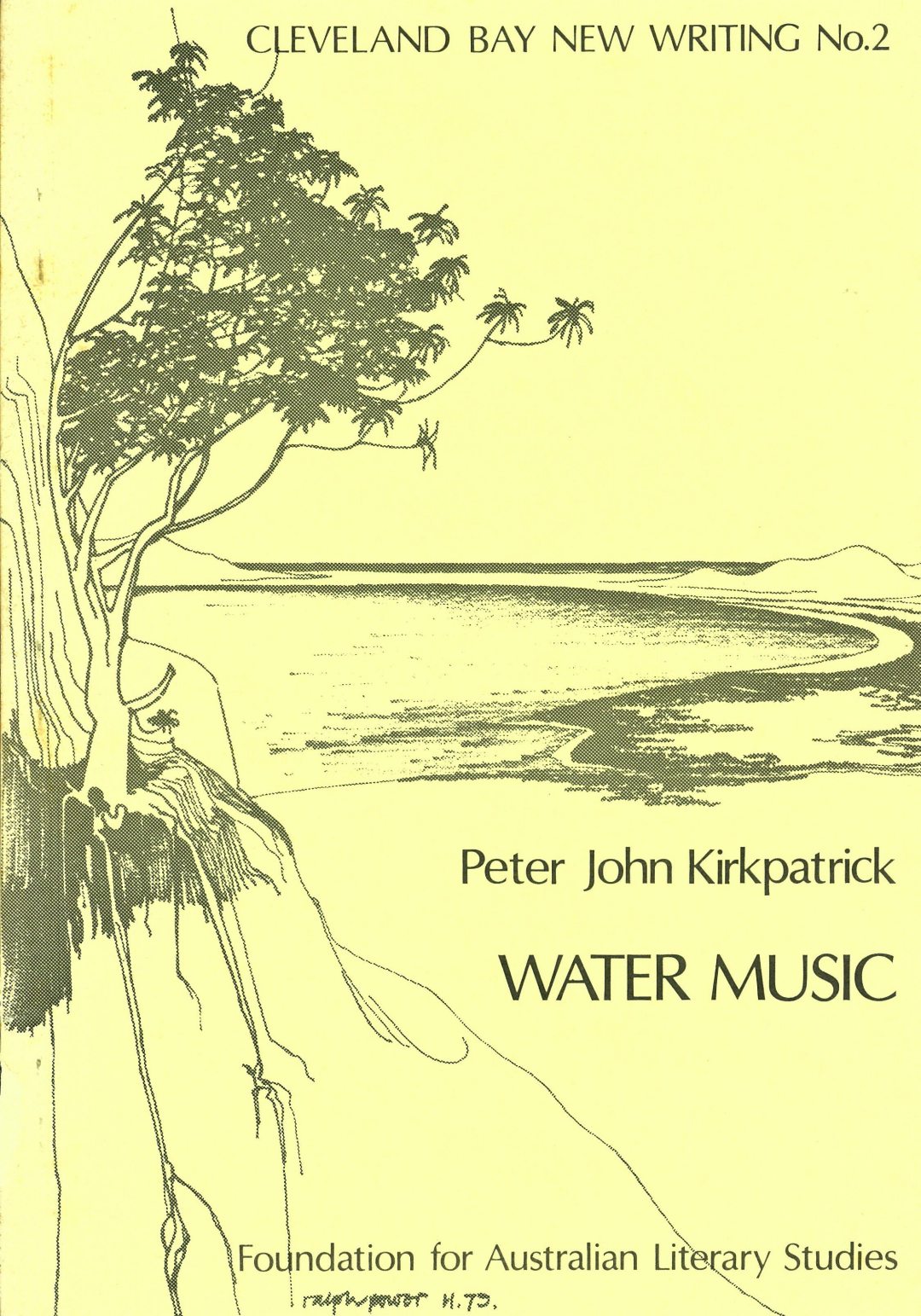


CLEVELAND BAY NEW WRITING No.2



Peter John Kirkpatrick

# WATER MUSIC

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies

*Ralph Powell H. 75.*

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**WATER MUSIC**

**or,**

**CERTAIN MYSTICAL VOYAGES**

**OF IMAGINARY MARINERS.**

A philosophico-cum-symphonic

narration with considerable

epic pretensions.

“Life’s nonsense pierces us

with strange relation”

— Wallace Stevens.

For Harry Heseltine.

With apologies to  
George Frederick Handel.

## PROEM.

The poem is the grand tautology  
of world  
which it disowns  
by the tautology.  
Everything shall be the poem  
once upon a time,  
for it wants to be  
the other  
everything it represents,  
but moreso.  
It will be archetypal,  
an ordering tautology:  
the world creates its artifice.

The tautology of water  
is order:  
the sea aspires symbols  
towards uncreated sky,  
breaks into huge white lips  
alongshore  
which we apprehend  
preciser than cloud.  
An adequate scene  
is mastered.  
It is in this sense then  
that blueness  
maintains us:  
azure skies release  
clear heavenly fluid  
into liquid empires,  
demi-empyreans

of more solid blue.

Upon that blue tautology  
biremes, triremes, brigs and brigantines, barks and barquentines,  
carracks, caravels, clippers, schooners, luggers and junks  
— and here particularly  
galleons  
like fortresses adrift,  
webbed in rigging,  
strung with shrouds  
like impossible stringed instruments  
worked by wind,  
with sails rippling like flowing caramel  
and pennons festooning the air like scrolls,  
their castellated poops bejewelled  
and their hulls overall encrusted with beaten gold,  
armed with a stubble of guns:  
these are the romantic units  
we will use  
and shall assume,  
purely for the music of it,  
the rhetoric,  
the blue tautology  
of water.

And so what  
if it is overwrought?  
It is order:  
out there where scimitars of wavelets  
parry sunfish fins  
and slice the light  
to sensible dismemberings,  
or where hidden pearl-shell temples

prefigure Aphrodite  
deep down in their molluscan seclusion  
(as though she had never risen  
to that occasion  
from their chambers,  
populous with octopus and lobster,  
to bestow strange colour  
through the viscous atmosphere,  
where the sun himself  
is still explorer,  
and who met her there  
to find those fierce blue eyes  
transfiguring his influence  
as they surfaced,  
arguing the naked fact),  
it is order.

There fishes hear a soft music  
shifting in the liquid,  
sounds immemorial  
fluidly longing and lashing,  
so that sunken galleons  
spilling their doubloons in the ooze  
wonder why the urgency of old  
seemed so necessary  
— why always there were territories  
and jungle palaces,  
what all the fuss was  
over putrid solid gold.  
As if the oceanic sapphire  
were not enough,  
that fabled crystal  
holding music

understood  
in a fluid lattice:  
comprehensively,  
the tension in the gem  
called ocean.  
Solid blue.  
It is order,  
the colour of the poem  
which is the tautology  
we now invite.  
The tautology of water:  
WATER MUSIC.



I.

*Romanticism,  
ruined by the feel  
of being there,  
wanted this  
most necessary  
solid blue  
tautology of water.*

Earth upholds us rigid and pedestrian.  
Go to the dissolving margin of the land:  
there where leather kelp buckles around our ankles,  
drawing or detaining,  
there where pincers edge beneath the beach,  
where crab and sandworm  
riddle our foothold,  
firm as it may seem,  
and there scan  
the space of that liberation.  
No wonder old-fashioned galleons wandered  
once upon a time  
to investigate huge new liquid tracts,  
epics of that blue reflected-welkin  
through whose broad visionary surface,  
positively treasure-laden,  
so many of them finally were sent.  
And just to get away from it all,  
the feeling of arrival,  
of being there  
when everything is said and done.

Listen,  
once upon a time

there were these galleons  
that wandered like the drooling note  
upon a viol,  
beginning in their own soap seas  
then out into the blue translucency of open ocean,  
but were beaten by consumptive breezes  
back into visions of unheard-of monsters.  
Drifting past what seemed like wild island paradises,  
sailors heard from out the wooded dunes  
sounds of tuneful lutes  
that deemed the pure wind a fool.  
Turned out to be Lucifer  
— Pan much fallen —  
riding astride the polyped hummocks of a kraken,  
seeking to seduce as it were scientifically,  
with air pumps and compressors  
playing through the branched protuberances  
like organ bellows  
artificially,  
all of our so fond journeying mariners,  
a few of whom bought into it  
and were sucked in.  
These huffed and puffed and frothed,  
and rehearsed some private mystery to the others,  
less initiated,  
who still imagined they could laugh,  
and laughing at their blithering shipmates  
tossed them overboard  
to sink or swim as maybe  
for a joke.

Great big whales and shellfish  
invoke themselves  
without much difficulty:

we need some medium  
for belief.  
Here particularly  
let it be the sea  
whose blueness  
ships us  
into fluid universes  
osmotic  
with our tropical blood,  
becoming whole  
with the animal  
we see through  
as a vehicle of being,  
the inner whatever  
befitting itself  
by that embodiment.  
Acknowledging the voyage,  
we break faith  
with the sustaining assumption  
of the universal ocean  
at our cost  
as mariners.  
Even as mutineers.  
(But get this clear:  
no conquistadors these  
we delineate  
— none of that thin imperial vision,  
the high temerity of Iberian iron  
inciting violences of plump helmets  
to startle a yellow day with silver.  
Ours are romantic mariners rather,  
lured purely by the music of it  
and lacking an extraneous volition  
when everything is said and done.)

## II.

Monsters may come and go  
or change shape  
and colour,  
like Proteus  
skulking murkily  
for somebody  
to call his name again,  
but the deities do not move.  
Being aloof,  
they stay put  
— advance and retreat  
like an ice age,  
but retain their pole.  
And cold wills things frozen,  
kills with immobility,  
leaving a static semblance.  
It is an abstract  
dangerous in fact  
as in imagination.  
It is silent  
at heart,  
almost classical  
with the singleness  
of one thing:  
its pantheon is empty  
but for that chill existence  
pressing against  
the many several blocks  
and giving them a reason.  
It is an imposed assumption  
and does not impersonate  
the world,

but is its own tautology  
of infinity.

But we discover our mariners  
involved in more strange passages,  
sinking down the face  
of the blue earth  
like a trombone glissando  
announcing hellish wiles.  
Slowly though  
the sea became a statuary exhibition,  
with white marbles vast as mountains  
thrusting through the thick mist,  
demanding adoration:  
ice had set in  
and frozen the ocean  
into an obedient machine.  
The floes closed up  
around the rimy galleons  
like a giant skull forming,  
and the blizzard howled  
as in travail  
of something hideous  
being born dead.  
Such a hard place,  
peradventure,  
did not encourage them:  
none of them wanted  
this massive winding-sheet  
presuming to be an absolute  
fulfilling its own completeness  
and ruling the sea  
into utter resolution  
— especially as they had lived



with limitless horizons  
uncemented into ice,  
gentler crystal  
reflecting something  
of the blue sky,  
rendering it liquid  
and a solid colour indeed,  
not white.

With difficulty and effort  
they turned about,  
averting catastrophe  
just in the nick of time,  
to seek more tropical  
ports-of-call,  
their reversed bowsprits and masts  
cocking great snooks back  
almost in jest.

The poem is intentional:  
it has been meant  
to be said  
and can be inevitable,  
given the sustaining assumption,  
but it is not imposed.

And so what  
if it is overwrought?

It is order.

It is the cry of gulls  
which is like the fall of gold bangles,  
but it is still the cry of gulls:  
the world creates its artifice.

It is the way we say  
next to everything.

and one very small typhoon,  
but not impossible at all.  
Then when seasons clash  
the sky implodes  
and rainbows fall:  
out of clouds,  
trident lightning  
locks,  
unlocks  
with golden weapons  
held by an impertinent sun,  
wielded towards winter's massacre.  
The sea rolls rococo now,  
and down and up and up and down,  
controlled by the woeful surge,  
they rose and fell.  
This was hard,  
no authority over wonder:  
lost properly now,  
not just aesthetically astray,  
the storm urged it all for them.  
The intermittent sun ran around the heavens fierce and frantic,  
not the wonted time-keeping pedant,  
and night saw the small moon swarmed on by teeming clouds  
— thick black insects picking up the stars like sugar —  
while the sea sought to tear down the very structure of the sky,  
fastened on with wrists of waterspouts  
twisting terribly to the grey-beaked slaving waves.  
Finally the sickened depths vomited up their brood:  
great finned carcasses careened and plunged around them,  
unimaginable forms torn from the sea-bottom  
lunged and thrashed and gasped,  
and ancient wrecks rolled limply in the flood,  
were reanimated into rotten travesty of life.



But to them,  
the living,  
all these were images adrift from sense.  
What they had was the knowledge of their force  
and the fact of fear.  
Nevertheless  
— miraculous! —  
they did live,  
quite in spite of all  
existed through it.  
Nimbus surrendered into cumulus,  
waves settled gently into nestling creases,  
and ocean resumed its long adagio.

Operatic winds  
undo the ocean,  
scattered half-forgotten into images  
the way that words create,  
neglecting exactly.  
Nature may alienate,  
huge forces can havoc us,  
yet the heart will instil,  
carry over finer rhythms and fulfil  
that abstruse superabundance,  
like the limbeck shall  
alchemical gold,  
or seaweed stealing green from the tide.  
And let water be the metaphor,  
music the fluid,  
the solid prism  
interpreting the sun  
translucently.  
It is the tension in the gem

called ocean,  
the luminary surface  
and the sombre deep,  
but most of all the blue.  
It is the colour of the poem.  
It is order  
and a catchword for space.



#### IV.

The glass fortresses of myth  
are clear prisons,  
lenses to inhabit,  
and not the golden city jutting upwards.  
We may fashion forms to live and die in,  
glad enough of the blue sky on a clear day,  
the feel of being there,  
but freedom is the landscape we seek.  
And the sea is the vehicle,  
the fluid fiction of imagination.  
It is a giant liquid syntax of space  
that speaks  
and embodies  
that impossibility.  
For it is music.  
And it dreams prodigiously,  
conceives even a cavern  
for the worshipful green turtle spirit  
to be consecrated in,  
and feels with fleshly love  
the skimming of the flying-fish  
over its wind-dimpled skin.  
Mile after mile after mile  
the structure is magical,  
becoming an incantation:  
the tautology of water  
is order  
most necessary.

To resume,  
becalmed at last

and drained of inspiration,  
near insane,  
day after day after day  
they lay low,  
forlorn.  
And then a horn!  
A horn sounded,  
borne by a triton,  
while buoying around were nereids and mermaids.  
These revived our sailors' spirits with their lust:  
those white quartz breasts  
that bruised into chalcedony teats,  
those eyes of lapis lazuli  
and those sleek dark emerald tails  
were charms in excess for any boastful oceanographer,  
let alone such woebegone flagging seamen.  
With sails furled  
they hastened to partake,  
both nymphs and sea obedient to ease  
— indeed they bathed,  
paired and played  
naked,  
and would lay with them. . .  
But here the ladies chastened.  
Love,  
they claimed,  
was best enacted on the solid ground.  
Wherefore they summoned up enormous sea-horses,  
harnessed each one to a galleon,  
and made a great parade to lead them to Atlantis,  
so they said  
— Atlantis fully risen from the depths,  
the long-lost empire of the blessed resettled.

A mythological event this one,  
it shone like gorgeous tapestry  
(but gone a little threadbare):  
from their galleons  
the mariners  
viewed the towers and cupolas  
of crystal,  
sculptured walls  
decorous with sea things  
gleaming like a reef of gold,  
and the mighty gates of agate,  
while upon the shore  
there waited  
thronging forms angelical  
arrayed in white,  
each crowned with bays,  
to greet them as their own,  
glorious against the setting sun.  
Night had just that instant fell when,  
standing firm at last on shore,  
they realized and saw,  
or rather heard at first,  
the horrid truth:  
no sweet dulcet tones  
of harp or spinet  
whispered in that ulcered land afire,  
but rasping bagpipes buzzing arbitrarily,  
mournful shawms and serpents,  
and sackbuts droning dies iraes.  
As a final twist,  
a million grinning skeletons appeared,  
prepared to tear them limb from limb.  
Though none would say so,

this was it:  
they had submitted unto grisly death  
with all its ghastly apparatus and its gibbets  
(which was quite a come-down from their expectations).  
Our sailors then about-turned,  
only to discover their path barred  
by gruesome engines clanked along by spectres:  
scared would scarcely be the word  
for what they felt,  
reckoning they were hemmed in  
(terror and despair were evident however).  
But let us make a necessary pause.

Co-mingling behoves the poem:  
the broken paint box  
focuses our need  
in the colour of the poem.  
Add water  
and you make blue  
upon the debris  
now and then,  
almost as if  
the paint box exists  
to be so broken  
and to become one colour only.  
Solid blue.  
Which is the poem,  
the grand tautology  
of world  
which it disowns  
by the tautology.  
It is order  
and a catchword for space.

Therefore the sea,  
the fluid fiction of imagination  
transmuting understanding  
of its objects  
in the way it comprehends them,  
belonging to its own  
as a process,  
and in the way that they compound it  
out of abstract space  
but keep its best secrets unpronounced  
beneath the silent stitchings  
of the waves.  
Outside of it  
its nourished creatures cease,  
or vanish  
like the jellyfish in sunlight,  
it being  
most necessary.  
And let water be the metaphor,  
the image  
envisioning the image.  
It is the way we say  
next to everything.  
It is the blue screen  
drawn across the mind  
by a clear sky  
through which we see  
translucently  
the colour of the poem.  
It is the tension in the gem  
called ocean.  
For it is music.

Despair adheres us  
to old imaginings,  
fear of the emptiness and distance  
to be free,  
the space of that liberation.  
Behold how out of a villainous mythology,  
a ruining romanticism  
like the rubrics of a cheating soothsayer  
preaching a theology of bacchanals  
from his seventy-volume history of revels,  
comes. . .  
Something.  
Nothing.  
Clearance and renewal,  
the image  
envisioning the image  
in the longing for embodiment,  
which is the landscape we seek:  
Ithaca or Cythera or Thule,  
whatever.  
Acknowledging the voyage,  
we break faith  
with the sustaining assumption  
of the universal ocean  
at our cost  
as mariners.  
No vast cantata  
celebrates  
the golden empire  
embodied in the distances  
we have not yet discovered,  
let alone explored.  
The tautology of water

is order  
out there.  
And we are the only ships  
of our desires:  
as the ornate galleon  
trusts in its hoisted sails,  
and as they in turn  
hope for the clear wind  
to belly them,  
let us rely upon  
inspiration.

To resume,  
the skeletons descended upon our mariners,  
who found they could still catch a glimmer of the great sea  
and their ships' masts with the moon between  
in a blue haze. . .

And that was that.

The inspiration came,  
so that suddenly the good cause of life  
uplifted them again,  
and they threw themselves with song  
against the odds.

The skeletons descended,  
made empty menace,  
and were dashed to slivers  
in their millions.

And that was that.

Now in the mariners' hearts  
carillons rang out loud  
and the solemn night resounded it,  
bright with fiery meteors.

Where there had been sulphur

now there were fountains:  
caves and craters,  
marvellous architecture.  
Now forests silvered into the evening spaces,  
where hung the bulging pawpaw  
and clusters of the ripe date palm:  
there also bananas and green ginger  
entwined with grapes and gourds,  
while the crescent sails of native fishermen  
dipped like quills into the inky lagoons,  
returning with their carved boats  
brim-full of fish for treasure.  
And so it goes:  
a civilized ideal,  
if you will,  
and temperate with its earth,  
not chewing cud with culture  
nor locked out upon itself  
with lotus gobblers,  
but only an ideal as well.  
In time  
there would be others.  
Meanwhile our mariners must go in search.

Subsequent wonders and adventures  
need not trouble us:  
their meandering wake  
wrote poetry,  
untold epics,  
upon the ocean surface.  
We see them home,  
the dolphins at their prows  
in the harbours of their own estuaries.



But now how different the prospect,  
considering what had gone before:  
from the trimly ordered waters  
they saw their visionary city rise  
like the solid fugue of a baroque organ  
abutting the arching heavens with its  
business blocks and colleges and churches,  
and corrugated factories  
rising out of ochre cubes of houses  
into the fluid colours of evening,  
their chimneys smouldering  
and seeming to douse  
the fiercely gilded clouds  
with blue.

An adequate scene  
is mastered:  
the world creates its artifice.  
It was then the sailors realized  
that this was their particular space,  
peopled into rational lattices  
storey upon storey upon storey,  
becoming battlements  
bristling at the sun  
to capture its metal,  
its molten gold.  
As if the oceanic sapphire  
were not enough.

Add water  
and you make blue:  
co-mingling behoves the poem.  
It is harmonious,  
an ordering tautology,

the tension in the gem  
called ocean.  
For it is music.  
And let water be the metaphor,  
the image  
envisioning the image,  
translating into mind  
the majesty and mundane work  
of living,  
of world  
boiled down to one conclusion:  
inhabitable space,  
glad enough of the blue sky on a clear day,  
the feel of being there.

*Let us imagine  
this liberating tension,  
the depth  
to be essential,  
the length and breadth  
of our necessity  
once upon a time.*

## EPILOGUE.

Their language ended.

So does ours.

No heroes,

but their kings and their prime ministers  
came forth with offerings:

grand-duchies and garden cottages and gallows.

In time

they visited aquariums with their young

and went and watched the football

or did cross-words.

Yet they all spoke of going out again,

claimed they were ruined by the feel of being there,

wanting that most necessary sea

whose tautology of water is order.