

Romantic Nationalism and the Descent into Myth: William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise*

ANDREW McCANN
University of Melbourne

The study of Australian literature has been and no doubt still is a form of nationalist pedagogy in which the primary object of nationalist discourse, the people, is emblematised in the formation of a literary culture. The easy simultaneity of text and populace implied here is a recurring trope in the writing of Australian cultural history. Needless to say the 1890s is the decade that most clearly embodies this simultaneity in its foregrounding of an apparent movement from Romanticism to a more directly political realism. The narrative of the people's becoming, in other words, involves a stylistic shift that is seen as integral to, even constitutive of, political consciousness in the years before Federation. By this reckoning, the shift to realism concretises the perception of locality, the sense of time and space, we associate with the nation. Realism effects, in Mikhail Bakhtin's words, 'a creative humanisation of this locality, which transforms a part of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people' (31).

The trouble with this version of Australian literary history is that it mistakes obvious stylistic differences for a genuine and radical discursive shift. In positing the movement from Romanticism to realism as the key to national becoming it assumes a direct correspondence between the aesthetic and the ideological. This elides what, looking from a slightly different angle, is equally obvious about late-nineteenth-century Australian nationalism, and perhaps nationalism in general: that is, the nation, with its attendant notions of organically bonded community, locality and autochthony, is not simply haunted by Romanticism, it is unambiguously Romantic. To say this, I think, necessitates that we see Romanticism not simply as a style, an aesthetic, or even as a matter of affect, but more fundamentally as a discourse organized by oppositions that, as Pheng Cheah points out, are indicative of a 'vitalist

ontology' that extends from German idealism into Western-style nationalisms. These oppositions include, nation/state, community/society, integration/ alienation, health/sickness, the organic/the inorganic, the body/the machine, and labour/capital (see Cheah 236).

In this paper I want to argue that William Lane's 1892 socialist-realist novel *The Workingman's Paradise* is symptomatic of the ways in which the persistence of Romanticism organises popular political consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century. Lane's novel is one of those texts that embarrasses a cultural nationalism still convinced of the progressiveness of its agenda. The novel is explicitly xenophobic to begin with, making visible a more pervasive relationship between Australian nationalism, its socialist variant and the anti-Chinese leagues of the period. Like other texts of the 1890s, notably poems by Lawson, it also imagines the space and time of the nation in a way that replaces the contingencies of settler-colonialism with allusions to a white Australian autochthony in which settlers themselves appear as, in Lawson's words, 'the natives of the land' (227). At the heart of the novel is a compelling anatomy of urban decay and capitalist exploitation in which concerns for social hygiene and gender equality, both conducive to a healthy, organically unified nation and central to the fate of the Australian people, organise a myth of community in which the unity of land and blood is dangerously eroticised. The obvious social-realism of the text, in other words, is apparently insufficient for the generation of national identity, which, it turns out, requires a mythic idiom that draws upon the phantasmatic time-space of Romanticism in order to shore-up its performative dimension. But to think about Romantic nationalism in Lane's novel is not simply to think about an economy of affect. The phrase Romantic nationalism raises the bifurcated nature of nationalism itself: that is, nationalism as a discourse produced out of the undecidability of realism and Romanticism, history and myth, or, as Homi Bhabha puts it, the 'accumulative temporality of the pedagogical and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative' (145).

If the novel forces us to rethink the cultural politics of the 1890s, it also forces us to rethink the discourse of Romanticism, especially as it moves beyond the European metropolis to what British and North American Romanticists sometimes call the colonial 'contact zone'. Recently Saree Makdisi, whose work is both Marxist and post-colonial in orientation, has argued for the oppositionality of Romanticism *vis-à-vis* both capitalism and colonialism, ignoring altogether the ways in which Romanticism replicated itself outside of metropolitan contexts, organising forms of political consciousness that, in Australia at least, were directly implicated in the consolidation of settler-colonialism. The notion of Romanticism as a discourse, rather than a body of texts or formal characteristics, is one I am borrowing from Friedrich Kittler's work in order to read more readily the mobility and iterability of Romanticism in this imperial context. Kittler argues that 'Romanticism is the discursive production of the Mother as the source of discursive production' (xxiii). Romanticism imagines itself in relationship to a feminised origin – mother or nature, but also lover and muse – that motivates literary production from a position outside of, or prior to discourse. This means that Romanticism is simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of

gendered positions in regard to the production of its own discourse and that the relationship between these positions is also prone to a certain kind of eroticisation: 'The discourse that the mother in the discourse network of 1800 creates but cannot pronounce is called Poetry. Mother Nature is silent so that others can speak of and for her. She exists as the singular behind a plurality of discourses' (26). For Kittler this central aspect of the Romantic imaginary is situated in regard to quite material transformations in elementary acculturation techniques, involving, by the end of the eighteenth century, a shift from paternal to maternal authority in the private space of the nuclear family and the increased importance of mothers and conceptions of maternity in the early education of children and especially in language learning. The 'system of equivalents Woman = Nature = Mother allowed acculturation to begin from an absolute origin' (28), such that language learning increasingly involved the child's reproduction of a primary orality, the voice of the mother. It is not difficult to see how, in a British context, what Geoffrey Hartman calls Wordsworthian 'nature-inscription' works within these discursive limits (see Hartman 31-9) or how Australian poets like Harpur and Kendall replicate these discursive limits, albeit in a way that often foregrounds their unsustainability.

At first glance *The Workingman's Paradise* seems a world away from this kind of poetry in the urgency of its attempt to situate characters in terms of the substantive historical activity that grounds literary fictions of 'historically active man' (Bakhtin 37-8). The opening of the novel is in this vein, consolidating the space of historical actuality, as opposed to abstract or phantasmatic time-space, by exploring an emphatically disenchanting world that seems to have been emptied of the idealism that Romanticism imagines in its longing for the muse. Nellie, the heroine of the novel, is waiting for Ned, her childhood playmate, now a shearer in Queensland. Through discussions with her neighbours and her own interior monologies the novel foregrounds the concerns of Lane's political agenda: correlating unionism and anti-Chinese sentiment. When Ned shows up the novel adopts the style of documentary journalism as Nellie endeavours to show him the 'real Sydney': slums, gender inequality, worker exploitation, and proletarian mobilisation. Implicitly this involves a critique of urban space itself as the site of heterosexual romance and consumerist pleasure. By the time Ned and Nellie arrive at a fashionable restaurant on George Street, a 'painted, gilded, veneered, electro-plated place full of mirrors and gas-fittings' (23), urban leisure and entertainment are clearly rewritten in terms of the tawdry illusionism of false consciousness, emblematised in ornamental, reflective surfaces. This is most emphatic when the pair arrive at Paddy's Market on a Saturday night, to find the promise of metropolitan leisure, the mystique of the commodity form itself, rendered hollow. In a long description that seems both to evoke and displace Marcus Clarke's euphoric descriptions of Melbourne night life, Lane foregrounds the utter emptiness of the marketplace, suggesting the sense of waking from a dream that Walter Benjamin attributed to the Paris arcades.

Ned's political education, although well underway at this point, begins in earnest when he and Nellie end up in the midst of a circle of Sydney bohemians, 'the Stratton circle' (48). This broadens the possibilities for political discussion and

debate, and is structurally important to the novel, not just because it lets Lane introduce educated, cosmopolitan radicals capable of explaining the relationship between politics and aesthetic affect, pedagogy and performance, more thoroughly, but also because it lets these other characters verbalise Nellie's crucial and increasingly symbolic role in the novel's production of a national imaginary. The erotic component of Ned's acculturation is latent early in the novel, but this becomes more emphatic and compelling as Nellie herself becomes the centre of a kind of national cult of the feminine. The Stratton circle articulates the necessity of affect to political identification: art embodies man's developing consciousness in a way that evokes a Romantic account of history as the progress towards some sort of unalienated wholeness of spirit. Ned's initial encounter with the Stratton circle rehearses the relationship between art and politics expressed in this philosophy. When the Marseillaise is played, for instance, 'notes that made the blood boil and the senses swim,' Ned feels militant indignation, expressed in a 'mist of unquenchable tears' (61), amply illustrating the performative dimension of political acculturation. It is also clear, however, that Nellie herself is a source of affect for the group as a whole and as such embodies the novel's broader interest in healthy femininity and maternity as crucial to the health of the nation. 'There is but one Womanity,' Mrs Stratton asserts, 'and Nellie is its prophet' (50). Nellie is not only a passionate spokesperson for the emancipation of women and the cause of socialism in general, she also, at least in part, mediates the relationship of the other characters and especially of Ned to these causes, such that political affiliations become not only affective but, very transparently, erotic in nature. Ned's political acculturation, in other words, his emergence as the subject of socialist struggle, replicates the Romantic paradigm in which men pursue the eternal feminine as the source of their own interiority, agency and historical actuality. Of course the equivalence of woman, nature and mother that Kittler identifies as a crucial to the organisation of the Romantic quest for origins has an obvious extension. Women, nature and mother are also figures for the nation and suggest the ways in which Romanticism and nationalism are deeply and dubiously implicated in each other.

Love of the concept of beauty embodied in the feminine, in other words, allegorises political identifications, the love of the nation, just as the erotic facilitates the performative aspect of political identity. The novel's insistent articulation of politics as a love of beauty, however, takes on a much more emphatic ideological meaning in the second half of the novel, which opens with Nellie watching a child of the slums struggle against death. The sickly infant is clearly symptomatic of a broader sense of crisis and collapse, in response to which Nellie's long interior monologue becomes increasingly militant until, apparently at the limit of both conventional history and conventional histrionics, it moves into the register of myth, evoking a primal past as both the underlying origin and ultimate fulfilment of the nationalist-feminist agenda:

Oh, for the days when our race was young, when its women slew themselves rather than be shamed and when its men, trampling a rotten

empire down, feared neither God nor man and held each other brothers and hated, each one, the tyrant as the common foe of all! Better days when from the forests and the steppes our forefathers burst, half-naked and free, communists and conquerors, a fierce avalanche of daring men and lusty women who beat and battered Rome down like Odin's hammer that they were! Alas, for the heathen virtues and the wild pagan fury for freedom and for the passion and purity that Frega taught to the daughters of the barbarian! ... Gone forever seemed the days when the land was for all, and the cattle and the fruits of the field, and when, unruled by kings, untrammelled by priests, untyrannised by pretence of law, our fathers drank in from nature's breast the strength and vigour that gave it even to this little babe to fight its hopeless fight for life so bravely and so long. Odin was dead, whose son's dared to go to hell with their own people and Frega was no more whose magic filled with molten fire the veins of all true lovers and nerved with desperate courage the hand of her who guarded the purity of her body and the happiness of her child. (130-1)

In this passage the possibility of a socialist future is phrased as a longing for a lost moment of racial purity and vitality. Nordic paganism, primitive communism and the Romantic metaphors of a nature from whose breast one drinks, fuse into a worldview in which political violence on behalf of the integrity of the people, 'our race,' is referred to a conception of political agency that springs not from the sphere of historical actuality as it is presupposed by realism, but from a natural order that informs the past, the present and the future.

The novel's apparently progressive gender politics partly rest on the fact that Nellie is given voice in these passages, that she is allowed to articulate the fantasy life of the collective, rather than simply be a prompt for it. Of course these moments can't obscure that fact that Nellie also functions as the primary cause of Ned's politicization. In fact her ability to function as the occasion for Ned's, and by extension the late-nineteenth-century reader's entry into the mythology of nationalism, is reliant on her articulation of this pagan idyll. Later in the novel, as Ned's political identifications become clear, he can fixate on Nellie's physical appearance and read this in terms of the race memory her previous interior monologue had articulated:

the face, too, had gathered form and force, in the freer curve of her will-full jaw, in the sterner compression of fuller lips that told their tale of latent passion strangely bordering on the cruel, in the sweeter blending of the Celt and Saxon shown in the straight nose, strong cheek-bones and well-marked brows. (140)

When Ned and Nellie walk through the streets of Sydney shortly before their parting at the end of the novel, this sense of Nellie as the embodiment or evocation of race memory, 'the barbarian hating and loving and yearning and throbbing'

(141), is also linked to a heightened sense of nature. Looking out onto Sydney harbour Nellie senses 'life in the very rocks under her feet, language in the very shimmer of the waters, a music, as the ancients dreamed, in the glittering spheres that circled there in space' (158). As she imagines herself integrated into some great natural life force, the novel is also able to present its vision of community as autochthonous, springing from the land, in a way that underwrites the abstract pedagogy of nationality with the primal unity of individual, community and nature. At the end of the novel, however, this sense of settler autochthony is displaced by a typically Romantic gesture towards a universal, metaphysical principle manifest in nature. As Ned contemplates the 'Law that needs no policeman to maintain it' (224), nature no longer implies a geographically specific locality. It is, rather, the ubiquitous, timeless conception of nature, 'brooding, godlike, pregnant' (224), which Lane inherits from Romantic universalism. The space of the nation, in which history is actualised, here gives way to an abstract sense of place, as the empirico-historical slips into the suprasensible. The autochthonous unity of settler and land in Australia becomes merely a local example of the general unity of man and nature, comfortably eliding the problem of settler-colonialism and enabling the Nordic fantasy of primitive communism to ground itself as a specific manifestation of a universal principle. But if Lane's Romanticism holds onto a notion of primitive communism, which is integral to his sense of the nation, by locating it in some mythic space unbothered by the contingencies of settler-colonialism, its performative efficacy, needless to say, is still a matter of historical actuality. This contradiction is ideologically productive. It means, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in another context, that national identity can be affirmed before 'the people' have learned to place themselves in and understand their historical specificity: that is, their place in the social relations and political-legal frameworks that will define them as citizens. The mythic idiom, in other words, substantiates the referent of nationalist discourse, the people, before the pedagogical dimension of nationalism has realised its actuality. Corresponding to this doubled sense of political identification is a doubled sense of temporality: on the one hand, the abstract language of citizen's rights involves a sense of progressive, linear time, on the other hand, affective identifications involve the revival, or the return of something that is past, something archaic, an origin that legitimises and informs the unfolding of a future, but which is experienced as entirely present in one's assertion of identity. Nellie's interior monologue – 'Oh, for the days when our race was young' (130) – embodies this recursive temporality. It refers to the past for an image of the future, but in its shift to the first person plural, is also an apostrophe to the nation itself, which is evoked in the present.

In his exposé of 1935, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Walter Benjamin introduces this idea of recursive temporality in terms of what he calls 'primal history.' Wish images, he writes, are images in which

the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of

production. At the same time, what emerges in the wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated – which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination ... back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch dreams of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history (Urgeschichte) – that is, to elements of a classless society.

(4)

This passage describes the nature of political-historical progress in Lane's novel. The forward march of political enlightenment is also a recursive movement into myth, into primal history, just as the rational conception of rights is bound up with highly affective forms of political performance that draw upon this mythic register in their appeals to a people grounded in the archaic, in nature as a homeland. By this reckoning, the notion that realism facilitates the imagined space of the nation, banishing the Romantic from its conception of locality, is part of the wishful thinking of a politics that wants to will itself into an impossible rationality defined against the mythic, rather than thoroughly saturated by it.

Lane wasn't born in Australia (he arrived in 1885 from Bristol via the United States) and he didn't stay long either. By the time *The Workingman's Paradise* was published he was putting together plans for his ill-fated attempt to establish a communal settlement in Paraguay, where he hoped to build a utopian society, the realisation of a primitive communism – his 'new Australia.' With 220 other settlers he left Australia in 1893. The very notion of a 'new Australia' established in South America, is a revealing one in the context of Lane's political program of the late 1880s and early 1890s, and a fitting coda to this discussion. The notion of a 'new Australia' is, of course, contradictory in that it undermines any sense of Australian geographical actuality, while still preserving an allusion to the space of the nation. By phrasing nationhood in the idiom of novelty, moreover, the idea of autochthony, in the conventional sense of an intimate and intransigent bond between people and locality, can only fade into the Romantic universalism that promises 'man' his home in nature. At the same time the recursive temporality of myth is downgraded to, or incorporated into the iterative yet empty temporality of fashion, the commodity form, and the marketplace, in which the 'new' is always a beacon of false hope, a return of the always the same, an index of ennui. Looked at in this way myth itself seems at the mercy of the phantasmagoric culture of the nineteenth-century city, in which collective dreams are figured in the deceptive materiality of public spaces and popular spectacles. Lane's title, in its irony, in fact alludes to the slippage between paradise and forms of popular deception, the slippage between genuine transcendence and the false consciousness of the spectacle. If nationalism is saturated by myth, myth itself might turn out to intersect the ultra-mundane life cycle of the commodity, emblematised in the redundant objects sold at Paddy's Market or in the 'gilded, veneered, electro-plated' (23) facades of the city itself. This is of a piece with Benjamin's view of modernity as 'the world dominated by its phantasmagorias' (26) and of myth itself as phantasmagoric in nature. In a way Lane's 'new Australia'

embodies the radical historicity of nationalist mythology by drawing our attention to the strange amenability of nationalist myth to the logic of the commodity, inviting us not simply to dismiss his utopianism, but to grasp the utopian itself as intrinsic to modernity's dream-like surfaces. We might say, accordingly, that modernity offers myth as an image of its own transcendence. We also might say that the much discussed 'legend of the nineties,' the myth of the Australian nation, itself still operates like a phantasmagoria, a 'workingman's paradise' – a symptom of history, rather than the thing itself.

Note

A longer version of this article appears in the *Journal of Australian Studies* 68 (2001).

Works cited

- Bakhtin, M.M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Eds Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 'Nation and Imagination.' *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. 149-79
- Cheah, Pheng. 'Spectral Nationality: the Living On [*sur-vie*] of the Postcolonial Nation in Neocolonial Globalization,' *Boundary 2* 26.3 (Fall 1999): 225-52.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.
- Lane, William. *The Workingman's Paradise: an Australian Labour Novel*. Sydney: Edwards, Dunlop, 1892.
- Lawson Henry. *Complete Works 1885-1900*. Ed. Leonard Cronin. Sydney: Landsdowne, 1884.
- Makdisi, Saree. *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.