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Australian Fiction and the Lure of Painting

Abstract I: Questo saggio studia il perché i pittori, le tecniche pittoriche e i temi legati all'arte siano presenti nella narrativa australiana dal colonialismo ad oggi. La pittura infatti ha rivestito a lungo un ruolo importante nei diari dei coloni e nella loro narrativa, diventando un emblema dei dilemmi rivelatori e delle ispirazioni condivise dagli autori. In breve, viene dimostrato come l'arte pittorica sia stata scelta come Arte Sorella della scrittura antipodea dei bianchi.

Abstract II: This essay investigates the prevalence of painters, as well as painting techniques and concerns, in Australian fiction from colonial to modern times. Why this should be so is explored, while painting, it is argued, has long enjoyed a special prominence in settler diaries and fiction, been embraced as revealing cognate dilemmas and aspirations shared by authors, and singled out, in short, as the chosen Sister Art of white antipodean writing.

Keywords: Australian fiction, painting, settler diaries, modernism.

The literary appropriation of kindred art forms is arguably a key guide to national cultures and local attitudes. Germany, for instance, has long prided itself on producing epochal '*Dichter und Denker*', poets and thinkers. Names like Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin and Novalis, Kant, Schelling, Hegel and Marx, and a host of other seminal figures, have lent this boast trans-national credibility. But German-speaking Central Europe might equally well have celebrated its awesome contributions to music and the fact that, when German-speaking writers have sought cognate disciplines through which to depict imaginative creation and its national consequences, they have often focused on music. Novalis, as loyal to the muse of music as to his re-envisaged version of Christian Europe, wrote celebratory *Hymnen an die Nacht*, not poems but *Hymns to Night*. One of his would-be poetic competitors among the Jena Romantics, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, in *Heart-Outpourings of an Art-Loving Monk*, a volume devoted largely to painting, let art's sublimest heights, in the work's final section, be attained by organ music. Similarly, E. T. A. Hoffmann enriched world fantasy with a handful of obsessive composer figures, while Thomas Mann, when he sought to lay bare the fatal flaw in the German character that made it, Faust-like, engage in an infernal pact with Adolf Hitler, found no figure more apt for his updated Faustus than the demonically possessed composer Leverkühn. But whereas music, the apparently most free and ethereal of the arts, has repeatedly inspired the pen, and more recently word-processor keyboards, of

major German writers, in Australia a comparable ascendancy has been enjoyed by painting. Why this should be so, and in what ways Australian writers have drawn inspiration and succour from this Sister Art, is my subject today.

Initially white settler writing, with an artistic inflection, was inspired by two quite separate traditions. For those with an education in, or acquaintance with the classics, there was the tradition of the Sister Arts. This referred to the interchangeability, in certain respects, of poetry and painting, most famously expressed in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (*Art of Poetry*). From it came the Horatian tag "*ut pictura poesis*", "as is painting so is poetry", or the longer, more explanatory variant "*poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*", "poetry is a speaking picture, painting silent or mute poetry"[1]. This resemblance had been much exploited in eighteenth-century English writing, which was the immediate reading of the first white settlers in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. By the late nineteenth-century, as the popularity of prose increased and threatened verse's long-standing primacy, the novel or short fiction silently took the place of *poema*. Then there was the issue of mastering the polite domestic arts. Music and painting, or at least a facility in sketching, were desirable recreational skills among the disparate communities that contributed to the early white settlement of Australia. The latter was much in demand to memorialize new scenes and experiences, to make them transmissible, and in effect to lay claim to the continent. On the other hand music, associated necessarily with home, could lift the spirits, or momentarily whisk its listeners mentally far away from their crude frontier conditions to safer and, for them, happier climes. Painting and drawing therefore tended to engage more directly with local conditions.

Painting also offered a means of rendering the new world more familiar and intellectually manageable. For colonial amateurs it was inevitably mimetic in orientation which, incidentally, was the basis upon which Aristotle claimed their kinship[2]. Antipodean tyros (unlike their post-1945, fictional successors) were not interested in bold experiments or the traducing of hallowed conventions. They were happy, to judge from surviving sketchbooks, to capture the immediate scene, to hold fast a novel incident or passable likeness, and later to own a valuable, decorative composition, which testified to money and taste, and which, in response to specific commissions, celebrated recently achieved mastery of a once daunting landscape in the form of a homestead or substantial station[3]. At a time when educated Englishmen at home or on the continent might view a promising scene through a Claude glass (a specially tinted, convex mirror) intended to recast the natural givens as if from the brush of the master[4], an educated early settler, such as Louisa Clifton,

[1] Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts* (1987) remains the best study of this tradition in terms of poets who enjoyed wide currency in the antipodean colonies.

[2] See Alan Filreis, "Beyond the Rhetorician's Touch: Stevens's Painterly Abstractions", https://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Stevens/talcoat-alh.html (consulted on 20/9/2023).

[3] The indispensable study of the art of this period is of course Bernard Smith's 1960 classic, which continues to provide the intellectual bedrock for later scholarly studies.

[4] Claude glass (or Claude Lorrain glass) is a small dark-tinted mirror, slightly convex in shape: "its effect [is] to convey a relatively wide-angled view on to a small-scale surface [...] Its tonal effect is to reduce glare at the top end of the scale [...] and thus to allow the subtlety of the middle tones to emerge" (Kemp 1989: 199).

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had internalised the master's schema and so brought it to bear instinctively on novel settings in the Swan River colony: "We then mounted the hills […] and were charmed with the exquisite view of the estuary, the hills beyond, dips and dells and knolls beautifully studded with large and picturesque trees forming the nearest landscape" (Ackland 1993a: 6). Not only the trees, but the whole scene is strikingly picturesque, or (in its original meaning) that which can readily constitute a painting, and this aesthetic dimension renders the scene a true 'landscape' as well as a vista to be treasured by the connoisseur.

Crucially, too, painting encouraged a subtle imaginative and intellectual exchange with the antipodean countryside. At its simplest, the amateur artist, as well as later skilled practitioners, brought to a local setting the dominant European conventions of the picturesque, and sought scenes which could conform to its familiar repertoire of stepped *coulisses* and *chiaroscuro*, leading the viewer's eye to ever more distant, frequently sublime features. Settler diaries recount how immigrants, even before setting foot on this foreign soil, tried "to take some outlines of the coast" (Ackland 1993a: 4) – and frequently failed, then responded to events through borrowed prisms:

> We have been sitting on deck watching the fires on shore near Shenton's store. The scene has been most beautiful, worthy the pencil of a Claude Lorrain; the moon and sky dazzlingly bright; the sea glistening and perfectly smooth; the outline of the shore dark and clear; the lurid flash and the curling grey and vermilion smoke of the fires throwing a bright redness over the scene, investing it with a wildness congenial to the spot and exciting to the imagination (Ackland 1993a: 7).

Louisa Clifton's diary entry of 1841 (quoted above) is a veritable painting in words, as well as clear evidence of an imagination steeped in the traditions of the picturesque and sublime, associated in the Anglophone world with Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, and Salvador Rosa, and more recently John Constable, J. M. W. Turner, John Martin and a host of imitators. So engrained was this painterly way of viewing local landscape that, by the end of Queen Victoria's reign, Henry Lawson made a point of starting *The Drover's Wife* with a depiction that stresses the absence of picturesque elements:

> Bush all round – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek (Ackland 1993a: 64).

How could one create a landscape painting from a scene without a horizon, or without fore and middle-grounds? Or without a gleaming, serpentining waterway, that gradually led the viewer's eyes past solid masses of trees, with ample green foliage and dense shadows producing a variety of effects and *chiaroscuro*, to a key fixed point of interest and beyond, to intimations of a grand, all-overseeing maker? Lawson's reduction of nature to monochromatic colour and feature constitutes a definitive anti-picturesque, while rotting scrub, plaintive timbers, and a waterless milieu suggest a realm without hope, help, or

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deity. Naturally the full impact of the depiction depends on the widespread currency of the parodied, painterly ideal. As this and countless other examples testify, after a century of white settlement, the local landscape was as likely to be approached through the conventions of painting, as through literary figures inherited from pastoral antiquity or the eighteenth-century English landscape poets.

Herein, it seems to me, lay a seminal distinction between music and painting in Australia, which helps explain the later predominance of artists, rather than musicians, in Australian fiction. As practiced locally, painting connected with the landscape, music usually did not. The latter remained largely a cultural accoutrement associated with distant realms, whereas painting was intimately linked with individual endeavours to make sense of, to render familiar, and ultimately to possess (and later bond with) this alien domain.

By the late nineteenth century, a broadly educated, well-informed writer, with a limber imagination, could draw to great effect on a range of inherited stratagems borrowed from painting or classical rhetoric, as the short fiction of "Tasma" (Jessie Couvreur) amply demonstrates. "Tasma" was thoroughly versed in these traditions, and equally at home in English and French culture. The opening of her story, *An Old-Time Episode in Tasmania*, affords a *tour de force* enactment of the adage *ut pictura poesis* with a dual-aspect panorama that discovers in the setting of Hobart Town, first, a picturesque scene, then a complementary sublime landscape:

> From Trucaninny's perch […] she could see […] a considerable portion of the town, which took the form of a capital S as it followed the windings of the coast. Beyond the wharves, against which a few whalers and fishing-boats were lying idle, the middle distance was represented by the broad waters of the Derwent, radiantly blue, and glittering with silver sparkles; while the far-off background showed a long stretch of yellow sand, and the hazy, undulating outline of low-lying purple hills. *Behind her the aspect was different.* Tiers of hills rose one above the other in grand confusion, until they culminated in the towering height of Mount Wellington, keeping guard in majestic silence over the lonely little city that encircled its bases (Ackland 1993b: 127, emphasis added).

In this painterly panorama the human vantage-point shifts from on high to an overawed below, as befits the differing tenets of respectively the picturesque and the sublime. In the initial verbal canvas, apart from the distinct planes (foreground, "middle distance", "far-off background"), there is the equally mandatory "capital S" detail that leads the viewer ever deeper into the prospect, with visual variety provided by lively colour contrasts (blue, yellow, silver, purple), and distinct variations of light, from glittering sparkles to hazy outlines. This copybook exemplar of the picturesque is immediately played off against an equally standard, sublime tableau: hills that are almost vying with one another for ascendancy, an inveterate wildness, called here "confusion", which is positively "grand", while the whole is dominated by a stunning mountain. The observer is literally dwarfed by great and vast elements, but mentally expanded by a concluding image which implicitly evokes an invisible maker, mute but solicitous, protective rather than indifferent, with mankind's relatively puny achievement much in need of support and inspiration.

Far from being slavishly subordinate to a specific pictorial tradition, "Tasma" could play on a wide range of artistic motifs and contrapuntal settings, as is evident in *His Modern Godiva* and *Monsieur Caloche*. Many in the colonies knew of the artistic doings in the French metropole from the newspapers, but only "Tasma" made its famous "Salon", or grand annual exhibition, the focus and subject of equally modern fiction. *His Modern Godiva* plays interchangeably on the realms of art and literature, drawing at will on subjects, metaphors and settings from both, as if the two, together, constituted a single imaginative texture, while providing dramatic evidence of the adage *poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*. A young painter in search of a model for a portrait of Hester Prynne, the fallen heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and eventually for a study of Lady Godiva, finds a gorgeous young woman whom he marries and, through his love-informed art, transforms into a highly sensual Godiva. Her depiction becomes "the *clou* [hit] of the Salon" (120). Fiction has inspired art, now art energizes the fictional plot, as a notorious *roué* seeks to make the acquaintance of the model depicted in the portrait. This leads to a failed masquerade, a complex probing of male and female motivation, and a potentially fascinating meditation on the artistry of human life, all of which unfortunately lie outside the scope of this essay. *Monsieur Caloche* also turns on a crucial masquerade, on a different kind of, and transformative, *femme fatale*, and on fine portrayals of individuals and landscapes, such as the pictorially well-realized, outback station and motionless eucalypts, "as if […] waiting to be photographed" (Ackland 1993b: 108).

Throughout *Monsieur Caloche* "Tasma's" skill in creating verbal canvases is clearly secondary to incisive thematic concerns, as her painterly impulse is subordinated to moral and humanitarian issues. The story begins with a recently arrived French youth, Caloche, seeking work at the commercial enterprise of the wealthy businessman, Sir Mathew Bogg. As unprepossessing as his name, Bogg is an ignorant, self-made man with singular failings. One of these is a delight in bullying and humiliating others, a spin-off of his mature life-pattern and commercial success, which have depended on the brutal repression of nature and basic emotions – eventually to his great cost. The overture to this critique takes the form of an accusatory paragraph of serried contrasts between the torrid outside antipodean realm, where dust, great heat, and searing wind rule supreme, and a series of comfortable, protective, 'private' environments created by great wealth, that make Bogg feel secure from nature's elemental dictates. The description of his place of business concludes:

> It was something to be surrounded by polished mahogany, cool to the touch, and cold iron safes, and maps that conveyed in their rippling lines of snowy undulations far-away suggestions of chill heights and mountain breezes. It was something to have iced water in the decanter at hand, and a little fountain opposite, gurgling a running reminder of babbling brooks dribbling through fern-tree valleys and wattle-studded flats. Contrasting the shaded coolness of the private office with the heat and turmoil without, there was no cause to complain (Ackland 1993b: 97).

Bogg's bureau, though not entirely sealed off from nature's sway ("his big thermometer […] stood above 85° in the corner" [Ackland 1993b: 97]) conveys iron control, diversely

through "safes", "maps", and snug fittings. Here nature has been tamed, its timber transformed into furniture and paneling, its snowy peaks and tumultuous streams into pleasant, cooling memories. This is not only nature methodised (to borrow Pope's phrase), but managed and even mechanised, as a gurgling fountain attests. Here pictorial details, which in another setting might have contributed to a picturesque tableau, are nonetheless miniature "speaking pictures". But each is carefully subordinated within a rhetorical structure that reveals an individual's psychology and the shortfalls of his directive ideas, rather than as parts of an expansive tableau that offers an implied commentary on creation.

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From at least midway through the nineteenth century Western art underwent an accelerating sequence of transformations, that continued at a frenetic pace during the following century. New technologies, such as photography and the fledgling cinema, achieved previously unimaginable mimetic precision. Painting was henceforth free to reorient itself, to cast off the shackles of verisimilitude and to pursue new goals, such as the play of light, the evocation of motion, the interaction of pure, abstract forms and space, or the impact of a given scene on an individual artist. Henri Matisse's famous *Red Room*, for instance, depicts a state of mind and objects that have inspired it, or, to cite even better-known examples, the dancing stars or pulsating wheat-fields of Vincent van Gogh are indelibly stamped by individual imaginative perception. As William Blake stated matter-of-factly, and Turner repeatedly demonstrated, "For the Eye altering alters all" ("The Mental Traveller", Erdman 1988: 485). Western painting, in terms of its recurrent metaphors of the mirror and the lamp, long used to describe antithetical aims of art, was turning decisively away from the mimetic mirror that endeavoured to capture life's plenitude faithfully and realistically. Instead, it embraced the way of the lamp, which not only plays upon, but potentially penetrates and transforms quotidian reality to reveal a hidden, and arguably higher truth – a shift decisively registered in postwar Australian fiction.

Artistic modernism arrived late in the antipodes, where it was vociferously opposed, and its acceptance remained patchy (Ackland 2001: 29-82, Haese 1981). The equivalent of New York's Armory Show, which introduced North America to post-impressionist art in 1913, were the Herald exhibitions of 1939. Following the outbreak of war in Europe, their borrowed works by Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Cézanne and other established masters were not proudly hung on public exhibition in Sydney for the duration of hostilities, but consigned to the subterranean vaults of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where they could cause no further consternation and infection. According to Murray Bail and many others, this was part of a concerted pattern of cultural quarantining that extended well beyond 1945. Whereas avant-garde music, such as Stravinsky's, was often available at the flick of a switch, other artistic forms were less fortunate. Australia, with its long tradition of centralist paternalism, had routinely banned controversial novels like *Ulysses*, or those deemed morally reprehensible, like Christina Stead's *Letty Fox, Her Luck*, while ground-breaking movements in the visual arts were still stunningly under-represented even many

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decades after the Second World War. "There just aren't any cubist paintings in Australia. Not one. So we've been deprived of the third great modern experience", Murray Bail asserted in 1982 (Davidson 1982: 276). Although Picasso had ushered in a new world pictorially with *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907, in the postwar Australia of Bail's youth the gum-trees of Hans Heysen and Albert Namatjira still held popular sway – a hegemony subtly called into question decades later in his novel *Eucalyptus*.

Fortunately, however, Australia's cultural guardians could control neither all the coastline, nor all their citizens. Transplanted Europeans had slowly bonded with the continent, identified with its flora and fauna, and fought to ensure the safety of its shores during the Pacific War. Many of course felt conflicting pulls, and the claims of diverse heritages. Nevertheless, they tended increasingly to identify with Australia, as the examples of Patrick White and David Malouf illustrate. The former, born in London and intermittently educated in England, began his career as a London intellectual, but felt that a unique heritage and themes were to be found among what he termed the dry sticks and bones of outback Australia. Malouf's Lebanese background and bonds with the European Mediterranean are equally well known. And both men turned to the legacy of artistic modernism to depict Australians' new appreciation of, and desire for oneness with, their southern homeland.

Though the Australian gallery-going public remained enchanted with the Heidelberg school, and its explorations of possibilities opened up by French impressionism, for both novelists a key artistic figure was the expatriate painter Ian Fairweather, which signaled an embrace of post-impressionist developments. While overseas, Patrick White had bonded with the avant-garde painter and proto-cubist Roy de Maistre in the 1930s. He returned to Australia in 1948, bearing with him a rich cultural legacy, and determined to challenge local complacency and self-satisfaction. Sporadically he bought local works of art, and viewed himself as a "painter *manqué*". Meanwhile Fairweather himself, another artistic path-blazer of British descent, settled in 1953 just north of Brisbane on wild Bribie Island. There, living isolated and in truly primitive conditions, he began his own uncompromising quest for painterly perfection, built on a confluence of Far Eastern and cubist heritages. Fairweather's doggedly eccentric trajectory attracted attention, as did his chromatically low-key but powerful abstractions. White acquired one of his major works, *Gethsemane*[5]; Malouf drew on his life-story for the artist figure in *Harland's Half Acre;* and Bail wrote a definitive, specialist tome on this painter's achievement, entitled simply *Ian Fairweather* (hereafter referred to as *IF*).

For these writers the attraction of modernist painting, and of Fairweather's life-story, was twofold. After four centuries, when one-point perspective and verisimilitude had dominated Western art, subjective perception and compositional experimentation now claimed centre stage, and Paul Cézanne, living in semi-seclusion near Aix-en-Provence, emerged as the prophet and precursor of artistic modernism. Ian Fairweather seemed to admirers his antipodean equivalent. Unquestionably he offered a striking example of what a dedicated, creative career might entail. Artistic individuality, as Fairweather knew

[5] Unfortunately, the patchy record of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' reception of modernism continues to the present day. Some years ago it announced the deaccession of *Gethsemane* (gifted to it by White) in order to use the funds thereby generated to facilitate much needed acquisitions to its collection.

well, "is not spontaneous. It is a search" (*IF*, 118). From early on, Fairweather had "the sure knowledge that I am not going to paint as though through the lens of a camera. What I wanted to express was the effect the scene had on me" (*IF,* 118). This led away from conventional representation to compositions that were "fragmented, moving, regrouping, the outlines fluid and changing as they settled into the picture that conveyed my thoughts" (*IF*, 15). The result, according to Bail, were paintings or "visual equivalents which present ideas in a new and original way, often quite ravishing in its unity and clarity" (*IF*, 206), as well as a continual process of critique and quest: "there was nothing new here (Fairweather's constant phrase)" and "our ways of seeing are infinitely more complicated" (*IF*, 114). The other area of attraction was what the paintings themselves seemed to convey to an age in desperate quest of meaning. In Fairweather's canvases Bail perceived intimations of "the eternal mystery of the world" and "its comprehensibility" (*IF*, 128) – and so presumably did White and Malouf.

In their presentation of the painter as representative artist, these novelists have drawn on diverse transplanted traditions. Their characters are close kin of the "*poètes maudits/ artistes maudits*" (cursed poets/cursed artists) popularised in France, and confirmed by the Bohemian early life of countless iconic figures, from Picasso domiciled in his Montmartre atelier to Rauschenberg, scavenging detritus in the streets as the stuff of later Combines, when he lived down-at-heal in a dilapidated walk-up apartment in Lower Manhattan. The depiction of White and Malouf's painters is also informed by the Romantic doctrine of perennial dissatisfaction and striving as humankind's distinguishing trait and chance of immortality: whether in Goethe's famous formulation from *Faust*, "*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen*", ("Whoever continually strives, him we can save"), or in the purely artistic terms of Browning's "Andrea del Sarto": "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp/Or what's a heaven for?"– that imperfect but glorious reach which allegedly distinguished the ineffable life-force captured by Raphael from the colder, more purely technical mastery of Del Sarto. White's prototypal painter in *The Vivisector* dies trying to mix "the never-yet-attainable blue" and striving to transfer it: "All his life he had been reaching towards this vertiginous blue […] Only reach higher. Could. And will" (White 1970: 641) – before he Icarus-like crashes to the floor in his studio. His great gifts are accompanied by equally spectacular flaws – creativity springing, as Edmund Wilson long ago identified in *The Wound and the Bow*, from personal wounding (mental, physical or moral) and individual alienation. Genius and its handmaiden, imagination, usually came at a considerable cost – and in the antipodes it was no different.

In addition, the artistic pantheons of White and Malouf intersect in the figure of the poet, painter, and engraver, William Blake. To cite only the most obvious debt, both men have chosen from the English Romantic epigraphs for seminal works: respectively *Riders in the Chariot* and *Remembering Babylon*. White's quotation is drawn from plates 12-13 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (hereafter *MHH*), Malouf's from what Northrop Frye singled out as the greatest incomplete work in the English language, *Vala, or The Four Zoas*. The plates from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Blake engraved completed work onto copperplates, hence commentary usually refers to plates rather than pages) deal with the preconditions for prophetic utterance:

> The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert. that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time, that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.
>
> Isaiah answer'd. I saw no God. nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded. & remain confirm'd; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences but wrote.
>
> I then asked Ezekiel. why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right & left side? He answerd. the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite this the North American tribes practice. & is he honest who resists his genius or conscience. only for the sake of present ease or gratification? (*MHH*, 38-39).

Crucial to understanding these lines used as an epigraph by White are the role of perception and the contrary finite/infinite. Basically, Blake maintains that mankind perceives only a fraction of what exists through his five senses. Though supposedly his gateway to reality, they actually enclose him and narrow his awareness to "a finite organical perception". If he could once change and expand his sensory capacities, however, what passes for reality would be remarkably different, in fact it could be "the infinite in every thing", hence the adage:

> How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
>
> Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five? (*MHH*, 35).

For Blake there is always infinity, or the "eternal now", hidden under the apparent surfaces that surround us. We must strip them away, or cut through them (like the Bird in the above quotation). In short, we must cleanse the doors of perception, and learn to see not with but through the Eye, in the conviction that "the Eye altering alters all" (Erdman 1988: 485). Malouf's epigraph concerns the difficulty of evaluating and "knowing" the perceived object: "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not" (n.p.). Implicit in this dilemma, however, is the whole dialectics of vision just outlined, and to draw an epigraph from what is probably Blake's most difficult work already suggests a firm grasp of his directive ideas. To evoke Blake, then, at the very least is to suggest that other realities and the role of individual perception are to be in play, and in the case of White's epigraph, that his expected readership, his own society, will be hostile to his message, but honesty and artistic integrity leave him no other choice than to compose.

White's first portrait of a painter-in-the-making in *Riders in the Chariot* subsumes the antipodean heritage of an amateur training in the arts within a trajectory of genius and spiritual vision. His painter of course is no biblical prophet, but the mixed-race, aboriginal Alf Dubbo, who appears to the outside world stereotypically as drunken and bruised, or as "a brute that no decent man would touch" (309). White depicts Dubbo as a rootless,

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unformed youth who passes from an initial struggle to comprehend his own intuitions, through moments of searing insight, to "a rage to arrive at understanding" of the divine mystery that surrounds him (371). His work, once he discovers a "tube of supernatural blue" and other oil paints (322), will eventually become "a bonfire", a "blaze of colour" (35). Yet Dubbo as artist is no simple *ingénu* let loose with a box of oil paints. Instead, at the hands of a minister's sister, the lack-lustre Mrs Pask, he passes through an artistic apprenticeship familiar to early colonists, gaining "technical facility" and learning "the principles of drawing" (315). But thanks to innate gifts his learning is accelerated, his application of the basics masterful and manipulative: "with a few ingratiating strokes the boy might reproduce the whole world as his teacher knew it" (321).

Ultimately Dubbo remains the focus of numerous artistic traditions rather than a new type of the painter – the full potential inherent in the figure is not realised. On examining the work of a fellow artist he is able, like Browning's Andrea del Sarto, to correct a mis-drawn arm, but goes beyond him in being able to infuse a lapidary depiction with deeper spirit: he would paint it "dropping sparks. Or stars. Moving" (320). What he produces in response to his own daemon is shocking to weak and conventional minds (as were Blake's compositions). "Things are not like this", expostulates an overtaxed Mrs Pask (326). "It's downright madness", she adds, thereby placing his works in the exalted company of Blake's and Van Gogh's. In White's hands the act of creation becomes the focus of complex effects: it resembles ejaculation, leaving the painter spent, "sweating. His thighs […] as sticky as though he had spilled out over himself" (354). And like Leverkühn (and his likely model Nietzsche) Dubbo suffers from the scourge of syphilis, with his fevered, tortured condition producing heightened vision. This affliction ensures that his being is swayed by "two poles, the negative and the positive […]: the furtive destroying sickness, and the almost as furtive, but regenerating, creative act" (341).

Strikingly, however, White makes no use of Dubbo's putative indigenous heritage. Even his "expected laziness" (that is, the disinterested attitude of the blackfellow) might have been inherited, the narrator is at pains to point out, "from some Irish ancestor" (314). Instead, the painter's aboriginality serves primarily as a marker and guarantor of his alienated status, like Jew or feral old woman do for respectively Himmelfarb and Miss Hare – all of whom are destined to feel firsthand the evil that resides in mankind, or, as White puts it, to "experience the knife" (309). Thus, White creates a familiar "*artiste maudit*", who differs from the stereotype principally in his aboriginality, but the novelist does not exploit the native's potential oneness with the land. This would have fitted neither a plot that calls for similar visionary status in four characters, three of them white, nor a vision of the spiritual informed by Judeo-Christian and occult Western heritages.

The postponed day of artistic oneness with the land comes in *Harland's Half Acre*. Like *Riders in the Chariot*, Malouf's book is concerned with the possibility of an enduring, profound and thoroughly unconventional way of laying claim to the Australian countryside. The novel first documents changes in temporal possession of a given terrain: how it passes from aboriginal to white hands after "one brief bloody encounter" (3), then how the invader-settler, having won it, is in turn dispossessed by his fellows. Among the progeny of these

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feckless whites is another painter-in-the-making. Stage one of his *Werdegang* (his coming-into-being), associated with the use of water-colours, involves recording the countryside: "His pictures were a reminder and inventory […] a first act of repossession" that partakes of diluted magic (31). Both the medium chosen (water-colours) and his subject recall standard colonial practice; however, the reference to "magic" signals a key difference. Past practitioners strove for verisimilitude. It was mimesis pursued in many instances by the not-particularly-gifted. In Harland's case, what he brings to paper has undergone the alchemy of the artist's mind, and is far removed from the formulae of art academies: "the long undulations of the land under a sky that was filled with happenings […] such lyrical, slow tumblings and transformings in ice-blue or in opening mushrooms of black all ablaze at the edge" (30). Instead of seeing a landscape structured in terms of *coulisses*, planes, and other picturesque essentials, what he sees is highly personalised, as well as interactive and dynamic. Constant movement that unites is its key feature. "Filled with happenings", everything above and below, great and small, side by side, interacts and bears the stamp of the artist's mind, in this instance evoking primarily "events in the cloud-theatre above" (30).

The crucial step, which marks the divide between the broad categories of colonial and modern art, is summarised by Harland's approach to the artist's "sheet of paper" (29). His subject is not what offers itself immediately to his eyes ("It wasn't the objects themselves he was concerned with" [29]), nor is the process subject to rational control: "His mind, in its play-work, had got beyond that" (29). "Play-work" suggests a freeing of transformative capacities that transcend the usual compulsions of reason and conventional reality. Then comes the artistic act itself: like a Zen koan highly suggestive and minimalistic. Starkly white paper, a single black line, "slightly curved" (29) from his pencil, and a dent or conclusion to its movement. The mark is ambivalent. Does the black stop indicate closure or fullness and hence an opening? Malouf immediately answers: "It looked like a full stop, but was in fact an opening from which the lovely grey-black graphite flowed out" (30). Blake's famous challenge to "see a world in a grain of sand" ("Auguries of Innocence") is answered with the mark of a lead pencil.

> Hidden beneath it [the dent or full stop] was the world. He had only to let things emerge, to let his hand free them: on this occasion a head, a specific one, his brother Tam's […] the occasions were without end. The page and his mind could become one, and what they contained was the infinite plenitude of things that was Creation (30).

This is the fullness of life as known and perceived by the painter, but may not yet exhaust the plenitude that ultimately awaits him here. Up till now Harland primarily knows the land visually and through hearsay; it has not profoundly penetrated his being. To reach this higher stage he must become one with his subject. Malouf, whether by happy chance or design is unclear, locates this transfigurative event in a rubbish dump, the same site chosen by White for a similar experiential leap in *Riders in the Chariot*[6]. There Dubbo, having

[6] Nevertheless, Malouf's acknowledged immersion in White's fiction virtually rules out chance, as do important thematic continuities between the two passages, discussed in more detail in Ackland (2016).

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fled the homosexual embraces of Reverend Calderon, arrives at a sorry rural "hole" called Mungindribble. He overnights, then prolongs his stay in its rubbish dump with the sexually predatory Mrs Spice, where he contracts the disease that will help him have extraordinary visions. Malouf uses a comparable setting, when feverish young Harland washes up one night in a car dump on the edge of an unnamed town, to mark an epochal change in this young painter's life. This transformation will enable him to realise in his own person a version of the unexplored potential of Dubbo to become a supreme celebrant of his native land.

Exploiting the conceit of Harland's fevered condition, Malouf makes him undergo an ultimate bonding with the great south land. Quickly the youth's plan to sleep in an abandoned car is thwarted when he finds a "black devil, all blue-black hair and breathing fire" already in possession of his chosen wreck (47). He reels back, falls to the ground, then experiences a terrifying antipodean version of a turbulent *Walpurgnis Nacht* when he is hurled aloft, shaken, clawed at, has his ribs crushed, and is finally "spat out" in an exhausted state. His tormentors, in fact his initiators, are black "stately figures", identified with the *genus loci* (47), to whose overwhelming power he can only submit. Vaguely he intuits that "he had disturbed a rite, or interrupted an assembly of the dispossessed" (48). Malouf stops just short of transforming his painter into an *indigène*, but Harland does become one with the natural surroundings:

> When he came to his senses it was daylight. Damp red soil was at his eyeball with blades of blunted, razor-sharp grass sprouting from it, so coarse you could see the crystals that would cut. A host of ants was going about its business all around him, intent and scrambling, as if he were just another element in the landscape they had to negotiate and had been lying here from the beginning […]
>
> His back, he discovered when he tried to move, was sun-burned right through the shirt, but when he staggered to his feet at last it was into a feeling of wholeness, of renewed power and strength, though he could never be sure afterwards which side he had come out on, or what pact he had made with his native earth (48).

Like Swift's Gulliver staked to the soil of Lilliput, Harland seems a giant in a miniature world, only here real power resides in what seems most mundane and diminutive. He finds himself returned to the very matter of primal creation ("damp red soil"), in preparation for a rebirth that will see his quotidian vision, his gates of perception, slashed and henceforth transformed to grasp the oneness of creation and be alive to even its most humble workings and interactions. Though not black, Harland is no longer merely a white, floating, impotent figure. Through this serendipitous rite of passage his former self has been broken down and transcended. This supposed "graveyard of journeys" (47) has actually marked their new beginning. Finally, expectations are high as this otherworldly 'pact' has been made not with a Mephisto-surrogate, but his native land.

Frank Harland, in his final avatar as an Ian Fairweather-like isolato, marks the apogee of that bonding between painting and literature, those foundational Sister Arts, which

began in colonial writing. Then white settlers freely appropriated painterly vocabulary and approaches as part of a wider endeavour to document and possess *terra australis incognita*. But their efforts remained largely an imposition of transplanted conventions onto the landscape, linked with a desire for mastery and a need to make it conform to their expectations. Generations later reconciliation was sought. Similar aspirations had been much earlier at work in Germany, where characteristically the desired harmony was expressed in musical terms: "Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen,/Die da träumen fort und fort/ Und die Welt hebt an zu singen/Triffst du nur das Zauberwort" ("A song sleeps in all things, that dream on and on. And the world begins to sing, if you can only find the magic word", Joseph von Eichendorff, "*Wünschelrute*")[7] – a proposition presumably well known to that pronounced Germanophile, Henry Handel Richardson. For climactically, in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, she chose an embryonic musician as her type of the future great antipodean artist, and predicted his mission in terms similar to those used in the above lines by Eichendorff, that is, as releasing and articulating a new music inherent in the land. There a visiting German dignitary and botanist, Baron von Krause, tells Cuffy and his mother Mary: "Here is lying […] a great, new music hid. He who makes it, he will put into it the thousand feelings awoken in him by this emptiness and space", and by all that grows and inhabits it (III, 9 658). A translation of inspired feeling into other mediums, like painting, was of course possible, and in Australian fiction highly probable.

Repeatedly, then, Australian writers, colonial and modern, have turned to and drawn on painting as a kindred creative field. And they have kept abreast of major trends and innovations in Western art, as a means of depicting painters who encounter analogous dilemmas and breakthroughs to their own. At times they have also embraced a long perspective on this Sister Art. Thus, the attitude towards painting of many colonial settlers, which was seen primarily as a vehicle for instruction and recording, is both evoked and inverted in *Riders in the Chariot*, where the artist is ultimately instructed by the land. There Mrs Pask, when clearly feeling herself artistically overmatched by her pupil Dubbo, takes the ethical high ground: "Never forget, Alf that art is first and foremost a moral force" (315). But Alf is deaf to trite homilies, and dares to seek inspiration in the least conventionally picturesque aspects of antipodean nature. His artistic firstlings were "scribble[s] on the walls of the shed, the finespun lines of a world he felt to exist but could not yet corroborate" (314). Also Harland, around his Bribie Island campsite, discovers among the usually hidden doings of nature "scribbles under bark that might have been the most ancient indecipherable writing" (186). These reappear on his canvases, together with "the wandering crimson of ant-lines, companionable trickles" (186), as "sheets of newsprint" (187) are intermixed and overlaid with thick layers of household paint to capture his uncompromising vision. The Wordsworthian corresponding breeze, that famously buffets the speaker in the opening lines of *The Prelude*, is now surpassed by a constant interchange of "spirit that moved back and forth in him […] like the breeze that swung between land and sea, or the tides to which sandfly bites responded with itch and quiet" (187). Ultimately Harland does "not so much"

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[7] "A song sleeps in all things/That dream on and on/And the world begins to sing/ If you can once find the magic word".

paint nature "as paint […] out of it" (184). The intensely subjective vision of the abstract painter is in effect justified as an encoded speaking of nature's essential rhythms and being, while the supreme artist who envisages and depicts these transformations is a writer – a convergence hinted at when one of the last Harland canvases mentioned bears the title *Prospero I* (223). In short, the fabulous, wonder-working books described in *The Tempest* are potentially at work among us even as I write – though it may require an eye attuned to painting as well as literature to recognise them.

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