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PSYCHE AS TEXT: THE SHORT STORIES OF VANCE PALMER

In 1957 Allan Edwards wrote a preface for a selection of Vance Palmer's stories called *The Rainbow-Bird and Other Stories*. Edwards praised Palmer's ability to view his characters "from the inside as though he has spent all his life as one of them, sharing . . . their dreams and fears and aspirations."¹ Edwards developed this theme at some length, emphasizing Palmer's:

. . . interest in the inner life of ordinary people . . . He can suggest the flow of their ideas and thoughts . . . the flow of their feelings, the rhythm of their words, the shape and pattern of their unspoken daydreams, their private fears and anxieties, their cherished hopes and aspirations . . . The sufferings of these outsiders are rendered vividly with compassionate understanding, as though Palmer himself has known what it means to feel solitary, unwanted, and misunderstood.²

Edwards' comments raise an interesting question. How does an author present the psychic life of other subjects? Classical Freudian psychoanalysis regarded all texts as projections of the author's unconscious. Any insight into the psyche of a character was in reality an insight into the psyche of the author. But according to modern psychoanalytic theory, in particular, that of Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language, enabling us to read, as Elizabeth Wright says, psyche as text.³

For Lacan⁴ the unconscious is formed when the infant's first experience of language decenters it from the Imaginary state in which mother and child exist in a perfect symbiotic relationship. Lacan sees the infant's experience as dominated at the Imaginary stage by the "Desire of the Other", meaning that the infant desires only the Mother and believes that the Mother desires only itself. The succeeding Symbolic stage teaches the child that this is not so, initiating an endless process of deferral of desire and a gradual entrapment in the signifying system of the Symbolic. Lacan calls the subject's experience of the Symbolic the "Name of the Father", meaning by this all the signifiers of paternal authority. The subject is constituted then not only out of the synchronic signifiers of individual experience but also by the diachronic signifiers of cultural evolution. The psyche we read as text is thus as much social and cultural as individual, since it is brought into existence by language.

Althusser, following Lacan, sees the Lacanian notion of the production of the subject by a network of signifiers as analogous to the way the structure of a literary text is produced by (and can therefore reveal) ideology.⁵ For Fredric Jameson, ideology (defined by Althusser as “the ‘representation’ of the Imaginary relationship of individuals to their Real conditions of existence”⁶) is “the place of the insertion of the subject in those realms of order — the Symbolic (or in other words the synchronic network of society itself, with its kinship-type system of places and roles), and the Real (or in other words the diachronic evolution of History itself, the realm of time and death) both of which radically transcend individual experience in their very structure.”⁷ Thus for Jameson the ideological “representation” in a text is seen “as that indispensable mapping fantasy of narrative by which the individual subject invents a ‘lived’ relationship with collective systems which otherwise by definition exclude him insofar as he or she is born into a pre-existent social form and its pre-existent language.”⁸

In this paper I would like to look at the psyche as text, at that “mapping fantasy of narrative” in order to analyse its operations, and in order to reveal the unconscious ‘representations’ of the subject’s insertion in ideology. Although I have chosen Palmer as a subject, the stories to be discussed, with one exception for the sake of comparison, have been chosen for me by critical and editorial preferment, which, apparently under the force of some repetition compulsion, has given us a handful of stories which have come to be regarded as Palmer’s best. Uncannily, these stories have some striking features in common: all are concerned with children or adolescents; most concern tension between a child and one or other of the parents; and in many, one or other of the biological parents is displaced allowing for the introduction of metaphorical fathers or mothers.

In “The Catch”⁹ a boy and a man go fishing. While the man is fishing the boy splashes around in a rock-pool and later all but submerges himself in it while reflecting unfavourably on his father. The man then asks the boy to take the rod while he goes for a swim. The boy hooks a fish, and the man and boy carry the catch back home where the boy, by now in a high state of excitement, proudly shows his mother the fish. The mother’s comments are casual and dismissive whereupon, sorely disappointed, the boy decides to throw the fish back into the water.

It was Freud who said that a cigar is sometimes just a cigar, but in this story the fish is not just a fish. Palmer may have consciously drawn on Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (first translated in 1913, some thirty years before the story was written) since images and events are

used in the story in a way which closely follows Freud's interpretations of the snake and the fish as phallic symbols,¹⁰ and of rescue¹¹ and immersion in water up to the head¹² as representing birth. Added to this the sea is equated with the unconscious so that things emerging from the sea represent unconscious desires being made apparent, and things returned to the sea represent the repression of those desires. Through the use of these conventional symbols and motifs the story presents the conflict between the 'Desire-of-the-Mother' and the prohibitions in the 'Name-of-the-Father.'

In the first part of the story the boy lies in the sea of the unconscious giving us an insight into his psychic world. Images of sleepiness and drowsiness as well as warmth suggest the return to a desired place in the unconscious. As the boy watches the man "with absorbed eyes" his thoughts turn towards his mother and then towards his father. The boy's hostile feelings focus on the father's prohibitions concerning the boy's attachment to the sea. He is annoyed because "his father never wanted to go out in the boat" and the father complains about the "shells and seaweed" which the boy collects. In the psyche of the text hostility to the father is also conveyed by his being displaced, and replaced by a benevolent father, thus allowing the repressed desires freedom to surface. We are told that the father is often away in town for extended periods and during his absence a substitute appears, a man called Brian, whom the boy likes. Since Brian always appears when the father is absent and makes the mother happy we can assume that Brian is the mother's lover, but the boy seems unaware of this until the very end. From the boy's point of view Brian is everything that the real father is not, since he takes the boy fishing and generally indulges him; he is what occupies the absence created by the psyche's symbolic removal of the father.

The boy has now slipped deeper into the warm waters, there being "just enough to cover" him and his eyes being "just above the surface". The boy recalls an incident where he fell from the "top rail of the verandah" and injured himself, remembering how his mother rescued him, and his father's subsequent anger when he returned home: "Angry his father had been . . . angry not just with him for breaking his collarbone but with the lot of them". Since the rescue represents to the boy his imaginary belief that his mother desires him, the father's anger "with the lot of them" can be interpreted as his warning against both the mother's desire for the son and the son's desire for the mother. The text continues with a compulsive repetition of the boy's hostility towards the father: ". . . as he splashed in the sun-bright pool, the thought of his father hung over him like a cold shadow", and he remembers how his mother has warned him to "clear all those shells and seaweed off the

verandah before your father sees them” and, again, how “such warnings chilled him to the spine”. These warnings only crystallize the desire for the mother in another repetition of the rescue scene, since they “sent him out . . . to the back of the house where there was nothing to do but lie on his back in the thin grass and hope he would be bitten by a snake!” The hoped for catastrophe would compel the mother to rescue him again, leading to a re-birth of her desire for him and his intimacy with her. Recalling this, the boy is able to re-focus his attention on the exotic contents of the pool, which include shells such as “the snakes’ heads that felt like velvet”, but again the memory of the father’s voice intervenes to deride these objects which are the metaphors of his desire, the signifiers of his unconscious: “‘What muck’s that youngster been collecting now?’ his father would say, sniffing round his bedroom on the verandah.” In this first part of the story the ‘Desire-of-the-Mother’ is in constant conflict with the pronouncements in the ‘Name-of-the-Father’, and this psychic conflict is conveyed in the text by the repetition of alternating memories of mother and father, of desire and aggression.

In the second part of the story the man invites the boy to take the rod while he goes for a swim and the focus moves from the shallow rock-pool to the “deep water by the rocks [where] there were shoals of big kingfish, and once a whale had swum close in with the killers after it”. Here the depth of the unconscious is suggested as is the intensity of the desire now metonymically transferred to the larger objects to be found in the deeper waters. Before the boy catches the fish the text twice draws our attention to the man’s apparent lack of interest in those things which interest the boy: he notices that the man “didn’t seem to be thinking of fish” and that he “didn’t seem in any hurry to go in for his dip”. These comments serve to reinforce the difference between the man, whose curiosity for the contents of the unconscious is under control, and the boy, whose unconscious desire is about to surface. The moment is anticipated with the “blood moving deliciously round his heart” as he waits for the bite. When the fish is hooked the boy feels he is “fighting something savage and overwhelming, something like the creatures he had seen in dreams” and “incoherent cries [come] from his throat”. These incoherent cries represent the inability of the signifying system to signify that pre-linguistic stage in which Desire is all. Indeed when the fish is landed the syntax itself appears to warp as the signifiers attempt to connect to that presence for which the signifiers are normally an endlessly deferred substitute, resulting in this sentence: “Almost beside himself the boy knelt down beside it”. The repetition of “beside” here, although stylistically inelegant, forces an identification of “himself” and “it” so that the fish becomes the signifier of his desire. In this way then, the “monster [is] torn from the mysterious life of the deep water”.

The third part of the story considers the primal encounter between the boy and the mother: the boy “rendered dumb by his own excitement . . . was living in the moment when he would stagger up the steps and burst into the sitting room with the fish in his arms, overwhelming his mother as she lay reading on the sofa” (just as the text of the story tries to overwhelm us as we read). This encounter is presented, none too subtly, a number of times as the boy goes “over the scene again and again”. While the boy’s encounter with his mother can only be seen as a regression to the infantile Imaginary state, the text says otherwise: through this encounter he will be “carried on a cresting wave out of the trough of childhood, landed on a bright, glittering shore” and “even his father” whose return is now contemplated, will treat him as a man. However when he finally stands before his mother she doesn’t “seem to have seen the fish” and she complains that the boy has got his shirt messed up with “blood and scales” indicating that her eyes are fixed on a different world to that upon which the boy’s are fixed. The separation of son and mother is conveyed here through the metaphor of seeing: although when the boy enters the mother “glance[s] hastily over her shoulder” she then looks back into the mirror again “with strained, preoccupied eyes that could hold no more than her own image”.

The story’s conclusion presents the boy’s resentment and its causes. The mother both treats the boy as a boy, and pronounces the name of the substitute father, when she says “run away and change. We’re going over to the hotel for dinner with Brian”. The boy now realizes that his mother’s desire is given to another, ironically, the one he trusted, and he observes that “she swung the door of her wardrobe open and stood looking pensively at the frocks that hung there like discarded skins of snakes”. Here, as elsewhere in the stories to be discussed, the defeat of the son by a rival is only dimly understood, the actual feeling being that the mother is to blame because of her promiscuity, as the metaphor of the “discarded skins of snakes” suggests. The discarded son now represses his desire. Just as the story metonymically extended the boy’s desire through small objects such as shells, to “whiting”, to “kingfish”, to “a whale”, and finally to the “monster . . . of the deep waters”, his desire now contracts as the fish begins to seem “smaller than before, much smaller . . . mean somehow; its eyes had glazed, its scales dried and lost lustre”. As “darkness [surges] over him in a wave” he throws the fish back into the sea and “Dry-eyed, his face stony, his feelings tied in a hard knot, he watched the fish being caught up from the backwash and sucked out to sea”.

The narrator of “Mathieson’s Wife”¹³ is not in love with his mother, but he is in love with the wife of Mathieson from the moment she drops down out of a mulberry tree and stands “laughing down at me,

her blue eyes dancing and the mulberry-stains red on her lips". Like the boy in "The Catch" his blood rises and he suffers from incoherence: "The blood crept up my neck, and I tried to stutter out something, but my voice lost itself in the furry depths of my throat". These first stirrings of the 'Desire-of-the-Other' are destined to be repressed, just as they were for the boy in "The Catch", for, as the possessive case in the name of the text indicates, the woman, who according to public speculation is 23 or 24 years old, belongs to Mathieson, a Presbyterian minister who is 'almost 60'.

Mathieson appears as an ambivalent character. He is described as being "shy", having "kind, vague eyes" and as "A bit simple, inclined to live in the next world rather than this one, too soft and kind-hearted". The narrator always refers to him as the "old boy" or "old Mathieson". Yet at the same time there is a feeling of unease in his presence: "Sometimes, dawdling home from school, we caught sight of him in his shirt sleeves splitting wood by the outhouse, and it gave us a queer feeling, as if we'd come upon grown-up people bathing naked in the creek". In the pulpit, Mathieson takes on the appearance of authority, looking "like the prophet Elijah", and the "stairs of the pulpit creak beneath his weight when he [mounts] them in church". When preaching "words came rolling up as if from somewhere deep inside him. Words you could only understand through hearing them used over and over". These words are the signifiers of the symbolic Father, repeated "over and over" in order continually to defer the desire of the sons. It is not only in the act of repeating the 'Names-of-the-Father' that Mathieson appears as the Symbolic father, but also in the narrator's dreams of desire for Mathieson's wife:

In these dreams I was no longer a boy of thirteen, but ageless, older at any rate than she was, and so strong I could lift her to the saddle with a sweep of the arm when she ran to me for protection as I rode by. It was always from old Mathieson she was running. Now he was a mumbling giant who had hidden her in his cave above the railway cutting, now a hairy ape like the one in the school-books, swinging from one branch to another with his long arms, peering down through the leaves.

The narrator wishes (like the boy in "The Catch") to be rid of this father, and when he thinks of the woman at home with Mathieson he remarks that "I always thought of him, asleep in the dark front room, as being far away as if he were dead and in his coffin". Again, like the boy in "The Catch" he appeals to the woman to rescue him when he says "I could only lie on my back in the grass and wish there weren't so many years of

living ahead of me". However, to use a line from A.D. Hope's "The Wandering Islands", "The Rescue will not take place", and since the boy cannot tolerate the deferment of his desire, the psyche adopts the strategy of debasing the desired object by employing the signifiers of paternal authority, cunningly displaced onto social gossip and the language of the Grandmother. The social gossip makes the narrator feel that he "carried a smear of their talk on [him]". With her "sharp tongue and searching eyes [which] could strip other women to the bone" the Grandmother is even more critical of Mathieson's wife, being unable to "speak of her without dropping her voice and putting a slight hiss into her words". The Grandmother's culminating pronouncement on the wife is "She'd make love to any old horse hanging its head over the roadside fence".

It is when the boy realizes the impossibility of his love that a rival, a young man called Bob Curdie, enters upon the scene. Curdie is the manager of the "travelling dairy" but his name is surely a paraprosopon since it is he who is responsible for curdling the boy's desire. True to the Grandmother's prophecy, the wife takes a liking to Curdie's horse: "She had taken a fancy to the brown gelding and didn't seem able to keep away from it . . . I remember nursing a lot of resentment about the way it was beginning to snare all her attention". When Mathieson also becomes suspicious of his wife's frequent absences he looks for her at the boy's house. Later the boy dreams of "violence" in Mathieson's household: "Lurid scenes flitted before my vision . . . old Mathieson worked up to a pitch of madness, lightning shooting from his eyes, his great chest heaving, his hands grappling at his wife's throat". The next day the boy stumbles upon Curdie and Mathieson's wife in an embrace and like the boy in "The Catch" darkness falls upon him: "There are happenings that fill a boy with a confused darkness he doesn't wish to explore . . . I didn't want to meet [Mathieson's wife] again, and took pains to avoid her. For the time being, I couldn't help seeing her through my grandmother's eyes". From here the story moves rapidly to its conclusion. As Mathieson's wife plays "at being everybody's sweetheart and no one's", "giving little pieces of herself to all sorts of people and nothing very much to anybody", the narrator loses interest, begins studying for a scholarship and meets the wife only one more time when he feels she "had floated out of my particular world and become remote". In one sentence the story moves forward one year to observe that the wife has left Mathieson, and this is accompanied by an echo of the grandmother's prophecy: "'That woman!' I could hear my grandmother say".

The last paragraph of the story attempts to conceal the narrator's intense desire for the wife as well as the debased image of her which has arisen as a result of his aggression:

But for a long time I dreamed of her quite often, and gradually without bitterness, as a radiant figure in a far sky. A winged horse bore her along. Careering through those boundless spaces she leapt cloud after cloud triumphantly, an aura of light around her, completely absorbed in herself and her own airy freedom, yet looking down now and then with gay benignity to the three wistful figures below — Bob Curdie, the boy I had been, and poor old Mathieson.

By idealizing the woman the narrator cannily converts her debasement, and thus the conscious signifier of both his desire and his aggression into more acceptable terms. The last sentence is also a concealment of the truth. In this story, just as in "The Catch", the father is absent permitting the presence of two substitutes, Mathieson and Curdie. The last sentence thus brings together the symbolic fathers, the wife, and the son, forgiving the father/husband, canonising the mother/wife, and denying the pain of the son. The Oedipal triangle is, as Lacan would say, 'hidden in full view'¹⁴ in this text which is not about "the boy I had been" but about 'the boy I am still'.

In "The Foal"¹⁵ a child awakes one morning to find that her pet, Dozy the mare, has foaled. The girl forms a strong identification with the foal and alternately fears that the mare will abandon the foal and is reassured when the mare acts protectively towards it. The skittishness of the foal as the mare leads it towards water suggests the earliest experiences of infancy: dependency on the parent and fear that the parent will go away. Throughout this the girl identifies with the foal, but this identification is strengthened when the girl decides she does not want the foal to grow up, "she wanted it to stay a foal. There were three of them now, she was thinking dreamily — Dozy, herself, and this soft-eyed thing, her little sister, who was already nearer to her than any human being around". This is the second stage of psychic development, which Lacan calls the "mirror-stage", in which the infant imagines itself as unified and complete.¹⁶ This 'imaginary stage' is illusory however, for the Other is never exactly what the infant imagines. In the third stage, the 'Symbolic', the father enters into the scene, and the infant must now reluctantly relinquish its hitherto unchallenged 'Desire-of-the-Mother'. This third stage also occurs in the story. The appearance of the father is conveyed in the girl's dream of "heavy draught-horses . . . plunging about wildly" in the paddock, their "huge rumps [shutting] out the sky as they [kick] up their heels". The horses become "unicorns" with "steel horns" [jutting] from their foreheads". The girl then notices that the

foal is missing and she frantically searches for it, only to find it "at the bottom of the steep slope to the creek . . . its thin legs snapped like matches, its crushed body no bigger than a bird's". The girl also notices that the mother is "nowhere near", she "must have turned away and left it; she must have gone to join the great brutes thundering about the paddock above".

The ending of the story is interesting, for the child awakes from her dream to find "there on the dewy rise, not ten yards away . . . the foal tugging at its mother's teats . . . as if it was the one thing fully alive on the whole earth". Since in this story there is also a missing person, the mother of the child, both the mare and its foal can be seen as metaphors for the mother and the child. And the view of woman presented in this story is also consistent with that presented in the other stories discussed: she is either the perfect mother, or she is the promiscuous wife who always has more than one partner.

While the stories discussed so far contain the most obvious disparagement of women, in the next three this particular aspect is more subtly concealed. Instead, the emphasis falls on the consequences of challenging the father, and in all three stories, the psychic consequence of this challenge is presented as an actual death.

"Josie"¹⁷ is the most concealed treatment of the theme. The story presents the reaction of children to the death of one of their class mates. In thinking about Josie's death they begin to wonder what death is like. The feeling that death is a punishment is suggested by the initial reaction of the children to the teacher as he announces the news of Josie's death to the class: ". . . his eyes had the pale, uneasy look we always noticed in them when the inspector was about or someone's father was coming to speak to him". This uneasy feeling in the presence of authority is given a more forceful treatment later in the story in two ways. In the first the children recall the death of a man who is trampled to death by cattle when, in a drunken fit, he "laid about [them] with his whip". The children recall that "before he hit the ground he had muttered 'God be merciful to me a sinner,' and that had saved him in the end . . . For months afterwards we had been haunted by these words". In the second instance the children react fearfully to the "woodcuts in the illustrated Bible . . . Wicked people sitting on thunderclouds adrift in space; pits of darkness you looked down upon from the peaks of bare mountains; hordes of grinning figures with the wings of bats and feet of goats". Through metonymy, the authority of the inspector is transferred to the father then to God the father.

The oddest feature of the story is the character of Josie herself. Instead of creating sympathy for Josie by making her an appealing

character who tragically dies in childhood, the story gives the school-childrens' hostile reactions to her:

No one had ever liked Josie very much. There was her moony look, her way of cleaning her slate with her tongue, the silly grin she always gave when she was found picking at the lunch in other girls' bags. Often there was a fight about sitting next to her in class. They said she had things in her hair. And more than once she had had ringworm.

The ending of the story suggests that the children see Josie's death as a punishment for her offences against the social norms. The children see an opening in the clouds at sunset which is described to them as "the path . . . made by the angels' wings as they carried Josie up to heaven". But the children are not entirely persuaded by this comforting view, as is evident in the final sentence of the story: "We were glad the angels didn't know as much about [Josie] as we did". Perhaps God the Father will "be merciful" to the "sinner" Josie, but in identifying the authority of God with various forms of social authority, and then in showing how transgression of the laws and codes imposed by these authorities are met with the harshest punishments, this story merely repeats that text we have already divined elsewhere.

There is an uncharacteristic ambivalence in this story though, since the ultimate Symbolic father, God, although shown to be harsh, is not shown to be unjust (that is, the story will not blaspheme God). As a consequence those who are punished must be seen as having brought the punishment upon themselves, as in the case of the drunkard. But since the unchanging text we have been reading is always in a sense written by the son, who always presents himself as more sinned against than sinning, a substitute victim must be found who can be justly punished by the ultimate Father who cannot be blasphemed. This substitute can only be a woman, since in the unchanging text it is always the woman who sins. This is what accounts for the moral ambiguity in the presentation of the character Josie.

While "Josie" deals with the way religion is inscribed in the psyche within the usual Oedipal pattern, "The Red Truck"¹⁸ shows how society and the law are similarly inscribed. "The Red Truck" begins with the sentence "There wasn't ever a better cobbler than my old man" and ends with "There was never a better cobbler than my old man". Between these two assertions of a son's admiration for his father is a sequence of scenes presenting the decline of society's high opinion of the father and his eventual death.

The story begins by presenting the father's physical superiority as the star of the local football team: "He was a big man, built heavy

. . . there weren't many of his mates keen to put on the gloves with him for a spar". This is the image of the father the son identifies with when as the football team's mascot he runs onto the field with his father "while the crowd round the ground roared". The boy also tells of how his Aunt and Grandmother (who live with the father and son in place of the, as usual, missing mother) also admire the father, the Grandmother in particular seeing her son as the apple of her desire. Mainly though, it is the approval of the football crowds which is reiterated in the text, the word "roar" being used a number of times, especially in connection with the name of the father, as in "How the crowd roared out his name when we came running down the ramp". During the Sunday mornings after the football matches the man's cobblers "drop in to go over the game" and it is these mornings devoted to the linguistic stroking of the father which the boy wants "to go on for ever". Like the infant which delights in the unity of its reflected image the boy sees himself, the team mascot, in the esteemed adult player.

This illusion begins to fade when the boy is supplanted as mascot by the son of the team's captain, and from now on nothing seems real, nothing seems as good as the illusions of the Imaginary stage: "You didn't seem to be in the game: you saw a lot, but it was like looking at little figures in a glass case". At precisely this point the boy begins to notice that his father is getting "a bit slow on the ball, and that a good many free kicks were given against him for chucking his weight about in the ruck". As the father's physical prowess begins to fail, the adulation of the crowd turns to abuse: "The crowd would be on its feet, ready to tear the old man in pieces . . . All of them itching to hop over the rails and sink the boot into the old man". Bit by bit the father is stripped of his prestige and all that went to make it up is taken away: his friends desert him, he begins to have difficulty providing for the family, he is taken out of the team and made coach (which doesn't "work out well") and eventually he has "had enough of football". His mother, his most out-spoken fan, dies. There is a disagreement with the aunt about the insurance money, which the aunt feels belongs to her. The father buys a red truck but turns to shady practices in order to pay it off and spends some time in prison as a result. The son associates the law's disapproval of his father with the cat-calls of the football crowd, imagining his father "in the middle of the ground looking stunned and helpless, wondering what he'd done". Eventually freed, the father gets enough money for a deposit on another truck by cheating at an illegal two-up game, but again turns to theft in order to pay it off. He is caught in the act a second time and shot by the police.

In this story, society plays the part of the Symbolic father. Its signifiers, the roars of the crowd, confer approval on the father so long

as he follows the rules of the game. When he begins to challenge the rules of society, the signifiers of disapproval — the cat-calls of the crowd, the police, the law, the shotgun — come into effect. Against this the son can only use his own signifiers of praise, the much repeated “he was a good cobber my old man”. The Oedipal anxieties of the story are disguised but apparent nonetheless if we see that the father is really a son disguised as a father, and that society and its values and laws are metaphors for the real father.

Two mothers appear; the mother of the son and the mother of the father (called the Grandmother). When the father falls out of favour with the football team, the Grandmother dies. The text here is: when the Symbolic father acts against the son disguised as father, the son must give up his desire of the mother. The son who narrates the story also has a mother but she is, to use his own words, “no good”, because she has left the son (and her husband) and run off with another man. In a little sub-plot the son tells of how he is kidnapped by the mother, of how in the end her lover forces her to choose between himself and the son, and of how she chooses the lover, sending the son back to his father with the words “A nasty little piece of work you are. Got your father’s temper, and worse”.

In this story then, the son re-writes the text of his Oedipal situation, converting the bad mother into a good Grandmother, and the Symbolic father into a loving benevolent one. The strategy does not liberate him though, because despite all, there is the all-enveloping father of society and its signifiers. The text, with its nested Oedipal stories, is an example of the repetition compulsion; its structure, with its frequent flashbacks and flashforwards brings the separate components of the Oedipal stories into proximity, shaping the reader’s interpretation.

If “The Red Truck” can be seen as a narrative of “the glance of the son in the direction of the father”, one of Palmer’s earliest stories can be seen as “the glance of the father in the direction of the son”.¹⁹ In Palmer’s first collection of stories, *The World of Men* (published in 1915 in London), there is a story titled “Father and Son”. Although this story has never been reprinted, its title tempts the reader to consider it in the context of the stories discussed here.

Like “The Red Truck”, “Father and Son”²⁰ presents the relationship of father and son as a joyful one, though this time it is the half-caste father who admires his son: “. . . the meaning of his life was expressed by his attitude towards his son, Steve. He took an intense pride in the boy’s cleverness, his horsemanship, and in everything about him, and seemed hardly able to let him out of his sight”. Part of the father’s pride in his son is a projection of his own dignity which arises because:

. . . he never forgot that his father had been a white man with a proud name, and that though he was an outcast himself there was a great gulf fixed between him and the blacks who ate with their fingers and slept among their dogs . . . It was not that he tried to hide the fact that his skin was nearly as black as theirs and that his mother had once beaten a hide-drum in the chorus; his habits of thought, his ideals, even the texture of his mind were quite different from theirs.

Clearly we have here almost the same pattern that occurs in "The Red Truck": the mother is depicted as a savage, the father is held in the highest esteem. However, again like "The Red Truck", the father is an "outcast" from the white society which produced him. We might see white culture and society as the Symbolic Father which refuses one of its sons entry (his crime being that he is black) condemning him to a life of "mean drudgery", to "tying up the loose knots at the station". The father sees a release from this situation in "his only son . . . a slim lad of fourteen, with a lithe body, mobile features, and quick black eyes that seemed to observe everything that came within their range". Like the boy in "The Catch", "there were not many secrets of the life about him that he had not probed, yet his eyes still held a naive innocence and laughter, a boyish freshness". Here and elsewhere, the story makes much of the boy's strength, accomplishments, skill and experience, yet it also stresses his innocence, his naivety and boyishness. This is also what is foregrounded when the boy is killed after his horse collides with a runaway steer he has pursued:

. . . the boy lying among the tall grass did not rise . . . At that moment his figure looked pitifully small and his face wizened: the broad-brimmed hat that had fallen from his head was several sizes too large for him, and the leggings that reached to his knees were meant for a man. And his small face with its small nose and wide mouth had turned quite white, as if at the last some beneficent power had contrived to conceal the indignity of his skin.

It is perhaps obvious enough from this passage that the ultimate penalty for attempting to overcome the white Father is death (in death the boy is whiter than he has ever been). The point is doubly made, for when the steer breaks loose it passes closest to the boy's father, but the text tells it this way: "It was past Canty, the half-caste, that it dashed, but the boy was always ready to anticipate his father when there was any hard riding to be done". It is in "anticipating his father" that the boy is killed. Thus the son will never replace the father, just as the father has been "cast

out” from the position of his white father whom he hoped to replace. As a working out of the Oedipal theme in the context of race, it is clear that the text says, as it always does, that the black sons will never triumph over the white fathers.

In Palmer’s usual fashion there is a brief disparagement of the mother in the story’s conclusion: “Beside the door of the tin hut near the creek [Canty’s] gin, a withered old woman, had for once taken the pipe out of her mouth, and with her apron over her head was keening softly, but he did not go to her. He seemed anxious to do something with his hands”. Canty picks up an axe and begins splitting logs: “The mechanical thud, thud, of the axe as it fell had somehow an appalling sound”. The last sentence of the story presents the sound of an axe falling, and what this sound signifies can be discovered everywhere in the text we have been reading.

With the repeated falling of the axe, the reader is reminded that he has been reading “a pattern in the text”.²¹ As I said at the beginning this pattern is inscribed in the psyche of the subject who writes by the signifiers of his culture, so that what we read is a text of society and its ideology. We are not only readers in the texts of literature; we are also readers in the text of life. But although the psyche, under the compulsion to repeat the conditions of its own creation, constructs a text which seeks to occupy the reader, that reader, like the Imaginary Other, is never what the text desires. For he has already been described by a different signifying system, and, anxious to deconstruct the texts which seek to occupy him, might see “Mathieson’s Wife” as the story of a woman’s escape from the signifiers of paternal ideology, or “Father and Son” as an exposition of the operation of the signifiers of race.

NOTES

¹Allan Edwards, Preface, *The Rainbow-Bird and Other Stories*, by Vance Palmer (Sydney: A & R, 1957), p. vii.

²Edwards, pp. viii-ix.

³Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 107.

⁴The Lacanian notions and terminology used throughout this paper are based on Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), passim.

⁵Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 171-73.

⁶Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), p. 162.

- ⁷Fredric Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject." in *Literature and Psychoanalysis, the Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 394.
- ⁸Jameson, p. 394.
- ⁹Vance Palmer, *Let the Birds Fly* (Sydney: A & R, 1955), pp. 89-99.
- ¹⁰Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, 24 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-73), V, p. 357.
- ¹¹Freud, V, p. 403.
- ¹²Freud, IV, p. 227.
- ¹³*Let the Birds Fly*, pp. 1-21.
- ¹⁴Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), 44.
- ¹⁵*Let the Birds Fly*, pp. 62-70.
- ¹⁶Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 2.
- ¹⁷*Let the Birds Fly*, pp. 112-17.
- ¹⁸*Let the Birds Fly*, pp. 36-52.
- ¹⁹Lacan, "Seminar", 44.
- ²⁰Vance Palmer, *The World of Men* (1915; rpt. Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962), pp. 6-10.
- ²¹Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 271.