

Introduction : ↩

DREAM AND REALITY

07 | — 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 civilisation. 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 ^{colonial} ~~new family~~ dynasty ~~here~~ 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 ^{the} ~~colored~~ 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.

My purpose in these studies is to explore
~~The purpose of this thesis is to show how fiction writers in~~ of
~~& fiction~~ ^{some}
 Australia have reacted to this particular experience and environment, how they have treated the dream and how they have dealt with the reality.

stet 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. NP The significance of Patrick White ^{in this tradition} arises ~~therefore~~, not so much from any break he may make with ~~the Australian tradition~~ ^{his predecessors}, 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~~ ^{at times} ~~eventually~~ 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 is added} ~~This adds~~ a dimension which ^{had} ~~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} ~~received~~ 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 he shows in~~ Lawson's deliberate rejection of the ~~tragic mode~~ tragic mode, ^{which} requires the enlargement of the scale from "living-as-it-is", ^{which} 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.

² A.A. Phillips, 'The Democratic Theme', in The Australian Tradition, Melbourne, 1958, pp. 35-57.

³ Phillips, op. cit., second edition, revised, Melbourne, 1966, pp. 17-32.

⁴ ib., p. 31.

2 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".⁴ 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".⁴ 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.⁴

A further modification of this ~~received~~^{accepted} view is put forward by Vincent Buckley,⁵ who argues that there are in fact two streams of tradition,

4 ^b Herbert Piper, 'The Background of Romantic Thought,' in Semmler, op. cit. pp. 67-74.

6 ^b ib. p. 71.

7 ^b ib. p. 68.

8 ^b Vincent Buckley, 'Utopianism and Vitalism,' reprinted in Grahame Johnston, Australian Literary Criticism, Melbourne, 1962, pp. 16-29.

2 the utopian and the vitalist. Buckley argues that the utopian stream ^{TO BE} ~~flows~~
 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 ² 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 ~~to~~ 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 the vitalist} ~~while this~~ ^{interpretation} 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 ^{, works} 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 ² by H. P. Heseltine in "The Literary 2

2 Heritage'. Heseltine argues that, while there has been an enormous drive to egalitarianism in our literary tradition, the most important element in our writing has been its confrontation of the late-romantic problem of the emptiness of human existence, and the erection, in such codes as that of mateship, of barriers against utter despair. "The canon of our writing presents a façade of mateship, egalitarian democracy, landscape, nationalism, realistic toughness. But always behind the façade looms the fundamental concern of the Australian literary imagination. That concern, marked out by our national origins and given direction by geographical necessity, is to acknowledge the terror at the basis of our being, to explore its uses, and to build defences against its dangers." A.A. Phillips responds to this argument by claiming that there is an essential difference between the Common Man of Australian writing and the Outsider of the European tradition. The latter, a reaction against the dehumanising^z circumstances of industrialism, is possessed by demonic energy and joyfully embraces the negative qualities of life in order to live to the utmost. Although Australia certainly has a

6A H.P. Heseltine, 'The Literary Heritage', in C.B. Christesen (ed.), On Native Grounds, Sydney, 1968, pp. 3-15, (originally published in Meanjin Quarterly, Vol. XXI, No.1, 1962.)

~~10~~ ib. p.15.

11 A.A. Phillips, 'The Literary Heritage Reassessed', in C.B. Christesen, op. cit., pp.17-24. (Originally published in Meanjin Quarterly, Vol. XXI, No.2, 1962.)

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.¹² 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~~^{these studies}, 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

¹² Leonie Kramer, review of John Barnes (ed.), The Writer in Australia 1856-1964, Australian Literary Studies, Vol. IV, No. 2, 1969, 185-9.

but not an exclusive series,

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 endeavour to establish some continuity in the nature of the response, and in the light of this consider ~~the nature of~~ Patrick White's 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~~ ^{works/novels} of these writers either do not carry the same conviction as those I discuss at length, or, when they do, as

as in such of

Frank Dalby

2 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~~ ^{has shown} ~~out~~, ^{is} 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. ^{is} 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. ^{is} Again, however, Australian attitudes differ in the absence of the obsessions with guilt and innocence which color ^{is} the American notion of freedom, from

¹³ ~~op. cit.~~

¹⁴ A.A. Phillips, 'Lawson Re-visited', in The Australian Tradition, second edition, p. 30.

¹⁵ see Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, Cleveland, Ohio, 1962.

2 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.¹⁰ Not even the alternative
 English tradition, which runs back from Dickens through Fielding and
 eventually to Jonson and ultimately ^{to} Chaucer, has had much influence in
 Australia. Steele Rudd's humor^u is too slapstick, too much a defence
 rather than a means of exploration, to qualify. There are greater
 similarities ^{with} ~~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.

¹⁶ F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, London, 1948, and elsewhere.