MCLAREN-BOXB17 DOC 2

AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

John McLaren

c 1972

The main stream of tradition in Australian literature has usually been seen as being since the 1890's nationalist, xxxxxxxxxxx democratic and realist. Before this time, writers were concerned with the exotic and the utopian, but in general they continued to see this country through European eyes, either socially or topographically. But once Lawson and Paterson arrived in the pages of the Bulletin, the bushman joined the bush and Australian literature was born. The values of outbackery reigned from that time until Patrick White atarted to q uestion them with a view which was both more realistic and more visionary than any of his predecessors.

This view has in recent years been questioned by such critics as Vincent Buckley, who puts in its place his notion of two streams of tradition, the utopian and the vitalist.[1] According to this view, the utopian stream rises in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, only to turn bitter after the defeat of the workers in the middle 1890's. Thereafter the vision of a utopia being realizedz in and for the whole of society was transmuted into a lyric vision of an unattainable perfection beyond original sin in either the prehistoric past or in a country idyll of the present. As utopianism xx departs in this manner from its humanistic origins it approaches closer to its alternative tradition, vitalism.

1. V.Buckley, Utopianism and Vitalism, A.L.C., 1962. ib. Essays in Poetry, Ch.1. 1957.

Vitalism is an insistence on energy, or will, or a belief in the evolving powers of nature, or in Dionysian revelry, or in the importance of the ecstatic moment. Brennan, Henry Handel Richardson and A.D.Hope are seen as writers attracted by the concept of will, particularly when embodied in the creative artist. The Dionysian ecstatics are led by Norman Lindsay, and include in their numbers such figures as the earlier Slessor, Fitz gerald and Stewart, and in more recent times Ray Mathew. These writers tend to invoke a Dionysian amoral aristocracy of superior individuals who will redeem an otherwise barren land.

Although the distinction between these two lines of development is an important one, it can conceal a more important underlying unity, particularly in Australian fiction. The Australian novelist may subscribe to either of these codes as a solution and an aspiration, but the common element in Australian fiction is not the solution but the originating situation, which is characteristically one of failure, a failure of human beings to realize their own aspirations.

This sense of failure is no doubt a product of the social facts of defeat at the hands of nature and at the hands of the banks. To the extent that it is merely a defeat of utopian hopes, it would be paralleled in

American fiction, but whereas the American novelist reacts by an obsession with guilt and innocence, the Australian writer is more likely to adopt an attitude of pathetic nostalgia.

We can find the origins of this attitude in the work of Henry Lawson, although Marcus Clark, For The Term of his Natural Life, foreshadows the same phenomenon. In Lawson's most consistently developed work, Joe Wilson,[2] we are presented with a bush idyll of courtship and marriage, but not sex or passion. This idyll, however, is not presented so much as an ideal, but as one of the few moments in an adult life when a man can expect to be happy. It is set apart in contrast to man's normal lot. Before the story proper opens, Lawson spends a page cataloguing the "many times when a healthy boy is happy" and the "times"(note the absence of the qualifying adjective), "the times when a man is happy."[3] But even this cheerful note is qualified by the digression where the narrator explains that he himself was not a healthy minded boy, but a 'poet by mistake,' and the warning that these courting days 'will never come again.' The happiness in a man's life, in other words, is confined to the years of childhood and youth, and even this happiness is unlikely to be granted to the sensitive individual. We have here the genesis of Lawson's democracy, which is not so much a proletariat as a brotherhood of those who suffer but endure.

[2] Page references to The Prose Works of Henry Lawson, Volume II.

[3] p.3

Lawson's treatment of the squatter, Black, is instructive in this regard. Black is a squatter of the old school who sits on a log with Joe Wilson while the latter explains his intention to marry. Black, although a squatter, and therefore a class enemy, is portrayed sympathetically. This is not entirely, as A.A.Phillips suggests, because he is one of the old school, a member of the Bushman's Guild,[4] who has worked alongside his men in the early years of hardship. The other squatter mentioned in these stories, Wall, reverses the pattern, for in his case he is the unyielding tyrant and his son the sympathetic human.[5] Black is a bushman, but more importantly he is one of the brotherhodd of the failed.

'"What did you say, boss?' I said.

'"Nothing, Joe," he said. "I was going to say a lot, but it wouldn't be any use. My father used to say a lot to me before I was married."

'I waited a while for him to speak.

'"Well, boss," I said, "what about Mary?"

'"Oh! I suppose that's all right, Joe," he said. "I - I beg your pardon. I got thinking of the days when I was courting Mrs. Black."'[6]

Black is one of the failed, His courting days are over, and all he has left is nostalgia. As we learn later,[7] young Black is a quite different type from his father, so all the old man's achievements go for nothing. Human happiness is evanescent, success an illusion, and mateship the only refuge.

[4] A.A.Phillips, The Australian Tradition, second edition, 1966, p.62.

[5] Lawson, op.cit. p.71.

[6] ib. pp.28-29

[7] ib. p.83

Joe Wilson's courtship is destined to ~~be~~ lead to ~~succeeded by~~ the same pattern of failure. By the second story, Brighten's Sister-in-law - actually the first of the series to be written - Joe is already noticing that he and Mary are growing apart, that they do not seem to be able to find anything to say to each other these days. He dreams futilely of how, once 'things clear ahead a bit,' he will take more notice of his wife and child, but the agonizing truth is brought home to him in the boy's naive remark, '"You never has time to know Jim at home."'[8]

[8] ib. p.35

Against this record of steady human decline all there is to set is an occasional success, like the crop of potatoes, and the culminating achievement of the double buggy he brings home to Lahey's Creek for Mary. But these moments of success carry little weight against the picture of the Wilson's neighbour, Mrs. Spicer, in whom Joe sees a vision of what Mary will come to, and whose poor geraniums are no less secure a tie on decency than is Joe's buggy. Beyond even her story, we have the despairing imagery of the terrible deaths, in her yarns, the haunting memory of past comfort in her manner, and the surrounding presence of grey bush and wretched towns which controls them all.[9]

[9]

In this series of stories we have another motif which is to remain a feature of Australian writing. In distinction to that of most other countries, certainly England and America. This is the record of a slowly decaying marriage, a marriage which decays not because of the battle of the sexes or the inability to achieve the

perfect harmony of life forces, but merely because of the decay of individuals during the passing years. Although Joe Wilson concludes with the triumphant arrival of the buggy, we know that this is only a temporary reprieve, and that eventually he will join his mates on the wallaby, to reminisce nostalgically with Mitchell and the others about the little girls they have left behind. Marriage and home are seen simultaneously as the supreme ideal in life and as a symbol of the unattainable.

Joseph Furphy is at once more pessimistic and more cheerful than Lawson. His characters, including his narrator and alter ego, Tom Collins, are trapped in the unbreakable chains of circumstance, circumstance which is partly of their own choosing but not of their deliberate choosing. Yet Furphy does not allow the sentimental I-wish-it-had-been-otherwise which is characteristic of Lawson. Although he ridicules the various faiths which his characters have been born into, or have adopted, to make sense of life's vicissitudes, including Tom's own naive belief in his unerring ability to read character, his final stance is, in Wallace-Crabbe's words, "a warm, untheoretical concern for other men."[10] This, like Lawson's mateship, which Furphy endorses more equivocally than Wallace-Crabbe allows, is not so much a creed, far less a utopian faith, as a refuge against the impossibility of any more lasting success.

[10] Joseph Furphy, Realist. in Aust. Lit. Crit. p.144.

portrayal of
The failure in Furphy's book is in fact
far more radical than Lawson's more generalized
atmosphere. Furphy scoffs at the notion that
11 all the deadbeats (once) were more fortunate,11
but the characters in his book fail quite
specifically. Steve Thompson has a curse upon
him, and fails to gain the business success he
seeks. Nosey Alf fails to find Warrigal, just
as Tom fails to understand the import of
Warrigal's stories, and Warrigal in his turn
had failed to understand the truth of his love
for Molly, and she of his. Rigby, in the portion
of the novel which became Rigby's Romance,
failed to achieve his socialist aspirations in
the reality of his own life, by missing marriage
itself in his chase after the will-O'-the wisp
political idea. Tom fails most of all - he
fails to save the swagman, ~~xxxxxxx~~ is responsible
for the tragic failure in Rory O'Halloran's life,
fails to assist Andrew Glover but succeeds in
landing him in gaol, helps Warrigal Alf but also
sends him off to Queensland away from Molly, and
finally fails to escape from the wiles of Mrs.
Beadsfart, as wildly unsuitable a wife for him
as could be found.

Yet despite this catalogue of failure the
novel gives an impression of cheerfulness. This
comes partly from the unfailing resilience of the
bushmen, who may fail but are never defeated.
It comes also from the form of the book, which
suggests the apparently random pattern of life
which may always be ready to reveal a surprise

at its next turning. This is epitomiz ed in the episode of the swagman whom Tom encounters in the middle of the dust storm. This man has come from nowhere and goes nowhere. He has lost his swag, his tobacco and his way, and purely by lucky chance encounters Tom, who is able to ~~restore~~ give to him ~~the last two~~ tobacco a directions. There is no emotion in the recital of this almost miraculous escape from death by thirst; it is told just as another random episode, for such is life. This attitude can be criticized as lacking in heart, for ~~it~~ it not only fails to plumb the depths of the human experience ~~it is because it~~ but suggests that any such attempt would be ~~is~~ ludicrous. However, ~~but~~ in its unillusioned acceptance of the good with the bad, it does achieve a tough poise of its own.

No such balance is achieved in Henry Handel Richardson's "Fortunes of Richard Mahony." This again is a story of failure, traced ~~it~~ in agonizing detail through the course of a marriage, but the cause of the failure is not localized, as Lawson and Furphy localize theirs in the nature of life itself, the one as symbolized by the harsh Australian bush, the other in the multiply-tracked expanse of the Riverina. The opening of the novel suggests that the cause of failure is in a land revenging itself on those who have ravaged its wealth. However, although it at first appears that the field of this revenge will be localized in Mahony, as the novel ~~xxxxxxxx~~ proceeds his character gradually comes to dominate it. The external causes of defeat, symboliz ed earlier by the harsh Australian sun and the pictures of alcoholic dissolution, are transformed into an inner weakness which would, and does, prove

Jennifer Dallimore. The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, in Aust. Lit. Crit., ed. Grahame Johnston. O.U.P., Melbourne, 1962.

insuperable in any land. The heat returns to add to Mahony's destruction in Barambogie, but by now it is just an additional complication, rather than a prime cause.

Yet there is a sense in which the failure of Mahony can justly be attributed to the land itself, although Richardson escapes behind a forest of facts from facing up to the ultimate thule of her experience. For Australia offered a promise of freedom, or at least the means to obtaining freedom, while denying the opportunity to exercise freedom. The bushmen of Lawson and Furphy gain a strictly limited lease of freedom among their peers at the lowest end of society, but they also remain aware that the condition of this freedom is that they remain where they are. Their socialism is little more than a vague aspiration that these conditions should be extended throughout society, but they have no program by which this might be accomplished, and so it remains only an inspiration for the louder political ballads, not a practical code for defeating the realities of everyday life.

By his life and nature Mahony is shut off even from this solace. His ambitions to take his place in English society, or to cooperate in the construction of its counterpart here, ignore the source of his means in either the practice of his profession or investment in mining. It is his failure to reconcile the life he wishes to lead with the means by which he must support that life which brings about his tragic weakness, his alienation

from any society, ~~and~~ which leads to his final downfall. Mary, on the other hand, from her narrow practical viewpoint at first idolizes, and later ignores her husband. Because of her lack of dissatisfaction with life as it is she is unable to understand what is happening to her husband, and thus to reconcile him to the world he must live in. Despite the assertion at the end that Mahony's last words, 'Dear wife,' compensate for all the troubles that have gone before, there has at no time been any real union established between Mahony and Mary. ~~throughout the novel~~. They represent alternative, and equally limited, responses to the dilemma of failure. The difficulty is that we are not sure that Richardson does not endorse them both. The novel, then, afflicts us terribly with a sense of failure, but we are left in doubt whether the failure is a part of the nature of life, against which any values must be asserted, or merely a pitiful mistake of people whose values were inadequate.

If Richard Mahony leaves us with a feeling of unexplained tragedy, Capricornia's fierce comedy leaves no doubt that the source of the tragedy lies within the nature of life itself. The novel gives a picture of nature red in tooth and claw, but of milky mildness compared with the savagery of human nature. The more noble the aspirations in the novel, the more bitter the failure. In a catalogue of capricious cruelty, only the insensitive and the supine remain free.

The other significant work which needs to be considered is Katherine Prichard's Coonardoo. This book for once achieves the aspirations of the social realists by making the social tragedy real in the lives of individuals, but it remains a sport both in the writer's own work and in Australian literature generally. This may be because the characters in the book are too limited to their social role to have that complicated humanity which raises further questions.

This, then, is how I see the central tradition in Australian fiction. There is an element of vitalism, in the rich energy of Herbert or the undefined will of Mahony , more still in the artists of Maurice Guest. The novels of Norman Lindsay, or Louis Stone's Jonah, contain other manifestations of vitalism, but they are not embodied in either setting or characters richly enough conceived to have had any profound influence on the development of the Australian imagination. Utopianism, on the other hand, plays a small role in works of greater magnitude, except in the sense of an ill-defined yearning. Its place is in the works of those who believed they were imitating the pioneers, but in these, as Buckley points out, it takes a lyric rather than a realistic or a utopian form. It is significant that the vein in which minor Australian writers have excelled is that of childhood reminiscence, for the child still has the full potential of life ahead of him, and the adult who writes about him can avoid facing the fact of the failure of later life to achieve

its early promise.

This is the tradition which has been modified by the works of Patrick White. It may be true that he has disclaimed his intention of writing within the tradition, but the very fact of his rejection of the older modes has been his way of making a profound change in the tradition itself. The Tree of Man may explore life in a manner entirely new to Australian writing, but it explores themes which have been present for at least sixty years.

The most obvious characteristic of originality in The Tree of Man is the relentless honesty of the gaze White turns on the life of the small settlers. This realism shatters the idyllic bush idylls of writers like Dymphna Cusack or Miles Franklin, but it is no greater than the realism with which Lawson portrayed Hungerford or Gulgong. What is new, however, is the extension of this gaze to take a long and steady look at the mores of the inhabitants, whom Furphy did not see, Lawson saw only as figures in the class struggle, and Herbert saw only as pawns in a cosmic game. White looks with compassion on the more important figures in his novel, but when he turns to Mrs. Gage, or to the older Thelma or Madeleine, comedy dwindles to meanness.

His more important contribution, however, is the addition of a metaphysical dimension. The earlier novelists had been concerned to establish a pattern in the affairs of men, but White wishes to go further - his characters search for meaning as well as pattern, permanence as well as temporal success. The fact that their ambitions are little more successful than the more limited ambitions of their predecessors does not alter the significance of the change.

In the Tree of Man, Stan seeks permanence through the achievement of the farm, through a vision of Madeleine, through marriage, through routine, and through God, and finally he finds it ~~finally~~ in a glob of spittle, that is, through acceptance. Amy, on the other hand, seeks permanence through possession, and fails. White, behind the novel, seems to find permanence, and therefore meaning, in the ongoing cycle of life, in the round of seasons and in the grandson at the end of the book. But as well as this he is ~~grasping~~ seeking, through his style, to capture the permanence which can be found in the essence of each moment. ~~My next task will be to enquire into how he conducts this search, and how successful it is.~~