Introduction:

DREAM AND REALITY

The attitude of Australians to their country has always been ambiguous. Its origin as a convict colony stained its earliest history with infamy, yet its progenitors hoped that it would become a centre of British commerce and its first Governor saw it as a new outpost of civilization. Later patriots have been divided between those who saw it as a part of a greater Britain and those who dreamed of a new civilization free from the troubles and injustices of Europe. Some saw it as a place of opportunity where they could amass personal riches before either founding a dynasty or returning to their proper home in Europe, while others hoped it would be the site of a new brotherhood of mankind where everyone, except of course coloured people, would share in the wealth. There were those who dreamed of a new aristocracy and those who hoped to plant a solid nation of yeomen where each would have his stake in the soil. Many people aspired to a number of these ideals, without perceiving any contradictions. But the land itself proved equally inhospitable to each of these dreams, and exacted toll from the lives and fortunes of the dreamers.

The purpose of this thesis is to show how fiction writers in Australia have reacted to this particular experience and environment, how they have treated the dream and how they have dealt with the reality.
I endeavour to show how in certain respects the dream has been no more than a defence against the worst elements of the reality, and how certain elements of Australia's history, particularly the convict system and the failure of land settlement schemes, have been reflected in fiction in a peculiarly negative attitude to existence. Despite the efforts of social realists to create a romantic myth of equality among common men and a land responding to human care, the most significant element of Australian fiction has been the feeling of defeat and imprisonment. The significance of Patrick White arises, therefore, not so much from any break he may make with the Australian tradition, but rather from his determination to face up to the implications of the Australian experience of failure. Instead of retreating into myths of mateship or dreams of Arcadia, he probes the ultimate significance of human life in the face of the failure of both material aspirations and social relationships. In the course of his probing he at times turns his back on human settlement and follows the road of the explorers into the barren inland, but this inland now becomes endowed with a metaphysical significance which takes precedence over its physical reality. This adds a dimension which has previously been merely implicit in Australian fiction. The problem explored in this dimension, however, still remains that which has troubled Australian novelists from their first attempts to come to grips with the reality behind the dream.

There has been a considerable amount of debate about the question of what precisely does constitute the Australian literary tradition. The accepted view is represented by Manning Clark, who sees Australian writers
as being in the forefront of the movement to free Australians from imperial bondage, "to explain to their contemporaries why they had been cheated out of their inheritance". Although the background to their work may be a "rather depressing description of the Australian scene", the spirit is that of "social equality, mateship, independence". ¹ A similar point of view is expressed by A. A. Phillips in "The Democratic Theme", where he argues that Australian writers are the first to write unselfconsciously of and for the ordinary man. Socialism, for writers like Lawson and Furphy, was equivalent to mateship, although the bond of common humanity extended beyond the boundaries of class, though not of color.² However, in a later essay, "Lawson Revisited", Phillips points to a further consequence of the Australian writer's preference for the common man.³ This is shown in Lawson's deliberate rejection of the tragic mode (requires the enlargement of the scale from "living-as-it-is", and would therefore be untrue to Lawson's view of life. Instead of the tragic, we have "his sense of the insecurely triumphant survival of tenderness through endurance".⁴ This could be done only

¹ Manning Clark, 'Tradition in Australian Literature', in Clement Semmler (ed.), Twentieth Century Australian Literary Criticism, pp. 38-44.


⁴ ib., p. 31.
through the naturalistic mode which was accepted by Australian writers of the Bulletin school.

Herbert Piper accepts a similar view of the attitude of the Australian writer to the bush and its people, although he is not as well disposed to it, seeing it as merely the outcome of "a few come-by-chance fragments of what was once a living belief". This belief, he argues, is the romantic doctrine, deriving from Diderot and Priestley by way of Wordsworth and Coleridge, that what is natural is good. From this comes the belief that the man closest to nature is closest to God, and that "if the universe is intelligent and divine, then it will have some purpose in mind, and this purpose will be worked out by natural forces". Piper sees this tradition expressing itself in Australian literature in the importance given to the landscape, in the view that the bush-dweller is the true Australian, and in the later idea that "those who had been longest in contact with the natural surroundings and who had been most shaped by them, that is, the Aborigines", have the most relevance to our culture.

A further modification of this received view is put forward by Vincent Buckley, who argues that there are in fact two streams of tradition.

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6 ib. p. 71.

7 ib. p. 68.

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...the utopian and the vitalist. Buckley argues that the utopian stream rives in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, only to turn bitter after the defeat of the workers in the middle nineties. Thereafter the vision of a utopia being realised in and for the whole of society was transmuted into a lyric vision of an unattainable perfection beyond original sin and located either in the prehistoric past or in a country idyll of the present. As utopianism departs in this manner from its humanistic origins it approaches more closely the alternative tradition of vitalism. This tradition is one of extreme individualism celebrating the life of the man of action or, more particularly among its Australian followers, of the artist who turns his back on all that is common in order to follow his own will. Buckley suggests that, among novelists, Henry Handel Richardson belongs to this tradition, with her exaltation of the genius type. Although this applies to Maurice Guest, it does not seem to me to be true of The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, which I shall be considering later. While Richard Mahony certainly has aspirations towards the role of artist or intellectual, the novel, far from celebrating these aspirations, sees in them the seeds of his tragedy. While its spirit is sombre, its method is naturalistic, attempting to recreate a life as it was. It differs from earlier writers in its lack of interest in any utopian answer to the reality of life as lived in Australia, but it belongs with them both in its artistic intent and in its evocation of the land and people of Australia.

The importance of this sombre, even pessimistic element in the Australian tradition has been emphasised by H.P. Heseltine in "The Literary
H. P. Heseltine, 'The Literary Heritage', in C. B. Christesen (ed.),

literature of loneliness, which is extended to an image of the general loneliness of Man, this literature also shows man struggling against the facts of his condition. Man exercises a stoic endurance against a hostile environment; he does not discover the evil in himself. In this conflict, the Australian writer of the Lawson and Furphy tradition identifies with the ordinary man rather than with an artistic élite of the especially sensitive and suffering.

In writing at all about Australian literary tradition, it is necessary to avoid the danger indicated by Leonie Kramer of inventing something which does not exist in the writing. Professor Kramer points out that the debate about the nature of our literary tradition assumes that writers in Australia were attempting to establish some kind of authentic Australian tradition, whereas in fact they were probably more interested in the struggle to write. In this thesis, therefore, I am not attempting to argue either that the writers I discuss are self-consciously attempting to define the quality of their Australian experience, nor that there is growth or qualitative development from first to last. There is no reason to believe that any particular writer is consciously or otherwise influenced by his predecessors. Still less am I attempting to establish a "Great Tradition", in the sense in which F.R. Leavis uses the term, of Australian

fiction. Rather, I examine a series of what I regard as major, and quite
different, works of Australian fiction, each of which represents a different
kind of response to the Australian environment and experience. In this
examination I endeavor to establish some continuity in the nature of the
response, and in the light of this consider the treatment of similar material. In so doing, I attempt to show that the
Australian experience has produced a body of fiction which is distinctively
Australian, and that Patrick White's novels, in facing the same problems
as his predecessors, form a part of this body. The most important
element of this body of work is the note of despair about human possibilities,
whether this despair is externalized in the landscape or internalized in the
nature of man, whether its implications are traced to the social system,
avoided in the momentary relief of mateship, or faced through the solitary
horrors of the madhouse. Patrick White is new only in that he seeks an
answer on a plane of experience which had been seldom explored by his
predecessors.

There are, certainly, writers who do not fit this description, and
whose work presents an idyllic solution to the problems of life in Australia.
These writers, who include Miles Franklin, Katherine Susannah Prichard,
Frank Dalby Davison, Kylie Tennant and Eve Langley, some of whom I
discuss, show fulfilled relationships between man and man or man and nature
which suggest a basis for the political optimism associated with the
Australian tradition. However, the novels of these writers either do not
carry the same conviction as those I discuss at length, or when they do, ne
in the closing chapters of Prichard's Coonardoo, or in some of Davison's short stories, such as "The Woman at the Mill" or "The Road to Yesterday", they are shot through with the same lack of confidence found in the other writers.

The note of despair which sounds in that Australian fiction where the Australian experience is most deeply felt is, as Heseltine has pointed out, characteristic of much late romantic and modern writing. However, even in a writer as strongly influenced by European intellectual attitudes as Henry Handel Richardson, the inner torments are engaged in a dialectic with the outer world, at least until madness completely envelopes Mahony, and even then we are shown the story through Mary's practical eyes. As Phillips points out, Lawson's characters continue to face the plain, carrying their swags and their puppies in defiance of the outer world of circumstance. In this respect Australian writing is closer to the frontier tradition of American fiction, where the search for a solution to the inner problem is similarly sought in a dialectic with the environment.

Again, however, Australian attitudes differ in the absence of the obsessions with guilt and innocence which color the American notion of freedom, from

\[\text{op. cit.}\]


15 see Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, Cleveland, Ohio, 1962.
Cooper and Hawthorne through to Hemingway and Bellow. Nor does Australian fiction share the kind of moral concern which links American fiction to English through the work of Henry James, and which Leavis sees as the central theme of English fiction. Not even the alternative English tradition, which runs back from Dickens through Fielding and eventually to Jonson and ultimately Chaucer, has had much influence in Australia. Steele Rudd's humor is too slapstick, too much a defence rather than a means of exploration, to qualify. There are greater similarities to Russian fiction, with its emphasis on life as it is, its regard for the common man, and its concern for landscape, but the religious regard for Mother Russia and its people is replaced in Australia by an attitude of wry irony towards life. While, therefore, any particular Australian writer might well be studied best in relation to overseas models, it does seem to me that there is a point in examining the question of what is distinctively Australian in the work of those writers who have used the Australian experience as their subject matter, and in whose writing this experience is most deeply felt.