

P A R T   T H R E E

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WHEN GOD CAME STUMBLING

Francis Webb

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WHEN GOD CAME STUMBLING: FRANCIS WEBB

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## Abbreviation:

CP                               Collected Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney,  
1969.

## SECTION ONE

A FIRST PIECE

After World War II, Francis Webb decided to write poetry which was more overtly religious and so counter what he saw as increasing godlessness. His decision was not, however, entirely free of anxiety:

what of such friends as Norman Lindsay and Douglas Stewart:  
would they not forsake me altogether if God came stumbling into  
my poems?<sup>1</sup>.

Obviously, Webb is here concerned about the reaction of his friends. Yet why does he use the word "stumbling"? Does it simply express a pious anxiety about his ability to write of God? My thesis is that it is much more than that, that "stumbling" is the key to his imaginative and religious mode. The word functions at once to hold "God" and "poems" apart, and to bring them together.

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1. Cf. Sister Francisca Fitz-Walter, "From Word to Wonder", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 74. Michael Griffith also records how Webb "at this time felt that his poetry should become both more religious and more political in orientation": "Francis Webb: 'The Poet of our Desolation'", Southerly, 2, 1982, 189.

## SECTION TWO

THE MODEL OF THE "SUFFERING SERVANT"

Let me begin simply with "Five Days Old" (CP, 150). I would argue that it is not appropriate to interpret this poem's religious character as originating in Webb's belief in the doctrine of redemption (even though the poem does express such belief). Nor is it appropriate to locate the poem's religiousness in an experience of sacred dread, as the small moment of light is surrounded by great darkness - not because that is not very much what the poem is "about", but because that is more imaginative structuring than "raw experience". What is appropriate is to see the way both "doctrine" and "experience" are determined by an underlying imaginative structure which informs, integrates and enlivens both. The religious quality of the poem is to be discovered (as it reveals itself) in its structural relationships.

In that sense, the poem's imaginative foundation rests not so much in Webb's theology of redeeming grace, nor in his personal devotion to Christmas, but more in the tensive structure of the situation from which the poem arose:

This poem was written by Frank in response to the experience of holding a five-day old baby, named Christopher John. His kindly doctor had provided this experience in the hope that Frank would begin to write poetry again after a time of silence and protested barrenness.<sup>1</sup>

The imaginative sympathy between <sup>ε</sup><sub>A</sub> Sister Francisca's narrative and Webb's poem is instructive. In both, a saving power is centred in one who is very vulnerable. In both, the structuring tension is that

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1. Sister Francisca Fitzwalter, "From Word to Wonder", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 75. Sister Francisca is now known as Sister Pauline, but I refer to her as Francisca so as to be consistent with bibliographical information.

between the tiny, simple moment of peace and the large, surrounding world of complex pain. Simplicity is achieved within suffered complexity:

To shrive my thought for perfection  
I must breathe old tempests of action

For the snowflake and face of love,  
Windfall and word of truth,  
Honour close to death.

Webb is here recognising that he must discover the proper, if paradoxical, relationship between weakness and strength if he is to see the mystery of the child. If he is to cleanse (and heal?) his understanding, and so be able to appreciate the child's perfection (its existence as utter act), then he must struggle along the breath, must live through his tormented history, and hope in that way to achieve, not so much a state of resolution, as a state of sacred tension between the weak and tiny snowflake and the strong and strengthening face of love. The phrase, "face of love", incorporates a reference to Christ (as the often unrecognised but ever revealing face of God's love).<sup>1</sup> So does the phrase, "word of truth",<sup>2</sup> but the absolute, steady presence of this phrase is set in play with "windfall", which can connote fragility (and so recapitulate earlier references to "trembling" and "blown straw"), yet can also suggest unexpected good fortune (and that could have its theological correlative in the notion of redeeming grace). From within this structure, Webb indicates that the way to appreciate the birth is to enter the paradox of death.

This becomes clearer as we find comparable structures throughout the poem. The title has a sound which is as solid as an immediate fact,

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1. Cf. John, 1:1-18, 6:46, 12:44-46, 14:1-21.
  2. In Johannine theology, Christ is the Word (John, 1:1-18) and the Truth (John, 14:1-21).

yet also as fragile as the awed perception of mystery. "Christmas is in the air" operates as a statement of fact, yet lifts itself, with "in the air", towards some presence which is insubstantial, yet possibly transcendent. The poet's own presence is similarly complex: "You are given into my hands." This conjures power, something of the independence of the ego, but it is also receptive and relational. When the child is described as coming from "quietest, loneliest lands" and when "lands" is rhymed with "hands", Webb creates a complex interaction between transcendence and vulnerability. His own response is both inarticulate and eloquent - "My trembling is all my prayer", where "all" can mean both "merely" and "completely". He follows this with: "To blown straw was given/ All the fullness of Heaven". What is clear at this point is that Webb's imagination is in conversation, not with the entire Christmas story, but with that aspect of it which emphasises Christ's kenosis or self-emptying<sup>1</sup>. and which reflects on how the Creator became subject to the very world he had made.

Webb next utters what is effectively his religio-poetic creed: "The tiny, not the immense,/ Will teach our groping eyes." There is a gentle interplay here between the active and the receptive self, which represents a coming together of spiritual journeying and unearned epiphany, of effort and grace. Yet the centering impulse is directed always toward the tiny, just as in other poems it is towards the broken, the ugly, the leper, the idiot, the dead.

We have heard, and have not quite forgotten a line about "All the fullness of Heaven", but we are asked to search its meaning, not only as a "given" (the rhyme stresses grace), but also in an unexpected,

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1. Cf. Philippians, 2:6-11

nearly contradictory, mode: in the tiny. Not only in the tiny, but in the wound of one taken to be guilty, yet returning innocence:

So the absorbed skies  
Bleed stars of innocence

Here the skies are in sympathy with the speaker: their absorption bringing them both to renewed innocence. The "absorbed skies" continue the "groping eyes", and the stars, in the night sky, are tiny points of light. The word "Bleed" strongly emphasises that such innocent perception (itself reminiscent of the gospel's invitation to become as children) is attained through the wound, through suffering. It is because this is the way of Christ that Webb can now make explicit:

So cloud-voice in war and trouble  
Is at last Christ in the stable.

It is interesting that the repetition of "So" not only suggests a logic operating (the logic of redemption), but also continues that sense of strain so central to the poem's effect. The notion of a journey, of the child coming out of "quietest, loneliest lands", and of the eyes "groping", is continued with "at last", and then taken up:

Now wonderingly engrossed  
In your fearless delicacies,  
I am launched upon sacred seas,  
Humbly and utterly lost  
In the mystery of creation,  
Bells, bells of ocean.

As he is launched, the poem's concern becomes more metaphysical: the relational "you" disappears, the focus momentarily widens, moving from the child, out to the mystery of creation. Yet the characteristic structures persist: the large ocean is focused in the "bells" just as the skies were focused in the stars. So too the strong and the weak are combined through the combination of "fearless" and "delicacies", and of "humbly" and "utterly".

However, Webb's instinct has him return to the immediate and the particular. Any abstract mystery is quickly centered in the fascination with the baby's wonderful movements: the yawn and the "dawn/ At an eyelid". In each of these Webb finds something fragile and something great, just as he meditates on the tension between this delicate creation and the "maker of days". Power (absolute and creating) and vulnerability are held together, and he admits how the wonder of the new baby is "Too pure for (his) tongue to praise" even as his words stumble into beauty.

It is then that we arrive at the lines quoted at the beginning, where Webb hopes to cleanse his mind so that it may truly value the mystery of creation present in Christopher John. Webb next prays to the Holy Spirit:

O eternal truthfulness, Dove,  
Tell me what I hold -  
Myrrh? Frankincense? Gold?

Here patristic symbolism operates, giving us the complex combination of death and triumph by which Christ redeems: myrrh symbolising the suffering and death of Christ, yet frankincense symbolising his divinity, and gold his royalty. Even in the manger scene which closes the poem, this tension is maintained:

If this is man, then the danger  
And fear are as lights of the inn,  
Faint and remote as sin  
Out here by the manger.  
In the sleeping, weeping weather  
We shall all kneel down together.

The poem operates like a camera, drawing back, making us more aware of how the light of Christ is surrounded by pain and sin, by danger and fear. What holds this darkness back is the small moment of peace focused in the child - and also in the fragile community which the child brings, for Webb uses "we" for the first time.

It is possible, I would argue, to describe the religious character of Webb's work in this way: by apprehending its structural relationships, by perceiving the model through which his predominant imaginative framework is made present.

It is not too difficult to indicate some of the significant relationships which constitute and are constituted by Webb's model. There is the spiritual paradox in his preferred vision: "All beauty, all joy?/ Yes, and all pain and disfigurement."<sup>1</sup> There is the drama of recognition, in which the tiny, pitiable, rare, often the rejected, are unexpectedly found to contain a saving revelation and power. This vision, however, is most often attained at the centre of very immediate suffering, where the centre of reality and perception appears almost as a redeeming wound: "Light is the centre of our darkness. I am to tell you/ Of all light, all love, fast to the Cross and bleeding . . ."<sup>2</sup> (Webb so often applies the word "all" to a broken situation.) There is the constant combination of words evoking strength with those evoking weakness. There is the preoccupation with failure as somehow a sanctifying influence - Webb's vision here is eucharistic (as Eyre is finally transformed into an Emmaus traveller). Even Webb's metaphoric density shows the presence of his model: the usual individuality of words suffers a breakdown and thereby enters a new fellowship of meaning. The model is also seen in the way Webb creates dramatic absences which are then surrounded by diverse and partial perspectives, so that truth is always breaking towards wholeness and speech. Truth, for Webb, seems to lie at the heart of a secret, wounded sanctity, rather than in public statements which are

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1. "The Knight", The Canticle, CP, p. 81.
  2. Peter, The Chalice, CP, p. 155.

clear and coherent. The imbecile Harry speaks a Word deeper than all acquired learning.

These correspond to a classic model in the Judeo-Christian tradition: that of the "Suffering Servant". This model has its primary formulation in the four "Servant Songs" of Isaiah. The first song (Isaiah, 42:1-9) contrasts the great and final justice which the servant will accomplish with the unassuming, delicate way he will go about it. So too, the servant's call is described in terms which are at once intimate and awesome, and his mission identifies him with those we would today describe as marginalised. In the second song (Isaiah, 49:1-6), the servant, now in exile, is reminded that God's saving design is secretly at work in failure. In the third song (Isaiah, 50:4-9), the servant recalls his ministry to "the wearied", his vocation to suffer and so co-operate in God's redemptive purpose. In the fourth song (Isaiah, 52:13-53:12), the servant's ugliness and disfigurement, almost inhuman, break open as revelation: it is his very suffering which brings peace - and peace to those who neglected, even despised his truth.<sup>1</sup>

In the space between Yahweh's voice, which promises a future glory, and the servant's pain, which is so immediately and emphatically conveyed, we could easily locate Webb's dramatic quest for a way of recognising and uttering the (saving) truth about suffering. The very emphasis on the servant's inglorious condition not only prevents any easy transition into a transcendent mode, but actually makes the servant's suffering the questing centre of the song, thereby

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1. I should point out that I am concerned with the imaginative pattern within these texts - not with their varying theological interpretation and application.

deepening the causal connection between suffering and justification. That the one who suffers is innocent, while those he justifies are guilty, also makes this song sympathetically predisposed to Webb's imagination. So too does the tension created between this innocent core of truth and its surrounding surfaces of shame and repudiation. From this is derived an ironic balance - between his isolation in "evil" and our fellowship in justification, between his punishment and our peace - which in turn keeps the song searching between immediate reality and ultimate hope. These are then contained by and consistent with the primary tension: between historical suffering and eschatological glory.

The "Suffering Servant" model is an obvious choice for New Testament writers as they try to imagine and interpret the redemptive mystery of Christ. Christ too is found and identified at the place where suffering and glory paradoxically connect, and he too centres a drama of discernment very similar to that which surrounds the servant. Sometimes the identification of Christ with the servant is made directly, as when Christ names his mission by quoting the first song of the servant. (Luke, 4:16-30) At other times, it is implied by the use of imaginative patterns which are basically the same, as when Paul reminds his hearers that it is the "foolishness" of God which is the way to "wisdom". (I Corinthians, 1:21-25) Either way, the "Suffering Servant" becomes one of the most important models in Christian theology, imagination and culture.

Mark, in shaping Christ's three prophecies of his Passion, stresses how this suffering is the way to exaltation, and how Christ's listeners fail to appreciate this. Their failure is related to their preference for self-preservation over obedience, greatness over

smallness, and lordly power over service. Mark closes the third passage ironically, by introducing a blind man who has his sight restored. (Mark, 8:27-38, 9:30-37, 10:32-52.)

When Matthew has Jesus forbid people to speak about his healing, it is so that a prophecy may be seen as fulfilled - the servant's second song. (Matthew, 12:15-21.) In a central passage, that dealing with the Transfiguration, Christ is shown as choosing the Cross (rather than the Tabernacle proposed by Peter) as the proper mode of glorification. (Matthew, 16:21 - 17:8.)

Luke has Jesus quote the first servant song in order to name his mission. (Luke, 4:16-30.) Mary, the chosen mother, is strongly associated with the anawim, the poor and unimportant ones. (Luke, 1:46-55.) Christ himself is prophetically described by Simeon as "destined to be a sign that is rejected". (Luke, 2:34.) Most significantly, in his Emmaus story, which enacts his drama of discernment, Luke has Christ say to the slow perceivers, "Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?", and he has the disciples recognise the glorified Lord through brokenness: "Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognised him at the breaking of the bread." (Luke, 24:13-35.) Luke's commitment to a Suffering Servant Christology is strong. It informs his presentation of the church's primitive preaching: Peter, having learned his lesson, declares that death was Christ's destined way to exaltation. (Acts, 3:12-16) When Philip converts the eunuch of Ethiopia's queen it is after an explanation of the fourth servant song. As Luke puts it: "Starting, therefore, with this text of scripture Philip proceeded to explain the Good News of Jesus to him." (Acts, 8:26-40.)

It is Paul who places the "Suffering Servant" model at the centre of personal spirituality. Finding a parallel between Christ's incarnation and ascension, his dying and rising, his debasement and exaltation, Paul urges Christians to make this the pattern of their lives:

In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus:  
His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians, 2:5-11.)<sup>1</sup>.

This may seem somewhat remote from Webb's poetry, which is not, after all, riddled with references to Isaiah. However, in a more immediate, profound and pervasive (if less tangible) way, Webb's Catholic culture receives and reinforces the model. Where it appears in that culture, even if it does not acknowledge explicitly its Isaian origins, the model of the "Suffering Servant" preserves its fundamental imaginative structure: the almost reciprocal relationship between suffering and glory, coupled with the need for a darkly heroic faith.

We have to imagine Webb - by all accounts a deeply devout participant in Catholicism's spiritual culture - frequently attending Mass: a ritual re-enactment and reminder of Christ's humiliation and exaltation, as well as a continual call to believe Christ present in the breaking of the bread. We have, with him, to follow the liturgical year, which culminates in the Easter Triduum, and find how deeply the "Suffering Servant" model influences these central

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1. Paul's personal and spiritual application of the model can also be seen: Romans, 6:1-11; I Corinthians, 1:17-31; 2 Corinthians, 12:7-10; Colossians, 3:1-4; 2 Timothy, 2:1-13.

liturgies. For instance: on Palm Sunday Isaiah 50:4-7 (third servant song) is read, along with Philippians 2:6-11 and one of the Synoptic versions of the Passion; the readings for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week are from the first, second and third "Servant Songs"; on Holy Thursday, the Mass of Chrism has Christ quoting Isaiah to name his mission (Luke, 4:16-21), while the Mass of the Last Supper has him leading by washing feet (John, 13:1-15); on Good Friday, the solemn reading of John's Passion is preceded by a reading from the fourth "Servant Song". We have also to imagine Webb participating in paraliturgical practices. During the "Stations of the Cross", which in the fifties was a common Friday devotion, and which Webb himself frequently attended, Webb would focus again and again on the paradox in the Cross, since each of the fourteen stations was marked by the refrain, "We adore Thee, O Christ, and we bless Thee, because by Thy Holy Cross Thou hast redeemed the world."<sup>1</sup> Three times a day he would say the "Angelus" and, having recalled the mystery of the Incarnation, would conclude with a prayer that he might "by (Christ's) Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of his Resurrection".

The model is perhaps even more influential in the area of personal spirituality. Spiritual writers and preachers urged believers to accept suffering and to make sacrifices without complaint, so imitating Christ who "never opened his mouth". They even suggested praying for those who persecuted you - for Christ was "taking their faults on himself" and "praying all the time for sinners". If the faithful thus learned obedience through suffering, they would have their reward in heaven. (And, of course, this somewhat passive image of obedience was corroborated by the authoritarian aspect of

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1. Emphasis mine.

Catholic culture - though we shall see that Webb uses the model to critique institutional authority.) At times of exceptional eloquence, believers were even encouraged to imagine their personal sins as the scourge, the crown of thorns, the nails by which Christ suffered. In a less introverted way, the most common theme for advocating works of charity was that of seeing and helping Christ as one of "the least of these".<sup>1</sup>

I am not suggesting that Webb imagines within the energies of the "Suffering Servant" model because he is a close reader of Isaiah and Luke, or even because he lives within Australian-Catholic culture. It is not my intention to show why Webb's imagination and this model might seek each other out. My intention has been simply to suggest some of the range and dynamism within the model. I have referred to biblical texts because they contain the classic expression of the model, at least as it is articulated in Christian culture. Yet I have also suggested, tentatively, various other incarnations, some more partial than others, essentially in order to prevent too explicit an identification of the model with its classic texts, hoping thereby to prevent it becoming too constrictive an interpretative instrument, to establish it, rather, as an atmosphere of influence.

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1. Cf. Matthew, 25:31-46.

## SECTION THREE

WEBB'S VISION OF SUFFERING

While it is accurate to describe Webb's vision of suffering as Christian, this description is not yet sufficiently precise. In Christian belief, suffering is more than brute fact and disorder: it is an opportunity for incorporation into Christ's own redemptive purpose and activity. However, there can be, within this general belief, different theological models. One way of describing these differences is to talk of a continuum between an eschatological model of suffering and an historical one.

The more eschatological model hopes to find the meaning of suffering beyond this world, in a place (or state) of eternal happiness where every tear will be wiped away. Suffering is a test which is passed by endurance. There is, then, a strong emphasis on self-discipline and willpower, while, at the same time, the person has little creativity, has primarily to submit to the "will of God". While the "will of God" guarantees the relationship between suffering and glory, it implies that the connection is an extrinsic design ultimately established in a transcendent realm, in the "otherworld". Passing through pain and into the glory of Christ (who, in this model, seems to be on the other side of suffering), the person then achieves a victory over suffering.

In the more historical model, the victory is a victory of suffering. Christ is more an immediate presence within suffering. Rather than have the human figures struggle to a point beyond pain, this model has Christ move into the pain and be discovered among them. It encourages the kind of fellowship Webb himself valued: the community of

compassion and consolation.<sup>1</sup> In this it also challenges the presumptions of power, as suffering is more intrinsically connected with redemptive power and becomes a "sign of contradiction". This also affords the sufferers, in collaboration with (rather than in submission to) Christ, a more creative role: whether their suffering is destructive or recreative depends largely on their shaping imaginations. The purpose of suffering is discovered (and created) not so much without, in the divine understanding, as within the barely articulate fellowship and humanity it can constitute:

At this ruthless curve  
 We are driven to live. O sudden, the rags of our pity  
 Come back to us as a portrait of pain, a city  
 Of glory and torment - human.<sup>2</sup>

Webb's vision of suffering is, surely, most informed by the historical model (itself sympathetically attuned to the "Suffering Servant" model). His sense of its mystery rarely displaces his feel for its actuality, and he locates the mystery within the fact, just as he finds saving power within the wound. The sacralising effect of suffering is that it can create humanity as fellowship, as it does for the dying man at Winson Green, who becomes through brokenness "all life". Yet Webb's vision of suffering is also a critical one. His sufferers have more than a submissive role: they witness a contradictory and challenging truth in their very weakness. It has become a conventional piety to claim that the poor are especially identified with Christ, but Webb takes this view beyond sentimentality. His imagery closely critiques the oppressive structures which help create and sustain some suffering, yet these structures are overturned, not by power, but by poverty of heart.

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1. Cf. Webb's "Introductory Note", 12 Poets, 1950-1970, ed. A. Craig, p. 20.
  2. "The Stations", CP, p. 95.

There is a wonderful moment in Part II of The Canticle (CP, 69-84) when Francis urges Brother Ass to "Prance, play up as you will . . ." and to "Bray, brag, whichever you like: we are setting the pace." (CP, 77-78) Yet this piece does not set the pace for the entire poem. Its energy is remarkably unencumbered, full of "the gaities of Grace" (and of unstressed syllables). Francis even pities the sun, a long way from the top of its climb, and suggests that he and Brother Ass might "tip the earth over, sparing him all that climb". This liveliness is more than natural: Francis feels such power over the sun because he lives beneath "the greater Host" - the eucharistic bread which nourishes the life of grace. This is the second "round symbol" operating in the poem. Here Webb is expressing a traditional theology of grace: grace raises the natural order beyond (though in line with) its own power. He is also acknowledging a popular image of Francis: almost a saintly version of Doctor Dolittle, talking to the animals, at ease with the universe, and radiating kindness, peace and love. Yet the Knight is soon to remind us of Webb's favourite tension: "All beauty, all joy? Yes, - and all pain and disfigurement." (CP, 81)

Francis's cheerful chat with his donkey (self) is framed by suffering. The Canticle opens with an image of Christ carrying his cross and closes with the image of the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ which were believed to have manifested themselves in the saint's body. Further "Brother Ass and the Saint" occupies a space in the poem during which the other characters are changing their hearts, as if the saint's words to his donkey encode the wisdom these characters learn from their (unseen) contact with Francis. This dramatic structure implies that Francis's holy laughter may be akin to the Pauline notion of the "foolishness of God"<sup>1</sup>. - a foolishness not only wiser than

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1. I Corinthians, 1:17-25

"human wisdom", but also expressing itself through the sign of contradiction, the cross. It also implies that the poem's overall strategy is to enact a problem of discernment: we are invited to ask how the moment of simple joy is related to the more pain-filled utterances which constitute a great deal of the poem, to arrive at the final line and then appreciate how the song has come from the stigmata: "Five Wounds, and the Canticle." (CP, 84)

We are from the first involved in a process of discernment. As darkness shifts away, the eye searches for the early morning landscape, which shows itself in the image of Christ carrying his cross:

1210 A.D. - too much of that. Anno Domini,  
 When the brawny Umbrian moon, cloud-tethered, browses  
 At the poor edge of the plain, and breaks away.  
 Gusty needle, baggage-minute - call the bearers, prepare  
 harness!  
 For windlass-turnings of a light have rallied mountains:  
 The frost eyes open very cautiously,  
 Grey stone knuckles knock and fidget for a hand-hold  
 In the loose air, as Mount Subasio clambers  
 Dawnward, the town of Assisi fast to his back. (CP, 69)

With the next line Webb even buries an almost mocking reference to the way discernment often fails for lack of simple attention: "Hard to see, Assisi lies straight ahead of us." This is followed by a busy, crowded text, from which Francis himself suddenly breaks into view. While Webb does not let us see his face (again, there is an ironic observation that it is "too soon" to do so), Francis is represented by a verse form which is slender before the eye, a "poor edge" on the page. Yet even as he is presented as a break in the movement and mass of crowd and "common language", Francis is, in this condition, one with the mountain and with Christ:

Because of the Rabble,  
 All shapes, who streamed  
 From gates at the double  
 In his wake, he seemed

For a solitary  
 Moment of dim  
 Morning to carry  
 Assisi with him.

(CP, 69-70)

Apart from "Brother Ass and the Saint" (itself problematically related to the whole), Francis then disappears into the spaces between the diverse perspectives which comprise this pilgrim-poem. The Canticle is concerned not so much with Francis as object, as with the proper mode of searching for him - that way of seeing which might enable one not so much to admire, even idolise the saint, as to imitate his reality - which, Webb says, is his vision. If the old Franciscan, speaking slenderly, is right, it is a vision of climbing - climbing in sure shadows rather than brash certitudes.<sup>1</sup>

The companion, one of the poem's final speakers, is of the company which had known Francis well: the mother, St Clare, even the sun. Though each speaks in the slender verse form, their language is more abstract and theological, more mystical and hymn-like. They perform an oracular function, proclaiming the mystery by which "St Francis at the end of his life was very similar to Christ in all the multitudes of the Saints". The ageing mother is nourished by the same mystery into which her son has been assumed and "Drinks his faithful gold": the mysteries of eucharist and resurrection are seen to fulfil natural relationships and to nourish a new and deeper life. (CP, 83) St Clare, while acknowledging her grief, is confident of glory:

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

(CP, 83)

This is Francis: reconstructing the ruined church, living poverty and charity. It is also Christ, pushing at the door of the grave, his

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1. "The Companion", CP, 83.

power symbolised in his crown of thorns. What "The Sun" says is that time ("the sun") and humankind ("the man"), identified as "only" in a way that encourages in them humility and simplicity, must surrender their power to a light which is not their own. In that surrender they find fellowship (become "we") and enter the mystery of the five wounds, which is the song:

Small hours fattening, darkness losing  
 To the day that is begun,  
 The lean hours, and the vesper-dowsing,  
 These are only the sun.

The honest blue and the rainward treason,  
 The ball of pride and plan  
 Skittling vapours in damp collusion,  
 These are only the man.

But five times we shall rise in the night  
 When the halo over the hill  
 Is not of my own light.

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Five Wounds, and the Canticle. (CP, 84)

However, these speakers are privileged witnesses. They have a degree of achieved understanding and mystical insight, of clean and abstract utterance which is not so apparent in the other characters: the leper, the father, the wolf, the jongleur, the serf, and the knight. These are the voices, struggling for a more human authority, which carry the body of the poem. They shape its drama by the way they undergo a change of heart as they come to recognise some of the saint's meaning (and, for each, this meaning is represented by an appropriate fragment from his canticle). In each case this involves a new appreciation of suffering.

The leper, whose disease has (metaphorically) affected all he sees and says, suffers most from oppression: oppression seasoned as much by his own bitterness and self-disgust as by the wall, town, people and

seasons which conspire in one malign community of judgment, rejection, and, worse, false and fast charity. Even the official charity of the Church is wanting: shunned by the scampering priest with discreet senses, the leper loses faith in the eucharist - "Nor can I credit the Love aloft in those hands." (CP, 70-71) He learns from the saint's song how to praise forgiveness and patience, then discovers fellowship in active and receptive forgiveness. His "Grey obdurate" way disappears and the walled town is open before "a white way,/ Love aloft in those hands". His physical disease is also healed as his white, leprous flesh is tactfully transformed into that "white of embodiment" which is now the eucharist. (CP, 78)

The father first sees his son, Francis, as another piece of cloth which he must possess and profit by, and is outraged to find a "wilful swerve" in the cloth as Francis not only commits himself to poverty, but shows his father how to follow suit by sharing some of that merchant's gains with the poor. His last words convey his realisation that the deviate thread now brings a greater wealth:

But again one obstinate loitering thread  
From dead twilight fibres coaxes a sun.  
A continent is unbound,  
Still of my fibres, but of countless fibres,  
Still of my limits, but not of the mapping-pen's,  
Still of my trademark - but of daylight and vine. (CP, 79)

There is, in the reference to "vine", a neat combination of natural and supernatural graces. Not surprisingly, the lesson Bernadone learns from his son's canticle is how to praise the wealth of nature, gift of providence.

When the wolf hears the saint sing in praise of fire, his first, ice-cold world becomes more warm-hearted. When he finally realises that "Now all's a twig to my fire", his attitude is more celebratory

than predatory. At first, though, the Wolf of Gubbio is obsessed with survival in his own instinctual life, whose axis is food or fear. He obeys the "kill or be killed" rule and lives only in disparate and sensate moments, forgetting everything but the basic actions of his belly. (CP, 73) Under the saint's influence, he surrenders fear and eats "the meat of a fearless stare". His final sense of the world is more open - and more remembered:

Summer, ice, thunderbolt, come: you are the immense  
World of my imposition, you are response.

Night on my axis, weep, sing, be leisurely, strive.  
I forget nothing. There is no other Alive. (CP, 80)

Somehow "There is no other Alive" is not exclusive. It seems as if the wolf has opened himself to existence, to the axis of the real, and found that the world is not a matter of violence and power. With the loss of fear, his world becomes one of invitation and response. Struggling to create a high-sounding art in which he himself no longer believes, (CP, 73-75) the jongleur must listen to the saint's praise of the moon and stars, which the Lord has "placed . . . in the heavens, bright and precious and beautiful". (CP, 80) He sees then that the "old stories", for all their omissions and inadequacies, are affirmation of love, and that, in their very limitation, they tell a liberating truth:

The story comes to an end - not the pause for refreshment.  
Loyal voyage, loyal vision, loyal bones,  
Freed from the story, come closer and still closer. (CP, 81)

Even though he seems very much at peace with nature, the serf is actually afraid of the unusual. (CP, 75) He fears disturbance of his quiet seasons. He cannot control his world - power belongs to his lord "absolute as God". Though this lord is not as "single-rooted" to the land, he does determine its fortunes by involving it in his own political and military manoeuvres. So the serf's relationship to the earth is flawed by his anxious dependence on this lord. Before this

world of power the serf is passive and neutral: "I have no words: I am a man, and silent." His fears are unfounded: "If anything came at all, it was only the usual." (CP, 81) The usual is the miracle - or, as Francis puts it: "Praise be to Thee, my Lord, for our sister the Water, which is most useful, humble, precious, and chaste." (CP, 81) The serf's final wisdom is easier and more independent (his lord "absolute as God" has been replaced by the "Lord" of the Franciscan fragment):

The bank has been always my granite knowledge; the source  
Unknowable. Who is it sees, from desert to ripe trees,  
A river, truly a river: no bridge, no boundaries  
Nor left/right guardsmen, but the miracle of a course?  
I am the one who sees. (CP, 81)

Approaching Assisi, the knight refuses to be perplexed by images on the road:

Today, then, shall I be perplexed by the swarms  
Of roadside images flung from the uncalendared dreams?  
By this woman whose gaze is token  
Of a passing, by this room's  
Mud and wattle under my hooves, by this broken  
Foeman's lispings, word of what is unspoken?

(CP, 76)

These are not worthy: they are weak. His preferred images are those of heroic adventure, his dreams those of power. The only conquest he admits is that of being conquered by a woman's love: "And to you, lady, fell my young golden Yes." Yet this is made ambivalent when, telling how he gave her love songs, he describes the "troubadour's crying" in terms of a trained hawk, "whose flying/ Leaves unscanned not a stanza of daylight, living to dying". Even the more savage aspects of his knightly experience are accommodated: "Things clumsy as cloud, the heathen, bloodshed, rapine, and grief/ Ran tidily venturesome as the veins of a leaf." He is not about to discover God among the weak - but the next time he speaks he has surrendered power and taken the "last place". (CP, 81-82) By then he has heard the

saint's praise of that power of God which sustains all things. He destroys his artificial dreams, dismounts, and finds himself within "the dream":

Slashing the canvas of dreams, I have entered the dream  
 And dismount within it, observing, not from the stirrup,  
 Its signs and seconds, truthful core of the idyll,  
 Pilot of morning, core of my green vows,  
 Setting the pulse awake in a young man's dreams.

All beauty, all joy? Yes, - and all pain and disfigurement.

(CP, 81)

The knight is growing older - that in itself means that he is losing power in his world of brave action. But his dismounting ritualises a more spiritual loss of power: it signals an entry into fellowship, an abandonment of vertical, mounted authority and a commitment to community around the "truthful core". Weakness and community place him within the dream, whose centre is the relationship between joy and pain. Next he remembers how, even in his strength, he was haunted by an elusive sense of "the Centre" - "rather as a face/ Among the circling faces,/ The pandering elements, and the veal and the wine."  
 (CP, 82) After he listens to Francis, the knight has reached more deeply into his own powerlessness - it is "Evening. Time to dismount."

Although dismounted, the knight still sees much the same suffering and evil. The difference is that he is not detached. He is part of suffering - indeed, he is the last part:

When I was looking down, these were looking upward,  
 Tillage, mist, flame, drawling watercourse,  
 Adventurous good and evil, and you, you.  
 But here, on this level, there is also land  
 Laid waste, dying mist, fire's desperate subsidence,  
 Swift glittering ankle bolted to ice,  
 And you, and in the last place myself. (CP, 82)

This vision is more relational. It is also more participatively real. Here Webb again resists too easy a transcendence: "in the last place myself" at once acknowledges the reality of suffering, and reaches towards the gospel's promise that the last shall be first.<sup>1</sup>

These transformations might be interpreted simply as a structure which affirms the power of divine providence, whereby each of the characters is guided through suffering to spiritual abandonment. That is not quite the effect we receive in reading the poem. We are still reading within its overall framework, which begins with a strong emphasis on carrying the Cross and ends with a promise of resurrection uncomfortably close to the emblem of "Five Wounds". To discover how the characters change, we have to pass not only through "Brother Ass and the Saint" with its holy foolishness, but also, before that, through "Brother Ass", where the fatalistic donkey accepts that his mission in life is to carry burdens. (CP, 77) When we do discover that changes have occurred, we have to engage in a process of reading backwards, reading forwards, in order to appreciate those changes: in this way, the poem keeps to its fundamental impulse, which is not to state the meaning of suffering, but to invite us into a dramatic enactment of suffered vision. Along with the knight, we are invited to "Enter: see the many faces come closer . . ." - one of them may be the saint's. Whether we see his face or not, we have entered his meaning by engaging with the interpretative task of linking all beauty and all disfigurement.

The Canticle also includes moments when other individual aspects of suffering are closely and critically examined, and these should not

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1. Cf. Matthew, 20:1-16.

be too smoothly absorbed into its final affirmation of glory. Rather, these help us appreciate the kinds of saving activity which Webb identifies within different experiences of suffering.

Webb's treatment of Bernadone is, at one level, quite conventional: his suffering purifies his materialistic and selfish attitudes and teaches him true wisdom. However, to paraphrase the Bernadone poems into such a proposition is to distance them considerably from their own imaginative dynamic. Bernadone speaks within a metaphor of weaving - a metaphor over which he presumes total creative control, yet a metaphor which assumes an independent and ironic power. The suffering which comes by way of this metaphor is obviously self-induced, even though the metaphor also allows that there may be a greater design at work.

Bernadone begins in an aggressive, macho manner:

I am the merchant Bernadone,  
Also the weaver, artisan,  
Full face, full pocket, everywhere known,  
All this - and very much the man.       (CP, 71)

Thereafter, everything is centred towards his power as he controls the metaphor through which he relates the life of Francis. Francis is born from his "clean fibres", his birth happily coinciding with financial success which "wove continents". Love is a matter of "Obedient threads" which "figure (his) increase". When the mother seems to devise "some wicked warm design/ For (his) son to tread the unruly way", the father not only thwarts such a design, but greatly enjoys his own authoritarian display. Yet when his son reaches adolescence and uses women to experiment with manhood, Bernadone is happy with his liberal craftsmanship and blesses "Whatever is carefully profligate". Not even war is powerful enough to warp the

father's weaving of his son. Then, suddenly, metaphor and son break away:

But within him was born this contravention  
And wilful swerve from the one true shape.  
Now from his absolute dimension  
A man of my fibres would escape

Floorwards, displaying for a badge  
Mere snippets, formless. Thrown outside,  
He renders the final sacrilege -  
Almsgiving of my hard-won pride.

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? (CP, 72)

While Bernadone is here employing words with his habitual, unthinking authoritarianism, the relation between his use of biblical images and their more usual association becomes ironic. At the very point where he thinks he is using language to display his power, the language itself, out of its own memory and integrity of reference, initiates an independent judgment of his weakness. In order to describe how Francis denied his wealthy lifestyle and adopted the dress of poverty, Bernadone, still seeing himself as an absolute creator, invokes a parodic image of the Fall, speaking of Francis's fault, his fall from fatherly grace, his quasi-nakedness and expulsion. This does not, as intended, justify Bernadone's position - rather, it contrasts his intransigence with the redemptive inclination attributed to the Creator in Genesis. When he celebrates his capacity for hate and asks whether "a last obstinate/ Thread" can get past its "double eye", he judges himself as that rich person who will enter heaven with more difficulty than a camel passing through the needle's eye.<sup>1</sup> Since Bernadone draws this irony down upon himself and since it evolves organically, if not intentionally, from his own metaphor, the moral

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1. Matthew, 19:23-26

judgment is muted. This does not mean that Webb softens his attitude towards Bernadone's kind of suffering. That suffering remains wilful and unnecessary - indeed, Webb underlines this by giving Bernadone such a gratingly self-congratulatory tone. The biblical references also underline Bernadone's culpability. Yet they also cooperate in another more redeeming irony: at the point where Bernadone declares his determination to keep his son's fault an unhappy one, he has introduced biblical language which more usually speaks of the "happy fault" - the Fall which occasioned Christ's becoming human. This leaves Bernadone in a state which he would be the last to recognise: subject to the design of the divine weaver.

That state is confirmed in his second speech. (CP, 79) Here he admits the futility of his money-mania, the deeper hurt he experienced in losing his son, as well as his responsibility for the break. In this he starts to appreciate and express the ironic pattern itself:

"Creator declared journeyman of undoing." He has obviously been involved in some soul-searching and now when he speaks of his fabric - "the needle-prows of a schism/ Tormented my fabric" - he is wanting to possess his own vulnerable self. The basis of his perception has shifted from a tough, exterior world to a gentler, interior one. Yet he has not replaced his metaphor: he is able, rather, through suffering, to find new, liberating possibilities within it. His metaphor can express his confession of fault and failure:

Each of my honourable words -  
 He has stolen, imprison him, my son no longer my son -  
 Was the groping, gaining yellow signal,  
 And failure, the cere-cloth's moth-eaten pallor,  
 Printless under any advance of my craft. (CP, 79)

It is able to include his wonder at the paradoxical way the obstinate thread, earlier seen as deviate, is now seen as regenerative: "But

again one obstinate loitering thread/ From dead twilight fibres coaxes  
a sun." It is able to utter at once his fellowship with his son and  
his surrender of him:

A continent is unbound,  
Still of my fibres, but of countless fibres,  
Still of my limits, but not of the mapping-pen's,  
Still of my trademark - but of daylight and vine. (CP, 79)

This wonderful fulfilment of Bernadone's metaphor encourages a sense that redemptive possibilities, though they may be of an order higher than his conscious choice, are yet contained within the imaginative pattern of his suffering. Some very unassuming biblical resonances reinforce the effect. The Franciscan praise of providence recalls the gospel's lesson to trust providence rather than one's own financial prowess. "Continents I claimed and charted against the Last Day/ But to no avail . . ." recalls the rich man who filled his barns only to find he was to die that night.<sup>1</sup> The reference to moths echoes the gospel's injunction to store treasure in heaven, where moths do not devour.<sup>2</sup> However, the great difference now is that the relation between these references and Bernadone's voice is not ironic, but sympathetic (and the references are more deeply woven into the text, so that they create a mood rather than give the message I have here extracted and made explicit). If this is so, then the final reference to "daylight and vine" also contains a judgment that Bernadone's suffering has changed its meaning and incorporated him into the symbolism of the risen Lord. The metaphor, then, has followed its own way: it has shown us and Bernadone the weakness behind his brusque power and turned that weakness into a loitering thread with which to weave a redeemed cloth.

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1. Luke, 12:13-21.

2. Matthew, 6:19-21.

With "A Leper" (CP, 70-71) we are faced with suffering which originates in factors beyond the leper's own control. Webb does not take the opportunity for a devout meditation on the mysterious ways and permissive will of God. Instead he exploits the confrontative capacity which such suffering can have, and he attacks the values which lie behind oppression. Even as he does so, he continually emphasises that it is the leper's very deterioration which so powerfully contradicts the presumptions of power.

The image of the "high wall", expressing both inclusion and exclusion, shows how oppression is motivated by self-preservation and fear of the "enemy". As the passing crowds and passing seasons conspire to marginalise the leper, they betray the essential cowardice of an oppressive power structure: the majority singling out the minority, the group subjugating the individual to its own needs. The priest "whose discreet senses dare not linger upon (him)" signals an indictment of cosmetic charity, where "a halfpenny's smug bandage" is used as a substitute for real engagement with suffering, particularly suffering which does not fit conventional moral interpretations, but which simply exists in all its inexplicability. Interestingly, the leper does not make a direct attack on such injustice and oppression. He is always on the edge, struggling to utter himself into some more secure and acceptable reality. Webb does not let him achieve that sort of power. It is the leper's act of being (or just-being) which is his most potent and most frightening word. Because people find his existence disgusting, the leper's broken fact of being enters their mind (as it does the reader's) as an irrefutable speech:

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 . . .

Look aside, look aside. Yet this non-human thought  
 Cannot furl its bewildering pennon, must utter itself.  
 I am the graceless utterance, the question, the thought . . .

(CP, 71)

In allowing the leper such an activity, Webb is also challenging fatalistic, stoical attitudes towards suffering (strong in mainstream Australian culture), which assign the person a role that is basically one of passive resistance. Webb implies that suffering needs a better response: the creative and sympathetic response of mercy. This is subtly and ironically conveyed when the leper describes how he is assigned a church:

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?  
 For Santa Maria there was mercy; for me only vengeance,  
 An effigy sour as my body, and a scampering priest  
 Whose discreet senses dare not linger upon me.  
 Nor can I credit the Love aloft in those hands. (CP, 71)

The leper questions whether the church and people use charity so that their walls/eyes may house his ugliness without their having to become him, to discover in their strong eyes "the blink of ruin". This is enough to expose their hypocrisy. Webb, however, is doing more: the association of "church" and "ruin" reminds us that, in Franciscan lore, Francis found his mission when he dreamed he had to restore a ruined church. Here, the devout ones, refusing the ruin, refuse the Franciscan vision. They also effectively deny the eucharist (as bread that is broken). For all their well-established structures of devotion, they lack the brokenness needed for mission and for such love as is symbolised in the eucharist. The leper, however, is drawn by his words more deeply and more barely into the true meaning of "the Love".

When, in "Ball's Head Again", Webb again confronts the presumptions of progress, he does so through a suffered landscape, and through an

Aboriginal symbol which stands neglected by the road:

O within this land a hungry eloquence  
 Tortuous on hillock, simple in cave.  
 The upright flagstaff and the leaning fence  
 Could hear it - even was lightened  
 The burned-out scrub by an imminence, called Alive.  
 All the hammers and drills of night after night,  
 The cross-grained rainfalls, the whistling nine-tail years  
 Stir up the shark on his rock. Let him cast loose,  
 Be filled with them, welter in peace or war,  
 Be twisted and turned, be lifted up and let fall,  
 Have weeds in his teeth at the end of a day's scavenging,  
 And come home with the blue players, as now in December,  
 To this old road and this rock-face I remember. (CP, 93)

The revelatory symbol (of the shark drawn in rock) is humble and could easily remain unrecognised, although it is "at once beyond death".

Though itself tortured, the landscape confronts progress with something gentle and will "gently persuade the eyes of the audience, gently".

This conclusion is anticipated: throughout the text, Webb describes moments of revelation in terms which emphasise weakness. The lunchtime conversation which first reminds him of Ball's Head is a "Haggard recitative out of one spidery throat". The Head itself is imagined as an enfeebled thing, given the cold shoulder by the "islands, points, and bays". This creates the poem's necessity: to get through the limping memories and to "see". The way to see is "A road, hard involved with the Harbour's will". The object of vision makes its own approach, though it can easily be overlooked:

Now cruised to the roadside the aboriginal's shark;  
 Here a man brushed death from his wits, and what this rock  
 Affirmed was at once beyond death. We have laid its passion  
 Within abject bounds  
 As a value; the fence cries out for a brush and crumbles;  
 But these cool hesitant lines, swift arrowhead symbols,  
 Will embalm a figure of truth -  
 The few innocent, infinite hours of a vision. (CP, 92)

What is here characteristic of Webb is the fellowship found between what is "infinite" and what is "few" and "innocent", and the way the

fencing mentality crumbles before the almost unnoticed "figure of truth" embodied in the aboriginal's shark.

Although "Beeston Regis" (CP, 145-147) does not quite succeed, dogged as it is by obscurity, it does clarify whenever it abandons attempts at high-sounding grandeur and moves towards a simpler focus. It is a questing poem, searching the seasonal and historical passing of time and place (as also the passing between mind and place) for the core, here indicated as "beauty". It begins with sundown, beautifully rendered in swift impressions of "Wings, song, and sundown, wide outburst of orange." Then it enters the "entire darkness", broken only by the light of the moon and of the occasional house (and, of course, it is in this darkness that the poem begins to find its own light). Morning is "candid" and shows the "Coastline: the hunting fleeing blue, and the sky". It ends in the hour of monastic prayer - "this hour" - as the poem achieves meditative focus on the Priory ruins and its witness to Christ's hour: "In the arising is the Calvary,/ And the beauty of the passing."

The poem remains concerned with the meaning of "passing" - a meaning which shifts slightly as the word is repeated throughout the poem, so that, by the end, it refers as much to the passing or passion of Christ as to the passing of time. When Webb focuses on the Priory ruins, he has them show the effects of time's passing, but he also invests them with the power to reveal Christ's victory over time, the victory of "this hour", the eternal moment established here by the monks at prayer:

Saxon, Norman, the Priory has answered  
 Time and wind and space, come into ruins  
 Lovingly, crumbled, O tumbled zealously.  
 The Mass, or cantata of wind in the tall stones.  
 And space between:

Dust is the silent labours of the men in their long robes,  
 But they are here, they move,  
 Genuflect, tell their beads in the dancing light,  
 They are risen, they shall rise.  
 Walls, mankind, yes something of hungry earth  
 Melt into everlastingness, which is this hour.

In the arising is the Calvary,  
 And the beauty of the passing. (CP, 146-147)

The process of decomposition is voiced so tenderly that it speaks a pattern of love. There is a clear affirmation of resurrection and of eternity's triumph over time, but this should not overshadow the complexity of the line, "Melt into everlastingness, which is this hour." This recalls the earlier "Dissolving into silence, death" and while it displaces silence and death with eternity, it also, simply by calling them back to mind, creates a question about the dark relationship between the three terms. Therefore, the tensive character of belief is restored rather than resolved by the affirmation of resurrection. This tensive character is deepened by the way the abstract "everlastingness" is neighbour to the concrete "this hour", the way reading is directed from the eternal unknown to the familiar moment. The tension and faith are strengthened in the double-edged movement of the close, which locates in ruins the eternal centre, but sets the eternal centre seeking "this hour".

"Wild Honey" (CP, 231-232) also presents some difficulty of interpretation, but in this case the effort is guided by the imagery and we have, I think, one of Webb's finest poems, one of his most closely blended works of tenderness and terror. The key to the poem's success is that all its secondary images are controlled by the one image of the honeycomb, and that, within this framework, Webb follows through from one image to another.

The opening imagery is superb:

Saboteur autumn has riddled the pampered folds  
Of the sun; gum and willow whisper seditious things;  
Servile leaves now kick and toss in revolution,  
Wave bunting, die in operatic reds and golds; (CP, 231)

The autumn sunlight (hollows within gold) unifies inner and outer worlds - "the drones", the entirely passive sufferers/ patients of Ward Two, "Grove among chilly combs of self-contemplation" and move within their own riddled and pampered mental light. There is a sense then in which the final image of this first stanza, that of a brief appearance by the sun, applies as much to their minds as to the autumnal skyscape. It is also within the military bounds of the original metaphor: "the sun, on sufferance, from his palanquin/ Offers creation one niggling lukewarm grin."

There is also a wryness and frail assertiveness of tone which leads smoothly into the second stanza:

But today is Sports Day, not a shadow of doubt:  
Scampering at the actual frosty feet  
Of winter, under shavings of the pensioned blue,  
We are the Spring. (CP, 231-232)

The voice itself is scampering, busy at being brave and positive and energetic - yet the image of a cloudy and ageing sky troubles this optimism. The word "shavings" connotes a fragmentation and crumbling not unlike that which might be associated with the honeycomb, although in this case Webb is including a process of hollowing which belongs more to the grey of experience than to the gold. This becomes clear when, hived in a memory of rain, he recalls the hollowed spaces of his appearance and memory and how all is washed into "the single sheet of rain" (the colour grey disputing with gold for emblematic preeminence).

True, rain is about:  
You mark old diggings along the arterial street

Of the temples, the stuttering eyeball, the residue  
 Of days spent nursing some drugged comatose pain,  
 Summer, autumn, winter the single sheet of rain. (CP, 232)

It is difficult to know whether this disclosure of the "chilly combs of self-contemplation" shows distaste or desperation in the way it clings to the frightfully physical. The "stuttering eyeball" superbly condenses and connects sight and speech - but also stresses the tortured gaps present in these activities (and these gaps are themselves a variation within the honeycomb image).

So the bravura mood of spring gives way to the grey, enclosed world where the patient must see his own boredom and illness staring back from his riddled window. This rain is of the mind - a single sheet of "grey finality" which confuses all seasons but spring into the one state of atrophy. Spring is soon surrendering before an anxiety which takes on apocalyptic tremors and which finds the flower symbol as a mendicant defeated by the wall of grey:

And the sun is carted off; and a sudden shower:  
 Lines of lightning patrol the temples of the skies;  
 Drum, thunder, silence sing as one this day;  
 Our faces return to the one face of the flower  
 Sodden and harried by diehard disconsolate flies.  
 All seasons are crammed into pockets of the grey.  
 Joy, pain, desire, a moment ago set free,  
 Sag in pavilions of the grey finality. (CP, 232)

This third stanza might seem a lapse in imaginative direction - except that I see it as precisely a victory for the grey, a moment cut off from the honeycomb and the gold, a moment of neither faith nor doubt, but only unproductive emptiness. The autumnal light is gone and, with it, the image of the honeycomb. Gone with the image is the precarious balance of hollowness and shape, of persistent toil and sweet reward, of dark ways to beauty. The flower is "sodden" - its spatial balances are lost and it is all washed into the "grey finality".

Now that his honeycomb is denied him in the geographical and seasonal world, the speaker finds it again in the yellow hair being combed by a girl - not just a pun on "comb", but a perception of how, when being combed, long hair will fill and empty spaces in the light. This girl with yellow hair attracts the imaginative structure contained in the honeycomb image: her icon-like presentation stresses a presence almost incorporeal, but fully present, an outline enclosing no emptiness, a mobile stillness, a saved and essential gesture. She attracts all of Webb's longing for heaven, but there is a sense in which her moment is known to be brief. This does not mean that she, as the apotheosis of gold, is defeated by the grey: the poem's final stress is on the gold (even though it is at the same time returning it towards fact by calling it "her yellow hair"). The battle is clearly indicated: he is in a grey state of atrophy when confronted by her hair; she combs her hair "before the grey broken mirror" (which is as likely to be a rain-whipped reflection as any actual mirror); she shows "beyond the swirl/ Of golden fronds" awareness of his "grey stare". Webb is not precisely setting up an epiphany: he is too self-conscious for that. He is setting up a drama between the speaker's desire for such an experience and his inability to be a "naked soul", to break free of the labyrinth (another, negative, honeycomb-like way of mind) in which desire is lost. More than the mind, it is the will which cannot regain the innocence needed to know a truly simple moment. It is stranded in ambiguity and complexity:

And terror,  
 Rainlike, is all involved in the golden glow,  
 Playing diminuendo its dwarfish role  
 Between self-conscious fingers of the naked soul. (CP, 232)

The further we fall from innocence, the further we find that  
 self-consciousness makes us exiles:

Down with the mind a moment, and let Eden

Be fullness without the prompted unnatural hunger,  
 Without the doomed shapely ersatz thought: see faith  
 As all such essential gestures, unforbidden,  
 Persisting through Fall and landslip; and see, stranger,  
 The overcoated concierge of death  
 As a toy for her gesture. See her hands like bees  
 Store golden combs among certified hollow trees.

Have the gates of death scrape open. Shall we meet  
 (Beyond the platoons of rainfall) a loftier hill  
 Hung with such delicate husbandries? Shall ascent  
 Be a travelling homeward, past the blue frosty feet  
 Of winter, past childhood, past the grey snake, the will?  
 Are gestures stars in sacred dishevelment,  
 The tiny, the pitiable, meaningless and rare  
 As a girl beleaguered by rain, and her yellow hair? (CP, 232)

These stanzas are interesting in the way that they do not "transcend". They begin with a transcendent and strongly visionary tone as they seek the full and naked experience of Eden, the total and essential gesture beyond law's walls. But at the same time as the poem wishes Eden might persist "through Fall and landslip", it keeps those notions in its consciousness by concentrating on death. Then it assaults the wall of death - somewhere between command, hope and questioning the sentence lies: "Have the gates of death scrape open." Then the questions - they act like honeycombs in the texture of the poem, advancing towards and retreating from fullness of meaning, burrowing into the substance of things in search of gold. Then the last three lines turn back and the desire for complete glory cannot let go of the instinct for images which combine glory with suffering: the sacred dishevelment, the tiny and pitiable, and the golden-haired girl framed by grey rain.

Obviously, this section can do no more than begin discussion of Webb's vision of suffering. The pattern outlined here will, however, be reinforced as other angles and other poems are incorporated. This then is the structure through which Webb's vision of suffering, loyal to its "Suffering Servant" model, expresses itself: redeeming and

glorifying by its woundedness; by that woundedness also confronting and contradicting the usual modes of power and of perception; creating and revealing its cauterised centre as the place of humanity or compassionate fellowship (and, therefore, the place of Christ). It prefers ugliness and agony as a way to God, and sees the frailest gestures of language as "filled with the Word unwritten".

## SECTION FOUR

VISION AND STRATEGY

Webb's vision of suffering is as much a process of suffered vision as a meaning-system. His poems continually invite us to play in dramas of perception. It is, therefore, necessary to consider not only how the "Suffering Servant" model relates to his vision, but also - and perhaps more importantly - how the model encourages a profound reciprocity between the vision of the poems and the strategy by which they invite and even structure our participation.

The way in which the model determines a reciprocity between vision and strategy can be illustrated by "A Death At Winson Green" (CP, 153-154). It is possible to find in the poem evidence of a theology which claims that death gives way to eternal life and, therefore, that the dying man moves towards the core of triumph won by Christ's redemptive suffering and death. This is not, however, quite the movement which the poem enacts. Its religio-poetic strategy says the dying man is himself the core of triumph. If Christ is anywhere in the poem, he is at that core, in the man's woundedness.

Our groping eyes are continually being directed towards the single word, "dead", and each time we see it we move closer to the core reality. It is here that Webb locates the gaping truth which is the poem's centre: "a man is dying at the core/ Of triumph won". As the man is dying, the sun is rising. Whereas those who assume redemption is an unambiguous process would expect to follow sunrise all the way to resurrection, Webb insists on holding the focus on "dead", so increasing the tension between dying and rising. At the end, the dying man does achieve a Webbean style of transcendence: he becomes

"all life". Yet this state, as much one of wounded fellowship as of triumph, is never separated from the broken fact, which has the last word: "thrown on the gaping bed,/ Blind, silent, in a trance, and shortly, dead." This is not because Webb's belief in resurrection is in conflict with his experience of suffering. It is because his imagination wants to speak the moment where power and weakness converge.

Webb introduces his characteristic tension at the very beginning of the poem, when he describes Winson Green as "a green spell stolen from Birmingham". Is Winson Green a thief, deserving the general world's suspicion and judgment? Is it a place of rest rescued from the city's movement? Or is it a restorative space of almost magical potency? It may even be that the "green spell" is effective for Birmingham, as well as for the patients of Winson Green.

Birmingham does not seem to recognise Winson Green as its saving wound. Omnibus and tram look over the fence at the hospital in a way which prefigures the embarrassed attention which visitors feel they must give to the patients, and which further intensifies the poem's drama of recognition, its tension between rejection and acceptance of suffering. If Winson Green is itself a gaping truth, it is generally disregarded, and here Webb sets the song of innocence. "Here, through the small hours, sings our innocence."

It is not an easy or sentimental innocence. Describing the ward in such a way that it appears like the frayed energies of any one of its patients, Webb allows the metaphor to lead us to the reality: the "one gaping bed" where a single patient, foaming at the lip, gathers all that surrounds him, then, through the rhyming of "bed" with "dead",

carries "all" through to the centre of the poem, which is also the centre of Webb's religious vision. This is not a movement where the actual is slowly transformed into the transcendent. The mysterious, disclosing and enclosing itself in an immediate, but symbolic world, is leavening, but never leaving, immediate experience:

Joists, apathetic pillars plot this ward,  
Tired timbers wheeze and settle into dust,  
We labour, labour: for the treacherous lord  
Of time, the dazed historic sunlight, must  
Be wheeled in a seizure towards one gaping bed,  
Quake like foam on the lip, or lie still as the dead.

(CP, 153)

Metaphor creates a sympathy between the ward, the patient and time's ambivalent authority, the suffered light of history. However, the direction of the metaphor is not to take the familiar into the Other, but to bring the Other into the familiar - or, more precisely, to allow it to come: the emphasis on "labour" seems to stress not so much the power of human activity, as the point where it becomes an achieved receptivity, a struggle not to overcome the ward, but to become part of it. This is how the poem's metaphoric pattern supports its interpretative structure, which is based on the belief that light will break into beauty, not on the edge of eternity, but within the heart of suffering: on the silver, but derelict, integrity of this dying man's face.

Visitors' Day is succinctly and starkly represented: the frozen smile, dazed discomfort, disinfecting indifference - "the graven perpetual smile,/ String-bags agape, and pity's laundered glove." (CP, 153) It is important to name the tension in "agape". It does more than describe a visitor fumbling through a bag. It tells how the visitors are afraid of the patients, how they stare in discomfort and (precisely) disbelief. In this way it encodes the attitude which

would make Winson Green a space to be peered at from the outside, a space where ugly truths can be tidied away and forgotten, except for the obligatory pity of Visitors' Day. Yet it also encodes the opposite attitude: by linking with "one gaping bed", it secretly reflects that the visitors' helplessness and fear might yet be their saving wound. It tells us to look again at the wound, to connect critically and ironically (as the poem does) the well-dressed woundedness of the visitors with the more innocent or less disguised woundedness of the patients. It is a little word which invites us to share in the poem's drama of recognition. The visitors do not see sanctity before them and are described as "heathens":

The last of the heathens shuffles down the aisle,  
 Dark glass to a beauty which we hate and love.  
 Our empires rouse against this ancient fear,  
 Longsufferings, anecdotes, levelled at our doom. (CP, 153)

Against the fear the patients provoke - of death, of ugliness, of the will defenceless before weakness - the visitors raise their structures of power (empires) and use patience and conversation to push back the unpleasant fact. While this directs the patients back into a space of rejection and "doom", it also constitutes "doom" for the visitors since they fail to find Winson Green a redemptive space. The aisle along which they go mirrors the shuffling journey into faith (here a balance of light and dark forces), with beauty at the centre of paradox.

Like the dying man, the poem moves away from the complexities of past relationships, away from "prying" attitudes (so often in Webb those who suffer are victims of an almost institutionalised misunderstanding), away from the world of technological power and religious consolation, and towards the utter fact represented by "dead". As each stanza finishes we come back to this word and move

closer to the man and his actual dying.

The third stanza (CP, 154) creates the effect of a camera tracking from a sunset landscape, through the gathering dark, through the lighted hospital window, and finally to the hospital bed. An external environment is established, then its "realities" are "cast down" as we cross the "squared electric shore". Webb often has such an image of a barrier or transition point - quite often it is a wall. On the one side is conventional knowledge and familiar security. On the other is suffered wisdom. Here we pass to the other side to discover that the highest reality is a shadow seen on a bedside screen: the shadow of the dying man's face.

Even as the surrounding scene is created and surrendered, it is dominated by a sacrificial image: "the slouch-hatted sun/ Gapes at windows netted in wire". This unusual and evocative image, by using "Gapes", once more combines the notion of perception with that of woundedness. The bloodied sun is here likened to the doomed, if slouch-hatted, heroes of war, the Anzacs, facing battle wire and death. The Australian symbol of Gallipoli is here in conversation with the "Suffering Servant" model, and the metaphor is thus in sympathy with the dying man's unrecognised heroism. The dying beams of sunlight must also be broken on the wire netting if they are to arrive at the dying man. As they are, we move into a more interior perspective, one that does not at first appear so powerfully real. With the death of the sun, we,

Like early kings with book and word cast down  
Realities from our squared electric shore

Here we see that extraordinary quality of "fusion" which characterises Webb at his best. The image builds itself up from the actual effect

of the lighted window, which seems to knock objects (or "realities") off its own edge and into darkness. It is also sympathetic towards Winson Green itself - that is, the state of mind. The mental process evoked by these lines is very similar to the poem's own: in a context of instability and shifting uncertainty, it takes an almost obsessive fix on the one action or object. At one level the image implies that reality is jettisoned as part of this process of mental dissolution, and so it seems to support the conventional judgments about the mentally ill. Yet there is an undertow of meaning which is definitely released, although it is extremely difficult to capture it. There is an end-of-line pause which balances the "we" exactly between a position of magical power and one of weakness. We have to respect the placement of "cast down" if we are to realise that Webb is using the gap to suggest not only that we "cast down/ Realities", but also that we are "Like early kings with book and word cast down". This admits that the patients live in a world of fantasy, yet regrets that we are no longer rulers of such language-power as to determine reality. Having lost our mythic vision, we are ourselves cast down, the old magical space of power and green spells now replaced by the square of electric light. There is also, I would suggest, a functional ambiguity attending the use of "we": does it represent the visitors, the patients, or some paradoxical combination of both? It is never quite clear. Moving thus between disapproving visitors with their judgments and suffering patients with their innocence, the poem plays the tensive gap between two faces of suffering: alienation and engagement. To identify who "we" are, we have to discern how much patients and visitors are sinners, how much victims before reality. It is almost as if Webb is inviting the reader to struggle with Winson Green's own paradoxical wisdom.

Certainly he is inviting the reader to keep his attention on the core:

Two orderlies are whistling-in the spring;  
Doors slam; and a man is dying at the core  
Of triumph won. As a tattered, powerful wing  
The screen bears out his face against the bed,  
Silver, derelict, rapt, and almost dead. (CP, 154)

This is superb writing. The casualness of spring contrasts powerfully with the laboriousness of dying. The end-of-line pause on "dying at the core" creates its own "core" in the text, and this passes into the notion of triumph, a triumph itself absorbed, in the same line, by the image of a wing which is at once "tattered" and "powerful". This tension between strength and weakness is then heightened by the final line, which yokes glory with dereliction and death. All the while, the core of the perspective, the space which might repel as easily as attract belief, is the dying. Webb's language never fades upwards towards the effect of transcendence. His religious imagination responds to the rapture of death while simultaneously and rigorously regarding its waste and ugliness.

When evening comes, it comes like a patient stumbling from or towards his own mind's familiar light: "Evening gropes out of colour". If "light is the centre of our darkness",<sup>1</sup> there is something marvellously open in this line: we are never sure if the groping leads towards or from a better state of understanding. While evening is shaking off colour, the patients are trying to rid themselves of memory's painful encrustations: "we work/ To cleanse our shore from limpet histories". In contrast to the noisy crowd rushing home from work (whom Webb ironically describes as turning beserk), this patient is not released from his task, which is to become the metaphor:

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1. "The Chalice", CP, p. 155.

Inviolata, faithful as a saint he lies.  
 Twilight itself breaks up, the venal ship,  
 Upon the silver integrity of his face.  
 No bread shall tempt that fine, tormented lip.  
 Let shadow switch to light - he holds his place.  
 Unmarked, unmoving, from the gaping bed  
 Towards birth he labours, honour, almost dead. (CP, 154)

Webb has again placed integration at the centre of brokenness. "Let shadow switch to light - he holds his place" reads as if Webb were staying with the man, and refusing the conventional Christian symbolism which would transform death into resurrection. Potentially Christian metaphors - voyage, sunrise, birth - are all contained within the fact of the dying man. Satan's temptation is resisted as much by the poem as by the patient: "No bread shall tempt that fine, tormented lip."<sup>1</sup> Instead, the poem commits itself to serving a beauty which generates contrary responses, "a beauty which we hate and love". Here especially we enter the "Suffering Servant" model, see the man's face as "derelict", but also "silver" and "rapt", and so explore the reciprocal and creative influence which beauty and disfigurement exert within this suffering. Having so located itself, Webb's voice is able to declare faith in the redemptive role of the other's suffering: "I cannot pray; that fine lip prays for me/ With every gasp at breath".

Webb opens the final stanza with a note reminiscent of Ecclesiastes, bringing that book's determined realism to bear on this one death:

The wiry cricket moiling at his loom  
 Debates a themeless project with dour night,  
 The sick man raves beside me in his room;  
 I sleep as a child, rouse up as a child might. (CP, 154)

Here the darkness is a very determined force. These lines work from a kind of parallelism and create the effect of one force "beside" another: the cricket beside the night, beside the sick man, beside

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1. Cf. Matthew, 4:1-4.

the speaker. These relationships surround a "core" in which we debate (also in a themeless way) whether cricket and night are partners or opponents, whether sick man and speaker are partners or opponents, whether, then, cricket and night relate to sick man and speaker as partners or opponents. This range of possibilities, all of which could be simultaneously realised, is consistent with "a beauty which we hate and love". Though the emphasis here is on the darker side of these possibilities: despite the troubled creativity of his "moiling", the "wiry cricket" is an unpleasant creature to have control of fate's loom. Not only is his voice unrelenting and shrill, but its "wiry" threads make so much harsher the action of the loom, which, instead of weaving wool, seems to be weaving barbed wire destinies. Though it has no discernible meaning, the project which the cricket debates with night obviously places designs on the dying man. It has control. By contrast, the dying man himself has neither discernible meaning, nor control, in his voice: he merely "raves". The rhyming of "night" with "might" is extremely ominous. However, something else is happening: the rhyming of "loom" with "room" not only sets the forces of fate against the broken fact of death, but also directs the larger, darker mystery towards that simple focus. At the same time, the metaphorical language of the first two lines is displaced by a factual tone and statement: "The sick man raves beside me in his room". This brings us back to simple attention to reality, except that it does not make reality simple. The tensions established in the first two lines, and extended into the tension between metaphorical and factual language, continue into the final line: "I sleep as a child, rouse up as a child might." There are almost two opposing selves in this "I": the one which sleeps through suffering and is as innocent as the child, and the one which wakes suddenly and fearfully at the sound of pain and is as vulnerable as a child.

Webb now makes a characteristic shift: the one in power (the one with narrative power) is rendered helpless and must rely on the paradoxical power of the dying man. This man, disfigured and disregarded, begins to increase (as the speaker decreases) and to assume, first of all, the condition of the speaker, and then of all humanity. He finds fellowship with all the broken and, at the core of the despicable, the "all":

I cannot pray; that fine lip prays for me  
 With every gasp at breath; his burden grows  
 Heavier as all earth lightens, and all sea.  
 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. (CP, 154)

Webb's hermeneutic is clear in the placement of "his burden grows": the pause provides for a sense of new life emerging, but does not ignore the fundamental experience of increasing pain. The new sunrise is firmly contained within and counterpointed by the dying process. Time is ambiguously presented: is it crouching in fear of resurrection's victory, or like an animal about to take and devour its prey? The transcendent and universalising effect of "He is all life" is firmly placed at the centre of "the gaping bed". The man's representative status is not his final one, at least not in the historical line of the poem. Instead Webb uses commas to confront us with the man as fragments of fact: "Blind, silent, in a trance, and shortly, dead". The man, with the breath, breaks apart. In this way Webb's religio-poetic imagination sets itself in tension with more established religious positions and propositions, and stands precisely in its weakness.

"Nessun Dorma" (CP, 246) has a slightly different strategy. It has not the same sense of a frame commanding the eye to focus on a suffering centre. Bjorling, whose death the poem remembers, is

already "past" the immediate experience of suffering which is Webb's preferred material. While most of Webb's other poems are deeply engaged within their object, "Nessun Dorma" is more a pilgrim poem, moving in search of its object. The movement is already present in the opening line: "Past six o'clock. I have prayed. No one is sleeping." The poem keeps to this, its movement widening and heightening as it moves further into its own basic images of light and music. This may give a strong sense of harmony, even of transcendence. The poem ends with an abstract transcendence which recalls the end of McAuley's "Terra Australis" and which is so different from the immediate and existential focus which Webb sustains at the close of "A Death At Winson Green":

O broad light and tender, lucent aria,  
 Lacerate my paling cheeklines with the steep  
 Bequest of light and tears, flood me until  
 The man is the dawning child; be anathema  
 To man-made darkness. No one, no one shall sleep  
 Till the cry of the infant emergent, lost and lame,  
 Is the cry of a death gone towering towards the Flame.

(CP, 247)

This expresses a theological hope that death may lead to new birth, that Bjorling, the dawning child, may be taken into a new day and consumed by the Living Flame of Love. Webb even prays that the new life of grace will cast out the old life of sin ("man-made darkness"). Even so, this final harmony is fretted with words which remember that suffering, surrender, even helplessness are the way to light's victory. There is enough evidence to show that Webb will not easily let go immediate experience, will keep to the "trawling" which is the poem's meaning and strategy.

When Webb expresses his desire to suffer vicariously for Bjorling, he expresses as well his sense of the Christ-like suffering servant. It is the "broad and tender light" which lacerates even as it redeems.

The "cry of the infant emergent" is "lost and lame", but it is that powerlessness which guarantees victory, as "lame" is rhymed with "Flame". In the final line, "a death" remains single, indefinite, yet "the Flame" has a size and solidity unusual for a Webb ending (though even this is qualified, since the Flame is more desired than achieved). The effect of "towering" is interesting: in one sense, it emphasises the expansion and incorporation into God which Webb sees as the meaning of death, yet it also highlights a typical Webbean structure: the tension between the size of the mystery, here "the Flame", and the small moment of humanity. (In "Beeston Regis" the great mystery is death and Webb achieves the same effect with "The firefly life in the huge palm of death" (CP, 145).) Taken together with the phrase "steep/ Bequest", "towering" also connotes a laborious ascent. Even though Webb, in this poem, is bringing us the wide sweep and high destiny of the world, he has not entirely abandoned the sense of broken effort which is present in the "labour" of death at Winson Green (CP, 154), just as, in "Beeston Regis", "An obsolete weather cock gesticulates towards life" (CP, 146), and, in The Canticle, "Mount Subasio clambers/ Dawnward, the town of Assisi fast to his back" (CP, 69). This same sense of struggle is present earlier in "Nessun Dorma" with the use of "Trawl".

Even as the poem opens, the poet is already trawling - dragging a net along the bottom of his own dark consciousness in search of lights and comforts. He has already gone beyond the familiar consolations of prayer and sleep. He has also "wandered past the old maternity home's/ Red stone fermented by centuries" - moved beyond the mothering and fructifying influence of time. It is when he is beyond all the usual consolations that light begins to come:

and there comes  
 New light, new light; and the cries of the rooks sweeping  
 To their great nests are guerilla light in a fusion  
 - Murmurs, echoes, plainsong; and the night  
 Will be all an abyss and depth of light between  
 Two shorelines in labour: birth and death. O passion  
 (One light in the hospital window) of quickening light,  
 O foetus quaking towards light, sound the gaunt green,  
 Trawl Norfolk, and make shiver the window-blind,  
 Harass nebulae for Bjorling. Find him, find.

(CP, 246)

Something of Webb's metaphysical sense is here revealed: the human figure trawling for catches of light between those two shorelines of darkness, birth and death, while the light itself is somewhat darkly described as "all an abyss and depth", an image which approximates to that of a fissure or wound. Between the darkness faith carries on its guerilla exercise, rescuing fragmentary impressions received, I would guess, on a walk through the hospital grounds. This seems to be the poem's logic: confused with grief, aware of the existential chasm, the speaker searches his environment for signs. Even though they are jumbled in with the abstract agony, the signs are: the rooks sweeping to their nests; one light in a hospital window; the shivering window-blind; and the Norfolk evening itself. The images suggest that the speaker has arrived within a room and is looking out at the sky. Watching the homing flight of the rooks, he sees, in the shape of their movement, life itself, moving between the shore of sky and the shore of earth. He wants the light of his own room (mind) to overcome the growing darkness and this directs him to more abstract images of light: the "quickenning light" and the "foetus quaking towards light", which later fuse in the image of the "dawning child". This, presumably, aims at figuring Bjorling's new birth into eternal light. It is noticeable, though, that Webb keeps this possibility contained within a sense of struggle with the use of "quaking", "passion", "gaunt" and "Harass". There is also complexity in the rhyming. If

"night" rhymes with "light", it might imply complicity rather than enmity, such that light remains "the centre of our darkness". Similarly, "blind" rhymes with "find". Not surprisingly then, "fusion", the word representing harmony, rhymes with "passion". While we are reminded to look up and search the skies for a new star, the departed soul of Bjorling, and so know that he has arrived safely, Webb is not so easily sure and introduces the quiet urgency of "Find him, find."

Here the search is made more uncertain by the absence of the second, expected "him". In the second and final stanza, however, the search becomes more certain: it proceeds more from the speaker's immediate environment and it incorporates a simpler, more personal, statement of suffering. As this stanza opens we are within the speaker's room, watching the light slide off the furniture and off the radio where Bjorling's voice is heard (possibly singing "Nessun Dorma", "None shall sleep"). The day has become strips or (whip) strokes of sunlight which cut into the flesh of evening. As Bjorling is given into the light and sound, the speaker remembers his voice:

And now the bar, the feeble light, glissade  
Of tables and glasses, and the mantel-set  
Intoning his death. Broad tender sunlights fret  
Our twilight, his remembered voice has laid  
Cock-crow and noon upon harrowed palms of the sill.

This focus saves the poem, which has been on the edge of obscurity. If the final movement towards "the Flame" is unusually transcendent for Webb, we have still to recall where it begins: here, where the watching window, searching mind, receives from the singer by opening out its wounded hands.

By contrast, "Scherzo and Adagio of Bruckner's Ninth" (CP, 203-204) is a poem which resists finality. The opening line, neatly balanced

between "a day" and "this one", keeps the comparison open-ended, so that time cannot quite be fixed even if it is certain: "For certain it is on a day very like this one". The closing line breaks and trails away, as if the poem goes out in sympathy with Bruckner's unfinished Ninth Symphony.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the last line of each stanza trails away, as if the vicarious relationship between speaker and Bruckner cannot quite be established. Each stanza shifts between the healing, reconstitutive energy of the open landscape, experienced by the speaker, and the destructive energy of Vienna, experienced (at least in the speaker's imagination) by Bruckner. This is not a simple contrast; the relationship is more empathetic. A contrast may appear to be established when the speaker escapes the closed and cloying care of the hospital, enters the healthy, kind world of the sun, and then remembers Bruckner's Vienna as if it were a patient trapped in a closed world where "All love is become this mothering smothering beast . . ." However, the process of empathy between the two worlds, though keen, is made very frail by the poem's dramatic situation: the open landscape is only introduced as a momentary respite from "the submarine and constricting circuit/ Of doctors and nurses - patiently woven algae". Moreover, the landscape begins to disclose a typically Webbean mode of power: the breeze is a "Pauper", the sun is "autumnal" and sifts the leftovers of time, and, in a delicate epiphany, the red flower shows the speaker grace and emptiness:

He watches this flower, pistil and stamen in a ruby,  
 Dilating of a sudden, flushing out all its pockets,  
 Panning talents of fire from the old marl and stone,  
 Squatting as a good tippler under the suzerain sun. (CP, 203)

As the poem moves, the speaker tries to make his escape vicarious, to let the harmonies of his present moment vindicate Bruckner and, as it

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1. In dealing with this poem, I have derived biographical information from Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians and The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

were, complete his work. His attempt is at once sympathetic and troubled. After the red flower, the breeze, even the lounging cows, have given their support, the speaker still comes to a standstill with the sun-symbol and seems to be absorbed by Bruckner's own preoccupation with failure:

The sun is at a standstill. And it is time to go back.  
 Is not this his house, is not this the shining room?  
 He weighs them: the room, and the ruined city of his failure.  
 Where is the light at its most exacting, most truthful?  
 (CP, 204)

That question might operate as a coda for the poem, which looks for truth in the transcendent symbol of the sun, in the tortured process of art, and in the "wasted and frail" old man. The old man is the one Webb cannot ignore. He next considers the unfinished symphony: "The huge Theme masses. You are wasted and frail . . ." On one level, this may simply suggest that the very human artist is but a frail vessel for the sacred fires of art. However, it also focuses the poem's tension: in the break between the "Theme" which is great and which gathers and unifies and the "You" which is small and which disperses and disintegrates. The poem strains <sup>after</sup> meaning, knowing it must leave the sun and return attention to "the room, the ruined city of his failure". Indeed, the poem does much the same as the sun:

the autumnal sun  
 Sifts archives with a warm paternal hand. (CP, 204)

This stresses the delicate, reconstitutive intention of the poem, sifting tokens of the past to see if something of Bruckner's will last. Despite our knowledge that Bruckner did achieve recognition (even in Vienna), while we are in the environment of the poem, the question seems to remain open.

Even the metaphor of a passing day, which could provide the sense of

an ending, is broken open by the way the rising wind offsets the setting sun and by the way the sun itself defers to the man. Nor is the rising wind necessarily an image of the Holy Spirit: it could equally represent a shifting, disintegrating force, as the man "shakes". As the day closes, the man (who seems by now a representative figure, especially uniting Webb and Bruckner) "taps homeward, with his acolyte shadow behind him". If this suggests shaking off his mortal coil and going to his holy home, it also encodes an important tension when, in "acolyte shadow", the sacred is joined to the transient. Something similar occurs with Webb's use of St Florian's. It could represent a completed circle for Bruckner. As a child, Bruckner was taken to this Augustinian monastery by his parents and, after his father's death (when Bruckner was thirteen), he enrolled as a chorister, and studied organ, piano, violin and music theory. St Florian's was in many ways the home of his musical and religious identity. Later he was schoolmaster and organist there. He was also, on his instructions, embalmed and buried in the crypt beneath the great organ. It is this note of decomposition, more than that of completion, which seems to strike Webb, who makes of St Florian's organ a symbol of the ironic and aching distance between the sacred music (he even includes reference to Bruckner's mastery of polyphony) and the dust (and even here he adds another irony: that the creator and player of sacred music remained very much a peasant, unable to assume the smooth social graces):

- Old man, bones are breaching the very integument;  
 St Florian's organ mumbles in its argument  
 With the polyphonic dust settling like sin  
 Upon stops and upon the pipe's smudged peasant-grin . . .  
(CP, 203)

It also needs to be noted that Webb's imagination favours the elements of failure in Bruckner's life (as Bruckner's imagination seems also to have done). Webb edits reference to Bruckner's triumphant tours, and

focuses on the antipathy directed at his symphonies by the Vienna Philharmonic and the critic, Hanslick. He forgets the twenty-five young musicians, including Mahler, who stayed on to applaud the badly received Third Symphony, and focuses instead on those other young musicians, treacherously kind, who advocated and even executed revisions in Bruckner's scores, making him more palatable, wanting the "savours of greatness", but not the "line and rigour" of suffered genius. Even Hans Richter, a conductor who supported Bruckner's work, seems to be absorbed by the imaginative atmosphere of failure and betrayal and to be cast in a predatory role as he "smiles in the ruined city,/ Like a fine cat on a gatepost. Pad and claw of pity."

"Scherzo and Adagio of Bruckner's Ninth", then, derives its imaginative force mainly from the empathetic relationship Webb establishes between the speaker and Bruckner. Many interactive associations are gathered into that relationship: the momentary respite from the hospital, the attempt to make meaning of Bruckner's failure (as of the speaker's hospitalisation), the uneven connection between life and art, and the fractures in the poem's text and address. Working within these associations is the theme of the artist as a glorious failure.

Perhaps the poem could be described as an expression of counterpointing love, holding harmony and distress, attempting to heal as much with sympathy as with power. Yet it does not have the ready assurance which occurs in "To A Doctor" (CP, 141), when Webb invests a gentle doctor with the healing power he wants in music. The doctor is an organist, whose counterpointing touch allows the dreary, importunate organ pipes their one and glorious sound, a sound which tells ultimately of redemption in Christ:

All is in order, the close uniform dreary  
 Tubular pipes stand glum with open mouths,  
 Who spoke and sang together in their glory.  
 Learned and gentle, you resume your station,  
 Musician, or angel of Annunciation:  
 Timbers, rooftops, with painful joy will move  
 When your hands revive the contrapuntal love. (CP, 142)

Here the strategy is closer to that of "Nessun Dorma". Such clean strategy and song is, however, rare in Webb. "The Tower" (CP, 204-205) counterpoints a figure of innocence with one of battered experience. The young child is vulnerable before the future, which will bring "vats of the cruel smelter" - an image which may suggest suffering's refining process, but which stresses more its unjust and involuntary character. The speaker is very much attuned to pain, and the way it reaches out to involve "Costessey in every weather". In the third stanza, his sense of suffering is mediated through somewhat abstract images which burn with a sense of oppression, distortion and madness. One moment is quite concrete: "the dead gutted bird/ Lolloping in the wind". This becomes an unbearable focus and, as the image of wound occupies the speaker's imagination, he voices a desolation which is personal, poetic, and complete:

the mad process gaining:  
 I could not stand and feel, nor write a word. (CP, 205)

The speaker's suffering is all the more acute because his eye - of sad, mad experience - is estranged from that of the other, the eye of innocence:

And why do I look from you at this dead thing?  
 It cannot hold your innocence, nor your eye. (CP, 205)

This is potentially the worst suffering, since it images and dramatises isolation rather than fellowship and consolation. Without these, brokenness cannot exert its paradoxical, redemptive power. Yet Webb again redeems his art through the wound: from within the image of the dead bird comes another sign which is also seen to "stretch and

flap a wing":

Out of the quicksands and the anarchy  
 I see a strangeness stretch and flap a wing:  
 This tower of red stone, eroded whistling ghost  
 Where bush and grasses cross themselves and cower .  
 And juvenile pigeons play at being lost  
 And the airman's initials rest one single hour. (CP, 205)

With this irruption of bloodied, broken stones, the speaker reveals that his nostalgia for innocence is a form of fear and reaffirms his faith in the Christian and vicarious nature of suffering. The symbol of the tower encloses a reference to Christ in Gethsemane<sup>1</sup>, as the speaker takes the cup of suffering:

What frightens you must be a ruin, and waste.  
 But on this Easter Monday I will drink  
 Your Costessey to the dregs, and likely think  
 To find in these red stones the selfsame taste. (CP, 205)

While the tower has a redeeming function and brings a truce "to the ceaseless causeless war", Webb does not allow it to become distant from its constitutive pain. When the speaker describes how moments of peace rise up in his soul, the language recalls the irruption of the tower, and of the dead bird:

For out of my soul one hundred times before  
 Has leapt a ghostly thing, bare in its power,  
 As faith, and to the ceaseless causeless war  
 Brought truce, bearing itself like this old tower.  
 (CP, 205)

Here we clearly see how Webb's language makes the poetry's vision and strategy one. Just as peace has a posture which, "bearing itself like this old tower", combines suffering and dignity, so too tower and faith have their similarity centred in the phrase, "bare in its power".

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1. Cf. Luke, 22:39-44.

## SECTION FIVE

IMAGINATION AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

If we locate the religious character of Webb's poetry in its imaginative structuring, this helps articulate a more reciprocal relationship between the "dogmatic" and "existential" dimensions of his work. At this point, my argument has two directions which are closely interconnected, but which, for convenience, I want to treat separately. I want, first of all, to illustrate how poems which make no obvious or explicit claim to religious meaning, which might correspond to what we often imagine as "experience" or "ordinary life", and which are certainly pre-theological in their reference, nevertheless do show the shaping influence of the model which will so determine the later, religious frame of reference. Then I want to illustrate how, even with poems which do give explicit expression to a religious tradition (the Catholic tradition), there is at work an individual imagination which selects and shapes stories and dogmas so that they are appropriated by way of the model.

Whatever the obvious differences at the level of confessional content, the interpretative grid through which Webb filters his perception of "God" has the same basic structure as that through which he filters his perception of "experience". It is important to appreciate this, otherwise we could easily misrepresent Webb's tension between wholeness and brokenness, projecting it on to his life as a tension between "God" and "experience". That is not the case for Webb: the tension constitutes both "God" and "experience". What we have is a continuum within his imagination, not a disjunction between his faith and his life.

To illustrate this side of the argument, I want simply to survey some of the poems which precede The Canticle - poems which keep fidelity with a very early confession of Webb's:

But I have chosen the little, obscure way  
In the dim, shouting vortex; I have taken  
A fool's power in his cap and bells.<sup>1</sup>

"The Gunner" (CP, 57) attracts Webb's sympathy because he is so vulnerable. The poem's dramatic centre is characteristic: a man unable to erect articulate walls against some fearsome knowledge, which may yet break him into a deeper level of truth. Nor can he hold the boundaries between the world of facts and the world of dream: he lives somewhere between the remembered world of air warfare and the subconscious patterns of dreaming:

While slipstream plucked at a wafer of glass and steel,  
Engines sliced and scooped at the air's thin wall,  
And those dim spars dislodged from the moon became  
Red thongs of tracer whipping boards aflame.

While in the dream the plane is pushing at "the air's thin wall", in the poem the dream is pushing at reality's thin wall, threatening to dislodge the familiar sense of identity and place - just as the still hut in which the gunner sleeps and dreams is "Uneasily strapped to the reckless wheel of his will". As the poem progresses, he becomes more and more a victim, whose position of helplessness leaves him open to the powerful intervention of images he has himself dreamed. It becomes difficult to say which is the primary reality - objective and subjective states are intermingled, just as the mechanics of flying become those of dreaming. This confronts the usual power base of knowledge, because the poem finally suggests that the language of dream may reach more deeply into the real than the language of articulate discourse. Moreover, the world which speaks through this dream is described as "deaf and blind" - once more a mendicant is

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1. "Cap and Bells", CP, p. 4.

pressing at the walls of rational control; once more an unexpected revelation is anticipated - this time from forgotten, instinctual forces:

The world spoke through its dream, being deaf and blind,  
Its words were those of the dream, yet you might find  
Forgotten genius, control, alive in this deep  
Instinctive resistance to the perils of sleep.

While sleep is a conventional, even tired metaphor for death, Webb gives it back some danger by suggesting that death has a better memory than life, and a greater truth. It is a truth, though, which, like the gunner's real/dreamed voice, appears in patches, "driving electric fires/ Through the panel of sleep, the black plugs, trailing wires".

With "Dawn Wind on the Islands" (CP, 57) Webb clearly indicates that he will not use faith to tidy up the pieces of life, the bombers shot down during the war:

Here, where they died, oblivion will burn  
The moth-winged bomber's glass and gristle; weirs  
Of time will burst, burying them; the sun  
Casually mock a cross of stars.

Yet the poem enacts the drama of faith as it often expresses itself in Webb's poetry: the fact of death so that "the dead will be the dead,/ Twirled in a yellow eddy, frail and dull"; the merging of positive and negative forces - "only life and death" - so that one does not have power without the other; and out of this the question as to whether the dawn wind signals some release.

Webb refuses the opportunity to make dawn an image of transition, and sees it instead within a pattern of decay, where firm and well-defined spaces break:

The needle of dawn has drugged them, life and death,  
Stiff and archaic, mouldering into one,  
Voiceless, having no mission and no path,  
Lolling under a heavy head-dress. When  
The puppet sun jerks up, there will be no

Convergences: the dead will be the dead,  
Twirled in a yellow eddy, frail and dull.

The first stanza then concludes with an image which more explicitly anticipates Webb's whole strategy of drawing beauty out of ugliness (though it also increases beauty's ambiguity with "glittering"):

These hands of mine that might be stone and snow,  
Half bone, half silent fallen dust, will shed  
Decay, and flower with the first glittering gull.

The final stanza works between the world of familiar fact and the world of "other meaning". There is an insistence on focusing the factual and immediate - underlined by the repetition and isolation of "this". Yet the enjambement threatens to suspend that insistence, and suggests some other interpretation trying to rise through the world of fact. Webb never asserts what this might be - except negatively, when he says he cannot know if it is life. His assertion may not be confident, but his imagination is sure: the image he gives is of something predatory, but weak, something "shaking the bay" yet "labouring to rise":

The sun will rise, and with its landward swing  
The dead will be the dead, surrendered up  
To a dark annexation. Life will hang  
Red lights of warning on the crumbling ship.  
There will be only life and death. The slow  
Roll of the east, the passport of the day  
Blazing release, while still this moment lies  
Over the island, this. I cannot know  
If it is life that wakes, shaking the bay,  
Hungry, and circling, and labouring to rise.

The arrangement of the lines creates a marvellous effect - in fact, it enacts the phrase, "labouring to rise". The stanza begins with confidence - "The sun will rise" - swings quickly to a tersely stated, evidently factual, insistent statement - "The dead will be the dead" - then suspends both with the placement of "surrendered up". This suspense is continued with "Life will hang", "while this moment lies", and "I cannot know". However, each time the suspended line moves on, it shows less of the factual tone and takes on more and more the

"slow/ Roll of the east". The stasis of death gives way to an atmosphere which, if ambivalent, is dynamic. This is clear once we see how terms such as "crumbling", "Blazing", "shaking", "circling", "labouring", which are alive with movement, gather force even as the speaker says he cannot know their meaning.

As in "Dawn Wind on the Islands", there is also in "For My Grandfather" (CP, 48) a determination to stay with the facts, to contemplate, not an eschatological possibility, but "The bones ambiguous with life and death". R.F. Brissenden has noted that there is a sense that "everything in the situation is working towards some final resolution, some climactic event" and sees this occurring when the shells "lift/ Fragile and holy faces to the sky".<sup>1</sup> What strikes me about this moment is the relationship which so often attends climactic moments in Webb's poetry, where the climax is itself a fragile vision rescued from the more complicated texture of the poem, a small moment coming out from large dissolution. And the image which invites the moment of epiphany:

And to those years dusk comes but as a rift  
In the flesh of sunlight, closed by memory.

This image of the wound then associates deeply with the way Webb words the shipwreck. The wind is somewhat ragged: "the gust/ Piecemeal upon a widening quietness fails". The dead grandfather is enclosed in his beloved sea by images which stress their common decay: "against the bony mast/ Work in like skin the frayed and slackened sails". Their common decay encourages Webb to establish their fellowship, just as the speaker is finally one with the grandfather in weakness:

My years and yours are scrawled upon this air  
Rapped by the gavel of my living breath:

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1. R. F. Brissenden, "Frank Webb's Country: The Landscape of a Mind", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 47.

Rather than time upon my wrist I wear  
The dial, the four quarters, of your death.

Webb's treatment of some large, even legendary characters from Australian history takes a characteristic direction. The power of such characters as Morgan, Lawson, Boyd and Leichhardt is very much located in states of weakness. If they acquire a kind of heroic stature, it is not even because they endure through failure. Rather it is, in Webb's more closely paradoxical view, that in failure they embody a surprising truth. Some critics have briefly touched on this. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, for instance, finds in Webb's version of Leichhardt "paradoxes about the relation between his ridiculous aspect and his courageous aspect".<sup>1</sup> He also makes this point when distinguishing between Webb's Leichhardt and other versions of the heroic:

But against Slessor's Cook and FitzSerald's Tasman, Webb has fixed on a most ambiguous, even a grotesque figure. He is by no means seeking a conventional hero, let alone a successful one. As the title suggests, he is seizing on a figure who thrust himself into the limelight and taking a good look at this figure. We are shown Leichhardt in all his incompetence and indecision, and there is an attempt to show dramatically how these weaknesses are interwoven with the explorer's idealism.<sup>2</sup>

Vivian Smith points out that Webb's heroes are doomed figures, for whom truth does not gather to power, but rather dissipates and fragments.<sup>3</sup> At one point Michael Griffith seems to argue that Webb sees the heroic in a movement towards personal actualisation, a movement which has its model in Christ as the perfect human figure.<sup>4</sup> However, at another point he is concerned to argue that Webb is not in search of gods or heroes, and seems to imply that it is not

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1. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, "Some Aspects of Early Webb", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 54.
  2. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, "Order and Turbulence", Melbourne or the Bush, p 117.
  3. Vivian Smith, "Poetry", The Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, p 412.
  4. Michael Griffith, "Francis Webb - The Poet as Hero", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 62-72.

integration so much as disintegration which matters, since Webb wants to divest figures like Leichhardt of their mythology and to find the stained and vulnerable mortal.<sup>1</sup>

I would go further. It is precisely this structuring which actively anticipates Webb's more explicitly religious poetry: the attraction to characters found in weakness; then the attempt to show how that weakness is closely linked to an unconventional, but immediate, dignity. Further, the attempt can never become complacent, for it must suffer the way perception and language "follow charts of guesswork".<sup>2</sup> It is helpful, then, to take a closer look at the imaginative variations Webb works with the figures of Lawson, Morgan, Boyd and Leichhardt.

When "Henry Lawson" (CP, 59) was published (1950)<sup>3</sup>, it was still very common to view Lawson as the Poet of the Bush and the Apostle of Mateship. Webb is not attracted to this aspect of the "Lawson legend". His imagination sympathises with the later Lawson, whose writing powers had failed him and who read his verse for drinks of beer - "The pub's fool". Nor does he create a tragic contrast between the earlier and later Lawson. Rather, he stays with the image of a man who is mocked until, through the agency of one of Lawson's own creations, "Macquarie's Mate", he unites the image of indignity with one of fellowship.

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1. Michael Griffith, "Francis Webb's challenge to mid-century Mythmaking: The case of Ludwig Leichhardt", Australian Literary Studies, 10, 1982, 448-458.
  2. "Author's Prologue", A Drum For Ben Boyd, CP, 21.
  3. Bulletin, 13 December 1950, p. 18, Cf. "Francis Webb (1925-1973): Bibliography", Compiled by the Fryer Memorial Library of Australian Literature, University of Queensland, Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 88.

The poem opens with the fact of death: "Death had you: quiet, shrill, it was all the same." The matter-of-fact tone emphasises isolation and callousness as death comes for one neglected and forgotten. By way of contrast, the rest of the first stanza takes up the lives of "others", its tone, rhythm and diction underlining their (perhaps uncaring) serenity:

But for others a Sunday came  
With its leisurely blue and white,  
Twelve-footers rakish in a freshening wind,  
An old man's moody pipefuls, and a boy's mind.

Webb then brings Lawson back from the dead and again places him before this audience of "others". Although overly opaque, the poem can be seen as an incipient drama. At centre-stage, Lawson, himself absolutely absent, is played by the image of his final days. The poem questions whether this is "the truth". Once again, the drama has an absence as its centre, and is concerned with the relation between factual and imaginative modes of knowledge, as with the relation between "truth" and those partial perspectives on truth which, if taken too absolutely, can imprison the very truth they indicate. Nor is there any inclination to let the drama romanticise Lawson: the setting is determined by the image of alcohol, and highlights "sodden conjecture spread/ Over back fences" and "sour vapour on shambling footpaths and bays".

The image is still in control as the texture of Lawson's last years is brilliantly conveyed:

Dawn's broom in the gutter; like a label the sneer  
With every doled-out beer  
And landlord's mercy; the alloy  
Rusting each sense when from a ferry's box  
Of roped-in glitter swam night, and those faces empty and lax.

It is an image, though, which supports an uncompromisingly factual perspective and denies Lawson any consolation. Images of night, rust

and dissipation determine that he will have no fellowship with sunshine, silver and singleness. Nor will he himself redeem his state through "water and words".

At the last moment, though, Webb allows the imagination a new and redemptive direction. From the pubs where Lawson spent his last days, Webb makes a transition to Stiffner's Shanty, in Lawson's story, "Macquarie's Mate". There Awful Example is defending the honour of his mate, Macquarie, who is presumed dead. He volunteers to fight Macquarie's detractors, and is rescued from his own valour by the arrival of his mate (not dead after all). Lawson ends his story with the "resurrected" Macquarie defeating his detractors and sending the loudest mouth off thus:

Barcoo thought he heard his horse again, and went out in a hurry. Perhaps he thought that the horse would get impatient and break loose if he left it any longer, for he jumped into the saddle and rode off.<sup>1</sup>

Webb, however, ends his borrowing earlier than this: with the advance of the stranger who will be revealed as the one thought to be dead. This ending could be interpreted as a variation on the theme of immortal art. However, it seems to me that the parallel with the Emmaus story is inescapable, especially since "Someone" will appear again in Eyre All Alone. Webb's strategy, then, does more than affirm that Lawson's imagination has power over the fact of death. It believes that here where the actual man is mocked and most in need of fellowship, imagination has power to summon a Lawson about to be identified with Christ.

Back to the grave with this, then - but remember, wait:  
The pub's fool, Macquarie's Mate,  
Can hear them mocking his buried thought and stress,

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1. A Camp-Fire Yarn, ed., L Cronin, (Lansdowne, Sydney, 1984)  
p. 352.

Rises, becomes his dead friend - having nothing more -  
 And will fight to a standstill. Someone watches at the door.

Typically, Webb holds Lawson and his story at the threshold - a stance which itself actively anticipates the later one, where "fact" and "faith" are closely held in tension.

With "Morgan's Country" (CP, 46) Webb displaces the facts into an identification of Morgan and his landscape. Even the central dramatic fact - Morgan's death - is absent, and so shapes a hole in the poem, but a hole which strengthens the metaphoric process. The terrible facts of Morgan's life are also displaced. When Webb wants to communicate his basic sense of Morgan - a man knowing he will be killed, having no other response but to kill - he employs language which is almost apocalyptic to summon a demonic figure, then transfers attention to a very simple description of a blowfly:

Ashes drift on the dead-sea shadow of his plate.  
 Why should he heed them? What to do but kill  
 When his angel howls, when the sounds reverberate

In the last grey pipe of his brain? At the window sill  
 A blowfly strums on two strings of air:  
 Ambush and slaughter tingle against the lull.

This is very effective, and it illustrates two important aspects of Webb's imagination: how it derives power from relating the large to the small; how it informs a moral sensibility which sympathises with the victim (at the risk, here, of ignoring the issue of culpability).

As the facts of Morgan's life are also displaced on to the landscape, Morgan becomes more and more a victim. The poem derives its energy from the way various perspectives - police, wolf, Morgan - are fused into the one force of landscape, "Stunted and grey, hunted and murderous". It is a landscape in which characters are more fated than free, irresistibly drawn to the unnamed centre of violence. At the

same time, as if to counteract that movement into oppressive power, there is another movement in which the landscape is mediated through images which stress debilitation and which call for sympathy. This is particularly so at the point where Webb most fuses Morgan with his landscape and where he implies his death:

But the Cave, his mother, is close beside his chair,  
Here sunless face scribbled with cobwebs, bones  
Rattling in her throat when she speaks. And there

The stone Look-out, his towering father, leans  
Like a splinter from the seamed palm of the plain.  
Their counsel of thunder arms him. A threat of rain.

Seven: and a blaze fiercer than the sun.  
The wind struggles in the arms of the starved tree,  
The temple breaks on a threadbare mat of glass.

Eight: even under the sun's trajectory  
This country looks grey, hunted and murderous.

It is a landscape signifying death, sympathising with Morgan, though the final line places its woundedness in tension with its irresistible and ambiguous force.

This is not a religious poem, except in the limited sense that it expresses a spiritual sense of landscape and, through that, implies the metaphysical question of necessity and freedom. All the same, I would suggest a reading which says that the poem does contain indications of a religious imagination which, as it were, "leans/ Like a splinter from the seamed palm of the plain". In that image, as in the one of the wind struggling "in the arms of the starved tree", we can see Webb trying to open up a dialogue between his Australian story and his Christian one. This might begin to clarify, "The temple breaks on a threadbare mat of glass." Is it a conflation of two images: the window breaking as shots are fired, the veil of the Temple being torn as Christ dies? If so, it is still contained within one of Webb's favourite structures: the powerful force is broken by the

fragile one. The dialogue does not really begin and the final couplet shows the landscape resist the sun's influence and retain a religious sense which is savagely, not redemptively, sacrificial.

The manner in which imaginative structures anticipate religious ones can be seen even more clearly in the two major poems, A Drum For Ben Boyd and Leichhardt in Theatre. Each poem responds to a disappearance: the disappearance makes a gaping hole in the known world, a hole which at once defeats and glorifies truth and language, just as it combines finite perspectives with infinite sense.

While the poems do not identify their own empty centres as the saving wound of Christ, they do argue that disintegration is the way to deeper truth. Each of the "heroes" is glorified not when he actively achieves his ambition, but when, humbled, he realises with Voss that this is the reason and the way: "So saints acquire sanctity who are only bones."<sup>1</sup> Leichhardt guesses at this when, describing Australia as "a land where man becomes a myth", he describes the journey into myth as a painful incorporation into a larger reality where beauty and terror are crossed:

This is a land where man becomes a myth;  
Naked, his feet tread embers for the truth:  
Desert will claim him, mountain, precipice,  
(Larger than life's their terror, lovelier  
Than forms of mere life their forms of peril); (CP, 36-37)

With Leichhardt in Theatre this vision is sustained by the way Webb uses the historical, narrative substratum to stress desolation, and confirms this through symbolism. "The First Expedition", which was actually successful, is used to dramatise the death of Gilbert and the illusory nature of Leichhardt's achievement. Webb's description of

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1. Patrick White, Voss, p 414. I would interpret "So" as having a modal as well as a causal sense.

the night Gilbert was killed as "Endless assaults of blackness/  
Repulsed by sallies of firelight" is preceded by a prophetic image of  
wound and sacrifice:

But rain held off. The tightened atmospheres  
Hacked to the verge of sunset a deep ravine,  
And three galahs in unfaltering arrowhead  
Dipped in towards its lips, hurtled far down,  
Dots on the flowing, sacrificial red. (CP, 39)

When Leichhardt, after enjoying the "witching falseness" of the sea,  
returns to fame, it is a place where "narcotic murmurs connote  
bronze", where "a seeming trivial thing" which held the "clue" was  
missed amid the self-importance. Webb, with more than a touch of  
irony, directs his central metaphor of performance at the hollowness  
of Leichhardt's role and begs his audience to pity and applaud:

But this leading-man  
We shall not see again. For God's sake grant him  
Applause, and a long sleep  
With myths for lackeys. In a sense he died,  
Making no other journey. (CP, 41)

If Leichhardt has made the myth become a man (himself), then "The  
Second Expedition" unveils his pretensions. The "Doctor" is  
ludicrous: being kicked by mules and making speeches as if his words  
might have cosmetic power over his decaying ambitions. This moment  
plays out in the narrative what is already contained within the  
performances of the servant girl and the victim-clown. The girl,  
seeing Leichhardt only as "The funny old leader of the pantomime",  
offends her respectable audience: as much by the fact that she draws  
attention to the pantomime quality of what they want to think the  
"real story", as by her own comic, irreverent version of the great  
man:

He mounts like Quixote on a spavined old nag  
That could kick the slogan from a sugar bag.  
He mayn't know north from south, but he's clever  
At playing with windmills in the Never-Never.  
Off! With a cooe and a ribald song,  
Near stirrup short, off stirrup long. (CP, 37)

When the "clown besmeared with flour and ketchup" comes "Lolloping forth from the wings" and berates the disapproving audience, he does not merely confirm the girl's comic role. He performs his own - but it is a darker one, in which he tells his audience they cannot conquer laughter since it is part of the senseless character of life, then dares them to destroy it by imitating it:

There's no violence  
 Can silence laughter. Well, then, laugh with the thing!  
 Turn on it in ugly mimic carnival,  
 Guffaw and shout and stamp until your voice  
 Cuts off its air, splinters its blinking eyes,  
 Till its head rolls off to a corner, and its powers  
 Settle like chains tossed down -  
 But no, friends. This is Leichhardt, known as the Doctor.  
(CP, 38)

Once the clown has announced the "ugly mimic carnival", it may not itself be easily repressed. Under guise of acknowledging how the audience feels alienated from such a comic treatment of their hero, the clown has, with the last line, mischievously linked their respectable and formal attitudes with the respectable and formal version of "the Doctor", and so the journey of Leichhardt becomes a pantomime which either reflects or rejects their perceptions of him. "The Second Expedition" presents them with their hero, previously cast in bronze, caught thieving sugar and making among his half-starved men yet another speech in which he "extols the dignified doom of sugar/ Replacing energies that leadership/ Must dissipate". (CP, 42) This is a parodic image of sacrifice which serves to confront the egocentric attitudes of Leichhardt (and of those who made him into a statue).

In "The Room" Leichhardt has to surrender his self-serving symbols for "a gaunt symbol, to be shuddered from". He seems to understand that the "source" for which he is searching is somehow one with death. In that he seems not only to have found the source of the clown's dark laughter, but also to have returned to the poem's opening. There, as

orchestra and audience prepare themselves for the performance, as stage and landscape imagery blur into one, a wandering spotlight catches the figure of Sturt who "stands blazing in his own white world". Sturt's is preeminently an inner world: "Light has rapped at his skull, flooded into his heart . . ." As people question him about the "inland sea", Sturt replies (inasmuch as his silence is mediated by the speaker) in a way which reads the inland sea as a metaphorical state reached by way of the desert's stinging light:

The inland sea. Yes! There were sea-length waves and surge,  
 Sand's arched and massive velocities topped with a foam of  
 glitter;  
 And where sun grazed salt-glazed rock and the light's discharge  
 Circled its fabulous rings of tremor, there was water.  
 Here is the centre of their island. Shall he tell them of Poole,  
 of death? (CP, 35)

Webb is also establishing an ironic relationship between Sturt and Leichhardt: Sturt failed to cross the continent from South to North (1844-46), while Leichhardt, at the same time (1844-45), succeeded. It is the failure who dominates the poem's opening, and as it continues Leichhardt is more and more configured to him. As he paces "The Room", Leichhardt is taken into a more domestic version of Sturt's imagery of light (and the more domestic is also the more agonising):

The neat montage  
 Of flawless lamplight gathers in his movements;  
 Exact, predictable as waves, his thoughts  
 Shatter themselves between the bedsteads's knuckles.  
 Therefore we bring the doctor to this room. (CP, 43)

As rumours circulate about his leadership, Leichhardt loses his glorified self-image. He

Peers long into the glass and sees himself  
 As for the first time, stained and vulnerable,  
 Branded with whispers. Steeply he rebels,  
 Curses Mann, Perry, and the merciless rain:  
 Till something laughs behind him, and he breaks. (CP, 43)

Here the victim-clown has laughed. Webb has also, with the pause at

the end of the first line and in the middle of the second, sounded the tension between self-knowledge and suffering. Thinking of the dead Gilbert, Leichhardt, again echoing Sturt, wonders if he has found "the source", then finds a question staring from the dust, a question whose answer "traces/ Legends of fright upon his brain". He must confront his own fear (of death, and of humiliation) as "the heart/ Crumbles beneath its golden arrogance". Here the land he had tried to conquer as fact begins as metaphor to rule and scourge his inner world:

Desert with bleached eyes, mountain with the hawk's  
 mouth,  
 Sea with her witching falseness; cordon him.  
 He is taken, stripped, and bound. (CP, 44)

So broken and bound, Leichhardt yet comes out from behind the room's walls and enters "The Third Expedition".

In this final section, Webb uses the failure of Leichhardt and the absence of historical knowledge as a way of celebrating the world renewed by metaphoric and symbolic attentiveness:

Let what is waste lie waste; yield to the pressure  
 And silence of their fate. World, words, are closer.

It is where sun and world blossom into words  
 As a tree's lovely frenzies of bloom divide  
 Winter from winter, month from month of birds:  
 In such clean space the man and his shadow ride.  
 See them upon the hills, life-sized and breathing,  
 Where they will go, how perish - this is nothing.  
 (CP, 44-45)

In these lines we hear "the long wings of chimes", the whispers of transcendence - but not in the very last lines of the poem itself. As the metaphor of the inland sea returns to claim the poem, as it takes us "Beyond the gates" and into "the surly straits" (presumably beyond death and into the source), the poem throws back, at the last, a very troubling image of wreckage:

All that is life comes here. Beyond the gates  
 Only storm, drowned things, rock in the surly straits.  
 (CP, 45)

A Drum For Ben Boyd ends with a more reconciliatory tone, with "a moment's peace over the whole island". Yet it is much less concerned with suggesting that this particular man of power may have found, in suffering, another and more paradoxical heroic mode. Webb is not interested in the "facts" about Boyd's character, just as he is not really interested in his achievements. He is interested in the process of reporting - and, specifically, the mirror-action which ensures that the more the poem's characters try to fill up the hole left by Boyd, the more powerful it becomes, reflecting the gap within themselves, as well as the gap between their own finite perspectives and the infinite sense in which they participate.

In many ways the poem dramatises the beginnings of a shift from subjective and self-confident interpretations to ones which are intersubjective and humble. Each of the characters, having used imagination at the service of his own ego, finds that the absence of Boyd will not conform to the illusions of his subjectivity, but becomes an image of his own fear. Each begins to wonder, along with the "roving reporter":

what is imagination  
But oneself flying back at unsuspected angles? (CP, 19)

While the reporter may himself see this as a strategic apology for his own failure to find "first-hand information", it also signifies the hermeneutical problem which provides the poem's centre. This problem is examined as the characters give their versions of Boyd, then find themselves exposed, not by the history of Boyd's achievements, but by the symbol of his absence. Jan Strindberg, having forsaken Norway and the epic, is shaken by the way Boyd's "Wanderer" glides into his peaceful world and carries with it, into his "backwater of life", the breaking and brave figures of his past. Boyd's presence made him

explore the centre of his own truth:

I have chosen bread for dreams, the hearth-place for action,  
 Safety for courage, shutters and a candle for stars,  
 Handed over my youth for an old man's ironic caution.  
 (CP, 22)

With Boyd gone, he returns, troubled, to the safe life "polishing rowlocks". Although the journalist who reported Boyd's arrival does not so directly acknowledge his "gap" - he is of the pettily jealous kind who blame successful people for their own failures - he does at least envisage its result: himself "rotting slowly between editions". (CP, 23) Sir Oswald Brierly is afraid to "venture out beyond the shoreline" of knowledge and art, and Boyd's daring reminds him of this. (CP, 23-25) The whaler, homesick for the sea, seems to hate Boyd as much because he owns the land as for his arrogance, and he too ends his story by facing his own inadequacy: "Then there's one thing left: to get drunk and frighten a policeman." (CP, 25) For the Papuan shepherd Boyd represents an alienation which, though not based in self-deception, is all the more painful: the debilitating gap between himself and his traditional life:

Out in these bare places a poison wrings  
 Power from my arms; each new night spits ice,  
 And I am forgetting the songs and careless fishing  
 The old fighting and the old peace. (CP, 26)

The pragmatic politician likes "the suggestions of power and tradition" which attend Boyd, though he is slightly worried that Boyd may break the rules of bureaucracy, move too quickly and impede the "necessary documentations". Yet, should there be any hint that Boyd's official acceptability is at variance with his personal morality, the politician can always "retreat a little/ Behind formality". (CP, 27) The pioneer, wanting to be remembered on earth, is offended because he sees Boyd taking fame that he should have. (CP, 27-28) Claiming to have found Boyd's skull and hoping thus to end the "score of yarns", the Captain of the "Oberon" finds instead that the skull has power to

shatter the world of facts:

Holding it is like splintering a mirror  
And finding a thousand faces round your boots. (CP, 30)

If the roving reporter is to be believed, John Webster is an old captain "Cast up and abandoned on a high stool in the city". By his own admission, his "eyesight trembles badly" - yet, with such an unsteady perspective, he gets to the core of Boyd's disappearance: "His blurred shape grappled with the outskirts of the unknown." (CP, 31) He, of all the witnesses, seems sure that Boyd, who did not like to be tied down, would have liked his final appearance "as a shadow at the distant end/ Of a tunnel of sunlight". (CP, 31) If there is about Webster's version the mood of one who, like Boyd, does not like being tied down to the city, does not see or remember things as clearly as he did, this may not mean that he is as self-deceiving as the others, but that there is an instinctive fellowship of suffering and perception operating in his account:

Here, when my thoughts seek his last desperate day,  
All's torn and arrested, starting from a blank matrix:  
A dark upflung arm hangs suspended, glistening,  
A thrown spear, whistling in its arc like a comet,  
Bristles with knots of flame and points and violence;  
An eyeball glares like a sovereign by candlelight;  
Or a fired canoe eddies, and its prow snaps upward  
Like the jaws of a transfixed shark. (CP, 31)

In one sense these are possibilities, not facts. Webster cannot remember the facts - but he can see the pattern of transfixion, and this transforms the (absent) facts into the symbol. He sees Boyd, as Leichhardt, "Cross to the field pitched beyond world and words."

When, in "Author's Prologue", which is itself set beside the roving reporter's lament for lost facts, Webb says of his characters that they "mangled a shadow", he is identifying with them, but seeing the shadow more positively:

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1. "The Third Expedition", Leichhardt in Theatre, CP, p. 44.

I follow charts of guesswork, shape a cloud  
Formless, unplotted, rotten with endless change  
And the sky's blue mockery plummeting through its heart.

Yet truth itself is a mass of stops and gaps. (CP, 21)

The intersubjective truth of Boyd is gathered through symbols featuring fragmentation. The "Author's Prologue" is dominated by images of debilitation and woundedness. Beauty is a tortured shape. Dreams may easily be driven onto Time and have their backs broken. The dawn light is crazy and wandering. The wind's pulse is uncertain. "Stray drama comes lurching home like a late drunkard." This is the symbolic perspective through which Webb presents Boyd:

Through the cock-crow scuffle and tremor Ben Boyd  
comes striding;  
This is his world now - one thought's a drum for  
Ben Boyd.  
This is his life: the churned-up light and the dust,  
A tattered scrap of life in the cubicles  
Of memory with moths of forgetfulness,  
Now and then out for an airing in the tangent flash  
Of an old man's yarn, some yellow newsprint unearthed,  
Or the dregs of a reminiscence at Twofold Bay.

You and I, surgeons with scathing knives of perspective,  
May watch the Present, the second dissolution  
Piercing his fibres, draining his face of feature,  
And his groping, luminous eye fading, drying out.  
(CP, 20)

So that, even before God came stumbling into Webb's poetry, the model which was to receive and shape his presence, was already outlined and waiting. In Webb's case the model encourages an appreciation of weakness and suffering which powerfully reverberates with a crucified God, so that there is a profound sympathy and continuity between pre-religious and religious poetry. It is, however, a sympathy which prevents complacency: even as this God comes in, the God who provides comfortable coherence is detained at the door. He cannot survive the tension between "faith" and "fact" which is to come. Nor can he be seen by the "groping, luminous eye" which Webb appreciates in Boyd. In short, the only God who can enter is the one who is stumbling.

## SECTION SIX

IMAGINATION AND RELIGIOUS TRADITION

Webb's imagination is shaped by and shapes his Catholicism. His imagination holds a conversation between the symbols and stories of his religious tradition and those of his more individual and immediate experience (a conversation in which each of the partners is equal, and by which each is enlarged). At the heart of this conversation, centring its reverberations, is a moment when "life" and "Christ" are together imaged as a word of suffering:

Let a ship be taken by the ice, squeezed in the scrawny  
Fingers of the frozen element, clasped, and racked, and  
splintered,  
Driven like a living nail into the heaving bloodless  
Face of the cold and clenched there: yet will come back  
A Word or a Name. <sup>1</sup>.

From the Christian story, Webb's imagination receives the figure of a crucified Christ, but it takes that figure (more sympathetically than it takes the figure of a triumphant Christ) because it knows how "Old Mrs Mac and lumbago wait for the Cross". From St Paul, Webb receives the notion that the Cross represents divine foolishness, wiser than human wisdom <sup>2</sup>, but this is actively received and recreated because of Harry, whose imbecility frightens the sure walls of learning. In St Luke, he finds the Christ of Emmaus, but if it is this Christ who is moving towards Eyre at the end of Eyre All Alone, it must be recognised that Eyre, along with Boyd and Leichhardt, is moving towards him. If the relationship between imagination and religious tradition is not seen as reciprocal (as it is in the best poems), then religious imagination will be seen as having only a reproductive function and a theologically circumscribed authority.

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1. "Cartier at St Malo", A View of Montreal, CP, 62.  
2. Cf. I Corinthians, 1:17-25.

Webb's use of his dogmatic and devotional context is clearly being shaped by his central metaphor. "Poet" (CP, 152) takes the gospel story of the adulterous woman whom the Pharisees bring before Christ to see if he will obey the Law of Moses and agree to have her stoned. Christ says: "Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone." <sup>1</sup>. While Webb obviously captures the gospel's shift from an objectivist and legalistic worldview to a more intersubjective and compassionate one, he is also making his own imaginative variations. Whereas Christ says to the woman, "Go and sin no more", and so calls her into a process of conversion, Webb identifies this process within his poet, who is forgiven his betrayal of the desert's language and images. Similarly, the moment when Christ writes on the ground is given a poetic, more than a moral, reference. What the poet recovers is an open, reconciliatory image of his own work, his "marriage" of heaven and earth - and this is mediated precisely through the dialogue opened between the first image of the desert's horizon and the second, which contains elements of suffering (Webb sees the woman more as victim than sinner), compassion and fellowship, and which releases the intermediary camels-words:

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

With "A Death At Winson Green" (CP, 153), Webb's faith in resurrection, embodied in the image of sunrise, does not displace suffering but is itself placed within the poem's wounded frame: the fact of the man dying. The same structure operates in "Lament for St Maria Goretti" (CP, 262). Here too (whatever Webb's own conscious devotion), Webb's imagination shifts away from the conventional,

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1. Cf. John, 8:3-11.

devotional emphasis on the moral courage and glorious triumph of the virgin-martyr and towards his own emphasis: the little girl who has been obscenely violated by a knife and who is frightened, struggling with faith, and dying. As Webb presents her faith, it is very fragile indeed. Faith, in "The Tower" (CP, 204), belongs with a sense of ruin and waste and, though reconciliatory, is "bare in its power". This image of faith also incorporates an allusion to Christ, in Gethsemane, accepting the cup of suffering. Moreover, this image emerges through a fissure between innocence and experience (which is very much a matter of suffering) and grows out of an earlier "mad process" of imagery centred in "the dead gutted bird/ Lolloping in the wind". It is as if the poem enacts the way in which the imagination heals itself from its own wound.

At the end of "Pneumo-encephalograph" (CP, 223-224), Webb compares an oxygen bubble, searching out a brain tumour, to the Holy Spirit, moving through pain and inspiring its "amalgam with gold". This simile occurs suddenly at the end of a poem which has been determined to focus on the brute fact of suffering. Is Webb imposing the comparison, choosing the "will of God" over the "will of the poem"? I would prefer to say that the comparison constitutes a barely caught moment of faith and, in that way, further exemplifies the religious mode of Webb's poetry.

At first, the writer, seated at a desk where weak light and lame hours attend his craft, does not see himself as providing meaning. He merely rejects suffering:

May my every bone and vessel confess the power  
 To loathe suffering in you  
 As in myself, that arcane simmering brew. (CP, 223)

This simply expressed wish follows the confused, disconnected experience of the opening, where Ward Two's pain is sketched in swift, awesome fragments. Yet this first stanza does not entirely deny meaning to this suffering. There are, as it were, "bubbles" in the text which carry the feeble chance of hope. These can be identified (although they also need to be returned to the text, so as not to weaken its sense of suffering's absurdity and horror). There are hints that suffering might have a creative outcome: when nerve-fluxions are described as "flints coupling for the spark" and suffering is called an "arcane simmering brew". While "Passion and peace trussed together, impotent" primarily refers to the neutralised condition of the patients, it can also entertain a Christian shade of meaning. In the passion of Christ, suffering and redemption (peace) are tied together (on the cross) and are impotent: the helplessness of God (corresponding to the Pauline notion of the foolishness of God). Apart from the religious resonance in "confess the power" (confirmed, gently, by its end-of-line position), there is the fellowship of "To loathe suffering in you/ As in myself", where Webb blurs the object/observer distinction and evokes a compassionate intersubjectivity which softens the isolation implied by suffering.

These, however, are slender resonances. Those who would participate in Webbean art are not permitted to overemphasise such consoling possibilities. They have, with simplicity, to enter the colloquial, unclothed real:

Only come to this cabin of art:  
Crack hardy, take off clothes, and play your part.

(CP, 223)

"Only come" is balanced between commanding submission and inviting surrender and simplicity. At the literal level, there is something disturbing about the way the individual is subsumed into the larger drama of the pneumo-encephalograph, while, at the metaphorical level, that action may represent a surrender to the Holy Spirit, and be consoling. Here the tension between the world of suffering and the world of the Holy Spirit is taut.

The poet approaches pain as a reverent petitioner:

Let me ask, while you are still,  
 What in you marshalled this improbable will:  
 Instruments supple as the flute,  
 Vigilant eyes, mouths that are almost mute,  
 X-rays scintillant as a flower,  
 Tossed in a corner the plumes of falsehood, power?  
(CP, 224)

By what power has the patient "marshalled this improbable will" and gathered about him the medical "cabin of art" - especially since he is so utterly and existentially honest and helpless with "the plumes of falsehood, power" cast off? If the metaphor holds, then Webb's answer implies that poetry's "improbable will" is gathered by the same reality, which is very simply expressed: "Only your suffering." Does Webb then deny his own poem by the lines which follow and conclude the poem, making the hidden comparison with the Holy Spirit quite explicit?

Only your suffering.  
 Of pain's amalgam with gold let some man sing  
 While, pale and fluent and rare  
 As the Holy Spirit, travels the bubble of air. (CP, 224)

While the Holy Spirit is a very uncertain presence in the early parts of the poem, this sudden reference is not an imposition. It is too much in keeping with the general mode of Webb's religious imagination.

It does not destroy the tension - in fact, it heightens it, by making the Holy Spirit's mode of presence so brief and frail. The final emphasis is, after all, on "the bubble of air".

Even that very bright poem, "The Bells of St Peter Mancroft" (CP, 139) has traces of Webb's commitment to suffering as the way to joy. With its exuberant rhythm and mood, it certainly makes "its laughing golden sound". Yet the bells are, from the first, a force which opposes "the clockwork grief". By breaking the routine dimensions of existence, their sound creates a revelatory fissure in consciousness. Their tongues, though slender, speak of the very centre itself: "A frisson of gold at the centre/ Of prayer, bright core of life." Webb then likens their sound ringing out to a spring flower opening, but this is framed within a question, "Who knew . . .?", which suggests again his concern for recognising the sacred as surprise. Similarly, his townspeople are lifted out of their certitudes (even their cynicisms) and left less powerful:

Townspeople, who wear  
Shrewd colours, and know the move,  
Now blunder and wander, I swear,  
In a transport of love.

The story of St Francis has rich possibilities and Webb selects those which make The Canticle (CP, 69-84) a

New sun, round symbol  
Blown to us,  
Wind-ferried, humble,  
Mountainous.

Webb uses character perspectives to dramatise a hermeneutic of the holy - and this technique allows him to centre the meaning of sanctity in holes, to make a dramatic counterpart to the stigmata, which focuses his own image of Francis. Since each character utters himself as a process of confronting and reconciling his own wound, Webb does not emphasise the simple joy often associated with Francis, the sense

of a man in easy, delightful communion with a neighbourly universe.

Nor does The Canticle explore the relationship between Francis and Clare. She speaks only at the end, and then to utter a bare, almost impersonal faith in resurrection. The kind of power she has is not easily located in the struggle with egocentric power which so preoccupies the poem's male characters. The kind of peace she embodies is too remote (and Webb is too unsure of the female presence) to touch the immediate pain. Even where Webb appropriates the Franciscan theme of poverty, it is not so as to celebrate Francis's freedom: it is to represent the barrier within Bernadone.

The Franciscan ideal of poverty moves out from a gospel text celebrating the beauty and richness of the world and calling for trust in Providence (rather than in self or wealth).<sup>1</sup> When, through Bernadone's speech, Webb dramatises Francis's poverty, the gospel text which emerges is the one which calls the rich young man to renounce his wealth, records his refusal, and warns that "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven".<sup>2</sup> This hard-edged text suits Webb's purpose: it cuts into the wall of wealth which keeps Bernadone from the inner freedom where "A continent is unbound". It is, however, very different from the saint's romance with "Lady Poverty". With such selections and stresses, Webb's poem, while it presents the largely absent Francis as a figure of both pain and joy, does shift the balance towards pain. A hymn which praises the gifts of God and inhabits a very happy world ("Canticle of the Sun"), which is so lyrical in mode and feeling, can only function as fragments in

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1. Cf. Matthew, 6:25-34, Luke, 12:22-31.

2. Cf. Matthew, 19:16-26, Luke, 18:18-23.

The Canticle, with its dramatic and narrative modes, its scoured and visionary quality.

Another part of the Franciscan story is that Francis's mission - to renew the Catholic Church's witness to gospel poverty - was mediated through a dream-image of a ruined church. In The Canticle Webb reworks this by having the charitable churchgoers overlook the leper's ruin-revelation. In "The Stations" (CP, 94) a makeshift church becomes a cathedral because it is a place of humble fellowship, while a "Derelict Church" (CP, 220) provides more peace than does the cathedral - indeed, peace "loiters" in the derelict church, an activity which the cathedral might consider lacking in respect.

While it provided the inscription for Webb's own tomb - "Sunset hails a rising" - the faith expressed in "The Stations" (CP, 94) is more beleaguered than this theological extract might suggest. The poem confronts the everyday, exterior world with a few frail people who, inside a room, are praying "The Stations of the Cross", thereby witnessing their hope in the Resurrection:

The eve of the Resurrection is in this room  
And playing round it the stormlights of knock-off time.

If the threatened faithful seem to have the advantage - a deeper truth than the university's "impressive inch/ Of a cynical education" - this is because Webb has so conditioned us to believe that it is suffering which engenders a superior, if less articulate, wisdom. A few lines before the poem's close he uses an image which links suffering to Christ's redemptive sacrifice: "the spearhead of gall/ Touches the tongue of new life".

In describing the world of "knock-off time", Webb attempts to mime its

confusion and disorientation, using a bus-ride as a means of sweeping together various impressions of the world which (somewhat ominously) surrounds the church/room. In my view he does not succeed and the confusion contributes neither to an understanding of, nor an enjoyment of the poem.

The poem is one of those moments in Webb's work where "the multi-layers of meaning in his language often remain solvable puzzles rather than providing imaginative resolutions or illuminations".<sup>1</sup> The early stanzas remain confused: they enact a tortured climb up a hill of private associations with no promise of new light. It is possible, however, to obtain some picture of this surrounding world, which appears to be indifferently, if not unkindly, disposed towards the world of faith. Its suburbs contain "a taut partisan murmur", which conjures images of gossip, betrayal, quarrel, quietly intense conversations, whispered loyalties, situations which are explosive and barely contained. Discarded newspapers, having only a "fluke of glamour" now that they are useless (so dependent on time), are "ablush". Their condition derives obviously from the blurring of red ink, but what does it symbolise: shame, embarrassment, haste, heat, high blood pressure? This world has an embrace which is only ambiguously affectionate: "the moody Glebe, in a clinch/ With her ancient fog-trained hoodlum sea". Webb refers to university education as "cynical", momentarily displaying an Australian Catholic suspicion that university learning was "secular" and subversive of faith.<sup>2</sup> He follows this with a satirical reference to trendiness: "The young/ Glebe's ambit is headdress, necktie, figure of speech." It is, I

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1. Vivian Smith, "Poetry", The Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, p. 413.
  2. Cf. Edmund Campion, Rockchoppers, p. 12.

think, possible to say that from this there emerges a general impression or atmosphere: a community constituted by confusion and disorientation, whose spaces are quietly explosive and, if not antagonistic, certainly agnostic. It is the busy, successful world - this, in Webb's view, disadvantages it before the other community of neighbourly down-and-outs who, as much from need as from any developed faith, participate in "The Stations of the Cross". Like them, the church-symbol emerges from the text as something of a survivor:

And all for a song  
Conveying to us one church  
Out of unsurveyed darkness, hoarse with a history.

This might be Webb's sense of the Church militant, (it is hardly the Church triumphant) but it is soon qualified when the poem gives attention to a humble figure and, significantly, itself advances in power and clarity:

Old Mrs Mac and lumbago wait for the Cross  
In this threadbare room that's a college by day;  
and the hope  
And handwork of love has raised a cathedral round us.  
A door swings, a new wind . . . the old, known path is  
steep.

These lines privilege the Church of the anawim, the "little ones" of God. The path (of Calvary, promising the new freedom of the Holy Spirit) is described so that emphasis rests on its sacred agony. Mrs Mac's lumbago, pain personalised, sits beside her as a fellow believer and their togetherness directs them towards Christ's suffering. Togetherness in suffering becomes a sign of participation in Christ's redemptive activity:

Yes, here are our neighbours, quietly marching, less  
Sun-benefice and cloth of crimes. They will redeem  
Themselves, redeem me. But the wood is cruel to the back.

Once again, the notion of redemption is not allowed an open-ended ascent, but is brought back to focus on actual pain. The "threadbare room" becomes a sacred place because it houses these frail and

suffered gestures of hope and fellowship: these make it a "cathedral", a central place of worship.

Webb creates another such cathedral in "Derelict Church" (CP, 220):

Enter this crippled church  
To pray with a near-pride:  
Cases are piled in the transept and the porch  
Yet peace loiters here as not in cathedrals  
While with advertisement and trivia  
Man is besieging Heaven for his trade.

There is an almost hidden reference here to Christ attacking the buyers and sellers in the Temple, and this also suggests Webb's preference for the marginalised church over the more powerful, institutional and comfortable one. The poem prepares for this in the opening stanza, where pained and vulnerable figures are given a revelatory capacity:

When earth and flint rear themselves into certain shapes  
There is prayer from the fiery centre of the earth:  
That grey dancer the belfry vaulting as the Host,  
Arches as mouths importunate.  
Dun smoking flames come leisurely home to roost,  
The lost mind slews to an enigmatic path  
Joining hands again, the errant spirit leaps  
Into fire of joy at this grimy Fishergate.

What makes this imagery so consistent and convincing is that Webb is examining the relationship between joy and pain. In another echo of Isaiah, the desert breaks into prayer,<sup>1</sup> while the arched and importunate mouth of a bell produces song (and can only produce song because it is arched). These are centred in the image of the Host, the primary symbol of redemptive suffering and love. Then Webb introduces an image or compressed narrative of the prodigal returning home and discovering, out of the "enigmatic path", a greater joy.

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1. Cf. Isaiah, 35:1-7.

Webb is also establishing here a tensive relationship between absence and presence. The Host, the eucharistic bread, would not actually be kept in a derelict church. Where the Host is least to be found, Webb is making it still the measure of reality, the "realer than the Real". Webb's context therefore stresses that sense of divine dereliction already implicit in the eucharist. Indeed, in this poem there is a feeling that Webb would not expect to find the Host so really in the cathedral. This is consistent with the way his use of biblical material has been determined by his preferred hermeneutic: that the tiny, weak and pitiable will teach our groping eyes. The derelict church is more powerful than the cathedral because it is in fellowship with images which combine a tortured shape reaching up into an unexpected eloquence, the arch both of agony and praise.

This is strongly emphasised in Webb's use, at the end, of the traditional metaphor of the Church as a barque. While it usually speaks of salvation (from the flood of chaos and sin), it becomes in Webb's imagination a "gaping wreck":

Ghosts of bells chatter as from the sea  
 Out of memory slides home this gaping wreck  
 Still seaworthy, hallowed, and functional.

His language returns to earth: "functional" seems so much weaker than "hallowed", but that is just the point. In Webb's interpreted world, it is necessary to return to the little word; "hallowed" is dangerous, since it could easily apply to the cathedral, which is not the place of sacred dereliction. Webb's linguistic preference for an understated word symbolises his religio-imaginative preference for the tiny and weak.

Even Mary, Mother of the Church, is not represented through her blue and white iconography. While Webb certainly represents the

eschatological figure from traditional Catholic devotion - the Mother of God, immaculately conceived, ever virgin, assumed into heaven, mediating grace - he is also shifting emphasis, making Mary something of a fellow pilgrim whose faith embodies "a tenderness coupling/ White heat with goldenness".<sup>1</sup> This is all the more remarkable since Webb's poetry has few female figures, and most of them are in danger of becoming sentimental because they are often invested with too much of a nourishing and consoling function.

In "Our Lady's Birthday", (CP, 200) Webb acknowledges the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which states that Mary was conceived free from Original Sin, but he is concerned to stress that she is not thereby freed from suffering:

For the Immaculate as for Original Sin  
It is pain to begin:  
From womb of grace to pedantic midwife earth,  
Sharp oxygen-needles plotting in her two old hands; . . .

So these the hours of your birth  
Transcribe a primitive sacred agony.

Interestingly, this meditation seems to have been prompted by the sound of a small child crying, and it is there, in the frail sound, that Webb places Mary, identifying her more as fellow pilgrim than heavenly queen: "But you are the child crying, small rapture and paroxysm/ In the lewd snake-bodied wind." While this hints at a sexual anxiety, similar to that found in "Lament for St Maria Goretti", it also recalls Genesis, where God says to the serpent:

I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel.<sup>2</sup>

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1. This changing emphasis, which reanimates the tension between eschatological and historical images of Mary, reflects the changing emphasis of Vatican II. Cf., II Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), Ch. 8.
  2. Genesis, 3:15.

In Catholic culture this was traditionally read as a prophetic reference to Mary and Christ. It encouraged the image of Mary as the Second Eve. This image, which encourages suffering and redemption to converge, is the one which interests Webb as he next acknowledges Mary as co-redeemer: "And you are an arch hurled across the wicked chasm." However, this is an image which seems more willed than felt. The poem's best moment remains in the first stanza, when pain and glory are tenderly coupled in this description of sympathetic landscape:

And a tenderness wherein Calvary is begun  
 And sunset foreboded, a tenderness coupling  
 White heat with goldenness; and the seven  
 Rainbow sorrows; and the urchin sea  
 Clambering about; and the haystack library,  
 Academic decorous morocco and vellum  
 Bound, stalled in the heavy light upon a clam.

The halo-like sunset presides over a text which weaves together a number of traditional Marian references. There are the seven sorrows of Mary combined with the seven colours of the rainbow - the rainbow, of course, representing God's covenant with Noah and his descendants: sorrow and redemption are once more unified. Mary is also referred to as the "Star of the Sea". In a hymn which was still very popular in the early sixties, Mary was addressed:

Hail, Queen of Heaven, the ocean Star,  
 Guide of the wand'rer here below,  
 Thrown on life's surge, we claim thy care,  
 Save us from peril and from woe,  
 Mother of Christ, Star of the Sea,  
 Pray for the wand'rer, pray for me.<sup>1</sup>

If we read Webb's line backwards, the star-shape is coded into the sea-urchin. Reading it forward, the "urchin sea" suggests very much a child "Thrown on life's surge" and claiming Mary's motherly care. I would wager that what next happens is that Webb's "prospecting

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1. The text is taken from the standard booklet for what is called "The Novena To Our Lady of Perpetual Succour" (published by the Redemptorist Fathers, Mayfield), p. 16. In most parishes at the time, this Novena was a weekly occurrence.

nervous eye", sighting haystacks, thinks of bookshelves and all the learning they contain, remembers how their knowledge stalls before the foolishness of the Cross, how Mary is called "Seat of Wisdom", how Thomas Aquinas said that all he had written was but "straw" (and all of these associative possibilities were readily available within his Catholic context). From such a process we might arrive at the final image - where the metaphor actually reverses its direction, so that wisdom is measured more by "haystack" than by "library". In this way the moment appropriates Marian symbolism by way of the small and vulnerable. Later in the poem, when his language becomes not only more private in its associations, but also less tensive, Webb loses the power of this moment where sorrow and rainbow together constitute the figure of Mary. If much of the poem is abstract and arthritic, the first stanza shows Webb performing a profound variation on a very popular Marian hymn, which stands at the base of the entire poem:

Mary Immaculate, star of the morning,  
 Chosen before the creation began.  
 Chosen to be, for thy bridal adorning  
 Woe to the serpent and rescue to man.  
 Bend from thy throne at the voice of our crying,  
 Bend to this earth, which thy footsteps have trod,  
 Stretch out thine arms to us, living and dying,  
 Mary Immaculate, Mother of God.<sup>1</sup>

Webb (who lost his own mother when he was two years old)<sup>2</sup>. clearly derives his image of Mary from this devotional context. She is a great mother, who understands his sorrows, comforts him and guarantees peace. When Webb tempers this with some sense of her own suffering, he keeps the image tensive and lively. When he does not, he does not avoid a sentimental brand of transcendence.

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1. This hymn is also found in the "Novena To Our Lady of Perpetual Succour" booklet, p. 30.
  2. Cf. Rosemary Dobson, "Francis Webb", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, p. 5.

In "Canobolas" (CP, 197) Webb sees Mary as a powerful, heavenly mother. It is an unconvincing poem - largely because its thickly-woven veil of references obscures a more personal wish to escape suffering and return to the maternal breast. A.D. Hope provides a reading which is better than the poem.<sup>1</sup> The poem, he says, was written while Webb was in the Orange Mental Hospital, desperately using religious faith as a way of keeping some focus in his chaotic life. The title refers to an extinct volcano in the district, one of whose peaks Webb sees as a breast of the earth-mother, then metamorphosed into a breast of the Mother of God. In the first stanza the sun, setting behind the mountain, is seen as the mouth of a fish. The fish, in the early Church, was a symbol for Christ and, as the stanza ends, it is Christ who "puts on flesh". Then Mary is identified with the mountain. She is also named mother of Athens, Troy, Orange, and Christ. While Orange may "croon in a summer's joy", the other three must struggle and suffer in history and she, sorrowing mother, "may not pluck/ Destiny, nightfall from them". In a strange moment of metaphoric confusion, she herself then becomes an object in the hands of an ambiguous universe:

And all this houseless firmament, by strange luck,  
Is sunset playing with dice and nipple and toy.

On one side of her are the killers of Christ rolling their dice; on the other, the summer child of Orange, innocent and playful. Who has the nipple? A.D. Hope says that this line "unites the child Christ with his mouth at the breast and the dying God with the Roman soldiers casting dice for his clothes".<sup>2</sup> It is not quite as clear as that: the sunset, at first identified with Christ, must here also become

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1. A.D. Hope, "Talking to God", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 32-34.  
2. Hope, p. 34

the Roman soldiers since they are the proper subjects of "playing with dice".

However, Mary's motherly duties are clearly defined: to provide the nipple, and thereby nourish the innocent and comfort the sorrowful.

Mary is then taken up into heavenly language:

Because, rising above earth, she takes station  
 Upon eternity, between her two veined hands  
 Weaves dateless things from all the yellow strands  
 Of metronome, glances, memories, and commotion.  
 Pure hypostasis - all the inconsequent ocean  
 Of fading colours, all the grey towns and lands  
 And faces flock to her, rasping demands,  
 And drink, and settle and sink in her devotion.

If only we learn to pause and let her rise  
 Not steeply but as a gentle concave, all,  
 Towns, lands, faces, must nuzzle her tender swell  
 And learn from her the true Form and be wise.

Webb is here working very closely within traditional Catholicism and somewhat away from his preferred model: setting eternity "above earth", and invoking Thomistic concepts of hypostasis and form to represent an enduring, reliable pinnacle of truth. Whereas in "The Stations" life itself is a "ruthless curve", Mary now offers a "gentle concave".

Finally, Webb focuses on the actual mountain, where a television aerial acts as a warning to low-flying aircraft. A.D. Hope argues:

There emerges a poem which is coherent and a magnificent hymn of praise from something that at first sight looks a difficult and disconnected set of images and random associations.<sup>1</sup>

Even so, he goes on to say that the interpreter does need more clues than are given, and that difficulty arises from Webb's associative manner: "The associations may not only be private; they may be quite

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1. Hope, p. 34.

momentary and ephemeral."<sup>1</sup> Despite Hope's clarifications, the image of Mary presented here is somewhat petrified. It is also somewhat passive: though a sure, solid and doctrinal presence, she has to wait until colours, towns, lands and faces flock to her and find in her some satisfaction for their needs. Webb has made her so much a consolatory alternative to suffering that he has distanced her.

Even more remarkable and individual is Webb's treatment of the priest tortured by Communists. "The Brain-washers" (CP, 147-150) works with a martyr-figure who did, at the time, exert considerable power within the Catholic imagination. Yet Webb's treatment breaks with convention. Not only does he avoid any polemic against Communism, but he also shifts attention from the priest's spiritual strength to his personal disintegration. It is when he is broken that the priest hears the voice of God - and the poem implies that this is the real God, that the voice he heard when he was strong was the illusion.

Webb's narrative structure is simple. The priest, confronted by large and oppressive forces, resists and resists, then breaks. He then becomes a mouthpiece for the Communists, declaring that the Eucharist is a money-making superstition, confessing the Catholic Church's corruption, exploitation of the poor, and sexual hypocrisy. It is at this point, where the priest has lost all claim to be the typical Cold War Catholic Hero, that Webb's sense of heroism begins to emerge.

The poem takes its drama from the conflict between spiritual and physical forms of power. The priest begins with great spiritual

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1. Hope, p. 34. (Indeed they may: for each galah "flaunting his ruddish ceremonial sash" may be dressed with the red sash worn to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. That does not, however, add to the coherence.)

power. He resists well because he is so closely associated with a sure and strong God - almost a mountain-God, whose heights he has attained. Then Webb begins to undermine the priest's power, using the metaphor to do so. Having first warned us that the priest "may very likely have fought his fight a little too hard", Webb points at the fundamental flaw in his spiritual power: its denial of weakness:

This taller man  
Had climbed mountains in his time, was fond of the bodily  
temple.

When loudspeakers repeating a handful of words began,  
And murmur and whisper wriggled in between,  
He knew the greed of crevasse and placed a ban

Upon personal downward thought. Only the evergreen  
Pasture and young slopes of the Sacrament  
Mounted daily to a white summit, unseen and seen.

So for months he was infuriatingly content,  
Blessing the fellow who brought his mouldy bread;  
Till at last the personal threaded that white ascent

And not quite Gethsemane satisfied the Lord.

The ambiguity of "threaded" - connecting/disconnecting - is a typical Webbean moment. The priest's mistake is simply that he relies on strength to achieve his sanctity and victory. In this he, like his enemies, employs power as a mode. What he finally learns is the "bitter search for peace", where the way almost contradicts the goal.

Broken, he begins to say words which come from outside (there are no more coming from within), so that he may be left to the vast silence within himself. This is done not out of fear: "he had no fear then, for the world had ended/ Without fire or bang". It is done simply that he can be left with his interior emptiness:

It is the frightened and conscious resistance that tires,  
Though no one might venture to call it right or wrong.  
When he repeated the loudspeaker's words - after years,

Centuries of bloom and murmur - silence came along.  
It must be from God. He spoke often, feeling this,  
And the words were the price of silence, worth anything.

Webb is suggesting that the priest is not deluded, that the silence, and the defeat it embodies, may be from God, and more really from God than any victory achieved over the oppressors. He does not allow his priest even the private victory of the spirit - he loses his self, his conscious ego. Yet, in a parody of his more usual pastoral role, he is left vacantly feeding the multitude:

He simply mumbled the same words on and on -  
A charity to the excited hungry faces.

Webb is here taking traditional notions of interior silence and loving service to a most unexpected point of meaning,

For the words meant nothing save only silence. A vision  
Of man, perhaps, in his bitter search for peace.  
Be angry; but notice almost an elation.

In those rolling and rolling, uncontradicted eyes.

This is a very disturbing close: we are not told he has definitely found peace, only that the search requires some bitterness. We are not told there is "elation", but something like, yet unlike, it. We are left looking at the priest's eyes, the ambiguity within the suffering, within the peace.

This ending - open-ended, and challenging the usual notion of a Catholic hero - is very different from the ending Vincent Buckley gives his poem about Mindszenty, "In Time Of The Hungarian Martyrdom".

Buckley stresses that Mindszenty, though "spiritually wounded by the Hungarian Communists", is "a symbol of that spiritual strength and authority of which he is a foremost modern defender".<sup>1</sup> Webb opens a crevasse within the spiritual strength itself.

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1. Vincent Buckley, Masters in Israel, p. 50.

While Buckley is arguing that martyrdom is vicarious, Webb is fascinated with the extremes of the individual's desolation. He will deny his martyr even spiritual consolation - "Nor could the All-Knowing soothe his waking grief" - whereas Buckley will include reference to John of the Cross, making suffering a deep act of love - "Their neck is wounded with His gentle hand".<sup>1</sup> Buckley's attention is given, as he says himself, to "the nature of the Church and . . . her sacred duty to suffer, as well as to rejoice, on behalf of humanity."<sup>2</sup> Webb does not speak so easily on humanity's behalf - as with "A Leper", it is "almost a man speaking". For Webb's Catholicism submits its coherence to the image of crucifixion:

Canaries silent as spiders, caged in laws,  
 Shuffle and teeter, begging a First Cause  
 That they may tear It open with their claws  
 And have It hanging in pain from solid wall.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Cf. "Upon a gloomy night", Poems of St John of the Cross, trans., Roy Campbell, Collins, 1979, pp. 10-13.
  2. Masters in Israel, p. 50.
  3. "A Man", Ward Two, CP, p. 229.

## SECTION SEVEN

SUFFERING, ART, AND SANCTITY

At the shaping heart of Francis Webb's image of the poet lies his belief that both suffering and metaphor may break and renew meaning. From the centre of tongue-tied pain, Webb's poet sings "Of pain's amalgam with gold".<sup>1</sup> Within this redemptive image of poetry, other qualities are included and encouraged - particularly those of compassionate realism, vision, and prophecy. The poet will be compassionately, but rigorously realistic if he is to "confess the power/ To loathe suffering in you/ As in myself . . ."2. The poet will be visionary if he is to see the fire of suffering transformed, at "the centre of fierce art",<sup>3</sup> into the tongue of the Holy Spirit. The poet will be prophetic if he is to confront conventional and comfortable wisdom, the "Troy" of well-walled minds, with "The spontaneous thought retarded and infantile Light".<sup>4</sup>

Even so, the poet's mission is not ennobling before it is humiliating. Not only must he pass through personal suffering as "his feet tread embers for the truth"<sup>5</sup>, but he must continually suffer language.

While, from one point of view, Webb seems to ascribe to words an almost sacramental power to redescribe reality so that it is "filled with the Word unwritten",<sup>6</sup> he also, rather forcefully, imagines them as the leper's rags, signals of his "graceless utterance".<sup>7</sup> He has a sense of the symbolising power of language, but is concerned that

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1. "Pneumo-encephalograph", Ward Two, CP, p. 223.
  2. "Pneumo-encephalograph", CP, p. 223.
  3. "Melville At Woods Hole", CP, p. 51.
  4. "Harry", Ward Two, CP, p. 224.
  5. Leichhardt in Theatre, CP, p. 36.
  6. "Harry", Ward Two, CP, p. 224.
  7. "A Leper", The Canticle, CP, p. 70.

language approach us through modes of humility - for there is another power in words which Webb deeply distrusts: their power to become walls. Webb's "Poet" (CP, 152) refuses the pharisaic temptation to construct a high, secure wall of words to contain reality (and reality, for Webb, is being constituted in the desert-space between the broken fact and the redemptive symbol). He refuses the "thick grey loam" with which literalism and legalism are fashioned and keeps to the "so tender voyaging line of truth".<sup>1</sup>

The line of truth and humility follows the "suffering" within metaphoric language: the tension between "is" and "is not" as words, like the camels of "Poet", approach and withdraw from the horizon of meaning. While the poet's words may indeed "redeem" the world, they do so if their mode is "eucharistic", if their saving power and communion is made present in their broken pieces. This sense of poetry as the suffering in language expresses itself in a variety of similar structures. Sometimes a tiny word or image, disregarded, is "sown" in the text, allowed to grow unobtrusively until its humility comes to signify a hidden glory. Sometimes a simple, frail word, image, line or stanza can seem to rise out of complex, tortured language - just as there is often strain between familiar, colloquial resonances and those which sound "Huge symbols featuring strangeness".<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the suffering is centred in a simple verb, such as "come", which seems caught between commanding and describing action. Often, Webb uses gaps in speech and perspective to dramatise his sense that, if poetry is a metaphorical language, it will say at once: "Fullness, shadow."<sup>3</sup>

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1. "In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806-1883", Around Costessey, CP, p. 207.
  2. "Author's Prologue", A Drum For Ben Boyd, CP, p. 19.
  3. "In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806-1883", Around Costessey, CP, p. 206.

If Webb's sense of metaphor and suffering makes his language humble, this does not mean that it becomes quiet and submissive. Rather, his language is remarkable for its open-ended and iconoclastic character. In the final section, I will consider how this creates its own conflicts with the language which dominates Webb's Catholic theological context. For the moment, though, let me remark that Webb's sense of religious language as open-ended, relative, and iconoclastic, distances him from the dominant language of his theological culture and inclines him towards what Sallie McFague describes as "metaphorical theology". McFague, among others, argues that religious interpretation and language are primarily metaphorical. Referring to Paul Ricoeur, she speaks of how metaphor expresses and constitutes a tension "between a literal or conventional interpretation which self-destructs, and an extended, new interpretation which is recognised as plausible or possible".<sup>1</sup> This may well describe the metaphoric visions and processes in Webb's image of poetry. It also describes, in a sufficiently open manner, the religious and Christian character of that image - once we realise that for Webb's poetry "religious and Christian" is a description which refers, not so much to dogmatic content, as to a way of being and a mode of utterance. Behind Webb's vision of the poet, analogous to his way of metaphor, is the way of the servant Christ who, before his disciples recognise him in broken bread, tells how it was ordained "that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory".<sup>2</sup>

When, in A Drum For Ben Boyd, Webb dramatises Sir Oswald Brierly's view of Boyd, he shows Brierly to be an unadventurous artist. Boyd

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1. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, p. 39. Referring to Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning, p. 50.
  2. Cf. Luke, 24-26.

represents something Brierly can no longer find in himself: an attraction to the breaking edge of greatness. Brierly says,

I always think of him  
As something past purpose, insensate, battering cliffs  
With a forehead fruitless and obstinate as the surf;  
And yet the air for miles around any cliff  
Is charged with countless poems (mostly unwritten).  
Something draws you to a cliff - you see yourself  
Enlarged, and sometimes you hate the surf  
As sometimes I hated Boyd, you feel ominous currents  
Dragging you away from humanity.

But, passing on,  
You do not quickly forget such magnitudes. (CP, 24)

The pathetic implication in Brierly's testimony is that, by so preferring safety, he committed himself to a mediocre art. Unwilling to undergo diminishment, he can give no picture of Boyd - nor even of himself: "True to myself, I grew colourless, left no self-portrait." In a moment touched with regret and self-recognition, he admits he has not painted Boyd because he refuses the risk of exploration which Boyd represents:

No hope, no pity  
Keeps me away from the canvas, but there's something missing,  
I paint from memory mostly, build a landscape  
Crowded with whaling-ships, but all at anchor,  
And rarely venture out beyond the shoreline.  
Something in my brain is atrophied, fallen away,  
And this, I suppose you could say, is Boyd or something about  
him. (CP, 24-25)

Brierly reappears (A Drum For Ben Boyd, 10) when his dreams "of a studio,/ The governor's portrait, grave magisterial duties" are contrasted with Boyd's "cities/ Bleeding the hardy pastures with new wounds". (CP, 26) (There is at once in this reference to wounds a criticism of rampant progressivism and a belief in suffering as the way to greatness.) While Boyd does build his town, Webb is not really interested in his success. Rather, he is fascinated by his later failure (given almost mythic proportions) and concludes:

Yet all the poetry of a tower's ascent  
Leaps out most powerfully in its rocking and fall.  
(CP, 27)

Brierly's withdrawal from the cliff is here recalled and judged by Webb's characteristic conviction that the breaking process is somehow integral to the wording process. This is the conviction expressed in the "Author's Prologue", where breaking light, baffling music, jagged thoughts summon "Huge symbols featuring strangeness". Within these symbols, which shake the known world loose, the author may sometimes "clasp some shape/ Tortured into beauty". (CP, 20)

"Melville At Woods Hole" (CP, 51-53) speaks "from the centre of fierce art" and hastens us "Towards the white, flying vision of terror and love". The poem opens with a storm - "a strophe" whose rhythm is opposed to that of "sheer weather". Sheer weather encourages the perception of ordered days, one succeeding another under a sun which represents the diminishing power of time. The storm, which fractures and reassembles perceptions, stokes the fire of art because it makes things such as the engine "a shimmering fable/ Of timelessness". Sheer weather encourages an illusion in the artist. In the second stanza, the artist is reminded that he cannot secure possession of a place, cannot daze the clouds with his voice, nor manage a will which is "ever outward bound". These are illusions of transcendence, which ignore those glancing truths which come from the storm - "the spinet voices of the drowned". What the storm does is break the "net of history" (that arrangement of time by which we catch ourselves) and "compel (us) back/ To the niche and sheet of the past/ Where (we) are nothing". While it breaks the "net of history", the storm itself "will take in the one cast/ These seaboard villages, this heaving thicket of sea", as it "dismantles together/ Four roadstead centuries". (The paradoxical expression, "dismantles together", focuses Webb's vision of community found through disintegration.)

In the third stanza, the storm metaphor is momentarily abandoned while Webb concentrates on "fire" - formerly associated with sun and "sheer weather", now reconciled to the storm and its art:

With words as firebreaks, from the centre of fierce art  
 You hold out your hands. But all is kindling for the blaze,  
 Mossed bone or hump-backed folio. (CP, 52)

As "firebreaks" to "fierce art", words contain and control even as they release meaning, a meaning which could easily destroy their boundaries. From the fire, the suffering centre, the artist holds out his hands: a gesture of giving and/or receiving, of seeking companionship or help, of begging release. The fire is irresistible: it consumes life, represented as its most vulnerable by the "mossed bone", and art, represented by the "hump-backed folio" (itself encoding a relationship between art and suffering, even deformity).

Through one of the fissures which occurs in the confused storm-consciousness, there emerges a fragment of truth: the moment in 1812 when a Chinese sailor fell from the maintop. This is a moment which strongly attracts Webb's imagination. The man breaking through the air is analogous to the way, in art, the tender instant of truth is gained through destruction:

In eighteen-twelve the Chinese sailor, falling  
 Back from the maintop to the glittering, turning deck,  
 To the white, swaying arms,  
 Knew truth for a second: the night watch: the dim alarms:  
 In what he had sought and loved destruction calling,  
 In the cruel puzzle of the rigging, in the simple swell.  
 The spin of his curious luck,  
 Wordless, foreshadows your tortuous parable. (CP, 52)

This is a comparatively simple moment in the poem, rescued, as it were, from the swiftly intersecting mind and language of the storm, yet in its structure containing the art of Melville, particularly the story of Ahab who found "In what he had sought and loved destruction calling". Finally it is not the monument of "carved, grey, perfect

rock" which represents Melville's greatness as an artist, but the fellowship which Melville, Ahab, Webb and reader find in Melville's "maiming inheritance":

Night's province dowses lighted waters. You pace  
 The shaken bridge, your maiming inheritance knocks  
 At our hearts, inescapable,  
 Hastens us past the breakwaters, the shoal bell,  
 For the devious truths of nightmare where rip-tides race  
 And seasons spindle to the ice-flow. Swiftly we move,  
 Hull down, under heeling trucks,  
 Towards the white, flying vision of terror and love.

(CP, 53)

As we go past the breakwaters, the watery equivalent to "firebreaks", we are returning towards the centre of fierce art, the heart of the storm with its "shimmering fable/ Of timelessness" and its "vision of terror and love".

The jongleur, after he understands the stigmata of Francis, develops a similarly paradoxical appreciation of his own song. From one point of view, The Canticle examines the relationship between suffering and art. Each of its six "central" characters comes, through suffering, to an integrated act of speech. Each begins with some anxiety about the power of his words (and this is usually linked to an anxiety about being "man"). The leper sees that his speech is as ragged and rejected as his disease and that "It is almost a man speaking". The father's confidence in his manhood and booming voice can easily be construed as poorly disguised bluster. The wolf speaks and forgets, refusing to acknowledge any truth, any language but the instinctual moment. The serf keeps both humanity and speech obedient to the "speak no evil" rule of survival. The knight, whose humanity was an exercise in physical power, is finally troubled by debilitation in language and humanity, by "this broken/ Foeman's lispings, word of what is unspoken". When each makes his second appearance, this preoccupation with humanity and speech has disappeared. It is as if

each has forgotten himself. Webb's argument would seem to be that their earlier sense of suffering, associated as it is with so many kinds of alienation, encourages an isolated humanity and false speech. Their later sense of suffering implies that they have achieved a human status which is honestly bare and representative, and that this provides them with a simpler fellowship in words. Language and art become more integrated as they become more positively suffered and suffering.

This argument is more clearly seen in "The Jongleur" (CP, 73-75). The jongleur first addresses the city, the common language, foretelling its noontime enjoyment of "wine and gossip with the languid sufferings/ And happy endings". He conjures the bright world of romance and fairytale, but argues that an art which denies suffering humanity is flawed: "Breathtaking profile of granite, but the chisel's art/ Fell short of blood and bone and beating heart." This, though, is the art expected of him, and he is no longer able to believe it: "the chanson wavers, cannot consume/ My defiance new and lonely as St Damian's bell". Whereas his second speech will evidence a genuine acceptance of loving death, his earlier art is expected to censor ugliness and horror:

Living lustre goes kindly to illustrious death;  
 Fabulous gold finds the orphan and the widow;  
 Love, always love  
 Is the body superbly immaculate - hold there, not a move -  
 Requiring all courtesies, all of faith;  
 War, the tallest horseman, may cast no shadow. (CP, 73-74)

If he is to have his "lodgings in place, language, or time", he must sing of a perfect world in which man - grand and righteous emperor, proud knight, humble man of the field - is the noblest creature. He also perpetuates a very stylised and dependent image of woman.

Yet this artist's suffering is more than his realisation that his work is an illusion. He sees his song as a palliative, yet still hopes that his story-telling fulfils a genuine need for something other than the facts. His cynical submission to the will of the crowd takes on another shade of meaning. In a parody of the eucharist, he becomes what they need to believe. Within the larger context of the poem, this is deflected towards an affirmation of some religious pattern in what he does, even as it highlights his cynicism:

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

Wide-open mouth and bunting and drum  
 Endorse some momentary, tireless, militant maker.  
 I sing as that maker directs. May I speak only as a man.  
(CP, 74-75)

The term, "mummery of freedom", continues his emphasis on pretence, but it also implies that these "holy day" celebrations are an image of the greater drama of freedom. When the jongleur sees himself as an obedient creation, he is calling the crowd his "maker", but he is also reminding us of the Creator and so participating in the "mummery of freedom". Similarly, when he lets the cheers and needs of the crowd "Work within (him) as a prayer", he invokes a simile which, in Webb's world of words, has a power to grow beyond the speaker's intention. Most significantly, his surrender to the crowd is represented in the rhyming of "receive" with "believe": obeying needful humanity is the paradoxical way to belief.

In his second poem, the jongleur drops his mask and speaks more directly and wholly from the heart. His speech, as well as being more integrated, is also more human and compassionate in its insight. While his brilliant image of the sun hoisting its sail and drawing "merchant images" after it suggests the transcendent end of art, he yet relates art to the present and imperfect moment:

I tell you, word and wit are ashine no less  
Under the loose, cranky wheel of our time  
Coming, perhaps coming again. (CP, 80)

The last phrase touches the present moment with an apocalyptic possibility. There is tolerance, not cynicism, when he recalls his earlier story-telling, with its "nice perspective", and endorses "Time's gallant refusal to clear his throat/ Before the old stories, the old omissions". There is a new sense of what it means to say that death was "illustrious". This must be balanced by a hard recognition of mortality, and the way the grave will not house the power of the sword: "There are also bones. A few yards are no scabbard."

Following this intimate engagement with bones, there is the jongleur's superb realisation that love which is broken is beautiful:

Love, even love,  
Under her wrongs may be inartistic, uncouth,  
Move when she should be still, her voice in tatters,  
Hair befogged, mouthline a guttering, out of the sun.  
(CP, 81)

In "Poet" (CP, 152) Webb rejects the "thick grey loam" of pharisaic language, in which words become walls of legalism and literalism. He returns to the vision of terror and love - in this case, the stinging revelation of the desert, with its mediatory image (of the camels moving to and from the space where desert and sky merge). He confesses a Christian vision of poetry, but this is precisely centred in an image of forgiveness.

The poem soon establishes its choice between the "desert country" and "this big town" of the "masters". The desert provides an ascetical and mystical truth, and gives a language which moves on the edge of obedience and perception. At first the poet appears to appreciate a correspondence between his "words" and the desert's particular brand of scoured sanctity:

I'm from the desert country - O, it's a holy land  
 With a thousand warm humming stinging virtues.  
 Masters, my words have edged their way obediently  
 Through the vast heat and that mystical cold of our evenings.  
(CP, 152)

He even resists the temptation to pseudo-transcendence and will not word the frozen wonder of the stars. Instead, he finds his tongue in the image of camels. Coming out of the gap between earth and heaven, they figure at once mediation and wound:

But came the long train of camels blowing drowsily:  
 Words paced, nodding, tinkled through my spirit;  
 As with the camels, I could never know nor wished to know  
 Their origin or destiny, for our horizon and the sky  
 Tremble together in uneasy connubial whiteness.  
 So my lawless words (I speak figuratively)  
 Moved the desert, as a train of camels waken  
 The dozing miles made for them, retreating slowly.  
(CP, 152)

As well as introducing the matrimonial image (and, with "uneasy", anticipating the adultery which provides the poem's narrative base),<sup>1</sup> Webb is here obviously addressing a question of language - particularly, its uneasy capacity to "marry" heaven and earth. He seems to see the poet searching for words which will not constrict the truth, words which will not need to explain their origins or destinies, but words which will reverberate with frailty and fellowship as they "Tremble together", words which will approach and withdraw from meaning just as the camels move within the observer's shimmering perspective. Yet this desert tongue is denied even as

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1. Cf. John, 8:2-11.

it speaks: for the poet is addressing the masters, wondering if and how he may win their approval. He cannot quite forget the desert, but he is anxious to make it acceptable for these men whose minds prefer "orderly distances". This anxiety is indicated by the apologetic parenthesis in "So my lawless words (I speak figuratively)/ Moved the desert . . ." To the pharisaic mind, figurative language is merely decorative. Accordingly, when he wants to reassure the masters that any lawless element in him is only figurative, he instinctively adopts a strategy which mirrors their values: it diminishes the stature of metaphor, even as it exalts that of law. It is only a glancing moment, yet it is a precise, concentrated dramatisation of that connection between literalism and legalism which constitutes the pharisaic word-world. In a manner which is consistent with that, the parenthesis also begins to encourage the gap between public and private meaning - a gap which widens as the poem proceeds and as the poet more and more says one thing to the masters and thinks another to himself. It also has a Webbean double-edge: while it may appear as a fawning affirmation of lawful words, it anticipates the reverse, when the "lawless words" of Christ's forgiveness will fulfil the language of the desert and return the poet to his first place of inspiration.

For the moment, though, the desert poet, impressed with the "big town", denies his original language and place. He was "never happy there". It was "the haze and quandary of (his) early manhood". It is to be dispelled. The masters are acknowledged for their order and security.

You are the law, you are the thick grey loam  
Of orderly distances, unshakable houses.  
Dispel, then, the haze and quandary of my early manhood.  
(CP, 152)

Then there is another nervous parenthesis: "Of course I am still - how

shall I put it? - the singer." As he is being tempted to make walls from words, the poet gives a sign both vulnerable and hopeful. It is offered dramatically, in a self-deprecating, befuddled tone, which is presumably meant to make it seem less offensive to the stern and objective masters. Yet, it is the final fragment of himself that he will not deny: a slender allegiance to the fact that he is a poet, and the slightest hint that this may lead to a language other than that approved by the "unshakable houses". Although such fragmentary references to the desert and its song will eventually grow in power, this one is, for the moment, repressed, and the poet joins the pharisees in their attempt to destroy Christ, the Word, the iconoclastic metaphor of God:

And this One you speak of as the enemy of order,  
 As the wilful floating daze of refractory sunlight:  
 I do know that we could never exchange words  
 (But the tinkle and psalm of rubbing harness sometimes  
 Upon my word and image blowing drowsily . . .?)  
 Vah! You are the law, my masters, the thick grey loam  
 I shall go to the temple with you, take Him in the act;  
 From the bed of the sick child He comes, from alleyways of the  
 possessed,  
 And with this woman He shall speak His public perverseness.  
(CP, 152)

Christ is "the enemy of order" because he embodies an unconfined perspective: "The wilful floating daze of refractory sunlight". He eludes the straight-lined view. He and the poet cannot exchange words because the poet has assumed the pharisaic attitude. However, at this very point, another fragment of desert language creates a disorderly space within the "thick grey loam" text. This gap in the speaker's well-rehearsed attitude allows the camels to reappear and, with them, a new, unrecognised connection with Christ's language begins to emerge. This is signalled in the similarity of phrasing: Christ is "the wilful floating daze of refractory sunlight" and the poet sees his own "word and image blowing drowsily". In a word-world which is oppressed by the egocentric need to impose an authority which makes

distances "orderly" and houses "unshakable", two such fluid states of mind could only be brought more closely together. The poet now begins to experience an authority within himself: an authority which is an expression of integration, not an imposition.

He begins without realising it:

The big stone in my hand will fly shrewdly, I assure you,  
As your words, in the house of God. (CP, 152)

When the comma creates a slight pause before "in the house of God", it makes a space for judgment and subverts the surface righteousness of these lines. The comparison rebounds and exposes the calculated and self-serving power-play which motivates the masters' external order: for the comparison says that, as well as stones, it is their prayers which are "shrewdly aimed". We sense that the poet has suddenly seen the shocking implication in his comparison: that the distance between the language of public order and that of prayer could be widened so far as to accommodate such a comparison between words of prayer and stones of execution.

Christ, then, confronts, not so much the woman's adultery, as the poet's: his betrayal of the desert's "uneasy connubial whiteness".

Christ also redeems the poet's imagination:

He stands confronting the woman and death in my hand.  
No words between us, I say, for You are the loneliness,  
My home, You are the broad light all about me:  
You are the train of camels within that light.  
Speak up, my masters, quickly, for death hurts my hand.  
(CP, 152-153)

This last line does more than register faltering confidence and growing guilt. It implies some identification with the crucified Christ. With a typically compassionate irony, Webb begins to transform the instrument of power and oppression into an image of redemption.

When, in the final stanza, the "first stone" is ordered thrown, it too rebounds, breaking the language of "grey loam" and freeing the poet for a word which belongs with the wind and sand.

Cast the first stone. And the grey loam is scattered,  
 And we slink out one by one. But my narrow clever desert eyes  
 Peer back over my shoulder. They are strangely together,  
 A grave broad light in the temple. Breast upon knees,  
 The woman crouches beside Him: I have seen the sky at midday  
 Bent earthward. From the two together a train of camels.

She has given her love - but Paradise, what is his love? -  
 To a hundred of us. Again she will love, may tempt me;  
 But can ever this stone fly into the face of beauty  
 While the wind, as his delicate burning finger,  
 Gives a Word to the Sand? (CP, 153)

By editing "Let the one who is without sin . . ." from Christ's well-known words, Webb creates a fascinating change of meaning. In the gospel, "Cast the first stone" is uttered as an ironic invitation, and its object is the woman. In Webb's version, it is an urgent and prophetic command, but directed now at the wall of legalism and literalism. This is immediately taken up: "the thick grey loam is scattered". The mighty are cast down by an image of forgiveness. As the pharisaic word-walls are broken, the poet emerges more as a visionary and prophet and offers an alternative language: the unifying but open image of Christ and the woman. With characteristic irony, Webb has turned an image of adultery into one of marriage and transformed the rejected woman into a redemptive figure. This image, which acquires an explicit visionary status with "I have seen", is found at the centre - of both the temple and the desert. It also implies a prophetic judgment on how the symbol of forgiveness reverses the usual power patterns of religious language and thought: recalling Christ's "descent", the image stresses the humility of the transcendent: "I have seen the sky at midday/ Bent earthward." When this image then recovers and fulfils the earlier image of the camels,

the poet himself recovers his desert vocation. He realises that pharisaic words or "stones" can only hope to destroy the open-ended, mysterious and dynamic centre of beauty - beauty, that is, recognised through an attitude of mercy. Walls give way to horizons, where the Word is given by the wind, a traditional biblical image of the Holy Spirit, inspiring creation and moving where he wills. Still, the poem underlines the manner in which the Word is given and received: inspiration is like Christ writing on the ground, his language of forgiveness opposing that of the pharisees. Webb's description retains its tension since Christ writes with "delicate burning finger", combining fierce power ("fierce art", perhaps) with slender gentleness.

When Webb wants to commemorate the painter, Anthony Sandys<sup>1</sup>, he at first contrasts the vitality and "eternal motion" of Sandys's work with what he sees as his own fumbling and time-bound work of words. However, within this contrast, Webb shapes between himself and Sandys the fellowship of two who are out of fashion. While Sandys has the "reverberating touch" and can communicate "Fullness, shadow", he is also disregarded: his style is "bravely out of fashion". Then, as Webb further describes his own limitations in language, he pictures himself genuflecting before a crucifix which is "daring dated". This recognition has a redemptive direction:

Past luring, the bird . . . but if, in my side-room,  
I taste the Broads once more, and genuflect  
Before the mill and daring dated Cross,  
Swim in golds westerly and auras, pass  
Into civil distances, blues, and marshalled gloom,  
My hungry frame traps light, I stand erect. (CP, 206)

Sandys's landscape has a restorative effect on Webb - yet, to exert such power, it needs the kind of emptiness which a frame has.

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1. "In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806-1883", CP, pp. 206-208.

Webb's image does more than suggest that the artist is a vehicle for revelation. It does more than suggest the human need for art's "reverberating touch". It creates a reverberation between the open structure of art and of the self. When Webb writes "My hungry frame", he blurs the distinction between Sandys's landscape and its observer, and mimes the intersubjective, participative character of art - though, once again, the fellowship established between art and self is one which focuses some strange relationship between states of emptiness and outline and those of light and dignity, caught by that emptiness.

This sense of art as "An outline of fullness" is then made explicit, and in a way which encourages another correspondence (with life itself as "a worn album of love and pain"):

Fullness, shadow: again I am abashed  
 Amid scuttling designs of chaos, at your mission  
 To sing the posture of reality,  
 Unsubtle - one did say chivalrous - as the tree.  
 An outline of fullness soberly embraced  
 By shadow of widest meaning is creation.

Fullness, shadow: what to tell again  
 But the so tender voyaging line of truth.  
 Time shuffles a timid foot, will linger  
 While the tired cockcrow of your lifted finger  
 Opens dawn and a worn album of love and pain.  
 Brown eyes and hair flow humbly from the earth. (CP, 207)

"Death", the third poem in the sequence, reinforces how Sandys, with "his eye/ For shaping a causeway between earth and heaven", transforms the Norfolk landscape into an artifice of eternity. Moreover, artistic inspiration, in which the shapes of inner and outer worlds correspond, is a process marked by the Cross:

The mill that kissed his soul again is seen  
 Bearing by day as by nightfall the tall Cross. (CP, 207)

The fourth poem, "Art", takes this up. Assuming a visionary stance, the speaker presents Sandys as a victim tortured into wisdom:

I see him in a sense as strapped to his chair,  
 Bloodstained with erudition, unafraid. (CP, 208)

Suffering seems inescapable. Even when the painter receives his earthly gifts, they both "embrace" and "sting" the senses. But from within this room, centre of suffering, which has its "windows wide", Sandys and speaker can look out:

And I see the Broads at sunset, skimming past:  
 Shadows on water, sun, and natural blue  
 Moving as one at supernatural speed.  
 To engage those Broads of the spirit is their need.  
 Beauty, be tongue of fire, of the Holy Ghost,  
 For the mill and the haggard Cross are moving too. (CP, 208)

This stanza produces a mood of clean transcendence - except for "haggard Cross". It is not the mention of "Cross": that is a notion easily absorbed by an exalted mood. It is the way "haggard" stumblingly resists such absorption. With its connotations (of effort, exhaustion), and its hard, dragging sound, the adjective seems to bump the visual rhythmic flow of the poem/landscape. In its own way, it represents the realistic wound in what would otherwise have been an easy engagement between the "Broads at sunset" and the "Broads of the spirit".

The artistic endeavour seems even more vulnerable when Webb turns his visionary attention "downstairs" and sees the artist's materials "teased by cockroaches". This stimulates a final vision, one balanced between a sense of recovered courage and a sense of lingering menace:

And I see, downstairs and teased by cockroaches,  
 Cool crayon, oil, and glittering watercolour:  
 A courage unmans me, a ritual generous teaching  
 Forsaken for a spell but overreaching  
 Staircase and cockroach and forgetfulness,  
 While machines of burning mumble in the cellar. (CP, 208)

What kind of courage "unmans"? Given that it is associated with the religiously coloured "ritual generous teaching", this is possibly an

obscure reference to a notion of spiritual abandonment, where the natural self is surrendered in the graced self. Even if we were to wager this, the new courage does not so much subdue the "downstairs" powers as hold them in check. In its rhythm, tone, and meaning, the last line is disturbingly open-ended. If "Metaphor and flesh await a resurrection", it has not as yet arrived: the "tongue of fire" still reverberates with the "machines of burning".

"Harry" (CP, 224-225) can also be read as an analogue for Webb's vision of writing. The poem envisions a mongoloid's attempt to write a letter as a sacrament of the Word. While Harry's action is "painstaking" and inarticulate, it is one with a truth and wisdom which precedes creation. While his action is endangered by institutionalised forces, it critiques their "giddy alphabet". While his action is influenced by and paradoxically represents "the world of commonsense", it transcends and eventually transfigures that world with its own "retarded and infantile Light". While his action is isolated, it creates community within the ward. While his action is holy, its final direction is ambivalent: Harry directs his letter "to the House of no known address".

The opening line dramatises Harry's situation - his strained determination and uncertain ability: "It's the day for writing that letter, if one is able." Harry's writing - an isolated and sacred art - is performed despite the institutional atmosphere and the distractions provided by fellow patients. It is as if Harry is making his moment by sheer integrity - and by begging. He has to purloin paper and beg the ink and "bent institutional pen" needed for his task. All this is given religious stature when Harry is said to be weaving "his sacrament".

Webb next extends the religious direction of his language, but relates Harry's action to the ward in a way which deepens its complexity. His "Sacrifice? Propitiation?" carries a Catholic resonance: a commonplace in Catholic theology is that Christ's sacrifice on Calvary is re-enacted in the propitiatory sacrifice of the Mass. Webb is using the reference to open the possibility that Harry's act has a representative and redemptive character which participates in Christ's. The liturgical language - "vestments" and "cruets" - extends this possibility. Yet he does not allow it to develop easily. In the same stanza he is increasing the distance between Harry and "us" - and that by increasing the distance between Harry's word and usual language. Harry wears the language of the ward (itself woven with nostalgic threads from "all known worlds"), but his "innocence" is neither shaped nor complicated by its "giddy alphabet".

His vestments our giddy yarns of the firmament,  
 Women, gods, electric trains, and our remaking  
 Of all known worlds - but not yet  
 Has our giddy alphabet  
 Perplexed his priestcraft and spilled the cruet of innocence.  
(CP, 224)

As he imagines Harry a sacred fool, Webb is surely nodding to St Paul: "Do you see now how God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom?"<sup>1</sup>.

He is also indicating the poem's fundamental dynamism, which is derived from the interaction between Webb's use of high, sacramental language and Harry's own inarticulate presence and "mongol mouth". As it moves between symbolic and descriptive levels of language, the poem is enacting a mediatory and redemptive vision of poetry - like Sandys, "shaping a causeway between earth and heaven". It is also enacting a

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1. 1 Corinthians, 1:20.

more prophetic vision of poetry, enticing the reader to experience the play between a conventionally wise assessment of Harry and its own more paradoxical and religious view, and thus to participate in the poem's drama of recognition. It is the drama of the "Suffering Servant":

As the crowds were appalled on seeing him -  
 so disfigured did he look  
 that he seemed no longer human -  
 so will the crowds be astonished at him,  
 and kings stand speechless before him;  
 for they shall see something never told  
 and witness something never heard before:  
 'Who could believe what we have heard,  
 and to whom has the power of Yahweh been revealed?'<sup>1</sup>.

The poem next engages with the possibility that Harry's word, more primitive than "common-sense", may embody eternal wisdom. Harry's language has been "Shaped" by "our" memories of "the world of commonsense",

But it is no goddess of ours guiding the fingers and  
 the thumb.  
 She cries: Ab aeterno ordinata sum.  
 He writes to the woman, this lad who will never marry.  
 One vowel and the thousand laborious serifs will come  
 To this pudgy Christ, and the old shape of Mary.  
 Before seasoned pelts and the thin  
 Soft tactile underskin  
 Of air were stretched across earth, they have sported  
 and are one. (CP, 224-225)

He is one with the feminine personification of Wisdom - "no goddess of ours", but God's everlasting companion, active in creation. "Ab aeterno ordinata sum" is the cry of Wisdom:

Yahweh created me when his purpose first unfolded,  
 before the oldest of his works.  
 From everlasting I was firmly set,  
 from the beginning, before earth came into being.<sup>2</sup>.

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1. Isaiah, 51, 14-15.
  2. Proverbs, 8:22, 23. This is the Jerusalem Bible translation. "From everlasting I was firmly set" translates "Ab aeterno ordinata sum". A variant translation (The New English Bible) uses "I was fashioned" instead of "I was firmly set" - which comes closer to the way Webb is here using the "Shaped" and shaping Harry to imply an active/receptive structure in inspiration. (My thanks to Fr. Jim Murphy for locating the text in Latin, and for providing alternative translations.)

In Catholic liturgy and prayer, this text was often applied to Mary, whose collaboration with the Redeemer was analogous to Wisdom's collaboration with the Creator. Webb is drawing on this when he refers to "the old shape of Mary".<sup>1</sup>

Harry's imbecile wisdom, because it is original and outcast, now threatens the walled power of conventional learning:

Was it then at this altar-stone the mind was begun?  
 The image besieges our Troy. Consider the sick  
 Convulsions of movement, and the featureless baldy sun  
 Insensible - sparing that compulsive nervous tic.  
 Before life, the fantastic succession,  
 An imbecile makes his confession,  
 Is filled with the Word unwritten, has almost genuflected.  
 (CP, 225)

The rhyming of "succession" and "confession" locates a tension which runs throughout the entire poem, between empiricist evaluations and theological ones, between the "fantastic succession" and the Word. Here the language of "fantastic succession" creates a central focus in which Harry is empirically described: convulsions, nervous tic, and a head which is shingly bald, but featureless and insensible. Around this Webb weaves a symbolic language: the altar and the Word. (Because it is a language of and from the weak, he gives it a cutting edge: it "besieges our Troy", our walled mind.) This language has a reverberating quality: the altar-stone remembers and makes present

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1. Moreover, when, within a stanza centred in marital imagery, Webb depicts Mary coming to Harry-Christ, he is not about to entertain the possibility of incest. The poem is working with a tension present in the biblical imagery itself: Wisdom is at once a creative and receptive state, and is imagined as both mother and bride. Ecclesiasticus says that Wisdom "will come to meet (whoever fears the Lord) like a mother, and receive him like a virgin bride". (15:2) In Wisdom, Solomon describes and desires Wisdom as the mother of all good things (7:12) and resolves to have her as his bride (8:2). Without denying or defending the patriarchal leanings in this imagery, I would suggest that Webb is using it to picture poetry as a communion of receptive and creative conditions. The image of Mary focuses this: she must listen and speak if there is to be a Word.

again the earlier references to sacrifice and the eucharist. The "Word" recalls the references to Wisdom. So that the symbolic perspective is reverberating more deeply even as the physical description becomes more direct.

This strategy is maintained in the final stanza. We are given two heart-rending images: children screaming "at the sight/Of his mongol mouth stained with food"; Harry licking "the soiled envelope with lover's caress". Around these Webb weaves words of resurrection and transfiguration. The vision and strategy of the poem - and of the poetry - is made quite explicit: it is "because" of these images that Harry can be seen transfigured.

Because the wise world has for ever and ever rejected  
Him and because your children would scream at the sight  
Of his mongol mouth stained with food, he has resurrected  
The spontaneous thought retarded and infantile Light.  
Transfigured with him we stand  
Among walls of the no-man's-land  
While he licks the soiled envelope with lover's caress

Directing it to the House of no known address. (CP, 225)

Right down to the fact that the envelope is soiled, this is a portrait of a suffering servant whose writing transfigures others, especially those it confronts, those who think themselves wiser and more beautiful than he. With the final ambiguity, the servant is again denied the consolation of a literal marriage. The letter will be read by no woman. The poem, however, is there, besieging Troy, and containing perhaps a secret irony, difficult to recognise from behind the walls of the "known" world: that the (symbolic) House addressed may be more certain because not "known".

Obviously, it is not uncommon for the poet/artist to be depicted as one who suffers on behalf of humankind, one with prophetic and visionary gifts, one whose word is ignored, even one who performs a

Christ-like role. It is important, though, to hear the variations which Webb sounds within that theme. He stresses the tension within the vision: it is a vision of both terror and love. He does not allow belief to soften this: Christ writes in wind and sand. Moreover, Webb does not allow the poet an elitist mode of suffering: the poet must sit beside Mrs Mac and her lumbago, must return to ordinary fellowship. If the poet's neglected vision is finally vindicated, it is not so much because he or she sees life entire and whole, as because her or his speech is riddled with compassion. Struggling between the language of belief and that of fact, between complex symbolic utterance, physical description and simple statement, between dramatising the (often complex) subject and focusing the (often simple) object, poetry is, for Webb, the suffering of language.