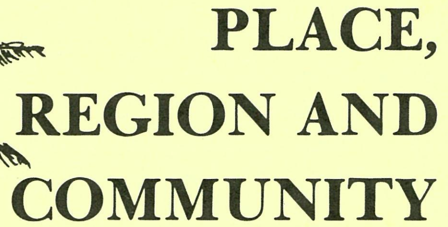
PLACE, REGION AND COMMUNITY



by

BRUCE BENNETT

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies 1985

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FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN
LITERARY STUDIES
1985

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ISSN 0725-6744

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication Data
Bennett, Bruce, 1941-
Place, region and community.

Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0 86443 152 X.

1. Regionalism in literature — Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Australia in literature — Addresses, essays, lectures. 3. Australian literature — History and criticism — Addresses, essays, lectures.
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.11).

A820'.9'32

Wholly set up and printed within the University

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I

PLACE, REGION AND COMMUNITY

How important is place in Australia? Does it matter? What difference does it make if I write, or speak, from Townsville or Perth or Alice Springs; or from Esperance, or from the edge of Lake Disappointment? Do these names mean any more than squiggles of writing on a map? What influences, what associations do they have for you, for me? Does place count any more?

I begin with an illustration, from another place but of our time. It's a cartoon from the *New Yorker*. A man, bewildered, lost, is addressing a policeman. "Excuse me officer, I'm an academic", he says. "Where am I?" The cartoon transfers across cultures; in its transference, it says less about the confusion of being in New York than about the confusion of being an academic. Although international, perhaps cosmopolitan, the man's head is in the clouds: in the Walter Mitty sense, he is lost in the 'remote intimate airways of (his) mind'; in another sense, as I read that cartoon, I perceive him in George Steiner's phrase as 'extra-territorial'. He probably has a rich and complex consciousness. But he does not know where he is. He needs direction about where to go.

Let me turn to another, more certifiably rich and complex consciousness, that of Joseph Conrad:

> I have no doubt that star-gazing is a fine occupation, for it leads you within the borders of the unattainable. But map-gazing, to which I became addicted so early, brings the problems of the great spaces of the earth into stimulating and direct contact with sane curiosity and gives an honest precision to one's imaginative faculty.[1]

As a sailor, Conrad knew the value of anchors; precise knowledge of place is one such anchor to the wandering heart and mind. At least, that is one writer's perception of the matter.

But to return to the bemused academic, and his plight. Why is he lost? Why must he ask the policeman where he is? Is the

lost academic an Australian as well as an American phenomenon? If so, does it matter? I fear he is, and it does matter. The condition which he suffers is a chronic illness in the body academic since at least the 1940s; its genesis lies further back. Geoffrey Serle has described the symptoms in the post-second world war years:

> The academic class contributed much less than might have been expected (to Australian cultural life) ... The older generation tended to live a vicarious English intellectual life with little commitment to the local scene ... an intellectual class concentrated in the universities, largely alienated from the society around it, ideologically unsophisticated, and rarely involved closely with creative culture.[2]

Such a view, arising from a recognisably Melbourne perspective but with application elsewhere, implies a belief that 'commitment to the local scene' is an important facet of university education. It does not follow that such commitment should be uncritical. But a desire to understand local conditions (and the local literature) was far less common than a desire to make judgements, and to ridicule local achievements. Supporting this attitude was a universalist view of knowledge, which remains unimpressed with relativised notions of culture-specific knowledge or belief.[3]

One of the disappointing shortcomings of contemporary critical movements, including most versions of structuralism and deconstructionism, is their neglect of place as a serious consideration either within writers' work or as a factor in what, and how, they write. This general lack of interest in topography, geography, climate, the spatial relations of towns to cities and seas, the composition of populations and their movements seems to derive from a common academic misconception that ideas float free of all these stimuli and constraints. Common experience, and writers' own accounts suggest otherwise. It will be obvious that I do not accept the fashionable view that the author, outside his or her work, should be dead to the critic. As students of literature I believe we should be prepared to look more closely at writers' statements about place, (as about other aspects of their work),

both as features within literary works and as factors in their genesis.

But universities change, and so do some people. There are signs in the 1980s of a healthier responsiveness to place, region and community in Australia and a curiosity to know more. A major example of this is the Association for the Study of Australian Literature's nation-wide project, the Oxford Literary Guide to Australia. Like the Oxford Literary Guides to the United States, Canada and the British Isles, the Oxford Literary Guide to Australia will contain entries for places and regions throughout the country which have significant associations with writers' lives, or are referred to significantly in their works. When the book is published, probably in 1986, the outcome for general readers will be an opportunity to see Australian places (including buildings, streets, mountains, valleys, towns and cities) through the eyes of original writers, whose words may re-activate memory, stimulate fresh perceptions, cause wonder, or laughter. For academics, the project will provide an invaluable archive on authors and their relationship to places in Australia. Further, the project will provide a much firmer basis than exists at present to answer the question which Northrop Frye asked in Canada, 'Where is here?'[4]

What is the point of all this activity, this research into what the human imagination has made of places we think we know? Is it a specifically Australian recidivism, reverting to the first explorers' need to map and name places in order to control and give order to the land, and to settle it? That may be a partial cause. But the interest in place seems also to be an international tendency, carried on in the face of international satellite communications, rapid air travel, the growth of cities and the dematerialization of place in much post-modernist and science fiction literature. Strangely, in the face of such challenges, the significance of place is reasserted with increasing urgency. In this respect, writers and critics are our greatest conservationists.

In Britain, recent publications have included literary atlases, guides and biographical studies of writers' relationship to

places — far more than the tourist industry requires, and some of high scholarly and literary quality.[5] In the United States and Canada regional studies abound.[6] This phenomenon may indeed reflect a need among inhabitants of the advanced technological societies of the West to re-establish roots in the soil before the widely advertised hi-tech paradise gets us firmly in its grip; it may be a last flurry of defiance, or an assertion of needs that will outlast the current technologies.

Traditionally, place has been more significant to writers than to critics, though some regions have had both. In the American South, writer and critic Eudora Welty has written:

> It is by the nature of itself that fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that *feelings* are bound up in place. The human mind is a mass of associations — associations more poetic even than actual. I say, "The Yorkshire Moors", and you will say, "*Wuthering Heights*", and I have only to murmur, "If Father were only alive —" for you to come back with "We could go to Moscow", which is certainly not so. The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of "What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?" —that is the heart's field.[7]

Another Southerner, Allen Tate, argued that the instinctive power of the novel was "putting man wholly into his physical setting."[8] William Faulkner's myth-making, which is often held to represent the spirit of the Old South, is shown by Cleanth Brooks[9] and other critics to depend strongly on local detail, idioms and environment.

In Canada, it seems that critics have kept pace with, and even preceded some poets, short story writers and novelists into interpretations of place and region. Certainly, there is a voluminous literature on regionalism in Canada by geographers, historians, constitutional lawyers, political scientists and literary commentators. Consequently many conflicting definitions of regionalism exist. Some of the most striking models are: the 'two nations' model of English and French Canada; the 'West' and the rest; the centre usually (usually Ontario) and the rest; and each of the individual

provinces as regions, with certain amalgamations of convenience (eg. in the Maritimes, or the prairies.).[10]

In Australia, thanks to an arguably beneficent tyranny of distance within the nation, many places have retained a sense of separateness while usually accepting that they are part of the main — Western Australia's attempt to secede in 1933 and recurrent defiant political gestures in Queensland (especially Northern Queensland) and Tasmania notwithstanding. Often, the sense of separateness has manifested itself in cultural, as in economic life, in a sense of grievance against the centre; the conditions of publishing, for instance, or grants from subsidising bodies, have been felt to favour applicants from Sydney or Canberra. The response to this sense of grievance can work in two ways: it can induce a sense of helplessness and inertia, or it can instil an urgent sense of independent activity. I know of communities where the former response has occurred; the founding of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1975 and its subsequent success in Western Australia and on the national scene is an encouraging example of the latter, positive response to a sense of adversity. It is a psychological fact that those who inhabit the perceived centre are less likely than those who inhabit the perceived peripheries to believe in concepts of regionalism: New Yorkers, Parisians, Torontonians and Sydney-siders usually seem mighty unimpressed with regional claims, which are often put down as chauvinistic, parish pump exercises; after all, they often assume, rhetorically, don't all roads lead to the capital. New Yorkers' jokes about illiterate Californians are one example; Maritimers often cop it in Canada as the Quebecois used to; West Australians, Tasmanians and Queenslanders escape comparatively lightly, perhaps because of a diffusion of moving targets. Nevertheless, the practice of mockery and denigration is still alive and well in Australia.

The common expectation of metropolitan cultural elites that other centres will conform to their values or style can exist only if the other centres are prepared for this to happen. For instance, Balmain styles and attitudes held a fatal fascination for certain writers in other states. This tendency has been commented on ironically by Frank Moorhouse, who is

temperamentally and philosophically inclined towards regionalism, especially political regionalism, because of its tendency towards diversity in a nation.[11]

A common assumption has existed in Australia that a "Sydney or the bush" division best describes our physical and cultural inheritance. Those of us who live neither in Sydney nor the bush know that this is a distortion of the real physical differences between places in Australia and imposes a false uniformity upon an actually quite various and imaginatively diverse nation. My contention here is that the study of actual places and regions and writers' relations with them, and depictions of them, should gradually correct these over-simplifications.

The chief problem is the magnetic term 'the bush', which has attracted writers and critics in inverse proportion to their wish to actually inhabit that elusive entity; and has, as J.W. McCarty, the Monash University historian has argued, attracted historians away from urban and suburban histories until recently.[12] Its usual colloquial meaning, as G.A. Wilkes has shown us,[13] is the 'woods' or 'forest'; the unsettled or sparsely settled areas generally; the country as distinct from the town. Wilkes's first recorded reference is in the *Sydney Gazette* in 1803, but he also refers to Mossman and Banister's record in *Australia, Visited and Revisited* (1853), in which the term 'bush' is quite 'indiscriminately applied to all descriptions of uncleared land, or to any spot away from a settlement'. What seems to have given the term an emotional coherence and symbolic force in literary culture was its use in the 1890s, especially by Lawson, in lines such as his well known conclusion to 'The Bush Undertaker':

> And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush
> — the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home
> of the weird, and of much that is different from
> things in other lands.

Yet, as Brian Matthews[14] and others have convincingly shown, Lawson's distinctive Australian bush received its specific impetus and inspiration from his 1892 visit to Bourke, 'the metropolis of the Great Scrubs, on the banks of the Darling

River', with which Lawson was 'agreeably disappointed'.[15] The power of Lawson's images, magnified by the receptivity of city readers to them, as their necessary 'other world', appears to have created an archetypal Australia which was largely rooted in the Bourke experience. The local had been made national; and for some, universal.

The resultant belief, as Tom Inglis Moore described it, was 'a national psychology which prizes the bush as the creator and home of a distinctively Australian way of life'.[16] Some interesting research has explored the 'historical moment' which generated the psychology of this special kind of national belief; and more remains to be done if we are to explain the power which sustained this belief for more than half a century, so that in the 1960s and 1970s proponents of variation in literary subject matter and style such as Hal Porter,[17] Michael Wilding[18] and Robert Drewe[19] found it necessary to criticize the retarding influence of Lawsonian bush realism upon the subject matter and style of succeeding writers.

That a 'Sydney or the bush' dichotomy has not persisted in the national consciousness as an 'all-or-nothing proposition' is due to several factors. Prime among these is Melbourne's role as an alternative cultural capital — or, in the view of certain spokesmen and women, its role as progenitor of ideas and talent which are exported to the larger city on the eastern seaboard. According to this myth (which perhaps has a stronger basis in art than literature) the St. Petersburg sages, warming hands before their coal fires in dingy inner-city houses, produce the ideas and scripts which the Tinsel Town hedonists market and sell.[20] Some artists, depicted by fellow Melbournians as deserters, have left their true home for the tinsel and glitter. One, a tall playwright, whose going was noticed by some, exclaimed in print in the *Bulletin:*

> Melbourne is a much more belligerent city. Its dinner parties are more violent. The trouble with Melbourne is that it's made up of Scots stockbrokers and Irish publicans.[21]

(David Williamson had been stung by the attacks of his fellow playwright Jack Hibberd, who stayed at home. Hell hath no

fury like the one who sees the inheritance being sold out!) An interesting feature of the Melbourne-Sydney duels, which John Docker re-opened at an intellectual level with *Australian Cultural Elites* (1974), and Jim Davidson, as editor of *Meanjin,* resuscitated at a conference in 1979 (at which I was privileged to sit ring-side)[22] was that Sydney-siders were less eager to talk about their characteristics and differences than Melbourne-ites. As the aggrieved party, those from Melbourne made more noise and seemed keener to demonstrate their city's moral, if not material superiority, over its opponent. Moreover, one of its most talented and impudent sons, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, had already published a book of his essays entitled *Melbourne or the Bush* (1974)!

A second, less publicised factor in preventing a simple 'Sydney or the bush' division persisting in the 1960s and 70s was a recognition of the important middle-ground of country towns, farms and mining centres. Hal Porter's Gippsland and Peter Cowan's Western Australian wheatbelt are examples of regional depictions which sit uneasily on any continuum that is drawn between Australia's largest metropolis and the uncleared interior. Les Murray's 'frequent image of farms' on the New South Wales mid-north coast is another major contribution to a way of living and imagining which is firmly rooted in a region. I will return to Cowan, Porter and Murray later. My concern here is to suggest that significant regional variations in Australian literature and thought have blurred the clear hard lines of a national cliche.

Yet a city-country distinction, more complexly considered, does correspond to important psychic and cultural divisions in Australian, as in most other societies. Indeed, it may be the peculiar mix of bush and city, of nature and civilization, which gives Australian places their particular distinctiveness. For this reason, some of the most important cultural documents of our time are the public discussions through 1978-80 between Les Murray and Peter Porter[23] about the values and styles of country and city in their work. This is as important a debate as the literary altercation between Lawson and Paterson in 1892 and shares some of its factitiousness as well as the genuine beliefs of the participants. Centrally, it is about values,

attitudes, ways of living and the scope for poetry in both city and country, in Australia and overseas.

Porter's poem 'On First Looking into Chapman's Hesiod' expresses his own preference for the city:

> Sparrows will acclimatize but I still
> the permanently upright city where
> Speech is nature and plants conceive in pots,
> Where one escapes from what one is and who
> One was, where home is just a postmark
> And country wisdom clings to calendars,
> The opposite of a sunburned truth-teller's
> World, haunted by precepts and the Pleiades.[24]

Porter has explained that although he has lived in London for more than 30 years (and the poem clearly refers to London in some respects), his subject is

> the ideal city state which doesn't exist but which has existed in men's minds since social order first existed . . . To put this up against a real place — Australia, America, anywhere — is unfair, but tends to occur to people like me who have lived their lives in self-imposed exile.[25]

Earlier in the Chapman's Hesiod poem Porter says Hesiod's *Works and Days* reminds him of Australia and, by strong inference, of a particular poet-farmer:

> Like a Taree smallholder splitting logs
> And philosophizing on his dangling billies,
> The poet mixes hard agrarian instances
> With sour sucks to his brother . . .[26]

Far from being offended by this, or by the proverbial meaning in ancient Greece of the Boeotians with whom he is compared as 'thickheads', Les Murray launched into a lengthy and serious exposition of Porter's poem as a statement about metropolitan and provincial ideals. Porter is an Athenian, Murray says, and he himself is proud to represent the Boeotian side of a fundamental tension which runs through Western civilization — and in which Australia might achieve some sort of synthesis. Athens is the traditional winner — 'the urbanizing, fashion-conscious principle removed from and

usually insensitive to natural cyclic views of the world',[27] as Murray put it. Murray notes the polarities (some of them a bit strained for the sake of the argument): Athenians tend to *count*, while Boeotians *list* and *name*; Athens specialises in drama, philosophy and political theory, while Boeotians preferred dance or pageant, and their philosophy was subordinated to religion and precept. In a somewhat dubious dichotomy, Murray suggests that if aristocracy is Boeotia's chief vice, Athens's is elitism and, as a consequence, abstraction. Stressing the great importance of Porter's poem as a cultural document, Murray concludes that his friend and fellow poet is indeed right:

> (Australian) culture is still in its Boeotoian phase and any distinctiveness we possess is still firmly anchored in the bush.[28]

> There is wisdom in Australia's Boeotianness; it may be a good sheet-anchor for us during the period of collapse of many of our [European] parent cultures . . .[29]

> Again, the idea of our deliberately remaining Boeotian is full of exciting possibilities. It would be something, indeed, to break with Western culture by not taking, even now, the characteristic second step into alienation, into elitism and the relegation of all places except one or two urban centres to the sterile status of provincial no-man's-land largely deprived of any art or any creative self-confidence . . . the centre of Boeotia is every place held sacred by any Boeotian.[30]

Murray's argument is a not unfamiliar one in Australia. But it deserves closer attention than it has received. A prior exponent of a similar point of view was Arthur Phillips who, writing out of the Melbourne of the 1950s, argued forcefully for an assertion of Australia's provincial status and independence from the metropolitan magnets of London, Paris or New York. (Like Murray, he perceived London as the major cultural threat.) But Phillips's literary nationalism was no more based on ignorance of foreign cultures than Les Murray's. (Nor, for that matter, is the work of earlier literary nationalists such as A.G. Stephens and Vance Palmer.) Indeed, Phillips's models are often European: a revealing instance is his preference in architecture for the "modest colonials" of Provence over the

"metropolitan heaviness" of Rome.[31] In describing the waiting and nurturing game of a deliberate provincialism —in the sense here of independence from the influence of foreign cities, especially London — he wrote:

> What I hoped for was something not altogether unlike the efflorescences in Periclean Athens or Elizabethan England. It was obvious how much these flowerings had been fortified by the community's sense of a common identity and of a pride in it.
>
> Provincialism has its own positive qualities; and it is the only positive way by which a provincial community can express itself. If we intimidate ourselves by a fear of it, we shall lose the freshness and flavour which often go with it, and we shall become, not metropolitan, but merely imitative.[32]

The lure of the metropolis for the young seeking excitement, intellectual or otherwise, has been dramatised memorably in many countries — for instance, in Wordsworth's 'Michael', White's *The Tree of Man* and many African novels. Sexual excitement, anonymity and the freedom from a restrictive, often parentally induced moral code are considerable attractions, as are the faster tempo, greater choice and the transience of attachments. To 'make it' there, on the larger stage, is to prove something about oneself which no mere provincial honour can bestow. But Phillips's preferred bush culture, and Murray's agraria are important elements in the dialectic which Emerson contributed to in America, between civilization and nature. As he watched the growth of American cities Emerson expressed his fear of a reduction of the earth to a mere "brain".[33]

But old myths need re-vamping. One of the chief means of doing this is by re-examining the sense of place and its significance in the work of our writers, without trying to impose simplistic patterns upon them. In these ways we may develop that sane curiosity in our surroundings which held such fascination for Conrad; and begin to answer satisfactorily Northrop Frye's provocative question 'Where is here?'

The pity of the provincial-metropolitan debate is that it has not kept pace with the writers; it has not yet sufficiently

transferred its grounds, as I have argued it should,[34] to literary and cultural interrelations *within* Australia as well as with overseas countries. This is not to denigrate dialogue with other countries, including England, especially in her period of post-Empire *tristesse*, which should be a productive time for dialogue. Comparative studies should also be encouraged with all countries with whom we share the legacy of colonialism, especially at this time the countries of South-east Asia. But having chosen our ground in this country we should not treat its fascinating local characteristics and variations with the dismissive ignorance which has unfortunately stamped much of our cultural history; instead, we should seek out and nurture our own centres of cultural growth which are apparent at many points around the nation.

The task involves some clear thinking as well as emotional responsiveness. In some cases, it will require considerable patience, a recognition which A.A. Phillips perhaps mistakenly interpreted as a need to put the brakes on cultural change in order to hold to an assumed independence. There is no good reason why Australian folk music should not survive alongside rock; or why rock should not achieve its regional variations within Australia, which might subsequently appeal in their own right as an international currency. Dave Warner and *Redgum* have shown that this can happen. Similarly, we should not necessarily cling conservatively to certain subjects, styles or forms in literature as having a singular claim to authenticity. Our best means of achieving a strong sense of cultural independence is a 'forward defence' policy; a generous acceptance of other points of view and a continuing creation and revision of our own. One of the best ways of building a soundly based national confidence founded on a knowledge of Australia's real diversity is to stimulate research into regional, class, and ethnic characteristics within Australia. In the end, national purpose will be the stronger for such understanding.

Now to the question of regions in Australia. Just as nationalism has suffered from sloganising and simplistic labels, so may regionalism if it becomes an inflexible '-ism'. Regionalism should not be confused with parish pumps: parochialism and provincialism of spirit have no necessary

place in the development of a regional awareness. As one of the outstanding contemporary regional writers, Randolph Stow — first a Western Australian and now an East Anglian regional writer — has argued, close attention to the landscape and way of life of a particular region is not restrictive for a writer, whereas provincialism is, for it expresses an attitude of complacency and an associated lack of curiosity.[35]

Rejecting that kind of narrowness, Stow is also critical of 'an unrewarding kind of internationalism', which he perceives in some contemporary short story writing in Australia, "a kind of rootless writing which is not based in any particular place or society".[36] McLuhan's global village notion is also rejected by Stow, with good reason. Apart from glossing over the cultural imperialism of television production, this view fails to recognise that much of the Third World is not part of the international network: 'It's been noticed', Stow has said, 'that the Dayaks of Borneo don't watch Coronation Street because they can't'. In his views they're fortunate. Landscape and local, relatively self-contained communities are of central importance to Stow and to others interested in regionalism, as are vegetation, climate, idioms and community attitudes. Most often recognised as a 'poetic' prose writer, Stow proclaims himself a "fanatical realist" in attempting to describe what he has experienced with his own senses.[37] His work shows that an intimate acquaintance with place can be combined with a broad literary and cultural reference.

Let me now raise some of the problems involved in analysing the question of literary regionalism. Some of them are raised in *LiNQ* in relation to North Queensland literature; some in *Westerly*; others have occurred as research on the Literary Guide to Australia proceeds.

First among the problems is a temptation to swallow the physical geographer's notion of region and to look for unique characteristics. The term allows more flexibility than that. For literary and cultural purposes region may be an area, space or place of more or less definite extent or character *and*, more figuratively, a state or condition of mind, having a certain character or subject to certain influences.[38] We might, with Frank Moorhouse, think of regional as

> a posture growing out of special conditions surrounding or forming the imagination — geography, historical accident, distance, climate.[39]

But we should also be prepared to accept his tentative comments about Western Australia as a warning against oversimplification:

> There may be no single "regional identity" discernible in all Western Australian writing. The sum total of all writing produced from the West over a century may show up something but it may not show up a tight single "identity".[40]

The literary evidence should not be skewed in order to prove an impression, or thesis. Certain place names, images, rhythms, attitudes and values may recur sufficiently for tentative generalisations to be made, but they should be always provisional, awaiting further evidence.

Just as political, administrative and other boundaries are changed according to changing conditions, so also should the definitions, characteristics and boundaries of literary regions be continually re-examined and revised. Contradictions should not be baulked at but should be included in the picture. Dorothy Hewett's mythic Garden and City antithesis of Western Australia and Sydney,[41] for instance, has to be examined more closely in the light of Peter Cowan's much more sombre vision of the state.[42] What we may have to consider is a decentralising of our notional regions within each state and sometimes across state boundaries.[43] Regional anthologies such as *Downs Voices* (1978)[44] and *This Place: Poetry of the Hunter Valley* (1980)[45] may help to focus such regional consciousness.

Let me give other examples from work in Western Australia. As we have worked with individual place entries for the Oxford Literary Guide in Western Australia, certain connections have appeared between these places and others in terms of their treatment in the literature or in biographical or social terms. With these in mind, we have tentatively suggested eight regions within the overarching concept of Western Australia. The smaller regions (some of them none too small) are: Perth Metropolitan; South-West; Great Southern; Midlands; Eastern

Goldfields; Murchison; Pilbara; and Kimberleys. These are principally geographical regions, names which refer to generally agreed areas with certain boundaries or 'core settlements' in Western Australia; names are a mixture of terms describing land-use and administrative regions. Just as important images are associated with Robert Frost's New England or William Faulkner's Deep South in America, so have certain Western Australian writers identified themselves closely with a certain region (eg. Donald Stuart with the Pilbara, Mary Durack with the Kimberleys, Dorothy Hewett with the Great Southern). Others, like Peter Cowan and Randolph Stow, have been more peripatetic, thought it still makes sense to talk of Cowan's wheatbelt or Stow's Murchison because their literary imprints on these regions have been so strong. All are associated with a larger concept of 'the West' in Australia.[46]

But this West has its variations and should not be considered too reductively. Contrasting literary and social modes within the West are significant. The Goldfields and the South-West of Western Australia, at certain periods of their history, exemplify such differences. The South-West, particularly in the early to mid-nineteenth century, is noteworthy for the diaries, letters and journals of settlers, explorers and visitors, such as George Fletcher Moore, the Bussell family, and Lieutenant H.W. Bunbury. Their view of the land was mainly in terms of its suitability for settlement and was based on the belief that the taming and cultivation of the bush through hard and dedicated work would establish a civilized social order along English lines. Much of their writing is imbued with a strong awareness of lineage and social stratification. The Anglican Church was behind much of this, as the Reverend J.R. Wollaston's *Picton Journal* shows:

> It has been the boast of this colony that we have no poor, but I think it is a misfortune (I don't mean paupers) for society will never work well unless there is a station for each class according to God's ordinance; not to mention the evil arising from the non-exercise of the reciprocal duties of rich and poor, master and servant.[47]

The early writers also showed a fascination with what was curious or quaint in the natural flora and fauna and a remarkable interest in the customs, dress and language of the Aborigines, while almost never questioning their own right to be there.

Whereas writers of the South-West often wrote out of a sense of aloneness or the need to settle, and recreate as much as possible civilization as they knew it, Goldfields writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made drama — humorous, sardonic, often knockabout — out of a sense of their transience on a flat landscape beneath a pitiless sky. The sense of community they created was remarkable, and was largely due to a vigorous literary press. Between 1892 and 1909 no less than 60 newspapers came into being in goldfields towns, and only 9 of these were still in publication after 1920. The goldfields press was populist, occasionally radical, good-humoured, and published a stream of verse of similar outlook by writers such as 'Dryblower' Murphy and J.P. 'Bluebush' Bourke. Grant Hervey commented in the Kalgoorlie *Sun* in 1904:

> considering the strict limitedness of the population, journalism flourishes like measles, and you can hardly throw a defunct marine out of the window without abrasing a scribe.

Katharine Susannah Prichard and Gavin Casey are the major writers of this region; Prichard's Goldfields trilogy is the region's saga, weaving Aboriginal legends of place into a story heavily laced with social and industrial history.

There are different ways of looking at these characteristics. One is to simply note them for the attention of present inhabitants of the West to build their sense of a past. Another is to examine the contending impulses which might be summed up in the images of settler and gambler in the two regions and compare them with similar manifestations in other regions in Australia, or in other literatures (eg. in America, New England may be seen to represent in some respects the settler mentality and the Californian West that of the gambler). Alternatively, these antinomies may be shown to relate to common human impulses, or to philosophical positions. Regional studies need

not stop with description of surface features and the question of their accuracy, but may attempt to plumb "deep structures" of regional identity.

Noel Macainsh has suggested that the literature of a region (he was referring to North Queensland):

> must relate to the wider world, must engage the interest of that world, must reveal as always the universal in the particular.[48]

The imperatives are perhaps unnecessary. In Australia, a literature exists, and is growing. It is our job to recognise and foster it and show it to the world, with its own mix of local and universal concerns. W.D. Howells said of American writers in their 1890s:

> We are an intensely decentralised people in our letters as well as in our politics . . .
> there is no section or region without some writer emulous to report its life.[49]

Australia's topographical diversity and variety of human and social perspectives will be best served when our metropolitan critics and administrators accept the significance and value of such decentralisation; and when regional writers have the confidence to recognise that neither the politics nor the geography of writing prevent them from contributing as effectively as those in metropolitan centres to the wider conversation of the human race.

NOTES

1. Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays*, ed. R. Curle, J.M. Dent, London, 1926, p. 13.

2. Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1973, p. 212.

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43. Suggestions regarding decentralisation of the American 'West' are discussed in Bruce Bennett, 'Concepts of the West in Canadian and Australian Literature', *Westerly*, 29, 2, 1984. For the discussion of the Goldfields and South-West, in Western Australia, I am indebted to David Bean and Derryn Hammond.

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II
COUNTRY PLACES

Country places — stations, farms, small settlements, towns — are usually thought to give closer access to 'the land' than cities. In a literal sense, they usually do. But in a metaphoric sense, as writers present things, country places may provide a setting for divorce from nature.

In this lecture I want to trace some imaginative contours which certain writers have given to country places in Australia — the use they have made of places and the use places have made of them. For there is, I would argue, always an interaction between a person and his or her environment — even when this involves an attempt to block out that environment. The dynamics of the interaction are often explored by our most sensitive writers, or are implicit in their work; and an understanding of these dynamics may increase our own awareness of our relationship to place.

Place, I will argue (and in particular this time, the territory outside cities) is often, for the responsive writer, an active force, which is different at different points on the earth's surface:

> 'Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence,' says D.H. Lawrence (with unfortunate contemporary connotations), 'different vibration' (that's better), 'different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality.'[1]

Lawrence argues that this spirit of place is best expressed, not in the cool literalness of scientific prose but in 'art language', infused with the power of feeling. Lawrence was here writing, during his wanderlust years of the 1920s, out of an intense sense of his own transitoriness, which lent many of his Australian and American writings of that period their personal urgency and preternatural clarity.

Places, I suggest, are perceived radically differently according to one's angle of vision. This is a matter not only of

class, ethnicity, sex and other factors which a sociological analysis would adduce, but also according to factors such as one's sense of stasis or mobility. Faulkner's Anse Bundren, for instance, takes a lot of shifting, but when he moves there is no doubting he will meander on to his goal, as the Mississippi moves to the sea. In Australia, Boldrewood has presented the opposed principles of stasis and mobility with their associated value-systems in Starlight and George Storefield:

> 'It always astonishes me,' said Starlight, 'how any human being can consent to live, year after year, the same life in the same place. I should go mad half a dozen times over. Change and adventure are the very breath of my nostrils'.[2]

Richard Mahony and Brennan's Wanderer are perhaps chief among Australia's literary travellers, and they become tragic symbols of displacement. Their psychic counterweight, that sane curiosity to 'know the piece of earth on which I stand,' as Chris Wallace-Crabbe puts it[3] is a more modest, less romantic or metaphysical pursuit, but important. In the small and local may be discovered great poetic truths, as writers from Donne to Blake have reminded us. Thought-adventures are not just for the free; in the constraints of the local may be felt the tensions which the idea of freedom imposes; freedom has no meaning without them.

The literature of Australia contains many detailed descriptive accounts of places beyond the cities and suburbs, and some enduring poetic statements. In some works, *Such is Life*, for instance, the descriptive and poetic modes are combined: Furphy's Riverina is shown to us in the most precise descriptive terms (including distances, soil-types, vegetation, topography) but also with collocations of the far and the near, so that close-ups alternate with distant vistas, suggesting, in Conrad's words, the 'borders of the unattainable'. Such spatial juxtapositions, of contraction and expansion, are characteristic of Furphy and provide an initial example of ways in which the inventive writer — in this case as traveller *within* his region — may use place in his work:

> Mile after mile we go at a good walk, till the dark boundary of the scrub country disappears northward in the glassy haze, and

> in front, southward, the level black-soil plains of Riverina Proper mark a straight sky-line, broken here and there by a monumental clump or pine-ridge. And away beyond the horizon, southward still, the geodesic curve carries that monotony across the zone of salt-bush, myall, and swamp-box; across the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee, and on to the Victorian border — say, two hundred and fifty miles.[4]

It's a fine example of the writer who knows his place intimately, but who continually extends our view, spatially and imaginatively, beyond the limits of perception.

A number of other examples in this lecture will be from short story writers and their work. I make no apology for this. The short story is a major literary form in Australia and has been unwarrantedly neglected by literary historians and critics. It is the form in which the essence of place is often expressed, either from a static or from a mobile perspective, or from multiple angles.

Two quotations are suggestive. The first is from Chekhov:

> Descriptions of Nature are in place and do not detract from the effect only when they are a propos, when they help you communicate to the reader this or that mood, like music accompanying declamation.[5]

The second is from an emergent writer on the Australian scene, who at last count had published three books of stories and five novels. The writer is Elizabeth Jolley.[6]

> ". . . It's all highly symbolic. The writer sees the human body all laid out over the Bush and the fences and paddicks."
> "How?" I asked.
> "The human contours and emotions are expressed in the landscape," Mother said, her voice all posh.[7]

Jolley's is a comic depiction of the crediting of human traits to nature, the so-called pathetic fallacy; Chekhov's is an important stricture about the criterion of relevance for descriptions of environment in stories. Both imply the power of writers to create symbolic fictional environments which may still seem too real for comfort to the spectators. For both writers, aesthetic criteria are significant, but so are features of

actual environments: Chekhov, especially, reminds us of the infrangibility of the actual environment in the affairs of men and women.

With these comments in mind, we might now consider two writers of country places in very different parts of Australia, who consider themselves regionalists. Here is the voice of the first:

> Of course . . . most writers in Australia are regional writers. The place is so big. No-one can encompass all of it. I mean, dear boy, I'm a southern Victorian — cold wind, bare apple trees, all that . . .[8]

As sketcher, local historian, autobiographer and short story writer Hal Porter has left us with a myriad indelible impressions of Bairnsdale specifically, and Gippsland more generally, in the 1920s and after. His signature is so clearly under those names that future generations of Australians will refer genitively to 'Porter's Gippsland' or 'Porter's Bairnsdale'. That of course puts the individual writer first as creator of a consciousness of place; but throughout his work Porter writes convincingly of the active spirit of place which worked upon him. The word 'spirit' is accurate: he is often intoxicated with the detail and associations of that firmly located, ever-moving kaleidoscope of his childhood home. Along with Randolph Stow's childhood recalled in *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* (1965), Porter's is one of our literature's most vivid reminders of the power of the sensuous imagination of childhood for the adult writer; and the chief source of a sense of place. David Malouf's *Johnno* (1975) and Tom Hungerford's *Stories from Suburban Road* (1983) are other contemporary works which testify to the power of the sensuous imagination in one of Australia's most significant fictional genres, the quasi-autobiographical narrative.

Hal Porter's recreation in *The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony* (1963) of his arrival at Bairnsdale is instructive. The spatial contrast between suburban Kensington and the shire town of Bairnsdale some eight hours and 170-odd miles east of Melbourne is what first strikes the boy:

> In Kensington, stuck on an asphalted suburban ridge at the rim of a panorama, I had seemed taller to myself, a spy suspended above luminosity. In Bairnsdale, I feel myself let loose at the centre of an immeasurable sphere. Pure light gushes and soars away from my minuteness in every direction, upwards and ever upwards, inhabited by slicing swallows and creaking swans and stock-still hawks and pin-prick larks; outwards they arch over the northern mountains in the thick blue of which are half-forgotten, tumble-down gold-mining towns occupied by mere hill-billies as incestuous as cats; outwards and east to curve for a century of miles over the farthest eucalypts and their sumless tons of glistening morocco leaves; outwards and southwards over the river-mouths, the swan-haunted lakes, the very South itself, and the world's felloe.[9]

We are aware here, as often in Porter's work, of the narrator's consciousness as he changes from micro to macroscopic lens and back again. The writer's perspectives are mobile, travelling rapidly in time and space, in and out of memories of childhood and the voices of family and community gossip ("hill-billies as incestuous as cats") as far as imagination will stretch through words, to the Old English "felloe", wheel rim to this world. But always there is a sense of abundance, whether in the bric a brac of the interiors of houses (which I think of as most characteristic of Porter) or out in the paddocks in his images of midsummer madness:

> I am never so passionately aware of the power of the earth and the lavishness of it as on Gippsland midsummer days. Before eleven in the morning the bees are staggering drunk in the madonna lilies. The endless safaris of ants pass each other scarcely speaking. Out and out beyond the town's rim of orchards and asparagus fields and maize crops and pumpkin paddocks, thousands of acres of peroxided grasses shimmer and surge at the bases of an infinity of ring-barked trees pale and lustrous as aluminium. The rotating shadows of the rotating tin louvres of windmills do not cut one swathe in the grassy pelt of fragile tassels, bobbles, plumes and maces. Out and farther out, beyond the Golgotha of the slaughter-yards, lies the cemetery like a spilling of shapes in marzipan, the cemetery and its abundant dead boxed down under the freesias and sparaxis and periwinkle and briers and gorse more abundant than they.[10]

The audacity is breathtaking. Which other writer could bring together Golgotha and marzipan in the one sentence and top them off with freesias, sparaxis, periwinkle and briers? Abundance is the keynote, and intoxication, not just with the natural setting but with the marvellous proliferation of words which can re-animate the place and its associations. It is a high-spirited and witty celebration of place, a magic-land of memory and observation.

Porter's metier is architecture and interiors. A room of furniture swarms with life which reminds one of Dickens or Balzac, but which is entirely Porter's own. His rooms are full of voices, usually filtered through the narrator's consciousness, as in 'Country Town' and 'Everleigh's Accent'. Voices, accents, clothes, mannerisms: from the protected environs of a quasi-genteel household of conservative, country-bred tastes and values Porter's alter egos look out upon a world of scheming, rivalry and corruption. The forbidden, seamy side of country-town life is found additionally fascinating: most people are presumed to be actors playing out a role; the trick is to unmask them. That is the central technique of Porter's fiction, as it is of much country-town talk.

Nowhere is Porter's essential fealty to his region more apparent than in his autobiographical and fictional encounters with Japan, based on periods spent there in 1949 (as a teacher of Australian and American servicemen) and again in 1967. Porter's strong sense of natural forces, noted earlier, is reflected in the farmer Masao in *A Handful of Pennies* (1958) whose behaviour is informed by the changing seasons, fields and trees, and his dead ancestors. The author's fascination with social rituals, sharpened in Bairnsdale and elsewhere, recurs with a vengeance in his depictions of the 'New Japan'. Nowhere is Porter's satire more stinging than in his travel book *The Actors* (1968), where he continually strips away masks from an Americanized, technologised society which has lost touch with its indigenous and natural traditions. (He begs the question as to how the latter may have contributed to Japanese nationalistic aggression.) While criticising, Porter remains fascinated nevertheless with the superabundant circus

of contemporary Japan, an alluring otherworld for the rural regionalist.[11]

Here is the voice of my second self-professed regionalist:

> To live in Western Australia is to be strongly aware of a physical landscape — one behind the urban facade, and even though the population is overwhelmingly urban. This sense of another environment comes through to the sprawling suburbs, it comes in the smoke of the forest department's endless burning fires, the lack of water, the heat, the distances . . .
>
> And out beyond metropolitan Perth there are stretches of quite pitiless but utterly attractive landscape. Even here we put down instant towns and suburbs that are replicas of Perth — or other such Australian models. The new iron ore towns of the north, for instance. This does make for sameness, yes. Yet a few miles outside their airconditioning and supermarts one can die in a couple of days, left alone.[12]

Peter Cowan's fictional landscapes usually derive from places he has worked in or visited; they are not restricted to a small area of Western Australia but range from the jarrah and karri forests in the south-west to the central and eastern wheatbelt, the goldfields and Perth and its suburbs.

More than any other Australian writer I know, Cowan shows the obdurate 'otherness' of the landscape which, as in Chekhov's stories, resists being taken over by the writer's or his characters' consciousness. Cowan's land is solidly present, harsh and uninviting. Yet its indifference can be a sort of rough comfort, a reminder of a persistence and continuity which is denied to the drifters and dropouts from metropolitan society whom Cowan observes crossing its surface. The land dwarfs, overpowers and finally flattens them out. Instead of the idiosyncrasies and flamboyant verbal play of Porter's southern Victorian 'characters', we have Cowan's anonymous, laconic drifters, for whom betrayal and disappointment are the usual outcome.

Interiors of houses, furniture, gossip, scandal, even history are stripped away in Cowan's short stories: his figures are located in relief against a landscape which is also reduced to

fundamentals. The style is closer to Hemingway than Faulkner — the bare, spare Hemingway of Spanish stories such as 'Hills Like White Elephants'. There are some similarities too with Canadian prairies writer Sinclair Ross, whose novel *As For Me and My House* (1941) shows the flattening, conforming effects of both landscape and small-town society on a man and a woman; the Canadian inland West, like the Australian, is a place of barrenness, with a stark beauty nevertheless, against which buildings appear to be temporary facades against a distant horizon and the vast bowl of the sky.

Cowan's photographs, like Porter's drawings, show some of his interests: outcrops of rock, trees and spinifex recur, as do bush humpies, mine shafts, the temporary retreats of old prospectors or escapees from city life. Cowan's region is inhabited by drifters who have escaped their community to find, or lose, themselves. The myth of rural Arcadia is undermined, as is Dorothy Hewett's generalised myth of Western Australia based on symbols and images of the Great Southern wheatbelt area of her childhood as a place of innocence, a garden, albeit one where the worm is in the bud. A writer of Cowan's stark and un-charming power provides an alternative version of the West also to T.A.G. Hungerford's semi-rural idyll in *Stories from Suburban Road* (1983). The figures in Peter Cowan's landscapes are seldom innocent (not even with the 'brutal innocence' which Dorothy Hewett noticed[13]); violence and betrayal are in the air wherever humans congregate; the best, the only thing to do is to make one's individual alliance with the earth. The hermits, prospectors, artists and others who do this are not transfigured, as in Patrick White; but they have a resilience, an endurance which reflects the harsh, unpleasing but quite beautiful land itself.

A characteristic recent story by Peter Cowan is 'Collector' (in *Mobiles*, 1979)[14]. In this story, we are not treated to brilliant descriptive prose of the Hal Porter kind; instead a style of austerity and restraint is used in the depiction of a man and a woman whose car has broken down in the desolate interior, probably around Cue-Mt. Magnet (a desolate, former gold-

mining area which Cowan often used to visit in his four-wheel drive to escape the university and suburbia). Here is the setting:

> The ground was bare, only the broken boughs of the mulga, near them the few clumps of dry cassia. As they came closer to the breakaway, quartz, white, clear in the light, scattered across the surface. Bright, she thought. Like water. Snow. Snow out here. By the base of the outcrop long bands of white clay, stained where the brown ochre ran from the upper surface. Broken to make a white floor in the clefts and caves that were shadowed.
>
> Shade, she said. At least it's cool.[15]

In the silence and shade of the cave and then, as the two walk in a circular and futile search for help, Cowan's sparse dialogue reconstructs fragments of a relationship which has turned sour. There are hints and clues. He has wanted freedom from suburban commitments; there has been another man who wants her. A quiet menace is in the air, a chill, as the possibility emerges that the man has engineered the breakdown, and the wandering in the bush, to dispose of his wife. Some earlier clues reimpose themselves: he is a collector of old bottles; he collects and disposes. The dialogue is taut, enigmatic, at times Pinteresque. The distances in the landscape and its implacability are reflected in the relationship at its unresolved crisis. The landscape is an essential component of the whole situation, the significant constant against which a timeless human dilemma is acted out. Cowan has written:

> I have always been involved in the Australian landscape, the physical landscape and everything about it, and in my short stories particularly I have tried to see an interaction of people with this landscape . . . With its flexibility of form and style, the impact it can achieve, the short story snatches at the fragmentary nature of today's experience, the pointlessness and frustration and bitterness . . .[16]

By highlighting Porter's and Cowan's regionalism, I want to stress the *literary* force of their images and thereby their enduring contribution to the physical regions in and about which they have written. It is *not* inappropriate to talk of regions in Australia in terms of outstanding writers who have

given new imaginative dimensions to them: Furphy's Riverina, for instance, Lawson's Bourke and beyond, Stow's Geraldton and areas to the east and north, Dorothy Hewett's Great Southern wheatbelt area of Western Australia, Les Murray's mid-north coast farming districts of New South Wales, Malouf's Brisbane and so on. The symbolising and mythicizing dimension in each of these writers' work does not diminish their significance as regionalists in Hal Porter's sense. On the contrary, though their visions are quite original, their sense of place as well as the places they write from and about so different, they compose in that 'art-language' which D.H. Lawrence argued has a greater impress of truth than the language of science.

It *is* possible to make literary judgments about the value of certain kinds of writing about place; with the proviso that value should be related to function. Although local communities would place different valuations upon certain work according to criteria such as its relevance to their concerns, its exactness of detail or the frequency with which it names recognisable land-marks, the literary critic may also make appropriate interpretations of the work or works and evaluate technique in relation to theme. Discrepancies will occur: for instance, readers in a country town may give a special accolade to 'local colour' while the university literary critical community may give higher value to linguistic complexity and overall coherence of the work. Each of these institutionalised responses can learn from the other and thereby learn more about the function and value of literature. Reader-response theory encourages this kind of analysis.

While Hal Porter and Peter Cowan can be assessed to a large extent according to traditional criteria, popular travel books, detective stories and romances also provide interesting test cases for analysis and evaluation. To take just one cross-section, we could compare the use of the north-west of Australia as a setting in novels by Ion Idriess, A.W. Upfield and Lucy Walker. What characterises the use of the north-west as a setting for a number of novels by each of these writers is its signified remoteness, its exotic flavour. For metropolitan readers in Australia, but also England, these books developed

interests which would have been fostered by *Walkabout*, *National Geographic*, *Wide World* and other such popular magazines from the 1930s to the 1950s. A commercially successful formula for travel/adventure, detective and romance fiction is employed by Idriess, Upfield and Walker respectively, for which the setting of the remote north-west of Australia provides a suitable panorama.

Genre is a strong determinant of the use of place in these works. Idriess, for instance, provides plenty of specific detail in the semi-biographical *Flynn of the Inland* (1932) but lapses into cliche in *Man Tracks* (1938), when all the native fauna and the flora meet their expected adjectives:

> Wild country, harsh country. Craggy rock-bound hills and nearly waterless, with broken gorges and abrupt ravines scoured by the flood of ages. And a silence down on the sparsely-timbered creeks disturbed only by the hoarse croak of a crow. Up above, among the rocky crests, a foraging wallaby thumped along the ledges seeking scanty pickings on the sides of the steep spurs. Then valleys poorly grassed, with but little herbage.[17]

There is no personal signature, no special slant on this congregation of details. But if we are interested in understanding the function of such writing and its relation to other writing about the north-west we must consider the purposes for which Idriess was writing, his audience, and the generic and other constraints upon his craft.

Lucy Walker's case is an interesting one. After the Pepper Tree Bay series of novels (written under the name Dorothy Lucie Sanders), in which detailed setting and social mores of the Peppermint Grove area were built into her romantic plots, she was inspired by the success of Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice* and decided to write about 'the more attractive and adventurous aspects of Australian life whether in city or country'.[18] Like other Australians with British publishers (e.g. Nicholas Hasluck, Paul Buddee) Lucy Walker was advised to avoid overly specific Australian settings, since British readers would prefer just the main outlines. Lucy Walker's outstanding commercial success, due to enormous sales in Pan paperback editions in Britain and the U.S., and subsequently

in the Ulverscroft series of large print, testify to the popularity of stereotypical outback settings for the English girl-meets-Australian-grazier kind of romance. The scenery is a generally static backdrop to the complication and resolution of the romance plot.

A.W. Upfield's settings, on the other hand, are often both exact and freshly considered, befitting the proper modes of perception of the detective story writer. No misty lens confuses his clear-eyed look at the scenes of crime, whether they're in the Kimberleys, the Murchison, the Eastern Wheatbelt — or indeed, in Queensland, where his half-caste Aboriginal detective hero, Napoleon Bonaparte, hails from.[19]

I would contend that the popular writers who have found their formula and stuck to it can tell us less about the use of country places in fiction than those who pull and stretch their fabric to adapt to the great variety of ways in which individuals perceive and respond to their environment. Thea Astley is one such writer. In her recent story 'The Scenery Never Changes' Astley shows how the self-preoccupied mind can arrange the scenery of the outside world to suit itself. The story is an ironic study of the egotism of a woman between 30 and 40 whose concern is to capture a man, any man, to massage her emptiness. The irony is withering: she is "maxfactored", has a "starlet mouth" and continues to play the same scene:

> Each new amorous venture contained its own wry and inward assent to the dismissal that came within two or three months of that introductory and brilliant smile.[20]

As she rattles along "on a rail-motor somewhere south-west of Bundaberg" the landscape is presented as a "prop" to her consciousness:

> Every prop in the jerking landscape outside the window reminded: classicism of eucalypt disposition along the whistle-stop branch lines to nowhere but that two-storeyed pub, the pedagogue chatter, the claustrophobia of coastal hills — all had their own heart-breaking italics for the loveless last occasion that had so nearly been it.[21]

Here we have place encapsulated, hermeticised in the character's mind, reflecting her acute disappointment: hers is indeed a pathetic fallacy. The story's recursive pattern takes us to another version of place towards the end:

> Never again, she told herself. Not ever, ever again. But she could see herself all the same. There it would all be as it had always been. The station and the back-chatting clerk. The hotel with its veranda brim pulled well down over its eyes. The dirt road. The half-dozen stores. The school with its moth-eaten fox fur of pepper-trees. Another station went by, and the absurd optimism that was her special poison began to secrete. Outside the window, tide was on the turn. The acid-blue waters were receding in direct proportion to the speed with which the racketty carriage crashed towards the town.

But the woman does not accept the receding tide of her own fortunes and the petty drama will be repeated. Astley integrates her landscape with tonal assurance into her satiric portrait; and there may be a hint, behind the irony, of the author's understanding of the need for an excitement beyond what the environment offers; an understanding which also informs some of her stories in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (1979), of which Thea Astley has said: 'The setting (of North Queensland) is as much an emotional as a physical one and a gesture towards the long-standing love affair I have had with the geography of this state'.[22] Such love affairs for the complex writer are constituted of both attraction and repulsion, love and hate; a calm mirror is not their mode of communication.

Elizabeth Jolley's favourite setting in her fiction is the small landholdings in the country around Wooroloo about 50 kms east of Perth: the title of her first book of stories, *Five Acre Virgin* (1976) wittily locates this interest. She understands particularly the need of the migrant to own a piece of land as an anchor, a guarantee. This need has nothing of the portentousness of Wordworth's

> To the solid ground
> Of Nature trusts the mind which builds for aye.

Rather, Jolley's vision is comic in the stories of *Five Acre Virgin*. The land is no glimmering inferno as it was for Voss; it

emanates a saner kind of wisdom and provides its anchoring rituals: "There's nothing like having a piece of land to conquer," says one of the characters in 'Five Acre Virgin', "It makes a man feel better to clear the scrub and have a good burning off".[23]

Elizabeth Jolley has however pushed her exploration of the small farm outside the city to more disturbing depths in her story 'Grasshoppers' (in *The Travelling Entertainer*, 1979). The grasshoppers of the title are like Faulkner's buzzards in *As I Lay Dying*: they are a continual accompaniment to the protagonist's journey through crisis to a dubious resolution. In 'Grasshoppers' Jolley gives an ironic twist to the pastoral idyll of a dream childhood. When her protagonist's marriage is disbanded, she dumps her child and a friend's on her mother at the farm and flies off to a holiday in Madras with her lesbian friend; here she is rejected again, and returns, not to the dreamed-of peace and order of the farm but to the chaos and disorder of a house where her mother is dying and her daughter missing, presumed drowned. The grasshoppers accompany her grief and guilt and seem to express it; and the dam, which had been a place of pleasure and enchantment becomes dark, secretive and malignant. Place is used in the story to communicate feeling and enhance dramatic changes of mood, like music, as Chekhov recommended. Significantly, the protagonist in Jolley's story is a former music teacher, who has read to her girls from Beethoven's diaries when he was composing the *Pastoral Symphony*:

> '. . . trees, rocks and flowers send back the echo man desires.'

But the story shows that the land can answer back in its own terms.

The examples I have discussed confirm that the use of country places by a number of contemporary Australian writers demonstrate the different 'vibrations' (to use D.H. Lawrence's term) of these places. Certain writers have so 'captured the spirit' of their region that we can call that region theirs: for example, Furphy, Hal Porter, Peter Cowan. That the same region can be perceived and used quite differently by

writers according to the constraints of genre is shown in heightened form in the examples I have given of the use of North-West settings in travel books, detective stories and romances by Idriess, Upfield and Walker. Thea Astley and Elizabeth Jolley demonstrate the uses of country landscapes in Queensland and Western Australia respectively for satiric and lyric/pathetic purposes respectively.

Looking across the range of contemporary writing about country places in Australia, one observes a specificity which is less comfortable with the grand gesture than were some writers in the 1950s. That "grandeur" which Marcus Clarke had seventy years earlier gone to the Australian Alps to discover[24] had its counterpart in the 1950s in the extensive inland regions of *Voss* and *To the Islands* and in the paintings of Drysdale, Nolan and Tucker. The recognition that these landscapes were essentially mindscapes of the artists and that they could be appropriated to great symbolic effect was expressed by Randolph Stow with a grandiosity which now embarrasses him:

> So that what, in the end, I see in Australia (so far only in the bush, but that need not be the end of it) is an enormous symbol: a symbol for the whole earth, at all times, both before and during the history of man. And because of its bareness, its absolute simplicity, a truer and broader symbol of the human environment than, I believe, any European writer could create out of the complex material of Europe.[25]

Such an assertion suggests an almost religious pressure for discovery through the land of one's essential being. This was no simple use of landscape to praise God, as in many nineteenth century English hymn writers, nor was it a doctrinal Jindyworobakism, though the Aboriginal spirits have their place in both White and Stow. It was a recognition that the land could make men suffer and give them visions. Stow's Ishmael[26], in the poem of that name, calls upon desert and sky to take him, wind to shape him in its image.

Such large gestures about what the country outside our cities can show us have been overtaken in recent Australian writing by a more circumscribed spirit, which is summed up best

perhaps in Les Murray's work. It is Les Murray who quotes with interest and approval Eric Rolls' controversial contention that in pre-European times Australia had the appearance of

> a vast parkland kept open and well grassed by constant burning off. It was a *paysage humanise* and *moralise* which the Aborigines had maintained for untold centuries; the wilderness we now value and try to protect came with us, the invaders.[27]

That image of continuing human control over landscape is in keeping with Murray's more circumscribed depictions of the Australian wilderness; implicit is a recognition of the need to know in detail, and to name aspects of the environment; the grand symbolic gesture is not enough. In some respects he represents that aspect of the pragmatic spirit which A.A. Phillips described as 'an obstinate bondage to the positive'.[28] Yet his work also shows a strong interest in Aboriginal culture (in some respects he is a latter day Jindyworobak) and a down-to-earth Christianity. He is fond of quoting Chesterton: 'Those who lose belief in God will not only believe in anything; they will bring blood offerings to it'.[29] The modest, contained quality of Murray's literary psyche has its occasional outbreaks; but the wilder explorations of madness, nihilism or despair are left to other writers, chiefly of the cities; and in the main, foreign cities.

The graph which I have sketched suggests a decline since the 1950s in the engagement of our writers and artists with the bush and the outback, though there remain outstanding exceptions to this (e.g. Fred Williams' late great Pilbara series of paintings). One of the chief defining myths of Australia, as powerful for us as the northern wilderness is for Canadians, seems to have been put aside, perhaps temporarily, as writers come to terms with more restricted territories. Perhaps we are in a new phase of naming, as writers locate themselves more precisely in an environment where they know they can stay, however provisionally. If this sounds like digging in, perhaps that is no bad thing. A sane curiosity about this country, and a fresh recognition of local characteristics may presage an era in which superficial notions of typicality give way to an understanding of diversities and difference in Australia.

NOTES (to Lecture 2)

1. D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, p. 12.

2. *The Portable Rolf Boldrewood*, ed. Alan Brissenden, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1979, p. 298.

3. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 'A Wintry Manifesto', in *Selected Poems*, Angus & Robertson, 1973, pp. 35-6.

4. *The Portable Joseph Furphy*, ed. John Barnes, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981, p. 2.

5. Anton Chekhov, *Letters on the Short Story*, ed. L.S. Friedland, Vision, London, 1965.

6. See Elizabeth Jolley, *Five Acre Virgin*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1976; *The Travelling Entertainer*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1979; *Palomino*, Outback Press, Collingwood, 1980; *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981; *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1983; *Woman in a Lampshade*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1983; *Stories*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984; *Milk and Honey*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984.

7. Elizabeth Jolley, 'The Play Reading' in *Woman in a Lampshade*, op. cit.

8. Graeme Kinross Smith, *Australia's Writers*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1980, p. 326.

9. Hal Porter, *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, Faber, London, 1963, pp. 52-53.

10. ibid., p. 69.

11. See Bruce Bennett, 'Australian Perspectives on the Near North: Hal Porter and Randolph Stow, *South Pacific Images*, ed. Chris Tiffin, University of Queensland, 1978, pp. 124-144.

12. Peter Cowan, 'Regionalism in Contemporary Australia', *Westerly* 23, 4, 1978, pp. 74-5.

13. Dorothy Hewett, ed., *Sandgropers*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1973, Introduction.

14. Peter Cowan, *Mobiles,* Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1979, pp. 7-13.

15. ibid., p. 7.

16. Bruce Bennett, ed., *New Country,* Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1976, p. 1.

17. Ion Idriess, *Man Tracks,* Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1938.

18. Letter to B.H. Bennett, June 1977.

19. A.W. Upfield's books have recently been republished by Angus & Robertson.

20. Thea Astley, 'The Scenery Never Changes', in *Impressions on a Continent,* ed. Bill Scott, Heinemann, Richmond, 1983.

21. ibid., p. 183.

22. Thea Astley, 'Writing in North Queensland', *LiNQ,* No. 1, 1981, p. 5.

23. Elizabeth Jolley, 'Five Acre Virgin', op.cit..

24. See *A Colonial City: High & Low Life*: Selected Journalism of Marcus Clarke, ed. L.T. Hergenhan, University of Queensland Press, 1972, p. 366.

25. Randolph Stow, 'Raw Material', *Westerly* 2, 1961, p. 4.

26. Randolph Stow, 'Ishmael', in *A Counterfeit Silence,* Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1969, p. 55.

27. Les Murray, 'Eric Rolls and the Golden Disobedience', *Persistence in Folly,* Sirius, Angus & Robertson, 1984, p. 154.

28. A.A. Phillips, 'The Family Relationship', *The Australian Tradition,* Cheshire-Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1966, p. 111.

29. *Persistence in Folly,* op. cit., p. 29.

III
SUBURB AND CITY

A principal aim of these lectures has been to consider the notion of specific places in Australia as crucibles of, and stimuli to, literary expression. This involves an understanding of the complex interrelatedness of writer, place and work. Traditionally, writer or work has been examined exhaustively at the expense of place. Contemporary research is restoring a balance. Yet barriers remain, not least in the expectation that the imagination can be set alight only by extremes, represented in the oppositional symbolizations of City versus Wilderness, the imaginative worlds of *homo faber* versus *homo naturalis*. In this discussion I am concerned to examine the interaction of certain Australian writers with suburb and city, those milieux where men and women as builders, or artificers, are most evident.

In literature and speech, 'suburban' often connotes narrow-minded or conventional in outlook, while 'suburbia', the suburbs considered collectively, is thought to embody the middle range of community standards and values, for which 'boring' is the most common epithet. Further down this presumed scale of civilization is 'rural' or 'rustic', which connotes simple, artless, unsophisticated or, more scathingly, uncouth, rude or boorish: agraria, the world of farms and country towns is commonly thought to be inhabited by slow wits. By contrast, the urban dweller is a metropolitan figure, commonly associated with 'urbanity': i.e., he or she is sophisticated, civilized, and at least knows what elegance, refinement or courtesy in manners and expression are; while the bush or outback is held to breed its inhabitants tough, to endure hardship and to face ultimate tests of the human spirit. At each extreme, City and Bush cry out for capitalisation; agraria and suburbia are relegated to the lower case.

An assumed 'suburban spirit' has been held by many intellectuals and artists in the first half of this century to stifle innovation and creativity. Life was to be found in the bush or

the city for Nettie Palmer and her circle for instance, but not in the suburbs.[1] A number of A.D. Hope's poems published between 1930 and 1950 satirise the conformity and standardised values of suburbia, expressed especially in a repressed sexuality:

> Once he sees into the landscape of their minds,
> All those nice young girls, so properly brought up
> To be sensible and attract, the poet finds
> Not a street in the suburbs, gossip at the tennis club,
>
> But a primitive world of unnecessary hurt
> And ignorance, where words like savage beasts wander.
>
> ('The Explorers', 1939[2])

Metonymic use of 'suburban' for ignorant, conformist, mechanical behaviour was common among Australian intellectuals in the inter-war and early post-war years. However, this could sometimes lead to absurd contradictions. An interesting case is Walter Murdoch's attack on the 'suburban spirit' in his preface to *Speaking Personally* (1930), where he describes it as 'the everlasting enemy'. This is an example of a portable idea; for as John La Nauze has shown, Murdoch, who lived in suburban Perth when he wrote the preface, had earlier published on this theme in an article of 1921, describing Melbourne:

> the awful sameness of Melbourne's suburban streets, with their red-tiled houses, neat lawns, gravel paths, *Pittosporum* hedges, reflecting a uniformity of spirit, a complacency, a positive fear of originality or difference.[3]

With uncharacteristic fervour, Murdoch invoked Nietzsche to encourage revolt against this modern hell. The irony of Murdoch's situation was that, at the time of writing his 1930 preface, he was living in a pleasant two-storeyed house, named Blithedale (after Hawthorne's novel) in a street called Suburban Road in the pleasant, semi-rural suburb of South Perth. Hell hath many faces, and resides in the memory as well as around us. We carry places with us. Tom Hungerford's autobiographical *Stories from Suburban Road* (1983) refer to the same road in which Murdoch lived, but evoke a very

different riverside environment, where young boys would catch goannas or pinch vegetables from the Chinese market gardeners who worked the foreshore. One person's Arcadia is another's imagined hell. Whereas Murdoch's *cultural* imagination was at work in his book-lined study overlooking the Swan River, Hungerford's *senses* were fully occupied in coming to terms with his environment. Ironically, it was the bookish Murdoch who, on reading a romantic poem presented to him by the young Hungerford, advised him that 'A poem must be a statement of fact'. These examples suggest that the study of place requires a consideration of both the sensuous and cultural aspects of imagination and what gives scope and stimulus to each.

Intellectuals are most often perceived as seekers after cultural satisfaction, and the usual state is frustration. The contradiction for intellectuals who lived in the suburbs but who aspired to a more dramatic or extreme state is evident in Chris Wallace-Crabbe's essay 'Melbourne in 1963', in which he observes that

> One cannot focus on any place, any situation, and say, 'Here indeed is the true centre of Melbourne', for the city is not merely large, but to an extraordinary degree, sprawling and centreless. The mile-square grid of the city proper is somehow far less real, less permanent, than the hundreds of square miles of suburbia into which the population flees in the evening, draws down the puritan blinds and settles itself before the blue shimmer of the television set.[5]

This mass ritual was a common image of those critical of suburbia in the decade after the introduction of television in Australia, and is continuous with inter-war images of suburbia. Wallace-Crabbe deplored the lack of cultural autonomy in his suburbanised Melbourne and generalised that 'Australian cities are still to some extent spiritual suburbs of London, Paris and New York'. Yet, he argued, while Melbournians may be embarrassed to recommend their city and suburbs to others, they seldom want to leave it (that was in the early 1960s). In the Melbourne context, Wallace-Crabbe believed it was not possible to be a full-time intellectual in the New York or Parisian manner: the lure of the suburban way, to

be a 'regular guy' was too strong. Chris Wallace-Crabbe's observations and recollections record the perceptions of a long-time 'local' of Melbourne's suburbs (South Yarra in his boyhood). Only the outsider, perhaps, feels free to say, as David Malouf has, that Melbourne is 'one of the world's great cultures'.[6] From across the Nullarbor, in a city much influenced intellectually by Melbourne, I agree with him. But the long-time local, who feels responsible for his city and suburbs, often tends to understate his environment, to name, record, praise, criticise, see ironic incongruities perhaps, but not to present things *in extremis*; to recognise boredom, but not the horror and glory. The place where one lives, especially in the suburbs, suggests the life by routine rather than the life of intensity, a place to smoulder rather than burn.

The 1950s and decades following have seen some important revaluations of suburbia. Robin Boyd's *Australia's Home* (1952), Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* (1971), Craig McGregor's *The Australian People* (1972) and Hugh Stretton's *Ideas for Australian Cities* (1970) all include significant social analyses, and a new sense of appreciation of the suburbs as an important middle-ground way of life in Australia, while recognising, often ironically, its limitations. The points of view of Boyd, Horne, McGregor and Stretton differ, but all recognise that the dismissal of the suburbs is the dismissal of a way of life that has an often unrecognised vitality; and may indeed, as McGregor observes in his championship of the suburban 'Alf', be the basis of a middle-class populism.[7]

But it was left to Bernard Smith to raise the difficult questions about artists' perceptions of the Australian suburb and their significance.[8] Smith observed that a strong preference for 'up-country' imagery was apparent in Australia before 1945. Thereafter Australian towns, cities and suburbs have been given more artistic scope. This is not a mere quantitative observation; it relates to a different quality of perception which, in the post-war period, shows suburban scenes as 'lived environments' rather than as stock concepts. An obsession with Rousseau-istic notions of nature and the noble savage had previously displaced *homo faber*: now a more historical perception of Australians as fabricators and artificers was

possible. Sali Herman's paintings were important, Bernard Smith suggested, not just for their aesthetic qualities but also for their place in the historical perception of the Australian suburb.

What then are some characteristic images of suburbia of contemporary writers? Do they suggest diversity or uniformity? What pressures, strains or aspirations do they reveal?

Let me begin with Perth and suburbs. As yet, few substantial suburban histories exist, and none of the quality of Weston Bate's *Brighton* (1963). Nevertheless F.K. Crowley's *History of Perth* (1962) and Robert Pascoe's *Peppermint Grove* (1983) are suggestive of what might be done. C.T. Stannage's social history, *The People of Perth* (1979) is on the other hand a major urban history which compares favourably with Graeme Davison's *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne* (1978). In both books, the city fathers' creation of the suburbs is shown to be a response to the goldrushes, which occurred forty years later in the west than in the east. Whereas many memoirs have depicted Perth in the first half of the century as a haven, a relatively quiescent, more or less organic society, Stannage has stressed the *differences* between suburbs in the early 1900s and subsequently: for instance Subiaco (where I was born) was a lower middle-class suburb for 'ordinary people', East Perth was a suburb 'of transients and battlers' and West Perth was 'a nice area' with a 'better class' of house and wealthy people, often in the professions or business. While Davison stresses the ideal of Home and Stannage the expectation of peace and stability, neither Melbourne's nor Perth's suburban extensions could be said to wholly fulfil their founders' dreams of an advantageous combination of country and city life.

Contemporary Western Australian writers have generally taken an ironic view of suburban existence. It is the nature and quality of this irony, and a compensating commitment or even affection in some writers which I will now briefly examine.

The transients in Peter Cowan's stories, ranging from the 1930s to the 1980s are often 'on the run' from Perth's suburbia,

which appears as setting and idea most regularly in *The Empty Street* (1965). The concise opening paragraph of 'The Island' in that collection introduces the central character's conflict between freedom and responsibility:

> The square of lawn before the house, and the small rose-bed, were neat and clean, but as he looked at them he thought that the roses needed pruning.

That setting unobtrusively foreshadows the conclusion, in which the man, having desired divorce, romance and adventure seems destined to remain suspended between what is and what might be. House, garden and suburban street are no mere backdrop to this taut low-keyed drama: they symbolise the man's self-imposed prison and his inability to leave; it is drama of the middle way, between extremes.

Dorothy Hewett's *Rapunzel in Suburbia* (1975; second printing 1976) is a more flamboyant protest than Cowan's, but the central image is still of imprisonment:

> Snared in the suburban drawing room
> With my husband, my ex-husband and my ex-lover,
> I sit alone Rapunzel, oh! Rapunzel let down your hair.
>
> ('Reunion')

In this suburbia however, letting down your hair is not done; or is done at considerable cost to the self, and others. In her own life, Hewett's temporary attachment to Communism was, as she has stated, principally a mode of protest against, and escape from, the staid mores of suburbia. (She had not read Karl Marx.)[9] Her work suggests the fervidly romantic revolutionary sentiments that can be generated from a sense of conflict with place and community, though it must also be said of Hewett that her childhood and youth in the relative freedom of a farm in the Great Southern wheatbelt area was an important formative influence, which has increased in proportion to her time and distance from it; from that region emerges much of the pastoral imagery and inspiration of *The Man from Muckinupin* and *The Fields of Heaven*.

Robert Drewe's ironic criticism of 'silver-tail' larrikins is located precisely in the suburb of Dalkeith in *The Savage Crows* (1976):

> He floated on his back on a Li-Lo in the swimming pool of his brother Geoffrey's home in Dalkeith, a salubrious riverside suburb of Perth, watching swifts dipping and gliding in the upper airs. As he cruised gently from one end of the pool to the other his brother's two Great Danes, Lady and her son Cheyenne (Shy for short) hurtled around the pool's quarry-tiled sides barking excitedly despite the heat. There was just breeze enough to ruffle the leaves of the silky oak bordering the pool and to tinkle the oriental wind chimes dangling from a branch. The Li-Lo had a special fitting at the front to take a glass of refreshment so you could sip as you floated. It could also hold a can of Aerogard spray as protection against the March-flies. It held neither at the moment. Occasionally Crisp slapped a thigh or shoulder where a fly landed but he was too lazy to fetch the spray. When he became too fried in the sun he slid off into the pool, swam a couple of laps and remounted the Li-Lo.[10]

The social criticism which follows is acute and accurate, showing networks of alliance through school, business and leisure activities among the privileged, especially at yacht club parties. In a comic and satiric account of one such party, Drewe shows the confrontation of one idiom and attitude, the complacent politeness of local 'well-bred' girls, with another, the accumulating anger of a Sydney woman with feminist views:

> 'Where are you from?' She smiled widely, showing a tiny smudge of lipstick on an upper tooth. With a deft gesture she flicked her long blonde hair behind her shoulders.
> 'What do you mean? From Sydney — but originally Yugoslavia.'
> 'Sorry.' The smile was apologetic. 'I mean what area. The North Shore, Double Bay? I love Double Bay. I always shop there when I'm in Sydney.'
> 'Lavender Bay actually. We're living together at the moment. They call it Lavatory Bay because all the harbour rubbish collects there.'
> 'Oh, I don't know it. What school did you go to? I know most of them in Sydney — Abbotsleigh, Ascham ...'

> Anna turned back to Crisp and linked arms. 'I'm pushing thirty and the lady wants to talk to me about school. Isn't that an interesting phenomenon?'[11]

Finally she explodes with

> 'Fuck all you bourgeois piss-ants!'

and escapes.

Drewe's satiric treatment of this aspect of suburbia is intensified in his depiction of the hypocrisy of men in this group who go to another suburb, East Perth, for their 'sport' with the Aboriginal women. The naming of suburbs is an important marker, indicating different populations, mores, and ways of behaving.

A major recent development is the fictional confrontation of suburbia with Aboriginal ways of living, from Aboriginal points of view. Nene Gare, who has worked closely with Aborigines, sets the scene with her novel *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961). Colin Johnson's *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) and Archie Weller's *The Day of the Dog* (1981) provide vivid accounts from Aboriginal points of view of the clash between their ways of living and those of conventional white suburbanites; and Jack Davis's poems and his plays, *Kullark* and *The Dreamers* (1981) further develop this theme. The refrain lines of Worru's opening soliloquy in *The Dreamers* clearly place this Western Australian suburban scene as a defeat and disappointment for the old man Worru:

> I walked down the track
> to where the camp place used to be
> and voices, laughing, singing
> came surging back to me.
>
> It was situated on the Swan
> not far from the old homestead.
> That's gone too.
> Kindly old man Hammersley,
> they can stay there as long as they like,
> he said.
> Now he too is dead.

Billy Kimberley used to corroboree
there weekends
for a tin of Lucky Hit,
then share it with his friends.

Now we who were there
who were young,
are now old and live in suburbia,
and my longing is an echo
a re-occurring dream,
coming back along the track
from where the campfires used to gleam.

Then there was Angie,
twenty-two stone.
Proud she and Herbie was proper given
church married not livin'.
Meal times,
Bella pulling the damper like a golden moon
from the ashes of the fire,
then sharing the last of the bacca,
some with clay pipes
and others rolling.

Now we who were there
who were young,
are now old and live in suburbia,
and my longing is an echo
a re-occuring dream,
coming back along the track
from where the campfires used to gleam.[12]

Within the alternating past-present structures of *The Dreamers* this opening statement, with its nostalgia for what Western Australia suburbia once was, for some Nyungar people, gathers an accumulating force. A single generation has seen the disappearance of a more casual style with ritual links to the past. For the present suburb-dwelling Aborigine, the campfire and its associated rituals have almost completely receded. This is dramatized in Scene 5 when the old man Worru, after a drinking session, begins 'a drunken stumbling version of a half-remembered dance'. Eighteen-year-old Peter pushes him aside, turns up the radio volume and does his own disco dance. Then, in the words of the stage directions:

> The scene freezes, the light changes, and the radio cuts abruptly to heavy rhythmic didjiridoo and clap sticks. An intricately painted DANCER appears on the escarpment against a dramatic red sky, dances down and across in front of them, pounding his feet into the stage. Finally, he dances back up the ramp where he poses for a moment before the light snaps out on the last note of music.[13]

The Dreamers is rich in such juxtapositions, which dramatize the contrast between a sordid present of urban fringe-dwelling Aborigines, lightened only by humour and a rough concern for each other, and a more splendid, heroic past which is no more, or less, than an old man's dream.

The impingement of a dream-time perspective on the assumed limitations of a white suburban outlook is also dramatised in *Kullark*, when Yagan, an early opponent of the Swan River Colony's first governor, Captain Stirling, and an important symbolic figure for the Nyungah people, re-tells the story of Warrgul, the Rainbow Serpent who created river, hills and plains where a city and suburbs with other names and significance now stand:

> Woolah!
> You came, Warrgul,
> With a flash of fire and a thunder roar,
> And as you came
> You flung the earth up to the sky,
> You formed the mountain ranges
> And the undulating plains.
> You made a home for me
> On Kargattup and Karta Koomba,
> Kargattup and Karta Koomba.
> You made the beeyon beeyol,
> The wide clear river,
> As you travelled onward to the sea.
> And as you went into the sunset
> Two rocks you left to mark your passing,
> To tell of your returning
> And our affinity.
> You gave me kangaroo and emu for my middens,
> Feathers for corroboree at night,
> The Swan, the duck and other birds you gave me,

And the waters teemed with fish a-shimmering bright.
You gave me laws and legends
To protect me,
And sacred places hidden in the hills.
The, oh wirilo, wirilo,
The jungara came across the deep blue waters
To rend my soul, to decimate and kill.[14]

One of the characteristic qualities of *poesis*, or art-language, as D.H. Lawrence called it, is its multivalence, its suggestion of worlds other than the one ostensibly referred to. Jack Davis's work has this quality. It is also strongly the case in Randolph Stow's verse and prose. Like the other writers about the Perth suburban life to whom I have referred, Stow generally takes up an adversary role towards the suburbs and what they represent, but with due attention to the gradations of difference among them and the different needs, or obsessions, which they signify.

Stow's poem 'The Utopia of Lord Mayor Howard',[15] for instance, evokes a dystopia ruled by the suburban spirit. Commencing with a reported statement of the Lord Mayor that trees in one of Perth's suburbs have 'grown so tall that they have lost their attraction' and that 'Neat rose gardens would be much more attractive', Stow constructs a devastatingly witty picture of city, suburbs, hills and forests replaced by roses, one of them named after the Lord Mayor's wife. Roses become a potent symbol (as in Peter Cowan and other West Australian writers) not of passionate love as in Robbie Burns' poem, but of the subjugation and distortion of nature.

In his angry outburst of self-justification for planning to leave Australia at the end of *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* (1965), the twenty-nine year old returned war veteran, Rick Maplestead, lambasts the 'arrogant mediocrity', the 'shoddiness and wowserism' and the 'unspeakable bloody boredom of belonging to a country that keeps up a sort of chorus: Relax, mate, relax, don't make the pace too hot'. The outburst arises, in part at least, from his knowledge of another world of intensity, suffering and mateship in the war, which Perth's suburbs have swallowed up. But Stow is a subtle writer who knows that places are to a large extent what we make them. Rick's war-time mate Hughie, from a working-class

family, is content to return to a civilization of getting and spending which Rick, and his younger alter ego Rob, bred on country life and books, find profoundly unheroic. There remains in the older Rick, at the end of the novel, more than a hint of that transforming romanticism which makes Rob think:

> It was all wrong for Hughie. There was something brilliant and buccaneering about Hughie, that ought not to be shut up in a shop, that ought to be out in the Territory hunting camels among the legendary gallant bones, or shooting crocodiles in the wet North.[16]

Instead, the pragmatic working-class boy will 'learn to play all the rich buggers' sports and finish up in high society'. That Hughie's decision is a let-down is of course in the eye of his beholders who, like most of the romantics and reformists who have written about Westralian suburbia, present it as an antithesis to their ideal other-world.

William Grono sums up a pervasive sense of emptiness, a picture of absence, and a vague longing for more than is offered in his 'Postcard from Perth'. The symbolic roses are there again:

> Between the long white shore
> and the pillaged hills
> the haze of roses
> in the aching suburbs
>
> Your mother and I
> are keeping well, touch wood.
> The garden's looking very nice. It seems
> to be getting through the summer
> all right. Old Harry has finally
> passed away, which was a blessed release
> all things considered.
> Please let's hear
> from you soon . . .[17]

The irony is pervasive, but it is not corrosive; like Australia's most famous poet of suburbia, Bruce Dawe, Grono is half in

love with the place whose limitations he regrets, for he identifies with it; its voices are his.

What then do these contemporary images of Westralian suburbia contribute to our knowledge? In general, they have less to offer in factual detail than in modes of interaction with place. Taken together, they suggest dissatisfaction with the norms (and perhaps, in Craig McGregor's terms, the Alfs) of West Australian suburban living. In some cases (e.g. Colin Johnson, Archie Weller) anger and violence are evident; but in Jack Davis's work comedy is the framework within which a larger pathos and sense of loss is developed. The disinheritance of Aborigines also lies behind the stinging social criticism in Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows*. The interrelated institutions of marriage and the home, perpetuated in the suburbs, are probed and examined by Cowan and energetically flouted by Hewett. But the prevailing tone of most able writers of Western Australia who choose to write about the middle-class suburbs rather than country towns or outback is a wry irony akin to Grono's, almost affectionately observing the characteristics of his life, while registering the limitations and suppressions of the "aching suburbs". Randolph Stow's work balances out the alternatives. To offset Rick Maplestead's angry criticism, Stow presents Hughie's understandable acceptance of suburban comforts and expectations. But the suburbs are still a source of, and appropriate analogue to murder, suspicion and fear, as Stow's latest novel, *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984), reminds us.

Outside Western Australia, as well as within that state in the 1960's and 1970's the attraction of *inner-city* working class suburbs for intelligent and articulate young people has had important consequences in contemporary literature. In this context, it makes sense to talk of Helen Garner's Fitzroy[18] or Frank Moorhouse's Balmain[19]. Both are places of experiment, in which a different sense of community is sought from that which is assumed to be offered by upper-middle class suburbia, especially its alleged obsession with the nuclear family and sexual continence. Garner and Moorhouse are forerunners in modes of fiction which dramatize the break-up of old forms of social organization and the establishment of new, more

flexible tribal groupings. The irony and pathos of these experiments are skilfully exposed. Appropriately, they are located on the very fringe of Australia's two largest cities.

But how are such changes expressed in cities outside the 'top two'? Robert Drewe's comments indicate his belief that many Western Australian readers have not yet accepted the suburbs as a proper locale for fiction:

> West Australian readers, suffering from an overdose of local outback novels, are struck by such a welcome (or unwelcome) flash of recognition when a novel pops up using a provincial suburban background and familiar characters, that they are immediately convinced that this is 'real life' and that the others, being full of sentiment, climate, saltbush and squatters, are what is meant by fiction.[20]

Perth's increasingly cosmopolitan flavour is welcomed by Drewe, who nevertheless recognises that Nature still prevails over the works of men and women:

> More than any other Australian city dwellers the people of Perth are in physical harmony with their environment.[21]

Alan Alexander, an immigrant to Western Australia from Northern Ireland, celebrates in his poetry the same increasingly cosmopolitan Northbridge area in the 'airy city'[22] of Perth and looks outward for dialogue not with Europe but with the other 'Cities of the Southern Cross' — Durban, Cape Town, Montevideo, Santiago.[23] Other writers from the western capital have sought alternative images in the near north of Southeast Asia and in this way express a 'de-centring' of consciousness which may paradoxically increase a sense of their identity as Perth-ites *and* Australians.

When Australians say they have no 'real' cities (except, at a pinch, Sydney), they usually imply an absence based upon American, or European, or British experience. Writing from the American experience, Joyce Carol Oates has commented that the City,

> a material expression of civilization itself, must always be read as if it were utopian (that is, 'sacred') — and consequently a tragic disappointment, a species of hell.[24]

Yet while we know that for many inhabitants of Perth, as for other cities in Australia, intense suffering is part of their lot, our writers have not generally found in the city the symbolic extremes which Oates refers to. In Perth, Canberra, Brisbane, Adelaide or Hobart, a middle register of fictionalised experience has seemed more appropriate to our writers: our Bush Capital and our middle-sized cities seem to lack the necessary grandeur or horror for apocalypses, or even for deep suffering; a comic or light-ironic mode has usually seemed more appropriate. Peter Porter's comment that in the 1950s in Brisbane 'suffering was considered vulgar, no-one was allowed to suffer'[25] has its parallels elsewhere in Australian cities and suburbs.

Sydney has undoubtedly attracted Australia's most metropolitan writers, though the quality of that metropolitanism surprisingly remains largely un-analysed. From William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise* (1892) (an example of a transposed setting away from the author's home-town, in this case Brisbane) to Louis Stone's *Jonah* (1911), Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1932), *For Love Alone* (1944) and Patrick White's novels (especially *The Vivisector*, 1970, and *The Eye of the Storm*, 1973) we become aware of a city which has the capacity to attract and repel. As Patrick White says, he hates what he loves[26] and that ambivalence is obvious in his fictional treatment of Sydney.

Both *The Vivisector* and *The Eye of the Storm* 'belong to Sydney'. White has said that to write *The Vivisector*

> I had to feel Sydney round me, day and night, in my maturity.[27]

He knew he would write *The Eye of the Storm* set in a house in Sydney because 'Sydney is what I have in my blood'[28]. These statements help to account for the remarkable inwardness from diverse points of view of his presentation of Sydney in the two novels, as well as the detailed accuracy of many descriptions.

The Eye of the Storm seems to me to be Australia's major urban novel, though it is not exclusively that. In spite of its varied population, and its placement of urban experience in relation to island, country and suburb, *The Eye of the Storm* achieves an intense unity that is summed up as much by the metaphor of the city as by the momentary vision at the storm's eye. In each major character we are shown constructions and deconstructions of the city, in varying degrees of sophistication, understanding and coherence. In no sense is Sydney a mere inert backdrop, but is a created world of contending beauty and ugliness, which Patrick White has seen in his lifetime developing from 'a sunlit village into this present-day parvenu bastard, compound of San Francisco and Chicago.'[29] To the egotistical actor Basil Hunter, in whom White recognises himself, the city to which he returns is in a complicated way himself and not-himself, a creation of his mind and a solid obdurate otherworld, which may yet teach him something about himself:

> Though he had played no active part in his city's transformation, though he had rejected it in fact, he accepted some of the credit for it. He had to share his recovered self-respect with this self-important metropolis. However late in the piece, he offered his love to its plate glass and neo-brutal towers; at the heart of it, his old mother.[30]

Precisely because he is not a bound creature, moulded by an occupational role in the city, as Arnold Wyeburd is, Basil has some freedom to use and project the city as his theatre. But significantly, as in most Australian fiction, the real depths of identity are sought in the country at the childhood farm 'Kudjeri', where, in a reversal of expectations, White shows that real innocence and humility are not to be found either.

Nurse Flora Manhood's apprehensions of the city show her to be less 'fixed' in an occupational role than the lawyer Wyeburd. But her perceptions are not comprehended:

> These furnaces refineries whatever along the Botany sky-line look real scary sometimes specially the one which turns into a fiery cross if you look at it through a fly screen.[31]

Unlike Bellow's New Yorkers or Chicago-ites, White's Sydney-siders tend not to meet their moments of truth in the streets, or in buses or trains, but in gardens, on islands or farms or in the outback. The man-made parts of the environment, and social forms, are more favourable grist to White's satiric mill.

If *The Eye of the Storm* is our most reverberant city novel of the past decade, Vincent Buckley's *The Golden Builders* (1976)[32] is our major city poem of the same period. Its principal locale is Melbourne or, more specifically, the inner-city suburbs of Carlton and Fitzroy, where Buckley lived and worked in the early 1950s. Significantly, Buckley was born and brought up in the country, in Romsey, Victoria, with a strong attachment to nature and to his Irish Catholic inheritance; and while the poem is notable for its ecumenical range of cultural and religious reference, it is also marked by the fresh perceptions of a country-bred consciousness. In the terrible magic of this city of Melbourne/Jerusalem images of vitality and disintegration co-exist. The poem expresses the spirit of man-made Melbourne and its assimilation of the country beyond. The hammers and drills of demolition are a reminder of the transience of city environments. Fragmentation, dislocation and changes of tempo reflect urban change. Images of death and of living death are juxtaposed: an uncle from the country

> ... brushed his foxy hair
> sideways on his skull, walked
> from the knees, with a camel's lope,
> down all the streets to the Sarah Sands
> sickened for hillside air ... (viii)

There is something of that fascinated horror of the countryman in the poet too, as he immerses himself in the destructive element of his city; it is a steadiness of vision in the midst of flux.

Buckley's Melbourne and White's Sydney are intensely personal; both authors are receptive to the special vibrations of their chosen cities. Named streets and buildings are invested with an intense, almost visionary awareness. The differences

are in part the authors' personalities, in part those of their cities: an interaction of place with person is understood and projected in both writers' work. Buckley's Melbourne has a more moral 'edge' than White's Sydney and a stronger concern for order. In the end, *The Eye of the Storm* is a celebration of the esemplastic individual against the combined forces of conformism and order; yet it is also a recognition of the terrible power of that individual. In the crucible of each of these half-real, half-fictional cities the question of transcendence is posed; the concluding images are for Buckley the church, for White the garden.

None of the other Australian cities has yet produced a work which compares with the singular intensities of *The Eye of the Storm* or *The Golden Builders*. In the test case of Perth, which I invoked, a range of attitudes to suburbia are apparent from violent rejection to the more common literary response of a wry ironic acceptance. As in most of Australia's middling-sized urban agglomerations, the city of Perth is still dominated by its suburbs; and the man-made environment has not yet blocked-in its dwellers to a full experience of the horrors, or pleasures, of a fully fabricated existence.

The relative lack of pressure in our city centres is marked by a similar lack of intensity in our writers' visions. If utopia is not to be found there, neither is hell. But our cities and suburbs are increasingly providing scope for the expression of the mixed economies of our private and communal lives.

NOTES (to Lecture 3)

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