

Chapter ~~12~~10 Sheer Perversity: ^{Peter} Mathers and ^{David} Ireland

Peter Mathers and David Ireland are two writers who share an utterly bleak view of human possibilities, but whose work contains a comic energy which seems to contradict the futility of the world they ^{depict.} ~~portray~~. In the work of ^{both} ~~either~~ writer^s, the hopes of the characters portrayed and the expectations of the readers are constantly disappointed by the sheer perversity of things and of people. Both ~~writers~~ show a world where everything is possible and nothing is likely. In Ireland's work, things dominate, and human beings merely struggle to find a tiny area of freedom where ~~they~~ can briefly be themselves. In Mathers' work, people are thwarted by the randomness of events, the perversity of other people, or the stubbornness of physical facts. The machine works ^{too well} ~~the~~ victim is decapitated, and the hero finds himself made a scapegoat. In both writers, however, this capriciousness of fate is combatted by ^{an} ~~the~~ endurance of the human spirit, which ^{appears} ~~exists~~ both in the central characters and in the exuberant ingenuity of the writing itself.

The world of Peter Mathers can most ^{easily} ~~simply~~ be approached through a semi-autobiographical piece of ^{writing} ~~writing~~ published in Overland in 1968.¹ ~~On the surface~~ This article tells the story of Mathers' encounter with America - with the identity clerk who is not ~~not~~ "at liberty to say" whether ~~xxxx~~ Mathers is nobody, with the veterans and the protesting students, the police he fears will shoot him if he reaches for his wallet to prove his identity, the neighbor^u casually shot down in a bar during a television commercial, the cop with the .38 who watches over the library, with the weather and the buildings and the people. Behind the crazy episodes Mathers makes us aware of the recurring pattern which leads to the greater craziness of Vietnam and of the deprived and victimized at home. The pattern manifests itself in the isolation of each person and each incident, so that the only way people have of relating is through fear or through the machine. This isolation is reflected in the disjointedness of the narrative and of the prose. Yet the story does suggest a way beyond the craziness through its very existence, for the writer, bewildered as he is by the environment in which he finds himself, is nevertheless committed to it for its very perversity. The article closes with the comment: "I went to America to study theatre at a university. But the theatre that interested me was taking place in the streets." In this theatre, Mathers is a participant, and his writing is a part of his participation.

The nature of Mathers' commitment is suggested by Lawrence Collinson in another Overland article,² in which he describes Mathers as "the insistent underdog, the non-passive non-conformist, constantly berating society for its adherence to platitudes and conventional ~~attitudinal~~ values. His outrage carries itself over into his writing; and indeed it is this with which 'Trap' is concerned."¹ Collinson¹ is right in emphasizing the non-passive nature of Mathers' relation to ~~existence~~ ^{life}, but I feel he is less than fair in suggesting that his writing berates society. This *judgment* suggests a distancing which is quite alien to the characters in *Mathers'* ^{his} books. These people are passionately involved, yet those who achieve a measure of success, such as Jack Trap in Trap, have a self-possession which enables them to survive the buffetings of fortune. It is this quality which distinguishes Mathers' attitude from that of ~~absurdist~~ ^{most} absurdist writers ~~as Camus~~. The world of Mathers is as arbitrary and ^{as} cruel as anything found in the absurdists, but it moves him neither to anger nor to intellectual enquiry. In a novel like The Plague, the characters are confronted with the horror of life, and have to find a response which makes sense of their own existence. The only satisfactory response is that which seems furthest from reality, the giving of oneself to the cause of love and order in a world which seems to deny both. Mathers' characters, ~~however~~, are denied the luxury of the choice which is presented, however insistently, to those in the Camus novel. David David, the narrator of Trap,³ and Thomas Wort, the target of The Wort Papers,⁴ are assaulted by events which demand a response without giving any time for careful thought. In any case, events in Mathers' world always defy logic.

In the work already quoted, Collinson describes a "typical piece of Mathers prose" as "inconsistent, confused in intention, flabby in plot and uncertain in characterisation; with all its faults, however, it revealed an imaginative mind trying to force the language to yield an original style . . ."⁶ With the benefit of a greater quantity of writing than Collinson had to consider, we can now see that what he describes as faults are in fact the constituents of Mathers' world. The intentions of the writer are confused and inconsistent because that is the nature of intentions. Plots are not clear and characters are not certain. His style is original not because his aim is originality but because only such a disjointed and anarchic style can render the disjointed and anarchic world of his imagination. NP The development of this style can in fact be traced through the ~~entire~~ stories ~~he~~ ^{Mathers} has published in Overland. The first, ~~is~~ "These Poets",⁶⁵ is a lively account of the would-be lady literary patron whose fears about the wildness of her protégé are ~~quite~~ quieted by her admiration for his penis. The style is, however, quite straightforward narrative. The second story, "Something Touchy and Delicate",⁶ ^{ments} experiments with the shifts in person and time which ^{have} come to characterize his work. This story also contains the delightful and pathetic image of "tinned May" ^H the wife rolled down the hillside ~~in~~ in a galvanized iron tank ^H which epitomizes ^{Mathers'} his ambiguous and ironic view of the intermingled comedy and cruelty of the world. His two autobiographical sketches ⁷⁸ abandon any pretence of orderly verisimilitude ~~in~~ for the deeper veracity of total unpredictability.

It is significant that Mathers moves furthest from ordinary reality in "Wondermath", the sketch written in response to a request for an autobiographical statement. This sketch opens with linguistic speculations about the meaning of the name Mathers, which he ^{is linked} ~~links~~ among other things with the "stinking camomile", one of the plants using the suffix "wort" which was to play a part in his later novel. The speculations appear to be pure fancy, but they suggest also the ~~tenuous~~ nature of our identity, which rests so much on our ability to find words to define it. This perception ^{explains justifies} alone the apparently random ~~mixed~~ mode of ^{the} ~~his~~ narrative, for when the very words we use have such an arbitrary connection with reality it is absurd to pretend to any greater consistency than is inherent in our medium of expression.

The ~~xxxxxxx~~ whole sketch is presented as a scenario for a film, with a chorus providing comment from the point of view of the conventional world, which both fears and despises the ^{substance} ~~subject~~ of the narrative. This ^{ostensible theme substance,} ~~subject~~ however, never emerges clearly. In the manner of his novels, we have a digression into the lives of his parents. His own life ~~however~~ is presented as a fantasy, a conglomerate of dreams which could never exist in any objective reality. Yet this fantasy is really a kind of descant or inner truth which ^{parallels} ~~accompanies~~ the outer events, which we can only infer. We see ^{the narrator} ~~him~~ as after-school messenger boy, avenger of industry, master politician, military panjandrum, phantom of the stockyards, international traveller. The individual episodes follow an outrageous and incredible logic; the whole is both impossible and complete.

These sketches help to provide a clue to Mathers' narrative method. ~~xxxxxx~~ There is in them no real distinction of inner and outer reality, of fact and fantasy. The non-events of the autobiography, "Wondermath", have neither more nor less reality than the quite objectively concrete but equally ~~incredible~~ incredible world of Pittsburgh in "Identity". Similarly, the narrator is also the author, but the author is also a fictitious personage, a character who has to construct himself out of his words. Mathers thus abolishes not only the normal convention of fiction, ^{that} that the world ~~is~~ of the novel is one wholly within the author's consciousness, ⁸⁹ but also the fictional device used by such writers as Furphy, where the person of a narrator involved in the action enables the author to further distance himself as an objective and ironic commentator. Mathers is wholly involved in the action, rather in the manner of Sterne, but he lacks even a consistent point of view, and therefore makes no attempt to make sense of what happens.

The status of the narrator is made clear in The Wort Papers, which are passed on by a crazy correspondent named Matters, one of the variations of Mathers. But the speculation on plant associations in "Wondermath" makes it possible that Mathers is also the brothers Wort, the protagonists and victims of the book. There is no such simple association in Trap, but in "Wondermath" ~~the~~ Mathers does refer to being "befriended by a Mr. J. Trap in a low wine ~~shanty~~ cellar" and being taken home by him to his family circle.¹⁰ This lifts Trap from fiction to a reality in Mathers' life, although the fantastic form of ~~the~~ memoirs removes him at once to fictional status again. In Trap itself, however, a great deal of the narrative is told directly by Trap, and there is no sense of the author managing the story in the background. While Trap is speaking, or any other character, his is the sole consciousness through which we see events. The distancing and questioning comes from the fact that we see the main characters not only through their own words but also through the words and eyes of others. Mathers' involvement is not merely through the creation of the characters, but ^{through} his complete surrender to them. His writing is therefore not merely a fictional probing of the relationship between men and events, but a fundamental questioning of what we are accustomed to accept as human reality. The disappearance of the author into his characters, like the unreality with which he presents himself in his memoirs, questions not the nature but the possibility of human identity. Autobiography and fiction become a single genre.

The comedy and verbal wit of Mathers' writing springs from the same ~~xxxxxxxx~~ understanding of the tenuous nature of reality as does the anarchic structure of his work. The comedy itself is in ~~an~~^{the} Australian tradition of vulgar knockabout which ~~stretches~~^{far} as ~~far~~ back as Steele Rudd. In this writing, the characters are always the victims of circumstances, and the humor^u is most often crudely physical. This tradition exists outside formal literature in the kind of oral lore collected by Bill Wanner in his book The Australian,²⁹ and of course Steele Rudd's characters ~~move~~^{fit} easily ~~back~~ into this medium in the countless jokes of Dad and Dave. The essence of this humor^u is the way it ~~takesthe~~ deflates human pretensions, "takes the mickey" out of not only the easy targets, the new-chums, parsons and city slickers, but also out of almost any human aspirations. Dad Rudd and his family are, after all, hard-working selectors, and the humor^u of the yarns comes from the failure of their work. A.D.Hope has pointed out how this sort of joke can come only from the insider; from anyone else it would be pretentious or insulting.^{10 12} ~~this~~

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The Australian tradition of vulgar knockabout^u
~~tradition~~ can be traced through the digger humor of two wars, through early Australian films, and ~~perhaps~~ perhaps most obviously in the Australian graphic tradition of black and white art.^{11 13} It is Mathers' place in this tradition which makes his work most obviously Australian. The exuberance of his comic invention relates him to a writer like John Barth, his proletarian sympathies perhaps put him in the company of such English writers as Alan Sillitoe, but his ~~main~~^{central} characters, perpetually resilient underdogs, born losers who still prove superior to ~~xxxxxxxx~~ the surrounding society, are unmistakably Australian. The humor^u springs from his identification with ~~them~~^{these characters}, ~~from~~
as seen from a

emerges
~~arises~~ from *this* viewpoint.

The chaotic structure of Mathers' novels ~~represents the view of~~ ^{life from within the machine.} People struggle against the events which buffet them, sometimes managing to shape ~~the events~~ ^{them} for a period, more often being shaped by them. Tangled up with the present is the past, which recurs not only as memory but also as one of the forces which has contributed to the shape of the present, and as a partially revealed pattern linking the most unlikely people. The past is the series of events which ~~have~~ ^{has} developed certain characteristics in the actors in today's drama and which ~~have~~ ^{has} given these people their particular stations in life and thus their roles in the drama. These events, however, cannot be presented in a straightforward narrative, because Mathers interest is not so much in how they came about as in how ~~they are present~~ ^{their presence is felt} today. The characters in his novel therefore relate these events as they come to remember them, or as they become important to them in the present. As the events are related, however, a time change occurs, and the past is ~~xxxx~~ made present, its characters as real in the novel as the ostensible narrators. There is, in consequence, a constantly shifting perspective on events and a constantly shifting ~~xxxxxx~~ centre of consciousness within the novel. This method of narration enables the author to make an ironic commentary by the juxtaposition of events from different periods and different parts of society, but it also threatens to disintegrate the novels, leaving us only with their energy as a unifying force. The reader becomes confused by a multitude of events and characters, so that no clear theme emerges, ~~so that~~ ^{and} the novels come to celebrate only their own ^{nihilistic} vitality.

If, however, we examine the structure, a number of ~~xxxxxxxx~~
~~them~~ persistent concerns do appear. In Trap, these ~~concerns~~ relate
to the destructive nature of society and to the efforts of individuals
to build an identity which can resist the onslaughts on it. The
characters in the book can be divided ^{into} ~~between~~ those who build their
identity from the material goods offered by society, and those who
build their identity in ~~despite~~ ^{them} of it. The central character, ^{the mixed-blood Aboriginal, Jack} Trap,
belongs with the latter; Free-Rutt, financier and developer, ^{with} for the
former. The narrator struggles ^{to escape} ~~against~~ Trap's ~~influence~~ influence, ^{to}
^{and} achieve the Free-Rutt standards, but finally has to acknowledge defeat.
^{This} ~~These~~ distinctions ^{is, however,} ~~are~~ not ^{in all the characters.} clear-cut. Old Peters, for example,
achieves material success through a narrow concentration on his own
material advancement, yet we are forced to admire his versatility and
his tough endurance. Similarly, Mrs Nathan is both a shallow hypocrite,
living a life of social, intellectual and artistic pretension ~~on the~~
^{based on} ~~basis of~~ unashamed ~~exp~~ but unadmitted exploitation of the less
powerful, and a woman with the drive to force society to acknowledge
a life she has built for herself. It is Mathers' ability to
perceive ~~both~~ the attractiveness and the real quality of such a person
which makes his satire of Toorak so effective. He admits all its real
qualities and still shows how the civilization on which it prides
itself is ~~still~~ ^{shell} a mere cardboard ~~carapace~~ which reveals its essential
insubstantiality, even in comparison with so frail a vessel as Mrs
Paine, of the marvellous panacea and the cactus crucifix.

The search of these people for ~~the~~ viable identity is detailed in ~~a~~ ^{the} story about the efforts of a social worker, David David, the narrator, to prepare a report on Trap for his patron, Mrs Nathan, who hopes to use Trap to organize natives who might otherwise obstruct a mining venture in which she is interested. In the ~~process~~ ^{process} of his investigations, David has to ~~decide~~ choose the way of life he wishes to follow. He is ~~extremely~~ fascinated by the Toorak world of finance and fashion, and becomes most upset when Trap and others question its values and justifications. With his conscious mind, he accepts society's valuation of Trap as an evil man, and ~~he~~ resigns from his public welfare post with the council to follow a career in Mrs Nathan's companies. Finally, however, he is unable to free himself from Trap's influence, and at the close of the novel ~~he~~ heaves a brick through the ~~plate~~ glass and aluminium doors of the Megopolis building, headquarters of the biggest company of the syndicate. ~~He~~

The novel is not, however, essentially about David David. He is the narrator, and as such also functions as a commentator. His commentary is the more effective because he is involved, and the reader's response to the actions of the story is conditioned more by David's struggle to avoid Trap's influence than by his explicit words. Although he is able to mock some aspects of his own life, as when he laughs at the time he was "Rehabilitating whores and at the same time having two call-girls in South Yarra," any inclination we might have to accept the accuracy with which he sees himself is immediately contradicted by his observation that his "saving grace" is: ^{"My} ~~his~~ ability to see others as they really are. My honesty. My ability to stand off and observe them with complete detachment." This is part of a meditation on an occasion when he has been so much involved, ~~has~~ had so little detachment, that he is too exhausted either to work or to sleep. Moreover, the subject of his meditation is not concern for others but for himself. Other people are for David a challenge which forces him to examine his own identity. He describes himself as a person who has "attempted just about everything. Associations, clubs, parties, sects, movements." Yet the only spontaneous action we see him perform in the novel is when he heaves the brick at the end. ^{He functions, therefore, not simply as} ~~His function is therefore neither~~ actor ^{or} ~~or~~ commentator, but rather ^{as} surrogate. Mrs Nathan and Trap, and the people they introduce, act on David to force him to a commitment, and his reactions are ^{mirrored by} ~~those of~~ the reader. Through him, Mathers is, ^{through David,} using Trap to push his readers towards a commitment.

Far more interesting than David's development in the novel is Trap's response to Mrs Nathan's ~~xxxxxxx~~ attempt to implicate him in her mining venture. ^{In defiance of her plans,} ~~Instead,~~ Trap departs with his own party to obstruct the venture, only to be arrested on the first day of his journey. These events, however, occupy only two days and six pages from the opening of the novel. The rest is a flashback to David David's diary for the month before the opening date. This diary incorporates narratives which leap back five generations.

Altogether, there are ~~five~~ ^{four} ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ connected but distinct narratives ^S interpolated within the framework ^{provided by} of David's ~~xxxxx~~ story ^{Mrs and the account of Trap's relations with Sally.} ~~and xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ^{the Nathan's plans.} The first of these is the relatively short account of Eb Cruxtwist and the Pediment Shoe factory. This is vaguely connected to the rest of the novel through the employment at Pediment of a kind of niece of Trap, Maisie, who manages to infect Cruxtwist and, through him, a whole religio-political ~~xxxxxxxx~~ conference, with crabs. The image of crabs is renewed in the novel through the Crabbed Circle, the astrology group dominated by Mrs Nathan. The implications are evident, but Mathers does not emphasize them in the development of the novel. The thematic relevance of the Cruxtwist episode appears to be mainly the absurdity of life, and particularly of the attempts to justify it by various forms of morality. Cruxtwist is a lecher, and also the devotee of a particularly vicious ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ political crusade which uses morality as justification for denying any respect ^{to} ~~for~~ others. The factory manager is well-meaning but uncomprehending. Only Maisie, with mental and biological weapons derived from her oppressed state, is adequate to the situation.

The second interpolated narrative in the novel is the story of Trap's early life, up to his meeting with Sally. This is followed by ^{the third digression,} ~~a similarly lengthy section~~ telling the story of Trap's grandparents and parents, from his grandmother's ~~abduction~~ long-sought abduction from Tierra del Fuego to his father's career as a Wobbly and arsonist. The image of fire, derived from grandmother Maria's homeland, persists in the ~~accident which explains his life~~ ^{way in} ~~the mode by~~ which Armstrong Trap clears the ground for his garden, the accident which causes his death, the ^{manner} ~~mode~~ of death of Armstrong's two elder boys, ~~and which explains Wilson Trap's father's~~ ^{is} the conflagration which symbolizes Wilson Trap's acceptance of the anarchist doctrines of the Wobblies, and his last gesture of defiance to a capitalist world.¹⁶ The same image occurs in Jack Trap's career in the name of his first partner, Vulcan, and in the meditation on arson which follows his release from the police and his reunion with Sally.¹⁷ The grand conflagration of fire destroys Maria's hopes of achieving her dream, the settlement of her family in a rural paradise, but it also seems to offer the only hope of ^{escape} ~~escaping~~ from the machine which continually binds Trap to its wheels. This machine has symbolically shat on Trap at the very moment he seems to have achieved some freedom, just before the meditation on arson. The only real freedom he has enjoyed has been from his acts of defiance. Fire, the instrument of the machine, seems also to offer the complete escape from it.

delete

not explained

This section is dominated by the image of fire, derived from grandmother Maria's homeland. This image defines the reality at the heart of Trap. Itself shapeless, it gives shape. Wholly destructive, it is yet an achievement. Its being is taken from other things, and it exhausts itself in its being. Wilson Trap, Jack's father, ~~reflects that the definition of fire is that which~~
~~derives his~~
 ,Kruger,
 inspiration from a Wobbly who virtually exists only as fire. . .
 "trousers like cool coals, violent red shirt, a pink, cooler face,
 then ginger hair Ginger flame bristled from his nostrils.
 He was compact fire." Kruger burns down the mill where Wilson
 is working, and Wilson, reflecting that such an act can arise only
 from a noble inspiration, follows his example for some years, until
 "the fire went out it was as though he'd been given a
 certain amount of fuel, which, when exhausted, was not to be
 replenished." The same thing is true of the other major characters
 in the book. To the extent that they are alive, they are destructive -
 but the life of the book is destructive.

This is not ^{where} more true than in the case of Old Peters, Jack Trap's great-great-grandfather on his mother's side, ¹²~~20~~ and central figure of the fourth major slab of narrative. ~~Peters' father had~~ ^{his} a destructive temperament ~~which~~ resulted in his killing a rival lover and being transported to Australia. ^{where he} Old Peters lays the foundation of his fortunes by participating in the rape of the cedar forests. A quarrel with a convict ^{causes} ~~causes~~ the loss of his arm, which is crushed in a log jam. ~~while the convict and Peters quarrel over payment of a toll on the logs caught in the~~ ~~xxxx~~ chain the convict has stretched over the river for this purpose. The hand is also, however, Peters' ^{However,} ~~salvation,~~ ^{his hand} for a hutkeeper's dog carries it off, and so brings about ^{his rescue} ~~the~~ a search which ~~discovers~~ Peters and leads him to ~~success~~. Peters furthers his fortunes by a ^{partnership} ~~partnership~~ with Colonel Sancty-Mony, who has derived part of his wealth from trade in shrunken cannibal heads, some of which have been chopped off just to meet the demands of the trade. Peters eventually replaces his hand with a savage hook which is incorporated in the arms of his company. Meanwhile, he becomes a ~~member~~ member of the narrow sect of True Believers, whose theology supports his prosperity, and fathers a child on the daughter of the ^{hutkeeper} ~~hutkeeper~~ who had originally rescued him. The contradictions in this career effectively satirize the pretensions of the pioneer families, but their point is not essentially satirical. Rather, these contradictions constitute the reality of Peters. His life is built on the destruction of the great cedar forests, but it is still a real achievement. By the exploitation of his contradictions Peters creates his own place in the world.

What is true on a lesser scale of Old Peters is true on a greater scale of Trap himself. Certainly, he does not achieve the material success of Peters. He does, however, impose himself on those with whom he comes into contact. His resilience enables him to overcome such ~~xxxxxxxx~~ setbacks as his regular terms of imprisonment. Finally, he creates his life according to his standards rather than those ~~of~~ which others would impose on him. The token of his success is David David's eventual act of defiance.

The story of Trap's early life ~~Trap'sxxxxxxxx~~ is presented through the words of his friend, the wine-shop proprietor Adamov, while the story ^{of} of his ancestors is told by Trap himself. This gives a certain mythic quality to Trap, as his life is ~~something~~ something which belongs in hearsay rather than in sober fact. This quality is enhanced by the opening of Adamov's tale, which describes Trap's early life as a boxer; "the delight of ~~the~~ boxing fans. . . The Ultimate in boxing - the man . . . who does not ~~eye~~ touch his opponent - the match in which there is no physical contact whatsoever. Only where the shadows merge is there conflict." ~~Adamov~~ Adamov then immediately ~~xxxxxxxx~~ denies the reality of this vision and gives ~~instead~~ the reality: "Actually, he was born in an inner suburb, Balmain." ²¹ He commences work, not ~~as the~~ ^uglamor boy of the boxing ring, but as an apprentice carpenter. Yet the mythic picture, like all myths, has its own truth. The image of ^{his} Trap's early life as a ~~the~~ fighter defying the ordinary laws of the game exactly suits Trap, whose life defies the laws of both conformity and dissent, and who is invincible precisely because he acknowledges no necessity. The image of conflict where the shadows merge applies both to ~~Trap's~~ the matrix

of Trap's life in slumtown Sydney and Melbourne and to the social milieu of the novel, where the conflict is real but obscure, occurring ~~behind the~~ beyond the veneered boardrooms and trendy homes, in the small print of the agreements, the back alleys of the cities and the recesses of the minds of David David and those he meets.

On the other hand, the fact that Trap himself tells the ~~xxx~~ stories of his ancestors gives these characters an immediacy ~~and xxxxxx~~ as a part of the present reality of Trap. These stories, told late at night under variously trying circumstances, form part of Trap's **assault** on David and on the society David represents. Truth is the human degradation of the Fediment factory, not the platitudes of the executives with whom David chooses to mix. The fortunes of the ~~xxxxxxxx~~ better families are based on the rape of the environment, in which ^{old} Peters plays his part. The foundations of our present civilization were laid by poisoning the Aborigines, by destruction of the kind suffered by Maria's people ^{at the hands of from white settlers} in Tierra del Fuego, ~~after her flight~~. The established families are linked by the miscegenation of their ancestors with the deprived lower world from which Trap springs. *With his own truth he* He challenges the picture of itself, ~~xxx~~ which this established world includes ^{existence} holds ~~with his own truth~~. This truth ~~is surrounded by~~ the fact of himself as a black man for whom the whites, by their share both in his paternity and in the deprivation of his ancestors, are responsible.

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Trap's

His joint ancestry is therefore a double reminder of the guilt of white society. But the history of his family, which he embodies in his person, also challenges accepted values by showing the futility of religion, morality or law in the circumstances which led to the establishment of these institutions in a new country. The men who succeeded were the strong, the devious and the cunning, men like Old Peters and ~~Sanctus~~ ^{Sanctus - Mary} ~~Mary~~. Even Maria Trap survived while she was devious, destroyed herself only when she was possessed by a gentle vision of rural peace. ~~23-22~~ If this is the reality of the world, the pious hypocrisies of David are irrelevant, and Trap is free to wage war as he chooses. During the novel, he chooses to use a randy dog, forged stamps, faked parrots and random assaults with fist and blowtorch before he finally makes an organized attack ^{on society} in his effort to establish a commune. Equally, however, he assaults the left, and his own family traditions, when he acts as scaffoldwright and ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ constructs the apparatus which plunges convicted murderers ^{ers} to their death.

Above all, however, Trap's assault on society is sexual. He is the product of the guilty sexuality of the past, and his marriage to the evangelistic Martha and immediate desertion of her, and later symbolic rape of the quite willing landlady, Mrs Faine, are ^{retribution on} ~~a return to~~ white society both for their past and present use of ^{the} ~~Aboriginal~~ people. For just as Trap's ancestors, men and women, have been used and discarded in the past, so Eb Cruxtwist continues the pattern in ^{the} ~~the~~ present. Similarly, Mrs Nathan would castrate Trap by making him an agent of her company. Instead, he attacks the company project, and implies that he has also enjoyed Mrs Nathan. ~~23~~

an attack on

Trap's assault on Australian society is not limited to ^{comprehends} establishment values, but ~~includes~~ our whole way of looking at ourselves. His career as scaffoldwright ~~next~~ illustrates this. He accepts the job only after he has been successively rejected by his employer, ^{his} wife, a baths attendant and a cinema usher, and has commenced his war against authority by strangling policemen's dogs which have ventured too near the bars of his prison. He is further pressured into accepting the job by the news that policemen have been making enquiries about him. But what the public and his friends find offensive is that he enjoys the job. He refuses to "have his behavior ^u taken for granted. . . . I'm ready, he told everybody, to do the job. Happily." ²⁴ It is this attitude which makes him a suitable scapegoat for the government after a hanging is botched, but even then he continues to wear an air of calm detachment. ²⁵ It is only when the judge wallows in his own self-righteousness that Trap's calm breaks, and he suggests adding drawing and quartering as a public spectacle. ²⁶ ~~This~~ This remark provokes fury because, ~~it~~ although it contradicts public professions, it is the logical extension of the actual conduct of the public. Trap's refusal to become involved in an anti-hanging movement reflects a similar contempt for public stands. The implication of both actions is that publicly struck attitudes are necessarily a caricature of genuine values.

Trap undermines all the accepted values of Australian society. As an Aborigine who wants at first only to be accepted as a white, he shows the limitations of our valued mateship. His encounters with ~~the~~ and accounts of the rich and the powerful show that we have got neither an egalitarian democracy nor a ruling class any wiser or better than the rest of society. His descriptions of life at the Pediment and Steelcyl factories, and his father's attempts to be accepted by the Aboriginal community, show ^{that} the deprived classes as no better than their oppressors. Religion is no more than Faine's Panacea. Yet it is in this rejection of all established values that Trap is most Australian, for in the act of rejection Trap lives, he establishes and preserves his own unique, disturbing identity. His distrust of all institutions and codes of behavior ^{is} is a distrust of all dreams, but his survival is a warranty that the common man can succeed. For by rejecting dream as illusion, Trap does establish the grounds on which the Australian dream of the common ^{man} can be a reality, for by discarding all ideological lumber Trap makes himself invincible. He ^{does not seek} ~~seeks not~~ to control the machine, for that would merely maintain ^{its} ~~the~~ supremacy ^{it.} ~~of the machine.~~ Instead, ^{he} ~~to~~ constantly throws it out of gear. He therefore establishes an untameable area of personal freedom.

The possibility of personal freedom is also what concerns David Ireland. In his second novel, The Unknown Industrial Prisoner²³, he creates an image of the machine society in his Puroil Oil Refinery, a place neither factory nor workshop, but just a giant machine tended by humans whom it reduces to the status of cardboard cutouts, known only by ~~XXXX~~ nicknames which indicate their roles in the refinery, not their identity as persons. Within this machine a small ~~and~~ measure of freedom is obtained at the Home Beautiful, a ~~hith~~ brothel constructed by the men in the midst of the polluted wasteland, but this offers only ~~the~~ temporary solace while they sneak away from their meaningless and readily dispensable tasks, not permanent escape. Ireland's next novel, The Flesheaters^{14/28}, offers ~~the~~ a view of the same society from a different sort of oasis, a boarding house maintained for the unemployed. ~~However,~~ although this boarding house, named Merry Lands, is maintained by the society, through unemployment relief cheques which the proprietor turns to free-enterprise advantage as the staple of his business, and is a microcosm of society. The only real escape is in the tiny area of uncut grass, the "freedom area", where nature can practise its random cruelties unimpeded.

These two novels ~~both~~ present the same kind of random world that we find in Mathers' work, but neither contains ^a ~~any~~ fiercely anarchic ^{individual} ~~spirit~~ like Trap, ^{who} ~~to~~ wrest ~~him~~ meaning out of the raw material with which he is presented by life. The ^{nearest approach to such a} ~~closest such~~ character in The Unknown Industrial Prisoner is the Great White Father, who shares with Trap a distrust of all systems and an inventive ability to turn the system to his own purposes. He it is who constructs and organizes the Home Beautiful. Finally, however, he is missing when a blow-out would seem to promise some hope of beating the system, and at the end of the book he has become the Great White Feather; and Puroil continues its way, although the grudges it accumulates promise further troubles for the future. For the present, however, the machine is wholly victorious.

Although Ireland writes as one of the prisoners within the machine, his account is retrospective and essentially detached. "It has been my aim to take apart, then build up piece by piece the mosaic of one kind of human life," he remarks in the preface he provides near the end of the book. ²⁹ In his mosaic he builds a picture which is completely convincing in its realism, often comic, but finally without hope, except for that which arises from the few glimpses he gives us of natural human relationships even in his bleak company-dominated landscape.

In The Flesheaters, Ireland changes his perspective. The narrator is one of the inhabitants of Merry Lands, perhaps an employee, although this is never made clear. The book opens in the same detached manner as The Unknown Industrial Prisoner, with a description as from afar. "A man was in the grounds of Merry Lands. Patiently talking to a dog . . . A half brick loosely held in the left hand." ~~38~~ The tone is impersonal, the image both absurd and menacing. But a few lines later the narrator enters, and becomes involved. "I put both hands to my throat to steady my voice, and said, 'What's the main work around here?' I didn't care, but others seemed to find the question acceptable." ~~39~~ In these words the narrator, Irving Lee, defines his relationship to the narrative. His attitude is ~~xxxxxx~~ ^{of} one detachment, but the detachment is part of an effort to retain his self-control. In order to ~~retain this~~ ^{do this} control, he has to possess himself with enough facts to operate in the world in which he finds himself. While Trap forces the world to accept his identity, Lee is constantly aware of the precariousness of any identity. He both fends off the surrounding world and uses it to construct a fragile self.

Just as the world of The Unknown Industrial Prisoner is dominated by the refinery, so the world of The Flesheaters is controlled by the proprietor of Merry Lands, O'Grady. O'Grady is the figure from the old game, "O'Grady Says", and the characters in the book do as he says. He allots random numbers to their rooms, devises the rules, administers the discipline and makes the profit. Yet he too is a victim of the system, despite his Midas touch. He has been a bricklayer, has created something of lasting value, but the developers are tearing his buildings down, ³¹ and eventually they resume Merry Lands itself and make it a part of the intersection.

The vision which Irving Lee has of the whole continent as a machine proves real for Merry Lands. The traffic itself wasn't moving.

It never had. It was all on a system of conveyer belts that intersected, crossed over and had to stop now and then. The roadway was only one track on a factory floor: the continent was a vast factory, the sky providing natural light. Roads, buildings, shadowy people-figures - we were all ingredients in a process, all part of a vast machine called Australia. ^(p. 163) ₃₂ The image is the same

3) / # as that ~~of~~ the refinery in the earlier novel, but it is the more frightening because it is implicit in the action rather than the ^{obvious} ~~dominant~~ force in it. O'Grady, like his tenants, struggles with his individual destiny, and it is only the outcome which reveals the futility of the struggle, the omnipotence of the machine, which is in no way lessened because it is not always obvious.

But if O'Grady is eventually revealed as victim, through most of the novel he plays the part of at least manager, if not master, of the machine. His lodging house ostensibly provides a refuge for the victims of society, but it enslaves these victims as completely as any other part of society. ^{"O'Grady says" is the capricious law of the inmates' lives.} The sinister reality of Merry Lands is revealed in the second chapter, "House of Numbers". ³³ The ideology is liberal: "My idea is that the good society is not something you learn about. It's something you live. Here and now. The work program is part of your life here. The government - that is everybody here - decides how much work time we'll have." The language is Orwellian, for people totally dependent on the proprietor and the government could not possibly exercise this autonomy. But the narrator comments: "To give him his due, I never once saw anything at Merry Lands that corresponded with these gentle sentiments." We have moved beyond Orwell into a world where both speaker and listener know that words are meaningless, just part of a game which both play to camouflage the truth in which both are trapped.

N.P.

For most of the inhabitants of Merry Lands, however, the nature of the trap is defined by O'Grady. The conducted tour of the premises on which O'Grady leads Lee is a tour of hell. The inmates are all anonymous, and are put through their paces to amuse the visitor. Some remain dumb, one is given a primary school stamp because he has done nothing, two will not leave their room, two lift their skirts to the stranger, one is given shock treatment for "Laughing without ^{due} ~~dis~~ cause." The complaint which leads to the incarceration of the inmates is poverty, which O'Grady refers to and treats as ^{an affliction} ~~a drug~~. The people are therefore involuntarily reduced to a state of total dependence on the institution. O'Grady's methods - discipline, drugs, electric shocks - follow logically from this definition of the lodgers' status. Yet it is not O'Grady who reduces them to this status, but ~~himself~~ the society from which they flee to him for refuge. He is therefore, in this inhuman moral ~~ex~~ arithmetic, quite correct in regarding himself as a benefactor. In the country of the absurd, the most absurd is sane.

The comparative sanity of O'Grady's refuge is emphasized by the repeated references to the outside world which are conveyed to the reader in terms of newspaper headlines. "C^hips Are Down, Warns Defence Minister. P^lt^h Alleged in Education. Professors Back Radicals. Spy Swap with China. Doctors Cut Smoking. Firecrackers Thrown at Police: Children Shot. Confession on Abortion. Call for Arrest of Justice Minister. U.S. Warns Australia against Disloyalty."

Such lists of headlines occur at intervals through the novel as a kind of counterpoint to the action within it. The cruel and often self-contradictory references, the disjointed sequences match and universalize the world of Merry Lands. The difference is that Merry Lands is confined to a scale which remains within human comprehension, if not within human control.

The characters who appear in ~~the~~ The Flesheaters are both participants in the action and symbols of the possible ^{methods} ~~modes~~ of adjustment to an absurd world. Clayton Emmett, the narrator's lover and tyrant, is both the scientist ruthlessly ignoring those elements of reality he cannot control and sensual man subjecting the world to his own desires, using sex as a means of domination. The sex, however, like the knowledge, remains sterile. Crystal, his mistress and later Lee's mistress, represents the alternative attitude to love, as the universal comforter and healer. Her universality, her desire to give herself to everyone and everything, is defeated by the desire of the individuals to whom she gives herself to possess her. Scotty, the writer, on the other hand, wants to possess nothing except words, to give nothing except the understanding which comes from words. Symbolically, he has amputated his own penis, and his detachment is defeated by a yearning to be involved. His words become as sterile as Emmett's ~~experiments~~ experiments, and the two form an alliance.

The two recurring images in The Flesheaters are of the food chain on which all depends, and which makes flesheaters of us all, and the sewers under Sydney which flush away what we do not wish to acknowledge, but what is the end of the chain.

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And silently, under the footpath, fat pipes carried away waste from the bodies of anonymous humans miles away. To serve those not fortunate enough to be at some distance from this other horror, the dunnycart careered out on its run. . . .

Every day, humane people turned their eyes from systematic death and breathed the delicious aroma of the cooked remains of animals. . . .

I knew that if I could have something to turn over in my mind, no matter what it was, I would be safe for a little from her, and from the power of the live cord of flesh that was strangling me. ³⁵ (p. 161)

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(NP)

¶ The last paragraph in this passage reflects the central dilemma of the novel. The only escape from the absurd is through love, in this case Lee's love for Crystal, but love itself is an act of the flesh, feeding on the flesh of another and reminding one of the body ~~which~~ flesh which both embodies and incarcerates the person. Intellectual speculation offers one escape, that chosen by Scotty, but it does not finally satisfy Lee. Neither, however, does he find a release in love. He scourges his mistress, but she still gives herself to him in a spirit of universal love. ^{However,} She continues to refuse to be possessed by him, ~~however~~.

At the end of the novel, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ Clayton Emmett is killed, partly

because of an angry patch of driving in response to Crystal's suggestion^s that he try to love his fellows, and partly because, after the subsequent accident, the need of Crystal's body to go on breathing punctured Emmett's lungs. ~~XXXXXX~~ The failure of her universal love leads ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Crystal to attempt suicide, and she is confined in a mental home. This in turn leads Lee to attempt to escape his "knot of flesh" by destroying it with a knife, but he too is caught and put in a home. Here, he is left with words, the only means left towards sense. "And the work of putting them on the paper, it's something to do between now and dying." ~~21~~ ~~36~~ By this time, O'Grady's Merry Lands itself has been destroyed.

Both ~~of~~ Ireland's novels create an image of utter hopelessness. In neither do we find any human being who is able ultimately to make reality conform to his own wishes. The Flesheaters is the more bleak because we are taken further into the minds ~~of~~ the leading characters, and share their struggles to make sense of the world through their will, through ~~into~~ the intellect and through ~~into~~ love. Each attempt proves equally futile, and to the extent that even temporary success is achieved, as it is by O'Grady or by Emmett, the means are as cruel as ~~these~~ the operation of the implacable machine outside. Ireland tests each human dream, and finds each equally fallacious.

The work of both Ireland and Mathers is recognizably Australian in ~~their~~ ^{its} cynicism about human possibilities and in ~~their~~ ^{its} contempt for ~~conventional social convention and~~ social convention and social distinctions. In each of ~~them~~ ^{their novels}, man has to find his individual reality in the face of overwhelming ^g odds. Both novelists are, however, firmly secular. However absurd they find this world, there is no suggestion that it is justified or ~~it~~ ^{meaning} given by anything outside it. The characters in ~~their~~ novels struggle not to find ^{meaning} through the world, but to define ~~it~~ ^{meaning} against ~~the~~ an anarchic world, using only the materials with which the world provides them. They are seeking neither for a glimpse of a justifying numinous, like White's characters, nor for the metaphysical freedom in obedience for which Keneally's characters search. They accept the world as given, but not its terms.

The work of these two novelists therefore opens up new possibilities for the realistic novel in Australia. We can see in both White and Keneally a discontent with the aridity of the Australian experience, unilluminated by the traditional symbols which give meaning to life in older lands. Earlier Australian writing, ^{clinging} ~~sticking~~ fairly close to experience, recorded the failure of a dream, and therefore left little but ^u ~~dark~~ ^{colored} reality. Mathers and Ireland accept this reality, and their novels are, first of all, excellent documentaries, the one of slum life and race relations, the other of life in factories and suburbs. But this documentary reality is only the raw material for their purpose, which is to show man constructing his own reality out of the raw facts of his life. In

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this sense, their work makes mythical, and therefore ⁵accessible,
through its essential truth,
/ the everyday urban reality which is life in modern Australia.

Mathers goes further in relating this to the myths of our past,
while Ireland finds in it the phantasmagoric reality of a science-
fiction future. Both, however, speak urgently
to our present.