

Reality and/or Imagination—Recent Australian Poetics

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Dorothea Mackellar's seminal confession has long been regarded as a milestone in the literary process of constructing Australia. Though the poem "My Country" employs a fairly traditional form, it is its imagery, also seen as conventional by present standards, which demands attention since it takes stock of exactly those qualities which define the land and which in turn define the speaker of the poem. The "sunburnt country", the predominance of the colour brown, the contrasts of "sweeping plains" and "ragged mountain ranges", the irreconcilable opposites of "droughts and flooding rains" construct an almost stereotypical picture of Australia, yet these are the very features of the land in its physicality, these are what create "her beauty and her terror." The seemingly simple picture, however, is also cunningly manipulated as the poem reverses established associations of colours: the blue sky becomes "pitiless" and it is the "grey clouds" which bring blessings to the land, making the contrast between the visited world of England and the distant world of home.

Though poems of this type may be justifiably seen as outdated and even simplistic in terms of their mechanism, the sentiment out of which it arises is one with many implications. What the speaker of the poem is concerned with is in fact the origin of her unease in what is considered the civilised centre, which is generally understood as a place associated with a fixed and unchallenged, even unchallengeable, set of values, and the mysterious reality of the feeling itself, all of which eventually boil down to the question of identity, this time defined solely in terms of the place of origin.

However mundane (my suggestion) and worn out the concept of identity may appear, it is still a relevant basic category in examinations of poetry. While it is true that identity discourses may prove to be more tempting in criticism than a careful and attentive reading of the poems themselves, it is still something that cannot be simply dismissed. The rooting of the poetic self in some sort of origin (identity) is a relevant starting point, or as it often happens, the quest for such an act itself becomes the focus of poetic itineraries, and it is especially the case in contemporary poetry. Whether a postmodernist or a globalist approach is taken, or postcolonialist or multiculturalist, the age-old problem of finding at least illusory points of reference will assert itself – and contemporary Australian poetry is definitely not an exception in this regard.

Why the question of identity and self-definition should surface in contemporary Australian poetry is perhaps amply indicated by debates which

concern the nature and location of Australian literature itself. Australia's past as a British settler's colony involves an English and a colonial element in the origins of this literary tradition which will inevitably affect the present of the tradition yet the question of the postcoloniality of Australian literature is far from being settled. As Graham Huggan points out, the postcolonial approach to Australian literature poses more questions than it answers as the current relationship between Britain and Australia does not prescribe any residual colonial dimension and the problematic of the temporality of the passage from ex-colonial to postcolonial, and perhaps even beyond that, is also implicated (Huggan 27). The issue is further complicated by the presence of the indigenous peoples of the continent with respect to whom the concept of neo-colonial treatment is a legitimate observation (*ibid.*). The critical agenda is varied enough to unsettle any simple approach to Australian literature, contemporary poetry included.

The history of 20th century Australian poetry is underlined by a constant tension between the forces of tradition and modernity. The literary models brought from Britain certainly had their long-standing appeal to monopolise the tradition and the peripheral position of the continent did not help matters either. Modern and modernist influences eventually made their way into the poetry yet the difficulty of more experimental approaches to poetry in a readership (academic as well as popular) which is more bent on a conservative poetics remained strong for a long time. As a result, self-definition and inquiries into what is essentially Australian took different routes, which still outlines major directions in recent Australian poetry.

When asked about "something uniquely Australian" (cf. Yeabsley 73–76) in Australian poetry, Bruce Dawe offers a cunning answer. Somewhat evasively, he suggests that those qualities which are regarded as typically Australian can be found elsewhere too, which ultimately points towards a less self-conscious position in relation to a unique Australian tradition, and his recommendation for the future is in accordance with this direction: "In a sense we have to become less Australian to become more Australian." (*ibid.*) This idea is at the very core of debates about the postcolonial nature of Australian literature, that is the less prominent insistence on the overtly self-conscious assertions of something uniquely Australian against something else offer a certain sign of the coming into its own of Australian poetry (and literature as a whole, too) and indicate that self-definition is increasingly grounded in observation and detail rather than in polemic.

In terms of technique, however, the self-conscious dimension has increased significantly in the course of the last few decades as the more traditional and formal approach to poetry has been increasingly complemented and challenged by the advance of modernist and postmodernist influences. A case in point may be Dawe himself: he began to write poetry in traditional forms but he has subsequently moved to embrace less structured forms which are associated with more experimental modes. This path is not confined exclusively to Dawe, and the overall result is a gradually increasing sophistication in terms of not only the

form, with a more subtle communication of concerns which pertain to Australian reality.

Something of this process of simultaneously increasing and decreasing self-consciousness can also be witnessed in what could be termed as John Kinsella's 'rites of passage': Kinsella, in an essay entitled "Towards a Contemporary Australian Poetic", refers to Judith Wright as the first major voice in Australian poetry for him, and he considers her a figure who fits neatly in the curriculum of the English classics due to her formal excellence but she is at once specifically Australian in her concerns (cf. Kinsella 94–95), which epitomises something of the postcolonial element in the Australian tradition yet at the same time it points forward as well as her more subtle engagement with the minutiae of everyday life gradually undermines the importance of the elements which could be linked with postcolonialism, principally with the need of self-definition in the matrix of an elsewhere.

As far as the thematic universe of contemporary Australian poetry is concerned the shift is even more marked. Les Murray traces this back to the time when he started writing and publishing poetry, remarking that "it was the era where people decided that Australian culture didn't really reside in the bush any more" (interview with Baker, 238). The earlier trademark element of the bush is now more of a curiosity and the modern, predominantly urban world is the major scene, which is not surprising given the basically urban nature of modern Australian society. The city, however, does not prove to be a cordially embraced location – city life is often seen as distressing despite the comfort of the modern environment it offers and the city itself is considered something to be tolerated as a given rather than to be liked as something proudly constructed.

There is a more intriguing dimension to the urban predominance since what is perhaps the most prominent focus is rather a part of the urban world but it is one which is at once urban and yet still not so much urban: this location is the suburban world. The suburb is a peculiar place almost in spite of itself as it is a typical representative of the modern urbanised world, associated with comfortable life, suggesting affluence and prosperity. The suburb has grown out of the need of people for more space yet with the wish of not sacrificing the civilised standards of city life, and the presence of such a place reflects the success of an endeavour to create a balance between opposing forces. The suburb understood in this way is something of a transitional world between the city and the country, with the advantages of both and with the implied lack of the disadvantages of either. The suburb, however, also epitomises the unheroic nature of the modern world as its quiet and peaceful nature can be equated with the uneventful and even boring pattern of life in the present. This double nature of the suburban world renders it a fitting topic and trope in contemporary poetry, with an implicit element for subversion in it.

The suburban world has become something of a seeming constant in Australian literature in this way, functioning as an important constituent of the spatial element of identity. The suburb is an important field which seems to be ubiquitous, yet its features have undergone significant revisions as it is

The motif of a journey with profound memories is involved in the poem “The Settlement” (published in the volume *I learn by going*, 1968) as well. The poem recalls the sight of people living in a humpy in an unspecified inland location, a place which is visited out of sheer curiosity since the hostile landscape does not imply the possible presence of a human population. The experience is a lasting one as the local people are found in apparent poverty and with only the bare essentials for survival yet are unwilling to accept anything from the visitors. Despite the depressing sight the speaker still discovers something that could connect him with them: “Perhaps their eyes were too much like our own / but without our loneliness”. (Powell, 1968, 21) This prompts a rather unsettling observation at the end of the poem: “They / were at home there, and watched us like the dead.” (ibid) The concept of home becomes relative as a result and the ambiguity of the last clause opens up the various possible meanings of the title word “settlement” which in turn keeps the tension of the poem masterfully alive.

Inland journeys venturing beyond the safety of the familiar are thus unsettling experiences, and in turn they are analogues of the continuous drive of self-scrutiny. In “Argument for a City” the ambiguities of the journey are dismissed but the picture does not emanate harmony in this case either. The poem echoes something of the plight of modern man, the inhabitant of the city as the destructive spirituality of the urban world is explored. The upward climbing buildings of the city become something of a menace, yet the location is also seen as the inescapable destiny of the inhabitant of the modern world: the profound sense of being confined to a man-made wilderness which is expressed by the image of the city as “mildewed matriarch” (Powell, 1968, 27) which implies hostility rather than warmth and affection yet it is also given and inescapable at the same time.

If neither the country nor the city provides the proper sense of communion with place, there is one more hope left – the world in between, the suburb. Powell, however, does not give up the sobriety of his vision as the poem “Outer Suburb” indicates. The physical conditions of the place are already sketched in rather unfavourable terms and the as a result the ambivalent nature of the suburb as a location is realised. The picture is all the more telling as it is created from the perspective of “exiles” (Powell, 1968, 51), with no chance to go either back or forward. In accordance with this menacing position of compulsion and inability to move, the monotonous and dry nature of the area becomes even more distressing, yet this is the place where the speaker is confined to live. The final image of the sight of green hills as a backdrop to embody everything that the suburb is not provides an unsettling closure to the poem.

As these poems suggest, Powell still carries something of the spirituality of the settler in the creation of his speakers. There is a general sense of unease, a pervasive sense of ambivalence which is the result of the perspective of the need to face the different conditions of the new surroundings, the awareness of the impossibility of return and the subsequent pressure of having to live within the confines of what is present. This perspective reflects postcolonial concerns on

one level and indicates the process of the conflict between the forces of reality and the imagination as still an intense one, pointing backwards to the romantic tradition.

Similar concerns can be found in the poetry of Thomas Shapcott yet he is more apparently at ease with the situation. Shapcott's landscapes are permeated with personal memories, they are haunting and occasionally even nearly pastoral locations. The places are closely observed, with little of the traditionally seen elements of the arid and hot conditions prevailing on the continent. The urban world features prominently in his poetry but it is treated with reservations – there is some stereotypical hostility towards it but the frequent involvement of parks and similar locations work toward a more balanced relation with the city.

The poem "The Sleeping Trees" (originally published in the volume *Time on fire*, 1961) equates the land with the people through the image of the city constructed on the hill but it quickly focuses on the process of how the forest is turned into a city. Though the transformation is ample proof of human ingenuity and power, something still remains indestructible about the forest – the trees may be cut down and turned into objects with a human significance but the sleeping trees remain elusive and beyond human control, something remains intact beyond conquest. This mysterious prevalence becomes the source of an unsettling question at the end – whether the sleep will find its resolution in awakening or in death (cf. Shapcott, 1989, 22).

Shapcott is apparently more in favour of peaceful locations than congested urban spaces, as is suggested by the poem "Stranger in the City". The narrator of the poem provides a rather disillusioned account of the urban world and he is certainly unimpressed by the monuments of modern prosperity. The city becomes "Man's metaphor" (Shapcott, 1961, 46) yet its principal landmark is the ugliness of the man-made structures, and the material wealth out of which it grows is basically seen as barren if it only yields what he can observe. If the city is "Man's metaphor", it is a reflection of human experience – but it apparently reflects only a propensity for ugliness. The closure of the poem, however, implies some form of hope as it makes a list of items finally noticed in the city that are associated with light. The sermon-like condemnation of the city is finally complemented by a similarly effusive record of the more encouraging aspects of the place yet the tone of the poem retains the doubt that is raised by the employment of such a speaker that Shapcott chooses for the occasion.

As if to demonstrate some sort of penance, a later poem entitled "The city of home" seems to readjust the perspective on the concept of the city. The poem is printed in italics, with the typography already hinting at its imaginary dimension and the very first line already gives it away: "*The City of Home is reached only in dreams*". (Shapcott, 1989, 352) Yet the imaginary still has its validity as the idea of home is constructed – the city of home is made out of memories, wishes, the accumulated wisdom and experience of all the earlier generations, and the sweep of the ideas becomes convincing enough to visualise such a location until the end of the poem mercilessly undermines everything that has been said:

The City of Home has only one drawback, but that is terrible:

The City of Home is empty of people.
All its songs are the songs of exile. (ibid)

Such a construct has a rather rich set of implications in the context of Australia as it hints at both origins and beginnings in the terminology of Edward Said. This certainly involves postcolonial overtones yet the speaker of the poem employs a reserved tone which manages to broaden this particular concern with contemporary Australian identity beyond its own scope towards a more general experience of cultural globalisation.

Though Shapcott is fond of the country, the principal voice associated with rural locations in contemporary Australian poetry is Les Murray. Murray is a highly influential figure who tries to realise the cultural convergence of settler and Aboriginal and who has not forgotten his roots in the rural world and the less prestigious section of society. His anger at what he observes as some form of cultural exclusionism has surfaced in various poems yet it is rather his evocations of the rural world which make him a significant figure on the contemporary scene.

The meditation “Evening Alone at Bunyah” (first published in the volume *The Weatherboard Cathedral*, 1969) manages to capture the spirit of a country place in an idiosyncratic manner. The title already creates the atmosphere of the poem, and the story is that of a father somewhat reluctantly leaving for an evening of entertainment for the first time in a long time, and the speaker is left alone for the evening and the night in the house of his upbringing. Murray conducts a quiet meditation on past and present, paying careful attention to detail and the setting becomes almost pastoral-like as result. The past appears to be alive, it is not distant and closed down but something close and simultaneously present, and the family ancestry comes to be entangled with the history of the location itself through the image of the house. In spite of the continuity between past and present the change from the old days to the present is observed and observable. The historical dimension finds an analogue in the image of the piece of rock which is at once a carrier of the mass of rock it was once a part of, underlining the importance of ancestry and the sense of belonging, and it leads the confessional section of the poem which asserts the oneness of the speaker and the place. The inescapable roots are tangible in the intimate physicality of the location, and the speaker consciously employs this to illustrate the contrast between his world and that of his “city friends” (Murray, 2006, p. 21). This sense of belonging and rootedness is what is palpably lacking in the urban world and its accounts. This is what cities fail to provide and it is frequently expressed through the image of the upward buildings which suggests a break with the past or anything that is personally significant.

This country location is a special one as it manages to preserve the spirit of the past. Not all locations are gifted in the same way as the poem “The Last

Continent” implies. The sonnet demonstrates the ‘taming’ of Australia, the coming into control of the last continent through the human endeavour of conquest. The emphasis in conquest falls on the subduing of nature – tractor fields, roads and cities take over as human ingenuity finds its way forward. Consolation is present in the form of art and memory both of which seem somewhat out of place as the poem employs a cunning tone which does not admire the enterprise of conquest in an unconditional way. The final line of the poem, “The earth gives way to the world” (Murray, 1969, 49), is a concise moment of summing up the essence of the change in which the imagination comes to shape reality to its own liking and the choice of the sonnet form itself embodies this idea too.

In spite of all the efforts put into the transformation of the continent there remain elusive elements which remind the observer of the limits of human ingenuity. Some of these are consciously cultivated, like the country locations of Murray’s poetry and some are simply acknowledged, as epitomised by the sleeping trees of Shapcott. There is, however, a compromising approach which is offered in Bruce Dawe’s “Homo Suburbensis” in which the transitional nature of the suburb becomes emblematic of a life which is haunted by some sense of a practical version of negative capability. The solitary figure of the contemplating man in his garden is a highly potent starting point as the various suggestions of the contemplating posture and the variety of vegetables which provide the backdrop to all this simultaneously create tension and ease it. The suburban garden becomes a place out of time as the moments of contemplation are apparently suspended in a world of their own, and the details of the experience in their very triviality render everything else even less significant. There is little glory in this but there is as much as there can be – the final lines of the poem legitimise the location as the equal of any place.

Dawe’s suburb resembles more the country than a comfortable and affluent urban location and it suggests pastoral-like peace though this is mainly due to the narrowness of the experience. It is a location permeated by noises and smells which could belong to anyone, which hints at uniformity, a characteristic feature of the suburb in spite of all contrary aspirations. Still, the suburban garden reflects its owner in a metonymic relation, since the garden is methodised landscape, the result of the imagination imprinting on reality. As the details indicate it is not anything grandiose yet it is not something to be ashamed of either, and as the metonymic relation is translated back onto the owner, the suburban man who is “One constant in a world of variables” becomes the general unit of mankind offering “Not much but as much as any man can offer / — time, pain, love, hate, age, ware, death, laughter, fever” (Dawe 96).

This vision of the modern suburban world and its inhabitants achieves exactly what Dawe himself claimed in the interview referred to above. The details characteristic of this world are to be found elsewhere too and there is less insistence on the self-conscious localisation of the experience – as a result the picture is general enough and could be associated with any modern location. Yet the cunningly manipulated tone, the down-to-earth underpinning of the

experience with precise and concrete detail and the cordial embracing of the character in the focus of the poem make up for an unmistakable Australian poem. Dawe demonstrates in the poem how to be less Australian to be more Australian.

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