THREE ABSENCES IN AUSTRALIAN WRITING

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FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN LITERARY STUDIES

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by

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These three lectures will be concerned with what strike me as absences, or lacunae, in the literature of this country. Talking about absences may sound too much like scholastic speculation about the thing which is not, like a hunger for the square roots of minus numbers or perhaps like Mallarmé's attempts in verse to evoke and create *absences* as a mode of experience, a deeply suggestive area of existence. No such thing: my aims are simpler.

I want to suggest three areas of literary experience, three characteristics of literary practice in which Australian writing seems comparatively lacking; not with a view to blaming or belabouring our writers, although I may hit the key of regret from time to time, but rather to help define further just what kind of creature our literature is, what distinguishing marks it bears. Nor do I propose, like those whom Ronald Conway has dubbed "the Australia watchers," to bound from my observations to large generalizations about Australian life and values, although some of my literary evidence must, in complicated ways, point in such a direction: it is probable that what I have to say does reflect strands of puritanism, pragmatism and conservatism in our mores, but the argument back from books to common life is always a wobbly one, sometimes downright bumptious, and I shall try to abstain from it.

As I shall freely admit, there are also exceptions, sometimes vivid exceptions to the three general cases I am making, but I hope you will admit the broad justice of what I have to say about these three neglected realms: that of romantic love in our fiction, that of fully developed metaphysical views in our poetry, and that of forging radically new forms in prose or verse. The last of these, incidentally, is the one to which I admit the most exceptions.

Let me show you the colour of my money, then.

1

THE ABSENCE OF LOVE

> We said that man, having found by experience that sexual (genital) love afforded him his greatest gratification, so that it became the prototype of all happiness for him, must have thereby been impelled to seek his happiness further along the path of sexual relations, to make genital eroticism the central point of his life. We went on to say that in doing so he becomes to a very dangerous degree dependent on a part of the outer world, namely on his love object, and this exposes him to most painful sufferings if he is rejected by it or loses it through death or defection. The wise men of all ages have warned us emphatically against this way of life; but in spite of all it retains its attractions for a great number of people. (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*)

> Women represent the interests of the family and sexual life; the work of civilization has become more and more men's business; it confronts them with ever harder tasks, compels them to sublimations of instinct which women are not easily able to achieve. Since man has not an unlimited amount of mental energy at his disposal, he must accomplish his tasks by distributing his libido to best advantage. What he employs for cultural purposes he withdraws to a great extent from women and his sexual life; his constant association with men and his dependence on his relations with them even estrange him from his duties as husband and father. Woman finds herself thus forced into the background by the claims of culture, and she adopts an inimical attitude towards it. (*ibid*)

These two contrasting passages from the mature Freud define two contrasting paths which may be taken through the thickets of love. The former is that which we call romantic love, be it in life, in literature or in grand opera. It is very rare indeed in major Australian writing. The latter passage sounds remarkably like a characterization of many figures and many relationships in our fiction.

Now you may think it strange that views at which Freud arrived by the treatment of neurotic patients in high bourgeois Vienna should seem at first glance so applicable to relationships in what we like to regard as a frontier society, manly and egalitarian, little given to creamcakes and cream-topped coffees. Reflect for a minute, then, that the period of Freud's early clinical career exactly corresponds with the decades which we have come to regard as strongly determinant of Australian culture, Australian writing. Freud, too, was a man of the 'nineties; but that is tangential to what concerns us here.

When we cast an eye back over our most significant works of fiction we find in the first place remarkably few treatments of passionate or romantic love: think how different Italian or Russian or French fiction is in this respect. Secondly, I suggest, we find peculiar and, some would say, distorted presentations of which Freud called "the interests of the family and sexual life." And, as in his diagnosis, we find frequent representations of a world in which the man or men are drawn away from close familial love into the sphere of work) Freud's "cultural purposes") and into the rules of male companionship—or, worse, remain adrift, powerless and confused between two worlds. Not that women are generally neglected in this fiction; on the contrary they are frequently idealized for their strength, stability and powers of endurance. Emma Bovaries and Anna Karenina need not apply here.

What replaces romantic or deeply familial love in Australian fiction, then? Most often, it is what I should like to call *eroded persistence*, a capacity to stick on, bear up, bustle around and hold things together. And it is a quality most often attributed to the leading female characters rather than to their male counterparts, so often inclined to be feckless or impulsive, even when hard-working as well.

Henry Lawson had a keen nose for what was deeply representative. Generations of readers, as well as painters and parodists, have recognized this and have made "The Drover's Wife" his most famous story. The eponymous heroine of this tale (her appearance was finally fixed for us among the American Depression photographs of Dorothea Lange) has become an archetype for literate Australians; even the title's definite

article helps to enforce this representativeness. All the droving yarns and ballads celebrated freedom, mobility: here is its necessary counterpart, the new Penelope of fixity.

Governed by the possessive case of her husband's calling, she is none the less sheet-anchor to the family: both present demands upon her and the frequent blocks of flashback make this quite clear:

> One of the children died while she was here alone. She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child.

The ingenious construction of this story interlocks units of past material with chunks of the present historic; a lifetime and one night have the same general character, which includes continuity but not hope. The future tense is reserved for little Tommy's negative utterance, "Mother, I won't never go drovin'; blarst me if I do!"

If the aspirations of this bushwoman have been cut back to the retrospective "As a child she built the usual castles in the air," Lawson gives the emotions more room to spread and wither in his most ambitious narrative sequence, *Joe Wilson*. In this sequence of four linked tales Lawson allows play to what lies behind the disillusionments of a drover's wife, a Mrs Aspinall or a Mitchell: courtship itself.

Joe and Mary's courtship is poignantly, delicately dramatized (contrasting in this with the cynicism of something like "An Unfinished Love Story"), but even here, in the first tale of the sequence, it is hedged about with qualifications. Before we reach the young Joe Wilson we have heard the old Joe: narrator first, protagonist afterwards. The narrator is worldly, battered, sentimental and resigned; looking backwards, he offers us piths as superficially varied as "I wasn't a healthy-minded, average boy", "Make the most of your courting days, you young chaps, for they will never come again" and "A married man knows all about it."

Within the limits this isolated speaker implies, the courtship goes ahead. It is tentative, inarticulate and its moments of communication are few and intuitive—but it does have the

romantic charge of first love. The story shuttles nicely between mateship with Jack and courtship of Mary, and there is a fine, telling touch when Joe forgets to propose. The second part of the sequence deals, not with Joe's love for Mary, but with his love for their son, Jim. He can only dramatize married love at the points where it is foundering on misunderstandings, veiled bitternesses, transient occasions of hope. Anything more than this he cannot conceive. Like Browning's Campagna lover, his figures keep asking,

> Already how am I so far
> Out of that minute? Must I go
> Still like the thistle-ball, no bar,
> Onward, whenever light winds blow,
> Fixed by no friendly star?

Lawson's contemporary, in birth if not in floruit, Henry Handel Richardson, had a much deeper imaginative interest in continuity, as her much larger fictive structures would suggest. She too, however, from as early as that spry study, *The Getting of Wisdom*, fixes on the erosion of feelings.

Richardson's major novel, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, is at heart the massive documentation of a created marriage. Here, too, love is deficient and here, as in Lawson, the man's butterfly emotions seem incapable of sustaining love. No, butterfly emotions are not quite it in the case of Richard Mahony, restless, peripatetic and questing though he is. From early on Richard is presented to us as emotionally virginal, incapable of tuning his feelings steadily to the world; or, what is more important for us, to a wife.

The narrative fabric of the trilogy exposes so much of Richard's moment to moment flux that we might almost seem to know too much about him: we cannot see him steady and whole. His courtship of Polly is, in a sense, a chapter of accidents; courtship is set in train by goldfields loneliness, Purdy's coaxing and silly games, the contrast between Polly and the Beamishes, Richard's return to Ballarat and his need for a woman's hand about the place. And there is sentiment, I admit, but the couple are seen as embarking upon marriage with even less knowledge of one another than Joe and Mary, if that is possible. Patronage weds adolescence.

Their marriage lasts hundreds of pages, but it would still be hard to talk of any sustained capacity for love on Richard's part. Wisdom he loves, and the pursuit of spiritual doubts through the densest of cover, but common love is something he hardly understands. We can agree, I think, with Dorothy Green's claim in *Ulysses Bound* that "Throughout the book we are meant to see Mary as a pagan soul, *naturaliter Christiana* by reason of her unfailing love," if we add that it is a very dutiful kind of paganism. But Richard can only give of himself to his wife intermittently: his interests are "higher," as the spatial metaphor would have it.

Green finds her way around this uneven marriage by reading it hermeneutically. She moves beyond the naturalistic surface of the book to look at how the symbols balance and lock:

> For the marriage of Mary and Mahony, like everything else in the book, has its anagogic meaning and the brief return of Mahony to consciousness while he is dying is not, as has been claimed, a sentimental lapse of the author's, but a part of that meaning. Alchemy was concerned with the 'marriage of opposites.' Richard and Mary Mahony are psychic opposites, water and earth, exhibiting all the characteristics of interchangeability of which Jung was to speak so much later, but which Swedenborg had already described in the eighteenth century in *Conjugal Love*. Mary is the will, which is Love or the activity of life; Mahony, the understanding, or the wisdom of life. In spite of their exterior differences, they recognise one another in spirit (a fact which Tilly unwittingly acknowledges when she clumsily allays Mary's doubts about being the proper wife for Richard) and according to Swedenborgian doctrine the task of their spiritual selves when freed from the body will be to bring their will and understanding into conjunction, and form one Angel, the divine hermaphrodite.
> (p. 317)

This is a large and impressive claim, yet it is hard to credit that symbols can have quite such force and capacity for resolution in a book which is lived so steadily on the level of behaviour, a book where everything is embedded in the dailiness of manners and actions. In the world's terms Richard has been deficient in love, grasp for the moon though he did. This is one reason why his last two words are such a harrowing recognition of value.

The work of civilization may have been men's business, in Freud's terms, but Mary, forced into the background so often, triumphs in the end by virtue of her deep alliance with Eros.

What these, and other writers (think of Barbara Baynton in their generation, Martin Boyd in a later one) make of woman's role is something stable, persisting, strong, something which abides despite the vagaries, or the simple absence, of men. In terms of dichotomy proposed by a recent title, they are akin to "God's police"—albeit a very mildly deistic God—and share next to nothing with that lurid group of antonyms, the "damned whores." Romantic love comes and goes early, if at all: there are much longer games to be played against fate itself, the improvidence of men or the implacable bush; there are crops and mines and shares that fail, children who die, startling revelations or, in Baynton, malevolent figures who wander by night. (It is striking, by the way, to see what an awareness of evil adds to that picturesque line of indigent wanderers who come down from Wordsworth's old Cumberland beggar to the sundowners of Lawson and Furphy.)

To return to our main track, we must find it no accident that Richardson's two novels which do treat of passionate, romantic love, *Maurice Guest* and *The Young Cosima,* are not only set in Europe but permeated with European culture. The force of this is self-evident in the latter novel, and even can be demonstrated in *Maurice Guest,* as Dorothy Green has shown, stressing the novelist's imaginative cannibalization of the exotic Eleonora Duse. Romance belongs to Europe.

After the frequent harshness of these earlier fiction-makers, we may feel that Martin Boyd's inventions are done in gentle water-colour; certainly romantic imaginings of one kind or another hover over all his characters, or almost all. Padded by money and genteel society, they are figures to whom a whole series of romantic day-dreams are available: they dream of malign ancestors, rural England, the churches and palazzi of Italy, of settling in gracious country houses, of childhood recalled as an age of gold, and of civilized relationships. A number of these men and women share Lucinda Brayford's apprehension of an ideal:

> It seemed to her that only when one's life was linked to the beauties and tragedies of the past, as in this music and in this house, did it have any richness of texture, that only when one accepted a background of pessimism did one's pleasure become civilized. (*Lucinda Brayford*, p. 172)

However their relationships with one another are clouded by a number of factors, some of them inherent in the manner of their characterization, others springing from the kinds of dichotomy Boyd saw in modern life—perhaps in all post-Hellenic life—and imposed on the action of his novels: or, more accurately, used to organize that action.

This is the huge gap Boyd reveals between those who live for refined or heightened pleasure, with whom are oddly also numbered those who show a strong religious awareness, and those who live by money, puritanism or vulgarly materialistic pragmatism. This schematization is apt to cut boldly across his treatment of romantic and familial love.

Nevertheless, a recurrent pattern of male-female relationships emerges clearly from Boyd's major novels. A woman of character and charm is placed at the centre of the narrative—Lucinda Brayford, Alice Langton, Diana von Flugel—married to an extroverted husband who is persistently unfaithful. Lucinda, it is true embarks on an affair with a man who is not much different from her husband, but in general the novels set up opposite the sentient woman a sensitive, fragile, attractive man who is either homosexual or asexual: Paul, Aubrey, Russell. Nothing quite happens in these romantically teasing demi-relationships, and these strong, abiding women go right on as sheet-anchors of the family structure.

Alice in her middle years is typical enough of this Boydian conception of the strong, intelligent woman for whom there is no adequate counterpart:

> She imagined that the fates which had shaped her destiny and her character had about finished with her, that her role was now one of a looker-on, or of the onion-woman, stationary in mid-air, not ascending to Heaven but performing a useful and not too uncomfortable function in sustaining her family at a good height above the infernal regions of poverty. (*The Cardboard Crown*, p. 248)

Strength, endurance, a capacity for moments of vision or at least wisdom, these are what Boyd endows his heroines with, together with a palpable degree of authorial admiration: like Uncle Arthur, he would never think anything disrespectful about a true lady. His novels are, in a sense, love stories, but they find, wryly, even humorously, that the elevating love which they seek is not available in fact. At worst, the disparity or disproportion of feeling is that betrayed in the first quatrain of Aubrey's poem to Alice:

> Alice, your beauty is to me
> As those strange Russian wooden toys
> Which come in half, and then we see
> A smaller size of painted boys. (*The Cardboard Crown*, p. 230)

Two successive, and in some ways perfectly contrasted, novels by Patrick White have at their heart polar versions of an intense, extended relationship between a man and a woman. In *The Tree of Man*, White's conscious "raid on the inarticulate," we follow the near-lifelong relationship between Stan and Amy Parker in almost as meticulous detail as that which clung around the Mahony marriage. If this novel appears in its mundane concentration upon dull principals to flatten out any romantic possibilities, much as Stan's dreams about the *nouveaux-riches* possessors of Glastonbury are cut back to size by the fire, we should also recognize the profoundly democratic impulse which is almost everywhere in the book; the impulse to allow glamour, mystery and transcedent value to the lives of the dowdiest couple imaginable, a couple who have next to nothing to say to one another. There is no courtship here, merely Stan sitting out at a dance with "the thin Fibbens girl" and a subsequent marriage. Mystery inheres in the trees around the house more than it does in the personalities of this couple. And yet it must be added that even Stan and Amy, lumpily wordless as they so often are, have more capacity for wonder than their socially and psychologically typecast children, the criminal Ray and the frigid Thelma. Here at least, though, is a novel in which both the woman and the man show that massively sculptural capacity for endurance which Australian writers characteristically reserve for the woman.

Voss, I have suggested, is as different as could be. Historical rather than modern, a quest fiction rather than a low domestic narrative, brilliantly symbolic (brilliance of colouring is what I especially had in mind), it is a novel in the traditions of European romanticism, which takes a grubby, Byronic German explorer on a quest into the desert heart of Australia which, drawing on a metaphor from Lawrence's *Kangaroo*, is also a quest into the heart of man. Voss is seer, poet, sacrificial hero and holy fool.

He also conducts an intense, yet idealized love affair with a young woman in Sydney, Laura Trevelyan, who resembles members of White's spiritual elite in other novels in her inability and unwillingness to conform to the world's social standards. An insight like love at first sight enables her to recognize Voss immediately as one of the illuminati in a scene which also, ironically, is full of deliberate recollections of chapter two of *The Europeans*. But *Voss* is so deeply analogical a novel that it is hard to decide what is the primary level of significance in the Voss-Laura relationship, a relationship which is sustained through the book by means of a long-range telepathy rendered in prose which is often Gothic-operatic. Towards the end, for instance, we encounter this:

> So they rode through hell, that was scented with the *Tannenbaum*, or hair blowing. His mouth was filled with the greenish-black tips of hair, and a most exquisite bitterness.
>
> 'You are not in possession of your faculties,' he said to her at last.
>
> 'What are my faculties?' she asked.
>
> Then they were drifting together. They were sharing the same hell, in their common flesh, which he had attempted so often to repudiate. She was fitting him with a sheath of tender white.
>
> 'Do you see now?' she asked. 'Man is God decapitated. That is why you are bleeding.'
>
> It was falling on their hands in hot, opaque drops. But he would not look at her face yet. (*Voss*, pp. 363–64)

This passage epitomizes the novel's marvellous daring, given that Voss is moving towards his death in the central desert and that Laura remains in Sydney. Their unity, as communicant soul-mates or fellow Zaddikim, is presented in an eloquent wedding of symbolic clusters. But what it means at the level

of behaviour is far less clear; this kind of ideal, sexless love stands for so much; these amazing prose sequences ask more questions than we can finally answer. At what level, even, is Laura Australia itself, the unknown south land which an explorer may possess by right of vision?

If neither *The Tree of Man* nor *Voss* could possibly be said to offer a normative vision of human love, they surely extend importantly the dramatic significance of man-to-woman relationships in our fiction: both leave the attempt to represent provincial manners far behind, providing us with memorably new tropes and actions.

This brings us sharply back to the question of how we read novels. When I sample our novels in the way I am doing here, I am of course begging the question of how far these novels work mimetically, rendering something "real," something known, or typical, or representative of something in Australian life: or else something an Australian author finds significant about life in general, being predisposed to do so by his Australianness. Lurking behind all I've been saying there prowls and snarls the ugly suggestion that what I am finding in Australian novels—or not finding, to be more accurate—represents a broad tendency in our "national life and character" (C.H. Pearson's phrase).

Let me admit two things: first, that I want to keep this suggestion at bay, having no clear idea of how the elaborate verbal constructions of our most sophisticated authors represent what goes on in our sociological lives. And second, a counterview, that despite my disclaimer I secretly believe, as all the rest of you do, that our novelists and short story writers do somehow perceive and catch significant tendencies in Australian life. Most of us would not be here if we did not believe that deep down. So we go on, keeping our guards up but constantly beaten back into simple mimesis.

Much recent fiction calls such difficulties up. A notable example is Frank Moorhouse's latest piece of discontinuous fiction, *The Everlasting Secret Family*, the surface of which is naturalistic and notational, almost to the point of meanness, but which progressively builds up a sense that all its accounts of erotic distortion, perversion even, and odd familial secrets

are a symbolic representation of some larger view of the relations between illusion and reality, act and deception. In a book whose characters overlap with those in the author's other books, and also with real life, it is disconcerting to feel that a minutely specific account of a homosexual love affair may be essentially a metaphor for something wider . . . and much less specific.

Despite the deconstructionist warnings of a Moorhouse, I want to return to a more naive reading of fictive characters for a little longer, just to extend our picture.

In Christina Stead's novels the woman is apt to suffer more emotional damage in the harrowing life of the emotions. For instance Henny, herself in many ways childlike and melodramatic, is progressively driven to her death by her emotionally infantile Sam Pollitt in *The Man Who Loved Children*, a book which portrays marital relations as not unlike the cupboard love which existed between lions and Christians in the Roman Coliseum. This is, in short, a novel where the affections are at once ebullient and utterly destructive. Rampant ignorance on both sides of the marriage has rendered love impossible; an ignorance which is so extroverted, so expressionist in both Henny and Sam that both Lawson's and Richardson's portrayals of marriage seem intimate by comparison.

More astonishing, if that were possible, is Stead's dramatization of an adolescent love affair in *For Love Alone*. Set in that zany, bohemian, technicoloured Sydney which Jack Lindsay called back to mind in *The Roaring Twenties*, this hourglass-shaped novel sets out from amidst a turbulent family which is plainly a later projection of *The Man Who Loved Children* and follows the young woman, Teresa Hawkins, into a dreadfully prolonged relationship with the most undesirable love-object that God ever blew breath into: this intellectual young man, one Jonathan Crow, ridden by theories, manages to combine egotism, male chauvinism, frigidity and impermeability at such a level that he seems more like an obstacle in a morality tale than like a credible human portrayal; he is an adequate metaphor to trigger off Teresa's long ordeal of self-denial, almost purgation, but hardly one to stand on his own long legs. In some measure he is a satirical portrayal of those

members of the *Vision* school who preached liberation and practised intolerance, but the novel cannot fully articulate the reasons for his hyperbolic nastiness. If this is a weakness in its over-all balance, it also has the effect of throwing yet more weight on Teresa's poverty and self-abasement, on a process of physical depletion and attenuated romantic hope which is portrayed with a compelling, almost hateful vividness, until Teresa finally tumbles into the soft complexities of London and sexual release.

A peculiar emotional charge, a romantic frisson, is apt to come into those works which portray relationships between whites and Aborigines, which commonly tends to mean between white men and black women. In such a relationship, we are thrust back into the fictive worlds of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since society offers no safety net to support the black woman in such a relationship: as the reader is well aware, tragedy is always lying just around the corner, and such a tragic end is precisely what awaits Coonardoo in Katharine Susannah Prichard's novel of that name.

Prichard, both by natural impulse and with the aid of D.H. Lawrence's influence, was an unambiguously romantic writer, not in the historical sense, which is common enough, but as the man or woman in the street uses the word, romantic. For all Hugh's attempts at repressing his emotions, and at making a go of his orthodox marriage, his feelings for Coonardoo are impassioned and inescapable, as hers more simply are for him. A shadow of impending *Liebestod* hangs over the action from very early on. The prose is full of lyrical celebration of their feelings for one another:

> Coonardoo lived on the veranda at Wytaliba and was regarded as Hugh's woman. Only she could not imagine why Hugh did not take her as his woman. His woman, he had said she was to be. She watched and waited, knowing his loneliness, the deep surge of his drawing to her.
>
> Sheer cussedness, Hugh thought, deterred him from doing what everybody expected him to. A sullen anger grew in Coonardoo's eyes because of it. She had come one hot night and laid her head on his feet and Youie had pushed her away. She did not understand it. Hugh's **hunger** was in his eyes

when he looked at her; he did not wish her to go away, and yet he would not touch her; moved away if she stood near him.

He was kind to her; gave her keys of the store, and ginaginas of bright new dungaree. His eyes lighted as he sang out, coming in from the back hills or Karrara.

'Hi, Coonardoo! Coonardoo! Anybody at home there?'

And always her dark quiet figure appeared from the shade of the white flowering bushes, or on the kitchen veranda, with eyes which shone their welcome.

'Eeh-mm.'

No surprise; no elation. Only the deep eyes and that murmur with its flowing joyousness. (p. 140)

It is here, and in *Working Bullocks*, which appeared three years earlier, that we find that rare thing, then: a celebration and orchestration of patterns of erotic impulse in Australian fiction.

When Xavier Herbert treats of similar relationships in *Capricornia*, however, the lovers and their emotions are constantly being dwarfed by the author's comic-destructive irony. Nothing succeeds, except by freakish accident; nothing lasts; all men and women are fools or hypocrites much of the time. Relationships are both tangled and absurd, even if they end in unmitigated disaster. In the central affair, if so nihilistic a novel can have a centre, Norman, who embodies the white man's values, is in fact a half-caste, while Tocky, who embodies the Aborigine's, is a white quadroon. Like other lovers in the book, they squabble childishly, misunderstand one another and are the victims of ghastly accidents. It is only Herbert's sense of an ending that rounds out *Capricornia* on something like a tragic note, restoring to Tocky's bones more dignity than she possessed in life. There is no place in his monstrous comedy for any abiding impulse of love, except for Tim O'Cannon's overarching familial benevolence, which, like everything else, is doomed.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir reflected on "The Myth of Woman in Five Authors," categorizing them thus: the bread of disgust, phallic pride (Lawrence), the handmaid of the Lord, poetry, and the romantic of reality (Stendhal),

with Stendhal not surprisingly receiving her accolade for the deepest kind of understanding of women and love. It is hard to think of Australian portrayals of women, or of relations between men and women which would even pass through the portals of such lofty categories. With exceptions here and there—and I realize that I have said nothing here about Roger McDonald's robustly tender view of late-adolescent love affairs in *1915*, a view which takes in transience and damage without negating emotional intensities and even joys—it seems to me that Australian fiction categorizes its males under the heading of The Inattentive Heart, its females under The Loneliness of the Long Distance Stoic.

2

THE ABSENCE OF METAPHYSICS

> The facts of life do not penetrate to the sphere in which our beliefs are cherished; as it was not they that engendered those beliefs, so they are powerless to destroy them. (Proust, *Combray*)
>
> We began scribbling in corners of this enormous blackboard, dwarfed and obscurely alarmed. (Judith Wright, "The Upside-down Hut")

The topic of this lecture would seem to be still more chimerical, more evasive than the first, for what on earth might there be in the absence of metaphysics: something akin to "an acre of land between the salt water and the sea sand," perhaps? Let us be more solemn and earth-bound in order to clarify the matter. What I am asserting is that I find remarkably few Australian writers, even among the best, whose work bears witness to a system of metaphysical beliefs which genuinely informs that work. And this is intimately linked with the fact that there are no writers here whose work commands the kind of overwhelmed allegiance to a whole way of thinking and feeling that we find demanded by the work of Blake or Lawrence or Yeats or Shelley or Beckett or Proust.

Let me hasten to say that this is not in any simple way a disparagement of our writers, though it implies some criticism of the range of kinds of writer that the culture has produced. Eliot has warned us not to expect "ideas" from greater writers, not even from—or especially not from—Shakespeare. And we know how many major novelists there are whose fictions seem to be almost all "rendering," yielding very little in the way of a scrutable set of ideas, let alone a metaphysical system. On the other hand, we have that recurrent **hunger** for an awareness of something more coherent, memorably set down in William Empson's complaint that "Most poetry today is in the Imagist

tradition, and it simply isn't the fashion in poetry today to understand things."

For the most part, critics have tended to agree, most Australian writing has flowed in that positivist current of which imagism is one small rivulet or swirl. Not only in fiction, an art which, because of its dramatizing nature, leaves the author's philosophical stance much harder to determine than does poetry, but also in poetry Australian writers have been found somewhat deficient in metaphysical speculation. Thus, Vincent Buckley has written:

> The tradition of Australian poetry, as of Australian society, has been an anti-intellectual one. Many commentators will agree that the level of intellectual aspiration in Australian life is not very imposing. We are always for localizing the truth, for assuming the answers to basic questions about man's life or for answering them in a casual, pragmatic, workaday manner. If our religion is vaguely pantheist, concerned with works rather than with faith, our philosophy is social, concerned with consolidating human relations rather than with understanding them . . . In a settled and prosperous land such as this, only a tiny minority asks itself the central questions about the destiny of all. And the poets are not always members of this minority. For us, poetry is not a vocation, but an additional pleasure; it is not a seeing of ultimate meanings, but a surrender to immediate experiences, . . . (*Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian*, p. 2)

Whatever Buckley may mean by this being a "settled" land, the terms of his critique are perfectly clear. What I want to do is to look at the spectrum of relationships between personal belief and poetic practice which we have in our tradition and to find out just what this has to show.

At one end of the scale, then, we have Christopher Brennan. Brennan's collected prose is perhaps the most distinguished body of critical and aesthetic speculation from any of our poets. At the very least, it sets out a sustained idealist philosophy and a sophisticated application of this idealism to questions of artistic practice: I shall return to this in rather more detail. We may also fairly say that Brennan's metaphysics and aesthetics find expression in his interwoven volume, *Poems*

(1913), although not in his—inferior—later verse. In his major work, then, the belief structure informs the poetry.

We soon find that transactions between metaphysics and poetry offer us no simple desiderata when we turn to the curious figure of William Baylebridge. As Noel Macainsh has shown in his study, *Nietzsche in Australia*, Baylebridge arrived at a complex web of philosophical beliefs, derived variously from Hegel, Nietzsche and other nineteenth century thinkers. But his interest as a thinker is hardly at all matched by his interest as a poet: critics are now virtually unanimous in finding his poetry unimpressive, except as further evidence of his ideas.

A very different case again of the relation between literature and beliefs is provided by the career of James McAuley. In 1946 he published his first book of poems, *Under Aldebaran*. This book, which contains his finest poetry, might be described as ranging from apocalyptic to sardonic, late-romantic in feeling despite a steady attraction to formal clarity, hungry for faith and vision but at the same time locked in solipsism. Already these are occasional signs of a sceptical realism derived from the influence of John Anderson. McAuley becomes a convert to Catholicism in 1952 and his collection of essays, *The End of Modernity*, published in 1959, gives the essence of the system of belief which he seems to have retained without significant change to the end of his life: it combined a strongly traditional, mediaevalizing Catholicism (which included a firm sense of the "normal society" and the "perennial poetry") with Andersonian realism in epistemology and sceptical pluralism as a basis for social organization.

In my judgement, the anti-historicist basis of McAuley's conservatism did harm to his poetry. The attempt to find a universal, generalizing poetry without period coloration or marks of style had the effect of leaving his verse frequently cold and sometimes merely archaic. He once wrote, "I play a game against the Age's mind," and this resolute stance against his age and environment left him incapable of learning from it or of dipping in the rich swirling pot of the common language. (In the present climate of taste it is striking how often he was heard to proclaim his dislike of all modern American poetry.)

At the end of his life, McAuley's marmoreal classicism softened a little in practice and he produced a number of modest, observant, plaintive landscape lyrics which lay claim to no large views but which have some affinities with the empirical observations of Douglas Stewart or of Philip Larkin. "Another Day, Another Night" is an attractive example:

> A breath rises from enormous distance
> Blowing through the empty afternoon,
> Shaking dry raspberry canes and shattering roses.
> The yellowing willow streams in a wan dusk.
> In the evening the stars come out blurred.
>
> And we sit down to wine and meat and bread.
> The pain of loss infects the loneliness,
> And there is less and less that can be said.
> When the wind lapses in a vast silence,
> Pale blue and amber target the clouded moon.
>
> Things have a way of turning out absurd.

A number of McAuley's contemporaries, those poets who flowered especially in the 1940s and 1950s, appear to have had in common the almost complete lack of any metaphysical view, or at least of any hunger toward philosophical enquiry or system-building. Here, even more than in Britain, positivism pervaded the 'fifties, and simple positivist assumptions pervade the work of even such admirable poets as Douglas Stewart, David Campbell and W. Hart-Smith. In Stewart's verse, for instance, there is no evidence of any intellectual system, nor yet of any enquiry into the direction of life and the fundamental components of things. Yet Stewart has produced many fine poems and, more than that, an impressive body of work couched in a manner that is utterly his own. As Eliot suspected, a poet may render experience convincingly without having any philosophy to offer, even any ideas. Stewart's long poem, "Rutherford", is an interesting crux: here the poet demonstrates his deep interest in the great scientist's ideas, but there is no evidence that he entertains those ideas himself. Like Browning's Andrea del Sarto, Rutherford is used by the poem and makes an alternative form of life available to the poet's talent. It is not surprising that Stewart was such an admirer of Browning, who, also, had no ideas to speak of.

Another form of positivisim flourished at the same time in the work of one of Stewart and Campbell's major contemporaries, John Manifold. In this case, however, it was part of an ideological system: Marxism. As Vincent Buckley has provided a broadly convincing account of Manifold's poetry in *Essays in Poetry*, I shall not revisit it here, except to note that Manifold showed no apparent interest in Marxist philosophy: Communism exists in his verse—and it *is* strongly felt there—as a mode of rigour, a briskness of definition, a call for positive action; he is a materialist poet who delights to evoke revolutionary energies in which "Shouts get back shouts, cries waken cries" or

> Mixed as we are, we sometimes yearn
> For father's simple hates again,
> Carbine and pike and loosened rein;
>
> "Brumby's Run"

There is one other poet of substance who is deeply, craggily imbued with the positivism of the mid-century, and who was closely associated with Stewart, and with Stewart's Red Page of the *Bulletin*, in those unspeculative years, but who at the same time showed and shows much more restless, dissatisfied patterns of thought. This is Robert D. FitzGerald, and I shall return to him a little later. Certainly FitzGerald's "The Face of the Waters" is one of the very few poems from those years which questioned the mode of its own utterance. Other Australian poets accepted their voices and their selves much as they accepted the solid, sunlit reality of things in the outside world.

There is one major exception to the tacit but almost universal materialism of those middle years. This is Judith Wright, whose poetry bore from the start evidences of metaphysical disquiet, of dissatisfaction at the limits of the ostensibly real world. Her first book carries like a banner the Platonic utterance as epigraph, "Time is the moving image of eternity," and the title poem engages, as "Essay on Memory" and *Four Quartets* had already done in their different ways, with the question of what time is, of what stuff is it made. There also began to appear in this book a deep core of doubt in Wright's poetry: whether culture, tales, language itself is adequate to the vivid pressure of continuous experience. This aching doubt echoes throughout her career in poems as utterly different as "The Harp and the King," "For Precision" and "Some Words."

In "Birds" it reaches the state of a hunger for transcendental wordlessness:

> If I could leave their battleground for the forest of a bird
> I could melt the past, the present and the future in one
> and find the words that lie behind all these languages.
> Then I could fuse my passions into one clear stone
> and be simple to myself as the bird is to the bird.

That gnomic last line represents the extreme condition of *being* without utterance towards which Wright's poetry frequently presses. Another key point is that harrowing moment in "The Unborn" where she imagines the aborted foetus trying to give expression to the essence of its brief existence.

There is no evidence, inside or outside the poetry, that Judith Wright can lay claim to any metaphysical system, nor even to any consistent set of philosophical attitudes. There is, however, this recurrent hunger for transcendence or immanence, towards the absent or the hidden god. In "The Lost Man" this deity is almost glimpsed—at least his tracks are—and here he seems a being midway between the martyred Christ and the ghostly, martyred Aborigines. But this is atypical. Usually the poetry hungers towards essence and celebrates being: glimpses of Platonic reality are all we have.

The nearest thing to an account of her sense of ontology which Judith Wright has given us is a single paragraph of prose. It comes in her book, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, at a point where she has just compared Hope's and Rilke's apprehensions of reality:

> But, archetypal force or Angel, both require that man should be able to serve, perhaps even, unknown to himself, to harbour powers greater than he knows; and this is the conception which frees poetry at last from the limitations of conscience and consciousness into which the artional and intellectual life of the eighteenth century first betrayed it, into the service of faith and praise of what is. (p. 192)

The historical ground of "first betrayed it" is wrong, of course: think of Bacon, of Descartes and of the foundation of the Royal Society, all of them pre-eighteenth century. But the

personal thrust of the passage is clear; what Wright is welcoming are those apprehended moments, frequent in Rilke but a good deal rarer in Hope, where poetry takes on a religious scope, serving the mystical or at least the mysterious.

It is in the unsystematic prevalence of views like this in her poetry that Judith Wright parts company, not only with the many positivists of her generation, but also with the realist (and sometimes reductivist) world picture which prevails in Anderson, the later McAuley and, despite the above quotation, A.D. Hope. In fact, one of the things which were borne more and more strongly in on me while writing this lecture was how very strongly, in its bases and its development, Hope's values have resembled those of Anderson: even the drift from inoclast to cultural conservative is parallel.

There remains one further thrust in Australian poetry in which a philosophical position closely underscores poetic practice. This is in the "anaesthetic" poetry practised by John Forbes and John Tranter, and enfolded in Tranter's 1979 anthology, *The New Australian Poetry*. On the grounds of a fairly rigorous nihilism, and scepticism about the status of the ego, conition, language and, hence, all value judgements, Forbes and Tranter have set about constructing what we might slangily call "self-destruct poetry." By means of crafty dislocations of syntax, non-sequiturs of reference and abruptly shifting tones, they produce poems which are at once whimsical and, with a negative face on, philosophically sceptical about language itself. They do not even quite share the assumptions of pure aesthetes, since their jokiness undermines the beauty or value of the work made. Their attitudes are hard to distinguish from one another's, although Forbes is the more meticulous anti-craftsman (see what paradoxes rear their heads!) and Tranter the more copious as well as (another paradox) given to the building of large, dare I call them structures.

In his introduction to *The New Australian Poetry* Tranter offers a modernist attack on humanist or mimetic readings of poetry, seeking a text which is at once autonomous and evasive. And Forbes at once expounds and exemplifies this new poetic, its Three-Bears-Oats-packet quality of infinite recession, in the

beginning of a recent interview, which was published in *Helix* for August, 1980:

FORBES: I think he means I'm not religious. I think for him poetry has an ethical function. It replaces religion as a focus of values. I don't conform to that stance.

JENKINS: Or you are positively hostile to it?

FORBES: In so far as a poem *depends* on that procedure or outlook for its worth, or to work, then I am against it. A lot of people, however, have written poems from similar orientations which have been very good poems, which haven't needed the back-up of those sorts of assumptions. But a lot of poems, for instance Peter Kocan's, *depend* for the reader's response on a shared view about certain key words. I suppose he finds in my poems a lack of that stance, an awareness of it; and the poems are happy about it, too.

JENKINS: So these key words—perhaps ones like 'sin,' 'faith,' 'search,' 'darkness,' 'profound,' 'portent,' 'angst'—cue in a whole backlog of *implicit meanings* that are the real subject matter of the poem.

FORBES: Well, the poem *depends* on them to work. It's quite possible to write poems from the same area of sensibility which don't have that dependence. For example, a lot of Peter Porter's poetry.

JENKINS: So, if you question the implicit rationale, you reduce those key words to their mere lexicon meanings, without them having any weight which is able to enforce the poem?

FORBES: Yes. I think all poems should be judged this way. For a poet to *depend* on a certain code weakens his poems. The poems would depend on the words only. In the larger context, there's also a whole code that gives the idea of writing a poem itself a meaning. It's false to depend on that rationale too, but it's very hard not to be involved with it in some way. Because, if you ask yourself, 'What are you doing?' you say, 'I'm sitting down, typing.' But what does that mean? 'I'm writing a poem,' you say. What does this mean? Well—then there's a whole set of implicit assumptions about the worth of the activity itself. I think it's always right to question them

as much as possible, to do without them as much as possible, even though they're self-reinforcing.

Here, then, we have writers pursuing a mode of poetry which has firm intellectual premises: it embodies assumptions about metaphysics, but they are (probably: the ground is treacherous) anti-metaphysical. It further strikes me that the motives of these poets are less pure than their poetics might lead us to expect; when I have heard Tranter read his "Ode to Col Joye," "Sartre at Surfers' Paradise" and "Leavis at the London" at public gatherings, the audience has gone down in fits of laughter: there is certainly a strand of larrikin comedy in the whole enterprise. No wonder these poets have been so bitterly attacked by reviewers who, not surprisingly perhaps, still want their poetry to be "about something."

The handful of examples which I have offered should be enough to show how many kinds of interface there can be between thought and poetry, even in a literature (or perhaps an historical period) which has not been noted for its philosophical aspirations. As we have seen, the thought systems which lie "behind" the work of our poets may be aspiring or they may be reductive; they may be enabling or disabling; they may be metaphysical or they may be materialist; in some cases they may be damn near invisible.

I want to end by turning back to two lightly linked but strongly contrasted examples, both of them poets whose philosophical demeanour has called for a good deal of commentary, while the gap between the pair of them will only serve to heighten our awareness of how differently thought and thought-systems may make their way into literature.

As I suggested earlier, the Brennan of *Poems (1913)* is a poet whose belief structure and patterns of speculation are deeply incorporated into his poetry, even if, as Wilkes, Sturm and Docker have successively pointed out, there is a striking gap between Brennan's body of Symbolist theory and the subjective-expressive element in this poetic work. (We may, I think, say that Brennan's broadly romantic personality was incapable of the rather frigid detachment of Mallarmé.) The process of his emotional disintegration was, obviously, a kinetic one, yet he

sought, like the Symbolists, a stasis which was truth and beauty: which was the apprehension of *being* itself.

What he wrote about Mallarmé after the Frenchman's death was true of his own poetic ambition, at least:

> He was that rare poet—Keats, our most splendid possibility, was on the way to become such—who possesses a poetic philosophy, a philosophy that is entirely poetry; a systematic body of imaginative thought wherein reality is transposed, dissolved into pure light—such is the sense his work leaves behind it, affecting you almost physically—transmuted into a unity of beauty, truth, and justice. He believed in the supremacy of poetry—the gold by which man lives the spiritual life, . . . (*Prose*, p. 281)

Brennan, too, systematically worked to create a "body of imaginative thought wherein reality is transposed"; this is why attempts to find in his poetry a rendition of Australian landscapes are quite beside the point; it is also one reason why Brennan has often been harshly treated by critics of an imagist or empiricist persuasion, though one must also admit that there are areas of sheer linguistic clumsiness in his verse. However, he could never transmute reality into "a unity of beauty, truth and justice," as he believed Mallarmé to have done. Reality was incalcitrant: the shadow of Lilith, of perpetual disquiet, was too heavy upon him. The direction of *Poems (1913)* staggers, moving both towards an ideal symbolist harmony where vision and reality will be one, and towards a harsher recognition of the constantly provisional nature of the world: it is the rendering of that latter awareness in temporal motion which underscores the triumph of Section III, "The Wanderer."

As Ken McSwain has urged in *Southerly*, number one for 1980, there is a double principle of ordering in Brennan's book-length sequence. Partly the poems are ordered by sequence (and by typographical emphasis) and partly by the appended dates of composition. Thus, while "The Wanderer" is dated 1902—, and "Pauca Mea," which follows it, 1905—08, they are followed and the book completed by not one but two "Epilogues," a 1908 one which confronts the fallen mess of the common world but also an 1897 one which preserves intact a vision of unshakable Idea, a symbol of wholeness and regeneration:

Deep in my hidden country stands a peak,
and none hath known its name
and none, save I, hath even skill to seek:
thence my wild spirit came.

Thither I turn, when the day's garish world
too long hath vex'd my sight,
and bare my limbs where the great winds are whirl'd
and life's undreaded might.

For there I know the pools of clearest blue,
glad wells of simple sooth,
there, steep'd in strength of glacier springs, renew
the lucid body of youth.

. . . . . .

The gift of self is self's most sacred right:
only where none hath trod,
only upon my secret starry height
I abdicate to God.

I can hardly guess at what degree of courage and imaginative strength could lead Brennan, as late as 1913, to make this transcendental utterance the penultimate section of his masterwork. Despite the turmoil of his "wild spirit," he could still pay tribute to this pure, brisk image of transcendence.

Let me add that Brennan's speculative writings provide a basis not only for his sense of artistic purity and wholeness, the Edenic vision, but also for his increasingly insatiable feeling that man is a rootless and anomalous wanderer, *Ahasuerus redivivus*, for whom only "the road is plain." In "Philosophy and Art," an address of 1903, he wrote,

> That man is a wanderer by nature is, I believe, proved by the latest discovery of philosophy. Not merely has material science shown that man is no fixed type, but a transitory product of the continual flux and transformation of species: philosophy also—or rather, I should say, psychology—has lighted on the revolutionary idea that man is not a self-conscious creature: not *yet* self-conscious but in process of becoming self-conscious. (*Prose*, p. 42)

It may be the Darwinian, the post-Darwinian, note that is registered in such a passage as this which can help to explain how Brennan could have had a strong influence on so antithetical a spirit as the young R.D. FitzGerald. Earnest, awkward, secular, active, hopeful, questioning, wordy, conservative, reformist and unyielding in his humanist optimism, FitzGerald has put together a substantial body of poetry upon which is occasional prose throws hardly any light at all. We find that he admires Montaigne, Whitehead and Norman Lindsay, the first two unreservedly despite the difficulties he admits to in reading, or at least following, the cosmologist. Writing on the poet's treatment of time, Humphrey McQueen finds his lack of theory typical: "Even allowing for FitzGerald's modesty, his account of an unsystematically acquired philosophy applies to almost all Australian writers and painters" (*The Black Swan of Trespass*, p. 101).

His materialistic outlook, his discursive mode and explicit metaphors, these are the things which go with a Browningesque optimism to make FitzGerald's verse look almost complacent at times, and yet its main demeanour is that of doubting the obvious, asking the root meaning of things. As early as *Moonlight Acre* (1938) we can find a lyric like "Return" which, although partly calling up his common world of busy action, begins and ends with propositions about the limits of reality or knowledge. The same volume contains two longer, argumentative poems about transience and the character of time, neither showing the poet at his best but both full of his restless enquiringness. If he proceeded on the one hand to a series of large historical narrative poems, very firm and clear in outline, he also went on with occasional wiry lyrics which called in question his very place in space, time and identity: such lyrics as "Duped though We Were," "Individuality" and "The Waterfall" help one to see why McQueen has praised FitzGerald for being the first Australian poet to exhibit an awareness of modern physics, modern epistemology.

Again and again FitzGerald has pushed his somewhat abstract syntax hard, demanding that it give some account of the Heraclitean or Einsteinian flux; from his classic modernist investion,

"The Face of the Waters," down to even such a small, recent lyric as "Movement" his enquiry into flow and dissolution goes on:

> Drifts of our streaming life expand
> into the neither now nor then
> of movement become the world
>
> "Movement"

I am going to leave "The Face of the Waters" until my third lecture, in which it has a rightful place. It pleases me, however, to be able to end this lecture with the contrast which presents itself so vividly between Christopher Brennan, whose ambitious idealist philosophy helped to shape, but could not finally discipline or resolve, his poetic *oeuvre*, and FitzGerald, whose reach-me-down, stringybark bits and pieces of thought fed into so passionate a mood of questioning, from time to time at least, that he was to write recurrent poems of serious metaphysical enquiry.

3

AND WHAT ABOUT FORMS?

> I am sure that every scientist must have noticed how his mental reflection at the deeper level is not verbal: it is an *imagined experience*, simulated with the aid of forms, of forces, of interactions which together barely compose an 'image' in the visual sense of the term. I have even found myself . . . identifying with a model of protein. However, it is not at this moment that the significance of the simulated experience becomes clear, but only when it has been enunciated symbolically. Indeed, the nonvisual images with which simulation works should be regarded not as symbols but, if I may so phrase it, as the subjective and abstract 'reality' offered direct to imaginary experience. (Monod, *Chance and Necessity*)

This brief account, given by the French biologist, Jacques Monod, of the very complicated morphology of thought and experience, should only serve to underline how central and at the same time how un-simple is the role of literary form. The writer, whether expressionist or constructivist, mimetic or wisdom-seeking, seeks appropriate forms: these forms should enable him to translate lived, or worldly, experience into the abstract medium of language without losing the immediacy of that experience. All manner of devices—rhythmical, numerical, echoic, repetitive, imagistic and narrative—play their part in the verbal complex, the form, which attempts to re-enact the author's sense of how the world is.

Many writers and critics, many readers, no doubt, have found Australian writing to be formally uninventive. What I would want to do is to agree with them in large measure, but also to ask exactly what this means, what kinds of formal invention we have to offer, what kinds we should reasonably expect, and how far it matters. (After all the border between "derivativeness" and "tradition" is a wavering, blurry one, confused by many swamps and miasmas, among them the Oedipal wish of the

young to reject and overthrow their forebears, seeking a fresh new identity not in Thebes but in the pages of the American literary magazines, where everything is glitteringly different.)

Years ago, a colleague of mine proposed an imaginary exam question which ran, "The Australian poem is a series of rhyming quatrains with a moral at the end," thus expressing his dissatisfaction with local practice; since 1968 or thereabouts he would no doubt have to change the details to "The Australian poem is a series of free verse stanzas with a landscape at the beginning," but his general dissatisfaction would hardly have changed. Still, it is always unprofitable to talk about the lowest common multiple in a mode, rather than about examples which test us. Although I adhere to the blanket view that our poetry, fiction and drama are generally lacking in formal invention, I want first to turn the notion of *form* round on the table-top for a few minutes, and then to look at what some of our more innovative writers have done more specifically.

We use the word in several overlapping ways when we talk about works of literature. First, we use it to signify visible shape: as, for instance, a novel, which is shaped rather like a box of chocolates and contains several hundred pages of close type, characteristically sub-divided into chapters and paragraphs; or a ballad, containing a symmetrical series of short, rhymed quatrains (sometimes the lines are longer, especially in bush ballads) separated by white spaces; or blank verse and heroic couplets, which look exactly the same until we spy the rhymes and punctuation-marks; and so on, Lewis Turco's 1968 handbook, *The Book of Forms*, setting us back on our heels by offering no less than eighty-two major verse-forms, together with sub-categories!

Again, "form" can be used to refer to genres, specifying the narrative mode or manner of address, as in the picaresque novel, the *Bildungsroman*, the ode and the French farce.

Thirdly, we may talk about form when we are trying to characterize the gestalt of a work more broadly. As one might when talking about the form of Milton's "Lycidas," in which case one would not only be discussing the rhymed pentameters and the fact that the poem is an example of the pastoral elegy,

but would also be looking at the changes of ostensible subject, the orchestration of moods, the points of climax, the patterns of water imagery and such like features of the poem.

When Auden counselled a young poet to make use of stricter verse forms because, "I think it is easier to find out what *you* want to say . . . as the very nature of the form forces the mind to think rather than to recollect" (Charles Osborne, *W.H. Auden: The Life of a Poet*, pp. 95–96), he was simply thinking of the first sense, though implying that such practice would in time enrich the gestalt, the whole creative effect. However, we are concerned here with all three senses of form, especially the first and the third. In any of these areas, which can overlap so much, Australian literature has not been very inventive . . . it seems to be less inventive now, at the higher levels, than it was at the turn of the century, although it is more widely competent, more variously interesting, in all likelihood.

Mind you, literary value is not just dependent upon formal inventiveness: A.D. Hope, for example, who is without doubt one of our most distinguished, impassioned and even subversive poets, is surely one of the most monotonous in his range of verse forms and metres; that remark about the ubiquitous quatrain might have been designed especially for him. Again, formal invention may have its prime seasons. The years 1920–1943 were a golden age of experimentation in English and European literatures, but there is no evidence that the next quarter-century demonstrated the same characteristics, and by the 1970s a hunger for novelties had passed over from literary practice into criticism and theory. It's really up to the *Zeitgeist*, isn't it? Besides, we do not necessarily require cultures to prove their credentials by continual leaps of the shaping imagination.

For instance, one of our greatest poems, "Five Bells," has a powerfully individuated structure or cycle of feeling even though its form is a superficially familiar one, the extended pentameter reflection, in this case engendered both by "Lycidas" and by "Tintern Abbey." The metre and syntax are unsurprising, yet the reflective curve of feeling here can be felt as something new, exploratory, fresh.

If we turn back to the question, which Australian works have demonstrated outstanding formal originality, the first answering example bounds readily to mind. Joseph Furphy's experimental novel, *Such is Life*, was not only astonishingly advanced for provincial Australia in 1903, but was indeed, for all its harking back to the ironies of Sterne and Shakespeare, a formal precursor (unknown, unacknowledged, a freak if you like) of the great European novels of the modernist period. Harry Heseltine has argued that our writing, far from being belated, anticipated much of the nihilist awareness of modern metropolitan fiction: *Such is Life* also anticipated the antinovelistic tactics and structures of that fiction, its manifold reflexiveness.

As is well-known, the book is punctuated by a series of warnings and assertions by the narrator all of which distinguish what he is doing from what "your novelist" or "the romancer" is up to: this produces a self-conscious, *mise en abîme* effect, since the narrative is on the one hand proclaimed to be far more reliable than the "romance, and . . . poetical justice" and on the other hand is aware of itself as being a narrative construct and hence not life itself. The most artificial and romantic of late nineteenth century tales find it far easier to be "natural" than a subversive text like this can. Events and stances here are constantly being dislocated (a capital term, that, given how far bullockies' lives consist in their being dis-located time after (adj.) time), in such ways as to prevent the reader from indulging his or her appetite for sequential narrative (cf. William James on HJ: ". . . to give an impression like that we often get of people in life. Their orbits come out of space and lay themselves for a short time along of ours, and then off they whirl into the unknown . . . .").

Another deep joke contained by *Such is Life* lies in the fact that those weavy strands of plot which come to the surface against Tom's best intentions, and/or without his noticing them, turn out to be sentimental-romantic (Alf and Molly; Sollicker's child) or pathetic (Alf Glover) or ingeniously picaresque (Bum and the horses). Life should not be obscured by tired literary conventions but, when seen truly, may turn out to be just like them. Or again it may not: no literary prototype gave Furphy the personnel of Rynnymede station, apart from Mrs Beaudesart in obverse.

What *Such is Life* is built to offer us is a series of layered detachments from that evasive stuff, reality; what it provides is a hierarchy of fictions, layered progressively away from what might be designated as the real: thus we have

1. Furphy's own memories of bullock-driving in the Riverina.
2. The "factual" Riverina which is the setting for *Such is Life*.
3. Tom Collins's dairies for 1883 and 1884.
4. His random choice of "a week's record" from the 1883 dairy . . . no, his further decision to take consecutive months: "What fatality impelled me to fix on the 9th, above all other days in the month?" . . . .
   no, his "napoleonic" decision changes the final sample to March 28 and 29.
5. But Tom is an unconvincing observer, mistrustful of abstract theories and at the same time blinded by them; further, as a public servant in a squattocratic society he is decidedly atypical.
6. Anyway, some of the "evidence" which makes up the narrative is told, or let drop, by other characters.

In other words, the fictive fabric of *Such is Life* is systematically, or should I say wilfully, unreliable, so that knowledge is always provisional, inadequate, shifting. As Robert R. Wilson argues in his very perceptive recent article, "Bushmen in Porcelain Palaces: Knowing and Mistaking in *Such is Life*":

> . . . Furphy pushes his narrative toward the implicit view that the conflicting ideas about knowledge (knowing and truth), veined deeply in what is apparently an unrelenting opposition, are actually interdependent. Induction and deduction, intuition and subsumption, the up and down of cognitive discourse, hang together much as certain vines and trees may be said to use each other. Perhaps nothing in *Such is Life* so clearly distinguishes Tom, the character-narrator, from Furphy, the novelist, as this implicit repudiation of the former's firm conviction. It is also worth noting that Furphy's discontinuous structure emphasizes, while paralleling, the inhering problem of knowledge: separated, facts and identities become fluid,

> and both recognition and classification evolve into heightened exercises in collation and inference. (*Southerly*, 1979/2, pp. 129–30)

Such is Life is such a fascinating phenomenon, and one whose appearance could only have been possible in a provincial centre outside the main stream of western culture; the generosity of distance (it was not all tyranny) made it possible for Furphy to create a work which in part drew from sources before the nineteenth century novel tradition, in part deliberately mocked that tradition, and ultimately went far beyond it in undermining the tyranny of narrative, the mechanical view of causality. In doing so, Furphy was finally calling in question language structures themselves.

I do not think any other Australian work has been as radically inventive as *Such is Life*. Brennan's *Poems (1913)*, sprang from a much more profound philosophical and aesthetic awareness, and its complicated patterning proposes something very richly ambitious: the achievement is impressive in the upshot, but two things prevent its being that magnificent oxymoron, a symbolist epic "which has passed beyond becoming and entered eternity" (*Prose*, p. 46). These curbs or hindrances were, first, a rhetoric which was more discursive and scrutable than the symbolist enterprise called for and, second (entangled with the other), an ineradicable sense of the suffering and uttering self: partly the poem aspired to pure Idea but at the same time it was Christopher Brennan complaining of his emotional lot. The verse is less exploratory than the scheme it fills out.

Poems (1913) offers at least a case for comparison with Furphy's masterwork, very different though they prove. Our subsequent fiction offers virtually no such cases. Almost all our novels accept their continuity with nineteenth century novels and work within that tradition. Even our greatest works of fiction are conservative in structure: *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, Capricornia, The Man Who Loved Children, The Tree of Man, The Vivisector*, all of these accept the novel, finding the form adequate to their needs: there is next to no urge to subvert the mode.

Given this gene-pool of stylistic conservatism, it is not

surprising that Furphy has had next to no impact on the work of his successors. I can think of only one novel which is not only a subversive one but actually bears marks of the Furphian influence. This is *Trap*, by Peter Mathers. Here narrative sequence is dislocated, evidence is suspect and the only heroes are anti-heroes, their especial talent being arson; here, too, the narrator is an untrustworthy public servant, intimate with nobody; here, too, language is disconcertingly protean, even random in its metamorphoses, and people's inner selves inaccessible; and here, too, everywhere that there is sequence there are traps, for the wary and the unwary alike. Anarchy pervades the universe, if one may generalize about so pompous a notion as that of a universe. Mathers' more confusing second novel, *The Wort Papers*, shows that his vandalization of fictive norms may be expected to continue, while some of his shorter pieces find him deconstructing the very nature of sentences, phrases and even proper names. One can only hope that his relentless anarchism will allow him to put other books together.

As I suggested in the previous lecture, the generally optimistic and cohesive Robert D. FitzGerald wrote one poem which went far beyond his usual modes. This is that haunting meditation, "The Face of the Waters":

> Once again the scurry of feet—those myriads
> crossing the black granite; and again
> laughter cruelly in pursuit; and then
> the twang like a harpstring or the spring of a trap,
> and the swerve on the polished surface: the soft little pads
> sidling and skidding and avoiding; but soon caught up
> in the hand of laughter and put back . . . .
>
> There is no release from the rack
> of darkness for the unformed shape,
> the unexisting thought
> stretched half-and-half
> in the shadow of beginning and that denser black
> under the imminence of hugh pylons—
> the deeper nought;
> but neither is there anything to escape,
> or to laugh,
> or to twang that string which is not a string but silence
> plucked at the heart of silence.

Nor can there be a floor to the bottomless;
except in so far as conjecture must arrive,
lungs cracking, at the depth of its dive;
where downward further is further distress
with no change in it; as if a mile and an inch
are equally squeezed into a pinch,
and retreating limits of cold mind
frozen, smoothed, defined.

Out of the tension of silence (the twanged string);
from the agony of not being (that terrible laughter
tortured by darkness); out of it all
once again the tentative migration; once again
a universe on the edge of being born:
feet running fearfully out of nothing
at the core of nothing:
colour, light, life, fearfully
becoming eyes and understanding: sound becoming ears . . . .

For eternity is not space reaching
on without end to it; not time without end to it,
nor infinity working round in a circle;
but a placeless dot enclosing nothing,
the pre-time pinpoint of impossible beginning,
enclosed by nothing, not even by emptiness—
impossible: so wholly at odds with possibilities
that, always emergent and wrestling and interlinking
they shatter it and return to it, are all of it and part of it.
It is your hand stretched out to touch your neighbour's,
and feet running through the dark, directionless like darkness.

Worlds that were spun adrift re-enter
that intolerable centre;
indeed the widest-looping comet
never departed from it;
it alone exists.
And though, opposing it, there persists
the enormous structure of forces, laws,
as background for other coming and going,
that's but a pattern, a phase, no pause,
of ever-being-erected, ever-growing
ideas unphysically alternative
to nothing, which is the quick. You may say hills live,
or life's the imperfect aspect of a flowing
that sorts itself as hills: much as thoughts wind
selectively through mind.

The egg-shell collapses
in the fist of the eternal instant;
all is what it was before.
Yet is that eternal instant
the pinpoint bursting into reality,
the possibilities and perhapses,
the feet scurrying on the floor.
It is the suspense also
with which the outward thrust
holds the inward surrender—
the stresses in the shell before it buckles under:
the struggle to magpie-morning and all life's clamour and lust;
the part breaking through the whole;
light and the clear day and so simple a goal.

The first strophe of this poem, even the first three stanzas, represents one of the most disturbing imagistic inventions in modern poetry. That daring "once again" initiates a Heraclitean vision of a universe of constant flux and process, continual creation and perpetual entropy. FitzGerald has found images so strange and new that they carry no staleness of past systems with them: their symbolic power is utterly undimmed; they are spatial, active, specific but finally unknowable. At the beginning of strophe four the poet falters for a few lines, beginning to explain what his symbols represent, but the poem knows this cannot be done, and we are immediately swept into a recurrence of that first rushing movement of creation, a row of dots indicating the *ad infinitum* of this cycle of processes. Then, for two restless strophes, the ruminative phrases struggle to define what time and the timeless *are*, in incorporeal images which manage to suggest both cosmology and particle physics, the two limits of knowing:

For eternity is not space reaching
on without end to it; not time without end to it,
nor infinity working round in a circle;
but a placeless dot enclosing nothing,
but pre-time pinpoint of impossible beginning,

Everywhere in this poem FitzGerald shows himself to be aware of the provisionality of images, concepts, language; even the "so simple" vitalism of the last three lines has already been qualified or controlled by its dependence on the precarious

tensile balance of an eggshell. No wonder Judith Wright has called this meditation "perhaps the most unexpected poem by any Australian poet" (*Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, p. 164).

Probably the most radical thing any Australian writer can attempt is precisely what seems to overseas observers the obvious first thing for us to do: to try and ingest some of that Aboriginal culture which is all that gives this country a history of any duration. There have been translations, retellings of myths and folk tales, novels with Aboriginal characters, and so on, but, amazingly, next to no attempt to build upon the forms of Aboriginal art and poetry. (The painter, Margaret Preston, was a rare exception to this climate of indifference.)

The Jindyworobaks pointed the way but lacked the formal invention to travel along it. Accordingly, it was left to a post-war poet and linguist, Les Murray, to write the first poem to be entirely structured upon Aboriginal modes of feeling and naming. As he points out in his fascinating article, "The Human-hair Thread" (*Meanjin*, 1977/4), Murray not only had a childhood interest in the remaining Aboriginal life of his region but, more importantly for our purposes here, studied the works of Strehlow, the Berndts and other scholars and translators of Aboriginal poetry. He made a number of attempts to treat Aboriginal figures and attitudes, but all of these were still poems in Western modes until he subjected himself to the great Arnhem Land "Song Cycle of the Moon-bone" in the translation of R.M. Berndt. This long, spacious poem is familiar to many of us from Willard R. Trask's anthology, *The Unwritten Song*, but presumably most readers find it, as I have, at once deeply impressive and alien to the way they themselves write. Let us hear further from Murray's own account:

> Around Christmas 1975, I conceived the idea of writing a cycle of poems in the style and metre of Berndt's translation of the Moon Bone Cycle. As I thought about it, I realized it would be necessary to incorporate in it elements from all three main Australian cultures, Aboriginal, rural and urban. But I would arrange them in their order of distinctiveness, with the senior culture setting the tone and controlling the movement of the poem. What I was after was

> an enactment of a longed-for fusion of all three cultures, a fusion which, as yet perhaps, can only exist in art, or in blessed moments when power and ideology are absent. The poem would necessarily celebrate my own spirit country, the one region I know well enough to dare comparison with the Arnhem Landers . . . . Fairly soon, I lighted on a device by which the projected poem could be launched and ordered: this was the annual exodus of many urban Australians to the country and the seaside resorts, . . . (p. 566)

In his own song cycle, accordingly, Murray has abandoned his usual range of metres for a long line whose only Western affinities would be with Whitman's (another namer of spirit country), which is filled with the names of places, kennings, typical actions and bits of folk wisdom. "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" is like nothing else in our side of Australian poetry. Its landscape is also a map, the map of a loved region: a mode of treatment which the painters, John Olsen and John Wolseley, have also used. It covers large areas, is packed with commonplaces and typicalities; it celebrates the folk. The poetry is cumulative, anaphoristic, deliberately external. Nothing merely personal is dramatized. Section two, for example, turns the Highway into a public emblem:

> It is the season of the Long Narrow City; it has crossed the Myall, it has entered the North Coast,
> that big stunning snake; it is looped through the hills, burning all night there.
> Hitching and flying on the downgrades, processionally balancing on the climbs,
> it echoes in O'Sullivan's Gap, in the tight coats of the flooded-gum trees;
> the tops of palms exclaim at it unmoved, there near Wootton.
> Glowing all night behind the hills, with a north-shifting glare, burning behind the hills;
> through Coolongolook, through Wang Wauk, across the Wallamba,
> the booming tarred pipe of the holiday slows and spurts again; Nabiac chokes in glassy wind,
> the forests on Kiwarric dwindle in cheap light; Tuncurry and Forster swell like cooking oil.
> The waiting is buffed, in timber villages off the highway, the waiting is buffeted:
> the fumes of fun hanging above ferns; crime flashes in strange

windscreens, in the time of the Holiday.
Parasites weave quickly through the long gut that paddocks shine into;
powerful makes surging and pouncing: the police, collecting Revenue.
The heavy gut winds over the Manning, filling northward, digesting the towns, feeding the towns;
they all become the narrow city, they join it;
girls walking close to murder discard, with excitement, their names.
Crossing Australia of the sports, the narrow city, bringing home the children.

I have cited so far the few works whose form is restlessly original in our literature, as I see it. But, as I admitted earlier, one does not live by perpetual originality, nor do any of us want every work to be an original, a freak, another breakthrough.

Indeed, few enough of the great nineteenth century European novels, to choose one area of comparison, were as radically innovative as *Such is Life*; and this is not to say that the novels of Austen or Stendhal or Hardy or James were merely flabby or conventional: significant form may be arrived at by gradual modification and adaptation of the system, not only by revolution from the grass roots.

Shall we consider, then, the case of a writer whose work quietly, unobtrusively modified the traditions of fiction, whose forms are differently and distinctively his own without being in any overt sense experimental? I refer to Henry Lawson, the Lawson of a few collections of fine short stories published between 1894 and 1901. Here we have the case of a talent, working without apparent theory, arriving at narrative forms which we can all now feel to be deeply convincing, unlike anyone else's, subtly adapted to and expressive of Lawson's peculiar way of envisaging experience.

The great German critic Walter Benjamin observed in his essay, "The Storyteller," that storytelling was an art which had died out or was dying out in all modern societies, oral wisdom giving way to massive factual information, as the domination of the printed book became complete: thus, he

claimed, the public and communal act of telling a story yielded to that most private of all art forms, the long novel, read silently and in solitude. It was Lawson's bold achievement to create a kind of printed short story which did not resemble the sequentiality of traditional storytelling, but which carried with it the stamp of a bushman's voice recounting yarns or bits of experience.

In Lawson's best fiction, art seems to be reportage; art seems to be autobiography; art seems to be accumulated facts; art seems a record of inarticulacies; it stumbles after truth. There looks to be little invention in these tales, and there is certainly seldom much in the way of continuous narrative flow in such curt mosaic structures: there are some exceptions to the general picture, that hoary old schoolboy favourite, "The Loaded Dog," being all story, as are the tales about that ingenious pair of con men, Steelman and Smith, but for the most part Lawson is yarn-like in tone while un-storylike in structure.

Instead of the good old "What happens next?", the thrust of sequentiality, we have Mitchell's tight-lipped bits and pieces of utterance; a nameless unionist's unionist reflections on an unknown dead man (who even went by a famous but false name, it transpires); or representatively vivid slices of the stripped melancholy of the bush. Most of these wedges or slices lead nowhere, neither to happy nor to tragic endings: they merely exemplify or sample the inscrutability of life. This is where Lawson stands closest to Chekhov, his contemporary, each being aware that there is no such thing as an ending. Everything, stylistically as well as morally is clipped, cut off short. These are reports from a world too inchoate, too new to have "stories."

Lawson, then, developed his crypto-narrative forms with great distinction, in order to give this sense of life as built up of numbly contingent impressions. To raise an intentionalist question, whether he knew what he was doing in any theoretical way is beside the point; in fact his letters show him to have been a remarkably ignorant man. Perhaps his age reached out and chose him willy-nilly, but he also knew what to use from his age, and his artistic instincts knew how.

For all the continuing popularity of his mythopoeic materials, few of his many successors have learned anything inward from Lawson. Palmer admired him, but Palmer's own tales are closer to English models of the well-made short story; and John Morrison shared his sense of epiphanic possibilities inherent in the common working man but has no comparable incisiveness of form or viewpoint, no comparable selection of bleak life's atomic facts.

If any writer could be said to have learned something below the surface from Lawson's fictive forms, it might be Frank Moorhouse, outwardly as different a writer as cheese from chalk. In *The Electrical Experience* and *The Everlasting Secret Family* Moorhouse comparably employs a sort of dispassionate, disciplined, zig-zag flatness which keeps implying that what he has to offer is merely the facts, perhaps deeply private facts. So many events and things in these linked stories, including the proper names of living people, sociological categories, notes, sources, dates, lead us to half-feel that they might "only" be about the author himself, or so the style says, and the way characters persist (where?) from story to story, book to book, or even film to book (*Between Wars* being the film), perpetuates the illusion that all this is a stoical kind of documentation between which lie the deep truths. "Do you have secret names for everyone?" asks one major character, and so do we.

Both Lawson and Furphy, despite some later claims, prove to have been writers from whose inventions or modifications their successors could not learn; nor have latecomers been able to develop the sub-Dickensian anarchist plotting which Herbert used in *Capricornia*. Conventional story-spinning and unquestioning mimesis have proved far more common, even among our most admired writers. David Ireland is the only other recent novelist to have shown signs of new formal constructs, new departures. Perhaps *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* which, as David Carter revealed to me, resembles the flow-chart diagram of a cracking plant, will be a pointer towards a more radical postmodernism. I have my doubts. Fortunately, literary criticism is not required to analyse the future since its texts are out of reach.

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