Copyright and use of this thesis
This thesis must be used in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Reproduction of material protected by copyright may be an infringement of copyright and copyright owners may be entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

Section 51 (2) of the Copyright Act permits an authorized officer of a university library or archives to provide a copy (by communication or otherwise) of an unpublished thesis kept in the library or archives, to a person who satisfies the authorized officer that he or she requires the reproduction for the purposes of research or study.

The Copyright Act grants the creator of a work a number of moral rights, specifically the right of attribution, the right against false attribution and the right of integrity.

You may infringe the author's moral rights if you:
- fail to acknowledge the author of this thesis if you quote sections from the work
- attribute this thesis to another author
- subject this thesis to derogatory treatment which may prejudice the author's reputation

For further information contact the University's Copyright Service.
sydney.edu.au/copyright
The Wounds of Possibility
Reading absence and silence in some contemporary Australian writing.

Bernadette M. Brennan

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of English
April 2001
No one but a child or a fool dares
to listen to silence, or to the words of my song.
Silence goes back into the man who hears
and carries all the sorrow was ever in his ears
and all the fear he has gathered all his life long;
and this song is a fool’s song.

Judith Wright: ‘The Blind Man, V’
Abstract

This thesis investigates some of the ways in which silence and language can be related. In order to demonstrate how different absences and silences operate in Australian writing (and reading), it gives readings of the absences and silences at work in three seemingly disparate texts: the poetry of Francis Webb, the fiction of Brian Castro, and writing about *Bringing them home*.

Webb’s poetry is read from two divergent perspectives: in conversation with Alberto Giacometti’s painting and sculpture; and from the viewpoint of negative theology. Such readings move beyond traditional readings that frame Webb’s poetry within Catholic dogma and Thomistic theology, deconstructing the figure of ‘God’ in the poetry. In doing so they uncover not only a God of absence but, more controversially, the anguished possibility of an absent God.

Castro’s postmodern fiction accepts the death of God as a given and celebrates the literary consequences of that death: the release from meaning and presence; the play of difference and the space left empty by (his) absence. That void is a powerful force that drives Castro’s writing, writing which playfully postulates not only the death of the author but, in *Stepper*, the death of writing itself.

The third section appears at first to represent a radical departure from the previous two. It considers the effects of a silence and absence that, unlike those operating in Webb’s and Castro’s writing, has been imposed or enforced. The silences and absences explored in relation to the public response to *Bringing them home* cannot be contained by a theology of transcendent suffering, nor by a belief in the presence of the unknown. They cannot be accommodated by literary theory, nor celebrated as spaces of imaginative possibility. Rather, they function to disturb the readings of silence that have informed Australian literary criticism and to suggest that these readings themselves ignore an/other silence, one that invites literary criticism to reconsider its ethical responsibilities to public life.
Acknowledgments

There are two people I would like to thank for making this thesis possible. They are as different as they are similar. Firstly I would like to thank Noel Rowe for nurturing, over many years, not only my analytical skills but more importantly, my imagination. Secondly, thank you to my husband Justin without whose practical and psychological assistance I could not have completed this work.
CONTENTS

Introduction 1

PART ONE: THE EMBRACE OF NOTHING
Writing God 42
Outlines of Absence in ‘Eyre All Alone’ 61
The Face of Love 79
The Embrace of Nothing 98

PART TWO: WHAT MATTER WHO'S SPEAKING?
Centres of Absence in After China 119
Stepper: writing of death/death of writing 140
Drift: Storytelling and/of annihilation 162

PART THREE: SPEAKING SILENCE
Body Language 189
Breaking the Silence 217
Lest We Forget 244

Conclusion 273

Appendix 282
Bibliography 283
Introduction
Introduction

Everything spoken stems in a variety of ways from what is unspoken.

Heidegger

How could one sustain, how could one save the visible, if not by creating the language of absence, of the invisible?

Rilke

In the period between 1260 and 1285 Johannes de Garlandia, a French music theorist, introduced notations in music for rests of various lengths: ‘rests were signs not for sounds, but for the absence of sound’.\(^1\) The rest inserted a quantifiable space of silence into the musical score. To foreground the absence of sound, the silence upon which music is written, was a truly revolutionary act. The medieval mind was not tuned to the possibilities of absence. ‘Vacancy had no authenticity or autonomy for a people who rejected vacuum as a possibility.’\(^2\) Before 1300 space, for medieval artists, was the objects or drawings contained in it. There was no three-dimensional vacancy around or among the subjects in early medieval painting (Fig 1). It was not until the beginning of the fourteenth century that scripts routinely incorporated word separation and punctuation, a development which heralded the introduction of silent reading. In the fifteenth century the Sorbonne, Oxford and Angers universities established that libraries were to be quiet: ‘that is to say, that silence and an appreciation of what was in books went together’.\(^3\)

By the twentieth century, absence had become an integral element, and at times a central subject, of Western art and literature as artists and writers strove increasingly

---


\(^2\) Crosby, 170-71.

\(^3\) Crosby, 136.
towards a goal of silence. Artists such as Edward Hopper and David Hockney were applauded for their painting of empty space, whether that space be between subjects or of the landscape. In literature the focus had shifted from ‘silence and an appreciation of what was in books’ to an appreciation of the silence in books/texts. Mallarmé, the ‘poet of Nothingness’, and Beckett, whose dramas demonstrate what he saw as the nothingness at the heart of both being and language, became, respectively, two of the most respected and influential writers of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modern and postmodern critical theory has attempted to provide twentieth and twenty-first century audiences and readers with strategies to read the multiple absences and silences at work in contemporary art and literature.

Absence and silence are not easily definable terms. They are multilayered and multifaceted terms which resist attempts to frame them or sharply define their focus. Theirs is a dynamic, interactive relationship. At times they function as related but separate terms, at others they slide into and over one another to become loosely interchangeable. As elements of a work of art or literature, absence and silence can perhaps best be read as moveable points on a continuum and understood, or rather experienced, by the way they operate, by their effect.

Mallarmé looked to some of the techniques employed in painting and music as a means by which he could create, through language, an effect of silence and vacancy. Painting and music offered a system of direct correspondence between colour, sound, sensation and ideated memory. It was this method of synaesthetic communication which spoke directly to the sensual, to the emotional, that Baudelaire and in turn Mallarmé and the Symbolists, attempted to express in their poetry. Mallarmé’s use of colour, especially the blankness of white, enhanced the sense of nothingness he portrayed through his imagery of silence, loss, absence and failure. In *L’Apres-midi d’un faune* and the *Ouverture* of *Hérodiade* he attempted to suggest in language corresponding organisations of musical form. He constructed *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* as a musical score in the hope that the closer his text moved towards the condition of music the greater its ability to communicate silence.
George Steiner has noted that, music and painting, because they are modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded not on language but on other communicative energies, have the ability to communicate silence. He is less certain about language. How can speech, asks Steiner, 'justly convey the shape and vitality of silence?' With Steiner’s question in mind it is worthwhile to briefly glance at some of the ways silence and absence operate in, and are communicated through, music and painting. An aesthetics of the aural and visual that focuses on absence and silence may assist in articulating how these concepts operate in language and literature.

Music:
‘Melody’, writes Levi-Strauss, ‘is the mystère suprême of man’s humanity’. Though music is more than simply melody, Levi-Strauss’s observation captures the essential nature of music: its ability to speak in a language that is beyond linguistic explanation. ‘Music’, writes Steiner, ‘puts our being as men and women in touch with that which transcends the sayable, which outstrips the analysable’. Music cannot be adequately explained by the rational mind. More than other art forms, music resists any deconstructive attempt to separate it into component parts and find meaning in those parts. In music form and content are one, being and meaning are inextricable. ‘Music means. It is brimful of meanings which will not translate into logical structures or verbal expression.’ Part of that meaning comes about through music’s relationship to and communication of silence.

The German musicologist Victor Zuckerkandl has taken issue with

---

7 Steiner, Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?, 217.
Wittgenstein’s statement, ‘What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’,
8 to suggest that ‘what we cannot speak of we can sing about’.9 Zuckerkandl, along with a
number of German philosophers - Bloch, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Hegel - argues
that music enables people to enter into another dimension. Music has the ability to
transport its listeners, and makers, to a profoundly emotional and oft-times spiritual
dimension, because it operates, often simultaneously, on a sensual, emotional,
intellectual and physiological level.10 Music both precedes and transcends language. In
Rilke’s ‘To Music’ it is a transformative medium that exists in the realm beyond speech:

Music: breathing of statues. Perhaps:
 stillness of pictures. You speech, where speeches
end...

Oh, you transformation
of feelings into...audible landscape!11

David Malouf’s ‘An Die Musik’ celebrates the ability of music, a primal and
subconscious force, to offer profound spaces of silence:

We might have known it always: music
is the landscape we move through in our dreams, and in the Garden
it was music we shared
with the beasts. Even plants
unbend, are enchanted. A voice wading
adagio through air, high, clear, wordless, opens perspectives
in the deepest silence.12

In Malouf’s poetry music is at times substituted for words thereby opening up the

---


10 John Cage has written: ‘music...sets the soul in operation’. See J. Cage, Silence, (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1961), 62. Cage also writes of and experiments with what he argues is the interdependent and mutually creative relationship between silence and sound.


possibility of imaginative vision and even the experience of infinite cosmic space.\textsuperscript{13}

Because music is an aural art form the silences it offers may appear to be more readily apparent than those which occur in literature and yet both music and literature communicate silence in similar ways. The most obvious form of silence offered in and by music is the absence of sound brought about by the musical rest. That silence operates to intensify the perception and appreciation of the heard music and to emphasise the background silence upon which music is played. In a simple piece of music the cessation of sound offers a pure silence. In a more complex composition, such as an orchestral symphony, there is a play of silence and sound on a number of levels. In addition to the pure silence experienced when all music has ceased there are multiple silences which operate between instruments. A conversation of music and silence is established as various instruments fall silent at different times. Judith Wright's 'Dialogue' captures this relationship between music and silence, likening it to the process of poetic composition:

\begin{quote}
All dialogue's a bargain: \\
while A supplies the words \\
B adds the silence. \\
Or here's the poem \\
set on a blank of paper; \\
the music's pattern \\
is eloquent only against its intervals.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

There is another less definable silence brought about by music. It is the silence music leaves in its wake, Shelley's 'memory of music fled'.\textsuperscript{15} It is not pure silence but rather a trace of sound, an echo in the memory of the listener, that continues to stir emotions. That trace is neither a presence nor an absence, it is rather, a memory of the play

\textsuperscript{13} In 'A Poor Man's Guide to Tuscany', Joan Sutherland's 'high E-flat' offers unlimited possibilities. See \textit{David Malouf: Poems 1959-89}, 195-96. See also the wordless passion of the aunts expressed through music in 'Maiden Aunts', 5.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Collected Poems 1942-1985}, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994), 313.

between the two.

**Painting:**

Painting, like music in Rilke’s poem, also has the ability to transform feeling into audible landscapes. In paintings, colour and line speak. The viewer of Munch’s *The Scream* (1893) feels and hears the piercing anguish of the scream, as it passes through the landscape, with the eyes. Synaesthetic correspondence facilitates immediate sensual communication. Arthur Dove (1880-1946), an American artist inspired by the Symbolist doctrine of synaesthesia, attempted to portray sound through colour. In *Foghorns* (1929) Dove ‘represents the moaning of warning sirens in the Long Island mist as concentric rings of paint growing in lightening tones of grayed pink from a dark center: the bell mouths of the horns, their peculiar resonance, and the color of the fog are fused in one image’.16 The viewer of *Foghorns* feels the fog and hears the sirens through vision (Fig 2).

What of silent landscapes, or as they are more easily experienced in the visual arts, landscapes of absence and vacancy? Modern artists have explored various methods by which they could represent nothingness. Kasimir Malevich’s *White on White* (1918), one of a series of paintings, is perhaps the closest any visual artist has come to offering a canvas of unqualified absence and silence. Malevich’s complete denial of objective representation was an important milestone in the development of modern art. No longer did artists feel compelled to offer a visual representation of some form of reality. No longer was it necessary or desirable to offer a linguistic account of the subject of the work of art. Language had given way to feeling. Thirty-four years before Malevich’s revolutionary paintings van Gogh had written that technique was the only means by which a painter could accurately and profoundly express what he wanted to say: ‘the

---

less verbiage the better'. Van Gogh insisted that the painter painted not what he saw but what he felt. 'What is seen can be transposed into words; what is felt may occur at some level anterior to language or outside it. It will find expression solely in the specific idiom of colour and spatial organization.' Modern painting communicates through technique, the play between colour, internal spaces and canvas or, more specifically, colour and form.

In Mark Rothko's deeply contemplative paintings, produced from the late 1940s until his death in 1970, colour and form are inseparable (Fig 3). Rothko's fields of colour, also inspired by the Symbolist doctrine of correspondences, speak of and to emotions, 'from foreboding and sadness to an exquisite and joyous luminosity'. Variations in saturation, tone and hue evoke an elusive yet almost palpable realm of space. The viewer is drawn into that space. It is a space of nothingness, a space of absence. Barnett Newman (1905-1970), the painter most often linked with Rothko, has been described by Harold Rosenberg as a 'theologian of nothingness'. Newman called the blank canvases on which he worked 'the void'. His characteristic paintings are large monochromatic canvases, painted over that void, and transected by one or more stripes which he called zips (Fig 4). Newman sought to erase representation in an effort to create a vision of the nothing, the no-thing that he saw as the plenitude of being. In Rosenberg's words: 'Barnett Newman works with emptiness as if it were a substance. He measures it, divides it, shapes it, colors it...His program is to induce emptiness to exclaim its secret.'

This brief overview of the techniques employed by Malevich, Rothko and Newman, demonstrates some of the different approaches these painters have taken in order to offer landscapes of absence and silence. Their approaches, as will become

17 Letter to Anton van Rappard, second half March 1884, Available from: http://www.vangoghgallery.com/letters/r43.htm; INTERNET.

18 Steiner, George Steiner: A Reader, 292-93.

19 Hughes, 490.

20 'Icon Maker', New Yorker, 19 April, 1969, 136.
apparent, are not dissimilar to those taken by Francis Webb and Brian Castro in their writing. Indeed Rosenberg’s analysis of Barnett Newman’s use of emptiness could apply equally to Castro’s literary technique. Though writers cannot bypass language for feeling they can, like painters, communicate absence and silence through play. Whereas painters manipulate the play between colour and form, writers communicate absence and silence through the play of absence and presence, through qualification, cancellation of meaning and the use of metaphor. A more obvious example of such play can be seen in Marsden Hartley’s *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914) in which Hartley paints the symbols and emblems worn by his dead lover, Karl von Freyburg, against a black, funereal background. It is these symbols and emblems, arranged as a solid Cubist image, that constitute the portrait. Hartley has recreated Karl’s absent body, the physical presence torn from him in the First World War.\(^{21}\) Karl is both absent and present in the portrait (Fig 5).

Perhaps the greatest twentieth-century painter of silence and absence was Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), who through the use of white and muted colours, imbued his paintings of dusty bottles and jars with an overwhelming sense of stillness (Fig 6). Morandi sought, in his paintings, to eliminate all that he considered superficial and ephemeral. He painted the same bottles in various arrangement again and again. Through the play of shadow, volume and space, these bottles were transformed into shapes whose real dimensions are light and time and silence. Charles Wright describes Morandi’s technique in his poem ‘Chinese Journal’:

> In 1935, the year I was born, 
> Giorgio Morandi 
> Penciled these bottles in by leaving them out, letting 
> The presence of what surrounds them increase the presence 
> Of what is missing, 
> keeping its distance and measure.\(^{22}\)

\(^{21}\) For a more detailed interpretation of Hartley’s *Portrait of a German Officer* see Hughes 368-70.

Throughout the critical commentary on Morandi’s work there recurs the caution that one has to be patient, to spend time in the presence of these paintings, in order to appreciate their silence. As John McDonald writes:

The first time I saw his paintings, they left me non-plussed. I could barely get beyond my amazement that such small, undemonstrative pictures could be placed in a museum alongside the representative works of all the modern movements. Today, I adore and revere these paintings. Those aspects that were originally so puzzling now seem like marks of distinction. What was once small and insignificant, now seems almost saintly in its reticence...Morandi’s work is a measuring stick of aesthetic sensibility. One may look at it with glazed eyes and see nothing special; but as the mists recede - perhaps only through years of sustained looking - it grows increasingly wonderful.23

Lou Klepac, the curator of the 1997 Morandi exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, says of Morandi’s paintings: ‘You have to give Morandi time...Morandi is an accumulative effect...you must allow the picture to empty out on to you, and the more time you give the picture, the more it will empty out upon you’.24

McDonald’s and Klepac’s observations suggest that an aesthetics of vision that focuses on absence, on what has been taken away or was never there, is a learned way of seeing. Contemporary audiences, unlike their medieval forebears, are tuned in to the possibilities of absence. To look for what is not there, what cannot be framed or signify a final meaning is, however, to go against a metaphysics of presence that has informed Western philosophy, theology and thought for centuries. Contemporary audiences need a language and an aesthetics of absence, of the invisible. Deconstruction, through its inversion and subversion of the metaphysics of presence, offers such a language, such a vision.

Music and painting communicate in ways that bypass, indeed, deny language. They operate as a play between that which is absent and that which is present, between levels of sound and silence and between colour, representation and canvas. In both,


form is meaning. Is language so very different? Let us return to Steiner’s question, substituting language for speech: How can language justly convey the shape and vitality of silence? The preliminary answer to this question is that language, like music and painting, justly conveys the shape and vitality of silence through form. As T.S. Eliot writes:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.25

It is this idea of form, of linguistic strategies employed by writers to push their work towards what Susan Sontag has termed ‘the ever-receding horizon of silence’,26 that I seek to unravel in this thesis and thereby uncover some of the silences and absences at work in the poetry of Francis Webb, the novels of Brian Castro and the narratives and history of Aboriginal Australians. I intend to unravel these silences with reference, where necessary, to other art forms. I read Francis Webb’s poetry in conversation with Alberto Giacometti’s painting and sculpture and with recourse to Kevin Hart’s concept of negative theology as a process of deconstruction. Brian Castro’s writings lend themselves to a reading which draws parallels with modern/postmodern architecture and the philosophical theories of language and negativity put forward by Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot and Wolfgang Iser. These first two chapters seek to uncover and celebrate various forms of absence and silence at work in Webb’s poetry and Castro’s narratives. The third chapter takes a markedly different stance. It seeks to name and challenge the absences and silences that have historically enshrouded Aboriginal stories, Aboriginal voices.


This fourteenth-century painting in the medieval style depicts an accurate representation of what Florence looked like to the visitor who walked its narrow, winding streets: a collection of buildings, not the empty spaces between them.
Why read for the silences, the absences?

Why is it necessary to read for the absences, the silences, in literature? Merleau-Ponty would suggest that one must read with an ear for silence because language expresses as much by what is between words as by the words themselves. Heidegger would answer such a question with the argument that what is spoken (or written) is doubled by what is unspoken (unwritten):

Everything spoken stems in a variety of ways from what is unspoken. What is unspoken is not merely something that lacks voice, it is what remains unsaid, what is not yet shown, what has not yet reached its appearance. That which must remain wholly unspoken is held back in the unsaid, abides in concealment as unshowable as mystery. That which is spoken to us speaks as saying in the sense of something imparted, something whose speaking does not even require to be sounded.

Heidegger goes on to explain that:

Saying sets all present beings free into their given presence, and brings what is absent into their absence. Saying pervades and structures the openness of the clearing...which every appearance must seek out and every disappearance must leave behind, and in which every present or absent being must show, say, announce itself.

Both spoken and written language operate on a system of play between that which is concealed, implicit, seemingly absent and that which is revealed, explicit and seemingly present. The implicit or unspoken dimension of a text, which may be the result of conscious and/or unconscious authorial intention, performs two important functions: it qualifies or transforms that which is said and it stimulates the reader into active participation with the text.

Heidegger’s ‘not yet’ signifies the active nature, the potential transformative


29 On the Way to Language, 126.
force, of that which is 'held back in the unsaid'. To read literature with an aesthetics that is open to the possibility of the unspoken or concealed is to activate this force. When that which has been concealed is brought into the open it operates to transform or qualify that which has been revealed. This transformation comes about through various strategies that range from the simple qualification or undercutting of the revealed, to the cancellation and unravelling of language. Yves Bonnefoy, in his summary of Blanchot's argument in *The Space of Literature* explains this phenomenon: 'The essence of literature is not to be found in what it explicitly asserts but in its continual annihilation of the meanings which language forces it to compound with, in its flight towards its goal of silence'.

Jean-Paul Sartre has noted that 'the literary object, though realized through language, is never given in language. On the contrary, it is by nature a silence and an opponent of the word.' Sartre identifies two kinds of silences that operate in literature: those which involve the writer and those that the reader causes to appear. It is the second of these silences that I want to consider here. These are the 'inexpressible' silences which endow the literary object with 'its density and its particular face'. Sartre explains that these silences are 'everywhere and nowhere' in the text:

The reader must invent them all in a continual exceeding of the written thing. To be sure, the author guides him, but all he does is guide him. The landmarks he sets up are separated by the void. The reader must unite them; he must go beyond them. In short, reading is directed creation.

The writer depends on the reader to 'collaborate' in the production of the work, to participate in the game of imaginative creation. The fabric of the text is always indeterminate and incomplete. It has silences, blanks, holes, gaps and loose ends and it is these that stimulate the reader into active participation with the text, a participation that is controlled by what the text has openly revealed. Productive readers will infinitely

---


expand and extend the text. Inattentive readers will not perceive the relations at work in the text. They will perhaps ‘draw some phrases out of the shadow, but they will seem to have appeared at random’.

The idea that writing and reading literature are part of a contract between writer and reader and dependent on the interaction between the implicit and the explicit is not new. Laurence Sterne wrote in 1781:

Writing, when properly managed...is but a different name for conversation. As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; - so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own.

Language is structured on a system of differences, the most obvious being speech and silence. These terms are not, however, mutually-exclusive binaries. Silence is a powerful form of speech. It may be a positive or a negative force. It may be a voluntary or an enforced means of communication. It may operate as the other of the dominant form of discourse or as an absence within that discourse. Just as silences in conversation signify and communicate different messages so too the language of silence, which operates in writing, is open to multiple interpretations. Some of these interpretations, relevant to the concerns operating in the writing of Webb and Castro, will now be briefly reviewed.

*les blancs:*

Mallarmé’s poetic experimentation offers a valuable starting-point for a discussion on the interrelationship between language and silence. Poetry, more than any other written art form, strives to use language in its purest form. It makes an audible and a visual

---

32 Sartre, 52.

space for the silence that is part of speech. ‘In the concentration of good poetry we experience silence as the ground against which language finds its most intense meaning, as we hear silence in the rests without which music is impossible.’

Mallarmé, not content to rely upon the aural qualities of verse, strove visually to emphasise the background of silence, *les blancs*, the whiteness of the page, against which his words were cast. His typographical experimentation with *les blancs* rendered a powerful sense of language distilled. The pure space of whiteness which surrounded each word not only affirmed the integrity of the word - the truth of the word as the absence of the world - it also imbued the word with a deep sense of silence. Like a single note that rings out in the midst of silence, Mallarmé’s isolated poetic word continues to vibrate in the space of whiteness that surrounds it. Mallarmé describes his technique thus:

> Let us have no more of those successive, incessant, back and forth motions of our eyes, traveling from one line to the next and beginning all over again. Otherwise we will miss that ecstasy in which we become immortal for a brief hour, free of all reality, and raise our obsessions to the level of creation. If we do not actively create in this way (as we would music on the keyboard, turning the pages of a score), we would do better to shut our eyes and dream...each of us has within him that lightning-like initiative which can link the scattered notes together.

Thus, in reading, a lonely quiet concert is given for our minds, and they in turn, less noisily, reach its meaning. All our mental faculties will be present in this symphonic exaltation; but, unlike music, they will be rarefied, for they partake of thought. Poetry, accompanied by the Idea, is perfect Music, and cannot be anything else.

Writers constantly wrestle with the paradoxical nature of language; that on the one hand there are too many words and that on the other words are not available to express what the writer wants to express.

---


36 T.S.Eliot looked outside the English language in order to find a word that could convey ‘The peace that passeth understanding’. He found ‘Shantih’ in the ancient Hindu *Upanishad*. When asked to explain her use of the refrain ‘*Shah, Shah, Shah*’ throughout *Paradise*, Toni Morrison explained that ‘no word could
was not only a way to move his poetry closer towards the form of music, it was also a conscious attempt to clear up what he saw as his word-clogged reality and give language its due. As ‘The Tomb of Edgar Poe’ makes clear, the poet is an ‘angel’ whose task is to draw ‘A purer meaning from the tribe’s word-hoard’. The speaker of David Malouf’s ‘Inspirations VIII’ seeks to offer his lover a poem of pure meaning. The most perfect, sensual gift he can offer is a poem of pure silence:

   If I were to offer you
   a poem   it would be silence
   itself    unattended
   still 38

The ideal of a purely silent poem, however, can only ever be an ideal because the poet must communicate through the medium of language. Randolph Stow attempted to overcome what he saw as the restrictive barrier of language to silent communication by attempting to ‘counterfeit’, or make the closest of copies of, ‘the communication of those who communicate by silence’. Poems such as ‘Ishmael’, ‘Persephone’, ‘Penelope’ and ‘Enkidu’ allow what is not said to be communicated because they are, in Stow’s words, ‘very personal, each one addressed to a particular person, and talking about my relationship with that person’. ‘From the Testament of Tourmaline’, with its strongly Taoist influences, is Stow’s most nearly silent poem:

   XVI
   Silence is water.
   All things are stirring,

   capture the ineffable, the longing, therefore I used tactile sound and rhythm’. J.Wendt, Uncensored, ABC Television, July 1998.


40 Randolph Stow, 381.
all things are flowering,
rooted in silence...

XXV

Before earth was was molten rock, was silence.
Before existence, absence. Absence is Tao.41

There is one further dimension of Mallarmé’s les blancs which invokes comment
and that is the very real drama that writers continually face: the blank page or computer
screen, the void that awaits their creative imprint. This void is the silence of Sartre’s
writer, a silence that is ‘subjective and anterior to language. It is the absence of words,
the undifferentiated and lived silence of inspiration’.42 Mallarmé exploited this ‘silence
of inspiration’. He found that:

...the sterility of the blank page produced sterility in [himself]. There being
nothing to say, he could say nothing. Then he realized that the inability to
produce meaning could itself be the subject for poetry, that language could
enact the cancelling operations of nothingness and thus transform the failure
to express into the successful expression of failure in the poem.43

Writing comes out of the gap between imagination and language. Inga
Clendinnen names this space when she describes the task of writing about her near-fatal
illness: ‘to try to understand any of this by transforming inchoate, unstable emotion and
sensation into marks on paper is to experience the abyss between fugitive thought, and
the words to contain it’.44 Clendinnen’s description of writing mirrors Wittgenstein’s
statement: ‘Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that

41 Stow, 226-227.
42 Sartre, 53.
43 C.D.Minahen, ‘Poetry’s Polite Terrorist: Reading Sartre Reading Mallarmé’, in Meetings with
Mallarmé in Contemporary French Culture, Michael Temple (ed.), (Devon: University of Exeter Press,
1998), 62.
can be put into words can be put clearly.  But not everything that can be thought can be said. The ‘abyss’ or gap that exists between thought and word is an essential element of language that, according to Merleau-Ponty, should be celebrated rather than lamented as an inadequacy:

The absence of a sign can be a sign, and expression is not the adjustment of an element of discourse to each element of meaning, but an operation of language upon language which suddenly is thrown out of focus towards its meaning. To speak is not to put a word under each thought; if it were, nothing would ever be said. We would not have the feeling of living in the language and we would remain silent, because the sign would be immediately obliterated by its own meaning...Language speaks peremptorily when it gives up trying to express the thing itself. Language signifies when instead of copying thought it lets itself be taken apart and put together again by the thought.

The fracturing and remaking of language in an attempt to express what the writer wishes to express is a continuous process, a driving force of creativity. It is a process that must by necessity fail because completion and satisfaction are fatal to writing. Writing is born out of desire, out of loss, out of failure. It is never possible to produce the poem, or the novel, or the story that one imagined because, as David Brooks writes, failure and loss are constitutive of creativity:

We paint, as we write, because we desire, because we have in mind, because we hold out, in mind, in front of ourselves, a book or painting - we might say the Book, the Painting - that we wish to create, and so endeavour to reach or to match it with the thing upon which we then commence to work. But the thing upon which we work can never be the thing in our mind. And not only because this would be an end, a culmination to our being or reaching or making - for what could be the point in simply repeating ourselves? - but also because our desire will always over-reach it. So that we make - so that we do our making - at the horizon of desire (and, in making, make that horizon), always pushing desire beyond our particular making.

Every book, every painting is in this sense a failure, because in writing, in painting it, we have made it redundant. It - the It that it has

---

45 Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 4.116, 51.

46 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', 81-2.
become in our hands - *is not what we were doing*. Because it exists, it is not the thing we wished and wish for, which was something *that did not yet exist*. It is an Image, a Simulacrum, a Fetish only. In being spoken, being written, being painted, it has left the very realm - of the ineffable, the inconceivable - which had first called it in to being and the pursuit of which was its reason. And so has become not the Thing Itself but its trace...

What is a trace? The outline of the Thing Itself? The memory of the Thing Itself? A trace is neither properly present nor absent. A trace is, in some sense, at the same time present and absent. It speaks of unfulfillment, absence and desire.

**The gaze of Orpheus:**

Blanchot’s reading of the Orpheus/Eurydice myth celebrates the need for artistic failure. According to Blanchot, Eurydice represents for Orpheus, ‘the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead’. Orpheus descends to the Underworld supposedly to bring Eurydice, the dark point, into the light of day, to ‘give it form, figure and reality’. He is warned that the only way he can succeed in this task is to keep his back turned on this dark point yet he turns and destroys his work. Why? Because, argues Blanchot, ‘the ultimate requirement of his impulse is not that there should be a work, but that someone should stand and face this “point” and grasp its essence...in the heart of night’.

We come to realise that Orpheus was always going to turn around and ruin the work when we understand that, in order to draw her to him, he must have been turned towards Eurydice as he descended into the Underworld: ‘he saw her when she was

---


invisible and he touched her intact, in her absence as a shade, in that veiled presence which did not conceal her absence, which was the presence of her infinite absence'. Blanchot’s reading identifies Eurydice as a trace in the depths of night, as unfulfilled desire. Orpheus’ true impulse desires Eurydice in her distant, nocturnal darkness. He ‘wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible’. His desire ‘does not want to make her live, but to have the fullness of her death living in her’. The whole purpose of Orpheus’ work was to ‘look into the night at what the night is concealing - the other night, concealment which becomes visible’.

Orpheus’s ‘mistake’, suggests Blanchot, lay in his desire to possess Eurydice. He should have realised that he needed her absence, her lack, in order to exist himself as an artist, as a singer: ‘He loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and he loses himself too, but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus scattered are necessary to the song’(439). Orpheus’ impatience, bred of desire, is ‘inspiration’:

All we can sense of inspiration is its failure, all we can recognize of it is its misguided violence. But if inspiration means that Orpheus fails and Eurydice is lost twice over, if it means the insignificance and void of the night, it also turns Orpheus towards that failure and that insignificance and coerces him, by an irresistible impulse, as though giving up failure were much more serious than giving up success, as though what we call the insignificant, the inessential, the mistaken, could reveal itself - to someone who accepted the risk and freely gave himself up to it - as the source of all authenticity (439-440).

This relationship between writing, desire, inspiration and failure, as outlined by Blanchot, informs much of Castro’s writing. Castro celebrates authenticity in writing as ‘the freedom to fail absolutely’.50

. The desire to look at that ‘other night’, the blackness of the void at the other side of life, has become an increasing preoccupation in the art, literature and science of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most blatant literary exploration of this void is Martin Amis’ Night Train (1998) in which the ‘brilliant’, ‘beautiful’ and popular astrophysicist

Jennifer Rockwell suicides in such a way and for no other reason than that she wants to stare at the black hole of death, to experience the void that she has only been able to mathematically calculate in her work. Castro employs the imagery and metaphor of black holes to speak of absence, erasure and death.

This deep nothingness, night, death is to be found, Blanchot suggests, at the heart of literature. It is a void that is intimately related to the 'death of God' and the ability or otherwise of language to articulate that loss.

Silence and the withdrawal of the G/god(s):

Historically the relationship between God and the void precedes language. Genesis 1:1 states: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void.' It is John, in his New Testament gospel, who inscribes the nexus between God, origin and language when he writes:

In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God
and the Word was God. 51

This relationship between nothingness, language, origins and God informs much Western art and literature. It is a relationship that Webb struggles to come to terms with in his poetry (and, if one excludes God from the equation, a relationship that Castro delights in). The question of how to speak properly of God when language can only improperly signify Him has been and continues to be addressed by philosophers, theologians and writers. A deity that exists beyond the phenomenal realm can hardly be described by language restricted to that realm. Language, when faced with the impossible task of naming the unnameable, must remain silent.

Patrick White articulates the difficulty faced by a writer who senses some form of divine Other but lacks the language to name the experience:

What do I believe? I am accused of not making it explicit. How to be explicit about a grandeur too overwhelming to express, a daily wrestling

match with an opponent whose limbs never become material, a struggle from which the sweat and blood are scattered on the pages of anything the serious writer writes? A belief contained less in what is said than in the silences. In patterns on water. A gust of wind. A flower opening...Am I a destroyer? this face in the glass has spent a lifetime searching for what it believes, but can never prove to be, the truth. A face consumed by wondering whether truth can be the worst destroyer of all.52

White’s language of belief is by necessity a language of silence. His language differs, however, from the language of silence that operates as a central feature of religious and mystic traditions in that White remains committed to language as a means of expression. In the Eastern traditions of Buddhism, Taoism and Sufism, one journeys towards a deeply silent state that has surpassed the inadequacy of language and its material world. In Christian religions the exercise whereby one attains silence as a state beyond language is most often an ascetic act practised by religious orders. Both Eastern and Western traditions believe that it is in the silence beyond language that the divine can best be apprehended. But belief in the divine and the naming of that deity are two distinct issues. Zen, Taoist and Sufi texts, and in the Christian tradition the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Jakob Boehme and Meister Eckhart, all struggle with the task of representing the unrepresentable. Pseudo-Dionysius wrote of the ‘ineffable God of faith’53 through a language of negation:

...nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be grasped by the understanding, since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is it Kingship or wisdom...nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is it [sic] darkness, nor is It light, or error, or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation apply to it [sic]... 54

His language raises two issues relevant to an understanding of Francis Webb’s poetics: firstly that God, like deconstruction, or more particularly différance, resists any attempt


at definition or framing and secondly that negative (apophatic) theology precedes positive theology.

Despite the difficulty of naming the divine, and despite the critique of authority that arose during the latter part of the eighteenth century - a critique marked by a shift from traditional religious faith to a renewed confidence in human reason - there continued to be, until the late nineteenth century, a sense of faith in the existence of God and a concomitant faith in the ability of language to mean. With the advent of the twentieth century, however, came the declaration by Nietzsche’s madman that God was dead and that ‘we had killed Him’. The added horror of two World Wars and the Nazi death camps ensured that the death of God became more than a linguistic phenomena, it became a palpable absence.

‘Do we not feel the breath of empty space?’, asked Nietzsche’s madman. And indeed many artists and writers do. The space of silence beyond language has become for them an empty chamber, a void which echoes with the absence or departure of the G/god(s). ‘The “other” has withdrawn from the incarnate, leaving either uncertain secular spoors or an emptiness which echoes still with the vibrance of departure’. Our aesthetic forms seek to explore that echoing chamber of emptiness, that void left in the movement of departure. Blanchot locates that chamber of emptiness at the heart of literature when he writes:

Literature’s space shelters nothing within it: it is also called le vide, “the void”. Sometimes it is associated with the anonymity of big cities, sometimes with the gap left by the absence of the gods, but sometimes, too, with what Rilke calls “the Open”, or “the world’s inner space”, the intimacy of an expansive welcome, the inward yes which death can say in the song of one who consents to fall silent and disappear. Or it is connected with the interval, which for Hölderlin is the sacred, between gods that abandon the world and men who, likewise, turn away from God - the sheer void in between, which the poet must keep pure.

---


56 Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?*, 229.

Disappearance, inner space, death, interval, void. These terms are integral to the study of absence and silence in literature.

Kevin Hart has considered the repercussions for poetry in light of Nietzsche's and Hölderlin's divergent testimonies that God is dead and that God has withdrawn. The idea of there being a 'role' for poets after the death of God 'seems implausible', writes Hart. There may, however, be a role for poets if God has only withdrawn:

In a world where God has withdrawn from humans and humans have turned away from God, the poet must maintain a space between the two infidelities while awaiting another revelation. On this understanding the poet would serve neither the old myths nor the new demythologising; the one tempts us with nostalgia, the other with reductionism. Rather, poetry would maintain a space where the unknowable would be remembered and made welcome. This space has been called the impossible, the open and the sacred.58

For Hart 'poetry holds being and meaning together. It can't let them converge and it can't eliminate the gap between them, either. That's the experience of poetry.'59 Poetry is, according to Blanchot, about humanity's relationship with nothingness and death. Heidegger situates poetry above the abyss. Webb's poetry, in its struggle to write God, exhibits elements of all these interpretations.

Steiner insists that 'where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable'.60 Blanchot would agree with Steiner on this point. For Blanchot the true language of art is born out of a deep sense of loss occasioned by the withdrawal of the various forms of the divine:

It seems that art owes the strangest of torments and the very grave passion that animate it to the disappearance of the historical forms of the divine. Art was the language of the gods. The gods having disappeared, it became the language in which their disappearance was expressed, then the language in which this disappearance itself ceased to appear. This forgetfulness now speaks all alone. The deeper the forgetfulness, the more the deep speaks in

---

60 Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?, 228.
this language, and the more the abyss of this deepness can become the hearing of the word.  

It is the ‘abyss of this deepness’ that is heard in the silence of Beckett’s modernist dramas.

**The depths of the void:**

For Beckett, as for Mallarmé and Blanchot, language answers to a nothingness which precedes and underlies it. It is the responsibility of the writer, wrote Beckett, to expose the nothingness on which language is based:

...my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it ... As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it - be it something or nothing - begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. Or is literature alone to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have been so long ago abandoned by music and painting? Is there something paralysingly holy in the vicious nature of the word that is not found in the elements of the other arts? Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, like for example the sound surface, torn by enormous pauses, of Beethoven’s seventh Symphony, so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence?

Beckett’s dramas repeatedly enact the dissolution of the ‘word surface’. The silence to which his drama and characters aspire is not a silence as plenum beyond language but as linguistic failure. The nothingness which underlies and pushes through into his plays is a negative void.

---

61 *The Space of Literature*, 245-46.

62 Letter to Axel Kaun, in S.Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, Ruby Cohn (ed.), (London: John Calder, 1983), 171-72. Roland Barthes takes up this same point when he states: ‘In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, “run”...at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced...’, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, David Lodge (ed.), (London: Longman, 1991), 171.
It could be argued that the felt depth of the void is one of the significant markers that separates modernism from postmodernism. Both modernist and postmodernist writers have sought to undermine the foundations of accepted modes of thought, experience and language, in order to reveal what they perceive to be the meaninglessness of existence. In the postmodern, however, the emphasis is not on Beckett’s ‘unfathomable abysses of silence’, it is rather on the ephemeral, the superficial layer that sits lightly over the perceived nothingness. The existential angst of modernism finds no place in the postmodern: ‘In the absence of transcendence, interiority and depth give way to a labyrinthian play of surface. When nostalgia is gone and waiting is over, one can delight in the superficiality of appearances’.63

If one accepts Steiner’s argument, that when the existence or non-existence of God is no longer of any relevance to the artistic project ‘certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable’, then a postmodern aesthetics that deals only with the superficial cannot address the deeper questions of being and non-being historically posed by art. Despite the efforts made by Western science and philosophy to provide humanity with the knowledge and faith that they are capable of an intimate understanding of their universe, ‘the eternal silence of these infinite spaces’64 that so terrified Pascal, continue to perplex the Western psyche. In a sense the postmodern, in disallowing the possibility of transcendence or otherness, attempts to reduce the world to the human. And yet some postmodern writing, writing like Castro’s, which bypasses any notion of a transcendent God, continues to probe the depths of unknowing. It does so through its engagement with the disturbing question posed by Leibniz and in turn, Heidegger: ‘why is there anything or something or everything, when there could be nothing?’65 Such a question will always elude a satisfactory answer. It is a question that goes beyond the play of surfaces to raise additional questions as to the nature of

---

63 Mark C Taylor, 15-16.


65 Steiner, Martin Heidegger, 35.
mortality and of art. It is a question the leaves open the possibility of an O/other dimension.

Writers and artists are haunted by, yet drawn to, the possibility of nothingness, of Sartre’s *neant*. The ultimate nothingness is, of course, death. Death is the absence that is always present. It is the silence that every human must face and a silence that must remain forever uninterpretable and beyond rational comprehension. It is a silence that language can never fully address. As Rilke writes in ‘The Fourth Elegy’:

> to bear all death, the whole of death; death even before life; and gently, without rancour to keep it, contain it, is terrible beyond all language.66

In postmodern writing the death of God is inextricably linked with the death of the self. Mark C Taylor writes: ‘Postmodernism opens with the sense of *irrevocable* loss and *incurable* fault. This wound is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death - a death that “begins” with the death of God and “ends” with the death of ourselves.’67 The death of God, the death of the self and, in Castro’s narratives the postulated death of writing, insist upon an aesthetics of reading that is tuned into the possibilities of absence.

**Logocentrism and presence:**

It is widely, though not unanimously, argued that the Western theological tradition rests upon a ‘dyadic foundation’. It is repeatedly inscribed in seemingly opposite binary terms: God/World, Presence/Absence, Affirmation/Negation, Truth/Error, Reality/Illusion, Light/Darkness, Invisible/Visible, Speech/Writing, Seriousness/Play.68 The Western theological tradition is also logocentric. In these supposed oppositions ‘the superior term belongs to the logos and is a higher presence; the inferior term marks


67 Erring: A Postmodern A/thetaley, 6.

68 Mark C Taylor, 9.
a fall. Logocentrism thus assumes the priority of the first term and conceives the second in relation to it, as a complication, a negation, a manifestation, or a disruption of the first.\(^{69}\) The privileging of the first term establishes and 'sustains an asymmetrical hierarchy in which one member governs or rules the other throughout the theological, logical, axiological, and even political domains'.\(^{70}\)

Deconstruction challenges logocentrism. It not only refuses to privilege the first term, it denies or blurs the boundaries between the terms and thereby allows for a fluid movement between the two. Deconstruction undoes the metaphysics of presence that historically has informed Western philosophy, theology and thought. ‘The authority of presence’, writes Jonathon Culler, ‘its power of valorization, structures all our thinking. The notions of “making clear,” “grasping,” “revealing,” and “showing what is the case” all invoke presence.’\(^{71}\) Such notions have been, and continue to be, the directed end of much literary criticism and interpretation.

Steiner affirms the authority of presence, whether that presence be ‘that of God (ultimately, it must be); of Platonic “Ideas”; of Aristotelian and Thomist essence. It can be that of Cartesian self-consciousness; of Kant’s transcendent logic or Heidegger’s “Being”. It is to these pivots’, writes Steiner, ‘that the spokes of meaning finally lead. They insure its plenitude. That presence, theological, ontological or metaphysical, makes credible the assertion that there “is something in what we say”’.\(^{72}\) Steiner writes of the threat deconstruction poses to presence in pejorative terms. He denounces deconstruction for its ‘nihilism’ and ‘zeroing’ effect. Yet deconstruction is not nihilistic in its intent or practice. In its rigorous resistance to closure it opens up new modes of reading and interpretation. It allows the language of absence to speak. Theorists such

---


\(^{70}\) Mark C Taylor, 9.

\(^{71}\) Culler, 94.

\(^{72}\) *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?*, 121.
as Derrida, Blanchot, Culler and Hart, in foregrounding play and absence and the ways in which deconstruction allows them to operate, are in concert with Rilke when he asks: ‘How could one sustain, how could one save the visible, if not by creating the language of absence, of the invisible?’.

Play and differance:
The ‘death of God’ signals a release from the metaphysics of presence. The absence of the transcendental signified denies any fixed point of reference or meaning and affirms the limitlessness of play. ‘Play’, writes Derrida, ‘is the disruption of presence...Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around.’ Derrida replaces the hierarchical structure that defines absence in terms of presence, as the negation of presence, with a strategy that treats presence as the effect of a generalized absence or differance:

Differance...is a structure and a movement that cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. Differance is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other.

Derrida’s reasoning opens a way forward for an understanding of the operation and effect of the complex and often disorienting language in Webb’s poetry and in Castro’s narratives. By emphasising the nature of language as a system of differences, absence and the trace are affirmed:

[T]he play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself...no element can function as a sign

---

73 cited in M.Blanchot, The Space of Literature, 142.


without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each element...being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system... Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. 76

Play is the means by which difference is appreciated and absence empowered. As Wolfgang Iser explains:

Since play strives for something but also undoes what it achieves, it continually acts out difference. Difference, in turn, can be manifested only through play, because only play can make conceivable the absent otherness which lies on the reverse side of all positions. Thus the play of the text is neither winning nor losing, but is a process of transforming positions, thereby giving dynamic presence to the absence and otherness of difference.77

Iser understands this process of transforming positions, a process whereby the unformulated background of a text is communicated, as the operation of negativity. Negativity, as 'the articulation and dissemination of the “unsayable” in literature’, 78 is a characteristic of almost all complex literary texts. It is certainly a powerful force in the texts discussed in this thesis.

In 1996 Cambridge University Press published Paul Kane’s study of negativity and absence in Australian poetry: Australian poetry: Romanticism and Negativity. Kane’s ground-breaking study is a valuable text for readers who seek to understand the workings of absence and silence in Australian poetry. Taking Hegel and Freud as his

76 Positions, 26.


78 P.Kane, Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 38. Kane argues that a mode of negativity which turns upon absences and lacunae in literary history itself is peculiar to Australian writing. In particular, the way in which the ideology of romanticism functions as an absent presence in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australian poetry.
Kane outlines various philosophical positions on negativity. He offers a 'thematics of negativity' in regard to the Australian literary tradition before examining a number of specific instances of negativity in Australian poetry. Kane concludes his text with a brief discussion of the 'vocabulary of negativity' which he identifies as being at the root of Webb's poetry. He suggests that the via negativa evident in Webb's poetry 'is a mode of negation which may well prove to be the most characteristic feature of the strongest Australian poetry in the twentieth century'. I begin my consideration of negativity and absence in Australian writing with a study of the poetry of Francis Webb.

It will be apparent from the above discussion that this thesis suggests that it is important to read for absences and silences; that the way absence and silence operate in literature and language should not be divorced from the way they operate in other art forms; and that there are a number of different concerns and strategies at work in literature and other art forms relating to absence and silence. I have chosen three contrasting writers and texts, Francis Webb, Brian Castro and Bringing them home, in order to develop these themes further.

Francis Webb's poetry:
Webb's poetry is most often discussed in terms of its linguistic difficulty, its preoccupation with failed explorer figures and questions of national identity, and its affirmation of the poet's Catholic faith. It is certainly a densely crafted and linguistically complex poetry. Webb's choice and manipulation of metaphor and imagery offer, at times, a sense of disorienting impenetrability. Yet despite the linguistic density of the poems, Webb's is a poetry above all of absence and silence. The felt absence is acutely religious in nature. It is the nature of that religiosity which I seek to explore further. Kane has correctly noted that the via negativa is a powerful force of

79 For a more detailed discussion on various positions on negativity taken by these writers and others such as Adorno, Bataille, Blanchot, Derrida, Iser and Macherey, see Kane 36-46.

80 Kane, 207-8.
negation in Webb’s writing. It is important to distinguish, however, between the *via
negativa* as a mode of negation and negative theology; the first being a contemplative
practice directed towards union with God while the second is a discourse directed
towards the concept of God. My negatively theological reading of Webb’s poetry seeks
to open up possibilities in the poetry that to date have been largely overlooked.

Webb’s poetry, through its repeated reversals and paradox, resists any attempt at
final interpretation. It seems to offer some meaning, image or suggestion only to cancel
that same offering. For this reason I have not sought to offer a linear, directed overview
of Webb’s *oeuvre*. I have, rather, concentrated my discussion on various poems that
demonstrate some of the strategies Webb employs in order to allow silence to speak and
to give absence presence.

‘Eyre All Alone’ exemplifies Webb’s framework strategy: a strategy that appears
to offer meaning and direction only to have that meaning and direction undercut,
qualified or cancelled. It is also an important sequence for understanding the poetry’s
approach to the concept of God. ‘The Canticle’ demonstrates the way in which Webb’s
multilayered, ambiguous metaphors operate to proliferate meaning and possibility. The
poem, constructed as a journey, appears to go in one direction only to turn and follow
another. It is less a drive towards the Centre, as some critics have suggested, than a
series of excursions around the periphery of a shifting, uncontainable centre. ‘The
Canticle’ also celebrates two related and essential characteristics of Webb’s poetry:
human spirituality and the suffering, uncertainty and hope that are integral elements of
that spirituality.

There *is* a sense of forward linear drive in Webb’s last six published poems.
These poems dramatise the poet’s willingness not only to name death but to explore the
space beyond it, a space from which Webb’s earlier poems shied away. These last
poems seek to probe the depths of the void but again no final resolution is offered.

**Brian Castro’s fiction:**
When one reads for the absences and silences in texts, one starts to identify connections
between writers as seemingly different as Francis Webb and Brian Castro. Castro, through play, also extends language to its maximum potential. Like Webb, he stretches his metaphors to dizzying limits whilst simultaneously undercutting or qualifying any suggested meaning. Castro also constructs his narratives around frameworks and courts the demolition of those frameworks in order to proliferate meaning. Significantly however, his frameworks are those of literary theory. *After China* becomes deconstruction, a process of difference and deferral that greatly expands the implications of the text.

Though he employs many of the linguistic strategies associated with postmodernism Castro denounces what he sees as postmodernism’s ‘overly self-conscious, ideological and theoretical’ modes of discourse. For Castro, ‘every novel... must make an ethical gesture toward the end of suffering’. 81 Whether he achieves such a goal is debatable. He attempts in his fiction to trace love, care and concern as absences. In *Drift* he parallels the attempted erasure of an author with the attempted erasure of Tasmania’s Aboriginal population. Sartre’s ‘inattentive’ reader would fail to uncover some of the deeper moral or redemptive moments that operate amidst Castro’s sometimes vertiginous word games.

Whereas Webb’s poetry tentatively gropes its way towards a full confrontation with and naming of death, Castro’s writing embraces death as a powerful creative force of freedom and possibility. Annihilation of the author and of the self gives birth to writing; in *Stepper* the writing flirts with its own annihilation. Castro’s engagement with questions of death, nothingness and absence is informed primarily by his interest in the philosophy of language. There is no space in his narrative project for the spiritual and theological concerns addressed by Webb. Where Webb’s language cancels itself to reveal the felt depth of the void and the anguished suggestion of the absence of God, Castro’s writing actively celebrates the experience of the void. The void in Castro’s writing is reminiscent of that described by Beckett: a nothingness that exists prior to and underneath language.

The relationship between language, the void and death is at the heart of Castro’s writing. It is a relationship described by Blanchot when he writes:

Language can only begin with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself. Negation is tied to language. When I first begin, I do not speak in order to say something, rather a nothing demands to speak, nothing speaks, nothing finds its being in speech and the being of speech is nothing.\(^\text{82}\)

Castro’s word games strive to allow nothing to speak.

‘The Great Australian Silence’:
The absences and silences operating in Webb’s and Castro’s writing can be described as creative and comfortable. Creative because though they may speak of anguish, negation and/or death they function to expand the reader’s imaginative perception, to further, through reader participation, imaginative possibilities. In terms of literary theory and the academy they are comfortable in that they can be understood and celebrated through the application of critical analysis. What of silences and absences that are destructive rather than creative, uncomfortable rather than comfortable? What of silence that has been imposed, of orchestrated absence? In the third section of this thesis I examine some of the implications, for literature and literary criticism, of the silencing of Aboriginal voices and the absence of Aboriginal history in the collective memory of the Australian nation.

W.E.H. Stanner, in his 1968 Boyer Lectures, named what he saw as the absence of all matters Aboriginal in Australian history texts, ‘The Great Australian Silence’.\(^\text{83}\) Stanner explored the effects of this absence on Australian race relations and noted the difficulty an increasingly vocal Aboriginal presence posed to a government unaccustomed to considering that presence. Twelve years later Bernard Smith, in his attempt to explain the oppression and survival of Australian Aborigines, revisited many of Stanner’s concerns. It was time, argued Smith, that the ‘locked cupboard’ of

---

\(^\text{82}\) ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, 381.

Australia’s colonial history was opened. The opening of that cupboard and the recognition of ‘what actually occurred’, he wrote, ‘constitutes a central problem for the integrity and authenticity of Australian culture today’.

Much progress has been made in terms of Aboriginal rights and reconciliation since 1980. There is now a significant Aboriginal presence in most aspects of Australian cultural and literary life, yet Smith’s words remain relevant today.

When Inga Clendinnen was invited to deliver the 1999 Boyer Lectures she had no difficulty in deciding on her theme: ‘the practical usefulness of good history both morally and politically’. Clendinnen admits that initially she ‘wanted to avoid Aboriginal issues, as being at once too complicated, and too politicised’. Such avoidance was not, however, possible because, writes Clendinnen: ‘Our ignorance of their [Aboriginal] history, or our denial of it, is a threat to us all, because it is the major impediment in the way of general agreement as to what constitutes justice and decency, which are core issues in any democracy’. Clendinnen titled her lectures *True Stories*.

The questions that have been raised by the publication, in *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997), of many life stories of Aboriginal people separated as children from their families are both morally and politically complex. The stories in the Report are, to those who told them and to those who have been moved by them, true stories of pain, injustice and trauma. To the detractors of the Report they are untrustworthy, unsworn, emotional statements sadly lacking in credibility. These critics argue that since the stories have not been subjected to rigorous cross-examination in a court of law and are not backed by hard, statistical fact they cannot be accepted as a record of history. The stories themselves stand in the middle of a debate that is fundamentally about different models of truth. To argue that stories cannot convey truth

---


86 *True Stories*, 15.
and that truth can only be reached through rigid, legal practice is to affirm a model of knowledge which seeks to reinforce the power of a central, ‘white’ legal principle. Such a model encourages a damaging silence and creates an absence that is aligned with injustice.

The stories in *Bringing them home* are not fictional. Told through the filter of lived experience and memory they are necessarily fictive. The individual stories, published together, operate on an imaginative level to offer a narrative of historical import. If one had to classify the stories they may best fit into what Clendinnen has described as collective memory, that ‘vast steppe between history and fiction’. These stories were neither told nor published as works of literature. I do not, therefore, intend to critically analyse them as such. My focus of concern is on the public response to them and what that response says about the power of story to inform social and political discourse. Such an approach necessarily marks a shift from my close, text-based readings of Webb and Castro. In this final section I want to broaden the definition of text to include public discourse and to offer a different model of interpretation. Because the published debate about the value of these stories has been predominantly amongst non-Aboriginal Australians - historians, poets, prime ministers, journalists - my discussion is heavily weighted towards the ‘white’ reception and representation of them. I seek to set up a conversation between political speeches, editorials and essays, and in so doing explore the interface where economic, legal and imaginative models of

87 I am using ‘fictive’ to recognise that these stories are, in some sense, created effects. There is, for instance, a selective and imaginative process involved in remembering and in narrative ordering. I am not using ‘fictional’ because I do not want to be seen to be implying that these stories are simply effects of language. In their material origins and their narrative intention, they constitute and are constituted of moral claims on and about actual events. They therefore set limits on any easy assertion that there is only fiction. While writing and story-telling might be described as ‘fictive’ or ‘made-up’ in terms of their signifying processes, this does not necessarily mean that they are ‘fictional’ in terms of their referential response/responsibility to their originary material, nor in terms of their intention to have their readers believe in them as substantially accurate accounts of what actually happened. So ‘fictive’ is meant to mediate between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ by distinguishing between various causalities of narrative acts.

knowing collide, confirm and/or challenge each other.

Why include these stories and the public response to them in a literature thesis? Like Clendinnen I too could have avoided ‘Aboriginal issues, as being at once too complicated, and too politicised’, but also like her I could not sustain such avoidance. A thesis that considers various manifestations of absence and silence in Australian writing, and written at this time in Australian history, should not ignore the very real historical silence of Aboriginal voice. Nor should it ignore the decisive fracturing of that silence with the publication of *Bringing them home* and the attempt by some, including the Federal government, to maintain that silence. The attempt to discredit and thereby silence these stories raises many complex moral issues, one of which is the responsibility of academic scholarship. As Adi Wimmer has written:

> There is a story which I have heard at least a dozen times from Austrian Jews who grew up at the time of rising Nazism. Gangs of Nazi youths used to attack Jewish students as they were entering university buildings, or sometimes right in front of a lecture hall. *And the professors looked the other way*. To leave the ivory tower of academe, to intercede on behalf of the victims carried the taint of ‘lowering yourself’ to the level of ‘dirty politics’. It must never happen again that academics stay aloof from struggles where important moral issues are at stake.  

Literature and the arts profoundly influence the society in which they operate. Academic scholarship that probes the workings of literature and the arts has the capacity not only to inform public debate on a variety of issues - race, gender, sexuality, class, the environment, history - but to open up the possibility of imaginative engagement with difference, otherness and the past. Literature has the ability to engender empathic imagination. While there is a place for postmodern literary games that play with questions of authorial responsibility, speaking positions and erasure, there comes a point when the language of literary discourse must look to something outside itself. There is a very real consequence in Australia of the death of language, the silencing of voice, the erasure of history.

---

89 ‘Message from the President’, in European Association for Studies on Australia Newsletter No.22, May 2000, Klagenfurt, 1.
The kinds of absence and silence involved in this public discourse are radically different from those discussed in relation to Webb’s and Castro’s writing because they have been imposed. They therefore invoke a moral enquiry. For this reason I have situated my discussion of the reception of the stories within the context of ethics and literature. In returning literature to the public sphere, I seek to reanimate an ethical concern and show that absence and silence can have moral meaning in addition to the more refined aesthetic meanings favoured by postmodern approaches.

Literature and ethics:
The publication of *Bringing them home* coincided with a growing resurgence of interest in Australian studies about the place of literature in the public sphere. The 1998 Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) conference took ‘Australian Literature and the Public Sphere’ as its theme. Papers delivered at that conference and published in the proceedings, addressed a range of ethical issues: Aboriginal land rights and the High Court’s *Wik* judgement; *Bringing them home*; the rise of Hansonism and One Nation; sexual harrassment and gender inequality; queer theory; literature and the mass media; and authorial authenticity. 1998 also saw the publication of John Frow’s ‘A Politics of Stolen Time’, Carmel Bird’s *the stolen children: their stories*, and significantly, two collections of essays: *Seams of Light: Best Antipodean Essays* and *The Best Australian Essays 1998*. The interest in the essay form and the publication of essays from newspapers, magazines and public speeches as ‘literature’ marks a third strand of the convergence between the publication of the stories and the renewed academic focus on the ethical responsibility of literature. My discussion in the final section of this thesis seeks to interweave these three strands.


The significant turn to ethics in contemporary literary studies is not an Australian phenomenon. David Parker, Martha Nussbaum and Tony Siebers, just three of a large number of academics, Australian and international, whose published work explores the relationship between ethics and literature, have all commented on the recent return to ethics in the humanities. The 'Literature and Ethics' conference held at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, in July 1996 was an important marker of this renewed academic concern. In their introduction to *Critical Ethics: Text, Theory and Responsibility* (1999), Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods point out that the revival of 'ethics' - and they acknowledge the spectrum of possibilities offered by that term - has been most conspicuous in literary and cultural studies. They note that the ethical was a neglected category of concern 'throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, in part because it was felt to have been surpassed and discredited. The Left regarded ethics as a liberal humanist apology for the bourgeois subject, while poststructuralists tended to treat most ethical discourse as contaminated with metaphysics'. Rainsford and Woods go on to suggest that world events such as the Gulf War, the State of Emergency in South Africa in the 1980s, the Eastern European revolutions of 1989, the Tiananmen Square massacre and the Bosnian war have 'raised the stakes of becoming a committed intellectual...A greater understanding of the aesthetic and performative elements in politics and

---


93 *Critical Ethics: Text, Theory and Responsibility*, 3.
ideology has made real events seem very much the humanities’ business’.94

The publication of *Bringing them home* and the published backlash to it, a backlash supported by the more conservative elements of the Australian business and political communities, has provided an opportunity for those skilled in the practice of criticism and debate to engage with some very real and pressing moral issues. I want to demonstrate, in this thesis, that the strategies involved in discerning the absences and silences operating in poetry, fiction, or works of art, may be effectively applied to an interpretation of other texts. That is to say, I want to affirm the ability of literature and literary criticism to make a constructive difference to the way society understands itself and its relational structures. At the same time, I want to confront aesthetic and theoretical notions of absence and silence with political and ethical ones - not to discredit postmodern interpretations, but to respect the differences that may occur within ‘absence’ and ‘silence’ as these terms cross the different contexts that operate in this thesis.

**Kafka’s wall:**

In ‘The Great Wall of China’ Franz Kafka suggests that the wall was deliberately constructed in ‘piecemeal’ blocks. When one thousand yards of wall was constructed the builders were sent to work in different neighbourhoods and the more imaginative supervisors for that section were sent ‘far, far away’ to oversee the building of the next thousand yards. ‘Naturally in this way many great gaps were left’,95 writes Kafka. On the journey to their distant destination the supervisors not only caught glimpses of finished sections of the wall, they discovered in the spaces between these sections, in these gaps, many new and interesting things. Kafka’s wall operates as a metaphor for the structure of this thesis. It is constructed in three distinct blocks separated by genre, time, voice and intention. Within the gaps or absences between those blocks are readings I have not pursued but which open up further possibilities of meaning. Thus it

---


would be possible to trace a movement in them that mirrors the cultural development of Australian society over the last fifty years; a progression from the voice of Webb, white anglo-Catholic male through to Castro, multicultural immigrant writer, through to an affirmation of Aboriginal voices that have only recently begun to be widely heard in the public sphere. From another perspective questions of literary and legal inheritance could be explored through the application of post-colonial literary theory. However, such readings are not the concerns of this thesis.

There are a number of binding threads that connect the three sections of this work. One is the movement of silence as it un-speaks Webb’s tortured poetic language, becomes a form of non-speaking in Castro’s postmodern word games and speaks in the narratives of Aboriginal Australians. Another is the narrative of care and concern that, though written differently by each writer/text, implies some relationship between ethics and literature. In Webb’s poetry one can identify the splintering of the overarching narrative of God, the narrative that traditionally supported meaning, the metaphysics of presence and importantly, ethics. Castro’s writing grapples with the postmodern dilemma: if God is dead and writing is all a game how can it sustain any moral and ethical concern? What difference can writing make in a postmodern society that has surrendered notions of coherence and purpose? The stories in Bringing them home reactivate an older more historical view that ethics informs literature and suggest that the ethical and epistemological category of ‘story’ can contribute greatly to the political problems embodied in the reception of the report. By approaching these disparate texts in this way one can identify, broadly speaking, three different qualities of absence and silence: a withdrawal of the gods; the play of différence and trace; and a moral meaning that involves ethical questions of literary responsibility. There is another discernible movement that can be traced as it shifts from the transcendent, through writing, to lived experience. The absence and silence operating in Webb’s poetry is aligned with transcendence; not a privileging of a mystical absence and silence but a felt absence of a transcendent God. In Castro’s writing absence and silence are wholly immanent. The absences and silences identified through and within the stories in Bringing them home,
in contrast to the transcendent and the textual, are features of our actual, contemporary Australian society. The connections or conversations between the three sections of this thesis will be further drawn together in the conclusion through the image of the wound.
PART ONE

THE EMBRACE OF NOTHING

Francis Webb
PART ONE

THE EMBRACE OF NOTHING: FRANCIS WEBB

I: Writing God
II: Outlines of Absence in ‘Eyre All Alone’
III: The Face of Love
IV: The Embrace of Nothing
Note on sources for Webb's poetry:

I note the textual discrepancies, commented on by Patricia Excell, between editions of Webb's poetry. None of those discrepancies have any bearing on the poems discussed in this thesis. I have, therefore, cited references from M. Griffith & J. McGlade (eds.), *Caps and Bells: The Poetry of Francis Webb*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991. Where necessary *Caps and Bells* is cited as *CB* in the text. The following abbreviations are used for citation of poem sequences in the body of the text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BB</td>
<td>'A Drum for Ben Boyd'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>'Eyre All Alone'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>'Leichhardt in Theatre'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SV</td>
<td>'Sturt and the Vultures'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMG</td>
<td>'Lament for St Maria Goretti'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Writing God

To say ‘God’ is to explode immanence...There’s a sense in which poetry answers to the absence of the Word, the unique master word that underwrites all other words. Not even the word ‘God’ can do that, for as soon as you pronounce the divine name it divides like spilt mercury. As soon as it enters the world, the Word is lost. Writing poems is a search for that Word.

Kevin Hart

Francis Webb’s poetry is always involved in ‘the Search for something’ (SV 237). That ‘Search’, as Judith Wright has noted, is directed towards an understanding of ‘the truth about man and his relationships, to himself, to other men, and in the end, to God’.1 It is by necessity a linguistic search, an attempt through words to locate the incarnate Word. Kevin Hart’s explanation of his poetic engagement with the word/Word relationship could equally apply to Webb. Hart’s ‘explode’ captures the powerful destructive force harboured in the creative moment of Incarnation. This paradoxical force operates as a source of both inspiration and anxiety throughout Webb’s poetry as it strives imaginatively to come to terms with the doctrine of Word made flesh and its attendant contradictions, reversals and in a sense ‘schizophrenic’ potential. Webb’s poetry is one of quest and of questioning. It is the experience of the search. It is the experience of the attempt to write ‘God’.

Webb saw in music and painting a way to push beyond the horizon of the known, a way in which the unknown, God, could best be apprehended. ‘In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806-1882’ articulates the respect and admiration he held for the art of painting and Sandys’ painting in particular. Sandys’ wordless art achieves what Webb considers to be the ultimate goal of artistic creation: it shapes ‘a causeway between earth and heaven’. Through his poetry Webb increasingly sought to offer a similar gesture or prayer towards heaven and God, but his poetic language remains rooted in suffering, pain and uncertainty. Webb’s is never a transcendent poetry. His causeway is more of a horizontal road. On this road the characters in his poems glimpse or tangentially encounter another: ‘Man to man. Which is sometimes/God to man’(E 173). While the

characters often undergo some form of redemptive experience, the ‘Someone’ whom they meet is never fully apprehended.

It is the ‘Someone’ on the road, who appears in various guises throughout Webb’s poetry, that operates as a focus for this study of Webb’s work. An examination of this ‘Someone’ reveals an understated anxiety operating in Webb’s poetry; an anxiety about faith, desire, creative ability and the ever-present and increasingly-encroaching void. The anxiety can be identified most clearly if one listens to the silence behind and between the words, the cancellations and absences created by the language and the unanswered questions the poems pose:

Has Gilbert found the source? or do his bones,  
Forever at war with death,  
Trudge nightly towards Port Essington, till dawn  
Chains them again to stone?  
A question stares  
Relentless from the dust, the answer traces  
Legends of fright upon his brain, he turns  
Swiftly back to the mirror and, as one  
Aloof, for a moment watches fear at work. (L 70)

How shall I face their golden faces, their pure voices? (E 184)

Are you from the Void? (SV 238)

Must I fall with Him into chloroform? (LMG 240)

Poems of exploration:

Most of Webb’s major poem sequences have as their central figures well-known though questionably-successful explorers. ‘A Drum for Ben Boyd’, ‘Leichhardt in Theatre’, ‘A View of Montreal’ and ‘Eyre All Alone’, were published in Australia over a period dating from the late 1940s until the 1960s. It was a period of intense cultural introspection in which a diverse range of Australian painting, verse drama, fiction and poetry engaged with questions of national identity and history by focussing on the somewhat romanticised figures of white explorers who had ‘found’ and traversed the
harsh southern continents of Australia and Antarctica. It was a time, according to Douglas Stewart, when poets and poetry were called upon to 'sing the nation itself into shape'. It was a time of search:

a search...for gods, demigods and heroes, the men or divinities who have founded the nations and whose deeds or characters, whether for good or of ill, as inspiration or as warning, are still felt to be working through it...a search for the basic myths of the nation.

Webb’s fascination with explorer figures, however, went beyond the nationalistic, literary project of the *Voyager Poems*. The sheer number of artistic and literary works dealing with explorer figures must have provided a nourishing environment for Webb’s imaginative vision but his explorer poems stand apart from the prevailing representations of heroic explorer figures in two significant ways. Firstly, as Michael Griffith has noted, Webb resisted ‘the kind of myth-making he saw about him - which tended to glorify the past and highlight the differences, rather than the kinship, between men’. Secondly, as Jim Tulip and Bill Ashcroft have argued, Webb’s explorer poems interweave religious and national mythology to become poems of intense spiritual searching, poems in which Australian history and space are employed to address metaphysical concerns.

Explorers, by their very nature, are involved in quests of discovery. Webb’s explorers search for a sense of unified self, for a language in which they can express their imaginative vision and for a sense of communion with others. This longed-for sense of kinship reflects the deeper desire of the poetry for a sense of communion with the Other. Just as his explorers largely fail in their quests, ‘positively seemed to rely/On

---


4 *God’s Fool*, 51.
a chain of failures' (BB), so too does Webb’s poetry fail in its attempt to find answers, certainty and communion with God. Webb’s explorers are not the self-assertive heroes that Douglas Stewart or Robert FitzGerald dramatised. They are almost the antithesis of the elitist Nietzschean ideals so prized by Norman Lindsay. They have ‘honour, courage, ambition’ but they are ‘stained and vulnerable’ (L) mortals. A significant and to date under-emphasised aspect of Webb’s explorers is their Christ-like qualities.

When Boyd ‘spoke/You almost saw flesh and ribs within his schemes’; Leichhardt is ‘betrayed...taken, stripped, and bound’; Cartier, in a kenotic speech act, cancels himself; Sturt gives ‘the old bearded Predestinator’ his ‘text’; Harry, as a ‘pudgy Christ’, ‘weaves his sacrament’; St Francis ‘was very similar to Christ in all the multitude of the Saints’. St Francis and the explorers all disappear into a nothingness, a void and leave only a trace of their departed presence.

Absent presences:
The roving reporter’s attempt, in ‘A Drum for Ben Boyd’, to grasp the ungraspable, to give flesh to an absent presence, mirrors Webb’s poetic project. Both the reporter and the poet struggle to create something out of fragments of nothingness. Theirs is a struggle of the imagination. And ‘what is imagination/But oneself flying back at unsuspected angles?’ Poetic creation is a struggle of the self. ‘A Drum for Ben Boyd’ dramatises the impossibility of pinning down the self. Does the self exist? Is there such a thing as a unified self? Knowledge, it seems, is a fragmentary, subjective quantity that offers only perspectives, echoes and contradictions. Despite his best efforts the reporter is left, in his search for Boyd, with a ‘shadow at the distant end/Of a tunnel of sunlight’, a trace or outline of a departed presence, and silence.

The earliest critics of ‘A Drum for Ben Boyd’ noted the ‘elusive’ nature and the ‘somewhat shadowy idealization’, of Webb’s ‘central character’.5 In 1967 Harry Heseltine penned his now-familiar criticism of the poem: ‘At its centre, where Boyd

---

should be, there is a hole. It is as if, having fragmented the personality of his protagonist among the witnesses to his career, Webb could find no way to dramatize it centrally and directly. This absence of a central character has become known as a characteristic trait of Webb’s poetry. In his review of Australian poetry, in the *Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1981), Vivian Smith notes:

> It is significant that Webb’s central figures - Boyd, Leichhardt, Eyre, and St. Francis - are not dramatic presences. They are not *there* in the poems built around them in the way that Browning’s Duke of Ferrara is present in ‘My Last Duchess’. This is because Webb is less concerned with defining characters through word and deed than with showing what they have become - ‘myths’, ‘legends’, ‘monsters’, ‘clowns’. Webb’s sense of the quest, his exploration in search of meaning, is ultimately metaphysical.

My reading of ‘A Drum for Ben Boyd’ and of Webb’s larger poem sequences accepts as a starting point the critical consensus that Webb’s central figures do not feature as dramatic presences. The question of ‘thereness’ in the poetry is, I feel, a separate issue. My argument, in contrast to previous criticism, is that Ben Boyd - and God and St Francis - are absolutely *there* in the poetry, absolutely present but as absences. The following discussion of Webb’s poetry seeks to suggest some new ways of reading those absences.

The reporter never set out to offer a dramatic representation of Boyd. His promise was to ‘entertain’ his readers ‘with the story/Of a strange person’. He achieves this promise. Boyd’s power, energy and influence, expressed through arresting synaesthetic imagery, set the tone of the poem before any witness has a chance to be

---


8 My reading of the character’s ‘thereness’ in the poetry is distinct from Andrew Taylor’s somewhat contradictory objection that Smith’s ‘innocent notion of presence’ leads him to look for something in the poetry that was never there. Once Taylor has noted that the central figure is a subject ‘constituted by language’ and could, in the case of ‘Eyre All Alone’, be called an ‘Eyre persona’ or an ‘Eyre effect’, he agrees with Smith as to the ‘tenuous existence of Eyre’. See *Reading Australian Poetry*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987), 105-107.
heard: '1842. An immense shaking of the sun'. We come to know of Boyd's qualities -
his courage, vision, charisma, foolhardy schemes, brutality, corruption, selfishness and
importantly his refusal to be 'tied down' - by way of difference. Boyd, who 'seemed to
drink in colour', is everything that the frightened, 'colourless' witnesses to his life are
not. He is there in the poem as the unspoken other of the witness' utterances. There is
a sense in which he leans over all their shoulders and 'has the laugh' not only on the
Captain of the Oberon but on all those sheltering in safe-harbour from his tremendous
wake.

To argue that Boyd is there in the poem is not to suggest that he may be
precisely located. An understanding of this difference between a character's absent
presence and the inability to frame them is crucial to an understanding of Webb's poetic
strategies and central to an understanding of the poetry's search for and engagement
with God. Michael Griffith has written of the search for the father that operates as a
powerful subtext in much of Webb's early poetry.9 As Webb's poetry matures this
search for the father becomes more a search for the Father. The poetry attempts to
locate, or more precisely to write, God but God repeatedly manifests himself through
absence. God becomes, in Webb's poetry, the ultimate absent presence. In moments of
intense anxiety He is experienced as a present absence.

The omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God of Catholic faith has commonly
been held to be a God of full presence. Yet as Kevin Hart has noted: 'by dint of
Adam's sin...God is for us an absent presence'.10 Christian theology, argues Hart,
understands God as a presence who, after the Fall, represents himself and is in turn
represented by signs:

If the Fall introduced a gap between man and God, words and objects,
thereby making signs the indispensable and imperfect vehicle for any
knowledge, religious or otherwise, the economy of salvation was also
worked out according to signs, specifically verbal signs. Thus Christ was
held to be the Word of God, the mediator between man and God, the one

9 God's Fool, 10-42.
10 The Trespass of the Sign, 7.
perfect Sign in an imperfect world of signs. Like other signs, Christ is both signifier and signified, body and soul. But Christ is also unlike other signs, for here the signified - God - is perfectly expressed in the signifier. He is at once inside and outside the sign system; since Christ is god, what He signifies is signified in and of itself: He is what Derrida calls a 'transcendental signified'. Yet Christ is also a transcendental signifier. Miraculously formed, His body is uncontaminated by the very Fall which required the proliferation of signs and the distinction between presence and the sign of a presence.  

It is the incarnated Christ, operating as a sign, who will redeem humanity from the Fall and bridge the 'gap between man and God'. Christian theology, in its attempt to know God, is therefore a study of signs, a semiology. Hart's passage identifies the nexus between the Fall, of humanity and language, writing, Incarnation and absence. Webb's poetry, most obviously 'Harry', explores these connections. The pre-linguistic, mongoloid Harry remains in a state of prelapsarian innocence:

His vestments our giddy yarns of firmament,  
...  
  but not yet  
  Has our giddy alphabet  
  Perplexed his priestcraft and spilled the cruet of innocence (CB 217).

Harry is positioned at his altar. His 'holy holy chair' calls to mind the moment in Catholic liturgy immediately prior to the Consecration. But the only word attempting to struggle into being here is Harry's 'I'. It is a 'painsstaking', tentative process.

It is in 'Harry' that Webb's poetry comes closest to writing 'God' but not as a transcendent, unified Being. Harry, a 'moron', a 'pudgy Christ', an 'imbecile' is 'realer than the Real', 'filled with the Word unwritten'. It could be argued that Webb, in keeping with Catholic teaching, is simply locating the greatest in the least12 but the poem resists such a positive, redemptive reading. Harry is not God. It is the 'we' of the poem who have made this puppet, this insensible 'featureless baldy sun', into a God-like creature: 'What queer shards we could steal/Shaped him, realer than the Real'. When

11 The Trespass of the Sign, 7-8.

12 Matthew 25:40.
Harry is ‘filled with the Word unwritten’ he ‘almost’ genuflects. What has prevented him from completing this gesture of reverence? And why, when he seals his letter to the woman, both the goddess of wisdom and the Madonna, does he have to direct it to ‘the House of no known address’?

**Frameworks of imagination:**

‘Harry’ demonstrates the way in which Webb’s poetic imagination disrupts any conventional Catholic theological concept of ‘God’ and ‘Incarnation’. Such disruption, which occurs throughout Webb’s poetry, merits considered investigation. Though the terms ‘God’ and ‘Incarnation’ feature prominently in discussions of Webb’s writing, the way in which they are constructed and operate in the poetry has not been given sufficient weight in the published criticism. Too often Webb’s Catholicism is taken as a given and his poetry interpreted within the framework of Catholic belief. That framework of belief is, however, repeatedly ruptured by the imaginative vision of the poetry, a vision that struggles with the possibility of an absent God and the certainty of an unknowable one.

James Tulip was the first critic to emphasise the dynamic relationship between Webb’s religious perception and his imaginative vision:

In Webb’s case, the key to the structure of his perceptions, lies I believe, in the religiousness which informs the whole of his writing. Here lies the answer to so many aspects of his work: the poet as priest, the adventure-explorer as saint, the stance of prayer and meditativeness underlying the constancy of the rhythm and tone in poem after poem, the spiritual exercises in the semi-dramatic projections of his plays; and above all, the objectifying tenor and orientation of his verse as the expression of a special kind of religiousness which risks everything in a non-objective concentration of mind and spirit and stands to lose everything in the sheer difficulty that this kind of self-transcendence imposes. The nervous, lacerating language of his verse encases itself in the fragile, crystalline structures of his stanzas, their rhythms and rhymes; and it is here that the phenomenon of faith, in its widest and most human of forms, finds its contingent finality in the unique and necessary utterance which is his art.13

---

Tulip makes no assumption that the Catholic Webb writes a poetry of dogmatic Catholic faith. He identifies rather 'a special kind of religiousness' and a 'phenomenon of faith, in its widest and human of forms'. It is the quality of this faith, its tortured doubts and its imaginative engagement with, and reworking of, the symbols and language of Catholic liturgy, that make Webb's poetry so 'unique' and so resistant to any interpretation that seeks to frame it in orthodox Catholic teaching.

Michael Griffith, in his important, ground-breaking study of Webb, *God's Fool: The life and poetry of Francis Webb* (1991), identifies some of the significant biographical details of Webb's life and their impact on his poetry. In his reading of St Francis and Hitler, Griffith identifies a key aspect of Webb's imaginative and religious vision: the interconnection between the positive and the negative and the way in which one holds within itself the potential to undo the other. Griffith writes of the central importance played by incarnation, Word made flesh, and God in Webb's poetry but he does not deconstruct the figure of 'God'. In his reading, the God of Webb's poetry is always a God of presence. Griffith does, however, make the crucial observation that though Webb's 'commitment to the church appeared to strengthen towards the end of his life...his poetry demonstrates that his faith was never one of mere acceptance or assent but rather was...a searching and questioning one'.

The most sustained body of published criticism on Webb's poetry, written over a period of more than twenty years, is that of Bill Ashcroft. In his earlier articles and more recent book, *The Gimbals of Unease: The Poetry of Francis Webb* (1996), Ashcroft reads the 'Poet as Catholic' by locating Webb's religious imagination firmly within the realist frameworks of Thomistic natural theology, Ignatian spirituality and the writings of Augustine. These frameworks allow him to read Webb's work in terms of a 'linear' progression from the temporal, sensate world of being towards a knowledge of Absolute Being, God. In addition to the 'Ignatian impulse, which...underlies Webb's whole view of the sanctity of the simple', argues Ashcroft, is the 'Augustinian vision of God at the centre of the self'. Ashcroft explains that this 'Augustinian impulse with

---

14 *God's Fool*, 204.
its theme of the inner journey through the soul underlies Webb’s vision of the divine at
the centre of life, accessible through the revelatory and exploratory functions of art.’ He
concludes that in these ‘two complementary impulses of Catholic thought...we have a
framework in which all of Webb’s approaches to enlightenment can be encompassed’.15

Ashcroft has persuasively argued that Webb’s poetry is structured on a
‘framework system’ that operates on metaphorical, intellectual and structural levels to
‘suggest the outline of an unenclosable experience’.16 Less persuasive is his
identification of what he calls the ‘strata system’:

The ‘strata system’ is a way of ordering the facts of observed reality which
derives from the thought-processes of a particular form of Catholic
philosophy with which Webb’s own thinking is empathetic. Accepting the
self-evidence of God in creation, many Catholic thinkers postulated that
man could approach divine truth by an ordered progression of reason or
religious experience through the definite world of creation. This
progression towards revelation is the rationale of the ‘strata system’ in
Francis Webb’s poetic technique. Each stratum of the meaning of the poetry
represents an experiential stage in the approach to epiphany, an approach
which underlies the poet’s conception of the essential role of the artist.17

Ashcroft seems to equate Webb’s professed Catholicism with his poetic imagination.
Noel Rowe has cautioned against such an approach:

When most Australian literary critics...imagine Catholicism, they see a
system of doctrines, they see Catholicism under the guise of its ideology. They see its logos as distinct from its mythos. They then perform what I
would be tempted to call a Vatican reading: they read down from the ideas
to the poetry. The problem with such a criticism...is that it assumes that
poetic imagination is obedient to theological reason, and forgets that
theological reason is also a work of poetic imagination.18

15 The Gimbals of Unease, 58.
16 The Gimbals of Unease, 93.
17 The Gimbals of Unease, 93.
18 "Are you from the Void?" A Reading of Webb’s “Sturt and the Vultures”, paper delivered at the
‘From Francis Webb (Poet) to David Tacey (Critic): Psychospiritual Liberation in Australian Literature,
Religion and Culture’ Conference, Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, 14 November 1997 and
available as a tape recording from the Religion, Literature and the Arts Centre, ACU.

51
Rowe has argued that the Catholic nature of Webb’s poetry stems less from the teachings of Augustine, Aquinas and Ignatius than from:

popular devotions such as the Stations of the Cross and the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, of the Good Friday service with its empty tabernacle, its story of Isaiah’s suffering servant, its great drama of redemption which also became a personal dilemma of faith and betrayal.19

In his early critical writing on Webb, Rowe sought to emphasise the Christocentric nature of Webb’s poetry. He read Webb’s poetry against the model of the suffering servant in order to identify what he saw as the deeply religious character of Webb’s imagination, an imagination that ‘persistently links suffering and glory, reverences the rejected one, and names Christ within that suffering and rejection’.20 Rowe’s more recent readings mark a significant critical departure. In a conference paper delivered in November 1997, Rowe acknowledged that over the fifteen years that he had been reading Webb’s poetry, he had never ‘found a way of criticism that keeps fidelity with the tattered eloquence of the poetry itself’. This dissatisfaction with his reading of Webb prompted him to ‘attempt a negatively theological reading’ in which he argued that Webb’s ‘is not just a poetry about the kenosis or self-emptying of Christ: it is a poetry which empties Christ’.21

Rowe acknowledged that he was taking his ‘cue from Carl Raschke’s point that, after the death of God, a theology of crucifixion has also to be a crucifixion of theology’. Raschke’s The Alchemy of the Word: Language and the End of Theology (1979) was the first major publication that brought Derrida and the concepts of deconstruction and differance into conversation with theology. T.J.J.Altizer et. al. Deconstruction and Theology (1982) and Mark C. Taylor’s Erring: A Postmodern A/theology (1984) extended this discussion. These texts address concerns that Webb,

19 “Are you from the Void?” A Reading of Webb’s “Sturt and the Vultures”.


21 “Are you from the Void?” A Reading of Webb’s “Sturt and the Vultures”.
years earlier, had wrestled with in his poetry - concerns about the viability of the Word in a world of words, the disappearance of Christ into writing, the death of transcendence and the explosion of immanence, the fear of and resistance to the void and incarnation as a sign of contradiction. Part of Rowe’s dissatisfaction with his own and other critical commentary on Webb’s poetry, therefore, can be attributed to the fact that Webb’s poetic concerns were well ahead of his time. Since 1984 many books and articles which discuss and evaluate the relationship between deconstruction and theology have been published. In addition to the works already mentioned there are two further texts that have significantly influenced my reading of Webb’s poetry: Kevin Hart’s *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (1989) and John D. Caputo’s *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (1997).

My reading of Webb’s poetry sits between the more redemptive readings of epiphany offered by Tulip and Ashcroft and Rowe’s negative reading of absence and woundedness. It is in part informed by the discourse of negative theology, a discourse that profoundly questions the theological and semiotic possibilities of ‘God’ and ‘Incarnation’, and investigates, through the process of deconstruction, the relationship between ‘God’, presence, absence and writing. To read Webb’s poetry within the discourse of negative theology is to undo the all-encompassing frameworks of faith suggested by Ashcroft and to reinstall some of the poetry’s uncertainty and contradictions. Ashcroft asserts that ‘Webb’s poetry is unashamedly, even brazenly logocentric’, yet the poetry does not recognise the binaries on which logocentrism is based. It repeatedly fractures the distinction between concepts such as God/world, presence/absence, affirmation/negation, truth/error, light/darkness, thereby refusing to privilege the prior term conventionally attributed to the logos. Negative theology affirms such fracturing and affirms the vision of Webb’s poetry whereby absence is presence, darkness is light, negation is affirmation, and ‘truth itself is a matter of stops and gaps’ (BB).

Negative theology:
Negative theology is a discourse of profound paradox that denies the possibility that one may speak (or write) of the unspeakable, transcendent God and continues to attempt just that. It is a theology of kenosis which empties itself of every predicate or attribute of God because it argues God is never what we might say He is.\textsuperscript{23} God is beyond knowing, beyond comprehension, beyond naming. To name God would be to bind Him which is why He slips away from every name He is given. Since it cannot name what it most desires to name and what it must in some way name, negative theology is caught in a double bind: ‘But in the “economy” of negative theology, the double bind - it cannot win - also means it cannot lose; its failure spells success’.\textsuperscript{24} In striking out or un-saying the name of God it saves that very name.

Saving the name of God:
John D.Caputo employs a Husserlian analogy to suggest that the name of God in negative theology is like an arrow aimed at, but never reaching, its intentional object, God. God therefore remains safe, unwounded:

The whole multifarious tradition of negative theology is like a sky filled with arrows aimed at a target they cannot reach but toward which they all silently, lovingly fly. The real wound would be inflicted if the name of God were actually to hit its mark and so to wrench God into manifestation, thus putting a violent end to God’s absolute heterogeneity and holy height.\textsuperscript{25}

Webb’s poetry is forever turned toward the recognition of God but the God of the poetry resists recognition. He refuses to be framed. He is never wrenched into manifestation but appears most often as an outline, a trace, a desire, slipping through the margins of the poetry. In the explorer poems He is experienced at times as an absence on the

\textsuperscript{23} For a discussion on the historical debate between the priority of positive and negative theology and an explanation of definitional differences in various forms of negative theology, see K.Hart, \textit{The Trespass of the Sign}, 198-206.


\textsuperscript{25} \textit{The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida}, 44.
journey, at times as a felt presence in the void.

The capacity of a negatively theological reading to break open frames of meaning in Webb’s poetry can be clearly seen when one considers Ashcroft’s important observation that the statement ‘truth itself is a mass of stops and gaps’, ‘gets to the heart of a profound tension in Webb’s work, because this provisional and deferred truth, a function of the process of discovery rather than an end to the search, is at odds with the hermeneutic stance of Webb’s spirituality’.26 This tension may be interpreted in two radically different and equally valid ways. On the one hand the gap between the biographical ‘certainty’ of Webb’s faith and the uncertainty of the faith played out in the language of his poetry operates to generate a powerful tension that could be read as a failure of belief. When considered in the light of Caputo’s analogy, however, ‘truth itself is a mass of stops and gaps’ may articulate the very essence of faith, a tortured, questioning faith that protects God by surrendering any claim to certainty or full presence. Webb’s poetry, through its failure to locate God, keeps open the possibility of the impossible.

Kevin Hart has noted that because the God of negative theology ‘transcends...all conceptions of being as presence...[t]he negative theologian uses language under erasure’.27 Webb writes God under erasure. His manipulation of language, of multilayered metaphors - most significantly the metaphor of incarnation - breaks open the name and the meaning of God.

**Incarnation as metaphor:**

In the beginning was the Word:  
and Word was with God  
and the Word was God  
...

The Word was the true light  
...

The Word was made flesh,

---


he lived among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth.
...
No one has ever seen God;
it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart,
who has made him known.

John 1: 1-18

Central to the doctrine of Incarnation is the act of divine *kenosis*. Phillippians 2 states that Christ Jesus did not cling to his divine state but emptied himself in order to become an immanent man and undergo the final kenotic act of crucifixion. The process by which the transcendent, unknowable God of full presence becomes the immanent ‘human’ Son is a dynamic and contradictory one. It is a process described in St John’s Gospel through metaphor: ‘The Word was made flesh’. The metaphor of incarnation, as distinct from the doctrine of Incarnation, holds within itself the divine and the human, creation and destruction, presence and absence, but as interactive rather than binary terms of difference. In the metaphor of incarnation, as in Webb’s poetry, the divine is the human, creation is destruction, presence is absence and vice versa.

*Kenosis as lived metaphor:*

In the Catholic faith the mystery of Incarnation is re-enacted at the Consecration of the Mass when the communion wafer/bread undergoes transubstantiation to become the body of Christ. That body, in what is known as the Fraction Rite, is then broken and eaten: God into ‘man’(E). ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’ articulates the sense of felt anguish that Christ’s repeated *kenosis* engenders:

... you know you often asked me
Why I was in tears at Mass before the Communion;
I seemed to see Him there, heaving up to Golgotha,
And rising and falling (CB 239).

The celebration of the Eucharist becomes a lived experience of Christ’s passion, a repeated reminder of the brokenness and agony He suffered for the sake of human
Webb's poetry consistently locates the redemptive possibilities of the Eucharist in 'crippled' churches ('Derelict Church'), 'threadbare rooms' ('The Stations') and communities of outcast, wounded people:

Again I am tempted, with the Great,  
To see in ugliness and agony a way to God ('Homosexual').

Though the poetry suggests the possibility of an approach to God, the moment of communion between God and 'man', if and when it does arrive, is couched always in ambiguous metaphorical terms.

**Kenosis as linguistic mode:**

In the metaphor of incarnation, the Word becomes a word, a sign in an imperfect system of signs. The incarnated Christ becomes a construct. As Charles E. Winquist explains: 'The radical *kenosis* of incarnation is the embodying of the transcendent word that is also an imbedding of the word in a signifying play so that there can be no claim to transcendence or to the transcendental signified'.

God, as presence or absence, becomes a function of language. Winquist's comment supports the deconstructive possibilities of incarnation suggested by Mark C. Taylor, possibilities in which the transcendent God and his incarnate Son surrender their authority of presence and disappear into the spaces of text:

The main contours of deconstructive a/theology begin to emerge with the realization of the necessary interrelation between the death of God and radical christology. Radical christology is *thoroughly* incarnational - the divine 'is' the incarnate word. Furthermore, this embodiment of the divine is the death of God. With the appearance of the divine that is not only itself but is at the same time other, the God who alone is God disappears. The death of God is the sacrifice of the transcendent Author/Creator/Master who governs from afar. Incarnation *irrevocably* erases the disembodied logos and inscribes a word that becomes the script enacted in the infinite play of interpretation. To understand incarnation as inscription is to discover the

---

28 Webb was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. In his reading of Webb's poetry within the narrative of schizophrenia, Ashcroft emphasises that 'a prominent feature of schizophrenic experience is that the schizophrenic experiences metaphor as fact'. *The Gimbals of Unease*, 66.

Webb’s poetry might be usefully read as anticipating Taylor’s deconstructive a/theology. The God of his poetry is at once present and absent. He is most often experienced in the spaces of the text, a product of linguistic qualification and ambiguity. Like Hart’s ‘spilt mercury’ He cannot be neatly captured. But in contrast to the writings of Hart and Taylor, Webb’s poetry clings to the possibility that the Word may be found, or more correctly, witnessed in the world. In this sense, Webb’s poetry turns deconstructive a/theology back towards (its origins in) negative theology. It is significant, however, that Webb locates the Word in the silent Harry (‘Harry’) and in the shifting desert sands (‘Poet’).

**Poet as sculptor:**
As noted previously my reading of the complex play of absence and presence in Webb’s poetry is only in part informed by the discourse of negative theology. Another strategy that allows for the investigation of this play is to read Webb’s poetry through the framework of art. Ashcroft partially titles some chapters in *The Gimbals of Unease: The Poetry of Francis Webb*, ‘The Poet as Catholic’, ‘The Poet as Explorer’ and ‘The Poet as Schizophrenic’. I want to remove Webb’s poetry from those frameworks and read it in conversation with the painting and sculpture of Alberto Giacometti. I make no attempt to draw these separate frameworks - of negative theology and art - together, rather, they operate as do the frameworks in the poetry, to break open new perspectives and imaginative vision.

**Alberto Giacometti:**
Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) was a Swiss artist and sculptor. He is perhaps best known for his minuscule sculptures and his exceedingly thin, tall, walking-man sculptures. Giacometti was obsessed with the simultaneous portrayal of absence and

---

30 *Erring*, 103.
presence. He strove, in his sculpture, to portray the nothingness and absence that he felt and saw in the world around him. Giacometti’s is an art of loneliness and isolation; an art that probed the depths of the void; an art which insisted that ‘emptiness and fullness, existence and nothingness are not mutually exclusive. [That] sometimes they must be considered together to signify the mystery in one person’s life or the contradiction in another’s.”

The sculpture which most obviously embodies simultaneous absence and presence is Spoon Woman (Fig 1) in which the woman appears to be pregnant, but with a child who is always already a void, a nothingness as much as a presence. Though difficult to appreciate in a photograph, the viewer’s gaze, on encountering Spoon Woman, is drawn to the swelling of the upper abdomen which is immediately counterbalanced by the concavity beneath. Giacometti’s sculpture demonstrates an understanding similar to that expressed by Judith Wright’s ‘Dialogue’:

Concave backs convex.
Turn Presence inside out
Absence is demonstrated.

It is a vision Francis Webb’s poetry demonstrates again and again.

The original ‘A Drum for Ben Boyd’ (1948) was illustrated by Norman Lindsay (Fig 2). An alternative painting that would provide a fitting accompaniment to the sequence is Giacometti’s Standing Nude (1953) which is reproduced as the frontispiece that introduces this discussion of Webb’s poetry. The central figure could be read as Boyd, ‘His blurred shape... as a shadow at the distant end/Of a tunnel of sunlight’, and the frames as the reverberating echoes of the ‘drum’. Standing Nude (and other similar paintings of Giacometti’s) also offers a compelling visual suggestion of the ‘Someone’ on the road at the conclusion of ‘Eyre All Alone’, the leper from ‘The Canticle’ and the intimated presence in the ‘Void’ of Webb’s last published poems.


Giacometti's art is vastly different from the realism of Anthony Sandys' painting that Webb admired, wrote about and purchased. I make no claims that Webb knew of Giacometti's work, indeed Webb would in all likelihood have disapproved of some of Giacometti's more surrealistic and abstract styles, but an understanding of Giacometti's work can offer some valuable insights into Webb's poetry. One looks at a Giacometti sculpture with an aesthetics of vision that focuses on what has been taken away, what is not visibly there. I want to suggest a similar aesthetics of reading for Webb's poetry; a reading of the silences and gaps, of what is made present by its absence.
2. Some of Norman Lindsay’s illustrations for the 1948 publication of *A Drum for Ben Boyd*. 
Outlines of Absence in ‘Eyre All Alone’

An outline of fullness soberly embraced
By shadow of widest meaning is creation.

In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806 - 1883, II Self-Portrait

Much of Giacometti’s work is about intense isolation and aloneness. He expressed the isolation of the individual in the domain of the lonely public square. From 1947 he repeatedly sculpted his walking man or men crossing an empty square (Fig 1). The walking motif is a metaphor for what Giacometti saw as humanity’s ‘tedious activities and fateful movement’.¹ Over the next decade - a decade which saw the publication of ‘Eyre All Alone’ - Giacometti sculpted a number of works in which a walking man or men approach a large standing female figure who represents eternity. The men gaze past the female figure and continue always to walk because Giacometti never considered an encounter with eternity to be within reach. Eyre ‘walk[s], walk[s]’ towards an encounter with eternity and reaches the moment when just such an encounter may be possible.

In 1941, six years prior to the first of Giacometti’s walking-men sculptures, Russell Drysdale, also interested in emphasizing the tragic isolation of the human spirit, executed a series of paintings now grouped under the heading ‘Riverina Period’. Had Drysdale’s paintings of the harsh, dry Australian outback appeared on the cover or in the pages of Leichhardt in Theatre (1952) or Socrates (1961) they would no doubt have been considered an appropriate and powerful accompaniment to Webb’s desert-explorer poems. Both Drysdale’s paintings and Webb’s poems have consistently been read in terms of the 1940s renaissance of Australian culture that re-imagined questions of identity and belonging. It is interesting to note, therefore, the striking similarities that exist between Drysdale’s ‘Man Feeding his Dogs’ (Fig 2) and Giacometti’s ‘The Dog’ (Fig 3) and walking-man sculptures. The Giacometti sculptures and the Drysdale

¹ E. McDonald & K. Regan (eds.), The Beyeler Collection: Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century, (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1996), 182.
painting speak of paring down and elongation where the elongated figures metaphorically depict isolation, sterility, hardship, dogged perseverance and routine. The resonances between these two works of art suggest a way of seeing that is perhaps less to do with nationality and personal history and more to do with a similar artistic vision. I want to explore this notion of similar artistic vision in relation to Giacometti and Webb.

Both Giacometti and Webb were profoundly influenced by the devastating realities of World War II and all that war said about human nature. Giacometti lived in Europe through both world wars. In 1920, at the age of nineteen, he remarked that he:

suddenly had the impression that he could no longer do anything, that having once seen things ‘clearly’, he now had only a confused impression of the ‘world outside’, with gaps, huge distances between things, which caused him dizziness and even terror.  

In September 1945, after some years of self-imposed exile in Geneva, Giacometti returned to Paris and underwent what he felt was a crucial change in the way he saw the world:

I had the feeling of being faced with something I had never seen before, with a complete change in reality...and at the same time, the silence, an unbelievable sort of silence. And then this grew...everything had an air of absolute stillness...The way everything looked became transformed, as if movement was no more than a series of points of stillness...[I began] to see heads in the void.

For Giacometti there no longer seemed to be any connection between objects. Everything appeared to be ‘separated by immeasurable chasms of emptiness’. Giacometti’s radical change of perception coincided with a significant change of attitude for Webb. Appalled by the horrors of World War II, the cruelty of ‘race-hatred’ and the accounts of German concentration-camps, Webb ‘knew that now [his] poetry

---

2 Bonnefoy, 77.

3 Sylvester, 97.
must openly acknowledge God and the Redemption'.

Both Giacometti and Webb struggled to express an artistic vision that they felt inadequate to express. This vision was more anguished and complex than the Romantic quest to express the inexpressible. It was a vision that recognised the simultaneous operation of presence and absence, fullness and emptiness. It was a vision that embraced silence and the void. It was a vision that saw 'truth...[as] a mass of stops and gaps'(BB). Where Webb struggled with the inadequacy of words, Giacometti struggled with the solidity and materiality of clay to give the effect of transparency and silence. There are two interesting similarities in technique that both sculptor and poet employ. They simultaneously elongate and compress their material, and they use frames to emphasise the inability of their art to capture or encapsulate the contour of experience.

---

4 Griffith, God's Fool, 89.
Compression and elongation:

Giacometti felt that the way to 'drown objects in silence'\(^5\) was to imbue them with a sense of depth. Until 1946 he repeatedly sculpted minuscule figures. The compact density and detail of these tiny figures, often no more than 4 centimetres in height, require the viewer to focus their vision on the whole of the piece even though that piece occupies only a small amount of the visual field. This concentration of vision affords the sculptures an added presence because they appear to dominate more space than they actually do. No matter how big the piece of clay that Giacometti had to work with he pared his sculptures away until they were almost non-existent. Of his compulsion to pare things down he said: 'the more I take away, the bigger it gets'.\(^6\) This statement could apply equally to Webb's Ben Boyd. Boyd, increasingly less present in the language of the poem becomes larger than life: 'Six feet when he died - this fellow would top a cloud!'.

After 1946 Giacometti began to sculpt larger figures, some as tall as nine feet (Fig 4). These figures are exceedingly thin and all, in their rough surfaces heavily marked by Giacometti’s fingerprints, emphasise the role played by the sculptor in their creation.\(^7\) Many of these stick-thin sculptures present a face with an intense visual expression and a posterior view of a flattened head and body. In looking at the sculpture one experiences the problem of trying to define the contour, of finding what can and cannot be defined. To fully appreciate the work one must almost put oneself in the place where Giacometti looked from and imaginatively replace what he has pared away.

How is a poet to 'drown' his/her poems in silence? As mentioned previously Mallarmé achieves stillness and silence in his poetry through his choice of language and the spatial orientation of the words on the page. Like Giacometti's drawings and caged

\(^5\) Bonnefoy, 290

\(^6\) Sylvester, 25.

\(^7\) Films of Giacometti at work show him consciously imbedding multiple finger and thumb indentations on the wet clay.
sculptures the white space around Mallarmé’s words is as important as the words themselves in producing the effect of silence. When one first encounters Webb’s poetry, however, one is struck not by white spaces but by the density and complexity of the words. A first reading of most Webb poems leaves the reader with a sense of drowning in language rather than silence. The complexity of that language requires the reader to enter dramatically into the poem. The reader must focus on the detail, often word by word, or phrase by phrase before any chance of meaningful interpretation is possible.

‘The tiny not the immense will teach our groping eyes’ (‘Five Days Old’).

Webb’s poetic dictum for coming to some understanding of our troubled world offers also a key to understanding his poetic method. The ‘tiny’ in Webb’s poetry is most often a multilayered metaphor and the poem a series of such metaphors. It is only when one grasps the multiple possible meanings of the metaphor and, most importantly how that metaphor is operating, that one can begin to appreciate what the poem is saying or withholding. Often one image or metaphor will unlock a field of understanding but just as often this understanding will be undercut by a different interpretation of that same ‘slipping image’ or metaphor. Webb’s early poem ‘Images in Winter’ outlines his poetic method:

And so I make the secret yours, my friend
Of long-winded endurance! This is why
(In an era of free-verse, poor company)
I pin my faith on slipping images
Twisting like smoke or a fish caught in the hand (CB 15).

In Webb’s poetry the layers of meaning collide, qualify and at times cancel each other until the reader is left with little more to hold on to than an awareness of somewhat anguished gaps and silence.

Webb stretches his metaphors between the simple and the complex, the theological and the material, the real and the surreal. His technique of stretching language is not novel. Indeed Nowottny, in 1972, identified such a technique as a prerequisite of poetry: ‘Poetry is language at full stretch bringing into maximal interplay
the various potentialities afforded by linguistic forms in artistic structures'. What is characteristic of Webb’s elongation of language is the degree of difference he achieves within the one word, phrase and ultimately poem. An example of this technique is his use of water in ‘Eyre All Alone’ where water operates on a number of levels to represent actual thirst-quenching water, temptation, sexual desire, prayer, the intimation of Christ and a barrier or wall. Another important characteristic of Webb’s poetic language is that though it strains towards some height or transparency, it is never a language of transcendence. It always takes the reader back to a core of suffering. Thus there is often a sense that ‘the centre cannot hold’ as the language begins to fracture or dissipate.

Framing:
The space around Giacometti’s sculptures is central to their meaning. To emphasise the importance of this space and ensure that it was seen just as much as the object was seen, Giacometti framed many of his sculptures in a kind of cage, or placed them on massive base stands (Fig 5). The frames operate to focus the viewer’s attention on the central object(s) or figure(s) who, by being framed, is now isolated from what Giacometti saw as the prevailing nothingness. In his paintings and drawings Giacometti places his subjects in a series of frames (Fig 6). He presents a multiplicity of outlines to mark the transition of mass to space and then consciously blurs these outlines (Fig 7). Blurring the outline is more effective in suggesting the elusiveness of the contour than a simple gap because it demonstrates that Giacometti committed himself to a contour only to find that it could not to be fixed. This method of constructing and then deliberately blurring outlines is used consistently by Webb to resist certainty in favour of questioning and possibility.

Webb’s poetry is crafted within a series of frames. It asks to be read within

---


these frames, for it is only when one attempts to frame the poetry, that one appreciates how utterly, convincingly, it invites and then fractures any framework applied to it. It is in the dissolving of the frames, where one frame fractures and to some extent cancels another, that the space of silence, or the 'mass of stops and gaps', is revealed in its intensity. In 'Eyre All Alone' it is in this space that the possibility of God, and the possibility of His absence, is suggested.
She stands at 276 cms.
Four Women on a High Base, 1950. The tallest of these figures is 7 cms.
'Eyre All Alone':

Webb frames ‘Eyre All Alone’ on the historical facts of Edward John Eyre’s journey recorded by Eyre in his journals. On one level, therefore, ‘Eyre All Alone’ can be read historically as yet another poem of exploration following on from the explorer poems of the 1940s. But Webb, and here it is important to defer to the poet, through his notes to the poem directs his readers to a different interpretation:

Eyre’s personal journal is infinitely more dramatic than this poem can pretend to be. My insistence upon Eyre’s aloneness is not an overlooking of Wylie, but comes from my seeing such a journey of discovery as suggestive of another which is common to us all.

These notes lend credence to a reading of ‘Eyre All Alone’ as a journey of suffering and self-discovery through the desert of the mind, or soul, towards death; death which awaits every person and which every person must ultimately face alone. A poet with Webb’s facility to play with and layer language must have been attracted by the fortuitous aural presentation of Edward John Eyre’s surname when titling his poem. ‘Eyre All Alone’ can be read as ‘E’er all alone’. Just as the refrain ‘walk, walk’ echoes through the poem so too does that of aloneness: ‘Transfixed in fear and loneliness’, ‘I am alone’, ‘I am truly alone’.

The opening stanza of ‘South Australian Settler’ portrays the historical reality of the severe isolation of Australian settlement, the harsh, empty landscape and the image of the cast-out, orphaned country/child. The poem also sets up resonances with King

---

10 E.J. Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia, and Overland from Adelaide to King George’s Sound, in the years 1840-1, Vols I & II*, (London: T. & W. Boone, 1845). The language in which Eyre narrates his journey and his concerns is woven throughout Webb’s poem: ‘brackish water’, ‘tea-tree scrub’, ‘dense scrub’; the never-ending search for water ‘beneath the tableland’; the condition of the horses; the facts and dates of April 29; the Mississippi and her cargo; and the gun that won’t fire. Griffith has noted that ‘Eyre All Alone’ resulted from Webb reading Eyre’s journals: ‘In a letter to Douglas Stewart... Webb records “I based it on the account of Eyre, and extracts from his journal, in Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s book on Australian Explorers”.’ *God’s Fool*, 232.

11 ‘Author’s Notes’ in *Caps and Bells*, 250-251.
Lear\textsuperscript{12} which are significant for two reasons: they reinforce the notion of severed parental relationships and obliquely glance at the conditions for reconciliation or reunion with the father at the moment of death; and they ensure that Eyre’s cry, ‘We are isolated. Is man man?’, evokes an image of ‘unaccommodated man’. This image is central to an understanding of the strategy of the sequence and its insistence on Eyre’s aloneness. When Baxter is killed in the midst of a storm, Eyre, as ‘unaccommodated man’, cries ‘maimed my brain, maimed my limbs.../I am alone’. Yet Eyre was not alone, he was with Wylie.

Webb takes the historical framework of Eyre’s journey as his ‘outline of fullness’ and imaginatively reworks it ‘with widest shadow of meaning’ for his own purposes: ‘Beauty is walled in freedom’ (‘The Sea’). He makes extensive use of Eyre’s journals but there are three significant absences at work in his poem: the absence of Wylie; the absence of Eyre’s insistent faith in ‘the Almighty Being who...guided and guarded’\textsuperscript{13} him; and the absence of closure to Eyre’s journey.

**Absence of Wylie:**
Webb’s negation of Wylie’s presence can be read as problematic when one sees how prominently Wylie features in Eyre’s journals. Ashcroft has taken issue with Webb’s dismissal of Wylie:

The psychological and symbolic isolation of the British explorer is a significant aspect of the poem, but manifestly, Eyre was not alone, no rationalisation can overcome the fact that Wylie’s non-existence, both on Eyre’s journey and in the poem, is deeply indictive [sic] of the exclusion of the indigenous inhabitant, and of the fact that the aloneness felt by white culture was a product of its own colonial mentality. Eyre’s reaction (and also perhaps the explanation in the notes) gives a very clear report upon the attitudes underlying British expansion: the assumption of

\textsuperscript{12} W. Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, Alfred Harbage (ed.), (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966): ‘The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason.’ (1 v 30), 68; ‘Is man no more than this? ... Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.’ (III iv 97), 107.

\textsuperscript{13} Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery, Vol I*, 306.
the inhabitants as either subject races, inferior or non-existent...

Ashcroft’s argument is a powerful one when ‘Eyre All Alone’ is read in the post-colonial context in which he reads it. But Webb’s notes, in drawing attention to his treatment of Wylie, show that he was acutely aware of Wylie’s presence and the problem this presence caused him in his appropriation of historical material. The poem ‘Wylie’ demonstrates the extent to which Webb imaginatively reworked the facts of Eyre’s journey. ‘Wylie’ is not about Eyre’s Aboriginal companion and guide. Wylie simply provided the shadowy outline.

Wylie

Wylie, the huddled works
Of my soul, in motion:
Three pampered patriarchs
In glib collusion.
Hurrah for the catlike mile,
The gin of your vision,
And your boomerang-shaped smile.
Son and daughters germinate in your eyes,
Through their territory I grovel on hands and knees.

Mistrust, and hate, and a dark gargantuan sorrow
Are Wylie who will walk with me tomorrow.

Wylie, I lie awake.
Your muddy vital river
Flows, dawdles for my sake.
Lie still - no, turn over.
We evolve our own flies and flames
In the never-never,
Says that rugged fisherman James.
My lapdog will has run wild, fathered, and found me.
My agents listen and finger their weapons round me.

Wylie is constructed, not as an individual, but as part of Eyre’s psyche. He is both the huddled works of Eyre’s soul and ‘mistrust and hate and dark gargantuan sorrow’. If

14 The Gimbals of Unease, 150.
Wylie who ‘will walk with [him] tomorrow’ is ‘the huddled works of [his] soul’, essentially Eyre is alone. The sequence as a whole, however, denies such an easy resolution. Eyre knows he is not alone. It is only in the final poem, ‘The Sound’, when Wylie is enveloped by his ‘tribesmen’ and ‘taken back to earth’ that Eyre proclaims:

Looking down, or up, at the town from the brow of this hill
I am truly alone.

Who are the ‘Three pampered patriarchs’? They are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they could also be ‘mistrust, hate and dark gargantuan sorrow’, that is, Wylie. Webb consciously plays on the biblical story of Abraham, his preparedness to sacrifice his only son for God and God’s subsequent promise of generations, by linking this biblical story with the ‘sons and daughters [who] germinate in [Wylie’s] eyes’. So Wylie, previously imaged as one of three ‘gentiles’ (‘April 29th’), becomes an Abraham figure, a prophet who will populate the land. ‘Wylie’ is not a poem about biblical patriarchs, yet biblical patriarchs are part of its overall meaning. They operate as a subtext. The reader, already keyed in to Old Testament themes from the ‘bloodless ground’, ‘Promised Land’, the ‘plague’, the ‘bitter waters’ and ‘sands of Exodus’, must recognise the biblical allusions and their relevance in this new context. The Old Testament stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are stories of journeying, war, tribulation and deception. They are also stories of faith (repeatedly challenged), trust, reconciliation and the hope of the ‘Promised Land’. These same themes reverberate through ‘Eyre All Alone’.

Webb establishes a framework of Old Testament teachings and almost immediately cancels it. He works an obscure kind of inversion or undercutting of the Abraham myth with the ‘lapdog will’ that like Wylie and Abraham goes out and fathers, and like the ‘boomerang’ goes out and returns. A closer examination of ‘boomerang’ and ‘gin’ demonstrates the imaginative connections Webb attempts to weave between his Aboriginal and European protagonists. Wylie’s ‘boomerang-shaped smile’

---

acknowledges his friendly disposition and his Aboriginality while glancing at Eyre’s belief that the lakes he crossed all formed one horse-shoe or boomerang shape. Through his smile, therefore, Wylie becomes the land and signifies the presence of life-sustaining water. The ‘gin of your vision’ employs both contemporary European and Dickensian language to simultaneously suggests the mid-century term for Aboriginal women and the brightness of vision in Wylie’s eyes from which generations will come.

What of the ‘muddy vital river’? Throughout his journals Eyre writes of the salt-caked mud of the river Torrens, ‘Hag Torrens’ of Webb’s next poem. Eyre also quotes two excerpts from Isaiah: ‘The poor and needy ask for water, and there is none, their tongue is parched with thirst. I, Yahweh, will answer them, I, the God of Israel, will not abandon them’ (41: 17-18); and ‘I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert’ (43:19). The water offered to Webb’s Eyre is ‘vital’ but that vitality has already been qualified by the adjective ‘muddy’. It is offered and withheld. It ‘flows’ and ‘dawdles’. This negated offering, coupled with the sense of menace suggested by the ‘glib collusion’ of the patriarchs, reinforces the uneasy feeling that Eyre has become a plaything of a higher order. The sense of unease is strengthened in the next poem when the frustrated Eyre laments: ‘The Centre has rolled me as a dice’ (‘From the Centre’).

It could be argued that it is Eyre’s rather than Wylie’s existence that is at stake in ‘Wylie’. The long ‘I’ sound in ‘Wylie’, ‘mile’, ‘smile’, ‘eyes’, ‘Wylie’, ‘Wylie’, ‘lie’, ‘vital’, ‘lie’, ‘flies’ and ‘wild’ imparts the sense of a fragile, potentially fracturing ego. Eyre’s fear of distintegration and isolation is emphasised by his insistent naming of and speaking to Wylie. Yet he is speaking to himself. Is he trying to convince himself of Wylie’s presence? Or could it be that Eyre, in a very real sense, feels that he is alone because he has been abandoned by his true desert guide and protector, God?

16 Journals of Expeditions of Discovery, Vol I, 365. The desire for water that comes from God is an increasingly powerful theme in Webb’s poetry and is discussed with reference to ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ and ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’.
Absence of Eyre’s unwavering faith in the ‘Almighty’:

Eyre writes repeatedly in his letters and journal of his being ‘deeply sensible of the Merciful protection of that God who alone can guide the wanderer on his way in safety’ and of his ‘faith in the Almighty being who had guided and guarded us hitherto, amidst all our difficulties, and in all our wanderings...who would undoubtedly order everything for the best’.17 No such certainty of faith is played out in Webb’s poem. While ‘Eyre All Alone’ glances at Abraham’s unswerving faith in God, it also alludes to Moses’ need for constant reassuring signs of God’s favour.18 God is on Eyre’s pilgrimage. He is perhaps, the ‘something on foot, and burning, [that] nudges us’. He may be read as the ‘Water, essential sweetness, beneath my tableland’. As Eyre approaches King George’s Sound he spies a flowering banksia erupted from the earth and enjoins it to ‘carry fire, like the thurifer’(‘Banksia’). Tulip has interpreted this moment as an ‘epiphany in uniquely native and Australian terms. A sudden manifestation of a beautiful grace and salvation’.19 So too have Taylor and Griffith. Griffith writes: ‘The moment is transformed by Webb into an epiphany in which all inner restrictions give way to an ecstatic harmony, a union with the spirit of the land’.20

Eyre’s sighting of the banksia is a moment of heightened expectation, joyous release and renewed hope but the ‘The Whaler’ and ‘Cape Arid’, the poems immediately following ‘Banksia’, qualify such redemptive readings of epiphany. In these poems any sense of Presence and salvation is married to a counter perception of abandonment. The appearance of the banksia sends Eyre into an elated frenzy of activity. A similar scene ensues when he spies the Mississippi:


18 Exodus 4:1-10.


20 God’s Fool, 232. See also A.Taylor, Reading Australian Poetry, 103.
There beats a pulse of whiteness overhead -
Grace of God! Fire rifles, shout, wave handkerchiefs!

He has turned His back; goes roundly about that whiteness
From our doggerel prayer. Let us ramble into Lucky Bay
-And the gracious sacramental barque at anchor!
On your knees, Wylie, coax leaf-smoke upward for incense.

Eyre’s seesawing emotions and his quickness to despair lend a somewhat hysterical quality to any sense of ‘grace and salvation’ he may have experienced. It is a tenuous faith that slips so easily from ‘Grace of God!’ to ‘doggerel prayer’ and back again to worship of the ‘sacramental’.

‘Cape Arid’ suggests, silently, that God is with Eyre on his pilgrimage:

> Mapped case-sheeted Cape Arid
> Wordless as stonefall,
> Your dogmatic forehead
> Answers them all.
> Let heretical surf erode
> Weary old courage,
> An outline quotes me God
> On my pilgrimage.

The outline has quoted him God but that outline holds within itself the shadow of a wider meaning. Cape Arid is both an intimation of God and a barrier to Eyre’s journey: salvation and defeat. Eyre describes Cape Arid in his journal: ‘Distressing and fatal as the continuance of these cliffs might prove to us, there was a grandeur and sublimity in their appearance that was most imposing’.21 Webb’s description of Cape Arid calls to mind Hopkins’ anguished poem about faith and despair:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.

Earlier in the sonnet Hopkins writes:

> Comforter, where, where is your comforting?

---

Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?22

These same questions inform Eyre’s physical and spiritual pilgrimage and echo throughout Webb’s poetry.

The sense of fellowship and being part of and responsible for a team is a powerful theme in Eyre’s journals. Webb’s Eyre ‘gropes’ for some kind of fellowship with Baxter and the Aborigines. His ‘We are one mind, one body even’ echoes St Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians where Paul explains how Christ’s crucifixion has united humanity into ‘a single Body’. Paul extends the metaphor of the body when he writes of ‘the church as the body of the risen Christ’. 23  Eyre does not find unity and fellowship in this ‘church’. Wylie remains a ‘stranger’ and though there is some sense of oneness established between Eyre and Baxter, ‘your sleep is in a manner mine’, Baxter is dead. Eyre looks forward to Judgement day where he and Baxter ‘before God ... are together again’. It seems that only in death can true reconciliation and unity be achieved.

**Absence of closure to Eyre’s journey:**

With the death of Baxter Eyre passes through his ‘dark night of the soul’. 24  He is ‘transfixed in fear and loneliness’ but with the dawn he resumes his journey. It is only when Eyre is ‘truly alone’ that he sees the destination of his journey: ‘Someone’ ahead on the road. This enigmatic ‘Someone’, as Ashcroft has suggested, is ‘one of the most complex figures in the poetry’. 25  An appreciation of the significance of this figure is essential if one is to grasp the spiritual nature of Eyre’s journey and, on a larger scale, the spiritual search dramatised throughout Webb’s poetry.


24 ‘The dark night of the soul’ was a phrase St John of the Cross used to describe his tormented wrestling with questions of faith. The phrase was commonly used in sermons at the time Webb was writing and is also discussed in L. Lavelle, *Four Saints*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 50-60, a copy of which is in Webb’s library.

25 *The Gimbals of Unease*, 82.
The uppercase 'Someone' signifies a Christ figure but Webb makes no attempt to name the figure. Is this the 'God' that has been on Eyre's pilgrimage all along? If so the 'Someone' can be read as the risen Christ who journeyed unrecognised to Emmaus with two of the apostles. It was only when He broke the bread at table and handed it to them that 'their eyes were opened and they recognised him'. In that same moment he 'vanished from their sight'. Mark C Taylor describes that moment in terms reminiscent of Webb's poetic engagement with God:

Here presence is absence, and absence presence. Jesus' followers see but do not see; they listen but hear only the silence of the empty tomb...Hocus-pocus: a vanishing act that really opened their eyes! And what did they 'see'? They recognized presence in absence and absence in presence. This unending (inter)play is the eternal (re)inscription of (the) word(s).

In the Catholic tradition life on earth is considered to be a journey towards, and a preparation for, death and eternal life. The 'Someone' is on the main road. The figure can therefore be read as God, the eternal father, who awaits His faithful children at the end of their journey through life. In his gospel St John states: 'No one has ever seen God'. It could be argued that Eyre sees God up ahead on the road at the conclusion of his journey because in 'the final days' when he reaches the intensely silent Sound, he undergoes his own act of kenosis and arrives at the point of death: 'One year on the march, an epoch, all of my life'. In his journal Eyre writes: 'The rain still continued falling heavily as we ascended to the brow of the hill immediately overlooking the town of Albany - not a soul was to be seen- ...the place looked deserted and uninhabited'. In 'The Sound' Eyre says:

Looking down, or up, at the town from the brow of this hill
I am truly alone. And hardly visible now
The straight grey lines. I am coming. I am rainfall...

27 Erring, 103.
28 John 1:18.
David Malouf offers, at the conclusion of *An Imaginary Life*, a moment and a movement similar to that experienced by Webb’s Eyre:

> From here I ascend, or lower myself, grain by grain, into the hands of the gods. It is the place I dreamed of so often...but could never find in all my wanderings in sleep - the point on the earth’s surface where I disappear...The fullness is in the Child’s moving away from me, in his stepping so lightly...into his own distance.\(^{30}\)

Malouf’s Ovid melts into the earth as the Child moves away from him. Webb’s Wylie is taken back to earth in a positive, downward movement: ‘He is growth, he is a gallant tree in flower,/He is unbound geometries of the good soil.’ In ‘The Whaler’ the ‘pulse of whiteness overhead’, ‘that same white grace’, ‘lures’ Eyre out from ‘walls’ of his own kind into ‘old disconsolate lands’. Now, at the conclusion of his journey the walls of himself are completely broken down and the self dissipates. He is rainfall. He too is going into the earth.

The fourteen poems in Webb’s sequence call to mind the fourteen Stations of the Cross that mark Christ’s journey towards death. Significantly, those Stations conclude not with the resurrection of Christ but with his burial, the entombment of a ‘dead’ God. Christ’s crucifixion and all that His death means in terms of redemption and the forgiveness of sin, is woven throughout ‘Eyre All Alone’ from the stigmata, ‘the moody nails of the sun’, of the opening poem to the ‘bloodless tree’ of ‘The Sound’. As Eyre approaches death he feels humbled and unworthy. His ‘torn stinking shirt, my boots,/And hair a tangle of scrub’ stand in sharp contrast to the ‘golden’ faces and ‘shining’ dress of those he is about to meet. ‘Not a soul was to be seen’ writes Eyre in his journal. Webb’s Eyre, in his humility, anticipates the vision of many ‘souls’, the angelic faces of the Heavenly Hosts:

> How shall I face their golden faces, pure voices?
> O my expedition: Baxter, Wylie!

Eyre’s final cry is a plea for the reconciliation and unity that has eluded him on his

---

journey. After that final cry the poem concludes with: 'But the rain has stopped. On the main road Someone moves.' 'I am rainfall...But the rain has stopped.' Eyre has narrated the complete emptying of himself. If the figure on the road is Christ then the metaphor of Eyre's solitary journey towards death has become real: 'Eyre All Alone' has dramatised the doctrine of Real Presence. The Word has become flesh. Christ is risen.

Significantly, Eyre does not name, approach or apprehend the 'Someone'. There is no communication between them. The 'Someone' is on the main road and Eyre is still alone on the hill. Which way does the 'Someone' move: away from Eyre? towards Eyre? or simply sideways? 'Eyre All Alone' can be read in terms of Giacometti's *Standing Nude* with its series of dissolving frames into which the central figure appears to dissipate. The outermost frame could be read as the journals of Edward John Eyre. Within that framework is a series of frames: frames that speak of metaphor and linguistic strategies; frames that speak of old testament stories; frames that speak of fear and the fracturing of the ego, of isolation and aloneness; and frames that speak of death. In the centre of these frames, and central to all of Webb's writing, there stands a blurred outline of a presence inscribed with an absence, God, 'Someone', who cannot be captured but who slips into the outline.
The Face of Love

But farther on,
Harder to place,
Is a man - too soon
To observe his face...

Eyre's journey towards the 'Someone', 'Man to man. Which is sometimes/God to man', mirrors a journey dramatised in Webb's earlier poem, 'The Canticle'. 'The Canticle' simultaneously offers an ambiguous reading of the life, conversion and death of St Francis of Assisi and the lives and conversions of a cast of characters with whom he came in contact. Like much of Webb's poetry, 'The Canticle' is a complex meditation on the Incarnation of Christ, a meditation centred on an enigmatic figure on the road.

A reading of G.K.Chesterton's St Francis of Assisi, one of four books on St Francis in Webb's library, offers valuable insights into Webb's source, inspiration and imagination in his writing of 'The Canticle'. Chesterton writes of an incident which he feels marked the 'great break' in Francis' life:

Francis was out riding when he saw a figure coming along the road towards him and halted; for he saw it was a leper. And he knew instantly that his courage was challenged...what he saw advancing was not the banner and spears of Perugia, from which it never occurred to him to shrink; nor the armies that fought for the crown of Sicily...Francis Bernardone saw his fear coming up the road towards him; the fear that comes from within not without...He sprang from his horse...and rushed on the leper and threw his arms around him...it is said that when he looked back, he could see no figure on the road.1

The figure on the road was the embodiment of Francis' most intimate fears. Francis, a brave and gallant knight, had failings in terms of courage and compassion. He was afraid of, and revolted by, lepers. Yet Francis confronted his fear and enthusiastically

1 St Francis of Assisi, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), 60-61. Three other significant texts on St Francis are in Webb's library: J. Adderley, Francis the Little Poor Man of Assissi, (London: Edward Arnold, 1908); O.Englebert, St Francis of Assisi, E.Hutton (trans.), (London: Burns Oates, 1950); and L.Lavelle, Four Saints. For a reading of 'The Canticle' in terms of Australian literature and the medieval tradition see A.Lynch, 'Remaking the Middle Ages in Australia: Francis Webb's “The Canticle” (1953)', Australian Literary Studies, 19:1, 1999, 44-56.
embraced the leper. Chesterton's description of this crucial moment in Francis' life is marked by an absence: 'when he looked back, he could see no figure on the road'. Similar life-changing moments, also traced as absence, confront the characters in 'The Canticle'.

The man 'farther on' on the road to Assisi operates, as do so many of Webb's characters, to disturb the complacency of those with whom he comes into contact, physical or visual. The narrator of the poem is confidently relaxed about '[p]assing the time of day' with the 'usual crew' on the road to Assisi. He is in control of the journey. He orchestrates the narrative and is powerful and benevolent enough to bestow words on the 'dumb'. But his long conversational lines become terse clipped phrases when he spies the unidentified man. The now-agitated narrator cannot afford to have his 'schedule' disturbed:

there must be no slowing
Of our schedule today.

'The Canticle' is concerned with disturbing schedules, with upending preconceptions and undermining certainty. The narrator may try to control the poetic narrative but it is Francis, not the narrator, who is 'setting the pace' ('Brother Ass and the Saint') on this journey. The flow of the narrator's poem is arrested by a single word, afforded its own line: 'Mountainous'. 'Mountainous' introduces a tension that is intimately related to the figure on the road. There is a sense that something momentous is about to occur. For now, however, the moment of contact is deferred:

Thank God he is going
The opposite way.

The man may appear to be absenting himself by going the opposite way but in fact he weaves his way throughout the text and texture of Webb's poem. He is the thread, perhaps the one 'obstinate Thread' ('The Father'), that at once binds the poem together

---

2 It might be argued that the characters in 'The Canticle' serve an allegorical purpose, and that this modifies the sense of absence. It needs also to be remembered that allegory is here a work of desire rather than a guarantee of presence: like many of Webb's reading frames, it is buckling under the pressure of an absence released at the centre of the poem, where the moment of encounter is not written.
and unravels it to reveal a core that lies somewhere between ‘All beauty, all joy? Yes - and all pain and disfigurement’ (‘The Knight’).

Assisi, perhaps because it is ‘straight ahead’, is ‘[h]ard to see’. The unidentified man is seen but is ‘[h]arder to place’. It is significant that it is ‘too soon to observe his face’. With ‘his nuggety stick/And his grubby dress’, he can be read as a leper, perhaps even the leper that Francis met on the road. The narrator, like the all-too-human Francis and possibly like the reader of the poem, is challenged and revolted by the possibility of a disease-ridden man and wants no contact with him. Perhaps that is why he is so relieved that the man is going the opposite way. Yet, if this man is a leper and has gone away, why is it that the first voice we hear is that of a leper? It would appear that the leper, rather than going the opposite way, has come towards us to ‘breathe our air for quite some little time’.

The man’s clothing could equally depict St Francis who walked the roads of Assisi and beyond in his hessian robes. St Francis was also known as ‘Brother Sun’. The man on the road is imaged as a ‘New sun, round symbol/...humble/Mountainous’. So the man could be a leper or St Francis. Like Mount Subasio which ‘clambers/ Dawnward, the town of Assisi fast to his back’ the man appears ‘to carry/Assisi with him’. Is he a Christ figure carrying his cross on the road to Calvary? The figure repulses all attempts to frame him. On one level he remains unidentified and unidentifiable. On another level he is recognisable as a leper who suffers by bearing the cross of his disease, as Francis Bernardone who humbly renounces earthly possessions to take up his cross and follow God, and the incarnate Christ present in all humanity. This deliberate blurring of identity is developed throughout ‘The Canticle’.

By titling the next poem in the sequence ‘A Leper’ Webb encourages his readers to imaginatively connect the man on the road with the leper. The leper of this poem offers a complete reversal - complete reversals being central to the structure and understanding of ‘The Canticle’ - of the doctrine and metaphor of incarnation. In the figure of the leper the Word made flesh is rewritten as the rotting, pustulant flesh made word:
There is always this question, this something, in its yellow
Rags which prefigure the almost living ulcer
Beneath them, whose words are the filthy vivid trickling
Never quite congealed by a halfpenny's smug bandage.

The leper is 'the graceless utterance, the question, the thought'. Untouched by the grace of God, consumed by hatred, vengeance and self-pity, he represents fallen humanity at its most base level. He is the 'non-human thought'. His 'crumbling' skin gapes open to expose the very essence of who he is, a 'festering ravenous gully', not dissimilar to the depraved wolf of Gubbio. There is, however, a redemptive movement within this poem. Through speech the leper empties himself, undergoes his own act of kenosis, and progresses from being 'a man speaking' to 'almost a man speaking'. In 'The Canticle' this loss of certainty suggests an imaginative gain.

'A Leper' sets up a relationship - extended in 'The Leper' and discussed further - between the body of the leper and the incarnated body of Christ. The 'scampering' priest's failure of compassion and the leper's self-entrapment within walls of bitterness, vengeance and self-pity, set up a situation in which the act of transubstantiation is, for the leper, negated. Just as the priest refuses to acknowledge the leper, the leper cannot acknowledge the body of Christ held aloft at the Consecration of the Mass: 'Nor can I credit the Love aloft in those hands'. For the leper the priest's hands hold a void. The moment of Real Presence is one of felt absence.

Again one of Giacometti's Standing Nude paintings provides a compelling visual accompaniment to 'A Leper' where the dissolving figure is 'quartered' within a series of walls, walls of his own making, walls of the church and the walls of Assisi. This central figure, as in the conclusion of 'Eyre All Alone', refuses to be contained within a single frame and slips into and through the outlines. It is significant that the leper is positioned within the church of 'Santa Maria Maddelena':

God's mercy upon all, then: a church is assigned me,
Of Santa Maria Maddelena - so there are stones, eyes
To contain my grossness without the blink of ruin?

Though 'stones', 'church' and 'grossness' connote shame and judgement, the linkage of

82
'stones' with 'Santa Maria Maddelena' and 'God's mercy' glances at the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. Such a moment, of forgiveness, reconciliation, love and consequent inspiration, is witnessed by the speaker of Webb's later poem, 'Poet':

The woman crouches beside Him: I have seen the sky at midday
Bent earthward. From the two together a train of camels.

A similar moment occurs between Francis and each of the characters in 'The Canticle' but it is more elusive. The jongleur heralds its approach:

O city, be radiant, flutter all your wings!
Listen, listen: far hoofbeats foretell noon-hour

... 

Noon session boils
Together monument and change. O receive, receive...

That approach is anxiously anticipated in the first poems spoken by the serf and the knight who at this stage lack the 'clever desert eyes' ('Poet') needed to appreciate the significance of what will occur. In 'Poet' Webb employs the symbolism of the midday sky bent earthward to suggest the communion of the Divine and the human. The relationship between the human and the Divine, man/myth, word/Word, disembodiment/embodiment is of central importance in 'The Canticle' and is investigated not only through the approach of a figure at noon but through the insistent blurring of identity between and within the characters of the jongleur, the knight, the saint, the leper and, by implication, Christ.

The imagery of stone walls signals another important parallel between 'The Canticle' and 'Poet'. In 'Poet' the pharisees, as 'masters', 'the law', 'the thick grey loam/Of orderly distances, unshakeable houses', attempt to convince the speaker (or singer) of the poem that Christ is the 'enemy of order'. The speaker makes ready to destroy that enemy but the stone in his hand, as an instrument of death, becomes impotent in the presence of Christ's love. It is the oppressive order and certainty of the 'old grey loam' that is scattered. So too in 'The Canticle' the stone walls crumble in the presence of love, a love that operates to unravel the strictures that bind and control.
Unravelling the walls of language:
The narrator’s apprehension of the unexpected sets the tone for Part I of ‘The Canticle’. The speakers exist in a controlled, ordered world largely of their own making. Such control, suggests the poetry, narrows and stifles imaginative perception. ‘Nothing to you is the unannounced’, says the Jongleur. ‘Curious’ is a ‘word which doesn’t concern’ the wolf. The serf cares only for the ‘usual’. These characters, like those dramatised in ‘A Drum for Ben Boyd’ have no desire to push beyond the horizon of the known. Even the world of war is neatly ordered:

So trimly manorial, this gallant structure!
My flag’s blue and white doctrine in the wind would lecture
Everything to its fief.
Things clumsy as cloud, the heathen, bloodshed, rapine, and grief
Ran tidily venturesome as the veins of a leaf.

The Knight senses that he is to encounter something unscheduled:

Today, then, shall I be perplexed by the swarms
Of roadside images flung from the uncalendared dreams?

He is correct. All the characters will encounter something or someone unexpected and that encounter, like Francis’ encounter with the leper, will turn their lives and their perceptions upside down. For now, however, the knight represses his uneasy thoughts. He refuses to allow the images or unspoken words of suffering to challenge his sense of self and his superior position in the world. He affirms his preferred narrative of self, ‘Other words—my desire/As knight, as man’, and moves forward with his confidence only slightly shaken.

Bernardone’s modus operandi is to control and enclose not only his family but the world. In his tightly controlled four-line stanzas with their rigid rhyme scheme, the language of abandon is crushed by that of control and constriction: ‘disobey’ and ‘unruly way’ are defeated by ‘Foot down was mine’; ‘a certain easiness’ and ‘deviate’ are qualified by ‘carefully profligate’. Bernardone ‘sheathe[s] a lifetime’. His vision is ‘husbanded always’ towards a ‘neat vocation’. A son is ‘coaxed’ from his ‘clean fibres’. He weaves ‘continents’ from ‘obedient threads’. He offers a self-portrait:
I am the merchant Bernardone,
Also the weaver, artisan,
Full face, full pocket, everywhere known,
All this - and very much the man.

His dramatic monologue demonstrates not the ‘full face’ of success but that of arrogance and stupidity. He is unaware, in his pompous rejection of his son and his fury at Francis’ ‘sacilege’ in renouncing material possessions, that he has narrated his own severance from Grace:

I say, as a man: what was of me
Is offal. Can a last obstinate
Thread get past the double eye
And tinsmith’s beauty of my hate?3

The leper, with his rotting flesh and filthy rags, appears to be everything Bernardone despises and shuns, yet these two characters are bound together through their language of hate. In Part III, after Bernardone has been touched by the saint, he comes to understand not only the futility of his plan: ‘Continents I claimed and charted against the Last Day/ But to no avail’, but that his ‘honourable words’ of hatred and rejection were ‘the groping, gaining yellow signal’.

The characters’ relationship to words reflects their spiritual and imaginative status. In Part I their language operates as a wall which restricts their imaginative vision and marks the extent of their separation from Grace. Bernardone and the knight are publicly comfortable with language but unaware that their narratives portray their self-deception and mistaken certainty. The leper, the serf and the wolf of Gubbio speak a language of silence. The leper speaks ‘Only for himself - no other will hear him’. The serf, bound in his usual routine, has ‘no words: I am a man, and silent’. The wolf ‘dictate[s] to nobody’. He is ainguistic with a dim intuition of language in a negative sense: ‘that which is not forever/Silence tilting at words’. He lives only in the present moment of senses. His language of opposites effectively cancels itself: ‘alive’/‘non-

living', 'never'/ 'forever', 'remember'/ 'forget'. The wolf's selfish, driven hunger is in stark contrast to the words of scripture upon which St Francis' prayer was based:

Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right:
they shall be satisfied.4

The wolf hungers and thirsts for self-satisfaction and the immediate sating of desire.

The jongleur:

Francis and his followers were known as 'God's troubadours' or the 'Jongleurs de Dieu'. In the thirteenth century a jongleur was a story-teller, clown, acrobat and jester. Webb's earlier poem 'Caps and Bells' celebrates the power of the jester to understand and convey the deeper truths of life:

... I have chosen the little, obscure way
In the dim, shouting vortex; I have taken
A fool's power in his caps and bells
And know that in my time the haggard Prince will discover
A blunt shell of Yorick, that laughs forever and ever (CB 11).

The jongleur plays an important part in 'The Canticle'. He increasingly takes over the role of narrator from the speaking voice of Part 1. His words give shape not only to the story of Francis but the message of Francis' story: 'Love, always love'.

In Part I the jongleur is a prisoner not only to the conventions of language but also to the expectations of his audience:

Again to the square. A holy day. Food and wine,
Throat and mummery of freedom - now for stagecraft of the fingers,
And the costumed syllables
In their adequate soaring, declension.

There is 'no score of belief prompting the modes' of his song. He strains for something to believe in as he forces himself to fulfil his role: 'Sing! But the chanson wavers.../ Sing, sing!.../And I sing'. The jongleur is little more than a singing puppet. The song's 'theme' controls his 'lodgings in place, language, or time'. Unlike the other characters

he is aware of his limitations and knows what is required of him. He must undergo an act of *kenosis*:

- To believe in this day, resign identity and hunger.
- Let the cheers of the crowd
- - Lover, dotard, cripple, bawd -
- Work within me as a prayer,
- From my borrowed instruction instruct me.

This ambiguous resignation of self applies not only to the jongleur. His words are also directed towards the other characters. They too must resign identity and hunger, empty themselves of their selfish desires and egos in order to be redeemed, to receive:

- Noon session boils
- Together monument and change. O receive, receive
- What comes of your pot-stirring, soothsayer.
- *Believe, believe, believe.*

The jongleur seeks to empty himself in order that he may operate as St Francis sought to operate: as a channel for prayer and reconciliation.

There is an internal element of contradiction within the jongleur’s poem. He speaks as a man and sings as a myth. This division suggests that the jongleur, like all the characters including Francis - ‘humble man of the field/So happy in his humility; [and] proud knight’ - embodies a somewhat schizophrenic psyche. ‘The Canticle’ seeks to dramatise the story of Francis as man and Francis as myth as a way of investigating the ultimate man/myth story, the incarnation of Christ. The insistence throughout the sequence that ‘it is a man speaking’, ‘[i]t is almost a man speaking’, ‘very much the man’, ‘And I speak as a man’, ‘I have no words: I am a man and silent’, ‘As Knight, as man’, emphasises the human aspect of the mythic story being told and the role of language in that story. The significance of the man/myth story will be discussed later.

**Reversals:**

The Prayer of St Francis is structured on reversals:

- Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
- Where there is hatred let me sow love.
- Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is discord, unity.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is error, truth.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is sadness, joy.
Where there is darkness, light.

'The Canticle', also structured on reversals, enacts St Francis' prayer. Injury gives way to pardon, doubt to faith, despair to hope, as the language and perspective of each character is reversed in their second poem. Through their encounter with the saint the characters come to understand and articulate the closing passage of Francis' prayer:

For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.5

Francis himself underwent a dramatic spiritual overturn in which he renounced the life of a proud, wealthy knight for the austere, humble road of poverty and prayer. Chesterton writes: 'Many signs and symbols might be used to give a hint of what really happened in the mind of the young poet of Assisi...Of the intrinsic internal essence of the experience I make no pretence of writing at all'.6 The closest the reader of Webb's poem gets to an insight into the mind of Francis is in 'Brother Ass'. 'Ass' was the name Francis gave to his body in his 'Canticle of the Creatures'. 'Brother Ass' can therefore be read as Francis speaking of the physical arduousness and denial in his life. The repetition of 'must' lends an air of forced insistence to his statements:

Brother Ass you must feel the whip...

There must be a rider...

and the voice
Cursing above me must always seem the same
As my famished earthen bray, and the lazar-houses

5 This is the familiar version of St Francis' prayer prayed in Catholic devotions. For a slightly different translation of the prayer see E.Doyle, St Francis and The Song of Brotherhood, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 39-40.

6 St Francis of Assisi, 87.
Offside must be always my Eden...

Francis had to force himself to embrace the leper. In 'Brother Ass' there is a sense that he continues to force himself to accept the trials and tribulations of his new way of life. His Way of the Cross is a difficult road. Something of a reversal or change of heart occurs in the space between 'Brother Ass' and 'Brother Ass and the Saint'. In the second poem there is a reconciliation between Francis' mind and body, the 'melting...truly together' of aspects of himself. He is at one with his new self: 'at last off [his own] back and is standing by'. He throws off the external garments of the nobleman and knight, 'Off with the belly band and the stirrup-leather!', and embraces the freedom of nothing.

'The Canticle' affirms Chesterton's suggestion that '[w]e cannot follow St Francis to that final spiritual overturn in which complete humiliation becomes complete holiness or happiness'. That moment is traced as an absence. So too are the moments when each character undergoes his spiritual overturn through contact with the saint. As is characteristic of Webb those redemptive moments are off-stage and silent. The reader must imaginatively create them. Francis not only causes the spiritual reversal of all those he meets, he turns the world upside down:

Unheard of time for a homecoming - such a time,  
With the nonplussed look of the Sun, miles from his prime.  
We shall tip the earth over, sparing him all that climb.

He facilitates the meeting of earth and the midday sun and with that meeting the walls that have encased the characters fall away. Chesterton describes the possibility of such an occurrence:

If a man saw the world upside down...one effect would be to emphasise the idea of dependence. There is a Latin and literal connection; for the very word dependence only means hanging. It would make vivid the Scriptural text which says that God has hanged the world upon nothing. If St Francis had seen, in one of his strange dreams, the town of Assisi upside down, it need not have differed in a single detail from itself except in being entirely

7 St Francis of Assisi, 86.
the other way round. But the point is this: That whereas to the normal eye the large masonry of its walls or the massive foundations of its watchtowers and its high citadel would make it seem safer and more permanent, the moment it was turned over the very same weight would make it seem more helpless and more in peril. 8

‘And who is speaking?’
One of the major tasks of reading ‘The Canticle’ is to recognise Francis. The critical reception of the sequence has assumed that Francis is another of Webb’s central characters who is, to a large extent, dramatically absent. Michael Griffith writes: ‘The structure of the sequence is rather like A Drum for Ben Boyd in that it is through these characters that we get to know the saint, he himself making only a brief clown-like appearance.’9 Having argued thus Griffith does go on to note that Francis’ ‘abiding and curative presence’ is embodied in the fragments of St Francis’ Il Cantico de Frate Sole incorporated into the poem and that ‘as in the case of the Jongleur, this character [the knight] can also be read as a portrait of St Francis himself’.10 My reading of ‘The Canticle’ goes well beyond Griffith’s brief suggestion to argue that Francis is to be found throughout the sequence as an absent presence who repeatedly pierces the fabric of poetry. Francis is overtly present in ‘Brother Ass’ and ‘Brother Ass and the Saint’. He can be heard in the fragments of Il Cantico that introduce the poems of Part III. He slips out of these spaces, however, to reappear in different guises. He is always ‘hard to place’. In order to locate Francis we must heed the leper’s words: ‘Look aside, look aside’. Francis can be read as the poor man ‘up ahead on the road’ in Part 1. He can also be read as both the ‘poor man walking’ on the road in the second poem titled ‘The Knight’ and as the proud horse-riding knight who meets the man. At times he can be spied in the jongleur’s words. He is both the ‘Face’ of love and a ‘face/Among the

8 St Francis of Assisi, 87. Chesterton is referring to Genesis 1:1 which states: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void.’

9 God’s Fool, 182.

10 God’s Fool, 197.
circling faces'. In Part IV, the final hymn of praise to Francis, he is a present absence.

Chesterton writes that Francis:

was a poet and can only be understood as a poet ... He was a poet whose whole life was a poem. He was not so much a minstrel merely singing his own songs as a dramatist capable of acting the whole of his own play. 

Here is one of the key points to Webb’s poem. Francis plays many roles. ‘The Canticle’ celebrates imaginative possibility over certainty. The strategy of the poem is to involve the reader in a drama of perception and to suggest that Grace and love can be perceived in the world if one is open to them. In our quest to identify Francis it is again helpful if we refer to Chesterton whose imagination was captured by Francis Bernardone the man, not the saint, and the effect that this one man had upon so many others in his lifetime and through the centuries. Chesterton writes:

men acted quite differently according to whether they had met him or not... Francis Bernardone...happened; and we must try in some sense to see what we should have seen if he had happened to us. In other words, after some groping suggestions about his life from the inside, we must again consider it from the outside; as if he were a stranger coming up the road towards us. 

‘The Canticle’ does as Chesterton suggests. ‘Part I’ establishes the framework of the journey with the narrator as guide. The reader is implicated in the journey:

We shall overtake these one by one, weighing them all;
For they, in a manner of speaking, will bid for us,
To breathe our air for quite some little time. (my italics)

Webb’s poem becomes the road upon which or through which his reader must journey in order to place the man. By travelling the path taken by Webb’s characters, the reader appreciates the extent of the pain and suffering experienced by them in their doubt and fear and witnesses the beauty and freedom that is born in them after love and forgiveness become part of their world. Like Webb’s explorer poems ‘The Canticle’ is a poem of quest, of searching. In this instance the quest is to recognise the face of love.

\[\text{\cite{11 St Francis of Assisi, 106.}}\]

\[\text{\cite{12 St Francis of Assisi, 100-101.}}\]
It is, as always, an arduous task. As the jongleur reminds us: ‘tree-vestured chapels, observe, always are hidden/Somewhere on brutal roads’. Only by travelling the difficult road of the poem can the reader recognise the face that is tentatively offered.

**Blurred identities:**

As is the case in the explorer poems, Webb adapts the facts of an historical story to fit his creative purpose. The leper, the serf, the knight, the jongleur and the wolf are all part of the story of St Francis. In Webb’s poem the identities of the leper, knight and jongleur are deliberately confused. They can be read as themselves and as elements of Francis. This blurring of identity allows the poetry to investigate the possibilities of the embodiment and disembodiment of St Francis and, by extension, Christ. St John wrote not only that ‘The Word was made flesh’ but that ‘he lived among us’.13 ‘The Canticle’, through the ambiguous connection it weaves between the leper, Francis and Christ explores the implications of that shared humanity.

The love and forgiveness that Francis brings dismantle the walls of egotism, isolation, bitterness and fear that have oppressed the leper:

Is there any wall withstands  
This one white embrace?  
The town falls open, I  
Know the whence, sureness, release,  
Bread to my pillory.

Christ, the ‘bread of life’, now embraces and is embraced by, the leper:

Lamp in the spectrum’s tent,  
Homing shades to the one mirror  
And white of embodiment.  
Given, the kiss of peace,  
Given, a white way,  
Love aloft in those hands.

The lamp in the spectrum’s tent indicates Christ’s presence in the tabernacle. No longer is the incarnated Christ a felt absence. But as always with Webb’s poetry the moment of

13 John 1:14.
acknowledgment and reconciliation is not without qualification. The leper no longer needs the wall to hold him together. He has progressed from being 'A Leper' to 'The Leper'. He is embodied. His embodiment mirrors the embodiment of Christ. The connection established in 'A Leper' between the body of Christ and the diseased body of the leper is continued.

For the serf noon heralds the arrival of the his 'gracious lord/(Now within eyeshot) absolute as God'. This lord could be the knight or Francis, or Francis as knight. As the 'lord' approaches the serf says: 'Now, now (within eyeshot) moonshine at high noon'. In Chesterton's text Francis is likened to the moon:

> It is really very enlightening to realise that Christ was like St Francis ... St Francis is the mirror of Christ rather as the moon is the mirror of the sun. The moon is much smaller than the sun, but it is also much nearer to us; and being less vivid it is more visible. Exactly in the same sense St Francis is nearer to us, and being a mere man like ourselves is in that sense more imaginable. 14

And so we are back to 'Man to man. Which is sometimes/God to man'(E). Francis as the human reflection of Christ can be read as the lowercase 'lord' version of the Lord. The line endings of 'lord' and 'God' suggest such a relationship. It is a 'gracious' lord who approaches. Is he that approaches the human carrier of divine Grace?

This double play with identity, where the approaching lord could be the knight or Francis, continues on through the next poem in the sequence. Just as the poetry suggests, by titling the poem following Part 1 'A Leper', that the poor man walking may be a leper, so too a reading of the 'gracious lord' who approaches as a benevolent knight is lent credence by the title of the next poem: 'The Knight'. But 'The Knight' could equally portray a knight, possibly Francis' follower Angelo Tancredi, or Francis. 'The Father' has already established that Francis was a somewhat 'unruly' young man who as a knight lived 'a young man's dreams'. In the St Francis story it was Francis who gave 'his young golden Yes' to 'Lady Poverty'. The second Knight's poem only deepens the uncertainty. In this poem the reader is finally offered a silent tableau of

14 *St Francis of Assisi*, 140.
perhaps the redemptive moment:

Afternoon brought a poor man walking, a man
Above and below my reverie. Words together:
I could speak, did speak, but there was a time of listening...

And a transmutation.

Is this ‘poor man walking’, the man who was ‘harder to place’? These lines can be read as the knight finally meeting that unidentified man on the road. If that man was Francis here is the meeting with the saint that the reader has so far been denied. Transmutation comes from speaking and listening but the poetry resists any attempts to articulate what is said to bring that change about. The poetry offers the moment and withholds it. It is both present and absent.

If these lines are read as Francis’ words, we have witnessed Francis’ meeting with the leper on the road. This is the moment of Francis’ confrontation with his fear and his consequent ‘transmutation’. Speaking and listening have replaced Chesterton’s version of Francis flinging himself down from his horse to embrace the leper. In Webb’s poem the rider of the horse, like the earlier rider of the donkey in ‘Brother Ass and the Saint’, dismounts. He is then one amongst ‘the many faces’ just as ‘perhaps, the Centre’ has been imaged as ‘a face/Among the circling faces’.

Underlying both these readings of the ‘poor man walking’ as a leper or as Francis, are the words of scripture that the ‘first will be last, and the last, first’. These words mark the central reversal that weaves a connection between the leper, the jongleur, the knight, Francis and Christ. The other crucial instruction, also from scripture, upon which ‘The Canticle’ rests is, whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers that you do unto me. The ‘poor man walking’ therefore, is also, and always was, Christ, the incarnated God present in all humanity.

---

15 Matthew 19:30.
16 Matthew 25:40.
The face of love:

How much longer will you hide your face from me?
Psalm 13:1

In ‘Five Days Old’ the infant’s face is likened to the Eucharist in the phrase, ‘the snowflake and face of love’. It is the ‘face of love’, offered by St Francis, that cannot be acknowledged by the characters in the first half of ‘The Canticle’. From the opening poem the reader is involved in the drama of recognising the face, the ‘New sun, round symbol’, that could not be seen ahead on the road. Many faces are offered - the seasons, the church, the averted face of the scampering priest, the ‘full face’ of Bernardone, the faces of the serf’s children, the ‘wrong face, strong face, long face’ of the multitudes - but the face of he (perhaps He) who is coming remains elusive. For all the expectation and the serf’s pronouncement of the arrival ‘within eyeshot’ of his ‘lord’, he cannot be sure of the approaching man’s face: ‘quills may rewrite his feature (never his charter)’.

A face is revealed immediately prior to the arrival of the ‘poor man walking’ and the consequent ‘transmutation’:

And sometimes, perhaps, the Centre - but rather as a face
Among the circling faces.

The uppercase C lends ‘Centre’ a prominence and suggests the presence of the Divine but the suggestion of ‘the Centre’ is qualified. The use of ‘perhaps’ casts a shadow of doubt as to the Presence that may have been witnessed. It is significant that ‘the Centre’ is seen as a ‘face’ not a ‘Face’ ‘[a]mong the circling faces’. Webb continues to build on the already ambiguous relationship he has established between the human and the Divine by allowing ‘the Centre’ to be read as Christ and/or St Francis. If the speaking voice of ‘The Knight’ is Francis then ‘the Centre’ is Christ seen amongst humanity. If it is the knight speaking, ‘the Centre’ can be read as Francis the Saint. The poetry, in its deliberate obfuscation, enacts the words of scripture: ‘The kingdom of God does not

admit of observation...you must know, the kingdom of God is among you’. 18

When the knight/Francis dismounts ‘the many faces come closer’. In a similar movement the story of Francis, perhaps one could argue the face of Francis, comes ‘closer and closer still’. The jongleur tells the reader: ‘Living lustre goes kindly to illustrious death’. At the close of his second poem, when ‘[t]he story comes to an end’, he remarks:

Loyal voyage, loyal vision, loyal bones,
Freed from the story, come closer and still closer.

The Jongleur saw that what was missing in the ‘[b]reathtaking profile of granite’ was a full-on, frontal view of the beauty of humanity: the ‘blood and bone and beating heart’. Webb as poet is interested in putting the heart back, in reinstating love, humility and humanity, in the story of Christ’s presence in the world. His project in writing ‘The Canticle’ was not to record the dry historical story of Francis’ life and the legal founding of his order: ‘1210A.D. - too much of that. Anno Domini’. ‘The Canticle’ is an imaginative engagement with the story of the saint’s life. Whereas St Francis offered his Canticle in the thirteenth century in an attempt to bring peace, love and reconciliation, Webb’s poem is a prayer for the present. The opening words of the three eight-line stanzas of the jongleur’s second poem read: ‘Now’, ‘Now’, ‘Now’. Webb as poet has unbound the St Francis story and offered his readers the opportunity to meet Francis the man who experienced fear and failure but who brought redemption and happiness through the power of love. Assisi was ‘camp fire stuff, the stuff of legends or myths but ‘The Canticle’ dramatises the human dimension of the myth.

‘The Sun’ offers a definition of the dawning sun (which in Webb’s poetry is often the metaphor for the risen Christ), a definition of man and an offering of the myth of St Francis. Again there is a relationship mapped out between the Divine, the human and the mythic. The ‘Five Wounds’ represent both Christ’s crucifixion and the stigmata, the earthly sign of that crucifixion bestowed on St Francis. The wounds are intimately related to Webb’s poetic project: ‘Five Wounds, and the Canticle.’ Like

Francis Bernardone, Francis Webb has written a poem of divine praise but Webb’s poem is qualified. ‘The Canticle’ remains firmly located in the suffering of humanity and the redemption that is born out of that suffering. There are no direct statements of faith. There are no miracles witnessed. There is God, there is man and there is Webb’s version of myth. There is solace and hope:

There was a hand that rolled
Timbers from the doorway, stressed
A warm Word that arranges
Kindling from thorns and cold.

There is the positive image of the ‘halo over the hill’ but it is a halo caused by ‘Five Wounds’.

Webb chose ‘A Leper’ and ‘The Leper’ as two of twelve poems to represent his work in *Twelve Poets* (1970). These two poems dramatise the almost indivisible role played by ‘beauty...[and] joy...and...pain and disfigurement’ in Webb’s writing. Read in the context of ‘The Canticle’ these poems suggest that the difference between these extremes of emotion are to do with perception. Significantly, these poems demonstrate that the incarnate Host may be experienced as sign of beauty and joy and as a void, as pain and disfigurement. This relationship between the felt presence or absence of God and the void increasingly informs Webb’s later poetry.
1. Alberto Giacometti: *Hands Holding the Void* or *The Invisible Object*, 1934
The Embrace of Nothing

‘Death and the Woman’:

In 1934 Giacometti sculpted a life-size female nude seated somewhat precariously on a type of throne. Her bent legs are both supported by and lodged behind a large tilted board. The statue’s hands are held out in front of her as if holding some object. They are holding nothing. The alternative titles of the work are *The Invisible Object* and *Hands Holding the Void* (Figs 1&2). The statue initially creates the illusion of a living being. Her hands seem to be carefully caressing something that the viewer is drawn to explore. As the viewer enters the field of the woman’s gaze however he/she discovers that the face is divided by a robotic-like sharp ridge and that the gaze is unseeing. Wheels, one of which is broken, take the place of eyes. The mouth gapes open. The look is of death.

Yves Bonnefoy has noted the resemblance between Giacometti’s statue and Cimabue’s *Madonna Surrounded by Angels* (Fig 3), a painting Giacometti is reputed to have loved:

Now the throne in the Cimabue painting is somewhat like the one in *The Invisible Object*, the same base with a cavity at its bottom, and the same impression of discomfort for the sitter, who in both cases appears to be tipped forward. The twentieth century sculptor’s figure recalls the Madonnas of the Italian trecento, and really we only have to imagine an infant between those hands which do not reveal what they are holding - so carefully, up to the breasts which seem full and soft - to be before a version, nude indeed but still virginal, of the medieval Virgin and Child.¹

Bonnefoy defends his suggestion that though the hands hold nothing the statue may be read as a Madonna figure by arguing that ‘the child Mary holds upright on her lap is potentially the dead Christ of the Pietàs’. That is to say that the present Christ child is always already an absence. Bonnefoy’s argument is strengthened by the etching *Hands Holding the Void* which definitively outlines the woman’s distended uterus (Fig 4).

¹ *Alberto Giacometti*, 230.
is, therefore, a figure intimately related to Giacometti's *Spoon Woman* who seemed to be pregnant but with a child who was already an absence or void.

The offered object that is both present and absent, visible and invisible may also have something to do with artistic creation. The hands can be read as the modelling hands of the sculptor: hands that give life to inert clay, that mould something out of nothing; hands that may sometimes appear to offer nothing, the artist having failed in his attempt at expression; hands that offer something that only the viewer may interpret; hands that continually seek to create and to re-create a body of work. It is significant that the statue's hands are raised. She is actively asking the viewer to contemplate the void. That absence read as an affirmation of a lack (in art?, in life?), operates to engender longing and desire. In this way *Hands Holding the Void*, by offering Nothing, denies nothingness.

Giacometti's art was profoundly influenced by his experience at twenty years of age of the death of a travelling companion he referred to as van M. As Giacometti sat with the dying man he attempted to sketch the process whereby life slowly drained out of van M's eyes. Some years later a man, T., who shared a small house with Giacometti died. In 1946 Giacometti wrote an essay titled *The Dream, the Sphinx and the death of T.* for the Surrealist magazine *Labyrinth* in which he articulated the way in which these deaths had shaped and inspired his artistic perception. He described how he stood by T's bedside just prior to and immediately following his death:

I saw him sunk in his bed, motionless, his skin ivory-yellow, withdrawn into himself and already strangely far away, and then shortly after, at three in the morning, dead, his limbs as thin as a skeleton's, flung out, spreadeagled, abandoned, an enormous swollen belly, his head thrown back, his mouth open. Never had a corpse seemed to me so inexistent... I looked at this head that had become an object, a small box, measureable, insignificant. At that moment, a fly approached the black hole of his mouth and slowly disappeared inside it.2

T's corpse remained in the house the following night. Giacometti, gripped by terror, felt that the absent T. was somehow filling the house with his presence: 'even

---

2 Sylvester, 69.
though I didn’t believe it, I somehow felt that T. was everywhere, everywhere but in the wretched corpse on the bed, the corpse that had seemed so inexistent’. T. was both a material nothing and an ethereal everything. It was at this moment, Giacometti wrote, that he began to see living people’s heads as objects, simultaneously alive and dead, fixed in an instant of time. On waking the next morning he perceived ‘for the first time ...a stillness...a dreadful silence...there was no relation at all between the objects [in his room] now separated by immeasurable chasms of emptiness’.³ Though raised in a small village whose inhabitants followed a Calvinist creed, Giacometti professed no spiritual or religious belief. He viewed death as the moment in which a living presence became a meaningless absence. After T’s death that experience of absence, of immeasurable emptiness, increasingly informed his consciousness.

The creation of Hands Holding the Void marked a significant turning-point in Giacometti’s personal and artistic life. He broke away from the Surrealist group in order to concentrate on sculpting as close a copy as possible of the human head. He wanted to represent presence, the presence of an other. For the rest of his life Giacometti attempted to capture, in paint and clay, the living gaze of an other as a counter to what he saw as the meaninglessness of death. His artistic project mirrored that of Webb’s Leichhardt whose canvas was the harsh Australian continent. Leichhardt, tormented by questions of death and salvation, asks:

Shall he explore
Time after time this death’s-head continent,
Probe the eye-sockets, skinless cavities,
Till the brain sweats from his skull, his hands contract,
And bone probes bone at length; bone lifted to cheek
Knows the flesh dwindling, blasted by such a love? (CB 70)

Giacometti wrote most of The Dream, the Sphinx and the death of T. in one session. When he returned to his script some days later, with the intention of finishing his narrative, he was overcome by what he saw as the difficulty of linguistically conveying a sequence of events that seemed to move backwards and forwards in time.

³ Bonnefoy, 292.
Defeated by words he schematically drew his story: ‘Suddenly I had the feeling that all these events existed simultaneously around me. Time was becoming horizontal and circular, was space at the same time and I tried to draw it’. The result was a horizontal disc divided by lines into sections (Fig 5):

On each section was written the name, date and place of the event it corresponded to, and at the edge of the circle facing each section stood a panel. The panels were of different widths and separated by empty spaces. The story corresponding to the section was printed on each panel...But the panels are still empty; I don’t know enough about the value of words or their relationships to be able to fill them in.4

Words collapsed under the weight of Giacometti’s artistic vision so he translated his experiences into sculpture. His narrative can be read in his upright figures who stand, like the upright panels at the edge of his disc, separated always by empty spaces.

Giacometti’s sense of the inadequacy of words to convey experience, his attempt to artistically deny death and his exploration of the void raise concerns similar to those addressed in Webb’s later poetry, most especially ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ and ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’. In these poems the sense of the inadequacy of language, a recurring theme in Webb’s oeuvre, is heightened and assumes an explicitly spiritual dimension. Questions about the role and the efficacy of poetry are tied to the possibility of spiritual redemption. These poems, like Hands Holding the Void, ask their audience to consider some disturbing questions: What is the void? Can it be felt or expressed through art? Can art contain, in both senses of the word, the void? Is the void an empty space? Webb’s poetry increasingly embraces and is embraced by the void. It is a space that is at once silent and empty, and home to God, the Virgin Mary and poetry itself. In ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ that space confronts and is confronted by a figure on the road. The figure is a much blacker version of the Someone glimpsed in ‘Eyre All Alone’. Unlike the figure from ‘The Canticle’ it is not hard to place. ‘[I]ts name is Death.’

4 Sylvester, 74.
2. Side-on view of *Hands Holding the Void*, 1934. (Plaster)

Death:

In much of Webb’s poetry ‘the tale always brings death’ (L) but death largely remains off-stage. The poetry seeks to dramatise the arduous, tortured journey towards death rather than the moment of death itself. In ‘A Death at Winson Green’ the repetitive drum of ‘dead’ closes every stanza and insistently drives the poem towards the moment of death. But the poem refuses to name that moment. It eschews the space of death and remains focussed on the gaping bed:

> Time crouches, watching, near his face of snows.
> He is all life, thrown on the gaping bed,
> Blind, silent, in a trance, and shortly, dead (CB 160).

There is a significant shift, however, in Webb’s last published poems in which death is more deeply explored and, in ‘Sturt and the Vultures’, boldly named. A clear example of this development can be seen if one compares the stanza endings of the structurally similar poems ‘A Death at Winson Green’ and ‘Incident’. The ‘lie as still as the dead’, ‘feast-day long since dead’, ‘almost dead’, ‘almost dead’ and ‘shortly dead’ of the earlier poem give way to five insistent ‘McMurtrie’s dead’.

The death that informs Webb’s poetry is a dying into eternal life, a dying that signifies a birth: ‘towards birth he labours’ (‘A Death at Winson Green’). Webb’s poetic engagement with the seemingly paradoxical movement whereby death signifies birth is more ambiguous and qualified than the conventional Catholic teaching of death and resurrection. Christ’s death and resurrection, and their implication in terms of spiritual redemption and eternal life, are a central concern of the poetry but the poetry repeatedly veers towards resurrection and death rather than death and resurrection. The possibility of resurrection is most often suggested through the image of the sun, particularly the dawning sun. In ‘A Death at Winson Green’ the sun, one step removed from the drama unfolding on the bed, quietly counters the movement towards death. ‘The dazed historic sunlight’ gapes in through the window. ‘Noon reddens’, ‘evening gropes out of colour’, ‘Twilight itself breaks up’ to give way to ‘dour night’ and still the man ‘holds his place’. With the coming of the dawn, however, there is a shift in dynamics:
With every gasp at breath; his burden grows
Heavier as all earth lightens, and the sea.

In a characteristic twist the poem returns from the suggestion of transcendent possibility to the man’s suffering and imminent death.

‘The Stations’ celebrates the integral nature of Christ’s death and resurrection to everyday human life. Its closing image offers a rare example of unqualified, hopeful expectation:

Sunset hails a rising
The eve of the Resurrection is in this room
And playing round it the stormlights of knock-off time (CB 125).

More often in Webb’s poetry that anticipated rising remains always tied to the suffering of the Cross. As ‘Beeston Regis’ insists: ‘In the arising is the Calvary’. In ‘Good Friday, Norfolk’, Christ’s resurrection is acknowledged but qualified by the positioning and cadence of the final word:

The time is propitious. Dawn in gardener’s dress
Stands close to us:
Words of ploughed lands, of sunrise, and a Cross (CB 203).

The poem locates the reader with Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday morning but in place of the risen Christ it offers his ‘Cross’. Webb’s poetry refuses any easy transcendence. It gestures towards resurrection but always returns to earth, to the road, to the gaping bed, to suffering. That is to say it dramatises a faith that recognises ‘All beauty, all joy? Yes - and all pain and disfigurement’, in that order.

The ambiguous space of death:
Socrates is another of Webb’s characters on a journey towards death which is to be a birth into eternal life. He is awoken from his final night of imprisonment to embrace death: ‘Daylight calls me to birth’. ‘Socrates’ simultaneously traces the journey not only of the philosopher’s last day but through the stages of the ‘returning immortal soul’, the journey of his life from the ‘light’, ‘pain’, ‘love’ and ‘sound’ of birth through the world
of language, 'laughter' and 'irony', out into 'silence'. Socrates is one of Webb's lesser-recognised explorers. He of 'the free foot, made for exploration and the road' has travelled the road of knowledge, the examined life. Like Webb's other explorers he too is absorbed into that 'field pitched beyond world and words' (L), a dark and silent space.

The ambiguous nature of that space is developed through the poem. Initially Socrates looks into it. He shares it for a brief moment with Sisyphus the man who, for trying to cheat death, must forever struggle with his punishment. Through this encounter Socrates knows that after death 'they wake, wander, are born; they know all, they ask no pity'. Has he discovered the answer to Leichhardt's questions:

Has Gilbert found the source? or do his bones,
Forever at war with death,
Trudge nightly towards Port Essington?

Will Socrates, in death, find the source? Will he too 'know all'? Is the silence and stillness which envelop him a positive or a negative space? The poem resists any firm conclusions.

In the conclusion to The Republic Socrates mounts an argument, through the consideration of good and evil and through his 'doctrine of opposites', for the existence of the immortal soul. 'Socrates' does not question the existence of an immortal soul. It is the ambiguous destination of the soul that the poem explores. The ambiguity stems from the divergent sources that provided inspiration for this poem: Plato's Phaedo and Yeats's 'The Black Tower'. In the Phaedo Plato records Socrates' last day and final conversations:

'The lovers of learning understand', said he, 'that philosophy found their soul simply imprisoned in the body and welded to it, and compelled to survey through this as if through prison bars the things that are, not by itself through itself, but wallowing in all ignorance; and she saw the danger of

---

5 For a reading of 'Socrates' in terms of the stages of the soul see Ashcroft, The Gimbals of Unease, 49-50.

6 In 'Incident' the dead McMurtrie 'knows all, he is superhuman'. See Caps and Bells, 234.

this prison came through desire, so that the prisoner himself would be chief helper in his own imprisonment.'

Socrates goes on to explain that philosophy strives to free the soul, persuading it to withdraw from the senses and trust nothing but itself. Read in relation to Socrates' teaching, the stages of the soul in 'Socrates' mark a positive journey on which silence and stillness signify an elevated state of freedom and understanding.

Plato also explains in the *Phaedo* how Socrates' friends began to weep when he 'cheerfully' drank the cup of poison:

> Apollodoros...now burst into loud sobs, and by his weeping and lamentations completely broke down every man there except Socrates himself. He only said, 'What a scene! You amaze me. That's just why I sent the women away, to keep them from making a scene like this. I've heard that one ought to make an end in decent silence. Quiet yourselves and endure'.

In 'Socrates' the faces and the 'tongues of love' are stilled and elided by 'a darkness'. These 'tongues of love' are both the voices of friends and the sign of the Spirit, the comforting tongues of fire sent by Jesus at Pentecost. They are the agent of speech and that of the Spirit, of flesh and metaphor, of word and Word. They are overpowered by darkness. Presence and presence give way to 'stillness' and 'silence'.

The influence of Yeats's 'The Black Tower' can be seen in the powerful resonance between the italicised refrains of the two poems. The first refrain in 'Socrates' reads:

* Tight to the breast of cold dark upright night  
* Cleaves the immanence, the Form, of living light  
* As light is of the returning immortal soul. (CB 137)*

Webb alters a word in the final line of each refrain to suggest the different qualities of

---


9 *Great Dialogues of Plato*, 521.
the returning soul. Yeats modifies the opening line of his:

There in the tomb stand the dead upright,
But winds come up from the shore:
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.¹⁰

The mood of ‘The Black Tower’ is one of heroic despair. The second refrain offers a glimmer of hope, ‘There in the tomb drops the faint moonlight’, but the tone becomes increasingly pessimistic as the faithful soldiers wait for the arrival of their King. The King will not come: ‘There in the tomb the dark grows blacker’. Webb’s Socrates is also abandoned to the darkness:

And next the faces, the tongues of love, all, all
Withdraw into stillness, are elided by a darkness.

The encompassing nature of this darkness is emphasised by the line endings: ‘all, all... darkness’. Yet, as the refrain reminds us, in darkness there may be light:

Tight to the breast of cold dark upright night
Cleaves the immanence, the Form, of living light
As silence is of the returning immortal soul.

Webb’s ambiguous grammatical construction allows for the possibility that ‘immanence, the Form, of living light’ both clings to and is cut asunder from the heart of this darkness. The ‘living light’, a term that in Webb’s theology could refer to Christ, may be present in the darkness. This dependent relationship between light and darkness (resurrection and death) is woven throughout Webb’s poetry. As ‘Nessun Dorma’ attests:

... the night
Will be all an abyss and depth of light between
Two shorelines in labour: birth and death (CB 231).

Or as Peter declares in ‘The Chalice’: ‘Light is the centre of our darkness. I am to tell you /Of all light, all love, fast to the Cross and bleeding’. Three of Webb’s last

¹⁰ Collected Poems of W.B.Yeats, (London: Macmillan &Co, 1950), 396-97. This text is the most heavily annotated of any texts in Webb’s library.
published poems, 'Rondo Burleske: Mahler's Ninth', 'Sturt and the Vultures' and 'Lament for St Maria Goretti' seek to probe the depths of that darkness, to extend the glimpse of the space of death offered by 'Socrates'.

Unlike Socrates, Mahler was deeply troubled by the thought of death. He converted to Catholicism in the hope that faith in an afterlife would provide him with comfort in the face of death. His attempt was in vain. Mahler's fear of death effectively destroyed the religious faith he had opposed to it. His ninth symphony, in the tradition of Beethoven and Bruckner, was to be his last. In the 'Rondo Burleske' of that symphony the confrontation with death is anguished and personal. It evokes horror and bitterness. The finale, with its dissolution of tonality, is one of heartbroken resignation. In 'Rondo Burleske: Mahler's Ninth' Webb captures Mahler's desperate confusion and that of his music:

You swim in a gulf, a void, out of creation:
Among nameless atonal amphibia in slickest motion
You (Austrian, Catholic, Jew) are floundering.

... There are fiddles and choking woodwinds without number;
Leaderless, buttons showing, you near the Abyss ... (CB 236).

He takes Mahler to the very edge of the Abyss and, as the music climaxes, throws him into it. Again at this crucial moment there is creation and destruction, creation and crucifixion:

It's the climax takes us ...
(Let there be light! Why hast thou forsaken Me?)
You, master of the verge, diving over to prod
The delighted but somewhat dilated eyeball of God.

It is in the feared void, in the midst of darkness, that Mahler comes face to face with God.

Words of water:

'Sturt and the Vultures' is, like all Webb's explorer poems, based on historical facts, in

---

1 Matthew 27:47, Mark 15:34.
this instance Charles Sturt’s 1844-46 expedition into the central Australian desert in search of an inland sea. Sturt failed to find such a sea. He and his team were defeated by parching blasts of hot North-Easternly wind, unbearable heat and debilitating thirst. Webb’s poem maps an equally arduous journey. It is a journey into language, more specifically into poetry, in search of some sustaining, spiritual inner core. The poem’s search, like that of Charles Sturt, appears to admit of failure.

Sturt first appears in Webb’s poetry in the ‘Advertisement’ of ‘Leichhardt in Theatre’. Light has ‘[s]hrivelled’ and ‘consumed’ him. He wonders if he should destroy the audience’s illusions, ‘open their veins with a bitter lancet of heat’ by telling them ‘of death’ but he is not given the chance. He is left to ‘burn’ backstage, trapped in his desert hell, with no hope of rain. ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ initially revisits the pantomime form of ‘Leichhardt in Theatre’ as it weaves together a sense of farce with a menacing sense of fatigue and harassment:

MINCING, mincing we go. And it follows, follows,  
This hot nor’-easter: sometimes even a little testy as us  
So that these poor horses sprocketed to its whirring coils  
Slew away, working at the bit. Browne may be dying.  
Little hot tantrums of wind and tiny pebbles  
Desiccate and annul the words I toss to him (CB 236).

‘MINCING, mincing’, introduces an image of affectedly elegant explorers almost prancing across the desert. With their carousel-like horses they struggle against a juvenile wind. This wind, however, is destructive. It too is linked with ‘mincing’. It brings the possibility of death not only to Browne but to the vitality of language. Sturt’s words offer no lifeline to the dying Browne. They are dried out and shredded by the desert wind and pebbles. The use of ‘annul’ suggests a cancellation of any sacramental benefit the words may have had. The desperate lack of water in the harsh, sandy desert was a physical reality that threatened Sturt and his men with failure and certain death. In ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ it is a spiritual thirst for inner water, for ‘words of water’ (LMG), that must be slaked. The God of the poem, however, is far removed from the
unassuming figure of Jesus whose ‘living water’ will quench all thirst for all time.12

Like Eyre before him, Sturt recorded his trust in Providence and his abiding faith in a merciful God:

A second time had we been forced back from the interior, conquered alike by the difficulties of the country, the severity of the season and the scarcity of water...I had made no discovery to entitle me to credit or reward, and...therefore I should fail...Providence had denied that success to me with which it had been pleased to crown my former efforts...In vain had I prayed to the Almighty for success on this to me all important occasion. In vain had I implored a blessing on you and on my children, if not on myself. But my prayer had been rejected, my petition refused, and so far from any ray of hope having ever crossed my path I felt that I had been contending against the very powers of Heaven, in the desperate show I had made against the seasons, and I now stood blighted and a blasted man over whose head the darkest destiny had settled.13

Despite failure and a feeling of abandonment Sturt never seemed to doubt that his ‘darkest destiny’ was in keeping with the will of God.14 ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ parodies such a notion of divine will. The poem offers an image of the God of Calvinist teaching, not as an all-powerful, absolute Sovereign but as a pitiful ‘old bearded Predestinator’ imprisoned in and by his ‘plan’, a plan the poetry refuses to endorse. Each morning Sturt hands this ‘misunderstood’ and ‘moping’ Predestinator ‘His text’ and leaves ‘Him [to] sob over the dear sacred scheme of His dotage’. He is little more than an old, emotional puppet, another incongruous character in this disturbing pantomime. It is significant, though to date unnoted in the published criticism, that this

12 John 4:1-16.


14 Sunday October 19, 1845: ‘However, Dearest, we must leave our fate in the hands of the Almighty from whom whatever adversity may await me, I pray ever for a blessing upon you’. Sunday November 9, 1845: ‘In this uncertainty I must close the proceedings of the week, placing everything in the hand of that Good Providence which altho’ it has refused me success for which I prayed has yet been visible in my destinies’. Journal of the Central Australian Expedition 1844-5, 85 & 95.
God is the God of unconscious memory. He exists only in a dream. The dream is punctuated, and eventually overcome, by the reality of the desert experience: 'wind, stones, pebbles./Browne may be dying', 'Browne may be dying -', '(Hullo, Mr Browne)', 'Wind, Stones -', 'Browne may be dying. Water back at the Depot'. This 'Grandsire' God disintegrates in the face of the crying birds:

Browne may be dying, Water back at the Depot.
- If only to rest His poor old hands a little ... How it follows
This hot nor'-easter ... the Void, the sand, the pebbles,
Little tattered pockets of the Void ...
Browne is calling,

I was dreaming.

-The birds, the birds! Crying like children

It is the birds, what they signify, and the Void from whence they come, that are sovereign in 'Sturt and the Vultures'.

These intensely ambiguous birds operate on a number of levels. They have a basis in an actual encounter between Charles Sturt and some of his men and 'a flight of large hawks' who swooped down upon the party 'from the upper sky in hundreds'. Sturt wrote: 'every part of the sky was alive with them...They flew right into our faces in such rapid succession as to perplex one, but at length ... they soared up aloft again and disappeared'. Webb translates this incident into a meditation on the spiritual vitality of poetry, the nature of the Void and the relationship between poetry and death.

Webb's desert birds call to mind Yeats's 'indignant desert birds' and the sense of anxiety and menace expressed in 'The Second Coming'. They are also set against Yeats's falcon. Whereas the falcon turns in a 'widening gyre', the vultures operate in

---

15 For further discussion on the image of God offered in this poem see Robert Sellick, 'Francis Webb's "Sturt and the Vultures": a Note on Sources', Australian Literary Studies, 6: 3, 1974, 310-314, and Noel Rowe, "Are you from the Void?" A Reading of Webb's "Sturt and the Vultures". Rowe argues that the poem uses the Calvinistic theology of predestination as a metaphor 'for sovereign and ultimate purpose, so that its effect is not so much to expose the shortcomings of Calvinist theology, as to disassemble the very idea of theological exploration when the Void annuls so sovereign a God'.

16 Journal of the Central Australian Expedition 1844-5, 47.

17 Collected Poems of W.B.Yeats, 210-211. 'The Second Coming' and 'Sturt and the Vultures' both explore the play between destruction and illumination.
the reverse direction. In ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ it is not so much that ‘the centre
cannot hold’ but that the birds will spiral into the centre and the centre will implode:

Closer, wheeling, wheeling, descending, closer!
They come in ecstatic flight, rapturous as the Paraclete,
Tongues of fire - it’s a well of voices. Crying like children.
My horse props, makes to rear, shivers, and cannot move.
They come at us, begging, menacing, at eye level, above.
I lash at them with my hands, filled with terror and love.

Webb’s use of ‘rapturous’ glances at the theological act of transporting believers up to
to heaven at the Second Coming of Christ. It is significant, therefore, that the line
endings ‘move’, ‘above’, ‘love’, suggestive of an ascension, compete with and are
cancelled by the downward thrust of the birds. Transcendence is denied.

The birds are a sign of the Holy Spirit, ‘the Paraclete’, sent by the risen Christ to
the fearful Apostles at Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles (2:1-5) relates the coming of
the Spirit:

When Pentecost day came round, they had all met in one room, when
suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven...and
something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these
separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled
with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak foreign languages as the Spirit
gave them the gift of speech.

With that gift of speech, the Apostles left their room and addressed an assembled
congregation:

Now there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under
heaven and at this sound they all assembled, each one bewildered to hear
these men speaking his own language. They were amazed and astonished.

There were no barriers to linguistic communication. In ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ the
power of the Spirit is reversed. Not only are Sturt’s words ‘desiccated and annulled’, a
‘well of voices’ would be indecipherable.

Matthew 24: 26-28 notes that Christ explained the coming of the Son of Man in the following terms:
‘If then they say to you, “Look, he is in the desert”, do not go there...the coming of the Son of Man will
be like lightning striking in the east and flashing far into the west. Wherever the corpse is, there will the
vultures gather.’
Desire and death:
The vultures fill Sturt with ‘terror and love’. In ‘Melville at Wood’s Hole’ *(CB 77-79)*, published nearly twenty years before ‘Sturt and the Vultures’, it is the seagulls, birds who hold within themselves the ‘impulse of death and of life’, who are the ‘vision of terror and love’. The ‘crazy captain’ moves swiftly towards that vision as he approaches death. The oblique reference to Melville and Captain Ahab is not incidental. In *Moby Dick* the great white whale is a vision of terror and love, both the desired object of the quest and the harbinger of death. These seemingly contradictory impulses, of terror and love, desire and death, creation and destruction underpin Webb’s poetic vision. As the narrator of ‘A Drum for Ben Boyd’ explains:

... all the poetry of a tower’s ascent
Leaps out most powerfully in its rocking and fall.

For Webb, poetry, creativity, comes out of a space of cancellation, a space of nothing. ‘Sturt and the Vultures’, by identifying the birds as poets, dramatises this poetic vision. The birds/poets are lured down to earth from above but they belong neither to ‘high Heaven/Nor the earth of statuesque stones’. They come from and return to the ‘Void’.

The vultures, for all their theological and literary significance, are always already signifiers of death. What is it then that Webb is suggesting when he works a shift in which the vultures are identified as poets? Are poets birds of prey? Is poetry about praying? These birds are ‘Poets of dry upper nothingness’. Are they intellectual poets bereft of passion and emotion? Is it that poets mince language, dessicate it so that it has no spiritual vitality, no life-giving water? If words are not life-sustaining, what role is there for poetry? ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ poses these questions but offers in reply only contradiction and uncertainty. At the same moment that Webb pessimistically questions the redemptive possibilities of poetry, he affirms, through the wealth of spiritual and literary allusion captured in the metaphor of the birds, the power, depth and eternal

---

19 The allusion to *Moby Dick* opens up another connection through which ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ engages with Calvinist teaching. Melville’s text is a powerful allegory of the archetypes of good and evil struggling together within the tenets of eighteenth-century Calvinism. The ‘pallid whale’ also makes an appearance with Sturt in ‘Advertisement’, ‘Leichhardt in Theatre’.
nature of poetry.

In the midst of the hellish desert, at the point where ‘thirst’ has wheeled ‘into madness’ within the explorers, the poetry entertains what appears to be the possibility of spiritual consolation:

Your immaculate Words, cryings (O hear the sweet nor’-easter)  
Piping to us, see the lovely Madonna-faces in the gilt  
Frameways of pure sand and pebbles!

These ‘immaculate Words’ may seem to counter the desiccated, annulled words tossed earlier to Browne and the undecipherable well of bird’s voices but the poetry resists such an easy resolution. These words offer no sacramental benefit. They are tied to the ‘lovely Madonna-faces’ framed by ‘pure sand and pebbles’. Such a frame would, like so much else in this poem, disintegrate. The ‘Madonna-faces’ would, like the birds/poets, be ‘lost, gone’ into the Void. Indeed the Madonna-faces could be read as ‘Little tattered pockets of the Void’:

...the Void, the sand, the pebbles,  
Little tattered pockets of the Void... (ellipses are Webb’s)

As ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ concludes someone, ‘man - or is it God!’, attempts to expel the vultures from earth, to drive them ‘out of sight and mind like exhausted breath’. The attempt fails. The birds disappear upwards but they leave behind a trace of themselves. Unlike Boyd, Leichhardt or St Francis, that trace is not a shadowy suggestion of departed presence. It is rather the personified embodiment of what the birds represent, ‘Death’:

Only something far beneath  
Cowers away when you come.  
And its name is Death.

Again the poetry has turned away from transcendence to focus on the figure ‘far beneath’. Death ‘cowers away’ from the birds but is it really threatened by them and what they represent: poetry; the Holy Spirit; exploration? From the suggestion in the opening stanza that ‘Browne may be dying’ the poem builds towards the possibility of death. The closing line-endings affirm the presence and the inevitability of death:
"earth", "breath", "beneath", "come", "Death". Death is awarded the final word. Is it not therefore as powerful as the birds/poets? The birds, as signifiers of both poetry and death, negate the suggestion of a contest between the two. Perhaps the poem is suggesting that somewhere between the ascendent birds and the cowering figure on the road there is a third way, another space. Perhaps by naming death, in according death its due, the poetry can move forward into that space. It is a space of nothing. It is 'the Void'. Webb's last published poem, 'Lament for St Maria Goretti', explores that void.

**Poetry as prayer:**
Whereas the harsh desert poems move towards disintegration, 'Lament for St Maria Goretti' charts the journey of a dying child towards dissolution. The poem revisits the attempted rape of Maria and through its repeated images of penetration seeks to penetrate the space of nothingness, the 'gasping void' into which Maria and her world are fast dissolving. In this poem Webb linguistically captures, as the teenage Giacometti beside the dying van M sought to graphically capture, the process by which life slips into death, presence becomes absence. Webb's use of ellipses, fragmented utterances, urgent pleadings and delirium, interspersed with the tolling bell and the changing perception of the child's face, ensure that the reader, like the dying child, 'feel[s] the embrace/Of Nothing scrambling ashore at this child's face'.

Chloroform achieves what Giacometti sought to achieve in his paintings: an unravelling of the frameworks or boundaries of the self and an intermingling of self and surroundings. Like Socrates Maria, through her chloroform-induced delirium, is able to see into the space beyond death, 'the wash of space'. That space holds within itself 'Meteorite, cherubim. Horseman', her dead Father Luigi and the suggestion, through the 'flight of birds...like a rosary', of the Virgin Mary. Despite her vision and despite her unwavering faith for which she is to die, Maria remains a frightened child afraid of the nothingness into which she is to fall:

- I am falling with Him
- Must I fall with Him into chloroform?
Her desperate struggle to ward off death is conveyed through her urgent calls for human contact: ‘Touch me, Teresa’, ‘Touch me. Teresa, quickly’, ‘Teresa Teresa ...’. Maria has taken up her cross. Is she now, to complete Jesus’ command, and follow Him into eternal life? She asks, in the face of death, the question alluded to in so much of Webb’s poetry: ‘have words of water been truly uttered/To my thirst’. As is characteristic of Webb’s poetry, Maria is denied an answer.

Webb’s symbolic use of the redemptive possibilities of water has a scriptural origin. In St John’s gospel story an unrecognised Jesus sat down by Jacob’s well ‘at about the sixth hour’. There he met a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water and, though Jews were not meant to associate with Samaritans, he asked her for a drink. When she challenged him for speaking to her Jesus remarked:

‘If you only knew what God is offering
and who it is that is saying to you:
Give me a drink,
you would have been the one to ask,
and he would have given you living water’.

‘You have no bucket, sir,’ she answered ‘and the well is deep: how could you get this living water? ...’ Jesus replied:

‘Whoever drinks this water
will get thirsty again;
but anyone who drinks the water that I shall give
will never be thirsty again:
the water that I shall give
will turn into a spring inside him, welling up to eternal life.’

John’s gospel story also informs ‘Teresa of Avila’, a poem by the English poet Elizabeth Jennings that seems to have provided significant inspiration for Webb’s ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’. A copy of this poem is in Webb’s library and for ease of


21 Maria’s question looks back to Leichhardt’s anguished question: ‘Shall a man go crazy for the kiss/Of thirst upon his throat?’. In ‘Sturt and the Vultures’ the quest to quench a spiritual thirst drives the explorers to the point of madness: ‘hunger and thirst wheel into madness within you’.

22 John 4:1-16.
comparison it is quoted here in its entirety:

Teresa of Avila

Spain. The wild dust, the whipped corn, earth easy for footsteps, shallow to starving seeds. High sky at night like walls. Silences surrounding Avila.

She, teased by questions, aching for reassurance. Calm in confession before incredulous priests. Then back - to the pure illumination, the profound personal prayer, the four waters.

Water from the well first, drawn up painfully. Clinking of pails. Dry lips at the well-head. Parched grass bending. And the dry heart too - waiting for prayer.

Then the water-wheel, turning smoothly. Somebody helping unseen. A keen hand put out, gently sliding the wheel. Then water and the aghast spirit refreshed and quenched.

Not this only. Other waters also, clear from a spring or a pool. Pouring from a fountain like child’s play - but the child is elsewhere. And she, kneeling, cooling her spirit at the water, comes nearer, nearer.

Then the entire cleansing, utterly from nowhere. No wind ruffled it, no shadows, slid across it. Her mind met it, her will approved. And all beyonds, backwaters, dry words of old prayers were lost in it. The water was only itself.

And she knelt there, waited for shadows to cross the light which the water made, waited for familiar childhood illuminations (the lamp by the bed, the candle in church, sun beckoned by horizons) - but this light was none of these, was only how the water looked, how the will turned and was still. Even the image of light itself withdrew, and the dry dust on the winds of Spain outside her halted. Moments spread not into hours but stood still. No dove brought the tokens of peace. She was the peace that her prayer had promised. And the silences suffered no shadows.23

In Jennings’ poem the ‘dry words of old prayers’ are ‘lost’ in the cleansing ‘four

waters’ that are ‘the profound personal prayer’ of the saint. Teresa draws up buckets of water to quench the parched land and to satisfy her physical, intellectual and spiritual thirst. In Webb’s poem it is buckets of sound - the sound of the Angelus bell - that are brought to ‘the thirsting wilderness of [the] child’s face’. The Angelus is the water. When Teresa is reborn into purity, ‘Moments spread not into hours but stood still’. Time is also at a standstill in ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’. Maria’s visions and her painful journey towards, and reception into, death begin and end at ‘Six o’clock’.24 Webb’s poem is held within the one framework that remains firm, that of the evening Angelus:

Six o’clock. The bells of Nettuno chime
Angelus: Ave to Ave, hand to hand
The buckets of sound are passed in slow time
Up to a thirsting land.
Again the breeze at the hospital window flutters in lace
Near the thirsting wilderness of this child’s face (CB 239).

In the Catholic faith the Angelus is a practice of devotion in honour of the Incarnation. It celebrates the moment of Christ’s conception, that paradoxical moment when the Divine became human, when the eternal entered the temporal world. That moment is referred to by the poet of ‘In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806-1883’ as the ‘hallowed second’, the ‘precious and eternal second of love’, the ‘enormous second frozen’ and ‘metaphor’. By framing ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’ within the Angelus Webb consciously draws and then blurs the boundary between poetry and prayer. ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’ is Webb’s prayer. It is not a prayer that seeks easy consolation. The prayer is the experience of suffering. With an understanding of this vision of prayer as suffering one can read backwards in time to ‘A Death at Winson Green’. In that poem the speaker states:

I cannot pray; that fine lip prays for me
With every gasp at breath (CB 160).

Such a statement could be misconstrued as demonstrating a lack of faith or a failure of belief but the speaker does not need to pray, the dying-man’s suffering is the prayer. ‘Homosexual’ supports this vision:

...Again I am tempted, with the Great,
To see in ugliness and agony a way to God (CB 222).

If God is to be found in Webb’s poetry He will be found in the darkness of suffering, uncertainty and doubt, in ‘the many gaping wounds’ (‘Compliments of the Audience’) the poetry explores but cannot salve.

Webb positions a Yeatsian ‘Horseman in the wash of space/Round the petty bays of this child’s face’. In ‘Under Ben Bulben’ Yeats wrote himself into death and in so doing affirmed what he saw as the power of poetry over death. Maria Goretti, in stark contrast, can hardly scrawl her name. She is lost to death but that death, for all her urgent supplication and fear, is an occasion of peace. The anointed child will be embraced by ‘Nothing’, a Nothing that is both ‘Death and the Woman’. Mary, the mother of consolation, is in the void (Is this void Harry’s ‘House of no known address’?):

Six o’clock. And the Miserere. Final Grace.
And Death and the Woman, strangely at one, will place
Ambiguous fingers on all of this child’s face.

The use of ‘will’ ensures that even in death the poetry resists certainty in favour of possibility. The Virgin’s embrace will be experienced as the ‘embrace of Nothing’. In giving, however, she will also receive. She, like the child and the reader of the poem, will also feel the embrace of Nothing. When she places her ambiguous fingers on this child’s face the child will be dead. Her hands will be holding an absence. Her hands will be holding the void.

PART TWO

WHAT MATTER WHO'S SPEAKING?

Brian Castro
PART TWO

WHAT MATTER WHO’S SPEAKING?: BRIAN CASTRO

I: Centres of Absence in *After China*

II: *Stepper*: writing of death/death of writing

III: *Drift*: Storytelling and/of annihilation
The titanium walls of the Guggenheim museum, Bilbao, change colour with the sunlight, imbuing the building with a sense of change.
The ideal pluralism is when everybody exists on the margins, because the centre, which is like the centre of writing itself, is an absence.


Literature’s space is like the place where someone dies: a nowhere...which is here...
Literature’s space shelters nothing within it: it is also called le vide, ‘the void’.
Blanchot, The Space of Literature.

In October 1997 the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum opened in Bilbao, Spain. This massive structure is fashioned from seemingly disparate materials of glass, titanium, limestone and concrete. Gehry has juxtaposed large sculptural volumes of rectangular concrete forms with sweeping curved titanium-clad edifices and huge glass walls to create a truly revolutionary architectural structure. The museum’s nineteen galleries, of varied and unusual shapes and proportions, are spread over three levels and connected by a system of curved walkways, glass lifts and stairs. The central focus of the museum is a monumentally empty space, a fifty metre-high, towering void, crowned with a roof reminiscent of a metallic flower.

The architect in Brian Castro’s After China constructs a hotel not dissimilar in its description to Gehry’s museum. He designed it with:

...no enclosed courtyards, no circles, no centres or comforting squares.
‘When I built it,’ he said, ‘I wanted people to be lost in it.’

The guest was not to come round again with any recognition or familiarity. Movement is discovery.

So he built it following a snaking line of glass-roofed corridors from one level to another by means of ramps and elevators and rejoining each other at different angles, rooms debouching into alcoves, lounges into restaurants, sunken bars that led you almost into the sea (16).

The hotel stands as a powerful metaphor for narrative creation. The disorienting corridors that lead the guest astray and the rooms that drop without warning into the sea

1 All references to After China are taken from the 1992 edition published in Sydney by Allen and Unwin. Page references will appear in the text.
are some of the multiple narrative fragments that make up *After China*. The hotel guest, as reader, must negotiate the unfamiliar spaces of the text. In so doing the guest/reader experiences the liberating sensation of being lost because as *After China* suggests, reading stories, like telling stories, should be a process by which the self can be lost.

Frederic Jameson, in his discussion on architecture and the postmodern,\(^2\) notes that:

> recent architectural theory has begun to borrow from narrative analysis...to attempt to see our physical trajectories through...buildings as virtual narratives or stories, as dynamic paths and narrative paradigms which we as visitors are asked to fulfil and to complete with our bodies and movement.\(^3\)

Jameson comments on the impossibility of the postmodern body orienting itself in hotels such as John Portman’s Westin Bonaventure in Los Angeles. Portman’s hotel has three entrances on different levels, none of which take the guest to the registration desk. Jameson writes:

> it is quite impossible to get your bearings in this lobby...the most dramatic practical result of this spatial mutation [is] the notorious dilemma of the shopkeepers on the various balconies: it has been obvious since the opening of the hotel in 1977 that nobody could ever find any of these stores, and even if you once located the appropriate boutique, you would be most unlikely to be as fortunate a second time.\(^4\)

Jameson terms this disorienting space ‘postmodern hyperspace’ and notes how it transcends the ‘capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable

---

\(^2\) Gehry has stated that he is more comfortable with the term ‘Modernism’ being applied to his architecture rather than postmodern. ‘Uncensored: Jana Wendt interviews Frank Gehry’, ABC Television, 10 July 1998. Castro has said that he feels comfortable with the term post-modernism being applied to his writing ‘to a point’. R. Sorensen, ‘Yearning for diversion’, *Australian Book Review*, July 1992, 9.

\(^3\) *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), 42. Hereafter referred to as *Postmodernism*.

\(^4\) *Postmodernism*, 43-44.
external world'. ⁵ 'The newer architecture', he writes, 'stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable...dimension'. ⁶ Castro’s fiction shares a similar project. In *After China* the narrative conventions of form, place and time are fractured in Castro’s quest for a revolutionary erotics of art. His writing is an attempt to liberate those readers ‘imprisoned and confused’ by the literary conventions of ‘[t]ime; reality; structure,’ ⁷ into a new way of reading, a new experience of language.

Language, in Heidegger’s philosophy, operates as a building block that constructs some form of reality in which the self might dwell. Paul Carter extends Heidegger’s argument that ‘being’ dwells in language to suggest that ‘language is in many senses a virtual architecture’, ⁸ for both language and architecture structure reality. For Castro, however, the concept that language can structure reality is inherently problematic because of what he sees as the unstable nature of the real: ‘There is no reality...that can be conveyed purely by language. Reality...is an imprisoning concept, and from the earliest times storytelling has felt the necessity to escape it.’ ⁹ *After China* consciously establishes a connection between language and architecture in order to explore the deconstructive capabilities of each. Castro looks to Kafka and his notion of the doubleness of writing: ‘Writing has a double function: to translate everything into assemblages and to dismantle the assemblages. The two are the same thing.’ ¹⁰ The theory behind *Metabolist* architecture - that of ‘the integration of constant change into a

---

5 Postmodernism, 44.

6 Postmodernism, 39.


system of design, in which replaceable structures were given a predetermined useful life’(145) - provides an exciting metaphor for Castro’s narrative project. Metabolism, as Mi Liao insists Kafka knew (110), is about the process of transformation and becoming. Metabolism is metamorphosis.

The architect’s hotel is designed to incorporate constant change and ultimately to self-destruct: ‘My buildings are ships. They have a potential for taking on water. That is what really defines a ship...a negative potential.’(107) The hotel, as building, ultimately collapses into the sea, the hotel as narrative, ‘collapses into other genres’(21). Gehry understands this creative need for movement and change. He chose titanium as the coating for many of the Guggenheim’s external walls because titanium changes colour with sunlight and thereby imbues the building with a continuous, almost metabolic, sense of change. He orientated the museum so that it became a living part of its environment. Bilbao was once the major port and industrial ship-building centre of the Basque region. Gehry therefore strove, in his design, to evoke a ship moored to the banks of the River Nervión. On land the building sits between a large abandoned factory and a functioning goods and rail yard. The largest of its galleries continues underneath the La Salve Bridge and the busy city freeway which Gehry, through the construction of a viewing tower, has integrated into the museum. From certain angles the freeway appears to enter the museum. Gehry’s extensive use of glass ensures that these external surrounds are brought into the gallery and await the unexpectant visitor at many turns. The startling mismatches of foregrounds of modern art and backgrounds of urban industry, coupled with corridors or galleries that lead abruptly to an unexpected descent, the soaring vault of the atrium or further elevated walkways, complicate and enhance the relationship between the visitor’s body and the building. The body that negotiates the spaces in Gehry’s museum is released from the conventional expectations as regards orientation and functional space. Castro seeks to offer a similar kind of experience to his readers.

11 The largest viewing space in the museum is the boat-shaped gallery dubbed ‘The Fish’ by Gehry. Free of supporting columns the gallery measures 130m x 30m.
The reader of Castro’s text moves through unfamiliar and disorienting spaces. The process by which a text opens up spaces for the reader to negotiate has been outlined by Wolfgang Iser. Iser regards the literary text as a ‘playground between author and reader’. When the relationship between reader, author and text becomes a dynamic, interactive one, the text is converted from a ‘mimetic to a performative act’ thereby creating what Iser calls ‘the play spaces of the text’. Iser identifies four basic strategies of play that operate in texts: agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx. After China, like all Castro’s fiction, employs the strategies of alea and ilinx:

**Alea** is a pattern of play based on chance and the unforeseeable. Its basic thrust is defamiliarization, which it achieves through storing and telescoping different texts, thus outstripping what their respective, identifiable segments were meant to mean. By overturning familiar semantics, it reaches out into the hitherto inconceivable and frustrates the reader’s convention-governed expectations.

... **Ilinx** is a play pattern in which the various positions are subverted, undercut, cancelled, or even carnivalized as they are played off against one another. It aims at bringing out the rear view of the positions yoked together in the game.

The repeated cancellation of meaning, or the playing off of meanings, operate to multiply the play spaces of the text. It is the means by which the typed words on the pages of a bound book undergo a constant process of metamorphosis. It is the means by which something absent is made present: ‘If the signifier means something and simultaneously indicates that it does not mean that something, it functions as an analogue for figuring something else which it helps to adumbrate...something absent is endowed with presence.’ Play is the central strategy by which Castro repeatedly

---


14 Iser defines agon as a contest in which the reader must choose between opposing values offered by the text and mimicry as a pattern of play designed to generate illusion. For a full description of the four strategies and their operation see ‘The Play of the Text’, 334.

15 Iser, 330.
attempts to lure absence, in its various guises, into presence.

*After China* is structured on the desire for demolition and renewal. The text is framed by an epigraph which acknowledges the inescapable human need to construct and an afterword which suggests that an integral part of construction must be transience, demolition and reconstruction. The architect constructs his hotel with an eye to transience and demolition: ‘How could he have explained then that although a building, like life, was ordered complexity, there was nevertheless always an element missing...the desire for demolition?’(21) Stasis, permanence, completion, thwart creativity. In China the architect is told that he is sterile. He translates his creative capabilities into indestructible Stalinist buildings. In Australia he has developed a new way of thinking and creating. He knows that ‘stale and static inventions’(133) are not life sustaining. True creativity must always be incomplete, part of a process of becoming and disintegrating.

Both the architect and the writing in *After China* suffer from ‘structural phobia’ (68). The narrative constructs itself around a framework of theoretical fields, while simultaneously courting the demolition of these fields:

Look at a Chinese hut. They build the frame in an hour. The bamboo is cut and tied with strips of cane and tightened. Then they build the mud walls. Very slowly. There is a secret to the slowness. It establishes order. And the walls last forever, but the frame deteriorates. When that happens they knock the whole thing down. Life is a renewal of its own secret, and dying is the final refusal to make, to join. Nothing lasts. Except jade. They used to make coffins out of jade.(77)

Time, patience, structure, death, destruction, renewal: Castro’s narrative project. The continual process of constructing and demolishing interpretive frameworks ensures that meaning is deferred and proliferated rather than consolidated. Any attempt by the reader to impose a final authority or meaning on the text, to impose some sense of closure, is resisted and undercut.

Castro writes, and the architect designs and builds his hotel, in order to ‘free

---

16 *After China* consciously play with the theories of Modernism, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and the writing of Barthes, Benjamin, Deleuze & Guattari and Foucault.
Kafka’s fear’ (68): his fear of death; of failure; and of any final meaning or closure being imposed upon his work. Deleuze and Guattari describe Kafka’s work in terms reminiscent of the architect’s hotel/narrative:

This work is a rhizome, a burrow... no point matters more than another, and no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse... We will be trying only to discover what other points our entrance connects to, what crossroads and galleries one passes through to link two points, what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one enters by another point. Only the principle of multiple entrances prevents the introduction of the enemy, the Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is actually only open to experimentation.17

Castro’s playful narrative strategies ensure that the only form of interpretation that can be applied to his writing is that which ‘extends the text through an endless process of multiplication, pluralization and dispersal’.18 In his quest for pluralization and proliferation of meaning, the architect consciously designs his hotel with no centre: ‘Trying to enforce a meaning upon buildings hollowed out your heart... created the bent back, the inner turning, imprisoned you... the absent but all-powerful centre with its mania for primacy, origin and cohesion. A real meaning must always refer elsewhere’ (68).

After China wraps itself around multiple ‘absent but all-powerful centre[s]’: the absent centre of the hotel which is the absent centre of writing and language; the absent political and social centre of the postcolonial subject; the absent presence of ‘the writer’; the absent centre of the architect’s/narrator’s self; and the all-powerful central absence, death. No reading of these absent centres is more privileged than another. Each reading, as the following discussion demonstrates, functions as a supplement to open up the text to multiple interpretations, to a spectrum of possibilities. Like the corridors and alcoves of the architect’s hotel each reading takes the guest/reader in tangential

17 Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, 3. Note the similarities between Deleuze and Guattari’s description of Kafka’s work with its multiple entrances and Jameson’s description of Portman’s Bonaventure Hotel.

18 Taylor, Erring, 180.
The absent centre of writing and language:
The absent centre at the heart of the hotel/narrative can be read as the denial of the ‘point of presence, a fixed origin, whose function is to orient, balance and organize’. While After China is interested in balance - balance between fiction and theory, demolition and construction, brevity and duration, desire and intellect - the narrative refuses to orient its reader in space or time. Any sense of linear narrative is denied: ‘Time of course is never linear...a discontinuous presence’(28). The narrative is constructed as the Great Wall of China is constructed in Kafka’s story of the same name: in multiple discontinuous blocks linked by absence. As Kafka knew, it is what is to be discovered in these spaces that is important. Multiple micronarratives that may be ‘real’ or imaginative, effortlessly jump from ancient China to modern-day Western cities and back again in a cyclic process of reflection and refraction. 499BC China blends with 1960s France, 1980s New York and 1990s Sydney. T’ang China, the mystical realm of fantasy and exotic difference, is mapped onto contemporary Western society. The Australian writer becomes Yu Hsuan-chi, a 9th century courtesan (92). The rapidly changing spatial and time frames flow into each other so that the narrative structure becomes a fluid medium that can be read only if the reader surrenders his/her conventional reading practices and ‘go[es] with the flow’(105). The reader is born/borne into a new way of seeing, a fluid reinterpretation.

The denial of linear time is, for Castro, essential to the project of writing. Writing, like Kafka’s letters to Felice, is a ‘prolongation of desire and the suspension of time...An infinite deferral’(63). ‘To write’, notes Blanchot:

is to surrender to the fascination of time’s absence...The time of time’s absence has no present, no presence...The irremediable character of what has no present, of what is not even there as having once been there, says: it

---


20 By implication China’s Cultural Revolution is related to the Western social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s.
never happened, never for a first time, and yet it starts over, again, again, infinitely. It is without end, without beginning. It is without a future.  

The ‘time of time’s absence’ is the time of the novel. Real time speaks of mortality and death but *After China* attempts, through storytelling, through writing, to deny time and thereby deny death. The narrative has no beginning or end. It is a continuous cycle of stories in search of immortality. But death will not be denied. In China the architect comes to understand that he is ‘a bourgeois escapist...[that] upon the moment of anyone’s death, all I want to do is to run away’(87). In Australia the writer helps him to confront death, to touch death, and through her death she bestows on him the gift of ‘the present moment’.

Not only is *After China* a continuous cycle of stories, it is also part of a larger cycle of texts. ‘Every text’, writes Mark C. Taylor, ‘arises and passes away through its interplay with other texts. Consequently, no single text can be regarded as either the absolute origin of another text or as the initial source of the entire metonymic chain of texts.’ Castro signposts that *After China* is in conversation with the writings of Kafka, Marquez, Lao-Tzu and Benjamin - ‘Walter Benjamin wrote a little story...called The Warning’(17); ‘Kafka...wrote a story called The China Wall’ (18) - in order to foreground the idea that *After China* is not so much an original text as a moment in a larger memory of texts. ‘Was there ever a pure origin?’(8) the architect asks himself. The narrative, in affirmation of Roland Barthes philosophy of writing, replies no because ‘[w]riting is the destruction of...every point of origin’. In its refusal to privilege any origin of writing the narrative asks to be read as part of an allegorical palimpsest where texts, none of which are preferred, are read through each other.

Taylor’s writing, with reference to Derrida, helps to clarify the relationship between intertextuality, the absent centre and the loss of origin played out in *After

---

21 *The Space of Literature*, 30.

22 *Erring*, 178.

China:

Paradoxically, texts are made possible by the intertextuality that they make possible. In the ceaseless oscillation of text and intertext, there is no textual originality. The loss of origin again proves to be inseparable from the disappearance of center. The tissue of texts is radically acentric. The boundless fabric of intertextuality always lacks 'a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions'.

The substitution of the architectural term 'wrapping' for intertextuality adds yet another dimension to the reading of After China. 'Wrapping', writes Jameson, 'unlike intertextuality... retains the essential prerequisite of priority or even hierarchy... but makes that now reversible. What is wrapped can also be used as the wrapper; the wrapper can also be wrapped in its turn.' With its implication of movement from inside to out, outside to in, the term 'wrapping' is particularly appropriate for a reading(s) of After China for three reasons: the idea of wrapping, like the narrative of After China, confuses the relationship between inside and outside; it problematises the notion of borders; and it suggests a way of reading the text as a blossoming of layered stories.

The design of the hotel undermines any sense of security on the part of the guest as to the boundaries between inside and outside:

An external ramp led nowhere, ending abruptly at a cascading water-race through dank rainforest and giant waterlillies...the ballroom on the northern side opened onto a cliff ledge, with no safety railings, no paths nor steps, just an expanse of boulders and eroded runnels tempting you up a gentle incline suddenly to face a hundred foot drop and the immense Pacific Ocean (17).

The architect, in a quintessentially postmodern gesture that questioned the very
categories of inside and outside, had once proposed to build an office tower in which 'the original nineteenth-century facade [was] preserved. So I've got this Georgian sandstone facade inside the building...sort of hermetically preserved foyer...Glass everywhere, so people can see it from the outside as well. But they're not keen, the authorities. Too much conceit.' The architect does get approval for his 'glassed-in Submarine Bar beneath the ocean' (18). It is the design of this bar that causes the hotel to start collapsing. The need for demolition. In the climactic moment of saving the hotel from total destruction the architect swims from inside to 'outside his own conceit' (141). He crosses a border and emerges from an amniotic space to be reborn into a new way of being.

The narrative of *After China* penetrates the borders between interior/exterior, centre/periphery, land/sea, life/death, here/there, then/now, self/other, original/derived and realism/fantasy. It is the transgression and dissolution of these borders that makes for an innovative, sustaining fiction. The architect/narrator, like Tang Yin (1578), experiences 'illicitness...a reaching over, a swelling of artistic borders, and finally, a subversion of codes and genres that had real consequences' (99). Transgression matters.

Tang understands that the way to tell different stories at the same time depends on the way the story is unfolded. He constructs a 'double-folding fan. Opened from left to right, you can see a traditional landscape...But opened from right to left, the fan discloses his erotic painting' (101). Castro’s narrative unfolds as both ‘Hsui’ and ‘Shu’ (97): writing and embroidery, desire and deferral, penetration and openness. It unfolds in the way Kafka’s parables unfold:

A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to

---

27 Gehry, by extending the external titanium coating into the interior walls of the foyer, blurs the distinction between outside and inside. Jameson notes that Gehry’s internal renovation of his Santa Monica house resulted in new spaces being opened up ‘between the loosely draped external wrapper and the withering away of the now unnecessary structural frame’. ‘This space’, writes Jameson, is ‘the new postmodern space proper, which our bodies inhabit in malaise or delight, trying to shed the older habits of inside/outside categories and perceptions.’ *Postmodernism*, 115. Gavin Macrae-Gibson, commenting on Gehry’s architectural preoccupations, has noted that ‘for Gehry the sense of center no longer has its traditional symbolic value.’ G.Macrae-Gibson, *The Secret Life of Buildings: an American mythology for modern architecture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 16.
make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper. This second kind of ‘unfolding’ is really appropriate to the parable; it is the reader’s pleasure to smooth it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand. Kafka’s parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom.²⁸

The multiple narrative fragments of After China wrap around each other. The blossoming text then reveals layer upon layer of ‘unfolding’ narrative or ‘layered evocations’(8). The life experiences and stories told by the architect and the female writer not only mirror and extend each other, they also reflect and are reflected by Loa-Tzu’s teachings and Benjamin’s and Kafka’s narratives. The cover of the 1992 edition of After China unfolds with extendable flaps on either side to suggest a physical extension of the text, an opening outwards beyond the bound structure of the book. Significantly, as noted earlier, the glass and metal dome that crowns the massive empty space at the centre of Gehry’s Guggenheim museum is reminiscent of a flower.

The museum’s many open, circular walkways take the visitor to unexpected places.
Gehry’s extensive use of glass ensures that the external surrounds are brought into the gallery and await the unexpectant visitor at many turns.
The glass and metal dome that crowns the atrium is reminiscent of a blossoming flower.
The absent political and social centre of the postcolonial subject: Through its use of multiple cross-cultural stories, *After China* refuses to privilege the colonialist notion of a political or interpretive centre. Stories which move across boundaries of time, place and identity offer a pluralist model of culture and national identity; they oppose 'the unification of history, nationalism and racial identity...[break] these things down into parts. Rearrange them.' (21) If one considers the aesthetic and literary assumptions of the writer's culture, the narrative structure of *After China* can be read as traditionally Chinese. 'Chinese narrative is characteristically episodic, rambling, picaresque and fragmentary'. 29 The intellectual constructions of Castro's text which emphasise indeterminancy, impermanence, incompletion, transience, emptiness and absence can be seen to derive from Buddhist and Taoist traditions as much as from postmodern and poststructural literary theory.

In August 1988 Peter Copeman, a postdoctoral research fellow and playwright at the Centre for Innovation in the Arts at Queensland University of Technology, staged a production of *After China* as part of Company B Belvoir's Sydney Asian Theatre Festival. Copeman had worked closely with Castro on his adaptation of the novel for the stage. 30 His production incorporated a rich and varied use of traditional Chinese theatre and pageantry. The extensive use of Chinese music, costumes, masks, puppetry and stage settings emphasised the strong sense of cross-cultural relations that are an important element of *After China*. Copeman's production was also a powerful example of the way in which *After China*, through its denial of central focus, opens itself out to diverse interpretations.

Questions of racial identity and cultural and linguistic displacement constitute an important theme in the novel. As a Chinese immigrant the architect is 'at best, a curiosity from the ancient past, at worst, a refugee' (68). He experiences the 'loneliness


30 Discussion between Bernadette Brennan and Peter Copeman, Sydney, August 1988. Castro also told Helen Daniel that he was 'writing a screenplay' for *After China*. See 'Outside the prison of logic', *Island* 59, 1994, 22.
of the long-distance migrant'(7). His hotel is a form of shelter or refuge but it is never a home:

He could barely understand what he meant by home. The lack of crowds. So much air between words. Places in the wind. He had purposely designed the hotel without a hearth or centre and it was this idea, that he was part of an indistinct and wandering tribe, which comforted him (67).

The removal of any narrative centre can be interpreted as an important postcolonial strategy that disorients the reader and constructs him/her as a refugee who, like the architect, must negotiate a foreign space.  

The architect is never truly at home in the language of his adopted country. This new language ‘does not shelter his innermost thoughts’32 for when his deepest emotions are challenged he, like Seamus before him in Birds of Passage, can only speak in ‘Shanghainese’(143). The architect, having escaped from a period of Communist rule known as ‘Constructing the Nation’,33 has experienced first-hand the power of a regime that manipulates language, signs, history and culture. He ‘understand[s] restriction. Political, physical, ideological, material.’(27) In his narrative he too manipulates language, signs, history and culture but in a deconstructive way. He wants to break through the barriers of silence and alienation, the ‘failure to communicate’(15) that occurs when one is transplanted into a foreign linguistic and cultural space: ‘Between cultures there was System, a systematising which shifted to the borders, made differences, organised. If my designs had a sound, that was what it sounded like from the beginning: a breaking.’(29) His project for uncertainty and openness insist that freedom must be the ability to be flexible and to accommodate change. China, like his hotel, is defined as ‘a stasis which needs an explosion or emission in order to redefine itself, to re-enter the stream of time’(124).

31 Janette Turner Hospital achieves a similar sense of disorientation in the reader of Borderline where the reader is constructed as the refugee. See Borderline, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987).


After China satirises the colonialist notion of China as some remote location at the end of the earth\textsuperscript{34} : ‘Where are you from?... If you dig a deep hole you will find me there...on the other side of the world’\textsuperscript{(10)}. The architect plays on and subverts perceived racial and sexual stereotypes. He offers an image of himself as the lascivious, ‘inscrutable’\textsuperscript{(44)} Oriental man yet, despite his sexual fantasies, he resists sexual consummation. The text plays with and subverts the Orientalist constructions of the ‘Other’ by explicitly questioning one’s ability to know another: ‘If they think I’m this mysterious architect...a Chinaman, inscrutable, withdrawn, they’re wrong. If only they knew what went on in my head’\textsuperscript{(9)}. The architect is known as ‘You. You Bok Mun. Broadly speaking his name meant he was well read. Narrowly speaking he was just You. Everyman. Or sometimes, just Old China.’\textsuperscript{(7)} The Oriental ‘Other’ is You. The reader both looks at the face of You and through his eyes. In this way the distinction between self and ‘Other’ is blurred. That distinction is further confused by the narrative’s construction of the white, female Australian writer as the ‘Other’. She is a far less tangible presence than the Chinese narrator. Is it possible to know her? Does she exist?

The absent presence of the writer:
The writer is a central ‘character’ in After China but she is never a knowable presence.\textsuperscript{35} The architect stresses the ambiguity of her existence: ‘The goddess Athene was born from the head of Zeus...It meant he might have invented her, from the moment he had seen a woman on the beach, lying on the sand, reading.’\textsuperscript{(62)} His refusal to name the writer makes her an even more questionable presence. In death she becomes one of Kafka’s sirens: ‘He thought about her over and over again. It was her silence that held

\textsuperscript{34} Alison Broinowski writes that the Australian adaption of the English notion of China ‘being so remote that by digging straight down and deep enough an Englishman could get there’ is not only a thing of the past. Broinowski quotes a paragraph from Kevin Brophy’s The Hole through the Centre of the World published in 1991 in which he writes ‘Some people said the holes went right down in to the centre of the earth, and even through to China itself’. The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 14.

\textsuperscript{35} In the guise of Yu Hsuan-chi the writer also becomes a character in her own book.
him. *That was her siren song.*' (92) Her silence, unlike that of Kafka's sirens, is a gift. In a sense her silence, like Shan's in *Birds of Passage*, creates a writer out of a once passive reader: 'Was he creating me out of his silence, so that deprived of his voice, I could discover my own?'

When the architect comes to Australia he decides that:

> Here in Australia he would speak no more. He withdrew into his notebooks and made miniature sketches, his fine pen weaving magic out of places that had never existed, drawing impossible buildings and bizarre landscapes. Perhaps he could not exist in the present, but suddenly he was finding that these places recurred, parts of them were filled as soon as the writer appeared (55).

The writer is his muse. She can be read as the origin of his creative work. 'The central point of the work of art is the work as origin, the point which cannot be reached, yet the only one which is worth reaching.' She is an absent 'central point', an absent 'origin'. The architect wants the writer to live. He tells her stories, just as he told Me Liao stories, in an attempt to defer her death. But the writer remains always out of his reach. As the architect draws closer to her, she necessarily withdraws into the ultimate distance of death. The writer is Eurydice, the architect, Orpheus. *After China* plays out the Orphic myth as interpreted by Blanchot (and discussed in the introduction). The architect attempts to save the writer from death but ultimately he needs her to die in order that he may continue to create. (It might also be said, of course, that the writer elicits a certain element of his creativity while she is alive.)

It is essential for the architect's creativity that his relationship with the writer remains always fragmentary and unfulfilled. In an attempt to recapture some sense of

---

36 In Kafka's 'Silence of the Sirens' the Sirens have 'an even more terrible weapon than their song ... their silence'. See Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 118.

37 Castro, 65.

38 Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 54.

39 David Brooks has discussed the powerful Scheherazade trope in recent Australian fiction ostensibly set in China or Southeast Asia. See 'Scheherazade - The Search for Story: Recent Australian Fiction Set In China And Southeast Asia', *Southerly* 59: 3&4, 1999, 228-238.
the absent writer the architect begins to rebuild his hotel. He rebuilds only to 'recover a kind of purposeful emptiness' (85). Emptiness, lack, absence, are constitutive of creativity. 'He was serious about the incompleteness' (16). 'You've always got to have something incomplete and because it cannot be completed it sustains you' (38, 107). Incompletion speaks of transience, absence and transformation. Incompletion prompts desire. One of the most crucial elements of desire in After China is deferral. Consummation, satisfaction, climax, may be anticipated but must never be reached. As the opening sentence boldly states: "During winter," Lao-tzu said, "one should not ejaculate at all." (1)

In Castro's fiction writing and desire are inextricably linked. Both carry within themselves the destiny of their own non-satisfaction.40 Lao-tzu's lover explains the relationship between writing and desire: 'the intention of [writing] is jade resplendent. But writing is not jade...It is transience, smallness, and the dying of many deaths' (3). Writing is a continuous process born out of repeated failure. Failure to write 'the Book'41 is not only inevitable, it is desirable because failure requires the writer to continue writing in an attempt to reach a desired goal. As Mark C Taylor has written: 'Desire desires desire'.42 After China attempts to be a metaphorical erotics of desire. The narrator wants to discover the 'pleasures of the text' by reading with his 'penis...a sort of electronic scanner of the humps and bumps of pleasure...to be transformed without ideas!' (19). The eroticism offered is textual rather than physical. It is an eroticism concerned with the reading and writing of stories.

The reader of After China is constructed as a voyeur and seduced into the labyrinthine narrative by the textual eroticism of story telling/writing, the deferral of consummation, textual wit and the foregrounding of play. The writing becomes


41 D. Brooks, Black Sea, 43. Brooks' passage is quoted in full in the introduction. Graham Greene has argued that it is failure that prompts the writer to write again and also that 'Failure is a kind of death'. A Sort of Life, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 9.

42 Erring, 147.
intercourse where the narrator repeatedly penetrates the text but infinitely defers climax. The narrator as courtesan arouses and controls the reader. The courtesan’s ‘main job was mental stimulation...Carnal factors are secondary to social intercourse...what couplets! What unconstrained rhyming! Men flocked to them to escape from the excesses of the body...hours in verbal intercourse.’ (79)

The absent centre of the architect’s/narrator’s self:
Since his daughter’s death the architect has felt like an empty husk. Like his hotel he harbours an emptiness within, a ‘frightening’, ‘unfilled space’. The architect/narrator is constructed as a divided, decentred subject, ‘as though he were outside himself’(54). He is both ‘I’ and ‘he’, ‘foreign even to [him]self ’(27). His decentred subjectivity may be read in a number of ways. It can be interpreted as the postmodern condition which celebrates the fragmentation and dispersion of the subject and the multiplicity of perspective that this process involves. As Jameson explains: ‘Our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities...makes itself felt by the so called death of the subject, or, more exactly the fragmented and schizo decentring and dispersion of this last’.44

As a Chinese migrant You Bok Mun exists ‘on the edge’(5) of society so his decentred subjectivity may be read as ‘an intrinsic part of the marginal position’.45 It could also be read as the fractured centre of articulation that occurs as a result of transplantation into a foreign space: ‘In this new land I am not me. In and out. Ease and unease.’(7) Or again:

There was one side of me and there was another. I shifted uncontrollably

---

43 Seamus describes himself in similar terms: ‘gaps that if strung together would have been truer to what I am, because essentially I am a being hedging around nothingness, my centre arid, desolate, unfulfilled’. Birds of Passage, 44. In Double-Wolf, the painter G ‘hated to be looked at, found out, spied upon, because, as he said, there was nothing there’. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 57. In Stepper, both Stepper and Ishi operate as spectral presences.

44 Postmodernism, 413.

between...I had failed to adjust myself to my crisis. I wanted to bring two ideas together, but all I could hear was something breaking. What got in between was a layer of sand. The moment when architect became engineer (29).

The ‘I/he’ division also marks the moment when the architect becomes the writer.46 ‘To write’, says Blanchot, ‘is to pass from the first to the third person’. Blanchot notes how Kafka stated that he had ‘entered into literature as soon as he can substitute “He” for “I”’. Blanchot suggests that this movement from ‘He’ to ‘I’ involves a profound transformation: ‘The writer belongs to a language which no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no center, and which reveals nothing. He may believe he affirms himself in this language, but what he affirms is altogether deprived of self.’47 This is Castro’s territory. For Castro writing necessarily entails the negation of the self. The ‘I’ in all Castro’s fiction is introduced in his novel Pomeroy: ‘I (who?), an aside, an apostrophe. A Chinese box I, a puzzle, which is I and not-I’.48 It is an ‘I’ which profoundly questions the roles of author and narrator. An ‘I’ which is also ‘not-I’ denies any sense of single stable authorship. It is an ‘I’ that in the words of Barthes is not an original source but an ‘I’ composed of a ‘plurality of texts’.49

In After China (and Stepper) the ‘I/not-I’ is intimately related to the ‘you’. The writer’s stories reflect the ancient Chinese stories the architect has told her. She returns his stories to him from beyond the grave:50

He had in his hand the latest of her books to have been published, a

46 Writer in this instance refers to the writer of After China, not the unnamed Australian writer, though she could be read as the feminine aspect of the architect, the Yin to his Yang. After her death he develops ‘a kind of paralysis, as if one side of him had become weighted and unwieldy, as though he were overcome by immense inertia and weariness, and felt the heavy pulsing in his throat of the huge, marmoreal bird which hung there’(142).

47 The Space of Literature, 27.

48 Pomeroy, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 206. This passage is quoted in full and discussed in the following chapter: ‘Stepper: writing of death/death of writing’.


50 See discussion of Paul de Man and the trope of prosopopoeia in ‘Drift: Writing and/of annihilation’.
posthumous edition of fragments and Chinese stories which the bookseller
had ordered for him and on the dedication page he had found the words: *To
You*. He remembered how she had noted his displays, and the more he read
the more he understood how he had been incorporated into her writing, its
resonances now being carried downstream to him...he could hear its ghostly
music in the wind...and from that moment knew...he had to keep building
...for it was only here he would find her again...discovering the junction of
concrete and glass (143).

*To You.* Who wrote *After China*? The concept of the ghost-writer, a feature of all of
Castro's fiction, is raised early in the text to signal a mode of reading:

On his table, the future magnum opus. The introduction was already
written. For the first time he experienced a fear of not being able to go on.
A terrifying vision of somebody else completing his work appeared before
him: a ghost-writer, a supplementer stealing the sacred kernels of his words,
the hard-won visions of his longevity. Some bastard making the most of
hindsight (2).

If *You* is You Bok Mun then the book we hold in our hands is the writer's book, her
posthumous gift to him. But if You Bok Mun, the architect/narrator, is the writer of
*After China*, then the book we as readers hold in our hands is his gift to us. It is a gift
that will demand a radically different set of reading practices if the reader is to negotiate
the continual metamorphosis of the text.

**Death as *After China's* central space:**
The 'absent but all-powerful centre' of the hotel/narrative can be read as Blanchot's 'le
vide', the space of death at the heart of writing. Castro suggests such a reading:
'Signs, signals, semaphores. Within their silences, death was forever lurking.' (117)
This sense that death occupies the centre of the narrative is reinforced by the description
of the hospital/hospice in which the seriously-ill writer languishes. In terms reminiscent
of his hotel the architect in the 'glass-roofed' hospital 'felt he was in a ship'. Like his
hotel, the hospital is 'never a home'. It houses 'an inmate...a guest.

HOSPES>>>>>>HOSPITAL>>>>>>HOTEL' (121)

---

51 *The Space of Literature*, 10.
At the centre of the hospital/hotel/narrative is a 'purposeful emptiness' (85), death.

Castro investigates the relationship between writing and death throughout his work. It is a relationship explored through play, fragmentation, multiple perspectives and absence because, as Castro has stated, it is only through such writing strategies that the 'wound of existence, which asks the most profound question: What is that emptiness we have inherited in simply *being*?' can be contemplated. 'Contemporary writing', argues Castro, 'asks our imaginations to be bold and not defensive...to see ourselves naked, accepting the fact that we have to die, understanding that blind-spot which we have always contrived not to investigate but to hide'. In his writing he seeks to unwrap death, to set it free from the silences in language in which it lurks.

---

52 ‘Lesions’, 200.
Stepper: writing of death/death of writing

Between the novel’s busyness and emptiness falls serious contemplation and care; that melancholic activity which finally creates a space for seduction, scepticism and ultimately, death.

Castro, ‘Just Flirting’.

In 1966 Lucas Samaras created his Mirrored Room, a space in which the walls, ceiling and floor are faced with mirrors (Fig 1). Robert Hughes describes the experience of being inside this artwork:

To enter the Room and close the door is to see oneself reflected to infinity, fragment by fragment, never whole, but infinitely expanding in detail; to be multiplied thus...is a strange feat of narcissism. At the same time the mirrors compose something very much larger than the self, an illusion of twinkling infinity where all solid location is lost.¹

Stepper can be read as a text of mirrors at whose centre stands Victor Stepper, Ishigo Isaku and ultimately, death. Stepper and Ishi are reflected, refracted and fragmented in a multitude of ways. The writing operates to dissolve them, and itself, offering in their place a sense of absence, a space where ‘all solid location is lost’, the ‘no-man’s-land’ of death.

Stepper investigates the relationship between writing and death. It is a relationship that Castro repeatedly explores because as a writer he is ‘troubled by the most important, and probably the only issue facing every single human being: the inevitability of death and silence’.² In Pomeroy the narrator, aware of his impending death, attempts to forestall its inevitability through story telling: ‘Let’s go back a bit. Give a man a chance to put off his own death.’³ In After China storytelling defers the deaths of Me Liao and the writer. Stepper is the mirror image of the Scheherazade

---

² Castro, 106.
³ Castro, 106.
narrative’s attempt to ‘keep death outside the circle of life’. The narrative of *Stepper* is encased inside a circle of death. The prologue and concluding chapter mirror each other offering not only the death of the writing subject(s) but the death or dissipation of writing itself.

*Stepper* introduces betrayal as a third co-ordinate in the relationship between death and writing. These three terms can be read as the points of a triangular prism through which the writing projects itself and through which the reader is presented with ‘information’ (26). Prisms, like mirrors, refract, distort, deceive and betray. *Stepper* is a text of betrayal: ‘All language betrays...or was this a tautology?’ (290). It asks to be read as a contemporary adaptation of that classical symbol of deception, betrayal and death: the Trojan horse. The text appears to be something it isn’t. It seduces its reader into a tale of espionage, eroticism, war and death set largely amongst the mystery and intrigue of 1930s-1940s Japan. The reader voyeuristically spies on Stepper’s most intimate thoughts and moments. But the reader, like the soldiers of Troy, is ambushed. With Ishi’s final confession, that he has doctored Stepper’s manuscript, the text disgorges its soldiers of subterfuge and death:

[Stepper’s] obsession was in building a wooden horse. From it he would bring forth soldiers of the Revolution. They would march forward in lines of text. He sometimes believed his own lines, and that frightened him. Why? Because to carry the responsibility of betrayal in marvellous efficiency was to behave like a true professional (35).

Victor Stepper is a professional writer and a professional spy. *Stepper* suggests these two professions are one and the same, because ‘all representation is subversive...is a spy’ (225). The concept of writer as spy appeals greatly to Castro because writers and spies are masters of deception and dissimulation. To deceive is maximally to exploit ambiguity. To betray is to transgress: ‘Betrayal is always stepping out from the ranks of boredom...Discipline and routine made him invisible. But there was always the overreaching which importuned him to break cover. Not carelessness, but intention.’ (72) As author Castro makes his intention to betray obvious to his readers:

---

4 M. Foucault, ‘What is an author?’, in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, 198.
'For the whole to be visible, the structure had to be broken down and reassembled, and the whole, finally, was quite likely the product of invention and falsehood. Was not the master spy also the grand artist?'(248). He encourages his readers to deconstruct Stepper's puzzle but subtly warns them not to make the same mistake as the Tokko who approach a text looking for a message: 'they are pulling it apart, scanning the pencilled lines, the scored marginalia, the annotated meter...There. They think a pound of flesh they have. Very excited they are. Messages? What messages?'(280-1). Any messages Stepper has to communicate are hidden within the codes of writing:

...the new codes. It's a matter of difference and deferral. Putting off the message indefinitely as in a chess game while pushing forward a protocol which signifies, but never resembles, intention, depending on whether or not one had the knowledge. He likes this process. It is very Japanese (197).

Différance, deconstruction. The knowledgeable reader recognises the game. He/she understands that Stepper resembles a 'B-flat saxophone; a transposing instrument; which means you have to adjust the key when reading the text'. To read Stepper one must '[t]ranspose the key. Learn how to play.'(34)

Play is a major feature of Stepper. The writing revels in Castro's familiar games of coincidence, double-ness and ambiguity. Castro's earlier fiction is alluded to through the somewhat gratuitous return of Fatiminha da Costa. Clara Biedermann's bookmark refers to After China. Reiko, in acting out her streetwalking routine, offers Stepper 'a critique of pure reason'(196). The game with literary theory and theorists is signposted because, as Iser explains, one of the essential qualities of play is that of emphasising what strategies of play are at work in the text:

Part of the system of play insists that the text stages transformation and at the same time reveals how the staging is done. Transformation is an access road to the inaccessible....staged transformation makes that which is inaccessible both present and absent. Presence comes about by means of the staged transformation, and absence by means of the fact that the staged transformation is only play. Hence every presented absence is qualified by the caveat that it is only staged in the form of make-believe, through which we can conceive what would otherwise elude our grasp. Epistemologically speaking, [play] imbues presence with adumbrated absence by denying any authenticity to the possible results of play. Anthropologically speaking, it
allows us to conceive that which is withheld from us. By allowing us to have absence as presence, play turns out to be a means whereby we may extend ourselves.\textsuperscript{5}

For Castro ‘writing literature is something that isn’t given, it is withheld’.\textsuperscript{6} Play is the means by which what is withheld is revealed. In Stepper play allows Castro to investigate the inaccessible, the ‘Nothing behind the silence’\textsuperscript{(104)}.\textsuperscript{7}

Ishi ‘taps out the least amount of information, infusing it with sub-texts, innuendoes, metaphors to liven it up’\textsuperscript{(198)}. So too does Castro. The ‘information’ given to the reader is a form of mask, a veneer of words. Ishi plays with Stepper’s messages: ‘So what is it to Stepper if I rewrite his texts? Collaborate with them in a way which defuses and diffuses their meaning to spread multiple transmissions across the airwaves’\textsuperscript{(218)}. \textit{Stepper} performs a similar operation on the texts of poets, theorists and painters. T.S.Eliot’s ‘I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter’\textsuperscript{(77, 209)},\textsuperscript{8} refers to Celia Ramsay’s holiday and a planned Japanese invasion of China.

Ancient Japanese writings are appropriated for spying codes:

Poetry permeates the language and the coded messages used by the spy ring. Genji’s collection of calligraphy in the elegant retirement of Rokujo, as well as the cunningly wrought poetic messages, redolent with seasonal and floral metaphors, are parodied in the phrases selected for the spy network out of ‘Selected Poems’ which had become the code book.\textsuperscript{9}

Magritte’s, and in turn Foucault’s, \textit{Ceci n’est pas une pipe}\textsuperscript{10} becomes an identification

\textsuperscript{5}Iser, ‘The Play of the Text’, 338.


\textsuperscript{7}Since the focus of this work is on the way absence and silence operate in the text only some elements of the rich and varied play entered into by \textit{Stepper} are traced.


\textsuperscript{9}‘Aimee Mazza responds to Tessa Morris-Suzuki’, \textit{Meanjin} 3&4, 1997, 744.

\textsuperscript{10}M.Foucault, \textit{This is not a pipe}, with illustrations and letters by Réne Magritte, James Harkness (trans. & ed.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). James Harkness notes in his introduction that Magritte had read Foucault’s \textit{Les Mots et les choses} (\textit{The Order of Things}), in the mid-1960s and that his attention was drawn to the text because he had given an exhibition in New York under the same title.
code between Stepper and the agent Yoshio Toso: ‘This is not a pipe, Toso saying, grinning. This is not a woman, Stepper replying.’(132) Both Magritte and Foucault, in their respective disciplines, sought to assert the arbitrary nature of the sign. In his earlier text, Les Mots et les choses, Foucault introduced the notion of the ‘heteroclite’, a ‘lawless and uncharted dimension’ in which ‘inappropriate’ things are linked. The word heteroclite should be taken, wrote Foucault, ‘in its most literal etymological sense; in such a state things are “laid,” “placed,” “arranged” in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to...define a common locus beneath them all’. Stepper celebrates the imaginative possibilities opened up by ‘inappropriate’ linkages. The use of literary allusions for purposes totally foreign to their author’s intention, however, raises serious questions as to the role of literature and communication. How far can language be stretched before it falls apart, fails to signify? Is language anything more than a fluid system of signs that infinitely refer elsewhere?

In Stepper the writing decentres, commits metaphorical seppuku. Any concrete sense of character, place, and to an extent, time is denied. No-one is who they appear to be (even Inspector Shimamura resorts to disguise). Identities become fluid as ‘characters’ reflect elements of each other, wish to become the other. Ishi understudies both Reiko and Stepper. He watches Stepper’s ‘style, studying his performance, learning’(114). He ‘need[s] to learn to dance because Stepper dances...considerably better’(187). He cross-dresses in Reiko’s clothes and in so doing, studies ‘his own transformation...understudying her’(131). Stepper, when making love to Reiko, wants ‘to be’(136) her. The ‘moment in which he actually saw her, was the moment in which he discovered himself. He was and was not her.’(144) It is ‘through her, his shape was emerging’(155).

The mask that each ‘character’ wears both conceals the self and offers to the ‘other’ a mirror in which they see themselves. In a sense Stepper and Ishi are actors in their own version of a Noh drama. The main character of a Noh play, the shite, appears

---

in the first half as an ordinary person, departs, then reappears in the second half in his true form as a ghost. Both Ishi and Stepper are spectral presences. Ishi intones his family code: ‘The pain of always decentring creates strength...it was supposed to give him substance and establish his presence. But there was nothing, not even ghosts...He wondered at the wisdom of reviving passion for the sake of putting something into the emptiness’(83). When Ishi looks into the mirror he sees only absence: ‘Hold the glass before me. This broken piece take your fancy? Turn it about. It is the god-body. The shintai. A masked spirit approaching it is reflected in its true form. But you see nothing there.’(248)

Stepper is a man of many faces. When Reiko photographs him he sees her action as one of ‘betrayal’. Her love removes ‘a spectral layer from him, ghosting him with its unsteady hand’(150). Stepper’s aversion to being photographed is shared and explained by Estrellita in Castro’s earlier novel, *Pomeroy*:

You will never see her totally. She has never allowed herself to be photographed and never will. She didn’t ever want to be seen. She could not be seen. I used to think it was an excess of vanity, but in a rare moment of seriousness once she said it was quite the opposite. ‘The image’, she said, ‘debases. To allow oneself to be photographed is to submit to self-entrapment, to become objectified as an image to be possessed.’

Stepper falls from his motorbike and gets ‘a new face’(174). He resists entrapment. Even in death he cannot be possessed. Reiko’s mausoleum contains his dental bridge and shrapnel from his thigh but no body. At the centre of the mausoleum is an absence but it is an absence that asks to be filled by Stepper’s writing rather than his body: ‘to complete this display...Reiko needs...Victor’s memoirs’(305).

*Stepper’s* ‘game of the name’(113) further clouds any sense of stable character identity. Stepper is known as Bill Johnson, Herr Meissner and Victor Stepper. His name becomes the source of multiple puns ranging from the Russian countryside

---

12 Castro, 120.
through German literature to cocktails: ‘Steppes’, ‘Steppenwolf’, 13 ‘High Stepper’, ‘two step’, ‘step this way’ and ‘Victorious’. Reiko’s name implies a sense of ‘strict enforcement, to observe to the letter’(106), but in Murasaki Castro pays oblique homage to Murasaki Shikibu the Japanese novelist and the author of what is generally considered the world's first novel, The Tale of Genji (1001-1005). 14 Both Mishima, from whom the epigraph is taken, and Hokusai the Japanese painter famed for his paintings of Mount Fuji - whose person and paintings become in Stepper agent and code - used multiple pseudonyms in their artistic careers.

Ishi’s name speaks of death: ‘For Isaku Ishi...He used the diminutive. Both names, let me remind you, are deadly. Isaku: posthumous works. Ishi: the will of a dying person.’(299) Ishi tells the reader that he has been ‘[r]educed to a ruin. A word.’(248) He refers to himself as ‘nothing but a brush and an ideogram...Nothing but a dead letter’(290). Earlier in the narrative Hans, when trying to connect with the world, muses: ‘The wavelength lambda...which looks like a Japanese ideograph...meaning a man...which is why that painter...what’s his name...was so obsessed with making waves...man drowning’(66). Ishi is not only ‘character’ and ‘author’ he is the sign of death in this system of signs called the novel. In his cross-dressing, his being ‘of that kind of persuasion’(159) and his possession of ‘weak’ genitals (162), Ishi can be read as Cixous’ bisexual signifier, 15 a signifier that refuses the self/other dichotomy and in so doing erases the slash in structuring binary oppositions such as male/female, 16 presence/absence, real/imaginary, life/death.

13 Stepper and The Steppenwolf both use mirrors as a means by which the self may be discovered, double-ness in narrative perspective, fragmented psyches and suggestions of homosexual desire. Ishi’s rewriting of Stepper’s memoirs is reminiscent of Hesse’s use of ‘The Tract’ as a device in which Harry Haller reads his own biography written by an unknown hand.

14 For further discussion on the parallels between Stepper and The Tale of Genji see A. Mazza, Meanjin 3&4, 1997, 744-45.


16 The undercurrent of bisexual and homosexual desire that informs Stepper finds echoes in Hesse’s The Steppenwolf (1927) and in Mishima’s first novel Kamen no kokuhaku (Confessions of a Mask, 1949).
Who is Stepper?

Stepper is and is not himself: 'yourself and not yourself' (2). He is the 'you' of the prologue and the not-you of the conclusion. He is a master of deception. He is both the author and the divided subject of the narrative. Stepper is a development of Pomeroy who describes himself thus:

I (who?), an aside, an apostrophe. A Chinese box I, a puzzle, which is I and not-I. I enclosed in another; an other I, alter ego altered I, I that slips reductively into lower case, a smaller I : I. I many-sided, from different points of view; without prominence, many-eyed. I-mirrored. I-mirrored holding a mirror. Mirrors and I. I that is one. I. One-eyed. Balding. Standing in this labyrinth of mirrors glazed by architects of the ego. Place. City. Country.

In Castro’s ‘labyrinth of mirrors’ Stepper is ‘a man in bits and pieces...Unlocalised...He was like pieces of a jigsaw you could never put together because some bits were missing’ (248). He is ‘a man of many parts’ (155): teacher, writer, spy, betrayer and lover. He is a man unhoused in place, city and country. He is an ‘enigma...a man without a country, a stranger unto himself, a refracted being’ (290).

Pomeroy continues:

Since birth I had been given names, responsibilities, moulded to respond to mirrors; other people’s desires. I had. A past preening itself to a more perfect state. All these years of illusion thinking you, I, one, belonged when the substitution of a single ‘he’ brought the vast emptiness on the other side of that thin partition of sound. Heeee, heeee. The wind of death and the smell of corpses...wanting to become her...The dread of I. I-dread. A hollow I, a holograph, many-sided and without presence, a mute ellipsis, a mark of life and death, gravely smearing the steamy glass, the engraving of disappearance in the furrow of her image...I am not me; but if I am he then someone, some other, is projecting me onto this glass. Wipe the slate clean.17

Stepper is the refracted image that emerges through the prism of Ishi’s imagination and paranoia. It is Ishi who projects Stepper onto the glass, into the text. Stepper becomes Ishi’s ‘holograph, many-sided and without presence, a mute ellipsis, a mark of life and

17 Pomeroy, 206-7.
death’. Read in this way the most notable characteristic of Stepper is his absence. From another perspective, however, Stepper is something more than Ishi’s creation. Stepper is the central protagonist in the narrative and Stepper gets the last word. As the true master of deception, it just may be possible that Stepper has constructed Ishi, the Japanese character/‘ideogram’, as a tool through which he can narrate his own death.18

Both Stepper and Ishi are, with deference to Foucault, dead men in Castro’s game of writing:

...this relationship between writing and death is also manifested in the effacement of the writing subject’s individual characteristics. Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing.19

Otherness and death:

Ishi tells his reader that Stepper loved Japan and that ‘Japan became his mirror’(155). He also insists that he, Ishi, is Japan: ‘I am Japan.’(247) Ishi offers a reading of himself as Stepper’s mirror: ‘You won’t get a better mirror. Here, a likeness. A sketch I did while sitting at a bar, while he, unknowing, suffered opposite me. These baggy eyes, these furrowed brows...is that not unlike me?’(248) He signposts Lacan’s theories of identity formation20 in order to interweave his identity with Stepper’s: ‘Did not a famous psychoanalyst once declare that the mirror-stage is the first totalised image of the body? The proto-self? The spy, if you like, as spy?’(155). Like the child’s reflection Ishi both is and is not Stepper.21 Ishi wants to reflect Stepper. He needs Stepper in order to give his life some meaning, to make him whole. Lacan insists that

18 For a discussion of writing as a posthumous activity see ‘Drift: Storytelling and/of Annihilation’.

19 Foucault, ‘What is an author?’, 198.


21 Ishi expresses that loss of innocence, the loss of the child within, noted by Lacan: ‘Did I not lose a child when I met him...destroyed everything, my ideals, innocence?’(248).
the mirror stage is crucially important for the gazing self to establish a sense of
'oneness' and that this oneness must be established because 'man is painfully aware of
the threat of fragmentation'. Ishi is all too painfully aware of this threat.

His role, he writes, was to bear witness to Stepper's life:

I have doctored his manuscript, edited, rearranged, driven my pencil to hell
and back in order to interweave my significance. I did what I had always
done...refurbished a life, saved it from oblivion...you see, his life was never
going to be his own. He needed a witness. None of this could be seen by
anyone without understanding the role I played (304).

Whose life is it that Ishi has saved from oblivion? Stepper was known and respected in
Moscow. The Soviet regime struck a medal for him. Reiko has constructed a memorial
to Stepper's life in which one can 'see the truth, see what a hero Stepper was'(304). Ishi
admits that 'time would vindicate' Stepper, that he was 'mighty, prophetic,
visionary'(287). It is his own 'little life'(115) that Ishi tries to save from oblivion. In
his mighty confession Stepper 'deprecated' Ishi's role: 'Ineffectual Isaku, he called
me'(287). Far from trying to 'erase' himself as he suggests, Ishi has gone to great
lengths to inscribe his significance, to assert his presence, in Stepper's story.

Mark C Taylor's discussion of the nexus that operates between the self and an
other which is death, encapsulates the relationship between Ishi, Stepper, writing and
death:

As a kinsman of Hermes, the errant subject is not only a trickster but a thief.
The expropriation of the subject robs the self of all purely personal
properties. For the possessive self, 'the relation with the other and the
relation with death are one and the same opening.' The individual's
elaborate strategies of self-assertion are actually various efforts to secure
self-presence by excluding the dangerous other. To the extent that
otherness represents the guise of death to the self-possessed subject, the
individual's struggle for self-realisation necessarily entails the effort to
repress death. Death, however, will not be denied. Otherness...is never
merely external but is always already within. Recognizing its own
impropriety, the subject is forced to confess: 'I is an other.' This
dispossession is the annihilation of the self-possessed individual. Death, no

---

longer appearing as an extrinsic wound accidentally befalling an integral self from without, now is manifest as a powerful parasite that relentlessly feeds within the subject. With the return to/of this para-site, we rediscover the uncanny guest that always lingers on the threshold - nihilism.23

Stepper, as journalist, spy and writer, is both a trickster and a thief. He has no personal properties, no stable name, no recognisable face. As a man in ‘bits and pieces’ whose narrative is and is not his own, he can only be read in relation to Ishi and Ishi signifies death. Stepper repeatedly acknowledges and accepts his closeness to and his rapid journey towards death. Ishi is also a writer, a trickster and a thief. He is, in his inability to face death, the reverse image of Stepper. Ishi strives to assert his existence in Stepper’s narrative but ultimately his efforts to repress and deny death are futile. He is inexorably drawn to Stepper and enters into a relationship with him that demands, even if it be fifty years later, his death.

Ishi is drawn to Stepper as a moth is drawn to a flame: ‘Like a moth into the flame. A midge; a mote; a maggot.’(248) ‘Moths did that. Loved their host so much so they absorbed it, changed into its colour.’(219) It is Ishi, not Reiko, who is the ‘Poor Butterfly’(182) in the drama of Stepper. Stepper dies and leaves Ishi behind. Ishi knows he ‘was meant to kill himself’(291). His parents, Ambrose Prior, Christa and the Chinese widow all understood the necessity for suicide. Ishi, however, refuses to accept that ‘purity and divine strength came from dismissal, ultimately, of oneself: timely self-termination’(16). He cannot face the prospect of his own death. He is forced for his ‘cleansing’ to come ‘face to face with Stepper, upon the moment of his execution’(290). Stepper takes five long minutes to die and it is those five minutes that haunt Ishi for the rest of his life.

Ishi’s weak genitals not only glance at his questionable sexuality and set him in stark contrast to the sexually voracious Stepper, they also signify Ishi’s impotence. Taylor continues:

The self-assertion through which the individual attempts to affirm its own power by negating the other is really a sign of impotence. This weakness

23 Erring, 140.
stems from the subject’s inability to accept the prospect of self-loss.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Stepper} understands loss, negativity and nihilism as constitutive of writing. In Castro’s opinion ‘postmodernism fails...[because] postmodernism by its nihilism and through its ironies doesn’t profess the courage to die...Whereas I think modernism, which is much closer to me, had that sense of total alienation and destruction.’\textsuperscript{25} From the opening moment of Mishima’s epigraph \textit{Stepper} is a relentless push towards death:

\begin{quote}
\textit{We do not collide with our destiny all of a sudden. The man who later in his life is to be executed is constantly - every time that he sees a telegraph pole on his way to work, every time that he passes a railway crossing - drawing an image in his mind of the execution site, and is becoming familiar with that image.}
\end{quote}

Death is marked throughout the text. Ishi repeatedly encounters water and the possibility of drowning. Stepper knows he is ‘going to die soon’(148). He sees the ‘hangman’s noose’ in the \textit{shime-nawa} (149). His ring, like the text, has a central space filled with death. The date of his execution, 7/11/44, is Clara Biedermann’s telephone number.

Ishi narrates Stepper’s death in the Prologue:

\begin{quote}
One day you, too, will be caught in no-man’s-land and there will be no elsewhere and no mountains, no forest glades, no limbo in which you could hide and remember, and you will taste the fear like metal and there will only be heaven or hell whether you believed it or not, feeling your hands covered in blood, listening to yourself saying:
I don’t think I can ... (3).
\end{quote}

As the hood is pulled over Stepper’s head, in readiness for his execution, Stepper thinks these same words with an important difference. Now he ‘would hear himself say:
\textit{Finally...to become something else entirely...I think I can now’}(291). Stepper embraces

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Erring}, 140.

\textsuperscript{25} ‘Outside the Prison of Logic’, 22.
the space of death as a positive space in which the self can metamorphose. Death is 'the end of the limit of presence and the beginning of possibility'. Like betrayal, like writing (104), death is a way to move across borders. It is his preparedness to die, his 'knowing how to die' that makes Stepper 'a Samurai' (298), the hero of the novel. Again Taylor's writing can be applied in a way that illuminates this process:

Nihilism becomes fully actual when death or, more precisely, the death of the self is no longer passively suffered and reluctantly conceded but is actively affirmed and willingly embraced. The "no" of the radical nihilist harbors a "Yes" that freely acknowledges the interiority of exteriority that perpetually faults the integral subject. At this critical point, nihilism undergoes an unexpected reversal which reveals that 'nihilism is reversal itself: it is the affirmation that, in passing from the no to the yes, refutes nihilism - even though it does nothing other than affirm it, at which point nihilism is extended to all possible affirmations. From this we can conclude that nihilism is identical with the will to overcome nihilism absolutely'.

It is this radical nihilism, this resounding yes to the acceptance of death, that Stepper applauds.

In its affirmation of death and nothingness, Stepper demonstrates Mallarmé's proposition that 'when everything falls back into nothingness, when everything disappears, disappearance appears'. Absence is lured into presence. Silke von Strohm's wooden egg operates as a metaphor for Castro's narrative technique. Stepper plays with the egg:

... you know the kind of toy which can be opened to reveal another egg and which in turn can be opened and so on ... and he held this in his huge hand, hypnotically, so that I couldn't take my eye from it and when he gestured

---

26 Pomeroy writes of the death of the self in a similar way: 'The death of oneself. To become the other. I suddenly suspected that I knew what Stella Wang meant when she said I had to learn the nature of repression and then to cross the bridge over to something other than myself.' Pomeroy, 179.


28 Erring, 140. Taylor here quotes Blanchot, 'The Limits of Experience: Nihilism', in D.B.Allison (ed.), The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation, (New York: Delta, 1979), 126. Taylor replaces Blanchot's 'Nihilism' with 'nihilism' and fails to emphasise, as Blanchot has emphasised, the 'no', 'yes' and 'absolutely'.

29 Blanchot, The Space of Literature, 158.
with his open palm later in the conversation, it had quiet disappeared (61).

At the heart of Silke’s egg is nothingness. *Stepper* investigates this nothingness. The narrative is increasingly pared away to reveal what Alex Miller terms ‘the blankness at the heart of the work of art’. In *The Sitters* Miller writes:

> The blankness at the heart of the work of art. That’s what we lose with our obsession with cause and effect. With the logical order of beginning, middle and end. The absence and the isolation of things. We forget that. The silence that surrounds everything we do while we are doing it. Always. The silence we work in. At the centre. Working with the absence.30

*Stepper* understands the need to uncover this blankness, this nothingness that resists interpretation. It is one of the reasons why the novel is ostensibly set in Japan:

> I have spent years studying Japan. I have accomplished nothing ...What we do and what we achieve is based on elicitation. We draw from possibility the real existence of things...what *is*...and that demands an understanding of the possibility of nothingness. The Japanese understand that (123).

Stepper comes close to experiencing nothingness when, in excruciating pain, he is ‘unable to breathe, unable to arrest the sweet oblivion when his heart stops and he falls into the gaping hole again and again, jolted back by the static of the world, human movements, the cranking universe’(170). He longs to return to that gaping hole:

> The accident left me feeling strange...Think of this...a flash of fever through which we, disembodied, experience sensations unreachable in the ordinary universe, and we touch for the first time the exaggeration of our being. Hope and desire. This hole into which we fall while reaching forward. Bring it closer...fall further (197-8).

Stepper’s experience of that which allows him to ‘touch for the first time the exaggeration of [his] being’, dramatises the Heideggerian philosophy of being and nothingness (discussed later), that is a central concern of the text. Ishi imagines the experience of love in similar language: ‘love is an exaggeration...of that moment in which you feel *at one* with someone or something’(269). After that moment, Ishi suggests, there is only betrayal and disgust and emptiness. The reader of *Stepper* ...

---

undergoes an experience that could be described in terms similar to those used to articulate Stepper’s and Ishi’s real and imagined experiences. In crossing the border between the world of being and that of fiction the reader becomes lost in the multilayered, playful world of the text. The density of literary and cultural allusion coupled with subterfuge and play pushes the reader, in an attempt at comprehension, towards an ‘exaggeration’ of their imaginative processes. In the closing stages of the novel, when it appears that the complex web of betrayal is at an end, the narrative abruptly drops the reader into a gaping, ambiguous hole. What exactly is the reader left with at the conclusion of Stepper?

The unsigned text or what matter who’s writing?

Walter Benjamin opens his account of Kafka’s writings with ‘a political apologue’. Potemkin, writes Benjamin, was suffering a particularly long bout of depression. As access to Potemkin’s room was forbidden the ‘high officials’ could not procure his signature on an ever-increasing number of important state documents. A presumptuous, ‘unimportant little clerk’ named Shuvalkin volunteered to take the documents to Potemkin. He marched into Potemkin’s room unannounced and wordlessly presented him with the documents and a pen dipped in ink. Potemkin signed every document and Shuvalkin returned to the officials triumphantly brandishing a sheaf of signed papers:

The councillors of state rushed towards him and tore the documents out of his hands. Breathlessly they bent over them. No one spoke a word; the whole group seemed paralyzed...One document after another was signed Shuvalkin...Shuvalkin...Shuvalkin.

For practical purposes Shuvalkin, with his sheaf of papers, was empty-handed. Ishi, as the ‘unimportant little clerk’ takes Stepper’s manuscript and inscribes his name and his significance, or lack of significance, into Stepper’s story. The reader, text in hand,

---

31 Deleuze & Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, x.

discovers that what he/she is reading is not Stepper’s but Ishi’s story. Barely over the shock of this revelation we see this same manuscript ‘spiralling into the...black oily water’(308). Are we empty-handed? What are we reading? Was there a second manuscript left with the hotel owner who against Ishi’s wishes published rather than burnt it? Who has written the final chapter?

Stepper’s final chapter is the mirror image of its Prologue. In the Prologue Ishi addresses Stepper: ‘You’re on a steamer...’. Now it is Stepper’s turn to address Ishi: ‘You have finished your room service meal...’(307). The Prologue offered a writing of death, both Ishi’s and Stepper’s. In the concluding chapter Stepper offers the death of writing. The origin and end of writing is death, is the black water. David Brooks writes of this quality in writing:

I keep, always, a notebook or pad beside my bed, and a pen or pencil, so that when a fragment of a particular feel or clarity arises I can write it down. I do this in the dark... my fingers feeling for the page’s edge, inching me down and along so that, hopefully, I don’t write again and again in the one spot. It’s a strange writing, when I look in the morning, spidery and groping and uncertain. And all too often, of course, I do write over and over in the one spot - so much, sometimes, that the text is virtually irrecoverable, seems to have retreated in the black pool, the black water again.33

As Stepper states: ‘You know, what it all came down to in the end was the disintegration of the word, and thus, of life; life without the heart radical’(221). The writing, like the protagonist, welcomes the space into which it can disappear.

In The Space of Literature Blanchot argues that ‘the work requires death, the source to be in the work; it demands that in it the ending which initiates all beginnings, swell up as the essence of all swelling...It wants disappearance to come forth.’34 Stepper fulfills Blanchot’s requirements. It is not only Stepper who embraces the prospect of death. In its impassioned movement towards death the writing posits the possibility of its own impossibility. In Heidegger’s terms the writing strives towards authenticity.

---

34 Blanchot, 7.
To read *Stepper* as merely a narrative of dissembling language games, deception and 'indifference', is to neglect the novel's very real engagement with the question of authenticity and care. Stepper is both a narrative of indifference and a narrative of care. The writing sets up a dialogue between the two narratives. While the concept of indifference is explicitly and repeatedly named and explored in the text the question of care operates in a more veiled way. *Stepper* lures care into presence by tracing it as an absence throughout most of the novel.

The young Ishi insists that 'indifference is the only way to be fully alive'(139). Despite his attempts to distance himself from Japan and its Imperial traditions, he laments the passing of the 'gamesmanship...play...disinterest and skepticism'(271) of the Edo Period: 'The genius of the Edo period was that they knew how to incorporate cruel and deadly seriousness with haughty and supercilious indifference.'(272) Ishi stresses the central role played by indifference in the art of spying: 'the notion of spying is really a defusing, a delicate and deadly task. It is the love of defeat...and of death...and of indifference!'(270). It is the intensity of Stepper’s indifference that determines his quality as a spy. When he discarded Katya because she ‘proved unsuitable’ for his revolutionary purposes he ‘knew...that he was capable of anything’(25). Until he met Reiko he ‘didn’t care about anyone...would use anyone providing they served his purpose’(180). He fitted Ishi’s prescription for a great spy: ‘Before 1940 Stepper was a first-rate spy. He was solitary and integral, without anxiety.’(155) A brief examination of these three characteristics - solitary, integral, without anxiety - demonstrates the subtlety of *Stepper*’s codes of writing.

Ishi presumably uses the term ‘integral’ to refer to Stepper’s self-sufficiency and isolation. He could not be referring to Stepper’s psychic unity because Stepper is a man in ‘bits and pieces. Broken. Fragmented’(145). Stepper’s fractured psyche enhances...
his effectiveness as a spy. It ensures a slippage of identity that precludes him being truly known. Significantly, even he does not know himself. It is only through his love for Reiko that Stepper begins to discover who he is. He 'sees himself unravelled' (133) and, in that paradoxical movement of coming undone, he embarks on a journey towards wholeness - and ceases to be an effective spy: 'Felt for the first time the woman next to him was no longer a stranger, was part of him, so how could he possibly work indifferently again?'(139). In loving Reiko Stepper undergoes a metamorphosis: 'No, he was not a spy. He was a lover.'(244) Whether spy or lover, however, he never waivers in his commitment to something larger than himself. Ishi suggests that Stepper 'did not set out to spy...It was a game; played with disinterest'(271). Ishi is wrong. Stepper, in the same moment that he surrenders his identity as a spy, declares what has motivated him in that capacity: 'the world could be saved and one day there will be a bright future for those children being born now...Let this be said: we took a stand for something beyond the expedient...a future life...even if it was only five minutes in Lenin's brain before it all closed over again.'(244)

Stepper playfully manipulates signs, narratives, people and history for a more serious ethical purpose. So too does Castro. He employs the games and strategies of postmodernism to create boldly innovative novels that make 'the disinterest of postmodernism look extremely conservative'. 36 'Every novel', writes Castro, 'must make an ethical gesture towards the end of suffering. The masterworks are those which do this in a powerfully redemptive moment without collapsing into a cheap mirroring of the unexamined life.'37 Does Stepper make such a gesture? Ivor Indyk argues that it does:

Castro’s fiction goes looking for truth in a world of shifting appearances and allegiances, where the stable points of reference - identity, language, human relationships - are themselves complex and often contradictory in their assurances. Hence the real interest in Stepper’s portrait of espionage...the need to strike an ethical stance in the midst of intrigue and

36 ‘Lesions’, 199.

37 Barker, ‘Fireworks: An Interview with Brian Castro’.
betrayal, and to stand by some notion of commitment.  

Indyk identifies love as the moving force which endows Stepper with ‘identity and unity’. He acknowledges that the love between Stepper and Reiko is ‘central to the novel and is convincing enough’, but he has reservations: ‘I don’t think love can be a stance, for all that it may be inherently ethical’. Stepper also recognises the inability of love to fulfill that requirement: ‘But he loved her isn’t that enough? Not for a writer...love is never enough. Not for a spy...love is always too much’(180). If Stepper strikes an ethical stance in the midst of its intrigue and betrayal it is a stance that articulates the need not for love but for care.

The Stepper who was ‘without anxiety’ was a spy who did not care. That ‘first-rate spy’ is not the hero of the text. The hero of Stepper is the man who acknowledges that in spying (as in writing a book), ‘You used and you got used’, but who ‘mourns the usage’(101). Stepper, for all its dissembling literary games, refuses to countenance the indifference of people like Ishi, Anna Hausen or Katya. As an old man Ishi comes to appreciate the emptiness of indifference. He returns to Japan to ask Reiko if Stepper ‘wrestled with his existence, whether he had a concern for it, for surely it was care which made existence meaningful? Care? he had said to her, using the German word...Sorge...which also meant anxiety’(298).

Sorge is Stepper’s consummate ‘game of the name’. Richard Sorge was the Soviet spy upon whom much of the biographical aspects of Stepper are based. Critics have sought to outline the many similarities between the fictional and the actual spy, but Stepper is not Sorge. As is characteristic of Castro’s fiction he has, in Stepper, taken some of the historical facts of Sorge’s life and experience as the embryonic skeleton for his narrative. Richard Sorge, however, never appears in Stepper. It is his surname that captured Castro’s imagination, sorge, Heidegger’s term signifying ‘care-for’ or ‘concern-for and -with.’ In Heidegger’s philosophical reasoning sorge is

---


intimately concerned with both freedom and authenticity (two key terms in *Stepper*). It is the means by which the false, inauthentic being-in-the-world attains authentic being. Heidegger argues that the individual leads an inauthentic, fallen life. To comprehend how far one has fallen one must experience everyday idle talk and chatter. The individual must then strive to attain authentic *Dasein* and the only way to achieve this state is through care, *sorge*.

Stepper, as spy and cocktail-party conversationalist, takes Heidegger's example of idle chatter and gossip to a professional high. There comes a point, however, when he understands and laments the depths of inauthenticity to which he has fallen. The game of personal deceit and betrayal begins to weary him. He cannot aspire to the supreme indifference of Ishi. Stepper cares about his dead son, his cold and estranged wife, his dead brothers, Celia Ramsay. He cares, most of all, for Reiko. In caring for others Stepper not only attains authenticity, he gains the power to profoundly touch the lives of others. Having touched the depths of nothingness and experienced an exaggeration of his being, Stepper undergoes a 'kind of positive transcendence', or transfiguration. In dying he bestows a similar gift on those he leaves behind. In death, Ishi writes, Stepper 'had suddenly taken responsibility for our transfiguration so that we, the inauthentic, could now exist' (292).

*Stepper* is a narrative of freedom. Death offers one possibility of being free. Heidegger suggests that caring offers another:

> Desire and hope are the reaching-forward of care. Thus care underlies and necessitates 'the possibility of being-free.' The careless person and the uncaring are not free. It is *Sorge* that makes human existence meaningful, that makes a man's life signify. To be-in-the-world in any real, existentially possessed guise, is to care, to be *besorgt* ('careful').

Stepper dies because he learns to care. In death he achieves freedom, the possibility to

---


become something else entirely'(292). Ishi, the master of indifference, is never free. He is haunted by his family history, by Japan’s Imperial traditions and most of all by those ‘five long minutes’ when he came face to face with Stepper’s death: ‘Five minutes of millennial time...I have lived with those five minutes of agony all my life and soon they will be the death of me’(292).

The third of Ishi’s terms, ‘solitary’, refers not only to Stepper’s personality and lifestyle but to the project of writing itself. Stepper’s narrative charts an inevitable path from the ‘Prologue’ through ‘Dissidence’ and ‘Collaboration’ to ‘Solitude’. Inevitable because, as Beckett has argued, writing must be the ‘rediscovery of solitude, and the road back into the...self’.42 Inevitable because writing, like spying, is a solitary activity: ‘In the end it always came down to the same thing; to being irrevocably alone’(101).

The ultimate solitude is death and death, writes Heidegger, ‘is a strange and unhomely thing that banishes us once and for all from everything in which we are at home’.43 Death unhouses being. So too does spying: ‘To be a good spy is to keep spying. To keep spying is to reach an inevitable end in which no help will come from any quarter. No home, no home. Keine Heimat’(101). Stepper is ‘of no fixed address. No nationality’(145). Like Hans Hausen he understands ‘Sehnsucht: yearning for home which is no longer home’(169). Unlike Hans, Stepper can never again be at home in Germany. The only home left for Stepper is the space of ‘no-man’s-land’, the space of death.

It could be argued that in withholding the term sorge until the closing stages of the narrative, and ensuring that when it does come forth it is uttered by the once-indifferent Ishi who now appreciates the necessity for care, Castro privileges the narrative of care over that of indifference. But Castro refuses any such privilege largely because he aims always in his writing for a spectrum of possibilities and interpretation rather than an either/or binary proposition. The way in which a withheld narrative of care or concern operates to extend (not compete with) a seemingly more dominant

42 R.Scruton, The Aesthetic Understanding, 228.
43 Being and Time, l.vi ,188, 176.
narrative of linguistic play is most obviously demonstrated in *Drift* and is discussed in the following chapter. In *Stepper* care, anxiety, *sorge* are finally awarded a voice but it is a voice in mid-conversation. *Stepper*’s final chapter revisits Castro’s preoccupation with the question of authorship and glances obliquely at yet another aspect of ‘indifference’.

*Stepper*, in denying any sense of authoritative author, asks, with reference to Beckett via Foucault, what matter who’s writing. Foucault begins his discussion on the notion of ‘author’ with Beckett’s question: “What does it matter who is speaking”, someone said, “what does it matter who is speaking”. It is a question to Foucault’s mind of ‘indifference’. He writes: ‘In this indifference appears one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing. I say “ethical” because this indifference is...a kind of immanent rule’. Foucault identifies ‘two major themes’ of this ‘indifference’, both key elements in the narrative of *Stepper*. The second, already discussed, is writing’s relationship with death. The first offers an explanation as to why Stepper, and ultimately Ishi, have to die and why the end-product of writing must always be silence, nothingness, the black water, empty spaces linked to death:

> Writing unfolds like a game [*jeu*] that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is rather a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.

*Stepper* creates that space. It is a space which houses ‘serious contemplation and care’ but as a means by which the primary focus of the writing, ‘seduction, scepticism and ultimately, death’, can be playfully explored.

---

44 ‘What is an author?’, 197.

45 Foucault, 197-8.
BRIAN CASTRO

Drift

Tony Gilevski’s cover design of the 1994 edition of Drift.
**Drift: Storytelling and/of annihilation**

Only play can make conceivable the absent otherness which lies on the reverse side of all positions.

*Languages of the Unsayable*

Let's play Chinese Whispers. 
What's that?... What's the point? 
...To tell the truth about lies. To see that justice is never done. 

Castro's *Drift* can be read both as a narrative that attempts to tell the truth about lies of the past and a text that suggests any quest for truth is futile because 'truth is simply a language game' (246). *Drift* is first and foremost a literary game: a game of dissimulation, questionable identities, coincidence and wit. It is a game that persistently probes at what it believes to be the mythical border between fact and fiction. It is a game that simultaneously inscribes an absent dead author and an absent dead Aboriginal tribe with almost palpable presence. Like *Stepper* the game is underwritten by something of more significance, something that 'really matters'.

Thomas McGann's preface to *Drift* pays homage to the deceased Bryan Stanley Johnson (1933-1973), a 'little known though important British author who dared reassess the novel form' (vii). Not only did Johnson write radically experimental fiction, his commitment to write only the truth in his fiction meant, according to McGann, that he died for his writing. Johnson's commitment to authenticity killed him. He wrote himself out of being. McGann admires Johnson because he believes Johnson wrote 'as though it mattered, as though [he] meant it, as though [he] meant it to matter' (viii). McGann's musings on 'what matters...what has always mattered' (266) frame the narrative of *Drift*. What is it that really matters in this narrative?

It could be argued that the violent abuse, rape and attempted annihilation of the Aboriginal people of Tasmania and the historical silence or repression of that story matter. *Drift* powerfully tells such a story and demonstrates, through the figures of Emma and Thomas McGann, the ongoing effects of that history. While Castro is, as mentioned earlier, concerned to take an ethical stance in his writing, he is a writer
primarily concerned with questions of language and imagination. Historical events underpin his writing but they serve more as a launching pad for his creative capabilities than as an occasion for political or social commentary. The story of the colonial settlement of Tasmania matters but only in as much as innovative writing matters, imagination matters, the exploration of death and nothingness matters, the suicide of the author that gives birth to the work and to the reader matters. In Drift the attempted annihilation of the Tasmanian Aborigines operates as the ‘unformulated double of the text’,¹ as the story that underlies, complements and punctuates the story of the attempted self-annihilation of Byron Shelley Johnson. The doubling of these narratives allows Castro, through play, imaginatively to explore a connection between the process of writing and Aboriginal history. More precisely it allows him to explore the erasure of writing and the writer, and the erasure of an ancient culture.

Drift charts the journey of an English author - Castro’s fictionalised double of the real but now deceased author Bryan Stanley Johnson - Byron Shelley (B.S.) Johnson, towards death. B.S. is lured away from England and his infirm, elderly mother to Tasmania by intriguing letters written by an Aboriginal girl, Emma McGann. Like Heriot before him,² B.S. undertakes a physical and metaphorical journey to an island in order to assuage his guilt and to die. On one reading Tasmania is ‘that lone island within himself dissolving into drizzle’(263). B.S. is drawn into the black hole of madness at the centre of his being and confronts his own troubled psyche on his road to suicide: ‘Not wanting to live, I let myself be drawn. Gravity. Drawing me down. From the plane I could see a kind of hole in the sky; a glaring icy sun. Tasmania. Madness in its name.’(84) On another reading Johnson travels to Tasmania where he meets and tutors Emma’s twin brother Tom, an albino Aboriginal, on the connection between

¹ Iser, The Act of Reading, 225.
² Randolph Stow, To the Islands, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1958, 1981). ‘The impetus for Heriot’s journey lies in his sense of being driven towards a spiritually pure land where personal - and perhaps analogically communal or national - identity lies and where the intolerable burden of memory may be relinquished.’ O.Lovesay, ‘The Place of Journey in Randolph Stow’s To the Islands and Sheila Watson’s The Double Hook’, Ariel 27:3, 1996, 56. B.S. Johnson’s journey is also allied to questions of identity and memory.
writing and death. Through his relationship with Emma, a relationship that occurs on the other side of death, B.S. is initiated into a world where imagination allows him to experience the truth of history. Emma leads him through the past where he encounters a cast of characters from the 1820s, most importantly the brutal white whaler Sperm McGann and WORE the Aboriginal girl/woman abducted and repeatedly raped by McGann. Through Emma B.S. comes to witness the massacre of the Pennemuker people as they are driven to their deaths off the cliffs at Cape Grim.

Fact and fiction:

Bryan Stanley Johnson could not tolerate what he saw as the inevitable discrepancy between life lived and life written: fact and fiction. In his opinion, '[t]elling stories is really telling lies' (vii). Johnson wrote:

I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels. A useful distinction between literature and other writing for me is that the former teaches one something true about life: and how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction? The two terms, truth and fiction, are opposites, and it must logically be impossible.  

Drift, through its chaotic, random narrative, deconstructs these supposedly mutually exclusive binaries by destabilising the relationship between them. (It is significant that B.S.'s initials are an acronym for 'bullshit'.)

Castro has argued that such binaries are meaningless because:

...truth is available only in the telling and has no privileged existence in real life beyond human language. As Raymond Williams has said, there is a negative definition of fiction placed against a pseudo-positive definition of fact. Both these definitions omit the spectrum of propositions and modulations involved in any understanding of reality.

---


4 Drift is Castro's next published novel after Double-Wolf, a narrative deeply attracted to the idea that psychoanalysis and lies provide an understanding of reality, and precedes Stepper, a text which suggests that all writing is betrayal.

5 Castro, 'Auto/biography', in Seams of Light, 133. (This essay also appears in Looking for Estrellita, 99-123.)
Drift offers a ‘spectrum of propositions and modulations’ which operate to undercut any sense of reality or verifiable truth while simultaneously presenting the contemporary reader with the horrific truth of life in nineteenth-century Tasmania. Unlike Johnson, Castro believes that storytelling and imagination are important tools in helping those who come after an event to understand, to feel, to witness, the history that has gone before them.

Drift engages with and extends Johnson’s obsession with the relative merits and demerits of fact and fiction to examine the relationship between history and imagination. Early in the narrative Byron Shelley Johnson, suggests that imagination is incompatible with history:

It’s no good imagining, for it brings no comfort. Just creates another hole into which we fall, a temporary amnesia. The disease of mankind, imagining; it takes the place of forgetting, guilt, repression. Why have history otherwise, if not to celebrate the continuity served by ritual? Facts, not imagination, the latter all self-obsession (10).

Through Emma McGann’s letters B.S. becomes interested in the history of Tasmania and the people of the island. Emma’s letters, filled with pain, tip him into a dizzying spiral of the past. True to his nature he ‘won’t have history yield to mere imagination. I’ll have to go to Tasmania, put the pieces together, abandon writing to disprove the artefact.’(28) In Tasmania B.S. is initiated into a world where imagination allows him to experience the truth of history, ‘he falls into the black hole of the past, which is pure imagination’.6

Emma doesn’t have to imagine the history of white settlement, she has lived it. In the final stages of Drift her musings on history and imagination mirror those of B.S’s with two important variations. She substitutes ‘remembering’ for ‘imagining’ and asks a further question as to the nature of history: ‘Why have history if not to act, to explode what is necessary? History was a continuity of explosions.’(242) B.S. comes to realise that Emma is right. He wants physically and metaphorically to explode the lies and silence of Tasmania’s past. His narrative, which becomes Tom McGann’s narrative, is

an attempt to re-inscribe or re-present absent bodies, absent stories. *Drift* reaches into the black holes of the past, of memory and forgetfulness, in order to lure those absences into presence.

Byron Shelley Johnson progresses from a belief that truth and fiction are 'deadly enemies' (172) to understand that ‘the truth...is only anxiety over a belief in truth’ (203) and that since ‘words are no longer sovereign...truth is simply a language game’ (246). Where Bryan Stanley Johnson may have aspired to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, Byron Shelley Johnson tells the truth of holes - metaphorical holes, textual holes, black holes - and the truth of (N)/nothing.

*Nihil ab origine:

The essential link between the process of writing and that of the history of white settlement in Tasmania is encapsulated in McGann’s phrase: ‘*Nihil ab origine*’ (266). Castro has suggested that roughly translated that phrase feeds back to the line from B.S. Johnson’s novel: ‘There are no aborigines now left in the island’. The absence of a verb allows for a more ambiguous interpretation. The phrase could suggest that there is nothing original there now that has been there from the beginning. Such a reading raises questions of central importance to *Drift*, questions of inheritance, authenticity, hybridity and survival. Strictly translated the phrase reads ‘nothing from the beginning’, and echoes Blanchot’s writing on literary creation:

> [L]iterary creation goes back over each thing and each being, it cherishes the illusion that it is creating them, because now it is seeing and naming them from the starting point of everything, from the starting point of the absence of everything, that is, from nothing.\(^8\)

In his discussion of Hölderlin’s poetry, de Man articulates a similar philosophy of language:

> It is clear that, in Hölderlin’s own line, the words...need to find the mode of their being...they originate out of nothing, in an attempt to be the first words

---

\(^7\) Launch of *Drift*, (Sydney: Gleebooks, 1994).

\(^8\) ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, 373.
that will arise as if they were natural objects...it is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, but of never achieving the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object. Poetic language can do nothing but originate anew over and over again; it is always constitutive, able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness. The word is always a free presence to the mind, the means by which the permanence of natural entities can be put into question and thus negated, time and again, in the endlessly widening spiral of the dialectic. 9

*Drift* suggests that the attempt to go back to the beginning, to find the origins of race, genealogy, nationhood, identity, language, will uncover the nothingness that precedes and underlies language. ‘[E]verything’, the writing suggests, ‘comes out of an aching emptiness’(244). The discovery of that nothingness or emptiness is a worthwhile enterprise and those who are brave enough to search may, like Tom McGann, discover ‘the painful secret of existence: that invention was always the result of repression, censorship and violation’(266).

As a ‘true descendant of Samuel Beckett’(vii) Bryan Stanley Johnson understood the power of textual silence. In *Travelling People* he blacked out entire pages of text; in *House Mother Normal* he whited out pages. In *Albert Angelo* he extended his technique of omitting words and sentences and physically excised segments of four pages of text. That novel ‘wasn’t available in Australia because H.M.Customs had seized the whole consignment since the text included holes cut in the pages and they wanted to view the offending sections’(174). The custom’s officers did not appreciate the liberating gift Johnson had offered his readers. They wanted wholeness, completion, closure but Johnson left both physical and metaphorical gaps in his writing in order to stimulate his reader’s imagination.

Castro also seeks, through silence and absence, gaps and negations, to release his readers into ‘the real chaos of [their] imaginations’(83). He has written of his admiration for ‘the outstanding First World War poet’ Isaac Rosenberg: ‘Rosenberg was the master of the fragment. He left gaps purposefully so that a better connection could be made.

---

He was obsessed by linkage, and was a precursory diviner of that slippage and aporia which made something understandable but ungraspable.  

Understandable but ungraspable - the quality Castro strives for in his writing. The quality of cosmic black holes. The quality of death.

Iser ascribes a similar quality to negativity: ‘In order to evoke the multifariousness of negativity and to suggest how it can allow the unsayable to speak, negativity can only be described in terms of its operation, and not by any means in terms of a graspicable entity’.  

In Iser’s theory of negativity it is the blanks and negations, the omissions and the cancellations, in a text that qualify what is written on the page and allow the unsayable to speak. The ‘blank...in negating techniques expected for the structuring of the text, acts as a matrix for the productivity sparked in the reader’.

Iser argues that the reader of any text ‘makes implicit connections, fills in gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches’ through his/her understanding of ‘the world in general and of literary conventions in particular’.  

In *Drift* those literary conventions are continually undermined or transgressed so that the reader’s habits of perception are constantly violated and the gaps, in narrative structure and understanding, are never filled. The ‘chaotic, fluid, random [narrative] leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily’(vii). There is always a slippage, always a suggestion of other ways of reading the text. Castro’s narrative techniques - his kaleidoscopic interweaving of multiple perspectives, fragmentation of narrative voice, denial of linear time and stable character identity, paradox, contradiction and outrageous coincidence - effectively confuse and challenge the reader’s expectations. They set the reader adrift.

---


12 Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 211.

Erasure:

*Drift* is concerned with erasure: the erasure of the author, of a race of people and of writing itself. The overarching metaphor for the novel’s writing process is a child’s wax slate, a ‘mystical writing pad...upon which everything written can be erased by lifting the plastic sheet’(266). Whatever has been written on such a slate can be largely erased by lifting the top sheet but the trace of that writing remains. *Drift* suggests that that which has been written - story, history, the past - can never be fully erased. New stories may be written but they are written across the potentially powerful trace of the story beneath, a trace that at some point will overcome its repression.

For Castro writing is a series of fluid, migratory traces:

Writing knows no boundaries. Its metaphors, its translations, are part of a migratory process, birds of passage which wing from the subliminal to the page, leaving their signs for the reader. Meanwhile the writer stands a little to the side, shooting arrows into the wind, with an expression of alarmed uncertainty as the traces disappear into the eternal roar of society’s unconscious.¹⁴

These ‘birds of passage’ appear on the cover of the 1994 edition of *Drift* (Fig 1) in Escher’s ‘Dag en Hacht’(‘Day and Night’). Escher’s woodcut encapsulates the narrative structure and processes of *Drift*. The picture depicts two stories that mirror each other, show the reverse side of each other and that taken together form some sort of a whole. Read one way the picture can be interpreted as a flock of white geese migrating over a settled, controlled countryside. But part of and emerging from those birds is another picture: that of a flock of black geese heading in the opposite direction. The darker more sombre landscape is a reflection of or is reflected by the brighter, more sunny aspect and vice versa. The power of Escher’s woodcut originates from an appreciation not only of its two aspects but the way those aspects interact. Through the centre of the picture there is an invisible division that operates as a reversible mirror would operate. That division demonstrates ‘the absent otherness which lies on the reverse side of all


169
positions’, the ‘unformulated double of the text’.¹⁵

Tony Gilevski’s cover design extends the concerns of the text by situating the image of the Escher woodcut against a more diffuse, fluid background of the same picture. The design suggests layers of stories, layers of detail. A more detailed, particular story, perhaps a personal story, is set against a backdrop of a similar much larger, less-clear story: Drift. The design could also be read as a pictorial representation of the two modes of negativity that inform Drift: Iser’s more focussed understanding of negativity as a process of writing, as play between the black and white spaces of a text, and Blanchot’s recognition of negativity as a larger force in the world of literature and history, a force of absence and death.

B.S. Johnson, in an effort to ensure his readers appreciate the double nature of his narrative, signposts how his text is to be read:

I have always celebrated the intermittent, appended indiscretion and forgetfulness. That’s how stories are formed...I guess we’ll never know the truth, which lies in contradictory fragments. Put them together one way, like a jigsaw: make a story. Put them together differently: make another (13).

I have put the jigsaw together, broadly speaking, in two different ways. In the following discussion I read Drift as a narrative of the relationship between storytelling and annihilation, and as the storytelling of annihilation.

**Storytelling and annihilation:**

Blanchot has written:

When we look at the sculptures of Giacometti, there is a vantage point where they are no longer subject to the fluctuations of appearance or to the movement of perspective. One sees them absolutely: no longer reduced, but withdrawn from reduction, irreducible, and in space, masters of space through their power to substitute for space the unchangeable, lifeless profundity of the imaginary. This point, whence we see them irreducible, puts us at the vanishing point ourselves; it is the point at which here coincides with nowhere. To write is to find this point. No one writes who

---

Writing begins at the point where the writer disappears. Bryan Stanley Johnson understood this proposition. He touched that point. He made it literal. It is the point of balance, the equals sign, in the equation Byron Shelley Johnson recites in *Drift*: ‘death [is] exactly equal to life’ (234). Johnson suicided after completing the first book of his proposed *Matrix Trilogy*. His was ‘the quintessential literary suicide’, an act of ‘ultimate imagination’. He had, in *See The Old Lady Decently*, invited reader participation in completing the remaining two volumes of the trilogy. In killing himself he offered his readers the gift of authorship.

Castro, as a reader of Johnson’s work, accepts that invitation and through a resurrected B.S. Johnson and Thomas McGann writes *Buried Although... and Amongst Those Left Are You...* under the title, *Drift*. Castro, and in turn Tom McGann, take on Foucault’s challenge. They ‘locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers’. Tom does not understand the significance of B.S.’s disappearance. He wants to know why B.S. committed suicide and he cannot discover a satisfactory answer on his own. Castro brings B.S. back to life, and into Tom’s life, in order to demonstrate the process by which writing necessarily annihilates its author.

*Drift*’s opening sentences clearly outline this suicidal process: ‘Let me get to the point immediately: I’ve always wanted to compose my own obituary...Yes, the writing of this tale will literally kill me’ (7).

Tom is an aspiring writer. He has been short-listed for the Booker Prize but B.S., as a favour to Tom, has thrown his potentially prize-winning manuscript into the Thames. The narrative suggests that Tom cannot be a successful author until he understands the essential requirements for writing - an understanding of loss and death

---

16 *The Space of Literature*, 48.
18 Foucault, ‘What is an author?’, 200.
and a preparedness to destroy himself in order for his work to live. Through B.S. Tom comes to appreciate the positive power of loss and nothingness: ‘And then it came to me...I would say [to passengers]: look there’s nothing here. Nada. Nichts. Niente...the smarter ones would get it. You can always tell. They’ve stumbled upon loss. Enlightenment comes when you’ve lost. It would transform their lives.’(247) But an understanding of loss is only the first step of the creative process. Tom needs to know the answer to B.S.’s question: ‘which death matters?’. The answer is, of course, the death of the author.

B.S. is a sacrificial victim of writing. The pen has pierced his side and ‘made a wound from which he will never heal’(225). He returns from the dead to assure his doubting Thomas that if he wants to write he must willingly embrace his own annihilation: ‘Writing is putting a finger in a wound, a wound of experience and working it to the point of your own death.’ To be a truly great writer Tom must desire death and eventually he does: ‘I longed for the unwritten, for the impossibility to write...I longed for the last gasp of death which would release me from the constant extinction of myself’(193).

What is an author?
Castro takes the opportunity of the author’s disappearance through death, to explore his preoccupation with questions of writing, the figure of author and the concept of ‘auto/biography’. As Paul de Man points out, autobiography is often weighted on the side of fact over fiction due to the presence of the author’s ‘proper name’. By re-inscribing the dead B.S. Johnson as B.S. Johnson Castro immediately clouds any sense of a single, stable identity. Byron Shelley Johnson is and is not the English author Bryan Stanley Johnson. Byron refers to The Unfortunates as ‘my’ book. He shares the same birth date and place as Bryan and much of Bryan’s personal history. He disappears, presumed drowned, on November 13, 1993, twenty years to the day after Bryan suicided.

19 Castro, ‘Outside the prison of logic’, 22.
In *Drift* the author figures metamorphose into other authors, other voices. Byron ultimately casts off the responsibility of author and becomes silent. In doing so he passes on the baton to Tom. Tom McGann absorbs B.S. into himself: ‘I was determined to meet with him again, involuntarily learning his mimetic association with the past... already the nervous tic, already the sardonic smirk passing through him to me’(207). Tom believes that B.S. left it for him to finish his work. He writes ‘the last part of Johnson’s trilogy...as a kind of memorial’(172). Tom’s narrative is, however, not so much a remembrance of the dead as a continuing conversation with the dead. Tom muses: ‘Perhaps I was calling him down, pleading for a guiding hand to show a stutterer on his way; or perhaps even as a guide, his Virgilian shyness and distemper may have matched the complicities of my ancestors’(172). His address to the absent B.S. is ‘an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits a possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech’.20 De Man, in ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’, identifies this method of writing as the ‘figure of prosopopeia’(*sic*).21 ‘The prosopopoetic trope’, writes Castro, ‘confers a mask on a person, the feigning of a person when we bring in the dead. It is a fictional address from and to the dead, or as De Man [*sic*] has it, a voice-from-beyond-the-grave. This was my engraving or *graphein*, embodied by my character B.S.Johnson.’22 While *Drift* entertains the notion of the death of the author, the continuing layered spectral presence of the author(s) throughout the text suggests that perhaps the author is not quite dead, he has simply ‘disappeared with a slight trace’(8).

Through its re-inscription of the deceased B.S. Johnson the narrative addresses not simply the death of the author but the cyclic process by which the death of the author gives birth to the reader who in turn becomes author. Seamus describes this process in *Birds of Passage*: ‘Not only am I the author, the originator, but I am his


21 *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 75.

progenitor, having impregnated myself with these fictions.'23 Johnson’s *See The Old Lady Decently* is deeply involved with questions of motherhood - conception, birth, breasts - and the death of the mother. A similar process of birth and death occurs along paternal lines in *Drift*. The male authors annihilate themselves after giving birth to their male readers as the new authors. In *Drift* Bryan Stanley Johnson has given birth to Brian Castro who gives birth to Byron Shelley Johnson who gives birth to Thomas McGann who passes on Bryan Stanley Johnson’s challenge to the reader:

By imagining us, he lit a fire in which he perished. In dying, he pushed the truth beyond its own limit, turning the challenge of supreme honesty upon itself:

...what I am really doing is challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing.

The equation is balanced. It made it impossible to live (266).

When Tom understands B.S.’s equation - that death is equal to life and that the death of the author equals the birth of the work and the birth of the reader, who then becomes author - he applauds the ‘startling, dazzling and blinding originality hidden in his suicide’ and takes Johnson’s death as his own: ‘a death that has become mine’(265). In taking on B.S.’s death Tom is able to ‘retrace [his] steps working back to tell the story before this one’(265). Tom’s narrative is the story of the annihilation of his Aboriginal people.

**Storytelling of annihilation:**

Byron Shelley Johnson signals his contemptuous awareness of what readers will do to his texts:

... fragmented misreadings floating out into the universe, never to return. Take your pick. Some will bend it to their own purposes; others... well, who knows?...will keep it behind the cistern...It’s one of the hazards of putting things down: you no longer belong to yourself. All those acolytes clamouring at the gate (7).

Can a reading of *Drift* as a political comment on the colonial settlement of Australia and

---

23 Castro, 58.
the ongoing effects of abuse and institutionalisation of Aboriginal people be justified or is it simply one of those ‘misreadings’ B.S. laments? Castro has insisted that writing for him is not a ‘politically correct activity’, and that the ‘noise’ of political and social institutions stifles his creativity:

The public culture ... introduces an immense noise, which sounds something like this: nation/nationalism/identity/place/cultural cringe/self-confidence/myth/cultural production/genre/rationalism/commonsense/us/we/them/tradition/postcolonialism/internationalism/immigration/multiculturalism/gender/ethnicity/patriotism etc.

Surrounded by this noise, I am immediately afflicted with paralysis. Sometimes it is days before I can write again.

Yet he has also decried what he sees as the ‘disinterest of postmodernism’, and argued for the ‘noble, autonomous and redemptive’ possibilities of art. Castro asserts that it is only through boldness, inventiveness and play that the novel can aspire to such possibilities. His fiction repeatedly affirms Sergei Wespe’s remarks in Double-Wolf: ‘It was Freud who first taught me that parody comes before the paradigm, play before the principle’. In Drift, when the personal story of B.S. Johnson is mapped on to the story of massacred Aboriginal clans, Castro’s literary games take on a serious hue. Questions of narrative voice, speaking positions, authenticity, hybridity and erasure, concerns of all of Castro’s writing, assume an added political dimension when applied to the history of the colonial settlement of Tasmania.

Is play an appropriate means by which these concerns should be addressed? Castro would answer that play is the only way such concerns can be addressed. ‘The ludic’, he says, ‘is the ultimate awareness of erasure’.


26 ‘Lesions’, 198.


28 ‘Outside the prison of logic’, 22.
play, quoted in the previous chapter, helps clarify this somewhat opaque statement. As noted, Iser explains how the literary strategies of play and staged transformation operate to uncover that which is repressed or seemingly absent in a text. Play is the means by which that which has been erased is made manifest.

Bryan Stanley Johnson appreciated the revolutionary potential of play, not only to make absence present but also to address serious concerns about human relationships, daily existence and Imperial history. Castro laments the inability of the English critics to comprehend Johnson’s strategy:

he was...condemned as ‘experimental’ by critics who were insensitive to the darker purpose beneath his more frivolous provocations. With its freight of black humour and white laughter, a kind of cosmic joking from which one knew there was no recovery, with its eccentric typographical layout, its cut-outs and black holes which mocked the censors, his texts left a particularly vivid representation of the erratic articulation of daily life. 29

Johnson’s experimental narrative techniques directed towards a ‘darker purpose’ seem to have been wasted on a readership that failed to comprehend his strategies of play. Drift, because it employs such outrageous coincidence, fantastical mirroring of characters and events,30 and jokes that at times can only be described as in poor taste,31 is at risk of sharing a similar fate to Johnson’s novels. To dismiss Drift as nothing more than a clever, self-conscious narrative of linguistic play would, however, be a mistake. As Castro has sought to emphasise, his playful, irreverent narrative seeks through its ‘morality of style’ to lend a voice to suffering.32

29 ‘Lesions’, 190

30 Ainslie Cracklewood is the aristocratic English woman who marries and leaves B.S. She is also the nanny for the Tasmanian family where Emma worked years before. The Nora procured by Sperm McGann and sunk off the Fumeaux Islands in the late 1820s sails again in Tasmanian waters in the 1980s under the captaincy of Morris McGann.

31 Tom McGann’s flippant remark : ‘I came from a long line of jumpers’(190) is hard to reconcile with the graphic depiction of the Pennemuker people being driven over the cliff to their death. And elsewhere: ‘They were my people. We were very closely knit. After one genocide you didn’t branch out much’ (186).

32 Barker, ‘Fireworks: An Interview with Brian Castro’. In ‘Lesions’, Castro goes to great lengths to explain the motivation and strategy behind his writing of Drift.
Drift plays with and radically destabilises the terms fact and fiction, history and imagination, in order to deconstruct ways of knowing and not-knowing. Castro’s deconstructive project, like Derrida’s before him, is inherently political. Terry Eagleton’s assessment of Derrida’s philosophic project could equally be applied to Drift:

Derrida is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is for him an ultimately political practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force. He is not seeking, absurdly, to deny the existence of relatively determinate truths, meanings, identities, intentions, historical continuities: he is seeking rather to see such things as the effects of a wider and deeper history - of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices. \(^{33}\)

Drift is Castro’s creative fulfillment of Johnson’s trilogy in which Castro sought to link Johnson’s ‘disappointment with Britain’s colonial adventures to the tragic demise of the Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania’. \(^{34}\) B.S. Johnson himself gestured towards such a link by referring, in the closing stages of See the Old Lady Decently, to ‘what was unmistakably Tasmania’ (viii):

land unalienated ... and some of us still possess maps where the blanks are filled in with vague descriptions, but now we can sit and look comfortably at a photograph and know that our fellow-countrymen out there have settled down to a pleasant life under a fair sky.

Forest solitudes magnificent, glories of secluded fern-tree vales, ‘England all over’

Perhaps no part of the world can show relatively so many old people.

There are no aborigines now left in the island. \(^{35}\)

Tom insists that it was this reference to Tasmania that was the ‘point of departure’ for...

---

\(^{33}\) Literary Theory, 128.

\(^{34}\) Lesions, 197.

\(^{35}\) B.S. Johnson, See the Old Lady Decently, 115-116. Quoted as the epigraph to Drift. The spaces in the lines of text are from the original publication and are significant.
him in writing *Drift*. His narrative comes out of the textual silence, the void that exists between B.S.'s closing two sentences. It is the story of how the 'unmapped' land was settled. It is a violent and disturbing narrative of warfare, rape, disenfranchisement and death. The colonial sense of uninhabited, unmarked land, captured in Johnson’s description, evokes the fiction that the Australian continent was a *terra nullius* when first settled by the British. *Drift* dramatises the ways in which that fiction was an explosive misreading of the land.

Emma McGann is the link between B.S.'s literary preoccupations and that of Australian history. She writes passionate letters to B.S. that plead for action against injustice. Her letters not only draw him down to Tasmania, they force him to confront the question of responsibility:

> Emma soon began to admonish me for not taking action against injustice...Masquerading as myself, I had made the mistake of assuming my readers would at least subscribe to one tiny part of the idea that work and author were separate. Yet now I discovered that I'd been pushed back to a literalness, to what Voltaire meant when he wrote: *I raise the quill, therefore I am responsible* (57-8).

How responsible is B.S.? In England he was ‘excited’ by the thought of Aborigines. They rated alongside unicorns as emblems of extinction and interest: ‘At London University...I learned about extinction. Unicorns, native Tasmanians, the frenzy of purity and cleansing during nationhood. I was excited...I was fascinated by what pioneers called *wooly-haired savages*'(32). Does he care what happened to the Tasmanian Aborigines or are they and their history merely a convenient metaphor for him to write out his fantasies on extinction? The answer(s) to that question can be found in the different readings *Drift* offers of Emma McGann.

**Emma as ghostly other:**

Both Emma and B.S. disappear off Northwest Tasmania on November 13, 1993. The only trace Emma leaves behind is her ‘handbag filled with smooth pebbles’(263). Tom McGann tells his reader that when she disappeared a ‘part of myself went missing as
well, and for months after, I had cause to say: *Emma, c'est moi* (263). Tom’s lament probably has less to do with Flaubert\(^3\) than with Bryan Stanley Johnson’s obsessive relationship with his mother. In *See the Old Lady Decently* Johnson writes:

> from them
> from Em
> from embryo
to embryan
> from Em,
> Me

Tom’s *'Emma, c'est moi'* can be translated as Emma/am me to suggest a reading of Emma as the spectral aspect of Tom, his mystical feminine other. She is his twin but ‘the difference between them, she wrote, was in colouring’ (9). Emma is black, Tom is white. It would appear that colouring is a more powerful signifier of difference than gender.

According to B.S. Emma wrote to him to say that she liked his books. The narrative later suggests that Emma wrote to B.S. out of desperation, out of a ‘need to communicate her grief to someone...who seemed to understand the betrayal of...mothers’ (242). Her cards with their ‘manic pointillism and pithy runes’ (9) were written with ‘an ancient hand, [her] phrases ornamented with the bouquets of the past’ (10). At this juncture Emma is ‘a blank page’ (14). In Tasmania she materialises as a woman on a bus but she can only be seen ‘reflected in the glass’ (15) when the bus is in darkness: ‘It all depends on the dark...on what we left out. And that was how I saw you, my dear Emma’ (15). Is it that Emma is from the darkness, the other side of life? Emma reappears to B.S. when he is drowned, or in a delirious state of semi-drowning, it is never made clear which. He sees the outline of his bloated body washed up on the beach, presumably dead, and goes with Emma to explore the life of the muttonbird mob.

---


\(^3\) B.S. Johnson, 139.
Emma shows him the past. She leads him ‘among the errors which would never be righted, amongst the disregard and the neglect and the trammelling of centuries’ (214). ‘Emma wore a long tee-shirt bordered with a colourful motif. It was the same, he noticed, as the border around her letter-paper and envelopes...he was unborn and she had no substance’ (182). Is Emma anything more than a conveniently blank page upon which B.S. can inscribe his literary and sexual fantasies?

**Emma as absent woman:**

Emma may be yet another of Castro’s absent women. As objects of desire, the women in Castro’s fiction, with the possible exception of Reiko, must remain absent. Ainslie proclaims: ‘Ainslie the Absent, you might as well call me. Always the absent. The woman’ (229). In *Birds of Passage* Seamus, having married Fatima because he liked the way she spoke, explains the important role absence plays in his relationship with her:

> I came to understand that immense gratification was possible only through absences. The absence of touch, the absence of proximity, the absence of any possibility of sexual contact, was what created Fatima’s wholeness for me. It was in this abnegation that I saw her entirely. 38

Again with the exception of *Stepper*, consummation in Castro’s fiction remains textual rather than sexual. Seamus and Fatima seek to join their minds, never their bodies. In *Drift*: ‘Whenever [B.S.] felt love... (love was absence, always a wanting...to express and to die), he sought out another as surrogate, with whom he would make metaphors instead of love’ (136). 39 The male protagonists in most of Castro’s novels exhibit an Oedipal attraction to women. 40 Emma McGann shares her Christian name with the familiar version of B.S.’s mother’s name: ‘Em’. But Emma McGann will not suckle

---

38 Castro, 80.

39 In *Pomeroy* Estrellita makes love to Pomeroy ‘crying softly. Write me! Write me!’, 89.

40 When, in *Birds of Passage*, Seamus finally climaxes he cries ‘Edna’, the name of his stepmother, not Anna the woman he is with. Pomeroy becomes sexually aroused when he watches his aunty, who is his surrogate mother, in the bath. The case of the Wolf Man that forms the basis for *Double Wolf* suggests that the men’s psychological problems stem from Oedipal fantasies and fear of castration.
B.S.'s fantasies. Her tattooed breasts proclaim: 'Whitey Sucks' (214).

**Emma as the land:**

On one level Emma can be read as the Tasmanian land. She and the land share a common history of rape and violation. Emma, at sixteen, is raped first by her foster father and then by the white invaders:

> The second time they came from the sea...around the point came a cruiser seeking shelter from heaving seas and she watched it anchor in the bay...and they were after her, naked now they were...great thighs trembling upon her as she was pinned again, playing dead, gasping and shrieking with pain; each again; and she held the heads of those who seemed to care, feeble exploiters of her grief (242).

The colonial history of Tasmanian settlement is one that celebrates 'the penetration, the amniotic haven of coves and harbours which [the white men] prized so much because they came from the sea and needed anchorage in their own reflection, their identity synonymous with conquest' (242).

Having been abused, raped, penetrated, Emma has trouble speaking and is at times described as 'mute' (206). While Castro may consider muteness as a state of innocence, a state removed from 'the guilt of language and its betrayal' (109), Emma's inability or refusal to speak takes on a more political dimension when one considers that she is an Aboriginal woman with no voice. *Drift* suggests that history is about story that is remembered and recorded. History is about memory, or lack of, and voice. It is about ways of telling. With no voice Emma is left with only memory.

**Emma as descendent of WORE:**

WORE's voice is the one powerfully authentic female voice which punctuates the text of *Drift*. The reader is given direct access to her consciousness as she mutilates herself and aborts her foetuses. WORE's pain, her abuse, her situation are made all the more palpable by the fragmentary nature of her narrative. The horrific glimpses the reader is given of WORE's existence haunt *Drift* in a manner that calls to mind the 'spectre of
Truganini's spectral presence hovers over and is woven through the narrative.

Damien Barlow has examined how Drift ‘intervenes in and disrupts the discourses of the “extinct”, “authentic” and “hybrid” Aboriginal Tasmanians’. Barlow draws attention to what he sees as the significant absence of Truganini in the text. Though Truganini is not named in Drift the trace of her presence is undeniable. While WORE’s story embraces only some aspects of Truganini’s story she can be read as a symbol of Truganini. WORE’s name, always in uppercase, emphasises the symbolic role she plays in Drift. Like Truganini, WORE can be read as an ‘emblem of extinction’. Ian Anderson explains that term:

When I was a kid we were told we were TRUCANNINI’S descendants. In actual fact we aren’t. But colonialism had extinguished a tapestry of history and offered in return an emblem of extinction: TRU-GEENANNER. Being the children of TRU-GAN-NAN-NER we were the children of the vanquished and gone - hybrids, half-castes, those touched with the tar brush ... coloured, discoloured. But it was never: your history is black. We were born out of the end of history - out of that moment in 1876 when TRU-GAN-NAN-NER the so-called ‘last Tasmanian Aborigine’ died.

WORE - in a move reminiscent of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s Beloved - tries to kill her children to spare them the pain that she has suffered at the hands of the white invaders. She wanted to be the end of the line but one of the foetuses survived: ‘There must have been a child’(256). WORE’s line was continued. Her descendants are the ‘hybrids’,

---

41 B. Smith, The Spectre of Truganini, 9.
43 WORE’s bones, like Truganini’s, were put on display. Unlike Truganini, but like Yagan and many now unknown and unnamed Aboriginal people, WORE’s remains, in that Darwinian era, were shipped to scientists and museums in London.
45 The narrative technique of fragmentary voice and explanation enhances the parallels that can be drawn between WORE and her repeated abortions and Sethe in Morrison’s Beloved.
'the half-castes' (174), Tom and Emma. In contemporary Australian society Emma, the abused Aboriginal girl who now 'belongs nowhere', has come of age. She is a politically aware young woman but she has no voice.

Drift refutes any suggestion that Aboriginal society and history ended in Tasmania in 1876. The narrative structure and the outrageous coincidence between names, places and the Nora, suggests that then is now and that history is an ongoing process forever evolving, moving backwards and forwards. History, like writing, is a process of becoming and unbecoming. But for history to survive its story must be told and recorded and passed on. B.S. laments: 'Someone must have known about it. Someone keeping records'.

Bernard Smith has referred to the attempt by 'white Australians' to forget the atrocities dealt Aborigines by British settlers and consequent generations as the 'continuing colonial crime, the locked cupboard of our history'. B.S. labels this not-knowingness of the Australian people, 'collective amnesia' (203).

Drift confronts the amnesia that to B.S.'s mind afflicts the non-Aboriginal, and in Tom McGann's case, the Aboriginal population of Australia. Amnesia is a loss of memory. The term carries within itself the notion that what has been forgotten or unremembered was once known. Drift suggests that it is not only Sperm McGann and his cohorts who are responsible for the systematic abuse and decimation of the Tasmanian Aborigines. 'When we speak', says B.S. Johnson, 'we are all McGann's... collective amnesia makes us all guilty, each to each...guilty relations' (203). Drift wants to penetrate the black holes of Australian memory and history, to peel back the layers of unknowing and expose the truth. It wants to destroy the ignorance and apathy towards Australian history exhibited by characters such as Deakin, the Federal policeman: 'Mournful history, he ruminated. Never learned much of it. All those places had

46 The titles of Johnson's remaining novels, Buried Although and Amongst Those Left Are You, could be interpreted within a postcolonial framework as a suggestion that the repressed past will eventually erupt and demand accountability from those who are left.

47 The Spectre of Truganini, 10. Smith goes on to say: 'it is this new awareness of what actually occurred that ... constitutes a central problem for the integrity and authenticity of Australian culture today'. Integrity and authenticity are two key terms in the game of Drift.
D.H. Lawrence recognised the sense of drift that informed the Australian consciousness:

What was the good of trying to be an alert conscious man here? You couldn’t. Drift, drift into a sort of obscurity, backwards into a nameless past, hoary as the country is hoary. Strange old feelings wake in the soul: old, non-human feelings. And an old, old indifference, like a torpor, invades the spirit...Would the people awaken this ancient land, or would the land put them to sleep, drift them back into the torpid semi-consciousness of the world of twilight?48

*Drift* challenges its readers to renounce any sense of apathy.

Much Australian history, suggests *Drift*, is a history of erasure. Cape Grim has been cleaned up leaving no trace of the horrendous massacre which occurred there: ‘Cape Grim...we invested the place with views, health, fresh-air monitoring stations, and cleaned up the stains of the past’(13). But stains by their very nature always leave some trace, some discolouration. Cape Grim is one of the black holes of Australian history. A cosmic black hole is hidden by an event horizon. Bodies crossing that event horizon seemingly disappear as they are pulled into a bottomless pit of intense gravity. There are no bodies at Cape Grim. B.S. attempts to blow up the cave, the ‘cathedral of silence and deception’(254), that he suspects harbours the remains of the Aboriginal people driven off the cliffs to their death. He fails. Not only are their bodies never found, neither is B.S.’s. After the inquest into B.S.’s disappearance Tom remarks: ‘The reports carried a particular refrain, echoed down through the ages, resonant of the fate of so many Tasman explorers, convicts, escapees, dreamers, natives...there were no bodies, no sir’(258).

*Drift* simultaneously marks the massacres and consequent absence of the original Aboriginal inhabitants of Tasmania and importantly signifies their ongoing presence. The narrative outlines a process by which the reader can not only understand the continuing presence of the Aboriginal people, but with imagination, can feel, see

48 *Kangaroo*, (Sydney: Collins, 1989), 204.
and smell that presence. When B.S. shows Tom the brutal events of the past he says: ‘Here, kneel...Kneel for God’s sake and listen to the hacking cough, the dry fever of an afternoon drawn to the coolness of an open door...here, feel the wind and its time entering through the stone where the lintel and threshold have fused...listen, smell...listen...see’(204-205). B.S. has no trouble hearing the cries of the World War I dead in the fields of Flanders:

...the thought of the thousands of bodies lying beneath suddenly burst my eardrums, sounds of them crawling through the earthworks and calling to me, their mouths filled with worms and water and mud, their shouts forming exploding shells, great starbursts of fire and dirt (63).

He can hear the convicts long-since buried in the Tasman peninsula:

You can hear them stirring now.
Turning about, to and fro, and muttering.
Isolated, internalised.
...In the end, just ghosts.
Just voices.
Justice (142).

Yet it is only when he is ‘blacker than most mainland Aborigines’(232) that Byron walks the cliffs at Northmere and hears ‘the shouting and the screaming of the PENNEMUKER; the PENDOWTE; the TOMME-GINNER; the PEE-RAPER; the MANEGIN’(233).

What matter who’s speaking?
It is not only the cries of the dead in *Drift* that cannot be heard. The voices of the living are also silenced. Emma McGann has lived a life of homelessness and sexual abuse. She is hurt, angry and powerless to change the imprisoning structures that surround her. She has been silenced:

So now Emma McGann doesn’t speak much. She sees things and says nothing, except that once, in a towering rage at his politics, she had told her brother to go back to the reservation. Things will take their course.

---

49 Emma operates as both a spectral figure from beyond the grave and as a character in the narrative so her voice can be read as that of the living and/or the dead.
Someone will come along and set the record straight. It’s no good remembering, for it brings no comfort. It just creates another hole into which she falls, a temporary amnesia. Why have history otherwise, if not to celebrate the continuity served by ritual, to applaud ritual establishment; the penetration, the amniotic haven of coves and harbours which they prized so much because they came from the sea and needed anchorage in their own reflection, their identity synonymous with conquest? Why have history if not to act, to explode what is necessary? History was a continuity of explosions.

It was then that she began to write letters, feeling such a need to communicate her grief to someone she had read in desperation, who seemed to understand the betrayal of his own mother, of her mother and the betrayal of all mothers beyond her, through the painful dissolution of himself (242).

Despite her lack of voice Emma’s story does get told, though significantly, it is not told by her. Perhaps that is why she operates as a largely intangible presence. Tom is less astute than Emma but he eventually comes to understand how the inability to tell one’s story results in a loss of personal and communal identity and history:

I said to Byron...do you ever think how the individual is never in command of himself, like the way someone else’s voice takes over the story he has to tell and soon there’s a chorus and the chorus is like distant cannon fire, the wind melting everything into dust, all the great ideas...and all this the end result of a momentous single experience?... it’s the greatness of the world that words are no longer sovereign, he said, truth is simply a language game and I said no, that wasn’t what I meant at all... I mean when you are not in control of who you are, not knowing your place in the world and others begin to tell your story and sooner or later you have no story that’s yours. The core is emptiness...Rejoice, he said. Rejoice that death is inside life (246).

Tom McGann is one of the voices of contemporary Aboriginal Australia. His question to B.S. raises crucial issues that confront much black/white collaborative efforts in writing, drama and the visual arts, in Australia today: Who has the right to speak? Whose story is it anyway?

The experience of skin:

B.S. injects himself with ‘melanotan’(225). He eventually turns blacker than all but the blackest Africans. He blacks himself out: ‘Extinction. No longer white, unquestioning,
biblical. No more dreams of primogeniture and ownership. No longer an author. What a relief (209). He throws off the mantle of author and takes the opportunity to become silent because he understands that the story that needs to be told is not his story. B.S. remarks: ‘It was imperative a McGann would come to record it all... McGann’s flickering paleness gives him the authority. For this skin of mine has silenced the inauthentic, endowed a potential simply for action, not words’ (209). B.S. chooses action, injecting the blackness into himself to the point of self-annihilation, which for him operates as a form of redemption. Tom chooses words. He seeks redemption through storytelling.

The question of skin colour, like so much else in Drift, is multilayered. The text offers no easy political or politically correct statement. Tom McGann is given the right to tell the story of the annihilation of the Tasmanian Aborigines because of his skin colour but Tom is an albino Aboriginal. The figure of Tom deconstructs most aspects of the ‘authentic’ Aborigine; not only is he white, he has no connection with the land or, before B.S., the stories of his ancient past. Tom can be read as the hybrid body in extremis, the acceptable white Aborigine par excellence. Al-bino may also refer to the double nature of Tom and B.S.’s relationship. They are each constructed as binaries of self and other. As writers they metamorphose into each other. B.S. becomes Tom, Tom takes on the death of B.S.

For Castro the writer is ‘an inhabiter of other people’s skins’. 50 He has explained in the ‘Afterword’ to ‘Lesions’ - an essay in which he outlines his thinking and strategies in the writing of Drift - his obsession with what he terms ‘the experience of skin’ and the way in which he has attempted, in Drift, to tie this linguistic experience to that of colonial history:

I had met some Tasmanian Aborigines three years before; living examples of the myth of extinction, as they pointed out, and I found their humour infectious. I coupled this with an obsession that had run deep in me for a while, namely that a corporeal process, ‘the experience of skin’ as I liked to call it, formed the essential meninges or membrane of language. Its

50 Barker, ‘Fireworks: An Interview with Brian Castro'.
accuracy exacts the most extreme effort of the imagination and it jeopardises even the most empathic attempts at universality, for the experience of skin has a strong link with suicide, known only to those with the gift of sorrow. From that abjection I hoped to salvage some linguistic reconciliation.\textsuperscript{51}

In that same essay Castro probes the relationship between experimentation and experience. 'Experiment', he writes, 'originally meant to have experience of, to experience, to feel, to suffer'. Castro deplores the experimentation of the postmodern in which "anything goes", or which is "impossible to understand".\textsuperscript{52} The density of his narratives and the self-conscious playfulness of his style, however, especially in Drift where he is dealing with the very real experiences of Aboriginal people, leave Castro open to precisely that criticism. \textit{The London Review of Books} decried B.S. Johnson's 'microscopic recordings of self-consciousness and irresponsible frivolity'(28) and accused him of falsely placing writing before living. Castro's literary style could be interpreted in similar terms. For Johnson and for Castro, however, there is no separation between writing and living: 'what I am really doing is challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing'(266). Castro makes no apologies for his experimentation and his game-playing. As he concludes in his discussion on the 'experience of skin':

\textit{We do not all feel in the same fashion. The experience of skin has the capacity to include or exclude, enhance or corrupt ... its link with language is to make a final attempt at life; another go at the old enigma with the freedom to fail absolutely.}\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} 'Afterword' of 'Lesions', 201.

\textsuperscript{52} 'Lesions', 187.

\textsuperscript{53} 'Lesions', 201.
PART THREE

SPEAKING SILENCE

*Bringing them home*
PART THREE

SPEAKING SILENCE: *BRINGING THEM HOME*

I: Body Language
II: Breaking the Silence
III: Lest We Forget
I have laid my ear to the dust, and the thing it said
was Silence. Therefore I have made silence speak; I found
for the night a sound.

Judith Wright ‘The Blind Man, V’.
The Yirkalla petition crystallises key features of all contemporary Black Australian writing: the marriage of art and politics, of the verbal and the visual.

**Body language**

Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia?

A.O. Neville (1937)

Yes, the birth of even an unsuccessfully first-white-man-born-in-the-family-line has required a lot of death, a lot of space, a lot of emptiness.

Kim Scott (1999)

Castro’s argument that ‘the experience of skin’ is a corporeal process which forms the essential membrane of language clearly establishes what he sees as the intimate and interdependent relationship between the body and language. The self is embodied by both skin and language. Skin and language operate for Castro, not as some protective covering, some promise of wholeness and integrity, but as a source of potential rupture, a rupture through which the self may be abandoned to the power of death. Castro theorises ‘the experience of skin’ in terms reminiscent of post-colonial Aboriginal history. ‘The experience of skin’, he remarks, ‘makes the link between death, repression and reconciliation’. The experience of skin for Aboriginal Australians has been a process of discrimination, injustice and death: death of many individuals, of language and of culture. Against great odds it has also been an experience of empowerment. Aboriginal skin, through body markings and ceremonial painting, is the canvas on which stories, old and new, of Aboriginal culture are told. It is also, through skin names, a powerful source of identity. The colour of Aboriginal skin defiantly and immediately tells part of the story of the settlement of Australia. ‘I stand before you’, states Wendy Brady, ‘clothed in the colour of colonisation’.

Kim Scott’s novel *Benang: from the heart* is a narrative concerned with skin colour, language, silence, repression, death and ultimately reconciliation. It is a

---

1 Barker, ‘Fireworks: An Interview with Brian Castro’.

2 Brady, delivering the keynote address at the ‘Assimilation: Then and Now’ conference (University of Sydney, 30 Nov. 2000), was referring to the whiteness of her skin.
narrative written from the heart but written on and about the body. More precisely it is written on the skin and about skin colour. *Benang*’s protagonist, Harley, is the end product of his Scottish grandfather’s eugenic experiments. He is ‘the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line’. Harley inherits not only his grandfather’s skin colour but ‘his language, the voices of others, his stories. That history whose descendants write: *There was never any trouble. Never blood spilled, or a gun raised in anger.*’ (*Bn* 183) His possession of this language, this history, these voices, has necessarily dispossessed him of his Nyoongar tongue and culture, his true inheritance as an Aboriginal man. It is only as he approaches adulthood that Harley discovers his Aboriginal ancestry and the calculated evil of his grandfather’s experiments in racial breeding. Ernest Solomon Scat, Harley’s grandfather, has achieved in Harley, what Ern’s mentor and hero A.O.Neville envisaged: a white-skinned, hazel-eyed man with no memory of his Aboriginal culture or family.

Harley is the catastrophic end-product of Neville’s policies that were designed to ‘uplift and elevate [Aborigines] to our own plane’ (*Bn* 11). On discovering that he is of Aboriginal descent Harley becomes weightless and finds it increasingly difficult to remain grounded. Rootless, with no cultural references or Nyoongar language, he is unable to leave his mark upon the world. He comes to understand that only by knowing his past, by owning his own story, can he achieve a palpable existence, one in which he can leave a footprint in the sand.

Harley sets out to write ‘nothing more than a simple family history, the most local of histories’ (*Bn* 10). But Harley’s family history is part of a much larger story; a story of nation building, of government policy, eugenics, assimilation, rape, abuse and death. *Benang* tells these stories by interweaving official correspondence and records of Aboriginal protection officers and police with an imaginative reconstruction of the lives of three generations of Harley’s Aboriginal ancestors. Ern, being of a scientific and meticulous disposition, has accumulated years of family records: ‘documents...

---

3 K.Scott, *Benang: from the heart*, (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999), 11. All further references to *Benang* are to this edition and page numbers appear with the abbreviation *Bn* in the body of the text.
certificates of birth, death, marriage; newspaper clippings, police reports; letters...parish records; cemetery listings; books, photographs' (Bn 25). In these photographs Harley’s ancestors are ‘grouped according to skin colour...full-blood, half-caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon’. Harley recognises these silent, increasingly pale faces for what they are: ‘fractions of what [they] might have been’ (Bn 26). His narrative seeks to restore the voices and life-stories of the photographed specimens and in so doing to make them whole.

Harley writes in order to ‘repopulate’ Ern’s version of history. He fills in the whitewashed gaps and silences of Ern’s records with the lives of his Aboriginal ancestors. Fanny Benang, Harley’s maternal great-grandmother, was able to reunite her family with her ancestors by leading them through country in which she recognised her ancestor’s trace. Such an option is not open to Harley. In order to connect with his ancestors, to reinscribe their presence, to tell their stories, he must use white-man’s language, white-man’s ways. In place of country he has ‘paper, and words not formed by an intention corresponding to my own’ (Bn 471). Harley supplements these white-man’s ways with his own initiation process. Empowered and embittered by learning the truth of his family history, he carves words into his grandfather’s skin ‘to mark him, to show my resentment at how his words had shaped me’ (Bn 37). He rubs black ash and ink into Ern’s wounds in order to inscribe his black words on the white page of Ern’s skin. Harley’s words literally cut deep. The wounds he inflicts, like those inflicted on generations of Aboriginal people through government policies of assimilation and child separation, scar ‘in unforeseen ways. Letters I’d taken so much trouble with changed shape, and the words became hard to decipher’ (Bn 78). Harley writes:

My blade drew letters with a fine white line, but in an instant all precision would be lost in gushing blood. I bandaged his wounds to conceal what I wrote and, bathing them, considered how they grew, how they altered and elaborated on what I had intended (Bn 286).

Harley knows that his story must be told not only on the body of his grandfather but also on paper so that future generations of Australians can read it and know the truth of Aboriginal history. He repeatedly feels unequal to the task and wants to abandon his
yet, as difficult as it sometimes is, he knows that he must persist in the struggle to tell his story, to be heard: 'There is no other end, no other destination for all this paper talk but to keep doing it, to keep talking, to remake it' (Bn 471-72). Benang demonstrates how Aboriginal voices have for most of the twentieth century been effectively silenced by the voices and stories of non-Aboriginal Australians and, through the figure of Harley, how those more dominant narratives have been absorbed at the cost of traditional stories by some Aborigines themselves. Harley has to dismantle the language and stories he has inherited before he can discover and relate the earlier stories of Aboriginal Australia that lie buried beneath. Scott uses the metaphor of the grandfather's house as non-Aboriginal or Australian history to chart Harley's progress.

Harley sets about renovating Ern's house by chipping away at the external render and the mortar that binds the bricks together. The relationship between this chipping away and writing is made explicit through the repetition of 'Tap tap': 'Tap tap. I began chipping the render from the stone walls of the old house. I hesitate to mention it; in the context of this story it may seem so dreadfully symbolic' (Bn 24). And later: 'Tap tap. Fingers on the keyboard now' (Bn 25). As the render begins to fall away Ern suffers a stroke that leaves him debilitated and, more importantly, mute. The walls and frame of the house remain firm. Harley feels he lacks the strength and will to continue with the renovation until, with the help of his old Nyoongar uncles who tell him stories of their past, he finds his own voice. He begins to tell his story, to sing and to rebuild the house. Significantly, he allows some gaps to remain in the replastered walls. It is through these gaps that the darkness creeps in.

Fanny Benang wondered how to tell her story 'softly enough so that [her surviving children and family] might remember' (Bn 246). With the disappearance of his mother, the early death of his father, his separation from his Aboriginal relatives and his abusive upbringing by his white grandfather, Harley almost didn't hear, let alone remember, Fanny's story. His ignorance of his family and national history is part of a larger collective ignorance about the history of black/white relations in Australia that has been consciously fostered through the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth
century. In April 1937 A.O. Neville, in his capacity as Chief Protector of Aborigines and Fisheries (WA), addressed key administrators of Aboriginal affairs at the Commonwealth and State Authorities Conference in Canberra and proposed the methods by which white Australians could 'eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia'. Neville outlined a plan of child removal and racial outbreeding as the means by which the 'problem' of 'half-castes' could be dealt. While Neville's plan for a national amnesia ultimately failed, it did substantially contribute to a pervasive culture of forgetting that has informed much Australian history and identity.

Professor W.E.H. Stanner, in the second of his 1968 Boyer Lectures, labelled what he saw as the almost total absence of reference to Aboriginal people in Australian history: 'The Great Australian Silence'. Stanner, after a partial survey of history texts, concluded that:

inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness...What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale.

Stanner called for the telling of 'the other side of the story over which the great Australian silence reigns'. Such a telling, he argued, 'would have to be a world...away from the conventional histories of the coming and development of British civilisation'. Such a telling has, over the last thirty years, begun. It can be heard in the 'revisionist' histories told by, amongst others, Henry Reynolds, C.D. Rowley and Peter Read. It can be heard in the proliferation of Aboriginal stories being told through literature, dance, painting and song. It can also be heard in the stories told to a government-sponsored inquiry into the practices of child removal.

---


5 *After the Dreaming*, 24-25.
Bringing them home:

May 1997 saw the publication of one of the most important stories of recent Australian history, a story that to date has been largely silenced. It is an immensely powerful story about how tens of thousands of children were denied the opportunity to be part of their family and develop a sense of belonging, culture and identity because of their skin colour. Bringing them home, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, documents the effects of the policy of racial engineering or ‘breeding out colour’ that operated in Australia from at least the 1930s until the late 1970s.

The Inquiry was established in 1995 in ‘response to increasing concern among key Indigenous agencies and communities that the general public’s ignorance of the history of forcible removal was hindering the recognition of the needs of its victims and their families and the provision of services’. The publication and reception of the Inquiry’s findings has ruptured the blanket of silence that has nurtured the ‘general public’s ignorance’ of Aboriginal history. That rupturing has caused considerable discomfort amongst some commentators who, having decried the incorporation of first-person narratives in the Report, have sought comprehensively to discredit and, therefore, silence it. The detractors of the Report apply the rules of evidence to the stories of the witnesses to the Commission and find them less than credible. The nature of this criticism raises important questions not only for the prospects of education and reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, but also questions about the role of literature, of narrative and of history in informing a national

---

6 Penny van Toorn has insisted that Aboriginal communities knew of the stories of widespread child removal and that it was a case of ‘white deafness’ rather than silence but, as will be discussed, Peter Read has explained how and why that multilayered silence did in part extend to Aboriginal communities.

7 The Report notes, at its outset: ‘Indigenous children have been forcibly separated from their families and communities from the very first days of the European occupation of Australia’ (BTH 27).

8 Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), 18. The Report is hereafter referred to in the body of the text, with page numbers, as BTH.
consciousness.

In an unexpected way, engaging with this criticism may involve a realization of Webb’s figure of the absent presence/present absence who goes ahead of the explorers on the road elsewhere. It may also involve a realization of Castro’s intention to deconstruct conventional categories of time, reality and structure and so liberate readers into a new way of reading. Webb’s poetry and Castro’s fiction have in common an impulse to break down the walls of oppressive language, imprisoning fiction. In this sense, they model a way of seeing and being differently. Further, they show that reconciliation and justice require more than legal models of truth; they require a recognition that story itself is a valid way of telling and knowing truth (as well as a recognition that truth ought not be reduced to fact).

The terms of reference:
In August 1995 The Human Rights And Equal Opportunity Commission was requested by the then Attorney General, Michael Lavarch, to inquire into and report on: the past laws, practices and policies which resulted in the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by compulsion, duress or undue influence, and the effects of those laws, practices and policies; the adequacy of the need for any changes in current laws, practices and policies relating to services and procedures currently available to those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were affected by separation; issues of compensation; current laws, practices and policies with respect to placement and care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.9 The President of the Commission was Sir Ronald Wilson, a former judge of the High Court of Australia and moderator in the Uniting Church. Sir Ronald and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Dodson, took primary responsibility for conducting the hearings of the Inquiry.

The Commission heard oral and written submissions from 535 Aboriginal people who claimed to be affected by the laws and policies of separation and from 49

9 These terms of reference have been paraphrased. The terms in full are reprinted in the Appendix.
church and 7 government bodies. These submissions were collated and many of them published under the title *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. The Report is a 689 page document, bulky and difficult to handle. It cost $59.95, roughly four times the cost of a novel.

The Australian Government Publishing Service did an original print run of 2000 which sold within days. Two further print runs each of 7000 copies also sold quickly. Random House, at a time when publishing houses were downsizing their author lists, commissioned books and staff in an attempt to arrest rapidly decreasing profit margins, recognised something in the stories of *Bringing them home* that made an abridged version of the Report a worthwhile commercial bet. In March 1999 they published *the stolen children: their stories* edited by Carmel Bird. In this book Bird has collated nineteen stories of witnesses to the Commission with comments on and reactions to the Report from a diverse selection of public figures. *The stolen children* retails at $19.95. The original print run of over 7000 sold out within five weeks. Since then a further two print runs totalling 13 500 have been done. Of the 20 500 books printed, 18 500 copies had sold within eleven months of publication.

Why was the Report a runaway success in publishing terms? If *Bringing them home* was merely a legal document reporting on a Commission of Inquiry, like so many Commissions of Inquiry in the Australian political landscape, 2000 copies should have easily satisfied public demand for it. Why was the Report so much in demand? Part of its initial popularity can be attributed to the fact that the hearings were conducted in private sessions and that the print media serialised excerpts prior to publication with

---

10 Over 40 000 community guides (abbreviated versions of the report) and 4000 thirty-five minute video versions of the report have been produced and distributed or sold. In 1997 Doubleday published a revised edition of Coral Edwards & Peter Read (eds.), *The Lost Children: Thirteen Australians taken from their Aboriginal families tell of the struggle to find their natural parents* (1989).

lead-ins in bold type stating: ‘I’ve seen girls naked, strapped to chairs and whipped’.12

Voyeurism aside, the Report was released at a time of heightened public debate about Aboriginal rights, reconciliation and the implications of the High Court’s *Mabo* and *Wik* judgements. There was a hunger in the community to know more about the life experiences of Aboriginal Australians. That hunger to know did not seem to be shared by the Prime Minister. In October 1996 the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald* announced ‘Howard closes the door on “stolen children” inquiry’ and quoted Howard’s parliamentary statement that he held doubts about the ‘long-term value and practical contribution of the inquiry’.13 The Prime Minister’s pre-emptive dismissal of the Report’s findings fuelled the political tensions, and consequent public interest, that were building around the issue of the stolen generation.

The overwhelming appeal of the Report, however, can be attributed to the way it was written. If the Report answered the public’s hunger to know about the stolen generation with legal argument and statistics, rather than with powerful personal stories, the demand for *Bringing them home* would not have been so great. In the words of Sir Ronald Wilson:

> I think the secret has been to keep intact the actual words of the storytellers as far as possible in describing the effects of the process. That has built in an enormous capacity in the book itself to compel the reader to be moved by it, because it’s almost as if they were listening to the stories themselves.14

It is the power of the words, the sheer force of the stories that rescue *Bringing them home* from being yet another dry, legalistic report. It is difficult to put this book down. However, there has been a conservative backlash, against this document. By the time *the stolen children: their stories* was published in March 1998 it was necessary for Random House to insert an erratum slip inside the front cover stating:

---


The publisher has been contacted by a party that denies certain allegations made in the Report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This party states the Inquiry process did not allow it to respond to the allegations in the Report. The nature of the Inquiry process and of the information sought and provided meant that evidence and submissions could not be tested as thoroughly as would occur in a courtroom. This applies to all the evidence.

And here lies the crux of the backlash. The ‘truth’ of the stories, the oral autobiographies, told by Aboriginal people to the Commission, is seen by some to be seriously suspect because it has not been tested in a court of law.

Backlash:
The published backlash to the Commission of Inquiry and *Bringing them home* began in earnest in January 1998. After some months the heightened public debate, carried out largely through newspaper columns, letters to the editor and *Quadrant* magazine articles and editorials, eased off only to be reignited in September 2000. The columnist and *Quadrant* editor P.P. McGuinness has been a driving force behind the attempt to discredit the Report. In 1998 McGuinness wrote that the Report:

> has shown scant regard for evidence, balance and the credibility of witnesses...While there is no doubt that many of the witnesses wept when they recalled their childhood, and the hearts of many were wrung, there is more than one cause of adult misery than removal from one’s parents...While the evidence given by witnesses to the commission cannot be ignored, neither can it for the most part be checked against other sources of evidence.15

Frank Devine complained of manipulation: ‘Harrowing anecdote is used in an attempt to force compliance with the report’s recommendations’. He went on to comment on Sir Ronald Wilson’s suggestion that the Canadian government’s apology to its native people was a ‘great endorsement of our own report on the stolen children’ by stating: ‘Such impulsive intensity is a reminder of Bertrand Russell’s aphorism: “An opinion

15 ‘We need a closer look at the stolen children’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 1998, 17.
needs to be held fervently only if it is doubtful or demonstrably wrong".16

In February 1998 the Institute of Public Affairs published Ron Brunton’s concentrated attack on *Bringing them home*, a ‘backgrounder’ titled ‘Betraying the Victims: The “Stolen Generations” Report’.17 In this paper Brunton denounces the use of ‘heart-rending statements from witnesses’, and claims that *Bringing them home* is among other things, ‘a most unworthy and tendentious document’ and ‘the most intellectually and morally irresponsible report to be presented to an Australian government in recent years’(B 3). Brunton goes so far as to assert that because the Commission did not rigorously check the evidence given by each witness, the Report ‘betrays the Aboriginal victims of the past almost as surely as would a report which attempted to deny their experiences completely’(B 3).

Brunton takes issue with many aspects of the Report. A detailed response to those criticisms, though warranted, remains outside the immediate concerns of this thesis.18 These chapters seek to explore the consequences of Brunton’s suggestion that truth can somehow be reached only through rigid legal practice and not through story. If such a proposition is correct what place is there for literature, art and spirituality in informing both an individual and collective consciousness?

Brunton writes:

Because the issues at stake in the ‘stolen generations’ inquiry are so important, and because these involve a number of matters of ongoing and


18 Robert Manne has taken issue with some of Brunton’s claims. See ‘Rumble turns into a raw deal’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 1998, 15 and ‘The removalists’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 2000, 17. See also Hal Wootten’s criticism of Brunton’s backgrounder in *Indigenous Law Bulletin* June 1988, 4:12, 4-8. Peter Read’s *A Rape of the Soul so Profound: The Return of the Stolen Generations*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), though not written as a reply to Brunton, effectively rebuts Brunton’s arguments that the Commission should have included the experiences of white children and deals with questions of evidence and the truth of oral history. As this thesis goes to print the inaugural *Australian Quarterly Essay* is about to be published. An edited extract of that essay, by Robert Manne, titled *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*, has been published. See ‘Right and Wrong’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 March 2001, Spectrum 1, 10-11.
heated contention, it was imperative that the Inquiry did everything in its power to ensure that its accounts of past practices and its conclusions were beyond any reasonable question (B 2).

'Beyond any reasonable question', beyond reasonable doubt. For Brunton, McGuinness and Devine, unless the rules of evidence are applied to the testimonies of the witnesses, 'the painful experiences which the Inquiry sought to make known could be easily dismissed or ignored, as could their contemporary implications' (B 2).

The key words operating almost as a mantra throughout Brunton’s backgrounder are ‘evidence’ and ‘corroboration’. He may be correct in noting that the Report ‘does not provide any evidence that the Inquiry attempted to distinguish possibly false or exaggerated claims about experiences and later effects from genuine claims' (B 5). The power of the witnesses’ testimony was such that Sir Ronald Wilson, a conservative lawyer, who has said he was ‘privileged’ to hear the testimonies, abandoned what would have been a lifetime’s legal training: ‘I didn’t stop, as a judge would have stopped, to ask where’s the corroboration. How could you doubt the authenticity of a story when tears are running down the faces of storytellers?’ (B 5) Brunton finds it:

surprising that Sir Ronald, a former High Court judge, did not seem to realise that by asking ‘Where’s the corroboration?’ and demonstrating that appropriate corroboration had been sought and obtained, he would be strengthening the cases of witnesses and assuring the credibility of the Inquiry’s findings (B 5).

In a legal sense Brunton’s criticism may be valid. Truth in a court of law must depend on more than emotional distress. When questions of genocide and compensation are being examined a more rigorous test of authenticity may be called for but as Wilson has repeatedly stressed since the publication of Bringing them home:

We weren’t asked to decide whether offences had been committed. We were asked to ‘trace the history and record the effects’ of a policy by consulting widely and that didn’t spell out to us that we were to be like a criminal court testing evidence...We made it our business not to probe because these people were distressed enough to simply record it and we were about simply telling a story, not pursuing retribution...we thought it was the best way to go and to simply tell a story that would move the
Australian community to heal the nation.\textsuperscript{19}

The Commissioners 'were convinced after hearing from so many that the telling of stories was a very important part of the human process'.\textsuperscript{20} The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and the Chilean National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation have also stressed the importance of allowing those who have been oppressed or abused to tell their stories in the public arena. It is the act of storytelling and of being listened to which begins the process of healing and reconciliation.

For many of the witnesses to the Commission, it was the first time they had told the stories of their painful past. They told a Commission established by a white government how they had been abducted and abused by legal and religious figures of white authority:

I ran away because my foster father used to tamper with me and I'd just had enough. I went to the police but they didn’t believe me. So [my foster mother]...put me in one of those hostels and none of them believed me - I was the liar. So I’ve never talked about it to anyone. I don’t go about telling lies, especially big lies like that (\textit{BTH 164}).

Numerous submissions recount similar stories, echo with similar phrases: 'I was scared to tell anyone 'cause I once attempted to tell the local Priest...and he told me to say ten Hail Mary’s [sic] for telling lies' (\textit{BTH 164}). 'I was thirteen at the time Mr E tried to rape me...I told the Superintendent at Cherbourg. He wouldn’t believe me.' (\textit{BTH 165})

Belief and trust, two extremely important principles, are at stake here. As John Frow has noted: 'This is a story...about acts of telling that are true and acts that are false; it is about being told things and not being heard; it is about the relation between telling stories and existing, or about being made not to exist.'\textsuperscript{21} For many of these witnesses their stories and memories are the only connection they have with their childhood

\textsuperscript{19} Morrow, 3.

\textsuperscript{20} Morrow, 2.

\textsuperscript{21} 'A Politics of Stolen Time', 353.
identity. Birth certificates, family histories, documents relating to the fundamental aspects of who they are and where they are from have been lost, destroyed or sit in dusty archives. This absence of documentation, discussed later, has serious implications in terms of legal restitution for past injustices. Brunton suggests that there may have been an element of 'false memories of events' and 'false or exaggerated claims about experiences' (B 5). McGuinness, in his November 1999 Quadrant editorial, extends Brunton's proposition to state:

There is almost certainly an element of false, confabulated memory, and perhaps even a degree of deliberate fabrication, in the sad histories related to the HREOC/Wilson inquiry. Indeed, even to describe it as an inquiry is dubious, since there is no evidence that any independent corroboration of any story was sought in the course of the inquiry and the writing of its report.

For Brunton and McGuinness the testimonies of the witnesses must necessarily be in doubt because they have not withstood cross-examination or been individually cross-referenced with documented evidence. The Report has, however, pre-empted these attacks. It emphasises that the:

nature of the Inquiry process and of the information sought and provided meant that evidence and submissions could not be tested as thoroughly as would occur in a courtroom...indeed...much supporting evidence including records had been destroyed...We have ensured that our findings, conclusions and recommendations are supported by the overwhelming weight of evidence (BTH 20).

Peter Read, whose research into the Wiradjuri people of New South Wales, involved privileged access to the State Archives and the untouched records of the Aborigines Protection Board, asks the question implicit in Brunton's and McGuinness' criticism: 'Can we trust oral history?'. Read's answer is an unequivocal 'yes'. He writes:

If an individual's own perceptions of his or her past change, can they be


23 In 1981 Read wrote a paper titled 'The Stolen Generations' setting out the historical context of child separation. The New South Wales government published Read's article as a pamphlet. That pamphlet contributed considerable momentum to the establishment of the Inquiry.
relied upon?...If the separated children tell different stories at different times of their lives about their removal, the critics of 'Bringing Them Home' may ask, why must we accept the ones which present separation in the worst light? The answer is that the written records uphold them. The files still held by the state administrations almost uniformly support the most harrowing of the verbal accounts which together explode the myth that institutionalised children somehow were better off for having been separated.24

Read goes on to note: 'As a Link-Up field worker I routinely, with permission, obtained the file of every person whom I was asked to help find family and Aboriginality. I can think of only one instance of hundreds where the record did not closely collaborate the individual's own narration.'25

Both McGuinness and Brunton accept that Aboriginal people have suffered great injustices. Brunton writes that he regards 'the removal of children from caring families as indefensible, and...[that] the Aboriginal experience of such removals has contributed to a legacy of bitterness that other Australians need to comprehend'.26 He readily admits that there is 'widespread public ignorance' (B 2) about the practice of child separation. The Report, drawing on the experiences of the international community, repeatedly stresses that 'justice requires that the wider Australian community be informed about these policies and practices' (BTH 294). If Bringing them home is to be discredited and therefore silenced and if Aboriginal people who tell their stories of separation are not to be believed how are we, as a nation, to reach even the preliminary stages of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians? How is 'the widespread public ignorance' to be eradicated?

At the outset of 'Betraying the victims' Brunton acknowledges that criticism of the report may allow its findings to be 'easily dismissed or ignored' (B 2). In his conclusion he states: 'In making these criticisms I do not wish to provide any grounds

24 A Rape of the Soul so Profound, 172-73.
25 A Rape of the Soul so Profound, 182.
26 R. Brunton, Letter to the Editor, The Australian, 10 March 1998, 12.
for Australians to dismiss the “stolen generations” issue, or the other shameful denials of human rights that Aborigines have suffered.’ (B 18-19) Yet Brunton’s challenge to the validity and worth of the Report does precisely that. As Hal Wootten points out, the thrust of Brunton’s booklet is:

to damn the Report as unworthy of attention, to create such an atmosphere of sleaze and suspicion around it that those who want to reject or ignore it feel they can comfortably do so...The denigration thus becomes an effective weapon for suppression of the whole Report. 27

Brunton holds up the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody as an example of how the testimony of a witness should be checked against official files. Wootten, the man who headed that Royal Commission, categorically dismisses Brunton’s suggestion. ‘The Royal Commission’, writes Wootten:

sat for four years at a cost of $30m, with up to five full-time commissioners assisted by many counsel and staff, and supplied with files by co-operative State Governments which had joined in commissioning the Inquiry. In that time, it investigated the lives and deaths of about 100 Aborigines who died in custody. The Inquiry by contrast lasted for about 18 months, with a budget of $1.5m, no full-time members and no counsel assisting, and was confronted with the stories of over 1500 lives. The tasks of the two inquiries were of course completely different, and any comparison between them is absurd. Yet Brunton makes it. 28

For Brunton the only satisfactory solution to the shortcomings of Bringing them home and the inquiry process is to hold a ‘new Inquiry by people who would treat their task with the rigour, objectivity and probity it demands’ (B 20). Rigour. Cross-examination. Rigorous cross-examination of Aboriginal witnesses. The Commonwealth Government’s barristers in Cubillo & Gunner v The Commonwealth applied just such a tactic. Cubillo & Gunner v The Commonwealth was a bitterly fought test-case in which the Federal Court was asked to determine whether the Commonwealth was liable for millions of dollars in compensation to Aborigines for past government policies of child separation. Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner, the

28 Wootten, 7.
applicants in the case, were said to be members of the stolen generation taken from their parents without consent.

In his opening address the Government’s senior counsel, Douglas Meagher QC, quoting extensively from the assimilationist government policies of the 1940s and 1950s, argued that the removal of mixed-blood Aborigines was an act of charity designed to uplift illegitimate children. This address was delivered two years after the release of Bringing them home. The Commonwealth legal team’s strategy was to depict Peter Gunner and Lorna Cubillo as dissemblers whose evidence could not be trusted. The Government’s lawyers repeatedly suggested to a semi-literate Peter Gunner that his life was ‘hopelessly confused and distorted’. Gunner responded to rigorous cross-examination by developing chest pain and long silences.

Opening her cross-examination for the Commonwealth, barrister Elizabeth Hollingworth spent several hours questioning Lorna Cubillo about her medical history, her marital breakdown, her husband’s violence and her children’s criminal records, until Cubillo became so visibly upset that the court was adjourned. Hollingworth challenged Cubillo’s description of the harsh life at the Retta Dixon home and sought to disprove Cubillo’s claim that she, and other Aboriginal children, were forced to surrender their native language. Hollingworth stated: ‘I put it to you that you did not cease to use your traditional language at Retta Dixon because you were flogged; rather, you ceased to use your traditional language out of necessity of learning English.’ ‘Miss Hollingworth,’ retorted Cubillo, ‘I was flogged. I was flogged. Our language was flogged out of us. I know what happened to me ... and to the rest of my countrymen’. ‘You saw all of your countrymen being flogged, did you?’ responded the barrister. 29

Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner lost their case against the Commonwealth. In 1999 Joy Williams, a prominent stolen-generation activist, sued the State of New South

---

29 R.Guillatt, ‘Their day in Court’, The Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend, 20 Nov. 1999, 22. As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation of Languages submission 854 noted: ‘The story of language loss is the story of separation...It is well known that the mission children were not only discouraged from speaking their native languages, but in many cases physically punished for doing so’ (BTH 299).
Wales for compensation claiming she had been forcibly taken from her mother. Justice Abadee dismissed her claim. In October 2000 his decision was upheld on appeal. Williams' case took more than a decade to get to trial and cost a substantial sum in Legal Aid funds. Government lawyers have estimated that there are 2,200 lawsuits pending from the stolen generation claimants and damages that could run into the hundreds of millions. Civil litigation cannot resolve the stolen generation issue. Indeed the judgement in *Cubillo & Gunner*, which accepted as truth the stories of abuse metered out to the appellants as children, confirmed that if reparations for past injustices can only be sought through the courts then justice will never be achieved.\(^{30}\)

It was the loss of these two cases that moved McGuinness to convene his second *Quadrant* seminar, titled 'Truth and Sentimentality', in September 2000. McGuinness and his supporters have trumpeted the Federal Court ruling as a vindication of their arguments against *Bringing them home*, and proof that the stories of Aboriginal people separated from their families as children cannot withstand legal cross-examination. McGuinness states in his November 2000 editorial:

> Presumably these were among the strongest cases that could be brought, and so far there is not a single authenticated case of a 'stolen' child brought to any court - while there must have been some genuine cases of forced removal, they do not seem to be nearly so common as the Wilson report on 'Bringing Them Home' asserted, on as it appears very shaky grounds. Both the Commonwealth lead counsel, and two other eminent legal analysts who spoke at the seminar showed that the whole Wilsonian edifice is built on sand.\(^{31}\)

The 'Quadrant message', writes McGuinness 'is getting through'. The adherents of that message overlook Justice O'Loughlin's opening statement that '[n]either the evidence in this trial, nor these reasons for judgment, deny the existence of “the Stolen

---

\(^{30}\) The Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) has lobbied the New South Wales and federal governments to set up a reparations tribunal which would shift the focus away from individual monetary compensation and explore other forms of reparation, such as counselling services, community facilities and cultural initiatives. On November 30, 2000 a Senate Standing Committee endorsed PIAC's proposed model for hearings and reparations. As yet no government response has been forthcoming.

\(^{31}\) 'Aborigines, Massacres and Stolen Children', *Quadrant*, November 2000, 2.
They argue that because these two stories have ultimately been rejected in a legal context there is nothing further to be heard on the matter of stolen children. This second backlash to the stories in Bringing them home has mushroomed from an attempt to discredit the notion of the stolen generation to a discounting of the violent frontier conflicts, dispossession and massacres of Aborigines by European settlers. It would seem that all stories of Aboriginal history are now under question. The historian Keith Windschuttle has weighed into the debate dismissing claims of Aboriginal massacres with the argument that Australia was settled ‘lawfully’ by British who were Christians and part of the Western intellectual and legal tradition. This nexus between intellectual and legal traditions, between narrative, history, politics and the law is at the centre of the current debate about the value and validity of story as a means of knowledge.

Cubillo & Gunner demonstrated that if the norms of the legal system are to be applied to the stories of the stolen generation, those stories are unlikely to be accorded legal authority or authenticity. Justice O'Loughlin was compelled to find for the Commonwealth. As he explained in his judgement:

the case for the Commonwealth was dominated, in my opinion, by the claim that it has suffered irreparable prejudice through the absence of material witnesses and the infirmities of others. In short, the case for the Commonwealth was that so much time has gone by and so many material witnesses are now dead that it was not possible for the Commonwealth to present its defence adequately. The strength of the Commonwealth's claims...is, in my opinion, overwhelming. I have come to the conclusion that its defence, based on prejudice, must prevail.

The absence of witnesses and the absence of documents will always prevail in a court of

---


Cubillo & Gunner v The Commonwealth (2000) 174 ALR 97 at [1420].

207
law over an individual’s story. According to Windschuttle they should also prevail in historical research.

Windschuttle insists that the stringent standards of criminal law - where the onus of proof is on the accuser and the case has to be proven beyond reasonable doubt - are the only criteria for historical evidence:

Historians should only accept evidence of violent deaths, Aboriginal or otherwise, where there is a minimum amount of direct evidence. This means that, at the very least, they need some reports by people who were either genuine eyewitnesses or who at least saw the bodies afterwards. Preferably, these reports should be independently corroborated by others who saw the same thing. 35

Bob Gould, who to date has offered the most detailed refutation of Windschuttle’s claims, rightly suggests that to apply such a standard of proof to ‘historical inquiry into the past...is palpably absurd, and loads the historical record totally in favour of conquerors and victors...[because] after one generation, no witnesses at all are available for cross examination’.36 In October 2000 Fremantle Arts Centre Press published Anna Haebich’s Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000, a systematic and total refutation of the Quadrant group’s thesis in relation to the stolen children.37 The impact of Haebich’s detailed analysis of the practices and effects of the separation of Aboriginal children from their communities on the Quadrant group’s assertions is yet to be felt.

That debate is not, however, the issue here. The primary concern of these chapters is to examine the question of the ability of story to inform and offer a valid way of imaginatively knowing the past (and therefore, the present). In shades reminiscent of


36 ‘McGuinness, Windschuttle and “Quadrant”. The Revisionist attack on Australian History about British Conquest and Aboriginal Resistance’, (Sydney: Self-Published, 2000), 5. Gould’s article is a densely typed eighteen-page document that systematically outlines texts that disprove Windschuttle’s thesis.

37 For ease of reference the term ‘Quadrant group’ refers to Brunton, McGuinness and Windschuttle.
Castro’s *Drift* Windschutte argues — in the face of much well-documented literature, newspaper articles and individual recorded memoirs — that suggestions that scores of Tasmanian Aborigines were violently killed are highly questionable. He insists that only those whose bodies were listed can be counted as killed. It is worthwhile, at this point, to look back to Castro’s comments on what he sees as the different roles played by fiction and history in the dissemination, not of Truth, but of truths. ‘Fiction and history’, says Castro, ‘should not make claims on each other. Fiction discovers truths that are quite different from the chronological, historical project’. Those truths discovered by fiction are significant. As Iser has noted: ‘if fiction and reality are to be linked it must be in terms not of opposition but of communication, for the one is not the mere opposite of the other — fiction is a way of telling us something about reality’.

Iser’s observation is supported by much contemporary moral philosophy that focuses on the power of stories to offer not only truths but, through the kind of moral thinking they embody, a model of how one should live. In his discussion on the place and importance of narrative in epistemological crises Alasdair MacIntyre states that ‘to raise the question of truth need not entail rejecting myth or story as the appropriate and perhaps the only appropriate form in which certain truths can be told’. Martha Nussbaum goes further. In *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, she asserts that there are some moral truths and views that can only be adequately expressed through novels. Why is this so? Because stories invite their readers/listeners into the presence of truths which are discovered through participative awareness, through a preparedness to listen and to engage imaginatively with narrative voice and form. Legal truths by contrast are discovered through decisions on determinable facts.

---

38 Barker, ‘Fireworks: An Interview with Brian Castro’.

39 *The Act of Reading*, 53.


Moral truth vs legal truth:

The first step in any compensation and healing for victims of gross violations of human rights must be an acknowledgment of the truth.

*Bringing them home*

In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts.

Dickens, *Hard Times.*

To accept the *Quadrant* group’s argument that only facts verifiable ‘beyond reasonable question’ are to be believed is to accept that the stories told in *Bringing them home* cannot convey truth. Such a position has significant literary, philosophical, historical and legal ramifications. Of course with the advent of poststructuralism concepts such as truth are inherently problematic. As Terry Eagleton explains:

> The 1980s saw the so-called new historicism... a historiography appropriate for a postmodern age in which the very notions of historical truth, causality, pattern, purpose and direction were increasingly under fire...History...was a tangled skein of dispersed narratives, none of which was necessarily more significant than any other; and all knowledge of the past was skewed by the interests and desires of the present. There was no firm distinction any longer between ...fact and fiction. Historical events were treated as ‘textual’ phenomena, while literary works were regarded as material events. Historiography was a form of narration conditioned by the narrator’s own prejudices and preoccupations, and so itself a kind of rhetoric or fiction. There was no single determinable truth to any particular narrative or event, just a conflict of interpretations whose outcome was finally determined by power rather than truth.42

There is much in this passage that will be discussed in the following chapters. Of note here, however, is the final sentence. Legal victory for the Crown in the two cases dealing with stolen-generation claimants and their stories has been seized upon by the *Quadrant* group to render their version of history as the more truthful narrative. That version is a history of the victors, past and present.

Poststructuralists may theorise that there are no single determinable truths and that the difference between historical narratives and fiction comes down to a question of

---

42 *Literary Theory*, 197.
power but there are some truths that are more valid than others. These are moral truths and one of them is that thousands of Aboriginal children and their families were subjected to immense pain and suffering due to 'discriminatory, callous and humiliating policies and practices of the past' (B 19). Brunton, through his repeated use of the terms 'moral', 'morality' and 'morally', acknowledges that there is an important moral dimension to this debate about Aboriginal history and truth. To argue that stories cannot convey moral truths is not only an attempt to silence Aboriginal voices and dismiss the experiences of the Aboriginal witnesses, on a larger scale it is to deny the important role literature and religion (which originated in the form of stories) have had over the centuries in shaping the imagination, behaviour and moral codes of a large percentage of humanity.

Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell have argued for the role of story in informing a moral consciousness:

There can be no normative theory of the moral life that is sufficient to capture the rich texture of the many moral notions we inherit. What we actually possess are various and sometimes conflicting stories that provide us with skills to use certain moral notions. What we need to develop is the reflective capacity to analyze those stories, so that we better understand how they function. It is not theory-building that develops such a capacity so much as close attention to the ways our distinctive communities tell their stories.

Hauerwas' and Burrell's comments raise two related issues that go to the heart of the debate about the validity and worth of the stories in the Report as sites of truth. Both issues will be discussed in the following chapter. At this juncture I simply want to note them. Firstly, it is not just what a story says but how it models that saying which is important. What sort of feeling and imagining is enacted in the telling of the story?

---

43 It is tragically ironic that the language and stories of the Bible replaced the language and stories of the Aboriginal children taken from their families: 'Y’know, I can remember we used to just talk lingo. [In the Home] they used to tell us not to talk that language, that it’s devil’s language. And they’d wash our mouths out with soap. We sorta had to sit down with Bible language all the time. So it sorta wiped out all our language that we knew.’ (BTH 154)

Secondly, an appreciation of story must consider what kinds of readerly activity is built into its form. How should I listen to this story? What must I be open to?

McGuinness and his supporters argue that there is a clear distinction between moral truth and legal truth but such a distinction has not been recognised by some of Australia’s most senior judges. The most significant judgement in which moral and legal argument were inextricably interwoven was that of Deane and Gaudron JJ, in the High Court’s 1992 *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)*, or as it is commonly known, *Mabo* case. The judges sought to explain to the public why this was so:

[I]n those parts of this judgement which deal with the dispossession of Australian Aborigines, we have used language and expressed conclusions which some may think to be unusually emotive for a judgement in this Court. We have not done that in order to trespass into the area of assessment or attribution of moral guilt...the reason which has led us to describe, and express conclusions about, the dispossession of the Australian Aborigines in unrestrained language is that the full facts of that dispossession are of critical importance to the assessment of the legitimacy of the propositions that the continent was unoccupied for legal purposes and that the unqualified legal and beneficial ownership of all the lands of the continent vested in the Crown.45

The majority judgements in *Mabo* recognised that the forcible dispossession of Aborigines of their land, and the reinforcement of that dispossession in Australian law, was a legal, historical, political and moral issue; one going to the heart of Australian identity and cultural integrity. Deane and Gaudron wrote: ‘The nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgment of, and retreat from, those past injustices’.46 *Mabo* was one of those seminal moments in Australian history where the nation’s moral values were publicly examined and found wanting. Bernard Smith described such a moment in the first of his Boyer Lectures:

A culture...in order to develop and survive must put down firm ethical roots in the place from which it grows... its vitality and capacity for survival will depend largely upon the quality of the moral values it brings to the solution of human problems during its emergence at a particular place and particular

45 *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (1992) 175 CLR 1 at 120.

46 *Mabo* 175 CLR 1 at 109.
time. A culture...requires moral values born of its own historical experience, values which are continuously tested against the successive challenges of its history.  

Australia was settled on the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, a international law term meaning that for settlement purposes the land was 'practically unoccupied'. In 1982 Eddie Mabo, David Passi and James Rice, members of the Meriam people who occupy the Murray Islands in Torres Strait, brought an action against the State of Queensland and the Commonwealth of Australia in the High Court. Legal argument saw that case move between the Supreme Court of Queensland and the High Court for another ten years. In 1989 Eddie Mabo challenged the white-man’s fiction that his island was ‘practically unoccupied’ and certainly uncultivated when annexed by the State of Queensland with his own story of family adoption and property rights. Justice Moynihan, the judge hearing the case at that time, found Mabo’s evidence less than convincing. If the *Quadrant* group’s rules had been applied, Eddie Mabo’s story would not ultimately have led to the High Court declaring that the doctrine of *terra nullius* was null and void. Through Mabo’s determination to have his story heard, a new form of truth was established.

In *Mabo* the credibility gap between the legal truth - or legal fiction - of Australian soil being *terra nullius* and a true understanding of Australian history was closed. As Brennan J noted in his judgement, the law was brought ‘into conformity with Australian history’. Peter Cochrane has emphasised the moral dimension of the *Mabo* judgement and its relationship to history: ‘The new facts underwrote a new morality. The new morality gathered up the new facts. It was the moral atmosphere, more than any finality of evidence, which confirmed the supremacy of the new history’.

The *Mabo* judgement also closed the longstanding gulf between the authority of

---


48 *Mabo* 175 CLR 1 at 58.

49 P. Cochrane, ‘Hunting not Travelling’, *Eureka Street* 8: 8, October 1998, 34.
Aboriginal stories and Western legal principles; a gulf that the *Quadrant* group want to maintain and exploit in order to cast doubt on the validity and worth of *Bringing them home*. The first court case in Australia in which Aboriginal stories had to compete with white legal practices was in 1970. In the 1960s a consortium of mining companies wanted to mine bauxite on what the Aborigines living at Yirrkala on the Gove Peninsula considered their traditional land. The Aborigines sent two bark petitions to members of the Commonwealth parliament requesting that mining leases not be granted until there had been appropriate consultation. The petitions (featured as the frontispiece to this section), now proudly displayed in glass cabinets in the Federal Parliament building, failed to influence the government of the day. Consequently a group of traditional owners sued the miners and the Commonwealth government in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory. In that case, *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty.Ltd.*, more commonly known as the Gove Land Rights case, the Rirratjingu and Gumatj men broke their tradition and took their holy *rangga*, the sacred emblems of their clan, to Darwin.\(^{50}\)

They gave Sir Richard Blackburn, the white judge hearing the case, a secret audience in order to reveal their evidence to him. The men believed that as an intelligent man Sir Richard would understand the significance of their *rangga*. Blackburn ‘appreciated that these objects decorated with coloured bird feathers and woven possum fur were religious in character but he did not find them to be legally persuasive’\.\(^{51}\) He found against the traditional owners of the land. In the *Mabo* judgement, the majority of judges ruled, among other things, that Blackburn was wrong in his findings and ‘that the old men at Gove with their *rangga* over twenty years before were right’.\(^{52}\)

\(^{50}\) These *rangga* had previously been shown to only one white man, the respected anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner.


\(^{52}\) Brennan, 14. In 1999 the Anangu people of north western Western Australia presented a number of painted canvasses that told their stories, places, ceremonies and songs to the Federal Court as evidence of their land claim. In 2001 the Croker Islanders from north western Arnhem Land will contest a native title claim to their traditional ‘sea country’ with what they refer to as their ‘title deeds’: a number of drawings and paintings of sea country dating from the 1940s until the present.
The Gove Land Rights case led to the Woodward Royal Commission (1973-76) which ultimately conceded land rights to traditional owners in much of the Northern Territory through the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act* (1976). The Act allows for land claims to be made on vacant Crown land in the Territory. These claims are dealt with through land-claim hearings. Deborah Bird Rose has been involved in many of these hearings. Whilst initially sceptical of the Australian legal system’s ability to listen to and accept Aboriginal people’s ‘traditional evidence’ of their relationship to country, she now applauds the positive outcomes of these hearings which are not marked by a rigid adherence to rules of evidence. The ‘structure of the hearing has been significantly Aboriginalised in ways that enable Land Commissioners to hear Aboriginal people’s evidence fairly.’ A land claim hearing’, writes Bird Rose, ‘is a hybrid event that allows for multiple systems of knowledge and meaning to engage with each other without being annihilated’.

The Howard Government has been attempting to dismantle the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act*. In October 1997 the federal government commissioned a report into tribal land ownership in the Northern Territory. That report, brought down in August 1998 and known as the Reeves Report, is a highly-contentious 617 page document. In March 1999 a Parliamentary committee of ten (white) backbenchers conducted hearings on the Report, and on land ownership, in Canberra and across the Northern Territory. Seven of the committee flew into Kalkarindji to hear the views of 21 Aborigines who had come in from Daguragu, forty kilometres away. The Aborigines were listened to for one hour. The meeting was reported in *Hansard*. As Alan Ramsay writes:

> the people at Kalkarindji ... want no part of the Reeves proposals to break up the two big land councils and break down the absolute authority of the

---

53 Alan Ramsey outlines the Howard government’s attempt to dismantle the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act* in ‘Fighting for the Never Never’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 1999, 43.


55 Bird Rose, 51.
1976 Land Rights Act. They want John Howard to honour the word of government. Yet for the most part the mainstream media is ignoring the committee hearings. The voices of the Gurindji and Walpiri are being heard by nobody.\textsuperscript{56}

The silencing of Aboriginal voices is not only a practice of the past.

\textsuperscript{56} A. Ramsay, ‘Dignity confronts whitefellas’, \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 1 May 1999, 43.
Breaking the Silence

The silencing of, or the not listening to, Aboriginal voices has been, until recently, an integral element in the formation of a non-Aboriginal Australian identity and history. Chris Healy relates an episode from 1822 in which two members of the Philosophical Society discovered from an Aboriginal eyewitness the landing place of Captain Cook. Having ascertained the site, they fixed a brass memorial on a nearby rock to mark the beginning of ‘history on a silent continent’. Healy writes:

Imagine the other conversations which could have taken place in relation to those rocks on Botany Bay. It seems that Mr Berry and Dr Douglas refused an opportunity for dialogue and a chance of translating social memory between cultures.¹

On an individual level there has been, since the arrival of the British, constructive dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. On a national level, however, the opportunity for dialogue has been squandered repeatedly over the past 220 years. Dialogue is a two-way process that involves speaking and listening. Voices that spoke of invasion, dispossession and cultural genocide had no place in the emerging Australian narrative of nation. The establishment of Australian culture was, in significant measure, reliant upon the death of Aboriginal culture. Social Darwinism, an ascendent philosophy in the latter half of the nineteenth century, explained away the necessary death of the Aborigine. Yet many of the established white settlers remained troubled by a spirit of unease.

The Aboriginal presence in Australia continued. It manifested itself in the nation’s literature as a haunting, ghostly, voiceless presence. It was there in the poetry of Charles Harpur and Henry Kendall² and in the funereal, melancholy forests identified

¹ C. Healy, From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 23.

by Marcus Clarke and has continued until recently to be a feature, in varying degrees, of much Australian writing. It is significant that Clarke identified the ‘funereal, secret, stern’ qualities of the ‘Australian mountain forests’ with the repression of story. ‘They seem to stifle in their black gorges a story of sullen despair’, he wrote.3 One hundred years later Bernard Smith remarked: ‘We might ask ourselves whether it is the black gorges or guilty colonial hearts that sought to stifle the story of despair, projecting their fear and guilt upon nature itself’.4 Smith sought, in his 1980 Boyer Lectures, to give some thought to the effects of the continued existence and presence of the Aborigine in Australia upon the emergence and character of our own Australian culture’.5 He argued that the ‘spectre of Truganini’, the supposed last of the original Tasmanian Aborigines, ‘has haunted Australian culture’ and went on to comment:

Truganini’s story must stand, in these talks, for all those that will never be written, but live on in the folk memories of the descendants of the victims. By contrast, white Australians have tried to forget. Indeed at times it would seem as if all the culture of old Europe were being brought to bear upon our writers and artists in order to blot from their memories the crimes perpetrated upon Australia’s first inhabitants.6

Repressed and untold stories, fear, the attempt to forget, continued presence; these same qualities inform the current debate about the stories in Bringing them home.

The late 1920s was a time of significant developments in terms of Australian literature and Aboriginal voice. In 1928 David Unaipon published his address: ‘An Aboriginal Pleads for his Race’. He followed this publication in 1929 with Native Legends. Though only fifteen pages long, Native Legends, with its blend of Aboriginal, Shakespearean, Biblical and fantasy stories, is a significant text because it is the first


4 The Spectre of Truganini, 21.

5 The Spectre of Truganini, 9.

6 The Spectre of Truganini, 10.
'book' published by an Aboriginal Australian. But Unaipon's work was (and has continued to be) largely overlooked by Australia's reading public. The publication of Coonardoo, also in 1929, marked the beginning of an attempt by non-Aboriginal writers to give some voice to their Aboriginal characters. Prichard's lead was taken up in the 1930s by Xavier Herbert, Vance Palmer and Eleanor Dark. In the 1950s Patrick White, Randolph Stow and Judith Wright carried on and extended that tradition. It was not, however, until the publication in 1964 of Kath Walker's (later known as Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal) first volume of poetry, We are Going, that Aboriginal people had a powerful written voice. Oodgeroo's stated aim with We are Going was to put 'their voices on paper'. It was not that Aboriginal people had been silent prior to Oodgeroo's text, rather that:

Oodgeroo's writing ended a period of white deafness by bringing a powerful Aboriginal voice into earshot of large, mainstream audiences both in Australia and overseas. The importance of We Are Going was that it opened a new channel of transmission that allowed the dominant society to hear what Aboriginal voices had been saying for many years.

We are Going was published the year after the Yirrkala bark petition was sent to Canberra and just prior to the release of Colin Johnson's (Mudrooroo) first novel Wild Cat Falling (1965). It was an extremely popular book; reprinted seven times in seven

7 Unaipon was not the first published Aboriginal author in Australia. Between September 1836 and December 1837 three Aboriginal clerks working for George Augustus Robinson produced a handwritten newspaper titled The Aboriginal or The Chronicle. For further discussion on this publication see For the Record: 160 Years of Aboriginal Print Journalism, M.Rose (ed.), (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996); A.Shoemaker, 'White on Black/Black on White', in The Oxford Literary History of Australia, 14-15. Penny van Toom discusses the presence and reception of much pre-twentieth-century indigenous Australian writing in 'Early Aboriginal Writing', Meanjin 55: 4, 1996, 754-65.

8 Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker are currently editing the first authorised version of David Unaipon's writing which will be published by Melbourne University Press with the title, David Unaipon: Legendary Tales of Australian Aboriginals, in June 2001.

9 The critical reception of Prichard's representation of Aboriginal characters, especially Coonardoo, will be discussed later.


months and published the following year in Canada and the United States. The title poem of the volume has been studied by school and university students since its publication. It is a poem that captures powerfully both the voicelessness of Aboriginal people and their abiding presence.

We Are Going
For Grannie Coolwell

They came in to the little town
A semi-naked band subdued and silent,
All that remained of their tribe.
They came here to the place of their old bora ground
Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.
Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts:
'We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers.
We belong here, we are of the old way.
We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
We are the old sacred ceremonies, the laws of the elders.
We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told.
We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp fires.
We are the lightning-bolt over Gaphembah Hill
Quick and terrible,
And the Thunder after him, that loud fellow.
We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.
We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.
We are nature and the past, all the old ways
Gone now and scattered.

The poet speaks for the ‘confused’ and silent remnants of the tribe as they sit amongst the debris that is both the white-man’s waste and the remains of the tribe’s cultural heritage. Oodgeroo both laments and celebrates the dignified and eloquent silence of the Aboriginal people who, confronted with the near destruction of their culture and way of life, ‘cannot say their thoughts’. By speaking what cannot be said ‘We Are Going’ models the historical silencing of Aboriginal voices and demonstrates the effects that imposed silence has on Aboriginal people. The second half of the poem articulates not silence but buried speech, speech that cannot be heard by the ‘white tribe’. Yet Oodgeroo works a double movement; amidst the destruction of culture and environment and the silencing of voice, the poem affirms the old people’s authority and voice. The ‘traces of the old bora ring’ remain. The use of the present tense for the powerful refrain ‘we are’ emphasises the continuing presence of Aboriginal people and through them the continuing presence of their now-absent tribal ancestors.14

It is this vital and sustaining link with the past that many of the witness to the Inquiry lack. Their hope, in telling their stories to the Commission, was that their survival and their continued resistance to invasion, assimilation and annihilation as Aboriginal Australians, would be recorded for the wider Australian community to hear. By telling their stories the witnesses shattered some of the silence that had surrounded them and their families for generations. Eva Johnson’s ‘A Letter to my Mother’ powerfully articulates the loss experienced by a separated child as well as her determination to reclaim, for herself and her mother, a shared identity and culture. The

---


14 Judith Wright’s ‘Bora Ring’, *Collected Poems 1942-1985*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994), 8 and Gwen Harwood’s ‘Aboriginal Bora Ring’, *Notes and Furphies* 43 (2000) 4, also capture the powerful silence and sense of absent ancestral, Aboriginal presence around the remains of the ring.
poem suggests that it may be possible, through the act of speaking one’s story, to silence the burden of separation:

A Letter To My Mother

I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now
White fulla bin take me from you, I don’t know why
Give me to Missionary to be God’s child.
Give me new language, give me new name
All time I cry, they say - ‘that shame’
I go to city down south, real cold
I forget all them stories, my Mother you told
Gone is my spirit, my dreaming, my name
Gone to these people, our country to claim
They gave me white mother, she give me new name
All time I cry, she say - ‘that shame’
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.

I grow as Woman now, not Picaninny no more
I need you to teach me your wisdom, your lore
I am your Spirit, I’ll stay alive
But in white fulla way, you won’t survive
I’ll fight for Your land, for your Sacred sites
To sing and to dance with the Brolga in flight
To continue to live in your own tradition
A culture for me was replaced by a mission
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.

One day your dancing, your dreaming, your song
Will take me your Spirit back where I belong
My Mother, the earth, the land - I demand
Protection from aliens who rule, who command
For they do not know where our dreaming began
Our destiny lies in the laws of White Man
Two Women we stand, our story untold
But now as our spiritual bondage unfold
We will silence this Burden, this longing, this pain
When I hear you my Mother give me my Name
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.15

The ‘I’ of the poem has lost the most essential aspects of her identity: her name and her language. The story of child separation and the attempt (often through derogatory comments about ‘Blacks’) to erase from the child’s memory any trace of their family, language and culture is captured in the repetition and linkage, through rhyme and positioning, of ‘name’ and ‘shame’. Similar stories are told by ‘your lore’, ‘no more’ and ‘tradition’ which gives way to ‘mission’. Bringing them home comments on the repercussions of separated children being forced to forget their native tongue:

What must be remembered is that language is not simply a tool for everyday communication, but through recording of stories, songs, legends, poetry and lore, holds the key to a people’s history and opens the door to cultural and spiritual understanding (BTH 2).16

‘A Letter To My Mother’, through its mix of linguistic registers, captures this sense of loss and cultural dislocation. The daughter writes to her mother in the ‘new language’ of her ‘mission’ education. In that new language she defiantly asserts her intention to reclaim her mother’s stories, lore and tradition. In her emotional turmoil, however, the now-grown ‘Woman’ slips easily into her pre-missionary language and speaks as the sad and lonely ‘Picaninny’ she still is.

The daughter in Johnson’s poem never does hear her mother’s voice. In a similar way, though Bringing them home goes some way towards uncovering and explaining a more recent chapter of Aboriginal history, there remains a large aspect of the stolen children’s story that has not been told and will probably never be told and that is the story of the mothers who had their babies and children taken from them. Despite Brunton’s claim that the Commission consciously gave ‘greater prominence to the negative accounts’ (B 6) and that they ‘stacked the cards’ (B 11), Link-Up (NSW), in their submission to the Inquiry, stated that:

In preparing this submission we found that Aboriginal women were unwilling and unable to speak about the immense pain, grief and anguish that losing their children had caused them. That pain was so strong that we were unable to find a mother who had healed enough to be able to speak

16 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation of Languages submission 854.
and to share her experience with us and with the Commission (*BTH* 212).

**The space of story:**

At the close of *Benang* Kim Scott writes: ‘I can only hope that by this novel, if not in person, I can...help create more space into which all our stories and voices may grow’ (*Bn* 500). *Bringing them home* has done just that: created a space into which previously unheard and in some cases untold stories are told and can be heard. In interweaving the first-person narratives with excerpts from official policy documents and archival material the Report repeatedly focuses on the effects of government policy on the individual. The ‘collaging strategy which episodically punctuates third-person reporting and analysis with fragments of stories’ allows the individual voices ‘a space of effectivity, or answerability’.17 For privacy reasons witnesses are identified in *Bringing them home* under pseudonyms or as numbers, yet the Report, through its fidelity to the individual’s language and speech patterns, conveys a sense of the individuality of each witness. This sense of the individuality of each person’s experience is extremely important when one considers that the history these witnesses are relating was based on the grossest of generalisations: skin colour.

Only a select few people have heard rather than simply read the oral histories of the Aboriginal witnesses to the Inquiry. Yet *Bringing them home*, by remaining ‘faithful to the language used by the witnesses quoted’ (*BTH* 20), renders a sense of voice similar to Raimundo Panikkar’s second form of speaking:

> We have two forms of speaking. One is to chatter, to gossip, to go on repeating learned things and previously conceived opinions, generally of others. The other is when we inhabit the words we say, when language is the very house of our being, when we live in the very words we utter, when we create each phrase our of a concrete experience in time and place - an experience which we allow to crystallise, as it were, in the very words which flow spontaneously out of our whole being. We do not think such words beforehand, we do not calculate them, nor do we arrange them, trying to make an impression on our hearers...we simply say them; we inhabit those words; they are a revelation of what we truly are...[they are]

17 Frow, 355.
sacraments. They create a space...which encompasses both us and our true listeners.\textsuperscript{18}

Listening, as John Frow has noted, ‘is a form of ethical responsiveness which recognizes a duty to the story of the other’.\textsuperscript{19} Sir Ronald Wilson and others who listened to the witnesses’ testimonies experienced something that went beyond the question and answer format of a courtroom. They experienced the power of voice and memory. George Ewart Evans, an English oral historian, has described the forceful impact on him of the combined power of voice and memory. It creates, he said, ‘a kind of osmosis [which works] through your skin so to speak, to give the feel of history, the sense of the past which is such an essential ingredient in the best historical writing’. Oral histories, conversations, interviews, bestow in Ewart Evan’s opinion, not only historical information but ‘that little bit extra - that enlightenment, a trace element of imagination, a little supererogatory grace’.\textsuperscript{20}

To admit the power of story and the power of voice to offer something larger than proven facts is to be open to the feel of history, to the feel of lived experience. Stories operate imaginatively to offer a way of knowing and understanding that the bare facts of history cannot provide. It is not only the meaning of a story that is important it is also its significance, the way in which it can be understood. Meaning and significance are two separate stages of comprehension:

Meaning is the referential totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading. Significance is the reader’s absorption of the meaning into his own existence. Only the two together can guarantee the effectiveness of an experience which entails the reader constituting himself by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar to himself.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} ‘There is No Outer without Inner Space’, in \textit{Cross Currents} 43, 1993, 73.

\textsuperscript{19} ‘A Politics of Stolen Time’, 364.


\textsuperscript{21} Iser, \textit{The Act of Reading}, 151.
Stories, especially well-told stories, facilitate a reader's 'absorption of meaning into his [sic] own existence'. That absorption is as much a physical, emotional and/or sensual experience as it is a rational one.

In the previous chapter I introduced some important questions as to the role of story in informing a moral consciousness. What sort of feeling and imagining is enacted in the telling of a story? How should I listen to this story? What must I be open to? The Report insists that the community needs to listen 'with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past' (BTH 3). That is to say that one should listen to these stories with a blend of reason and emotion, thought and feeling. One must be open to the feel of the witnesses' lived experiences. And here we start to enter the world of imagining and comprehension that Les Murray has sought to explain through the concepts he calls 'Narrowspeak' and 'Wholespeak'. According to Murray 'Narrowspeak' is the language of forensic argument, the language of mind only, the language used to conduct business and politics. 'Wholespeak' is the language of the whole being: heart, mind, dream, breath, body. ‘Wholespeak’ is primarily the language of poetry. Murray suggests that humans are not rational but poetic, and poetry, he argues, models the way we really think. Poetry 'models something much wider than the simple conveying of information'. It models:

the whole simultaneous gamut of reasoning, envisioning, feeling and vibrating we go through when we are really taken up with some matter, and out of which we may act on it. We are not just thinking about whatever it may be, but savouring it and experiencing it and wrestling with it in the ghostly sympathy of our muscles.23

The stories told in Bringing them home are part of the ‘vast texture of overlaid and overlapping poetries’24 which tell us something very real and very personal about a

---


23 ‘Poems and Poesies’, 170. The philosopher Bernard Williams has written, in terms similar to Murray's: 'We are not minds which have bodies but bodies which think'. B. Williams, Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers, 1956-1972, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 80.

largely repressed period of Australian history. Because the witnesses were allowed to tell them in their own time and in their own way and because they are stories spoken ‘from the heart’ (Bn) and free of cross-examination, they function to engender empathic imagination in their listeners/readers.

**Storytelling and imagination:**

The High Court’s *Mabo* judgement marked the beginning of a revised historical narrative of British settlement, Australian justice and the place occupied by Aboriginal people in the political and psychological landscape of the Australian nation. In December 1992 Paul Keating, as Prime Minister, launched the 1993 Year of the World’s Indigenous People at Redfern Park stating:

> It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion...It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask - how would I feel if this were done to me. As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded us all.\(^\text{25}\)

Keating’s speech is important to this debate about the truth of stories not only because as Prime Minister he publicly acknowledged shameful acts committed against Aborigines but also because of the language he used. Keating, an economic rationalist charged with the practical, political job of running the country, spoke of the facts of history in terms of imagination.

An imaginative act is required in order for non-Aboriginal Australians to comprehend the suffering inflicted by, and the continuing repercussions of, policies of separation. What better way to fire the imagination of a nation than through the act of

---

storytelling? Stories, fictional and non-fictional, operate to inform, stimulate, challenge and enlarge the imaginative vision of their listener or reader. Powerful stories work on the imagination. They make it possible to see oneself as an Other. Unless non-Aboriginal Australians can attempt to imagine the pain and suffering of the stolen children - an attempt that for the majority of Australians must necessarily fail but an attempt nonetheless - the nation, as a whole, cannot progress very far along the path of healing and reconciliation. As Senator Aden Ridgeway has written: 'The art of storytelling is at the centre of reconciliation, and reconciliation is at the heart of Australian society.'

By publishing the 'actual words of the storytellers as far as possible in describing the effects of the process', Bringing them home has afforded its readers an opportunity to imagine and thereby understand a previously little-known aspect of the life experiences of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Martin Flanagan has identified Charles Dickens as the only writer who:

come[s] close to capturing the scale of the experience of the Stolen Generation...Because of Dickens, and a few people like him, we cannot think of Victorian England without summoning images of the urban poor - particularly the children. What we need in this country is an artist with similar largeness who can implant the story of the Stolen Generation, or a member thereof, in the Australian imagination.

Through its use of first-person narratives, Bringing them home has 'implant[ed] the story of the Stolen Generation...in the Australian imagination'. Stories of Aboriginal children being forcibly separated from their parents have been told in the past but Australians as a nation were largely unaware of them. The works of Mudrooroo and

26 'An Impasse of a Relationship in the Making?' in Reconciliation, 13.

27 M. Flanagan, 'Brother', in the stolen children: their stories, 161. Dickens' Hard Times takes as its explicit theme the contribution of the novel to the moral and political life, both representing and enacting the novel's triumph over other ways of imagining the world.

28 As noted in the introduction, in 1989 the stories of thirteen Aboriginal children taken from their families was published as The Lost Children: Thirteen Australians taken from their Aboriginal families tell of the struggle to find their natural parents, Coral Edwards & Peter Read(eds). Doubleday published a revised edition of this text in 1997 in response to the overwhelming interest in Bringing them home. In 1995, the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia published Telling Our Story, based on the
Jack Davis, though they tell stories of Aboriginal displacement, cultural and spiritual destruction and the continuing importance of the past in the present, have failed to capture the imagination of Australians as Bringing them home has. Kevin Gilbert’s Living Black: Blacks talk to Kevin Gilbert, a collection of Aboriginal people’s testimonies of how they think about themselves and their background, was well-received amongst a select readership. The only Aboriginal story that would have a comparable readership to the Report, however, is Sally Morgan’s My Place, a fictionalised autobiography that has sold 500 000 copies and been reprinted in eleven international editions.

Silence or whispers?

In 1842 Richard Windeyer, a prominent member of the Sydney bar, gave a public lecture in which he attacked traditional Aboriginal society and the notion that Aborigines had any rights to the land of Australia. Despite his tightly-reasoned defence of Aboriginal dispossession Windeyer’s conscience remained troubled. He concluded his speech with two questions: ‘How is it our minds are not satisfied?...What means this whispering in the bottom of our hearts?’ Some of the power of Bringing them home can be attributed to a sense, on the part of many non-Aboriginal Australians, of this ‘whispering in our hearts’, a sense that we should have known or even that maybe somehow on some level we did know and did nothing about it. Such a sentiment is captured in Senator Rosemary Crowley statement:

For me the 1970s is not a very long time ago. I find it absolutely shocking to read these stories and to somehow know that, while I did not know as a child, I had a faint idea, I suppose, as a doctor in South Australia in the testimony of more than 600 separated children and parents. It followed this in May 1996 with After the Removal, a 450-page submission to the Inquiry.

29 H.Reynolds, This Whispering in our Hearts, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 21. Reynolds details the conscientious objections of non-Aboriginal Australians, since the early nineteenth century, to the treatment of Aborigines in Australia. As Reynolds points out, this chapter of our history remains largely unknown.
McGuinness asserts that those who have been troubled and upset by the stories in *Bringing them home* are suffering from guilt:

There is the clear element of evasion of guilt as to one’s own lack of concern in the past. It seems that a generation of university students grew up indifferent to or ignorant of the plight of Aborigines in Australia and now wish to expiate their own guilt by exaggerating the guilt of others. There was little excuse for being unaware of the appalling state of our indigenous people in the 1950s and 1960s; those who remained in placid ignorance can only blame themselves. It is not true that ‘we were not told’...We for the most part were not listening or just did not want to know.31

Is McGuinness’ suggestion plausible? Malcolm Fraser, the Australian Prime Minister from 1975 until 1983 - whose government from 1975 to 1978 had responsibility for governing Northern Territory Aborigines - has stated that he and probably none of his ministers knew anything about the policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families. ‘One of the quite extraordinary things I find about the whole incident,’ wrote Fraser in 1999, ‘is how could such policies endure for so long with so much of the body politic being totally unaware of it’(sic). He went on to argue that Australians must make a ‘mental leap’ to understand their history anew because for ‘non-Aboriginal Australians, the hard thing is to understand that the early history is not what we thought it was, it is not what we were told it was and if we were taught any early history, it is not what we were taught’.32 Fraser attributed the cynicism which greeted *Bringing them home* to the way in which the Report challenged non-Aboriginal Australians’ notions of themselves. He acknowledged that ‘facing the truth about our own past, when it is contrary to what we have been taught for generations, is difficult’, but that it could no

---

30 The stolen children: their stories, 133.

31 ‘Poor Fella My “Stolen Generation”’, 3-4.

32 D.Jopson & D.Reardon, ‘Fraser “was unaware” of children’s removal’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 April 1999, 4.
longer be denied that ‘[w]hatever history the older among us were taught in schools and universities about the earlier settlement of this land was partisan and one-sided’.\textsuperscript{33}

Inga Clendinnen has admitted that despite being an Australian and an internationally renowned historian her knowledge of Aboriginal history in Australia was something of a ‘black hole’.\textsuperscript{34} In order to deliver the 1999 Boyer Lectures she had to cure her ‘ignorance’ of Aboriginal history. Are these eminent, highly-educated Australians lying about their understanding of Australian and Aboriginal history, or has there been a case of what Clendinnen calls ‘bad history’; history made up, not of multiple, sometimes disturbing ‘true stories’ but of ‘one simple and therefore necessarily false one: a story about how fine and great we are, how fine and great we have always been’.\textsuperscript{35}

Public storytelling and Australian history:

History is a narrative that remembers and celebrates some stories and forgets or represses others. Robert Hughes, writing on Australian attitudes to history at the time of the Australian Centennial, states that: ‘the obsessive cultural enterprise of Australians a hundred years ago was to forget [their own history] entirely, to sublimate it, to drive it down into unconsulted recesses. This affected all Australian culture’. Hughes quotes a ‘Centennial Song’ published in the Melbourne \textit{Argus} which ‘struck the right note of defensive optimism, coupling it with an appeal to censor early Australian history - or, preferably, not write it at all:

\begin{quote}
Is it manly, fair or honest with our early sins to stain
What we aimed at, worked for, conquered - aye - an honest, noble name?
And those scribes whose gutter pleasure is to air the hideous past,
Let us leave them to the loathesome mould in which their mind is cast.
Look ahead and not behind us! Look to what is sunny, bright -
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{33} M.Fraser, ‘Apology must be first step’, \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 8 April 1999, 15.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Arts Today}, Martin Porteous interview with Inga Clendinnen, Radio National, 14 Nov. 1999.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{True Stories}, 9.
The sentiments of this Centennial Song are echoed today by a chorus of voices that label the acknowledgment and examination of policies that resulted in significant destruction of Aboriginal life, identity and culture as the ‘black armband’ view of history.

Geoffrey Blainey, having appropriated the term ‘black armband’ from the Aboriginal protest movement of the seventies, coined the phrase ‘black armband history’ to describe what he saw as the ‘rival view’ of history that challenged the more ‘optimistic’, ‘Three Cheers view of history’\textsuperscript{37} taught to Australian school children of his generation. For Blainey and his followers Australian history seems to fit neatly into one of two camps, the ‘gloomy’ or ‘compassionate’ view written by Manning Clark or Blainey’s more upbeat, patriotic view of history. This kind of either/or categorisation of history serves only to polarise opinion and paralyse constructive debate and scholarship on the many true stories of Australia’s past. The factually and morally complex history of this country refuses to be reduced to constricting binaries and yet these binaries continue to dominate public debate.

The most apparent restrictive effect of this either/or mindset can be seen in the way each of the opposing sides of the debate label the other ‘revisionist’. Initially it was the ‘black armband’ historians who were accused, by the more conservative forces, of being ‘revisionist’. Most recently the ‘revisionist’ tag has been applied to the Quadrant group who now seek to deny the narrative of violent European settlement. Gould titled his self-published pamphlet which refutes the claims made by speakers at the Quadrant ‘Truth and Sentimentality’ seminar: ‘McGuinness, Windschuttle and “Quadrant”. The Revisionist attack on Australian History about British Conquest and Aboriginal Resistance’. Both sides of the debate argue that the other has attempted to rewrite or revise history for their own political purposes. Such an impasse supports Eagleton’s


assessment of the new historicism. In this postmodern age history has become 'a conflict of interpretations' whose outcome is determined not by any determinable truths but by the more powerful voice.

The conservative forces in the debate view any attempt to promote greater awareness of Australia's violent and less-than-honourable past in terms of Aboriginal history, as blatantly unpatriotic. Hugh Morgan, Chairman of Western Mining, responded to the Mabo judgement of Deane and Gaudron JJ and Keating's positive response to the Court's majority judgements, with the comment that: 'despite their high office, these people seem ashamed to be Australians. They seem to have no pride in their country and they strive mightily to melt it down and recast it, furtively, in a new, self-deprecating and much diminished mould.'

Deane, in his capacity as Governor-General, has repeatedly demonstrated his immense pride in the Australian political system and the Australian people. In his Centenary of Federation speech he insisted that Australians have much to be proud of in their strong, democratic history but cautioned that, while rejoicing in the nation's achievements, Australians should be 'honest and courageous about the failures and flaws which mar those achievements'.

The acknowledgment of wrongs, the owning of painful episodes in a nation's history, does not preclude national pride. Indeed a truthful admission of past injustices is essential if a nation is to mature in its understanding of itself and its future direction. Australia is not the first country to face this somewhat painful introspection. Bringing them home quotes a member of the Chilean National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, a commission established to investigate gross human-rights violations under the Pinochet dictatorship:

[S]ociety cannot simply block out a chapter of its history; it cannot deny the facts of its past, however differently these may be interpreted. Inevitably, the void would be filled with lies or with conflicting, confusing versions of


the past. A nation's unity depends on a shared identity, which in turn depends largely on a shared memory. The truth also brings a measure of healthy social catharsis and helps to prevent the past from reoccurring [sic] (BTH 307).

In our current conservative political climate there seems to be a concern that the telling of new stories, in this case new only because they have not been extensively voiced before, will somehow deface or dishonour the stories that are strongly interwoven into our dominant culture. The fear that the surfacing of Australia's Aboriginal past will supplant the integrity of the anglo-Australian present lends credence to the suggestion that Australian history has depended on the silencing of Aboriginal stories and voices. As Don Watson argues, history is more than capable of accommodating multiple stories, good and bad: 'Why should literature, art and cinema studies be free to study the dark, while history is confined to the light?' If you sanitise history, writes Watson, it will die.

History is available to us as a text. Thus how we read history depends in some measure on how we have learned to read it by means of our practice with it and other texts. With Stanner's comments about the 'Great Australian Silence' in mind, we would do well to approach Australian history texts with an eye to what is absent or unsaid. As Greg Dening has noted:

If the texts of the past are mountainously high, the silences in them are unfathomably deep: silences of pain, and of happiness for that matter; silences of guilt, silences of fear; silences of exclusion; silences of forgetting. The language of the deepest passion is often trite, bland and without apparent depth. The highest and lowest moments of human living often have no elaboration. These are sorts of silences too. But these silences are not likely to be an emptiness. They are more likely to be, as Paul Valery says: 'The active presence of absent things'. I suppose I believe that that is what we must empower our imaginations to do: to see these absent things, to hear these silences.41


One needs imagination to see absent things, to hear silences. Imagination does not take the place of the detail, the facts, the evidence of history. When permitted to work in communication with history, it can operate to trace the sometimes only faintly perceptible lines of significance that exist between voice and silence, presence and absence.

Sometimes history, left to its own devices, is not powerful enough to inform public consciousness. Morag Fraser writes:

> In Australia there is a disjunction between what historians bring to the public mind and what filters through in the form of public policy. The lag is predictable. And the history is still there for the reading. But its dissemination ... is another question. But art sometimes answers questions. Art and history will collude. In time.42

Narrative and history have colluded in the publication of *Bringing them home* with the result that a largely silent chapter of Australian history is now ‘there for the reading’. That chapter, with reference back to Eagleton, is seen by some as a threat to the ‘interests and desires of the present’. All parties involved in the current debate about the validity of these stories would admit that history is a powerful means of social and political control. McGuinness encapsulates the argument when he explains why this debate is happening and why it is so impassioned: ‘the point relates to the uses of history as a way of manipulating the present and the future. As Orwell put it, who controls the present, controls the past, and who controls the past controls the future’.43

To reiterate Eagleton’s comment, history it would seem, is ‘just a conflict of interpretations whose outcome [is] finally determined by power rather than truth’.

In July 1996 Prime Minister John Howard delivered the Sir Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture in which he spoke of the ‘true purpose of history’. Howard began his lecture stating:

> Occasions such as this are important and uplifting for many reasons, and not least of them is the opportunity they provide to set the historical record

---

42 'Reading the Weather', *Australian Book Review*, June 2000, 36.

43 'Aborigines, Massacres and Stolen Children', 4.
straight. One of the more insidious developments in Australian political life over the past decade or so has been the attempt to re-write Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause.

He went on to argue that:

This process of officially attempting to re-write Australian history was an insidious one because it was an abuse of the true purpose of history. It read history backwards, imposing on the past a pattern designed to serve contemporary political needs. It portrayed a partial and selective view of our past as the officially endorsed version of our history. And it sought to stifle voices of dissent from that view with abuse and vitriol rather than reasoned debate.44

Is it not the nature of history to be rewritten? New stories are told from new perspectives with new voices not to silence the stories that have gone before but to challenge, qualify, enlarge or confirm them. The present and the past, as Oodgeroo’s poetry repeatedly demonstrates, are communicating presences. Or to use Gadamer’s language, the ‘horizon of the present’ is continually in the process of becoming because we have to continually test our current perceptions and prejudices through our encounters with and understanding of the past. It is not a question of privileging one over the other, rather ‘old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other’.45 Howard, and the more conservative forces in this debate, see the ‘true purpose of history’ as a means by which the nation is to be united, a means by which a common identity and national direction are to be discovered and nurtured. This sense of unified nation and the preference for one true story of Australian history is starkly at odds with what Curthoys and Muecke have argued modern, multicultural Australia needs: ‘a sense of nation informed by

---


Howard admitted in his speech that:

There is certainly a need for Australians to understand their history better...The fact is that the history of our nation is the story of all our people and it is a story for all our people...It is a history which has its flaws - certainly - but which broadly constitutes a scale of heroic and unique achievement against great odds.

The recorded history of Australia has not been the ‘the story of all our people’. It is the official history, rather than ‘black-armband’ history that has ‘portrayed a partial and selective view of our past’. Until recently Australian history has been the story of white Australians and their ‘heroic and unique achievement against great odds’. Aborigines have, at best, featured as a ‘melancholy footnote to Australian history’, a ‘codicil to the Australian story’.47 While commentators such as McGuinness and another of his Quadrant contributors, Robert Murray,48 may argue that Australians as a nation knew of the past practices involving Aborigines there is too much evidence to the contrary, too many history texts that mark Aborigines by their absence.49

What were we told?

It was relatively easy to leave Aborigines out of the narrative of Australian history because until 1948 they were not considered to be Australian citizens. At the beginning

---


47 Stanner, After the Dreaming, 11. Stanner is here referring to the observation made in 1959 by the Australian historian John La Nauze: ‘unlike the Maori, the American Indian or the South African Bantu, the Australian Aboriginal is noticed in our history only in a melancholy anthropological footnote’. See ‘The Study of Australian History, 1929-59’, Historical Studies, 9:33, 1959, 11.

48 See R. Murray, ‘Who Wasn’t Told?’, Quadrant November 1999, 56-59. Murray argues that there were ample references to Aborigines in history texts. References however, do not necessarily equate with balanced, truthful information.

of the twentieth century school primers told children, quite explicitly, that Aborigines were not part of history because they had none:

When people talk about 'the history of Australia' they mean the history of the white people who have lived in Australia. There is a good reason why we should not stretch the term to make it include the history of the dark-skinned wandering tribes who hurled boomerangs and ate snakes in their native land for long ages before the arrival of the first intruders from Europe...for they have nothing that can be called a history. They have dim legends, and queer fairy tales, and deep-rooted customs which have come down from long, long ago; but they have no history, as we use the word...Change and progress are the stuff of which history is made: these blacks knew no change and made no progress, as far as we can tell. Men of science [i.e., anthropologists] may peer at them and try to guess where they came from, how they got to Australia, how their strange customs began, and what those customs mean; but the historian is not concerned with them. He is concerned with Australia only as the dwelling-place of white men and women...It is his business to tell us how these white folk found the land, how they settled in it, how they explored it, and how they gradually made it the Australia we know today.50

The term 'history' refers to much more than the story of 'change and progress'. History today incorporates a multitude of ways of knowing and talking about societies and their past. In Australia it may be helpful to discuss history in two strands, Australian history and Aboriginal history. While the separation of Aboriginal and Australian is problematic in that it appears to signify an exclusory classification, in reality there have been two separate histories operating in Australia since the British arrived in 1788 and began 'Australian' history on the 'silent', 'empty' land.

Murdoch was not the only historian to deny the existence of Aboriginal history. In 1888 Alexander Sutherland wrote:

A truly savage race can have nothing that we may narrate as history. We may gather from them a few stories...but these are without continuity ...It is only when such a degree of civilization is reached that the race becomes welded into a solid nation; when wandering tribes consolidate and own

some unifying authority, that we can tell its story as a history.\textsuperscript{51}

Chris Healy's research supports the proposition that the Murdoch and Sutherland view of history has predominated in Australia:

For a long time Aboriginal history in Australia was an impossibility. Aborigines were allowed to have myths, for myth is one of the markers of the primitive, but history they had not. History was both the product and the (self) contemplation of European civilisation manifest in southern regions. True knowledge of the past was knowledge of white Australia reserved for white Australians.\textsuperscript{52}

The Australian history that did speak of Aborigines used terms such as 'care' and 'protection'. \textit{Australia since 1900}(1965), book three in the three year history course for Australian high-school students, discusses racial relations under the heading: 'The Problem of the Aborigines'.\textsuperscript{53} Much is made of how white Australians cared for and protected Aborigines. 'Welfare' and 'assimilation' are discussed but no mention is made of the policy of separation. If 'change and progress are the stuff of which history is made', why was there silence about the policies which brought dramatic, unalterable change to Aboriginal society?

Kevin Gilbert, like Stanner in 1968, viewed the ignorance of non-Aboriginal Australians about Aboriginal history as the result of purposeful neglect on the part of historians:

Ask white or black Australian kids to name a heroic Red Indian chief or a famous Indian tribe and most will be able to do so because of comics and films. Ask them to name an Aboriginal hero or a famous Aboriginal tribe and they will not be able to do so because Aboriginal history is either unknown or negative.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{52} From the Ruins of Colonialism, 50.


It was Gilbert who in 1972 publicly identified the ways in which the Australian government had sought to wilfully destroy the structure of Aboriginal families by removing Aboriginal children. At that time the silence that surrounded the process of child separation was so encompassing and so insidious that many Aboriginal people themselves were unaware of its magnitude and devastating consequences. Peter Read has offered some explanation for the silence of both white and black Australians on the policies of child separation:

The long silence of the concerned blacks and whites was compounded and assisted by the public silence of the people concerned. The removed children and their parents were absent from the national debates during the decades from the 1930s to 60s...Their histories still are mostly confined to collections of family letters and PhD theses. The masculinist political discourse of the 1960s remained, as it had in the later 1930s, not families but economics, wages, civil rights, land, education[sic]. To grieving parents separation implied a lack of their own care.

‘In 1983’, writes Read, ‘the Aboriginal communities still had not regained their understanding of child separation as central to their history.’ They were not fully aware of why or how so many of their children had been taken. ‘Removal in 1983 was still almost unmentionable by any family member involved. It seemed to reflect equally badly on one’s family and oneself.’ Read explains how in that year when Coral Edwards addressed a group of forty middle-aged Aboriginal community leaders on the policy of child separation and the reasoning behind the policy:

it was one of those remarkable moments when Australian history takes on a new direction. A palpable silence descended ... Heads looked up, pencils hovered. Unspoken questions began to flash about the room... : ‘Is that why my family never talks about my youngest sister?’ ‘Do you mean that my mother didn’t put us away?’


56 A Rape of the Soul so Profound, 171.

57 A Rape of the Soul so Profound, 102.

58 A Rape of the Soul so Profound, 71.
A refrain of 'I didn't really know', 'I didn't know', runs throughout *The Lost Children*. The interviews related in that text demonstrate the multifaceted and multilayered nature of the silence that surrounded the policies and consequences of child separation and the way in which that silence has worked backwards and forwards through generations of those affected. Jean Carter, one of the stolen children, explains why she remained silent about her history: 'I didn't tell my kids because I was ashamed. Wasn't going to talk about something my mother and father did, put me in a home'.

Pauline McLeod and her siblings were taken as babies and toddlers from their parents. When Pauline, a well-known television personality and story-teller, finally found her mother and some of her immediate family, she kept silent about her institutionalised childhood because she felt that her mother and family were not strong enough to know what really happened to her.

It would now be almost impossible to read any significant work of Australian social and political history that did not include the active participation of Aboriginal people. The dichotomy between Aboriginal and Australian history is no longer as stark as it has been. Over the past two decades non-Aboriginal Australian researchers have begun to try and consider Aboriginal history from an Aboriginal viewpoint, through Aboriginal stories. Most importantly there is a growing number of Aboriginal historians, Phillip Pepper, Robert Bropho, Wayne Atkinson, James Miller, to name a few, whose work will ensure that the existence of Aboriginal history can never again be denied.

The battle for the tag of legitimate history, however, is not over. Aboriginal histories present a profound challenge to the discipline of history itself. In general Western culture has always assumed and reinforced a distinction between history as a story informed by facts and verifiable by empirical truths and myth as a story that portrays a more imaginative form of truth. Aboriginal history incorporates traditional oral narratives and myth as ways of knowing about the past and - because it eschews the stark discontinuity between then and now that the objective, positivist tradition

59 *The Lost Children*, 97.
maintains - the present. Much Aboriginal history has come through stories, not legally proven, factually verifiable stories, but stories that express the truth of Aboriginal beliefs and experience. Ruby Langford Ginibi has said of her writing: ‘I want to store all this knowledge about my mob here so that we don’t get left out of the next lot of history...I’m not interested in writing fiction...I’m too busy writing the truth about my people.’ Langford Ginibi reiterated this point in her address delivered at the 1997 Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) Conference. ‘And because of that “non-history” of ours’, she said, ‘all our Aboriginal writers...show that our stories are our histories, because they tell of our lived Aboriginal experiences in Australia since invasion’. Susan Lever has drawn a similar connection between Aboriginal autobiographies and history. In *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998) Lever notes that the publication, over the past decade, of a significant number of autobiographical accounts of Aboriginal experience have been ‘particularly important in restoring a history of black lives in Australia, as so much has been omitted from public histories’. Significantly, Lever goes on to note that these published stories - and she includes the stories told in evidence to the Inquiry - have contributed ‘as much to Australian history as to its literature’, and ‘seem bound to influence fiction making’.

The power of story to convey the truth of history cannot be denied when one considers that Aboriginal lore and tradition have survived for thousands of years through the act of storytelling. One of the main recommendations of *Bringing them home* was the need to establish an Aboriginal oral history archive in which all the stories already told and those yet to be told, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

60 Penny van Toorn admits certain types of traditional Aboriginal oral narratives as ‘history’. She has cited a number of critics who argue that ‘non-Western ways of knowing and representing the past fall outside the bounds of “history”’. See ‘Tactical History Business: The Ambivalent Politics of Commodifying the Stolen Generations Stories’, *Southerly* 59:3&4, 1999, footnote 5, 264.


63 ‘Fiction: Innovation and Ideology’, 323.
affected by the policies of separation, could be gathered together as ‘a memorial to the Stolen Children’. The National Library of Australia, with a grant of $1.6million, commenced its ‘Bringing Them Home’ Project in July 1999. The project aims, over a four year period, to record the stories of nearly 300 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved in the process of child removals. A publication based on these oral histories will be made available in order to ensure that these stories are widely accessible.
The Aboriginal Memorial, 1987-88.
Lest We Forget

Remembrance is the womb of freedom and must be cultivated long before men are able to name their slavery...Remembrance is the bodily infrastructure of political knowledge and action. It holds injustice to account and sustains the utopian hope that underlies the will to freedom and equality. ¹

Chris Healy has noted that:

in their history-making, non-Aboriginal Australians, and men in particular, have shown a positively morbid interest in the remembrance of death. From ubiquitous war-memorials to the deification of explorers who perished slowly and painfully of dehydration, from the death-masks of saintly sinners to the manifold terrors endured in convict gulags, Australian history and death have been woven into one story. ²

Those ‘ubiquitous war-memorials’, found in most country towns and in all major cities, commemorate sacrifices generally made on foreign soil. In their various forms - bronze soldiers, obelisks, clock towers, memorial gates, avenues or gardens - these memorials both honour the dead and provide the living with a tangible site where they can reflect on and remember the history that resulted in so much death. Significantly memorials operate as sites not only of memory but of story that unite the past with the present. There remains, however, a notable absence in this Australian landscape of memorials: memorials to the Aborigines who died in the ‘black wars’ defending their country, their sacred sites and their way of life.³ Bruce Dawe captures this absence and its effect on


² From the Ruins of Colonialism, 42.

³ Ken Inglis has detailed the history of recent attempts to construct memorials which recognise the contribution of Aborigines to the war effort. See Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape, (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 1998), 449-458. Inglis also notes that in 1984 a memorial commemorating the centenary of the killing of Kalkadoon people was unveiled. The memorial’s inscription celebrated Aboriginal resistance to invasion. In 1988 a bicentennial monument to Kalkadoon war dead, that ignored the killings of 1884, was unveiled. The ‘1988 monument revived an older tradition of amnesia, giving no hint that Aboriginal people had died defending their country’ (449).
the Australian psyche in his poem ‘For the Other Fallen’:

You fought here for your country.
Where are your monuments?
The difficulties we have in belonging
- these, these are your cenotaph.  

Australia’s first war memorial was a pillar, raised in 1850 by soldiers stationed in Hobart, ‘to perpetuate the memory of comrades “who fell in the service of their Queen and country during the campaigns in New Zealand, 1845-46”’. Between the years 1888 and 1915 thirty additional memorials were raised to the white Australians who lost their lives in the racial wars with Maoris. Ken Inglis, in Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape (1998), traces the history of the establishment of war memorials in Australia and comments on the ‘remarkable’ absence of monuments to those who fell in the black wars. ‘Pillars and inscriptions’, writes Inglis, ‘were not part of Aboriginal culture but they were very much a part of European culture’. Why was it then that ‘the newcomers so seldom commemorated conflicts between black and white’? The official explanation may be that conflicts between black and white were not classified as ‘warfare’. Another explanation may be that the first stage of the ‘culture of forgetting’ - a stage that Windschuttle and McGuinness now actively seek to enforce - had begun.

Inglis relates the story of James Dawson, one of the oldest settlers in Victoria’s western district, who in 1884 canvassed support from surrounding landowners to erect a monument to ‘record the passing of the last local Aborigine, Wombeetch Puyuun’. The landowners declined to support the memorial due to their ‘sense of unease that the memorial would be read as evidence of their inhumanity’:

‘I decline to assist in erecting a monument to a race of men we have robbed of their country’, one correspondent explained candidly. A few years later,

5 Inglis, 15.
6 Inglis, 21.
in New South Wales, the same thought prevented any monumental or ceremonial recognition of Aborigines during celebrations for the centenary of British settlement. When a radical politician proposed that ‘we ought to do something for the Aborigines’, Sir Henry Parkes retorted: ‘And remind them that we have robbed them’.

There was one monument erected in the early 1900s which made reference to Aborigines. It was created to preserve the memory of the death of three white explorers at the hands of Aborigines at Roebuck Bay in 1905. The words ‘ATTACKED AT NIGHT BY TREACHEROUS NATIVES’ were engraved on the monument erected over the explorer’s graves. The inscription ended with ‘LEST WE FORGET’. ‘It was the first time these words were used as a pledge to keep in mind an evil deed supposedly done by Aborigines’.

**Anzacs and Aborigines:**

Bernard Smith argued in his 1980 Boyer Lectures that to act ethically a nation must have a conscience, it must remember what it has done. While Australians seem to have forgotten certain aspects of their history, the story of Anzac and the bravery and selflessness of the diggers seems to loom ever larger in the Australian imagination. On January 26, 1988, Australia celebrated the bicentenary of the English settlement of the colony of New South Wales. To many Australians, black and white, the day signified an invasion rather than a settlement and the celebration was not of the arrival of the British but of Aboriginal survival against enormous odds. Arthur Boyd painted *Australian Scapegoat* (Fig 1) as his contribution to Australia’s Bicentennial celebrations. *Australian Scapegoat* (1987) critically explores, through its coupling of two essential aspects of Australian identity and history, the Anzac and the Aborigine, the myth of national identity. Terry Smith interprets the painting thus:

> Myths of national identity are savaged in Boyd’s *Australian Scapegoat*...Its rising sun imagery evokes the heroic masculinity of the Anzacs, but the

---

7 Inglis, 26.

8 Inglis, 72.
soldier fuses with the black man to become a symbol of desperate impotence. The skate, evocative of femininity, lies ravished in the wet sand. In this strong anti-jingoistic statement, the bicentennial nationalism of 1988 is anticipated as a multiple rape.9

Boyd was not alone in recognising the connection between Aborigines and the Anzacs. Graham Jenkin, in his study of a South Australian people, *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri* (1979), argued that the fight waged by Aboriginal people against the white invaders of their land and their consequent defeat at the hands of these invaders, was ‘redolent of Eureka, Glenrowan and Gallipoli’.10 Thomas Keneally has described 26 January as the Aborigine’s Anzac Day. Jack Davis encapsulates not only the connection between Aboriginal history and Anzac Day but also that between memory, history and death:

I really think the majority of Australians are just buffoons. They tell us to forgive and forget what’s happened in the past. Then, every Anzac day, they glorify their own history. How are we supposed to forget what’s happened to us in Australia when White Australians keep on remembering their own violent history elsewhere? Besides, we have a lot more to remember right here.11

The legend of Anzac has been a central tenet in the foundation of Australian identity. So too has been the absence of Aboriginal people. ‘Australia’s presence’, writes Ian McLean, ‘was founded on an absent Aboriginality’.12 The difference between these two markers of Australian identity is that the story of Anzac lives, indeed flourishes, in the narratives and collective memories that inform Australian history and identity, whereas the stories of Aboriginal life have been largely silenced. They fail to

---


10 *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri*, (Adelaide: Rigby, 1979), 11.


register in the memories of many. At the State funeral of Ted Matthews, the last surviving Australian soldier of those who stormed the beaches at Anzac Cove, Gallipoli, on the morning of April 25 1915, the Prime Minister said that the story of the bravery, sacrifice and heroism of Australian soldiers is the story we must tell our children. He is right. However, on the same day that John Howard made that statement, it was announced that his government would offer no official apology to the stolen children.

How is it that the Anzac myth has been kept so alive and sustaining? Why, 85 years after the event, are there ever-increasing numbers of Australian tourists, significantly young backpackers, who attend the dawn service at Gallipoli? The answer to both questions is, through storytelling:

We who were not there do not know Lone Pine, the Nek or Pozieres. But we had a Charles Bean and we have a Bill Gammage and those who have followed him to help open our imaginations and to impose reality on our understanding. We might not know war, but we have had generations to absorb and develop the story for us through celebration, commemoration; through books, song and film. By imposing Anzac Day on our calendar, we have given ourselves the space...to read and think about these things, and...the repetition has worked on us.13

Storytelling and imagination allow those who have come after the event to experience a palpable sense of connection with a lost generation of young men. It is a connection felt not only on an intellectual level, a knowing of the facts of history, but on a psychological and emotional level as well. When tourists make their pilgrimage of remembrance to honour the dead at Gallipoli, they move amongst the headstones and read on them the names and ages, the stories, of the young men who lie buried there. They place themselves among the dead.

Visitors to the black, granite Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. are also positioned in such a way that they see themselves reflected amongst the names of the dead. When Maya Lin, a 21 year-old architecture student, won the competition to design the Washington Memorial she had no consensus to work with. The Vietnam

War had been lost by America. To many Americans it was an immoral and tragic event. Maya Lin designed a memorial that would not ‘tell you what to think about Vietnam. She came up with a design that would not try to resolve conflicting emotions over the war...but would reawaken the intensity of each [person’s]... feeling’. Greg Dening has written eloquently of the Washington Memorial. His response to it echoes many important aspects of the public response to *Bringing them home*:

There was terrible debate over the memorial...It was a black-armband of a memorial, its opponents might have said. It degraded the American past, they certainly said...It did not turn out that way. There are not many now who don’t say that a visit to the Wall is therapeutic. Most will say that it doesn’t answer any questions. It doesn’t make any rhetorical, closed statements. That’s its therapeutic quality. It just makes you ask questions. If you don’t have answers for your questions, that’s all right. Maybe there are no answers to some questions. But people have said that the deeply silent Wall has broken the silence about the Vietnam war and lets people say things that should have been said a long time ago... I like to think that the only memorials that we... have, temporarily, are our histories. These temporary memorials, I think, should have some of the characteristics of Maya Lin’s memorial. They should be therapeutic. People should weep when they read them. They should break long silence and make those that read them ask questions that had never been asked. Readers should see their own reflection in them.

We are back with imagination: being able to see oneself in the face of an other; being able to stand among the survivors and listen to their stories; being able to bodily participate in those stories. It is significant, however, that the readers/listeners of *Bringing them home* have the opportunity to stand amongst the living. Whereas memorials by definition look to the past and commemorate those who can no longer speak, *Bringing them home* is a document of living voices that seek acknowledgment of the past and a moving forward into the future.

Returned Australian Vietnam veterans suffered, for many years, a sense of

---


isolation and hostility. Their war was not on the same level as the two World Wars. Until October 3, 1992, they were without a memorial at which to gather and remember their experiences and the deaths of their comrades. At the ceremony of inauguration of the Vietnam War Memorial in Canberra, Peter Poulton said: ‘This is the final healing process and we can now join together as one nation’. On the first anniversary of the publication of Bringing them home the Council for Reconciliation instituted a national Sorry day; a day when non-Aboriginal Australians could, in various ways, publicly acknowledge their sorrow at the practices of separation that operated in Australia for so long. That day, May 26, has since been named a ‘Journey of Healing’. Despite the massive turnout for Bridge walks across the nation in 2000, May 26 has not as yet taken hold of the Australian imagination in any way comparable to that of Anzac Day though, as Michael McKernan suggests, perhaps one day it might. The story of child separation ‘would be told, hesitatingly at first; with more confidence as both the story and ceremony took hold and expanded our imaginations. Then, slowly, we might become more alert to wider aspects of our Australian narrative.’

Aboriginal Memorial(s):

It was Geoffrey Blainey who first advised, in 1979, that the Australian War Memorial would have to include an acknowledgment of the warfare between Aborigines and Europeans within the next ten years. In 1981 Henry Reynolds, having estimated that 20 000 Aborigines were killed in frontier wars, asked:

Do we give up our cherished ceremonies or do we make room for the Aboriginal dead on our memorials, cenotaphs, boards of honour and even in the pantheon of national heroes? If we are to continue to celebrate the sacrifice of men and women who died for their country can we deny admission to fallen tribesmen?...If they did not die for Australia as such they

---

16 Inglis, 408.

17 ‘War and remembrance’, 6.
fell defending their homelands, their sacred sites, their way of life.\textsuperscript{18}

John Pilger echoed similar questions in his 1985 documentary \textit{The Secret Country}.\textsuperscript{19} These questions inspired Djon Mundine, then art adviser in Ramingining in Central Arnhem Land, to suggest the creation of an Aboriginal Memorial which would mark the bicentennial of the European invasion/settlement of Australia in 1988.

Mundine, with financial backing from the federal government and the National Gallery of Australia, commissioned forty-three artists from the Bula'bula Arts Centre at Ramingining to make two hundred burial poles: hollowed out ironwood and eucalyptus logs, traditionally used in Arnhem Land communities to house the bones of the dead. Each pole represents a year of European settlement. The installation as a whole signifies a war cemetery, a memorial to all those Aborigines who died defending their country and who have been denied a proper burial. The leaflet which first accompanied the \textit{Memorial} was titled: 'LEST WE FORGET'. One of the powers of the \textit{Aboriginal Memorial} is the way the poles are positioned on two large bases separated by a space. That space, in the shape of a winding river like those found over Arnhem Land, or the shape of the life-giving Rainbow Serpent, allows the viewer to enter into the \textit{Memorial} and walk through the landscape of death and memory (Figs 2 & 3). The space operates - as do those remarked upon by Iser in his writing on negativity and textual play - to encourage viewer participation. By being physically present amidst the poles, as with the headstones in the Gallipoli cemetery or in the reflection of the names on the Washington memorial, the participant experiences a powerful connection with the past and the absence signified by each individual pole. The participant experiences an interactive model of knowing (as distinct from the factual model advocated by the \textit{Quadrant} group).

The artists who created the \textit{Aboriginal Memorial} intended that it should be

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European Invasion of Australia}, (Ringwood: Penguin, 1982), 201. This text was originally published by James Cook University in 1981.

located in a prominent public place where it could be preserved for future generations. From 1991 it was displayed in the first room of the National Gallery of Australia to ensure that every visitor to the Gallery was confronted by it. Recently it was suggested that the Memorial be relocated to the Australian War Memorial. That debate continues. In February 2000 the Memorial, along with other Aboriginal art, went on display at St Petersburg’s world-renowned State Hermitage Museum in an exhibition titled, ‘World of Dreamings: Traditional and Contemporary Art of Aboriginal Australia’. The image of Australia depicted by that exhibition is a far cry from that idealised by A.O.Neville in 1937.

There is as yet no memorial to the stolen generation but there are two other vastly contrasting memorials commemorating Aborigines and the history of their death. The most recent of these, unveiled on June 10, 2000, is the memorial to the 28 Aboriginal men, women and children massacred at Myall Creek on June 10, 1838. The Myall Creek Memorial consists of a plaque mounted on a 14-tonne, granite memorial stone. Its unveiling was attended by descendants of both the killers and those killed. The other memorial, in the form of four large portraits, dates from 1834. In that year the Tasmanian Governor, Sir John Franklin, after lobbying from the policeman-turned-journalist Gilbert Robertson and 113 colonists, used public funds to purchase Benjamin Duterrau’s portraits of Truganini, Woureddy, Tanleboueyer and Manalargenna (Fig 4). These paintings, writes Tim Bonyhady, ‘were recognised immediately as a “memorial” to the Aborigines’. Bonyhady goes on to note:

The prime function of many colonial pictures of Aborigines was to perpetuate their memory when, as the colonists expected, they either died out altogether or were transformed by civilisation into a different people. Duterrau’s four portraits are particularly significant both because they are big oil paintings (whereas most colonial portraits of Aborigines were small prints, drawings or photographs) and because they were bought to mark the peaceful end to Tasmania’s Black War in the 1830s.20

Duterrau’s portraits were the first Australian paintings bought by an Australian

20 ‘Never forget a face’, The Sydney Morning Herald, 14 Oct. 2000, 10S.
government for permanent public display. They remained on display in Hobart’s Legislative Council until the end of the nineteenth century when they were transferred to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. These paintings, like the *Aboriginal Memorial* 150 years later, were conceived as a major public commemoration of Australia’s Aborigines.
3. Floor plan of *The Aboriginal Memorial*. 
schools. In New South Wales the primary school curriculum for 2001 encompasses the terms ‘invasion’, ‘occupation’, ‘settlement’, ‘exploration’, and ‘discovery’. Children are asked to explain why the different terms reflect different perspectives of the same event. Part of the mandatory content subject matter in Stage 3 of the Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) Kindergarten to Year 6 syllabus, the stage taught in Years 5 and 6, is ‘Australian human rights issues including the impact of the stolen generations past and present’ on Australian society. Nationally, primary-school children celebrate NAIDOC week, a week of special celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, usually with visits from Aboriginal artists, storytellers and dancers who discuss Aboriginal history, culture and reconciliation between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians.

On the crucial issue of language there are positive and negative developments. Bilingual education was introduced in the Northern Territory in 1973. In 1998 Northern Territory primary schools offered 21 bilingual education programs in which 17 indigenous languages were taught alongside instruction in English. One of the great advantages of bilingual education for Aboriginal children was that it afforded Aboriginal parents and extended families a place in their education. It put Aboriginal teachers in classrooms and in legitimising and strengthening their language, gave adults and children increased self-esteem. In December 1998 the Northern Territory government abolished all bilingual education programs. This decision placed Aborigines in the Territory in a position not dissimilar to that faced by the Kaurna people nearly 150 years earlier. In 1835 the governor of South Australia made a speech to the Kaurna Aboriginal people of the Adelaide plains, in which he exhorted them to drop their languages in favour of English:

‘Black man, we wish to make you happy’, he was reported as saying. ‘But you can not be happy unless you imitate white man. Build huts, wear clothes, be useful, have God, love white men...and learn to speak English!’

The last fluent speaker of Kaurna, Ivaritji, died in 1929. More than three-quarters of Australia’s 250 indigenous languages have already been
extinguished by processes of colonisation.\textsuperscript{22}

In July 2000, however, the Kimberley Language Resource Centre launched the publication of \textit{Thangani Bunuba}, a book of stories written in English and Bunuba from the Bunuba elders of the Fitzroy Valley. In 1999 Galarrwuy and Mandawuy Yunupingu, in association with the Yothu Yindi Foundation, established an annual Garma festival in order to celebrate and teach Yolngu culture and language to black and white Australians. In September 2000 over 400 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, including a number of academics, attended the Garma festival in north east Arnhem Land. The festival provided the impetus to establish a Garma Cultural Studies Institute which aims, with the co-operation of select university vice-chancellors, to promote Aboriginal language and knowledge. A program of Yolngu studies, including bachelor degrees and graduate diploma courses in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is available through the Northern Territory University. Stories of Yolngu life and culture are offered in both Yolngu and english on the university-backed Yolngu website.\textsuperscript{23} In June 1986 R. David Zorc, Senior Lecturer in the School of Australian Linguistics at the Darwin Institute of Technology, published the first Yolngu-Matha(tongue) dictionary containing 8407 entries which translate Yolngu words into english. Zorc has titled the dictionary ‘Stage 1’ because it contains less than one-third of the Yolngu-Matha vocabulary.

Aboriginal activists have often used creative writing as a medium for protest, dissent and community education for their own communities and a wider readership. The establishment of Aboriginal publishing houses, in 1986 Black Books and in early 1988 Magabala Books, has boosted the number of stories from Aboriginal Australia offered to the Australian reading public. ‘In July 1988 Kevin Gilbert’s \textit{Inside Black Australia} became one of the highest-selling paperbacks in the nation, giving rise to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} C.Nicholls, ‘Cruel Blow to bilingual education’, \textit{The Australian}, 1 Jan. 1999, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{23} See http://www.ntu.edu.au/yolngustudies; INTERNET. See also http://www.dnathan.com/VL/austLang.htm; INTERNET for dictionaries of and resources for 40 Aboriginal languages.
\end{itemize}
optimism that Aboriginal voices will be heard even more clearly in the future’. In 2000 Kim Scott’s *Benang: From the Heart* sold over 10 000 copies and shared the Miles Franklin Award with Thea Astley’s *Drylands*. In that same year Fremantle Arts Centre Press published new or revised editions of five other significant texts that tell the stories of child separation and the stolen generation: Anna Haebich’s *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, Quentin Beresford’s and Paul Omaji’s *Our State of Mind: Racial planning and the stolen generations* and *Rites of Passage*, Carolyn Wadley Dowley’s *Through Silent Country* and Anne Brewster’s, Rosemary van der Berg’s and Angeline O’Neill’s edited anthology *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember*. In April 2000 Donna Meehan - the only witness who wrote under her own name in Bird’s *the stolen children: their stories* - published her story titled, *It is no Secret: the story of a stolen child*. In ‘Indigenous texts and narratives’, the first chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000), Penny van Toorn documents an extensive number of contemporary texts written by Aboriginal writers including those such as *Shadow Child: A Memoir of the Stolen Generation* (1998) and *Malanbarra* (1997) which tell stories of the stolen generation. These texts represent only a portion of the Aboriginal voices now being heard in the Australian community. The flourishing number of recently-published stories by or about members of the stolen generation draws attention to the fact that there has been a silence and an absence not just within Australian history and literary texts, but an historical absence of texts which tell these stories of Aboriginal experience.

After publication of the Report, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was inundated with requests from writers, dramatists and film-makers for permission to translate witness statements into books, films, plays and television documentaries. The Commission turned down all these requests, with the exception of Carmel Bird, in order to protect the privacy of Aboriginal witnesses and to preserve the confidentiality of their testimony. Van Toorn has explored the political implications of the commodification of Aboriginal histories and in particular of the commodification of

---

the stories told in *Bringing them home*:

Commodification of the stolen generations’ stories is a politically ambivalent process. On the one hand, the commodification process introduces problems to do with privacy and confidentiality, ownership, custodianship, voyeurism, copyright and the danger of financial exploitation. On the other hand commodification can work as a powerful means of education. Distribution of these stories through market channels could go a long way towards breaking down racist attitudes, promoting empathy and understanding, and securing social justice and equity for Indigenous Australians.  

Implicit in van Toorn’s statement is the belief that stories, through their capacity to engender empathic imagination, have the ability to influence society’s political and moral attitudes.

Stolen-children narratives are being told in increasing numbers through a variety of media. In the week surrounding Corroboree 2000, from May 25 to June 3 2000, SBS television broadcast a range of programs which told stories of Australia’s Aboriginal past. One of those programs was Jeni Kendell’s documentary, *Cry from the Heart*, initially shown as the opening film at the Sydney documentary film festival, ‘REAL: life on film’, in April 2000. *Cry from the Heart* tells the story of Chris Edwards, born in 1967 and taken that year, as were his brothers and sisters, from his mother. Chris was placed in a series of foster homes and had no knowledge of his Aboriginality until he met his brother, a complete stranger, in his troubled teenage years. Chris and his extended family spoke at the opening of the film festival and were available to discuss their story with the audience at the film’s conclusion. Again, a predominantly non-Aboriginal audience had the opportunity, through physical interaction, to gain a deeper understanding of the outcome of policies of separation.

The last decade has seen Aboriginal history and culture positively and dynamically presented to national and international audiences through initiatives such as the successful and well-subscribed 1998 Festival of the Dreaming and the internationally acclaimed Bangarra Dance Company and rock-band Yothu Yindi. Two

---

25 ‘Tactical History Business’, 263-64.
public sessions at the 1998 Sydney Writer’s Festival, at which members of the stolen generation told their stories, overflowed with interested listeners. Jane Harrison’s *Stolen*, a raw and passionate play that explores the emotional legacy of being part of the stolen generation, premiered at the Melbourne Festival in 1998. It has since performed to full drama-houses in Hobart, Adelaide and Sydney before moving to London as part of ‘Heads Up: Australian Arts 100’, a Centenary of Federation festival backed by the Australia Council. *Stolen*’s producers are currently negotiating seasons in North America and Asia.

Leah Purcell’s autobiographical one-woman play (and text) *Box the Pony*, after a sell-out national tour and a repeat season at Company B Belvoir in Sydney, was also performed in London at the Centenary of Federation festival. *Box the Pony* is a story of abuse, racism, despair, near-suicide and ultimately determination, second-chances, success and happiness. In May 2000, New South Wales magistrate Brian Lulham stated that when he sits in judgement on Aboriginal children in regional courts across the state he thinks of Purcell and *Box the Pony* which he has seen four times. Lulham invited Purcell to perform her play to 127 New South Wales magistrates at their annual judicial education conference in order to ‘try and make sure magistrates appreciate where these people are coming from and the problems they face in their life’.26 Such a development, where a magistrate values the ability of the arts to impact positively on the understanding and attitudes of fellow law officers, is significant. It is one example of the belief that stories have the ability to inform and to shape a public, moral imagination.27

The Aboriginal input to the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic and Paralympic games, and the public response not only to that input but to the Aboriginal athletes competing, the lighting of the Olympic cauldron by Cathy Freeman and the national celebrations of her gold-medal victory in the women’s 400 metres, demonstrate

---


that the Australian and international public have heard and are clearly supportive of the many Aboriginal voices that have been raised in recent years. When a capacity Olympic-stadium crowd stand, dance and cheer the ‘Sorry’-clad Midnight Oil’s performance of ‘Beds Are Burning’ and Yothu Yindi’s ‘Treaty’, it is obvious that the public imagination and sympathy has been fired. Yet the Australian culture of forgetting seems to persist. While one should not place too much faith in polling and statistics, in March 2000 *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported the results of a 1300 person Newspoll survey accompanied by qualitative research in which:

84 per cent [of respondents] agreed that Aborigines were treated harshly and unfairly in the past. But 57 per cent are against saying sorry...Nearly 8 out of 10 endorse the proposition that ‘everyone should stop talking about the way Aboriginal people were treated in the past and just get on with the future’.  

As the opening statement of *Bringing them home* asserts:

...the past is very much with us today, in the continuing devastation of the lives of Indigenous Australians. That devastation cannot be addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past and, having listened and understood, commits itself to reconciliation. (*BTH* 3)

The past is a continuing present. Those whose told their stories to the Commission are alive.

Stuart Macintyre concludes his *A Concise History of Australia* (1999) concerned about the ‘fading memory of a people who no longer learn from the past’.  

He argues that this continual desire of Australians to turn away from the past sits uneasily with what might be called a national obsession with Australian identity. No

---

28 M. Grattan, ‘Senate dumps on PM over reconciliation’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 March 2000, 2. It is important to note that the divisive nature of some of the questions in the poll, endorsed by the head of the Indigenous Policy Unit in the Prime Minister’s Department, may have skewed the poll results. Respondents were asked if they agreed that: ‘Compared with other Australians, Aborigines get too many handouts from the Government’. See M. Seccombe, ‘The PM’s man who is master at massaging words’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 2000, 6.

29 *A Concise History of Australia*, (Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 279.
nation can come to an understanding of itself or its place in the world if its peoples do not know their own stories. David Carter, in his flyer for the upcoming 'Nation and Narration' conference (June 2001), states: 'Nations gain meaning through the stories they tell and the stories they choose to believe'. It is significant that a conference which aims to 'explore the stories Australians have told themselves and the stories they are still being told about themselves and about their country' is to be held at this time in Australia's history. The conference will be interested a range of stories, from 'the conflictual narratives of history to the power of individual testimony and collective memories' because 'the stories of nation have the power to transform social structures and to shape what it means to be Australian'.

**Literature and the political:**

The energies of art invade, with a shaping intensity, the energies of life.

*J.J. Healy, Literature and the Aborigine in Australia.*

The storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers...Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom.

*Benjamin, Illuminations.*

Can literature help to inform a collective national consciousness in regards to Aboriginal history and the ongoing effects of past government policies on Aboriginal Australians? In the 1930s, when the policies of separation were being drawn up, positive images and stories of Aboriginal life and culture were to be found not in history books but in the novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard, Xavier Herbert and Eleanor Dark. Vance Palmer declared that 'if a change has come over our attitude to the aboriginals it is largely due to the way Katharine Prichard has brought them near to us.

---

30 Email correspondence February 2001.

31 The representations of Aborigines in these texts are not without problems. It has been suggested that Eleanor Dark, in situating Aborigines in a 'timeless land', a kind of 'dreamtime' which exists outside the material world and physical space and time, in effect removes Aborigines from history. See B.Hodge & V.Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian literature and the postcolonial mind*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 30.
This is a great achievement.\textsuperscript{32} The significance of Prichard’s work, notwithstanding the problems of representation in, and resolution of, \textit{Coonardoo} noted by a number of critics, was that it initiated a different way of imagining.\textsuperscript{33} As Peter Cochrane has written:

Prichard is important because of the excitement her novel created beyond the literary world, but also because of her influence on Herbert, James Devaney, Mary Gilmore, William Hatfield, Eleanor Dark, Vance Palmer and Henrietta Drake-Brockman. Devaney mattered because it was his book (\textit{The Vanished Tribes}, 1928) which inspired Rex Ingamells to launch the movement which became the Jindyworobaks. Stephensen was also an influence. And so the connections go, or should. These are all points in a matrix linking activists with artists, writers, trade unionists, publicists, raffle organisers and so on.\textsuperscript{34}

But how influential were these writers? Adam Shoemaker has suggested that:

‘The social and political conditions which prevailed between 1929 and 1945 militated against either \textit{Coonardoo} or \textit{Capricornia} having a significant educative impact on racial prejudice and Aboriginal stereotypes, especially before World War II.’\textsuperscript{35} Shoemaker reinforces his argument by noting that Ion L. Idriess’s \textit{Lasseter’s Last Ride} far outsold \textit{Capricornia}\textsuperscript{36} and that, whilst the work of David Unaipon was all but ignored, Daisy Bates’s \textit{The Passing of the Aborigines} was reprinted five times before 1948 (and a second edition issued in 1966 was reprinted a further three times) and continued to

\begin{flushleft}


34 ‘Hunting not travelling’, 39.

35 \textit{Black Words White Page}, 41.

36 \textit{Black Words White Page}, 54.
\end{flushleft}
influence non-Aboriginal Australia’s perceptions of Aboriginal life and custom well into the 1970s. It is not possible to say which of these texts was the more influential in informing non-Aboriginal Australians about actual or supposed Aboriginal experience. It is significant, however, that in 1929 the *Bulletin* refused to publish Vance Palmer’s *Men are Human* which, like *Coonardoo*, dealt with a white man having a sexual relationship with a black woman. S.H. Prior’s letter to Palmer supports Shoemaker’s observation about the social and political climate in Australia at the time. Prior wrote: ‘I am sorry, because it is well done, but our disastrous experience with *Coonardoo* shows us that the Australian public will not stand stories based on white man’s relations with an Australian Aborigine...There is no chance I suppose, of your whitewashing the girl?’37

The current political climate, as evidenced by the Reconciliation marches, the reception of Aboriginal performers and athletes at the Olympic games and the celebration of Aboriginal culture in many aspects of Australian life, is a far remove from that of the 1920s-1970s. There is still cause for concern, however, about the political effectiveness of Aboriginal voices. The current Prime Minister listed Aboriginal reconciliation as one of the major priorities of his second term in office. Yet halfway through that term he stated that the timetable for reconciliation, set and agreed upon ten years ago with bipartisan support, was not achievable. The Prime Minister not only refuses to apologise in Federal Parliament to the stolen generation, his government, through Senator John Herron the (then) Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, publicly disavowed the existence of a stolen ‘generation’. Having previously acknowledged their existence and allocated $63million towards programs to facilitate family reunions and provide counselling for those traumatised by past practices of separation, the federal government, in its submission to a Senate committee hearing into the stolen generation, resorted to semantics to argue: ‘There was never a “generation” of stolen children. The proportion of separated Aboriginal children was no more than 10 per cent’. Senator

---

Herron, who had attested repeatedly to personal feelings of abhorrence and outrage at the separation of Aboriginal children from their parents, argued in his submission that the ‘nature and intent of events [past practices and policies] have been misrepresented and that the treatment of separated Aboriginal children was essentially lawful and benign in intent’.  

Prime Minister Howard defended Herron’s submission stating: ‘It’s a factual analysis of the issue’. The ‘facts’ are statistics gleaned from a 1994 Bureau of Statistics survey which involved interviews with 17,500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; statistics Herron himself admits that cannot be verified.

The government’s Senate submission, coming on top of its refusal to override mandatory sentencing legislation in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, ensured that Australian race relations and the stolen generation issue became again, in April 2000, front-page headline news. While the debate in the mainstream media about the stolen generation, Australian history, and facts and truth, continues to be dominated by non-Aboriginal intellectuals, there are, as noted, an increasing number of Aboriginal voices that are demanding, through literature, to have their say. Aboriginal literature - in the form of writing, dance, drama, song and painting - has an important role to play in this increasingly polarised political atmosphere.

Literature is a powerful communicator and politically concerned literature, as Elliot Pearlman argues, can perform an educative function. Pearlman cites Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* as the novel responsible for focussing world attention on the poverty and virtual enslavement of rural workers forced to migrate from the Oklahoma dust bowl. He writes:

> Literature with a political concern can force people to confront truths they would prefer not to confront. More than documentaries, more than reportage, more than history, good politically concerned literature can take

---


you to places you might never otherwise visit.40

To paraphrase Pearlman, politically concerned literature should disturb.

What does it mean to speak of politically concerned literature? If the term ‘political’ is taken to refer to the way a society organises its social life and the power relations which that organisation involves, then surely any literature which deals with the nature of relationships, language, history, existence and death, is political.

Eagleton’s comments on literary theory apply equally to literature:

...any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future.41

Such an interpretation of literature does not preclude the argument that art should be created for art’s sake or that it should be judged on anything other than aesthetic standards. Rather than close the possibilities of literature down, such an interpretation opens up new possibilities. It empowers literature because it affirms the ability of story to inform the way readers think about language, relationships, society, history and existence.42

David Carter has faith in the ability not only of literature but also of literary criticism to inform a public, moral consciousness. In ‘Good Readers and Good Citizens: Literature, Media and the Nation’,43 Carter explores the concept of literature as ‘a kind of public good’, in particular literature’s capacity to exercise a creative, critical

40 ‘Maintain the wrath’, The Sydney Morning Herald, 18 Dec. 1999, 10S.
41 Literary Theory, 170. For ease of expression here I write of literature but my comments apply equally to other art forms.
42 Clem Christesen ‘has explained that his intention in establishing Meanjin was to provide a journal that should... make clear the connection between literature and politics’. C.B. Christesen, Radio interview 3AR Radio 2, 8 Jan. 1985, cited in J. McLaren, Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18.
influence on both positive and negative meanings of 'nation'. He asks: 'Can we take seriously the idea of literature having a role to play in forming good citizens?'. His answer supports much of what these last chapters have sought to argue: that literature and literary criticism have the power, through their engagement with ethical considerations of truth, justice and human rights, to influence the way society understands itself. 'It seems to me', writes Carter, 'that the idea of forming good citizens might in fact be much closer to what we do as teachers and critics of literature than are many of the fantasies surrounding the notion of textual politics'.

Literature, politics and literary criticism:
In delivering the 1998 Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture, 'Australian Literature in the Marketplace', Elizabeth Webby probed not only the connection between literature and the political but also the way in which literary critics can constructively make sense of sometimes disturbing political developments. Webby outlined the rise and fall of the bushman as Australia's national ideal and noted how shocking it must have been for the bushman or farmer, with the advent of a revisionist ('black armband') history of Australia, to see themselves 'or their ancestors transformed from heroes into villains, from pioneers into invaders. Perhaps worse, to find that their story was no longer central to the story of the nation, since this story was no longer centred in the bush but in the suburbs or the city, and often revolved around old ways being challenged by the new.' Rural Australians, said Webby, have found 'themselves on the margins rather than at the centre, feeling like displaced persons in what they thought was their own land'. Webby suggested that the groundswell of support for the One Nation party from country voters was driven by this new image of themselves and their place in the Australian story:

Recast as villains rather than heroes in the national story, they have responded by casting themselves as victims. In voting out the Keating government in 1996, they presumably felt they were assuring, with the return of the Coalition government, their own return to a position of

---

44 'Good Readers and Good Citizens: Literature, Media and the Nation', 139.
centrality. Instead, they perceive things have continued to get worse for them rather than better, and so they are flocking to a party which promises to turn the clock back to a time when the bush was still seen as central to the nation.45

Those Australians who felt disenfranchised by the new narrative(s) of nation sought, in their voting preferences, to reinscribe their presence in the national story.

One of the most distinctive markers of Australian literature in this new century is its diversity of voice, subject matter and genre. It is neither possible nor desirable that all Australian literature should deal with questions of race relations or historical ‘truth’. However, when that literature does deal, or says it deals, with these questions there is, considering the current political climate and the historical silencing of Aboriginal voices, an added responsibility on the part of the literary critic to be alert to and expose the silences operating in a text. This thesis is concerned to promote the reading and comprehension of some of the multiple manifestations of absence and silence in Australian writing. It argues that the skills required to read these absences and silences are learned rather than innate and that they can and must be applied to all manner of texts and interpretation. Kathleen Mary Fallon’s review of Neil Armfield and Nick Enright’s stage production of Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet, is a recent example of the astute criticism needed in Australian studies if the ‘Great Australian Silence’ is to become a thing of the past.46

Cloudstreet, was an overwhelming national and international success. Armfield attributed this success on a national level to ‘Australia’s craving for reconciliation’. The story, he said, ‘is finally about reconciliation and the resolving of pain from the past’.47 Reviewers across Australia had nothing but praise for Cloudstreet. Fallon quotes Helen Thomson:


...it defines the Australian character in terms that are unmistakably proletarian. And it creates a ritual of reconciliation between 'black' and 'white' Australians, asserting a common humanity and a fresh start as the goodness of the Pickles and the Lambs cleanses a dark and haunted past (C 24).

For Fallon the production was not about reconciliation. It was yet another example of the whitewashing of Aboriginal history and Aboriginal presence:

Any attempt at a national saga must, in some way or other, address the problems of dispossession of indigenous Australians and the subsequent relationship of 'white' Australians to the land and to the place...There were three 'black' presences in Cloudstreet...One was a nameless character, the 'black' narrator who wandered on and off the stage, the second was a shadow on a screen - the ghost of a suicided 'black' child and the third was the invisible spirits of 'black' children rising from the ground, their 'presence' simply described by the 'black' narrator (C 23).

Fallon analyses the way the 'black' narrator is used supposedly to legitimate the 'white' occupation of land, how the birth of a white boy lays to rest the ghost of the dead black girl and how the silent, fleeting spirits of black children are initially mistaken for a herd of kangaroos. Whereas Thomson asserts that in Cloudstreet Winton 'gives us a new history of Australia', Fallon sees only the '[s]ame old, sad old sick pantomime - the absent "Blacks", the loveable innocents - egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, mates (the cult of forgetfulness back in full swing)'(C 24).

Fallon, like Pearlman, believes that literature should be disturbing. 'It is imperative that cultural work of all kinds should be guiding audiences and readers through...perilous places, through the blind-spot in the Oz psyche'(C 26), she writes. But Cloudstreet dropped her into rather than took her through that blind-spot:

I felt myself being re-initiated back into the cult of forgetfulness, with its overwhelming virulence. The great Australian silence in full swing, as I sat there in the audience, I felt myself going blind, deaf, numb again, sliding back into the psychic dissonance of the blind-spot in the Oz psyche, just as I felt growing up in the 50s and 60s. I felt the amnesia I'd struggled so hard to overcome the past years, returning (C 25).
Fallon’s reading of *Cloudstreet* interpreted the way in which the production modelled race/power relations. In the context of this thesis, it is important to stress that what Fallon was exposing was the difference between an absence of which writing is, as it were, aware, so that it evokes and frustrates originating desire, and an absence of which writing is unaware and needs to be re/minded - through its interaction with other writings and other stories. Helen Daniel invited written responses to Fallon’s essay. The majority of letters received, and two of the three published in the November 1999 edition of *Australian Book Review*, unequivocally supported Fallon’s interpretation of the production. So too did Tom Burvill, senior lecturer in the Department of Critical and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University. Burvill delivered a paper titled: ‘A tale of two cities?: The metamorphosis of *Cloudstreet* in the Company B Belvoir Sydney Production’, at the 2000 ASAL conference. Though he made no reference to Fallon, Burvill’s scathing attack on the production’s lack of representation of Aboriginal perspective and voice, and its attempt to ‘whitewash’ history, fully supported Fallon’s argument. Like Fallon, Burvill was disturbed at the lack of outcry by both reviewers and audiences regarding the sidelining and silencing of the black ‘character’ in the production.

*Cloudstreet*, with its warehouse setting and its five-hour performance, is an exciting theatrical event. It is to be performed again in Australia in 2001 before opening in New York. Will some members of the audience notice, in the midst of the spectacular staging, that the Aboriginal narrator doubles as the stage-hand? How many will notice that when the entire cast gathers on stage at the end of the performance for Fish’s grand dive into whatever river or harbour is behind the curtain, the Aboriginal narrator is nowhere to be seen because he is holding back the curtain?

Fallon’s essay and Burvill’s paper demonstrate the vital role literary criticism has to play in exposing and reading the absences and silences that operate in a text intended to be ‘about reconciliation and the resolving of pain from the past’. The silences which they uncover are not those which function as the other of language. Those silences are and will always remain unarticulated. The silences uncovered in
their critical interpretations are those that operate as an absence within the dominant discourse. They are silences and absences that have become so ingrained that many readers, audiences, producers and critics are oblivious not only to their presence but also to their power. Once recognised however, they, like other forms of silence and absence discussed in this thesis, open up previously unthought of possibilities in the performance/text.

Coda:

One of the most powerful tools of communication available to Aboriginal Australians is, and has always been, painting because painting bypasses spoken language. Galarrwuy Yunupingu has expressed the frustration experienced by the Yolngu people in their attempts to communicate to non-Aborigines, the significance of their Aboriginal attachment to land and the role which their art might play in this dialogue. Speaking about the preparation of the Yirrkala bark petition he said:

Very few white people have even tried to learn our language, and English is incapable of describing our relationship to the land of our ancestors. We decided then to try and do it in a way we hoped non-Aboriginal people would understand; through pictures. If they wouldn’t listen to our words, they might try and understand our paintings.48

Yet painting, like every art form, requires a set of reading practices. Aboriginal painting demands a knowledge not only of story and technique but of specific cultural silences and absences. After many months of thinking about, and researching strategies of, silence and absence I was completely unskilled in detecting those same qualities in bark painting.

In July 1998 I visited the Buku Larrngay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala on the Gove Peninsula in North-East Arnhem Land. Established in 1975, the Centre operates as a service centre for Yolngu artists from around Yirrkala and as a keeping-place for much North-Eastern Arnhem Land art including the Yirrkala Church Panels (1963). While

there, I was particularly taken with a bark painting done by Batjang Burarrwanga, a Gumatj man. The painting was titled Bāru ga Gangalkmirri. The director of the Gallery, also a member of the Gumatj clan, explained the story of the painting.

The painting, he said, deals with the relationship between two of the three different groups within the Gumatj clan. In this painting Batjang describes a conflict and resolution between the Burarrwana group represented by the crocodile (bāru) and the Munungurritj group represented by the stingray (gangalkmirri). Bāru left his river where he was hot and went to the cooler island of Murrmurra which belonged to the Dhaluku Gumatj. He fought with them. This fight is represented by the spike from the stingray that pierces Bāru’s leg.

This image is referred to as a Makarratha painting, referring to a traditional dispute resolution ceremony but the story given on behalf of the artist was not explicit about the law of Makarratha except to say that after the peace was settled between the two, the Dhinimbu (Spanish Mackerel) jumped out of the water to see the beautiful, colourful clouds symbolising peace between the parties. Thereafter the groups stood in a Mari-Gutharra relationship with each other; an important bond in Yolngu life between a child and its grandmother’s brothers with important duties and rights as far as funeral, circumcision and other ceremonial law is concerned.

The Dhaluku Gumatj have generally resisted the movement towards the public display of Miny’tji and this is a rare painting of one of their clan lands. It was only the third time this story had been painted for commercial purposes.

Of course, the director said after a lengthy pause, you would have noticed that a number of white borders that would normally surround the diamond shapes on the crocodile’s back are absent and that many of the diamond shapes should be painted with fine cross-hatchings but that part of the story must remain silent. Of course, I had not noticed, though once it was pointed out to me the lack of story evidenced by the mat black and ochre spaces became obvious and even more appealing.

On a return visit to the Buku Larrngay Mulka Centre in 2000 I was quietly pleased that I could recognise what now seemed to me to be the stark absences in
densely-crafted bark paintings offered for sale. My understanding of the way absence and silence were operating in these particular narratives had, only after considerable dialogue with Aboriginal Australians, progressed a little.
Conclusion: The Wounds of Possibility
Conclusion: The Wounds of Possibility

If there is such a thing as darkness which can be felt, then the Australian desert possesses a silence which can be heard, so much does it oppress the intruder into these solitudes.

Ernest Favenc (1905)

Drysdale’s boy, alone in a desert landscape seemingly devoid of other life-forms, listens. His frown suggests that he is puzzled. His arrested stance lends him an air of tension and perhaps, expectation. What is he listening to in this landscape of nothingness? Could it be silence? If so, is it the silence that troubles him? He has not only intruded into this landscape, he also appears to dominate it. He is foregrounded, a much more solid figure than the spindly mine-shaft rig. His large, broad feet are firmly planted in the desert earth. Why then does he remain uncomfortable in this environment? The answers to these questions may become evident if we look at the painting from a different perspective (a process this thesis has affirmed repeatedly and a process that produces more questions than certainties). Does the boy really dominate the desert landscape or do the blended colours of earth and sky offer a sense of vast, powerful space that dwarf him? His feet are bare yet they are curiously clean and white. Perhaps he has not walked into this landscape but has been placed there, a somewhat gangly, scarecrow figure, ill-at-ease in a land to which he does not belong.

The desert has traditionally been portrayed in Australian art and literature as a site of absence, a vast canvas of nothingness upon which painters and writers have projected their existential angst.1 The void without has consistently been taken to signify the void within on both an individual and national scale. As McAuley’s ‘Envoi’ suggests:

Where once was a sea is now a salty sunken desert,

---

1 As Alan Frost, commenting on the sense of void or neant expressed in White’s novels and Webb’s poetry, has noted: ‘It is a moot point whether these authors, rather than pursuing an Australian tradition, have simply found the empty centre of the continent a convenient “objective correlative” for the evocations of concerns that belong to other places, other times, or to their individual psyches’. See ‘On Finding “Australia”: Mirages, Mythic Images, Historical Circumstances’, Australian Literary Studies 12:4, 1986, 491.
A futile heart within a fair periphery;
The people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them...²

The literary depiction of Australia as an empty, silent land has been a feature of Australian writing since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. David Collins, a magistrate in the new penal colony, recorded how Governor Arthur Phillip chose the site for settlement in the following terms: ‘the spot chosen...was at the head of the Cove near the run of fresh water, which stole silently through a very thick wood, the stillness of which had then, for the first time since the creation, been interrupted by the rude sound of the labourer’s axe’.³ This same sense of the white man forging a path into solitude, silence and the ‘death-like stillness of the interior’,⁴ is to be found in the journals of Blaxland, Leichhardt, Sturt and Eyre.

Of course when the white explorers and settlers penetrated this idealised land of solitude they found not emptiness and silence but Aborigines who, in varying degrees, sought to defend their tribal lands from intruders. Significantly however, stories of frontier conflict, widely known in the white bush communities, were not told in the nation’s literature. As Michael Cathcart has argued:

It was easier by far to place, not Aborigines, but silence on the far side of the frontier. In this Geography of Silence - which was just one of the many traditions in colonial writing - the same stories were, and are, told again and again. In one standard tale, a settler ventures into new territory. He strikes a blow with an axe, it rings through the woods shattering the solitude and announces that history has begun.⁵

The Aborigines in these stories were silent. They were ‘forever “padding about

noiselessly”, “moving stealthily” through a melancholy landscape. They were children of silence, and their era of timelessness was drawing to an end... They were here, but not here. They were here, but not heard.\(^6\)

That silence has been definitively shattered by the publication, since the 1980s of ‘black armband’ histories of settlement, and more recently of *Bringing them home*. With that shattering comes a challenge to both the reading of silence in Australian writing and the reading of ‘Australia’. When Harry Heseltine emphasised, in 1962, the central role played by ‘Nothing’ in Australian literature he was reading silence and emptiness from a particular perspective because he, like many other critics, in a covert and unexamined way, related Australian literature to the white (male) story of Australia. The ‘clue to our literary tradition’, Heseltine argued, was that the ‘canon of our writing presents a facade of mateship, egalitarian democracy, landscape, nationalism [and] realistic toughness’, but that behind and beneath that facade lay a ‘compelling awareness of horror, panic and emptiness’.\(^7\) His reading was appropriate to the texts considered. In a similar way my readings of the absences and silences at work in Webb’s and Castro’s writing are appropriate. I have sought to deconstruct - and deconstruction is an affirmative process - the silence within language and the anguished silence of the existential void that informs Webb’s poetry and the silence beneath and behind language, the silence of nothingness and death which drive Castro’s artistic vision. Those readings demonstrate a preference for certain types of silence, types that can be accommodated by negatively theology, an aesthetics of art and architecture and literary theory. In my final section, however, I have supplemented those readings, that is to say I have set up an ‘other’ to those silences by introducing notions of silence as suppressed speech, as injustice, as a moral absence. My intention was to write these ‘other’ types of silences back into the story of absence and silence in Australian writing. The stories in *Bringing them home* look back at the silences preferred by the academy and undo the unambiguous assumption of white subjectivity that has traditionally informed Australian

\(^6\) Cathcart, 96.

literary criticism. They challenge Australian writers, readers and critics to assume an imaginative mode similar to that suggested by Judith Wright’s ‘Nigger’s Leap, New England’ (1946):

Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff
and then were silent, waiting for the flies.
...
Now must we measure
our days by nights, our tropics by their poles,
love by its end and all our speech by silence.\(^8\)

In *The Generations of Men* (1959) Wright wrote of the ‘mortal wound’\(^9\) dealt her great-grandfather by the Aboriginal people whom he, as a white landholder, had dispossessed. He was neither able to despise and disregard the Aborigines who in the twenty years since his arrival in New England had become physically and mentally diminished by ‘an incurable invisible sorrow that drove them to the townships...seeking forgetfulness and death’,\(^10\) nor to admit their legitimate cultural and spiritual rights to the land. He knew that he was responsible for their demise but could see no way out of the guilt and woundedness such knowledge entailed. More recently Veronica Brady has extended Wright’s concerns and imagery to suggest that a deep psychic wound continues to be inflicted on non-Aboriginal Australians. This wound, writes Brady, is all the more serious because it is generally unacknowledged. Brady argues that only if non-Aboriginal Australians recognise that wound and enter into it will they be able ‘to come to terms with Aboriginal people and culture and with what we have done to them and, in that, to ourselves’.\(^11\)

To enter into a wound necessarily entails that the wound is kept open. In all


\(^10\) Wright, 162.

\(^11\) *Can These Bones Live?*, (Sydney: The Federation Press, 1996), 144.
three writers/texts discussed in this thesis the open wound, in its various guises, operates as a site of imaginative possibility, a gap that invites and allows fiction. My argument, like Brady's, is that Australian writers, readers and critics need to be aware of these wounds and to enter into them in order to appreciate what possibilities are being offered. As Kierkegaard insists, the wounds of negativity (by which he means uncertainty and possibility) must be kept open in order to prevent certainty and inertia. The genuine subjective existing thinker, Kierkegaard states, 'is conscious of the negativity of the infinite in existence and therefore keeps the wound of the negative open...The others let the wound heal over and become positive; that is to say they are deceived'.

Any attempt to close over the 'many gaping wounds' ('Compliments of the Audience') in Webb's poetry and to read the poetry as an unqualified affirmation of faith or certainty must necessarily fail. Those wounds - the stigmata as the earthly sign of the *kenotic* process whereby the Son emptied himself, became human and was crucified; the death, suffering and isolation of the outcast and rejected; the 'ugliness and agony' ('Homosexual'); the 'pain and disfigurement' ('The Knight') - run throughout the poetry. They are the 'ancient sore' ('Pneumo-encephalograph'), the 'fissures of love and agony' ('Moushold Heath'), which through their symbiotic relationship with a paradoxical other - the resurrection, light, 'All beauty, all joy' ('The Knight') - generate the poetry's power and tension. Negative theology allows us not only to enter into those wounds or fissures but to discover within them the possibility of an impossibility, 'God'. At the same time it denies, as does the poetry, any certainty to that discovery.

Castro's writing seeks to uncover and celebrate the strictly textual possibility of impossibility: death of the self and of writing. The wound of death sits at the heart of his writing and manifests itself in the nothingness and silence that underlie his playful language games. Whereas theorists such as Blanchot and Adorno may argue that that wound is due to art's inevitable withdrawal from theology, Castro's vision is more to do with a personal sense of sorrow and negativity, the experience of grief and anxiety that

---

he sees as being the critical edge to writing. He explains: ‘For me, writing is not a celebratory, joyous nor a politically correct activity. It is a melancholic and mostly frightening thing to discover the dark sides of human nature and to wrangle them into a linguistic overload’. It is significant that Castro titles the essay in which he outlines his artistic struggle: ‘Lesions’. ‘A lesion’, he writes:

is an injury or a wound. Whether in the physical, legal or psychological sense of the word, it implies some damage has been sustained. In any form of writing, and if one concedes that good writing must contain some form of emotional push and shove, some damage must occur.

But it is not only writing which involves woundedness. So too does the process of reading. As Kevin Hart has suggested: ‘Why do we read a poem? Because it opens an old wound. Or because it closes a wound. Or because it does both at once.’

The reader of Bringing them home is all too aware of the wounds caused to generations of Aboriginal Australians by the policies and practices of separation. To suggest that those wounds be kept open is not to propose that the continuing hurt from those policies and practices should be maintained. It suggests, rather, that the history, the pain, the woundedness of the past, must be acknowledged and not hidden under some external scar and consigned to a buried and forgotten past. The woundedness of the stolen generation should be kept open in the form of public knowledge and public memorials that operate, as does the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C., as a slash in the ground, a fissure that continues to ask difficult questions and in so doing opens up new ways of seeing, of imagining, of being other.

Flaubert has suggested that ‘fiction is ... the response to a deep and always hidden wound’. Edmond Jabès has cautioned: ‘Mark the first page of the book with a

---

13 ‘Lesions’, 183.
14 ‘Lesions’, 183.
16 Cited as epigraph to E.Jolley, Lovesong, (Ringwood: Viking, 1997).
red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible'. This thesis argues that we need to empower our imaginations if we are to uncover those ‘deep and always hidden’ wounds. Greg Dening’s comments on the relationship between history and imagination neatly outline the kind of imagination called for by the three sections of this thesis. He writes:

Imagination is the ability to see those finelined and faint webs of significance. Imagination is hearing the silence because we have heard some of the sounds around it. Imagination is seeing the absent things because we have seen so much else. Imagination is an act of human solidarity, or rather, imagination is an act of solidarity in our humanness.

In Webb’s poetry we learn to hear the absence and silence amidst the dense and tortuous language ‘around it’. In Castro’s fiction we are given many clues or teasing trails of information that lead nowhere or lead off into confusing tangents. Eventually, ‘because we have seen so much else’, we learn to see what is being withheld in the game of writing. In the narratives of Bringing them home we listen and are moved by the stories of suffering. In responding to those narratives with empathy and compassion we show an ‘act of solidarity in our humanness’. Such a response goes to the heart of what history, literature and being human is about: being open to the possibility of otherness and in that, to woundedness and suffering.

In all the texts discussed in this thesis there is a movement whereby one opens oneself up, in the Levinasian sense, to the face of an/other. In Webb’s poetry the face that is sought is the face of love, the face of God that can only be glimpsed among the circle of humanity. In Castro’s writing the faces of the self and other are shifting signs. The ambiguous and often masked self is to be spied in the reflected face of an other who is and is not the self. The readers of Bringing them home have the opportunity to recognise a common humanity in the face of others who stand before them and tell their stories of separation. With that recognition there comes, for the writers and readers of


18 Readings/Writings, 209.
Australian literature, a certain responsibility. That responsibility involves the act of reading or more precisely re-reading.

When the medieval monks copied the ancient Greek texts which allowed for no spaces between the words but ran the text together as a solid line of letters, they argued 'that this unspaced solidity held a divine purpose which would be revealed through the effort of re-reading'.\textsuperscript{19} To re-read a text is to return to it, perhaps again and again, in an attempt to understand what it may be trying to communicate. This thesis argues that it is important for Australian readers and critics to go back and re-read (Australian) texts with an ear for the unsaid, for the absences, for the wounds. Those absences, silences and wounds are not uniform. They cannot be totalised or neatly contained. Neither should they be. When we listen to music we are stimulated by the different voices, melodies, rhythms and instruments, and the conversations between them. We have no desire to totalise them into a homogeneous whole. In the visual arts we appreciate the relational spaces, the contrast of materials, colour, light and texture, and the ambiguity which the juxtaposition of these offers. Literature is no different. To understand literature's silences and absences we need to learn to read with a different sort of eye and to be attentive to different sorts of things. We need an eye (and an ear), that not only scans the line for word breaks but one that is prepared to re-read the line and to listen to that which has not been said.

\textsuperscript{19} Castro, 'Lesions', 195.
Appendix

Terms of Reference for the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families:

I, MICHAEL LAVARCH, Attorney-General of Australia, HAVING REGARD TO the Australian Government's human rights, social justice and access and equity policies in pursuance of section 11(1)(e), (j) and (k) of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986, HEREBY REVOKE THE REQUEST MADE ON 11 MAY 1995 AND NOW REQUEST the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to inquire into and report on the following matters:

To:

(a) trace the past laws, practices and policies which resulted in the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by compulsion, duress or undue influence, and the effects of those laws, practices and policies;
(b) examine the adequacy of and the need for any changes in current laws, practices and policies relating to services and procedures currently available to those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were affected by the separation under compulsion, duress or undue influence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, including but not limited to current laws, practices and policies relating to access to individual and family records and to other forms of assistance towards locating and reunifying families;
(c) examine the principles relevant to determining the justification for compensation for persons or communities affected by such separations;
(d) examine current laws, practices and policies with respect to the placement and care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and advise on any changes required taking into account the principle of self-determination by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
IN PERFORMING its functions in relation to the reference, the Commission is to consult widely among the Australian community, in particular with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with relevant non-government organisations and with relevant Federal, State and Territory authorities and if appropriate may consider and report on the relevant laws, practices and policies of any other country.

THE COMMISSION IS REQUIRED to report no later than December 1996.

Dated 2 August 1995

MICHAEL LAVARCH
Bibliography


Adderley, J. Francis the Little Poor Man of Assissi, London: Edward Arnold, 1908.


- Rites of Passage, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000.


284


Brady, V. *Can These Bones Live?*, Sydney: The Federation Press, 1996.


Brett, J. ‘Every morning as the sun came up: The enduring pain of the “stolen generations”’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3 October 1997, 3-4.


- ‘Tokyo’s Secrets,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 1997, 10S.

- 'Scheherazade - The Search for Story: Recent Australian Fiction Set in China and Southeast Asia', *Southerly* 59: 3&4, 1999, 228-238.


Castro, B.

Fiction:

Essays and Interviews:


Chesterton, G.K. *St Francis of Assisi*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923.


Ellis, C. 'A Strange Case of Double Vision: Reading Carmel Bird's The Stolen Children: Their Stories', Overland 158, 2000, 75-79.


- Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia, and Overland from Adelaide to King George's Sound, in the years 1840-1, Vols I & II, London: T. & W. Boone, 1845.


Flanagan, M. 'Brother', in the stolen children: their stories, 158-162.


Fraser, Malcolm. 'Apology must be first step', The Sydney Morning Herald, 8 April 1999, 15.

290


- 'Francis Webb and Norman Lindsay', *Southerly* 49:1, 1989, 32-42.


Heseltine, Harry,


Jopson, D. & Reardon, D. 'Fraser “was unaware” of children’s removal', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 April 1999, 4.


- ‘Ramona Koval interviews Kim Scott, co-winner of the Miles Franklin Award for Benang’, *Australian Book Review*, July 2000, 48-49.


McDonald, J. ‘The sights of silence’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 1997, 14S.


- Wild Cat Falling, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992.

Mueke, S. No Road: (bitumen all the way), Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997.


Purcell, L. & Rankin, S. *Box the Pony*, Sydney: Hodder Headline, 1999.


- ‘Are you from the Void?’ A Reading of Webb’s “Sturt and the Vultures”’, published as tape recording, available from Religion, Literature and the Arts Centre, Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, 14 November 1997.


- 'The PM’s man who is master at massaging words', The Sydney Morning Herald, 13 April 2000, 6.


- To the Islands, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981.


Tipping, R. ‘SILENT/LISTEN’ poem distributed by Tipping to tutorial class, University of Sydney, 1994.


van Gogh, V. Letter to Anton von Rappard, March 1884, available from: http://www.vangoghgallery.com/letters/r43.htm; INTERNET.


Webb, F. *A Drum for Ben Boyd*, with illustrations by Norman Lindsay, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1948.


Wimmer, A. 'Message from the President', European Association for Studies on Australia, Newsletter No 22, Klagenfurt, May 2000.

Windschuttle, K. 'The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History'


