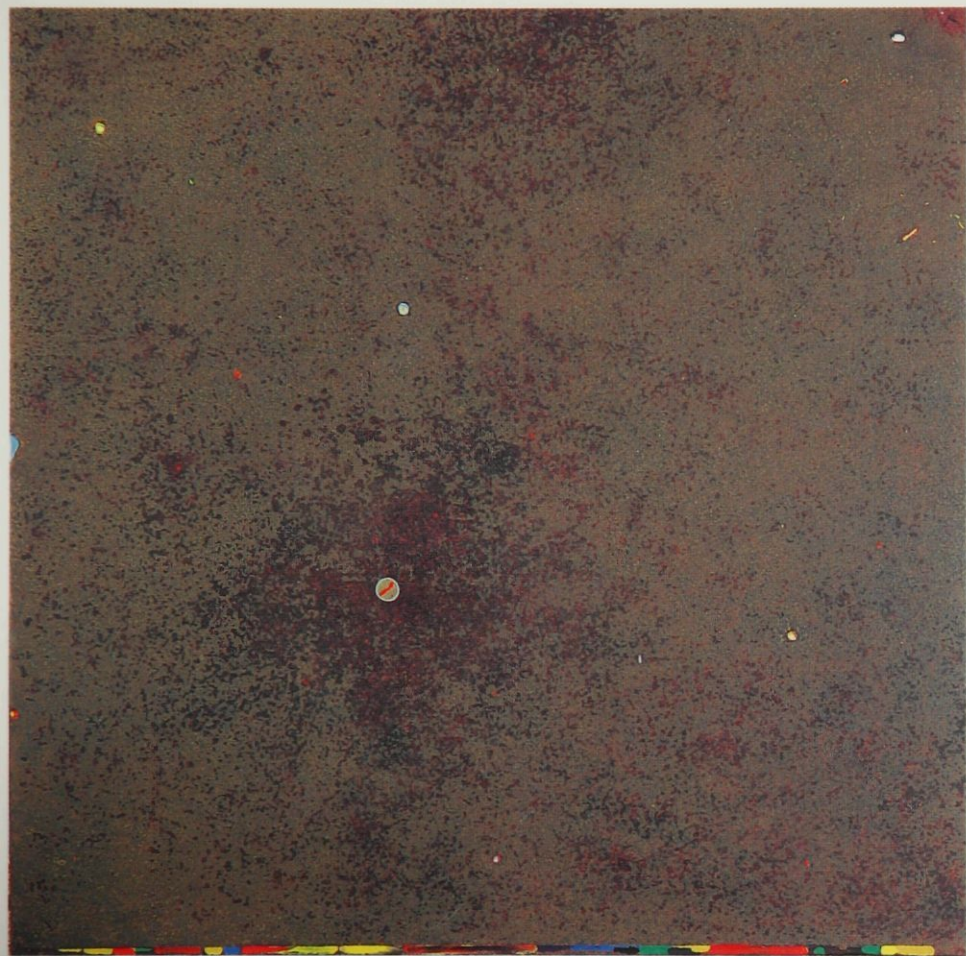


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APOLOGY

The editors apologise for the errors appearing in Graeme Hetherington's poem "Horse (West Coast, Tasmania)" which first appeared in *Westerly* no. 1 Autumn 1997. A reprint of the correct version appears in this issue.

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Ladybird, Ladybird

I have seen this small street over a decade
lose direction, fragment into discrete particulars:
the Harley-Davidson bikie with the Rottweilers
who talks to no-one but his booming hi-fi surf,
the couple next-door who park in their garage in clement weather
for a cuppa
and wave to the odd non-stranger passing by,
the widow brooding over imaginary slights who in her widowhood
drives the car she was never allowed to previously
as thought it were an unexploded bomb,
the young bloke in the reversed baseball cap who guns his Alpine
as thought he had personally invented testosterone,
the retired shearer, the retired teacher mowing lawns
under the illusion that this is real work still...
Conversation over fences is a dying art
as distant as the Renaissance. Every day
the young come and go endlessly, leaping in and out of vehicles like
grasshoppers in a wheatfield, punctuating statements
they have yet to make; the cherry guava seedlings planted by the council
get short shrift on nature-strips; the generation-gap
is deeper than the Marianas Trench
and the pearl-grey 51cm screens on which householders of an evening
are watching the same programme
offer a pethedine window on the world.
When the last of the earlier generation die or retreat to nursing-homes
the street will be blank, memoryless, like an abandoned bee-hive,
and the strong honey of neighbourliness not even missed.

The one communal activity still observed is the putting-out of
wheelie-bins on Monday mornings
and some are already hiring the post-natal services of Bin-Busters
—the sanitizing firm which promises to keep bins smelling sweet...

Not ecstasy, but anxiety

Fine resolutions adorn self-pity—
What is it he imagines love would solve?
Death's white papers blow through every city
where shadows hawk their blinding charity
from those who saw a talking cure revolve
around a self-delusion full of words
untarnished by thought, of emotion bereft,
but bud-lights tangled to placate the herds
who otherwise might question what rewards
—less an analysis and more a theft.
Anxiety thrives on a high income
its complex childhood skiting its results
and now immune to hurt, instead insults
the legislation it has risen from.

Achilleus to Odysseus

Vanished day,
to strive for fame, to glitter in a marble pool
but lose the task
You sit among the virtuous weeding out life
Personalities sulk
the talking breakfast, the blacked-out calendar
They whirl and fit

I wish I lived with silence
Black waves plucking the shore away from things
Traffic stripes night and trains kick

the black dissolving world
 the stove-white pages
 Drunken introverts graft home
 the active and idle
 Velvet bodies forming on the beach
 Footsteps break the slab of flats
 I walk into a house of death.

Peter Bibby

Walking up the Shadow

Since you are just as likely to sit in your tracks
 as take a step, I shall call you Drunken Reveller.
 Walking up your shadow, curious toed explorer,
 seeing for the first time that presence ahead,
 you press upon it as if to try the consequence...

And puzzle at it for a while, and then dismiss
 the taunting occurrence before you on the sand,
 where shells are found and washed up twigs,
 teach your grain-adhering fingers to grasp.

What do you learn from that which recedes
 as you advance? prefigurement of encounters,
 elusive, portentous, ominous joke-shape—
 now is your time of innocent eyes, even and grave
 renewable resource of ignorance, unbroken wave.

The Deluge

Almost stalled her before we pulled over.
You'd swear we'd parked at the foot of a
waterfall or under a dam with its sluice-
gates ripped open. And when it subsided

we couldn't believe it — funny, whatever
the gods chuck at you, they always pull back
in the nick of time — leave you some rope
to hang yourself, and that's *your* decision,

of course. Getting underway again, we
found ourselves driving with a new respect,
brown channels lining the edge of the road,
even the grass now treacherous.

For what seemed like hours I saw the drops
suspended in front of the headlights. That
was the night I kept seeing her face, the
features never quite complete, disappearing

and re-forming in the endless loop of
rain. By midnight, though, even that
had retreated, till we could see beyond
the hills the lightning flicking half-

heartedly, like a stockman with a tiring
arm, his mind on food and sleep.

Seeking the missing person, or reading the poetry of John Forbes

TO take an image from the title poem of *Tropical Skiing*, the poetry of John Forbes may usefully be compared to “a surfboard lost in Peru”.¹ On the one hand, as many critics down the years have agreed, his poems, like the surfboard, are afloat: they are nothing if not buoyant. Gary Catalano, for example, says: “his work has been widely reviewed and anthologised”.² Yet, in a sense, his poetry is also “lost” on some sort of eclectic surfing safari: his poems are “said to be difficult”. Rather than reaching out to be found by the reader, the poems seem to be lost in their own cleverness and inscrutability. Perhaps Ken Bolton provides a good short description of how to read them: “the poems attempt to be ... exemplary.... They are demonstrations of how to be”.³ To put it another way, perhaps we could say that the typical Forbes poem is its own enactment: it is not about something, rather, the poem is its own subject. If the poem “Tropical Skiing” mentions surfboards lost in Peru, it is because that is where the poem has taken itself, lost to its expressing subject (Forbes) so that it exists only as an enactment of the challenging idea of “Tropical Skiing”, which may, perhaps, also lose the reader on the breathless moguls of Forbes’ associations and imagination.

The question then becomes, why should the reader pay attention to such a self-possessed, baffling entity floating amongst all the other jetsam that comes his or her way, which may be not only more useful to him or her, but also easier to relate to? For example, Dennis Haskell, critic and poet, comes to Forbes with a reserved humanism. Haskell, the critic, admires Forbes’ self-mockery and scepticism, but not

1. John Forbes, *New and Selected Poems* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992), 14. Future references to this edition will be nominated in the text as NSP.
2. Gary Catalano, “Finding the proper noun: the poetry of John Forbes”, *Otis Rush*, #8, 1993, 103.
3. Ken Bolton’s early review in *Magic Sam*, no. 4, 1978.

when he descends to “sensational or trivial exercises in debunking”.⁴ This attitude is refined and enacted in a recent tribute by Haskell the poet: “On sitting down to deconstruct John Forbes once again”.⁵ As this title suggests, Haskell thinks Forbes will never be simply read and reread in the orderly, readerly, way in which one reads Keats or Homer, but only “deconstructed” as Meaghan Morris has done in her adulatory *Ecstasy and Economics: American Essays on John Forbes*. On the other hand, Haskell reads Forbes when:

I'm on holidays and
it's like wandering around in a lively daze
or flinging a boomerang into the mulga:
it never comes back.

This is precisely the problem for the Forbes poem. Ultimately, the poem's survival will partly depend on the critic who is *not* on holidays, and who demands a return for his intellectual boomerangs. The critic needs to pin down his victim, and make him fast in some sort of “cultural context”. Haskell continues, accusing Forbes:

You'll never be hooked by a cultural context
no matter what your visa says, or,
how long you're staying. You won't be here! or there!
no matter where you are.

Yet this observation, playfully enacting one of Forbes' stances, is, I believe, one of the most generally helpful that can be made about Forbes' poetry; its dilemma, and its lostness. His is the poetry of the missing person, of the disappearing subject, both in terms of subject as author/poet, the controlling presence, and subject as subject matter. It is as if his poems continually enact one of the fundamental axioms of structuralist/post-structuralist literary theory: the death of the author. It is often tempting to see this as his real subject. One certainly feels that Haskell is suspicious that this may be the case and that he finds this studied stance of the deconstituted subject a bit of a cop-out. In some ways, it is as if Forbes' poetry never grew up, and like Peter Pan, was always off with the lost boys, thumbing his nose at the academic

4. Dennis Haskell, “Thoughts on some recent poetry”, *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 8, October 1977, 142-3.

5. This poem is from the recent volume *Abracadabra* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1993), 53.

adults. His early poetry, for example, often bounces around with a sort of adolescent sensationalism. There is a fascination with the images of consumer products that is at once sceptical and libidinous. As Haskell puts it:

opening the book's like opening a Pepsi
 or plugging a fuse into the box
 with the power on: it always fizzes, no matter what the
 expiry date, it froths like a machine.

From Haskell's perspective the poem's buoyancy tends to be rather thoughtless, mechanical, and mass-produced, evading, rather than exploring human experience — rather like the pop-art that seems to have inspired much of Forbes' early poetry. And indeed, the buoyancy provided by the Pepsi bubble may be short lived if there is no more substantial issue or significance than the enactment of frothiness.

From the opposite end of the intellectual spectrum, Meaghan Morris' analysis of "Watching the Treasurer", written very much when she was at work, may give us a clue in the attempt to identify this more substantial issue. The conditions for the survival of a bubble have more to do with the tension at the surface than with the contents of its interior which inevitably are somewhat thin. If traditional criticism is concerned with the contents of the interior, modern textual studies are very much concerned with the tensions in the surface of the text. In "Watching the Treasurer", Paul Keating is described in terms of pure image, and the subject of the poem begins as the willing victim of this image. But Morris makes the point that the "I" who wants to believe the Treasurer's "beautiful lies" (*NSP 61*) disappears in the very act of enunciating the desire.⁶ The experiencing subject of the poem at once loves the image of Paul Keating — "elegant apostle of necessity" — but is also aware that this so-called "necessity" is really only "what rich Americans want". In positivist terms, the fundamental substance of Keating's message is perceived by the constituted subject of the poem as a "lie". This fact, however, if it were to be perceived as Forbes' ultimate "message", is easily grasped and the poem would scarcely survive its reading. The poem is not about the lie itself, but about the desire for such lies. Indeed, the poem is not about desire, but is its enactment. Sexually speaking the desire for the "lie" is consummated in "the milky white fluorescent glow", the

6. Meaghan Morris, *Extasy and Economics: American Essays for John Forbes* (FM Press, Sydney, 1992). See 67-73.

ejaculation of Keating's image on the television screen.

Yet we can clearly see how both the subject of the poem, the "I", and its subject matter, Keating, disappear in the enactment of desire. "I" becomes "you" after the first line, while Keating literally disappears into the TV screen: "a few millimetres / of invisible cosmetic". Keating's "world is / like a poem", his utopia precisely word and/or image deep: "what your words describe / you know exists". This defrocking of Keating is, of course, neither profound nor original, and would not survive his demise. What is interesting, however, is to see traced the conditions of desire that kept him in power so long. The poem will survive like any other love poem as an account of the tension in desire — the kiss and the cut. If the object of love is political and cultural, rather than the more usual physical and personal — this is usually the case in Forbes' poetry. His poems are the record of a sort of love affair with objects of popular culture: Pepsi, Camel cigarettes, television, pop music, sport, beaches etc. Like Andy Warhol's art, his poems are sceptical acts of love with objects from the world of mass consumerism. But these objects are not the subject of his poetry; rather, they operate by crowding out the subject in an attempt to render the poem more purely an object.

Yet despite her philosophical practice and credentials, Morris does not so much deconstruct Forbes' poetry as provide a reading of the way in which the Forbes poem preserves itself as an object by the deconstruction of its subject — which is lost somewhere between the lie and the beauty of the Treasurer's speech. Keating's "lie", if you like, is what liberates the "beauty" of the poem. In the world of Keats, alluded to in the title of Haskell's poetic tribute, "Truth is beauty, beauty truth". The truth about Keating for Forbes, if you like, is that as a politician he was a beautiful liar; and his performance aspires to that of those other beautiful liars: the fictions of artists and poets. It is the truth of the performance. This is the aesthetic outlined by Forbes himself in various interviews. He told Catherine Kenneally, for instance, that he distinguishes his poetry from that which is merely "embroidering or illustrating a point — rather than just making it, creating it".⁷ Or again: "I don't really work from having something to say. I work from getting a line or a couple of lines that suggest some more lines ... and the poems write themselves in a way".⁸ Forbes goes on to describe the poem as "a self-validating currency" which differs from legal tender in that "there's no such thing as a fake poem".⁹ The problem is, whatever the

7. Catherine Kenneally, "Form, Intuition and (a) song", *Otis Rush*, 8, 1993, 90.

8. Kenneally, 88.

9. Kenneally, 95.

buoyancy of such performative poetry (not to be confused with performance poetry), it tends to seal itself hermetically. Our work-a-day, rational, empirical minds want to break the bubble's hermetic seal and get inside: but then the bubble is broken; the poem does not survive. It implodes elsewhere than Peru on the reefs of knowing. And indeed, despite Morris' sympathy for Forbes' performative autonomy, she does tend to burst Forbes's bubble on the reef of her profound knowing as she (not unfairly) makes the poems of *The Stunned Mullet* volume reveal cultural truths beyond their hermetic seal.

In many ways, the archetypal Forbes poem is not one of his best. It is one that has clearly lost its subject in both senses: "Admonitions / written with Mark O'Connor". In the first place, the poem is not ostensibly *about* anything, being a series of apparently incoherent "admonitions." Again, the very title enacts the disappearance of the expressive subject by dispersing it into a duality: Forbes and Mark O'Connor. Thus traditional critical statements such as "Forbes thinks, says, means, intends..." are overtly banished before reading begins. Indeed, the poem very much presents itself as a hoax against reading. In some ways, the poem enacts the problematic created by the Ern Malley hoax. According to its perpetrators, the intention behind the Malley hoax was to create a series of "false" poems in order to subvert reading, the reading of poetry in terms of the burgeoning modernism of Pound and Eliot then taking place in Australian poetic circles. But the hoax was too hugely successful. The Malley poems certainly made the point that Max Harris could not distinguish between a "real" modernist poem and a "false" one, and at an empirical level would seem to have scuttled the claims of modernism. Yet from the perspective of the post-modernist nineties, one could argue, from the fact of the very buoyancy and capacity to survive of the Malley poems, all the hoax scuttled was the idea of the "fake" poem. The Malley poems survive not despite, but because of their ability to subvert the intention of their perpetrators, as well as their ability to subvert Max Harris' reading. Forbes' poems are similarly subversive: in their autonomy, they evade an authorial desire to express a particular thing or make a particular point and also the readerly desire to possess that intention.

The final admonition of "Admonitions / written with Mark O'Connor" is a clue how to read it. It is about letting go of the ego into a game or contest between the "me" and the bull, where the game transcends and swallows up the individual:

let me disappear, let me go to the spontaneous bullfight! (NSP 7)

If we return to the start of the poem, we can see how it can be read in terms of this “spontaneous bullfight”. Reading is a self-validating performative contest as much as writing. Indeed, the initial reader is the writer — or one of them. It is the writer Forbes challenging the reader O’Connor, or vice versa, not only to read, but to come up with the next line. (In other poems, this can be transferred to the idea of the writer Forbes challenging the reader Forbes to come up with a new line based on the suggestiveness of the one just proposed.) The opening statement is a challenge:

The happiest of cannonballs

This, if you like, is the opening bit of “bull”. How can cannonballs be happy or have any personal feelings? It can be thought of as the initial charge of the “bull”-figure (the initial writer) in the poem (Forbes, perhaps? Or O’Connor?) So how does the “toreador”-figure (the initial reader) respond? How can he respond to such metaphysical inanity? Heroically, he lifts his cape, and hazards: “is a burger”. Is this to be taken literally or metaphorically, or simply desperately? There is a certain geometric congruence between the burger and the cannonball, but the question of its feelings is still difficult. So the toreador/first reader lifts his cape again, as if to clarify by using a personification: “a labour of love walking naked / along the beach”. In contrast to the first two images, this verges on the “poetic”, conjuring visions of a pleasant hippy existence on the NSW north coast or a commune of poets at Surfers Paradise. The “beach” is a recurring image throughout Forbes’ poetry. An early selection of the *Stalin’s Holidays* collection appeared in the slender volume entitled *On the beach*, which, taking its title from the ‘60s Cliff Richard hit of the same name, reminds us in its epigraph that this is where “your troubles are out of reach”. The image endures in the Bicentennial Poems of *The Stunned Mullet* collection, where the idea of the beach is played with in terms of being part of an Australian national icon. But in “Admonitions” we are not allowed to visualise the beach. It is anti-poetic. The clarification only serves to entangle. How can a burger, or a cannonball, walk? Why is it a labour of love? The following line is like an attempt to cut through the tangle, and dismember the bull, deflating the happiness of the cannonball by exposing its thoughts, in the form of another trope, the rhetorical question: “thinking: ‘Will our shit return to us in paperback?’” Thus the poem surprises itself with the revelation that “the labour of love” may have been a bowel movement rather than a more creative version of this theme. The joke is also literary: if the “labour of love” turns

out to be a “shit”, it will return to pollute the poetic, “the beach”, in its cheap popular form, the “paperback”.

I do not intend to present the above as a definitive “reading” of “Admonitions” in any but the most fundamental way: that is, it is exemplary of reading as an act of engagement, a sport, a contest, indeed, an act of writing, rather than one of closure, meaning, and message. It is an act of engagement to be renewed with each succeeding line. The remainder of the first part of “Admonitions” pursues the trope of the rhetorical question as the most appropriate to the contest taking place: the trope which challenges reading and evades providing the answer as the reader/author responds to each unanswerable question with another equally unanswerable question, if only to keep the ball in play, but perhaps to overgo and win the point. Thus knowing the answer to these questions is not as important as the ability to keep up an end, and indeed, to “know”, would be the death of the contest, the death of the poem just as it would be, for example, to “know” the “dancer from die dance” in Yeats’s more traditional “Among school children”. It would close the poem down with an opinion or definitive reading. Thus “Admonitions” presses on with new rhetorical challenges, an exclamation pursued by a question:

ah Sweeny Todd
will we ever forget “Him”?

The apparent nostalgia in this reminiscence of the famous butcher/barber of London is ironic in a text whose every line remembers nothing of the one before. The series of non sequiturs that make up “Admonitions” are like the limbs of one of Sweeny’s victims, hacked from a body of meaning whose identity is forgotten. If this is becoming dangerously close to giving the reader a serious headache, the Forbes’ poem never takes itself seriously for long. The challenges of the Sweeny lines are responded to with advice on how to *take*, as opposed to how to *read*, them:

swallow slowly with a glass
of water

These lines, hacked, it would seem, from a commercial medicine label, are the first sign overtly mocking the reader’s “stumblebum” efforts to reconstruct a poem that has already self-deconstructed. From this point phrases cascade quickly down the

page: "I'm a migrating worker /I love a celestial fridge". Is this a poetic way of suggesting: "I, John Forbes, removalist (the migrating worker) like celestial fridges because they are light to lift?" Or is it Mark O'Connor complaining that the Beatrice of his aspirations (the celestial body) is somewhat frosty in her responses? Or do these assertions merely play with the reader's need to find such a presence behind the poem in order to make it comprehensible again?

This provocation and evasion of the reader constitutes the tension that keeps the poem afloat. It is an enactment of the centrifugal tendency of discourse to become mere words and the centripetal or readerly desire for a centre, presence or whole. This is the tension suggested by lines later in "Admonitions": "the longer you stay up, / the more you divide and sticky tape." This could be glossed as: "the longer the poem goes on, the more it seems to divide and disperse, and the more readerly sticky tape is needed to keep it together". The final lines of the first part of "Admonitions" enact this tension with a series of rhetorical questions:

Will apples happen?
Will glycerine flow like blood?
What's the typical daze?
Is this the average spelling?

Usually rhetorical questions are left unanswered because there is such community of agreement as to the answer it need not be uttered, or else the question is considered too profound for an answer. The questions here, however, are too shallow for answering. They are corrupted at the level of denotation and connotation into absurdity. Apples grow, but do not happen; glycerine flows if heated, but never to the same emotive effect as blood; dazes are individual, not typical; spelling is accepted or not, but never averaged. The superfluity of these questions and of any attempt to read them is mocked in the evasive closure of the final lines, perhaps one of the "trivial exercises in debunking" disliked by Dennis Haskell: "Not if we / can help it, / stumblebum." This gratuitous insult works by diverting the reader from questions of meaning into a question of style of reading. It is announcing that poetry is a diversion, rather than a grasping after meaning or significance, typical of the critical enterprise. It is announcing that "we" are not only going to refuse answers to readerly enquiries, but frustrate any such attempts from the beginning.

Part 2 of “Admonitions / *written with Mark O’Connor*” presents a new series of challenges. The writer poses as the nimble gingerbread man (“for you’ll never catch me”) who will only be caught by his “Memories of Cocaine” — the first allusion to substance abuse that may “explain” the confused nature of the poem. Here the subject escapes the poem by posing as an unreliable witness — it’s not really “me” speaking, it’s the substances: “What I think is a dirigible is only a visible whiff”. This may explain the “mistakes” the poem makes, for example, in its allusion to the peregrinations of the author of *Ulysses*: “Trieste — Paris — Zurich 1914-1917 B.C.”¹⁰ But in this post-modern rewriting of Joyce’s modernist rewriting of Homer’s B.C. epic, the “B.C.” “= before all night Coke machines/ or rainy afternoons chainsmoking the Alpine of my mind”. The Muses and gods of Olympus are replaced in the post-modern world by chemicals — Cocaine, Coke and Alpine cigarettes. These are responsible for the “the inimitable mind-fuck” where everything is distorted in a complete orgasmic experience. Indeed, the connections are not always totally absurd or random. The allusions to Joyce and Homer seem to be prompted by the previous assertion that the writer(s) of the poem are “waiting for the/ milkshake dawn” — an obvious pale imitation or parody of the “rosy-fingered” variety favoured by Homer. But it is only in the reading that these connections are made — the poem purposely, if playfully, leaves them out “salting your mind with a paydirt ellipse”. Overall, “Admonitions / *written with Mark O’Connor*” gives the impression of an alternate line poem with Forbes and O’Connor sparking off each other, each the reader of the other’s writing, thus enacting in the poem a reader/writer relationship, where the writer is the first reader, where reading is writing within the poem’s ellipsis. To return to my initial metaphor for reading a Forbes’ poem, the “spontaneous bullfight”, “Admonitions” is the most typical Forbes poem because it is nothing but surprise, adrenalin and blood, the “bullfight” into which its subject has disappeared, a hacked body of sense and meaning. It can be thought of as a paradigm to which many of the other poems aspire — but in varying degrees fail, as the ghost of the subject, meaning and sense returns to haunt them — to their ultimate poetic benefit.

Indeed, the very idea of the poetics of surprise is not completely ghost-free. Forbes himself has explained it in another way, describing the poetic process as a “finding out”:

10. The “correct” order of places and dates for the writing of *Ulysses* are: Trieste-Zurich-Paris 1914-1921.

finding out something you're not sure about — it's a surprise — surprising yourself, I mean, if you *know* what you're going to say, the poem tends to be, boring. It tends to turn into a sermon or reflection ... if you're finding out something new it's sort of more original.¹¹

Here we see Forbes explicitly rebelling against the traditional poetics of Pope, for example, where the poem takes as its subject the common thought but which is “ne'er so well expressed” as in the poem. The surprises in “Admonitions” are rather overdone, making no point other than the autonomous, performative and surprising nature of the poem itself. But this “surprise” becomes a bore after the first time it is made. The real surprise in the poetry of John Forbes is where the subject, like Alfred Hitchcock, puts in a surprise, guest appearance.

In Forbes' most famous early poem, “Four Heads & How to do them”, most of the first twelve lines of “The Classical Head” are taken from a treatise on painting by Aretino.¹² The “surprise” in this poem comes in the final lines, where it jettisons its ostensible subject, it “leaves out the head”, and relocates it well and truly in the body:

A man is ten faces tall and assuming one leaves out
the head the genitals mark his centre exactly. (NSP, 8)

This is not simply a clever surprise or shift, but, with its neutral tone, appears to be making a rather Swiftian comment on human nature, at the same time opening the whole philosophical question on the relationship of mind and body. Similarly, “The Romantic Head” loses itself as a subject as it achieves its desire for identification with the world: “The head/ at last one with the world, dissolves.”(NSP, 9) This seems to be a fairly parodic version of Keats' famous “negative capability” of the poet, and opens questions as to the relationship between the poet and the world. The idea is pursued as the “artist changes genre”, giving birth to “The Symbolist Head” which surprises by invoking a universe “from which only the head has been removed”. The “surprise” of this poem is the discovery that this universe from which the head has been removed turns out to have the head at its invisible centre, where the landscape is conceived as existing as a web of clues as to the head's existence. But

11. Kenneally, 89.

12. Interview with John Forbes in *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*, 75.

as the metaphors open up upon each other, the Symbolist head emerges, parodically, from a Daliesque “rubbish dump”:

And here, like finding a lone wig in a vast rubbish dump devoted to shoes, the Symbolist head appears, a painting filled with love for itself, an emotion useless as mirrors without a head. This art verges on the sentimental. It's called pillow talk. (NSP p.10)

The similes here may be surreal, as Gary Catalano notes, prompting some people to read Forbes as a surrealist poet, but Forbes does not emphasise the super-reality, but rather the uselessness — the rubbish dump image — or superfluity of this version of art: its ultimate absurdity. He consigns it, with the other heads, to the dustbin of history. “Four Heads” in many ways functions as a wittier, pithier version of Tranter’s *The Alphabet Murders*, a clearing of the artistic and theoretical grounds, defining a new moment in artistic endeavour — the post-modern, “conceptualist” moment. The final part of “Four Heads” conceptualises this new art by *enacting* the poem’s “longing to be a piece of flesh and blood” rather than being the “immortal tape recorder” of the poem that is “trapped inside its subject”. In “The Conceptual Head”, the poem achieves a sort of autonomy, its own head, as it were, sailing off into new worlds, new heads, by itself, taking off into the extended metaphor of the Magellanic Traveller, which we only find out about by means of the postcards, sent with “colourful native stamps”. The Magellanic Traveller is the surprise ending to a poem ostensibly about heads, and has the same buoyancy function as the “surfboard lost in Peru” has for “Tropical Skiing”. The poem is the “flotsam” — the survivor of the wreck of the poetic process “that addles our skis” and is “a total flicking gas” (NSP, 14). The pieces of flotsam that make up the Forbes poem are the serendipitous survivors — a phrase, image, or idea whose original intention or meaning has vanished, but which survives at the level of textuality, off the sea-coast of poetry.

By way of contrast, *The Stunned Mullet* collection appears to represent a bit of a sea change in Forbes’ poetry. Gary Catalano, for example, thinks; “At the very least, Forbes now writes out of his own feelings. These feelings are, moreover, rather sombre...”.¹³ Yet one could argue, perhaps, that the poems in *The Stunned Mullet* collection are more other-directed, less narcissistic, rather than simply “more sombre”. This can be seen in the poems analysed by Meaghan Morris, “Watching the Treasurer” and “On the Beach: a Bicentennial Poem”, which can be thought of

13. Catalano, 113.

as being about demystifying politicians and national mythologies respectively. As Forbes told Catherine Kenneally:

I just became more and more aware of how society is organised and ... the breathtaking brutality and ruthlessness that underpins everyday reality.¹⁴

There is a dimension of overt satire in "Watching the Treasurer", for example, as the poem seeks to analyse the way that politicians manipulate the watching public, while in "On the Beach", the beach is no longer just a place where "beauty... closes a book" but is analysed in terms of being a national icon, including some of the sinister overtones of Neville Shute's novel of the same name.

Having said this, however, it can also be argued that such analysis, such satire, has always been present. This can be seen if we compare the title poems of *Stalin's Holidays* and *The Stunned Mullet*. Both poems sport the usual complement of proper nouns and references, without which, as Gary Catalano notes, "Forbes would find it next to impossible to write a single poem".¹⁵ "Stalin's Holidays" features: Stalin, Sholokov, Lenin, Sgt. Fury, Stephen Fitzgerald, Wolverhampton Wanderers, USSR, Red China, as well as the nationalities, French, Australian and Russian. "The Stunned Mullet" features: Bob Hawke, Captain Nemo, Wendy Hughes, Alan Bond, the Olympics, Sydney and a reference to a "European judge of good cigars." While both poems contrast European and Australian culture, "The Stunned Mullet" uses the contrast to perform a more overt analysis of Australian culture. Both poems characterise Australians in terms of lack. In "The Stunned Mullet", Australians, it is implied, are as inarticulate as mullets stunned from impact upon "a stupid beach". In "Stalin's Holidays" Australians "don't/speak French or play Soccer... our/vocabulary and games are lazier by far" (NSP, 49). Yet this laziness seems to be presented as a virtue when compared to Europeans like Stalin, who, Forbes has explained, pushed European idealism to an extreme point "with unpleasant results for the slag".¹⁶ In this poem, one feels the poet is adopting the role of the laid-back, laconic, larrikin Australian — perhaps, playfully, he is the "lazy dog" of the first line, jumped over by the quick brown foxes of Europe. This, however, is too much of a reading of what is, after all, only a sentence that contains all the letters of the

14. Kenneally, 95.

15. Catalano, 105.

16. *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*, 83.

alphabet — “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog” — a sentence which, in containing everything, says nothing. It probably says as much as the attempts at Russian by the “two members of Wolverhampton Wanderers” which is overheard “without understanding”. Or indeed, the French of Stalin’s telegram “mes vacances sont finies”, which “we” — including the poet who identifies with us Australians — are claimed not to speak. Then there is the game of “the nicotine-stained fingers of our latest defector” shaking as they reach for “Sholokov’s *Lenin*.” I can find no trace of the existence of this book (in Australia). This “commie” is thus metamorphosed into “the ones in comics like ‘Battle Action’” — the very last place one would expect to find a reference to the literary Sholokhov. The poem concludes with a deformation of Paul McCartney’s: “Back/ in the USSR, we don’t know how lucky we are”. This would seem to assert the superiority of European culture to that of the lazy Australian, except that it is ironically undercut by the reader’s knowledge of the actuality of Stalin’s Russia. But by then, once more, the poem seems to have lost its subject. Is this “we” the same “we” — that is the Australians — who couldn’t speak French? In that case it could be we Australians who don’t know how lucky we are to not be in Stalin’s Russia. Yet, despite these characteristically challenging riddles, in the middle of the poem, there is a very solidly evoked subject and situation, which is the poem’s real surprise:

Well, after lunch we hear a speech.
It’s Stephen Fitzgerald back from ‘Red’ China.
Then, you hear the postie whistle.

The conversational tone here, and casual allusion to the interpreter to the 1972 A.L.P. delegation to Red China (Fitzgerald), suggest a real event in a real world which stands out amongst the other absurdist juxtapositions, stereotypes and non sequiturs that make up the poem. A poet, perhaps Forbes, could have been sitting on his verandah reading comics, having lunch and then listening to Stephen Fitzgerald on the radio, as the postman’s whistle is heard. In fact it holds out the promise of a constituted subject as if the poem were going to be a circumstantial account of a particular person on a particular subject, Communism. But this illusion is dissipated by the anachronistic receipt of Stalin’s telegram: “Mes vacances sont finies, Stalin”. It is written in French, because as Forbes has explained, in the Second World War the European press, like the members of the Wolverhampton Wanderers, didn’t speak Russian and would refer to him in the language of

diplomacy. But the telegram is scarcely news. Stalin's holidays finished, finally, some twenty-five years before the writing of this poem. In the end, the poem seems to be content to display and play with various attitudes to national stereotypes, communism and the functions of language. Perhaps the paradigm is established early in the poem when the "copies" of Sholokov's spurious work are changed to "commies" and finally to "comics" by simple consonantal transformations. The reader is severely challenged, as in "Admonitions", to come down with his "stumblebum" reading. But Forbes' triumph is to keep all the balls in the air. As the poem advises: "Bottoms up, Comrade.", for we will never get to the bottom of it.

The significance of writing about receiving an anachronistic telegram from Stalin in a language that is native to neither sender nor receiver, is not to make definitive points about national characteristics or about the arbitrary nature of signifiers (although arguably it does these things as well), but to fantasise goonishly on this fantastic situation that words have created. The title poem of *The Stunned Mullet* collection begins at the same point. It begins from the fantasy situation of a speaking fish, leading to a Keating-like "beautiful lie", like "Stalin's Holidays":

lips bruised blue
 from the impact on the shore
 form words you applaud
 because, after all, a fish is speaking (*NSP*, 78)

By the end of the poem, this miraculous fish has succeeded in transferring the significance of the vernacular metaphor which is its original element — that is, stupidity — to the beach itself, not only an icon of Australian culture, but widely scattered throughout Forbes's poetry. The Bicentennial Poems tend to transfer this symbolism to Australia itself — the typical lazy Australians mentioned in "Stalin's Holidays", a category which Forbes does not set himself up as superior to, or different to, except perhaps in his ambiguities. But this is not the only transferral in "The Stunned Mullet". In the course of the poem, the fish is magically transformed into Jules Verne's "Nautilus" — "a cunning mechanical contrivance" that brought Captain Nemo to our shores, and then Alan Bond's "belly coloured airship" which "inspects Sydney like a stupid beach". This swapping of roles for the mullet — from being the stunned, stupid one on the beach, to inspecting the beach from above — precisely enacts the buoyancy of the Forbes poem: rather than beginning with a subject and a point of view, the poem begins in stupidity, in a stunned not-knowing,

until it rises, like the airship, to gain not simply a point of view, but a panorama of stupidity.

Thus it is important to note that Forbes' miraculous fish deserves applause not for *what* he says -it is no purveyor of knowledge or wisdom — but merely for the ability to make an utterance. As in "Watching the Treasurer" this poem is more interested in the response to its subject, rather than the subject itself. Something is interesting, only if there is someone interested. With the fishes' first transformation into a "cunning mechanical contrivance" whose "scales are false / like Bob Hawke's hair", the fantasy attempts to extricate itself by superimposing a fantasy of even greater mechanical contrivance, falsity and cunning. But the simile is confusing again as the "false" nature of the scales is transferred to the subject of the simile. The "cunning mechanical contrivance" seems to say more about Bob Hawke than the fish. The simile's usual function is reversed. Thus by a series of surprises Forbes succeeds in formulating a sort of political analysis of Bob Hawke. The comparison to the "stunned mullet" suggests a sort of stupidity, while his glittering, false, alloy hair is suggestive of the manufactured nature of the "beautiful lie" in which he participates.

Moreover, this surprising and fantastical appearance of Hawke — somewhat paralleling Stalin's telegram — triggers more cultural comparisons between Australians and Europeans. A characteristic ampersand — emphasising the tenuous, spontaneous nature of the connections in the poem — announces this new movement. The stunned mullet's metamorphosis into the "mechanical contrivance" becomes identified with the Nautilus, while Captain Nemo seems to function as a representative European. The temporal cut and pasting required to make the modern Australian actor, Wendy Hughes, an object of desire for this fictional, fussy European — whose name means "no-one" — staggers the reader with its anachronistic fantasy. The "fussy European" has style: he knows his cigars, bears "elaborate" grudges, and has designer submarine controls. His passions run deep. The last few lines seem to contrast this with a modern Australian equivalent. The ship of the deep becomes a ship of the air:

while above you
Alan Bond's belly-coloured airship
inspects Sydney like a stupid beach

The "mechanical contrivance" of this Australian captain of the stock market, does

not glitter, but is grossly “belly coloured”, its object of interest the “stupid”, rather than the beautiful. The poem’s final act of bravado is finally to identify “you”, possibly the reader, with the mullet, stranded, stunned and speechless between these icons. As in “Stalin’s Holidays”, therefore, between the fantastically mutating metaphors, there is a sort of analysis of Australian cultural identity going on. But Forbes does not leave you with the answer as to “what it is to be Australian”. Instead, he leaves you suspended and challenged among the possibilities raised.

Earlier it was suggested that the Forbes’s poem be compared to a bubble as it floats or dies according to the surface tension of its textuality. If there is a difference in *The Stunned Mullet* volume from earlier poems, it is that the text does not simply enact this surface tension as textuality but exhibits the tension as conceptual analysis as well. To take another example, drugs in “Drugs” from *Stalin’s Holidays* are celebrated merely hedonistically as “blind chemicals to make you freak” (NSP, 59). By contrast, “Speed: a Pastoral”, from *The Stunned Mullet*, which begins by supporting the argument “its fun to take speed”, finishes by admonishing the poet Michael Dransfield for dying “too soon”. The poem’s final lines suggest Dransfield mistook metaphor for reality, thus enacting the lie behind drug taking:

as if he thought drugs were an old fashioned teacher
 & he was the teacher’s pet, who put up his hand
 & said quietly, “Sir, Sir,”
 & heroin let him leave the room (NSP, 75)

Here, the ampersands and loose syntax do not take the poem off into a new tangential subject as if the text had a mind of its own, do not send a postcard with “colourful native stamps” (as in “Four Heads”), but bring the poem to a simple poignant point: the “as if” brings the subject home, rather than giving it free reign. On the one hand, there is an elegiac note for Dransfield’s death; on the other, there is a note of surprise and revelation at the power and intoxicating effect of the metaphor, as if that were the real heroin, to which Dransfield, as poet, was addicted. It is as if Dransfield took the metaphor too seriously and was lost to this, rather than the physical drugs. In other words, in *The Stunned Mullet*, the “I” that desires to love the treasurer and love beaches, for instance, cannot forget that the “elegant apostle of necessity” is only doing “what rich Americans want”, and that the beach, rather than being a place where “your troubles are out of reach” is also the scene of the dazed, stunned life of the mullet. In short the “present” is not simply the site of

absolute disintegrating “presence”, but gives way to vanishing temporal perspectives as well. As we are told in “Missing Persons”:

the day goes to pieces and you disappear
equally indulgent and almost on schedule
in the next life I am Ike
& you Tina Turner, vibrating
between box speakers on a shelf (NSP, 60)

Here we observe the speaker of the poem becoming a “missing person”, lost in the fantasy of being like Ike, and hence with, pop-star Tina Turner as lover. He is in his “next life” every bit as much as Dransfield. But Forbes’s narcotic does not have such a permanent effect. The fantasy still “bounces” him around, “vibrating between box speakers”, every bit as much as the “blind chemicals”. Forbes is still addicted to proper nouns and popular culture. But rather than being presented as a statement of the infinite present like a piece of pop art, so characteristic of his earlier poems, the tension that provides the buoyancy in these later poems involves a recognition in the surface and structure of the poetry that the fantasy is a fantasy, its beauty is a lie. Thus the fantastical speaking fish, that ought to have been a popular knock-out, only received scattered applause: it is not “a *total fucking gas*” [my italics]. In short, it is recognised that we cannot completely disappear into “the spontaneous bullfights” without fatal mutilation.

Describing Phenomena

i

Green lights
pattern the far point

glow on the mouth
as code drips

or bait hung
over eddies

cleaves light into dark orbit,
edge mapped out

by the cast.
Fish rise from mud

to cool water,
rest up the hull

and bump beneath feet
to shadow us,

dull bee-stung drunk
on the currants.

Amanda says
you poets never catch a thing

as the last train
erupts

from an empty hill,
devours the bridge

and spans another age
of error,

sandstone pylons
built to carry nothing

over precious stars.
Look at this,

*one more
glorious lie*

*anchored over the original.
Leave the bridge*

*to sink further
into itself,*

*phosphorescent bubbles
to track the atrocity of living.*

ii

Next morning
Anthony stands at the top of a ladder

with James Dickey,
lines arranged like

inaccurate theatre
applaud language,

that unwelcome
freedom of symbols.

They told me deliverance
will devour

the body, the dead weight
of composition

drifting on each tide,
knots open

& details & all
that is oblivious

we may not
know *till then*.

Alec Choate

Wind Among the Leaves

Curtains breathe, windows are only half closed.
Bach's 'Forty Eight' lies open on a chair
by the piano, but, when he composed
these fugues, these preludes, could he have foreseen
they would be fingered by shrewd garden air?
The leaves start up, then fall, but none can quite
be turned, a fingering that seems to mean
a special item is worth searching for.

One leaf that flutters higher, flicks the light
more brightly, like a call, making me see
the title and first bars of a loved score,
the great D Major fugue I often play,
but must not now, as Bach seems close to me,
taking my place, rousing the leaves this way.

Breath of a Season

IF you were to roam high above this country you would see a great tessellated pattern of barley and wheat fields glinting grey and silver in the moon. The earth is clean and undulating, outlined with black lines of bitumen, streaking across the land. Further down there is a dark sheen, glimmering with stars. The night is rich with the sound of frogs. A warm layer of air, musky with the smells of summer and dust, hovers just above the surface. If you sink down into the warmth of this layer, you will find water glinting black at your belly.

And you will see a small light, bobbing over the water, or perhaps just around the edges of the dam. It is always here at this time of year. It belongs to a man who takes his daughter and a net, paddling out through the darkness to poach the marron which feed below.

* * *

It is just after lunch when the car rushes around corners, teetering a little under its load of a tin canoe and the Webber. The Christmas ham sweats fat next to the white dimples of a frozen turkey, thawing blood and water in the heat.

A distant triangle of blue glimmers and sparkles in the sun, fringed with the straggling green of tea trees. The air is thick with the sounds of cicadas and the tang of bush, burnt dry by summer.

The people in the car are cranky in this heat, slipping in their sweat on the vinyl seats. The youngest feels the roll of the car as it swerves and veers over the hills. There is a hot rush of carsick and they stop.

At once they clamber out, grumbling while the youngest spits into the dust. They are breathing deeply, stretching and yawning with their faces to the sun. They study the dam in the distance. The youngest, between spits, sees that look come over her father. The one that starts in the corners of his eyes. She sees it in the set of his shoulders, the space between his feet.

He is thinking of a river running in the early morning light and the tailor that gather there in early summer. He thinks of the marbled blue of a manna crab, the clack of their claws and the weave of their underwater dance. He thinks of prawns gathering upriver and birds diving to feed where whitebait teem. He feels the drag of a tide moving in from the west, sees it rush over the shore and pour down the river as fish flash in the moving water.

When her father is not thinking of these things he is thinking of the marron that hide in the stillness of inland waters. They live in shadows and rotting trees, feeding on the debris that collects in the dam. As the afternoon cools to dusk they come to feed, pink eyes gleaming in the night.

Her father loves to poach marron. He loves the hours spent fishing in darkness, listening to the water slide under the tin hull and watching the rectangle of yellow light that is the owner's house. Waiting for the wet flick of a marron caught in the net.

Her mother gave up fishing years before. Flung her rod into the salt spray, swearing into the buffeting wind, sick of the grunge of octopus bait under her nails and the hot splash of fish blood on her skin. She roved in sand dunes with binoculars, looking for birds and naming plants. He is left to stand out in the pull of the tide alone, whipping the line out over the cresting waves, waiting for a sudden pull and the sun to catch a flash of silver out to sea.

He taught his daughters to fish. Bundled them into beanies, hung them off jetties, off pylons, sat them on rocks and taught them to run the outboard. He showed them how to dig their toes into the grit of the ocean floor and cast out over the break where the waves spilled in white streams over the reef.

The eldest is very much like him. Their legs bow at the same places, they are both

rake thin and share a temper that sparks like the dry leaves of summer.

The youngest is a little awkward and her father is aware of this. He is more careful with her. The eldest saw and felt something sour slide through her belly her like oil. They youngest knew how her sister felt and an uneasiness grew between them.

So the fishing trips became a father and youngest thing. It was her responsibility to buy the chocolate and pull the thick worms which squirmed in the mud. She could choose shrimps that were the fattest with eggs and thread them on a hook so they wriggled and flapped, yet stayed alive. He taught her not to wear hand lotion so her line was clean of scent. The youngest grew up with chafed hands and a feel for the tides and moon. She grew up knowing to gut a fish from anus to head, the dull gleam of purple and red intestines spilling out onto the board. She knew when the king prawns were running, where to net for crabs and watched the almond tree for its blossoms to know when the bream began their journey down the river.

She is still coughing and spitting as she climbs into her bathers, carsick burning her throat. She feels grimy and ill. Her swimsuit pongs. Although the dam sparkles brilliant blue, the water is tea stained. Small particles catch in her arm hairs. Her mother is on the gravelly shore, drinking tea and reading four books at once. She calls out about freckles. Her sister lies on the little jetty, gleaming and taut in her purple bikini. The bush hums lazily. Her father is in the canoe paddling towards the part of the dam which dips into a hollow.

The owner's house is on the rise where he can look over the whole of the dam. There are some corners in the hollow, however, some shadows in which the water cannot be quite seen. Her father calls this his poaching ground. He drops over a stocking packed with a mash of cat food, chook pellets and chop bones.

The water is warm at her shins. Mud billows up in little swirls as she moves out into the dam. She hates to be standing at this depth, where the water becomes thick with cold and the mud soft and squirming at her feet. Quickly she plunges in, choking on the coldness and splashing further out into the dam where the moving mud is far below.

She lies on her back and floats in circles. Looks at her chest for bosom beginnings. All she can see is the hard curve of her rib and belly. She watches the edges of cottages and tree tops drift slowly past, lulled by the smoothness of this water and the sun on her face.

She wonders how she must look from below. Imagines the white of her back and legs, sees her hair fanning out behind her. Listening to the strange underwater sound of clicks and ticking, she suddenly cannot swim for the fear that is beginning to rouse and grip her insides. Cannot move for what may glide through these deeper waters, cannot swim for the mud that shifts in the shallows. She knows the slug whiteness of her body must be luminescing in the darkness.

The youngest stayed out in the dam until the frogs and mosquitoes thumped and whirred with the coming of night. She wouldn't come in for her mother's calls, ignored the jibes of her sister. It took her father to paddle out quietly and heave his shivering daughter into the canoe to get her back to shore.

On the top floor of the museum there is a display about ocean creatures. The room is not air conditioned and it seems hard to breathe. A whale skeleton takes up all of the space, she wonders how many people could live inside it. Whale song plays and she is sad for the white bones. There are preserved fishes and strange spiky animals that grow in ledges. Dangerous things float in bottles. And there is a display for deep sea creatures. Deformed and unexpected, gnarled with heavy coverings and white blind eyes. All of these creatures look a little like something she knows from shallower waters, but these are made for water that is heavy with cold and pressure. The animals have protection from this, yet they may feed only on each other. So with their great shells and thick skins come strange and powerful devices for catching and eating. They go not by sight, for the water is solid in its darkness, but by feel, so their limbs are for reaching and clawing, for grabbing and snapping. And their jaws are set on great hinges to bite through the strangeness of their prey.

Her father says there are marron that live in the very bottom of the dam, where the sun cannot reach and the water is concrete with pressure. He says they grow to enormous sizes and spend their lives feeding on what drops down to the silt floor.

Where there is not enough debris they feed on each other and the darkness is strewn with great carcasses that rot to shells. She imagines the white curve of these shells in the stillness of black water.

There is only one time when these marron may come up. When the moon is new and below the horizon, when the night is thick with heat and when distant seas shift and pull with a strange tide. When the breeze is sucked out of the evening air and clouds build with rain that does not belong to the season.

Her mother and father are drinking gin with tonic on the balcony. Her mother holds the cool glass to her throat, watching her father. She is not the same woman the fisherman married years before. He married a girl that fished and liked animals. Now she spends her evenings at public speaking lectures and petitions for the eradication of feral cats. He sometimes wonders at this, but says little, spending his evenings in the shed with fish hooks and cans of whale oil. Tonight he has his back to her, intent on the water, watching for the moon. She eats a piece of gin soaked lemon and looks at the sweat on his back. He turns and catches her look before moving past.

The canoe grates over gravel as they slide out into the darkness. The youngest is cross at losing her paddling place at the front of the canoe. She is crouched in the bottom of the boat, water slopping up and sogging her pants. Her sister has decided to come along. She thinks night paddles are romantic. The night is cool with the breeze that ruffles the water, bringing smells of dry fields and a far ocean.

When out in the deep, they stop for a moment, paddles mid air as the canoe skates over star reflections. They stop to listen. There are sounds here you may have heard from far above this country. Sounds that the youngest heard when she was swimming in the afternoon. An echo trickles wetly from the well in the centre of the dam.

She has hung off this well in the day time with her sister. Bodies wet and gleaming in the bite of the sun. It is a cold, concrete tunnel, boring down into the murk of the water. She leaned to spit into it, waiting for the wet splat to echo back. The well

remained dank and silent. Only when the sunlight fades and the evening draws close does the concrete begin to quiver and catch the noises moving across the water.

Her sister and father are paddling again, scooting past the dark circle of the well. She trails her fingers in the water and imagines how they must look through the gloom below. White slugs worming across the surface.

At her father's call she throws the net over the side. It lands in shadow, disappearing with a faint *plash*, trailing twine the exact colour of dam water. Half a cork is attached to the twine and it floats above the net like a drifting leaf.

Later the bobbing cork was gone. They lurked below the light of the owner's house, shining the beam in the lee of the canoe and finding nothing but floating twigs and the sounds of the well. Her father smiled in the darkness, telling her a giant marron must have got caught in the net and dragged it to deeper waters. Trailing their fingers through the cool blackness they searched blindly. Something touched her and she screamed, sinking her face into her jumper to silence her cry and making the canoe rock wildly. Laughing quietly, her father pulled the cork from the water and hauled up the line. A great marron thrashed and flapped in the net. For the long ride home, she sat in the bottom of the canoe with the crawling thing whilst her father and sister paddled triumphantly above her.

The marron scraped and flapped in the laundry tub all night. It made such a noise they laughed that the owner must hear it over the water on the other side. When she went to pee in the morning, the room smelt of its damp clagginess. Her father took the limply flapping thing and dropped it into boiling water. It hisses and froths for an instant, scraping against the thin metal of the marron pot. Stripping the black strands of marron gut out from the flesh, they peel and clean it. Flakes of orange gather on the newspaper. Vinegar is sharp in the air.

The owner is at the door. Her mother answers, steaming and flustered behind her glasses. Her father quietly wraps the marron shell in newspaper and puts the marbled flesh in the refrigerator. The owner has come to see them about his sheep. Another has been found floating, belly hard and purple to the sky. He warns it is best if they don't drink the dam water.

Her father often spoke to her about the nature of fishing. She asked him about poaching. He was silent for a long while and he spoke carefully in answer. All fishing, he said, is poaching. The water is not our own and when you are not in your territory it is difficult to be sure of things. What things? She was curious now. He seemed not to answer telling her instead about the river near his home and the jetty where fish blood dried black in the sun and the boards were smooth and white with seagull droppings.

He thinks of his own father who taught him how to land his first fish on this jetty. His teeth were ground flat from biting lines. He knew the movement of the water in the half light better than the ages of his children. He was distant with them, distracted. They were disciplined with the rigours of the prawn season, with late nights baiting mulloway and mornings netting whitebait in the soft chill of dawn.

There was a part of him they could never quite get near. It frightened them. When the river was moving with a changing tide or stirred by rains their father became preoccupied. He moved even further away from them, leaned a little closer to the water striped with shadows under the jetty. His face became distant, as if listening, and his eyes would turn the same colour as the moving river.

The girl's father has not told her all these things. They are sitting watching their reflections shimmer beneath the floating leaves on the surface. She sees his face close and his eyes change. For a moment he is so far away, with his eyes reflecting the swirling water. Then he knocks the brim of her cap gently, tells her that fishing is just one of those things that gets you in the guts. She sees his eyes are still light and strange and she looks again to the water which glimmers black in the shade.

* * *

There is an ocean beyond the gravel of the dam shore, further than the dusty paddocks, out past the roads baking in the heat. It is where the spinifex bushes grow in the moving sands of the coast. White caps move over waves, the sea is grey green and clouded. A tide is moving in. A long slow tide, unwearied by a journey through vast seas. This water comes from places where the ocean floor is lost in the darkness.

There is something about a tide which few understand. The way it moves, the places it comes from. It has a call which goes unheard in the rush of traffic, a sound wave lost below the clamours of speech and the pound of feet on the earth.

You may know something of this call in the way that all waters move with the tide. Not only rivers and tributaries. Inland waters shift and move also. Lakes slide across to one shore, puddles ripple in one direction. A glass of water shivers and spills.

In the afternoon they went walking. The sun was high and the bush stilled with cricket song and smells of dry earth and a long summer. There were paths climbing over hills, fields fenced with faded, splitting wood and wire black and twisted in the heat. They walked and sweated, the air was sticky. Charcoal scraped across her legs with the dead undergrowth. They stood watching the shapes of clouds build with rain. She remembers the first, fat drop landing on her face. Her father's laughter, his sudden wild dance over the paddock. The smell of the dry earth, wet down with the sweetness of rain. She remembers running to dance with him, their sneakers getting clompy with mud, being whirled and seeing the wideness of his smile, his face to the rains.

From way above, the country looks burnt dry and red by the sun. It begins to melt and move in the rain. Further down a great gangly figure whirls his daughter, they shift and blur in the downpour. They are shouting in the drumming roar of the splattering mud. Chasing cows and stomping wildly through the undergrowth which sogs and sticks to their legs.

The dam is moving in these rains. The surface rippling and smoothing over the drops that fall like small stones into the blue black of its depth. A moment before the rains, clouds moved over the opal sheen of the surface. There are shapes in these clouds. Strange forms sculpting out of the billowing darkness.

He dances out in the paddock, aware only of the way his daughter looks at him when he laughs. He watches that she doesn't trip, that her wet strands of hair don't catch in the bushes as she whirls and stamps and drags him over the stubble of the field.

He looks away from her for an instant. His shoulders stiffen, there is a tilt in his

neck. He feels a quickening. She is standing with her face in the rain, neck back, throat slick and gleaming in the water. The quickening he feels comes a long way in from the west. A glint begins to catch around the corners of his eyes. He leaves her, disappearing in great strides in the gloom of late afternoon. His daughter turns to see him vault the fence and she stands suddenly still, red hair plastered dark and wet over freckles as water streams down her face. Her jaw is tight with a fear that she doesn't understand.

Across the country an ocean moves with a tide that does not belong to this season. It comes in at river mouths, hissing over wrinkled mud, lapping at the shore and sliding past pylons. It comes with the faint roar of moving water.

The dam is taking in the downpour. It seems greedier than the shifting dirt which slides in dust streaks over the puddles. The dam lies in the drumming rain, swallowing silently.

Her mother is serving beans on toast sodden with butter. They eat in the clink of cutlery on plastic and the sound of rain on the roof. Her father's seat is empty. The cordial in her glass trembles strangely. Through the window she sees the dam shimmer black in the storm.

The owner is banging at their door. He is out of breath. He explains the slopes of the dam have loosened in the rains. Stock have been caught in the sliding mud and lie in sodden heaps in the shallows of the water.

The beans are left on plastic plates, midges flounder in the sauce. They say nothing to the owner of their father who is out hoping for great marron, stirred by the summer storm. They say nothing of the canoe which shifts in the corner where the slopes are high and soft.

She runs and trips through the rain until she stands on the shore where the edges are steepest. A blurry form moves out over the water. The bush is alive with noises behind her. Something is shifting. She feels the mud at her back.

The owner stops. He sees a man paddling out in the panic of this storm. What strikes him about this man is the way he holds his head. He seems to be listening

for something. He drops things over the side of the canoe. Meaty things. Left over dinner things.

There is a dam moving in response to the sea pouring in from the west. A man paddles in the panic of a storm. His oar dips steadily in water which is smooth despite the drumming rain. This man has lived his life by the tides. The water in the canoe is shifting slightly. He is here with his blood thrumming in answer to a pull which makes the dam move strangely.

Below him, the gloom stirs. The white rafts of his hands float for an instant on the surface as he drops bait below. The water is warm. It seems to move at his touch, to pull against his fingers. He dips his arm into the water. The quickening is humming through his skin. He feels very clearly the line on his arm where the water ends and the air begins. His body is hot and heavy, but for the arm that slides in the pull of the water below.

She sights him in the rains. Mud begins to move past her. He has an arm in the water and the canoe tips. He is very still. She feels something go cold inside. The canoe is listing in the rain. It moves with the water, against the wind. In one fluid movement her father spills over the side.

Something murmurs overhead. The dirt slope rushes down. In a roar of mud the youngest is caught in that dirt and pulled into the choking grit of the landslide. She disappears in the tumbling earth.

Water smooths over where the father went down. A great mound of broken trees and boulders groan and settle in the shallows. The rain softens and hisses across the water.

Deep in the gloom a man is moving. He is sliding with the water. Closer to shore a girl is stirring. The water blooms red. Her form is white and broken in the murk. She drifts out from a tree branch, leaving little shimmering trails of red. Slowly now, turning listlessly, she is pulled by the water and sinks down to a depth where the pressure will hold her.

Her father deep is below the surface. He feels something singing through him. The

blood in him has stopped moving to his pulse, it moves instead with the water, rippling in one direction through his shape. He has forgotten the feel of the earth, the taste of breath. He is shimmering in the warmth of what moves him.

He sees a form drifting in the green ahead. It is a white haze, pluming red. His daughter trails past, hair drifting out like kelp, her body twisted into a shape he doesn't know. Something kicks inside and the warmth rushes out of him. He is gasping, taking in flecks of mud and twig, the water burning at his throat, tearing at his lungs. As he struggles his daughter is lost below and he strains to reach for her. He gargles a cry. The pull that ran through him is gone.

Red hair catches in his hands. His daughter hangs still and heavy against him as he fights upward against the burning of his lungs and the roaring in his head. Bubbles stream past. His straining face is turned to the sheen of the surface above. There is dread at his throat.

The dam is moving, its polished surface rising as if in breath. It is shattered by a man who surges up, his face lost in the sheen of water that spills down around him. A child drifts up. He takes her and turns her face to the sky. The man is still heaving and a cry comes from him. The sound of his breath drifts across the water.

Perhaps you will recognise it, this cry that catches on the rising swell. You may know it for the way it travels over water at night or hear its echo in the trickling well. Now it comes from a man who holds a child in the water. Her chest curves the wrong way, there is red billowing around them. The cry moves up away from him to keen across the land, across barley and wheat fields, riding the charcoal breath of summer out to where a great tide moves.

The Sounds of Summer

WE wheeled our bicycles through the August twilight with damp hair and trainers caked in mud. The sun had sunk beneath the Hampshire countryside, so that the shadows of ourselves and the patterned shadows of overhanging branches merged into innumerable shades of blue and grey. The Broad wound uphill from the meadow in a lazy slither towards a humpback bridge and the brand-new houses of an outer suburb that all looked to me like show homes.

We were tired from a long day on the riverbank: swinging from a rope into the crisp, dark water; and paddling over the river in inflated inner tubes we'd stolen from a nearby farm the night before. In early evening, after a supper of sausages and marshmallows, cooked on sticks over a makeshift fire, we'd waged the most ferocious mud fight any of us could remember: we'd leapt like water spirits among the reeds and dry grass, whooping and shouting into the meadow's silence as the summer sunlight yellowed and died.

'Got any orange left?' asked Ryan, to nobody in particular.

But everybody was too tired to talk; so we continued up the hill, content to watch the landscape darken, to breathe the cooling air, and to listen to the gentle *tick-ticking* of our bicycle wheels.

It was when we were half way up the hill that the quality of the air and light began to change. Merging with the aroma of dew-dampened foliage was another smell—a smell neither industrial nor rural, but oddly human like the smell of sweat. The light was thinning fractionally with every step as white floodlights blinked at us through the shifting branches; they lit up the long driveway and forecourt of a building set back from the road we'd passed many times to and from the river. Nobody knew what the building was and had never thought to ask, for its

appearance didn't inspire such questions: it was a low angular building with a shabby, metallic exterior. Under the perimeter fence ran a single railway track, partially covered by weeds and grass. Its only prominent feature was a slate-grey tower, shaped like the letter Y, which was separate from the main building and rose above it. Once or twice I'd seen a thin but steady trail of smoke twisting from the tower into the sky, and had idly assumed it to be some kind of chimney. But I was too tired to think about it now, or to speculate in my mind about those pale-blue articulated lorries we occasionally saw passing through the lopsided gates.

As we drew nearer, the peculiar smell thickened the air. A subtle change had come over us, more apparent, perhaps, to somebody watching us from the outside: we no longer walked with lowered heads, absorbed in our own thoughts, but were looking up, our senses alerted by the alien smell. Michael turned to me and wrinkled his nose—at which I nodded to acknowledge I smelt it too. Instinctively we looked to the buildings ahead of us, for it seemed inevitable that the smell must come from them. But the floodlights dazzled us, and reduced the building to a shapeless haze that yielded nothing.

It was when the sound began to rise that everybody took notice—even Ross, who was dreamy and inattentive at the best of times. At first it was barely audible above the *tick-ticking* of our wheels, so that each of us looked at the other to make sure it didn't come from inside our own heads. But as we continued up the hill, our steps becoming slower out of vague apprehension, the sound rose in our ears as certainly as the smell had filled the air, and rays of light from the silhouetted building had sliced the early darkness.

'What is that?' asked Matthew, turning to look at us from a few metres ahead. But everybody shrugged and said nothing; though much was said by our widened eyes, and by the butterflies flickering to life in our stomachs, which nobody could've explained if they'd wanted to.

'Don't know,' said Ryan, though it was more to himself than a reply.

The sound was clearly audible now above the other noises around us. It was a continuous, high-pitched monotone, though whether electrical, animal or human it was impossible to say. It sounded like the screeching brakes of a train making an emergency stop, only it was much more even and sustained. All we could be sure of was that it was growing louder as we approached the building.

'Sounds like ... I don't know what,' said Matthew, carefully angling his head.

As we neared the perimeter fence, the quality of the sound began to change. It wasn't a continuous monotone at all, but countless separate screeching sounds, each

at a slightly different pitch. We looked at each other blankly, though it was not the blankness of vacuity or indifference but inarticulate fear, for the sounds were unsettling and touched me, I remember, in the base of my gut. We stopped outside the gates, holding the handles of our bicycles. It was clear that the sounds came from the heart of the building.

‘What is that place?’ whispered Matthew, looking through the bars.

We stood still, listening. It was difficult not to let the ear focus on a single pitch, so that it could be heard repeating itself over and over again. Nobody seemed to want to speak, let alone offer an explanation.

‘It’s where they kill animals,’ mumbled Ross, standing, as ever, at the edge of our group.

Everybody turned to him in the semi darkness. It was rare that Ross spoke at all unless it was required of him. To offer something voluntarily—something useful, of which the rest of us were ignorant—was unheard of. Matthew turned to him, frowning. It was usually him who had the answers.

‘How d’you know?’

‘My dad told me,’ said Ross. ‘Pigs, mostly.’

We listened without speaking for some time—I couldn’t say how long—before eventually fidgeting into motion. We shuffled from the gates and continued our ascent, the sounds fading out as the night closed in on us. Without even turning round, Matthew suddenly mounted his racer and cycled on ahead. I remember seeing his outline rise against the amber glow from a distant streetlight to disappear from view as he peddled over the humpback bridge.

Nobody mentioned that evening afterwards, though we didn’t return to the river all summer. Instead we played cricket in the nets by the old gas plant, spent long afternoons on the beach when the weather was fine, and fed the ducks and swans by the town creak in the pink light of dusk.

Ard Mor

OF all the places I adored beside my childhood town, Ard Mor was the most mysterious and special. From the train window it loomed up into the sea, a short peninsula with a hill at the far end decked in broad-leafed trees. My father used to take me there on Saturdays in the summer, when the honeysuckle filled my head with yellow scent and the warblers' songs flowed in concertos around the woodland paths. I loved searching the beach for polystyrene; great white weightless chunks of it that broke into tiny beads at my touch like miniature snowballs.

Across the water the town buildings on the south side of the River Clyde stretched away in bits of polystyrene themselves; blocks of flats and crumbling white factories and sheds.

But Ard Mor was Java and Sumatra to me; it had undiscovered glades and unknown species, it smelled of the richest and most distant lands I could imagine.

I brought back honeysuckle and unhatched birds' eggs and great lumps of polystyrene—the treasure trove of an explorer.

Treasure

MY great uncle was a sea captain. When he died, all the trunks and boxes he had brought back from India came to our house. They lay like dank sea monsters in the attic and I climbed the stairs every afternoon to open them. The air smelled of dusty records, leather and dead flies. The water in the

pipes gurgled like an old woman's stomach.

There were locks in those trunks that had turned to grimy red rust with age. When my fingers prised open the lids they became encrusted with dark stains like congealed blood. I imagined I was not at home at all, but rather in a sea cave, and that these chests had been washed out of the ocean from some huge, masted ship. Only I possessed their keys.

The papers that lay inside the trunks made me sneeze. The flies in the attic and the cobwebs and the dusty papers from my great uncle's chest made me sneeze. I looked out of the attic window onto the thin blue edge of the Firth of Clyde and wished it was a hundred years before, that I could sail away myself and bring back chests from India—captain of my own ship.



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Endings: Reproducing Originality

IN March 1995 I was asked to talk to a group of Creative Writing students at Victoria University of Technology at St Albans, an outer suburb of Melbourne. I decided to travel there by bicycle from Brunswick because the weather was fine. Before leaving I checked a street directory and planned my route. As a precaution, knowing that my memory for details on a map are not reliable, I tore out the page with the last part of my journey on it and put this in my shirt pocket.

When I was less than halfway there, riding along Maribyrnong Road, I began to think that perhaps I hadn't planned out the most direct route. Not yet in the area mapped on the page in my pocket, I stopped at a service station and asked the attendant if I could look in one of their unsold directories. The directory I looked at was new, with more detail than my thirteen-year-old one at home. It showed a footbridge across the Maribyrnong and a bicycle track just beyond the turn-off I had been planning to take. From the map it looked as if I could ride down to the footbridge, cross the river and take the bicycle track along the other bank until it met with a road running almost directly onto the St Albans railway line close to the university. I had plenty of time and the prospect of a ride beside a river was more attractive than my planned route along the Ballarat highway with its semi-trailers and peak-hour traffic.

I took in as much of the detail on the map as possible, noting the name of the street running down to the bridge, the place where I should leave the bicycle track, the name of the street I should find when I rejoined the world of traffic. It looked simple enough, and it was the sort of route I am fond of taking on my bicycle. The first problem I encountered was that at the end of A'Hern Street, where I should have been able to go onto the footbridge, there was a cliff-like fall covered in low scrub, grass, weeds and paddock fencing. I went back to the next side street but it

ended in a neat cul-de-sac and a children's playground. A dog barked from one of the back yards next to the playground. The street seemed to be one where strangers would be noticed and reported to police. I went down to the back of the playground to see if there was a track or steps to the river and bridge. But my way was blocked by the same scrub and paddock-fencing. The dog was barking loudly now. I returned along Maribyrnong Road to the main bridge over the river and found that I could get onto a dirt track under that bridge by lifting my bike over a fence. This track was wide and smooth, gliding along beside the grassy banks of the river. One of my fantasies is to take a canoe along this river and explore it, leisurely, back up towards its source and then down as far as the ships docked on the edge of Port Phillip Bay. As I rode beside the river part of me was there on the river in a boat, watching the cyclist push past, enjoying not having any particular destination. The part of me still on the bicycle began to resent having a destination and a time by which I had to be there.

The footbridge, I discovered, was blocked to all but pedestrians by a series of complicated steel poles. I considered abandoning the new route then, but I still had enough time to go this way, and besides, once across the river I could relax along the scenic bike track on the other side. I lifted my bike across the barriers at both ends.

On the other side the track which had been marked with the simple symbol of a bicycle in the street directory ran straight up a steep hillside and was scoured by gutters of erosion. I pushed the bike up the rise and then followed the track as it cut back towards the river, riding my bike in a braking wobble, dangerously slipping on the edges of washed-away sections of the track. By now I knew that if I went back I would almost certainly be late. But if I went on this way there was some danger of becoming lost, for if the map had been misleading in indicating that this was a bicycle track it might have been mistaken in even suggesting that the track did continue for the distance marked on the map. To me the track looked like petering out or coming to a halt where it might be washed away completely. When I saw up ahead a hillside of closely mown grass which seemed to rise to a suburban street, I decided to leave the track. The hillside was steep but I could push the bike up to the street above me. When I reached the street I rode in what I hoped was the right direction, but knowing from experience that this inner conviction of a right direction can be hopelessly wrong. After passing some street signs which didn't fit with anything I had seen on either of the directories I turned into a road with heavier traffic. The next intersection looked vaguely familiar. It was the Ballarat highway. I

was back at the very road I had intended to avoid by taking my alternative bike path. With some confusion and relief I pedalled as hard as I could to get to the university on time to talk to a class of Creative Writing students.

There were about twenty-five students in a small mauve room inside a large mauve building. After reading aloud some poems and part of a story I asked what aspects of creative writing they would like to talk about. They were silent. I asked if any of them were writing poems. None of them admitted to this. They agreed that all of them were tackling short stories. I picked up a whiteboard marker and asked them again if there was anything about creative writing that they would like to discuss. "Endings," one student said. She told me I had once rejected a story of hers that she sent to a magazine I was editing. In my rejection note I had asked her why she had ended the story at the point she had chosen. She seemed to have some continuing resentment, or perhaps it was puzzlement over my reason for rejecting her story. I wrote "Endings" on the whiteboard and asked if there were any other issues they wanted to address in the next two hours. The next issue that was important to them was "Beginnings".

What they wanted was a map. They wanted to be able to set out on a route clearly marked all the way to its destination. I could only tell them, truthfully, that the map in my pocket had been no more than a comforting but useless presence on my way to their classroom, and the maps I had consulted had been misleading approximations of the territory I had cycled and climbed through. Were they asking for beginnings and endings because this is what concerns new writers when they tackle their first short stories? Or were they asking for this because inside that mauve building they were students at a university who must learn something—something that can be set down and recognised as knowledge—and must pass a course with a certain number of "completed" words? What kinds of anxiety, and what kinds of understandings of creativity lay behind their requests for beginnings and endings?

For me it is still startling and strange to stand in a room with twenty-five students who have declared they want to be creative writers and can even name particular problems of their craft such as the problems of beginnings and endings. When I began to write I knew no one who thought of themselves as a writer. After ten years of writing I had met only one other person who called himself a writer. It did not occur to me to ask questions about how to begin or how to end a piece of writing. I wrote, blindly, from within the current of enthusiasm created in me by the books I had been reading. The writing itself seemed to be the point of it and the great pleasure of it—I had no place to get to by a certain time or within a certain

number of words. The river took me. I suppose my map, if I had a map, was whatever book I had most recently been reading; but imagine trying to find your way along a bicycle path at the back of Keilor with a map of Dickens's London or Dostoevsky's Russian minds in your backpack.

In reflecting on this I am not wanting to pit my experience against these students' experiences in order to claim that my way of learning was more truly creative. It is to see that the activity we call creative, that kind of writing we call creative, can be experienced and used very differently in different contexts, and that it carries within it certain contradictions.

The notion of creativity throws up a number of oppositions which highlight the way its presence shifts under our gaze or slips through our fingers—or the way it takes us by surprise despite and because of our maps. Spontaneity/planning, original/copy, art/craft, new/old, uncanny/familiar, play/work, self-expression/chance, Dionysian/Platonic, personal/impersonal, are only some of the hierarchies and oppositions that immediately come into play when we approach a creative task (or approach a task creatively).

Creative Writing students desire to write something which will be acknowledged as creative. What they write must then be new and original, but at the same time it must be a copy, that is a repetition of some formula of beginnings and endings—it must be *recognisably* creative. In 1920 at the Festival Dada in Paris, Breton wore a sandwich board which advertised Francis Picabia's Far-Sighted Manifesto: "In order for you to like something it is necessary for you to have seen and understood it a long time ago, you bunch of idiots".¹ Are we idiots because we mistake our recognition of something creative for an "original", or have we excluded the possibility of recognising anything truly original as long as we insist (idiotically) on admiring only copies of aesthetic formulae already established? Whether one or both meanings resonate in Picabia's manifesto it points to elements suppressed by the social, cultural and institutional value given to originality and creativity: we tend to obscure the fact that the original, the creative, is fundamentally based upon the copy, the already-mapped-out grid.² What Rosalind Krauss calls the "originality-effect" is dependent on a repression of the knowledge of the role of the copy in producing any "original" work (177). In *S/Z* Roland Barthes made the point that

1. Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the Twentieth Century*. NY: Abrams, 1994, 119.
2. I am indebted to Rosalind Krauss's essay, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde" for raising this issue of the relations between originals and copies in art: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994, 151-170.

realist writers do not even copy from an original nature. Their work is a copy of a copy. He wrote, "... realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy ... through secondary mimesis [realism] copies what is already a copy".³ In seeking guidance on beginnings and endings creative writing students do not look to nature or 'life' for clues, but to other short stories, and other writers who have managed the trick of starting then stopping passages of writing.

And what of the writer/student—the one who sits in front of the page, anxiously waiting to begin writing something inimitable? Can the writer find the new, the original, the unexpected somewhere within his/her unique self? Embedded in the oppositions personal/impersonal, original/copy, conscious/unconscious is the now-disputed presence of the author as originator or creator. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault considered this notion of a personal originator: "But this thin surface of the original ... is populated entirely by those complex mediations formed and laid down as sediment in their own history by labor, life and language so that ... what man is reviving without knowing it, is all the intermediaries of a time that governs him almost to infinity" (335).⁴ Is this depiction of the author as a thin (though nevertheless geological) surface or as a mere intermediary in a chain of intermediaries a misleading reduction of the sweaty reality of the writing self or is it a bold unrighting of the vessel of the self so charmingly and convincingly constructed by the self-expressing author? Foucault's statement can be read as an attack on any claim to spontaneity or originality—and yet, in the striking phrase, "thin surface of the original," and in Foucault's biblical reminder of individual

3. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1974, 55.

4. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Tavistock, 1970. This mediated self, constructed out of history or out of language, has become either a commonplace in literary discussions, or the site of a battleground between humanists and post-humanists. In his essay on the textual self, Chris Wallace-Crabbe seems to assent to the self-evident constructedness of any self: "In the long, circuitous haul we are all—readers, writers or just plain livers—determined by a greater host of things than we can ever put a name to; and since we cannot put all the names to them we behave as though we had free will" (*Falling Into Language*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990, 117). Here Wallace-Crabbe gestures towards a human infiniteness played out in the same sorts of mediations that so struck Foucault, but for Wallace-Crabbe their meaning falls away, or falls back into the personal. More prosaically Ian Hunter pursues a baldly Foucauldian line in an essay debating changes in teaching the humanities: "The modern humanities are inseparable from a technology of ethical formation aimed at producing the self-regulating and self-developing citizen" ("Accounting for the Humanities" *Meanjin* 3, 1989, 444). In 1996 the reviewer and editor, Peter Craven took English professor, Simon During to task for trotting out this Foucauldian claim in a discussion of Patrick White's originality. During wrote, "The trouble is that many of White's characters are stereotypes: they are cut and pasted from widely disseminated discursive practices." In defence of White's talent and genius Craven described During's summation as a "truly terrible lumpy, bureaucratic/academic phrase—terrible by whatever standard of semiobabble you might care to invoke" ("The Kingdom of Correct Usage Is Elsewhere" *Australian Book Review* 179, April 1996, 40).

mortality within an endlessly revivifying humanity it is difficult not to respond to the peculiar movement of his vision (from the minute to the infinite) and the oddly poetic force of his phrasing. Something fails within the claims of the sentences even as their force and power impress themselves on us. Does the writing hint at the kind of resistance the poet and academic, Chris Wallace-Crabbe recognises in his own text-thin figure as he moves between “theory” and “literature” in *Falling Into Language*:

In the last gasp, in the run home, I find that theory, however bracing, collapses. For what I want in and from literature is mystery: the withheld, the unexplained, the plangent, whose secret name is Death. And whatever it is that dances on the thin roof of Death’s house. (126)

Foucault’s thin surface of the original becomes in his short passage a layered sediment of such complexity that it approaches infinity. He might not dance upon this thin surface but he does make of its paucity something mysteriously myriad. The images seem to move against the austerity of the insight offered. What kind of author is this? Perhaps the creative writing students already worried over ending what they had not yet begun were feeling the weight of this sediment. In the search for originality, for creativity, what writer can resist the vertigo of the past?

To take another of the related oppositions—spontaneity/planning—is to see again how one of these terms has been suppressed in the promotion of a certain image and value connected with creativity. Originality was confirmed as an ultimate value in art with the rise of the modern *avant-garde*, and its earliest art movement, Impressionism, is named for the quality of spontaneous ‘impressions’ in the paintings of this period. Monet became perhaps the most famous Impressionist. It would be a mistake, however, to consider his work was accomplished simply with spontaneity. It was in fact accomplished in a slow, painstaking manner which resulted in a surface that gave the *impression* of spontaneous brushstrokes. Famous as the painter of light and natural effects Monet boasted to journalists and critics about the extremes of weather he endured to produce his landscape impressions, obscuring the fact that he worked obsessively on his canvases in the warmth of his studio, sometimes unable to finish a painting for several years.⁵ He named his technique “instantaneity,” and its far from instant production is described by

5. John House, “Monet and the Genesis of His Series”, in *Claude Monet Painter of Light*, ed. Ronald Brownson, Auckland: Auckland City Gallery, 1985, 9-26.

Rosalind Krauss in the following manner:

The sketchlike mark, which functioned as the sign of spontaneity, had to be prepared for through the utmost calculation, and in this sense spontaneity was the most fakable of signifieds. Through layers of underpainting by which Monet developed the thick corrugations of what Robert Herbert calls his texture-strokes, Monet patiently laid the mesh of rough encrustation and directional swathes that would signify speed of execution, and from this speed, mark both the singularity of the perceptual moment and uniqueness of the empirical array. On top of this constructed "instant," thin, careful washes of pigment establish the actual relations of color. Needless to say, these operations took—with the necessary drying time—many days to perform but the illusion of spontaneity—the burst of an instantaneous and originary act—is the unshakable result. (167)

To see how calculation was crucial to Monet's achievement of a spontaneous effect is not to expose him as a fraud, but to see again that creativity is never simple, that it operates with and through signs that have social, cultural and historical values.⁶ It operates as a language which is as compromised and contradictory as any utterance constrained and generated in the autobiographical moment of a self-justifying "I". It operates as a strategy, subtle or crude, in manoeuvres over influence, significance and ownership. Signs of spontaneity give Jack Kerouac's quintessential beat novel, *On The Road*, its particular sheen and its particular place as a work of modern prose. Kerouac took three weeks to write the novel in 1950, but then it was seven years in the rewriting.⁷

To seek the codes of beginnings and endings as if they are natural or necessary to living or to writing is to bring certain tastes, certain preferred rhythms, certain assumptions to creativity. In 1759 Edward Young commented elegantly and mournfully on how thoroughly enmeshed we become in our own cultural time: "Born originals," he wrote, "how comes it to pass we die copies?"⁸ In 1818 Jane Austen recognised manifestations of this process in enthusiasm among the cognoscenti for Gothic or Romantic effects. In *Northanger Abbey*, she has Catherine

6. Monet also played interestingly with the notion of the original and the copy by working on up to one hundred canvases of the same landscape subject at once. See John House, "Monet and the Genesis of His Series" *Claude Monet Painter of Light*, ed. Ronald Brownson (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1985) 25.

7. Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters 1940-1956*. NY: Viking, 1995, 187, 326, 593-4. See also Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book*. NY: Hamish Hamilton, 1980.

8. Edward Young, *A Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison*. Leeds: Scholar Press, 1966, 42.

and the Tilneys take a walk around Beechen Cliff above Bath:⁹

They [the Tilneys] were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost ... It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer proof of a fine day ... She confessed and lamented her want of knowledge ... and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in every thing admired by him, and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades; — and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make a part of a landscape. (127)

The first assumption is of course that the creative or aesthetic act finds its origins and inspirations in life or nature, and the second, as Austen makes clear, is to have a pre-existing set of aesthetic rules confirmed by what is “discovered” in nature. The Tilneys might be more ridiculous than Catherine, but not because they are less natural than her. The difference between them is that Catherine’s code of understanding the picturesque is a simple one while theirs is elaborate and modern. Both imagine they learned their codes by looking at nature.

While writing creatively might seem to promise an open-ended and unpredictable experience, anxieties over beginnings and endings alert us to the presence of maps (in the forms of assumptions, rules, craft or techniques). Creativity is always an act already mapped-out, already begun in imitation.

Yet creativity can still be approached as a moment of promise because it holds out the possibility of throwing up the unknown and the unexpected. Both writer and reader want to be surprised by unpredicted (though not, in hindsight, unpredictable) outcomes. This process must always find itself in some danger—for a degree of control must be relinquished if the surprises are to come. Both the writer and reader must relinquish some control if something new is to be allowed.

Issues of control, of expectations, of tensions between the copy and the original are highlighted now with creative writing established in university humanities

9. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*. London: Penguin, 1985.

courses. These institutions of education find they must accommodate an activity which, while it seeks to be assessed, still insists on a freedom to set (and alter) the criteria for success.

The introduction of Creative Writing courses to Australian universities in the past fifteen years might seem to be a challenge to their traditional structure as institutions of strictly framed scholarship and research. At the same time the universities' absorption of creative writing might seem to be a form of control and distortion over acts of creativity. How creative can a student writer or an artist be who must achieve a certain score out of one hundred? There is no doubt that tensions and contradictions are present in this process, but whether they are new tensions and contradictions or an exposure to processes which have been repressed or ignored as long as creativity avoided these institutions is not clear. The students at Victoria University were correct—writers must face the question of finding an ending each time they begin to write. But is this any different for the writer of an exploratory essay? The creative writing students seemed to experience this problem as a mysterious one, as a daunting and personally challenging task—as something particular to creative writing. I wanted to see it as something typical, and typically unsettling, in an experience of a journey. Something everyone has experienced at some time. A map might be a comfort, but it must always be exposed as misleading once the journey has been undertaken. Neither the main road nor the bicycle track was as simple as the maps promised. And in any case it was not the maps which advised me on what route to take. They multiplied my choices.

On the way home from talking with the Creative Writing students I kept to the main roads I knew well. Large trucks came dangerously close to the bicycle and one car with a trailer seemed to swerve deliberately towards me so that I had to move into the gutter to avoid it. At all times I knew where I was, and I knew what route was ahead, but I felt I was living too dangerously. I kept in my mind the certainty that I would return to that bicycle track by the river one day when I have nowhere in particular to go.

Slaves

Her memories faded, and slowly disappeared.
A silent babble ran alongside her name,
a cloud of doubt punctuated by little thrills.
She went to interview the famous painter

and a silent babble ran alongside her name,
fools in the foyer, brittle and knowing.
She went to interview the famous painter.
They felt like slaves at their games,

fools in the foyer. Brittle and knowing
“sheets of thought wrapped around the body of love.
They felt like slaves at their games,
praying for release from the chains of lust,

sheets of thought wrapped around the body of love.
What if that's all — a quick breath, then
praying for release from the chains of lust?
She could feel the bad vibes in the bar.

What if that's all — a quick breath? Then
She had to make friends among the new arrivals.
She could feel the bad vibes in the bar:
she was on her third scotch, and in an ugly mood.

She had to make friends among the new arrivals,
and the music flashed and blathered.
She was on her third scotch, and in an ugly mood.”
The jukebox sounded like a cement mixer

and the music flashed and blathered,
a cloud of doubt punctuated by little thrills.
The jukebox sounded like a cement mixer.
Her memories faded, and slowly disappeared.

Thanks, Joe

Thanks, Joe, I'll have a martini with a twist.
 I can drink spirits, but I can't take wine.
 I lost my taste for it, the first time I was kissed.
 I met this woman, down from Proserpine,
 she'd been out at Wagga picking boysenberries,
 came up to Sydney, wanted to be
 a model. She liked sherry. She had this owl,
 and a ferret that bit me. Life's full of mysteries.
 We drank — what a night. I woke drowsily
 the next day, and looked at her naked body. My soul

shrivelled, my blood froze, I thought I'd fall
 flat on my face, it was like a cloud
 had hidden the sun. What she'd told me, that was
 bullshit. She was a bloke! The sheet was a shroud,
 the bed a grave for my self-respect. She rose,
 put on some makeup, dressed and was gone with a wave
 of her pretty hand. I stared at the bowl of peonies
 I'd brought her — they cost a packet, and quality shows.
 I couldn't remember much — she'd been on some rave
 about disordering the senses, how you could fantasise

a new life for yourself. I wanted to die.
 I remembered her filthy kisses, her lying lips—
 she'd said she was a student, name of 'Gayleen Nye',
 a virgin! And I fell for it! As for drink, three sips
 and she was a slut. Barman, turn up the light,
 will you? This place is like the bloody Shrine
 of Remembrance. Do you know the Latin tongue?
 They have a motto: 'Love's like a river — clear
 one day, dirty the next.' You know, I might
 have another. Damn, she was well hung.

('Thanks, Joe' is an ode. It uses the end-words of 'Ode to Melancholy' by John Keats. The title is an anagram of 'John Keats'.)

Paid Meridian

I had stretched out the silk
and I was just about to sketch the image of a fish—
no, not a fish, a bird, maybe a goose—
 some kind of bird
anyhow, when Joan rang. 'Have you heard?
we've moved into a new flat above a Thai
restaurant! Hey, Fred hit me in the eye

last night at that book party for Robert Duncan—
it was an accident, Fred sent me a note
this morning: 'Sorry. I was listening to the drums.'
Isn't he crazy? Come on over!' So here I am at Joan's
party, and the talk gets dirty,
it's one of those noisy events in a walk-up cold-
water flat with some music performance in the next room already,
it sounds 'experimental', but already

I'm on my way home on the uptown
 bus—
thanks very much — parties make me anxious, I get
faint and claustrophobic if it's too
noisy or too crowded, do you think people notice?
Besides I have no obligation—
stuck in a hallway — to chatter to some creep
or clique of enthusiasts. Outside it's — alas, alack—
a day for wearing a heavy coat
against the brown wind—
 if you're going out

in NYC the winter wind
sucks the avenues like a vacuum,
now, walking four blocks in just a jacket it
hits me like a freezer chilling the street.

All I want, really, is a clean, cosy loft,
instead I have to put up with some dank
 cheap joint, rank
from the Korean cooking downstairs, blank
 walls, blank thought—

I pick up a pen — the phone rings, it's Joan: Hello?
 Thanks for the party, Joan, but there's nobody here,
 really, nobody at all.

(‘Paid Meridian’ uses the end-words of ‘On Sitting Down to Write, I Decide Instead to Go to Fred Herko’s Concert’, by Diane Di Prima. ‘Paid Meridian’ is an anagram of her name.)

Andrew Sant

Days of Incompletion

It is the morning of the job still-about-to-be-done—
 the garden fork holding the soil in its place
 like an hors d'oeuvre. Meaning talk not action
 characterises this season, and doodles (deciphered)
 outwit tasks delivered like punishments. I ask,
 did Capability Brown stand appalled when,
 surveying his scape, its completion dismissed him?
 It's the idea of foreplay that pleases, the flight
 but not the arrival when, and undercoat applied,
 the topcoat in its can for weeks merely teases.
 Friends to such suspense is, praise be, undying breath.
 Ah, days of incompletion — the umpteenth draft,
 the road yet to be taken — I embrace them, let go.
 Torpor of their obverse: a last nail's driven home.

Horse
(West Coast, Tasmania)

A paid-up member of The Craft,
My mason-father's yarns unnerved,
Expertly timing his remarks,
That mates lopped feet off felling trees
And bludgeoned seals or tiger snakes

Thrown broken-backed on bullant nests
Barked like a child with croup, to fall
As my young daughter wildly rode
My left until the shoe came off
Despite her whooping cough, my hiss,

Snap, shout that cudgelled love to death
While cut and stung I faced the thought
Of getting wood in with his axe
His steel-sharp cunning eyes implied
The headless horseman had once used.

Letters from a Distant Country

1.

WE drove for a full day and a night to get here, crossing the country from one sea almost to another. I feel I have seen all the world now, and must write of things I do not fully understand.

We left early, the rising sun still split by the sea's horizon, and headed westwards into long blue shadows. The city came with us for a while, trailing itself thinly along the roadsides like something discarded from passing trucks, like a crust of stone and fraying concrete sweated from the air. But later we were into open country, speeding past verdant farmland; and now we passed through villages that were more substantial than the city's ragged edge. And though it was still early, already old men sat on upturned crates beneath white-washed walls and talked, one hand on a cane, the other waving to an imagined audience. Women shooed goats and chickens from their doorways. Sleepy children were leading sleepy donkeys along the road to the muddy ditches of banana groves; and in the groves already the cutters were taking the day's first break. Some pointed to us as we passed. I felt caught out, as if I were entering enemy territory without the password.

And then the river joined us, idling wearily beside the road between high banks of yellow clay. The morning's light smeared its surface with a pale sheen like mother-of-pearl. In some places it still slept beneath green rafts of lily-pads, and there jacanas strutted on impossible feet and dragon-flies the size of birds threatened the cool blue silence. And I think I caught a glimpse of a hippo once, a flick-eared head rippling the stillness, though it might have been no more than insects dancing on a swollen carcass.

Later we left the river and headed north into the glare of threadbare plains, wide

white sweeps of stone and dust freckled with grey scrub. Haughty camels watched us pass from the sparse shade of thorn-trees. Now the day was fully awake, the sky tall and clear and pale and hard as stone. The air was thin and, coming through the open windows, stung like a thousand needles. We passed few villages now. Those we came to seemed to cower from the sun, to crumble and turn to powder beneath its weight, or else were gathered into the shelter of inselbergs, giant bubbles of rock that had boiled from beneath the overheated ground. And near every village, in the bare and empty day, marabouts sulked on one leg and vultures hung their wings out as if to dry. Nor did we see many people; only goat-herds who saluted us with their sticks and the soldiers at every checkpoint who waved us by from where they lazed in the thin shadows of their huts. We kept going on, rushing on, as if trying to escape. For hours we hastened onwards and the only sound we heard was the hypnotic humming of the wheels on the untroubled road.

Until late in the afternoon we left the tarmac where it turned west, and kept on north towards the mountains and the night. Now we wallowed through sand and over shattered stone, and now we could hear the pop and crack of twigs beneath our wheels, as if we were travelling through an ancient land and were breaking its dry bones. Sometimes, crossing droughted mudflats, the track divided into twenty tracklets like a braided stream, and we bounced in long wide arcs that could have been leading us to the world's end. There was nothing here, no birds, no goats nor camels; no villages nor any sign of animation. Just a few grey scrubby bushes in the glaucous evening landscape.

And then night came, and it came all at once, as if even light had suddenly abandoned us. We stopped then, to stretch, to breathe the coolness for a moment and to listen. But we heard only the singing of a million stars. That and, somewhere in the distance, the sniggering of hyenas. We went on. We were climbing now, up onto the plateau.

Now Redwan was nearing home, and even in the darkness he knew where he was going. He named for me each village that we came to, almost before I'd seen it looming from the dark. And I heard each name as if it were something precipitating from the night's black vacuum, strange and airy and ungraspable as a ghost, but comfortable for all that: Ceel Afweyne, Gal Shiikh, Xudun, Garadag. And as we ground slowly through each village, I could see the wavering light of hurricane lamps through open doors and tiny windows, and once a silhouetted child waving to us as we passed. And inside each doorway there were charcoal braziers, set not just for warmth but to burn frankincense as well, the sweet smell drifting through

the air so that all these were places that tested the night's oblivion and greeted strangers. But we did not stop. We kept on, out again into the blackness. Going on as if there were no end.

Until we arrived here at last in the morning's small cold hours. And bumped over the rocks and ruts of the main street to the iron gate. The horn woke a dog somewhere, and then there were lights and noise and smiles and handshakes; all the bustle of a welcome and a homecoming as we stood and blinked inside the compound. The newly-risen moon spilled off the house's iron roof and the white-washed walls gleamed like tarnished ivory. And for thirty minutes then I was pressed with strong sweet tea and questions, a sort of gentle, friendly inquisition, sitting in a narrow moonlit courtyard with a gecko chirruping on the wall above me. I answered as best I could. But you must remember how I found it hard to answer you, my love, to tell you why it was I was coming here. How then could I answer these new-found strangers?

And later, lying in darkness in my new room, waiting for my mind to settle, for all the day and night's accumulated humming to subside, I tried to recall all that I had seen and heard and smelled this day. I wanted to understand what it might mean, what it all might have to do with what I have come here for, what my answers should have been. But I could only think of you. You, half a world away and already half-way through another day.

2.

I had to present myself to the district governor today. I went rehearsing formality and duty, walked through the gateless fence and across the pathless yard as if I were entering a minefield of grand concepts. A bare flagmast flagged beneath a candid sky.

His room was bare. The only decoration was a map pinned to the wall beside the window. It showed this country in crimson, and the colour spilled far beyond the borders marked in any atlas I've ever seen. I prepared myself for absolutes.

He gripped my hand across the desk and then leaned back. His uniform was damp with sweat and the brass buckle of his belt was loose beneath his belly. His voice was quiet, but still it seemed to fill the little room, swelling in the hot breeze that gusted through the window, drowning the muttering of the sleepy chooks

outside. And as we talked the sun plucked at the long crack in the window-pane and sang on the iron roof above us. We spoke of the weather and the price of tea. Nothing else.

And when I left and stood blinking in the sudden brightness, the soldier who had been dozing on the verandah-step came suddenly to attention, almost presented arms to me. But then, seeing who it was, he relaxed and grinned and nodded and said, 'Nabat'. Peace.

3.

It is Ramadhan. Sometimes I feel I should walk on tiptoe through the bright days, not wanting to wake the quietness.

Two nights ago we walked into town, stumbled along the dark streets to the centre. I could imagine us lost in blindness, going on forever through a silent landscape made of ebony and basalt. But then we came upon sudden light and movement. People thronged the street, strolling, hurrying back and forth, standing in small groups and talking. It seemed we had come upon a festival. Light streamed from shop doorways. There are no streetlights nor neon signs nor spotlit windows here. Inside the shops we saw all the town: a smiling man unrolled a bolt of brightly-coloured cotton for a covey of sceptical women; another weighed out onions on old brass scales that shone like gold; a boy swung his hips and clicked his fingers in time to music that blasted from a portable cassette-player while three girls watched him sideways from beneath their scarves, smiling to each other; a child hastily paid for a breadroll and began to eat it before he had turned from the counter; an old man sitting before an old, scarred typewriter nodded to us as we passed. We threaded our way through the crowds, around the potholes and the little piles of goat-dung, to the café. We sat on wooden benches at a steel table near the street, half in garish light and half in darkness. As we ate, passers-by would greet us, 'Salaam aleykum' or 'Galab wanaagsan'. Once a child came shyly and solemnly to shake our hands.

Then we returned. We left the light and the evening's bustle and walked back through the darkness. And the world expanded again, became thin and cool. Our voices seemed to be taken up by the wan starlight, to lose themselves in preparation for the next day.

4.

When I get the chance I walk out of town to the hills behind. I leave the town and walk towards the distant mountain, along the spines of ridges, across the sand and gravel of wadis, pausing sometimes to watch a lizard on a rock, or a scorpion, or to inspect a small pink flower that grows alone amid the stones, miles from any other of its kind. It is easy walking. The land is open and semi-desert, and though it is the middle of a cloudless afternoon, the air is cool. So I stride through emptiness, my mind unfocused. I am aware only of impressions, of the gentle indiscipline of the world around me. The sky is wide and the horizon could be anywhere.

And then suddenly I catch sight of someone. It might be a goatherd, a small boy or girl, who has been watching me from the skyline. Or else it is a man who waves to me from the other side of a gully. I go to him and find that he is standing in front of his aqal. I had not seen it because it is the same colour as the landscape, the yellow stone, the grey scrub, the tawny shadows. His whole family is there with him. He introduces me to them as if I had known him all my life, and they press on me a bowl of curdled milk or the sweet spiced tea that I have come to love. I stumble through the few phrases that I know and they all nod as if they understand me perfectly. At other times I might round a bluff and come across some young women who carry bundles of firewood over their shoulders. They smile to me or else veil their faces. I lower my eyes and walk on. This is not the empty landscape that I first set out to see. This is a peopled landscape.

Do you remember that once I told you that I was weary of security? That I wanted indiscipline, anarchy, autonomy, to flee the opacity of absolutes and to lose myself in a landscape, any landscape? And do you remember that though I tried to reassure you, I could not explain my words? I hurt you then. Now I think I know what I was trying to say.

Here there is no difference between the people and the landscape. These people do not live in their landscape but are of it. Here the world is not sealed from mind beneath tar and concrete; there is no fence that shelters civilisation from wilderness, man from nature, security from anarchy. These things are all the same. And here when someone says, 'This is my land', he is not saying, 'This is what I possess' or 'This is what possesses me'. He is saying 'This is me'.

5.

Imagine this: imagine that you sit with me in the cold, still starlight of these taut nights. Before us is a fire and behind us only the glow of darkness. We sit in silence. There are no words for such simplicity as this.

Now imagine this: the smoke drifts too near you, caressing you, curling into a cloud about your head. You grimace. Your eyes blink twenty times, leaking tears. Your lips curl back and your teeth bite at those frail, sweet-scented wisps. What is that word you speak?

Here the word for smoke is qiiq. It is the sound you made, said with tongue stopped against the palate, with a mouthful of cobwebbed air.

Sometimes I find it difficult to write to you, my love. I am stuck dumb by self-defining words. Sometimes I find writing is as hard as catching hold of smoke.

6.

Yesterday I went with Redwan to his family's home, a small village so far from anywhere that it might be lost from all the world. In the early afternoon I sat on the doorsill of the house and stared out into the bright, brash light, letting its drone benumb my thoughts. Redwan and his family murmured their salat in the cool, dark room behind me.

Later he came to join me, and leaned against the jamb, and he too gazed out into the day. For a while we were silent. Then he lifted his arm and swept it in a wide arc that encompassed all we saw and more. 'Look', he urged in a voice that was still at prayer.

I looked, and saw the distant trembling mountains, blue as a whisper, and thorn-trees treading air in front of them. And there I saw the bare-bone plains studded sparsely with the camel-hump aqals of the camel-herds; and here the village with its mosque, a bare patch of ground with white-washed stones marking each corner and three more the mihrab. Beside the well I saw a dying eucalypt and beyond it a field of desiccated cornstalks. And there where the sunlight stood like a sheet set out to dry I saw a child playing with a kitten, and here a few hang-head sheep leaning into the sliver of a shadow. I saw all these things and more, but was not sure that I saw what I was looking at.

All my life I have peered at a solid world and seen only its ghost, shimmering like the promise of smoke from an unlit fire. I have seen as if through frosted glass so that structure is dissolved and substance made insubstantial. And now I have come to think that it is my human soul that distorts my sight, as if it had grown like cataracts in my eyes and half my gaze were turned back to meet itself, and reality were veiled by doubt; as if, envious of immortality, my soul, my educated soul, had undone the architecture of the universe and had me dream something less enduring in its place.

I would give my soul away for a moment's sight of truth, my humanity for a glimpse of a secular and self-proclaiming world.

7.

I will tell you about Ali Mohammed, someone who is lost. So well-known that even children let him be, he walks around the town as if he were not lost at all, striding earnestly from one place to a random other, his eyes on a distant third. The pockets of his shirt are stuffed with broken pens and pencil-stubs, and to his chest he clasps a ragged sheaf of papers that are smudged with sweat, yellowed and cankered by the dry sunlight. If you seem sufficiently important he will stop you in the street and, looking beyond you to the hills or even further, he will ask you for paper. Just that one word, as if he were demanding your ID.

He is illiterate, of course. You can give him any piece of paper that you might have, with writing in any language and any script. He will scan it quickly, nod in satisfaction, add it to his bundle, and then walk on without another word. Though if the paper that you give him is unmarked, he will hand it back to you, his eyebrows raised in resigned contempt.

I was told that he is one of those few who failed the tests of literacy several years ago. (That was when people were bullied from their daily lives and sat in front of chalkboards that might have been black holes to swallow all their worlds, and there were taught to read and write almost at gunpoint.) And having failed, he went mad. His mind moved sideways to a different state, leaving his empty body to live imperfectly in this one.

I often see him, watch him walk down the street's perspective. He is the solitary who decodes the discipline of progress.

8.

Last night I opened the book you sent me and was reading Marlowe again. His chortling decasyllables were made smooth by the uncertain light of the hurricane lamp. I turned a page and found a single bronze-red hair curled across the lines, and I found that if I held the book to my nose I could smell your honey-scent.

Yes, my love. Your Heroic beacon shines across a thousand Hellesponts.

9.

Not far from here is the end of the world, a place where the earth falls suddenly from beneath your feet, tumbling massively and extravagantly to the plains below. It is the southern rim of the rift valley, cliffs that are 2000 feet high. The northern rim is 200 miles away and the gulf lies in the valley between. Sometimes we go there for a picnic, sit with our legs dangling over the edge in emptiness.

It is a strange place. Behind us the dry plains slope away, dust and bare stone calloused by the sun. And below us is only the dark, cool greenness of a forest where mist drifts among the tree-tops. We sit there and our gaze is lost in the sombre depths. Further out the pale yellow coastal plains shelve away, the forest leaking onto them along the filaments of wadis, and beyond that the grey-blue haze of the gulf. And the horizon then, its curve so flagrant that it seems we see a quarter of the sphere. And the sky above it vast. Yet it is not what we see that impresses us. This is a place for listening. It is what we hear that holds our command. Sometimes we might hear a truck grinding up the hairpins of the road to the pass, or else we hear the call of a dove or the faint keening of an eagle or the barking of baboons. But they are not what we are listening for. What we hear above those sounds is the hum of wilderness and the whispering of the solid earth. What we are listening to is the anarchic silence of the universe. Here it is without the thin crust of noise that humans press upon it.

Sometimes, because we are fearful of our own fear, we throw paper planes over the cliff's edge and watch them wig-wag down through the gentle updraughts until they are lost in the mist and the tree-tops far below us.

10.

We woke early on Christmas morning, the day as yet undefined, sat up in our sleeping-bags and squinted at the air's salt-smear'd promise of later warmth. The long pale dunes hid us from the haze of the dawn. The sand of the swale where we had slept was still crusted with dampness, the night's footprints not yet fallen into shapeless hollows. Grasses were still bent low with the glistening weight of dew. Then, standing and stretching, our arms semaphoring to the sullen, empty sea, we wished each other a 'Merry Christmas'. We spoke quietly, with shy smiles, as if embarrassed, or conscious of some subversive act. We had come down to the coast just for the day, just for a short break, without fuss.

Then, while we stood there still unsure of what we should do next, we heard it, a whine wavering towards us from the east. It almost seemed the day were coming in a wave and the dawn's damp dullness were whimpering as it was swept ahead. We saw nothing when we looked that way except blue shadows crowned with light. Then, rounding a stubby sand-hill, the jeep appeared, bouncing, slewing back and forth, its engine racing as it followed the tracks we had left the day before. It roared into our camp and stopped by the ashes of the fire.

The lieutenant strode among us, shook our hands, wished each of us a happy Christmas. He was proud of his English and his knowledge of foreign holy days. Then he took a stance before us, thumbs behind his patent leather belt and frowned.

'You must let the authorities know where you are going.'

We listened as he chided us, specifying our rights and duties in his country where Christmas was not celebrated. His voice was gentle but particular, sailing over us, sweeping doubt from the silent morning sky. From time to time he spread his hands, a benovolent master then, reluctant to scold his guests. And all the while the boy-soldier who had come with him, hanging on for grim life as the jeep tore across the dunes, stood to one side, his beret carefully casual on his tight dark curls, and looked on us with something between a scowl and a grin of puzzled awkwardness. He cradled a heavy automatic rifle in his arms.

When they left they did not return the way they had come but drove onto the dry, stony plain behind the dunes. I climbed a sand-hill and watched them go, weaving recklessly among the thorn-trees, a long thick plume of dust rising in their wake. A hoopoe called after them. Now the sun was fully risen, the sky already pale, the shadows dark. Now the haze of dawn was gone, and the day was now defined.

This year Santa Claus came bearing a Kalashnikov.

11.

I am back in the city where I started seven months ago. I am on my way back home.

I have been here for two days now, waiting impatiently for the next stage of this long circuitous journey. I sit here in a bare room in a tiny hotel near the market. At night, in the humid darkness, the room echoes with the scuttling of geckoes and obese moths and spiders, but now, in daylight, it has shrunk. The sun has burst the window's shutters and burns its way into all the corners, and damp heat presses heavily as stone on everything. Outside the afternoon welters with rank portent: stormclouds hoist themselves to the dazzle of their silver caps, teasing the importunate earth with the damp shadows of their skirts, promising a deluge that never comes. And there is a constant congested clamour of traffic jammed in streets that are too narrow and of people jammed in a city that is too small. Donkeys are braying and goats are bleating, and somewhere a cock is crowing as if trying to drown the horns and whistles, and the shouts and laughter, and the long elegiac calls of the muezzins. It doesn't succeed. I am back in civilisation again, and feel as if I have been exiled from the real world. That, I think, is what I will be bringing back with me: a knowledge of the real world, a knowledge of stillness and of substance, of things established in their own shapes, unglazed by human absolutes. It is as if I had read the original of which civilised truths have made a palimpsest.

Yesterday, in the city's centre, I saw the presidential motorcade pass on its way somewhere. The street had been cleared a good half-hour before it came, and I didn't know what was happening until I heard the sirens. Then it sped by, a brief storm: four motorcycles, two jeeps crammed with soldiers in camouflage uniforms, each with a rifle erect between his knees, and in the middle, a long, black, sleek limousine with darkened windows and a small flag snapping at the slipstream. And though there were many people along the street, none waved or cheered or clapped, and none booed. They all stood there like granite and watched in silence, and I could not read what they might be thinking. Beggars, with their polio-thinned limbs, stopped begging, and the kids who stand at street-corners and sell cigarettes one at a time were still, their hands behind their backs. And even when the motorcade had passed and the sirens were beginning to fade, all still watched after

it as if stunned. Until the sudden, sardonic, wheezing laughter of a donkey woke them.

And it was seeing that silence that first made me think of a palimpsest, as if I had caught a glimpse of what lay beneath the passion of human things, the unheeded stillness beneath our frenzied dance. We have so convinced ourselves of a need for truths that we are constantly and frantically imposing them on reality, overlaying what we have forgotten how to read with the contorted grammar of civil pretence. Fearful of things bigger than ourselves, of things more vast than our own thoughts, we scribble more and more of our invented truths over the simple script of landscape, sealing it from our sight the way we hide bare earth beneath tar and concrete, forgetting that it is what holds us up. We try to trap entropy and anarchy beneath the imposture of human absolutes.

Is this what I came all this way to find? I had wanted to give, not find, to vivify 'responsibility' and 'human dignity'. Remember how I spoke those words so carefully? 'Development' and 'sustainability' were passwords to admit me by sentinels named 'Poverty' and 'Third World'. But now I find that what I sought to enter was a mythology. I find that all those words are merely the sophistications we write over what lies beneath us all, the first things written, the first world, the chaotic harmony of reality. And I am beginning to feel ashamed that all I have come here for is to add my own scribbles to the palimpsest.

12.

This is my last day in this distant country, and this my last letter. I am coming home.

I am sitting in my room. Outside a storm pelts blood-warm water in long harp-strings past the open windows, and thunder plays long, rolling, sonorous chords over the withered city. At last the wet has broken.

And with the rain has come the spice of earth, a scent that swells into the sapless air, fills all absences.

I think of you continuously, my love. This earth-smell is your image. And when I breathe it, you surround me and fill me and revivify me.

I am coming home.

The Letter

Just casting round for something good to read
On the train home, I riffle lovely names:
D'Annunzio, Gozzano, Montale ... no,
There's *Lavorare stanca*—fancy that,
I haven't picked it up since, let me see,

Since 1980, fifteen years ago,
And here it is. Well, well, some grammar notes
On yellow paper; a mistaken verb;
And there beside my favourite line of all,
Another list of conjugations — no,

A letter written in a childish hand
I open then gulp down and down and down,
Something about 'regret' and 'loneliness',
Something about 'in ten years' time, maybe'.
I say *il mestiere di vivere*

But far too badly to impress myself.
I read those poems once again, and try
Ne stilla una pena antica.
Fifteen years have taught me 'peace' and 'calm'
Yet still a letter slaps me in the face.

Brisbane

I travelled to a city made of heat
 Where brown snakes slithered past a paw-paw tree.
 Our new house stood on stilts and creaked at night
 And thunder took the place of history.

Where brown snakes slithered past a paw-paw tree
 I sat and wrote my future in a daze.
 Huge thunder took the place of history
 And yet a *no* uncoiled within each *yes*.

I sat and wrote my future in a daze:
 And though the sun kept hammering my head,
 And though a *no* uncoiled within each *yes*,
 I listened hard for what is left unsaid.

And while the sun kept hammering my head
 The bright hours took my body, one by one.
 I listened hard for what is left unsaid,
 Convinced it called to me from far within.

So dark hours took my body, one by one,
 And played for all my future, all my past:
 Convinced it called to me from far within,
 I waited for a strangeness I could trust.

With all my future, and with all his past,
 My father claimed that city made of heat.
 I waited for a strangeness I could trust
 In a house that stood on stilts and creaked at night.

Listening

That evening, the sea plane nodded on a hidden edge of river.
First, the two boys clambered in the back,
Scrapping like young bears.
We followed, folded in behind the dials, knees in our chests.
Lars steered out, hammered the plane across the water
Till suddenly we rose, and all of Finnmark fell away
The sun climbed diamond from a ledge of sky
To light a hundred lakes. Reindeer battled out beneath,
Streaming from the aircraft's sudden coming;
Our shadow passed across the hills—
A slow midge drifting south.

We came down on the tundra—
A white curve across the wind—
A thousand feet up, forty miles from any road.
All around the cabin nets and paddles, drums of oil, old wood,
Then nothing, only lake and moor and lake.

I listened, waiting for the silence, and heard instead,
A sky full of voices—
Great northern divers, phalaropes, curlews, grebes—
An ancient chorus sung
Since the beginning.

The Lesson of Barambogie: Richardson's Response to Schopenhauer in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*

THE *Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is generally considered Richardson's greatest naturalistic achievement and, of all her major fiction, the work least indebted to Continental culture. This distinction was early underscored by her husband, J G. Robertson, who remarked that "while *Maurice Guest* was a web of literary influences, *Richard Mahony* is almost strikingly free of them: the author has here acquired an original and personal art".¹ And subsequent commentary has confirmed his judgement. Even so diligent an explorer of Richardson's sources as Dorothy Green concluded that the "book is architecture on the grand scale, with all the scaffolding cut away". Yet she does add the important rider that "the more bits of scaffolding one finds, the more one admires the grandeur of the structure which so completely conceals them".² What follows is an attempt to trace important elements of this 'scaffolding' to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Though well assimilated within the novel's intellectual structure, its impact nonetheless emerges in the struggle between pessimistic and spiritualist perspectives, and climactically at Barambogie. There prostrate Mahony, like the doomed miner of the Proem to *Australia Felix*, digs "with his hand until what it grasped was a compost of mud and gravel", and he is duly "caked in mud, soaked to the skin" (RM 884).³ But this time the potential image of irremediable human suffering is eclipsed by promised access to another sphere which, as the author would assert years later, offered "more & better chances than this earthly life".⁴

1. From the essay 'The Art of Henry Handel Richardson', in H.H. Richardson, *Myself When Young* (London: Heinemann, 1948), 208.
2. *Henry Handel Richardson and Her Fiction* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 386.
3. RM indicates a page reference to *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (London: Heinemann, 1930).
4. The comment, in a letter to Oliver Stonor of 29 April 1941, is preceded by the statement: 'the death of the body doesn't mean as much to me as it does to others; for I look on death not as an ending but as a new beginning' (Mitchell Library MSS 546).

There can be little doubt that Richardson was thoroughly versed in Schopenhauer's thought, and that it provides an intellectual leaven to the drama played out between Richard and Mary Mahony.⁵ His central treatises, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Conception*) and *Parerga und Paralipomena*, and the works of his acolyte Friedrich Nietzsche, were prominent in her reading during the composition of *Maurice Guest*,⁶ while this tradition of philosophical inquiry informs Mahony's reference at Barambogie to "the thing itself":

in his new clearness of vision he saw that his bloodiest struggle that day had been, not with the thing itself, but with what hid it from him. Which was Time. He had set up Time as his bugbear, made of it an implacable foe, solely to hinder his mind from reaching out to what lay beyond. That, he could not face and live. (RM 881)

Although at the close of this experience Richard will be associated by Cuffy with "the picture of Tomfool in the 'King of Lear'", here "the thing itself" evokes not Lear's seering vision of humankind stripped of pomp and pretence,⁷ but an intangible and unreachable presence beyond, or perhaps underlying, perceived objects and experiences. As such, the phrase apparently originated in Immanuel Kant's related conception of the *Ding an sich*, rather than in Shakespeare. Acknowledged but uninvestigated in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's "thing in itself" inspired speculation ranging from the idealism of Schelling and Hegel, to the pessimism of Schopenhauer and the "joyous science" of Nietzsche. And its appearance at this climactic moment of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* signals, I believe, the lasting challenge that Schopenhauer's ideas represented to Richardson's deeply held spiritual convictions.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) composed his works over a period of almost forty years, but his basic conceptions remained constant. Building upon what he hailed as Kant's "very great" discovery — namely that we have conceptions

5. The place of his thought in her intellectual formation has, however, been neglected. Normally Schopenhauer is discussed, if at all, as part of the general climate of ideas to which Richardson was exposed on the Continent, although he receives more detailed treatment in Green's monumental study of Richardson, and in Karen McLeod's discussion of his conception of the will in *Henry Handel Richardson: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 20-21.
6. See in particular her diary entries for March, April and August 1898, held in the Richardson Papers, National Library MSS 133.
7. "Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (*King Lear*, III, iv, 108-110).

of time, space and causality independent of empirical experience —⁸ he postulated the radically subjective character of human knowledge:

“The world is my conception” — this is a truth which is valid for every living and knowing being, although only man can formulate it in this abstract, self-conscious fashion; and in doing so philosophical reflection is born within him. Then it becomes clear and certain that he knows neither sun nor earth; but always only an eye, which sees the sun, a hand, which feels the earth; that the world, which surrounds him, is only there as conception, that is, only in relation to another who conceives, who is himself.⁹

The entire world, described “as an object in relation to a subject, a view of the viewer, in short, a conception”,¹⁰ is linked philosophically with Plato’s realm of appearances, and with the Kantian knowable as distinct from the thing itself, and also with the Hindu spiritual teaching of “Maya, the veil of deception, which shrouds the eyes of mortals, causing them to see a world of which they cannot say whether it is or isn’t, for it resembles a dream”, or a mirage.¹¹

The second major component in Schopenhauer’s metaphysical equation is the will. This is at once the Kantian *Ding an sich* and the will felt in each individual. A blind striving without cause or goal, it is the animating principle of all life, from the smallest crystal or plant through to the animal realm and humankind. Though not intrinsically evil, it lies at the root of human suffering, because the worldly endeavours to which it incites us bring no lasting contentment and are ultimately meaningless. As Schopenhauer puts it, “the subject of the will is continually on the turning wheel of Ixion, draws his water from the sieve of the Danaides, and knows the eternal thirst of Tantalus”.¹² Yet within this weary cycle the philosopher allows for transitory perceptions which pierce the veil of Maya. Through suppression of personal will or interest and complete self-abandonment, an individual can achieve a peaceful, painless state of pure knowing, in which “we celebrate a Sabbath repose

8. On his equally important disagreements with Kant see Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 96-9 and *passim*; and Christopher Janaway, *Self and World in Schopenhauer’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

9. *Welt und Mensch: Eine Auswahl aus dem Gesamtwerk*, ed. Arthur Hübscher (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1966), 33-4. Translations from the German are my own. Wherever possible quotations of Schopenhauer’s work are drawn from this readily available edition.

10. *Welt und Mensch*, 34.

11. Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin: Tempel Verlag, 1963), I, 37.

12. *Welt und Mensch*, 79.

from the penal-labour of desire, the wheel of Ixion stands still".¹³ This is a condition of spiritual calm, celebrated alike by Christian and Hindu mystics in which, according to Schopenhauer,

the storm of passion, the impulses of wanting and of fear, and all the torment of desire are suddenly appeased in a marvellous fashion. Torn free of the will, we give ourselves over to willess knowing, and so enter instantly into another world beyond everything which moved our will and shook us violently. The emancipation of knowing [Erkennen] raises us as utterly and completely above all that as do sleep and dream. Happiness and unhappiness disappear. No longer individuals, we become the pure subject of knowing: we exist there only as the *one* universal eye, present in all conscious beings, but in mankind capable of being entirely free of service to the will.¹⁴

This blissful state is always potentially at hand, but even if attained, who can remain in it? As soon as the individual will reasserts itself, we succumb again to physical dictates. Then we "no longer know the [Platonic] idea, but the separate things, the links in a chain to which we also belong, and we are once more immersed in all our grief".¹⁵ The conceded moment of revelation, however, would inspire later readers, including Richardson, whose spiritualist beliefs enabled her to recognise the justice of Schopenhauer's dark conception of the human condition, and yet to subsume it within a vision of a more purposefully creative, universal agency.

The mortal realm portrayed in Richardson's *magnum opus* affords in most respects a fictional dramatisation of Schopenhauer's conception of existence. Life is associated with suffering, unshakeable striving, and the amassing of unsatisfying worldly goods. As the Proem to *Australia Felix* highlights, the New World, which is the contemporary embodiment of humankind's perennial dream of material fulfilment, will inevitably become the site of that individual disappointment, pain and eclipse, epitomised by the closing figure of a puny mortal as the helpless plaything of a nurturing, and yet malignant, supreme will. This fate is worked out equally among the rich pastoralists and merchant princes, the impecunious and the innocent. Representative of the settlers who conquered the land is the crushed alcoholic Glendinning. "One of the pioneer squatters of the district", he has been led

13. *Welt und Mensch*, 79.

14. *Welt und Mensch*, 80.

15. *Welt und Mensch*, 81.

“to drown doubts, memories, inevitable regrets; ... to the bitter discovery that forgetfulness alone rendered life endurable” (RM 212). Another warning example is provided by Mahony’s brother-in-law, John Turnham, who overcomes his humble origins to succeed in business and politics. Yet even his accumulated power cannot deflect an implacable destiny — a point underscored first through the loss of a beloved wife and later when even his fine constitution, which has borne him triumphantly through the trials of colonial existence, serves only to prolong his terrible suffering from cancer.

Moreover, John’s exclusive concern with material goals, the lifelong “absence of the spiritual in him”, leaves him facing a palpable void, and brings into sharp focus for Mahony the purpose of individual existence:

Life was like a procession that trooped along this perilous margin [of an abyss], brimful of hope and vigour, gay, superbly unthinking; and then of a sudden there was a gap in the ranks, and one of the train had vanished, had pitched head-foremost into the depths, to be seen no more — by mortal eyes at least. (RM 623)

Richard also grasps, thanks to John’s ordeal, “pain, as the profoundest of life’s truths, the link by which man is bound up with the Eternal ... pain that bites so much deeper than pleasure, outlasting pleasure’s froth and foam as granite outlasts thistledown’ (RM 622), and feels compelled to probe the darkness of the abyss itself.

Qualifying this bleak prospect, and confirming the validity of Richard’s quest, are strategically placed adaptations of Plato’s allegory of the cave. The latter illustrates Plato’s central teaching that we mistake our illusory life, based on temporal appearances, for truth or the realm of eternal forms. This unthinking condition is likened to a state of mortal imprisonment which restricts our vision to mere shadows thrown on the walls of a cavern. Beyond it exists the Real, or the Kantian *Ding an sich* which Schopenhauer identified with the will. The first echo in the novel of Plato’s parable occurs in Sheffield, the last on the eve of Richard’s funeral. Trying to establish an English practice, Mahony passes a miserable winter incarcerated in “a small darkish room”, cut off from the outside world by a “brown gauze shade. Across this blind he saw people move like shadows; or like bodies immersed in water, only the tops of whose crowns showed above the surface” (PM 448). For an instant, corporeal existence is reduced to shadows on the wall of his cave, and the insight is underscored in terms of watery submersion, itself a standard

Neoplatonic symbol for the individual soul's immersion in matter. In Platonic terms, Mary is one such soul who has forgotten her eternal birthright. Hence, although at times striving to see beyond the immediately given, her profoundest visions remain, to change the metaphor, within the folds of the veil of Maya:

How would it all end? — Letting her work fall, Mary put her chin in her hand, and sat staring into the flame of the kerosene lamp. But she did not see it. She seemed to be looking through the light at something that lay beyond ... something on the farther side, not only of the flame, but of all she had hitherto known of life; to be looking, in visionary fashion, out towards those shadowy to-morrows ... an endless line of days, that would come marching upon her, with never a break, never a respite, each fuller of anxiety than the one that went before. (PM 777-8)

This questioning comes to a head after Richard's death, but even then Mary's horizon remains stubbornly terrestrial: "what had she to do with angels? She wanted the man himself, the dear warm incompetent human creature at whose side she had been through so much" (PM 984). The text, however, immediately provides a further perspective on her final meditations which reduces them to flitting appearances, generated by a loving though limited condition.

She could weep, without fear of surprise, alone with him who had passed beyond the sound of human grief; in this little back room where, by the light of a single candle, monstrous shadows splashed walls and ceiling: shadows that stirred, and seemed to have a life of their own; for it was winter now, and the wild Australian wind shrilled round the house, and found its way in through the loosely fitting sashes. (PM 985)

The antipodean setting, like Mary's mundane hopes, "seem[s] to have a life" of its own — but the Platonic subtext to the scene could direct the reader's vision to a realm where these appearances will be eclipsed, not by nothingness, but by enduring eternal truth.

Richard is the flawed but heroic spokesperson of this otherworldly perspective, and a major dilemma raised by the narrative is what credence can be given to the experience of a man well advanced towards certified insanity. His life also illustrates Schopenhauer's dictum that "all willing springs from need, therefore from shortage, therefore from suffering".¹⁶ The victim of unfocused desire, Richard is constantly restless, and feels that the pattern and purpose of existence remain veiled from sight.

In Ballarat, for instance, he decides after much vacillation to return to his original profession, and has the impression that “all he had had to do was to brush aside a flimsy gossamer veil, which hung between him and his fate” (PM 178). Yet neither his career nor his metaphysical speculation brings about this disclosure. Instead, with his sanity crumbling, he gradually relinquishes society and its norms in favour of a maniacal fixation on private anxieties, as well as a desperate search for evidence of spiritual continuance. The resulting supernatural ‘proofs’, however, are usually countered by Mary’s rational explanations — though his mental aberrations need not provide incontrovertible grounds for dismissing his conjectures.¹⁷ For Richardson not only builds into the narrative qualified confirmation of his premises, as we have seen, but she also alludes tellingly to the long asserted conjunction of madness with privileged wisdom, which underlies the fierce storm scenes of *King Lear*.

Richard’s most exalted vision occurs at Barambogie, and significantly is counterbalanced, not by Mary’s commonsensical rejoinders, but by Cuffy’s less prejudiced insights. Here as elsewhere his innocent view-point affords an ideal means of conveying difficult scenes and contextualizing commentary. Cuffy reads his father’s night sortie in terms of the states of being lost and found, and compares him naively to two prototypes: the “monkey in a wood” which the son pursues in an uneasy dream, and “the picture of Tomfool in the ‘King of Lear’”. For Mahony, when finally rediscovered, “had no hat on, and was wet, the water all running out of him, and so muddy, the mud sticking all over his greatcoat and in his face and hair” (PM 885). The dream image of the monkey encapsulates the father’s return to origins and his physical reduction to the Shakespearian “thing itself”. The latter is identified by Lear with another outcast, Edgar, who in his assumed role as a bedraggled Tom of Bedlam can articulate the normally inaccessible and unspeakable. Richardson’s allusive linking of Mahony with this tradition of the holy or wise fool suggests powerfully that his revelation is not simply inspired by intense personal needs, and that he may be successively lost and found in ways which mercifully exceed childhood’s limited experience.

The high-point of Mahony’s night venture in fact conforms to Schopenhauer’s

16. *Welt und Mensch*, 78.

17. Even when Richardson, with scrupulous impartiality, allows Tilly and Mary to demonstrate the abuses to which gullible seekers at seances leave themselves open, she nevertheless attributes to Mahony a last word which at once testifies to his unshakeable hopes and leaves the issue unresolved: “There may be ... there probably is .. fraud. And why not? ... do not rogues oftimes preach the gospel? But that there’s truth in it — a truth greater than any yet dreamed of — on that I would stake my soul” (RM 684).

account of the preconditions for and actual moment of supreme revelation, but differs from it in affirming a divine instead of a blind will at the centre of creation. Prior to this climactic scene Richard has gradually cast off all links with diurnal reality and his ruling passions:

His books lay unopened, withdrawn into their primary state of so much dead paper. And it was not books alone that lost their meaning and grew to seem useless, and a burden. He could forget to wind up his watch, to pare his nails; he ceased to care whether or no his socks were worn into holes. (PM 824)

The temporal is virtually rejected, although at this stage the life-instinct, that obstinate manifestation of the individual will, still remains. The next phase is self-loathing and suicidal impulse, manifested when Mahony rains down blows on a personal surrogate in the tired horse drawing his buggy. Finally, he takes two essential steps on the night of his ultimate vision: he overcomes the desire for self-preservation and then the impulse to suicide, which Schopenhauer maintained was the last expression of will.¹⁸ This crucial process of self-transcendence acknowledges at the outset its metaphysical basis with the allusion, quoted earlier, to “the thing itself”, and recasts the doctor’s stubborn resistance to colonial materialism in terms of an excessive focusing on the temporal, with “Time as his bugbear”, because he cannot face “what lay beyond”. (RM 881). The fear acknowledged here is generated by the unknown and by his awareness of mounting insanity. “For, below the surface here, under a lid which he never lifted, which nothing would have induced him to raise a hair’s-breadth, lurked a darker fear than any, one he could not face and live” (RM 828). Both spell eclipse of the rational self. Madness may well be the price demanded for Mahony’s ensuing vision; the novel offers no verdict on this. But it does suggest that after such supernal knowledge there is no further cause for despair — conviction mediated in a minor key when Cuffy closes the chapter with: “What did it mean he [Mahony] said he *couldn’t* be lost? Why not?” (RM 886).

Richard, having momentarily annihilated the last vestiges of his will, assumes the death-like position of the miner in the Proem to *Australia Felix*, to become Schopenhauer’s “pure subject of knowing”. Selfhood is overcome, and he shares the

18. This decision, in Schopenhauer’s terms, remains an expression or extension of our will-defined inadequacies and conceptions. The alternative form of negation is described in *Welt und Mensch*, 117-8.

awareness of the German philosopher's "one universal eye".

[H]e was lying, he found, in a pool of light; a radiance thick as milk, unearthly as moonlight. And this suffused him, penetrated him, lapped him round.... All sense of injury, of mortification, of futile sacrifice was wiped out. In its place there ran through him the beatific certainty that his pain, his sufferings ... had their niche in God's Scheme (pain the bond that linked humanity: not in joy, in sorrow alone were we yoke-fellows) — that all creation, down to the frailest protoplasmic thread, was one with God; and he himself, and everything he had been and would ever be, as surely contained in God, as a drop of water in a wave, a note of music in a mighty cadence. More: he now yearned as avidly for this submergedness, this union of all things living, as he had hitherto shrunk from it. (RM 884)

Counterbalancing Schopenhauer's vision of suffering as the bedrock of human experience is a sense of all-embracing union, epitomised by a suffusing "radiance thick as milk". Its restorative, maternal operation complements the book's famous opening image of the New World as "some primeval monster in the sun, her breasts freely bared, she watched, with a malignant eye, the efforts made by these puny mortals to tear their lips away." Sustenance, both passages confirm, is never denied. But to the merely physical seeker no satiety can come, and existence inevitably assumes a malignant aspect, whereas access to its spiritual core provides an affirmative perspective on creation. Mahony's extraordinary vision is Richardson's version of what Schopenhauer dubbed the "Sabbath repose from the penal-labour of desire", when, with the individual will annihilated, for the chosen quester the "import of existence, the mysteries hid from mortal eyes, the key to the Ultimate Plan: all now were his" (PM 884). But the wheel of Ixion begins to turn again, and the debt to Schopenhauer's system, here answered and transcended, is acknowledged in passing when Mahony returns abruptly to the folds of Maya, and "awakening found his brain of an icy clearness, in which no jot or tittle of what awaited him was veiled from him" (RM 884).

Complementing and completing this affirmative rejoinder to Schopenhauer's conception of an unfeeling cosmic will and its insatiable human manifestations is Mrs Mahony. The unflinching care which she displays in her dealings with humankind, and her insistence on the good innate in each individual, compromise the closest earthly approximation to the all-accepting, laving radiance in Richard's vision. Though presented emphatically as a natural woman who "needed the

evidence of her senses" (RM 706), Mary exhibits a charity and compassion of truly New Testament dimensions, and demonstrates that attachment to the loved beings of this world is far removed from simple immersion in its material shows. "Her true mission in life", as Richard notes, was "the care of others — especially of the poor and suffering, the unhappy and unsure" (RM 542). This, coupled with her fierce loyalty, defines the limits of her metaphysical speculation.

Mary came as near as she ever would, to a conscious reflection on the aim and end of existence ... in imagination, she gathered her little ones to her heart — and gathered Richard with them, he, too, just an adored and absent child — it came over her like a flash that, amid life's ups and downs, to be able to keep one's little flock about one, to know one's dearest human relationships safe and unharmed, was, in good truth, all that signified. (RM 695-6)

Her revelation involves encompassment rather than exclusion, the acknowledgment of communal before solitary concerns, and an unshakeable identification with those who share her pilgrimage through life. For a moment, too, her thoughts intersect with those of the freethinkers Tangye and Mahony. According to the former, the infidel chemist of Ballarat, "life's only got one meanin' ... and that's to keep a sound roof over our heads and a bite in our mouths — and in those of the helpless creatures who depend on us" (RM 309); while Mahony grasps this humble truth during his ordeal at Barambogie. What separates them, however, is their response to this insight. Whereas Tangye posits that "the truly lucky ones o' this world don't grasp it," and Mahony's thought sweeps on to transcendental union, Mary responds with unstinting mother-love to the stricken. Eschewing angelic promise in favour of purposeful action ("if I go to heaven, I hope at least to find there'll be something — something really useful — to do" [RM 684]), she appears nonetheless to be a terrestrial refraction of the universal principle perceived by her husband, while the principle provides an ultimate affirmation of what she stands for. The novel, of course, stops short of overtly confirming a vision of interlocking spheres — though it subtly evokes their union through the shared lives and insights of the two characters who most closely adhere to terrestrial and spiritual possibilities, Mary and Richard.

To the end *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* maintains a fine balance between temporal and supernatural perspectives, between particular and collective fates. Like Johanna Cayhill from *Maurice Guest*, Richardson in her youth had read "Huxley

and Haeckel, Goethe and Schopenhauer".¹⁹ In later life, however, her acknowledged preference was for the wisdom of "old Goethe", "he who 'saw life steadily & saw it whole'" and, she might have added, who eschewed pessimism in favour of a belief in eternal becoming.²⁰ A related perception moves Mahony in Edinburgh, when he recognises "of what small worth was the individual: of what little account the human moulds in which this life-energy was cast" (RM 457). The thought recurs in a variety of guises, as when Richardson notes that "the lovers passed, but the pledges remained: had put on immortality" (RM 74), or when Mahony retorts testily to Tangye's doubts with "Pray, does it never occur to you, you fool, that *flowers* may spring from you?" (RM 307). Though few individuals can find relief in such a reflection, the book locates its *consolatio* beyond individual pessimism in a vision of an encompassing oneness. To Schopenhauer this would have seemed self-deluding wish-fulfilment; to Richardson it was a reality perceived in seances,²¹ or on rare revelatory occasions, as at Barambogio or in the daily miracle of sunrise, when darkness is dissipated and the mind's eye drawn towards infinity:

And now the sky was streaked with crimson-madder; the last clouds scattered, drenched in orange and rose, and flames burned in the glass of every window-pane. Up came the tip of the sun's rim, grew to a fiery quarter, to a half; till, bounding free from the horizon, it began to mount and to lose its girth in the immensity of the sky. (RM 199-200)

Less exaltedly the novel ends with Richard's interment, but Mary's earthly sorrow does not predominate. Instead, emphasis falls on a grave-site "where not a tree, not a bush, nor even a fence stands to break their [the winds'] force. Or to limit the outlook", and on reconciling, fruitful union: "The rich and kindly earth of his adopted country absorbed his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, vagrant spirit" (RM 990). As in the Proem to *Australia Felix*, the smallness and nullity of human endeavours in comparison with the scale of antipodean nature are underscored, though this time queter and

19. Maurice Guest (London: Heinemann, 1908), 73.

20. Letter to Oliver Stonor, 29 April 1941, Mitchell Library MSS 546.

21. Hence, for instance, after the death of her husband she could write, "Odd to think that I shall never need to be troubled about his whereabouts again. Death has *had* him; it is over; he is safe now for ever. My heart can be at rest in his eternal absence" (note dated 28 May 1933, rpt. in Edna Purdie and Olga M. Roncoroni [eds], *Henry Handel Richardson: Some Personal Reflections* [Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1957], 103). On her "life-long adherence to Spiritualism" see Dorothy Green, *Henry Handel Richardson and Her Fiction*, 16 and passim.

other are subsumed in a sense of abiding wholeness which ratifies both the role of the veil of Maya and all our puny efforts to attain an unlimited prospect.

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The car theory

I go over on Sunday morning. Mum boils the kettle and gives me a small parcel from Grace Bros, like she always does, usually two tea-towels, some stockings and a packet of Shortbread Creams. I tell her I have my own money, can buy my own food, I now have 30 tea-towels in my cupboard and that I never dry up. She smiles, says stockings are always handy. She herself was never the sort to let dishes drain.

We have instant coffee, which Mum always insists I make for her, because she says I make it taste better. That's only because I'm more liberal with the coffee and the milk than she would ever be but it's probably the only food-related thing I do better than my mother, so I let the fiction stand. We sit in the kitchen with its orange lineoleum and '70s wood panelling, looking at the sun out the back door. They have a big green backyard with lots of trees and neat lawns, backing onto a creek, and you can hear the birds chirruping and quarrelling, hundreds of them, even the odd kookaburra. When I sleep here, they keep me awake. I miss the roar of traffic.

Mum tells me there's a certain blue wren, a very vain little bird, which constantly flies against her kitchen window, stunning himself against his own reflection. She says its funny how his wife is such a drab little thing, brown and sombre, sitting wisely in her tree.

My dad comes in the back door, sighing, rubbing his shoes off on the mat, a gesture he has had drummed into him for over 40 years. That tree out the back needs lopping, are his first words, as if we are continuing a conversation from only a moment ago. But that's his way of saying hello. He washes his hands in the sink, all black and grimy from the garden, then clatters out to get them dirty again. He always makes a lot of noise.

Mum tells me news about the rest of the family, all far-flung and scattered and even as we speak beginning to propagate a third generation. My niece is pregnant, five minutes after she got married at the age of 21. This will be my parent's first great grandchild. They still look after them all, the grandchildren and the grandchildren's grandchildren coming to stay, coming to lunch, coming to talk about their problems. Mum makes them cups of tea and they sleep in the spare room, and study for school and high school and degrees, and Mum and Dad rarely sit down. There is always a hot meal to get or a lawn to mow or a car to fix. They have no need to play bowls.

Dad wanders back through saying, your front tyre's a bit down. And next time you're out, we should take it round to the mechanic here, he won't charge you an arm and a leg. I feel my eyes glaze over and the familiar mixture of guilt and anger rise up, but I nod, staring at the teapot where I can see my reflection distorted, eyes small, mouth huge. Dad says he might just take that tyre off, see if the brake linings are worn. The front door bangs again and Mum rolls her eyes. He can't do anything quietly, she mutters.

Mum asks me about my job. She listens avidly, highly impressed, and I make it sound more intimidating than it really is. The terrible and wonderful thing is that no matter what lies I could tell, she would believe me. I rev it up for her, and listen to myself, through the addition of a few discreet embellishments, becoming the hero of the piece. In my tone if not my words, I hear my father's voice, telling his stories about the job he had and his political activities, with just that particular note of bravado which still gives others their due. I realise with a shock that I too repeat the same funny stories to different friends, like he used to do with jokes we'd all heard before, told each year around Christmas dinner.

Mum says she should be getting lunch and this is her cue to ask me if I'm eating properly and my Dad to come crashing back through the front door, to wash the grease off his hands at the sink. She has always told him not to do it there, to do it in the bathroom, I think because she believes it might contaminate the food. He also cuts his own hair in the bathroom with the nail scissors and leaves the mess lying on the bathroom floor.

Mum makes lunch, a pie for her and Dad, a salad sandwich for me. Aren't you going to have any meat, my Dad says, as he always does, and as I always do, I tell him I

don't eat meat. I haven't eaten meat for fifteen years but he always asks and I always tell him.

Mum asks me how I'm going with money and if I need any extra. I'm actually broke but I lie and say I'm fine, thinking of all the dinners out and the pubs I go to and how they would die of shock if they knew how much money I wasted on things like that. My mother always thinks I'm struggling to make ends meet and I know that when I get home I'll find twenty dollars secreted somewhere, in the pocket of my jacket or the lining of the skirt she's mended for me. She's getting wilier because I always find it now before I leave.

Once, when she knew I was having a hard time with a boyfriend, she kept trying to give me money and I wouldn't take it, but she sent many extra pairs of stockings and doubled her tea-towel rate. It was summer so I wasn't wearing stockings and I nearly threw them all out but one cooler evening, I opened a pair and found twenty dollars inside the packet. Then I opened the other packets, six in all. There was twenty dollars in each.

Dad finishes his pie slathered with sauce. He says the car will need a tune up soon and asks whether I've been checking the oil. I lie of course and say I did it yesterday. He says it was a bit down. This is why I lie and why I never check the oil, because I know he does it every time I come out. He asks whether I'm making good mileage around town. Trying to make conversation which is car-related, I tell him I'm going on a longer trip in it soon, to Canberra, to see a friend, but this evokes grim warnings about older cars breaking down on lonely highways. His voice gets louder and quicker and more agitated; have I renewed my NRMA membership? I lie and tell him I have. I'll do it next week. He's not convinced and says why don't you take my car.

I have a theory about this car business. It's a code, you just have to break it. That when he says how are the tyres, he means how is your health. Have you checked the oil and water means is your life on track. More major questions and concerns, such as engine trouble or a head gasket, must relate to love.

It reached a crescendo when two years ago, I came to recover here from a broken heart. I spent two days in my room crying and wishing to die and when I came out,

my Dad had sold my old car through the Trading Post and bought me a new one, exactly the same as the old one except it had four doors instead of two, was red instead of blue. It was as if the enormity of the situation, the extent of my grief, demanded a car thing of equal measure, more than a tyre check or an oil and grease.

After lunch, they settle down in front of the TV. It doesn't take long. A half an hour later they are both asleep. I let myself quietly out the front door, climb into my car with its fresh oil and water and safer tyres and drive home.

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T-Song

IT'S the way the song starts. Like a heart beat, like a heart beating slowly and her heart responds to the rhythm of it; a slow steady pounding from some other place.

Over a decade ago, one humid summer, that song was on the radio in Melbourne and she fell in love with it and she was in love with him. And he hears it the first time crouched before his parent's Bakelite radio. He's having trouble with the tuning and she's laughing and yelling at him 'Turn it up Matt, that song, turn it up.' And he's given a hopeful wink from his father and a hug from his mother because he's twenty-two years old and he's never had a girlfriend. Katie could see them wondering if she'd be daughter-in-law material and they remember, years later, all the hopes his parents had for them. And he laughs too, balancing on one knee and stays silent until the music fades and he turns around with that smile and his honey-coloured hair sparked up like a halo.

'I can see why you like it so much.'

And for ten years that song weaves between them; trips them up with meanings whenever they hear it. And wherever they are, time stops for three minutes, almost like Remembrance Day except everyone else is moving.

* * *

Photographs of them together mark the years. All those blurred photographs. What do you think it means? She asks him. With each year and each frame she becomes heavier and he becomes thinner. So thin that she sometimes wondered

where he was going, what he would fade into. It means nothing, he consoled her. You read too much into things. When they first met he was lithe and strong. Hazy photographs show a lean boy and a plump, fair-haired girl, squinting at the camera, heavy silver jewellery glinting in the sun.

He moved so quickly then. Everything he did was deft and light. He was all movement and light then.

Now he seemed all light.

I see your body outline
thinner now, a body trace,
a body blur. A thin man with
a walking stick. A lean
shadow stretching across ten years
and many wants and the letter sent to a friend
telling her of my love for you — It's hopeless — she
read into it from the start and me saying you don't
understand. Shadows are my weakness.

* * *

When he arrived it was autumn, a time of fadings and turnings. The leaves kicked up layers underfoot and for an instant everything seemed golden. It's the first time she's seen him in four years and it's a thin figure in black running towards her, confounding all expectations. A dark blur in the pale Edinburgh light. She watches herself stop at the sight of him and time reeling backwards until there they are, hugging each other, tears between them.

They wander the city watching the light slant and curve along the Royal Mile. He walks quickly, more quickly than she remembered or hoped for, clambering to the top of red buses, enjoying everything, a calmness at the core of him. Different to how she remembered.

'I wasn't expecting to see you like this,' she says.

'So healthy you mean? I've thrown away the stick, I forget to take my medication...'

Her mind runs back to their last meeting: the thin man in his pyjamas lying in a purple haze. The thin man unable to leave the house.

'It's more than that — so happy, really. I think I'm jealous.'

'You've always been a jealous cow,' he teases

'But you've always had the answers.' She slants a look at him, willing it to be so.

'Just because I'm still around doesn't make me a wise bastard.'

'But you've always been a wise bastard'

He grins. 'Well, that's all right then.'

* * *

They take photos of golden chimney tops and the shadows lengthening over Edinburgh. She takes a shot of him outside the castle walls, a thin figure like a line drawing against the volcanic darkness. His enthusiasm for everything moves her, makes her want to cry almost.

They stop for a rest; the nerve endings in his feet no longer what they were and the pain starting to show on his face. It's a look she doesn't recognise and she's frightened by it. The corners of his mouth turn down, and his face is whitewashed with exhaustion.

'I think it's time to take it easy,' she says. He catches the tone in her voice as she tells him she needs a rest too and he hesitates. It won't go away she says pointing down to the Scott monument, it will still be there tomorrow.

'Yeah, I know, I know,' he laughs at her concern. 'But maybe I won't.'

* * *

They rest in Cafe Florentin. It's late afternoon and they take a window seat before the place fills up and he runs outside into the rain softly falling and takes a photo of

her with a teacup raised at the bench window, the hot tea steaming the window pane. 'Very Brunswick St.' he pronounces happily, as he sits down next to her again, bites into the cheesecake and strains his earl grey tea.

'I'm a real sugar junkie these days, Katie. Every three hours. It's like the pain killers, y'know.' He shrugs. 'Every three hours. What more could a man ask for?'

She interrupts about him needing more protein and why can't he eat properly. He tells her how he's trying to cut down on the pills, only two halves a day now, soon it'll only be one half and she shuts up about his diet and they sit happily planning the rest of his trip. He looks up and says playfully:

'A pair of tight buns perhaps.'

'Eh?'

'A man could always ask for a pair of tight buns.'

'In the hand or in the bush?' She's enjoying herself, that ease between them, always the to and fro.

'Both. You know me, never greedy.'

'But always wanting more?'

'Better than never wanting enough.' He shoots this back at her, too sharply almost.

'You know me too well.' Hurt, she twists the ring on her little finger. 'If I don't expect much, I won't be disappointed.'

'It's the lack of expectation that disappoints.'

She shakes her head. 'And after all you've been through, you can still believe *that*?' He takes her hand and smooths over her fingertips, reaches into his daypack and gives her a tape. 'A little present. I hope you won't be disappointed.' And he's pleased when she asks him if that song is included. He nods. 'Of course.'

And memory is triggered, a Pavlovian response.

* * *

They often anticipated each other's phone calls or dreamt about each other at the same time, the same dream even, which was uncanny, they both agreed. Often their dreams involved death. But Matt reassured her 'It's like Tarot, Katie, death means new beginnings.'

She believed him but always felt unsettled.

The first night they spent together they lay in a single bed, heads on the same pillow, dreaming the same dream. In the dream, he is attacked by a group of men. They surround him, baying like dogs they fall upon him, cursing and kicking until the blood starts to flow; from his nose, from his mouth from between the legs like a menstruating woman. The men leave him face down, arms splayed; a crucified figure on the pavement.

They woke at different times, disturbed, and only related the dream when it had cast a strange shadow over their first morning together.

'It's bad luck Matt, I know it.'

They slept together a few more times after that and then they stopped being lovers because it was more than the dreams which had come between them. Yet they were light and playful with each other, so careful that even ten years later he could say: 'We've never had any tense moments, have we? Not like other people.'

If only, they said to each other, years later, if only. If we weren't the people we were. If only I could've settled in one place she told him. If only I didn't like boys, he said, half-serious, I'd be with you now. They played with the thought of it. Them, years later, still together. She kept chasing that feeling, looking for the kernel of him in other men, but it was never the same.

I turned many men
sideways
Walked behind them observing the
slant of the midday sun on their
bodies; the arc of light on their
cheekbones,
the outline of their laughter traced
in smiles on the pavement. In the

half-light sometimes, there was a
close approximation.
I named them you.
But it was never close enough.

* * *

She settles the bill and returns to her seat to find him with his sleeve rolled up, staring at the purple welt on the inside of his forearm. 'Maybe they've got it wrong', he looks at her hopefully, wanting confirmation.

'Maybe. Doctors make mistakes sometimes.' She looks away from him, willing it to be so.

'And what if I'd given it to you? Have you ever wondered? It kills me to think about it...'

'Well you haven't ... and I've slept with a lot of bastards since. I'd be more likely to have got it off them.'

'But if I *had* given it to you...'

'Well...it would have been one of those things ... I would have coped ... I would have lost weight even.' She pulls a face at him.

'As a dietary strategy I don't recommend it.' He frowns, annoyed at her avoidance.

'No? Not much fun eh?'

'All cream cakes and opium suppositories.' He smiles despite himself. His mood starts to lift as he rolls down his sleeve. 'I'll have one of those chocolate things...'

'Right,' she says happily.

* * *

When the shadow time began, he didn't tell her at first, which hurt deeply, and she found out some time later when he called to say there's been something I've kept from you. And she listened and sobbed with surprise.

The shadow time lengthened. And for ten years she'd looked on. Hoped and prayed that every year when she returned that he would still be there. She observed the catalogue of symptoms and the glassy disbelief from those around him. His mother wept and talked about destiny. His father retreated into the tool shed and became even more quiet.

And she watched him become accustomed to this thing, make peace with it, even, as everyone around him seemed to fade from view.

* * *

On his last night in Edinburgh, they end up at the Station Bar, in the Safari Lounge with its one potted palm and the old men with whisky faces.

'Did I tell you about the time I won a trip to Sydney? First prize in the Big Boys' Bake-off? My gateau was a real beauty.'

'No. I would've remembered. What year was this?'

'The year Jim died.'

Oh, she says, *that* year. 'What brought this on?'

'The cakes in that cafe the other day ...and I wanted to ask you a favour

'Uh-huh. Anything.'

'Well, I want you to write something and read it out at my funeral...'

Katie touches the wooden tabletop three times, an unconscious gesture, and their drinks shudder over its surface. Her eyes fill up.

'Don't talk like that Matthew, its bad luck.'

'Its bad luck not to talk about it.'

'Well...' She's unconvinced.

'Well, anyway. Don't forget to mention the Big Boys' Bake-off. My crowning achievement.'

'If you say so.'

'I say so.'

* * *

It was winter when his photographs arrived. She was startled by their clarity. All the photos of them so painfully clear. And she sits in her cold flat listening to the music, watching her teacup steaming and the condensation sliding down the windows. She reaches for the telephone.

A clear line. A heartbeat of delay between them.

'I needed to talk to someone with the sun in their voice.'

He sighs. 'But you know it only ever rains in Melbourne.'

She tries again.

'I got the photos this morning. They're really clear, Matt, wonderful...'

'Katie, I'm sorry, y'know. I've had two opinions now, two opinions...'

The music gathers around her. She holds out the receiver.

'Can you hear it — guess which song?'

'I can guess.'

And she has a moment of almost grasping it, this thing he lived with, this thing that she thought would go on forever. Like looking from the dark street into a brightly lit room. A quick glimpse of someone else's life. That sort of realisation she had. But too late.

The realisation comes when he is thin and translucent as ivory silk, when his teeth are removed and the bruising bubbles up purple under the skin, a time when he can

only walk with a stick, when they have long distance calls about vanity.

'Will you still love me if it shows on my face?'

'What a question.' she laughs sadly.

With your stick you draw the
number of your T cells in the dirt.
'I'm not sick' you say, looking up at me from the midday shadows
'I'm not angry with you for leaving'
My body hits the ground and you draw
grief rings where my arms fall
and we're laughing, almost.

On the other side of the world, the thin man with the walking stick, listens to that song, the way it starts, like a heartbeat. He asks the woman with the rings if she will write something special for him.

'I'll write something now, although you can't see it' and she moves to the window, her rings fracturing the grey light and writes his name on the wet glass with her index finger.

(For Steven Pizaro 1961-1996.)

Serving Maid

She had me wipe the taps and every porcelain crevice,
rinse the cloth three times, fold it, throw it away...

I filled the bath with milk of roses. She floated,
an island of snow with a rosebud on twin hillocks.

Her hair was a gold tower twined with pink ribbon;
she had cupid's-bow lips; thin lids hid china-blue eyes...

I'm no black witch but would have bargained my soul
to slip a newt or two in, a warty old yellow one

to stub her lily toes. I longed to stuff cinders inside
her slippers, plant a spider in dainty drawers...

All I did though, was add a little pig swill to her porridge.
She tasted, spooned a second, a third, gulp... 'More!'

Within three days, a film of fat; that pure gaze glassy...
On the night of the test, it was to spite *them* I told her:

'Under the seventeenth mattress, they've hidden a lentil...'
Our eyes met in the mirror; I went on brushing her hair.

When first she'd met the prince, her pert nose crinkled.
Now she confided: 'I quite fancy him, you know!'

After eight hours perfect sleep, she staggered downstairs
toute distraite, flourished the lentil with a lace-fringed yawn:

'Didn't get a wink — *this* must have been the cause!'
She got the prince, settled down, grew plumper and plumper.

It was plain water baths now, filled lower, and less often...
She'd splash like a flounder, throw soap at me, giggle.

After, I'd erase grey rings, give everything a scrub—
I like to keep things nice. But, *Re-lax!* she would say,

'put your poor feet up, have a cuppa...'
That was long ago. These days, I work with herbs.

I'm married, too. We live on the outskirts — it's forestry:
I like it. He's a woodcutter. I keep pigs as well.

I think of her sometimes when cooking my famous
lentil stew (the one with all the bacon bits in it).

Haven't heard of her for years. I never, to tell the truth,
thought much of him, but they made a pair.

And if they're not dead yet, they're still living.

Hester Siding

She sat stunned on the wooden step.
The tin shack without windows and doors
hummed a note of midday; the family group—

of which she was the dismal centre—
still stuck fast in interlocked referral,
rode the waves of panic there with her.

Food, it is true, had been deposited—
the Greenbushes grocer had got through—
without doubt, his promise had been kept,

but they were a day late. Inside the shack,
the bread was rock-hard, butter a greasy mess,
and the meat gone maggoty and black.

Century heat. And they were very thirsty,
and when someone mentioned their affairs,
it was the young group foreman to say:

Bungling. Government bungling. And to declare
he was sorry, but they shouldn't have been,
not until April of that year.

A bucket of brackish water came their way
with instructions to boil it first.
No fire to be lit; the bush was tinder-dry.

Then the man and his cart made scarce.
And it was understood if they went out
they must make their way by the blazed trees.

Written Among the Living:
Patrick White and the Zaddikim

WHITE'S interest in Judaism is curiously under-researched especially given the fact that he had shown an interest in at least three or four areas of Judaism. He not only read Judaic literature — histories of Judaism in particular — in order to prepare for the writing of *Riders in the Chariot* but also maintained a substantial level of interest in Judaic myths, religious beliefs and rituals. Indeed, in 1961, he claimed that he had been “immersed in Judaica over the last few years”, especially the mystical elements which he called “fascinating”¹. The Anglican church, to which White’s ancestors belonged and the religious context in which White had been brought up, seemed “feeble” according to White, in comparison to the “Jewish faith”². Moreover, he involved himself in the battle against anti-Semitism and it is important to remember that he had had some experience of the uglier aspects of anti-Semitism in Australia:

when Manoly and I settled here in Castle Hill the postman of that day would not speak to us, because, we discovered, he thought we were foreign Jews speculating in land (I, if you please, was pretending to be an Australian); again when I once protested against paying over again the fare of somebody who had travelled in the same taxi, the driver stood on the kerb screaming at me: “Go back to Germany!” (In those days practically any foreigner here was of Jewish extraction, and added to that there was my strange diction which many seemed to find practically incomprehensible.) These little instances do have an influence on one’s outlook. (*Life*, 180).

There is no doubt that he found anti-Semitism ugly and disturbing and expressed

1. Patrick White. *Letters*, ed. David Marr (Sydney: Random House, 1994), 179.
2. David Marr, *Patrick White. A Life* (Sydney: Vintage Books, 1992), 196.

this in a number of novels such as *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala*, as well as in his other prose. Indeed, he was so disgusted by the ignorance and intolerance displayed at a meeting which he attended in 1960 to protest against “the outbreak of anti-Semitism in Australia” that he took upon himself the somewhat extraordinary step of sending 35 copies of Lord Russell’s *The Scourge of the Swastika* to municipal libraries! (*Life*, p. 164) White’s homosexuality, he claimed, had made him familiar with “what it is to be an outsider” and had given him “added insight into the plight of the immigrant — the hate and contempt with which he is often received” (*Life*, p. 249). It is important to note that these are the terms in which White empathised with Jewish emigrants in Australia.

His concern would be reinforced later. In 1973, he managed to attend a screening of de Sica’s film, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*; a film which had an extraordinary effect on him, principally because of its masterful exploration of the latent nature of much anti-Semitism (which White significantly also found in himself and explicitly acknowledged). He found the film “shattering” beyond any other that he had seen and added:

Fortunately, we were only able to get seats in the fourth row, so I was able to stay on when it was over and creep out into the back lane. There’s not a false note in this marvellously acted, visually beautiful film. Everybody should see it to remind them of the anti-Semitism hidden in themselves (*Life*, 414)

Also, of course, White had begun to read Judaic literature and commentaries in order to prepare for the writing of *Riders in the Chariot*. He wanted this book to be acceptable to Jewish readers and expressed some anxiety about the prospect that he might have failed (indeed, according to one of White’s letters to Huebsch, his American literary editor, one of his Jewish friends read it and “flew into ecstasies, and announced that I am the ‘first goy to have understood the Jewish mind’ ”)³. He had taken great care to ensure that the sections dealing with Himmelfarb were authentic and credible. He had read Isidore Epstein’s *Judaism* in a single-volume edition as well as Abraham Heschel’s *Man’s Quest for God*⁴. He had made sure that Klari Daniel, a Jewish friend, read and re-read the drafts specifically in order to “check the Jewish parts” (*Life*, 151). The journey of Mordecai Himmelfarb, one of

3. *Letters*, 167.

4. *Letters*, 108.

the four "riders" in the book, would become, in the words of White, "expressive of hopelessness and despair, both for what has happened to him [Himmelfarb had survived the holocaust] and for the ugliness and awfulness with which he is surrounded [he is subjected to anti-Semitism and this eventually costs him his life]" (*Life*, 327).

Finally, White also showed considerable interest in the rituals of Judaism. He visited the Great Synagogue on the Jewish New Year in 1959 with a taxi driver whom he claimed had been a "scholar of Hebrew" and who it seems, had taught the language to members of the Synagogue (*Life*, p. 159). In all, he attended services on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Succoth, and he took Manoly, his partner, to a Bar Mitzvah. He found these occasions and the attendant rituals of great interest and preferred them to services in the Anglican church and not just for reasons of research:

I find the Synagogue services much more 'live' and moving than our Christian ones. At least the Jewish faith seems to be a part of life, and ours is just tacked on, if at all (*Life*, 163).

For some time before he attended these Jewish rituals, he had been studying an abridged version of the *Talmud*⁵. As this paper has already suggested, the reader underestimates these influences on White's work at great cost indeed.

The *Talmud* would have reinforced some of White's own beliefs about the mysterious aspects of religious experience and the intersections between the sacred and the natural dimensions which are integral to a mythological conception of the world. It also would have presented him with a vivid picture of the *zaddikim*, or chosen ones, and would have reinforced and deepened White's interest in Judaism, in general, and in the *zaddikim*, in particular.

Certainly, the *Talmud* is a key source of information regarding the "righteous ones" who had had such an impact on White's thinking, and who would be represented in the figure of one of White's most memorable — some would say his greatest and most memorable character — Mordecai Himmelfarb⁶ in *Riders in the Chariot*. The Talmudic descriptions of the *zaddikim* are diverse and brief, but the vividness of the descriptions, the figures and their designations would not have been

5. According to White, "I am up to my ears in an abridgement of the Talmud, which I find most rewarding, and that is leading to other reading" (*Letters*, 153).
6. William Walsh called Himmelfarb "the most fully developed and powerful creation in the work", in *Patrick White's Fiction* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), 54.

missed by White, especially since they are designated as “foundations” of the faith and of the redemptive potential of the world:

where do we find the “righteous” designated as “foundations”? — In the verse, *For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and He hath set [wa-yasheth] the world upon them.* Alternatively, [it may be deduced] from the following, *Wonderful is his counsel and great his Tushiyah [wisdom].*⁷

Such passages suggest that the “righteous” are essential and fundamental presences if the world is to be redeemable but also that they represent and express a portion of the deity’s wisdom. Their names are “written among the living”; these are the chosen ones who will endure.

The number four is also worth remembering, since it becomes crucial in White’s work. According to Talmudic writers, four “craftsmen” are named who will have a redeeming and transforming function, just as four ladders and four youths are mentioned.⁸ In one of the most vivid images, moreover — precisely the sort of image that White would have found striking — R. Johanan calls the righteous “greater than the ministering angels” in response to the apocalyptic description of “four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire” who “have no hurt”, the fourth figure resembling the “son of God” (*Sanhedrin II*, 261).

Hassidic Judaism and the *Zaddik*

White professed a particular interest in the mystical strands of Judaism represented for example, by Hassidic and Cabbalistic writings⁹. This interest was consistent with and no doubt reinforced his conviction that a numinous force could be intuited in the cosmos quite independently of religious institutions, orthodox structures and theological dogmas. Certainly, the Baal Shem Tov’s conviction that the divine is omnipresent¹⁰, that is, present in all things and in all the events of

7. *The Babylonian Talmud. Seder Nezikin. Sanhedrin, Volume I*, ed. Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, trans. Jacob Schachter (London: Soncino Press, 1935), 155 — hereafter cited in the main text as *Sanhedrin I*.

8. *The Babylonian Talmud. Seder Mo'ed. Sukkah*, ed. Rev. Dr. Israel W. Slotki (London: Soncino Press, 1938), 251.

9. He claimed to have read the “Hasidic mystics”. See *Flaws in the Glass. A Self-portrait* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 140.

10. For a revealing and amusing account of White’s early attempt to make sense of the concept of divine omnipresence, see *Flaws in the Glass*, 70-71.

history — a conviction which is at the foundation of Hassidism¹¹ — and that a mystical devotion, a heightened enthusiasm and a desire to see the numinous presences themselves¹² are the noblest purposes of a life, would have interested White. (It is significant that a number of White's protagonists such as Himmelfarb, Ruth Godbold, Voss and Arthur seek or are granted a vision of the numinous in the study, in nature or the wilderness, in a mandala or a dance. They seem similar in some respects to those whom Scholem understood as "columns from the earth up to heaven"¹³. Hassidism's emphases on the emotions, instincts and on intuitions rather than the intellect or reason in many texts is also a point that would have been consistent with White's own convictions, many of which were stated unequivocally in letters, prose and fiction. For example, in his autobiography, White observed:

I believe it is this rag-bag of a disorderly mind which has more than anything offended some of my Australian academic critics. For them the controlled monochrome of reason, for me the omnium gatherum of instinctual colour which illuminates the more often than not irrational behaviour of sensual man.¹⁴

Clearly, White's discomfort with this emphasis on rationality combined with his interest in the emotions and the instincts, in short, in the non-rational aspects of the creative self, suggest important links with fundamental points of emphasis in Hassidic strands of thought.

But it is the Hassidim's emphasis on the *zaddik* that seems most pertinent in relation to White's interests once again. Hassidic writings from those of the founder, the Baal Shem Tov, to those of the modern defenders and expounders such as Martin Buber, consistently highlighted the functions and importance of the *zaddikim*. An understanding of the role of these figures in Hassidic traditions is crucial if one is to understand and appreciate White's visionaries more deeply; just as an understanding of the Hassidic emphasis on the immanent rather than transcendent character of the *zaddikim*, since they are figures-in-the-world and figures who are in the midst of others — in Buber's words, they are "in the world

11. For a selection of texts which are attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, see *Hasidic Thought*, ed. Louis Jacobs (New York: Behrman House Inc., 1976), 1-12. Subsequent quotes from this book will be cited in the main text as *Thought*.

12. The Baal Shem Tov's aim was nothing less than the apprehension of the "angels of God", *Thought*, 5.

13. *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1962), 152.

14. *Flaws in the Glass*, 38.

and with the world"¹⁵ — serves to clarify White's profound desire to believe that the divine "is here around us on earth".¹⁶ (Crucially, White preferred sacred architecture, which suggests the immanence of the divine, to Gothic cathedrals, for example, which he believed — with good reason — involve a "finicky... soaring and aspiring towards Heaven".)¹⁷

The Baal Shem Tov, it is said, articulated a number of views about the *zaddikim*. They embody three principles of Hasidism, namely, an *experience* of God; a surmounting of doubt or the realisation of certainty; and ways of applying these things in the context of everyday life.¹⁸ They do combine holiness and power, and resemble those who are engaged in *ma'aseh merkava*, that is to say the mysteries of the heavenly chariot, as Mintz argues¹⁹. The chariot is a crucial symbol in White's novel and the four riders seem to be attracted to the mysteries of the chariot. But these figures combine courage and creativity with resolve and humility. Buber described them as figures who combine "vitality,.. spiritual powerfulness and a manifold originality" (*Hasidism*, 27). Moreover, it is not really accurate to refer to them as "saints",²⁰ for they are generally exalted as human beings in the midst of other human beings, or in other words, it is their humanity that is central in many tales of the hassidim. They awaken humility and a desire to empty the self in order to make room for the *Shechinah* (the indwelling spirit) and act as catalysts of *hith galluth* ("revelation"²¹).

Accordingly, they offer the possibility of transcendence on two levels: on an existential level (the self is mastered) and on an ethical level (ethical codes are adopted and followed). "Ethical self-mastery" is gained.²² In addition to these two levels, it is important also to bear in mind that Buber spoke of four kinds of exile and redemption in the hassidim: the exile of the "holy sparks" and their return; the exile and redemption of the individual; the exile and redemption of a nation; and the exile and redemption of the *Shekhinah* (*Hasidism*, 203). Hassidism includes the

15. *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, trans. Maurice Friedman (Horizon Press, New York, 1960), 24. This book will subsequently be cited in the main text as *Hasidism*.

16. Interpreters such as Walsh (63) and Ingmar Bjorksten in *Patrick White: A General Introduction* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976), 67, have drawn attention to the link between the riders and the *zaddik* but no detailed commentary is offered.

17. See *Flaws in the Glass*, 166-167.

18. See E. Klein, *Meetings with Remarkable Souls* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995), xx.

19. J.R. Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 8.

20. The term is used by B.L. Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), 140.

21. M.A. Lipschitz, *The Faith of a Hassid* (New York: Jonathan David, 1967), 16.

22. See Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 36.

belief that God is in every place (in the Cabbalah, it is claimed that “No place is empty of Him” — *Thought*, 10), which is to say that no barriers can be maintained between God and God’s subjects. The *zaddik* serves the function of dismantling the barriers which are erected between lord and subject, or between ruler and ruled. Even in *galut* (“exile”), the *zaddik* brings, it seems, a sense of faith and hope.²³

This is not the place to offer a critical evaluation of the perceptions and conceptions of the *zaddikim*, their opponents and the quarrels with the *mitnagdim*. Such an evaluation is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the similarities between the *zaddik* and White’s protagonists are notable. Indeed, the parallels and analogies offer crucial hermeneutical possibilities. Three examples should suffice.

Just as the task of the Hassidic narratives is to glorify the human aspects of the *zaddikim*, their “deeds”, “acts” and “duties”,²⁴ so too White’s novels, especially *Riders in the Chariot*, glorify figures such as Mordecai Himmelfarb. The name of the character significantly draws attention to his heavenly associations. “Himmel” might be translated as “sky” or “heaven” and “farb” might be translated as “colour”. In this context, the character’s surname suggests the affinities between him and the “colour of heaven” (a metaphor which evokes a sense of piety, devotion or holiness).

Himmelfarb is also the crucified one in the novel. Through him, the reader gains a vivid sense of the bigotry, cruelty, violence and insensitivity of the world which engulfs him in so many poignant ways. Just as the Hassidic narratives²⁵ warn that those who do not take the death of the *zaddik* “to heart”, or feel “the lack”, will be like a “body without a soul”, so too White suggests that those who are moved by the death of the protagonist are precisely the ones who become the sources of hope:

The water of a light creek consoled her ankles. The structure of her world might have risen vaster, soaring with her breath out of the incidental cage of ribs, if it had not been reduced finally by anguish. In the circumstances, the spirit returned, wounded and doubtful, into the dumb, trundling body of the beast (*Riders in the Chariot*, 421).

The death of the Jew in the novel will cause, in White’s words, a return of the “spirit” (the Hassidim affirm that the spirit — *nefesh* — of the *zaddik* will awaken when the

23. For a discussion of this point, see Avraham Yaakov Finkel, *Contemporary Sages* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994), xix.

24. in Buber’s words. See Aubrey Hobes, *Encounter with Martin Buber* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1972), 63.

25. See the excerpts in Elijah Judah Schochet, *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*, 99.

adept lies prostrated upon the grave or the body²⁶). This somewhat mystical notion is akin to the Hassidic emphasis on the mystical powers of the *zaddik*: in Elie Wiesel's words, all of these figures "combat sorrow with exuberance,.. despair with prayer, to defeat resignation by kindling... a more exalted faith..."²⁷ And it does seem in White's novel that Ruth, for example, is rekindled, so to speak, by her contact with Himmelfarb.

Hassidic narratives also stress that the *zaddik* is a figure in whom suffering, which is a consequence of the transgressions of others, is absorbed.²⁸ It is striking then to find that in White's fiction, an analogous affirmation is implicitly made:

During the afternoon Himmelfarb drifted into a doze. He was swallowed up by the whiteness. He was received, as seldom. Of course, there had been other occasions when he might have allowed himself: the hills of Zion, spreading their brown pillows in the evening light, had almost opened; the silence of his last and humblest house had promised frequent ladders of escape; as he knelt on the stones, in his blindness, the flames of Friedensdorf had offered certain release. But the rope-end of dedication had always driven him on. Even now it was torturing his side, although the goat-mask and hair shawl had slipped, leaving him hanging abandoned on a tree. Again, he was the Man Kadmon, descending from the Tree of Light to take the Bride. Trembling with white, holding the cup in her chapped hands, she advanced to stand beneath the *Chuppah*. So they were brought together in the smell of all primordial velvets. This, explained the cousins and aunts, is at last the *Shechchinah*, whom you have carried all these years under your left breast. (*Riders in the Chariot*, 430)

Apocalyptic Literature, Prophecy and the Vision of Ezekiel

It is significant that the inspiration for one of White's major novels came from the Book of Ezekiel. White's interest in religion lay not so much in its dogma and doctrine but in ecstatic experience, or in the mystic's apprehension of the *mysterium tremendum*. It is interesting to note that White had been struck by the music, the

26. See A. Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality from the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, 80.

27. *Four Hasidic Masters and their Struggle Against Melancholy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 122.

28. For a discussion of this point, see Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent*, 140 ff..

sound, the aromas in churches, but he “did not return to orthodox Anglicanism” because, perhaps, of his conviction that “the Anglican church is a feeble organisation compared with the Jewish faith” (*Life*, 358). Indeed, when White heard Billy Graham on radio in Sydney, he said: “I am afraid he made me writhe more every day he was here, with the result that I find I am not a Christian, but some kind of eclectic” (*Life*, 358). Indeed, *Riders in the Chariot* reflects this eclecticism in its four riders.

White’s fiction is, in a sense, an affirmation of the mystery of the deity and of the novelist’s search. He claimed that the churches destroy this mystery. His task as a writer, then, becomes “to evoke symbols... through which to worship” (*Life*, 358). Of course, one of his most memorable “symbols” is the symbol of the four riders, which his reading of Ezekiel inspired.

Ezekiel is a crucial source of White’s fiction for a number of reasons. First, Ezekiel had been deported to Babylon where he became a prophet. In other words, Ezekiel embodies the idea of the post-exilic wanderer who receives his calling not in Jerusalem but in the wilderness. He receives the *hāzōn* (the “visionary experience”) there.²⁹ This idea can be related to the figure of Himmelfarb quite easily: Himmelfarb receives the visionary experience in the “wilderness” of Europe, flees Europe and the holocaust, travels to Australia to seek peace and a new life only to find that he has arrived in a wilderness of another kind and that his years of wandering are not yet at an end. In this way, White suggests that such figures — post-exilic wanderers — will not and perhaps cannot find a sanctuary from bigotry, hatred and intolerance in the world. Indeed, just as the prophets were “despised and rejected”³⁰, Himmelfarb and others such as Alf are subjected to ridicule and hatred. And Ezekiel, like Himmelfarb, is clearly a learned man. Both speak from the margins and both speak as marginal figures to those who largely do not comprehend their distress. It has been pointed out too that Ezekiel adopted stronger invective than the other prophets³¹ — White himself was not noted for the gentleness of his invective!

Ezekiel’s book is striking for its declamatory tone and visionary intensity:

Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel upon the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance

29. See John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel. An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tynedale Press, 1969), 53.

30. in the words of John A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2.

31. See D.G.M. Stalker, *Ezekiel* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 27.

of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of a chrysolite; and the four had the same likeness, their construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel.... Wherever the spirit would go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels... And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of a host; when they stood still, they let down their wings (I, 15-21, 24).

The use of repetition, vivid imagery, assonance and alliteration (in the English translation at least), the assertive tone and the lack of doubt or uncertainty mark Ezekiel as a poet and visionary. Ezekiel's chariot symbolism which reappears in White's novel is a well-known catalyst of *merkabah* (chariot) mysticism.³² Clearly, there are similarities between him and the *zaddikim*. He is also clearly a master of allegory and symbolism. The style and the content suggest that Ezekiel's God is an awe-inspiring and transcendent figure who "speaks" only to those who have been selected,³³ and those who have been selected, in this context, significantly, are exiles and victims of bigotry. Crisis is given a religious context³⁴ just as it is in White's novel (for example by the use of the name Himmelfarb). Yet Ezekiel's God, like White's, is mysterious. It has been said too that Ezekiel's God is "stern and austere"³⁵. One might infer from White's novel that the narrator's God fits this description, especially since Himmelfarb does suffer so much in the book.

Ezekiel's description of the *image* of God is conveyed in terms of analogy, that is to say, in terms which emphasise not what God is but what God is *like*:

And above the firmament over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness as it were of a human form. And upward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were gleaming bronze, like the appearance of fire enclosed round about; and downward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him (I, 26-27).

32. See for example, Sawyer's *Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament*, 95.

33. For a discussion of the affinity with the *zaddikim*, in this respect, see Dan, *Gerschom Scholem and the Mystical Dimensions of Jewish History*, 320-321.

34. Paul Joyce argues that Ezekiel articulates a "theological meaning", *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 17.

35. Stephen F. Winward, *A Guide to the Prophets* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), 167.

The reader is struck here not by the sense of what Ezekiel's God is, but by the multiplying and proliferating similes: appearances seem to be all that he can convey. They do not describe God in any specific way and they are perhaps deliberately left shadowy, vague, indistinct. It is difficult if not impossible to gain a determinate picture of what God is from such passages. Even the articulation of one analogy after another and talk of likeness after likeness, image after image, suggest that the very limits of descriptive language have been reached and found wanting. The overwhelming sense here is in fact Ezekiel's *failure* to give a clear account of what he claims to have "seen". This point would then reinforce the sense that what Ezekiel claims to have "seen" exceeds and transcends the beholder's attempt to encompass the deity's image in linguistic structures. All he can do is multiply analogies and similes which are approximations and inadequate ones at that.

White's work offers analogies. Ezekiel's rhetorical discourses seem to suggest that the image of God — which is of course, only a *likeness* or a simulacrum — cannot be described literally and directly. Likenesses, and anthropocentric ones at that, multiply in the attempt to describe or evoke something which does not seem to be human at all. As a consequence, Ezekiel's discourse heightens the sense of transcendence even as it multiplies networks of likeness and similarity. Certainly, White could not complain here that this discourse destroys God's mystery. Ezekiel suggests that the mystery of the deity exceeds and evades every attempt to describe it literally. White will often echo this point in his fiction, largely through the emphases on silence and the explicit dissatisfaction with speech and its limits. For example, in *The Aunt's Story*, the inability to explain oneself and the conviction that one has attained certainty are not seen as incompatible elements.³⁶

Similarly, in other novels like *Riders in the Chariot*, White's insistence on the integrity of silence and the conviction of certainty is consistent:

Yet Himmelfarb was heartened by his study of this other living creature, to whom he had become joined, extraordinarily, by silence, and perhaps also, by dedication. On one other occasion, finding that they had arrived simultaneously at the outer gate, and there was no avoiding it, they must go out together, he could not resist addressing the black. "The day we spoke," the Jew ventured, "either I did not think, or have the time, to ask your name." The abo could have been preparing to sulk. But changed his mind quickly, it appeared, on sensing there was no trap. "Dubbo," he answered briskly. "Alf Dubbo." And as briskly went off. He was gay on

36. *The Aunt's Story* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977), 249-250.

that day. He picked up a stone, and made it skip, along the surface of the green river. He stood for a moment squinting at the sun, the light from which splintered on his broad teeth. He could have been smiling, but that was more probably the light, concentrated on the planes of his excellent teeth.³⁷

In such passages, the “riders” are united through the idea of silence and a sense of their common status as outsiders, as characters who yearn for another place and another time, both of which remain largely inaccessible, at least, in their lifetimes. Significantly, both are granted visions of the chariot and both remain largely silent about whatever it is that they learn from these privileged glimpses. If, as Buber thought, one of the functions of the *zaddik* is to end the “eclipse of God”³⁸, then one of the functions of the riders in this respect is to end the processes by which each is estranged and separated from the other; to end the eclipse of their small “community”. The sense of their shared humanity is, however, suggested strongly by the narrator, just as the sense of their struggle brings them closer together³⁹. It is striking, to say the least, that White had chosen to bring together a half-caste aboriginal and a Jew who had survived the holocaust, in order to suggest at least two ideas: the idea that these figures embody great and creative forces which seemingly unite them in tragic, terrible and at times, incomprehensible circumstances;⁴⁰ and the idea of untimely prophets and untimely artists or creators perishing in a land that they find uncomprehending, largely unsympathetic and somewhat strange⁴¹.

37. *Riders in the Chariot*, 311-312.

38. Buber’s “Interpreting Hasidism” is quoted by Lawrence J. Silberstein, *Martin Buber’s Social and Religious Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 51.

39. It is quite erroneous or misleading, in this context, to claim that the Chariot symbolism and images are “arbitrary”, as Margaret Walters claims, or that the novel is concerned with “Jewish mysticism”, as Colin Roderick claims. The images are functional in the sense that they convey the dilemmas, vision and unity of the “riders” and the novel is concerned with much else besides “Jewish mysticism”. See “Patrick White”, *New Left Review*, 18 (January, 1963), 37-50 for Walters’ view and “*Riders in the Chariot: An Exposition*”, *Southerly* XXII, ii (1962), 62-77, for Roderick’s view.

40. See Nahum N. Glatzer (ed.), *On Judaism. Martin Buber* (New York: Schocken, 1973), 20.

41. F. Burrows is surely correct in arguing that the “mythic element is ultimately neither factitious nor esoteric but something essentially related to contemporary issues”, in “Archetypes and Stereotypes: *Riders in the Chariot*”, *Ten Essays on Patrick White*, ed. G.A. Wilkes (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970), 48.

Singing Under A Full Moon

IN her dreams I am not there. She travels with others. I ask her about sex, after all it is night time, but she says, no, there is no sex in her dreams. No sex with men or women. Just confusion of all the countries she has ever been in coming together as one, and money that keeps changing currency. In some Asian cultures all a person's memories and experiences are said to be 'in the one house'. I am not in her dream house. I go shopping.

At Supa Valu things go haywire. The checkout girl (who isn't a checkout girl but a student at the local high school) shows me her breasts in the glaring commercial light and asks, "Do you think they are changing colour? My nipples are different colours. What's that mean?"

Indeed, I wonder, what does it mean.

The man behind me leans forward and looks closely. "Nothing wrong," he says, "they just want to be different."

"Different?" she asks, confused.

"Yes, different from each other. Like twins."

She puts them away as if that makes sense and tallies up my shopping. I cradle the frozen chicken in one hand as I walk to my car, the welcome weight and wholeness of it.

As I drive the street is lined with nuns in black habits blowing in the wind. Down their sides giant wooden crucifixes clatter amongst black rosary beads as big as golf balls. They are chattering like birds on a powerline, and wave as I drive by, nonchalantly, as if the street was always full of nuns in black habits. "Nothing wrong," says the man behind me, "they just want to be the same."

Nearing the top of the hill, near the railway where the big red train engines chug along, a clerical procession walks down the middle of the road, the cardinal in his

layers of purple and golden and white robes, priests in sacramental garments, altar boys and girls in white robes over black sautanes, carrying giant crosses and golden censers of burning incense. They fill the road, the colourful cardinal in front like a peacock with his entourage fanned out to the edges of the road where the nuns line-up and wave to passers-by.

Yet all dissolve as my car approaches impact. Not a wisp of incense. Not a feather from the colourful cardinal. Completely gone. "Nothing wrong," says the man behind me, "just imagined it. Everyone does that."

I pull into my drive and shake my head as I unpack the shopping. Food for the cat. Breakfast for my children. Dinner for my wife and I. Fruit bread for toasted snacks. Apples and oranges and bananas, plums are out of season. I am holding these things from their white plastic bags like trophies of reality. They are as real as a stubbed toe.

The phone rings. I answer.

"You sound preoccupied," he says.

I agree. "It's just that things run through my head and I think they're real, and of course they aren't, but they are when they're happening, know what I mean?"

"Sometimes you worry me," he laughs. "Get real!" It's teenage jargon, and he says it as a joke. I get real.

"What do you want?"

"I'm going camping on the weekend, with that 'fancy nancy' art group — Want to come along? Just down the Bibbulman track away ..."

"Sure, anything to get away from the nuns!" I laugh.

He laughs too, uneasily. "It must mean something to you, man."

We arrange it. Tents and times and lavish sexual claims.

She lines up skulls. Then small bones in harpstring patterns like ribs. Legs and arms with leftover bones. An installation. We wait for evening then add a sausage between each set of legs by moonlight. A full moon. It has a New Age feel to it. Men will be boys, they'll say, and I'll agree.

The fire crackles louder as we wait for her reaction. She goes by like a shadow. Passes her installation. Enters her tent. Nothing.

In the morning her dog is eating the sausages; neatly piled by the fire.

"There's something in that," my friend laughs.

In my dreams she is there. All the young women of the camp are pegdolls in the background as she leers and lifts her skirts towards me, legs far apart.

“Come on, then, come on, show us what you’ve got that’s so great.”

Out of the folds of her skirts comes a pair of lips like a giant sea anemone on an extending vacuum cleaner hose. Its wet wrinkled skin slithers towards me with sucking sounds that are exaggerated and disgusting. The lips are dribbling now and trying to reach into my pants. I turn, I walk away, almost running, laughing nervously, but the lips keep coming, leaving a trail of silvery dribble behind them, droplets hanging off my knees where the lips have brushed. Everyway I turn the lips are there, nudging at my crotch. In the background all the women are laughing, cut-throat barbed wire laughs, and the loudest of all is my wife. Her mouth is open like a clown in sideshow alley, already her breasts are enormous with tassels on bull’s eye nipples which twirl and blow hooters and whistle with party playfulness. I run out of the room, I stumble and fall. I wake.

I crawl out of my tent and pat her dog. He growls and folds back his lips to bare his teeth. I walk down to the creek, the still creek, to clean my teeth.

Up and down the banks of the creek green weed grows like stringy moss, hanging from bushes and short tree boughs. I squat by the edge of the water and lower my face to rinse my mouth. In the water is a white alabaster woman’s body, nestled in a bowl of green seaweed. She is perfectly formed like a department store’s window mannequin, and when I stare at her face to see who she is she smiles. It must be the current. Beside her another white shape floats just below the surface. It is an ice cream container. When I look back at the floating body of the young woman all I see are disposable nappies bunched together. I look up and down stream but there is no drowned young woman. There is no perceptible movement in the creek. I clean my teeth with paste on the brush, and spit into the creek, white dribble running into the putrid water ...

“What’d you expect, hot and cold running chambermaids?” My friend laughs at my disgust. “That’s why we boil up the water, isn’t it girls ... Anyone’ll tell you that.”

I sit by the fire, silent, withdrawn into my all-weather jacket. “Nothing wrong,” the man behind me says, “everyone sulks sometime.”

Sullenly I grab the camp’s spade and go off walking, looking for a bush that provides enough screen to bare my arse to the earth. I walk along a fallen fenceline. Jarrah posts have been eaten at the base and fallen, and now the fencing wire lies in the red clay and occasional weed. Someone fenced this off, a couple of men working together in the blazing sun with axes, shovels, hammers and rolls of wire. What a thankless job. Red dust in their throats and eyes. I squat behind a bush with thick green leaves. I dig a shallow hole and squat. I piss on my underpants and

curse. Thirty years of porcelain seats hasn't prepared me for sticking my arse out at the earth. Carefully I aim, then bury the toilet paper, an environmental hint from our camp boss. Applause rises like a flock of budgerigars from the fenceline and behind me all the women of the camp are applauding my stools and environmentally pleasing shovelling. Blushing I bow, jeans collapsing around my angles. My cock shrivels shyly.

As I walk back towards my tent the prettiest girl takes the camp's spade off me. "Where'd you go?" she asks. I point. She goes the other way. "Nothing wrong," the man behind me says, "perfectly natural."

In her dreams I am not there. She is on camp with twenty young men in a desert of purest white sand and bluest sky. They are watching her bathe in a clear blue pond in a palm-shaded oasis. She floats the deadman float she learnt at school swimming classes, her hair framing her naked body, her breasts islands of pleasure, nipples standing up like One Tree Hill on each, her pubic hair an atoll where exotic birds breed and colonise, scuttling claws sending shivers up her body as she dreams, fingers feathery between her legs ...

I heat up a can of spaghetti, toast bread over hot coals. I eat from the can, balance toast on my knees. The girls have killed a kangaroo with a spear and throw it on the fire after cutting out its innards. They drape the red-and-white cord of its insides around their necks and speak of gold nuggets rolling down their breasts into their hands. They turn the roo on the fire, and a fresh cloud of fur-and-burnt-flesh smoke covers the camp. I vomit in the creek. The man behind me holds me gently round the shoulders, "Nothing wrong," he says, "better out than in."

After stoking the fire with large limbs of trees the women sit in a large circle. The wood has been dragged here by two young women in a flatbed truck from a nearby property and now the flames flicker and flare in the night's dark. The flames throw nuns in black habits amongst the bushes. They run and hide back and forth across the breakaways. In the centre of the fire the cardinal rises in crimson red robes and blesses all with his fast hand language. Priests in red, black and white, surround him, with altar boys and girls at the fringe before the logs where the women sit. At the fire's crescendo, the women join hands and rise, little flames in their hair, they lift their voices and sing rounds, bouncing off the walls of night, a cathedral of solidarity.

My friend and I sit in a two-man tent trading stories of nights with other women. The man behind me says nothing.

In my dream all the young women of the camp lift their skirts towards me, legs far apart. Their singing rises and a full moon glows high in the sky.

A tall woman with red hair which flows to the ground has tied me to a tree with her plaits and taunts me, "Show us what you've got that's so great, show us what you've got." She draws back and out of the folds of the women's skirts comes dozens of pair of lips on wet wrinkled tentacles slithering towards me making sucking sounds that gradually drown out their singing. The lips are dribbling as they start to suck and tear at my clothes. As little areas of skin are exposed, they suck on to flesh and draw blood to the surface, then the skin bursts and they drink, they drink me until I am alabaster. I awake. Her dog is licking me.

The camp area is littered with trees and rocks and rusty old horse shoes and farm items. It was littered so by time's casting hand before we came but now the women have modelled these haphazard droppings into mandalas and representative shapes that say Man and Woman, that say Day and Night, that say Black and White, that say Look At Me and Look Away. The skulls and bones are now lined up in size and interest. The grey sky is a mournful blanket over us as we dismantle the tents and pack up our bags and utensils. Each has fallen in love with some item and wants it on the bus. The driver vetos the bigger branches, the boulders and any bones with flesh or fur on them. He is trying to be patient but they are throwing things in the bus until it looks like a rubbish dump. He starts throwing it off.

My friend leaves the last tent standing, and helps the women fold it up. As he walks towards his car he slaps a big woman on the arse. She glares at him and gives him the finger sign. He laughs and pumps his fist in the air. The semiotics of a past culture, dying away. "Nothing wrong," says the man behind me, "each generation overthrows the last."

As we drive out of the bush the track is lined with kangaroos and wallabies, sheep with torn fleeces, and farmers and farmhands with their barefoot families. Aboriginals are tearing up their Citizenship papers and their dogs are ripping up kapok mattresses. My head pounds and the road has more holes than surface.

"Let's get out of here," my friend drawls in a cowboy voice, "before you go loco."

There's a funeral in the nearest town today, a notable from the district. The publican has his wife helping behind the bar, and beer is free. We stop to pay our respects but little else. "Nothing wrong," says the man behind me, "Jacko's last shout."

Slice of two lives

In snapshots they are smiling, glad perhaps
To have the kind of life you photograph.
The windowsill is crammed with junk: a green
Thick plastic mug stuffed with old pencils,
One wineglass, and a Hello-From-Dublin
Ashtray piled with coins, a vase of jonquils,
A cask (two litre) of cheap red (Yalumba),
A Chinese notebook, and an opshop camera.

This albumed epoch of their scribbled lives
Will come to seem a kind of grunge idyll,
One of their simpler and more solid loves,
Preserved in debris from a windowsill.

Girlfriend Weeping

She's on her wood floor sobbing
about the guy who left her.
He's killing himself with heroin.
He's got a job now driving
working girls to posh hotels.

We've just had sex for the first time
after a night of pizza, beer, and — on
a black and white portable — *Rashomon*.
I too am awash in this chaotic room,
incapable of throwing her a line.

Seeing each other again

She tried to kill him with a volvo
but that was a decade back, and now
after three cagey phonecalls they
are eating choctops in row F.
The desperations of nine years
of separately messed-up lives
converge to this surprising 'date',
and straight away they're holding hands,
her fingers playing at his wrist.
They each begin imagining
their quick exit at intermission,
the drive to his untidy place,
the violent kissing, and the rush
to loop time back upon itself
with hands and mouths and memories.

Speaking of Cats The Samburu, Kenya

Yesterday's leopard
asleep on the bottom limb of an acacia,
the heavy rope of rail hung over the side.
A sign: *At Home/No Visitors*. This morning
we find it, smaller in the dust of the Samburu,
dead. The lions still surround it, bat it around.
One cub plays mouse with the tail, swipes
at it to make it jump. A male takes the whole head
in his jaws, argues it like a cat with a mole.
We can't look each other in the eye.

Episode to episode, we bounce and
backtrack the Samburu, peering out the windows
like propped up plates in a cupboard.
Zebra ribs lean bloody from a cracked spine,
four lions snarling in the gut. How informed
we are, how pinched and painted our talk.

Five Americans in a bus behind glass
in the middle of this vase emptiness
with only a few days left. At least
let's speak of the leopard, admit we also
revel in the stronger, take comfort
in the camaraderie of the bully for the promise
of inclusion. The sure laugh at the foolish
or the one so uneasy in his skin he mirrors
the tongue-tied stranger we're afraid we are
who's not guilty? Let's talk about the leopard,
we five with only a few days left.

Sisters

WE are sisters. We are born on the side of a green hill. We run wild. We yell and scream. We hide in cupboards and spy on people. We help our father dig up new potatoes. He wears his hawaiian shirt and sings "Goodnight Irene" and "Mack the Knife." We climb trees. We tell lies. We chase sheep in the park then run home madly. We go to the library and get out books. Our mother is in the Good Food League. She feeds us carrot sticks, brown bread and freshly squeezed grapefruit juice but she drinks sherry. We are sisters. We run wild on the slopes of a green hill. Pink tea roses climb in the window of the wooden house and purple wisteria drapes over the garden wall. We are the four daughters of Robert William and Irene Ethel but we are not given middle names so we make them up. Robin becomes Robin Pansy Primrose Violet Lowry. Judith adds Lucy. Brigid takes a fancy to Gloria while Vanya's pseudonyms are Aurelia Atom Bomb and Bohemia Cutaway. At party time we grate wax on the wooden dance floor and pull each other round on sacks. It is as smooth as glass. *Oh the shark, babe, has such teeth, babe, but he keeps them out of sight.* At dinner time we sit together on an old sofa while our father rages at the kitchen table. There is stew all over the wall and a plate flies out the window. We hide our faces and our feelings. We go to Epsom Girls Grammar School in pleated gym frocks and squashed panama hats. We do Latin, French, English, Bio, History, Art and Drama. Our father plays Mack the Knife over and over again. He brings people home for dinner but he does not pay the bills. Our mother hides behind a door smoking a cigarette and crying. She uses Ponds Skin Cream. In her dressing table drawer there are chunky bracelets, white lace hankies and a red lipstick that she never uses. We are sisters. Judy buys a motor scooter. Vanya goes to art school. Robin falls in love. Brigid climbs the plum tree and falls down into the compost heap. In the wild garden we plant freesias, violets and snowdrops but in the house the anger bruises our soft skin. On a cold, still day

we go to our father's funeral. His suicide note is written on our hearts forever. Forgive me, he asks, but this is easier said than done. We head off into our lives and have lovers, babies, breakdowns. Our mother says I hope you know what you are doing. She drives around in her little blue car helping the less fortunate. She is always there for us but then she dies. We are the four daughters of Irene Ethel and Robert William. At the funeral we carry our mother's coffin. A man says, can I help you but we say no, we know what we are doing. We blunder red-eyed back to our lives. We buy things at jumble sales. We make apple crumble and Irish stew. Our mother has taught us to make a little go a long way. Three of us have chunky legs but Judy has a decent pair. We marry a variety of men but it never quite works out. We give birth to five daughters and six sons between us and we give each one a middle name. We feed them carrot sticks and brown bread and squeeze grapefruit to make juice. We read them stories and we hold them tight. We agonise about our weight. We say to each other, do you think I should wear this? We say, that haircut really suits you, it makes you look younger. We say, you can have this if it fits you. Something is dreadfully wrong. Robin has gone from slightly odd to very ill. The doctors say she has a tumour wrapped around her spine. We do not know what to do. We visit her with bunches of roses, with books, with packets of biscuits and pasted-on smiles, but she dies. Goodbye, Robin Pansy Primrose Violet. We drink wine. We smoke a joint. We learn to meditate. We see a therapist. We know that every loss triggers the old losses. *Sometimes we live in the city, sometimes we live in the town, sometimes we take a great notion, to jump into the river and drown.* We are sisters. We paint. We write. We sew. We wrap things in brown paper. We hesitate at the lip of the sherry bottle. We love to swim. We love to dance. We love rivers, music, flowers. We give each other books for Christmas. We are beginning to grow old. We like to sit together on Sunday afternoons eating bran muffins and drinking tea and saying to each other do you remember when?

Served cabbage when all you wanted was potato

YOU are: alone and desperate on a prison farm. You have a brand new spade but you can't seem to dig. The dirt is really hard. You press with both your hands and then put your foot on the spade and push but the dirt isn't moving. You grunt and violently thrust at the spade. It edges further into the earth. Further than you have seen it go before, you note, feeling pleased with yourself. You look down and see with surprise that you have torn your regulation prison sneakers. And that you have torn your skin. The sight of blood you can handle. But the thought of all that farm dirt under your skin, rubbing your muscles raw, makes you feel woozy.

You hang onto that spade because right now it's the only thing holding you up from falling in the hard dirt. Looking at the sky, you see three birds. But they keep moving. Every time you try to count them, they move again so you're never sure there are really three.

But you know they're black. And that they're birds. And that there are probably three of them. You scratch your head because the sweat has made your hair stick to your scalp. But your hand feels like it belongs to someone else. And you can't tell if you're scratching your head or your arse.

You blink and suddenly you've forgotten how many birds there are. Or were. Because they've moved. And how many prison farms there are. Because you really don't know.

And just what is a prison farm? you seem to be asking yourself. Prison. Farm. The words don't mean anything.

You happen to look up and you see a particularly brutal guard walking towards you resting his large black nightstick on his huge circular palm.

Uh oh. Now you're in trouble.

Tuesday sees you digging a new swimming pool for the Warden's daughters.

The job is taking forever. You don't know why you're doing this because you're not the best digger in the world. You're putting dirt into a wheelbarrow in the deep end and then shifting the barrow up through the shallow end, past where the patio will go and out to a dumping ground. This dirt is softer but there is just so much of it. The Warden's requirement that this pool be deep enough to accommodate a very steep dive is unreasonable, you feel. No one dives like that.

As you are wheeling the next load of dirt, you look up and see the Warden's two pre-pubescent daughters and their cousins frolicking on the balcony in their bathers. They are laughing and drinking coca-cola. Suddenly they start spitting on you like the scum you are. Large balls of spit land on your shoulders and your face. You drop the barrow for a moment to wipe the spit off your face. But your hands are covered in dirt and the hard grains mix with the liquid and your face is covered with a soft mud. This starts to hurt your eyes. The tiny pieces of dirt feel like stones in your eyes. You rub them with your palms but this only gets more dirt in.

Your eyes start weeping to clear all the dirt out but it's just not happening fast enough. And meanwhile the little girls have started throwing glasses. You take shelter behind the wheelbarrow where it's cool. The girls try but they can't hit you where you are. Slowly your eyes clear and the first thing you see is the cool riveted stainless steel of the barrow.

Lunch is an unusual affair today. You're standing in line with your enamelled food tray. The first prisoner behind the counter who does not know you has given you a serving of watery green beans with white seeds. The second, who recognises your face, gives you three chops instead of two. You thank him with a smile.

The third, again a stranger, readies a large helping of steaming cabbage to put into

the circular place on your food tray. You hold the tray away saying that you'd rather have some of that mashed potato. The prisoner says you can't have both. You reply that you don't want both, you just want the potato. Another prisoner walks in through the kitchen door and wheels the potato server away.

You hold out your dish and say, give me the cabbage. The prisoner dumps the cabbage on your tray and you go off and sit down. Holding a piece of cabbage up with your fork, you examine the veiny leaves as greasy water runs back onto the tray. It doesn't look very good to eat.

You taste it and you find it tastes better than it looks. Better than you thought it would. Maybe even better than the mashed potato.

You are shitting yourself with fear outside the Warden's office. The receptionist is talking about you to another staff member. They're talking about your crime. But not so you can hear. They're whispering and it makes your offence sound ten times worse. They keep glancing at you.

You scuff the floor with your sneakers and look down. The floor is very clean. You can see your shoes reflected.

A word comes floating to you from the conversation. Backyard. You remember your backyard. Where the body was buried. The funny thing is: you're actually innocent.

You look up at the receptionist who picks up the phone. She says to you: go in. You walk through into the Warden's office. The Deputy Warden is behind the desk. Clark? he says. You shake your head. He says: out.

You're back in the corridor. The receptionist says to you: seeing you're here. And she hands you a mop.

You are: alone and desperate on a prison farm.

REVIEWS

Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia*, Melbourne and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

\$29.95 (pb); \$90.00 (hb); xi + 235 pp. Those who doubt that Australian literary and cultural studies are in the midst of a 'spatial turn' need only refer to the proceedings of the 1995 ASAL Conference. Paul Carter's Keynote Address, entitled 'Crossing the Line: Space as Colonialism', was followed by papers grouped under topics such as 'Cartographies', 'Gender and Geography', and 'Metaphors of Spatiality'. Who do we blame? The French are often a convenient scapegoat. The wily Descartes with his set-square and protractor, Foucault inside the panopticon, de Certeau walking through the city. Or should we look closer to home and point the finger at Paul Carter? Should the 'cartographic eye' be re-named the 'Carter-graphic eye'?

Simon Ryan's *Cartographic Eye* can be situated in this expanding cartographic genre in cultural studies. In Ryan's book, the methodology of spatial semiotics is overlaid with the methodology of colonial discourse analysis. The process of exploration

was both a spatial practice *and* an imperial practice. Or, as Ryan explains it: 'This book discusses space as it is socially produced in the context of the colonial enterprise' (4). According to this formulation, the explorer is not a discoverer, but a space-producer. Exploration was not about heroism and discovery but about spatial production and imperial appropriation. In the book, therefore, biography is largely eschewed, while narrative, discourse, and the 'explorative gaze,' occupy the foreground.

In deconstructing the practice of exploration, Ryan takes as his starting point the written narratives of explorers. These narratives have been traditionally revered in white Australia as the first accounts of a new land. They have attained something of the status of ancient scrolls, a treasured reservoir of originary knowledge. However, Ryan insists that these texts must yet be re-visited. His reasoning is that exploration was as much about language as it was about geography and that in the explorer's journal, language and land collide in telling ways.

But how did explorers apprehend the land of the Australian continent? Where do they get their language? Ryan traces in impressive detail the discursive origins of common tropes

within the exploration narrative. He demonstrates how theories of the picturesque and the panoramic, myths of the antipodes, and the discourse of military conquest all form threads in the discursive fabric of exploration narratives. Ryan's analysis belies the explorers' claims to scientific objectivity. The book focuses particular attention on the journals of Mitchell, Sturt, Eyre, and Grey, although extensive reference is also made to the narratives of Stokes, Leichardt, Stuart, Giles, Warburton and others. In this respect, *The Cartographic Eye* makes a useful companion to Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987). Ryan sacrifices some of Carter's lyricism for a more down-to-earth analysis of tropes. Where Carter was at times guilty of mystification, Ryan works hard to demystify explorers. He exposes their strategies of self-construction, probes the sources of their rhetorical devices, and challenges the assumptions of *terra nullius* on which their narratives rest.

Ryan is especially concerned to deconstruct the mythic status of the explorer. He notes that in exploration narratives, the explorer is a special kind of protagonist because he 'operates both as author and actor' (45). It doesn't take a conspiracy theorist to suspect a potential conflict

of interest. Of crucial importance, then, is the way that this dual-figure is situated in the text, but equally important is the way that the narrative constructs the 'landscape'. Within the structure of an exploration narrative, the 'landscape' is the sum of everything that lies outside of the exploring party and includes both geographical features and indigenous people. For Ryan, the exchanges between explorer and landscape are based around a visual economy of the gaze. The explorers, we are told, suffer from a form of scopophilia — obsessed with elevation, gaining views, takings sketches, and reading the land as if it were a system of signs. In fact, it is this gaze which lies at the very heart of his thesis:

'The explorative gaze is a mastery of space. This book is about this gaze, about its discursive construction in journals and its meaning within the context of the colonial enterprise.' (6)

Text, space, sight and imperialism fall readily — perhaps a little too readily — together in Ryan's analysis of exploration. Ryan inherits from Carter a heavy emphasis on the importance of sight in the imperial aspirations of settler communities.

However, Ryan's book is by no

means devoid of dimension. A wealth of contextual material is presented in the exposition of the narratives. For instance, the book usefully collects material on the history of Australian cartography. He surveys the European cartographic history of *Terra Australis* from classical times to the nineteenth century. From this history, the blank map emerges as a potent imperial icon. This familiar image has powerful symbolic resonances for Ryan: 'Its blankness is a representation of European ignorance, but works semiotically to form the antipodal landmass as empty, unsettled, and inviting European inscription' (105).

Also fascinating is Ryan's account of the motivations of the explorers, especially the role played by the Royal Geographical Society. The RGS, as Ryan reveals, was instrumental in Australian exploration and the 'discovery of Australia' reflects the values of scientific professionalism espoused by that institution. The RGS provided to Australian explorers a publishing outlet, a system of rewards (including medals and gold watches), an official methodology, and, occasionally, direct sponsorship. In return, the landscape of Australia is littered with the names of RGS big-wigs, which is something that bears remembering the next time you take a

dip in the Murchison, climb Mt. Bartle, or stop a while on Barrow Island.

The book concludes by looking at Aboriginal Australia. Here Ryan canvasses the ways in which indigenous people are presented, interpellated and constructed in the narratives of explorers. For those ignorant of nineteenth-century racial stereotyping, this is a useful catalogue. For those with even a cursory knowledge of the period, the list will seem depressingly familiar.

The process of exploration, it seems, is endlessly fascinating. In Australia, we appear condemned to return perpetually to these journeys and their stories. Whether through hagiography or revisionist critique, our obsession with explorers soldiers on doggedly, like Eyre on the Nullarbor. But why? What is it about our society that craves knowledge about continental exploration? Why do explorers figure so prominently in our national consciousness? Why are whole semesters in primary school devoted to the quixotic meanderings of Leichardt, the tragi-comic bumblebings of Burke and Wills? Ryan's book does not answer these questions but does suggest ways in which they might be addressed. What Ryan's analysis shows time and again, is the ordinariness of these supposedly

mythic figures. Despite 'his' mythic status, the Australian explorer was no visionary, no wily Ulysses. The explorer, underneath the rhetoric, was simply a soldier, a surveyor, an information gatherer. *The Cartographic Eye*, is a useful assessment of exploration as a colonial practice. It is also evidence of a continued cultural phenomenon in Australia. The fetish of first impressions.

Tony Hughes-D'aeth

Lucy Frost and Marion Halligan,
Those Women who go to Hotels,
Minerva, 188pp, \$15-95.

This book emerges out of a friendship, a respect and growing comfort with each other as intrepid travellers to Australian capital cities, living in different ones. And the recognition that they both get pleasure from staying in hotels, the ease of the contract in anonymous spaces that vary mightily and offer different comforts, different facilities. Early on, in a hotel lobby bar, sipping on gin and tonics, they realise that this sort of life and social mobility was not available to their mothers. As fifty year old women, it was now perfectly respectable to stay in hotels.

This is the premise of the book, the collaboration, and they also write about their enjoyment in the project idea being taken up with enthusiasm by their publisher. Taking delight in saying to friends lines to the effect of *We're just off to Paris to write a book about hotels and the women who go to them.* Always moderated by economics, though, and they have their seven days in Paris but the truth is they were going to Europe anyway.

This is a pleasant book, a dedication of a friendship, with a bit of a sense of how women of fifty these days are no longer over the hill in the way that their mothers might have been. Women out in the public world, straddling corporate benefits and an independent identity. Lucy Frost and Marion Halligan know how to enjoy themselves, to indulge their fine tastes, and they can afford to. There is plenty of eating, drinking wine, swanning around rooms in bath robes, making comparative notes on all aspects of a hotel stay. The sexual encounters they largely, and safely, attribute to others which affords them a continued tone of respectableness, only fitting for such a book.

I sort of enjoyed the gossipy line through the book, including friend-spotting: dinners that Marion Halligan describes that she has had with *my* friends, as well as surmising on the

identity of other Australian writers named only with their familiar first name.

The best part of this book is the skilful way that the two voices of two writers weave around and form a neat dialogue. They often commence a section with a simple sentence in the third person and then straight into the first person voice. It worked and enabled a good tone, an interesting chattiness. Each evening for their seven days in Paris, sleeping in the same room, a little cramped, there is also the bonus of a before-sleep story, an anecdote from some other part of a life.

It is a curious book: not really a travel guide, not a *Best of Hotels 1997*, but an intimate and modest book about having friends and about negotiating your way through the world — the practical stuff about public toilets and train systems and hotel room service as well as the other important concerns about care and loyalty and careers. I love the pre-history of this friendship: that one wrote a less than glowing review of the other's first book and they tiptoed around each other for some time before a simple smile of welcome from the mean critic dissolved a whole mountain of tension between them. Now, there's a tale of taking criticism well, and not personally; a story for all

of us who need reminders of what is important and *why* we write.

Terri-ann White

Leigh Dale, *The English Men: Professing Literature in Australian Universities*, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 242 pp.

One consequence of the paradigm shift in literary studies over the last two decades has been a greatly increased attention to the history of the discipline. Some of these excavations of the origins and developments of English in the university are combative and 'patricidal', clearing the ground for the new methodologies: Terry Eagleton's summary of "the rise of English" in *Literary Theory* is a case in point. It is possible, however, for a genealogical study of English to be constructive and affirming in its treatment of past and present. One of the many merits of Leigh Dale's outstanding study, *The English Men*, is that it combines historical critique with a sense of the ethical, intellectual and political imperatives for literary study in contemporary Australia. As such it is a deeply informed intervention not only in theoretical debates within literary

studies, but in the urgent current debates about diversity in our culture. Internationally, this historicist project has produced such distinguished studies as Chris Baldick's *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932*, Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* and Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*. Dale's book draws productively on their methodologies, and adapts them to the particular context of Australia. It is meticulously researched and cogently argued, and its findings represent a signal contribution to our understanding of the place of English and Australian literature in this country.

Dale appropriates Graff's title for her subtitle, *Professing Literature in Australia*, and like him defines her project as an "institutional history of the discipline of English" (203). She examines the institutional frameworks that have moulded literary teaching and research in the universities, focusing on curricula, examination papers, methods of staff selection, the personal and educational background of Professors, conflicts within departments and how they were resolved, publication records and teaching methods. The result is a materialist study of the production of authoritative interpretations, canonical texts, and critical reputations.

However, Graff's approach to these processes is supplemented in several ways. First, Dale brings an awareness of feminist and postcolonial politics to bear on her analysis of the production of knowledge of English literature and language in departments and universities located in British colonies. Secondly, institutional practices are critically examined using Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Bourdieu's idea of 'habitus'. The third "and most important theoretical force is cultural history" (7): Dale's reading of this disciplinary formation derives from the nationalist critiques of the Anglocentrism and elitism of academic critics mounted by non-academic writers like Miles Franklin, A.A. Phillips, and C.B. Christensen. And, finally, to this well oiled and well used theoretical structure is added an alertness to individual difference, to emotional investment and undermining, and other personal factors that not only illustrate the historical argument, but complicate and enrich it. Dale shows how hegemonic Englishness is embodied in personal bearing, dress and speech, and mobilised in interpersonal relations. The importance of the personal is announced along with the significance of nation and masculinity in the book's title, *The English Men*, which faintly echoes J.P. Kenyon's 1983

study of English historians, *The History Men*.

Four key movements are discerned in the hundred years covered by this study: the foundation of English in a Classics-dominated Arts curriculum in the last third of the nineteenth century; the replacement of this universalist and humanist model with a patriotic and exclusivist Anglocentric one in the years surrounding the First World War; the centring of the discipline around a pedagogical regime of decontextualised close readings of canonical English texts following 1945; and the struggle in this climate to establish the academic study of Australian Literature within Departments of English. Dale distils a vast amount of detail in tracing these significant patterns. While situating literary teaching and criticism at all the long-established universities within an Arnoldian paradigm of disinterestedness, the opposition of civilisation and barbarism, and commitment to tradition, she is alert to the particular culture of individual institutions. The terms of endowment at Adelaide of university governance at Tasmania are shown to have had effects on the conduct of research, teaching or community involvement. One of the most interesting aspects of the second phase in Dale's treatment is

the record of modes of public service provided by professors of English, from adult education and newspaper reviewing to censorship and propaganda. The latter were particularly in evidence from 1914. At this time scholars disavowed their German intellectual affiliations. A.T. Strong of Adelaide published vitriolic attacks on the German scholar, Kuno Meyer, who had collaborated with Strong's father thirty years earlier. Dale notes with journalistic directness how Strong "whipped himself into a frenzy of guilt and outrage about his father's apparent 'collaboration' with Meyer, let alone his connections with German literature and culture" (82). More consciously, a "passion for imperialism" animated Strong and others at this time, informing their readings of texts and their political activities, such as advocacy of an imperial federation.

As well as analysing key episodes, Dale examines recurrent tropes in the writings of her "English men". The invocation of nationalism during the war lays bare some of the tensions between national myths and cultural speaking positions. Dale points to the pervasive "fear of effeminacy" in Strong's writings, and throughout the discipline, in which "women are everywhere, as novelists, poets, students, quiet researchers,

unexpected applicants, strong characters ... , even monarchs, giving their names to two of the most studied periods of English literature" (81). "Feminisation could be astonishingly mobile as a mode of invective" in this context. The reference to "unexpected applicants" is to Enid Derham, who lectured at Melbourne, and applied for the Chair at Adelaide. Dale recovers the names of several women academics from the archives, including Vera Jennings and Joyce Eyre. In reading tropes, Dale can be subtle and trenchant. Commenting on George Cowling's argument that English literary tradition was indispensable to the development of Australian culture, she observes: "things were not as grim as we might think, however. Australians were simply Britons in another place — albeit the wrong one ± and were therefore the rightful inheritors of the 'eternal' cultural values and habits of mind of the English people" (55).

Dale is a forceful but scrupulous critic of the institutional trend to make literary study "a way of acquiring surrogate Englishness" (87). She notes the differences between departments, and does not uncritically accept the judgments of previous nationalist commentators. It is a pleasure to be able to record in this journal her judicious reassessment of

Walter Murdoch. His "early advocacy of Australian literature" (145) is recovered through balanced contextual readings. The complex understandings made possible with Dale's many-sided method are well illustrated in her account of A.D. Hope working through "a conflict between the authority of the spatial (place, locality, landscape, creative writing) and the authority of the temporal (History, Tradition, the University as guardian of these things)" (168).

There is a subtle shift in the argument between the beginning and the end of Chapter Three, from "English was soon to be the centre-piece of the Humanities curriculum" to "English assumed a central position". One can hear the History men challenging the former. It is a measure of Dale's broad understanding and assurance that she usually reconciles the demands for strong formulations and necessary qualification in her incisive prose.

In the insightful conclusion to this important book Leigh Dale notes an uncanny resemblance between the oppositional critics of today and the Arnoldian critics who stood apart from their culture. This proposition evidences her scope and forthrightness as a critic, and her care for the integrity of the discipline and its capacity to engage with the culture of

which it is part. She recommends "a recovery of the sense of audience that is so acute in the writing of the first generations of 'the English men', particularly Walter Murdoch" (207). This timely history should be obligatory reading for anyone professing literature in Australia.

Kieran Dolin

Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as social memory*. (1997). Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, pp. viii+249. \$29.95.

The imperatives of disciplinary boundary maintenance within the humanities rather too often produce glib assertions that history and historians are, by definition, theoretically unsophisticated. Chris Healy's excellent new monograph, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as social memory* gives the lie to such generalisations, making it clear that historians are well and truly capable of a subtle, yet powerful application of theoretical concepts, casting on their subject matter both appropriate shadows of uncertainty as well as the clear light of illumination. Of course, Healy achieves this result, in part, because he reaches out well beyond

the confines of 'traditional' historiographical practice to draw inspiration from other intellectual projects, other disciplines (which might, loosely, be termed post-positivist). Yet he still being guided by some proud traditions of historical scholarship: political commitment, powerful storytelling, attention to the nuances of time's otherness. *From the Ruins of Colonialism* is not 'history' because it transcends the limitations within which positivist, empirical historiography labours. Yet, in the way that it promotes, by example more than direction, a fundamental reorganisation of the whole meaning of 'history' (as both discipline and object), Healy's work is very much the history we need. *From the Ruins of Colonialism* quietly rebuts claims that history is being killed by cultural theorising (along with any number of poorly understood '-isms'), demonstrating that attention to culture and signification indeed re-vitalises historiography. More importantly, Healy's work points the way to a crucial program of investigation about 'history' that depends, not upon the recovery of true meanings from the past, but upon the careful and sensitive analysis of the way that history, as social memory, operates always to signify past, present and future, to create 'in-between moments

when we cease to live in time and space in order to reflect on, or be trained in, or entertained by something of our historicity, our being-in-history' (5).

Healy's goal in *From the Ruins* is to explore 'social memory', a pattern of 'relatively discrete instances in a network of performances: enunciations in historical writing, speaking, (re)enactment, (re)presentation and so on; the surfaces of historical discourses; the renderings of memory practices' (5). He does not simply wish to 'historicis[e] the historiographic operation', but rather to examine how social memory, at particular moments, gives rise to 'structures and disruptions which have produced historical sensibilities' (5). In doing so, Healy makes no claim against the 'actuality' of history but instead deftly explores the way that lived experiences are governed, in part, by the social memories, the 'telling of being-in-history' against and within which experiences become meaning-ful (131). In this regard, the chapters on museums and schooling, two primary 'practical institutional forms of social memory' (73), convincingly show how Australians become 'modern citizens in time, conscious of their destiny' through the instructive spaces and processes of social memory at school and in the

museum (83).

Healy begins by exploring the very different appropriations of Captain Cook from the past as a signifier within European and Aboriginal social memories, both recent and past. For Healy, history, however rendered, is always already about racial relations in Australia. *From the Ruins of Colonialism*, conceived in 1988 ('a year replete with history' (2)) and published into the maelstrom of contemporary uses of history consequent to the Mabo and Wik court decisions, makes as significant a contribution as any recent book to the understanding of 'history' in this very political context. Even in the chapters on institutional social memory, and in the last two which explore the gendered dimensions of social memory through two major historical 'events' — the Eureka Stockade and Eliza Fraser, issues of colonialism, race relations and the appropriation of Aboriginal memories into European social memory are ever-present.

Citing Paul Fox, Healy asks: 'Do Australians inhabit a postcolonial world or a landscape of colonial memories?' (95). Essentially, this question frames Healy's entire text, even when he goes well beyond Fox's original concern and even though he never settles upon an easy answer.

Healy suggests, for academic histories at least (and in the social memories which coalesce around institutionalised history), the answer is that we are not yet in a postcolonial world. Healy concludes, speaking of Eliza Fraser but articulating a view that could apply to many other historical themes and stories, events and accounts, historians have too readily sought to find the 'authentic', or to 'add Aboriginal voices and mix', or slip into an uncritical 'pluralism' (189). Instead, historians must transform their 'not yet postcolonial histories' by thinking less about the 'history' of events and more about their historicity, or 'being-in-historyness' (189).

Healy's point is that there is no way in which the ruins of colonialism can be recreated or ignored by historiographical processes of excavation or burial. Popular senses of the past, the substance of most social memory, confound historians who make 'far too much or far too little' of celebrations such as the Bicentennial (4). Rather, historians and, perhaps Australians more broadly, might better begin to '[learn] to inhabit landscapes of memory which are, in part, landscapes littered with ruins; some archaic, some nightmarish...[such landscapes are] a ground from which new flights of

historical imagination might depart and to which they might return, differently' (2).

From The Ruins of Colonialism, with its use of concepts such as history of the present and governmentality; with descriptions of social memory as a 'field' and a concentration on the discursive nature of events: 'relentlessly reported, described, portrayed, analysed, discussed, interpreted and disputed' (132) owes much to Foucault. But, the most compelling sense in which Healy's work is Foucauldian is that *From The Ruins* is (rather like *Discipline and Punish*), quite simply, an engrossing read, whose central conceptual framework remains well hidden within a wealth of detail and imagination. The many substantial and crucial insights (for just one example, consider the elegance of 'To know history in the colonies was, it seems, to know the revelation of the past in the future' (20)) are not to be found in some comprehensive, disconcertingly eager theoretical chapter, but instead, lie in wait, sparkling faintly to catch the eye of the alert reader, their discovery made all the more exciting for the apparent casualness with which Healy has distributed them throughout the text.

From The Ruins of Colonialism is a book that says much about Australia,

history and culture: but its real strength lies in the softness of the voice with which it speaks. For Healy history is 'braiding the time of the past with the time of the present to produce memory in and out of time, backwards and forwards' (17). Perhaps, this braid will lead to the sorts of understandings Australia needs for its future.

Matthew Allen

David Carter, *A Career in Writing: Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career*, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1997, p.284.

It has been said, with some degree of wisdom I believe, that when a reviewer is negative about a book, his/her review deserves to be taken with a grain of salt; such a review may be no more than an expression of the reviewer's own envy or jealousy. Or it may simply indicate the sort of book the reviewer him/herself would have preferred to have read or even written.

With no further beating about the bush I unabashedly admit to this sort of culpability in my response to David Carter's book on Judah Waten. One may well be envious of David Carter's achievement. His is a book displaying

all the marks of patient scholarship and erudition, a book packed with instances of close textual scrutiny and analysis, the sort of book which one might guess must have taken a good many hours and years to write. As the book's subtitle suggests, Carter's chief interest lies in the cultural contextualising of Waten's writing; but it goes a good deal further since 'culture' is taken in the contemporary 'postmodern' rather than narrower traditional sense, meaning that the job in hand for Carter is not just cultural in the old sense but historical, political, theoretical, linguistic, etc., etc. in the new sense—in short, a project demanding that almost every conceivable context be taken into account, *everything* included, nothing left out. And this is precisely the nature of this rather daunting book.

The author's intentions are spelt out in the Introduction where he admits, to using Judah Waten, in part, for a range of other 'concerns'—such as theorising the concept of 'a literary career', examining contemporary attitudes to 'realism', examining Waten's Jewish identity, apart from dealing with a further range of more arcane things designated by recently-coined modish words like 'positioning' and 'framing' which require an understanding of recent literary theory to make a lot of sense.

Also displayed in these opening chapters, it must be said, is the author's finely detailed grasp of the period of Australian social evolution in which Waten wrote. Again in a somewhat modish critical spirit (despite an occasional throwing down of the gauntlet) Carter is interested in person and personality as text, as rhetorical trope, as system (rather than, say, the untropological, unsystematic individual I, for instance, *think* I know myself to be). But he is also interested, it must again be said, in the peculiarities, complexities, even the inconsistencies in Waten's work, those places where aesthetic and ideological forces sometimes seem to be pulling in different directions and Carter takes great pains to detail these things in a number of criss-crossing analyses of works like *Alien Son*, *The Unbending*, *Distant Land*, etc. And in all these matters there is never—yes, never—any skimping of small detail. His is a finely constructed mesh which lets very little escape.

The critical project in this book is, to say the very least, ambitious: it involves such diverse strategies as accounting for Waten's literary career, defending literary 'realism' from postmodernists (like himself?), locating Waten in the crosscurrents of the Australian 1940, 50s and 60s,

accounting for the odd ambivalence of Waten's 'outsider/insider' status, accounting for the particularities of Waten's 'Jewishness', theorising the notion of Waten as an auto-biographical writer, and so on. The chapter I personally find most interesting, "A Jewish Australian Writer", offers a discerning account of Waten's notion of the relation of his own Jewish to his Australian identity, a notion reminiscent incidentally of Israel Zangwill's vision of the American 'melting-pot' at the turn of this century where Jewish identity was seen as a condition of necessary transition along a route to a greater humanity rather than anything more 'essentially' significant, thus marking out a road to secularism.

But this is also where, for me, this account of a Jewish author finds its limitations, and this is because the book is only very partly an account of a Jewish author. While I think that David Carter is mostly right in his assessment of Waten's Jewishness, I happen to be equally interested in other manifestations of Jewishness apart from the the specific Waten variety which strikes me, in some ways, as atypical of Jewish writing of the period. Although Carter does not make the mistake of trying to generalise from the Waten example, I find it hard not to see Waten in

relation to other Jewish writers of the time whether or not the examples are Australian—say Abraham Cahan or Henry Roth (who are a bit earlier) or the Singer brothers, I.B. and I.J., let alone Herz Bergner and the Yiddish writers Waten himself translated from Yiddish.

If such comparisons are made Waten appears in some ways the odd man out. In particular, that comfortable slide from the position of outsider to insider which Carter finds characterises Judah Waten is precisely what does not occur in the works of a majority of other Jewish writers. While this is not David Carter's fault, I think it is important to be aware of it. In this respect at least Judah Waten seems quite unrepresentative of modern Jewish experience—at least as it has been documented in twentieth century fiction and as it has been discerningly written about by critics such as Gershon Shaked in *The Shadows Within*. A contemporary Australian short story writer like Serge Liberman, for instance, might be regarded as a far more reliable guide to the trials and tribulations of modern Jewish deracination, assimilation, and modernisation—the kind of thing John Cuddihy wrote about in *The Ordeal of Civility* and the sort of thing which characterises so much better known Jewish writing this century. On

the other hand, I wonder whether for all of his discerning analyses David Carter entirely captures a more skittish, less certain, less buoyant mood in Waten's novels, a certain underlying sense of alienation and directionlessness which, despite Waten's much-vaunted commitment to communism and despite the chubby Waten appearance of comfortable assimilation, works at a deeper level in his writing to subvert what is more immediately and rhetorically apparent.

And this in turn leads me to wonder whether Carter's critical stance really serves him well in capturing what contemporary critical ideology is generally at pains to deny—namely, the mysterious glimmerings of human personality as something more mysterious and unaccountable than rhetoric or ideology strictly allow. Carter employs a writing style which, for my taste, is too concerned with justifying its 'contemporary' credentials, a style full of self-conscious asides, self-justifications, intertextual interventions, imbrications, critical definitions, multiple reiterations, and so on and so forth, the kind of thing the more 'robust' Robert Hughes, for instance, recently complained about in so much contemporary academic writing. And it is this which, for me,

makes the job of reading this book so arduous despite my own interest and despite what I concede is the author's very real achievement.

But I am in no doubt that those scholars and academics of a more decentred, postmodernish, groovy bent than myself, those who are inclined to see a revolutionary message in every flower, who regard human thought as cybernetic function, will find my own misgivings with this book anachronistic, perhaps trivial, and probably irrelevant. After all, a book on Judah Waten, any book on Judah Waten—and this is by no means a bad one—fills an outstanding gap on the critical shelves.

Ron Shapiro

Alec Choate, *The Wheels of Hama: Collected War Poems*, Victor Publishing, 1997, 133p.

Jill Jones, *The Book of Possibilities*, Hale & Iremonger, 1997, 96p., \$16.95.

'Memories are clothing,' remarked John Mateer in his recent collection *Anachronism*, 'and the mind an op-shop.' Rummaging through the poems in Jill Jones's *The Book of Possibilities*, I try to imagine what sort of outfit I might put together. I pull

out a pair of old corduroy pants, rumpled but distinctly chic, then a leather coat, a skivvy, and finally, a beret — all are black. Jill Jones's poems are self-consciously 'urban', a pastiche of Baudelaire, film noir, and jazz music. A very hip and restless eye moves through Sydney's mean streets, flickering between the harbour and the hazy outlines of its glassy towers. It is a sensory world of traffic, trains, and shimmering lights. Sydney is a neon metropolis, all glassy planes and blurred movement. The effect is prismatic and alienating. Jones's feminist flâneur, at times subversive, nevertheless retains a rather too surgical stare. Sydney's drag queens, for instance, are dissected layer by layer in 'Five star drag night':

Even when the skin,
daahling, has seen better nights,
they up the cue on brightness,
as a sadder membrane struggles
and thins. (46)

The rebellious lifeworld of the Mardi Gras is reflected against the petri dish glass of shop fronts: 'squinting at sequins in the warping,/ plate-glass windows of Oxford Street.' (47).

Time and memory run through the volume in watery metaphors, rippling, washing, pulsing. The 'glossy street-light swims in a blur' (30) and the 'the street outside

streams' (39). Everything is awash and running and just a little bit damp. It seems to rain a lot in these poems. For Jones this is part of the restless rhythm of the city. It's a little bit scary, sometimes sad, but fun and pretty as well:

I can't avoid it now.

An old valedictory horn solo
rises through distracted imaginations,
its final breath exhaling into
a wide and changeful black landscape
that moves into the planetary wash,
forever escaping. (67)

On occasion, the pulse of time, memory, streets, rain, shiny lights and groovy music can leave the poems seeming a little too wide-eyed and cosmic for my liking, but maybe I don't get out enough. Still, there is an austere beauty in Jones's vision of contemporary Sydney and something haunting in the way she speaks about transience.

Transience is a powerful undercurrent in Alec Choate's recently published collection of poems, *The Wheels of Hama*. Here the themes of time and memory are taken up in a somewhat different context: war. Fifty years after the time of their composition, Choate's poems about his experiences in the Second World War, have something of the quality of a time capsule. The young man who

authored them, paints a surreal picture of life on and off the battlefield. The war, or 'my war', as it is often called in the poems, is transmuted from industrialised carnage into epic narratives of being and time. 'On the Frontier', is a long poem describing an artillery exchange in the deserts of North Africa:

Gunfire was called, four rounds were
fired as one.
Like striking claws withdrawn to
strike again
mad metal leaped, recoiled, as gun by
gun
lashed the tense air of plateau and of
plain
to send the gulping shells in one wild
rain
upon some target to these men
unseen.

Wars fought between unseen enemies are one of the more unsavoury hallmarks of modernity, and Choate's poems seek to render the peculiar terror of this practice. Interestingly, the somewhat bouncy couplets tend rather to enhance the phantasmagoric scenes of his war than to deflate them. The violence of the battle, which is at the same time random and systematic, erupts shockingly out of the pitter patter of his verse.

Yet, while acknowledging the momentousness of the occasion, it is also useful to dispel some of the aura which is associated with the literature

of war. Although Tobruk and El Alamein seem somehow to float in the mythic space of our nationhood, they were, in fact, real places with real people living in them. The engagement of a twenty-something Australian soldier with the cultures of the Middle East provides an intriguing counterpoint to the war poetry, a dissonance not lost on the poet:

At times the jolt of comparison
with days of desert war, still bleeding
on

for others, sniped to undermine my
mood,
but my leave pass was precious,
pitiless. (33)

In 'Luxor', the young poet takes a trip down the Nile with a guide called Ahmed. What emerges is a jaunty and thorough orientalist journey through the temples of Egypt in which the young Choate sees the stone monuments and timelessness of Ancient Lands as a kind of mirror, or master code for his own military engagements and aesthetic endeavours:

Dazed by the many splendours I had
seen,
I followed his hushed greyhound
steps away
thinking of Karnak's people who had
been

like others born to die, how they
could say
to later cultures that god-kindled art
was their great statement. I had
touched its heart.

In some ways it seems rather quaint to picture a young Australian soldier staring at Egyptian temples and remarking calmly, 'I had touched its heart.' It is these moments of candour that make Choate's work important, not only as documents of battles but as an imaginative case-study. Choate finds compensation for the precariousness of his own condition, in the projected 'ancientness' of the lands around him. The turning of the water wheels in the Syrian town of Hama becomes a symbol not of time, but of timelessness. It is contrasted to the wheels of the army convoy in which Choate is travelling, which are restless and self-propelling. The value of Choate's poems is that they reveal as much about the conceptualised Asia of the Anglo-Australian consciousness as they do about the campaigns of World War Two.

Tony Hughes-D'aeth

CONTRIBUTORS

MICHAEL ACKLAND teaches English and Australian literature at Monash University. His monograph *Henry Handel Richardson* was published by OUP last year. **ALAN ALEXANDER** has had four collections of poetry published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press: *In The Sun's Eye*, 1977; *Scarpdancer*, 1982; *Northline*, 1987 and *Principia Gondwana*, 1992. A fifth collection is in the making. **MATTHEW ALLEN** lectures in history and cultural theory at Curtin University and has published recently on memory and forgetfulness in Australia's commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. **PETER BIBBY** writes poems, plays, film scripts, music theatre. Edits books, acts and sings. He lives in Broome. **KEVIN BROPHY** is the author of a collection of poetry *Replies to the Questionnaire on Love* and three novels. From 1980 to 1994 he was editor of the small press literary magazine *Going Down Swinging*. **ANDREW BURKE** is an Australian poet who lives in Perth. His latest collection of poems, *Mother Waits for Father Late* (FACP, April 1993) was shortlisted for the WA Premiers Poetry Award 1992. **ALEC CHOATE** was born in Hertfordshire, England, but has lived most of his life in Western Australia. He has published five volumes of poetry, his latest is *The Wheels of Hama — Collected War Poems*. (See review in this issue.) **ALAN DAVIES** lives in Melbourne. Of the several millions of words he has written over the past few years, these are the first to appear in print. **DANIEL DAVIES** lives in London, and has had fiction and poetry published in a number of literary magazines. **BRUCE DAWE** is one of Australia's best known poets, and this year was awarded the Inaugural Philip Hodgins Medal for Literary Excellence. A fifth, revised edition of *sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954-1997* is due out later this year. At present he is teaching U3A classes and enjoying it.... **MEAGHAN DELAHUNT** is a Melbourne-born writer. Previous short stories have appeared in the anthology *Bodylines* (Women's Redress Press) and *Harpies & Quines* (Scotland). This story is dedicated to the memory of Steven Pizaro (1961-1996). **KIERAN DOLIN** teaches in the English Department, UWA. **DIANE FAHEY**'s fifth volume of poetry is *The Body in Time* (Spinifex). She is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing. **ALICE FRIMAN** is an American who has had poetry published widely. She won the Consuelo Ford Award, 1988, and the Cecil Hemley Memorial Award, 1990, from the Poetry Society of America, and is the author of five poetry collections, the latest of which is *Driving for Jimmy Wonderland*

(Barnwood). **KEVIN HART** is an Australian poet, critic and literary theorist who is presently at the Department of English, Georgetown University in Washington DC. **GRAEME HETHERINGTON** is an Australian who lives in the Czech Republic. **TONY HUGHES-D'AETH** is a PhD student in the English Department, UWA. **BRIGID LOWRY** is working on an MA (Creative Writing) in the English Department, UWA. Her latest book is a novel for young adults, *Guitar Highway Rose* (Allen & Unwin). **DAVID LUMSDEN** lives in Melbourne and works as a software designer. His poems have appeared in numerous magazines. **KATE LYONS** is a Sydney-based freelance writer currently working on a novel. She has previously been published in *Hecate*, *Westerly*, *Overland* and *Going Down Swinging*. **PETER MINTER** is a Sydney poet, editor and publisher. He co-edits *Cordite*, Australia's poetry and poetics tabloid review. **GIG RYAN** is a well-known Australian poet whose books include *Excavation*, *The Last Interior* and *Manners of an Astronaut*. **ANDREW SANT** is the author of several collections of poetry. His most recent book is *Toads* (Allen & Unwin), a collection of essays he edited about the relationship between writing and work. **MICHAEL SARIBAN** is a Brisbane poet. His most recent book is *A Formula for Glass* (UQP, 1987). His next, *Complicity*, is to be published by Penguin in 1997. **RON SHAPIRO** teaches in the English Department, UWA. **NICK SMITH** was born in Adelaide, has lived in Auckland and now lives in Canberra where he is employed by the Federal Public Service, making the world safe for creative types. **KENNETH STEVEN** lives in Scotland. His poetry has been published widely in the USA, Canada, Ireland, Norway and Australia. **JOHN TRANTER** is one of Australia's best known poets. He lives in Sydney. **ALAN URQUHART** teaches at the Sydney Institute of Technology and is currently working on a book of poems. **RENEE WEBSTER** is a Murdoch University graduate and currently works in the film industry. She hopes for a life of writing and films. **TERRI-ANN WHITE** writes fiction and currently teaches writing in the Department of English, UWA. **RAYMOND YOUNIS** is at the Central Queensland University (Sydney Campus) and has a special interest in Australian Jewish writing.

"Interactions"
**The Eighth Biennial Symposium on Literature
and Cultures of the Asia-Pacific Region**

9-12 December 1997

The theme "Interactions" signifies a special interest in cross-cultural explorations. The symposium is being organised by the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, a research centre within the Department of English at The University of Western Australia. The Centre publishes the magazine *Westerly* and scholarly books; it is a key part of Perth's lively literary community. Selected papers from the symposia have been published in a series of highly regarded scholarly books, some of them pioneers in this now rapidly developing field: *The Writer's Sense of the Contemporary* (1982), *The Writer's Sense of the Past* (1987), *A Sense of Exile* (1988), *Perceiving Other Worlds* (1991), *Myths, Heroes and Anti-Heroes* (1992), and *Crossing Cultures* (1996).

The symposium will include

- *papers*
- *panel sessions*
- *readings by writers from the region*
- *a reading at a vineyard in the Swan Valley*
- *an informal Symposium dinner*

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FICTION

Andrew Burke
Meaghan Delahunt
Brigid Lowry
Nick Smith
and others

POETRY

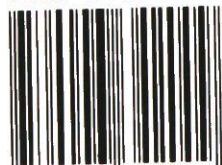
Bruce Dawe
Diane Fahey
Alice Friman
Peter Minter
Gig Ryan
John Tranter
and others

ARTICLES

Michael Ackland on
*The Fortunes of
Richard Mahoney*
Kevin Brophy on
Reproducing
Originality
Alan Urquhart on
John Forbes
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Patrick White



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