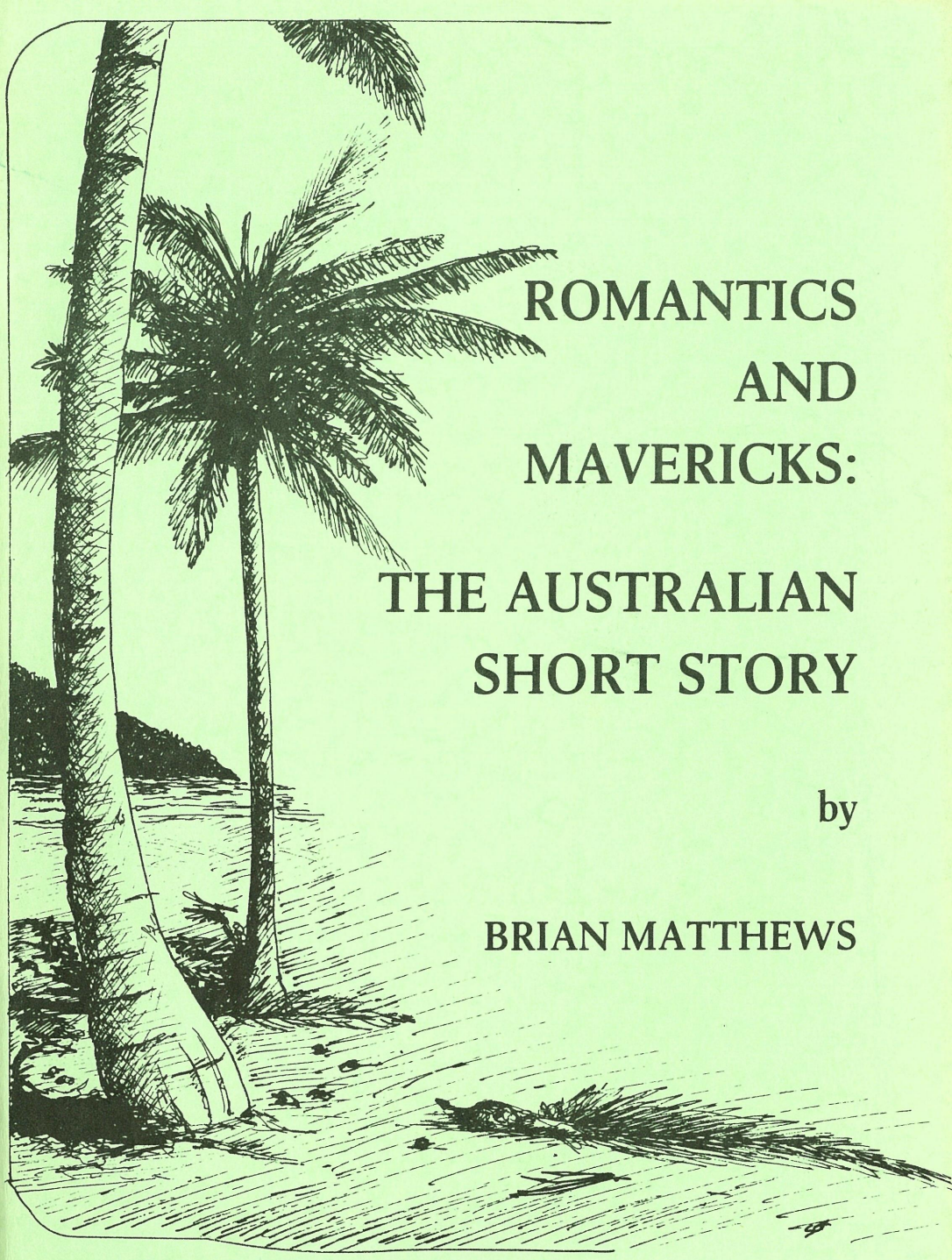

ROMANTICS AND MAVERICKS: THE AUSTRALIAN SHORT STORY

by

BRIAN MATTHEWS

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies 1987

THE COLIN RODERICK LECTURES: 1986

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INTRODUCTION

The Colin Roderick Lectures, sponsored by the Townsville Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, are delivered annually by a distinguished Australian writer or academic at James Cook University, and subsequently published by the Foundation. The series is named for Emeritus Professor Colin Roderick, Foundation Professor of English at James Cook University and distinguished Lawson scholar. Colin Roderick also established the Foundation in Townsville in 1966 and continues in his retirement to play an active role as its Vice-Patron. The publication of the Lectures makes them available not only to members of the Foundation but to the world-wide literary and academic community interested in the study of Australian literature.

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Professor A.J. Hassall
Executive Director

I METAMORPHOSES

Australian literary study and criticism since the 1940s or thereabouts has been very strong on a process we might call "retrieval" — that is, the business of returning to and in some ways rediscovering certain writers in order to make a new, a renewed or a more accurate case for their claims to serious attention. In short: to retrieve them if not from oblivion at least from neglect and above all from misunderstanding and distortion. We might expect lesser literary figures to become the focus of this sort of activity, but it has been true also, and spectacularly, of some of our best and most central writers. For example: A.A. Phillips's late 1940s essay 'Henry Lawson as Craftsman" is usually regarded as the one that rekindled interest in Lawson's achievement as a prose writer. Just as notably, A.D. Hope's review of Miles Franklin's *Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and His Book* began the work of retrieving Furphy from the misunderstanding that plagued *Such is Life* during its first forty years (even if it did not drop out of sight so completely as was once thought).

More recently, there have been several attempts to retrieve certain writers of the 30s and 40s — Prichard, Tennant, Penton *et al.* — from what is seen by their various champions as undeserved neglect on the part of critics and university course designers in general. Again — one more example — Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* was retrieved from its curious limbo (published on the eve of World War II, it made little impact before being engulfed by history) in Vincent Buckley's famous essay of the 1950s.

When the retrieval is begun and who begins it are matters of some interest to anyone becoming conscious of the pervasiveness of the process. Barbara Baynton and Miles Franklin, for example, have been the subjects of relatively recent feminist retrievals which, while they have achieved much justice, have in my view introduced some distortions of their own, by omission more often than not. *My Brilliant Career*, once regarded indulgently as a sort of girlishly effusive *sport*, has been given a refurbished image by

feminist critics and, perhaps especially, by film maker Margaret Fink (though at the expense of overlooking or distracting attention away from the manifest inadequacy of some of Franklin's writing). And Barbara Baynton's work has likewise benefitted from the new approaches of critics like Kay Iseman and Susan Sheridan, who depart from, rejuvenate or play interesting variations on those unexamined stand-bys of Baynton criticism, "the Gothic" and "grim realism".

Teachers of Australian literature will find themselves not only becoming conscious of the phenomenon of retrieval but also indulging in it. To a populace ever eager to condemn universities in general, academics in particular and English Department academics perhaps above all, the retrieval process is often cynically characterised as a part of the thesis "industry", the search for topics, new fields. Sometimes, of course, it is: though anyone who reads, say, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* will realise just how extensive and unplumbed are the riches of our literary culture and how little need there is for any unseemly jostling for, or phoney "discovery" of new areas, issues and figures. But retrieval is also an inevitable part of any relatively youthful literary culture: it takes the form of a constant undercurrent of debate — among readers; in reviews and professional criticism; in biographies, literary histories and critiques — about the importance and contributions of various writers, about who should take precedence over whom, about who has been neglected and who unduly elevated. It is in this way that we establish not a *canon* (which involves permanent exclusions) but our sense of the shape of our literary culture, the *wholeness* of it, its peaks and valleys and little-known places, its capacity for continual and intriguing metamorphosis, its proteanism . . .

Becoming aware of the impulse towards retrieval, as well as my own surrender to it, I put a number of highly tentative, not to mention tendentious, propositions to an honours seminar at Flinders University, inviting a fairly free and easy exploration of a mixed, even unlikely, group of writers within the general context established by preliminary discussions on the phenomenon and the workings of retrieval. We reflected on the idea that nationalism and the *Bulletin* school seemed to have created the necessity

for several retrievals; that Franklin and Baynton, being two of these, remained to some extent tantalisingly elusive despite (but perhaps also because of) the glare of recent attention which gave the impression of having come up with the final verdicts; that Thea Astley, arguably misunderstood and neglected for twenty years, had been gratefully *received* as the feminist wave picked her up, but still elicited in many quarters — and especially among reviewers — no more than wary respect, uncommitted appreciation; that Vance Palmer had been the subject of several varieties of retrieval attempts each of which seemed to give up on him in the end, fixing him the more firmly with the critical stereotype which was supposed to be under attack; and that Hal Porter, despite the detailed and sympathetic scrutiny of one or two academic critics, was for a long time watchfully regarded if he was regarded at all, criticised, puzzled over for his baroque excesses, uneasily suspected of being perhaps un-Australian, held to be out of the stream — not *qualified*, as it were, for retrieval.

As our discussions week by week grappled with the various and shifting connections between these admittedly disparate writers, certain points of interest emerged and recurred: the perceived or actual maverick streak in several of the writers; the strong Romantic links and provenance in much of their work; the way the women writers portrayed their female characters; the idea that all of them inhabited a space in the literary culture nearer the margins than the centre; the fact that two of them (Astley, Palmer) at one time or another explicitly suspected and regretted this marginalising; (Porter suspected it too, but exulted in it!). All of this gave rise to some interesting honours classes and I thought it might be appropriate to pursue some of these ideas —or rather touch down on them from different directions and within altering contexts — in the Colin Roderick Lectures for 1986.

II DISGUISES AND PERSECUTIONS: MILES FRANKLIN, LOUISA LAWSON, BARBARA BAYNTON

Why *does* Sybylla Melvyn, in Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, take to her fiance of only a few minutes standing with a riding whip? Sybylla herself offers a torrent of explanations: it was "the outcome of an overstrung, highly excitable, and nervous temperament"; or it was "perhaps" wounded vanity; or an expression of her tendency to "strike when touched"; or, Satan "got hold" of her; or Harold's "calm air of ownership" irritated her. Whatever the cause of her impulse, there is nothing tentative, undecided or half-hearted about the way she carries it out: Harold's lips are saved from a mashing only by his moustache, but his nose and left cheek are heavily struck, he is blinded in the left eye and a cut on the temple bleeds profusely. The extent of the injuries, which could have been even more serious, somehow seems to outweigh any or all of the suggested provocations; likewise, Sybylla's penitent reaction, as it gathers ever more extravagant momentum, seems out of proportion to the misdemeanour, startling, painful and potentially serious though it undoubtedly was. Just as her explanations come in a torrent, so also do her successive visions of appropriate penance: "I half expected and fervently wished he would strike", she reports; and, as the whip falls from her fingers within seconds of the deed, she assumes the posture of one about to be punished and abased and does so willingly: "I dropped on to a low lounge behind me, and placing my elbows on my knees crouchingly buried my face in my hands; my hair tumbled softly over my shoulders and reached the floor, as though to sympathetically curtain my humiliation. Oh, that Harold would thrash me severely!" she entreats.

This amazing scene has, of course, been much conjured with; it's a psychoanalyst's dream as each new sentence seems to vie with its predecessor for masochistic, sadistic or sado-masochistic honours. Any overall view which tries to make unified sense of this in any case fairly incoherent book runs into trouble with this

scene at least (though there are other problems as well). Neither the book's overt nationalism nor its found feminism can easily cope with Sybylla's rush of blood — in the one case because it stands outside the nationalist theme; and in the other because Sybylla's violent act of self-assertion is matched, if not negated, by an equally trenchant self-abasement (paralleling other episodes in the book when her behaviour shows no awareness at all of the extent to which convention, custom and unexamined expectations were imprisoning her).

The problem of how to regard *My Brilliant Career* — of how to fashion a view of it which will cope with its mercurial changes of stance, atmosphere, mood and conviction — is not one I want to pursue further here. But I raise it because it strikes me as an especially good example of a book's being misconstrued from the very start by its readers and critics, a misconstruction to some extent guilelessly encouraged by its young and radically confused author. Miles Franklin and Barbara Baynton, arguably the two most important women writers in their day, were both tarred with the nationalist and bush-ethic brush and both more or less accepted the classification. But Franklin and especially Baynton (and, for the record, Louisa Lawson in many of her poems and in many of *The Dawn's* articles and editorials), revealed beneath a surface Australianism, Antipodean versions of an instantly recognisable figure: the persecuted woman.

As a theme, the persecuted woman is very venerable; it was well-tried though in abeyance when Samuel Richardson resuscitated it in the 18th Century in the person of his heroine Clarissa Marlowe and, across the Channel, it was given a further if perverse lease of life in De Sade's *Justine*. The persecuted woman became a standard and characteristic figure in Gothic romances: in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* there are actually two such sufferers — Antonia and Agnes; in the tales of terror of Mrs Ann Radcliffe in the 1790s, the persecuted woman stands always at the centre of the tortuous plot and is the means by which all is resolved; in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* a young woman is wrongfully accused of killing a child as a result of the schemings of the monster, who terrorises her and brings about her imprisonment and eventual execution. Her name, incidentally, is Jus-

tine. In Mary Shelley's much less well-known novel, *Valperga*, the persecuted woman reappears in the form of the heroine Beatrice; and Beatrice Cenci is, of course, her husband's persecuted woman in his verse drama, *The Cenci*. It is not difficult, though also not necessary, to enumerate further examples.

Like all themes that become cultish or overworked, the persecuted woman figure gradually took on certain classically recognisable traits: in general, persecuted women suffered various and similar terrors, were in one way or another imprisoned, were abused and outraged and died eventually a violent death, or, occasionally, escaped such a death only at the very last and by a hair's breadth. Samuel Richardson's Clarissa endures physical trials and psychological torture in the confident knowledge that the greater her endurance, the more certain will be her reward beyond the grave to which those trials are hastening her. Virtue will be rewarded. The connection between the nature of the endurance and the certainty and quality of the heavenly reward becomes looser and looser as time passes; Lewis, Radcliffe and Shelley all make more than passing gestures in the direction of the greater truth that explains and justifies what happens here below, but all of them, especially Lewis, become much more engrossed in the exquisitely ramified evils and grotesqueries that are increasingly their real concern. De Sade, of course, inverts the whole picture, as the titles of his persecuted woman sagas indicate: *Justine, ou les malheurs de la vertu* and *Juliette, ou les prosperites du vice!*

Other ideas, characteristics and variations that from time to time attach themselves to the general theme of the persecuted woman are: the not all that uncommon romantic or decayed romantic view of the lover as a monster or as monstrous. This is one of De Sade's special contributions and it can be seen, of course, in an experimentally literal form in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; or, the theme of the virtuous but seduced heroine abandoned to her fate by the father of her child; or, the preoccupation with green eyes as a sign of evil in women (which in turn becomes transmuted into a sort of cliche — the sinister statue with emeralds in place of eyes); the associated language of corruption — graves, ghosts, tombs, corrupting flesh, disinterment, the

vulnerability of babies whom mothers in the last extremities of terror try to protect (as in Monk Lewis and Mrs Radcliffe), the preoccupation with rape and incest, the connection of these with what the Encyclopédistes called being in a state of nature: *en etat de nature*, so the theory went, one could realise with true passion the virtues and joys of brother/sister incest. And so on.

Because they were part of the reassertion of feeling, sentiment, emotion, these were powerful ideas in the Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries, even if they were variously espoused and involved constantly fluctuating infusions of the arcane and the weird. While one can argue at great length — and many have — about the ways in which and the degree to which such ideas were filtered, percolated or distilled into the Australian literary atmosphere, there is no question that they got here in one form or another. Indicators of various kinds reveal their subterranean presence: the extraordinary durability of the Frankenstein story, for example, in both American and Australian culture, and its many reincarnations and versions; and the continued presence of the persecuted woman as a staple and central figure in stage melodrama, decayed Gothic, which was so prevalent and popular in Australia towards the end of the 19th century. Whatever its manifestations and however tortuous its routes, it seems to me that the persecuted woman figure had, consciously or not, become a part of the mental, emotional and imaginative "equipment" of three major female literary figures of the turn of the century — namely Louisa Lawson, Miles Franklin and Barbara Baynton. Here is some of the evidence.

Louisa Lawson's collection of poetry, *The Lonely Crossing* (published on *The Dawn* press in 1905 and recently republished in facsimile) contains many poems in which a narrating female voice tries to deal not just with loneliness or other hardship but with some form of profound, desolating terror, psychological or physical: with, in short, some variety of persecution which her vulnerable womanhood attracts. For example:

Thirty long miles to the nearest town
Mary! Pity women
The way is long and the bush is lone,

I'll start tonight by the rising moon
She lies so still and she makes no moan.
Mary! Pity women

The baby's lips from her breast unclung
Mary! Pity women
As she brushed the bush where the black snake hung
And caught the gleam of his red forked tongue
As he rose in wrath with coil unwrung
Mary! Pity women

These are antipodean versions of the horrors which beset Monk Lewis's persecuted Agnes and her child, and they are much more compassionately rendered. This woman, carrying her dead baby on a horrendous, almost surreal journey to seek the protection and the solace of her own mother, is of course irresistibly reminiscent of Barbara Baynton's heroine in "A Dreamer" — of which more later. There are several poems like the one I've quoted, a female voice sympathetically and sometimes desperately portraying a condition of persecution or entrapment of one kind or another. But a classic persecuted woman is revealed in Louisa Lawson's very good poem, "The Libertine", narrated by a male voice, the libertine himself:

There's blood in the ink of her writing
The paper so stiffened with tears,
And I with my conscience am fighting,
And striving to quiet my fears.

And these are the words she is saying
"My life I no longer can bear,
For death I am constantly praying,
Oh when will God answer my prayer."

And later in the poem the libertine confesses that he "sullied her soul" with his lust;

I poisoned her life with my passion
And murdered her beautiful trust.

The poem ends with him sitting with soul-lepers in torment at Hell's gate. This is slightly untypical in its regard for the tortured conscience of the persecutor, but wholly typical in its portrait of a woman at the mercy of a tormentor and an imprisoner, a woman for whom death would be a release. Perhaps even more significant is a poem called "Alice Gertler". When a writer turns an actual, documented event or case to advantage in pursuing a particular theme, such selectivity tends to suggest a strong conscious interest in the theme as against merely fortuitous and occasional references. A newspaper report gave Nabokov the idea for *Lolita*, but one only has to read that book to realise that Nabokov's interest in that kind of sexuality pre-dated and loomed larger than the mere occasion. In the same way, Louisa Lawson seized upon a small news item which told of a squatter who married a beautiful and gifted girl and installed her in a hut on his property alongside his black mistress and her family. The new wife then suffered all kinds of indignities and horrors. Louisa turns this into an antipodean version of the imprisonment and gradual destruction through horror and degradation that are the hallmark of the persecuted woman's experience:

> On the creaking bluegum tree
> Moans the bronzewing drearily
> And anon the curlew's cry
> Sharp and shrill goes wailing by
> Like a weird Litany
> — Alice Gertler

> Uncongenial sights for thee
> Gruesome sounds of death and dree;
> Filling all the nights with fear
> Making dreary days more drear
> All the uneventful year
> — Alice Gertler

> None to harken. And despair
> Gives to thee a listless air.
> Dear how long the stretch of pain
> Ere will turn a woman's brain,
> And her sad tears cease to rain?
> — Alice Gertler

And, later in the poem:

> Girl, it fills me with dismay
> Seeing thee give thy life away;
> Burned thy cheek is by thy tears,
> Wrung thy heart is by thy fears;
> Pray thou dost, but no one hears,
> — Alice Gertler

> Millais makes a face like thine
> On the Huguenot to shine;
> What would I not give to be
> Like him, forced all else to flee,
> But beloved by one like thee
> — Alice Gertler

The horrors here are translated into what Louisa knew best — the horrors of boredom, lovelessness, drought, hardship, squalor, entrapment — and rendered through some nice echoes of Barcroft Boake; but the figure, allowing for these local differences, is a classic version of the persecuted woman. It is incidentally interesting to note that the same perception appears in *The Dawn*, frequently, where the imprisoning and loveless marriage is seen as a condition of torture and persecution for the woman: "The sacredness and strength of marriage ties can never be weakened by the severance of bonds which womens' tears have rotted"; and: "In time she does not know her own body or mind, and her only morality is to be faithful to the marriage contract."

I've dwelt on Louisa Lawson a little, because it seems to me especially significant that such a dynamic, extroverted woman, whose life was spent at great pace in the world of journalism and business, should have perceived both herself and woman as such in that way, in those utterances that were her most personal and most genuine. Louisa was neither a good enough writer nor compromising enough to seek to align her writing with what might have been seen as the mainstream Bulletin school nationalism and realism. Miles Franklin, much younger, highly impressionable, and in touch with that world (the *Bulletin et al*) rather than with the world of *The Dawn* and the women's movement,

dropped naturally into bush yarn idiom and context: " . . . the descriptions of bush life and scenery came startlingly, painfully real to me," says Lawson in his Preface; and, "I've been through the life you write of" he tells her in a letter. Nevertheless, and despite also the naturally comic or ironic orientation and tone of much of the book, Sybylla Melvyn is a persecuted — or at least potentially persecuted — woman: she has profound fear of men and their world; almost every social situation she experiences —her own family, other families, friendship, courtship — becomes threatening to her, a species of entrapment; she is acutely conscious of and sensitive to the killing ennui, the ineluctable terrifying boredom of bush life for a woman of lively mind. As Louisa Lawson put it, portraying precisely the same mood, precisely the same kind of psychological prison, "Making dreary days more drear/ All the uneventful year." The same poem exactly catches Sybylla Melvyn's mood and plight and her perception of it:

> Careth aught the world for thee
> Or thy life long misery?
> Thou art gifted good and fair,
> But neglected; hence a snare
> Would entrap thee everywhere
> — Sybylla Melvyn

This is not just a neat fortuitous coincidence of ideas and mood; the accord exists between the poem and the novel because they share the same provenance, the perception of woman as beleaguered and persecuted. *My Brilliant Career* is a series of variations on the theme in which, despite a prevalent comic, ironic or even flippant note, the language persistently betrays the depth and seriousness of the actual or imagined or expected persecution:

> My sphere in life is not congenial to me. Oh, how I hate this living death which has swallowed all my teens, which is greedily devouring my youth, which will sap my prime, and in which my old age, if I am cursed with any,

> will be worn away! As my life creeps on for ever through the long toil-laden days with its agonizing monotony, narrowness and absolute uncongeniality, how my spirit frets and champs its unbreakable fetters — all in vain!

This is the complaint of the persecuted woman *par excellence*, and would need only minor amendments to be truly worthy of Monk Lewis's Agnes. The whipping episode is a central moment in the pattern of persecution: the persecuted woman will welcome death as escape, but not dishonour. Harold's shepherding her into a room alone, his proprietorial air and gesture, his loveless proposal, his closeness, his sheer male presence are all Franklin's versions of nastier horrors that befall persecuted women in enclosed rooms with their persecutor. She resists but, true to the stereotype, is overwhelmed and, in imagination at least, severely thrashed, with all that that implies for thrasher and thrashee . . .

And so to Barbara Baynton. Recalling to mind what I said earlier about the persecuted woman theme and its characteristics, here are some reminders of sequences and images and events that we find in Baynton:

— in "Squeaker's Mate", a woman is imprisoned in a room, disabled and in agony, where she is tormented and taunted by her erstwhile "mate" and his newly acquired lady friend. At the end of the story the persecuted woman is assaulted so violently with a pole that the pole breaks over her arms and body, while her tormentor is bitten to the bone again and again by her protective dog . . .

— in "A Dreamer", a pregnant woman making an expiatory visit to her mother, is assailed by the anthropomorphically portrayed forces of nature:

> The wind savagely snapped (the branches), and they lashed her unprotected face. Round and round her bare neck they coiled their stripped fingers. Her mother had planted

> these willows, and she herself had watched them grow. How could they be so hostile to her!

And, as she tries to cross the raging torrent:

> "Will you?" yelled the wind. A sudden gust caught her . . . hurling her backwards . . . She opened her lips to call. The wind made a funnel of her mouth and throat, and a wave of muddy water choked her cry . . .

And so on. She reaches her mother's house, to find it inhabited by eerie, silent women and a child; and the mother lying dead . . .

— at the end of Baynton's novel, *Human Toll*, the green-eyed and malign Mina tries to suffocate her new-born child. Ursula rescues the child and runs terrified into the bush, where she becomes lost. Clutching the child, she begins a nightmare of imprisonment in the bush. The baby dies, but she struggles on, clutching it to her. Exhausted, she buries the baby, but returns to it, obsessed, disinters it and from then on carries it through the whole of her increasingly horrifying journey which brings her always back to the same spot. She is tormented by loneliness, darkness, the unknown, grotesque fears and fancies, "Nature . . . frankly brutal," heat, thirst, hunger, her grim and stiffening burden, moral agony as to whether or not to leave the body, hallucination and impending madness and obsession. In all the discussions of that great stereotype, "Lost in the bush", I have never seen this sequence mentioned, yet it is surely a conscious variant — persecuted women in the bush.

— in "The Chosen Vessel", a woman is abandoned by her husband, imprisoned and besieged in her house with her small baby, and eventually chased, raped and murdered by her besieger.

These examples, and there are others, seem to me very compelling. Baynton's own life experiences and the literary atmosphere in which she lived and wrote in the 90s made it completely

natural for her to set her tales in the bush and, indeed, to make the bush a significant element and not merely a backdrop — just as Lawson had done and was doing. But the overwhelming central concern of these bush studies is with woman's experience of persecution, siege and imprisonment; and an accompanying obsession is that of motherhood, mother and daughter and mother/child relationships, and pregnancy. Baynton's persecuted women are almost always accompanied by, and their persecution rendered exquisitely more agonizing by the vulnerable presence of, a baby, either in fact or *in utero*. This has nothing to do with anything in the nationalist or realist writing that surrounded her, but is integral to persecuted woman variations: indeed, the image of the surviving child still grasping or still being grasped by the dead or nearly dead mother is a favourite one. Baynton uses it straight out in "The Chosen Vessel" and inverts it in *Human Toll*. In "Squeaker's Mate" she gives a strange and somehow chilling twist to the situation by making the persecuted woman barren and her female tormentor pregnant.

Baynton's is an eerie, hot-house world which has only the appearance of the *Bulletin* school to which it was confidently thought to belong as a poor feminine relation, and from which it is rescued, even now, only by feminist critics. It must have been practically impossible to make any headway as a woman writer when the Dawn and Dusk club and the all-male *Bulletin, Boomerang, Worker* etc. etc. were setting the pace. Little wonder that prose writers Franklin and Baynton took on, chameleon-like, the colour of their surroundings; and that "poetess" (as women poets were called with genteelly repressive tolerance) Louisa Lawson simply didn't get published till she published herself. If Zola, de Maupassant, Bret Harte, Twain, and Sterne are some of the writers who lie behind Lawson, Furphy and lesser *Bulletin* males, the lonely, passionate, enigmatic figure of Emily Bronte looms behind Baynton, Louisa Lawson and Franklin.

In *Wuthering Heights* and in much of her poetry, Emily Bronte crystallises and centralises the philosophical and psychological possibilities and ramifications of the persecuted woman, while stripping the theme of its more tendentious sado-masochism and sensationalism, and making it accommodate *both*

a deeply personal conception of an individual feminine plight *and* a projection of the plight of women generally — in the family, in sexual relations and as artists. Contemporary women writers like Jean Bedford, Kate Grenville, Thea Astley, Gabrielle Lord, Beverley Farmer, and others all owe something to that vision of maelstrom and silent, tortured, eye-of-storm with which Bronte evoked the metaphoric condition of women. In a sternly male world, and scarcely understanding themselves what was moving the deeper currents of their fictions, Franklin and Baynton intuitively disguised themselves — not truly belonging, mavericks at heart, romantics, loners; engendering no imitators, no disciples, and doomed to wait more than half a century for even the beginning of sympathetic and understanding critical recognition.

III THEA ASTLEY: "BEFORE FEMINISM . . . AFTER FEMINISM"

Thea Astley has remarked that, despite various kinds of awards and recognitions (and she has had her share of both), she has not made the impact on the Australian literary culture that she might reasonably have expected after nearly thirty years writing within it. This is an accurate impression in my view, but it needs some qualification and explanation. Thea Astley published her first book, *Girl With a Monkey*, in 1958, when it was a lonely business to be a woman writer in Australia. It remained a relatively lonely business for the next ten years, during which she published four more novels (*A Descant for Gossips*, 1960; *The Well Dressed Explorer*, 1962; *The Slow Natives*, 1965; *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, 1968). The first and the fourth of this quartet were coolly received, by and large, while the considerable and deserved success of *The Slow Natives* was counterbalanced by the curious swiftness with which *The Well Dressed Explorer* — one of the best and wittiest of Astley's explorations of the predatory egotist — was allowed to drop out of sight. In the seventies, Astley achieved somewhat greater recognition, partly by demanding it on merit (*The Acolyte* at the beginning of that decade and *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* at the end being particularly successful) and partly because the women's movement helped to create a climate more sympathetic to women writers. In the great efflorescence of women's writing in the 1980s, Astley is a senior and respected figure: she remains apart, nevertheless, something of a loner, something of a maverick even in the eyes of her sisters. She has been too long in the cold, perhaps, to be entirely comfortable with or the slightest bit compromised by the new warmth, the encouraging and supportive atmosphere.

A further refinement of these explanations and qualifications would go like this: Thea Astley has won prizes, she has been writer-in-residence, she has been guest of honour at local and overseas seminars and conferences; but she is meanly reviewed with surprising frequency and has made relatively little impression on academic critics. From about the middle of the 1970s

through to the early 80s, anyone who gave a paper at a conference on the work of Thea Astley could be relied on to say at some point of the presentation, with a certain amount of incredulity, that there was *still* only one full-scale, substantial journal article on the work of Thea Astley. As the writer of that article, I gradually began to have mixed feelings about its lonely notoriety: on the one hand, it was nice to be cited; on the other, there was something dinosaur-ish about the way the article was living on into another and a different world. Slowly, it became a liability: one conference speaker, with that exquisite facility so perfected and beloved by academe, managed to deliver a forty minute paper, with me in the audience, and refer several times to my article without mentioning the name of its author! The situation has changed but not all that much: there are still very few articles on her work; she is stereo-typed as a *difficult* writer (Helen Garner has said that Astley's style drives her crazy); and she is, by and large, uncompromising. Despite some fluctuations in the challenging nature of her prose — geared as Mark Macleod has shown to the intensity or otherwise of hostile reviews — she has remained pretty much committed to the dense, intricate, image-packed and compound-word-littered prose (like this sentence) that suits the way her mind works and the way she sees the world. This has undoubtedly contributed to the neglect she has suffered in comparison to others and to the persistently lukewarm response of reviewers . . . .

Thea Astley's "problem" is that she has always been writing against the stream: "before feminism", to quote from Helen Garner's "The Life of Art", Astley was, as I have already suggested, a relatively lonely figure — first, as a woman writer; second, as a woman writer who had not chosen to be expatriate; and third, as a woman writer whose mode was not realism — social, socialist or otherwise — and who had nothing overt to say about national myths. "After feminism" Astley continues to be different in crucial ways from the present wave of highly productive and successful women writers. Her protagonists, more often than not, are men, in contrast to the focus on women characters in contemporary women's fiction (*Lilian's Story, Foxy Baby, Miss Peabody's Inheritance, Sister Kate, Annie Magdalene, Last Ferry to Manly* et al). And Astley's women in any case are very different

to the Annies and Miss Porches and Lilians and Athenas of current women's fiction, about whom there is a luminous quality, a sort of mellowness even in adversity, suggestive of great inner strength and security: it is summed up by Lilian (*Lilian's Story*), whom people regard as half mad, when she says "I am ready for whatever comes next". Astley's women, on the other hand, are mostly nervy if not neurotic; they are unsure of themselves, building or shoring up defences, turning in desperation to this or that recourse; they are often at the mercy of men and abased by them. Indeed, in the whole Astley *oeuvre* it is difficult to think of a single woman character who has anything like the control over life and the self-knowledge that so distinguish the Grenville, Garner, Jolley, Hanrahan "heroines".

Astley's view of the world and, among other things, of women's place and plight in it, is pungently presented in the stories that comprise *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (1979). This collection is jaunty and often very funny, but there is a grim, tough level to most of the stories which may be, by virtue of its vivid, sometimes shocking evocation, what one remembers most readily. Almost every story involves the deconstruction of a given situation which was not ideal in the first place but which disintegrates into much greater disorder in the course of the narration; and these disintegrations are especially bleak and uncompromising when they involve women. So, for example: in "Ladies Need Only Apply", a series of defeats and faltering compromises leads the heroine (using the term loosely) to abase and degrade herself in craven supplication before her monstrous would-be lover, Leo:

> A blown passion vine caught her before she reached his stairs and plunged her once more on her face into slush. Something hot zipped in a tendon behind her knee, and when she tried to pull herself up pain shouted her down.
>
> Again she had a vision of herself, an animal vision, as slowly, on all fours now, she crawled up the higher ground the last thirty paces to his shack, unaware of water, pain, or blood; and she laughed, crawling towards that other face in the mirror, knowing nothing

most beautifully, her purpose the empty kernel of lit music.

At the foot of his stairs she cried furiously and briefly for her shame, grief and rain becoming one.

Ponderously she dragged herself onto the first step, then the second, before she called out to him.

She heard the movement of his chair shoved back, heard his bare feet pad across board; and not until she felt the frightful quality of him did she look up, forcing herself into the one word, "Please?": into one smile — the whole body and want of her into one doubtful, querying smile as he looked down at her on all fours, naked, glistening silver with lust and rain.

"That's better," he said. "That's more like it. Come on in."

It is worth reflecting on the many echoes there are of some of the Baynton stories discussed earlier — echoes that exist not because Astley is necessarily influenced by or conscious of Baynton but by their shared bleak view of metaphoric woman.

Again, "The Curate Breaker", a very funny story, slowly contorts itself into a ghastly scene of persecution, when the Anglican Canon forces his wife to kneel before him to beg forgiveness in the presence of the appalled sybaritic catholic priest, Father Rassini:

The room took on a crystal tension that transferred a glaze of rage to the Canon's eyes, a rage he could no longer control as the second assault, the sloppy coiffure, guyed his dignity.

"Kneel down!"

His wife blinked unbelieving and fearful eyes.

"I said kneel down!"

"Please," she whispered. Appearing to shrivel.

Furiously the Canon indicated the floor.

"Down! Kneel down, woman, and repeat after me these words for forgiveness".

Rigid on his probationary chair Father Rassini thought, "Oh, my God my God".

"Please, John," she begged again, so softly it could hardly be heard.

"Down!" the Canon repeated.

She flashed one terrible glance at Father Rassini, then closed her eyes on the shame of it and wobbled to her knees on the carpet before her husband.

"Now," the Canon said, "now repeat after me: I beg forgiveness —"

It was as if she were stoppered for a few seconds and then the words, almost inaudible, faltered out: "I beg forgiveness —"

"— for having interrupted the work of God —"

"— for having interrupted the work of God —"

"— and that of my husband —"

"— and that of my husband —"

"— who is His servant".

"— who is —"

At this point Father Rassini, who was swallowing a revolting nausea, hauled himself up abruptly and blundered out of the room, down the clean hall, down the clean steps and into the rain.

In the story "Petals From Blown Roses . . . " another woman, Mrs Waterman, kneels before a man. As if to insist upon the variety that distinguishes women's willingness to be thus humiliated, Astley makes this particular obeisance occur before a grinning, swaying drunk: "I look across to Mrs Waterman who is kneeling, I swear, at his feet and bending, yes bending, in the simple curve of devotion". "A Northern Belle", a story that is again very nicely satirical and sharp, tightens to awful hysteria and ghastliness when the sophisticated Miss Geary is reduced to shrieking fright in a shattering last line by the gentle and compassionate touch of her faithful, self-sacrificing *aboriginal* gardener. . . . There are many other examples.

Like Patrick White in *The Burnt Ones*, Astley's concentration is on those people who are left out in one way or another. Lilian, the Jesus freak, is a sad product of loneliness, attempted suicides, the false dawn of revivalist religion and, finally, the terrible truth that she is doomed to be lonely, to have no comfort from others. Mr Pasmore, in the title story, is another kind of

outsider: vaguely alcoholic, saddled with and imprisoned by a desperate and alcoholic wife, living a life full of jokey pretence that everything is just lovely, wagering everything — social acceptance, personal style, sense of meaning — on an absurd invention, the hunting of the wild pineapple. The story deals with layer after layer of pretence and failed reality: Pasmore's house is a kind of movable, infinitely collapsible facade; Mrs Bellamy is doing research for "a nonsense thesis" — non sense; Mr Pasmore pretends that his wife will be getting dinner for them when in fact she is clearly incapable and there's almost nothing to eat; and so on, to the biggest sham and unreality of them all — the wild pineapple itself. These are people desperately engaged in trying to pretend, even prove to themselves that a meaning and a purpose and an order exist in their lives when everything they do and say tends to suggest just the opposite.

The emphasis on the misfit, to which Astley herself has several times drawn attention and which is often remarked by students in discussion, is actually a step along the way to a larger and more inclusive emphasis in Astley's work — namely, the sense of a world disordered, disjoint. Her people are misfits *partly* because with the best will possible they can't make sense of the context they have been given: where they encounter calm, it turns out to be only the eye of the storm. All recourses fabricated in that fake stillness are themselves fake, of necessity, for all around is maelstrom which will eventually close in and which is irresistible. Nothing could be further from the world-view of the second-wave feminist writers of the 1980s.

The fine wit of *Hunting The Wild Pineapple* does not conceal the fact that it is offering a very grim, abraded and basically disillusioned view of human (and often specifically feminine) lives, related by a drop-out defeated misfit who, as if to distance Astley from the full impact of her own vision, is a male. Others have done this without penalty; not many in recent times have done it with such skill. But somehow there is an uncompromising and apocalyptic quality in Astley's mordant portrayals which places them always in an implicitly or overtly confrontationist relationship with current liberationist consensus. This disjunction between her maverick self and so many of her audience, aside

from *aficionados*, is exacerbated by her naturally dense prose, the product of a complex, unillusioned intelligence given to uncomfortable revelatory, acrostic leaps and destabilising juxtapositions.

IV VANCE PALMER'S LONG JOURNEY

Vance Palmer's failure to gain much more than a (gently) grudging acceptance from many critics and literary historians, his being pushed — though with the best will in the world — always towards the periphery, may well be partly the result of an initially uncompromising attitude to his art. But if this is in a general way reminiscent of Thea Astley's "problem" with reviewers and most critics, there is nevertheless an important difference: one feels that Astley, regardless of questions of acceptance and centrality, is speaking for better or worse in the voice and mode that come naturally to her. There is some reason to wonder, however, whether Vance Palmer might not have been more influenced by an ideological view as against what his natural imaginative leanings were trying to urge upon him.

As usual, a first glance tells us otherwise: no one seems more central than Vance Palmer in our literary history; he is a kind of institution. Apart from being a great champion of Australian literature; and apart from being the author of one of the most famous and crucial interpretations of the 1890s, Palmer seemed to be a true and genuine inheritor of the Lawson mantle: he greatly admired Lawson, he aspired to write in the Lawson style, and he brought to his writing the same profound commitment to Australia and things Australian. Even better, Palmer's commitment was more enduring than Lawson's, less prone to quixotic fluctuation; and it was more substantially underpinned by the workings of a discriminating critical intelligence. "I started with implicit faith in human nature," wrote Lawson, with "a heart full of love for Australia", "a hatred of wrong and injustice". Palmer's equivalent statement (written incidentally only half a dozen years after Lawson's) is much more considered, less subjective and less vulnerable to shattering disillusion:

> Art is really man's interpretation of the inner life of his surroundings, and until the Australian writer can attune his ear to catch the various undertones of our national life, our art must be false and unenduring.

> There must be no seeing through English spectacles. Our art must be original as our own fauna and flora are original.

Palmer was only twenty when he wrote that manifesto and there is no reason why he should be held to it for life. The fact is, though, he does seem to have remained pretty well of that mind and was thus committed to some form or other of nationalist expression — to catch the tones of the "national life". Where Baynton and Franklin adopted, more or less perforce, the superficial lineaments of nationalist-style story-telling in order to tell a very different story indeed, Palmer seems to have adopted the mode and the content as a philosophical commitment and as a kind of self-imposed duty. There is at least some reason to believe that it was a wrong choice for him and that kind of writing to which he was thus notionally committed was not the kind for which either his talents or his temperament were most suited.

All writers feel misunderstood and undervalued half the time, but even allowing for that characteristic of the species, Vance Palmer felt himself to be unappreciated, marginalised, and he felt this more and more strongly as his long writing life neared its end. In a letter to Clem Christesen written only weeks before his death, Palmer refers to a very appreciative article on his work by John Barnes:

> I am sorry I read John Barnes's article. It may seem churlish to react against a piece as brimming with generosity and goodwill, but that first deadly sentence fell like clods on my coffin. And if even half the strictures on my work were valid ("limited in tone, lacking force," "material often dull," "characters not imagined dramatically," "range of sensibility narrow") there would be no excuse for the kind generalities at all.

Palmer has here fixed upon the precise problem: critics paid much attention to his work but seemed constantly to be cutting the ground from under their own feet. The more he was attended to, the more somehow he was pushed away from the centre.

Though endlessly referred to, Palmer scarcely appears on university syllabuses, is the subject of only rare articles by specialists; and his work has so far failed to shake off the burden of certain ready-made critical clichés that attach themselves instantly to it in most discussion — that it lacks passion, that it tends to be on one note, that there is no *spark* etc.

A curious incident of Palmer's young man-hood, recounted by Vivian Smith in his *Vance and Nettie Palmer*, and described by Palmer himself in a piece called "Pilgrimage", seems somehow to prefigure the impression his overall work gives that something has eluded his grasp, that he has fallen just fatally short. The incident occurred when Palmer was on his way home from London in 1907, via Finland and Tsarist Russia. Palmer went to Russia with the idea of visiting Tolstoy, but when he was very near his goal he had great difficulty with directions and language and got lost. Eventually, he realised he'd gone in a circle: in his own words,

> . . . suddenly, I found that I was on the outskirts of Tula again! . . . Soon I began to pick out recognisable landmarks, and knew for a certainty that I had missed my goal! knew also that I could not make another attempt to reach it. The confidence had gone out of me, and I was in need of warm food and dry boots. Commonsense assured me that to wander about on lonely roads looking for the home of a great man, whose language I could not speak and whose privacy I had no right to disturb, was a futile proceeding and a little ridiculous. What if some servant had refused me admission? In the circumstances the buffet at the railway station was a very friendly place, and there was no one to gloat over my defeat. I did not succeed in my mission, and I have carried a sense of failure about with me ever since. Tolstoy was a great man, the greatest of our time, and he is dead. If I had seen him . . . (he) might have given me some word or phrase that would have unlocked many doors during the long journey . . .

This is a moving and strange recollection. Vivian Smith lets it stand, more or less without comment, conveying its message of failure. But, of course, Palmer's life is not a chronicle of failure — far from it — despite what he felt to be the message of his attempt to visit Tolstoy. What seems to me more telling in that story is Palmer's denial, under the pressure of circumstance, context and failing self-confidence, of his own most profound conviction about how he should behave, what he should do. Palmer's self-imposed quest was a romantic one which foundered amidst the mute, withering satire of stern practical existence. There is a parallel in his writing: Palmer espoused his nationalist themes and theories almost as a duty which he owed his country's culture and its literature. Just as he abandoned his quest to visit Tolstoy, overwhelmed by its romanticism, its impracticality, its sheer ambition, so also he seems to have deliberately shortened his literary and imaginative reach — "allowed himself to be possessed," as Harry Heseltine says, "by the daemon of the ordinary" — leaving always just to elude his grasp a more romantic, a more poignant, a less sternly male response.

Certain of Palmer's stories suggest a strain in him quite different from his keynote, struck in the tough, stoic Lawsonian stories of *The World of Men*. For example: "Mathieson's Wife". This story is narrated by an adult looking back and remembering his impressions as a barely teenage boy. The adult, of course, now realizes significances that had escaped him as a boy, but while we are aware of these implications, the narrator does not intrude them. The reactions and responses are all those of the boy — which means that the reader always knows and understands more than the central character does. We are able to infer things about Mathieson's wife which the boy cannot. And one of these inferences is that some of the boy's confusions and embarrassments arise from his half-realised sense of the woman's vibrant sexuality.

> How well I remember that morning when the fair haired young woman who had come to live with old Mathieson made my heart jump by dropping from the mulberry-tree to the grass beside me! A rustle of the branches, a soft plop — and there she was as if she had fallen right out of a cloud. I stumbled back a pace or

> two and the billy of milk I was holding nearly slipped from my hand. It was partly the shock, partly the look of her as she stood laughing down at me, her blue eyes dancing and the mulberry-stains red on her lips. The blood crept up my neck, and I tried to stutter out something, but my voice lost itself in the furry depths of my throat.

This is in the same moment extremely romantic, very skilful and not the sort of thing that one immediately or easily associates with Vance Palmer. Without straining credulity or realism in the slightest, he has managed to evoke the Fatal Woman, mouth sensuously smeared with sweetness; the ambiguous Goddess who descends literally from the heavens. The boy is enslaved on the instant: his guilelessly adoring description enhances the taut, trembling atmosphere of sexual possibility. She was, he says,

> the most wonderful creature I had ever set eyes upon; even with her hair tumbling over her eyes and her mouth smeared with mulberry-juice. The frock she had on was a skimpy one, torn down the front, and her bare feet were thrust into old sandshoes . . .

It is worth reminding ourselves briefly of how different this is from almost anything in *The World of Men*. Here is the opening paragraph of the story, "Brede":

> It was only through an accident that Brede came to me. There had always been dogs about the place, for they were as necessary as stock horses to its proper agistment. Patient, industrious little brutes, they were, who worked hard when they were called upon . . .

Here indeed is that flat, reined-in, repressed utterance, reference to which has become something of a cliché of Palmer criticism.

"Mathieson's Wife" is a long, rich, deliberated story about innocence and experience and appearance and reality, in which the young boy is initiated into the adult world of sexuality, loss, betrayal, irrecoverable joys, nostalgia, philosophic acceptance. It

is a story of unashamed and successfully evoked romanticism because, although the boy reluctantly sees through the woman's sexual vibrancy to her actual shallowness and self-centredness, he retains a vision of her which, as it were, mutely and endlessly reasserts in dream the possibilities of the idyllic, the excitement, the sheer transcendence of beauty, the lure of the untramelled spirit:

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

Another very good story, which has the same sort of interest, is "The Foal". This is about a small, lonely girl, living with her father and her aunt, forced by lack of companionship to exist much within her own imaginative self. The actual substance of the story is slender: when her horse has a foal, the little girl is captivated by it, feels identified with it and the mare, fears for its safety and actually sees it killed in a dream, only to be reassured next morning when she goes out at first light to check. The achievement of the story is its evocation of the little girl's visionary world of terrors and joys, the otherness of her perception in comparison to the well-meaning but lumpish father and the relentlessly materialistic, earth-bound aunt. The story opens with an array of marvellously meticulous detail being discovered by the dawnlight which, in the process, reduces to familiarity the terrors of the night. The two worlds — of vision and mundanity — are immediately conjured up:

> A faint whinnying, penetrating her dreams, woke the little girl . . . it was still not quite light and the tall gums crowding the steep rise to the road loomed up darkly over the house . . . Dew lay heavily on everything — the bark woodshed, the wheelbarrow by the

> stump, the bracken on the edge of the bush. From the spouting trickled beads of water, dimming the fly-wire that netted the verandah. Warm in her blankets the little girl looked drowsily up at the dark shape that always frightened her at bedtime; it had the beard and hunched shoulders of an old man and stretched out a dead hand. Now, in the growing light, it was only a tree, no different from other trees . . .

The girl's uneasy observations during the day, when she sees the other horses, kept away only by the fence, "their heads held high, their manes windblown, their glittering eyes fastened on the foal", take on a terrifying surrealism as the world seems to her to "become filled with waving manes, staring eyes, threatening heels; and in all this tumult the foal's body seemed small and fragile, liable to be beaten into the earth. It cantered about crazily, as if blown here and there like a feather . . .

Her dreams are invaded by images of horses that would do justice to Stubbs or Fuseli:

> Their huge rumps shut out the sky as they kicked up their heels; they cut great flakes out of the turf; the ground quivered beneath their hoofs. Sometimes they fought in the middle of the paddock . . . with the sound of thunder. They were not horses now, but unicorns; steel horns jutted from their foreheads and their eyes were fiery coals.

In the middle of this plunging chaos she finds the foal, "its thin legs snapped like matches, its crushed body no bigger than a bird's." But morning, as it had done at the beginning of the story, reveals the foal intact. The girl has identified with the foal: it is her sister, closer to her than any human being; she imagines going away with the foal and the mare in spring, and how they will walk together and suddenly find they are talking, understanding . . . It is visionary loneliness, a world of "other". When the girl finds the foal the morning after her dream, butting its mother's flanks "as if an urge for power and mastery were driving through it — as if it was the one thing fully alive on the whole earth", this essential

liveliness encompasses her also, distinguishing her from the mundane world which she is in but not of.

Again, Palmer in my view shows considerable skill and tact in handling a series of intensely romantic images, or images that are very reminiscent at least of characteristic romantic models. Neither of these stories owes much at all to Palmer's own manifesto, aside from backdrop which is minimal and not crucial in either story. The same sort of achievement may be found in, for example, such stories as "What is Love?", "Josie", "Home" and "The Rainbow Bird". The latter story — one of Palmer's very best — is interestingly comparable with "The Foal" in that it, too, involves a child's vision of beauty and the essence of existence despite the drearily impeding, earthbound and uncomprehending behaviours of adults. In both stories, a visionary experience in the natural world becomes a turning point in the maturity of the girl. Like the boy narrator in "Mathiessen's Wife", these two girls (Maggie in "The Rainbow Bird" and Lena in "The Foal") pass from innocence to experience; but for all three, somewhat disillusioning recognition of the tawdriness of the adult world is vitiated, compensated for, by a sense of the enduring transcendence, the sheer intensity and shaping power of the maturing experience. Thus the boy retained his vision of Mathiessen's wife as "a radiant figure in the far sky" on "a winged horse"; Lena, finding the foal after her dream of its death, sees it as transformed — aspiring to power and mastery, bursting with life and liveliness, a kind of essence of existence; and Maggie, in a very similar ending, is able to cancel the reality of the Rainbow Bird's needless and callous death with her own vision of its enduring and mystical transcendence:

> Maggie (stared) up at the ceiling in the dark. But the vision of a world oppressed by a heavy brutal heel had vanished. Her mind was lit up again; everything had come right. She could see the cropped slope by the sea, the overgrown wheel-rut, the small round tunnel with the heap of sand in front of it. And it was the man with the gun who was lying crumpled on the grass. Above him sailed the Rainbow Bird, lustrous, triumphant, her

opal body poised at the top of a curve, shimmering in the sunbright air.

In this group of stories romantic, transcending images of sky, height, flying, cloud, stars, disembodiment, airiness, dream merging into and out of the real world — are recurrent, especially as endings. Here, just for the record, is the ending of "Josie" — a story about an outcast child whose death brings her schoolmates face to face with large and frightening questions about eternity, guilt and the hereafter:

> That evening, when tea was finished, mother called us out to look at the sky. It was filled with small clouds the colour of tinned salmon, massed together lightly like plucked feathers, but parted in the middle to leave a path of pearly blue. Far, far away into another world that path took you. The sun had just set, and there was a gentle look about everything — the cropped paddocks, the cows lying by their penned calves, the soft trees touched with gold.
> No one wanted to speak. We were thinking of Josie —Josie squatting in the dust under the school steps; Josie letting the spit run down her slate; Josie lying now, white as wax, her hands folded on her chest, in a room that smelt of lilies. And above were the soft clouds, parted in a pearly-blue opening, as if they had been brushed aside by a feather, letting the faint stars show through. Beautiful it looked, shedding an awe upon the heart. It was the path, mother said, made by the angels' wings as they carried Josie up to Heaven. We felt sad and tender about Josie. We were glad the angels didn't know as much about her as we did.

And then there are recognisable variations on these images: "The Silky Oak" ends with the men standing high above the waterfront "staring down into the blinding light", as they begin to cope, by self-deception and lies, with the superior mettle and individuality of the part-aboriginal girl, Rosie; and "Clouds and Eclipses" poses the young girl, Lennie, high on a hillside in a

"magical world" of "blue wind, bright sunshine, white moving figures on the henna court" far below.

These stories, and a number of others that go with them, have certain interesting things in common: most of them are about a child or importantly involve a child; most times, the child is a just-about-to-be-adolescent girl, poised at that state of being when certain aspects of existence take on a peculiar intensity and urgency; the stories share a particular imagery which one does not find in Palmer's tough and reticent stories about the world of men and the bush and the coast, and this imagery tends to be of the kind we associate with the passage from innocence to experience — images of light and dark, of aerial lightness and earth-boundness, of illimitable sky contrasted with imprisoning earth, of the profound life-force in the natural world contrasted with its attenuation in many human adults — the imagery in short, of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. In none of these stories is the recognisably Australian setting emphasised or of particular importance. Finally, just about all these stories (there is one notable exception — "The Rainbow Bird" — and there might be the odd other less important exception) are to be found in Palmer's 1955 collection, *Let The Birds Fly*. Adrian Mitchell, in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, notes that "the best of his stories are those of adolescence or late childhood", but several times emphasises in various ways that commonplace of Palmer criticism that so depressed Vance Palmer himself, that "he had very little freshness or vigour of insight." Noticing that he managed to write a few good stories about children will not bring Vance Palmer very far back from the margin, nor will it do anything much to cancel the drone of objection to his lack of passion, insight etc. It seems to me more important to notice that, in *Let The Birds Fly* and in fleeting prefigurements of earlier years, Palmer found a late voice whose romantic intensity, imagery and nostalgia were quite at odds with what he had judged to be the Australian writer's proper note. The 1950s, though not a writer's paradise, were a time of growing literary activity and atmosphere in Australia and of the beginnings of that diversity we now know so well. *The Tree of Man*, with its unashamed Lawrentian romanticism, was also published in 1955. Perhaps Palmer, older, mellower, feeling less burdened by a personal sense of

responsibility for the national literary directions, and in any case deeply disappointed with his own reception, consciously dropped his guard and let a voice speak that had been there, but silenced, all along.

If Palmer's abortive attempt to visit Tolstoy mimes anything about his life, it is not failure — because he was not a failure — it is making the wrong decision through sudden lack of self-confidence and a fear of public rejection. He should have tried harder to get to Tolstoy; and he should have risked conflict with the literary mood and prescriptions of the times (including his own) to give a voice to his maverick romanticism. As it was, to return to the images of his journey, he opted for the safety and anonymity of the station buffet, leaving that utterance till the end of his life, when it was too late and too insubstantial to override the critical stereotypes with which his safe years had irreversibly burdened him.

V RUMINATING AMONG RUINS

> Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate —
> That Time will come and take my love away.
> — William Shakespeare —

There are many ways in which Hal Porter, even more so than Thea Astley, can be seen as an established Australian writer. But it is fair to say that he is still known more readily as the author of *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* and *The Tilted Cross* than as a short story writer. Joy Hooton's bibliography in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* reveals strong critical interest in the autobiographies and in his distinctive style but less attention to his stories which, despite the fact that his first collection, *A Bachelor's Children*, was not published until 1962, reach far back into his writing career. Moreover, to the extent that he is known as a short story man, it is as one who spins endlessly coruscating brilliances that glitter and flash but tend to be impenetrable, deliberately eccentric and determinedly cosmopolitan. "Baroque", "brilliant", "intricate", "original" are words often used about his stories to signal both short-hand approval and determination not to get any closer to someone who seems to be something of a maverick. This was certainly the case at the level of reviews during his lifetime; and he still commands less than whole-hearted acceptance or widespread attention among professional literary critics (allowing for a few honourable exceptions) despite having attained that condition — viz. death — which so often legitimises writers in the eyes of more reluctant and usually non-Australian commentators.

Porter *is* rather daunting, however, in a way that reminds us of reactions to Thea Astley. This was demonstrated to me years ago though I failed to recognise it at the time. Appointed to my very first teaching position at Shepparton Technical School in northern Victoria, I went soon after my arrival in town to join the local Library, which I had heard was very good. In fact, it was extraordinary: the range of English and translated European fic-

tion would have been regarded as superior in a metropolitan Library let alone up on the Goulburn — despite the benign influence of Joseph Furphy, more than fifty years earlier, on the Library's modest predecessor, the Mechanic's Institute. But what I remembered years after and much too late of course, was the dynamism and the immense knowledge of the Librarian; and the fact that there were six copies of *A Handful of Pennies* on the shelf not one of which, to my knowledge, was ever seriously disturbed after I had thumbed through, and baulked at, that highly individual, mannered text. It was my chance to begin reading Hal Porter and to meet him, the Librarian of the Shepparton Public Library. I missed both opportunities — but perhaps was too callow to take advantage of either . . . . And Time, as usual, ran over the whole episode before it could be understood, let alone savoured.

Time, anyway, is the subject of my story now. I want to look at a few of Porter's stories and at the recurrence of a particular theme: the inexorability of time as a destructive force, the attempts we make to defeat or stand outside time, and the profound nostalgia, the wistfulness, the romantically satisfying experience of loss and pain that all that entails.

A commanding theme in many of Hal Porter's deceptively jaunty stories is: the rearguard action or rescue operation amidst the depredations of time. This enterprise is conducted, in a conserving spirit, on behalf of remembered landscapes and townscapes or of nostalgically evoked childhood scenes and the growth away from innocence or of a peculiarly Australian ethos which has either long since disappeared or has been eroded beyond recognition. The manner of his variations on this theme is almost always dynamic, full of positive energy despite the contemplation of ruin. The tone is usually ironic, with the narrating voice not immune as an ironic target; and the mood is often though not always emphatically optimistic. The characteristic Porter tendency to bestrew the prose thickly with a rush of arcane, compound or otherwise attention-getting words and images occasionally infects the optimism with a tinge of hysteria, a kind of galloping zaniness suggesting that, behind all the energetic fire-

works, the narrating consciousness is intimately and realistically acquainted with the remorselessness of time, the finally futile nature of the struggle.

"Country Town" is an example of a story where part of the emphasis is on the fate of certain cultural values and manifestations, though the narrator is not unaware of the ultimate implications for himself as an individual. But, overall, it "is less a story of people than of a country town", and, we might add; *as much* about the meeting of cultures and the turmoil *that* brings as it is about the country town. Porter's linguistic and imagistic complexity is rarely mere show: it works in this case to produce a complicated double effect whereby his arrival in and perception of the town as it now stands is balanced by a split-second series of visions of its former identity — an identity utterly unified and unmistakably in period. Arrant nostalgia, the somehow indulgently sad stance of "I remember how it once was", can have no place in Porter's ebullient, thrusting tone, so he first makes himself the subject of his own irony ("My nostalgic, just tearless eye strains to unfade . . . ") and then superimposes the old townscape over what has supplanted it — a *tour de force* of negative images in which the town as it was is constantly recreated in the same moment and the same imaging act that obliterates it:

> No; and for ever, no.
>
> No the monumental mason's urns and scrolls poking through horehound and fennel; no the smithy, the saddler's, the doctors' red lamps, the Show Day procession, the elm avenues, the hitching-rings on shop-veranda posts; no the hickory golf clubs mashie and cleek, washerwomen, bullockies, knickerbockered boys in boots, girls in ribbed stockings, the hat on every outdoor head, the immodestly defining cotton bathers from which inky dye seeped into the white-edged sleevelets, and no no no the sound of hoofs on gravel roads. Gone cabby, rabbit-oh and fish-oh, John Chinaman greengrocer, the dago ice-cream cart and its bell, the Hindu old iron man, the scissors-grinder, the Afghan pedlar, and all their clockwork nags which wore in

> midsummer their earholed equine millinery above wowserish William S. Hart faces; gone the medieval pageantry of hearse-horses, Black Prince plumes, and top-hatted undertakers in cutaway coats.

Thus, attacking nostalgia while triumphantly nurturing it and fleshing it out, the narrating voice defiantly recreates an idyllic past and an archetypal *place* which he knows, as we do, are gone forever. The counterpoint to this piece of vigorous defiance is a piece of equally vigorous realism which comes about a page later after an autobiographical-sounding digression. "Had I foreseen all these?" he asks, referring to the fluorescent and neon-lit grotesqueries and abominations that stand now in place of that gentle past — "the drive-in, the ice-block automat, the auto-port, the self-service petrol bowser . . . the caravan park whose machicolated public lavatories like Disney castles have been built with municipal delicacy on the top of pioneer graves . . . " "Had I foreseen all these?"

> Nearly all, for they are everywhere else, the production-belt contrumpery, the wrought-iron knicknackery, the Yankeefied barbecue furniture, cheapjack self-service stores, cellophaned rubbish, grubbed-out street elms, municipal vandalism, pre-fab. schoolrooms . . .

Having delivered himself of this salvo, Porter turns to such plot as the story has. What has happened in these opening pages of "Country Town" is that a context has been proposed, in a characteristically dynamic and ironic way, in which the ebb and flow, profit and loss and eventual outcome of cultural confrontation and coalescence can be portrayed and thus opened to implication and inference.

The narrator's meeting with Kurt Schmidt in the boarding house, which is the actual meeting of cultures for which the opening blast stands as general introduction, is a case of cultural confrontation, wary circling, retreat and advance, at several levels. It is age and youth, frailty and strength, the earlier generation and the with-it generation: but above all, it is Australian and non-Australian. The moment of meeting says it all, picks up every level:

> I was, however, not quickly enough unpacked to escape young men for, in acrobat vees, patently dewy from a shower, enter, *vigoroso*, on peanut-shaped toes, one of them. Say, rather, a young man made an entrance: chest out, belly in, a *pas seul* seemed imminent. Instantly, though it was impossible, I felt I knew him, had met him. He was somewhat above short, flaxen, pretty as a pretty ape with little electric-blue eyes which, in a crackle, assessed my suit and shoes and condoned his toothpaste smile and knuckle-deforming handshake. My mind said, "Ouch!" He was pleased to meet me, man. I how-d'-y'-do'ed. He was Kurt Schmidt, man. He was now — ha, ha — a dinkum Aussie, man. He flexed.

Porter's *real* concern, his most serious and delicate topic, now emerges bit by bit behind the prose pyrotechnics that convey his adventures with this "quarter-bodgie from a Berlin slum": that concern is not mainly the country town, not mainly its present-day fate in comparison with the gentilities of the past; it is above all the phenomenon of cultural invasion and the retreat of a vulnerable, necessarily shallowly-planted culture before the remorseless pressure, the greater momentum of the-rest-of-the world. The story proceeds from this point on by juxtaposing the old and the new, but more precisely, the native and the foreign. Porter and his fellow townspeople walk two streets, seeing both past and present with every glance. "Not so the foreigners", whose own past is too far away and too irremediably separated from them. Two pasts are lost in this collision: the native born mourns "the pioneer vineyards, the wharves for the river-steamers" etc; but the foreigner, for his part, "inhabit[s] an Ionesco stage-set, a province without memories, or memories only of the day before yesterday . . . ". The irresistible logic of incompatibly clashing histories and customs begins to invest the story with darker notes than its bouncy, confident opening pages suggested: "the smell-of-an-oilrag escapees from tourist countries littered with the fabulous wreckage of pasts, the shrewd, the defeated . . . spiv hands, the beast hands with grimy knuckles, the foreign garments buttoned on savings folded as tightly in

purses as fear is in the kernel of being". That fear in the kernel of being is not the refugee's fear only — it's a general statement, psychologically very revealing at that point of the narrative, and beginning to look rather like a xenophobic fear more than an existentialist one. But — not finally. The sketch ("sketch" actually describes it better than "story") ends with a return to the earlier jauntiness and a repeat of the opening image: "a cocktail tasting like the inside of a coffin". Porter springs that one on us within the first five or six lines of the narrative, at which point it seems merely exotic and quixotic. Repeated at the end, however, it carries much more significance: it is a significance which the specifically cultural focus of the story — its concern with the superimposition of cultures and townscapes and times on each other — has invested it with. A cocktail is a *mixture* — often a daring one and may well taste like death. The new mixture — what Australia has become and is becoming, partly through the influence of the Kurt Schmidts of this world — must be accepted, has to be swallowed. There is no other way, and nostalgia will neither help nor obliterate the persistent reality. "I, you, we, they must drink it." In the cocktail image, three certainties become merged: time, death and change: we are reluctantly persuaded about time and death; but change, in the form of Kurt Schmidt, fluorescent lights, machicolated lavatories, the burial of a gentler past, the rise of a brash and unpalatable present, is just as remorseless. "Oh, cer-tain-ly!"

"Country Town" on the face of it is an unlikely place for preoccupations of the kind I've talked about to emerge so seriously and, I think, insistently. That very unlikelihood maybe points to how deeply embedded in Porter's creative consciousness is this concern with the change/ruin of a native Australian prospect by the rush of time and the world pushing at it ceaselessly. Porter is the last person in whom we'd expect some form or vestige of nineties nationalism (the kind, for example, that convinced people like Lawson that a whole era was fading from sight, and people like William Lane that a great chance was being lost), yet we so often find him, behind the protection of his distinctive prose, looking longingly back to what, for him, appears to be an achieved, rounded and characteristically Australian moment and scene which are swallowed up by time and the world even as they

become recognisable and able to be appreciated. And that evanescence, as I've said, becomes imaged in and central to the prose strategy by means of which he suggests this process — i.e. a description which, with negatives and disclaimers, obliterates even as it evokes.

Once you see Porter in this way — that is in a general sense reverencing an older and gentler world and in a specific sense looking back with affection on an Australia now lost — you are decreasingly deterred or distracted by the sophistications of his method, his clear penchant for what is distinctive and his equally clear aversion to the *common*. You would also not only be *un*surprised by a story like "First Love", but would actually *expect* it, look for it somewhere in his fictions. "First Love" is not mainly or even obviously about an Australia of the past — though that still flickers there, unobtrusively, in various fugitive references: "Melba hooting *Home, Sweet Home* through the toffee-coloured, convolvulus-shaped horn" of the gramophone, for example, or the obliquely obscene postcard from that Melbournian haunt of the illicit and forbidden, St. Kilda. But "First Love" is, more importantly, about the general philosophical, emotional and psychological preference which lies in turn behind the frequent hankering for an Australia of the past: that is, the preference for the old against the new, for a valuable past against a meretricious present, for a humane culture against a culture in which humanity seems threatened with being dwarfed or in other ways subverted.

In "First Love", with great good humour and the usual half-defeated tolerance, Porter makes a Shakespeare-like effort to defeat time, to keep something of value in defiance of time's assiduity; and he is as unsuccessful as Shakespeare was. As in "Country Town", the story opens with a longish, contextualising manoeuvre, in which the narrator/protagonist establishes himself as a willing creature of the past, somewhat at odds with the present ("odd boy out", "a throwback inheritance" etc); and for the reader of these opening pages, that past is made constantly to well up, tossing its bits and pieces, names, rubbish, treasures, absurdities endlessly before us. (Well before Barthelme and other radical contemporary reshapers of short fiction, Porter knew the subtly atmospheric and irresistibly persuasive value of the list,

and he uses listing with great skill, especially early in narratives, to carry a reader along very rapidly through potential barriers of belief and sympathy:

> . . . shoe-buckles, wildernesses of embroidery silks, bone crochet needles, Piver's powder boxes, raped-looking dolls, and fans still releasing from their broken wings shadows of a scent long out of fashion . . . my brothers brought back wilting lizards in jars of spirits, cigar-boxes of cigar-bands, a carved emu's egg, tortoise-shell pen-knives with broken blades . . .

and so on).

As was the case in "Country Town", this bombardment gradually both abates and narrows down till the focus is on one person or one thing: in "Country Town" it was Kurt Schmidt; in this story it is a photograph, his first love. It is inevitable that his first love will be not someone of flesh and blood — because "rosy lips and cheeks/ Within *(*Time's*)* bending sickle's compass come" — but a photograph, beyond age and decline, beyond the changeability of moods and passions, beyond mortality. Like Shakespeare, the protagonist tries to elevate a love beyond the reach of time; and like him, he fails, because the photograph is *of* somebody and that somebody, in good time, is revealed to him —ruined and repellent. At the end of "Country Town" the narrator gears himself up for a swallow of the coffin-tasting cocktail: at the end of "First Love" the protagonist is broken-hearted while his older self, intermittently audible in the narrative's background noises, looks on knowingly. In both cases, their recognition is that the individual cannot escape time; both in their different ways — the one, wry but cocky, the other broken-hearted — have to settle for ruminating among the ruins. The past will not be preserved, whether it is the gentleness of a long-ago way of life or the reality enshrined, but unreally frozen, in an old photograph. The world will not stop turning: " . . . everything that grows/ Holds in perfection but a little moment."

"At Aunt Sophia's" shares much common ground with these two stories, but it is more daring — a story in which tragic entrapment in time is most movingly but least philosophically evoked. The story opens with the now familiar flourish of period detail, listings, swiftly changing perspectives; but it is denser, briefer and more ambiguous than in the other two stories. The real train journey to Gippsland, on which Gregory is embarking, is punctuated by staccato and sinister flashes of larger events whose distant yet inexorable logic will dwarf and eventually inundate the people who farewell the train and those who are on it travelling that day to Gippsland. That day is in 1912, we soon learn, and obscure glimpses forward and back place Gregory's innocent journey against a larger and stormy backdrop as a result of which it becomes both pathetic and tragic. The train journey becomes, by means of landscape glimpses surrealistically juxtaposed, several journeys: sometimes vaguely European (satin horses, haystacks with cake slices cut out of them); sometimes, apparently, a metaphor for time speeding certain of history's actors to their rendezvous in a grim future; finally, with the wreck, it becomes a symbol of the disaster that will overtake them all and kill so many, Gregory included, in a few years. Gregory's own journey to his Aunt Sophia's is, this year — as he discovers in agonized self-knowledge at the end of the story — a journey away from innocence and into the tawdry adult world from which all magic has departed and which, we know, will kill him almost before he is aware it has begun. And, on the larger scale, as "Spokes of the world revolve serenely" — a typical Porter irony — it is a journey away from innocence for everyone, and into the abyss.

Like the protagonist of "First Love", Gregory wants to hold time still, to allow the little boy that "wails" within him to run free again, to regain the simplicity of earlier days. But not only can that *not* be done, but the time that insists on moving brings monsters with it. The story is full of death — the prefigured death that the coming European war will bring; the terrifying, faceless grave-digger; the mementoes and accompaniments of death in the cemetery; the two babies, products of incest, fed to the pigs; the grave-digger, digging a grave for no one in particular but in the

certain knowledge there will be *someone* — another bleak chord reminding us of the state of the world at large as Gregory painfully confronts maturity in a remote Gippsland town. A younger, excitingly domineering Aunt Sophia and a cheeky, ever-delighted small boy romp through the story running in and out of focus with the old, tentative, euphemistic aunt and the agonized, corrosively guilty teenager; while the faceless, everyman grave-digger confidently waits — in the wings of their life's drama, and in the wings of history.

The wry, tragic, sad or defiant contemplation of time as remorseless destroyer or indifferent gobbler-up, or blundering but no less effectively consuming fool, is central to a great deal of Porter's work and is a preoccupation which, for all its basic sombreness, would seem to be at odds with the exotic, baroque and coruscating prose style. There are some elaborations to be made about that, I think. First, while that particular, and let it be admitted very time-honoured theme, is certainly central to much of his work, Australia and being Australian is also central — sometimes explicitly and substantially so, as in "Country Town", sometimes more by inference and atmosphere, as in "First Love" and "At Aunt Sophia's", but no less present for that. I think this enables Porter to invest his versions of the tyranny of time theme with a peculiar and individual poignancy which comes from the sense he gives that Australia, by its very nature, has had but a mere moment of flowering before being brought to the brink of a decay and disintegration that the rest of the world has been able to lead up to. These suggestions are fleeting but various: for example, the swiftness with which the country town as it once was seemed to have disappeared (an impression helped by the furious pace and chock-a-block detail of the description) as against the "fabulous wreckage of pasts" that is Europe; or the sense, in "At Aunt Sophia's", that that boyhood world which Gregory desperately tries to reincarnate but which seemed scarcely to exist before it was changed, was a mere moment in comparison to the massive historical forces, accidents and blunders long building up to alter it forever and to make Gregory, whose agonies seem to himself to fill and colour the whole world, utterly irrelevant. And so on. There are many other examples. It is a way in which Porter successfully takes an old theme, an old ache, and makes it his

own, renews it, makes it local without diminishing its centrality for all men and women everywhere and every*when*.

A second observation on this question of Porter's being very much preoccupied with a theme that could easily look or turn stale, is that he is a powerful enough writer to carry out various kinds of renewal and not only the one I've just mentioned. Much has been said in praise of and against Porter's style. Too few of those who are quick to note his off-beat style are prepared to wonder if it serves any purpose beyond distinctiveness, *un*commonness. I suggest that Porter has a particular strategy which he uses to provide momentum at vulnerable points of a narrative: examples of vulnerable points would be the start of some stories — e.g. "Country Town", where he has to admit the story is not about people and then avoid nostalgia while actually indulging it — or moments when he is fusing different time periods to produce a double or triple vision. The strategy is, simply, that Porter on such occasions (and on some others as well, the examples aren't exhaustive) tries to bring off a *tour de force*: it is writing with all the stops out, meant to sweep us along and perhaps off our feet, overriding incipient objection and purse-lipped rationality; overriding also contemporary preference for the unadorned, the flat, the spare and lean and honed. Porter may not always get away with it, but he's one of the rare writers who often can. There are examples of this in the stories I've looked at (the "No No Never" passage from "Country Town" is one), but here is the famous opening of *The Tilted Cross* as a classic sample:

> Van Diemen's Land, an ugly trinket suspended at the world's discredited rump, was freezing. From horizon to horizon stretched a tarpaulin of congealed vapour so tense that it had now and then split, and had rattled down a vicious litter of sleet like minced glass, that year, that winter, that day.
>
> That year, that winter, that day, the terraces and cucumber frames and summer-house and stables and attic gables of *Cindermead* were also freezing. The pump had been frozen until ten o'clock; the peacocks skulked, and squawked imperial displeasure, in the barn; the gardener, as he hacked at metal clods, swore

> vilely as an earl. Elegance had no more been denied the icy scourgings and crystal grits from Organ-pipe Mountain than the gibbet staked in the heart of Hobart Town, than the gaols, the dolly-shops, the limekilns, the brickfield, the orphan school and the Jews' burial ground. At noon the sleeting had stopped.
>
> Ladders and gallows and crucifixes of fused snow slanted up the precipices of Organ-pipe and the steeps of Knocklofty to the skylights of a firmament lacking angels to cosset anything or manna to sustain anyone. Land and sky alike seemed repelled by the English and the half-cultured urbanity they had securely established on a solid foundation of political brutality, crime, unemployment and colonial corruption.

In passing it's worth noting that there one finds yet another variation on the business of superimposition of times, on the paradox of time as trap; and the deceptively timeless look of history which appears to liberate, allow for new forms and shapes, while in fact it merely varies the old moulds. But the main point is that that passage is an example of a Porter *tour-de-force* and it's there to create, deliberately, and as effectively as he's able, an intense experience to further, or make credible or re-enforce some fictional aim or other. Porter is, in that way, an old-fashioned writer: he's not afraid to throw everything at the reader, array his literary weapons consciously, like a sonneteer; he ought not to be blamed if he quite obviously has a lot to throw.

Porter also plays variations on the time theme. A story called "Everleigh's Accent", briefly summarised, makes an interesting example. In "Everleigh's Accent" the narrator, a commercial traveller, stays at a Gippsland pub and meets Everleigh — a life-of-the-party type who speaks in a brittly educated way and with an unplaceable accent: "Welsh but not Welsh, intangible as fumes." The narrator asks Everleigh if he comes from up north:

> Infinitesimal delay.
> Then, "Yes, man," he said, and, presenting me with a matinee-idol smile of such glistening chinaness that it seemed to open a door on Truth's nudity, named a

> small town I had passed through some months ago. It was one of those places exposed for no detectable reason miles one way from willow-lined irrigation channels, miles the other from orange orchards. It was a parenthesis on a brick-red road, a paragraph of salt-bush, dust like paprika, a senselessness of shacks whose fallen-down gates were iron bed-ends that let nothing into yards littered with oil-drums and camp-pie tins.

Everleigh entertains the pub in a whole series of expertly mimicked accents and tells details of his home town, the only trouble with which, he says, is the blacks, and he mimics their incessant pleas round his father's hotel: "Gimme drink, man", "gimme little cigarette, boss." At the end of a long night, the narrator finds Everleigh sitting drunk at the bottom of the stairs, and this is the story's last paragraph:

> Vivacity and mobility having drained from his face, the archaic light magnified contours I should have noticed before, revealed in shadow what I could have recalled under fluorescents: the secret of his accent. I do not like people but can well enough act the Intelligent Good Mixer . . . You remember that? But I could not act as well as Everleigh. His brilliant toil had concealed everything in light until that moment when I was forced not to ignore his outstretched hand in the hell of whose stained palm lay not only the ghastly town with its shattered verandas and the fly-besequined eye-sockets of his part-blood parents but the Main Street garden debauchees, the reeking ones, the outskirt-walkers skinny as their mongrels, the soft-eyed beggars whose lilting and smoky accent Everleigh was using at the foot of the moonlit stairs, for it was his by custom, practice, and heredity: "Drink, man . . . . Drink gimme . . . . Gimme little cigarette, boss."

It is yet another trick of time — time in league with place (" . . . for there was no hotel in that home town . . . there was nothing except the burning-down of kerosene lamps and the

compline of blow-flies"). Everleigh is caught by history and race, where history means only indignity and shame and race means racism; where culture, like murder, will out; where time with the utmost indifference will tell; where place — the tell-tale landscape of home ("the ghastly town with its shattered verandas . . . ") — forever haunts. Like other Porter characters who tried to outface time and history, he ends up broken and defeated in a landscape of ruins.

Porter looks more deeply and for longer periods into the abyss than he is perhaps given credit for. His exultation in language and his capacity to create moments in prose that are the fiction equivalents of great arias or show-stopping stage performances, ought not be allowed to obscure the seriousness and the tragic awareness with which he views the maelstroms of sadly inevitable cultural change and the individual's battle to make sense of the "conceit of this inconstant stay".

That this kind of perception — looking back to times and places and people brought to ruin by one force or another — was central to Porter's imagination, is attested by many of his stories, but perhaps nowhere so succinctly as in one of his relatively rare poems, "After September 21, 1914 AD:"

> My khaki uncles marched the streets
> of that no-turning-back September
> and, roaring *Goodbye, Melbourne Town,*
> sailed off life's map. All I remember
> is pre-Great-War — their trilby hats,
> those ox-blood boots and primrose spats.
>
> Their masher eyes, macassared curls,
> and ragtime ruby rings had glistened
> while inner GOD-KING-COUNTRY ears
> (at all times pricked) with ardour listened
> to pick up what they hankered for:
> the Empire's bugles crying "War!"
>
> They quitted their ingenuous world
> of horse trams, hansoms, stable-keepers,

of penny postage, oyster bars,
lamplighters, bootblacks, crossing-sweepers,
enamel placards artlessly
extolling cocoa, starch, and tea.

A guileless time: on twilight blinds
the idling candle shadows trembled;
the barber's fish-tail gas-jet showed
a shelf of shaving-mugs assembled,
some with an uncle's name still on
though he — and something else — had gone.

Sunbonnet girls in pinafores
still skipped; those funny men still chattered
on gramophones — but innocence
had lost its voice, no longer mattered:
no innocence at all since then,
never such innocence again.

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