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CONTENTS

WESTERLY

VOLUME 35, No. 3, SEPTEMBER 1990

STORIES

Holi <i>Gloria Frydman</i>	41
Alla prima <i>Lorraine O'Brien</i>	54

POEMS

<i>Harry Aveling</i>	38	<i>Penelope Layland</i>	55
<i>Andrew Burke</i>	18	<i>Shirley Geok-lin Lim</i>	52
<i>Heather Cam</i>	51	<i>Chin Woon Ping</i>	43
<i>Michael Dugan</i>	58	<i>Peter Porter</i>	27
<i>Steve Evans</i>	26	<i>Selwyn Pritchard</i>	68
<i>Robert Gray</i>	31	<i>David Reiter</i>	47
<i>Terry Harrington</i>	69	<i>Peter Rose</i>	36
<i>Kathielyn Job</i>	60	<i>Carol Seitzer</i>	70
<i>Christopher Kelen</i>	35	<i>Nicolette Stasko</i>	8
<i>Jean Kent</i>	79	<i>Debra Stokes</i>	67
<i>John Kinsella</i>	17	<i>John Tranter</i>	56
<i>Andrew Lansdown</i>	80	<i>Graeme Wilson</i>	40

ARTICLES

Into The Desert For Once <i>Robert Drewe</i>	5
Rearticulating West <i>W.H. New</i>	9
Australian Provincialism Writ Large <i>David Hough</i>	20
Theatre in the West <i>Andrew Ross</i>	23
Portraying the Aboriginal People: the role of "Aboriginal and Islander Identity" <i>David Kerr</i>	61
Towards "The Shadow": Henry Kendall <i>Michael Ackland</i>	71

AUSTRALIAN STUDIES ROUNDUP	81
----------------------------	----

REVIEWS

Anna Rutherford, ed., 'Aboriginal Culture Today' <i>Kieran Dolin</i>	86
Andras Domahidy, 'Shadows and Women' <i>Paul Kovesi</i>	87
Sue Cramer, ed., 'Postmodernism: A Consideration of the Appropriation of Aboriginal Imagery' <i>Mudrooroo Narogin</i>	89
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, 'Modern Secrets' <i>Terri-ann White</i>	90
Mudrooroo Narogin, 'Writing from the Fringe' <i>Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra</i>	91
Tom Flood, 'Oceana Fine' <i>Michael Heald</i>	93
Giovanna Capone, 'Incandescent Verities: The Fiction of Hal Porter' <i>Bruce Bennett</i>	94
Pat Lowe with Jimmy Pike, 'Jilji: Life In the Great Sandy Desert' <i>Veronica Brady</i>	96

CONTRIBUTORS	103
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Into The Desert For Once

Ideally, my response to the topic of 'Western Literary Perspectives'* should be accompanied by guitar music of a particular kind. Ry Cooder's *Paris, Texas* theme would be fine, some J.J. Cale would be suitable.

This will be a very personal, self-indulgent response — a note of questionable taste in what has been a very responsibly-minded academic seminar. You see, this week I thought I would take part in one of the western literary myths under discussion today.

I'm not precisely sure why I have been driving the length of the Great Eastern Highway all week, into and out of the surprisingly cold and drizzling desert, with the ubiquitous silver water pipeline snaking above and over my shoulder, and the glove-box of my hire-car full of speeding tickets.

I am here to attend a conference held by the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature *and/or* to write an essay on the Goldfields for the Western Australian Tourist Commission *and/or* to complete research begun in Wiltshire and Zimbabwe for a new novel set in the 1890s *and/or* to flee someone else's fugue effect, in the psychologist's term, meaning their clashing emotional overload, *and/or* to try to stave off a fugue effect of my own.

I think that running away is at the heart of the western literary myth. And carrying a lot of freight with you. I do know what freight I'm carrying with me in my hire car, and why the airline employee at Sydney airport put a green sticker on my suitcase carrying the warning to his fellows **Heavy, bend your knees!**

Actually I'm carting about *West Coast Fiction*, an American anthology edited by James D. Houston; *Impressions, West Coast Fiction 1829-1988* (our west coast), edited by Peter Cowan; *A Short History of Western Australia*, by Crowley and de Garis; *Memories and Reflections of a Pioneer in the Western Australian Goldfields 1875-1939*, by Denis O'Callaghan; *The First Fifty Years of the Weld Club*, by T.S. Louch; *The Chief*, a biography of C.Y. O'Connor, by Merab Tauman; *Barbecue of the Primitives*, poetry by Philip Salom; *Gold and Typhoid — Two Fevers*, by Vera Whittington; *Mates and Gold*, by N.K. Sligo; Larry McMurtry's recent western novel, *Anything for Billy*; and Kazuo Ishiguro's gentle perambulation through another West Country, *The Remains of the Day* — all this on top of three exercise books, a glossy press pack from the W.A. Tourist Commission, the latest *Vanity Fair* with Kathleen Turner on the cover, plus clothes of course and a toilet bag which includes a free sewing kit, shampoo and body lotion from the Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle.

* Robert Drewe read this paper in a session on 'Western Literary Perspectives' during the York Australian Studies Symposium held in York, W.A. on 1-2 June 1990.

Why so well-, not to say over-prepared? (Ry Cooder could play *Feelin' Bad Blues* about here.) I have deliberately made myself a participant in a sort of road movie, a dusty cliché, a west coast story. It is certainly a rather complicated way of attending an Australian studies seminar, or researching a novel that began in England and Africa, or trying to absent myself from pain and dislocation at home, all of which I am doing, to a greater or lesser extent. It certainly flies in the face of my usual thesis, that when Australians face crisis they tend to flee to the coast. I chose the hinterland, the Goldfields, instead. But then, I remind myself, I did come west to do that, to the coast, to the familiar Indian Ocean of my boyhood.

As I wrote this, at a cramped, ill-designed desk in my room in Kalgoorlie's Plaza Hotel, unable to avoid the bloodshot eyes facing me in the mirror, I was, however, still curious about my motives. I had in front of me a notebook in which at some time in the past I had written: "At 7.30 a.m. a boy walking along the sea-shore south of Fremantle found a riderless horse. A little further on, near Robb's Jetty, the body of the Engineer-in-Chief lay half-in, half-out of the shallow waves on the beach, and by its side, sinking slowly into the wet sand, was a revolver."

Last Sunday, in the gusty rain and wind, I walked along that shore. And early on Monday morning I set off. I drove to Mundaring Weir in the Darling Ranges where the Engineer-in-Chief in question, C.Y. O'Connor, began his remarkable reticulation scheme, and then I followed his pipeline to its destination, Kalgoorlie, six hundred kilometres east of Fremantle.

At Merredin, halfway along the pipeline, I stopped for food and to stretch my legs. In the newsagents they had an old copy of *The Bodysurfers*. In the coffee shop they had an espresso machine as well as lamingtons. It began raining hard during my walk and I sheltered under a spindly jacaranda with an Aboriginal man. Four months before, I remembered, the jacarandas were blooming in Harare as I walked among black people with my then partner. Our shoes scuffed up the petals. She got ill there.

In Merredin this black man said, "Just my luck. It was raining when I left Sydney this morning, too." He told me he worked for the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. I told him I was a member of the Australia Council's Literature Board. On Friday we had been working under the same roof in Redfern, Sydney, on the other side of the country, and on Monday we were sheltering under the same tree in Merredin, W.A. It began to hail about then. Neither of us said, "Small world, isn't it?" because we were too wet and depressed, although he did inform me that Merredin was "a one-horse town". "There's not even an ANZ bank," he said.

As I barrelled along the Great Eastern Highway I played American Audio Press Library tapes of interviews with Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Richard Ford, Jim Harrison and Tom McGuane, all practitioners of what the reviewers call the New Realism, or Dirty Realism, the shrewder phrase coined by Bill Buford in *Granta*. They all struck a chord with me as I streamed along the flat, straight, empty highway. In fact I was feeling more dirtily realistic than I have in a long while, which was why I took the opportunity to shout out some pungent phrases I'd been bottling up and to press too hard on the accelerator, thereby attracting the attention of the police radar traps.

I suppose these writers could also be called writers of the West. The American West is a territory of the earth and the mind. James Houston points out that the West began with James Fenimore Cooper and that its stories and legends could occur anywhere between Appalachia and Puget Sound, between Saskatchewan and Vancouver and Mexico. It was originally peopled by cowboys, miners, trappers, pioneer women, Indian warriors, sheriffs and sharp shooters. However, the west coast as a literary region began with Mark Twain.

In 1861 Twain left St Louis for the Sacramento Valley and eventually San Francisco, which he recounted ten years later in *Roughing It*, published in 1872. According to Houston, it is in Twain's early writings that we can see the point where far-west travel narrative began to take the shape of fiction — and it is here that I think the parallels are closest to the West Australian experience. *Roughing It* is rich with tall tales and outrageous gold country escapades, written while he was working as a journalist in San Francisco. The stories showed exaggeration and humour, qualities familiar to the yarn tradition that was developing just as strongly in Australian journalism and writing generally.

One such tale became *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras Country*. It was published in *The New York Saturday Press* in 1865 and brought him national attention. At the same time Bret Harte was editing *The Overland Monthly* in San Francisco and beginning to write short stories. They were joined by other journalists such as Ambrose Bierce and, later, Frank Norris, and home-grown writers like Gertrude Atherton and Jack London.

Here there are also vague parallels with Western Australia in the 1890s. Though local writers seemed to lack interest in the novel as a form, the many Perth and Goldfields papers and magazines actively encouraged local writing, usually verse, and yarns that sometimes qualified as short stories. *The Western Mail* and *The Golden West* especially encouraged short stories with generous space and cash prizes. (Interestingly, these tales are resurfacing now in the steam of yarn and blarney-filled reminiscences which have followed Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life*.)

Where the experience differed over here in the travel-narrative-turned-novel was, as Peter Cowan has pointed out in *Impressions*, that the practitioners tended to be rather innocent visiting romantics (no Twains or Hartes here) who saw no necessity to link their melodramatic and predictable stories with the local background, perhaps because they had the expectations of the English magazine market firmly in mind.

(Incidentally, when I read John Boyle O'Reilly's serial-novel *Moondyne Joe* I see something rather different. His fantasy Aborigines with their great caves, heavy gold ornaments and temple handmaidens assembled from stories of Peru rather than, as Cowan puts it, from "the prosaic realities of the Swan River," put me in mind of Peter Weir's early films, specifically *The Last Wave*.)

At the same time in San Francisco, by contrast, Bret Harte was publishing *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*, a haunting and poignant story which, as Houston says, does what American west coast fictions have done ever since. It plays *against* the prevailing myth of boundless opportunity by recounting the fate of several people forced out of a mining camp, who meet their deaths in a Sierra snowstorm they aren't prepared for. And here we have it. Right from the start, American west coast fiction has provided *counterpoint*, playing under or around or against the legend. And the legend is huge — of gold and riches and open space and oranges and movies — the Great American Dream. The authors' names are too many to mention — everyone from Hammett to Steinbeck to Kerouac to Didion has taken part — but they all saw that the conventions existed only to be broken.

Western Australia was never in the forefront of convention-breaking. Anyone wanting to get to the essence of the older West Australian white culture should look at a recent popular exhibition of paintings, "Western Australian Art and Artists 1900-1950" at the State Art Gallery, which effectively showed how deeply a conservative and conventional society successfully held off pernicious Eastern States influences for half a century.

According to the exhibition's curator, Janda Gooding, "West Australian artists painted a landscape of light, prosperity and promise — a rural arcadia. Images of work and industry or the reality of urban experience were rarely produced. West Australian artists painted the 'ideal' landscape they wanted to see, and in so doing

averted their gaze from the reality surrounding them.” According to Gooding, “the myth based on the spirit of the land gained ascendancy in the 1900 to 1950 period and exerted influence on the artists and their public. The myth still holds force, forming opinion today.”

Interestingly, on the other side of the continent another exhibition, “Five Western Australian Artists”, was showing simultaneously at Sydney’s Holdsworth Galleries. The artists in this show all came to maturity in the burgeoning Fremantle art environment of the 1970s. According to the Sydney critics their work was “colourful” and “affirmative” but “restrained to the point of passivity”. Most of the artists were castigated for their lack of formal tension, their leisurely concentration on landscape, and for a “safe and polite show”. If I understand Peter Cowan correctly, he says much the same of our earlier writers.

Obviously this is no longer the case. No one could accuse the Jolleys and Hewetts and Campbells of a safe and polite show. I am flattered that Cowan mentions that my novel *The Savage Crows*, published in 1976, “reflects the change that had occurred in what might be written about, and the way in which it might be expressed.”

To counter that immodesty I was going to finish with a self-deprecating joke about carrying too much emotional freight, too many disconnected fictional ideas, American junk from the recent and far past — but none suggested itself.

Let me be serious and writerly and just mention that halfway between Coolgardie and Southern Cross yesterday it struck me that I needed to actually *touch* the pipeline that I had followed back and forth halfway across the State.

I stopped the car, got out and walked rather self-consciously up to it. I looked around but there were no cars or people, just some emus over the hill. The pipeline stretched as far as I could see in either direction. I put my hands on it. I put my arms around this lifeline; I actually hugged it, put my ear against it, to try and hear its workings, the hum of the current. It was silent and very cold to the touch.

NICOLETTE STASKO

Lament

Unable to bear this
I bend with the weight
like a willow
lacing the ground
with my hair
and a scattering
of loose pins
beside the river

Rearticulating West

Midway through 1980, after I'd spent a year living in New Zealand, I visited Sydney on my way home to Canada. I was eager at the time to try out on Australian critics a cultural generalization that I'd just come to. New Zealand, I suggested, was a synchronic society; everything that happened in that country happened at the same hour for everyone. But Canada was a polychronic society, everyone always having to make adjustments for other people's time difference. (One version of the Great Canadian Joke, in fact, features a man in long robes, walking down the street, carrying a placard — which reads 'The World Will End Tonight at Ten; Ten-thirty in Newfoundland.') I asked those critics in Sydney if Australia, too, had to take account of time zones this way. 'No,' they said — and then after a long pause they added: 'though you might get a different answer in another part of the country.'

I wasn't sure at the time if I was in the middle of a Great Australian Joke or if I was just hearing the unexamined perspective of power. Certainly my own West Coast generalization about Canada needed some re-examining, for it clearly expressed a perspective born of the experience of living on a geographic and social margin, and it articulated the desire of the margin for some sort of accommodation from Wherever happened to be the current 'centre' of power. Toronto, say, or Sydney. Montreal or Melbourne. (Maybe Washington, London, Tokyo, or Hong Kong.) That desire was, and is, probably naive. Centres of power tend to assume that their power is normal and natural, and to give little attention to and place little credence in people, events, or ideas that constitute alternatives to their received way of behaving. Instead, they construct the margins as the primitive, the past, the sentimental, and the comic thus diminishing (by the very rhetoric of their own construction) any perceived need to consider alternatives seriously.

When I visited Australia midway through 1990, I asked my students at the University of Queensland how they referred to Perth, thinking that one region (and Queensland seems acutely to be conscious of its own difference, its identity as 'North') might throw some light on Australian perceptions of 'West.' 'Oh, that's too far away,' they said. 'It's "over there".' 'It's the Wild West,' said another student, and when I questioned this last term — because for me it's a Hollywood idiom, one that doesn't readily apply to my part of North America — the student agreed: 'Yes, Hollywood about sums up Perth.' These rhetorical tropes seemed familiar to me. They were a way of packaging reality into units of receding relevance. Insulating formulas of accepted terminology substituted for a language that might cautiously address the complications of regional perspective. Such formulas are not, however, universally accepted or uniformly used. Sometimes they're automatic utterances that express the absence of thought about alternatives; but sometimes they're defensive masks worn against the suspicion of vulnerability because of an awareness *of* alternatives.

Sometimes, that is, inarticulateness is an attribute not of expression but of interpretation; it's the listener who determines it, not the speaker. But a speaker from a margin depends on there being a listener with the ears to hear past surface statements to the gist of what is really being said. A laconic irony is, for example, an indirect mode of address. It is therefore acutely political in form, if not always consequential in effect. Which expresses one of the recurrent dichotomies of living, aware, on the edge.

Some of these reflections on the structure of received power and the processes of shaping alternatives to it lay behind the composition of a book I wrote almost twenty years ago, called *Articulating West*. It's a book about the shifting *idea* of 'West' in Canada — as a cultural subject, a literary trope, and a process of using language itself as a field of political and regional expression. It's this book that Bruce Bennett referred to when he asked me to speak at the 1990 York Australian Studies seminar in Western Australia. It's also a book that I hadn't read since 1972, and I went back to it with about equal measures of curiosity and caution. More than a few time zones divided me from it. Hence what follows here is not a formal comparison of Western Australia and Western Canada, either as social organizations or as verbal territories, nor is it a full scale theoretical enquiry into the validity and character of comparative methodologies, or a prescription. It's more of a continuing meditation on the process of 'articulating west' in a version of 'west' that (characteristically) refuses to stay fixed. Rereading my 'West' turned into a series of reflections on change, and of some of the particular kinds of change that a rewriting of *Articulating West* would now invite.

The first change simply involves number, and from this flow all the others. Twenty years' worth of time has produced twenty years' worth of new publications and new writers, and numerous discoveries or rediscoveries of writers whose relevance to critical constructions of reality was less apparent to commentators at the time of their publication than it was some years later. Among the first group are such writers as Arnason, Armstrong, Bringham, Cooley, Culleton, Fawcett, Hodgins, Kamboureli, King, Kogawa, Marlatt, Reid, Suknaski, Thomas, and Wah — a group that already hints at another social change that has taken place in the Canadian West, both social and literary: a change involving ethnic plurality. The latter group — the rediscovered — involves such figures as Howard O'Hagan and Wilfred Watson, whose work was once considered merely romantic or unconscionably quirky, and which is now read for its verbal fracture and its parodic inversion of social stereotypes.

In *Articulating West* I reflected at one point on the Newfoundlander E.J. Pratt's long poem about the building of the transcontinental railway, *Towards the Last Spike*, possibly paying too much attention to theme and too little to form, but using the poem to try to differentiate between the politics of dreaming and the politics of consolidating power through marketing a dream. The Alberta writer Watson's 1959 poem about the Laurentian Shield — the term refers to the ancient rock mass surrounding Hudson's Bay, effectively dividing Eastern from Western Canada, over which the railway had to be built — occupies much of the same territory as Pratt's poem. But Watson uses a laconic regional idiom to undercut several of the institutions of power and convention that Pratt's poem significantly never questions. Watson's poem opens this way:

1.

When indefatigable God decided to make a new man, *homo Canadiensis*
He somewhat dubiously supposed that pulverized
Laurentian Shield would do all right as a corporeal basis.
Because (I give only a few of the Divine Reasons)

Though it's a phlegmatic conservative old-fashioned dust
More than a few centuries dour, without the least vein of humour,
And puritanic to a geologic fault, still,
It reddens with a blush of past granitic fire.

2.

Pioneer in creation, God took a deeper breath than usual,
and said hopefully, let there be life.
The Canadian Shield slept on, as through the ages.
God took a second breath, and cleared his throat.
Let there be *some* life, he hesitated; but the dust was deaf.
Let there be life, or else — God shouted; and at last
Of course there was some life, of a sort.
God rested from this day's labour, quite fatigued.
It's far from good, he said, but then it isn't so bad,
Considering this dense porphyry I've tried to work.

3.

Before him, obvious as a senseless crime, the first Canadian stood gaping
At him, with that magnificent blank complacency,
That awful monotony of face, that face to face
Blankness of mind, all cattle grass and trees, all wood and beef —
Consummatum est, God punned. He all but gave up the ghost,
Self-crucified in a wanton act of creation.
I shall have to make it, he shuddered, a second Eve.
No woman not of Laurentian dust could face this face all her life.

4.

God wept. But still, he thought, brushing away his tears,
It may do yet, if mated to a nice appropriate Eve.
A happy sex life will polish up many rough edges.
It has got a nice big simple decent heart.
I'm not completely sold on brilliancy.
I made the Greek too subtle and too sharp.
The French too polished. The English too poetically glib of tongue.
The Irish too fanciful, always fighting fairies. ¹

Thus dispensing with others, and even though the language reiterates several conventional attitudes to gender and ethnicity, the poem goes on to seek alternatives to the Canadian status quo. The new values Watson espouses are relative; the new landscape is verbal. Speech is open to alternative possibilities; and speech is the territory in which values change.

Watson's poem was one of several works that in the late 1950s was disputing the precedence of angloprotestant codes in anglophone Canadian culture. What interests me most in this particular passage is the vernacular method; for this particular technique constitutes a methodological challenge to the High Anglo cultural conventions of elegant diction, such elegance being a modified extension of the conventional 'elevated diction' that a century earlier had separated such writers as J. Mackay and Susanna Moodie from the very landscapes they wanted to describe. The vernacular speech, that is, redefined the terms that intrinsically made the old versions of landscape 'barbaric.'

But the vernacular raises other kinds of problem, involving among other things the connection between convention and value. As the poet Dennis Cooley has observed, in a polemical essay on the Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry, 'It must be difficult, even for the curious, not to perceive vernacular poetry as a failure of imagination or intelligence. It hardly offers, it seems, the shock of metaphor or the challenge of interpretation many of us have come to expect in (good) poetry. Apparently, vernacular just sits there blinking and naked as a newborn baby, and (some would have it) just as dumb.² That is, Cooley goes on, when a set of terms

of expression has come to be prized by readers of many different political persuasions, then those terms — here he lists referentiality, unity, high seriousness, linearity, closure, mastery, hierarchy, ingenuity, high-mindedness, and systems of overriding belief or structure — will have come to seem absolute rather than socially relative arbiters of art. Other terms (fragmentation, inconclusiveness, coarse jesting, uncertainty) by definition are consequently (and usually unquestioningly — accepted as inartistic; and under such conditions (in Cooley's words) we 'can at best be entertained by vernacular poetry, which will seem insignificant by such standards, immune to the exercise of the hermeneutics in which we have been so deeply inscribed and by which we have learned to value poetry.'³ The relevance of this distinction to region and the political articulation of a regional perspective is the subject Cooley goes on to examine.

I have alluded so far to questions of numbers, ethnicity, and verbal idiom. Along with questions involving gender, class, social conditions, and subtler regional discriminations (distinctions that would variously identify 'Coast,' 'Interior,' 'Island,' 'Gulf,' 'foothills,' 'lakeland,' and 'prairie' — rather than just a unitary 'West'), these issues emphasize the nature of plurality. Asserting pluralism is, moreover, a way of denying homogeneity and the implicitly assumed uniformity of authority. Such authority depends upon binarism — upon the validity of One and the invalidity of All Else. And binaries can be attractive, even if often misleading. If I were 'rearticulating West' I would try more to resist the binary structure which my initial argument embraced even while it was trying to address the nature of *process*, of continuing change. How to do so? Challenges to static belief can, it seems, spur thought, which is motion, into being. But motion is not unidirectional. It usually leads to more alternatives than one. And so in the 'West.' In Canada — perhaps more so than in Australia, because of the separate patterns of settlement and expectation — the West has been a multiple cradle of difference: a territory in which eleven of the fourteen native language groups were spoken, territory that subsequently became Metis, territory that functioned in the longer run as a source of alternative national models to the bicultural (or implicitly monocultural) designs and expectations of Jansenist Quebec and angloprotestant Ontario. When, for example, Prime Minister Laurier's Minister of the Interior at the turn of the century, Sir Clifford Sifton, invited Eastern European and Ukrainian immigrants to Canada to *settle* the prairies, he did so with the deliberate design of putting *peasants* on peripheral lands, to assert an Ontario political presence in the territory, establish the geography of nationhood (against the real inroads of the expanding United States), and economically serve the 'centre.' If he reflected on culture at all, he probably assumed that over the course of time the so-called peasants would be wholly assimilated into the value system of the Ontario culture in place. That there might be another culture brought *with* the immigrants and in some measure kept and valued *by* them, and that these values might in due course modify the so-called 'centre' and that literary figures might emerge from these immigrant groups seems not to have crossed his mind at all. But to refer to contemporary writers is to list precisely these eventualities: Ruby Wiebe, using both German and English in *The Blue Mountains of China*, to express the separate aspirations that different registers of speech and writing convey within a close community; Andrew Suknaski, using an associative poetic line to reconstruct the pogroms, penury, and emotional plenitude of his Ukrainian heritage;⁴ or among other ethnic groups, Joy Kogawa, probing in *Obasan* the silences that suppress history and sometimes contain a resistant racism; and Fred Wah, seeking in *Breathin' My Name With a Sigh* to celebrate in the lyric syllable of his own name the multiplicity rather than the divisiveness that derives from a racially-mixed identity.

graphic metaphor of this dilemma.) But sometimes, as these contemporary writers recognize, the institutions of power have less to be met or written at head-on than to be circumscribed, written around. For such writers, literary form is a potential weapon, not just a passive medium of transmission. They use parody — the carnival of tall tales and hyperbolic irony — to redefine old authority by filtering it through a stylized version of whatever has become the natural idiom of region. Which is exactly the method employed by Jack Hodgins, David Arnason, Robert Kroetsch.

Kroetsch's discontinuous long poem *Seed Catalogue*, for example, asks in part:

'How do you grow a past/
to live in . . .
the absence of Heraclitus . . .'¹⁰

Where is the poetry of the new experience to be located, in other words, if even change is a trope inherited from the past? How, in Kroetsch's words, can one 'unhide the hidden,' 'unwrite the written,' in order to speak the voice of region?¹¹ In the terms of *Seed Catalogue*, how do you grow a lover, a prairie town, a poet? His answer is a sequence of answers: laconic, vernacular, experiential, tongue-in-cheek, coarse, raw:

Son, this is a crowbar.
This is a willow fencepost.
This is a sledge.
This is a roll of barbed wire.
This is a bag of staples.
This is a claw hammer.

We give form to this land by running
a series of posts and three strands
of barbed wire around a quarter-section.

First off I want you to take that
crowbar and drive 1,156 holes
in that gumbo.
And the next time you want to
write a poem
we'll start the haying.

Asking then how you grow a poet, Kroetsch goes on to declare that a prairie road — the 'shortest distance between nowhere and nowhere' - 'is a poem,' but 'As for the poet himself / we can find no record / of his having traversed / the land / . . . / only a scarred / page, a spool of wording/ . . . / a pile of rabbit turds that tells us / all spring long / where the track was.'¹² Like Arnason's mordant rewrite of fairytale (in *The Circus Performer's Bar*), the Hodgins' comic and contradictory apprehensions of the ostensible single 'truth' of history (in *The Invention of the World*), it is the form itself here talking out its insights into difference. It doesn't declare a new uniformity. Rather, it argues out the validity of multi-voicedness as the paradigm of an emerging norm.

And here is possibly a point of most relevant overlap between Western Canada and Western Australia: the function of the resistance to uniformity. Let me rephrase this overlap as a series of questions:

1. Do Australian Studies still suffer from a Sydney-vs.-The Bush binarism?
2. Is ethnic plurality as important on the West Coast as in Vancouver, Sydney, or Melbourne?
3. Is class a relevant issue in as self-sufficient and affluent a city as Perth?
4. Do women in Western Australia have any more or any less access to real political power than they do elsewhere in Australia?

5. Is the 'homogeneity' of Australia a reality of nationhood — or just a socially acceptable fiction? (In my country, 'homogeneity' would be a national illusion, and 'unity' is dependent on political will and cultural sharing rather than on political fiat or cultural or geographical uniformity.)
6. To what degree is *language* in Western Australia an ideological vehicle of regional expression or political reconstruction or social reconfirmation or social change?
7. To what degree do technological and social institutions — television, the publishing industry, curriculum and government policy — assist or limit regional expression?
8. How does 'regionalism' differ from 'factionalism', and why is it important to assert the distinction?
9. Is 'Western Australia' an imaginative entirety, or does it separate readily into functional or imaginative subregions: urban/rural, Southwest, Kimberley, Nullarbor?
10. It is perhaps even idle and naive to think in *national* terms as the frame within which regional tensions occur, and not to recognize that Canada and Australia, say, are both, in their 'entirety', simply peripheral territories of various active, powerful forms of political, economic, and conglomerate so-called 'internationalism.'

I doubt that there is a single useful generalization for the 'entirety' that will 'unify', 'authenticate', or 'synchronize' such Western Australian writers as Cowan, Drewe, Jolley, Stow, Ward, Zwicky, and others all at once. They might all, nevertheless, be severally engaged in a process of observing — and maybe questioning — the world in which they live and the world that received notions of hierarchy and wholeness ask them to live in. And the perspectives born of place — however one interprets place — no doubt influence how these questions are, and can be, asked.

I began these comments by referring to convention in New Zealand. It's worth remembering, in the context of what I've been saying, that the word 'Maori' once meant 'normal' or 'natural.' In the context of a more recent reality called 'New Zealand History', the word began to lose this meaning and to conjure images of marginality instead. But this is not a fixed definition either. One's own time can be reclaimed. For margins have a way of writing back — and changes in cultural expression can rearticulate what is being said and what is being assumed, in literature as in other forms of human expression, about the shape and nature of power.

NOTES

1. *Poems Collected/unpublished/new*, Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986, p.47.
2. *Prairie Fire* (1986-7); rpt in his *The Vernacular Muse*, Winnipeg, Turnstone, 1987, p.171.
3. Cooley, p.178.
4. As in 'Vitpalno', *Canadian Literature*, 120 (Spring 1989), pp.21-41.
5. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1984, n.p.
6. *Net Work: Selected Writing*, ed. Fred Wah (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1989), p.99.
7. *Waiting for Wayman* (1973); rpt in *Vancouver Poetry*, ed. Allan Safaik (Wintaw, B.C.: Polestar, 1986), p.158.
8. *Burning Water, The Daughters of Captain Cook, and The Secret Life of Alexander Mackenzie* respectively.
9. In "Migration: C.P.R."
10. *Completed Field Notes*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989, pp. 38-39.
11. See *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, Toronto, Oxford, 1989, pp. 58-63.
12. *Completed Field Notes*, pp. 42-43.

Magpie Larks

Magpie Larks are almost skittish:
unsettled, withdrawing into themselves,
you could diagnose split personalities.

Tilting, swallowing their voice,
you'd expect them to turn full circle,
flip the world back on its shoulders
and lift it pertly up again.

Mildly aggressive, they suggest threat,
and are often seen on the tails of larger birds,
though make light of a pursuit
which may finish as abruptly as it began,
almost convincing we ornithologists
that such acts are games, that life is really
as light-hearted as we'd like to think . . .

Though sown into the black and white
of their patches is the solitary codex,
their gatherings small scale,
and even these tentative.

warble orble ardle oodle

(for rob finlayson)

sun day is clicking with
crickets is an island
in a sea of nast
urtiums
last night's
webs are shoddy like
a club bar mourning after
her moaning before
i have
experience of this
and that the night brings
down on the day with its false
laughter turning into
sobs sex
you well growns of
treasure on broken lounges
with bad blues singers you'd
never fuck in real
light only
through this amphet-
amine glow sores break
out and into your pissed story
like a colour or
a lie
you tell for
art's sake on the make
for fame and depression the
double-faced modern
prize here
and there is
no history of the pre-
sent yet all lies before
the after-breath of
yes-today
we differ yet/but
all words carry their

bags as we move them about
pages leaving
trails
obvious garden
sun day setting birds
trill down a soundtrack
crickets click
my mating
call is
a mumble words so
short as to tear at
meaning like knives if
you want
more heart
the hear is in it
'there' is ungeographic
is never far a
final
grunt: "there
are you pleased now?
god knows what you've
done to us" who is
speaking?
language? wife?
are you wed to
both bigamist of de-
sire to forever hereafter
compose?
who have
you pleased now
and when with a song of
arms and legs and nouns
and verbs
'o touch
and see' an act
of meaning wriggle like
a sheet torn with desire

Australian Provincialism Writ Large*

Are we re-inventing the wheel? Or just going round in circles?

David Hough

In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last December, and reproduced in the *Australian & New Zealand Theatre Record*, critic Paul McGillick wrote:

Mainstream Australian theatre is in a bad state. The playwrighting is flabby, undisciplined and largely bereft of vision. The production values are shallow and conventionalised. Our main theatre training schools are intellectually flaccid. The Australian theatre seems to pride itself on being thoroughly ignorant of all other art forms and generally demonstrates a sneering disregard for any kind of mental activity, far less for what used to be known as education.

[*Sydney Morning Herald* 5 December 1989]

In the space of a few minutes I would like to address each of these issues.

There is a consensus among Australian theatre critics that at present we are going through a pretty sorry state of affairs. What Harry Kippax is reported to have recently said of the Sydney scene — “The worst season I can ever remember!” — I would say is true of Perth. [Incidentally, Harry, who retired at the end of last year as the long time theatre critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, defined himself as a “propagandist for good theatre.”]

This weekend you will have plenty of opportunity to see for yourself. I seriously doubt that you will leave York believing, as the program would have us believe, “The 1990 Festival offers a richer and more diverse program of activities than ever before.”

But first let’s distinguish between play-making and play performance; between script development and its realization on the stage. When these two processes are concurrent and collaborative, as they ought to be, as they so often have been for Caryl Churchill and the Joint Stock Theatre Company then, what Katharine Brisbane calls “necessary theatre” is often the electrifying result.

Churchill’s *A Mouthful of Birds* is an example and David Williams’ work with the UWA Theatre Studies students an impressive exploration of theatre in performance. And it was staged in only 180 hours of rehearsal — with young people not vocationally training for the theatre.

* This paper, and the following paper by Andrew Ross, were delivered at the York Australian Studies Seminar on 2 June 1990.

It was the most exciting local production I've seen in the last twelve months. Sadly, the night I went, there were no more than thirty people in the Octagon Theatre.

You'll have a chance to see another example of Churchill's collaborative work in *Serious Money* which is the next production at the Hole in the Wall.

There are three major problems with new plays coming to the stage today: firstly, there is little evidence of the craft of playwrighting, secondly, there is too much influence from the episodic, linear demands of television; and thirdly, there is too little evidence of collaborative development with those who make theatre happen – the theatre practitioner – actor, director and designer.

In the first newsletter of the Australian Playwrights' Centre, the editor of Currency Press, Katherine Brisbane, wrote:

. . . too many plays of the 80s are poorly structured . . . I would go so far as to say that some of our best playwrights no longer know, or have learned, the basic craft of play structure . . . I mean the capacity to structure the emotional energy of the play, the rhythm of speech and the dramatic imagery.

There is an urgent need at the national level and at our state level to provide formal education in the craft of playwrighting. The WA Academy of Performing Arts, The University of Western Australia, Murdoch and Curtin Universities should get their heads together and get someone here on a shared basis, for an extended period of time, to teach the craft.

The film industry provides a model that the theatre could look at in terms of developing a script. Too many plays are too far down the track before they get near a theatre and this leads to too much disillusionment on both sides of the curtain.

I have never been to the annual Playwrights' Conference but I have reservations about the efficacy of its workshop approach to scripts, and wonder just how much benefit playwrights in general and the theatre in particular get from it.

I mentioned earlier what Katherine Brisbane called "necessary plays". Aboriginal theatre is probably the best example of that, and two people — Andrew Ross and Jack Davis — the exemplars of it.

A case could also be made for the emergence of women playwrights, as well as women directors, and this will gather momentum. Peta Murray, for example, whose *Wallflowering* we saw at this year's Festival of Perth, had three plays produced last year. It was a Perth woman, Doreen Sullivan, whose script *Sharon Lilly's Screwdriver* was the highlight of the last Playwrights' Conference.

Jeremy Eccles, the editor of the *Australian & New Zealand Theatre Record*, tells me that there is genuine excitement in the eastern states about *Bran Nue Day* — in the words of the song from *Midnight Cowboy*, "every body's talkin'".

It was premiered at this year's Festival of Perth — Andrew directed it — and negotiations are well in hand for a national tour.

The collaborative work of Jack Davis and Andrew Ross is unique in Australian theatre. Jack is writing plays that are genuinely political, not just the superficial exploration of topical issues we see too often. They articulate with insight and humanity the agony and the hope of a people trying to find a voice and a place in today's Australia.

Sport has been the traditional passport for the young Aboriginal into a white man's society. It is through the visual, the performing and the literary arts that Jack and others are now showing another way: the exciting thing *is* that so much of it is happening in Western Australia.

Let me now look briefly at two aspects of the theatre industry: production and employment.

I was given the latest figures on full-time employment from graduates from the WA College of Advanced Education who graduated last year. It might interest you to know that 92 per cent of our business graduates are in full-time employment; and for the record, 72 per cent of our teachers and 68 per cent of our nurses. I do not know what percentage of our actors [from the Academy] are in full-time employment. We all know that the theatre is a precarious livelihood. But the level of unemployment in the theatre industry at the moment, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, and particularly for the older actor, is epidemic.

The WA Theatre Company has tried to give work to as many actors as possible, Linda Aronson's *Dinkum Assorted*, for instance — and that's commendable — but with disastrous results in terms of choice of plays and production standards; and inevitably the box office.

Actors are prepared to travel to work with good directors — as John Gaden showed in Adelaide; Aubrey Mellor illustrated in Brisbane and as Simon Phillips is demonstrating again in Adelaide. They did too when Arne Neeme, who has done so much to get the public acceptance of Australian plays, developed the Octagon Theatre Company in 1969. But these ensemble examples are too few to sustain the art of Australian theatre and the Australian theatre industry. We have the acting talent but there are too few directors. At present we have neither the vision, the climate, nor the soil conditions to nurture theatrical creators. This is a matter of national as well as of local importance.

Last year I attended a Stage Designers' Conference in Sydney. Everywhere I went I heard the same thing said of graduates from the Academy: they are technically good, they have a high level of energy and they'll have a go at anything. Many of our actors are doing well. They come from all over the country to attend, and when they leave they often develop their own cooperative efforts.

That there is now an opportunity to study theatre at UWA is exciting, challenging and lamentable: exciting because of the combination of the intellectual and the performance possibilities; challenging because of the physical spaces, unique in Australia; lamentable because it has taken so long.

Now let me conclude with something I feel quite passionate about.

Over the last ten years David Blenkinsop and his staff have brought a magnificent array of international theatre to Perth. What evidence is there in local theatre practice that we have seen anything? Almost nothing! Jack Davis excepted: *No Sugar* in particular. Deckchair Theatre possibly.

We have seen levels of performance and standards of production of the classic and the contemporary, from the famous and the unknown, from the generously endowed, to the shoestring and the threadbare — from Russia, from Louisville, from Milan, from London.

Money is *not* the key. Remember Trestle Theatre Company with their mask work? And the Medieval Players? Poor but honest.

But what did these visitors have in common? Four things: vision, commitment, respect for the craft skills — and most importantly — an overwhelming desire to communicate with, and excite an audience.

I see little of that in contemporary Australian drama or on the contemporary Australian stage.

Theatre in the West

I've witnessed a few changes the direction theatre in Western Australia has taken since I first came to Perth in 1976. Perhaps my view has been enhanced as well as interrupted by periodic absences interstate and overseas, not so much seeking greener pastures as fleeing drought-stricken ones in what has steadily become home.

My theatrical education was in Melbourne, in the fabled days of La Mama, The Pram Factory, of David Williamson, Jack Hibberd, John Romeril. The year before I moved to Perth I was employed as a director at Monash University while Dorothy Hewett was writer-in-residence. I think it was 1975; Dorothy had left Western Australia a year or so earlier. She arrived at my office, introduced herself and asked to use my 'phone as she was 'in-residence" in a broom closet' in the English department. I'd seen *The Chapel Perilous*, George Whaley's production in the Melbourne University Theatre. After reading her plays and listening to her I realized how different she was from the new Melbourne and Sydney playwrights, Williamson, Hibberd, Romeril, Buzo and Oakley. Katherine Brisbane observed in 1977 that "of the playwrights from other states, the one who most flamboyantly tangled with the environment was the rebellious Dorothy Hewett in Perth (though she moved to Sydney in 1974). The most isolated capital in the world, Perth has produced many original minds of rebellious nature and it is interesting that its playwrights, like Alan Seymour and in the previous generation, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Henrietta Drake-Brockman, have all injected their writing with a similar boldness. Miss Hewett, whose work is absorbed by the expression of a need to live with mind and senses in a community sparsely populated and deeply unsure of its vital values, writes about an Australia richly different from that portrayed by the eastern group."

Shortly after meeting Dorothy I was offered a job in Perth by Aarne Neeme, who was then Artistic Director of the National Theatre Company (The Playhouse). I was "Youth Director" — it was fifteen years ago — which involved directing contemporary plays (mainly British and Australian) in the tiny Greenroom Theatre and establishing a theatre-in-education company to perform specially-written plays in schools. There was a lot of touring and I was able to see most of the State within two years. It was a great apprenticeship. How many young directors today are presented with such an opportunity?

The theatre in Western Australia was enjoying the last days of what we now look back upon as a golden period: Aarne Neeme's final year at the Playhouse, John Milson at the Hole-in-the Wall. The industry was vigorous, standards were high but what was "richly different"? Where were the "many original minds of a rebellious nature"? Programming closely mirrored the Eastern States, the companies were strikingly similar to their Melbourne and Sydney counterparts. The actors, designers

and directors perceived themselves as part of a wider national and international community of “the theatre” rather than as part of a local community of artists. Naturally, their eyes were trained towards the Meccas of their art: London, New York, Sydney, Melbourne. The theatre in the most isolated city in the world was isolated from the creative and intellectual life of Western Australia; it exhibited little local character. It had not followed the path of literature and the visual arts in the post-war years.

Popular mythology has it that the Anglophile period of Australian theatre lingered in Perth like the Summer. I don't think it's that simple; but if Perth theatre was traditionally a branch line of the West End, then in the seventies it became a branch line of Carlton and Darlinghurst. The notion that the direction of our theatre involves some sort of progress from imitation to originality isn't new.

Neville Teede, in surveying theatre during the war years, observed:

Local theatre was proving itself to be something more than just an amateur imitation of the visiting professional companies upon which the West had come to rely for so long. Perth theatre, as a cultural statement, had grown up.¹

Bill Dunstone, in his fine survey of Western Australian drama in *The Literature of Western Australia* (edited by Bruce Bennett) points out that the Perth Repertory Club mounted eight new local plays in the years between 1935-40.² In 1937 Henrietta Drake-Brockman's *The Blister*, a drama set in Broome, was performed in His Majesty's Theatre (which then had about 2,000 seats); *Bran Nue Dae*, also set in Broome, was regarded as a great success because it filled 650 seats in the Octagon Theatre in 1990. The “growing up” Neville Teede speaks of has not been steady progress but a repetition of fits and starts, advances and retreats. Perhaps the advances have been associated with the presence of a major playwright, Henrietta Drake-Brockman in the 30's, Dorothy Hewett in the 70's, and Jack Davis in the 80's, while the retreats have been the cause or effect of the absence of important local writing. Writers rather than directors make theatre history. Directors stumble upon opportunities and then struggle to make the change that history is dictating anyway.

One salient difference is that playwrights in the West are rarely exclusively or even primarily playwrights — Katharine Susannah Prichard (novelist, poet, pamphleteer, playwright), Henrietta Drake-Brockman (novelist, historian, playwright), Dorothy Hewett (poet, novelist, playwright), Jack Davis (poet, playwright), Jimmy Chi (songwriter, musician, playwright). A number of recent plays have come from established literary figures: Tom Hungerford's *The Day It All Ended*, Nick Hasluck's *Van M.* Writing for the stage sits comfortably into regional literary history and has little to do with playwrighting trends in the other States. Paradoxically, the theatre has traditionally followed the patterns of the other states and had little to do with the literary life of the region.

The local tradition has been described by Katherine Brisbane as “epic and poetic” and “lyrical rather than dramatic”; it is “richly different” and fits into the traditional claustrophobic, experimental studio theatre as comfortably as Dorothy Hewett fitted into her Monash “broom closet”. New drama has not usually come from the fringe or even second-string companies but as occasional aberrations in an otherwise conservative state company. Small, poorly funded companies are not much use to writers like Dorothy Hewett, Jack Davis or Jimmy Chi. Local plays need no longer be produced out of duty with an anticipation of box office disaster. A number of local plays have been amongst the most outstanding box office successes of recent years — *A Fortunate Life*, *No Sugar*, *The Man from Muckinupin*, *The Day It All Ended*, *Bran Nue Dae*.

What I believe is needed is a break with the tyranny of imitation; we must question whether we need to follow the examples of other States. Do we need an Arts Centre? Do we need the pattern of a major "State" company, along with a second string company, a community company etc? Playwrights in Western Australia will certainly not shine on the fringe. What they need is a company of scale with access to expansive performing spaces and devoted to developing a regional style. Regionalism is not the same as parochialism, and it does not exclusively apply to locally written plays. A regional style can infect the production of all plays, especially the classics. I don't mean bring social realist productions of Shakespeare set in Mukinbudin in the summer of 1939 but imaginative, interpretive use of the art, literature, mythology, history and landscape of the region.

The University of Western Australia, as Neville Teede documents, has played an important if spasmodic role in the development of local theatre:

The University had shown the potential of creating a first rate company and training programme, but unfortunately the hierarchy of the University thought of theatre as a business venture, and certainly not respectable enough to be treated seriously as an academic discipline. Unable, or unwilling, to incorporate the changing philosophy and events, the leading academics of that time must accept responsibility for rejecting drama (as they later accepted music) and forcing its student body to be just another amateur group.

The University of Western Australia has the best theatre facilities of any campus in Australia — facilities that were provided because of an assumption that the University played an important role in the cultural life of the region. The last fifteen years have seen Australia's universities, including U.W.A., taking a diminishing part in the performing arts. Arts training has become increasingly narrow and specialised and a trend towards anti-intellectualism has overtaken the theatre industry. As the industry develops and diversifies, and the city looks at rationalising the use of its theatre facilities, the University has another opportunity to assert its role in the performing arts. It can only be hoped that Neville Teede's comments are not ignored, that the mistakes of the past are not repeated so that the best theatres on any campus in Australia become little more than a glorified school assembly hall.

What are the "changing philosophy and events" we should be observing now? My own experience has been of three significant areas of change: the increased output and viability of local playwrights, the role of the Festival of Perth as a showcase for new work from Western Australia, and a diversification in the community of performing artists. Until recently, the theatre was largely the preserve of Anglo-Celts, like myself. Recently we have seen an influx of European artists, most conspicuously in W.A. Kryztof Kaczmarek and his wonderful Theatre Zart company. Of even greater significance has been the increasing influence of Aboriginal writers and performers: playwrights like Jack Davis, Richard Walley and Jimmy Chi and actors like Ernie Dingo, Lynette Narkle and John More. These are the changes, I believe, the industry must be able and willing to assimilate over the next decade.

I'm afraid I can't let the subject of race relations and the theatre pass without comment at a time when it is the sub-text of much of the current debate and controversy. I've enjoyed the privilege of directing plays by Jack Davis and Jimmy Chi and working with many Aboriginal artists. On the surface there is a picture of productive harmony, and indeed on the stage, in the rehearsal room and dressing room that has been the case. Initially, the response from the industry was a well intentioned if patronising pat on the head. As Aboriginal artists enjoyed increasing success and recognition this response was overtaken by fear, jealousy and resentment. This is not to say that all my white colleagues are racist, but sadly some of them

are. By international standards, the only ones that count, our progress is poor. We haven't managed to make a multi-racial theatre as commonplace as it is in that blatantly racist state, South Africa, or colour blind casting the norm as it is in Britain, whose theatrical practices we so like to disparage.

The impact of Aboriginal artists has been especially significant in Western Australia. There may be many reasons for this, but one activity is that so called "Aboriginal Theatre" has not developed separately here from the mainstream of the industry. Pressure from black and white towards separatism should be resisted. Arguments about jobs for local (white) actors from whites, along with self-determination from blacks are generally smokescreens to camouflage self interest.

Finally, to finish at the beginning. The first recorded theatrical performance in the colony of New South Wales was Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in 1789. This celebrated event was the subject of a novel by Thomas Keneally and later a play, *Our Country's Good*, by Timberlake Wertenbaker. The first recorded theatrical performance in the Swan River colony was a corroboree in March 1833, organised by Yagan, who also acted as a master of ceremonies. According to the *Perth Gazette* the audience, comprising the gentry of the colony, enjoyed, if not fully understood the performance. A year later, Yagan, with a price of thirty pounds on his head was betrayed, shot and decapitated. His head was smoked in the stump of a tree at Government House before being sent to England. Perhaps here is the origin of our rich difference: in Yagan — the first of "many original minds of a rebellious nature" to "flamboyantly tangle with the environment."

NOTES

1. Neville Teede, 'Theatre Out West', *Meanjin* 43, 1, March 1984.
2. Bill Dunstone, 'Drama', *The Literature of Western Australia*, ed. Bruce Bennett, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1979, 185-214.
3. Katherine Brisbane, 'From Williamson to Williamson : Australia's Larrikin Theatre', *Theatre Quarterly*, VII, 26, Summer 1977.
4. 'Theatre Out West.'

STEVE EVANS

Wattle

at a distance
the tree in bloom's
a bright beachball
a child's sun
but closer
a cloud of yellow confetti
like a laboratory model
of a runaway molecule
small furry marbles
that powder your fingers
like moths' wings
a pointillist piece
an exception to Monet's assertion
that the world is not made of dots

An Address to the Stars

These points of light which metaphors debate
Disclose a separation so extreme
Infinity awakens from its dream,
A tongue-tied horizontal figure eight.

Since they are unimaginable, we
Invert them till they shine through inner space:
Up close they act as gods whose laws replace
Extrapolation with sublimity.

O stars encompassed by our measurements,
Your integers show where belief may build
And adding noughts until the chart is filled
Exchange eternity for immanence.

Memorandum to my Daughters

You are discovering one of the unacknowledged truths
About Australia — it is a long and silver littoral
Within the sound of surf, a country rhymed by waves
And scanned by the shifting outlines of the bay.
We are all still strangers on its shore — the palms,
The Norfolk pines, the ugly face of concrete to the sea:
No matter how far inland you may go, you only
Leave yourself and drift in double legend to
An old impossibility — no wonder those explorers sought
An inland sea; it was the pool of madness in them
Fed by rivers running into nothing. Relax instead
Along the endless shore, the mountain seas of sand,
The various heads and raging bars where change of tide
Rips channels through a narrow bottleneck — you can be
Odysseus or Captain Cook, forget the packet tours
Flying into Cairns, the washed-up stubbies on the beach,
And step into a balanced darkness, mangroves, mud
And soft withdrawal at evening. Your dual inheritance
Is welcoming you, and as you flap among the sandbanks
Look out to sea and watch the tourist preen himself:
Thus sang they in the Australian boat, but not to praise
The land, themselves or God, but with a level voice
To mark their presence in a sky of perfect stars.

Vecchio Libro, Senti

You must to your apotheosis, book,
a minor treasure in the vaults
of scholarship — blaze in darkness
through the numbered files,
let the hours I spent with you
filter through the paper till you glow.
One day perhaps a sky-patrolman
will establish you, the hinge
of constellations, calling you
The Bear of Secret History,
The Holy Huntsman's Belt.

Your spine is reinforced
with yellow tape, your edges
kept from fraying by glued paper —
whether wine or tears have spotted you
exacts research — now you're
'forisportam', gone to earth,
your words like mine stagnant as the stars.

Autobiography

Here are proclaimed the deeds I should be judged by
With some peculiar stroke to make them bold —
The wounded little boy, the crayoned martyr,
The long retreat to youth from being old,
Spiced in the telling by obscure betrayal,
A sort of public pilgrimage of grace
And when the light invades the page the reader
Sees through the chosen words to one true face
Which wears the glow of Rousseauesque confession,
Its absolution built into its pose:
I left my home, I looked for love, I published,
I heard the gates of truth behind me close.

And this official version has its wonders,
All rare enough to earn a good advance:
The miracles beside the sea, strayed starfish
Aggrieved like God, the test case of the Dance
Where girls along the walls are lined accusers
Inside a catacomb, the pies and peas
Of bullying, the sparrows' heads declining
For tuppences a time in backyard trees,
A grammar made for gardens whose exotic
Invasions threaten unmarked tennis courts
Reliving old temptations of the species
In vesperal Miltonic afterthoughts.

The proper story is less saleable —
The books I read, the records I put on,
My dreams with their low bow-waves always fronting
An inner lake where self itself had gone —
Born into print and pictures, I took passage
Down channels of the archived past whose shrill
Chromatics counterpointed ordinary
Unhappiness, the casual family-kill,
And knew that every atom of existence
Possessed of an inviolable design
Was where the dirt and metaphysics melded,
A nowhere in an everlasting line.

The Girls

All these unbalanced galaxies . . .
steel rivets, burred,
the gas-blue constrictions.

Over the playing fields
lies a blue-white mistiness
of arc-lamps.

There are girls at practice,
the implacable strike
of their hockey sticks,

whose limbs surpass
anything we have contrived
in wood, for shapeliness.

Wandering the pavements,
I watch with the separate men
through wire-netting

the girls play exactly
where they may, within a silent
roaring and fangs of light.

Nothing seems so marvellous
as a small white ball
exchanged among their sticks.

Renga

A last headstone
against the bush, grey
as a face; its single word
a woman's name

Emptying woodash
about the garden, under
Moonlit clouds.

Halfway crossed;
from the railway bridge, circles
of a water-spider.

Slowly drawing out
a tape measure, the shop-assistant
watches the rain.

Imagine dying
on this wet road:
that shapeless moon
would seem so close.

Passage

The train is long and slow
and curves away
as though
one watched upon a leaf
the detour of a worm

it is dragging behind
the lilies
white
and flagrant
outside the bedroom

each bloom
in the green light
is filled with rain
a syrup
in a tall stirrup cup

and the mosquito it would seem
this bit of soul
this little grey appetite
would like to stamp
its fibrils

upon the air
the way that it keeps pacing
tightly and frustrated
wavering and drawn
tracing

a set-square shape
it wants
hovering something of that drink
while the train
that rattled the wet panes

near sundown
and the sunlight drawn straight
a wet blond
across the forest top
are gone

in the time it's taken for the windows
to be shut

ROBERT GRAY

“Out rowing . . .”

Out rowing at night
on the river

voices

in the stillness
some cabins

among

the shoreline
in one

a bottle is opened

any of them might be
a lantern

that I could hold

Socialism in one Poem

The very language is ours!
Syntax, meter, all characters
and alphabets, all lead
to fill the air, to punctuate
the new frontiers. Contradictions?
We're annihilating them
as fast as they bob up.
We're reforging the lot
— backs bent to the furnace,
shovelling the images in.
It's poetry. We're grinding it all
in the mill of state, welding
the old hymns, making socialism
in one poem. It's unconditional
modernism. It's knocking down
forests, trains lashing the seas
together, armies out of the soil.
We're making history, making
the future. We're making the best
history of the future. And the past
— we've made that futuristic too.
Poem into a mountainside, kaleidoscope
of roads weighed down with wheat,
happy republics
with all the autonomy
they could ask for.

The Classicist's Birthday Tribute

Beneath the expressionist Judas,
vomiting his brilliant coinage,
two women speculate
about a colleague's tips,
or are they real?

Outgallanting death,
urbane as an elegant fowl,
a bourgeois pushes his wife's
wheelchair, so sweetly
it could be a waltz.

Then a courtly purblind mannerly man,
led by his son. Squinting
at the walls he prefers his own
Entombment to the one on show.
Rather more life, he says.

Dexterity

Slumped in a Roman trattoria
for our brutish ration of pasta,
you watched an aproned waiter
folding innumerable napkins,
memorizing each intricate
and venerated step
(at least twenty of them)
habit piquing our oscitant talk,
some Heraclitean farce.
Stubbing your Camel
you reached for a napkin
and folded it without a pause,
meticulous, expressionless.
Stoic in your triumphancy
you handed one to me,
my ironic Aristotelian.
Fumbling for a match I lit
my cigarette at the third attempt,
the pristine napkin in my lap
queer and imperfectible as the heart.

A Selection of Malay Translations

Sleeping Platform

no more smiles, leaves are falling
autumn is almost here.
no more talk, there are still many tales to tell
but the storyteller has his coffee
the lamps have been extinguished
night grows dark, I close
my eyes, wrapped in dancing candlelight, I
allow time to run free, to remember, to meet
with my man, forgive me your woman
is not as innocent as she should be.

Siti Zainon Ismail

4th December 1984

They flew to heaven
as though in a deep sleep.

Goats and oxen fell to the ground.
Vishnu was angry
and wept.

Their eyes
saw only blood
Their milk
turned to pus.

Between the old huts
the painful sight
of weary people
remains.
Will the rain fall,
will it renew
their corn and wheat?

Perhaps the disaster
was deliberate -
an old punishment
for their sin
and wickedness.

Overseas, men throw dollars at them
Blind men, with no light in their eyes.

Bhopal,
March, 1985.

Siti Zainon Ismail

Mogul Night Flute-Music

A song falls to his lips
A tune created by a cord of breath
Sorrow plucked from the gaps of our lives.

As the moon waits
Candles stand like nails
He picks the whispering leaves of this final night
Flute at the hidden window
Glass moon at day's end.

Before the window closes
Before the moon shatters
Knife and fork
fail to cut flesh
Hunger bare on the plate!

She sips
at the sad soup of sorrow
Glasses of wine are raised
The flute sighs
knowing that soon
a candle will melt
and harden on the table
of her room.

Agra,
5th March, 1985.

Siti Zainon Ismail

Siti Zainon Ismail is a major Malay poet and abstract artist. She was awarded the distinguished SEA Write Award in Bangkok in late 1989.

A Selection of Japanese Verse in Translation

At Ofu Bay

The inbound waves at Ofu Bay
Delight me as they bear
Whitecap blossoms up the beach
To be transfigured there
Into themselves and burst uphill
As flowers of mountain-pear.

Minamoto no Toshiyori (c.1057-1129)

Potential Bodhisattva

I think, if offered Paradise,
I would choose not to go.

For the sake of others? That, by remaining
Earth-bound here below,
The Buddha's purpose might better be served?

Perhaps: but I do not know.

Sub-bishop Genshin (941-1017)

Holi

One by one they came up to me. Those children of Calcutta's streets. Timidly, shyly, slyly, gingerly. Then boldly, daringly. Scattering their coloured powders to the winds. To my hair. To my skin. Gleefully they rubbed my white flesh in greens and golds, pinks and reds. And ochre. Turquoise. Amber. Rubbing my arms. Pinching, pulling, pushing.

I grabbed a handful of powder and threw a dollop at this one and that. Hysterical laughter. Then Bapi and Tepi and Minnie grabbed my hands and pulled me out onto the streets. Barefoot we roamed the unmade tracks as neighbours took their turn at showering my hair, my body in powders. I joined in their festivities. With abandon.

Skipping past swamps, young girls belting cheesecloth on the muddy banks, then dipping their washing in and out of the water. Clothes and cows, dogs and kids, all swimming in the waters.

Women rushed to their balconies, beckoning this white woman into their homes. Giggling with peels of rich rosy laughter they pasted my cheeks in the powders of Holi.

Holi. Holi. This their Hindu Festival of Spring. Where neighbourhood women and children used this pretext to abandon their formalities, to overcome their curiosity at this white skinned woman, perhaps a witch, who had joined one of their local families. If temporarily. Yet never before had a European lived among them.

Some had eyed me sceptically. Suspiciously. One young couple came to visit, then didn't come again. The father of their household had warned them to keep away from this 'she-devil'. 'She'll show you immoral ways,' he advised. Sagely. Protectively.

Others suggested I cover my arms, wear a sari, rub coconut oil through my hair. To darken it. To beautify it. Dry mousy brown hair is ugly. Glossy black oily hair is a sign of beauty. I declined to oil my hair. But I donned a sari to please them.

Some especially brought me bread and cake. 'Eat it,' they insisted. 'We've read somewhere that Westerners like to eat bread and cake.' So I ate their hard bread and their stale cake, accepting their gestures of friendship.

They preferred chapattis. I often joined the women of the house squatting round the sigris in the early evening. Watched as they kneaded and patted out the flat bread. They let me put the ghee in the pan and help with the frying. With pestle and mortar I too crushed the chillies and other curry condiments. We each dug our hands into the large oval pan of uncooked rice, picking out the weevils. They set the sigris alight using the patties of dried cow dung for fuel.

After the evening meal a slender young woman came to clean the pots and pans, using the black ashes as a cleansing agent. I would sit and survey this scene, then reel back as the black crows circled round and round, squawking and screeching and

swooping down to pluck at any leftovers.

In the Indian household where I was living there was no shyness. Simple peasant inquisitiveness brought all the women and children constantly to my room. They would walk about, fingering my clothes, trying them on, shrieking in delight, giggling, picking up combs and brushes and perfumes.

We would all crawl under the large mosquito net and curl up on the wooden planked bed, asking a million questions of one another. Drawn in common bonds that time manages to forge between womenfolk. Endless subject matter, the flavour of all international discourse.

The women of the neighbourhood had not the same courage to sit and gossip with me. They stared. They whispered. They spread tall stories. Of a winsome white western woman who came to spread bad influences. Exposing bare white arms. Sitting in upright chairs and smoking. Drinking alcohol. Driving their men to distraction for her decadent ways.

Now had come the first day of Spring. Holi. For days they had gathered their coloured powders. In bays and boxes. In hands and pockets. Ready to arrest the ghost. Preparing to anoint me in colour. And on this their day, their Holi festival, I conceded to their whims.

And as my hair, my face, my arms became a matted coat of colour, a patterned quilt, a powdery rainbow, so I too let loose with inhibition. I grabbed at their powders and threw them back. I showered them, touched them, sprinkled their bodies. Then ran off down the road laughing and giggling, and holding hands with Bapi, with Tepi, with Minnie.

That night I doused my limbs in water from the pump in the yard. Several times. Trying to remove the powders of the day. It had become ingrained in the layers of my skin. Taking days to finally remove all traces. It had been worth it though. Just to break through the barrier. Tomorrow they would all greet me now. Unafraid. With confidence. And affection.

The next day and all the next days of my stay, I walked through those same streets and watched the women turning away. Hiding again on their balconies. Whispering in little clusters together. Pointing their bony fingers. Mainly in silence. Their suspicions returned. Rebuilding the invisible walls that tumbled at their time of festival folly.

Perhaps a little ashamed at the intimacies of Holi. When I ran barefoot down their streets. In hand with Bapi and Tepi and Minnie. And they showered me in powder. And they made me a rainbow. On their first day of Spring.

Love in the Afternoon

She buried her face in his bushy
crotch and felt against her cheek
the small sapling of his sex
turn purple as a plum
in an Utamaro painting,
and he was tender
to her, putting the palm
of his bony hand
gentle on her head until it
covered all her jagged black hair
and she forgot about the morning's
leaks from toilet to ceiling
turning it leprous and reminding her
of mushrooms and explosions.
Nor did she think of the graduate
student from Hong Kong three
youngsters beat with a tree
limb at 45th and Kingsessing on a twilight
field until a man walking a dog
came by and thanks to the speed
of the guard at the Pharmaceutical
College they saved him long enough
for his parents to see him go.
When he reached to touch
her breast she saw how his eyes
had the look of a pilgrim seeking
something ineffable, yes, she knew
how to make the sounds of a mother
clucking over the misdemeanours
of her chicks but that was not
the sound she made, no, it was more
like the throaty humming
of an adolescent turning
in her sleep when she felt the blood
rushing to the forest of her hips
and she clutched with a catch
in her voice as if there were no

burglar alarms going off
when they were mouth
to mouth rising to the rhythm
of a loud iambic meter,
O it was so precarious
they uttered broad vowels
and slow consonants
till her ears rang with the shrilling
of cicadas as if they were in a summer
field beneath a clock of acacias,
but it was a car on the street
gunning itself awake and sending up
fumes so subtle she began to suck
them in as she sucked
on his dumpling of a buttock
for dear life.

CHIN WOON PING

Some Women Say

Some women say, mirror
If I avoid the sun
If I have rock, mineral, skin
Around me, I can abide
By dryness and bite
On a stone

Some women say, impossible
The flow unstaunched
Is tinged with fear !
Who could demand
Such animation of me,
Why do the devils
Shriek in my ear
And why are my breasts
Lumpy and painful?

Some women say, although
Barefoot and destitute,
I prayed nevertheless
For deliverance, I walked
The gangplank to a vast
Sea and fell into bitterness,
A gourd I've learned
To cook so many ways
To feed the young

Some women say, by and by
This body my jar
Will split with lust
Or death, so why resist
The tedium of it?
I surrender soul and hand
To ritual

Some women say, perhaps
I will sit this one out
And think hard on history
Cerebration is a maze
To be enjoyed but I must insist
On anonymity.

CHIN WOON PING

To My Second Aunt

Before you were gnawed
by the particular germ
that turned your features
simian sallow and gaunt as

a ghost, how vigorously
you tended your garden
in florid shade, lovingly
clipping cuts of philaenopsis

orchid, you taught womanly
worldliness in your crisp
uniform as Sister Tutor
winning scholar-

ships to England and Canada
returning fair, plump
full of new praise
for local things.

I remember tea-
time at your spacious
government quarters in
Ampang Road, fried bananas

and Ceylon brew washed
pale with evaporated milk
the money you thrust
into my palm for books,

the motherly chidings to
study harder, Auntie
Soo Chin, even at eve
of dying unrelentingly

brave to say, "No
need to cry, lah !
People immigrate to
Australia and America, I

am immigrating to heaven"
brave to believe in macro-
biotic wheatgrass
juice even as pain pushed

to the end, I like to think
of you in fresher times
before you chose spinster-
hood as vocation, before

the Methodist church colonized
your Hakka soul, happily
chewing chunks of sugarcane
in the breezy porch of grandmother's

new bungalow, spitting rough
bits to the wind,
full of intentions and
not yet distrustful of men.

Good Morning, Bangkok

Above, he faces the sun, opens his pores
to morning like leaves shedding a night

of snails. Stretches so hard from toes
to fingertips even his bones seem elastic.

He does not watch the city below
as it rubs the grit of fitful sleep from its eyes —

he has escaped the broom he once took
to the wet garbage of lesser lives. From here

sewers can silently swallow fish bones
washing them down with dark suds.

From here the alleys can glisten with dew
not urine, and no women have to wake

with semen crystallising their pubic hairs.
Still, the sun demands its tithes of devotions

from those who squat and bend on rooftops,
eyes closed, as if they are the high priests

of tin and brick. Bare-chested, he is thin
enough to sweat if tied to the splinters

of sacrifice but not for the saffron robes
and brass bowls of Buddhas scuffing sandals

along the damp curbs, weighted down
by so many spoonfuls of rice. No centuries

touch him now when he touches his toes:
he tunes his muscles for his next life.

Washing Her Back

The dawn is damp in Bangkok
and the dust and smoke are slow
to wake until sun can dry the air.

He washes himself first so Buddha
will taste no sweat on his knees
nor sin in his contrite, lonely sighs.

He wears the same white shirt,
the same silk slacks and thongs,
as though a week's wrinkles might

bring her back, *his* tourist lady,
whose touch wakened him to skin
pale as paper before the kiss

of ink. Blond hair, soft red lips
with a hint of mocking tongue —
she watched him dripping suds

on his feet, the rag limp in his
fingers. "Do you wash your car
every morning?" she asked,

her eyes loosening the buttons
of his shirt. "Yes, lady. Metal,
it hates the grimes of night, so I

must scrub it always clean to save
the paint!" He dropped the rag
in the pail like an apology after

twisted words, but she bent down
and drew it out again, a hot dream
cupped safe from the murky depths

of sodden wishes. "No, please —
don't stop. I saw you first upstairs.
You rubbed in circles along a spine

as if you massaged to sooth muscles
not steel. How I envy your lover's limbs!"
And so he began again, washing the car

this time for her, feeling downy hair
on fenders, each headlight becoming
a breast eager to flood with passion,

wiperblades begging for the tease
of warm water. Yes, even his mirrors
moaned. But when he turned back

to ask her name, there was nothing
but indifferent stone, not a whiff
of her remained. She had vanished

on wings shy of those confessions
sunlight demands, this tourist lady,
his tourist lady who wouldn't see him

drop his pail in mourning, dark suds
lapping across his feet, like blood
from a coffin's wound. Now he tells

no one of his loss, and tries to forget
her by polishing his surfaces
to a sheen finer than a lacquered

finger nail. The metal becomes
a looking glass, daring him inside,
where he washes her back, she his.

Fighting Beetles

Bulls are scarce in Northern Thailand yet the betting fever is high so they borrow you from your breeding but only if you have horns, long legs and a female with musk enough to boost sinking morale. Your keeper treats you better than he would have his wife treat him — he finds morning fog

and sprays of cool water to tonic your lust and you never want for sugarcane, banana or dishcloth gourd. He screams away any who would feed you tobacco to sap your life. You must learn to perch on a stick and ignore the shouts of those who stake *baht* on your balance and strength of purpose. Battered, you digress to whiff the female — her cringe rekindles your valour to lock horns again with your scraping opponent. You clasp him with your feet and hiss like death until he falls back into his cave, *baht* fluttering around his defeat like startled bats. How long reigns such a *kuang* king? You measure your pride in months.

Nightfall

At the sound of the motor humming,
you came out.
Night was falling.
A sense of touching
as my eyes found you
on the porch looking out
over the garden.

Light from the house
sifted through the screen-door
onto the porch
gathering night-insects
excitedly about you
in a net of light.

You were catching all the attention
as the last of the night
came down around you.

Haiku: Night-gift

A sprig of jasmine
starlight breathing on my sill
damp prints in the grass

To a Poet Who Died Young

(To C.P.)

I

Dead a quarter of a century
you have never been more alive
to me than now. Sandals sliding dusty

feet, I walk the bleeding laterite
in search of your home. Would you have approved
the warning signs, red traffic light,

or overhead pass across dangerous
highways? Or dashed impatiently,
reckless only child, between Merc

and buses? Daughter of immigrants,
born between colonial and colonized,
your mother's hair spins brilliant

white in Singapore October sun.
Humped with age, she hears, politely,
half of my careful words. I want

to tell her a white butterfly flew
beside me as I stumbled the raw earth
toward your steep garden, that you

are writing yourself, still, as I read.
I shout nothing into her good ear;
leave her standing in forgetting and sleep.

II

Barely twenty you must have believed
you didn't have time to live. Men
worried you, that they should want
your impure youth, that you should give

yourself away just for the asking
of a pirate face or a cunning
mind. Born in Malacca, white among
Asians, an anxiety of belonging,

layers of oddness in your ordinary
fare, teased you to bed with strangers;
drove you to Montreaux slopes to slam
down winters, and, always in a hurry,

in your screaming red car, to face
the wet night roads. You did not wait
for time, our slow lover, to show the way,
the difficult way, between race and race.

III

This is what I would like to believe:
you stood watch as I flew through the door
like a moth in the warm night, limp,
unconscious. He was beside me,
waiting to take me to the dark water,

skin clammy with dew, blood in my hair.
My flesh he had eaten in sheets;
but my mind fled before him in horror.
There at the place of your birth —
dear prepositional fulcrum — I broke
on the tarmac, speechless. So they kill us
for boldness, for trying, for driving
in the black night, we young women
who don't know what we want; but you,
already dead, stood beside me.
Your rapid heartbeat in protest
you shone the lamp of intelligence,
and drove the beast to his hole. I hold
your book in my live hand and read you
in words you'd dreamed up a life ago.
I believe this is what you would want.

Alla prima

Completing an oil painting in one sitting.

Sal is becoming more reclusive. She paints contrasts in colour and texture with the door shut. While technically, this may not be innovative, it looks and feels different. She speaks my head in acrylic and oil surrounded in wood and laughingly remarks that this constitutes the resonance of two autonomous realms resonating in a cultural space. She flourishes sable and sound, a complexity of the verbal and visual.

A brush-stroke in oil painting is a much more sensitive thing

She has me seated on this cane stool in her father's best suit. I'm wearing brogues and black socks and a nonchalant scarf buried between my cleavage. She insists that I hide all sexual semblance. My hair is scraped from my forehead and suddenly I'm Somerset Maugham with legs and arms folded. Restrained.

(Tilt the chin, just a little. Try for his arrogance. And Never smile.)

This show would be an Event if catered for.

Sal has some half formed conception of how things could be. She has painted the walls neutral grey so as not to draw the décor and colours of her palette into conflict. This miscellany was overheard at an art forum.

I get so tired of concluding the self-conscious.

My mouth trembles and shape of consensual emotions. Never Smile. Her utopian lines stress mystic catharsis. Grin.

Sal and I relax in the evening. A bottle of cheap tasty red and some coarse cheese. A French Stick. Got to act the part, in this loft. It was a gift. It came with the grey suit. Sal should be sued for misappropriating images. She just snuck in the back door and proceeded to take over the whole space.

The temptation was all too great. It had surfaces which could No Longer be ignored. I was hooked on a condition in which everything is already image. This is my Still Life with Fruit Basket. Sal and Cézanne and the occasional Sunday Supplement Sophisticate. We're all sybarites.

We lounged on a rug and whispered of David who was just too tired of trying to maintain his good feelings towards her. And how he and Julian had split up because Julian was under the impression that David's film noir scenarios stole imagery from

him. I was silent on the subject. I drank in her words. She became lost. We swam in our personal realms. For just a while.

You know, I'm interested. Men will confess to treason, arson, murder, false teeth or a wig, but will they confess to a lack of humour? (I asked a question to see who got to use the aerosol can on it.) Did I tell you I have discovered an almost-unknown American? . . . anyone with a name like Ted Danson has to be good.

You are so willow pillow sincere . . .

I do believe that painting is for the spirit . . . yet in some respects the only true art left to us is the art of self-promotion. I mean, look at this place. The architecture is bad modernism but that doesn't matter . . . on a good day when the sun's shining and everybody's at the beach . . . it looks like the loft of someone who made her money fast.

There is a dichotomy, almost a gulf at times. Yet, our conversation manoeuvres fast and freely and, lazing on the rug, the montage of moments becomes impacted idioms . . .

The spontaneity of her brushwork has captured the atmosphere. Note the simplicity of treatment with the buildings and the suggestion of something beneath the surface texture.

PENELOPE LAYLAND

Cave of Fishes

The disappointment is a slap I don't need
after the hot walk up
the thudding heat.
Someone with a small skull
has oozed through the camera slit
to draw Jaws III behind the wire.
The red fish
balanced in the middle of this
like the slight, idle brushings
of a rainy day.
Their importance eludes me like a name.

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Remembering Charles Buckmaster Tallangatta, November 1988

You would have liked it here.
It's a weir town, small,
perhaps a little larger
than I remember Quorn,
and you'd enjoy here,
as you did there,
pointing out idiosyncracies.
It's early summer now,
beginning a brief season
of joyful water picnic;
but each morning sees
a little more green
bleached from the hills.
When the country browns
weir gates will open,
leeching this town's life.

Since those long-gone days —
those few that you spent patiently
piecing back that broken gun
so you could step into darkness
(steps that were unfaltering?)
and make your final statement,
I have learnt, I think, a little
of life; perhaps of death.

On this visit I've brought with me
all your poems I could find,
and have spent long evenings reading;
recognising and remembering
with the shock of realisation
of how little I knew then.
In these poems that I greeted,
almost with exultation,
as triumphant affirmation
of my own bohemian dreaming,
I now learn of your loneliness,
of fear and desperation.

Since those long-gone days
that I spent pretending
to be experimental,
while you experimented
with chemicals and dreams,
I have also learnt a little
about lonely desperation:
even once came close to following,
though something drew me back.

This week I've been here talking
of words to quite young children,
hoping to communicate
that in literature lies enrichment;
and, of course, I'm reading
your poems, and I'm finding
what I'm telling them is true.
But also I am finding
that years enrich my reading:
now, if ever I'd said that to you,
how you would have mocked me!

Today I walked the weir's edge,
now alive with children:
leaping; splashing; rolling
down a gentle grassy bank,
laughing into water.
I found it hard to visualise
what soon this will become —
a slope of cracking mud
empty to the sun.

Flight

Breaststroking air
I jumped from the corner post
of the front fence —
measuring how far I'd flown
from that border
of my parent's home.
I thought if I tried hard enough . . .
surprised that I hadn't
quite.
It was fantasy —
the front paddock was theirs too
Avoiding my mother's eyes
floating around me
on their short threads
of amusement
I went dreaming
in the dry creek bed,
searching for direction
in the movement of my feet.
Many fences later
sixteen miles from my first home
I live drawn back
to old ground.
Sometimes I put my head in my hands
and fly away
without even trying.

Portraying the Aboriginal People: the role of “Aboriginal and Islander Identity”

The first issue of *Identity*, as it is most commonly called, appeared in July 1971, and the final edition appeared in June 1982. Its longest serving and most successful editor was Jack Davis, who became sole editor in January 1974, and relinquished control after bringing out the edition of January 1979, when both editing and production of the magazine was transferred from Perth to Canberra.

Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo Narogin), when canvassing plans to establish a new cultural magazine had this to say about its proposed model *Identity*. “This periodical was very popular amongst Aboriginal people when it was located in Perth under the editorship of the playwright and poet, Dr Jack Davis, but with its shift to Canberra it underwent a politicisation at the expense of cultural matters.”¹

The central issue for Johnson was that through magazines like *Identity*, Aboriginal writers were given the opportunity to publish as much as possible on their own terms. As he says, “The new writers refuse to be defined and contained by European models . . . writing for one’s people comes first and for others second.”²

The urgency to write and be published is given a further impetus by the tendency for Anglo-Celtic writers to misrepresent the Aboriginal people. Archie Weller asserts that “Australian authors as a whole have failed dismally in the case of portraying the Aboriginal people. They only look at one aspect of the image without attempting to explain it.”³

These words, if applied to the magazine *Identity*, provide its clearest rationale. Its object was to offer Aboriginal writers in particular an opportunity to express themselves and explain themselves to other Australians. As Kevin Gilbert said in the first issue (July, 1971), “The main problem [for the Aborigine] is one involving loss of a valued identity . . . [which] links DIGNITY and JUSTICE with the according to him of LAND RIGHTS.”⁴

To complete the picture, here are the words of H.C. Coombes, writing on “The Role of *Identity*” in the October 1971 edition:

The journal is an attempt to open to us, and to the Aborigines who have lost contact, the full richness of the culture and ideas which their people have. It is also the means to work out for themselves the problems of how they must deal with us and how we shall deal with them. (Vol. 1, no. 2, p.11)

The dominant political note was land rights. There had been dispossession which it was generally conceded could not be reversed. But there were lands largely occupied by tribal people, there were sacred sites, there were grounds for compensation, and

the need for recognition both for the sake of morale and for the possibilities that existed for financial and political independence.

From the earliest days, the land rights claim took the form of resisting English legal models. The Yirrkala case, in particular, while it represented a small advance in terms of recognition of the Aborigines as a people, failed because of the rigid application of European legal concepts to a situation where they were of dubious relevance. Judge Blackburn accepted the principle of the “spiritual significance of particular land to their clan . . . and [that Aborigines were governed under] . . . a system of law . . . [and that the Aboriginal community is] . . . in principle definable . . . [but found that these claims are] . . . not in the nature of propriety interests.” (Vol. 1, no. 1, p.6)

It is interesting to note that Pastor Brady, who fell foul of the Uniting Church in Queensland, offended in part by asserting, “Should the Yirrkala land rights case be taken [to the World Court at the Hague] the Blackburn decision, as one based on right of ownership by conquest, would almost certainly be reversed.” (Vol. 1, no. 6, p.39)

While explicit reference to land rights was a common feature of the journal, the spirit that lay behind the land rights claim was its cement. Land rights was the necessary underpinning of identity, and whatever could help to establish that identity was fit material for the magazine. It took a variety of forms. At different times it was a record of achievement — of sportspeople, dancers, painters, writers and community groups; a place to express opinion; a place to explore the present in terms of the past; a place to canvass solutions to pressing problems, and to record progress in solving them. In all these areas it adopted a constructive social role. Finally, it gave Aboriginal writers an opportunity to be heard, and to develop their craft without being required to conform to European models.

It was always the objective of the editor to present a range of views. There was common ground on such central principles as those on which claims for land rights were based, and on discriminatory legislation, but there were vast differences in the detail of solutions proposed. Probably the central problem for Aboriginal people could be summarised in the choice between separate and integrated development — assimilation was universally anathema to them. A representative figure, Bobbi Sykes, opposed separate development, but regarded it as probably inevitable. (Vol. 1, no. 2, p.31) Reg Saunders, on the other hand, while supporting land rights, and urging that Aboriginal culture be kept alive, spoke of solving Aboriginal problems by making better provision within existing welfare and educational structures. (Vol. 1, no. 6, p.6)

Such questions permeate the writing of the period. Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers*, for example, gives dramatic expression to integration of the tribal customs and ceremonies within the context of contemporary society, the impetus coming from the need of Aborigines to recover the spiritual foundations of their life. As Tommló says: “I've looked through a whiteman's eyes and I was lost . . . I ain't lost anymore . . .”⁵

The problem of identity of the Aboriginal people is one for both Aborigines and whites. While they know more surely what they are than the whites do they too are subject to confusion. Jack Davis comments that “. . . too many of our educated ones want to be recognised as being neither black nor white . . . [and] are gravitating around an in-betweenness which first stemmed from us being fragmented as a Tribal group, and by being killed off by the whites . . .” (Vol. 3, no. 5, p.34)

They feel deeply a violent severance from an almost irrecoverable past. In his semiotic commentary on Aboriginal oral narrative, Stephen Muecke takes up this point by drawing attention to their writing as “ideological reworkings of new experience in the context of a more traditional culture”,⁶ thereby slotting into a

theoretical framework the substance of art that reaches the reader as experience transformed. For this reader it is the particularity of response that matters — not the remote classification of typologies. For example, Yandgee (Jack Davis) and Tony Wurramarrba have expressed aspects of their isolation from their past in verses of considerable lyric power — but in each case it is a *different* isolation.

“From the other side”
by Yandgee

What bridges are there to cross over this?
It was something my ancestors did
A long time ago;
My ancestors, long dead, lost in antiquity,
And something in me just died
When I came to the wall
And couldn't get through. (Vol. 3, no. 4, p.25)

“I can still think”
by Tony Wurramarrba

When I sleep I can see them walking about,
cursing each other black power they used.
Wearing dilly bag, keeping ceremonial stuff,
Leaving sacred areas unpolluted, untouched. (Vol. 3, no. 6)

Wurramarrba has contact with his past through dreams, whereas Davis experiences the frustration of an impenetrable wall. Perhaps Wurramarrba is close to the tribal traditions through his upbringing than Davis was able to be. But there is ambivalence there — for the past is both a source of fear and of pride.

The problem of reconciling the superstitious elements of the past with its sacredness acutely confronts the educated Aborigine. A poem by M. Malone, in which an attempt is made to stave off her fears of being “sung”, provides a telling example.

God, medicine, ha, useless things.
The tribal will is strong . . .

Run, hide, you die alone.
Then wilful song endure.
Superstitious rot. You are educated.
Ancients, have pointed the bone. (Vol. 3, no. 8)

Davis feels a similar ambivalence in his response to the tribal past which he expresses through a poem of desire for and rejection of a tribal girl.

We knew
Of tribal law between us,
And what could not be.
I screamed my anger — at her —
Gin, barefoot black gin,
Keep your red earth and your wurlee,
I can walk my own path,
In the sun or in the dark
And find my own affinity. (Vol. 2, no. 1, p.23)

What is being rejected, even at the cost of emotional pain, is well understood. Less clear is the projected future.

The social complexities confronting the urban Aborigine appear to be better suited to exploration through prose. The processes of social interaction within the family, between black and white citizens, with the police and the courts, appears to demand representational treatment that will both document and expose the nature of the discriminations being suffered.

In the pages of *Identity* there is a consistent effort at factual documentation. Details of infant mortality, of educational disadvantage, of discriminatory legislation, particularly in Queensland, are given consistent coverage. The effect is similar to that achieved in newspapers which follow a story — a fragmented narrative builds through the successive issues of the magazine. It is the raw material from which the complex concentrations of fiction are built.

Some of the material is presented in documentary fashion with statistical summaries, comment and analysis; some is presented anecdotally. In Volume 2 no. 2 an article on country towns mixes anecdote with comment, concluding that “the court scene at Bourke was still used largely as an institution to process blacks . . .” while in Brewarrina “we feel that the over-zealous and discriminatory practices by the police towards the black community has been curtailed by the presence of the Aboriginal Legal Service” (p.37). The form of the article is the story of a visit, which provides both incident and authentication of the observations made.

In the following number (Vol. 2. no. 3) attention turns to the Queensland situation. The purpose of the article is to establish the complex and discriminatory nature of Queensland legislation. In particular, it explores the practical consequences of having, especially in the smaller towns, the same person as district officer, policeman and magistrate. The writer offers specific examples of unfair and unscrupulous practices (p.13). In the same number, Jack Davis writes about life on the reserves at Broome, where he says “a stultifying atmosphere . . . made it impossible for reserve dwellers to help themselves”. Further, reserves were effectively prisons; as even full-time workers, well able to support themselves, were “refused accommodation in town.” (p.16)

On occasions the reporting of an incident develops most of the qualities of fiction in that there is action/reaction/consequence, the whole process illustrating the underlying structure of cultural conflict. In Vol. 2, no. 5, there is an account of police taking sides with the whites against Aborigines when a train crew insulted Aborigines, leading to violent retaliation. The constable who fired shots was deemed to have acted with “blind and unnecessary panic escalating a situation that was settling down”. The reason for the violence was judged to be “fear, ignorance and arrogance” (p.3).

There is a unifying perspective in all these writings, regardless of their method or emphasis: it emanates from pride in difference, a small but saving consolation in a society heading substantially in another direction. In the light of the discriminations suffered and the special qualities of the people, Jack Davis is prompted to ask, “Where does the Aboriginal go from here?” He elaborates on the problem thus:

The mould of European-Australian thought is far too narrow to fit into the concepts of the life of the Australian Aborigine. When we can successfully widen the white man's perception of our existence then and only then will we be able to live in racial harmony . . . (Vol. 2, no. 5, p.14)

This passage seems to point towards a key purpose of Aboriginal writing. We cannot, he seems to say, ask Aborigines to deny their identity by uncritically assuming a European stance towards social living — it is preferable to seek to modify white Australian responses so that they will become more harmonious with the land and with the Aboriginal people. This approach has the effect of strengthening Aboriginal knowledge and pride in their heritage, and offering them support in their desire to rediscover and re-establish their identity. The writing which emerges from such a standpoint must achieve subtle complexity of statement, and should be marked by passion, vigour, ironic and reflexive thought and feeling — all growing out of

the mix of pain, pride, squalor and achievement that characterises contemporary Aboriginal society.

A writer who weaves these (and other) threads together with most telling effect is R. Chee, the pen-name of Archie Weller when he first broke into print in *Identity*. It is perhaps worth mentioning that, before I became acquainted with the identity of R. Chee I had noted in my comments on his stories “style remarkably similar to that of Archie Weller in *Going Home* (1986).” There is no doubt that his earlier efforts lack something of the later complex control of metaphor and narrative design — but the evocative and daring use of language is a quality he developed early. In “Dead Dingo” (Vol. 3, no. 1, p.28) he tells the story of a half-caste, isolated from both black and white society, getting out of prison. In the story the dingo becomes symbol of both hunter (the police) and hunted. He is isolated and hunted in a wild confusion of activity — the urban jungle: “Cars honking, people shouting and pushing, a river of wonderful moving noise. He pushes into people for the joy of contact, breathes in the air full of petrol smoke and human smells, the freshest air he’ll ever know.” His background is violent, and the story chronicles the inevitable cycle of violence, despair and entrapment leading to death. It is a repeated theme in Weller’s writing, which gains in power in later tellings. For example, “Stolen Car” (Vol. 3, no. 3, p.29), paints a picture of a violent city:

Buildings scar the purple, pregnant sky. Anguished, tortured silhouettes, rearing from the darker mass below. Holding the diving sky and the living city apart. The claws of the city rip open the clouds. Blood pours from the wound and night comes lipping over the too truthfully cruel city.

The substance of the story, however, is the futility of rebellion. The story has a circular quality. It begins with a car chase in a stolen car, where the police capture the wrong boy, heat him up, and after he complains in court continue a policy of harassment that, in the end, prompts him to steal a car. There is a car chase (again), and an accident in which he dies. He is not the classic victim, as his course has been marked by resistance. His end, however, is foredoomed. Even his first venturing into the stolen car driven by a friend is prompted by inter-family rivalries — a common touch in Weller’s stories. The tale concludes with all the people reduced to shadows, contrasting with the malevolent power of the abstract entity — the city — quoted above.

The shadowy formless people watch from the footpath. Watched you and the banshee — wailing police car rush past and away, leaving just a wind in your wake.
And who remembers a wind. (Vol. 3, no. 3, p.33)

Of the writers who had their beginnings in *Identity*, Weller has made the most pronounced headway in the wider world of publishing. Jack Davis, who is the most significant figure alongside Kath Walker, published extensively in *Identity* prior to bringing out in book form his poetry and drama. For Davis the magazine appears to have offered the opportunity for consolidation and sustained output, and may have indirectly contributed to his emergence as a major dramatist in the early eighties. However, an examination of Kevin Gilbert’s anthology *Inside Black Australia* reveals that the only other substantial voice to achieve support from *Identity* was the poet, Daisy Utemorrhah. This is hardly surprising, as Gilbert’s selection is largely based on works published in the eighties (after the demise of *Identity*), together with much previously unpublished work. Consequently, it may be — it is not possible to offer proof of this — that the climate of confidence in Aboriginal writing engendered by *Identity* stimulated a wider group to add writing to other forms of political activity in support of the Aboriginal cause.

I have written about Davis elsewhere, so propose to conclude with a comment on Weller's significance. His quoted comment that white writers fail to "explain" black characters adequately points in the direction of his artistic endeavour. Art is not, of course, explanation, but it may take the form of demonstration. That is, an action may be explanatory in itself — removing the temptation to intrude authorial commentary.

His black characters tend to be caught in webs of circumstance that limit their freedom or foredoom their lives. While it is true that Weller constructs the circumstance, he strives to make them representative of the kinds of situations young blacks — especially half-castes — tend to experience. The mix is a complex one, compounded of prejudice, discrimination, and social attitudes in both black and white communities, which in combination tend to entrap and defeat even those who have resolved to adapt to society and its requirements.

His prose is colloquial, quirky, varying in tone from elemental violence to irony of restrained acidity. Stories are constructed slices of life, explorations of social mores, where the way things are done — or not done — becomes attached to the characters' fates whether they know it or not. The finest example of his writing is "Fish and Chips" where all the family is exposed by the voice of the boy — observer and silent sufferer.

In the house everything's broken and dirty, no matter how hard Mum tries to keep things clean. I feel sorry for her because I know how she feels. But you can't keep a house clean with sixteen or more people living in it and only Mum doing all the work.
So at our house we sit around: playing cards or drinking or fighting or laughing.⁶

The rest of the story is, in effect, the explanation for this state of affairs. So that, in the context of the sequence of stories, the child is doomed to despair and violence (there is a passage of senseless violence in the story), as he has no sanctuary. That, indeed, is the substance of the whole work. Urban blacks have nothing they can call home — no secure retreat — no sustaining support. There may be moments of harmony as in "Cooley", where the boy of that name is at home and in command in the virgin bushland, but his life is uncomfortably located within a white family, his father having removed him from his black mother. "White man had defeated him on the day he was born. He had no identity and belonged to no tribe."⁸

To establish an identity in the minds of white readers for his suffering characters is Weller's goal: it was also the goal of *Identity*, and is demonstrably the goal of Jack Davis. It is a complex identity that they portray. Weller concentrates on urban blacks, drifting and congregating in fringe groups, often contemptuous of white law, and of the police, fighting, struggling, but doomed even when successful in the white world to alienation, despair and the grim cycle of prison, violence, rebellion and death. It is a world of extremes, of conspiring Fates, saved from melodrama by the luminosity and innocence of the characters. Davis, on the other hand, writes of the fringe-dwelling family, but offers historic perspectives that create empathy with his characters. His anger — and at times it bursts through with great bitterness — is always tempered by compassion and an underlying motive of reconciliation. His youthful characters, one senses, may very well be tumbling into a better future. Most of this material, of course, is outside the pages of *Identity*. But that is where the note was initially struck. That is where an accurate and comprehensive view of the life and culture of contemporary Aborigines was first brought together. It provided a platform on which to build. It may not be going too far to suggest that the present proliferation of published memoirs, histories, fiction, drama and poetry owes its strength in large measure to the life of this magazine.

NOTES

1. Colin Johnson, "The Growth of Aboriginal Literature", *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1988, p.53.
2. *Ibid*, p.53.
3. Archie Weller, "Portrayal of Aboriginal Men in Literature", *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 7, no. 1, 1988, p.55.
4. *Identity*, Vol. 1, no. 1, p.23 (All subsequent references to *Identity* will be made by volume, number and page within the body of the text).
5. Kevin Gilbert, *The Cherry Pickers*, Burrabingga Books, Canberra, 1988, p.65.
6. Stephen Muecke, "The Uses of Aboriginal Oral Narrative", *Southern Review*, Vol. 16, no. 1, March 1983, p.87.
7. Archie Weller, "Fish and Chips", in *Going Home*, Sydney, 1986, p.135.
8. "Cooley", *ibid*, p.179.

DEBRA STOKES

Healing

The long grey loneliness of a hospital ward
Broken sporadically by the swoop and slow passing
Of white nurses never calling: a silent flock.
Within hearing, the patient ticking of sterile time
And somewhere else the whooping, cawing cries
Of school kids fighting like frantic, nesting jackdaws,
Then scattering in seeming confusion at the sudden
Screech of a time fracturing, time measuring bell.

Somewhere else, a life measured relentlessly in red pens,
Recess and raucous callings of adolescents;
A life fractured every forty minutes
By a bell screaming freedom's end,
Or beginning; a life of hanging on
For just five more minutes, more minutes
That drag till that life is leaden, deadened
By routine and slipping cunningly away.

I am somewhere between these two worlds,
Suspended on a thin swaying thread of despair.
Timeless twilight between health and death -
A cool moment of healing, of resting out of reach,
Not yet hearing the distant cry
Heralding anew a flightless crawling
To one of other of those insufferable worlds.

Hegemony in a Country Churchyard

In grief even in England it's hard to act: I knew
the obituary you word-processed was true,

thus contemptible. I will never understand
how that God-Squad girl, half your age, got you in hand,

college chaplain, then tugged you bowing through stately
homes and bishops' courts until suddenly and lately

Rolls queued at her funeral, in your old age
she's buried and you are left spotlight on the stage

of her twee kitchen, boiling eggs on yer tod
and phrasing this which never mentions cancer, god,

or much that isn't mannered cant, calender texts,
codswollop about Stratford and The Bard, Thatcheresque

claptrap, but mostly catalogues (first names) the county set.
That's it? You'll preach on, tell 'em like it's not? . . . You bet!

A Pink Christmas

Mayfair pigs are substantially pink

are far from clumsy & have been known
in their shadowy caves
to devour a stray child

are in no sense of the word inhuman

communicate pure pig incarnate:
tailflicks,
flankquivers,
pulses,
all in the dictionary of their flesh —

they are in their own understanding, most important,
needing no further embodiment in this earthly sty.

They thrive on an admirer or two,
showing us their tricks & the intricate emergence of fat.

Indeed, commonsense has shown they are

affluent but unhappy
heralded but unwise
intelligent but without dominion
finely-snouted but poor in spirit
cloven-hooved but ignorant of evil.

Wearing regal
plastic gowns
& masks & caps,
we hail them,
raising them up
onto the thorny throne
of the knocking box.

Cab Fare

It's probably still there
in his casket, that dollar bill
she snuck inside, in case he
needed to take a taxi back —

but I wanted to pull it out,
not believing such nonsense —
didn't want my father alone,
near that crumpled symbol

of the business world that
killed him, all the pressure
and decisions and people he
had to juggle. Instead, I

should've thrown in one of
my poems, placed it neatly
on his chest — as I touched
his face for the last time.

If anything could've brought
him back, it would have been
me, or my creations. But lately,
I haven't been worried about it —

busy remembering the things
Dad did, re-reading the letters
he wrote to me in college (insisting
I eat three meals a day, study

hard and not smoke the sticky
green stuff anymore). Our aunt
must have been wrong about taxis,
transporting people back or getting

them into a brighter next life —
because that dollar's been with him
for sixteen years now and still,
he hasn't yet made it back.

Towards “The Shadow”: Henry Kendall and the mid-century Crisis of Faith

Prostrate with accumulated woes, Henry Kendall, aged thirty-three, finally suffered the long impending physical and mental collapse which he would subsequently allude to as “in the Shadow of 1872”. The events surrounding this crisis are well known, and provide motives for each phase of the unfolding drama. Harassed by debt and family problems, the poet had fled Sydney for Melbourne in 1869. There he struggled unsuccessfully to make a living by the pen, and succumbed further to the twin evils of alcoholism and usury which brought other contemporary men of letters to untimely graves, and him to the Gladesville Mental Asylum. The antithesis to this image of bad Bohemian, urban ways is the later bush idyll, associated with his regeneration at the hands of the Fagan family of Gosford. The healing process issued in self-assurance, restored marital life and his final collection, *Songs from the Mountains* (1880), where he pictures himself as a potential singer of the dawn, who dissipated God’s precious gifts. Yet the accepted biographical record also leaves unanswered a number of disquietening questions. Most notably, the melancholy of his personae seems too pervasive to be linked solely to individual problems; while it is unclear why, at a time of acute crisis, he was unable to find succour in that “larger faith” celebrated in such later poems as the dedicatory “To a Mountain”. In what follows, I shall argue that a further though neglected factor contributing to his fate was the mid-century crisis of faith, which emerges as a dominant theme in writings preceding “the Shadow”. Correspondence demonstrates that for him the period was one of increasing spiritual anxiety, and suggests that he attempted to supplement the truths of religion with those of poetry. The result were major verse narratives of the late 1860s that confront contemporary “spectres of the mind”; but, far from laying them, afford imaginative revelations which threatened to rob existence of significance, and eerily foreshadow the author’s path forward into sin, despair and personal disaster.¹

Our knowledge of the poet’s religious background and beliefs is tantalizingly incomplete. Religion would undoubtedly have played some part in his formative years, though its precise nature has not been documented. To J. Sheridan Moore he asserted that both his grandfathers were clergymen, a claim since proven only on the paternal side; and he acknowledged the early impact of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.² But the first sustained evidence of independent spiritual probing comes in a handful of extant letters to the family of Reverend A.E. Selwyn at Grafton in the mid-1860s. Words addressed to the reverend himself are predictably conventional; whereas letters to Mrs Selwyn are confessional in nature, and place a number of his abiding themes within the context of current religious debate.³

Specifically, faith is seen as a potential counterbalance to human failings, with poetry assuming the position of arbitrator on conflicting possibilities. These themes are adumbrated in the first of these letters, dated 2nd January, 1864, where he speaks of his “recent depression of spirit and body”, related to the poet’s “twofold life”, or capacity for extremes of elation and depression (p.50).⁴ The reason for these marked oscillations of temperament is not spelt out. We know, however, that family problems were making substantial demands on his psychological and pecuniary resources; while a further cause was apparently his private search for belief, leading him to conclude: “I fear that I have a long road to travel in the dark yet; and the hand of God has not been reached”. Here, at least, would have been one potential source of elation. Hence he places his hopes for relief from a state “constantly overbalanced and surrounded by exaggeration”, not in “human sympathy”, but in reaching “the everlasting hills of Faith” where “all shall be changed”. Other letters of the period reinforce this metaphoric projection of his life as pilgrimage, by suggesting his participation in diverse contemporary forms of spiritual questing, as in his involvement with spiritualism which led him to see it, at best, as a “wayside gloom emanating from the Great Central Truth” (Letter to Charles Harpur, 7th May, 1863, p.24).

To judge from subsequent correspondence, increased doubt led the poet to seek in his craft an instrument of truth and “the means of a man’s salvation” (p.76). Indices of spiritual malaise dominate his letter of 9th April, 1864. Here he describes himself to Mrs Selwyn as “a sorry Christian”, shaken by the findings of “Chemistry and Ethnology”, who “very often” has caught himself “saying ‘there is nothing certain, but Doubt and Death’ ” (pp. 56-6). This experience, he suggests, is perhaps of general applicability, recalling Christ’s who “sojourned in the glooms of Egypt before he triumphed in Palestine”. Yet Kendall is too clear sighted not to recognize the discrepancy between divine and mortal potential; and so concludes with cumulative images of threatening human bafflement:

We, the cheated — the deluded, turning from thankless thorny ways, straining half-gladly, half-fearfully, towards *that* which lies beyond the everlasting face of Death, *we* would be cast down indeed without these happy Assurances. (p.60)

A year later his faith is no firmer. Again he likens himself to “the wayfarer who would be steadfast but cannot”; or to a stranded ship menaced by approaching waves (pp. 77-8). This time, however, in place of earlier trust in diurnal convictions which “point, however obscurely, to a great and good God beyond all entities” (p.57), he privileges poetry as a means of insight. It, he alleges, has “prevented me from falling many a time” (p.76), enabling him to discern in actuality the “everlastingly new — everlastingly suggestive” verities of creation. Verse, then, becomes not simply a question of the pursuit of letters but, more exaltedly, “a revelation of Divinity beyond all revelations: a religion past religion” (p.77). Where conventional creeds falter, there poetry may begin, “half-gladly, half-fearfully”, in the dangerous pursuit of whatever “aboriginal” truth may lie “beyond the everlasting face of Death”.

A complementary record of Kendall’s progress as an honest doubter emerges from the verse of this period. Here the publications of 1864 and 1865 mark a definite turning-point. Prior to this his frequent religious utterances are conventional either in projecting the faint traveller struggling after the water of faith; or in their affirmative rhetoric, as in the concluding lines to “The Light Above”:

But if to the summit — to Heaven upturning,
We look with the eyes of religion and love
We may see where the day o'er the darkness, is burning
And pierce to the glitter and glory above. (p.255)⁵

His publications of 1864, however, exhibit a far more personal grappling with issues of belief. Whether mediated in biblical or contemporary terms, the depredations of doubt afford recurring motifs. Unchained speculation is seen to transform existence into a black battlefield, where disputants “are hacking and hewing like madmen / Because of their sorrow and scorn” (“Elijah”, p.300). Now “Heaven seems far, and Faith grows cold and pale” (“Eighteen Hundred and Sixty Four”, p.298), undercut by doubt arising presumably from scientific and empirical findings; while this new “Truth shines dead, because of Faith” (“Woolli Creek”, p.305), that is, is rendered void in destroying the guarantee of its ultimate significance. Caught in this cycle of desolation, the poet turns for strengthening precept to a range of saviour figures, including Christ the deliverer in “Rizpah”, the strong prophet-poet Elijah, and the humanly fallible celebrator of “perfect Love”, Henry Halloran, who, despite “an alien darkness on the front of things”, is nonetheless conjured to sing “for Life, nor fall behind,/ Like me, with trailing tired wings” (“To Henry Halloran”, p.304). Evidently that faith, which might have sustained Kendall in future crises, was seriously undermined by the close of 1864, thereby preparing the way for the daringly speculative poems of ensuing years and contributing to his eventual breakdown.

The narrative verse published in 1865 affords first hand evidence of that capacity of poetry to probe “towards *that* which lies beyond the everlasting face of Death”, of which Kendall spoke to Mrs Selwyn. Externally few changes were to be witnessed in the poet’s personal lot; although the poems of this year, with their insistence on untimely death and the absence of divine manifestation, reveal Kendall moving mentally to the brink of disbelief. In both “On the Paroo” and “The Glen of Arawatta” the slaughter of whites by natives affords a prototype of blighted human endeavour, in a bush landscape where death remains “alone / With Night and Silence in the sobbing rains” (p.128). This bleak summation of existence is mitigated in the latter work by images of loving, if delusive, hopes maintained in the Old Country; whereas “On the Paroo” bluntly challenges deity to provide solace:

O Master! Father! sitting where our eyes
Are tired of looking, say for once are we —
Are we to set our lips with weary smiles
Before the bitterness of Life and Death,
And call it honey, while we bear away
A taste like wormwood? (p.121)

Appearing also for the first time in 1865, “A Death in the Bush”, like “The Glen of Arawatta”, tries to defend the salving notion of surviving “Love *in* Death”. Here again, however, the dramatization of grounds for doubt is imaginatively more persuasive than the concluding plea for faith maintained in a far away order. The wasted settler, brought to the verge of death by disease, exclaims feverishly “Where is God? — it is bitter cold” (p.86). But no supernatural help is forthcoming for him or his widow, who is left without “The faintest token of Divinity / In this my latest sorrow”. Admittedly the poem concludes with her asserted return to faith; yet the abiding impression created is of human existence as a series of setbacks ameliorated by dumb fellow-sufferers which, if viewed frankly, would leave us, like the recently bereft wife, with “the sight which shuts and blinds, / And seems to drive me wholly, Lord, from Thee” (p.87).

In the latter part of the decade less qualified projections of causes for disbelief are countenanced in poems on non-Australian subjects, like “The Voyage of

Telegonus" (1866) and "King Saul at Gilboa" (1869), which signal an eclipse of those "happy assurances" without which, as Kendall had confessed, "we would be cast down indeed".⁶ The power of these two poems is now recognized; though their relationship to his life's work, and the putative reasons behind his turning to biblical and classical matter in the late 1860s, remain to be explored. Kendall, of course, had earlier drawn on received material, and would do so again. But the concentration of verse at this period, derived from the literature of the Old World, is unique in his *oeuvre*.⁷ Similar colonial forays into inherited sources have been variously explained as attempts to reach an English market, to challenge international comparison, or as forms of poetic accreditation. Given that the poet had early sought overseas recognition by submitting work to the *Cornhill Magazine*, such motives cannot be entirely discounted. Yet they neither explain this sudden output of uncompromisingly European matter directed solely to local magazines, nor do they take into account the revelatory program advocated for verse in correspondence at this time. The latter context, coupled with the works themselves, suggests that full speculative freedom was linked for Kendall with the treatment, not of original local matter, but of received material. For rather than seeming to countenance indices of doubt these might be attributed to sources, and yet the writer could confront, albeit obliquely, timeless grounds for despair — evoked in "Elijah" as "the Curse that is breaking / The life in you, day after day" (p.300).

The choice of Saul and Telegonus as subjects can scarcely have been fortuitous, as traditionally both men are, in a sense, the victims of larger processes, rendering them potentially monitory examples of human fate. Already the Israelite desire to be governed "like all the nations" (1 Samuel 8:5 & 20), which led to Saul's appointment, is seen in the biblical account as a rejection of the Lord. Similarly Telegonus, the natural son of Ulysses by Circe, becomes the unwitting means of Ares' vengeance for deeds which go back to the Trojan war; so that his understandable longing to see "his father's exiled face" is achieved in cruelly inverted form when, in the very act of homecoming, he slays his unknown parent. Saul's fate is also predicated on yielding to human desire, linked specifically to "vengeance spared at Amalek" (p.107), referring to his failure to carry out Jahweh's Draconian dictates against idolatrous kith and kind (1 Samuel 15). Natural impulse, in each case, costs the protagonists dear, and plunges their respective nations into mourning. Here, then, was ample matter from which to fashion works which suggest that alienation and loss are mankind's birthright. Error will be shown to be the concomitant of our limited knowledge; while wisdom, as embodied in fulfilling union with God or father-figures, remains always out of reach. In reworking tales of an alien son who pushes off beyond the "utmost islands", and of one obeying human rather than supernal dictates, the poet effectively launched the reader into a realm of existential dilemmas beyond the safe periphery of faith.

Kendall's depiction stresses how everything conspires against the hopeful quester in a cosmic order where each player or event forms part of an incomprehensible destiny. The human protagonists, like the natural elements, are puppets in the hands of the gods, who themselves are instruments "to work the ends of Fate".⁸ Moreover, portrayed here is not an isolated, cruel instance, but the type of recurrent human suffering, as the poet suggests by evoking the unhappy fate of Meleagar, "All in the wild beginnings of the world", when Telegonus' fierce attack upon innocent farmers is compared to the depredations of the boar "which Artemis did raise in Calydon" (p.96).⁹ Existence, then, is revealed to be an uneven conflict; similar to the fateful storm at sea, itself likened to "hard hot battle", where the more fortunate are those soonest to die:

Whereat the sea in fearful circles showed
Unpitied faces turned from Zeus and light,
Wan swimmers wasted with their agony,
And hopeless eyes and moaning mouths of men.
But one held by the fragments of the wreck,
And Ares knew him for Telegonus,
Whom heavy-handed Fate had chained to deeds
Of dreadful note with sin beyond a name. (p.94)

The actions of the drowning swimmers will be echoed by each of Kendall's crushed protagonists — bleak resignation and deterministic turning-away from failed sources of orthodox illumination, in works where unswerving fate usurps the role of benign providence; and humankind is reprieved for further suffering.

This conception on unrelenting doom is confirmed in "King Saul at Gilboa" by two flashbacks which frame Saul's last heroic actions. The poem commences with tumultuous, seesawing battle-action which "shook the scales of Fate". But here shaking alludes exclusively to the violent force of the conflict, not to indecision on the part of deity. For as the ensuing section reminds us, Saul has already learnt his fate during a visit to the witch of Endor:

But he that fasted in the secret cave,
And called up Samuel from the quiet grave,
And stood with darkness and the mantled ghosts
A bitter night on shrill Samaritan coasts,
Knew well the end: of how the futile sword
Of Israel would be broken by the Lord. (p.107)

"Kendall's account of these events" is not, as W.H. Wilde claims, "slightly changed from the book of Samuel" — presumably in the belief that "he" designates a male soothsayer in place of the original female oracle.¹⁰ Rather the "he" referred to here is unmistakably Saul, singled out in the witch's cave by his lone resolve to fast: "But he refused, and said, I will not eat" (1 Samuel 28:23). Moreover, this scene is again evoked after his prophesied defeat, confirming that his fall is the result of divine wrath:

So fell the king! as it was said by him
Who hid his forehead in a mantle dim
At bleak Endor, what time unholy rites
Vext the long sleep of still Samaritan heights:
For bowed to earth before the hoary Priest
Did he of Kish withstand the smoking feast,
To fast, in darkness and in sackcloth rolled,
And house with wild things in the biting cold;
Because of sharpness lent to Gaza's sword,
And Judah widowed for the angry Lord. (p.109)

Again the mantled figure and "hoary Priest" is Samuel, summoned from the dead; the fasting "he of the Kish" the doomed king. While the first allusion arguably affirms Saul's heroic stature ("Yet strove the sunlike king" despite his known end), the second adds the inference that God was implacable towards the sinner. This, at least, is the effect of Kendall's interpolation to the succinct biblical account of Saul's response to his predestined end:

Then Saul fell straightaway all along on the earth, and was sore afraid, because of the words of Samuel: and there was no strength in him; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night.

.....

And she brought *it* [a meal] before Saul, and before his servants; and they did eat. Then they rose up, and went away that night. (1 Samuel 28:20 & 25)

Saul's momentary collapse becomes in the poem an act of physical self-abasement; and the subsequent breaking of his fast is passed over in silence. This reshaping, together with added ascetic details, suggests a genuine sense of culpability and a strong desire for repentance which will go unheeded by divinity. The cumulative verdict of these poems is disturbingly clear. Where implacable destiny precludes any hope of mercy or redemption, man's only recourse is to heroic perseverance against all odds; or finally, like the cruelly enlightened Telegonus, to dumb endurance: "This man nor stirred nor slept, but lay at wait, / With fastened mouth. For who may brave the gods?" (p.97)

The growing despair, engendered by Kendall's private life and witnessed in works of the mid-1860s, is mediated here in terms of the harsh negation of life-long goals. Saul, who devoted himself to war and material prosperity, is finally killed by a slave deaf to the appeal of pity, but not to the gain promised by dazzling, regal accoutrements:

At this a flood of sunset broke, and smote
Keen blazing sapphires round a kingly throat
Touched arm and shoulder, glittering in the crest,
And made swift starlights on a jewelled breast!
So, starting forward like a loosened hound,
The stranger clutched the sword and wheeled it round,
And struck the Lord's Anointed! . . . (p.108)

The king is literally smitten down by his accumulated deeds, with the sun, like Ares, prompting the workings of a subsuming destiny. Similarly, the slaying of Ulysses by Telegonus marks another mocking inversion of human endeavour:

Unknown to him — dealt out his strength, and aimed
A strenuous stroke at great Laertes' son
Which missed the shield, but bit through flesh and bone,
And drank the blood, and dragged the soul from thence! (p.97)

Characteristically, all stands under the sway of man's incomprehension. The very attributes of prowess underscore his ultimate powerlessness; and the tragic play on "miss" summarizes the case against sanguine hope. The first impression raised by "misses", that Ulysses will be spared, is dashed immediately; so that the verb stands as an ironic commentary on the lack of beneficent intervention which, in other saving fictions, would have averted disaster, and so missed the true nature of existence. Moreover, such insights leave "wise" Telemachus only one response: inaction "Amidst the desolations of the world. He "smote not / But rather sat with moody eyes, and mused, / And watched the dead" (p.97). Love, "a loyal heart", noble bravery, and remorse have proved of no avail. Mute stoicism remains the only safe rejoinder when all deeds, based necessarily on incomplete knowledge, may lead to "sin" and self-defeating ends. This is indeed a poetry of revelation beyond conventional religion. But one in which we witness how mankind's best hopes, like the life-blood of Ulysses, are consumed as "bright water spilt in sands of thirst" (p.97) — that spreading mental desert in an age of waning faith.

This eclipse of mortal prowess highlights an alienated consciousness, evident also in the use of received material. In each case selective treatment of the subject matter focuses attention on a stark contrast between past glory, coupled with noble intentions, and inevitable failure, which is given immutable form either through the slaying of a heroic figure, or through his transformation into an embodiment of human impotence. Quite other emphases could have been achieved with a different selection based on the same sources. According to Lemprière, for instance, Telegonus goes on to father with Penelope, at Minerva's behest, Italus — a name resonant

with historical fame; just as Telemachus later sloughs off inaction and also continues the family line through his son Latinus.¹¹ Similarly, the handling of Saul's end is devoid of direct indications of a positive, informing design. Most obviously, all reference to the Saul-David saga is omitted; and with it the stress on Saul's stubborn incomprehension and guilt, as well as the promise of triumphant renewal for God's people. Moreover Kendall, in depicting Saul's death, had two versions to draw on. In 1 Samuel 31 Saul dies by falling on his sword in the presence of a loyal armourbearer, who subsequently chooses the same end. In 2 Samuel 1 an Amalekite presents himself to David as the compassionate slayer of the defeated Saul, from whom he "took the crown that *was* upon his head, and the bracelet that *was* on his arm," in order to bring them to the God-chosen successor, David. Kendall's free adaptation of the second account reveals individual action as the expression of personality. The good die in the heroic, martial fashion; whereas the slave disappears like a varlet-robber, in an interpolation which leaves the reader wondering if David will ever see the insignia of succession again: "'Mark, Achish, mark!' — Southwest and south there sped / A dabbled hireling from the dreadful dead!" (p.108). Collectively this reworking of traditional material amounts to an abjuration of the grounds for hope. Not only is the hallowed notion of meaningful human participation in the course of events negated; but implicitly it raises the question of what relationship would be possible to existence if we were once but categorically deprived of the framework of Christian faith.

As these works diversely demonstrate, despair or estrangement is the typical lot of those granted insight at once superior to, and darker than, the quotidian. Hopeless and deep-seated melancholy becomes its corollary, for as Kendall has prophesied in a poem which takes its title from the year which marked an intellectual turning-point:

God help us all! If that lone Faith we have
 Were reft from us by any ruthless fate,
 Who, sisters, looking down a gloomy grave,
 Would have the strength to stay behind and wait?
 ("Eighteen Hundred and Sixty Four", p.299)

Augmenting this sense of impending crisis were other factors, including deteriorating external circumstances, the recoil produced by a difficult literary milieu, plus a complex burden of guilt and anguish stemming from his family, past and present. But the iterated cause of alienation singled out in the poetry is spiritual in origin, linked with a recognition of unfulfilled responsibilities, such as we encounter in the opening stanza of "The Voyage of Telegonus". There the speaker projects the "ill" awaiting the man, or more specifically poet given his characterization as language-user, whose "bitter themes and words . . . spite the gods" (p.93). His speaking of dark truths is equated with "sinning"; his lot with severance from divine and human springs of potential solace: a dual loss encapsulated as separation from "fathers of the high and holy face". Kendall, of course, was such a sinner, questioning the dominant mores and projecting a vision to which others may respond with disbelief ("cries ill-favoured shall be dealt to him"), or by conscious repression ("with mute fast mouth"). And like the narrator he found himself "as on hard hurtful hills", midway in a spiritual search for that "subtle strength" without which, as he recognized in "Eighteen Hundred and Sixty Four", he would inevitably "halt, and faint, and fall" (p.298).

Henry Kendall, then, entered "the Shadow" long before his final breakdown. Certainly the process would only be completed with the cumulative personal blows of the late 1860s. To peruse the few extant letters of this time is a harrowing experience, carrying the reader without softening transition through a series of

tragedies, beginning often in a minor key, as in a begging note “for five shillings for a prescription . . . Will you give me the same? Baby is in an almost dying state” (p.190); though issuing always in implacable defeat, revealed in this case through laconic words addressed to Gordon: “A man who sees those dear to him faced with real want is not likely to be rational. The day baby died I had not a shilling to bury her with” (p.191-2). The accompanying sense of degradation and loss can hardly be over-estimated. But what apparently aggravated personal setbacks, and fed the melancholy note of Kendall’s verse, was a far more insidious undermining of deeper grounds for hope, which might otherwise have provided a source of inner strength in the troubled years ahead. Significantly, when reviewing the poems of the decade for reissue in the 1869 collection of *Leaves from Australian Forests*, he chose to omit all the 1864 verse except for “Faith in God”, with its conventional call to be drawn “upwards” by belief in divine truth. The pessimistic renderings of Australian material from 1865, together with later, fatalistic reworkings of familiar themes, however, were either sufficiently qualified or veiled in reference to be included. Explicit expressions of individual doubt were thereby banished to the limbo of newspaper archives, and with them valuable clues to the poet’s evolution, for personal as well as wider social reasons, perhaps not dissimilar to those offered for dissimulation at the end of “On the Paroo”:

. . . we therefore hide our eyes
 And weep in secret lest our grief should risk
 The rest that hath no hurt from daily racks
 Of fiery clouds and immemorial rains. (p.121)

If Kendall, unlike Henry Halloran, was not always able to sing “for Life”, at least he chose not to preach expressly of the self-doubts and bleak despair which all but overcame him in 1872.

NOTES

1. Commentary has shown little interest in Kendall’s religious beliefs, and Judith Wright, in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), expresses succinctly a long accepted view-point when she concludes: “Kendall’s Christianity was conventional and not deeply felt; his Biblical poems are wooden and unconvincing” (p.46). The notion of laying mental spectres is taken from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, section 96, which also contains a brief projection of the Victorian paradigm of the honest doubter, as typified by Arthur Hallam.
2. The most comprehensive account of these matters remains T.T.Reed’s unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Life and Poetical Works of Henry Kendall* (University of Adelaide, 1953), in particular p.30. See also Kendall’s letter to Moore, dated 19th June, 1877.
3. Important statements on belief, contained in this correspondence, have been neglected, apparently because Kendall’s correspondent was the wife of a minister. While this circumstance may help to explain why these topics would have found in her a ready interlocutor, the fact that his intended audience is ecclesiastical renders, if anything, more striking recurrent admissions of faltering faith.
4. Quotations from his correspondence are from Donovan C. Clarke’s unpublished M.A. dissertation, *A Critical Edition of the Letters of Henry Kendall* (Sydney University, 1959). The third letter to Mrs Selwyn, cited below, is also reprinted in Leonie Kramer and A.D. Hope, eds., *Henry Kendall* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1973), pp. 158-61.
5. Quotations of Kendall’s verse are from T.T.Reed, ed., *The Poetical Works of Henry Kendall* (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1966).
6. My ensuing comments are generally applicable to other works of these years, like “Ogyges”. Such poems, when examined at all, have been discussed chiefly in terms of their prosodic verve and narrative power, strongly advocated in Leonie Kramer and A.D. Hope, ed., *Henry Kendall*, p. xxix; and in Hope, *Native Companions: Essays and Comments on Australian Literature 1936-1966* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974), pp. 116-26.
7. The list from this period is long and fascinating: “The Voyage of Telegonus” (June, 1866), “Merope” (November, 1866), “Syrinx” (November, 1868), “King Saul at Gilboa” (January), “Ogyges” (April), “Galatea” (April), “Daphne” (August) and “To Damascus” (October), all first published in 1869. In documented cases, initial periodical appearances followed hard upon genesis, suggesting that the above dates provide a fairly reliable indication of the approximate time of composition.
8. In context, the phrase refers to “men” and specifically Telegonus; but the rest of the poem also suggests its wider applicability.
9. The classical allusion operates on two levels, directly likening the warrior to a mere animal, tool of Artemis’ vengeance; and recalling its ultimate slayer Meleager, whose destiny was similarly presided over by the Fates. Given courage by Clotho, power by Lachesis, and a life-span linked with a burnt but unconsumed brand of Atropos, Meleager presents the spoils of the boar to Atlanta, and then is forced to slay his envious uncles to protect her. His mother in turn, upset at the death of her brothers, kills him by casting his life-linked brand into a fire. Once again the ultimate reason for these interlinked events is lost in tenebrous myth.
10. W.H. Wilde, *Henry Kendall* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), p.77.
11. The first known printing of the poem in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 11 June 1866 is accompanied by a long footnote reprinting the entry on Telegonus in Lempriere’s *Classical Dictionary*; and it is generally assumed that Kendall drew on this standard reference work for information on a range of classical subjects.

Practising

In the music rooms, patiently,
the pianos hold oceans of stillness.
Dipping into their muffled depths our hands
waver. Soon we may lean moonlight on the water
or a melancholy nocturne. Now, schoolgirl-dark
we brood over scales. Chip them off
with clipped nails. Toward the window
the notes flutter — and then die down,
only promises, shivery foam.

Suddenly across concrete: typewriters.
Flung out the windows, tearing at their reins,
unbroken-in brumbies. Fingers on their flanks
play the quick brown fox —
cymbals and horns and baying hounds
pursue each galloping invoice.

In the dark room suddenly the music
falls apart fillets of mullet
flakes of mud on the blunt tips
of my hands . . . I want
to put the music back in the water
I want to put the blood back
into my hands . . .

The typewriters neigh. And scoff. Tossing ponytails
they canter through dreams. At the end of each steeplechase
a cadenza of cash registers rings: SUCCESS!!
End of lesson. Truce? Into the deep keys
like spotlit crabs searching for their shells
our fingers scuttle . . . out onto the concrete
the typewriters clatter, chattering
almost like schoolgirls. This present
is no more than sand flicked
at a fetlock, it does not even wet behind their ears
as they flounce out with someone blasting on a tranny
(banned) SHE LOVES YOU YEAH YEAH YEAH . . .

Past the music rooms (How *square* can you get?)
they prance their futures as doubtless
as wedding rings, before their practised hands.

ANDREW LANSDOWN

The Spider Orchids

Already the spider orchids are gone.
The triggerplants are still flowering,
their styles rearing back between
the top two petals like small snakes
ready to strike. Five types of these
four-petalled flowers — from the large
mauve ones like bows for a woman's hair
to the small pink ones with a twist
in the petals like boat propellers.
And everywhere the small, insectivorous
sundews, waving orange handkerchiefs
from their sticky hands. But the orchids
are gone. The white spider orchids
with their wispy petals and tall stems.
Those delicate Australians who by contrast
make the cultivated, immigrant kind
look like gaudy ornaments. I have missed
the splendid spider orchids, their
slender movements in the slightest wind.
I have been too busy for wildflowers
and now, two months into spring, I am
too late. With, to tell the truth
(not that one expects a poem to be true
— who cares if it's true to the facts
so long as it's true to the heart?),
one exception. Beside a granite boulder
I saw a single orchid with one petal
draped across its labellum, like a woman
who hides her face while she weeps.

AUSTRALIAN STUDIES ROUNDUP

A two-day seminar, the York Australian Studies Symposium, was held on 1/2 June at York, Western Australia. It was organised by the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, UWA, and attended by more than sixty people including writers and publishers, teachers and students as well as those whose professional or personal interests centre around this area. Papers, panel discussions and general debate was lively and informed and the seminar provided ideas and interaction with a range of people that stimulated all the participants. In his opening address, "Australian Studies Now", Peter Spearritt, the first Director of the newly established National Centre for Research and Development in Australian Studies at Monash University, situated Australian Studies within its current educational field:

AUSTRALIAN STUDIES NOW

Peter Spearritt

We are gathered here today in a village called York. Unlike what most of my past and present colleagues would call the "real" York, it has no cathedral and no obvious evidence of Roman occupation. The lack of proper Cathedrals and the failure of the Romans to colonise Australia are a source of perpetual disappointment to Euro-centric professors in many a university staff club. These upholders of scholarly excellence are still muttering about crass nationalism and — though now usually in private — about the lack of capital C culture in Australia.

Fortunately most of the people who have contributed to the now burgeoning literature on capital S and small s Australian studies have forsaken that kind of cultural cringe. But they continue to be concerned, some would say obsessed, with the allegedly nationalist implications of Australian Studies. In 1986, a year before the CRASTE report was published,¹ F.B. Smith wrote that the intention of Australian studies courses "seems to be the reinforcement of prescriptive nationalist beliefs, rather than the exploration of social problems". He expressed concern that Australian studies courses, along with courses in Australian history, geography and literature and "borrowings from municipal libraries of Australian-based soap-opera novels" (I assume here he was referring to the work of Robert Drewe and Nicholas Hasluck, *Cry of the Blue Guitar*) "all reflect a remarkable growth in people's concern with their Australian identity, amounting to isolationist self-obsession". He particularly cited as evidence universal public joy at the America's Cup victory. I wonder what he would say about the public joy now being expressed in some quarters about the difficulties of Bond University, spelt by some erstwhile cup devotees with a small case 'b'.

Smith goes on to wonder just who these promoters of capital S Australian Studies really are:

commonly refugees from the study of English literature, art history and teaching-training
— disciplines which, for some of them at least, have silted up.

With the publication of the CRASTE report into Australian studies at the tertiary level and some spectacular developments at the secondary level the debate is now taking place not only in academic journals and monthly reviews but in the popular press. Following the announcement that Australian Studies was going to become compulsory for year 11 students in Victorian high schools, the Victorian Liberal Party

and theorists at the Institute of Public Affairs went to town. The Victorian Liberals said that the Victorian course, which centres around the theme of work,³ was promoting an ALP agenda of collectivist values and the notion that the world owed students a living. Those of us who thought of the Victorian ALP as a floundering merchant bank rushed to the syllabus, looking for evidence, which was certainly there, with phrases like 'the culture of work.' On re-reading the syllabus it was obvious, as the Liberals alleged, that "it reeked of the ALP Socialist Left trilogy: class, gender and ethnicity". Dr Ken Baker of the IPA attacked the course for being intellectually shallow and ideologically loaded. He expressed concern that it would erode far more valuable studies such as 'history and languages'.⁴

Australian Studies is now provoking a continuing debate. There is no doubt that its introduction as a compulsory course is viewed with alarm by many history, commerce and geography teachers in Victorian high schools, though it must also be noted that some of them have seized on it as an opportunity to teach all the students in their schools about aspects of Australian life and culture that they would otherwise not encounter in the classroom, remembering that many students don't take history, geography or commerce at all. This concern at the secondary level is translated to the tertiary level where the disciplines are even more entrenched than in secondary schools and where the EFTSU numbers game is hard fought. The debate about teaching in both schools and universities focuses on disciplinary, funding and pedagogic issues, though at the secondary school level compulsion and ideological bias are also at stake.

Also under attack is the development and role of Australian Studies Centres, presently the most modest part of the Australian Studies push. Around one third of our recently amalgamated tertiary institutions now have some kind of Australian Studies Centre, all boasting some research activity and most also involved in teaching. Only two have substantial funding: Monash, with key centre funding from DEET, and the University of Melbourne with money from the Hugh Williamson Foundation.

Judith Brett prefaced her analysis of these centres in the *Age Monthly Review* with the remark that

For Dawkins and Aitkin academics are accountable to society as technology intellectuals serving the corporate state, acquitting their contributions to the taxpayer in their contribution to a healthy economy and an efficient state.

Brett appears to think that any dealings with the commercial sector or with government agencies immediately result in one abandoning a critical stance. The difficulty is of course that an effective critical stance often requires an insider's understanding of the workings of public and private corporations. It is increasingly hard to speak with any credibility about many areas of current social policy unless one has access to public service and corporate knowledge.

Brett fears the demise of public intellectuals in Australian life, and there is no doubt that the enormous pressures on universities to interact with and/or serve the outside community have often muted academic analysis and criticism of both business and government. But one of the great difficulties for academic unions in promoting notions of academic freedom is to find many examples of academics who use their freedom to promote public debate.

Like F.B. Smith, Judith Brett also identifies a nationalist ethos in Australian Studies, 'nationalism', to Brett, providing "the language of consensus, of the symbolic unity in which all differences of class, race and gender are subsumed". At this point I'd like you to recall the Victorian Liberals' allegation that Australian studies "reeks of the ALP Socialist Left trilogy: class, gender and ethnicity".

The crux of Judith Brett's fears are summarised in the following questions she poses

Might not a whole generation of Australian intellectuals be hijacked into Australian Studies as it becomes the basis for promising new academic careers? Might not a whole generation of intellectuals be so busy establishing new journals and professional associations, arguing for the respectability of their discipline within the academy, and writing suitable course material that they will have little time or energy to participate in critical public intellectual culture?²⁵

These are genuine and substantial fears, but I do not see how they apply to Australian Studies any more than to a number of traditional disciplines. What political scientists have recently made major contributions to public debate? Which Australian sociologists have recently spoken out about the crisis in rental housing in this country? Which Australian anthropologists have consistently attempted to prevent the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery? Australian academics rarely write for the daily press and even the monthlies like *Australian Society* and *The Independent* are rarely overwhelmed with literate copy from the university community. I see no evidence that new journals or professional associations are being established, and most of the Australian Studies debate in universities is not about respectability; it's about disciplinary versus interdisciplinary budgetary distributions.

Australian Studies Now is an Australian studies that's here to stay. Very few people employed under its banner regard it or want to regard it as a discipline. In its small 's' interdisciplinary sense it is penetrating into secondary and tertiary curricula. Recycled editions of American textbooks in economics, biology and psychology are belatedly being sent to recycling plants. The cultural cringe is still alive in our universities, not so much in the collective psyche but in the minds of individual scholars, often Australian born scholars, who have failed to develop a genuine curiosity about their own society, even with its human occupation now dated at 60,000 years. Rather than worrying about whether Australian studies is a 'discipline', we should be striving instead to develop an intellectual community which sees questions to be asked about Bangkok and Bellagio, Bahrain and Boorowa. They all have sanitary features in common. There is more meaningful interaction in the Wyalkatchem cafe than in any Woollahra coffee lounge. And lest you think that the two Yorks have nothing in common, I remind you that they both boast Benedictine Abbeys to their north.

* * *

A panel discussion on Prospects for Australian Studies in Western Australia followed. I spoke first — from the position of lecturer in Australian Studies and Women's Studies at the University of Western Australia, outlining the structure and aims of the masters by coursework program, the MPhil Australian Studies, which has been running at UWA for five years. It's an Arts Faculty based course and involves teachers from a number of the disciplines, making an interestingly diverse and relevant coursework structure for students, many of whom themselves bring particular abilities and resources to the program.

Relating a brief history of Australian studies in Western Australia, I looked back to what now seem like the golden days of the beginnings of Australian studies in the '70's, when the future looked illimitable. This emergence of Australian studies has been identified by Lyndall Ryan as both a "sign of maturity and a sign of independence in Australian tertiary institutions". The shifts in both an educational climate and a social climate now project less optimistic prospects than was the case a decade and a half ago, and very different strategies must be engaged in to deal

with these structural social changes. We are now called on to carve out and defend a territory that's constantly under siege and constantly being asked to justify itself. However, while educational areas and interests are shifting and often being redefined, Australian studies can take advantage of these conditions. I argued for continuing and productive debate within the field to establish Australian Studies as an intellectual space which can provide a challenge to accepted ways of understanding cultural relations and formations. If we continue to exchange ideas — about courses and concepts — and if we plan for the future in a large as well as a local sense, Australian studies will benefit.

Lenore Layman, Senior Lecturer in History at Murdoch University spoke of the climate of that institution as different from UWA, with a strong interest in area studies. A core course for students in the Social Sciences and Humanities, "Interpreting Australia", leads on to options such as heritage studies and studies in Australia's material culture which give a clear focus for post-graduate research studies in the area. Newer universities like Murdoch are more able to support and encourage studies programs like Australian Studies since their structures are less discipline based and their intellectual brief provides positive sanctions for interdisciplinary work. Despite the status of Australian studies programs at Murdoch and their success Layman was not sanguine about the prospects for such courses nor for the area as a whole. She argued that a well documented history of preference for people educated outside Australia and with research interests other than Australian ones being appointed to high level academic positions tends to reproduce a discernible antipathy to Australian studies in Australia.

An outline of the current state of Australian Studies at Curtin University was given by Graeme Seale, who referred to the long history of that institution in the field (a degree major in Australian Studies was established there in 1974), and of its Centre for Australian Studies (1984) as well as its close links with the national Australian Studies Association. Australian studies is a university wide elective at Curtin, and potentially open to students in any discipline. The program of study is shared between the Schools of Culture and Communication and of Social Science.

Seale told a cautionary tale, a familiar one, of the successful resistance at Curtin to a proposal for an MA in Australian Studies which would be open to graduates from all disciplines. From this experience, he drew the following conclusions, which he believes are fundamental to the future of Australian studies. He argued that Australian studies needs to develop a profile outside academia, generating demand for such courses in schools, employers, community organisations, cultural and government institutions. This in turn will demand academic attention. Secondly, Australian studies needs to raise its profile overseas, taking advantage of current scholarly interest in things Australian. After sketching in ways in which Curtin is part of these initiatives, he sounded a warning note, citing lack of attendance at AUSTA conferences, the persistence of the view that Australian studies is somehow intellectually disreputable and continuing debates over the lack of theorisation of Australian studies, ending with a plea for a proper study of area courses outside Australia, for instance in American Studies to provide models for Australian studies courses.

Glen Bennett, a consultant for environmental education in the Ministry of Education sent notes on Australian Studies in Western Australian schools, to which Brian Wolfenden addressed himself in Glen's absence. Here, the importance of an interaction between students' life experience and their formal education was stressed. If this interaction is acknowledged, it follows that aspects of Australian studies should be fundamental building blocks in any Australian student's education. Within schools education, the aim is for a curriculum which consistently uses Australian

examples and Australian material of a local, regional and national kind in all subject areas; which ensures exposure to the study of Australian history, geography, systems of government and law as well as the social fabric of Australian life in ways that are stimulating and diversified; and which promotes familiarity with Australian cultural life in its many forms, including the arts and the media. One of the major prospects Bennett referred to is linked to the development of units of Aboriginal studies which are currently being trialled for introduction across the state as lower secondary social studies units in 1991 or 1992. Although a compulsory year 11/12 Australian Studies course based on the Victorian model described by Peter Spearritt had recently been put into the Curriculum Review of Social Studies and Social Sciences Education, there has been no enthusiasm within the Education Ministry or the various advisory committees for such a change to course offerings at this level. This speaker stressed the constant vigilance needed from Australianists for representation on the boards and committees where decisions are made about the schools curriculum.

The opening address and the panel session set an agenda for the symposium which focussed the talks and discussion that followed and generated ideas as well as the feeling that we are working within a strong network of people involved in the study of Australia.

Delys Bird

NOTES

1. Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education, *Windows Onto World Studying Australia at Tertiary Level*, Canberra 1987.
2. F.B. Smith, "Australian Studies: A Comment", *Australian Cultural History*, 5, 1986, p.115.
3. See Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board, *Australian Studies: course development support material*, April 1990.
4. Cited in Greg Sheridan, "Testing time for Australian Studies", *Australian*, 25 April 1990, p.15.
5. Judith Brett, "Critically Placed: Public Intellectuals and Australian Studies", *The Age Monthly Review*, January 1990, p.17. See response by D.J. O'Hearn "Australian Studies, Australian Centres", *The Age Monthly Review*, May 1990, pp. 12-13; and letter by Judith Brett, *The Age Monthly Review*, June 1990, p.13.

REVIEWS

Anna Rutherford, ed., *Aboriginal Culture Today*, Dangaroo Press, 1988.

Aboriginal Culture Today is a special double issue of *Kunapipi* Volume X, Nos. 1 & 2 (1988). Published with the assistance of the National Bicentennial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program, it provides a wide-ranging and well-illustrated presentation and analysis of aspects of contemporary Aboriginal culture.

The Bicentenary provides not merely the occasion for this publication, but the examined context of its critical investigations and cultural expressions. For the contributors to *Aboriginal Culture Today* are not concerned to explicate the traditional world-views and practices of Aboriginal people, but to document the various forms and media of Aboriginal creativity that have emerged in modern, white-dominated Australia. The problematics of Aboriginal participation in the Bicentenary are acknowledged by many of the contributors. In her editorial Anna Rutherford notes that Joy Williams refused to allow her poems to appear in the volume. Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson) suggests, in a passage adopted by Rutherford to conclude her editorial, that the Bicentenary can be resignified by Aborigines:

The celebration is not for the birth of white Australia, but for the survival of the Aborigines over the last two hundred years, of their coming together in Sydney; of the bringing down of the ancient ceremonies from the north, and of the laying to rest of the corpse of the past. It is a celebration of hope for the future.

The keywords of this account of "Aboriginal culture today" are survival and regeneration. Philip Morrissey, manager of the Bicentennial Aboriginal Program, summarizes its aims as the preservation or commemoration of Aboriginal life and customs, the better understanding of Aboriginal experience in Australia and the promotion of social harmony. He introduces two cultural movements which become important themes for the whole collection: that of an oral tradition into written form; and the development of new forms as a result of "the interplay between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture." Morrissey suggests Jimmy Pike's poster, *Kartiya Boat*, as the definitive Bicentennial picture.

Given this claim, it is a pity that the work is not reproduced in the book. Morrissey concludes by imagining a future in which the present cultural renaissance has its fulfilment in "the Aboriginal repossession of Australia."

This relationship of culture and power is central to the subject of the book. Will the success of such ventures as *Desert Designs* and *My Place*, and the increasing presence of Aboriginal images and concepts in the national cultural consciousness lead to a just recognition of Aboriginal rights, or will their adoption into the mainstream culture have the effect of dissipating their political significance? *Aboriginal Culture Today* is structured around these issues. It begins with an interview with Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) who places her writing in the context of her political campaigns and argues that art must be political. She explains that her aim was to "record the cries of her people", to write their stories and thus to recover the lost tribes. This was the mission of her mythic namesake. All subsequent writers acknowledge the paramountcy of Aborigines telling their own stories: this collection is fittingly dedicated to Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

A number of issues flow from this recognition. The importance of Aboriginal languages is stressed by Sally Morgan and by Pat Torres, author of Magabala's bilingual children's books. The issue of white representations of Aboriginality in literature and film is explored by Terry Goldie, Susan Sheridan and Graeme Turner. Goldie's political semiotics enables a critique of many texts including *Coonardoo* and *Capricornia*. This critique is so unremitting that it tends to denigrate the whole enterprise of writing about Aborigines, however informed or sympathetic such writing may be. It may be contrasted with Sheridan's argument that colonial women's texts such as *The Incredible Journey* contain recognitions of women's shared oppression with the Aboriginal Others. Sheridan also looks to the emergence of new discourses on Aboriginality. The importance of discursive change is emphasised in Turner's study of filmic representations. Turner's argument is rigorous, but it acknowledges the need for a "degree of generosity in [the] assessment of efforts of black and white filmmakers to break out of an ideologically regulated representational system." He traces changes in

both ideology and film from the 'fifties to the 'seventies. Finally, Turner welcomes the success of Aboriginal film-makers like Tracey Moffatt. The access of Aborigines to the various media is another strand running through the collection, not least in its many selections from writers and reproductions of paintings and posters.

Some contributors are less sanguine about the relationship of culture and power. In summarizing developments in Aboriginal art J.V.S. and Ruth Megaw argue that the recent boom in acrylic painting is as "alarming" as it is "exciting" because it produces commercially-motivated forms which could cease if their market demand dropped. Julie Marcus studies the "cultural appropriation" of Ayers Rock for tourist and "new age" spiritualist purposes. Tourist advertisements which employ Aboriginal motifs are analysed and found to be invasive and ethnographically inaccurate. Marcus relates this phenomenon to resistance to Aboriginal land rights and especially to the claim that "the Rock belongs to everyone". She argues that "settler Australians" are being encouraged to visit Ayers Rock as a pilgrimage site and that its sacredness to Aborigines is being appropriated for use in modern Australia's search for a centre of meaning. This is a far-reaching and challenging argument, but the differences between the literal "new age" pilgrims and the metaphorical-pilgrim tourists left this reader wanting further demonstration of the notion of secular pilgrimage. Further, the juxtaposition of tourists with religious pilgrims of a syncretic kind raises general questions about the widely-felt desire to create an Australian culture composed of Aboriginal and European elements. Were the Jindyworobaks wrong to invoke Aboriginal stories and images in their quest to make Australia a spiritual home? Ultimately, the issue is, as Marcus properly insists, one of respect: for cultural difference, for tribal secrets, for the land and its traditional owners.

Aboriginal Culture Today assembles critical essays, creative material and interviews with Aboriginal practitioners. A structure of work-and-discussion is established early in the volume through Mudrooroo Narogin's "Paperbark", a creative and critical reflection on Oodgeroo's "Cookalingee" and through Stephen Muecke's discussion of a story and drawing by Butcher Joe. This multi-faceted examination enables

sustained attention to and examples of major artists. The collection's emphasis on Aborigines writing about Aboriginality is supplemented by a bibliography of Aboriginal writers from 1924 to 1987. This is an important scholarly project and, like the whole book, will be of value to students.

This leads me finally to applaud the coherence of this volume. Issues raised by one contributor are often illustrated by others, and the juxtaposition of items is always instructive. Though different judgements may be reached by various writers, complex questions of politics and aesthetics are addressed. The structural coherence and the inclusiveness of the material presented (Aboriginal dance seems the only field omitted) are a tribute to the editorial insight of Anna Rutherford. *Aboriginal Culture Today* can be recommended.

Kieran Dolin

András Domahidy, *Shadows and Women*, Aeolian Press, Claremont, 1989. 281pp. \$20.

Sophie, one of the three heroines of *Shadows and Women* by András Domahidy, opens the novel by turning a hot water tap in a shower "playfully with one finger as if it were a helm." The slight gesture charged with the slightly odd simile reverberates in concentric circles for a page and a half, revealing immediately the nature of this novel. The finger now turning the tap is the same which years ago separated the pages of a Conrad novel at the point where Willems, the hero, turning back on his former life, turns the helm of his schooner among the reefs of the Singur Straits, as the much younger Sophie, sitting on deck, near the cabin door, watched her father steering the family yacht out of Arakoa Bay.

Shadows and Women is not just about the partial victory of memory over time, although the illusion of such victory permeates its action. Domahidy is more interested in the infinitely complex, unstable yet forever coherent nature of consciousness. He is relentlessly inquisitive about its mysteries, without burdening his prose with one single theorizing sentence of abstract phrase. As he maps, charts and plumbs the minds of his characters, every connection or association, however slight, is shown, every

sensation, ordinarily too fleeting to be recorded, is set down, every distinction which seems intangible is noted, impressions too tenuous are given provenance and consequences. The second motto of the novel is taken from Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up" (which is already used by the poet as a motto for his "Immortality Ode") "The child is father of the man". Had there been room for a third, my choice would have been these enigmatic and haunting lines from Auden's "As I walked out one Evening"

The glacier knocks in the cupboard
The desert sighs in the bed
And the crack in the tea cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

The three women, whose names head each section of the tripartite division of the book, provide in their various ways subjective correlatives for the emotions of two men, János and Berci, emigré Hungarians now living in Australia. In their youth, in the faraway, now sunken golden world of rural Hungary, they both loved Inke. Inke loved Berci and liked János. When in the last year of the war, false news of Berci's death on the Russian front reaches her, she married János. Now dead, she lives with particular intensity in the mind of Berci where she enfolds and rescues, not unlike those Proustian talismans the totality of a vanished Eden:

Everything comes back to me at such times, like forgotten photographs in a box discovered by accident: girls in evening dresses, in tulle, in taffeta, with field glasses in their hands at a King's Cup race meeting wearing Florentine hats in a road through a gorge made dark by the shade of hornbeams, not the sepia tint of the photo or the weak lens of pre-war days. (p.67)

Domahidy's sensitive but powerful prose transforms glimpses into a continuous vision, so the whole vanished world appears no longer a collection of ephemera but coheres into a constantly evolving tableau. Like many before him, Domahidy at times despairs of his medium and yearns for the kind of simultaneity and unmediated sensation which only paintings can deliver; yet simultaneity of a painterly kind is what Domahidy often achieves. At one point János sees Inke, young "by the rosebed in his hometown, drying her hair in the sun". The

golden hair does not become, rather *is*, at the same time, a cascade of yellow flowers, a "blond waterfall" which he and his second wife look at in an Australian garden. And here of course, we approach — as at many other similar points — one of the central preoccupations of the novel. The lyrical yet precise evocation of a Hungarian past irradiates the Australian present, like an improbably golden sunset seen through the sparsely spaced branches of eucalypt trees. And on this terrain of "migrant experience" where the grass has been churned to mud in recent years by the heavy feet of contending writers (to say nothing of multiculturalist social workers) Domahidy excels again with restraint, good sense and truthfulness. His "new Australians" take all those difficulties which naturally attend the diaspora for granted. (They were of course lucky: Berci and János came to this country before those vast bureaucratic armies rose to damage and obstruct the natural and necessary process of assimilation.) After the death of Inke János marries Sophie, pledging himself thereby in a most intimate way to his new land. Her "pogácsa" (see page 277) is not nearly as "risen" as those baked in the long ago ruined ovens of the old world, but the old world itself became "flat", colourless or no longer extant. At least this is how János meditates on his condition, by way of consolation: "you become an emigré in your own country; a tourist in your own land. All of us, or nearly all of us have become emigrés on this earth. Some are local foreigners, others are foreign locals." To this most of us might nod a melancholy assent. Yet the essence of that slow moving transaction which turns aliens into amphibians and amphibians into citizens, which transforms refuge into home is insistently suggested in glimpses everywhere in this novel. It is rendered with characteristic obliqueness and delicacy first through the consciousness of Sophie. Not only is the garden around the large old hotel where she and her new husband, János are staying "not there at all but somewhere in England", but her own memories and fragments of family history, beautifully evoked on the opening page, serve as an overture to those moments where Domahidy's Hungarians begin the process which Sophie's ancestors completed so long ago. When the blackboy smells like pine and its sizzling on the fire reminds Berci of fat on a hotplate in a splendid kitchen in another continent, memory pays homage to the new land

more convincingly than conscious mind does as for instance in: "here in this monotonous, drab green, red dust, stimulating, cruel, masculine land are all the fruits, disappointments and new beginnings of my maturity".

The fruits of András Domahidy's maturity, all ripened under the Australian sun, are three novels and a collection of short stories. The book under review, first published in its original Hungarian in 1977 in Berne, has a most interesting publishing history. It became, in 1985, the first emigré work published by a Hungarian state publishing house, breaking thereby a forty year-old publishing ban on Hungarian writers living outside Hungary. The appearance of *Shadows and Women* on the bookstalls of Budapest was certainly among the first swallows heralding an incredible Eastern European spring. The book's success in Hungary was immediate and widespread. Apart from its other merits, readers of Domahidy's generation found details and whole vistas of a rural past, brutally obliterated by four decades of Marxist dictatorship, miraculously preserved in the web of a richly textured, supple and elegant prose. From a meticulous recreation of an embroidered tablecloth or the intertwined initials on some silver spoons to the vision of a great communal dance ("Peasants and gentlefolk had danced like this here from time immemorial. Side by side or facing each other, with an arm round their partner's waist or holding hands They danced to each other what they wouldn't dare say to each other." (p.123)) Domahidy celebrates the artifacts, gestures and rituals of a civic society so ruthlessly destroyed by agents of an inhuman ideology. A Hungarian critic with enviable insight and precision called *Shadows and Women* the "bell of Atlantis".

Shadows and Women fortunately found not only a most gifted translator (Elizabeth Windsor, an Englishwoman now living in Hungary) but also a publisher of rare taste and expertise, who has produced Domahidy's memorable novel in an appropriately attractive and elegant form.

Paul Kovesi

Sue Cramer, ed., *Postmodernism: A Consideration of the Appropriation of Aboriginal Imagery*, forum papers. Brisbane, Institute of Modern Art, 1989, \$6.50.

Aboriginal affairs is a complication in which morals and ethics often clash. A minority group seeking to "share its culture" finds that this has been taken literally, that suddenly things "Aboriginal" have become important artefacts within the majority culture. A majority culture now classified as "postmodern": a weariness eschewing the creative for the pastiche. Cultures are there to be plundered as once the whole world (excluding Europe) was there to be plundered. Perhaps what we are confronted by is an interiorisation of the lust for empire. The shattered post-colonial cultures never having recovered from the imperialism of the 18th and 19th centuries are now seeing their cultural remnants, processes edging tentatively into the modern, being taken and used. But the process is two way in value. There is a signalling of the artefacts (and art) of the Aborigine entering into the market place, but to do this they first must be rendered into consumer goods. This has happened to Western Desert designs (paintings) and to Arnhem Land bark paintings.

In Australia, the postmodern cities, Darwin, Perth, Brisbane — the decentred population areas of metropolitan Australia in themselves reflect the postmodern as pastiche. They are to be read as postmodern texts — texts which juxtapose cultural elements and architecture in a jumble in which the old has been renovated, has been rendered consumable. It is appropriate that a debate on postmodernism and the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery was held in Brisbane at or near the time of that hotchpotch of postmodernism, Expo '88. The participants were similar to Expo '88, a pastiche consisting of the following: an Aborigine (Henrietta Fourmile); an artist (Tim Johnson), two sociologists (Vivien Johnson and Bob Lingard) and an anthropologist (Eric Michaels). What is of significance, in the sense of absence, is the Aboriginal artist, though she (Fiona Foley) participates as text in Eric Michael's paper.

The first paper by Henrietta Fourmile stresses the problems of appropriation in an imperialist context. An important point raised is the appropriation of regional Aboriginal motifs (and styles) by other Aboriginal artists. The t-shirts of Kalki Prints are fine examples of pastiche and also examples of the problems of an art which may be placed on anything, from a car to a pair of sneakers. This in itself is rendering Aboriginal motifs into consumer

goods and stresses Aboriginal art as commodity.

Eric Michaels, who in his short life in Australia emerged as a thinker of note, in his paper brings attention to the problems of artist and art. This too is addressed by Tim Johnson who writing from the Western art tradition gives the artist and his/her production a prominence which I believe dates from the Renaissance or from the 19th century. Eric Michaels does not fall into the trap of equating Aboriginal art with Western art. He sees it as a dialogue between the individual workers and the market. Essentially, Aboriginal artworks are being produced in response to market demand and at present are upmarket consumer items. They have established a niche in the market and when we consider a debate on ownership of Aboriginal designs, and who may or may not use them, what we really are talking about is who should control a marketable commodity. This may seem unduly materialistic, but if the demand for Aboriginal artworks did not exist I believe that there would be no Aboriginal art. We only have to note the shops and galleries which have sprung up in Darwin, Cairns, Alice Springs and elsewhere devoted to the trading of "authentic" Aboriginal art to see how much an industry it has become.

Postmodernism: A Consideration of Aboriginal Imagery is of interest in that it is an opening into an intensifying debate. It has an added importance in that it contains the last essay of Eric Michaels who, in his short life, emerged as a major theorist on contemporary Aboriginal culture. His paper here may serve as a summary of his work. A thinker of his calibre will be sadly missed.

Mudrooroo Narogin

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Modern Secrets*, Dangaroo Press, 126pp, \$15.95.

Transform deep to depth, dazzle to clarity.
Arrest movement to gesture, time to moment;
Turning neither left nor right, but standing still,
To make stillness, and stillness a vocation;

(opening lines to "Thoughts on a Cezanne Still-Life")

The poems in *Modern Secrets* have been collected over the last decade, and many of them have been published elsewhere, including complete sections in two earlier volumes, *Crossing the Peninsula* and *No Man's Grove*.

Crossing the Peninsula won the 1980 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, the first time the prize had been awarded to an Asian and the first time to a woman. Lim was born and educated in Malacca, Malaysia, and now teaches in universities in the U.S.A.

In her poetry she speaks of both of these worlds, as different and discrete as they are. She has the privileged language of the First World at her disposal, of academic discourse, high culture and she has the experience of the immigrant. From "To Li Poh" she writes

To one who knew traditions, the best
of race. Country man, you believed to be Chinese
No more than a condition of human history.
Yet I cannot speak your tongue with ease,
No longer from China. Your stories
Stir griefs of dispersion and find
Me in simplicity of kin.

The poems are always precise: as sharp and clear as the lines above, sidestepping metaphor and allowing things to show their own qualities, their own differences. Lim looks back to the world she left without sentimentality but with understanding; some of which applies to her new life, forming the American citizen, some of which slowly dissolves, and is lost to her.

Dislocation is written clearly into these poems. Traditional and modern, Asian and American; she doesn't try to straddle a space between the two worlds; rather, she makes the most of both of them. She looks back to landscape, kinship, ritual, with a sense of the mundane, writing about the difficulties and compromises of a colonised people and place, following transitions from colonised to otherwise: the struggle to adjust to a different type of self-determination:

The pink-and-glossy man wants the little chap
to bring back the water glasses. He settles
on the platform and calls for questions. The plain jane
from the Ministry of Culture wants to know
how to be modern without becoming Ike and Tina
Turner. Her chinese convent voice is constantly
apologizing on the edge of rudeness.
We don't have a national culture, she complains

(from "Cross-Cultural Exchange" (Singapore 1986))

A glance through the index of titles tells a lot of the story of this collection: "Returning to the Missionary School", "Christmas in Exile", "Identity no Longer", "Translation from other Languages", "Song of an Old Malayan", "The

Exile”, “Chinese in Academia”. Again, from “To Li Poh”,

I read you in a stranger’s tongue,
Brother whose eyes were slanted also.

And, with irony, from the New World:

The city is a mountain
Also, made of Asia,
Europe and Africa.
They call it America.
Every morning I practice li,
Perform my wifely duties,
Watch colour television,
And eat pop, crackle, snap.
It is not hard to be
An Asian-American Chinese.

(from “Dedicated to Confucius Plaza”)

Shirley Geok-lin Lim explores tensions and disruptions, in cultural and linguistic terms, in an effectively sharp and precise style. She makes use of vernacular language, and tackles the everyday — experience and rhythm. Her poems have poignancy, a strong sense of loss; a sense of remaking on someone else’s terms. I enjoyed reading these poems, and they stimulated me into thinking further on some of the issues around post-colonial literatures, on language use by immigrants and their children, on minor literatures within the context of a ‘major’ language, of the gaps that non-‘native’ speakers can fall into, and what can be worked within these gaps. It is an impressive production by the joint Australian-Danish publisher, Dangaroo Press.

Terri-ann White

Mudrooro Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe*.
A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature
Melbourne, Hyland House, 1990.

Mudrooro Narogin’s *Writing from the Fringe* is the most important piece of literary criticism to have come out of Australia since Frederick Sinnett’s ‘The Fiction Fields of Australia’ (1856). It certainly belongs to a tradition of criticism in Australia ‘punctuated’ by the writings of Vance Palmer, P.R. Stephensen, A.A. Phillips and Judith Wright. Narogin uses a complex social semiotic approach to develop a fundamental theoretical insight of Roland Barthes (which he quotes or

paraphrases at least three times) that the ‘text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of cultures’. In this illuminating work Narogin advances an Aboriginal critical practice which, in its postmodernity, is not so much a criticism as a ‘politics’ since Aboriginality, the core or centre of the Aboriginal cultural experience, like Feminism, requires for its articulation and ‘decoding’ a specific sensibility or consciousness. To develop Aboriginality as an ‘advanced coherence’ in literature Narogin’s thesis is based upon a strategic (and extremely functional) reading of Michael Riffaterre’s use of the matrix and the hidden intertext. Narogin calls this the hidden metatext which both signifies Aboriginality and is the defining feature of an Aboriginal text. Because an Aboriginal text must trigger this, one’s reading explores those moments in the text which lead to the ‘experience’ of Aboriginality. Working from Riffaterre’s theory, this means that an initial minimal reading of a text along purely representational (mimetic) lines must give way to a retroactive reading which uncovers the work’s ‘significance’. This ‘significance’ is directly related to a text’s Aboriginality, an essence which literature, like the processes of Buddhist nirvana, unfold as it disentangles or lays bare the world of illusion. In the process Narogin uncovers precisely that multiplicity of ‘tissues’ which constitutes the Aboriginal text.

Writing from the Fringe offers an archaeology of crucial Aboriginal ‘moments’ such as the history of the publication of the journal *Identity* (1972-1982), the white writing of ‘trustories’, the ‘consumption’ by the white community of the ‘battler genre’ of Sally Morgan and Glenyse Ward, the place of popular music, especially reggae rock in Aboriginal society, and so on. But central to both the thesis and the archaeology is an unresolved contradiction: Aboriginal texts are written in a language (English) for an audience which is predominantly white. This leads to a peculiar schizophrenia (p.125). In exploring this contradiction, or schizophrenia, Narogin points out how the Aboriginal cultural artefact, and certainly the literary text, is trapped in an entire history of Australian assimilationist policy. This policy of assimilation valorized conformity at the expense of difference and led to a form of literary imprisonment. A particular discourse (standard English), a particular ethic

(Christianity) and a particular genre (the ballad or hymnody) denied Aborigines access to the great and complex texts (and experiences) of the Metropolitan centre as well as of Aboriginal tradition itself. Black Australian writing was trapped in this generic and linguistic continuum since the Black writers were told no other: their own way forcibly suppressed (as primitive, pagan, or whatever) anyway. Oodergoo Noonuccal, Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis and Narogin himself are all part of a generation 'scarred by assimilation' (p.49), part of a racial 'splinter' who had no 'natural' family (p.79) and who show how 'assimilation has hindered Aboriginal creativity rather than helped it' (p.86). Only those Aborigines least affected by assimilation will be able to write the most exciting forms of literature (p.30).

To say that the Aboriginal writes in a 'whitefella' style, organised along 'whitefella' time is to admit the triumph of white assimilationist ideology. There is no way out of this except through a self-conscious adoption of an Aboriginal discourse as Narogin himself attempts in *Doin Wildcat* (1988) which he considers his 'best work to date' (p.174) written in a 'close proximity to oral styles' (p.111). Here what Riffaterre called ungrammaticalities threaten the easy, mimetic orientation of language as representation (p.58).

Writing from the Fringe defines both an Aboriginal literary dominant at the level of structure (no neat endings, circuitous narratives, repetition, inconclusiveness) and an Aboriginality at the level of content (the text is marked by a 'self-deprecating humour' and 'pessimistic ending' (p.128)). Narogin frames the Aboriginal 'dominant' in an historical periodization strictly along Aboriginal lines with only the year 1788 being common to both white and black Australian histories.

At the ideological level, Narogin's criticism seeks to find texts which emphasise survival and struggle rather than those which search for personal genealogical roots or equal opportunity in a multicultural Australia. For this reason Glenyse Ward and Sally Morgan's works are given tentative, and slightly contradictory, endorsement. 'Battler genres' as he calls them figure slightly better when he returns to Morgan later in the text, though *My Place* with its focus on the individual and not the class as a whole (p.149) is, by implication, not a 'black text'

(p.161) whose ground of existence is, as in Labumore's (Elsie Roughsey) 'life story', the survival of the race at large. The process of tentative endorsement tempered by an afterthought is an interesting feature of Narogin's criticism since it signifies a continuity of thinking on the part of Aboriginal writers working in both the critical and creative modes. Afterthoughts are included within the covers of the same book not as signs of the Aboriginal critic/writer's indecisiveness (or lack of unity) but as a discursive (and political) feature of Aboriginal writing generally.

It is because the Aborigine is a social being who is never isolated from his culture that he is 'a value creator and integrator' (p.24). Unlike Frederick Sinnett's ideal, the Aboriginal writer is a social being for whom the aesthetic coexists with and is locked into the social. Aesthetic value is in fact subordinated to the content, the message of the text. If Aboriginal literature is to be informed by Aboriginality, then it must produce verbal discourses 'in which the message is dominant and the aesthetic function is subordinate' (p.35). The criterion of value is thus the degree of Aboriginality in a given work (this in itself excludes, as inauthentic, the works of Herbert, Keneally or White on Aborigines). This may be deemed an Aboriginal aesthetic (a social aesthetic?) in its own right as it considers the author, his biography, his complete works as part of a total racial experience produced from within the complex culture itself.

Yet Narogin is no simple romantic. He recognises that cultures must never fossilize (as indentured Indian culture with its mimicry of the coloniser's values has done) since this would only confirm its 'museum' status as a 'calcified colonised society' (p.144). Their vibrancy must never be sacrificed and for this they must be self-reflective as well. The theoretical cosmopolitanism of Narogin's criticism with its strong basis in French post-structuralist theory is part of this self-reflexivity and 'de-calcification'. What is needed is a generic freedom as well as a refined sense of the Aboriginal struggle. The defining feature of the Aboriginal text, to which Narogin returns over and over again whether it's Lionel Fogarty or Narogin himself, is the text's Aboriginality. It remains a structural and a thematic dominant because of a fundamental, inalienable fact of history: 'being born in a white world is no joke for a black man or woman'

(p.136). This is a cruel indictment of the majority culture as well as an incisive statement about the Aboriginal historical predicament.

Given the fact of birth — being born in a white world is no joke — compromise, manipulation, abuse and misuse are all part of the processes through which the colonised negotiates with the coloniser. Because the apparatuses of power and knowledge are all European, artistic creativity and help itself might mean colluding with the coloniser and writing on his own terms. The black writer feels like a 'shuffling Beckett character uttering parables into the recording apparatus of white dominance' (p.151). He also exists at the very interface of this ambiguity. He writes, as white critics keep on reminding him, for the invader and in his own language. He is also reminded — such is the cruel irony of it all — by white converts that he is trapped in a discourse from which he can find no escape. 'It is a curious fate', writes Narogin 'to write for a people not one's own, and stranger still to write for the conqueror of one's people' (p.148).

Thus Aboriginal writers must use (white) literary genres as a political weapon with which to challenge white hegemony. They must redefine genre, explode discourses, delegitimize standard English, subvert expectations, challenge assumptions while maintaining their rage and their centrality in an Australia which, after all, ultimately and preeminently, belongs to them. Their literature therefore participates in forms of magic realism as it mixes fantasy and reality, dreamtime and chronology, fact and myth. But reading — our reading — also requires an Aboriginal reading practice, an Aboriginal strategy of unearthing mythic, totemic meanings which Narogin demonstrates as an exercise in radical practical criticism in the final chapter of this challenging, and disturbing, work. Like a taboo, a sacred ritual, Aboriginal literature does not open its secrets readily to the uninitiated.

Bob Hodge and
Vijay Mishra

Tom Flood, *Oceana Fine*, Allen & Unwin, 1989.

Oceana Fine is set for the most part in the wheat-belt of W.A. around Merredin. The novel is set in the present, but it deals mainly with the

activities of previous generations of the narrator's family. *Oceana Fine* is in fact a kind of family history, though fictional: a very innovative and ambitious variation of this increasingly popular genre, which aspires to the condition of myth and psychological thriller. And Tom Flood has shown that both his temporal setting — the succession of gold mining by wheat growing — and the geographical setting — the vast and artificially productive wheat-belt — are rich sources for fiction. He has discovered and tapped a flow of angst and obsession which can make compelling reading.

The novel generally makes the transition from the realistic to the fantastic convincingly, and often with a powerful surge which suggests great force of desire. This aspect of the novel seems related to that phenomenon present in Australian writing, the radical and damaging split between the inner life and outside realities. This dramatization of country banter, for example, is convincingly real, and yet also has an intensity which is resonant of other dimensions:

He looked out the door at the disappearing Italian as catcalls rang down the line. One voice detached itself.

'Hey Spazzoney, you bribe the sampler, you greaseball', it yelled in a laughing voice tinged with a German accent.

'Go suck your mother's cock, Jorge, you poofter', the tall Italian shouted back.

'Hey, Spaghetti', a country voice whined hoarsely. 'Only the men have cocks in Australia.'

Laughter all down the line. Mazzone stood next to his truck and jutted his hips forward, lifting the leg of his shorts and letting a thick stream of steaming urine arch towards the back of the line.

'You, Mozzie. You insect. See this. Don't be frightened. You wife get tired of cocktail frankfurt? I, Mazzone, Italian Stallion, I service for you.'

A red streak shot around the backs of the last trucks and cruised along the line, brassily blowing its horn. (p.16)

The gigantism is well done, too, particularly with respect to the senior bin attendant, Mark Reynolds' wielding of a front-end loader. The psychological scene, of powerful human motives clashing, is nicely set by this image. I did find Flood's use of dreams less successful, however. The dreams came too neatly on cue, and this device did not avoid cliché. Flood is more successful when creating more subtle images: 'It was too hot to wear anything to bed on these

nights and his naked body slipped luminously through the darkness like a fish in deep water. He half expected the loader to come wheeling out of the moonless depths under the truck bays at the side of the bin . . .' (p.15)

One of the book's subjects is story-telling itself. The writing here is exceptional in creating a kind of vertigo: the pace of events rushes the reader on so that the orientation which a conventional narrative may provide becomes a disorientation, which serves well the narrator's aim of exposing the inadequacy of any story's grasp of experience. Such is the case, for example, as the story of Grace's childhood is related, the dizziness here also literal as she tumbles, trapped in a barrel, down Greenmount Hill to Midland. Events sometimes swirl to form a whirlpool into which characters are sucked. Finlay Torrent, student of history, sets out for the wheat-belt with naive ambitions: 'But that's what I've been waiting for, you see. To be part of the harvest. That's why I took this job. I wanted to see if I could find something in the country. In nature.' He is informed by Rex Cleaver that 'There's nothing natural out here, boy . . . It's the biggest factory you'll ever work in, Finlay.' Events, history, soon overwhelm him. him.

The strange power of story-telling is also evoked. A striking example is when Chloe is told a story by an Aboriginal boy, about the Wallaby Man and his tribal area. The mythic power of the story is enhanced by the compressed and colloquial telling.

The sense of disorientation is skillfully created through Flood's use of language. Words themselves are interrogated, their sources and metaphorical roots uncovered, so that language is represented as an unstable and dangerous medium with which to understand experience. At times the disorientation is seen to be suffered by the characters themselves:

I'll tell ya what, he never did anything ta that sampler, I know that. There's more ta this than that and that's what's got him worried, not the coppers. It's about this feller's kids, isn't that right? Augie? (p.206)

Flood manages here an excellent image of language floundering in the midst of experience, the deictic, or 'pointing' words — 'this', 'that', 'it' — pointing in all directions.

Tom Flood also has the ability to brilliantly sketch a character in a few sentences:

It was the man Jorge had called Wally, a big bluff character with one of those inevitable faces, the kind of person who accepts that everything that can happen, will happen, and consequently goes round in an amiable daze of fulfilled expectation. His laughter, a muffled roar padded by the sheer size of him, surrounded Finder in an easy warmth. (p.204)

The book's main characters are fascinating, though their eccentricity is at times rather inscrutable. It is with regard to the larger structural composition of the novel that I have reservations. The chopping up and juxtaposition of narratives can be fruitful, but as an organizing device I found it unsatisfying — too arbitrary a means, perhaps, of creating mystery and disorientation. My reservations about *Oceana Fine* are far outweighed by my admiration, however. Flood is capable of a prose which has a genuinely transforming power.

Although it is difficult to summarize or speak briefly of the novel's thematic scope, the theme of our connections with the land is conspicuous, and provides a point of stillness that is not paralysis in a book which is predominantly restless, searching.

There's a quality about this garden, this rusting old tank. Timeless would be the usual word but it'd be more correct to say outside time, a thing that doesn't apply, doesn't respond to modern tools. And this thing is no mirage, no oasis in the desert; more one of those waterholes that determine where you must go. Because you must. Go.

And lie out on the wall in the sun and listen to the ticking of the pipes. And doze. If I was a plant, I'd split open pods, expose anthers, burst fruit, here under this sun, in this place. This is my land, my place. I own it, own to it, the kind of ownership that transcends deeds and titles, that doesn't exclude the same in others, that exists beyond the laws of trespass. (p.238)

Michael Heald

Giovanna Capone, *Incandescent Verities: The Fiction of Hal Porter*, Bulzoni, Rome, 1990. 238pp.

This is the first extended study of Hal Porter since Mary Lord's brief monograph in 1974 in the Australian Writers and their Work series. The fact that it comes to us from one of the major English language publishers in Rome, Bulzoni,

should not be too surprising, since Australian studies are perhaps stronger in Italy than anywhere else in Europe. Giovanna Capone, the author of this excellent critical study, is a Professor of Modern Literatures and Languages at the University of Bologna, Europe's oldest university. She is also President of the recently founded European Association for Studies on Australia.

The title of Capone's book comes from a comment made by Porter in the first and best known volume of his autobiographical trilogy, *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, in which he attempts to link his omnivorous reading since adolescence with 'an aim, not to this day accomplished, of stating as incandescently as possible verities not yet fully realised.' Capone links this aim with an artistic quest traceable through Porter's autobiography, short stories and novels, in which 'home' is finally a more significant factor than 'away.' In support of this interpretation, she quotes part of a manuscript letter to Beatrice Davis, held in the National Library of Australia: 'Beatrice, have no fears of my becoming ex-patriate — my ceiling of comfort and Australianism is too high . . .' (p.42)

A self-confessed regionalist, Porter reclaims in his autobiography and elsewhere a Bairnsdale of his childhood. Capone remarks: 'It is the generative place par excellence, the Mother Earth, the rich soil, fertile like mother, the opulent garden, the generous land that will be found over and over again in the short stories and in the descriptions of the overpowering Ballabool gardens in *The Right Thing*.' (p.46) While Capone's book is principally a study of Porter's writings across several genres, she does not eschew biographical commentary, and indeed uses it to good effect in her sketch of his father's aloof, anti-intellectual, 'prefabricated and carefully inspected' middle-class personality, quite different from his mother's rivetting emotional centrality. Throughout his autobiography, Porter is concerned not just with his own individual case but, in Capone's words, 'the making of Australians'. In this, as she points out, Porter parallels Gertrude Stein's 'making of Americans' (p.34). The comparison is only partially accurate. While both present fictional recreations of childhoods within contexts of the coming of age of their home countries, a closer comparison would reveal the greater self-

consciousness, intellectual sophistication and love of elaboration of Porter, suggesting a closer literary relationship with Henry James than Stein. (James is invoked elsewhere as a comparison.)

Capone's study gives an important role to 'the neglected genre', the short story, in Porter's oeuvre. Quoting generously and well from short stories ranging from *A Bachelor's Children* (1962) to *The Clairvoyant Goat* (1981), Capone traverses the theme of memory as it oscillates between fact and fiction. The chapter on Porter's short stories is entitled 'Woman With Hidden Face', and reinforces a psycho-literary reading of the stories as centrally concerned with a recovery through memory of the figure of the mother. The epigraph is from Samuel Johnson: 'Forgetfulness is necessary to remembrance.' If a sense of loss is recurrent, so too is a certain aesthetic set towards this loss — an 'aesthetic dolour and delight both in separating himself out from contact with the actual, and in sublimating it' (p.63). Capone's analysis is acute in its differentiation between a merely rhetorical evocation of regret and loss and a 'more sinewy' emotionality. She does not sidestep the 'distorting sentimentality' to which Porter is prone, but shows this as an aspect of a dynamic process, wherein his characters are 'constantly in motion' and are 'captured while trying to get close to something, or to get far away from something', (p.70). The stories 'Country Town' and 'Home Town' show both tendencies, as do 'overseas' stories such as 'Brett' and 'Cats of Venice.' Capone presents 'Country Town' as an archetypal story, demonstrating a recovery through fragments of memory of Bairnsdale, the place where Porter feels 'localized': she calls this story 'an act of love', celebrating, after thirty years, what Porter called 'real' land under a 'real' sky, where the protagonist may scan 'my mother's country stars, holding up my head under the imperial sneer of planets' (p.104).

Capone's readings of Porter's three novels, *A Handful of Pennies* (1958), *The Tilted Cross* (1961) and *The Right Thing* (1971) retrieves them from an unwarranted critical neglect, which an almost exclusive attention to the autobiography has brought about. She shows that the novels share a continuum with the rest of Porter's work, as elements in a quest for personal and social meaning. I found the reading of Porter's novel set in postwar Japan, *A*

Handful of Pennies, particularly illuminating. Here, Capone relates 'the central homecoming' feeling of Porter's work to his comment in an interview that the Japanese island of Shoda Shima was the only other place outside Bairnsdale where Porter would have wanted to live for good (p.118). On the whole, however, the Australian revisiting Japan finds it like a great 'clown's act', a sort of 'gigantic mask'. In the steps of another aesthete Lafcadio Hearn, he indulges in 'a voyeurism of remembrance.' Capone's emphasis on the mystical-symbolic connotations of the number five, and her analysis of the five characters who are returning to Australia in the novel, according to the symbolic animals which preside over their stories, is original and persuasive. The five passengers, she points out, 'are the performers in a handful of stories which are paradigmatic of this deformed world' of the Occupation Forces in early post-war Japan. The title of Tom Hungerford's novel, *Sowers of the Wind*, sums up the Australian occupation forces' encounter with disorientation and despair. Capone reveals in Porter's novel a unique mixture of tones from apocalypse to irony, and an exoticism of objects which parallels in some respects Lawrence Durrell. Porter's theme here, as elsewhere, is 'the abandoned place, which is also the theme of impermanence, of travel, of the past, the *vissuto*' (p.155).

In *The Tilted Cross*, Hobart is 'the abandoned place':

In [the novel's] system of correlations Hobart becomes Hal Porter's 'city at the end of the night', as demoniac as Victorians and Edwardians, from Tennyson to Thompson, expected cities to be. A hell of ice and night, Hobart is his city of Dis (p.169).

With judicious use of quotations from the novel, and literary comparisons, Capone shows Porter's fictional recreation of convict Hobart to be a settlement of crosses and crossings. 'By means of an extreme symbolism', she points out, 'the realistic dictates of the map of Hobart are accurately respected by Porter' — an author who often claimed to have no imagination. Porter's theatricality is revealed in the London/Hobart antimony in *The Tilted Cross*: the stage is the upper world, London (*The Queen's Theatre*), while *The Shades* is the underworld. Porter's story is a modern 'harrowing of hell' (p.176).

Less exotic and theatrical than the previous novels, Porter's third novel, *The Right Thing* casts a colder eye on these qualities. Capone's epigraph from *Candide*, 'Il faut cultiver notre jardin' is an entrée to Porter's last extended study of insiders and outsiders, the found and abandoned places of human experience.

More central to this than perhaps to any other Australian novel are gardens. Ballabool, for instance, which is a fictional composite of Ballarat and Warrnambool, suggests a 'rightness' in things, recalling Johnson's *Rasselas* (p.203). But gardens can also exclude, as Mrs Ogilvie's private garden, *Erradale*, seems designed to do. Capone's sense of literary ancestors here as elsewhere is acute, without threatening the primacy of the text under discussion:

Porter never forgoes tradition, the taste for the 'landscaped garden', Pope's 'nature methodized', Addison's 'natural wilderness', Thompson's 'regulated wild', nor Rousseau's 'verger metamorphosé.' The 'replica garden' (*Erradale*) . . . is the garden of Boileau's fine disorder, against the fine order of the formal garden. It is also vaguely allegorical, like Marivaux's double garden. (p.220)

Capone interestingly chooses to conclude her study of Porter's work in contemplation of this garden and the mother-figure who controls it. She ends on a note of mystery, for readers of Porter to ponder. Gavin, Porter's alter ego in *The Right Thing*, observes that his mother's garden is 'a magnificent fake.' But he watches her with an absorbed interest as she constructs her artefact from nature; as we, in Capone's study, are invited to watch her watcher.

Incandescent Verities is an absorbing and often illuminating study of Hal Porter's fiction. Its author wears her learning lightly in a clear, elegant and persuasive appreciation of a major Australian writer.

Bruce Bennett

Pat Lowe with Jimmy Pike, *Jilji: Life In the Great Sandy Desert*, Broome, Magabala Books, 1990, \$39.95. ISBN 0 9588191 2 5.

Aboriginal culture is one of Australia's growth industries. As Mudrooroo Narogin writes in his study of contemporary Aboriginal writing,

Writing From the Fringe, it is fast “becoming a national resource”, with anyone from “tee shirt manufacturers to dollmakers” taking what he or she wants from it. Narogin is quite properly angry about this. But this is not all negative, of course. Most non-Aboriginal Australians are astonishingly, even appallingly, ignorant of the original culture of this country; a rich, subtle, complex and remarkably successful culture built up over at least 40,000 years. The first settlers seem quite genuinely to think that they were coming into an empty country. The painter William Woolls wrote for example:

It is a remark frequently made by persons who have immigrated to New South Wales, that this colony is not only devoid of any venerable remains of antiquity, but that it also is deficient in those interesting scenes which contribute so much to enliven and dignify the histories of other countries. To a certain extent, we must admit the truth of this assertion. It is true that we cannot boast of the massive structures which have been raised by the piety of our forefathers, and which are not the sacred storehouses of our predecessors, and guardians of their bones: we cannot pride ourselves upon the triumphal arch, the high-raised battlement, the moated tower, and the mouldered grandeur of days gone by; nor can we lead the traveller to the contemplation of those glorious fields on which tyranny and oppression fell beneath the sword of patriotism. We are not famous for the gigantic pyramids which were reared by kinds whose names are now unknown. The lofty column and the lengthened aisle do not grace our shores. We have no plains of Marathon, no pass of Thermopylae, on which we may feel an honest pride.²

Colonisers need to believe in their own superiority, in their God-given right to rule. Ideology, the “system of meanings which installs people in a given culture in imaginary relations of their actual situation”, has a potent force, and it is not, I think, an exaggeration to say that many, possibly even most Australians still unconsciously accept the terms of what one scholar, Abdul Jan Mohamed, has called the “Manichean allegory” which governs the colonial and indeed the post-colonial mind, setting up a series of relations in which black is to white as good to evil, superior to inferior, civilised to savage, adult to child, and so on.³ For that reason it is important that we learn more about a people whom we have systematically denigrated and despised and a culture which we have equally systematically ignored.

It is also important, however, that we learn about it from them, and on their own terms. Writing is a form of power, and until recently Aboriginal people were denied this power. Non-Aboriginal anthropologists, missionaries, politicians and well-wishers of all kinds tended to speak for and about them. This is a form of cooption, of course, since it assumes on the one hand that they need to be spoken for and on the other that the need lies on the Aboriginal side, that they should be translated into our culture, explained to us in our terms for their own good, so to speak.

Aboriginal people today are increasingly resisting this cooption and beginning to speak out for themselves. But writers like Kath Walker (now Oodjeroo Noonuccal), Jack Davis, Bobbi Sykes, Kevin Gilbert, Colin Johnson (now Mudrooroo Narogin), are still dependent on white publishers and the media, and the first Conference of Aboriginal Writers in Perth in 1983 identified this as a major problem. That is why Magabala Books, a project of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre located in Broome, represents such an important initiative as the first publishing house in which Aboriginal people are in complete control.

Jilji; Life In the Great Sandy Desert, by Pat Lowe with Jimmy Pike, is one of their books. The first thing to be said about it is that it is a beautiful book, a combination of qualities of language, image, form and colour which not only delights the senses but the mind and imagination also. As such, it is proof, if proof were needed, of the professional skill of the publishers and of everyone associated with this publication. The text is written by Pat Lowe, a white woman who also took the photographs, and illustrated by the well-known Aboriginal artist, Jimmy Pike, one of the Walmajarri people, one of the last of his people to leave their own country, what we call the Great Sandy Desert, but which they saw and still see as “the living heart of the continent”.

The words thus go beyond themselves here just as in Aboriginal culture, our kind of geography disappears, to be replaced by a much larger sense in which distance becomes an aspect from time and space, a living presence. So here Jimmy Pike’s images go beyond the matter-of-fact, however beautiful, of the photographs operating on a strangely flexible, intensely dynamic way, opening out new ways of seeing

beyond the mere representation of the camera. That is not to deny the force of the photographs; they are beautifully composed and reproduced. But it is to point to the real subject of the book, one which is implicit, rather than explicit, sky, if you like, rather forthright, the otherness of Aboriginal culture, a depth of resource we cannot quite understand and which in fact the book does not really try to express, preferring to give us only imitations of it. But it is this sense of mysterious resource and resourcefulness which makes the book so engrossing.

In the section on "Desert Medicine", for instance, the camera gives us pictures of the various plants and grasses as sensitive and observant eyes would see them. But Jimmy Pike's paintings then enter into them, moving through them, to give us a vivid sense of energies and forms at work in them and through them. As Blake would say, here we do not look at these things but through them, as through a window, to become aware of the sheer wonder and force of existence itself and of our part as living beings amongst living beings.

The camera does not know what it takes. It captures the materials, the shapes and colours with which we are able to reconstruct not so much what we see as what we think we see. At best, therefore, photography is a matter of illusion. It uses illusion and even encourages it. The photographs in the section on the Turtujarti tree which holds a central place in life of the desert people, providing good, shelter, fuel and building materials, for instance, give us an impression of a rather stunted bushy tree, remarkable only because it is able to survive in desert country. But Jimmy Pike's painting turns a grove of them into something almost paradisaical, green, intensely living, moving in the dance of life. Bill Neidjie is not a desert man, it is true, but he reflects this sense which pervades Aboriginal culture as a whole, in another Magabala book, *Story About Feeling*

I love it tree because e love me too.
E watching me same as you
tree e working with your body, my body,
e working with us.⁴

In the second thing to be said about *Jilji* therefore is that it is not a mere coffee-table book, not just a series of beautiful pictures with words to match, designed to soothe and entertain, an alternative to switching on the telly or going out for a coffee. It is also a gently

troubling book, troubling in the way a mirror can be when it holds up an image for speculation, as it does so suggesting the possibility that what we call "real" may itself be an image, even perhaps an image in an infinite series of images.

The book's story is outwardly simple. It tells about the life of the desert people, "the people of the sandhills", moving from place to place, living simply, travelling light, but also because of their "fine adjustment to their exacting country" thriving, caring for the land, for its living creatures, which includes trees and grasses and waterholes and soaks as well as the animals. It tells also about their skills; finding water and preserving its sources from year to year, husbanding it through the dry season, devising ways of carrying it and preserving it if rain falls suddenly and unexpectedly, working together with the land, not against it as we tend to do, noticing everything, even letting the ants help them gathering the seeds they use for making damper, reading the land like the pages of a book, integrating the marks made by the animals, birds and insects that walk over what we see as empty and barren land.

So it also tells a story of adaptation, flexibility and subtle change. One of the myths we like to cling to because it justifies treating Aboriginal culture as irrelevant, unimportant to us "moderns", is the myth of a "Stone Age". This presents Aboriginal culture as static and unchanging, fossilised as it were, a remnant from a past which no longer matters, out of place in our kind of world. But in *Jilji* we not only see them adapting to and caring for their own environment, modifying the way they live to its pressures but also responding to the European invasion, using our implements, adapting their methods of cooking and travelling, getting work on the cattle stations and proving themselves as stockmen. Even in traditional times they did not live outside history, in a kind of vacuum. They heard from the early days about the activities of the newcomers, the "Kartiya". What we call the "dead heart" of Australia was for them very much live with stories and new ideas as well as the exotic new goods of the Europeans travelled along the nomad trading routes that criss-crossed the country from east to west. Here, too, later they heard about World War II and as air travel became more fashionable and mining companies arrived, watched planes flying overhead.

Seen like this from the other side, reflected in the mirror held up to us here, our history begins to look rather different:

As Ngirjarti, the reddish-coloured strangers, moved into the northern regions, grazing their cattle in the river valleys and ranges, the desert people heard of it. They knew how the riverside people had resisted the invaders and speared their cattle, and how in reprisal many of them had been killed. Eventually, they had given up the struggle. Some went to work for the settlers, in this way straying close to their own country while adjusting as best they could to a new way of life. Even then the news was often grim. The former hunters fell victim to mysterious illnesses, and many did not recover.

In his *Literature and the Aborigine In Australia* J.J. Healy shrewdly notes an “uneasy shuffle, a sense of sweaty anxiety” in nineteenth century Australian writing whenever it deals with Aborigines.⁵ Reading this passage perhaps points to one of its causes, a sense of guilt, of feeling somehow responsible for not being responsible, which exists at the unconscious rather than the conscious level. A people who pride ourselves in our sense of justice and decency, on having made a country in which everyone has a right to a “fair go”, we have difficulty in acknowledging the fact that this country was also built on the attempted destruction of its original people and their culture. To the extent that we do acknowledge it, we usually justify it as “historically necessary”, implicitly assuming the divine right of white people to dominate the rest of the world. Seen from the Aboriginal point of view, however, things look very different. Kevin Gilbert, for instance, writes of a “rape of the soul”, accusing Europeans not only of invasion but also of attempting to destroy all that Aboriginal people held sacred and which in turn gave them their reason for living.⁶ *Jilji* is much less aggressive. Indeed, the passage just quoted is almost the only one in which the white invasion is explicitly mentioned. But the result may be even more disturbing.

The way we have managed to explain ourselves and our behaviour to ourselves has been to assume our superiority. We were the intelligent and civilised ones and the Aborigines mere “primitives”, “Stone Age people” doomed to give way before the inexorable onward march of evolution of which we were, of course, the spearhead. As a pioneering squatter, Thomas Major, wrote:

Our treatment of the natives may be deemed unjustifiable by some. Naturally they may say that it was their country and ask what business we had to be there? . . . It will not hold water, however, nor can we change the unalterable law of nature. For untold centuries the Aborigines have had use of the country, but in the march of time, they, like the extinct fossil, must make way . . . the survival of the fittest is nature's law and must be obeyed.⁷

As the Macquarie Dictionary defines it, racism is “the belief that human races have distinctive characteristics which determines their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that one's own race has the right to rule or dominate the other”. This book however, makes this idea very difficult to sustain, showing the people of the desert as real people, just like ourselves, but much more intelligently and subtly adapted to their environment. It is a telling point, for instance, that since they have left the desert many of the waterholes have dried up for lack of preservation and the vegetation, no longer thinned out and controlled by systematic burning is dangerously overgrown and inflammable.

To say this is not necessarily to denigrate European culture. But it is to say that Aboriginal culture has a richness of wisdom we ought to respect and might well learn from. *Jilji* is different from many other picture books about Aboriginal people and culture because it makes this point, subtly but firmly. In most other such books, text and image do not lead back to real people or situations but rather to other images, like the Noble Savage or the Mysterious Primitive. But here we meet people and a way of life which becomes quite comprehensible, if remarkable for the subtle intelligence with which they manage to live so well in such a difficult environment. The way they manage to do this and arrive at this primordial simplicity interrogates us because it is less a matter of technological skill than spiritual mastery. True, precisely because this mysterious mastery is so crucial, the text says almost nothing about its source in the ritual and beliefs, the Dreaming of the desert people. What is sacred is by definition set apart, available only to those who are initiated since its profanation threatens not only the life of the people but the world which it maintains, and Aborigines respect it. But it is clear that their strength comes from their belonging within a sacred story before they belong in the story of the here and now. At the

simple level, this is how they find their way in the world.

There is more to finding one's way about a vast country than knowing the compass points . . . Every tree, every small change in landscape and vegetation must be noted. One must keep an imaginary map of one's movements in mind.

This map is provided partly from observation and partly from the deep instinct of belief which renders the world intelligible, the Dreaming through which they move:

Desert legends tell how natural features were formed: stars and moon, rocks, waterholes, even individual trees commemorate characters and incidents for these stories, linking places in the minds of people as they move through the countryside.

This is as close as *Jilji* comes to describing the ceremonial source of their lives. But the written text as well as the photographs and paintings rests on a sense of reverence, of the world as a vast echo chamber, of people, animals and plants resonant with a significance beyond themselves. For them, the world is thus one great metaphor; its meaning lies in its correspondences. Life was not just "practical" therefore, it was part of one great ceremony, aesthetic and religious as well. Art and life were two sides of the one reality.

At the simplest level, this explains their success as artists.

The sand of the desert is like the pages of a book to the people who know how to interpret the marks made by the untold variety of animals, birds and insects that walk over it. Desert children learned to read these pages very early. They also used the sand as their own drawing board. With their fingers or a twig they learned to draw imitation tracks of living beings, from human beings to insects.

But it becomes more complicated when we see in this an image of something which our own culture may have once had but now seems to have lost, something which we are beginning painfully to try and recover, meaning as correspondence. As Foucault describes it, this sense turns the world into a lattice of reciprocal relationships between human beings and the rest of creation, seen as a living organism not a mere machine or set of abstractions:

The great metaphor of the book that one opens, that one pores over and reads in order to know nature, is merely the reverse and visible side of another transference, and a much deeper one, which forces language to reside in the world, among the plants, the herbs, the stones, and the animals.⁸

Seen in this context, Marcus Clark's notion that in Australia one can discern only "the scribblings of Nature leaning to write"⁹ becomes quite poignant but also highly significant. Where Aboriginal people are profoundly at home in their environment we feel ourselves homeless. Making ourselves and our purposes the primary referent, we made the rest of the world meaningless in itself and consequently threatening and often antagonistic, to be dominated rather than loved and respected.

Jilji, then, lets us see our culture as if in a mirror, making us see ourselves as if we were from the outside, asking us to reflect on our own reflection in a people and a culture we customarily regard as so different from ourselves. The result is admiration, not only for their intelligence and skill but also for the way they have found their place imaginatively in the world, seeing it as a place of wonder and reverence and finding in it a force for surviving in an otherwise dangerous world.

All this, as we have said, is done very simply, implicitly rather than explicitly — *Jilji* is anything but a tract or a political pamphlet, which is what makes it so powerful, of course. Nevertheless, if we read it in this way it becomes something more than a book, becoming a kind of parable, a story designed to upset certainty, and make us question the premises of our existence.

It does this, as we have said, by introducing us to the Aboriginal sense of space and time, for instance. For then what is physical and manifest is braided in with what is unseen and metaphysical. Self is part of the one great living whole, not separate. Sympathy becomes not a kindly private emotion but the living force of things. When a woman has a difficult labour, for example, her husband must loosen the hairstring Wapuru around his head and slacken his arm-bands to ease the baby's passage while older relations encourage the birth with song. Sympathy, too, this time with the land itself, seems to lie at the heart of their customs of birth and death.

For desert people life began and ended in the sandhills. A new born baby was delivered into a sandy hollow in the shade of a tree; his pale, soft body was cleaned with sand.

Similarly, when an old man or woman becomes too feeble to keep up with the rest of the group, he or she would simply ask to be left behind, sitting in the shade of a tree, waiting for death to come. Later, when they judged that it was time, his relations would make the journey back to the place where he had died and gather up the dry bones, tying them together with a string spun from hair and placing them under a tree for time and earth to dispose of them. There was no funeral ceremony, the ceremony was that of earth's cycle of life and death.

This is parabolic, an image of human existence very different from the masterful, even arrogant ones of our technological culture to the extent that it offers an image of finitude. So, too, does the image which opens the section on Desert Medicine, of smoke from their scattered campfires "soon lost in the vast clean air". But it is possible to stay with this sense more or less comfortably, at the level of contemplation rather than action. The real force of the book, however, lies in another series of images which thread through it, holding the whole together, lying under the surface but all the more powerful for that reason. These are the images of exile.

At the beginning, we learn that Jimmy Pike, artist and master of this way of life, born in the desert, now lives in exile. So, too, do nearly all of his people. They only visit the desert from time to time but live mostly in our world, dependent on our economy. There is no discussion of their reasons for leaving, though the section called "leaving" suggests that in the first place it was curiosity about the white man and his ways and then the attractions of our way of living — Aborigines are not very different from the rest of us in that respect. Moreover, station life, it seems here, was a good one for the men. It drew on their skill with animals and their knowledge of the country and gave them work and dignity. But as the book goes on there is a growing sense of loss: mention of signs of old encampments clustered on certain sandhills, for instance, and of artefacts like flakes of stone used for cutting, or grinding stones, the remains of cooking fires, fragments of emu egg-shell or bones from a meal of kangaroo or possum. This sense of loss culminates in the scene with which the book ends, with a group of people returning to their

country for a visit. The waterhole they used to rely on is now "dry and full of silt, choked with dead grass and wood".

"Ah, poorfeller", says a woman, looking sadly at [the] neglected waterhole she used to visit as a child. She was with the last small group to leave her country in the 1960's. Now, she is a grandmother. While her husband helps to clear the debris from the jila and dig away the silt, she walks off by herself to look at the old camping grounds nearby.

The turtujarti tree which used to stand here is gone, but nearby she finds a large, flat stone.

She stoops, and turns it over. The surface is worn into the characteristic grooves of a grinding-stone. She recognises it as the ngamanyan her grandmother always used. Holding the stone on her lap, she smooths away the sand, feeling with her palm the shape of the grooves. After a while, she carefully replaces the stone in the spot where she found it.

The language is very simple and there is no attempt to exploit the scene. But the sense of bereavement comes through, the more powerful for being so carefully observed, every action reported sympathetically, echoing with larger significance. Replacing the stone seems somehow to restore order, to be a guarantee that in the long run after all, everything will be well. This sense of restoration is continued in the image with which the book concludes as she returns to the waterhole where the men are still digging.

Now the sand in the bottom has turned to grey mud. The man in the pit squats down and, after consulting those who know this place best, scoops a smaller, deeper hole to the east of his feet: the Ngapa Mil or eye of the jila. The water starts to seep in. The sides of this inner well are crumbling, and the man calls for Yaly to line the mil. Someone looks round for Jalngu grass, and pulls up tufts of it. The well-man curves banks into an arc and, stooping, presses them into the seepage hole. Everyone stands on the heaped sand above, watching the water slowly rise.

Then someone calls for a cup and the man below cleans the well and fills it. They pass the cup. "The water goes from hand to hand. It is cool and fresh and tasting of the earth".

There is no need to labour the point. The parable is clear, I think, for all of us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, all of us to a greater or lesser extent in exile from where we really belong.

In this sense *Jilji* is a kind of testament, a text which bears witness to something, some richness received. But it is significant also because in this way it points ahead to the future, does not dwell nostalgically on the past, on what has been lost and perhaps will never return, but sounds a note of responsibility, for one another and for the earth. The desert has become overgrown, the waterholes are silting up and many of the animals have died off for want of the human beings who once looked after it. Roads built by prospectors and mining companies cut scars across it, changing the environment. But it can be restored.

As well as being beautiful, then, *Jilji* is an important book, not only for what it says but the way in which it says it, recalling us to other and richer ways of knowing, by means of images and symbols of the logic of indirection. Aboriginal people may have something our Western culture badly needs, a sense of resonance, the sense which Shakespeare expressed and which Nicholas Hasluck uses as the epigram to his latest novel, *The Country Without Music*,¹⁰ a novel which is concerned

with the shape and direction of Australian society.

The man that hath no music in himself,
nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils.

As one of this characters remarks, mere materialism, like the "realism" which goes with it "is a worn-out shoe. We return to the universal by way of myth and anthology. The truth lies behind the story". He might have been thinking of *Jilji*.

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