Reviews

Gould's Book of Fish: a novel in 12 fish
Richard Flanagan
Picador, 2001

Linnaeus Downunder

For me the standout novels of 2001 were Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* and Flanagan's Gould's *Book of Fish: a novel in 12 fish*. Chalk and cheese in every respect. Where Winton seduces and cajoles, takes one through pain into idylls and seeks a benign resolution, Flanagan presents obstacles to reading, retails monstrosity, and offers a process/resolution as black and challenging as the grimmest novels in existence: I would compare it with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Patrick Susskind's *Perfume*. It's a work that invites such big comparisons, because it overreaches in a variety of ways.

The novel is challengingly postmodern along many axes: it constitutes a trenchant re-writing of the history of the penal system and of colonialism from the point of view of its underbelly, the convict class; it engages in a wide range of parodies of Victorian styles, and as well begins in a contemporary style which takes none-too-subtle, reflexive pot-shots at literary skirmishes closer to our own times (the manuscript, published "as a novel […] could win literary prizes" [21]); it overlaps several different narratives, and genres; and it is dazzlingly intertextual. It's the rare Australian novel that warrants annotation, and intrigues with its learning. Not to mention its metafictive and deconstructive feints: in short, it is "not at all the sort of open-and-shut thing a good book should be" (14). It is, though, a wonderful story, a book that sets out to prove that stories tell more truths than facts. It ends up suggesting something rather different: that language, finally, cannot serve. Flanagan tells mesmeric stories, ones that "itch" (58) to be told and heard, as, for example, the compressed tale of Gould's conception and birth (55–56), which reads like a bent hero-tale.

The novel opens with two phenomena that are almost as old as fiction: the unreliable (institutionalised) narrator (whether psychiatric or penal is not quite clear) and a found (or invented) manuscript (sighted first by its cotton threads, "like Great Aunt Maisie's stubble" [11]). The finder, con-man Hammett, resembles the narrator of the second interior frame in being one whose life was "an ongoing act of disillusionment," but a sense of wonder and a raucous, irreverent sense of the black comedy of human life empower both of their enterprises. We are warned in Chapter 1 that we will begin with a fairytale and end as a nursery rhyme, "riding a cock-horse to Banbury Cross" (4). The cock-horse, by a process of impeccable fictional logic, becomes a weedy sea dragon and yet another narrator.

Flanagan's 1830s Tasmania may be a "far-off place," but we are meant to read Hammet's claim "that everyone knows it is not here or now or us" (4) resistantly. He is, after all, a specialist in faking antiquities, metamorphosing government discards into Shaker chairs in the Van Diemonian Antiquarian Association workshop, and flogging them to American tourists as whalers' imports. The next stage in that downward trajectory is signaled in satiric mode as eco-tourism. There are many gestures in this novel towards magic realism, not the least of these being the watery transformations that occur and recur at beginning and end of the novel. These motivate a reworking of the texts of the past. The novel teasingly removes the narrative standing-ground, fragile as it is, by the dream stratagem in the first of its two apocalyptic resolutions, by having Gould destroy the very manuscript we are reading (335). Subsequently, Flanagan suggests that the artist and memoirist might be his jailor Pobjoy, or even Conga and Mr. Hung, inheritors of a legacy of colonial faking.

Once the reader has negotiated the teasing outer-frame narrator, the inner-frame journal of Gould becomes the spine of the work. Flanagan creates a sharply satiric analysis of the penal system of Sarah Island, circa 1828, suggesting that its inner story is a microcosm of Australia in the present. It is a crazy place, based on a cruel abuse of hierarchical power. Its Commander envisions Sarah Island as a New Venice, in which Europe is to be replicated, but some weird parodies of civilisation are enacted. Flanagan demonstrates that civilisation downunder is inverted and criminalised. The Commandant's tiny island, which aspires to nation status, is a place that is founded in illusion and buttressed by simulacra: journeys by steam train around the known world are virtual. Trading economies ride phantom booms and busts and traffic in whale oil in return for worthless luxury commodities (barrels of oil are traded for a single overripe guava, and Huon pines are exchanged for Moluccan feathers [152]). Then there is the trade in Siamese girls with their manfern fronds. Finally, in a manoeuvre so Tasmanian, the Commandant attempts a Mahjong-led economic revival. The Commandant's "success" is pithily expressed:

> His reputation grew, his name began to be spoken far & wide, & boats began appearing with all manner of traders, merchants,

> beggars & charlatans. The Commandant welcomed them all, & what started off as furtive trading along the southern stockade wall, administered but not controlled by the felons of a Saturday afternoon, grew into a market & the market into a bazaar & the bazaar into the idea of a nation. (153)

Ultimately, the man who succeeds to the helm, Musha Pug, will decide that a company is preferable to a nation, and discarding "The Supreme" and "His Bunefience" [sic] as honorifics, he settles on "The Chairman" (379).

Intellectually, Sarah Island is bankrupt too. Flanagan mounts a heavy-duty satirical critique of Linnaean assumptions about the world and its methodologies. For Flanagan the delusion that all is knowable/improvable/explicable/solvable/remediable is to engage in a "gargantuan act of vandalism" (126). Becoming "Botticelli" to the Surgeon's "Medici," Gould sabotages these delusions by capturing the mystery of life in his ichthyologic paintings. His written exposé of the settlement sees men in the fish and they become fundamental to his self-knowledge and his understanding of the key players in the drama of Sarah Island. The ironic discrepancy between Lempriere's version of the fish-paintings and Flanagan's and Gould's understandings that the narratives are in fact humanising ones is delicious. This is a text that keeps one continually pivoting. Gould's scheme backfires as the narrator progressively is turned into a fish who/which seeks the loving ambience of water and finds freedom from speech and language the ultimate consolation. The highlight of Flanagan's anti-scientific critique is to have the Surgeon, Lempriere, the chief Linnaean naturalist of Sarah Island, not only lose his manhood in a Shandyesque accident, but, more humiliatingly, consumed by his pet pig, Castlereagh, in revenge for his tedious conversation. Most humiliating of all for one of his racist beliefs, his pickled cranium is deemed by London phrenologist, Sir Cosmo Wheeler, to suffer from excessive amativeness, to be the ultimate in depravity, mental inferiority and racial degeneration, and its origins to be outside the Garden of Eden (302–03).

Flanagan's "bonfire of words" (91) continually draws attention to its fictiveness. It begins by assuming that many "civilizing" projects are transformative (buildings, streetscapes, railways, Linnaean categorization, fiction writing, theories of penology, and certainly paintings) and designed to "[offer] us a purpose,"—"[s]ome alternate idea of ourselves" (103). They offer us "a world more fantastick & yet bizarrely more familiar than the one we lived in" (85). However, the easy assumption of benign transformation is progressively deconstructed, at first through the trope of "forgery":

> I fancied faces as rough as theirs [Hobart Town society] with pasts as dirty as theirs deserved someone with as little talent as me to paint

> them. This wasn't work for the Academy or the Prado or the Louvre, but for the bastard & idiot issue of the Old World who through theft & terror thought they had a right to rule the New.
>
> Which, I ought add, they did. (134)

And "colonial art is the comic knack of rendering the new as the old, the unknown as the known, the antipodean as the European, the contemptible as the respectable" (68).

Gould, the archetypal little-man/misfortunate, having been accused unjustly of forgery, finds it expedient in the New World to become a forger. He begins his career inventing coats of arms for the "bastard gentry" of Launceston's coaches, and Latin mottoes to go with them with the help of a cleric doing time for bestiality (*Quae fuerent vitia, mores sunt*—"what were once vices are now manners" [97–98]). That Gould is not alone in the enterprise of becoming a forger/artist is many times made clear. Indeed, the colony depends on forgery and scams for its very existence. Flanagan, a precise historian, offers a roll call of colonial forgers. Wainewright the murderer and Bock the abortionist were both valued portraitists of the gentry, while Lycett painted Tasmania without ever needing to visit it (187). On the literary side, Savery the forger "wrote mannered trash about the colony that flattered its audience with so many imitations of their own stupidity" (73).

Gould's fictional manifesto is learnt from Capois Death, a black convict from San Domingo: his is a narrative of colonial brutality, garnered close to the earth ("truth is never far away but up close in the dirt," [93]). It is told in the style of "firing, loading, & refiring [a] musket," told "without pause & without emphasis, & the horror & the glory & the wonder of it all were in the accumulation of endless detail" (87). It is a narrative method that Flanagan himself employs, and it is self-consciously transgressive: "life is better observed than lived" (94). His text revels in the representation of the abject:

> Death was in that heightened smell of raddled bodies & chancre-encrusted souls. Death arose in a miasma from gangrenous limbs & bloody rags of consumptive lungs [. . .]. Death was rising in the overripe smell of mud fermenting, enmities petrifying, waiting in wet brick walls leaning, in the steam of flesh sloughing with the cat falling, so many fetid exhalations of unheard screams, murders, mixed with the brine of a certain wordless horror; collectively those scents of fearful sweat that sour clothes & impregnate whole places & which are said to be impervious to the passage of time, a perfume of spilling blood which no amount of washing or admission was ever to rid me. (104)

There is a passionate intensity that spares no gothic detail in its anatomy of the cultural pathologies of Tasmania. He adroitly ties together a raft of pointed political issues: the horrors of the penal system, the despoliation of irreplaceable Tasmanian landscapes (and the Huon Pine), and genocidal massacres of Aborigines. There is a grim-faced refusal to glorify any aspect of the colonial system, and certainly no impulse to glorify the Tasmanian Ned, Matt Brady. (And why is it so hard to resist the idea that his treatment of Brady is in some sense a swipe at Peter Carey who is far less critical of history and national icons?) However, to bring all these elements together does make for a very discursive ending in which all the ideas that animate the text are spelt out, sometimes more explicitly than they need to be.

The two apocalyptic movements of Flanagan's resolution—the disillusioning search for Matt Brady and the conflagration of the Sarah Island gaol, both of which precede Gould's election to become a fish—serve to demonstrate that there is little to sustain Gould's original faith in the liberatory power of fiction. This text systematically undoes its own pretensions and fantasy about the uses of books and the need to rewrite history. Whereas Gould reveled as a young man in the ways in which a world can be created by a mere 26 letters, his ultimate insight is that "a world could never be contained in an alphabet" (358). "Unburdened by speech" (397), and living the life of a weedy sea dragon, the narrator sees ever more clearly the fictional impulse in history, in settlement and nation-building, and the interconnectedness of class and race enemies:

> [. . .] it wasn't the English who did this to us but ourselves, that convicts flogged convicts & pissed on blackfellas & spied on each other, that blackfellas sold black women for dogs & speared escaping convicts, that white sealers killed & raped black women, & black women killed the children that resulted. (401)

Astonishingly, the production values of this book also overreach. It is a magnificently luscious physical object, printed on heavy ivory paper, in a variety of ink colours (to mimic the narrator's use of improvised inks—blood, powdered stone, laudanum, excrement and porcupine-fish-quills). The twelve fish of the title are reproduced from William Buelow Gould's book of the same name, and used for a variety of narrative-driving and character-defining purposes. Picador is to be praised in this age of economic rationalism for providing so pleasing a material and aesthetic artifact. While the book mimics the condition of a nineteenth-century natural history, we can be glad that verisimilitude has its limits: that we are spared the microbes and the transverse copperplate.

Flanagan may at times read like a nihilist, but his anger is powered by a sense that to live intensely in the real world is inevitably to love it in ways that are beyond expression. It is a risky place for the novelist to be. Let us hope that this is

a position that the logic of his characterisation of Gould and magic realism dictates, and that there are many more Tasmanian novels in Flanagan.

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Patrick White, Painter Manqué:
Paintings, Painters and their Influence on his Writings
Helen Verity Hewitt
Miegunyah Press, 2002

Australian literary studies have always struck me as a field that takes its various objects of study very literally. Whereas Walter Benjamin's book on Baudelaire, to take an obvious counter-example, uses its nominal object of study to structure a broad ranging and eclectic series of departures, we can usually expect that a book on Patrick White, David Malouf or Peter Carey will be just that. It is as if the proper name has something terminal about it. And just in case we need assurance that critical energies will not be stretched beyond it, cover and jacket designs in the field often feature a photograph of the writer in question, confirming the "life and letters" approach, where a combination of potted biography and plot summary usually suffices. There is an obvious utility in this critical mode, one that shouldn't be underestimated: it establishes a basic set of facts, relationships and thematic foci that might then sustain further interpretive work. It is, however, a critical mode that can be frustrating, because it also circumscribes the object of study and the role of the critic. It disorganises any sense of a writer's relationship to broader cultural-historical dynamics (modernity, capitalism, colonialism, for instance), while rendering criticism itself overly derivative of, if not parasitical in relationship to, its object.

Helen Verity Hewitt's *Patrick White, Painter Manqué* prompts this minor diatribe partly because it quite obviously pushes against a kind of critical myopia in order to explore White's relationships to key figures in modern Australian art, to the art world in general, and finally to a shared set of metaphysical themes indicative of Australian "romantic modernism." This is the strength of Hewitt's study. *Patrick White, Painter Manqué* guides us through White's careers in terms of his relationship to the painters that loom large in his circle, and charts the ways in which visual culture impacts upon his novels. As the title suggests, the basic argument of the book is that White was a writer who translated his obsessions with the possibilities of the visual into text, and that he even longed to be a painter himself (settling for literary genius as a poor second). Hence Hewitt demonstrates the ways in which his novels echo key visual referents and ponders the overwhelming significance of painters in his work, where artist-visionary and artist-outsider figures enable a

host of themes long recognised as central to White's *oeuvre*.

Hewitt begins with Roy de Maistre's exodus from a culturally conservative Australia and pursues White's relationships with both him and with Francis Bacon in pre-war London. This encounter frames the rest of the book and, implicitly, the development of White's career as at least partially a reaction against the aesthetic conservatism and spiritual vacuity of pre-war Australia: "Knowing that de Maistre had in effect been forced into exile by this reactionary parochialism may have planted the seeds for White's antipathy towards the Australian cultural establishment" (6). By the 1950s, however, White had recognised a vibrant kind of modernism in Sydney's art scene. Hewitt shows us how he embraced this as both a co-traveller in what emerges as a post-war variant of romantic modernism, and as an important patron of younger, less recognised artists. Some old ground is covered here, and some new. Bacon, de Maistre, Sydney Nolan and Brett Whitely obviously loom large, but so do a host of other, less well known figures, equally concerned with pursuing sacred, mythic or apocalyptic themes: Thomas Gleghorn and Stanislaus Rapotec, for instance. Hewitt also pursues the influence of a *fin-de-siecle* avant-garde on White, paying specific attention to Odilon Redon and Edvard Munch, and examines White's role as patron, collector and benefactor of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

For all these reasons, *Patrick White, Painter Manqué* does significantly expand our understanding of White and his motivations as a writer. The book's conceptual horizon, however, is also defined by its object in a way that I found limiting. Hewitt focuses on White as a romantic modernist—a writer obsessed with the sacred, the epiphanic and the metaphysical. She returns to this a number times as a way of defining the artistic and intellectual context of White's work, and of giving unity to her vision of White's aesthetic: "Romantic modernism uses fragmentation and iridescent colour in its aspiration to depict the sublime in the everyday" (43). Romantic modernism is also, at least, implicitly, part of a claim for White's importance in post-war Australia. It suggests his hubristic commitment to high modernist norms, to "romantic and metaphysical themes that now seemed too big or overblown to many of his contemporaries" (93), in a society that was rapidly turning its back on the hieratic content of modernism in favour of a demotic postmodernism.

So far so good, but this is where the book seems to stall. It is as if the conceptual frame implied by the modernism of White and the artists who inspired him contains the critical energies of the study. While the book is good at contextualising White within his milieu, there is almost no attempt to contextualise this milieu in terms of something exterior to it. As a result, we get little or no sense of romantic modernism's relationship to broader social, historical or aesthetic dynamics, little or no sense of its place in the world. This is a shame, because the particular kind of modernism epitomised by White has a vital and controversial relationship to

the cultural politics of postcolonial Australia. It raises far-reaching questions about the relationship between art and mass culture in Australia, between European modernism and notions of the sacred appropriated from Indigenous culture, and between local cultural institutions and the circulation of cultural capital. Even a straightforward account of the sacred as a response to a disenchanted modernity (almost a critical platitude by now) could have broadened the scope. All of these possibilities seem to be implied by the issue of White's modernism, yet all remain more or less invisible in Hewitt's study. Even an engagement with Simon During's well-known critique of White's "late colonial transcendentalism," a pointed euphemism for romantic modernism, is absent.

It is perhaps unfair to criticise a book for what it doesn't say. Yet in *Patrick White, Painter Manqué* the unsaid encroaches on the argument and focus of the book to such an extent that we begin to experience a kind of claustrophobia related to the insistence with which the terms of the book's title are literalised in its execution. That said, I still think this is a useful study and one that students and scholar's working on White will get a great deal from. It brings us to a kind of threshold in work on White. With White's position in Australian literary culture so precariously balanced between hollow adulation and complete neglect, the time has come for critics working on him to get serious. If romantic modernism is something worth preserving amidst the rapidly changing cultural forms of the twenty-first century, let's hear why. The life and letters approach to literary criticism certainly doesn't tell us.

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The Making of the Australian Literary Imagination
Richard Nile
U of Queensland P, 2002

Before reading Richard Nile's book I had reviewed Peter Ackroyd's recent *Albion: the Origins of the English Imagination* for Melbourne's *Age* newspaper, and it has been instructive to compare the two works, each with their rather grand-sounding titles. Ackroyd casts the English literary imagination as organic, adaptive, dreamlike, rooted in the soil and the sea: grand Humanist claims that see English modernity shaped by its deep literary heritage. This deeply nostalgic, conservative and inward-looking book tries at least to give a national literary imagination some textual definition, going into the literature to see what it says and does. In Richard Nile's book, however, there is no textual analysis at all. This is not a criticism, but it is a striking point of difference: in Nile's book, there is no attempt in any of its twenty-three chapters to try to discern what an Australian literary imagination

might actually consist of. Indeed, in spite of this book's title, the Australian literary imagination as some definable thing-in-itself barely rates a mention.

The difference here, of course, is one of approach or method. Much of Nile's work in Australian literary studies has been *extra*-textual: concerned with the prevailing ideologies of literary folk and institutions, rather than with the literature itself. Those familiar with this work would know in particular of Nile's careful and exemplary charting of distinctions in the cultural field between literary "elites" and popular writers during the 1930s and 1940s. Chapters 12 and 13 in his book draw out contrasts between Vance Palmer's circle and a popular novelist like Ion Idriess, for example, to convey a formative moment in Australian literary cultural politics. These two chapters are the best in the book, giving expression to a powerful binary code in literary production. But they speak about the Australian literary imagination (if it is there at all) only in the sheerest of material terms: whatever it might be or do, it is condemned to oscillate between the "narrowness" of high literary nationalism and the commercial worldliness of popular fiction.

The unacknowledged spectre of Pierre Bourdieu haunts this book, but even Bourdieu had looked closely at literature itself in order to illuminate his sociological approach—through his subtle reading of Flaubert, for example. In Nile's book, however, literary imagination is utterly subsumed to industrial practice: production, rather than creation. He writes about Australian publishers and publishing ventures (Angus & Robertson, the Bookstall series, etc.) and the development of a market for Australian writing both locally and overseas (meaning Britain and the U.S.). The historical details of government patronage for writers occupy several chapters, and there is much discussion of the FAW and the ASA. A number of chapters concern themselves with how Australian writers made a living: as journalists, soldiers, public servants, and so on. One of the sections of the book is titled "Creative Industries"—a nod to Stuart Cunningham's Faculty at QUT, probably, but also expressive of the book's own method. It lists facts and figures, concerns itself with revenue and sales, sees literary production in terms of a writer's avowal or disavowal of "professionalism" and links all this (rather unevenly throughout the book) to issues of actual industrial practice and national cultural/literary policy. Where Peter Ackroyd's English literary imagination is organic, Nile's Australian literary imagination is as inorganic as it is possible to be.

Ackroyd also had some clear (albeit romantic) points to make—but Nile's position on his Australian subject matter remains frustratingly unstated. He offers up two prevailing themes, two binary codes: the tension and differences between literature and popular fiction, already mentioned, and the uneasy relation between local markets and transnational or international sales. On the latter, Nile charts some of the ways Australian literature has been dependent on British publishing ventures and discusses the transnationalisation of various Australian writers. But on both themes it is difficult, finally, to know where he stands. Peter Carey emerges

as a bit of a hero in his book, living in New York, making money out of his fiction, winning the Booker Prize—and writing a novel about Ned Kelly into the bargain. But Katharine Prichard also inhabits much of Nile's study: struggling in Britain, and then writing to literary/nationalist imperatives in Australia. His book goes on to raise questions he probably should have answered himself: does Australian literature have a viable future? Is it too heavily promoted under the rubric of the author-as-celebrity? Is there too much of it? Is it "mediocre"? Perhaps these are unanswerable anyway or perhaps they are beside the point. It doesn't help, incidentally, to have the back cover of Nile's book add another, dumber question to the list: "He leaves open for wider speculation the question: Is Australian literature dead?" Nile's (rather lively) study does at least answer this one (in the negative).

This book is partly about the promotion of Australian writing and writers as part of their industrialization—but a thoughtless remark like this on the back cover suggests that UQP, his publisher, may still be naïve about promotional practice. In fact, Nile has been badly served by UQP, which seems not to have bothered to edit or structure his work at all. Chapters meander, picking up a topic and dropping it almost at random, only to return to it again in some other chapter later on. The discussion leapfrogs across place and time: a paragraph will jump from Henry Lawson to Helen Demidenko, or from the 1930s to McPhee Gribble, in a single breath. Outside of the two best chapters, there is almost no sustained analysis of anything: the prevailing method is rather to list one case or example after another. The writing is often too casual ("And they come from a bloke who…" [40]), and with far too many run-on sentences. It is also full of clichés: "A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing…" (47); or, more obscurely, "Today's chook is tomorrow's feather duster…" (178). Nile's accounts of writers are often interesting but he can too easily lapse into banalities—on Henry Lawson, for example, "Eventually the booze killed him" (57). In a book published by a Go8 university press, it is strange indeed to see no citations. All quotes, as well as all the facts and figures, are given blankly without reference to text or page number. The index is often wrong or partial, and the typeface seems uneven, single spaced at times, double-spaced at others.

I've noted that this book doesn't give an account of a national literary imagination in the sense that Ackroyd does: that is, underwriting it with some sort of internal definition, some creative, mobilising and sustaining dynamic, however romantically conceived this may turn out to be. Still, although Nile deals mostly in the polar opposite realm of fact and figures—charting the material conditions of Australian writing, listing its most "industrial" aspects—he nevertheless offers some imaginative flourishes of his own. Several chapters begin by setting dramatic scenes, especially involving writers making deals and negotiating contracts. The opening chapter begins with a meditation on the book's cover, a painting by Jeffrey Smart

of a man reading a newspaper, and then Nile goes on to spin a yarn around UQP's Laurie Muller, paying tribute to him—a "champion organizer," etc.—in a way that seems to me to run the risk of compromising the fact that UQP published him. Some of that organisational skill could also have gone into the book's production.

Nile's best chapters tell a story about Australian literary cultural production—a compelling one in many respects—so perhaps it is not surprising to find him spinning occasional yarns into an otherwise academic venture. In the closing chapter, he returns to storytelling once more. Here, however, readers may be surprised to see all the industrial features of his book suddenly and inexplicably vanish. The chapter turns to women writers, building itself initially around the figure of Maria Stannage. She is, so I gather, the wife of Tom Stannage, an Executive Dean at Curtin University who has co-written with Nile. A dialogue is created (real or imaginary?), which sees Nile addressing her by her full name in a kind of stilted, fable-like manner. The focus shifts to other Australian women writers and then settles again on Katharine Prichard, describing her provocative sexual power over men and noting community disapproval of her behaviour. Nile, who seems caught up with the aura of Prichard at this point, casts himself in the role of one of her "watchers." I'm afraid to say that I simply could not follow the rationale for this closing sequence, which seems to have nothing to do with anything else in the book.

Finally, Nile returns to Maria Stannage who gives him the manuscript of a novel titled *The Foetal Woman*, credited in a later note to Nile's wife. In the final sentence of the book he accepts the manuscript and tells Stannage, "I shall love it because it is surely a wonderful thing that this sort of novel has been written." I have no idea why Nile's book ends in such a mawkish, sentimentalised way: it seems so utterly out of character with the preceding study. His otherwise inorganic approach to literary-industrial production suddenly flips itself over into the organic in this last chapter with a vengeance. Is this some sort of belated, lyrical celebration of women's writing in Australia? But why turn to women writers in this way only at the book's finale? And why does Nile suddenly pay detailed tribute to Prichard's enthralling sexuality and his wife's embryonic draft novel—in a study that prior to this had been exclusively concerned with the material facts and figures of Australian literary publishing? A question like this could perhaps have more profitably occupied the back cover of his book. For me, the final chapter is a kind of return-of-the-repressed: after so much inorganic commentary, after chronicling so many facts and figures on one of the local culture industries, the book is finally overwhelmed by the sort of romantic, organic version of the imagination it had kept at bay for so long.

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Christina Stead: Satirist
Anne Pender
Common Ground, 2002

The Enigmatic Christina Stead
Teresa Petersen
U of Melbourne P, 2001

In her obituary for Christina Stead (*Notes & Furphies* 11, October 1983, 1–2), Dorothy Green writes that Stead produced her novels in a spirit of disinterested love of writing. She was impelled, Green suggests, "not by fame, nor money, nor status, nor the egoism which lies behind the search for self expression." This is generous, but does little to advance our understanding of Stead. Hazel Rowley, in her biography of Stead (*Christina Stead*, Heinemann, 1993), provides a different assessment, using a psychoanalytic approach to argue that Stead wrote to achieve a sense of her own empowerment:

> [For Stead] writing had become a means of attaining power over others, and resisting their power over her. By writing—and showing her writing to others—Christina could reduce people by ridicule or raise them to great heights. (26)

There have been many critical studies of Stead since her death, taking various approaches—political, cultural, feminist and so on—and these two monographs make a valuable contribution to the body of Stead scholarship.

Anne Pender's book situates Stead's fiction in the genre of satire and argues that she should be read as a conscious satirist. Observing that the best-known works—*The Man who Loved Children* (1940) and *For Love Alone* (1944)—are the autobiographical novels, Pender claims that they are the least satirical in Stead's *oeuvre*, and that this might help to explain the general critical erasure of Stead's satirical vision. But from *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946) onwards, claims Pender, Stead was preoccupied with various forms of satire. She argues that critics generally have failed to read Stead's less familiar fiction as satire, because they have been more interested in Marxist and psychoanalytical models.

The argument for satire is grounded strongly in the fiction, but also draws upon Stead's diaries and comprehensive historical notes. In particular, Pender rejects the version of Stead advanced by Hazel Rowley, who "seems unwilling to understand the distortion and exaggeration in Stead's fiction as a feature of satire, but reads it as evidence of neurosis on Stead's part" (8).

Pender locates Stead in a long tradition of literary satire dating from the classical Romans, Juvenal and Horace, through to Miguel de Cervantes, Henry Fielding

and the early twentieth-century satirists Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, the writers contemporaneous with Stead. On the whole, suggests Pender, Stead's satire falls into the category of "degenerative satire (subversive satire that is truly oppositional and subverts hierarchies of value" (21), a mode of satire that became prominent between 1930 and 1980 and includes the work of Nathaniel West, Flannery O'Connor, John Hawkes and Robert Coover.

In explanation of the failure of critics to notice properly Stead's satirical vision, Pender observes that there have been few female satirists because the form traditionally has been characterised by harsh criticism of women. She notes that where women, such as Jane Austen and George Eliot, have produced satire, it has been satire of the salon rather than satire of the political sphere. Pender's argument is that Stead's satire breaks down this male/female binary in English fiction. (19).

I find Pender's claim for Stead's feminist satire more wishful than convincing—Stead often wrote very scathingly of female characters in her novels and made misogynistic comments about women in her interviews. But Pender does not allow this to impede her feminist reading of Stead. She places her on a continuum with recent feminist satirists, such as Fay Weldon and Angela Carter, who invert the paradigm of satire to make men and masculinity the objects of their satire. Pender notes that Stead uses the grotesque but avoids caricature to maintain a sense of realism in a body of fiction that represents an encyclopaedic historical project. This project is, Pender argues, an achievement that is no less than a comprehensive analysis of Western civilisation.

In stressing the writer's conscious political purposes, Pender refuses a reading of Stead's fiction founded upon the personal. She does concede Stead's use of people she knew for her characters, but notes that, in the writing, she transformed them into whatever suited her satirical purposes. The strength of Pender's critical study is that it is strongly informed by formalist approaches (categories of satire) which tidily situate Stead's subject matter in the history and politics that characterised her era.

In contrast, Teresa Petersen's analysis of Stead's fiction focuses on the writer's subjectivity and the unconscious of her texts. This makes possible a different kind of political understanding of Stead's work, an understanding of the politics of desire. Petersen argues that Stead's fiction presents an enigma to her readers because it is marked by a baffling contradiction. It poses the question of why Stead's heroines desperately seek marriage and heterosexual partnerships only to remain angry and unsatisfied when they have achieved these goals. The thesis is that these heroines speak Stead's unconscious desires.

Petersen understands Stead as a repressed lesbian who could not be fulfilled by the heterosexual relationship. Several other critics have noticed Stead's interest in and hostility towards lesbians, while also noting that she was not a conscious lesbian engaged in relationships with women. Petersen argues that Stead was

misogynistic and homophobic, especially about lesbians. In both her work and in her public utterances Stead aligned herself with the dominant discourse of compulsory heterosexuality. Reading against this, Petersen suggests that Stead's fascination with lesbianism, as the alternative to heterosexuality, is deeply inscribed in the fiction. This contradiction, to be discerned hidden in the interstices of the texts by the alert reader, is where Petersen finds an explanation in the otherwise puzzling unhappiness of Stead's heroines in the heterosexual relationship. In a sustained close reading of Stead's fiction, Petersen finds a recurrence of "the lesbian signifier." At the same time she argues from absence, for what Stead left out:

> It is precisely what Stead leaves out of her narratives, what disappears into the gaps, fissures and ellipses that needs close attention. The narrative dynamics of Stead's texts position the reader as a patriarchal subject; therefore it is necessary for the astute reader to listen carefully for the silent voices buried beneath. (14)

To formulate her argument, Petersen invokes Freud's psychoanalytic model of the Oedipal family, the heterosexual norm of father, mother, and child—and its complicity with a capitalist hegemony that represents "God, law and order" (4).

In her claim for Stead's subversion of Freud, Petersen superimposes the model proposed by French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, which suggests that the tensions between the conscious and the unconscious for those who cannot conform to the Oedipal structure drives them to the anti-Oedipal.

> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari' s revolutionary politics of desire focuses on an individual's potential of "becoming" and rejects the Oedipal system based on binary logic that upholds patriarchal law. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the way out of the Oedipal construct is not by conforming to the "same," but instead by becoming "other," and the way to do this is by "imperceptibility." Overtly Stead projected an image that empathised with the norm in society: in this sense she was like most people [. . .]. It is while appearing to be "like" everyone else that Stead imperceptibly, through her writing, covertly deconstructed the very icons she overtly upheld: heterosexual love, marriage and family—summed up in the Oedipal paradigm. (17)

In her reading of Stead's texts, then, Petersen is dependent upon Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Oedipal. At times, however, the odd mixture of these inimical theoretical models in the argument is confusing. On the one hand, Freud provides the basis for the analysis of Stead's subjectivity; on the other, her fiction is understood as an anguished rejection of this, as an "imperceptible" rejection of

the Oedipal. On the whole, Petersen is careful to reiterate that it is Stead's *unconscious* desires that are being voiced in the fiction. If the argument is to hold, however, Stead's "covert" deconstruction of the icons of the heterosexual norm, alluded to in the above quotation, must consistently be read as an unconscious process. Despite this, I found that Petersen's book enables a new and valuable interpretation of Stead's work.

Although Pender's and Petersen's books are very different in perspective and, indeed, on the matter of feminism, offer conflicting readings, each deepened my understanding of Stead. The richness of Stead's work makes of her "broad-church," capable of accommodating many approaches. With these monographs, both Pender and Petersen make a significant contribution to Stead scholarship.

Chris Hill, Deakin University

Seven Versions of an Australian Badlands
Ross Gibson
U of Queensland P, 2002

Ross Gibson's exciting new book, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, focuses on the inhospitable, Central Queensland territory that lines the Pacific Coast from Rockhampton to Mackay, a region referred to in popular mythology as the "Horror Stretch." Evoking a damaged and dangerous landscape that mirrors the violence of its social relations in its ecological degradation, Gibson frames the area as a "badland"—a sinister meeting place of natural and cultural breakdown. The term originated in the experiences of nineteenth-century European explorers attempting to cross the ridged, desert plains of Dakota in America's west. The French described the territory "as *mauvaises terres à traverser* (bad lands to cross)" (14), and Gibson stresses the relevance of these colonial roots, noting "a badland was originally a tract of country that would not succumb to colonial ambition" (14).

The book counts the ways such resistances to "civilising" forces have characterised the Horror Stretch in seven "versions," each chapter building on the criminal profile of a territory that historically has been disproportionately marred by violence. The tropical cyclones that periodically distort the harsh landscape and devastate agriculture, the territory's bloody frontier history, its past association with the injustices of the labour trade and the unsettling frequency with which corpses are dragged from the brigalow, Gibson suggests, might be viewed as somehow continuous and connected. He describes the way "the tales told of this place suggest it is a lair for evil either because malevolence flourishes naturally there, or because trouble has been shoved in there since colonial times" (13), and highlights the function of exclusion zones as repositories for society's ills, particularly in colonial cultures.

Such illicit places can offer a "savage" counterpoint to the "successful" colonisation and domestication of most other regions, containing "badness" in an external realm where it can be distinguished from the contrasting legitimacy of the broader society. What would be more useful though—what is *necessary* if we are to come to terms with the cruelties that defined our colonial past—Gibson argues, is to peer into the blood-soaked terrain of the badland instead of averting our eyes. Society can only "recover" from colonialism by interrogating its relics (in the form of stories and myths), by returning to sites like "this immense, historical crime scene" (1) and unearthing its secrets, gathering its clues.

Seven Versions of an Australian Badland performs such a process of narrative retrieval at the same time as it theorises the cultural imperative to do so. It's a hard book to classify and that is part of its attraction. Slim and intensely readable, it acts like a whodunit, a pulp history that somehow manages to be at once compassionate, conceptually sophisticated and seductively literary. The genre changes with the landscape as Gibson journeys through the Horror Stretch—offering a *noir* history of colonialism that effortlessly splices the tabloid appeal of late twentieth-century badlands murders with an analysis of the region's chaotic social relations, a consideration of personal memoir, and an (elegant) anthropology of myth and magic.

In telling these tales, Gibson not only draws on popular anecdotes and legends, "official" record and history; he also unravels histories of violence written in a way so as not to be told—events written out of existence in the negative vocabulary of officialdom. The story of Frederick Wheeler, a murderous lieutenant of the Native Police who vigilantly contributed to the decimation of Aboriginal tribes in the region provides a particularly compelling example of this strategy. Although material documenting Wheeler's villainous reign is scarce, Gibson "tracks and imagines" (64) his career through clues scattered through Government paperwork and through a broader elaboration of the Native Police as frontier terrorists, whose usefulness expired when they fulfilled their purpose of clearing the land of its native inhabitants.

The devastation enacted by the Native Troopers, Gibson argues, was always accompanied by a second manoeuvre—the destruction of remembrance that was necessary to enable white settlers to call such tainted ground home. Accordingly, the very inaccessibility of Wheeler's story, the suppression of his actions even throughout Wheeler's own written reports, is brought to evidence the broader resistance to remembrance that the book establishes as a key to the colonial malaise. This kind of seamlessness between theory and its enactment and exemplification characterises the book more generally, enforcing a scholarly rigour even where concepts are potentially intangible and concrete sources elusive.

Important also to the success of Gibson's unconventional and accessible approach to writing history is his use of personal anecdote, his engagement with what Jane

Gallop recently described as "the uncanny detail of lived experience" (*Anecdotal Theory* [Durham: Duke UP, 2002] 2). More than writing a history of his encounters with the badland, Gibson offers an account of his thoughts and responses to it over the years, from the demonic vapours he saw spiralling from the asphalt in childhood to his research trips throughout the project. His "private quest" is what enables the book's broader "inquest"(177) by allowing access to emotional, intuitive aspects of thinking about our relationship with our inglorious "White Australia" history.

Not many writers could carry this off so convincingly. Gibson's account of the Horror Stretch inspires a dark recognition in the reader, recalling the uncanny familiarity of the American photographer Joel Sternfeld's "On this site…" series. The images depict famous American crime sites from the recent past—now stripped of characters, their deadly dramas complete and their forensic value exhausted, as a means of interrogating broader aspects of American history and culture. Sternfeld's images implicate contemporary crime scenes within a history of violence through visual references ranging from representations of the Civil War and the Wild West to contemporary cinema. Likewise, there is something about the simultaneity of the discussion of past and present in *Seven Versions* that seems filmic or photographic. Far from the laboured comparisons of "now versus then" that sometimes afflict cultural histories, it is with a light, dryly humorous touch that Gibson leads us to "think more boldly about how the past produces the present" (2). It's difficult to imagine a more compelling way of looking into the bad in our lands, and in our colonial history.

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The New Collected Poems 1961–2002
Les Murray
Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002

Les Murray
Steven Matthews
U of Melbourne P, 2001

The Poetry of Les Murray
Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross, eds.
U of Queensland P, 2001

A paradox of the postcolonial condition is the way in which highly regional art can acquire a national and even international audience, turning local objects into global commodities. This has happened to Aboriginal desert painting, of course.

It's also happened to the poetry of Our Man in Bunyah, Les Murray, who has entered what Steven Matthews calls "an international poetic superleague" (154) that includes those other post-colonials Derek Walcott and Sheamus Heaney.

The two critical works under review highlight an important aspect of this local/global paradox. As Hergenhan and Clunies Ross put it in the introduction to their collection of essays:

> There is a disparity in Australia between Murray's acknowledged status as the leading poet and the relatively small amount of criticism on his work. This is the result of the distracting effect of a complex combination of cultural politics and biographical circumstances. These factors have no influence on his international reputation, which is founded on his poetic achievement. Murray is the first Australian poet to attract such wide readership and criticism outside his own country. (vii)

In evidence of this, five of the ten contributors to *The Poetry of Les Murray* are scholars connected with the University of Copenhagen, the rest are from a variety of Australian institutions.

Steven Matthews is Reader in English at Oxford Brookes University in the UK and, although his critical monograph on Murray is published in Australia by Melbourne University Press, it's part of an international series from Manchester UP called *Contemporary World Writers*. The unnamed editor of this series—an Internet search reveals him to be John Thieme, Professor of English at London's South Bank University—is careful to deny any elitist or exoticising implications, suggesting that *Contemporary World Writers* "aims to counter tendencies to appropriate the writers discussed into the canon of English or American literature or to regard them as 'other'." Of course, as old ideologues know only too well, there will always be tendencies that must countered—including the tendency to doublespeak. For how could a series called *Contemporary World Writers* represent anything other than a kind of canonization? The last paragraph of the editorial foreword is downright contradictory:

> C*ontemporary World Writers* aims to bring together the theoretical impulse which currently dominates postcolonial studies and closely argued readings of particular authors' works, and by so doing avoid the danger of appropriating the specifics of particular texts into the hegemony of totalising theories. (ix)

What is "the theoretical impulse which currently dominates post-colonial studies" *but* a totalising paradigm?

Fortunately, Matthews' text stands aloof from this pious nonsense, offering a solid introduction to Murray's work; one that, while it is written far from the "distracting effect" of Australian literary-cultural politics, nevertheless remains conscious of them. It begins thematically with a chapter on "Contexts and intertexts," where Matthews locates Murray in terms of Australian and postcolonial literary history. This serves to foreground the inevitable issues of place and polity in his verse, underpinned, as they often have been, by powerful feelings of dispossession. The final "Critical overview and conclusion" spells out the literary politics of the poet's reputation. In between, Matthews arranges his discussion into four decade-based divisions of the oeuvre. Chapter Two looks at the sixties (*The Ilex Tree* and *The Weatherboard Cathedral*), Chapter Three the seventies (*Poems against Economics* to *Ethnic Radio*), Chapter Four the eighties (*The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* to *Dog Fox Field*, published in 1990), and Chapter Five the nineties (*Translations from the Natural World* to *Fredy Neptune*). Matthews presents Murray evolving from his early engagements with history and country, through a "creolized" if mystical nationalism in the 1970s, into the mature religious vision of *The People's Otherworld* and an increasingly strident poetics of incarnation. As a substantial review of Murray's career so far, Matthews' book has a scope and authority that an eclectic collection of critical essays can never match, and will be, as they say, an essential text for scholars in the field.

The *ALS* collection, *The Poetry of Les Murray*, announces itself in a tone of disappointment. The editors state that their original intention was to draw international contributions from a range of European and North American "scholars, critics and translators of Murray's work," but that the result has been "limited" to the toilers of the University of Copenhagen (vii–viii). Differences in focus between visitors to Murray country and the local team are marked. Not surprisingly, the Australian critics are more alert to the immediate cultural context of Murray's writing. The Copenhagen set are given to more universalising readings, with a particular interest in figuration, prosody and genre. It's perhaps notable that three of their essays (by Line Henriksen, Bruce Clunies Ross and Charles Lock) are on *Fredy Neptune*, the most conspicuously cosmopolitan of Murray's works. It's the "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" that provides a test case, however.

Martin Leer from Copenhagen writes persuasively about the chiasmus of time and space in Murray's topographical poems, but his extensive commentary on the cycle as "enact[ing] an entire philosophy and poetics of place" (33) takes Murray at his word as a latter-day Jindyworobak and overlooks the textual politics of his Indigenous appropriations. In a similarly metaphysical spirit, Nils Eskestad sees the cycle's tendency towards a vernacular hexameter as evidence of Murray's concept of "Wholespeak." Christopher Pollnitz, on the other hand, who usefully characterises the longer topographical poems as "middle-distance" works, reads

the cycle against the claims of Murray's well-known essay on Aboriginal influences in his work, "The Human-Hair Thread":

> Poem and essay are now a quarter of a century behind us [. . .]. [Y]et, if Murray's cycle simply celebrates what white Australians do during their Christmas vacation and implies that thereby they are doing their bit for reconciliation—"integration" as it would have been in the 1970s—the poem's social agenda is something worse than appropriation: it is an argument for self-congratulatory complacency. (55)

This level of political sensitivity is lacking in the Copenhagen essays, which are uninterested in Murray as cultural warrior. Yet the etiquette of Murray's borrowings are not ideological "distractions," any more than his public stoushes are, but gnaw at the heart of the vernacular republic as it waits, UFO-like, to descend from heaven, perhaps on a north coast farm in New South Wales. (For what it's worth, I think "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" is one of Murray's masterpieces and, while I'm acutely aware of the problems of cultural appropriation, I don't think you can copyright what is, through R.M. Berndt's translation of the Wonguri-Mandjigai Moon-Bone cycle, an already mediated version of an Aboriginal genre.)

Pollnitz's essay locates the madness (*folie*) of the holy fool as an energizing element in the poet's earlier work and—*pace* Fredy Boettcher—notes its gradual decline as Murray became "the anti-Romantic poet of community and Catholic tradition" (61). Peter Steele's essay uses G.M. Hopkins to orientate Murray to the Church and, while his readings of poems such as "Words of the Glassblowers" and "Dead Trees in the Dam" are illuminating, his conclusions aren't. The strongest essay in the pack is Noel Rowe's "Justice, Sacrifice and the Mother's Poem," which draws upon detailed analysis of "The Steel" (restored, incidentally, after an absence to the latest *Collected Poems*) to reveal blood sacrifice as an ever-troubling theme in Murray's poetry, "a ritual [which] must fail to satisfy" (155).

A poet's own *Collected Poems* isn't going to be the same as that of a scholarly editor. Murray's latest—like his previous Collecteds of the 1990s—is more like an expanded *Selected* in the manner of Heaney's *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996*, which the author defines as "contain[ing] a greater number of poems than would usually appear in a *Selected Poems*, fewer than would make up a *Collected*: it belongs somewhere between the two categories." Coming with a CD of the poet reading fifty-five of his works, this *Collected Poems* might almost be a multi-media work. I first heard Murray read twenty-five years ago, and he's improved a lot: the delivery is less muttered and more open-mouthed, more like the Widespeak that he wishes poetry to be.

Reading across Murray's now considerable output—554 pages, and that doesn't include the two verse novels—I discern more clearly what has for some time dimly bothered me about his later poetry, and that's its increasing attraction to literary hieroglyphics. As a small example, take the following lines from "Puss," one of the *Translations from the Natural World*: "I pose on long wood to groove on one crazy food-tin: / a real blood rabbit, hunched throbbing / round his knotty vegetable tube!" (369). This is, I guess, a very clever description of a cat watching a rabbit eat a carrot, but the pleasure of decoding is purely intellectual. While I'm sceptical of taking the religious intentions of Murray's verse at face value, the effect here is more like a cryptic crossword clue than a convincing verbal embodiment of the "presence" of its subject.

This aspect of Murray's work is not new. Matthews relates "[t]he obliquity of Murray's poetics, as in its refusal to declare its own subject matter" to the "national withholding" in the laconic Australian vernacular (68); he also notes the poet's long-standing "interest in riddles" (94). The riddle is an ancient poetic form deeply embedded in rural cultures, but in poems such as "Shower" or the splendid "Accordion Music" Murray turns it into baroque music: "it shuffles a deep pack of cards, flirts an inverted fan / and stretches to a shelf of books about the pain of man" (332).

This cryptic style dominates his most recent collection, *Poems the Size of Photographs*, which begins with a poem called "The New Hieroglyphics" whose taking-off point is "the World language" of pictorial signs and icons:

> Spare literal pictures render most nouns and verbs
> and computers can draw them faster than Pharaoh's scribes.
> A bordello prospectus is as explicit as the action,
> but everywhere there's sunflower talk, i.e.,
> *metaphor*, as we've seen. A figure riding a skyhook
> bearing food in one hand is the pictograph for *grace*,
> two animals in a book read *Nature*, two books
> inside an animal, *instinct*. Rice in bowl with chopsticks
> denotes *food*. Figure 1 lying prone equals *other*. (508)

The word "pictograph" here offers a key to the linking of poetry and photography in the title; so might Horace's *ut pictura poesis*:

> Propped sheets of bark converging
> over skin-oils and a winter fire,
> stitched hides of a furry rug-cloak
> with their naked backs to the weather,
> clothing as dwelling as shouldered boat

beetle-backed, with bending ridgelines,
all this, resurrected and gigantic:
the Opera House,
Sydney's Aboriginal building. (526)

"Clothing as Dwelling as Shouldered Boat" presents a verbal rebus of its subject, only to decode it in the last two lines. Other poems are less kind. Among the most confounding of the many epigrams in *Poems the Size of Photographs* is "The Tin Clothes":

This is the big arrival.
The zipper of your luggage
grows *valise* round three sides
and you lift out the tin clothes. (519)

I should fess up that I'm one of those who thinks Murray's lyrical poetry has declined, become less fully realized over the last two decades, since his return to Bunyah and *The Daylight Moon*. It's one thing to rhapsodize Boeotia from an Athenian distance, and quite another to attempt the same thing from within its cowyard gates; for, strange to say, Murray's lyrical practice has moved ever further away from the "colloquial, middle-voiced poetry" celebrated in his prose.

The deeper Murray's gone bush the more he's become, stylistically, a crypto-modernist. While the ranks of his admirers grow, the poet's imagined audience has ironically become less palpable, more disembodied and ideal. Peter Pierce's remark on the preface to *A Working Forest* in his review of Murray's prose from the *ALS* collection serves also as a poignant commentary on this later poetry: "The many consolations of which Murray finally speaks, 'the enterprise of more inclusive civilisation which all my writing tries to serve,' does not appear to overcome the aggravations and melancholy to which he has already given pre-eminence" (83).

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