MODERN AUSTRALIAN STYLES

Mark O'Connor

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies
Monograph No. 8

To Tony Hassall
Best regards

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Three Lectures on Verse and Drama
by Mark O'Connor

FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN LITERARY STUDIES

1982

First Published in 1982

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing in Publication Data

O'Connor, Mark, 1945-

Modern Australian Styles

ISSN 0725-6744
ISBN 0 86443 085 X

1. Australian literature - History and criticism.
I. James Cook University of North Queensland.
Foundation for Australian Literary Studies.
II. Title. (Series: Monograph (James Cook
University of North Queensland. Foundation for
Australian Literary Studies): no. 8).

A820'.9

This publication is set in 11pt Journal Roman by
James Cook University and printed by James Cook
University and Instant Print.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, to the friendly staff of the English department of James Cook University, and especially to Professor Harry Heseltine, who arranged for me to visit Townsville to give the Foundation's annual lectures in August 1981.

In revising these lectures for publication I have pruned the first two, on the current state of Australian poetry, of some quotations that were of more "anthological" than critical interest. On the other hand I have fleshed out the lecture on "David Williamson and 'The Australian Sexual Problem' " with more extensive quotations from the plays.

THE 70s BUBBLE IN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

> . . . of course the air is always a dictionary and
> words are easy we are all poets.
> – *The Change,* Dransfield

> "Where did we go wrong? Was it us? Am I to blame?"
> – John Forbes on the Bubble in *Australian Literary Studies*

Why do Australians read so little of their own poetry? Fifteen years ago the answer would have been the same as to why they didn't go to see plays set in their own country: a feeling that the local product was bound to be inferior. Today if you ask the same question, the answer would be: we approve of the home product and the local theme, and we've tested both. In drama, the novel, and the short story we're enthusiastic; but in poetry we're rather disillusioned.

Readers may be disillusioned, but poets (until recently) weren't. The great "avant-garde" poetry ferment of the 70s produced more than a hundred new volumes of poetry – several times as many as those young poets not associated with it. Its most recent anthologist, John Tranter, boasts that "No other group of poets in Australia's history has produced such a sheer mass of published writing."

But not everyone is impressed by this statistic. In a recent article in *The Age Monthly Review* (July 1981) Jamie Grant argues that it is precisely the sheer mass of published writing and the avant-garde's relentless promotion of third-rate books that has turned the ordinary reader away from poetry. "*Poetry, it's boring.*" If no other group has published so much, says

Grant, it "may be because no other group of poets has made such a virtue of derivativeness." There are, he says, many talented, younger poets whose work could attract a large audience if only it was not hopelessly lost in the "shops full of bilge" left over from the 70s.

At the same time, the survivors of the 60s avant-garde continue to make enormous claims for their own work; and John Tranter has recently edited an anthology of the movement unrelentingly titled *The New Australian Poetry.*

In this lecture I want to talk about the great underground poetry boom of the late 60s, how it turned into the offical poetry culture of the late 70s, and how in the very moment of success it began to deflate like a giant South Seas Bubble, leaving behind some who had gained, and some who had lost by it. I want to link this to an earlier boom, the one that was prematurely checked by the Ern Malley hoax; for in a sense the phenomenon had happened before.

I should make it clear that all I have time to do in this lecture is talk about the rise and decline of a literary movement. There won't be time to evalute its work. I'll simply say in passing that their one great genius was Michael Dransfield who reaped a rich harvest of psychedelic and other experiences before dying in 1973; and that there's an excellent appreciation of some of the major survivors by Dennis Haskell in *Australian Literary Studies* (1977, VIII, 2, pp. 136-48).

I also don't propose to explain (because I wasn't involved) the promotional mechanics of the 70s Bubble: how a group of poets who couldn't publish in the established magazines set out to publish themselves, and review each other, until they all but turned into a new establishment. You can find a sugar-coated account of how it was done in some of the movement's anthologies, notably *The Applestealers.* You can find highly cynical accounts in articles by Jamie Grant, Richard Packer, Les Murray, Gary Catalano, and obliquely in the stories of Frank Moorhouse. All I'll say is that I don't think the Bubble was primarily a *hoax* – that is, the deliberate promotion of material known to be bad (as the Ern Malley affair was). It was rather what the best-selling

book-trade calls a *hype* – that is the relentless promotion of material whose actual merit is not the real issue.

Poets like actors can't see themselves, or directly know the value of their own work. Among those who put their shoulders to that heavy wheel in the 60s and 70s were some who believed utterly in what they were doing, a majority who half or three-quarters believed and said "My team right or wrong," and a minority of outright con men. (There was a criminal fringe too, of course). But I'm not proposing to pronounce on who was sincere and who was not. A hype in literature is like a boom on the stock market: it affects the judgement of trickster and victim alike -- and this of course was true enough of the Angry Penguins/Ern Malley affair too.

One last caution: this group of poets has many names, none of them quite satisfactory. They are the "Balmain poets by the dozen" of Frank Moorhouse's satirical stories (but there was also a Melbourne contingent); they are "the 60s avant-garde" (though as Noel Macainsh has pointed out, the term avant-garde has no real meaning here); they are Laurie Hergenhan's "new poets", except that they are now almost middle aged, and many poets of their generation never joined them; and they are sometimes called the drug poets and the gay poets, but by no means all of them were. They were once the Underground, or "the self-publishing poets." I prefer to call them simply the poets of the 70s Bubble, because I think that is what defines them, and also what links them to the earlier Angry Penguins/Ern Malley affair.

* * * * *

The Ern Malley story is well known. In the latter days of the Second World War, just as in the late 60s, a group of young poets banded together and began to promote their own poetry – one much influenced by contemporary European trends. Australian intellectuals were terrified of being behind the European fashions, and the movement began to make way. It had reached perhaps the same state of acceptance as the sixties underground poets had by 1972, when it was sabotaged by the

Ern Malley hoax. The editor of its Angry Penguins series, Max Harris, turned out to have acclaimed as the greatest poet ever to live in Australia a non-existent person called Ern Malley, recently deceased garage-mechanic and spontaneous working-class surrealist, whose life's masterwork had been concocted by James MacAuley and Harold Stewart, allegedly in a matter of hours and with the help of phrases lifted from an army manual on the control of mosquitoes. To make things worse, some of the poems contained phrases that could be interpreted by the salacious as suggesting that women had legs and that nameless actions might follow the meetings of naked bodies. Under the extraordinary laws of the day Harris was prosecuted for publishing an obscene book, and had no choice but to plead literary merit. To add insult to injury he got off largely when the magistrate ruled that no reasonable man could imagine that most of these poems meant anything. Harris's reputation was blasted and Australian poetry returned to more conservative channels.

It was not really until the late 60s, in the era of Vietnam and LSD, that a new avant-garde emerged, and this time into a polarised society where there was no Ern Malley hoax to destroy them. They overcame establishment resistance by the same method as the Angry Penguins poets. They simply published themselves, and wrote each other's reviews. And suddenly the establishment was powerless against them. It was like outflanking the Maginot line. They seized *New Poetry* magazine and printed it with a rubric describing it as the magazine of the Poetry Society of Australia (which confused foreign readers enormously) and with an impressive list of editorial consultants (headed by A.D. Hope, who needless to say was never consulted). Those who complained were told that they were behind the times, and had failed to recognise the enormous achievements of such foreign writers as Creeley, Duncan and Ashbery. Criticism of the Bubble poets' work was denounced as right wing; and gay politics was used to set *New Poetry* up as an equal and opposite alternative to *Poetry Australia.* In a decade of emergent gay pride, the movement's pretensions benefited by the encouragement or benign silence of some older writers. And by the early 70s it was able to coerce the allegiance of some fashion-followers who were merely, in Frank Moorhouse's deadly phrase, "terrified of being late."

By about 1974 the Bubble was at maximum expansion. Those were the years when Bob Adamson and John Tranter were reviewing for *The Australian*, with, as one member of the Sydney Push put it, "all the accuracy of a beserk ferris wheel." It was nothing to find Judith Wright's latest book dismissed in a couple of contemptuous sentences, and some Balmain poet lauded to the skies as being (on one famous occasion) the greatest literary masterpiece since Dante "with, of course, the possible exception of Bob Dylan's *Desire*."*

Even more bizarre things happened to Angus and Robertson, who suddenly realized that years of conservative editing had left them hopelessly behind. Unfortunately, almost all the new poets of talent had been snapped up by University of Queensland Press's astute editor, Roger MacDonald. In an effort to get back into things Angus and Robertson went right out on a limb, and for a time their manuscripts were being selected by what Les Murray christened, in engineering terminology, "the dirty filter of Rodney Hall and Carl Harrison Ford."

Meanjin magazine veered even more crazily as it abandoned its conservative old guard and installed as poetry editor one of the most embarassingly semi-literate of all the Bubble poets, Kris Hemensley. It seemed the 60s underground had become the New Orthodoxy, and everyone was going to have to see not only them but also their American idols, Duncan, Olson, Ashbery and Creeley, as the master-spirits of the age. The arrogance of the self-publishing Bubble poets, "the new illiterati" as Hemensley proudly called them, knew no limits. It was in this period that Robert Kenny could complacently remark that "Those who imagine there was a live poetic tradition in Australia before the 60s are ignorant of the facts."

The deflation of the Bubble was not the result of any sudden Ern Malley-style hoax, but of slower changes, including one they brought about themselves. Before 1970 there was a sort of gentlemanly convention whereby Australia's major poets rarely reviewed or discussed each other in print unless they could do so favourably. This kindness was automatically extended to the

*cf. "The Ern Malley Special Issue", No. 6 of *Angry Penguins*, Autumn, 1944, devoted to Ern Malley, described as "one of the two giants of contemporary Australian poetry", the other giant being a McDonald Bevis Kerr, co-editor of *Angry Penguins* No. 1.

young poets, as they then were, of the 60s avant-garde. When my friend Kevin Hart was taping an interview with the late David Campbell, Campbell, during their preliminary discussion said a number of trenchant things about the dishonesties and incompetence of the Bubble poets. But once the tape was switched on, the only comment he was prepared to make was "Yes, very interesting writers." As an older poet he simply didn't feel it his place to explode the pretensions of the young.

The Bubble poets took great advantage of this weakness of the establishment; and they developed the system since known as the Shuffle – 5 steps forward, 2 steps back. You claim as much as you think you can get away with, then if anyone takes you to task you retreat slightly, secure in the knowledge that the ordinary reader would rather see poets praise than denigrate each other. Most of the time their fellow poets were too busy or too gentlemanly to oppose their pretentions; and they got away unchallenged with things like Kenny's and Hemensley's claim in the preface to their *Applestealers* anthology that previous Australian poets were of interest only for their "abnormal mediocrity." Indeed the cover of *The Applestealers* proclaims: "This book contains the best poetry written in Australia." It actually contained such gems as Kris Hemensley's imaginary meeting with his hero Charles Olson.

A Brief Meeting

along
a long wooden corridor
there was much dust which
made
which caused the light to fray
tho it was not in the least bit dull
the boards
tended
to squeek
under any
weight
at last he emerged from a classroom
or
it was the school library
we walked
together

Charles Olson
& i
he looked to his front whilst he spoke
he was kindly
his face was flushed
whenever
he turned
to my side
it was a brief meeting

This is the whole poem. The pretentious typography that makes whole lines of "made" or "or" points up Hemensley's lack of self-criticism; and despite his extravagant admiration for Olson nothing in the poem suggests that the American poet has been a useful influence.

By the mid-seventies something had to be done. The Bubble poets' inflated reviews were disillusioning readers; and the piles of second-rate books in the shops were smothering a younger generation of poets with increasing right to attention.

In addition, the 60s "new poets" were getting older, and it was becoming harder to see their arrogance as a youthful peccadillo. Their downfall may have begun with the publication of their first major anthology *The Applestealers* in 1974. Once their poetry was collected, it was easy to see that, as the much younger Kevin Hart put it, their work suffered from "an easy willingness to focus on slightness of subject-matter." Still, it's often possible to fudge poetic merit with an appeal to fashion. What couldn't be concealed was the sub-literacy of the prefaces by Kris Hemensley and Robert Kenny. Of Kenny, Richard Packer remarked in *Quadrant* (1975, I, p. 69)

> One cannot pardon his consistent misspellings, his muddled tenses, his confused singulars and plurals, his misrelated clauses, his sentences without necessary verbs. Kenny's essay would not win him a cadetship on a suburban newspaper.

Prose style is an important clue when sorting through the Bubble poets, because I know of no exception to the rule that while good prose-writers are not necessarily good poets, good poets are always good prose writers. (One can think of A.D.

Hope, Judith Wright, Auden, T.S. Eliot.) The questionnaire replies collected in *Australian Literary Studies* (Oct. 1977) would suggest that while John Tranter and Vicki Viidikas *may* be good poets, Clive Faust, Kris Hemensley and several others certainly are not.

But the Bubble poets' real problems began in 1976 with a series of attacks on them by Les Murray, who was then the editor of *Poetry Australia.* Murray was in many ways ideally placed to lead such an assault. Being only five or six years older than most of them, he had few of Campbell's inhibitions; and as a poet who believed passionately in writing about real things in a language which "keeps faith with the reader," he strongly resented their tendency to obscurity. Above all, his personal style of gruff integrity was unmoved by the usual claims that the Bubble poets' exaggerations didn't matter, or that it was wrong to tear down the reputation of the untalented. A ruthless editor who prides himself on printing only the best, he described himself once as possessing "a horrible autistic uncharity and scorn."

Murray's first major piece appeared in the *National Times* for April 12, 1976. The article was essentially about the tendency of poets to migrate to the Canberra region – the list by then included A.D. Hope, Judith Wright, Roger Macdonald, Rhyll McMaster, myself, Dorothy Green, Alan Gould, Kevin Hart, Bob Brissenden, and several others. In a passing reference to the Bubble poets he remarked that they "can now be seen as a wholly derivative blind alley in the history of Australian verse," whereas people like Alan Gould, Mark O'Connor and Kevin Hart "can be seen more and more as the important figures of the future."

This reference to the existence of a *younger* school of new poets who were *not* part of the Bubble fell like a summer thunderbolt on Balmain and Fitzroy. They were so used to being the young revolutionaries that they could hardly adjust to becoming part of the middle generation; and "the young Canberra poets," as we were dubbed, rapidly became an obsession with them.

Murray returned to the assault in the October 1976 issue of *Quadrant* with a complete review of the University of Queensland Press *Australian Poets on Tape* series. This extensive series was also reviewed by Tom Shapcott in the *Australian*, but so blandly that many distinctions of merit were lost. Murray's review was more detailed and, as he remarks in the final paragraph, "cost me the last remnants of my older Slessorian principles of reviewing only poets I could praise, and condemning bad poets only through general comment." Of Kris Hemensley's reading he remarks:

> After a few minutes . . . I began to get depressed. . . This interminable soft-focus stuff, with its shifting viewpoints, its meaningless orotundities and vaticinations – 'whosoever drinks from a dead glass is witless or beyond redemption' was my favourite – was this the vibrant, youthful new poetry for which so much polemic had been lauched, during the late Revolution?

Robert Adamson's promotional techniques had been tactfully hinted at by earlier reviewers. Murray all but stated them:

> A man with a slender but fitfully genuine gift, he has to work rather desperately to sustain an overblown legend he once whomped up for himself out of hysteria and bullying and gang warfare in a time and a milieu which was receptive to such strategies. Once, he may have been prepared to settle for the legend. Now, one feels, he has begun to look for a better and truer thing for the long run ahead. He may be surprised to find that his gift is genuine. The legend, though, is necessary to his social survival now, and has become his demon.

The thrust of Murray's criticism becomes clear when he praises Geoffrey Lehmann for giving "what Adamson and Tranter deny us, the felicities of phrase and image and epithet which grow out of an ability to step outside ourselves and respect the otherness of things and their quiddity."

Murray's criticisms were slightly blunted by his sometimes conservative social viewpoint. The Bubble poets took to representing them as "right wing" attacks. But they were to get a lot more of such criticism after Alan Gould became poetry reviewer for *Nation Review.* As critic Gould was on the side of a neglected faction – the reader –; and, relative to the huge inflation of literary reputations that had been going on, he passed among poets for a savage reviewer. Discussing Tom Shapcott's exhaust-

ing 464-page 70-poet anthology of *Contemporary American and Australian Poetry* he remarked on "the curious fact that at least a score of the contributors are clearly poets;" and where reviewers like Shapcott and Hall seemed to think there were scores of major poets around, Gould recognized only half a dozen.

By this stage the Bubble was slowly deflating, and its poets had lost the advantages of surprise and youth. But they were determined to hold the ground they had seized in their initial blitzkrieg. They represented attempts to dislodge them as simple displays of spite or envy; and in their favour was the fact that most readers still had no clear concept of the Bubble, and no special name for its poets. "Those rather odd young poets in Balmain, and I suppose they've got friends in Fitzroy," represented about the general awareness of them at the time. Yet they had become familiar names and their extravagant reviews of each other were either believed, or taken for youthful generosity. The general naivety of poetry lovers was neatly exemplified in the late 70s when a Bubble poet with a long criminal record was invited to judge a major literary prize, and promptly gave it to his fifteen-year-old girlfriend.

Apart from lacking a name for the group, most readers (and even the Bubble poets themselves) had no clear notion of where they were going wrong as a movement. The first serious analysis of their mistakes goes back to 1975 when Noel Macainsh questioned in *Quadrant* the whole conception of an avant-garde (much as Robert Hughes has done more recently), concluding that the Australian "new" poetry "has no specific analysis of society and no programme of change." In the same issue appeared Richard Packer's article "Against the Epigones" in which he sought to adopt Erich Kahler's term *epigone* as a name for the Bubble poets. According to Packer the epigone or pseudo-poet alienates readers because he

> sees as antagonist *any* poetry in which aesthetic skills are evident, especially if that poetry expresses insights unpalatable to himself and his utopian conviction that since all men are equal, *anyone* can be a poet. Under the banner of "Now and New" he strives to make his pseudo-poetry the *only* poetry in order to negate the criticism of the past and differing present, as well as to intimidate those critics afraid of being wrong about the future.

Reading Packer's article recently for the first time I was struck by how many nettles he firmly grasps. He criticizes the movement's older advocates, Tom Shapcott and Bruce Beaver, "who consider it their duty generally to encourage the young in a society which, taken at large, encourages no creative writers at all," remarking that "As a result they have subjected themselves to an hubris of tolerance. . ." Yet he argues that, "The silence of other gifted poets is far more reprehensible than Shapcott's and Beaver's misplaced benevolence." He also discusses the ways in which the Bubble poets were able to use the Literature Board.

The term "epigone" was perhaps too recondite to catch on. Inasmuch as we are dealing with the concept of a loose conspiracy of mediocre poets wanting to see their own mediocrity as genius, I prefer the term *mediocracy* – *cracy* as in auto*cracy* or aristo*cracy*. Once one has a name for the thing it becomes clear that *mediocracies* are very common in literary history. There have been times when much of the creative energy of great poets (like Dryden or Pope) was expended in destroying the pretensions of the mediocre. Dryden's great butt, Shadwell, and Pope's Ogilvie and Colley Cibber were not then the harmless figures of fun they seem now. As a glance at the list of British poet laureates would suggest, they were important parts of the literary establishment of their day, with power to punish their rivals financially and even physically.

A mediocracy, as I understand it, operates by the exchange of favours: usually reputation and recognition of inferior work, but almost anything will do. In fact, a mediocracy is a little like a tropical cyclone: it requires an energy source to feed on, and rapidly weakens when that fails and there are less goodies to swap around. Vanity-publishing is an example. Poet A publishes a book of verse no commercial publisher will take, upon poet B's press. That is A's primary pay-off. Poet B gets in return a grateful disciple, whose reviews help build his status, and may help him to a grant, a sexual conquest, or any other reward of status.

The system, of course, works equally well if both parties are sincere. How then does it differ from good poets encouraging each other? But the problem is that good writers tend to be

prickly characters who care about their vision of truth, and often live by Martin Boyd's principle of having nothing to do with brutes and fools in authority. Hence they can rarely play the exchange-of-favours game as effectively as the true mediocrat.

The mediocracy was lucky too with the Literature Board. Not only did the Board inject large amounts of energy and cash into the system, but the concept of a revolving body (whereby writers give grants to other writers) created a strong inducement for writers to stay on good terms with each other. The Bubble poets had entered the Establishment just in time. They were by now sufficiently established to make others think twice of crossing them; and by the mid 70s many reviewers preferred to say as little (and as blandly) as possible about them. Expressing a clear opinion of their work became more than ever a test of personal integrity. And then just in the mid 70s,when the Board was most favourably disposed towards them,it all but ceased to revolve so that they enjoyed a long Indian summer of financial favour.

Even so, after 1976 the Bubble deflated steadily, and soon came to look like a circus Big Top with its main pole down – still covering a lot of ground, but insecurely. By 1977 *Helix* magazine could refer without explanation to the latest *New Poetry* as containing "the usual number of adolescent con tricks". In 1978 Hemensley, Carl Harrison Ford and Rodney Hall were replaced as editors of *Meanjin* and Angus and Robertson (though Hall is still working on an anthology). As early as 1976 *Nation Review*, the paper of the new intellectual classes who were behind the new drama and the new fiction, proudly serialised Hart and Gould's satire on the mediocracy *The Harrowing of Balmain* on its centre pages over four issues. Nothing could have demonstrated more clearly how the Bubble poets had failed to learn the lesson of the La Mamma theatre where in the 60s some of them had cohabited briefly with the new dramatists. Where the dramatists' motto had been "make it new, make it Australian" theirs seemed in retrospect to have been "Let's all be poets."

In 1980 when writing the introduction to the *Penguin Book of Modern Australian Verse,* Professor Heseltine singled out two pieces of evidence for the continued deflation of the Bubble. One was the publication of the October 1977 edition of *Australian Literary Studies* magazine in which the Bubble poets answered questions about their art, and conclusively demonstrated that most of them were not yet ready for public exposure. The other was my article "The Graying of the Underground" which appeared in *Overland* in 1979. Previously the Bubble poets had been able to present any severe criticism of themselves as in some sense "right wing," and a lot of it had in fact appeared in *Quadrant. Overland* is an overtly left-wing magazine, and one with strong ties to the old Angry Penguins movement. And the article was specifically invited by the editor. At the same time *Meanjin*, another former stronghold of the 70s Bubble, decided to publish a similar piece by Graham Rowlands. By 1979 in fact the conspiracy of silence of which Richard Packer had complained was largely broken; and where once Alan Gould had stood almost alone he was soon followed by a whole generation of highly literate young reviewers including Jamie Grant, Gary Catalano and Bob Gray, none of whom had any illusions about the Bubble.

The result was that in 1979 when the mediocracy produced by far its most sophisticated exercise in public relations, John Tranter's preface to his anthology *The New Australian Poetry*, it received short shrift from reviewers all around, and even Tom Shapcott (most mild-mannered of Australian reviewers) remarked brusquely that the introduction was "pompous and fuzzy." (In fact it was as far beyond Kenny's crude attempts in the *Applestealers* as a jumbo jet is beyond a rowboat.) As Jamie Grant's recent article on "Coffee-Coloured Verse" in the *Age Monthly Review* (July 1981) suggests, there is little question of the Bubble being allowed to stay even at its present stage of deflation.

By 1979 the only area the mediocracy (i.e. the wheeler-dealer side of the Bubble) still controlled was the Literature Board, and for the same reason as the Senate often represents an older balance of power than that of the House of Representatives. The Australia Council's latest published report (for 1978-79) tells the story. Of the seventeen senior fellowships

given for poetry, seven went to eminent poets of established reputation: Rosemary Dobson, Judith Wright, Peter Porter, David Malouf, Les Murray, Harold Stewart, and John Blight. One senior fellowship was given to the West Australian Alan Alexander; and the remaining nine were listed to seven male poets closely associated with the 70s bubble: Adamson (2), Eric Beach, Terry Gilmore, Rodney Hall (2), Rudi Krausmann, Tom Shapcott, and John Tranter. Since a poet has little chance of earning enough money from one book to pay his expenses while he writes the next, this large flow of cash was an enormous help to the Bubble poets in maintaining their status and rate of publication relative to other poets. In particular, by 1981 the long series of consecutive grants given to Robert Adamson for work of dubious merit had become a serious scandal.

* * * * *

In this long account of the rise and fall of the 70s Bubble there has been no space for large samples of the poetry. This may leave you with two questions: are these poets as second-rate as their critics make them seem; and what harm does it really do when poets inflate or "hype" the merits of their work?

Let me invite the reader to choose which of these two pieces of literary erudition he or she prefers:*

The Rumour: Part One

1
the first man to hear
Angels Sounding was John
the Divine as they told of descending on
Stars and Man's incorporate doubt

Was cast as the third Angel
Named its star *Wormwood* and language branched

* When the lecture was delivered, the audience was invited to express an opinion on these two pieces without further information. The balance of preference was for the second.

Away dividing itself
From God from the Sounding sphinxing Word
Wormwood comes

as a word in our time
Of war and speech buffets our Governors with its
Judaean Rites of obedience
Of America

Thus John sang
Against the Trinity as King Hiram sang against
Jehovah in Tyre 'If any man shall add unto
These things God shall add unto
Him the plagues . . .'

I take this as challenge
As the word *Wormwood* proceeds
My hand aflame to sing
Wildly and as clear as the Final Singer beyond
A prophet droning
through
hundreds of years

The hand aflame an encyclical to turn mental things
In their graves restoring
Truth to its original lineaments
In rumour

Or this one:

Tiresias

You wouldn't read about it:
all the women in black and the flames like dragons
hissing down on the broken roof and Oedipus
raining blood from his eyes like terrible tears
and his mother and wife in the bedroom hanging herself–

I saw it coming, but no one listened, of course:
you can't cheat fate, I said, and those gods are buggers
if you try to outwit them – but with his usual hubris

Oedipus told me to shut my mouth unless I was going to say
something cheerful, so I just went away, saying
you can wander in the desert by yourself, your majesty—
you can't say much to arrogance like that.

Not that I don't feel sorry for him. He wasn't bad,
a good king and usually fair, except when the famines
and starving people got to him. And he could have taken
Jocasta's way, shrugged the whole thing off his shoulders—
still, there's no satisfaction in being right. You can't say
"I told you so" to a man like that.

The first is from Robert Adamson's *The Rumour*, singled out by John Tranter in his introduction to *The New Australian Poetry* as "an ambitious and important work," but attacked by Packer as "a sort of mobile of snippets from Graves, Frazer, Pound and heaven knows who else." There is clearly a poetic imagination at work here, but it is immature, and so heavily derivative as to invite Packer's dismissive: "It has been praised, one suspects, by those who were afraid to cry out that these borrowed clothes had no emperor."

The second poem *Tiresias* is also derivative; but the writer is much surer of what she is doing. Line by line the poem shows one of the hallmarks of good poetry: that "perpetual slight surprise" of which T.S. Eliot speaks. But it is too reminiscent of Bruce Dawe to be highly impressive, unless we knew that the poem was an isolated experiment or that the author was very young. As it happens, both are true: the author is Alison Croggan, a young Victorian poet whose work has only just begun to appear in the magazines. When you consider that she is only 18, less than half Adamson's age, it's not hard to see why the aging Bubble poets are nervous of changes in fashion, and feel their overblown reputations weighing upon them "like a giant's robe upon a dwarfish body."

My other test poem, to answer the second question, is this piece by Dorothy Hewitt, Australia's best-known woman playwright, and author of several books of verse, including some fine poems. This time there's not much question about literary merit – the similarity to Hemensley's piece on Olson is obvious.

Creeley in Sydney

Creeley arriving one eyed at Sydney Airport
Searching for the American Centenary
Poetry Workshop
Writing exists in its own activity. . . . *
So why can't I leave a message for anyone?

. . . .
Creeley at the bar
black eyed
drinking his whiskey
Be careful! Look what missionaries have done
to the world.

Riding through the sky
to the Adelaide Festival
listening to bagpipes
talking about Robert Adamson

The sea broke at the end of the cliff face in Bermagui—
seeing it all
barbecue terrace children wife
waving as the little plane
lurched off the Moruya runway into space

Moruya / Narooma Tranter / Moorhouse country
the dark south coast of boyhood & trauma
Blay's spotted gums
& Dransfield's Courtland Penders

Fathers who wanted sons not poets to fill their shoes. . .
etc.

(Dorothy Hewitt, *Greenhouse.* Big Smoke Books, 1979)

It gets only a little better towards the end.

*The row of dots is Dorothy Hewitt's.

It's true that Dorothy's problem, even as a playwright, has always been to control her subjectivity. Nevertheless she *is* a very successful playwright, able to enliven her plays with a fine poetic sense, and so well aware of the disciplines of the theatre as to be one of the best (and most generous) advisors of younger playwrights. How then could she write, or having written publish, such embarassing drivel? Clearly there are degrees of silliness that an individual cannot reach on his or her own: the support of a fashion is required. Her poem fits exactly Packer's diagnosis of "a form of narcissism peculiar to the epigones, a garrulous chatting to one's in-group using a totally private frame of reference, complete with name-dropping . . . [reflecting the epigone's notion] . . . that what in other lives would be small banalities, in his become the right and urgent concern of as many people as he can reach."

Several of Dorothy Hewitt's recent poems show clearly the damage done to people of real talent and feeling when they fall among the mediocracy and become dependent on its approval. The simplest diagnosis of what ruined this particular poem would be T.S. Eliot's remark that even the most apparently inspired of creative labour always includes critical work. True, critical skills on their own can create nothing; but creative talent without critical sense is equally wasted. As this poem shows, the writer who abandons her critical sense says those things she ought not to say, and leaves unsaid what she ought. The result all too often is a waste of the writer's, reader's and publisher's time.

AUSTRALIAN POETRY

– THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE LAST 10 YEARS

Writing in *Meanjin* last year Mark Macleod remarked that Bruce Dawe and Les Murray have now clearly achieved among their generation of Australian poets "the kind of significance that Wright and Hope have had for the generation of poets preceding." When Dawe's selected poems appeared in 1971, adds Macleod, his voice appeared in retrospect "to be that of Australian poetry in the 1960s," whereas, "In 1971 Murray, with only two of his now six volumes, had established his voice as the one most likely to speak for the mainstream of Australian poetry in the Seventies, and events since have proved that impression right."

It is widely accepted today that Murray is both the main star and chief trend-setter of contemporary Australian poetry. Yet even four years ago I can remember being surprised when Peter Porter told me he considered Les Murray the best living Australian poet. I would have said that A.D. Hope was.

It may be silly to play top-of-the-pops games with poets; but it's at least an interesting irony that at the time when William Jay Smith and several other American critics have begun to suggest that Hope may be the best living poet in English, he should be meeting such strong competition at home. David Malouf is another eminent international critic who has no doubt of Murray's superiority. Such opinions are the more striking when you consider that most people on the literary scene, (including certainly Porter and Malouf), are antagonised by at least some of the ideas Murray so relentlessly advocates.

Murray is of course, even more concerned than Dawe with the unpretentious use of Australian English. He heightens the vernacular, certainly, but he neither mocks it outright (as Barry Humphries does), nor treats it as subtly comic (as Dawe tends to). When Bob Gray asked him in an interview in *Quadrant* back in 1976, "How do you see your own position?", the answer was, "I'm turning the Australian language into a literary language." Whatever bold techniques he may have taken over from contemporary American or European poets, Murray remains faithful to the Australian voice – or as he puts it, "To the vernacular style we do so well", and to the concept of a poetry that "keeps faith with the people."

How to be Australian without being comic? The trick, as the dramatists also have discovered, is to know the people you're representing. Consider this dramatic monologue titled "The Breach" from his *The Police: Seven Voices:*

I am a policeman
it is easier to make me seem an oaf
than to tell the truth

I came from a coaldust town
when I was seventeen, because there was nothing
for a young fellow there

the Force drew me because of a sense I had
and have grown out of

I said to Ware once, Harry, you're the best
cop of the lot: you only arrest falls
he was amused

I seem to be making an inventory of my life

but in that house opposite, first floor
there is a breach
and me, in this body I am careful with, I'm going to have
to enter that house soon.

and stop that breach

it is a bad one people could fall through
we know that three have
and he's got a child poised

I have struck men in back rooms late at night
with faces you could fall a thousand feet down
and I've seen things in bowls

the trick is not to be a breach yourself
and to stop your side from being one
I suppose . . .

. . . the ideal is to keep the man and stop
the breach
that's the high standard

but the breach must close

if later goes all right
I'm going to paint the roof of our house
on my day off.

The cadence of that last sentence is particularly fine. But this is not simple realism. It's a series of literary effects, based on real things. As he himself puts it, "Poetry is not life. It's the enrichment of life and the repair of life." Stylistically, his work is similar to the heightened realism of David Williamson's plays.

Dawe, by contrast, steers closer to satire, as in these lines from "Life Cycle":

In the pure flood of sound they are scarfed with light, a voice
like the voice of God booms from the stands
Ooohh you bludger and the covenant is sealed.

Hot pies and potato-crips they will eat,
they will forswear the Demons, cling to the Saints
and behold their team going up the ladder into Heaven,

And the tides of life will be the tides of the home-team's
fortunes

– the reckless proposal after the one-point win,
the wedding and honeymoon after the grand-final . . .

They will not grow old as those from more northern States grow old,
for them it will always be three-quarter-time
with the scores level and the wind advantage in the final term

As these examples suggest, many contemporary Australian poets prefer a highly compressed style, irrespective of whether they are using vernacular idiom. Here for instance is Geoffrey Lehmann's monologue for Pope Alexander VI:

It's good, my child, you often wash your hair
So it retains its gold – my favourite colour.
Your soft young lobe pierced by a golden ear-ring.
I feel so old.
On seaside holidays
I stand at dusk upon a crumbling headland
And watch water drag across a reef edge . . .

. . . Though I may burn
Remember my polluted hands
Are a link in the apostolic line,
and that I am God's glory manifested.

Gently Lucrezia, do not bite.

Another example is Alan Gould, whose "The Regulars" is one of the best poems of recent years:

Take lead figures pushed across a map
(the simplest notion of us) or tapestries
where we march without faces below a hill
as a general squints through field-glass, or
a warrior's fancy stallion picks between
the broken engines . . .

. . . It's a blink or twenty centuries
on from Hellas; the seconds tick still
toward that constant zero when the procedure

that women have called odd, that boys of sixteen
have lied to join, that's paid many, shamed

more into reticence, will reopen to the clap
and cheer of the bored in the bannered, rainy cities....

This packed somewhat difficult style is popular partly because of the disappearance of any strong metre from modern English poetry. (The old iambic metres presumed a language in which it was still possible to count syllables, and in which there were fairly even numbers of stressed and unstressed syllables. They are still available for comic verse, as a glance at *Punch* will show, but are now so artificial that it is hard to use them well in serious verse.)

The weakening or loss of metre paradoxically makes poetry less like prose. It can no longer be prosaically relaxed and discursive because, without the recurrent pleasures of metre, the old Chaucerian prolixity cannot be sustained. The poet comes to rely more and more on opportunist effects and on an epigrammatic brevity and richness. It is true that Dawe retains a certain looseness, because he makes the pleasure of recognizing familiar clichés and situations serve as a substitute for the pleasures of metre. But Murray's verse in particular is sometimes close to a string of epigrams:

'Inefficiency's the strength of Socialism:
it burns up Earth's resources slower –
We won't see full employment again.
We have priced it away to the underpaid
in the police states and the barefoot countries;
Work's emigrating now, out of our world. . . .'

The trend is conscious. Murray's advice to young poets – "When you've finished, cut the poem in half; then throw away the last four lines" – is at least half serious. In an interview with Robert Gray, he describes a style of writing called "halva":

> – you know, that very highly compressed sweet; I take anecdotes and compress them as much as possible; tell whole stories in a line, a novel in two.

At times in fact an anecdote may be so compressed that there is an uncertain balance between the power gained by compression and the constraints it causes. For instance, the end of "Sergeant Forby Lectures the Cadets":

> We had some sort of case:
> opportunity, motive, shot horse
> but Warwick's counsel made mince of it.
> Without bodies, the onus was on us
>
> (I hope the Onus comes on him
> some dark night)
> but he was right.
>
> And Warwick got off.
> He was ten minutes gone
> when the answer hit me like a brick
> country people aren't keen on decay
> of course!
>
> And we dug under the horse.
>
> The secret of our profession, this:
> we dig under the horse.
> Dismiss.

If this were a prose account there would have been leisure to clarify the final irony – that the husband, Warwick, though now known to have shot his wife's lover, cannot be tried a second time for the same offence.

I could say a great deal about the interaction between this new compressed style and our new awareness of the resources of Australian idiom in poetry, but it would cover the same ground as my article in *Kunapipi* III, 1. I'll content myself with reading an example which Geoff Page has suppressed – with unnecessary squeamishness, I think – from his last collection:

> Down that May
> from an upland boarding school,
> they put me on the sleep-out
> head just through the wall

from the old Royal Doulton,
first of its kind on the river,
the wall between so thin
the water seemed each time
to fill my skull.
Always last to rise,
I'd hear my family's other eight
sit down or stand next door.
High-pressure squirts, wide-open flows,
a weighty single splash,
a straining silence, diarrhoeal splatters,
a fall absorbed by paper.
I came to know them all,
and not by order only,
but by sound, the personal patterns
on porcelain and water.
Stupidly one morning
I told them my achievement.
They grew more circumspect.
It little mattered.
Lying late beside that old Royal Doulton,
I'd learned what critics mean
when they talk of a
'personal style.'

(Untitled)

I said earlier that the old iambic metres were now largely unavailable in modern English. One poet who has continued to use them with great success even in the last ten years is A.D. Hope. As my analysis would suggest, his use of metre creates a far less compacted style than Murray's "halva" one. In fact by Murray's standards Hope's style is prolix. Yet it has a relaxed discursiveness that has enabled him over the last ten years to handle subjects that would usually be thought too complex or technical for verse. In particular, he has exploited the enormous poetic potential of what I call "the modern world-myth" – that vast complex story, which people like Bronowski and Attenborough have been offering us on television, of how our universe, planet, species and culture have evolved. Hope's *A Late Picking* opens with a poem titled "On an Early Portrait of My Mother":

Who would believe it to see her now, the mother
Of so many daughters and sons – and one of them I –
Dear busy old body, bustling around the sky
That this was indeed my darling, and no other?

The rhythm is much looser than in Hope's earlier work, for he too is well aware that the English language is moving away from the iambic rhythm, and in fact he has made several experiments to find an alternative metrical principle for the late C20th. The content seems unexceptional – an elegantly managed piece with a pleasantly personal note. Yet what sort of Mother is intended?

You could not foresee this lovely old age beginning,
The ripeness, the breeding beauty. How could you know
Yourself with your lap full of flowers, soft-shouldered
with snow,
Royally wearing your waters. . . .

The ambiguity is maintained, but it emerges that what Hope is describing is the geological history of our common mother, the planet Earth.

In fact this new awareness of the modern world-myth has revitalized another large area of poetry with which Hope's urban imagination usually has little contact: nature poetry. As I have argued in a recent article in *Meanjin* ("Evolutionary Myth in the New Nature Poetry"), the myth has finally given our Anglo-Saxon culture and its North-West-European language a way to come to terms with the Australian continent. Judith Wright, David Malouf, Peter Skrzynecki, myself and Bob Brissenden are among poets who have benefited from this possibility.

To return to Hope: Max Harris once described him as Australia's greatest poet, but one flawed by "objective and subjective compulsions." There is little trace of this in the mellow tone of his recent poems. Their loosened iambic rhythms suggest a slightly garrulous intellectuality rather than emotional "compulsion." Here, in a fine metrical *tour de force* he captures the rhythms of Victorian father-and-daughters conversation:

"By God!" – he flourished his carvers in the air –
"She makes my flesh creep. No one asks *my* advice
Of course; but how your mother puts up with her
Passes my – yes, dear! yes, another slice?"

Yet the old passions still peep out from the intellectuality. Who but Hope would think to equate the fate of Man with that of the single lucky sperm, associated in turn with the story of the Sleeping Princess?

As in my flesh, so in my spirit stand I.
When does *this* hundred years draw to its close?
The hedge of thorns before me gives no clue.
My predecessor's carcass, shrunk and dry,
Stares at me through the spikes. Oh well, here goes:
I have this thing, and only this, to do.

Hope then has found one alternative to the compressed style, and has maintained something of the prose-like discursive freedom that poets like Chaucer and Dryden took for granted. However he does it through metrical skills which are now so old-fashioned that a beginning poet today might think twice before investing his energies in them.

There is a second alternative that might be associated with the name of Tom Shapcott. As I mentioned in my first lecture, Tom has often been blamed for encouraging the arrogance of the Bubble Poets, and thus submitting himself, as Packer puts it, "to an hubris of tolerance". Yet unlike some who might be suspected of having carefully built up for themselves the role of middle-generation poets who could talk to both the establishment and the young Turks, Tom's goodwill is beyond question. If he was too slow to see incompetence in poets whom the "compressionists" found diffuse and self-indulgent, it was probably because he had a different concept of poetry. Consider this passage from his Museum poem, "June Fugue":

The attendants are bored the children stop
and then laugh they move on it is nothing
how shall I tell them the curse is true?
that out in the sunlight their shoulders are fingered
that already the things they bring in as Everlastings

have the smell of Museums that once having drawn the circle
you will get the dark all over you.

This is a passage that might compare with the best work of Murray or Dawe. Lines like ". . . Everlastings/have the smell of Museums" and "you will get the dark all over you" have the compressed power of true poetry. If the piece had been by Murray this might well have been the entire poem. In fact it is merely the tail-end of a long narrative in which all the key-phrases have been previously introduced and explained with care.

But is its length justified? –

June Fugue

1
Where shall we go? where shall we go?
– We shall go to the Museum
What shall we see? is there lots to see?
– We shall see rooms full of treasures
I want to see jewels and costumes
pharoahs and mummies
– We shall spend hours among relics
We shall be able to look hard
at the blackened wrists of mummies.

2
Do you remember that June day we drove into the mountains we sang together all the songs from *Salad Days* and *My Fair Lady*?
– Shall we sing those songs now? Remember them?
No I was thinking of the mountains the walking track through that patch of rainforest
– And when we reached the sunlight
I picked you an everlasting daisy.
You were always bringing me things.

3
Do you remember the images the children said

'Why don't trees have two legs?'
'Daddy look at the broken moon'
'Mummy come in inside you'll get the dark all over you.'
Children are so unalike.
They all draw bodies of sticks and daisies and circles.

4
Where is that human hand? Where is the Egyptian Mummy?
I'm sick of stuffed birds like the cat brought in.
– It is a hand small as yours but very dark
dried out a bundle of sticks
Where is it now show me show me

5
The attendants are bored the children stop
and then laugh they move on it is nothing
how shall I tell them the curse is true?
that out in the sunlight their shoulders are fingered
that already the things they bring in as Everlastings
have the smell of Museums that once having drawn the circle
you will get the dark all over you.

Certainly the earlier sections are more diffuse. On the other hand they are straightforward and pleasant to read, and they do increase the intensity of the ending when it comes. Whether you think the length is justified depends very much on your expectations of poetry. Perhaps it is because so many poets fail to keep things easy for the reader that we feel a poem of such length which reserves most of its power for the final stanza, must have a poor power-to-weight ratio. But why should length be a deterrent in poetry? There was a time when popular poems, like best-selling novels, were the better for being long.

On balance it is hard to object to the prolixity of *June Fugue* which shows Shapcott at the height of his considerable powers. But the question hangs heavily over his looser pieces, including his recent prose-poems and "prose inventions". Consider as an extreme example this piece, originally presented with musical accompaniment, but now printed as a broadsheet to advertise his new collection:

BOPPLE-NUT

Macadamia
Macadamia Ternifolia
Macadamia Ternifolia is characterised
by dark green foliage with slight
serrations and a prolific annual
harvest of exceptionally nutritious
nuts
exceptionally nutritious nuts which are
encased in a very hard shell
itself encased in a pithy green husk
that turns
brown at maturation point
in late summer or early
autum. They are indige-
nous to the coastal scrubs of
Queensland or Northern
New South Wales
Australia

Bopple-nut
Bopple-nut we call it bopple-nut
Bopple nut
they're bopplenuts, bopplenuts yippee for bopplenuts
that's bopplenuts
bopple
bopple
bopplenuts
Y' can call them Queensland Nuts
Queensland Nuts, okay
It's really bopple.
"I call them Popple."
Popple's okay, it's really
Bopple: bopple-nut.

"As kids we cracked them with a hammer."
"Under the house: in that little crack in the concrete."
"Cracked them in my dad's iron vice: craaack-open."
"Gobbled them all afternoon." "Pinafores and khaki trousers."
"Sweetest nut. Sweetest nut in the world." "Crunchy without fibre."
"Sweetest nut in the world." "Go upstairs with a bottlefull."
"Never got to the verandah. Sweetest nut in the world."
"Never forget the flavour."
"Line them up with a hammer, split them down the centre."
"Small as the core of a golf ball." "Never forget the flavour."
"Never forget, in the bopple-nut season; never forget under the house, under the verandah: cracking 'em with a hammer."

"Part of our growing up, part of Queensland Australia."
"Although native to parts of Australia
the Macadamia was successfuly introduced to Hawaii
where its commercial potential was quickly recognized.
Because of their exceptional nutrition value (oils and protein)
they command the highest price on the International Market
and, given the right climatic conditions, as in Hawaii, have
become a truly profitable venture."

Bopple-nut
Bopple

"Macadamia.
Macadamia."

It is clear that Shapcott has a quite opposite conception to writers like Murray and Gould. They are like people writing letters for the London *Times*, in the hope that if they can pack enough wit and force into few words there may be space for them. Shapcott is more like a magazine short-story writer, who assumes that there is an endless public appetite for printed matter provided it is competently written. One of the best things about Shapcott's voluminous publications, I think, is that they give to the lie to an idea many young poets have – that to be published one has to write something frightfully difficult and "modern." Shapcott's success is proof that what most editors are really looking for is something direct and easy: not the laboured distillation of a lifetime, but a single emotion or subject competently handled.

On the other hand, is Shapcott using his abilities to best advantage? A worthwhile poem is not simply one that can be published. And as Horace put it two thousand years ago, "Neither gods, nor men, no not even the publishers' advertisements have space for middling poetry."

In a private debate with Tom Shapcott on this subject, I quoted Murray's line about poetry being "not the wine of life but the cognac", and remarked that he seemed to think of it rather as the flagon-red. He wrote back accepting the analogy, and remarking that it was time Australians realised what excellent house-reds and house-whites they had. Personally I have doubts about poetry ever becoming a public commodity in the same way as wine.

Perhaps the difference of opinion depends in part on our backgrounds. As a former academic I am all too aware of the mountains of creditably written printed matter piled up in various languages all over the world awaiting readers. I drown in evidence of human sensitivity, and come to care only for the very best that can be thought and written. Whereas Tom, coming from the world of professional accounting, still seems to find something liberating and exciting in the creative use of language as such.

Judges of poetry competitions do seem to prefer the more compact style. Murray and myself have been the most successful of Australian poets in major competitions held under anonymous conditions over the past decade. True: other kinds of poetry are more commonly published in the magazines, especially the mixed ones. But one should remember that there are many editors who look upon poetry as typographical light relief; and in fact most poets know to their cost how much easier it is to place the slight flawless lyric than a better but weightier poem.

Yet there might be quite a large readership for the light casual poem, if people could distinguish it clearly from more obscure and pretentious products which tend to frighten them off. And just as the literary novel might have trouble creating an audience if there were not a widespread custom in our society of reading newspapers and pulp novels, so it may be that diffuse popular poetry helps to prepare the ground for more ambitious work.

* * * * *

There are a number of other productive styles of poetry I can mention only briefly today. They include "drug poetry" in both senses. There are poems explicitly about drugs, like Dransfield's famous lines on a heroin "hit":

> Hits you like sleep –
> sweet, illusory, fast, with a semblance of forever.
> For a while the fires die down in you,
> until you die down in the fires.
>
> ("Fix")

but there are also poems whose sensibility is that of psychedelic experience. This is a far broader category than the inexperienced are aware.

I had gone for a walk
dressed in clouds
& with the wind
& with some friends

we were swift and slow
the sun entered us & went away
the moon hid in a tree

from a prison window
I watch go by
all but myself . . .
(Dransfield, "The Inspector of Tides")

There are also "performance poems," like much of John Forbes's work, or like Nigel Roberts's "The Quote from Auden" – a classic piece of masculine plumage-preening in which the quote from Auden is repeatedly mentioned, never identified, and finally submerged in a flood of details about Roberts's Balmain life-style. On the other hand there are sensitive poems that describe scenes and people in an almost novelistic way – another large category, ranging from much of Vicki Viidikas to most of Alan Wearne.

Then there is the so-called "open poem," a freer style of free, in which the lines are not only of unequal length but abandon the timid convention of starting from the left-hand margin. The "open poem" is often in reality an enclosed poem whose words refer only to their own reality. Language becomes, as John Tranter enthusiastically puts it, "a primary and opaque material," and the resulting work has such qualities as "self-signature" and "self-reference":

I find the girl naked under dry leaves I find
I have a searching pain in the neck
I am not happy I am full of elephants

(*The Alphabet Murders* 9)

Unfortunately critics like Dennis Haskell remain unimpressed, and see Tranter as a poet of great verbal talent hindered by a terror of revealing his emotions. And among the lesser Bubble Poets such ideas become simply an excuse for pretentious mediocrity: the poet espouses them to avoid competition with ampler minds. Yet when the rules of this fashion are not deified but treated as simple conventions the result can be a masterpiece like John Jenkins's parody of advertising language from "Read This!":

> Welcome to this poem. Why you? Because
> you're one of us, and belong here. You
> have the right credentials: the taste,
> sensibility and above all intelligence
> to appreciate and enjoy poetry. Now
> imagine a breast. A shapely, tanned breast.
> The sun and beach background is optional,
> but I know you'll want it too. You are
> driving in your open-necked way, enjoying
> the ocean view. . . .

It is interesting that this trend should co-exist with its contrary. The poems of Murray and Gould are "open poems" in the opposite sense: though complete in themselves they open onto a larger world. You need not be a saga-expert to appreciate Gould's Viking poems, or a cattle-lover to appreciate Murray's "Walking to the Cattle Place"; but if you are (or become one) you will find further meanings in their poetry. In a world of increasingly diverse knowledge, such openness may be the only solution; yet it raises all sorts of problems about specialized knowledge in poetry. (Can one assume knowledge of the modern world-myth? How much longer can one assume knowledge of minor Greek gods?)

As an expatriate poet over the last four years I have faced this sort of problem many times. Perhaps Alexander Pope was the last poet to really believe that all readers ought to have the same classical background and stock of common knowledge. Today the world is wide, and English has passed far beyond that North-West European country where it originated. Thus the poet who travels is always finding himself in some fascinating

place like Delphi or Stromboli, where there is a temptation to write about the environment as naturally as he would speak about it to the other English-speakers he is with. Yet back home the most elementary facts about this place may seem esoteric.

At one stage I attempted a sequence of poems on the volcanic Greek island of Santorini, now widely believed to be the source of the Atlantis myth. Many readers, even in Australia, are familiar with such books on Santorini as "Voyage to Atlantis"; yet it is also possible to find highly educated people who are totally ignorant of the island and its history. (Angus & Robertson have devised a partial solution to such problems in some of their recent volumes, not by footnoting the text but by placing optional notes at the end.) For Santorini I decided the best compromise was to write poems that were sufficiently sensual and description to be fairly self-explanatory, while remembering that the poems would have richer reverberations for those who know the island or are interested in the Atlantis legend:

> baked in glaze
> from garden walls above the barking heads
> the god's own monkeys flee up to the cone,
> their long prehensile tails a vibrant blue.
> The leader lags to pour scorn on the dogs,
> his cheeks still puffed with stolen fruit,
> while wet Spring lilies rise from lava rocks
> and pairing swallows welcome back the year.

Even so, there is always something a little awkward about a poem that calls for footnotes. Perhaps the poet who wants to be truly popular should look for a compromise between the self-referring and the outward-opening styles. As nice an example as any on which to close this simple sketch-map of contemporary Australian poetry is the start of Richard Tipping's "Mangoes," a poem which pleasantly mixes appreciation of this backyard Australian fruit with a large dose of self-referring whimsey:

> mangoes are not cigarettes
> mangoes are fleshy skinful passionate fruits
> mangoes are hungry to be sucked

mangoes are glad to be stuck in the teeth
mangoes like slush & kissing

mangoes are not cigarettes
mangoes are idiosyncratic seasonal seducers
mangoes are worse than adams apple
mangoes are what parents & parliaments warn against
mangoes like making rude noises

mangoes are not cigarettes
mangoes are greedy delicious tongueteasers
mangoes are violently soft
mangoes are fibrous intestinal lovebites
mangoes like beginning once again. . . .

Anthologies

The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Verse, ed. H. Heseltine, 1981 with preface by H. Heseltine.

The Applestealers, ed. R. Kenny and C. Talbot, Outback Press 1974, with prefaces by Kris Hemensley and R. Kenny.

The New Australian Poetry, ed. and with preface by John Tranter, Makar Press, 1979.

Note that three further anthologies are in preparation: by Rodney Hall (not specifically of contemporary verse), by Tom Shapcott (The Second UQP Paperback Poets Anthology, to be titled *Consolidations*), and by Geoffrey Lehmann and Robert Gray. An article by Les Murray on the politics of Australian poetry anthologies is due to appear in *Island* magazine (4, 1981).

"Rendered Worlds: A Poetry Chronicle," Gary Catalano, *Meanjin* 1, 1980, 81ff.

Reviews by Alan Gould, including "Fruit Trifle and Suet," *Nation Review* April 2-8 1976; "Poetic Paradigms," *N.R.* 16-22 Feb. 1978; "Colloquial Cartography," *N.R.* 26 Nov. - 2 Dec. 1976, p. 141.

"Coffee-Flavoured Verse," Jamie Grant, The Age *Monthly Review* I, no. 4, July 1981. (See also comments by John Scott and Mark O'Connor, with rejoinder by Jamie Grant, in the August edition.)

"Resisting the Yawn of Gods," Kevin Hart (review of *The Applestealers*) in *Within the Hill (Canberra Poetry* special edition) 1975, pp. 66ff.

"Thoughts on Some Recent Poetry," Dennis Haskell in *Australian Literary Studies* VIII, no. 2, October 1977, 136-148. This edition contains numerous statements and questionnaire-answers from the Bubble poets, and a lengthy interview with John Tranter.

"Australian Poetry – The Tradition of the New," Noel Macainsh, *Quadrant,* April 1975, pp. 34-41.

"The Great Federal Poetry Takeover Plot," Les Murray, *National Times,* April 12-17, 1976, pp. 23-24.

"More Wow Than Flutter" (Review of the UQP *Australian Poets on Tape* series), Les Murray, *Quadrant,* October 1976, pp. 45ff.

"The Graying of the Underground," Mark O'Connor, *Overland,* no. 74, 1979, pp. 5ff.

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DAVID WILLIAMSON AND

"THE AUSTRALIAN SEXUAL PROBLEM"

In the manner of those C19th novelists who used to preface each chapter with a favourite quotation, that might even have some relevance to the subject of the chapter, I'd like to start with two epigraphs. The first is from a letter to a lady by Dylan Thomas:

> The medieval laws of this corrupted hemisphere have dictated a more or less compulsory period of virginity during the period of life when virginity should be regarded as a crime against the dictates of the body. During the period of adolescence, when the blood and seed of the growing flesh need, for the first time and more than ever again, communion and contact with blood and seed of another flesh, sexual relationships are looked upon as being unnecessary and unclean. The body must be kept intact for marriage, which is rarely possible before the age of twenty; the physical expression of sex must be caged up for six or more years until for the price of a ring, a licence, and a few hampering words, opportunity is presented with all the ceremony of a phallic religion. But so often the opportunity comes too late, the seed has soured, love has turned to lust, and lust to sadism.

The second is by a contemporary female author, and is titled *The Pornographic Fortune Cookie Merchant:*

> When the pornographic fortune cookie
> merchant was caught eating all his own
> cookies and stuffing the fortunes into ears,
> pockets, button-holes and an assortment of
> other mentionable or unmentionable
> orifices, the only salvageable evidence

was the following: crumbs. 10 small pieces
of white paper, on which there was writ-
ten: 1, tongue. 2, midnight snack. 3, cunt.
4, bet you can't imagine where I imagine
my finger is now. 5, fucking your toes.
6, eating roses. 7, sliced strawberries
wine. 8, moon liquid. 9, mmmmmmmmm.
10, again and again and again. And, of
course, one over-weight, unshaven,
distraught, pornographic fortune
cookie merchant.

It's almost a cliché that the New Australian Drama which emerged in the 60s depended heavily on "the shock of recognition." Previously of course it had been the reverse: the last thing audiences of literary drama wanted was to recognise themselves. This was the thing that ultimately defeated Ray Lawler and Alan Seymour: audiences were actively embarassed by Australian accents on stage, or by scenes set in Wagga Wagga or at the MCG. Actors were expected to have English accents – some of them couldn't even imitate an Australian accent. Those were the days when, as Les Murray put it, culture meant "allusion to little-known names in a special accent." And as for trying to write serious drama about the world of Edna Everage and all those dreary Australian suburbs and towns – that was not *literature*; it was merely *life*.

The New Dramatists, led by Williamson, Buzo and Hibberd crashed through that barrier. They took advantage of the polarised permissive society of the sixties to use the rawest and most embarassing materials and they found or created an audience, derived from the new tertiary-educated classes, that actively enjoyed the shock of recognition, the thrill of seeing real things on stage. It was a movement parallel to that of Murray and Dawe in poetry, or of Frank Moorhouse and David Ireland in fiction. For the first time we began to enjoy our own drama, not one borrowed from England or America.

Since then Williamson especially has been turning into a classic. People who once knew him only as that controversial playwright full of obscene language now go to his plays as cul-

ture. In fact there's now a tendency to forget what raw nerves some of the earlier plays touched on; and to think of, say, *The Coming of Stork* as a rather raw piece of juvenilia, when in fact it is a brilliantly-structured play that simply deals with highly embarassing material about the way some respectable Australians were when they were adolescents back in the late 50s and early 60s.

In fact what Williamson's early plays (*Stork, Don's Party, Jugglers Three, What If You Died Tomorrow?*, and even *The Removalists*) deal with is a rather nasty little war of the sexes that was raging back then – or what those who believe it's still going on might prefer to call "The Australian Sexual Problem."

I owe that phrase to some Danish students of English whom I was teaching Williamson's plays in 1979. Teaching your own literature to foreigners forces you to sort out a lot of things you could take for granted if speaking to fellow Australians. My students in Denmark were particularly interesting because they spoke flawless English, but knew nothing about Australia. Everything had to be explained to them. Moreover the Danes have a very sociological, almost Marxist approach to literature. They examine texts to see what sort of society they describe; and Williamson's plays left them with a lot of questions.

One of the things that didn't shock, but surprised them was the crudity of the language. When they first struck expressions like "cold as a cunt on concrete," "dry as a dead dingo's donger" or "in more trouble than a poofter with piles" they asked me if these phrases were put in because they were realistic. I replied, not really. They're there because the characters, and very likely the audiences, think them funny. I pointed out that in sexually repressed societies like Italy or Australia (especially 20 years back in the period of Williamson's adolescence) an enormous amount of energy goes into sexual ribaldry; and that male conversation especially may go in for elaborate defiance of sexual taboos. There was no point in expecting the jokes to be funny in Denmark. But as A.D. Hope has recently remarked:

> A repressive and puritanical social system breeds an excess of bold bawdry and crude sexual fun by the same psychological law that a repressive political system breeds a strong undercurrent of jokes against the Government.
>
> (*Monthly Review*, July 1981)

This led on to the larger issue of the crude sexual attitudes of Williamson's characters. Most of my students were female; and of course in Danish universities today feminism is what motherhood was in fifties America. But my students, like good critics, were humanists first and partisans of one sex or other, second. If women were worse treated in Australia than in Denmark they wanted an explanation in terms of humanity, not diabolism. And it was they who provided me with the first succinct definition of the Australian sexual problem. The plays, they said, seemed to be about frustrated and aggressive males pursuing frigid and negative women. Just how good a first approximation that is will become clear as we go along. But notice that there is a kind of chicken-and-egg dilemma to it. Are the women frigid because the men are coarse and aggressive? Or are the men frustrated because the women are negative?

The archetypal caricature of the male side of this of course is the luckless Bazza Mckenzie, the perpetual virgin who like the job-seeker in the advertisement, can't get a girlfriend because he lacks experience, and can't get experience because he lacks a girlfriend. On the female side, the negative attitudes of Australian women to sex are caricatured in Humphries' Dame Edna who has never seen her husband Norm out of his pyjamas, and can't imagine how any normal woman could want to. One must beware of building generalisations on popular caricatures, but the lack of open sexuality in Australian female writers is worth noting.

In the poem I quoted at the start we don't really need the reference to "fortune cookies" to tell us that this is an American poetess (Siv Cedering). Australian women-writers are much more inhibited, though Michele Nayman among the short story writers shows a full-bodied appetite for sex; and the heroine of Helen Garner's *Monkeygrip* shows a lovely serene assumption that sex can be ecstatic *even* when her relationship with the man is on the skids. But these are writers of a younger generation.

To return to Williamson: the question remained, how the sexes in Australia had got into the habit of treating each other so badly. Here again my students had an explanation ahead of me, but this time it was not one I was prepared to accept. They said that Australian men were so coarse, and the women so negative because Australia was a pioneering country with a great imbalance in the number of the sexes, and hence with all sorts of crude attitudes.

I opposed this very strongly. It's so much the naive European picture of Australia as the vast empty continent always grateful to take off Europe's surplus population. This is a view that was shamelessly propagandised during Australia's immigration-seeking years, and which no one bothered to undo after we wound our immigration policy down. I pointed out that except in certain migrant communities the proportions of the sexes had been normal for several generations; and that anyone who stands in the centre of one of our cities can see an endless parade of attractive and apparently sexy young women going past.

So why all these crude sexual attitudes?, the Danes asked. I had never really thought about it before. The best answer I could give them was that sexual competence is a little like V.D. —the ability to make love sensitively, skilfully, tenderly, inventively, audaciously, lovingly, in a word *well* is something that few people are born with. Most pick it up from someone they sleep with who's already got it. And obviously the more of it there is in the first place, and the more people swap partners, the faster it travels. The 50s, when many people went steady for years with the first person they took up with at a school dance, and then married them, were not a good time for skills to spread. That plus the remnants of a pioneering tradition that faded into a tougn military tradition whereby about once a generation (up to the 60s) the males were marched off to war, was my explanation.

I don't think my students were very happy with this, because the old myth of the imbalance of the sexes kept cropping up shamelessly in their papers. And I had to admit that a lot of evidence did suggest an imbalance. What else is one to make of

Stork in which the cast list of several men and only one woman, whom they all pursue, is clearly meant to represent the larger balance of men to women, or at least of sexually available men to sexually available women? Even stranger is David Ireland's *Glass Canoe* (another of our texts that year) which seemed to be saying that tens of thousands of ordinary men had reached a position which among women is reached only by the most extreme of heterosexual feminists: that of wishing to hell that their sexual fulfillment did not lie in the hands of such utterly impossible people. Yet notice how easily Meatman, the narrator, becomes besotted with a young woman who does respond to him, in the phrase of one of Williamson's characters, "in the way a man hopes a woman will respond to him." And the respect which is accorded to the barmaid who, without actually getting involved with anyone, at least makes it clear she knows where it's at. There is non-literary evidence too, that suggests Australian men will readily abandon their crude attitudes if only women will respond. Recently Adele Horin in her series of feature articles in the *National Times* on sex in Australia investigated the Sydney one-night-stand sub-group, and was surprised to find the ocker myth out of date. The men (like the women) were voluptuaries of course, but they prided themselves on their sexual sensitivity and skills. "Men want even a one-night stand to be a mutually enjoyable erotic experience, she concluded." (*National Times,* April 12 1981).

Why then do Australian males – or at least the subgroups of them Williamson writes about – seem to find interested females so scarce? One obvious answer is that they are looking for sex *outside* marriage, whereas the women may have been looking for it *within* marriage. This is particularly relevant to the late 50s and 60s, a time when male attitudes to sex were changing much more rapidly than female ones. These changes show up most clearly in the magazines. Men's magazines have been extremely sexy, at least since the war; and certainly by the early 60s men could find in those magazines endless images of the kind of women their biology told them they wanted – big, laughing, uninhibited, willing, and naked. Beside these creatures of fantasy, the attitudes of real women were bound to be disappointing. Women's attitudes were at least a decade slower to change than men's.

Men of course are comparatively simple creatures sexually. If they want, they want. They wear their sex on the outside, and have comparatively few fears and inhibitions about it, unless reared in a strongly puritan culture. To most men sex is as self-justifying an activity as eating; and though it's best done in the right company, it doesn't strictly have to be. Whereas for women sex is always in part about deciding to take the risk of getting pregnant; and feminine attitudes to sex characteristically run a scale between caution and fascination.

Hence the women's magazines were far more conservative; and it's been interesting to watch them changing in the 70s. The cover models are particularly important, their age, make-up and mood being precisely calculated to fit the age, interests, and sexual attitudes of the readership at which each is aimed. The current (August) edition of *Vogue* is one that all sociologists should buy. The cover carries only one word "Warm"; and though only the model's head is shown her expression leaves no doubt that she has something on her mind. This is an absolute reversal for *Vogue* whose models all through the 60s preached the notion of beauty as frigidity. *Vogue* beauty had nothing to do with anything so dirty as sex: its women were frigid bitch goddessess, wealthily arrogant; and presumably it was aimed at readers who identified with that image. But women have changed, and magazines must follow. Frigidity is out of fashion.

We are now in a world where one of Williamson's characters can be believed when she claims that

> "if you total up the column inches devoted to it in all the glossies around the world, the female orgasm is responsible for the destruction of thirty-two million hectares of pine forest per annum."

--a detail carefully dropped in to set the milieu of *A Handful of Friends* (p. 15).

But of course back in the late 50s such things were scarcely talked about, and the two sexes knew little of each other's differences. Women got into endless troubles by assuming that men had similar inhibitions and parental instincts to themselves; while men often naively assumed that if they had a

natural instinct to penetrate a woman's genitals, and if women also had sexual feelings, then women too must have a natural desire to be penetrated. They were amazed to find that many women found the idea just as neurotic-making as a man would. But in those days, once you stepped off the duckboards of conventional sexual puritanism, there was simply no guidance. The sex manuals then were "marriage manuals," – single people simply weren't meant to have sex; and anyway the manuals did little more than recommend love and vasoline. A lot of what has passed since for male crassness was simply naivety, fiddling around in the dark, looking for kinds of feminine response that didn't exist. There wasn't even a women's lib movement to bawl you out for missing the point.

The world of *A Handful of Friends* is very different from this. But it is a play written by Williamson in his forties, and about another decade. In the plays he wrote while younger the issue of female frigidity is constantly surfacing, and often associated with an argument as to whether or not it is psychosomatic.

In *The Department,* a play about an all-male Engineering Department, the only time a man and woman are together alone the dialogue runs like this:

MYRA: How's your wife?
ROBBY: The specialists still haven't found anything.
MYRA: How many have you taken her to?
ROBBY: Three.
MYRA: What are you going to do?
ROBBY: Take her to another.
MYRA: Do you think that's wise?
ROBBY: Probably not.
MYRA: There's obviously nothing organically wrong with her.
ROBBY: I know.
MYRA: Do you think it's worth her talking to . . . someone?
ROBBY: A psychiatrist?
MYRA: I'm not suggesting she's –
ROBBY: I don't need a psychiatrist to tell me what's wrong with her. She hates my guts. That's what's wrong with her. Charlie's wife paid him out by hanging herself in his toolshed, so I suppose I can count myself lucky.
MYRA: There must be a reason for it.

ROBBY: Of course there's a reason for it. I've neglected her all my life. When we were setting up this lab about fifteen years ago I slept on a couch in my office for over a week. See that Tangye? That was built in 1872.

At least Robbo knows what caused his wife's frigidity. But which came first, the cold wife or the indifferent husband? Sometimes the issue is half suppressed. *Jugglers Three* is a play about two men competing for a super-attractive woman. To this end one of them, Neville, leaves his nice but apparently unexciting wife, Elizabeth. Their sex-life is mentioned only briefly when in the middle of a quarrel Elizabeth suddenly offers a reconciliation, which is instantly rejected with a groan:

NEVILLE: Elizabeth!
ELIZABETH: It's not as if our marriage is hopeless.
NEVILLE: Of course it wasn't hopeless.
ELIZABETH: I know I was a bit prudish about sex but I've bought this book . . .
NEVILLE: It's not the sex!
ELIZABETH: (*flaring*) Well, what is it?

It seems like a matter of too little too late; but she gets him back in the end.

In *What If You Died Tomorrow?* it is a son who confronts his mother with the fact that her puritan fierceness and neurotic behaviour to him and his father over the years is the result of her frigidity. I'll come back to this one later.

The Removalists is a play about police brutality. Looked at more closely it proves to have a sexual spring. The trouble comes when a police-sergeant, asked to arbitrate between husband and wife, conspires with the wife in the hope of free sex in return. Once again the background is a sexually dead marriage. "I had to stay away from my wife for years. She had 27 kidney fits." Most of the Sergeant's mixed and hypocritical attitudes to women flow from this situation. The clue to how important the sexual theme is comes at the moment when he loses control and starts beating the husband, Kenny, while still shouting about the importance of self-control. What precipitates it is Kenny's revelation, amounting to a taunt, that he can get

more sex from his wife even in the break-up of their marriage than the Sergeant has achieved in all of his. In a situation of sexual scarcity, access to sex gets tangled up with status, and even becomes a form of conspicuous consumption.

The play has a macabre ending when Kenny, unaware that his head injuries are fatal, spends his last minutes trading his promise of silence against the Sergeant's promise to get him the services of some prostitutes to tide him over the lean period after his wife leaves. Male crassness and female frigidity are entwined themes in the play.

The plot of *The Club*, another play set in a largely male world, hinges partly on the naive optimism with which some Australian males read sexual signals, looking for a response from the female that isn't there. Ted, the Club President is forced to resign after he assaults a stripper whose professional advances he took as real:

LAURIE: The stripper at the fund raising night?
TED: I didn't hit her. It's a load of trumped up garbage. If the Committee sticks with me, we'll see it through.
LAURIE: I thought you only fumbled with her garter?
GERRY: He followed her around backstage.
TED: She egged me on all through her act, Laurie. Eyed me off, stroked my hair, asked me to take off her garter – played the vamp for all she was worth, but then when I went around backstage she switched it all off and treated me as if I was dirt under her feet.

(p. 58)

In the sex-sodden world of *Don's Party* the problem of imbalance between the sexes is repeatedly mentioned:

JUDY: Mal'd go off his head [*sc. If she had an affair*]
SUSAN: What about him? He's been trying to pick something up all night.
JUDY: Men are always trying to pick up something. It's in their makeup.
SUSAN: It's in our makeup too.
JUDY: Yes, but we can control it better.

(p. 80)

Though earlier the double standard seemed capable of working the other way:

SUSAN: . . . Do you often get strongly attracted to someone?
KATH: Not often.
SUSAN: I do. I don't quite know how to handle it.
KATH: So I've noticed.
SUSAN: The average man under thirty-five gets a sexual thought every five minutes. Did you know that?
KATH: No.
SUSAN: The average woman gets one every two hours. I think I must be oversexed.
KATH: Mmmm.
SUSAN: When you think about it though, men are really inadequate. A turned-on woman could cope with ten men but I'd like to see the man who could cope with ten women.

There are uncertainties too in *Jugglers Three*. It is clear that Neville has left his wife Elizabeth for the glamorous Keren partly because of Elizabeth's prudishness; but Keren's husband Graham raises his eyebrows at Neville's suggestion that he has found sexual fulfilment with Keren. Later Keren and Graham argue out their own sexual difficulties:

GRAHAM: I believe your sex life has been flourishing?
KEREN: Do you find that surprising?
GRAHAM: Yes.
KEREN: Good.
GRAHAM: I realise I must be a terribly ineffectual lover. The fact that half the women in Carlton thought otherwise is immaterial.
KEREN: If half the women in Carlton enjoy being breached by a battering ram then that's their business.
GRAHAM: Battering ram? My God. I had to eulogise every square inch of your body for half an hour before I was allowed to have an erection!
KEREN: You were the one who insisted on the eulogies. The day after I met you you presented me with the complete works of John Donne. You weren't looking for a woman. You wanted a goddess!
GRAHAM: You found the role pretty much to your taste.
(p. 130)

Here it is clear that the doctrine of point of view applies: we have not enough information to resolve the argument at either the general or particular level. On the one hand some males are clumsy and aggressive in bed. On the other, mild frigidity in the female often takes the form of perverse fussiness about time, place and technique. (As Erica Jong demonstrated in *How to Save Your Own Life,* the statement "I'd come if you did it right" is no more to be believed than "The cheque's in the mail" or "I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help you.") And in the particular case we do not know what percentage of the truth either character is telling, or suppressing. All very true to life!

But Williamson's most relentless investigation of sexual imbalance comes in the Oedipal confrontation in *What If You Died Tomorrow?* In this scene Ken and Irene, an elderly middle-class couple return from an extended cruise to find that their only child, Andrew, has abandoned his medical practice to seek success as a writer. Worse still, he has abandoned his wife Meredith and their children to live with another women who has children of her own. Forced to accept the new woman's hospitality, the parents seize their first moment alone with Andrew to take him to task:

KEN: Do you think you've done the right thing, son?
ANDREW: I think so.
IRENE: What's behind it all? Sex?
ANDREW: Partly.
IRENE: Well, I hope that you can explain that to your children when they're old enough to know why you walked out on them.
KEN: Cut it out, Irene.
IRENE: (*emotionally*) Well, it's pretty weak, that's all I can say. Pretty weak when a man leaves his children simply because he isn't getting enough of what he wants in bed. You ought to be horsewhipped!
KEN: He didn't say it was the only reason.
IRENE: I know what Meredith had to go through. You don't, but I do. I've got her letters right here.
KEN: What letters?
IRENE: Never mind.
KEN: What letters are you talking about?

IRENE: Never mind. She wrote to me when it happened. (*Weeping*) I didn't show you. It would've killed you. Killed you.

KEN: What would've killed me?

IRENE: Two days before they were married he took some girl up to a house in the mountains and spent the weekend with her. It would've killed you.

KEN: That's a bit much, son.

IRENE: (*emotionally*) I know a lot more besides that. A lot more.

KEN: I don't want to hear it.

(p. 172)

Much of the richness of the subtext here depends on the parents' awareness that if sexual fulfilment justified abandoning one's partner and children, then they themselves would have split up. Each time Irene veers towards using their own case as example Ken dissociates himself from her argument. Only at the end when she had gone will he raise his own gentler version of it. The scene continues:

IRENE: I wouldn't tell you. I wouldn't tell anyone. Meredith walked into his surgery and found him having relations with a seventeen year old patient. It would've killed you.

KEN: It probably would've.

IRENE: She could've had him struck off the register.

KEN: That's bit much, son.

ANDREW: She was nineteen and she was my receptionist.

IRENE: Does that make it any better?

ANDREW: No. I would've preferred the seventeen year old.

IRENE: Listen to him. Listen to him. He just thinks it's all one big joke. You just get back to your family right away while Meredith will still have you. Your father and I had problems, but he didn't leave me.

KEN: That's got nothing to do with it.

IRENE: He wouldn't walk out and leave you without a father. He had some sense of responsibility.

KEN: That has got nothing to do with it.

IRENE: You just get back to Meredith straight away.

ANDREW: (*still building*) Shut up!

(IRENE *moves across in a fury and tweaks his ear viciously. She grits her teeth and appears to obtain some gratification from the action.*)

IRENE: Don't you tell your mother to shut up. Don't you dare tell your mother to shut up.

(ANDREW *grimaces in pain and looks sourly resigned. He keeps building.*)

Get back to your children.

ANDREW: Get to hell!

IRENE: (*letting go his ear*) Don't you tell me to get to hell. I know what's going on around here. (*Producing the note from the message tin*) Split your head with an axe. These children don't want you, that's obvious.

KEN: It's probably a bit hard for them to understand.

IRENE: Yes, well it's a bit hard for me to understand too. (*To* ANDREW) (I've been on this earth longer than you have, my boy, and I'll tell you one thing. Sex isn't everything. Sex doesn't plan ahead and make sure there's always something in those kitchen cupboards. Sex doesn't take a pride in the place and make sure it isn't looking like a pigsty. Sex doesn't—

ANDREW: (*loudly*) Are you obsessed with sex or something? It's all you bloody well ever talk about. I can remember when I first started taking girls out I'd come home and you'd be sitting up waiting for me in a pink dressing gown with your teeth out and your hair in rollers, howling wild accusations at me through your gums.

KEN: It was your mother's troubled time, Andrew.

ANDREW: It was mine too. Christ. At least most mothers had the decency to divert their Oedipal hangups into something constructive like bottling fruit or baking scones. I got the bloody lot. What kind of sex life did you two have?

IRENE: Don't you dare ask your mother questions like that.

ANDREW: What kind of sex life did you have?

In the normal course of events Andrew's taboo question would receive the same rebuke again, but Williamson cleverly sets the parents at cross purposes:

KEN: (*embarrassed*) Your mother had a, er, medical problem, son. It made things very difficult.

IRENE: (*emotionally*) Yes, and your father didn't walk out and leave us both. He didn't take the easy way out!

ANDREW: What in the hell was wrong?

KEN: (*embarrassed*) Well the, er, doctor said it was, er, sort of mental thing.

IRENE: I wasn't mental. That was nothing to do with it. There was something wrong and it wasn't my fault.

KEN: I didn't say you were mental. I said it had mental origins.

IRENE: There was something wrong with my nerves.

ANDREW: For Christ's sake. What were the symptoms?

KEN: Your mother got, er, very tense. In, er, her middle regions.

ANDREW: Dyspareunia.

KEN: Dys . . . what?

ANDREW: Dyspareunia. (*Quoting*) "A contraction of the vaginal musculature making penile penetration difficult if not impossible. Almost certainly due to psychological causes." Christ, how long did this go on?

IRENE: Ever since I was married. There was something wrong with my nerves.

ANDREW: (*throwing blocks at random targets around room*) Christ. Why me? Piss off, you mad old crone, and stop bothering the shit out of me.

IRENE (*to* KEN) I told you he needed a break.

* * * *

(The noise from the children increases.)

ANDREW: I'd better go and see to those kids.

IRENE: (*half-tearful*) I'll go and attend to them. They sound like they could do with some discipline.

(IRENE *starts to climb the stairs to the loft. The noise stops.)*

KEN: Don't underestimate your mother, Andrew. She's got her faults but the household always ran like clockwork, and she made every sacrifice for you.

Ken loses doubly. Not only is his wife frigid, but her blocked sex drive provides the hysterical and obsessive energies she uses to dominate him. There is a fascinating interplay here between the sardonic son, the Oedipal mother, and the father who though reduced to a kind of psychic eunuch has too much

decency to see the loss of his own sex life as justifying the restriction of his son's.

Most people respond to this kind of writing; yet the critics have had terrible problems in classifying it. It feels like realism; and yet far too much happens and too quickly for ordinary realism. It's not just that the dreaded secrets of a lifetime are extracted in a ten-minute exchange: the whole scene seems to have been sharpened, almost like a revue script, into a series of comic points.

The playwright Peter Kenna remarked to me on seeing this play that though the mother is a wonderful character Williamson seems unable to resist giving her a series of Edna Everage-style punchlines: things like "Sex doesn't plan ahead and make sure there's always something in those kitchen cupboards." Kenna *ought* to be right. It's usually only rank amateurs who try to mix comic exaggerations with sensitive delineation of character. The extraordinary thing is that most of the time Williamson gets away with it. He has invented a new form of drama that is not so much realism as what ought to be called Super-realism. One could say of all his plays what Philip Parsons has said in a more limited sense of *Travelling North*: "that each scene . . . is to be inspected and registered as in some sense exemplary" (p. viii).

Williamson's representations of individual characters are also in a sense statements about Australian society in general. He has an almost journalistic instinct for the jugular. It was almost inevitable that he would write a play about a sporting club, almost inevitable (granted where fanaticism runs highest) that he would choose Melbourne and Australian Rules, almost necessary that the Club would be Collingwood, and highly likely that the Carmen episode would surface.

It is this element of heightened satirical realism that so confuses the London critics of Williamson's plays. They mistake it for their own straightforward realism; so that instead of judging the play against prior knowledge of the culture they use it as evidence about the culture from which it came. Williamson's story of hearing two British gentlemen walk out of *Don's Party*

in London remarking "What a perfect example of why we can't stand the bastards" illustrates the point exactly. It is like taking Edna Everage as the plain truth about the Australian housewife.

This is one of the risks of Williamson's super-realism. It is a finely-balanced form that perhaps could only have been invented by a former revue-script writer, one accustomed to sharpening every scene to a comic point, and working with an audience trained to enjoy the shock of recognition. But once invented, the style seems likely to last. And it is a peculiarly effective medium for exploring issues like "The Australian Sexual Problem."

To show just how effective, I'll examine one of the plays that so intrigued my Danish class: *The Coming of Stork*. This, as I've mentioned, is an early play which many people vaguely remember as a crude and even adolescent one. I think a look at it will show that what is crude and adolescent is the sexual material it deals with: Williamson's observation of Australian realities and the dramatic art with which he deploys them are as fine as elsewhere.

Stork is the play in which Williamson most directly confronts the sexual imbalance of Australian society. How to represent such a large, almost statistical issue in a single plot with only a handful of characters? Williamson has two answers. The first is to show the competition among the males to possess Anna, who can never satisfy them all. But though Anna is relentlessly desired, her charms are in no way romanticised. She is simply a pretty girl who happens to be, as she puts it, "wired up the right way." She thus becomes what Mal in *Don's Party* describes as "a sought-after commodity"; and the uniformity with which the men pursue her tells us all we need to know about their unseen female friends who are not so correctly "wired up."

The other solution to the problem is the character of Stork himself. Stork is Williamson's more contemporary answer to Humphries's Bazza Mackenzie. Like Bazza, Stork is a type of the frustrated Australian male. He is an intelligent, gangling adolescent who desperately needs a woman but is so obsessed with his failures and so ill-at-ease with the opposite sex that, as one of his friends puts it, he couldn't interest a deaf-and-dumb

nymphomaniac. But where Bazza fully deserves the rejections he receives, Stork does not. Williamson's stroke of genius was to make Stork's problem largely physical, an extreme tallness approaching physical deformity. We are thus unable to withdraw sympathy from Stork's problems in the way we do from Bazza's; and a different kind of comedy results.

The realities of adolescent male sexuality with its incessant ejaculations, wet-dreams, and near-constant erections are very much as depicted more recently in the film *Devil's Playground*; and of course they had long been described in technical literature. But Williamson was I think the first to bring them honestly into drama. In the following scene Stork meets Anna at night in the house he shares with a friend she has been sleeping with. They talk. Anna is interested in turning Stork into a sexless confidant. Stork is interested in Anna's black-lace negligee—so much so that he comes spontaneously while talking to her:

ANNA: What's the matter?
STORK: I just fired off.
ANNA: You just . . . ?

(She looks at him incredulously.)

STORK: (*defending himself*) It's been a long time between drinks.
ANNA: Stork.
STORK: I've got a fetish for black lace.
ANNA: I was confiding in you.
STORK: Most of me was listening, but my dick wouldn't play ball.
ANNA: I'm going to bed.
STORK: Well, what do you expect when you go poking a set of lungs like that under my nose?
ANNA: Haven't you ever seen breasts before?
STORK: Of course I have.
ANNA: Then why do you behave like that?
STORK: I'm oversexed.
ANNA: You probably didn't listen to a word I said, did you?
STORK: I'll be able to concentrate better now.
ANNA: (*still angry*) I don't confide in everyone, you know, in fact I don't confide in anyone, but if you're going to have to . . . fire off before I get any sense out of you, then I may as

well keep my problems to myself.
STORK: You were saying that you've got an older friend.
ANNA: (*after a pause*) Yes.
STORK: Mmm.
ANNA: He's a real sweetie, yet there's so many things I admire about Clyde. . . .

* * * *

ANNA: I bet you're Pisces.
STORK: Yeah. I think I am.
ANNA: I'm Virgo.
STORK: Shit, eh? Is that good?
ANNA: It means we can develop a very meaningful relationship. On a cerebral level.
STORK: On a cerebral level.
ANNA: Mmm.
STORK: I'd rather we developed a more . . . total relationship. It's not always a good idea to divorce the mind from the body.
ANNA: Let's stick to our stars.
STORK: Bugger our stars.
ANNA: (*fending him off*) I've got two total relationships already.
STORK: How about we kick off with a quick total relationship and drift into something more cerebral tomorrow?
ANNA: Stork. You're nothing but an opportunist.

(STORK *looks abashed.*)

It's about time you stopped seeing me as a pair of tits and started seeing me as a person.
STORK: I do.
ANNA: Lust is all very well, but I'd value something else occasionally.
STORK: Right.
ANNA: Can you see that?
STORK: Yes.
ANNA: If you want to give me something, Stork, give me empathy.
STORK: Right.

(Pause.)

ANNA: I'd better go back inside. Bye.

STORK: Bye. (*After she leaves*) Empathy. I'll give you more than empathy, you little trollop. Cerebral relationship. What good's a bloody cerebral relationship? What good's any bloody relationship to a man with clogged arteries?

(pp. 26-28)

From Stork's point of view it must seem that Anna has offered him what he desperately needs on condition that he lies about his feelings for her. From Anna's point of view she has been very patient with yet another man who pushes for sex when what she needs is friendship.

One is struck again by Williamson's eye for the reality of Australian society. All through the 50s and 60s hundreds of thousands of Australian males were taking girls out each evening, spending huge amounts of time and precious money on the exercise, and being fobbed off at the end with just such nonsense about cerebral and total friendships by girls who were either uninterested or afraid of sexual relationships. And no one had prevously thought of it as the material of drama.

Once again the qualities of Williamson's super-realism are evident. The scene maintains the almost leisurely air of a realistic confrontation between two specific individuals. Yet it is also the epitome of thousands of such confrontations, and of entire relationships.

In fact it is a characteristic of Williamson's mode that he uses enormous amounts of thematic material. An idea that Ibsen or Chekhov would have expanded into an entire play will be disposed of in half a scene. The sprawling themes of *What If You Died Tomorrow?* – including pollution, marihuana, Oedipal tensions, the pressures on the creative writer, feminism, bohemianism, and even the mortality theme implied in the title – would have made three or four plays for most writers. Yet the compression is brilliant. What could be more powerful than the vignette at the end when the son, alone with his father asks one last question, this time very gently?:

KEN: Mind you, your mother's a fine woman in lots of ways. I always had clean shirts.

ANDREW: (*still building*) How did you manage for so many

years without sex?

KEN: (*very embarassed*) Oh, er, we, er . . . Your mother often helped me out.

ANDREW: (*irritated by the sadness of it*) Why didn't you separate?

KEN: It wasn't so easy in those days, son.

(p. 205)

In that short exchange one feels not only the present relationship of father and son, but behind it the immense sexual desert of the father's life, and beyond that the experience of all those other Australian men who found themselves trapped in sexless marriages they never anticipated, and went on with them for the sake of their wives and children).

Stork, unlike Bazza is not incurable. But before we see what Anna might do for him, we have to be shown the enormous pressures that prevent Stork approaching women. This is done primarily in the scene where Stork has the opportunity to approach some nurses at a party, but is unable to enter the room.

One of the hardest things for an adolescent like Stork to understand is that he can rarely make a frankly sexual approach to a strange woman. And this business of talking about other things instead, as Anna made him do, is a real problem for his gauche yet idealistic temperament. Hence his obsessive fear of "running out of conversation":

WEST: There's a party on in there. Go and con yourself a bird.

STORK: I'll go when I'm ready, West.

WEST: You're always telling us how desperate you are for it, and when it's there you stand out here in the kitchen.

STORK: I'm having a drink.

WEST: Do you think a giant vagina is going to float in here on the breeze?

STORK: I'm having a drink.

WEST: Or perhaps your animal magnetism is going to suck the birds out into the kitchen.

STORK: Piss off.

WEST: Well, come on now. You must reckon something is going to happen?

STORK: Piss off.
WEST: Put in some effort, man!
STORK: Later.
WEST: Later's not good enough.
STORK: It's no good making your move too early.
WEST: Why?
STORK: It's bad strategy.
WEST: Bad strategy? I didn't think you had any strategy.
STORK: If you make your move too early you run out of conversation and some other bastard steps in.
WEST: What a load of crap.

* * * *

STORK: She probably doesn't even fuck.
WEST: Bullshit. She's a nurse. Mick Masters brought along half a dozen.
STORK: Yeah?
WEST: Yeah.
STORK: Half a dozen.
WEST: There's still a couple left, so bloody well get in there and get amongst it.

(STORK *starts to move off, but loses courage and goes back to his bottle.*)

STORK: Later.
WEST: Jesus, you're a coward, Stork.
STORK: I'll just have a few more drinks.

(WEST *is disgusted. He goes to the door and calls* CLYDE.)
(p. 29)

Stork holds out with commendable strength, but eventually gives in to the pressures of his male friends, and marches off to predictable humiliation. It is a cruel scene, full of familiar realities. I can remember from my own undergraduate days in Newman College, an all-male College at Melbourne University, the enormous pressures we put on friends who refused to find a woman and come to the College ball – many, I realise with a retrospective twinge of conscience, were either not heterosexual or were simply terrified of further rejections. Not that the male peer-pressure was based on ignorance of these fears; it was rather a matter of spurring each other on to do what had to be

done. Stork's friends know that he has no real alternative to entering that deadly no-man's-land of the party where nurses are waiting to be "conned."

Before going on to the conclusion of *Stork* I had better make some final comments about the sexual imbalance in Australia in the pre- and extra-marital world of the 60s and 70s. It will be clear that Australia was a country where male sexuality was devalued by oversupply. Even today of course, male sexual skills, however much appreciated within established relationships, have almost no market value. Yet a top-class call-girl (one, that is, who has empathy and imagination as well as looks) can make herself $200,000 a year without working particularly hard. Men don't enjoy being exploited in sex any more than elsewhere (probably less); so it is clear that these staggering profits correspond to vast resources of male sexual desperation, and of course to many thousands of sexually cool wives and girl-friends.

What caused this imbalance? A full answer would turn this literary lecture into a sociological tome. I'll mention just a few of the most obvious reasons.

First, the imbalance was age-related. Men reach their sexual peak in their teens; but women prefer older men. Even today the editors of Silhouette romances for women lay it down in their brochure that the hero must be "8 to 10 years older than the heroine" and confident and self-assured. In the world of Conan Doyle's late-Victorian romances a man of forty was considered an excellent match for a girl of twenty. (One may suspect that such matches were seen as a way of equalising the balance between male and female sex-drive: young men being left to resolve their problems as best they could.) Hollywood films directed women's romantic interests not towards the qualities (like athletic superiority or sexual stamina) in which young men excel, but towards the social poise and implausible intuition of the older stars. Even the early pop-stars were surprisingly old – one reason why the Beatles were such an important change.

Not only did women prefer older men, but many did not

start their sex lives until they themselves were comparatively old. Anyone who makes a habit (as I do) of talking to people about their sex lives soon discovers how many women who were adolescents in the 50s and 60s remained virgins until well into their twenties, and also how many of those who did marry young tell you that they never really enjoyed sex until they were thirty or more. All too often the discovery of sexual fulfilment came only after the marriage was already destroyed. And of course the thirty-year-old divorcee usually had the custody of small children to restrict her sex life.

The fact is that in our society the sexual dice are heavily loaded against the younger man and the older woman. Especially in the 60s this led to a quite different pattern for the sexes. Attractive girls tended not to value, or even to resent sexual offers because they received so many. *Their* frustrations came later in life. Men on the other hand began their sex lives, unless they were very lucky, with a period of intense frustration. (Obviously this is true of other cultures also. I remember hearing a Dutch woman complain loudly of the way "Men always seem to think they've missed out," and her husband answering softly, "Because they have, my dear. They have.") The full extent of sexual frustration among Australian men in the 60s and 70s may never be known, because male pride prevents its disclosure, in the same way as feminine pride once made women refuse to admit to unhappy marriages.

The whole issue of age and sex is extremely interesting in Williamson's plays because he is known to be a very autobiographical writer. He is far too skilled a craftsman for events in his plays to be naively identified with those in real life; but we are certainly at liberty to speculate that changes in his own sexual situation as he grew older correspond to the steady way the sexual advantage in his plays moves from female to male. The sequence begins with Stork who, like Bazza Mackenzie, couldn't get a girl "if it was raining sheilas", and moves to the world of *Don's Party* where sex is available constantly to most of the women, but only intermittently to the men. In *Juggler's Three* we have again the situation of two men competing for the attractive woman; but for the first time there is heavy emphasis too on the fate of the less sexy wife who has been rejected: —

reminding us that women may suffer more (and longer) than men from the effects of sexual imbalance.

In *The Removalists* the women are more sexually responsive, though the men still wind up frustrated. But in *What If You Died Tomorrow?* the hero has more sexual offers than he can use, yet like a peasant who has lived through the potato famine can never resist another sack of potatoes when it's offered. When Carmel asks him why he wants to make love to her when he's perfectly happy with his wife, she gets the only possible answer: "Because I'm a moral imbecile." In fact Andrew's difficulty in keeping up even with his wife's demands becomes clear in the opening scene when she tries to sit on his lap:

ANDREW: You're heavy.
KIRSTY: I'm not heavy.
ANDREW: You're cutting off my circulation.
KIRSTY: I'm getting disillusioned with you. You didn't even make love to me last night.
ANDREW: I'm run down. That virus killed thousands in Europe.
KIRSTY: When we first started living together, we used to spend half the night making love.
ANDREW: I know. I've never fully recovered. Will you get off my knee?

(p. 149)

In *A Handful of Friends* the imbalance becomes even clearer:

WENDY: Why is our relationship important to you, Russell?
RUSSELL: I love you. That's why. If you want to know the truth, the physical side of our relationship is much better than anything I've achieved casually.
WENDY: Then why do you keep repeating the pattern?
RUSSELL: Because I like sex. I'm not very good at it but I like it. It's one of life's splendid ironies. I'm not very good at it, am I?
WENDY: It's not a very important question.
RUSSELL: I'm not, am I? I get so excited that I either slow down and become terribly boring or my cup runneth over. So much of human behaviour is attributed to metaphysics and the indefinable but I've got a sneaking suspicion that a lot of it has to do with such mundane matters as the density of nerve ends around the glans penis.

WENDY: Living with you is often quite depressing.

(pp. 8-9)

Here the titter that Wendy's last sally draws from the audience makes the point that in her eyes Russell's unromantic attitudes are more of a problem than his physical inability to perform. It seems that men and women still feel differently about sex, even when the balance of desire is reversed.

Finally, in *Travelling North* we find a 70-year-old man enjoying a vigorously consummated extra-marital relationship with a 55-year-old woman; and the memory of the great Australian frigid marriage has receded so far into the background that it shows only in Frank's lingering hostility to marriage, and in this brief reminiscence with his daughter:

FRANK: Let me finish. I want to explain something to you so that you don't judge me too harshly. I married your mother at twenty-two when she was only nineteen, and we were both very much in love, but unfortunately we were both almost totally naive, so that when I grabbed her passionately and, I must admit, clumsily, on our wedding night, she was so shocked that she turned to me and said, 'Don't ever do that again,' and unfortunately she meant it. Now it wasn't my fault and it wasn't hers, it was due to the general ignorance of the times . . .

(p. 55)

Age, then—or rather ageism—was a major factor in the Australian sexual imbalance. I'll mention only two others. The first is what might be called male fetishism. All researchers agree that males are much more easily conditioned not only to obvious fetishes like rubber and flagellation, but also to things we hardly recognise as fetishes because they shade into preferences: things like long blonde hair, regular features, large breasts etc. To criticise such preferences as irrational might be pointless. We are dealing with an instinct, not a syllogism. But men's preferences are certainly more easily channelled by fashion; and at the same time men are much more fussy than women about body shape. (Women are much kinder about physical defects, much less about personality ones.) The upshot is that men of all shapes

and sizes tend to run after women of only a few shapes and sizes—which is unfair to women. It also means that men artificially exaggerate the sexual shortage, bypassing the responsive woman who is the wrong shape in favour of the unresponsive one who is conventionally pretty.

The second factor was what sociologists sometimes call the multiplier effect. In a situation of sexual scarcity small differences between the sexes become magnified. This can most easily be seen by looking at the reverse process, which was represented in the 60s by the musical *Hair*. As sex became less of a problem to the younger generation the sexes began to come together, and not merely in hair-length. Girls, losing their inhibitions, became less "feminine" in behaviour and started to look for sex in the same frank way as men; while men, finding sex now freely available, became gentler, less possessive, fussier in their choice of sexual partners, and like females more concerned with building a loving relationship than with immediate relief from frustration. In society at large the reverse happened. Femininity was kept as distant as possible from masculinity; and a woman's self-image all too often involved negativity to sex in any form more blatant than that shown on the screen. This meant disappointments galore for husbands and boyfriends; and of course produced a strong ground-note of misogyny in masculine society. (Feminist authors often mistake this for "male-chauvinism," i.e., unwarranted aggression against females as such. Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* complacently adds to her list of male vices the claim that men idolise their mothers while resenting women of nubile age. If her indignation had allowed space for lateral thinking she might have reflected that perhaps men, poor simple creatures that they are, tend to respond lovingly to those they feel have treated them well, and negatively to those they feel have not.)

But strange misunderstandings could also occur when a woman was *not* in fact as sexually negative as convention made her pretend. This is really the plot of *Stork* where Anna, as we have seen, goes through the motions of refusing men on the grounds that she does not have a "total relationship" with them. The men, having heard this from dozens of women, believe it. The problem is that Anna doesn't. She is neither cold

nor unkind, and sooner or later, somewhere between kindness and desire, will sleep with all the men in her circle. When she does all hell breaks loose, because men who would not themselves equate a good fuck with being in love, assume that Anna does. Finding a woman who not only goes to bed with them, but actually responds in bed "in the way a man hopes a woman will respond to him," they assume they have made an enormous hit. In fact they proceed to fall in love with her themselves, anticipating a lifetime of sexual ecstasy that will more than make up for Anna's lack of intelligence. Only gradually do they learn that Anna is not in love with them, merely "wired up the right way." Here is Stork finding out:

STORK: Did you fake it!
ANNA: No. Of course not.
STORK: Then what are you talking about!
ANNA: I, er, never have much, er, trouble.
STORK: Never have much trouble?
ANNA: It's, er, pretty easy for me to, er, respond.
STORK: So it was nothing to do with the feeling between us?
ANNA: Of course it was.
STORK: And nothing to do with my virility?
ANNA: Of course it was.
STORK: Pretty easy.
ANNA: I must be wired up the right way.

(p. 39)

Thus far the comedy is of a fairly simple sort, based on Stork's naivety and on reversal of sex roles. But Williamson is preparing for a far more powerful scene towards the end of the play. By now the four young men have all slept with Anna. They are sitting around in their flat playing cards when a total stranger appears at the door. This is an older man, Anna's boss, who has also fallen in love with her. His own sexual history is much like that reported by Frank. His wife turned out to be frigid; but he accepted the situation and tried to retain the marriage. (This might seem like weakness now, but in those days people took very seriously their promise to stay together "for better or for worse." It was a sort of bet you made with the Almighty: if you drew a dud card you paid with good grace.)

Anna's boss has managed for years to smother his need for sex, telling himself that it is not a mature possibility of life. But he is still vulnerable. When Anna demonstrates that fulfilment *is* possible he lunges after it, and in doing so is lost. Like Will in Aldous Huxley's *Island* he is destroyed by the clash between what he needs and what he has promised. In a perverse attempt at integrity he tells his wife and children he is leaving, even before making certain that Anna will have him. Then, believing that Clyde is Anna's brother rather than her lover, he proceeds to confess to him.

The scene is remarkable not only for its ironies but for a brilliant super-realist technique whereby the young males who begin with stiff coolness towards the "square" businessman gradually warm to him as they realise his experience of feminine frigidity matches their own. By this means Williamson tells us more about their sexual history than a whole series of explicit scenes could convey:

ALAN: I was just saying to the fellas that you can live for appearances for years and years and wake up to find your life's half over. I've had a bad marriage.

CLYDE: Mmm.

ALAN: Not so much bad perhaps as untruthful. No, not really untruthful either. Uneasy. Mmm.

WEST: Have another beer.

(He pours him one.)

ALAN: Can I speak frankly, Clyde?

CLYDE: Go right ahead.

ALAN: (*relaxing, becoming expansive*) I know you're not too happy about this, Clyde, and what I'm going to say will probably make you angrier, but it's something that must be said if you're going to understand the situation. I don't think the physical side of a relationship is indicative of anything in itself, but I think its success or otherwise indicates something more basic. Would you agree?

CLYDE: Yes.

ALAN: You don't mind if I'm frank?

CLYDE: No.

ALAN: My wife has never responded to me in the way a man hopes a woman will respond to him. Do you understand what

I'm trying to say?

WEST: You couldn't make her come.

ALAN: (*momentarily startled, then relaxing*) Yes. Why not be frank! (*Louder, laughing, slightly drunk*) The bitch never came. Never. Lay there with her lip curled and never moved.

WEST: (*pouring him another beer*) And said, "Get it over quickly"?

ALAN: (*laughing raucously*) That's right. That's exactly right. Do you know what she reminded me of? An embalmed corpse.

WEST: All right if you're a necrophiliac, but not so good for a red-blooded male.

ALAN: Couldn't express it better myself. All right if you're a necrophiliac but not so good if you're a red-blooded male. My God. I'm glad I came here and talked to you fellas.

* * * * *

ALAN (*speaking of Anna*) . . . The first time I . . . Look, I wasn't brought up in this modern age of permissiveness, so I haven't had all that much experience with women, and I'd be the last to claim that I was a sexual athlete, but the very first time I . . . it all just worked and I think that says something about the relationship. The very first time.

(*There is a pause.* WEST *pours* ALAN *a beer.*)

STORK: Go home to your wife and kids, you stupid prick!

(pp. 42-48)

The scene ends, paradoxically because Stork, who still thinks he has a chance with Anna, is alarmed by the developing rapport between Alan and the others.

No sooner has Alan learned that Clyde is also Anna's lover than she arrives with the news that she is pregnant – and wilfully so:

ANNA: And now let's make the scene really heavy. I'm pregnant.

(*There is a pause. The men look at each other.*)

CLYDE: Pregnant?

ANNA: That's right.
CLYDE: But you're on the pill.
ANNA: I stopped.
CLYDE: You stopped? Why, for God's sake?
ANNA: Work it out for yourself.
ALAN: Anna. You don't just stop taking the pill. This is going to make things extremely awkward. Why did you stop?
ANNA: (*loudly*) I don't know!
ALAN: (*loudly*) There's no need to raise your voice!
ANNA: (*loudly*) I'm not raising my voice.

(p. 49)

"Why, for God's sake?" – There speaks the outraged voice of male rationalism. A man goes to immense trouble to set up a sexual relationship on a basis of rational hedonism, and to find the woman with whom this is possible, only to discover that she is just like all the others who want marriage and children. Inevitably a marriage is arranged between Anna and her main boyfriend Clyde. Anna's sexual generosity, which has caused so much mayhem, is henceforth confined to lucky Clyde.

But is Clyde lucky? The truth is that the marriage is so ill-matched it would have been out of the question but for "the Australian sexual problem." We have already seen that Anna's naivety grates on Clyde's snobbish intellectuality:

CLYDE: Yes, well it's pretty bloody embarrassing when you ask a business colleague of mine, who by the way happens to be a very sophisticated merchant banker: "Why can't they cure inflation by printing less money?"
ANNA: Well, why can't they?
CLYDE: (*slapping his forehead*) Because all you'd get would be a bloody liquidity crisis.
ANNA: Well, maybe that's what the country needs.
CLYDE: What? A liquidity crisis? What good would that bloody well do?
ANNA: It might make people sit up and think.
CLYDE: (*banging his forehead*) The worst part is they give people like you the vote.

(p. 34)

Clearly Clyde would be better matched with a fellow economist. But how many women studied economics then? (And how many of them could match Anna's sexual openness?) Clyde's social pretentions and intelligence, which are the very reason he should not marry naive Anna, become in practice the counters with which he outbids his rivals.

The plot's almost Aristotelian unity of time prevents Williamson's jumping into the future to show how the marriage will end, but he allows West and Stork to predict it in the conversation that ends the play:

(WEST *is not impressed. He picks up the ring from the table and rolls it across to* STORK. STORK *rolls his to* WEST. *They repeat the manoeuvre intermittently during the dialogue.*)

I know what's going to happen to Anna. Clyde's going to buy some property up the bush and stick her up there out of harm's way.

WEST: And give her a tribe of kids.

(They drink.)

STORK: And drive into his office each day in a Porsche.

WEST: Not ostentatious enough.

STORK: A Mercedes.

WEST: Not sporty enough.

STORK)
WEST) An Alfa Romeo. Yes!

WEST: From his thirty-two square, multi-level, L-shaped, ranch-style, exposed-beam, slate-floored, centrally-heated, air-conditioned, white-painted, Spanish-tiled gentleman's residence with private courtyard and fountain.

STORK: And fifty-by-thirty sunken ceramic-tiled, kidney-shaped pool equipped with a double Vortamatic filtration unit.

WEST: The house will be sited on a gently sloping hill facing north, with magnificent views of the valley.

(Pause. They drink.)

STORK: In about five years, Clyde will start stuffing his secretaries and telling Anna he's working back late.

WEST: And Anna will have seven kids who shit themselves fourteen times a day and cry all night.
STORK: After ten years of this, Anna will go insane.
WEST: And start making scones for the local women's auxiliary.
STORK: And fucking Jersey bulls.

(They look at each other and make a decision. STORK *collects the rings.)*

We'll flush 'em both down the toilet.

(p. 60)

The cynicism about marriage and babies is of a piece with remarks made by Susan in *Don's Party* and Frank in *Travelling North*. But more important still is the irony. Anna can hardly be blamed for choosing Clyde. He seems like the answer to her insecurities, and she is too young and conservative to know that the real danger to her independence is not the man who won't marry her if she gets pregnant but the one who will. Yet it is grossly unfair to Anna that she should be married off to Clyde; and in a less sex-starved society it could hardly have happened. Thus the play arrives at its final black irony. The heaviest price for female frigidity is paid not by the frigid women or their men, but by the one woman who was sexually generous.

NOTE: All page references in the text are to the appropriate Currency Press editions of Williamson's plays. Asterisks mark points where quotations have been shortened.