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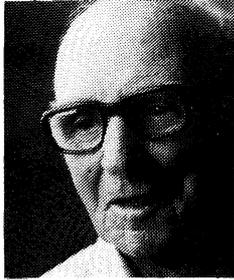


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# WESTERLY

a quarterly review

ISSN 0043-342x

EDITORS: *Bruce Bennett and Peter Cowan*

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*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.

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Recommended sale price: \$3.00 per copy (W.A.).

Subscriptions: \$10.00 per annum (posted); \$18.00 for 2 years (posted). Special student subscription rate: \$8.00 per annum (posted). Single copies mailed: \$3.00. **Subscriptions should be made payable to *Westerly*, and sent to The Bursar, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009.**

Synopses of literary articles published in *Westerly* appear regularly in *Abstracts of English Studies* (published by the American National Council of Teachers of English).



# WESTERLY

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Cover: Baynard Werner, 'Green Ideas Sleep Furiously', Screen-print, 1977.  
Courtesy Art Gallery of Western Australia. See Hendrik Kolenberg's article,  
'Printmaking in Western Australia', pp. 89-93.

'Printmaking in Western Australia', by Hendrik Kolenberg, is to be included in the  
Print Council of Australia's forthcoming book *History of Australian Printmaking  
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## Feathers

The manager asked me to take off my glasses when I went for the job. Everything looked soft and dreamy. I couldn't see the other side of the room. In the beginning Clara would help me to make sure I got to the right table.

There was a mirror round all the walls and small alcoves with seats around the tables.

We ran from the station to the club to get out of the cold. The snow crunched under my white plastic slippers. The manager would hiss if we were late and laughing.

The women in kimono shuffled across the room in tiny steps. Clara strode across, kicking out her long red skirt.

As the women got older they wore kimono more often, and talked in a maternal way as well as coquettish.

Sometimes the customers would pat my arm and talk about me, especially if they couldn't speak English. I did not learn Japanese. Anna said the less I understood the better.

Anna stopped working in the clubs and started making porno movies. At first she said it was easier, just a job. The cameramen were nice. After a while she became tense during work periods.

The club served small plates with savouries and watered down whisky. The girls picked up bits in chopsticks and popped them in an open mouth. Once Clara jabbed a guy's tongue, then apologised profusely, patting him with a serviette. All the girls were fluttering around him. I couldn't look at Clara or I would have burst out laughing.

It was considered polite to pass drinks using both hands.

The other girls arrived in their club clothes. Clara and I brought ours in a bag. We wore jeans. In the dressingroom we would peel off layer after layer. Sometimes the Japanese girls laughed at my thick red underwear. They got so tired being nice to customers they were bitchy to each other.

The manager liked to put the foreigners on the same table. There was Lil from Taiwan, Poppy from Vietnam, and us.

There were always drunks on the Saturday night train home. We avoided the carriages they spewed in.

We found some evening dresses in a plastic bag. Mine was white crepe with a scoop neck and bell sleeves. Lolly pink ruffle went round and round the sleeves and hem. There were small pink flowers on it, and some pearls and sequins. Aah beautiful, the men would smile.

The girls were whispering about cutbacks. Poppy was very nervous.

One of the older women was fired. On the way home Clara started kicking at TV sets amongst the rubbish on the kerb. Bloody Japanese, she said. What they don't need they throw out.

More and more often Hiroshé and I would start making love at seven o'clock. After that it was too late to go to work.

Poppy squatted in a corner of the dressingroom, rocking on her heels and crooning. There was a small old spot of blood on her pants. Clara shook her. She wouldn't get up. We all went out to the tables and left her alone. Finally Lil went back to help her dress.

Hiroshé asked me for money so he and Mizuno could go to a coffeeshop and listen to some music. He told me the first time he was given money to take to school he didn't know what to do with it. He gave some to a friend then threw the rest away near the river.

Anna was making too many porno movies. She was pale and strained.

I liked to sleep on the subway in the middle of the day. Sometimes there was soft pink upholstery and the train went very deep in the ground.

Hiroshé played guitar almost every waking moment. He walked around the house with his guitar slung round his neck.

Each time Anna finished a movie she snapped back to the way she was before, laughing and playing around. She and Hiroshé and Mizuno would jam till late at night. The house was very quiet in the morning. I would get up first and push back the wooden doors so I could look through the glass onto the garden. The snow stayed there a long time.

I saw Anna's face on one of the porno movie posters. She said it wasn't her body.

Hiroshé's pants always dragged on the ground when he took his boots off. I asked him not to ask me for money quite so much.

Anna sat on the roof crying, plucking at a mattress. Feathers floated in the air. The sun was warm on the roof.

HELEN BULLEY

## The Sick Child

The clock ticked. The baby cried. The tap over the kitchen sink dripped onto dirty dishes left over from a lone dinner. Outside it was black. Wartime, and all the lights were out. Black and cold. Winter had come. Rosalind walked up and down, up and down in the tiny flat rocking the baby in her arms. Still the baby cried. She paused by the window to peer into the darkness and heard a distant rattle as a tram made its way along the main road. The baby screamed so she began walking again, up and down, while the clock ticked and the tap dripped and she tried not to think of how long it would be before her husband came home from night duty. She didn't know whether she could span the distance between now and then, not without running into the dark street to scream out her fear. And loneliness. She looked at the baby. Her first baby, and she didn't know what to do. She didn't know why it cried. She had fed it, changed it, put it down to sleep. But the tiny girl wouldn't sleep and so Rosalind walked up and down, hour after hour, trying to comfort the bewildering child.

The picture of her parents sat in its fading frame on the mantelpiece near the block. If her mother had been here she might have told her what she should do. Or one of her sisters. For a moment she closed her eyes and imagined she had that wonderful luxury, a telephone. And that her sisters were nearby. And that it was simply a matter of . . . but she didn't have a telephone. And her sisters were hundreds of miles away. At home. She didn't even have a friend. She was alone in this alien city with her husband, and hardly anyone was aware of their existence at all.

She thought of home then, of the big stove in the kitchen where her father would be sitting, warming his hands. And of her sisters making tea before bed. And outside the smell of cattle on the frosty air and the sounds of the nightbirds calling to each other along the river. She might have appealed to God for want of somebody closer, more real, but the baby twisted in her aching arms and she put the tiny girl over her shoulder and rubbed her back as she had seen her mother do once.

After a long time the door opened and her husband came in. He had heard the crying baby before he had closed the gate and started up the steps. He was tired from the long hours of work and the long cold wait for a tram to bring him home. The tram had been full of American sailors on leave, loud and drunk and trying to be happy, and he had been glad to reach his stop and jump quickly off the tram to escape the noise. Darkness, silence after the tram rattled off. Until he reached the gate and heard his baby crying. He, too, had been thinking of

home. And the distance between there and here seemed immeasurable. But there was no going back. No job for him there, to support a wife and child.

'I don't know what to do', said Rosalind.

The husband took the crying child from his exhausted wife and she slumped into a chair. The people in the other flats were strangers. Barely known but by a nod of the head as they passed in the hallway or going down the steps. None of them had children.

'Perhaps she's sick', said the husband. 'A fever or something.' He knew nothing of babies either. And the child cried, and cried.

'Perhaps we should go to the hospital.'

Rosalind stared at the clock. It had stopped now. The hospital was so far away and they couldn't afford a taxi and how could they take the child on a tram? There was no-one who might drive them there. No-one she could have summoned the courage to ask. She sat paralysed, sick. Her husband walked up and down through the silence.

'Perhaps we could try putting her in the cot again.' But the baby screamed and so he picked her up and walked up and down, up and down as his wife had been doing for hours before him.

'She might die', and Rosalind covered her face with thin white fingers.

The husband thought as he paced up and back on the bare linoleum. He remembered a chemist shop down on the main road.

'But he wouldn't be open.' Rosalind shook her head. 'Not at this time of the night. Or morning.'

Her husband was slower now, exhaustion filling his body. The baby cried, and jerked, and sometimes screamed.

He handed the child back to his wife and put on his coat and went out. It was a long walk through the unlit streets and his head felt light on his large body. Once he saw a soldier and a girl embracing against the wall of a house. They didn't look as he went past. He saw no-one else. He, too, might have been in uniform. But he had been designated medically unfit. Along with the other failures in his life he was prepared to accept this one. When he reached the chemist shop it looked dark, deserted. He leaned against the door and banged. He banged until his knuckles were sore and until a light was switched on somewhere at the back of the shop.

Rosalind had resumed her walking. She was too tired now to feel the pain of homesickness inspired by the picture on the mantelpiece or the fear inspired by the crying child. Or the panic of angry neighbours being kept awake. She felt only numb, and half-aware.

She watched her husband come in and saw the bottle of medicine in his hand. He went into the kitchen and boiled a bottle and some water and spooned some of the medicine into it. They didn't speak, and rarely looked at each other, suffering each in their separate worlds. She couldn't compensate for his failure to win a uniform. As he couldn't make her failure at motherhood and her failure to conquer her fear of this alien place any easier to bear. He gave her the bottle and she sat down and put it in the baby's mouth. Her husband fell into a chair and closed his eyes.

The baby sucked noisily on the bottle and drank all its contents. Rosalind sat the child on her knee and rubbed her back slowly, rhythmically, rocking slightly. There was silence then. The child closed her eyes and leaned against the mother. Rosalind gently picked her up and put her in the cot at the end of the room. The baby whimpered a little, then fell asleep.

Her husband jerked awake in his chair. He looked at the clock that had stopped and began searching in his pockets for his watch. He brought it out and saw the time and stood up.

'My next shift starts in an hour. I might miss the tram.'

Smoothing crumpled clothes he walked to the cot and looked down at the sleeping baby. He kissed his wife and then went out quietly, down into a street now opening up to a cold grey dawn.

Rosalind pulled the curtains to shut out the grey light. She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and moved towards it, then hesitated. She turned and went back to her chair. She curled her body up in it and closed her eyes and heard in the distance the rattle of a tram receding into the morning.

## ROD MORAN

### Gardener

For Lyn

She keeps churning the dark loam,  
a brown marl of rind and green scrap;  
a fertile love tenders trees, bright shrub,  
the dank silt that worms chew and air.  
Days of fern-light and dirt she bends  
to raise, times later, new green-wood,  
or hang, triumphant, a basket blooming  
bright to hover like a prism refracting  
the cool scent of violets and mossy soil.  
Renoir splashes light from leaves like lace;  
she shapes sod towards new greenness  
where birds balance and cluck monologues—  
years on someone will sit, shaded,  
and, like her, paint a nurtured world.

W. GREEN

## On Ski-ing

Snow man, hung there above the world  
open to its full unfolding  
its strange & dazzling passionplay  
of sunlight

on snow your eyes blinded  
blinded into vision  
So cold!  
Space aches in you & out

Something awaits you a familiar darkness  
a blurred promise  
in the mind's distance downwards  
at the earth's end Poised at the crest

your body held there muscles tensed  
against the ecstasies of air  
you wait caught between  
questions & the urgency of answers

silences the quiet hungers of the heart  
all the flimsy dialectics  
of anxiousness & desire  
on the other side of dreaming . . .

Ah, to let go  
body into air—  
your breath catching fire eyes streaming  
& your furious burning hair—

the compulsion of such whiteness  
so impossibly  
white  
perilous & perfect

beyond all the words  
& the body's silence also  
an unimaginable ecstasy!

P. A. JACOBS

## Terry's Truck

He hurried his mother, in the small hot kitchen glazed with the last of the afternoon sun. He was impatient to eat. On Fridays he liked to be on the road by 5.30, cruising for a while, seeing how the traffic was moving, what the pubs were like.

How long will it be?

He jostled her, moving around her to take some of the fried potato. He smelled of wet hair, soap and fresh sweat.

She piled his plate with the food and placed it on the table. He would eat it with bread and drink several cups of tea. She poured herself a cup and joined him at the table.

Why don't you go out tonight? he said.

Get Audrey to go with you. Go into town and see a show.

She shrugged, not answering.

Go on, he insisted. Ring her up. Sitting around here on your own watching bloody television. He chewed vigorously, his neck muscles flexing rhythmically, looking at her.

Since the old man had died she'd shrivelled up a bit—not that HE'd been much company when he was alive. When the insurance money had come through he'd wanted her to go on a trip, but she wouldn't have it. Said she couldn't be bothered.

He pushed his plate away. Wordlessly she got up and refilled his cup.

Yeah, that's what I reckon you should do he said as she placed the cup in front of him.

Ring up Audrey and both of you go into town. Have something to eat and see a show. He wanted some response from her. He pulled his wallet from the tight back pocket of his pants and took out a fifty dollar note and pushed it across the table to her.

There you are . . . Now! You ring Audrey.

No Terry! She pushed the money back. It's too much.

He caught her hand, stopping her.

I can afford it. I'm off now. He smiled at her. Pleased.

He picked up his jacket and went out leaving a resonance that held her, still, at the table.

Outside he felt good. The meal had satisfied him. He felt at ease, relaxed. The truck was parked in the driveway, near the open garage doors. He walked around it, checking the tyres. He'd got a good deal on those. He was purposeful, intent on what he was doing. He polished the windscreen again. Checked the radiator, the battery and the oil. At the back of the truck he stopped again to look at the chains. The chrome job was good. He tugged at them, checking that they were secure, liking the cold smooth finish on the steel. The duco shone blue. A clear deep blue. The signwriting stood out. Red lettering bordered with orange on a white background. He rubbed the soft cloth over the paintwork.

He climbed in then and started the motor, revving it slowly. Feeding the fuel evenly, watching the needle climb on the rev counter. He selected a tape and slipped it into the cassette, moving off down the driveway.

He saw a break and swung sharply into the stream of traffic, changing gears, closing the gap. Ahead of him, from the height of the cab, he could see a woman in a sports car. He changed lanes without advance warning, grinning at what he saw in the mirrors each side of the truck. He ran up to a Cortina, almost nudging the bumper until the driver gave way and changed lanes. It gave him a clear run at the sports car. He rode above her. Looking down into the car. Her arms and legs looked young, but he couldn't see her face. He came closer, forcing her to accelerate in an effort to put distance between her and the truck. He let her go then closed up again. There was no room for her to manoeuvre as the traffic approached the lights. He tired of it abruptly and let her slip away, weaving fishlike to escape him as the lights changed. He laughed and pressed the play button on the cassette. The heavy rock beat suited his mood. The night was advancing, coming in swiftly. Filling out the angles of buildings with shadow. A neon sign sprayed him with colour as he passed. His bare arms and face shone red momentarily. The dome lights on the top of the cab gleamed a reflection. He sang with the music. Whatever turned up, he could handle it.

At Claremont he turned and headed back towards the central city, switching on the scanner to listen to the police radio frequency. He decided to take a run along the Coast Highway. Scarborough was always worth a try. The highway was being ripped up and the snarl of warning lights and detours adjacent to the hot confusion of bars and fast-food places was promising. He picked up the hand-piece of the two-way.

Mobile 25 to 6TX.

Where are you Terry? Harry's nasal voice cut in loudly.

Thomas street north to Scarborough.

Righto.

The traffic was light and he moved fast. Past the medical complex. His father had died there, in C block. Terry didn't think of him often, unless, like now, he was driving past. His mind threw up a picture. His father, small and grey in the quiet room. Christ, he'd hated going there.

Anyway, the old man had set him up whether he meant to or not. The insurance money had been a good deposit on the truck. Sometimes Terry thought the old man would have been pleased about the truck. It had been the right thing to do. He couldn't put it into words but he felt possessed of good fortune. Sometimes he couldn't believe it was his—well, in two years it would belong to him. Funny, since he'd had the truck he didn't really bother with anything else. Didn't have much time for women, what with working odd hours and all that. He'd get around to it. Mates were okay, but they bored him a bit after a while. The truck kept him busy. You had to keep on the go. First on the scene and sign up the owner. That's what it was all about. He checked with base again.

25 to 6TX. I'm at Scarborough Harry. Stationary at No. 1 car park.

Righto 25.

He reversed in the car park and turned off the motor. The truck sat ready, facing the exit onto the highway. Unobtrusive in the shadows. Across the road a band played in a hotel. Crashing, raucous, insistent. Some dumb bastard smashed a bottle. He settled back into the padded seat listening again to the scanner. Hoping for a code red from the ambulance or police frequency. He'd give it thirty minutes then he'd move.

A car, driven at high speed, caught his attention above the scanner and the music. He sat up. At the bottom of the hill on his left, the intersection was a mess. One lane was closed off. The chewed-up road surface was marked by the red glow of lamps on drums.

The car breasted the hill and sped past him. The driver clipped the first drum and the impact threw him into a clutter of parked equipment, the car bucked and slewed. The driver was thrown out. The girl passenger was flung forward as the car rammmed into the steel stanchion of the traffic signal. A jagged piece of metal pierced the windscreen and smashed into her skull, splintering the bone.

Terry gave the details to base. He switched on the dome lights and swung out. At the intersection he swerved, blocking the lane to traffic. The lights on his truck whirling, showing the only illumination. Already patrons from the bars and hotels were moving down to the scene. First he had to find the driver. Dust from the road-bed hung in the air. He walked back a few yards before he saw him. He bent over, not touching. He was dead alright. He wouldn't be signing him up. He heard the ambulance coming and moved back to the car. The girl looked dead too.

He talked to the driver, describing, pointing to the boy on the ground. The police arrived and at the same time he saw Lou Danovic pull up. He moved to intercept him.

I was on the spot Lou, he said.

The older man ignored him, walking past him to the wreck. Terry went back to his truck.

Got the OK to move her? he asked one of the police. He was young, about his own age.

Be about twenty minutes.

Terry looked around at the crowd. Already they were drifting back to the music. The girl looked about sixteen. She wasn't dead after all. Jesus! He kept one eye on Lou and one on the police. Ready to move in. The ambulance doors closed and as it moved off, its siren high-pitched, insisting on clearance, Terry jumped in and started the truck. The officer lifted his hand, pointing at Terry.

You, move it! he said.

Already in position, he backed up to the wreck and clamped the chains through the mangled radiator and chassis, winching it clear, feeling the weight taut and solid behind him. The truck handled it easily as he moved off slowly.

25 to 6TX. I'm on my way Harry. Where to?

Right, Terry. Go to the Osborne yard. Clem will let you in.

Any fatalities?

One. The driver.

Harry liked the details, but he couldn't be bothered. He wound the window down and let the soft night air blow through the cab. He put a Neil Young tape into the cassette, an old one, soft and sensuous. He turned the volume up so he could

hear the words, grinning to himself. It was the first time he'd beaten Lou to a location. He was a cunning old bastard, but he'd beaten him. He was getting old. You had to know what was going on. Where the crowd was, where the bands were playing. Maybe one day he'd buy Lou out.

He made a quick run through the back streets, anxious to get back on the road. He decided to try a new intersection further north where they were putting in lights. He had a feeling it would be on tonight. He wound the wheel, taking the corner wide to accommodate the wreck. Thinking. In the morning when the old lady brought him his breakfast, he'd ask her what show she'd seen. She needed a bit of a push. He'd keep on to her. He sang with the music. It was one of his favourites.

## CLIFF GILLAM

### Waiting for the Cyclone

(for Jerry P.)

Home beautiful; red cedar framed and  
full glass doors open onto ferns  
surrounding the flagged pergola, shaded  
by a Japanese pepper tree. Which shudders  
now, fondled by tendrils of air flung  
early out from Cyclone Felix, expected  
to cross the coast tonight.  
The flagstones report their chequered indifference  
to the jackboot, and the slashing crop.

VICTOR KLINE

## Student at Law

The sun got through nonetheless, building code spaces it could push through, break up and spread larger on the expressway, dust filtered streaks, isolating a car, half a bus, parts of the six lanes going home. It patched the red tiled roofs in the hollow and touched the people in the park. It had touched Betjman's window too, covering his desk in light. But it was retreating down the hill now, his ally, and soon it would squeeze back between the buildings. Then he would have to use the reading light. It lit such a limited space on his desk, and he regretted having wasted the sunlight, just watching the peak hour build. He should have studied then, but he had been greedy and now it was only he and the text, direct confrontation in the spotlight of his lamp.

It was closed on his desk, thick and green, full of past lives and squabbles. He would open it and read. But that would be its victory, to make him read. To make him learn, regurgitate line for line; that would be its silent victory, fat complacent wad. He could leave it closed but delay only gave it strength, gave it time to breed asexually more and more unlearned passages, cases, by-laws, rules. It was his enemy, growing stronger every day, gathering troops, covering the battlefield with soldier facts that could only be captured one by one, and slowly.

It got darker and the spotlight, the little sun, showed more clearly the judicious tome, confident of its power to destroy, full as it was, proud as it was to describe, record, lives litigously pecked away.

Already, after one term, he knew it was a war of attrition. Parts of him were going, but at the end of the year there would be some of him left and it would be dead forever, inscribed on its gravestone "passed". And then he would have the whole summer to regroup. But the battle was protracted and hard to justify. What was his glorious crusade? He had none now, if he ever had. Only the need to avoid defeat, humiliation by a book; to put some value on time already gone.

He would start from the very beginning, master it by learning its ways. *Carlisle v The Carbolic Smoke Ball Company*. He read it once then walked away from the desk, pacing, repeating. "Smoke ball company, influenza cure...". He sat down on the bed. The gold lettering on the book disapproved, shone contempt from his desk.

He went back, sat down, but immediately turned away and looked out of the window. The street lights were on, the lights were coming on in the buildings, the cars were free to go back to town. He watched the headlights. Perhaps he could join them, go to the city, visit his family, perhaps not.

Next case. *Peterfield v The Mutual Fire and Life Insurance Company Limited*. Read the name again, again, close your eyes; Peterson v The Mutual, Peterfield v The Mutual, The Mutual Life, the life and fire.

He walked away again, this time to stand by the window. So many lights, eight o'clock already. He stood watching though, counting the seconds between each car.

He came back, carried his adversary to the bed. He lay down with it and closed his eyes.

It seemed smaller now, the circle of light on his desk. His eyes were sore but he would have to return to it soon. He should return to it soon. He should. He should return to it now. "Now." It pushed him from the bed to say the word aloud. But when he reached the desk he found he had left the book behind and it was too far to go back, just yet. His clock stood just outside the spotlight like a prompter in the wings. Nine o'clock, it said. He reached to the cigarette packet on the other side of the desk, brought it back slowly into the light, examined it carefully side after side, filled in some letters with his pen. The ashtray could be emptied. But then he remembered he'd done that already—several times.

Later on he set out for the book, but passed it by. In the kitchen he had time to reason, the kettle took a long time to boil. He had enjoyed school. He had done well. How was this different. More voluminous—certainly. More boring—of course. But it had a right to be, it was career. A little willpower, that's all that was needed. He would start again, more tolerantly than before. He took his coffee back to the desk, collecting the book lightly on the way.

Ten o'clock. Now he had six names, six sets of facts he would not forget. Prove it. Say the names quickly, out loud.

"Carlisle v The Carbolic Smoke Ball Company, Peterson, no Peterfield v The Mutual Fire and Life Insurance Company Limited, Arbuthnot v . . . , Arbuthnot v . . ."

He sat back in his chair.

It was eleven o'clock and he was at the window again. He saw the lights in the office blocks still on, an electric illusion, no-one there. No-one outside either except a few briefly and anonymously in their cars. Only three nights left if he didn't count tonight. He could go to bed now and be relatively fresh to start again tomorrow. But the fatigue that had warred with his concentration all night had, as usual, begun to leave him. It had taken all these hours to get ready to work and he was ready now. But if he stayed up and exhausted himself for tomorrow and still got nothing done, how much worse would that be.

Then he realised that time had gone by whilst he worried about wasting time. He knew because some lights had gone out in the buildings. He wondered who had turned them off. Perhaps each building employed someone just for that. A strange job, like a modern day lamplighter, but internal and alone.

There it was again, more time wasted. The thought made his chest tighten more. At least the lamplighter wouldn't suffer from that, if he existed at all.

It will be quarter to twelve, he thought, and when he looked he saw that it was. He had left his room by thought, it had seemed like a moment, and yet he knew exactly how long his wanderings had been.

RHONDA PELLETIER

## Twilight to Dawn

In the cool early summer morning they come.

The old people—  
loose skinned and slow.

Ladies with pork-leg arms and thinning silver hair; gazing at windows and things that have been gazed at in just that manner since and before they were born. Bags poised on bent arms, jeeps and trolleys rattling. They look through pink-rimmed bi-focals, speak through sagging jowls and bulging goiters. Inch high heels hit lightly, squarely.

A couple, of fifty years, wrinkly brown and trim.  
Snow tufted man to his spouse—  
“Let’s not hurry dear.”  
Arm in arm. Touching, moving imperceptibly.

Lost in memory his liquid eyes growing wider every day, he goes to the gate.  
Heels dragging.  
Dragging as they have dragged for years that seem months, minutes.  
He reaches the gate.  
“Where’s Betty, then? Betty should be here.”  
then—  
“Don’t argue with me young man. You’ll finish; do you hear?”  
then—  
“Do you think I should paint the stoep dear?”  
Softly, in white, a whisper—  
“Not today Mr Henderson. Betty comes tomorrow. Come and play chess with Sam.”  
Although never a move is made.

It never stands still, rising higher and hotter. One by slow one they submit and disappear. Indoors to camphorwood and lavender pots scenting the air for brunch. Crochet needles crochet nightglass covers with little pearl beads to hold them down, stopping the contaminating dust reaching the two a.m. sip.

As if time knew no pause but held a red-hot whip over them mothers rush. Sandwiched between sun and reflecting paths with toddlers in tow, they study the red-spots and the limp red flags—

#### SALE TODAY

There are bargains too good to miss, too rare to be ignored and too enticing to be forgotten. Loose netlike Toorak-priced, Hong Kong manufactured lingerie. Elegant imitations of Parisian footwear. A forgotten stock of caviar. Searching for pulled threads, water marks and stains, they rub stretch and inspect. Then they buy.

Two hours are enough.

To walk the length of windows and buy no more than written on the list. With a toddler crying and a starving infant mounting bus steps is an Everest attempt. It is only the promise of cordial and cheese that gets them home. Home to close the curtains, fill the pool and strip off.

“Education is necessary my boy”

Mr Henderson is at the gate.

then—

“I wonder if we’ll ever see action?”

and—

“Betty, dear, your mother has past . . . has past . . .”

White and quiet—

“Mr Henderson, the sun is too hot for you out here.

Come and have a cordial with Jim.”

Remember—no ice—he can’t eat ice.

The shadows are crossing the roads, drawing the shouting children from school. An extra bus leaves the depot: is full three blocks later.

Trains halt, tumbling sweating bitter crowds and heralds with nothing to say. Heads down, ties loose, melting make-up they pack and spread, pay and sit—or, stand and sway, blankly. Patience thins as blood waters down. Curses softly greet the careless, the slow and the rest. Windows never open far enough. The bus never goes fast enough—to avoid soaking in our own sweat.

The sun dispenses the day. In a mad display of friendly colour, it blinks one long look into western windows—and “Good day”.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dusk is falling over triple-fronted suburbia. Cooling summer breezes call them from their homes to lounge half stripped, sipping iced cordial, beer and bead-glassed wine.

Sallow, slack skinned, motivated executives snore off bankruptcy and beckon shorthanded secretaries.

Milk-white women, flimsy dressed, ease sunglasses to the grass and flick through their warm *Women’s Day*.

A hose drips loudly on a rose of bruised blooms, scenting the air. The neighbours are splashing. A breeze presumes it is a gale, pulls at the trees restlessly. Cicadas surround the lawn in increasing crescendos. The cat stretches for his tea.

Lettuce yields a bevy of 'wigs swimming round down the drain. Tight skinned, rosy tomatoes pip and juice in folds of dressed green. Cucumber and cheese.

The salad is consumed as rain spots the windows. The television flickers with lightning. Creaking beams. Flying drapes. A storm lifts the garden lounge onto the rose. A bloom breaks and scatters. White balls dance into the verandah light and melt.

At the gate a slipper comes off.  
Stumbling, unbalanced Mr Henderson hits the fence.  
Whispering, sleepy white sighs a prayer.

The epilogue is cut short.  
Bouncing, one wall to the other, bankruptcy swims, an inebriated fact. Wonders how long he can keep the house. Stripped naked on a bottom sheet his sallow offerings are refused. It is lost. Snores begging for more time, money and dividends.

A liver heaves. Tries. And heaves again. Hops float in the air driving out the despair. Impossible to inebriate. There is no reason—just a habit trained reaction. Decantered on the side' is release. It fills her palate, loosens Betty's mind to float—seeking refuge from bruising.

"Why me?"  
"His underwear stinks. The nurses don't care."  
A tear rolls down one cheek.  
"Poor dad. Poor dad."  
Another tickles miserably the tip of her nose.  
"I'll die before I come to that."

Through the wine the next day begins. A little brandy and moselle. Reckless and free.

The dawn is lost to heaving and pouring forth the bitter, with the sweet, the never quite digested.

\* \* \* \* \*

Through the dimming light a rhythmical clop reaches my ears. Beginning to wake and just in time pulling back the blind to see him enter the 'frame. He's eighteen hands. He's got four white socks with lots of hair over his hooves. And the brightest blaze ever seen—better than the champ at the show. The cart isn't painted but who cares? And the milko isn't real nice, but he doesn't see me anyway. He's doing it.

"Christ bloody mighty Bob. Every night for eight years. What do you think you're seeing?"  
Finely muscled Bob bends his neck to see us. A parted blind. A pale face. He shakes his head slowly and returns to face the street.  
The man in the old runners and singlet jars the reins.  
"Come on, Bob. One more block then it's home to a cup of tea."

Nestling into a pillow a boy plans, while under a dusty globe a typesetter sets an obituary and Bob carries all our dreams.



## A Non-political Comment

Politic, political commentary says,  
"Incursion".  
The conscience numbed,  
The word, bland-faced,  
Absolves.  
After all  
"Excursion"  
("Ex" meaning "out of")  
Is the other countenance;  
Ergo "incursion" is  
A pleasure trip indoors—  
The curse removed.  
Removed:  
The swollen-bellied babies,  
Footless soldier,  
Buried mother,  
Incessant wailing,  
Rubble of refugees  
Over whom the tanks rumble.  
"An excursion—excuse me—  
Incursion into Thai territory . . ."  
The TV turns me off.

# DUDLEY DE SOUZA

## The Convert

There was no lightning, only,  
Over the years, the seepage  
Of common sense: the shrewdness of survival.  
No fall from horseback, only,  
A subtle sapping of integrity.  
Now he confidentially catechizes us  
(One hand on the statistics)  
Points to monuments of brick and glass,  
Burgeoning showcases, a crowded port,  
Multinational industries,  
The rising GNP . . .  
The gospel's irrefutable.  
And he remembers a comrade  
Who withered for the cause alone.  
Whatever for?  
The prudent were converted.  
They sport substantial waistlines now  
And drive the Mercedes with caution.

Common sense says he's right but somehow . . .  
Somehow . . . we wish he wasn't.  
And that comrade . . . Whatever did he die for?

NOEL MACAINSH

## It was Difficult

It was difficult, so very, very difficult, he said. And he laughed lightly, provocatively, with a double meaning. Which he liked, the way he laughed, so he did it again. You don't know the awful trouble I've had. Absolutely awful! His shoulder pressed the receiver a little tighter. Its coldness spread across his ear.

Her voice came cool and cautious: I am so happy you could finally make it. Where are you now?

I'm still at the airport. There's such a crowd, and the baggage is delayed. I'm lucky to have got this 'phone at all; there's a queue waiting for it. He looked over the edge of the bed, over the quilt that hung there like a frozen avalanche. It was she who had bought it. Do you think we will be happy here? he asked. Why not, she said, there's a lot to do.

I feel strange, he said. Of course you know your way around. But I've never come to you before. It's always been elsewhere. Now I feel so close to you. It affects me. Can't you tell? His hand was smoothing a leg protruding from the sheet.

Well, she said, you stay there, near the baggage. Make sure you get yours. It'll take me twenty minutes. Her executive voice. Louder now. Colder. Bitch.

His skin against the sheets. Hungry for touch. Don't hurry, he said, please. You know I don't mind waiting. I love looking at things. There are so many people here.

She released the button on her desk-set, pressed another and ordered a car. Taking a compact from a drawer, she studied herself, made adjustments. In the ante-room, straightening her coat as she went, she told her secretary that she'd been called out by a client, that it looked like a long discussion; she would not be back; she would ring later for messages.

He lay back. In the still room. He looked up at the plaster rose on the ceiling, from whose centre a confection of cold glass slivers was suspended by a cord feeding electric current into its glaring heart. It was the only event in his room. He himself was not. He lay. And let time press over him.

Emerging from the lift in the foyer, she pressed forward, then paused, fidgeted. On seeing the driver waiting, she went out to him, cancelled the car, and went back into the lift. She re-emerged at her floor, tugging the fingers of her gloves, and disappeared into the women's room. Then, sweeping in through the firm's glass doors, she announced to her secretary that the client had been called away.

She sat looking over her desk, the soft kid of the gloves still squeezed in her hands. She envisaged the airport, the baggage-rondels, and the people, paired,

grouped or solitary, standing waiting, their accumulation and dispersal as flights came and went. She imagined him as naively looking at other couples, perhaps at an older woman with a young man, wondering what kept them together. Reaching out, she pressed for an outside line and dialled his number. The ringing-tone sounded over and over in her ear. She imagined the room empty, the always-made bed with the quilt she had bought, the incongruous chandelier that she had told him to replace, the stillness of a room where nothing was happening, where everything between them had already happened. And she could see too how a shy and beautiful young man even now was still waiting for her at the airport, in a crowded hall where people and their baggage came and went.

He lay there, started up as the telephone rang, but lay back again, remaining still while the bell called and called. He saw her there, in the baggage-hall, impatient at the unscheduled delay, her plans affected. He drew the coverings up to his chin, then over his head. They seemed like her weight upon him, muffling the world. He waited, and wept. But stopped.

She took up some correspondence from the tray, advised her secretary of her renewed availability, ordered coffee, made notes. He stood thronged about in another world, facing expectantly toward an entrance, through which she did not come. She cut open an envelope, smoothed out its contents.

At the airport, she was having him paged over the loudspeakers, was enquiring of him at the taxi-desk, at the bus-terminal. Active as ever. He sat up, got dressed, and went.

## CLIFF GILLAM

### In Different Rooms

(for Jenny)

A car exhaust barks at the night,  
backfiring into distance until swallowed  
in the electric fan's swirl, its flutter and hum.  
Ghostly music floats on the air moving  
in the empty room on the edge of the city.  
Its inhabitant is on his hands and knees  
in another part of the house, trying to stab  
a large cockroach, with a pair of scissors.

ELIZABETH JOLLEY

## Hep Duck and Hildegarde the Meat

FOR SALE

1 old man's body with rare and  
interesting condition only person  
with established interest need  
apply price reasonable  
will deliver no dealers.

He told the Duck she was drunk. He told Hildegarde,

'She's inebriated that Duck. She's on fifteen eggs. She's obstinate and she's pleased with herself.' He jerked his chin in the direction of the Duck's half drum house. 'You're a meat bird,' he said to Hildegarde, 'so don't get to thinking you'll lay eggs. Shut up chicken!' he added. 'Mind your manners.' He listened, with his head on one side, to the Duck fidgetting and knocking her eggs against her tin walls.

'Listen!' he said, 'just hark at her!'

*Hep duck rattle tap tap hep heppy hep  
Hep duck shake duck rattle duck and roll  
Hep hep hep duck  
Ducky duck duck  
Rattle duck tap tap tap*

The old man, prancing on the path, enjoyed the noise. Years ago his son had always had a duck rattling and banging about in the half drum house.

'She's having a session,' he told Hildegarde, 'like she's on the bongo drums.' He laughed. 'You've no need to be jealous. Meat birds is good too.'

He boiled for himself a shop egg, date stamped with a time limit. There was a singing and a rustling in the next room as if someone was still there with a little brush and duster. An insect hummed alone and disappeared only to return reminding him, all the time, of a soft voice talking up and down. Listening, he ate his egg with pleasure.

The old man was not himself. Twice lately he had stumbled in the passage though he was acquainted with the little step for over fifty years. He was forgetful too. He forgot that he kept the key in the door and he spent hours looking for

it. For some reason he remembered other things, things he did not need, like the flash of green when the sun dropped into the sea at sunset.

He could not see the sea from his garden. His old house was surrounded by a ring of trees. Sometimes the cape lilacs, with their cloud coloured flowers, a false promise of rain, annoyed him. From his verandah he could see the top of a Norfolk Island pine tree. He often shook his head or his fist at it. It was like a clock for him. The changing light and shade and colour of the symmetrical tree told him what time of day it was. This tree bridged the middle distance between the earth and the sky. Long after the sun had gone, the top of the pine glowed. The tree simply stood endowed with this golden blessing. Every evening the old man watched the transfiguration of the tree and he knew that the last rays of the sun would be caressing cornerstones and crossroads making them noble.

In the evenings Hep Duck was quiet. Hildegarde, curtained in jasmine, slept early. The old man sat in the shed to smoke.

'Help yourself,' the doctor had said to him, 'help yourself and I'll help you. Give up smoking.' He tapped the clean shrivelled chest with knowledgeable fingers. The old man did not argue. On the way home he stopped in the short cut for an old man's reason.

'Half-head. Muttonhead!' he cackled, 'no use to make life longer without life.' He stepped back on to the long road walking beneath arching Sugar Gums all the way to his place.

He sat in the shed.

'Stop your snoring chicken,' he shouted up at the white tucked-in thing blurred in the rafters. 'Don't answer back! Yo' was snoring! Meat bird!' The bluish grey smoke crept through the yellow and purple flowers and mingled with the dusk.

*Hep duck hep duck heppy hep duck  
Why do you make all that noise?  
What you doin' to them eggs?  
You noisy hep! hep!  
Noisy in the morning.  
Why?*

The old man hurried on down to the shed. He had several things on his mind. Mr Richards, the land agent, kept calling to see him. Just now the gate clicked. Mr Richards would soon be peering in through the ragged leaves and flowers.

'I'm not changing my mind,' the old man was emphatic in the smoke filled gloom. 'I've told you before, I like living here. That brick path you're standing on, my son made that when he was only nine. Mr Richards looked at the bits of path which showed through the weeds. He held out his large kind hand, feeling his way into the shed.

'Remember my offer? It's worth your while. It still holds,' his voice was soft. 'You remember don't you, there's enough land, we could build eight town houses, remember? With balconies and carports. Remember, I've told you about the plan to pull down the old sub-standard homes . . .'

'There's nothing sub-standard here,' the old man interrupted, 'there's not a drop of water through the roof, nailed every piece of tin myself. So I know.' Successfully smothering Mr Richards in a fit of coughing, he recovered enough to shout up to the rafters.

'Come down off there you lazy good for nothing meat! Hildegarde! I'm warning you!' he wiped his head with a rag, 'You nearly got our visitor here, missed him only by an inch. I've told you not to do that!' He turned to Mr Richards. 'She's a sly one that one.' He turned to shout up to the roof, 'You

watch your language!' He smiled at Mr Richards. 'Just you listen to that Duck out there. She hasn't stopped banging about her tin walls. She's Hep that Duck. Hep Duck, having her session,' he cackled, 'Very fond of good music, both of 'em 'specially the Duck'.

*Hep duck. Hear that Hildegarde?  
Mind your manners meat bird!  
Come down off them rafters—  
—Meat bird. Hildegarde the meat.  
Hep duck hep Hildegarde the meat.*

Mr Richards left as quickly as he could, closing the little side gate behind him. 'I'll call back tomorrow', he called.

Late one night the key turned in the lock and there was a voice in the passage. 'You home Dad? Hullo there! You there Dad?'

The old man, asleep in his chair by the dying fire, could hardly believe it. His son had been away for nearly twenty years and suddenly there he was scraping the kitchen lino with his boots.

'Dad I want you to meet Lilian.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Lilian said.

'We were married last month,' Jack said.

'Married,' said the old man. 'Married! that's nice. Give us a kiss my dear,' he said. 'And are these your legs?' he gave her thigh a little pinch. 'Married,' he said, 'that's nice, very nice.'

The old man insisted that Jack and Lilian live with him.

'There's plenty of rooms,' he said, 'and I'll keep her company while you go to work.'

He approved of the marriage. Lilian was a sweet girl. He enjoyed having her in the house.

'You mind! You'll get the cold,' he warned her more than once as she strutted through the kitchen with hardly any clothes on. A young wife was not a bad thing for his son even if she did spend half the day getting herself dressed in nothing, and the other half in trying to think of new ways to arrange her hair.

*Hep duck hep duck  
Hildegarde the meat—  
Jealous girls eh?  
No need to be jealous.  
Lily doesn't interfere  
'er lets me do the washing up my own way.  
You still hep hep in there duck?  
Hep hep duck ducky duck duck duck—*

He thought he would make a dinner with roasted potatoes and plenty of gravy. He went out to buy a half leg of lamb, shank end. When he came back Mr Richards was in the front room with Jack and Lilian. He could hear their excited voices.

'Come in Dad! Come in! We've got good news for you!' He pretended not to hear and went on down the passage and unwrapped the meat in the kitchen.

'Dad!' Jack called. He followed his father. Obstinate the old man banged about in the cupboard for the meat tin.

'Dad!'

The old man burrowed into the sack for potatoes.

'I know your news,' he told his son. 'I know what that half-headed old biscuit is on about. I'm telling you no-one can live in a banknote. In any case, this is my place.'

'But Dad, this land's worth a fortune. We could have a new house, all modern, Lilian would like . . .'

The old man refused to listen. The house became a place of awkwardness and silence.

—*Hep duck hep*—the old man, on the early morning path, was half hearted. Hep Duck rattled and banged about as usual in her untidy half drum. Nearby, Hildegarde choked, trying to crow. The old man put a box over her but she still stretched her neck and crowed, muffled in cardboard.

'What next mixed up meat bird!' the old man muttered. 'Rooster!' he insulted her. 'Meat birds is often roosters,' he said, 'who around here wants a young rooster!' he shook his fist at the box.

'I suppose I could have a bit of a shed and a fowl yard on one of them new housing estates?' he asked one night squinting sideways first at Jack and then at Lilian.

'Oh yes of course Dad. You can have anything you want,' Lilian jumped up and kissed the pointed top of his head. With judicious excitement she showed him pictures in her magazines. He turned the treasured thick pages carefully, gazing at feature walls, patios and bedrooms in white and gold with bathrooms to match.

'You're a good girl,' he said, 'we'll sell this old place if you like.'

In the new house the old furniture looked like rubbish. They had to throw it away and buy new things. Soon there was nothing left from the old house and there was nothing for the old man to do. He was lost in the new house, even in the kitchen.

After a few days he started going out, quietly, early. They did not know where he went.

'Can you come?' Mr Richards telephoned Jack, who was surprised to hear from him. The old man was being a nuisance Mr Richards explained, getting in the way of the demolition. The men, he said, did not know how to handle him. 'He's sitting in the middle of that old brick path,' Mr Richards said, 'they're afraid he'll get hurt.'

Jack went over immediately. The roof was already off and the broken walls looked pathetic in the bruised garden. Someone had stolen the verandah posts. The workmen waited uneasily.

The old man pranced on the path.

'Yo'll not take down this shed nor touch this path,' he shouted, 'and yo'll let them trees alone, yo'll take them ropes offer that pine or else!' He shook his fist. He was covered in dust. There were tears on his cheeks and blood streamed from the grazes on the backs of his hands.

*Hep duck? Hep hep duck? You in there?  
Hildegarde? You there? Hildegarde the meat?  
Where yo' gone hep? Hep duck? Yo' asleep?  
Hildegarde? You lazy meat-bird—  
Yo' still up there?  
Come down off them rafters.*

FOR SALE

1 old man's body with rare and interesting condition only person with established interest need apply price reasonable will deliver no dealers.

The lack of privacy in his intention was a nuisance but it is not possible to have an advertisement without everyone knowing about it.

Streets, trees, lawns, houses—places which are well cared for are serene and pleasant but, in their emptiness, there is little meaning and no real happiness and rest.

The little hospital was surrounded by flowers in the neat suburb. The matron declared she would ignore the advertisement though it was clear to the old man that, swayed by the wish for dollars, she left slippery bars of soap all over the shower room floor. People never ignored anything where money was concerned, he knew that. Even Jack, taking him for car rides, drove like a mad man, taking corners on two wheels narrowly missing shop fronts, light poles and nuns on crosswalks. Lily baked cakes with rat poison in them and often he found himself fighting for air in cupboards or wardrobes among heavy worsteds. Twice he was nearly suffocated with moth balls.

The doctor tapped with experienced fingers on the old man's clean chest and took away his cigarettes.

'So you're up for sale,' he laughed. 'It's a good idea but there's not really any money in it. You can't leave your body anywhere while you're still in it. You'll be here a long time. You're very much alive.'

'Old half-head!' the old man muttered. He dismissed him by staring out of the window. You can't live on nothing he thought to himself that was why the advertisement was so useful. He would ask to be paid in advance and he'd be free to leave and get a place and a few fowls . . .

'What exactly is your interesting condition?' the visitor, a stranger, pulled a chair to the old man's bed and sat down.

The old man had fallen asleep over his cold meat and beetroot. He roused himself.

'Oh? Yo' must have come about my advert?'

'I have,' the visitor said. 'I'll come straight to the point. I have a place down by the harbour. Everything goes on there, it's only a matter of turning off at the right place.'

'I said no dealers,' the old man interrupted.

'I'm not a dealer.'

'Yo' a collector of some sort?' the old man asked.

'I suppose that's what you'd call me,' the visitor replied, 'though there's not much that's really rare. I've some very old ones antiques they are really, and there's some damaged and broken,' he paused, 'quite badly damaged,' he sighed, 'then there are the ordinary things, you know, injections, crutches, remedial surgery . . .'

'Ruptures,' the old man sat up, 'gall stones, valuable gems from gall, I don't think I've got any.' He pressed his side. 'Nothing rattles,' he said.

'Yes that sort of thing,' the visitor said, 'and then there's those that follow the path which no fowl knows and which the vulture's eye has not seen.'

'I don't know what yo' mean.'

'It's just a poetical way of describing a not very rare condition. I mean, you haven't named it yourself?' the visitor brushed a few specks from his dark suit.

'No, to tell yo' the truth, I was hoping somethin' would turn up.'

The visitor smiled. 'Lie down now and have a rest,' he said, 'there's nothing quite like a long sleep.'

The wood was not at all hard on his bones. The old man was surprisingly comfortable, it was like being in a wooden cradle. This gentle swaying, the result of four men walking in step, was restful. There was music too.

*Hep duck rattle tap tap hep heppy duck  
Hep duck shake duck rattle duck and roll  
Hep hep hep duck  
Hear that Hildegarde  
Mind your manners meat bird  
Meat bird Hildegarde the meat  
Hep duck hep Hildegarde the meat  
Come down off them rafters.*

The road to the harbour was long and straight. The sun was near the horizon. A few people, keeping their eyes on the bright ball of the sun, were able to see the miraculous flash of green explode into the sky and the sea at the moment of sunset.

NOTICE

To disinfect a bed after a  
patient has left take a bowl  
of hot water with ten per cent  
lysol and a cloth and wash down Matron

NOEL MACAINSH

## Aestheticism and Reality in the Poetry of Kenneth Slessor

It may seem a little surprising to consider Kenneth Slessor, who was born in the year 1901, in a context of aestheticism and *fin-de-siècle* writing. Such a procedure may seem more appropriate to earlier Australian authors such as Christopher Brennan, Hugh McCrae or Victor Daley. Nevertheless, the influence of the Aesthetic Movement, of certain nineteenth-century French authors, directly or via English authors and artists, on the work of Kenneth Slessor and other Australian writers, has been widely noted by critics here, if not examined in detail. The Aesthetic Movement represented a devotion to beauty as a good in itself in a materialistic world which otherwise seemed chaotic and depressing; it thus rejected theories which held that the value of literature is somehow related to morality or to some sort of usefulness, and instead advocated, in defiance of much tradition and of the bourgeoisie, the independence of art from any moral or didactic end.

A. C. W. Mitchell, in reviewing the critical literature on Kenneth Slessor, comments on the pervasive influence of the literature of the nineties, on its influence in the work of Slessor, and adds that

the Aesthetic Movement provides the basis for a number of assumptions about art and society made by the 'Vision' school, and directs its fundamental poetic attitudes. The two groups share essentially the same aesthetic principles, although these are rarely thought out with much clarity by the contributors to the second movement, and remain for the most part unquestioned assumptions.<sup>1</sup>

The present study is intended as a commentary on these "aesthetic principles" in Slessor's work, from the viewpoint that the aestheticism to be found in earlier writers, say Brennan and McCrae, is a persistent and important factor in modern Australian poetry right to this day, and that an interesting variant of it is to be found in the work of Kenneth Slessor, associated with a recurring element in Slessor's work, of distaste, aversion, even of nausea in the face of contemporary reality.

At first, the experience of the narrator in Slessor's poetry may appear to be contrary to that of the aesthete, since it is accompanied often by aversion rather than pleasure; the purity of this latter feeling is contradicted in Slessor's poetry by what has been termed variously as "irony", "anguish", "protest", "torture", "horror", "nihilism", or, as Vincent Buckley writes, there is "a vague yet disturbing air of frenzy about almost all Slessor's poems".<sup>2</sup> But, as we shall see, this concerns less the content of the experience than its evaluation.

The texts selected here for analysis are generally not those of Slessor's meditations on a past life nor instances of his interest in remote and exotic themes, but are selected rather from that smaller part of Slessor's work that appears to address itself more directly to the world about him. The poem "North Country", for instance, depicts one of the poet's experiences of aversion, in which reality appears to him as ill-formed, disordered, meaningless:

North Country, filled with gesturing wood,  
With trees that fence, like archer's volleys,  
The flanks of hidden valleys  
Where nothing's left to hide

But verticals and perpendiculars,  
Like rain gone wooden, fixed in falling,  
Or fingers blindly feeling  
For what nobody cares;

Or trunks of pewter, bangled by greedy death,  
Stuck with black staghorns, quietly sucking,  
And trees whose boughs go seeking,  
And trees like broken teeth

With smoky antlers broken in the sky;  
Or trunks that lie grotesquely rigid,  
Like bodies blank and wretched  
After a fool's battue,

As if they've secret ways of dying here  
And secret places for their anguish  
When boughs at last relinquish  
Their clench of blowing air—

But this gaunt country, filled with mills and saws,  
With butter-works and railway-stations  
And public institutions,  
And scornful rumps of cows,

North Country, filled with gesturing wood—  
Timber's the end it gives to branches,  
Cut off in cubic inches,  
Dripping red with blood.<sup>3</sup>

The experience of aversion here is nothing other than a particular mode of perceiving reality. In this mode, things are released from the reference they have in the world of expediency. The first part of "North Country" describes the poet's attempt to exorcise his experience by aesthetically transposing the origin and aim of the object that withdraws from the ordering comprehension of his consciousness. The latter part of the poem confirms the failure of this attempt. Firstly, the "gesturing wood" is likened to "archers' volleys" or "rain gone wooden" or "fingers blindly feeling" or "trunks of pewter, bangled by greedy death" or "broken teeth" or "smoky antlers broken" or "bodies blank and wretched" and so on; that is an interpretive list is advanced, a series of possible keys to the phenomenon. Furthermore, this list of similes, in accordance with the principles described by modern linguistic analysis,<sup>4</sup> engenders by association in the reader the paradigm of the medieval deer-hunt, that is all these terms may be construed as being selected from the general class of signs standing under this title. The particular guides to the reader, suggesting that he should so form this paradigm, are the "archers", "staghorns", "antlers" and the "battue", this last word being

derived from the French *battre* (to beat), meaning a kind of sport in which game is driven by a body of beaters from under cover into a limited area where the animals may be easily shot.<sup>5</sup> One could also point to other features of the poem leading to, and emphasizing this same impression; for instance, the part-rhyme of "smoky antlers broken in the sky" with "After a fool's *battue*", or that of "trees that fence, like archers' volleys,/The flanks of hidden valleys . . .!" but pursuit of such indications here would lead too far afield. Suffice it to say that two completely disparate realms of ideas, that of an Australian timber-milling and dairying district, and that of a feudal deer-hunt, are brought together, such that they mutually deflect each other from their normal significance, that is from their statistically most frequent meaning. The effect of simile, which, like metaphor, is one of the most important means of critical and creative use of language, rests on the tension between the normal significance of its individual terms and the deflection of significance each time, as well as on the latent system of relationships of the successive similes in the text, which, by repetition and variation, contribute to the structure of the text.

The similes employed by the poet in "North Country", under the paradigm of the medieval deer-hunt, reflects the poet's comprehension of the world in its mutually determining appearance of subjective and objective elements, such that a part of the world is not presented altogether objectively but with an induced subjective interpretation. One might also remark here that a preference for simile as against metaphor appears to be a mark more of realism, classicism, of the Enlightenment, rather than of romanticism, of the baroque or of expressionism. Such a preference fits with the poet's recurrent selection of elements from the paradigm, testing them in turn as it were for "reality". This procedure takes up the greater part of "North Country", five stanzas out of seven; only with the sixth stanza, beginning with "But this gaunt country, filled with mills and saws . . .", do we find that the attempted aesthetic transposition is abandoned and that the dominance of the principle of expediency is acknowledged. Even so, the poet thereupon spontaneously transposes the object of this meditation, not by means of simile, as previously, but by the more intense device of metaphor: the branches "cut off in cubic inches" are seen as "Dripping red with blood". Thus the initial aversion for the "North Country", whose perceived implacable timber-getting expediency cannot be aesthetically transposed and re-interpreted under the paradigm of the medieval deer-hunt is acknowledged for what the poet takes to be its dominant reality, and is all the more violently rejected then under the image of blood. Of the rich complexity of the actual timber-industry, its social purpose and human ramifications, there is no acknowledgement. Instead, the poem is a finely wrought structure articulating a central tension between a perceived unpalatable, physical reality and an invoked world of past European feudal life. In the moment of aesthetic perception of this reality, the poet's capacity to grasp real interconnections has receded before the spontaneous, imaginative transposition of this reality. This is by no means an atypical poem; it is illustrative of a similar approach to be found elsewhere in Slessor.

For instance, in the earlier poem, "Elegy in a Botanic Gardens", the narrator states that he came to the gardens in autumn, "Where spring had used me better", and, analogous to the acknowledgement of reality in "North Country", he comes to accept the expediency, the unromantic intent of the situation, with again a note of aversion at the conclusion of the poem. The springtime, in which the poet was better used, corresponded to a time when he did not assent to names, to botanical classification:

. . . Never before  
 Had I assented to the hateful name  
*Meryta Macrophylla*, on a tin tag.  
 That was no time for botany. But now the schools,  
 The horticulturists, come forth  
 Triumphantly with Latin. So be it now,  
*Meryta Macrophylla*, and the old house,  
 Ringed with black stone, no Georgian Headlong Hall  
 With glass-eye windows winking candles forth,  
 Stuffed with French horns, globes, air-pumps, telescopes  
 And Cupid in a wig, playing the flute,  
 But truly, and without escape,  
**THE NATIONAL HERBARIUM,**  
 Repeated dryly in Roman capitals,  
**THE NATIONAL HERBARIUM.**<sup>6</sup>

The poem discloses to us that it is not solely a matter of botanical names, but, by inference, of names in general. The "old house", which the poet had transposed previously as a "Georgian Headlong Hall/With glass-eye windows winking candles forth", and so on, suggestive of the world of Thomas Love Peacock's novel *Headlong Hall*, is assented to, "truly, and without escape", as the National Herbarium. The epithets "dryly" and "Roman", together with the repetition of the name in bold letters, imply literality, the death of romance and imagination under dryness and civic order. In the spring-season, the season "Where we had kissed, . . ./Where we had kissed so awkwardly" in the grove now dead, the poet was not obliged to grasp names and things as belonging to each other. Nor did he have the capacity then to properly orient himself in the world of society; for it is names that make it possible to order things in a world humanly created and administered. What the poet records as a "springtime" release of things from their names is nothing other than what earlier writers such as Proust and Valéry had striven for as a condition of artistic vision. As Paul Valéry has written, "Regarder, c'est-à-dire oublier les noms des choses que l'ont voit",<sup>7</sup> that is seeing means to forget the names of the things one is looking at. And Proust has said in his *A la recherche du temps perdu* that the names with which we designate things always correspond to a concept of these things that has nothing to do with our real impressions of them. The names of things allow of their placing in a purposeful, rational order. The designated objects are no longer perceived in their appearance *per se* but always in relation to possible use. This means that normal, daily perception is distorted by recollection, by knowledge of the object and by projects for the future, by plans of possible use. In contrast to this, the kind of artistic perception indicated by Valéry and Proust, and evidenced too by Slessor, restricts itself to the time and space of the present.

The same applies likewise for the experience of aversion expressed in Slessor's poetry; it also is restricted to the immediacy of what is spatially and temporally present; it is without concept; things no longer allow of their being subsumed under names. The opposing image is that of the expediently ordered world. In consequence, a transposition of reality takes place: just as the narrator in Christopher Brennan's first poem of "Towards the Source" contemplates a scene under pine trees from the aspect of "some forgotten afternoon, cast out from life, where Time might scarcely be",<sup>8</sup> so the narrator in Slessor's poem sees the trees of the North Country from the viewpoint of an imagined environment, in this case a cruel feudal hunt. As with Brennan, the transformation of reality in Slessor is independent of the will of the experiencing subject. Certainly, the aesthete Slessor thinks of techniques that shall make possible such moments, such "magic", but

in accordance with their nature these techniques are also for him largely incalculable.<sup>9</sup>

In another essential factor also, Slessor's protagonist agrees with the aesthetes of the *fin-de-siècle*: in the consciousness of being different from the others. In "Winter Dawn", for instance, originally the opening poem of *Earth Visitors*, published in 1926, the poet looks out through a "smoking pane" at the "dead suburbs", and invokes his fellow citizens:

O buried dolls, O men sleeping invisible there,  
I stare above your mounds of stone, lean down,  
Marooned and lonely in this bitter air,  
And in one moment deny your frozen town,  
Renounce your bodies—earth falls in clouds away,  
Stones lose their meaning, substance is lost in clay  
Roofs fade, and that small smoking forgotten heap,  
The city, dissolves to a shell of bricks and paper,  
Empty, without purpose, a thing not comprehended  
A broken tomb, where ghosts unknown sleep.<sup>10</sup>

Like Brennan's narrator, Slessor's, too, is not at ease with his fellow man; firstly because they live in an ordered world of work; they are "buried dolls", or, as Slessor expresses it elsewhere, in "City Nightfall",

. . . those who chafe here, limed on the iron twigs,  
No greater seem than sparrows, all their cries  
Their clockwork and their merchandise,  
Frolic of painted dolls. I pass unheeding.<sup>11</sup>

and, secondly, because they feel at home in this world, whereas the poet longs, in "Realities",

No more amongst earth's phantoms to be cast,  
No more in the shadowy race of the world exist,  
But, born into reality, remember Life  
As men see ghosts at midnight . . .<sup>12</sup>

The aestheticising perception of reality separates Slessor's narrator, as with Brennan, not from the working-class as such but essentially from the middle-class, bourgeois citizen. As with Norman Lindsay's *épaté le bourgeois*, expressed in his novels and pictures, this anti-bourgeois attitude could hardly be taken as political engagement, as *littérature engagée*; it remains individual criticism; its arch-enemy lives in the "monasteries of mensuration",<sup>13</sup> is the technocrat, the scientist, is the rationalist who can remark of a mermaid: "Those pisciform mammals—pure Spectres, I fear—."<sup>14</sup>

The development of Kenneth Slessor's poetry shows a progression from a relatively untroubled aestheticism, through a period of increasingly direct intrusion of the real world into the aesthetic mode of perception, to an ultimate *dénouement* and capitulation before this reality. It is an extended, essentially unreflective attempt to hold the world at bay by means of an exorcism, a poetical "magic" practiced in accord with an aestheticism that was already waning elsewhere in the world but still to run its course in Australia.

The fate of this process in Slessor is of considerable interest. What for the earlier aesthete is a moment of grace, signifying liberation from the everyday world, and to be pleasurably enjoyed, as with Albrecht Dürer in "Nuremberg",

O happy nine, spouting your dew all way  
In green-scaled rows of metal, whilst the town  
Moves peacefully below in quiet joy . . .  
O happy gargoyles to be gazing down  
On Albrecht Dürer and his plates of iron!<sup>15</sup>

becomes, for the later Slessor, an extremely negative experience, a compulsion from which he cannot extract himself despite the utmost exertion. Judith Wright has spoken of Slessor as of a man "buried alive".<sup>16</sup> This throws some light on the differing attitude of the poet towards the expedient world of everyday. The earlier aesthete shields himself as much as possible from it; he would like to savour the moment of grace so long as is possible. The later Slessor, in contrast, seeks precisely in the everyday appellation of objects for help against a spontaneous aversion. Insofar as he names the details, the poet attempts to master his unpleasant experience. This is by no means a resort to realism or naturalism, since both of these terms imply some element of social interpretation in the selection and presentation of particulars, rather it is, as Vincent Buckley writes, "something which is more properly called 'physicalism' than 'realism'—a preoccupation with grasping, in one desperate swoop, all the variety, the hard physicality of sense-experience . . .".<sup>17</sup> It should be mentioned that this is also an important aspect of the general impressionist culture dominating Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century, in which naturalist observation of detail is intensified to the point where sensory experience gains importance at the expense of any interpretative framework.<sup>18</sup> In Slessor's "William Street", for instance, the poem consists entirely of a noting of the sensory particulars of the street, its sights, sounds, smells, and the human types, "dips and molls", that range its pavements, or, as Slessor himself states, the poem "is a sort of flashlight photograph of the swarming city channel that runs up the hill to Kings Cross . . .";<sup>19</sup> despite a somewhat Villonesque touch, there is no direct aesthetic transposition as such, no simile or metaphor expressive of the will to project this reality onto an interpretative schema, be it from the Middle Ages, Tartary, or the philosophy of Henri Bergson,<sup>20</sup> such as may be found elsewhere in Slessor, but there occurs instead the plain assertion, "You find this ugly, I find it lovely", repeated each time as the last line of the poem's four stanzas:

The red globes of light, the liquor-green,  
 The pulsing arrows and the running fire  
 Spilt on the stones, go deeper than a stream;  
 You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

Ghosts' trousers, like the dangle of hung men,  
 In pawnshop-windows, bumping knee by knee,  
 But none inside to suffer or condemn;  
 You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

Smells rich and rasping, smoke and fat and fish  
 And puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,  
 Or grease that blesses onions with a hiss;  
 You find it ugly, I find it lovely.

The dips and molls, with flip and shiny gaze  
 (Death at their elbows, hunger at their heels)  
 Ranging the pavements of their pasturage;  
 You find it ugly, I find it lovely.<sup>21</sup>

The attempt here, considered in isolation, may appear to be successful; but considered in the context of Slessor's poetry as a whole, it can be seen as but one variant of a striving never to be fully successful. The distance from everyday life, which the earlier aesthete experiences as liberation, since he can turn back into it each time, is experienced by the later poet as a compulsory alienation, to which he is subject. The pane that is recurrently present between the central figure

and the world of the others, in Slessor's poems, proves to be impenetrable. In "Five Bells", it is present between the dead and the living:

Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face  
In agonies of speech on speechless panes?  
Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!<sup>22</sup>

and elsewhere, from as early as "Nuremberg" onwards, the glass, whether as "bottle-panes", a "smoking pane", "glass-eye windows" or in whatever form, only mediately allows perception of the world, not entry and participation.

Initially, on the subjective side of the glass, the gods and goddesses of art and culture, the Muses, appear to justify this isolation, the creation of an inner space, a "high, sun-steeped room", in which Art may be served; however, in the course of Slessor's poetry this room comes to be increasingly vacated by the gods and goddesses, and left empty. Early, in "Pan at Lane Cove", the poet could invoke Chiron:

... Chiron, pipe your centaurs out . . .  
This garden by the dark Lane Cove  
Shall spark before thy music dies  
With silver sandals, all thy gods  
Be conjured from Ionian skies.  
Those poplars in a fluting-trice  
They'll charm into an olive-grove  
And dance a while in Paradise  
Like men of fire above Lane Cove.<sup>23</sup>

But, later, in "The Old Play", the poet appeals to the gods:

... Be true to us,  
Play us not false;  
Be cruel, O Gods,  
Not fabulous.  
You were our statues  
Cut from space,  
Gorgon's eyes  
And dragon's face;  
Fail us not,  
You that we made,  
When the stars go out  
And the suns fade.  
You were our hope  
Death to bless—  
Leave us not crying  
In emptiness.<sup>24</sup>

The aestheticism, which for the earlier poet, was both a protest against and a flight from social reality, is later experienced as having turned against the poet; the earlier defence against "those tunnels of nothingness"<sup>25</sup> loses its credibility and effectiveness.

The question arises of how one is to explain historically the continuity of what has been designated here as an aestheticising perception. In the case of Christopher Brennan, reference has already been made elsewhere to a sense of exile, of isolation of the poet in Sydney at the time.<sup>26</sup> It would be possible to point out other cases of self-perceived isolation, say of Hugh McCrae, William Baylebridge or Victor Daley. An additional factor contributing in both Brennan and Slessor to the sense of isolation from contemporary reality may well have been that both writers also remained in the "universe of words" during their professional activities; Brennan, firstly as library cataloguer, then as University lecturer; Slessor, as journalist; that is both remained in the field of interpretation, of talk

of reality, but not properly in reality as known to their fellow citizens. The "hell" of journalism as referred to with Slessor, and the "cupboard-musty weeks"<sup>27</sup> of Brennan's library days, may well have derived their negative qualities, not only from their limitation of time and energy available for poetry but from their sequestering of these two employees from wider, more immediate, palpable experience. Furthermore, the very status of poet, as Brennan has indicated, had declined and, in public eyes, was ambiguous and marginal.<sup>28</sup>

The freedom that the poet found in art appears to stand in contradiction to his experience of aversion from reality, until seen in relation to the further experience of the alienation necessarily entailed by aesthetic perception of the world. For, in this particular approach, the factor of happiness is split off from the act of perception and reduced to the act of representation. Albrecht Dürer is happy, in "Nuremberg", working on his intaglios; the poet in "Winter Dawn" finds that contemplation of the "least crystal weed . . . stirs more my heart/ . . . than mortal towers/Dried to a common blindness . . .";<sup>29</sup> in "Realities", happiness lies within the "radiance" of classical art and not amongst the "shadowy race of the world";<sup>30</sup> in "Music", the sphere of art and merriment lies "On some old beach, where Time is put to rout,/and the world a buried star, not talked about", and so on. The embracement of alienation is to lift whoever achieves it out of the general fate in a wonderful way. So, in "To The Poetry of Hugh McCrae", the poet is addressed as one who comes "from the baleful Kimberleys of thought,/ From the mad continent of dreams", bearing the means of life to those who are dying in the midst of life—

. . . with blossoms wrenched from sweet and deadly branches,  
And we, pale Crusoes in the moment's tomb,  
Watch, turn aside, and touch again those riches,

Nor ask what beaches of the mind you trod,  
What skies endured, and unimagined rivers,  
Or whiteness trenched by what mysterious tide,  
And aching silence of the Never-Nevers . . .<sup>31</sup>

Here, an expectance of salvation is bound up with artistic activity. The aim of this activity is the justification of one's own life. What remains constant in both earlier and later Slessor is the sense of alienation, of being a pale Crusoe in "the moment's tomb". But this no longer comes to be seen in so relatively unproblematical a way as in earlier years. Between the aestheticism of Christopher Brennan and that of Slessor lies one great war, if not two, and also the Depression, in which the irrational nature of economic life had overwhelmingly revealed itself. The avantgarde movements had reacted to this by radicalising aestheticism in the attempt to overcome the separation of art and life. Where the aesthete, remaining passive, had contented himself with an ideal transformation of reality, the avantgardist had sought to change the public's attitude to reality by provocation.<sup>32</sup> If life, for the aesthete, is above all justified by art, then the avantgardist, whether along the lines of Norman Lindsay's "chillingly Olympian doctrine",<sup>33</sup> or otherwise, seeks to revolutionise life through art. After this attempt had largely foundered, after it had been shown that the status that art has in our society, and which at the same time conditions its relative freedom and lack of consequence, was not to be eliminated by the voluntary acts of isolated individuals, then the middle-class artist was thrown back to a position related to aestheticism. Slessor might be said to have outgrown this avantgarde movement, this "curious little Renaissance" as A. D. Hope calls it;<sup>34</sup> but A. D. Hope also puts the point suggestively when he remarks that this movement, this "Australian Vie de Boheme", was "congenial enough for him [Slessor] to stay in it and transform it into some-

thing genuine, lasting and alive",<sup>35</sup> and that this same movement represented the "first movement of provincialism towards autonomy".<sup>36</sup> It is indeed this last concept, of "autonomy", or of what Slessor himself calls "pure poetry or pure literature"<sup>37</sup> that is the crux of the matter, that represents both the glory and misery of the modern poet in Australia.<sup>38</sup> With Brennan, this same demand for autonomy had been tempered with an evolutionist doctrine of the "national" value of art and the restoration of a Golden Age, but with Slessor, the times had changed such that any lingering social and metaphysical optimism on behalf of an autonomous poetry was attenuated to a pale, Lindsayian ghost. Thus the likening of the timber-milling and dairying district of "North Country" to a feudal deer-hunt, without regard to the wider context of either of these two terms, is rationalised in that view of art as a concern "with the eternal simplicities and mysteries that have outlasted and will outlast every political "struggle" and every social transformation-scene".<sup>39</sup> But this same poem, as elsewhere in Slessor's work, exhibits a relinquishment of the attempt to transpose reality.

This relinquishment is indeed nothing further than the despairing recognition of the distinction between libidinous and actual reality, which enables one to deliver oneself up to the external, social value-system because survival is more important than the fulfilment of unreal desires.

In aesthetic literature, the author, also acting representatively for the reader can exhibit a certain omnipotence in the sovereign shaping of his text; the lost unity of the world can find its reflection in the unity of the work and death can be overcome apparently in a timeless, immortal work that survives a little bit longer than its author. This peculiar, quasi-religious "Artistenmetaphysik" is so pervasive an article of faith in modern Australian poetry that it is virtually taken for granted. The earlier modern Australian poetry, the middle-class aesthetic experience of this period, is elitist. Its social expression is the quasi-formal institution of the avantgarde, a loosely fitting Bohemianism, whether Lindsayian or otherwise, which represents an unexpected association of extreme individuals mediated partially by groups, legitimised by its extremity. It would be false to limit this concept simply to attempts at aesthetic renewal within this century alone. As the present writer has sought to show elsewhere,<sup>40</sup> the avantgarde organisation of experience reaches back at least to the aesthetic opposition around the year 1850 and has its prototype in the radical aesthetic intellectuality of the Jena romantics who so influenced both Christopher Brennan and the French Symbolist poets. The society of literary aesthetes, as of the avantgarde, is an outsider-society. Its happiness is fictive, always a happiness for the others, for the educated spectator. The psychic misery, with which the avantgarde pays for its poetic licence to aesthetic pleasure, keeps firm the commonalty of social relinquishment of happiness and surmounts it only in denial, in the taking of life over into art. This brief explanation naturally only applies for the writers themselves and for the small group of those whose real situation is largely similar to that of these writers. For the majority of readers, however, the isolation depicted by Slessor in his last major poem, "Five Bells", is a cypher of their own, or, as A. K. Thomson states: "It is also a moving description of the human condition which agonizes to reach some meaning, some purpose in life."<sup>41</sup> The poem allows them, not in the production of art, but in their conscious grasp of it, to lift themselves above what they apprehend as the meaninglessness of their existence. What is reproduced in the poem is not merely a subjective experience, that of freedom and election in shaping and contemplating, nor that which is actually the case, but both factors are mixed together in the poem in a remarkable way: it is precisely the aestheticising perception, exemplifying a total freedom of the

percipient in the face of reality, that is presented as a compulsory experience. The element of truth here lies predominantly in that the illusoriness of the freedom of the aesthete becomes comprehensible. Elsewhere in Slessor's work, but not in "Five Bells", however, it is precisely this element of truth that is taken back by the suggestion that the production of art is a way out of a world of distasteful expediency.

Like the *Fin-de-siècle* aesthete, the poet Slessor seeks the way out, not in social engagement, but in the realm of art. The fulfilment of meaning in art, which does not exist, corresponds to the poet's conviction of the total meaninglessness of the existing world. The flight into art is however not the only possible answer to the experience of aversion which Slessor has presented. In this flight and experience rather there is already negatively implied the necessity of engagement. The experience of the poet in "Five Bells" designates a limit to human self-alienation from which the demand must necessarily arise for some inter-subjective shaping of reality, however limited.

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1. A. C. W. Mitchell: Kenneth Slessor and the Grotesque. *Australian Literary Studies*, 1, No. 4, December 1964. Reprinted in A. K. Thomson (ed.): *Critical Essays on Kenneth Slessor*. Brisbane, 1968, p. 132.
  2. Vincent Buckley: The Poetry of Kenneth Slessor. *Meanjin*, 1, 1952. Reprinted in Thomson, p. 73.
  3. Kenneth Slessor: *Poems*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1957, p. 93.
  4. Some further comment on, and an example of application of these principles can be found in the present author's article "Charles Harpur's Midsummer Noon—A Structuralist Approach. *Australian Literary Studies*, 2, 1978.
  5. cf. Slessor's own account in his *Bread and Wine*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970, p. 199.
  6. *Poems*, p. 55.
  7. Paul Valery: *Oeuvres*, II, p. 1240.
  8. A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn (eds.): *The Verse of Christopher Brennan*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1960, p. 66.
  9. cf. *Bread and Wine*, p. 168 f.
  10. *Poems*, p. 14.
  11. p. 30.
  12. p. 33.
  13. p. 50.
  14. p. 52.
  15. p. 3.
  16. Judith Wright: *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*. Oxford Press, 1966, p. 176.
  17. Buckley, in Thomson, pp. 72-3.
  18. On this point, cf. the present author's comments on Impressionism in the case of Henry Handel Richardson, in "The Shock of Recognition—Henry Handel Richardson and J. P. Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne*". *Southerly*, 1, 1976, pp. 99 f.
  19. Slessor, *Bread and Wine*, pp. 199-200, also Thomson, p. 156.
  20. cf. Noel Macainsh: Pragmatism and Australian Poets. *Quadrant*, July 1977.
  21. Slessor, *Poems*, p. 99.
  22. p. 103.
  23. p. 5.
  24. p. 87.
  25. p. 26.
  26. Noel Macainsh: Christopher Brennan's Wanderer. *Quadrant*, February 1978, p. 54.
  27. *Verse*, p. 72.
  28. A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn: *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965, p. 224.
  29. Slessor, *Poems*, pp. 14-15.
  30. p. 33.
  31. p. 101.

32. *cf.* Slessor's remarks in his "Norman Lindsay", first published *Southerly*, 2, 1955. Reprinted in Thomson, pp. 111-127.
33. p. 119.
34. A. D. Hope: Slessor Twenty Years After, in Thomson. p. 128.
35. p. 129.
36. p. 129.
37. Kenneth Slessor: Spectacles for the Fifties—A Rejoinder to "Vision of the Twenties", in Thomson, p. 87.
38. *cf.* the present author's "The Writer and the State". *Quadrant*, August 1976.
39. Slessor, in Thomson, p. 89.
40. "The Tradition of the New". *Quadrant*, 1, 1975, pp. 34-41.
41. A. K. Thomson: Kenneth Slessor: An Essay in Interpretation, in Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

## ROBYN ROWLAND

### One Time

Where is she now,  
 now that I need her,  
 she with her store of tines  
 to point at the etched path,  
 to say, 'this way is sharp'.

Nineteen twenty-two.  
 Her time has come.  
 All day, in the old rosewood bed,  
 ripples of fear  
 have caught her unawares  
 and now that surge of life  
 tears her with its steely edge—  
 the child demands the light.

No choice now,  
 no way to retrace steps,  
 to retreat from the marriage bed,  
 no way to unconceive.  
 The rush of sharp command  
 drives its way out and out,  
 concentric are its jets of pain—  
 feet first the child is born.

When she returned  
 from that dark lonely wandering  
 of mind;  
 when Bronte moors ceased ringing  
 with her fevered step,  
 her body stole back its blood  
 and told her, 'only once'.

Landscape and Figures

1.  
No scarecrow rigid  
in a wide field  
of tangled grasses  
but a girl staring  
at storm clouds framing  
the wood's dark edge.

That orange flash  
on green is a book  
she has opened. Kneeling,  
she begins to write—  
some thought she has snatched  
from the storm's clutch.

2.  
What winds are stirring  
over these fields?  
How often before  
have they shaken  
the lines of hedgerows  
the clumps of trees?

A heavy wooden door  
swings on its hinges,  
but the long, white house  
pulls down its straw thatch,  
sleeps under it,  
unperturbed.

3.  
Three cows, black and white,  
and one a dun yellow  
drowse in the sun,  
flick flies, chew cud—  
a benign company  
in the low meadow;

but the bull  
on the top of the hill  
swings its tail,  
bellows,  
rampages against  
the hedge.

4.  
Artists with large gestures  
pace the field,  
take brush measure  
of the house's proportions,  
curse the changing light—

light that must be trapped  
in the brush's net  
before the sky clouds over.  
Once the glinting fish takes cover  
under a stone it is never caught.

5.  
Heat ominously. Suddenly  
the white bearded grass  
shivers, lies still.

Against the sky's pewter  
the thatched roof  
shows sable, silver.

But the squall only  
cavorts on the hill's rim,  
vanishes.

6.  
This silence is a sea  
that frays into  
small broken rhythms  
of birds.

A call from the wood  
where the buzzard hovers  
and waves flatten  
on field's edge,

till wind rises  
seeps through  
reeds and grasses,  
swirls round the house.

Now it has left us,  
sounding  
a distancing music  
on the next door hill.

Last night, moon at the full,  
I thought: quick  
catch that music.  
This is the place where

winds lie down, leaves stand still.  
But the house fell silent.  
No one could plumb the depth  
of that ocean.

## Peter Porter in Profile

British reviewers of Peter Porter's ninth book of poems, *English Subtitles* (1981) have bestowed high praise: 'a fit successor to Auden', says one (John Lucas in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 April 1981); another compares him to Stevens, Larkin and Hughes (Claude Rawson in the *London Review of Books*, July-August 1981). Yet his work has never been much read or discussed in Australia, the country where he was born and lived until he was 22. When it is discussed, his poetry is branded too 'difficult', 'European', or 'classical'—all negative terms in the current iconography of Australian poetic criticism. Porter's apparently confident metropolitan manner and his outspoken opposition to Australian nationalism have made him additionally unpopular with some Australian critics, blinding them to his poetic skill, experience and insight, which are especially relevant for Australian writing at the present time.

To begin with the question of nationality then, in what sense is Peter Porter an Australian? The facts are these. He was born in Brisbane in 1929, the only son of William Porter and Marion Main, and attended the Church of England Grammar School, Brisbane, the Church of England Boys' Preparatory School, Toowoomba, and the Toowoomba Grammar School—where he carried off the literary prizes. Unable to attend university, he worked as a reporter on the Brisbane *Courier Mail*, then in his father's trade in a wholesale clothing warehouse before sailing for England in January 1951. After ten months in Australia in 1954, he returned to London and did not see Australia again for 20 years, when he returned on invitation to the Adelaide Arts Festival in 1974. During that 20 year period Porter married an English nurse, Jannice Henry (in 1961) and became the father of two daughters. He worked as a clerk, bookseller, literary journalist and freelance writer (for the *New Statesman*, *London Magazine*, the BBC and elsewhere) and had eight books of poems published. Since 1974 he has had three more books of poems published (see list at the conclusion of the following interview) and a *Collected Poems* is expected in 1982. He has returned to Australia as writer-in-residence at the University of Sydney (1975) and the University of New England (1977). Australian topics have again become prominent in his writing. At present he is a freelance writer in London (*Observer* poetry reviewer, regular BBC broadcaster, etc.), where he lives and supports his two daughters, one of whom is at university and one at high school.

The following transcript is an edited version of several discussions which took place in London between November 1981 and January 1982.

\* \* \*

*Who, and what, were the main formative influences in your early life?*

- P. My father's family came out from Dover and settled first in Geelong in the 1850s. Then they made the leap straight away north to Queensland, where they settled in Brisbane. So by the time I was born in 1929, my father's family had already been living in Brisbane for 70 years. At one time they had made a bit of money, but it was all lost when my great-grandfather failed to put his money into a brewery (Castlemaine-Perkins) but instead put it into the Queensland National Bank, which collapsed after the 1893 flood. We were left with the remnants of an undistinguished but at one time quite opulent colonial family. I always remember my grandfather's house—a big old-fashioned house on stumps, surrounded entirely by verandahs in the Queensland style and with an inner core, the opposite of an atrium, hung with thick Genoa velvet, shaded lamps and dark even in the brightest days of summer. My grandfather had ridden the customs boundary with a black tracker and a horse in the days when there were customs being levied between the colonies of Queensland and New South Wales. He looked a remarkable man, like George Bernard Shaw, but didn't have a successful career. My father had to leave school quite early to earn his living.

I think I got from my father the sense of being ill-at-ease in my homeland. He was and is a decent, timid man with no great expectations of life. (He's still alive, at 96, in a Brisbane Nursing Home.) He was a gentile in the rag trade—he spent the whole of his working life selling the products of Manchester—sheets, pillowcases, towels and the like—to Australians. There's another thing about him. He was the only one of all his acquaintances who didn't volunteer for the first World War; and therefore, given the logic of the times, he was almost the only one who survived. My mother's brothers and my father's only brother were all killed in the war.

*You began with your father. Was your mother a strong influence?*

- P. My mother's family was more interesting. They came out mostly from Glasgow. My mother's father was a successful businessman who ran a big wholesale warehouse, first in Adelaide and subsequently in Sydney. So my mother was brought up mainly in Sydney, at Randwick, and after the war at Woolwich in a house on the harbour. We used to visit the house.

I have neither brothers nor sisters. In spite of the Depression, my mother would have had a larger family, but there were five or six miscarriages: I was the only one who survived.

My mother was a self-conscious person, a woman of high ebullience but very anti-cultural. She used to refer to chamber music as people pissing into pots.

Neither of my parents read much, though I remember some Zane Grey books of my father's.

*Your mother died early in your life.*

- P. When I was nine.

*And your father brought you up alone?*

- P. Not quite. I was similarly widowed in 1974—when my wife died and my younger daughter was nine. In his situation my father felt overwhelmed. He had more reason, perhaps, than I. I was in a much better position to cope, here in England in 1974 than he was in Brisbane in 1938. So I don't hold it against him. He did his best. In fact, he made great sacrifices. But what he didn't do was to keep the family home and keep me living in it, which was what he should have done. Instead, he listened to rich friends and I was packed off to boarding schools, where I spent the next nine years. At the first, "Churchy"—the Church of England Grammar School, Brisbane—the closest

thing to Auschwitz I've come across—I got a series of psychosomatic illnesses (mastoids, pneumonia, every childish epidemic there was). Then, against the advice of his smart friends, he sent me to Toowoomba Prep and Grammar Schools—far more humane places—where I got dramatically better.

*Is that where you became a reader and a writer?*

- P. Yes, I owe any ability I have as a writer to the education system. Australia in those days had a fairly rigorous approach to English literature on the principle that they didn't try to lead you by some gradus ad Parnassus system of easier leading to harder works: they chucked you in at the deep end. I'm very grateful because I think, even if one is baffled by good writing one needs to know what good writing is before one tries to appreciate literature, let alone to compose it. I think the thing that staggered me most as a child was to hear ordinary people around me and to suddenly realise that this was the same language used by William Shakespeare. The great thing about literature is that it is based on the ordinary language which we live and speak. What wonderful things can be made out of this ordinary stuff. For some reason when I was at school, apart from Shakespeare, the emphasis was almost entirely on the Victorians: so I was extremely well grounded in Tennyson, Arnold and Browning when still at school, but hardly at all in what now seems to me the greatest of all centuries for English poetry, the seventeenth century.

*You never went to university. Were you entirely self-taught after leaving school? Much of your writing suggests considerable erudition.*

- P. I had to be autodidactic. But you shouldn't take too seriously my erudition, which is extremely partial; it's something to hide behind to a certain extent, and an easy thing to simulate.

The cultural badges which I'm always being accused of wearing (Porter was reacting sensitively here to John Tranter's review of *English Subtitles* in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 1981) come to my mind because, due to some kind of early psychic shock, art has always been as real to me as ordinary life. Now Jean Cocteau—whom I regard as a completely spurious aesthete—did say something which is the epitome of the case against people like me. He said you can make art out of anything except other art. Most people seem to think about writing literature that one uses experience and that experience ought to be as fresh as it can be, and it ought to be, in most cases, new; and it ought to be about taking a car down to the beach, or about looking at a flock of galahs, or even about Sydney cocktail parties, but it should not be about other works of art, nor even about ancient Italian cities. This seems to me a pre-empting of human imagination. It suggests to me that if reading books is not one of the major experiences of your life, why do people bother writing them? For many people, what they read, or look at, or listen to, is primary experience.

*In 'The Story of My Conversation (Living in a Calm Country, 1975) you wrote:*

*"I am fond of the overdone. Of Lucia Signorelli/and Castagno. I'll never learn simplicity/I don't feel things strongly. I was never young."*

*Is that you? How ironic are these lines?*

- P. They're partly ironic, they're partly parroting and representing what people have said about me. And I agree with some of their criticisms. I do find it difficult to feel things as strongly as some people apparently do—though it depends whether you believe their thrashing about necessarily means they're feeling strongly. I don't know.

When I was young I was very frightened and I was so iced over I found it very difficult to feel things strongly. My mother and father had only this



Peter Porter  
and cat Flora

42 Cleveland Square, London W2  
(second entrance from left)  
Porter lives on the third floor



one child. They lived a stockaded life, since their friends came from a richer background and they withdrew in themselves; it was the Depression and my father just managed to keep his job. Brisbane was not exactly the Athens of the north, but in some ways I lived an Edenic existence. Then my mother died and the shock was that I was thrown into the world where I realised there was nobody to protect me, nobody to look after me; and during holidays I was always sent to board with relatives and friends and made to go through the usual humiliations. Many people have had a far worse time: compared with people in central Europe I had not too bad a time. But for this over-protected little boy my mother's death and its consequences were a severe shock. I remember apprehensions of mortality when I was about six, and being terrified, as though a black cloud had passed over the sky; and even earlier, extraordinary masochistic fantasies. Yet my parents were never unkind to me.

This is where I've been unfair to Australia and why a lot of Australians are deeply suspicious of me. I tend to associate what was probably a personal and individual experience or fate with the place; I tend to blame the place where it happened. And therefore I'm inclined to think of Australia as a country where everything goes wrong and people are inept, where somehow it's the opposite of Paradise, the left-handed land in a world of right-handed places. This is exactly what it is not today: today it's a prosperous country with booming capitalism, savage nationalism and a total feeling of success and gung-ho; but it wasn't like that when I was young.

*So you came to London in 1951. Why? The frustrated writer seeking greener pastures?*

- P. After leaving the *Courier Mail* in 1948 my father got me a job in a textile warehouse. When I wasn't working I settled down to a fairly sequestered life, trying to write. I filled bucketloads of pages, wrote piles of poetry, plays . . . I didn't join "Barjai", the Brisbane literary group, because they were homosexual and although I think they would have been perfectly friendly to one who wasn't homosexual, I didn't have the courage; in those days I wasn't any kind of sexual but my basic idea was to be heterosexual. The "Barjai" group were all a good deal more flamboyant than me, and slightly older. But I had some friends in Brisbane, including Roger Cavell (now Professor of Music at the University of New South Wales) who lived down the road and joined the *Courier Mail* just after me. He wrote to me from London and persuaded me to go. If he hadn't written, I would probably have stayed in Brisbane.

I came to London with Brian Carne, who was hopeful of making it as a painter, and lived in flats in South Kensington, Notting Hill Gate, then Belsize Park Gardens. It was a life of considerable poverty—with occasional jobs as clerk, bookseller and advertising copywriter. There was a broken love affair, disastrous relationships, the statutory nervous breakdown. It seemed I'd never met any Australians till I came to London. In 1953 I shared a flat with another one, David Lumsdaine (now Lecturer in Music at Kings College, London) and we "dropped out"—extraordinary, no money, never rose before 4 in the afternoon, but lots of nice girls to look after us.

*How did you become part of the London literary scene? Was it a closed shop?*

- P. I was lucky to be introduced in 1955 to a group of writers just down from Oxford and Cambridge, including Philip Hobsbawm, George MacBeth, Edward Lucie-Smith, Martin Bell, Peter Redgrove and Ted Hughes (later to be called "the Group"). I was very grateful to these people, who were all university trained, and accepted me as one of them overnight, like that: no

question of you're a colonial, or uneducated, or who are you, or anything like that.

*You expected to be treated like that?*

P. No, I didn't. It never crossed my mind that people would treat me like that. In fact, I've never had any kind of discrimination against me.

*Were there advantages in being an Australian?*

P. I suppose in the sense that it was easier for them to explain to themselves why they hadn't met me at Oxford and Cambridge. But they were of that generation which anyway was very free of class. England has become a class country overnight again. It always was, then it went through a brief period when it was much less so, and now it's become so again.

*You would date that "classless" period from the 1950s?*

P. Yes, from the early 1950s until about 1970. This was the period of the angry young men who, for all their vituperations against the upper classes, were not very class-oriented themselves. At least among the intellectuals, this was a relatively classless period.

*Were you influenced by the "Movement" poets of the 1950s and after (Amis, Enright, Larkin, Wain and the others) with their emphasis on irony, intelligence, and the depiction of 'ordinary' experience in poetry?*

P. The Movement's real influence seems to have been less to set a style than to create an ethos.

Many people have said it reflects the cutting down to size of England's standing in the world: let's have less bullshit, less of the Dylan Thomas afflatus, more truth to reality; and nearly all of the Movement people wrote novels as well, whereas our lot, who came later, immediately after the Movement, were not novel writers. We put such impulses as we had towards novels in our verse. So Movement poetry, with the exception of Larkin, tends to be commenting ironically on life: but this is not true of Larkin himself, whose poetry contains a very strong urge towards the grand style. Although Larkin's personality may partake fully of this limiting concept, which he shares with Amis and the others, in practice he writes a much grander poetry. And I think there is to be found in all the poets of the generation to which I belong a move towards grandeur. I don't mean for one second that we're as good as Larkin, but this impulse is there. So that when people say I'm an ironical writer, well yes, in the sense that irony is part of feeling, but it doesn't mean that the desire isn't there to write the grand line.

Irony is a part of the refrigerating process which stops voluptuous sentiments going bad: it keeps the goods better. Irony is a form of feeling; and all the neo-romantics who spend their time thundering that what is needed is more affirmation and less irony are completely missing the point. There is some irony which is merely self-protective and dismissive; whereas for most people, especially if they write poetry, irony is a recognition that states of mind are usually at variance with each other. I don't think an ironical writer is any less passionate; and I refuse to accept this idea that what we need is more vatic priest-like writing, more unironically inflected ceremonial writing; because what that produces is often sheer verbiage.

*You don't believe in the poet as an extraordinary individual, do you. As priest, or magician.*

P. I'm an old-fashioned Australian. I believe that the writer should be a real democrat, that he should behave in the same way as other men in most public places and you certainly shouldn't know he's a writer from his demeanour. But I don't think that's what people think in Australia today. The new kind of Australian writer feels that he can walk into the room and become dominating

and immediately be recognised, some kind of haunted, special figure. And I don't feel that.

*Nevertheless, it seems odd that for someone who writes and speaks so eloquently you seem deeply uncertain at times about yourself as a poet.*

- P. I do not think I'm one of the best poets writing. But I don't think I'm one of the worst either. I'm not going to get any better by adopting a different attitude to myself than the one I have. The critics can go on till the cows come home saying that I'm absolutely characteristic of my age in having these doubts and not having the authority and assurance and swagger which the great men have had; and how characteristic of a fallen nation; how characteristic of a nation that's lost its place in the world; how characteristic of a generation that doesn't have the confidence of other generations. That may be so, but it isn't going to get better by suddenly foisting on yourself the kind of personality which I know a lot of poets have tried to adopt; it has ruined their work and made them worse than they would have been otherwise. It's like wishing to look like someone else; you can't do it.

*How important to you is audience response?*

- P. It's difficult to say, because there is practically no audience for poets; but on the opposite side of that, nowhere is fashion more rife than in small Byzantine courts. You find that it isn't so much a public audience you're worried about, it's the shifting of fashion and taste in the tiny kingdom and dominion of one's fellow creatures.

*Are those shifts a worry to you?*

- P. Not an obsessive worry. But by nature I'm rather pessimistic and I feel, all the time, that I'm about to suffer a total eclipse—any minute my work's going to be rejected completely and they can say, 'Ah well, he *was* around'.

It's just really the permanent anxiety which people have which springs from their internal sense of whether they're any good. To keep writing at all you've got to please yourself—that part of yourself which is the pleasure-principle. Then you've got to somehow please some superior archons outside yourself who are on the one hand perhaps, *sub speciae aeternitatus*, like the gods, or on the other hand may be merely day-to-day and subject to fashion, conspiracy and just pure change. Self-doubt can be absolutely crippling, but without it one is likely to go into a complete dream-world of solipsism. Frequently, the sadness for a writer is to recognise that he is able to do very much less than the concept which lay behind his work—what Auden called 'the fair notion fatally injured'.

But sometimes you feel the opposite: that you've actually achieved something which, had you stuck to your original plan, you wouldn't have achieved. *You are a journalist and a poet: one foot in Grub Street, the other on Parnassus. Do you feel split between the two?*

- P. No, I don't. But I live in a good deal more jeopardy and squalor than most of my critics. I have no certainties in my life. Writing about literary things, the Parnassian side of things, is no more strange to me than writing about everyday things: the two are mixed in my own life so completely.

*Back in 1974, you wrote an article in The New Review on "Grub Street versus Academe". Does that conflict of interests between London metropolitan critics and the universities still exist in England?*

- P. It still exists, to some extent. Nowadays high art is not popular. The only way you can make it work is by imposing it, which is what the educational establishments do. The people who get paid to profess it are in a safe place. If you're professing it in the public arena, in the marketplace, you've got no such guarantee, you've got to get people to like it. People can, of course, be

coerced in the market place just as they can in the academy, but it's a far more difficult, and quixotic, process; at any time, their attention is going to be turned off. But the academy has its hands full, because it's got the full quiver of the past to deal with. This is why, with the exception of some places in the United States, there are seldom any really important parts of a university devoted to teaching the literature of one's own time.

So, for people who are basically interested in producing their own literature, if they don't necessarily see themselves as part of a great tradition or something, there's no place for them in a university.

Universities can be inhibiting to writers. Day-by-day writers outside in the world, even though they may be writing highbrow and Parnassian works, are not so bowed down under the weight of what they know.

*In England you have this powerful third realm of metropolitan criticism, which is embryonic as yet in Australia. How do university academics respond to it?*

- P. Some—a few—join in (Christopher Ricks, Frank Kermode, John Carey, and a few others). But you will notice that it's part of the fervour of the very puritanical academics in England to hate this third world more than anything else. The vituperation which is attended upon metropolitan criticism by the Leavisites still exists, though they have been relatively quiet recently. They have a deep suspicion of anything which is propagated by the weekly or monthly journals or the BBC.

*How bohemian is literary life in London?*

- P. When I first came to England it was quite bohemian: drunken poets up and down Soho, and they were very powerful in those days. They gave birth to a whole movement before 'the' Movement—the Apocalypse group, who, in the person of Dylan Thomas, brought their art to a very considerable apogee. That's still around. But neo-romanticism is perhaps stronger in Sydney at present; it has always flickered on and off in London. Curiously enough, the life style of the poets may not necessarily match their way of writing: the way in which Auden lived, although highly devoted to work, was more or less a bohemian way of living, which would have fitted in with the neo-romantics. But Auden was not a neo-romantic.

*Much of what you say suggests a neo-classical outlook on poetry and life, although I know such labels are distorting. You edited and introduced a selection of Pope's poetry in 1971 (A Choice of Pope's Verse, Faber & Faber, London, 1971). Are you still as keen on his work as you were then?*

- P. I think so. But the point I'd want to make about Pope is that the label doesn't fit. Like every writer, he wanted to produce grandeur without fustian. And he does that at the end of the *Dunciad*:

Thy hand, great Anarch, lets the curtain fall,  
And Universal Darkness buries all.

This is not only a statement of a conservative confronted with a world of frauds and phonies: it's a powerful cadence and a remarkable piece of organ playing. In other words, the way in which things are performed is what gives them their grandeur, not the sentiments they support. I also said in my introduction that the *Dunciad* is like the supreme bad LSD trip: Pope can be enormously baroque, very fantastical, full of the lights out of hell; he's not urbane all the time; he is always smooth.

Classic, or even neo-classic, are terms that have to be conveyed afterwards: a writer doesn't give himself labels, except for the purposes of polemics. But it is possible to distinguish between two temperaments: that which recognises that art is intensely powerful but has decidedly sharp limits; and the other,

which is less interested in the lineaments than in a sort of feeling which lies behind the lineaments.

*There is a distinction too, isn't there, between the writer who looks backwards for sustenance and the one who looks forward?*

- P. I have been criticised for making cracks against the avant garde; but they're no more than cracks. They're not a system mounted against experiment: I'm not such a neo-phobe as all that! But the next difficulty is that we're up against one of those paradoxes which are built into art, that people who claim they're doing one thing are frequently doing something else. A perfect example of this is the Renaissance which, though it now seems a period of unrivalled energy, everything made new, would have seemed to its own supporters to be a deliberate turning of its back on the present and a return to the past. The whole idea of rebirth: they really did think they were making themselves into ancient Romans. So advice to follow the old often turns out to be something new.

*Another characteristic of your work, less noticeable perhaps lately, is its satiric edge.*

- P. I have never considered myself to be a very satirical poet. You have to have a strong central viewpoint to be an efficient satirist; and I don't think I have a **very strong** central viewpoint. I've always thought I could make a perfect statement of what I think of the world out of the speech which Hamlet makes to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he says

What a piece of work is man. How infinite in capacity,  
how like an angel . . . .

It's clearly ironic in the situation but at the same time a statement which sums up Renaissance humanism. Man's attainments: there's nothing that man cannot do; man is like God. At the same time, he's pointing out to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that this creature like God is being used and can turn out to be a mere mole and secret agent like these two. The irony always seem to me to be built into life that the attainments of human beings are in fact magnificent—if you think of Scarlatti and Piero and also people's individual lives. And yet all around you is compromise, shiftiness, egotism, vileness. It's the contrast between what man can be and what man customarily is; and then the recognition that the person who can see this is himself like that.

*Do you think that in matters of tone, technique or point of view your poetry has changed greatly since the first book, *Once Bitten, Twice Bitten* (1961)?*

- P. That first book was directly influenced by the group of writers I mentioned before. We used to meet every Friday and talk about each other's work. They made me focus on what was ill thought-out. But also, to some extent, they killed some element which was true to me. So the first book is not really characteristic. It's deeply pessimistic, with an awful lot of self despair in it. Yet it's written in not quite nearly tailored structures, which do show the influence of Movement writing—stanzas full of rhymes.

*To leap forward fourteen years to your poem, 'The Story of My Conversion' (1975) you wrote there,*

*I have begun to live in a new land,  
not the old land of fear  
but the new one of disappointment.*

- P. I think I've matured. That doesn't mean I've got any wiser, but I've changed tack. I see the world now as a place where victory has to be snatched from what's around you. We live, as Wallace Stevens said, "in an old chaos of the

sun”, and to some extent classicism and romanticism are just aspects of trying to make sense of the confusion in which we live; whereas when I was young, I had a much stronger sense of order in the chaos, but an order which was quite defeating me; so I could be despairing; despair suggests a form of something you can’t get to.

*Your outlook seems to be humanist, yet you write and talk of God and the gods. And hell.*

- P. It’s possible to believe in the iconography of religion without actually having the complete faith. I don’t see how anybody brought up in two thousand years of Christian inheritance has any possible chance of not using words with a heavy Christian halation around them. So that’s what I do.

When I say I don’t believe in God, what I mean is that I can’t find it in me to accept the principle of a creator who manifested himself in one particular time as a sort of trinity. This I don’t find possible to believe. But what is much more interesting to me is that some people did find it possible to believe this, and they had far greater minds than mine. Because they believed it, it has a kind of reality which is more important than truth, since truth is unknowable whereas the real can be known. So the fact that I’m not a believer in the Christian God—or for that matter any other kind of god—is almost an irrelevance, because it has little bearing on my writing. It makes me more unwilling perhaps to accept the kinds of discipline which, if I did believe, I would have to put up with. But a lot depends on your temperament: Auden found it rather attractive to get up in the morning and mumble the creed in Church. It didn’t stop him doing things which the Church forbade him to do. For a poet, it rather depends on your attitude to the liturgy. I’m not very keen on hearing the liturgy pronounced in Church . . .

*If you’d used liturgy as a basis, a personal poem such as ‘An Exequy’\* would have been much less resonant, I think.*

- P. I think that’s true. But the poem doesn’t have very much specifically Christian about it. It ends on one Christian note, on the German words from the Psalm about ‘Fear not, for I am with thee’. But it’s really blasphemous because it’s God who says this originally, but in my poem it’s the dead wife saying it. The dead wife is saying, I’ll help you across to the other side: it’s more a Charon ferrying you across than it is trusting in God.

My trouble is I’ve never believed God was going to be kind and look after me. I’ve often asked him for things. The old joke that God hears and answers all prayers but sometimes the answer is no—I’d have thought that usually the answer is no. The last thing to die in a typical Protestant’s religion is what should be the first thing to die: this naive idea that you can do a deal with God. I remember being at school and promising him something if he would give me something. I actually kept my part of the bargain but He didn’t keep his. But of course the answer is, you don’t bargain.

*Even collectively?*

- P. Least of all collectively. But my poems have been more and more concerned —to my worry because I think it’s a dangerous obsession—with the gods.

At a recent conference in Cyprus (in October-November 1981) I gave a short talk on man and the gods—appropriate perhaps because I was talking to a lot of Greeks! I tried to run through various ways and stages of thinking about the gods, beginning with Lucretius’s utterly indifferent gods, to Auden’s poem ‘Shield of Achilles’ about the irrelevance of the gods because of the evil of man, and concluding with Hölderlin’s ‘Die Linien des Lebens’, where

\* see pp. 58-61.

the gods are transcendent.

Between the Auden and Hölderlin, I slipped in one of my own called 'The Missionary Position'\*—I like writing clean poems with dirty titles. My poem shows the gods as decent, unimaginative, hard-worked civil servants.

*Why didn't you include the eastern gods?*

- P. I don't like them. They're very hard for me to focus on. I prefer those gods who are anthropomorphized—basically the classical gods of the ancient world and the Christian God. There are important aspects of the idea of being used by some other force which is always relevant to an artist. But it requires a firm hold of yourself so you don't become self-conscious about it. Sitting around, in lotus positions, looking for inspiration or hoping that the divine afflatus will come fluttering down—no.

Where I do very much reflect English pragmatism against Eastern mysticism is in the idea that life must be lived in its earthly aspect, irrespective of how unsatisfying you may find it. And I'm dubious about ecstasy being even desirable.

*Is it that you don't think ecstasy (religious or otherwise) is possible? Or just that it's undesirable?*

- P. I don't think it should be sought. It is possible perhaps, but I don't think I'd at all like the people to whom it was possible. Mystics, on the whole, I find very uninteresting people; the few I've tried to read, I find remarkably dull . . .

*Is it also that you don't like letting go?*

- P. That's true. I don't particularly like to let go, I think, because ecstasies are fearfully transfiguring and dangerous things. They're not very far from death. Of course you cannot stop dying, eventually you will die.

*But you don't ask for it?*

- P. You don't ask for it, you don't anticipate it. Why I like music best of the arts is because music is the most controlled of ecstasies; it is also wholly and completely designed and is therefore not subject to accidental aspects of itself.

But yes, I'm probably talking about a temperamental lack in myself. When I was young I had a frightful temper. Several blazings of temper at school when boys were teasing me nearly got me to the point of homicidal rage. It was so like an epileptic fit that I want nothing like that ever to happen again. Curiously enough, sexual pleasure is not as ecstatic in my experience as rage or fear or even perhaps the transcendence caused by great art—Beethoven's Opus 132 quartet. Sexual ecstasy is a high ecstasy, but it's also easily simulated. What people don't admit is that it has a mechanical side to it.

*So does music.*

- P. So it does. Perhaps I'm not being consistent. But I know my fear of the ecstatic comes largely about through experience in my childhood of the intensities of anger and fear. The anger was always accompanied by a vile and terrible frustration. The great thing about happiness is that it doesn't have any emotional connotation: you can't describe it. Auden said that while no man can remember what it was like to be happy, or even where he was happy, he can never forget that he was happy; and there is a sense in which happiness has a quotidian quality. Unhappiness is not the same thing as despair. I expect to be unhappy. Despair is a much worse thing. I was much more despairing when I was young.

*This brings to mind a recent poem of yours, which you call "In the New World Happiness is Allowed" (1978). But you refute your title in the first line, saying, "No, in the New World, happiness is enforced". That's effective rhetorically, but did you mean it?*

\* see p. 62.

- P. I was attacking Les Murray, because Les wrote that title sentence in one of his swash-buckling reviews. I was also thinking of parties I went to in Australia in 1974. And in certain parts of Australia in my childhood I recall that suffering was considered vulgar, nobody was allowed to suffer. Although any sensible person wants to avoid suffering, I regard suffering as part of the human condition. Nobody wants to be a suffering snob. (A very morbid friend and fellow poet once said to me, I don't see how you can be a poet, because every time I see you, you're so cheerful.) You don't foist your unhappiness on other people. So I'm not interested in those who carry a badge of suffering to prove their authenticity; I'm also against Les Murray's view that suffering is a nasty European notion imposed upon a healthy southern nation. Now Les knows better than that—he probably wouldn't agree to it—but every now and again he gets the chance to thunder against what he calls European socialist misery. I suppose what he wants is jolly feudal happiness, or something. Les, for all his Southern Cross enthusiasm, is basically a feudalist.
- You think there's enough suffering in Australia for writers to get on with?*
- P. Of course there is, there's enough suffering anywhere. Good heavens, Australia started out as the most suffering place on the globe: it's been possible to reduce suffering since, but you can never eliminate suffering while human beings are alive.

*But the pursuit of pleasure is not, for you, a valid goal, is it?*

- P. There are several ways of looking at hedonism. You've got to have the right temperament for a start. You've got to be good-looking. And to have an unreflective nature. Because even the beautiful and young grow old and get sick and ugly. So you've just got to not think about the passage of time if you're going to be a hedonist—unless you're using the passage of time to speed your pleasures up. But another thing against hedonism can be seen from examining the Latin poets—Catullus, Horace and others. Too much fucking, too many drinking bouts, too many good times left them desolated.

*Where then does this restless nature of yours take you? I'm interested in your imagery of 'home' in the poem 'On First Looking into Chapman's Hesiod' (1975). It's a complex poem, but one of its elements is a contrast between a 'blunt patriotism,|A long-winded emphatic, kelpie yapping|About our land' (obviously Australia) and the larger possibilities for personal freedom and exploration suggested by the city in the poem's concluding lines:*

*Sparrows acclimatise but I still seek  
The permanently upright city where  
Speech is nature and plants conceive in pots,  
Where one escapes from what one is and who  
One was, where home is just a postmark  
And country wisdom clings to calendars,  
The opposite of a sunburned truth-teller's  
World, haunted by precepts and the Pleiades.*

*Is this city London?*

- P. No, it's not London; it's the ideal city state which doesn't exist but which has lived in men's minds since social order first existed. But perhaps it's just the republic of the imagination, the place where everyone is as gifted as the great men of the past and where you are made welcome as a confrère. To put this up against a real place—Australia, America, anywhere—is unfair, but tends to occur to people like me who have lived their lives in self-imposed exile.

\* \* \*

## COLLECTIONS OF PETER PORTER'S POEMS

*Once Bitten, Twice Bitten* (Scorpion Press, London, 1961)  
*Poems Ancient and Modern* (Scorpion, Lowestoft, 1964)  
*A Porter Folio* (Scorpion, Lowestoft, 1969)  
*Penguin Modern Poets No. 2* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962)  
*The Last of England* (Oxford University Press, London, 1970)  
*After Martial* (Oxford University Press, London, 1972)  
*Preaching to the Converted* (Oxford University Press, London, 1972)  
*Jonah*, by Arthur Boyd and Peter Porter (Secker & Warburg, London, 1973)  
*The Lady and the Unicorn*, by Arthur Boyd and Peter Porter (Secker & Warburg, London, 1975)  
*Living in a Calm Country* (Oxford University Press, London, 1975)  
*The Cost of Seriousness* (Oxford University Press, London, 1978)  
*English Subtitled* (Oxford University Press, London, 1981)

\* \* \*

## PETER PORTER — A Recent Squib

### The Castle in Sight

At a dreadful party  
thronged by freeloaders,  
ancient idols, Sloane Rangers  
and the painted dead,  
I know bereavingly  
that after thirty years  
clutching at London  
I have gained nothing  
but English dirt  
under my fingernails.

## PETER PORTER

### An Exequy

In wet May, in the months of change,  
In a country you wouldn't visit, **strange**  
Dreams pursue me in my sleep,  
Black creatures of the upper deep—  
Though you are five months dead, I see  
You in guilt's iconography,  
Dear Wife, lost beast, beleaguered child,  
The stranded monster with the mild  
Appearance, whom small waves tease,  
(Andromeda upon her knees  
In orthodox deliverance)  
And you alone of pure substance,  
The unformed form of life, the earth  
Which Piero's brushes brought to birth  
For all to greet as myth, a thing  
Out of the box of imagining.

This introduction serves to sing  
Your mortal death as Bishop King  
Once hymned in tetrametric rhyme  
His young wife, lost before her time;  
Though he lived on for many years  
His poem each day fed new tears  
To that unreachng spot, her grave,  
His lines a baroque architrave  
The Sunday poor with bottled flowers  
Would by-pass in their mourning hours,  
Esteeming ragged natural life  
(‘Most dearly loved, most gentle wife’),  
Yet, looking back when at the gate  
And seeing grief in formal state  
Upon a sculpted angel group,  
Were glad that men of god could stoop  
To give the dead a public stance  
And freeze them in their mortal dance.

The words and faces proper to  
My misery are private—you  
Would never share your heart with those  
Whose only talent's to suppose,  
Nor from your final childish bed  
Raise a remote confessing head—  
The channels of our lives are blocked,  
The hand is stopped upon the clock,  
No-one can say why hearts will break  
And marriages are all opaque:  
A map of loss, some posted cards,  
The living house reduced to shards,  
The abstract hell of memory,  
The pointlessness of poetry—  
These are the instances which tell  
Of something which I know full well,  
I owe a death to you—one day  
The time will come for me to pay  
When your slim shape from photographs  
Stands at my door and gently asks  
If I have any work to do  
Or will I come to bed with you.  
*O scala enigmatica,*  
I'll climb up to that attic where  
The curtain of your life was drawn  
Some time between despair and dawn—  
I'll never know with what halt steps  
You mounted to this plain eclipse  
But each stair now will station me  
A black responsibility  
And point me to that shut-down room,  
'This be your due appointed tomb.'

I think of us in Italy:  
Gin-and-chianti-fuelled, we  
Move in a trance through Paradise,  
Feeding at last our starving eyes,  
Two people of the English blindness  
Doing each masterpiece the kindness  
Of discovering it—from Baldovinetti  
To Venice's most obscure jetty.  
A true unfortunate traveller, I  
Depend upon your nurse's eye  
To pick the altars where no Grinner  
Puts us off our tourists' dinner  
And in hotels to bandy words  
With Genevan girls and talking birds,  
To wear your feet out following me  
To night's end and true amity,  
And call my rational fear of flying  
A paradigm of Holy Dying—  
And, oh my love, I wish you were  
Once more with me, at night somewhere  
In narrow streets applauding wines,  
The moon above the Apennines  
As large as logic and the stars,  
Most middle-aged of avatars,  
As bright as when they shone for truth  
Upon untried and avid youth.

The rooms and days we wandered through  
Shrink in my mind to one—there you  
Lie quite absorbed by peace—the calm  
Which life could not provide is balm  
In death. Unseen by me, you look  
Past bed and stairs and half-read book  
Eternally upon your home,  
The end of pain, the left alone.

I have no friend, or intercessor,  
No psychopomp or true confessor  
But only you who know my heart  
In every cramped and devious part—  
Then take my hand and lead me out,  
The sky is overcast by doubt,  
The time has come, I listen for  
Your words of comfort at the door,  
O guide me through the shoals of fear—  
'Fürchte dich nicht, ich bin bei dir.'

from *The Cost of Seriousness*, 1978

## PETER PORTER

### The Missionary Position

Since those first days it has been like this with Tellus,  
That the stiff sky is always on the point of breaking  
And intervention, above the roof of a shearer's hut  
Or in a shower of gold, is what we may expect  
Of such pent-up presences. Then there comes that  
Augustinian fairness which gives us metaphors  
Appropriate to our condition. Upon the roads  
After a drenching resurrection, or eating in darkness,  
The abandoned followers are shown a sign so  
Comforting it sets as a star upon their flag,  
A dog recognizes its master by a tone of tail,  
The pools fill up with abstractions of the Spring.  
The Little Soul itself, natured and then flung upon  
The world, revisits cabins of its gloom, kiosks  
Where marvellous things matured. Among the queueing gods  
Long Service Veterans sigh for ordinariness,  
To bring the brilliant seed of the future down  
To an average hearth, there among the rugs and rules  
Of generations, removed from graphs of passion,  
Serve their chosen companionship face to face,  
The decency and boredom of diurnal love.

## Little Harmonic Labyrinth

Come stars and beg of the one star  
a progress through the laughing fields  
beyond our pink-walled town.  
The little monkey on its cushion  
brings the priceless gift  
of sexual desire. Without this rubbing  
luxury there'd be no chasseresse  
of envy, nothing but our getting staler  
on the avenues of evening.  
How dare they share this gift,  
these best of lucky solipsists—  
'On this soft anvil all mankind was made.'  
And the tyrant will,  
unrepentent of its mediocrity,  
is governor of created things.  
The flight from meaning is our magic—  
overhead a perfect line of birds  
pegged out to dry: the picture shows  
where dreams have passed,  
trooping to a reborn god.  
O captains of your consciences,  
the world's a middle sea  
washing tearful stories to the shore—  
Tell of blushing Psyches  
in little breasts and sneakers  
bringing serfdom to tomorrow;  
reflate the fluffy trees, the cobalt sky  
in allegories of sin  
with all our ages snickering in bushes.

Even the guaranteed untalented  
have style of their own, our God  
has given us immunity  
from everything except ourselves.  
No wonder I have dreamed  
the living and the dead are one,  
that out of their congestion  
a planet rises which has sounds for air,  
whose syntax may be synthesised.  
O eyes I cannot meet,  
yours, Preppy teenage gods,  
show me something serious  
beyond imagination. When sex dries  
all that's left is abstract,  
completed outlines without presences.  
Find me a star to shine  
through the whiteness of the mind.

## ROBYN ROWLAND

### Aftermath

The photo is in "Life".  
Its bleakness marks the year  
as after-war.  
No sepia softens the German pain  
and endless shades of black  
present with woodcut clearness  
a girl, half-carried,  
descending railway steps.  
Like borrowed clothes  
she hangs between two strangers,  
and the couple seem to hold her  
tilted, aslant.

She is fifteen, orphaned by war,  
and once a week the Polish lads  
do their hectic circuit  
seeking her out,  
their seething victory  
tucked below their belts.  
She is raped.  
Her hollow eyes are black  
their colour turned in, yielded,  
they rivet toward descent.  
Shock draws her face  
down over bone,  
interminable,  
                  deathless.

TOM SHAPCOTT

## An Interview with Michael Ondaatje\*

TOM SHAPCOTT: Michael, how do you see your own poetry, in relation to what's happening in Canada?

MICHAEL ONDAATJE: I think it's probably not—normal. I mean, most people tell me it's not typical of Canadian poetry, saying it's probably a "Sri Lankan influence" or something else.

TS: They do say things like that?

MO: Well, they keep trying to put me into an 'exotic' category. Which I loathe. It's like being called "gothic"; I don't think it actually *means* anything. If I had to place myself, in the Canadian context, it would be very close to a lot of other writers who are my contemporaries.

TS: In other words, you see the use of these apparently 'exotic' things simply as part of the new accessibility of material?

MO: It's hard to put it exactly: I'm someone who has moved around a lot in my life. I was born in Sri Lanka, then I lived in England; then I moved to Canada, and so my sense of the world is one where there is a variety of landscapes and climates. Sometimes they're not real ones. Certainly with *Billy the Kid* and with *Coming Through Slaughter* they're mental landscapes.

TS: In Canadian writing, has there been much attempt to emphasize a purely Canadian landscape, or region; as there has been, say, in Australia?

MO: That's been one of the main lines in Canadian writing, yes; especially in the Prairies. And the major Canadian novels have been about non-city landscapes. Except for Mordecai Richler and a few others.

TS: To an Australian, one of the interesting things is the number of Canadian writers who actually live outside of cities. That seems rather surprising.

MO: They live in cities, but cities that are in the middle of nowhere.

TS: There's not the sense, as in Australia, where everyone gets dragged either to Sydney or to Melbourne.

MO: No, I think that in Canada they really are spread out. That's why the Writers' Union or the League of Canadian Poets are important. Because once a year they usually get together, and that allows more contact with the writers. I think the real value of something like the League of Poets is a social one. Not just to sit down and discuss Royalties or stuff like that.

TS: Right. So the isolation is broken up by forms of exchange?

\* This interview took place in Brisbane on 23 June, 1981.

- MO: Exchange. And readings—poets coming through doing readings. There's much more a feeling of an ongoing reading series going on in Canada, I think, than there is here.
- TS: Is this a new development?
- MO: It began about 10 years ago when the Canada Council decided to sponsor readings. So what happens is, they will pay your travel to, say, Winnipeg, and also pay the basic reading fee, \$150. And the host has to put up food, lodging, and travel within the city. So, in a way, it was an artificial thing. But it has really done a lot, for poetry anyway. Audiences have built up, and they seem much more intelligent, as listeners. Certainly more so than audiences in the States. Much more aware. They can pick out the con-man, and the ham, and the Performer—as opposed to the true poets.
- TS: That's very interesting; yeah. This sense of regionalism that you've mentioned; it seems a much more emphatic thing than in Australia. Where it would be very hard to pick, if you weren't told, a West Australian writer from a South Australian writer. Do you have any other comments on this: what dangers, as well as what positive things?
- MO: I think we're moving out of that tradition. Though writers like Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe are based in the prairies—Alberta, Saskatchewan.
- TS: And the 'Prairie Pub Poets' and . . .
- MO: Exactly. And Jack Hodgins, on the West Coast—he's dealing with Vancouver Island. And Alice Munro has Southern Ontario. But I think that's almost, already, a cliché. I mean, obviously writers like Alice Munro and Rudy Wiebe are also writing other things.
- TS: You think these readings have helped that—that 'moving out'?
- MO: I think so. There's much more cross-fertilisation as a result of that.
- TS: Getting back to your own poetry: what aspects do you see as being part of a larger 'movement'; you mentioned other contemporaries?
- MO: I'm not sure it's a kind of 'movement'. What one writes is so utterly personal, and accidental. So full of chance. I don't really believe in 'movements'. You can look back, say 20 years on, and say 'oh yes we could see them all kind of veering towards this kind of thing'. But when you are in the middle of it, it seems so accidental. You know; I really believe in 'the amateur writer'. That doesn't mean you're not writing professionally; but in the sense of thinking, in an amateur way.
- TS: What about your contemporaries, whose work *you* find interesting, provoking, stimulating . . . ?
- MO: Yes, that is what interests me. These are probably writers who are not much *like* me. Writers like, say, bpNichol, who's a poet—he's also a concrete poet but he writes also more 'traditional' poetry. Daphne Marlatt, who's a poet and also a prose writer, who lives on the West Coast. George Bowering, novelist and poet, he's very different from me but I always read his stuff. His 'take' on something of mine is always very useful to me—also usually very critical. It helps me. David McFadden is another writer. These are all people about my age, who tend to be overlooked when they bring out the usual anthologies. But these writers are important. And others like Fred Wah, I think is very good. And then there is that sense of an older generation that one also does learn from . . . I think, in Canada too, we have what I've heard you talk about: several generations of poets in layers. Some of the older ones (like Phyllis Webb) are very important for the younger group.
- TS: Yes, her later work has seemed to move in fresh directions . . .

- MO: Yes. There was a book of hers called *Naked Poems* in the 1960s; that was very important, economic, imagistic, minimal poems. That interested a lot of writers of my age, at the time.
- TS: What about someone like Christopher Dewdney?
- MO: Chris Dewdney is also someone who fascinates me as a writer. And I think, really, as the New Age. I would say, if I picked just two writers from the young generation, they would be Christopher Dewdney and Sharon Thesen, who's from the West Coast. Almost a totally new language; and dismissing, casually, things people 10 years older were obsessed by.
- TS: What would you say would be the defining areas?
- MO: What I find interesting in Thesen is her style; real technical craft; what she's learned from people like Duncan and Blaser; but her personality is also very central to the poem. There doesn't seem to be a loss of personality—or wit. She can combine a strict craft with a variety of emotions.
- TS: What about Dewdney?
- MO: Dewdney I can't make out yet. You know, when I first read his works I thought they were wonderful parodies of scientific journals. Then I discovered they were all true. He is the only genius that I know; I think. He has expanded the subject matter of poetry—into science, into brain cells, into all kind of things.
- TS: He writes about paleolithic aspects, then he has moved into Thought Control, things like that . . .
- MO: And Remote Control. And then he's also very interested in the Rastopharians; I don't know how these all fit in; he was translating Rastopharian songs for a while.
- TS: What reaction to him among Canadians?
- MO: Not yet taken as seriously as he should be. I mean, he *is* by some writers; and certainly people like Coach House Press take him very seriously indeed. Phyllis Webb would take him very seriously. But he is a very difficult poet; and the general poetry audience is probably quite lazy; they prefer a style they are used to that's easy to take in.
- TS: The extraordinary assurance in the writing took me aback, as well as a capacity for absolute surprise and inventiveness. I mean, there's sudden leaps and associations that just click. There's nobody in Australia attempting anything that remotely resembles Dewdney; there are a couple of people in Melbourne who have attempted, but in a very amateurish way, to move into certain areas like that, but it is very tentative; and lacking any—intellectual confidence, I think. That might say something about a basic environment. Or just a particular person. A genius, as you say.
- MO: Someone has an epileptic fit on a train, Dewdney is the guy who'll take over, who'll break the emergency light, get the sugar . . .
- TS: Back to your own work, Michael; what about the two larger books that are based largely on prose: *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*: how do you see them in terms of what you were doing?
- MO: I can trace a kind of line; in my first book there was a sequence called "Peter" based on the Deor story; and I guess the second big thing I worked on was this Australian poem (*The Man With Seven Toes*) which was the first attempt at a book-length poem. A serial poem.
- TS: But still a very lyric form.
- MO: That lyric thing was what I picked up from someone like Phyllis Webb; to try to write a narrative that didn't have all the standard bridges in order to get to the interesting parts. To have the lyric moment in a narrative without all the 'dutiful' elements of the narrative. To keep the lyric

but then to put the next one and the next one and the next one beside it, as in a collage.

TS: That's very interesting. There's an Australian poet, Rodney Hall, who right from the beginning of his career has done something very like that; he calls them 'progressions'; your description virtually parallels his own.

MO: Robin Blaser calls it the 'serial poem'. There's an image Blaser uses of going into a house and turning on a light in one room, then turning it off. Then going into the next room, turning on a light; so it's just rooms of light—a beautiful image. The idea of a serial poem has been going on for quite a while in certain parts of the States and in Canada—among writers like George Bowering. Again, I wasn't conscious of it; we were all doing the same thing. Then with *Billy the Kid* I began this book which was just going to be a few poems; then felt I needed to break out of the lyric form completely; and then I started to write prose sections which became part of the book as well. But they were real poems, in a sense, in terms of structure, and intensity. They weren't there to fill in the gap between poems. What they were doing was what a poem was doing as well, using more arms.

TS: Providing a different kind of breathing pattern . . . ?

MO: Yes, allowing a bit more landscape to stroll on and stroll out. I wrote the poems in *Billy* as tightly as I could; rewrote those poems dozens of times. They were manically tight. And the prose just came—almost one take. It was a very odd book, the balance as far as it worked.

TS: That book won the Governor General's Award. In 1970.

MO: Yes, the reaction was pretty good, among writers. What was odd, was, it caused quite a scandal—John Diefenbacher, who was our ex-Prime Minister, mustn't have had anything to do at the time and actually read a book of poetry and it happened to be mine. He was outraged that this book that won the award was about an American. And full of foul language, sex, and he went public with this attack.

MO: And of course that was in the front pages. So it sold more copies.

TS: Any effect apart from sales? I mean, did you get backlash?

MO: No. There was some reaction against it, but I don't think people who attacked the book read it. What's been happening in the last few years with people like Alice Munro and Margaret Lawrence being attacked, is that they are very good writers who are very popular writers, genuinely popular writers. And so when they reach the small-town circuit they hit the problem head-on. Whereas a small town like Clinton, Ontario, is not going to buy a copy of *Billy the Kid* in the first place. I mean, it sold very well, but nowhere near the level of truly popular fiction.

TS: What would be considered a good book sale, for something like *Billy*?

MO: It has sold about 17,000, which is very high . . .

TS: But then it's also been made into a play . . .

MO: And that's over a long period—since 1970. An average sale of poetry is about a thousand, possibly 2000.

TS: What about *Coming Through Slaughter*?

MO: That came out in 1976, and grew out of my fascination with Buddy Bolden, another historical figure. And also wanting to write a prose work. But with a form that was still much like a poem.

TS: So you felt in a sense that you'd learned things with *Billy the Kid* that you wanted to follow through further?

MO: When I start out wanting to do a thing it is not from a technical reason; but, I mean, it's always there. In *Slaughter* I tried to juxtapose the inten-

sity of the prose with a documentary coldness. Bolden interested me a great deal, as an historical figure, but there was very little information about him, so I had to improvise a lot of material on him.

TS: Any reaction to its U.S. setting?

MO: I thought there would be all kinds of hell to pay, but actually at that point I think they all realized it was not about America, it was about an individual, about a personality.

TS: That implies, in the Canadian context, much greater confidence.

MO: I think so.

TS: What about the new work; that is prose *and* poetry, isn't it?

MO: I think it is mostly prose; a few poems floating around in it, I'm not sure how the poems are going to work. This is the book about my family in Sri Lanka. I'm not sure whether it's a Memoir—that sounds rather 'staid' to me; so it's going to be semi-fictional, biographical . . . it's mostly about going back to Sri Lanka, and about my family in the '30s and the '40s, the end of a whole era of wild living. I wanted to write about that. I'd written poems about my father before, but I went back and discovered all kinds of incredible stories about him.

TS: How do you see the form, the architecture? does it grow, sort of, one thing after another? Or do you have to find some dramatic or cohesive element to cohere it?

MO: I'll have to find it at the end.

TS: At the end?

MO: At the end. *Slaughter* and *Billy* were similar in that I would write a piece, then throw it into a drawer, and then two days later or even a month later I would write another piece, put it away in a drawer. I'd probably rework them a little bit; but then I would put them away. The way the book appears is not the way the book was written. And so after three years, four years, I'd get them out and start looking through it—incredible mess—I'd find things I'd written two or three times. And then have to start finding the organic form that was already there in the thing. It wasn't a narrative from A to Z; and so I had to shape it. At that point it was a matter of how you make the collage; how you make the collage understandable with a narrative line as well. The problem there is the beginning, you know, where you put the first two or three pieces on. You've got to convince the reader to trust you, that it's going to look good at the end.

TS: And the same sort of thing is happening with the current work?

MO: Usually, you see, I have a kind of a rough idea. In *Billy* you know what's going to happen—he's going to be chased and he's going to die. In *Slaughter* Bolden is going to go mad and he's going to end up in the hospital. And I have a general line in this book too, which is the line about my parents, how my parents met, their lives, their separation, and their separate lives afterwards. But into that there is also their parents, and my generation. It moves around, it swirls back and forth, it meanders quite a bit. But I know the basic line.

TS: Are there any other Canadian writers who have perhaps been influenced by your experiments? Do you see any kind of common ground?

MO: I guess there have been some historical poems; long poems based on historical figures: I'm not sure if those would have been influenced by me or not. It's a very natural form, I think. There certainly is a much greater awareness of trying out 'historical' forms.

TS: And this you feel has developed in, say, the last decade?

MO: Especially in the last decade.

# MICHAEL ONDAATJE

## High Flowers

The slow moving of her cotton  
in the heat.

    Hard shell of foot.  
She chops the yellow coconut  
the colour of Anuradhapura stone.

The woman my ancestors ignored  
sits at the doorway chopping coconut  
cleaning rice.

Her husband moves  
in the air between trees.  
The curved knife at his hip.  
In high shadows  
of coconut palms  
he grasps a path of rope above his head  
and another below him with his naked foot.  
He drinks the first sweet mouthful  
from the cut flower, then drains it  
into a narrow-necked pot  
and steps out to the next tree.

Above the small roads of Wattala,  
Kalutara, the toddy tapper walks  
collecting the white liquid for tavern vats.  
Down here the light  
storms through branches  
and boils the street.  
Villagers stand in shadow and drink  
the fluid from a coned leaf.  
He works fast to reach his quota  
before the maniac monsoon.  
The shape of knife and pot  
does not vary from 18th Century museum prints.

In the village a woman like lowland air  
shuffles rice in a cane mat.  
Grit and husk separate  
are thrown to the sun.

From his darkness among high flowers  
to this room contained by mud walls  
everything that is important occurs in shadow—  
her discreet slow moving his dreams of walking  
from tree to tree without ropes.  
It is not vanity which allows him this freedom  
but skill and habit, the curved knife  
his father gave him, it is the coolness up there  
—for the ground's heat has not yet risen—  
which makes him forget necessity.

Kings. Fortresses. Traffic in open sun.

Within a doorway the woman  
turns in the old pleasure of darkness.

In the high trees above her  
shadows eliminate  
the path he moves along.

## CAROLE WILKINS

### Megalove

Two giant computers, the latest models  
Arrived at the complex  
Were unpacked, manoeuvred to positions opposite each other  
To fulfil their functions for administration of the State

Their scanners met across a gleaming floor  
And in the temperature-controlled room circuits raced  
Just a little faster than usual  
She admired his lines, the rotation of his tapes  
He traced her angles with his feeling apparatus  
A shiver hung in the dust-free air

No use denying the vibrations, the yearning  
But no-one else must know  
So, when the cleaner had passed by with his polisher  
And the security guard made his last round  
The two machines, glorious in their desire  
Strained at their bonds of site, moved closer  
Only the knowledge that their power inputs must remain connected  
Prevented them from tearing free altogether

What ecstasy when their cabinets touched  
Heavenly choirs chorused as metal clanked, dials spun and screens pulsed  
Such was the coming together of the lovers  
That the night rang with their soundproofed cries until  
They parted exhausted, to take up their allotted spaces again

No sign in the morning betrayed that evening's passion  
Except for a sheen on her still proud body  
A trace of moisture on his taut frame  
Across the distance, when lunch hour emptied the room  
Lights flashed the question that needs no answer—

“T.O.N.I.G.H.T?”

JIM LEGASSE

## Telling A Self: More on Moorhouse's Family

This is a true story—the story of a fact and the story of a fiction. The fact is this: I read a fiction and thought I experienced it as fact; that is, I read Frank Moorhouse's *The Everlasting Secret Family* and thought it was true. I had not read Moorhouse previously (just a story or two and *Tales of Mystery and Romance*). I knew little of the man's work and less of the man. In reading *The Everlasting Secret Family*, I did not necessarily find myself wanting to know about the extra-textual life of the author; rather, I wanted merely to know why I felt it was autobiographically informed. I did not want to know, in fact, whether or not it was factual, but how it as a published fiction made me feel it was. I know that I felt the text offered moments of intimacy and spontaneity which I was both titillated and shocked by. I know that I felt the author an exhibitionist, liberated from self-restraint, and as confidential as they come. I know that I felt the voyeur observing someone's private life being anatomized, warts and worse. I know that I felt attracted to the way its secrets were told, as I'm attracted by gossip. And the fact of the matter is that all this troubled me, because the experience of the text gave me back an image not of my mind or my soul, but of my imagination and its "illegality". My story, then, is how a text tells a self—an author's self and a reader's self, and how those two selves contact one another through a fiction.

### I

After having read the book, my initial desire, as I recall, was to guard myself from my response to it. I may be strange but I must confess that knowing that a story is true protects me from its truth. If I know that a story is "made up", then I get anxious about the world that the writer is presenting as true; "the world of this may be" is, for me, more frightening than "this is the world that was". "May be" presents a challenge; "that was" suggests survival and "here we are, after all, so it couldn't have been that bad anyway". My first effort, thus, was to find out what Moorhouse thought he was doing in this work. What I found out only half satisfied me. He's said in a Melbourne *Age* interview: "[My work] is fiction pretending to be autobiographical. It gets very confusing—at the end of a group of stories, I can't remember what happened to me and what happened in fiction." This sort of authorial experience, being lost between fact and fiction, intrigues me, and the fact that the reader is manipulated in such a way as to share in that experience intrigues me even more so. And a few writers, I might parenthetically add, seem to know the feeling that Moorhouse knows too well. Murray Bail says somewhere that "the reader should be at risk; the writer is". And Stefanie Bennet

("summons 74 [Fer Nike]" in *Mother I'm Rooted*, ed. Kate Jennings, Outback Press, Victoria, 1975, n.p.) states that a poem must be "nervous enough to admit that it's yr biography". These are just a few such claims implying contact between writer and reader, but they suggest the point: the writer's self and the reader's self must meet—as Michaelangelo's Adam and God meet, radifying creation by touching, delicately yet dangerously.

It is in this context of the presentation of the self that I turned to the genre of autobiography itself. Perhaps the most helpful of the critics of autobiography to date, and to my mind, is Elizabeth Bruss, whose book is called *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Traditions of a Literary Genre* (The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1976). She acknowledges, like most other critics, that there is a fine line, perhaps an overlap, between certain types of novels and certain types of autobiographies. Professor Bruss writes:

Textual features, whole narrative structures, once exclusively associated with one genre may be appropriated by another, with the result that these formal features will no longer be sufficient to signal the illocutionary force of a text and other devices will be discovered or promoted to prevent ambiguity. When the first person experiencer, narrator and hero, was appropriated from autobiography for the sake of "realism" in the new, bourgeois novel, the presence of such a narrator was no longer enough to distinguish autobiography from fiction. Although autobiographers continued to use this device, it was no longer dominant in either the formal or functional definition of the genre—in fact, one could argue that the autobiographical "I" took on a new, less empirical and more subjective value as a result of this. When the formal delights of direct observation, eyewitness testimony, and density of domestic detail became more general literary phenomena, they no longer appeared autobiographical. These features continued, for the most part, to be present in autobiographical texts, but they were less visible—functionally "effaced" as Tynjanov might have put it. (pp. 8-9)

If a text is "to count as autobiography", according to Professor Bruss, it must satisfy three rules. The first concerns the "truth value" of the work, its historical verifiability: the information disseminated must be presented as at least having the "potential for being the case" (p. 11). Moorhouse's text makes this claim, not in the first of the four stories, but in the other three. The second story and the third story offer notes, scholarly apparatus, to locate allusion in each text in history and to ground them in fact. One of the background notes to "The Dutch Letters" is headed, "Why The Dutch Airforce was in Australia". It begins: Members and places of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army Air Force came to Australia in 1942 fleeing from the Japanese. A squadron of Mitchell Bombers known as the 18 Squadron worked within the RAAF mainly out of Batchelor in the Northern Territory [where Pieter was stationed]" p. 78). One of the notes to "Imogene Continued" headed "The Match Game" ends: "Professor Derek Marsh is acknowledged as the Australian Champion match game player at conferences" (p. 16). The final story is subtitled "An Erotic Memoir in Six Parts" and professes to have been "prepared for publication by the author from letters, monologues, conversations, diaries and other sources" (p. 165). Evidence for and claims of verifiability can be found throughout the text.

Another rule for counting the work as autobiographical is that the writer must purport "to believe what he asserts" (p. 11). This belief in the narrative credibility of stories is certainly established in the subtext of the narrator's note to the title story, where he says: "This was originally to be published privately and circulated privately. I do not in any way wish to harm the conservative forces in this country. In so far as this memoir touches on political things (and caution delimited this severely) it does so simply as a fact of our lives. It may be

suggested that the publication of this work is a ploy in a personal relationship—be that as it may, that also was not the energising motive behind my having this put down on paper. I recorded it out of joy and I dedicate it to him who gave me the highest sexual privilege” (p. 165).

The final rule, according to Bruss, involves the “dual role” the life-writer assumes in the autobiographical act as both “the source of the subject matter and the source of the structure to be found in the book” (p. 10). The author may be working with a persona in one story, wearing a mask in another, creating character in a third or inventing his little heart away in a fourth, but still the creator is his creation. What this principle ultimately means for Bruss, as she moves through representative types of autobiographical works from Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* to Nabokov’s *Speak Memory* is that “individuality [or a sense of self] is nothing more than the ‘unique design’ of certain recurrent themes of a past and present, thematic repetitions which become discernible only when the isolated and evanescent details of a lifetime are held fast for a moment—as they were not and cannot be in life—within a work of art. [The] present sense of a self is merely the nucleus of the pattern, the central point defined by the continuum, shifting as the pattern itself appears to change” (p. 137).

*The Everlasting Secret Family* may not in one sense isolate and individuate its author, but in another sense it does. It does not announce itself to be about Moorhouse but it is, because he is the source of the structure to be found in the text. He is responsible for the way in which his audience responds in the act of reading that text. He is responsible for the signals and for what is signified: for the design in general and the metaphors in particular, both of which defy us to respond to the definitions as Moorhouse constructs them.

James Olney in his book, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton University, 1972) puts the point that “he” is what “he” makes this way; Olney says:

There are unquestionably times when the self is more highly “pitched” or intensely concentrated, more fully realized or richly “selved” or self-possessed; in some moments, why or how one does not know, we succeed in incorporating more of the energy of the body of the unconscious into the narrow web of consciousness, and the self is defined in those moments of great capability as the relation between consciousness and unconsciousness, or as the process of bringing unconscious contents into the area of consciousness and under the control of awareness and will. The highest peaks of self, when the largest areas of the vague unconscious are brought to an intensity of consciousness, when the whole potential of humanity seems realized in the individual, cannot be analysed or explained but only experienced and, if the artist’s faith is justified, perhaps re-experienced in metaphors and symbols: in autobiography and poetry. (p. 25)

Yeats expresses the point somewhat differently. In one of his letters he writes: “[I] go on from year to year gradually getting the disorder of [my] mind in order and this is the real impulse to create” (*Letters*, p. 627). The order is the structure is the metaphor is the creation is the creator.

What I now perceive in Moorhouse which I identify as autobiographical is not so much the name, the place, the date, but the way of organizing, and what I conclude from all of this is that the reality of self is found in that which the self produces and that that alone is knowable. A work of literature gives us back an image of a mind. The mind as self is discoverable in the process of patterning. Patterning results from perceptions based on contradictions, contrasts, oppositions, mediations, associations and relationships. The most telling of these—that is, the most individual or “selved” of these—are those that deal with opposites and

move us, thereby, to metaphor—or those that cause startlingly and challengingly bizarre bumps in patterns: Blake (Satan is good); Marquis de Sade (the agony is the ecstasy); Moorhouse (being involved in an S and M, January/May, homosexual relationship is “joy” and “the highest sexual privilege” (p.165)). With Moorhouse’s book, the reader’s self and the writer’s self make contact when the bump is felt and the design/metaphor presents the challenge of truth, justice, and the Australian way.

## II

The title of one of the chapters of “Imogene Continued”, the third story in the Moorhouse collection, is “Only the Interaction of Complex things” (p.125). The phrase comes from, and is a proper summary of, an article written by Professor John Anderson entitled “Realism and Some of Its Critics”. As Professor John Passmore has said (*Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, Angus and Robertson, 1962): “. . . Anderson set out to show that there is no reality (whether “Higher” or “Lower”) other than the complex” (p. ix). And this philosophy—and ethics—is one that Moorhouse seems to share and certainly demonstrates. The four stories in the collection create a network of complications which force us, as I shall try to explain, to appreciate the fact of intertextuality and the fiction of morality. The irony is that the fact of intertextuality, the way in which Moorhouse’s stories cross-reference each other and the effect this has on the reader and meaning as perceived by that reader, is of the author’s making. The fiction of morality is of society’s making. Both the fact and the fiction, then, are constructs, neither of which has more validity than the other—except, perhaps, as Moorhouse would have it, in their complex interaction.

Each of the stories deals with similar themes, more specifically with ethical problems. Each articulates, anatomizes, even allegorises the point in different ways, so that convictions about moral issues lose their certainty and show “sureness” as arrogance, if not ignorance. Each of the stories depicts the Oz relationship between sexuality and secrecy.

In the first story, Irving Bow feels he has “to hide too much from this town” (p. 13), Pacific City. In the story we discover that Bow, “the proprietor of darkness” (p. 3) with his “etiquette of Deception” (p. 10) knows the disadvantages of secrecy. In a very symbolic passage describing Bow’s desires in the context of the Odeon, Moorhouse writes of Bow that he “[wanted to] throw open the drawers, unlock the doors, reveal the secret passages, open the trunks of costumes. Not to receive punishment but to be relieved of being warder to this, his imprisoned life” (p. 16). In the second story the narrator, who puts the letters of Dirk Hansen before us, tells us that Hansen, whose room the teller of the tale is staying in during a conference, “was one of those who had locked his secrets in one of the lockers using a feeble Taiwanese lock and thumb catch” (p. 57). “Shortly after I had arrived at the conference and begun to occupy his room”, says the narrator, “I had decided to look into Dirk Hansen’s secrets” (p. 57). In the third story, “Imogene Continued” we find that the narrator and Cindy each have secrets. During a rather sentimental scene, the narrator confesses to Cindy: “I’ve never told you—but Imogene was my secret name for you” (p. 153). After Cindy is raped by the “Redfern Delegation” (p. 96), she insists on secrecy saying to the narrator: “You mustn’t tell . . . You must swear that it doesn’t go from this room” (p. 96). The final story brings the idea of secrecy into light. After the politician’s male lover initiates the politician’s son, the narrator, the politician’s male lover, says:

I was joined to a line through history which went back to the first primitive person who went my way, who took a virgin boy lover, and every boy who

became a man took, in due turn, a boy lover, through to Socrates. I had played a part now in the continuation of that chain. I had played my first part as a child in becoming a man's lover. I had now played my second part. I now belonged fully in that historical line. It was a way of passing on and preserving the special reality, a way of giving new life, the birth for the boy of a new reality, a joining of him to a secret family, the other family. To belong to that chain is to belong to another life. (p. 204)

By the time we finish this collection, we see secrecy both in and out of the closet. We at first notice it out of the corner of our eyes and experience it in the back of our minds: we eventually observe it up front. We see it shy and ashamed, and liberated and proud. Its meaning and reference are not stabilized. Intertextuality, cross-referencing from story to story, makes for an interaction of elements which creates complexity.

Secrecy is hard to sort out, because it's everywhere and has positive and negative implications attributed to it by the text which shifts our perspectives on it. This is exactly the case for another idea which moves beyond literal to metaphorical meaning as a result of the network of referentiality created by Moorhouse. This idea concerns groups and bonding principles. The title of the collection, obviously, focuses on family. The fourth story, which is the title story, establishes the textual definition of family by locating its meaning in metaphor, yet at the same time, in literal reference. The mediator between father and son says: "It was a way of passing on and preserving the special reality, a way of giving new life, the birth for the boy of a new reality, a joining of him to a secret family, the other family." There are families and there are families. There are mothers and there are other mothers.

The other three stories put groups before the reader—all kinds of groups, thereby forcing us to be very group wary. In the first story, "Pacific City", we have the Science Club (p. 45) which meets in "The School of Arts", two different groups each of which delights in freaks, though different sorts of freaks. Pacific City offers us a closed community, a symbolic "incomplete town" (p. 13). Moorhouse exerts the pressure of metaphor early on, so that the analogical urge is felt by the reader throughout. In the second story, the group we look at is a family but not a family. The people who are sending letters back and forth are blood relatives, that's true, but mother and father seem to behave less than lovingly towards their son, whom we are told has a behavioural problem which we assume has something to do with his perhaps homosexual tendencies. We are told that "Dirk is forever in the city playing billiards and smoking and mixing with well-dressed older men" (p. 76). His parents establish that "discipline and punishment is not working, [that they] must find the correct method to bend him" (p. 60). So as to make Dirk a "real man" (p. 20), they have him castrated. His mother reports: "Dirk's operation went off well enough and it does not hurt very much for him to pass water... The Macquarie Street specialist said that the operation will remove his irritability and stop the outbursts but that definitely Dirk will not be able to have a proper married life" (p. 67). "In many ways", she says, "I am happier about this kind of operation than an operation on his brain" (p. 67). The therapy that the Hansen family subjects their son to is similar, though different, to the therapy that the young lover is subjected to in the fourth story. The narrator writes of that experience: "He [the politician/lover] had once had one of his heavies follow me and then there'd been efforts to stop me from being promiscuous, including terrifying—but unsuccessful—'therapy' in some private hospital, when I was sixteen" (p. 168). The word "therapy" is in inverted commas. The way parents love their children is ironised in the first story, too. In "Pacific City", a boy gets lost in the bush and a search party is

organised to find the boy. (Irving Bow is the hero here.) When the boy is returned home, Moorhouse writes: "The father then gave the boy a hiding with a leather harness strap to teach him not to waste people's time, until the mother stopped it" (p. 44). The point is that the idea of family comes into scrutiny in this story and in the second, as does the idea of "therapy" or physical treatment of a young person by a parental figure. Our response to love/beatings/therapy in these stories prepares us for the fourth story, where the subject is overtly sado-masochistic.

The idea of grouping is important, and as I was saying; there are groups all through these stories. In the third story we are in conference-ville. We have people "from the Third world, some from the Fourth World, and me"—as the narrator notes—"from Balmain" (p. 83). We have Aborigines who are referred to as the "Redfern Delegation" (p. 96). We have people admitting to being a "Vadim's" person (p. 126), people who are Andersonian. The narrator of this story admits that "I'm obsessed at the present moment with what might be called "exclusive groups", people who live a certain way or believe certain things that they don't want to be made public, don't want others to know" (p. 86). His obsession reminds us of a confession made by the pederast, Irving Bow, in "Pacific City": "... one should not reveal information about oneself—which the people around you could not comfortably accept" (p. 14). We are invited, I suspect, to think of this obsession, then, this interest the narrator has in exclusive groups within the context of the homosexual subculture, because the first two stories and the last operate in and out of the shadows of this world. However, the idea of "the group" is expanded as the dialogue of "Imogene continued" continues:

"You think of the Masons."

"Well, I suppose that's what people think of but, oh revolutionaries, sects, religious sects including some Aborigines. Sexually aberrant clubs and secret societies. Elitist groups like the Camden Group and maybe the Pacific Institute and so on." (pp. 86-7)

As we move into and through the listing of groups in these stories—on to the "Journalists Club" and the "League of Married Homosexual Statemen" (p. 171)—we have great complexity being created by context. Several groups are listed; some, out of context, invite a positive, a negative, or an indifferent response. The idea of "family" out of context for example allows for a positive response ordinarily. The idea of the "League of Homosexual Statemen" out of context probably invites a negative response. The references to the "Science Club" and the "Journalist Club" arouse indifference, I'd say. However, in context,  $A=B$  and  $B=C$ , so  $A=C$ ; guilt by association works in one direction; innocence by association works in the opposite direction. Thus, complications cancel signification.

The principle then transfers to, or rebounds on, two other important ideas in the context—and by context I have now come to mean not only the context created by a single story, but also the context created within the collection as a whole, and for that matter, to the whole of Moorhouse's canon. (The Acknowledgements at the end of the book read: "For more about Cindy, see *The Story of Nature*, *The Second Story of Nature*, and *The Third Story of Nature*, all in *Futility and Other Animals*, Angus and Robertson, 1976" (p. 214). It's appropriate, then, at the end of "Pacific City" to discover that it is "to be continued" (p. 53), that we have not come to the end, that the story is as incomplete as the town whose actions it records and the nation whose mores it allegorises. Contextual meanings gyre throughout the book and the moral world it imitates.

But the real problem is resting easily with the ideas of sex and violence as shown to be what they apparently are: i.e. just facts of life. Throughout the four stories, pederasty and homosexuality seem most prominent, although heterosexuality is here as well, as is a brief look-in on lesbianism. In the first story, homosexuality is connected with "extravagance" (p. 28), and extravagance, in the complicated associative network of the story is equated with "ideality" (p. 38). The ideal is connected with the "Golden Age" (p. 5), the "Odeon" (p. 6), "A place to be quiet like an art gallery or a library" (p. 5), a place of "dark freedom" (p. 6), "a temple" (p. 10), an oasis, a place of harmony, of mysteries, a place one might escape to. The real world is Pacific City, "sand and grit" (p. 7), "the jungle" (p. 5), "a dry place" (p. 12), a "sawdust-in-the-eye town" (p. 28), a town with a preoccupation with "sewerage, handwashing, and flies" (p. 41). The homosexual idea and ideal are brought into clear view, "in the sun on a flat rock further up [Sapin's Creek]" (p. 20) were Selfridge, the "town's only Olympic athlete from the Amsterdam Games, and eighteen year old who'd had a close friendship with Irving from the young days" (p. 28) and his old friend rub body balm on each other. Moorhouse invites us to consider the proceedings without making them explicit for us. He says: "It was an indulgent idea and they had a fit of monkey play while they rubbed each other down. The inevitable happened as they rubbed the balm into each other" (p. 28). That he should describe the action as "monkey play" can be read, I suppose, as a somewhat negative charge, if we consider closely enough the literal rather than the metaphorical meaning of (albeit dead-metaphorical meaning of) the phrase. However, any negative judgement is immediately cancelled, certainly qualified, by Irving's remarks: "Not enough of this sort of extravagance . . . not in this saw milling, sawdust in-the-eye town. All this putting up of houses and everlasting talk of one day having 'sewerage', their one and only dream" (p. 128). The sexual and the secret offer the exotic and the tantalising.

Initially, I think, we are meant to be rather uncomfortable with Irving Bow the sybarite, who has this passion for "love-making with the young" (p. 15). His desire to dress up young boys in togas and young girls in "silk stockings", "garter belt" (p. 37) and make-up doesn't seem right. And yet the children do enjoy the game and the fantasy. But I suspect we come to see Bow as playing an important part in developing the imaginative lives of the children who attend his cinema and "pass through his hands" (p. 21). And certainly, in contrast, to the wasteland of parents, Bow offers much. He offers "dark freedom" (p. 6).

In the second story, "The Dutch Letters", we have a sense of significant detail. The intention of the letter writers is not to be metaphorical or symbolic, but simply to convey thought and feeling. The letter of 15-4-42, for example, reads as follows: ". . . not much of a letter because I am in the middle of cooking dinner and have only a methylated spirits affair upon which to cook. Rudy is with me and licking lips at the thought of Roode Kool. How do you cook Roode Kool when you do it? I mixed two big apples, put a little water in the pan, brought it to the boil, added vinegar, sugar, and some salt, and am letting it simmer" (p. 62). We can read this as telling in giving us a sense of the person, but we respond to the habit of mind alone. We don't focus on individual details—"two big apples"—and read them as symbolic. They are meaningful, nevertheless, in creating context, a *gestalt*, and it's to that we respond, since we feel the pressure here to reconstruct the narrative—the same pressure informed by what in the first story was called the "illegality of the imagination" (p. 37). It's the facts—"two big apples" for "Roode Kool"—and what you can make of them.

The reality here is "war", "death" (Rudy's), "illness" (Dirk's), and "pyorrhoea", as well as the notes to the story, "Some Background to Dirk's letters" (p. 28). The

ideal lies in "music" (p. 68), *Pride and Prejudice* (p. 71) and "schemes for the futures" (p. 61) the world of art and the world of the dream. We escape from the real into this ideal by means of the imagination. The narrator, or the one who puts the letters before us, certainly enters a place and time remote to him in Conferenceville as he probes the secrets of Dirk Hansen. However, to escape the moment is not necessarily to transmute the pain of now: quite the contrary, as this story shows. The narrator says at the end of "The Hidden-Away Letters: I put the letters down, too tired and boozed to read on. Confused also by this operation on Dirk, who I had assumed was my Dirk's father . . . It was like turning over a pile of someone else's rubbish" (p. 68). And the narrator notes at the end of "The Hidden-Away Letters" (2): "I returned the letters to the writing slope's secret compartment . . . I felt a nausea from having looked into all that forgotten life" (p. 76). Thus, although the first story seems to privilege imagination over literalness, the second story qualifies the first—more accurately, the two stories qualify each other.

The sexual and the psychotic are dealt with in this story, but we need to reconstruct the context so as to know how to respond to them. In one letter Moorhouse makes us translate from the Dutch what we imagine to be "dirty". Marijke says to Pieter: ". . . I am so glad you are coming home from Darwin on leave, darling, want ik heb de smaak te pakken. Je bent zoo'n verrukkelyke kerel" (. . . I've really got a taste for it; you are such a delicious bloke [p. 63]). We see the two as being quite intense and full of pent-up violence, which probably results from a desire for life to be one way and an awareness of it being the other. Each parent is fastidious. The father writes: ". . . my plan was how to be hard working but not appear to be on my stomach to the Fraters and also not to show it to the Australians. Also, . . . never going to the lavatory in the firm's time, always making myself go before I go to work, even taking laxatives the night before" (p. 60). And the mother writes: "I am going to the dentist Monday to let him hack away at the tartar at the back of my front teeth. He says that, like you, and the children, I have an extra large deposit of lime. He said I would get pyorrhoea if I don't get them scraped. We use Pyrex tooth powder for it. It is awfully good and as for toothpaste I have switched us all to Ipana. I hope you won't go off the deep end when you come home and find we've changed but I think you'll like it . . . I try to get the children to squeeze the end rather than the top and to roll the tube with the pencil the way you said" (p. 64). Understandably, Mr and Mrs Hansen do not sleep together. Understandably, Dirk, even after his operation, is "forever in the city playing billiards and smoking and mixing with well-dressed older men" (p. 74).

The narrator is the reader. He puts the letters before himself and us. We create a context for comprehending the whole story. We create a context for understanding, too. We judge the Hansens and sympathize with Dirk, glad that his operation was not successful and that authority didn't win out over him. Still, when we learn that the narrator, whose role, we as the readers, share in, has been sleeping in Dirk's bed and that the narrator is Dirk's age, "maybe older slightly" (p. 77), I think we cringe as we imagine the narrator to cringe, as reality once again mars the dream.

The second story requires us to develop that contextual sense by cross-referencing the letters between individuals and by working through the writer/narrator who serves as the mediator between us and the Hansens. He functions as something of a mediator in the third story as well, where we hear more about sex and violence, and are provided with more about metaphor, meaning and morality, preparing us I think for that final story—the story which offers the greatest moral challenge to suspend judgement.

The sexual and the violent come together in the third story, "Imogene Continued". One of the main characters, Dr Cindy Braughton, an academic attending a conference, is raped by three Aboriginal men. We hear, too, though only briefly of a lesbian attraction of Cindy by Anna. We hear also that Crawford had come out as a homosexual about six months earlier, and that he changed from businessman to gay activist (p. 144).

Cindy, of course, is angry that she's been raped, but is determined not to press charges and reluctant to even pass judgement on her assailants. She finds herself, as a strong professional woman, in a dilemma and her conflict is political. She says: "It's a classic textbook dilemma . . . if you look at it—feminism and racism" (p. 97). She chooses to put the act in historical perspective; i.e. to see it from the point of view of "what we did to the Aboriginals" (p. 97). Her silence on this crime is meant to right history. Violence and degradation are to be excused given the larger context of circumstances. This is the idea, I suspect, that Moorhouse is conditioning us to see and persuading us to accept. Morality changes according to circumstances. There are no absolutes as the text establishes, all is variable.

Thus, the effort is to explain the seemingly inexplicable. Moorhouse uses Cindy's acceptance of the rape to demonstrate the principle of the Stockholm Syndrome, "where the aggressor and the victim form a special bond, a puzzling alliance" (p. 107). This prepares us for the sado-masochistic relationship in story four. In both stories, the belief that pain separates people and that pleasure unites them is proven to be not the full story. The full story is that it works both ways; pain can separate and pain can unite people. The first two stories of the collection show that pain distances people from people. The last two show how it is a tie that binds them together. The third deals with this in the context of academic claptrap, and ironizes the explanation. The fourth story presents the subject explicitly and naturalistically. The third story is somewhat comic, as it parodies the divided self. The fourth is quite straight in its presentation of an integrated self, the boy who mediates between the father and the son.

There are parallel scenes in the two stories which offer interesting similarities and contrasts. One scene, in the third story, is chronicled in the "Notes" and is headed "Across the Plains, Over the Mountains, and Down to the Sea" (p. 160). The journey motif here suggests the context of romance (as defined by N. Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, 1957)—a context which is supported by the phrase, "it was that road in the dream" (p. 161). What's more, the moment has meaning because it "symbolized everything" (p. 161). Most importantly its meaning makes for its morality. It's hopelessly complex, because of the "overlapping grief and jubilation connected with the moment": "Grief from having lost perfection, and the jubilation from having had it" (p. 161). The moment is moral, because it's intimate and charged. The narrator says: "It may have been neurotically doomed but god it felt right. I feel tears about it now. But I do not want to cry. Cindy released me. I don't mean from marriage but from numbness" (p. 161). The scene is sexually explicit. The narrator is moved by the moment; Cindy doesn't remember it.

The narrator remembers it because it was "hypercharged" (p. 176), a word used to describe the life between the politician and his lover in story four. Life is "hypercharged", we assume, only "when it breaks out of propriety" (p. 176) when it indulges in the dream, the illegality of the imagination, and the freedom from stricture. The drive to Canberra is another explicitly described sex scene. For the narrator/boy lover of the story, it is a meaningful moment. Another moment of what elsewhere he refers to as "our silent performance in all its human basicness, complete. Corporeal recognition and fulfilment of need and role. The perfect rightness of it beyond morality" (p. 168).

The two stories, although they deal with hetero- and homosexual relationships make the two seem as one, not only through the use of the journey motif, and the nostalgic tone which informs the recalling of past moments, but also in the texturing of the narratives, and the way each of the tellers allows memory to speak freely-associatively. The psychiatrist to whom the narrator of story three is telling of the journey across the plains, over the mountains and down to the sea, says to the narrator: "I want you to free-associate on the dream" (p. 161). The boy/lover who relates what he calls "the drive to Canberra", works laterally in detailing the event. He begins:

Let me recall the "drive to Canberra". That evocative memory. It was your election campaign. We were driving through the electorate. I was fifteen. No. I was probably fourteen. Had I even done the school certificate? I had been released from school after one of your "notes" had arrived at the Headmaster's office and I was told that there was a government car waiting for me. The faces of my friends staring down from school windows. I'd pack my things knowing that I would be whisked away to some hotel, to be fucked into a daze. And later, sometimes, to be used by your associates. Made drunk. And the drugs, oh yes, the muscle relaxants. Or no—sitting around in hotel rooms while you talked to people about things I didn't understand. That is what I remember most. You talking to foreign people. I remember once hitting on the idea of filing my nails in front of them. I think I wanted to embarrass you . . . (p. 180)

With this story as with the other, one person remembers the events and the other responds to it nonchalantly.

The point, then, is that references are not stabilized within isolated stories, that these stories are intertextual, and that they work to demonstrate the Andersonian principle. This is not to say, however, that the text does not control our response to it or to the amorality behind it. Moorhouse works meticulously throughout the four stories to condition us as to how we are not only to read each and particularly the fourth, but how we are to read the collection as a whole. In each story we are given statements with meanings which reverberate beyond the literal. In the second paragraph of the second story, for example, we read about the un-stableness of meaning. Blackhouse and Bow, we read, "[tried out] meanings on each other sometimes before they got it right in their own heads" (p. 3). The repetition of the word "sometimes" at the beginning of each of a series of successive sentences in this paragraph suggest the precariousness of exact meaning. The paragraph ends with two significant remarks: "Sometimes the way they misunderstood each other was more interesting than what they meant to say. So the conversation was sometimes tricked along by misunderstandings and non sequiturs . . ." (p. 3). Both remarks tell us how the narrative will tell itself. Both, moreover, point to the problem of isolating and identifying either the meaning or, I suspect, the morality of a human act. Multiplicity, or pluralism, is the only reality. As Irving says: "Everything I own and use has been selected after much thought and testing, and has many meanings for me" (p. 35). For Bow, read Moorhouse.

And this leads to ambiguity and even to confusion. When categories are broken down and definitions crumble, then chaos results and anarchy is liberating—or such is the thinking, I think, with Moorhouse. The first story records an interesting conversation on the subject of aesthetics. The Doctor offers an example to extend the meaning of beauty beyond the conventional. He says: "Yet take Tutman's workshop—beauty in disorder, or is it an order of its own? Does the attritus of human effort fall randomly into a pattern of beauty, as in the way the tools are left, the curled shavings of the carpenter's plane . . . ?" (p. 34). The

Doctor's point of view is opposed by Phillip, the town hairdresser, who [laughs and shrieks] before answering: "But what about the tools of your profession, Doctor, is that beauty—the remains of the operating theatre?" (p. 34). The common denominator here is beauty. The criterion for beauty is disorder—or apparent disorder. That point of view is, I think, acceptable. "Neatness", its opposite, is said to be "the plain man's substitute for beauty" (p. 34). Disorder, then, has a note of romantic wildness about it—a randomness that suggests the way life is, rather than a symmetry which suggests the way we'd like it to be. To this randomness is added the grotesque. And I think we're led to accept that as beautiful, too. We, I suspect, support the Doctor's argument, siding more with him than with Phillip, who "laughs and shrieks", Phillip who is intelligent but rather too affective. The argument signifies much. Most importantly, it establishes the range of possibilities wherein we might find beauty whatever it is.

In the fourth story ambiguity is central to meaning, because ambiguity suggests the complex interaction of things, the anti-teleological stand which we come to appreciate having dealt with stories two and three. Ambiguity come story four means, an acceptable perversion of what is the status quo, or what so oft was argued to be right, proper and just. The politician is a person of "sexual ambiguity" (p. 172); his lover is not. The politician is perversely bisexual. His lover is purely homosexual. The politician's son is a transexual; he's taking estrogen. It's all very complicated, and the complications work to make us sit up and take notice and then sit back knowing that it's all too complicated and such is life, and there's little we can do about it. But the point is made: "it illustrates", as the text says, "the indigestible fact—that truth is divisible" (p. 188). We may feel that "it's like turning over somebody else's pile of rubbish" (p. 68), but we must admit that filth can be fascinating.

What I see the four stories doing then, is establishing creative chaos of metaphor and meaning. The text works to enlarge on literal meaning and to move it out into an area where it is unstable. Meaning is not localized by the text; it requires substantiation within the context. The context, the stories work to suggest, is not the sum of the four stories, or the whole of Moorhouse's writing, but the culture itself—Australia. Literal meaning is difficult to come by and accept. Given the demonstrated principle of the complex interaction, conventional morality, the strictures which structure the status quo, is a limited approach to life. The text wants to bring us to feel, understand, and even appreciate this.

Who, then, is Frank Moorhouse? He is the one who presents life, says it's complicated, accepts it, and challenges us to do the same. That's all we know about him, and all we need to know.

## CAROLE WILKINS

### See-through Man

From the shadows he came lovingly towards me  
And suddenly a shaft of light hit his body  
No soft skin but a plastic surface covering machine parts  
Heart pumping, lungs expanding  
A scarlet coil of bowel above his legs  
He had become a model in a science museum

There was no face—a globe of perspex  
Held two white fixed orbs  
The lips replaced by a line  
And the arms by his sides were full of wires  
Like telephone cables exposed to be repaired  
A fluid of various reds surging within his shining frame

Horrorstruck, I tried to raise my arm  
But an unnatural stiffness took hold  
And as a beam from the sun, that special sun  
Further illuminated the room  
I saw my clear dummy's limb, twin to the man's  
Pulse with new, non-life

VERONICA BRADY

## Yet another letter to Joseph Furphy

Dear Joe,

It's some time since you've had a letter—in public, at least. The last, I think, was from Manning Clark about the state of Australia. But I've thought for a long time that *Such is Life* is one of the most important books ever written in Australia, so I'd like to have a yarn with you about the appearance of *The Portable Joseph Furphy* edited by John Barnes, an old friend and admirer of yours, and published by the University of Queensland Press.\*

So Joe, you're a classic—and about time in my view. Indeed if we set *Such is Life* in the context of the story Manning Clark tells about Australia, it's a life and death book. On the one hand, it looks back to a heroic age (which perhaps never really existed) in the Riverina before the coming of the railways, and expressing the sense of loss, of living in a world which is not only chaotic and fragmentary but even at times absurd—the sense we know only too well today, Joe. But on the other hand, it keeps our eyes open to new possibilities, to the Australia you hoped for as the home of the “coming race”, the “recordless land” exempt from the bigotries, injustices and tyranny of the old world, the home of free men and women. Since your day, these possibilities seem to have been receding from us, in the last few years especially, but that probably makes your book all the more important to remind us of hopes we may have forgotten or set aside. As Manning Clark has also told you no doubt, the industrialization which has taken place has brought enormous changes taking us a long way from the Australia you lived in and even further from the one you hoped for. But that doesn't mean that yours isn't still a voice we might all listen to—hence, to return to it, *The Portable Furphy*.

Usually I have my doubts about this kind of publishing exercise which reminds me of the old -time Show Bag; a collection of samples which is never enough for a decent meal, much less to set up house. But *The Portable Furphy*, you'll be pleased to hear, is different, largely, I suppose, because of the place it gives to *Such is Life*—you were a one book man not only in the sense that that's far and away the most important book you wrote but also that everything you wrote as well as most things you wrote was part of that book which also overflows its covers decomposing as well as composing itself before our eyes. But part of this difference depends also on John Barnes. His selections are masterly, sections from *Rigby's Romance* and *The Buln-Buln and the Brolga*, from your letters,

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\* *Portable Australian Authors: Joseph Furphy*. Edited with an Introduction by John Barnes. University of Queensland Press, 1981, ISSN 0156 6636.

poems and contributions to *The Bulletin* as well as an earlier version of the lost-child story which became the story of Mary O'Halloran in the final version of *Such is Life*. All these are gathered about *Such is Life* itself, like so many filings about a magnet, making one large and lively field of force. So far very good. *Such is Life* now appears more truly what it is than it ever has done as a game of mirrors, of admissions and concealments, sincerity and pretence, jokes and pain. The collection here of letters you wrote to your brother when you yourself were a bullocky in the Riverina in the early 80s and of those you wrote during the process of the publication of *Such is Life* together with the account of your life to Miles Franklin highlight the play between life and art, pitch us out upon the comic frontier, the place of the mind, habited by the great masters of truthful deceit and deceitful truth, Cervantes, Swift, Sterne and Kierkegaard. Your letter to Stephens after you'd signed the contract for *Such is Life*, for instance, begins with a ring master's flourish.

Dear Sir,

Thy promises are like Adonis' Gardens which one day bloomed and fruitful were the next. I return agreement, signed and witnessed.

And sure enough, in the next letter the talk of a visit to Sydney has also borne fruit and you're looking back on it. In fact, of course, the two letters were five months apart but here in fiction, or at least between the covers of a book, they become part of your mock-heroic assault upon the commonsense of things.

So *The Portable Furphy* gives *Such is Life* a new lease of life because it sets it in a different, more problematical yet more playful perspective. It also highlights the part its readers have to play. For a long time, ever since I put together for myself its strange history—which John Barnes releases here in his introduction—I've wondered whether *Such is Life* isn't, indeed, a book invented by its readers. When A. D. Hope wrote in the 1950's in the first flush of Australian Literature's academic existence, that it is about the theory of the novel and compared it with Ulysses he was not reading the same book which delighted its bush readers, however few, fifty years earlier. Vance Palmer's abbreviated version, done with missionary intention in the 1930's, is something else again and John Barnes, too, has his own no-nonsense reading which he argues for in his introduction.

But all of this would delight you, I think. John Barnes would set you in the tradition of nineteenth century realism. But as I understand you, Joe, you're one of nature's sceptics and your book is one long series of shifting perspectives. Not so much a lie, as you put it, as "one long series of lies" in which may make it its own kind of truth, of course. Now all this makes you a rather different kind of writer from Lawson, with whom Barnes compares you, not entirely to your favour, and from most nineteenth century writers. True, as your attacks on Kingsley and "Ouida" tell us, you wanted to get at the truth of experience and had not time for sentimentality or mere romancing. But the "truth" you were looking for was anything but the product of the robust empiricism of a Balzac or even a George Eliot. As the beginning and end of *Such is Life* make clear, for you we are such stuff as dreams, or at least illusions, are made of, and the most serious thing we can do perhaps is to play. So I find John Barnes' claim that you weren't interested in the inner life very strange, especially as he quite simply fails to discuss your experiments with form, the attempt (as I see it) to render the free flowing, ever changing and finally incomprehensible shape of experience. In this, and in your sense of being suspended between belonging and alienation, meaning and meaninglessness, the aesthetic and the ethical, a sense which issues in the games you play with language running up and down the social scale as well as ranging back as far as Shakespeare, you seem to me to have far more

in common with the twentieth century than with your own time—though no doubt you yourself would suspect any kind of placement, as labels and roles won your mockery rather than your respect. If you fit with anyone, then, it's with writers like Cervantes and Sterne, but John Barnes doesn't have anything to say about that comparison. The trouble is, I suppose, that he's let himself be taken in by you, believes you when you present yourself as a simple "up-country bloague" (I'd like your reasons for that spelling, by the way). It's true, of course, that you left school early, but not many of the people I teach in University have read as widely, were as interested in people, ideas and contemporary events as you. In your own day, you seem to me to have been closer to the Socratic ideal than that other great polymath Chris Brennan. Your love of paradox, of balancing on the sharp point between belief and unbelief, contrasts with his preference for absolutes and rhetorical immensities. You're the man we need today, Joe, the man fascinated by the absurdity of things, and it's in this sense that you'd be interested in the theories of fiction and metafiction. After all, you honour the conventions of plot, character and incident only by parodying them and suspend your world between the cosmic speculation which follows your marvellous opening sentence, "Unemployed at last!"—for you the novel isn't about the individual in but living in despite of society—and the equally cosmic but comic agnosticism of the parody of *Macbeth* which concludes your story.

Such is life, my fellow mummies—just like a poor player, that bluffs and feints his hour upon the stage, and then cheapens down to mere nonentity. But let me not hear any small witticism to the further effect that its story is a tale told by a vulgarian, full of slang and blasky, signifying—nothing.

So I'd put it to you that Barnes' introduction, learned and entirely at ease with its learning, urbane and lucid, nevertheless introduces a book which you didn't write or, more accurately perhaps, which I and many others today don't read. But this, I suspect, only increases the value of *The Portable Furphy*, extending the parodic power of *Such is Life* so that John Barnes tends to become a character invented by Joseph Furphy or, alternatively, inventing Joseph Furphy, and his introduction becomes another part of the game of swinging perspectives as the introduction to Swift's *Tale of A Tub* does, for example.

So *The Portable Furphy* represents a new stage in the continuing life and adventures of *Such is Life*, a book built upon the fault-lines rather than the certainties of our culture and so capable of almost endless expansion. For myself, I'd like to see it talked about in the same breath as books of the same kind—Borges' *Labyrinths*, for instance, as well as *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*. You'd enjoy this talk, I'm sure—Barnes prints your letter to Cathels, for instance, in which you rejoice in the "reposeful satisfaction in the Columbus-discovery of a man worth talking to, a man who knows that Thales the Milesian was not an Irishman, and that the publicans of 18 centuries ago were not grog-sellers"—especially as it gets you out of the onerous role of Nineteenth Century author. You'd prefer us to think that you took up writing as a way of passing time, less dangerous than drink or religion, as you told Miles Franklin in another letter published here. Maybe this talk will tarnish your reputation as a nationalist—Barnes also makes a good deal of that. But as I read you, being Australian for you is something like Simone de Beauvoir's idea of the second sex, a state originally conceived as inferior by which the other sex defines itself as superior, but which now exists as a state of dissent. What you gloried in as an Australian was your freedom from convention, from "fealty to shadowy idols" and the possibility this gave you of making your own life, your own world from the inside. Ultimately, I think, your allegiance went to humanity and you'd have

agreed with Forster in his hope that if he had to choose between betraying his country and his friend he'd have what you'd call the intestinal fortitude to betray his friends—the passages Barnes includes from *Rigby's Romance* makes it pretty clear that you've little time for ideology, even for the ideology of socialism.

So I'll finish here, Joe, with apologies for taking up so much of your eternity. Still, thought you'd like a response to *The Portable Furphy* and don't worry: if it does make you a classic, it will be a living classic, not a fossil. It's one of the best do-it-yourself kits on the market and you should get numbers of lively new readers as a result.

*Some Features in*

**WESTERLY, No. 2, JUNE 1982**

**Focus on Contemporary Short Fiction**

—Stories by: Francis Walsh, Tom Winton, Jill Smyth, Patricia Avery, Julie Lewis, Geoffrey Bewley, Margaret Eliot, Beverley Farmer.

**Sir Charles Court's Passing**

**Malaysian Exile in Australia: Ee Tiang Hong**

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*New Release*

**Western Australian Literature: A Bibliography** by Bruce Bennett, John Hay and Susan Ashford, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1981. Available at major booksellers.

## Printmaking in Western Australia

Until recently there were very few artists who made prints in Western Australia. During the 1950s and 1960s (fertile periods of exploration for printmaking in other parts of Australia), the medium was almost completely forgotten.

It is only during the last eight years or so that the kind of collective momentum that printmaking has had in Melbourne or Sydney during the last twenty years has developed in Perth.

The only other comparable time during which there was an interest in printmaking in Western Australia was between the two world wars. Even then it was only spirited activity by a few individuals, inspired by two dominant personalities—Henri van Raalte (1881-1929) and A. B. Webb (1887-1944), both Englishmen trained in London, who had come to Western Australia for their health.

Henri van Raalte had served as Master of Painting from Life at St John's Wood School of Art prior to his emigration, and had distinguished himself as an etcher with The Royal Etchers Society, of which he was an associate and exhibiting member, and he had had two works selected for reproduction in the influential *Studio* publication *Modern Etching and Engraving* (1902) before his arrival here in 1910. He was Western Australia's first printmaker.<sup>1</sup>

A. B. Webb arrived in Perth in 1915 having worked as an illustrator for many of London's well known magazines and weeklies.

Both artists exerted a decided influence in Western Australia, primarily because both established authoritative positions as teachers, and because each developed a vision of Australian landscape which had a strong sense of place and individualism.

Henri van Raalte's talent matured early. His etching *The Boatbuilders Shop, Rye*, exhibited with The Royal Etchers Society and reproduced in *Modern Etching and Engraving* (1902), is a remarkable success for such a young artist. His romantic 19th century imagination has, not surprisingly, Dutch overtones.<sup>2</sup> Several of his monumental compositions of Australian gum trees are almost reminiscent of the church interiors of the 19th century Dutch artist Johannes Bosboom. They are certainly like Hans Heysen's (also of a northern European background). As well, they owe something to Francis Seymour Haden, Frank Brangwyn and the Scottish etcher D. Y. Cameron.

Shortly after his arrival van Raalte was teaching young people on Saturday mornings, and soon started his own art school, the *Berry School of Art*, in Outram Street, West Perth, later the *Perth School of Art* in Hay Street.<sup>3</sup> Among his pupils were the printmakers Beatrice Darbyshire, Edith Trethowan, and an amateur

etcher, the architect Colin Ednie Brown. He taught at Guildford Grammar, Loreto Convent and Queens School, Cottesloe, prior to moving to Adelaide in 1922 as Curator of the National Gallery of South Australia. He also took an interest in an amateur photography club, who later named themselves the *Van Raalte Club* in his honour.

A. B. Webb made his first colour relief prints c. 1921, at about the time he was appointed assistant art master at Perth Technical School.<sup>4</sup> His prints (which include three lithographs) capture with particular poignancy, the charm and stillness of the Swan River foreshore in Perth, and also the sharp translucent Australian light. His work owes a great deal to the influence of the Japanese woodcut and art nouveau.

Webb taught at Perth Technical School from 1921-1934 when the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease forced his resignation and brief return to England. In London the Fine Art Society held the first comprehensive exhibition of his work in November - December 1934. Upon his return to Perth in 1937 he opened his own private art school. Although he had many pupils, the only artists to make prints were his friend George Pitt Morrison (1861 - 1946), then Curator of The Art Gallery of Western Australia, and Frank Mills (1901 - 1957) whose colour linocuts reveal Webb's influence.

The only exhibiting societies in Perth at the time were *The West Australian Society of Arts* (formed in 1896) and the *Perth Society of Artists* (formed in 1932). Two excellent bookshops also provided exhibition space—*Booklovers* and *Franceska's*.

From their records only the following other artists made prints during the ensuing twenty years up to the second world war—Gordon Holdsworth (a silversmith), John Mcleod (a sculptor), Eric A. Hummerston, Charles Nuttal, Angus McKail, Miss B. Mengler, C. A. R. Hill, Robert Hetherington (the first Arts Supervisor with the Education Department), Beatrice Darbyshire and Edith Trethowan. Recent research has revealed the remarkable work of these two fine women artists. However both led relatively quiet and uneventful lives and had no followers.

Beatrice Darbyshire followed in van Raalte's footsteps. He advised her to study in London, where at the Royal College of Art, South Kensington, van Raalte's steady influence was reinforced by Malcolm Osborne.

Though stylistically unadventurous, her strong sensitive drypoints such as *The Bachelor* (c. 1926) and *The Old Fremantle Bridge* (c. 1930) certainly enrich our view of Australian etching during the 1930's. Her last was unfortunately made in 1939. Her oeuvre as etcher was small, but includes landscapes, portraits, and marine and aboriginal subjects.<sup>5</sup>

Edith Trethowan's activity went virtually unnoticed. She was the only wood engraver in Perth in the 1930's, and was initiated into the art by her friend Beatrice Darbyshire after her return from London in 1927. After some experiments together, Edith Trethowan worked on in private, only exhibiting her engravings once—five in 1935 with the *Perth Society of Artists*. Though an unspectacular artist, the discovery recently in Perth of almost her complete work in the medium, has given her delicate and individual work a place in an overall history of Australian relief printmaking.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1940s printmaking virtually ceased to exist in Perth. After the second world war many emigrants from Europe passed through Fremantle on their way to Melbourne and Sydney. Western Australia represented their first sight of Australia, but few artists lingered. Two artists who were printmakers did stay briefly. Louis Kahan (b. 1905 in Vienna), arrived in Perth 1947, and Vaclovas Ratas (b. 1910 in Lithuania) who arrived in 1949. Both had European reputations

as artist-printmakers, but their stay was too short-lived to exert any influence locally.<sup>7</sup> Ratas moved to Sydney and Kahan to Melbourne, doubtless discouraged by local conservatism, and eager to make contact with a more vigorous artistic milieu.

The state Art Gallery in Perth remained amalgamated to the Museum until 1959, and had no curatorial staff responsible for prints until 1955. However, during the benevolent directorship of Laurie Thomas (from 1952-1956) a Keeper of Prints and Drawings, Hilary Hunter (Merrifield) was appointed in 1955. Upon her resignation in 1959 Ronald Weddell was appointed. Unfortunately the position was cancelled in 1964 and Weddell left to become an art lecturer at Claremont Technical College. During this period The Art Gallery did acquire some contemporary prints by both Australian and European artists. This represented the second phase of acquisitions of prints since their initiation as part of the collection through Joseph Pennell's purchases at the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup>

There was unfortunately still a lack of activity in printmaking in Western Australia. Catalogues of the exhibiting societies at the time record some individual prints by various artists, but few if any would have claimed that printmaking was an essential activity. Guy Grey-Smith (1916 - 81) and his wife Helen (b. 1916, India) alone continued to make prints despite local indifference—screenprinting as it was being popularised practically everywhere else at the time.<sup>9</sup>

One amateur etcher deserves mention—Hubert Smeed (1883 - 1965) who exhibited with the West Australian Society of Arts during the 1950s. Smeed retired as an engineering draughtsman in 1948 and thereafter occupied himself with drypoints of topographical subjects, recording for his own pleasure (and posterity) the many curious and interesting architectural landmarks of Perth at the time. His drypoints are somewhat naïve, but sensitive and evocative, deserving of a place in an account of printmaking activity in the State.<sup>10</sup>

Printmaking has found its most active and accomplished converts in Western Australia during the last decade. The resurgence which occurred in the medium much earlier in the eastern states of Australia was long in coming to the West.

The efforts of the Print Council of Australia to convert both artists and public did eventually reach Perth, as did the success of printmaking departments in the art schools and colleges of the other Australian states.

In the mid 1960s separate courses in printmaking were established in Perth, first at Perth and Claremont Technical Colleges, where Edgar Karabanovs (b. 1925, Latvia) and Ronald Weddell (b. 1926, England) taught respectively, and who established their departments with the necessary equipment and supporting staff. Now printmaking is as generally available as elsewhere in Australia, and everyone has the opportunity to develop sophisticated graphic skills.

The formation of the *Printmakers' Association of Western Australia* and the establishment of the *Fine Art Printmaking Studio* (with funds from the Visual Arts Board) in 1974 has also nurtured local activity. The Printmakers' Association initially developed due to dissatisfaction with the Print Council of Australia, which it was felt was just too far away to be sensitive to local needs. Past Presidents have been John Fairhall, Cliff Jones, Ray Beattie and Helen Taylor.<sup>11</sup>

A recent annual exhibition was devoted to three-dimensional prints (or multiples?) and should have been seen in other parts of Australia.<sup>12</sup>

Naturally groups do not suit every need and have to rely on a dedicated membership with common ideals and financial support.

The *Fine Art Printmaking Studio* has likewise not been without its share of controversy and the vicissitudes of shifting premises, but it has provided a central working place and produced good work—Helen Grey-Smith's screenprint *Per Simmons* 1977 for example.<sup>13</sup>

The insistence which prints have in capturing public interest in turn, has given almost instant recognition to several Australian artists. In Western Australia, Ray Beattie (b. 1949, Northern Ireland) shortly after winning first prize in the inaugural Fremantle Print Award in 1976,<sup>14</sup> held successful 'sellout' exhibitions in several Australian capital cities, and had works instantly acquired by all major public collections. In fact he had difficulty in meeting popular demand, a happy situation for any artist, but even more so for a printmaker who can look to his edition.

Beattie may be something of a maverick in the local art scene,<sup>15</sup> but at the same time represents the kind of technical professionalism which has developed fairly generally amongst printmakers in Western Australia.

Three of Western Australia's senior contemporary artists have recently developed graphic forms which complement their activity as painters.

Guy Grey-Smith began to make his present series of bold and uncompromising black and white woodcuts in 1974 after experimenting briefly with etching.<sup>16</sup>

Brian McKay (b. 1926) has developed a form of heavily textured screenprint in which there are subtle variations within the small editions made. He uses the same technique in his 'paintings', gently reminding us how easily an artist can choose to ignore artificial boundaries between the various media.<sup>17</sup>

Robert Juniper (b. 1929) has also very recently begun to make prints—at first etchings, a result of Charles Blackman and John Olsen's encouragement, and presently collographs, a technique which he has made into his own.

In fact there is a great deal of experimentation. Leon Pericles (b. 1949), well known as an etcher,<sup>18</sup> has more recently produced prints from process blocks, painstakingly wiping, printing and colouring by hand.

They are but a part of a large body of graphic work which reveal a fascination with technical problems.

Neil Hollis (b. 1954) works convincingly with, and from, colour photographs, and Brian Blanchflower (b. 1939, England), who has encouraged innovation as a lecturer in printmaking at the Western Australian Institute of Technology, has developed a unique graphic oeuvre which incorporates an imaginative use of collage.

Others who have made noteworthy prints are Judy Chambers (b. 1937, Hong Kong), Cliff Jones (b. 1939, England), Helen Taylor (b. 1943, India), Barbara Hawthorn (b. 1948), Memnuma Vila-Bogdanich (b. 1934, Yugoslavia), Baynard Werner (b. 1930), Miriam Stannage (b. 1939), Richard Hook (b. 1946), and Hans Arkeveld (b. 1942, Holland).

The exhibition *Ten Western Printmakers* organised by The Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1978 (and which toured Australia 1978/79) attempted to document the activity of some of the most active at that time, but requires sequels if a continuing record is to be made. Those selected were certainly not the only artists seriously making prints, but when taken together with all those presently active gives an encouraging sense of collective energy.<sup>19</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Lionel Lindsay, The Etchings of H. van Raalte, A.R.E., *Art in Australia*, December 1918.
2. Henri van Raalte's father was Dutch and from the town of Raalte.
3. Henri van Raalte had an etching press made by a local firm, Hoskins, according to his specifications, for his own use and that of his pupils. A replica was made by Hoskins for Beatrice Darbyshire which she presented to Perth Tech. in 1970, and is still in use.
4. For a general account of Webb's life and work refer to Hendrik Kolenberg's 'A. B. Webb', *Art and Australia*, Vol. 16, No. 4, June 1979.

5. See exhibition catalogue *A. B. Webb, Edith Trethowan and Beatrice Darbyshire, Western Australian Printmakers of the 1920s and 1930s* by Hendrik Kolenberg. Exhibition shown at S. H. Ervin Museum and Art Gallery, Sydney, July and University of Western Australia, September - October 1979; touring Australia through Australian Gallery Directors' Council 1980-81.
6. Hendrik Kolenberg 'Letter to the Editors', *Imprint*, No. 1, 1979.
7. The Art Gallery of Western Australia did acquire works by both artists at the time; Kahan's were European subjects, and from Ratas works he made in Perth.
8. See introduction by Hendrik Kolenberg to *The First Fifteen Years*, The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1979 (exhibition catalogue).
9. See introduction by Daniel Thomas to *Australian Print Survey*, Art Gallery of New South Wales and touring Australia, 1963/64 (exhibition catalogue).
10. Hendrik Kolenberg, 'Hubert Smeed 1883 - 1965—a contemporary topographical artist', *Westerly*, No. 4, December 1978.
11. See introduction by Hendrik Kolenberg to Annual Exhibition of Printmakers' Association of Western Australia at Undercroft Gallery, The University of Western Australia, 1977 (exhibition catalogue).
12. Refer to exhibition catalogue, *Three Dimensional Prints*, Printmakers' Association of Western Australia, Fremantle Arts Centre, 1979. Introduced by Helen Taylor.
13. Judy Chambers, 'The Fine Art Printmaking Studio, Perth', *Imprint*, No. 2, 1980.
14. The 'Fremantle Print Award' organized by the Fremantle Arts Centre and supported by the Shell Company is an important event on the printmaking calendar in Western Australia, if not Australia—now the *Shell Invitation Print Award*. Other winners: Jock Clutterbuck (1977), David Rose (1978), Basil Hadley (1979), Jörg Schmeisser and Rod Ewins (1980).
15. Beattie is now gaining recognition as an adventurous photo-realist painter, see exhibition catalogue *High Street Studio Realists—Marcus Beilby, Ken Wardrop, Ray Beattie*, The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1980. (Also at Art Gallery of New South Wales and National Gallery of Victoria.) Also refer to Craig Gough. 'Ray Beattie', *Imprint*, No. 1, 1977.
16. A draft list of all of Guy Grey-Smith's prints was prepared by Hendrik Kolenberg in conjunction with the artist's retrospective held at The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1976. (Photocopies of this catalogue were made for distribution.)
17. In fact one of his screenprints, *Guardia*, 1976, was included in the exhibition *Ten Western Australian Artists*, The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1976, as a painting, catalogued 'oil on panel', cat. no. 17 (reproduced). Also refer to Hendrik Kolenberg 'Printmaking as Painting', Brian McKay's recent work, *Art and Australia*, June 1981.
18. N. and L. Perry (compiled), *Pericles' Etchings*, Perth: Service Printing, 1976. Introduction by Frank Norton.
19. Refer to introduction to the catalogue of this exhibition by Hendrik Kolenberg, and to Murray Mason (ed.), *Contemporary Western Australian Painters and Printmakers*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1979.

## BOOKS

Thomas Shapcott, *Stump & Grape & Bopple-Nut*, Bullion Publications, Brisbane, 1981, 56 pp.

*Stump & Grape & Bopple-Nut* is a collection of what Thomas Shapcott calls "prose inventions"—something like *Parabolas* by Andrew Taylor (Australia) the prose poems of Michael Benedikt (America), the work of Helga Novak (Germany), and the stuff of Julio Cortazar (Argentina). But I'm not comparing, just suggesting a context. *Stump* is a thin volume, although "totalizing" in its sparseness. The subjects for these pieces range wide, as the list of contents evidences: from "Stump . . .," through "Fictions/facts" and "Voices", to "Motel Territory", to "Objects/Things". The topics may seem random, but it's a matter of touching on all bases—i.e. "totalizing". Shapcott references the world without to explore the world within, and he demonstrates, through the experience of these prose inventions, how the word can connect these two worlds.

To start to understand what he's doing in the collection, we have to go to the end, where the final paragraph provides the perspective. Shapcott writes: "Call this a game. Object—describe the litter on this table. Describe the way of seeing this litter, of being this, describe being—describe and all this shatters. Until we are truly entered we do not know we are active, we do not remember we are alone." Objects, and the way they appear to us (i.e. the way our language makes them appear), signal what we may be about. Our descriptions of them chart where we are and where we've been. As the author tells us: "We know the outer ones are only maps of a district, not the journey itself." The journey is the process of discovering how the object and the subject (the self) contact one another. What we come to know is how we feelingly come to know hard fact.

Like in "Barley Sugar". That's one of the inventions from "Objects/Things", and it's fairly typical in what it's doing and how it's working. The piece has four sections and each makes advances away from hard fact and

literal reality into the soft centre and poetry. Shapcott here and elsewhere meditates freely-associatively. He begins with the sensory and a simile: "Barley sugar tastes like kindergarten." His memory unpacks association after association and his mind moves laterally: "Sickrooms at school: couch and the nurse expecting some trick. And there is a calendar on the wall with ancient month, December last year perhaps. A picture of scrawny gumtrees, "McIntyre's farm". The next section fixes barley sugar in the context of adult feeling and grown-up relationships: "Why did you give me this bottle of barley sugar" The "you", we learn, as we follow the speaker who follows the line of feeling mapped by the object, is his estranged partner. Barley sugar takes him back to "kindergarten" and "sickrooms" and the wary "nurse" and another bad time when he must say to his lover "go your own way". We go, I repeat, from fact to feeling, and discover that the truth is really with the latter. Wasn't it Sartre who reminded us what Kirkegaard said: that "The reality of everyone's existence proceeds . . . from the 'inwardness' of man, not from anything that the mind can codify, for objectified knowledge is always at one or more removes from the truth—'Truth . . . is subjectivity'." As Shapcott says in Toowong, Brisbane: "We strike a chord across time by vision of inter-connectedness. That's how we happen. That's how language keeps correcting us, that's how we correct language, that's how we can call for a doctor, ambulance, lover, family, even at 2 a.m."

In most of these prose inventions, the author puts an object or two before himself—an "aubergine" or "feather and claw"—and uses a few phrases to locate that object. Those phrases bounce around inside the invention until the literal gives way and the object/thing becomes, as Shelley says, "dearer for its mystery". With each piece, too, the transforming power of language is felt. The gentle pressure of art is exerted; the reader goes through the pleasure of the change from the factual to the figurative presentation of the concrete. Take "Blue", for example; Shapcott writes:

Close your eyes. Dive. It is very deep here but somewhere there is sunlight diluting the darkness of blue scooping it up in a fine net of gold till your mouth is opened eagerly and there are tears, it is such joy. Those

tears are the ones you had forgotten last night when the ache was too hard, nothing could release, it was clamped in with cold. Blue is the colour we come to alone, it will not be shared. Of course you do not see what I see, we cannot share the identical spot, the shadows are so much different for that. Open your eyes now. Look, we are both smiling. We are both aware of walking in the dark night, the tears that could not flow were the same blue string as ice. In the sunlight now it is transformed, it is melting.

There is clearly not the conventional curve of action to these—no Aristotelian beginnings, middles, ends. Rather it's all flowing like the smoke of dry ice; like the wash of a water colour; like a woman whose mind doesn't cut her feeling off from her yesterday.

Although they are "inventions", they retain their contact with human emotional reality. They're not tinny; they're hearty.

JIM LEGASSE

Veronica Brady, *A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God*, Theological Explorations, Sydney, 1981, 113 pp., \$8.20.

Despite the naturalist school of criticism which created the "Lawson-Furphy" tradition, and which concentrated its attention on the physical surface and material structures of Australian society, the defining features of Australian literature must eventually be traced through the patterns of meaning which underly these physical forms and material structures. This assumption, while hardly radical, is not one that we see widely reflected in Australian literary criticism. Admittedly, the possibility has been raised in the work of Kiernan, Heseltine, and Buckley; but much of Australian literary criticism still contents itself with detailing the objective world of our fiction, the decorations of existence in Australia rather than what those decorations might mean. We are not like the Americans, who are fortunate enough to have a distinguished body of criticism which examines convincingly and exhaustively the links between the central myths of that culture and the particularisation of those myths in its literature. Australia's failure to generate or recognise this kind of criticism denies us the

opportunity of seeing, through the most intense and self-conscious response to our national life, the defining possibilities of meaning within Australian experience.

These, or something like them, are the premises behind Veronica Brady's approach to Australian literature in *A Crucible of Prophets*; and such premises alone would make the book a welcome contribution to what one hopes is a growing critical debate. *A Crucible of Prophets* is a richly perceptive book engaged in the attempt to define a peculiarly Australian search for meaning, what the author calls "the question of God", through an examination of Australian fiction. In reaction to a tradition of criticism that is doggedly realist, that projects Australia as simply a geographic concentration of material forms, Dr Brady's discussion assumes that "the challenge offered by Australia to its new inhabitants is not merely physical but metaphysical" (p. 3). This metaphysical challenge, she argues, involves the writer of fiction in the "question of God", as the specificity of Australian experience demands, and evokes, the articulation of a distinctive answer to that question. The discussion of this "answer" is complicated by the generosity of Dr Brady's approach, salting away provocative but tangential insights; however, her method is designed to reveal, through the individual writer's patterns of imagery and meaning, a sense of acceptance of God and of spirituality developing chronologically in Australian writing.

*A Crucible of Prophets* argues that our beginnings in convictism imposes a link between the metaphysical and physical predicament of the first settlers that postulates isolation and exile as definitive dilemmas: from this flows the Australian problem of existence which is predicated upon the certainty of isolation and of suffering—which is not relieved by an ameliorating society. In Clarke's *For The Term of His Natural Life*, Dr Brady finds evidence both of the novelist's nihilism in the face of the convict experience, and his baulking at the full implications of such a view of existence. In consequence, we see hints of a resolution through "redemption" at the end of *His Natural Life*. Since, however, such a sense of the possibility of redemption is at best residual in Clarke it is not easily discovered in other nineteenth century writers. At this point there

is little disagreement between Dr Brady and the proponents of the Lawson-Furphy tradition; however, there is a change in emphasis in Dr Brady's insistence that Clarke's admission of the relevance of God reveals that the problem of metaphysics does have an important function in our early fiction. And if it is difficult to trace this in other nineteenth century writers, Dr Brady argues, this is because these writers deliberately deny and expunge from their fiction Clarke's sense of the spiritual. In her discussion of J. B. O'Reilly, Boldrewood, and of Furphy later on, the writer uncovers the attempt to keep metaphysics at bay: it is presented as a deliberate posture adopted in order to dismiss the despair created by a nihilistic response to Australian experience; to ignore the questions which might undermine a romantic version of such experience; and to evade the need to articulate a redeeming but demanding sense of spirituality in order to deal with experience. The "Great Refusal" (and the equestrian metaphor is appropriate), as Dr Brady calls it, is a conscious resistance to the question of God, and to the consideration of any ultimate meaning, in deference to a perverse but determined focus on the opportunities offered by the objective, secular world. The "Great Refusal" dominates our fiction and our culture, in Brady's description, until the mediation of the work of Patrick White, where the acceptance of man's isolation and inevitable suffering is seen as emerging from a commitment to spirituality and an openness to the possibility of God.

This, crudely, is the thesis of *A Crucible of Prophets*, and it is persuasively argued. However, this thesis does not represent the book's only benefit, since the methodology Dr Brady adopts is probably the most important feature of her work—the choice of perspective on our literary tradition illuminates it in new ways, and at least rearranges the patterns of light and shadow we have become accustomed to seeing. The notion of the great refusal, for example, offers itself as a new idea, and a rich vein to mine, tempting the reader to apply it more widely than Dr Brady does. If we accept, for instance, a certain stereotype for our national character that includes a basic hedonism, a deliberate pragmatism, and the sentimental affection for the working man that tends to surface in our use of egalitarianism as a means

of levelling and domesticating individualism, we do so out of a certain empiricism; with hindsight, we can deduce the enabling conditions for such features but not the reasons why they become so dominant. We do not, that is, make the connection between such features and their roots within the central myths or ideology of the culture. Dr Brady's discussion implies that such details of the Australian self may well emerge from a specific response to the "metaphysical challenge"—the motivated and dogged embrace of secularity; if we have focussed on the objective world we have done so only in order to protect ourselves against the "intuition that our lives stand out into an emptiness" (p. 22). And, as Dr Brady points out, the success of such a metaphysical strategy for survival can be seen in the extent to which we have made Australian culture "one which professes itself secular and is profoundly suspicious of intensity of experience in general" (p. 22). Observations such as these provide insight beneath the surface forms of our social structure and behaviour, and suggest what structures and behaviour might mean; from these perceptions it would be interesting, for instance, to enquire afresh into the phenomenon of mateship as the concrete result of a metaphysical position rather than simply a social code or a simplistic response to the loneliness of the bush.

The determined secularity of our society, and of our literature, is not dealt with in *A Crucible of Prophets* as it is in, say, Inglis Moore's *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*. For Dr Brady, social pattern is the form which proceeds from a metaphysical position. So, Australia's secularity is seen as explaining the deliberate focus on the objective world that typifies Australian literary style in the Lawson-Furphy tradition, as well as the typical interest of our literary critics, one imagines. Dr Brady investigates the nature of this secularity through Furphy; her inquiry into his metaphysics discloses a combination of utopianism and humanitarianism which results in the recommendation of a practical, egalitarian Christianity that contrives to excise all spiritual content from its beliefs. For Tom Collins, even the Sermon on the Mount can be domesticated and de-mystified by his rugged practicality:

It is no fanciful conception of an intangible order of things, but a practical workable

code of daily life, adapted to any stage of civilisation and delivered to men and women who were in most respects like ourselves.

This discussion of Christianity is filtered through a self-conscious pragmatism and so ingeniously manages to avoid mentioning God at all. Instead of an "intangible order" we have the focus on people "like ourselves" facing up the world as it is here and now. Here we find another fabled Australian characteristic—egalitarianism—depicted as evolving, not as a principle in itself, but as a strategy of evasion of the spiritual, the "intangible". By seeing the concept as a strategy of evasion we see also the cause of its weakness; as Dr Brady points out, this vision is so pragmatic and world-centred that the "feeling for the individual remains at the level of sentiment and tends to give way under the pressure of economic, political or social necessity" (p. 52). Democracy becomes populism. The metaphysical weakness is even more apparent: Furphy's reliance on his social solutions to metaphysical doubts never fully excises the hints of absurdity and despair from his fiction, while his faith in the social codes of the bush never succeeds in drawing the teeth of that environment.

What is operating in *A Crucible of Prophets* is a critical tool that causes the individual perceptions and insights to reverberate satisfyingly. While the connections between Australian writing and belief that support the book's thesis are convincingly drawn, they do not exhaust the possible connections the reader is tempted to make. Further, there is an attractive sense of a debate being opened, not closed, that is created by the reader's impression of Dr Brady's genuine curiosity. However, there are limitations to the persuasiveness of the work, points at which the author's approach leads her to claim more for her evidence than can freely be given. The treatment of the ending of Marcus Clarke's novel, for instance, as an ending that seriously implies redemption, thus quashing the nihilistic implications of the preceding chapters, is not convincing. The ending of *For The Term of His Natural Life* is marked with the hoary conventionality of a melodramatic Victorian novel; this means that the reference to a redeeming God could be weary cliché as easily as an indicator to a troubled mind seeking a formal solution to a

metaphysical problem. Here one feels the author's reading is too willed, dominated rather than aided by the thematic approach.

In such instances, and to some extent in general, this analysis of the search for God in Australian writing enacts its own subject, as the writer covers a wide range of material in order to extract the outline of a particular argument about the existence of a God relevant to Australian experience. While the method is rigorous and challenging, it is clear that the work is not a wholly disinterested work of literary criticism; it is also a work of theology, and this fact particularises the discussion and some of the conclusions in ways that occasionally render it unconvincing. The concentration on a theistic search for meaning is often bothersome; where Dr Brady argues for the Australian crisis of belief being resolved by a sense of acceptance, that sense of acceptance is seen almost arbitrarily in religious terms:

The task of Australians, as of every individual and of every culture, is to come to terms with their memories, their bodies and their environment and then to situate themselves as creatures within a mysterious, often painful but always worshipful cosmos. (p. 112)

While I find myself agreeing with most of the argument which leads me to this point—the sense of acceptance Dr Brady finds in White does suggest a resolution of the sense of despair and the suspicion of spirituality we see in the early novelists—I am not prepared to see this modern sense of acceptance as self-evidently Christian in nature. In spite of Dr Brady's excellent account of Patrick White, I am left with the opinion that our literature is definitively agnostic, and accepting *that* seems to be the task for the Australian. From the evidence provided by Dr Brady I would be confident of proposing a view that Australian fiction pushed, in fact, towards the acceptance of nothingness, the failure of transcendence—as we accept the gamble taken by Camus' Algerians (whom we strongly resemble) and "risk everything on the body".

Nevertheless, the real value of *A Crucible of Prophets* is that it provides us with an argument one would like to worry at more. Dr Brady's book is admirably open-ended without being inconclusive, and it is an important work in that it opens up central areas of

discussion in new ways, and does so through a method that manages to be both unassuming and challenging at the same time.

GRAEME TURNER

Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm*. McClelland & Stewart, Toronto: 1981, 301 pp.

In each of her novels, Margaret Atwood has explored a popular form to make it yield new meanings, taking in turn social comedy (*The Edible Woman*, 1969), the ghost or mystery story (*Surfacing*, 1972), the gothic romance (*Lady Oracle*, 1976), the soap opera (*Life Before Man*, 1979), and now, in her most recent publication, *Bodily Harm* (1981), the political adventure story of gun-running and revolution in a fictitious third world country. Atwood believes that "'popular' art is a collection of rigid patterns: 'sophisticated' art varies the patterns. But popular art is material for serious art in the way that dreams are".<sup>1</sup> *Bodily Harm* takes the rigid patterns of the political adventure story and varies them in order to disturb rather than drug its readers.

Instead of "ugly Americans", Atwood provides "sweet Canadians". This devastatingly appropriate phrase, applied by Dr Minnow, the Caribbean island's reform candidate, disturbs the novel's Canadian heroine, Rennie, because she is unsure whether it's meant earnestly or ironically. Whatever Dr Minnow's intentions, the reader is in no doubt about Atwood's. The "sweet Canadians" emerge as no better than their partners and masters, the traditionally ugly Americans.

Instead of producing a straightforward narrative of adventure, Atwood fragments her narrative, jumping backward and forward in time and place. She focusses attention on character rather than on plot. She plays with point of view, shifting between two speakers, Rennie and her prison-mate Lora, and the implied author, who limits herself to describing what happens or has happened to Rennie. This fragmentation is disorienting. It forces the reader to share Rennie's alienation and to make sense of her disrupted world.

The plot is simple: Rennie, a Toronto jour-

nalist who specializes in "lifestyle" pieces, has concentrated on escaping her solidly middle class upbringing in small town Griswold (grey world?), partly through a modern relationship with Jake, until a routine medical examination discovers cancer. She has a mastectomy, "imprints" (her own word) on the surgeon responsible, Daniel, and is devastated by both experiences. Jake leaves her. A mysterious stranger enters her apartment while she's out, leaving a heavy coil of rope on her bed. The police imply that it is somehow her fault and tell her she's been lucky this time. In an attempt to escape all of this, she accepts an assignment to do a travel piece on a small and little known Caribbean island, only to stumble into the middle of an election, political intrigue, a failed attempt at revolution, and a prison cell, before she is allowed to return to Canada and her "normal" life.

The island setting puts Canada in sharper focus. It is used less for its own sake than for the perspective it provides on contemporary North American life, particularly the self-righteous Canadian variety. Deceptive surfaces and treacherous depths dominate this novel, recurring in each of its three worlds. In Griswold a respectable surface covers unhappy realities, marriage as an ideal is betrayed in fact by separated parents, the grandmother's discipline—exemplified in the command "don't touch!"—breaks down in the recurrent nightmare of losing control as the grandmother searches helplessly for her lost hands. In Toronto the trendy surface of sexual gamesmanship masks the alternately empty or violent realities of boredom or pornography; men can't afford to tell their dreams but they surface anyhow, usually as aggression against women. On the island, these contrasts are magnified: the postcard pretty surface barely covers the poverty and prison-cell reality. To dream becomes a political act. Dr Minnow is dangerous precisely because he insists on imagining that things could be different.

Rennie moves back and forth between her conscious and her dream lives, sinking and surfacing, clinging to trivia in her effort to remain superficial—a tourist—until a gun-running American named Paul gives her back her body and a fellow Canadian named Lora gives her back her soul. Her witnessing of Lora's beating forces her out of her self-absorption

<sup>1</sup> Linda Sandler, "Interview with Margaret Atwood", *The Malahat Review*, 41 (January 1977), 10.

to touch another human being. The account of this crucial moment is reminiscent of descriptions of Inuit birth ceremonies, recalling Rennie's earlier desire to have a baby. Here she metaphorically does give birth, pulling Lora back from the under-world through sheer force of will—"the hardest thing she's ever done". The hand imagery in this passage, as elsewhere in the novel, stresses our human capacities for touching, healing and loving as a counterpart to our destructive ways of damaging and withholding. After this act, Rennie is free to foresee a future of returning home, feeling herself buoyed up by luck and even capable of subversion.

But can we believe in this happy ending? Are we meant to? Rennie has fled what she sees as the random, sick violence of the man with the rope and the arbitrary violence of her cancer—and discovered that violence and injustice are the laws of life: they are institutionalized everywhere. She still has cancer, and cancer is first of all a reminder of her mortality and secondly an emblem for the malignancy Atwood sees as inseparable from being human. Rennie's cancer mirrors the cancer at the heart of her society. We are all, even the "sweet" Canadians who would like to remain oblivious, tainted by it. Rennie herself sees this, applying cancer's terminology to her love affairs and her social observations. Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* has identified cancer's role as the metaphor of our century. Atwood is not innovating so much as consolidating insights here. The chief impact of Rennie's cancer remains the dramatically realized hurt she undergoes as a victim of our superstitious dread of this disease.

Rennie's sex also makes her a victim. The novel's epigraph from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* elucidates the difficulties facing women in our society:

A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her.

If one accepts Berger's belief that one's "presence" defines one's life, then Rennie's obsession with appearances is less an indication of superficiality than of her will to survive. It is when she mis-reads appearances in a foreign country that she runs into trouble. The options for women are portrayed as limited: in

the language of the fifties, one can be a "good" girl like Rennie, middle class and sexually discreet, or a "nice" girl like Lora, lower class and promiscuous. The "good" girls of this world can be threatened with rape and even imprisoned, but have a better chance of escaping violation than the "nice" girls.

Rennie is constantly encountering signs of male violence against women: in her relationship with Jake, in her research for an article on pornography, in her reading of murder mysteries. But the most frightening image is that of the faceless man with the rope. Although he begins as a symbol of male violence against women, he takes on even more disturbing implications as Rennie dreams in her prison cell that he is in turn each of the men in her life, then finally herself. In a passage reminiscent of *Surfacing's* narrator's sighting of the ghosts of her parents, Rennie dreams: ". . . he's only a shadow, anonymous, familiar, with silver eyes that twin and reflect her own." A few pages later, watching the prison guards torture a deaf and dumb man who has functioned as a surrogate or shadow for her own victimization and anaesthetized condition, Rennie thinks:

She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening. She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there's no longer a *here* and a *there*. . . . She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything.

I am irritated by the first sentence's identification of men as by nature frightening and of women, by implication, as naturally frightened, because the thrust of the narrative is clearly that Rennie is exempt neither from outrage nor complicity. She is there both as victor and victim. However pious it sounds when put so baldly, the novel asserts that stereotyped sex roles can and must be changed, that Rennie must assume responsibility for her own life and for her world, that she must stop being a tourist and become a citizen. But it conveys this message through metaphor and the repetition of key events and phrases, not through preaching. The passage just quoted is one of the few jarring moments in the novel.

Rennie clings to her status as tourist, because it renders her invisible, uninvolved, exempt. Her tourism is more than a temporary

state—it is how she has organized her entire life to avoid vulnerability and possible hurt. This tourist theme is the logical extension of the museum mentality explored in *Life Before Man* and some of Atwood's poetry. First history, then art, and then finally everything is divorced from its function to be set apart and viewed as a monument or tourist site. Tourism is the twentieth century way of life—an expression of acute alienation and of a double-edged imperialism: it turns foreign cultures into objects of cultural consumption (Rennie does this to her own culture too), and it turns the tourist herself into a slave to trends, incapable of “seeing” except in prescribed patterns. In *Bodily Harm*, the museum and tourist site, Fort Industry, is also the jail. When Rennie escapes this prison, she is ready to return home with a different attitude toward herself and her work.

I hope it's clear by now that I found this a serious and interesting novel. It's also very funny, as only Atwood can be, but the thrusts are deadlier and more sardonic here than ever before. To dismiss it as “popcorn fiction”, as a CBC reviewer has, is to mistake the popular patterns underlying it for the whole. While it can be read fairly quickly as a guns and romance narrative, I've met no one who was satisfied with the story when read on that level. There is some awkwardness in the mechanics of the plot, the humour is black, the wit uncomfortably sharp, and above all, the protagonist is an unsympathetic character, self-absorbed and aggressively superficial. Atwood, of course, specializes in unsympathetic central characters, yet it is a technique her readers continue to resist because it forces them beyond identification into speculation and self-criticism. In short, it is an alienation device, one Atwood wields with great skill. Her readers complain, but keep coming back for more: *Bodily Harm* is already a best seller.

Yet there is something about this book that prevents it from being really great and I think it is Atwood's own fear of taking real risks. (Novels do provide her livelihood, after all.) Like Rennie, she is very much aware that these are the 1980s, when “outrage is out of date”. You can almost feel her holding back, as she doesn't in the painfully bleak poems published as *True Stories* (by Oxford) earlier in 1981.

DIANA BRYDON

William Warnock, *The Samurai Kites*, Sphere Books, London, 1981.

*The Samurai Kites* is not the kind of book usually reviewed in *Westerly*. But that may be *Westerly*'s loss because books like this represent a cultural phenomenon which we ignore at our peril: interior migration, as Hannah Arendt has argued in her studies of totalitarianism, threatens the very notion of civilization. The loss may also be the writer's. Bill Warnock shows himself here to be intelligent, concerned with large and crucial issues and determined to be a professional rather than a mere dilettante writer.

What first needs saying therefore is that this determination has all but wrecked his enterprise. His subject is an important one and he can obviously tell a story. But writing is also a business and he has chosen the wrong kind of publisher for someone who wants to write seriously. Consider, for example, the cover his book has been given. The picture of a burly, if battered white man about to plunge a blood-stained knife into a Japanese soldier, stereotypically inscrutable and impassive, promises a carnival of sado-masochism, patriotically sanctioned. In fact, the story Warnock has actually written has the Australians at the mercy of the Japanese, and two Australian women at that, two nurses, the only survivors of a plane which has crashed en route to a new base hospital, who are taken prisoners by a Japanese reconnaissance party and forced to undergo what the cover calls “a terror journey” through the jungle. Despite the old saying, though, most people do judge a book by its cover and so the real captive here, it seems, is the author himself.

Saddled with this cover, labelled “WA.'s New International Novelist”, author of a book “more powerful than ‘Deliverance’”, he is placed where few serious writers would want to belong, in the sensational heartland of Austerica, the land of commercialised desire.

This is unfortunate. But it highlights what preoccupation with “classical” writing can lead us to forget, that books are part of history, affected on the one hand by the way they are produced, by the economics of publishing, and on the other hand by their readers' expectations. Some works, of course, are more self-contained than others but even the most self-

referential, works like *Finnegans Wake* or, the less extreme, the stories of Borges, exist in history to the extent that they become an incident in the life of those who read them. In books like *The Samurai Kites*, however, this historical existence becomes crucial.

As the cover suggests, Warnock wants to reach a wide audience, though not, it is true, by the ways that cover promises. He wants to make the kind of contribution to our self-understanding made by his friend Tom Hungerford, whose fine book about the jungle war, *The Ridge and the River*, obviously inspired him. But the 1980s are not the 1950s, and the war imagined is not the same as the war lived and sweated through. More importantly, different experiences demand different forms. So Warnock's great mistake may have been to choose the old form of the realistic novel, the form which so easily then turns into the format of commercialised sensationalism because it presupposes that appearances correspond with "reality". This is not to argue for experiment at all cost—heaven knows we've had all too much of that. But it is to say that the writer who is not prepared to explore the rules and test the possibilities of his art has no real claim to be a serious writer. Having a good story or rather what James calls a "donnée", is not enough. Everything depends, as James also says, on how it is rendered, and Warnock's rendering is disappointing. His situation overmasters him and turns to melodrama. Instead of controlling it, building up the pressure which comes from the play of the mind upon the primal emotions at work in his story, he lets desire have its way, relying on stock response and on ritualistic repetition of images like the butterflies his Japanese Officer, Oshima, used to collect, and, at the other extreme, of the wrecked fuselage of the plane now become a charnel house; on situations combining erotic fascination and violence with guilt, and promising but always failing to deliver the utmost in lurid sensation. At other times, as if aware of this loss of control, the author intrudes on his material, manipulating character and situation in a way which can seem an insult to the reader's intelligence.

However, aesthetic questions are not the only ones, and to remain fixated on them is to condemn criticism to the impotence it often suffers from in a culture like ours. Warnock's

choice of subject raises questions about his readers and their expectations. He is not the first to explore Australia's Asian connection, of course. In the last few years in particular Koch, Drewe and Pulvers among the novelists and Romeril and Buzo among the playwrights have written impressively about it and Porter and Hungerford before them explored the connection for previous generations. Significantly, however, Warnock's position is closer to this earlier generation. Where the more recent writers find Australia and its culture at least as problematic as Asian people and cultures, Warnock recurs to the earlier, paranoiac position. His Japanese Sergeant is a figure from a nightmare and his Asia is the jungle, a kind of hell. This may simply be due to Warnock's friendship and admiration for Tom Hungerford to whom, and to his wife, he dedicates his book. But given that *The Samurai Kites* is the kind of text Barthes calls "readerly" rather than writerly, a book which comes from its culture rather than breaks with it and honours its ways of thinking and feeling, this regression may be more widely symptomatic. Marx has argued that the events of history tend to repeat themselves twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. If this is so, Warnock's book suggests that the trauma of the Pacific War is now turning for us into farce. Not that the novel itself is farcical. What it expresses, however, may be. In the kind of world we inhabit it does seem absurdly comical to focus on old enmities and prejudices and glory in superannuated fears. If this is the kind of novel we are to accept as a classic, as the publishers would have us, then Patrick White is right in describing us as "child adults lying cocooned and stationary in the over-upholstered cocoon of the past, refuge of so many Australians then and now". What we need, he argues, is to walk in the present. *The Samurai Kites*, however, would have us escape to the past, a past moreover which has become an occasion for sensation rather than thought.

In effect, for all its claims to a hard-boiled "realism", this is a novel fascinated with the comforts of melodrama, with simple-minded notions of good and evil in which appearances tell all. The two nurses, one fair, one dark, represent the good which must struggle against evil personified by Nagato, the Ugly Japanese, "the Enemy", "the Beast", lusting for rape and

violence. The jungle is hell, an "eternal disorder of an arbitrary and random nature... [an] anarchy of death and violence". True, the other two Japanese, the officer Oshima, former scholar and naturalist, and the young soldier Moritoh, also a scholar—or at least a student—but an aristocrat as well, are more ambiguous figures. But they are also impotent. The story centres on the struggle between Beauty and the Beast which the readers must accept. In this sense the story's opening identifies Oshima as our representative, staring through his binoculars at the two women beside the wreckage of their plane "as though his eyes were being sucked out by the power of these fascinating images". The reader as voyeur corresponds to the citizen as spectator and history turns into fantasy. Situations and images here tend to become self-referential, part of an obsessional pattern of threatened rape and death and images of physical suffering and decay, all hinted at rather than fully realized. So actual experience gives way to what Johnson calls "the dangerous prevalence of imagination" in which a book becomes an occasion of wish-fulfilment. Thus the characters and events here function more or less as projections of atavistic desires and New Guinea becomes the place of the primal scene.

No doubt some kind of outlet is desirable for these urges—as Mr Warnock has argued recently, protesting against the banning of the film *Caligula* in W.A. The question, however, is whether a book of this medicinal kind can be called "the classic novel of the horrors of jungle warfare". As I see it, *The Samurai Kites* fails to effect the transfiguration which makes fiction more revealing than mere fact, or rather the surface appearances of it. Instead of mastering his experience, the author seems to be subject to it here, so that instead of expressing an individual act of consciousness his story repeats the fears and cravings of a repressive society bored by the only goals it knows, comfort and security. So it is not accidental that it is a story of imprisonment in which the captors become prisoners of their prisoners or that the journey ends not with release into freedom but into loss, with the two nurses mourning the death of the two enemies who have become part of themselves. Like the novel itself they are looking backwards, cherishing the pain which at least made life sig-

nificant, instead of looking ahead.

The question *The Samurai Kites* raises therefore transcend the book itself and call for judgements of a social rather than a literary kind. Bill Warnock is a competent and promising writer but he seems to have been overwhelmed by his culture, by the need for the consolations of myth which afflicts a culture without a past to live from. In the tribute he attempts to pay to ambiguity in his characters like Oshima and Moritoh it appears that consciously he is prepared to take the risk of history and recover this past in all its complexity. Yet the melodramatic and mythic form his story and his language take expresses the need to put an end to the complexity, the need to make life perfectly intelligible, which leads on the one hand to interior migration and on the other to totalitarianism. Mr Warnock himself is a notable champion of freedom. His novel, then, shows the effects of public pressure on even the best of us.

VERONICA BRADY

Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait*, Cape, London, 1981, 260 pp.

Even the simplest of stories means more than it says. But what of the account a man gives of his own life, especially if that man is a writer as self-conscious, sophisticated and by now as central as Patrick White? It is possible, of course, to respond as many of the first reviewers have done at the level of gossip, to fasten on the outrageous, the smart or the merely witty, to repeat yet once more White's sallies at the expense of public figures like Sir John Kerr or Sidney Nolan or to sensationalise the painful honesty of his account of his family or of his long relationship with Manoly Lascaris, "the central mandala in my life's... messy design". (100)

Gossip matters for White, it is true—he quotes Thackeray's remark that "there is no good novelist who is not interested in gossip". But the point of *Flaws in the Glass* is the way he grapples "this human flotsam to [himself] as he is swirled from hemisphere to hemisphere" (127) transforming it into something else. It is this "something else" which is im-

portant for the understanding not merely of the work and life of a major writer but also Australian culture as well. Reading the account White gives of himself here it becomes clear that the normal distinctions between life and art no longer hold. Writing is for him "a saving occupation". He writes to know who he is, and to make himself known, putting himself on stage, acting out his life in the "theatre of [his] imagination . . . [a theatre moreover] which can be dismantled and reconstructed to accommodate the illusion of reality life boils down to". (154)

So life becomes art, a concept basic to Modernism but not so familiar and indeed suspect to most of us in Australia. But *Flaws in the Glass* makes clear, however, that White came by this idea honestly and that it has an enabling rather than disabling effect. He talks more freely here than ever before about his unhappy childhood, about his time in England just before World War II, about his decision to return from New York in 1942 after the fall of Norway and about his service as an intelligence officer in the R.A.F. in Africa and the Middle East. But the "central mandala in [his] life's hitherto messy design" (100) is Manoly Lascaris, the "small Greek of immense moral strength" with whom he has lived since the end of the War. Clearly White is both more sophisticated and more intent on finding some moral significance in this sophistication than most of his critics. Having read modern languages at Cambridge, spent some time in Germany under Hitler, through his Withycombe cousins met supporters of the Republican cause in Spain as well as painters and people interested in contemporary painting in Roy le Maistre's studio and actors and theatre people at the Arts Theatre Club, he found the Australia to which he returned with Manoly after the war disturbingly parochial and ignorantly innocent. Above all the attacks by critics unable to understand what he was about set up a permanent suspicion of the academic, characterized in the figure of "Professor Leonie Kramer" who appears here as a kind of straw-woman, the scapegoat who has to carry out into the desert of his scorn the sins of all those who, misunderstanding him, have increased the sense of alienation so evident in his work.

For him their concept of literature was not merely dated but frivolous as well. Formed

imaginatively in the 'thirties, his sense of disaster and longing for renewal makes him impatient of balance and moderation. Convinced as so many young writers were in the 'thirties

That it's farewell to the drawing room's  
civilized cry,

To the professor's sensible where to and  
why

(Louis MacNeice)

he sees in art "a means of shaping the emotional chaos with which I was possessed". (7)

*Flaws in the Glass* is thus not merely self-conscious, it is also self-creative. But it is aesthetic as well. Examining the contents of his life the artist is also examining the materials of his art. Although it gives the impression of randomness the book is governed by the image of the mirror with which it begins with the twelve-year-old boy sitting in the neo-Gothic house his parents had rented at Felphan gazing into the mirror "all blotches and dimples and ripples" at the image of himself which "fluctuated in the watery glass; according to the light [retreating] into the depth of the Aquarium, or [trembling] in the foreground like a thread of pale-green samphire" (1). The Shakespearian echoes of the word "samphire"<sup>1</sup> remind us that this is also the house of art, a place with "no connection with any other part of my life, yet in [which] life seemed to be forming" (1). There is a nice significance in the fact that the house is in Felphan, not far from where Blake lived and felt "heaven . . . on all sides [opening] her golden gates" and belonged to Blake's friend, the poet Hayley.

The "Patrick White" who appears in this book, then, is as much a literary creation as a real person—as are the public figures like Sir John Kerr and Joan Sutherland or the Queen and Prince Philip. They too have been drawn into the story he tells, to become counters in a design of moral loss, coloured by his growing disillusionment with the society to which he returned with so much hope. This means that the first thing the reader needs is a sense of proportion, the wit to appreciate the games White is playing with facts and fictions.

Nor is this game merely frivolous. True, the satiric wit evident here as in his novels is always shrewd and usually entertaining. But the game that is being played is also for his own life. Attacking the complacencies of our culture White is in search of that freedom which

comes from understanding not merely of others but also of oneself. In doing this, however, as the tone of his attack makes clear, he is also defending himself and his values. As Freud points out, wit can be the product of "the principle of parsimony", the need to save on one's expenditure of psychic energy, and the story White tells here of a life almost permanently embattled from his childhood onwards suggests that he has very little to spare. The satiric edge to many of his descriptions, including those of his own parents, is therefore less surprising perhaps than the simplicity and real affection with which he speaks of his childhood nurse, Lizzie, and various friends of his later life and, most of all, of Manoly.

*Flaws in the Glass*, then, is more truly polyphonic<sup>2</sup> than the rest of White's work since there is more interaction here between levels of reality. It also reveals the governing passion of his life, what William Worringer, one of the early theorists of Modernism, called "the will to art", the "drive to understand which . . . exists for itself and behaves as the will to form".<sup>3</sup> True, in the self portrait the need to understand tends to overpower the will to form. But the aesthetic loss is made by the new understanding of the writer and his work which emerges.

It remains, however, that Narcissus eventually drowned in his own image, and some readers may feel this has happened here. It is true, I think, that certain incidents and issues are given inordinate attention. One reviewer<sup>4</sup> complained, for instance, that White's own comment that those who discuss their homosexuality "as though it had not existed, except in theory, before they discovered their own have always struck me as colossal bores" (80), applies to himself. Against that, however, one has to set the insight we are given into the sources and condition of his art. "Ambivalence has given me insights into human nature [he writes] denied, I believe, to those who are unequivocally male or female" (154). In the long run, he sees himself "not so much a homosexual as a mind possessed by the spirit of man or woman according to actual situations or the characters I become in my writing" (81). Read in the light of these remarks and of the passage in which he speculates about the kind of life he might have lived had he been born "a normal heterosexual male"

(154), *The Twyborn Affair* in particular takes on a new, more personal significance as an interpretation of his own life, suggesting that his ambivalence provides if not the cause at least the occasion of his work. Without wanting to fall into the Romantic fallacy of seeing the artist as a special kind of man and especially privileged, it could be argued that if this sense of ambivalence is seen in its widest sense—as it is in *The Twyborn Affair*—it is more general than it seems, especially in a derivative culture like ours. The story White tells in *Flaws in the Glass* of a life suspended between the two sides of the world as well as the two poles of the self may in fact be an exemplary one and the distaste it arouses in many of its readers is the product of their anxiety.

What is more disturbing perhaps is the preoccupation with pain, the sheer indifference to the notion of happiness so important in our culture. But here too the question comes back, to use Henry James' test for the "morality of art", to "the kind and degree of the artist's prime sensibility" and what appears then is a sensibility not unlike Kierkegaard's, concerned with ultimate questions of truth and therefore sceptical of anything but this. By definition the long view makes for irony, especially about oneself. Like Kierkegaard here White is using his knowledge of himself to annihilate himself, to make himself an example of the truth which is that to be human is to be vulnerable, a finite being with infinite desires, suspended "inter stellas et faeces". But precisely because for him as for the Danish philosopher truth is personal, consisting "precisely in that conception of life which is expressed by the individual",<sup>5</sup> the only person he can really "convert" is himself. Therefore the task is to make an example of himself, "employing every bit of knowledge [he has] about men and their weaknesses and stupidities, not to profit thereby, but to annihilate [himself] and weaken the impression he has made".<sup>6</sup> This may not be to every reader's taste, of course. But there can be no doubt, I think, of White's seriousness of purpose or of his right to it. Nor, if one sets his self-portrait in this long perspective, can there be much doubt that at times it can also be very amusing—the travels in Greece in particular lend themselves to all kinds of absurdities, swinging between the sublimities of the monasteries, monuments and scenery and the ridicu-

lousness of bad plumbing, rough seas and seasick passengers, eccentric and wilful peasants, foolish quarels and so on.

But it is perhaps for the insight that it provides into White's work that *Flaws in the Glass* is a book to be grateful for. Some years ago the American critic Manly Johnson shrewdly remarked that the major characters in his works are "in some intensely personal way . . . projections of the author",<sup>7</sup> and the self-portrait confirms this, enabling us now to see this fiction as "interpretations of events in his life". Here White traces many of his works back to their source. *The Solid Mandala*, for instance, represents an attempt to come to terms with the first years in which he and Manoly lived at Castle Hill in an old house on six acres of paddock facing Showgrounds Road. *The Eye of the Storm* "came to me crossing Kensington High Street, London, after a visit to my mother at her flat in Marloes Road where she was lying bedridden, senile, almost blind, tended by a swarm of nurses and servants" (149). Miss Hare in *Riders in the Chariot* originated in the "Mad Woman" who used to invade the garden of the house he lived in as a child and the message which lodged when a taxi-driver "his belly bursting with beer and indignation", abused him shortly after his return to Australia as a "bloody reffo" combined with the impressions of the strength and peace of the ceremonies in the Jewish synagogue at Sydney and with his memories of refugees from Germany in the 1930s in the story of Himmelfarb in the same novel. A White Russian, an ex-admiral and crazy, who lived on the ground floor of Roy le Maistre's house in London in the 1930s became Sokolnikov in *The Aunt's Story* and Arnold Wyburd in *The Eye of the Storm* owes something to the family solicitor who was the father of the three Ebsworth girls he met through his Withycombe relations. And so on. The reader familiar with White's work as a whole will not only appreciate these connections but will probably be able to make others, enriching the polyphonic sense of the works.

It is this polyphony which must be stressed, however. Although his mother's plight started off *The Eye of the Storm* he is not necessarily Sir Basil Hunter nor his sister Dorothy Lasca-bannes, and though *The Vivisector* may be a portrait of the artist, White is there grappling

with the ideas of art and the artist not painting a self-portrait—*Flaws in the Glass* is much more meditative and much less triumphant, a work that is suffered through within the self not projected beyond it, and transformed into art. But for this reason the self-portrait allows us to see the human impulse behind the otherwise mandarin and often somewhat inhuman completeness of his other works, to realize that, like Proust's and Kafka's, his works were written out of a sense of loss and might almost be seen as a series of letters to a missing father and an all powerful mother.<sup>8</sup> Thus the state of unity which is the goal of these works can be seen as the return to the maternal state and the death which concludes most of them as the sacrifice of life itself to the absent father. The novels thus show a writer rehearsing his own possibilities, learning to live in a world which is for him almost unliveable, and this attempt gives new point to the heroic quality nearly always evident in his work.

Paradoxically, however, this very personal struggle has more general reference—that is, if we accept that Australian culture in general is in a state of suspension, European in its origins but transplanted into an alien environment. *Voss* becomes particularly important in this reading. Voss and Laura represent the two sides of the self, masculine and feminine but also European and Australian, the "wild and tame" (192). Significantly the reconciliation which is finally achieved between the two corresponds with the goal Christopher Brennan proposed for the writer, "the Wanderer on the way to himself"; "the state wherein [he] will have taken up into himself the whole world that is outside him, and the whole world that is within".<sup>9</sup> This is the goal of the Symbolist movement, of course, but in White's case at least living in Australia is in fact a Symbolist project, the unification of self with the world (which, incidentally, Aboriginal culture achieves). So in *Voss* the moment of childhood terror in which he fled from the Mad Woman in the garden is taken up and transformed as the "wooden, irregular beating" of his heart which later turns into "the hooves of Voss's cavalcade" which now drum "their way down stars in this same house" (21) as imagination plays upon memory. Similarly the oscillations of the novel between the two affective poles of ecstasy on the one hand and a

pained almost paranoid vulnerability on the other perhaps reflect a similar ambivalence in our culture as a whole.

If each of his works thus rehearses an aspect of his own experience which also has a larger cultural significance, it is also interesting to see how single incidents and images are also transposed from life into art. The pilgrimage Hurtle Duffield and Hew Pavloussis make to the shrine of Perialos in *The Vivisector*, for instance, reworks his travels with Manoly through Greece. But the point of these journeys which take up so much space in the self-portrait only appears in the novel, where the pilgrimage concludes not with some mystic revelation at the shrine—it is empty, with only a pile of excrement beside the altar—but with the image of the little golden hen picking at crumbs under the table (an image which occurs also in *Flaws in the Glass*) “consecrated to this earth even while scurrying through illuminated dust”.<sup>10</sup> Although White has been accused of excessive religiosity, it is clear from this and from the account he gives of his own beliefs that for him, as for Blake, “God only acts and is in existing beings and things”. So too with the crystal bird on his mother’s dinner table which reappears in *The Twyborn Affair* and, more crucially, in *The Aunt’s Story* and reveals its deeper significance in the self-portrait. The association the image has with his mother accounts for the pressure it seems to exert on Theodora (whose story has so many parallels with White’s own) at her first meeting with the Greek, Moraitis, at the dinner party given by Huntly Clarkson. But perhaps the most revealing of all such images is the dark pool into which Ellen Roxburgh, then Ellen Gluyas, lets herself down in *A Fringe of Leaves*. In *Flaws in the Glass* the pool reappears in one of the most important sections entitled “A Detour” which interrupts the account of his travels through Greece with Manoly. In this passage attempting to judge the success or failure of his life and what he might have been had he been made differently or made different choices, he reflects on the difference between the self he knows and “this unknown man the interviewers, the visiting professors, the thesis writers expect to find” (182). What he knows of himself is much more mysterious, more demanding: “At the age of sixty-nine I am still embarking on voy-

ages of exploration which I hope may lead to discovery” (182). But the discovery is not the discovery of Narcissus of his own Beauty. Rather, like Ellen Gluyas, he has to let himself down into the dark waters and come to terms with “monsters” of the self and the brutal powers of physical necessity to live in a world which may be disastrous and painful but is all we have:

I am this black, bubbling pool, I am also this leaf rustling in the early light on the upper terrace of our garden. In the eyes of God, the Eye, or whatever supernatural power, I am probably pretty average crap, which will in time help to fertilise the earth. The books I have spent years in writing will perhaps be burnt in some universal, or perhaps only national, holocaust. (182-3)

So for all the Romanticism of its preoccupation with the inner life and longings for a world elsewhere, *Flaws in the Glass* reveals the realism, the essential humility of Patrick White. His refusal to accept things at face value, his insistence on the tribute the spirit must pay to the tragic necessities of the body in its subjection to time and to history arise out of the experiences he describe here, the childhood disappointments, what he saw of England and Europe of the 30’s, his war service and the personal vicissitudes of the outsider. The passionate sense of indignation which makes him such a sharp critic of Australian society thus comes from his awareness of these realities this society prefers to ignore and disappointment that what is accepted instead falls so far short of human dignity as he conceives it. Subjectivity for him entails more not less accountability.

According to Lacan, the mirror stage can also be a permanent state, not merely a phase in the development of the child in which, lacking motor co-ordination he or she begins to anticipate the physical mastery to come.<sup>11</sup> As White’s use of image shows, this reflection of the self can have a formative effect something like the process of psychoanalysis, which enables the individual to come to terms with feelings of powerlessness by contemplating the painful, even shameful as well as the more pleasing possibilities of the self and mastering them at least in imagination. At least this process lends a certain dignity of self-knowledge.

in contrast with those White characterizes bitterly as "creatures squirming in today's social pool, ladies with their lip pencils and exposed nipples, shady knights and captains of self-advertisement" (153) who are content to accept the surface appearances as reality.

Paradoxically therefore, it is his preoccupation with the truth of himself which turns White into a social critic. Where he is concerned with memory, with the painful return to the source, the Australia he attacks is in flight into the future, obsessed with illusions of pleasure and power. The "neo brutal towers [of the cities] pile skywards in the name of progress, but never civilization" (225) and their inhabitants, "child adults" who shrink "from the deep end of the unconscious" (104) from the claims of time and history, other people and the natural world, consistently run away from themselves, resenting anyone who would oblige them to recognize themselves—the task White has assigned himself.

Australia then is bound up with the problem of himself. On the one hand, as he remembers it from childhood and as it figured for him when he was a boy at school in England and during the War, it is the place of maternal identification where the inner and outer worlds are one and where the timelessness of the landscape reflects that "state of silence, simplicity and humility" which he has long regarded as "the only proper state".<sup>12</sup> To return to this country after the war was therefore "a matter of necessity. Surrounded by a vacuum, I needed a world in which to live with the intensity my temperament demanded" (46). *The Aunt's Story* and *The Twyborn Affair* in particular pay tribute to this need while, negatively, the frozen landscapes of *Happy Valley* and the placeless sterility of *The Living and the Dead* witness to the effects of being cut off from this world. For all his distaste for its inhabitants, Australia, it is clear, is where he belongs—it is either here or nowhere. "The ideal Australia visualized during my exile and which drew me back was always . . . a landscape without figures" (49). "Noble though often harsh", this landscape offered him "spiritual sustenance" precisely because of its timeless indifference to human limitations. For him the myth of the Antipodes is valid still. Situated on the demarcation line between nature and art, Australia represents

not only the other side of the world but also the anti-self, the equivalent of the necessity or fate central to the tragic philosophy of the Greeks. In contrast with the "sad, sick stinking world"<sup>13</sup> of Europe as he experienced it in the late 1930s and 1940s, in which art had lost touch with nature and "the ghosts of Homer, St. Paul and Tolstoy sat waiting for the crash"<sup>14</sup> Australia at least offers the possibility of renewal by a return to the origins, to the original maternal identification with nature.

As *Flaws in the Glass* makes clear, his feeling for the land is bound up with his feelings for literature. Both represent an attempt to salvage language from the unconscious restraints imposed upon it by the rationality of our culture. Negatively, his dislike of academic critics follows from this attempt. "The monochrome of reason" is not for him. He prefers the "omnium gatherum of instinctual colour which illuminates more often than not the irrational behaviour of sensual man" (38). Positively, however, his feeling for the land puts him in touch with the "primitive sources of feeling", with the symbolic consciousness which pervades his work, and it is significant that this feeling goes back to childhood, where in his loneliness "I was faced with sharing surroundings associated with my own private mysteries" (10). Then his feelings were Aboriginal:

I often flung stones at human beings I felt were invading my spiritual territory. Once I set fire to a gungah to show it couldn't be shared with strangers. Years later I persuaded myself that I hadn't been acting merely as a selfish child, but that an avatar of those from whom the land had been taken had invested one of the unwanted whites. (16)

Memory, as Hobbes remarked, is "the mother of the muses" to the extent that, as here, it becomes a "World (though not really yet so as in a looking glass) in which the Judgement . . . busieth herself in a grave and rigid examination of all the parts of nature", and also we would add, of the self. But other faces also appear in this glass. What we see here of White's feeling for the land illuminates the work of some of our major writers, Henry Handel Richardson, Thomas Keneally and Randolph Stow in particular who share his ambivalence, his sense on the one hand of the

land as spiritual territory and on the other hand of its profanation. As far as White is concerned, this sense of profanation explains his defence of the environment and opposition to material development. In this context his dislike of Sir John Kerr is understandable: he is made to serve as the villain in an old-fashioned melodrama in which Australia as White remembers it becomes the outraged virgin. So too with the Queen and Prince Philip whom he attacks for their association with a culture he sees as vulgar and bullying, and without a "moral core" (153). In contrast Gough Whitlam appears as the champion of proper values, leading the advance into "a brave new world" (226). The Whitlam era, as he recalls it, "was . . . particularly inspiring for artists, till then a down-trodden minority in Australian philistine society" (226), and so his public defence of all that Whitlam stood for becomes part of his defence of his own values.

Once again, then, *Flaws in the Glass* makes sense of apparent contradictions and sharpens the point of words already spoken. It also reveals that what might appear at first as moralism is rather a profound and passionate worldliness which directs attention to man's self-conscious social existence and explores the drama inherent in it. True, this drama arises out of the conflict set up between this worldliness and the instinctual and intuitive life. Nevertheless the moral passion of his work and of his life arises from his awareness of this conflict, the sense that the claims of society must be honoured, however antipathetic they may be. Once this point is taken it becomes possible to resolve the quarrel over the religiosity of his work. Quite simply, *Flaws in the Glass* makes it clear that, as we have already argued, what belief he has is sceptical and involves a belief in a divinity which is immanent, in human experience rather than transcendent. Drawing the "graph of [his] religious faith" from "the gentle Jesus prayers gabbled from behind Gothic hands to Mummy or Nursie" (143) to the present, White attacks "the sterility, the vulgarity, in many cases the bigotry of the Christian churches in Australia" (146) but insists that his "clumsy wrestling with what [he sees] as religious faith . . . is what keeps [him] going" (188). What "inklings of God's presence" he has been given are bound up with this world and above all with

his feelings for Manoly. The intuition of God as the Vivisector follows therefore, and "the many travesties of an ideal I am still foolish enough to expect after a lifetime's experience and knowledge of myself" (145) serve only to remind him that love can be a form of punishment as well as joy. As for the need to worship, "my work as a writer has always been what I understood as an offering in the absence of other gifts" (143).

So we return to the centrality of art, though now it is clear that this is not an elitist view. Rather, for White, being an artist is the only way to be a man, to go on living in a world from which otherwise values seem to be absent. Thus he recalls winter afternoons spent on the Acropolis immediately after the War when the Parthenon seemed "the symbol of everything I or any other solitary artist aspired to before we were brought down into the sewage and plastic of the late twentieth century" (116). For him as for E. M. Forster art appears to be the only guarantee or order, of the ability to preserve some humanity in the midst of increasing inhumanity. As he puts it, unromantically, in an address to "any of you who have continued reading":

Don't despair . . . it is possible to recycle shit. Could this be my positive message to the Australian optimistic jingle-writers of today? (116)

White the prophet emerges, the man who senses himself born out of time, profoundly ill at ease in a society which seems to him to confuse reality with surfaces. His whole life then can be seen as a quest for this hidden reality, a search for a "grandeur too overwhelming to express" which demands "a daily wrestling match with an opponent whose limbs never become material . . . [and] a belief contained less in what is said than in silences. In patterns on water. A gust of wind. A flower opening". (70)

It may be a measure of our times that at least in this book White has been drawn out of hiding and makes conspicuously evident not only his refusal to live by clichés and popular pieties but the reasons for this refusal. In claiming responsibility for his life, parading his hurts and his destructiveness and confessing his need for some source of absolute value, he contests the loyalty to spurious values and

the patriotism which excuses all believing that in any case there is nothing much an individual can do. *Flaws in the Glass* is therefore an arresting book, paralysing its readers by doubting their conventions and complacencies. It also a difficult and disturbing book for this reason and it is not surprising that most of its first reviewers, apparently unable to cope with it, have sensationalized it. What emerges, however, from an attentive reading is not only the humanity but also the centrality of the work. In it the plight of the artist, the exile, becomes exemplary. Wyndham Lewis remarked that if you want to know what is going on at the centre of any culture art may be a truer guide than politics. It may be that the sense of being suspended between two worlds is more widely characteristic than first appears. So too with the series of marks White fashions for himself here to sustain the faltering fiction of his self-possession. In attempting to overcome his fears and anxieties by giving them a form and an image White may be exposing the true history of our time.

VERONICA BRADY

#### NOTES

1. *King Lear*, IV, 6, 14-20.
2. In an unpublished paper delivered as one of the 1981 Series "Towards a Theory of Australian Literature", Dr Vijay Mishra applies Bakhtin's concept of polyphonic discourse to White's work. I am indebted to him for the suggestiveness of this paper.
3. William Worringer, quoted in James M. Curtis, *Culture as Polyphony; An Essay on the Nature of Paradigms*. London, University of Missouri Press, 1978, 46.
4. Terry Coleman in the *Guardian Weekly* 13/11/81.
5. Walter Kaufmann (editor), *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Cleveland, Meridan Books, 1970, 97.
6. *ibid.*, 87.
7. Manly Johnson, "Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*" in R. Shepherd and K. Singh (editors). *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Adelaide, Centre for Research into New Languages in English, 1978, 97.
8. Jeffery Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Levi-Strauss*. Cornell University Press, 1974, 23.
9. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn (editors). *The Prose Works of Christopher Brennan*. Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1965, 45.
10. Patrick White, *The Vivisector*. London, Cape, 1970, 409.
11. Mehlman, 37-8.
12. Patrick White, "The Prodigal Son". *Australian Letters*, 1, 3, April 1958, 38.

13. Patrick White, *The Living and the Dead*. Melbourne, Penguin, 1962, 270.
14. Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story*. London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969, 146.

Jan Carter, *Nothing to Spare: Recollections of Australian Pioneering Women*. Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1981. pp. xi [xiv], 237 [242], illus. \$6.95.

Albert Barnett Facey, *A Fortunate Life*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981. pp. [xiii], 326 [328], illus. \$12.00 (pb); \$22 (hb).

Page references in parentheses refer to either Carter or Facey as the context indicates. Otherwise fuller reference is given.

*A Fortunate Life* is a stunning book. I don't know what the sales figures are but unless everyone is reading borrowed copies they must be well above average\*. All kinds of people who don't usually read further than the daily paper have read this, and even without the aid of the ABC broadcasts. No doubt Nev's prize helped, but an awful lot of books get prizes and people go on not reading them just the same. Look at Herman Hesse. Look at *Voss*, even. If we needed to know about pioneering and the harshness of Australia, why didn't everyone read *Voss*? A discussion about *Voss* is just not a goer in most circles but mention *A Fortunate Life* and almost everyone chips in. Why?

Perhaps because Mr Facey has succeeded in transmitting his own experiences so that they fulfil a lack in the reader. Solid specification of the days of Bert Facey informs our own ignorance about the myth which burdens us. There were never many Australians who chopped and burnt the bush to live in isolation, who drove cattle in the North West, who survived Gallipoli to stand in the dole queue,—in short, who pioneered. But the world expects us all to wear this garment, the bushman's hat, and to account for ourselves, in these terms. Mr Facey's autobiography debunks, not exalts, that myth. In spare and denotative prose he objectifies his own part in these events so that

\* The Fremantle ACP edition has sold approximately 6000 copies. The Penguin reprint has sold approximately 28,000 to date—Eds.

they lose the prescriptive heroic patterns. *A Fortunate Life* is true autobiography. That is to say it is shaped by events of which Bert Facey is the centre: being horse-whipped almost to death, suffering from boils, being saddle-sore, being eaten alive by dog fleas, burying the pieces of his brother at Shell Green, riding on the train to Subiaco, washing the dishes, banking forty pounds in the Savings Bank. This is not social history or national mythology or biography disguised as autobiography. There is hardly a name in these pages which could be found in the index of Western Australian history. *A Fortunate Life*, and also *Nothing to Spare*, will become important texts in the new history of Western Australia 'from below'.

*Nothing to Spare* resembles a product of the book-making of the 1890's, a decade with which it is concerned, except that at that period bookmakers were preoccupied with the great and the famous, who were, of course, male: viz. Macmillan's English Men of Letters Series; and except that the publishers have not announced any plan to follow up *Nothing to Spare* with a state by state Pioneer Women Series. They might like to think about it. The bookmaking characteristic I refer to is the semblance of miscellany arising from the conjunction of editorial discussions of method, social background, themes and implications with maps, photographs, and scraps of verse, all clustered around the central matter announced in the book's subtitle, *Recollections of Australian Pioneering Women*. The intention to make a 'pretty book' (again, the idiom of 1890's criticism is appropriate and should not be read pejoratively) is, in part, successful. Yet the poetic, and some of the photographic, epigraphs do not cohere with the study of social conditions, which on the evidence of the cataloguing recommendations is the book's proper category: 'Women—Western Australia—Social conditions.' The reader must be ready to respond to two modes of communication alternatively: that which is appropriate to social history, and that which is attuned to works of the imagination.

The almost simultaneous publication of two books which focus upon the life led by 'ordinary' people in Western Australia at about the same period invites juxtaposition. Six-sevenths

of Mr Facey's book deals with his life from birth in 1894 and migration from Victoria to Western Australia in 1899 to his return from the war in 1915; *Nothing to Spare* collects the oral reminiscences of fifteen women in Western Australia between 1890 and 1918. It is the differences between the male and female accounts of self which particularly illuminate the period. The women's recollections were elicited by Ms Jan Carter in a series of 'guided conversations', which she subsequently edited to eliminate 'coffee stops' and to restore chronological 'flow'. Mr Facey, notwithstanding his acknowledgement of his late wife's encouragement and the publisher's acknowledgement of editorial assistance by Wendy Jenkins, wrote his own autobiography. (Given that he never went to school, the tautology is unavoidable.) Here is a distinction of will: an autobiographer's sense of self-esteem is of a different order from that of the elderly women sought out by Ms Carter for their suitability (good memory) and consent to a taped interview for her projected book. In her discussion of method she records that three women were not interviewed following preliminary conversations 'because they lacked the ability to stand outside themselves and to reflect on their personal history. [...] They tended to see their lives through the perspective of other people—their husbands, their children, their grandchildren—and they did not want their perspective destroyed' (pp. 228-9) The awareness of the relationship between self and society is not very deep in many of those whom Ms Carter did interview. Too few have developed any consciousness of how in the organisation of power in Western Australia they have come to be where they now are; too many find great age a plight. Only the brewery worker's daughter who became a union organiser displays the political nous, which Mr Facey eventually acquired in the Depression. It is she who is most outspoken about the horror of 'the half-death' in 'homes for old people' (p. 100), into which many of them have been forced to retreat.

Most of the women, however, are perspicacious about personal relationships, and frank about their sexual ignorance and later enlightenment. For the butcher's daughter (Ms Carter identifies only by the father's occupation) enlightenment was ultimate:

[...] I started to get these pains in me stomach as I thought. I was in the bedroom doin' somethin' and I felt this terrible bearin' down. So there was an old chamber pot under the bed, so I got that out and I was lettin' this water run away into this chamber. And the next thing, a baby was there, almost into the chamber. (pp. 54-5)

Whereas the women delve quite deeply into their emotional life as girls and as wives—and much of it was distressing—Mr Facey's autobiography consistently stresses the external, visible life, not inner complexities. His youth was overshadowed by violence and soreness, and that which bites, hurts, and smells makes good dramatic autobiography. His book is built out of spectacle and action, not exposition or introspection, and observes the prim conventions of his time. Patrick White may record his first erection: '[...] on the walk home from the baths, [...] something unusual was happening' (White, *Flaws in the Glass*, 1981, p. 5); but Bert Facey, in spite of some down to earth descriptions of his own or other people's sickness, never strays across the line which divides the admissible from the unmentionable. That divide is perhaps more impassable than the actual chalk line drawn across the Wongan dance hall which the accountant's daughter remembers: 'The silver-tails danced this end and the common people danced the other side of the white chalk line.' (p. 175) And it is disappointing, when one calculates what long stretches of time the young Facey passed quite alone in the bush, to be told so little about his inner life. He describes what he used to do at the age of thirteen during his Sundays off:

[...] I had no young company, so I used to take my rifle and walk in the bush. Sometimes I got a shot at a 'roo and many times I would find a quiet spot and sit down and keep quiet and watch the birds and the small animals. (p. 89)

The following page of descriptions of birds concludes: 'They make the bush a beautiful place and helped one forget about loneliness.' (p. 91) One is persuaded to read this rare passage of extended description as a displacement for a censored meditation upon his loneliness, but one would not venture to identify the censor.

Although the brief reminiscences of the

women interviewed by Ms Carter do not allow for extended introspection, they focus more frequently than Mr Facey upon the inner life. The accountant's daughter recalls her withdrawal into the bush the day after she received news that her fiancé was 'killed in action':

[...] on Saturday morning I got up and I went into the bush and I walked and walked in the bush—I don't know where I went—crying my heart out. Looking back now, it seems so silly, it couldn't do any good, crying. Then I sat down under a tree and I just sobbed. (p. 179)

The twelve year old Bert Facey suffered a comparable loss when his employer's proposal to adopt and educate him failed at the last. Facey believed that his mother had asked for money in exchange: 'All of my hopes of a permanent home were dashed because of the actions of an unworthy mother.' (p. 77) The warm relationship with the 'aborted parents' cooled, and Bert developed boils:

I asked Frank to relieve me of the ploughing until the boils were better. He looked at them a few seconds, then grabbed me around the neck and started squeezing the boils. The pain from this was terrible. I swung my hand towards him and struck him in the stomach, knocking him down. (p. 76)

Bert was sacked and took to the road forthwith. Like the accountant's daughter, he 'cried and cried', but 'After awhile [he] pulled [him]-self together'. (p. 78)

The code of behaviour epitomised in 'pulling oneself together' is the tether which circumscribes the range of this autobiography. It is reflected in the tautness of the language and the clear driving narration. It also leaves unanswered many questions about character and personality. Mr Facey, one suspects, believes that he knows himself fully, and has told all that is worth telling. After reading *A Fortunate Life* the words of the factory worker's daughter spring to mind: 'Now that Mum's dead, there's a lot of questions I'd like to ask her.' (p. 77) As Mr Facey still enjoys his life, fortunately, perhaps Ms Carter could go and put some questions to him. Would she please ask why he went off at half-cock when the railway Ganger called him a 'clumsy bastard'? (p. 224) And why, when he himself had with good cause called a stingy ironmonger, out for cheap

labour, a 'cold-footed bastard', did he expect 'to be confronted by a policeman at any time'; whereas his method of dealing with larrikins jeering at him for a soldier, which was to 'clout them quick and lively', seems to have given him satisfaction and pride? (pp. 286-7) In 1914 when war broke out in Europe he was touring with a professional boxing troupe; the troupe broke up so that the boxers could enlist, and Private Facey found himself at Gallipoli. These three passages relate to his fight with the Ganger in 1913 and to the years 1914 and 1915:

[The Ganger] increased the force of my hit by rushing in and I put everything I had into that punch. It stopped him and blood started running from his mouth and nose. Without easing up I repeated the punch again and again, and each time a punch landed his head jerked back. Blood started to run off his chin all over the front of his shirt. Now all fear had left me and I was in full command of the fight. (p. 225)

[...] my trip with the troupe was a wonderful experience. I had some twenty-nine fights and was lucky enough to win them all. I had what was called a perfect left straight and most of my opponents were inexperienced and not very fit, and were easy targets. (p. 234)

The awful look on a man's face after he has been bayoneted will, I am sure, haunt me for the rest of my life; I will never forget that dreadful look. I killed men too with rifle-fire [...] but that was nothing like the bayonet.

People often ask what it is like to be in war, especially hand-to-hand fighting. Well, I can tell you, I was scared stiff. (p. 260)

The wars changed his outlook to unbelief. He says so, loudly: 'No sir, there is no God, it is only a myth.' (p. 317) There is so much to admire in Mr Facey: the pluckiness of the boy, the determination to teach himself to read and write, the persistence of the wounded soldier, the awakening political discrimination, and his commitment to negotiation:

I always believed that if there was a problem that it was better to talk things out—I was always good at this, both with the men within the Union and the Government representatives. I was able to get on well with everyone, even those I disagreed with. I was forever talking to them. If you just kept talking you could slowly win them around. I was able to get a lot done this

way and things were improved. I even got things improved by the Liberals, and got on well with them, although I had no time at all for them—they'd fight the working man all the way. (p. 313)

Admirable! but what an unaccountable *volte-face* for one who, man and boy as he records it, fought first and talked little. He concludes on a note of impregnable satisfaction: 'I have lived a very good life, it has been very rich and full. I have been very fortunate and I am thrilled by it when I look back.' (p. 326) Indeed he has built a house, planted a tree, fathered a child, and written a book—which was published, moreover: the perfect man. While his book may free some readers from ignorant obeisance to the myths of the pioneer and the digger, his own soul lies still in durance to the myth of the fortunate country.

The women who contributed their recollections to *Nothing to Spare* assess their lives more subtly; their retrospectives are convincingly ambivalent, and less assertive. Some have much to regret and are not afraid to weigh their misery in the final balance: 'I wouldn't go through my marriage again for anything.' (p. 67) 'My life was pretty mixed.' (p. 153) 'I think I was born too soon. I was at the tail-end of the Victorian era and too early for the twenties [...].' (p. 181) Transcription of the spoken word has created an intimate and intricate sense of their personalities. Qualities such as impishness, indignation, and 'side' play through the informal syntax and the idiolects. Ms Carter occasionally transcribes orthographically a quirk of pronunciation. The speech of the barmaid's daughter who became an 'extra' and went to London would have given Nancy Mitford a field-day. Think of 'gels' next to 'well-to-do!' (pp. 39-40) It must have been the elocution lessons; one can hardly blame Kalgoorlie. The fascinating possibility arises of tracking back sayings and style across the generations. The speech of the accountant's daughter bears traces of the bantering tone prevalent in the 1890's. She was born in 1887, and recalls her father's style: 'He was very sarcastic, and early Victorian, you know.' (p. 168) I hope the tape is preserved, in which she tells how she and her friend were surprised on West Leederville station when returning at midnight from watching a risqué melodrama, *Honour thy Father* from the gods:

'The Pater!' I said. 'There's the Pater on the platform.' [...]

'Well,' he said, 'This is a very late hour for little girls to be out. [...] Where have you been? It's a late hour for a Wesleyan bazaar.' [She was eighteen.] [...] He made a lot of sarcastic remarks about honouring fathers and we were dumb. He said, 'Muriel, I'll see you home.' To me he said, 'I'll see you in the morning.' I thought, 'Bejabbbers you won't!' (pp. 168-9)

Across the social classes the women's recollections of physical punishments, containment (whether by the protective decorum imposed upon the accountant's daughter or in the cells in the home for Aboriginal girls), and unremitting sexual demands bring an implicit judgement against the kind of fortunate life which thrilled such as Mr Facey. Whatever the deprivation and violence suffered by boys, society accorded them the freedom to strike out—whether with fists or onto the road—to preserve their freedoms. That could not be allowed to girls. 'Girls got into trouble just the same. But they'd be turned out of home, half the time.' (p. 82) 'The orphanages of those days were full of girls who'd be sent out to service and they'd come back pregnant, to keep the orphanage going!' (p. 96) The accountant's daughter remembers a friend: 'Everybody dropped her like a hot coal and she went down to the jetty and jumped in to the river and drowned herself because she was going to have an infant and it was a disgrace.' (p. 169)

A contemporary of Mr Facey's read straight through *A Fortunate Life* and commented, 'Very readable'. So it is, but I hope to goodness enthusiasts also read *Nothing to Spare* to give them a perspective.

Robert Juniper's illustrations for *A Fortunate Life*, if they survive without foxing into the next century, will probably be carefully removed from the book and framed. His smudgy, romantic landscapes with figures are charming.

That's what's wrong with them. The skittish, minimally equipped boar (p. 48), would be very suitable to illustrate 'This little piggy went to market', but looks far too innocuous to represent the frothing, roaring brute that charged the fence and cornered Bert up a tree. Perhaps some irony of Juniper's escapes me. The cover illustration is a bookseller's dream.

The layout and appearance of each book is consonant with its price. The proportion of printed matter to white space in the Fremantle Arts Centre Press production is admirable, the type-face is pleasing, and the choice of a large point-size will be welcome to readers of Mr Facey's own age. The paper, however, is not satisfactory under a reading-lamp, where it too readily reflects light. At the top of p. 19 a word (? called) is omitted. The interlinear spacing on p. 91 is irregular. At section breaks where half title and illustration occur the result may be four unnumbered pages in sequence. Bibliographically this is a nuisance, and the printer should consider bending the conventions. These are small quibbles, except for the choice of paper, in a book which looks and handles well. (I speak of the paperback only.) On editorial matters: the assumptions made about the reader's acquaintance with Western Australia and the period are usually consistent, except for the parenthetical information on p. 116 concerning Geraldton and Carnarvon, which is gratuitous. *Nothing to Spare* also inherits from superseded printing practices inconveniently long breaks in pagination. Surely Penguin has the clout to break this tradition. In the event of reprinting, the spelling on p. 158 should be corrected ('admissible' not 'admissable') and a correction on p. 103 may be needed. Should not 'late 1800s and early 1900s' read 'late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century'?

DOROTHY COLLIN

NOTE: Albert Facey died in Midland on 11 February, 1982, at the age of 87.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**BRUCE BENNETT**—co-editor of *Westerly*, editor and co-editor of a number of anthologies. Has recently been on leave, when he visited China, to produce the China issue of *Westerly*, No. 3 1981, and England, where he interviewed Randolph Stow—*Westerly*, No. 4 1981, and Peter Porter.

**VERONICA BRADY**—is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of W.A. She has contributed critical articles to Australian and overseas literary journals, and edited a selection of Western Australian poetry. A new book, *A Crucible of Prophets—Australians and the Question of God* is reviewed in this issue.

**DIANA BRYDON**—teaches in the English Department at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Her doctoral thesis at the Australian National University compared aspects of Australian and Canadian literature.

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**HELEN BULLEY**—is a graduate of Sydney University, taught at High School and Sydney Technical College. She has written plays for radio on the ABC, and is interested in stage and film script writing. Has only recently started writing stories, and this is her first published story.

**MOYA ELLIS**—was born in Perth. She has attended creative writing courses at Columbia University, and published a story with *Impetus*, a Columbia University literary magazine, as well as in *Westerly*.

**CLIFF GILLAM**—worked for some time as a tutor in the English Department at the University of W.A. Is active in W.A. theatre and radio.

**DUDLEY DE SOUZA**—lectures in the English Studies Department of the Institute of Education, and is working on Ph.D. studies in English at the National University of Singapore.

**BILL GREEN**—studied at the University of W.A. and at Murdoch University. He is at present teaching in a senior high school.

**P. A. JACOBS**—was born in Western Australia, and studied at the University of W.A. He works in the library at Churchlands College of Advanced Education.

**ELIZABETH JOLLEY**—was born in England and worked as a nurse in London during the war. She came to W.A. in 1959, and has worked here as a nurse, and at a variety of jobs. She is a part time tutor at Fremantle Arts Centre and at W.A.I.T. Her poems and stories have been broadcast on radio and published in journals and anthologies. She has published a book of short stories and two novels.

**VICTOR KLINE**—studied law at Sydney University, and practised for two years in Sydney, later working as a barrister at Alice Springs, and with the Australian Legal Aid Service. He travelled and worked in England and Europe, returning to Sydney last year, and is now working in publishing.

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**VERA NEWSOM**—lives in Sydney, is a retired high school principal, now devoting her time to writing poetry. Her poems have been published in Australian literary journals and newspapers.

**MICHAEL ONDAATJE**—see interview on page 65.

**RHONDA PELLETIER**—lives in Melbourne, and has studied at the Prahran College of Advanced Education. She works part time, to enable her to write. This is her first published story.

**PETER PORTER**—see profile on page 45.

**ROBYN ROWLAND**—lives near Geelong and is a lecturer in social psychology at Deakin University. Has published poetry in Australian and New Zealand journals.

**TOM SHAPCOTT**—poet, reviewer, anthologist. Received Canada-Australia Award 1978. Was writer in residence at W.A.I.T. in 1979 and Deakin University in 1980.

**GRAEME TURNER**—teaches in the English Department at W.A.I.T.

**CAROLE WILKINS**—worked as a typist and started writing full time five years ago. Is interested in writing for children and science fiction poetry. Her stories and poems have appeared in Australian magazines, and been broadcast on radio.

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