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All that is solid melts into air: Australia's future?

Abstract I: The task of imagining those of us who are not of Aboriginal descent into existence in this strange new land (Australia) for two hundred years, which is a very short time in world history, is both challenging and necessary. This paper explores two attempts in doing so as presented in Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life*, published in 1903, and David Malouf's more recent *An Imaginary Life*, published in 1978.

Abstract II: Il compito di immaginarci, noi, non Aborigeni, un'esistenza in questa nuova e strana terra (l'Australia) per duecento anni, un lasso di tempo molto breve nella storia del mondo, è una sfida necessaria. Questo articolo esplora due opere che offrono prospettive diverse su questa esistenza: *Such is Life* di Joseph Furphy, pubblicato nel 1903, e il più recente *An Imaginary Life* di David Malouf, pubblicato nel 1978.

My title, of course, comes from Karl Marx's discussion of the effects of the Industrial Revolution. But it is not a far-fetched reference, I believe, when applied to a settler society like Australia, "last sea thing dredged by sailor Time from Space" (O'Dowd 1979: 95) as far as its effects are concerned, since our arrival has had similar effects, damaging if not dissolving relations built up over thousands of years between the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants and imposing on it a model developed elsewhere in my view with disastrous consequences for both.

Mircea Eliade argues that settlement in a hitherto unknown land involves more than material and economic development and that the consequences are also, imaginative since "the transformation of chaos into cosmos" needs to be "given a form which makes it become real" (Eliade 1974: 113). In traditional societies this transformation has, by and large, been pursued. But from the beginnings, faced with a strange and difficult environment, we have tended to

suspect what is unseen and indefinable. In 1904, for example, Stephens noted that "there is in the developing Australian character a sceptical and utilitarian spirit that values the present hour and refuses to sacrifice the present for any visionary future lacking a rational guarantee". Attempting to mould an untouched and often intransigent environment to their will, the settlers "had little time or energy to spare for metaphysical speculation, feeling that what they achieved they owed to themselves, and found little for which to thank their fathers" heaven (Turner 1968: x-xi), and it is much the same today, I believe.

By and large our energies are still devoted to material and economic development and in many respects we remain, as Hope put it, "secondhand Europeans" who "pullulate / Timidly on the edge of alien shores" (Hope 1979: 130). Yet the task of imagining ourselves into existence in this strange new land two hundred years is a very short time in world history is both challenging and necessary. In this paper therefore I would like to explore two attempts, to do so, Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life*, published in 1903, and David Malouf's more recent *An Imaginary Life*, published in 1978.

Such is life (1), to begin with it, is the more explicit in its attempt to discover our place in the larger scheme of things, to develop some kind of cosmic understanding to enable us resist the pressures of this new place. Its opening scene has a cosmic setting which conveys a sense of our human vulnerability with the narrator and central character, Tom Collins, finding himself unemployed, speculating that this may have been predestined "ever since a scrap of fire-mist flew from the solar centre to form our planet" (p. 1). Decides to fill in his time by setting down the events of a week in his life as a Government official in the outback before the coming of the railway when goods and supplies had to be transported by teams of bullocks.

Most novelists set their characters in a social context. But here society seems to have dissolved, leaving the individual solitary and exposed to the powers of nature. The novel's opening scene describes a solitary horseman riding across the Riverina plains between earth and sky under the "geodesic dome" of the firmament with the sun blazing "wastefully and thanklessly down" (p. 2) and

concludes on a similar cosmic note with a parody of Macbeth's despairing "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech: "Such is life, my fellow mummers just like a poor player, that bluffs and feints his hour upon the stage, and then cheapens down to mere nonentity" (p. 297).

In this pioneering world, the public realm and the "power of illumination" it usually offers (2) no longer seem to exist. The self is alone in an indifferent and often hostile world. As Tom puts it later: "We are all walking along the shelving edge of a precipice and any one of us may go at any time or be dragged down by another" (p. 94).

Furphy's characters, mostly bullock drivers, live and work on the fringes of society, carrying supplies and produce to and from remote stations, must rely on their wits to survive, often at odds with the squatters they serve since their bullocks need grass and most squatters will not let them graze on their properties so that the drivers have to break into the squatters' land to let their bullocks feed there. So the drivers' lives tend to involve a series of "dirty transactions". As one of them says wearily to Tom:

> The world's full of dirty transactions. It's a dirty transaction to round up a man's team in a ten-mile paddock, and stick a bob a head on them, but that's a thing that I'm very familiar with; it's a dirty transaction to refuse water to perishing beasts, but I've been refused times out of number and will be to the end of the chapter; it's a dirty transaction to persecute men for having no occupation but carting, yet that's what nine-tenths of the squatters do (p. 13).

Working and living as they do more or less as outlaws, they find brief moments of community in the evening in chance encounters with other travellers around the camp fire sharing stories, mostly about survival in a harsh and indifferent land which has little or no sympathy for or with human beings or indeed, their animals. As a result they must accommodate themselves to the land as best they can by transforming the "chaos" facing them into "cosmos" by finding some "latent

meaning" in it, "so grave, subdued, self-centred; so alien to the genial appeal of more winsome landscape" and interpreting it "faithfully and lovingly" (p. 65). But this meaning lies beyond commonsense, pointing to the larger, more mysterious reality hinted at in the description early in the early scene of a group around a campfire at night:

> It was a clear but moonless night; the dark blue canopy spangled with myriad stars grandeur, peace and purity above; squalor, worry, and profanity below. Fit basis for many a system of Theology unscientific, if you will, but by no means contemptible (p.13).

One is reminded here of Prospero's vision in *The tempest*:

> We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on and our little lives
> Are rounded with a sleep.

and also of Pascal's *Pensee* number 265:

> When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened and astonished at being here rather than there, for there is no reason why here rather than there (2).

For them, therefore identity becomes an anxious matter. As Luiz Carlos Susin points out traditional societies identity is a "closed circle around sameness" (Susin 2002: 87) in which the self "triumphs above all as critical understanding, distinguishing and identifying good and evil in a very particular way, based on itself, on its glorious position as basis and referent of the whole of reality spread out its feet" (ibid.: 80), whereas, in contrast, in settler societies, initially at least,

the self is a pilgrim to some elsewhere beyond the horizon rather than a figure like Ulysses who is trying to find his way home or to re-establish it there, as many more privileged settlers in this country tried, to "build a New Britannia in another world", as Wentworth put it in the early days in New South Wales (Turner 1968: 12).

Such is life it, I suggest, is a "pilgrim text" of this kind since in it Furphy explores the possibility of better kind of society than the one we have at present, one which provides a "fair go" for all. So, as he says, it is a novel whose "temper" was "democratic and its 'bias' offensively Australian", attempting to dissolve established forms and practices. There is not the space to explore any further what he has to say on this score, though it is worth pointing out that, as we have already noted, he anticipates some of the metaphysical concerns evident in work of later writers like Patrick White and Randolph Stow. Instead let us turn to David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, published in 1978 (3).

As the contrast between the two titles implies, stylistically it is very different from *Such is life*, much shorter, less argumentative and more of an idyll, what Bakhtin called a "chronotope of threshold" since it combines the motif of encounter with a crisis or break in life which expands the reader's sense of reality. It is about a "Wild Child" brought up by animals in the wilderness. But its protagonist, is a sophisticate Ovid, the Roman poet who has been banished by the Emperor to the fringes of the civilised world to live amongst the tribal people there who becomes aware of a "latent meaning" to be found there. But for Malouf this meaning is metaphysical rather than political or social, as it was for Furphy and comes from beyond the self, "the unknown" into which the "Wild Child" he encounters there finally leads him to follow "the clear path of [his]fate" to push out beyond the merely human, "beyond what know cannot be my limits" (p. 135) In that sense he can be seen as a Promethean figure. Nevertheless the tone is "feminine", receptive rather than "masculine" and aggressive – as it is in *Such is life* – since he is responding to a call from beyond the self which is to transform it.

Significantly, the real life Ovid shared this preoccupation in Ovid, in his major work, the *Metamorphoses*. As *An Imaginary Life* concludes, Ovid is following the Wild Child, identifying with him with the "immensity of the landscape" and caught up in a life beyond history and "beyond the limits of measurable time" (p. 144). If we return to the questions facing a settler society like ours, it could then be said that, properly seen, colonial identity ought not be a "closed circle around sameness" (Susis 2000: 88), a replication of the world from which we have come, but, Malouf suggests, "a continual series of beginnings, painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet except in dreams" (p. 135), dreams which will enable us to live in tune with the universe, in contrast with *Such is life* in which, as we have seen, a tension exists between the self and nature.

In this way I suggest that *An Imaginary Life* may have something significant to say to us as a Australians about the task of settlement which is still to be achieved, which is to move beyond the limits of the imperial imagination and, to draw on the distinction made by Heidegger (11), learn from its First Peoples who have lived in and with this land so long, intimately and respectfully, learn how to "dwell" in it rather than merely to "build" on it, exploiting it for our own purposes.

NOTES:

1. Barnes, John (ed). 1981. *Portable Australian Authors. Joseph Furphy*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press: 1. Hereafter all page references will be given in my text from this edition.

2. Pascal, Rene. *Pensees*. In Maynard Mack et al (eds). 1965. *World Masterpieces II*. New York: Norton & Company: 32.

3. Malouf, David. 1978. *An Imaginary Life*. London: Chatto & Windus: 15. Hereafter all references will be given in my text from this edition.

4. Heidegger, Martin. 1974. *Building Dwelling Thinking*. In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Colophon Books.

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