

WESTERLY

STORIES • POEMS • ARTICLES • REVIEWS



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Provisional Maps: Critical Essays On

DAVID MALOUF

edited by

Amanda Nettelbeck

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Mediterranean Issue

Each year the Summer issue (no. 4) of *Westerly* is a special issue of poetry, fiction and articles on a selected theme. The editors would now like to receive contributions in each genre for the 1994 Summer issue, which is to be a "Mediterranean Issue". Contributions need to be received by 31 August at the latest; material received sooner has a greater chance of acceptance.

Perth and some other areas of Western Australia, and other parts of Australia as a whole, are often seen as having a Mediterranean climate. *Westerly* is interested in receiving material concerned with links or similarities between Australia and the countries around the Mediterranean Sea. These might deal with features such as climate, food and wine, dress (or undress), art and architecture, the quality of light, beach culture, attitudes to time and many other matters. Creative and critical work from Australian writers with links to these countries is particularly encouraged.

Cover Details

The cover painting comes from an exhibition about the relation of Asian and European visual cultures. Stephanie Choo provided a screen print, a black abstract shape on a gold orange background, from the remains of some domestic implements burnt in protest against Chinese patriarchal values. Without knowing this David Bromfield conceived an overlaid painting of a feminist hell, women dressed and posed to communicate power gathered round flames which signify two kinds of absence, the fires from Buddhist sutras indicating Nirvana and the Lacanian phallic absence around which everything human is built, including language — as the speaking flames of souls in Dante's *Inferno* testify. The artists see the finished version of this study as bearing a strong relationship to Raphael's 'Transfiguration' in the Vatican.

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Three *Westerly* Indexes 1956-77, 1978-83 and 1984-8, are available at \$5.00 each from the above address.

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The Musings of Marion

On a rainy Sunday morning Marion moves around the kitchen clearing up the breakfast dishes. This unholy mess left by her pious family on their way to mass is Marion's penance for thinking it too wet for God this morning.

Too wet, too cold she told Tim firmly. I don't feel quite grateful enough to thank God for anything this today. Mind you, she thinks now, I'm feeling a little dangerous this morning and a good dose of christian wisdom might not have gone astray. Where are all the wise people in this society? They're all catholic priests that's what they are. I have to pay a fortune for the weekly dose of wisdom I receive from my analyst. I think everyone needs an analyst and in a true socialist society we would all have access to one every morning for half an hour. So muses Marion viciously stabbing out her cigarette in a half chewed brittle piece of toast sitting by the sink.

Marion examines bits of museli adhered to breakfast bowls. Too hard to wash off now. May as well just throw the whole damn lot of them in the bin. So she does. Just scoops them up in wobbly, pink, fat arms and heaves them in the bin. There, she tells herself chuckling with delight, quicker than a dishwasher that's for sure. The spirit is as mercifully unwilling as the flesh when it comes to washing breakfast dishes on a rainy Sunday morning.

She lights another cigarette and pulls her dressing gown closer to her. The limp terrytowelling can only contain so much of Marion and the rest of her spills out defiantly. Marion knows with happy certainty that Tim is going to be very angry with her for smashing the breakfast dishes. Tim's going to kill me for this, she scolds herself. It's the second time this month I've done it. His mum gave it to us ... the dinner set that is. Silly cow. I'm happy to smash every last plate on her account. But Tim is going to be so angry with me. I'm looking forward to it actually. It's becoming ever so difficult to rile him these days. He's become so tolerant of me lately. He thinks I've gone mad. Unfortunately I haven't. My analyst tells me I'm frighteningly sane. Can you believe it? I tell her all about my dreams and desires, fetishes, fantasies. I pay her eighty dollars a week to be assured that I'm frighteningly sane.

Marion resolves not to apologise. My actions were, she will tell Tim later, a legitimate response to the insurmountable problem of what to do with breakfast dishes I did not want to wash. I will not apologise, she tells herself now, because I wish to make up for the millions of women who spend their entire lives apologising for things they didn't ever do. Marion spends the next very pleasant few minutes inventing images of previously harmonious households readjusting to the cataclysm of unrepentant women refusing to apologise for things they didn't do.

Your problem, Marion's friend Alice pronounces, is one of space. You're larger than life. You're after the bold brush stroke, the broad canvas. But you have to learn to fit yourself into smaller spaces. Marion can't believe the insensitivity of someone telling a twenty stone woman to fit herself into smaller spaces.

Tim tells her that her problem is that she complicates everything too much. Marion's mother had said to her on the eve of Marion's wedding, Tim is an uncomplicated man. You could do worse than marry him. And so it was, thinks Marion, that I made the uncomplicated decision to marry him and, without protest, bear him two children.

The children. These children who sprang from her loins. The very idea. They might just as well have come from Mars. Katie is becoming immersed in puberty, poor love and yesterday evening she packed a little bag and announced she was running away. Aren't you going to stop her Tim spits angrily at Marion. Why she replies calmly, she's had dinner. You're unfit he says exhaling stale air in her face, his own contorted by malice and frustration. Tim stalks around the house enraged while Marion, a stoic mass of stubborn flesh, remains wedged solidly in her chair.

And James, bless him, is just like his father. He's daddy's little man. You'll make a sissy of him Marion with your ways. You spoil him rotten. It's no wonder he's like he is. How can it be that Tim has lived with his son for seven years and doesn't realise that James is just like his father?

Marion knows with terrible certainty what she is like. She couldn't very well not know since everyone feels obliged to tell her, often, what they think of her. You're a strange one Marion say the women at the park where she takes James to play, voices at once admiring and admonishing. Marion pushes James higher and higher on the swings until he squeaks with delight. Be careful you don't hurt him Marion you're so strong.

Marion, why do you have to be so perverse says Tim. I think you do it deliberately. You're deliberately contrary.

And so Marion muses over these unassailable facts in the hour and a half she has to herself before Tim and Katie and James come chattering home from mass imbued with their own less secular thoughts.

Therapy

Instead of a cityscape, the girl we all remember as Sorry drew a portrait of her cat. Underneath it, in pointy charcoal letters, she wrote, *Sorry '92*.

"That's very good, Lois-Ann," Mrs Freeth, our therapist, said. "But we didn't come all the way up here to draw cats."

Sorry didn't seem to hear her. Or at least she took no notice.

"His name's Freud," she called across to me. "He likes to be fed Whiskas. But sometimes, for a special treat, you can give him King Oscar herrings."

Ten seconds later — or however long it takes to fall 22 floors — she was dead.

* * *

One afternoon coming back from TAFE I dared myself to walk out onto Pallister Road with my eyes shut. But I chickened out before I was even halfway across the service lane.

* * *

"When you look at it," said Mark Arnold, one of only three guys in our group, "we haven't got such a bad record: out of all of us, Sorry's the only drop-out."

"The only graduate," Adam Bell corrected him.

* * *

I should have known she was going to do it. She had said something to me in the lift going up. Something about being weightless: how in the moment before a lift stops you feel a yummy sense of freefall.

"I've always wanted to skydive," she whispered as the silver doors breathed open.

* * *

You couldn't say we were friends. We only saw each other in therapy. A few times she came and sat in the chair next to mine. It made me feel good that she did that. She was pretty. You couldn't help noticing the way the guys used to watch her. I don't know why she chose me to give her cat to.

* * *

We all just stood there. In my mind I could still see her silhouette, bent like a hospital straw against the huge sky. There was a small, circular cloud exactly where her head had been. For a moment she had had a halo.

"Everybody please walk over to the fire-escape," Mrs Freeth said.

* * *

You never know when it's going to hit you. You can be feeling on top of the world then ... bam! you come crashing down.

That's a bad metaphor. Sorry.

* * *

It wasn't her real name. She was christened Lois-Ann Laine. Whatever were her parents thinking of? Lois Laine. In the movie Superman comes flying up out of his phone box and snatches her to safety. I don't think I'd have been any more surprised that afternoon if he'd suddenly appeared in the empty space above Sorry's lonely easel, holding her in his arms.

* * *

I've taken up painting again. For six months I couldn't even think about it without seeing Sorry perched up there on that ledge all ready to jump. I didn't notice it myself, but a couple of the others said afterwards that she'd wet herself.

* * *

"What makes them do it?" Peter Couchman asked on his television show straight after the ABC Special they did about it last month. "What drives a young woman like Lois-Ann to take her own life?"

* * *

Young? You stop being young after the first time you try it. When you wake up in hospital after they've pumped out your stomach and your parents are there trying to seem brave and supportive, but all you can see is how frightened they look, how lost. That's when you realize that something in the balance of your relationship with them has changed: that from now on you are the parent and they are the children. And a part of you — a new, cynical part — despises them for never having progressed beyond their simple, churchy optimism. But at the same time you're sorry for them; the old part of you longs to reassure them, to say "Hey, everything's going to be like it used to be". It's the new part that wins out though.

"One hundred and twenty Aspros," you hear it say, "and I wake up with a bloody headache."

* * *

I was there in Couchman's audience. I wanted to tell him why Sorry killed herself. But when the microphone came to me I froze. All I could think of was that empty patch of sky where she had been standing. And that little cloud hanging there, like the eye of God.

* * *

Do you think there's an afterlife? We discussed it a couple of times in our group. It's a subject we're all interested in, naturally.

"I can't believe there's a God," Sorry said. "I mean, if there is he must be some sort of sadist to make the world how it is."

"It's men who made the world how it is," I pointed out to her.

"And women," Adam Bell said.

"But how can he just sit there up in heaven or wherever he's supposed to be and watch everybody suffer?"

"Heaven's a reward," I said. "It's a reward for suffering."

She looked at me. "Well I don't want it. I don't want the suffering and I don't want the reward.

"All I want," Sorry said, "is to be able to sleep forever."

* * *

I have a dream where I'm falling off a tall building. As I go plummeting down down-down I see people in the windows I'm going past — people looking out at me. They're sitting in chairs all lined up neatly in rows facing the windows. I realize they are there because of me. That I'm the star attraction. But my main concern, in the dream, isn't that I'm about to die, it's that all those people are going to *see* me die.

* * *

The press made a big deal of it. Whatever were we doing, the editorials wanted to know, a bunch of suicidal teenagers on the roof of the city's second tallest building?

Mrs Freeth resigned. She had no choice, I suppose. But it wasn't her fault. If you really want to do it — if you're serious about it and not just kidding around with asprins — there's nothing anyone can do to stop you.

* * *

I was really pissed off with you, Sorry. You didn't have to jump like that — in front of us all.

* * *

I used to think of ways to do it so no-one would find my body. I even bought a bag of lime from a nursery not far from here. But halfway home I realized there was nowhere I could put it where Mum wouldn't find it. I know she goes through my room when I'm not around because my razor blades keep disappearing.

* * *

It was Mum who made me go to a psychologist not long after Sorry's funeral. The psychologist, Doctor Horton, ("Call me Meredith") said I had a low self-esteem. She made me look in a mirror.

"What do you see?"

"Me," I said.

"Do you think you're pretty?"

She wanted me to say no.

"Yes," I said.

"Do you ever wear make-up?"

"I don't need to."

"What do you mean?"

"I look OK without it." That got her.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" she asked.

"I've got a cat," I said.

* * *

Freud. What sort of name is that for a chocolate pointed Siamese? He looks just like Sorry's portrait of him. I wanted that, too, but her parents took it. They thought her signature was a personal message to them; an apology, not a name. Why would she call herself that? they said.

* * *

"My name's Sorry. I'm eighteen years old and I wish I had never been born."

It was quite an introduction.

"Well," said Mrs Freeth, "I hope we can change the way you feel about yourself, Lois-Ann."

"I doubt it. And I'm not Lois-Ann anymore — my name's Sorry."

Mrs Freeth glanced down at the register with all our names on it. "Why do you call yourself that?" she asked.

"Because I want to. Because the world owes me an apology."

We all looked at her, this spunky-looking blonde in ripped jeans and a Jim Morrison tee-shirt, and some of us were thinking (I know I was): *Jesus, I thought I had problems.*

* * *

When that episode of *Couchman* went to air they had edited out the bit where the microphone came to me. I was sitting right up the back, on the left. Near the end of the show, when the camera panned right across the audience, you could see the empty chair where I'd been sitting. It was as if, like Sorry, I no longer existed.

* * *

Adam bell said he nearly followed her. "I came this close" — about a ten millimetre gap showed between his thumb and forefinger — "to chucking down my paints and taking the plunge myself."

Who knows what would have happened then. All it needed was someone else

to go — someone like Adam to follow in Sorry's footsteps — and we might all have been caught up in the momentum. I can see it now: all nine of us pouring off that roof like lemmings. But nobody had the guts to do it. We all just stood there waiting for someone else to go.

For a lot of us, I think, it was a turning point.

"Everybody please walk over to the fire-escape," Mrs Freeth said.

Quiet as mice, we obeyed her.

* * *

I saw Mrs Freeth again today. I rang her last night and she agreed to meet me this afternoon in the city.

"Are you sure you're going to be all right?" she said as we rode up together in the lift.

Neither of us was too steady. I dreaded the moment when the lift would begin slowing: that moment of near-weightlessness which Sorry had likened to freefall.

"Don't worry," I said. "I've got a cat to look after now."

It didn't stop her, a little voice reminded me.

* * *

We didn't go anywhere near the edge. I set up the easel right back next to the door of the fire-escape. I was shaking so badly it was hard to dip the brush in the paint, let alone to shape the colours on the paper.

"Take deep breaths," Mrs Freeth said. "Try to relax."

It was hard to relax with her standing over me like my guardian angel.

"I'm a lousy drawer," I said, embarrassed about the mess I was making.

"The important thing isn't how it looks," Mrs Freeth said, "but how it feels. Loosen up. Let the paints speak for themselves." I've always been sceptical about that kind of talk. How can paints speak? But I took her advice — I had nothing to lose — and really got stuck in. Mrs Freeth was right: in a little while a picture *did* start to take shape. I could hardly believe it, the way the colours came together. It was as if someone else, an artist, was doing the painting.

"They make a handsome couple," Mrs Freeth said over my shoulder.

She was right: they did.

"It's how I'm going to think of her from now on," I said. Safe in his arms.

But just now, tonight, when I got the picture home and sat here for a while in my bedroom staring at it, that same old feeling hit me, bam! Out of the blue. And before I had time to think about it, before I knew what I was doing, I had opened a brand new can of black acrylic and, using my Number 12 brush, I'd written *SORRY* right across her and Superman in big, dribbly letters.

And do you want to know something? It feels right somehow. It feels good. As if that's my own name.

Sorry.

I guess Freud is just an unlucky cat.

ANTHONY LAWRENCE

The Name, The Bird

Whatever's been carried in the long haul
of trucks banging against their linkages —
machinery parts, drums of chemicals,
or wheat sweating under heavy canvas tarps,
the driver is unaware of what's behind him.
He is rolling in deep thought
beside small waves, each with a narrow band
of moonlight folding into its curve.
He's had a bad weekend — the hometeam
trashed again, and his wife coming in
at 3 am smelling of aftershave and bourbon.
Lying beside him, she drained herself of tears
before she slept.

The engine's control panel
lights his face as the beach gives way
to a stand of low black trees.
Tomorrow at the harbour, he'll add his name
to the multi-lingual visitor's book
of painted concrete where container ships
and trains take on their loads.
He's already chosen the place:
grey stone stained with gull-shit
between the scripted Arabic names
of a shore-leave in '73, and a beautiful
line of blue Korean characters which reads,
he's heard, *Safe water, far from home.*

A white bird flashes low into the light
then wheels up at him, into the glass.
He brakes, looks out to see sparks
like silver weeds sprouting from the wheels.
He steps down and follows the line back,
finds an egret draped like cotton batting
over the sleepers. Tonight he'll bury
a white bird beside the tracks, tomorrow
he'll paint another beside his name —
a ruffled signature on concrete over oily water.

Grenough Hamlet

There are two free-ranging spectres in permanent residence
at the hamlet: a transparent Sister of Mercy who blows

through the yard, the breeze her blousy habit makes urging
the bell's rusted clapper into one or two muted tollings;

and Joe Kelly the black lifer, whose sharks and barramundi
still cruise cold limestone in isolation. Once a year

he scarpers over the sandhills in his leg-irons. At the crest
he falters painfully, his back rivetted with shot

like red upholstery tacks punched out from a turnkey's gun.
Colonial death and its predictable hauntings fog

he guide's breath as he tells the stories, word for word,
four times a day, the bullshit and truth holding hands

as in all good local history. We file into the courtroom.
No rosewood gavel hammers out the length of sentences.

The walls, window-frames and glass are original, nicked
with copperplate graffiti manacled men composed using

the stone-sharpened handles of pewter spoons. There are
names, dates, the details of crimes, and on a bench

In the lofty sentencing dock, a map of Surrey the years
of shifting arses haven't blurred. A few people, moving

through to the cells, boast of a convict heritage:
Irish bread-stealers chained to months of darkness

on a creaking three-tiered plough with sails. Some speak
of the landed gentry: waistcoated fops who poised flour

and water-holes, who turned blacks over like logs
with their riding boots. I'm not from transported stock.

On one side, my blood's been traced back as far
as a crumbling hovel on the Isle of Skye that ponies

and sheep still bump for shelter when it rains.
On the other, a consumptive German novelist coughed

his life out in a leaky tent, his letters home signed
despairingly with blood and dispatched through the rain

and coalsmoke of a violent Lithgow winter. The guide yawns.
The tour's over. In the carpark, a man is loading a silver

fish into the back of a station wagon. Cloudshadow darkens
the crest of a sandhill. The hamlet bell rings. In the wind.

VIVIENNE PLUMB

Hill Hungry

Giant puddles, sometimes the land is
so flat there are puddles. Scrappy sheep
standing at the edge, doing what, just
looking at their reflection I guess.

Where are my hills, I sing in tune
to the train, traversing this marsh, this
country of the puddle people, this
pancake land, waffle patch, koeken country.

We hallucinate, see a hill in
the distance, maybe a wee bump in
the distance, or a peak in the fore
ground, rising, rearing, and we rub our eyes.

Don't Snap Those Finger Bones at Me

Honey go jump rope
before you snick at me,
make names, shake fist,
and don't try to snap,
never snap
your finger bones at me.

Jump old rope.

I'm telling you honey
your own fear
is your worst enemy.
Your own mind
is the projector
through which those thousand
images are thrown blown.

Just remember honey
fish can walk
birds do swim
the mute can talk and everything
so take a faith
or count to ten
or hold your breath
anything
before you write
those high hippin flippin
uppitty words to me.

The Iphigenia Complex: Repression and Empowerment in Australian Colonial Women's Verse

When the familiar roll of major Australian colonial poets is read, the names of female authors are strikingly absent. Standard histories of the period accord substantial entries to Harpur, Kendall, Gordon and the bush balladists, but the reader will search in vain for mention of the songs composed by that mythical creature, "Lawson's sister", or for accounts of verse produced by such a significant historical personage as Henry Lawson's actual mother, Louisa. That she was preceded by figures of the stature of Ada Cambridge, Catherine Martin, Emily Manning ("Australie") and Emma Anderson is similarly passed over in silence.¹ Instead, the record of female poetic endeavours in the antipodes is likely to commence with Mary Gilmore, whose work earned her national acclaim and a title. Yet Dame Mary did not always enjoy the public recognition and assurance which marked her final years. At the turn of the century, she, as a newly married woman, felt torn between conflicting callings, and had no doubt as to what was traditionally expected of her. As she explained to A.G. Stephens in 1903, "I didn't contract when I married, to be a writer, I contracted to be a wife & mother & the honour in and of and by one's own house & household is greater than that of all the outside world".² Later in the same year she could speak without irony or self-pity of the need to avoid "the temptation" to "give way to writing & to dreams of writing", which would otherwise lead "more & more to the neglect of other things manifestly more right to do".³ Fortunately Gilmore yielded to "temptation", as had local female poets before her. What follows is an attempt to trace their struggle against the repression imposed by gender expectations and, in effect, to suggest new ways of approaching their much neglected work. My discussion begins with a brief overview of constraints imposed on their authorship, and concludes by exploring the strategies of empowerment these generated, which reveal an irrepressible impulse to depict what was "manifestly" taboo.

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1. For an account of their precursors and contemporaries see Elizabeth Webby, "Born to Blush Unseen": Some Nineteenth Century Women Poets", in Debra Adelaide, ed., *A Bright and Fiery Troop* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 41-52.
 2. W. H. Wilde and T. Inglis Moore, eds., *Letters of Mary Gilmore* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), p. 27.
 3. *Letters of Mary Gilmore*, p. 30.

A central figure for the dilemmas confronting the would-be female poet in the colonies is the Iphigenia complex. This apparently was already sensed by the young Catherine Martin, though with the self-effacement and subterfuge typical of some of her most radical insights, it emerges only indirectly as a translation, printed inconspicuously at the end of her first published volume, *The Explorers and Other Poems*, which appeared under the pseudonym "M.C.". The passage is drawn from Goethe's *Iphigenia on Tauris*, a work which focuses on legendary events that ended the cycle of destruction associated with the house of Tantalus. Before the opening of the play, Iphigenia has been offered up as a sacrifice by her father, Agamemnon, to secure a favourable wind to speed the Greek fleet to Troy. To mortal eyes she appeared to die, whereas in fact she was carried off by the gods under the cover of mist to the island of Tauris. Her disillusioned mother, Clytemnestra, later slays Agamemnon, leading his vengeance-driven son, Orestes, to commit matricide. In the course of Goethe's drama, exiled brother and sister will be finally united, after Orestes is first cleansed of sin, and Iphigenia, who officiates in the temple of the virgin huntress Diana, is freed from the onerous burden of either slaying aliens in ritual sacrifice or marrying the ruler of the island, Thoas. The Australian poet, however, chose only the opening scene for translation that stresses the heroine's seemingly hopeless impasse, which is rendered even more doleful and immutable by her sex:

. . . alone
 The state of women is to be deplored.
 At home and in the field is man the ruler,
 And in the midst of strangers self-reliant.
 Possession gives him joy; conquest crowns him;
 An honourable death on him awaits.
 What narrow limits bound a woman's bliss!
 Obedience to an uncouth consort
 Is her first duty and sole consolation,
 How much more miserable when her fate
 Is heavy exile in a far-off land! (248)⁴

Moreover, as contemporaneous verse and correspondence testify, Catherine Martin was facing an analogous quandary. She too found herself, in a sense, cut off from her past and loved ones, and compelled to act in a male-controlled social sphere. Having left behind the safe but restricting Calvinist faith of her family, she was currently seeking a sustainable credo, as well as recognition and adequate self-expression through literary creation.⁵ The immediate results are well known. Her volume of verse was apparently neglected or misread, and disappeared from sight, while the anonymous author turned to a field which provided scope for more direct treatment of her pressing concerns. Poetry, where men stood pre-eminent, was abandoned in favour of fiction, where in the nineteenth century women could increasingly vie as equals with the Adamic lords of creation.⁶

4. This translates verbatim Goethe's original. Page references to her poetry are to M. C., *The Explorers and Other Poems* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1874).

5. These problems are touched on briefly by Margaret Allen in "Catherine Martin: An Australian Girl?" in *A Bright and Fiery Troop*, pp. 155-6, and dealt with in more detail in her unpublished Ph.D dissertation, *Three South Australian Women Writers, 1854-1923: Matilda Evans, Catherine Spence and Catherine Martin*. Flinders University, 1991.

Verse, as distinct from prose, carried numerous drawbacks for a colonial female author. In practical terms, its pursuit suggested a desire for "unwomanly self-display, or even sexual self-exposure" which, as Dorothy Mermin explains, "could be justified more easily if one wrote novels to make money rather than poems just for glory".⁷ Thematically, too, women's verse was often associated with the trivial and familial or, as one of Martin's heroine's notes caustically of her mother, with "sympathetic verses . . . to dead crows and things".⁸ To depart from conventional celebrations of faith and domesticity was potentially to go beyond the bounded sphere of knowledge thought proper to a mid-Victorian woman, and to trespass in realms largely inhabited by, and structured according to the needs of, male protagonists.⁹ Nineteenth century verse resonates with the male speaking-voice, and female figures, in keeping with Romantic tradition, mark primarily poles of choice or stages in the individual's passage of soul-making. Woman is quintessentially other, or that against which the independent male measures his endeavours, and with whose possession his efforts are duly crowned.¹⁰ Working within these conventions, the predicament of the local female poet is that of Iphigenia. Her own experience and knowledge are set at nought or can only be expressed indirectly, while she, as a colonial writer, finds herself veritably exiled, or further marginalized, by her Tauris-like place on the periphery. Whereas a male might seek to be "in the midst of strangers self-reliant", she is prevented by her sex from seeking a bold solution to her plight. Instead, she is forced to occupy ground not of her own choosing, to maintain the role of demure maidenhood rather than of an independent combatant, and to carry out forms and rites at times antithetical to her spirit. Placed from birth under the apparently immutable sway of male authority, her quest for personal liberty becomes synonymous with intrusion or transgression. In the widest sense, she is bound to "an uncouth consort" or, as Ada Cambridge presented it, the victim of long-standing patriarchal structures, epitomized by the manor house.

Confronted with these impediments, her primary choice was between accommodation and subversion. The annals of colonial verse are littered with dull testimonies to the former, whereas the struggle for more individual expression has generally escaped attention because of its covert and varied nature. "Australie" for instance, in *The Balance of Pain and Other Poems* (1877), seemingly acquiesces in the case against female authorship, when Agatha in the title-poem acknowledges that overt polemic and comprehensive reasoning are not for her sex:

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6. The link between female authors and fiction was, of course, already well established by the beginning of the nineteenth century. As Ellen Moers points out, Jane Austen, on learning that Scott "had turned to the then woman-dominated field of fiction", wrote with a mixture of humour and concern: "Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones. — It is not fair. — He has Fame and Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people's mouths" (from *Literary Women*, quoted in Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1986], p. 10). Relatedly, in the antipodes the case for intellectual parity between males and females was often buttressed by the example of such acclaimed women novelists as George Eliot, as in an unsigned article on "Heroines of Fiction" in F.R.C. Hopkins, ed., *Australian Ladies Annual* (Melbourne: McCarron, Bird and Co., 1878), p. 134.
 7. Dorothy Mermin, "The Damsel, the Knight and the Victorian Woman Poet", *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1986), 65.
 8. Catherine Martin, "Mrs. Archibald Thorndale's Dog", *The Leader*, 27 December, 1890, pp. 1-2.
 9. For a general discussion of these and related issues, with reference to Anglophone and Australian women poets, see respectively Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1992) and David Brooks and Brenda Walker, eds., *Poetry and Gender: Statements and Essays on Australian Women's Poetry and Poetics* (St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1989).
 10. For her more specifically Australian role at the turn of the century see Barbara Holloway, "'Woman' in Federation Poetry", in Susan Magarey, Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan, eds., *Debutant Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), pp. 151-62.

I dare not argue. I am all too weak.
A woman poor in speech, unlearn'd in art,
Who cannot shape in words the truths she knows,
Nor prove their reasons and conclusions wide.
Still do I feel with strong instinctive power
That what thou say'st is wrong, against the wont
Of God and Nature . . . (2-3)¹¹

Yet this socially sanctioned stereotype, in fact, is circumvented here and elsewhere in the collection through a range of empowering strategies. Dreams, dual narratives and the enactments of a divided soul, as we shall see, provide diverse opportunities for exploring issues raised by social injustice, human restrictions, and the processes of sin and acculturation. Other contemporaries, who were equally conscious of their "strong instinctive power", sought expressly to subvert received forms. In "The Shadow of the Past", Emma Anderson plays off a central narrative, replete with iconoclastic motifs, against closing scenes which affirm piety and submission. More complexly, poets could turn to the established forms of romance to encode rebellious commentary against the dominant mores. The mediaeval settings in the verse of Martin and Cambridge, so frequently dismissed in favour of their direct fictional treatment of antipodean scenes, reveal on closer reading incisive gender critiques enacted in the trappings of another age. Women may have felt debarred from a direct and authentic voice in colonial verse, but they proved themselves adept in questioning, while superficially preserving, Victorian decorums.

Manning is able to achieve considerable intellectual range by depicting personae who are commensurate to the themes in hand. That is, matter is skilfully matched to its socially countenanced mouth-piece in ways which afford expanded scope for insight and commentary. In "The Two Selves; or, the Angel and the Demon of the Soul", contrasting view-points highlight life's antithetical impulses, and illustrate the central tenet of her *consolatio*: the notion of balance or beneficial compensation. The speaker, tired of the warring of supernal powers "for mastery within me" (63), is granted the boon of letting them go their separate ways. For a probationary year "his one soul may watch th' embodied selves, / And not the working of their alien guides" (67). Predictably, the result is entirely unsatisfactory. The evil emanation undergoes bestial "retrogression" (70), while the spotless manifestation of light, exuding child-like peace, is unable to produce good because he is too far removed from the temptation and suffering which creates truly compassionate understanding. This lesson of complementarity is exemplified on the level of the sexes in the collection's title-poem "The Balance of Pain". To the male is attributed the unruly spirit and disquieting speculation, while the female actualizes a current ideal of womanhood, formulated below by John Ruskin, which was no doubt as familiar to Emily Manning as to Catherine Martin:

She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise — wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless

11. Page references to her poetry are to Australia, *The Balance of Pain and Other Poems* (London: George Bell, 1877).

pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service — the true changefulness of woman.¹²

The husband Theodore, "deform'd and maim'd / From birth", personifies and articulates the supposed "grand injustice of the Lord". Ministering to his physical and spiritual needs is the faithful Agatha. She opposes the truths intuited by womanly instinct to the doubt-laden conclusions generated by man's much vaunted reason, and preaches a doctrine of adequate and divinely regulated compensations.

The key "weapon" in Agatha's as in Manning's "armoury" is the dream or vision. The familiar argument that the design of deity necessarily escapes our mortal purview is demonstrated dramatically through the enlarged vision afforded the spouse during mesmeric trances. These in no way challenge the conventional image of "a woman poor in speech, unlearn'd in art", while allowing her, as the instrument of a greater power, to pierce beyond delusive, temporal appearances to suggest that disinterested action is the only secure basis for happiness ("*With self-renunciation life begins*" [15]), and that "earthly pain" is sure of due reward. Repeatedly, where her consort can only see evidence of injustice and evil triumphant, she reveals an ultimately just and benign purpose at work. The female, through her privileged access to intuited lore as a Ruskinian "queen of higher mystery to the world beyond",¹³ is able to be the fit helpmate to a partner "rack'd in flesh and mind" (4). It is given to her to save him from destructive despair and to lead him towards progressive enlightenment, not by superiority-conferring instruction, but by acting as the passive medium for the revelation of those lasting verities of which she, herself, is already convinced. Equally revealing is how Manning uses the device of the trance. Whereas a male author might have chosen it to promote radical speculation,¹⁴ due balance or empowerment within socially condoned constraints remains her goal. Vision at once preserves the fiction of an intellectually limited sex and yet ensures it special insight and authority, much as her pen-name "Australie" serves primarily to alert readers to an antipodean orientation, rather than to win for her the imaginative freedoms often associated with a semblance of anonymity.

Others among her peers, however, directly challenged these long-accepted sexual roles. In her portrayal of Agatha, Manning is careful to maintain the fine distinctions which separated the contemporary ideal of faithful, wifely service from its demonic inversion in the woman who sought unnatural dominion or unsanctioned pathways. As such, Agatha affords a perfect foil to Helen in "The Shadow of the Past", who is the focal point of Emma Anderson's radical portrayal of female subjugation and rebellion in the volume *Colonial Poems*, published in 1869.¹⁵ This heroine is a strong-willed, free-spirited American lass, who has rejected the slavery and humiliation of marriage. Her resolve is a consequence of her largely vicarious

12. John Ruskin, "Of Queens' Gardens", from *Sesame and Lilies* (1865; rpt. London: Cassell, 1910), p. 74. Martin, in a long review article on Ruskin's writings, ranked him unequivocally among "the most profound thinkers and the great teachers of history" (Martin, "The Works of John Ruskin", *Victorian Review*, 10 July, 1884, p. 281), and cited "Of Queens' Gardens" in support of her judgment, claiming that "we find every page fraught with utterances which are worthy of undying remembrance", while for women not to have read this particular essay would be to have "missed the truest and the wisest words spoken to or of her sex in this generation — indeed in any generation" (p. 298).

13. Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, p. 90.

14. This is its function, for instance, in the work of Charles Harpur, whether in shorter works such as "The Vision of the Rock" and "The Spectre of the Cattle Flat" or longer works like "The Tower of the Dream" and "The Witch of Hebron".

15. This poem alone constitutes 49 pages of the slim 109-page volume.

experience of male oppression and the woman-destroying trap of love. Close to her heart Helen bears a "spray" of cypress taken from the grave-site of her mother and her elder sister: an emblem of a supernaturally witnessed vow to "never wed, but live / For May" (40),¹⁶ or the nascent female potential represented by her younger sister. From her mother's wedded state she has learnt that, according to the male order, she was born for bondage:

Above her [mother's] head, the storm of bitter words
Hurried her shrinking, trembling from the room;
And I, — I heard it, heard the cruel taunt
Of womanhood flung at her. 'How could she,
A senseless thing, created but to be
The plaything or the slave or man, thus dare
To set her thoughts on equal ground with his?' (27)

Furthermore, the fate of her sister Emily, who suicides as a result of being jilted, confirms woman's hapless condition and the dangers of romance, for both Emily and her mother have trusted mortal promises and the mirage of total union ("When they should be companions one in soul", [34]), only to awaken to "a dreary waste" and untimely death. The lesson is unambiguous. Wedlock for one like Helen, who in knowledge and in stature is "raised above the height of woman", would be death or its mental and spiritual equivalent. Passionate remonstrance therefore usurps her malleable and previously innocent soul, while the poem as a whole dramatizes a "shadow of the past" stretching from our progenitors to the present, which has continually blighted all that is most independent and creative in womankind.

Helen's portrayal, despite its refreshing frankness, nevertheless bears testimony to the ever-present gender constraints which affected all colonial women's verse. For Anderson's was evidently the recurring problem of finding a way to articulate matter that was acutely sensitive or taboo, and yet of avoiding attendant social disapprobation and critical reprisals. Her solution was to present an emancipated view-point and clear grounds which justified it, while at the same time assuring a measure of detachment by underscoring shortcomings in its spokesperson. Consequently Helen speaks like an early feminist heroine, but is hedged around by comments which suggest that she is a latterday, female version of Milton's Satan, struggling heroically but wrongheadedly against the unquestioned order of the father. Her critiques recall notions popularized through Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. There a false system of education and reductive expectations were attacked, which effectively cast woman as a male plaything whose limited sway depended on sexual arts. "Why must the female mind be tainted by coquettish arts to gratify the sensualist?" asked Wollstonecraft,¹⁷ voicing ideas which were still appropriate eighty years later in an austral setting:

'Was it for this', I cried, 'was it for this,
That life was given me? Was it, then, for this,
That charms of face were mine; that I might hope

16. Quotations of her verse are from Mrs. William J. Anderson, *Colonial Poems* (London: Marlborough, 1869).

17. Carol H. Polston, ed., *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; rpt. New York: Norton, 1975), p. 31.

To please the idle taste of some proud man?
Was it for this my intellect was given,
Merely to teach me how to smile and talk,
To sing and dress, and kiss, and seem to love,
And practice woman's fascinating arts?
My proud young soul rebelled; I nursed my pride,
And fostered it with care; and day by day
It grew upon me, filling all my heart
With keen and vain resentment. (28)

References to the ravages caused by Helen's pride are persistent, as are suggestions of imbalance or exaggeration: "her real, and fancied griefs. / Her bitterness and pride, and scornful hate / Of all mankind" (7). The former is shown to usurp areas which might otherwise have born less refractory fruit and, as in Blake's "A Poison Tree", to grow unchecked to the potential detriment of all. Ultimately, of course, what is at stake is the whole patriarchal system, from its divine fountain-head to His clay-footed representatives, and it is this which renders her Satan-like aspirations so apposite. Helen thirsts "To stand on equal ground with man," "to pierce / Unfathomed depths of wisdom", and to be revenged (35). But as a weak woman, all she can do is "render pride, for pride, and scorn, / The foolish scorn of a high-hearted girl" (35). This undercurrent of criticism directed against the heroine forestalls charges of authorial complicity, while leaving largely undiminished a coercive case which, no less than better know works by males such as Harpur and Wentworth, is concerned with potential future directions, though differing from these in focusing on sexual relations as the primary means of achieving important social transformations.

The greatest dilemma for the author, however, was not posed by potential establishment outrage, but by the need to envisage more satisfactory situations for females than those whose limitations are so forcibly underscored by Helen's revolt. Three apparently unanswerable and interrelated points are raised by the poem, that "Love is the source of all our misery" (6), that its socially approved unfolding issues in the mirage of marriage, and that this state produces personal subordination and not mutual enrichment. As the dying mother of the heroine asserts:

A woman when she weds, must willingly
Consent to sink into a mindless shade;
To follow in man's steps, and turn with him,
Reflect his image, and obey his will. (36)

Admittedly, the possibility of a companionate relationship is countenanced, but it is lent no credence by the imaginative logic of the tale. There rapprochement between Helen and a young stranger, Leonard, takes place owing to his illness, in keeping with a popular formula of Victorian romance; however, he then departs without adequate explanation from their blossoming relationship — an eloquent testimony to Anderson's profound distrust of passionate consummation. Finally, the plot demands his death and Helen's acceptance of local duties, while the younger sister May, in spite of the passage of many years, is described as "child-like still" (45), a condition which both maintains her promise and postpones too difficult questions concerning her future. For positive alternatives are few and imprecise. As presented

in the poem, they are either spinsterhood, which terminates in subdued service to a male head of the household, or the path of resignation and self-immolation in the name of superhuman and otherworldly substitutes: "He [Leonard] strove to set / Christ and His lowly life of pain and love / Before her as her pattern and her guide" (13). Proposed in essence are the central tenets of Manning's volume: that all gain involves pain, and that certain recompense awaits us in a transcendental sphere. Only now these dogmas assume a bitter edge because, in view of what Helen termed "woman's curse" (40), the stalemate and submission enacted at the conclusion are not a sign of acquiescence in a just order, but of the hopelessness of her sex's impasse.

Similarly negative verdicts recur in the verse of Catherine Martin and Ada Cambridge, although their recognition depends on reader willingness to grasp that works with mediaeval or romance settings may be the vehicles for subversive critiques of contemporary social arrangements.¹⁸ The acute awareness of gender imbalances, which underlies many of Martin's individual pieces in *The Explorers and Other Poems* (1874), is already registered in "Lord Hector", the opening work of the section headed "Miscellaneous Poems". Despite its title, the poem's actual focus is Lady Maud: a discrepancy which highlights a crippling lack of female power, mediated here as initial invisibility and then as fatal dependency. For the destiny of Lady Maud, like that of her mother before her and of her kinswoman "the lovely Alice", is one of sorrow in a realm where to man alone is given the right of free movement, epoch-making action, and control of individual fate. Woman is repeatedly linked with tragedy and incarceration or, more subtly, in the nurse's song with a condition in which "the life-drops . . . trickle slow, / From the wound which no art can heal" (141). She is at best a wisher and instigator, but more usually a hopeless victim of forces which propel her from springtime innocence towards darker insights denoting worldly actualities. At the outset of the poem, Lord Hector, after years of absence during the crusades, sues for the hand of Lady Maud. She makes consent conditional upon him freeing Alice from her grandsire's keep, who otherwise will be forced to wed "the cruel Lord of Heyling Towers":

I would that thou wouldst succour bring
Unto a maiden true and fair,
Who in my bowers was wont to sing,
But pineth now in deep despair'. (136)

The ensuing narrative portrays Lady Maud's preparations for her own marriage, a growing sense of foreboding, and her eventual spousals with death, when Lord Hector returns as a corpse upon which she expires. The neighbouring damsel has been temporarily released, but as Lady Maud's eclipse within the castle suggests, there is no life or freedom for woman outside the confining structures of male dominion. Alice is not only "near to me [her] in kin", she is also a refraction of her

18. With the exception of recent articles by Michael Ackland, "A Martial Code: Meditation and Action in the Verse of Adam Lindsay Gordon", *Westerly*, 38 (1993), 53-65 and Philip Mead, "Charles Harpur's Disfiguring Origins: Allegory in Colonial Poetry", *Australian Literary Studies*, 14 (1990), 279-96, commentary has inclined to view such works as escapist in tendency and as a poetry of exile. In the case of Cambridge, for instance, the mediaeval motifs of *The Manor House and Other Poems* are generally linked with girlish fantasies which had to be thrown off so that she could finally, in her aunt's words, "write what you understand" (Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling, *Rattling the Orthodoxies: A Life of Ada Cambridge* [Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1991], p. 12).

own and more generally her sex's Iphigenia-like predicament: a plight iterated in both chivalric and current forms in the poetry of Ada Cambridge.¹⁹

Cambridge's volume *The Manor House and Other Poems* (1875) constitutes a major but unacknowledged problem for commentary. The verdict of Beilby and Hadgraft, that it represents "a fairly mixed bag of religious, narrative, and descriptive verse of little consequence",²⁰ has been gratefully recycled,²¹ while the assumed disjunction between this collection and her first local novel, *Up the Murray*, serialized in the *Australasian* between March and July 1875, has never been explained. The latter, it is agreed, clearly signals her major breakthrough as a writer and social critic, and contains "themes she was to explore in all her later novels — the position of the exile, what it meant to be a 'lady', the problem of choice in marriage and its relationship with money".²² That similar issues have been missed in her book of verse from the same year testifies to a long-standing tendency to ignore works on non-Australian subjects, as well as to how central and effective veiled statement could prove to a female poet intent on questioning social norms. Though the author would later claim that the collection represented "the effusions of [her] extreme youth, and [she] could not consent to the dragging of those bygone crudities into the light of day", they were in fact the work of a woman in her early thirties, who was giving creative expression to her varied observations of the previous decade,²³ many of which might well have returned to haunt the more conservative seventy-year-old matron had they been reissued in post-Federation Australia.

This volume of poetry, like Catherine Martin's of the preceding year, offers not so much scathing denunciations as themes and motifs which recur with admonitory consistency, or paradigmatic situations that point to underlying concerns which, in subsequent novels, are related more directly to aspects of contemporary society. Admittedly, other issues are also reiterated, particularly those associated with current grounds for faith, and a number of stock religious works, which close the volume, recall her earlier devotional collections published before her voyage to Australia: *Hymns on the Litany* and *Hymns on the Holy Communion*. But as she would later state, that event marked a radical "sea-change" in her existence, and saw the emergence of new preoccupations and situations in her writing. In the interim she, in the words of her biographers, had "lost her early unquestioning acceptance of the Church's supremacy. She began to want answers".²⁴ This coincided with a shift from the exclusively spiritual matter of her earliest verse to works which repeatedly focus on interaction between the sexes, and on woman as an isolated, impotent victim of her own love needs and social impositions. One major group of such poems bears the trappings of a chivalrous age, with personae who are aristocrats and ladies, or actual knights with grim fortresses, as in, respectively, "A Story at Dusk"

19. For further discussion of these and related issues in Martin's poetry see Michael Ackland, "'Wrecked through all Eternity!': Faith and Gender Issues in Catherine Martin's *The Explorers and Other Poems*", *Southerly*, 54 (1994).

20. Raymond Beilby and Cecil Hadgraft, *Ada Cambridge Tasma & Rosa Praed* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 4.

21. The two most recent and detailed studies of Cambridge either cite their judgment authoritatively (*Rattling the Orthodoxies*, p. 50) or paraphrase it as "a quite unrelated mixture of romantic ballads, religious poetry, and private verse, whose real value, on the whole, lies in the glimpses it provides of Ada herself" (Audrey Tate, *Ada Cambridge: Her Life and Work 1844-1926* [Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991], p. 84).

22. Tate, *Ada Cambridge*, p. 79.

23. Although we cannot be sure when Cambridge composed individual pieces, publication of earlier collections in the mid-1860s suggests strongly that they were written during the following ten years.

24. *Rattling the Orthodoxies*, p. 26.

and "The Legend of Lady Gertrude". The talisman or holy grail pursued in these encoded romances is love. Its joys are shown to be at best fleeting, and always doomed. The forces that operate against its fulfilment are caste, money and worldly cynicism, with young, innocent female life bearing the brunt of the suffering. The powerlessness reflected here, and the forces which work to keep women in their place, are adumbrated in other poems which illustrate both the workings of dominant contemporary codes and that the poet, as well as the emerging novelist of 1875, was already engaged imaginatively with the dilemmas which are later articulated in *Unspoken Thoughts*, the overtly transgressive volume of 1887.

The title-poem of the collection, "The Old Manor House", introduces a central symbol for the venerable, interlocking structures which impede human happiness and freedom. As in a related piece, "The Legend of Lady Gertrude", the seat of patriarchal power is presented at the outset in virtual ruin: "An old house, crumbling half away, all barnacled and lichen-grown, / . . . / Grand with the work and strife and tears of more than half a thousand years" (1).²⁵ In both works, the fate of these male-dominated structures depends on a young woman, born of noble race. In "The Old Manor House" she is sold into sexual bondage to her cousin, the scowling "great Sir Hildebrand", in a marriage of convenience that anticipates the loveless unions attacked in *Unspoken Thoughts* as virtual prostitution:

'She did not care for him, they say. But the old house was falling low —
Her father's name and fame at stake. She would do anything for his sake.
Some mortgages foreclosed — the price of years and centuries of debt;
The manor doomed for sacrifice — or else the Lady Margaret.
Doubtless for Hildebrand's red gold the rare Madonna face was sold'.
(18-19)

Her ideal qualities increase her marketability and underscore the absence of genuine spiritual concerns in the transaction. Predictably, the union does not flourish, and both the Lady Margaret and the old manor are extinguished. Opposed to this loveless match is her fleeting idyll with the narrator, a poor but kindred spirit. This takes place, as in related works, in nature — or outside the sites of caste and stultifying convention. Only there can "a very Paradise" be renewed: "'Twas fair as the first Eden, then; and Adam had no fairer mate!" (15); "O my sweet Eve, with your pure eyes! — you're mine now, in God's Paradise" (16). The couple that walked together reading Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* are doomed (10); but their and our grail, by implication, may be within reach, if we can only escape the socially ratified constraints of the past.

This paradigm is repeated with amplifying detail in "A Story at Dusk" and "Dead". In the latter, the death of a sailor lad recalls to the mind of a countess their former, blissful love, which renders the more insufferable her materially advantageous marriage: "She shudder'd now, — his diamonds gall'd her worse / Than felon's chains" (145). The melancholy narrator of "A Story at Dusk" is galled by a less enduring treasure cast away in keeping with social reason: an innocent young girl. He loves her truly at first, and then he heartlessly debauches her in accordance with the mores of his elevated station:

25. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations of her poetry are from Ada Cambridge, *The Manor House and Other Poems* (London: Daldy, Isbister, 1875).

I lost the tender chivalry of my love,
The keen sense of its sacredness, the clear
Perception of mine honour, by degrees,
Brought face to face with customs of my kind. (97)

In each work, woman is the site of contention for rival codes associated with paradisaical potential or with worldly artifice. This assumes a further social dimension, linking the aristocracy or powers-that-be with material concerns, the disempowered or commoners with natural and spiritual goals. The triumph of the former involves death or the crushing of Edenic innocence, and is built on the subversion of unfallen impulse. The sophistry of the countess's future husband in "Dead" transforms her life far away from civilized Europe into sacrilege: "Reine, 'tis sin, / 'Tis sin and shame, that such a face as yours / Should waste its sweetness in these heathen isles" (145). Similarly, the speaker at dusk, once "hardened" by fashionable society, perverts his beloved with "cunning worldly wisdom — talked / Of empty forms and marriages in heaven — / To stain the simple soul, God pardon me!" (98). In the realm portrayed in these and related works, ignorant innocence is as sure to be despoiled as "some young helpless doe" by pitiless man (96). That the stories conform in many respects to the familiar conventions of romance makes their lesson more, not less, urgent: society is godless and governed by a "fatal, false philosophy", deleterious to both sexes and to all their unquenched aspirations for a grail-like "something which does not possess a name, / . . . / The long-lost legacy of forgotten knights" (92-93).

The starkest expression of this dilemma, and of its specific consequences for womankind, comes in "The Legend of Lady Gertrude". The mediaevalism of the tale, far from being escapist, serves to highlight the central attributes of a timeless predicament which enshrines female beauty as an inestimable treasure, yet confers power not on its embodiment but on its male possessor.²⁶ Such are Lady Gertrude's charms that her brother, a fierce robber-baron, "the proudest of an ancient race", dooms her to strict seclusion until such time as her full value can be realized:

Fetter'd, with jealous care, his white dove's wing;
Guarded his treasure in an inner shrine,
Till such a day as knightly hands should twine
Her slender fingers with the marriage-ring. (173)

She is, as the narrator bluntly states, "From all her household rights . . . debarred". As in related works, love is found outside the patriarchal seat in nature. The "wild bird, so honourably caged, / Grew sick and sad in its captivity" (174), and seeks freedom beyond confinement in romance. Fittingly, this assumes the form of "An armed knight, in noblest knightly guise" (176). He, however, is her brother's deadliest enemy. When love ensues, she elopes to the promised shelter provided by her future husband's fortress and equally puissant manhood ("In his strong, tender arms — now safe indeed —" [183]). A feud ensues. Her new lord is slain and his kinsmen

26. A similar point is underscored in "Dead" by depicting today's aristocratic inheritors in the accoutrements of another age: "the great Earl, stark / In plume and crest and linked mediaeval steel, / The Countess *en bergère*" (142), a bucolic dress made fashionable by Marie Antoinette.

reject her. On reappearing at her brother's castle, she is similarly spurned, and her disgrace would go unrevenged but for the intervention of her faithful hound: "There was no clarion cry, none heard the sound / Of knightly challenge, till the champion rose, / Avenging" (193). Both man and dog die of their wounds, and Lady Gertrude returns to the death-couch of her husband, which is bedecked like an altar to the martial code, to pass away. The poem ends by noting that now, moving silently between the ruined castles, may be seen at times "the phantom of a lady and a hound", who find in death as in life personal freedom in the interstices of male power.

As even this simple plot summary indicates, this is one "legend" which rewrites standard versions of past and present conditions. Whereas in comparable works, such as Adam Lindsay Gordon's "The Feud" and "The Rhyme of the Joyous Garde", the female is allowed independent action and to exercise alluring sway through her beauty, this woman is powerless and propelled by masculine forces. One by one, the glorifying myths of female life are deconstructed. Premarital existence is not a blissful paradise of innocent joy and growing influence, nor is marriage her crowning glory. Instead, romantic love is presented as a dangerous surrender of the self (hers are "bright, blank eyes" on elopement [182]), which leads to the exchange of one form of captivity for another on entering into her spouse's realm:

She felt the shadow of a mighty wall,
 And then the glow of torchlight, and again
 The gloom of cloister'd stair and passage, fall
 Upon her vacant eyes. (183)

The veiled critique of the dominant code is precise. State, church and social customs are shown to cement this bond, and with it continued enclosure, passivity and impotent silence for women. Their encapsulating figure is her iterated swoon, or a metonymic change of mood: "evening came, and, with the setting sun, / The sudden darkness that eclipsed her life" (190). As the heroine of Emma Anderson's "The Shadow of the Past" underscored, the conventional enthronement of love is fraught with perils for womankind, and constitutes a threat to independence, mental balance, and ultimately even life.

The complementary aspect of this critique in "The Legend of Lady Gertrude" is its portrayal of the *modus vivendi* of a patriarchal line, which is identified with possessiveness, dictatorial sway, and pointless bloodshed. The deepest passions are ignited not by sexual mingling but by male confrontations for power and status, such as the feud "bequeath'd / With those rich baronies by sire to son — / A sacred charge, a great work never done, / A sharp and fiery weapon never sheath'd" (179). Woman, far from exercising a civilizing, soothing influence, is here little more than the whetstone of internecine rivalry. Nonetheless, the forces generating evil and merciless destruction are unambiguously male, and, in a fine touch, the traditional roles of knight and "belle dame sans merci" are reversed. It is not the lady encountered in the woods who casts a dangerously bewitching web but the mail-clad suitor ("Brave lips, o'er tender palms bent down so low, / Silent and reverent, as it were to bless — / 'Twas e'en a knightly love they did bestow" [178]), with "knightly love" displacing the fiendish enchantress of male romances.²⁷ In this realm, woman may fulfil a Victorian ideal by arming or strengthening her knight, "She held his dinted

shield and sword; and knelt, / Like lowly squire, to don his golden spurs" (189);²⁸ however, contrary to the socially propagated lesson, this merely confirms her vassalage and alienation from actual power, while even exercising her so-called "household rights" depends on male consent. Ultimately, as this poem and "The Old Manor House" suggest, such conditions are fatal to all parties. Neither the Iphigenia-like sacrifice of Lady Margaret, nor the merciless rejection of insubordinate Lady Gertrude, can save the age-old patriarchal structures and their current beneficiaries, who stop at nothing to preserve their privileges and authority. They are portrayed as the last of their line, and their order as subject to the natural cycles of succession and decay. The Manor House is burdened by "centuries of debt"; "foreclosure" is at hand. What will follow, as in "The Shadow of the Past", remains less clear. With hindsight, we can see it adumbrated in the volume's recurrent motif of idyllic union, based on genuine love and reciprocal sympathy, which, although currently frustrated, anticipates the revisionary gender-program of *Unspoken Thoughts* by implicitly projecting the need for a new social order far removed from the antiquated and harmful traditions of the past, and one where women can enjoy true equality with open, far-seeing eyes.

This rereading of the poetic romances in turn sheds light on, and is reinforced by, even apparently cautionary tales in the collection, such as "Lord Nevil's Advice" and "The Old Maid's Story".²⁹ Already the speaker's caste in the first poem, given the worldly, selfish values attributed to scions of the aristocracy in other pieces, makes his fair-seeming advice suspect. It represents a masculine perspective noticeably absent in the narrative romances, which typecasts Eve's successors as the menace: beware the "subtle ways of womankind; / [lest] The meshes thou wilt fall among" (121). Dramatized here is a worldly wisdom akin to that which brought the narrator of "A Story at Dusk" irreparable loss. According to it, "blind faith" is to be abjured, the impulses of the heart mistrusted. In woman independence is undesirable and domesticity sought after, together with recognition of her "natural" place: "Who will aye help thee, woman-wise, / And yet not set herself to teach" (125). And the paradigm of male enticer resurfaces with the concluding counsel to "woo her, as a good knight can" (126), veiled in an ethos scarcely realizable outside the realm of male-serving fictions. A related demonstration of questionable standards and female impotence is provided in "The Old Maid's Story" through the account of a woman who makes herself a target for derision by falling in love with a commoner: "I had lovers in plenty, of high degree, / . . . / But none were so noble and brave as he, / Though he was the scorn'd of all" (136). Like all good heroines of romance she is loyal to her plighted troth. Far from being rewarded, however, it earns her social disapprobation and, when foreign service takes him abroad for years, the pejorative title of old maid. Redemption of her lot on her own terms is impossible. She must

27. The play on romance motifs is even more explicit in "A Story at Dusk", and in keeping with the usual power relations between the sexes:

I caught her, and I kissed her mouth and eyes;
And with those kisses signed and sealed our fate
For evermore. (96)

28. Cf. You cannot think that the buckling on of the knight's armour by his lady's hand was a mere caprice of romantic fashion. It is the type of an eternal truth — that the soul's armour is never well set to the heart unless a woman's hand has braced it; and it is only when she braces it loosely that the honour of manhood fails. (Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, pp. 71-2)

29. These poems, and in particular "Lord Nevil's Advice", have constituted a constant stumbling-block to recent attempts to discover a feminist orientation in Cambridge's early work, as in *Rattling the Orthodoxies*, p. 50.

either marry someone of her family's choosing or bear the burden of loss, with hollow betterment coming only through the heroic, and fatal, endeavours of her beloved Harry. "Like olden knights", we are told, he fell "for his land and Queen" "on the Alma heights" — appropriately sacrificing himself for the enshrined images of maternity and material advancement which doubly doom his bereaved sweet-heart.

Cambridge's encoded vision at once devastates the castles of romance and reflects her sex's general need to pay lipservice to a male-prescribed thematic canon. To have done otherwise would have exacted an unacceptably high price, as she and her peers were well aware. Two years later, Emily Manning dramatized this lesson, though typically of the time it is projected in each instance as a male fate. In a brief vignette from "The Balance of Pain", the composer of "The Titan's Weird" is told by a prospective publisher: "We *dare not* engage / To publish. Good, no doubt; but quite beyond the age!" (emphasis added, 14). And later, tucked away at the end of the volume before the final section of hymns, is a parable on the thankless task of the innovative thinker, entitled "The Old Path and the New: A Serio-Satire". Here the would-be benefactor of mankind, after being declared a heretic by the clergy and pronounced insane by medicos, dies an unknown martyr. Cambridge had inflicted a similar diagnosis on a victim of conventional wisdom in "Up the Murray" (1875), only there it was a young heroine who suffered a breakdown owing to unrelenting paternal pressure to learn mathematics. The scene, moreover, raised the wider issue of women's mental aptitude, and by extension their capacity for authorship: a point underscored when the heroine recalls a comparable illness which befell "a young authoress". This question is dealt with at greater length, years later, in "Mrs. Carnegie's Husband" through the figure of the promising young writer, Hester. Inspired by "the great and famous . . . like George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte", she devotes increasing time and energy to her craft in order to sustain herself and other members of her family, until her career is abruptly cut short by "neuralgia" and "brainfever".³⁰ Cambridge, however, makes it clear that this indisposition is not entirely due to imaginative over-exertion, but that it is linked to the unexplained disappearance of a man, indispensable alike as a publishing-aid and inamorato — thereby providing another categorical verdict on woman's failure to attain complete independence in letters as in life.

With the publication of the various collections discussed here, all of which display a desire not to contravene openly the ruling gender codes, each author had reached a critical point in her writing. Further poetic advances within these constraints were hardly possible, and their subsequent careers suggest the inevitability of virtual silence or a search for radically different ways. To Emily Manning's volume no companion collection was added, as she devoted herself increasingly to shining in those elevated circles of Sydney society to which she could lay claim by birth and personal attainments. Emma Anderson tragically lived out what she had evoked imaginatively as "woman's curse". Disowning Helen's vow, she married and went with her husband to meet an early death in Mauritius, leaving him to misconstrue her work to posterity as "the breathings of a pious, gentle, and thoughtful spirit".³¹ Catherine Martin, ever desirous of not adding to "that Serbian bog of

30. Ada Cambridge, "Mrs. Carnegie's Husband", *Australasian*, 22 November, 1884, p. 1001.

31. Foreword to *Colonial Poems*.

useless literature, which is 'good for neither god nor man',³² turned her creative energies to fiction, though without ever leaving behind her uneasy awareness of woman's vulnerability to society's imperatives and male theorizing, as her later prose testifies. Finally, Ada Cambridge embraced wholeheartedly the greater freedoms afforded by fiction to a female author. Serialization was followed by novels, and these by international acclaim. But she refused to cede verse entirely to male interests. Twelve years after depicting the Manor House of patriarchal prerogatives, she sought a new path beyond its stultifying, outmoded structures in *Unspoken Thoughts*. There she boldly confronted the dilemmas encountered by her twentieth century successors of self-imagining, direct statement, and the need for personal transformation. The exceptional collection, however, proved the general rule. Five years later it was withdrawn from sale, and repression won out over the call to "Give thy true thought to unconventional speech".³³ Despite some favourable reviews, relatively few copies had been sold. The colonial reading public was ready to take the bush balladists to its heart, but not the unnamed "she" described by Cambridge in "Seeking" as "that straight and upright soul — / True friend, true mate, true woman . . . / . . . / True to the truth, not only true to me —".³⁴ Such brave self-reliance, as Cambridge's poetic personae wistfully recognized, was scarcely thinkable in "this enlightened age",³⁵ and history would prove her to be right. Lawson's sister, no less than Shakespeare's, was doomed to at least temporary disappearance, and colonial Iphigenias to further decades of constraint before their eventual release from the temple of Diana and its well-entrenched custodians.

32. Catherine Martin, "Edward Bulwer, Lord Lytton", *Victorian Review*, 9 March, 1884, p. 524.

33. *Unspoken Thoughts* (London: Kegan Paul, 1887), p. 49. This is intended as a general observation on the effect of Cambridge's decision, not as a neat explanation of her motives. These were undoubtedly complex, as recent biographers and commentators have pointed out.

34. *Unspoken Thoughts*, p. 139.

35. The phrase is taken from a poem of that title in *The Manor House and Other Poems*, though its ironic use is implicit in much of her fiction and *Unspoken Thoughts*.

MARGARET BETTS

Private Matters

I was sitting in the kitchen while my father cut my hair. He was telling a story to distract me, but I concentrated on the bitter coffee taste in my mouth, and tried to convey by my expression that I was above listening to his stories. At eleven years of age, I resented my father's thinking me still young enough to be placated by a story.

Before that, my father's stories had always captivated me. They dealt with events in his life before I was born, and I regarded them as his way of letting me know a secret side of him. In his everyday dealings with me, my father was often impatient and remote, but when he told a story, his manner was genial and revealing, and his voice was low and mild.

My father's stories were like the thin golden silk spun by a silk-worm, fine filaments spun in darkness beneath a perforated lid. The sticky, criss-crossing threads bound me to him.

Earlier that morning, my father had offered to take me to Belgrave for the day. "It'll be a break for you, dear," he said to my mother. My mother looked at me. Then she picked up my baby sister and jiggled her up and down. My sister was not wearing a nappy, and her bottom bulged over my mother's arm like a pillow of dough. My mother stretched her free arm towards me. "You'll have to do something about her hair," she said, and tugged at my right ear lobe and then my left. "I want her hair just covering these." Her tone was urgent, and when my father did not respond, her face grew pink and sharp-looking as it always did when something displeased her. I understood that the haircut was a condition of my going to Belgrave, and so did he.

My neck was itching and the scissors felt cold against my skin, but I stared straight ahead at the flowers on the window sill. The stems stood in barely an inch of water, and three of the roses drooped over the lip of the vase. Their limp, pale petals made me think of discarded silken skirts. I thought of the slippery folds of my mother's old evening dress. My mother's name was Rose. In Poland, her name had been Rooshia. In Australia my mother called herself Rosie, and then Rose when someone told her Rosie was a barmaid's name.

My father snipped and talked, only interrupting his story to say, "Over here, dear," to my mother, who was circling us slowly with a brown paper bag to catch the falling hair.

His story was about a mare he had owned as a young man in Belgrave. He

described himself somersaulting over the mare's head when she balked at a snake along Monbulk Road. When he said the word somersaulted, he whirled the scissors in a glittering arc, then pushed my head to one side with the flat of his hand. He claimed he had landed on his feet, still holding the reins, and that a young woman walking by had applauded, and asked him if he was a trick-rider with Ashton's Circus.

I wanted to look at my father when he said this — I suspected he embellished his stories — but his hand was still pressing my head to my shoulder, and all I could see was the open kitchen cupboard. The bare brass cup-hooks were a row of golden question marks.

My father stopped snipping, and straightened my head in both his hands. He said that when we reached Belgrave, he would show me the precise spot where the young woman had stood.

While my father strolled along the platform, I studied his thin back. His blue nylon shirt was pulled into a narrow belt, and the outline of his singlet showed beneath the shirt. When the train drew up, he put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me towards a carriage.

The carriage was crowded, and the mohair rug over my arm was hot and prickly. Yet something about the name Belgrave made me think of coldness. I pictured ancient, grizzled trees bent low over a deep lake, with its grey surface stippled and pocked by unending showers. I saw golden eyes flicker behind thickets of sweet-brier, and heard in my mind the weak splash of waves above the soft moan of a cold, grey wind.

I pressed my head into the padded green leather of the seat, and closed my eyes. My father had never taken me to the country before. My mother and I went often with my aunt and uncle, but my father would never come.

Once, when my mother and I returned from a Sunday drive to Sassafras, my father looked at us with a crooked smile, and asked my mother whether she was about to surprise him by declaring that either she or her sister had taken the trouble to step out of my uncle's car and onto a bush track.

My mother didn't answer, and neither did I. We had never been on a bush track on any of our country outings. My uncle stopped the car only when we came to a scenic lookout. On our last trip to Silvan Dam, my uncle photographed the three of us standing with our backs to the view. I insisted that he photograph me standing on a concrete paving stone on which words expressing gratitude to the Lion's Club were engraved in gold. I had pretended to believe that these words referred to a club of jungle lions, to make my mother and aunt laugh, and think me more innocent than I was.

I looked at my father's face reflected in the darkened window of the train. I knew that he had lived for two years in Belgrave, yet I doubted that he knew the country so much better than my mother's family. We had always lived in the city, and for all my father's talk of bush tracks, I hardly ever saw him out of doors.

Sometimes on a Saturday, my father took me to the Athenaeum Library, and afterwards to the pictures if a war film was playing. He loved war films, especially those dealing with espionage like *Five Fingers* with James Mason, and *The Man Who Never Was* with Clifton Webb. My father reminded me of cinema etiquette each time

we went to the pictures. "Don't you ask me any questions during the film," he said, "you might annoy people sitting nearby. Afterwards, I can tell you everything you want to know."

On the way home from *The Dam Busters*, my father spoke about the professor-character played by Michael Redgrave. He insisted that the professor, rather than the pilot, Guy Gibson, was the hero of the film. Then my father lowered his voice, and talked about his own work for military intelligence. He glanced over his shoulder as he spoke, as though it were still war time and he feared being overheard. He said he regretted not having been a soldier, even though his intelligence work had been highly valued. Sometimes on a Friday night in the city, he said, groups of uniformed men jeered at men who were not in uniform. Although he assured me this had never happened to him, I did not believe him.

That same night, while my mother and I were sitting on the sofa, my father unlocked his writing desk, and took out a packet of letters in brown envelopes. "Want to look at these?" he asked, holding them out to me. Printed in black block letters across the top of the first envelope was ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE. The word SECRET was stamped in purple beneath my father's name.

When I saw that all five envelopes were stamped SECRET, I thought of James Mason in *Five Fingers*. "Were you like James Mason?" I asked. "A spy, I mean." He threw back his head and laughed. "Good Heavens, no," he said. "Not really."

He stretched out his hand for the letters, "You know I can't let you read them," he said, still smiling. "I've told you about the Official Secrets Act, haven't I?"

My mother put down the sock she was darning, and smoothed her pinafore over the hump of her belly. "Don't tease her, dear," she said. She stood up and walked towards the double-bed sheets drying on the fireguard. "He's only teasing you, Sally." She picked up a sheet and began folding it.

My father stood stiffly by his desk. Usually, he helped my mother fold the sheets. They faced each other holding opposite ends of the sheet, then stepped forward and back with my father handing his ends of the sheet to my mother until the sheet became a neat, flat package in her hands. Their measured movements, and air of gravity transformed the sheet-folding into an ancient, courtly dance, a refined mating ritual. I felt like laughing when they did this. The Dance of the Bed Sheets, with my mother calling the tune.

The next day, my mother told me that the decoding my father had done for military intelligence had been only a part of his war-time job, and that he mainly worked for the Censorship Department reading the overseas mail sent from Victoria. Most of these letters, she said, were love-letters written by the wives and girlfriends of men who were serving overseas.

I thought my father would have hated this work — he appeared discomfited by any allusion to what he called private matters. Yet I sensed he was deeply interested in them. I remembered his sheepish expression whenever my mother and aunt discussed their friends' romances, and the bogus air of purpose he assumed before escaping outside to the garden. I also remembered an afternoon when my aunt told my mother about an unmarried friend, Dulcie. "Dulcie's fallen pregnant," my aunt said, and I had sniggered at the unlikely passivity implicit in the phrase — as though falling pregnant were like falling ill, or falling out of bed. My father had looked furious, and left the room. When the door banged behind him, my mother and aunt cupped their faces in their hands, and laughed and laughed.

I wished my mother had not told me about the love-letters my father had to read. I preferred to think of him working for military intelligence. I imagined him in a small dim room, lit by a single desk-lamp the greenish-golden colour of tarnished brass. A cone of yellow light shone from this lamp onto a large white page covered in complicated diagrams of machinery, and blocks of slanted foreign script in black India ink. When I tapped on the window of this room, my father looked up as if he had been expecting me, and was prepared to answer every golden question I asked.

At other times, I saw him in a grand salon with a polished parquetry floor, and glittering chandeliers like inverted fountains. The high white walls were covered in warning posters: "Loose Lips Sink Ships"; "Shhh — The Enemy Is Listening." I pictured my father sauntering between long tables where young women glanced at him admiringly as he passed.

The train line ended at Ferntree Gully, and we were seated on the hot, rattling bus that was taking us on to Belgrave. My father folded our bus tickets into a wedge, and slid it under the band of his wedding ring. He tried to turn the ring, but the thickness of the wedge prevented any movement. The flesh of his finger was yellowy-white.

An old man leaned into the back corner of the bus, and a woman and a girl of about my age sat opposite my father and me. The girl's hair covered her shoulders like a sleek, brown cape, and I pictured the woman, who I took to be the girl's mother, steadying her daughter's head, then brushing the smooth ends of hair into her cupped palm.

When my father pulled the overhead bell cord, the bus veered into the kerb. The old man at the back stood up, tottered, then fell back into his seat. "Must be getting old," he said, and looked towards my mother and me, waiting for an assurance that this was not the case. I turned my head and stared over the driver's shoulder at the broken white lines on the road, then down at my skirt with its two sets of crease lines where the hem had been twice let down.

My father helped the man from the bus, then remounted the step and held out his arm to me. My father's domed head, and wispy, silvery hair saddened me. I remembered when he had taken me to a travelling circus where old and sickly jungle lions yawned and scratched in battered wagons, and an elderly magician burned a ten shilling note borrowed from a member of the audience, then failed to restore it as promised. I had pretended to enjoy the circus, and afterwards praised it to my mother in my father's hearing.

I made up my mind then to be pleased with everything about this day at Belgrave, and I looked all around hoping to see something remarkable in the landscape that I could store in my mind, and afterwards mention casually to my father to impress him with my sharp observations. I noted the low, blue hills that folded into the distance like pleats in a giant skirt, and the gum trees that I had always considered drab, now amber-topped as though each had been dusted with golden powder. I, too, was capable of telling a story, and I pictured myself describing this day at Belgrave to my mother, while my father stood proudly beside me.

My father started out along the road, and called over his shoulder for me to stop dawdling. We walked past weatherboard houses set well back from the road, and old-looking gums with ribbons of bark hanging from their boughs. My feet were

aching, and my skirt was sticking to the backs of my legs, but I kept up with my father. When we came to a wide track with a fenced paddock along one side, my father stopped and fanned himself with his hat. "There's the spot," he said, and pointed to a clump of young gums some distance inside the fence. "We'll eat our lunch in there."

Ahead of us, two of the fence posts sagged, and the knotted wire connecting them lay coiled on the ground. My father strolled towards the sagging posts. "This way," he said.

I did not want to argue, but I was uneasy that my law-abiding father would trespass on someone else's land.

When we reached the gums, my father scooped the rug from my arm, and spread it in the shade. Then he dropped to his knees and smoothed the wrinkles and folds in the rug. Beads of perspiration glistened in the open vee of his shirt collar, and his forehead and nose shone.

I stretched out on the rug drinking the tinny tomato juice from our thermos, while my father set out our lunch — a salad with crinkly-skinned black olives; ham topped with rings of canned pineapple; hard-boiled eggs; buttered white bread; and cold grilled sausages each with a frill of fat down one side.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" my father asked. He asked again when we had finished eating. Then he sighed and lay back on the rug with his handkerchief over his face.

I was always bothered if ever I discovered my father sleeping during the day. Old people did that, and I did not like to think of him as old, yet he was only thirteen years younger than my mother's mother.

I walked around the gums, wriggling my bare toes in the warm grass. The sun beat down, and the air buzzed with the sound of insects. I was hot and bored. I considered rousing my father to tell him this, until I saw two horses jostling in the neighbouring paddock behind another post and wire fence.

The horses were out of the view of my father, and I opened my mouth to call to him. I wanted to tease him by saying he now had a perfect opportunity to show me what a good rider he was. I started back to the rug, then from the corner of my eye, I saw the large chestnut horse mount the smaller grey horse. I turned to watch. The grey reared and heaved, but the chestnut horse held on. Clouds of dust rose around their hooves. I hoped that my father was still lying on the rug with his handkerchief over his face.

When I heard someone shout behind me, I jumped. I turned round and saw a large man coming towards the gums from the direction of the broken fence. Although he was still some distance from the trees, this man had an unimpeded view of me watching the mating horses. My face grew hot. I imagined the man with a mocking expression on his face, telling my father that he would be well-advised to keep a closer eye on me.

I moved swiftly to the rug, and stood beside my father who was groping for his shoes with a bewildered air. One of his trouser legs was rolled up, and the skin of his calf and shin looked pearly-white.

The man who had shouted stopped a few yards from the rug. Sunlight glinted from a square buckle on his belt.

My father squashed his handkerchief into his pocket and stood up. "Afternoon," he said.

The man folded his arms. His breathing sounded loud and unfriendly. "This is private property, you know,"

My father put on his glasses, frowning. He looked all around as though seeing the paddocks for the first time. "Ah," he said, "many years ago, I knew this place well." His voice was soft and dreamy, and like his story-telling voice.

"Yes," the man said, "but it's private property now. There are signs."

"Signs?" my father said. "Did you see a sign, Sally?" He was playing the simpleton. Socratic irony, he called it, so people would leave him alone. It wasn't working now.

"No," I said, looking down. "No sign." I saw myself reflected in the man's metal buckle — my face appeared flat and foreign-looking, the way it was when I looked at myself in the back of a spoon.

"There's a sign down there," the man said emphasizing each word. He waved his arm over his head. "Can't you read?"

My father took off his glasses. "I can read."

The man stepped towards my father and jabbed his finger at my father's chest. "Now, you just look here, mate," he said.

My father stepped back towards me. "Come on," he said. "Surely there's no harm done."

"That's what you think." The man moved closer to my father. "How about them bloody fence posts?"

My father expelled his breath with a puffing sound. He stooped and picked up his hat.

I scratched at a bite on my knee and watched as the blood dribbled down my shin. I remembered my mother cracking eggs for our breakfast, and the bright red thread in one golden yoke. The yoke made me think of a bloodshot yellow eyeball, and my stomach had churned.

My father put his hand on my neck, and muttered without looking at the man. "Clearly, those fence posts have been down for some time."

"Oh. Clearly!" the man gripped my father's upper arm in his large freckled hand.

I looked up at the man's stubbly chin, and the grey, spiky hair in his ginger moustache. I thought that if this man knew my father as I did, he would have welcomed him onto his property, and invited him to return whenever he pleased. I wanted to tell this man something impressive about my father, but I could not find the words. The man's large mouth closed over his teeth. I thought of a sea-anemone with its waving, stumpy tentacles closing over a small crab.

When the man released his grip, my father stumbled. One foot came out of his shoe.

The man looked down sourly. The lid of our picnic case was open. Greasy left-over ham curled over the bent edges of the fluted white paper plates.

"You and the kid just get going," he said. He stood there waiting while my father bent down and laced his shoes, and fastened the toggles on our picnic case.

I folded the rug into a small, flat square. My father took it from my hands without looking at me. His shoulders drooped.

My head felt light, and my ears were buzzing with an odd tinny rustle. I pictured our house with the Hills Hoist looming grey and eerie like derelict scaffolding. I pictured my mother waiting on our dark verandah with her hands clasped

around my sister. I saw myself as I described today as a perfect day at Belgrave.

Ahead of me, my father plodded towards the fence, with the rug unfurling from his arm like a fuzzy, blue banner.

LES HARROP

Taps

Just as the vast proprieties of Simla
were heaved into place, and as Leopold's
agents had almost assured him "*Le jour
belgique sans fin se commence*", and the holds
of freighters jammed with Kant and kitchen ranges
were wallowing south from the Ruhr to Windhoek —
without prior warning, the goddess of changes
stuck out her neck and drew a breath, and shook

the plague of colonists off us. A moment
Silence And then a hum among the locals:
Back-block musclemen performing afresh
with huge backing groups and furious vocals
their deadly music of national foment;
thudding their sticks into resonant flesh.

ERIC BEACH

grief house *for gwen*

enter through unreasoned gates
one over-grown night, when uncut stars
on crossed wires catch wool-wisps of light

follow a dull curve of drive, down
past macrocarpa & pine, antiseptic
smelling, but there's no anodyne

you must open a door which warns
that bones & iron rust, enter here
seek what you've lost because you must

slummock tears, you touch wet walls
coming unglued, appearances thin
maps of darker places coming through

strange consolation, to build anew
to leave behind, light arrives & is lost
& a roof staring open, bewildered & kind

ANNA BROOKS

Figs

Our fig tree
 is bearing fruit
 we give it to friends
 make jam
 dry slabs on the roof
but still they come...
 starting as
 small firm knobs
 budding out in clumps
then swelling...
 rounding...
 drawing life-sap through branches
lengthening...
 taut-skinned...
 ripening to dark flesh-purple
 tight-bursting
 filled with juice
A viscous
 drop
 drools
 from a hollow tip
I reach forward
 with lips
 and longingly
 lick

Reading Aboriginal Writing

Reading is increasingly becoming a minority activity, something done by the eccentric few — the rest of us rely on electronic media. But despite or perhaps because of this, it is becoming increasingly crucial.

There is clearly something inadequate, if not wrong about a world as full of misery, injustice and plain hopelessness as ours. The electronic media, however, leave us more or less as spectators, watching the play of images, like Plato's prisoners in the cave. Even when the purposes of these images is interrogation, in a documentary, for instance, or in a film like *In the Name of the Father*, the focus is still on perception. There is not much sense of obligation to others, or even that the other exists and compels our respect and attention — a centripetal compulsion is one of the marks of consumer society, as Baudrillard remarks. Yet today the excluded other/others may well be the central problem returning to haunt western society in general and Australian society in particular.

There is little hope of understanding who and what we are as individuals or as social beings if our only models of self and society are of asymmetrical power relations, of inclusion and exclusion on the one hand and of rule of bodies by force, — what some call "law and order" — on the other.¹ Nor can we build a proper society by relying on pre-determined patterns of behaviour: conformity tends to produce what Foucault calls "docile bodies" and Garfunkel "cultural dopes", rather than citizens. We need people who can still think and feel for themselves, critically aware not only of the social and cultural forces which shape them but also of the possibilities of difference, and ready to cherish those possibilities. Creativity arises not from commonsense but from its interrogation.

All this, is in defence of the importance of reading, but is also a prelude to a discussion of four books, very different in style and concern from the usual run of Australian writing, each dealing in its own way with the question of the other, in this case Aboriginal Australians. These books matter politically — in the largest sense of that ambiguous word — not merely aesthetically. A society which has lost its identity, as ours is in danger of doing, surrendering instead to the so-called "rationality" of economics, is like someone who has lost his/her shadow, in danger

1. Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*. London, M.I.T. Press, 1993, pp. 58-9.

of madness or death. However, reading about the shadow side of our history and culture, the experiences of Aboriginal Australians, is a way of recovering this identity, creating a set of shared meanings and values, an objective world we know and relate to together and a shared social world which is wider, more in tune with actuality and therefore more capable of expansion than the one we non-Aboriginal Australians have lived in hitherto, enclosed within the Orientalising fantasies of western colonialism.²

This is not an easy project, of course, even as far as reading is concerned. So it is worth reflecting at first on some of the difficulties involved. Culturally Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians inhabit two very different worlds, relating to one another either in terms of stereotypes or of bureaucratic definition and organization. Consider, for example, the long-running debate about the definition of "Aboriginality" — usually conducted in terms which are not only hollow, the result of ideological determination rather than personal interaction, but also the product of the history in which we have situated ourselves as winners, justifying this by evolutionary logic, the "survival of the fittest". For Aboriginal people, however, this "victory" means dispossession, poverty, illness and humiliation and often death; it means becoming strangers in their own land. Yet this experience is not included in the story of Australian identity. Aboriginal Australians have been written out of history until very recently, rendered invisible, and their definition amended accordingly.

This is the situation these four books set out to remedy. Susan Maushart's *Sort of A Place Like Home* which has already won several awards, is about the Moore River Native Settlement seen through Aboriginal eyes. Rosemary van den Berg's *No Options No Choice!* deals with the same subject but at the individual level, telling the story of Rosemary's father, taken at the age of six to the settlement from his Aboriginal mother in the North West, who spent more than twenty years, from 1920 to 1944, at the settlement. *Aboriginal Australia*, edited by Colin Bourke, Eleanor Bourke and Bill Edwards, non-Aboriginal people who have nevertheless had a long association with Aboriginals, is rather different, a collection of essays designed for the Open Learning Project to introduce non-Aboriginal readers to Aboriginal history and culture and to the problems involved in deconstructing our notions of Aboriginality.

These books, then, are part of what one of the writers in *Aboriginal Australia* calls a "new invasion":

Challenging the dominant "white" view of Australia's past [Aborigines] have begun presenting their own versions of what has happened in Australia in the last two hundred years and introduced a new perspective, based on The Dreaming, of Australia's much longer history.

For that reason the non-Aboriginal reader is at a certain disadvantage. It is not easy to find yourself the villain in a story in which hitherto you figured heroically, building up a new and decent society in which every one has the right to a "fair go" — hence, of course, the angry reaction of many Australians, West Australians particularly, to the High Court's Mabo decision which in effect wrote Aboriginal people back into the history of settlement and undermined the moral justification on which

2. Edward Said, *Orientalism*. Ringwood, Penguin Books, 1978.

we relied. Nor should we take this anger lightly — any challenge to the ways in which we represent ourselves threatens incoherence.

But that, as we have said, is why these texts matter because they attempt, each in its own way, to rework and renew that representation and to make it more inclusive. By and large colonial cultures live by exclusion, by what Abdul JanMahomed has called the "Manichean allegory" of colonisation in which white figures to black as good to evil, civilised to savage, superior to inferior, and so on.³ Aboriginal Australians have figured, if at all, as incidental to the on-going history of "civilization", "development" and "progress", turned into objects of anthropological study or for the delectation of tourists, Orientalised, to use Said's term, figures at best from a prehistory we believe we have superseded and at worst from an evolutionary cautionary tale, figures of the "degradation" we left behind on our way up the evolutionary ladder: "nearest of all to the money or orang-outang and therefore incapable of enjoying the same state of intellectual existence as ourselves", as one settler wrote; "the very zero of civilization"⁴, to quote another.

This matter of representation is the central concern of the essays in *Aboriginal Australia*. As it remarks, in the history of contact between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, favourable representations have been rare. Dampier set the tone in the seventeenth century with his picture of them as "the miserablest race on earth", a picture which supported the conviction that their land existed to be colonised and that they needed to be "civilised" by us. Similarly, the alternative notion of the Noble Savage, representing them as "childlike", "simple", "primitive" etc, justified our speaking for them, excluding them from power and subordinating them to our purposes and values. In this way, as Colin Bourke points out in *Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal people have been held as hostages to images of our creation.

Images, of course, are usually forms of alienation from one self and reality, and it is this attempted separation of Aboriginal people from their history and culture on the one hand and on the other the cult of forgetfulness on our part which, writing them out of our history, inserts them into the fantasies by which we justify ourselves. Challenging the abstractions and generality of images and stereotypes, *Sort of a Place Like Home* presents the specific story of a named and known group of people, the "alumni of Moore River", Aboriginal people who as children spent years of their lives as inmates of the largest and most notorious of Aboriginal settlement camps in Western Australia.

Even more significantly perhaps, their story is largely told by the people themselves in their own voices — it is based on a series of interviews with them, and their views are set in telling contrast to the official records and newspaper accounts. As Maushart remarks, "history speaks through as many voices as historians have ears to hear", and she is obviously concerned to attune our ears to the voices of those who were the victims of the social experiment at Moore River. Her book also reminds us of the links between representation and power: "Archival sources, the voice of authority, speak in more official accents" and are thus necessarily complicit with positions of authority. For that reason, "they are often more telling in what they omit than in what they reveal". Her concern, however, is with these omissions, with the

3. Abdul JanMahomed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Fusion of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature" in Henry Louis Gates (ed), *Race*, *Writing and Difference*. London, Chicago University Press, 1980, pp. 78-106.

4. John Harris, *One Blood: The Hundred Years of Aboriginal Encounter: A Story Of Hope*. Sydney, Albatross Books, 1990, p.24.

voices which have been silenced by official accounts and discourse. The pain, confusion and loss so often expressed here finds no place in the official view that what was being done at Moore River was an exercise in "civilisation" and was "all for the good" of the Aboriginal people involved. But it is these voices which Maushart and her team set against the official record, appealing from its impersonal matter-of-fact to the "oral record, richly textured and bright with detail".

Listening to the people who actually lived there, the picture is very different from the official version: children living crowded into dormitories, locked in at night with only a bucket for sanitation, permanently hungry, separated from their parents, badly taught by poorly trained teachers, educated sufficiently only to work as domestic servants and farm hands, forbidden to speak their own language. This is not a picture of people being civilised but of an attempt to create second-class whites, people displaced not only from their own country — they came from all over the state — but also from their culture. According to many of these survivors, there was a deliberate attempt to make them feel ashamed of their own culture and to destroy their language.

At the same time, because it is based on personal reminiscences and because Aboriginal people seem to be extraordinarily resilient, we also hear about good times, of fun the children had together, swimming in the river or hunting and looking for food in the bush, visiting the old people down at the camp, and so on. That is important too, a necessary correction to the "victim history" which turns Aboriginal people into objects of pity, not the strong, courageous, adaptable and life-loving people that they are.

This is not history as matter-of-fact, of statistics, then. Nor is it the imperial history of progress but its underside, the story of those who bore its brunt. That is what makes it so powerful, pointing us to the gap between the real and the ideal in which these Aboriginal people were caught. Officials like A.O. Neville, "Protector" of Aborigines may have thought they were doing them a kindness by initiating them into our ways. But the story told here represents that "normative surplus" of meaning and experience which, Habermas argues, points beyond our agreed meanings and sense of identity, to become a "thorn in the flesh" of the reality by which we live.

Generally, history writes out the personal and the specific: the intentions of the government and of Government officials like Neville may have been benevolent. Given the dominant view that the life of tribal Aboriginal people was "nasty, brutish and short," then it was kindness to rescue them from it and try to induct them into "civilised:" European ways. But ideology is a form of censorship, sifting out some perceptions and emphasizing others. In this case what was censored was the fact that Aborigines were human beings like us with feelings like ours and profoundly attached to culture and traditions which stretched over thousands of years.

It is therefore a painful story. One woman still remembers how afraid her parents were of losing her (her father was an Irishman and her mother Aboriginal, so as a half-caste she was due to be rescued:

When I was born I was carried around in a suitcase. That's the only way they could hide me. They had a little hole in the suitcase so that I wouldn't get smothered, and they carried me round till they couldn't carry me any more in the suitcase.

Found there with her parents by a policeman, she was taken away at gunpoint. Many others still remember their parents' grief. Another woman, for instance, recalls how she felt when they took her away — she was only "about five or six":

Oh I felt awful. I cried all night. Tell you the truth, I cried and cried. I wanted to go back to my mother an I couldn't go back. All he said was you got to go to this place where you have to go to school, that's all, he didn't tell me where I was going. My mother, well, she stood there as they, as I got into the car and went and she just cried and cried. I can see her crying, you know. I can see her standing there crying and I just couldn't do nothing, just standing there. Nothing she could do, nothing at all. She just stood and watched me go away.

Whatever else rationality may be, it is what obtains when persuasion is substituted for force.⁵ In the face of evidence of this kind, it is difficult to argue for the rationality of such policies based on force, on the isolation of human feeling.

Sort of a Place Like Home is thus much more than a series of oral histories. Building up from them a picture of the trauma of being taken there of life as it was actually lived at the settlement, it also attempts some kind of explanation. On the one side it shows Aboriginal people as victims of power and of racist ideology, of the Manichean Allegory of colonisation. So colour seems to have obsessed people like Neville. As one Aboriginal remembers it:

They draft us out in different colours, and if you're whiter than the other kids, your half-caste, quarter-caste or quadroon or whatever it is, they draft us out like that and I was drafted out to be sent to Moore River Native Settlement there, and when I got there every Aboriginal looked like me, same colour.

In fact, of course, Neville was consciously engaged in a programme of eugenics, breeding out "black blood": "Half-castes" were only allowed to marry "half-castes, quarter-castes" and so on until "black blood" was eliminated, as if they were cattle or sheep. Many Aboriginals sensed this: "Get a big truck to pick us up like a load of cattle (laughter) or, you know, sheep or anything else". But they were helpless, mostly children taken from their parents, far from home in a strange place amongst strangers. So, whatever they felt and thought — which they did shrewdly and powerfully — they had no say. "We never ask questions", Vincent Lambadgee recalls. It was safer that way because they were in effect prisoners, "where the settlement, the Government took you and shoved you in there, and forgot about you."

Australia, then also has its Gulags. Reading this book and *No Options No Choice*, one has the impression that, as with successive Russian governments, "out of sight out of mind" was the official policy — Moore River was the Aboriginal Siberia. But unlike most oral historians, Maushart and her colleagues, probe the reasons behind the policies whose effects they record. The last section of the book reproduces a number of articles in Perth newspapers which detailed abuses at the settlement and the appalling conditions there, making it clear that the Western Australian public had ready and repeated access to accurate, detailed and timely information about

5. McCarthy, p.3.

what was going on. There was, for instance, open debate about the incident in 1944 in which the Assistant Superintendent shot an Aboriginal youth in the foot, and the case against him was dismissed on the grounds that "It was more or less bad luck" that he hit the youth.

What emerges, then, is the force of ideology. As far as Aboriginals were concerned, most whites had their minds made up; Aboriginal people were inferior, "primitives" who needed to be "civilised" and who were in any case dying out, doomed by the logic of evolution of which we were the growing point. Yet it also appears that, with a few exceptions, the superintendents, teachers and others who ran the settlement were not monsters but ordinary people doing a job under difficult conditions. The problem lay with the job, though it is true that most of them shared the premises on which that job was based. These premises were articulated by a Police Court Magistrate and former Protector of Aborigines in the North West who told the 1934 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Affairs that, while "we all regard (Aboriginals) as human beings ... humanity is not all on a level plane" — or, as Orwell put it, that all people are equal but some more equal than others.

If, as Anthony Appiah says, "race" functions as a metonym for muddled thinking about the relations between genetics and intention, meaning, culture and history, in this case the muddle was also convenient economically. At least some Aboriginal people were removed to Moore River — Ken Colbung suggests, "to get them off the land that the white people wanted." As Deleuze and Guattari observe, "there is no 'race' but inferior race". Colonization produces the colonized, and produces them as inferior, subordinate to the colonizers' purposes. Notions of "white" superiority thus provided the justification for the destruction of Aboriginal resistance and the attempted destruction of their culture; it was official policy at Moore River. As we have noted already, children were forbidden to use their own language and taught to be ashamed of their heritage — easy enough when they were separated from their parents and their people. They were also educated for subordination, to work as servants, and since it was assumed that they could not look after their own affairs, the Protector "looked after" what money they earned.

Seen from an Aboriginal point of view, not much had changed, therefore, from 1835 when the editor of the newspaper, *The Colonist*, pointed to the usefulness of the "pervasive doctrine of Aboriginal worthlessness", though administrators like Neville would have argued that their motives were very different, that they were concerned for the good of Aboriginal people, to "uplift" them to the level of white society. Yet there was no suggestion that Aboriginal people were, or ever would be, fit for anything more than menial work. The premises identified by *The Colonist* remained, though expressed less violently:

Sordid interest is at the root of all this anti-Aboriginal feeling. Because the [Aborigines] ... interfere, in some of the frontier stations with the easy and lucrative grazing of cattle and sheep, they are felt by the sensitive pockets of the graziers to be a nuisance; and the best plea these 'gentlemen' can set up for their rights to abate the nuisance by the summary process of stabbing, burning and "poisoning", is, that the offenders are below the level of the white man's species.⁶

6. Harris, p.25.

True, as Maushart shows, there were those white people in the 1920's, 30's, 40's and 50's, the time of the Moore River Settlement, as there were in the 1830's who opposed these policies. But they seem to have had little influence. Like the Aborigines, though rather differently, of course, their voices were silenced — and we are all the poorer for it today. Yet it is also one of the signs of hope today that similar voices are beginning to be heard again. Bill Day's *Bunji*, which we will discuss later, is one of these signs, telling about a white person, Day himself, who, with a few like-minded friends, stood beside the Larrakia people of Darwin to regain part of their tribal lands. If racism depends upon the division between white and black, those on both sides who defy this division, crossing the frontier into a common humanity, strike at its very roots.

So to return to *Sort of Like Home*, Moore River was two different places. Seen through Aboriginal eyes what seemed to Neville and many like him a benign and "civilising" operation appears as little more than slavery — the favourite song, we are told, was "Misery Farm"

See, it is all about these animals that didn't do this and didn't do that — you know, hens won't lay, we can't make hay, we work all day and get no pay. Think whoever wrote that song must of stopped at the settlement!

Jack Davis' play, *No Sugar*, set in Northam and later at Moore River, also gives us a glimpse of this kind of resistance, underground but effective in preserving the people's dignity. Manshart's account is one of the first histories to acknowledge this resistance. For her, the contrast between bush and compound was central to life at the settlement, and she identifies this as a struggle between competing cultures, the institutional culture of "the official (European) culture of the compound versus the outlaw (Aboriginal) culture of the bush".

This is important, not just because it sets the record straight but also because it challenges the comforting and comfortable view that Aboriginal people put up no resistance to our invasion and conquest of the country. Moreover, as Maushart suggests, settlement officials seem to have felt strangely threatened by this underground resistance:

The official culture at Moore River regarded Aboriginality as a kind of communicable disease, spread by contact. The settlement was designed to function as an isolation ward, cordoning off the infected from the wider community.

In some cases of course, this succeeded, if only temporarily. Some were ashamed of their Aboriginality and looked down on traditional people and their ways. But for many, especially for children from whom everything else had been taken away, having "to just find our own way out, most of us, in the world without love", their Aboriginality was all they had.

It was not destroyed, Manshart realises, reflecting on the stories, but went underground. The physical centre of this subversive culture was the camp where families lived:

But its spiritual centre was the bush, where Aboriginality could be freely expressed and nurtured. Despite the barriers erected between compound and camp, aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture survived in the form of cherished special events — from weekend camping expeditions to moonlit corroborees. Equally important were the everyday pleasures of being Aboriginal: savouring short snatches of freedom from rules and bells, seizing opportunities to learn by doing, luxuriating in the unconditional acceptance of family, of friends.

One is reminded here of Chairman Mao's advice in the *Little Red Book* that when the enemy is in positions of power it is suicidal to attempt a headlong attack. What one must do is to "take to the mountains", retreat to some place where it is possible to preserve one's own peculiar power for the future. Alternatively, there is the story of two giants fighting one another. One is weaker than the other and on the brink of defeat. Yet he manages to keep going and finally to defeat his antagonist because he listens to a tiny dwarf who sits in his ear, urging him on and reminding him of his strength. Aboriginal peoples have lived for thousands of years by their stories, and it seems that they have also survived the last two hundred years thanks to them.

This brings us to Rosemary Van den Berg's account of her father's story. Born to a tribal woman and an unknown white father, he was taken at the age of six to Moore River, a thousand miles or more from his country, and lived there for more than twenty years. The details of his life there are much the same as in *Sort Of A Place Like Home*, though Thomas Corbett seems to have had more respect for Neville than most of the people Manshart talked to. The value of this book however, is rather the way it introduces us to a remarkable man, remarkably talented — whatever work he was set to do he seems to have succeeded in, even though Moore River had given him only minimal education — but also remarkably spirited. An essay in *Aboriginal Australia* reminds us that one of the most devastating stereotypes of Aboriginal people is of them as permanently needy and incompetent. But Thomas Corbett was evidently someone able to stand on his own feet and succeed anywhere, if only he was given the opportunity to do so.

Looking back, his greatest complaint, was, that "the freedom to be responsible for one's own life was denied Aboriginal people in my day". This sense of his own dignity makes him a subversive figure, more subversive perhaps than the more obvious rebellion of political activists because it undermines the assumptions of the well-meaning who have in the past done almost as much damage to Aboriginals as the racists. Patronising behaviour, Corbett asserts,

... was the ultimate insult to my intelligence and pride, and that of all other Aborigines. It is bad enough to be told what to do when one is a child (one has no choice), but when one is adult, it is. Countless times worse to be treated like a mindless twit.

In a sense, then, this book, the record of his conversations with one of his daughters, is his revenge, speaking back to the culture which all his life tried to silence him. The heading of one chapter, significantly the one which tells of his arrival at Moore River is "Grateful To Be Allowed To Breathe" — this is his "no" to the structure which he has had to inhabit so long, so intimately and so humiliatingly.

As Gayatri Spivak says, the crucial question is not whether the subaltern, people like Corbett, can speak — obviously they can — but whether people of the dominant culture can hear them.⁷ *No Options No Choice*, like *Sort of a Place Like Home* demands our attention not only because of the way it rewrites history but also because of the new map it draws of our relations with Aboriginal people, turning what we see as the centre, our position, into the margin and the Aboriginal position into the centre. In this way they are examples of that ethnocriticism, that Arnold Krupat describes as the "particular organization of cultural studies which engages otherness and difference in such a way as to ... interrogate ... what we ordinarily take as familiar and our own".⁸ Corbett's story insists that we take him and his culture seriously, as different from ours but equally valid. He knows about us, our culture and our history — his assessments of Perth and the reasons for the white man's success are shrewd and judicious, and it is clear that, to the extent that the social system allows him, he succeeds in whatever he is given to do within that system. But it is equally clear that he refuses to yield his own ground. In the 1950's, for example, he and his wife scornfully refused the offer of citizenship — a reward offered to "deserving" Aboriginal people which turned them into honorary whites.

For him it is the Aboriginal way which is normative. Reflecting on the history of settlement in Western Australia, for example, he finds "a parallel ... and the way Aborigines survived in the hard, rugged country", though he compares our treatment of the land unfavourably with his people's:

The big difference between my two races is that one conforms to the land — the other conforms it. Sadly, that is the crux of the problem in today's struggle for land rights for Aboriginal people.

His objection to what happened at Moore River therefore, is principled, not merely a matter of resentment, "the slave's revolt". He recognizes that the universe of rules by which Aboriginals there were obliged to live was not designed to temper tolerance but rather to satisfy it.

Men, women and children were continually harassed into obedience with no redress, no options, no choice. The criteria for living at the settlement was, "be good, do as you are told and mind your white superiors", or suffer the consequences of degradation and despair.

Thus his story resists the power of normalization, used so powerfully against him from childhood onwards. But it also suggests the possibility of alternatives. Early on, for instance, there is an account of a group of tribal people, Wangkis, who descended on the settlement to be near the children and others who had been taken away to be interned there.

The Wangkis stayed for several weeks. One night they suddenly left without a word. No one heard or saw them go, but the next morning their camp was cleared. The children, who had stayed in the compound of the settlement, had also vanished as if into thin air.
The authorities were flabbergasted ...

7. Arnold Krupat, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature*. Oxford, University of California Press, 1992, p.8.

8. Krupat, p.3.

This is an obvious act of defiance. But the story of Corbett and of the thousands of others like him who managed to survive with dignity, refusing to surrender the ground of their Aboriginal identity is also a story of resistance. Even though they were forced to adapt to European ways, they drew their strength from the very things those ways were trying to suppress, their Aboriginality. Taken from his mother and his traditional culture at the age of five, he had learned little of his traditional culture. But he resisted the missionaries' attempts to take what he knew from him.

[Aboriginal] beliefs were strongly discouraged and even ridiculed because they were considered heathen, pagan, or even downright demonic by white society at the time. The Dreamtime definitely had to be stamped out. Indeed, every aspect of Aboriginal culture was to be discouraged and suppressed. Aborigines were made to feel ashamed of their heritage and their dreaming.

Instead, typically, he captured the whites' God for himself, turning him against them, putting him at the service of life rather than death and division. Thus, in church for the first time, he tells us he felt part "of a unity of mankind, giving thanks to a more powerful Being than those in authority at the settlement." Life rather than law is at issue here:

It seemed to me that the God I couldn't see was more merciful than the white people, and I wondered whether this God was white like the superintendent, or black like the Aboriginal inmates. Surely a white God wouldn't show mercy to Aborigines?

This puts paid to victimist notions of history, making his Aboriginal perspective superior to the white one. The second chapter sets up the dialectic which runs through the rest of the book between unfeeling white power and the human feeling on which he and his people take their stand:

The wrench of being taken from [my mother] still haunts me, leaving me with feelings of loss.... But it was one of those circumstances beyond our control or comprehension at the time. We were pawns in a political game, not able to reason or understand why such things happened to Aboriginal women and their half-caste offspring.

I still don't know why I was taken away from her. It was inhuman to say the least. The pain still lingers although I am now an octogenarian.

From this position he tries from time to time to put himself inside the non-Aboriginal mind, imagining for himself their "reasoning" about the difference between "half-castes" and "full bloods", for instance, or about white "superiority" and Aboriginal "inferiority" and even "degradation". This is the tactic used so powerfully in Tracy Moffatt's films and films like *Barbecue Area* which worked so powerfully in 1988, turning the anthropological gaze on us for once.

Read together, then, *Sort of a Place Like Home* and *No Voice No Options*, the one more general, the other specific, redefine the frontier, the shifting space between the two cultures, which have coexisted so painfully and with such misunderstanding

over the last two centuries. This space, of course, is not physical, not fixed or mappable, but, in the words of James Clifton, "a social setting ... a culturally defined place where peoples with different culturally expressed identities meet and deal with each other."⁹

That is the point taken up in a more theoretical way in the essays assembled in *Aboriginal Australia*. They turn the spotlight on the ways in which we have constructed Aboriginal identity for ourselves, inscribing it into our space and into a position of inferiority and subordination. But, unlike *Sort of A Place Like Home* and *No Choice No Options*, they do not turn us to the past but to the future. If the crux of the problem of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations is ideological, a matter of perception, then it can only be solved by a change of heart. Legal and political change is not enough. We need to move from the monolithic and monological world view which reflects difference to what Arnold Krupat calls a "polyvocal polity"¹⁰, one in which other peoples and cultures are allowed to exist in their own right and on their own terms and people are able to cross the frontiers between them freely and with mutual respect.

Here individuals can make a difference. *Bunji* tells about the story of one brave and prophetic man who came to understand and respect the Larrakia people of Darwin, decimated by invasion, disease and the power of white society, and put himself at their service in their attempt to fight back and preserve what traditional land was left to them. As Stewart Harris says in his Foreword, Bill Day is an "unusual man, unusually brave and determined, who found raw material (for his struggle) in his own courage and [the Aborigines'] often different, sense of real politic" which, as Harris also remarks, "they had, after all, been learning for 200 years."

The role Day and others like him had to play was not very rewarding, "to be the grit in the pearl shell ... But the finished pearl is the main thing", and the goal to which these books, put together, are pointing. From an Aboriginal point of view, what that means is clear, recognition of their identity and their rights to it and to self-determination, to be treated as Australian citizens in the proper sense and on their own terms. From a non-Aboriginal point of view, however, this goal is fraught with difficulty because what is at stake is the deconstruction of the picture we have constructed for ourselves as a people and of the history of our settlement in this land, the creation of an alternative cartography.¹¹

This also implies a critique of our dominant culture on the one hand and on the other a proposal for new ways of looking at things, what has been called "the bordering area of the world".¹² This essay is long enough already, so there is no time to discuss in detail what this might mean. But two points need to be made. The first is that borders are dangerous places because they are points at which one is confronted with the other. In this sense they also involve the larger question of the Other, of some reference point beyond that of culture. Since the Enlightenment, Western cultures have tended to occlude this question of the Other, appealing instead to the concept of universal Reason. But the encounter with Aboriginal cultures and those of other cultures of Asia, Africa and the Americas makes it clear

9. Krupat, p.5.

10. Krupat, p.4.

11. Krupat, p.3.

12. Krupat, p.3.

that this is a Western concept. Their world view is different, more mythical than rational. Seen from this larger point of view, it appears that the concept of Reason is itself a kind of myth, a story which compels quasi-religious assent.

If this is so, then, despite the widespread view that Australia is a secular society, the problem of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians may be essentially religious not just a matter of competing economic and political interests (though both of these are crucial elements of our mythology), but of competing world views. Nor is this exceptional. Karl Popper, for instance, has argued that the main arguments of our time are religious arguments, the product of misguided moral enthusiasm which in our case identifies ourselves as good, the "spearhead of history", and others as Evil, "primitives", the enthusiasm which inspired British expansion through the world in the nineteenth century, for instance, and inspires U.S. expansion today.

Recognition of the power, complexity and richness of Aboriginal culture may serve to relativise these absolute claims. As Popper points out, struggles between peoples tend to be struggles

... between competing theories of how to establish a better world, and our moral enthusiasm is often misguided, because we fail to realise that our moral principles, which are sure to be over-simple, are often difficult to apply to the complex human and political situations to which we feel bound to apply them.¹³

Thus as Maushart's book and most of the essays in *Aboriginal Australia* remind us, Aboriginal people were often the victims of good intentions, of the ideological blindness which dresses up violence and cruelty to look like kindness and sees our ways not only as the only proper ones but also as the only possible ones. Nor is this a matter of the past. The conviction that the purpose of the state is to foster economic development, especially mining and investment, is equally ethnocentric, and has equally brutal consequences for Aboriginal people and culture.

This brings us to the second and last point. As each of those books suggests in its own way, Aboriginal people have a good deal to teach us about ourselves, our history and other ways of being in the world. The destruction of memory is typical of totalitarian societies. In contrast, as Walter Benjamin argues, the memory of human suffering is an essential element in the story of our striving for a better world. In that story, the dead, those Aboriginal people who were vanquished and forgotten but who continue to speak in works like *Sort of A Place Like Home* and *No Options No Choice* and the work of many other Aboriginal writers, have a meaning as yet unrealised.

The realisation of that meaning, I believe, is the task of all of us. The future meaning of our history does not depend only on us, the winners. Meaning is not reserved to the conquerors; those who suffered and continue to suffer the effects of power have crucial things to say about it and its future directions.

A society which supposes these and similar dimensions in the history of freedom, and in the understanding of that freedom, pays the price of an

13. Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection: Papers*. London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1985, p.101.

increasing loss of all visible freedom. It is incapable of developing goals and priorities which prevent the creeping adaptation of our freedom to a society that is becoming increasingly anonymous and more and more completely divorced from the subject.¹⁴

It may be, then, that what we most need today as a people is to recover the kind of memory preserved in books like *Sort of A Place Like Home* and *No Options No Choice* and make them work not only upon our political, social and economic purposes but also on our deeper awareness of ourselves individually and as a people. Reading may be more important than we think.

The books discussed in this essay are the following:

Susan Maushart, *Sort of A Place Like Home: Remembering the Moore River Settlement*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993. ISBN 1 863 68 66081.

Rosemary van den Bey, *No Options No Choice* Broome, Magabala Press, 1994. ISBN 1 875 641 12 2

Colin Bourke, Eleanor Bourke and Bill Edwards, *Aboriginal Australia: An Introductory Reader in Aboriginal Studies*. University of Queensland Press, 1994, ISBN 0 7022 2684 X.

Bill Day, *Bunji: A Story of the Gnala Darank Movement*. Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994. ISBN 0 85575 240 8.

14. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith In History and Society*. New York, Seabury Press, 1980, p.113.

PAUL HETHERINGTON

Light

This shaft of light is transfiguring—
the abstract painting on the wall becomes
The Last Supper, showing a new grace
that's carried by the sunlight, and escapes
into my recollection of the hall
where we waited, ten and twelve years old.
The haloed sun through glass stained your smile
with grace, as images in church are stained

that stand next to the coloured fractured glass.
And now, these long and cumbersome years later,
you are standing still—the image waits
for me to hold its potent, magic charm,
a cipher for a love beyond my love
that's still mysterious. You became
less cautious with your words, and loved me more
than all the pious niceties of form

your parents championed, and I could then
define those much used words, my joy, your beauty.
Sometimes, now, life seems residue
of all that took place then in grace of light,
learning codes and gestures in a realm
different from the realist's world where love
stands muted and maligned—how to say
that your quiet joy still lives in me, when joy

seems so ill to fit the human mould,
and irony to fashion so much praise?
Later, we embraced with innocence
that wasn't pure, but sensuously full,
and you told me you would be gone a month
in Europe and in Africa, where hope
was harder and more worn. Still I keep
an image I can never put away,

your conscientious journey with your faith
ending in an Africa of doubt,
a world where you did not feel at ease,
looking, even in my unbelieving,
for solace, and a lively new translation
of worldliness into a deeper grace.
Death does not kill this, and still you live
in light, transfiguring my fractured glass.

Answering Love

Behind our questioning a double face,
a mirrored stare, and looking in this glass
your face appears, your smile and tears, your words
which embrace me with their care, telling me

I am somewhere else, and you are waiting
far from the glass, although I see you there.
Your words speak loudly even through your absence,
your nervous need for reassurance, words

I am not used to in your close—held way,
words that once I say reverberate
through every month and minute of my life,
describing, freeing, holding all I do—
you wish to hear them: listen to the sound
of the past speaking, of the unspeaking now.

*

In the mirror is my twin, and yet
my twin and I are distant, different.
In my memory of our last touch
a twinning overtook our reticence,

and then my twin was not the twin I knew,
my self united with a difference
that did not wear my outward face, the smile
my real, my other twin still wears.

The sameness and the difference combine
into a love that's always drawing closer,
a closeness that is always moving on
to other moments, other differences.
I cannot hold my twin, whose love I own
and own this love that twins me to another.

*

I cannot live entirely with such love,
full of itself, full of close emotion,
impatient with all compromise, and all
the inconvenience life insists love know.

But hold these words, as if my hand, and feel
the regular pulse, the heartbeat that makes me:
you hold your love, wishing to quicken its pulse,
the steady beat that even now you feel,

which slows again: the pulse's metronome
always returns to regularity
and your urging settles once again on this,
the heartbeat of a love that you would urge,
but as you hold my words, and touch your love,
your own pulse quickens, and our love must surge.

The Escaping Housewife

When the washing machine broke down, June got out the rubber gloves and filled the laundry trough with hot water and soap powder. She emptied the nappy bucket and stirred it with the copper stick. A primal soup of poo and suds floated in brown gunge to the top of the trough.

"Ugh," said June. She woke up baby Toby, loaded him and the garbage bag full of wet nappies into the pram and walked down to the sea.

She pushed the pram through sand until it bogged right up to the top of the wheels. Then she took off her sneakers, tied the laces and draped them over her shoulder, and hauled the pram right down to the water's edge. Toby gurgled and chuckled and hung onto the side, rocking merrily with the violent passage across the beach.

Down on the damp sand June let go and the pram sank down to the spokes with a sigh.

Waves broke meringue onto the sand and the feeble winter sun came out. June unloaded the bag of washing as Toby stared at the sea, fist in his mouth. His cheeks were as red as the pom-pom on his beanie and his tongue as he yawned.

The sky was a marble-cake of blue and yellow and grey as clouds hovered and drifted and blocked out the sun.

June took off her trackpants and windcheater and shivered in the cold until, with an armful of washing, she trod gingerly down through the slurping shallows to the sea. It lapped her knees, her thighs, her breasts, and she drew a deep breath, her last glimpse of Toby being the red pom-pom lolling back in the pram, booties in the air. Then she dived under the sea.

Trawling the nappies was hard work. They sank heavily and she kicked until her legs beat the sea into a Rinso of bubbles. Exhausted, she had to struggle up for air and panted in the cold wind before the next dive.

Under the water she opened her eyes. Small fishes blinked to either side and there was an amazing blue all away to the watery horizon. She swam with the nappies bunched into each fist, hips undulating like an eel, and she thrashed and dived and frolicked in the salty bath of the sea until the nappies were clean.

She bundled them up to her chest, bounced in on the surf, and waded up the sand to the pram.

The baby murmured and turned in his sleep as June put the washing on the

garbage bag. She smiled at the bits of seaweed that clung to her shins.

When the lemon sun had dried her skin, June pulled the track pants on over her wet undies, the windcheater over her bra. Toby began to grizzle and rock in the pram, and as June lifted him he nuzzled for the breast. She sat cross-legged on the wet sand and put the baby's hungry mouth to her nipple. He tasted salt and spat it out, then grabbed for it again and gave it a little chew. June glanced down to see his blue eyes watching her.

"Go on," she said, and poked the breast to his mouth. He nibbled the salt off and then began to draw on the milk with the usual deep, gulping swallows.

June watched the choppy surface of the sea flash like a kaleidoscope as the sunlight caught each wave.

Then a pair of fins broke the surface and June saw the dolphins dipping their heads out of the water.

"Naaa," said one, like a nanny goat, and they played around in the shallows while Toby fed, leaping and splashing like children. When Toby released the nipple with a sigh, milk running down his chin, June took him down to the water and let him see the dolphins. She stood ankle-deep, held her son over the water and the two dolphins carefully swam as close as they could, bellies scraping the sandy bottom, fins curving out of the sea like glossy carvings. From there they watched Toby, the baby giggling in pleasure. A wave crashed up and broke against June's legs and the she-dolphin came with it, bumping lightly against her legs.

"Naaa," she said.

"Naaa," said June, and they watched the dolphins disappear.

June placed Toby upright in the pram and began knotting the wet nappies together by diagonal corners. When they were all attached, she tied one end to the pram handle and threw the rest into the air. Immediately the wind took them and spread them across the sky, and the kite of nappies flapped and billowed and danced over the clouds.

June dragged the pram back across the sand and they walked along the street towards home. Toby chuckled at the fluttering nappies and chewed his fist.

As the other housewives in their kitchens saw June and her triumphant kite of washing they boiled their whistling kettles in salute, and the whole way home June and Toby were feted by kettle song.

At home, the wind eased off and June pulled in the bright, white, clean dry nappies, untied each one and folded them away at once. Toby clapped and reached for his toes.

"Naaa," he said, and as June bent to pick him up he grabbed her hair, as stiff and dry as seaweed, and sucked off the salt.

Miranda Fair

The transformation was quick, painless and complete. One moment I was an innocent young schoolgirl on a picnic with my dear friends and fellow students from Appleyard College for Young Ladies; the next I was a white swan, all neck and feathers, gliding across a lovely sundappled river in the general vicinity of Hanging Rock, Victoria. To say I was surprised should hardly be necessary; has a more astonishing thing ever happened to a young lady?

I must say though, fatuous as it may seem, that I always knew I was different from the others. For years I have felt the stirrings of some strange, indefinable force coursing through my body. All through those tedious days of Latin recitals and long summer nights in white linen, relieved only by my passion for the mysterious loveliness of poetry, I was waiting for this supernatural blossoming. How I longed for release from the tyranny of my dull existence! The day before the fateful picnic at Hanging Rock my inner forces were positively radiant; I just *knew* something was going to happen! Was I to be plucked, like Alice through the looking glass, from one world to another? To sip afternoon tea with Aphrodite? To boldly go where no country schoolgirl had gone before? My mind soared with anticipation. Therefore, imagine my mortification to find myself returned to earth, after such an epic and dreamlike ascent to the Rock's summit, as a mere water fowl! It was so ... mundane.

Was I to live out my entire lifespan (now presumably much shorter) with all the limitations and discomforts imposed by my new form? I paddled sulkily up and down the river, stretching and testing my new neck. I wasn't game to attempt flight just yet. I shook some water from my wings. The initial shock was fading — already I was bored! Surely this won't last forever, I hoped with increasing desperation, surely there was a more exalted plan for me in the scheme of things!

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the arrival of another swan, as graceful and white as myself. It completed an effortless landing upon the water and headed straight for me. Although unaccustomed to dealing with swans as fellows and peers, I had already guessed its ghastly purpose. Oh God, no! Please! Not on my first day! The swan swam close to me, keeping its eyes firmly fixed on mine.

Then it came much closer, brushing my breast with its own, and commenced turning its head slowly from left to right. What was I to do? This was something I'd never faced as a woman. I was an innocent in the ways of love, a virgin, and I knew nothing but the vague promise that one day I'd meet a handsome grazier's son who would take care of me. I had pictured him in my head. My girlish fantasies even extended to the station we might settle on, or the beautiful laughing children we would raise. I longed for him to hold me in his strong arms, to kiss me tenderly, but I never planned for him to win my affection by preening my back feathers or by holding his long neck against mine. Yet this is exactly what was happening. I was allowing an animal to seduce me! Gradually our movements became synchronised, and after dipping and turning our necks together for a while the swan pushed his body over mine. Wild thoughts swamped me. Is it really a swan? Am I being mounted by Zeus, the Cloud Gatherer? Perhaps I was a nineteenth century Lada, predestined to beget a God! But I wasn't. I was being ravished by a common, dirty bird, not a deity, and deep down I knew it. My romantic flights of fancy seemed nothing but storybook stupidity as the hard, wet reality of a physically aroused (and rather hefty) swan on my back began to sink in. It gripped my neck feathers with its foul bill, consumed by bestial lust. We swam little circles together. My human mind wailed in devastation even as my body co-operated in the disgraceful act. The horror! The horror! My future disintegrated. No dashing country lad would ever sweep me off my feet, which now, clawed and webbed, paddled underwater like a bicycle riders' as the horrid creature shot its sticky liquid into my nether regions. Ugh! A servant girl in Queensland once told me it was just like riding a bicycle, but this couldn't be what she meant at all!

Ah well, everything begins and ends exactly at the right time and place. Satiated, my grotesque paramour slipped gently off my back and gave a kind of muted trumpeting call. I was now surprised to find my horror far from all encompassing, mixed as it was with a strange sense of satisfaction that one could only describe as *swannish*. The swan's call was barely audible and its hoarse fragility was incomparably sweet. It seemed to skim across the river and melt into the golden afternoon. I found myself replying, and before I knew it we had both risen half out of the water, white breasts touching and necks at full stretch. We pointed our beaks up, down, then side to side as if compelled to perform an ancient dance of nature. It was both chilling and reassuring that I knew exactly what to do.

My first clutch of eggs were five in number, and I've settled down to a solid period of incubation. It has given me ample time for reflection, and I must admit that it's not that bad being a swan. And do you know, one day I was sure I saw my dear, sweet friend Irma paddling across the water to greet me! She always possessed a certain swan-like grace, but I bet she never dreamed the opportunity would arise to put it to such good use. However, I didn't get a chance to positively identify her as my mate promptly drove her away with a short, savage display of wing-raising and neck-ruffling. I fear I have been transformed into a beast even more territorial than mankind.

In any case, I'm not sure I'd recognise Irma anymore. The day we ascended Hanging Rock seems a lifetime ago. Sometimes I watch the clouds, and sometimes I watch the shadows roll and flutter across the face of the Rock. With the fading light of my human imagination I fashion those shadows into the faces and forms I once knew, but their existence is already as remote and unreal as yesterday's dreams. Excuse me, I must keep these eggs warm!

A Hard Freedom The Poetry of Lee Knowles

With the publication to date of three poetry collections¹ of impressive quality, various anthology and magazine publications and the winning of a series of major prizes, Lee Knowles has emerged as one of Western Australia's most substantial and original poets.

Further her work — her book publications total about 230 pages of poetry, and there are in addition numerous uncollected poems and other writing — can now be seen as adding up to a coherent and luminous whole. It is genuinely and in some ways quite radically original. Part of no school, it resists easy categorisation. Certainly it makes nonsense of "traditional", "modernist" and "post-modernist" divides.

This body of poetic work has received one relatively extended essay in the anthology *Wordhord*.² It does, however, deserve wider attention and appreciation.

Much of Lee Knowles' poetry speaks to a particular audience. This is not to suggest that it has any relationship to the esoteric and solipsistic mumblings of what Mark O'Connor called the "bubble" poets of Balmain and Fitzroy³ — on the contrary an outstanding quality of her work is its consistent strength and meaning — but that it is poetry which arises from a particular set of cultural norms. It speaks to an audience that has some familiarity with the central myths of European civilization. It is set firmly against the parochial and pseudo-nationalistic pronouncement of, for example, Patricia Wrightson, who has claimed:

We have tried to plant here the magic that our people knew, and it will not grow. It is time we stopped trying to see elves and dragons and unicorns in Australia. They have never belonged here, and no ingenuity can make them real. We need to look to another kind of magic, a kind that must have been shaped by the land itself at the edge of the Australian vision.⁴

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1. *Cool Summer* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1977); *Dial Marina* (FACP, 1986); *Sirocco Days* (FACP, 1993).
 2. Dennis Haskell & Hilary Fraser, eds., *Wordhord: Contemporary West Australian Poetry* (FACP, 1989), pp. 106-8.
 3. Mark O'Connor, "The 70s Bubble in Australian Poetry", *Modern Australian Styles* (Foundation for Australian Literary Studies Monograph No. 8, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1982), pp. 1-18.
 4. Patricia Wrightson, *An Older Kind of Magic* (Puffin Books, Australia, 1974), pp. 150-151. The villain in this rather vicious little story is called, with heavy symbolism, Sir Mortimer Wyvern.

While it was to be hoped the Jindyworobaks had gone to their last muster some time ago, it seems this in not the case.

I don't know if Lee Knowles has read this pretentious bombast, but her work is a quiet refutation of it.

Roy Campbell once described the "South African vision" of some precious provincial writers as "... something that can't be felt or seen or heard/ or even thought — a kind of mental mist/that doesn't either matter, or exist."⁵ Few West Australian poets have been more aware than Lee Knowles of the West Australian landscape, but it has been a part of her art that her writing transcends the parochial to include it into the larger body of the Western imaginative heritage. Lee Knowles' adult poetry does not do anything like evoke elves and dragons *simpliciter*, but makes contact between the local and the universal, the mundane and the transcendent.

Her work can also be discomfoting: Lee Knowles is a poet who not only poses questions for the inhabitants of alienated contemporary society but, sometimes obliquely, sometimes directly, supplies answers. These answers are not always easy ones. The editors of *Wordhord* have made the point about her poems that:

Written in a middle register, suggestive of sanity and order, their subject matter is by contrast often slightly off-beat. This counterpointing of evenness of tone and unconventionality of subject itself suggests the disruption of ordinariness which is so often her theme. (p. 106)

I intend here to examine briefly a single theme in Lee Knowles' work: her role as a poet of real and actualised personal freedom, and the manner in which this theme has developed through the whole canon of her work: in particular, her development as a poet of the sea: the symbol — and actual means — of freedom and adventure.

Many of the poems in *Cool Summer* are concerned with wild or disquieting landscapes (or often seascapes), and it may be said that in this her work is typical of West Australian writing. She is not, however, interested in landscape for its own sake but for its connection with the numinous. Her landscapes have promises of "peril". They are sites for longing, adventure, aspiration, romance — or in some cases gain at least a poignancy by the utter absence of these things.

The abandoned and then-desolate hamlet of Greenough, for example (the poem was written before its resurrection as a tourist attraction and more recent notoriety as a murder site) gains something from having once been the site of an ill-starred Gyro-Gearloose attempt to launch a man-powered flying machine:

It is still remembered how Walters with his preying-mantis legs
climbed a tall haystack and, standing there with legs outstretched,
embraced a multitude.

Several times his wings flapped — a strange metallic rooster.
Boys in sailor suits cheered wildly, farmers grunted,
the soldiers by the fence twitched nervously.
The moment came, the whole sky blurred as Walters sprang ... (p.26)

5. Roy Campbell, "A Veldt Eclogue: The Pioneers", in Michael Roberts Ed., *The Faber Book of Comic Verse* (London: Faber, MCMXLII), p. 361.

The *moment*, coming in the torpor of the haystacks, is important. When the sky blurs, it is not only a matter of Walters crashing ridiculously before the farmers and soldiers, but a hint of a window opening onto something altogether different. Walters, the poem suggests, at least *had* it: a touch of Tom Wolfe's Right Stuff.

It is not only in West Australia that she sets this quest for the numinous against contemporary alienation. Her King Ludwig of Bavaria, builder of Neuschwanstein, prefers to drown rather than "marry and live among/ the petty merchants of reality." In Wales, dingy modern Carmarthen still has some touch of Merlin in the deeps of its history (it is a pity her splendid Arthurian poem with its haunting "Corn King" refrain has not had book publication so far). These poems, in a sense like the central character in Evelyn Waugh's *Scott-King's Modern Europe*, reject the assumption that the modern world, as it is thrust every day upon the consciousness of modern man and woman, is the best or only world to be aware of.

If a poet, as the world now exists, is not at least in some part seeking answers to the alienation and sterility of the mundane, the question of why he or she seeks to write poetry at all becomes somewhat pointed. Lee Knowles' answers to alienation and sterility are radically different to the drug-poetry and troubador-poses fashionable in some poetic circles fairly recently: they are won through understanding and knowledge.

Her travel poems reinforce the feeling of an organic connection between the actual and the symbolic, the past and present, the bizarre and the normal: the stones of a ruined Norfolk abbey, site of treachery and murder in the eleventh century, are still "uneasy" at the ancient violation of natural order. In the Scottish Highlands "nothing is healed". Her treatment of this physical contact with the portentous is fascinating to compare with that of Peter Kocan, another highly individual Australian poet who despite radical differences in technique shares many of the same pre-occupations.

There is also a real and difficult dilemma wrestled with here — and to an extent throughout her poetry — as she contemplates the nature of the numinous in the real world, a dilemma once expressed perfectly by the great British journalist "Peter Simple" (Michael Wharton), writing of the sudden environmental enthusiasms of the 1970's. He concluded:

... In that planned, departmentalised [future] country, with its industrial areas, residential areas, leisure areas, amenity areas and all the rest, something of what Wordsworth thought of as "natural beauty" would remain (after all, it is known to have social and educational value). It would remain; officially certified, cold, dead and embalmed, its life and poetry gone.

"Queue here for the view." "Have you got your solitude voucher?"
"National Wilderness No. 3 Property of the National Conservancy Board. Authorised Ecological Personnel Only."

An incorrigible ... voice whispers; rather than that, let England be ravaged from end to end, and perish.⁶

This question in various forms haunts much of Lee Knowles' work, a particular existential question which fairly few other Australian poets seem concerned with

6. *The Stretchford Chronicles* (London: The *Daily Telegraph* & Papermac Books, 1981), pp. 148-9.

today. How does the artificial, token landscape of "otherness" — the park, the approved wilderness, the correct response, the superficial "reality" — relate to The Real Thing?

One aspect of Lee Knowles's poetry is to do with finding out what that Real Thing is. Thus many of her earlier poems about Western Australia seek to connect its landscapes and its short and provincial history to a larger world in which universal myth and experience has some embodiment.

The early Dutch contact with Western Australia is important here: the dark apocalypse of the *Batavia* massacre offset by the simple courage and the *proper* authority and leadership of Abram Leeman. The figure of Lucretia van der Mylen, the woman swept up in the *Batavia's* maelstrom of evil, haunts much of Lee Knowles's work.

Cool Summer is, on the whole, a most impressive first collection. When it was written, however, it would have been difficult to anticipate the fulfilment of so many of its themes in the succeeding volume, *Dial Marina*. Most West Australian poets do not develop a theme beyond one book or over a period of several years.

Early in *Dial Marina*, in "Slipyards", the poet is examining a graveyard of half-built or abandoned yachts — presumably the Maylands slipways on the Swan River. This is one of the central poems in the collection. The symbolism is *apparently* obvious:

Keels deep in grass, they sleep,
more than twenty mainly rusted
hulls. A jetty slowly sinks.

The FOR SALE sign glows everywhere.
Yachts, fishing boats and even a ferry
with ragged sides decorate this yard
with their shelters, ladders and ropes,
their creeper-torn scaffolding and torn sheds.

So far the description seems straightforward and obvious: dreams fade. In the hulls of the abandoned boats physical and symbolic decay co-incide. Like the jetty, dreams have a tendency to slowly sink. And even the mere act of having had those dreams at all is not costless.

An old factory reflects the emptiness
of a theatre with, upstairs, a row
of bruised windows. So many dreams
lie here and several marriages
wrecked by the boat builders' folly.

The brief evocation of the theatre is a brilliant touch: not here, it seems the Wagnerian theatre, the Flying Dutchman defying the sea, the tempest and the Gods, but the walking shadow, the poor player. Reality and folly have collided, and reality has won again. The glowing "For Sale" sign says "No Exit". Or so it seems.

But this is only half the story ...(p. 40)

One might think terminal disillusionment has set in, but for that last line. Many of the lives the poet examines in this collection and elsewhere have been small and tangled. There is a frequent suggestion of fatalism. "Suburban Selkies" live in an uneasy no-man's-land between dreams and reality. Even if the waves are sounding on the skerries somewhere far away, and the seals call, reality is usually winning. One early West Australian settler, Rebecca Morgan, is mazed by the emptiness of the land, as her father fiddles with Jarrah timber to repair ships. The formalised, pica-yune splendour of a 1920's Governor's Ball is the site for a completely irrational murder. This is largely a peasant culture, its people attracted by economics, kept by ... inertia? It looks as if (to borrow from Wharton again), the "greyman" are winning. But something else obtrudes. One comes to realise gradually that the consciousness of the mundane is a preparation for something else, something apparently quite Quixotic or futile. Fatalism does *not* have the last word. Suddenly, the myth can be measured:

...The myth discussed for years was thirteen meters long,
a feature display and what is more, it cut down
on gardening. The neighbours were amazed.

Shipwreck cliches bothered her, word problems.
We'll never make it out of harbour
she said — winds, reefs, the whole negative trip.

Her daughter said the boat obscured things,
interfered with her music. Who needs a steel horizon?

Again, the phrase "steel horizon", is perfect. The complaint is that the home-made boat's growing steel hull is blocking off the view. But the physical "steel horizon" of the boat is becoming something else: the means to escape the *real* steel horizon of the greymen's world.

He wasn't sure, either, about this.
Only the boat seemed real. He held to that
and kept on in his helmet, a backyard
Vulcan. At night the sheets fairly swirled.

In the evocation of the "backyard Vulcan" the ordinary man, working on the boat, is seem to have something more than the mundane in him. We are getting a hint in mythic grandeur now. It is a mundane world, yes, but a great challenge is being made.

Nobody thought they'd make it, admitting
as they did to a measure of inner damage.

Then one morning an early gardener,
glancing up, saw a boat sailing out
over flowerbeds, back steps, incinerators,
rotary lines, fences and over the rooftops. (p.57.)

And while the figure of Rebecca Morgan may have been lost at last in the mundane:

Father's jarrah, once scorned,
surprised all. He found
the dream I sometimes glimpse
in a gull's wing, past clouds
in these strange skies. (p. 88)

In another poem in the same collection, a description of Albany ends with the possibility of the breaking-through of the numinous:

... Drifters, we walk the sea's edge, feed seagulls,
also scavengers at the outskirts of town.
Streets, parks, churchyards, sandhills and always
the sea's unchanging response.

Oyster harbour ...
a boat lies half-sunk, full of sleep.
Misted in rain we build a pile of sticks.
A rainbow's arc cuts sea and sky,
holds us a moment here. (p. 52.)

Again, there is ambiguity: is the rainbow's arc holding the suburban selkies back, in the limbo of Oyster Harbour (Albany is rich in evocative place-names) or holding them up to the threshold of something new? The complex historical symbolism of the rainbow centres upon the fact that since in a sense it does not have a physical existence, it is seen differently by every individual and is a link between the individual and the infinite. Thus, it seems, there is more than rain and rotting boats. The final poem in *Dial Marina*, "New Number", declares a quantum leap. The boat, symbol of freedom, has been launched and fitted out. Dreams are coming true and the prospect has its daunting side:

Can this be our next home,
this collection of jetties,
with boats clinging to a few sticks?

It concludes with a breaking of what H.G. Wells called in one of his more optimistic passages "the paper walls of everyday circumstances":

There are horses in the sea
and mermaid tails can
almost get you round
the supermarket. This will
be home. But where will you
be, friends left behind?
Don't lose touch. Dial
marina, rocks, sea, sky. (p.93)

Freedom has a price. "Don't lose touch" is probably a forlorn hope. But there is real sea under the boat's keel now. Mermaids are an appropriate symbol of the freedom of the seas, carrying a sense of wonder and beauty, but also of seductive peril. Mermaids are emissaries of the Perilous Realm, dangerous in themselves, not *normal*, and they certainly do not have their feet on the ground. In supermarkets they make awkward customers but there is no denying that their existence gives life a new dimension of richness. The greymen are disconcerted.

Sirocco Days is another jump. The first poem, "Sea Woman" sets the scene with a new firmness:

She has forgotten the land's language.
Sometimes, ashore, she catches eyes,
her cover blown, the alien revealed,
sea-loving the height of indiscretion.
She lives at the end of the longest jetty
and need never go back.
No outward sign, no trailing seaweed,
nothing to say that here she changed course,
fell off the edge of her itinerary.
But the day she made the big decision,
we noticed she seemed happy with
strange currents and we tasted salt. (p. 10)

Like Walters, the woman is not afraid to be different, and like Walters, she has *it*: the freedom that comes with courage. There are again haunting landscapes and seascapes, including familiar metropolitan sites like the old Fremantle Round-House, transmogrified by a sense of contact with something infinite. Cervantes (there is perhaps an apt literary association in the name), Green Island, the edge of Western Australia, become part of the Perilous Realm. A major part of Lee Knowles' gift is to show the availability of wonder. The hard price of freedom is understood, and now there are *real* dangers the suburban selkies cannot fully touch. Her work has always contained elements of various sorts of tragedy, inevitable in a poet of high sensitivity, and becoming a "live-aboard" carries with it no guarantees of unmitigated plain sailing.

The mysterious disappearance of the WA-based schooner *Patanela* off Sydney provides a poem that warns all the live-aboard people, the modern romantic sea-tramps:

... Slipping so lightly out of Fremantle
you expected no albatross.
A fine-eyed man and a sunshine
lady, you were on terms
with fortune's sometimes puzzling winds ...

Distant cousin to a ballad, the poem works by an accumulation of detail. When one gets into the world of The Real Thing, legends are not always comforting. It is more dangerous to *be* a legend than to be inspired by one.

... No sightings
in that sea bowl. Just an eye
at a lighthouse glass saw you
off Jervis Bay, drawn north.
But there are legends
and perhaps a lifebuoy message.

And in those seas
ships like cities pass.
We wait for the true voice
beyond the sea's breathing.

Who knows what fell on your deck,
Patanela, when you sailed out
beyond solutions. (p. 71)

Beyond solutions. I remember climbing aboard *Patanela* at East Fremantle one night in about 1970. She was too big a vessel for it to be likely that she simply disappeared under some bulk-carrier's forefoot (I cannot write this without some personal feelings of envy and admiration: although the sea is a major part of my imagination and a frequent theme in my own writing, and indeed Lee Knowles and I have written on several of the same seascapes, it is, I suddenly realise, more than five years since I cast off the moorings of my own boat for as much as a voyage from the Nedlands Marina to Perth Water. The paper walls of ever day circumstance indeed!).

The poet's vision is vulnerable but indomitable. Courage, too, is an important part of what Lee Knowles writes about. It is — from the hare-brained adventure of Walters to the world-defying "live-aboards", the lone sailors of *Sirocco Days* — the people with The Right Stuff who give the world meaning. The book ends with the words:

...a fragment of our dreams (p.80)

The dreams are perhaps fragmented, but they *exist*.

It is hard to know how many of these poems are directly personal and how many are the evocation of some *persona* (several seem ironic rather than declamatory). In her celebrations of those who have *it* Lee Knowles says little or nothing directly about herself. However, the dust-jacket note of *Sirocco Days* tells us that:

In 1993 Lee Knowles and her husband Richard Johnson left Fremantle on their yacht *Ghawazee*...

Ghawazee, Lee Knowles explained, was an Arabic word for female dancer "The Ghawazee people were gipsy people, not Arabs, who performed in the streets and courtyards of the Arab world but maintained their separate identity [it also means] invaders of the heart."⁷

7. Letter, Lee Knowles to the author, 23 August, 1993.

If poems of wonderment do not deal with fashionable poetic preoccupations, so much the worse for those fashionable preoccupations. Reading Lee Knowles' three books in sequence leaves one both uplifted and humbled by the extraordinary vision and remarkable lyrical gifts of this poet.

DAVID RAY

The Great Auden

Not a hitch-hiker I had picked up,
but the great Auden,
for I was his chauffeur that morning,

driving too fast to suit him
as he shoved his foot to the floor
each time a truck looked ahead.

"Watch out!" he yelled more than once,
fumbling for a new cigarette,
calming himself, lighting the new

from the old. I told him what
our critic had said
of his revisions, some

of his poems we loved best
left in fragments, almost,
in his *Collected*.

"You go back," he said,
"and tell that critic
they're my goddamn poems

and I can do anything
I want with them."
So I kept my eyes

on the road, still pissed
that he had cut
his best line, "We must love

one another or die."
Halfway to Syracuse
I swerved off on gravel,

took aboard three
hitch-hiking kids. They piled
in the back, babbled

of baseball, never knew
who turned around
and shushed them, was glad

when they left. Plane
was late due to storms,
so we checked his one bag in,

looked around, found
a lounge that looked out
on runways, scattered snow

on low hills. We shuffled
along. More than one
stared at Wylan, his Sears

Roebuck felt houseshoes.

He ordered a martini, a burger,
then took out his wallet

to pay. I put up my hand —
horrific suggestion!
"Hell," Auden said,

and his eyes swept the scene.
"I can buy and sell
this goddamned airport!"

And he showed me his book —
log of miles he had flown
that year, readings given

in most every state,
fees paid. I wondered
if he meant he could buy

the planes too, if they
were thrown in. I let
him pay, yet insisted

on leaving the tip
for that waitress who asked
if he had ever been in a movie,

"a Western?" Her eyes
went flat when he said
No, she must mean

somebody else. "They've tole me,"
he said, winking through smoke,
"that I looked like somebody

famous." But the waitress
was miffed, knew she was teased,
waddled off in a huff,

returned and smirked, "Chill
Wills!" for she had invited
others to observe him.

She meant, of course,
the cowpoke who was always
a sidekick, riding along,

good with a grimace,
not bad in a gunfight.
Loyal though, deputised

when a posse was needed.
Time to go, and we parted.
On impulse I hugged him —

this uncle or father
or guru for a day. We both
promised to write,

share poems. He shuffled
on out toward the plane,
shopping bag in hand —

on to Chicago, Vienna,
and I stood, waved
through the smudged window

till the revved-up plane
took off at last,
hoping to catch a glance

from a porthole. That's how
one said goodbye
in those days. I walked back

to my car as if under
a grey, leaden lid — on a pot
made of pewter. In the hushed

air where his acrid smoke
lingered and the ashtray
was stuffed full

I was struck with the heart—
battering smart of a child
abandoned once more,

and brushed into blue dust
the reliquary ash.

ANDREW BURKE

Small Change

for Viv Kitson

Sap rises, new leaves shoot, seasons come
and go, die back to earth. So too our old

addresses – flats, houses – flake into
history like skin. Today your letter

arrived, so full of narrative, life a
Catherine wheel: your lovechild's love–

life, Whiteley's death, your son reading
William books, catching that language

in your own. Sap rising, new growth, my
children speak an urban pastiche of sport

and rap. What archaeologist will dig this:
our constant revolutions, the media con

of edited wars, bulletproof Pope, weeping
princess? My mother's Constable hangs on

her nursing home room wall, a faded boy
reflecting in the same river, season

after season. Here the Swan flows, there
Sydney Harbour rises and falls. We flake.

Drawing Mermaids

It was him from across the road.
Leaning over her shoulder.
"Is it a mullet or a trout?"
She linked the scales like choppy seas.
"You've made the breasts too low."
He was making her mad.
"Come over home and I'll show you in my *Gray's*."
She finished the chain-mail silently but went.
He spread some paper on his desk
and traced her outline gently as he drew.
It prickled her breath.
"The nipples here, about the fourth rib level.
And now the belly-button – ping!"
It wasn't a mermaid, it was a girl.
He coloured her dark between the legs.
That prickling feeling, further down,
"You've done the feet all wrong.
Besides, she's fat," something
was making her very cross.
He stood up, "Alright, fierce Miss Flounce,
let's finish off the cake."
When she got home
she took her clothes off in the front bedroom
and looked at the scalloped glass:
two points, anemone-pink, and a seaweed patch.
She didn't mind it after all.
Besides *she* wasn't fat.
She stroked it softly as a small stray cat.

The Dancing Body — Somatic Expression In Elizabeth Jolley's Fiction

The Dance of the Pine Trees, *Mr Scobie's Riddle*¹
The Pear Tree Dance, *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*²
The Lampshade Dance, *Woman in a Lampshade*³

Although not a dancer, Elizabeth Jolley uses dance to enhance her fictional characters; conveying aspects of their personalities, their quirks and idiosyncracies. Through dance, she explores issues of power, prompts characters to action, conveys experiences of liberation or creativity. Articulating experience through the body is nothing new, of course. Indeed, Jolley draws on our most ancient traditions; ritual and ceremonial dance, mimetic movement, chanting, storytelling.

More specifically, in Jolley's fiction, the dynamic forces connecting dancer, observer and reader replicate the close interactive relationship between actors, chorus and audience in Greek theatre. Jolley has said that her characters — like the original, pre-dialogue Greek chorus — express in dance experiences 'for which there are no words'⁴. A gulf, she implies, exists between experience and language, a gulf her characters bridge as they dance. But what is this experience which language cannot articulate, and how does Jolley, as writer, accommodate such experience in her texts? Why, when language fails, is the body able to come to the aid of expression? Is such embodied experience gendered?

Dancing men are conspicuously absent from Jolley's fiction. When a man does dance, as Torben does in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, it is of a different order, motivated by different impulses and producing an outcome different from that of the women's dances.⁵ In attributing to the dances gender-specific qualities, Jolley, by implication, suggests that certain female experiences, including liberation and crea-

1. Jolley, Elizabeth *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, Penguin Books Australia, Ltd., Ringwood, 1983.

2. Jolley, Elizabeth *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Western Australia, 1981.

3. Jolley, Elizabeth *Woman in a Lampshade*, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, 1983.

4. Jolley, Elizabeth, personal interview with Julie Carr, Tilba Hotel, South Yarra, 6 May, 1991.

tivity, are successfully articulated through the rhythms of the body more than through language. Which is not to suggest that Jolley is endorsing biological essentialism; this is far too narrow a definition of her position and a misrepresentation of her concerns. But Jolley's position is far more subversive than that of just by-passing the limitations of gendered language.

French feminist theorists, Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement, share similar concerns. They advocate liberation through *L'Écriture féminine* (a process of female writing from a position within phallogocentrism, loosely defined as *writing the body*). *L'Écriture féminine* is a difficult concept to come to grips with (as Cixous says, 'to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine'⁶). Clement does, however, cite the almost extinct ritual of tarantella as an example.

Tarantella (in which young women, said to have been bitten by a tarantula spider, dance frenziedly until they collapse), like Mardi Gras and carnival, is a remnant of ancient, pre-phallogocentric culture in which the female body was the locus for creation and procreation. The dancers cross, temporarily, what Clement identifies as that 'dangerous line, the cultural demarcation beyond which [woman] will find herself excluded'⁷. Jolley's dancers, Miss Hailey, Weekly and Jasmine Treadwell, also breach demarcation lines to achieve transcendence and creative expression. Like Clement's sorceresses and hysterics who disrupt 'the edge of female consciousness, the liminal zone between sleeping and waking'⁸, dancing they achieve a state of heightened consciousness in which subliminal impulses override the authority of phallogocentric law.

While her young women dance disco, Jolley's older women dance intuitively, inventively. Collectively, the older women's dances, subversive and empowering, convey an uncanny resemblance to Sandra M. Gilbert's description of Cixous' and Clement's 'newly born woman':

There is a voice crying in the wilderness...the voice of a body dancing, laughing, shrieking, crying. Whose is it? It is...the voice of a woman, newborn and yet archaic, a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage.⁹

Miss Hailey, trapped in St Christopher and St Jude Nursing Home, has much to shriek and cry about; her friend's (Mr Scobie) death, hunger, powerlessness, old age. Instead, she dances. In her dance of the pine trees, the link between somatic expression and writing is explicit. Although the reader never sees Miss Hailey's manuscript, 'Self Stoked Fires', her literary pretensions are gently satirised by Jolley.

5. Jolley, E. *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1981, p.47. While Torben dances at his wife's insistence and ends his dance in a state of collapse, the women dance spontaneously and of their own volition, and are liberated or empowered through their dances.
6. Cixous, H 'Le Sexe ou la tête?', *Les Cahiers du GRIF*, 13, pp.5-15. Trans. Annette Kuhn, 1981, 'Castration or decapitation?', *Signs*, 7,1, pp.41-55. Here quoted from Moi, Toril, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Routledge, London, 1985, p.108.
7. Cixous, in *Moi*, p.108.
8. Cixous, H. and Clement, C. *La Jeune Née*, UGE, Paris, 1975. Trans. Betsy Wing *The Newly born Woman*, Manchester University Press, 1986. Introduction by Sandra M Gilbert, p.ix.
9. Cixous, H. and Clement, C. *La Jeune Née*, UGE, Paris, 1975. Trans. Betsy Wing *The Newly Born Woman*, Manchester University Press, 1986. Introduction by Sandra M Gilbert, p.ix.

However, when Miss Hailey — supremely confident of her ability as author, but recognising that creating an idyll for her novel is 'not the easiest thing to write' — dances her text, she achieves synthesis of imagination and spirit:

'I shall write this', she said, and she began, with solemn movements to dance.

Miss Hailey danced a pine tree dance. She danced a dance of the majesty of the pines and of their transfiguration in the changing light of the morning sun. She included in the dance a mysterious hill. She tiptoed round its base indicating with expressive fingers and an arching of her eyebrows that, though life was active at the foot of the hill, no one knew the secrets of the hill itself. She danced the promised vision of an open door leading in to a small but neat house. (p.211)

The mysteries of life and after-life find resonance in a physical, domestic world in which everyday actions (feeding the hens, planting the vegetables, picking ripe fruit), reflect Miss Hailey's growing excitement and exuberance in her role as creator/author. This is not a passive, intellectual exercise, but an active, physical experience — a mimetic dance in which the dancer embodies the power of the danced objects:

She danced a rustic and natural childbirth setting the whole scene in a primitive wash-house. Because this part of the dance, with all its meaningful movements, was so satisfying she danced a second natural childbirth demonstrating the effort and the exhaustion and the rewarding joy of the new mother when a child is born. She danced a celebration of the new life, that of the child, and of the people engaged in their new found way of living. The celebration included her own joy at being about to take part in the new life. (p.211-2)

Female creativity is articulated as a powerful, tactile, multi-sensory experience which leaves Miss Hailey out of breath, ecstatic and in a soft radiance of happiness. Her attempts to convey such experience in writing is another matter:

Writing she knew, even when it was what she wanted most to do, was an act of the will and, as such, required tremendous determination and discipline. (p.214)

Jolley validates the dancing body as the site of resolution and healing, as the vehicle for intuitive knowledge, and, most importantly, as the means of creative transcendence. Dancing, Miss Hailey vanquishes the world of the nursing home and writes her idyll.

While Miss Hailey draws on biblical images of birth and afterlife to revision a new world, Weekly celebrates a powerful, pantheistic ritual of fertility, life and death. Culminating in the abandonment of Nastasya, her dependent companion, Weekly's dance inverts conventional, biblical (patriarchal) morality, expressed in the epigram she sings as she goes down to the mud flats to plant her pear tree: 'redeem thy misspent time that's past and live this day as if thy last'. Weekly's 'redemption' is

achieved not by selfless devotion to Nastasya (as one might expect), but by rejecting the philosophico-theoretical framework within which the epigram usually functions in favour of an archaic, pre-Christian, woman-centred order.

An ageing, arthritic, spinster, Weekly is transformed in dance: 'like a bride dancing. She imagined a veil of lacy white blossom falling all around her.' (p.113). Subverting conventional expectations of the bride as young, beautiful and fertile, Jolley validates Weekly's sexuality as an expression of the fruitfulness of her land. Long-repressed Dionysian impulses are released:

Round and round the tree, dancing, firming the softly yielding earth
with her bare feet. And from the little foil label, blowing in the restless-
ness of the evening, came a fragile music for the pear tree dance. (p.113)

The connection between female body and earth/nature is established before Weekly's dance; she 'sank down on to the earth as if she would never get up from it again' (p.110) and she 'wanted to rest on the earth and look about her, feeling the earth with her hands, and listening for some great wisdom to come to her from the quiet trees and the undergrowth' (p.111). Taking possession of her land is enormously important to Weekly. She is no longer just the housekeeper of other people's property. It is, however, in the pear tree dance that body and land forge a powerful alliance. Watching, but excluded from the dance, Nastasya is trapped and dies in the mud, her life force absorbed by the pear tree:

...the little tree seemed comfortable at last. Weekly looked at its tiny twig
like trunk, perhaps it was not dead after all. It looked glossy and stood
bravely there in the dusk. She began to walk slowly up her land still
dancing, it seemed, only more slowly; she heard the tiny label, it was like
strange faint music. (p.114)

Dancing, Weekly expresses her long-repressed female voice, evoking an ancient, pre-Christian paradigm to resolve the problem of Nastasya and rewrite the terms of her own 'redemption'. Her text is as terrible and final as Cixous' prediction:

When the 'repressed' of their culture and their society returns, it's an
explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet
unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions.¹⁰

Like other strong women who intervene with fate to control their own destiny — Medea, Medusa, Electra, Antigone — and like the tarantella dancers, Weekly transgresses the boundaries of her culture to enter a realm of female power.

Dance, Elizabeth Dempster argues, is a particularly effective medium for subversive action: 'The body, not disciplined to the enunciation of a singular discourse, is a multi-vocal and potentially disruptive force which undermines the unity of phallogocentric discourse'.¹¹ Just how effectively the body usurps the authority of the male voice is demonstrated in Jasmine Tredwell's lampshade dance.

10. Cixous, H. 'Utopias', p.256.

Jasmine, lampshade on her head for inspiration, responds to a bout of writer's block, which prevents her from finishing her story about a pathetic young man holed up in Madras, by dancing:

'I know,' she said, 'let's dance! My little transistor's here somewhere. I know it's here, somewhere here.' She rummaged among the bear skins and the ancient silver fox. 'Ah! here we are. If we danced, you never know, it might be better. I'll just see if I can get some music. Ah good! here's music. Listen there's a dancing teacher too. What a scream!' (p.144)

Jasmine's dance, in which the body activates and expresses her creative imagination, explores, like Miss Hailey's idyll, the link between the dancing female body and creativity/writing. Jasmine, like Miss Hailey, resolves through dance creative problems (what to do with the young man in her story) and, by extension, real-life problems (what to do with the hitchhiker she picked up and brought with her to her isolated farmhouse).

Dancing, Jasmine conveys the primordial, female knowledge and predatory skills of a fox. Her visitor, a confused, out-of-luck, young hitchhiker, whose identity and fate become inextricably linked with that of the young man in her story, tries vainly to impose order as Jasmine positively invites chaos:

'Touch and one and two and step back three and four forward five and six repeat touch and one and two and step and one and two and one.' 'Now you've properly done it!' The young man fell over the furniture. 'You've knocked over the light. Have you broke it? It's pitch dark!' He stumbled again, knocking over a chair. 'Where are you?' he shouted. 'It's pitch black dark. Yo' must 'ave broke the lamp.' (p.145)

The hitchhiker's erotic expectations that he and Jasmine 'was going to have it away together' which the rising energy in the prose also suggests, are thwarted by his inability to cope with, or impose authority on, her chaotic libidinal energy.

Elizabeth Dempster observes that 'If dance is the space of "the feminine" and "the maternal" it follows within the logic of a patriarchal social order that its power and the power of the body be controlled, constrained, disguised or denied'¹². However, Jasmine resists constraint and usurps the authority of the male voice (both radio broadcaster and hitchhiker). Rejecting formal dance movements, she inscribes her own code and claims her own space — that dark, dangerous and exotic space at the edge of female consciousness where the body 'invents for itself a language to get inside of'¹³. This is the locus of *differance*, the place of the hysteric who articulates, as Mitchell notes, 'both the acceptance of and refusal of sexuality in contemporary

11. Dempster, Elizabeth 'Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances', *Writings on Dance*, 3: Of Bodies and Power, 1988.

12. Dempster, p.15.

13. Cixous and Clement, p.97.

culture.¹⁴ Jasmine's tactics are anarchic:

'Yoo hoo! Here I am,' Jasmine was beside him, and then she was far away. 'I'm over here,' she called, and suddenly she was close again. Both were breathing heavily, gasping even, the furniture fell and crockery crashed as if something was rocking the cottage. Jasmine was laughing and laughing, pleased and excited. (p.145)

This is diabolical, libidinous energy. Jasmine is powerful, in her element, uninhibited. As she reaches a climax of excitement, uttering the cliché of orgasm: "'Oh go on," she cried. "Don't stop!" she pleaded', the impotent voice of the broadcaster intones: 'Repeat these movements till you feel comfortable and confident in your performance'.(p.145)

Jasmine's *jouissance*, like Miss Hailey's, is creative, libidinal energy which Jolley links with female writing — the act which Cixous claims will "'realize" the un-censored relationship of woman to her sexuality, to her women-being giving her back access to her own forces'¹⁵. In both dances Jolley endorses this relationship.

Jasmine's dance resolves her creative dilemma by demonstrating the young man's/hitchhiker's uselessness to her, sexually and textually. She turns off the radio, kills off the young man in her story and tells the hitchhiker to leave. She thereby silences and banishes all traces of maleness from her space and reverses what Cixous says happens to women in patriarchal discourse; she 'annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds'.¹⁶

Contemporary Australian culture does not legitimate the creative dances of older women, which makes Jolley's achievement all the more significant. Several elements contribute to her success in writing dance. First, characters resolve through movement situations which they have not been able to resolve through language; second, the reader experiences vicariously the rhythms of dance, enacted in the rhythms of Jolley's prose; third, the spontaneity and ease of expression of dance is contrasted with the frustrating and far less successful intellectual activity of the characters' own attempts at writing. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Jolley's creative energy is confident, intense and convincing in its own rhythms when she writes the dance.

Jolley's subversiveness (always a powerful impulse in her work) is never more potent than when her female characters usurp the authority of phallogocentric discourse by writing their experiences with the body.

14. Humm, *Maggie Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1986. (Humm quoting Mitchell) in 'Language and Psychoanalysis', p.66.

15. Cixous and Clement., p.97.

16. Cixous, 'Utopias', p.257.

SARAH FRENCH

Pale Sand, Dark Sand

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
It's always ourselves we find in the sea

e.e. cummings

Cottesloe 1973

The child is brown on pale sand. Summer always stings her eyes. She has to squint. The ocean narrows to strips of blue then disappears behind her lids. Her parents sit further up the sand under the lollipop stripes of the umbrella. Their arms are brown, their bellies are white, and flop over the top of their swimming bottoms. They have special bottoms for swimming. The child does not. The child has her fiddly knickers, blue and white nylon checks. She rubs the fabric between her fingers, the damp saltiness making it rough. She stretches back on the sand, presses the shell she's found to her ear. It sings the sea. The sun lives inside her belly, it travels under her skin, makes her mouth yawn. The child is brown on pale sand. The wind shuffles the air like paper. The ocean's blue salt inhales, exhales, in her ears.

Maddington 1975

They are going to the quarries to get rocks for their garden. The quarries are large, carrot vomits of orange in the dull green of the hills. It is hotter living away from the ocean. The above-ground pool is a permanent shallows. The child is bored. She floats face down, pretending she's drowned to make her mother panic and come shrieking from her guardpost at the kitchen window. They put a towel in the back seat of the car, she imprints it with her wet bottom. Her swimming bottom, which will never replace the fiddly knickers in her affections. Up close, the hills become less and less green. The quarries are flecked with yellow. The air is sickly with heat, dust, wildflowers. She wants to carry rocks she can't lift, she wants an icy-pole, she wants to live by the ocean again, she wants the toilet, she wants to grow up and be a mermaid, she wants to be black and white like the people in old movies, she wants to go to school, she wants a little brother for Christmas, but the only thing they offer her is a smack. On the way back, her shoulders are red from sun, her tongue is raspberry-icy-pole-red, her head is icy-blond drowsy on the soft pink cushions of her mother's thighs that overlap each other where they meet. She

wants her own rock-garden, she wants the Barbie townhouse, she wants a bike for her birthday, she wants not to be adopted.

Morley 1980

General comments: *too talkative in class. A Great improvement could be made with a bit more perseverance.*

She is living in a nowhere between the ocean and the hills. The hills are blue and the heat smudges them in the distance. She hates this school, her third one since moving here. She hates her hair, which is rusting on her head. She hates being told the blue is a boy's colour so it can't be her favourite. She hates choosing orange instead. There's not even a pool here, only a public one, and the water smells like bleach and burns her eyes. She hates boys, now she realizes she's not going to become one. She's glad she broke Frazer's nose, she's put together an army for the honky-nut wars, making a fort out of cardboard boxes. She likes hiding in things, attacking unseen. She wishes she could turn invisible from the neck down. Her legs belong on somebody else's body, so does the public hair. *Public hair?* her father laughs. *It had better damn well not be public.*

Jindalee 1982

Driving to the new house, they pass Surfer's Paradise, the tarnished silver ocean hammered flat, the pasty sand with Coke-can blemishes, and she doesn't mind living far away from it. Jindalee is far away from everything, but a golf course and an ice-skating rink. Her parents buy her figure skates. She speed skates in them. The most consistent wet near her is in the air, as if the sweat formed around you before it landed on your skin. The sky has more stretch marks than her mother, they appear suddenly, accompanied by percussion and heavy bombardments of water. The school oval floods every second year, but the water is muddy and if you swallow any, it can make you sick. She fumbles about with boys behind the ice rink, but they never get far because she's dressed for a blizzard.

Morley 1984

General Comments: *A good student, but has trouble relating to her peers.*

Since she's declared her agnosticism, her parents keep sending her to Catholic schools and she keeps on getting expelled. Her skin is permanently pale, her chest is distressingly flat. She shaves her legs, which makes her a fallen woman, or at least a teetering one. Sister Bernadette has two blunt objects of wisdom she batters the girls with daily - fear of God and fear of sex. The girl suddenly becomes interested in Greek mythology. All those gods and mortals having sex. *But what if God came into somebody's room as a shower of gold, Sister?*
Our God doesn't do that sort of thing. He has a capital letter.

Sister is slightly cross-eyed and the glare she intends for the girl goes out the window instead.

But what about the Virgin Mary, Sister?

They stand outside for half an hour in the forty degree heat for that, not just her, but the others for snickering. The next day, degrees of burn and tan are compared, but unlike sunburn, fear of God and sex does not peel off. The girl gets rid of her fear of God by giving Him up. But giving up sex does seem a bit drastic.

Bayswater 1986

General comments: *With such a high level of absenteeism, it is hard to estimate the extent of her ability.*

She's tired, of parties in rooms that smell of stale vomit and fresh mull. She's tired of summer and riding horses when she's stoned. The men that sleaze onto her are too old, they have matured from delinquent to criminal, their breath smells of crisps and beer, their lips are soggy and cracked with salt. She wants a one-way ticket to America, jewellery that doesn't change colour when it's wet, long blonde hair, the blue eyes she had in childhood, red roses, candlelight dinners, walks along moonlit beaches, that expensive perfume she samples every time she walks through Myers, someone to write her a sonnet, a shell to sing her the sea, but all she gets offered is a can of VB.

Lockeridge 1989

All her Mondays are dead on arrival. She and her mother make packet cakes every Sunday. She can never get the lumps out of the mixture. The cooked cake is riddled with tiny balls of dry powder. She is too impatient to wait for the cake to cool before adding the icing; it melts, runs down the sides, a ring of icing sets round the base, leaving the top bald. Her father sends money every birthday and Christmas. She speed skates at the Morley Rollerdrome Friday nights. Her tongue is always red from raspberry Icies.

Victoria Park 1992

It has been years since she went to the beach, so he takes her, a cask of cheap red wine, a waxy lump of cheese of uncertain origin moulded like a fist. She used to know the name of this beach, he says it's Trigg but she's sure it's not. The sand is almost phosphorous in the moonlight. The dark has a cold salt liquidity as they walk through it. The wind agitates her skirt. The scent of seaweed is sour, rotting in the air. His hands dig blindly, tossing up froths of rubbery weed, trying to find a shell, but finding only a cuttlefish bone, and breaking its chalkiness in half. The ocean at night is a different planet. Black waves have grey frills, they wave like mournful handkerchiefs at the shore they devour. They are the handkerchiefs people dab their eyes with at funerals, they even smell of tears. *Mournful handkerchiefs?* he laughs until

he's at a loss for sound, and only his shoulders twitch amusement. He offers her the fist of cheese that smells of his pocket. Her fingers sink in to rip it apart. The moon has buried its head in a cloud. Her legs are pale on dark sand. His hand is on her knee.

SYD HARREX

Folio of Dreams

Maybe we remember the Sacred Man
in our folio of dreams when sifting
the myth fragments of this land we have read
as if words were cave shells and desert pebbles
our eyes and fingers could pick up—that's all.
No effort required in such surrender.
*(Narroondarie plumbed the western seas
until he found his pearl-eyed maidens'
spirits and they ascended to heaven,
the mystery land of Wyerriwarr.)*
After love in the wave folds of our bed,
the seaweed mahem, the exchange of dreams
in the eros carnival of the deep,
we turn the pages of each other's sleep.

Whistle-stops on Anzac Eve

for my father

Arthur Spurway

21/1/1909—28/6/1992

Carriages roll chattering like dentures
over points and sleepers; outside
in the frost are spaces
vast as night, and cut—
glass stars: I saw the Southern
Cross once from a plane, and it
seemed nearer then, pendant in
the firmament where ice meets
fire. A window with a light
accentuates the waste of distances,
finite in the infinite, a small
cry from the heart.

Close by the brick and timber
and scrolled wrought-iron country
stations hang neon signs,
the stations of a cross
whose god is thirst. Men congregate
out of the frosty silences
for solace there, out of a thirst
for warmth and reassurance
in afflicted times, seeking restitution
for old wrongs, absolved of wordless
crimes. Haunted by the great
Australian loneliness, attracted by
the promise of fluorescent comforts,
beer on tap, companionship, they come
as pilgrims to familiar shrines.

Amethyst with morning, mountains
meet my eyes: for this, they died;
the sleek train hurtles headlong
into sunrise.

ROLAND LEACH

The Girl Who Dreamed that the Meaning of Life began with the Letter 'I'

I remember her wearing her untidiness
like a post-punk princess

her canvases of dark figures
in angled corridors

of listening to Desperado
on soft nights beside the water

of dreaming the meaning of life:
it began with the letter 'I'
but had been casually left on night sheets

then leaving me with
some lines from e.e. cummings
as though they would be enough.

REVIEWS

Dorothy Hewett, *Peninsula*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994. pp. 144. \$16.95.

ignorant and afraid
but without choice
I have taken the first step
out onto the peninsula

This is an extremely moving and fully human book, one which will yield most when the reader puts aside excessive (post-structuralist) discomforts about "author" and "persona" in poetry. Hewett's work has always risked a conflation of these, and somehow that is courted even more by the physical details of *Peninsula*. Hewett's name on the cover, as of course befits a poet of her status and selling power, dwarfs the mere title — this book is quite literally the latest "Dorothy Hewett" — and the text is interspersed with black and white photographs that include one of Hewett as a child with her sister and father, placing the poems in an autobiographical context.

Rather than enter into the usual debate about this ("Romantic mythologizing of self", etc) I want to shift the focus and ask: what makes some readers so frightened of this kind of poetry?

Rejecting the customary accusations made against so-called "confessional" poetry — that it is "self-indulgent", "formless", "too inward looking" — since Hewett's work is none of these, I wonder if poetry in this mode is threatening precisely because it is just so much (rather than too little) art. It demonstrates that anything can be worked up into a poem — "true life" like any other material. Because of the division we make between public and personal, we are sometimes horrified that this could be. How can a writer be so ruthless? Isn't anything sacred? and so on.

Dorothy Hewett's poetry has always chal-

lenged these conventions — what is most specific to "her" individual life is refined to the point of becoming public property, art, a potentially shared experience. Working in the same vein as with *Rapunzel* and *Alice*, Hewett here extends her vision from a perspective later- in life, most surely "at the top of her form" as the blurb tells us. There are the familiar magical but unobtrusive uses of rhyme, the sure links to the nineteenth century through Tennyson, Arnold, Whitman and others — an era that has fallen out of favour perhaps because people were so force fed on it at school, or perhaps because writers of doggerel also have an attachment to at least the forms of this period. But Hewett of course culls the best influence from any period. *Peninsula* may be, as John Tranter says on the dust jacket, "modern Romantic", but you'd have to place the stress there on "modern".

Peninsula is a large collection and is set out mainly as long sequences (separated by those photographs). One sequence, the remarkable "Upside Down Sonnets", was awarded the Mattara Poetry Prize a few years ago. Only Hewett could so expertly turn a form on its head (the poems run through sestet and then octave, a reversal I heard was at first accidental!). Here the delightful mix of grit and romance runs, to paraphrase Catherine Earnshaw, through the form like wine through water and alters the colour of the sonnet:

I will be there forever
with my hair
falling idly in a white mane
across the open window
while you climb sneaking up
through the icy air

to your albino princess
varicosed Barbie doll
my rough trade lover drunk as Chloe
on Skid Row
with wetchex in your jeans
what did it take
to make a go of it?

Hewett's poetry has always had enough irony, enough sense of what it was doing, to avoid sentimentality. It has a tongue-in-cheek

awareness that "from aromatic nightsoil poets come" ("Lines to the Dark Tower"). I say tongue-in-cheek because while at one level this is deadly serious poetry, its constant invocation of childhood and the past, with all their distortions, the appeals to fairytale, Gothic, Tennyson, and that which is generally over-the-top, invite us to read Hewett with a stagey or campy sense of fun:

Ah! Stevie Stevie
what a girl you were
always ripe for the shroud
what an original
a delicious wit with a Lion Aunt
to warm your milk at night
("Stevie")

So there he is in the mirror
again his armour glistening with tears or rain
and I am expected to leave the room
to take three paces and then go down
to the water's edge where the lilies blow
("Lady's Choice")

But back to the serious side, "Still Lives", another section, creates a profound sense of the social, of family, connectedness and character, without the tweeness that can accompany poems about "Uncles and aunts and country cousins". This and the rest of *Peninsula* leave me with that strange contemplation of the passage of time that Hewett always provokes, but most strongly of all in *Peninsula*, recollecting Marge Piercy's lines about the occasional nearness of the past: "bustling scenes acted just the other side/of a scrim through which surely I could reach/my fingers tearing at the flimsy curtain/of time..." (Piercy, "My mother's body").

"Summer", in "The Blue Kingdom" section of *Peninsula*, for instance, plays around with time and personal history:

one will lose her child
one will be unhappily married
my father will be buried
in the graveyard
on the edge of town
my mother will lose her wits
but none of them know it...

in a manner very reminiscent of Sharon Olds ("I Go Back to May 1937", in *The Gold Cell*); and just as pleasurable I find myself wishing there was more in this vein in Australian poetry — Hewett was doing, it first and best and continues, with *Peninsula*, to provide a model for a new generation of poets who have had enough of the dryness of some of their predecessors: who want flesh and blood in their work.

Tracy Ryan

The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads eds Philip Butters and Elizabeth Webby, Ringwood, Penguin (Australia) 1993. \$17.95.

As someone who arrived in Australia twenty years ago at the ripe old age of twenty-nine the Australian bush-ballad has a special appeal. Many of the writers of these ballads were themselves people who were not born in Australia, many also shared as I did an antipathy to the worst social practices of that dominant English part of Britain that Bob Ellis once graphically described in a modern ballad so well:

Factors and middlemen in the Strand,
Sent out their relatives in chains
To Macquarie Island and Emu Plains,
From that green unpleasant land.

Yet when I arrived in Australia as a willing and eager new chum in 1973 it was to discover that the connections with this old flow was a more complicated affair than I had thought. I well remember how at a welcome part given for me in Sydney in 1973 a well-known Labour party intellectual of the day, Richard Hall, was deeply offended when I remarked at how Irish his features were! To be Australian was not to have the features of that national identity confused with such foreign origins, obviously. As a Celt I found the difficulty involved in such identification mildly puzzling. The puzzle became clearer when, at

the same party, my enthusiastic endorsement of John Shaw Neilson was set aside with a lecture on how Christopher Brennan was a far more important figure. I confess even now that as an habitu  of the old, now sadly long disappeared, Angus and Robertson bookshop in Australia House through the sixties when, as James Joyce put it, "there was no money in the game" of Australian Literature I had read Brennan but had not warmed to him the way I had to Shaw Neilson, to Henry Lawson or to Frank the Poet. At the time, resurgent early-seventies nationalism, to an extent not now acknowledged in the romanticisation of the Whitlam years, was also wedded to the desire to prove that Australian culture was "up there with the best of them." Poets who had read and could quote recondite German philosophers clearly outweighed those who could rejoice in the swirl of a schoolgirl's skirt, or the light glancing of sun through the branches of an orange tree, and do so in rhythms which both transcended and yet still invoked the accents of the ""speaking voice" of the Australian ballad tradition.

I confess with no regret that I have not lost my taste for the poetry of the "yarn" tradition. This profound and ongoing element of Australian verse registers the degree to which the oral (transliterated) is a bastion of resistance to the transient internationalism that often passes as "culcha"" in the late twentieth century. Butters and Webby are clearly aware of the problem, and their selection in this volume seeks to show how the transition from the oral to the literary in Australia is a seamless one. Frank (the Poet) McNamara is a good case in point. They note the fact that he may well have been the unrecorded author of that most moving ballad "Moreton Bay", which, as I recall, was sung, rather defiantly, I suspect, and in good two-part harmony, at the end of that same welcome party by myself and an Australian of Welsh descent! And what better way to end a party one may say.

The bulk of the poetry here is written by that most ubiquitous of poets "Anon". But Butters and Webby include enough of the

literary ballad tradition to acknowledge how powerfully the form affected the work of that generation of writers (such as Harpur) whose unenviable task was to "forge the unwritten conscience of their race" in a cultural exile which they converted into a heritage. At the same time there is no defensiveness in this acknowledgment and its record. For the editors of this collection, the premises of Australian culture, its rootedness in a popular oral tradition, multivalent in its origin but united in a defiant sense of difference, is not in dispute. Lawson and Patterson, twin, if quarrelsome, kings of the popular vision of the Australian bush, are represented effectively, as are such less well-known but delightful gems as George Essex Evans, and Cecil Poole, whose "When Dad Comes Out of Gaol" has long been a personal favourite. If I have a mild regret it is that the scholarly bent of the collection precludes the inclusion of the many modern examples of how this tradition continues to live in both popular verse and in the literary derivatives of this. Witness the example from Ellis above, or a rather more baroque extension of the tradition in Les Murray's politically incorrect but oh so delightful quatrain,

I shot an arrow in the air,
It fell to earth in Taylor Square,
Transfixing, to my vast delight,
A policeman, and a sodomite!

The collection replaces Russell Ward's classic *Penguin Book of Australian Ballads*. It is fascinating to note how, even though the last remnants of Australian self-knockers are man/and woman fully resisting the Republic, the times have changed so much. When Ward published *The Australian Legend* and the first collection of Penguin Australian Ballads was assembled it was still necessary to feel that Australian culture had to assert its virtue in terms of the values of the metropolis, if only by overkill. What makes this book so much a hopeful sign of the times is its lack of defensive polemic. The value of the tradition is, now quite properly, taken for granted, and

the sober, scholarly tone of the introduction reflects the fact that this great, national tradition of verse needs no such defence. Forgive me, then, gentle editors, if in this review I have allowed myself, occasionally, to hear and to remember the sounds "of battles far away and long ago".

Gareth Griffiths

Tracy Ryan, *Killing Delilah*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994. 94 pp. \$16.95.

In Tracy Ryan's first collection of poetry, *Killing Delilah*, one narrator is accused by her beloved's voice of always wanting "everything to end/ like fairytales". This familiar jibe about the way women imagine their lives through "happy ever-afters" echoes ironically through the volume's imperfect world of losses, betrayals, partings, and "man-high" stubborn weeds. Here, there is indeed no betting on the prince, but in many poems (notably *How To Speak Frankly* and *Post-Partum*) there is a both tentative and triumphant coming to a knowledge of the separateness and autonomy of the self. Rarely does Ryan's persona take refuge in a nostalgia for a lost paradise, as in *In The First Place*:

The trees, the earth, look familiar.
They call me back to before
we got separated.

I want to lie down beneath them
become what I was in the first place
in the first place where we knew how to

mate and die without talking
of love because
love was obvious

Here wistful candour and repetition create a sense of timelessness and the use of words like "fur" (in an earlier verse) and "mate" simply and directly evoke prehistory. Again, in the balladic and rather Keatsian *Le Grand Meaulnes* there is a lost garden path and a castle gone to dust. The disenchanted voice

warns us: "We can never go back there now". Mostly, however, the poems offer in tight syntax and skilful rhythms a direct confrontation with her characteristically painful subject matter.

Ryan's multiple roles as student, tutor and editor have involved her richly in her craft and it is not then surprising to find in her poems some of the important preoccupations of contemporary Anglo-American and Australian women's poetry. All of her work is touched by a knowledge of the way in which narratives of gender both constrict and enrich life. In *Prepossession*, a poem about knitting for her unborn daughter, Ryan writes:

once I was clear as you are
but years have layered round me
language lies and gender
this red defies the codings
this red is to reveal you
alive and just beginning

Many of the most moving and compelling poems in *Killing Delilah* deal with the experience of being in a woman's body — of fetishes and love-making/marking, of pregnancy and after. In the exquisite opening poem of the volume, *Arrival*, the poet's body is a new ark:

far more than forty days and nights
you float recapitulate
each creature in your growth
already wiser than I am

Often in Ryan's poems the body subtly expresses a symbolic parallel with something else, as in *Exorcism* where a house "remembers you as I do/ making easy, entering at will", while in *Bread* the expansive joy of baking and pregnancy are allied, only to turn sour.

As its title suggests, this collection is involved in the reworking of myth and, more strongly, fairy-tale, a well established strategy in women's writing and feminist poetics. Stevie Smith, Anne Sexton, and more recently Liz Lohead, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson have all worked in this vein. It seems appropriate and imperative that women writers confront and

re-use these old stories, as Ryan has done so effectively, because they are on the one hand sites of limitation and entrapment for their heroines, but on the other, they are scenes of subversive action, as demonstrated by the narrative voice of *The Snow Queen*:

Quick out
through the gate where roses caught
my eye spots of blood & I remembered
my own quest not
as I thought of him

The latent meanings contained in myth and fairytale always have spoken and will continue to speak powerfully to and about female experience. As in all engaged retellings of fairytales, the poems *Ever After*, *Dead Lock* and *The Snow Queen* use the material to make the familiar strange, simultaneously sharpening the reader's sense of archetypal female experiences, and even more tellingly, specific ones. Part of the pleasure of reading revisions is the very life of the old tale within the new. This pleasure is played with in the delightful and witty *Bison*, *Perth Museum*, in which the poet revisits the home of a feared childhood fantasy:

Ah but you and I know
what that wedgehead drives at
what big teeth you have
when I consent to let you out.

It would be wrong to give the impression that Ryan writes only about the body and myth, yet it is also wrong to suggest that these two important preoccupations could be separated out from the works. The immediate wrench one experiences when reading Ryan's poetry derives from the way in which the voice seems always to listen to and register bodily experience. Her range and treatment of subject matter in this volume are impressive, covering both the beginning and painful demise of relationships (often figured in metaphors of battle), intense childhood recollections, hymns to nature, family histories, travel memories, and more besides. Some of the most memorable poems, such as the

haunting sequence *Storms in the Desert* and *Wise & Foolish* Virgin, deal with the experiences of a Catholic upbringing.

Ryan is in full possession of her own voice and she has command of an enviably elegant and passionate poetic style. In all these poems every line counts, and her last lines in particular have the ability to at once bring the whole piece together and intensify meanings. Readers who have eagerly sought Tracy Ryan's poetry out in journals now have a treat in store.

Lucy Dougan

Judith Wright: Collected Poems 1942-1985, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1994.

Judith Wright, The Flame Tree, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1993. Japanese translation by Meredith McKinney and Professor Nobuo Sakai.

The publication of *Judith Wright's Collected Poems 1942-1985* allows us at last to view in the one place her astonishing output: its quality, variety and development. Wright's major concerns emerge in full strength: love in all its aspects and the relationship of human beings to their world. The subtlety of her interpretation is obvious, as is the way in which matters such as conservation are taken beyond the mundane to that level which A. D. Hope has, quite rightly, seen as metaphysical. Nature is not to Wright simply the physical, although this emerges in the poetry as vivid, energetic and powerful. Nature is as well the source of images and symbols which exhilarate the heart and feed the imagination; its destruction would starve both mind and feeling. Her concern for Aboriginal life is expressed in a series of poems which tear the heart:

... be dark, O lonely air.
Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff
and then were silent, waiting for the flies.

At the same time they force the mind to contemplate a further dimension: the mythic in 'Bora Ring', the historical in 'Nigger's Leap, New England' and, in a series of poems such as 'At Cooloolah' and 'The Dark Ones' the damage done to the white psyche by continual exclusion; by dispersal and killing.

This collection of forty-three years' work demonstrates the flexibility of Wright's poetic; the way it can seize the moment yet always transcend it. The poems of *The Moving Image* appropriate the national ethos in poems such as 'Bullocky' and 'South of my Days', yet qualify it with the Aboriginal poems and with reminders of the erosion of the land and the heart. At the same time these poems question the philosophical basis of time, fear and death, and Wright is a considerable philosophical poet. The clear lyrics of *Woman to Man* and the visionary poems of *The Gateway* convey, through symbolism and paradox, the love and regeneration which underlies her vision. Here nature is no genteel water-colour landscape; it is a mighty universe, driven by energy and passion, its symbols the Yeatsian great tree of life ('Night'), the dancer, and the flaming wheel which is the universe itself:

Caught between birth and death
we stand alone in the dark
to watch the blazing wheel
on which the earth is a spark,

crying, Where does the dancer dance -
the terrible centre spin,
whose flower will open at last
to let the wanderer in?

'Song' from *The Two Fires*

If some of the poems of *The Other Half and Shadow* are disappointingly flat, there are poems such as 'Typists in the Phoenix Building' and 'Camping at Split Rock' which redeem the time, and astonish with their depth, passion and virtuosity. They remind us that we are in the presence of one of the great poets of this century. What a pity it is that the anthologists, so often tone-deaf, prefer prosody, because of its overt polemic, to the shining complexity of a metaphysical

lyric. 'Woman to Man', 'Woman's Song' or even 'Smalltown Dance' say so much more about the power of the female, and of what Joyce called the 'daisy-chain of umbilical cords', than the much anthologised 'Eve to her Daughters'.

The last three volumes — *Alive*, *Fourth Quarter* and *Phantom Dwelling* — have received cursory attention from reviewers and critics, yet in them Wright moves on to a more vital and experimental poetic. Many of her previous poems had expressed her disillusion with poetry, and her despair at the ruin of the natural world. In her final poems she seeks a radical poetic in order to 'reinvent' the 'constellating' image which will reunite the imagination with a dwindling world:

To sing of Being, its escaping wing,
to utter absence in a human chord
and recreate the meaning as we sing.

Like Beckett and Borges she rejects traditional forms, the tired clichés of a familiar language, and seeks the vitality and freshness of other cultures and their unfamiliar poetic forms. In 'Notes at Edge' (*Phantom Dwelling*), the haiku, with its brevity, clarity and depth of meaning is her model as she homes in on the close focus: the caddis-fly ('Small twilight helicopter'); the primitive embroidery of 'Lichen, Moss, Fungus' or the violet stick-insect which unfolds 'a brilliant wing - / a fearless violet flash / to centre that grey and green'. The ghazal, the ancient form of Persian love poetry, becomes in Wright's hands an infinitely variable form to conclude her vision of the dubious yet powerful energy of the universe, and her love for its every aspect. At times this energy finds expression in the homeliness and intimacy of radiator, log fire and red wine. At other times the vision is cosmic; a 'human pattern' of 'constellations against featureless dark':

Impossible to choose between absolutes,
ultimates.
Pure light, pure lightlessness cannot be
perceived. . .

We are all of us born of fire, possessed by
darkness.

These last poems must be read in the context of the whole. In a totally satisfyingly way, reminiscent of Yeats's last poems, they round out the poet's thought, so that the opus is like a luminous crystal; turn it this way or that, the vision appears whole and tremendous, every facet alive and significant. A. D. Hope was right to remind us, in his great 'Ode on the Death of Pius the Twelfth', of the 'strange serene' that comes with old age when, 'Emerging in its ecstasy of fire/ The burning soul is seen'. It is then that the life's work, in Wright's case a work of luminous energy, becomes clear and complete. We should be grateful for this chance to see it whole.

Given the experimentation of Wright's last poems, and her interest in Eastern thought and aesthetic forms, it is wholly appropriate that the National Library selection of her work, *The Flame Tree*, should be a bilingual text, English and Japanese, the translations by Professor Nabuo Sakai and Wright's daughter Meredith McKinney. This is a splendid production, its every aspect contributing to the sense of economy, purity and sparseness which belongs to the haiku, and to Japanese art. Visually it is superb. The Japanese translation, because of the totally different arrangement on the page, gives a radically different perspective, as the lines hang vine-like on the page rather than laboriously traversing it. This lifts the poems out of the traditional western matrix. And what a selection this is! No tone-deafness here, but the resonance and clarity of 'pure colours, blacks, whites, bells on the central tone'. In these fifteen poems Wright speaks:

. . . with a pure voice,
and that the gull's sole note like a steel nail
that driven through cloud, sky, and irrelevant
seas,
joins all, gives all a meaning, makes all whole.
For Precision'

Shirley Walker

**Philip Neilsen, *The Sting in the Wattle*,
University of Queensland Press, 1993. \$16.95.**

In deflating the rich, the famous, the fatuous and the foolish, the satirist, as Bruce Dawe points out, performs a vital public service. Yet the importance of satire is still not widely enough recognised in this country.

Dedicated to Queensland writer Patrick Buckridge, this anthology of Australian satirical verse is sensitive to the responsibility of an editor to reflect the range and variety of the subject, rather than merely satisfy editorial predilection or bias. *The Sting in the Wattle* is perhaps the first anthology to provide a balanced representation of both male and female poetry, as well as a substantial selection of indigenous writing. As a result we have a comprehensive and imaginatively conceived collection.

Himself a superb satirist, Philip Neilsen is at pains to remind us that satire cannot be narrowly defined. In his introduction, he reminds us that since the classics — Horace, Juvenal, Pope — satire has covered a spectrum from the comic to savage denunciation. The nineteenth century examples in this anthology tend to the latter, and the twentieth century to the former — perhaps partly in response to our draconian libel and defamation laws, but there are enough contemporary specimens of the savage type, such as Gig Ryan, Pamela Brown and Jack Davis, to satisfy both tastes. Gwen Harwood's work stands out as one of the highlights of the book — her exposure of academic politics is deft indeed:

It must be twenty years since A has written
a useful word. B begs him to relate
old victories in academic wrangling.
He dreams of his promotion while A pours a
wine not too assertive. His hands wait
lax at his chest. One thinks of the small
dangling
forelegs of the flesh-eating dinosaurs.
(*In the Bistro*)

The phrase 'the sting in the wattle' refers to the satirical tradition of Australian poetry, as well

as to the sharpness and bite that is carried by the lyrical form. That the anthology includes a virtual Who's Who of Australian poets, reinforces the book's contention that satirical verse is a strong Australian tradition, even if it has often been relegated to second place by the establishment gatekeepers who have preferred the reflective or descriptive lyric. After all, the introspective and delicate lyric does not confront anyone rudely or cause trouble. Neilsen quotes A.D. Hope's condemnation of the fallacious "notion that humorous, satirical, and polemical verse cannot be poetry of the highest order or cannot be poetry at all:, as well as Bruce Dawe's spirited defence of Hope's position:

It is surely one of the crowing ironies of the Romantic movement that those critical perceptions that gave it its initial dynamism were reduced (and the focus on the natural world narrowed) to the point where human aspirations were seen as unimportant unless directed to enthusiasm over the individual ego and landscape, and where Lawson, Paterson & Co. (with the assistance of Dorothy Mackellar) were principally to be engaged as ex officio members of some National Tourist Promotion Board ...

Most of the poems in the collection testify to Dawe's assertion that public verse demands as much skill and subtlety as private verse.

The chronological organisation of the book reveals the consistency of targets over two centuries. Anti-royalist satire has been with us a long time - through Harpur, Daley, Campbell, Hall, Murray and Archer. Victor Daley is confirmed as one of the finest poet

Sixty years their gracious queen has reigned
a-holding up the sky,
And a-bringing round the seasons, hot and cold,
and wet and dry;
And in all that time she's never done a deed
deserving gaol—
So let the joy-bells ring out madly and
delirium prevail!

It is also satisfying to see how well satire in all its forms, including parody and lampoon,

addresses the universal evils of lust, pride, stupidity, hypocrisy, envy and culpable ignorance.

Particular favourites of mine include Kate Jennings' blistering song-cycle "Couples" and Clive James' richly acerbic "The Book of My Enemy Has Been Remaindered". As a lifelong Aussie Rules barracker I am, however, yet to be convinced that Bruce Dawe's evocative hymn of praise and rapture "Life-Cycle", featuring the friend of my Collingwood-player father, Fitzroy's Brownlow medal winner "Chicken Smallhorn" is fundamentally satiric either in intention or effect!

Perhaps an answer to this minor doubt about nomenclature and terminology lies in realising that the sophistication of many of these attacking verses is a testament to the complexity that can attend a critical stance. One of the finest satirists is Barry Humphries. Neilsen chooses well in including Humphries' "Threnody for Patrick White". At the same time that Humphries sends up the shortcomings of the Nobel laureate, and refuses to grovel, like so many Australian critics, at Patrick White's feet, there is also a recognition of worth:

... a famous author hostesses pretend that
they have read;
A querulous curmudgeon with a tea-cosy
on his head.

He had a vulnerable hauteur, he was
arrogant and shy
He had the visage of a dowager with
a beady light blue eye,
He wrote at least two masterpieces, his
correspondence flowed
in torrents,
With Firbank in one pocket, in the other
D.H. Lawrence.

Humphries concludes:

He was generous to young artists; often petty,
never mean,
He was a typical high-minded, interbellum,
stage-struck
queen ...

He had a few friends (mostly female), who
 he wrote to all their lives
 And he loved his male friends too until
 they traded in their wives
 Then he cut them and he dropped them
 and defamed them on the page
 You felt he'd once been dropped so cruelly
 he had to share the pain and rage

On the other hand, there is also complexity in the unequivocal scorn of Gig Ryan's dismantling of an American journalist in Cambodia:

He's artistic, uninvolved,
 weeping for the source's loss. His big American
 heart throbs
 and gets paid
 (*The Killing Fields, nominated*)

At the end of his Introduction, the editor concedes that some may consider satire to have lost its teeth in a post-modern age which questions all moral certainties. But Neilsen powerfully suggests that, in the late 20th century, satire's function is more necessary than ever:

(Satire) is less concerned with positing normative and correct standards than with exposing the hypocrisy of those who espouse them; it does not reinforce absolutes, but constantly undermines the appearance of stability with the irreverence that is its own uncertainty principle.

In other words, satirical attack is one of the few defences left against bureaucratic authoritarianism and the abuses of political and cultural power.

More than ever in Australia we need writers of poetry and prose who are courageous enough to produce the barb in the barbecue, to supply the sting in the wattle. For this superb collection we are indeed in Philip Neilsen's debt.

Ross Fitzgerald

Shrieks, A Horror Anthology Eds: Jillian Bartlett, Cathi Joseph, Anne Lawson
 Womens Redress Press Inc. 1993.

"*Shrieks*" may not be an apt title for this book. To me, the word "shrieks" conjures up laughter as well as blood-curdling screams; gruesome fantasy that is as exciting as it is horrible, the hiss of a snake, the kiss of a spider, a parrot's screech, the delicious ripple of a witch's cackle or the gathering quake of a vampire's triumph. It is certainly a penetrating name. To that extent it is useful. Yet, the dominant mood of the writing in this new anthology is often darker than a horror-movie 'shriek' suggests.

Shrieks suggest terror and thrall. Shrieks can never be taken entirely with seriousness. There are touches of comedy here, but they are shadowed by the authentic horrors of interior life.

Embarking on the latest theme of 'horror', *Shrieks'* contributors are women from around Australia and their contributions are equivalently diverse. Short fiction and poetry make space here for Alison Lyssa's essay on "The Silence of the Lambs" and for some highly textured prose poems by Sara Rosetti and Coral Hull.

There are common motifs such as childhood, confinement, motherhood, fear and mutilation. But, this is never the Hollywood movie version. Here is an immediately recognisable horror, visceral, grounded in the physicality of womanhood and the powerlessness of children.

Even the more playful entries, such as Stacey Smithers "I Should Have Known" or Diane Beckingham's poem "Dali-mania" rely for their chill on the resonances of fear in daily life, conditions so familiar they have become acceptable. Smithers' final line "i should have known you'd go straight for my vermilion jugular" is witty enough to produce a chuckle, but her Prussian lover's desire to 'go straight' for her ripe source of life is also a reminder of rape.

Popular culture often deems woman as the source of fear or evil. The monster is female, from Lilith to Alien II. Shrieks thrusts this mythology aside. Here the enemy is often male or connected with the hostile external world.

One shared preoccupation is a sense of interiority. A source of horror arises when this sense of internal completeness is breached. Other shared themes emerge, such as domestic violence, rape and war, events tinged with a prosaic madness that is truly the stuff of horror.

Some heroines deem men as their enemy and accordingly take their revenge. Mary Haire's "Cut Glass" is no doubt spell-binding in performance and remains compelling on the page. I was delighted by her dark humour:

The lighthouse represents power, but I'm the one in control. I can look at it, talk to it, touch it, and there's not a thing it can do to stop me. It's rooted there in the ground: it can't ever abandon me. Now, that's what I call a relationship!

Janet Greason's "Lest We Forget" was an intriguing contemporary version of the revenge plot, perhaps a touch bombastic at the conclusion "I know who Jack the Ripper was.... A MAN." Christine Owen's "Skinned Alive" builds up layers of memory and identity in a succession of images which are stripped away at the end to reveal the self's literal muscle, tendon and bone.

In "Lynch Pens" Sarah Rossetti utilizes prose quotations from various sources, including epigrams by Helene Cixous ("censor the body and you censor breath and speech"), to formulate poetry. Rossetti creates a fragmented poetic narrative, representing ways in which language confines women's expression. Her work is striking and powerful, but it is also visually confusing, demanding an effort to pursue its various elements from the reader.

The mix of genres — fiction, poetry, dramatic monologue and non-fiction — is interesting partly because it is so unusual,

although Alison Lyssa's essay sticks out a little and would have been better balanced by at least one other comparable discussion. Perhaps a consideration of horror as a literary genre would have provided this balance. Instead, the editors achieve a kind of rich imbalance.

Many of the contributions step close to the edge of sanity. Jane Meredith and Frances Stephans examine the extremities of motherhood. Stephans writes in "The Wardrobe Door" with beautiful despair, "I'll take you to the sea my little darling to rub salt into your mother's wounds". Meredith is sharper.

Screaming.

I dream that I am carving the baby up. It is a very neat job. There is no blood, which is a relief, only lines of red like a scientific drawing. He is quite awake, looking up at me with that wide-eyed expression.

Carolyn Logan's "Horror Story" is utterly convincing and ghastly in its portrayal of a "middle-aged woman of ordinary appearance" who, set the task of writing a horror story for her writing group, goes so close to the edge that she takes out her own real life horror story on her cat.

Lowering herself to the chair and pinning the cat to one knee, Martha drags the comb through the sodden fur. The animal howls. She laughs and inspects the comb...

Some of the most disturbing scenarios are written from a child's point of view. Margaret Coombs "The Pea Princess and the Monsters from Outer Space" about a little girl with a medical father is brilliantly frightful. Gail Warman's "Hiding" is a short but effective piece of realism reminiscent of Barbara Baynton's earlier meddlings with this genre. Coral Hull depicts a childhood world of colours, things, darkness and knives drowned in isolation where each phrase, each thought? is encased in its own brevity yet spills out into the world like a cry.

In her brief introduction to this collection, Jennifer Maiden argues against American

critic Camille Paglia's proposition that (as Maiden paraphrases it) "artistic concentration on the amorphous, tactile bloodiness of female liquidity" is a sign of social decadence, Jennifer Maiden sees the preoccupation with the body, its force and vulnerability, rather as "a sign that the individual is trying to confront the realities of creation and violence through art."

The conventional horror genre frequently reaches for a redemptive quality, demanding sacrifice to achieve salvation. In *Shrieks* there are victims, monsters and saviours but they are not always the ones you expect them to be. Some writers seek to reshape reality through imagination, while others show us a mirror of ourselves and our society reflecting cruelty as well as beauty. *Shrieks* is charged with voices trying to account for the horror of being.

Stephanie Green

Carmel Bird, *Not Now Jack, I'm Writing a Novel*. Australia: Picador, 1994, \$14.95.

Carmel Bird is the first to point out that "there is no recipe for writing fiction". There is, however, a recipe for Japonica Jelly. In absence of the former, Bird includes the latter, and so locates one of the main aims of fiction:

to suspend people, events, images, ideas in jelly, magic jelly, so that readers can see and know and feel. You spend your life learning how to make the jelly — clear, amber, tart, beautiful. (75)

If there is a "secret ingredient to writing fiction, it might be attitude. ... And this attitude needs to be cultivated and practised." (75) *Not Now Jack* is about fostering attitude:

If you want to write fiction, want to invent stories, you'll have to invent yourself first. You'll have to take up a point of view and a tone of voice. (1)

Through example, discussion and direction,

Bird sets about showing us how, in a way that is clear and tart and sometimes beautiful. It is her poetic attitude to the prosaic that makes this book a delight to read.

Not Now Jack functions at a number of levels. First, it is a writer's manual, a book of practical advice for the earnest and the willing to learn. To this end it contains a swarming bibliography (writers are not only the ones who write, they must be the ones who read as well) and enticing snatches of text, quotations, and anecdotes from other writer's lives. Along the way, writers may locate snags of recognition with their own operations:

Even as events are taking place (say, the house is on fire) I feel myself standing aside collecting the details in a cold, detached, rather unpleasant way. (75)

The text also aims to provide insight into the way a writer (this writer) works. Many of Bird's reflections arise from questions asked at Writer's Festivals: How did you get started? How do you get started? What is the difference between fiction and fact? How do you overcome writer's block? According to Carmel Bird, "audiences continue to want to hear writers talk about writing," (2), and her attempts to grapple with these issues are deft, entertaining and instructive.

The text is divided into enticingly titled sections offering instruction on matters of character, metaphor, dialogue, markets (Romance, Crime, Horror), plot, structure, et al. In the section entitled "Real Writers Don't Have Mothers", Bird confronts the reader-writer about block:

Ask yourself questions about your fear. ... Are you afraid of your subject matter, afraid of the feelings it arouses in you, afraid of what people will think of you if you write this? Are you afraid you will hurt people? Are you afraid you will hurt you? (44)

She is both chatty and confrontational, and therefore as useful as the reader-writer wants her to be. In "The Well-Thumbled Page. How

to Write about Sex", Bird waves a few flags from centre stage, then retires to the stalls to allow the experts to demonstrate 'Thirty-Nine Ways To Do It On The Page'. She has included a wide variety of examples to illustrate how sex can and can't, should and should not, be written. Bird relies on her headings and the savoir-faire of her readers to make their way through this heaving thicket. This chapter is revealing in many ways, not least because it reinforces the notion that, if writing can be learned at all, it is most effectively achieved through reading. *Not Now Jack* closes with one of Bird's own stories, "The Man in the Red Car", which is offered to readers as a reward for persistence and as proof, at the end of the process, that Bird's method can work. Once familiar with its contents, the reader-writer can embark upon the process of sifting and unpacking: it is not only the chapter headed "The Well-Thumbled Page" that should succumb to the thumb if this book is to be used to full benefit.

I was initially troubled by similarities between this text and Bird's earlier writers' manual, *Dear Writer* (McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988). Both, predictably enough, cover similar themes, including the technical aspects of writing, the subject of writer's block, markets. If any distinction can be made between these two, it is that *Dear Writer* is a text of specifics, while *Not Now Jack* is about process: the first a book you might consult for precise information, the second a text that invites readers to follow a trail. My own conclusion is that there is room for both approaches. *Dear Writer* is an excellent text for the novice writer, while the joy of *Not Now Jack* lies in its attention to process, and in the delicate weaving of art with the more sturdy yarn of the craft. For fans of Bird's fiction (*Cherry Ripe*, *The Bluebird Cafe*, *The Common Rat*, *The Woodpecker Toy Fact*), this book will be something of a reunion, with all glee to be had from Bird's turn of phrase:

I think of the dying pig balloons as they fly wailing and shrieking above the lawn,

above the party food, up and into the leaves of the palm tree, up over the hedge and into the street. (89)

and, my favourite:

One day a galah knocked at the front door and when my mother answered the door the galah said hello and walked in. (89)

Bird's economy of expression and sly wit provide the golden thread.

Carmel Bird has the credentials, of this there is no doubt: she is the author of a novel and a number of short story collections and has long been a manuscript assessor, and teacher of creative writing in a wide variety of institutions.

For the reader who wishes to write, *Not Now Jack* should be (and is intended to be) a means, rather than an end. Patrick White (crustily) remarks, that it is "more important to get on and do in this dangerous age." Bird will show you how.

Georgia Richter

Giovanna Capone, *Percorsi Immaginati*, Editrice CLUEB, Bologna, 1993.

"Scrivere è viaggiare," writes Giovanna Capone (quoting Michel Butor) in the Preface to her collection of bi-lingual essays whose title translates, not quite accurately, as *Imagined Routes*. The sub-title is more explicit: *Journey*, metaphor and model *In anglophone Writers From Africa, Asia, America and Australia*.

This is a journey through space and time: reshaped, re-aligned, clarified, distorted even, by the power of the imagination and in the service of particularized reality that art creates. The journey inevitably leads to exploration of self.

There is a journey through cultures, like the more traditional route taken by V.S. Naipul and traced by Marla Pia De Angelis in her essay : *V.S. Naipul, viaggio dopo viaggio*,

libro dopo libro.

Naipul leaves Trinidad, his birthplace, and goes to England to find his future, a true post-colonial journey this one, from the periphery of the empire to its centre.

Of course the future is shaped by the past. So begins for Naipul a return journey in which Europe is the point of look-out and its civilization the reference. However Trinidad is not a true return for Naipul, but a necessary rite of passage and not a very pleasant one at that. Naipul himself confesses in his autobiographical, *Middle Passage*, that he took refuge in humour, irony and detachment in order to conceal a profound confusion.

His real destination is India, the birthplace of his ancestors. There he seeks to know the inscape of his consciousness (formed in part by his cultural patrimony) in order to make more sense of the landscape surrounding him. India provides the torch of the past to illumine the present.

A contrary journey is illustrated by Paolo Bertinetti's essay '*Solo chi tradisce puo essere fedele*',¹ which discusses George F. Walker's adaptation of European texts such as Turgenev's *Fathers And Sons* and Genet's *Pompes Funebres*. Not for Walker the reverence of the colonial towards European works. He adopts no slavish adherence to the original text, instead, "*il drammaturgo entra in conflitto con il testo originale, lo sflida, lo 'tradisce'...*"²

In a reversal of history, Walker is the new cultural invader who pillages the European text, retains only what serves his purpose and takes it back across the Atlantic. The colonial has become colonizer. Toronto and New York are the new centres.

A more ambitious inter-textual journey is undertaken by Robert Coover in his novel, *Pinocchio In Venice*. Ermelinda Campani's essay on this work is itself a fascinating journey into the world of myth, fiction and the

novel as self-conscious construction.

"Come Cervantes," writes Campani, "Coover attua una rivoluzione, egli istituisce un'opposizione antagonistica tra fiction e mito, una polarizzazione intertestuale entro cui attuare lo spazio simbolico del narrare."³

Coover 'pillages' Collodi's original work, turns puppet into character: an American Professor of Italian origin, come to Venice to research the final chapter of his book on art history and, of course, to find his identity.

He is not, however, a 'realistic' character that attempts to create an illusion of life, rather a constructed entity, a wooden puppet, operating in a most unreal of settings: Venice. There Coover surrounds him with other constructed characters, stylized figures from *Commedia dell'Arte* who talk in proverbs. Indeed the narrative alternates between English, Venetian dialect and Italian. A language is reconstructed, then; a world is self-consciously fictional, a world which demolishes rigid myth (Pinocchio, Venice, established language) and imposes its own reality. Campani describes this world as being, "absurd, chaotic, without a focus or guarantees".

In the end, after a succession of picaresque adventures, the professor-puppet is sent by the Blue Fairy to the pulp mill, "to help ease the world paper shortage", then to be turned into book, a 'talking book'. So, from myth, to character, to puppet, to book. Human identity as text. Quick someone, get me a copy of this book...

My own journey into this collection ends close to home. Sheila Downing's essay on Henry Lawson's short stories proposes him, quite correctly, as a myth maker:

" Henry Lawson, convinced generations of Australians that the experiences of his bush-heroes were the real Australia. "

1. Only those who betray can be truly faithful.
2. The playwright engages in a conflict with the original text, challenges it, 'betrays' it...

3. Like Cervantes, Coover enacts a revolution: he sets up an opposition between fiction and myth, an intertextual polarization in which the symbolic space of narration is to be found.

Convincing he certainly was. Some eighty years down the track and with millions of migrants settled in this country from all over the globe, the face of our most widely recognized folk heroes has hardly changed.

Crocodile Dundee is surely the quintessential Lawson hero: tough, rural, naive, honest, independent, equipped with sense of humour and self irony. Above all Anglo-Celtic in appearance and in name. People with names like Rossi, Dimitrianos, Chen, Pinjiri are seen by the man in the street (including the Rossis, the Chens etc) to represent only a particular section of Australian society. The all-Aussie folk hero is still played by people with names like Paul Hogan or Slim Dusty, and with faces to match. Lawson helped create the Aussie myth, subsequent generations have petrified it.

But, back to the review. There is good stuff aplenty in this collection of essays. From William Fenton's careful illumination of Ondaatje's *Skin Of A Lion* (useful also to better appreciate *The English Patient*); to Bernard Hickey's sortee into Mary Durack country; and Giovanna Capone's own sensitive descent into the divided world of Barbara Hanrahan; the book presents a landscape of World Literature on a latitude not usually tackled in this country.

We may be one of the most travelled people in the world, but our contemporary literature is paradoxically insular, regional, navel-gazing. Rare is the Australian novel that looks out onto the wide world. Even more rare is the multi-lingual academic publication, another paradox in this most cosmopolitan of countries.

This collection invites us to window-gaze onto the world with an intelligent, critical eye. Conversely the window looks in as well and we are given the luxury of observing how 'others' like Capone and Downing, see our writers.

One point of criticism. It's a pity that some contemporary Australian writers were not included in the collection. Indeed none of the major Australian writers of the past thirty

years get a mention, an omission that hopefully will be corrected in subsequent editions, or in further publications of this kind.

Antonio Casella

Ric Throssell, *In a Wilderness of Mirrors*, Sydney: Left Book Club Co-operative Ltd, 1992.

While it is folly to overestimate the power of literary texts, they often provide occasions for and accessible ways of thinking, talking about and acting on important social, political and cultural issues. Reading Ric Throssell's novel *In a Wilderness of Mirrors* is one such occasion. In contexts of supposed "postmodern" fragmentation it mounts a persuasive argument that people learn politics practically and get history lessons that do not dissolve in the face of postmodern musings. History is always made sense of from definite situations and socially learnt points-of-view in the present, in connection with current and contingent concerns. Pasts determine presents and, in this sense, co-exist with them. The concrete history lessons, "history's work" (p.194), that *In a Wilderness of Mirrors* stages include gendered and other familial relations of power, alongside more commonly recognized political matters. Its contrapuntal, almost nomadic narrative and characterisation imbricates a family's mundane struggle with political events in the former British colonies of Uganda, Grenada and the Seychelles, newly independent socialist nations variously subjected to counter-revolution, coup or invasion, as well as with not unconnected Australian political events, from opposition to involvement in the Vietnam War to apparent surveillance of the pro-republican movement which re-emerged and flourished after the dismissal of the Whitlam ALP federal government. Gubernatorial intervention in this and Grenada's Bishop government are implicitly linked when the novel's central character and

anti-hero, Selwyn Joynton, reflects on the outcome of the 1975 Australian federal election:

The war was over. The dead were buried. The victors had marched away. It was over. Treasurestone and the nation had given their democratic verdict; booted out Labor and given assent to the exercise of the vice-regal prerogative to dismiss the prime minister; but those who disagreed still seethed. They were a conquered tribe refusing defeat (pp.134-135).

Like communication, politics, especially democratic politics, is a risky business, a calculated gamble with sometimes unpredictable and often ambiguous outcomes and social effects, precisely the "wilderness of mirrors" of the novel's epigraph.

This same element of ambiguity and precariousness in the novel should deter its readers from absolute judgements of the Joynton character's identity and conduct. The woman to whom he is married, Marietta, diagnosed as schizophrenic (p.182), dies tragically in an asylum for the insane, but not before upbraiding Selwyn as "always on both sides" (p.130) and as a "Traitor, traitor, traitor" (p.189). He is a many-sided character, an effect due not to a complexly composed interior life but to the diversity of episodically presented situations in which the character is developed. The time and location shifts of the narrative have Selwyn Joynton, journalist, handicraft importer and "Messenger boy, nothing more" (p.158), visiting governmental and other civic dignitaries in Uganda, Grenada and the Seychelles shortly where-after violence and political mayhem erupt as if at his, possibly unconscious, signal. Joynton is presented as a contingent actor in history's events — caught up in the "accident" of a surface involvement, shrugging off responsibility but nonetheless an (unaccountable) locus of responsibility. As another character observes:

There was contrivance here; the quiet manipulation of events; the planned

response to destabilisation that his people [Americans] had made their strategy (p.123).

Yet, while Selwyn goes to Hanoi at the height of the Vietnam War (p.80) he might have betrayed anti-war protesters and their relatively selfless politics (p.21); he brings daughter Lucy a treasured porcelain puppet from Shanghai but volunteers for access to the membership records of the Australian Independent Republican Party (p.138). He is evidently loathed by son Jack and tormenting of the terminally confused and frightened Marietta, but abidingly loved and cared for by Lucy.

These apparent conflicts and contradictions indicate gaps in the Joynton dossier which, to be closed into a unified characterological essence (Selwyn's "identity"), requires readers to do and *to be alert to* their own labour of unification, definition and policing, as well as aware of the cultural and political baggage they draw on to perform this labour. The novel's use of realist compositional techniques makes it possible to read it as quizzing and challenging such prevalent concepts of identity and truth as usually coalesce around the composition and reading of character. These common-sense notions of identity and truth are themselves the politically-inflected cultural products of other realist forms of documentation, notation and surveillance, such as the security dossier, passport record and the psychological profile. Entailed in these inscriptions of identity is the administrative imposition of "consensus", and together these practices comprise the institutional capacities for the government of lives — pinning and identifying, blaming and dismissing, deploying a repertoire of means of terror from the military to the domestic departments of existence. In Joynton's case the platitudes, closures and putative final solutions of these tactics of identification aren't really plausible, although it is just such techniques of regulation and social division, in patriarchal and medical forms, which

secure Marietta's pitiful fate in the "tomb for hope" of the asylum (p.182).

In a Wilderness of Mirrors is concerned with the geo-politics of inter-regional relations of power, with parts of the Third World and Australian connections with and resemblances to these parts. Selwyn Joynton is a British citizen living in rural Victoria and travelling widely over-seas to:

the exotic places of the Third World that had once been the rich colonies of the old empire, until they were discarded, tossed aside to fossick for a wherewithal in their independence (p.142).

Post-colonial Australia shares with the very different nations of post-colonial Uganda, Grenada and the Seychelles imperial British cultural and political inheritances which far from guarantee their independence. Their common predicament is evidenced by various historically recent events graphically described in the narrative. The novel is thereby an occasion for contesting prevalent cultural arguments that "the source of the world's significant action and life is in the West"⁴, as well as the separatist demarcation of "us" and "them" and the ignorance of social and geo-political *relations* that accompany them.

In a Wilderness of Mirrors charts a history of certain aspects of the politics of post-World War II generations: politics in households, in the streets, on various national and interna-

tional stages. Contrary to claims of "the end of history" and the so-called near global triumph of liberal democracy, these political struggles have not produced uniformly progressive outcomes. This is a complacent, death-dealing and perhaps dominant Western illusion in relation to Third World populations in their struggles for even basic economic subsistence, political independence and social justice. Similarly, Australia's population does not consist in a homogeneously prosperous and socio-politically empowered citizenry, as the various situations of women, children and radical activist characters in the novel suggest.

On this novel's occasion, its readers may be left with some pertinent and fairly urgent questions: what senses are to be made of recent and contemporary histories? how are we to compile what sorts of necessary resources of hope and strategy to achieve equitable relations of power, economic and ecological sustainability, and social justice? Throssell's novel does not address readers in any didactic way. These questions are simply registered, at least implicitly, and left available for, hopefully, informed and democratic deliberation and rectification.

In a Wilderness of Mirrors reminds us once again that Throssell is a very accomplished writer. The first book of fiction to be published by the energetic Left Book Club, it is handsomely presented, relatively affordable at \$14-95, and highly recommended.

Cathy Greenfield
Peter Williams

4. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1993), p.xxi.

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