Sydney, Not the Bush

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In 1930 the photographer E.O. Hoppé came to Australia, where he spent ten months taking pictures for a volume entitled *The Fifth Continent*. Though he conscientiously documented the bush, and lined up the so-called 'wild men' to compose a 'dusky background' for his images, he expected more of Australia than eroded plains, mozzy-ridden jungles and lunar deserts. 'The spiritual home of the white races', he declared, 'is naturally in the cities built up by their vigour and vision'. Had Australians constructed that white, shining, spiritual citadel?

Hoppé was not sure. He considered urbane Melbourne virtually Bostonian, but in Canberra he thought that the government buildings and the lamp-posts looked as if they still had price-tags on them. In Sydney, the prodigality of nature blinded him, mercifully perhaps, to the defects of culture. The city was synonymous with its harbour, which is actually a negation of the city, a dazzling emptiness at its centre; and around the foreshore, Hoppé saw only verdure, not signs of vigorous, visionary human effort. He called Taronga 'the happiest Zoo in the world', because 'its boundaries come right to the ocean-edge and make a natural home for water-loving denizens of the animal world', while across the harbour lay the Botanic Gardens, 'Mecca of typists in the lunch-hour'. The typists, like those water-loving denizens, could be considered fauna, nibbling their sandwiches among the flora. The gardens for them were Mecca, a place of pagan worship. Where, however, was the spiritual home of the white races?

At the time, the question was fair enough, and in a way it still is, though of course we tactfully rephrase it. Australians live and work in cities, but our 'spiritual home' is still the bush, or what lies beyond it in that unpopulated and once unimaginable terrain which used to be called the Never Never. Australia derives its idiosyncratic character and its collective myths from this landscape. Some kind of god, certainly not the Christian one, made the country. Man was left to make the towns, which he did, to begin with, half-heartedly. I still remember with a shudder my first trip to Canberra in 1965. I went there to be interviewed for a National Undergraduate Scholarship, and one evening set out to walk from the ANU campus to that tantalising location called Civic. Blitzed by blow-flies, misled by country lanes, I never got there – though if I had, all I would have found was some optimistic plastery arcades.

I turned the scholarship down, and went to the university in Hobart instead. That at least, I remember thinking, was a city, with tramlines, milk bars, musty thrift shops and houses containing staircases. Of course if I looked more carefully, I had to admit that here too the civic pretence soon faded out. Our city skulked in the foothills of a bad-tempered, intimidating mountain, and slid into a harbour much emptier and less sunnily scintillating than Sydney's, intermittently

frequented by boats which took our apples off to be eaten in England or by a flotilla of rowdy yachts which, having set off from Sydney, made a teasingly brief visit for a few days after Christmas. Was this a city, or only a town? Did cities perhaps exist only in the congested northern hemisphere?

Canberra, apologetically adopting the bush as camouflage, seemed then to be the most modest of capitals, despite a ceremonious town plan devised by an American architect who never visited Australia and a water spout which pays disoriented homage to Lake Geneva. The city's inventors worried about what to call it. Naming a place, like christening a child, evokes sainted precedents and sets a wishful agenda for the future; it is an act of appropriation, but also a magical charm. Australians are hard bitten, laconic ironists, reluctant to make grand statements or to hold tickets on themselves. (If you ask an American how he or she is, you will probably be told 'I'm great!' If you ask how I am, the best you'll ever get is 'Not too bad', even if I happen to be feeling great.) So it was never likely that the Australian capital would be called something triumphal, like Centripolis, or assigned some imported literary deity as its godfather; among the rejected suggestions for a name was 'Shakespeare'. Reviewing the discarded names, I have come up with a personal favourite, which is Sydmeladperbrisho – a compound, as nonsensical as supercalifagilisticexpialidocious, of all the state capitals, which positively trips off the tongue. Its separate syllables could also have been jumbled up and recombined, depending on your own allegiances and your sense of priority. Why not Hosydmeladperbris, or Brisadmelperhosyd?

I once spent many stalled hours pondering the paradox of the Australian city while travelling between Sydney and London in a Qantas 747 which happened to be called 'City of Townsville'. The apparent tautology amused me. Here was a town which translated itself into a ville and then promoted itself to city status, now painted across the side of a machine which soaringly contradicted the civic aim of laying foundations, tethering itself to a spot of earth. My pleasure in the conceit did not outlast my discovery that Townsville got its name from its founder Robert Towns, an English seaman – though the –ville still seems presumptuous, because it wasn't until 1866, two years after Towns's initiative, that the settlement qualified as a municipality.

Even so, Towns was right to think ahead. Before you can build a city, you must imagine one. On a mound of vision in Montefiore Park, the sickly green copper figure of the Surveyor-General Colonel Light imagines Adelaide. A scroll droops from his hand. His left leg is anchored – as his rapt, springing pose requires if he's not to fall off – by the trunk of a beheaded tree: advance warning that culture will require the brutal clearance of nature. But even after you have enticed people to live there, your work of fabrication is not done. A city is a small world walled with echoes and allusions, stocked with precedents and predecessors. It saves you from being alone, because it embeds you in a shared past. The streets are paved with quotations, like the bronze plaques of Writers' Walk on Circular Quay.

A city requires memories and corpses, which take a while to accumulate. The visionaries are not the founders or planners like Light, whose gaze is in the direc-

tion of a non-existent place. That role devolves on artists, the writers and painters who look at what does exist and recreate it, establishing the dominion of imagination. It is they who really construct the city, mapping its by-ways and filling its vacant lots with stories. The man-made objective setting remains the same, but everyone who passes through subjectivises it in a peculiar and personal way. Take the case of the Domain in Sydney. A freethinker like Norman Lindsay could not cross it without scoffing at 'Sydney's self-appointed evangelists, afflicted with megalomania'. But the depressed insurance man in Donald Crick's novel *Martin Place* hears the noise of the stump orators differently: 'From the Domain rose voices of dissent, like echoes of his own discord'. Cities encourage and license such simultaneities.

A decade before Hoppé, D. H. Lawrence spent a season in Australia. His novel *Kangaroo* attributed his own first impressions of Sydney to the hero Somers. How, he asks as he surveys the straggling, improvised bungalows, do you *make* a new country? In England, where the landscape was barbered and parcelled up and domestically annexed aeons ago, no-one remembers. In America, the arduous business of making the country is abbreviated by a profiteering impatience, and a brisk contempt for the land itself. The Manhattan grid was geometrically laid out to the top of the island long before anyone went to live in that wilderness of numbered blocks to the north. American cities are still made, or serially remade, overnight. I went to Houston for the first time in the late 1980s, just after the end of the oil boom. I remember the drive in from the airport through a scruffy desert, with tumbleweed careening across the highways and roadside sheds selling guns or liquor or the services of lap dancers. Then out of this level nowhere, a vertical illusion suddenly sprouted: a line-up of post-modern pinnacles, including a Dutch guild hall which had grown to a tremendous height after guzzling steroids. The young black woman who was driving the cab glanced in the rear-vision mirror and noticed my jaw drop open at the shock of it. 'Don't worry honey', she said. 'Dey's all empty.' The oil boom which conjured up those towers was over, and the instantaneous mushroom clump of a city was already as obsolete as Venice.

Australian cities grew more gradually, and never got speculatively ahead of themselves like Houston. Kangaroo, the demagogue in Lawrence's novel, understands the contribution writers must make to the civic, civilising project, and tries to recruit Somers: 'Australia', he says, 'is waiting for her Homer – or her Theocritus'. The self-qualification in his phrase is perceptive, because the founding of a literature requires you to get the genres in the proper order. First comes Theocritus, the pastoral poet. 'Some description of landscape is necessary', as Murray Bail puts it in *Eucalyptus*. To start with you need poets for whom culture is a branch of rural cultivation, a species of husbandry: Spenser with his alter ego Colin Clout, who is a shepherd, or Milton in Lycidas seeking pastures new; Patrick White jackerooing in the Snowy Mountains, then self-sentenced to 'rustication' (as he put it) at Dogwoods where he bred schnauzers, or Les Murray reflectively supporting his bulk on a fence at Bunyah. After this, you can advance to Homer, and plan the creation of an epic. Pastoral cultivates the land. But the concern of the

epic is the city. The land is always the same, governed by seasonal cycles. The city, however, is perpetually being created and destroyed by its human imaginers. Carthage falls and so does Troy, while Rome is founded; Brecht curses the arrogant towers of Manhattan and predicts that they will one day be dust.

Australian literature acquired its epic not long ago – though the self-deprecating national sense of humour twisted it into a mock-epic. The setting is a cinema conveniently called The Epic in Manly, a suburb whose name equally conveniently pays homosocial tribute to the epic cult of virility. In *Holden's Performance*, Murray Bail's hero gets a job at the cinema, where one of his chores is to clean up a puddle of vomit expressed by a drunken cricketer on the foyer carpet. The orange and russet mess forms itself into the map of Australia, 'a work of art, containing its own spontaneity and moral force'. The drunken poet is topographically meticulous, since even he manages a couple of supplementary heaves to fill in Tasmania, with a blobby overspill for the Bass Strait Islands. Flies authenticate the design by settling on the Northern Territory. Holden Shadbolt preserves this action painting under a glass dome borrowed from the confectionary counter, while the sight rouses his demagogic employer Screech to a proud tirade. It reminds him of the theatre's name: EPIC, he explains abbreviates the slogan 'Even Patriotism is Colourful'. Bail's joke is brilliant, and not so very far-fetched. I wonder if he knew that, when the radical novelist Upton Sinclair unsuccessfully campaigned in 1934 for the governorship of California, he called his party EPIC? The acronym, in Sinclair's case, stood for 'End Poverty in California'.

Despite this loud, liquid rallying cry, the Australian tendency is to stray back from epic to pastoral. Cemented suburbs like the one in which I grew up can't do without their nature strips, and even Sydney has its Agricultural Show, when the country – riding high on the sheep's back – returns to town. I was staying at the Wentworth Hotel in Sydney last November, and one night did a jet-lagged double-take as the lift doors opened on the bar and I stepped out onto bales of hay, as if I had staggered into the stables. The room had been pastoralised, I discovered, in preparation for the Melbourne Cup next day. Oswald Spengler described the modern city as a 'daemonic desert of stone', and the painter Francis Picabia or the architect Le Corbusier saw Manhattan as a cubist sculpture. Australian cities do not fit these arid and abstract definitions. Ada Cambridge in 1891 pointed to the view from Dawes Point, above the piers to the west of where the harbour bridge is now anchored, as an instructive example of 'how the charms of nature and the utilities of modern civilisation may blend'. To clear the Australian land counts as vandalism, not progress. In Brent of Bin Bin's *Back to Bool Bool*, a character who has just got off the migrant boat at Circular Quay complains about the deforestation of Hyde Park during excavations for the railway tunnel to Bondi Junction. Where are 'the great Port Jackson and Moreton Bay figs with their marvellous roots, that made Sydney different?' The city's character, for him, derives from vegetation not architecture, and the settlement's initial name of Botany Bay is a 'certificate of original glory'. Displaying that certificate, every Australian city makes room for its Botanical Garden. In Perth, half of King's Park is still an unedited,

unmolested excerpt from the bush, and even neoclassical Adelaide has those bewildering desiccated squares of sun-burned grass where the Greeks and Romans would have installed a paved agora or a forum.

'The Mitchells', Les Murray's account of a Wordsworthian communion between countrymen who have not been defensively individualised by urban life ends with a sudden, startling challenge to the alienated un-neighbourly city: 'sometimes the scene is an avenue'. I love this poem, but I wonder whether that cosy avenue might not be a cul-de-sac in Melbourne – or should I say in Erinsborough? – called Ramsay Street. Our literature mistrusts urbanity. The talk in *Illywhacker*, as Peter Carey says, is 'a celebration of towns as plain (and plainer than) Geelong'. Rather than the condensation and verticality of the city, Murray celebrates the sprawl, which is a suburban disfigurement, while Carey praises plainness or flatness, a topography which looks the way a drawl sounds – the 'uneventful horizons' stared at by vacant-eyed cockies in the Western District of Victoria, or 'flat featureless landscapes where it is the lot of sheep and their gaolers to spend their lives'.

If you focus on the taciturn, lowbrow vista beyond the suburbs, the city in the foreground comes to seem chimerical, even fraudulent. Hal Porter once likened Hobart, which starts on a waterfront and arduously climbs a mountain, to 'such upstairs/downstairs Old World cities as Naples and Genoa'. Of course the comparison was too good to be true, because it depended on an undemocratic spatial hierarchy. Porter therefore withdrew the compliment by going on to call Hobart a 'minified' version of San Francisco – 'without' – he added, 'the tang, glamour, ebullience and uproar'. How can you have a city without such vices? Gwen Harwood, writing to Thomas Riddell from her family home on Grimes Street during 1943, did her witty best to incriminate or begrime Brisbane: she gave her address as Crimes Street S.W.1 or Grime Street, and renamed the suburb Auchenflower Urbs Beata. Adelaide, in *Holden's Performance*, 'a small city and flat', dwindles to a luminous mirage when they tear up the tramlines. The metal grid organised space and the inflexible schedule made sense of time. When these are removed, there is only a blinding blankness left. In *Illywhacker*, Carey shows how easily Sydney can be unbuilt. All it takes is an experimental act of hooliganism. Scrape away at the granite veneer of the Bank of New Zealand in Martin Place and you'll discover brick beneath; even the ersatz granite is only terracotta tiles. Augustus, the epic hero saluted by Virgil in *The Aeneid*, was said to have found Rome brick and left it marble. Carey finds Sydney granite, but leaves it wattle and daub.

The bush at least is idiosyncratic, authentic, and so is its wildlife (which is why one of the names proposed for Canberra was Marsupalia). Australian cities, built so belatedly, could only seem like imitations of prototypes in other places. Sydney is always being uprooted or displaced by metaphors which seek to build bridges to the multiple elsewheres it allegedly resembles. Christopher Koch in *The Doubleman* calls King's Cross 'a southern hemisphere Montmartre'. Peter Corris in *The Empty Beach* remarks that the palm trees on the Parade at Bondi 'would go better in Singapore', while the blocks of flats are a hopeful exercise in 'Hollywood Morocco', almost plausible in the right light. Koch convinces himself that an Eliza-

beth Bay boarding-house is 'Sydney's version of a Venetian *palazzo*'. The analogy with Venice has always been alluring. 'All it wants is a gondola', says Madge about the harbour in Arthur H. Adams's *The Australians*, published in 1920. A poster with an aerial view of the moonlit city by Douglas Annand, designed for Australia's 150th anniversary in 1938, is called *Venetian Nights: Sydney Harbour*. The analogy doesn't really work, because Venice lacks the balance between nature and culture which characterises the Australian city. Venice is all culture, with no nature at all, except for occasional rooftop gardens and wet streets.

When the Harbour Bridge opened in 1932, an article in a commemorative book published by *Art in Australia* tried twinning Sydney with another maritime city, arguing that its destiny was to become 'a New York in miniature with skyscrapers exceeding 150 feet'. North Sydney and Mosman had the dubious honour of impersonating 'a second Brooklyn': Brooklyn, as they say in those parts, should be so lucky. David Williamson in *Emerald City* settles for comparing Sydney with Oz, the illusory destination at the end of the yellow brick road. At least that's more appetising than another metaphor which I came across in a brochure about Melbourne, produced by the Australian Publicity Council in the late 1950s to attract overseas investment. A photo spread on the coalfields of Gippsland was accompanied by an earnest testimonial, which vouches that 'Visiting industrialists have seen the Latrobe Valley of the future as the "Ruhr of Victoria". May that particular future never come.

This pining habit of metaphor, which conditions the way we see our cities, is one of the strange, sophisticated idiosyncracies of the Australian literary imagination. James McAuley referred in 'Terra Australis' to our 'land of similes'. (His metaphor, incidentally, was made metaphorical by a misprint or by simple inattention when the expatriate novelist Colin MacInnes cited the phrase in his 1967 guide to Australia and New Zealand, published by *Life* magazine. MacInnes quoted the phrase as 'your land of smiles'. Unfortunately the land of smiles, in Franz Lehar's Viennese operetta, happens to be China; McAuley's poem, splendidly muddled by McInnes, thereby becomes 'a gentle affirmation', reflected in what he calls the 'fine smiling eyes' of the orientally inscrutable McAuley himself.) Our metaphors empower us to contradict reality, as Shelley does when he tells the skylark 'Bird thou never wert'. Tasmania's official metaphor is that of the heart. Hal Porter, however, preferred to liken the island's shape to a 'much kicked bucket', as if expressing a wish that Tasmania itself might kick the bucket. I'm not sure that my already complex feelings about my native state will soon recover from hearing Sir Les Patterson liken the bushy female pudenda of his Lesettes to the map of thickly forested Tasmania.

Trained on Sydney, the metaphoric eye sees the city as a body – an organism, not the product of human ingenuity and engineering; nature as yet undeformed by culture. Whenever Somers in Lawrence's *Kangaroo* is asked how he likes Sydney, he replies with diplomatic obliquity 'The harbour, I think is wonderful'. Its wonders are corporeal. He first glimpses 'the famous harbour spreading out with its many arms and legs', and later – coining a genuinely Homeric epithet – refers

to 'the many-lobed harbour'. Even more deftly erotic, he sees the 'hidden and half-hidden lobes intruding among the low, dark-brown cliffs'. For Ada Cambridge's heroine in *A Marked Man*, the inner port is deliciously closed off by 'two little grassy tongues of land'. Kenneth Slessor proposed a more uninhibited reading of the scene in 1950. The water now fondles the foreshore like an exploratory male seducer: the city is shaped by 'the fingers of the Harbour, *groping* [my italics] across the piers and jetties, clutching deeply into the hills'. Slessor described the harbour waters 'dyed with a whole paint-box's armoury of colour'. Mixed metaphors prove as intoxicating as mixed drinks: colours, for the enthusiastic Slessor, are armaments. The cocktail goes on to get frothier. 'The water is like silk, like pewter, like a leopard's skin, and occasionally merely like water ...' – just for a change! 'Sometimes', Slessor continues, 'it dances with flakes of fire, sometimes it is blank and anonymous with fog, sometimes it shouts as joyously as a mirror'. Wait a minute: how can a mirror shout? I'm reminded of the use Narcissus found for water. The city of similes is a looking-glass world.

Metaphorical last waves like the one in Peter Weir's film are always threatening Sydney with dissolution. Lawrence's metaphors inundate the city. The ferries, he says, allow the citizens to 'slip like fishes' between the two shores. Vivian Smith described the city as 'a room far undersea', an arcaded Atlantis, and when Shadbolt in *Holden's Performance* takes the bus into town from Manly he feels the water lapping at the jetties, curtailing streets, reclaiming domain: 'Water everywhere', he notes, like the thirsty ancient mariner. At least Bail, a proud modernist, sees all this water as a technological aid, not just a natural amenity. Sydney, he points out, is 'water-cooled like the majority of four-stroke engines'. He adds the customary metaphors, noting that San Francisco and Venice are – if you permit me to commute between similes – in the same boat.

A metaphor is a vehicle, literally a transporter, a device which makes metamorphosis possible. In 1970, David Malouf's volume of Horace acts as transport, projecting him through space and time. He reads the book thirty miles outside Sydney (which 'glitters invisible/In its holocaust of air'), but is equidistant from Rome, 'two thousand years from'. A metaphor works like a harbour cruise: once embarked, you can elide the sight of the squat, ragged, suburban foreshore. A trip on the water enabled Sydney's early novelists to describe the city while keeping it invisible, as it still is in Malouf's poem. The characters in Louise Mack's *The World is Round* go up to North Sydney Suspension Bridge for a moonlight picnic. Once they reach the middle harbour, Mack announces 'The city was out of sight now'. The Lane Cove ferry performs the same service for the heroine of Louis Stone's *Betty Wayside*: 'the noise and stir of the city were left behind'. Seen from Cremorne in Adams's *The Australians*, 'the jagged city sky-line' is 'blurred and liquefied by the heavy heat-haze'. At last the case-hardened eye of Peter Corris disenchants the distant view. If he validates the illusion you peer at from the other side of the harbour, it's merely to underline real-estate values: in *The Dying Trade*, 'Mosman looks nice from across the harbour and just as good up close'. Corris's detective, of course, lives in Glebe, without so much as a harbour glimpse.

Novelists before Corris compose the setting pictorially, like those photographers who greased their lenses or shot through euphemising veils: these impressionistic tactics allowed Jack Cato to present a landscape in the Tasmanian Midlands as an illustration to Gray's *Elegy*. Adams saw the warships as Fort Denison as 'faint washes of liquid grey laid on the warmer haze by a delicate water colourist', and Christina Stead in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* assumes that the estuary and its untouched hills 'sprang from the artist's brain and straightway came into life and breath upon canvas'.

Even when they are blurring the view and translating culture back into nature, like the ferries in *Kangaroo* which turn Sydneysiders into fish, these metaphors admit that nature is altered, perhaps perfected or perhaps replaced, by culture. The advent of the bridge announced that there was more to the harbour than lobes and fishes. Hoppé, who photographed it just before the completion of the span, liked its closure of the vista, which blocked off the mazy meandering infinitude of water. The *Art in Australia* souvenir edition acclaimed the bridge as the 'acme of precision', and was glad that its construction had stamped out the 'dissolute streets and crazy buildings' of The Rocks. Another telling metaphor, especially given the abiding concern to dissolve Sydney, to merge it with the harbour: the streets are now seen as dissolute because of their unmodern, picturesque crookedness, not because of the rough pubs situated in them.

'The bridge is certainly the simplest answer', as John Philip remarks in a beguiling poem about the Manly Ferry. It was the answer to many questions more complex than that of the quickest route to Manly. All at once it modernised Sydney, and belatedly sponsored a modern refraction of the city. Grace Cossington Smith painted the curvature of the span, still with a gap in the middle, as an essay in cubic and volumetric forms, and a 1932 linocut by Ailsa Lee Brown, *Moths Around the Quay*, looked down on it futuristically, from the viewpoint of a pilot high above: the quay is a vortex of agitated shipping, whipped up by the plane's propeller. The bridge, like a metaphor, is a transporter; from the first, it had more to do than carry traffic. That's why it's a grander thing than its drab, dwarfish English prototype in Newcastle: the difference lies in the ways it has been looked at, and the almost supernatural jobs it has been called to perform. Eleanor Dark in *Waterway*, published in 1938, regards the bridge with 'wilful mysticism'. The hero of her novel likens the span to a 'ghostly arc', or – when the sun rises, ridging the sky with flame – to a rainbow. Rather than grey steel, it displays the shimmering polychrome sign of a covenant, which might perhaps harmonise the conflict-ridden, accident-prone society of the novel, a harbinger of 'ultimate good'.

Hart Crane saw in the fraught, tense suspension of the Brooklyn Bridge with its vibrant cables a new mode of heroism, loftily absorbing the stress of contemporary existence. The bridge gave Sydney its share in this modern technological epic. Our Homer was an engineer, or a whole team of them. Robert Emerson Curtis published fourteen lithographs about the building of the bridge in 1933. Those gods in machines who rule the classical world have been usurped by god-like machines, which deify the men who operate them. Curtis's captions strive to

invent an appropriate Homeric diction, ennobling the workers with capital letters: 'From his lordly seat in the clouds, the Driver of the Creeper Crane is the High Master, the Weaver of Steel'. Curtis's metaphors sanctify the bridge – he entitles the shadowy nave under the pylon 'Cathedral' – but they also acknowledge that the city, as Spengler said, is a demonic invention, the profane collective fantasy of men. He likens the twisted cables, not yet braided, to 'Medusa's locks'. More startling, a reporter from the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1928 watched the riveters lobbing incandescent clumps of steel from hand to hand, and called them 'playful Satans'. You wouldn't find such a knowing literary allusion in a newspaper today. Pandemonium, the demonic parliament erected by the devils in *Paradise Lost*, took slightly less effort than the bridge, and 'rose like an exhalation'.

Yet in Australia we don't allow ourselves to believe in our own myths. Even Robert Emerson Curtis, for all his determination to make the bridge Herculean, can't stop himself registering an ironic quirk of its Ocker physiognomy which Whitman or Crane, the acolytes of the Brooklyn Bridge, would never have noticed. He illustrates the iron case of the cable anchorage, and calls it 'one of four immense 'warts' on the buttock of the Bridge'. He sees it, quite literally, warts and all. The opening ceremonies also comfortably slid back, in accordance with Australian priorities, from epic to pastoral, from Homer to Theocritus. Ours is a country in which a poet like Les Murray can refer to 'us primary producers, us farmers and authors'. The Historical Pageant which trundled across this monument to structural engineering included a series of floats representing the triumph of primary industries. An allegorical Australia had her golden chariot drawn by six merinos; 'classic specimens of milking cows, milk cans, separators and so forth' were mounted on the Dairy Float; and Bacchus boozily presided over the Viticultural Float. These processions coincided with the Royal Agricultural Show in Centennial Park. *Art in Australia* therefore commissioned an article from the President of the R.A.S., whose task was to explain what the show 'Means to the Nation'. The enterprise, Sir Samuel Hordern argued, was of 'constructive National value as an essential stimulant to breeding and culture'. The culture had nothing to do with the writing of books or even the building of bridges. Culture, at least when not being used as a dirty word, was still an abbreviation of agriculture.

Hart Crane's Brooklyn Bridge is both harp and altar. Unlike messianic Americans, we domesticate our bridge rather than sanctify it: its fond nickname is the coathanger, just as the new and marmoreal apartment building on Bennelong Point has come to be known, less fondly, as the toaster. The Sydney Opera House has not been so easy to make affectionate, belittling, metaphorical jokes about – and that's its importance, both as an iconic completion of the urban vista, finally ensuring that the city is not upstaged by the harbour, and as the symbol of a new Australia which consists of more than trees, sheep and flies. When the architect Harry Seidler first saw Utzon's design, he sent him a cable acclaiming it as 'pure poetry'. What Mallarmé called 'la poésie pure', that earliest announcement of linguistic modernity, was dispensed from having to mean anything in particular. Its words were no more than signs, and they could signify anything at all. Like the

purified language of Mallarmé, the Opera House offers an education in abstractness. You can imagine what Whitman or Crane would have made of it – Whitman who listened to outdoor performances of opera at Castle Garden just off Wall Street, and Crane who likened cables of the Brooklyn Bridge to the lyre of Orpheus. As always, we Australians dread sublimity, so Clive James has jocularly called the Opera House a portable typewriter stuffed with oyster shells. His metaphors, I suspect, are a bit formulaic: he also said that a body builder looks like a condom stuffed with walnuts. But the zany, surreal object he imagines is an apt enough tribute, because the Opera House is less a building than a metaphorical facility – another transporter, ready to metamorphose into a seagull or a yacht, anxious to take flight or set sail. Opera, cramped onto its exiguous stage, is itself a metaphor for something unuseful and perhaps supernatural. Hence Jan Morris, in one of her recent descriptions of Sydney, squeezes all the harbour and the rowdy city too into the space beneath those ceramic sails. 'Few cities on earth', she said in 1992, 'can offer so operatic an approach'; Sydney itself – born for show, with a facade of brilliance, and a gift for exhibitionism – is the opera. I relish the fact that in the concert which opened the Opera House in 1973, Birgit Nilsson sang the final scene from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, in which Brunnhilde ignites a funeral pyre and burns down the hall. Inside the Opera House, it could be admitted that cities are perpetual ruins, monuments to a restive human creativity which relies on destruction and never attains completion.

Of course the Opera House did not resolve Australia's pitched battle between nature and culture. Les Murray, in his poem 'Sydney and the Bush' declares that there can be 'no common ground' between them, and happily imagines fashionable suburbs floating 'at night, far out to sea', like the litter of Malibu beach-houses decanted into the ocean by mud-slides on the other side of the Pacific. My own sympathies are with Corris's inner-city private eye Cliff Hardy, who, in *The Black Prince* goes on an uncomfortable excursion to the Daintree rain forest in North Queensland. He camps out, eats damper, and sums up his feelings with an alliterative grimace: 'I was notorious for preferring pavements to paddocks, beaches to the bush'. I have made my own small contribution to the campaign by maligning Mount Wellington. The description of the mountain in my book about Tasmania was actually an oblique portrait of my father, who resembled it: mountains, as Edmund Burke said, exemplify the fear excited by sublimity. I have never been forgiven for my impiety. Last November, on Margaret Throsby's radio programme, I grumbled about the bad temper of that extinct volcano and its oppressive profile. When I got to Hobart a few days later, the owner of the bookshop in which I was reading told me that a local beldame had popped in to complain about me. 'Did you hear him on Margaret Throsby', she asked, 'criticising the mountain?' I felt like the dandified Mr Amarinth in Robert Hitchens's novel about the aesthetes of the 1890s, *The Green Carnation*. Mr Amarinth allegedly 'said something scandalous about the North Pole' and 'ruined the reputation of more than one eminently respectable ocean which had previously been received everywhere': he covers 'Nature with confusion by his open attacks on her'.

Mount Wellington will outlive me, I know. But meanwhile, isn't it culture's project to quarrel with nature? Let us by all means, as Bail recommends in *Eucalyptus*, name and number the trees. Having done so, we can ignore them. The creation of a literature is more like architecture than forestry. Trees, Bail concedes, should recede into 'part of the scenery', in front of which all cultures go through their motions.

Others have triumphed over nature more spectacularly than I did when I aimed my paper darts at the impervious flank of Mount Wellington. As the Sydney drag queens prepare to go bush in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Terence Stamp wonders why Guy Pearce is packing so much otiose glitter. 'Ever since I was a lad', Pearce earnestly explains, 'I've had a dream – to travel to the centre of Australia and climb King's Canyon as a queen, in a full-length Gaultier sequin, heels and a tiara'. 'Great', sneers Stamp, 'that's just what this country needs – a cock in a frock on a rock'. And so it is, and this is just what the country gets when those three ambisexual human art-works clamber through the scrub and teeter like spangled skyscrapers on the edge of the canyon, swaying (as the tallest skyscrapers do) in the wind. I can't imagine Les Murray approving of this, and I wonder whether Hoppé would have recognised the drag queens were establishing a 'spiritual home' in the outback. But it's a signal moment in our history, which moved me almost to tears – almost! – when I saw the film for the first time a few weeks ago.

Actually those sacred monsters don't need to leave Sydney: a prototype or predecessor beams across the harbour from Milson's Point. I am thinking of the florid human sun whose gaping mouth is the gateway to Luna Park. Her tiara is made of fizzing electric bulbs, and the pylons between which she is squeezed mimic the pinnacles of the Chrysler Building, the jazziest of New York's skyscrapers. Aptly, she has established herself on the ground vacated by the engineering workshops of the bridge builders. Her eyes wide with excitement, she dazzles the Opera House with her portcullis of cosmetic dentistry. Long before the Mardi Gras made Sydney (as David Malouf has claimed) a carnal, carnivalesque place, this ignited female face symbolised the seductive allure of Sydney, offering slippery dips, peep shows, barrels of fun, and an invitation to the giggle palace. Of course the city is a spiritual home, though not exclusively for Hoppé's 'white races'. But we should not forget that it is also an erogenous zone, home to all pleasures frowned on in country towns. Whether you give the credit to Priscilla's passengers or to the Art Deco sorceress on Milson's Point, the outcome is the same. In Australia, nature has at long last been triumphantly topped by high-heeled, tiara-ed culture.