to come. For over half a century Palmer’s central conviction that the significant Australian artists were those who wrote out of deep-felt nationalism did not waver, but his view of the relationship between Australian life and Australian literature underwent some subtle modifications. More and more he was on the defensive, as the gap between his idealised and romanticised conception of Australia and the reality widened. As a consequence he came to stress the power of literature to preserve and reaffirm what was threatened and in danger of being lost. In the 1905 article he saw literature as capable of revealing the reality, the Australian reality, of which he was part. The nationalist writer, because his view was unclouded by English prejudice, would penetrate the surface and perceive the “inner life of his surroundings.” His art, unlike that of the colonial artist, would have the truth that results from an emotional identification with Australian life. However, over the next twenty years Palmer came to see literature less as a mirror and more as a kind of storehouse of values, a potential force in changing the direction and quality of national life; and the work of the “literary pioneers” of the nineties assumed a greater value as giving definition to the “spirit” of the country.

But first, the “nineties” had to be discovered, and the significance of the period located in specific works. As a youth, Palmer had not originally found the Bulletin congenial, but it soon became the central influence in forming his sense of what was Australia. He wrote of the period when he first left school that the Bulletin “had become my touchstone for what was the reality of the world about me.”2 Lawson’s stories were an essential part of his education; and Lawson always had a central place in his vision of the nineties. In 1913 he singled out Lawson, Baynton and O’Dowd as three writers who had found “the Australian soul” in their writing, and he regarded O’Dowd as a “national force” and one whose “value in the future will not lie so much in his own accomplishment as in what he will impel others to accomplish.”3 Furphy was as yet unread by Palmer. The notion of a Lawson-Furphy tradition is familiar to us; but it dates from the forties, when Furphy’s stature and centrality in the period was first widely acknowledged. Although Such is Life sold over a thousand copies when first published in 1903, very few of these seem to have got into the hands of other writers or people interested in literary affairs. Palmer did not know of Furphy until Kate Baker’s edition of Furphy’s poems appeared in 1916. (Reading through Kate Baker’s correspondence of that time, one appreciates how important she was in bringing Furphy’s work
to the attention of those who would be likely to recognise its value.) Palmer responded with enthusiasm, writing a review of the volume in Socialist, and following this up with a short article, "A Note on Joseph Furphy" in Sinclaire's Fellowship (March 1917). He expressed the opinion "that Joseph Furphy's mind was about the freshest and most stimulating we have produced, and that it is a spiritual waste that circumstances have not allowed it to carry its full influence." Palmer was prepared to make an effort to alter circumstances so that its full influence would be felt, and as well as helping Kate Baker with the reissue of the remainder of the Bulletin edition, he wrote a preface to Such is Life. (In passing, one must note the irony of the situation that occurred twenty years later when, hoping to gain English readers for Such is Life, Palmer undertook to edit and condense the novel at the request of Edward Garnett, and so drew upon himself the wrath of the literary nationalists with whom he generally made common cause.) From the time he first read it in 1916, Such is Life became a key work in his conception of what was distinctively Australian.

Its importance for Palmer was not simply that it had what he calls in various places "an absolute value" as literature, but that it was one of those works that was contributing to the making of "an Australia of the spirit". As David Walker has shown, Palmer's ideas about how Australia should develop were greatly influenced by the New Age circle to which he belonged in the years between 1911 and 1915. Walker quotes a remark of Orage's which seems to sum up Palmer's whole approach to the question of a national literature: "To go back is to go forward . . ." (p. 7). For this paradox to have any force, there must be something to go back to. Although Palmer was a radical in politics, his cultural outlook was fundamentally conservative, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say conservationist. He thought increasingly that the way forward for Australia was through a recovery of something from the past that was in danger of being lost or submerged, and both as a creative writer and as a critic he was wholly committed to this point of view.

This concern with the past increasingly coloured his thinking about literature in Australia. He valued both Lawson and Furphy as artists, but not purely as artists. It was because he saw them as artists of a special kind that they mattered so much. They expressed values that Palmer assumed to be "essentially Australian", and therefore they had a special value that an artist like, say, Brennan did not have for him. The Great War and the changes in Australian life that followed it lent urgency to Palmer's conviction that in the literature of the nineties was a source of values that society needed. Just how highly Palmer rated the influence of literature can be seen in his praise of Lawson. In 1921, for instance, he saw Lawson as being "the foremost civilising agency in Australia up to the present . . ." The whole passage is worth quoting as a statement of how Palmer saw the function of literature in relation to Australian society:

I believe that some sort of civilisation will have to be built up in Australia if we are not to remain a meaningless jumble of incoherent creeds, cliques, classes. At the present time we are living intellectually in a state of barbarism. Poetry is not enough to alter our condition — a poetry that is read only by a small circle. We want a social life created through prose and the drama, both to satisfy our own instincts as reasonable beings and for the sake of the country as a nation. I would say that the foremost civilising agency in Australia up to the present had been — no, not the Ford car — but Lawson's short stories. Here you have something created where all sorts of people can meet on common ground — the artist and the miner, the bushman and the lawyer. No one has the right to ask that all stories should be as general in their appeal as this, but when they happen so they are a lucky accident for all concerned.4
There it is made plain: Lawson's great value is that through his democratic view of life he creates the "common ground" for Australians, and so strengthens their sense of national identity. When Lawson died the following year, Palmer wrote a tribute, in which the point is made more explicit:

... we can be proud that Lawson was known from one end of Australia to another, and that all kinds of men have read his books. By some divine accident we have produced a national writer, one whose influence penetrates everywhere. It is a mystery. Australia was born in the spirit when Lawson began to write: when we look back on the days before his stories appeared, it almost seems as if we were looking at an alien landscape and unfamiliar people. We have grown since then and become conscious of the world about us, but to take Lawson's stories away now would be like plucking out our eyes.

He concludes his article with a statement which reveals the sense of threat which he felt:

In a country like ours, a man's work has two values — an absolute and a relative one. We can leave overseas critics like Edward Garnett to compute the absolute value of Lawson's stories. Whatever that may be, to us they are greater. Something has been created — a landscape, a crowd of men and women, a way of looking at life. Lawson's work will be a touchstone for us when we are in danger of being overwhelmed by a crowd of writers who have looked at life through the windows of English and American magazines.5

This notion of the touchstone is one which the nationalists tended to employ more and more in relation to the writers of the nineties (one finds Miles Franklin making the same claim for Furphy6). It was a form of defence against what they saw as a threat from overseas, a threat which actually seemed greater as the "tyranny of distance" seemed less. In their eyes the availability of imported books, and the newer forms of entertainment threatened the emergence of the distinctive local culture.

Palmer's thinking about nationalism rests upon a notion of the organic community, and the analogy of the human being is one which is in the back of his mind when he thinks about the "nation". The finest writers express the "soul" of the country. As Palmer saw it, the "soul" of Australia had been revealed in the nineties, but the spiritual potential of such writers as Lawson and Furphy and O'Dowd was not being realised in the next generation. By the 1920s Palmer could feel nothing but dismay at the way Australian society was developing; and the literature of the nineties was his touchstone. His very simplistic view was that the cities had "conquered" and the Bush had been defeated. Writing in 1921, he asserted:

Thirty years ago life in Australia was not moulded by our coastal cities. It took its character from the Bush. The lean, bronzed man from the station, the selection, or the small township was the accepted national type . . .

Our immediate past, then, was determined by the Bush . . . If Australia had developed from that base, its body would be healthier today and its mind more coherent . . .7

What is starting to emerge here is a sharp sense of the contrast between what Australia is becoming and what it might have been. Palmer viewed contemporary developments with increasing dismay: "What is there in modern industry to give any character to the towns it creates?"7 he asked. Australian cities, lacking any cultural tradition of their own, were vulnerable to the threat posed by modern technological change. "The older cities have a native art and culture that prevent them from being overwhelmed by the cinema, the jazz dance, the cheap scientific
reprint, and the megaphones of the publicity agents: we have nothing”. It was an article of belief with Palmer that suburbia was the same everywhere, and that suburbia was inimical to the life of the spirit. But he did not attack suburbia, and expose its life-denying characteristics, as the creator of Sarsparilla has tried to do. Palmer’s response was to turn back to an idealised vision of Bush life rather than to confront the complexities of the present.

By the time he made a selection of A. G. Stephens’ criticism at the beginning of the 1940s, Palmer had become a leading literary figure, and it was in these years, when National Portraits reached a wide audience, that his view of the Australian past probably had its greatest impact. The war drew from him his most fervent expression of his nationalism, and predictably he located the “true” Australia as being defined in the writing of the Bulletin generation:

If Australia had no more character than could be seen on its surface, it would be annihilated as surely and swiftly as those colonial outposts white men built for their commercial profit in the East — pretentious facades of stucco that looked imposing as long as the wind kept from blowing. But there is an Australia of the spirit, submerged and not very articulate, that is quite different from those bubbles of old-world imperialism. Born of the lean loins of the country itself, of the dreams of men who came here to form a new society, of hard conflicts in many fields, it has developed a toughness all its own. Sardonic, idealist, tongue-tied perhaps, it is the Australia of all who truly belong here. When you are away, it takes on a human image, an image that emerges, brown and steady-eyed from the background of dun cliffs, treed bushlands, and tawny plains. More than a generation ago, it found voice in the writings of Lawson, O’Dowd, Bedford, and Tom Collins: it has become even more aware of itself since.

The connection with the earlier quotation is obvious enough. There is a disturbingly sentimental quality about Palmer’s vision of the ‘national type’, and although one wants to allow that an expression of one’s beliefs at a time of crisis is likely to be emotional, this is embarrassingly self-indulgent in feeling.

By the time The Legend of the Nineties appeared, over a decade later, the tone was muted, the confident assumption of what the future would bring had gone, but the vision was essentially the same, with the ‘special type’ of Australian created by Lawson and Furphy at the centre of the picture. Perhaps the most interesting change lay in the shift of emphasis from what was to come to what had been achieved.

You will recall Palmer’s claim for the tradition of democratic writing which I quoted earlier:

It is not too much to say that this body of writing, deriving from the literary pioneers of the nineties, has given Australians a clearer conception of their qualities and limitations, and brought some coherence into their social life.

It is an extraordinary claim, and Palmer’s argument that “many Australians have had their values shaped and their ways of thought coloured by writers they have never read” really leaves the whole question open. When Palmer attempts to give substance to his conviction that there has been a potent tradition of democratic writing, one has the uneasy feeling that he is clutching at straws. The “tradition of democratic writing” is confined to the novel and the short story, and is characterised in this way: the viewpoint is that of the “working community”; the idiom is that of “the man on the job”, with his slang and his colloquial rhythms; there is more emphasis on the “social being” than on the “interior life”, more on the “mass” than on the “individual”. Apart from a casual reference to Coonardoo and The Battlers, Palmer gives no illustrations. One can think of
novels which more or less fit this description, but the description doesn’t direct one’s attention to what is most distinctive. And one can’t help reflecting that it is very hard to see Palmer’s own fiction in these terms, though he probably did. When Vivian Smith recently placed the work of Palmer’s generation as belonging to a “genteel, lettered but still ‘colonial’ tradition”, he was offering a valuation totally at odds with the view Palmer himself took, and one which he would doubtless have strongly contested. Yet I think it is probably right, and it suggests some interesting reflections on the element of personal necessity in Palmer’s advocacy of nationalism.

There are aspects of Palmer’s early life (and especially the Englishness of his father’s taste) which must have had considerable bearing on his self-conscious commitment to nationalism even before he began to write; but it was a commitment that never wavered, and, when one considers Palmer’s life, his thinking on the issue of nationalism seems hardly to have developed at all beyond that early position. In one of her best essays Nettie Palmer writes: “Three or four generations have not been enough to allow us to get thoroughly rooted in the soil. Waves of uncertainty sweep over us”. Palmer and his generation struggled with the “waves of uncertainty” and opposed them, but they did not explore such feelings of uncertainty in themselves. It is one of the great gaps in our literature that so few writers undertook to examine the sense of exile and alienation within them. Palmer always held to the position that to write about Australian life you had to feel at home in Australia. Running through all his discussions of the nature of literature is the assumption that a writer needs to be part of the community, to be close to the soil, to be of the people. In Australian Writers Speak (1943), at the end of an interesting dialogue with Nettie, Vance Palmer sums up his views in this way:

I think we have to keep in our minds the fact that literature isn’t a solitary personal cult, the special concern of a few writers. Really it’s the ferment of a country’s thought and activity, and will flourish in proportion as the whole community becomes awake and aware. The important question is, have we anything to say as a people? I think we have, that when we fully recognise this there will be a continuous, subtle flow of communication between writer and reader: the one will kindle the other’s feeling and imagination and become inspired himself by the depth of the response.

Here Palmer is describing an ideal which he believed in as a kind of personal necessity: the writer sustains and is sustained by the feeling of belonging to a community. Palmer conscientiously tried to be a democratic writer, but in its style and viewpoint his fiction has none of the marks of the artist who is imaginatively alive to the ways of thought and feeling of common people. There is little of that intuitive understanding that his hero Lawson shows (one must add that Palmer’s account of Lawson tends to ignore those aspects of his work that don’t fit the stereotype of the writer as the voice of the community).

In Dream and Disillusion David Walker, after drawing attention to the limitations of Palmer’s fiction, remarks that “the nationalist critique enabled Palmer to attribute some of these shortcomings to the failings of his society”, (p. 198). This is perhaps an ungenerous way of looking at it, but it is certainly true that Palmer tended to think of a writer as being dependent upon an audience, a sympathetic and responsive audience, if he were to realise his potential. The absence of major writers in his generation he was inclined to explain in terms of the absence of an adequate audience. In the dialogue to which I’ve referred, he argues that there was a compact audience in the nineties which was dispersed, and that in the forties a larger national audience was coming into existence: “It isn’t large enough yet to support a single writer of quality out of the score or so that we have... But our audience will grow as interest in our life grows—
as Australians become conscious that they are a distinct people, with a character of their own and a special contribution to make to the new world that’s being built”. It was true that a larger audience was growing, but it was not an audience with which Palmer could feel the close identification he desired.

In the contrast between their conception of what should be a writer’s relationship to his audience and the facts of their own experience the dilemma of Palmer and his friends like Esson is most clearly seen. They aspired to be popular writers in the older sense of the word: they saw themselves as guardians of the true spirit of the Australian people, and the inheritors of the popular culture of the nineties. They were at odds with the values of the middle class society to which they belonged, and from which their readership came; yet they felt the need of a close relationship with their readers, such as they could not establish. They had a vision of community and their relationship to it which was drawn from the past, and which they failed to make relevant to the present. Out of their sense of perplexity at the way Australian society was going, they turned more and more to the affirmation of Bush values. In a sense, they became propagandists for the Bush in what seemed to be a time of suburban ascendancy. Generally, one would have to say that their work didn’t bear a close and creative relationship to the realities of their time. Seeing themselves as spiritual nation-builders they tended to substitute a sentimental conception of life in the Bush for the suburban actuality they retreated from.

In The Legend of the Nineties one can see, I think, a strong desire to find a continuity of literary development from a beginning in what Palmer calls “oral legen­dary” through the writers of the nineties to his own generation. There is a great deal of wishful thinking in this view, but I don’t think that it was confined to Palmer. Those who held a radical-nationalist view seem to have had at the back of their minds a hope of a national literature rooted in the folk-imagination. And it is here, I think, that the Irish connection in Australian writing is so relevant.

P. R. Stephensen characterised the Bulletin under Archibald as a publication which “provided an Irishman, in fact numerous Irishmen and Irish-Australians, with a grand opportunity to express themselves”;14 and one can hardly deny that. Pointing to the anti-English attitude of the Irish, he argued: “They provided the basis, if not for an indigenous Australian culture, at least for the weakening of English influences here”. The topic is too large to deal with here, but it is worth researching. The aspect that concerns me now is the significance which the nationalist writers attached to the “Irish Renaissance”, especially in the theatre; and at this point I must shift the focus from Palmer to Esson, his friend and elder, whose thinking had a considerable influence upon him.

The essential history of the Pioneer Players experiment is well known, and Esson’s indebtedness to Synge and Yeats is recorded. The Pioneer Players enterprise was the culmination of Esson’s hopes long cherished, and followed his return from abroad in 1921. “The time, at least, seemed ripe for making a beginning with the dramatic schemes we had so fully discussed”,15 Vance Palmer wrote afterwards without a trace of irony. While in Sydney the Lindsay-inspired magazine, Vision, was arguing that Australian writers must repudiate the Bulletin tradition if they were to advance, in Melbourne the Pioneer Players were attempting to revivify that tradition by putting it on stage, taking the Abbey Theatre as their model of how it should be done.

The fundamental assumption on which the whole enterprise was based is put forward by Esson in a letter to Palmer, reporting his conversations with Yeates at Oxford in 1920:
Plays on really national themes, he said (not 'popular plays' in the ordinary sense) — and this is his important principle — help to build a nation in the spiritual sense; while the other type of play, so-called intellectual drama, abstract and cosmopolitan — Galsworthy, Bennett, etc., and the husband wife, lover triangle (not on moral, but artistic grounds) will 'shatter a nation'. That is what our scholars fail to realise. The arguments look good on the surface, rather difficult to meet sometimes, though they are quite unsound. We are on the side of life, and they ('they' means too many people in Melbourne) are on the side of death and desolation. And yet most people would be against us.\(^{16}\)

The consciously nationalistic programme of plays was based on a genuine and deeply-felt idealism. Esson's receptivity to Yeats' suggestions isn't surprising, when one reflects that Esson had known Yeats and Synge for over fifteen years, and had long admired the Abbey Theatre as a possible model for Australian development. The point I want to stress is that the Pioneer Players wasn't a whim of Esson's. As early as 1908, Leon Brodzky, who had been in Paris with Esson, was writing in the *Lone Hand* urging that “To us, with our increasing belief in our own country, the Irish National Theatre should be a source of inspiration, and as such is deserving the fullest and most sympathetic study”.\(^ {17}\)

The Australian socialists saw nothing incongruous in adapting Yeats' concept of a theatre which found its inspiration in the peasantry and a legendary past. It was the only model available to them of a drama which in some measure corresponded with their desire for a democratic literature. The Irish plays (which Esson thought “the greatest plays written in English since Webster”\(^ {18}\)) provided a model which was accessible to the Australian writer. Brodzky reported Yeats' famous advice to Synge to leave Paris and go and live in the Arran Islands, and told his Australian readers: “If, in giving counsel to the would-be dramatist in Australia, we substitute for the name of the Arran Islands some part of the Commonwealth, Mr Yeats' advice holds good for us equally. ‘Go to the life of the Australian people,’ is what Mr Yeats, Mr Synge, and other members of the movement have told me in one form or another.”\(^ {19}\) The effect of such advice on Esson was that, though he was capable of writing a witty comedy of political argument under the inspiration of Shaw and Wilde, as in *The Time is Not Yet Ripe* (1912), he chose not to work that vein. In plays like *The Drovers* (published 1920) and *Mother and Son* (1923), Esson was aiming to do for Australia what Synge had done for Ireland in *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World*.

The Pioneer Players struggled on for four years, presenting some worthwhile plays, but it was not the beginning of a national drama as Esson had hoped — and it is implicit in what I've been saying that it couldn't have been. It is perhaps symbolic of the whole enterprise that Palmer's first contribution was his comedy, *A Happy Family* (written in 1915), and his second, an adaptation of Lawson's short story, *Telling Mrs Baker*. Of *A Happy Family* Palmer says that it was about “a conflict between the heads of two back-country families, one of whom had become prosperous and the other sunk to the position of dummy on his old mate's run”, and Esson, in reviewing it, said that “in its outlook upon life and technical method it recalls some of the plays written for the Abbey Theatrical Company”.\(^ {20}\) The dilemma of the nationalists is revealed, I think, in this earnest attempt to persuade the middle-class citizens of Kew and Hawthorn of the values of the folk culture.

The time, it seemed, was not ripe for the creation of a national drama, and it was never ripe for the creation of a national literature along the lines that Esson and Palmer envisaged. It comes as something of a jolt to realise how greatly the
literary scene has changed since Palmer's time, and this prompts two final reflections. First, the nationalism of Palmer and Esson has to be seen in the context of what Nettie Palmer called (in a letter to Frank Davison, 10 August 1936) "the inconsecutive nature of our literary life in Australia". It was a constant endeavour of the Palmers and their friends to create among themselves a literary circle. They found little but indifference in the community at large, they were acutely aware of the intellectual insufficiency of life in Australia but unwilling to become expatriates in order to survive as professional writers. The sense of purpose which came from their shared conception of a national literature helped to sustain them in a situation where not only were writers ill-rewarded, but where the stimulus of a vital and continuing "literary life" was lacking. Second, in Patrick White and A. D. Hope Australia now has two writers who are part of the mainstream of English literature. The very existence of such major talents creates new perspectives on the past and a sense of different possibilities in the future. The work of the major creative writers is decisive in a way that criticism never can be, and I should say that with the work of Hope and White Australian literature has come to be something very different in character from what Palmer and his generation looked for.

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2. "Dr Wallace", Intimate Portraits and other pieces: essays and articles by Vance Palmer,
6. Miles Franklin (in association with Kate Baker) Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and his Book, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1944, p. 3.
8. Ibid, p. 120.
10. This and other quotations from Palmer in the paragraph are from The Legend of the Nineties, Ch. 9.
13. "It Takes Readers As Well As Writers To Make A Literature", Australian Writers Speak, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1943.
16. Ibid, p. 27.
First and Last Things

I lectured about modern life and modern poetry, but the students kept looking past me till at length I was driven to turn and see what so compelled their attention: and there, in a cupboard, hung a skeleton with (some schoolgirl's macabre joke) lace panties on, mocking our solemn talk of illusion and reality with its stark assertion of mortality. Modern poets too have brought their thoughtful imageries like the lace panties not as proper veneration for the place of love but hopefully or wryly to conceal what the futile images transparently reveal — that their desiccating cerebration has withered the parts that were means of creation.
IAN WILLIAMS

Lessons

In the beginning you run
with only the hooting sun to catch you
then the roads are out of bounds
and you learn:

truancy is cardinal sin

The waking giant broods in grim stone
prefects monitor the ranks boys in single file
brush their shoes
against trouser legs

cleanliness
is cardinal virtue
perhaps

The masters don their faces
expound rage at improprieties such as names
boys for example will
address their seniors respectfully

A bell explodes you leave the grounds
taking the girl who flaunts her skirts
where the orchard
creeps in green lace

Your father thumps your ears
and the masters dull your wit
only the skirts lift the matter
spun off into dark

Where you live the houses run down
faces fall and age you are told
winter will kill you too after
school turns out for the last time

The death is quick
the neat scythe severs your head
turns your learned soul
on lathes of cold machinery
Refugee

Observe the strange beast, winter skin
hunched against the wind's edge; anonymity
crossing the tide to the island where
the jetty sags into stone.

Across the bay the peninsula freezes,
blistered scrub and stone, turning a gull's head to
land when the sea cracks like a curse of bones.

In dimmed lights shadows
take on vulgar forms. Man slips into darkness,
approving the bare thighs of stone.

The sea absolves him: separates. Skinned of
the grey robes, he soars like Icarus, a birdman,
flung through the blown spray,
crying down the wind for the crags.
The Old Man

He sat quiet on the brown-slate bench
Like a statue
In the dappled sunshine
Of the velvet-green, tree lined square
His haunched shoulders
A barrier against the blue-cold wind.

Etched face, seamed and worn
Gnarled hands clutching
Threadbare dirty jacket.
Shivers through the angular frame
Flesh, goosepimpled, fish-white, blue veined
Peering shyly through torn trousers.

Tired, drawn, inward
Empty, non seeing eyes stare at the ground
See grey, sered, imperfections magnified,
Ants busy pincers ripping black beetle flesh.

Sunshine fingers ply at his toes
Like a wanton golden mistress
Warms and calls into the recesses of his ear
Soft, moist promises of time yet to be,
Pulls gently the wind, clinging like cobwebs,
From the bowed shoulders,
Shines into the empty, non-seeing blue eyes.
Caresses the worn face,
Lovingly, gaily,
Her face glow gentle on the rheumatic limbs.

But he,
Petulantly — dismisses — pushes aside
Shaded his eyes against the irritating brightness
Gets up.
Hands in pocket.
Turns his back
Angry
Limps towards the shadows

She, like the soft, sea-washed anemone,
Quivers momentary rejection.
Then, turns, lightens to play
Children, raucous with laughter and noisy dog
Running along the golden arrow street.
Twilight

The room is quiet, grey with evening silence.
The hills stoop down to drink the twilit river.
You sit, placidly reading, eyes hooded.
My turning is as relentless and unperceived
As the coming of darkness.
You have never been faithless, never angry or jealous.
Civility has stroked the air to silver.
Habitual kindness lies on our home like dust.
When you turn the page, your hand glimmers a moment
With light from a distant, half-imagined star.
Children’s cries from the city drift up muted,
Meaningless as the words we’ll speak when I rise
To cross the room, switch on the reading lamp,
And stand beside you, ringed about by shadows.
The Wade to Horsey Island,
Thames Estuary

Strange that grey low-tide mud is so alive:
winkles and eels, crabs in the reeds,
deep grass upon the island, with the sheep.

In yards the landscape changes:
blue water shimmers in the summer breeze,
the ripples whitter in the briny creeks
and cattle move under heavy trees.
Sea to grass islands, mud-flats, leafy lanes,
and then the usual seaside town: boarding houses,
sandy feet and shops of oddities. A town
like a bit of a joke.

Above the Wade, the flint road rises
to the Hard, past the crumbling machine-gun nest. Green,
past the saltings, the island hangs
in the sound of sheep and larks.

Up the small creeks, old barges towed to mud.
Bubbles at the tide-line. Dry, floating crab shells rise
with the tide from tussock-blades. In the seaward dunes
lie pre-historic flints.
Crab, eel and heron. Cattle country round the lanes.

Blue water stretches
back out of sight, between the grassy islands.
Nothing in the guide-book but a Martello tower
and, on the mill-pond, sailing boats for hire.
Mud breathes, the tide-line runs.
Whoever lives here, still leaves well alone.
It is time that critical attention is given to Vance Palmer’s *The Swayne Family*, for it is his only novelistic view that encompasses the period of the depression as it affects a particular social group in one of Australia’s major cities. Vance Palmer is free from the geographical obsession that hampers novels such as Eleanor Dark’s *Waterway* and its discussion of Sydney. Melbourne, seemingly because of its lack of a dramatic setting, need not affect the novelist in the same fashion. Nevertheless, Vance Palmer’s attitudes to the city are of major importance to a discussion of *The Swayne Family*, for not only does the city setting mark this novel apart from the rest of Palmer’s novels, it also forms the central concern within the novel itself.

Vance Palmer’s attitude to the city is perhaps best read against the background of change in Australia which Vance Palmer saw as inevitable, but not necessarily welcome. H. P. Heseltine feels that “The change that he sensed spreading through Australian life seemed to Palmer to have its genesis in the cities. Melbourne, for instance, he found to be largely given over to commerce and philistinism.” This attitude did not just come to fruition with the publication of *The Swayne Family*. Palmer, as early as 1921, had been considering the role and the influence of the city in Australian life, and in March of 1921, he published an analysis of the Australian cities which has some bearing on his attitudes in the later novel:

The cities have conquered for the time being, and that vast tract we call the Bush has been pushed into the background. Such civilisation as we have has become urban. Melbourne and Sydney stand for Australia nowadays. They provide the politicians and their policies, the artistic and literary ideals, the Utopias, and the national characteristics: and because they have no roots it is natural that all their products should have a second-hand flavour ... Picture theatres, gramophones, motor cars and villas are universal, and with them you can build a modern suburb in a week — one that, like the mule, is without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity . . .

I believe that the dominance of villadom and of its shadow is not a good thing. In many obvious ways it can be shown that the crowding of people in a few big cities is bad, but every argument that is used against it in other countries has triple force in Australia. The older cities have a native art and culture that prevent them from being overwhelmed by the cinema, the jazz dance, the cheap scientific reprint, and the megaphones of the publicity agents: we have nothing. Our life would be richer and more stable if there was a closer connection between the coast and the centre of the continent. Politics, literature and social institutions would take on more reality.
H. P. Heseltine calls this condemnation of city life "as much the nostalgia of a bush-bred Australian for a vanishing past as an objective account of the contemporary reality." There is, however, something more powerful than just nostalgia at work here. Palmer is displaying a distaste, indeed a hatred of the city that becomes more shrill as the argument progresses, and inherent in the writing is an unwillingness to accept change. Thirty-three years later, with the publication of *The Legend of the Nineties* Vance Palmer admitted that "By the end of the century [i.e. the nineteenth] it seemed likely that the Bush would cease to play the large part it had hitherto done in the national mystique." Palmer also claimed, in the same book, that few people really feel at home in their environment until they have somehow infused that environment with myth, and that established myths that did give rise to a literature were essentially rural (or at least removed from the cities).

Given what must be regarded as at least a grave suspicion of the city, and the idea that the Australian myth was that of the bush, it is not surprising that Palmer's one serious excursion into the city in *The Swayne Family* must be regarded not as myth-making, but as myth-serving. By this, I mean that Palmer, convinced that myths really only found currency in the country, and that the city (at least in his mind) was not a congenial source for literature (as opposed to literary "ideals"), retreated from the implications of the city in the writing of *The Swayne Family*, preferring to avoid its inherent conflicts which were provided by depression atmosphere, and created, instead a novel with a city setting and a country ethos. In virtually every stance taken, Vance Palmer, in his one city novel, measures the city against the country and finds the city wanting.

This is perhaps most clearly seen when we come to examine the Swayne family and the manner in which Palmer relates each to Melbourne. Digby Swayne, if not the patriarch, at least the patrician of the family, lives in the city of Melbourne, but in a specialised, insulated sense. Digby specifically rejects his country background in his first eagerness for the city:

*How far that hole-and-corner township lay behind him when, as an eager youth, he poked about the bookshops of Bourke Street, dropped into the theatre to see Buckley, the English comedian, argued with Angus about evolution in his bedroom overlooking the river! Days of liberation those! (Swayne, p. 37.)*

Yet Digby's transition into the city has not survived this early flush of enthusiasm; rather, he has retreated into a private world that is in the city, but not of it. His house, in one of the better suburbs, is separate and removed, the clangour of the town reaching it but "faintly as through water or mist" (Swayne, p. 21), and his hatred of what he terms the "crowd" although it has its roots in his childhood fastidiousness, is merely intensified by the city:

*Deep down in him — he didn't attempt to disguise it — was a dislike for the crowd, a fear of its hostility, a contempt for its applause. The complex feeling was in his very marrow: all his life it had affected him strongly; it went back to the dim, half-forgotten days when he had been ragged and bullied by rowdy young louts at the bottom of the dusty playground in Jaffra. (Swayne, p. 40.)*

The political life that Digby takes up is destroyed by his inability to compromise his overly scrupulous tenets and Digby, like his father before him, is happiest "when he kept to himself and made his own terms with the ruling forces" (Swayne, p. 41). Digby's "keeping to himself" is evident; his own terms would seem to encompass a retreat from the struggle in the city he has chosen and a subsequent substitution of the family as a unit over which he can maintain both control and a high degree of paternalistic justification; something the city would
never allow him. Digby makes his money from land speculation in the city and from the family store, Swayne and Moffat, and to a large degree, this explains Digby's relationship with the city. He uses it, as one might any other commodity, but he is unwilling to enter fully into it. At best, Digby's transition from country to city life is tentative; his attitudes toward the city ambivalent.

In this sense, Digby's brothers, the other senior members of the Swayne family, serve as a contrast to his attitudes to the city. The most obvious, of course, is Anthony, owner of Niva Downs and the proponent of what Digby sums up in the accusation, "You've one panacea for everyone, Anthony. Go on the land" (Swayne, p. 55). Anthony has never bothered to consider the city in any light except as a source of comfort and amusement when he comes to Melbourne for periodic race meetings. Even the depression which is causing Digby worry because his investments are dependent on continued city growth, has little effect on Anthony. His ridicule of Digby's worries is calculated to make the most of the city-country contrast:

"My God, man, you've lost weight; trained down so light you'll want lead in the saddlecloth. Haven't been lying awake listening for the sound of falling bricks, have you? World's crumbling, they say. Everything we thought fixed collapsing in a pile of rubble. I haven't noticed any signs of it at Niva Downs; wool growing on the sheep's backs same as ever, and people talking about what horse they fancy . . ." (Swayne, p. 51.)

Anthony marches resolutely through the novel, refusing to view the changes, economic or social, which are going on around him. To be fair to Anthony, it should be admitted that he finds the city (at least as it is expressed by Melbourne) as necessary to his life as Niva Downs (Swayne, p. 179), but it is a Melbourne that he is familiar with; the world of hotels that smooth out the problems of city living, a world of ease and comfort no less than that provided by the insulated life that Digby leads, for, like Digby, Anthony is protected from the realities of Melbourne. Digby may be forced to acknowledge that the depression has hit, as he watches his investments fall, but like Anthony, the world of marches by unemployed workers and economically engendered bitterness is far from him.

Hugh, the third Swayne brother, can be dismissed almost instantly. Deaf and shy, he spends most of his time with his plants, frittering away his time in a world that is neither country nor city, neither complicated nor over-simplified. He exists as a cipher in a world that is neutral, perhaps as an example of what total withdrawal can do to a life.

In Willie, we are more aware of the contrasts in the Swayne brothers, and also in the social changes overtaking Australia and its cities, for Willie has made the transition from country to city easily and without problems. Digby resents Willie's success as he views it from the study of his own home:

From the window of his study Digby could almost see his brother's printing-works across the river, and sometimes he stood there of an evening trying to pick out the squat brick building through the branches of the elm-tree. Swayne & Son! Or had Willie two boys in the business now? There was something ironic in the thought of how prosperous and popular Willie had grown after his stormy past. He was a member of the local council, a patron of football clubs, a little king on his own democratic dunghill. (Swayne, p. 43.)

A good deal of Digby's distaste for Willie's popular success is prompted by the patrician disregard for other people noted earlier, but there is also a hint of jealousy over their relative roles regarding their sons. Vance Palmer goes to some lengths to point out that part of the hostility between Willie and Digby centres
upon two aspects; politics and a paternal regard for the son. Willie, during the war, precipitated Digby’s political downfall by espousing pacifism at a time when Digby advocated full support for Britain. Willie also has offended Digby by providing Digby’s son Stephen with an alternative to Digby’s high-handed parental policies. Digby finally asserted his authority and Stephen enlisted, only to be killed, while Willie’s sons, heeding his pacifism, now constitute a galling reminder to Digby of what he must consider his worst mistake.

Significantly, Willie’s son Barney now has the success that Digby foresaw for Stephen, and which George, Digby’s second son seems unable to attain. It is perhaps only fortuitous that Willie has had the politics that would save his sons, and that Digby sacrificed his son Stephen for his own political principles; what is less fortuitous is that a good deal of what Digby regards as success in the life of Willie is a direct result of Willie refusing to tell his own sons how to run their lives. As Willie says, “Have you ever heard of any trouble among our lot?” (Swayne, p. 96). In Digby’s case, there would seem to be a great deal of trouble, most of it left unexpressed, between himself and his children. H. P. Heseltine, in his analysis of Vance Palmer’s background, devotes some space to the fact that Palmer’s own father, like Digby Swayne was an overbearing, rigid and even patrician figure. He goes on to add that, “In any case, the recurring need throughout Palmer’s fiction to work out the relation of fathers to sons is incontrovertible evidence of the deep-seated importance it bore in his own life.” Whether or not one is as sweepingly adamant as Heseltine, it must be admitted that in the second generation, and in the relationships of fathers to children, lies the bulk of the tension in The Swayne Family.

It is precisely in these relationships, however, that the novel fails as a city novel, for in every case examined, Palmer fails to relate the children and the parents to the city in which he places them.

George is the perfect example. Pursuing a career that Digby approves, George has become a lawyer, in spite of the fact that to him, freedom means “a little station somewhere in the Riverina near Niva Downs — low-roofed buildings shaded by pepper-trees, himself in corduroys holding a horse in the yards, sunlight shimmering on yellow-brown slopes” (Swayne, p. 141). Instead of finding freedom, George spends his days cooped up in a dusty office, tending a non-existent law practice and, in Anthony’s words, “Wearing the seat of . . . his trousers shiny, waiting for something to turn up” (Swayne, p. 180). Although Digby’s money rescues George from banishment to Palmer’s “villadom,” his dissatisfaction with his life does lead him to pursue the pleasures and products that Palmer in 1921 described as “second-hand.” George drinks and spends his time pursuing a series of girls from what Ernest calls “the submerged nine-tenths.” The scene in which George dates Rita (his current “ninety per center”) is a good indication of Palmer’s desire to point out the futile and desperate quality that marks not just George’s life, but also that of many of Melbourne’s citizens:

Threshing of feet on the glossy floor, blare of brass, wail of plaintive minor tones filling empty spaces between the walls of sound, thridding and weaving of countless figures under the powerful arc-lights that poured down an incandescent fluid on bared shoulders, glossy coiffures, white blobs of faces in which features were dissolved and eyes had the look of smudgy fingermarks. (Swayne, p. 133.)

The countless figures, Palmer later indentifies as clerks, typists, bookmakers and shop-girls; a representative sampling of “villadom” into which George is temporarily subsumed. The passage is highly emotive, the empty spaces in the music suggestive of the empty spaces in the lives of the participants, filled with a “plaintive wail.” The faces, like the pastime (and, by implication, the lives) are bland,
featureless and vacuous. Lest the reader fail to take up his inferences, Palmer goes on to explain the significance of the dance as a form of modern, city-inspired escapism:

What was there to do but dance, hang on as long as possible to that sense of life pouring along in continuous movement, setting up a tide in the blood, gathering everything into its flow. (Swayne, p. 135.)

In addition, the dance which George and Rita attend is on the evening of the first day of football in Melbourne; Palmer finds the escapism engendered in the evening a natural follow-on of the escapism of the afternoon, both providing momentarily a sense of action, however spurious, that is in marked contrast to the banality and monotony of every-day life. George’s life, of course, is the prime example of this wasted quality which Vance Palmer attributes to city life as expressed in Melbourne, and it is only through an auto accident that George is freed from Melbourne to take up life on Niva Downs, for the accident reminds Digby of the waste that he feels was Stephen’s fate and he is willing to release George from his thrall.

The solution of George’s problems (and to some extent, Digby’s) by the removal from the city to the country may not in itself be deemed ample evidence that Palmer is unwilling to confront the city, but if we add to it the solutions postulated for the other Swayne children, we must grant the idea more credence.

Kathleen, cast as the most intellectual of the Swayne children, also retires from the reality that is Melbourne to an idyllic life in the country with the farmer Carl Svenson. Until she decides to marry Carl, Kathleen’s life is almost as empty as George’s. She is finishing a post-graduate thesis in philosophy at the university (which, one might add, seems to finish itself in spite of Kathleen’s casual attitude to it — “I haven’t worked at it at all hard till now. Just played around and browsed”), but the university work is devalued by Kathleen. She would, she says, rather do something “practical.” Digby is probably correct in his analysis of Kathleen’s academic career:

Hadn’t this idea of a university career been just a wayward impulse on Kathleen’s part? A mere reaching-out toward some vague sort of freedom. There was no real urge behind it, for she had never been bookish, had even been rather conspicuously slow at school. (Swayne, p. 107.)

There is an unreal air here surrounding Palmer’s portrayal of Kathleen as a graduate student, or even as an intellectual, but more important is the denial of one of the more salient features of the city—the intellectual life. Kathleen denounces philosophy as “impractical,” preferring rather smugly, to take up auto mechanics. Worse still is the complacent air that permeates the country “retreat” into which she retires and the self-satisfied, anachronistic ideas which Carl Svenson uses to justify their rural haunts. Kathleen admits that her “work at the University was only a temporary escape from an environment that was trivial, diffused, lacking in any sort of intensity” (Swayne, p. 129), yet the world which she holds up in contrast to this could be faulted with equal fervour:

What a snug little world, Kathleen felt, looking up the valley, which was overhung by the orchard on one side and uncleared bush on the other. It seemed quietly self-contained, curled in upon its own fatness. (Swayne, p. 117).

This is a world divorced from reality. If the city, in Kathleen’s terms is trivial, diffuse and lacking in intensity, the valley could be described as circumscribed, narrow, escapist and blatantly utopian in its wish to be divorced from the outside world. Worse still is Carl Svenson’s rigid adherence to the Rousseau doctrine of
cultivating his own garden. Svenson feels that "in town, everything takes on an artificial look" (Swayne, p. 61), and frankly admits that his attachment to the land is escapist: a retreat from civilization. Kathleen tells Ernest that:

Besides, he [Carl] thinks that this soi-disant civilization of ours may crash at any moment, and that the only really secure person is the one who can grow his own apples and potatoes. Cultivate your own garden. Don't be dependent on anyone. (Swayne, p. 81.)

The speed with which Kathleen absorbs and employs Carl Svenson's rather simple-minded arguments belies any rigorous thinking that philosophy may have taught her. Like George, she has only to wait for the contrived moment (which Palmer supplies) before she can stand up to Digby and leave Melbourne.

In both cases, the retreat to the country solves both the child's relation to city life and the problem inherent in Digby Swayne's conviction that he knows what is best for his children. Since Digby is (at least for them) committed to Melbourne, the solution resolves both lives by the simplest method.

Ernest, the youngest of the Swayne family is not given such an easy escape route, for in the end, he has completed his pilgrimage through the country, to Sydney and has returned to take up an unquestionably urban career as a caricaturist.

Even with Ernest, however, Palmer reveals that his attitudes towards the city are constant; that the city as an entity is fit only to be a place to escape from or a focus for controlled hatred.

On the surface, at least, Ernest would seem to be the one child of Digby Swayne who has come to terms with the city of Melbourne and who has chosen it as his natural milieu. Harry Heseltine, for example, feels that Ernest Swayne:

... springs directly from Palmer's own early rebellion against a stultifying environment and his determination to widen the bounds of his contact with the world. Ernest's drive to get into touch with what he takes to be the sources of vitality in Melbourne society almost certainly has its genesis in the young Palmer's escape to London, his exploration of the East End to see how the other half lives.9

If we discount the biographical bias that Heseltine propounds, we find that there is some value in his statement. Ernest does reject the stultifying environment which Digby Swayne and his world represent. The controlled malice that Palmer suggests is the feature of his drawings (Swayne, p. 172), is a direct result of his rebellion:

"What's Ernest doing now? Still studying art is he?"

He had heard that so often, usually in a faintly ironic accent, that it had made him ready to run amok. There would have been no question that he was doing important work if he had gone into the offices of the Clune Investment Company, helping to cut up decent little dairy farms and orchards into ghastly pocket-handkerchief allotments for week-end cottages. (Swayne, p. 172.)

The passage is revealing in more ways than Vance Palmer may have intended. Ernest's first anger is over the philistinism that separates art into a category that is not useful. That it inspires the desire to satirize the middle-class concepts of "usefulness" is valuable. It gives Ernest a plausible motivation for his transition from art (which Digby approves for its aesthetic value) to caricature (which Digby deplores for its vulgarity). More revealing of Vance Palmer's attitudes is the image which Ernest uses to castigate middle-class values, for he sees the economic values of the city destroying the more valuable rural land; a cancer, as it were,
feeding on healthier tissue. The attitude is confirmed later, when Ernest, questioned about caricature of his cousin which begins his career, claims that he does not caricature people, but Melbourne:

"... damn it all, it wasn't just him I was drawing."
"Him as a symbol of his political party then?"
"No; myself—you, if you like. Jerry—the whole infernal town. Life without any inner spark: people who've lost their guts and become bits of mechanism. Drawing out the words expected of them, trying to think what everyone else thinks." (Swayne, p. 169.)

If Ernest is speaking the truth, he has not found the source of vitality in any segment of Melbourne society that he has so far examined, for his condemnation includes himself, his friends (who are, it should be pointed out, concerned with the values of art and creation) and, seemingly, the people who populate Melbourne. It is soon evident that the "deadness," the lack of vitality that Ernest so opposes is a product of the city he lives in, for he questions Melbourne and the stultifying effect it produces:

Was there something in the life around . . . that reduced him to an automaton? Was there something about the town itself, with its dull, middle-class dignity, its geometric streets, flat suburbs, featureless surroundings, that sucked all the passion out of people except the passion for conformity . . .
(Swayne, p. 172.)

The objection that could obviously be raised here is that of the tentative quality of Ernest's objections to Melbourne. He only questions the possibility that the city is responsible for the quality of life that he so deplores; he does not come to any firm conclusions as to the validity of his queries. Granting this, it is evident to the reader that Ernest's condemnation of the mode of life produced in Melbourne is couched in rather passionate terms. Ernest does evidence the qualities which he so obviously finds lacking in his fellow citizens. Palmer, however, gives more conclusive proof of Ernest's distaste for the city and the attitudes engendered by the fact of living within it, for later, Ernest reflects upon the way in which those of his friends who are artists are forced to live, and his conclusions leave little doubt about the way in which he regards the city. His basis for complaint lies in the fact that the philistinism of the city, which he continually emphasizes, devalues everything but the reigning commercial ethos. As a result, the artist or creative thinker has no choice but to create an alternative to the city; a world that is civilized as opposed to the city's brutality, a world which, although satisfying, is nevertheless a defensive enclave in the midst of a hostile environment:

They [i.e. the artists and thinkers] were secure in the world they had created, a world where ordinary civilized values held good, and art shows, concerts, the publication of new books, were events of consequence . . . A man could be happy in this Axel's castle of theirs. Even if there were little chance of making a living in it, he could treat his work outside as a daily foray for food into strange and rather barbarous country. There were gatherings in back street cafes, occasional holiday camps in the hills or by the sea, a continual sense of contact with realites — with creative work and ideas. (Swayne, pp. 172-73.)

Although Ernest values the world of ideas, he concedes that it flourishes only under duress within the city; reality, such as can be found, is in the country, or only in selected haunts which are in effect removed from the very city in which they exist. For the thinker or artist, Ernest implies, the city is unreal and uncivilized. The reference to Axel's castle, however, shifts a large degree of disapprobation onto the artists and thinkers themselves. Ernest quite obviously feels that there
is something wasted and decadent in this retreat from what surrounds them and later drops the inference that art can be a "social instrument" (Swayne, p. 173). But even if Ernest wishes to reconcile what is "real" with his art, it is not in the city that he finds such a reconciliation. The first success as a caricaturist does not inspire him to further efforts, but to a temporary withdrawal, so that he can find out more about what the "realities" of life are. He says, "My game's to riddle whatever's mediocre and jerry-built in the world at hand . . . I feel I just want to get away. To knock around for a while among ordinary people who're doing their day's job and learn what the life of the country is" (Swayne, p. 177.)

The use of the word "country" here is ambiguous, and perhaps unfortunate. It can refer to either the land, as opposed to the city, or, more logically, Australia. But even if we assume, in fairness to both Palmer and the character of Ernest Swayne that it does mean a longing to learn about the life of the country as a whole, it is soon evident that the country, as expressed by life in the cities has very little interest for either Palmer or Ernest. The only portion of Ernest's truncated wanderjahr described in any detail is the time spent in a small township (Swayne, pp. 248-52) which Palmer, in a pointless bit of ironic coincidence, contrives to be the one in which the Swayne family had its origins, and, although we learn that Ernest has "reached" Sydney he does not, we learn, explore the life there, but recommences his caricaturing. Palmer does make a few concessions in the direction of understanding the life of the city, as when he has Ernest concur with Kathleen's statement that "it seems as if I'd always lived at second-hand. As if I'd have had a richer and more vital experience behind me if I'd been brought up in Footscray and gone to work in a factory" (Swayne, p. 177). Such concessions are rare, however, and in Kathleen's case, the statement, in light of her own retreat from the city, would seem to be a mere romanticizing of the poor; in Ernest's case, it would appear to be lip-service to his own social conscience, for he has moved from the "coterie" world of art to the country to caricature of Melbourne, but never, we can assume, has he made more than token efforts to understand or share the life of the city he so despises.

Ernest becomes, in final analysis, simply a mouthpiece for the sentiments expressed by Palmer in the article published in 1921. His attitudes echo Palmer's and one fails to see how, if he satirizes the city, as he claims, he will ever progress from a surface parody to a deeper understanding of the causes of the effects he so bitterly resents. Like his father before him, Ernest has only made a partial adjustment to the city; where Digby exploited Melbourne for capital gain (through his land purchases), Ernest will exploit it as a satirical source. Neither displays any real understanding of it or any desire to confront its complexity.

Dorothy, the remaining child of Digby Swayne, takes a far more conventional approach to Melbourne, but one which is, for all that, very like that of her father. Dorothy's attitudes to Melbourne are governed entirely by the state of her love life, and later, by the state of her marriage. That is to say, like Digby, the focus of Dorothy's life is the family; Melbourne exists merely as a backdrop against which she can play out the domestic drama. Before she is engaged to Basil Lockhart, a young English engineer who has come to settle in Melbourne, she considers the world around her "humdrum"; the realization that she will marry Basil and settle in Melbourne changes all this:

She was overwhelmed by a feeling of having suddenly come into touch with reality. A new beauty shone around the places she had always known and rather despised . . . Even the town, agog with excitement over the Melbourne Cup, had a quickened interest for her. There really was something in living in a place you had watched growing and knew to the core. Yet the consciousness of this had only come one evening when Basil had said, driving home from a dance:
"Looks as if I'm here for a long spell. Life-sentence, perhaps. Headquarters seem to take for granted I'm a fixture." (Swayne, p. 74.)

Once the possibility of the family unit is established, Dorothy's views on Melbourne are not just altered, they are completely transformed. This abrupt volte-face is not, however, marked by any new involvement in the city; rather, it allows Dorothy to create a world as self-contained as that sought by Kathleen, for Dorothy's apartment is no less "snug" and "curled in on its own fatness" than the valley to which Kathleen retires. Even the one crisis in Dorothy's life is resolved within this world. The interest Basil has shown in a visiting actress ceases abruptly when, fortuitously, the news of Dorothy's pregnancy is revealed. Like her father, Dorothy is not committed to any particular place, but to her own family.

Although one of the first Australian reviewers of The Swayne Family claimed that "The rest of the family [i.e. Digby Swayne's children] is constructed to show all the facets of Australian life," it is evident that they are not. If they lack Digby's fastidious distrust of the "crowd," they nonetheless recoil from the city and all that it stands for. In the case of Kathleen and George, this is readily seen, but the other two children could not be called representative of Australian city life. Dorothy, as we have noted, has no real life within the city; her retreat into a family unit is merely a second-generation extension of her father's attitudes. George, though he lives and works in the city, despises it. In no sense does any one of them represent that large facet of Australian life that is the urban civilization which Vance Palmer back in 1921 felt was Australia.

Even with the minor characters in The Swayne Family Palmer continues his campaign against the city. Jimmy, the violent rival who takes Rita from George, is a country boy "gone bad," for as Rita says to him, "Town's no good to you, I guess: you're not the shadow of the man you were back there" (Swayne, p. 138), and with the portrayal of Rita's life as a senseless pursuit of pleasure, Palmer would seem to imply that the town has been no better for her.

Willie Swayne, and his family, who have made the transition from country to city, although they are not "spoiled" in the process, are not allowed to serve the novel as city representatives. The sons who now run the printing company never appear, and George, the rising young Labour politician surfaces only long enough to serve as a source for Ernest's caricature. Willie, whom Digby concedes has found his fulfilment in the life of the people (Swayne, p. 325), is presented in some detail, but the smug, self-satisfied and even vindictive manner in which he flaunts his success in front of Digby (Swayne, pp. 241-43), leaves the reader with the suspicion that if he is not "tainted" by the city, at least it has not brought out his finer instincts.

The generally accepted view of The Swayne Family held by Australian critics is that it is both a city novel and a social comment. In 1934, for example, it was hailed as "in every way . . . an advance on most social novels published in Australia," while Frank Dalby Davison, fourteen years later felt that "the Depression . . . can be felt at work around the story, speeding the disintegration of Digby's hopes, and shaking the children down to new levels of social awareness." Contemporary critics continue the ideas. Harry Heseltine goes so far as to say that "Melbourne emerges from the page of The Swayne Family not as some two-dimensional backdrop to a theatrical plot but as the matrix of a densely imagined reality," and goes on to add that the novel is an examination of the "forces of social authority and cohesion." Heseltine also makes a comment that coalesces the social and the city aspects of Palmer's novel, and it is through this comment that we can see the truth of the claims made by most of the critics. He says:
In the . . . novel this basic unit of human community [the family] is put under the microscope of social analysis [and] tested to discover the kinds and degrees of stress that it can bear in an Australian city.15

Insofar as The Swayne Family examines the basic “social unit,” it may be considered a social novel, but one cannot take the idea of a social novel any further. None of the Swayne children are aware of the teeming life of Melbourne that goes on around them, and the depression, far from “shaking them down to new levels of social awareness,” only induces a mass retreat among the Swayne children from the stresses the city produces. Palmer no less so retreats from the city; his major criticisms, like Ernest’s are directed not at society, but at the excesses the particular form of society he examines has produced. His solutions are not given in terms of the city, for while he lists the city’s defects, he cannot see beyond them to offer any alternative except escape. If we allow that the Swayne children have been subjected to stress within the “Australian city,” we can only conclude that they cannot stand any stress at all, and that the city, in Palmer’s view has little to offer but deleterious effects.

When one considers The Swayne Family as a city novel, one must regard it as such in a negative sense. To give Palmer his due, he does try to give depth to his portrait of Melbourne, yet one cannot conclude with Heseltine that the picture is “the matrix of a densely imagined reality,” for Palmer’s vision of Melbourne while critical, is, in the last analysis, shallow. He gives a degree of vitality to his city by delineating much of what is vibrant within the city atmosphere — the Saturday afternoon sport, the Melbourne Cup season, the portrait of a city at play. He does not, however, delve any deeper than this, and the criticism of the Melbourne citizens hinges on how they spend their leisure time. There is a submerged Puritanism here, and this, coupled with Palmer’s refusal to penetrate the surface of Melbourne’s inhabitants bespeaks a lack of sympathy for the city, or, more probably, a lack of understanding of what the realities of city life are. Palmer’s attitudes to the city, it would seem, did not progress from the implacable hatred expressed in 1921.

In this sense, the description of the novel, given earlier, as “myth serving” must be qualified. As we noted, Palmer postulated the existence of the “Bush” myth of the nineties, yet in The Swayne Family, Palmer, like Anthony in the novel, offers little hope other than a return to the land and Palmer’s novel is serving the older myth. His withdrawal from the problems of the city, as expressed in The Swayne Family is more than a lack of understanding of the city, it is a refusal to front what he himself admits is a major aspect of Australian life, and while John Barnes can claim that Palmer’s writing “has been informed by a sense of responsibility to himself as an artist, and to Australian literature as an expression of the deepest experiences of Australian people”16 one can only conclude that Vance Palmer largely abdicated that responsibility when he approached the Australian city and that he has failed to understand the Australian city dweller.

REFERENCES
1. The Swayne Family (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1934). All further references to the novel will be made within the text, preceded by the abbreviated title Swayne.
3. Although it was originally published in Fellowship (March 1921), the quote is taken from Heseltine, Palmer, pp. 18-19.
She’s Back!

She’s back! They’re together again! Around the chops and potatoes we get up and go to the window — we hear their voices chiming in the kitchen; later we see her plump arm on the arm-rest of the lounge, watching the television.

The portents of peace are everywhere: Rusty, her young red setter, no longer hangs his foolish lovable face over our fence, nor savages the plastic rubbish-bin, tearing up the Woman’s Day, scattering “Those Early Years of Marriage” all over the yard . . .

Now, when they leave for work in the morning the house looks far less empty — there are two again to come home to it (she has a new red rinse in her hair and we’re sure she’s expecting!)

She works in a solicitor’s office, he in an engineer’s, his battered saloon stock car on its trailer behind the garage gets taken out on a truck like an invalid on Sundays to the roaring sunlight and dust of the local speedway (O anti-rust proofing, O body filler resurrection!)

Clucking over the silence, an unhappy house, we said, recalling six families in ten years, listening to their voices raised on the final Saturday in Theban rhetoric in room after room, with an epilogue over the phone . . .

Will it last? We doubt it, but take our painful pleasure from what we can see through the key-holes of coming and going; watering the garden with secret smiles in the evening we note that her Ford Cortina XL is parked once more alongside his diminutive yellow Kawasaki 125.
The Series ‘Vegas’

It's all crap-tables and sky-signs
like CAESARS PALACE and THE GOLDEN NUGGET
with another smart-ass private eye called Dan
and the mandatory dopey blonde assistant in
an endless parade of play-suits
and a phoney reverend (played by Red Buttons)
running cut-rate weddings for $14.00 a throw
and new girls in town are always getting beat up on
by dark-haired goons in sequined waistcoats
or their louche sisters adopting classic poses in white nylon
by the bluest of swimming-pools or handing around
stingers — to music that is jaunty, strings
and piano, up-tempo with a touch of brass
in the chase sequences involving
private planes and the usual miscellany
of rampant limousines while the phone continues ringing
in Dan’s office and the distraught voice of
another beautiful client is sobbing into the mouthpiece:
“Oh God, it’s Sandra here, please come quickly . . .”
And he does (Dan, that is).
Slugged in the car-park he rises
with a strip of sticking-plaster to mark his mortality,
trapped in the steam-room he turns on a fire-hose
and escapes in a towel into the neon sunlight. Yes, it’s all
bright lights and crap-tables with the house percentage
carefully figured out in advance and it’s all
unredeemable one hundred and one per cent
crap.
BRUCE BENNETT and BRIAN DIBBLE

An Interview with Bruce Dawe

Bennett: Your work is often referred to when people talk about satire in Australia. Can you comment on the way you go about writing satire? What are the most important targets for a satirist in Australia?

Dawe: Because I tend to work in terms of characters anyway, the most important targets tend to be characters. More often I tend to work at an issue through a particular character who's identified negatively or positively with a particular issue. So, in one sense, this is a lot closer to the cartoonist's approach which is, with some necessary simplification, to identify (say) the Premier of Queensland with certain attitudes, a certain style of politics, and then to tackle him. It's a two-edged sword. I always keep in mind the fact that one of the things that it might well be is simply an image-builder. But I don't think poetry is an image-builder for people in the way that general media exposure is. The thing may publicize aspects of character but I think that what a satirist should be doing is showing, generally speaking, the complexity of an issue but also some particular side that he comes down on, some general abuse that may extend much wider than any particular character.

Bennett: That would apply then to a “A Victorian Hangman Tells his Love,” which was related to the Ryan hanging in 1967 but in which you built up a dramatic monologue of a hangman speaking, which created, in a sense, the general issue. Is that the point you're making?

Dawe: Yes, that's right. And even in the hangman poem, if one takes it slowly, it couldn't be said that I was really attacking the hangman, but was seeing him as a victim of the State policy just as much as the more obvious victim, the person being hanged.

Bennett: In that case you seem to be particularly interested in the language of deception, of bureaucracy and of State officialdom. You seem to be enjoying, in the process, the language that you're satirizing. Is that right?

Dawe: Yes, I think so. In that one in particular I think I had in mind the way in which even those who are bureaucratic (and the word isn't necessarily a derogatory word, though it's often used that way) them-
selves may only be the expressions of bureaucracy. The people typified may be themselves caught in something much larger than they can handle. They themselves don’t know the answer to the problem but are merely acting out certain roles as in fact a hangman is. One is not really indicting the hangman per se at all. One is indicting a general philosophy. That may be why the bureaucracy is merely the instrument of putting into effect that philosophy.

Bennett: I’d like to turn now to another well-known poem of yours which has been anthologized often, “Life-Cycle”. Students are inclined to talk about the comparison you make between the language of football and the language of religion. It’s one of the devices you’re using to show up the ironic discrepancy between those two worlds. Being a West Australian, I see some Melbourne league football on T.V. and understand something of the religious fervour associated with it. But people have said to me, he (Bruce Dawe) seems very much to sympathise with, even to enjoy, the target that he’s attacking there. How would you respond to that?

Dawe: Well, I’d respond by agreeing whole-heartedly. In fact I can remember a critic — in Westerly, if I’m not wrong — at one time saying that this was a savage attack on Australian Rules football. It’s nothing of the kind of course, and most West Australians who have any football know-how at all would understand that. Anyone with sympathy for language would know that there’s far too much support going on there for that to be true. (In fact the original version of certain lines in this poem made it clear. I spoke in some of the latter stanzas about the footballers or the players preferring “the baulk and blind turn/Out of trouble” to “the tricky bounce of involvement”, or words to that effect, which is coming far too close to home.) You’ll note that in the Sometimes Gladness collection I placed it (some people must surely find this rather grotesque) in the section that has social and political issues. But I placed it there because it seems to be connected to those same blindesses that one sees in the bureaucracies and those who work through them and can get away with it. Those things are facilitated by the sort of bread-and-circus involvement of too many Australians in what is a simpler ritual and a much more meaningful one than the political one. Of course I’ve no doubt at all which is the more important.

Dibble: The hangman poem reminds me to ask about another one of yours, the poem “To Lt. Calley”. If I remember correctly, the last lines are: “Others must forget whatever it is they do — / you can’t afford to, you poor bastard, you.” “Poor bastard you” can be slightly ambiguous in the sense that the bloke can be a right bastard and you can down him for that, or he can be a sad bastard which is another form. Am I right in singling out the two functional ambiguities there?

Dawe: Yes. The poem itself is fairly savage and, it could be argued, at least at the beginning of the poem, that there doesn’t seem to be much sympathy at all for Calley himself. But I was aiming at suggesting that in one sense he’s the victim, and anybody who has followed through any of the accounts of his precipitation, his own unhappy life (I hesitate to use terms like “low achiever”, but it has been used before of him) will understand that his own problems in fact made
this a last resort. One could have predicted that out of the many people who may be in that category, who find themselves in an unpopular war, in a war for which they're psychologically unprepared, some would find it too much to take. In fact, many regular soldiers would be ill-prepared for it, let alone people who have joined the services as a way of building up their status after a series of pretty severe setbacks. So he himself, I think, is very much a victim of his background. Of course that particular war was a very pernicious tester of people with poor backgrounds.

Dibble: Good. Can I take that further then and relate it to Bruce's previous question? If I remember the poem correctly, we might conclude that Calley was made to be right for that form of activity in that kind of war and subsequently probably would be lionized or forgiven (either one, it doesn't matter) for his activity there. That recalls, it seems to me, the question Bruce asked about the bureaucracy. If you take it as far as that, are not we in fact the bureaucracy? It is only us in the sense of our elected officials?

Dawe: Well, yes. In what we do we certainly are a part of the bureaucracy. The thing is, insofar as we are an un-self-critical bureaucracy, we make the direction of the bureaucracy all the more objectionable. Insofar as we are self-critical about the things that we are involved in we are in a position to control those bureaucratic directions. You know, there's always those who say "nobody should be a knocker" (you know, those who say it now, for example) and various important people in the community say, "this isn't the time to be knocking, it's a time to be all working together". Well, personally I think that's a load of bullshit. There is no time when criticism isn't valuable. In fact I've argued that many times. I hope in one sense the poetry argues that in another form. By being critical one is paying the ultimate compliment. That is, you think there is some chance that the criticism will have some effect, otherwise you wouldn't be uttering it. You believe that you have the right to do this. Since I haven't personally been persecuted, I believe that right is implicit in being able to go on doing it. But even if I was persecuted, I'd still go on doing it. In putting books together. I've never worried about whether, since (to take a nitty gritty question) there is such a thing as textbook sales, that I shouldn't put this or that poem in because it may offend some part of the bureaucracy. That's the chance I have to take. I don't believe I should temper the wind to that particular shorn lamb.

Bennett: To take another direction Bruce, do you see yourself as a sexist writer?

Dawe: Could you define the term?

Bennett: I was thinking of a poem like "Condolences of the Season" in which the father and the boy have a kind of winking alliance against the 'cosmogony of mums'. I was wondering if you see Australians as basically praising male superiority — a masculinity hang-up. Do you see that as something that's worth attacking in Australia? Or do you usually take the male point of view on these issues?

Dawe: That's rather easily answered, Bruce: I usually take the male point of view. You know, it's not really out of any denigration of the import-
Bennett: During the Perth Poetry Festival (February 1979), there was a certain amount of what one of my friends calls "acca-bashing" going on: attitudes to university academics have been expressed which suggest that they're very negatively inclined towards the creative writer. You have made a number of statements which support the universities. Would you want to enlarge on those?

Dawe: Well, perhaps it may have something to do with the way in which I first experienced universities. I haven't hidden the fact that it may be a very partisan view still manifesting itself. The people at universities were very helpful to me, very magnanimously so; more so, I would suggest, than the run of their compatriots outside universities would have been. I think that sort of general help has always been there. I'm not denying, from my own experience as a student, that universities have still a long way to go. I realize the chances of getting there are reduced by the tendency to see them as luxury items, items which are only turning out yes-men and not people informed with any critical views. But I don't know that academy-bashing is going to do anything except delight the heart of that breed of bureaucrat who's really very close at the moment breathing down their neck and sharpening his knife. So, you know, I think that's a very wasteful and short-sighted view. I think if one takes the role of the universities (which is one role they still sometimes in an insufficient way perform) of bringing the past into the present, then on that basis alone, if they never taught any modern literature or any Australian literature, I would still defend their role to teach us what literature there was in the past. That would be a very salutary activity in itself to us in the present, since we are part of the past; we carry that around with us, whether we like it or not, in the present.

Bennett: But you think that the teaching of Australian literature in universities is important?

Dawe: I certainly do! But I can understand why, for example, some academics may find it rather difficult, since they themselves are part of Australian literature, to put forward that view without appearing to be partisan. For example, it's easy enough to point to leading academics who are also leading poets (we'll say) and ask why the hell haven't those universities got more Australian Literature courses than they have? I suspect one of the reasons why they don't lay heavily into Australian Literature courses themselves is because they'd be wide open to charges of setting their own texts.
Dibble: There was one poem, Bruce, in which you talk about teaching. You teach students how to do this and you teach students how to do that, and so on. They're non-human things that you're teaching them. It concludes by saying that then you have to teach “Dogs, to bark again; lions to roar...” You teach them in the beginning, I suppose, how to get out of themselves and how to experience other things; and in the end you help them to learn how to be themselves. Can you elaborate on that in the context of what Bruce just asked?

Dawe: Well, taking the poem “Teaching the Syllabus” first, I must point out that the poem was written before I took on tertiary teaching. So it's an expression really of the secondary syllabus as it then was and the contraints built into that. Now those constraints are of course nowhere near as obvious in tertiary teaching. I had to teach what was there — I couldn't, for example, construct courses on my own. You had to teach one of this, one of that, and so on. Now those constraints no longer apply, but for those who do find themselves constrained by very much an imposed syllabus, that's really what the poem is arguing: there is a kind of paradox because any syllabus is meant to be, amongst other things, a source of personal development. Of course one of the paradoxes is that in the very process of so-called self-development those who are being developed may in fact lose all ability to react spontaneously or to be able to go on and develop themselves at some later stage. They may be so stifled by close-shepherding that they never really break out into the open pasture and know what it is to be fully alive in the particular discipline or particular areas of interest in literature or anything else.

Dibble: Can we turn the implications of those past few things you were saying back on yourself and ask if you find conflicts among the various selves whom you must be? You're a poet, you're a family man, a teacher of literature, a student of literature, and so on. I'm interested to know where, in the various possible positions or hierarchies of positions, that you finally locate Bruce Dawe.

Dawe: Well, first of all, I do agree that there are conflicts implied. But I suggest that these are only corollaries of conflicts which most people find anyway. For example, the conflict between somebody who has a particular work situation, a particular home situation and a particular study situation are very common ones which in one sense put me in no more or no less a difficult situation than the rest of the human race (or a great number of them). Those who have a work situation, for example, those who have a family situation — everybody comes from one (or most people do). The teaching situation: I think it is probably the one that creates the most obvious additional tension and difficulty by the very fact of... I'm not myself one of those people who've ever evolved a philosophy of poetry or any systematic philosophy of life...

Bennett: Nevertheless, you do appear to have firm convictions on a range of issues, social and political, as well as personal. For example, in regard to the present civil liberties campaign in Queensland, as reflected in such poems as “The Privilege”, “News from Judaea”, “Open Invitation”, and “Over the River”. You have been arrested and spent the night in jail for leading an illegal march in Toowoomba, haven't you?
Dawe: Yes, but that is only par for the course. Several thousand have been arrested in Queensland since September, 1977, and spent longer periods in a much nastier jail, in the same cause, and many more no doubt will be before the issue is resolved. There are some things that even conservatives like myself cannot stand by and merely observe: suppression of traditional freedoms is one of those things.

Bennett: Wouldn't you call what you are doing a form of radical activity?

Dawe: Not in Queensland. It's just that one bunch of conservatives (those dominating Government policy-making) have moved so far to the right on a whole range of issues as to make normal conservatives appear radical by comparison.

Dibble: Do you think you will ever feel like leaving Queensland if the present trend continues?

Dawe: Not really. I share the common Australian taste for the ratbag, and Queensland political life is at present extremely rich in this particular animal, at times in dangerous proportions. In an odd sort of way, it is a "privilege" to live in this state now: like sitting ringside at the circus. The disadvantage of ringside seats are of course obvious, too: tigers with toothache, elephants with the "trots"...
ANDREW TAYLOR

Time And The Long Poem In Australia

"For once not travelling to arrive"
(Les A. Murray)

I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase ‘a long poem’, simply is a flat contradiction in terms.¹

That was Edgar Allen Poe, writing in 1848. Only seven years later, Poe's fellow-American, Walt Whitman, published at his own expense the first version of *Leaves of Grass*, which had as its central and major achievement an undisputably long poem, *Song of Myself*, consisting of 1346 lines, divided into 52 sections.

Not only is Whitman seen today as the great father of American poetry; he is also seen as one of the main originators of a form of long poem which has had such distinguished offspring as *The Waste Land, Four Quartets, The Cantos, Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* and *Paterson* in one generation; and *Howl, The Maximus Poems, Dream Songs, History, Tape for the Turn of the Year,* and *The Book of Nightmares* in the next. Far from being dead, the long poem has become the vehicle chosen by many major poets for their most deeply imaginative and seriously considered statements.

In recent years, we have seen a similar turn towards longer poetic forms by many poets in Australia. We have, of course, one splendid early example in Slessor's *Five Bells*, which may eventually be seen to stand in relation to later Australian poems in much the way *Song of Myself* does to the American ones. And standing behind Slessor is Brennan with his *Poems 1913*. But in the 40s, 50s and early 60s long poems, i.e. interesting long poems, were not easy to find. The two exceptions I would make would be A. D. Hope's *An Epistle: Edward Sackville to Venetia Digby* (1959) and *The Double Looking Glass* (1960). These are not very long, of course, but they do extend beyond the traditional range of the short lyric, and demand — and receive — a different kind of reading.

More recently we have seen a spate of long poems: some examples (and I am not even trying to be exhaustive) would be Les Murray's *Walking to the Cattle Place*² and the recent *Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle*³; Bruce Beaver's *Letters to Live Poets*⁴ and *Lauds and Plaints*⁵; Douglas Stewart's *Rutherford*⁶; Vincent Buckley's *Golden Builders*⁷; Francis Webb's *Eyre All Alone, Around Costessy and Ward Two*⁸; Thomas W. Shapcott's *Shabbytown Calendar*⁹; Fay Zwicky's *Kaddish*¹⁰; John Millett's *Love Tree of the Coomera*¹¹; Philip Robert's *Will's Dream*¹²; John Tranter's *Red Movie*¹³ and *Crying in Early Infancy*¹⁴; Richard Tipping's *Multiple I* and *Multiple II*¹⁵; Jennifer Maiden's *The Problem of Evil*¹⁶; and Alan Wearne's *Out Here*.¹⁷ To name literally but a few. (I have even had a try at one myself, which perhaps helps explain my interest in the matter.¹⁸) As we can see, the long poem in all its variety is very much a part of contemporary Australian poetry. What I want to do in the rest of this paper is to give some account of it as a literary entity; and to attempt some sketch of the way we
actually read individual ones so as to be able to determine whether or not they work.

* * *

In several respects, the long poem and the problems associated with it bear a striking resemblance to that more indigenous Australian art form, the pavlova: they both tend to be boring, and they both have a tendency to fall apart. I am speaking, of course, only of tendencies: a good long poem is anything but boring; and paradoxically, despite its frequently fragmented appearance, it gives an effect of coherence, wholeness and comprehensive co-ordination far exceeding that available from a tightly structured brief lyric. Why is this so, and how is it brought about?

The most common structuring device in older long poems was narrative. One need only think of such poems as the Homeric epics, *Gilgamesh*, *The Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Paradise Lost* and so on up to *The Ancient Mariner* and *Sohrab and Rustum* to realise that in the past the term “Long Poem” is almost synonymous with Narrative poem. And by narrative, I mean the recounting of events in such a way as to create a chain of causalities operating through time: what we loosely call storytelling. Inseparable from this is the notion of sequence: the fact that B is caused by A means that A must have preceded B, so that the causal chain A:B:C:...X corresponds to a temporal sequence which is identical. A narrative long poem, therefore, asserts and works within this sequential view of time, and the concept of causality that goes along with it. The poem may start in medias res, the events may even be recounted backwards, but the causal/temporal chain, though knotted or convoluted, remains intact.

But of all the *modern* long poems I have already mentioned, not one of them is genuinely narrative. They may contain narratives within them, e.g. *Shabby-town Calendar* or *Letters to Live Poets*, but the over-all structure of the poems is not determined along narrative lines and certainly not co-terminous with any contained narrative. And this is surprising in Australia, where the ballad tradition used to be so strong, and where probably our best known (though probably not our most read) poems are “The Man from Snowy River” and “Waltzing Matilda”. Anyone seriously interested in the development of Australian poetry must surely ask: Why has narrative been abandoned as a primary structuring principle in poetry?

Of course, poets continue to be fascinated by stories, since stories involve change or development, and these qualities underlie a number of long poems as well, for example, *Letters to Live Poets* or *Out Here*. None the less, even though a story may underlie a poem, it is not narrated as such: it is inferred, or its contours are touched on, or it is fragmented, or meditated upon from varying angles. I cannot here go further into this matter — I have already done so in another paper — but I want to stress that the abandonment of narrative in no way prevents a poem from dealing with process, even causality. A non-narrative long poem simply finds other ways of dealing with them.

In lyrics, as distinct from long poems, narrative can still be found. But even here something very significant has happened to it. A clear illustration of this is Les A. Murray’s brief poem, ‘The Burning Truck’, which bears all the marks of a narrative, even starting with the words ‘It began...’ The poem recounts an incident in which a truck, set alight by cannonfire from raiding aircraft rolls unattended and apparently endlessly down the street of a town while the inhabitants watch appalled for the moment when it has to stop, fetch up against a building, fall to rubble from pure force of burning, for its whole
body and substance were consumed with heat...
but it would not stop.

In fact, it never does: that moment lasts forever as the poem concludes with the truck rolling on 'out of the world/with its disciples.' What this poem has done is subvert sequence. What should be an incident which, having begun, comes to an end and leaves us alone, simply does not end; it is frozen into awareness; it inhabits a time which has become synchronous.

The antecedent for Murray's poem is one such as Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce at Decorum Est', in which process refuses to proceed; but the lyric in general tends towards synchronicity: being relatively brief, its beginning can still resonate in our memory even as we are reading its conclusion. It resembles a musical chord, rather than a musical melody. A great deal of the pleasure and excitement we get from reading a lyric derives from approaching it as a kind of palimpsest, in which its beginning and middle are still visible beneath its end. The fact that we do this argues for the existence of 'literary competence', which I shall discuss briefly later. But to return to my earlier question: why do poets today not organise long poems by means of narrative? The fact that one Australian poet attempted to do so and the result seems so anachronistic i.e. James McAuley with Captain Quiros, only supports my picture of things: narrative no longer satisfies our needs. But why not?

If we see traditional narrative as the child of a sequential view of time and a notion of logical causality, we can understand why in its delineation of mechanistically conceived causal relationships it should have reached its point of greatest glory in the nineteenth century novel. But to argue that the rise of the novel killed narrative poetry is somewhat off the point. What we need to look for is a reason why poets voluntarily abandoned narrative as a structuring principle in long poems, leaving the field open to the novelists; and, more particularly, how they successfully found alternatives, and what those alternatives are. The fact that many developments of twentieth century prose-fiction have paralleled poetry's abandonment of narrative surely indicates that even a sketch of such a major movement is worth attempting.

The answer to the first question, i.e. why narrative no longer served the long poem and was therefore abandoned, is complex, bound inextricably with cultural and ideological history, easy to state but, in a paper of this size, impossible to explain. Put simply, it is that the twin notions of temporal sequence and causality failed to satisfy poets as they once had done. There are obvious parallels in the physical sciences and mathematics. Mechanistic theory gives way to probability theory; time loses its linearity; even space turns out to be curved, returning onto itself. More important for literature are the developments of Freud and Jung in psychoanalysis, since their explorations of the way experience inhabits the psyche are directly relevant to what writers are doing. Both Freud and Jung argue a synchronous time, the time of memory, in which the past inhabits the present. In such a time, even the future can determine the shape of the present: today, the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy is a commonplace. Linear, sequential time is still with us, just as Newtonian physics is; but we inhabit another time as well, where effects can be read backwards.

In accord with these changes outside literature, writers of long poems today have abandoned narrative and its implications because it implies sequence and causality of a kind that poets do not feel, that just do not seem right enough for enough of the time. In Australia, even some recent prose writers are following the poets, and as such are adding to an honourable list of prose writers which
originates with Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. A teleological view of experience, where the end of things gives significance and therefore determines the shape of what preceded it, fights within our minds with the old, mechanistic, and commonsense view that causes precede effects, and not vice versa. We read time forwards, and we read time backwards. Time has become synchronous and our literature has adapted to embody this. T. S. Eliot has put it succinctly in *Four Quartets*:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future
> And time future contained in time past.

And

> Time past and time future
> What might have been and what has been
> Point to one end, which is always present.23

The second question to answer is: With the abandonment of narrative, what alternative method of structuring long poems have poets been able to replace it with? It is tempting to give the simple answer which was common at one time, and to say that long poems today do not have any structure: their fragmentation parallels the fragmentation of modern life. But the superficiality of this attitude is easily shown up by comparing *The Waste Land*, which has a powerful and coherent deep structure, with Pound’s *Cantos*, which have not. How though are we able to decide that the former is well structured and the latter isn’t?

This brings me to the subject of literary competence. I have taken the term from Jonathan Culler and his excellent book, *Structuralist Poetics*; Culler adapted it, in turn, from Chomsky’s notion of linguistic competence, as distinct from linguistic practice. The concept is a simple one, and not new, but important in its implications. By literary competence, Culler means the agglomeration of expectations and predispositions which the reader educated in literature brings to bear on any literary text. As he says, “Reading is not an innocent activity. It is charged with artifice.”24

To read a text as literature is not to make one’s mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for.25

And he quotes Roland Barthe’s comment, ‘How can one discover structure without the help of a methodological model?’26

It surely must be clear to everyone that we do not read an advertisement for pantihose in the way that we would read a poem about pantihose. Equally, we do not read a novel in the way we read a lyric. The linguistic density which we frequently welcome in a brief poem, calling it ‘metaphoric compression’ or some such thing, would be intolerable if maintained for three of four hundred pages of prose. In fact, with its margins of silence surrounding and at times penetrating the linguistic text of poetry, we do not read poetry of any kind in the way we read prose. Our literary competence prompts us to be armed with the expectations appropriate to poetry when we open Judith Wright’s *Collected Poems*: any attempt to read the book as a novel would lead to total bewilderment, like that famous comment about the telephone directory: ‘It has a superb cast, but the plot’s terribly weak.’

Literary competence is, of course, something we learn. It is also something which can change with time or, perhaps more accurately, it develops while preserving earlier forms of itself, just as the trunk of a tree preserves its earlier contours in the form of growth rings. If this were not the case, there would be
no change in literature; or, if there were change, all earlier literature would become incomprehensible. What makes the concept central to my argument is that without it we would be unable to determine whether a long poem were well-structured or not. Every long poem would be a unique being, incapable of comparison with any other. Therefore we have to determine what expectations we bring to any long poem we read, bearing in mind the fact that our literary competence has been formed with a reading of such poems as The Iliad, Paradise Lost and The Prelude forming its inner growth rings. Clearly these expectations, which enable us to comprehend the poem and thus make sense of it — which enable us to read the poem meaningfully — are not identical with those we apply to the novel, the short story, or the lyric, even though the long poem shares characteristics of these three other forms.

Until recently, anyway, one has expected the novel and short story to involve themselves in some exploration of character in action: which, of course, involves plot, a notion of causality coupled with temporal sequence. Even in a story such as Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener or a novel such as Beckett's The Unnameable, where the characters are involved in in-action, the fact that the protagonists do nothing gets its significance from our expectations that they will do something. As I have pointed out, today's writers of long poems have lost faith with temporal causality and narrative; but they inherit a form, the sheer size of which was once appropriate to such an exploration, and which still needs some kind of organisation.

The language of poetry incorporates within itself a greater proportion of its opposite, silence, than prose can. Like a Henry Moore statue, poetry embraces emptiness, nothingness, and gives it a shape in relation to language. But despite this linguistic family relationship with the lyric, the sheer size of the long poem makes it difficult for us to read it in the way we read a lyric. We expect more of long poems than we do of lyrics, which is probably the reason why poets attempt them: they feel, sometimes wrongly, that they have more to say than can be compressed into thirty or so lines. Donne's "The Good Morrow" may contain two hemispheres, even the whole world: but it does so with a high degree of generality. The long poem demands — and by this I mean that our literary competence leads us to demand of the long poem — the silence-defining language of poetry, but also greater specificity, more detail, more variety, a larger number of contrasts, than a small poem can accommodate. As Whitman said, "I am large, I contain multitudes." And "Do I contradict myself? Very well then. I contradict myself." Without this variety, the long poem will be boring. Yet if it is not organised in some way, the long poem will fall apart. To return to my image of pavlova — the organisational patterns that make long poems coherent tend to make them boring; the variety that makes them interesting tends to make them incoherent, finally insignificant. The good long poem satisfies our demands for both variety and coherence at the expense of neither; it tantalises and vitalises our imagination by its miraculous ability to fulfill both expectations.

Which leads me to suggest, more or less in parenthesis, that the form 'long poem' cannot be defined by mere size or length. There is no clearer line of demarcation in terms of length between long poem and lyric than there is between novel and novella. The form can be defined only in relation to our expectations, Barthes' 'methodological model'. Rather tautologically perhaps, a long poem is a poem which we read with expectations appropriate to a long poem. To put it slightly differently, we can only understand the nature of long poems by an examination of the way we read them.

What these expectations are has already been partly defined. We still expect of the long poem both variety and unity, diversity and coherence, even at the

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moment in history at which it has given up story or plot, its, and the novel's, habitual ways of holding diversity together. Furthermore, a long poem must be poetry. No matter how it disguises the fact, it must separate itself from day to day linguistic acts such as ordinary speech or letter writing or even literary prose; and it must dispense as much as possible with a dependency on external contexts. If you like, it must carry all its baggage with it. And third, it has to be understandable in such a way as to be significant. (This last demand is clearly related to the first. Total incoherence, as in some poems by John Ashbery or the Ern Malley poems, is significant only in relation to our expectation of significance. Now that our expectation of coherence has changed, the Ern Malley poems are becoming more comprehensible and therefore more significant. They are, in fact, becoming poetry.) For the rest of this paper I must confine my attention, however, to the first expectation, the relationship between diversity and coherence, variety and unity. At a time when the form is becoming so common in Australia, it seems important to articulate a way of reading these poems which will allow their complex life to become clear. In other words, I am trying in some way to help define the grammar by means of which we read long poems, and within which they make themselves meaningful to us.

* * *

The commonest way of approaching the organisation of long poems has been thematic. However a study of thematic unity must be combined with a study of thematic disunity and discontinuity, if we are to account in any way for the poem's diversity. This involves a study of breaks in continuity, a study of suspenseful lapses of the poem's attention, a study of the way the completion of the poem is being deferred. This deferment can be achieved by interweaving differing strands of thematic content, in much the way that various plots are woven together in a Victorian novel. It can be achieved by changing the images by means of which the theme is conveyed, so as to re-locate it in various areas of experience. For example, in Vincent Buckley's Golden Builders, the thematic contrast of destruction versus creation is imaged in terms of physical streetscapes (Carlton, North Melbourne, Fitzroy), in human lives (abortion, finding children, murder, suicide etc.) and in animal lives (killing rats, centipedes), as well as in the spiritual lives of people (despair, hatred, love, nurture etc.). This parallel thematic development is an equivalent to metaphor in the lyric: finding similarity within a diversity of experience, it produces that concordia discors we associate with poetry. It is therefore not correct to say that the limited geographical location of Golden Builders gives unity to the diversity of action and actors within it: after all, all the action of any poem goes on in the mind of the reader. Rather, locations contribute to the unity of Buckley's poem to the extent that location itself, as well as the life within it, is subject to destruction and creation — there is thematic similarity; while much of the poem's diversity comes from the different areas of experience within which thematic similarity is exemplified.

One further, and very important way, the end of the poem can be deferred is by constant recourse to the essentially dualistic, self-divisive nature of the theme itself. If one thinks of Golden Builders as being constructed not on the theme of destruction versus the theme of creation, but on the simple theme of destruction versus creation, on a simple binary opposition, one sees what I mean. The 'hammers of iron' which batter at Carlton and the secular names of Lordship destroy the physical past in the very act by which they transfer it to memory and thus preserve it synchronously with the future they are building. They are both destroying and creating. The people whose lives the poem momentarily touches on are the same: some destroy, some create, almost all wish to create. The City of Man, within which the poem is firmly located, can aspire to become the City
of God, where the pastoral injunction ‘Feed my lambs’, carved on the foundation stone of a Sunday School, will be no longer necessary. But its very humanness fights against this aspiration: the longing to create, to build the new Jerusalem, is held in check by the propensity to destroy. In reading the poem, our expectations — in this case our longing for a resolution of tension, our desire to see conflict annulled — are granted glimpses of gratification, only to have it withheld. For once not travelling to arrive, the poem explores a condition, while we follow it in the hope that it will travel beyond that condition into a simpler one. The fact that *Golden Builders* does not, affirms its commitment to the world in which we live, in which aspirations to the absolute continue to aspire, in which needs and losses continue to be felt. Thematically *Golden Builders*, and I suggest every other long poem of significance, is a ‘music of division’, structured around a binary opposition which exemplifies difference, diversity, while at the same time compelling us to seek unity.

To conclude this paper I should like to illustrate how a long poem achieves a dynamic structure by giving a quick analysis of Les A. Murray's recent poem, *The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle*,29 which is a briefer and simpler poem than *Golden Builders*. One central binary polarity in Murray's poem is that of city and country, and this provides a point of easy access into the poem's structure. The city is an intruder into the country; the convoy of city cars on the highway is described as a ‘big stunning snake’, mechanical, unnatural and dangerous, where ‘crime flashes in strange windscreens’, and where ‘girls walking close to murder discard, with excitement, their names’. It is associated with unnatural and vicious killing. This ‘narrow city’ is also described as a gut full of parasites, ‘a tarred pipe’, which none the less conveys the children of country folk back to their parents for the holiday: it is ‘bringing home the children’. Murray's judgment is one-sided: there is no comprehension here that city people can make homes or have histories of their own. Within this poem, the only true home is, sentimentality, in the country, and the only genuine source of history and creativity is there too, where the parents are making up beds for when 'children return with their children'. The country is characterised by a sense of family and tradition. Whereas city girls discard their names, the country is where the past lives on in the names adhering to places: 'the place of Bingham's Ghost, of the Old Timber Wharf, of the Big Flood That Time'. The country is the place of generation in two senses: it is where things are generated, in contrast to the sterility of city. And it is where generations exist as history meaningfully alive in the present: the act of naming makes the past synchronous with the present. Of course, among its creeks, cattle, corn and timber, killing also takes place. But, as we shall see, Murray considers that it is a natural and necessary killing, condoned by the poem.

So, in the poem's first two sections, a particularly clear and traditional (even antique) set of polarities is established, exciting our expectation of some kind of resolution, even if it is only, as would appear likely, a clear and quick victory of the country over the city. However the poem's structure resists such a victory, and the discontinuities and frustrated resolutions which result give the poem much of its life in its remaining eleven sections.

The poet returns from the city to his childhood countryside in the third section, and in this and the next one it looks for a moment that the contrasts between city and country will be resolved by the poet's peaceful surrender to his rural past: he will be naturalised, he will return to the fold. But in Section 5 the rural past becomes a threat to the present:

The Fathers and the Great-Grandfathers, they are out in the paddocks all the time, they live out there . . .

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and the poet feels the need to put it in its place:

We tell them that clearing is complete, an outdated attitude, all over;

We preach without a sacrifice, and are ignored; flowering bushes grow dull to our eyes.

The resolution proffered us in section 3 therefore begins to fade; “the grinners under grass” refuse to lie down. The poet, who has, after all, been living in the city, feels now out of step with the country, which seems to be rejecting its returning children. The poet’s personal involvement in this conflict is left unresolved, however, as the next section (6) returns us to the earlier explicit confrontation of city and country, and parallels the poet’s incipient naturalization on a wider, social scale. The holiday is under way; the city folk have assumed a temporary heroism, with their Homeric ‘tripods and flat steel’ (which, of course, form their barbecue) and their momentary ability to ‘rise up as charioteers’ on waterskis. Has the country claimed and redeemed them, after all? Section 7 refuses to answer this. The whole city/country conflict is left in suspense, unresolved, while the poem turns to the synchronous, historical quality of the country, taking up the theme of the ever-living past from Section 5, but now transforming those Fathers and Great-Grandfathers to children who are eternally present in the landscape. The basis of this notion of generation is then revealed (in Section 8) in the image of the mosquitoes which need “blood to breed their young”. This is a rural inversion and naturalization of the unnatural killing which characterised the city, and which had been partly naturalised and redeemed by the poet’s thoughts about his childhood familiarity with guns. This theme was raised earlier but has been left in suspense since Section 3.

In contrast to the temporary Greek warriors of Section 6, Section 9 introduces for our approval the full-time warriors: the tree killers, ‘the warriors . . . cutting timber with brash chainsaws . . . they are fitting tappets and valves, the warriors, or giving finish to a surfboard.’ These warriors, the noble rural working class, are members of ‘the life peerage of endurance’, which for reasons unexplained in the poem attract Murray’s full assent. There is no attempt to explain why endurance cannot be experienced as much in the city as in the country. They are ‘the warriors who have killed, and the warriors who have eschewed killing’, but why their killing should make them warriors, while city killing should make people murderers, is unexplored. The poem moves now to endorse everything rural. Yet this section also subverts what looked like a hatred of machinery in Sections 1 and 2, where machinery was identified with the intruding city. A simple dislike of machinery has become ambivalent, leaving us in doubt. Machinery can be naturalised. What looked like a possible reason for the city’s inferiority, its mechanical, rather than natural, orientation has been taken away, has been shown to be a false lead.

Section 10 continues with the natural/unnatural killing theme of Sections 2, 3 and 8. The ibis kill methodically, almost mechanically: ‘they take out their implement at once’. We have an element of urban disquiet introduced into the natural killing of the country:

city storemen and accounts clerks point them out to their wives remembering things about themselves, and about the ibis.

But although city folk may doubt the wholesomeness of this methodical and semi-mechanical killing, the previous section has already approved of machinery and killing so long as it takes place within the country — not, significantly, within the rural husbandry which Section 10 exemplifies, but simply in the country.
Section 11, however, returns to the generative and synchronistic character of the country, left in suspense since Section 7, whose children now appear among ‘the fruit trees of the Grandmothers’, whose ‘fruit has the taste of former lives... children bite it recklessly.’ The children destroy, like the ibis, to build themselves and the future. The city/country conflict seems to be resolved. Now we have a victory for the country, which not only embodies the past by its act of naming it and thus giving it an entity in the present, but also nourishes the future, the children, with its fruit tasting of former lives. Section 12 endorses this apparent victory: the poem is over, the ‘rational zoom’ of the ‘long city’ is no match for the ‘abandoned things (which) are thronged with spirits’, for ‘the paddocks... full of ghosts’, which now, it seems, finally welcome the returning children.

But the final section, 13, subverts that victory. What had seemed to be the resolution to the conflict established in the poem’s first two sections, a clear victory of country over city, proves to be not exactly where the poem was going after all. Up until this moment the country has been identified with the preservation of the past, and endures, whereas the city, since this after all is a holiday weekend, abideth not, but stayeth only for a short time. But Section 13 introduces a new and final perspective: the timelessness of the stars. In Murray’s poem, the stars have been lost in the city. ‘People recover the starlight’, however, ‘hitching north’. Presiding over the stars is the ‘Cross... rising on his elbow, above the glow of the horizon’. The capacity of the country to confer timelessness on history is endorsed by its closeness to the stars, to the Cross; but even the visitors from the city can share in this essentially religious conversion of the temporal to the eternal:

The stars of the holiday step out all over the sky.  
People look up at them, out of their caravan doors and their campsites;  
people look up from the farms, before going back.

When seen from this perspective, the initial “horizontal” contrast between country and city diminishes, to be subsumed into the “vertical” polarity of the temporal and human on the one hand and, on the other, the eternal and cosmic. The resolution offered by the preceding two sections turns out to be misleading, and the poem refreshes itself at its end by subverting our previous sense of completion, even though at the same time it affirms the country over the city as the place where such transcendence can best take place, and which most closely approximates to the stellar eternity. The poem allows this judgement to be made, I should point out, because although the city is always cast as polar opposite to the country, Murray actually says nothing much about it. The city’s role in the poem is to be anti-country (as Murray says elsewhere, ‘When Sydney and the bush meet now/There is no common ground.’30) The city, largely by means of the familial links that connect them, is what holds the country back, or hauled the country back, from a closer companionship with the Cross. The poem, I feel, would be a more compelling and dynamically structured one, if the city were more firmly established as an entity in itself: in that way the thematic binary polarity would have been more resistant to a solution.

* * *

I have had to give here a necessarily simplified analysis of the structure of Murray’s poem. Another structuring factor which could have been analysed further is the appearance of poet as persona within his own poem and the degree of coherence which he can generate (in this respect *Golden Builders* is a more rewarding example, or Bruce Beaver’s *Lauds and Plaints*, in which the poet as first person persona appears in almost every section.) Unities of time, place or season etc. are in themselves of little structural value to the long poem, and can well
help to generate boredom. They become structurally significant only when some thematic relevance is more or less explicitly established (as in *Golden Builders*), or when they are felt to be unifying factors by the persona himself, who contributes his own sense of unity to the diversity of the poem. This last is close to the way older forms of meditative, non-narrative poems are structured: they are held together by the coherence of the meditative mind which produces a coherent system of thought felt to be such by the mind/poet himself. Most long poems today, however, display, and even thrive on, a greater fragmentation than we find in Lucretius or Sir John Davies.

What I hope I have demonstrated, however, is that the apparently shapeless modern long poem is historically explicable; that it actually can have a structure, in fact a very complex one, and one necessarily different for each poem as well as being different from that of the novel or the lyric; and that this structure is meaningful, in fact can exist, only in terms of a literary competence which demands of the long poem that it be not boring, i.e. that it displays diversity, and that it be not totally incoherent. The challenges to coherence defer the end of the poem and allow it to continue interestingly, as also does the poem's continuing recourse to its essential thematic binary opposition. When these tensions are finally resolved, then the poem must stop. Until that point, a careful attention to the poem's structure will enable us to read the poem meaningfully, it will enable us to comprehend just what life it has in our mind, and it will prepare us to make whatever judgements we then think appropriate.

REFERENCES

22. For example, the 'discontinuous narratives' of Frank Moorhouse.
23. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*.
25. ibid., p. 113.
REVIEWS

Roger McDonald, 1915. Queensland University Press, 1979, $9.95

1915 is a good novel in the traditional sense. It creates a world and then investigates the relationships of people within it. This world, moreover, is freshly, sensuously delineated: the wheat country of N.S.W. before 1914, the stench, the heat, and the dark glories of Gallipoli, Sydney, the Harbour, the ferries, the suburban high teas, all come alive, illumined by the novelist’s understanding, compassion and ironic acceptance so that the book’s values correspond to its subject matter. The story, too, keeps moving and compels attention, propelled by the logic by which its characters live to the conclusion which, on reflection, is the inevitable one. Best of all, however, are the characters, vividly recognizable in their boredom, their hunger for love, their longing for something, no matter what, to happen to get them out of the terrible doldrums of adolescence. As well as all this, however, this is an important novel in a larger, historical, sense. It is a book by a writer who is prepared to contribute to the intellectual debate which is the life of any culture. For 1915 restates and revalues the story of Gallipoli, for so long central to Australians’ understanding of ourselves both individually and as a people and attempts to articulate, clarify and even refurbish it. In this sense, the reference in the text to the story of the last labour of Hercules (Walter is labouring to translate the Latin version) is an apt one. Just as Hercules is sent to capture the wild horses of Diomedes, horses fed on human flesh, McDonald sets himself to capture what there is of humane value in a story all too patently capable of destroying these values.

In this sense the novel is an immensely serious and ambitious one, an attempt to rephrase and reinterpret collective memory. Some readers will not like and will suspect this seriousness and this ambition as they suspect Patrick White’s. Personally, however, I believe with Dr. Johnson that the major writer is the one whose work is able to express “general and transcendant truths”, not merely “present laws and opinions”. Not that 1915 sacrifices what is local and specific. One of its great strengths is the tribute it pays to the facts; and its accounts of Gallipoli are based on long conversations with survivors as well as upon historical records, so that the story remains in touch with the commonsense of the events it describes, intensifying rather than outraging communal piety. Not that the account of life at Gallipoli goes with the tide of complacency—the scenes in the trenches or out of them, the one, for instance, in which the soldier bathing, trying to wash the lice and filth off him as well as cool down in the blazing heat, is decapitated by an enemy bullet or the long hallucinatory description of the day of the truce which is called for the burial of the dead, these combine to create a sense of outrage at the brutalities of war. This outrage is not diminished by the respect the novelist obviously has for the men who had to endure the brutalities; at times indeed it even tends to give a gothic tone to the descriptions. Nevertheless, events and situations work to reveal new aspects of character, advancing the action to its climax, as with Billy’s attack on Francis, which is the outcome of the logic to which war has trained him. Moreover, the distance that the descriptions preserve from the people involved in these horrors allows us to feel for them. The consciousness playing upon theirs is compassionate and humane, civilised in the best sense of the word, as theirs in such a situation could not be. Not that the novel is in any way sentimental. On the contrary, part of the book’s excitement lies in the intelligent appraisal it makes of the story it tells. “The mystery of armies, the secret of glory”, it appears here, is ultimately a “mystery of despair”, the “opposite of [the] hope and fruition” the heroes of Gallipoli are supposed to represent. Billy and Walter and their comrades are transformed into “creatures of self-sacrifice” because war delivers them from the sense of meaninglessness which has oppressed them in their everyday life and threatens them again on their return.

In this sense McDonald’s view of Australia echoes Manning Clarke’s notion of a country in which the spirit starved because there was
no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity in broad and simple daylight.\(^1\) True, in the novel, there is a certain lyric grace to the early scenes which are set in this broad and simple daylight; scenes of harvest and of picnics and dances, scenes in country pubs and of young men yarning into the night or competing with one another for the love of Frances, the stylish daughter of the publican. Yet this world is also shadowed by the sense of the wrong and of the unsatisfied striving Clarke speaks of, and governed on the one hand by the image of the Kangaroo Billy shoots and whose dead eyes seem to demand something of him and on the other by the planet Walter mistakes for the headlight of the train he is driving to meet and sets himself and his horses to outpace. Despite or perhaps because of their vitality, the young people here seem to be oppressed by a sense of meaninglessness, which dies away only occasionally; for Walter, for example, at harvest time when he faces the “fear, which in this city was abstract and confusing . . . [but which he realizes here] had ground to contend with” (p.16). It is only in the war that they find coherence and meaning: “to the army, rightly flung on the shores of a foreign land but not seeing itself as an invader, closing with a foe provided the supreme justifying platitude of its existence: we are not whole until we are sundered (pp. 369-70). The self-awareness provoked by the constant threat of death rescues them from their loneliness: “in the present perpetual moment the reliance of others on one’s own strength and quickness became the long hostage each possessed against the utter extinction that might come even before the heart truly stopped beating and the eye seeing” (p. 365).

What is being suggested here is that a whole culture, secretly filled with what H. P. Heseltine has called a “horror of sheer existence,”\(^2\) found itself empowered by death. Certainly in 1915 it is death not love, which emerges as the powerful force giving energy, intensity and a defiant purpose to lives otherwise without meaning or direction. It is true that, briefly, Billy finds a different kind of exultation in the news that he is to become a father. But that exultation is short-lived: death triumphs there too and all that is left him is the ecstasy of killing, the “union of private thoughts and military function” (p. 370) entailed in his mission as a sniper.

Not that the book is as portentous to read as this makes it sound — except perhaps in the scenes with Hurst, the atheist, and with Mr Fox, the parson who turns failure into saintly heroism on the battlefield, a character who obviously exists for didactic purposes. In these scenes as also in Cairo when, in a mosque, Walter discovers his vocation to art, questions of metaphysics are pressed with an insistence which tends to interrupt the life of story and character alike. But generally, the novelist’s metaphysical assurance creates an ambience within which both the reader and the characters can move freely and trustingly. Indeed it may be that this authorial presence which pervades the novel is its greatest asset, compelling affection, even reverence for the people and events it describes. True, some readers may find this presence somehow old-fashioned. Certainly, the narrative point of view is omniscient, as assured as Tolstoy was of the goodness and trustworthiness of the world. Yet with the exceptions just referred to, this narrative presence is not obtrusive, less active than passive, a sense of some “infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing” which pervades and endures the events described, drawing the reader similarly into sympathy. It works also towards an extension of significance which is quietly unobtrusive. Objects and events tend within this context to point beyond themselves and function almost as natural symbols: the Kangaroo and the star already mentioned, for instance. Far from weakening it, in my view this sense of the trustworthiness, the ultimate intelligibility of the world empowers the action, on the one hand heightening feeling for the characters who are shut out and in a way the victims of this intelligibility which is so evidently more than they or we can understand, and on the other hand keeps the story in touch with the world it describes, a world in which, despite everything, a similar belief in an ultimate meaning was taken for granted. Thus, finally, this belief rescues 1915 from the trap of the avant-garde, from the disdain for the common forms and common beliefs which intrudes between writer and reader in so many contemporary Australian novels.

In this sense, then, McDonald is writing out of the tradition of Furphy and Lawson, intel-
ligently aware both of the possibilities and of the cost of life in Australia. But he has also refurbished this tradition—Aboriginal culture figures, for instance, lightly but effectively as in the incident in which Billy finds “An Abo thing . . . by the creek”, a sacred stone which Billy somehow associates with his mourning for his mother dying of cancer and with some nostalgia for innocence within him—and it is this sense of renewal which makes 1915 a creative contribution to a culture, neither isolating itself from the present nor repudiating the past but accepting what the majority of Australians probably regard as our common cultural heritage.

This acceptance bears most fruit perhaps in the character of Billy whose attraction rests on a series of stereotypes from which the novelist draws support while at the same time placing a new value on them. Billy represents a type, perhaps the type, of the Digger; antinomian but attractive because of the dash, the unselfconsciousness, which gives him a “rough grace. Knowing what he wanted from his fellow-creatures by way of consolation and reward [he also knew] how to reach for it, how to take.” (p. 71). His brashness thus represents a kind of innocence. Yet, underneath, the novelist shows us that he is uneasy with himself, with others and with the world. So his swagger is really a form of self-defence. More interestingly, since it fits the individual life into a tragic pattern underlying the whole culture, it also represents a kind of hubris. “Thinking about things might have helped someone else but not Billy. If he acted, and the result went against him, he could only act again.” (27) This, of course, is what makes people like him magnificent soldiers but inadequate and destructive in the long-drawn out skills of personal relationships, “the joining of thought thus cracking into life: a harsh word to bark out and settle something.” (p.12)

Living the life of sensation rather than thought he and his type appear then as the last of the Romantics, rebels of the kind Camus describes as the “sons of Cain”,3 those who live by the law of power for whom exaltation takes the place of truth—“if all the excitement fizzled out he would be desperate” (p. 127). What McDonald's unillusioned perspective allows him to see and to show also, however, is that this life represents a cry of anguish. Billy's only good is death, self-annihilation. His whole life leads to war and he is most perfectly himself as a sniper, a solitary killer. Here the greatest degree of self-affirmation coincides with the greatest degree of destruction. Exempt at last from all claims to permanence and all demands for loyalty, he feels supremely free: “nothing but a practical equation arranged itself in his mind: the death of the enemy equalled the security of his place in the world” (p. 369).

In creating Billy, then, McDonald touches on what is not merely a social but a poetic truth, suggesting that the pathos of such characters, people of whom Patrick White recently remarked that they “do not have enough disguises in their wardrobe.”4 is ultimately cosmic. “The truth was that Billy's entire person made a demand of something beyond the world . . . [a] world [which] (as this something’s mouth piece) sent back no answer.” (p. 171). He is man the “wanderer on the way to himself” as Brennan described him, shut out from his own heart and from all that is sacred in the world yet hungering for them. In this sense he becomes a type in the sense of Lukács definition in that he “experiences the most abstract problems of his time as his own individual problems that are a matter of life and death for him.”5

Wally, the other main character is less compelling, probably because he depends on feelings which are less general, more personal to the novelist. At the same time he gains from the tenderness McDonald evidently feels for him, a young man for whom the world is less a prison than “a chapel, where he blundered, knelt and was given” (p. 171), finally, a sense that the meaning of his life is bound up with art. Yet this personal pressure leads to a need to justify the character whose desires set him apart from the others — his great friend in the army is an Englishman, already a writer, and the scenes in which Walter glimpses his vocation as a writer, especially the scene in the mosque in Cairo stand out like patches on the fabric of the novel. This indeed is the main weakness of the novel—that the novelist has not been able to fuse together his understanding of the Australian situation with his personal convictions about the importance of art, which figures here as the centre of order and reverence in a world otherwise governed by necessity, careless of human
feeling and significance. The end of Walter's story highlights this failure since it is his imagination which destroys him. Advancing across no-man's land he imagines he hears a voice calling his name, plunging ahead into a forward trench only to find that there is no one there and that he is stranded between the two armies. If Wally represents the type Manning Clarke also discerns in Australia, the man who still tries to go on "faintly trusting the larger hope", the "knight of the sorrowful countenance," he is finally betrayed by his illusions as Don Quixote is not, and the last glimpse into his mind is a despairing one:

There had always been something further up ahead. Always. Since his first steps taken from one parent to another the world had been calling out with its promise. Even as he had sprinted through bullets just minutes before there had been something. 'Get there, get there', prompted the inner voice. 'Then you will see'. Well now he was there, stumped. Shut away ahead of Time. (p. 375)

Unconvincing as Walter and his story tend to be, however, his story keeps alive an awareness of the problematic nature of reality and prevents the book from becoming too schematic.

So, to sum up: There will be those who see this novel as precious, too intent on significance, too densely written. Certainly, it is a poet's novel, but then impoverishment is not necessarily virtuous and it is hard to see why only in poetry it is permissible to load every rift with ore. More seriously, it could be argued that the novelist does not seem to know enough people or enough about them — the minor characters are shadowy and not sufficiently particularized — and that what he knows about his main characters is deductive, derives from his interest in general and metaphysical truths rather than from the experience which feels its way into individual lives and predicaments. Yet it is unfair to be prescriptive: a novelist has a right to his own sense of the world, provided only that he compels the reader to believe in it — at least so long as the book lasts. Ours is increasingly becoming a society in which ideas have no place and values are merely material. We need books like 1915 which provoke us to thought as well as feeling about ourselves. Nostalgic the novel may be, but the nostalgia it offers is noble and virile.

It is also an attempt, despite the lack of faith and hope around us, the breakdown of civic-mindedness and the conditioning to barbarity and every kind of aberration that outmoded values fail to resist, to cherish values which remain and to restore faith in a tradition which, for all its inadequacies, is all that we have as Australians.

NOTES
4. Interview with Jim Sharman, National Times, 30/6/79.


A political novel of the new Africa, The Coup marks a sharp break for John Updike, author of such celebrated discussions of middle class America as Rabbit Run, Couples and Rabbit Redux. Set in the fictitious country of Kush, a former colony of French West Africa, The Coup tells of the rise and demise of Colonel Hakim Felix Ellellou. Like all good coup-makers who survive their own overthrow, Ellellou is writing his memoirs from exile and it is through the pages of his manuscript that the story is told. It needs to be stated from the outset that this book is a delight to read and those who argue it should not be regarded as a political novel (such as several reviews I have seen) would appear to have no conception of extra-European (in this case African) politics. Politics is threaded throughout the whole work; it is simply that the issues are different to the run-of-the-mill intrigues of Washington or U.S. Presidential campaigns that have abounded over the last decade or so. Instead the reader is forced to consider such unfashionable issues as the politics of neocolonialism, military intervention and the para-
doxes involved in efforts to fuse Islam and Marxism in a common revolution. What is more, Updike discusses these issues not from the view of opulent European or North American drawing rooms, but from the barren and poorest regions of the Third World.

Drawing on the contemporary political history of francophone Africa, particularly landlocked Mali, Upper Volta, Niger and Chad, Updike creates a 'feel' for the drought-stricken Sahel in a way that none of the thousands of pages of IMF, FAO or IBRD reports on the region could ever do. In that land of "lava and ash" where "only Satan has like domain":

"The people starve. The rains now have failed for the fifth year. The herdsmen steal millet from their wives and children to feed the cattle; still the animals drop, and are fallen upon for the little meat left on their bones. I have seen vultures come to the feast and be themselves stoned and consumed. The people eat bats and mice, they eat skinks and scorpions, gerbils and termites; they glean the carcasses that even jackals leave . . . There was no such thing as garbage in refugee camps."

Similarly, Updike is quick to pick up many of the dilemmas of would-be revolutionaries in much of Africa. Ellelou notes that:

"Kush is too thin to be administered except by gestures. When we effected the revolution we discovered a strange thing. There was nothing to revolutionise."

The complexities of political leadership in Africa are well set out. Thus, despite being a murderer and an Islamic fundamentalist, Ellelou is portrayed with sympathy. He is not an Idi Amin or Jean Bedel Bokassa of popular press image; his quest for ideological purity is not nonsense. The problem of Africa, as Ellelou reminds us, is that for the lack of other alternatives, government and state power becomes the major avenue for those who seek wealth. As such we are treated to a highly sophisticated discussion of the personalised nature of much political rule in Africa and we are meant to sympathise with the problems that mount for a luckless Ellelou who will not take advice offered him to:

"... rule as other leaders do, give your cousins assistant ministerships and conduct border disputes with other nations to distract us from our poverty."

It is also in the context of this conflict between political pragmatism and ideological purity that we are treated to a discussion of super-power involvement in the affairs of poor states. The short term band-aid effects of Western assistance are weighed against the long term debilitating effects of Western penetration on African society. Similar treatment is reserved for the blatant political opportunism and thinly disguised racism of the Soviet Union in Africa. The leader of the Soviet team in Kush offers Ellelou a toast to "all good niggers." !

Fulsome praise for Updike's political awareness should not of course allow us to forget his mastery of personal relationships — at its best with Ellelou and his four wives and one mistress. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the novel's best lines are saved for, or about, Ellelou's second wife, an American whom he meets while at university in the USA during his exile in the last years of French colonial rule. The reality of marriage to an African revolutionary does not turn out to be the same for Candy as did the vision which accompanied the status of a black boyfriend in a US college in the late 1950s when Candy would "... fuck anything as long as it's not a boy of her own age, race and income bracket." That was her revolution.

It is of course the privilege of the novelist to amalgamate the particular influences he or she chooses and to situate characters in a similar personal fashion. It is in this sense that the influence of the USA, and all the author's instincts and training sit rather uneasily in francophone Africa. Updike needs Ellelou's sojourn to the USA but at the same time seems aware of the predominance of the former colonial power on Kush, and consequently the ambiguity of the American interlude for the rest of the novel. As Ellelou comments to Candy's father:

"In the strange climate of my native land . . . the literature the French brought us may transplant better than the political institutions . . . In the less developed quarters of the world the power politics of the West can be brushed aside, but its culture is pernicious."

Perhaps by way of conclusion it should be acknowledged that this review was initially hampered by the inhibitions of a 'specialist', so-called, in African politics. One particular prejudice was the knowledge that Updike's
‘African’ novel would be read by millions, while the excellent political novels of the Nigerian, Chinua Achebe, or the Senegalese, Sembene Ousmane, for example, would reach a much smaller audience. This feeling disappeared with a reading of the book. Updike, speaking through Felix Ellellou, will probably do more to create an understanding of the problems that face the new states of Africa than have most of the textbooks written by supposed ‘Africanists’ over the last two decades, and certainly more than the coverage the continent has received from both the popular and the quality media over the same period. The Coup should be prescribed introductory reading in university courses in African politics.

RICHARD HIGGOTT


Superficially, these new Adamson poems, with their deadpan simplicities and articulation of a childhood innocence sneaky as we’d all prefer not to remember, appear to be a surprising turn-around from the ambitious New Romantcism of his previous book, Cross the Border (1977). There, his characteristic Hawkesbury River evocation and homage often strained into a Shelleyean need to embrace the illimitable and the ineluctable. Where I Come From is tersely immediate in expression, a contracted—and, I think, intensified—canvas of seemingly autobiographical fragments that trace process and progress. The Hawkesbury backwaters here are mangrove-stinking and physical, only indirectly emblematic.

The sequence is about limitations. Its finest effects are based upon the projection of a narrator who does not claim to understand what lies behind or beneath his telling:

And Dad walks in at six o’clock
and is tired and wants a shower
he comes towards me
asking about the wood
hoping I’ve chopped it for him
I haven’t and this gets him going
it’s cold and there’s no wood
and you just do it to upset your mother
(The Truck)

Sometimes this reliance on the slippery last line leads the poet to opt for a too easy way out (as in the otherwise fine “At home”, about the first father/son fight: “It’s because he knows what you think about him sleeping with Mum” is simply glib; we are not convinced from within the poem). But Adamson invests the opening sequence, “They say memory’s a lie” with an overall vividness that etches deep. “Growing Up Alone”, with its final evocation of his grandfather, enlarges this child-experiencing world with further ripples of growing awareness and a sense of interdependence. “The Stealing Poems” are Adamson in an already familiar guise as larrikin. Their blend of obsessional compulsion and sheer effrontery is disturbingly ingratiating, you find yourself onside before you know it. Adamson is expert in the art of manipulation: “Today before the ghosts” begins as an extension of the poet-as-roaring-boy but asides into a group of love poems, in which the “I” lets us see him in an increasingly complex world of relationships and responses. “Love and Acid”, the final section, presents the poet as fellow to his senses and to an immediacy of responses. The terse, often elliptical expression developed consistently through the volume is shown to have, by now, considerable punch and implosive power. These last pieces are infinitely more self-aware, but they are also concerned with presenting the poet in a stance of vulnerability. It is a dangerous trick, and I think Adamson succeeds. He has, in this excellently integrated volume, created a terse but powerful ‘lie’ that convinces with the ring of truth. It is not a matter of asking “Will the real Robert Adamson please stand up?” The real Robert Adamson is here alright, even if he has already, and elsewhere shown us he is many more people, and where he comes from is wherever he wants.

What makes Dorothy Hewett’s poetry exciting is not the superficial engagement with current formal experimentations — though this has, I think, certainly impelled her towards fertile ways of examining the forces that drive her, the daemon that energises her best work. It is worth nothing that the most recent of the poems in Greenhouse are not the spaced-through journals of nervous mobility, like “Creeley in Sydney” but the substantial and
dramatic centrepiece “The Mandelstam Letters” and the Gwen Harwood poems, as well as the final elegies of “Solstice”. What, though, excites in Greenhouse is the creative release that vibrates everywhere, a release of energy and the capacity to fuse the elegaic with the opening-out of experience. This is done, with the sort of punchy simplicity Dorothy Hewett’s earlier books had prepared for us, in a poem like “Father and Daughter”:

at the R S L

country women waltz in green shawls with runny roses
Princess Marina has married the Duke of Kent
the Greek’s wife celebrates with a lime-juice spider
over the rooftops with Edna the half-caste girl
There’s blood on your pants
you better tell your mother.

On the pub corner arguing politics
with Cecil Elsegood the Country Party member

But it expands beyond the world of childhood or recall of the past (intrinsically elegaic subjects) to capture an ongoing capacity for living, being hurt, learning, or not learning:

Too old to consult
the psychiatrist (I know more than he does)

heart water gall
broken too many times
betrayal is commonplace
love poems are a pleasant fiction

& we didn’t get caught
we played all the games right through
it was easy wasn’t it
like a sex manual on a dozen different ways
of how not to do it
do you think we had

a meaningful relationship?

(“Lay Lady Lay”) But for me, it is the “Mandelstam Letters” that are tautened with his new-found energy release. It is interesting that they are virtually the first sustained attempt by Hewett, though well known as a dramatist, at the Monologue form. It is obvious that she identifies with the figure of the persecuted writer, but she is not tempted to over-indulge in comparisons: her “Sydney Postscript” gains immeasurably because of this.

Dorothy Hewett refuses the pose of reticence traditionally accepted by most women poets in Australia. Where this leads to self-indulgence and over-empathetic gestures it is still redeemed by the quality of abiding energy — a female energy — that increases, not diminishes, with age. She is one of that wonderful generation of older writers who have renewed themselves in our time.

THOMAS SHAPCOTT


Dorothy Hewett’s latest play, The Man From Mukinupin, was commissioned by the National Theatre at the Playhouse as that Company’s contribution to Western Australia’s sesquicentennial celebrations. The play was first performed at the Playhouse, Perth, on 31st August, 1979, and this first edition was released to coincide with that premiere. The text is given as it stood prior to any revisions by the author during rehearsals at the Playhouse and it must therefore be taken as authoritative pending the appearance of a version incorporating any such revisions. Tim Cotter’s fine musical settings of the songs for the Playhouse production are not included in this edition of the play, and it is to be hoped that they will appear in a subsequent edition.

Set in Mukinupin, an imaginary wheat-belt town “east of the rabbit-proof fence”, in the years 1912 to 1920, the play is a festive comedy whose perspectives reach back to ancient festivals of country life associated with fertility and harvest. These perspectives are established symbolically at the opening of the play by the juxtaposition of two key images, one a night scene in which disembodied voices call snatches of dialogue through weird night music, and the other a Five Man’s Morris, in which the dancers “are dressed in gum boots, and wheat sheaves, so that they look like moving haystacks”. The atmospheric contrasts between
the distant, libidinous voices of the night people and the Morris Men's celebration of harvest and marriage are built up through music, dance and lighting effects. This transition from nocturnal to festive dance establishes a formal and thematic unity at the outset of the play: it begins a larger pattern of antitheses and parallels, of which it is part, and it also looks forward to the resolution of conflicts and the lifting of guilts in the comic resolution of the play.

*The Man From Mukinupin* stands out as the most consciously and rigorously shaped of Dorothy Hewett's plays, her most successful experiment in dramatic form to date. The plot line of the play is relatively simple, the characters boldly drawn in their contrasts and parallels, but the deeper unity of the play is in its syntax of images and striking visual symbols, such as the silhouette of the crippled Miss Clemmy, ex-tightrope walker from Wirth's circus, leaning on a crutch under the Mukinupin sky — or the lunatic star-gazer, Zeek Perkins, with his eye glued to his tripod telescope, also under the canopy of the sky. Dorothy Hewett has shown her gift for striking dramatic images before, but in none of her earlier plays is form so married to content. There is marked symmetry in the family groupings of the characters - a device which especially accentuates the values expressed in the relationships of parents to their children — and this impression of symmetry is strengthened by the ways in which characters are contrasted and aligned according to their temperaments and values. The significance of these family groupings is mainly psychological, but it embraces some subtle moral concerns as well. Polly Perkins, the romantic heroine, sheltered and innocent, contrasts to Lily, her half-caste half-sister by Eek Perkins. This contrast is the basis of social satire, touching most deeply on the oppression of the Aborigines in the town. The irony which governs this satire is that social respectability amongst the white population is a brittle veneer, and is certainly not synonymous with moral integrity and human justice. The point is made through contrasts of character. The very proper young Polly commits a sin against the spirit when she foregoes her childhood sweetheart, Jack Tuesday, in favour of a safe marriage to Cecil Brunner, middle-aged "travelling salesman in manchester goods and lingerie". Lily, by contrast, bears the social stigma of her begetting:

They reckons me Daddy slept with every coloured woman in the camp.

Lily also represents the memory of those of her people who fell victim to Eek Perkins' genocide — a barbarity to which he was driven years ago by his jealous wife:

'ear 'em, cryin' an' screamin', y'know. They reckon they was done in, down in the creek-bed, fulla bones. Me bastard Daddy was in on that. Ever seen 'em?

Unlike Polly, who wavers in her affections until she is forced to grow up, Lily remains tenaciously loyal to her unpromising lover, Harry. But Polly and Lily are really sisters beneath the skin in more senses than one. Despite their contrasting situations, each must learn to distinguish false values and be true to herself.

The symbolic relationship between Polly and Lily is the central concern of the play. It is supported by another study in contrasts between Jack Tuesday and his twin, Harry, who, in an extension of the play's symmetry, are respectively in love with Polly and Lily. This interlocking pattern of antitheses and parallels is strengthened by the device of doubling the roles of Polly and Lily and those of Jack and Harry. A series of doublings among the lesser roles also points up the function of antithesis and underlying similarity in the play. In keeping with the romantic spirit of the play, the course of true love does not run smooth. But the social tensions and abiding guilts which are attached to the community, and which create obstacles in the course of true love, are ultimately resolved by the marriage of Polly and Jack and the departure of Lily and Harry to a life beyond the salt lakes. Love, tested and true, provides the moment of festive release, and its truth renews the life of the community.

The play's festive spirit and elements of its structure have their antecedents in Shakespeare's romantic comedies. Witty allusions are made to *The Tempest*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, but the play is clearly influenced in atmosphere, structure, imagery and spirit by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The pairing of characters and the construction of parallel actions within a larger structure in *The Man From
Mukinupin recall similar techniques in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. So too, do the functions of setting and music as elements of the action in Dorothy Hewett’s play. The setting determines character to some extent, but its major function is to symbolise the values of the community and the inner lives of the characters. The setting alludes not only to the immediate locale but to more distant places and events, like the Great War. The setting in its totality contributes to the processes by which false innocence is found to be corruptible, and true innocence — integrity of the self — is proven.

Dorothy Hewett’s allusions to Shakespeare do not seem, however, to be a matter of mere academic interest. Parody, as in the version of the Strangling of Desdemona, performed as a play-within-the-play, is a means of establishing strong thematic links between apparently discrete parts of the play. In this particular instance, the parody of a tragic love story hints at the tragic underside to Hewett’s romantic comedy, especially concerning love between a man and a woman of different race. The broader implication of these allusions to Shakespeare is perhaps, that the world of Shakespeare’s plays is part of the heritage of the inhabitants of this remote Western Australian town — even if they remain aggressively impatient of that heritage, or even innocently unaware of it. The force of this heritage is nowhere more evident than in the symbolic marriage of Harry and Lily, who are joined by Zeek Perkins with some apt quotations:

Eek is the lay preacher, but I was never much of a one for churches. Y’see I’m a religious man . . . Hang on a minute . . . Just the ticket . . . Rain’s easin’, cloud’s passin’. And now the moon like to a silver bow, new bent in heaven, shall behold the night of our solemnities . . .

Look down ye gods and on this couple drop
A blessed crown, quiet days, fair issue and long life.
Give me your hands, and by the merry rite of spring
I charge you lovers you are eternally knit.

It is appropriate to the occasion for which The Man From Mukinupin was written that, in what is a regional play, Dorothy Hewett should invite us to view our own immediate heritage from the perspectives of a rich and distant past. The Man From Mukinupin suggests, paradoxically, that the remote past is perhaps not so distant in spirit from us as it seems in time and place — and that the regional need not therefore be synonymous in literary circles with the parochial.

BILL DUNSTONE

Andrew Lansdown, Homecoming. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1979. 29 pp. $2.50

Publication of this first book of poetry by a young West Australian writer is another very creditable achievement by the Fremantle Arts Centre press.

In the few years it has been operating this press has brought out an impressive list of high-quality first books by writers whose work is certain to be remembered long after the already-fading geniuses hailed in Australian Poetry Now or New Writing in Australia have had the last dusty memory-hole sag shut behind them.

Andrew Lansdown is a professional writer in his early twenties, who has published a remarkable amount of diverse and admirable work in a very short time (readers of Quadrant will be familiar with some of his poetry and social essays), including more than 100 poems in reputable journals in Australia and New Zealand.

Even in a small collection like Homecoming the stamp of a powerful individual talent is unmistakable. The author is unusual for a young poet in many ways. He is, for example, concerned in his poetry with expanding rather than diminishing areas of human feeling and understanding. Further, his work is frequently explicitly religious, with a commitment to traditional fundamentalist Christianity quite unusual to find in technically, conceptually and even politically sophisticated poetry like this.

One of the most striking features of his serious poems is their sustained imagistic and intellectual power, as this extract from “The October Revolution” may indicate:

“It was not long before we knew
that the sun would always hang, for us
just below the black rim of the world.
Our skies put on the twilight like a uniform.
Our Earth dressed in a sepia of grey —
without depth of shadow or distinction of
light,
without bright of colour or sharp of shape.

We have become winter rivers
rigid on top, flowing always below
conforming to the dictates of our only season . . .”

Striking a grand but essentially empty pose is all too easy for a young poet. Though Andrew Lansdown is not afraid of grand gestures, there is an untypical strengthening wisdom within his work. Further, the reader becomes aware that Andrew Lansdown does not regard his gifts of perception and articulateness as simply means for self-advertisement of those perceptions. He conceives of poetry as having a purpose: a very large and serious purpose, in which the role of the poet and even of the poem as artifact, is a humble one. I doubt he could ever join the ranks of those who try to write poetry in order to be able to regard themselves as poets.

Untypically, too, for a young poet, there is no self-pity in his visions of the world, that succeed in celebrating without sentimentalising or trivialising, as in “Rosa Glenn: Tree”:

“The old tree stands
dead
like a woman
huge
in dimension and beauty.

Framed by the door
way
she nullifies
the
necessity for artistry.

She claws at the
sun
praying its gold
will
turn her smooth silver to green.

My small hut is
filled
with her serene
sorrow
and the song of her magpies.”

This is, in its way, a quite perfect poem. To stand it beside a chosen piece of other, noisier poets would be simply to be cruel to the latter.

Ezra Pound said that one gets tired of promise. It is enough to say that Andrew Lansdown has already moved a long way from promise towards substantial achievement.

Hal Colebatch


The West Australian Goldfields Courier of 27 November 1897 records the funeral procession in Coolgardie of Ernest Giles, who had died on 13 November and had hoped to be buried among the rocks at Ularring. The expectation that the Premier, John Forrest, would have wished to honour a fellow explorer with a state funeral had not been met. Indeed, the events which followed the completion of Giles’ fifth expedition in 1876, demonstrate not only how apposite to Giles is the sententious generalization with which Ericksen begins his thirteenth chapter: ‘A meanness in human affairs requires most men to find their own rewards, and nowhere is the principle more evident than in Australia’s treatment of its explorers’, but also the ironic appropriateness of an Adelaide citizen’s remark to Giles after his second expedition: ‘Ah, Ernest my boy, you should never have come back; you should have sent your journals home by Tietkens and died out there yourself’. Rather than perishing mysteriously like Leichardt, or tragically like Burke and Wills, or returning to become Governor of Jamaica or Premier of Western Australia (like Eyre and Forrest), Giles resumed a life as unremarkable and unrewarded as before he first set out on the five expeditions which stretched only from August 1872 to August 1876. Ericksen’s objective, quantitative assessment of Giles’ achievements emphasizes the paucity of the recognition he was accorded: ‘The sum of his main traverses in previously unknown country exceeds 5,000 miles, and the distance, especially on his first two expeditions, is enormously augmented by reconnaissance. No other Australian explorer travelled so far in new regions, and none made a larger contribution to primary geographical knowledge’ (p. 270, italics

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mine). But he came back alive, bearing the unwelcome news that the new land was of little pastoral value. And the colonial bureaucrats competed in mean-spirited provincialism to deny him any tangible rewards. The South Australian Surveyor-General, for example, contended that credit was due to Thomas Elder, who financed the exploration, rather than to ‘his paid servant’, Giles. To suggest to a man with no capital that he has a priority in leasing land newly discovered by him, at 2/6 per square mile per annum, is properly described by Ericksen as proof of how ‘a pastoral society took care of its own and [that] the chief beneficiaries of policy were those who controlled wealth’. (p. 258). Plus ça change. But such polemics play little part in Ericksen’s study.

Nor is he preoccupied with attempts to refurbish Giles’s personal qualities. Indeed, especially in the early chapters, the portrait Ericksen so meticulously builds up comprises more warts than clear skin, a litany of failings. At best an amateur in botany, despite a close association with Baron von Mueller, poorly informed in geology, ignorant of botany, contemptuously dismissive of aborigines (whom he believed certain of extinction), and ‘ill equipped to command large bodies of men’, Giles was not only ‘of sallow complexion and no commanding presence’ but, quite simply, ‘not of the stuff of which great explorers are made.’ (p. 35) Yet the judgements of Giles’ contemporaries enact prejudices that Ericksen does not share: ‘weighted in the balances used by the society of his time [Giles was] a failure. He had made no fortune, acquired no land, found no wife, put down no roots, and won no fame.’ (p. 24). The more objective judgement is decisive: ‘none of [Giles’] deficiencies proved to be of great moment’, not merely because it compels a reappraisal of Giles’s strengths, such as the ‘exceptional toughness in body and mind [of] one who accepted danger and hardships without hardships and fuss’ (p. 25), but rather because it focuses attention upon Giles’s dedication to the task of exploration and his imaginative affinity with a landscape that so many of his contemporaries found disillusioning.

Although Ericksen’s study is concerned with the life of one man, it is curiously unsatisfactory as biography. To many questions answers are quite simply not to be had. Much of Giles’s personal life, especially his childhood, is inadequately documented. How the ‘sallow’ young man could have been regarded as a ‘dandy’ (p. 262) is impossible to know. Ericksen himself is reluctant to invoke the claims of biography for his work, professing rather to describe it as ‘primarily . . . a study of the circumstances surrounding Giles’s major work, a critical examination of the five expeditions he conducted, and an evaluation of his performance in the twin roles of fact-finding explorer and impression-recording traveller’. Within these modestly stated limits, Ericksen achieves some conspicuous successes. His scholarly thoroughness, lucid narrative technique and minute familiarity with the land itself give a sense of authority to his examination of Giles’ work as an explorer and a quite magisterial force to the discriminations he makes, especially in chapters 7 and 13 (‘The Rivals’ and ‘A Place in History’) between Giles’s achievements and those of his contemporaries. Forrest, Gosse and Warburton are, at last, seen in a dispassionate, sceptical perspective, while Giles emerges secure ‘in the front rank of Australian explorers — arguably close to Charles Stuart and somewhat ahead of Thomas Mitchell, Edward John Eyre, Ludwig Leichhardt, Augustus Charles Gregory, John McDouall Stuart and John Forrest’ (p. ix).

Ericksen’s description of the limits of his book is, however, too confining. He achieves far more than a cogent, unillusioned assessment of Giles’s expeditions. Paradoxically, what emerges from his decision to focus upon the only four years of Giles’s life that are adequately documented is a more compelling portrait of the explorer than might have emerged if the other years had been more fully documented. The vestigial records of his childhood do not explain Giles’s predilection for quoting (and, more often, misquoting) romantic writers from Byron to Poe, for naming a valley ‘Fairies Glen’, for distinguishing Mount Olga from ‘Mount Ayers’ in terms of the wonderful, the grotesque, the ancient and the sublime, or for seeing a mountain as ‘pink blancmange’. Nor is the suggestion that a taste for horse-meat derives from a long familiarity with English public-school fare more than whimsical. But the records of the five expeditions have a pervasive subjectivity and from them Ericksen constructs a compelling, multifaceted portrait of Giles. In his handling of Giles’ records,
Ericksen blurs the distinctions between the artist and the historian: even the most circumstantial details possess the significance that characterises the art of the novelist, yet no sense of arbitrary selectivity emerges. When Giles published *Australia Twice Traversed* in 1889, he subtitled it 'The Romance of Exploration'. It is the quite exceptional achievement of Ericksen's study that both the romanticism of Giles himself and the romanticism of exploration are illuminated. In three crucial extracts from *Australia Twice Traversed*, which in their abbreviated form make up the epigraphs of his study, Ericksen captures Giles's essential romanticism:

'I have called my book The Romance of exploration; the romance is in the chivalry of the achievement of difficult and dangerous, if not impossible tasks. Should I again be called on to enter the Field of Discovery, although to scenes remote from my former Australian sphere, I should not have represented myself in these pages, if, even remembering the perils of my former adventures, I should shrink from facing new. 'An explorer is an explorer from love, and it is nature, not art, that makes him so.'

'There was room for snowy mountains, an inland sea, ancient river and palmy plain, for races of new kinds of men inhabiting a new and odorous land, for fields of gold and golcondas of gems, for a new fauna, and above all the rest, there was room for me.'

and

'The wild charm and exciting desire that induce an individual to undertake the arduous tasks that lie before an explorer, and the pleasure and delight of visiting new and totally unknown places, are only whetted by his first attempt.'

Ericksen's study affords the insights into Giles that allow us to make sense of the explorer's enigmatic claim: '... though I shall not attempt to rank myself amongst the first or greatest, yet I have reason to call myself, the last of the Australian explorers'. But Ericksen does more than understand Giles, he unites biography with metahistory, recognizing in the expeditions of the explorer the more metaphysical sense of the quest or archetypal journey that so decisively shapes both fiction and the lives of men.

*JOHN A. HAY*


Australians who follow mining activity will realise that that economic sector has been experiencing a "boom" period. However, they might not realise that mining has been the subject of a different type of "boom" recently. For decades the literature on mining has been dominated by an assortment of popular histories and anecdotal biographies. This style of writing promoted an image of the land as a harsh and natural enemy to be conquered and exploited by heroic pioneer miners. Although there were a few important exceptions, there was little serious study of the impact of resource extraction in Australia. Now, after many years, the serious study of mining has begun to come of age. In the wake of the spectacular growth of mining and the bitter political disputes which accompanied that growth over the last decade and a half, there is a new wave of interest in the mining sector. Although there has not been an overnight change, a number of important works have been published. More importantly, there is now a climate of interest, sufficient to encourage a more wide-ranging and critical look at mining activity and to tolerate perspectives other than the frontier, imperialist approach to the use of natural resources.

Of the many events and personalities which have received a less than thorough treatment in the past, Langley George Hancock is a natural subject for further study. Few people associated with contemporary Australian mining have been the centre of more controversy than this maverick millionaire, iron ore prospector, and political publicist. Lang Hancock has also been the focus of a great deal of written material including a biography, several feature

*POST-SCRIPT. Ernest Giles, Explorer and Traveller, 1839-1897 has won the second of two prizes awarded for Australian literature by the National Book Council of Australia. The prizes are made possible by a grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. In 1976, Ray Ericksen's Cape Solitary won the Council's first prize.*

WESTERLY, No. 4, DECEMBER, 1979
In virtually every instance Lang Hancock has lost. Although he has discovered more iron ore than any other individual, he still does not own or operate a single iron ore mine. His current wealth is based on a royalty agreement, in essence a “finder’s fee”, with one of the large mining consortia, Hamersley Iron. On a number of occasions even they have publicly ignored the “King of the Pilbara”. More importantly, his wealth and influence have failed to guarantee security of tenure over his vast ore discoveries. As many as twenty-nine leases have been “confiscated” by Western Australian governments of both political colours, either to be held as reserves for future developments, or, worse, to be handed over to mining corporations currently producing in the region.

Despite these setbacks, Hancock seems to bounce back more audacious than before. By the time he has suffered one defeat, he has conceived another, more imaginative scheme, much to the chagrin of his opponents. His current project is a northern transcontinental railroad which would link Queensland coal with Pilbara iron in a massive steel project. He has also been a tireless promoter of nuclear technology, convinced of its safety as a result of hav personally flown through the radioactive fallout of the Montebello Island explosion in 1953 with no apparent physical damage. Hancock’s schemes have yet to succeed but he has at least seen that they have had considerable public exposure. Over the years he has become a competent publicist, once owner of a Perth newspaper and author of countless speeches and articles. Even on his seventieth birthday, when most people would be content to retire, Hancock is still promoting. That birthday was celebrated by sponsoring a 747 Jumbo jet tour of Australia on which his daughter and heiress Gina demonstrated to a planeload of paying pressmen, politicians and businessmen, the untapped mineral wealth of the continent. For those unable to afford the flight an inexpensive paperback was published outlining Hancock’s beliefs and plans. There is little that Lang Hancock wouldn’t do to convert Australians to his love-affair with mining.

Hancock is more than just a colourful maverick. He is a revealing anachronism, a nineteenth century pioneer prospector living in the last half of the twentieth century. From his overwhelming desire to own an iron mine to
his efforts to perpetuate, through his daughter, a mining dynasty, his values are rooted in experiences which by and large are alien to the current population. His political and corporate struggles of the last two decades have symbolised a clash between a forceful nineteenth century mining entrepreneur and the impersonal bureaucratic structures of today. His failures owe less to individual opponents than to the triumph of organisation over the individual and the present era’s mistrust of frontier visionaries.

The free-enterprise catechism of hard-work and reward, and the antipathy to the values of social democracy do not ring hollow when uttered by Hancock for they are an inextricable part of his heritage and his life. The integrity of his individualism is acutely embarrassing to conservative politicians who while revelling in the rhetoric of “free-enterprise”, actually run governments which intervene extensively in the mining sector. Hancock’s opponents on the right are in reality so far removed from the pioneering creed which they extoll that his presence is a threat to their credibility. When his individualism is combined with his wealth and influence Hancock is even more troublesome, for his activities and plans force premiers, public servants and businessmen to confront policy choices which cut too close to uncomfortable contradictions in their own beliefs. It is not surprising then that he is as ridiculed and trivialised by those persons who should be his natural allies, as he is maligned by those who are his natural opponents. The fact that it was his energetic prospecting and promoting that set off a wave of mining development which others have ridden to wealth and power underlines Lang Hancock’s unusual role in Australian politics.

From this background a powerful account could be made of Hancock’s life. Unfortunately the reader will not find such a portrayal in Duffield’s biography of the man. Of the several reasons why Rogue Bull is disappointing the most significant is Duffield’s failure to accomplish what he set out to do, namely to provide a “total” picture of Hancock which would go beyond the public clichés. Quite to the contrary, this biography consists of far too many clichés. Rather complex ideas and situations are too often reduced to simple journalistic phrases and then repeated throughout.

Chief among these is the term “mining über alles” which Duffield uses repeatedly as a shorthand for the primacy of mining in Hancock’s life, and which is explained by the author at only the most superficial level. Rather than escaping the popular images of Hancock this distortion through simplification actually perpetuates such images.

If Duffield is unable to escape clichés he is even less successful in presenting a thorough analysis of his subject. There is little coherence in the presentation of Hancock and his ideas. The chapters are fragmented and resemble a series of feature articles in the weekend supplement of a major newspaper. In fact one chapter is a reworked newspaper article while another is little more than a verbatim report of an interview with Hancock. The biography lacks an overall structure and the chapters give the impression that they have been written individually or in small groups with little thought to overall consistency. The author seems to be aware of the problem to some extent. But he chooses to attain coherence through the irritating repetition of such phrases as “we will go into this later”, “as we shall see”, “as I said before” or words to that effect. The result is a compartmentalised book which seldom comes to grips with its subject.

Rogue Bull is too much the product of the journalist and not enough the work of the meticulous biographer. The literary style of Duffield’s profession is clearly the major problem. Coherence can be sacrificed and repetition used more successfully with a topic which is itself a series of loosely connected events. Political crises, mining booms, the overall development of the Pilbara would have been more easily dealt with in a journalistic style. What Duffield has written would make a competent series of feature articles. But it is presented here in a format which lacks the camouflage of competing news items or the time intervals between instalments. The chapters come unstuck and the focus on a single subject magnifies this fragmentation. If nothing else, Rogue Bull is a lesson for journalists that when they consider writing a book they should choose a topic with a view to the strengths and weaknesses of their own literary style.

This is not to state that there is little of value in this book. Even if Rogue Bull only succeeded in updating the information on Han-
cock since the publication of the previous biography it would be a useful contribution. But the biography, for all its problems, still makes interesting reading, primarily because the Hancock story is fascinating in itself. Moreover, Duffield is able to express the powerful economic visions which dominate Hancock. The book leaves little doubt that the act of producing wealth is primary, overshadowing all other aspects of Hancock’s social and personal life. At the same time, however, the most interesting and well-written chapters are those which deal with Hancock’s important personal relationships. In the chapters which focus on his daughter Gina, and on the town of Wittenoom near which he was raised and which he later purchased, Duffield is able to capture Hancock’s concern for the future of his family and his strong proprietary sentiment for the region which produces his wealth.

Although Rogue Bull is little more than a colourful journalistic account, and not an especially competent one at that, the Hancock story itself warrants the purchase of the paperback version of this book due to be released in October. Nonetheless, with the emergence of a new level of interest and scholarship focusing on the mining sector and considering the unusual role which Hancock has played in this area, it is disappointing that Duffield has not written a more definitive and critical study of this “rogue bull”.

ED ARUNDELL
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ED ARUNDELL is a Canadian Ph.D. student in the Department of Politics, University of Western Australia. His thesis is on resource diplomacy.

JOHN BARNES is a reader in English and chairman of the English Department, La Trobe University. His publications include The Writer in Australia: A Collection of Literary Documents 1856 to 1964, Henry Kingsley and Colonial Fiction and Joseph Furphy.

GEOFFREY BEWLEY was born and educated in Sydney. After leaving university in 1968 he worked as a journalist, and has had material published in Australian literary magazines and papers.

VIVIEN BON was born and educated in Melbourne, and now lives in Sydney. This is her first published story.

VERONICA BRADY is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Western Australia. She has contributed critical articles to Australian and overseas literary journals and edited Soundings: A Selection of Western Australian Poetry.

HAL COLEBATCH: Born in Perth, he has published stories, poems and articles in various magazines. His second book of verse In Breaking Waves was recently published (1979). A third, Coastal Knot, is in preparation.

HELENA DABROWSKI was born in Germany and came to Australia in 1949. Graduated from the University of Sydney and taught in secondary schools before becoming a guidance officer in educational psychology. This is her first published work.

BRUCE DAWE has worked at a number of occupations and served nine years in the RAAF. He is a graduate of the universities of Queensland and New England, and is senior lecturer in Language and Literature at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education. The latest book of his poems is Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954-1978.

ROSITA DELLIOS works as a journalist at the Geelong Advertiser and has recently been travelling overseas and studying in Penang.

BRIAN DIBBLE is head of the English Department at W.A.I.T. He has published poems and critical articles in Australian and overseas literary magazines.

BILL DUNSTONE is a lecturer in the English Department, University of Western Australia, with special interests in drama.

MOYA ELLIS was born in Perth. She has attended creative writing courses at Columbia University, and published one story with Impetus, a Columbia University literary magazine. "A Private Reverie" is her first published Australian story.

SU GRUSZIN has been at various times worker, traveller, student and one of the unemployed. She is a generalist, a humanist, and a writer of works in all forms.
JOHN HAY is a senior lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia. He has published widely in eighteenth century literary studies and Western Australian literature.

R. G. HAY was born in Queensland, where he has been a teacher and is at present senior lecturer at Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education. His poetry has been published in Australian literary journals.

RICHARD HIGGOTT is a lecturer in the Department of Politics, University of Western Australia with special interests in West African politics.

JEAN KENT was born in Queensland and completed an Arts degree at the University of Queensland. She is at present living in Sydney and working as a student counsellor for the Department of Technical and Further Education. She has published stories and poems in Australian literary magazines.

WELLINGTON - KEVIN MOORE is a photographer at Claremont Teachers College. An exhibition of his photographs was held at Fremantle Art Gallery in April 1979.

RON PRETTY is a lecturer at the Wollongong Institute of Education, has published poems in Australian journals. The poem in this issue is one written as a result of a year spent teaching in Greece.

ISOBEL ROBIN was born in Sydney, and now lives in Melbourne. She has worked as a copy writer and typist, and is now a secretary in the Department of Philosophy at Monash University. She has had poems published in Poetry Monash.

MARGARET SCOTT was born in England and educated in Bristol and Newnham College, Cambridge. She came to Australia in 1959 and worked for the Tasmanian Education Department, and then in the English Department of the University of Tasmania. Her poetry has been published in Australian literary journals and periodicals.


IAN WILLIAMS was born in England, and since coming to Australia in 1970 has worked in Perth, Sydney, and Melbourne. He returned to England in 1975, and is now back in Australia.
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