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Radical nationalism and socialist realism in Alan Marshall's autobiographical Writing.

The factory snarls as it eats ... it rears its head above the damp of narrow streets ... above the swamps of houses ...it is a dinosaur ... [...] its talons are steel ... its entrails are machines ... its mouth is a door ...

*Into it you workers ... take with you your youth [...] your laughter ... writhe in the digestive juices of its clattering guts ... through days of sunshine ... through months ... through years ... through a life ...*¹

With these words, Alan Marshall begins his first novel, *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*. The impressionist style suggests the unstoppable momentum of the system, the elision marks suggest obliterated possibilities. The idea of the factory as mechanical monster, dominating the neighbouring houses as well as the people it swallows, drives the action of the book. The picture of workers denied any function except their duty to the company makes concrete Marx's theory of abstract labour. The factory takes the workers only for their value to its production, stripping them of their humanity as they enter its doors. But the workers refuse to be reduced to mere units of production, and find ways of pursuing their individual lives in the interstices of their work, as well as in the homes, streets and theatres they frequent outside working hours.

In this essay I contend that this novel and Marshall's autobiographical trilogy warrant renewed critical attention. He was a writer who was both shaped by and helped to shape the tradition of radical nationalism that was influential in Australian writing for more than fifty years. This tradition had its origins in the folk lore and popular writings of the nineteenth century, and particularly of *The Bulletin*. These writers, often anonymous, produced a literary tradition that rested on the myth of the

bush as the true Australia and mateship among ordinary bushmen as the source of true Australian values. It was embodied most fully in the work of Henry Lawson, and continued to influence generations of Australian writers from Vance Palmer and Katharine Prichard to Frank Hardy and Dorothy Hewett. Its origins and development were spelled out most fully in the 1950s by the historian Russel Ward, who traced its origins to the convicts, and the critic Arthur Phillips, who tracked it to Henry Lawson and his contemporaries.²

The radical nationalists believed that the working class had played the major role in developing a distinct Australian cultural and political tradition, and that democracy was central to this tradition. It constituted the central doctrine of the Victorian Writers' League, its successor, the Realist Writers' Group, and realist writers' groups in NSW and Queensland, which assimilated it to the doctrine of socialist realism.³ In the view of members and associates of these groups, the democratic ideal of radical nationalism would lead to a sense of solidarity with workers throughout the world. They therefore supported both national movements seeking to free people from colonial or capitalist oppression, and movements that sought to promote peace between nations. They believed that the task of the writer was to further these ideals by portraying the individual in society in such a way that readers would recognize and act on their truth. Since then, critics have pointed to other traditions,⁴ and the limitations of radical nationalism have been exposed by writers as various as Humphrey McQueen and Kay Schaffer.⁵ Yet the tradition and its foundation myth remain a source of popular views of Australia.

Marshall's works have historical importance as examples of the tradition, as well as extending it to encompass urban society and providing vivid portraits of Australian society between the world wars. Beyond this, the works are valuable as

instances where the personality of the autobiographer merges into society, rather than progressively emerging from it, and for giving lively portraits of ordinary people in their everyday lives in the bush, around the factories and on the streets of an earlier Australia. Marshall constructs this vision of ordinary decent people contending with an oppressive system through all of his writing—journalism, fiction and autobiography alike. It is the animating principle of the novel, *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*, based on an episode of his life, and of the overtly autobiographical trilogy that starts with *I Can Jump Puddles*, and continues through *In Mine Own Heart* and *This Is the Grass*.⁶ The trilogy gains its force as a political statement by its grounding in personal experience framed by a radical nationalist understanding of the world, which he first encountered this ideology through his participation in the Victorian Writers' League, and later in the Realist Writers' Group.⁷

Marshall's writing raises questions of the relationship of fiction to autobiography and of autobiography as witness to history that are largely outside the scope of this essay. It is sufficient to note that, as his diaries and letters now in the National Library of Australia testify, all of his writing was based on his own experiences as a victim of polio, a clerk, a lodger, an observer in public bars and on the streets, and as a traveller talking to the people he met. In his journalism, he reported these experiences and observations directly; his fiction, both novels and short stories, was produced after a long process of reflection in which he polished his recollections to find artistic form.⁸ This form in turn was governed by his idea of a finished story and by his understanding of the duty of the writer to convey the relationship of the individual to society, as understood in the doctrines of socialist realism, with its emphasis on the potential of the workers to build a better society, and radical nationalism, with its valuing of mateship among ordinary people. On this basis

he produced a record of one man's experience of his time, enriched by his ability to enter imaginatively into the conditions of other people's lives. Rather than offering specific answers to social problems, he portrays ordinary workers whose common decency offers the collective strength to build a future community.

Marshall's simply written portraits of the apparently ordinary people he had met made his writing popular, yet this populist appeal has led to a critical neglect. He is seen purely as a popular writer with its sympathy for the ordinary man and woman, rather than a writer whose work has a clear political intent. There are few detailed assessments of the political implications of his writing. It is the contention of this essay that Marshall's book-long works have a strong political framework that meets the demands of socialist realism, and that this intent accounts for the ways they cross the boundaries between fiction and autobiography.

Although during his life Marshall was one of Australia's most prolific writers, since his death in 1984 his work has largely passed out of public and critical consciousness. The exception is *I Can Jump Puddles*, which has remained in print in a children's edition and was republished in 2010 as one of Penguin Books' new series of popular works. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Joanne McPherson says that this book alone has sold over three million copies, but Marshall scarcely appears in any book length criticism published since his death.⁹ An exception is McPherson's essay, which provides a valuable discussion of his life and work. The Australian Literature Gateway records that since his death various critics have discussed his work in the context of folk-lore, film and disability. John Colmer discusses him in his study of Australian autobiography, where he reports that Marshall wanted not simply to tell of his childhood, but to give a picture of life at a particular period of Australian history.¹⁰ The autobiographical trilogy, he concludes, provides an impressive analysis

of the moral corruption of capitalism under pressure, but is limited by its masculine perspective. Bruce Bennett mentions Marshall briefly in his history of the Australian short story, where he notes the author's "positive belief in oral story-telling" of the kind encouraged by *The Bulletin*.¹¹ Adrian Mitchell dismissed his work in a discussion in the 1981 *Oxford History of Australian Literature*, where he claimed that, like Marshall's writing, like Gavin Casey's, expects rather than generates a certain kind of sympathy: "Their fiction does not scrutinize the nature and meaning of the experiences presented; rather, they confirm attitudes and patterns of behaviour, and their chief interest for us is in historical terms."¹² The most recent Oxford and Cambridge literary histories are even briefer in their treatment, mentioning him mainly in lists of like authors, although Stephen Torre in Cambridge notes his ability to place the individual in relation to nature and the community.¹³

Mitchell's dismissal is perhaps symptomatic of critical opinion, but by emphasising sympathy it directs the reader's attention away from the other qualities of Marshall's achievement. The authors of the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* came closer to recognising the nature of his achievement when they wrote that "Underlying all Marshall's writing is a simple code, grounded in an optimistic faith in humanity, that values social solidarity, tenacity, work and physical courage." They further identify the qualities of his writing as an open approach to nature and children, graphic descriptions of people, place and incident, and command of the Australian idiom.¹⁴

Marshall found the grounds for his optimism in the qualities he discovered in the people he met. As his friend John Morrison wrote, he "had the gift for making friends with complete strangers, for winning the confidence of people in trouble ... for yarning in the best Australian tradition ..."¹⁵ His positive characters overcome

ugliness in behaviour and hardship in circumstance through the tolerance, sympathy and support that constitute his understanding of mateship. In *I Can Jump Puddles*, his account of growing up in the country witnesses to an experience that, as he recalls through the ideology of radical nationalism, embodies the Australian myth of rural innocence and solidarity. He shows how he learns these qualities from his father and friends. In the two later books of the trilogy, he tests these qualities against the harsh realities of industrial Melbourne. His descriptions of life in the streets, factories and boarding houses of the depression city match American social realists like dos Passos or Dreiser, but his optimism, won in the teeth of a crippling disease and an often hostile or uncomprehending society, distinguishes him from these.

His narratives show how individuals present themselves to others, and how society shapes their individual possibilities. This social context gives meaning to the experiences he scrutinises. He constructs this meaning from the conflict between his desire to enjoy all life has to offer and the frustration of his physical handicap. It is also shaped by the values he absorbed in his country childhood and by the Marxist ideology he encountered in the Realist Writers' groups. This ideology appears in his work only as a way of structuring the context of his narratives. Implicit in his structure is what Morrison describes as "his abiding conviction that only a socialist form of society lay any prospect of man continuing to inhabit the planet Earth."¹⁶

Hardy and Waten both present Communism as an answer to the problems they describe, while in Morrison's stories it remains in the background as he concentrates on the response of individuals to particular situations. Marshall's work expresses an ideal, not commitment to an ideology or to a plan of action. He is actually more political than his contemporaries because he explores the way that the shaping of individual lives gives rise to a universal politics, implicit in the radical nationalist

belief, where action serves a compassion that extends to the underclasses of all nations. This universalism inspired both his writing about the Soviet Union and his activity in the Peace Movement.

At least until the stories in *Hammers over the Anvil*, which explore the inescapable darkness that lies alongside the compassion he finds at the core of human existence, optimism is a constant in Marshall's work.¹⁷ In *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* and his autobiographical trilogy, this optimism has to survive alongside a clear-eyed view of the greed, cruelty and poverty that prevent individuals from achieving the fullness of life he sees within them.

Colmer argues that the trilogy forces the reader to make clear distinctions between autobiography and fiction. Although Marshall goes beyond the facts to establish the contextual structure that gives facts their significance, he does not, according to Colmer, require the reader to distinguish between the author and his younger subject. But if we broaden our consideration to include *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*, we can see that all four of these works oscillate between fiction, memoir and commentary, as Marshall describes his younger self learning to overcome his personal and social handicaps in order to realise himself in society as man and as a writer. *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* was published as a novel, but it draws on the same experience that Marshall was to use in *In Mine Own Heart*. Both tell of how a young man, handicapped by the effects of polio, holds down a job in a shoe factory during the Depression. Both tell of the life, at work and at home, of the factory workers, and the effects on them of the factory's closure. The novel however is written in the third person, giving it an air of objectivity. The overt autobiographies distinguish more clearly than the novel between the different perspectives of the boy and young man who is the subject of the narrative and of the mature author reflecting on this

experience, and so makes room for the author's reflections on his experience.

Marshall later reflected that he had published *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* too soon, and thus had denied himself the opportunity to come back freshly to the shoe factory material. Presumably he meant that the form of the novel had prevented him reflecting openly on the significance of the events, as he does in the autobiographies. Morrison however felt that the novel gave a very accurate portrait of Marshall as a young man.¹⁸

In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidoney Smith and Julia Watson remark that although an autobiography may slip into fiction, fiction, however much it may reveal the author, lacks the kind of truth-telling that might enable it to become autobiography. Autobiography, they argue, shows the experience of the inner self behind the public activity.¹⁹ Marshall's work evades this distinction because, although he is concerned with the individual, he is concerned with this subject as shaped by and shaping society rather than with its inner self. He is more concerned with establishing a healthy society than a stable ego. To fulfil his ambition of becoming a writer in the radical nationalist tradition,, he set himself learn to understand society through the people he met. His autobiographical works fit into Smith and Watson's category of historical documents. The stories he tells may have romantic resolutions, but they have firmly social realist groundings and a socialist realist perspective. Social realism portrays the individual in society, socialist realism adds a revolutionary or reformist agenda or implication to suggest how the ills of society could be corrected. Certainly, Marshall describes the moral development of his protagonists, but his morality is directed outward towards the realisation of the individual's full self through social solidarity. The individual can become author of his own life once he recognises the forces that confine it, and joins with those who resist these forces through organised

political or industrial action through, for example, the Communist party. Yet unlike Waten or Hardy, none of his characters surrenders the self to a cause, and he himself never joined a political party.²¹

Marshall's autobiographical writing fits the understanding of the socialist realists about the function of fiction, which they saw as a depiction of social and political truth through the experience of representative characters rather than as the creation of an imaginative world of its own.²² The problem of deciding what is representative was by-passed by assigning it to the collective judgement of the group, who read and criticised each other's work. In their discussions, they were concerned with whether the writing gave a true, if idealised, portrayal of workers and their behaviour. Truth was understood in the Marxist sense of an accurate depiction of the circumstances within which the characters made their decisions, and of showing the characteristic behaviour of working men or women. Hardy's *Power Without Glory* shows this process at one extreme. His fictional characters notoriously were based on historical actors, and he took great care to ground their actions in documentary evidence.²³ Others, like Marshall and Morrison, were encouraged to achieve authenticity by writing about their own experience. Consequently, all their writing tends towards autobiography, even when it is ostensibly fiction.²⁴ Likewise, their autobiographical writing is shaped by their ideological framework. Their narrators present themselves as participants and witnesses, and even their fiction can be read as history. Because of this overlap, it is convenient to use the language of both fiction and biography when discussing Marshall's works.

As author, Marshall is the protagonist not of an autobiographical past in which he finds his inner self but of a history with contemporary significance. Of the autobiographical processes identified by Smith and Watson, he is involved in memory

and experience, or rather the memory of experience, rather than personal identity. The choices he makes between the narrative 'I' and 'he' are purely rhetorical, not a means of distancing narrator from subject. Although told objectively in the third person, *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* invites readers to identify with the main protagonist as much as the narrator/protagonist of the trilogy.

The characters Marshall portrays, whether in the fictions or the autobiographies, are presented for their importance as actors in the history he shares with them, rather than because they are important in his personal life. The exception might be the father of the narrator of the trilogy, but even he is presented as the repository of a wisdom gathered from his historical experience. Place also, as we can see from the introductory quotation, is described as an agent in the lives of the particular people whose stories he tells.

We can trace this through the four volumes being discussed. In *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*, the factory is described as a living creature that dominates its workers and the subject. *I Can Jump Puddles* opens with the narrator's mother lying in her front room, watching "the tall gums tossing in the wind, and a green hill, and cloud shadows racing across the paddocks," and foretelling that she will give birth to a son.²⁵ The son is dominated as he grows up by the natural world symbolized by these images. When polio forces him into hospital, his mat tress is hard and he misses the blankets that can be channelled for marbles, the warm caves between them, and the comforting sounds of a barking dog or a horse munching chaff. Then, when he finally returns home, his father and his friends take him to school and about the township. With his friend Joe Carmichael he again starts again to walk through the bush, where he is able to achieve independence. His first triumph is when he succeeds in crawling into the crater of Mt Turalla and back again. The mountain is the antagonist against

which he proves himself and which, by contrast, affirms the worth of the lively world around him:

And the earth was brown ... The dark green of the ferns was swamped with brown. The still, silent boulders were brown. Even the silence was brown. We sat cut off from the bright sounds of the living world that lay over the encircling rim and all the while we felt we were being watched by something huge and unfriendly.²⁶

Overcoming the mountain gives him the confidence to make himself at home in the countryside generally, learning to fight, to fish, to swim, to ride. An overnight trip with a neighbour, Peter McLeod, to collect fence-posts, allows him to enter the world of work. Yet in this world nature still stands apart, testing those who use it:

The sixteen bullocks moved as one ... Arthur [the bullocky] strode beside his team with his dog at his heels, his whip over his shoulder. Where the track began to drop with a sharp descent he hurried behind the wagon, turning the handle of the screw-brake ... As the steel tyres bit into the huge redgum brake blocks a painful shrieking came from the lumbering wagon. The sound sped round the hills, echoing from side to side, filling the valley with its anguish and startling a flock of black cockatoos into flight. They passed over my head with a powerful beat of wings and their mournful cries merged with the shrieking of the brakes in some sad protest ...²⁷

Nature tests the men, makes them self-reliant in the way the narrator learn to be, but it remains apart, a being of its own. It has the “weird melancholy” Marcus Clarke attributed to the Australian bush.²⁸

This Is the Grass takes the author from the remote countryside to the periphery of Melbourne. Instead of a bush shared with friends, he has an office where he works

and a pub where he boards. These diminished places have a correspondingly diminishing effect on the people who frequent them, and the narrator, now known as Alan, has to return home at weekends to refresh himself. Later in this book and in *In Mine Own Heart*, the bush completely disappears, its place taken by the offices and boarding houses, the factories and streets of Melbourne. Boarding houses are withdrawn from their neighbourhoods, each one with a personality of its own, in turns imposing and condescending. The streets shape the lives that fill them. They “drew from the stadiums, the dance-halls and the theatres the excitement developed behind doors arched with globes of pulsating lights, and they clothed themselves in it till they, too, became a source of feverish gaiety.”²⁹ They produce the conniving pie seller, the thieves, the larrikin pushes, and finally the mobs that swarm through them during the police strike.

How Beautiful Are Thy Feet was written in 1937, when Marshall was already an active member of the Victorian Writers’ League, but not published until 1949. Marshall wrote and published it as a novel, and it is only in the light of his later writing that it can be recognised as autobiography. Because there is no implicit contract with the reader to present a factually accurate narrative, it does not fit into Smith and Watson’s category of autofiction, but is closer to a witness narrative.³⁰ If it lacks the intensity they attribute to these, this is because the industrial system and depression it describes do not match the horrors of slavery, colonial subjection or the Holocaust, and are balanced in Marshall’s account by the resilience of the victims. It has also one of the qualities Smith and Watson attribute to autobiography as history that deliberately offers a vision of an alternative future. Amid his descriptions of misery, Marshall shows characters with the strengths to build a better world. He also introduces characters who explicitly describe better futures. Unlike, say, Martin

Boyd's family novels, which transform their origins in the author's life story into dramas of moral choice set against a background of cultural decline, Marshall keeps close to the facts, adding only an ideological perspective that constitutes his narrative as a romanticised version of socialist realism.

A comparison of the novel with his later explicit autobiographical trilogy shows how, despite its presentation as fiction, its narrative is a form of life narrative. Its apparent grounding in reality provides its social force. The Trueform Shoe Company factory in Collingwood, where Marshall had previously worked, becomes the Modern Shoe Company Factory, although in the novel he makes the factory an image of the city that he shows from the perspective of its streets in the trilogy. Marshall does not show the workers as parts of a mass that will power a revolution, but as individuals calling for a social order that will enable them to realise their own, albeit socially produced, ambitions and human potential. Throughout the novel he distinguishes between those who draw their strength from solidarity with their fellows and those who constrict others and diminish themselves by pursuing only selfish ends. He shows all people in the light of the values he took from his country upbringing, appraising them by their truth to themselves and to each other. He shows their individuality as it is swallowed in the relentless logic of production. Even in their homes their lives are dominated by their need for a job to put food on their tables or to get medical treatment for their children. They may pursue their love affairs outside the factory, but they begin them in its workrooms. When the company is forced into bankruptcy, it brings down the individual lives with it.

The novel is told from the point of view of the accountant, Rod McCormack, who like Marshall himself walks on crutches. Early in the novel, the author shows us an unnamed girl coming in to start work for the first time. McCormack notices her

when he hears a timid knock at the counter, and looks up “into the frightened eyes of a little girl in a red beret ... Her throat moved as if a crowd of words were struggling there.” Her mother, who has come with her, gives the work permit to the forewoman, who asks whether the girl can start right away. “The little girl drew a deep breath. She looked unwaveringly into her mother’s eyes, seeking strength.” The mother says she can, and the forewoman takes her off. As she opens the door to the factory, she lets in the low, unceasing roar of machinery. “It overwhelmed the little girl like a wind. She paused as if from a buffet before passing through.” The generalisation of the opening pages has become concrete as the monster claims another victim. The individuals become mere subjects of this drama being played outside their control.³¹

By telling the story in the third person, Marshall gives the novel a sense of objectivity. He provides a political context through the conversations McCormack listens to between advocates of communism and social credit. But within this fiction is the deeper theme of the narrator’s attempt to escape from the industrial system into the freedom of the writer, the author of his own life and the recorder of other peoples’ struggles towards a freedom they scarcely glimpse. To this extent the novel is as much a *bildungsroman* as are the autobiographies in the trilogy. It describes both his desire to be a writer and the way he prepared himself for this role.

He watched the people passing. He was moved by a desire to know them all. Behind each face was a life. He saw it as a large space from which branched many roads. Many roads behind their faces and all the roads were different and they spent their time walking up and down these roads they knew so well.

No stranger saw these thoroughfares they knew so well.

Yet sometimes they took a friend by the hand, and led him to and fro and showed him only that which they wished to see ...

... He would not stay upon the familiar roads behind his own face ...

He would storm the fortress face of friends and with them stride the roads they trod alone. He would show them the beauty in all their roads ...³²

In showing the beauty in the ordinary, Marshall achieves an aesthetic end, and at the same time he condemns the system that blocks the road to beauty.

Marshall continues to use the techniques of the novelist in his explicitly autobiographical trilogy. In a brief Preface to the first of these, *I Can Jump Puddles*, he explains that he has sometimes “gone beyond the facts to get at the truth.”³³ He has altered scenes, made composite characters, changed sequences and introduced dialogue. These devices of fiction do not however make the book a novel. The Preface makes a pact with the reader that the work tells the true story of the author growing up in the country town where he has been crippled by polio. In the telling of the story, however, Marshall does not put his emphasis on the trauma of the disease, terrible as it is, but on the strength of the community that empowers him to overcome his handicap.

Alan, the book’s protagonist, finds a ‘normal’, or characteristically Australian, self caught in a crippled body, and there are elements of the bildungsroman in this record of the narrator finding his place in society. The values of the townsfolk, and particularly of his bushman father, give him the strength he needs to make his own way in the world, although he also learns to recognise examples of the narrowness and class privilege that can be found in his rural Australia, like the cocky farmers and tradesmen the swaggies avoid, the poor labourers who live on the outskirts of the town, or the squatter and his wife who patronise the town.³⁵

Quite rightly, the book can be seen as a celebration both of individual endurance and of the Australian bush myth that has contributed so strongly to the

Australian tradition and sense of identity. But read in the context of the novel and the two later books of the trilogy, it can also be seen as an interlude or flash-back that establishes the values that come from this tradition and are tested in the rest of the work. Marshall does not, as Mitchell suggests, simply expect his readers to share these values. Rather, they are embodied in the people who support his quest for independence, and particularly in his father. The father is significantly different from the feckless scamps, ill-fated travellers or cheerful opportunists his readers might have known from Lawson, Furphy or Paterson. Marshall shows him as a master-horseman rather than the country storekeeper he also was, but more importantly he presents him as the responsible head of a family who provides his son with a protective home as he grows up and a refuge where he can recover his strength when later he tries to establish his life in the city. Unlike Lawson, who knew a far harsher environment, and showed bushmen and women resisting it, Marshall shows bush values growing from a closeness to a nurturing natural world as well as from a common experience of hardship. His father, labourers like Ted Wilson, and skilled workers like Peter McLeod the driver, share both a common background as itinerant workers and a present reality of scarcity. This also gives them an affinity with the swagmen they help.³⁶ Marshall does not simply contrast their bush values with those of the city, but shows them as relevant in both environments. The fault of the city is not that it is inhuman in itself, but that industrial capitalism has structured it to repress humans and cut them off from the natural world that generates the human value of compassion, and in doing so generates, like Lawson's bush, a feeling of solidarity among those it oppresses.

The narrator in the three volumes of the trilogy speaks in the first person, making his characters actors in a history he shares rather than simply participants he

observes in a drama of his mental development. Their lives, as much as those of the factory workers in the earlier work, are shaped by their physical and social environment. However, while its first readers may have taken the novel as a call to action, the overtly autobiographical trilogy is more of a warning, recalling the precarious control a previous generation had over their lives. Like the actors in his novel, the actors in his autobiographies share the desperation of needing a job that depends entirely on the whim of another. As they turn their attention to the narrator, his responses open them as individuals responding in different ways to a common system.

Marshall published the autobiographies in 1955, 1962 and 1963. By the 1960s, capitalism seemed to have transformed itself into a benign master bringing affluence, if not freedom. Parental poverty did not so often force children to leave school for factory, and a combination of full employment and better industrial conditions gave workers some control of their working lives. Yet the second volume, *This Is the Grass*, takes the reader back from this time to the 1930s Depression, with Alan seeking work in the city, where his handicap makes it clear to him that all power rests with the employer, a situation not changed by the more prosperous times when he wrote.³⁷

As Alan moves away from the bush, he finds increasingly oppressive circumstances. Outside his workplaces, he found his first anthology of human nature in the boarding houses where he now lodged. Through an increasingly depressing series of lodgings he encounters young men, and occasionally women, working like himself at clerical jobs that lift them in status above the manual and factory workers while still subjecting them to the same oppressive conditions. He escapes to nightly rambles through Melbourne's streets.³⁸

During the police strike that occurred on the eve of the Melbourne Cup in November, 1923, Marshall observed the narrow border between free festivity and riot, and the way individuals coalesce into a crowd, from which a mob can form. The city was uneasy when he first went there on the Friday night, when the crowds making for the station after late closing were interrupted by groups of men walking in the other direction. Some of the mood is festive, as groups of youths and girls began dancing in the streets, but there is a lot of pushing and shoving. The next night he sees the special constables marching up Swanston Street, swinging their truncheons. Then, through the crowd, come “gangs of purposeful men, members of Melbourne’s underworld who regarded this night as theirs.”³⁹ Marshall gives the drama of this scene its political relevance by reporting the comments of a wharfie, a strong unionist who nevertheless shows some sympathy for the scabs on the waterfront who will have to live for the rest of their lives with the knowledge they betrayed their mates.

Some of [these men] were scabs in the last strike I was in ... some of them are all right ... One bloke ... says to me, It’s all right for you; you can look the world in the face—you went out. All I can do is die ...” It was sad in a way, the poor bastard.⁴⁰

Then Alan watches as the crowd forms a mob and begins breaking windows and looting stores. Marshall adds his moral and political judgement, likening the mob to “wolves, expressing their greed and hate in looting and savage violence,” and explaining that they were “the products of a society that educated them to regard possessions as a symbol of success, poverty as the symbol of failure.”⁴¹

In Mine Own Heart continues Alan’s long march through the boarding houses. One is governed by the strict observance of manners, with “no exercise of thoughtfulness, consideration and compassion”.⁴² His fellow boarders eat together in

gloomy silence. In another he tries to raise his spirits by singing in his room, only to have the landlady's lover rage at him to shut up. These gloomy recollections, although tempered by humour, add to his record of a society where life is crushed by physical deprivation and social exclusion.⁴³

The source of this misery is shown in this volume when the narrator returns to the Modern Shoe factory. His narrative repeats some of the scenes from *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* almost word for word, but with crucial additions making explicit the reality of the loss for those who step through the factory's doors. So when he retells the story of the little girl being brought to her first day of work, he adds a sight of the mother and child standing together "in isolation from all kindness and help", and spells out the implications.

There were no green paddocks to skip and play beyond that door ... All the lovely things that she should know she would never know once that door closed behind her.

... Her hand would become skilful and sure, her mind ... would remain untended.

... She would listen appalled, shrink in bewilderment and finally accept, never knowing that what she was accepting was not the natural fate of small girls with poor parents but a calculated pattern of existence fashioned by grasping men for their need.⁴⁴

The green paddocks take us back to the source of his critique of the industrial city in the world of his childhood and the deeply rooted Australian myth of rural innocence that has structured his reminiscences of childhood.

Marshall's critical witness is strengthened by the shorter portraits he inserts in his general narrative. These show how the system limits even its most devoted

servants. For instance, Mr Richard B. Bodstern, the owner of the Crown Casket and Joinery Company where Alan works for a time, is “a tall erect man” who rarely smiled.⁴⁵ In his world, people have a prescribed status and way of behaviour, and he neither understands nor accepts deviations. He rewards those who accept the system, but punishes those who refuse, even by dismissing them. “If you merged yourself with the people, differing from them in an individual contribution to a common good, you had [in Bodstern’s eyes] escaped from the elect.”⁴⁶ Bodstern contributes nothing to Alan’s personal development, but his portrait strengthens Marshall’s retrospective social critique.

The ideal that Marshall took from his childhood was of the individual like his father who joined with his fellows but still preserved his individual integrity. In a brief interval where he moves from witness to introspection, tracing his development as a writer, he describes how he taught himself a method of writing that was itself an expression of this ideal. His mind was crowded with the books he had read, but he had to learn to get beyond these and share the lives around him so that he could see people for what they were. “Writing was the bursting into flower of shared experience deeply felt.” The experience is social rather than inward, and Marshall remarks that he can share it only as he loses himself in the crowd, becomes anonymous.⁴⁷ It is one of solidarity, which he contrasts with the world he found in books that “assumed a natural tendency to anti-social behaviour ... that demanded laws and social restrictions to control.”⁴⁸ He judges people by his own experience of them as sharers or controllers. The consequence is that his writing becomes not merely social realism but rather stories for a modern morality play. He shapes his narratives to point to the moral dimensions of the particular episodes and participants he describes. The positive values are given: arts, music, children at play, fellowship. They appear in the

writing both directly and by their exclusion from the lives of many of his characters, either by their own choice or by the conditions of their lives. By excluding them from his depiction of working lives, he dramatises the cost of the industrial city.

The warmth of Marshall's responses to others means that his city is not entirely bleak. Apart from the family love and comradeship that his workmates and friends extend to each other, he finds humanity asserting itself in the Bakhtinian carnival of characters he meets in the streets where he roams outside working hours or while unemployed. Even among the most desperate he finds those who help each other. Yet shame and desperation can destroy even this togetherness. On one occasion, in an alley beside a hotel in Elizabeth Street, he sees a line of shabby men carrying sheets of newspaper. One of the waiting men advises him how to get his share of the food that is coming. When a cook empties a bin of kitchen scraps, another man takes the lead, plunging his hands into the greasy mess to divide it into parts for each of those waiting. They seize their portions, then, ashamed, turn their backs on each other as they wolf their refuse like dogs. In this detail, Marshall conveys the shame and the loss of human dignity that accompany misery.⁴⁹

The political force of these incidents depends on the reader accepting Marshall's recollections as factually accurate. The social historian David Potts questions whether such events actually occurred, saying that Marshall's accounts are just examples of urban myth which were not supported in Potts's own interviews with Depression survivors. After quoting Marshall's description of the men eating like dogs, and similar accounts by the novelists Ruth Park and Ronald McKie, Potts comments that "Here is a side-myth in the making ... passed on from teller to teller, and requiring suspension of disbelief."⁵⁰ The people Potts interviewed made no suggestion that people were treated in this way, at least in significant numbers. He

objects to the novelist's account being preferred to sober history. But in a comprehensive review of Depression studies, Julie Kimber points out that the Depression affected different places and groups of people in quite different ways. She finds plenty of evidence that suffering could be extreme.⁵¹

Marshall implicitly claims that his account is based on facts. He turns these into an account of the moral consequences of the Depression and the system that brought it about. As in Barthian myth, he "transforms history into nature", revealing absolute truths, but he also makes a claim to actual truth, to truth that resides in an accurate transcription of his own history.⁵² Memory may exaggerate, and the telling may concentrate disparate occasions to make a point, but it is a sufficient condemnation of capitalism if even the smallest number were reduced to such destitution. The force of the condemnation comes from the clarity of the narrative, which embodies the moral significance in concrete events. These events follow a common dialectical sequence: free spirits (workers, lodgers, travellers) are set against an oppressive force (factory, landlady, mob). The third element, the resolution, is sometimes escape, to a new job or house, or is left implicit in an unstated future.

The contrast between givers and takers that Marshall finds in his workplaces and boarding houses is equally evident among the characters he meets as he wanders through the city's streets. The main quality he encounters is people's resilience in adversity. Many are criminals, but this does not affect their relations to each other. Marshall gives these characters a vigour that resists the system that seeks to contain them. For example, a pie-cart at the bottom of Elizabeth Street was operated by Flogger Davies, the Fighting Pieman, who also fought preliminary rounds as a boxer at the Stadium. His cart is a combined firebox and oven on wheels, drawn by a shabby pony. Marshall makes the Pieman an example of human ingenuity and resistance to

adversity, and expands the figure of the pony to become an emblem of all the thousands of horses that still worked Melbourne's streets, although their time was ending. He embeds this reflection in history by telling the reader that trucks were now taking their place at the new Myers building, where the draught horses were brought in only when a truck could not make it up one of the steep ramps. This image in turn is turned back to an earlier history as Marshall sees the horses as successors to the convicts, all prisoners in a city where they will never know the delight of walking on grass, and where they will be discarded when they are no further use.

Marshall widens his view of the city as he watches and talks to prostitutes and criminals, sailors and clerks, countrymen coming to the city to cure their clap or find sex; to bookies and standover men, mothers and children, bullies and larrikins.⁵³ From them he learned the conditions that had shaped their lives, through poverty, pride or family misery, and became determined that, even in the city, he would shape his own life by living by the values of his bushman father. Thus the city becomes a part of the story of Marshall's discovery of his place in history. This history is made not by great leaders, but by the common people the city brings together.

Eventually, as the Depression sets in, Marshall takes to the roads with other refugees from the city. This is not however a rejection of the city as much as a further stage of his education. The people he meets are, like those he met in the city streets, wanderers. He pays his way along the road by writing an advice column for a city paper, but he comes to the conclusion that this is not freedom but another form of servitude.

The Melbourne of Marshall's autobiographies resembles the Carlton of Vincent Buckley's 'Golden Builders'.⁵⁴ Like Buckley, he looks back to an original unity that has been shattered by human weakness, greed and crime. The author

becomes himself a metaphor for this state, as he struggles against his crippled condition to achieve fullness as an individual in society. Reflecting on the world he sees around him, he decides that “There was nobility here, sacrifice, greed, and lust. It was irrational, misdirected and incomplete but behind it all, justifying it, lifting it to the greatest heights, was truth.” For Buckley, such truth came from God, but for Marshall it would come as the product of “the upward struggle of man”.⁵⁵ His resolutely secular belief means that he looked to humanity to remedy evil through collective action, not through individual salvation. He saw his role in this struggle as refusing to surrender to his own physical handicap, achieving the love of a woman, and experiencing “all the happy and lovely things” that bring a rewarding life, along with “the knowledge that such a state is only possible when it is shared with people.”⁵⁶ He undermines his own dichotomies by showing how among even for the most oppressive or miserable people this sharing remains a possibility. But by the end of *In Mine Own Heart*, his experience of the battle everyone wages for a livelihood persuades him that the only solution is to get out of the struggle itself:

We were jugglers of pretence, each one the other’s enemy ...

I saw myself kneeling side beside with them scrabbling for money in a room beyond the door of which I could hear children crying.

I must get out of that dark room. Out . . . Out!⁵⁷

The hardships he experienced on the road confirmed his belief that mateship is necessary for survival, but the fierce competition he encounters as he tries to make a living as a freelance writer show him that mateship is not enough. The crying children can be freed only when society is remade. This realization took him beyond the politics of reform to the politics of revolution that he shared with Frank Hardy, but his

faith in human individuality kept him from any attempt to straiten his insights into dogma.

Donald Sassoon has identified the initial appeal of socialist writing as lying in its combination in a single narrative of a description of social misery that its audience recognised, a moving account of an alternative future, and a clear and plausible specification of a path that would take humanity from the former state to the latter.⁵⁸ Marshall's autobiographies, including his first novel, have this appeal. The misery they described lay a few years in the past, but remained a threat to the present. The future, in accord with socialist realist doctrine, is implicit in his descriptions of the people he meets. The political passage between these two states of society is sketched through occasional remarks, but is clearly implied by the qualities of humour and endurance he ascribes to his people. By presenting them as representative of the Australian character, he overcomes the opposition in radical nationalism between socialist and nationalist ideals, and in so doing makes his distinctive contribution to the development of an Australian tradition. In doing so, he has constructed a compelling narrative that brings together his own construction as a social being and a witness's record of a testing period in the development of Australian society.

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- ⁴⁶ Marshall, *In Mine Own Heart*, 49.
- ⁴⁷ Marshall, *This Is the Grass*, 213.
- ⁴⁸ Marshall, *Heart*, p. 97. Compare his remark in the same book that as a writer he has to "play the game," not watch from the grandstand: 4, and in *This Is the Grass*, 213.
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