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IT'S A SMALL MARTIAL ARTS WORLD: MATES OF MARS AND THE FOSTER NOVELS

A.P. Riemer describes David Foster as a writer who presents European high art in exclusively Australian terms and Foster, assenting to the proposition, has spoken of his entitlement to "larger themes of science and religion," to the "cultural heritage of the West," which he methodically translates in terms of the vernacular, "the language that I use and the language that I hear" (Travers 76).

Nationalist text and internationalist context combine to form a Gargantuan whole in Foster's fiction. *The Pure Land*, featuring an ambiguous dialectic between Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism, compares the respective claims to symbolic promise of Australia and America. The two nations are tellingly differentiated: America, a more advanced culture, has been determined by its war of independence; Australia, a less advanced culture, will be shaped by republicanism, the "bloodless coup" (77), consigned to an indefinite future. In *Moonlite*, Foster historically revisits the nineteenth century; mythically, the novel takes in all time and is largely the Christian story of a redemptive possibility for reprobate mankind. *Plumbum*, which plays with ideas of ascent and its demonic counterpart — the word plumbum means lead — reconstitutes the genre of apocalyptic literature. Dealing with a group of musicians who, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, lead the elect on a spiritual odyssey, the novel depends for its effect upon Neoplatonic conceits of music. The sequel, comprising *Dog Rock* and *The Pale Blue Crochet Coathanger Cover*, takes as its theme the decline of Pastoral — Arcadian Dog Rock is overtaken by the twentieth century and Sydney's suburban sprawl. Paradoxically, the novels revivify the pastoral genre, the conventions of which govern their composition. Foster's idiosyncratic protagonist is exiled Briton, D'Arcy D'Oilveres, whose baronial heritage and royal wedding invitation inevitably infuriate his neighbours, the "ignorant colonial[s]" (96) of Dog Rock. *The Adventures of Christian Rosy Cross*, a unique blend of scholarly picaresque, is populated by Dominican and Franciscan Friars, among whom Foster's larrikin Christian figures incongruously. *Testostero*, the novel which profiles the Australian tourist abroad in Venice, invokes the improvised, vernacular *Commedia dell' Arte* as its *raison d'être*. The characters are recognisably the traditional masks — Punchinello, Judy, Arlecchino, the pimp, courtesan, and pedant. Identical twins Noel Horniman and Leon Hunnybun are separated at birth as part of an experiment designed to distinguish nature from nurture. Hunnybun is raised in Britain; Horniman dispatched to Australia, "the most deprived cultural environment conceivable to an English gentleman" (69).

In the latest novel, *Mates of Mars*, Foster sustains his dual commitment, undertaking an ambitious anatomy of the Australian character under the pressure of global influences. Mock-epic in its manifest Australian ethos, the narrative invariably assumes colossal proportions in its integration of Western and Eastern concepts of martial valour. The medieval Chivalric code of the Troubadours and the Japanese Samurai ethic, epitomised by the legendary warrior, Yamamoto, are implicitly compared.¹ While *The Pure Land* and *Plumbum* both assimilate aspects of Zen Buddhism, *Mates of Mars* signals a more radical realignment of cultural values on Foster's part. In this respect, it topically reflects the socio-political, economic reorientation of Australia itself, from a posture of accepted Eurocentricity to one which takes into account the dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region on its doorstep. Set in 1988, the bicentennial year, *Mates of Mars* constitutes an insightful, artistic appraisal of the Australian experience, and of the nation's place in a rapidly changing world.

It's an appropriately incongruous band of mates whom Foster introduces in his bicentennial novel. Wolfgang Coogan — "a hero" who championed "the family man's right to a night out" (119) — is a parodic Roland-Orlando type, conspicuous by his absence. Wolfgang is known primarily by his reputation which, throughout the novel's course, rests upon six acolytes, half of whom he has hand picked before his head is unceremoniously kicked off.² The group comprises a Jewish professor, Bruce Nonnemacher; a Chinese doctor, Vincent Cheng; a full-blood Aborigine, Cyril Jibberan, a legless Aussie, Steve Overton; a French male model, Sven Scimshaw; and a woman, Jade Muldoon. The characters' names flag the pluralist debate to which the novel contributes. *Mates of Mars* is no less than a documentation, facetious and serious, of the extent to which multicultural (and feminist) pressures are deconstructing and reconstructing the innately Australian notion of mateship.

Crucial to the mateship issue are two non-events. Ironically, the first is what the bicentenary is all about. White settlement of the land is the plot historically emphasised; pre-emptory dispossession of the original inhabitants the unacknowledged sub-plot. At no stage in the novel does Foster directly allude to the fate of the Aboriginal people: Steve patronises Cyril: "You gotta find your feet in our society" (19); Sven is offended that the Japanese are "buying out this country, Cyril's country" (332); and Cyril's country is simply designated as "dead" (362). The omission scornfully defers to bicentennial spirit. In *The Pure Land*, in comparison, Foster critically depicts the landing of the first fleet:

See here the First Fleet, cargo unloading to Yorkshire accents, much bustle; and in the background of the cyclorama, Aborigines, standing in dumb incomprehension, already feeling the shafts falling from their spears ... and behold, the result. Never let a Yorkshireman smoke your pipe or discover your island. (78)

In *Mates of Mars*, plot and subplot conjoin to explain the phenomenon of mateship: "Mateship cannot flourish under conditions of hardship alone; it needs [a common enemy] against which to define itself" (333). Thus, the "whole different world" (226) of Neverfuckinlose, the Top End Aboriginal community ensconced behind the dingo-proof fence, epitomises the legacy of colonial mateship. The mates' invasive visit to Neverfuckinlose culminates in the death of two Aborigines and apprehension abounds as to what judge, jury and the Murdoch Press will have to say about this in the bicentennial year. It eventuates, however, that the boys from Neverfuckinlose neglect to report their loss — a familiar scenario. The whole divisive issue of black-white relations in the novel effectively explodes the myth of mateship.

"The battle of the Coral Sea that never was" (339) is the second non-event to clarify the mateship issue. Australia's national symbol, the Southern Cross constellation, casts an interesting light upon this "quintessential male ordeal" (322) which necessarily invokes the historical Battle of the Coral Sea. Interestingly, as historian David Day proposes, the first tangible threat to comfortable assumptions of a white Australia materialise in 1942 with the Battle of the Coral Sea (322). External affairs are at issue here. The fictitious mates, conveniently minus Jade who has defected and Jibberan who is dead, are prawn trawling. Their nets are crawling with the beautiful blue and gold painted cray of the Torres Strait. Indeed, they've "struck the jackpot" (335), but the catch is illegal because "only the Japanese are licensed to fish New Guinea waters" (336). In ready defence of the rights of Australian fishermen, the renegade mates — who have stolen their vessel as certainly as they have stolen their land — retaliate by secretly plundering the cray cargo of an unsuspecting Japanese trawler under cover of darkness. Curiously, the real Battle of the Coral Sea inaugurated "a new type of naval warfare in which the two fleets never came within sight of each other" (Day 323). Nonnemacher, "100 per cent Australian despite [his] ethnic background" (350), is most vocal against the Japanese — erstwhile enemy, latter-day trading partner and owner of some of "the prime real estate freehold" (332) pinched from the Aboriginal people. Nonnemacher receives a commensurate sentence: "one crime jurists will not abide, in this bicentennial year, is racism" (341). Foster, the master of reverberating irony, subtly relates the two non-events. Mateship, insidiously linked to nationalism and certainty of title, proves as dubious in this as in the former context.

The novel intelligently avoids partisanship however and, as is typically the case in Foster's writing, carnivalesque effects insistently challenge the hegemony of serious matter. From jail, Nonnemacher continues to stir up racist hatred, winning the support of the Returned Servicemen's League in the process. This last detail is potentially inflammatory. The infamous and offensive Bruce Ruxton, Vice-President of the RSL, is wordlessly summoned and once he

appears — arguably Bruce Nonnemacher half realises Bruce Ruxton — the reference works as a wicked joke, strategically defusing tension. Even the uncompromising argument advanced by Sven Scrimshaw is not without grim hilarity:

I suppose you realise that the Japanese would have colonised Australia well before the British except for the ordinance of 1639 forbidding Japanese citizens to travel abroad. There were Japanese traders in Mexico in 1597, only 50 years after their first encounter with the Portuguese. And they love our climate. They regard Hokkaido as too cold and Taiwan as too hot. What they really prefer is California and New South Wales. That's why they're buying them up. When they came back into the world in the 19th century it was too late to colonise the Pacific, so now they have to buy it. (379-80)

Factual detail, objectively stated, coexists alongside zany, subjective psychoanalysis which subversively tempers the impact of what is unnegotiable. Moreover, the frequent citation of Yamamoto, proponent (and critic) of Bushido,³ the code to which Foster's martial artists adhere, serves a similar goading effect to Nonnemacher's jingoism. This seventeenth-century character recalls the medieval Yamamoto Date, and prefigures Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the strategist who orchestrated the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour and subsequent Japanese incursions in the Pacific.⁴ Foster's stealthy incorporation of the Admiral's credentials is darkly humorous in view of the mates' martial allegiance. Meanwhile, a farcically disguised reference to the ubiquitous Yamamoto as "U No Hoo" (375) operatively hints at the bogey man's identity.

The novel's first section, "On the Door," deploys a symbol familiar in Foster's work. In *Testostero*, in particular, the repeated opening and closing of doors prioritises the recognition theme, a comic hallmark, while ultimately, epiphanically, the point is made that "all doors in Carnival remain open" (164). Whether Frye or Bakhtin be credited, Carnival is a period of licence and receptivity in which life's rules are gleefully circumvented. In *Mates of Mars*, the door literally belongs to Wolfgang Coogan's establishment, a shadowy Sydney nightclub patrolled by a team of bouncers; figuratively the door stresses the idea of entry, who's in and who's out. As such, the door is crucial to Foster's theme of cultural confrontation. To Cyril Jibberan, the indigene from Neverfuckinlose, "the very concept of the door was alien" (25) and predictably Cyril makes an indifferent bouncer:

By Western standards, [Cyril] had a strange perception of place. Neverfuckinlose was not so much lost to him, as buried ... In a real sense, he could never be anywhere else ... By Western standards Cyril had a strange perception of time, but every once in a while Neverfuckinlose made its presence felt ... Then Cyril would breathe in deeply, drawing strength and nourishment. (121)

No boundaries are affirmed by Cyril's sense of belonging. Correspondingly, to new Australians like Vincent Cheng, the concept of the door emerges as formidable:

It was Vincent's appointed task to anchor the extended family in this new land. In less than a century they have come from Fukien Province in China, to Australia, via Perak. But those, like Vincent ... who emigrated, never fully settled in. Theirs were the bodies laid upon the barbed wire fences of Custom. (130)

Custom not customs, Foster stipulates, but the distinction proves immaterial. Similarly, the Dog Rock novels attest to a prohibitive progression of the lore, the locals' gossip, to the law, the word of the authorities. The fact that both indigene and immigrant are alienated in this land contains a profound irony, dubiety accordingly enveloping the notion of Australia. Foster's door motif is instrumental in promoting simultaneously "the notion of external fighting" and "the disharmony within" (379) which, in turn, highlights the nationalist-internationalist dimensions of the text.

"Over the Hill," the novel's brief concluding section, is ambivalent in the manner of all Foster novels. Colloquially, the phrase conveys decrepitude and superannuation, and in such a context any self-congratulatory bicentennial tenor is rendered emphatically inappropriate. In short, "it's downhill all the way" (252). After dispatching Nonnemacher to jail, Foster expounds the imprisonment metaphor so that it comprehends the entire nation. Parodying the patter of a tourist brochure (345-46), he debunks the National Trust, which becomes synonymous with the penal heritage over which it bureaucratically presides. Instead of investing in the future, the anniversary revisits the ignominy of the past-making flags (and all that symbolically entails) does not provide the same adrenalin rush as robbing banks. Accordingly, the sentimental, patriotic gesture of bowing to the flag is stripped of any substantive meaning. Martial sparring sessions begin with a ritualistic bow, allowing Foster readily to develop nationalist implications:

Nonnemacher had been training a year before he discovered he was bowing, not to an imaginary Australian flag, a flag he loathed and detested, but to an imaginary South Korean flag, or perhaps both, at a pinch. This pleased him little better, till he learned that the South Korean flag consists of a red and blue Tao, and features two profound and provocative hexagrams from the I Ching. He was then content to bow. (52)

If Eastern Taoism supersedes Western dualism in *Mates of Mars*, philosophy transcends nationality as a unifying force.

Australia is dismissed as a two hundred year old colony, "the colony now of every country of earth," (349) historian Geoffrey Blainey is quoted as saying.

Australian culture is pronounced to be merely physical — the martial artistry works as an extended pun on this idea. In "Outback Radio," the chapter dedicated to indicting the welfare mentality destroying Neverfuckinlose, Bravo Yankee Zulu sardonically affirms: "De land's still dere mate, under de beercans somewhere" (207). Brooding introspection displaces the proleptic note of optimism accorded republican fervour at the close of *Moonlite*:

The world of the intellect and spirit is not revered here. It is scorned as superfluous. Why produce your own scientific culture when you can import it? Australians are great importers. It's hard to believe any country could actually espouse such an attitude, but then the word "country" is a misnomer for Australia, when Singapore exports goods to the same value. Australia is not a country at all, in the sense that Singapore is, because the Straits Chinese know who they are, what they stand for and where they came from. Countries develop in isolation, over long periods of time, generally (Singapore being an exception in this regard as in most others). Cyril and the boys had a country once, but that country is dead and all the best intentioned folk from Glebe to Carlton will not revive it. (362)

Foster's satire abets the entropy associated with Australia. In its alternate sense, however, the phrase "over the hill" paradoxically implicates the notion of completion. Foster's allusion is to the two fundamental forces of yin and yang and the strange harmony underscoring the title. As Hellmut Wilhelm notes, yin means the shadowed side of the hill, yang the illuminated side (30). In *Mates of Mars*, as in the other novels, it emerges that "there are always 2 ways, always 2 solutions ... Each encompasses the other" (52). Yin and Yang, feminine and masculine, yielding and firm, internal and external — the dichotomy may be variously defined. To go beyond the duality however takes time — all time in fact — and as Vincent sagely and subversively advises, "Ho Chi Minh City wasn't built in a day" (373).

It is an instrumental fact that Foster, working habitually with Doppelgangers, draws his fictional landscapes in black and white terms. Photography, depending upon the effects of light in a dark room, is central to *The Pure Land*; *Moonlite* entails a fellowship of light and darkness; half-brothers Jason and Pete Blackman afford the figurative colouring in *Plumbum* — Jason is blond and soulful, Pete, swart and physical. That occupational schizophrenic, D'Arcy D'Oliveres, the Dog Rock postman who doubles as telephonist, works for one authority by day and another by night. Jachin and Boaz, the symbolic pillars of Solomon's cabbalistic temple, one black, one white, dominate the metaphysical landscape of *The Adventures of Christian Rosy Cross*. The matching grimace and grin of Leon Hunnybun and Noel Horniman (Leon spells Noel in reverse) advertise the tragi-comic nature of *Testostero*. *Mates of Mars* perpetuates the symbolic pattern in its concentration upon European-Aboriginal relations.

In conformity with both the law of nature and Foster's practice in the foregoing seven novels, the doppelgangers of *Mates of Mars* inevitably exchange

attributes. In *The Pure Land*, the European brain is labelled "that most accused of liabilities out of doors" (83); in *Mates of Mars*, Foster satirises Aboriginal pragmatism and cynicism as the upshot of imperialism. "Mobile people's representative Bravo Yankee Zulu" upbraids the Flying Doctor: "You bin destroyin our culture for centuries. It's our turn now to destroy it for ourselves, in fact, it's our democratic right" (206). Indeed, the need for money draws Cyril to Sydney, "a city in which greed and lust were untrammelled by tradition" (33). Conversely, the white and yellow mates, newly arrived in Neverfuckinlose, "a place with its own rules" (224) attempt a difficult adjustment. Compelling too, is Foster's symbolic revivification of Cyril's country. The Dead Heart, the Red Centre of the continent, "where riverbeds are sand dunes and creeks anfractuositities" (196), is metamorphosed into a vision of plenitude ratifying Aboriginal affinity with the land. Camera-toting tourists capture the locals, the bedraggled groups of blacks, trooping out from the dry Todd river bed; but these same figures are transformed by Foster: "it's not just the blacks; it's the reds, the whites, the mauves, the blues and the greens. It's the perentie, the euro, the Port Lincoln Parrot, the corkwood, the camel melon, the river red gum" (197). The rainbow which implicates both Aboriginal and European mythology presides over Foster's imaginative world — indeed, *Moonlite* constitutes a symbolic rainbow. Here the hordes of international tourists photographing the blacks (the starting point of Foster's inventory of colour) attest to "the pull of a vacuum on the world's strongest currencies" (196). The pot of gold accrued, however, is less than legendary. It is the rainbow serpent's visitation which proves more potent, anticipating the imminent deluging of the Top End. Predicated relations between images of centrality and notions of nationality are dismantled and compellingly reinterpreted in *Mates of Mars*.

Until *Mates of Mars*, all Foster's major characters, with the exception of Christian Rosy Cross, complete a figurative circle by trekking from one hemisphere to the other and back again, necessarily traversing light and darkness, in the course of their various quests. Essentially, the globe trotting dramatises the concept of wholeness. Throughout his fiction, at the same time as he invests in universality, Foster acts as self-appointed cicerone to Australia, guiding the reader "all around and over Australia" to adapt an image from *The Pure Land* (77). *Mates of Mars* specifically accommodates national and international agendas. Foster keeps the focus upon Australia although he does so in order to transect it, roughly along north-south lines. A roll-call of the "usual gang" who train at dojangs around the "cosmopolis" (146) of Sydney registers an auspicious change: "Aside from Turks, Koreans and Greeks, there were Indochinese and Chinese. In the outer West, Slavs, Lebanese and Vietnamese predominated. Native-born Anglo-Saxons preferred air-conditioned premises and were more likely to be found in the Surf Clubs ..." (122). Clearly, it's "a small Martial Arts World" (161), but what remains unresolved is whether

the world has contracted to suit Australia or whether Australia has expanded to contain the world. One nation or many is the question the novel enigmatically poses.

Notes

1. Refer Juliet Piggott, *Japanese Mythology* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969), pp. 28–30 for a brief biography of Yamamoto Date.
2. Even the circumstances of Wolfgang's murder serve as an index of Australia's changing nature. Steve Overton bombastically protests: "You tellin me an Aussie would kick a man's head off in the street? If we want to kill a man round here we do it fair and square, with a piece ... None o' this mutilating corpses, neither: Christ, you'd think it was Afghanistan." (pp.119–20).
3. For information on Yamamoto Tsunenori, see Mihamoto Musashi, *A Book of Five Rings*, trans. Victor Harris (London: Allison and Bushby, 1974), pp.38–39.
4. For details of Yamamoto's role in World War II, refer James Rusbridger and Eric Nave, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbour* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

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