

Chapter 2

3 THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE: <

LAWSON AND FURPHY

Henry/

Joseph/

Marcus Clarke's imaginative encounter with Australia yields the System as its central image. The land sometimes supports this image, sometimes stands in contrast to it. With Lawson and Furphy, however, the central image becomes the bushman, ^{re} seen against the background of a land which sometimes offers promise, but which is characteristically hostile. Certainly, neither of them is unconcerned with the social system existing in the country, but this system is seen through the eyes of their bush workers rather than being the major subject. Furphy analyses ^Z the social system which oppresses his teamsters, and in that part of his book which became Rigby's Romance he dreams of a better ^{System}, but his major concern is with individual people in their duels with fate. Lawson explicitly criticises ^Z the system in such stories as "Arvie Aspinall's Alarm Clock,"¹ but these works tend to lapse into maudlin sentimentality rather than ^Z to achieve imaginative realisation. His best work is concerned with the shifts individuals like Steelman, Mitchell, Peter M'Laughlin and Joe Wilson make to cope with life, and particularly to live with what life has made of them.

¹~~The Prose Works of Henry Lawson, Sydney, 1935, Vol. I, 48-50.~~

Short Stories and Sketches, 1888-1922, edited by
Colin Roderick, Sydney, 1972, pp. 30-32.

It is commonplace to say that Lawson's landscape is dreary.

A.A. Phillips has commented that "if one assembled the meteorological statistics, one would probably find that the total rainfall in the Collected Works of Henry Lawson was about three inches.² Every reader remembers Hungerford.³

#

Indent

The country looks as though a great ash heap had been spread there, and mulga scrub and firewood planted - and neglected. The country looks just as bad for a hundred miles around Hungerford, and beyond that it gets worse - a blasted, barren wilderness that doesn't even howl. If it howled it would be a relief.

I believe that Bourke and Wills found Hungerford, and it's a pity they did; but, if I ever stand by the graves of the men who first travelled through this country, when there were neither roads nor stations, nor tanks, nor bores, nor pubs, I'll - I'll take my hat off. There were brave men in those days. (p.27) (p.106)

#

(NP)

Yet while the picture of the bush in this passage is the grimmest possible, it is somewhat balanced by the admiration for the men who first travelled to the area. They are the bushmen who were first moulded by these conditions. Certainly, ^{Lawson's} ~~this~~ admiration does not extend to the present inhabitants, who are almost as barren as their environment. ^{They} ~~However,~~ ~~they~~ are town dwellers, except for the drover who joins the narrator in 2

²'Lawson Revisited,' in The Australian Tradition, second edition, revised, Melbourne, 1966, p.21.

³'Hungerford', Works, Vol. I, 26-29.

Short Stories, pp. 105-7.

2 cursing the colonies. This curse is important, for it generalises² from Hungerford to all the colonies, and it is motivated by the social system, exemplified in the miserly terms of employment^{the driver} ~~has~~ been offered, as much as by the landscape. Yet even this gloomy element is balanced by the action of the storekeeper who gives a swagman free rations to take him on to Queensland.

The sketch of Hungerford exemplifies the mood which reappears time and again in Lawson, in such stories as "Settling on the Land,"¹ "Stragglers,"² or "In a Wet Season."³ It is symbolised² in the swagman in "Rats,"⁴ who fights with his own swag, and by the bush shanties and the derelicts who inhabit them.⁵ This sort of symbolism comes to a head in "The Bush Undertaker,"⁶ which has been analysed² by Brian Matthews.³

← In this last tale, the mood of the bush develops into an active force of evil, but, even so, in contrast to some of Barbara Baynton's stories,⁴ the evil is matched by a good-humored, ironic perseverance on the part of the human character, in this case the old shepherd.

⁴ Works, Vol. I, 135-7

⁵ See for example, 'An Incident at Stiffner's', Works, Vol. I, 309-14; 'Macquarie's Mate', ib., Vol. I, 187-191.

⁶ ib. Vol. I, 139-46

⁴ "The Nurse and Tutor of Eccentric Minds": Some Developments in Lawson's Treatment of Madness' Australian Literary Studies, Vol. IV, No. 3, 1970, pp. 251-7

⁵ Barbara Baynton, Bush Studies, Sydney, 1965. (First published, London, 1902.)

(NP)

⌋ In the bulk of Lawson's stories it is this human quality which is at the forefront, while the bush remains merely a presence in the background. Nevertheless, this ironic endurance is exercised^z by Lawson's bushmen not merely in the face of malevolence, but of defeat, and usually a defeat which has been brought about by their own weakness as much as by the harshness of the country. Lawson may celebrate the virtues of mateship, but it is the mateship of the damned, whose only strength is the "courage never to submit or yield." Yet even to call it courage is to put it at too high a price. Rather, it is ^athe flexibility which enables his bushmen to turn their backs on the past, accepting what has happened, but shouldering their swags again to accept whatever the future may bring. ^{This}The attitude is suggested by the closing sentences of "Stragglers".

Indent

K

Some of the men will roll up their swags on the morrow and depart; some will take another day's spell. It is all according to the tucker. (p. 55) (p. 94)

#

The attitude is both unsentimental and unillusioned. The degree of companionship shared in the hut which has been their temporary resting place has been important, both for the sake of morale and for the practical acts of assistance which have been performed - taking the "Wreck" up to the station for supplies, sharing food, baking bread. But the whole episode

⁹ Lawson, Works, Vol. I, 51-5.

⁶ Short Stories, pp. 91-4.

is seen as a passing ~~episode~~^{one} which has been brought about by one set of circumstances and will be ended or renewed by another.

A similarly casual air marks the personal relationships in Lawson's work, and particularly the deepest of all personal relationships, marriage, the failure of which is the typical reason for his bushmen being rootless.

We see this in "He'd Come Back". ~~101~~¹⁰¹ The city bushman describes the series of mishaps which break ^{up} his marriage, and the way in which he is again

accepted on his eventual return. The yarn seems finished, until one of the listeners asks "And what did you do?" and we learn that after a year the

husband deserted again, "but I meant it that time." The apparent willingness of both husband and wife is not enough to withstand either the chance ^{happenings}

which separate them in the first part of their marriage or the incompatibility which they discover after reunion. The story leaves it carefully unstated

whether this incompatibility is a product of the years of separation, or of innate characteristics which they discover only after the early ^{glamor} has

departed. We see a similar pattern in "On the Edge of the Plain", ~~102~~¹⁰² where

Mitchell explains how the welcome which he received on his return to the parental home lasted only a week before ¹⁰³ they began to growl because I

couldn't get any work to do. ¹⁰⁴ Human nature is just too weak to stand the

stresses of ordinary living. Another variation of this pattern is seen in

"Mitchell on Matrimony" ¹⁰⁵ where Mitchell describes how a husband should

7 ¹⁰ Works, Vol. I, 63-5. ~~Short Stories~~, pp.

8 ¹¹ Works, Vol. I, 59-60. ~~ib.~~ pp.

9 ¹² Works, Vol. I, 238-42. ~~ib.~~ pp.

2 treat his wife to show how he really loves her, only to reveal that, despite all these efforts on his part in his own marriage, his wife eventually left him for "another kind of fellow ". Once again, inexplicable, or at least unexplained, chance destroys man's attempts to find happiness and stability. The end of the process is seen in "The Union Buries Its Dead", ^{up} ~~to~~ where eventually man loses all of his identity except his union membership. This story indicates the limitations of Lawson's "Socialism as Mateship"; ~~as~~ the union is not a source of strength or hope, but merely a last desperate defence against total disintegration, the only thing left to men in a hostile environment.

All these characteristics of Lawson's work can be seen in the eight stories which cohere to form the elements of a novel - Joe Wilson. ~~5~~

In a note appended to these stories, Lawson states that he had intended to make Joe Wilson a "strong character" (p.90). In fact, he is anything but this. His marriage has virtually to be arranged by his mate, Jack Barnes. (p.16). Once married he tends to neglect Mary (pp.135-6). Even in the climactic story, where he decides to purchase the buggy which will give her some freedom of movement, he is pushed into the decision by the coach-[^]builders who have known Mary as a child and who understand her loneliness on the isolated selection, and by the chance sighting of young Black, Mary's unsuccessful suitor, dashing past with his wife in the kind of smart turnout Joe has been unable to provide for ~~Mary (pp.82-3)~~. The only firm decisions

¹⁴ ~~Works, Vol. II, 3-90.~~

Joe makes are symptoms of his fundamental weakness of character.

He refuses to listen to her suggestion to plant potatoes, but as he has no sound reason against the proposal he is fairly easily cajoled into adopting it, while still mentally reserving the right to blame Mary if things go wrong (pp. 75-6).

Most importantly, the whole series of stories ^{is} are told in retrospect by a man who is looking back on the better time of his life. The earliest story in chronological order, "Joe Wilson's Courtship," ¹⁵ ²⁶ starts with a series of reminders of how precarious is human happiness, and how fleeting is even the happiness of marriage. ^{Although} The subject matter of the story may be happiness, ~~but~~ its theme is not happiness itself, but rather its evanescence and rarity. During the story it seems only the greatest of good chance, helped along by Jack Barnes, which enables Joe and Mary to overcome their shyness and their mutual misunderstanding enough to ever discover that they are in love with each other. Then, when Joe finally comes to the point and states his intentions to the squatter, Mary's guardian, Black drifts off in a brown study as "I got thinking of the days when I was courting Mrs. Black." (p. 29). The ambivalent nature of his meditations is indicated by Joe's present happiness, which has sent Black's thoughts drifting back, and by the bitter remark Black has just made about the fact that his wife and son are now managing the station, leaving him as a discard of time. The account of the Spicers in the two stories that constitute

¹⁵ Works, Vol. II, 3-29. The first story written, according to Lawson's Note (p. 90), was 'Brighten's Sister-in-Law'.

"Water Them Geraniums"¹⁶ is ^{an example} a paradigm of one of the possible fates which awaits Joe and Mary, the quarrel they have on their arrival at Lahey's Creek¹⁷ an indication that already they are heading in the direction which finishes with the man a lonely wanderer, carrying his guilt with his swag, like the characters of the earlier sketches and of the later stories centred around Bourke and Solong. The ultimate cause of the quarrel is now plain to Joe the narrator, although it was concealed from him then as participant.

———

Indent

It's an awful thing to me, now I look back to it, to think how far apart we had grown, what strangers we were to each other. It seems, now, as though we had been sweethearts long years before, and had never really met since. (p.50) (pp. 570-1)

———

(NP)

|| The immediate cause of their conflict, their inability to find anywhere decent to settle down, is caused by Joe's own weakness for drink, which had previously denied them his chance of a job in Sydney. (p.53) Then, before we even see Mrs. Spicer, the narrator puts the quarrel in its context by reminding us that his destruction of his own happiness proved to be irrevocable.

———

Indent

... But the time came, and not many years after, when I stood by the bed where Mary lay, white and still; and, amongst other things, I kept saying, "I'll give in, Mary - I'll give in," ... (p.54) (p.573)

———

¹⁶Works, Vol. II, 48-72.
¹⁷Works, Vol. II, 52-4.

The constant figures in Lawson's stories are the deserted and dying women, and the men, defeated through their own stubbornness and weakness. The narrator of the Joe Wilson stories is himself one of these men.

It is doubtful how far Joe Wilson can be distinguished from Lawson himself. The actual incidents of his life as selector are not autobiographical, but his character seems to be very close to that of Lawson himself, both in the stories which tell of his courtship and marriage and in the later ones where he appears mainly in the role of spectator. ^{Wilson} He tells us that "I drank now and then, and made a fool of myself . . . but I only drank because I felt less sensitive, and the world seemed a lot saner and better and kinder when I had a few drinks" (pp. 4-5). This passage not only suggests Lawson's own weakness for drink, but also the somewhat self-pitying attitude which runs through many of the stories. This ^{attitude} arises from a fancied sense of superiority, coupled with the feeling that the world has not paid him his due. So we read of the hardships of his early life on a poor selection, "all for nothing", and of :

Indent

K

The few months at the little bark school, with a teacher who couldn't spell. The cursed ambition or craving that tortured my soul as a boy - ambition or craving for - I didn't know what for! For something better and brighter, anyhow. And I made the life harder by reading at night. (p. 50) (p. 570)

This could certainly apply as easily to Lawson as to Joe Wilson.

The same note appears in other stories, where the narrator paints himself as someone of higher sensitivity who understands others. We find

this in "The Babies in the Bush",¹⁸ where the narrator, travelling under
 the pseudonym of "Jack Ellis", is the drover to whom the boss is able to
 unburden himself, on the basis of a common interest in poetry. Yet it
 is only in the ^{later} ~~last~~, and in some ways ^{weaker} ~~weakest~~, of his stories, beginning
 with "The Blindness of One Eyed Bogan",¹⁹ that Lawson explicitly appears
 as Harry, to whom Mitchell tells the yarns.

Yet, while the details of the stories can be treated as autobio-
 graphy, ^{100%} there is ^{no} ~~a~~ sense in which the narrator can be identified with the
 author in a way in which Furphy cannot be identified with Tom Collins in
Such is Life.²⁰ Furphy's yarn is ostensibly factual autobiography, but
 as we read it the narrator's blindness to the implications of his own story
 become increasingly obvious. On the other hand, while Lawson's work
 is ostensibly fiction, his whole manner is that of one speaking directly
 to the reader about men and places he has personally known. Like the
 Ancient Mariner, he buttonholes us with such opening remarks as "You
 remember when we hurried home from the old bush school ...", "The
 worst bore in Australia just now ...", or "We were tramping ..."²¹
 The tone is that of a man who is about to share his reminiscences with us,

¹⁸Works, Vol. II, 130-48.
¹⁹Works, Vol. II, 404-12.
²⁰Joseph Furphy ('Tom Collins'), Such is Life, London and Sydney, 1948. First published, Sydney, 1903.
²¹Works, Vol. I, 3, 6, 13.

2 or to remind us of some common experience in our past. They differ from openings like "Jack Drew sat on the edge of the shaft ...", or "The Western train had arrived ...", ²² in which a scene is set where action can take place. These stories establish their own objective worlds, whereas the others, especially when read consecutively, gradually build up the world of a particular person.

The important characters in establishing this kind of world in Lawson's earlier stories are Steelman and Mitchell. Steelman is a confidence man, who owes loyalty to no-one, except perhaps, in a perverse way, to his companion and frequent dupe, Smith. He belongs in New Zealand, and the stories about him are told in the third person. The author's role in these stories is impersonal, and although he creates a distinctive character and world, the experience remains at a distance. We admire Steelman's adroitness in surviving in a hostile world, but he remains the outsider, the curiosity who is a subject of comment rather than a mate whose experience ^S we share. When we first meet Mitchell, ^a alighting from the Western train referred to above, he too is a curiosity like Steelman. ²³ Instead of being the outsider who lives by his wits, however, Mitchell becomes the mate who shares our failures. Although it is not until the story "Our Pipes" ²⁴ that Lawson drops the third person and speaks in the first person as Mitchell's mate, he has already implicitly

²² Works, Vol. I, 19, 11.

²³ "Enter Mitchell", Works, Vol. I, 11-12.

²⁴ Works, Vol. I, 146-9.

established himself as the auditor of Mitchell's reminiscences by throwing the main burden of narration on Mitchell himself. When Steelman is allowed to speak for himself, ~~it~~ it is because the author dramatises him, painting him ~~something~~ larger than life in the process. Even his sorrows have an air of humorous exaggeration about them. But Mitchell is a victim of the ironies of life. So when he uses his wits, as in "Mitchell: a Character Sketch", ~~22~~ he does not assume the character of a confidence man, like Steelman, but of someone having a piece of luck for a change. We thus identify with him in a way we cannot identify with Steelman. Steelman we read about, Mitchell talks to us over the campfire. We distinguish him from the author, but the author presents him as someone he has known and whose yarns he has ^{heard} heard at first hand.

These distinctions in character are not apparent in the earliest stories. Steelman's first appearance is as the mate who refuses to take the hint that his welcome is exhausted, a role which, apart from the lack of consideration shown for the wife, could nearly be played by Mitchell. ~~27~~ By the time we come to "Steelman's Pupil", ~~28~~ however, his character is fully developed as the self-contained cynic. We neither admire nor

~~25~~ "How Steelman Told His Story", Works, Vol. I, 290-3.

26 Works, Vol. I, 137-9.

27 "Steelman", Works, Vol. I, 67-9.

28 Works, Vol. I, 114-8.

2 condemn, but are amused. When finally he tells his story, not directly to the reader nor to the narrator, but to Smith, it is the story of a man whose generosity has been betrayed by family, employers and wife, and who now follows the principle "strike hard ... Failure has no case, and you can't build one for it." (p. 298) The images he uses for the man who can look after himself are those of the axe, the grindstone and the bullock. While we may suspect that he is not quite as hard as he asserts, and that his companionship with Smith contains some genuine feeling, he presents in the main the picture of a man who has overcome his earlier softness and now successfully confronts the world with a hardness to equal its own.

Mitchell, on the contrary, is characteristically sociable. In "Mitchell: a Character Sketch"²⁹ he is as adept at scrounging as Steelman, but he does it on behalf of his mates as well as of himself. At his first ~~entry~~ ^{appearance,} he has a dog with him, an indulgence which Steelman could not be guilty of, and his fierceness towards the cabby proves to be just bluster.³⁰ His favourite mood is reminiscence - of his family, marriage, boyhood - but his reminiscence can also be pointed, as when, for the benefit of the newly-married but somewhat neglectful Joe, he reflects on the way a husband should treat his wife.³¹ ~~For~~ ^{At} this sketch, while showing Mitchell's sensitivity, also reveals the way this sensitivity has been betrayed in the past. Mitchell,

²⁹Works, Vol. I, 137-9.

³⁰'Enter Mitchell', Works, Vol. I, 11-12.

³¹Works, Vol. I, 238-42.

however, answers the world's harshness not ~~with hardness~~ but with the same irony he finds in circumstance. ^{in kind}

When Lawson returns to Mitchell in the later books and the more elaborately plotted stories centring mainly on Bourke, Mitchell's character is fully realized^Z. He does not take a leading role in the action, but is the by⁽stander who understands what is going on and who, by virtue of the respect accorded him, shapes public opinion and thus the outcome of the actions of others. ^{In "Send Round the Hat",} He is the one to comment ironically on the selfish pleasure the Giraffe derives from his acts of charity; ~~but~~ he is also the one to start the collection with a quid when the Giraffe himself is off to be married.³² Later, he turns ^{public} ~~the~~ opinion against running "Lord Douglas" out of town.³³ When Lawson, who has already appeared as the housepainter who contributes to the Bulletin, ^{in "The Blindness of One-Eyed Bogan",} ~~and now~~ appears as "Harry", ^{and} ^K makes a slighting remark about one of the strongest opponents of Mitchell's charity ~~on that occasion~~, it is Mitchell who tells the story which shows the other side of Bogan's character.³⁵ Lawson is not consistent in the details of Mitchell's life, for we learn in ^{"Mitchell on Matrimony"} ~~an early sketch~~ that he has been married "at one period of his chequered career",³⁶ whereas in

³²'Send Round the Hat,' Works, Vol. II, 363.

³³Works, Vol. II, 401-3.

³⁴Works, Vol. II, 369.

³⁵'The Blindness of One-Eyed Bogan', Works, Vol. II, 404.

³⁶Works, Vol. I, 239.

a later story Mitchell tells Peter M'Laughlan that "I couldn't get the girl I wanted" and therefore he expects to remain unmarried.³⁷ However, the character development is perfectly consistent between the Mitchell who corrects both Joe's attitude to marriage and also, by telling the story of "The Hero of Redclay", his lack of charity towards another shearer,³⁸ and the later Mitchell who recognizes³⁹ the significance of Peter M'Laughlan's story of "Gentleman Once".⁴⁰

The character of Mitchell which is developed in this way acts as a foil against the more self-indulgent figure of Joe Wilson. Joe seems to appear first *in the guise of* ~~as the name of~~ the narrator of "She Wouldn't Speak",⁴¹ and then becomes attached to Mitchell's mate in "A Vision of Sandy Blight",⁴² although the Jack and Joe who appear in "For Auld Lang Syne" may also be Mitchell and Wilson.⁴³ The point is that during the books which precede Joe Wilson, Lawson creates a person for his narrator, and gives this figure a past and a background. The tone of voice of the Joe Wilson stories, in which Joe speaks in the first person,

³⁷Works, Vol. II, 276. The contradiction could be reconciled by allowing for a long period between the marriages of Jack Barnes and Joe Wilson, and putting Mitchell's marriage in this period, but there is no reason to suppose that Lawson plotted in this detail. cf. also Vol. I, 99-100.

³⁸Works, Vol. I, 314-29.

³⁹Works, Vol. II, 270-84.

⁴⁰Works, Vol. I, 178-80.

⁴¹Works, Vol. I, 212-16.

⁴²Works, Vol. I, 196-7.

then becomes characteristic of the greater part of the succeeding work, so that we identify Joe with the narrators of such tales as "The Babies in the Bush", "Telling Mrs. Baker" and "The Bush-Fire".⁴³ The stories around Bourke seem to continue the same tone, although presumably they take place much later. Finally, we scarcely notice the transition from "Joe" to "Harry" when Tom Hall comes down with Mitchell to Sydney (p. 1404).¹⁰ In his work up to this point Lawson has created a consistent world as seen through the eyes of Joe Wilson. Characters such as Mitchell himself, Dave Regan and Jimmy Nowlett keep reappearing and thus lend continuity to the stories. If we except the stories of Sydney, the venues are either the western divide country between Gulgong and Solong, where Joe and his mates grew up, and where he selected, or Bourke, metropolis of the great north-west to which the men drift or are driven. The times range from the Roaring Days of gold, or rather just at the end of this period, through ~~the~~ childhood at the old bark school which provides a focal point for the different lives, to middle age in the outback. The embryonic novel, of Joe Wilson, ties together this broad pattern around a single archetypal story, which thereafter acts as the central myth of the prose works.

Joe Wilson is the man who lives out the stories hinted at in earlier sketches like "Settling on the Land", "A Day on a Selection" and "The Drover's Wife".⁴⁴ With his mate Jack Barnes, and Jack's wife, he comes

⁴³Works, Vol. II, 130-48, 160-72, 208-17.

⁴⁴Works, Vol. I, 6-11, 36-41, 107-14.

from the same bark school as the red-bearded selector of "His Colonial Oath", the venue of New Year's Night dances and the master's mistake.⁴⁵ The selector of Lahey's Creek,⁴⁶ who still likes to "sink a shaft somewhere" (p. 33), is the successor of prospectors like Dave Regan. Before his marriage he has knocked about the country, and once he gets his selection he sets about fulfilling the national dream with land of his own. The dream fails, however, partly through his own weakness, more through the hostility of the land, which beggars the selectors with its poverty, drives them away from home and then destroys their families through loneliness, and finally leaves the men as wanderers either without a home or unable to return to it. The end is oblivion through the horrors of drink, or through suicide. Joe tells the story after the dream has failed and he has lost both Mary and the land, but even during the time of which he is speaking he encounters, directly or indirectly, the strange shanty and ominous black bottle of Brighten and his sister-in-law (pp. 42, 45); the suicide of the swagman near Mrs. Spicer's (p. 63); and later Mrs. Spicer's own death (p. 72), following the inexorable breaking up of her family, the incipient break-down of his own marriage and the near-death of his child. Against this catalogue of woe the only qualities which can be set are the passing happiness of the courtship, the companionship in adversity, the momentary victory of the buggy, and the grim humor^u of Mrs. Spicer,^λ

⁴⁵ Works, Vol. I, pp. 127-8, 350-5.

⁴⁶ Joe Wilson, Works, Vol. II, 3-90.

together with the courage and endurance of the women. But if these qualities suggest a belief in the human potential to overcome adversity, they are contradicted by the weakness of Joe's own character, which seems defeated from the start.

The only answer Lawson finds to this wretchedness and self-[^]defeat is the irony of Mitchell or the wisdom, born of suffering, displayed by men like Peter M'Laughlan. These men cannot be defeated because life can no longer surprise them, and consequently they no longer need to run away from it. Significantly, neither is a drunkard although both frequent hotels. M'Laughlan, like ~~Walter Head~~,⁴⁷ has already faced the despair which comes from a man's own weakness, and he is now able to endure life, but only as a man who is fundamentally defeated.⁴⁸ Yet the fact that M'Laughlan does endure, and in fact lives a useful life, means that Lawson, as Phillips has noted,⁴⁹ draws back from the tragic view of the human condition. In his work he counters the facts of loneliness, suicide, ~~the horrors~~,^{drink and failure} not only with the sentimental indulgence of Joe Wilson, but also with the sympathy of M'Laughlan and the irony of Mitchell, who refuses to accept as final either the good or the evil. Mitchell, who is perhaps Lawson's ideal, is able to take some of the seriousness from ~~the Giraffe's~~ charity,⁵⁰ to accept the possibility that he himself is capable

⁴⁷'The Babies in the Bush', Works, Vol. II, 130-48

⁴⁸'The Story of "Gentleman Once"', Works, Vol. II, 270-84.

⁴⁹A.A. Phillips, op. cit., p. 27.

⁵⁰Lawson, Works, Vol. II, 368, 373.

of any treachery, even blacklegging, and with it the probability that the worst of men has some good in him,⁵¹ and to accept the defeats of his own past while still pressing forward to tomorrow.⁵²

The dominant mood of the stories of Joe Wilson and his mates is, however, one of guilt and defeat which is only softened by charity and irony. The positive side of Lawson finds its strongest expression in the five stories of Dave Regan which follow Joe Wilson.⁵³ In these stories the humor^u depends not on contrived plotting, as it does in later work like the tales of Old Mac the carrier,⁵⁴ but on character and situation. Dave himself in these stories is energetic in pursuit of his own interests, but he is able to take what comes not just with resignation but with positive enjoyment. When ^{the members of} his party are flushed out of their golden graveyard by the irate widow, they take what they can and leave (p. 103). He tells and enjoys the story of his own discomfiture over the Chinaman's ghost. (pp. 103-6), outwits the lambing-down publican who goes by the name of Poisonous Jimmy. (p. 112), and goes back to the apparently haunted house to trace the secret of the Ghostly Door (p. 118). In each of these cases, one or more of Lawson's

⁵¹Works, Vol. II, 397.

⁵²Works, Vol. II, 275-6.

⁵³Works, Vol. II, 93-123.

⁵⁴Works, Vol. II, 330-44.

bogies of drink, the loneliness of the bush, the fickleness of fortune or death is laid. But perhaps the mood of this group of stories is best epitomised in the final sentence of "The Loaded Dog". After the prospector's dog has terrified the goldfield with the cartridge Dave and Andy have constructed, with the intention of dynamiting the fish, life returns to normal, except that, "for years afterwards, Dave has to put up with his friends greeting him with the drawl 'Ello, Da-a-ve! How's the fishin' getting on, Da-a-ve' (p. 112). In its lazy drawl, its enjoyment of the comic, and its easy friendship, this sentence sums up the positive spirit of Lawson's bushmen. ~~Yet even here we need to note that~~ Lawson's vision of good-humored enjoyment of what life has to offer embraces a male society only.

NP

~~Yet~~ This does not mean that Lawson believes that mateship is limited to men. On the contrary, his women rally around just as strongly in times of distress, when death strikes or when children are lost.⁵⁵ But while Lawson strongly and explicitly embraces the code of mateship, he shows it far more as a necessary defence against the assaults of life and the injustices of society than as a positive value in itself. So in "Shall We Gather at the River" we see how people draw comfort from each other to face the hardships of drought, enmity and desertion, but the hope exists only in words, the problems remain real.⁵⁶ We are told that "mates are

⁵⁵Works, Vol. II, 142, 305.

⁵⁶Works, Vol. II, 245-55.

closer than brothers in the bush " (p. 258), but this explanation covers Joe Wilson's consciousness of his mate's victory in love, and precedes the betrayal in a shanty of the trust arising from that love. We learn that "mates pull mates out of hell" (p. 282), but this victory is won only in the context of drugs, drunkenness and death. In the story of "Send Round the Hat",⁵⁷ like the others set in Bourke, we see how the people of the outback stick by each other in trouble but, on the whole, the life there is shiftless and despairing, characterised^Z by "Gentleman Once" as hell (p. 364). Even the careful classification of the meanings of mateship which Lawson gives us in "That Pretty Girl in the Army"⁵⁸ is put in a context where Jack Moonlight's mate, the narrator, is unable to help.

Yet these constant assertions[~] of mateship cannot merely be dismissed. If they do not remove the general gloom, they do at least lighten it. Moreover, Lawson extends the creed of mateship beyond the narrow bounds of personal commitment or political system when, in the story of "Lord Douglas",⁵⁹ he has Mitchell admit the overriding commitment to a fellow human being. The reason that this spirit does not predominate in his work is not so much that the spirit is false, but rather that for most of the time it is outweighed by the more indulgent, and therefore more readily defeated spirit of Joe Wilson.

⁵⁷Works, Vol. II, 363-78.

⁵⁸Works, Vol. II, 378-94. Mateship is discussed on pp. 388-9.

⁵⁹Works, Vol. II, 401-4.

When we move from Henry Lawson to Joseph Furphy, we immediately enter a more robust world. Furphy's bullockies may have curses upon them, his tale encompasses misanthropy, injustice and death, his lovers may never meet, but essentially Such is Life remains a human comedy. Like Lawson, he takes refuge in irony from outrageous fortune, but the irony implies a positive acceptance of life and enjoyment of its vicissitudes rather than a sentimental avoidance of its possibilities. "Tom Collins" and his companions may be constantly disappointed, but they are also constantly ready to enjoy the present, whether it is offering them the opportunity to duff some grass, to do some fishing, or merely to have a yarn. The comedy, whether of a lost child, failed romance or missing garments, is absurd and tends to slapstick, but it is presented in a more genial tone than that associated with Dave Regan and his mates. It is a part of the whole of life, an example of the way in which fate treats men, and ^{in this way} it is closely related to tragedy. This relationship is not, however, that of the comedy which is tragic when seen through the eyes of the sufferer, as in the figure of the broken-hearted clown, nor is it the desperate joke against fate which is the tone of Lawson's comedies, as well as of ~~the~~ Steele Rudd's farces and the whole tall-story school of Australian humor ^u in ballad, prose and, above all, cartoon. ¹³ Rather, Furphy's laughter is that of the man who

⁶⁰ See A. D. Hope, 'Steele Rudd and Henry Lawson,' in C. B. Christesen (ed.) On Native Grounds, Sydney, 1968, pp75-83; Vane Lindesay, The Inked-In Image, Melbourne, 1970.

knows that he has just missed disaster, but is still able to appreciate the comedy of the actual situation in which he has landed.

A clear example of this occurs in Chapter V of Such is Life, where Saunders' story of the child stuck in the hollow log does nothing to lessen the tragedy of the stories Thompson and Stevenson tell before and after, yet still makes the point that life can as easily turn out absurd as tragic. ~~62~~ Even the way in which Saunders introduces his story, by taking up an ostensibly minor point about the proper technique of searching, mirrors the casualness which Furphy finds in life itself, whereby great matters hinge on apparently trivial details, and lead either to comedy or to tragedy as a consequence. But while the point has been made that this could be regarded as a nihilistic or at least pessimistic attitude to life, ¹⁴~~63~~ such an interpretation is invalidated by the sheer pleasure which Collins takes in life's unpredictability.

This whole chapter is, in fact, an extended celebration of contradiction. The tragic story of Mary O'Halloran is succeeded by the comedy of Saunders' tale, which nevertheless is punctuated by reminders that most of the participants are now dead. The tales in their turn provide the entertainment for a collection of bullockies enjoying a night of rare tranquility and contentment as their beasts graze for once on ample pasture. The morning, however, shows that their tranquility has been misplaced, for the men are in

~~62~~ Such is Life, pp. 242-5.

⁶³e.g. John Barnes, Joseph Furphy, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 18-19; H.P. Heseltine, 'The Literary Heritage', in Christesen, op.cit. pp.7-8.

fact victims of an elaborate revenge by which the Chinese boundary riders pay off their past injuries. The chapter ends well for the bullockies, nevertheless, for they are able to use their superior bush skills to outwit the squatter and steal not only more of his grass, but some of his bullocks as well. The people involved in these episodes include an old lubra, an outcast boundary rider, bullockies, well-sinkers, a Dutchman, Chinese stockmen and the squatter himself, who suffers the unpardonable weakness of a headache which interrupts his business. We therefore see during one evening two spectra of human possibilities, from tragedy to comedy and from material profit to material loss, and the whole gamut of human types, from humblest to highest and from outcast and isolate to the companionable, familial and loving.

The pessimistic interpretation of Furphy's novel is, I believe, put in its right perspective by Chris Wallace-Crabbe, who contrasts the comedy of Furphy with that of Xavier Herbert.⁶⁴

-

K

In the more Dostoievskian world of Capricornia ... an irrevocably tragic pattern includes a great deal of comedy; in Such is Life, on the other hand, a predominantly comic world manages to encompass the tragedies of such people as Mary O'Halloran, George Murdoch and Andy Glover without demanding a grimly stoical response.⁶⁵ ~~15~~

#

⁶⁴Chris. Wallace-Crabbe, 'Joseph Furphy, Realist', in Grahame Johnston (ed.) Australian Literary Criticism, Melbourne, 1962, pp. 139-7.

⁶⁵ib., p. 143.

Mr. Wallace-Crabbe goes on to suggest that the only response to the vagaries of life which can command Furphy's assent is the kind of "warm, untheoretical concern for other men" displayed by Stewart of Kooltoopa.⁶⁶ This, however, is a response within the novel to life itself, not the response to life of the novel. The consistent response of the novel is comic, as Furphy deflates the human vanities by which "men vainly, ridiculously, seek to systematise, generalise, moralise and theologise."⁶⁷ Mr. Wallace-Crabbe argues that this point of view finally constitutes a moral limitation whereby Collins is "allowed to escape from any lasting sense of responsibility for his fellow men."⁶⁸ Finally, then, this interpretation, although stressing the comedy, is not so different from the nihilist interpretation of H. P. Heseltine, who argued that the point of the sociability of Such is Life is that "it enables its characters to escape from the unbearable reality of being themselves. Society is an act, a decent bluff, which makes bearable the final emptiness, the nothingness of the honestly experienced inner life."⁶⁹ If life is nothing, then there can be no human responsibility, and it is almost a matter of indifference whether

⁶⁶ib., p. 144.

⁶⁷ib., loc. cit.

⁶⁸ib., p. 146.

⁶⁹'The Literary Heritage', in Christesen, op. cit. p. 8.

one chooses to accept and enjoy its vagaries or recoil in horror from them. However, I do not believe Furphy was ~~faced by~~^{acknowledged} this choice. In accepting the comedy of life, he also found it worthwhile, and the value he found lay precisely in the area of human responsibility.

Recent critical discussion which has drawn attention quite properly to the carefully worked relationship of ~~them~~^{these events} and structure in Such is Life has tended to obscure the fact that this the book is finally, perhaps more than most novels, about people. A.A. Phillips points out that Furphy presents a microcosm of society, ^{16 20} but his concern to show the care with which Furphy constructed his book prevents him from drawing out fully the implications of his observation. ¹⁷ The two important facts are that Furphy has presented us with the whole range of social types of the Riverina, and that he has emphasised ² the randomness of the events which bring them to us. Moreover, in most of the chapters we are presented with his characters in a state of recollection rather than of action. In other words, the emphasis is on what life does to people, and how they respond, rather than on what people do with life.

If we examine the novel we will find that it contains only about a dozen positive and significant actions, and these can be reduced to three groupings. The most constant is the war between squatter and ⁰ driver over grass, and includes the successful theft by the bullockies in the first chapter and the counter-coup by Smythe and his stockmen in Chapter V, as well as

⁷⁰ A.A. Phillips, 'The Craftsmanship of Furphy', op. cit., p. 33.

Stewart's succor^u for the distressed bullockies during the drought, and the ambiguous encounter between Montgomery and Priestley, when the reluctant generosity of the former salvages the blighted labors^u of the latter. The second grouping follows Collins' loss of his clothes, and includes the destruction of the hay-rick^h and the eventual imprisonment of Andrew Glover for arson. The third group concerns the pursuit of men by women, although it also is linked to the positive acts of charity to Warrigal Alf by Tom and by Stewart. The women who pursue men are Mary O'Halloran, with tragic results, and Molly, or Nosey Alf. With these we should put Kate Vanderdecken from Rigby's Romance,⁷¹ which was originally a part of Such is Life.

Even this list exaggerates the amount of direct action in the novel. Of these events, only the battles over grass, Tom's burning of the hay-rick and Kate's pursuit of Rigby are shown directly. We learn of the rest indirectly, as something reminds Tom or one of his companions of another incident. Because the notions are presented to us obliquely, through the mouths of participants and spectators, and because the chains of cause and effect linking these actions are scattered and hidden throughout the book, our attention is concentrated on the reactions of the characters rather than on the action itself. Even the important episode of the bush search for Mary O'Halloran is told by Steve Thompson as an example of the superior powers of primitive people rather than for its own sake. Moreover, Furphy

⁷¹Melbourne, 1921. For account of the revision of the MS., see Barnes, *op. cit.*

introduces it by drawing attention both to Thompson's self-conscious skill as a narrator and to the studied indifference of his auditors (p. 232). This attitude of indifference is reinforced by the way Thompson concludes his story, most of which is heard without interruption. Then, just as he has described the discovery of the child, whose voice has just been heard calling for "Daddy", but who is now dead from suffocation in the loose mould into which she has fallen, Steve comments, "Now, that little girl was only five years old; and she had walked nothing less than twenty-two miles - might be nearer twenty-five" (p. 240). The silence with which his story is received is explained by alluding to the same idea of astonishment at the distance Mary had covered. Yet this indifference to events is only apparent, as is made plain by the vehemence of Stevenson's remark that "This Dan has much to be thankful for" (p. 241), and his story of the loss of his brother, as well as by Tom's reflections on the way Rory would be confronted by pathetic reminders "that the irremediable loss is a reality, from which there can be no awakening" (p. 247). In the light of these remarks, the assumed indifference of the bushmen becomes merely a stance by which they can accept reality and yet go on living.

It is in the light of this reality that Tom's celebrated philosophy of free will and destiny must be understood. As set out in Chapter II, it suggests that man is like a train running on a line with occasional junctions. At these points he has to choose, but once having chosen he is then forced to follow the line to its destination or to the next set of points. Moreover,

his choice involves him with the fate of others similarly travelling along their own lines (pp. 85-88). John Barnes suggests that Furphy meant this philosophy to be taken seriously,⁷² although he does not think it can be regarded as a serious explanation of the meaning of life. Nevertheless, the novel can be considered as demonstrating this theory. The two most explicitly relevant incidents are Tom's decision in Chapter III to have a smoke before crossing the river, a decision which leads to the loss of his clothes and ^{to} the eventual imprisonment of Andrew Glover, and his courteous decision not to disturb the swagman in Chapter II, a decision which leads to the death of Mary O'Halloran. Now, although each of these decisions is but one of the many circumstances which lead to the particular outcome, it is still the one choice which has been in the power of the narrator. Yet the choice has to be made without any knowledge of the pertinent mesh of circumstance, so it must be made, in this sense, irresponsibly. The fact of choice does not, therefore, bear the weight which Mr/ Phillips places on it when he claims that it is not "compatible with the belief that human life is futile."⁷³ On the contrary, the novel demonstrates that choice is usually futile. The value of human life lies in the stance with which we confront this fact. This is why "we do not feel any dramatic seizure of ^{the} points^o at the crises of choice."⁷⁴ We do not

⁷²Barnes, *op. cit.* p. 17.

⁷³'The Literary Heritage Reassessed', in Christesen, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁷⁴*ib.* p. 22.

know when these crises are upon us, and to present them dramatically would contradict Furphy's understanding of the essentially undramatic nature of life. The response Furphy finds adequate includes, as Mr. Phillips also points out, a stoic endurance, but it also involves the kind of unconsidered kindness which Tom shows to Warrigal Alf, Stewart to Alf, Montgomery to Priestley or the whole coterie of bushmen to Rory in his time of need. This response is more than mere acceptance of life, for it creates a positive value in the face of fate.

This is the context of Tom Collins' unanswered question to Steve Thompson, "Would you suppose ... that the finding of George Murdoch's body was a necessary incitement among the causes that led to the little girl's getting lost?" (p. 247) Thompson does not answer the question because he is asleep, but Furphy sends him asleep precisely because the question is unanswerable. Furphy's subsequent reflections become generalised and sentimental, but they also focus on the precise image of the boots which Mary had shed along the way. There is no justification for suggesting, as does Mr. Wallace-Crabbe, that the "O'Hallorans are all too easily forgotten", nor that the failure to answer the question allows Tom Collins "to escape from any lasting sense of responsibility for his fellow-men." Furphy does not acquiesce in "an amoral and fatalistic universe" but accepts a universe which behaves in this fashion and investigates the possible responses of men to it.

⁷⁵ Wallace-Crabbe, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

The response of the bushmen to Mary's loss is twofold. On the one hand, they do everything they can to find her in time and thus to avoid the tragedy. When, however, tragedy has struck they accept it and go on living. Barefoot Bob, the first tracker, has been to Queensland and back. The drovers who hear the yarn go to sleep, and then wake the next morning to confront fate's latest throw against themselves when they discover that their stock has been impounded. The chapter closes with comedy which does not negate the tragedy at its core, but indicates the only possible response other than despair. His ability to find this response enables Furphy to escape the melancholy which characterises Lawson.

This distinction between Lawson and Furphy can be made clear if we just glance at the way they treat their younger days. Lawson is typically nostalgic. Schooldays and youth were times of an innocence and of prospects which have been irrevocably destroyed. "An Echo from the Old Bark School" provides an example of the way Lawson looked on the past.⁷⁶ The sketch is redolent of innocence, nostalgia and loss. The same feeling marks Mitchell's discussion in "Our Pipes".⁷⁷ It is perhaps clearest in the opening paragraphs of "Joe Wilson's Courtship".⁷⁸ "There are many times in this world when a healthy boy is happy ... There are times when a man is happy ... But I think the happiest time in a man's life is when he's courting a girl ... Happiness is something which can be

⁷⁶Works, Vol. I, 88-9.

⁷⁷Works, Vol. I, 146-9.

⁷⁸Works, Vol. II, 3-29.

singled out, not something which is characteristic of life, and it lies in the past. In the last story, too, there is the added feeling of self-pity and difference; "I wasn't a healthy-minded, average boy; I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake . . ." Furphy, in his persona of Tom Collins, also has this feeling that he is different from others, but his sense of superiority is constantly deflated as the author arranges events to reveal how Tom Collins' prized learning and wisdom is a continual source of error. His attitude to his past is summed up in his description of Thompson in the first chapter, when he remarks that "I knew him well, for we had been partners in dogflesh and colleagues in larceny when we were, as the poet says, nearer to heaven than in maturer life" (p. 3). The poet's belief in childhood innocence is gently mocked without being entirely dismissed, the illicit joys of youth are acknowledged, but the past is firmly set aside in favour of the present.

It is not, however, merely in the oblique way that he presents his stories that Furphy shifts our attention from the event to the response. His pretentious, self-mocking, circumlocutory language itself invites us to consider the speakers and their speech as much as their subject matter. This is true of both his own style, with its learned allusions and tortuous and usually vain philosophizing^z, and of the way in which he renders the bushman's language. For example, during the bullockies' discomfiture at the end of Chapter I, Dixon is unable to take part in the action because, as we later learn, he has been kicked by Collins' horse. He sits on his own horse giving advice.

"... Lay her whole (adj.) weight on-to him, an' jam him, so's he can't budge if it was to save his (adj.) life." ... The next moment, ... both bullocks were gone ...

K

"O, go to (sheol). You're no (adj.) good. You ain't fit to (purvey offal to Bruin). An' here's them (adj.) sneaks gone; an' Martin he'll be on top of me in two (adj.) twos; an' me left by my own (adj.) self, like a (adj.) natey cat in a (adj.) trap. May the holy" &c., &c. "If I'd that horse," he continued, glancing furiously at Cleopatra, "I'd make him smell (adj. sheol)." (p. 57)

If we replace the parenthesised ^Zeuphemisms as we read, we have the full flavour and rhythm of the bullocky's language. But if we read it as it is written, we are constantly pulled up short by the punctuation, and an entirely different rhythm results. Furphy thus simultaneously dramatises ^Zhis character and invites us to pause and study him carefully as he exhibits him as an example for our consideration, for "Such is Life" ^U

The effect of this style is to force us constantly to consider the underlying patterns of the life he is presenting to us. The language thus reinforces the patterning of the events. In each case we are driven back to consider the people who are at the heart of the pattern. It is true that, although these characters are effectively dramatised ^Zthrough their speech, "they are characters who are observed", ¹⁴ and that we are not presented with their "honestly experienced inner life" ²⁰ ⁸⁰. But this is precisely what is distinct about Furphy. He is like the medieval romancers in that he is concentrating on the externals of life, the web of circumstance and the way

⁷⁹ John Barnes, 'The Structure of Joseph Furphy's Such is Life', in C.B. Christesen, op.cit., p. 56.

⁸⁰ Heseltine, op.cit. p. 8.

men behave, rather than on inner motives and personal vision. Like the romancers, this has led him to a tapestry form of organisation, for when the chronicler is interested in the underlying pattern there is a sense in which any episode can be relevant, and so a book tightly organised around a single dramatic situation would be misleading. The sense of life as it is lived is conveyed not by showing how one person, or group of people, has experienced it, but by showing the reader episodes, letting him observe people as they live, and inviting him to discover connections and speculate on causes. The conclusion implied by Furphy's novel is that the pleasure of life lies in its variety, but that its value lies in kindness and mutuality.

The word mutuality suggests a further difference between Lawson and Furphy. In Lawson, mateship verges on gospel, and is the sole defence left to his characters against loneliness and failure. Furphy does not insist on it in the same way, but is much more matter-of-fact about it. His groups of men are brought together by casual circumstance, finding themselves camped on the same grass or caught in the same sandstorm, and they part equally casually. Even where there is a longer bond, as between Tom Collins and Steve Thompson, their behaviour is equally casual.

#

K

"Taking it easy, Tom?" conjectured a familiar voice.
 "No, Steve," I murmured, without even raising my eyes.
 "Tea in the quart-pot there ..." (p. 221)

#

There is nothing to indicate that Steve has come on Tom quite unawares in the middle of nowhere. Yet in the offer of tea, made just as readily to the stranger, is the symbol of the real mutuality underlying the casualness. It is this quality which distinguishes the bushmen from the townies Tom meets

during his naked wanderings after he has lost his clothes in the Murray. The self-containment and lack of sympathy of these people isolate Tom in a way that the loneliness of the bush never does. Moreover, the companionship of the bushmen is strong enough to be extended even to an outcast like Bum, and to outweigh the abortive attempt of Dixon, otherwise one of the most generous and attractive characters, to steal a horse from one of his mates. The strongest indictment, and punishment, of Warrigal Alf is that he has isolated himself from this fellowship. ^{81 2i}

Just as Furphy finds positive value, rather than just defence, in his fellows, so he derives a positive satisfaction from the land. The two ideas are brought together in the same place that Steve unexpectedly encounters Tom. By now he has returned with his companions and all their bullocks.

#

Daylight had now melted into soft, shadowless moonlight; and the place was no longer solitary. Dozens of cattle were scattered around, harvesting a fine crop of grass ... During daylight, I had made it my business to find a secluded place, bare of grass, where a fire could be kindled without offending the public eye; and to this spot the four of us repaired to see about some supper. (p. 221)

#

⁸¹ Chris. Wallace-Crabbe, op. cit., p. 145, contends that 'the scene in Chapter 1 where the camped bullockies systematically destroy the reputation of each man who goes to fetch water puts paid to any idealised notion of mateship.' However, these remarks are characteristically derogatory gossip rather than malicious character-assassination. Such remarks are possible only between men who basically accept each other, and are quite different from the remarks in which the bullockies discuss Warrigal Alf.

The atmosphere of contentment is created by the place itself, ^{by} companionship, the satisfaction of the cattle and ^{by} Tom's pride in his own skill. Despite the risk, the four drivers are in every sense at home and at peace. Yet this is the setting for Thompson's tale of Mary O'Halloran's death. The perception of positive value is not allowed to negate the ^Zrealisation of tragedy.

The positive value Furphy finds in companionship is at the heart of his proclaimed "temper democratic, bias offensively Australian."⁸² Tom Collins proclaims himself a socialist and a democrat, but the main burden of the argument for socialism is left to Rigby, ^{in Rigby's Romance, but he} who is so blinded by his egotistic pursuit of his socialist ideals that he brings suffering to Kate Vanderdecken.⁸³ To the extent that Such is Life is socialist in tone it is so because of its satire on those who divide mankind by isolating themselves. So Collins satir^Zizes the sectarian Irish, the bigotted fundamentalist, the obsequious and the arrogant Englishman and the greedy Scot. These people remain types because they have excluded themselves from the human race, and therefore Furphy is not interested in revealing their psychology. However, the Chinese lie outside his own definition of humanity, and so do not live either as individuals or as types.²²⁸⁴ These people are, however, largely used to provide a contrast

~~82~~ Such is Life, Publisher's Note.

~~83~~ Rigby's Romance, p. 276.

~~84~~ There is a brief exception in Such is Life, pp. 219-20, when Paul Sam Young is conceded the encounter.

to the genuine humanity which can transcend both economic divisions, as with Stewart, and social divisions, such as those Collins finds on Runnymede.⁸⁵ This spirit of humanity, rather than any particular doctrine or class-consciousness, is the positive value which Such is Life sets against the tragedy and failure, which in their turn are shown as coming from human weakness and from unavoidable fate rather than from any particular social or economic system. Men like Sollicker fail not because they are oppressed by the squatters, but because they accept the oppression. On the other hand, the drivers eventually triumph over Smythe because they do not accept his pretensions, while Montgomery rises above both Folkestone and Priestley because he is able to transcend the strict definition of his situation.⁸⁶

The same principle of mutuality provides a basis for comparing the major stories which are woven into Such is Life and Rigby's Romance. Rory O'Halloran's marriage is a failure because of the lack of any understanding between the two partners, and this situation makes the child, Mary, too vulnerable a hostage to fate. Collins, as we have noted, raises the question of human responsibility, but the answer is so remote and devious as to be almost irrelevant. Rory, his wife, and Mary are all victims of a fate of which Collins is no more than agent. On the other hand, Kate Vanderdecken's fate in Rigby's Romance is a direct consequence of the

⁸⁵ib., pp. 205-17, 255-7.

⁸⁶ib., pp. 177, 250-3, 296-303.

human irresponsibility to which Rigby is led by his enthusiasm for expounding socialist ideals. Between these, the situation of Warrigal and Nosey Alf is brought about originally by malignant fate, but could be solved by human persistence, although I cannot share A.A. Phillips' confidence that Molly will eventually find her man.⁸⁷ The pattern of life revealed in the rest of the novel has been too contrary for the reader to have any confidence that particular human expectations will be fulfilled. The one thing we can be reasonably confident of, however, is that Mrs. Beaudesart will eventually capture Tom Collins. This courtship is the mirror image of Rigby's romance, for while human weakness prevents Rigby completing a satisfactory relationship, a similar weakness will prevent Collins avoiding an unsatisfactory one. This same theme is echoed by the comic but also pathetic romances of Dixon and Thompson which are told in Rigby's Romance.⁸⁸ It is from these that we get the key image, in the canoe which Thompson finds and in which he unluckily persuades his Agnes to embark. His downfall is brought about by a combination of fate, represented by the current, and by his own foolhardiness and weakness, which take him into the canoe and then prevent him from returning in it in good time. (pp. 68-78) These tales, then, present us with a picture of life in which, although the final outcome rests with fate, the human decision is still crucial. Man may not be responsible

⁸⁷ Phillips, Australian Tradition, p. 45.

⁸⁸ Chapters X-XIV.

for his fate, but he is shown as enduring the consequence of his actions.

Yet these stories also point to a limitation ⁱⁿ of Furphy's work.

The value his characters discover lies in their mutual resistance to fate, but their experience is always one of failure. Even if we allow that Molly may find Alf, the novel, in either its published or its original form, lacks any description of a successful marriage. A strong value

is attached to human relationship, but the relationships we are shown are all transitory and second-best. While they lack the defensiveness we find in Lawson, they still do not represent the highest achievement.

If we look only at the action and the discovered values of Such is Life,

we must agree with H.P. Heseltine that at the heart of the sociability

and the geniality there is mere nothingness. ⁸³ Yet this assessment seems to run in the face of the tone of the book, and of Collins', and in this case

I think Furphy's, refusal to take life so seriously. At the end of the novel

Collins is playing his many parts, before he "cheapens down to mere nonentity", and they signify "nothing", but he is still enjoying them. (p. 371)

The original words of Macbeth revealed ed the utter nihilism to which he ^{had} had

been driven by events, but Tom Collins appropriates them with a cheeky irreverence which belies their strict import. His novel, therefore,

confirms Lawson's experience of the failure of human aspirations, but

by putting his trust in man he is still able to wrest a satisfaction out of

human life. We must nevertheless recognise ^z that the satisfaction he

discovers is made possible only by denying, to some extent at least, the depths of human experience.

It is interesting to compare the work of these Australian novelists with the work of United States writers of roughly the same period. In both countries we find the same feeling of newness, the same idea that here is a new country offering new and better possibilities to mankind, together with the idea that these possibilities have been destroyed by man himself. This is the theme of a book like The Scarlet Letter,²³ where the forest offers the chance both of freedom and of corruption, and where finally the lovers are destroyed by their own guilt. Marcus Clarke has a similar feeling for the Australian countryside, which stands in contrast to the cruelty of the System, but also destroys those who trust to it for escape. Furphy's attitude to the peasants of China and of Great Britain who threaten his Australian dream is similar to the attitude shown by Mark Twain to the people of England in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.²⁴ Twain's Yankee finds the English intolerably limited by their inherited ideas, which have conditioned them to servitude so that they were "so poor-spirited that they took even this sort of attention as an honor" (p.48). Yet there is an essential difference in the ideals of Twain and Furphy. Whereas Furphy dislikes class divisions because they destroy human community, Twain objects to the rigid traditions which stand in the way of

⁹⁰Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, New York, 1962. First published, 1850.

⁹¹Mark Twain, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Greystone Press edition, New York, n. d., First published, 1889.

individual opportunity. There is an unpleasant racism in Furphy's attitude, but it lacks the imperialist fervor^{of} of Twain, whose hero sets about implanting American ideas and customs, even to the form of the currency, in Arthur's Britain with the same zeal displayed by hearts and minds teams in Vietnam. Yet Twain also manages to mock his hero's belief in his own country in a way which is beyond Furphy. For all its self-confidence, there is an element of provinciality about the Australian writing^{of this period} which is quite foreign to the tone of the American novels. The Australian dream was one of human fellowship, but the fellowship was to be confined to this continent to the exclusion of any troublesome foreign elements.

The cosier conception of the Australian dream leads to a distinction between the responsibility attributed to the individual in American and Australian fiction. Whereas in the American novel man goes out to conquer, in Australian writing he goes out to find. In American fiction the hero defeats himself by the violence and guilt he brings with him, but the Australian is defeated by his own weakness in the face of an implacable nature. The Australian hero therefore remains curiously innocent. Only in Clarke's tortured clergyman, the Reverend Mr. North, do we find a really guilty figure, and even his quite venial sins arise from weakness and lead to compassion. Maurice Frere is evil, but his evil is carefully shown to be a product of the evil System. In Lawson, only the abstract capitalists of Grinder Brothers are in any sense evil, and the very concept is foreign to the ironic stance of Such is Life. There is no

obsessive figure to compare with Melville's Captain Ahab, nor is there anything that resembles the pervasive violence that Huck Finn finds along the Mississippi. Violence and death in Australian fiction come from the System or the land itself, and are therefore beyond man's control. Hence the kind of individual ambition and moral struggle of American fiction is inappropriate. Instead, we have the characteristic stoic fatalism, which is the other side of the coin to the solidarity of mateship. In the face of implacable nature individual striving seems futile, and if this leads to a sparseness of personal, as opposed to institutional, violence in our early literature, it also makes it seem old and world-weary before it is young. In American fiction, life, with all its problems, is tackled enthusiastically; in Australian literature, life itself is the enemy. Even Furphy, who makes the enemy yield by taking pleasure in his onslaughts, does so only by turning life into a sort of a game.