The Life and Work Of Cynthia Reed Nolan

Jane Grant.
Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
University of Sydney.
March 2002.
Copyright in relation to this Thesis

Under the Copyright Act 1968 (several provisions of which are referred to below), this material must be used only under the normal conditions of scholarly fair dealing for the purposes of research, criticism or review. In particular no results or conclusions should be extracted from it, nor should it be copied or closely paraphrased in whole or in part without the written consent of the author. Proper written acknowledgement should be made for any assistance obtained from this material.

Under Section 35 (2) of the Copyright Act 1968 'the author of a literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work is the owner of any copyright subsisting in the work'. By virtue of Section 32 (1) copyright 'subsists in an original literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work that is unpublished' land of which the author was an Australian citizen, an Australian protected person or a person resident in Australia.

The Act, by Section 36 (1) provides: 'Subject to this Act, the copyright in a literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work is infringed by any person who, not being the owner of the copyright and without the licence of the owner of the copyright, does in Australia, or authorises the doing in Australia of, any act comprised in the copyright'.

Section 31 (1) (a) (i) provides that copyright includes the exclusive right to 'reproduce the work in a material form'. Thus, copyright is infringed by any person who, not being the owner of the copyright, reproduces or authorises the reproduction of a work, or of more than a reasonable part of the work, in a material form, unless the reproduction is a 'fair dealing' with the work 'for the purpose of research or study' as further defined in Sections 40 and 41 of the Act.

Section 51 (2) provides that "Where a manuscript, or a copy of material of other similar literary work that has not been published is kept in a library of a university or other similar institution or in an archives, the copyright in the material or other work is not infringed by the making of a copy of the material or other work by or on behalf of the officer in charge of the library or archives if the copy is supplied to a person who satisfies an authorized officer of the library or archives that he requires the copy for the purpose of research or study'.

* Thesis' includes 'treatise', 'dissertation' and other similar productions.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their kind assistance:
Mary Andrews, Barbara Blackman, Betty Bell, Daria Block, Joan Brodsgaard, Gavin Butler, Roslyn Carrodus, Alannah Coleman, Ethel Coote, James Crouch, Adrian Deamer, Virginia Edwards, John Handford, Lady Maisie Drysdale, Ninette Dutton, Mary Eagle, Cedric Flower, Joyce Good, Malcolm Good, Patricia Grant, Polly Grant Butler, Sadie Grant Butler, John Hull, Michael Keon, Alice Klapake, Diane Langmore, Jean Langley, Elwyn and Lily Lynn, Alan Maclean, Jane Macgowan, Angela Marshall, Drusilla Modjeska, Guy Morrison, Robert Morrison, Terry Miles, Marion Miller, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, Jinx Nolan, Lady Mary Nolan, Paddy Pearl, Jocelyn Plate, Reg Preston, Dr Margaret Reed, Barrett Reid, Andrew Sayers, Julie Sharp, Michael Sharp, Clare Skillbeck, Damien Smith, Geoffrey Smith, Peter Townsend, Tom Thompson, Nancy Underhill, Nicholas Usherwood, Kenneth Von Bibra, Martin Ward, Eleanor Watson.

I would also like to thank the following institutions: the British Library, the Department of English: the University of Sydney, the Latrobe Library. The London Metropolitan Archives, Mitchell Library, the Multimedia Unit: National Library of Australia, the Pears-Britten Foundation, the Powerhouse Museum, the Tate Gallery, and the University of Sydney.

Finally, I would like to thank my supervisor, Jennifer Gribble, for her advice, insights, and patience.

To the best of my knowledge, I have permission to quote from the research material obtained from public institutions, private archives, and interviews that I have conducted.
| CONTENTS |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS         |                          |
| INTRODUCTION             | 1                        |
| CHAPTER ONE              | CHILDHOOD TO MATURITY    |
| (i) From Tasmania to Melbourne, 1908-1935 | 13                       |
| (ii) Nursing in America and England, 1935-1940 | 32                       |
| (iii) Home, 1940-1947    | 42                       |
| CHAPTER TWO              | THE EARLY NOVELS, 1944-1947: |
| (i) *Lucky Alphonse!*    | 49                       |
| (ii) *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* | 62                      |
| CHAPTER THREE            | MARRIAGE AND TRAVEL, 1947-1971 | 80                     |
| CHAPTER FOUR             | THE TRAVEL WRITING, 1962-1971: |
| (i) *Outback*            | 94                       |
APPENDIX

Photograph and Paintings

Ripolin enamel on hardboard.
91 x 122.2cm.
Inscribed i.r. 4.12.48. /21 Nolan.

152.5 x 122cm.
Oil on Hardboard.
Signed and dated 1.r. N, inscribed on reverse: 16 Feb 1963/ Nolan/ No.3.

91.5 x 122cm.
Ripolin on hardboard.
Signed and dated l.r. Nolan 3/12/49.
Reproduced Usherwood, ibid.

Ripolin on masonite.
26 x 42 inches.
Collection: the artist.


From the painting, *Girl*, by Sidney Nolan.
Ibid.

48 x 60 inches.
Polyvinyl acetate on masonite.
Reproduced in Clark, op.cit.

122 x122 cm.
Ripolin on board.
Reproduced in Usherwood, op.cit.

Ripolin on board.

132 x 100cms.

Oil on board.

Signed and dated: Nolan 1975 on reverse.

Reproduced in Usherwood, op.cit.
INTRODUCTION

Cynthia Reed Nolan¹ (1908-1976) published three autobiographical novels: Lucky Alphonse!, Daddy Sowed a Wind! and A Bride for St Thomas, as well as five books on her travels with her artist husband, Sidney Nolan: Outback, One Traveller's Africa, Open Negative: An American Memoir, A Sight of China and Paradise and Yet: The Travels of Cynthia and Sidney Nolan.² Until the re-release of Reed Nolan’s last novel, A Bride for St Thomas, and the publication of four abridged versions of the travel books, Outback, One Traveller’s Africa, A Sight of China and Paradise and Yet, in the single volume Outback and Beyond in 1994³, her books had been long out of print. Before 1994 it would have been possible to argue that it was the difficulty of obtaining her work that led to her neglect by literary critics.

What little attention literary critics have paid to Reed Nolan has tended to affirm her marginalised status as the wife of the famous painter. In Seeking the Centre Roslyn Haynes discusses in some detail the paintings Sidney Nolan did in response to the Nolans’ 1948 expedition into Australia’s interior. Reed Nolan’s book of this journey, Outback, is only mentioned in a footnote.⁴ Apart from Dale Spender’s aside that Reed Nolan might be an interesting subject for study,⁵ Australian literary critics have remained silent.

Reed Nolan’s neglect is particularly striking given the revival of interest in Australian mid-twentieth century women writers. In the past ten years, biographies of Christina Stead, Eleanor Dark and Charmian Clift⁶ have begun the process of uncovering the social and cultural constraints that operated upon the work of these Australian women writers. Examinations of the contexts within which these women wrote have begun to assemble a

¹ In deciding to refer to Cynthia Nolan as Reed Nolan, I have taken into account the problem that arises in discussing her life and work after her marriage to Sidney Nolan, and the issues raised in the travel writing about her own feelings of creative subjugation within this marriage. Prior to her marriage to Sidney Nolan, I refer to her as Cynthia Reed. To refer to her simply as ‘Cynthia’ is inappropriate to her status as an Australian writer. However, there are points in the biographical chapters when I discuss her relationship with her family where it has been necessary to call her ‘Cynthia’. Although I recognise that she wrote separately under the names of Reed and Nolan, my decision to call the writer, Reed Nolan, attempts to give consistency to her creative identity as writer.
³ A Bride for St Thomas, (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1994). Outback and Beyond: The Travels of Cynthia and Sidney Nolan, (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1994).
⁵ Writing A New World: Two Centuries of Australian Women’s Writing, (Pandora, North Sydney, 1988), p. 301.
clearer understanding of the collective pressures that operated on mid-twentieth century creative women.

Drusilla Modjeska’s 1981 study, *Exiles at Home*, represents an important landmark in the revival of interest in Australian women who wrote and published from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s. In drawing on writers such as Eleanor Dark, Dymphna Cusack, Marjorie Barnard, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Christina Stead and Kylie Tennant, among others, Modjeska analyses the political, cultural and social crossovers of Australian women’s writing of this period. Reed Nolan’s first novel, *Lucky Alphonse*, is not included in this company, while her second novel, *Daddy Sowed A Wind*, falls outside the period on which Modjeska focuses. Nonetheless, *Exiles at Home* provides a useful starting point from which to examine Reed Nolan’s early novels.

The two early novels were written when Reed Nolan was living in Sydney in the 1940s. As I shall suggest, they are to a large extent autobiographical. *Lucky Alphonse* is based on the period between 1935 and 1940 when Reed Nolan trained and worked as a nurse in Chicago, London and Paris. *Daddy Sowed A Wind* draws in detail on Reed Nolan’s childhood and youth. Although both works are fertile ground for a biographer, they are also novels of their period and place.

Like the Australian ‘international novels’ of Christina Stead, Martin Boyd and Patrick White in the 1930s and 1940s, *Lucky Alphonse* and *Daddy Sowed A Wind* position their Australian central characters either partially or entirely outside Australia. In *Lucky Alphonse* the Australian woman, Alphonse, travels through America to England to become a nurse. *Daddy Sowed A Wind* also involves a central journey from Australia to Europe. From a different angle, there are also important links between Reed Nolan’s early novels and Eleanor Dark’s *Prelude to Christopher* (1934), which Reed Nolan had been recommended to read in 1940, Dymphna Cusack’s *Jungfrau* (1936), and Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone* (1945). All five of these novels, written between 1934 and 1947, explore the conflicts between love, sex and vocation, and the inhibitions and constraints of being female within an Australian environment that is experienced as being hostile to women’s ambitions.

*Lucky Alphonse* and *For Love Alone* can be read as narratives of expatriation. In *Lucky Alphonse*, it is only by leaving Australia and freeing herself from the expectations of her patrician family that Alphonse can fulfil her ambitions. In *For Love Alone* Teresa leaves Australia and becomes a writer. Both novels construct utopian dreams of female independence and success. In *For Love Alone*, however, utopia is predicated upon a view of Australia as dystopia. Teresa’s torturous struggle to escape Australia insinuates the morbid

---

consequences of remaining in Australia. In *Lucky Alphonse* this oppressive Australian landscape is an occasional yet insistent motivational memory for the exiled Alphonse.

On the other hand, there are the cornered, claustrophobic nightmares of isolation and entrapment displayed in Dark’s *Prelude to Christopher* and Cusack’s *Jungfrau*, whose central women characters never leave Australia, and commit suicide, and in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!*, where Hyacinth does leave, but returns home to kill herself. Reed Nolan’s writing operates as a bridge between the ‘international’ and expatriation novels and the women’s writing produced by Modjeska’s ‘exiles at home’. As I shall argue, the idea of homecoming for Reed Nolan was weighted down by the fear of failure. As early as 1947, *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* canvasses an extreme response to returning. Reed Nolan’s reflections on her 1965 journey home in *A Sight of China* are hardly less extreme. Australia is represented as hell. It might be argued that geographic exile was a necessary process in the self-construction of Australian woman as modernist artist. Conversely, staying, or returning home, might be seen to enact the death of the creative self.

A closer analysis of the connections between Reed Nolan’s novels and the early work of Dark and Cusack sheds further light on the literary expression of the obstacles facing creative women in the mid-twentieth century. Beneath the surface of these novels, there lurks a Gothic element engendering fear and uncertainty through its tropes of female victims, madness and suicide. This Gothic legacy is most powerfully present in the work of Dark and Reed Nolan, where the Gothic preoccupation with disintegration is allied with modernism’s concerns with degeneration. The abortions central to all three novels may register the pressing social concerns of women in the 1930s and 1940s, yet abortion is closely related to suicide, and is another self-generated attack on the female body.

The fear of inherited madness, self-destruction and death of the future, signified by these representations of abortion, suggests a specifically female nihilism. In their Australian context, these representations reveal uncertainty about the place for creative women, and, perhaps, for women in general. These fears, however, are not restricted to women novelists of this period, but are equally evident in Patrick White’s *The Aunt’s Story* published in 1948. Theodora Goodman, on her way home to Australia, is side-tracked in to the Californian desert, where she goes mad. Simon During has read the ending in terms of White’s divided cultural identity and anxieties about returning to Australia from London. For During, White’s writing records the ‘colonial/postcolonial switching point’, a transitional moment of cultural

---


uncertainty. White’s multi-faced image of sterility in the figure of the spinster going mad in the desert makes an interesting counterpart to the barren lives of the female protagonists in Dark, Cusack and Reed Nolan.

Andrew McCann has speculated on the ways in which the Gothic in Australian writing realises the guilt that lies behind white settlement: ‘The Gothic unearths the “repressed” of colonisation: collective guilt, the memory of violence and dispossession, and the struggle for mastery in which the insecurity of the settler-colony is revealed’. Although the fearful anxieties that these women’s novels project may well be an expression of the postcolonial condition, the anxieties I identify are also a response to their gender, place and historical period; to the reality of being creative women in Australia through the 1930s and 1940s.

Although the 1994 publication of the compendium of Reed Nolan’s travel writing Outback and Beyond did not generate interest in her work by literary critics, her writing was being noticed by historians. In 1996 an extract from Reed Nolan’s second travel book was included in The Oxford Book of Australian Travel Writing, edited by the historians, Ros Pesman, Richard White and David Walker. Further recognition by Australian historians was acknowledged in her inclusion in volume 15 of The Australian Dictionary of Biography.

Since Edward Said’s seminal work Orientalism was published in 1978, travel writing has been the subject of intense critical and theoretical scrutiny and speculation. Over the past ten years, particular attention has been directed towards women’s travel writing, although the focus of this attention has tended to be on writing of the colonial period that has reflected the perspective of the colonisers. More recently, work by colonial and postcolonial theorists and scholars has explored how colonial (and postcolonial) writing of white settlers differs from writing from the imperial centre.

The Oxford Book of Australian Travel Writing demonstrates the distinct and different voice of Australian travel writing. The editors note: ‘Colonisation implies a one way gaze, the imperial power gazing over the colonised territory and its people and resources: few have

11 ‘Colonial Gothic; Morbid Anatomy, Comodification and Critique in Marcus Clarke’s The Mystery of Major Molineux’, Australian Literary Studies, Vol. 19 No. 4, p. 399.

Despite these acknowledgments, there have been oversights. It should also be noted that Stephen Alomes refers exclusively to Reed Nolan as Sidney Nolan’s wife in his book When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999). It should also be noted that although Ros Pesman mentions Reed Nolan’s third novel, A Bride for St Thomas in Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996), she makes no mention of either Lucky Alphonse! or Daddy Sowed A Wind!

bothered about the gaze in the other direction. As Gillian Whitlock has recently pointed out: 'Little has been done to theorise the settler/subject, and there remains active hostility to the inclusion of Australian/Canadian, South African and New Zealand colonial settlements in the framework of the post colonial.' This 'active hostility' is evident in Ania Loomba's unambiguous description of white Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians and South Africans 'as agents of colonial rule'. Reed Nolan's novels and first travel book, *Outback*, reflect this 'gaze in the other direction.' Her later travel writing, written after the Nolans had settled permanently in London, registers the dual vision of the expatriate white Australian, whose legacy is both that of the coloniser and the colonised.

As McCann has demonstrated in his analysis of Gothic tropes in Marcus Clarke, the Gothic functions to unearth the repressed. Roslyn Haynes' work on the Gothic dimension of the Australian landscape is similarly useful in identifying the Gothic legacy in *Outback*. Haynes writes: 'A post-Freudian reading of the Gothic as a trope for the suppressed fears imprisoned in the dark atavistic house of the subconscious is equally readily transferred to accounts of the desert.' *Outback*, based on a journey the Nolans undertook in 1949 into the interior of Australia, is not only a geographic expedition into the desert interior of Australia, but also a psychological journey into white guilt. The quest to know one's own land becomes an unsettling confrontation with the guilty secret of Aboriginal dispossession, a secret that has lain hidden in the psychic trope of the desert landscape. It becomes evident that Reed Nolan's own ambiguous perspective as a postcolonial white Australian informs her subsequent travels away from Australia.

The inclusion of the extract from *One Traveller's Africa* in the Oxford anthology of Australian travel writing foregrounds Reed Nolan as a writer and signals a critical moment for any study of her writing and its reception. That this recognition of Reed Nolan as a writer is unusual is best understood in the context in which she has been written about and represented since her death in 1976.

In 1981 Patrick White wrote in *Flaws in the Glass* about Reed Nolan's death and his deep sadness at the loss of a close friend. Although it was widely known that Reed Nolan had committed suicide, this was the first time it had been acknowledged in print. White's bitter

---

16 *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, (Routledge, London, 1998), p.9. Loomba treats white settlers as a homogenous group. Her position fails to take into account the cultural differences integral to all white settlements during the colonial period. Certainly, the Irish Catholics who arrived in Australia during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as convicts and as refugees from Britain's colonisation of their own country, would rightfully have seen themselves as colonial subjects. Understandably, Loomba's horror at the subsequent treatment of the indigenous peoples by the white settlers prevents her from engaging in what she dismissively refers to as the white settler's 'differences with the mother country'. Ibid., p. 9.
attack on Sidney Nolan was to spark a well-publicised and publicly played-out feud between
the two men:

I have never been able to blame Sid, knowing they were both, that we are all, always, to
blame. If I have not been able to accept him since Cynthia’s death, it is for knowing the
Cynthia in myself and that I may have acted the same way. What I cannot forgive is his
flinging himself on another woman’s breast when the ashes were scarcely cold.\footnote{Penguin, London, 1981, p.237.}

Whatever White professed, clearly his melodramatic description of Nolan ‘flinging himself on
another woman’s breast before the ashes were scarcely cold’ is an accusation that raises the
spectre of an affair, the possibility of a connection between Reed Nolan’s death and Nolan’s
marriage to Mary Perceval fifteen months later. Nolan’s outrage at the moral implications of
White’s accusation took the form of a vicious homophobic painting of White and his partner
Manoly Lascaris. In an interview Nolan is reported as saying ‘usually I put on some Mozart
when I’m in the studio to warm up but on this occasion I thought I’d just better do it in cold
blood.’\footnote{The Sunday Times, 11 April 1981, (courtesy of The Tate Gallery Archive, London).}

As David McCooey has pointed out, autobiographies are not simply accounts of the
writer’s life but contain within them multiple biographies.\footnote{Arfoul Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), p.181} It is not surprising that Nolan
retaliated with such fury to Flaws in the Glass. White trespassed on Sidney Nolan’s private
pain and exposed it to public scrutiny. At its worst, Flaws in the Glass is gossip. It is also a
detective story. Reed Nolan’s suicide becomes the mystery that White solves. Several years
later the mystery of suicide is touched upon in Brian Adams’ biography of Sidney Nolan.
Adams describes how Nolan, reading Lucky Alphonse! in 1944, became fascinated by the
‘intriguing woman’ whom he had briefly met in 1941.\footnote{Such is Life: A Biography of Sidney Nolan, (Random House, Sydney, 1992), p.74.} In entitling the chapter in which Reed
Nolan enters Nolan’s life ‘In Search of Cynthia’, Adams also gestures towards the enigma of
her life.

White’s passage on the Nolans embellishes her death with mystery and scandal, but
he also drew attention to the powerful role she played in Sidney Nolan’s career. She was, as
he says, ‘steel to Sid’s elastic’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 236.} White understood how her inflexibility and resilience caused
resentment:

Naturally Cynthia was much hated by those who had designs on Sid. They hated her for her
patrician, increasingly ravaged face, her unfailing taste which showed up their own flyblown

\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{18}}\textit{\textsuperscript{19}}\textit{\textsuperscript{20}}\textit{\textsuperscript{21}}\textit{\textsuperscript{22}}
vulgarity, their ambition to nail down an investment, to bed a genius, or simply hooze with a mate. Reed Nolan is seen as the protector of Nolan's fragile genius. White's identification with Reed Nolan is evident. The 'patrician, increasingly ravaged face' he describes could easily be his own. If Sidney Nolan was offended by White's attack, so too were other erstwhile friends who might have read themselves into the above passage.

In the 1990s Barry Humphries and Geoffrey Dutton, two men who had maintained friendships with Sidney Nolan while falling out with Patrick White, included hostile descriptions of Reed Nolan in their autobiographies. In Out in the Open Geoffrey Dutton refers to Reed Nolan as a 'vampire', presumably preying off the talent of her husband. In More Please Humphries relates an anecdote about the Nolans. After an afternoon spent drinking with Nolan and Patrick White, Nolan asked Humphries to telephone Reed Nolan to invite her to join them for dinner:

I had no sooner announced myself than she barked: 'how did you get this number? You can't speak to Sidd anyway, he's busy in his studio and doesn't want to be disturbed!' The phone slammed down. Poor Cynthia never knew that her busy husband was standing right beside me, or that Patrick White, the great Australian novelist was anxious to dine with her. She would have been mortified had she known, avid lion-hunter that she was.

Although Reed Nolan is the apparent butt of the joke, the anecdote substantiates White's sneering remark about boozing mates keeping Nolan from his work. In all three accounts, Reed Nolan's identity is founded on Nolan. In the case of White and Humphries, she is the gatekeeper guarding Sidney against distractions. To Dutton, Reed Nolan is sinister: a ghoulish parasite.

This image of Reed Nolan as dependent upon other people's creativity has other sources beyond her marriage to Sidney Nolan and the way male contemporaries viewed her. In Australian Art between the Wars – 1914 - 1939, Mary Eagle addresses the role Reed Nolan played as curator and shopkeeper in Melbourne in the early 1930s. Examining the importance of shops and galleries in the dissemination of modernism in Australia during the 1930s, Mary Eagle asserts the significance of this background in nurturing modernism. Yet in noting Reed Nolan's contribution, Eagle is also locking her within a role that prefigured her instrumental, yet backstage, role in launching Sidney Nolan's international career. It makes

---

23 ibid., p.236.
sense that the woman who would eventually manage Sidney Nolan’s career begins her working life as a curator and vendor of early Australian visual modernism. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that Reed Nolan’s involvement in the shop and gallery lasted a little over two years. Repeatedly signified as the gatekeeper she now appears in the guise of the shopkeeper. Consistently, these representations define Reed Nolan as a conduit to the creative talent of others.

Reed Nolan has also been written about in reference to her brother and sister-in-law, the art patrons John and Sunday Reed. Within months of the conclusion of his seven year affair with Sunday Reed, Sidney Nolan married Cynthia Hansen in March 1948.27 The marriage and its aftermath reputedly severed any further communication between the two couples.28

In her introduction to her selection of letters between Sunday Reed and the artist Joy Hester, Janine Burke includes Reed Nolan in the cast of peripheral characters who collected around ‘Heide’: ‘Cynthia’s was a varied and unusual life marked by phases that included both writing and psychiatric nursing.’29 Reed Nolan spent five years nursing between 1935 and 1940. In 1940 she spent six months in New York working towards a postgraduate qualification in psychiatric nursing which she did not complete. Although, as I shall further argue, Reed Nolan’s ideological commitment to Freudian psychology is an important key to the writing, Burke’s equal weighting of a period of months with the four decades she was a writer is curious.

All of these various references to Reed Nolan privilege her life above her writing. Her fame, such as it is, comes as a consequence of the part she played in the lives of the famous, and from her inscription in their autobiographies, biographies and studies, as the wife, the sister, the sister-in-law, the manager, the shopkeeper and the curator. In a curious twist, Reed Nolan’s daughter Jinx Nolan has complained that her mother has been ‘written out’ of Sidney Nolan’s story.30

The sorts of questions that have been asked by Drusilla Modjeska in Stravinsky’s Lunch about the dynamics of power within creative partnerships have a direct bearing upon any study of Reed Nolan. The Australian painter Stella Bowen lived with the English writer Ford Maddox Ford for many years. The couple had one child. Although Ford was supportive

27 Cynthia Reed returned to Australia at the end of 1940 as Mrs Hansen. She claimed to friends and family that she married a Dane named Hansen who was killed in Romania in 1940. (Interview with Jocelyn Plate by Jane Grant 10 March 1995).
28 See Adams, op.cit., p. 98.
30 Interview with Jinx Nolan by Jane Grant, 27 October 1996.
of Bowen's painting, his creative needs dominated in their life together while she acquiesced
to the role of wife and mother, to the cost of her own creative work.\textsuperscript{31} Like Ford, Sidney Nolan thought of himself as supportive of his wife's writing. In an
interview in \textit{The Bulletin}, Nolan draws attention to Reed Nolan's book, \textit{One Traveller's
Africa}, shortly to be published.\textsuperscript{32} In various ways they worked collaboratively. One expression
of their collaboration is the travel writing in which Reed Nolan documents her husband's
artistic quest. Another aspect of their collaboration are the photographs, paintings and
drawings by Nolan that illustrate Reed Nolan's texts. The inclusion of his images in her books
needs careful consideration. On one hand, his books can be seen to be promoting his art. On
the other hand, they indeed illuminate her writing. My study of Reed Nolan's life and writing
explores the creative collaboration of the Nolans and their interchanging influences on each
other. However, the travel writing is also testimony to Reed Nolan's feelings of creative
subjugation, recording conflicts similar to those Modjeska locates in Bowen's life.

In the travel writing, Nolan is presented as the subject and Reed Nolan as the scribe.
Certainly contemporary reviews focused upon Reed Nolan's apparently subjugated role.
David McNicholl's review of \textit{One Traveller's Africa} was facetiously titled 'Potty about Sid':
'It is perhaps natural that Cynthia Nolan should be overshadowed by her husband. Her
admiration for him is boundless and it is apparent that many of her impressions are through
his eyes, his flashbacks, his imagery.'\textsuperscript{33} A similar point is made by Lorna Curtin in her review
of \textit{A Sight of China}: 'Cynthia Nolan must have had her pencil and notebook continually at
the ready for her role as an efficient Boswell recording the utterances of the good Doctor
Nolan.'\textsuperscript{34}

In noting the delay between the writing of \textit{Outback} and its publication, \textit{The Times
Literary Supplement} is more reflective: 'The delay is doubly unfortunate because in 1962
(though not in 1948) Mrs Cynthia Nolan is bound to be thought of as “Sidney Nolan's wife”
and this work may even be construed by some to be cashing in on her husband's fame.'\textsuperscript{35}
None of these reviews observes the ironies in Reed Nolan's representation of her husband, nor
how her own self-portraits expose the frustrations of her secondary status.

Pesman, Walker and White have noted how the line between Australian travel writing
and autobiography has not been 'well policed'.\textsuperscript{36} Travel writing is, by its very nature, a
subjective record and travel a rich metaphor for self-discovery. Although Reed Nolan's travel
writing is an account of the Nolans' travels, it is also biographical and autobiographical

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{31} Pan Macmillan, Sydney 1999.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{The Bulletin}, 20 March 1965.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{The Bulletin}, 12 June 1965.
\textsuperscript{34} 'The Nolan's Chinese Journey', \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 27 December 1969.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Times Literary Supplement}, 6 September 1963 From Bill (Ida) Cantwell's scrapbook, Mitchell
Library, New South Wales.
\end{flushright}
writing. The stated and implied purpose behind all the journeys is Nolan’s artistic quest. As Sidney travels to find inspiration, Reed Nolan records that quest. The travel books contain the creative biography of the modernist artist, Sidney Nolan. On this level Reed Nolan is the biographer. Yet, as the narrator constructs her portrait of her artist husband, she also monitors and records her response to this portrait. As Sara Mills has noted: ‘Women’s travel writing can be seen as a response to disciplinary pressure, tending to exhibit a concern with displaying the ‘self’.

The autobiographical aspect of the travel writing develops a subversive and vengeful memoir of one side of a marriage, connecting with the curious and often incoherent narratives of complaint and disease found in the novels.

Laura Marcus has suggested that the authors of women’s autobiographical writing are ‘responsible for the problematical reception of their work, for they perform willy-nilly both as artists and historians, negotiating a narrative passage between the freedoms of imaginative creation on the one hand and the constraints of biographical fact on the other. Both John Colmer and Gillian Whitlock have separately argued that the rigid division between fiction and history, which has dominated much of the theoretical debate surrounding autobiography, fails to take into account the processes of reading. As Gillian Whitlock has written: ‘The question of “what is autobiography” is replaced by a series of questions about when and how it is possible to read autobiographically."

Marcus’ theory that the autobiographical author is responsible for ‘the problematical reception of the work’ is applicable to Reed Nolan for reasons that extend beyond the transgressive nature of autobiographical writing. Simon During has persuasively argued that there were factors involved in Patrick White’s canonisation as a ‘great Australian writer’ other than his talent, such as the text’s engagement with its historical moment. During also makes the point that White played the self-conscious role of ‘genius’. The opposite is true of Reed Nolan. Her writing not only fails to engage in protestations of ‘genius’ but also seems to revel in invisibility. She also seems to be ambivalent about the significance of her work, and once declared to the Australian press, ‘I write like other women knit.’ This apparent self-effacement, so often the source of unease for the reader, was one impulse only: part of the

36 Pesman, Walker, White p.xiii.
37 Op.cit., p.19. Mills is reluctant to read women’s travel writing as autobiographical, arguing that these accounts ‘cannot be read simply as autobiography, but must be read as textual constructs emanating from a range of discourses.’ p.20.
40 Ibid., p.247. In order to read autobiographically, however, the reader must be armed with what David McCooy in Artful Histories has defined as the reader’s ‘extra-textual knowledge’, op.cit., p. 8.
42 The Sun, 27 April 1966.
paradox inherent in Reed Nolan’s writing out and publishing the story of her eclipse. More important, perhaps, Reed Nolan failed to return home. Her ill-disguised dislike of Australia and, in turn, the dislike she provoked, also played its part in her neglect.

Nadia Wheatley’s biography of the writer, Charmian Clift, uncovers another creative female overshadowed by the success of her husband, the writer, George Johnston. Wheatley asserts in her prologue, ‘The book is also concerned with mapping the invisible boundaries between the territories known as ‘real life’, ‘fiction’ and ‘myth’. Wheatley raises some interesting and challenging questions about the influences of biographical and autobiographical writing on lived experience.

Wheatley presents her case that Johnston’s autobiographical quest trespassed upon and possessed both Clift’s writing and her life. At the epicentre of Wheatley’s biography is Clift’s suicide, only days before the publication of the second novel in Johnston’s autobiographical trilogy, Clean Straw for Nothing. Wheatley argues that Clift believed that through his fictional character, Cressida Morley, based upon herself, Johnston would expose her infidelities. This, Wheatley asserts, was, at least partially, responsible her suicide. As McCooey has commented in reference to George Johnston’s portrait of his first wife: ‘To claim that My Brother Jack is merely a ‘further’ text in Johnston’s life is to fail to admit one crucial aspect of the writing: its effect.

There are both parallels and important differences between Charmian Clift and Reed Nolan. Johnston deliberately attempted to strip her of creative identity in his portrait of Clift as the non-creative Cressida Morley. Reed Nolan’s story is more complex. Wheatley admits that Clift’s creative output was small, yet it did not take Wheatley’s biography to instate her as a writer. By contrast, Reed Nolan created a relatively substantial body of work that has been largely ignored. She has rarely been represented as a writer. The argument that Johnston’s characterisation of Clift informs the emotional landscape of Clift’s suicide can also be applied to Reed Nolan. I shall suggest that clues to Reed Nolan’s suicide lie not only in her own literary self-portraits, but also in Nolan’s paintings from the years leading up to her death in 1976.

In presenting this pioneering study of Reed Nolan’s life and work, I assess her significance as a writer and her contribution to Australian literary modernism. I argue that the travel writing is less a record of journeys undertaken than a series of narratives that are often

---

44 Gary Kinnane first speculated upon the possible correlation between Clift’s anxieties about Johnston’s portrait of her and her suicide in George Johnston: A Biography (Penguin, Ringwood, 1989). This point was also noted by Hazel Rowley in ‘The Beautiful and the Damned: George Johnston and Auto/biographical Fiction’, Island, p. 34. 1988. Rowley wrote of Kinnane’s biography: ‘He demonstrates the conflicting nature of such writing, and the possible effect of fictionalising one’s narrative life’. Ibid., p.166.
45 McCooey, op.cit., p. 167.
best read as fiction. The travel writing develops the novels’ concerns into a major exploration of the alienated and exiled Australian modernist artist, forming an important and illuminating parallel to the work of Sidney Nolan. At the centre of the travel books is the marriage. If the textual marriage can be read as a metaphor for the struggle of Australian creative women in a culture dominated by men, it is also a dramatic and compelling realisation of the interchanging influences of literary and visual modernism.

In interweaving this study of Reed Nolan’s writing with an account of her life, I explore the relationship between life and autobiographical writing in order to demonstrate ‘the process by which experience is transformed into art.’ 46 However, as Laura Marcus has suggested, ‘although we assume that the life produces the autobiography, it is equally possible that the autobiographical project produces and determines the life.’ 47 To what extent Reed Nolan’s life and death were shaped and determined by her autobiographical self-constructions and in turn by Nolan’s portraiture of her, and in what ways it is possible to argue for the influence of art on lived experience, will be further investigated.

46 Kinnane, op.cit., p.ix.
47 Marcus, op.cit., p. 205.
CHAPTER ONE: CHILDHOOD TO MATURITY
(i) From Tasmania to Melbourne, 1908-1935

Violet Cynthia Reed was born on 18 September 1908, at the family property ‘Logan’ in Tasmania, the sixth and youngest child of Leila and Henry Reed. The Reeds were wealthy pastoralists who owned a number of substantial properties in Tasmania, ‘Mt Pleasant’, ‘Logan’, ‘Evanale’ and ‘Wesley Dale’, as well as land in England near Bath.1 Cynthia Reed was born at a moment of transition between colonial Australia and the new nation brought about in 1901 by Federation.

Like many Australians at the turn of the twentieth century, the Reeds saw Britain as home.2 Reed Nolan’s mother, Leila Borthwick Dennison, was born off the coast of Scotland in the Orkney Islands. Like the Reeds, the Dennisons were a farming family. Orphaned at the age of twelve, Leila lived with the Guinness family in London, before meeting Henry Reed and moving to Australia.3

Henry Reed was a first generation Australian. His father, also named Henry Reed, had arrived in Tasmania from England in 1826. Beginning his working life as a clerk in Launceston, Reed rapidly became prosperous in the new colony, first as a merchant and subsequently as a pastoralist, ship-owner and banker. One of Reed’s most astute investments was to lend John Batman three thousand pounds to establish himself at Port Phillip Bay.4

Education was one way the Reed family maintained a close connection with their country of origin. The four eldest children, Henry (Dick), Coralie, Margaret and John were sent to school in England. However, the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 was to dramatically alter the education of the younger Reed children. In 1914 John returned from Cheltenham College in England to finish his schooling at Geelong Grammar.5

Cynthia Reed was educated at home by a series of governesses until she was twelve. In 1920, when she joined her sister Barbara at The Hermitage School in Geelong, the war was

---

1 There are a number of brief biographies of Reed Nolan, see: Margaret Giordano and Don Norman *Tasmanian Literary Landmarks*, (Sherewater Press, Hobart, 1984), p. 179. It should be noted, that Giordano and Norman wrongly date Reed Nolan’s death as 1974. See also Sally O’Neill’s entry in *The Australian Dictionary of Biography*. O’Neill mistakenly claims Reed Nolan was one of seven, rather than six children, op.cit.. See also *Letters of John Reed: Defining Australian Cultural Life 1920-1981*, eds., Barrett Reid and Nancy Underhill, (Penguin, Ringwood, 2001), p 45. The problems with these brief overviews of Reed Nolan’s life is that they attempt to condense a complex and involved life into several pages.


3 Interview with Jinx Nolan, op.cit.

4 Interview with Dr Reed by Jane Grant, 30 October, 1996.

5 Ibid.
long over. One effect of a world war that made travel difficult and dangerous was to legitimise Australian schools in the eyes of Australia’s landed classes.

Patrick White, whose patrician background was very similar to Reed Nolan’s, wrote that her childhood was ‘shrouded in Gothic gloom’. Like a heroine in a Gothic tale she was born into a grand house precariously built upon oppression. Present in her writing are not only the ghosts of the ‘chained convicts’, but also the ghosts of the Tasmanian Aborigines. A feeling of unease about this colonial past is an undercurrent throughout her travel writing on Australia, Africa, China and Papua New Guinea.

When Cynthia Reed was four her grandmother Margaret Reed became ill and the family moved permanently to ‘Mt Pleasant’ on the outskirts of Launceston. Many years later, she would remember her grandmother with affection in the early novels. ‘Mt Pleasant’ was less fondly remembered. It was to be the setting for Hyacinth’s childhood in Daddy Sowed A Wind!. Hudson Fysh’s impressions of ‘Mt Pleasant’ in his book on his pioneering grandfather, Henry Reed, make an interesting point of comparison:

In the early days of this century Mt Pleasant was a magnificent property on the lines of an English manor house (except that it was late Georgian or early Victorian) with a Colonial style veranda on two sides. We children had cause to remember this veranda as there was a highly varnished portion from the front steps to the entrance if we had nails in our boots, for fear of scratching this highly polished surface; and that is how Mt Pleasant was kept in those days under a fleet of highly efficient housekeepers, cooks and maids with Curtiss the head gardener presiding over the surroundings with the help of his many assistants.

What a place it must have been to keep up. From the lodge gates, always kept closed and always opened by the lodge keeper, up a windy half mile of grand drive to the well-situated house, as one pulled up in front the air was redolent with odours of Mt Pleasant prize chrysanthemums on the veranda if the season was right. The blue-stone stables attracted attention and the family tomb close to the house. There were spacious lawns, English elms and oaks, down to a slope, tennis courts and a full size bowling green. Mt Pleasant had a large orchard, the apples and pears being carefully stored for use throughout winter. Down at the hot house the rather famous ‘Mt Pleasant’ grapes were grown. Further through the trees gleamed the surface of an artificial lake with its swans and trout. Here we used to swim after the Christmas dinner in the great dining room with the portraits of grandfather and grandmother looking down on us.  

---

6 Ibid.
8 Cynthia Reed, Daddy Sowed A Wind!, (Reed and Harris, Melbourne, 1947), p.9.
Although Hudson Fysh conveys the grandeur of life at ‘Mt Pleasant’ with its servants, swans, hothouses, family tomb and bowling green, his perspective remains that of an intimidated young child. From this child’s viewpoint the highly polished floor, so tempting to slide upon yet so easy to scratch, is a source of anxiety. The anxiety of the passage is given form by the portraits of his grandparents ‘looking down upon us.’ The aesthetic beauty of ‘Mt Pleasant’, with its promise of childhood adventure, is spoilt by the memory of inhibition, of adult scrutiny and possible displeasure.

Reed Nolan gives a comparable picture of childhood in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* in which Hyacinth is suffocated by an atmosphere of patriarchal disapproval and strait-jacketed by Victorian Puritanism. In the novel, although the grandfather casts a gloomy shadow over Hyacinth’s childhood, it is the father who oppresses her childhood and determines her life.

If, as David McCooey has argued, one gauge for whether a novel is autobiographical is the effect it has upon people who recognise themselves within it, then *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* is clearly an autobiographical novel. The Reed family was deeply upset by the novel and they, certainly, interpreted it as a thinly veiled attack upon them.\(^\text{11}\) The Reeds were not alone in reading the novel as autobiography. Brian Adams claims that Sidney Nolan read *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* and ‘studied it carefully, page by page, seeking clues to her character.’\(^\text{12}\)

The Reeds were deeply religious. Hudson Fysh describes the first Henry Reed’s religious conversion during a shipwreck. From that dramatic moment onwards Reed became a pillar of the Methodist church.\(^\text{13}\) Henry Reed is also credited with beginning the Salvation Army in Tasmania.\(^\text{14}\) The story of Reed’s conversion is told in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!*, and forms the moral basis for the family’s privileged status in Tasmania when God is imagined telling the grandfather to: “‘Repent! Give to the poor! Return to Australia. Lighten the hard lot, soften the hearts of the convicts. Feed My sheep!’”.\(^\text{15}\) In a way characteristic of the coloniser, Christianity is seen as a civilising force.

An anecdote in *A Sight of China* gives insight into the sustained power of these childhood influences:

I was not altogether a stranger to China, I told them, because of Uncle Howard and Aunt Geraldine. He was an eye specialist, she a biographer for the China Inland Mission. Both in China as missionaries, they married and continued to work. At long intervals throughout my childhood letters would appear from Aunt Geraldine; I would listen to my mother’s

\(^{11}\) Interview with Dr Margaret Reed, op.cit.
\(^{13}\) Op.cit., p.52.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 137.
exclamations of pity as she spoke of disease and death from famine. I would watch the horror in her eyes grow as, turning the pages with trembling hands, she spoke of civil wars, slavery, spiritualism, polygamy, opium smoking, the torture of foot-binding and then, in great indignation, of the wicked luxury and hard-hearted corruption of the court, civil servants and wealthy landowners. These sessions always ended by her hurrying to her desk where she would sit down, open her cheque-book, then enclose a slip of paper to those ‘dear good people’.

The adult Reed Nolan’s claim that she is ‘not altogether a stranger’ to China is based on her childhood experience of listening to her mother read aloud letters from her aunt. Like fairy tales, these epistles from the exotic east enabled the child to travel in imagination beyond the insular and domestic perimeters of home. Her mother’s reaction fuels the child’s excitement. Seen through the distorting eyes of Christian evangelists, cultural difference is shocking. Despite the adult Reed Nolan’s desire to distance herself from the missionary zeal of her relatives, as she points up her mother’s naivety about ‘those dear good people’, the substance of her knowledge about China consists of these fantastic tales told to assert the legitimacy of a colonising religion.

Although Cynthia Reed’s relationship with her father appears always to have been tense, she was very close to her mother. Leila Reed indulged her youngest daughter, who was called by the pet name ‘Baby’ well into her teens. Later, she was called by the tomboyish nickname of ‘Bob’. The portrait of the mother in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* is of a pretty, self-centred, but sympathetic personality, dominated by the oppressive figure of the father.

Leaving school without matriculating in 1925, Cynthia Reed went to live with her elder sister, Margaret, in Melbourne. Margaret Reed had studied medicine at Cambridge and had recently returned to practise. Although medicine was still an unusual pursuit for women in the 1920s, Margaret Reed’s path towards her career was made doubly difficult by her father’s objections. Family lore has it that she locked herself in her bedroom and refused to come out until her father finally relented. Henry Reed’s resistance to his daughter’s desire to study medicine, although typical of the attitudes of the times, is particularly interesting given the fact that he had himself begun a degree in medicine at Cambridge which he had not completed.

---

17 Interview with Dr Reed, op.cit.
18 Many of the letters written to John and Sunday Reed are signed ‘Bob’. Nancy Underhill claims that Henry Reed nicknamed the girls after pet dogs, op.cit., p. 45.
19 Interview with Dr Reed, op.cit.
20 Interview with Kenneth Von Bibra (Reed Nolan’s nephew) by Jane Grant, 10 November 2001. See also a version of this in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* p 43.
21 Interview with Kenneth Von Bibra, op.cit.
Margaret was a role model for her youngest sister, who had decided at the age of eighteen, that she wanted to train to be a nurse. In a letter written to Sunday Reed in America in the mid 1930s, Cynthia Reed wrote that it had been the influence of her family and friends who had not considered nursing a suitable occupation for a lady, that had persuaded her against it at this point.

In many ways Margaret represented the sort of person, dedicated to a humanitarian profession and never married, that Cynthia Reed aspired to be. Although Margaret was one of the few members of her family with whom she maintained close contact throughout her life, her feelings for her were mixed. Elizabeth in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* is a portrait of Margaret. Like Margaret, Elizabeth wants to study at the university. Yet she goes on to study biochemistry rather than medicine. There is a degree of cruelty in Reed Nolan's characterisation of Elizabeth, who is variously described as ‘stooped’, ‘bilious’, ‘an ugly duckling with big feet’ and ‘moody and irritable’. While she is clever, Elizabeth is unattractive to men and the story told to illustrate this point is insulting: ‘One night under the stars she had nearly become engaged. But the next morning the delightful young man had taken a good look at her by daylight, and that afternoon he left the ship when she berthed at Port Said, and forgot to say goodbye.’

In the mid-1920s, Cynthia Reed’s social acquaintance was the conventional world dictated by her family's expectations. Dr Reed, however, remembers her young sister pushing the boundaries of what was socially permissible, staying out late and refusing to listen to her sister’s well intended advice: ‘I had no influence over Baby.’ Nevertheless, in 1927, Cynthia Reed was back at ‘Mt Pleasant’ to attend her debutante ball. It was through her brother, John, that Cynthia Reed first began to expand her social network beyond the confines of wealthy Tasmanian grazier sons and daughters and Melbourne Establishment families. Over the next ten years the brother and sister would become very close.

John Reed had studied law at Cambridge before returning to Melbourne University in 1925 and then entering the law firm of Blake and Riggall. In the middle 1920s Reed lived in a house in South Yarra with Frederick Ward, who had studied art at The Gallery School and was working as a cartoonist and theatre critic on *The Bulletin*. Elinor Roper Martin

---

22 Undated letter from Cynthia Reed in America to Sunday Reed (my dating, 1936), Reed Collection, Latrobe Library, Melbourne. Cynthia Reed’s letters to John and Sunday Reed from the 1930s, and held in this collection, are extensive. Most of the letters are not dated. Unless specified, any dating is my own and was arrived at by a combination of identifying historical events cited in the letters and information supplied by friends and family. I have also quoted from the letters without correcting her often-erratic punctuation.

23 Ibid.


25 Ibid., p. 85.

26 Interview with Dr Reed, op.cit.

27 Society notice in *The Home*, July 1927, (courtesy of Mary Eagle).
(known as Puss), whom Frederick would shortly marry, remembers John from these years as being ‘so handsome as to be beautiful.’ As Frederick Ward remembered him, Reed was very much the conventional young solicitor who ‘wore bowlers and did not utter at breakfast except to chide me for wearing my pyjama top for a shirt.’

It was into this distinctive mix of artistic and Establishment families that Reed introduced his sister. Ward was a good friend of the artist, Daryl Lindsay, brother to the painters Lionel and Norman. Daryl Lindsay’s wife Joan, a cousin of the prodigious Boyd family, had attended The Bell School, run by the painter George Bell, and the only modern art school in Australia at this time.

Living close by in South Yarra was Clarice Zander. In the late 1920s, Daryl Lindsay’s brother-in-law, Bill Dyson, returned from England to work as chief cartoonist on *The Herald*. Dyson developed a close friendship with Clarice Zander and when he returned to England in 1930 she went with him. In 1933 Zander returned to Australia bringing with her a significant exhibition of modernist paintings. Zander had developed a strong interest in modern design. Generally, her philosophy was that art was not simply something hung on walls but should be applied to the lived environment. She was to have a profound impact on both Frederick Ward and Cynthia Reed. Several years later, Zander’s influence can be seen most directly in the modern design shop Cynthia Reed managed in the 1930s, which showcased the furniture of Frederick Ward and Sam Atyeo, and the hand-printed fabrics of Michael O’Connell.

In the late 1920s Cynthia Reed met the psychiatrist, Dr Reg Ellery, Melbourne’s first practitioner of Freudian psychoanalysis. Through the late 1930s and early 1940s, Ellery was to be an influence on the ‘Angry Penguin’ group and was the defence psychiatrist in the ‘Ern Malley’ trial. Max Harris cites Ellery’s book *Schizophrenia, the Cinderella of Psychiatry* as a major influence on the painters Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd and John Perceval.

As an outspoken socialist and pacifist, Ellery was an interesting figure in the medical Establishment from the 1920s until his death in the 1950s. His significance in the development of psychoanalytical practice in Australia has never been fully recognised. Equally, his influence on Australian modernism needs further acknowledgement.

28 Puss Ward’s diary, (private collection of Martin Ward, Canberra).
29 Ibid.
30 Notes made by Fred Ward, (private collection of Martin Ward, Canberra).
32 Interview with Jocelyn Plate, op.cit.
In introducing Cynthia Reed to psychoanalysis, Ellery shaped both her writing and her life. His influence on Reed Nolan’s writing is seen most clearly in her first two novels written in the 1940s. She would also pursue her interest in Freudian psychology through her nursing. In 1940, Cynthia Reed returned to America where she studied for a post graduate qualification in psychiatric nursing.

In 1928 Leila Reed fell critically ill and Cynthia Reed returned to Tasmania to nurse her.\(^{34}\) After her mother’s death, Cynthia Reed’s relationship with her father further deteriorated. In *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* the father blames his daughter Hyacinth for her mother’s death. In both the novel and the life, the father marries the housekeeper shortly after the mother’s death. Whatever Cynthia Reed’s feelings for Mrs Von Bibra were, she would later develop an attachment to her stepbrother, Kenneth Von Bibra, and her sister Barbara would eventually marry another step-brother, Donald Von Bibra.

In the late 1920s, Cynthia Reed began an affair with the German composer and conductor Bernard Heinze. This was to be her first and most profound experience of love and one which, significantly, ended for her in rejection.\(^{35}\) In 1929 she decided to leave for England. The plan was that Heinze was to meet her in London, but he never arrived.\(^{36}\) In June 1932, Heinze married Valerie Hennessey, the daughter of Sir David and Lady Hennessey.\(^{37}\)

Heinze’s rejection of Cynthia Reed was the source of a deep and abiding distress to which she was still referring many years later. In 1935 she wrote to her sister-in-law, Sunday Reed, from Sydney:

Bernard gave a concert here the other day, I believe it was - he was - simply wonderful, the town hall was packed, and they screamed with joy every time he appeared. I was looking through an old copy of that letter I wrote, how many words I’d already forgotten. How could I ever have lived in such a trance, I was really surprised...There you are and look what that man gave me, the utmost happiness anyone could have, the utmost hell, he changed my whole outlook. He made me see the sky was blue and that flowers were sweetest small. He gave me kindness and great understanding. Yet God I’ve hated him sometimes haven’t I. And if I ever stop being a whiner, it will be because I so often remember how he hated anyone who sat down and wept and wept.\(^{38}\)

Heinze becomes another possible father, somebody whose good opinion, six years after the end of the affair, she continues to crave. Her continued longing for Heinze in part gives rise to

\(^{34}\) Interview with Dr Reed, op.cit..
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
\(^{36}\) Ibid.
\(^{38}\) Undated letter from Reed Nolan to Sunday Reed, 1935, Reed Collection, op.cit.
the deep associations between father, love and rejection that are repeated throughout her work. *Daddy Sowed A Wind* includes a version of this relationship. If the novel sanitises the relationship, and omits the rejection and betrayal she suffered, there are still many similarities between Hyacinth’s attraction to the German musician Claus Weinen and Cynthia Reed’s feelings for Heinze. Above all Weinen is a father figure to replace Hyacinth’s own emotionally absent father. As a child, Hyacinth is discovered to be musical, but her real father scorns her talent: “there is no artistic nonsense in my family.”39 When Claus Weinen visits Hyacinth’s school he plays the violin so beautifully that it re-awakens her passion for music and through this her passion for him. Desire for paternal and sexual love are entwined as she wishes ‘I had a father who loved music, who loved me.’40 Later, when the grown-up Hyacinth meets up with Weinen he becomes the idealised father. Like Hyacinth, Cynthia Reed had real musical ability. She was encouraged by her music teacher, Miss Cox, to study at the Conservatorium of Music in Melbourne but never did.41

In 1930 she travelled from London to Germany where she worked as an _au pair_ for a series of German families. In a letter to John from Germany, she writes of wanting to go on travelling forever:

> Oh John I get so breathless wondering how long this can last. I keep grabbing more quickly in case something happens and I can’t go on any longer...I’ve got plans for countries years ahead. Damn jobs, I can live like this. I’m still hungry for more and wider. So don’t like a lecture on them. This life is ideal and I’ve got to pick up a lot before I’m ready to do anything definite.42

Travel for Cynthia Reed is as much a sensual as an intellectual expansion: ‘I’m still hungry for more and wider’. Later in this letter she writes of going to a ‘friend of a friend of mine in Berlin’ and her plans to have a ‘an orgy of opera and shopping.’43 Yet behind the delights of travelling through Europe is the shadow of her father and the implication that, as much as travel represents self-expansion through the satisfaction of her artistic and hedonistic cravings, it also represents flight:

> Haven’t heard from Dad since Jan 12th so perhaps I’ve said something to cause offence. Must be even more careful. Wish you were here but expect we’d fight. How’s matrimony. Oh John

---
40 Ibid., p. 79.  
41 Although it might be coincidence, Cox is later used as the name of a psychiatric patient in *Lucky Alphonse*.  
42 Letter from Cynthia Reed to John and Sunday Reed, 5 May 1930, Reed Collection, op.cit.  
43 Ibid.
it must be awful lying for you all. I do hope everything’s settled and got over soon and to everybody’s satisfaction.  

Her insecure relationship with her father reveals itself in her uncertainty over whether or not she has given offence and her determination to ‘be even more careful.’ The question about matrimony seems to suggest that in May 1930 John and Sunday were already married, or at least living together, although their official church wedding was not to take place for another two years. The need for secrecy reinforces Cynthia Reed’s own anxiety about her father and her fear of displeasing him.

The period that Cynthia Reed spent travelling and working in Europe is not well documented. In Daddy Sowed A Wind! Hyacinth works in Germany as an au pair for a Jewish family and is profoundly shocked by the developing Nazi movement. However, the novel, published in 1947, offers a retrospective analysis of this period and there are no records or letters I have found with which to compare it.

It is unclear when Cynthia Reed returned to Melbourne. Underhill claims she was back for Christmas in 1930 and that she spent much of the following year in Sydney. Shortly after coming back to Australia she had an abortion. In Daddy Sowed A Wind! Hyacinth has a brief shipboard romance that results in her pregnancy and subsequent abortion without anaesthetic at the hands of a brutal back street abortionist. In letters home from America in 1935, when Cynthia Reed was training at a Catholic teaching hospital, she jokes about letting slip to the matron the details of her abortion. The abortion was so physically destructive that she wondered whether it would ever be possible for her to conceive. It is likely that the horror of this abortion would later influence her decision to go ahead with the unplanned pregnancy in 1940.

By the middle of 1932 Cynthia Reed was back in Melbourne. The city was plunged into Depression. The Herald reported on 24 August 1932, that the impending cut of 2/6 from old age and invalid pensions (the new rate would be 15/- a week) would save the Government one million pounds a year. Many of the people affected by this cut were war widows and returned soldiers. The ongoing debate in the community was on the fairness of ‘The Work for the Dole’ which the Herald editorial of 24 August 1932, actively supported, claiming that,
while there were many genuine unemployed, there were other 'idlers' that the community should not be expected to support.

Yet, although the Depression dominated the pages of the daily newspapers, for many, the Depression in Melbourne was something taking place on the wrong side of the Yarra. Geoffrey Dutton looked back on his own sheltered world, untouched by the suffering of the unemployed:

But like millions of other Australians, most of us had no personal contact with the miseries of the unemployed. In the 1930s in Australia, the egalitarian land of opportunity, there were horrendous gaps between the rich and poor. The best way of seeing how the fortunate in Australia lived then is to look at the issues from the 1930s of The Home, the finest glossy magazine ever produced in Australia. It not only had advertisements (of superlative quality of design) for Orient liners about to sail for Europe, for Packard and other luxury cars, and for imported furniture or glass, but articles on the arts, architecture, a gossip column from every State, of grand balls or receptions, and a regular London and Paris letter that is a gem of intricate snobbery. You would never suspect from The Home that there were homeless people living in caves around Sydney Harbour, as reported by Kenneth Slessor for The Sun.49

Dutton's view of the Depression is a salutary reminder that it was possible for some to carry on as if nothing had happened. A privileged schoolboy at Geelong Grammar, he nonetheless formed a powerful sense of parallel worlds of extreme wealth and poverty, worlds that rarely collided. For the majority of the population, though, the reality of the Depression might be more accurately summarised by Nettie Palmer when she wrote in her journal entry on 12 November 1931, how she 'answered the door-bell this morning, dolefully expecting some hawker from the Depression.'50

At the end of 1932, Cynthia Reed became involved with Frederick Ward's shop at 52a Collins Street. The shop had grown out of a workshop, where Ward, together with a number of artists, including the young painter Sam Atyeo, made and sold furniture designed by Ward. In the late 1920s and early 1930s the simple functional lines of Ward's furniture, made from unstained Australian timbers, were unusual, and in sharp contrast with the heavily-stained, reproduction Jacobean pieces which dominated the market. After his involvement with the shop, Ward went on to design a line of furniture for Myers before being employed in the late 1940s in the newly formed Department of Architecture at the University of Melbourne and finally moving to the design unit at The Australian National University in Canberra.51

---

51 Puss Ward's Diary, op.cit.
Melbourne in the 1930s was a comparatively small town. The size of the city is an important factor in understanding the cross-fertilisation of ideas that was energising its intellectual life. As Richard Haese has noted, particular coffee shops, restaurants and pubs became favoured meeting places among the city's young artists, writers and intellectuals.\textsuperscript{52}

Haese has emphasised the importance of 'Leonardo's Bookshop', opened in 1931 at 166 Little Collins St and run by an Italian, Gino Nibbi.\textsuperscript{53} In the early 1930s, however, Nibbi's was just one of a number of interesting shops that were contributing to the intellectual and creative life of the city. Equally important were Edith Macmillan's 'The Primrose Pottery Shop', and Margareta Webber's bookshop. Mary Eagle has written about the important role played by shop-owners and booksellers in creating environments for the exchange of ideas necessary for a city's intellectual and artistic life.\textsuperscript{54}

Nibbi and Webber were publishers as well as vendors. Cyril Pearl's short-lived modernist magazine of 1931, *Stream*, was published by Nibbi, while Harry Tatlock Miller's magazine, *Manuscripts*, was published by Margareta Webber. The shops also became meeting places where people interested in art, literature and ideas could gather. It was precisely this environment of cultural and social exchange that Cynthia Reed's shop represented.\textsuperscript{55} As the potter, Reg Preston, remembers it, the shop was 'a centre' to which gravitated a diverse group of people brought together under the umbrella of modernism.\textsuperscript{56}

The first exhibition Reed mounted at the 52a Collins Street shop was of Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor woodcuts. The exhibition was reported in the society pages of the magazine *Table Talk* on 3 November 1932:

People literally overflowed onto the footpath late on Monday afternoon for the exhibition held at Frederick Ward's fascinating Collins St shop. It was arranged by the Beardsley-like Cynthia Reed, and the exhibits were Thea Proctor and Margaret Preston woodcuts which lined the walls of the little shop for the occasion. Of course the fact that Theo Shall came along to open the exhibition was an extra attraction for the two hundred people who turned up to view the prints. Cynthia, however, made an excellent mistress of ceremonies and saw that everyone at least had a peep at the pictures. She looked very slim and chic in a blue dress of the famous Rodier material. After the exhibition I went along to see her flat at Alcaston House. Really,
my dear, it's the most intriguing place. Terribly modern, but with a restfulness which comes from having masses of books and flowers everywhere. The table in one room is a foot from the ground and people sit on cushions or on a large low divan which takes up a quarter of the room and seats about nine or ten people. Hand-woven and stamped linens form the curtains and brightly covered felt covers the floor. There is a minute veranda too, decorated with various cacti and here we enjoyed cocktails - one person at a time for there was no room for more. Altogether a delightful place I thought.

While the opening of the exhibition by the now obscure German actor, Theo Shall, is of interest to *Table Talk*, the woodcuts rate little more than a passing mention. Shall's arrival in Melbourne in August 1932 caused a sensation in the press and he was interviewed by Basil Burdett in the November issue of *The Home*. Having acted in several films with Greta Garbo, Shall was under contract to J.C. Williamson as the lead in the play 'Autumn Circus'.

From Shall the focus of the *Table Talk* article then moves to the 'Beardsley-like Cynthia Reed', 'slim and chic' in her Rodier dress and to her 'terribly modern' flat. The hand-printed fabric mentioned in the article is probably that of Michael O'Connell whose work was highly fashionable and sold through the shop. The article is also evidence of Cynthia Reed's astute business sense and her ability to exploit the growing relationship between modernism, design and fashion. Both Thea Proctor and Margaret Preston regularly supplied graphic designs for *The Home*. George Johnston would later parody this commercialisation of modernism when he looked back on the thirties in *My Brother Jack*.

As a curator, Cynthia Reed was not only able to draw upon her artist friends, but also on the Establishment. Her acquaintance was wide-ranging, and included Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, wife of the newspaper proprietor Sir Keith Murdoch. Dame Elisabeth's sister had been at The Hermitage with Reed and Dame Elisabeth would drop in for coffee at the shop. Both Murdochs were (and Dame Elisabeth still continues to be) important patrons of the arts. Sir Keith Murdoch was to be responsible for sending Burdett to Europe to select the paintings for the hugely successfully 1939 Herald Exhibition of Modern Art.

It was through the shop that Lady Casey met Cynthia Reed: 'I knew her, first, through Daryl Lindsay and Basil Burdett when she worked for a short while in an art shop in the east end of Collins Street, Melbourne.' Maie Casey typifies the cross-pollination of radical and Establishment. The product of a privileged background and cousin to the Boyds and the Lindsays, Maie Ryan was sent to finishing school in Switzerland. Returning to Melbourne, she attending the Bell School, where she became interested in modernism. She married the

---

58 Letter from Dame Elisabeth Murdoch to Jane Grant, 16 May 1995.
Maie Casey’s was one of the few friendships Cynthia Reed formed at this point that she maintained throughout her life. Other important friendships were made though the shop. Mary Alice and Bert Evatt first met Cynthia Reed when they came into the shop to buy a Van Gogh print. Later the Evatts commissioned her to decorate their flat.

Basil Burdett was a useful friend for Reed to cultivate, but clearly she was also very fond of him. In the October, 1932 issue of *The Home* Burdett wrote a two-page article, ‘He Dyes who Makes Pots’, on the fabric and pot maker, Michael O’Connell. Burdett wielded considerable power over public taste evidenced by his sole responsibility in selecting the *Herald* exhibition paintings, which introduced many Australians to works by Picasso, Dali, Leger and Braque, among many others. An affectionate cameo of Burdett appears in her first autobiographical novel *Lucky Alphonse*! The Burdett character is an Australian art critic on a mission to Europe to collect paintings for an exhibition to be held back in Australia.

Cynthia Reed’s friendship with Burdett is not hard to understand. She enjoyed the company of a charming and amusing man and shared his interest in art and music. Nettie Palmer’s description of Burdett strikes chords to which Reed would also have responded. She speaks of Burdett’s frustration at not being able to find fulfilment as an artist, but perceptively notes that the role Burdett would be most suited for was ‘critic and entrepreneur’. Cynthia Reed’s friendships from this period, with the journalist Burdett, and patrons, such as the Caseys, the Murdochs and the Evatts, is an important insight into her own entrepreneurial capacity: into her skill in cultivating friendships useful in her promotion of artists and designers.

While the patrons of visual modernism were typically the Establishment with money to spend, the practitioners of modern art and design were, as Frederick Ward has pointed out, young, radical and provocative:

> At this time modern design was the province of the young and radical. It was hardly respectable, one might say not respectable and was considered a threat to the established social order. As I remember, the public of those days (the thirties) was not apathetic in their attitude towards modern design but quite violently for or against it.

---

62 Cynthia Reed was evidently working through the shop as an interior decorator. In the May 1934 issue of *The Home* it is reported that that Cynthia Reed decorated the house of Mrs Lee Atkinson of Kew.
63 Jennifer Phipps’ essay in the Sam Atyeo Exhibition catalogue, 27 Niagara Lane Galleries, 7-27 May 1982.
At the end of 1932, Sam Atyeo, then a student at the Gallery School, asked Cynthia Reed to exhibit his painting, *The Admonition of Lot*, in the windows of 52a.\(^{65}\) The story of Atyeo's exhibition of this painting at the shop has been told by every major art historian who regards him as an important precursor to the modernist painters of the late 1930s and 1940s.\(^{66}\) Atyeo's submission in a competition for a travelling scholarship was a painting depicting the Director of the Gallery School, Bernard Hall, dressed in a night-shirt, admonishing his naked daughters. Hall refused to hang the painting and Atyeo retrieved it from the School and took it to Cynthia Reed's shop.\(^{67}\) The event was reported widely in the press.

In 1933 Sam Atyeo held his first major exhibition at the shop, which had recently moved to 367 Little Collins Street and was now listed as 'Cynthia Reed's Modern Furnishings'. The paintings were figurative works. It was not until the following year that Atyeo would exhibit an abstract work, *Organised Line in Yellow*, at the Athenaeum Gallery with the Contemporary Artists Group. This painting was bought by John and Sunday Reed.\(^{68}\)

The figurative works exhibited by Cynthia Reed caused a considerable stir. The exhibition was reviewed with hostility by *The Age*:

> The point of view expressed in these twenty-five paintings is subversive of most of the canons subscribed to by the normal painter, and it is useless to form an estimate of them on the basis adopted by that exponent of the principles of direct representation. The various things are in themselves mostly matters of everyday experience - Joan, Kinlane Road, The Clothes Line and The Little White Hen - but Mr Atyeo's manner of interpreting them, while no doubt kind to himself and his confreres as expressing a mental reaction to certain phenomena of nature, can have little appeal to the normal minded.\(^{69}\)

The review must have greatly amused Reed as she gave a response to *The Sun*: ""The names mislead you,"" said Miss Reid. ""They oughtn't to be named. We'd have numbered them but we hear that critics like names so we just gave them whatever names we could think of at the last moment.""\(^{70}\) Reed's intention was clearly to ridicule the art Establishment and the provincial attitudes she thought it represented. However, the argument with the critic evokes one of the central dilemmas facing the art Establishment throughout the 1930s. Few critics were equipped to understand modernism. Beneath the pomposity of the tone is seen *The Age*

---

\(^{65}\) Phipps, op.cit., unpaginated.

\(^{66}\) See Richard Haese, op.cit., Robert Hughes, *Art in Australia* (Penguin, Ringwood 1988), and Mary Eagle, op.cit. Both Hughes and Haese fail to name the shop.

\(^{67}\) Reported in *The Bulletin*, 4 January 1933.

\(^{68}\) Phipps, op.cit.

\(^{69}\) *The Age*, 7 June 1933.

\(^{70}\) *The Sun News Pictorial*, 15 June 1933.
critic's admission that modernism defied 'direct representation' - the only tool of analysis available to an Australian critic at that point.

The reaction against modernism is most vividly captured in the public furor over an exhibition of British modernism that Clarice Zander brought over from England in 1933, and which was shown in both Melbourne and Sydney. The exhibition traced the development of modernism from the Camden School through to Ben Nicholson. The press coverage at the time documents the intensity of debate raging around modernism. Under *The Sydney Morning Herald* headline 'Judge and Professor Buy Paintings', with its implication that those bastions of conservatism, the judiciary and academia, were being undermined by the subversive forces of modernism, it is revealed that the Judge is Dr Evatt and the Professor John Anderson.  

The 1933 Exhibition of Contemporary British Art, which was the first exhibition in Australia to be curated by a woman, was shown in Melbourne at Newspaper House, where it drew a substantial crowd of five thousand people. In Sydney it was shown at the Blaxland Gallery. A smaller exhibition of woodcuts and linocuts accompanied the paintings. Zander saw the exhibition as a much-needed educational experience for Australians and offered special discounts to schools.  

In setting up the exhibition in Melbourne, Zander enlisted Cynthia Reed's help in creating an environment of modern design which she believed was necessary for the appreciation of the paintings, linocuts and woodcuts. A photograph in *Art in Australia*, 15 April 1933, shows a corner of the exhibition set out like a living room. All the furniture had been designed by Frederick Ward, with the exception of a small cupboard designed by Cynthia Reed.

The friendship that developed between Cynthia Reed and Sam Atyeo in many ways prefigures her future relationship with Sidney Nolan. It was through Cynthia Reed that John and Sunday Reed came to know Sam Atyeo. It has been suggested that Atyeo played the

---

71 Scrapbook of Clarice Zander (Private Collection of Jocelyn Plate), no date recorded.
72 Ibid.
73 It is most likely that Atyeo met Cynthia Reed before he met John and Sunday Reed. Haase claims that Reed Nolan introduced Atyeo to both the Evatts and the Reeds at his 1933 exhibition, op.cit., p. 22. Janine Burke reports that Cynthia Reed introduced Atyeo to John and Sunday Reed, op.cit., p. 10.
In an interview Atyeo gave to Gerard and Rose Vaughan in Vence, France, in 1979 (courtesy of Mary Eagle) he is quoted as saying: 'She was an up and coming girl. She helped with modernism, preaching the gospel, and she had modern furniture and she had this guy working for her called Freddie Ward who was an excellent designer of modern furniture...Then when I left the gallery I went to her to design modern furniture.'
Pesman, Walker, and White, include a short biographical introduction on Cynthia Reed Nolan. They claim: 'Through her brother, John Reed, an art patron and prominent member of the Angry Penguins group, she moved in circles of modernist writing and painting.'Op.cit., p. 224. Although John Reed introduced Cynthia Reed to Fred Ward, at that that point he was a lawyer not an art patron. It is a powerful aspect of the myth initiated by the Reeds, and subsequently recycled by historians, that they 'discover(ed) Atyeo and, later, Nolan. In 'correcting' what he saw to be Kylie Tennant's mistakes in
role for the Reeds that Sidney Nolan would later inherit. Certainly Sunday had an affair with Atyeo, and both John and Sunday Reed worked to promote his art. Of more interest to this study, however, is the way Cynthia Reed’s friendship with Sam Atyeo foreshadows her future relationship with Sidney Nolan. Although the affection she expresses for Atyeo in letters to John and Sunday Reed throughout the 1930s is not romantic, her managerial role in his brief career predicts her instrumental role in shaping Nolan’s career.

In the early thirties, Cynthia and Sunday Reed were very close. Sunday Reed appears to have had an enigmatic and manipulative personality which commanded the admiration and love of her younger sister-in-law. Many years later John Reed was to refer to his sister as his wife’s best friend. Sunday Reed emerges from accounts given of her as an imperious figure, inspiring devotion from those she helped and dislike from those she ignored. Joan Arthur, who was to marry Reed Nolan’s stepbrother, the journalist Kenneth Von Bibra, remembers Sunday Reed as being very possessive and treating Von Bibra as if he were her personal property.

The two years during which Cynthia Reed lived in Melbourne in the 1930s reveal a young woman struggling to find some form of creative expression through sculpture, painting, modern furniture design and interior decoration. She studied sculpture under the abstract sculptor Elenore Lange and she was also painting. Set against this artistic quest is the role she established promoting the creativity of others. In her friendship with Sam Atyeo there are the hallmarks of her later relationship with Sidney Nolan, a relationship that would be driven by conflicting aspects of her own personality, in which the desire to nurture and promote another’s talent vies with her own need for creative expression. The years in Melbourne provided Cynthia Reed with the contacts that she would later use to benefit Sidney. In the late 1940s, her friendships with Harry Tatlock Miller, Clive Turnbull and Maie Casey would open doors for Sidney Nolan and set him on a path towards national and international success.

her book *Evatt, Politics and Justice*, John Reed wrote in 1970: ‘Cynthia may have had a flair for finding artists of talent, although I am not particularly aware of it; but she did not ‘find’ Sidney Nolan.’ op.cit., p. 757. Yet it is clear that artists ‘found’ Cynthia Reed. In retrospect, probably the most important exhibition hosted in the shop was of the paintings of the English painter Ian Fairweather. In 1934 Ian Fairweather arrived in Melbourne and was taken by the Melbourne artists, Jock Frater and Arnold Shore, to see Reed Nolan who arranged an exhibition at 367 Little Collins St. See Murray Bail, *Ian Fairweather*, (Bay Books, Sydney, 1981). Reed also erroneously claims that Reed Nolan ‘did not design furniture.’ op.cit., p. 577.

34 See *Letters of John Reed*, op.cit., p. 28.
35 Letter from John Reed to Margaret Reed, 8 December, 1976, Reed Collection, op.cit.
37 After the death of John and Sunday Reed, Mary Eagle, working as an assistant curator at the Australian National Gallery, went to Heide to assess the collection. She found two paintings, one of John and one of Sunday, signed ‘Cynthia’. (Notes courtesy of Mary Eagle.)
At the beginning of 1935, Cynthia Reed left Melbourne for Sydney, leaving the shop in the hands of two friends, Mark Bracegirdle and Robert Morrison. In Sydney, her quest for independence from her family took a more dramatic turn. She instructed John and Sunday Reed to address their letters to Liese Fels. As she had begun to pursue an interest in acting, the pseudonym was perhaps a stage name, yet it was also a reflection of inner confusion. She was told by a producer that her looks were too unusual for public taste, and she had little success beyond a small part in the Roy Rene film, *Strike Me Lucky*. The name change, however, did not simply signal Cynthia Reed's quest for a new creative identity in a new city, but a more radical rejection of her former life. Gone is the society girl with the fashionable address, to be replaced by Sydney bohemia and a flat 'full of fleas' in Fairfield Mansions, Kings Cross.

If these two formative years were experimental, part of Cynthia Reed's long quest for creative identity, they were also emotionally difficult. Her relationship with her sister-in-law suggests that she was extremely insecure. In a letter to Sunday Reed, responding to the accusation that she had spread gossip about Sunday and Sam Atyeo, Cynthia Reed wrote: 'you have become a dream of myself, as I might have been if I hadn't seen all sorts of things in life that you haven't. When I am near you, you become too strong for me and I try to live from your point of view, and it doesn't work for me and makes me a pose.'

Despite the warmth and intimacy between the sisters-in-law, there are undercurrents which occasionally surge to the surface in open recognition that Cynthia Reed found the relationship suffocating:

I've said the most peculiar things about you. That you are the biggest egoist I have ever known - worked you out on that line. I've said you have such a terrific personality that I lose every inch of my own and simply imitate you when I see too much of you. I've said you're a genius. I've said a man, or men, are more necessary to your living than to mine. God knows what I've said. You're not like me there. I've often noticed when people are discussed you're not interested, you look bored and either go away or change the subject. I wish you'd done that in this case. I've always admired you for that because although one hopes for a certain amount of tact from one's co-chatterers one seldom gets it. Some people, like me, like Sam, everything pours out of with generally the accompaniment for Christ's sake don't breathe a word of this ever.

---

78 Interview with Guy Morrison by Jane Grant, 12 July, 1995 and Robert Morrison, op.cit.
79 Letter from Reed Nolan in Sydney to Sunday Reed undated (Reed Collection).
80 Interview with Barrett Reid by Jane Grant, 5 January, 1995.
81 Letter from Cynthia Reed, Sydney, 1936, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
The letter concludes that if Sunday is still worried she should seek advice from their friend, Dr Reg Ellery. The letter, as she admits, is an out-pouring of emotion. The seeming honesty of the letter, in which she confesses to all the things she has said about Sunday behind her back, can also be read as another form of attack. The tone is ambiguous, for although she claims to admire Sunday for not talking about people, it remains unclear whether Sunday's attitude arises from good manners or, less admirably, from a lack of interest in anyone but herself.\(^\text{84}\)

It was not until after Cynthia Reed's marriage to Sidney Nolan in 1948 that her relationship with her brother and sister-in-law was finally severed, yet these letters hint at the complicated emotional landscape that lay behind the breach. Above all, the letters reveal Cynthia Reed's struggle to establish a sense of her own independence and autonomy, a sense of self that she felt unable to develop within her relationship with John and Sunday Reed.

In Sydney, she studied modern dance, under the instructor Irene Vera Young. In a letter to Sunday Reed she wrote: 'I think you would like the dancing, Moya will tell you about it but God knows when I'll ever be about to do it.'\(^\text{85}\) Alice Klapake, also a student of Young, would sometimes have coffee with Cynthia Reed, although she knew her only as Liese Fels and did not discover her true identity for many years. Alice Klapake remembers the deliberate shabbiness of Cynthia Reed's clothes and that her stockings were full of holes, a far cry from the chic dresser described two years earlier in Table Talk. Annoyed by the statement she appeared to be making with her clothes, Alice asked her why she dressed as she did. Cynthia Reed replied: 'Well if you are very poor then you may as well go to the very depths of poverty.'\(^\text{86}\) It is unclear, however, whether her poverty at this point was the result of cutting financial ties with her family, or the affectation of a bohemian identity.

Cynthia Reed did not commit herself to any of the media she was experimenting with in the early 1930s. The next five years would see her train to be a nurse, first in America and then in England. Although this period represented a displacement of her creative ambitions, she was also incorporating into nursing the principles of Freudian psychology and the broader social and environmental applications of modern design. In Cynthia Reed's thinking, there was a connection between physical and mental health. In the novel she would write about this period, Lucky Alphonse!, she would place great emphasis on the influence of the environment on both mental and physical well-being. It might also be claimed that she never entirely abandoned her aspirations to act. Nursing was, in some sense, another acting role that she was

---

\(^{84}\) The double edged tone of this letter links it to the disconcerting voice of the travel writing, in which Reed Nolan's personal confessions often sabotage her, seemingly, adoring portrait of her husband.

\(^{85}\) Ibid.

\(^{86}\) Interview with Alice Klapake by Jane Grant, 11 March 1995.
taking on. Although it would provide her with the vocation she clearly needed, nursing would also represent to Cynthia Reed a flight from sexuality.

In early 1945, Cynthia Reed began taking courses in a nursing school near her home town. She attended classes in the mornings, while her husband worked in the office of a furniture store. After work, she would return home to care for her children. The long days were exhausting, but she found the work fulfilling in a way that she had never felt before.
(ii) Nursing in America and England, 1935 -1940

In early 1935, Cynthia Reed sailed for the United States in the company of a married man named Michael with whom she had fallen in love. By the time she reached Los Angeles, the affair was over. It is evident from letters she wrote to Sunday Reed during this time that Michael was violent and manipulative. Unlike Bernard Heinze, who merely failed to honour his promise, Michael hit her.¹

However much the failure of this affair was to be the ongoing source of deep unhappiness, she was young and wanted to experience life in a large and exciting city. ‘I met minor filmites and Clark Gable looked at me twice when I passed him on the street’, she boasted to John and Sunday Reed.² In another letter she informs them that she ‘wanted to buy you a Klee for fifty pounds but contained myself.’³ Along with movie stars and modern art there was music:

We went to the Cotton Club, I wished you had been there, I saw my first coloured revue. Christ coloured people and a coloured band is better than you can imagine I think. The music sent me nuts. The Star of Blackbird was singing...Fred knew her and she came over and talked to us, she is sweet but not as hot as some of the others...One girl sang Smoke Gets in Your Eyes and Love in Bloom, she’d have to of course, just these two Palm Beach numbers - yelled them out in a very nigger voice - I nearly died. And dancing - the girls had the most beautiful thin bodies I’ve ever seen. They were gay and lovely. We drank champagne and champagne, and I didn’t say I didn’t like it...and we danced in a haze.⁴

Nonetheless, misery is never far from the surface of these letters. The affair with Michael was to be interpreted by her as the ultimate demonstration of her failure to find love and to be loved:

I miss Michael’s love, which made me feel sometimes as if living with myself and my oddities is too much for me. The compulsion to have to see that destiny hurts me. They say it comes from a longing to have your father punish you, which comes from a longing to get into bed with him. Well you can see these things but that doesn’t stop you doing them. I knew I shouldn’t get on that boat with Michael yet I had to do it. Ten thousands damn.⁵

¹ Letter from Cynthia Reed in America, 1935, to Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
² Letter from Cynthia Reed in America, 1935, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection op.cit.
³ Letter from Cynthia Reed in America, 1935, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection op.cit.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Letter from Cynthia Reed in America, 1935, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
The influence of psychoanalysis is apparent. She touches on the idea that her neuroses spring from her unresolved desire to have sex with her father, which Freud termed the Electra Complex. In *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* the Electra Complex is figured as the source of Hyacinth’s depression. In the novel, the father’s rejection of Hyacinth leads to repression of her sexuality and she develops revulsion for sex. Yet in Cynthia Reed’s personality there is a similar see-sawing of extremes between sexual repression and libertinism. Letters to Sunday Reed from this period in America reveal Reed Nolan’s wildly oppositional views of her sexual self, who, within a single letter, moves from good time girl, dismissing a dull sexual liaison with the comment that she does not like ‘bald heads’, to her idealised dream of becoming a nurse and of being ‘intertwined with the nuns.’

Even while Reed was rationalising her masochism in a letter to Sunday Reed, she was engaged in its full expression. Her immediate response to the end of the affair with Michael was to have a breast reduction:

Did I tell you I had my bosoms cut off, its what they call a mastopaxi. It cost a lot of money and I wasn’t in much of a state to have it done after not eating on the boat at all, and they had to pump things into me after lying on the operating table all morning. I wanted to stay good and asleep forever. What a difference a good hospital makes though. I was so doped hours before I didn’t know a thing, and had no real pain afterwards. God knows if the scars will ever go, on some people they do, but not on me, I should think. They are big and wide and red but I am happy about being a good shape and not having to wear a bra and don’t mind a bit. Over a hundred and fifty stitches each side, so you can imagine it was some cutting up.

Fury at rejection is directed against the body that had not succeeded in capturing love. In mutilating her breasts, Cynthia Reed was attacking the part of her anatomy that defined her as a female. The tone of the passage is curiously ambiguous, as it not only suggests her self-loathing, but her capacity to revel in her masochism. There is a certain glory in her description of her mutilation: ‘some cutting up’ and in her detailed counting of the stitches.

The episode is part of a litany of anatomical and gynaecological failings that she recounts in this letter to Sunday Reed. She also alludes to gynaecological problems that were probably complications from her abortion: ‘If they don’t get this straightened out in a few years I’ll be sterile.’ Given their close, confidential relationship, it is very likely that Cynthia Reed would have been well aware of the fact that as her sister-in law had contracted gonorhhea

---

6 Letter from Cynthia Reed from America, 1935, to Sunday Reed, op.cit.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.

33
from her first husband, Sunday was unable to have children. It is evident that Cynthia Reed saw Sunday as competition and that John Reed was the site of contention between them. In an earlier letter written from Sydney, Cynthia Reed had baldly stated about John: ‘he’d never have married you if he hadn’t been crazy about me and you first reminded him of me’.11

To some extent, the detailed account of the mastopaxi seems deployed in this letter as part of a complicated rivalry with Sunday Reed. Yet, this operation, by no means the routine procedure it is today, clearly expresses a confused and depressed mental state. As she admitted to Sunday Reed: ‘I wasn’t in much of state to have it done what with not eating on the boat’. In response to the anaesthetic she recalls ‘I wanted to stay good and asleep forever.’ Depressed, not only by the break up of her relationship with Michael, but by the nature of the relationship itself, ‘this compulsion to see destiny hurt me’, she blames and attacks herself.

It was in this frame of mind that Cynthia Reed made her decision to train to be a nurse. Her intention was to train in psychiatric nursing at the prestigious Johns Hopkins Hospital.12 To Sunday Reed, she admitted that given her incomplete schooling and her poor record at The Hermitage she had little hope of success:

I very much doubt they will take me. They send you papers to fill in or at least to get your school to fill in. You have to have a record of every subject you took during the last four years and your term average and the examinations passed and lists of things, like were you dependable and how did you control your emotions. Aha what couldn’t the Hermitage say about me.13

Nursing, as she explains, had always been in the back of her mind:

People’s minds and bodies have always interested me - and if I go to Johns H I will be majoring in psychiatry. The thought of putting a needle in someone horrifies me more than anything…and being shut up with people doing what they tell me to do - but always I have had my eye on nursing -I remember before I wanted to do it. It seemed the only solution to me, and still does. I am not the certain sort of person who can put things over and sell myself and the knowledge of having good training and qualifications for earning my own bread and butter will be a fine thing.14

Although nursing would provide her with the opportunity of ‘earning my own bread and butter’, her interest in nursing went deeper than a quest for financial independence. Nursing,
she thought, would also give her the opportunity of studying psychology. Given that in a single letter she moves from an analysis of her own neurosis, ‘this desire to see destiny hurt me’, to her decision to become at this point a psychiatric nurse, it is not improbable to suggest that a fascination with her own neuroses motivated Cynthia Reed’s interest in nursing.

Nursing was also a retreat from sex. Becoming a nurse represented to her an escape from the trauma of emotional and sexual relationships with men. Nursing, which demanded celibacy (at least officially) by only employing unmarried women, offered a retreat from the kind of pain she had experienced in her affair with Michael. With a number of failed sexual relationships behind her, and her inability to focus on and develop some form of creative expression, nursing is imagined as a ‘solution’, the answer to the problem of herself and her life.

In becoming a nurse, she was constructing a self that was very different from her dream of being a film star or a gallery owner or a designer. After being accepted at St Joseph’s, she wrote to Sunday: ‘I long to be among calm women and nuns I believe are calm in themselves.’ An aspect of Cynthia Reed’s attraction to nursing was this longing to be in the company of women cut off from masculine society.

In *Lucky Alphonse!* Reed Nolan has her central character muse ‘it must be fine to be a nun. Think how peaceful and secure a life, how ordered. And one’s only Lover, Jesus Christ.’ Looking back on this period, Reed Nolan was to write in *Lucky Alphonse!: ‘So for the time being they were buried, far away from the outside world, hidden beneath the snow and cold winds, warm in their work and interests.’ Not only does this female interior world represent an escape from the emotional pain of failed love, it was also an escape from her struggle to forge a creative identity within the masculine creative world that she formerly inhabited. As I will demonstrate in the later novel, *A Bride for St Thomas*, occasional glimpses of this hard-drinking and masculine creative world are strategically juxtaposed against the interior female nurturing world of the hospital. The nurse, perhaps the ultimate figure of the female nurturer, was also an extension of the nurturing role begun in Cynthia Reed’s friendship with Sam Atyeo and, as I shall argue, fully realised within her marriage with Sidney Nolan.

Her life prior to her marriage with Sidney Nolan reveals the struggle between the creative and sexual freedom claimed by modernist women and the feminised and nurturing model of the nurse. Marianne DeKoven has described this uneasy struggle in women’s modernist writing as ‘a desire for freedom in unresolved dialectic with fear of punishment’. Although Reed Nolan’s autobiographical novels were centrally engaged with the unresolvable

---

15 Ibid.
16 *Lucky Alphonse!* (Melbourne, Reed and Harris, 1944), p. 16.
17 Ibid., p.34.
conflicts between desire and repression, between self-expression and masochism, between sex and death, her life story in the 1930s was in fact an enactment of this female modernist dialectic. She had herself interpreted her sexual behaviour in terms of a desire to be punished by her father. To defy convention was inevitably to risk both patriarchal and divine retribution.

In June 1935, Cynthia Reed was accepted into what she described as ‘an inferior course’ at the Catholic teaching hospital, St Joseph’s, in Chicago. Her self-conscious awareness of the perversity of entering a Catholic teaching hospital is apparent when in mock horror she imagines herself ‘getting confidential and telling matron about my lovers and my abortion.’ She was to last nine months at St Joseph’s before it was discovered that she had entered America on a tourist visa and would have to leave the country.

Cynthia Reed arrived in England in early 1936. Initially she stayed with her sister Margaret who was now practising in Cambridge, before being accepted by St Thomas’ Hospital in London. In June 1936, Reed Nolan began her training in the Nightingale Home, named after its founder Florence Nightingale. She was in London in time to see the International Surrealist Exhibition held at the New Burlington Galleries between 11 June and 4 July 1936. In his introduction to the catalogue Herbert Reed has proclaimed: ‘Don’t judge this movement kindly. It is not just another amusing stunt. It is defiant - the desperate act of men too profoundly convinced of the rottenness of our civilisation to want to save a shred of its respectability’. Cynthia Reed, however, thought differently. She wrote to John and Sunday Reed: ‘There is surrealist show on, don’t worry, all the same chat against it as there is in Melbourne only more so... disgusting and outrageous and so on... disappointing I thought it. On the whole a lot of amusing nonsense.’

Her impressions of St Thomas’ in her letters home to the Reeds, and later in Lucky Alphonse! and A Bride for St Thomas, is of a snobbish institution catering for the unmarried daughters of the upper class. It is clear from the letters she wrote John and Sunday Reed that after Chicago, she found it difficult adjusting to St Thomas’:

But the English Gentlewoman is nearly making me quit - I dunno I reckon I can hardly take them. People are what mostly matter and I miss my Yank friends horribly - these are all high class women.

All Church of England with a Bible and a copy of Swinburne’s poetry on every shelf. 2 are from India. I has spent 3 years in Rome, nearly all have travelled and there is one B.Sc.

---

19 Letter from Cynthia Reed in America, 1935, to Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
20 Ibid.
21 Interview with Dr Reed, op.cit.
22 Ibid.
24 Letter from Cynthia Reed in London, June 1936, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
God they make me sick and ill and miserable but maybe I will get to get on with them better and even get to like them. I’m so imitative. Haven’t adjusted yet though.²⁵

Three years into her training, she is still complaining to John and Sunday:

I hate them Sun and John I can’t tell you how I froth and foam and it is so bad for my nasty nature. I tried all my while at first and you know I always do make friends quickly with whom I want but not this time not a bit of it they are just not having any - not that they treat me so differently from each other but I guess I can’t take it - this absolutely ignoring of remarks put to them - this turning a complete back at table - this rude stupid dumb stuff they pride themselves on as being so English - their arrogant dumb ignorance - now I don’t try anymore I just snap and that is bad.²⁶

Many old friends and acquaintances were living in London in the late 1930s. Cynthia Reed saw a great deal of Clarice Zander and, until his death in 1938, of Bill Dyson: ‘Clarice is as warm hearted and hard working and amusing as ever. Looks a marvellous trollop sometimes. Bill I like a lot.’²⁷ Her stepbrother Kenneth Von Bibra, a journalist, was working in London: ‘I feel very attached to him and responsible for seeing his coat is brushed and his bowels open.’²⁸ She also developed a friendship with the journalist and writer Clive Turnbull, whom she had first met in Melbourne, and who was now living in London.²⁹

Into this expatriate community in London in the late 1930s floated travellers such as Reg and Mancell Ellery and Maie Casey: ‘Maie is over and has bought a Picasso painting. I was having a mild flirtation with her until it made me sick and I got out.’³⁰ Although the reality of sex with another woman revolted her, the ‘flirtation’ might be understood as her rebellious response to the constraints of her gender.

If her life outside the hospital continued to be unorthodox, life within the hospital was conservative. Training at St Thomas’ consisted of both lectures and practical experiences in the wards where the Ward Sister would record her opinion of the probationer nurse. The notes on Cynthia Reed are often harshly condemnatory, not of her abilities as a nurse but of her personality. Grudgingly it is admitted she is ‘intelligent’, ‘keen to learn,’ ‘reliable’ and ‘good to patients’. Whatever positive appraisal is made of her work, however, is undercut by negative remarks about her character. She is accused of being ‘argumentative with the nurses who say

²⁵ Letter from Cynthia Reed in London, 1936, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
²⁶ Letter from Cynthia Reed in London, 1939, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
²⁷ Letter from Cynthia Reed in London, 1936, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
²⁸ Letter from Cynthia Reed in London, 1936, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
²⁹ Ibid. These letters talk of a possible marriage between Reed Nolan and Turnbull. However, Joan Brodsgaard (Arthur, Von Bibra) denies that there was any romantic attachment between them. Brodsgaard claims this was pure fantasy on Reed Nolan’s part. Interview Brodsgaard, op.cit.
³⁰ Letter from Cynthia Reed in London to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
she is difficult' and of having 'a casual manner'. She 'argues when corrected' which 'seems a fault of manner.'

Cynthia Reed’s ‘manner’ seems to have been a sticking point with the Ward Sisters as later she is again accused of having an ‘unfortunate manner which almost amounts to rudeness’. Another fault was being ‘self opinionated with undue belief in her own powers’. She was thought to be ‘a curious mixture of diffidence and assertiveness liking to be thought original’. In all, she was considered: ‘Somewhat colonial in manner and outlook’.

In a letter to John Reed shortly after she started at St Thomas’ she describes the ‘Oliver Twistings’ of the hospital, a hierarchical and anachronistic culture in which the senior nurses exploit the probationer nurses. Her belief that psychology should be incorporated into nursing practice was a reflection of the holistic ideals she had developed through her interest in modern design, in which the environment is designed in harmony with its inhabitants. To John Reed she wrote: ‘I think all education should be co-educational and aim at teaching a design for living. I think the yanks are on the right track’.

The hospital continued to take an interest in the careers and marriages of its nurses after they had left St Thomas’. At the bottom of Cynthia Reed’s file is written: ‘a book “Lucky Alphonse” published in Australia. Book based upon nurse’s training and containing scurrilous descriptions of certain sisters of St Thomas’ hospital.’ Clearly the antipathy that she displays towards St Thomas’ in both her nursing novels was mutual.

In the summer vacation of 1937, Cynthia Reed went to Paris to visit her stepbrother, Kenneth Von Bibra, and Sam Atyeo, who had moved to France the previous year. The trip to France was longed for by Cynthia Reed, who was recovering from a severe bout of the flu. She had hoped that her friend Joan Arthur (later married to Kenneth Von Bibra, and later Brodsgaard) would come with them. However as Joan later noted, she had no wish to join them: ‘I did not go to Paris with C to spend the weekend with Kenneth Von Bibra and Sam Atyeo; though naive for my age I knew a potential disaster when I saw it.’

Cynthia Reed, however, appears to have revelled in the outrageous behaviour of Von Bibra and Atyeo:

Sammy kept smoking between courses of all the most marvellous food and everyone scowling at him - and saying put it out - and drinking pernods before and after and in between taking

31 Nightingale Probationers’ Record Book, No 18, London Metropolitan Archives.
32 Ibid.
33 Letter from Cynthia Reed in London, 1937/38 to John Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
34 Ibid.
35 Nightingale Probationers Record Book, op.cit.
36 Letter from Cynthia Reed in London, 1937, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
37 Letter from June Brodsgaard to Jane Grant, 11 November 1995.
mouthfuls of red and then white wine - and going to the toilet in the bidet - and we laughed a lot.\textsuperscript{38} Back in London the long hours and physical exertion took their toll. The nursing records mention that she ‘tires very easily’. To John and Sunday Reed she complained endlessly of poor health, depression and her longing for the sun. In her last year at St Thomas’ she suffered from suicidal thoughts: ‘All day long I think how dumb it is not to take a good lot of dope and finish but I don’t suppose I ever will’.\textsuperscript{39} What stops her, she confesses, is being scared of the physical pain:

My perception is afraid, not of the ultimate peace but of the immediate discomfort. The whole of living stretches out before me in endless years of exhaustion, and inability to meet demands, of stupid mistakes and dazed misunderstandings, of poverty and memories of failure and a deep knowledge of the impossibility of ever being the person I wanted to be or having the things I wish for.\textsuperscript{40}

In the context of a life that was ended by suicide, her thoughts from the 1930s should be interpreted with care. She was prone to melodrama. As I have suggested, at times she exaggerated her suffering. However, it is equally evident that the idea of suicide was taking hold as a fantasy that she would further develop through her writing.

When Reed Nolan came to write \textit{Lucky Alphonse!} in the early 1940s, she has Alphonse think of suicide. Unlike the more generalised depression which she herself was evidently suffering from in the late 1930s, Alphonse’s thoughts of suicide are contextualised by the approaching war. Alphonse steals some morphine ‘which she kept always in her pocket. She did not fancy being alive with her legs blown off.’\textsuperscript{41} Later, in Paris during an air raid: ‘she felt less shaky when her hand contacted the phial of morphia taken from the ward cupboard over a year ago, and these days never far from reach.’\textsuperscript{42}

In Reed Nolan’s second published novel from the 1940s, \textit{Daddy Sowed A Wind!}, the central character commits suicide. Hyacinth’s suicide is the end result of a neurosis whose source lies in her childhood and her unhappy relationship with an unloving father. This underlying and unresolved neurosis is given its fatal impulse by the failure of a love affair.

\textsuperscript{38} Letter from Cynthia Reed in London, 1937 to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{39} Letter from Cynthia Reed, London, 1938/39 to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Lucky Alphonse!}, (Reed and Harris, Melbourne, 1944), p.166.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p.195.
By the time she came to rewrite the *Lucky Alphonse!* material in the late 1960s for her second nursing novel, *A Bride for St Thomas*, the theiving of the morphine is still mentioned but she removes the explanatory and protective context of the war. Six years after the publication of *A Bride for St Thomas*, Reed Nolan would commit suicide. As I shall argue, the shaping of this suicidal fantasy through her writing was a form of therapy interacting with and directing the life.

It is clear from the letters that she was experiencing a loss of sexual confidence as she trained at St Thomas’. Her letters are full of anxieties about her physical appearance and of exaggerated concern that her body is becoming middle-aged. In July 1936, shortly after beginning at St Thomas’, she wrote to John and Sunday about her meeting with Reg Ellery’s wife, Mancell Ellery:

Saw Mancell looking young and thin and prettier than I’ve ever seen her. She had a nasty little cough but I expect she will lose this with this last we have been getting. She said she didn’t want to be unkind but I looked years older and must go and get my face done to keep up my morale - but that’s the way if I rush out without time to do things to myself and I look like hell if I don’t.\footnote{Letter from Cynthia Reed, July, 1936, to John and Sunday Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.}

Despite her evident personality clashes with ‘certain staff sisters’, Cynthia Reed managed to do very well in her written examinations in anatomy, physiology, gynaecology, surgical, medical and general nursing, and in June, 1939, became a fully qualified nurse.\footnote{Probationers’ Year Book, op.cit.}

Unfortunately she was holidaying in the South of France when the Second World War was declared. In Val Andre, a policeman had taken her passport and lost it. She managed to find her way back to Paris where she volunteered as a nurse at the American Hospital where Margaret was now working. To John and Sunday Reed she wrote:

I’ll most likely be in a concentration camp. Now I doubt I could get out even if I wanted to, yes in a welter of childishness I landed myself in Paris without money, without passport, without gas masks and they don’t sell contraceptives for women in big towns. Now at least I have money and a gas mask.\footnote{Letter from Cynthia Reed to John and Sunday Reed, France, 1940, op.cit.}
She escaped the coming occupation on a ship bound for New York, travelling as a nurse/companion to a mentally ill American woman.\textsuperscript{46} In New York Reed began a postgraduate qualification in Psychiatric Nursing at The Payne Whitney Clinic until pregnancy forced her back to Australia at the end of 1940.

\textsuperscript{46} It is believed that Dr Evatt was responsible for getting Cynthia Reed out of France. It is also believed that when the ship stopped at the West Indies she met up with Sam Atyeo who was stranded there trying to get a ship back to Australia. (Interview with Jocelyn Plate, op cit.) As Atyeo subsequently joined Evatt as his secretary in New York, it is possible that Cynthia Reed and Atyeo travelled together to America.
(iii) Home, 1940 - 1947

It was to John and Sunday Reed's home, 'Heide', that Cynthia Reed returned at the end of 1940 to await the birth of her baby. In order to explain her pregnancy, she told people that she had married a Dane named Hansen while in Europe. According to her story, Hansen had been posted to Romania where he had been killed.¹ In war-time Australia this story would not have seemed far-fetched, although many years later John Reed admitted that he had not been entirely convinced by it.²

Leaving America would not have been easy for Cynthia Reed because the decision was imposed upon her by the pregnancy. However much she wanted the child, her future as a single parent would have looked bleak. Melbourne had also changed in the nearly six years she had been absent. Many of the artists she had known in the early 1930s, such as Michael O'Connell and Sam Ayeo, had left Australia. Fred Ward was now working in Canberra for the design unit of the then University College. Basil Burdett had joined the airforce and would shortly be killed. A new generation of artists had grown to maturity and John Reed had become President of the recently formed Contemporary Artists Society.

Most importantly, perhaps, the role Cynthia Reed had formerly played through the shop had been taken over by her brother and sister-in-law. Sunday Reed's considerable wealth enabled the Reeds to play the grander role of patrons of the arts. The Reed's home, 'Heide', in the then outer suburb of Heidelberg, had become a centre of sorts for Melbourne artists, among them Albert Tucker, Joy Hester, Arthur Boyd, John Perceval and Sidney Nolan. The Reeds gave financial assistance to Tucker, Hester and Nolan, as well as to other artists such as the young painter Alannah Coleman.³

Shortly after arriving back in Melbourne, Cynthia Reed spent an evening at 'Heide' alone with the writer Michael Keon. The two of them had talked about writing and she expressed a desire to write. She asked Keon who he considered to be the important new Australian writers and he suggested she read Eleanor Dark's Prelude to Christopher.⁴ Eleanor Dark figures prominently in the chapter on 'Heide' from Keon's memoirs. His focus on Dark's landscape imagery is an important marker of the interest the writer generated at 'Heide'.⁵ In Dark's strange and complicated tale of eugenics, madness and suicide, Cynthia Reed had clearly discovered a corresponding voice. During these months before the birth of her daughter, she began to write early drafts of Lucky Alphonse!

¹ Interview with Jocelyn Plate, op.cit.
² Letter from John Reed to Dr Margaret Reed, 8 December 1976, Reed Collection, op.cit.
³ See Burke, Haese, and Underhill, op.cit. The Reeds paid for Alannah Coleman to go to Europe in 1950. (Interview with Alannah Coleman by Jane Grant 24 October 1996).
⁴ Letter from Michael Keon to Jane Grant, October 10 1995.
In his biography of Nolan, Adams describes Cynthia Reed’s arrival at ‘Heide’:

When Cynthia Hansen had arrived at Heide at the end of 1940 she was the most sophisticated member of the group. Good looking, intelligent and charming, it seemed she would add brilliance to the household, with recent experience in Vienna, Paris, London, Los Angeles and Chicago. Her presence, however, was an obvious challenge to Sunday’s dominance and she was determined to be rid of her sister-in-law. Cynthia soon learned about Nolan’s relationship with the Reeds. He was painting in the dining room one day, on leave from the army, when she entered and without any preliminaries, asked, ‘Why don’t you get out of this situation?’ 6

If Reed represented a direct ‘challenge to Sunday’s dominance’, this was not superficially apparent. Michael Keon described a dinner at which both he and Cynthia Reed were present. Over the course of the meal she spoke just once to ask Albert Tucker a question about the Communist Party. 7 Silence, however, is sometimes a more effective and subversive threat than vocal competition.

Janine Burke has suggested that Sunday had a controlling and manipulative personality:

Around her, there existed a huge emotional climate. Sunday was mistress of atmospheres. Her capacity for friendship meant she insisted on playing a major role in the lives of those she loved, whether they liked it or not. This could lead to demands, restrictions and a desire for control. 8

As I have suggested, Cynthia Reed felt overshadowed by her sister-in-law. However, the rift between them was not as straightforward as Adams suggests. In the first few months of Cynthia’s return the sisters-in-law were very close. Michael Keon remembers them returning from swimming in the river arm in arm. 9 Years later, after Reed Nolan’s death, John Reed was to write of how bemused Sunday was by the breach and how she continued to think of Reed Nolan as her ‘best friend.’ 10

Cynthia’s daughter, Mosca Jinx Margaret Ellery Hansen, was born on the 6 May, 1941. Shortly afterwards Cynthia Reed moved to a cottage in Kew that may have been purchased for her by John Reed. 11 It is clear that at this point she was under tremendous strain. Very soon after the birth of her daughter, she took a job as a social worker and the

---

7 Keon, op.cit, p. 101.
8 Burke, op.cit., p.17.
9 Letter from Michael Keon to Jane Grant, op.cit.
10 Letter from John Reed to Margaret Reed, 8 December 1976. Reed Collection, op.cit.
11 Interview with Allanah Coleman, 24 October 1996.
submerged tensions with Sunday Reed came to the surface.\textsuperscript{12} The baby would have reminded Sunday of her own sterility and her own longing for a child. It has been suggested that Sunday Reed, who could not have children, attempted to persuade Cynthia Reed to allow her to adopt Jinx. This rumour is given some credence by the fact that six years later Sunday adopted Sweeney, the son of Albert Tucker and Joy Hester.

Although John and Sunday might not have been considered suitable parents by Cynthia Reed, she did contemplate allowing the journalist Jack Bellew and his wife, Molly, to adopt Jinx, but changed her mind.\textsuperscript{13} Several years later she wrote to John Reed:

> Objective, I have always felt she would be better in a stable household. But then I feel there might come a time when she needed me alone. But looking around, I wonder where is the ideal home? Who the right people? She is a child to me, not mine, but my responsibility.

Once again Sydney seemed to offer an escape from the history and tensions of Melbourne. In 1943, Cynthia Reed and Jinx moved into a small cottage in Wahroonga. Her choice of house and suburb might be thought a smaller version of ‘Heide.’ Wahroonga, like Heidelberg, was an outer suburb on the edge of the bush. The cottage was weatherboard and described by Joy Hester as ‘a dear little cottage in the semi-bush.’\textsuperscript{14} The choice of suburb would also have been influenced by the fact that her close friends the Evatts were living nearby. Here, she was to develop her passion for gardening.

In the early years in Sydney, Cynthia Reed was under considerable physical and emotional pressure, as she attempted to work full time in a government office and bring up a young child alone.\textsuperscript{15} A close friendship was formed at this time with the writer Pat Flower with whom she was working. Inevitably, the strain became too much. Cynthia Reed’s eldest sister, Coralie, looked after Jinx when, run-down and exhausted, she became ill.\textsuperscript{16} In a letter to her brother, John, she complains of illness, exhaustion and her anxiety about Jinx:

> Maybe you heard that I resigned from the job for physical fitness. I was dying there, with the hours and the work and having always to come home to some bitch whom I felt was being unsatisfactory with Jinx and my anxiety for her, then the morning she followed me to work, over the fence and bowling down the street crying. No work today! The outside surveys over the country were the only things that kept me anyway sane, that I did very well at, and

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Letter from Joy Hester to Sunday Reed, 7 February 1948, Burke, op.cit., p. 147.
\textsuperscript{15} Underhill refers to Reed doing war work in the Munitions Department, op.cit., p. 46. Cyril Flower remembers his wife and Cynthia Reed working together in ‘some Government department to do with hostel accommodation for migrants and factory workers.’ Letter from Cedric Flower to Jane Grant, 3 November 1996.
\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Jinx Nolan, op.cit.
enjoyed. And more and more my pulse rose and my uncertainty at last became inevitability - I had to quit. The terrible tiredness and illness had some physical reason that arose from mental sure enough, but anyway I was so low in red cells that the miracle is I kept on my feet so long. Now they pump me with iron and I get sun, and sleep is coming again.\textsuperscript{17}

In this same letter she writes of yet another failed relationship with a man:

All my dreams and fantasies have centred around one man. A man I suppose who does not and cannot exist and yet again after many sterile months always the phoenix head arises again. For the first time I can say that this one you would like, or love in that deep way men sometimes feel for one another. He is beautiful in a fey Irish way, quite perfect physically, with a hard strong body and hair like dark honey, blue eyes, good teeth, a quick laugh and a good voice. A tortured man, thoughtful and violent and gentle, frustrated, striving, loving and hating his fellows, given to long periods of loneliness when he works and wracks himself and fights to be himself. A man I loved the first moment I saw him, and waited trembling for him to open his mouth in case what came blasted my love.\textsuperscript{18}

As the letter continues, it becomes clear that the man she refers to is real. She explains to John how she has known him for six months and that, on the day of writing the letter, the man had ended their friendship, or affair, by telling her he did not love her. It might be argued, that her description of this unnamed lover never escapes from the fantasy of the perfect man who begins the above passage, a fantasy of a man who ‘does not and cannot exist.’ It is perhaps significant that the physical description of the man bears a resemblance to Sidney Nolan, whom she had met during her brief period at ‘Heide’. She refers to his blue eyes and his ‘fey Irish’ beauty. She would have come across many Irish Australian men who would fit this stereotype, but it is noteworthy that she refers to John’s capacity to love this man. Essential to her attraction, it seems, is the lover’s capacity to draw her closer to John Reed. John’s close friendship with Sidney Nolan has been well documented. It is impossible that Cynthia Reed was actually referring to Sidney Nolan, who was in the army and stationed in the Wimmera region of Victoria at this point. It is possible, though, that she was projecting onto this unnamed lover her jealousy of Sunday and her attraction to Sidney Nolan.

John’s tolerance of Sunday’s affair with Sidney Nolan was clearly difficult for Cynthia Reed. If she was jealous of Sunday for marrying John, she could still believe that he had done so because Sunday reminded him of her. John’s acceptance of Sunday’s sexual liaison with another man was, however, the ultimate displacement of Cynthia Reed within John’s life. Janine Burke explains Sunday’s affair with Sidney Nolan by reference to John’s

\textsuperscript{17} Letter from Cynthia Reed from Sydney, 1943, to John Reed, Reed Collection, op.cit.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
impotence. It might, therefore, be argued that if the Reeds’ sexual relationship was unsatisfactory then it was permissible for Sunday to seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere. By continuing to live with John, in what was presumably a non-sexual relationship, Sunday might be seen to have appropriated Cynthia Reed’s role of sister.  

Now in her middle thirties, Cynthia Reed had been unable to sustain a stable relationship with a man. To her brother she describes how her rejection by this unnamed lover released thoughts of ‘other mistakes, which rise up to taunt me one by one’. With typical melodrama she concludes the letter: ‘No man will ever love me as I have about me too much the smell of hell.’

Rejection cannot be lightly dismissed but becomes a personal statement of failure as she humiliatingly imagines herself to be ‘all he wants - but not from me.’ Most tellingly, rejection leads her to thoughts of suicide as she writes in the letter of ‘counting the morphia tablets’, only stopping herself because, like a character in a Dorothy Parker short story, there is still a possibility that he might ring her. In the novel she would soon begin to write, the connection between rejection and suicide in Hyacinth’s mind becomes an enactment of Reed’s own feelings of despair.

In this letter she also congratulates her brother on becoming a publisher. This would have been of special interest to her. In March 1944, John Reed wrote to Max Harris:

Yes, I know Cynthia Hansen quite well. She is my young sister! I didn’t wish to prejudice you in advance. I am afraid she probably won’t do any better than she has done and I agree her writing ‘doesn’t drive on’ but, in her own way, she has fought hard and spared herself nothing, and some of this comes through in her writing. I haven’t seen the rest of the book but she showed most of it to Sunday two or three years ago.

The manuscript John Reed refers to is *Lucky Alphonse*. Harris’ criticism of the book that ‘it doesn’t drive on’ is fair. It might be argued that the central weakness of both the early novels is their plots. In following Cynthia Reed’s actual life too closely, the novels tend to indulge in disruptive episodes and incidental characters. It might be suggested, that some of these problems could have been resolved by competent editing. Yet it would not be until the travel writing that she would resolve the problem of plot. The structuring discipline of the journey.

---

19 Burke writes of ‘Sunday’s sexual dissatisfactions with John and John’s helpless inability to remedy the situation’. Op.cit., p. 28.
20 It should be noted, that although John Reed appears to have accepted the sexual relationship between Sunday Reed and Nolan, Nolan’s marriage with his first wife did not survive.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Letter from John Reed to Max Harris, 27 March 1944, Underhill, op.cit., p. 292.
would supply her with a way of shaping concerns that were still predominantly autobiographical. Despite Harris’ reservations about the book’s literary merits, Reed and Harris published the book later that year. Cynthia Reed was now a published novelist.

She was already working on a second novel. The following March, John Reed wrote to Max Harris:

Your response to Lulu seems a very valid one and I have passed it onto Cynthia more or less intact have told we would publish the book though we did not necessarily accept it in the full sense of the word. I don’t think we are under any obligation to stand behind everything we publish. As long as we are satisfied with the integrity of the author and the worthwhileness of what he says and of the way in which he has said it, I think we are justified in publishing even though we may disagree with the merits of the book’s implications.24

It is possible that Lulu is an early version of Daddy Sowed A Wind!. Certainly the novel’s thinly disguised portrayal of the Reed family, and Reed Nolan’s vicious portrait of Henry Reed in particular, might have given John cause to ponder ‘the merits of the book’s implications.’ Despite Reed and Harris’ intention, they did not publish Lulu and by 1946 the publishing company had ceased to operate.

By the middle-to-late 1940s, Cynthia Reed had developed a number of friendships in Sydney, not only with Pat Flower and her artist husband, Cedric, but also Cyril Pearl, editor of The Sunday Telegraph, Sid Deamer, editor of The Daily Telegraph, and his son Adrian Deamer.25 She saw a great deal of the Evatts and their children and spent holidays with them in Leura in the Blue Mountains.26 She was also friendly with Mary Andrews, the wife of the designer Gordon Andrews, who lived nearby and also had young children.27

Through acquaintances such as Harry Tatlock Miller and his partner Loudin St Hill, now living in the artist’s colony, ‘Meeriola’, Cynthia Reed maintained her interest in visual modernism. She bought a painting by Loudin St Hill, which she hung over the mantelpiece in her living room.28 Her close friend Clarice Zander and her daughter Jocelyn returned from England in 1946 to live in a house next door to ‘Meeriola’.29 Other Melbourne acquaintances such as the painters Alannah Coleman and Joy Hester had moved to Sydney in 1946. Sunday Reed heard something of her sister-in-law through Joy Hester’s letters to her:

24 Ibid., p.412.
25 Interview with Adrian Deamer by Jane Grant, 4 February, 1996.
26 Interview with Roslyn Carrodus by Jane Grant, 27 February 1995. As the Evatts were acquainted with Eleanor Dark it is possible that Cynthia Reed met Eleanor Dark at this point.
27 Interview with Mary Andrews by Jane Grant, 17 February 1996.
28 Interview with Barrett Reid by Jane Grant, 5 January 1995.
29 Interview with Jocelyn Plate, op.cit.
Some friends were invited to Cynthia Reed’s place for arvo [tea] and dinner presumably as they arrived at around 3 o’clock. After two hours travel to Pymble, [they] arrived tired and thirsty - no cup of tea but at 6 pm when dinnertime was imminent, they got coffee and nuts. At 9.30 pm still no dinner. They got coffee and cakes at 10.30 pm [then] they went home for a meal. This story came from Allanah.\textsuperscript{30}

Throughout this period Cynthia Reed was working on \textit{Daddy Sowed A Wind!}. Some time between 1945 and 1946 the novel was edited by Sidney Deamer and was finally published by Shakespeare Head in 1947.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Daddy Sowed A Wind!}'s autobiographical subject matter and Freudian framework suggests that it represented to Reed a form of self-diagnosis and therapy, as she reviewed her past in an effort to make sense of what she felt to be the ‘futility’ of a life in which she could neither find love, nor be loved. The novel’s bleak nihilism reveals the intensity of this private suffering. If the veiled autobiography of \textit{Daddy Sowed A Wind!} provided her with the opportunity for therapeutic self-analysis, it also provided her with the opportunity of revenging herself against her father. As I shall argue, therapy and revenge would continue to direct her writing.

\textsuperscript{30} Burke, op.cit, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{31} Interview with Adrian Deamer, op.cit.
CHAPTER TWO: THE EARLY NOVELS

(i) Lucky Alphonse!

*Lucky Alphonse!* traces the nursing experiences of an Australian girl, Alphonse, in America and England between 1936 and 1940. *Lucky Alphonse!* is predominantly autobiography, but the narrative also conceals and frequently departs from Reed Nolan’s life story. Autobiography is, moreover, inevitably retrospective, and shaped as well by the moment of writing. The novel was written after Reed Nolan returned to Australia during a period of introspection, depression and domestic entrapment. As Gillian Whitlock notes, autobiographical novels must be read as both autobiography and as fiction.\(^1\)

The story is told in the third person. The narrator often interrogates the reader when a point needs to be underlined, and is an ironic observer of the dubious luck to which the sardonic title refers. The narrator of the travel writing, who is both character and narrator, has her origins here, in the split between the narrator and Alphonse. Inherent in the narrative structure is what Daniel. R. Schwarz has described as the ‘double vision’ of the modernist novel: ‘the reader must maintain a double vision. He must apprehend the narrative and the process of creating the narrative.’\(^2\) If ironic self-scrutiny also marks this first novel as modernist, the question of how skilfully and consistently Reed Nolan maintains her ‘double vision’ needs to be pursued.

*Lucky Alphonse!* must be characterised as an Australian modernist novel. The omission of Australia from the novel is, however, an obvious departure from Reed Nolan’s own story. Although Alphonse is an Australian, the novel begins on the ship taking her to America and ends when she has returned to America. The novel hints that her displacement within Australian society informs her journey. A brief examination of the parallels and divergences between *For Love Alone* and *Lucky Alphonse!* raises ‘questions about the status of the (self-)exile of white women from European colonies and, by extension, about the status of their writing.’\(^3\)

Unlike Teresa in *For Love Alone*, or Stead or Reed Nolan, Alphonse is not a writer. In *For Love Alone*, Teresa’s quest is creative and the text explores the process of becoming a writer. Yet *Lucky Alphonse!* is also centrally concerned with a quest for self-realisation. It is necessary for Alphonse to leave Australia to achieve her ambition. In *For Love Alone*, Freudian sublimation is suggestively present: in order to realise her self, Teresa has to travel through and

---

\(^1\) Whitlock, op.cit., p.247.


displace an early sexual liaison. In *Lucky Alphonse*! Freud’s theory that vocation of any kind is a sublimation of sex underpins Alphonse’s journey from wife to nurse. As I shall argue, although the concept of sublimation is under scrutiny in *Lucky Alphonse*, it is made clear that it is irrelevant whether or not the self-identity sought is specifically a creative one. Both novels explore a woman’s self-realisation and in both novels the woman has to leave Australia in order to achieve this.

The process of self-realisation in *Lucky Alphonse*! has its beginnings in Alphonse’s flight from her failed marriage and Australia. On the ship to America the narrator tells the reader:

> There was something that Alphonse must do, something that she must become. Have you ever known that feeling? Her mother had told her once how shocked she had been to hear her say when she was three years old ‘When I grow up I’ll be a ...’. No, she would not even think that word until she had reached that goal, although now she felt she was nearer to it than ever before. Once she mentioned it to Jonathen; he had just looked at her and said, ‘You’re crazy.’

Australia is hostile to Alphonse’s ambition to be ‘something’. Travelling away from this environment she is travelling closer to her ‘goal.’ It is only when she is accepted into a Catholic teaching hospital in Chicago that it is made clear that Alphonse wants to be a nurse. In concealing what it is that Alphonse wants to be the novel places a stress on the verb. It is, significantly, seen as irrelevant what that ‘something’ is: the desire for vocation is the focus. In Alphonse’s formative context, this desire is seen as aberrant, her husband thinks she is ‘crazy’ and her friends think she is ‘joking’ (p.12). Alphonse is fleeing from this atmosphere of repression, where her ambition marks her as deviant, in her marriage to an American, within her Australian family and, by extension, within the Australian culture it represents.

Having left her husband, Jonathen, Alphonse discovers that she has not been sufficiently well-educated to find work: ‘She had made many enquiries in Los Angeles and Hollywood regarding opportunities to start work, but found that her education did not come up to the standard required. Languages, sport, travel and a few social graces were pretty useless now.’ (p.15) The kind of education acquired by Alphonse consists of the decorative skills of the elite, in which women were not expected to work. It is implied that Australia is backward, still educating its women for a world that no longer exists. Not only is Australia not a place where she can become ‘something’, but her Australian education has not prepared her to earn a living. It is not just the constraints of her gender that Alphonse is fleeing from, but the constraints imposed upon her class.

---

Drusilla Modjeska’s analysis of the shift in Australian women’s writing, in the latter part of the period she examines, away from the personal subject matter of women’s lives to more broadly political concerns, helps locate Reed Nolan as an Australian novelist of her generation. \(^5\) *Lucky Alphonse!* shows what Modjeska has described as the ‘rephrasing’ of the ‘concern with women’s situations’ into ‘the universal language of the “human” problems’ \(^6\) that occurred in the war years. Although Reed Nolan’s novel is concerned with rebellion against the constraints of gender, the narrator’s dream of an ideal Freudian/Marxist world seems to suggest solutions to the inequalities of both class and gender.

Marxist communism is sympathetically treated in the novel. Nursing in France at the outbreak of the Second World War, Alphonse makes the statement: ‘“Everyone must surely admit that there is a great deal to be said for many of the social reforms Russia has brought about”’ (p 205), and is accused by a colleague of being a communist sympathiser. Ros Pesman’s documentation of the pilgrimage of Australian women writers of the 1930s to Russia sheds light on the novel’s sympathies for Marxism. Pesman notes the 1930s journeys to Russia of Jean Devanny, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Betty Roland and Amirah Inglis, among others. \(^7\) Alphonse’s personal dream, however, is not only the alleviation of material suffering and inequality, but also of mental suffering.

Back in America, towards the end of the novel, Alphonse is asked:

‘Don’t you believe in miracles like that, Alphonse? Even when they are proved?’

‘No’, said Alphonse, ‘I believe in psychiatry - so far.’ (p. 225)

Despite Alphonse’s qualification that she believes only in psychiatry ‘so far,’ neither her expressed views nor her characterisation ever escape from a Freudian perspective. One of the novel’s weaknesses is that it does not question Freudian assumptions. Ultimately, the novel declines into propaganda and Alphonse becomes a mouthpiece for a Marxist/Freudian utopia. Not only is Alphonse’s emotional life viewed from a psychoanalytical perspective, her life, and the lives of those around her, are seen to reflect the constraints and privileges of class. Further reflective of its period is the interweaving of its Freudian and Marxist concerns. W. H. Auden’s attempt to reconcile the interior psychological concerns of Freud with Marxism’s exterior material concerns, also suggests how *Lucky Alphonse!* might relate to a central intellectual debate of its historical period. \(^8\)


\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Op.cit., p. 137.

\(^8\) Although I am interested in examining the novel in its historical intellectual framework, I am aware that more recent feminist theory has continued the attempt to reconcile Marxism with psychoanalytical criticism. See, for example, Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, (Penguin, New York, 1974), and Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, (Verson, London, 1986). For a critical
Both Marx and Freud start from the failure of civilisation, one from the poor, and the other from the ill. Both see human behaviour determined, not consciously, but by instinctive needs, hunger, love. Both desire a world where rational choice and self-determination are possible. The difference between them is the difference between the man who studies crowds in the street, and the man who sees the patient, or at most the family, in the consulting room. Marx sees the direction of the relations between outer and inner world from without inwards. Freud vice versa.  

As Julian Symons has reflected, Marxist Freudianism was a fashionable position in 1930s England:

It has always seemed to me that Marxist materialism was absolutely irreconcilable with Freudian psychology, and I read with thorough approval John Strachey’s scornful reference to Freud “as one of last great theorists of the European capitalist class” in The Coming Struggle For Power and the criticism in Left Review which pointed out that the conclusions of psychoanalysis were largely drawn from a limited section of the leisured and cultured, and that “Freud might never have heard that the human individual under Western civilisations a member of a class.” But any idea which in any period seems to correspond with a personal apprehension of reality will be rationalised so that it can co-exist with other and perhaps contradictory ideas.  

Lucky Alphonse! demonstrates what Symons goes on to call “the double vision” of Freud and Marx in this period. Although the novel is partially set in England and in various ways fits into the intellectual climate of England in the late 1930s, these views were also being expressed in Australia. The Freudian psychoanalyst and socialist, Dr Reg Ellery, also preached a Marxist/Freudian vision. Ellery’s leftist pamphlet, Eyes Left! The Soviet Union and the Post War, was published by Reed and Harris in 1943, the year before they published Lucky Alphonse!

Alphonse’s quest to be a nurse is apparently driven by her desire to contribute towards the new equalising order, a Marxist-Freudian world which would relieve both material and mental suffering and her desire is, in turn, psychoanalysed in the text. Nursing represents rebellion against the constraints of her class and gender, but it is also a flight from sexual love. Flying to St Joseph’s in Chicago, Alphonse muses:

overview see Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean, Material Feminisms, (Blackwell, Massachusetts, 1993).


11 Ibid., p. 131.
She wondered what it would be like to be with a lot of girls again. For years now, when she came to think of it, there had been only men to talk to. She had met other women, of course, but it had always complicated matters still further, to encourage them to be around Jonathen. (p. 21)

In the biographical section above, I speculated that the failure of her love affair with Michael was the catalyst for Reed Nolan’s decision to train as a nurse. In the novel, after a letter from Alphonse’s husband telling her that he had spent the night with a ‘girl whose body reminded him of hers’ (p. 16), the narrator sardonically intrudes; ‘It must be fine to be a nun. Think how peaceful and secure a life, how ordered. And one’s only lover, Jesus Christ.’ (p.16)

It is the narrator who makes the connection between Alphonse’s emotional rejection and her desire to train to be a nurse among nuns. To the degree that the narrator is Alphonse, she is looking back upon herself with a sardonic eye, aware of the losses as well as the gains of sublimation, as when she describes the trainee nurses as ‘buried, far away from the outside world, hidden behind the snow and cold winds, warm in their work and interests.’ (p. 34) This markedly female world is both positive, it is ‘warm’ and the nurses are engaged in ‘work’, but it is also entombing. The writing evokes the dual perspectives of the character and of the retrospective narrator. At other points, the narrator exchanges ironic detachment for outrage. After Alphonse learns that the nuns put saltpetre in the coffee, it is the narrator who indignantly exclaims: ‘What do you think of that? Saltpetre is the stuff they give male prisoners, so that they will not become restless, missing their wives.’ (p. 31) The reader has no idea what Alphonse thought of this at the time. The narrator’s inability to contain her outrage shows an abandonment of the ironic stance on a younger self, the separation between narrator and character is blurred, and the autobiographical pressures dominate the fictional form.

Alphonse, like Reed Nolan, is deported from America when the authorities discover that she has entered the country on a tourist visa: ‘This meant England or Australia. She felt it was better to go forward than retrace one’s steps, and had already chosen England.’ (p. 35) However, if returning to Australia is imagined as going backwards, England, too, is seen as backward looking, as when she imagines the hospitals with ‘long, grey moss and barnacles on them’. (p. 25)

In England, Alphonse is accepted to train at St Thomas’ hospital in London. Her foreboding about English hospitals proves a premonition. The hospital is described, at the outset, as an anachronism: ‘The architecture was horribly Victorian and it was hard to imagine, going up the steps of the shabby entrance, that you would be entering one of the most famous hospitals in the world.’(p.41) Nursing in England, however, is a different matter from nursing in either America or Australia. ‘St Thomas’ caters for ‘gentlewomen’ and is run like the ‘army.’ (p.44) At the interview she had liked the look of her fellow applicants ‘but thought,
rather wistfully, that it would take a long time to get to know them, as they were English.’ (p.41) This alienation within a foreign culture is reinforced by prejudice when she is told by the matron, ‘We have had Australians here before – not very satisfactory on the whole, difficult – so rude, always wanting a reason for everything, thinking of better ways of doing things, so impudent and opinionated.’ (p.47) Alphonse’s introduction to the hospital establishes a distinction between the English system’s emphasis on discipline, hierarchy and obeying orders, and an Australian attitude of egalitarianism. Alphonse’s Australian identity is a point of reference from which the English hospital system is critiqued. Her national values of egalitarianism are also imagined as naturally sympathetic to Marxism.

If the system in which she is working will, over the course of the novel, draw out her natural sympathies with a Marxist perspective, her personal motivations for becoming a nurse are understood from a Freudian perspective. A holiday with the neglectful Jonathen in France again points up nursing as a retreat from failed sexual love. Before Jonathen deserts her in Paris, ‘The inevitable end’, (p.115) he tells her: ‘Alphonse, you know you have been lucky’ (p.115) The ironies of Alphonse’s ‘luck’ are apparent in the conclusion she draws about her life: ‘If there could be no more loveliness, there would also be no more despair.’ (p.116) She may have a vocation but she cannot have both vocation and marriage. It is, then, from this perspective of failed love, that ‘the longing to do this work which she had embarked upon’ (p.115) is understood.

The English system is both draconian and disciplinary. Survival within the system means internalising this discipline: ‘Alphonse’s jaw set like a trap and she had to shut her fists tightly to prevent herself saying a whole lot of things that might have considerably shocked the young ladies present.’ (p. 53) While Alphonse unsuccessfully struggles to repress her outraged voice of protest, she continues to sublimate her sexual desire through nursing:

And Alphonse loved this patient so much that her body ached for him, became his, and she knew when he was thirsty, uncomfortable, in need of something, troubled by light...But one morning she awoke with a feeling of certain terror and hurriedly dressing, ran down to the ward before breakfast...And when she saw the empty bed, her love died, too, and flew to him. And she was bereft once more and barren... (p.139)

The sublimation is transparent. Her ‘body ached for him’ and his death left her feeling ‘bereft once more and barren’. Sexuality may be repressed but it is not destroyed. She even talks in terms of ‘love’: the relationship she creates with this male patient is charged with sexuality.

Foreshadowing Reed Nolan’s later writing on illness in Open Negative, repression is seen to lead to illness. In Lucky Alphonse! the denied body asserts its presence: ‘As she tried to study in her off duty she felt the flu creeping over her. She tried hard, trying to forget her head,
her ears and her leaden body. She felt sad, old, and weary and so serious’. (p.144) The flu has a
sexual power, ‘creeping over her’, reminding her of a body she ‘was trying to forget.’
Alphonse’s conflict is with the body that, through defining her gender, dictates and limits her
desires. As the novel’s glimpses into her formative childhood and into her marriage attest, to
desire to be more than a body is seen as deviant. It was, after all, Alphonse’s body that her ex-
husband was reminded of when he slept with another woman. Her aberrant ambition is to be
recognised for her mind. Elizabeth Grosz’s reflection on Western culture’s association of the
mind/body dualism with male and female, ‘where man and mind, woman and body, became
representationally aligned’, is gesture towards in this image of disease. The focus on
sublimation is not just a reminder of the inescapable power of the body, but of the radical
nature of Alphonse’s struggle against cultural formation.

The grim repressive world of the hospital is, however, not immune from outside
influences and the winds of change. A sense of the ever-increasing radicalisation of politics in
the outside world penetrates the hospital. The nurses begin to organise themselves collectively
in order to bargain for better wages and conditions. Again, the narrator hectored her reader in
order to validate the rightness of this behaviour: ‘What sort of nurses, what sort of women,
could one expect to evolve under these conditions? Well perhaps you could answer that
question, maybe you or your relations have suffered at the hands of some of them.’ (p.139) The
nurses who are supportive of the system are construed as paranoid: ‘On all sides one heard the
older sisters saying all this talk was nothing but the Bolsheviks trying to insidiously undermine
the English Hospital System and rouse up trouble and discontent.’ (p.140) Although the
hospital is a microcosm of English society of the 1930s, reflecting deepening oppositional
political perspectives, the hospital becomes a metaphor of an increasingly paranoid Island
waiting for the first signal of war with the outside invader and at the same time suppressing
internal dissent.

The narrative perspective is blurred through the ‘one’ of the passage, merging
Alphonse’s and the narrator’s impressions into ‘one’. This is not an isolated occurrence nor is it
accidental. In the opening sentences of the novel the repeated use of ‘one’ obscures the
perspective ‘one could buy anything... one would not stay there another moment.’ (p. 7) These
moments of merged perspective foreground the autobiographical project at the text’s centre.
The narrative construction of the older self, ironically observing her younger self, looks
forwards to the split observer/subject of the travel writing and of the last novel A Bride for St
Thomas, in which there is, I shall argue, a similar instability.

12 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards),
1994, p. 4.
Deployment of the hospital as metaphor for the wider political and cultural climate of England in the late 1930s is most apparent on the few occasions where the novel moves outside the hospital. This pre-war England is imagined as delusional and ridiculous:

A funny little gun that looked as though it was a toy 1914 model, had been placed on Westminster Bridge, and all day long a bewildered young soldier stood beside it, polishing it. No one believed that it could go off, but nonetheless it was somewhat disturbing to see its nose continuously pointing at St Thomas’ Hospital. (p. 167)

The image of the gun pointing at St Thomas’ conveys the paranoiac unease of pre-war England, a sense that enemies may just as easily lurk within as without.

When Chamberlain declares ‘peace in our time’ the narrator wryly observes: ‘There was only a slight feeling of indignation that the trenches and shelters dug up in the parks had caused the crocus to be dug up for nothing.’ (p.168) This collective delusion is again emphasised on the eve of both the war and Alphonse’s departure for France:

And yet the English did not seem to be worrying. Alphonse did not understand them. To her they were more foreign than any other nation on earth. Even now, with disaster so obviously and near at hand, the young ladies laughed gaily and said light heartedly ‘Nonsense there will never be war!’ (p. 197)

This denial is also reflected within the hospital. In entitling a chapter ‘Totem and Taboo’, Reed Nolan is directing Freud’s seminal work on ‘primitive’ beliefs and ritual, at the hospital system.¹³ The totemic practice of medicine is suggested when Alphonse is ‘delighted’ (p.153) to be told by a lecturer: ‘that more surgery was in use simply because, in certain cases, one knew of nothing better to do.’ (p.153) It is the narrator who underlines, asserts and lectures the reader on the absurd, demeaning rituals that entrench inequalities within the hospital system.

After Alphonse returns from a rest-cure she follows the tradition of thanking the matron for her holiday:

One supposed that as long as one was in the hospital, it would be difficult not to feel that one was in the nursery. This was one of the ways the authorities had, for putting itself across. Imagine men or university students, complying with such regulations. Well the nurses had only themselves to blame. They went on, through the ages… ‘Now that I have reached man’s estate.’ Nightingales never arrived at that stage. (p.151)

The ambiguous use of ‘one’ again contracts the narrator into Alphonse. Here the older narrator looks back with rage on the younger self’s child-like capitulation to the ‘authorities’. She is now shocked to recognise how she too was ‘trying to get into this or that nurse’s good books.’ (p.176)

Alphonse’s contemporary voice is also filled with social protest against the constraints of being female projected in the novel. The maternity ward is full of unmarried mothers and Alphonse is outraged by a comment from another nurse: ‘“They should practise self-control.”’ (p.58) As the novel has observed, it is precisely through this practise of self-control that the ‘authorities’ maintain their power. In responding: ‘Sinning indeed! Having a baby is the sort of thing that might happen to anyone who is reasonably young and attractive’ (p.158), Alphonse asserts the normalcy of pregnancy and protests against the system of self-control that she herself is compelled to uphold through sexual restraint.

The social ideals of Marxism are reflected in the narrator’s outrage at the treatment of the cleaning ladies:

The funny pinkies some of them young, some sixty, some over seventy going around with their buckets and brushes. There were many who looked old and worn out, you wished you could sit them down and tell them, ‘Look, Grannie, you don’t have to do this anymore, see? Things have been arranged differently. There is another system now... ’ (p. 161)

It should be acknowledged that the narrator herself seems slightly uncomfortable with this new egalitarian world order. Her amused tone, ‘the funny pinkies’, and her sudden adoption of a stereotyped working class inflection, ‘see?’ and ‘Look, Grannie’ is patronising. The narrator is more comfortable when she is able to sneer at her peers as in her description of a fellow nurse who ‘radiated an aura of Buckingham Palace and bedpans’. (p. 172)

Alphonse, like Reed Nolan, finishes at St Thomas’ in 1939 and is holidaying in Val Andre in the South of France when the war breaks out. Returning to Paris to work in the American Hospital she is struck by an image:

Every window was stuck across with strips of adhesive brown paper, in order to prevent the glass shattering when the bombs began to fall and many proprietors were showing quite a genius for design in the patterns they conceived. On second thoughts Alphonse realised that it could not be the proprietors, there were so few left. It must be their wives who were responsible for the precise and geometric designs.

Yes, a woman’s city now, taken over-night, quietly and efficiently. (p. 190)

The passage expresses the sudden shocking impact of war, emptying cities of men, yet also an idealised beauty of ‘the woman’s city’, where even the adhesive strips on the windows express
‘pattern’ and ‘design’. The inception of this ‘woman’s city’ mimics the impending invasion of Paris. The city is suggestively ‘taken over-night and efficiently’ by the women just as shortly the city will be taken over by the German Army. Although the image is of French wives of soldiers, subliminally present in the writing are the Australian women modernist designers and painters Cynthia Reed had worked with in Melbourne in the 1930s. The image brings to mind the domestic geometric designs of Margaret Preston. The observation is also prophetic. Two major exhibition of the painter Joy Hester at the Australian National Gallery, Modjeska’s study of the painters, Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington Smith, in *Stravinsky’s Lunch*, as well as the 2001 exhibition of the Australian Women Modernist Artists held at the Australian National Gallery, have indeed begun to reclaim these Australian modernist women artists, just as women here have taken over a city famous for its male modernist painters. The description of the patterned windows is quintessentially painterly, forshadowing the image-driven prose of the travel writing.

In leaving Europe for America, Alphonse is leaving behind her a dying civilisation. Prefiguring the brief period of English socialism after the war, Reed Nolan imagines something better to emerge from these ashes: ‘But already blitzed and bombed and tottering as England was, something more than snobbery and patriotism was afoot - something to do with the workers, and their spirit, and their children’s futures - the world would see.’ (p.231) Yet in returning to America, where Alphonse enrolls in a postgraduate degree in psychiatric nursing, the novel returns to its idealised beginning.

In contrast to the ‘Victorian ugliness’ of St Thomas’ is the high-rise modernity of the hospital in New York: ‘The Psychiatric Block of the Payne Whitney Clinic consisted of ten storeys, especially constructed to suit the needs of its patients and personnel.’ (p. 214) Just as the facade of St Thomas’ reflects its interior, a world of anachronistic rituals and delusional practices, so the architectural facade of the New York hospital promotes its interior ideals of mental health: ‘Three floors were given over completely to offices and research laboratories. There were also psychotherapy, recreational and occupational therapy departments, a large outpatient clinic and an experimental nursery school.’ (p.214) The high-rise exemplifies American modernism. The concept of an outpatient clinic would have been innovative in the 1940s, when the conventional treatment of the mentally ill demanded long periods of hospitalisation. The concept of a nursery school within an institution would have been revolutionary.

The Payne Whitney is the realisation of Alphonse’s social dream. Yet its evocation seems more dream-like than real. The Clinic represents the antithesis of the punitive environment of St Thomas’. At the New York Clinic ‘the environment is ideal’ and ‘the interior decoration was perfect’. Even the food ‘could hardly be bettered.’ In this new environment Alphonse feels ‘the dawning of tremendous enthusiasm, and a great thirst for
further knowledge.’ (p. 215) The idealism is, perhaps, slightly modified when Alphonse begins to learn the treatment methods employed by the hospital:

The first practical class the post-graduate students had was concerned with the giving of wet packs and prolonged baths, considered valuable treatment in practically all acute psychoses. In order to perfect their techniques, and to gain understanding, the students practised the wet pack on each other. The girl acting as patient lay wrapped tightly in sheets and blankets wrung out in tepid water. Finally narrow double sheets were lain across the mummy-like figure, strained tightly, and tucked and fastened beneath the mattress.

Alphonse didn’t like the experience at all. The teaching superintendent kept asking, ‘Now aren’t you comfortable? Aren’t you starting to feel nice and warm? Aren’t you beginning to relax?’ And, she, with just her head appearing out of the top of the muffling clothes, answered, ‘No, I’m most uncomfortable. No, I’m cold as anything. No, I feel all tied down and I’m getting tenser and tenser.’ (p. 217)

Momentarily the text escapes from ideology. Alphonse’s reaction of increasing tension to the treatment wryly counters its relaxing aims. Far from feeling relaxed, she feels ‘all tied down’. At a time before anti-psychotic drugs, the wetpacks are another way of restraining patients. If the treatment is a kind of imprisonment, it is rational to conclude that it also a form of punishment. However, this moment is quickly passed over: the narrator states that ‘only a few people get a bad reaction from a wet pack.’ (p. 217) It is when recovery is discussed that the novel becomes most overtly propagandist, revealing inconsistencies that reflect basic tensions in the writer: ‘There was a particular satisfaction in seeing girls from 15 to 18 years of age, who had been punished and expelled from school after school, regarded as disobedient, rebellious and vicious, at last being treated gently and scientifically – for an illness.’ (p. 222) If the wet pack was anything to go by, treatment at the hospital was neither ‘gentle’ nor ‘scientific.’ The narrator’s reading of the girls’ ‘rebellious’ behaviour as ‘illness’ perhaps unconsciously reveals the conforming and controlling practises of psychiatry. It is a reading quite at odds with Alphonse’s experience: she had herself been a ‘rebellious’ girl who had broken away from her family’s and friends’ expectations of correct behaviour and had been called ‘crazy’ by her husband. Yet neither Alphonse, nor the narrator, appear to see the ironies of psychologising these ‘rebellious’ girls as mentally ill. Psychiatric practise may not moralise against ‘rebellious’ girls’ but it still punishes them. The conflict between how the novel reads Alphonse’s behaviour and that of the other girls perhaps reveals inconsistencies in Reed Nolan’s thinking about female rebellion and psychology. There are other inconsistencies in the novel’s conclusion:
There was a new future dawning for mankind, a future full of promise, and she wished to contribute, to play her part in it. She felt this was a time for intensive training so that she might, with other co-workers, take her place in the world of which she had some understanding - for which she was intellectually, emotionally, spiritually prepared. (p. 232)

Alphonse’s future at the Payne Whitney may be ‘full of promise’: America represents a refuge from war-torn Europe and a place where Alphonse can pursue her studies. At St Thomas’ promotion had been based on class, but in this imagined New World class has been swept away in favour of equality through education. However, slightly earlier the narrator had observed ‘soon the bugles would start to blow here, too’ (p.231) and troops would be ‘sent to live in holes in the ground’ and to ‘shoot at other men.’ (p. 213) The historical moment of the novel’s conclusion is 1940, after Dunkirk, when Europe was under the heel of the fascists and before the Americans had entered the war. Yet having left behind her a Europe rapidly falling to the fascists, Alphonse talks of ‘a new future dawning for mankind’ with the optimism of ‘a future full of promise’. There is a strained, clichéd quality in this peroration.

The novel ends on an ambiguous note:

Alphonse was thinking of these things as she changed into white stockings and bent to carefully lace her white shoes. But they did not occupy her mind for long, for she was filled with an insatiable curiosity for further knowledge and with the dawning of a great content… She was doing the work she wanted to do, and it was time to go on duty. (p. 232)

The novel doesn’t end in the ward, amidst her work as a nurse, but just before she goes on duty, as she puts on the ‘white stockings’ and ‘white shoes’ of the nurse. On the surface, the novel appears to resolve itself: Alphonse has achieved what she set out to do in the beginning of the novel. Beneath the surface resolution, however, is an undercurrent of unease. The uniform may be symbolic of an identity defined by vocation, but it is also expressive of the superficiality and insecurity of identity: with the same ease as it can be put on, it can also be taken off. Emotionally, there is also conflict. While Alphonse ‘was filled with an insatiable curiosity for further knowledge’ she also feels the ‘dawning of a great content’. It is not easy to simultaneously feel contented and insatiable. The struggle to imagine an unreal state suddenly moves the writing into fantasy. It also raises again the problem of the character’s unresolved conflict between sexual fulfilment and vocation, the body and the mind, and Alphonse’s unhappy failure to reconcile these conflicts. Struggling through the bad writing (and poor editing) is the final image of Alphonse, still not quite there in the ward among her patients, but in the process of putting on her uniform, an image of becoming rather than an unequivocal image of being.
The novel as a whole does not fulfil the promise of irony signalled in the exclamatory title. In the last section in America, the novel’s failure to maintain its narrative ‘double vision’ prevents any ironic observations on Alphonse’s imagined future happiness. Through its inconsistencies and in the abandonment of narrative perspective, the novel reveals an unresolved conflict between autobiography and fiction. As fiction, the novel is unconvincing. Although it is claimed that Alphonse is on the eve of ‘a great content' the text’s awareness of her unhappily sublimated sexuality, and the masochistic denial of her body, actually conveys discontent and incipient neurosis. Yet unintentionally, the ambiguity of the final image again casts doubt upon the ways in which Alphonse is lucky. With a lonely and loveless future before her, and her self-worth bound up in the facade of a uniform, Alphonse’s promise of contentment appears dubious.

Reed Nolan is unable successfully to realise Alphonse’s transition from becoming to being because she has not resolved whether she is telling her own story or writing a work of fiction. From a biographical perspective, the novel is interesting for what it reveals about her inability to come to terms with her pregnancy and her life at the time of writing *Lucky Alphonse!* in the early 1940s. The pain of lost independence and the loss of a career she clearly loved are present in the novel’s ambiguous final image. Reed Nolan’s own story of pregnancy and forced return to Australia appears to disrupt a more satisfactory resolution. It is worth noting that when she came to revise *Lucky Alphonse!* for her third and final novel, *A Bride for St Thomas*, she abandoned the last section in America. It is possible to speculate that she herself realised that the lasting value of the novel lay in its exploration of women’s desire rather than in the achievement of this desire.
In *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* (another exclamatory title) Reed Nolan continues the project of self-analysis through the use of third person narrative and from a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective. In this second novel, however, the life story being told is far more extensive. Although I would describe *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* as a psychoanalytical novel, it also reveals its place within a larger literary heritage. The novel charts the evolution of the heroine, Hyacinth, through childhood and youth to the point where she is about to commit suicide. As Lionel Trilling has pointed out, the literary origins of psychoanalysis can be traced to the Bildungsroman of Goethe. As in the ‘life story’ novels of the romantic tradition of Goethe, Dickens and Thomas Mann, for example, the childhood experience profoundly affects the adult life.

However, in entrapping her autobiographical self within neurosis and leading this self unconsciously, and untreated, towards suicide, the novel does not admit the idea of recovery. It is the reader, and not Hyacinth, who is aware of the novel’s psychoanalytic framework. Self-determination is only possible, the novel seems to suggest, through a therapeutic process which the author deliberately withholds from her autobiographical self. If the novel was written as a form of therapy, it is a curious therapy that does not conceptualise cure. As I shall argue, other signs of the writer’s own entrapment within the malaise that the novel explores are the vengeful aspects of the narrative and its culmination in a suicide which so plainly foreshadows the ending of Reed Nolan’s life.

Although this chapter focuses on the novel’s Freudian framework and the psychoanalysis of the autobiographical self, the influence of Eleanor Dark’s first novel *Prelude to Christopher* (1934) on *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* points to other implications of this narrative of entrapped female characters within a deterministic postcolonial landscape. Both *Prelude to Christopher* and *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* end with the implied suicide of their female characters. Linda, in *Prelude to Christopher*, steps out in front of a train and Hyacinth, in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* , appears to be about to drown herself. There are other connections between these two novels. Like Dark, Reed Nolan enters into the psychology of her character through interior monologue. Both novels reveal an awareness of the shaping influence of world events such as the First World War and the subsequent rise of Hitler on the modernist sensibility that both novels express. *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* ’, published thirteen

---


2 It should be noted that *Jungfrau* by Dymphna Cusack also deals with female suicide and was published in 1936. *Jungfrau* falls more easily into the category of social protest than either *Prelude to Christopher* and *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* , as it explores themes of sexual exploitation, sexual freedom and abortion, at a period when this subject matter was taboo.
years after Dark's novel, shows its modernism in its citation of such writers as Havelock Ellis, T. S. Eliot and the implied, if not openly stated, references to Freud. *Prelude to Christopher*‘s compressed time scale, in which Linda’s life story is told within a day, is the more radically experimental of the two novels. Reed Nolan’s psychoanalytical study of her character, however, clearly demanded a more chronologically organised narrative. In both novels, the overall atmosphere of nihilism and futility, although an expression of the modern age, is also clearly linked to an older Gothic sensibility, in which deep anxieties about the future manifest themselves in family extinction and decaying ancestral homes.

*Prelude to Christopher* is a potent blend of Gothic fears of disintegration and modernist degenerative anxiety. The plot in which Linda, a brilliant scientist, marries an eugenicist, whose disgust at the uncertain prospect of imperfect children drives him to deny his wife a child, and her subsequent descent into madness and eventual suicide, is melodramatic. Linda’s psychological and social isolation within the house, with its entrapping, haunting, memories, and the figure of the mad scientist, further link *Prelude to Christopher* to the classic Gothic novel. However, the ambiguous construction of Linda’s madness, in which the reader is left uncertain whether its cause is genetic or environmental, the consequence of growing up with a mad uncle, connects the novel to a contemporary debate between social Darwinism and Freudian environmentalism. The novel also explores the female conflict between mind and body central to *Lucky Alphonse!*. The title implies that a child will be born to Nigel (the eugenicist) and the woman he will marry after Linda has died. There is a future, but it is one without rebellious and brilliant women such as Linda and her progeny.

*Daddy Sowed A Wind!* reveals a similar mingling of Gothic disintegration and modernist degenerative anxiety: the central female character is, like Dark’s protagonist, the product of an unhappy childhood and of her genetic inheritance. Hyacinth’s uncle has committed suicide. In this second novel, Reed Nolan again explores suicide, this time within the context on which Dark draws of the dialectic of environmental factors and genetic

---

3 Edmonds, op cit.
4 As Barbara Brooks and Judith Clark have noted in *Eleanor Dark: A Writer’s Life*, (Macmillan, Sydney, 1998), eugenics was a fashionable creed in Australia during the 1930s. Brook and Clark reveal that Dark’s aunt was Marion Piddington, a well-known advocate of eugenics who established ‘The Institute of Family Relations’ (p. 116.) The authors claim that Dark was supportive of eugenics. The book that followed *Prelude to Christopher* was a murder mystery, *Murder on the Ninth Green*, in which the murderer is man of mixed Aboriginal and European blood. According to Brooks and Clark, however, it was not until the writing of ‘Waterway and The Timeless Land that Eleanor changed her mind about race.’ (Ibid.). I would suggest that Dark’s treatment of eugenics is not as straightforward as Brooks and Clark imply. *Prelude to Christopher* fully realises the pain and suffering inflicted upon the female protagonist as a consequence of this ideology. The novel’s ambiguous construction of madness also tends to suggest that Dark was interested in fictionalising a central debate rather than espousing an ideological position. Ultimately, whether Dark personally supported eugenics is less relevant than the fact that she explores this issue in her writing.
determinism. Hyacinth’s abortion is central. Again, not only does the female character kill herself but, through the abortion, she also extinguishes future generations. Each novel imagines a rebellious woman entrapped and doomed by her extended family history and by a culture that construes her as aberrant. Unlike Linda, however, who does fulfil her potential by becoming a scientist, Hyacinth’s potential is never realised. *Lucky Alphonse!* struggled to describe the process of becoming. In *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* the female protagonist is entrapped within her social, cultural, and psychological, construction as rebellious woman. Daddy might have sowed a wind, but the wind that might effect change, that might sweep away the past, is ironically directed into the woman’s psychic interior, and becomes a force of self-destruction.

Patrick White’s comment that Reed Nolan’s childhood was ‘shrouded in Gothic gloom’⁵ is also an apt description of Hyacinth’s childhood in the novel. The gloom of the ancestral home begins and ends the novel. Baldrick has drawn attention to the house as a Gothic trope:

Doubling as both fictional setting and as a dominant symbol, the house reverberates for us with associations which are simultaneously psychological and historical. As a kind of folk psychology in stone, the Gothic house is readily legible to our post-Freudian culture, so we can recognise in its structure the crypts and cellars of repressed desire, the attics and belfries of neurosis.⁶

As Baldrick observes, a post-Freudian reading of ancestral homes not only conjures up the sinister, but also the repressed and the neurotic. Whether the literary house is seen in supernatural or post-Freudian terms, it is indelibly inscribed as Gothic. The opening description of the ancestral home in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* is deliberate in its drawing on a post-Freudian reading of the Gothic house, now transposed to an Australian landscape:

The big house in its great surrounding gardens, with its lake on which floated white swans, with its orchards, its stables and farm houses and its cottages, its brood mares somnolent in the little sheltered paddocks, its coach men and stable boys, grooms and gardeners and croquet lawns, the big house so English, so utterly un-Australian, so foreign in the midst of the Eucalyptus-covered, wild mountain land, where chained convicts toiled upon the dusty road. At Worthness all was cultivated, schooled, watered, green and flowery. English elms and oaks had been planted long since. There was a great quiet, for no sounds from the rising buildings in the valley below reached this place, no cries from the waiting, beaten convict crews. Van

---

Diemen's Land had other houses like Worthness since fallen into ruins most of them, neglected when their owners left for the mainland in search of the bigger money.  

Behind this solid, prosperous and functioning estate is the shadow of insecurity: 'So English, so un-Australian, so foreign in the midst of the Eucalyptus-covered wild mountain land, where chained convicts toiled upon the dusty road.' Worthness is an imitation, a facsimile of a grand English house imposed upon the 'wild mountain land.' The insecurity of Worthness not only arises out of the possible encroachment of the bush, but also as a consequence of the terrible history which lies behind the house's construction: 'There was a great quiet, for no sounds from the rising buildings in the valley below reached this place, no cries from the waiting, beaten convicts.' Like silent ghosts, the convicts who built the house are present, if unseen. While Worthness survives, other big houses have fallen, like Poe's The House of Usher, 'into ruins'. In the knowledge of the fall of these other houses lies Worthness' own impermanence. In contrast to the 'wild mountain land' the house has an apparent fragility, echoed in the psychological fragility of repressed guilt resulting from a class system built upon the backs of the 'beaten convicts'.

At the end of the novel the Gothic trope of the decaying house is amplified into the image of the garden grown wild: 'The neglected garden was doomed by a black bank of clouds, and the still lake, stretching to the utmost ends of the earth, lying sombre under an overcast sky, seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness'. (p.220) The garden is 'doomed' by a menacing nature intent upon reclaiming it. The neglected garden's reversion to wilderness becomes a metaphor for Hyacinth's own neglect and psychological disorder. Although Hyacinth's psychological journey is located in a post-Freudian landscape of the Gothic, in 'the heart of an immense darkness' there is the echo of Conrad and another metaphoric journey.

As Lionel Trilling has noted:

Only a relatively small number have ever made serious use of the Freudian ideas. Freud himself seems to have thought this was as it should be; he is said to have expected very little of the works that were sent to him by writers with inscriptions of gratitude for all they have learned from him.  

---

7 Cynthia Reed, Daddy Sowed A Wind! (Shakespeare Head, Sydney, 1947) p. 9. Subsequent page references will appear after the quotation in brackets.
Daddy Sowed A Wind! is an example of a novel whose very framework is shaped by the Freudian theories of the Electra Complex9 and of sublimation. My discussion of Lucky Alphonse! suggested that the novel founders in Reed Nolan’s own unresolved dilemmas. This is a problem that surfaces again in her second novel.

As Laura Marcus has noted: ‘both autobiography and psychoanalysis paradigmatically involve the reconstruction of life in narrative and the shaping of events into meaningful framework.’10 Once again, Reed Nolan draws on psychoanalytic theory in order to structure the thinly disguised autobiographical elements of her novel. Hyacinth is a near, if inexact, anagram of Cynthia. In Hyacinth’s childhood she is called by Reed Nolan’s pet name ‘Baby’. The family home ‘Mount Pleasant’ becomes ‘Worthness’ a satirical word play on worthless. The school, ‘The Hermitage’ becomes another religious retreat, ‘The Abbey’. The details of Reed Nolan’s mother’s death, her father’s (supposed) rejection of her, her close relationship with her brother John (Luke in the novel) are also included, as is the trip to Europe, her return to Australia, the father’s marriage to the housekeeper and the abortion. The points where the novel does diverge from Reed Nolan’s life story are, however, perhaps more illuminating than the points of contact between the two.

The most obvious divergence is the fantasy of suicide. Unlike Reed Nolan, who returned to Australia at the end of 1932 and rapidly forged a career for herself within the modernist art and design world of Melbourne, Hyacinth returns to Australia and kills herself. As I shall later argue, for the older, expatriate Reed Nolan, Australia was to become indelibly associated with limitation, constraint, criticism and failure. This feeling about Australia, however, was already embedded in Reed Nolan’s thinking in the 1940s. Return to Australia in 1940 had forced the abandonment of her nursing career. For Alphonse, it had only been by getting away from Australia that she could fulfil her ambition. In Daddy Sowed A Wind! the obvious catalysts for Alphonse’s suicide are her abortion, the result of a casual fling on the ship, and her discovery that Claus Weinen has married her friend. But the return to Australia also plays its part.

Hyacinth’s close (although non-sexual) friendship with Claus clearly draws upon Reed Nolan’s love affair with Bernard Heinze. Like Heinze, Weinen is a German composer. But whereas, it seems, the relationship between the still teenaged Reed Nolan and Bernard

9 The ‘Electra Complex’ was Freud’s term for the female equivalent to the ‘Oedipus Complex’, the psychosexual stage of childhood in which the child, having moved through the oral and anal stages reaches the curiously androgynous ‘phallic’ stage and develops sexual feelings for the opposite sex parent and an unconscious hostility for the same sex parent. According to the theory, it is when the girl develops ‘penis envy’ at puberty that her sexual feelings for her father and her resentment of her mother are aroused. See Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (W.W. Norton, New York, 1933). Although Hyacinth appears to feel no apparent hostility towards her mother it is critical to the novel’s working through of this theory that she is blamed by her father for her mother’s death.
Heinze was sexual and that he behaved callously towards her, in the novel it is Hyacinth who refuses marriage before she leaves for Europe: “I don’t understand Claus, I don’t know what love is.” (p.130) After she returns, and is in hospital recovering from an illegal abortion, she is visited by Claus who tells her he has recently married because he thought she was ‘gone forever.’ (p. 218) The reality for Reed Nolan had been a little more brutal: her first and formative love affair significantly ended in rejection. As I shall suggest, there are self-protective and wish fulfilment elements as well as vengeful impulses at work in her portrait of Claus Weinen.

Reed Nolan’s family, and her father in particular, were deeply offended by the novel in which they saw themselves depicted. If revenge is the likely motivation of the portrait of Weinen, revenge is even more powerfully present in the portrait of the father, Matthew Staunton. Hyacinth’s neurotic development and eventual suicide are seen as consequences of her father’s rejection of her and of her subsequent and unresolved Electra Complex.

The novel begins with Hyacinth’s first experience of paternal rejection:

Once the Australian Sunshine danced on the nursery floor, and a baby expectantly held out both her hands. Give me, she said, in her little high, barely intelligible voice. The father came into the room and, lifting up Esther, an elder sister, a child of six years of age, placed her on his shoulder, where she shrieked for joy.

‘Me too! Me too!’ cried the little one.

‘Me too! Me too!’ mocked the man, carrying the other child to the nursery table and setting her down before a steaming plate of porridge. (p. 5)

It is not simply that the father is seen to overlook Hyacinth in favour of her older sister, but that he mocks her for her expectation of attention and love. Although the point of view seems detached, later in the novel, as the narrative slips uneasily between third and first person, it becomes clear that this beginning is in fact a memory of great bitterness, the sort of memory that might be resurrected on the psychiatrist’s couch.

The novel both begins and ends with the house and garden. It also begins and ends with this memory. In a state of delusion brought on by an infection from a backyard and botched abortion and the discovery that Claus Weinen has married her friend, Hyacinth regresses to an infantile state. As she walks into the lake to drown herself, she relives the scene which began the novel: ‘a young girl expectantly held out her arms towards some far light visible only to herself, “Daddy! Daddy!” she called in a little, high, barely intelligible voice’. (p. 221) The ending completes the Freudian perspective which structures the novel, in which the infantile experience determines the adult personality and life. There is, though.

another moment of rejection relived here. While she enacts her first experience of her father’s rejection of her, holding out her arms ‘expectantly’ she makes literal the metaphor ‘drowning’ which she had first felt when her father threw her out of his house:

In the whites of his eyes traceries of blood red appeared. An inarticulate grunt escaped his swollen lips and he took a step towards her. “In the morning you will have your cheque and you will leave this house for ever. For ever, do you hear me?”

She shut her eyes. She was drowning, drowning. Her head was under water and within her all was dead. (p. 127)

For Hyacinth, the association between rejection and death begins with her father’s final rejection of her, an experience that makes her feel as if she is ‘drowning, drowning. Her head was under water and within her all was dead.’ This moment in the novel occurs after Hyacinth’s mother has died and her father makes the accusation: ‘You killed your mother with your madness’. (p.124) The accusation dramatises Freud’s theory of the Electra Complex, in which the girl desires the death of her mother in order to have sex with her father. By being blamed by her father, however, Hyacinth irretrievably loses her father’s love. Her eventual suicide becomes an enactment of this earlier moment of emotional death.

The father’s rejection of his daughter is seen to be based on her physical similarity to his dead brother. It is compounded by his jealousy and guilt over his dead brother’s suicide:

(The colour and expression of those grey eyes - how keenly they recalled her uncle. Yes, Simon - dark haired, white faced, rebellious; why on earth had he been so popular, so admired? - has come to life again in my own daughter, sits before me and defies me. Dissolute the pair of them.) In the blood of this brother flowed a love of dancing and a great passion for music. Mr. Matthew Staunton knew this very well, although he repudiated the fact that there was any musical ability in the family. Simon, after all, he had never regarded as belonging to the family. Rather he was a foreigner, a changeling, a throw-back: a dangerous enemy, stealing love, carrying off coveted prizes, brilliant, graceful, charming; easily affected - he would shake like a little girl when mocked. Yes, a dangerous enemy and a cunning one!

(p. 56)

In entertaining the hypothesis that genetics played its part in the construction of Hyacinth, the novel appears to escape from its environmental and Freudian perspective. Like Simon, Hyacinth is also a ‘changeling’. Physically she is different from the rest of the family. The grandmother believes it is ‘the Irish blood showing’ in her grey eyes ‘encircled by dark shadows.’ (p. 24) Like Simon, Hyacinth is ‘easily affected’, unable to control her feelings and given to dramatic emotional outbursts which alienate her cold, repressed father.
However, the father’s emotional response to Hyacinth’s physical similarity to the dead brother re-establishes the Freudian perspective. Matthew Staunton’s dislike for his brother is revealed to be based on jealousy over his mother’s preference for Simon: ‘Matthew would watch her eyes, warm and sparkling with happy indulgent love and pride dwell on this strange and fiery creature God had given her as an eldest son.’ (p. 56)

In reminding Matthew Staunton of his dead brother, Hyacinth also reminds him of his guilt. In telling his own father about his brother’s infatuation with a servant, Matthew causes Simon to be exiled to England where he commits suicide. Guilt lies behind Matthew Staunton’s rejection of his daughter: ‘It was maddening that he should feel guilty, always a little uncomfortable, thinking of this, even after all these years - that the grey eyes of his daughter, regarding him so, should cause him discomfort.’ (p.57) If the novel momentarily escapes from Hyacinth’s monocular perspective by entering into the Father’s inner life, it is only to claim an ‘objective’ stance on Hyacinth’s punishing treatment.

It is not just paternal rejection and guilty secrets that shape Hyacinth’s childhood, but Victorian puritanism. As Hyacinth reaches puberty the mother is incapable of speaking openly about menstruation, referring to ‘the pain’ (p.44) that Hyacinth will experience monthly.11 When she asks about sex she is told: ‘it is disgusting even to talk about such subjects’. (p. 44) Critically, in line with Freud’s theory of ‘penis envy’, Hyacinth is told by her mother: ‘“Daddy was disappointed you weren’t a boy.”’ (p.44)

Hyacinth’s unconscious desire to please her father manifests itself in her disgust at her developing breasts:

I won’t get big in front like Esther! I won’t grow up. I won’t, I won’t, I won’t grow up to be a woman. Why can’t I be like a boy? First I get the Pain, and now this - and she hated her body. The future and her body were wrapped in one, heavy with foreboding, wide with dawning problems too fearful to be contemplated. (p. 48)

Menstruation and breasts reconstruct the pubescent Hyacinth as body: ‘The future and her body were wrapped in one.’ The process of becoming a woman is the process of becoming a body, a process viewed by Hyacinth as entailing a future ‘heavy with foreboding’, a suggestive, troubled image of pregnancy, in which the birth will bring ‘dawning problems’.

As an adult, Hyacinth’s perception of sex becomes a strange and self-destructive fusion of inherited prejudices and fears from her mother, and a frustrated desire to be loved by

---

11 Elizabeth Grosz has differentiated girls’ experience of puberty from boys’ by the observation: ‘The onset of menstruation is not an indication at all for the girl of her developing sexuality, only of her coming womanhood…. For the girl, menstruation, associated as it is with blood, with injury, with wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable, not in sleep, in dreams, but
her father. When an attempt is made to kiss her, not only does she vomit, but also she hears her father’s voice telling her “You! You’re no good. Never have been. Never will be.”

(p.102) Sexual experience is inextricably linked with thoughts of her father’s rejection of her. Her female body is not only responsible for imposing upon her a limited life but also for denying her the love of her father. Rather than hate her father for what he has done to her she hates herself. Hyacinth channels her frustrated anger at her father’s rejection of her into self-hatred: ‘There was no beauty in the world. It was all filthiness and sex. She wished to kill her body, to hack it to pieces, burn it then scatter the ashes so far, so separately, that she would forever disintegrate.’ (p. 102) As Rod Edmonds has commented: ‘The body in pieces, whether fragmented or mutilated, has been used as a way of expressing a distinctive modern sense of the loss of wholeness and coherence.’

Although the fragmented body is a modernist image of loss of coherence and objective meaning, in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* this image is specifically female. Reed Nolan’s concern in *Lucky Alphonse!* with the body as entrapment, and the body as antithetical to the mind and vocation, is intensified in *Daddy Sowed A Wind!,* and driven further inwards into a masochistic desire ‘to kill her body’. In terms of the novel’s Freudian framework, Hyacinth’s masochism is an expression of Freud’s unconscious ‘death instinct’ in conflict with the libido and a premonition of her eventual suicide.

In desiring to ‘disintegrate’, Hyacinth rebels against the constraints of her definition as body, and the ‘foreboding’ future of pregnancy and maternity that awaits her. Hyacinth’s experience of the limitations imposed by her gender is not imagined in the novel to be particular to her, but shared to a greater and lesser extent by her sisters. In desiring to ‘compete in the world of men’, (p. 54) Hyacinth’s elder sister Elizabeth is described by her father as ‘a crank’. (p. 54) Even Esther, upon whom the father dotes, once home from school for good ‘was finding life a little unsatisfactory.’ (p. 54)

A further aspect of the novel’s Freudian perspective is the issue of incest. It is perhaps the following scene that caused John Reed’s disquiet about the novel’s implications:

‘Oh, Luke, it’s good to be just brother and sister. We can sit here together. And I’m a girl and you’re a man, but we are brother and sister, we don’t want to kiss, and neck, and carry on - ’

He stared steadily down at her. ‘The reverse isn’t impossible either, you know - it has happened.’ (p. 121)

---

wherever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that she was led to believe ends with childhood.’ Op.cit., p. 205.


13 See New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, op. cit.

14 The taboo of incest was evidently a subject which preoccupied Reed Nolan. Letters to the Reeds seem to suggest some sort of sexual involvement with her stepbrother Kenneth Von Bibra. It is however all rather vague, and perhaps should be read as a fantasy. Certainly Von Bibra’s widow, Joan
The taboo of incest, suggestively present within the daughter's longing for paternal approval, is here located within the relationship between brother and sister. I have speculated that Reed Nolan's jealousy of Sunday Reed, her insistence that John Reed only married Sunday because Sunday reminded him of Cynthia, suggests her own incestuous feelings. Certainly there is here an impulse to shock and avenge herself against a brother who had in a sense abandoned her through his marriage.

In this scene the incestuous suggestion takes place within a conversation about freedom which attempts to challenge the conventional world of their upbringing. Luke is himself rebelling against the constraints of a conservative family. Hyacinth reminds him that he used to read her T. S. Eliot. It is Luke who tells her to travel. It is, however, Hyacinth who is shocked by her brother's insinuation and whose orthodoxy is apparent in her appeal to God after she has run away: "'Take me away form this disgusting sex-mad world'" (p. 122), and who wants to 'die-die-die.' (p. 122)

In *Lucky Alphonse!,* sexuality is sublimated through nursing. In *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* Hyacinth initially sublimates her sexuality through music. Music is the legacy that Hyacinth inherits from her uncle. As a young child, Hyacinth wants to play the violin although she has never heard one played. She claims to: "'Know the sounds; I hear them all day long'" (p. 21). The violin is imagined inside herself, a part of who she is. Hyacinth is not allowed to play the violin: instead she is made to learn the piano which she comes to play well and which makes her feel: 'In one flame of concentration mind and body fused'. (p. 33) Only music has the capacity to integrate Hyacinth. At school she is made to play a broken-down piano and she abandons music at last.

Hyacinth's love for Claus Weinen is presented as a displacement of her own creative self, which is in turn a sublimation of her sexual self. She loves a musician instead of becoming one herself. The first time she sees Claus play her response is intense and sexual: 'Hyacinth shivered as the bow touched the strings.' (p. 58) In shivering 'as the bow touches the strings' Hyacinth becomes the instrument. Later in the novel, she tells her sister how a male friend described her as a violin: '... only a great artist playing with consummate skill could draw forth the tones of which I am capable.' (p. 85) With unconscious irony, or total naivety, Hyacinth finds this "'a lovely idea - so unphysical.'" (p. 85)

Claus, however, is not a boyish lover, but a father figure to replace her own imperfect father: "'I think he would be a good father - oh how I wish I had a father who loved music, who loved me.'" (p.79) It is not until the travel writing that the displacement of the creative

---

von Bibra, Brodsgaard, née Arthur, denied that there had been any sexual relationship between them. Brodsgaard, op. cit.
self is fully focused on as Reed Nolan’s narrator relinquishes her creative self within the marriage.

Claus Weinen’s relationship with his mother is also seen through the lens of Freudian theory. Preoccupied by his poverty, he reflects on the financial status of his future wife:

‘Wonder if she has money too - her family is bound to have, or she wouldn’t be in that house. To hell with this life, always watching for openings, for influential people. I’ve a good mind to chuck it all and go back to Europe’. Memories of the Regent Picture Theatre, of the brass band rising through the stage - the blue spotlight playing on his own white-coated figure - suddenly overwhelmed and frightened him. ‘I mustn’t get soft,’ he shrugged. ‘Without money life is unbearable.’ He glanced at his watch and pressed his foot on the accelerator; his mother would be waiting for him. Thinking of her, he relaxed. After all, she was the only person who mattered, the only woman in the world who had denied herself, sacrificed everything for him.

It was unthinkable that he should let her down now. (p. 83)

His interest in marrying for money is apparently justified by his concern for his mother and his memory of poverty. Yet his relationship with his mother is presented as unnaturally close:

‘Thinking of her, he relaxed: After all, she was the only one that mattered.’ The suggestion is that she is a dominating presence with whom he is still living and, perhaps, on whom he remains too dependent. Claus’ relationship with his mother seems also to suggest the unhealthy possibilities for which Hyacinth yearns in her relationship with her father. Yet although Hyacinth is trapped inside a destructive relationship with her father, in which she is doomed to repeat futile attempts to win his approval, Claus is depicted as unable to break away from his mother and, therefore, from developing into an independent adult. Reed Nolan’s revenge on Bernard Heinze was not to create a portrait of a heartless cad, but a weak, slightly ludicrous and pitiful figure. Claus Weinen is ultimately an object of mockery.

Hyacinth’s speech to Claus before she leaves for Europe is full of contradictions, which express a confusion of purpose. Although she speaks of being ‘restless’, wanting to ‘go far away and rest alone’ (p.130), her impatience for movement is more a sign of her insecurity than a genuine urge to see the world. While she states as her objective in going away, the need ‘to find out something’ (p.130) Hyacinth admits she ‘never knows quite what it is’. (p.130) Unlike Alphonse, who always knew what she wanted to be, Hyacinth has no idea. Ironically, as Hyacinth talks of going away to discover what it is that she wants from life, despite her knowledge that ‘it is quite near now’ (p.130), she fails to recognise that what she wants is standing before her in the form of Claus. Almost as soon as the ship has departed she realises that she is in love with Claus: ‘Her heart beat wildly, choking her breath, racing away from her. Now she was safe, her body was safe and she was free to love him. “I had to go away to
know...'' (p. 136) Significantly, for this girl terrified of sex, it is only when she is 'safe' on board the ship that she was 'free to love him'. (p.136)

To this point, the narrator had been largely concerned to create and endorse Hyacinth's unconscious. On the ship to England the narrator adopts a more ironic stance. The admission of Hyacinth's snobbery suggests awareness of a need for greater objectivity. There is also a sharper sense of the postcolonial world that has shaped Hyacinth and from which she is travelling. In a letter written on the ship, Hyacinth complains about her fellow travellers:

One thing to be thankful for is that they are going back to where they came from. For even if one doesn't particularly subscribe to the idea that Australia is the land of milk and honey, it seems a pity that a new country should be a dumping ground for England's half-wits, syphilitics and consumptives. (p. 138)

The absurdity of protesting against Australia being England's 'dumping ground' obviously does not occur to Hyacinth. Racism is later added to her less attractive qualities when in Germany she reads in the paper about Gandhi:

Funny looking reptile Gandhi is. Why doesn't that Dahelbehli or whatever his name is - the Indian who did so well for England in the first Test - he seems a gentleman - why doesn't he do his duty by his countrymen and keep them busy playing cricket, keep them contented in the good English manner? (p. 181)

Hyacinth's views are typical of her protected squattocracy background, in which privilege promotes fears of invasion and usurpation in order to cling onto minority power. Gandhi is a threatening figure to Hyacinth because, unlike the Indian cricketer who acquiesces to the colonial power by assuming 'the good English manner', Gandhi fails to conform and is, therefore, in Hyacinth's eyes, not even human but a 'Funny looking reptile'. In not assuming 'the good English manner', Gandhi represents to her the possibility of insurrection, of drumming up discontent. In the last part of the book, Hyacinth is, at best, a satirised figure, the Australian innocent abroad, through whom Reed Nolan holds up to scrutiny Australia's privileged classes. These moments, however, are far too infrequent. For the most part, there is little to distinguish between the narrator's and Hyacinth's perspectives.

Central to the 'international novel' (a category of novels to which both Lucky Alphonse! and Daddy Sowed A Wind! have claims to belong) is the rite of passage represented in the journey. In Daddy Sowed A Wind!, however, the expectation that this journey will have a profound effect is subverted. Before Hyacinth herself travels she is told by her friend, Ariel, that she really ought to go to England, describing Australia as: 'a God-forsaken country unless one enjoys putting on lipstick, playing tennis and getting necked.' (p.83) Ironically,
when Ariel goes to Europe with her friend Nancye their life in Europe is remarkably similar to life at home in Sydney. In a letter to Hyacinth, Nancye writes about shopping for clothes and about David whom ‘she picked up on the boat’ (p.103) and who drives her around Hyde Park: ‘that’s the way young men conduct their petting parties in this part of the world.’ (p.103) Unlike Alphonse, who is motivated to escape both gender and class, Hyacinth travels only to escape the constraints of her gender.

Pesman has pointed out that on the Suez route between Australia and England, Colombo was the first foreign port of call and that the shock of alterity had a profound impact on many Australians.\(^{15}\) For many Anglo-Australians this was their first exposure to a foreign race and language. While Hyacinth’s friends are ‘delighted’ by the ‘novelty’ of Colombo, Hyacinth is ‘nauseated’, ‘bewildered’, ‘sickened’ and ‘frightened’. (p.136) In the much later travel writing the shock of eastern poverty is a repeated experience, and Reed Nolan attempts to communicate the voyeuristic attitude of the western tourist to the human suffering that has become the subject of the tourist gaze.

At the time Hyacinth (and Reed Nolan) underwent this journey in 1929, the poverty of Colombo was much commented on, and Cairo had become the subject of cliched tourist appropriation. The First World War had brought Australian soldiers to Cairo who sent home many postcard photographs of themselves mounted upon camels with the pyramids as a backdrop. As a child, Hyacinth had received postcards from her father in Cairo during the First World War: ‘they were photographs of palm trees, camels, and pyramids.’ (p.27) By the time Hyacinth undertook her trip, the photograph of the camel had become a standing joke: ‘they took out their Brownies and Kodaks and snapped each other On a camel, By a camel, With a camel.’ (p.142)

For Hyacinth, travel is an outward manifestation of her own discontent. Just as her confusion was expressed in feeling ‘restless’ in Sydney and needing to get away so she could ‘rest alone’, so also the stimulation of London proves unsatisfying. At first, Hyacinth is excited by the city: ‘London stimulated, enthralled her and every day in a fever of excitement she wandered through the city.’ (p.154) Yet the ‘fever of excitement’ gives way to intense frustration:

Craving knowledge, aware of her ignorance, she attended lectures on painting; lectures on tapestry. Archaeology, the history of art. On Leonardo da Vinci, Watteau, Cellini, Turner, Michelangelo. Quickly, quickly, she made up for lost time; still that hunger, that craving, that empty urge and longing. (p. 155)

\(^{15}\) Pesman, op. cit., pp. 156.
As in *Lucky Alphonse!* knowledge becomes a substitute for sexual fulfilment. The ‘craving’, the ‘urge’, ‘the longing’ for knowledge, is seen in terms of sexual need. In Paris, however, Hyacinth is taunted by memory:

When I was a child, she remembered, I prayed for a violin - but they made me learn the piano. Then I found out about music and I understood that music was what I wanted for my life. But Daddy hated it, and me, and Mummy got tired of me. They wanted to see the rough edges knocked off and so they sent me away to the boarding school, where ‘music’ meant twenty broken-down pianos helling together and a woman with chronic diarrhoea (sic). To get the rough corners knocked off, living among two hundred girls dressed in navy-blue tunics and black shoes and stockings. Navy-blue and black. And in the holidays Daddy shouting at me that I was a fool and useless. And now everything becomes increasingly futile. Why do I go on living? I’ll never get whole again now. However I struggle, and in spite of the good times when the load lifts, it seems that I will never recover - I’m one of the lost. (p.160)

Although the above monologue begins in the third person as ‘she remembered’, it slips quickly into the first person. No inverted commas define and delineate Hyacinth’s thoughts. The effect is as if the novel has abruptly moved from third person to first person narrative. Within the novel’s Freudian framework, the slippage into first person enables Reed Nolan to more closely describe Hyacinth’s unconscious associative thought processes. The memory of being musical is displaced by the memory of her father’s hostile reaction to the music and to her enjoyment of it, and to her very being. Her mother, too, ‘grew tired’ of her. School is imagined by her as an exile from the home: a statement of parental rejection of her, to be reinforced on holidays at home where ‘she is proclaimed a fool and useless’. Hyacinth is trapped in an infantile state of development in which she craves parental approval. Her depression, her feeling of ‘futility’, is clearly seen to stem from her feelings of rejection.

It is at this point of remembered emotion that the perspective becomes interior, blurring the distinction between the narrator’s and Hyacinth’s voices. This blurring is indicative of Reed Nolan’s inability to separate herself from her fictional self-projection. Beyond the occasional satirical moments and the brief insight into the father’s motivations, there is very little else to distinguish Hyacinth’s perspective from the novel’s perspective.

Hyacinth’s restless desire for further travel also enacts her flight from the family. Leaving France for Germany, she is motivated by ‘the necessity to flee, to bury herself deep in the unknown; a new experience might solve her problems.’ (p.158) In Germany, a connection is made between her compulsive movement and her flight from the absent Claus:

She sat, facing the engine, in a second class compartment of the train that travelled express to Berlin. He had not appeared, driving up to the door, coming to claim his love. There had been
no word from him. And now her expanding nervousness compelled her once more to go, to escape, to search. (p. 190)

Feelings of rejection and abandonment again resurrect this need ‘to go, to escape, to search.’ If the feelings Hyacinth experiences are in part based on Reed Nolan’s failed affair with Heinze, certainly she did not confide a comparable sense of purposeless motion and flight to John Reed. In a passage from a letter to him, quoted in the biographical section, Reed Nolan wrote of travel as expansion. This departure from her life story does not problematise the autobiographical sources of the novel. As I have also noted, letters from the period when Reed Nolan first began working on *Daddy Sowed A Wind* detail feelings of futility and depression brought on by sexual rejection.

It is in Germany that Hyacinth’s repressed sexuality is finally awakened. At a Nazi rally she becomes fully conscious of her sexual self: ‘During the next hour Hyacinth moved restlessly. Somehow this man’s words had stirred her strangely. Ah, to give oneself completely to some gigantic hero, immensely powerful and masculine, strong, ruthless and detached...’ (p.188) Fascism and seduction both demand acquiescence, the need ‘to give oneself completely’. The object of Hyacinth’s sexual interest, however, significantly recalls the father through a child’s eyes, the ‘gigantic hero’ who carried the sister in the opening passage.

In deciding to return to Australia, Hyacinth is ‘tormented’ (p.203) by thoughts of a sick father ‘with no one to look after him’ (p. 203) and an equally lonely Claus. She fights against ‘the drummed insistence of her pulse beat’. (p.203) In capitulating to ‘her pulse beat’ she is powerless: ‘it was beyond her power to order her life; only as a magnet draws a pin she was forced to return.’ (p.203) In returning she is also capitulating to the compulsion to conform to her gendered role as dutiful daughter and companion wife.

On the ship, going home, Hyacinth learns by letter from Luke the news, (‘I hope you will take it sensibly’) (p.207), that her father had married his housekeeper. Hyacinth feels ‘betrayed, her love flouted and she cast aside, useless and unwanted.’ (p. 208) She imagines that this ‘is the end’ (p. 208), and that ‘there was no more hope’. (p.208) When she finally allows herself to be seduced by Paul Reich, a German passenger, it seems clear that her sexual initiation is a reaction to the final loss of her mother. Reich, despite his name, professes distaste for National Socialism. However, he is presented as ‘strong, beautiful and terrifying’, in many ways the classic Nazi. The experience of being seduced reduces her to a childish state: she feels ‘as a child’ (p.208) and he undresses her ‘like a child’ (p. 208) If seduction returns her to childhood then, suggestively, the seducer is a father figure. The sexual conquest relieves an earlier fantasy at the Nazi rally where she had felt overpowered by the rhetoric. Giving in to
the seduction is, therefore, presented as capitulation to a greater power. Finally fulfilling her body’s sexual function, Hyacinth feels her ‘mind benumbed.’ (p.210)

Arriving home pregnant, the Australia she sees is twisted to conform to and reflect back her depression: ‘Back in Australia, where the cities were soiled with sun; back to dust and sordid, drab suburbia.’ (p.210) Although the novel deals with the point at which the pregnant Cynthia Reed returned to Australia in the early 1930s, there is an echo of the second pregnant return to Australia from America in 1940. Reed Nolan’s first return resulted in what was, no doubt, the horrifying experience of the ‘backyard’ abortion. Her second pregnant return resulted in the birth of her daughter, followed by the difficult experience of bringing up a child alone and a long period of depression. The experience of returning home for Reed Nolan must have been quite literally ‘heavy with foreboding’.

The sadistic abortion scene sheds light on the secret suffering of many women of Reed Nolan’s generation. Once again, however, blame is directed at the father:

For one second Hyacinth braced her body to absorb the thrusting agony of scraping knife upon flesh, than sank shuddering from the pain, twisting to free her wrists. From very far away there came the ceaseless screaming of an animal - what animal? A calf under the branding iron? A hog, perhaps, staggering in the death pen, the knife still dangling from its jugular vein? No it was the daughter of Matthew Staunton Esq., landed gentleman, and the late pupil of The Abbey, Church of England College for Young Ladies, who was screaming and pulling with all her force, trying to free her limbs from the bed, while a woman with tight lips and heavy jaw stood over her, shouting, ‘Shut up! D’you want the whole street to know what’s going on? Do yer?’ (p. 215)

In comparing Hyacinth’s experience to the branding and slaughter of animals, the narrator vividly emphasises the barbarity of the back-street abortion and associates it with the activities of her landed gentleman father. Reference to the father and the school may be a form of social protest, echoing the view expressed in *Lucky Alphonse!* that pregnancy can happen to anyone, regardless of class and family background. But the reference to Matthew Staunton is more intimate and more strident in its protest. The evocation of the father in this scene in which his daughter is being tortured makes a connection between the torture scene and the father. Matthew Staunton is implicated in what the girl is experiencing, just as throughout the novel, he has been seen as responsible for the direction of Hyacinth’s life.

In hospital with an infection from the abortion, Hyacinth is visited by Claus who tells her that he has married her friend, Ariel. Hyacinth feels ‘the desperate stillness of inevitable failure and worthless despair without end, for no longer was there hope, no glowing ember of hope’. (p. 220)
In the final passages it is her father and not Claus that she is thinking of: 'How long since he had said, “Go - go forever”.' (p. 220) As she moves towards the lake in a distorted mirror image of her seduction, 'she was a child once more, sobbing her need.' (p. 220) Once again, there is an appeal to the Freudian theory of conflict between the libido and 'the death instinct'. It is to her father that she calls out as she enters the water:

The old neglected house drew yet another sorrow to itself and lamenting down its many corridors, shaking its shabby windows in savage sadness while a girl expectantly held out her arms towards some far light visible only to herself, and moving even deeper through the dark waters, 'Daddy! Daddy!' she called, in a high, barely intelligible voice. (p. 221)

In the last image, the narrative moves away from describing Hyacinth's feelings as the perspective swings away from the interior to the exterior. It is the atavistic house that observes her, as 'it drew another sorrow to itself', that feels her 'sadness', that mourns her death, and whose neglect merges into her own.

Unlike *Lucky Alphonse!*, this narrative is not scrutinised by the interrogative retrospective narrator: for the most part there is no coherent narrative perspective. In *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* there are few instances of ironic detachment from Hyacinth's experience, and when the reader is allowed to enter into another perspective, such as that of the father or Claus Weinen, the vengeful purpose is all too apparent. As I have suggested, Reed Nolan has attempted to sustain a narrative perspective shaped by insights derived from Freudian psychology, a perspective that seems, at the end of the novel, to collapse entirely. In beginning and ending the novel with what is clearly the first remembered moment of rejection, Reed Nolan attempts to confer a final coherence. But if Hyacinth is dead, who precisely is remembering this moment and to what purpose? If she lives, how does she survive?

The novel suggests a great deal about Reed Nolan's state of mind at the time of writing. The ending seems to reflect the depression and domestic entrapment suffered by Reed Nolan as she struggled to raise a young child. *Lucky Alphonse!* looks back nostalgically on its protagonist's state of becoming but ends on a note of dubious affirmation. The protagonist of *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* is constrained even more irrevocably by the writer's feelings of blame and accusation. In denying her character/self the possibility of recovery or any capacity for self-analysis that moves beyond recrimination, Freudianism becomes as deterministic as genetics. Ultimately, the Freudian insights might justify Hyacinth's neurosis and depression, but they effectively operate to further entrap her within the novel's deterministic world. *Daddy Sowed A Wind!* is finally most interesting for the way in which it reveals Reed Nolan's fantasy of suicide and its entrenchment within the self-construction of autobiographical writing. It also
sheds light on the shaping influence of this novel upon the life of the writer who would eventually take her own life.

In late 1947 Safiya Nolan arrived in Sydney after years spent working in Northern Queensland with the young poet Rupert Baca. The love affair between Safiya and the end of Nolan’s relationship with an older man, Norman Lilley, started during her time at Colombo. The relationship, which was short-lived, left Nolan feeling ambivalent and.section. The experiences in Sydney were a turning point for Nolan, who had left her previous life behind. It was a time of reflection and change.

**SMILE! YOUR HAVING A GREAT DAY**
CHAPTER THREE: MARRIAGE AND TRAVEL, 1947 – 1971

In late 1947 Sidney Nolan arrived in Sydney after many months travelling in Northern Queensland with the young poet, Barrett Reid. The journey had been a reaction to the end of Nolan’s eight-year affair with Sunday Reed. In Sydney, he stayed with Alannah Coleman. He also saw a great deal of Joy Hester who was now living with Gray Smith in Sydney. Janine Burke reports that the four, Nolan, Coleman, Smith and Hester, met often in the first months of his arrival in Sydney.

Brian Adams’ account claims that Cynthia Reed was initially hostile to Nolan when he visited her early in 1948. Alannah Coleman, however, remembers Nolan being formally invited to dinner and Cynthia Reed cooking him a chicken. Adams reports that within weeks Nolan had moved in. After ‘talking it over with friends’ (undoubtedly the Evatts) Reed Nolan married Nolan on 25 March 1948.

According to Adams, after the Reeds found out about the marriage, Sunday Reed became ill. John Reed rang Nolan and pleaded with him to visit. Burke’s account differs. She claims that the Nolans went to ‘Heide’ ‘to make the peace.’ Certainly Cynthia Reed telegraphed the Reeds on the day of her marriage telling them to ‘have faith in me.’ The telegram suggests that she, at least, hoped that the differences that existed between the couples could be resolved. In both accounts the visit precipitated a terrible row that ended communication between the two couples. Burke, though, has stated that ‘neither Sunday nor John – ever stopped hoping for a reconciliation.’ If Sunday had lost Nolan, and John his sister, they still had the Ned Kelly paintings. In April 1948 the Reeds exhibited the Kelly series for the first time at the Velasquez Gallery in Melbourne.

---

1 The friendship between Reid and Nolan was very close. When Nolan telegraphed Reid to inform him of his marriage to Reed Nolan, Barrett tried to telegraph his reply ‘You bastard’, but the Post Office would not accept it. (Interview with Barrett Reid, op.cit.) Underhill reports: ‘It was a great shock to him (Reid) when SN (Sidney Nolan) remained in Sydney and married Cynthia Reed, but BR (Barrett Reid) claimed his own break with SN was not out of loyalty to the Reeds but because SN refused to let him visit them and ended the letter by insinuating he was no longer a friend.’ Op.cit., p. 434.
2 Interview with Alannah Coleman, op.cit.
5 Interview with Alannah Coleman, op.cit.
6 Adams, op.cit., p. 100.
7 Ibid., p. 101.
8 Burke, op.cit., p. 29.
9 Underhill, op.cit. p. 46.
By late 1948, Nolan was preparing for an exhibition Reed Nolan had arranged for him at The David Jones Gallery to be opened by her friend, Maie Casey, in April 1949. Russell Drysdale first met Nolan at this exhibition. In a letter to George Bell, Drysdale is clearly disdainful of the Reeds and their sphere of influence and expresses surprise that he liked the artist’s work:

I couldn’t help asking him how he felt about his years in Melbourne, and he nicely chose to ignore the rudeness of so impertinent a question, and simply enough said he felt it was something of one’s past he wanted to live out of his life. I couldn’t help thinking Good God you clown, a man’s life is his own without bloody questions being asked. But I must say I did enjoy his show. He’ll have a better hand now with those mad influences behind him.11

Shortly after the exhibition closed at the end of April, the Nolans set out with the six-year-old Jinx on a four-month journey through central and northern Australia. Flying from Sydney to Adelaide, the Nolans took the train, ‘The Ghan,’ to Alice Springs and into the desert interior. From the centre they made their way through the Northern Territory to Darwin and Arnhem Land, west to the Kimberleys, down the West Australian coastline by ship to Adelaide and finally home to Sydney. The journey was written up by Reed Nolan as the first of her travel books, Outback.

Back in Sydney Nolan was visited by the English art historian Kenneth Clark who was deeply impressed by his work.12 While Nolan painted, Reed Nolan wrote her first travel book. It would take her many years to find a publisher. Within the first year of their marriage the Nolans had developed the pattern of travel and work that would continue throughout their marriage.

In 1950 the Nolans travelled to Europe, Nolan for the very first time. Adams reports Nolan making an ecstatic tour of the galleries and museums of Europe.13 Many people of Nolan’s generation were making this trip to Europe in the early 1950s. In his study of Australian expatriates, Stephen Alomes singles out the generation of Australians writers, painters, musicians and journalists who left Australia for London after the Second World War. Alomes cites forced containment during the six years of the war, feelings of cultural alienation from a supposed cultural centre, and a belief that it was only possible to pursue a creative career overseas, as factors that contributed to the scale of the post-war exodus.14

11 Letter from Russell Drysdale to George Bell, 1949, held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. This letter offers an interesting perspective on the Reeds by an outsider who was not part of their circle.
12 Adams, op.cit., p. 103.
13 Ibid., p 115-118.
Many of those who left in the late 1940s and early 1950s, such as the curator, Harry Tatlock Miller, and his friend, the designer, Loudin St Hill, the painters, Albert Tucker and Alannah Coleman, the writer and painter couple, Pat and Cedric Flower, and the poet Alister Kershaw, were acquainted with the Nolans. In London, the Nolans would also get to know the writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift, who had left Australia in 1950. As Alister Kershaw put it: 'The war was over and we headed for the great outdoors - in other words, anywhere that wasn’t Australia.'

In late 1950 the Nolans returned to Australia, only to leave again in 1952. England would become their permanent base. In their first few years in London they lived in a flat in Paddington while Nolan attempted to establish himself. They were not well off. In later letters to Maie Casey, Reed Nolan complained of the 'early years': 'watching the Melbourne cottage go, the land and house ...bonds go.'

During this period Nolan renewed his acquaintance with Kenneth Clark. Through Reed Nolan's friendship with Harry Tatlock Miller, now working with Rex Nan Kivell at the Redfern Gallery, an exhibition of his work was arranged at the Redfern Gallery.

Between November 1955 and September 1956, the Nolans stayed on the Greek Island of Hydra, at first as the guests of George Johnston and Charmian Clift. They soon moved into a vacant house owned by a Greek painter. The Nolans' stay on Hydra is well documented in Garry Kinnane's biography of George Johnston. Reed Nolan's impressions of Hydra are also recorded in a letter she wrote to the Australian writer Pat Flower. Creatively and emotionally, this period left lasting impressions on both couples.

Although the Johnstons had been living in Sydney in the late 1940s, it is unclear whether the couples met at that point. In London, the Nolans introduced the Johnstons to Clarice Zander, who suggested the Greek Islands as a cheap place to live and write. Johnston, Nolan and Reed Nolan shared common experiences of Melbourne. Johnston had preceded Nolan at the Gallery School in Melbourne by several years and had known Sam Atyeo. It is likely that as a journalist Johnston would have known Reed Nolan’s friends, Cyril Pearl, Clive Turnbull and Kenneth Von Bibra. Certainly Reed Nolan would have been familiar with Johnston’s journalist milieu.

Several years after the Nolans left Hydra, while travelling through New Mexico and

---

16 Letter from Reed Nolan to Maie Casey 28 October, 1969. (Courtesy of Jane MacGowan and Diane Langmore, now held in the National Library of Australia.)
17 Adams, op.cit., p. 103.
19 Ibid., p.127.
making their pilgrimage to the last home of D. H. Lawrence, the narrator of *Open Negative* is clearly thinking of Hydra and its community of expatriate writers and artists:

At first because the country and climate is so beautiful, one thinks how wonderful it would be to live in Taos and Santa Fe, or somewhere else in this state; but one has felt that way in other parts of the world and learned that it is not enough, that whatever the charm or the talent of individuals, small communities are fatal to those who do not enjoy communal intrigue, gossip and intimacy.\(^{20}\)

The ‘communal intrigue, gossip and intimacy’ of the artist colonies the Nolans pass through in America reminds her of ‘other parts of the world’. Her memory, in fact, holds two artists’ colonies, ‘Heide’ and Hydra. For Reed Nolan the atmosphere on Hydra was too intense but, also, too exposing. She communicated what she felt about Hydra in a letter to her friend Pat Flower, who had visited Hydra a few months before the Nolans:

\[\text{I get frank even though I have the best intentions, because everyone gives their things to read and wants to know what they think (thank God there is nothing of mine or Mr Nolan would be passing that around) and each in turn says Wonderful out of one side of their mouth and Crap out of the other.}\] \(^{21}\)

Reed Nolan’s insecurities as a writer are evident. Although she ‘gets frank’ about other people’s work, she will not expose her own writing. Playing the role of critic is far safer and it is a role Reed Nolan clearly played very well. In her letter to Pat Flower she writes of Johnston:

\[\text{I will not say what he wants to hear, that he is a brilliant writer. And if asked will say that if he wants to write something a bit better he’ll have to go to what he knows - Elwood, Melbourne, and the shoddy flats of third rate journalists, the newspaper rackets, the big time boys, Australia and NOT be afraid of treading on the toes of some mate who will one day cut him dead in the Hotel Australia bar and who really hates him like shit anyway.}\] \(^{22}\)

Some years later Johnston would, in fact, turn to ‘Elwood, Melbourne, and the shoddy flats of

---


\(^{21}\) Letter held at the Mitchell Library, Sydney and quoted in full in Kinnane’s biography of George Johnston, p. 155.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
third rate journalists, the newspaper rackets, the big time boys’ in *My Brother Jack*. herself and Nolan:

From the letter it is clear that the relationship between Reed Nolan and Johnston was tense. She claimed to ‘like George in small doses’ but that he ‘dislikes me intensely’. Kinnane quotes Nolan in explanation of Reed Nolan’s dislike of Johnston: ‘she thought he drank too much, smoked too much and talked too much.’ Reed Nolan was also concerned by the amount Nolan was drinking. After the Nolans left Hydra, Reed Nolan gave her husband an ultimatum, either he stopped drinking or she would leave him.

The letter reveals Reed Nolan’s awareness of the fundamental differences between herself and Nolan:

> It is true I have no ambition. I have always wanted to pull out, not to give it a go. Cities, unless one can live in sheltered luxury, disturb me. Walking along those crowded pavements, into those pushing shops, the noise of the gutter and horns, the smell of petrol and people, the anxiety on every face go my rhythms, buses, Under Ground, smoke. But not S who is a city man, stimulated as one should be, I’m sure, by the sights and sounds, longings to get in, to compete, to give it a go.

The differences between Reed Nolan who wants to ‘pull out, not to give it a go’ and Sidney longing to compete, ‘to give it a go’ are essentially irreconcilable and, as I shall later demonstrate, form the most personal and intimate dimension of the travel writing. The final image in *One Traveller’s Africa* of Sidney amidst the crowd and her own conspicuous absence, articulates not only Reed Nolan’s thoughts about her doomed relationship but also the reasons behind it. In *One Traveller’s Africa*, disconcerting asides, together with images and passages of personal confession that reveal a marriage in conflict, interweave into a subversive, ironic treatment of travel.

In 1956, after four years without a permanent home, Reed Nolan’s patience was wearing thin. Since their arrival in London in 1952 the Nolans had been living in a series of flats. For six months of the year they would travel and for the remaining six months of the year they would settle so that Sidney could paint. Temperamentally and artistically, Nolan was suited to this lifestyle. Short and intense bursts of painting were followed by months of travelling and gaining the inspiration for the next series. Reed Nolan, however, craved stability. Constant travelling with no permanent base was a source of anxiety to her. It was not until the Nolans returned from America in 1960 that they finally bought their London

---

23 Ibid.
25 Interview with Jinx Nolan, op. cit.
27 Adams, op.cit., p. 128.
home in Putney. Yet fear of upheaval and its consequences continued to manifest itself in the writing. *Outback* and *One Traveller’s Africa* are full of images of anxious transplantation and fearful consequences. By the late 1950s, Reed Nolan was applying these images of transplantation to herself. To Pat Flower, from Hydra, she complained about their constant travelling: ‘I shall really wither if I get my roots pulled up too often.’ Later, in *Open Negative*, the narrator refers to herself as ‘one of those peasants whose feet are roots that go deep into the earth.’

Talking with George Johnston on Hydra, Nolan became interested in the story of the Anzacs at Gallipoli. According to Kinnane, Nolan was struck by the transposition of this recent battle onto the ground where the Trojan Wars had been fought. Also living on an island nearby was a mutual friend, the Australian writer, Alan Moorehead, who was working on his book on Gallipoli. In America during the Nolans’ 1958 - 1960 visit he would begin to paint the Gallipoli series.

If Hydra made a lasting impression on both the Nolans, their visit to the island had an equally powerful effect upon the Johnstons. Soon after the Nolans left Hydra, Charmian Clift started work on her semi-fictionalised account of life on the island, *Peel Me A Lotus*. A portrait of Reed Nolan is thinly disguised in the book as the unsympathetic character, Ursula Donovan. Like Reed Nolan, Ursula is a passionate gardener. Much is made of her doomed attempts to grow inappropriate exotic plants on the barren, stony mountainside. It is a coldly insightful characterisation of Reed Nolan. The struggle to nurture plants in unsuitable terrain is expressive of Reed Nolan’s own frustrated desire to put down roots. The characterisation, perhaps, also suggests something about her marriage and her neurotic impulses to nurture a partner with whom she was essentially incompatible.

Nolan would later appear in George Johnston’s novel, *Clean Straw for Nothing*, as the painter, Tom Kiernan. Yet even though the portrait is of Nolan, Johnston’s judgement of the

---

28 Having a home also meant having a garden. In Putney, Reed Nolan was finally to have a garden to replace the one she had tended in Wahroonga. Many friends and acquaintances have stressed the importance of gardening to Reed Nolan. In his obituary White wrote: ‘I shall remember her in the shimmer of her Putney garden beside the river, amongst the magnolias, the hummocks of pinks and tussocks of cornflowers, the Persian roses with their spiny canes, the perfumed cabbage-roses. forgotten except by those who remember what is out of season and who are obsessed by roses.’ If gardening was to give Reed Nolan the connection to the earth, and through this the stability she craved, it must also have become another source of anxiety and frustration. As Mirabel Oeler has written: ‘If gardening is the essence of continuation, of one thing flowing into another, a procession of followers that must be compounded by colour, habit and form, then where does that leave travel? In almost total opposition. That is the true answer to my question. An impossibility. Leave a garden five days and disaster may occur which no amount of catching-up later can eradicate.’ *The Virago Book of Women Gardeners*, ed, Deborah Kellaway (Virago, Oxford, 1996), p. 177.

29 Reed Nolan to Pat Flower, op.cit.

30 *Open Negative*, op.cit., p. 56.


32 Ibid.
Nolans’ marriage is powerfully felt in the novel. Tom is single and never married. Whether or not he intended it as an insult, the absence of a wife can be read as an attack upon Reed Nolan. Johnston effectively erases her out of Nolan’s life and creative development and history.

In 1957, Nolan held his first retrospective exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Nolan was now at the height of his critical acclaim. Bryan Robertson, the curator, had written to John Reed asking to include the pre-1948 paintings in the exhibition. Adams reports that Reed did not refuse, although the prevarications and delays meant that, in the end, these paintings, and other early works, were not included.  

On 29 January 1957, John Reed wrote to Nolan:

> Sun got a letter from Bryan Robertson of the Whitechapel Gallery and as she did not feel able to carry out just what he asked, it seemed best that I write to you. The main difficulty, I think, is that Bryan Robertson speaks of the loan to Sun of all your work prior to 1948 but of course the position with regard to your early paintings and drawings cannot be resolved in terms of ‘loans’ – they were most certainly never ‘borrowed’ – and some more personal and sensitive realisation will have to be reached with Sun at some other time, and this naturally can only be done by yourselves. For this reason I am sorry you did not contact her while you were here recently, when perhaps everything could have been arranged for your exhibition as you wish.

> I am sure that you will remember that you once wrote and said for Sun to take what she wanted, and though she has never ‘taken’ anything it is impossible now to speak of ‘loans’...

> …I know it must be difficult, because of some change in yourself to accept the fact that for Sun there is no change, and that your paintings are just the same in relation to herself as they ever were. There are perhaps two truths, which must somehow be reconciled – or at least acknowledged.

Reed writes like the lawyer that, after all, he was. The letter is carefully worded, the term ‘loan’ is disputed, and the receipt of a letter from Nolan bequeathing Sunday his paintings, is subtly introduced. In her footnotes to this letter, Underhill quotes in part from Robertson’s letters: ‘Nolan tells me that he left on loan with you the entire output of his work up until 1948.’ Underhill then continues:

---

34 Underhill, op.cit., p. 514.
but acknowledges the Kellys are Sunday’s. BR suggested that due to the late date etc, all the works be sent on the Oronzay to sail from Melbourne on 25/1/57. In this way he could select the exhibition in London. Not surprisingly the Reeds smelt a rat.\footnote{Ibid., p. 516.}

Underhill is unequivocal in her bias. The implication is that Nolan would not return the paintings, despite his admission that he had already given the Kelly pictures to Sunday Reed. Over many years, John Reed would tirelessly pursue authors who wrote on Nolan and who failed to admit his or his wife’s primary role in Nolan’s creative life.\footnote{On 24 October 1957, Reed wrote to Colin McInnes following the publication of the Whitechapel exhibition catalogue, The Search for Australian Myth in Painting, informing him of his and his wife’s ‘own association with Nolan’. In this letter Reed ‘corrects’ McInnes’ judgement that the second Kelly series, painted in the 1950s, was ‘finer’ than the series the Reeds had in their possession, Underhill, op.cit., p. 518. In 1977 Reed wrote to Lord Kenneth Clark after the screening of a documentary ‘Nolan at Sixty’, objecting to the word ‘patron’ applied to himself and his wife: ‘We were not in any sense his ‘patrons’: We were intimate friends: We loved each other: We were all working together in a very exciting way and discovering the world together. And watching with daily fascination the daily miracle of Nolan’s paintings. How can you, knowing Nolan as well as you must, suggest that we were the potentially sophisticated ones when Nolan was born sophisticated?’ Underhill, op.cit., p.827. John Reed’s impressions (admittedly those of a now elderly man) that all three were young, ‘discovering the world together.—’ are misleading. In 1939 when the Reeds first met Nolan their age differences and attendant maturity and experience of the world was considerable - John was thirty-nine, Sunday, thirty-four, while Nolan was twenty-two.}

37 Underhill has interpreted the Kelly pictures as ‘transmogrified into the absent Nolan’.\footnote{38 Ibid., p. 248.}

38 As I have previously suggested, there is a sense in which the Kelly paintings came close to embodying Nolan for the Reeds. The exhibition of the paintings, following within a month of the Nolans’ marriage, and the Reeds’ personal quest to establish their artistic eminence, can be interpreted as a form of transference, in which the paintings stand in place of the ‘absent’ protegé. The Reeds’ behaviour might also suggest that, in believing they had in some sense created Nolan, they continued to try to possess him through any means possible. Whatever the conscious, or unconscious, motivations for their obsessive behaviour, the Reeds would continue to make their presence felt in both the Nolans’ lives.

In 1958, Nolan was awarded the prestigious Harkness Fellowship which enabled them to spend two years in America. In Florida they met Patrick White whose work, Voss, they had recently read and admired.\footnote{Patrick White, Flaws in the Glass: A Self Portrait, (Penguin, Ringwood, 1981) p. 234.}

39 Patrick White would remain a close friend of Reed Nolan’s for the remainder of her life. Shortly after this meeting the Nolans returned to New York where Cynthia was diagnosed with tuberculosis. The last six months of the 1950s were spent in hospital and this experience would form the basis of the second half of her American book, Open Negative.

In 1961, Methuen agreed to publish Outback. Russell Drysdale and his wife Maisie Drysdale were in London for the Whitechapel exhibition of contemporary Australian art. At
dinner one night, Reed Nolan complained to the Drysdales that Methuen was insisting that reproductions of Nolan’s paintings appear in *Outback*. She was determined that the book should stand alone on its own merits.\textsuperscript{40} It is likely that she was also worried about what the critics might say if the paintings were included. In the end a compromise must have been reached as the painting *Agricultural Hotel* was used on the dust jacket, and a number of his photographs and line drawings illustrate the text. Despite Reed Nolan’s caution, one critic went on to accuse her of ‘cashing in on her husband’s fame.’\textsuperscript{41} The fact that Nolan becomes the central focus of the second travel book may reflect her resignation to this view of herself as conduit for the work of her husband. Evidently, both Reed Nolan’s publisher and the critics saw the marriage to Nolan and her portrayal of her husband in the book as *Outback*’s selling point. The portrait of Nolan that develops in the travel writing from *One Traveller’s Africa* onwards was, however, counterbalanced by the interior narrative that reflects her own frustrated creative impulses.

Nolan’s perception of his wife as his muse is apparent in an interview he gave to *The Bulletin* in 1962:

‘When I paint I don’t paint for a public. I paint for five or six people. I don’t say they are the only people that understand what I am doing but I understand how only five or six people understand my work. My wife, for example, comes and goes in the studio all day. She knows as much of what I am doing as I do myself.’\textsuperscript{42} Sidney claims to paint for a small group because ‘I understand how only five or six people understand my work.’ The way this select group understands his work affects what he paints. Reed Nolan is singled out from the group because she ‘knows as much of what I am doing as I do myself.’ The understanding that existed between the Nolans, and this view of a shared, collective creative enterprise, is powerfully present in the travel writing. While on one level she is his interpreter to a reading public, she is also revealing a shared creative partnership.

In 1962, a wealthy American, Mayfield Salisbury, then living in Nairobi in Kenya, invited the Nolans to visit him with the view to Nolan painting a series on Kenya. Unfortunately, shortly after the Nolans arrived, they had a falling-out with Salisbury and left to stay with Daria and Jack Block, who had been recommended to them by Alan Moorhead. Having arrived in Africa, they then decided to see as much of the continent as time and money allowed.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} Interview with Lady Maisie Drysdale by Jane Grant, 7 March 1996.
\textsuperscript{41} *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 September 1963.
\textsuperscript{43} Interview with Daria Block by Jane Grant, 2 November 1997.
Daria Block was struck by the shared visual attentiveness that linked the Nolans. On the Block’s farm she noticed that it was Reed Nolan who drew her husband’s attention to the spectacular water lilies which filled the lake. Nolan had been standing with his back to the lake when Reed Nolan sharply called out to him. Turning in response, he answered her ‘Got it’. In *Outback* the narrator had described Nolan’s method of rapidly capturing an image, which she calls ‘the quick blick’. The scene with the water lilies not only demonstrates the ‘quick blick’ but Reed Nolan’s active involvement with the painter’s method of mentally recording images that he would later paint. As I shall later demonstrate, Reed Nolan also applied ‘the quick blick’ to her travel writing. Many of the images of the travel writing are impressionistic. They not only convey the sense that Reed Nolan rapidly recorded what she saw, but also the subjective nature of the process of seeing.

With the occasional exception, such as Nolan’s 1964 expedition to Antarctica, Reed Nolan accompanied her husband on his travels. From 1962 onwards they would travel annually to Africa. Throughout the 1960s, the Nolans undertook numerous trips to many countries in Europe. They travelled to Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, the United States, as well as making frequent visits to Australia. By the mid 1960s, although Nolan’s fame continued to grow and friendships were forged with eminent creative figures, such as the American poet, Robert Lowell, and the English composer, Benjamin Britten, the critical reaction to his work in both England and Australia was becoming less enthusiastic. In 1992, Nolan gave an interview where he talked specifically about the changed critical reaction to his work after the African series: ‘I moved around so much - I went to Antarctica, and then to Africa, and people and critics, or some of them, gained the impression that I was a sort of travel painter, the kind of painter who just travelled around.’

It would seem, though, that in practical ways Nolan attempted to promote Reed Nolan’s writing. In another interview with *The Bulletin* at which Reed Nolan was present, Sidney draws attention to her book: ‘We have so much to do each day what with my painting and Cynth’s writing. This here (picking up proof copy from the coffee table) is her latest, *One Traveller’s Africa.* Some of my African paintings illustrate it. They are excellent reproductions.’ It should be noted that, although he was the more famous talent, Reed Nolan’s books had become a means of publishing his paintings throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s.

These interviews also suggest willingness by Reed Nolan to be overshadowed by her husband. Her reference to her writing as ‘knitting’ suggests ambivalence about taking centre-stage. Her reluctance was also demonstrated by her response to the success of *Outback.*

---

44 Ibid.
45 Sir Sidney Nolan interviewed by Mary Sara, 23 July 1992, Tate Gallery Archive.
1962, *Outback* won the Danish Book of the Year Award. Reed Nolan did not attend the ceremony in Copenhagen because Nolan was working on his African paintings. He would not go to Copenhagen; just as significantly, she would not go alone.⁴⁷

Reed Nolan would also deliberately deflect attention away from her writing and onto her husband. In 1965, the Nolans returned to Australia for the premiere of a film on Nolan, *A Toehold in History*. During this visit to Australia, Reed Nolan was in the process of proof-reading the manuscript for *One Traveller's Africa*. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported her response to being interviewed under the headline: ‘Author Reluctant to be in the Limelight’ ‘Mrs. Nolan was reluctant to talk about herself or her new book and met most questions with “ask Sidney” - even ones about how long since she had last been in Sydney and where they intended to stay.’⁴⁸

In 1963, Geoffrey Dutton had lunch with Nolan in London and observed in him a new mood of pessimism: ‘I had a doleful lunch with Sid and Patrick. Sid was very hurt by some scornful remarks Max Harris had made about him in an article. Sid said Max’s *Nation* article had been the worst attack about him in an article. He would never ever go back to Australia now.’⁴⁹

Throughout the 1960s, Nolan was becoming increasingly sensitive to attacks made upon him in the press, particularly attacks by Australians whom he had once counted as his friends. Reed Nolan, too, was unforgiving about negative comments made of her work by fellow Australians. She never forgave John Douglas Pringle for his review of *Open Negative*.⁵⁰

As Dutton observes of Nolan’s relationship with Max Harris: ‘Max had an extraordinary ability to wound Sidney, going back to the early days at Heide and he could not resist using it.’⁵¹ Harris, now a prominent and influential columnist, had known Nolan intimately in the 1940s when they had both worked on *The Angry Penguins* magazine with John Reed. Harris’ knowledge of Nolan’s intense and ultimately painful affair with Sunday Reed would have given him considerable ammunition.

More generally, the decision to live in England while Nolan continued to pursue Australian subject matter, provoked attacks upon him back in Australia. The arts community in Australia throughout the 1960s remained very small and insular. Not all critics writing at this point could claim close friendship with Nolan, as could Harris and Dutton, though others would profess intimate knowledge based on a slight acquaintance. In an article published in *The Bulletin*, Bernard Hesling admitted: ‘My personal knowledge of Sidney Nolan and his

---

⁴⁷ Interview with Jinx Nolan, op.cit.
⁵⁰ Adams, op.cit., p.197
very vital wife Cynthia, is confined mainly to a few hilarious weekend meetings at the home of mutual friends at Wahroonga.\textsuperscript{52} Nonetheless, he continues:

He is good-looking in a typically Irish, rather lumpy way. Gentle, soft-spoken and very fond of talk (or perhaps 'blarney' would describe it better) I remember him gossiping continuously and amusingly about people, places, food, dogs and, above all, cars - provided they were Bentleys. His speech is clipped (almost English) and the only sign of his working-class background is when he meets working people and then his accent becomes immediately natural.\textsuperscript{53}

Hesling’s ‘few occasional weekend meetings’ occurred nearly twenty years before the article appeared, yet he presents an opinionated study of the artist, investing in his portrait all the accusations of social climbing and affectation typically levelled against the expatriate. Hessling’s judgement of Nolan is not so very far removed from more recent media disdain directed at other famous expatriate Australians, such as Barry Humphries, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes.

‘Heide’ and the Reeds continued to haunt the Nolans. In response to an article written by Charles Osborne in 1964 on Nolan\textsuperscript{54} (which failed to include a reference to the Reeds) John Reed accused Nolan of being their ‘executioner.’\textsuperscript{55} Reed believed Nolan had conducted a campaign against the Reeds of ‘silence, refusal to communicate, denial by implication, innuendo and the ostracism of mutual friends’.\textsuperscript{56} At the heart of the letter is Reed’s ‘bitterness’ at what he takes to be Nolan’s insinuation that the Reeds had ‘stolen’ his paintings. In self-justification John Reed wrote:

Each made his own contribution to the life we all led together, and your painting was part of your contribution, even though you said Sunday painted them as much as you did.

These paintings became in their own way as much a part of the total life we lived as Sunday’s cooking, as the trees we planted, as the books we all read and which were added to the Library, and a hundred other things we all contributed. It may be some confirmation of this that you said all your paintings were for Sunday, and I am quite sure you did not think of them other wise. They were created with her in a sense which is most literal, and it is certain that without your life at Heide, a great many of them would never have been painted.\textsuperscript{57}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Bernard Hesling, ‘Nolan the Myth Maker,’ \textit{The Bulletin}, 10 February 1962.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{54} \textit{Qantas Airways Australia}, Vol.30, No.5, May, 1964.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Underhill, op.cit., p. 616.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
John Reed makes some weighty claims: the paintings were Nolan’s ‘contribution’ to ‘the life we all led’, and that the paintings are of no more value than the meals cooked and trees planted. Reed also raises the spectre of the muse. Sunday, however, appears to be not simply an inspiration, but an unacknowledged collaborator who has not received her due. It is again the legal mind that is seen here at work when he reminds Nolan that he had told Sunday Reed that she ‘had painted them as much as you did.’ As well as attempting to justify his refusal to relinquish the paintings, Reed’s letter expresses anger at being written out of the record of Nolan’s creative life.

As Nolan came under attack from various sources, Reed Nolan’s role grew more defensive. According to Adams, ‘her principal role was perceived by acquaintances as a shield against annoying interruptions of her husband’s work.’ Adams cites the Humphries story (recounted in my Introduction) to illustrate this view. Fame brought with it paranoia. From the later 1960s, Reed Nolan was continuously changing their telephone numbers. In 1969, she claimed in a letter to Maie Casey that the people who lived next door to them at Putney had only bought the house because of Nolan.

Paranoia is perhaps also evident in a story told by Elwyn Lynn when he and his wife Lily Lynn were staying with the Nolans in the late 1960s. Sitting in a box seat at the theatre, Reed Nolan noticed that the people in the next box had abruptly left, leaving behind something in a paper bag. In a state of anxiety, she asked Lynne to make sure that it wasn’t a bomb. The IRA were certainly bombing London at this time so that on some level it was a rational response. Reed Nolan’s acute anxiety at this time, however, is corroborated by A Sight of China (1969) and Paradise and Yet (1971). In the Chinese journey the text’s paranoia seems to have its source in the hostile critical reception of Nolan’s work. In her last travel book, a diffused, yet insistent, melancholia permeates the text.

Without the wealth of personal complaint and interior analysis provided by Reed Nolan’s letters to John and Sunday Reed in the 1930s and 1940s, or Pat Flower in the 1950s, it is impossible to understand her motivations and feelings in the 1960s. Given their close friendship and similar sensibilities, the letters she wrote to Patrick White would, no doubt, have contained insights into this phase of her life. White later wrote of these letters: ‘Cynthia was the one who wrote, erratic, extravagant, sometimes crazy letters which would open up into sudden passages of great sense.’ Unfortunately, White destroyed his personal correspondence. Newspaper reports and interviews, however, seem to suggest that Reed

---

60 Interview with Elwyn and Lily Lynn, op.cit.
62 See White’s letter to the then Director General of the National Library of Australia (9 May 1977); ‘I can’t let you have my papers because I don’t keep any. My Mss are destroyed as soon as the books are
Nolan possibly wanted to be represented as an ambiguous figure. Alan Maclean’s description of her ‘as a mass of contradictions, everything about her was in brackets’, perhaps, summarises the impression she made.\textsuperscript{64} All that can be reconstructed about her life from the 1960s and early 1970s is a guarded silence. Her published work from this period memorably records her voice and gives further insights into the conflicts that would ultimately destroy her.

\textsuperscript{64} Interview with Alan Maclean by Jane Grant, 3 November 1996.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE TRAVEL WRITING, 1962-1971

(i) Outback

The journey taken by the Nolans and six-year-old Jinx (named Polly in the book) into Australia’s interior and north-west in 1949, is the source of Reed Nolan’s first travel book, *Outback*. In 1949 the vast majority of city-dwelling Australians had never travelled into the interior. The narrator’s account of their travels through ‘outback’ Australia is as foreign as later journeys through Africa and China. If, however, the ‘outback’ described in the book is a real, though alien place, it is also a ‘metaphorical side of a mythical partitioning’¹ and the textual journey must also be understood as a journey through the realm of ‘imaginative geographies’.²

As the Nolans leave behind ‘the terracotta bricks and tiles of city suburbs’³ they enter the ‘Dead Heart’ (p.18). Although the ‘dead heart’ was an established metaphor for the desert, in the context of *Outback*’s modernist and postcolonial journey into an unknown land, there is an unmistakable echo of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As Gillian Whitlock has argued, ‘the act of imagining Africa has helped various western cultures to define themselves’.⁴ Africa, like the Australian outback, is an imaginative as much as a geographic zone. In *Outback*, Reed Nolan subtly extends the geographic metaphor into something more blatantly sinister. If Africa’s heart is ‘darkness’, then Australia’s ‘heart’ is death.

From the first a sense of foreboding is conveyed⁵:

The sun was shining on my lap as the plane moved lazily through the brilliant air. I was thinking of millions of flies, miles of sand, and the bones of dead cattle, for our destination was Central Australia, and I suspected that this was a part of the world better left unvisited. (p.13)

Historically, the Australian desert is not only the graveyard of cattle but of European explorers of the interior. Although the book is based upon this 1949 journey it seems likely that it was revised for publication in 1962. There are references in Outback to the doomed expedition of Burke and Wills, around which Sidney was to paint a series in the 1950s. Other failed quests into the interior are subliminally present in the writing. Reed Nolan had read Patrick White’s novel, Voss, based on the mysterious death in the desert of the German explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt. Although the Nolans’ journey does not end in death, the quests of these doomed explorers and the vengeful animistic power of the desert, inform Outback.

In her exploration of Twentieth Century representations of the desert, Roslyn Haynes has observed a Gothic legacy:

Traditionally associated with gratuitous cruelty, with superstitious and claustrophobic imprisonment in some ancestral house, the term Gothic seems, on the face of it, to bear no relationship to the desert. Yet there are subtle and insistent parallels, suggested even in the journals of Eyre and Sturt. And these have been powerfully exploited by some Twentieth Century writers to provide an appropriately intense setting for modern psychodramas in which the desert functions as a mindscape for the horror within.

Baldrick’s definitive summation of the Gothic as ‘a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space’ combining ‘to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration’, appears to have no direct application to the representation of the Australian desert. Yet in Outback, the Gothic preoccupations with space, time, and inheritance, are present, though suggestively reworked. Claustrophobia becomes agoraphobia. Spatial confinement is replaced by exposure to space without perimeters. Inheritance is no longer symbolically located in the house but in the land. The desert is a site of contest between a displaced yet conquering white culture and a dispossessed black culture. To both cultures the concept of inheritance is paramount.

The post-colonial condition exposed in Outback is the inheritance of colonial conquest and theft. At Marraki, the Nolans meet a white settler who bemoans the inadequacies of government: “I dunno,” he said moodily, “The way Australia’s going the bloody politicians wreck the country. It’d be better to give it back to the aborigines with

---

5 In simply calling the textual self of the travel writing ‘the narrator’ I wish to make a clear distinction between her textual self and the historical figure, Reed Nolan. Similarly I refer to the Sidney Nolan character in the travel writing as ‘Sidney’.

6 White records that on his first meeting with the Nolans in Florida in 1958 they discussed Voss, Flaws in the Glass, op.cit., p.235.

apologies.”” (p.101) Although racism is observed, so, too is the insecurity of white inheritance: the land is to be 'given back', 'with apologies'. By contrast, black inheritance is seen by the narrator to be an inalienable connection with the land. Flying over the Kimberleys in Western Australia, the narrator constructs the land as mother and the Aboriginal people as its children: 'We were directly over hills drawn lumpily together like old stomachs too often stretched and shrunk from many a birth. Between them deep narrow-river-beds sculptured primitive forms.' (p.91) The geriatric mother's birthing of the 'sculptured primitive forms' implies the most powerful connection between mother and child. The connection, however, is ambiguously perceived: it suggests the inherited rights of the Aboriginal people to their land, yet it also distances the Aboriginal people by reducing them literally to stone-age relics. As I shall suggest, this tendency to see the Aboriginal people as relics of another time pervades the narrator's engagement with the reality of their present existence.

In discussing *Daddy Sowed A Wind!*, I suggested that Reed Nolan has attempted to reinvigorate the Gothic literary inheritance with an understanding of the post-Freudian unconscious. Hyacinth's inheritance is her father's guilty secret and the novel traces its influence on her formation. In *Outback*, guilty secrets are more broadly explored in terms of a collective white Australian unconscious. If the journey in *Outback* is to be understood as partially mythological, it soon becomes evident that the progress of the traveller into the nation's geographical interior is an extended metaphor for a psychological journey into the mind.

The experience of travelling through the desert evokes fearful possibilities:

The intensity of the drills beneath us increased as time slowly passed. My back ached so violently that I thought there were two halves of my body, and that at any minute they would be shaken apart. Sidney's eyes were shut, his face a horrible opalescent grey; the woman beside me was quite purple, rivulets of perspiration jerking down her forehead. Even Polly had given up shouting to the driver and slumped forward, every inch of her vibrating, her head nodding as though in disease. Every now and then she turned to cast us the despairing look of an animal that mutely resigns itself to some awful fate. (p.110)

In locating this expectation of an 'awful fate' in Polly, the narrator casts her daughter in the classic role of innocent female victim. As I shall suggest, in both *Outback* and *Open Negative* Polly is frequently the target of her mother's generalised feelings of anxiety and insecurity. The vague, yet sinister, allusion to the daughter's 'fate' is reinforced by the onward driving of the train journey, as if she is already in the process of travelling towards this fate.

The ‘sickening descent into disintegration’, associated by Baldrick with the Gothic, is enacted in a cacophony of images of disease, deformity and bodily disintegration. Here, however, a focus on ‘descent’ and ‘disintegration’ is specifically located within a postcolonial and modernist landscape.

Rod Edmond has suggested the ways in which modernism articulated imperial anxiety about the decline and fall of empire. Outback’s focus, however, is not upon the imperial centre and the fears ‘that what flowed in from outside was unsettling, untreated and possibly contaminatory’, but on the colonial fears of contamination from within, of internal collapse. The narrator’s sense of being physically split in two is an image of this internal collapse and further substantiates Edmond’s conjectures on the body as a site of enactment of imperial (or, in this case, postcolonial) anxiety.

In Outback then, in reaction to this journey through a post-colonial landscape, the modernist anxiety about degeneration blends with Gothic fears of disintegration. The postcolonial anxiety that the journey exposes is white cultural displacement and alienation in a land perceived as hostile. In this way, the writing ‘unearths the repressed’. The land, signifying the Aboriginal people, serves as a distorted mirror of unspoken white guilt for dispossession.

The psychic journey into this semi-mythological interior of cultural identity forms one level of the text’s multiple yet interconnected journeys. If the Nolans are united on their journey to uncover national identity, there are conflicts and differences between them that mark out the contest of creative power and territory that will be foregrounded in the later travel books. In Outback, the journey appears to be directed by Sidney’s desire to paint the country. His wife’s anticipation of the outback as a place ‘best left unvisited’ implies that she was the acquiescent partner. Outback begins what the later travel books will develop, the wife’s journal of her artist husband. Within the ambiguous politics of this creative partnership, however, the first-person vantage-point of the travel narrative enabled Reed Nolan to write into her portrait of her artist husband her own story.

In the travel writing, illness is one of many sites of conflict and contest between the Nolans. In Open Negative, the narrator’s tuberculosis becomes a metaphor for her relationship with Sidney, in which she imagines him consuming her. In Outback, however, it is Sidney, and not the narrator, who is sick. This reversal of what will become the pattern of the travel writing is, I believe, an expression of a very different balance of power from that which later emerges within Reed Nolan’s representation of her marriage.

In 1949, Cynthia Reed Nolan was turning forty-one and Sidney Nolan thirty-two. The age difference was significant in terms of each one’s maturity and experience of life. Nolan

was still in the process of establishing himself as an artist, while Reed Nolan had travelled extensively across Europe, lived and worked in America and England and had recently published two novels. In Outback, although she allows herself to be directed by Sidney and as the reluctant traveller follows him into the Australian outback, her self-image is far more buoyant and resilient than in the later writing, a reflection, it seems, of this honeymoon phase of their relationship:

Light from a huge moon enabled me to get an idea of the magical beauty and variety of the landscape through which we were passing. Every now and then excitement overcame my concern for Sidney and I encouraged him to sit up and look out. (p. 81)

She notes that ‘excitement overcame my concern’. Aesthetics prevail over wifely duty. To compare this scene of the narrator encouraging Sidney to ‘sit up and look’ to a similar scene in One Traveller’s Africa, in which fed up with waiting for Sidney to finish his contemplation of the landscape, she falls asleep, is to observe a change in the relationship. This scene in Outback expresses a different dimension to their relationship: Sidney dependent upon the narrator’s urgent energy.

The Nolans are not ordinary travellers. In Alice Springs a woman tells the narrator: “ ‘Tourists everywhere, worse luck,’” then she adds, “‘I don’t mean people like you: your husband being a painter makes you folk different.’” (p.45) If her non-tourist status is dependent on her relationship to Sidney, the artist, her writing seek to assert the legitimacy of the narrator’s own visionary and artistic powers.

In Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory, the Nolans go for a walk through a town which could have come to life from a Russell Drysdale painting:

In fifteen minutes we had wandered from one end of the unbelievably only street, wide as a paddock, to the other. On either side sprawled small single-storey galvanised iron houses, stores, cafes and milk bars, all unfenced and backing onto the desert; there were no gardens in Tennant Creek. (p.56)

More of a settlement than a town, its iron-structured buildings, in contrast to the solidity of the suburban ‘terracotta bricks and tiles’ that began the journey, project an atmosphere of impermanence. The relationship between the desert surroundings and the absence of gardens is suggestive, not only of an arid environment in which nothing will grow, but also of the transience of people who will not be there long enough to grow a garden.

10 Ibid., p. 59.
Joy Hooton has commented that the desert in Australian representation is commonly perceived both as a place of sterility and emptiness and as a place of visionary revelation... present most strikingly in the stark paintings of Nolan and Drysdale.11 There are echoes of Drysdale and Nolan in Reed Nolan’s word painting: Drysdale’s ‘galvanised iron houses’ and empty streets merge into Nolan’s desert paintings of the late 1940s.

In Sidney Nolan’s 1948 painting, Pretty Polly Mine, (See Appendix, image 1) man-made structures and people are overwhelmed by the encroaching desert landscape. The European man is an ill-adapted figure. He is dwarfed by the disproportionately large, flying form of a brilliantly coloured parrot, which hovers in the right-hand corner of the painting. Cultural displacement is distilled in this image. The imagery suggests the absurdity and futility of European man in this desert context. In the later painting, Death of Burke, the desert is no longer a passive, or even comic, context, but aggressively represented. The desert appears to be absorbing the dead body within it.

In Outback, the narrator is expressing her debt to her husband’s imagery. It might also be argued, however, that Pretty Polly Mine, painted after their marriage but before the outback journey, already reflects the influence of Reed Nolan upon her husband. Collaboration is an inevitable component of the works of Reed Nolan and Nolan after their marriage, yet each could claim a prior creative history which documents the separate evolution of their creative production, representative as it is of contemporary postcolonial discourses. Bill Ashcroft and John Salter cite a Ned Kelly painting from Sidney Nolan’s 1946 series as an illustration of the ways in which Australian modernism was a response ‘to the problems of post-colonial place’12: ‘The view from the sky through the helmet remains a potent metonymy of post-colonial displacement, an ambivalent combination of harmony and alienation, of location and dislocation.’13 At the same time as Nolan was producing his ambivalent post-colonial images of ‘harmony and alienation’ and ‘location and dislocation’ in the mid-to-late 1940s, Reed Nolan was engaged in writing her own elegy to postcolonial displacement in Daddy Sowed A Wind!.

As a creative biography of Sidney Nolan, Outback begins one of the central and interweaving concerns of the travel work:

‘This is a bugger of a town,’ he said, ‘Lots to paint - but a bugger.’

---

13 Ibid., p. 306.
Slinging his glasses around his neck, he went again to sit up on the hill and look. What he saw was deeply absorbed, and stored away to be thought about, to work within him until, enlivened with his own vision, painting executed with fiery speed, savage scrubbing, tender delicacy and penetrating wit would eventually confront entranced or outraged spectators. (p. 57)

Imagined here is the young, rebellious, and shocking Sidney who will 'confront entranced or outraged spectator.' The artist's sight is no passive act of reception but active, intense and passionate: 'Sidney seemed to be stamping on the retinas of eyes screwed to pin holes, storing in every brain cell, absorbing and taking into himself every sight, smell, sound and sensation of the vast landscape.' (p.132) Seeing becomes a violent act: Sidney is 'stamping on the retinas of eyes' which are 'screwed to pin holes'. Aggression is also there in the 'painting executed with fiery speed, savage scrubbing'. The artist is imagined as both consumer and creator: the process of artistic inspiration, of 'absorbing and taking into himself, every sight, smell, sound and sensation of the vast landscape', will later be reproduced, 'enlivened with his own vision', onto the canvas.

In the East Kimberleys the narrator describes the landscape: 'We sat in the open emptiness upon earth that stretched like a strip of endless hardboard beneath a high star-bright sky.' (p.157) The metaphor of the landscape as 'endless hardboard' suggests that the artist is more than the producer of an individual vision, but rather is to be understood as a demi-god whose vision fashions the world.

Yet the portrait of the modernist artist that Reed Nolan produces is problematised. In Outback, Sidney is often positioned as the camera:

Sometimes Sidney's manner of looking at things reminded me of a camera click, for he would turn his back on something that particularly interested him, then wheel around for a split second before turning again. I called this the 'quick blick' as against hours of concentration method of getting memory results. Sidney had decided long ago that the 'quick blick' had its uses, and had trained himself until he was adept at applying it. (p. 158)

The positioning of Sidney as the camera suggests something inhuman and machine-like about his creative processes. Susan Sontag's observation that photography is a 'powerful instrument for depersonalising our relation to the world' touches upon the representation of Sidney as camera-artist here in Outback, and later in One Traveller's Africa, when the photographer-artist begins to be seen by the narrator as a central and disturbing image of the role of the artist in the process of colonisation. In Outback, photography is the tool of both the tourist

and the artist. The narrator's earlier, uneasy, emphasis on the status of the Nolans as travellers: artists rather than tourists, is undermined by the text's focus on photography. At Halls Creek in the East Kimberleys 'Sidney had a great burst of photography' (p.158) As Sidney photographs the local Aboriginal tribe, their reaction is either shyness or amusement, except that: 'One, a tall strong middle-aged man, showed his teeth in a leer of such derision at our idiocy that it struck like a blow across the cheek.' (p.158) The hostility and 'derision' of this man, felt so strongly by the narrator that she compares it with being hit, operates as a powerful critique. Whereas fear can be dismissed as primitive superstition, this angry mockery casts doubt on the innocence of photography and, in turn, on the innocence of the photographer.

The first group of Aboriginal people the Nolans see are in the process of being transformed into a photographic image:

Still fresh from the south where one is totally ignorant of the native people and only occasionally sees a photograph of a dishevelled group, we were guilty in our surprise. realising what our nebulous and preconceived ideas of the aborigines had been. For here was a gentle smiling girl while the man was splendid, tall and broad shouldered, with a finely shaped and calm and aloof face. Embarrassed we were too by being with people who crowded about staring and asking questions.

'What's your name?' queried one fat woman sticking her fingers in the brown girl whose dark body and slim stick legs so perfectly matched the country.

'Daphne,' she answered quietly.

Amid the gabble of comment out came the camera. Unhurriedly, deliberately ignoring the crowd, admirable in his reserve and dignity the aborigine lit a cigarette. Abashed we retired to our carriage. (p.10)

In this first meeting between the Nolans and a group of Aboriginal people expectations are subverted. The Nolans are 'guilty in their surprise' in encountering a dignified people when debasement had been anticipated. The juxtaposition of the fat and stupid white woman and the Aboriginal girl 'whose slim stick legs so perfectly matched the country' is central to the text's exploration of cultural displacement and colonisation. The black girl appears in perfect harmony with her environment, while the white woman, by contrast, is a grotesque distortion. In 'retiring', the narrator attempts to distance herself from this white tourist view of Aboriginal people as images to be preserved in photographs, yet in feeling 'guilty' and 'abashed' she recognises that they too are complicit in a way she does not fully, or self-consciously, apprehend.
Before this encounter, the Nolans had been 'totally ignorant of the native people and only occasionally see a photograph of a dishevelled group... guilty in our surprise, realising what our nebulous and preconceived ideas of the aborigines had been.' Susan Sontag's commentary on the effect of photography: 'imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible, of making it stand still';\(^{15}\) sheds light upon the photographic act in *Outback*. For the vast majority of white Australians, the Aboriginal people only existed in photographs, where they became images objectified and frozen in time. However aware the Nolans are of this impulse to abstract the Aboriginal people, they are in their different ways, as I shall argue, unable to escape from it.

In 1951, Arthur Boyd undertook a similar but less ambitious journey into central Australia where he was struck by the appalling conditions in which the Aboriginal people lived. Boyd's comments provide an interesting parallel to the construction of Aboriginality in *Outback*:

> It was extremely hot and seeing the aborigines in such a bad way was depressing. I had prior to my trip seen only one aborigine, a chap around Melbourne who played a gum leaf. At that stage the plight of aborigines wasn't known to most Australians...I was quite unprepared for the Simpson Desert and seeing people living like that...I was amazed that in 1951 no-one seemed concerned.\(^ {16}\)

It was not until Boyd saw how the people actually lived that he was able to comprehend the reality of the Aboriginal experience and the history that had reduced them to these circumstances. At a time when contact between southern white Australians and the Aboriginal people was minimal, they had become a romantic symbol, while the political and social reality of their lives could be ignored. Abetting this hypocrisy was the commonly-held belief that *real* Aboriginal people occupied an unseen desert space and that to be detribalised was somehow, and mysteriously, to lose one's Aboriginality.\(^ {17}\) By living in the interior of Australia, where few white southerners ventured, the Aboriginal people could easily be transformed into an abstraction; the atrocities performed upon Indigenous Australians could, from this position, be relegated to a distant past and the genocide inflicted on them forgotten. To come face-to-face with Aboriginal people (as both the Nolans and Boyd did) was to

---

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 356.


\(^{17}\) Rowe refers to a 1985 Australian National Opinion Poll which 'revealed that many Australians distinguish the rights to land of Aborigines who are “tribal” and “traditional” and inhabit parts of the “outback” from the rights of those whom they see in or on the edges of cities and towns.' Op.cit., p. 174.
confront the realisation of how white Australia had successfully distanced itself from its moral responsibility.

In Outback, the white people talk and the black people are seen. With two exceptions (the young girl named Daphne and a tribal elder named King) the Indigenous people are observed presences, described and talked about, but significantly voiceless. Balanced against these silent images of the blacks is a chorus of white voices discussing their attitudes towards the Aboriginal people. For the most part these views are racist. Yet beneath all the talk is a powerful anxiety. Far from having gained materially from subjugating the Aboriginal people, the white speakers are themselves existing on the margins of society, the occupiers of a nightmare, hostile landscape.

Although I shall argue that the Aboriginal people operate in the text as an ironic parallel to dispossessed white people, there are other meanings inhering in its representation of Indigenous peoples in the text as voiceless. In her discussion of the representation of Australian Aboriginal people in contemporary Australian auto/biography Gillian Whitlock writes:

> The changing presence of Indigenous peoples in biography and autobiography is an important indicator of an ongoing process of cultural exchange where appropriation and decolonisation co-exist and contest in an aftermath of invasion and settlement. Here the politics of who is authorised to speak, and who becomes the subject(s) of biographic writing, and when and where, and why, are brought to light.18

An earlier text like Outback is even more relevant to the inquiry pursued by Whitlock into 'the processes of appropriation and decolonisation'. To what extent Reed Nolan's representation of the Aboriginal people as speechless can be read as a statement of an unacknowledged desire to deny them authority, or represents resistance to appropriation, or, indeed, whether it is possible, as Whitlock suggests, for these processes to co-exist, needs to be explored.

Although it might be argued that Reed Nolan's representation of the Australian Aborigine as voiceless reminds us of their marginalised and subjugated status in a way that might prevent romanticising them, nonetheless, their presence in the text is constructed in terms which raise further issues of appropriation and alterity. Outback draws upon a long European ethnographic tradition of pictorial representation of the Aboriginal people:19 the tendency to describe them in terms of their racial characteristics, rather than as individuals.

18 'From Biography to Autobiography', op cit, p. 242.
Sontag’s reflection on photography as a ‘powerful instrument for depersonalising our relation to the world’ is applicable to the textual image of the Aboriginal people in Outback and to the way the images inhibit emotional engagement.

Illustrating the text is a photograph of a naked Aboriginal girl beneath which is the caption ‘The people are beautiful in the manner of their country.’ The girl’s individuality is subsumed by the generalisation. Her image becomes representative of her people, a statement about her race rather than herself. The girl’s nakedness is, however, also an important indicator of her inferior status. As Roxanne Wheeler has commented in reference to eighteenth century English constructions of Africans, ‘nakedness is not just a sign of cultural inferiority to Europeans, it has an important material aspect; nakedness reduces European’s material gain.’\(^{20}\) The photograph of the naked girl recreates the legacy of colonial racism within the text’s post-colonial moment of production.

Yet it must be said that the representation of the Aboriginal people in Outback is often contradictory and inconsistent. On one hand, the narrator fuels the stereotype of the noble savage through her imagery. Yet on the few occasions where she allows the people to speak, as when the girl answers the expectation of the exotic with the European name of ‘Daphne’, she explodes the stereotype. Furthermore, the narrator’s stated views about the plight of the Aboriginal people and, in particular, her response to what we now refer to as the ‘stolen generations’ are years before their time. Not only does she document the historical atrocities committed against the Indigenous Australians by colonisers, the massacres and enslavement of a people, but also their contemporary treatment. She writes scathingly about the policy of assimilation, a policy that continued until the early 1970s, and which involved the forced separation of children of mixed blood:

But the policy of the Western Australian Native Affairs Department appears to be hampered on one hand by lack of funds and trained men, on the other by a too drastic attitude to detribalisation.

The latter is considered necessary but it involves the inhuman practice of taking children from their parents to place them in institutions often situated many hundreds of miles distant from their original homes. The children and parents seldom meet again. (p. 187)

At ‘Manbullo’ in the Northern Territory the Nolans encounter nine-year-old Irene, a half Chinese, half-Aboriginal child, ‘permanently employed’ as ‘a parlourmaid’s help’. (p.68) She writes: ‘For our family, used as we were to doing our own work and looking after ourselves, it was embarrassing to be constantly waited upon by adults, let alone a child.’ (p.68) As in the

Nolans’ earlier meeting with a group of Aboriginal people, where they felt compromised by the white voyeurs and retired ‘abashed’, here, being served by the girl induces feelings of ‘embarrassment’.

As an educated white Australian, the narrator is to some extent aware of her own complicity in the conquest and subjugation of the Indigenous people. However, at times she responds with the same degree of emotional disengagement that she exposes in her encounters with narrow-minded white people, as when in the Northern Territory she describes a tribe:

Not only young members of the tribes we had so far seen were singularly well made, but also many of the older men, although thinner, were upright and fine looking, their eyes and calm faces full of wisdom. True you got rogue and villain expression. But they were strikingly in the minority. Later we were to find characteristics varied in different tribes. (p. 97)

The narrator might well be writing about cattle. Although she condemns the political system of racism inherent in the removal of half-white children from their families, she remains oblivious to the racism explicit in her ethnographic views of the Aboriginal people. The interweaving of generalising images with outraged lecturing of her reader reveal confusions representative of her time, place and upbringing, of her own cultural formation.

In the East Kimberleys the Nolans are ‘enthralled’ (p.149) by the rock art they see, yet earlier, in talking about art, the narrator is able to claim:

Australia is not a country from which a painter might easily learn, for above all it is the changing colour of space which gives this empty land so intoxicating a beauty. There is no heritage of culture, no man-made art, architecture or history; only a dreaming which is almost lost, and the colour of light. (p. 57)

Australia is imagined as an ‘empty land’ emblazoned by light. Against this backdrop the modern, male, and presumably white, Australian artist is born. Having no ‘man-made art, architecture, or history’ to draw upon the artist is left with the physical aspects of the reality seen: space, colour and light. Included in the definition of the landscape is this non-visual ‘dreaming’ - the spiritual belief of the Aboriginal people. This reference gives a distinctive originality to the landscape. However, as a description of landscape it is very odd. It is not a reality that is being described, but the impressions of the narrator who senses this quality. In the face of the later rhapsodies over the rock paintings it is at best contradictory to claim that Australia had ‘no man-made art’. Yet this contradiction goes to the very heart of her confusion. In the evocation of an ‘empty land’, tinged by the spirit presence of the Aboriginal people, there is white avoidance. In essence the emptiness of the country is an anxiety-driven
justification for colonisation. Politically, it has been convenient to view the land as ‘empty’, ‘Terra Nullius’, thereby legally justifying its occupation. As Jeremy Beckett has pointed out:

The public has been largely dependent on representations of Aborigines to be found in the statements of various ‘authorities’, the work of painters and photographers, the printed and recently the electronic media, or even in artefacts aimed at the popular and tourist markets. These productions construct Aboriginal people in their absence. 21

At the heart of ‘Terra Nullius’ is an absurdity. The records proving prior habitation of the land existed, yet the mythology of emptiness, of absence, persisted.

For Reed Nolan, dispossession of the Aboriginal people is not an abstract idea belonging to a remote past, but a personally confronting history. Reed Nolan’s self-representation in the text reflects her descent from Tasmanian colonisers. It might be speculated that her inability to think about the Aboriginal people as a living race is an expression of her unacknowledged confusion about an ancestry that participated, if not in direct action, then by virtue of their presence, in the genocide of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

A conversation that takes place between the Nolans further reveals the denial that underlies the narrator’s confused thinking about the Indigenous Australian people. After referring to cattle, sheep and white men as ‘anachronisms’ (p.152) in the country, Sidney describes himself and the narrator as ‘white intruders’. (p.152) The narrator, however, responds by recalling that she ‘felt strangely embarrassed while staring unbidden at this ancient world lying in another time’. (p.152) Again, these feelings of embarrassment are an expression of seeing the reality of the situation but wanting to avoid its implications. In this rephrasing of Eleanor Dark’s The Timeless Land, the narrator reveals her own moral confusion. Once again it is the land and not the people who draw forth an emotional response. The narrator not only replaces the people with the land, but she also removes the land to ‘an ancient world lying in another time.’ The distancing of herself from the land and the people that it signifies is complete. The paraphrase of Dark is no accident. In the previous chapter I suggested Dark’s influence on Reed Nolan. In The Timeless Land when Arthur Phillip feels a momentary shadow of shame, it is the land and not the people that he feels is aloofly dismissing his actions as ridiculous. In allowing the land to speak on behalf of the people, the narrator reveals avoidance, which is also an involuntary acknowledgment of guilt.

In Alice Springs the Nolans also meet Herb Jenkins, whose attitude towards the Aboriginal people is presented as well meaning and in contrast to the blunt racism of his wife
“Else and I don’t agree about the niggers,” he said gently.” (p.37. The narrator describes Jenkins as ‘an endearing little man and we liked nothing better than to sit in his kitchen and listen to his modest, quick, soft-voiced talk of the country and its inhabitants. A great admirer of the aborigines, he told us many stories of their customs and character.’ (p.36) Yet despite his good intentions, Herb Jenkins’ views are essentially paternalistic. He describes how he accepts the invitation to become custodian of a tribal relic:

He turned back to the stone, telling us he was holding it for an old man who believed it would be safe with him, and who would not hand it on, as tradition dictated, to the younger members of the tribe - for they were half civilised, detribalised, untrue to the customs and religion of their forbears: he dared not trust them with such a precious object. (p.37)

Franz Fanon has argued that: ‘Colonised cultures construct idealised ahistorical images of the Indigenous cultures they subjugate’, and that, ‘controlling the definition of what was essentially characteristic of the subjugated culture, the colonisers reserve the right to distinguish authentic and unauthentic aspects of the living traditions of the colonised’. 22 Leaving aside the question of white authentication of black culture, the suggestion is nonetheless unconsciously registered in Outback that Jenkins’s custodial role is unstable. How dependable Jenkins is may not be in question, but his wife, admittedly hostile to the aborigines, has already compromised his role. Jenkins tells the Nolans that his wife will ‘give anything away, that woman.’ (p.37) His wife had recently given away ‘to a kid in Melbourne’ (p.37) a ‘bull roarer’, an instrument used in ceremonies.

The view accepted by Herb Jenkins that the Indigenous people cannot be trusted with their own relics is not so far removed from the view of Roy Williams at ‘Marraki’, and reported now with narratorial irony:

They’re just like children. They can learn like parrots, but they’ll never learn to think. You’ll never teach a black fellow to think and if you try to - watch out. They can drive a car, for instance, like a monkey, but if once they get to the engine, God help it. They’ll take a spanner and wreck the whole works. (p. 100)

Yet Outback establishes a parallel between black dispossession and white displacement. White lives are revealed to be as marginalised and as pitiful as the lives of the despised Aboriginal people. The white people ironically enact what is said about the

---

Aboriginal people. At Turner Station in the Northern Territory, Sidney is appalled to discover how the white family they are staying with are living:

Sidney got up and walked around the bare cement-floored room. The corrugated iron walls were painted brown, fawn and green curtains hung over the glass-less windows, a broken barometer, a letter rack and a calendar which pictured a retriever, were attached by wire to one of the wall struts. That was all.

As he prowled around he shook his head. 'It's not right the way these people live,' he said sadly, 'they don't have any roots, they're passers through, the country defeats them.' (p. 126)

Cultural degeneration and displacement are registered in this image of the white settler's house. The house, with its failure to express anything about its inhabitants, is nothing more than a temporary dwelling: the people, according to Sidney, 'don't have any roots, they're passers through.' The white people do not come of a nomadic tradition, yet their conflict with a land that will not nurture them forces upon them a sense of impermanence. It is pointless to put down roots, to grow a garden in Tennant Creek, or to decorate a home at Turner Station, because the 'country defeats them.'

It is in the tiny settlement of Halls Creek in the East Kimberleys, where the Nolans travel for the annual horse races, that the white drama reaches its nadir. The first sighting of the town builds upon earlier images of makeshift shantytowns and dwellings:

The township, which faced a wandering wide earth road and dry creek bed beyond, consisted of one hotel, an Australian Inland Missions hospital of a few beds, a Police Station, Post Office, four stores, and a couple of houses and shacks. All were built on a slope which was bare save for broken bottles, empty tins and petrol drums, beyond were dry spinifex hills. It was a lonely, shabby and somewhat terrifying sight. I heard even Sidney muttering, 'My God!' (p. 166)

The town built upon a rubbish dump. Throughout the text, images of white people living degrading existences counter-balance what is said about the Aboriginal people. At 'Marraki' the narrator had observed:

Yet many station whites, apparently blind to the aborigines' living conditions, say that they are naturally dirty, that it is no good letting them have decent clothes or huts because they would not look after them. (The old story, in another form, of coal in the bath). (p. 105)
The final parenthesis makes Reed Nolan’s antipathy to such views very clear. Earlier the Nolans had been told that if the Aboriginal people were paid wages, ‘the first white man who came along could get all their money in exchange for a handkerchief.’ (p. 71) At Halls Creek this self-serving racism is juxtaposed against the behaviour of the white people. The races at Halls Creek operate as a magnet for the surrounding district, drawing in stockmen and station owners:

One can only guess the amount of money these isolated bars make out of the men who visit them perhaps once or twice a year, or sometimes even less frequently. A station owner or manager pays his employees by a cheque which is handed over to the nearest pub keeper supplying alcohol. Few bother to keep count of their drinks while they are sober, soon enough they are incapable of doing so; in a week, a month or a fortnight, and their money ‘done’ they return to work. Such a cycle may last them into their old age, penniless pensioners, hangers-on living their last days on the sordid outskirts of some township. (p. 175)

These white lives enact what is said about the black people. Although they exchange their money for alcohol rather than handkerchiefs the effect is the same. The white lives parallel the desperate lives of many of the detribalised aborigines. White alienation and cultural rootlessness become, in the text, a counter-point to Aboriginal detribalisation.

At Halls Creek the Nolans meet ‘Old Jim’:

‘It’s a funny place, Halls Creek,’ Jim said. ‘I reckon white men don’t belong here any more than they do anywhere in this country. I don’t know what it is, or why it is, maybe they just haven’t been here long enough, or they haven’t found out how to learn what this land has to teach them. I’ve been around longer than most and I’ve thought on what I’ve seen. Yeah, underneath all his talk and silence, his boozing when he gets the chance, his boredom and his swearing – the white man’s scared. Some of them gets used to living with their fear, others can’t stand it any longer. There’s been men come into Halls Creek that haven’t got out again.’ He pointed. ‘One they found over by that big tree there, he’d done himself. Came in to spend his cheque after eight months’ droving, did his money, then did himself.’ (Within a year old Jim had also ‘done himself!’) ‘Another year, it was during the big Wet - we were in the bar one night when one of the fellows said, ‘Cheerio, mates.’ Walked across the veranda there, stepped into the water and was gone. (p. 139)

In not belonging, and failing to ‘learn what the land has to teach them’, the whites descend into a kind of madness in which life is lived out in the extremes of work and hedonistic abandonment. Absent from Jim’s litany of white failure is a direct acknowledgment of the dispossession of the Indigenous people and of any notion that they in return may harbour
resentment against the whites. The paranoia that develops in the passage, however, reveals deeper insecurities than simply not being able to make the land work. Once again, nature is imbued with powers of insurrection and rebellion, responses that might reasonably be expected of the Indigenous people. The passage builds to a surreal climax in which a man can step off the seeming domestic security of a veranda and be swept away and drowned.

While the adult Nolans are overwhelmed by the hopeless state of present Australia, six-years-old Polly is a mediator between the two races, perhaps offering hope for the future. At ‘Manbullo,’ black society, from which the narrator and Sidney are excluded, is immediately open to Polly:

We would move quietly, hoping to find a spot where we could sit undisturbed and read or talk, watching the unselconscious scene in the water below. But until we were known and found not to be troublemakers and tittle-tattlers, our presence was always heralded. A girl watching the goats on the hill would give a ringing call to a woman sitting in the shade of her hut who would repeat the message to old King. He would walk away, the children would subside and an outraged shout would come from Polly, ‘Go away! Go away! What are you watching us for?’ (p. 69)

The passage imagines a state of war between the races. The Nolans are like spies who ‘move quietly’ and attempt to sneak up on ‘the unselconscious scene’. The Aboriginal people, though, have an elaborate alarm system. By contrast with the adults, Polly is not only a trusted companion of the black children but significantly, as a white child, she becomes their ‘outraged’ voice. In the construction of the passage the Aboriginal people are silent, observed figures while the Nolans are the observers. The image of the observer/watcher connects with other images in the text of the photographer and the voyeur. A sense of uneasiness is conveyed through these images. The watcher is disengaged and distanced from the objects of observation, the Aboriginal people.

Throughout the journey, a gradual and steady portrait of Polly as a mediating presence between blacks and whites is built up. Her first meeting with Aboriginal children depicts her ‘squatting down to draw figures in the dust and laughing uproariously’. (p. 60) There is, however, a darker side to Polly’s engagement with the Aboriginal people. A sense of Polly’s increasing wildness and her mother’s anxiety is also conveyed, an anxiety earlier intimated in the premonition of Polly’s ‘awful fate’: ‘During these weeks she was completely abstracted. Impatient of adult ways, she only came to the house to quickly eat a meal and depart again.’ (p. 154) At a corroboree, ‘Polly scorned our company and dived into the most closely wedged mass of bodies she could find and there in the dark where no detail was distinguishable, where only the faces of the men nearest us could barely be seen, she became
invisible.' (p. 157) While on one level Polly's invisibility in the dark signifies new possibilities of racial tolerance, it might, ironically, be argued that Polly is in some sense being stolen by the Aboriginal people.

The narrator describes the occasion on which, after many attempts, the Nolans are finally allowed to come down to the river: 'The day came when we were allowed to go down to the river unannounced, to sit in a point of vantage enjoying the children's antics without embarrassment. Usually three or four of them would be in an old tin canoe, Polly naked, standing up, punting with a long stick.' (p. 69) It is not simply the scene that is unself-conscious. In being allowed by the Aboriginal people to watch the scene the Nolans are finally freed from feelings of 'embarrassment'. The absence of embarrassment is, however, a reminder of the unease that the Nolans have previously felt in the company of the Aboriginal people. At their first sighting the Nolans had felt 'abashed.' Later, the narrator had felt 'embarrassed' in being reminded of her status as 'white intruder'. Being served by a child had made the Nolans, once again, feel 'embarrassed'. Embarrassment is very near to shame.

It is significant that Sidney and not the narrator joins the children in the water:

After about an hour Sidney, no longer able to resist the sun and the water, would scramble down to join the children, splashing and playing with them and then swimming into the deep pool. I would follow, my trousers rolled up, to paddle judiciously in the shallows. (p. 69)

Sidney plunges in amidst the children while the narrator paddles 'judiciously in the shallows'. Hers is a far more nervous sensibility than her husband's: she goes on to say: 'In spite of knowing that crocodiles here were small and fish-eating, I never quite lost the expectancy of stepping into jaws filled with gaping teeth'. (p. 69) Yet 'to paddle judiciously in the shallows' is also to remain detached from the scene. While Sidney is able to immerse himself in the experience, the narrator expresses her diffidence.

The final paragraph of the book, which describes the Nolans' homecoming, draws together a number of the text's inter-woven threads and imagery:

As we ran through our garden on the outskirts of the town, almost forgotten rain descended in sheets upon ripe oranges hanging from trees whose wet-blackened leaves dripped over blue forget-me-nots run wild. We were home, thank God. And yet - I would always be grateful to Sidney for taking me on a trip that alone I would never have contemplated. Polly would now grow up with this continent and the aborigines as an accepted background, while behind my eyes there would always be a land flat as a strap and flooded by the light of dreaming. (p. 220)
The journey ends with the return through the garden to home. Here, at the end of *Outback*, there is a reversal of the Gothic trope of the neglected garden, symbol of the collapse of civilisation which ends *Daddy Sowed A Wind!*. The lush garden the Nolans return to is European, with its forget-me-nots and orange trees. Their arrival in Sydney is greeted by the regenerating power of 'almost forgotten rain', something not seen on the four month journey. It should perhaps be noted that the journey recorded in *Outback* precedes the Nolans’ 1950 journey to Europe. The end of *Outback*, with its images of lushness and European cultivated flora, intimates hope and, in the context of the text’s preoccupation with cultural displacement, that hope seems connected with finally belonging in the European centre.

The narrator makes a distinction between the impact of the journey upon herself and upon her daughter. For Polly, the Aboriginal people have become ‘an accepted background’. familiar, ordinary, and equals. Polly, the narrator suggests, has been transformed by the experience and the Aboriginal people are no longer figments of her imagination but made real. For the narrator, however, this transformation is impossible. Once again it is not the people who dominate her final impressions of the experience but this ghostly empty land ‘flat as a strap and flooded by the light of the dreaming’. Whereas for Polly the Aboriginal people are a vital and living presence, for the narrator the Aborigines remain an extinct race.

The narrator’s inability fully to engage with the Aboriginal people reveals the enormous difficulty of the task in either 1949 or 1962. *Outback*, however, remains an important and telling expression of its historical moment. It is worth noting that it is only very recently that black voices have begun the process of forcing white Australians to confront the crimes committed against them. In *Outback*, the narrator uncovers the layers of abuse that the Aboriginal people have suffered at the hands of the white settlers. Ultimately, however, the purpose served by the silent Aboriginal presence is as a warning, an embodiment of white colonialist and modernist anxieties about displacement, a disturbing and Gothic construction of white imagination. It is not until Reed Nolan begins to mature as a travel writer, and as her detachment from her husband grows, that the tacit criticism of his cultural practise and awareness of her own, is sharpened to the point of overt critique. The Nolans’ next journey, into the Africa of white colonial and modernist imagination, would continue that developing process.
(ii) One Traveller’s Africa

One Traveller’s Africa was published three years after the African journey of 1962 that it records. Two other major events of 1962 helped shape Reed Nolan’s second travel book. Nolan’s inclusion in the 1962 Whitechapel exhibition of major Australian painters consolidated his reputation in British critical circles as an important painter. In the same year, Reed Nolan finally published Outback to some acclaim. The publication of Outback introduced Reed Nolan as a travel writer and, as The Times Literary Supplement review noted, established her claim to being ‘an artist in her own right.’¹ This review of Outback also raised the charge that Reed Nolan could be accused of ‘cashing in on her husband’s fame.’ One Traveller’s Africa is a response to this dilemma. Although it continues what Outback begins, the creative biography of Sidney Nolan, the second travel book registers the darker complications of this creative partnership.

The united Nolan gaze of Outback focused upon the degenerative consequences of colonisation on the white Australian imagination. One Traveller’s Africa continues this exploration of the impact of colonisation on ‘imaginative geographies’ yet the imaginative Africa of the second travel book is marked out as Sidney’s exclusive domain. It is he who directs the journey as he follows in the footsteps of his hero, Arthur Rimbaud, and searches, with the inevitable disappointment of the follower, for the African source of both literary and visual modernism. There is a degree of ironic detachment implied in Reed Nolan’s representation of Sidney, in the dying days of European modernism, as a follower. Yet on first impression Sidney might appear to be the ‘one’ of the book’s curious title.

The title, however, can also be read ironically. Given the shared experience of the journey, ‘one traveller’s Africa’ strikes a lonely note. As this chapter will chart, the narrator’s growing resentment and resistance to the homogenising influence of her marriage makes its own disaffected parallel with Sidney Nolan’s artistic quest. The portrait of Sidney is constructed to conflict with the narrative voice. It is not an equal contest: Sidney speaks, while the narrator’s opposition is constructed as a private interior monologue. Mills’ view that ‘women’s travel writing being a response to disciplinary pressures revealing itself in concern with displaying the self² sheds light on the often bizarre interior monologues that punctuate the narrative. In the context of a work that looks at the relationship between colonisers and colonised there are subtle, if unconscious, parallels at work between Sidney’s speech and the narrator’s retrospective claims to her own subversive silence.

The Africa the Nolans were travelling through in the early 1960s was a continent of crisis and change. Many of the countries they visited had recently gained independence from

²op. cit., p.19.
their colonial rulers, or would shortly do so. The TLS review of One Traveller’s Africa commented; ‘If the reader looks in Mrs Nolan’s book for penetrating comments on the political situation in Africa, a shrewd objective analysis of Africa’s needs and difficulties, he will be disappointed.’ The book is, as the review continues, ‘a scrapbook of impressions gained on a journey, haphazard and intensely idiosyncratic.’ In again calling Reed Nolan ‘an artist in her own right’ the reviewer either deliberately or accidentally quotes the earlier TLS review of Outback. This claim directs attention to the distinctive quality of Reed Nolan’s image-driven prose. Although colonisation and the process of decolonisation may not be analysed objectively, nonetheless, they are inherent in the text’s visual ‘impressions.’

Unlike the growing sense of disturbance represented by the Aboriginal people in Outback, postcolonial black Africa greets the Nolans with the threat of violence from the moment they step off the plane:

Brilliant colour was swathed around dark forms and there were serious dark faces, observant, disciplined, disliking and watching. One was suddenly aware that our beige skins looked as though they had been washed in water containing too much bleach.

The image powerfully distils conflict, fear and difference. The writing, with its succession of adjectives: ‘serious’, ‘dark’, ‘observant’, ‘disciplined’, ‘disliking’, ‘watching’ has a quality that F.R. Leavis defined in Conrad as ‘adjectival insistence’. The effect in Reed Nolan’s writing is to vividly convey the disturbing experience of being an outsider. The faces are individualised by their different expressions, even as they express a collective sensibility. One obvious difference between Outback and One Traveller’s Africa is a reversal of the role of observer. Outback had been dominated with images of the Nolans watching the Aboriginal people. Here in the African text, it is the black Africans who are watching the Nolans. It is the colonisers’ ‘beige skins’ in contrast to the ‘Brilliant colour’ that the African gaze reinforces. If the effect of the experience of being watched is diminishing it is also threatening. From first sighting Africa is conceived of as a dangerous place, the Nolans are ‘watched’ and ‘disliked’.

One Traveller’s Africa fails to locate a black Africa that is not caught in the colonial gaze. On the border between the Congo and Uganda, the Nolans meet Walter, a good-hearted Belgian, who is unable to adapt to the new Africa he sees forming itself before his eyes:

---

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
It is pleasant to be paternal and love one's children, one's funny dependent children, sometimes tiresome savages who nevertheless work and keep one comfortable for so little return, and even provide amusement and a glow of superiority. But it is no longer pleasant to live on in the time of change one has helped to bring about oneself, the terrible in-between time when tribal patterns are lost, family traditions vanish, and all is confusion, resentment, frustration and an obsessive desire for new status symbols. It is then one hears an African voice saying clearly, 'The white man has brought us one God, money. Let him supply this need he has bred - and get out.' (p.148)

The paternalism attributed to Walter is very similar to the paternalism of Herb Jenkins in Outback. This satirical tone - 'one’s funny dependent children' - might suggest a degree of narratorial mockery. Mills' analysis of humour as a sign of instability, as 'symptomatic of the contradictions inherent in the power relation'\(^7\) has application here. But the degree to which the narrator detaches herself from Walter's perspective needs to be established. There is an oversimplification verging on stereotype in this emphasis on the African voice demanding money and threatening eviction, and a reductiveness in the representation of the relationship between coloniser and colonised.

This is not an isolated instance of the perception of the black voice as hostile. In Tanganyika, the Nolans attend a lecture at the university: 'One had the impression they would like to shout “Let all the uncoloured get out. That’s all we ask, all we need - to be left alone. We’ll do the rest ourselves.”' (p. 92) In response to this voice the narrator quotes a more acceptable and appeasing black voice, James Baldwin, pleading for an end to the 'racial nightmare.' (p.92) The hostile voice parallels the construction of the collective hostile gaze. There is a sense in which this perception of black Africa unconsciously condones white racism. Although the narrator sees Europeans as responsible for the conditions that have provoked black hostility, nevertheless, the black African is now the enemy.

The TLS review of One Traveller's Africa makes the statement: 'There is no mistaking the Nolans' attitude to "problems" such as independence. They feel so strongly the rightness of self-rule and the immorality of imperialism that she winces each time she is called memship and "Sidney blushes when he gets bwana."\(^8\) The reviewer's tone implies, perhaps, that this opposition to the 'immorality of imperialism' is what you might expect from people who were colonials themselves. The reviewer does not observe, however, the inconsistencies of the narrator's position, the ways in which her unstable, divided gaze, as both colonial agent and subject, shapes the Africa of the text. The narrator repeats the pattern of Outback. On the one hand she is capable of attacking blatant symbols of racism such as

---

\(^7\) Op.Cit., p. 198.
\(^8\) Op.Cit.
the slave warehouses the Nolans visit in Zanzibar, which bring to mind the contemporaneous civil rights movement in the United States. (p.78) On the other hand, she is not always capable of disengaging herself from the racist postcolonial discourse that she apparently condemns in Walter, and which constructs black Africans as dangerous children who need to be civilised. There is no irony apparent in the narrator’s report of her meeting with a Swedish woman, Mrs Bergstrom (and described approvingly by the narrator as ‘remarkable’) who is setting up community centres where she teaches the Africans cooking, gardening and ‘hygiene’: ‘It’s all progress you know. Another couple of years and they won’t need me any longer. They’ll be quite able to organise everything themselves, and I will go back to Sweden.’ (p.90)

At the source of the White Nile, the narrator pays homage to white explorers and in the process speaks in the uncomplicated and admiring voice of the colonisers:

How remarkable were those determined visionary men, who had marched and stumbled on to discover this vast treasure of fresh water, how tragic the fate of those in Australia who finally, half-blind and ruined in health, were confronted with the bitter fact that there is a desert at its heart. (p.106)

Absent from this eulogy is any presence of the indigenous peoples of either continent who have been colonised in the acts of exploration. The exploration of Australia, where the explorers ‘confronted’ the ‘desert at its heart’, makes a more ironic counterpoint to the exploration of Africa and their ‘discovery’ of ‘treasure’ than the narrator realises. The ‘dead heart’ of her own native land, she seems to be suggesting yet again, is the true ‘heart of darkness’ of the white imagination.

The ‘vast treasure’ to be found at the source of the Nile and ‘discovered’ by nineteenth century European explorers is also a metaphor for Africa as the source of European modernism. The ‘discovery’ of water ensures not only the survival of the explorers, but of the colonisers who followed them. So too, images of Africa transported home by writers, such as Conrad, and artists, such as Gauguin, would ensure the rejuvenation and survival of European art. Through its central study of Sidney Nolan, *One Traveller’s Africa* raises questions about the connection between nineteenth century colonialism and modernism. My analysis of the portrait of Sidney Nolan will explore these connections and in the process pursue further questions about the narrator through whose voice Sidney Nolan’s portrait is constructed. I would first like to set Reed Nolan’s portrait of Nolan within the context of other literary ‘portraits of the artist’ by two Australian novelists, George Johnston and Patrick White.

Reed Nolan was not alone in seeing Nolan as a fascinating character upon whom to base a portrait of the artist. In 1969, George Johnston used Nolan for his character Tom
Kiernan in *Clean Straw for Nothing*. The character of Kiernan is a mixture of generosity, as when he saves the financially desperate Merediths with a gift of money, and an obsessive nature: asexual and cut off from everything except his art. According to Garry Kinnane, Nolan was ‘puzzled’ by the characterisation, ‘but it did not offend him.’

In 1970, *The Vivisector* was published with a dedication to both the Nolans. Patrick White wrote to them about the work in progress in December 1967: ‘I should like you to read it to see how close or remote I am from the workings of a painter’s mind.’ David Marr has claimed that: ‘Nolan came to believe that he alone was Hurst Duffield and has in his library in Hertfordshire a copy of *The Vivisector* closely annotated to demonstrate all the many links between the two lives.’ According to Marr, White denied that Nolan was Duffield. Rather, Duffield was a composite creation, borrowing various aspects from the works and lives of White’s lover, Roy de Maistre, and from John Passmore, Godfrey Miller and Francis Bacon. Yet there are suggestive links between Nolan’s life and White’s character. Duffield’s adoption out of his working class family parallels Nolan’s escape from the working class through art and literature and his later ‘adoption’ by the patrician Reeds. As I shall argue, Reed Nolan’s projection, in her artist-husband, of a detachment amounting at times to the voyeuristic, anticipates Hurst Duffield’s ‘vivisecting’ eye.

All three portraits of the artist - Kiernan, Duffield and the Nolan of *One Traveller’s Africa* - represent the artist as outsider and visionary. The artist in all three texts is the embodiment of the ideal modernist artist who, in the words of the symbolist poet, Arthur Rimbaud, is privileged as ‘seer’, as one outside the normal moral order, ‘as a great criminal’ and who ‘reaches the unknown, and even if, crazed, he ends up losing the understanding of his visions, at least he has seen them!’

White’s dedication of *The Vivisector* to the Nolans suggests his empathy with both Nolans as fellow artists. White was closer to Reed Nolan than to her husband and confessed to Luciana Arrighi in 1966 that Reed Nolan was the one among his friends who saw the world most as he did. In wanting Reed Nolan’s opinion on a book which he hoped captured ‘the workings of a “painter’s mind”, White was acknowledging her own insight into this mind, an insight that went beyond her role of wife, but which was reflected in her experience as a writer who had attempted something very similar.

---

9 op. cit., p. 160.
10 *Patrick White Letters*, p. 321.
12 Ibid., p. 473.
14 *Patrick White Letters*, op.cit., p. 318.
15 Ibid., p. 321.
From the moment the Nolans step off the plane in Africa it is clear that the purpose of the journey is to locate Sidney’s artistic place within the visual modernist tradition. Sidney’s quest is imagined as the embodiment of the painter’s equivalent of T. S. Eliot’s claim that the writer writes ‘not merely with his own generation in his bones’. Sidney pointed out a brown girl dressed in green who stood upon ‘ground purple with long serpentine copper-coloured leaves’. In two days he was beginning to see the hidden resemblances between Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin. ‘I see the hidden resemblances and where Gauguin pinched Cezanne’s ‘little sensations’ that he took with him to the South Seas.’

A footnote informs the reader that the quotation ‘ground purple with serpentine copper-coloured leaves’ comes from Gauguin’s memoirs Noa Noa. Africa is understood to be the birthplace of European modernism, the source of inspiration for a revitalised western movement in art. The girl ceases to be real: she is imprisoned as an image, not only in Sidney’s modernist gaze, through which he comes to understand the entwined influences of Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, but also within the quotation from Gauguin’s memoirs, in which is held another literary modernist image.

Joseph Conrad’s much discussed image of the African girl in Heart of Darkness, and read by Ania Loomba as symbol of the conquered land, is echoed in this quotation from Gauguin’s Noa Noa and within the context of a passage that discusses influence. Daniel R Swartz’s analysis of the interchange between early visual and literary modernism, cites Gauguin’s 1897 memoirs as an influence on Conrad’s 1898 novel Heart of Darkness. As I have suggested, Heart of Darkness is evoked in Outback’s exploration of degeneration at the centre of Australia, in its ‘dead heart’. In the above passage, Reed Nolan brings together the literary and visual sources of modernism within the single image of the African girl.

Africa is repeatedly imagined as a painter’s canvas. If, as Pratt has argued, travel writing is a form of translation in which the exotic is made familiar, then this need to impose images familiar to the text’s implied, educated, European implied reader upon the alien landscape of Africa certainly reveals this process of translation. Flying over Serengeti the narrator looks down upon ‘Braque country.’ (p.17) In Uganda, they see faces which ‘look like paintings by Bacon’ (p.108). As they fly over Rhodesia, however, Sidney joins Eliot’s ‘ideal

---

order... modified by the introduction of the new when the sky is described as 'Kelly blue' (p. 55).

It would seem, then, that the text unquestioningly asserts Sidney's status as the new prince of modernism. Yet for an artist working at the tail end of a movement, arriving at its inspirational source carries its own complications:

A lion was drinking from the stream. Sandy-maned, majestic with deliberate steps he moved across the earth sodden from an early burning but already baring new sprouts of green. Firm-stemmed reeds made slight camouflage behind and through which he paced, slowly switching his black tipped tail. His background along the creek was all fronds weaving and intertwined, split by flashes from a bird's bright tail.

'Rousseau,' Sidney remarked somewhat dryly as the Landrover continued on its way. 'Rousseau has said all there is to be said about that, about what we've been looking at. In fact he's had the last word about lions.' (p. 21)

The passage exemplifies the style of the travel writing at its best: convincing in its observation, yet informed by a larger perspective which bears the weight of particular thematic concerns. As the Nolans watch Rousseau's famous painting of a lion merging into its landscape, a pattern of shape and colour forming before their eyes, the image is 'dryly' dismissed by Sidney. The dilemma for Sidney is that the long modernist tradition makes the task of creating something new all the more difficult. The text's construction of Africa as a sequence of famous paintings in effect becomes a reminder for the late-comers that everything has already been painted.

Published three years after their journey to Africa, the text uncomfortably registers the negative reception of Nolan's 'Africa Journey' exhibition of 1963 at the Marlborough Fine Arts Gallery in London: 'Nolan's first selling exhibition in London in three years was greeted with enthusiasm by the buying public and considerable disdain by the critics in a further polarisation of his reputation.' The inclusion of the text of a number of reproductions from Nolan's African series may in part be seen as an attempt to create a more favourable climate for the reception of these paintings.

In the course of his somewhat frustrating quest, Sidney returns to another early literary influence, the poet, Arthur Rimbaud. The TLS review sensitively recognises the point of Rimbaud within the text when it notes 'that in a sense the theme is Sidney Nolan’s interest in Rimbaud.' This perceptiveness is absent from the Australian review. Rimbaud as clue to Nolan's creative process is evidently lost on David McNicholl, when he complains: 'If there

21 Adams, op.cit., p.165.
is one feature of the book which becomes unnecessarily repetitious it is the scores of references to Rimbaud.’

The French Symbolist poet, who abandoned poetry at the age of nineteen and for many years lived in Ethiopia as an explorer, slave trader and gun runner, had obsessed Sidney since his youth. Early in the journey through Africa, when the Nolans are visiting Serengeti National Park the narrator says: ‘Sidney began to talk about poetry and about Rimbaud, for Rimbaud seems to be one of those figures who, if discovered when one is young enough, is usually returned to throughout life.’ (p.42) In 1938, Sidney’s painting The Head of Rimbaud had caused a sensation when it appeared at the Contemporary Artists exhibition. George Bell, who shared the presidency with John Reed, resigned in protest. In One Traveller’s Africa, a shaping sense of this formative influence is gradually built up:

Sidney was reading the translation of Rimbaud’s poetry. On and off he had read Rimbaud since he was eighteen or nineteen in Melbourne, when his friend Howard Mathews first told him of Verlaine, adding: ‘But Rimbaud is better for you Sid, you’ll find him simply beaut. You’ve a lot in common.’ So Sidney went to the Public Library. The following day, he took an extended lunch hour from the Fayrefield hat factory and bought Helen Rickword’s translation of the Illuminations. (p. 166)

Travelling across Africa, Rimbaud makes the connection between Nolan’s past and his next series of paintings, as Sidney says: ‘I have a feeling that Rimbaud will be one of the settings for the African paintings.’ (p. 43) Rimbaud at Harar was among the African series first exhibited in 1963 at The Marlborough Fine Arts Gallery in London. At another point in One Traveller’s Africa Sidney tells the narrator: ‘I must make it clear that Rimbaud is a kind of Kelly, or Kelly a kind of Rimbaud. There was, in both these men, a force which they didn’t try to hide or disguise. They played it out nakedly, for what it was worth, and in the end such men are respected.’ (p. 241)

During this African journey it becomes clear that Sidney does not simply admire Rimbaud but identifies with him:

‘When I was eighteen in Melbourne and was starting off to say my own say, and finding out all the difficulties in a town which had the same sort of closed mind as Charleville in 1870 reading Rimbaud was an enlightening experience for me. Well, he produced that great revolutionary body of work and then he quit. He came to Africa and he didn’t pretend, it wasn’t a stunt, he quit.’ (p. 226)

---

24 Hughes, op.c it., p. 132.
Rimbaud's life and art, as mercenary and poet, embodies the relationship between colonialism and the modernist art that followed in its footsteps, drawing its inspiration from the clash between so called 'primitive' and 'civilised' cultures. Furthermore, Rimbaud, as poet and revolutionary, is also the embodiment of the modernist anti-hero that Nolan himself aspires to be. Nolan's close friend Kenneth Clark remarked: 'Sidney set out in his youth to be a second Rimbaud, and although his natural gentleness has denied him this furious vocation, his mind is full of subversive ideas worthy of his model.'

The way in which Nolan's identification with his subjects often reveals itself as veiled self-portraiture, has been commented on by Andrew Sayers in reference to the Kelly paintings:

But there was clearly some broader self-identification with the character of Kelly himself. There have been various suggestions regarding Nolan's identification - his 'being on the run' after what was technically desertion from the army, his desire to be a rebel poet as he regarded Kelly, his identification with Kelly's Irishness.

Nolan's Kelly paintings have been read as 'reflective of his own alienated condition at the time.' One Traveller's Africa documents the autobiographical element to Rimbaud at Harar. Nolan's self-confessed identification with Rimbaud, and his connection between Rimbaud and Kelly, suggests that he saw being an outsider as the necessary condition of the artist. However, Jenny McFarlane opens up further possible autobiographical readings of the 1960s painting:

Rimbaud at Harar marks a beginning in a shift in Nolan's relation with Rimbaud. Gone is the god-like hero of the 1940s. For the first time we are shown a defeated Rimbaud, a Rimbaud exhausted by the debilitating conditions of an alien land, gnawed by the frustrations of pain and deceived of all expectations.

McFarlane's observations of the differences between the Rimbaud paintings of Nolan's youth and those of his maturity might also suggest Nolan's changed view of himself. Like his hero, the mature Nolan was living in an 'alien land' and, having reached a kind of artistic pinnacle,

---

26Andrew Sayers, Lecture Notes for an address at College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, seminar 'Likeness and Biography', unpaginated (Courtesy of Andrew Sayer).
there was now a struggle to continue producing original work. His own anxiety about the quality of his work, and the pressure he felt to keep creating it, may lie behind his expressed admiration of a Rimbaud who had ‘quit’. Although Reed Nolan’s travel book does not quite reveal a ‘defeated’ Sidney, it nonetheless documents the dawning of an artistic crisis on which the painting, perhaps, offers a commentary. It is not until A Sight of China that Reed Nolan would describe the ‘defeated’ Sidney, although there is a creeping awareness of the burdens of success gathering in One Traveller’s Africa.

If Reed Nolan seems to be offering a study of her husband’s interior, creative, anxiety, this perspective is punctuated by images of Sidney which are critical rather than sympathetic. The nakedness which Sidney finds so compelling in Rimbaud takes on an ironic aspect in the text’s portrait of Sidney as invisible and camouflaged. The artist as visionary is contrasted with another, more uncomfortable, image of the artist, the artist as photographer/voyeur: one of the most significant links can be made between Reed Nolan’s portrait of the artist and Patrick White’s in The Vivisector. Once again, as in Outback, the camera is the instrument through which Reed Nolan registers her perception of the artist’s devouring eye.

Early in the journey, in Northern Rhodesia, the Nolans visit the site where the head of the United Nations had recently been killed in an aeroplane crash, and Sidney was ‘photographing in a rage of grief.’ (p. 52) The description is awkward and discordant. Sidney’s behaviour does not correspond with the received view of grief as a disabling emotion. Grief seems to combine with rage and becomes a motivating and creative force. Yet while Sidney is energised by his emotion there is also a sense of camouflage at work. The camera might be a recorder of the scene but it is also an instrument for ‘depersonalising the world.’

The representation of the camera is disturbing:

Sidney had all his cameras out. The little Nikon with its huge telephoto lens that, when encased within its leather holster, looked so exactly and unpleasantly like a gun, the Agfa with its monocural lens that an acquaintance had thrust into my unwilling hands insisting that Sidney borrow it. (p. 113)

To the narrator, the Nikon looks ‘unpleasantly like a gun’; another camera had been ‘thrust into her unwilling hands’. The simile of the camera as gun underlines connections between the camera and violence. Ania Loomba has analysed the use of the image by colonisers as justification for subduing violence in peoples represented as violent. Images of war-painted natives make acts of violence subsequently inflicted upon them explicable. In this image in

---

30 op. cit., p. 99.
One Traveller’s Africa, however, it is the camera and not the photograph which is represented as violent. It is possible to interpret her ‘unwilling hands’ as implying her disinclination to borrow so expensive and sophisticated a camera. But recalling Reed Nolan’s implication of the camera in the colonial practise of ethnographic photography in Outback, it is not far-fetched to see here her desire to distance herself.

In Kenya, the Nolans are greeted by a group of Africans who expect to be paid money to be photographed:

‘I think these boys are Samburi,’ Mrs. Poole told us. ‘They have come here because they heard you would like to photograph them. Where would you like them to stand?’

‘Anywhere’ said Sidney, immediately embarrassed, all thumbs with the camera slung around his neck. He cannot work quickly with people, telling them to do this, go here, stand still or climb a tree. He likes to photograph inanimate objects, with infinite time at his disposal, or to remain out of sight, unnoticed. (p. 71)

The embarrassment Sidney experiences is similar that registered in Outback. Yet Sidney’s desire for invisibility seems almost furtive. His preference for photographing ‘inanimate objects’ might suggest his own ambivalence about exploiting people whose desperate poverty drives them to submit to being photographed in exchange for money. The relation between photography and death, captured in the image of the camera as gun, is further stressed when a young man who is being photographed begins to tremble. According to the interpreter: ““Every click of the camera could be death, they think...but they want their money too, you know.”” (p. 71) This scene vividly establishes the connection between photography and exploitation: a connection that Reed Nolan further pursues.

The blind child becomes the object of Sidney’s photography in Ethiopia:

Through the camera lens a triangle of face could be seen in the still, blanketed shape. Sidney was photographing as if obsessed. The Land Rover was packed, our fellow passengers were waiting; but it is such last minute pressure which often gives him the necessary flow of adrenalin to work well and fast.

On the hotel steps there lay a thin straw mat and a rug hand-woven in squares of brown and black. Here one of the servants had spent the night. We scrambled into the car through a dozen child beggars. Some held up clubfeet at the end of stick-like legs, others rolled blind eyes or pulled at empty eye sockets. My stomach is not strong enough for such sights in such a context. Misery one can alleviate is one thing, but nothing can equal the shame and horror of pain and of poverty from which one is turning away. (p. 186)
Sidney hides behind the camera lens, camouflaged beneath a blanket, ‘photographing as if obsessed.’ It might well be the last-minute adrenalin that makes him ‘work well and fast’ but significantly he is working from this vantage-point of concealment. His subject of the blind child, whose blindness magnifies the vulnerability naturally associated with children, is in sharp contrast to the all-seeing, possessive, and exploitative camera. Not only is the child blind and the camera an instrument for capturing sight, but the child is exposed while the photographer behind the camera is concealed. The narrator’s desperation to distance herself from the photographer and the photograph might be expressed in her emotionally charged response: ‘the shame and horror of pain and poverty from which one is turning away.’ However, in ‘turning away’, in choosing not to look, Reed Nolan adds another layer to the meaning of the text’s exploration of sight and blindness. The image of turning her back upon the blind child also suggests her denial, her self-willed blindness, in the face of a human appeal for help.

Ethiopia is the scene of her own disturbing visions. After Sidney has stormed off in a rage she goes out into the street in search of him:

Even in the dimly lit dusk one was easily seen, among such people, to be a foreigner. Beggars began to emerge out of dark shadows, scuttling crab-wise on distorted legs. A sightless boy, led by a child, stumbled beside me, naked except for filthy rags. Arms outstretched he whined and chanted ‘Blind, blind, blind, blind’. No sign of Sidney. It is true I have often been amazed by the manner in which he is able to vanish, but could he readily retain his ability to remain invisible even when he was moving along these roads? (p. 169)

Sidney’s invisibility leaves her exposed: ‘I gave what money was in my pockets, but the horrors did not leave my side but were soon joined by another I dared not look at.’ (p. 169) The people are seen through her peripheral vision, the distorted perspective of eyes that turn hurriedly away, as fragments rather than as a whole, ‘scuttling crab-wise on distorted legs.’ The image of the scuttling crab-like legs and the narrator’s own cowardly, averted vision, evokes Eliot’s fragmented modernist vision The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock. Like Prufrock, she doesn’t dare.

The writing, with its combination of horror, paranoia, persecution, flight and abandonment, where alone and terrified in the streets of Addis Ababa, she ‘can bear no more’ (p.170), has hallucinatory qualities. Fears arising from the scene itself are redirected to the absence of Sidney. Returning to the hotel to find him sitting calmly in the hotel lounge she comments, ‘Usually he is alright but there were times when it was just as well he was found.’ (p.170)
Collectively, these images of Sidney are disconcerting. Invisibility, furtiveness, concealment, make further parodic echoes of his identification with his visionary hero, Rimbaud. If, in some measure, the invisible Sidney is evocative of the narrator's fears of abandonment, he also offers an interesting parallel to Nolan's painting *Rimbaud at Harar*. (See Appendix image 2) This 'defeated' Rimbaud is an insubstantial figure, decentred to the right of the painting and poorly delineated against the background and camouflaging landscape. If *Rimbaud at Harar* can be read as self-portraiture, Nolan seems to be painting himself as the visual parallel to Reed Nolan's textual representation.

There is often an element of mockery in that representation. It is the search for Rimbaud that leads the Nolans to Ethiopia. Sidney's quest to find Rimbaud's house is presented as comically absurd: 'It did not matter that this house was not as we had been told it should be, a Muslim school. Sidney was on another plane of reality. He went a little way off, by himself, and I sat down on the dry grass and closed my eyes, knowing he would remain there for some time.' (p.231) Sidney's enactment of the role of 'seer' is mockingly subverted. When two men on horseback gallop past Sidney, he 'turned to me then, his eyes sharp as ice. “The one on the white horse, it was Rimbaud.” His voice squeaked with excitement and conviction.' (p.231) Sidney's 'vision' is made to appear childish and ridiculous.

Reed Nolan's exploration of the modernist artist's engagement with colonialism has further ramifications for the text. Not only is he seen as a cultural thief and exploiter, who possesses and so dispossesses a people through the artistic image. He is also seen as the coloniser, as I shall argue, within a relationship in which the narrator positions herself as the colonised.

Reed Nolan's identification with the colonised women of the text places her in the early feminist landscape of the 1960s. A review of *One Traveller's Africa* in *The Sunday Times*, while full of praise for Reed Nolan's 'vividness of observation and description', complains that:

Mrs Nolan's principle grudge all through her travels is the status of female in African society, a grudge she extends even to the male hornbill who builds and incarcernates his wife in his home, feeding her through a small hole. It makes one wonder whether, like many western female visitors to the Eastern world, she is not confusing natural division of labour with man's inhumanity to women.

As the reviewer notes, Reed Nolan's 'grudge' reveals itself in a series of images of subjugated women. In Kisoro, on the Uganda/Congo border, she observes: 'Women weeding, on all fours, made the same macabre table shapes which Sidney had preconceived in his

---

earliest Mrs Fraser drawings’. (p.142) The image is seen yet again trapped within the male artist’s uncanny preconception. In the next sentence the narrator underlines her own perception of subjugation: ‘Indeed here it is obvious that a woman’s life is nothing, that she is only allowed to exist as a segment of the labour force.’ (p.142) The image of the female hornbill becomes a metaphor for the marriage at the text’s centre.

A veiled comparison with her own marriage is seen in the portrayal of another creative partnership in the marriage of the painter Elimo Njau and his writer wife Rebecca:

He and Sidney went off to his studio, both of them talking with great animation. Rebecca and I drank tea. She had one little boy, Morrille, who was almost two, and another baby expected shortly. She taught at a school nearby. Where did she find the energy, let alone the time to write? Yet she was full of writing, full of passion too. But one needs to be resolute in order to get on with creative work, and it is easier for a man to be single-minded. (p. 159)

Although the narrator is full of admiration for Rebecca’s ‘energy’ and ‘passion’ she is fatalistic about Rebecca’s future. In contrast to the husband’s ‘single minded’ pursuit of creativity is the multiplicity of roles Rebecca has acquired: wife, mother, teacher, all of which compete with her time to write. In identifying with the young wife the narrator is projecting on to this marriage the complications of her own:

Being married to a painter took time too. ‘Elimo is having trouble with this big painting. He keeps calling me to look at it. Last night I’d been in bed asleep for some time when he came rushing in - it was after midnight - saying ‘Get up and come and look at it.’

‘But I’ve been looking at it,’ I said. ‘Just an hour ago I was looking at it.’

‘Yes, but you must come now, it’s all different. I’ve changed it all.’ (p. 159)

‘Resolution’ and the ‘single-minded’ pursuit of creativity are exhausting to live with. The husbands, however, are artists and for both the narrator and Rebecca, despite their complaints, this seems excuse enough for their behaviour. This scene in One Traveller’s Africa is, in many ways, a prelude to Open Negative, where the demands of living with the relentless self-involvement of an artist becomes all-consuming: ‘During the working day I would lie quietly on the bed reading, or trying to read, when I was not wanted for looking.’ If the male artists’ rampaging egos are a source of complaint, the women are uncritically construed as victims. As I shall suggest in Open Negative, the narrator’s inability to take responsibility for her lack of actual resistance within the marriage, increasingly skews the credibility of her representation of the marriage.

In *One Traveller’s Africa*, however, the narrator’s intimations of her subjugated position within the marriage are oblique.

‘I do enjoy the wind tremendously,’ he had said. ‘I get thoughts when I’m with it, and ideas, don’t you?’

When there’s a wind I get thoughts I don’t enjoy at all. But mine are dredged up from the inside, whereas his seem to come from the outside, from the world around. He catches them as they float past. (p. 70)

Sidney speaks and she is silent. He seeks affirmation through a rhetorical question. She does not agree but does not contradict him. It is not her disagreement with Sidney that marks the deeper conflict between them but the fact that she does not voice it to him. Yet the differences between them are also telling. Sidney is stimulated by the wind because his thoughts ‘come from outside, from the world around.’ She, however, ‘gets thoughts I don’t enjoy at all’, thoughts which are ‘dredged up from inside’. Sidney has a certainty and confidence about his relationship with the world: as a painter of landscape his engagement is with the external world. The narrator is introspective, battling unsettling thoughts which the wind ‘dredges up’. Through her interior monologue, the narrator builds a drama out of silent opposition to her husband. At this stage, however, the conflict is relatively benign: a contrast of opposites rather than the bitter opposition it will later become.

This drama of silent opposition and apparent acquiescence becomes a recurrent pattern:

Wandering along the beach I was already nostalgic, homesick in the knowledge of absence, for as always it is I who, once prodded out of my home to visit some distant place, long to stay there indefinitely. But Sidney had taken what he needed and was already looking forward to new scenes and old friends in Tanganyika. (p. 87)

This dread of mobility, first glimpsed at the outset of the travels, is projected in the self-portrait of a person who ‘once prodded out of my home to visit some distant place, long to stay there indefinitely.’ The thought of leaving now makes her feel ‘homesick in the knowledge of absence.’ In contrast to the density of this emotional response, there is an abrupt shift in tone in the description of her husband: ‘Sidney had taken what he needed.’ The bluntness of the statement suggests her anger at leaving, but also suggests a degree of shallowness in her husband’s ready detachment. The language the narrator uses to describe herself is highly emotional: ‘nostalgic’, ‘homesick’, ‘longs’, and ‘absence’, conveys a personality of depth, attachment and feeling. By contrast, Sidney appears superficial and self-interested. Although the passage intimates the gulf of sensibility between them, there is also
this sense of suppression at work, and of her acquiescence. Sidney’s needs dominate her own and they inevitably move on.

In another passage the psychological costs of self-suppression are more overtly registered:

Unconscious of my baleful eye he read on. Smothering a suggestion that if he was not going to look out of the window I would like to, I moved to an empty place across the aisle. It has always been agreed that I stand by the doors of each airport from which we embark, waiting to be the first one out. Then hurry, at times run, depending upon how many Germans and/or Americans are passengers, over the tarmac and reserve a good window seat, one which will allow Sidney an uninterrupted view down across the country that we will be flying over. He follows at a more leisurely pace for he dislikes pushing and receiving black looks. So do I but discipline myself with the knowledge that I can make a few contributions such as this towards his work, whereas I acknowledge that even the best intentions do not make me an efficient housewife. (p. 166)

As always, whether in letters or in the more formal writings, Reed Nolan’s prose is a breathless rush that speaks volumes about the ‘discipline’ to which she feels herself subjected. The passage moves from complaint against Sidney to self-criticism, self-flagellation as she ‘disciplines’ herself with the ‘contributions towards his work’ which will compensate for her inefficiency as a housewife. The domestic is relocated into an interior psychological zone of self-discipline. It is a masochistic place that foreshadows the darkening, self-enclosed interior of the later writing. She is ‘smothering a suggestion.’ She willingly humiliates herself, ‘pushing and receiving black looks’, in order to preserve his ‘leisurably manner’ and secure him a window seat. In ironic contrast to the rhetoric of travel, defined in the text as a masculinist quest opening up creative horizons, the narrator internalises the domestic into a state of self-imprisoning guilt.

Yet equally evident in the passage is her anger at Sidney. The act of exposing the dynamics of their relationship in this way and the depths of her humiliation, becomes a form of attack upon Sidney. The ambivalence of her feelings, admiration mingling with bitterness and resentment, courses through the narrative to produce such conflicting and contradictory images of him and, in turn, of herself as an object of pity. This ambiguous exposure has its literary source in the much earlier letters to Sunday Reed which reveal a very similar blend of admiration and attack. In a letter, previously quoted, Reed Nolan complained to Sunday Reed: ‘you have such a terrific personality that I lose every inch of my own and simply imitate you when I see too much of you’. Within her relationship with Nolan, there is also a strong sense that she felt diminished as a person. The need to attack may, in part, be due to the fragility of her own ego, giving rise to a misguided form of self-protection.
In her review of *One Traveller's Africa*, Elizabeth Riddell quotes yet another passage that reveals the narrator's intense feelings of self-division:

What is the reader to make, for instance, of this statement about a short stop in Mombassa:

*Suddenly realising this to be Mombassa Old Harbour, between December and April, that ocean going dhows come from India, Madagascar and the Persian Gulf, I begged Sidney to stay for I long to see them driven by a north-east monsoon and built and rigged as they were centuries ago. But already the call to board the aeroplane had gone over the loud speakers and as I talked I began from habit to move faster, half running to secure Sidney a window seat from which he could look out, his view unobscured by the span of wings.*

As she begs Sidney to stay and see the dhows, her body, out of 'habit', obeys their agreement for her to secure him the window seat. It is an image of someone who has lost her own autonomy. Passages such as this provide a glimpse of the disintegration at the journey's end of self-suppression. In the book's title, there is a sense of acquiescing to the surface order of the relationship, an outward acceptance of Sidney's desires shaping their travels and their vision, a recognition of the writer's own eclipse. In the sensibility displayed in passages like this, it is possible to see why, some ten years after the book's publication, Reed Nolan would take her own life.

While the narrator reflects on their relationship, she describes Sidney as obsessed by his art and by his need to find something new to paint. Throughout *One Traveller's Africa* there are several significant references to space exploration. On the island of Zanzibar, the Nolans visit a space station. As the narrator's 'mind staggered, appalled by the knowledge that the human race will need to mutate if it is to adapt to these conceptions' (p. 83), Sidney 'was enthralled. "It's such a marvellous, curious, communal thing," he whispered.' (p.83) The concept of seeing the world from space is as profound to Sidney as his first flight on an aeroplane from Melbourne to Queensland in 1947, when Australia's vastness was put for him into perspective. Space, the text suggests, is the New World to be colonised, the New World which will inject life into the Old World and its art.

At the end of the book the text's interweaving threads of colonisation, the need for new artistic directions, and the increasing gulf between the Nolans, come together in its final images. At an international fair in Nigeria, a world community seems to offer the promise of the end of regionalism, the end of nationalism:

An international Trade Fair was in full swing. Many pavilions were bedecked in flags and there was a competition between the USA and the USSR for the biggest, the most impressive building and the most popular exhibits. This time the Russians won hands down. There was a continual roar from crowds pressing around demonstrators who spoke Hausa and other Nigerian languages as well as English. Pamphlets were being given away in handfuls and the original sputnik was on view. Sidney’s day was made. ‘It’s a tin can,’ he said unbelievingly. ‘That’s what they go around the world in, a tin can’ And throughout the afternoon, in between looking for an Australian pavilion which was, as usual, non-existent, he returned to walk around the sputnik, to stand and gaze at this shape that made me feel like a cave woman might if confronted by a diesel train - unable to credit what was in front of her eyes and at the same time afraid it would bite. (p. 252)

Sidney is fascinated by the banality of the sputnik while she feels, ‘like a cave woman might if confronted by a diesel train’. His engagement with the outer world enables him to absorb these new conceptions while her anxiety makes the future a fearful place. She is at a loss in the face of a new technology that she doesn’t understand but which she knows will change the world and leave her behind. The final image of the book is, significantly, of Sidney:

I knew that Sidney would be there, one among the many standing where the crowd was thickest, most curious and most excited. He would be pressing to get closer to that ‘marvellous, curious communal thing’ that to him is part of the experience of life, of death and of outer space. (p. 254)

At the very last, the gulf between the Nolans reaches its conclusion. It is Sidney, without the narrator, who is imagined in the thick of this crowd representing ‘life, death and outer space’. This final image of the book is the narrator’s glimpse of some future in which she does not exist. These fearful projections are an expression of anxieties within her marriage, but they are also private and existential, welling up out of her melancholy nature, dark thoughts which are imagined to take their inevitable course into a world in which she does not belong and at some time will not exist.

The narrator’s description of her interior journey is both dependent upon and in reaction to Sidney’s journey. The powerful sense of separation developing between the Nolans perhaps goes some way towards explaining the strangeness of the book’s title. While Sidney’s surface journey leads towards a qualified creative fulfilment, Reed Nolan’s interior journey leads her towards the self-abnegation of Open Negative. As she studies her husband the artist, her own interior narrative simmers beneath the surface, erupting in passionate asides. Yet they are asides, which remain ambiguously private in their tacit appeal to the reader. The text’s exposure of the self as colonised victim of a colonising marriage raises
questions about the ways in which Reed Nolan’s self-portraiture compromises the intended critique of a masculine and colonising cultural hegemony, questions that will be further pursued in discussion of the third of her travel books.
(iii) Open Negative: An American Memoir

By the mid-1960s Reed Nolan had published two travel books, yet her career as a writer could be described as only moderately successful. More importantly, in focusing on her travels with her famous artist husband, Reed Nolan had created a literary career that was dependent on her marriage. The age difference between the Nolans was beginning to become significant. In 1967, Nolan turned fifty and Reed Nolan fifty-nine. Her health was deteriorating and she was in considerable pain. Jinx had grown up and was studying in America. There were rumours of his affairs. Although Open Negative is set between 1958 and 1960, this book, like her two earlier travel books, reflects tensions in the Nolans' marriage in the late 1960s, as she revised the manuscript for publication.

The interdependent coloniser/colonial relationship of One Traveller's Africa is reshaped in Open Negative into the relationship of disease and diseased. More coherently than in the two preceding books, the experience of travel provides Reed Nolan with a narrative structure through which she explores her relationship with her husband. Open Negatives' journey through America in the late 1950s culminates in her prolonged hospitalisation, although it is only towards the end of the first half of the book that the reader learns that she is seriously ill with tuberculosis. On first reading, this lack of disclosure creates ambiguity and invites alternative interpretations of her description of the descent into illness. Susan Sontag's discussion of tuberculosis as a 'psychic voyage' in 'extenuation of the romantic idea of travel' outlines a wider context within which to consider Open Negative. As Sontag has noted: 'Starting in the early nineteenth century, TB became a new reason for exile, for a life that was mainly travelling.' Robert Louis Stevenson, D.H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield, for example, paved the way for Reed Nolan's exploration of the consumptive's psychic journey.

The text is prefaced by a quotation from the Aeneid: 'These things I saw and part of them I was.' This seems to allow for an objective reality beyond the observer, and strikes a more inclusive note than the ironic One Traveller's Africa. I shall argue, however, that Open Negative moves further into the solipsism that reflects the narrator's disturbed interior state. The title, Open Negative, refers to the clinical diagnosis of her condition at the time of

---

1 Interview with Elwyn and Lily Lynn, op.cit.
2 It is very likely that Reed Nolan worked from a journal. Although as I shall demonstrate, the time frame of the late 1960s shapes aspects of the narrative, the recollections of other scenes and details have the vivid immediacy of journal entries. Adams describes Reed Nolan during this period in New York in the late 1950s: 'methodically assembling her notes made on the trip', op. cit., p. 143.
4 Ibid., p. 33.
discharge from hospital: the tubercular sites are still open but no longer contagious. But it also summarises the essential action of the text. In photographic terms, the title picks up the pervasive motif of the two earlier books. The narrator's descent into illness is realised as a journey into a subterranean, counter world. Like the photographic negative, the narrator's vision is an inversion of reality.

PART ONE

Open Negative is broken into two parts. The first half continues the now familiar pattern of the travel books. Part Two is in no sense a traditional travel book. In fact, in describing Reed Nolan's six months' hospitalisation in New York with tuberculosis, in which she is physically confined by the institution and her disease, the second half is the antithesis of a travel book. Yet, as I shall argue, the two halves of the book are reconciled in the text's construction of travel as an interchange between mobility and stasis, structurally represented in the two parts of the books.

Part One of Open Negative begins as the Nolans arrive in New York Harbour. Unlike the classic rendering of this journey in which the Statue of Liberty greets the traveller, fog obscures the view. The fog is prescient of things to come. For the narrator, who spent nine months in America in the mid-1930s, arriving 'was the same old story'. Africa had been foreign to both the Nolans. Travelling through a foreign land, the narrator had been engaged in the process of translating. In Open Negative, however, America is known to her. Nonetheless, she is lost: 'I was so disturbed by noise, faces and heat that I could no longer navigate' (p.4). Her dislocation and disorientation within a familiar landscape subverts the expectations of the traveller's tale. The familiar has become strange.

In America the Nolans are once again travelling with Reed Nolan's daughter. Whereas in One Traveller's Africa she records her sense of subjugation within the context of a marriage, in America she experiences it in this triangular relationship. By contrast with her disorientation, her daughter, Polly, 'was in ecstasy. She had been four years in a boarding school in England, now she was back in one of the New countries, fulfilling the teenage dream.' (p.4) From the opening pages, the mother and her daughter are at odds with each other. It is, however, the alliance between Polly and Sidney that is seen to most alienate the narrator:

'Ma never wants to walk,' said Polly. 'We got the pea without the Princess alright.' And she disappeared whooping into the shower-room.
Sidney tried to persuade me. ‘Just think where you’ve walked, where you’ve been. Do you remember that walk in Greece when we set out early over the hills? You walked behind me along that narrow sheep track.’

‘Forget-me-nots were flowering among the grey rocks under the turpentine pines.’

‘What a walk it was! You always wanted to see what was around the next hill. So we went on until we came to the Aegean. That day we walked all day and long after the sun went down. Remember the bright moon lighting the way home? Never tell me again that you’re too tired to walk. Energy! Energy! Plug into the Almighty. I only need to go out and look up at the sky. See the ocean flowing or trees growing and I’m re-charged. Can’t you do that?’ (p. 5)

In *Outback* Polly had been a lively, cheeky and subversive force. In *Open Negative* she is a far more problematic presence, ridiculing her mother and backed up by Sidney. If Polly is satirical, Sidney is overwhelming. The so-called questions he asks demand affirmation. There is a manic quality to his harangue as he works himself up: “Energy! Energy! Plug into the Almighty. I only need to go out and look up at the sky. See the ocean flowing or trees growing and I’m re-charged. Can’t you do that?”' Polly alone stands out ready to match his energy as she goes on to bargain with him for a trip to the Museum in exchange for a trip to the pool. The passage presents a new family dynamic: Polly siding with Sidney against her mother and a bombastic and bullying tone emerging from Sidney.

Part One quickly moves into territory familiar from the earlier travel books in which Sidney’s need to see more of a country he intends to paint directs their movements. Throughout all the travel writing the narrator makes it perfectly clear that travel is an experience inflicted upon her. In *Outback* she is initially the reluctant traveller. In *One Traveller’s Africa* the narrator talked about being ‘prodded out of her home to visit far off places’. This resistance and reluctance in the two earlier travel books create undercurrents of tension that cast light upon the marriage itself. In *Open Negative*, travel is not a broadening and enriching experience, rather it is an experience of contraction. The depiction of the narrator as a passive follower of her husband is recast in *Open Negative* within the dynamics of the triangular relationship:

One mid-day I was called down stairs. By the curb was a nine-seater station wagon painted a stewed mulberry and ivory. Sidney showed me how the seats folded down, and back together, constructing a platform. ‘There you are. You can lie down as we whiz along the roads.’

‘And I can sit in front’ said Polly. ‘You’ll be much more comfortable in the back Ma, with your eyes shut.’ (p. 5)

---

The assumption by both Sidney and Polly that she will sit in the back seems conspiratorial. The decision to drive around the country is presented as having been made without consultation, though it is suggested that Sidney had discussed it with Polly. Although there is evidence right from the beginning that the narrator is seriously ill, it is not until the end of Part One that tuberculosis is diagnosed, calling into question her somewhat malign construction of the family dynamic. A teenage daughter telling her mother to shut her eyes brings to mind the possibility that something might be going on that the daughter does not want her mother to see. As I shall suggest, the narrator’s construction of her daughter as a domestic threat is a persistent undercurrent.

She is both confined and defined by her placement in the back of the car: isolated from both her husband and daughter who sit communally in the front. Although she does not shut her eyes, from her position lying down in the back of the car her vision is circumscribed. ‘Flat on my back, another piece of luggage, I was swept along. Occasionally something of interest rushed past my line of vision.’ (p.8) The narrator is not just describing her isolation from her family by her position within the car, but experiences the car itself as isolating:

> Already we were slipping into the rhythm of the long quiet car’s speeding, hour after hour over endless miles of perfect highways, of the rapid variation of landscape, as though we were passing from one country to another, and the privacy and comfort, the self-service of motels, where one parked the car, unlocked the door and stepped into a comfortable room with air conditioning, good beds and lighting, boiling hot water at the turn of a tap. In this conformist country one’s days were to be standardised in every respect - except vision. (p. 7)

Although the narrator claims she retained this sense of ‘vision’, as withstanding the standardisation of ‘one’s days’, what she sees is determined by their mode of transport. The car imposes upon their travels an ordered isolation from this landscape as they travel along ‘perfect highways’ to the equal isolation ‘of the privacy and comfort of motels.’ Later, in New Orleans, the Nolans find themselves ‘addicted to the privacy of motels.’ (p. 75)

---

6 Adams claims: ‘Cynthia agreed with this course of action and went out to buy a Chevrolet station wagon.’ Op.cit., p. 138. This biography is notable for its exclusive presentation of Nolan’s perspective. John Ness Barke’s review of Such is Life, passes the following judgment: ‘Any expectation that Nolan’s complex personality will be revealed here is quickly disappointed. Adams has spent a great deal of time with the artist during the last two years, but the resulting form of the book is a mistake. For it immediately becomes dismally clear that Adams’s method of biography is to interview the subject at length and transcribe the tapes into reported speech.’ ‘Sunday Too Far Away’, The Spectator, 18 July 1987. Such is Life reads as an apology for Nolan and, as such, Adams’s assertion that Reed Nolan was consulted before the station wagon was bought strongly suggests that Nolan was not happy with his representation in Open Negative. However, it is not impossible that it was Reed Nolan and not Nolan who distorted the facts. This scene establishes the qualities of passivity and exclusion, and the sense of lack of consequence that defines her self-portrait. A comparison between the two interpretations of events strengthens my argument that the travel books are as much fiction as they are record.
Isolation is the abiding experience of Part One. The journey across America becomes one of self-enclosure, the isolation of the car, the standardisation of roads, the self-sufficiency of motels. The external world is a mirror reflecting back her painful and crippling psychological isolation.

Contemporary critics, while praising the second half of the book, were, in the main, dismissive of the first part. *The Bulletin* told its readers to ‘ignore the first half of the book’. However, not only is Part One a powerful charting of the ‘descent into disintegration’, it is also a necessary prelude to the entrapment of Part Two. In *Open Negative* Reed Nolan suggestively reworks the Gothic tropes of disintegration and entrapment within the context of the creative partnership.

In another contemporary review, Robert Brissenden notes that the first part of the book ‘reads like jottings from a painter’s note book’. Once again, there is recognition that the text’s painterly images often brilliantly realise the perspective of the creative visual artist. He goes on to claim, nevertheless, that the first half of the book ‘is less obviously original, but it is difficult to be original after what Nabokov did to the motel room or New Mexico after Lawrence’. On face value, this failure to be original is a damning judgement. I shall argue, however, that far from being derivative, the evocation of Nabokov and Lawrence is integral to the text’s thematic concerns.

Although Part One of *Open Negative* engages with Sidney’s artistic processes, as well as making references to contemporary American painters, such as Abe Ratner and Jackson Pollock, of more weight are the literary references. It is an eclectic selection of writers that the narrator names: Mark Twain, D. H. Lawrence, Nabokov, Henry Miller, Robert Louis Stevenson, Ernest Hemingway and Zane Grey. The references to fellow sufferers Lawrence and Stephenson are of particular interest, registering Reed Nolan’s sense of place within the tradition of illness and exile.

*One Traveller’s Africa* focused on the painter’s journey to the source of visual and literary modernism. In *Open Negative* it is exclusively writers who shape the artist’s journey: ‘In America it was the writers who had given us a vision of the continent, therefore we decided to head for Mississippi because of Mark Twain, then New Mexico on account of the desert.’ (p. 5)

The narrator does not attempt to describe the New Mexico desert. Instead she defers to Lawrence: ‘Taos is redolent with D. H. Lawrence’ (p.20), while humming birds ‘vibrated,
as he had written of them’ (p.20). The desert is described as ‘Lawrence’s yellow stripped
tawny sea.’ (p.21). When they visit Lawrence’s shrine she eulogises:

No one has written more beautifully of small animals, birds and reptiles, or of flowers, than Lawrence - or so quickly extracted the essence of a country. Today Kangaroo still gives the best description of the Australian character and bush, yet the author was only three months in the land. Now in New Mexico, we were continually finding forms he had pinned down for us, stones and flowers that we recognised as familiar. (p.22)

Like Rousseau and Gauguin in Africa, Lawrence reveals a hidden world. The role of the artist, whether painter, like Rousseau, or writer, like Lawrence, is to translate the foreign into the ‘familiar’. The travelling writer, like the travelling painter, is capable of rapidly absorbing images and ‘forms’. There are parallels between Lawrence’s method of approaching the landscape he wrote about and Sidney’s ‘quick blick’. A sense of how Reed Nolan saw herself as a writer is glimpsed through her admiration for Lawrence. It is perhaps not as a travel writer that Reed Nolan wished to be understood, but as a travelling writer who, like Lawrence, is capable of ‘quickly’ extracting the essence of a country. Yet for the contemporary travelling writer in America, the literary tradition is also a burden. The African landscape had been ‘preconceived’ by European modernist painters. The weight of this tradition made it difficult for Sidney to be original. Here, in America, the framing of her descriptions of New Mexico with acknowledgments and debt to Lawrence implies something very similar.

As Brissenden suggests, of equal importance in the text is Nabokov. However, whereas Lawrence is a named reference point to the American desert landscape, the references to Nabokov are more oblique and operate differently. Nabokov is never named but his most famous book, Lolita, is an insistent presence. Arriving in Texas, the Nolans are in ‘Lolita land’. (p.12) Driving out of Phoenix, the narrator observes that ‘A hundred miles further on the author of Lolita had spent last summer hunting butterflies.’ (p.66) It is not Nabokov the narrator is thinking of as she describes this drive across America, but the story of Humbert Humbert and his incestuous relationship with his pubescent stepdaughter. 

Lolita was first published in 1955. Brissenden’s allusion to ‘what Nabokov did to the motel room’, however, reminds us that the novel was still a sensation when Open Negative was published in 1967. But the text seems to be suggesting a great deal more than the influence of a book and how it changed the way people saw things: ‘The first night a band played in the hotel lounge. A man dancing with a young girl in black satin and white fox never took his Humbert Humbert eyes off Polly.’ (p.55) Here the narrator positions her daughter as Lolita. To a certain extent it could be argued that she is simply revealing anxieties
about travelling with a teenage daughter. In another passage, however, the narrator takes her anxieties one step further:

That night although we chose an upstairs room in a motel built on a beach, even windows wide to the Atlantic did not bring relief from the sticky heat. It was like trying to breathe velvet shredded steam. I lay watching Polly, who in thin pajamas, lay sprawled on top of the bed. Her hair, now unevenly bleached by the sun, had grown several inches and formed a halo at the centre of the pillow, her lips were moving and she was reading intently. Throughout puritan America we had been mildly surprised at the communal facilities for sleeping. Frequently Sidney and Polly booked a room while I remained in the car. Certainly unless incest is one of your family problems, it is often more convenient to be together. (p. 87)

Polly is described as a mixture of child innocence and sensuality. Her hair forms a ‘halo’ and she moves her lips while reading as she lies ‘sprawled on top of the bed’ in ‘thin pajamas’. Once again Polly is seen as a Lolita-like figure. This is followed by the reference to incest. And there is at least an imaginative entertainment of the Lolita-like situation projected by her husband and daughter as they book the motel room while the mother remains in the car. The narrator is presenting the scene through her own distorted lens. Given her illness, there is nothing surprising about Sidney and Polly booking the room. Like earlier images that convey her isolation from the family group, this passage focuses upon her own exclusion.

In *One Traveller’s Africa* Sidney’s invisibility had provoked fears of abandonment. In *Open Negative* the Nolans attend two separate parties where sexual threat is used to explore feelings of increasing isolation and lack of consequence. As I shall suggest, the narrator’s vision is solipsistic. At the first party she is: ‘Squashed against a staircase, pushed and bumped while people shouted to friends across the room or whispered, clinging to one another’. (p. 23) A sense of her own insignificance builds in the passage: ‘questioned, ignored, pounced upon, then shaken and tossed aside.’ (p. 23) While the confusing whirl of the party is conveyed, it is, overwhelmingly, her feelings of being ‘ignored’ and of being ‘tossed aside’ that dominate the narrator’s syntax as she describes this sudden realisation of her invisibility. The discovery of her insignificance is expressed as a kind of disorientation in which ‘voices multiplied in an incoherent roar.’ (p.24) In a state of confusion she searches for Sidney: ‘I clasped the arm of a man I had met earlier in the evening. “Do you know where Sidney is?” I asked him. He shook off my hand (he was on his way to the bar) “Not to worry,” he replied, “he isn’t in any of the bedrooms with the glamorous blonde.”’ (p.24) Her own lack of desirability is revealed to her by the man’s offhand manner and his preference for the bar over her, but also her fear of Sidney’s fidelity is sufficiently palpable for a complete stranger to have registered it. As in the scene in the motel room, where her anxiety about
incest implants the possibility in the reader’s mind, so here the man’s denial of Sidney’s flirtations sows a seed of doubt.  

At the second party, jealousy is no longer undercurrent but blatantly enacted. Finding herself engaged in an argument, she turns to her husband: ‘For support I looked over to Sidney, but he was listening attentively to a woman who was telling him that he was the only artist capable of painting her portrait.’ (p.59) In response to this the narrator recalls: ‘I refused a liqueur but already and over and above and apart from alcohol I knew I was out of hand.’ (p.59) Yet it is not a contest to which she feels equal: ‘Sidney, polite, suave, smiling, walked up with a very slim, pretty blonde woman who was wearing a white and gold brocade suit. I struggled to my feet and was introduced.’ (p. 59) In both the party scenes sexual jealousy is the apparent source of her unhappiness. Although no accusation is made, she feels abandoned by Sidney at both parties and a ‘blonde’ is either mentioned in reference to Sidney or seen to be talking to him. The writing strains to capture her inner life, these feelings of dislocation, confusion and disorientation that seem disproportionate to the circumstances in which they arise.  

No direct accusation can actually be made against Sidney on the strength of her accounts of these parties. An alternative reading of these episodes might suggest that her feelings of invisibility and jealousy are directed at Sidney himself rather than at his behaviour. As the famous artist, he is the centre of attention, while she is simply the unknown wife.

In New Mexico she tentatively ‘ventures’ an opinion:

The road now turned and started winding and mounting continuously so that the air at last became cooler; there were sheer cliffs dropping to deep gorges. Lately heights had begun to unnerve me. ‘Being so near the edge,’ I ventured, as we spun recklessly round another hairpin bend, ‘makes me feel queer.’ Sidney took a long look over the great canyon. Away in the evening light a solitary cliff floated among the transparent blue shadows pointed as wings. ‘Makes me want to soar like an eagle,’ he commented. And that is the difference between us.

(p. 28)

---

10 Patrick White’s observations of the Nolans when he met them in Florida give insight into the marriage at this point. Of Reed Nolan, White writes: ‘I was a little bit prejudiced against the latter before meeting; as a result of all the bitchy things I have heard about her as we travelled around the world. However, after knowing her, and thinking back I realised that all the bitchery came from other women. I found her forthright and intelligent, perhaps a little ambitious (a fortunate quality in an artist’s wife), perhaps also a bit jealous, but she is the wife who is slightly older than a very attractive husband, and she says that other women are always offering to mend his shirts and trying to put their hands up underneath his coat to massage his shoulders.’ Letter to David Moore, 15 September 1958, *Patrick White Letters*, op.cit., p. 148.

11 In White’s account of his meeting with the Nolans in *Flaws in the Glass* her jealousy is again alluded to, but now reflects his dislike of Nolan: ‘women, men, dogs - fell in love with Sid. Some of the women had been foolish enough to massage his shoulders at parties, not realising that he hated to be touched.’ op.cit., p. 234. White also refers to Nolan as a ‘charmer’ op.cit., p.235.
While her fear makes her retreat from the landscape, Sidney embraces it. For the narrator ‘being too near the edge...makes me feel queer’. By contrast, he identifies with the bird shape he sees in the cliff ‘pointed as wings’ and which inspires him ‘to want to soar like an eagle.’ Voicing her anxiety does not elicit empathy from Sidney, rather it provokes in him an affirmation of his own freedom from anxiety. His identification with birds as signifiers of freedom begins to emerge as a shaping motif of Reed Nolan’s biographical study of her husband.

In California, the Nolans rest beside a motel swimming pool:

‘Almost as good as Australia, isn’t it?’ he asked contentedly. ‘This is for me.’ And then a minute later, ‘But I wouldn’t want to live anywhere for long. Would you?’ I didn’t reply, because at that exact same moment I’d been thinking that this continual moving around would kill me, for I am one of those peasants in whose blood are roots that go deep into the land beneath their feet. (p. 56)

The enormity of her conflict with Sidney silences her. Earlier, when she had tentatively ‘ventured’ to express her anxiety she had provoked from Sidney a declaration that had belittled her fears. Now, beside the pool, she feels it futile to express an opposite viewpoint and simply retreats into silence. It is not only the yet-to-be revealed illness that seems to provoke the melodramatic longing for stillness. It is the awareness of the vast chasm that separates her from her husband. What is striking, is the violence of her sentiments coupled with her silence. Speaking becomes a pointless exercise and her frustration is channelled inwards into a fantasy of her death.

This one-sided conversation is typical of the travel writing. In shaping her account of this journey, it is possible that Reed Nolan censored her side of the conversation. This passage exposes both the book’s strengths and weaknesses. Reed Nolan creates a self-portrait of almost Lawrencian emotional depth, in which the writing struggles to convey the feeling of non-verbal space that exists in relationships, and powerfully demonstrates the need to read Open Negative as fiction. Yet only one side of this relationship is presented. John Douglas Pringle went so far as to say that Reed Nolan ‘was hopeless when writing about Sidney.’

Although I argue that the complex portrait of the artist One Traveller’s Africa demonstrates that Reed Nolan was far from ‘hopeless’ when she wrote about Nolan, in Open Negative’s solipsistic vision, the character of Sidney rarely rises above his function to reveal the narrator’s interior state.

In Florida, the experience of being momentarily released from anxiety conversely makes her realise the intensity of her suffering:
These moments were a sort of heaven, one could not imagine a greater bliss. For while the exhaustion of the past weeks, the awareness of being swept in a direction I did not want to go, yet one that was beyond my powers to resist - this horrible feeling of anxiety and helplessness was completely dispelled and I was I, swimming and floating in the rough sea. (p. 86)

The focus of the final sentence is on this return to self ‘I was I’ while the phrase ‘swimming and floating in the rough sea conveys the sensation of the self momentarily released from the strain of the journey. It is after weeks of ‘anxiety and helplessness’ that she returns to herself. These feelings of ‘anxiety’ are connected with the experience of being ‘swept in a direction I did not want to go.’ For a woman who believes she is ‘one of those peasants whose feet are roots that go deep into the earth’ travel is destructive. Yet by momentarily remembering who she is as she floats in the sea the narrator now realises how far she has travelled from her self. Now rebellion against the imposition of travel gives way to anger against the imposer: it is Sidney who is sweeping her in a direction she does not want to go and who is implicitly responsible for her disintegration.

It is from the perspective of being disconnected, of having become ‘inaccessible to myself’, that she returns to New York to search for a flat in which Sidney can paint through the winter months. Open Negative, here, moves outside the boundaries laid down by the earlier travel books and in the conventions of travel writing. In exploring the domestic sphere, this section also enters more fully into the creative lives of the Nolans who paint and write at home.

The intimacy of the Nolans’ domestic life together in a tiny bed-sitter: days spent shopping, visiting exhibitions, lunching at the Metropolitan Museum, going to the Zoo and dining at night at a local Italian restaurant, is established. This section is unique in Reed Nolan’s writing in its description of the Nolans’ working life together. Brian Adams has written of the creative harmony of this period in New York: ‘Nolan planned to keep a diary of impressions and a photographic record to assist him with subsequent paintings, while Cynthia would take copious notes with the intention of compiling a travel book.’

Adams’ view of separate, yet complementary, writing projects is markedly different from the narrator’s impressions in Open Negative. Sidney tells his wife that ‘I might do an American diary.’ (p. 97) In calling his work in progress a ‘diary’, Sidney comes close to her eventual subtitle, ‘An American Memoir’. Fear that her creative territory is being invaded by Sidney is registered: the conviction that he is appropriating her writing is bluntly stated ‘And he wrote lines to go with some of the drawings or used what I had written’ (p.98) She is

---

reduced to the role of typist: 'Composing sentences took him much longer than painting. As he finished a page I would type it out' (p.98). Collaboration, however, is not achieved without a battle: 'We would agree to change sentences, arguing with ferocity.' (p. 98)

Her role in relation to his painting is seen as essentially passive: 'During a working day I would mostly lie quietly on the bed reading, or trying to read, when I was not wanted for looking.' (p. 99) In describing a state of absolute passivity, the narrator withholds insight into her feelings. The absence of an interior monologue which had previously expressed her inner resistance to surface capitulation, dramatically alters the perspective. The narrator now looks back on herself, in a sense from the outside, and what she sees is no longer simply 'a part of who I was' but the self in entirety. It is function which is conveyed in the narrator's off-hand comment: 'when I wasn't wanted for looking', as if her primary role in her relationship with Sidney, this function of 'looking' at his paintings, of being the spectator, of being his muse, has consumed her utterly.

Yet the narrator quickly asserts another dimension to herself and to their relationship. In contrast to her passive role in relation to his paintings is the ferocity of their literary arguments:

He showed me a line. 'Isn't that an interesting point?' Three times I read the words, then shook my head, 'It doesn't make sense'. Sidney went red in the face. 'All right,' I said hastily, 'but you asked me. I'm a sort of average person and whatever your thoughts you should be able to put them down so that I can understand them.' (p. 98)

Her ridicule undermines the value of his project. Although she is marking out her own territory and resisting its relinquishment to Sidney, she is also making a comment about where his talent lies.

For the narrator, living with Sidney means living with his history:

'I saw bicycles before I saw flowers, so that I know them better' he said vaguely. 'The flowers of my childhood were often artificial and always vulgar.'

'But when you lived with those friends as a young man?'

'Yes, I heard a lot about horticulture then, but the attitude was a bit intense. I never really cared if all those plants in their garden flowered or not. Except some pinks I looked after, I grew fond of them. Look!' Unpredictably the painting he held up was of Mrs Fraser, she was a feminine presence, pale in the dark forest pool...And again she appeared, this time beside a black and white striped figure - the convict who dreamed he had rescued her, cherished her through wilderness and jungle, until she finally betrayed him. (p. 91)
Although the narrator impersonalises the ‘intense friends’ with whom Sidney lived and the subject of their conversation, it is clear that they are John and Sunday Reed. As they talk about the Reeds he produces two Mrs Fraser paintings. Andrew Sayers has written about the unconscious associative processes of Nolan’s paintings:

I want to touch on the way in which Nolan conjured likenesses from memory. Nolan never worked directly from a subject, so all his paintings of heads, such as the 1947 series of which the self-portrait is an example, had the capacity to act as a conduit for almost automatic or unconscious visitations from the past. So likenesses could be discovered, after the event, to be portraits where the artist had not set out to paint a particular individual. An example is the portrait of Arthur Boyd in the series of Gallipoli pictures of 1959. Setting out to be a portrait of a generalised digger Nolan discovered only after painting this work that it was a portrait of Arthur Boyd.\textsuperscript{14}

In the passage from \textit{Open Negative} quoted above, the narrator demonstrates Sayers’ observation about Sidney’s unconscious associations. During a conversation about the Reeds, in which he does most of the talking, ‘Unpredictably’ the painting he produces is of Mrs Fraser. In retelling the story of Mrs Fraser’s ‘betrayal’ of Braceywell, Reed Nolan may well have been sending a veiled message to her sister-in-law, informing her that after all these years, Nolan’s bitterness is very much alive.

After six months Sidney grows bored with their settled life and the Nolans set out on a journey to Chicago. Coming back to Chicago, after a distance of more than twenty years, proves a confronting experience. In her account of their domestic and creative life together in New York, the narrator had presented Sidney as an invader of her territory. Chicago, in a sense, belongs to her. It was in Chicago that Reed Nolan had trained to be nurse, a period that she wrote about in her first novel, in which the central character, Alphonse, escapes from her past and her marriage into a new identity as nurse. The return to Chicago recorded in \textit{Open Negative} is both a return to an actual city in which Reed Nolan lived in her youth, and a textual return to her first novel. Alphonse’s flight from an unhappy marriage into nursing and independence has ironic meaning to a narrator who increasingly feels trapped within the creative partnership of the marriage.

The competitive aspect of the Nolans’ marriage is partly located as conflict between the imagination of the writer and that of the painter. In Chicago, the narrator’s assertion: ‘This is a not a painter’s city. Writers yes’, is echoed by Sidney: ‘ “Writing has come from here, painting won’t.” Sidney declared huffily.’\textsuperscript{(p.103) However ‘huffily’, Sidney does acknowledge that in Chicago, a city that could be said to have nourished her writing, his wife

\textsuperscript{14} Sayers, op. cit.
had staked out her creative claim before him. Taking Sidney to the art museum, however, is a
threatening experience:

I hurried him to the museum, for although I had no memory of individual paintings, the
conviction of their excellence remained with memories of the joy experienced when, during
the months of hard work at St Joseph’s Hospital I had snatched an hour or two to come down-
town. Today walking at first past a few abstract works by Picasso and Braque I was abashed,
wondering if memory had played me false. And then one after another, the marvellous rooms,
one full of Degas’s, one of Renoir’s, one of Monet’s, and we were flooded with happiness.

(p.103)

In entering the gallery the Nolans might appear to be back in Sidney’s territory, but they are
also in the domain of the narrator’s memory. Showing Sidney the gallery, which she had
found impressive, leaves her vulnerable and exposed. She is ‘abashed’. Rather then accept
that she has changed, she registers her insecurity in her fear that ‘memory had played me
false.’ The discovery of the ‘marvellous rooms’ not only validates her judgement when they
are both ‘filled with happiness’, but forges a connection with this younger, now idealised,
pre-Sidney self.

At a time when she feels ‘lost’, both geographically and psychologically, this
connection with her younger self is a moment of re-orientation, of re-connection. The
narrator’s struggle to locate herself is again articulated when she meets up with old nursing
friends: ‘In the hotel-lounge a dozen middle-aged women were waiting. We searched each
other’s faces for the girl we had known. In some she was recognisable immediately, in others
it took longer to find her.’ (p. 104) The ageing body is a mask and the body, like the car,
becomes another layer of facade, hiding the true, idealised and younger girl-self. Writing this
moment was to regenerate Reed Nolan’s autobiographical fictional quest, when three years
later she would publish her final autobiographical novel, *A Bride for St Thomas*.

As the Nolans drive back to New York from Chicago, the approaching blizzard
becomes a dramatic enactment of the narrator’s fears of impending collapse: ‘The bare plains
of Nebraska with their raked horizons and windy sunlight were very beautiful, but to live
there would be a sort of death.’ (p.105) Although her anxiety, and her ever-increasing
disorientation and isolation from Sidney, is manifest in this description of the landscape, the
writing illustrates Reed Nolan at her best. It is a painter’s composition, the brush work
palpable in its ‘raked horizons’ illuminated by ‘the windy sunlight’.

The Nolans drive past ‘birds hardly able to fly’ (p.107) from the cold. Throughout
*Open Negative* the bird is closely associated with Sidney. Earlier, the narrator had retreated
from the cliff edge from fear, while Sidney had wanted to ‘soar like an eagle’. This sense of
Sidney as a creature of flight, with its associations of freedom, is central to the portrait created of him in the text. Here, in the frozen landscape, the narrator enfeebles the image of the bird. The image of the frozen and immobilised bird is built upon several paragraphs later when in Iowa she sees ‘corn bins arranged in three tiers of lessening circumference, they resembled large bird cages set down in this sinister, rather frightening arctic world.’ (p.107)

It was during this period in America that Sidney began working on the *Leda and the Swan* paintings that between 1958 and 1960 became a series of 75 painting in all (Appendix image 7). Watching his stepdaughter swim underwater apparently inspired Nolan.\(^\text{15}\) Yet clearly Nolan’s relationship with his wife was another source for these paintings, which offer a parallel commentary on her narrative of the creative partnership. The raping swan of the Leda myth, revealed in these paintings, is yet another representation of the consumer/consumed and disease/diseased study of the artist and his muse that begins to emerge in *Open Negative*. Nicholas Usherwood has accurately described these paintings as ‘floating levitating imagery.’\(^\text{16}\) Reed Nolan’s description of her own momentary suspension when she is ‘swimming and floating’ seems also to reflect this imagery. Most significant, perhaps, for the way in which Reed Nolan’s text sheds light on his paintings, is the physical separation between Leda and the Swan. If the swan is a rapist, this is a curiously non-physical image of rape. In *Open Negative*, although Reed Nolan’s ‘consumption’ is bodily disease, it is also a metaphor for the psychic rape enacted by the marriage. That rape is, I believe, evoked in these paintings. Reed Nolan’s image of the frozen bird, however, is flightless and imprisoned. Although she may be appropriating Sidney’s image of the bird as an expression of her own state of psychological immobilisation, there is an alternative reading. In a work that seems to block a sympathetic representation of Sidney, she may here be gesturing towards an understanding of his entrapment within the role of the devouring artist.

It is through glimpses of an enigmatic interior world of anxiety and fantasy that she hints at emotional sources of unhappiness beyond her illness:

Coming back to New York, all that long drive through days and late into the nights, I tried to recollect and rearrange my thoughts, but was unable to do so. I was utterly weary and could not understand how to loosen the painful band which was tightening its pressure on a bewildering passion of mind. I was beyond everything...and yet if at this time I had been offered an operation guaranteed to turn me into a strong cook-housekeeper of imperturbability I would somehow have found the strength to go through with it. (p. 105)

---


\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
It is unclear whether 'the painful band' she refers to is physical or psychological or a combination of the two. What is clear is that she connects this 'bewildering passion of mind' with her husband. In this state of imminent collapse, she reveals how pathetically entrapped she is. She longs to be 'a good cook-housekeeper': a desperate fear of losing Sidney is revealed in the banality of her aspiration and its self-punitive fantasy of the 'operation'.

Since the beginning of the American trip, the narrator has been slipping further and further into a subterranean world. In the depth of her crisis as they drive back to New York, the narrator recalls another fantasy: 'We kept passing hitchhikers. There is certainly one particular purgatory where I shall stand, in blazing heat or icy sheet, trying to get lifts from cars that whizz endlessly by, their drivers' eyes averted.' (p.105) If her 'purgatory' is to be the hitchhiker then, by inference, Sidney is the eternal driver. The fantasy becomes another metaphor for her relationship with Sidney. The narrator is suggesting that he is fully aware of her anguish but that he prefers to continue on in pretended ignorance, his eyes 'averted'. Back in New York as she sits in the doctor's waiting room she suddenly realises that she is living in 'a vast underworld of misery'. (p.109)

After she is diagnosed with tuberculosis the link between Sidney and her disease is made explicit: increasingly it is suggested that it is Sidney who is consuming her: 'I found no thought of getting well, no determination to get well, only a deep tiredness. But good spirits were necessary to cheer Sidney who was upset, much more upset than I was. “I won’t do any work. I shan’t work at all while you are away.”' (p.110) Sidney is depicted as petulantly concerned about the effect of her absence on his work. To please him, she agrees to an expedition to the Zoo:

After the first few hours I remember nothing but exhaustion, nothing but his energy, his pleasure in being in the world, and of it, combined with fierce pain that gripped as though with pliers, every nerve in my back. I had no tears to shed. There was only a completely useless, wrung out carcass, a failed piece of ectoplasm propelled along, the mockery of a dim moon under the spell of some sun, a nothing woman, aware only of a grande Jatte Noir against curtains of exhaustion.

'I have a surprise for you,' Sidney said, reappearing from a side-path. 'I’ll tell you in the car.'

It was five o'clock but the heat was still drilling New York so that babies and little children lolled against adults who were sitting still, lifeless, silent on fire escapes and doorsteps. They had come out from breathless rooms to seek air and would stay - until they had gathered strength to once more move indoors.

I did not realise that skyscrapers had replaced tenements until we were parked in a main street and Sidney was saying: 'Now here’s a new film by Bergman. That’s my surprise. I thought I’d take you to it. And after the film dinner at Montes in MacDougal Street.' I was
almost swooning, every sound came from outside some centre of deathly incapacity; people, the screen, the traffic in the streets, the wine and food, Sidney, all were hovering shadows.

(p.112)

She can only project her exhaustion onto the scene: the people they pass are ‘still, lifeless, silent.’ Part One of Open Negative is dominated by dramatic swings in temperature from the frozen planes of Nebraska to the hellish heat of New York, extremities whose main function, in a work that at least on some level professes to be a record of a journey through an actual country, seems to be the reflecting of the narrator’s interior state.

It is the word ‘energy’ which defines Sidney: his ‘energy and pleasure in being in the world, and of it.’ The relationship is increasingly seen as a destructive energy. She describes herself in relation to him as ‘the mockery of a dim moon under the spell of some sun’. It might be her role to orbit him but he is merely ‘some sun’ rather than the absolute life force, a parodic representation that makes it clear that she no longer shares her younger self’s blind adoration. If she is his victim, he is vampiric, consuming her, draining her of her vitality, reducing her to a ‘completely useless, wrung out carcass’, a ‘failed piece of ectoplasm’ that meekly does his bidding. Nine years separate the experience from the telling of it and the resolute concentration on Sidney’s ‘energy’ as punitive and insensitive suggests a degree of vengefulness.

At the end of Part One, the journey through America ends with the narrator close to death. This image of impending stasis is ironic in its contraction of the male travel quest, with its masculinist metaphors of travel as conquest and possession. The movement of the narrative from mobility to stasis equally subverts feminist readings of women’s travel writing as the work of exceptional ‘women who sought through travel more adventurous, interesting lives, and who reflected upon their wanderings.’ By the end of Part One, the interior world of suffering has displaced the exterior narrative of travel. The metaphors of female travel explored in Pesman’s work on Australian women travellers under chapter headings such as ‘Travel and Status’, ‘Travel and Aspirations’, ‘Travel and Independence’, ‘Travel and Discovery of the World’ and ‘Travel and Discovery of the Self’, have ironic application in

---

17 In her introductory discussion of travel writing, Pesman writes: ‘Travel was male territory and its metaphors were male gendered: the language of travel is of conquering virgin territory, of penetrating the landscape, of knowing and possessing.’ Op.cit., p. 6. Of course it might be argued that this is equally true of any genre, and that more generally, language is gendered.
18 Ibid., p. 7. See also Mills on feminist readings of women’s travel writing as ‘as examples of strong, exceptional women who somehow managed to escape the strictures of patriarchy’, op.cit., p. 29.
19 Chapter titles in Duty Free, op.cit.
Open Negative, where the world to be explored has contracted to the dark space of domestic entrapment, a suffocating marriage and an imprisoning illness.  

As Brissenden also points out, it is the eyes that instantly Nolan’s photograph of his wife on the third page of Part Two Apparitions image to the reader as central to the narrative. It is a story of entrapment that is told through Nolan’s photographs and is visualised in the eyes.  

Part Two

In his review of Open Negative Robert Brissenden wrote:

Part Two is not so different in some ways to Part One. It is an expression, in a dramatic personal way of themes which are present, I think, in the first part of the book. This is brought out if we look at the one illustration in the book - a photograph of Cynthia Nolan taken by her husband. It shows her in hospital mask and gown. All you can really see are her eyes and the worried forehead. It is not fanciful to remind ourselves of the Kelly paintings of her husband - you get the same impression of someone trapped inside a mask.

The ‘impression of someone trapped inside a mask’ picks up a unifying theme of the text. Part One is dominated by images of facades: shells, hidden selves, and the persistent image of the car, which like the mask, becomes a representation of isolation and entrapment. Part Two, which describes the narrator’s six months in hospital, is, as Brissenden suggests, a ‘dramatic and personal’ enactment of the first part of the book. The darkest fears and anxieties of the interior narrative have become the text’s external reality. In Part Two, the interior narrative, her ‘underworld’ has, as the title suggests, moved into the open.

At the beginning of Part Two the narrator’s entrapment is made literal by her hospitalisation. It is not ‘fanciful’ that Brissenden is reminded of Nolan’s image of Ned Kelly. Unable to sleep, the narrator spends many hours staring out at the building opposite: ‘At dawn two stern eyes were still staring at me from the dark Ned Kelly mask of the Seagram but by six a.m. it was once more a quiet building.’ (p.132) She feels herself trapped within ‘the Ned Kelly mask’, that relentlessly stares back at her. This, disconcertingly, is what Nolan’s photograph registers, together, perhaps, with the self-entrapment signified in the Kelly paintings.

The surgical mask, which is meant to offer protection between patient, staff and visitors, is revealed to be a deception. Its real purpose revealed by a doctor is: “Psychological”, he answered with a grin, ‘so that all the other patients or their visitors and your visitors won’t start worrying.’ (p.118) Like Kelly’s armoured mask, which promised

---

20 It is worth noting that in the 1994 publication Outback and Beyond, Open Negative was not included. No comment is made on this exclusion, although it is possible to speculate that its ironic treatment of travel is not, at face value, apparent and, therefore, it was not considered to be a travel book. Of interest, too, is Burke’s omission of Open Negative in her list of Reed Nolan’s published writing: ‘Cynthia would also publish four volumes of travel writing between 1962 and 1971.’ Op.cit., p. 84.
but failed to protect him, the protection offered by the mask is an illusion. Stripped of its function as a protector, the mask becomes an image of concealment and disguise.

As Brisenden also points out, it is the eyes that dominate Nolan's photograph of his wife on the third page of Part Two. (See Appendix, image 5). Her eyes are central to the narrative: it is her story of entrapment that is told. Once again, Nolan's photograph is entrapping, yet there is an interesting dialogue between the photograph and a further image of these imprisoned eyes. The dust jacket features a painting by Nolan. (See Appendix image 5). The viewer is immediately drawn to piercing blue eyes, encased in a disproportionately large head, on top of a body whose arms are raised wings. Tiny unstable feet perch upon the tip of a crest of the small half-hidden orb. The body fights for liberty through ascension, yet the head, and the mind revealed by the penetrating eyes, is too heavy for the body, weighting it down, the mind both entrapping and being entrapped by the body. Lacan's location of the symbolic importance of wings in dreams of the 'fragmented body' comes to mind in this unstable image of self-division and mind/body conflict. However, just as Nolan's painting of Rimbaud seems to support Reed Nolan's textual portrait of him, so too, his photograph and painting suggest his awareness of his wife's entrapment within the creative partnership. Reed Nolan's image of herself staring and being stared back at by the Ned Kelly mask perhaps, in turn suggests an understanding that both husband and wife are equally imprisoned within the collaborative imagery of their creative partnership.

In imagining the hospital as a prison, Reed Nolan draws upon the common view that disease is punitive in origin and process. Aldo, a fellow patient, breaks down one night: "'I can't stand it no more, I tell you. It's like prison. It's prison here.'" (p.142) Later the narrator herself makes the comparison: 'It was Sunday, the day for visiting prisons.'" (p.171)

Travelling across America in Part One the Nolans visit a number of zoos, yet another example of the inter-weaving of images that connect the two parts of the book and convey a steady movement towards entrapment. In Florida: 'in a very small enclosure a panther was serving a life sentence.' (p.80) In Part Two it is the room she shares with the sadistic Mary (who amuses herself by keeping the narrator awake ripping up sweet wrappers and refusing to allow the air conditioner on in the soaring summer heat) that 'smelt like a sour animals' cage'.

(p.160)

The hospital might be imagined as another form of enforced enclosure, yet an experiment is being trialed in which the patients regulate their own hours and come and go between rooms as they wish. Freedom from regulations is, however, an illusion, as the narrator finds herself equally constrained by the homogenised social world of the ward. A doctor tells her: 'we must be social, Mrs Nolan.' In the permissive context of the ward the

narrator’s plea for: ‘Silence in which to see and stillness in which to hear, to be enabled to think, to choose and discard’ (p.121) is aberrant.

If the hospital is explicitly compared to prisons, it is implicitly compared to a mental hospital. The response by the staff to one blind and terrified patient is to ignore him: ‘That night not one member of the hospital staff went in to see Joe. Was this treatment a kind of shock therapy, perhaps using mental cruelty instead of electric waves? Or was it simply that students cannot learn anything from a man’s agony of mind?’ (p.147) Through the social worker, Mrs Henty, the narrator learns that Mick, another patient, is scheduled to have a lobotomy. (p. 217) Mrs Henty tells the narrator: “I’ve insight, you see as well as training. Part of my job is to give a psychiatric diagnosis of each case.”’ (p. 218)

Before his wife is admitted to hospital Sidney quotes from ‘some Zen source’: ‘it takes no skill to miss the target.’ (p. 110) Now, in hospital, the narrator asks Sidney:

‘Do you think hospitals are other prisons where you are sent when you have missed the target?’ And then ‘whose voice does one listen to when own’s has ceased to speak? A biochemist’s? A Shaman’s? A God’s? Yours? A psychiatrist’s?’ Sidney clenched both hands and flared up at once. ‘Experts say there is absolutely no psychological basis for TB so don’t you start thinking there is.’ (p. 189)

In Part One many of the conversations the narrator records between herself and Sidney have been one-sided. Many of his questions are really statements based upon assumed agreement. Her voice had already ‘ceased to speak’ long before she recognises this in hospital. Here, however, she does in fact ‘speak’. In struggling to communicate her crisis she appeals for guidance. There is sarcasm, perhaps, in her inclusion of Sidney in the list after ‘a God’. There is unconscious irony in Sidney’s response when he angrily retorts that ‘experts’ claim there is absolutely no psychological basis for TB’, as he shouts her down. Sontag’s argument that the psychologising of illness in the modern age simply repositions the moral cause of illness has application. 24 In asking if it is because she has ‘missed the target’ that she is ill, the narrator suggests that she is responsible for her illness.

Nonetheless, the narrator appears to admit a more moderate, sympathetic view of Sidney who, we are told, visited her ‘every day when he was in New York’ (p. 190):

Sidney back from bulleting about London was full of messages from friends. He told me what he had seen but it meant nothing to me. I only felt puzzled, hearing about these people and happenings. It was frightening how quickly one was caught up in the wheels of the hospital

23 See Sontag op.cit., p. 43.
24 Ibid., p. 57.
machine. This was my world and it was not possible to jump straight into his without a bridge which he would not allow me to put down - apprehensive, perhaps, that he himself would stray over it. He told me of exhibitions, meetings, reviews, but whereas before he needed my thoughts and my comments were essential to him, he was now trying to give me some of his own strength. (p. 189)

Despite his characteristic attempt to rouse her, her puzzlement and alienation are attributed to his failure, indeed, his refusal to build a 'bridge' between them. Earlier, when she had tried to speak to him about her life in the hospital he had again shouted her down: "Don't tell me," he cut me short, eyes blazing, "I don't want to hear about hospitals. I detest hospitals." (p.132) Each is trapped in a separate world, and lost to the other.

Patrick White commented that although 'Open Negative' is one of the best examples of her writing...she was never at her best when writing about Sid, an elusive character for me too.' Her tendency to reduce her husband to the villain (and by inference herself to victim) shows how her narrative continues to be shaped by inner turmoil. Sidney's role is at least partially a catalyst to this inner turmoil. As White venomously reports: 'She throws more light on him and their relationship in one of the letters she wrote to me at this time (in hospital): 'Siddy comes to the hospital keening like an old peasant woman, her head shrouded in a shawl.'

If illness is a seen as a punishment, its treatment is presented as far more punitive still. The narrator is ordered to undergo a 'gastric', an invasive procedure involving the insertion of a tube down the patient's throat. At first, in a vain bid to retain her autonomy, she insists on inserting the tube herself:

I had undergone two more of these gastrics. The second, with another intern, I again gave myself. As I pulled out the tube a drop of fluid marked his coat, he said angrily: 'Look what you're doing' and I burst into tears. Without a backwards glance he walked out of the treatment room, perhaps this is the right attitude to tears. Next time I had been unable to muster sufficient resolve and just sat, a body being worked upon by awkward hands, against the will of every fibre. There can be an insult in the way something is pushed into one's body, into the privacy of one's interior. (p. 150)

The gastric is figured as rape, an assault upon 'the privacy of one's interior' an 'insult in the way something is pushed into one's body.' It enacts her worst psychological anxiety of being invaded and consumed by her artist husband. By the end of Part One, travel, illness and Sidney are seen as interchangeable agents of invasion. She here defines herself as 'a body

---

being worked by awkward hands’. It is not only that the female body is quintessentially the object of male colonisation, but this self-construct as body also gestures towards a deeper philosophical concern. As Londa Schiebinger has noted, the gendering of the mind/body dualism in western intellectual tradition: ‘made males the guardian of culture and the things of the mind while it associated females with the frailties and contingencies of the mortal body.’ 27 The narrator’s aspirations to be a ‘mind’, to be a ‘guardian of culture’, to compete equally with her artist husband through her writing, are, in Open Negative, threatened by a disease which defines her as ‘consumptive,’ which reduces her entirely to a ‘mortal body.’ It is this battle against, and inevitable acquiescence to, the constraints of her gendered body that is the ‘psychic journey’ of Part Two and which Nolan so sensitively illustrates on the dust jacket.

Attention turns to the scrutinising of the body’s interior. Diagnosis of tuberculosis is performed through x-rays to expose the body’s hidden interior. 28 The mapping of this secret interior is another form of conquest and possession. Like the photograph, the x-ray captures the person as image. Reed Nolan’s perception of the photograph as imprisoning the body through the ethnographic tradition and stereotype is now applied to the dehumanising power of the x-ray. Classification and homogenisation further erode the voiceless narrator’s individuality. Her medical treatment is summarised in the words of Dr Bronkhurst: ‘patients are not people.’ (p. 118)

The narrator’s medical treatment compounds fears of the consumption of the self within the marriage. When she first arrives in hospital, Sidney brings her some of his paintings, which she sticks up around her bed. The paintings are initially a source of comfort to her, a reminder not only of Sidney, but also of her role in his creative life, her knowledge that ‘my comments and my thoughts were essential to him.’ (p. 189) This sense of her role and of the paintings changes radically after a visit from Dr Ham: ‘a good looking young bull, thick shouldered, curly haired, vigorous. His manner veered from cocky charm to hectoring.’ (p. 126) After looking at the pictures, Dr Ham tells the narrator that Sidney ‘won’t get places’ as he, Dr Ham, ‘happens to know about art.’ (p.126)

In Part One, she had encountered and dismissed untrained and ignorant criticism of Sidney’s paintings. Here in the hospital ward, she is defeated by it. Despite her dislike of the doctor, as his patient she has moved under his influence and is unable either to counter his attack or dismiss it as philistine. After he leaves ‘I looked at the paintings for strength but insulted they disappeared, fallen away into meaningless smears’ (p. 127) and she takes them down. In removing the pictures, she is essentially capitulating to the hospital system.

---

26 Ibid., p. 235.
28 Sontag writes: ‘TB makes the body transparent. The x-rays, which are the standard diagnostic tool permit one, often for the first time, to see one’s insides-to become transparent to oneself.’ Op.cit., p. 12.
expressing, perhaps, her need to believe in the doctor who has his life in her hands. She is also systematically abandoning her former life and identity, in which the paintings had meaning, painfully relinquishing her role as muse. Later, when Sidney again brings her some illustrations, 'I did not want to look at them. When he held them in front of my eyes I saw only blurs, then some insignificant shapes. Both his eyes and mine were full of tears.' (p. 131) Sidney's grief for his dead muse is seen as both spontaneous and responsive, allowing in him a depth of emotion and connection with her not previously glimpsed.

There is some ambivalence in the presentation of Dr Ham's authority. He tells her that after she is discharged from hospital she will need a room of her own in which she can recuperate:

'a room to yourself where you can go in and shut the door and no-one comes in and disturbs you, or wakes you during the night. My mind spun off, unable to cope with the contradiction, unable to believe its ears. Any previous confusion was nothing to this.

'Then I'll have to stay here. You can't expect a painter to put off the light, stop work for someone else's convenience.'

Dr Ham took a short step forward, his face dark, threatening, 'I'm not interested in your husband's personality. I'm interested in your illness. You seem to think you've got some sort of genius and nothing must interfere with his painting. You can't expect a painter to stop painting.' He mimicked my accent. (p. 127)

There is an echo of Virginia Woolf's plea for 'a room of one's own' and the meaning this holds for the woman writer, however ironic this sounds on the lips of the bullying, philistine doctor. Although he is cast as dictator, only interested in her disease (and therefore in her as body) he nonetheless expresses what had been recognised in Part One: her subjugation within the marriage, her acquiescence to the loss of her autonomy, her own creativity, for the sake of Sidney's art. Her role as it has been presented throughout the travel writing is to be eternally at Sidney's service as his sounding board to mirror his own fascination with his art ('my thoughts and my comments were essential to him'), to be his secretary in Africa ('take a note for me')29. To secure him window seats, to be his muse. And so Dr Ham is authorised to speak for her. She, however, remains guarded: in appearing to dislike him, she appears to distance herself from his opinion.

A similar ambivalence is seen in the presentation of the authority of the social worker Mrs Henty. Where Dr Ham's unpleasantness disguises his good sense, Mrs Henty's wisdom is hidden beneath blindness that amounts to stupidity. In their first encounter, Mrs Henty claims that the sadistic Mary is the 'nicest patient' in the ward (p. 134) Judgements such as

---

this cause the narrator to wonder if Mrs Henty is ‘unreliable’. (p.184) The narrator is then able to reject Mrs Henty’s opinion that she has a ‘a death wish’: ‘My death wish. I stopped to examine the possibility but not with much interest. Some hour or day of their lives most people consciously, or not, wish for death.’ (p.184) This is extraordinary in view of a narrative which has continuously explored the existence of it. She may dismiss her death wish but the text has relentlessly exposed it. This is another instance of Reed Nolan’s revision: the fashioning of her record into fiction. Clearly, it is the character and not the retrospective narrator who dismisses the ‘death wish.’

In an earlier passage Mrs Henty tells her that she “must stop doing things for people and learn to be selfish.” (p. 164) To which the narrator responds, “can’t you see I am being selfish, that I have to do what I can for others if there is any chance of me getting well. Don’t you see what I can’t get I have got to give?” (p. 164) This simply reasserts the state of mind that she herself has implied was responsible for the illness.

In their last conversation before the narrator’s discharge, Mrs Henty bluntly tells her: “You’ve got to get away from your husband. After all there are plenty of other men in the world. You can always marry again.” (p.218) Like Dr Ham, Mrs Henty is authorised to speak for the narrator, pointing up the logical exploration of her repression, her literal and metaphorical consumption by the marriage. Yet her response to Mrs Henty’s advice is to claim to have been deceived, to have been ‘decoyed by a wooden duck and then shot down.’ (p. 218)

And there is ambivalence in her return to the role of muse. Without that role, she experiences a loss of identity and purpose. But it is a role that she also experiences as consuming of her own creativity and of her very being. In returning to Sidney she returns to a life which she makes abundantly clear has not changed. Sidney tells her that he put his brushes down the day she went into hospital and took them up again the day she came home. She can again find meaning in his paintings: ‘Thank God I recognised them, they spoke to me once again; I had been afraid they would not.’ (p.219) and ‘together we looked and talked about painting.’ (p.218). But the transition to her old life is not made easily: ‘I was unable to pull myself out of ineffectual lethargy, all night and the next day I lay semi-dreaming of death.’ (p.223) Sidney suffers as well. Although she puts it down to the emotional experience of painting the Gallipoli series: ‘he cried out in nightmares from which I woke him.’ (p.222) While Sidney sleeps and dreams she ‘was awake, wondering how I could learn not to become fragmented.’ (p. 222)

Her desire to prevent a recurrence of her breakdown appears futile, given that nothing has altered:
While I was away Sidney was used to going to bed early; but now he was working again he went back to our usual bedtime, any hour after midnight. During the day he painted on the floor, first placing areas of colour on the prepared board, next swiping on polyvinyl acetate until the whole 4 times 5 feet area was thick with paint, then seizing a short-handled squeegee and slashing and wiping, cornering and circling like a skater, until another painting was completed. For the moment he had left the Gallipoli theme. Now over and over he was painting Leda and the Swan. Sometimes the woman was bloody, the swan very savage. Often the figure was ambiguous, incidental, unidentified, the swan was not. At night he would usually continue on the large boards, on work, on paper, for he was having a run. 'You need to be sparked off by somebody because you don't believe it makes sense, out of yourself.'

(p. 224)

The Leda figures of the paintings are 'ambiguous, incidental, unidentified' as opposed to the masculine Swan figure who 'was not.' Nolan’s preoccupation with the motif of rapist and victim suggests not only a degree of sensitivity into the way his wife saw the relationship, but also, as I have pointed out, an awareness of his destructiveness within the marriage. The uncanny insight of Patrick White’s Hurtle Duffield to his destructive effect on the women in his life makes an illuminating parallel.

The Leda figure operates as an 'unidentified' 'other' to the raping swan in the above passage just as she, as the muse, is sketchily defined by Sidney as an anonymous 'somebody' who sparks him off. The suggestion is clearly there that anyone could play this role of 'other' to the artist, and that the energy generated by such a relationship is essentially destructive:

He ripped off his shirt. 'Energy, that letter's given me so much energy it's killing me. I'll paint for six months on this. For years I painted upon Uncle Freddy refusing to give me twenty-five quid so I could have my first exhibition - lousy, jumped up, stinking Uncle Freddy. I painted and knew that while I painted he was on the way out.

Then that woman who said "you'll never have the joie de vivre to paint away from me. I painted and painted for years on that." (p. 224)

'That woman' can only be Sunday Reed. Her past role as Sidney's muse is, however, ironically explored. The grudge he bears fuels his creativity, his remorseless, consuming 'energy'. Despite his denial of dependence, there is a sense in which Sunday Reed has proved him right. In using his bitterness to paint, Sidney remains dependent upon his former muse. And in revealing the depth of Sidney's antipathy towards the Reeds, the narrator is forced to admit that Sunday Reed has continued to exert influence over Sidney. The other muse casts light upon her own permanence. The past is a continual reminder to the narrator that she too can be replaced.

155
Recalling a conversation with an acquaintance who visited her in hospital, she again expresses the ease of replacement and the irony of her survival:

'Poor dear,' she had said. 'I know exactly what you must be thinking. You must feel the same way that I felt last year when I had to have a major operation. "If only," I thought "I could die, then dear Thomas would be free to marry someone younger and more suitable."

Sidney had gone bright red with scarlet with suppressed glee. As soon as she had gone ... he burst out laughing, then laughed again until he had to sit down. I had been amused too, but wryly, and when I thought of death her words came back to me and produced a twisted smile. (p. 223)

Nine years after the publication of Open Negative, Reed Nolan would take her own life and fifteen months after her death, Nolan would marry again. Although the narrator cannot know about his remarriage, she is imaginatively entertaining its possibility and thoughts of death provoke a 'twisted smile'. The issues that dominate Open Negative, her anxiety about ageing, her fears of Sidney's infidelity, her subjugation to his art, were not to be resolved by her recovery. She felt this subjugation keenly, yet it should be argued that the creative partnership enabled her to produce work which in its own right is deserving of critical attention and on which her reputation as a writer must stand.

Whereas One Traveller's Africa had ended with the image of a future in which the narrator did not exist, Open Negative ends with the depressing realisation that nothing has changed. Her journey through illness concludes where she began, trapped within the role of muse that displaces, consumes, invades and controls her creative identity. She may still write: and seven years after the experience she would produce Open Negative. But her most compelling subject remains the muse, her marriage, and her entrapment.
(iv) A Sight of China and Paradise and Yet

In 1965 Nolan was invited by The Australian National University to take up a three-month Arts Fellowship. Although it was a condition of the Fellowship that the artist remain in residence, the Nolans spent very little time in Canberra. During this three-month period they travelled to New Guinea, Queensland and the Simpson Desert, before setting out on a more ambitious journey through Pakistan and Afghanistan to China. In 1969 Cynthia’s record of their Asian journey, A Sight of China, was published. An account of their journey to Papua New Guinea, Paradise and Yet, followed in 1971.¹

In A Sight of China the narrator’s confessional drive to expose her dissatisfaction with the role of muse in the politics of the marriage seems to have disappeared. Revelation of her own disintegrating inner life is, however, replaced by her observations of a ‘defeated’ Sidney.² Both A Sight of China and Paradise and Yet record landscapes which failed to inspire him. In ironic contrast to the two previous books, it is Nolan’s creative paralysis that is now under scrutiny. As I shall suggest, the representation of Nolan in A Sight of China is marked by Reed Nolan’s awareness of the negative critical reception of his work from the mid-1960s, when accusations of ‘cultural tourism and reportage’³ were beginning to emerge. As The Times Literary Supplement review notes: ‘Their gaze outwards from the south-east Asian mainland is not, for once, in the direction of Europe or America, but southeast wards to Australia as a kind of therapy.’⁴ A Sight of China is, indeed, a kind of ‘therapy.’ Yet the fourth travel book raises the question of how sympathetically Reed Nolan presents her husband’s creative crisis and to what extent her own sense of subjugation shapes the narrative of his defeat.

If, as I shall argue, the representation of the ‘defeated’ Sidney operates as another form of reprisal, both his construction and the narrator’s retreat from personal complaint are to be understood in context of the the text’s awareness of collective female complaint. In A Sight of China the Nolans are back in the exotic East on a journey that takes them from Australia through the Muslim countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan to their destination of Maoist China. The Eastern image of the veiled woman extends the implication of subjugating masks and facades in Open Negative. New to A Sight of China, is the possibility of liberation. A Sight of China reveals the historical advent of second wave feminism in the late 1960s. Betty Friedan’s influential feminist manifesto The Feminine Mystique had been published in

¹ Although I shall refer to the ending of Paradise and Yet, I have insufficient space to discuss the book in detail. Reed Nolan’s final travel book covers much of the same territory as One Traveller’s Africa.
² Cf. McFarlane’s observation of the ‘defeated Rimbaud’ quoted earlier.
1963. The year *A Sight of China* was published Germaine Greer began working on *The Female Eunuch.* It might be argued that *A Sight of China* belongs to the Western feminist Zeitgeist of the late 1960s. Understood in the context of female revolution, the ‘defeated’ Sidney becomes the vengeful muse’s wish fulfilment.

A changed Sidney is apparent from the first pages of *A Sight of China* where the narrator addresses the risks involved in investing in an artist’s potential. The Australian National University agreed to Sidney’s plans to travel on the condition that an exhibition followed:

Intelligently flexible, the University authorities had agreed to his plan to travel, although certainly aware of the possibility that what came of such expeditions could not be controlled, that the results might not conform with what they personally desired, and that one might come away tamed by one’s experiences, a dove rather than an eagle.⁶

The possibility is implied that the University might be disappointed. As the narrator points out, an artist’s work is neither controllable nor predictable. Sidney is imagined returning from China ‘tamed by his experiences, a dove rather than an eagle.’ In the previous travel book, *Open Negative,* the eagle had been Sidney’s emblem of freedom. In imagining Sidney returning as a tame dove, the narrator hints at the journey’s outcome.

In September 1965, an exhibition of the Chinese paintings was held at the Albert Hall in Canberra:

Nolan was aware that these works were little more than a string of impressions without a strong statement because of the difficulty of summing-up his feelings about the trip. He had told Coombes that the University was investing in a long-term project and this journey was the start of a continuing painterly fascination with China.⁷

Nolan admitted that the Chinese paintings were an artistic failure, but justified this failure in reference to the University’s investment in ‘a long-term project.’ However, although the Fellowship had been awarded to Nolan, the books Reed Nolan wrote about their visit to Papua New Guinea and China also belong to this long-term investment. It might be suggested that the University’s dividend is finally paid through the publication of *A Sight of China* and *Paradise and Yet.*

---


⁷ Adams, *op.cit.,* p.185.
In the year in which *A Sight of China* is set, 1965, the Australian critics were particularly hostile to Nolan's work. Bernard Smith wrote in his review of the 1965 exhibition of the Antarctic Series at The Australian Galleries: ‘The show as a whole is disappointing.’ One year later in 1966, Robert Hughes’ sneering remarks gave voice to a growing antipodean disenchantment with Nolan:

As one passes from his African paintings to his Antarctic series to his latest Australian landscapes, one becomes uncomfortably aware that a cast-iron technique is being applied to a sequence of superficial tourist views. And poor Kelly, saddle-sore from riding through so many paddocks of hardboard, is on the verge of losing his point altogether.

It is the Australian reaction to Nolan’s work that *A Sight of China* is principally concerned with. It is in Australia that the following exchange takes place:

‘When you observe the ranks closing against you it’s better rather to look another way, otherwise it’s easy to become paranoiac.’
But it isn’t paranoiac to see situations as they exist, I thought. Also it was advisable not to be either embittered or paralysed by critics, some of whom, one reluctantly came to understand, have an overwhelming if unconscious desire to see an artist stop work, never to work again. (p. 15)

As on so many occasions throughout the travel writing Sidney speaks while the narrator, writing the experience, thinks her response. It is not surprising that her advice not to be ‘embittered or paralysed by the critics’, given silently, cannot rescue the ‘tamed’ Sidney who will return from the journey.

*A Sight of China* begins in Australia and recalls the return to Australia for the first time in eight years. The narrator’s tone is defensive, mocking and insecure. Addressing the idea of homecoming, Reed Nolan had written to Pat Flower in 1956: ‘So delighted to hear all goes well and you are both content to be back. I always fear a moment of revulsion, but you seem to have avoided this.’ *A Sight of China* expresses the kind of revulsion Reed Nolan fears in her letter, the attitudes of the Anglophile-Australian, desperate to distance herself from a people she sees as marked by vulgarity. Although she is ‘flooded by the recollection and nostalgia of homecoming’ (p.9) she is equally driven by a need to ridicule the people: ‘Just personals in there?’ asked a customs officer pointing to my hand bag.’ (p.9) Her antipathy is evident in the contradiction she observes in the officials who greet them with

---

9 Hughes, op. cit., p. 227.
‘friendly words’ (p.9) while scrutinising them with ‘hard critical eyes.’ (p.9) The homecoming does reveal a degree of paranoia in the narrator. While Australians might appear to be welcoming, this friendly face is pure facade beneath which lurks something very unpleasant.

Her belief in the duplicity of the Australian character is shared by Sidney who recounts a story about watching Donald Bradman play cricket:

Sidney distances himself from the crowd. Bradman is ‘their great hero’ while he, Sidney is not part of the pack. The strength of his feelings suggests a personal identification with Bradman. The public may not have betrayed Sidney, but he is painfully aware in 1965 of the fickleness of the critics.

Although the narrator champions Sidney as an Australian artist, she is disdainful of Australia as a place that could either produce or appreciate art. In Australia, she generalises, ‘art was becoming a civic virtue but by no means an appetite’ (p.10) After a visit to The New South Wales Art Gallery she realises ‘how much Australians suffer from both a lack of heritage and a lack of the art of other countries.’ (p.11) For both the Nolans this ‘lack of heritage’ and the physical and cultural isolation from European and American artistic centres is crippling.

As an artist working within a European tradition, Sidney went to Europe in 1950 to claim a heritage. The quest was driven by a need to alleviate these feelings of isolation but also by something more fundamental. Sidney explains to his wife that the experience of travelling to Europe is necessary for Australians who have Europe in their blood: ‘in whatever way one is European born one's experience is completed by going to Europe.’ (p. 18) For the Nolans the relationship between the land and the people it produces runs deep. Driving through the countryside around Canberra, Reed Nolan returns to the sense of alienation and discord evoked in Outback where people are cut off from their cultural roots: ‘In this setting an occasional house was just dumped down, there was no compromise, no attempt to adapt to geography. The people living here have been suburban foreigners, still unbelonging, their traditions elsewhere’. (p.15)

A straining to belong to a European tradition is strongly felt in the opening pages as the narrator draws awkwardly upon European painters. In the morning light the Harbour is a ‘grey and beige Turner’. (p. 9) It is inconceivable that Sydney Harbour could remind anyone of Turner, however grey the day and however famous the English painter was for capturing
the light. Arthur Streeton would seem a far more appropriate choice. The narrator continues her imposition of European painters onto the Australian landscape when she describes the Harbour in the afternoon: 'it was all very tonal, a tonal Rousseau.' (p.12)

There had been a time when Reed Nolan did refer in her writing to Australian painters. In Outback, although Drysdale is not actually named, her images of outback Australian townships bring to mind his work. In One Traveller's Africa, the references to European painters make sense. Sidney's modernist quest to Africa necessitates their inclusion. In the intervening years between the writing of Outback in 1949 and the publication of A Sight of China in 1969, the Nolans had settled permanently in England. The reference to Turner in A Sight of China is gratuitous and clumsy, revealing more about a shift in her imagined readership than conveying any real sense of Australia. Unconsciously, perhaps, these references to European painters register the desire for a new wave of colonialism. The Harbour is, in a sense, once again mapped and claimed as European.

The narrator's sweeping generalisation about The New South Wales Art Gallery, that it lacks both 'a heritage' and 'art from other countries', seems to imply that Sidney was unique as an Australian painter. It is clear that Reed Nolan was writing for a British reading public who would not necessarily have heard of many Australian painters and who perhaps were all-to-ready to believe that Australia had no 'heritage.' In her implied readership and her deference towards the imperial centre, Reed Nolan reveals the insecurities she still feels as a postcolonial Australian, insecurities only intensified by years of expatriatism.

In Flaws in the Glass, Patrick White maintained that although Sidney developed the stance of homesickness for Australia and Reed Nolan professed disgust, it was she who had the closer attachment to their home land:

Cynthia professed to hate Australia, but like most expatriates never escaped. Sid claimed to love Australia and returns here for brief spells. His attachment is material as well as spiritual. As I see it, he needs a mother more than a wife and Australia is the great maternal bub upon which he sucks.\(^{11}\)

White, however, was determined to think well of Reed Nolan. Sharing, as he did, her patrician distaste for vulgarity, he was able to reconcile her attachment with her revulsion. In Reed Nolan's writing, however, she makes no attempt to disguise her hostility. After asking whether 'Australia was just a damned country illuminated by a very beautiful light?'(p.10), she proceeds to feed and amplify the imagery of hell. Sydney is seen as the damned city: her personal idea of hell. Suggestively, the city is ringed by fire:

\(^{11}\) Flaws in the Glass, op. cit., p. 237.
For weeks bushfires had been destroying the countryside. Throughout New South Wales great areas of land were blackened, like burned paper with high moving edges of red flames. The inhabitants of the city of Sydney watched their precious gardens shrivel, beer-drinking records were broken, those who could get away with unorthodox behaviour wore shorts and sun suits to work. On Saturdays and Sundays families flocked to the thundering surf beaches or sat and panted on their verandas. (p.12)

As in Outback, the extremes of climate and environment are reflected in the hedonism of the people. Yet what could almost be an affectionate portrait of a people is soured by the disgust she cannot contain: ‘the stench of the mutton fat used in every kitchen was an abomination’ (p.13). There is a punitive edge to these scenes of Sydney. Here, in the imagery of the flames encircling the city, there is an echo of Dante’s Inferno.12

Images of heaven and hell are later suggested when the narrator writes of the stripped and desolate landscape around Canberra where ‘the light was burning glass, the air sharp, the parrots angels, the earth-rubble spread thin under a great arching vault.’ (p.14) In this confusion of imagery, the brilliantly coloured parrots are ‘angels’, while the landscape they inhabit is a wasteland, a desolate place of ‘earth rubble’.

Although the title of A Sight of China seems to focus on China, the book itself is actually structured around a series of journeys through Australia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, until China is finally reached. While Australia is imagined as hell, China is imagined as an ideal state: a Paradise. The intermediary sections in Afghanistan and Pakistan operate as a Purgatory, as it is by passing through these countries that Paradise is reached. The Dantean overtones to the journey are again a reflection of the crisis of confidence that Sidney was experiencing at this time, a crisis of creative ascent and fall.

If Dante is an implied presence in the text, Milton is a direct reference. In China, the Christian concept of the Fall is directly referred to when the narrator ponders whether China might yet become ‘One More Paradise Lost’ (p.160) The reference to Milton registers the text’s concern with artistic ascension and fall, but it also holds another meaning. The book is set in 1965, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, yet it was published after the State crackdown had taken place in 1966. This is the moral failure that Reed Nolan alludes to through her reference to Milton.

The town of Thatta in Pakistan is a powerful image against which the social progress of China and its ultimate disappointments will be measured. However bland Chinese culture might appear, Thatta represents the poverty the Chinese have struggled to overcome. Before the narrator describes the degradation of Thatta she underlines the significance of the place:

12 Nolan started work on the painting Inferno, shortly after he returned from China. See Adams, op.cit., p. 185.
'On the whole my memory of the places we visited during these days is one overall blur of merciless grey heat and dust. But Thatta remains a wound never quite healed, whose presence one becomes accustomed to until some blow on the same place opens it again.' (p.32) Thatta was a personal assault and its memory remains as raw as a 'wound never quite healed.' Yet even though Thatta was so traumatic that its very memory causes her to re-live the experience, there is something detached about her description:

A yard away a small boy in a short begrimed shift squatted to shit. The few women were humps of the usual, identical, dusty, veiled black; limply clutching fly-bitten babies they scuffled by. The blank eyes of many hollow-cheeked emaciated men in worn shorts, tattered shirts or scrappy dhotis, were fixed to the strangers. And soon not only the crawling legless, the blind, the snot noses in the immediate vicinity were beside us, displaying themselves, begging, plucking at our clothes and hands, but others could be seen emerging from lanes and alleys, making their way in our direction. Small children had run back to some filthy corner to fetch other horrors. They now re-appeared, pulling a vacant-eyed, stump-handed brother or a tubercular uncle who looked unseeing from milky cataracts. It seemed that every member of the town's 13000 population was diseased and destitute. (p.33)

The narrator is back within her personal 'horror' of One Traveller's Africa. As in the African book, she conveys both the shock of the scene and her need to distance herself from it by reducing its human figures to ghouls. Her description inhibits empathy with the people. It is fear that is located within the image as the Nolans are encircled and besieged by 'the vacant eyes', fear of lives that are impossible to imagine and, now, shocking to confront. This time, Sidney is not concealed behind the camera lens, but, like his wife, exposed to the besiegement of the 'diseased and the destitute.'

Through the reaction of Hugh, their travelling companion, China is positioned as a utopian Paradise:

I thought of the desperate faces in the bazaar and asked Sidney where the art was going to come from, the art that was for them? But it was Hugh who replied.

'Don't worry about life in Thatta, the people're used to it. It's always been like this and always will be.' Such sentiments, often uttered by well-meaning men and women, wake me in the night. Perhaps one of the reasons why the students enrolled in Peking universities were sent out into the country to work with the poorest peasants was so they would never talk like this. (p. 34)

For Hugh, the alterity of the East absolves him of moral responsibility. His belief that the people have always lived in such squalor makes it acceptable. And the narrator's descriptions
of poverty, however driven she is to show its debasing effect, contributes to the process of disassociation. In retreat from lives that she cannot imagine, she constructs a fantasy of the utopian destination to which they are journeying.

It is not only poverty that is seen to be in contrast to an imagined China, but also the treatment of women. Throughout the sections on Pakistan and Afghanistan the narrator observes a culture that keeps its women hidden. In Thatta, escaping from the ‘horrors’, a fleeting impression is glimpsed of female lives lived behind closed doors: ‘I hurried away, dodging through the crowd, then back up the rise past houses behind whose closed shutters one could hear the movements of shut-in women.’ (p. 33)

In tracing the evolution of the travel writing from Outback to Open Negative, it has become apparent that the narrator increasingly projects onto the landscapes and peoples seen on her travels the discontents of the marriage. A Sight of China appears to be a less personal book. Certainly it lacks the disconcerting asides and interior monologues of the previous two travel books. In the fourth travel book, however, her personal revelations of inner frustration within the marriage have simply been recast into an exploration of more general female oppression. The image of the ‘shut-in women’ is evocative of the implied imprisonment of Eastern women, but also, and more generally, of all women’s entrapment in the domestic sphere. The image conveys something of the narrator’s own state of psychological entrapment in Open Negative. In using images drawn from Eastern custom to imply a universal female subjugation, Reed Nolan might be accused of insensitivity and cultural appropriation.

As the Nolans travel through the Muslim countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan, women are markedly absent and when they do appear in public, significantly, their mouths are concealed. In Open Negative the lost voice signifies the narrator’s disintegration. Yet A Sight of China also registers a glimmer of rebellion in these ‘shut in’ and veiled women. In the travel office in Karachi two women are observed: ‘One elegant young woman wore a chic brown purdah-robe and dark glasses; her face was not covered but she wore a piece of the robe over her mouth. Another in a cheap black habit had thrown back the veil.’ (p.36) The image is one of subversiveness. Yet her impression of these women is drawn from a brief and superficial encounter. The woman’s veil may be pushed back but it is the narrator who selects the defiant word ‘thrown’. The narrator imposes upon the women her own desires. Again, when she falls into conversation with one of the women she does not let her speak, rather she describes the woman’s ‘tone’: ‘Behind the tone of resignation one sensed frustration and resentment that would either be beaten out of her or would one day erupt into total rebellion.’ (p.37) The woman does not express ‘frustration’, ‘resentment’ or ‘rebellion’, rather the narrator ‘senses’ ‘rebellion’ which she hears ‘behind the tone of resignation’.

Later a woman is watched in a park:
Opposite the Kabul Museum in a public garden rioting with roses, petunias, stocks and daisies, a young woman who was by some extraordinary foresight dressed in a fashion which was about to emerge in Paris, was holding a small boy by the hand and walking slowly between the flower beds. Beneath a brown burka that she had allowed to fall open she wore a flowered yellow dress that ended six inches above her knees, long yellow stockings and white flat-heeled shoes. (p 46)

The scene displays what James Duncan has called 'the shock of the familiar', the process, he argues, by which Victorian travellers in the Orient 'were simultaneously shocked by the familiarity of the place, and by its alterity.' The garden is full of European plants and the woman is both an image of East and West, an image of hybridity, the promise, or threat, of the future. The brightly coloured Western dress is worn beneath the Eastern robe. However, the woman is not seen as an imitator of the west, but rather as a prophecy of future trends. She wears 'a fashion about to emerge in Paris.' The Nolans are travelling the hippy trail. In 1965 the Western flirtation with all things Eastern was in full swing. Here too, is the recurrent trope of an inner self, hidden from the world, that is an insistent presence through the novels to the travel books. Like the girl in the travel agency who hid her rebellion beneath a facade of resignation, the girl in the park reveals a rebellious inner life. Beneath the constraints of the robe is the brilliant, flamboyant dress.

In glimpsing these vigorous inner lives beneath facades of 'resignation' and conformity, the text underlines the ferment of the coming revolution. While the female is shown to be engaged in a secret life, the narrator is at pains to point out that men bury her within it. In Pakistan the Nolans dine with the Macgregors, and their hostess tells them the story of their driver's marriage:

'Well he married a girl of thirteen and almost immediately she conceived. After a while everyone knew the baby was dead inside her but he refused to allow her to see a doctor, for another man looking at his wife is to dishonour him. The poor girl had the most frightful time of it and it was a wonder she didn't die too. Anyway, after it was all over she didn't have anything more to do with her husband so he took her to a priest to have the 'evil spirits' cast out of her. She was led into a small back room and beaten - she really must be exceptionally strong - until she was unconscious. The husband told Angus with a wink, 'She's much better now.' ' (p.49)

14 Ibid., p. 157.
The story realises the narrator’s fears for the defiant young girl at the travel agency. The husband has beaten her into submission. The detail of the girl’s strength, however, creates a picture of her resistance. The husband might finally have overcome her but she resisted her fate. A similar story is told at another party:

One of our hostesses, a young woman still relatively new to the country, confided in me. ‘I keep getting sort of the creeps when I think of the little room with the locked door. It’s at the top of the house and the cook keeps his wife there. She’s never allowed out except for an hour on Sundays when she goes heavily veiled, to the mosque. I suppose I’ll forget about her in time.’ (p. 62)

There are shades of Jane Eyre and ‘the mad woman in the attic’ here. The abused woman is a secret, shameful thing, hidden away in the attic, someone the young woman doesn’t think to rescue, but, indeed, about whom she hopes she will forget about ‘in time’. There are parallels between the hostess and the cook’s wife. The young woman’s own state of powerlessness is communicated through the horror she feels and her inability to do anything about it. This confidence is itself a secret to be whispered about among women, rather than openly discussed. The fate of the cook’s wife might be imagined in Gothic terms: she gets ‘the creeps’, yet the subject of her confidence is nonetheless real. In talking about her at all, there is, perhaps, the glimmer of hope that in fact she won’t ‘forget about her in time.’

China is fixed in the narrator’s imagination as the hope of liberation from the oppression of both gender and class. The reality proves more complex. A Sight of China is full of stories of female emancipation: Chinese women speeding by on racing bikes; a young female translator who wears the braids because she wants to, rather than to signpost her unmarried status. The narrator is told authoritatively by a Chinese diplomat that there is no difference between men and women. If China seems to have achieved the feminist revolution, there are also hints of a less ideal future to come. As a European diplomat tells the Nolans: ‘Lately I feel a great tension in the air, I don’t know why…perhaps it’s imagination.” (p. 89)

The contrast between China and Thatta is again strongly suggested:

It is difficult to convey the impact of a first sight of China, of the cleanliness, not only of the streets and the parks, but of the side alleys, neat, clean crowds of people. And of the absence of beggars, muffled, faceless women, filth, starvation, disease and signs of corruption which are inescapable in many of the adjacent countries. Moreover one has an overwhelming impression of conviction and purpose. (p. 75)
It is a struggle to describe China. Her first impression is through the ‘absence’ of the shocking conditions they had recently seen in Pakistan and Afghanistan. China itself might be incomprehensible, beyond an overwhelming impression of conviction and purpose, but its meaning is to be found through the ‘absence’ of horror and through a profound understanding of what China had been like before the 1949 Revolution.

In 1965, memories of life before the Revolution remain clear to the diplomat they meet in Peking:

'I can only say the change since liberation is incredible. Before then one could live a sheltered luxurious, extremely enjoyable life - if one shut one's eyes to the general corruption, depravity and misery. You can't imagine the beggars. I couldn't even wind down the window of my car without a dozen hands being thrust inside, trying to grab. Bodies lay rotting in the gutters, it used to be a joke that they were only shifted by people with grudges, to each other's doorways - you always knew who was the most unpopular in the street. Now everyone has enough to eat, there's work for all, there are no beggars.' (p. 84)

The similarities between the Thatta they have just observed and China before the Revolution are deliberately underlined. The diplomat's besiegement by disembodied hands is reminiscent of the narrator's earlier besiegement in Thatta. It is only by the 'absence' of past miseries that present-day China can be described and understood. There is a persistent sense of unreality registered in Reed Nolan's view of China; the sense that they have stumbled into a dream is reflected in the descriptions of the enigmatic landscape. Flying from Shanghai to Peking she writes: 'There was a lack of clarity as if one was looking through a blue motoring veil such as our mothers' wore' (p. 72) Later: 'The mountains, tier behind tier, each a fainter echo of the one in front, were floating in the mid-afternoon heat haze.' (p.79) When the Nolans leave China: 'Through a Madonna-blue sky, blue ranges receded until, far away, they blurred off into suggestions, hints rather than allegations.' (p.163) The inability to substantiate the dream they see to be China is continuously underscored. A conversation that takes place between the Nolans reverts to mythology in order to express her lack of conviction about the reality seen:

'Seeing the success of the immense campaigns to overcome famine, flooding, illiteracy, realising what's been achieved in this country, observing the young people - couldn't we be witnessing a sort of Golden Age? Couldn't it be possible that the Chinese will make their fairy tale come true?'

'You're the victim of the desire for a state of perfection. A Golden Age is something built into an individual. Perhaps a leftover from some mysterious Paradise, or as Levi-Strauss says, a pictured dream. And I tell you, you bloody won't find it anywhere but in art.' (p. 143)
Her appeal to fairy tales answers her question, even without the admonishment from Sidney. This rather stagey exchange between the Nolans, not untypical of the style of their conversations throughout the travel writing, is perhaps also the product of the revision of her view of China. If the China that the text imagines is unreal, its unreality may be partially shaped by her resistance to acknowledging a number of factors. Not only was the ‘sight’ of China glimpsed on this brief journey by its very nature superficial, but also, behind the idealised image presented to foreign visitors, oppressions went on unseen, other versions of her own ‘shut-in women’. The complete abandonment of Marxist ideology in the reworked *Lucky Alphonse*! seems to suggest that by 1970 her disillusionment with communism was complete.

The idealisation of China is also set against the living relics of pre-revolutionary China:

Nearby I noticed a tall woman in a long, very faded blue coat whose hem brushed the ground. Her thin hair was arranged in a flat bun on top of her head, six-inch black cloth shoes fitted feet deformed from binding. There was a slightly sceptical expression on her sad, intelligent face. Surrounded by people dressed in trousers, skirts and shorts, and with short braids, she stood out, although obviously trying not to be noticed as she tottered among these freely moving peasants. Surely she had once lived here and now returned, as shadows and spirits were believed to return from Hades? I caught her watching us. Was it my imagination that she longed for a breath from the outside world? Next time I looked she had disappeared. But in another hall, among cases of gold objects, we saw her again. She was a ghost from another era and well aware, as she retreated, with pale dignity, on her foot stumps, that she did not belong in this one. When she turned away we saw a long, carefully mended tear, like a scar across her shoulders. (p. 83)

Contemporary China is captured in the image of the ‘free moving peasants’, while the past imagined in the form of the old woman, hobbling ‘on her foot stumps’, the effects of the pre-Revolutionary custom of foot binding. Yet the ‘ghost’ is an enigmatic figure, and the expression that the narrator sees on her ‘sad, intelligent face’ is ‘slightly sceptical’. In this image of the woman as a ghost from a past age, who neither belongs to, nor likes, the modern world, there is an echo of the narrator herself at the end of *One Traveller’s Africa*. In the earlier book she could not comprehend the ‘Space Age’ and feels as if she is looking at a future in which she does not exist. As she wonders ‘was it my imagination’, the old woman realises her own fears about herself. The identification between narrator and the Chinese woman is, in autobiographical terms, a central realisation. Cultural difference is shocking, but so too, is generational difference.
In China the narrator is not alone in feeling alienated from the modern world. Sidney, too, is at a loss to comprehend the world through which he travels. Behind Sidney’s confusion about China, and his inability to be creatively inspired by it, is the shadow of the critics:

‘The Chinese have halted poverty, they’re living in a period of collective virtue. You just walk around the town and you get it. But to explain the identity of what is happening you’d need to observe it for years; it’ll go on unfolding, perhaps for decades, before it brings a statement. A writer might find interest in living here during this period, just describe what is going on, but I tell you there’s no art forms for painters.’ (p. 92)

On one level Sidney’s hostility is best understood as a psychological crisis, a reaction to his changing status and his fear of the future. For Sidney, China is an intensely self-confronting experience as he finds himself in a country that he cannot relate to and which cannot relate to him. At one point he is keen to visit parts of China for which they have no permit:

When asked to state the reasons why he wanted to see various areas of China he would only write the one word ‘painting’. When asked ‘who do you paint for?’ He replied, blushing with anger, ‘For me.’ I considered the busy man who dealt with us had been longsuffering and polite to an exceptional degree. But Sidney remained wrapped in his fury. (p. 86)

Sidney’s argument with the bureaucracy exposes the extremes of his ideological differences with communism. Art for Sidney serves no moral or political purpose and is the supreme expression of the individual. Yet his attitude to China does not simply express his conflict with a political system, it also expresses his existential crisis.

Intimations of this crisis are evident upon their arrival in China: ‘If we had imagined that there would be anyone in the least interested in our arrival it was soon obvious that here, as in other great twentieth century airports, one was left to one’s own devices.’ (p.72) The narrator continues: ‘No-one paid attention to us. Nervous again, and rather shamefaced we finally got a clerk to understand us that we would like an interpreter.’(p.72) While she describes the overwhelming experience of arriving in a country and not being able to speak the language, there are other factors at work here.

Throughout the section in China there is a growing sense of Sidney’s lack of consequence. After a few days in Peking, the narrator observes: ‘Sidney became increasingly silent during those first days in Peking. I think he was miserable, as unaccompanied, unregarded, we wandered in the streets, went sightseeing, or stood observing the children in the playground.’ (p. 89) While in part this growing sense of anonymity can be accounted for
through their experience of being in an alien culture, it seems also to reflect a crisis of self-confidence caused by changing critical reaction to Nolan’s work.

It is soon made clear that his plight is not the common experience of other European artists visiting China. A Swiss photographer they meet warns them: ‘And once you’ve been here you must learn to say ‘No’ when they want you to go to too many carpet or bicycle factories.” “We haven’t been asked to go anywhere.” Sidney was slightly aggrieved.’ (p.99) Not being the centre of attention is personally shocking but its significance extends beyond the personal. In discussion with a Chinese academic, Mr Lieu, the universal significance of Picasso’s painting, Guernica, is raised:

‘Guernica is as you say a great painting,’ agreed Mr Lieu, ‘but to a Chinese peasant it would mean absolutely nothing. Nor would they understand Sidney’s work.’ A smile took the sting out of his words. ‘At this time the artists must help the people, must rouse their feelings for harvest, or war, or learning. That is their job, that must be their contribution. Otherwise, as you say, one must wait for the forms this culture will produce. They are still to come. Yes the content is immense but the forms are yet inarticulate.’ (p. 102)

Sidney finds himself within a world where he is not only personally ignored, but his very usefulness, his purpose as a modernist artist in revealing universal truths, is called into question. While he can say defiantly to his wife that the only state of perfection is to be found in art, he is at sea in a country that cannot comprehend what he is attempting to do. The hermetically sealed, self-serving nature of Sidney's conception of art is, of course, deeply romantic, as well as ideologically opposed to the utilitarianism of communism. Later, in discussion with the narrator, Sidney admits to the depth of impact China has had upon him:

‘You’ve had quite a violent reaction to China.’

‘Naturally I feel violently when I find that my life as a painter is nullified. But I won’t be denied. I’ll come here, I tell you. I’ll paint here.’ (p. 111)

There are further factors influencing Sidney’s sense of diminishment. The narrator mentions the recent death of his father shortly before they leave for China. An awareness of his own mortality is no doubt an undercurrent in his reaction to China: “A revolution can have no art, only action. That’s what struck me the first day, why I had that reaction. That’s why one feels less than a matchstick.”’ (p.161) Later he again reflects: “You see that your own life’s work isn’t relevant in any way at all, that one isn’t part of this community nor wanted here. Worst of all, that one won’t live long enough to take part in it.” (p.161)
Sidney's realisation that he 'won't live long enough to take part in it' is a profound personal insight and an interesting echo of the narrator's own feelings at the end of One Traveller's Africa. Gone is the belief in the pantheon of great artists and universal truths so confidently espoused in One Traveller's Africa's study of the painter. In its place is recorded a far humbler recognition of a cultural relativism that would make both his paintings and those of other modernist artists such as Picasso irrelevant to the East. There is also a new regard for temporal relativism. At the end of the journey Sidney says of China: "It's as if one went into a cave at Lascaux when it was being painted. You'd see the beginning of something, but it wouldn't be for you." (p.164)

The idea that modernism, like any other artistic movement, was an expression of its cultural and historical moment, also informs Reed Nolan's final autobiographical novel A Bride for St Thomas. There are many reminders that the Sidney Nolan of A Sight of China is a recreation, indeed, at times, a fictional recreation, of the artist with whom his wife travelled through China. Although there is some concern and pity registered in the portrait of a man haunted by self-doubt and a sense of his own impermanence and the limited relevance of his work, it is impossible to escape the sense that there is as deeply-felt an element of critique in this work as there is in the depiction of the bullying, egotistical Sidney of Open Negative.

Flying home at the end of the journey, Sidney reflects on the experience of China: "A trip to China changes you. Something happens, a very quiet thing that's got to do with the future. It's a peculiar feeling," he said, "to have been where we've been and come back again - like a dream in which you drown and fly at the same time." (p.165) Again, China is referred to as a dream in which the impossible can happen. Bewilderment and confusion strain to be ordered and comprehended within the Christian paradox: in drowning he has died and in flight he has been resurrected. At the end of the journey the imagery reverts to the metaphorical Christian journey of spiritual redemption.

As its title suggests, Paradise and Yet also presents a Sidney who fails to be inspired. Overall Reed Nolan's final book is disappointing. Many of the images and concerns the Nolans encounter in the dying days of Australian colonial rule in Papua New Guinea are a repetition of issues that arose in One Traveller's Africa: poverty, the racist legacies of colonialism and the maltreatment of women. Yet this text is self-conscious in its exploration of repetition. Reflecting on why he has not been creatively inspired by New Guinea, Sidney draws attention to a more general sense of repetition amounting to cliché:

'New Guinea is a sort of paradise, all right,' he said. 'It's a primitive situation plus Turner, plus Gauguin, plus masks, ending up with Luna Park. I must think about the white man, white
as this antimacassar thing behind our heads, upside down, falling down the volcano...that gives me a little clue. Otherwise I don’t feel like painting, there are so many clichés.\(^{15}\)

There is a sense in which Sidney is experiencing the death of modernism. In its place is a string of post-modernist self-referencing ‘clichés’. There is a clue, in this awareness of creative immobilisation, as to why this was to be the last of the travel books, although not the last of the Nolans’ travels. As the narrator says herself at the end of the journey: ‘Suddenly I lost interest. Everything seemed to be an anti-climax.’ (p. 153)

On the journey back to Australia, the Nolans fly over Fraser Island. Sidney had visited the island on his Queensland journey of 1947 and had become fascinated by the story of Eliza Fraser. It was a story that would preoccupy him for many years of his painting life, in part as a bitter retort to the end of his affair with Sunday Reed. It was on Fraser Island that Sidney painted the Mrs Fraser painting which, according to the narrator, is ‘terrifying in its implications of intimacy without love.’ (p. 150) (See Appendix, image 4). She tells the story yet again as she had done in One Traveller’s Africa and in Open Negative. The narrator’s repeated retelling echoes Sidney’s own obsession with the story. Sidney had visited the island after leaving Melbourne in 1947 following the end of this affair with Sunday Reed. In revisiting Fraser Island, however, Sidney doesn’t return to the paradise of his youth but to a cheap and seedy tourist resort. The last chapter of Reed Nolan’s final travel book is emotionally oppressive in its atmosphere, charged by her sustained resentment and jealousy of her sister-in-law. Finally there is an ironic contraction in which Australia and the island seem to represent the essential emotional stasis that exists between the Nolans. Despite the distance of time, and the expansive possibilities of travel, the crisis that began their marriage still hangs between them unchanged.

On a whim, Sidney decides they are to visit Cairns and Green Island, other scenes from his 1947 journey. Interestingly enough, at the end of Paradise and Yet, amidst the litany of Turner, Gauguin, Matisse and Braque, Australian artists are finally mentioned. The hotel in Cairns has paintings for sale: ‘Drysdale’s figures standing on Nolan ground in front of Ray Crooke’s mountains.’ (p.154.)\(^{16}\) Sidney and his contemporaries have themselves become ‘clichés’.

The trip to Green Island among the tourists reflects the narrator’s growing mood of depression. The water is ‘dull toned, ugly’. (p.155) From the sordid lunch of ‘undercooked


\(^{16}\) This passage, among other passages in all the four books, was omitted in the abridged version of Paradise and Yet in Outback and Beyond: The Travels of Cynthia and Sidney Nolan, (Angus & Robertson, Pymble, 1994). The publishers note: ‘The focus has been on the vitality and beauty of descriptions of people and places, and the interaction between Cynthia and Sidney, while removing less significant details of the travels and historical material that no longer seems relevant or informative.’
fish' and 'tired lettuce' at the Island's hotel, while a 'juke box was playing desolately', to the walk in which 'the whole grey scene was sad, oppressive', the narrator's melancholic mood infects her impressions.

The tone that dominates the final pages reflects both Nolans' entrapment in their past. The final passages of *Paradise and Yet* return to what are clearly troubling issues that have never been resolved between the Nolans, and which are seen to be a persistent undercurrent of the travel writing. In *A Bride for St Thomas* Reed Nolan returns to her own formative past, and to the form of the autobiographical novel. Published in 1970, in the year that fell between a *Sight of China* and *Paradise and Yet*, her last novel would focus more single-mindedly on the funereal sadness that ends *Paradise and Yet*. 
CHAPTER FIVE: REWRITING THE NOVEL, 1970

A Bride for St Thomas

Brian Adams recorded how the poor reception of Lucky Alphonse! long preoccupied Reed Nolan:

Her ambitions as a writer were stronger than her husband realised for many years. She felt her wide experience of Europe before the war had led to a way of thinking she had never been able to explain back in Australia, and she was bitterly disappointed that her novel Lucky Alphonse!, based upon these experiences had not been better received.¹

Written in the first person, A Bride for St Thomas is more assertively an autobiographical novel than its predecessor. Gone is the ambiguous third person narrative through which Reed Nolan struggled to conceal her autobiography. Gone too, is the occasionally light-hearted tone that rescued the earlier novel from insular complaint and solipsistic perspective. As I shall demonstrate, Reed Nolan retains aspects of the earlier Freudian perspective, although the narrator, in retrospect, is no longer entirely persuaded by Freudian theory. But the Marxist perspective is entirely omitted.

The last novel concentrates on the three years from 1936 to 1939 in which the narrator, Mary, trains at St Thomas'. As in the travel writing, it is clearly a retrospective narrator in A Bride for St Thomas who tells the story. Her life at the time of writing becomes a shaping framework for the narrative of nursing in the 1930s. The dual time frame is apparent early in the novel, for example, as when she describes the nurses' wing: 'At the time of the 1939 - 45 war it suffered a direct hit, but although badly damaged, several floors were patched up and nurses still slept there until late in 1968, when it was demolished to make way for the rebuilding of a larger and more up-to-date hospital complex.' (p. 8) The sentence moves through three different time periods, the year the novel begins in 1936, the war years, and the late 1960s. As the novel was published in 1970 it is evident that Mary is telling her story at roughly the same time as Reed Nolan writes the novel.

This awareness of a contemporary perspective is reflected in the novel's omission of the American sections. In dropping these sections, Reed Nolan was able to give sharper focus

¹ Adams, op.cit., p. 160. As Reed Nolan was dead before Adams began his research for his biography on Nolan and he doesn't footnote his source, his knowledge of her feelings is questionable. Although he reports what Reed Nolan 'felt', her feelings are framed by Nolan's perspective and his failure to recognise his wife's literary ambition. Nolan's retrospective regret for his lack of insight and perhaps lack of interest is, however, an important admission. Essentially, this passage gives a measure of support to Reed Nolan's own record of stifled creativity.
to her narrative which ends on the eve of her departure from England. Perhaps she was also aware of the difficulties posed in a 1970s climate largely hostile to American imperialism, of explaining in any depth exactly what Mary means when she tells her reader that the United States was ‘at this time the Land of Hope.’ (p.198) The focus of her final novel was to be England in the 1930s and the English experiences of the expatriate Australian nurse Mary.

Perhaps most interesting at this point of Reed Nolan’s writing career, is the question of why she decided to rewrite *Lucky Alphonse!*. Adams claims that she felt that she had been unable to properly explain her English experiences. As I have suggested, the context in which Reed Nolan re-discovers her first autobiographical novel is an important key both to the process of rewriting and to the novel that subsequently emerged. Ironically, given that she would omit the American sections, it was when Reed Nolan was working on the *American Memoir* that she came to think of re-writing *Lucky Alphonse!*. She asked her editor, Caroline Hobhouse, to search for the book printed twenty years previously by the obscure and short-lived Australian publishing company Reed and Harris. Hobhouse was unable to find it, but as numerous passages in *A Bride for St Thomas* are identical to the first novel and others are only slightly changed, it is clear that Reed Nolan managed to find a copy of *Lucky Alphonse!* for herself.

In September, 1967, Alan Maclean, her publisher, wrote to Reed Nolan in Australia where she and Nolan were attending the retrospective exhibition of his work at the New South Wales Art Gallery: ‘I cannot believe you will have time or space to do much on *Lucky Alphonse!* but we will have a fiesta of work on both books when you get back.’ The two books that Maclean refers to are *A Sight of China* and *A Bride for St Thomas*.

In the rewriting of her first novel, the work that Reed Nolan produced was evidently shaped by the Chinese journey. In *A Sight of China* Sidney recognises the possibility that art may not outlive its historical moment of production. *A Bride for St Thomas* reflects this insight that the modernist moment has passed, and that she, too, had lived beyond her time. In rewriting *Lucky Alphonse!*, Reed Nolan inserts into the story of her younger years a considered response to visual modernism. Yet the narrator of *A Bride for St Thomas* is in many ways a continuation of the narrator of *Open Negative*. On a more immediate, personal note, the narrative of her last novel is shaped by an increasingly strong suicidal impulse. *A Bride for St

---


3 Many passages are only slightly modified. I do not intend to focus on the similarities of the two novels. Of more interest are the differences between them and the way in which the rewriting is shaped by a time frame contemporary with the retold story.

Thomas forms a bridge between Open Negative’s self-destructive interior journey and A Sight of China’s recognition of temporal relativism.

For Alphonse, nursing represents an escape from her marriage. Mary, in A Bride for St Thomas, has no failed marriage from which to flee. It is clear, though, that some unexplained crisis has led Mary to the point where: ‘A rest was acceptable, for I felt as aimlessly battered as a tin can that has been kicked around a vacant lot - but to start work again, that was a necessity.’ (p. 3) Although she claims that it is aimlessness which precedes her desire to work, the adjective implied in her description of herself as ‘a tin can kicked around a vacant lot’ is ‘abused’ rather than ‘aimless’. Later in the novel, Mary runs into Charles, a doctor friend from Australia, and their conversation tells the reader about Mary’s life prior to nursing:

He gave me a quick, keen look. ‘It was a surprise to run into you, Mary, though of course I’d heard you were nursing in America. I never liked that bastard you were with.’

‘You never met him.’

‘No but I heard about him. You got out of my class for a bit.’

‘You’re being rude.’

‘I mean to be.’

‘In the end it was so awful, Charles.’

‘Like the other times, you silly bitch. What d’ you expect?’ (p. 34)

While little is actually said, a great deal is implied about Mary’s emotional life: that she had been in a destructive relationship that was now over and that it had been one of a sequence of destructive relationships. Whereas Lucky Alphonse! progresses through the breakdown of Alphonse’s marriage, A Bride for St Thomas begins after Mary has already broken off a relationship. The husband, or the lover, is never known, but the emotional impact upon Mary is described. By adopting the first person, compressing the time frame, and telling the earlier story through conversation and remembered flash back, the impression is created of an emotional and interior psychological landscape from which Mary is escaping and which subliminally drives her.

The novel begins with Mary failing to recognise herself in the mirror:

I remember the moment, just as lunch was finished, when I looked up at a mirror hanging over the mantelpiece and saw three people.

The thin man with a pale, smooth face was Gerald Somerset, a thirty year-old obstetrician. Passing him a cup of coffee was a rather plump blond with a benign expression - that was his wife and my friend, Madge. The third figure, a girl with old bracken hair and smudged-in eyes - she was me. I only realised this when she straightened up and took her elbows off the table. (p. 1)
In psychoanalytical terms, the reflection in the mirror is emblematic. However, in failing to recognise herself Mary fails to enact the imaginary identification, in which Lacan believes, the subject claims an illusion of wholeness. What is revealed to Mary in the mirror is fragmentation and disunity. Although it is the young Mary who fails to recognise herself, the experience is also very similar to the older narrator's experience in Chicago in Open Negative when she 'searched the faces for the girl we had known.' It was on this American journey that the narrator first returns to 'another life' and uncovers memories of a younger self. Open Negative had charted a process of dissociation and fragmentation in which the narrator retreats from the external world, from her marriage to Sidney and into illness. In beginning her autobiographical novel with this failure to recognise herself in the mirror, Mary's psychic confusion (or illness) is displayed. The image also admits the inevitable chasm between the woman telling the story and the experience itself. The narrator is in some essential sense not the same woman as her younger self and the character in the story.

Having signalled the depth of her psychic crisis in her failure to recognise herself, Mary turns her wrath upon her body: 'how I wished that my face was not a confession, that my body did not speak through any number of clothes. That I had been born someone else' (p. 1). In Open Negative the body had been entrapped and entrapping. In A Bride for St Thomas it is treacherous: her face confesses what she wishes to conceal.

A Bride for St Thomas continues these sudden insights into a dark and emotional interior now familiar from the travel writing. The progression in Reed Nolan's style from the early novels is apparent. In Daddy Sowed A Wind! Hyacinth is all emotion: her feelings are vividly displayed and shown to dominate her vision. In A Bride for St Thomas emotions are guardedly revealed. Yet this shorthand description of Mary's emotional inner life is often more effective. Much later in the novel, in a state of 'semi-conscious exhaustion', Mary lies on her bed 'wishing there was a gas oven, taps turned on full beside my bed.' (p.131) The image is almost a surrealist painting, visualising her suicidal thoughts. In this mood of depression Mary gets up and again looks at herself in the mirror:

An affectionate friend called me a jolie laide. I was certainly never a beauty, but on that evening pretended my eyes were violet or velvety, my nose straight, my sallow skin ivory, my hair red-gold instead of red. Then I became preoccupied, practising a po-face. It was time everything I felt did not flash instantly on to the screen and betray me to the enemy. Surely the barbarian could learn to observe from behind a soft agreeing expression? (p. 131)

While Mary imagines that she has enemies, it is herself she cannot trust, the face that might 'betray her to the enemy'. Earlier she had described her face as 'a confession'; here she
construes her face again as a traitor. In this imagery of the traitorous face with 'a soft agreeing expression' and the dislocated interior self, is the entrapped narrator of Open Negative. Mary does not reveal what it is exactly that her face will betray but in the context of the suicidal depression that prefaces the passage it is obviously her deep depression.

In the second version of the novel, the theory of sublimation is once again continuously evoked: 'Working like this one thrives on abstinence and almost comes to believe in sublimation.' (p. 128) Later when she ceases to menstruate, her doctor friend, Charles diagnoses: "just overwork...lack of sexual stimulation." (p. 144) This allows an interpretation of malaise other than sublimation and makes for a more complex characterisation than is present in Alphonse. Reed Nolan is no longer simply telling her reader what to think.

As it was for Alphonse, nursing for Mary is an escape from the world of men and from the sexual self. Like Alphonse, Mary suffers an acute loss of sexual confidence over the course of the novel. In rewriting, Reed Nolan draws further upon the relationship between nuns and nursing:

For nine months I was in bed, alone, by eleven o'clock. I did not go out dancing or have a single drink. And, yes, the circles of misery grew further apart. I was sure they did.

How fortunate the nuns were in their relationship with the Lord, how satisfactory their intercourse with Him. Asleep in the arms of an individual Jesus Who was eternally faithful to each and every one. Then come let us adore Him on a diet lavishly sprinkled with saltpetre and a working day from 5.30 to 9.30 including two hours 'recreation' period. Maybe I had thought at the end of three years we would all be frigid and so saved endless trouble. I kill my body in order that it shall not kill me. (p.12)

In Lucky Alphonse! the experience of training at St Joseph's is seen as a nun-like celibacy, a retreat from sexuality, in which 'one's only lover was Jesus Christ.' A Bride for St Thomas builds on this view. Mary is named after the Virgin Mary and the book's title imagines her to be the Bride of a Saint. Significantly, Mary thinks that after three years training at St Joseph's she will be 'frigid' as a consequence of the sexual suppressants fed to the trainees, and therefore 'saved endless trouble.' If nursing is once again a retreat from sexuality, from the emotional landscape of failed love, then her italicised assertion "I kill my body in order that it shall not kill me." reveals again the conflict between the body and mind which had shaped Alphonse's story. Here, however, the self is seen as not simply engaged in sublimation, but actively seeking self-destruction. Although she questions the theory of sublimation, she draws continuously on the 'death instinct' in thoughts of self-murder.

A Bride for St Thomas is retrospectively more aware than Lucky Alphonse! of the importance of modernism and its expressions in art and music. Mary visits Paris with some
Australians, two painters, Rats Kevin and Joe Higgins, and two journalists only known as ‘the twins’. She spends her days in the Louvre, Musee d’Art Moderne, and the Musee d’Homme:

googing again and again to examine the Rodin sculpture, to dwell on the faces of Rimbaud, Verlaine and their companions in the big composite portraits in the Musee Du Jeu de Paume, to walk around the little galleries on the Left Bank, hunt down the Rousseaus, the Max Ernst, Picabia, Massons, Schwitters, the latest Picassos. (p. 90)

At night they go to a club where ‘a Cuban band, replacing Duke Ellington, played Jazz ‘ot with a compelling beat and great verve.’ (p. 90) The nightly excursions to the jazz club are seen as a natural extension of the daytime viewing of modernist art.

While the action of the novel (with the exception of two holidays in France) takes place in England, Australia is ever present through the world of expatriate Australians living in London. Many of the characters who appear in A Bride for St Thomas are thinly disguised portraits of Australian friends. Clarice Zander and Bill Dyson are recognisable in the novel as the characters Alma Dunn and Bill Savery. In Lucky Alphonse! the cameo of Basil Burdett is no doubt a tribute to a friend who died prematurely in the war. Alphonse goes out to dinner with an ‘Australian friend who had arrived over to collect pictures for an exhibition to be held in Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane, Australia.' In 1944, Burdett’s eminent status in Australian cultural life would have seemed assured. In A Bride for St Thomas this ‘Australian friend’ has become Olivier. His insertion in the much later work, so many years after his death and before the revival of interest in Australian modernism, might reflect Reed Nolan’s desire to record a near-forgotten past, before there was nobody left who remembered it.

The painter Sam Atyeo, her step-brother, the journalist Kenneth Von Bibra, and the art critic Clive Turnbull, form the basis for Joe Higgins, Rats Kevin and ‘the Twins’, the hard-drinking characters in A Bride for St Thomas. If failed love informs Mary’s flight into nursing, so too does her relationship with these bohemian, expatriate Australian men. Her changing relationship with these figures reflects her own evolution. Towards the end of the novel, when strong in her identity as nurse, Mary says of them: ‘No longer was I moved by chronic alcoholics and baby-men.’ (p. 174)

The painter Rats Kevin also reflects Reed Nolan’s repudiation of maculinist Australian bohemia. On the brink of war, Rats Kevin leaves England for America in the company of a wealthy older woman. After his departure the narrator is reminded of him when a fellow nurse, Bessie Twaites, tells her that, in advance of the German invasion, her family were burying their jewels in the garden:

---

5 Characters identified by Clarice Zander’s daughter, Jocelyn Plate.

6 Lucky Alphonse!, op. cit., p. 182.
But Rats Kevin had miscalculated and left the country too soon, for Bessie Twaites indiscreetly told us that her grandparents who possessed jewels and valuable objects d’art, had placed a selection in a tin trunk and buried it at the foot of the third apple tree of their orchard in Surrey. ‘All our friends are taking precautions,’ she said. (p. 191)

Mary snidely implies that Rats Kevin would have had no need to prostitute himself had he but realised how the panic of pre-war England would make thieving so easy. The contempt Mary feels for Rats Kevin may reflect Reed Nolan’s actual feelings for figures from her past, such as her sometime friend Sam Atyeo, though the character may also be more generally representative of the opportunistic artist. This view of the artist as opportunistic is also present in her study of Nolan in the travel writing, as in her blunt summation in Africa that Sidney ‘had taken what he needed.’

In the second nursing novel the protagonist is non-political. Mary, like Alphonse, is involved in the Nursing Association which will bring better conditions to the nurses. This time, however, her involvement is no longer imagined within a socialist movement. In A Bride for St Thomas, there is no better system imagined to alleviate the suffering and exploitation of the ‘Pinkies’. Yet the belief in egalitarianism is still strongly held by Mary, even though it is not politics that shape her plea for egalitarianism, but rather what is imagined to be her Australian identity. After she returns from convalescing, Mary, like Alphonse before her, is forced to thank the Matron:

during most of our training it was difficult not to feel as if one was still in the nursery. Perhaps that period of life is memorable to girls who loved nanny, bread-and-milk and being bathed, but Australians have no happy recollections of nursery days, having never seen either a nanny or a nursery. Moreover they have a strong suspicion that nursery practises are one of the ways authority has for putting itself across. (p. 146)

Alphonse objects to the ‘authorities’ because they represent a conservative hierarchy that excluded the working classes. Her position is informed by a Marxist perspective. In the re-written novel, Mary objects simply because she is an Australian. Mary’s view is made vaguely credible by the classic stereotype of the Australian who believes in a ‘fair go’. As I have noted, A Bride for St Thomas was written during the period when she was also working on A Sight of China. In the Chinese journey she had wanted to record the moment before Western intellectual disillusionment with communism became complete, even if the retrospective nature of the narrative inevitably allows some degree of disillusionment to intrude. In rewriting the novel, however, Reed Nolan removes from her protagonist any suggestion that she personally
supports communism, suggesting her need to distance herself from her earlier communist sympathies.

A Sight of China had also recorded the death of modernism. A conversation that takes place in the Chinese book between the Nolans and the Chinese academic attributes the death of modernism to cultural relativism. Picasso's painting Guernica is singled out as an example of a painting acclaimed within its own cultural and historical context, but which is meaningless outside of that context. A Bride for St Thomas expresses this view of modernism, that it is no longer innocently understood as an expression of universal truths but is a movement that needs to be explained and understood within its own relative, cultural context. The novel not only expresses the extraordinary impact of Picasso's painting, but the context of this impact. Mary is visited by an old friend, David Webster, who has just returned to London after having viewed Picasso's painting Guernica in Paris.7

Although Reed Nolan has evidently revised her position on communism, she does allow this friend to be a communist. He is described as wearing 'a red scarf, rumpled trousers made of some synthetic material, red socks and sandals.' (p. 121) Mary takes him into the unused drawing room. Webster reacts to her need to conceal him. "I know the English are very anti-Russian just now but I don't look like a Communist do I, Mary?" He smiled at the absurdity of the idea.' (p. 121) Whereas in the earlier novel, as she preached and lectured her readers, Alphonse's ideology had blinded her to the danger of being either a communist or a sympathiser, danger is sharply registered in the second novel. Mary is aware of the danger of being known to be communist or a sympathiser, and she is also careful to distance herself from it, to hide her friend from public view before listening to his description of the painting:

'You know when lightning strikes a tree you see the result of an invisible force? In Guernica the lightning has blasted the familiar human and animal shapes. Looking at it you live through those moments when Hitler's bombers swept over a little town crowded with peasants and animals - of course those bastards chose the weekly market day. It's a statement about the condition of the world, Mary. You have to weep it's so awful and so beautiful.' (p. 122)

There is something powerfully moving about Picasso's painting being described to Mary by a friend, rather than Mary seeing it with her own eyes. Her anticipation, "the painting, the painting", (p. 121) before he describes it underlines the emotional as well as cultural importance it held for people at the time. The painting emphasises that these were real people and animals dying under German gun fire. This point is made in Webster's speech as he moves freely between the painting and the actual bombing. This was a war that was in the process of

7 David Webster is based on Reed Nolan's friend Mark Bracegirdle, who briefly took over the shop after Reed left in 1935. For a brief biographical sketch of Bracegirdle see Letters of John Reed, op.cit., p.68
being waged not only when Picasso painted *Guernica*, but also when Webster describes it to Mary. In the late 1930s Webster’s view that the painting was a statement of ‘the condition of the world’ rang true.

That the Australian hears about the painting rather than sees it with her own eyes has, perhaps, another distinctive cultural meaning. Mary is only several hundred miles from the painting in Paris, yet she may as well be back in Australia reading reviews of it or hearing about it on the wireless. Although Mary is situated within the metropolis, as an Australian she retains a sense of the peripheral and second-hand colonial perspective.

Later, when she is about to depart from England for America (in the rewriting France is omitted altogether), *Guernica* is again mentioned:

There didn’t seem to be any paintings that mirrored the inevitable tragedy of the human situation. Could it be that for those living in a past age the martyrdom of St Sebastian was the ultimate - that every century had its own fashion in frightfulness? Only Goya’s *Horrors of War*, and by David’s account, *Guernica*, put down what was appropriate to our generation, what was menacing us all. (p. 178)

Each age has its own ‘fashion in frightfulness’ which is lost on the next generation. Although it is supposedly Mary who recognises the role of cultural and social context in the reception of art, it is clearly the retrospective narrator who, looking back on this period, recognises that without a shared context the paintings from her youth have lost their meaning. In a sense this is Reed Nolan’s response to the Chinese academic’s failure to understand *Guernica* and to Sidney’s recognition of the finite nature of his life and art in *A Sight of China*, of belonging not to some modernist pantheon in eternal dialogue, but to his generation, to his historical moment.

Like Sidney at the end of *A Sight of China*, the narrator of *A Bride for St Thomas* is aware of her own transience. In contrast with the evangelicalism of *Lucky Alphonse!* the rewritten novel is suffused by a powerful melancholy:

The Thames was running swiftly on a high tide. Knowing I would soon be leaving, never to see this river again, I shut my eyes, trying to memorise all its tones of light-reflecting brown, its long barges, insolent small tugs, floating seagulls, swans in stately flight; its sounds, and all the daily and seasonal changes in colour and in mood.

Disinclined to go to bed, I stood watching. And thinking in a disorderly way of what I had learned from the Lambthians; of America (at that time the Land of Hope); of how my feet ached; and that I was just starting to make friends. And trying to weigh eucalyptus trees and blue skies against Piero della Francescas’ loving *Nativity*. (p. 198)
This nostalgic yearning for the past, this overwhelming mood of loss is so different from the optimism of the imagined future in *Lucky Alphonse*. There is a strange, jarring error in the writing. Although the reader has been informed that it is America that Mary is travelling to, it is the very Australian ‘eucalyptus trees and blue skies’ that she holds in her mind and which weighs against the cultural history of Europe. In looking out at the Thames, Mary is struck by the certainty that she ‘will never see this river again’, and the need to capture its image in her imagination. Unlike the narrator, who does not contradict the young Mary’s conviction that she will never see the Thames again, Reed Nolan was to return to London permanently in 1952 and by 1960 had bought a house at Putney whose garden led down to the Thames. It is perhaps this view that Reed Nolan is actually describing. In a novel marked by the correspondence between author and narrator, it is interesting that at the end there should be this sudden divergence. Mary’s knowledge that she will never return seems to question the distinction between protagonist and narrator, between past and present:

The time for my going had been chosen for me. I opened the window. From the distance the faint reverberations of the metropolis haunted me like my girlhood, part of me yet remote, lost in the world and dream, in the irreparable notes of the song that sounds forever. (p.198)

While the narrator is still talking about herself in the past, she is moving away from that past into her present: ‘I opened the window. From the distance the faint reverberations of the metropolis haunted me like my girlhood, part of me yet remote, lost in the world and dream.’ There is something in the mood of the final lines which is not in keeping with the young Mary looking forward to her future. There is something absolute and final about the tone ‘the time of my going had been chosen for me’ which seems more appropriate to death than to travel. Although Reed Nolan’s suicide was not to be executed for another six years, these last melancholy passages of the novel suggest that her suicide was both well-planned and long-dwelt upon.
CONCLUSION: LONDON, 1976

On 23 November 1976, Reed Nolan committed suicide. According to Brian Adams, her death came as a terrible shock. There was nothing in her behaviour that day that betrayed what she had been planning for months. She had been intending to write a book about her mother and was engrossed in research at Somerset House, the London archive of births, deaths and marriages. That morning the Nolans travelled from their house in Putney into central London there to separate for the day with the plan of meeting later at Fortnum and Masons. She did not arrive. When he got home Nolan found a telegram waiting for him: ‘Off to the Orkneys in small stages love Cynthia.’ Imagining she had dashed off after a lead on her mother, whose family came from the Orkney Islands, Nolan assumed she would ring him when she could. The following morning the police arrived and he learned that Reed Nolan had booked into the Regent Palace Hotel where she had taken an overdose of barbiturates. As the hotel was on the edge of Soho, the red light district, it had a rule that women were not allowed to book in alone. Reed Nolan was with a man when she booked into the Regent Palace but that man’s identity has never been disclosed.¹

It is clear that the suicide was not a spontaneous decision. The Nolans’ move to a recently leased flat in Westminster provided her with an acceptable excuse for sorting through her papers. Legal complications, however, followed her death. A family trust had been set up years before of which she was the director. Under her will, Jinx was the sole beneficiary. Adams is very unclear about the result of Nolan’s legal challenge to the will:

There was a meeting with the lawyers representing Cynthia’s interests and they came to a general agreement that as the will was unconventional, and, in its present form, would attract considerable death duties, an obvious solution was to split the estate, allowing Nolan possession of half the property with a consequent large reduction in death duties. The two trustees, one of whom had drawn up the original document and was a close friend of Cynthia, agreed this would be the best course of action, but for a reason that was not explained it was never carried out. The full death duties were paid rather than sharing the assets. This left Nolan with few of his personal possessions.²

Rumours proliferated that the suicide was Reed Nolan’s revenge. It has been said that her suicide was her sixtieth birthday present to Nolan, though his sixtieth birthday did not occur until the following April, some five months after her death. The will may have been seen as

¹ Adams, op.cit., p. 228.
² Ibid., p. 231.
an attack upon Nolan, but it was also her way of securing her daughter's future. Certainly, to close friends, she expressed anxiety about what would happen to Jinx if she died. She would, no doubt, have calculated that if Nolan married again, a stepmother would legally complicate Jinx's claim upon his property. She herself was the daughter of a man who had remarried in haste after the death of her mother. There are, however, details that contradict the view that her death was meant as an attack upon Nolan. There is in fact demonstrable evidence to support the view that she was actually very concerned about the effect her death would have upon him.

While the move from Putney operated as a cover under which Reed Nolan could dispose of papers and make legal alterations without raising suspicion, the move would have made her death psychologically easier for Nolan. Their past together in the Putney house was in the process of being dismantled. Terry Miles, who had worked on Nolan's exhibitions at the Marlborough Fine Art Gallery and had set up his own business working for artists, was helping pack up the house in the months before Reed Nolan's death. Miles had always got on well with both the Nolans. She had been extremely upset to learn that in November he had been engaged to work on a Francis Bacon exhibition in New York. Four days after he arrived in New York, Miles received a phone call telling him of Reed Nolan's death. It seems unlikely that if she intended her suicide as revenge she should have cared who would be there in London to be with Nolan after her death.

In the months leading up to her suicide, Reed Nolan put her affairs in order. She arranged to deposit her papers with the Australian National Library in Canberra placing upon them a forty-five-year embargo. In placing the embargo she made certain that her papers would be preserved until such time as no living person, most significantly her daughter, could be publicly affected by what they contain. It is believed that she asked Elizabeth Harrower to write her biography, as Harrower was a friend and confidante but also someone she admired as a writer. Harrower is said to have refused.

Twenty-six years after her death, it might be argued that Reed Nolan's decision to place this embargo upon her papers was mistaken. In asking Harrower to write her biography, she was stating that her story needed to be told. But by imposing an embargo without securing a biographer, she reveals the same ambiguous mixture of assertion and abnegation that marks the travel writing.

The artist Elwyn Lynn, and his wife, Lily Lynn, saw Reed Nolan on her last trip to Australia. The Lynns had first met the Nolans in the early 1960s when Elwyn Lynn had been commissioned to write a book on Sidney. Never a demonstrative person, Reed Nolan hugged them before she left. Several days before she died, Reed Nolan rang the Lynns from London.

---

1 Interview with Elwyn and Lily Lynn op.cit.
2 Interview with Terry Miles by Jane Grant, 12 November 1997.
It was an anxious phone call, full of inconsequential worries about their diet. Adams reports that a letter to her doctor was found in Reed Nolan's hotel room. No mention is made of the three letters she sent to the Lynns, Patrick White and Maie Casey, which were received after her death.

The move from Putney gave Reed Nolan an excuse for divesting herself of her personal papers and giving away possessions to people she cared for. Virginia Edwards visited Reed Nolan several days before her death. Edwards had first met her through Pat and Cedric Flower in the early 1950s. Several years later Reed Nolan asked Edwards to store some boxes, which she did not collect for ten years. In was not until the 1960s that the two of them became friends, and it was a friendship which gives insight into Reed Nolan's guarded nature. Reed Nolan kept Edwards separate from her social world and in doing so secured a friend in whom she could trust and confide. Several days before she died, Edwards visited her in Putney. She thought Reed Nolan was acting strangely, continuously pointing out things in the garden and in the house and wanting to give her presents. It was clear to her that Reed Nolan was deeply depressed.

Adams has claimed that Nolan 'suspected that that his wife was in the process, consciously or unconsciously, of leaving him.' In a sense, of course, and with great finality, she did leave. The biography of Nolan suggests that their relationship was becoming very difficult, although Adams does not go into the details. He states that it was only after her death that Nolan started drinking again. Other people have said that he was drinking before Reed Nolan's death. It is evident from the ultimatum she delivered in the late 1950s that she found his drinking intolerable. There were also rumours that he was having an affair. In the mid 1970s Reed Nolan had expressed her belief that this was the case. Perhaps she reasoned that by committing suicide she would spare herself the pain of suffering yet another rejection.

Suicide was not a sudden solution. Her suicidal fantasies are documented in letters she wrote to John and Sunday Reed in the 1930s. Her published work also reveals her often self-punitive, even masochistic, self-constructions. Yet clearly there were issues between the Nolans that came to a head in the 1970s and dredged up pain from the past, which are relevant to understanding the emotional landscape in which she took her life.

Lord Clark claimed that Nolan's paintings were always autobiographical, but that from the early 1970s they become increasingly revealing of personal pain and anxiety. In 1970 Nolan's giant flower mural *Paradise Gardens* was exhibited at the National Gallery of

---

5 Interview with Elwyn Lynn, op.cit.
7 Interview with Virginia Edwards by Jane Grant, 2 November, 1996.
9 Virginia Edwards told me that Reed Nolan believed Nolan was having an affair, op.cit.
Victoria. According to Brian Adams, a multitude of flowers 'combined in this virtuoso piece to present a botanical front which masked a deeply-felt personal statement' about Nolan himself and the nature of creativity.\textsuperscript{11} In 1971 Nolan's friend Lord McAlpine published a volume of verse to accompany the paintings. The poems included some bitter attacks upon John and Sunday Reed, including these lines from the poem 'Love Manqué':

\textsf{Steeled by a noon whisky\
I entered her old plumbing}\textsuperscript{12}

The poems document Nolan's sustained, or resurrected, bitterness towards the Reeds in the early 1970s. Virginia Edwards, who was present at the launch, felt that these lines were directed at Reed Nolan, who was now looking frail and extremely thin. Edwards overheard a journalist spitefully telling Reed Nolan that she was looking very old.\textsuperscript{13} No doubt Virginia Edwards, like many other people present who did not know the details of Nolan's personal history, interpreted these lines as being about Reed Nolan. The painful irony would not have been lost upon Reed Nolan. In her youth she had felt herself a pale imitation of Sunday Reed. As the later travel writing documents, Sunday Reed had continued to haunt her. On one level the travel writing reveals Reed Nolan's need to prove that she was more than the muse, to prove that there was a genuine creative collaboration between herself and her husband that extended beyond the passive 'other' of the muse.

Friends have said that Reed Nolan's age was the significant factor in her suicide. It is certainly not uncommon for people to kill themselves because they are growing old, particularly when their life has become circumscribed by pain. She was in a great deal of pain from her back. By the mid-1970s she was no longer able to go to the opera or to concerts because pain made sitting for long periods unbearable. Elwyn Lynn remembered her lying flat on the ground throughout an entire performance.\textsuperscript{14} The fear that her tuberculosis would recur was also apparently another source of anxiety.\textsuperscript{15}

Nolan's mental state in the early-to-mid 1970s provides an insight into the emotional complexity of the last years of Reed Nolan's life. Paintings, as well as the poems from these years, reveal that he was dwelling on past pain and that his relationship with Reed Nolan was deeply troubled. In 1975, Nolan exhibited \textit{Notes for Oedipus}, a series of twenty-five paintings. (Appendix, images 8a and 8b). Adams records how the paintings only attracted one

\textsuperscript{11} Adam, op.cit., p. 205.
\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Virginia Edwards, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{14} Interview with Elwyn and Lily Lynn, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Virginia Edwards, op. cit.
buyer who subsequently returned his purchase. Adams also reports how shocked Lord Clark was by the paintings, believing that Nolan was revealing too much about himself.

The Oedipus paintings depict the legendary meeting with the Sphinx. Yet it is not simply this meeting and Oedipus’ solving of the riddle which is expressed in the paintings. The story of how Oedipus blinded himself after his discovery that he has married his mother is also present in the series. In one painting Oedipus appears only as a head emerging from between the Sphinx’s legs, a head whose face is covered with yellow and red dots, signifying his blindness. The Sphinx becomes the mother figure out of which Oedipus is emerging already blinded by his incest.

A menacing presence in the paintings, and of equal stature to the sphinx, is the figure of a giant cockerel. In one painting, the sphinx’s forehead is dotted with blood, suggesting that the bird has attacked it. Adams reports that Lucien Freud took offence at the paintings believing that Sidney was making fun of his grandfather, Sigmund Freud.

Nicholas Usherwood has written of these paintings:

> It is, without question, Cynthia and Sidney and his artistic alter-ego we see here. The resonances of all this which, even when Melville was writing about them in 1975 were dark and disturbing enough, took on an almost unbearable weight and poignancy of personal meaning when, just a year later, Cynthia Nolan took her own life after what, it transpired, had been increasing mental instability in the year or so leading up to it.

If the Sphinx represents Reed Nolan, than it is an ambiguous and terrifying portrait of her. The Sphinx strangled those who failed to answer the riddle. Sidney’s sphinx is, however, both this man-hating monster and also the mother of Oedipus and, therefore, the object of his guilty obsession. If, as Usherwood suggests, the paintings are autobiographical, then Sidney’s psyche is divided between the self-abasing Oedipus figure and the menacing rooster.

In Reed Nolan’s writing the bird is a central signifying motif for her husband. Nolan’s desire for flight and power are embodied throughout the travel writing in images of him as a bird, most significantly as an eagle. Birds figure prominently in his paintings, from the parrots in the early outback paintings, to the Leda and the Swan series. When Reed Nolan came to write A Sight of China in the late 1960s, a fear of creative impotence is suggested when the narrator speculates on Nolan returning from China ‘more a dove than an eagle’.

In Notes for Oedipus II the Oedipus figure is wearing sunglasses to conceal his sightless eyes. In the legend Oedipus removes his eyes, which have refused to see the truth.

---

17 Ibid., p. 228.
18 Ibid., 227.
19 Usherwood, op. cit.
Nolan’s blind Oedipus is an interesting parallel to Reed Nolan’s portrait of Nolan in the travel writing. In Reed Nolan’s writing on the Third World, Nolan is, above all, the photographer whose self-enclosed detachment protects him from engaging with emotional pain and suffering. This self-enclosure is most powerfully realised in One Traveller’s Africa in which the image of the blind child becomes the mirror image of the artist/photographer. As I have argued, the photographer is an image weighted with anxieties about colonisation and by the text’s ambiguous feelings about the nature of travel. In One Traveller’s Africa the conjunction of the photographer with the blind child creates self-reflexive levels of isolation and entrapment. The blindness of the child is an ironic, and perhaps savage, realisation of the modernist artist’s interior vision, cut off and isolated from external reality.

A sense of increasing tension in Reed Nolan’s relationship with Nolan is apparent in the letters she wrote to Maie Casey from the late 1960s until the mid-1970s. The letters are full of ideas for books, accounts of illness, and petty irritations about Nolan’s parents staying with them. Reed Nolan did not get on with Sidney’s mother, Dora Irene Nolan, to whom her son was close. In Flaws in the Glass Patrick White accuses Nolan of having a mother fixation and relays a malicious story about Sidney as a large child being breast-fed by his mother on a tram in Melbourne.20 It is, perhaps, simplistic to conclude that because Nolan was close to his mother and because two of his most significant sexual relationships were with powerful, dominating, older women, that he needed his wife to be his mother. Yet the disturbing Oedipus paintings suggest that Nolan was fascinated by the archetypal anxiety of marrying one’s mother.

Nolan’s Oedipus paintings also offer an interesting parallel to Reed Nolan’s early work Daddy Sowed a Wind!, in which Reed Nolan explores her protagonist Hyacinth’s Electra Complex. Her own interest in psychoanalysis clearly had a powerful effect upon Nolan. Adams writes in reference to the Oedipus paintings:

He had read extensively about psychoanalysis, particularly in relation to Cynthia’s mental state. She had dedicated her early life to being a psychiatric nurse and even after she ceased to practise professionally, remained close to the subject and its principles, which continued to rule her life.21

It is rumoured that in the 1970s Reed Nolan was attending the Tavistock Clinic in London, which specialised in Jungian psychoanalysis. An interesting symmetry develops between the Nolans in reference to Reed Nolan’s early exploration of her Electra Complex and Nolan’s later exploration of the Oedipus Complex. In the later paintings Reed Nolan has become the

20 Flaws in the Glass, op.cit., p. 237.
mother figure to Nolan’s Oedipus. Adams refers to Sidney reading Daddy Sowed A Wind!, a novel structured around the Electra Complex, for ‘clues to her character’. There is a mocking cruelty, which Adams avoids addressing, in Nolan seeking to understand Reed Nolan from this book and then transforming her into the object of his own mother fixation.

Although one aspect of Nolan’s self-representation revolves around this child-mother obsession, in which he is the child/victim of the older, more powerful mother figure, what is absent from this period is an expression of himself as father. Adams’ biography reads as an uncritical account from Nolan’s perspective. Apart from mentioning her birth, Adams is silent on the subject of Amelda, Nolan’s daughter by his first wife, Elizabeth. The Ned Kelly paintings have been read as an expression of his own feelings of being an outlaw after his desertion from the army, but there is perhaps another layer of personal meaning behind his admission of desertion.

In 1942 Nolan left his wife Elizabeth and their young baby. According to Brian Adams the separation took place after John Reed persuaded Elizabeth to visit him ‘with a view to helping her solve her problem.’ 22 Shortly after this visit the couple permanently separated. Whatever role Reed played in their separation, his subsequent behaviour towards Nolan suggests his own possessive desires. Nolan continued his affair with Sunday Reed until 1947 when he left for Queensland. Amelda, however, must have been a powerful undercurrent in Nolan’s life. It seems odd that Adams’ book, purporting to be a biography, should so completely bypass this vast and influential psychological landscape of abandonment, rejection and guilt.

Nolan’s relationship with his daughter as she was growing up is unclear. By the 1970s Amelda is mentioned in Reed Nolan’s letters to Maie Casey. Elwyn and Lily Lynn, who saw a great deal of the Nolans in the 1960s and 1970s, believe Reed Nolan was responsible for attempting to bring Nolan and Amelda together. 23 Reed Nolan’s letters to Maie Casey suggest that her relationship with Amelda was difficult but that she was working to improve it: ‘if you run into Sidney’s daughter or her friends from time to time you might drop in a word in my favour. I really like her very much. But I can’t be excluded’. 24 As she continues: ‘I let her begin with the impression I removed him from her mama.’ 25 Reed Nolan’s angle on Nolan, however, is interesting. She talks of him enjoying the ‘tug of war’ relationship between Amelda and herself over Nolan. 26

22 Ibid., p. 56.
23 Interview with Elwyn and Lily Lynn, op.cit..
24 Reed Nolan to Maie Casey, January, 1975, (courtesy of Jane McGowan and Dr Langmore).
25 Ibid. 26
26 Letter from Reed Nolan to Maie Casey, 6 May, 1975, (courtesy of Jane McGowan and Dr Langmore).
There are other issues that emerge in these letters and which cast light on the complexity of the Nolans’ marriage. Reed Nolan talks of wanting to write a book about the early years of their marriage and what she refers to as their ‘wild differences and conflicts’[27]. It is clear that the ‘differences’ between the Nolans did not abate. As I have argued, the travel books are essentially a documentation of different temperaments and ensuing conflicts. Taken as a progressive examination of a marriage, the travel books reveal an increasing alienation and isolation from one another. From *One Traveller’s Africa* onward Reed Nolan’s narrator retreats into herself, frequently refusing to communicate with the Nolan character, as if perversely willing her own subjugation to him.

The alienated narrator of the travel writing is, perhaps, an interesting parallel to the isolated and alienated figures that recur in Nolan’s paintings from the 1960s and 1970s until Reed Nolan’s death in 1976. In a 1975 painting, *Bathers-Sun Triangle*, (Appendix, image 9) a lifeguard, wearing sunglasses, is in the water with his back to the outstretched arm of a submerged person who appears to be drowning. It is a disconcerting painting. The lifeguard, like the Oedipus figure painted the same year, is wilfully blind; his back is turned to the drowning figure. The sunglasses draw attention to his self-enclosure, eyes, sightless or not, which are concealed from the viewer.

The narrator of the travel writing offers a comparable textual characterisation of Nolan’s alienated figures, through Kelly and Rimbaud, to the life guard of the 1970s. If there are autobiographical elements in their work, there is also a strong case against reading these textual and visual figures as purely autobiographical. Reed Nolan’s own alienated self-portrait in *Open Negative* is the obverse of her portrait of Nolan in *One Traveller’s Africa*. Yet both characters are seen as imprisoned within their self-constructions as artist, writer, wife and muse. *Open Negative* gestures towards a sense of mutual entrapment within the creative marriage. Nolan’s dust jacket and the central photograph, in their perceptive realisation of the narrator’s condition, seem to suggest that he did not read *Open Negative* as purely a ‘record’ of their life together and apart in America. Increasingly, Nolan’s status as a ‘great artist’ is seen in the travel writing as another form of incarceration. Inherent in an autobiographical reading of the travel writing is a sense that, collaboratively, the Nolans were attempting in their different media to work through and express the alienated self of the modern condition.

Nolan’s paintings, through from the 1940s until Reed Nolan’s death in 1976, are an expression of isolation and alienation, themes that preoccupied modernism in the twentieth century. The late 1940s outback paintings, which followed the Nolans’ journey into Australia’s interior, offer some of his finest expressions of the modern condition. In these aerial paintings, there are no people, only the geometric shapes of the rock formations and a

[27] Letter from Reed Nolan to Maie Casey, 28 October, 1969, (courtesy of Jane McGowan and Dr Langmore).
perception of vast desert spaces of the interior. (Appendix, image 1). In their evocation of a
desolate human emptiness, these paintings express the existential preoccupations of mid-
twentieth century European literature. As Haynes has commented:

The land, and pre-eminently the desert, becomes a tangible correlative of the tragic element
that European literature had traditionally had to supply through some abstract, philosophical,
psychological premise such as existential angst. In Australia the physical threat remains
actual: the desert can legitimately be cast as the implacable agent of existential terror
demonstrating the fragility and absurdity of the human condition.  

Similarly, in Outback, Reed Nolan's record of this journey through the landscape into the
mind brilliantly evokes the landscape as 'correlative' to human 'existential angst'.
Individually, as well as collectively, the work of both Nolans expresses the unique qualities of
Australian modernism in its capacity to realise the thematic concerns of European 'existential
angst' in the Australian landscape. It is the understanding of this 'correlative' between the
mind and the landscape which Reed Nolan takes with her and realises in the subsequent
textual journeys.

The guarded narrator of the travel writing, however, who cannot, or will not,
communicate with the Nolan character is also consistent with the Reed Nolan who emerges
from fragments of the life which I have attempted to piece together. The interior narrative of
the travel writing, in which the narrator's private self is revealed to the reader but kept secret
from her husband, reflects a withholding equally manifest in the life. This separation of public
and private faces exhibited in the travel writing is also expressed in the life, in Reed Nolan's
need to keep her friendships separate, as if forever anxious that what she says will get back to
Nolan. Her last will and testament can also be seen as expressing distrust of her husband.

On her last visit, when she realised how depressed Reed Nolan was, Virginia
Edwards asked her whether she would ask for help if she needed it. In reply, Reed Nolan
smiled.  The silent smile is an echo of the secret self of the travel writing. It is relevant to
compare this older Reed Nolan with her youthful self, from whom 'everything seems to pour
out.' On the surface it appears experience and maturity had taught Reed Nolan self-
censorship. Alternatively, it might be argued that while in her life she kept silent, her writing
became her outpouring and the reader her confessor.

It might be argued that Reed Nolan had, quite simply, had enough. The final images
from Paradise and Yet on the sordid resort island in Queensland return the Nolans to scenes
of his youth, but the ramifications of these scenes had also a direct effect upon Reed Nolan.

---

29 Interview with Virginia Edwards, op.cit.
The characters in his story of betrayed love were, after all, members of her family. The image on the island concludes the ironic, claustrophobic movement of the travel books. The frenetic life of travelling suggests that both the Nolans were trapped in a state of psychological flight from scenes and events from which they had never recovered. The paintings and the travel books reveal that both the Nolans were painfully haunted by their pasts. The brilliance of the travel writing lies in its realisation of this co-presence of physical flight and the claustrophobic entrapment of memory, relentlessly drawing them back to their beginnings.

It is to be hoped that when Reed Nolan's papers are finally released to the public that the interconnections between life and writing will be more fully mapped. Reed Nolan's autobiographical writings offered her an opportunity to review the suffering she connected with her father, ex-lovers, brother and sister-in-law, and finally her husband. The creative drive of revenge was not confined to Reed Nolan within the partnership. Adams’ one-dimensional portrait of Nolan can be read as a ghosted autobiographical response by Nolan to his wife’s writing; his need to defend himself against the insinuations and accusations of the travel writing. The travel writing also documents the role revenge played in inspiring Nolan. The obsessive Mrs Fraser paintings are a form of revenge against Sunday Reed and the Oedipal pictures against Reed Nolan. As McCooey has pointed out, an essential dimension of autobiography is its ‘effect’. The effect Nolan had upon Reed Nolan and she upon him is painfully clear in the veiled messages they sent to one another through their creative work. The revenge aspect of their work illustrates the effect of creative work upon lived experience; the entwined influences of life on art and, again, of art on life.

If reprisal is a basic motivational drive in the writing, I have also demonstrated that her work transcends the purely personal. When the embargo on her papers is finally lifted, the original diaries upon which the travel books are apparently based may come to light, to further illuminate the fictional dimension of the travel writing. From the early novels, and throughout the travel writing, however, her alienated, tortured self-portraits create an illuminating counterpart to the masculine modernist anti-hero, and a correlation between landscape and the mind, that establish her as a significant exponent of Australian literary modernism.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Works by Cynthia Reed Nolan:

Lucky Alphonse, (Reed and Harris, Melbourne, 1944).

Daddy Sowed a Wind!, (Shakespeare Head, Sydney, 1947).


Outback and Beyond: The Travels of Cynthia and Sidney Nolan, (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1994).

Reviews of Reed Nolan’s travel writing:


Laurie, Thomas, ‘Understatement as Cutting as a Scalpel’, The Australian, 28 October 1967.


The Times Literary Supplement review of Outback, 6 September 1963.
Newspaper and magazine articles:

'A Melbourne Modernist' *The Age*, 7 June 1933.
*Table Talk*, 3 November 1932.
*The Examiner*, Cynthia Reed’s birth notice, 26 September 1908.

Catalogues

(National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1987).
Lane Galleries, 7 May – 26 May 1982.


MANUSCRIPTS

Public Libraries and Archives

The Reed Collection, Latrobe Library, State Library of Victoria.
The Nightingale Probationers’ Year Book number 18, St Thomas’ Hospital, London.
Metropolitan Archives, United Kingdom.
Frederick Ward Archive, Powerhouse Museum, New South Wales.
Ida Cantwell’s Scrapbook, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.
Letter from Cynthia Nolan to Pat Flower, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.
Letter from Russell Drysdale to George Bell, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.
Nolan Archive, Tate Gallery, London.
The Nolan Archive, Pears Brittain Foundation, Norfolk.

Private Collections:

Mary Eagle’s archive on Reed Nolan, Canberra.
Puss Ward’s Diary and notes made by Fred Ward, (Martin Ward, Canberra)
Clarice Zander’s Scrapbook (Jocelyn Plate, Sydney).
Film of Cynthia Reed Nolan, taken by Dr H.V. Evatt Paris, 1939, (collection of Roslyn Carrodus, New South Wales).
Andrew Sayers paper for seminar *Likeness and Biography*, College of Fine Arts,

Interviews conducted by Jane Grant:

Mary Andrews, 13 February 1996.
Daria Block, 2 November 1997.
Alannah Coleman, 24 October 1996.
Adrian Deamer, 4 February 1995.
Lady Maisie Drysdale, 7 March 1996.
Virginia Edwards, 2 November 1996.
Elwyn and Lily Lynn, 23 February 1996.
Alan Maclean, 3 November 1996.
Terry Miles, 12 November 1997.
Jinx Nolan, 27 October 1996.
Jocelyn Plate, 10 March 1995.
Reg Preston, 2 March 1995.
Dr Margaret Reed, 30 October 1996.
Barrett Reid, 5 January 1995.

Other interviews:
Mary Sara, Interview with Sir Sidney Nolan, 23 July, 1992, Tate Archive, London.
Gerard and Rose Vaughan, Interview with Sam Atyeo, Vence, France, 1979. (Courtesy of Mary Eagle.)

Letters to Jane Grant cited in thesis:
June Brodsgaard, 10 November 1996.
Cedric Flower 3 November 1995.
Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, 16 May 1995.

GENERAL BACKGROUND


Ashcroft, Bill and Salter, John, 'Modernism's Empire: Australia and the Cultural Imperialism of Style', in *Modernism and Empire*, eds., Howard. T. Booth and Nigel Risby. (Manchester University Press; Manchester, 2000).


- *Fairweather*, (Art and Australia Books; Roseville East, 1994).


Blackman, Barbara, *Glass After Glass*, (Penguin; Ringwood, 1997).

Booth, Howard. T., and Risby, Nigel, eds., *Modernism and Empire*, (Manchester University Press; Manchester, 2000).


- *Joy Hester*, (Vintage; Milsons Point, 1983).

- *Dear Sun: The letters of Joy Hester and Sunday Reed*, (William Heinemann Australia; Port Melbourne, 1995).


Chadwick, Whitenev and de Courtivron, Isabelle, eds., *Significant Others: Creativity &


Clift, Charmian, Peel Me A Lotus, (Collins, Sydney, 1988).


Dark, Eleanor, Prelude to Christopher, (1934) (Halstead Press, Rushcutters Bay, 1999).


Donaldson Ian, ed., Australia and the European Imagination, (Humanities Research Centre, Canberra, 1982).


Dutton, Ninette, Firing, (Editions, Tom Thompson, Sydney, 1995).


Edmonds, Rod, 'Home And Away: Degeneration in Imperial and Modernist Discourse', in Modernism and Empire eds., Howard. T., Booth and Nigel Risby, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000).

Eagle, Mary, Australian Modern Painting between the Wars 1914-1939, (Bay Books, Sydney,


Gribble, Jennifer, *Christina Stead,* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994).

Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism,* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994).


- Stravinsky’s Lunch, (Picador, Sydney, 1999).


Prichard, Katharine, Susannah, Coonardoo, (1929), (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1982).


19 Mrs Fraser 1947
ripolin on masonite 26 × 42
collection: the artist
The author, photographed by Sidney Nolan
Open Negative: An American Memoir

Cynthia Nolan