

AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE, RELIGION AND CULTURE:

The Question of Identity

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It was thirty years ago, in 1955, that Australian literature took a decisive step towards achieving what many now consider its modern cultural maturity. Three books were published in that year which, broadly speaking, released Australian literature and culture from its past and the status Australia had as a dependent nation. These books were A.D. Hope's poems *The Wandering Islands*, Patrick White's novel *The Tree of Man* and Ray Lawler's play *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Along with other texts from around that time — and here I think particularly of the poetry of Judith Wright — these books brought literature into relation with Australian culture in terms of a recognisable, general and modern way of life. They expressed an energy and intelligence which was urgent, often abrasive and subversive, and especially in the theatre usually profane. They were self-critical, self-accepting, and to a certain extent self-transcending. A shock of recognition, or self-recognition, was felt at their disclosure of Australian identity. It was a shock of recognition which painters, playwrights, filmmakers, actors and dance groups have all made their own, and in a way that has won world attention.

These three writers have a normative position in modern Australian literature. Yet the fact remains that they share little common ground with one another. Hope's review of White's novel was a matter of controversy at the time. And since then Hope has gone on to develop a deeply conservative stance while White has moved into radicalism of a cultural and political kind such that for all his winning the Nobel Prize in Literature he now gives the impression of being a man without a country. Personal as the differences between Hope and White may have been, the divergence in their ways also says something about Australian culture. It is a deeply divided society. And the difficulties in finding and establishing identity in such a culture are acute.

Religion in Australia has not helped. It was in 1955 that the Catholic Church — or part of it at least — entered the political sphere with a strongly anti-communist stance which had the effect of splitting the Labour Party and giving control of the country to conservative forces. The role of the Church — despite the many liberal, ecumenical and progressive voices within it — has been to enforce a broad, formal and ideological commitment to conservatism in Australian culture, a position which admittedly has always been latent in the Australian tradition but which since 1955 has become clearer as a major structural principle and option in Australian society and culture.

How poets respond in such a situation is the subject of my paper. For while proceeding from a heavily conservative cultural base Australian poets have been making moves to redefine identity and relationships between literature, religion and culture.

It was A.D. Hope himself who wrote in his poem "Australia" the line "if still from the deserts the prophets come", and in doing so has touched on the role which poets have come to play in what some commentators have called the most secular society in the world today.

I wish briefly to outline four aspects or images of Australian writing in order to illustrate the complex nature of identity as defined between literature, religion and culture. First, the change in conservatism itself; second, the opposite experience of aboriginal culture and the change that has taken place there; third, the central reworking by certain poets of images of identity drawn from religious sources; and fourth the image of the artist as seen by the artist and in relation to Australian society.

Let me begin, then, with the conservative figure par excellence of James McAuley. Following on his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1952, McAuley adopted what might be called an ideologically fundamentalist stance on all matters to do with literature, religion, politics, education and culture. Prior to this time he had played a part through his contribution to the Ern Malley hoax of 1944 in effectively scuttling the modernist boat for Australian poetry. He had also resisted what he thought to be the simplistic efforts of the Jindyworobak school of Australian poets who were opening themselves up to the native culture of aboriginal Australia. Yet McAuley's stance has never been merely a negative one. His poem 'Envoi' defines a serious and original relation for himself with the Australian land and the life of Australian society. It expresses the once-European mind that now knows it belongs to a new land and culture. It is a kind of love-hate relationship, and he puts it in terms that are plain and prosaic but telling:

There the blue-green gums are a fringe of remote disorder
And the brown sheep poke at my dreams along the hillsides;
And there in the soil, in the season, in the shifting airs,
Comes the faint sterility that disheartens and derides.

Where once was a sea is now a salty sunken desert,
A futile heart within a fair periphery;

It is almost a cliché of European-Australian experience, but true nonetheless. McAuley states the way 'the reluctant and uneasy land resents / The gush of waters, the lean plough, the fretful seed'. Australia is a profound disappointment in this regard, and McAuley carries it over to the people. They are 'hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them'. Yet clearly he wants to affirm his own attachment to Australia. 'I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body'. These are abstract and conceptual terms to use for such a relationship. They do not balance out the weight of his critical feelings. Something self-conscious, unstable and willed stands as the image of his identity in this poem.

The uncertainty of values which marks the poem — for all its striking clarities — also marks the course of McAuley's later career. More Catholic than the Catholics, he felt betrayed by Vatican II. His book *The End of Modernity* (1959) reads today like a purely abstract schema, an Antipodean Jacques Maritain denouncing virtually everything modern, including Jacques Maritain. But a change came for McAuley in the late 1960s, when along with Vincent Buckley and others he stepped beyond his ideological style of the 1950s to rediscover the personal element in his own writing and that of other Australians. The autobiographical poems of his book *Surprises of the Sun* (1969) had a profound impact on his Australian public. The world of childhood, family and suburban existence was a new subject for him, a new way

of addressing reality. And while McAuley did not persist in this style of dramatising his own life for long, his change reflected a deep transformation in cultural values which for his part enabled him to find in his late poetry a renewed and delicate lyricism of a kind close to religious meditation and prayer. He has contributed many of the finest hymns to the *Australian Hymn Book*.

'In the Huon Valley' is one such poem from the later McAuley. It is about the Tasmanian autumn and is autumnal in mood. The essential thing to note in this poem, however, is the primacy and initiative given to the natural world. Nature is alive here. It is the subject.

Propped boughs are heavy with apples,
Springtime quite forgotten.
Pears ripen yellow. The wasp
Know where windfalls lie rotten.

Juices grow rich with sun.

There is here a reverence before nature, a receptivity towards what is given, and a humbling of the self. The human identity is not lost; the old McAuley is still there looking for and finding rational order and beauty. But now it is a shared total ritual: the human and the life outside the human belong together in the one ceremonious cycle and process.

The move from distance to closeness which we see here is characteristic of much white Australian experience in this generation. It has been matched, unfortunately, by an equal and opposite move in black Australian experience. Only recently has the general reader had access to the traditional poetry of aboriginal Australians. Anthropologists have known of it, and there has been a broad understanding in white society of the aboriginal Dreaming and the unselfconscious intimacy which native people have with the land. Song cycles such as the Moon Bone cycle of Arnhem Land have slowly revealed themselves as part of the Australian heritage; and while it is still too soon to claim to have responded properly to poetry of this kind, there is in the great catalogues, the process of naming, the repetitions, and what seems to white readers as the non-reasonings a remarkable demonstration of identity of a different kind. It is a poetry that celebrates being.

Yet this story changes, too. Instead of this traditional intimacy and oneness with the land, alienation, anger and irony are now felt in the voices of black writers. Jack Davis, Kath Walker and Kevin Gilbert are among those writing in English of their loss of identity. As Kevin Gilbert says in his poem "Earth" from his book *End of Dreamtime* (1971):

I am earth:
earth has its own high God, Ba'aime.
I dreamed that there was nothing
that could part me from my God
and his many spirits.

I am earth:
my God spoke to me as friend,
as he breathed, so I; on the hunt
together walked we two on earth,
and sometimes in the sky.

I am earth:
 from earth I did arise,
 to earth I shall return. And now
 across the empty earth I go,
 saddened and alone.

These lines speak for themselves. The dispossession of a heritage and the loss of identity match those of white society in coming into possession of the land and finding identity there.

I wish to turn now from extremes to the centre, from oppositions to what I see as a sharing of identity among poets. Here I will take three poets — Judith Wright, Les Murray and Fay Zwicky — who locate their poems close to religious experience but not explicitly so. Theirs is more the implicit prophetic role which writers in a secular culture are called upon to play, or are drawn towards playing. Judith Wright, over forty years, has come to be a central spiritual and imaginative resource for her readers, and, as I wish to suggest here, for other writers. Her meditative and philosophical stance touches on matters from the simplest to the most profound, from such things as a totemic sense of Australian birds to a fiercely committed sense of the destruction of the Australian environment. Les Murray shares Judith Wright's background in the Australian bush, but has more sharply experienced the urban take-over of Australian culture in the past twenty years, which he resists trenchantly. Fay Zwicky speaks from a Jewish vantage point, and has had to confront the inertia and apparent formlessness of white-anglo-saxon-protestant-catholic culture in Australia in order to ask many of the central critical questions of today, especially to do with the place of women in Australian society.

Let me begin by comparing Judith Wright's poem 'Night Herons' with Les Murray's 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow'. A visitation occurs in both poems. Two birds suddenly appear in a small-town street in the Wright poem, while in the Murray poem a man is discovered in Martin Place in the centre of Sydney, weeping. Some pattern or parable is being felt for by both poets. Are the birds a kind of angelic annunciation and is the weeping man a kind of Christ figure? The poems do not say so, but use the confrontation of these randomly experienced phenomena with the people of each poem as an intimation of a possible transcendence occurring in the midst of ordinary living.

The Judith Wright poem has a simple tone and manner of narration which is in keeping with her meaning and her feeling both for the birds and the Australian people. Let me read it now:

Night Herons

It was after a day's rain:
 the street facing the west
 was lit with growing yellow;
 the black road gleamed.

First one child looked and saw
 and told another.
 Face after face, the windows
 flowered with eyes.

It was like a long fuse lighted,
 the news travelling.

No one called out loudly;
everyone said 'Hush'.

The light deepened; the wet road
answered in daffodil colours,
and down its centre
walked the two tall herons.

Stranger than wild birds, even
what happened on those faces:
suddenly believing in something,
they smiled and opened.

Children thought of fountains,
circuses, swans feeding;
women remembered words
spoken when they were young.

Everyone said 'Hush';
no one spoke loudly;
but suddenly the herons
rose and were gone. The light faded.

Compare this poem now with the Les Murray poem. There are obvious similarities. Yet Murray locates his poem in the centre of Sydney, at the heart of secular society, at the shrine of Australian natural or civic religion, a place given over to the prevailing modern gods of western society — commerce, war, entertainment and politics. Provocatively, Murray projects his kind of Christ figure into this scene. He confronts the stereotype of the unfeeling Australian male:

There's a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can't stop him.

...

There's a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him.

Murray shares many of the qualities he seems to be resisting in this poem. He uses a laconic, homespun humour to create a disbelieving aura around the man. His poem holds itself back from commitment, even from response to the man. But this kind of tension in the intelligence works to release the phenomenon of the weeping man purely and starkly as phenomenon.

The man we surround, the man no one approaches
simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps
not like a child, not like the wind, like a man
and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even
sob very loudly — — yet the dignity of his weeping

holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him

in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,
and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him
stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds
longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

It has to be on Murray's terms an absolutely ordinary rainbow, however. There is to be no overt religious meaning or intent to the poem. That is part of its truth. It sidles up to its centre or climax intimately, even inconsequentially.

and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand
 and shake as she receives the gift of weeping;
 as many as follow her also receive it
 and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more
 refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance

'But the weeping man', as Murray goes on, 'requires nothing'. Like the poem itself he refuses to engage and resolve the issue. 'Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street'.

Murray's poem has become something of a *locus classicus* of modern Australian spirituality. Teasing, annoying, yet knowing — it marshalls Australian negativities or resistances into a position where only a parable can work. As indeed it does. Murray — himself a convert from a strict Presbyterian background to Catholicism — uses a strange kind of wit here both to propound and to deny. He has an instinctive sense of an Australian style.

The two poems — 'Night Herons' and 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' — may be said to share an identity of a modern quasi-religious kind in treating what could have been the symbolic term or object as purely phenomenological. It is the response of the people in each poem to the phenomenon of the birds and the weeping man respectively that generates the vitality, tension and meaning of the poems. The religious dimension is contained within, confined within, the human existential situation.

But Judith Wright can also work in an opposite way. By beginning with a figure or situation which is recognisably religious or scriptural, she shows how to advance towards a revelation of the human situation. One famous instance of this is her poem 'Eli, Eli' where she takes Jesus' suffering on the Cross and appropriates it into more broadly human, even mystical, terms. But a more pertinent instance is where she takes the figure of Eve as her starting point and offers a critique of modern male-female relations. Written in the mid 1960s, 'Eve to her Daughters' anticipates the feminist thrust of the past twenty years.

Eve allows Judith Wright to adopt a voice, a character, an identity which is playful, highly intelligent, and alive with barely suppressed anger and scorn. Eve begins by seeming to accept the punishment of God in being banished from the Garden of Eden:

But Adam, you know ...!
 He kept on brooding over the insult,
 over the trick They had played on us, over the scolding.
 He had discovered a flaw in himself
 and he had to make up for it.

Outside Eden the earth was imperfect,
 the seasons changed, the game was fleet-footed,
 he had to work for our living, and he didn't like it.
 He even complained of my cooking
 (it was hard to compete with Heaven).

So he set to work.
 The earth must be a new Eden
 with central heating, domesticated animals,

mechanical harvesters, combustion engines,
 escalators, refrigerators,
 and modern means of communication
 and multiplied opportunities for safe investment
 and higher education for Abel and Cain
 and the rest of the family.
 You can see how his pride had been hurt.

In the process he had to unravel everything,
 because he believed that mechanism
 was the whole secret — he was always mechanical minded.

He got to the very inside of the whole machine
 exclaiming as he went, So this is how it works!
 And now that I know how it works, why I must have invented it.
 As for God and the Other, they cannot be demonstrated,
 and what cannot be demonstrated
 doesn't exist.
 You see, he had always been jealous.

Judith Wright's critique of modern society ranges wide around her central focus on the sexist question. The poem is mainly directed at the male, and the female world is present mainly in terms of the author's felt presence and tone of voice. Where the female world enters the poem explicitly, it is presented with a mock irony:

But you are my daughters,
 you inherit my own faults of character
 you are submissive.

Judith Wright confines her female identity in this poem to this mock *persona*, and the irony of this role is something of limitation on the poem's achievement. Yet it is tellingly comic and satiric:

... nothing exists but our faults.
 At least they can be demonstrated.

But it's useless to make
 such a suggestion to Adam.
 He has turned himself into God,
 who is faultless, and doesn't exist.

Another poem which works in a similar way — and indeed may have been inspired by the Judith Wright poem — is Fay Zwicky's 'Mrs Noah Speaks' from her sequence 'Ark Voices'. Again, a biblical subject is taken over and appropriated to a modern experience. Fay Zwicky's approach derives partly from her Jewish background and partly from her more modern feminist feeling. She is more inside the character of her speaker than Judith Wright was. Mrs Noah is a broader, rounder, more humorous presence. She presumes to be in a kind of conversation with God or Yahweh, complaining about life on the Ark:

Lord, the cleaning's nothing.
 What's a pen or two?

Even if tapir's urine
Takes the paint clean off
There's nothing easier.

But sir, the care!

I used dream perpetually
About a boat I had to push
(yes, *push*) through a stony town
without water
There was no river and no sea and yet
I pushed a boat against a tide.
It wouldn't float although I pulled and
hailed, my flesh eddying,
drifting with the strain of it.
Is *this* a dream?

Fibre my blood, sir.

The new strength of comic tone here helps Zwicky to be generous in understanding the larger human situation. She has Mrs Noah look at her husband and say: 'Noah is incorruptible and good, a large / sweet soul'. Irony is never absent, but the game is played in such a way as to allow Mrs Noah's deep pain to emerge alongside her poised judgement of her husband's greatness. She sees them held together finally:

Strangers in this ark, this one small 'Yes'
afloat on a vast 'No', your watery negative.

Fay Zwicky's sense of the Flood, Les Murray's Rainbow and Judith Wright's understanding of Creation — all reveal how in a central way religion has bearing on literature's power to identify and make real the life of our times. I wish to conclude now with a final image of the artist as a selfconscious figure, concerned in the case of David Malouf with defining an identity for himself in a society and culture such as Australia. Over the past fifteen years David Malouf has opened up the discussion of identity perhaps more than any other Australian author, and specifically at a level where the planes of literature, religion and culture seem to intersect in what is apparently a secular society. Malouf has created for himself the voice of the tribal talker, part reflective, part fictional, part conversational, a voice of ironic wisdom that gives Australians and — increasingly — readers around the world real pleasure and delight. His award (1985) of the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction for his short stories *Antipodes* is a sign that the way he is addressing reality in terms highly relevant to this paper is meaningful today.

His finest novel, *An Imaginary Life*, which deals with the Roman poet Ovid, is full of dramatic insight into religious and cultural matters. It tells of the discovery and creation of identity between two opposite kinds of life and existence, that of the cosmopolitan Ovid in exile and that of a wolf child. It is a kind of love poem in prose, with the subtlest awareness of discrete identities. It brings love, hate and fear into dynamic relationship in the experiencing of identity.

I wish, however, to point to his most recent novel *Harland's Half-Acre* as having more application to Australian culture. It is the story of an Australian painter growing up through the years of the Great Depression, World War II and the affluence of

the Fifties and early Sixties. The novel has some connection with the life of a famous artist, Ian Fairweather, who became a hermit on an island off the Queensland coast. But Malouf uses the story to range further afield — to look at Australian sexuality, Australian-European relations, and finally to consider the place of the artist in such a world.

This last concern emerges best in the middle of the novel when Harland shows the narrator three of his paintings. One is of a half-caste aboriginal boxer at practice with his punching bag. It presents an image of real pathos — the outsider in Australian society fighting against a non-feeling, but heavily resistant, force or object.

... he was hugging the punching bag as if he were hanging on hard against forces that might tear him away ... despairingly baffled but not defeated, he was shadow-boxing with it, lunging wildly at the shadow while the bag itself, slack and puffy with evil, solidly passive, simply hung there and half-observed him, pushed him out to a corner of the frame. There was a naked globe. And all around stood the silent watchers, tree-trunks or house-stumps or transmogrified elders or wooden gods.

The second painting is of two women, their abstract but entwined figures offering as allegory an image of new female affirmation of identity. Significantly, the painting is called 'Two Fates', as if waiting for a third female presence to appear to regain the ancient mythic status of the Three Fates as the spinners and weavers and controllers of the human life span.

But it is the third painting that finally concerns us here. It is a self-portrait of the artist, but not in a literal or biographical sense.

... It was a self-portrait, the face all fragments. A force from 'out there' that was irresistible but might not, in the end, be destructive had struck it to splinters that met the flat board at every angle, so that the figure emerged simultaneously in many planes.

The artist, Malouf is saying, lives on many levels and feels many pressures. He highlights this phenomenon of the artist's existence by titling the painting 'The Iceman as Heavenly Bridegroom'.

There are some local allusions within the book which add meaning to the playful, bantering tone of this title. But generally Malouf is suggesting the artist as a Christ figure bringing a kind of love to the world. Yet it is cold and it melts. Malouf offers an ironic image of the identity of the artist, a point he underlines when he writes of Harland:

He saw himself in that comic light: as an imminent but un-annunciating angel

The artist is always on the point of telling the truth but can never — in the terms of this novel — pop the question or demand belief in an ultimate reality. Fiction is an as-if reality, ultimately itself un-annunciating for all its torrent of words. Yet while provisional and playful, literature — as Malouf understands it here — is reaching out in a central modern way to touch and tap the profound sources of traditional religion and human culture.