

THREE AUSTRALIAN WRITERS

Thea Astley

*Foundation for
Australian Literary Studies*

MONOGRAPH No 5

THREE AUSTRALIAN WRITERS

essays on

BRUCE DAWE,

BARBARA BAYNTON and PATRICK WHITE

by

THEA ASTLEY

The Townsville Foundation for Australian **Literary Studies**
1979

ISBN
0 909714 47 9

CONTENTS

	Page
1. The Shock of the Expected: Bruce Dawe's <i>Condolences of the Season</i>	1
2. The Teeth Father Naked at Last: The short stories of Barbara Baynton	12
3. Patrick White: <i>The Burnt Ones</i>	23

The Shock of the Expected:

Bruce Dawe's *Condolences of the Season*

From the end of World War I on, there has been an increasing tendency for writers here to react to some of the urgencies of the world at large. The cultural time-lag has been obviously reduced to somewhere near the actual point at which, as human beings in society, we actually *are*. The time may soon come when most Australian writers (and especially poets) may feel, from the outset, confidence in tackling in their individual ways the universal problems of man's relationship to society, with all that that entails, as well as the dramatic analysis of his inward odyssey in language that will invite, without seeming to, our sympathy and understanding. Perhaps it is necessary for us as a people to become, if only temporarily, *less* Australian and *more* cosmopolitan and/or American in order to disenfranchise ourselves from the old mythology. Whatever the long-term results of this diversification process, its short-term effects will certainly include a greater capacity for discovering universals which can only strengthen the at times rather precarious ties between poets and their immediate environment and poets and that larger environment, the world.

No matter how strenuously Bruce Dawe asserts, as he does here, that there is a need for us to become 'less Australian', to 'disenfranchise ourselves from the old mythology', almost every poem in this collection breathes through laconic, sun-burnt, linguistic pores. Sometimes this effect is created by his matter; sometimes by his vernacular; often by his particular 'sense of place'. Even when he is involved in de-mythification as he is in "Life-Cycle", echoes of the myth persist, animating his special vocabulary, his special rhythms.

Dawe is gifted with a fluid, wide-ranging technique, stunningly assured as he spreads his interest, shifting his emphasis from the individual to the universal with as much ease as the characters in "One Jump Ahead" change houses. He is poignant, witty, parodic, lyric, tender; he can use the language of singer-saint or ocker, of technology or dream, of board-room bar or super-market; he can employ the jargon of advertising, plot geometrically the charlatan scope of television; and with each change of poetic clothes, at each moment, he displays us ironically, satirically, good-humouredly to ourselves, with a warmth and sadness for humanity's follies. He is rarely didactic and the reader is never conscious of an imposed distance in the

Hope manner; Dawe includes himself in the frailty he pokes fun at and becomes for the reader 'the man whose back fence joins/diagonally onto' ours.

His poem titles alone, with their Ogden Nash flavour, may seem glib or 'flip' but it is this very flippancy that attracts, brings us to the poetic mind in full flight, speaking to us about us and what we know with all the shock of the expected: "Only the Beards Are Different"; "After You, Gary Cooper"; "Happiness Is the Art of Being Broken"; "And a Good Friday Was Had by All"; "Falling Asleep Over TV"; "The Not-So-Good-Earth". Within these capsule titles, Dawe's subjects range through love, death, the temporary nature of life, hire-purchase, dead-beats, Australian Rules football, capital punishment, seminars, war, provincial towns, gorillas, mime, bald patches, dogs, Mass, bantams. Too easy put that way, listed so quickly. Yet each subject of each poem attaches itself with its accessible face to something more private, more hidden, in the reader, and shocks him alive. And close behind, always, the minor chords of estrangement, the warning of death.

In "Letting Go of Things" Dawe writes:

Beautiful, ah always so
—this letting go of things, this
kneeling, no, prostration of the spirit,
in rehearsal of our last
mysterious release, the sacrament of death,
drifting now as then at evening's end,
consciousness calling quits....

.....
Beautiful, O beautiful to be thus
a source of pleasure, if involuntary,
something for an old man to doze over,
to be young again in the dark warm with voices
alive with quicksilver kisses, tears,
tigers running through dream-woods
and impossible poetry.

In the above lines we marvel at the serenity with which Dawe has placed in opposition the phrases 'calling quits' and 'tigers running through dream-woods' (to create 'impossible poetry') and we have here not the contradictions within Dawe—for language sanctions are what conventionalists impose—but the coalescence, concurrency, co-agency if you like, of his style which becomes his beliefs, his valid statements about the nature of things in the 'immediate environment' and the 'larger enviro-

onment'. The demotic is used to complement the poetic.

Perhaps I should look at a few of Dawe's poems in detail rather than make a loose and general appraisal.

"Enter without So Much as Knocking" is a dissertation on the humdrumery of twentieth century living, its predictable life-style, its pointlessness. The poem opens with an epigraph all of us recognise: *memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*. The child is born:

Blink, blink. HOSPITAL.SILENCE.

Ten days old, carried in the front door in his

mother's arms, first thing he heard was

Bobby Dazzler on Channel 7:

Hello, hello, hello all you lucky people and he
really was lucky because it didn't mean a thing
to him then...

Here is innocence confronted with the moulding forces of consumer conformity; the snake in Eden is materialist pressure to be as everyone else:

A year or two to settle in and

get acquainted with the set-up;

like every other

well-equipped smoothly-run household, his included

one economy-size Mum, one Anthony Squires-

Coolstream-Summerweight Dad, along with two other kids

straight off the Junior Department rack.

The child grows. The only untouched thing in a sullied world of unoriginal sin is 'a pure/ unadulterated fringe of sky, littered with stars/ no-one had got around to fixing up yet'. If Dawe's description of twentieth century dying suggests nihilistic thinking on Dawe's part, the reader would be making a false assumption. The very folly of this particular life-cycle would indicate that the remedies are apparent and to hand:

Probity & Sons, Morticians,

did a really first-class job on his face

(everyone was very pleased) even adding a

healthy tan he'd never had, living, gave him back for keeps

the old automatic smile with nothing behind it,

winding the whole show up with a

nice ride out to the underground metropolis:

Disrespectful? Yes. Sad? Very much so. A lament for our littleness; and if, here, phrases like 'for keeps', 'the whole

show' tend to make the reader think the vernacular erodes the matter, then one has only to turn to the exquisite "Elegy for Drowned Children" to appreciate Dawe's sensitivity to death and grief and to observe his capabilities with formal metric rhymed quatrains whose enjambed lines convey the terrible fluidity of the death-force and the sea-force he is writing about:

What does he do with them all, the old king:
Having such a shining haul of boys in his sure net,
How does he keep them happy, lead them to forget
The world above, the aching air, birds, spring?

Tender and solicitous must be his care
For these whom he takes down into his kingdom one by one
—Why else would they be taken out of the sweet sun,
Drowning towards him, water plaiting their hair?

Unless he loved them deeply how could he withstand
The voices of parents calling, calling like birds by the water's edge,
By swimming-pool, sand-bar, river-bank, rocky ledge,
The little heaps of clothes, the futures carefully planned?

Yet even an old acquisitive king must feel
Remorse poisoning his joy, since he allows
Particular boys each evening to arouse
From leaden-lidded sleep, softly to steal

Away to the whispering shore, there to plunge in,
And fluid as porpoises swim upward, upward through the dividing
Waters until, soon, each back home is striding
Over thresholds of welcome dream with wet and moonlit skin.

This sorrow Dawe feels encompasses the world about him as he identifies with lechers like Shagger or the soldier who nailed Christ to the Cross. His personal lament "Any Shorter and I'd Have Missed It Altogether", extends to grief for "The Family Man" who 'had the earmarks of a friend' and whose suicide he describes thus:

Rumours flower over his absence while I,
who hardly knew him, have learned to miss him some.

How skilfully Dawe arrests the possibility of sentiment with the throw-away 'have learned to miss him some', again a lovely aligning of the colloquial with the fresh metaphor of the previous line.

"And a Good Friday Was Had by All" illustrates even

more forcibly Dawe's ability to combine antitheses of situation, language and emotion and fuse them into an incomparable whole. Here is a free verse documentation of the Crucifixion written in the voice of one of the attendant soldiers who employs the crudely vernacular and the delicate:

You men there, keep those women back
and God Almighty he laid down
on the crossed timber and old Silenus
my offsider looked at me as if to say
nice work for soldiers, your mind's not your own
once you sign that dotted line Ave Caesar
and all that malarkey Imperator Rex

well this Nazarene
didn't make it any easier
really—not like the ones
who kick up a fuss so you can
do your block and take it out on them

Silenus

held the spikes steady and I let fly
with the sledge-hammer, not looking
on the downswing trying hard not to hear
over the women's wailing the bones give way
the iron shocking the dumb wood.

Orders is orders, I said after it was over
nothing personal you understand—we had a
drill-sergeant once thought he was God but he wasn't
a patch on you

then we hauled on the ropes
and he rose in the hot air
like a diver just leaving the springboard, arms spread
so it seemed
over the whole damned creation
over the big men who must have had it in for him
and the curious ones who'll watch anything if it's free
with only the usual women caring anywhere
and a blind man in tears.

The general lack of punctuation stops in this poem gives authenticity to the out-flow of the soldier's recollections and allows the rhythms of the voice reading the poem to be varied for emotional translation in much the same manner that the bar-less lines of Satie's musical compositions allow. By using contemporary idiom—malarkey, offsider, kick up a fuss, do your block (and notice the resonant *double entendre* of 'the

whole damned creation'!)-Dawe moves a two thousand year old event straight into the present. The Crucifixion could have taken place last week-yesterday; and, of course, in doing this, Dawe is religiously orthodox-Christ dies each day for us, each time we sin, in Catholic dogma. The humour is amazingly moving within the context of the poem and like all true and competent tragedians, Dawe spins along a tight-rope between laughter and tears, completely negating even the faintest rumblings of profanity with the totality of his emotion in the description of the saviour-figure, arms outspread to embrace and save the world, the weeping women, and the blind man who'd missed out on his chance of a miracle.

'...only the usual women caring anywhere', he writes and in "Drifters" is to be found further empathetic expression of his regard for the passive fidelity of those married to the restless:

One day soon he'll tell her it's time to start packing,
and the kids will yell 'Truly?' and get wildly excited
for no reason,
and the brown kelpie pup will start dashing about,
tripping everyone up,
and she'll go out to the vegetable-patch and pick all the
green tomatoes from the vines,
and notice how the oldest girl is close to tears because she
was happy here,
and how the youngest girl is beaming because she wasn't
And the first thing she'll put on the trailer will be the
bottling-set she never unpacked from Grovedale,
and when the loaded ute bumps down the drive past the blackberry-
canes with their last shrivelled fruit,
she won't even ask why they're leaving this time, or where
they're heading for
-she'll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish.'

It's the shock of the casual as well. Extraordinarily casual, while he hurls grief and tragedy at us like rocks; while he points out the tremendous scars of simply being alive. Casual in technique as he piles up half a dozen co-ordinate clauses where the simplicity of the 'and' connections translates into the pathos of the poem the childlike quality of the woman and underscores, by contrast, the deadly quality of her emotional future and her economic insecurity. The validity of Daw's ob-

servation 'opens up' the mother who gives time to observe her family's reactions before bothering to indulge her own, so that the horror of a line like 'the bottling-set she never unpacked from Grovedale' has us close to tears and swings us pitilessly to the despair and the memory of hope that are uttered in the last line.

Dawe's sense of the comic is always directed good-naturedly at man-made problems, without rancour, without accusation; he acknowledges we are as we are; he expects us, perhaps, to acknowledge it too, as he hopes for a dash of sanctifying grace. In "The Not-So-Good Earth", Dawe points a choppy finger at the callus twentieth century man has grown over his spirit; at the indifference fostered by media trickery; at our calm—in fact, our delighted—acceptance of violence:

For a while there we had 25-inch Chinese peasant families
famishing in comfort on the 25-inch screen
and even Uncle Billy whose eyesight's going fast
by hunching up real close to the convex glass
could just about make them out — the riot scene
in the capital city for example
he saw that better than anything, using the contrast knob
to bring them up dark—all those screaming faces
and bodies going under the horses' hooves—he did a terrific job
on that bit, not so successful though
on the quieter parts where they're just starving away
digging for roots in the not-so-good earth
cooking up a mess of old clay
and coming out with all those Confucian analects
to everybody's considerable satisfaction
(if I remember rightly Grandmother dies
with naturally a suspenseful break in the action
for a full symphony orchestra plug for Craven A
neat as a whistle probably damn glad
to be quit of the whole gang with their marvellous patience.)
We never did find out how it finished up...Dad
at this stage tripped over the main lead in the dark
hauling the whole set down smack on its inscrutable face,
wiping out in a blue flash and curlicue of smoke
600 million Chinese without a trace...

So much of Dawe's poetry speaks for itself as does this poem. The comic mode does not distract us from the real problems of the third world; from hunger; from the terror of governments; from the unpleasantly smug mirrored face we confront. There is a disarming quality about the ease with

which he inserts a many-layered word like 'inscrutable'—and moments, moments after we have finished reading, comes the shock of the pause while we make re-assessment.

Whether Dawe is writing formal or free verse, his rhythms rarely falter. And riding his rhythms are the bucking jockeys of metaphor. Occasionally, Dawe permits a metaphor to ride the full length of the poem's course, as he does so beautifully in "Sleight-of-Hand":

Especially I like the bit where
they take the sun away
by sliding a cloud hinged to a hill
over it late in the day
— it is so nicely done, this part,
barely noticeable until
it is, well, over...

I like particularly
the humility in the skill
that would much rather dodge
the embarrassing applause,
and under the invisible finger-tented
cloth gradually withdraws
until there is only the shadowy
stage, the hat, cloak, cane,
the tumbler of still water
and, last but not least, the plain
gesture of reversal even now
returning to scarves
of the most fluid silk the world's
pocketful of doves.

This tender tribute to God's skill is permeated with the same engaging reverence that informed "And a Good Friday Was Had by All". The gentle sunset rhythm of "Sleight-of-Hand" contrasts forcibly with the pounding funeral drum-beat of "Homecoming" ('All day, day after day, they're bringing them home,/ they're picking them up, those they can find, and bringing them home'), or with the extended and enjambed lines conveying the rhythm of the truck in "Under Way":

Later there would be miles, hills, a country, a world
between him and the old place, there would be days
banging open and shut like the wire door of the cafe in Tarcutta
where the flies sang at the windows and the blonde waitress
tossed her hair back like a ribbon begging to be tied,
while dust rose like a prayer in the road's mouth

and the tyres of the Leyland semi mumbled their slew of pebbles
as it pulled out
and an old crow-shadow hung crooked as a coat
over the highway.

Dawe shocks us when he turns the banality of window-breakers in the suburbs into agents of epiphany:

— I think of the rock-thrower, the glazier's benefactor,
raining down meaning from beyond the subdivisions,
proclaiming the everlasting evangel of vulnerability
— and the suburbs of men shrink to one short street
where voices are calling now from point to point:
'Is that you, Frank?'

'Is that you, Les?'

'Is that you, Harry?'

'See anything?'

'Nup...'

'Nup...'

'Nup...'

(from "The Rock-Thrower")

He shocks us in "Leasehold" when he describes the man who has finally paid off the house:

he ostentatiously dropped
a lighted cigarette-butt,
ground it carefully in with his heel and said:
'Now I'll do what I bloody like'.

But he shocks us with more than recognition — he shocks with metaphor:

In the Roaring Forties
of ownership he lost himself endlessly,
running before the gales of alcohol
like a Great Circle Clipper,

Even the gods of the household take up and transcribe the metaphor into further poundings of longing:

the old refrigerator by the door
starts up alarmingly, abandoning
its muted self-possessed loneliness
as it beat on out to sea with great shuddering strokes.

The almost Virgilian quantities of the last line translate the humdrum into a universal anguish.

In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth wrote of 'a plainer and more emphatic language...arising out of repeated experience'; and it is this charging with exuberant, hard-bitten

vernacular as Dawe catalogues routines in his laconic rhythms that points to a co-existence of irony and seriousness. His warm and saddened portraits are a harmonious blend of homespun and bayeux: "The Flashing of Badges", "A Double Haunting", "Suburban Lovers".

Where a poet like Les Murray extracts the mythic rituals from our sober landscape, taming the Ulyssean cattle of Taree, as it were, Dawe concerns himself more with the present indicative of people in the landscape, their mutual abrasions. In "The Boy" he describes the arrest of a young man 'beyond Laidley somewhere, /where the black-soil paddocks run flatly away from the road'. His casual 'It's a rich land all right, but humid in summer/ after the mountains' makes nature a mere backdrop to the drama of the arrest:

Yes, he was cheerful enough,
with neat red hair,
as though something important was about to happen to him at last
— or he thought so, anyway.

One of Dawe's freakish strengths is his ability to align the romantic concept with vernacular image. In "Weapons Training" his drill sergeant cries:

open that drain
you call a mind and listen remember first
the cockpit drill when you go down be sure
the old crown-jewels are safely tucked away

But against this place the mellow lyricism of his love poem, "Apology for Impatience":

Life, life cries my blood
Till I am dazed by its sound
The sound of my thirty-three years
Drumming like a monsoon
On the inadequate tin roof
Of words like these.

Dawe is concerned for the world's destiny. The dislocations caused by technology, the threat of the bomb, are the effluence of thoughtless men. In "Reverie of a Swimmer" he sees one of our prime ministers destroyed, not by kelp or current or shark:

It wasn't kelp, current or shark
That finally hauled me down under
But the voluminous waste of your minds,
The effluence pumped from the shore, against which
Only a god could contend.

It is people, all the time, people whom Dawe investigates with his probing, friendly, savage, affectionate lines. "A Double Haunting" describes the world as a place that haunts man who in turn is haunted by it:

— Even after his vapour-trails have scrawled their Omega
Over the evening heavens, kindly or gross
His shadow will fall on the ground and the beasts in their browsing
Tremble a moment remembering, the rivers and seas pause as they
Dwindle to rivers and seas, the leaves and the vines
Sigh in the simpler wind for the old touch of Latin
And for men to push through them and set up a camp in the clearing.

Dawe's poetry is a celebration of being human and the frailty that involves.

For me, Dawe's mode and his concerns are summed up in three lines of Mark Macleod's dedicatory poem to Dawe, "Outside the phone booth, Queensland wind breathes hotly down the passionvined fences":

We sit at the table to talk art
with its sleeves rolled up, my poet
in football shorts.

The Teeth Father Naked At Last: The short stories of Barbara Baynton

The Swiss scholar Bachofen suggested for the first time in his book *Mother Right*, published in 1861, the idea, embarrassing to the Swiss, that in every past society known a matriarchy has preceded the present patriarchy. His evidence, drawn from Mediterranean sources, was massive. Just as every adult was once inside the mother, every society was once inside the Great Mother.

The Stone Mother perhaps represents in history the Mother culture during the time it was implacably hostile to masculine consciousness.

In some cultures she is called the Teeth Mother. The intent is the same — to suggest the end of psychic life, the dismembering of the psyche.

— Robert Bly

In his poem, *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last*, Robert Bly, the American poet, discusses the savagery of war and the aggression principle as mythified in female presence. In a long essay, "I came out of the Mother Naked" he admits to the protective and creative mothers of poetry and living, basing his arguments on anthropological and mystic research. I take my title for this paper as a parodic version of the Bly thesis, for Baynton's stories undoubtedly equate male-ness with savagery and brutality.

H.B. Gullett's portrait of Barbara Baynton, given as introduction to the Angus and Robertson edition, offers the appreciative reader an unfortunate other-ness to contend with. I would suggest that the stories be read before the biographical sketch, lest the middle-class arrogance which Gullett hints at allows the reader to regard "The Chosen Vessel", "Squeaker's Mate" and "Scrammy 'And" as exercises in Australian Gothic rather than the horrible realism of selector life they are. A.G. Stephens' declaration that conventional Australians of her time were not ready to accept her out-spokenness is politically interesting. The stories do tend to tarnish the golden myth of the bronzed bushman, the Galahad of Grong Grong who, while he regarded women as less important economically or socially than his mate, horse or dog, nevertheless was depicted in the writing of Rowcroft, Kingsley, Boldrewood, Clarke, Lang, Lawson, Praed, Furphy, as treating women with sentimental

courtesy, rough or polished, according to his selector or squatter class. Stephens, in his review of *Bush Studies*, published in 1902, wrote:

Its truthful glimpses of Australian life, graphically expressed, could not (would not) have been printed in any Australian paper, though they rank highly as literature and are circulated widely in book form when issued by an English publisher. We are too mealy-mouthed (in print) and stuff far too much respectable wadding in our ears.

I do not altogether agree with Stephens that they rank highly as literature, but as an expression of revolt, particularly a revolt against the feudal conditions of life for women in the bush, they are valuable; and coming as they do from one who was prepared to form three acknowledged unions with the 'enemy', they are fascinating. That two of these unions were socially and economically advantageous makes the reader wonder also whether Baynton were not applying practical solutions to the plight of her gender. It also strengthens the credibility of her stories, for they are not written from a background of deprivation and its consequent rage and bitterness.

Baynton's mother, Penelope Ewart, had left her husband, Robert Ewart, not long after arriving in Sydney, for a Captain Kilpatrick whom she had met on the voyage out. The Kilpatrick alliance produced six children, the youngest being Barbara Baynton, who was born in wedlock after the ultimate marriage of the Kilpatricks when Robert Ewart died. However, knowledge of the social difficulties for her parents during their first years together must have made some impression on the girl.

There are six stories in *Bush Studies* and perhaps the dominant theme, the lingering acrid taste on the palate, is that of male brutality. Bly might write of the Teeth Mother, but in Australia we have always been conscious of the Teeth Father, whether it be the Teeth Father of the transportation system, overseer or felon, of our origins, or the Teeth Father emancipist settler removing the indigenes from their inheritance. In England the Teeth Father of British Victorianism disguised his force under religious or puritan cant, could sublimate this fearful paternity as factory owner, member of parliament, professional soldier or church god-man. The peasant Teeth Father has been with us always, modelling himself painstakingly on the primitivism of his betters but displaying it unadorned, ungraced by

social euphemism. And it was to this country that a peasant Teeth Father was imported, the Father of Ockers, the despiser of sheilas, the Meat Man of David Ireland's *The Glass Canoe*.

The reality is unquestionable. What there is of dream, mystery and the unexplained, comes from detail in the characters' response to landscape; from the landscape itself. Yet the actions within the stories are so austere they create another dimension of horror by the very nonchalance of the acts themselves and the nonchalance of Baynton as narrator. A.A. Phillips talks of her "pouncing feminine accuracy". I dislike the words "pouncing feminine". They make Baynton's own point! They smack of the Teeth Father as critic; are pejorative in their essence. Were Baynton a man, Phillips would probably have used the word "discerning". The peasant element, which Phillips insists Baynton directs her anger at, has not weakened in the seventies of this country. The whole cultural interest of the media is to protect the peasant Teeth Father's social manners while endowing him with the material properties of a Roman Senator. One has only to regard the advertising craft of the Singletons of this country, the vulgarity of national comics like Kennedy, Walsh, Hogan, and the newspaper caution and respect for white-collar crime, to realise that the characteristics of the Teeth Father are respected as virtues.

The six stories in this collection have simple enough narrative lines. Even "Billy Skywonkie" and "Bush Church", which are generally regarded as being Baynton excursions into humour, have overtones, particularly in the case of "Billy Skywonkie", of the brutishness and quiescent horror—the horror that awaits the ripe moment—of the other four.

"A Dreamer" tells of a young woman, pregnant, returning to her bush home after many years to visit her mother. When she reaches the house after a lonely storm-crowded walk, a struggle to cross a flooded creek, she finds her mother dead. That is all. Yet from the moment the young woman gets off the train at the whistle-stop station, Baynton has established a mood of crackling suspense. At the end of the first page, the woman encounters "an ownerless dog, huddled, wet, shivering" and concepts of singularity are built and extended so that the total of an infinite number of 'ones' gives still no plurality but a stressed sense of aloneness. One light burns in the small shop nearby and the "sound of swift tapping" instantly suggests a

coffin-maker at work. One mother-bird calls warningly from a tree, and this call signals the first stir of the young woman's child within her womb. Lightning takes single snapshots. Juxtaposed with the lone, the unfamiliar, are childhood landmarks that involve the woman in dream reminiscence with the flavour of nightmare. Late in the story the notion of expiation is introduced: "Long ago she should have come to her old mother, and her heart gave a bound of savage rapture in thus giving the sweat of her body for the sin of her soul." This idea strengthens when, as she struggles to cross the flooded creek, she feels the willows, which her mother had planted years before, actually oppose her passage. On reaching the farmgate, she finds the gate swollen and "difficult to open". A neglected gutter-spout overflows. The dog barks and does not remember her voice. With careful detailings such as these, the reader is prepared for disaster.

"Squeaker's Mate" is a monstrous story of a bush-woman married to a loafer. The Squeaker is not monstrous in that his behaviour is macabre, perverted. The monstrousness lies in the man's laconic indifference; his callousness, his lacking even the most primitive refinement of feeling. He is ocker supreme. When his wife is injured by a tree she has been felling while her layabout husband sweats on tucker time, she lies in frightful distress and pain (subsequently we discover she has been paralysed) and unwilling, (perhaps unable at that moment, certainly) to speak. " 'Did yer jam yer tongue?' " he solicitously inquires. After a period of grudging and minimal care, for he hates the extra work his wife's incapacity gives him, Squeaker shifts his paralysed wife to a back shed, introduces another woman to the house, a mate whose laziness matches his own. Catharsis comes when the newcomer, unwilling to fetch her own drinking water from the creek, attempts to steal that belonging to the injured wife:

"She bent.

It was so swift and sudden, that she had not time to scream when those bony fingers had gripped the hand that she prematurely reached for the billy. She was frozen with horror for a moment, then her screams were piercing. Panting with victory, the prostrate one held her with a hold that the other did not attempt to free herself from.

Down, down she drew her.

.....

As a wounded, robbed tigress might hold and look, she held and looked."

The trapped woman's cries bring Squeaker:

"He hastily fastened the door and said something that the shrieks drowned, then picked up the pole. It fell with a thud across the arms which the tightening sinews had turned to steel. Once, twice, thrice. Then the one that got the fullest force bent; that side of the victim was free.

The pole had snapped. Another blow with a broken end freed the other side."

All through the story are comments that spell out male indifference, but done so casually, so off-handedly, they seem as natural as the landscape. Horror! They *are* as natural as the landscape.

Squeaker's first comment, after the tree has fallen across his wife, is "'I tole yer t' look out.'" When the tree has to be lifted off, Baynton describes the scene thus:

"He was impatient, because for once he had actually to use his strength. His share of a lift usually consisted of a make-believe grunt, delivered at a critical moment."

When the injured woman asks for a pipe to smoke he loses

"patience with the swaying hand that tried to take the light.... He thrust it into her hand that dropped helplessly across her chest. The lighted stick, falling between her bare arm and the dress, slowly roasted the flesh and smouldered the clothes.

He rescued their dinner, pelted his dog out of sight—hers was lying near her head—put on the billy, then came back to her.

The pipe had fallen from her lips; there was blood on the stem.

"Did yer jam yer tongue?" he asked.

She always ignored trifles, he knew, therefore he passed her silence.

He told her that her dress was on fire. She took no heed. He put it out, and looked at the burnt arm, then with intentness at her.

He broke a green branch from the fallen tree and swished from his face the multitudes of flies that had descended with it.

In a heavy way he wondered why did she sweat, when she was not working? Why did she not keep the flies out of her mouth and eyes? She'd have bungy eyes, if she didn't."

Of course it is hard to conceive of anyone as unintelligent as this, but in a country that has established a hierarchic order of man, mate, horse, dog, wife, other women, black people—then anything is possible. Squeaker is heir to centuries of convinced faith that woman is object only, a kind of domestic machine, preferably self-mending, without feelings. It has been common in this country and other western countries for men to describe women as castrators—it is their final insult; but men have always been what Brian Matthews calls vulvators; they add that extra physical dimension, establishing two apertures in females, an additional one where the cerebellum is.

Baynton does admit a kindness on the part of Squeaker's pals who give some minimal care to the injured woman. But even the pals have a poor opinion of Squeaker: "Him they called 'a nole woman', not because he was hanging round the honey-tins, but after man's fashion to eliminate all virtue." This appraisal of Baynton's is as savage and direct as Christina Stead's but not nearly as skilled. The Baynton voice cries through. With Stead we see the men actively showing their teeth, for her characters almost always expose their own faults and the authorial voice practically never intrudes. Sam Pollit is self-condemning.

One of Baynton's skills in this story is to give the injured wife a minimum of dialogue. Silent, she has even greater force. After the accident she utters the one word "pipe". From that point she does not open her mouth for the reader again. She is described as speaking to her husband but we are never allowed to hear her words; only his. And this is marvelously effective, for the husband's words are so crammed with his smallness of spirit, the reader quails. To his wife's hope she will soon be better, he tells her bluntly: "'Yer won't. Yer back's broke....yer won't never walk no more.'" When she tells him of things he could do on his own around the place, "he whistled while she spoke, often swore, generally went out." His reply is often "'Go and bite yerself like a snake.'" "

Everything about Squeaker is vile. He pretends he has been bitten by a snake as an excuse for drinking the last of the brandy; he threatens his wife he will set her hut afire; he flaunts

his new woman before her; he is useless at doing the practical things men traditionally have done. And after the last terrible scene in which he smashes his wife's arms and is attacked by the loyal dog, he is reduced to whining and pleading when he realises his new woman has fled back to town. He suggests his wife soothe the dog onto the fleeing woman. " 'It's orl er doin,' " he pleads. (I believe this trait is known nationally as buck-passing.) No. Not one redeeming quality anywhere in this portrait of bush bully: lazy, cowardly, cruel, deceitful. Where, where are the tender Giraffes of Lawson?

"Scrammy 'And" plays male against male. An old settler left alone in his hut while the boss and his wife journey to town for the birth of their child, is besieged by Scrammy 'And who covets a pile of coins the old man has hidden in his hut.

Structurally the story is interesting. Although it is not set out in sections, the first half of the tale is presented from the old man's point of view and all the dialogue in this first part is that of the old man speaking to his dog. This is achieved with enormous conviction and fluidity and without the sentimentality of Lawson's "That there dog of mine." The reader senses the dog's replies and emotional responses with entire belief. The second half of the story is seen from the viewpoint of the besieger, the hand-less Scrammy; and Scrammy is soul-brother to Squeaker, deadly and callous. The technical reason for Baynton's shift in narrator is, simply, that within the hut the old man has died while enduring his terror; but the change of view-point is done so subtly the death could easily be missed. The dog becomes aware of some strange change in his master and only the reader is conscious of the old man's last clutch of prayer: " 'Cline our 'earts ter keep this lawr.' " Scrammy's stratagems and, later, his brutality, are directed at a lost cause.

In the closing paragraphs of the story the viewpoint shifts again. Baynton uses her images of nature, tender and untended, as she did in "Squeaker's Mate" where the cries of the penned, uncared for sheep were "cries for help" to the injured woman. In this story a ewe and her lamb still butt the walls of the hut, nosing for care until the ewe teaches her lamb to drink at the creek and to join the flock. The dog remains guarding his dead master and refuses to touch the hunk of boiled mutton which is beginning to spoil with blowflies. Then

the husband and wife return with their new baby. The story has constant shifts and positionings of tenderness and ruthlessness, moving naturally from one life-aspect to the other without any sense of disjuncture. Yet even in this sympathetic story—sympathetic, that is, to the old man in his loneliness and terror as Scrammy prowls his fearful menace about the isolated cabin—Baynton gives voice to the male's ancient antipathy to the female. The old man comments on a little button ornament the absent wife has made for a cabbage tree hat he has been making for his boss: “ ‘Its orl wrong, see! Twon't do! An she done it like that ter spile it on me er purpus. She done it outer jealousy, cos I was makin' it for 'im. But she can't make a 'at like thet. No woman could. The're no good.' ” Actually when he turns the button over he sees the wife has embroidered it exactly as he asked, but he hates admitting he has been wrong: “He had accidentally turned the button, he reversed it looking swiftly at the dog. ‘Carn't do nothin' with it. A thing like thet! Might as well fling it in the fire!’ He put it carefully away.” His one over-riding fear at the beginning of the story appears to be that the absent woman will give birth to a daughter: “ ‘It'll be a gal too, sure to be! Women are orlways 'avin' gals!’ ” His woman-scorn is even directed at the old ewe who brings her lamb to the shack to be poddy-fed: “His master explained to him (Warder, the dog) that the thing that ‘continerrally an' orlways' upset him was ‘thet dam ole yoe.’There was something in the Bible, he told War, about ‘yoes’ with barren udders.”

“Billy Skywonkie” and “Bush Church” have the surface appearance of geniality, but here again the war between man and woman, especially in this country, in this setting of untamed scrub and climatic discomfort, is observed with the sharpest eye. In “Billy Skywonkie” we meet a woman, half Chinese, who has applied for a house-keeping job but is sent away because she is too old and insufficiently good-looking—in a word, not sexually appetising enough. Throughout the story she is treated rather as a sub-human, from the moment she asks a man on a siding where the train is halted what the name of the place is (he ignores her and someone else supplies the answer) to her ultimate meeting with her boss:

‘What an infernal cheek *you* had to come! Who sent you?’ he asked stormily.

She told him, and added that she had no intention of

remaining.

'How old?' She made no reply. His last thrust, as in disgust he strode out, had the effect of a galvanic battery on a dying body.

Just as the cattle have died thudding to the floor on the train that carried her to her destination, so too is her human equation with these animals developed. Billy Skywonkie, the hand who eventually picks her up in a buggy, is a superb bush cob. When he encounters a mate called the Konk on the ride back to the homestead, he pauses for a lengthy chat, fails to introduce his woman passenger but exchanges much banter and innuendo about women. Is this all bush simplicity? It is certainly an aspect of the male that Lawson refrained from dealing with. They stop at a bush shanty and the women she meets there are either "on ther booze" or rough to the point of caricature, like Mag. Still, Billy Skywonkie has the Teeth Father's remedy for nonsense: "'Know wot I'll do ter Lizer [his wife] soon's she begins ter start naggin' at me?'" He intended this question as an insoluble conundrum, and waited for no surmises. "Fill 'er mug with this!" "The shut fist he shook was more than a mugful," Baynton comments drily! "'Twouldn' be ther first time I done it, nor ther lars.'"

Baynton observes the chattel role of women: when the Chinese cook volunteers to this new housekeeper that Billy Skywonkie is married, he adds that *he* is not. Once again Baynton draws her symbolism from the passivity of domestic animals. As the new woman is bundled away, again having failed by virtue of her appearance and age to be right for the job, she sees a rouseabout about to butcher a sheep: "She noticed that the sheep lay passive, with its head back till its neck curved in a bow, and that the glitter of the knife was reflected in its eye." Those words are, indeed, the closing lines of the story. How subtle and pleasing are the Baynton continuua, if I may call them that, compared particularly with the Lawson ending with its over-explicatory quality. Perhaps Lawson or his editors feared the reader would fail to get the point. An admission, perhaps, that the Bulletin catered for a male audience with the cerebral sensitivity of Billy Skywonkie and Ned Stennard (from "Bush Church").

No matter how earnestly critics insist that the rough and

ready humour, the slapstick, are all given with the lightest possible of hearts, no one can ignore that last passage; to fail to contrast it with the coarseness and animality of the horse-play in the preceding passages would be to ignore the totality of Baynton's intention. Much the same could be said of the apparent jocularity of "Bush Church", a semi-farce in which a group of simple country folk err in supposing a church minister to be a government inspector—a mistake fostered by Ned Stennard who is described in acid terms as a man "with time to kill and a tongue specially designed for the purpose." Stennard is no favourite with the women in this story because of his philosophy: "That it was the proper thing to hit a woman every time you met her, since she must either be coming from mischief or going to it." One is reminded at this point of Noel Coward's tired "Women should be beaten regularly like gongs." An illiterate, Stennard could barely sign his name except with extraordinary physical ploys: tying his wrist in such a manner that his hand would not stray off the paper. Failure to achieve a signature meant taking it out on his wife or kids. Yet Baynton is fair. She does reveal the idiocy of women in accepting such gods:

Things did not go wrong every day, and he did not beat her or Joey unless they did. A pound of lollies for her and the kids from a dealer's cart when one came round, would make her think him the best husband in the world.

"The Chosen Vessel" is an economic story, savage and disturbing, about a woman alone in her hut with her baby. She is attacked, raped and eventually killed by a swagman. What disrupts the story for me is the interposing of a sub-plot that distracts with its introduction of bush-politics and an Irishman's decision to give his vote to a candidate not favoured by the priest. This Irishman sees the fleeing, frantic woman, interprets her night-gowned form as a vision of the Virgin and decides to cast his vote as the priest has suggested. Of course the introduction of this sub-plot serves to underscore the heavy irony of the title; more ironically so, when the priest explains to Hennessey what it is he has actually seen and berates him. The opening of the tale has us once more view a cow and its calf, a natural complement for the woman and her baby. The story ends, too, with a glimpse of the killer and his dog.

Many miles further down the creek a man kept throwing an old cap into a waterhole. The dog would bring it out and lay it in the

opposite side to where the man stood, but would not allow the man to catch him, though it was only to wash the blood of the sheep from his mouth and throat, for the sight of blood made the man tremble.

In the opening paragraph Baynton reveals how the woman fears the cow; but her fear should be as nothing to that which she has for the husband who forces her to run and meet the advancing cow, calling her 'cur' for her cowardice: " 'That's the way!' The man said laughing at her white face. In many things he was worse than the cow."

Baynton handles suspense superbly: lonely huts, prowling swagmen and the desolate acres of moonlit bush come tremblingly, quakingly alive under her pen, and the terror mounts in almost geometric progression for not only are the primitive elements loose in nature but females are placed within this environment as the natural prey of the male hunter, placed as the elected and eternal victim. It is a pity in a way that Baynton closes "The Chosen Vessel" with the glimpse of the killer at the creek. His trembling can be due only to superstitious fear like that of Hennessey, for the arrogance of almost every male figure in Baynton's work, the callousness and the brutality do not for one moment line up logically with a sense of remorse. Tears for a dog—yes. A horse—yes. Perhaps a mate, though when we read "The Union Buries its Dead" by Lawson, we know the grief is only temporary. No man would have written these stories, for other men would have found him traitor and called him liar. But from Baynton's stance the stories ring horribly true, send out peal after peal of rage against belittlement and against that especial male fury that demands a victim.

"The women of the bush have little to share," Baynton says. But it would seem from these stories that though they might have few material things to give or lend each other, they have a vast river of spiritual injustice on which to draw, a river that spills out over their whole lives.

Baynton's attitudes as displayed in her stories were hardly engendered by the bitterness of poverty, failure to get a husband or barrenness. For practically all her life, she was comfortably off, happy and busy. One can only conclude—and a horrifying conclusion it is—that her stories were the result of a cool observation.

In Chekov's story, *Lady with Lapdog*, are the following words:

but both of them knew very well that the end was still a long way away and that the most complicated and difficult part was only just beginning.

In *Ariadne*, another Chekov story, Weltmann comments:

"What a story!" To this another character replies: "No. It is only the beginning to a story."

Both of those small comments suggest strongly what most writers of short stories would seek to effect: a sense of open-endedness, of the suggestion of future complication beyond the present page. A successful short story often generates the desire to know more.

The short story is a far more demanding form than the novel whose very length, like charity, serves to cloak a multitude of faults. The short story form has travelled great distances since the beginning-middle-end techniques of primitive ballad; though it would appear its form is declining into the senility of anecdotage — and not even anecdotage — with the proliferation of collections of sparse '*moments exquis*' that publishing houses of the seventies keep tossing like withered nosegays into the laps of reviewers.

Ezra Pound wisely wrote: 'Go in fear of abstractions'. Chekov said this about the art of story-telling: 'the first principle is to show not to tell'. Addition of these two precepts makes for an attractive literary total, for there is nothing quite as good as a good short story. In its own way it should have the perfection and emotional poetry of the finest ballad. Weightlessness in the fictive field has become the monstrous fashion of the sixties and the seventies, a form of 'mini-think' that might offer attractive savings in sheer yardage if the material used were of quality. But the material is so often shoddy.

One of the best short stories in the world opens with these words: 'A certain man came down from Damascus and fell among thieves'. Its simplicity and its tensions are classic and beautiful. After all, all stories can be condensed into the form: man is born; he lives; he dies. What the novelist does (and what

the short story writer does) is to take aspects of the living or the dying process. A novelist usually completes the suggestions made by those abstracts he uses. A short story writer, the best sort of short story writer, merely suggests, leaves an impression, as Chekov has said, that it is only the beginning of a story.

The short story form has altered considerably since the *Decameron*, say, or even the connected incidents of the picaresque novel. Characters then displayed more hard-edged qualities. The story-line was the thing. Perhaps as a result of the egalitarian principles promulgated by peoples' revolutions in the nineteenth century, there came an intensifying of interest in motivation. Story-lines were becoming softened but not blurred, so that in Chekov or Maupassant is found a gasping for further-ness. Less time than Poe, say, contrived to use is spent on suggesting ambience. Chekov managed exquisite tonal settings with often a mere flick of the pen. Since novelists like Eliot, Dickens, Hardy and Lawrence had convinced the reading public that the lower classes were human, too, and that their emotional crises were of concern, the way was paved for the emergence of realist writers like Hemingway whose best work, in my opinion anyway, was not done in his novels but in *The First Forty-Nine Stories*. The *New Yorker* was a seeding-ground in the thirties, forties and fifties for some of the finest short-story writing in English. Salinger, Updike, Cheever—all cut their teeth in this journal and produced an art form so incisive and immediate it had the quality of a lyric.

Perhaps the short story is more demanding than even the lyric; and it is when one reads White's short stories that an awareness of lyrical impulse strikes the reader most strongly. Conflict and unity are the most important parts of any story and here we have these factors operating deviously against backgrounds whose evocation is more than authentic; background often becomes a motivational source within the story. John Rorke has suggested that before White, 'Australian writers used their plots as a means of celebrating their subject matter, whereas White uses his as a means of discovering the meaning of his material'. Generally, I would agree with this but there are two notable exceptions in Richardson's "The Fortunes of Richard Mahony" and Lawson's short stories. One might add Baynton's "Bush Studies" as well.

In *The Vivisector*, Rhoda Courtney tells Hurtle Duffield:

White makes it so. The crucifixion of Sotos sits easily beside the killing of Vangelio. And I think that this terror dormant within the banal is what White wishes us most to see.

The setting of "Being Kind to Titina" is swampingly lovely:

Soon the house began to live again. There were always people on the stairs. There was a coming and going, and music in the old house at Schutz. That year my eldest sister Phrosso thought she was in love with an Italian athlete, and my brother Aleko decided he would become a film star. The girls from Lesbos hung out of the upper windows after the dishes had been stacked, and tried to reach the dates which were ripening on the palms. Sometimes there was the sound of dates plopping in the damp garden below. The garden was never so cool and damp as when they brought us back from the beach. The gate creaked, as the governesses let us in through the sand-coloured wall, into the dark-green thicket of leaves.

Dionysios, the narrator, recounts the cruelty of his brother and sisters to the plump, unsuitable child, Titina, who has come to live next door. Teased horribly at the first meeting, Titina makes a puddle on the carpet. She wears a blue bead to ward off the evil eye. But when time has passed and Dionysios is grown up, he rediscovers Titina who has become exquisite and an object to be physically desired; as well, she has the poise that is born of fat wads of notes from an elderly lover. White has manipulated the 'ugly duckling' theme to give us the role of sufferer-reversed.

That particular uncomfortable social balance which White reserves for married couples runs riot in the last of the Greek stories, "The Woman who wasn't Allowed to Keep Cats", where the antithesis in the characters of the husbands, Hajistavros and Alexiou, finds its complement in the quasi-lesbian relationship of the wives. The sterility of White's married couples—and there is much sterility—is oppressively apparent. In the main, central characters in all his work are childless and the riches and richness of child-character is a vein more frequently evident when he writes of the under-privileged: the Whalleys of "Down at the Dump", say, the Parkers in *The Tree of Man*, the Godbolds in *Riders in the Chariott*.

The black comic surrealism of "Clay", "The Letters", and, to a lesser extent, of "Miss Slattery and her Demon Lover", calls for some comment on abstractions. John Barth writes in *Title*:

'I believe literature's not likely ever to manage abstraction successfully, like sculpture for example....Well, because wood and iron have a native appeal and first-order reality, whereas words are artificial to begin with, invented specifically to represent something else'. The focus in innovative writing is upon the experiencing mind, on dreams, on the subconscious as manifestations of the true nature of mankind; this emphasis appears notably in "Clay". Rational means cannot uncover the full meaning of the free associationship formed between the objects and events as the stream of consciousness flows outward from the human; and the ending of "Clay" is only partly explicable therefore. The visionary and prophetic effects White achieves come not so much from his matter as his form: the unusual juxtapositions of words; the shattered syntax; the metaphysical use of properties and the investigation of the permanence of loved objects. Borges, the Argentinian writer, is an 'imagist of cultural fugues', who writes of labyrinths, refutes time, adduces that every man is one man ('There is only one gaucho'), and states that the searcher is the sought. Now this is a much tighter writing philosophy than that of White whose work does flow outward with sometimes unexpected and energising warmth, especially in two of the finest stories in this collection, "A Cheery Soul" and "Down at the Dump".

"A Cheery Soul" tells of Miss Docker, a militant Christian, who is determined to do good, no matter who gets hurt. Much as the reader loathes Miss Docker for most of the story, especially in those instances where she persecutes the Custances who have been kind enough to take her in and the saddened inmates of the Sundown Home at Sarsaparilla where she next goes, an ambivalence of feeling occurs in the description of Tom Lillie's funeral and the scene in church when Miss Docker berates the Reverend Wakeman. Not only is Miss Docker a giver of pain; she is a receiver of pain so sharply terrible that the memory of her gaucheries is erased: at the funeral of Tom Lillie her bossy attempts to organise are defeated in a scene that is one of the most cruel and, at the same time, most moving of anything White has written: the funeral cortege moves on without Miss Docker:

'Hey!' called Miss Docker, ambling first, then running. 'Have a heart! Mr Gartrell! Mr Custance? Mrs Fitzgibbon! Mr Galt!'

Running and running as they sped, she held her hands out-stretched to catch—no longer cars, no longer people—something which was escaping her.

It was curious, but, in the grip of procedure or grief, none of the faces in the procession even recognised Miss Docker. Although, it was true, all examined the object running red along the ditch.

‘Commander Clapp!’ Miss Docker cried. ‘Colonel Ogburn-Pugh! Mr Thompson! Mrs Jones! Miss Ethel Jones, Miss Dora! Mr Lickiss!’

But the cars were dedicated to a mission.

‘Mr Lickiss! For God’s sake! Mr Lick—iss!’ Miss Docker did not quite whimper.

At one point she fell upon a knee, missing the jags of bottle, though tearing her stockings on an almost equally vicious stone. Then, when her surroundings had been reduced to dust and silence, and the hoarding which announced: 2 MILES TO SARSAPARILLA, THE FRIENDLY SUBURB, she began the walk back.

The scene in the church is less clearly defined in its intention. Miss Docker, who has reduced the attendance there by her presence, debates with the Reverend Wakeman as he preaches, reducing him to silence and apparently causing him to have a stroke. At this point Mrs Wakeman prays aloud:

‘O Lord, save us! she prayed aloud in a terrible voice, from under her Bon Marche hat. ‘O Lord, protect us from the powers of darkness’

The reader feels, at this juncture, that White is begging protection from the aesthetic assaults of cheap millinery as well as the powers of darkness, and it is the unfortunate intrusion of the pejorative ‘Bon Marche’ that addles the satire. At whom, the reader may justly ask, is White directing his barbs? At Mrs Wakeman or at Miss Docker? But again White moves effortlessly into magnificence in the final scene where Miss Docker is rejected by even a stray dog:

She looked down into the dog’s pumpkin-coloured eyes. She did not touch, however, convinced as she was of a communion of minds.

‘Would you come home with me, Blue’, she asked ‘and share my mince collops and bread pudding, at an old person’s home?’

The dog's response is to urinate on Miss Docker's leg and as the tears gush from her eyes she blames the dust, the wind, the grit.

How masterly is the use of the word 'person' in the above passage—a psychological nicety of choice comparable with that which Richardson made when she had Mahony refer to his wife as 'Mrs Mahony' in the fearful scene where he is brought home insane in the boat.

That White, by the end of this story, leaves the reader unsure of which way the human condition must bend his judgement is splendid story-telling technique. Andre Gide once wrote 'My function is to disturb'. Disturbance in "A Cheery Soul" and "Down at the Dump" is maximum.

"Down at the Dump" is a complex story of several relationships: that of young Lum Whalley and Meg Hogben, each at the vulnerable adolescent stage of discovering the opposite sex; that of Daise Morrow and the relationships she had with many men, but especially her relationship with the dead-beat, Ossie Coogan; that of Wal Whalley and Isba, the parents of Lum; that of Councillor Hogben and Mrs Myrtle Hogben. Each of these relationships is fully realised.

The 'dump' of the title refers on one level to the garbage tip from which Wal Whalley makes his living; on another level it refers to the cemetery at Sarsaparilla where Daise Morrow, the only genuine 'liver' in this group of people, is to be buried. Daise has outraged Sarsaparilla because she has practised truly the Christian virtue of caritas. Finding Ossie Coogan, filthy and sick in a pen at the showground, she puts him into a wheelbarrow and takes him home to care for him, despite his lice, his scabs, his snotty nose:

What do you want? he asked straight out. I came down to the showground, she said, for a bit of honest-to-God manure, I've had those fertilisers, she said, and what are you, are you sick? I live 'ere, he said. And began to cry, and rub the snot from his snivelly nose. After a bit Daise said: We're going back to my place, What's-ye-Name—Ossie. The way she spoke he knew it was true. All the way up the hill in the barrow the wind was giving his eyes gyp, and blowing his thin hair apart. Over the years he had come across one or two lice in his hair, but thought, or hoped he had got rid of them by the time Daise took him up. As she pushed and struggled with the barrow, sometimes she would lean forward, and he felt her warmth, her firm diddies pressed against his back.

'Almost everyone carries a hump, not always visible, and not always the same shape'. With these words in mind, it is not surprising to find that the stories collected in *The Burnt Ones* are, as Harry Heseltine says, 'all ...concerned, in one way or another, with individuals unable or unwilling to accommodate themselves to the conventional demands of middle-class living. Their sufferings, their deprivations, are far more of the spirit than of material goods, but the world of the spirit is uniformly shown to offer infinitely greater rewards than any form of bourgeois success'.

The Burnt Ones, published in 1964, is a collection of eleven stories, four of which have Greek backgrounds, seven Australian. "Dead Roses" and "The Woman who wasn't Allowed to Keep Cats" are long enough to be classed as short novellas. Most of the stories are comedies or tragi-comedies of middle and lower-class tribal manners and in many of their freudian-based structures appear oedipal patterns and comments upon deviant sexuality. (Cliche blame is attributed to mothers, as usual, and the *matrona bellicosa* appears with fearsome frequency). There are stories like "A Cheery Soul" that seem to interpret conventional goodness as evil, or a matrix for evil; but, in all the stories, White is concerned with loneliness and/or isolation. 'Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind', says Laura Trevelyan in *Voss*. And this is a concept largely alien to the outlook of earlier Australian writers. Lawson used mateship as a weapon against solitary despair; but White is a kind of anti-mate. All his isolates are posed against a background of what White sees as false, through shared, conventional mode.

"Dead Roses" leaves the reader with ambivalent sympathies. Primarily it is Anthea Scudamore's story. The daughter of socially-clambering city-dwellers, sheltered to a pattern, she rejects the opportunity for a physical relationship with a young doctor, Barry Flegg, whom she meets on holiday, and marries the elderly Mr Mortlock (whose name is heavily symbolic). Mr Mortlock is rich, extraordinarily mean, and impotent. By the end of the story, the reader has discovered that Mortlock has been married to (or at least associated with) two women before Anthea, and that these women have left him for apparently similar reasons. If there be a fault, it is an embarrassment of anguish! The encounters with fate leave a punch-drunk Anthea,

a frustrated middle-ageing woman, imagining (wistfully?) sexual assault in Greece.

Fundamentally this is a sad story. Is it carping to ask whether one should be put in the position of laughing at eternal victims? To laugh in the face of such suffering diminishes the reader, yet laugh he does. The roses of the title appear as sexual symbols throughout the story— but unjoyously. There is no Dowson touch; and if it be 'roses, roses, all the way', the reader is more conscious of thorns than petals:

'It is thrilling', Anthea's mother comments, 'to watch the blossoming of a young girl'.

Holidaying on the island (Kangaroo Island?), a beginning vision for the islands in *The Eye of the Storm* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, Anthea was 'thankful for her own stone cell, in which she might flower again— a full, distinct white'. On her return to the mainland, at her meeting with Mr Mortlock, she overturns a bowl of pot-pourri. Mr Mortlock grows roses, but doesn't exhibit! Surely a warning! He courts Anthea with crimson roses bought cheap at the stalls. The honeymoon house in Sydney is a nightmare of vases and bowls of dead roses that 'creaked'. Years later, in Greece, roses decorate the coincidental meeting of Anthea and Doctor Flegg and she comments, 'Flowers die on me very quickly'. All this is a little heavy-handed and the reader is not pointed towards justice— after all, Mr Mortlock is the deadeast rose of the lot! Yet one feels the final judgement made is a criticism of Anthea for not yielding, all those years ago, to the 'brutality of sand'. Anthea Scudamore is burnt, without doubt, but her husband largely conducts the *auto da fe*, and White helps it along with stoking comments on Anthea's middle-class habits: the holidaying Anthea is rung each night after tea—a kind of maternal rape:

In the house on the point they would all sit round, after dinner, hands on their stomachs, waiting for Mummy. It had become their ritual.

My point is that the subject-matter of the story is for tears, not for laughter, and too often Anthea is painted as a fool, especially when she tries to spare her husband effort and allows herself (in fact, encourages the proceeding) to be harnessed to the cart in which Mr Mortlock drags manure to his plants. Again, overly-symbolic, for his wife is the one thing he refuses to fertilise.

Yet there is beautiful writing. There is detailed observation of children and adults; and one of White's most satisfying devices is the way in which a concrete actuality becomes absorbed and re-written as a further image, sometimes abstract, often taking the first concrete image, through metaphor, to a second:

All the time gently stroking her thigh. And she let him. Petrified with curiosity.

Gulls were flying overhead in slow white, unabashed sweeps, looking and lulling, and swooning, and wooing;
and,

The Mother's scent, far subtler than anything out of a bottle, arose from ritual and several layers of conviction.

Too often, however, in this story and generally in all the stories with an Australian setting, the destructive Barry Humphries' clichés have become rather tired little jokes:

It just occurred to me, Anthea dear—put in your blue. I know summer on the Island is what people call informal now, but one should go prepared for all eventualities;

and again;

Do you think he has everything he wants? Of course your father wasn't here to help me. But I pointed out both the lavatories.

Slings and arrows of that nature cannot—or should not deserve to—stand up against writing like this:

The furry darkness was full of the distinctive noise made by possums, and the giggles of little boys.

Much the same sort of criticism could be levelled at "Willy-Wagtails by Moonlight", a set piece of suburban satire, funny enough in itself (and sad enough) as the hostess unwittingly allows her guests to play a tape—they are keen bird-watchers—in which her husband is to be heard copulating with his secretary on one of their field excursions. Because of the brevity of the story, the characters are not endowed with any capacity for spiritual insight and White's intrusions, again in the Humphries manner, — a Lovely Old Home, the reproduction Sheraton mirror, pet-ty pwah — become a shame when one reads of the guests listening to the recording 'in the crackle of twigs, the stench of ants'.

"A Glass of Tea" is a strong story. Set in Geneva but retold in a series of flash-backs to Smyrna and Chios, it is a tale based on a superstitious belief that death will follow the breaking of a set of tea-glasses owned by the Philippides. The writing is tight and, at times, epigrammatic:

Of the three men she favoured the Frenchman, because his insincerity enabled her to feel secure.

This sort of technique reminds one of what Cheever calls diminishment and which Cheever, though a master of that art, now deplures. Yet there is nurturing writing in that imagery peculiar to White:

He heard the shutter banging. In Chios. Or was it inside Constantia's head?

White's theory that people can kill from love and that love is a destructive as well as constructive force, as we see in *Riders in the Chariot*, is evident in this story, too. Philippides says: *It was a wonder Constantia did not kill me. From love.* As well, the writing is rich with potent physical descriptions, especially of the destruction of Smyrna by fire:

in long, funnelling socks of smoke and reflections of slow, oily, light.

It is as if White makes special excursion into the poetry of sound and sense:

she would rise refreshed, and walk, almost stride, in a sound of imperious loose silk.

White's ear is particularly fine when his eye moves him to a translation of the physical through abstract simile.

"The Evening at Sissy Kamara's" and "Being Kind to Titina" also employ a Greek background. The first of these stories is once again devised in flash-back as Poppy Pantzopoulos suffers in the dentist's chair and reminisces about a recent dinner party with Sissy Kamara and her husband, Sotos. While it was the hostess in "Willy-Wagtails by Moonlight" who was victim, in this story, the thin, quiet Sotos is sufferer. Greek stoicism and Sissy's theories on Greek sado-masochism cultivate the setting in which Sotos is to be 'burnt'; so that the climactic moment of the story when Sotos breaks a favourite dinner-plate, a moment followed by the terrible laughter of the dinner-guests, completely over-shadows the descriptions of suffering at Smyrna and the killing of an old servant there. If it does not seem valid,

A beautiful contrast, here, with the sterile picture of Anthea Mortlock harnessed to her husband's wheelbarrow and dragging manure for the roses. The warmth and vitality of Daise, the poetry of her ('It was Daise who loved flowers, though. It's a moss-rose, Daise had said, sort of rolling it round on her tongue, while she was still a little thing'.) are passed on to her niece, Meg Hogben, who confides to Lum that she writes poems. The exchanges between the adolescents are tentative and exquisitely handled:

Meg imagines herself as Lum's wife, travelling with him in the truck he wants to own;

They had brought cases with tooth-brushes, combs, one or two things—the pad on which she would write the poem somewhere when they stopped in the smell of sunlight dust ants.

.....

As they drove they rocked together.

This technique of drawing dream-future into a concretion of the present is a device White used so effectively in the Vos-Laura relationship. The spiritual projection of Lum's and Meg's destinies is prepared:

And as they rushed through the brilliant light, roaring and lurching, the cabin filled with fair-skinned, taffy children, the youngest of whom she protecting by holding the palm of her hand behind his neck, as she had noticed women do. Occupied in this way, she almost forgot Lum at times, who would pull up, and she would climb down, to rinse the nappies in tepid water, and hang them on the bush to dry.

But White does not falter in his handling of the adolescent: after the funeral, as the Whalleys' car returning from the dump overtakes the Hogbens' car returning from the cemetery, the children avoid each other's face:

As Meg and Lummy sat, they held their sharp, but comforting knees. They sank their chins as low as they would go. They lowered their eyes, as if they had seen enough for the present, and wished to cherish what they knew.

Throughout these stories of emotional ambivalence move unfortunates cut off from the normal direction of life—unfortunates who do not appear to have the capacity for self-insight or self-tolerance that is given to similar characters in the

novels. The materialism and vulgarity of the Great Australian emptiness are White's prime targets; and even his Greek characters manifest those traits which are unlovely in us. If there is a fault in this collection, it is that White's rigid moral purpose creates certain limitations, for there is an insistent dissonance in the occasional caricatures that deny a human force to the Scudamores, the Hogbens, the Polkinghorns of this world.

Reference: *The Burnt Ones* (Penguin Edition)