

RETHINKING POETRY AND THE POPULAR or HOW TO RESUSCITATE AN IMMORAL PIECE OF POULTRY

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To begin with a maxim: popular poetry is minor poetry. Whether it is 'minor' literature in Deleuze and Guattari's sense will no doubt depend on the particular text in question, but I'm encouraged by the following:

An escape for language, for music, for writing. What we call pop — pop music, pop philosophy, pop writing — *Worterflucht*. To make use of the polylingualism of one's own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enter into things, an assemblage come into play (Deleuze and Guattari 26-26).

I don't think this should be read as a new formula for the avant-garde; 'art' isn't in it. This is not an aesthetics of meaning but an aesthetics of practice, of doing.

More people read and care about the poetry of Henry Lawson or Banjo Paterson than the poetry of, say, Les Murray or John Tranter. Majority taste is minor literary value. You only have to look at the number of articles written since World War II on Lawson's verse compared to those on his short stories, which are more readily appropriated to the symbolic structures of literary culture. The poems, on the other hand, resist such codification by being politically or socially overinscribed, which serves to hollow out their meaning as literature (in the narrow sense). Yet perhaps their resistance to the institution is precisely the issue we need to think about.

Over the last couple of years, when people have asked me about my current research projects I've tended to reply that I'm working on 'radical' Australian verse. By the term 'radical' I initially meant to refer to political verse of the left, rather than to the 'radical' aesthetics of the poetic avant-garde. But the more I've thought about the kind of poems that used to appear in trade union journals the more I've come to see the issue as one that more broadly involves the place of popular poetry within Australian culture. I'm aware that the term 'popular poetry' today seems oxymoronic, and I have to confess that my investigations have largely focused on the early to mid twentieth century. My approach was an historical one and, though I derived personal pleasure in a number of the works I uncovered, I was content to leave the question of their cultural values wither to one side or else, if pressed, would fall back on the kind of 'vulgar' pluralism that sometimes operates in cultural studies.

Two recent books have helped to realise how much the debate about values simply doesn't go away. Peter Goodall's *High Culture, Popular Culture: The Long*

Debate and John Frow's *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* have forced me to acknowledge that the question of cultural value is at the heart of my project, and until I address it I can't really give an answer as to why these texts were (and indeed *are*) in any way meaningful or important to their audiences – or indeed to me.

I should emphasise that cultural value doesn't equate with aesthetic value, although aesthetic determinations may well be implicated. Since the late eighteenth century, the word 'literature' has always been aesthetically value-added. As Peter Goodall has argued, in the debate between 'high' and popular culture the ability of cultural studies to claim the moral and theoretical high ground over literary studies is a function of its willingness to overthrow aesthetics in favour of analysing those forces that have traditionally been placed 'outside' literature. If the Enlightenment concept of objective aesthetic value is under a cloud, the specific problem of *cultural* value itself remains. Put crudely, just what do we *do* with these texts? In what ways are they *useful*?

This is not a paper about poetry as such, therefore, but about the social construction and use of poetics. I propose to look at one aspect of early twentieth century popular poetics through the distorting mirror of the Ern Malley hoax. Distorting mirrors can reveal more of their foreground than a smooth mirror can: their twisted margins take in a wider world, and we can extrapolate from their grotesqueries. Malley is useful for the way in which his unmasking uncovers mid-century popular assumptions about the status of poetry. If part of modernism's cultural purpose was to keep the barbarians from the gate of high art, Malley provided a key to let them in and frolic.

The Malley case offers an unusually good example of the clash of what John Frow calls 'regimes of value'. The affair still generates clashes of cultural values, but the general public has since deserted the debate, having largely deserted poetry as a form of entertainment. Malley has become an instrument in debates about the meaning of Australian modernism, a debate among elites, although the recent success of Michael Heyward's *The Ern Malley Affair* suggests that the spectacle it generated can still attract a wider public. For Malley was also a product of popular journalism, and the manner in which he was repackaged there influenced his meaning for cultural elites. The comparable case of 'Mort Brandish' highlights an important difference.

The Melbourne small magazine *A Comment* ran irregularly from 1940 to 1947 and perished 'for want of 150 subs' (Tregenza 95). In the early 1940s the polemical writer Adrian Lawlor, with the support of poet Alister Kershaw, launched the career of Mort Brandish, who also published under the name 'Rosa Lemmone'. It's not clear whether the journal's editor, Cecily Crozier, ever discovered the hoax. In a sense it doesn't matter. Kershaw wrote that: 'none of *Comment's* filthy-odd readers responded to either Mort or Rosa whether with awe-struck gasps or peevish reprobation. Mort, as far as Australia's forlorn few poetry readers were concerned, was still born' (Brandish 3). It was, according to Kershaw, merely 'a private bit of whimsy' (5):

The sublime decisions
Of our separate Valhallas are
What we expect, suspect, elect to endure.
Oh, but the Valhallas of separate me,
That me's ineluctable choice,
Is this lopsided hovel hovering
Over a polyhedral garage in Fitzroy
(20: 'Conversation Between Man and Cloud').

The story of Mort Brandish serves to emphasise the extremely small market for experimental writing in the early 1940s. *Angry Penguins* may have been bigger and more substantial, but its readership can't have been more than a few hundred – at least up until the Ern Malley issue. For the Autumn 1944 number the publishers spared no expense in an effort to trumpet their find. When *The Darkening Ecliptic* was exposed as a hoax in his publishing partner John Reed found they had a best seller. Michael Heyward writes:

Booksellers capitalized on the hoax in that long week of unknowing [between when *Fact* first announced the hoax and then revealed the hoaxers]. The magazine was walking off the shelves. In Adelaide the Argonaut Book Shop on North Terrace sold 112 copies...

Such prominence for a high brow literary magazine was a by-product of the war, and the book famine it produced. Imported novels were especially hard to come by and, since Australian fiction was thin on the ground, that meant a general scarcity of reading matter (132).

But is that the only reason?

Colin Simpson, who edited *Fact* and orchestrated the hoax's public unravelling, had himself been a poet in earlier days. When he was twenty-three some of his poems appeared in a section called 'Infidelities' in the volume *Trio* (1931), which also included Kenneth Slessor's ground-breaking 'Five Visions of Captain Cook'. Simpson's poetry suggests some interest in modernist subject matter – city life, the music of Stravinsky and a couple of pieces are in free verse, but it's a very muted, rather Georgian modernism. A forthcoming volume of his verse was announced by the publisher Frank Johnson in 1932, but it never appeared. After the War Simpson became a well-known travel writer, with a primitivist interest in tribal cultures.

Simpson fits into what was already a long-established local tradition of journalists who were also poets. That he could see the general newsworthiness of what might otherwise have been a storm in a literary tea cup shows how fluid the boundaries between high and popular cultures could be.

Mainstream Australian papers still regularly published verse in the 1920s, but by the 1930s it had become rather exceptional. Yet people continued to engage with poetry as a form of spoken entertainment and instruction. Children learned it at school through recitation: the relatively few officially sanctioned Australian poems included such colonial relics as Henry Kendall's 'Bell-Birds' or George Essex

Evans's 'The Women of the West'. Private elocution teachers promoted the speaking of verse as a disciplinary measure towards the 'correct' enunciation of English. The popularity of public recitation extended to eisteddfods, music halls and concerts, as well as the domestic home, so that in many ways poetry was understood primarily as an oral form. And, of course, the bush ballad continues to survive in popular culture. Symbolising the currency of oral performance was a famous sketch by the vaudevillian comedian Roy Rene — Mo — in which he attempted to recite J. Milton Hayes's well-known ballad of Empire, 'The Green Eye of the Yellow God', while being heckled by an offsider planted in the audience (I'll be coming back to Mo.).

If popular perceptions of poetry were strongly grounded in its potential as performance, the fact that modernist verse lacked metre and rhyme immediately limited its appeal. Here was a different sound, one that looked suspiciously like prose. Add to that the narrative and imagistic discontinuities of modernist writing, and it's evident why popular interest would fail to ignite. The general public wasn't able to read a text like *The Waste Land* as a poem: it didn't exist as a poem for them. A poem was, after all, something that you could *perform*. Modern poetry was limited by its purely typographical status as writing.

Arguing against the tyranny of typography, Walter J. Ong has suggested that words are not in fact signs, and that it is only writing and print that lead us, as they led Saussure, into thinking of language through the analogy of visual symbols. His discussion of what he calls the psychodynamics of orality in his book *Orality and Literacy* suggests his faith in the notion of speaker's presence within their discourse. I'm not wholly persuaded by what amounts to an argument for phonocentrism, but I am interested in the ways that orality is necessarily focused in the body of the performer.

As a poststructuralist projection, Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature emphasises the signifier over the signified; it stresses the material fact of language over its hidden or metaphysical possibilities. As such, minor literature is not about signification, if by that we mean a special kind of 'meaningfulness' separate from language itself: it's not about the unpacking of hermeneutic gifts. Hence the importance of what Deleuze and Guattari call *deterritorialised* language which draws attention to itself as language. The linguistic hybridity that is found in many postcolonial literatures in e/English, for example, constantly confronts us with the material fact of words: words from dialects or languages that we don't understand. But even in a phenomenon like Afro-American rap it's not what the words mean in any literary sense that matters so much as their rhythm and the way they rhyme: language as an affective, physical phenomenon. As Deleuze and Guattari would say, '*Language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits*' (23). In minor literature, language speaks as a communal 'machine' rather than an individual author. Its enunciation is collective and implicitly political.

Recitation involves a deterritorialisation of language as writing and its reterritorialisation within the body — a whole string of possible bodies (in

Deleuzoguattarian terms the reciter and text form an "assemblage"). Within popular culture, therefore, poetic texts have value in terms of their potential for communal re-creation. This is in sharp contrast to the aesthetic of *Angry Penguins*, with its romantic/modernist view of the author as individual genius and the text as unique artistic object. Now enter Ern Malley, to the accompaniment of Harris's trumpeting.

Simpson arranged to disclosure of the hoax so as to maximise its potential as a media event. The junior journalist Tess van Sommers (a friend of Harold Stewart's) had spilled the beans to him before McAuley and Stewart had intended to go public, so they needed a week to get their press statement together. Simpson therefore capitalised on the element of suspense. 'Ern Malley, the great poet, or the greatest hoax?' ran the headline in *Fact*, making the issue of Ern's artistic greatness or otherwise an immediate issue, and one that the newspaper reader is asked to judge. After summarising the alleged facts concerning Ern and Ethel, Simpson gives a few extracts from *The Darkening Ecliptic*, and it's apparent that these extracts have been positioned to be read as arcane nonsense: '*Fact*... has no high opinion of the Ern Malley "poems"' (1).

Asked what would be his reaction if it could be proven that the writings of 'Ern Malley' were nothing but obscurantist nonsense intended to test his critical judgement, Max Harris replied: "*I hope not — otherwise I've been fooling myself for a long time....*". Asked if he understood the poems, Harris said that, in general, their meaning was clear to him, and although Malley has a remarkable vocabulary which sometimes created *images* that could be obscure, he had found no discomfort in understanding any of the *symbols*. With the trap so heavily baited, Harris then fell in. He was asked to explain some lines from 'Documentary Film': He said he thought the lines had a '*fairly patent meaning*'. The 'rivet through the hand' was a reference to Christ which was also in the associative word 'crisis'. After the *universality* of 'suppressions of crisis' there was a *local image* in 'Footscray' (4). As a piece of lit. crit. improvised in the course of a phone interview this isn't bad at all — but that's not how *Fact's* readers would have seen the matter.

Harris is being set up like Mo in his recitation. In the Malley issue of *Angry Penguins* he'd written an earnest introduction to the poems, and had concluded with an 'Elegiac for Ern Malley' together with a surrealist verse 'Biography' of his new hero. Harris sets himself up as the 'reciter', the performer of Malley, and becomes the editor as ventriloquist. At the first interruption to 'The Green Eye of the Yellow God', Mo would wail, 'turning a piteous, appealing eye on the spectators': 'Oh this is lovely! This is beautiful! A gentleman and a scholar can't get up to resuscitate an immoral piece of poultry without being got at!' (Macdonald 224). Harris's 'immoral piece of poultry' brought him undone as well.

Without the publicity that Simpson gave it, Ern Malley would have been, if not a damp squib, at least a very minor rocket. Malley was so popular that Harris and Reed could afford to print a thousand copies of *The Darkening Ecliptic* in September 1944, half of which were exported. It sold out. The attention the

whole affair had received attracted the notice of the South Australian authorities, and resulted in Harris's trial for obscenity. The performative aspects of the Malley case were extended beyond the hoax's revelation in *Fact* to the court proceedings that crowned the events. Michael Heyward has called it 'the hottest show in town' (185).

David Saunders and Ian Hunter have shown to what extent the author as aesthetic and ethical subject was distinct from the author as legal subject, and how 'the liability for obscenity attaches not to the activity of *writing* but to that of *publication*' (9487). 'Ownership' of Ern Malley had also passed to Harris, as neither of the hoaxers ever claimed copyright. As the publisher, Harris can be further construed as the 'broadcaster' or public performer of the Malley poems. This is why he, not Stewart and McAuley, copped a £5 fine and costs. In later years, Harris's proprietorial interest in Malley extended to reprinting *The Darkening Ediptic* four times (1961, 1970, 1974 and 1988) and, in 1952, starting up *Ern Malley's Journal* — in the first issue of which he declared 'I still believe in Ern Malley' (cited in Heyward, 218).

What I've attempted to do today is to suggest some ways in which Malley may be read through a popular understanding of poetry as performance, as a form of textuality which implicates the body of the performer as part of its meaning. In the absence of an authorial 'body', Max Harris had to stand in as 'recusitator' and remained in that role.

This represents a popular regime of value that conflicted with both the avant-garde aesthetic of *Angry Penguins* and the conservative aesthetic of those who opposed them. I've taken the term 'regime of value' from John Frow (who in turn took it from Arjun Appadurai). Frow uses the term as a way of escaping the endless level playing field of cultural relativism, where the political advocacy of values can be sacrificed for the sake of pluralism, no community being better than any other. As well, it acknowledges the permeability of reading communities by other values and indeed by other communities (no community is organically unified or 'pure': cultural values and cultural capital are not tied inextricably to unified constructions of class, for example). Frow says:

It is probably not, I think, any longer problematic to say that value is always *value-for*, always tied to some valuing group; what does raise a problem is the fact that in our world the boundaries of communities are always porous, since most people belong to many valuing communities simultaneously; since communities overlap; and since they're heterogeneous. Moreover, to tie texts to forms of life in this way assumes that texts enter exhaustively into their content, without residue, and without the possibility of further, unpredicted, and perhaps unpredictable uses being made of them (143).

Regimes of value are 'a mediating institutional mechanism to account both for the diversity of value and for the absence of any simple or necessary coincidence between social groups and the structure of valuation' (143).

The extent to which there was widespread appeal in the Ern Malley affair is a product of the permeability of high art value systems by values from the popular arena. Popular culture was modernism's great other, but if there were no systems of alliance available there were clearly processes of exchange. The social dynamics implied in the Ern Malley affair don't simply resolve themselves into mass culture versus modernism, engineered by the print media. *Angry Penguins* wasn't the only casualty. McAuley and Stewart's more rarefied satirical intentions were deflected by Malley's comic entry into the popular domain. The philosopher John Anderson, for example, thought that the hoaxers had 'weakened their case by taking the commercial press into their confidence' (3).

That even Harris could see the farcical nature of the Malley case is suggested by the publication by Reed and Harris in 1945 — the year after the hoax — of *Playing with Girls*, the collected poetical works of Julian Prang, 'edited' by the actor Redmond Phillips.

Julian Prang was a poetic prodigy with an unhealthy interest in the Marquis de Sade (that hero of the surrealists) and whose untimely death at the age of nine was the result of 'a slight chill following his total immersion in the Quillinandabun horse-fountain by the enraged citizens' (9). Julian was a modernist, so naturally wrote in free verse, and his poetry was illustrated by Albert Tucker, just as Ern's had been by Sidney Nolan. His debt to Malley is evident in 'night scene' (24), echoing the two versions of 'Night Piece' in Malley's *The Darkening Ecliptic*:

out there where the laurel hedge stood
there is a black wall
hiding in its whispering buttresses
a blind panther
and a mad monk crouching
and a terror that will take shape
the moment you turn around
the fingered form you see
edging around the corner of the tool shed
is dracula
frankenstein the witch of endor and
a couple of were wolves [sic]
are talking in whispers at the front gate...
this is what i say to
morris carmody
morris is a little thin nervous boy
he has been playing with me tonight
as mother and father are at the pictures
and he has to go home
by himself

A footnote: On the back cover of *Playing with Girls* is an advertisement for some other Reed and Harris publications, foremost of which is *Mo's Memoirs*, the 'autobiography' of Roy Rene. But *Mo's Memoirs* was actually the work of another pair of resuscitators: Elisabeth Lambert

and Max Harris himself.

(This paper comes out of a project being written in collaboration with David Musgrave, and I wish to acknowledge his help in its conception and execution.)

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