Australian Poetry *

Judith Wright

Lecture 1: The English Poet in a Foreign Land

In this lecture, I want to consider the problems that confronted not just the poet—the creative personality—but every personality, in the early settlement of Australia. For after all, the poet is not and cannot be a person apart from his society and his environment; rather, the poet especially is the symbol and the full expression of the life around him, even when he is most rebellious against it.

So, to make clear what I mean by poetry', I had better clear the ground first of all by saying what I consider the nature and function of poetry to be. There has been a great deal of controversy about this, and where there is so much controversy there is bound to be confusion. In an age when creativity is discouraged in favour of conformity, when prestige attaches to making money rather than to making works of art and when machines have taken over so much of our lives that entertainment itself is often machine-made, we tend to forget the purpose and meaning of art, and to demand that the artist make something we think pretty, rather than something that makes us think or experience for ourselves.

It would be easy to spend a good deal of time explaining what poetry is not. For instance, it is not an outmoded decoration for the surface of our lives, now superseded in favour of streamlined radio-entertainment; nor is it a puzzle invented by 'intellectuals' for other intellectuals to solve; nor is it, as Molesworth Junior thinks, 'sissy stuff that rhymes, written by weedy people who say la and fie and swoon when they see a bunch of daffodils'. That notions like these, most of them hostile, are held by many people in a dim way, is a pointer to the rather important fact that poetry, in our day at least, is something which is essentially in opposition. In opposition, that is, to much of what makes up our daily lives, our public attitudes, our easy conformities. What poetry says, of course, varies from one poet to the next, for poetry is essentially personal. But this means that what poetry asserts is precisely the personal, as opposed to the public view—the emotional and intuitional, as opposed to the literal and intellectual—the individual, as opposed to the mass.

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It is this fact that poetry is an assertion of values other than public values, I expect, that is the cause of our so effectively teaching Molesworth Junior—whose childish problem is to learn to conform to the public manners and public attitudes of his elders and teachers, that poetry is sissy stuff. For, however sincere we may be in our efforts to drill him into analysing word by word, the poetry of Keats and Shelley, that is certainly what we do teach him, by implication as well as by torture. So it is a remarkable sign of the resilience and non-conformity of the human mind that any of our Molesworths ever finish up as poets—and some of them, of course, do.

But if poetry is not any of these things, what in fact is it? There are far too many definitions of poetry for me to dare to choose any one of them; but I think it will be helpful if I quote from a broadcast-talk, given this year over the BBC by W.H. Auden. He gives in it a list of what he calls 'three dogmas of the poet's art', which seem to me, if not to define that indefinable, poetry, at least to make a useful circumscription around it.

1. 'An historical world of events and persons exists, and its existence is good'. That is to say, the poet must accept life, as such, and even affirm it.
2. 'This historical world is a fallen world, full of unfreedom and disorder. It is good that it exists, but the way in which it exists is an evil'. That is to say, the poet, though he accepts life, does not accept that in it which may be changed for the better. This does not of course mean that he must be, though he may be, a reformer of society. The unfreedom and disorder to which Auden refers may be an artistic unfreedom and disorder, as it were; that is, the chaos of events rather than of persons—the fact that what happens to us seems often to happen through blind fate, unavoidably.
3. 'This historical world is a redeemable world. The unfreedom and disorder of the past can be reconciled in the future. Every successful poem…presents an analogue of that Paradisal state in which Freedom and Law, System and Oder, are united, and contradictions reconciled and sins forgiven. Every good poem represents very nearly Utopia.' (Again, this is not necessarily in reference to purely-social evils, though it may be. A poem of Shaw Neilson's, or of Blake's, is a reconciliation, not of man with society, but of man with the world; it is a rearrangement of events.)

The point I want to make here is that poetry is, in general, an attempt at some reconciliation of man with his experience. That particular experience may be as slight or as deep as you like—it may be the sight of a flower whose internal beauty and order remind him of his own or the world's disorder, or lead him to a cry of praise that beauty and order exist; or it may be, as in much of Brennan's poetry, the deepest-possible experience of disunity and unhappiness. This means that the starting-point of poetry is Feeling—emotion, which can only be roused by certain disharmonies or harmonies of experience. So we have these points to remember our investigation of Australian poetry in its relation to

Australian growth and problems—it will be concerned with personal experience; it will be an attempt at a reconciliation of the poet with his experience; and it will be an approach, not through the intellect but through feeling and emotion. We will not expect the poet to be tackling problems of water conservation and the ownership of land, or of housing and transport. His business may be with such matters, but on a different level—his concern with them is in terms of their meaning in our life and feeling. So that I would think of the poetry of a race or nation as a kind of gauge of its attitudes to life—an indication of that inner reality which is, after all, the only truth about us, and forms our motivation and expresses what, in fact, we are. I would think of it as, to use a psychological-term, the dream-work not only of the individual but of his nation and his time; and as such, it may indicate to us, not only our conscious attitudes, but our unconscious oppositions—not only the problems with which, whether we know it or not, we are preoccupied, but our own unspoken criticisms of our preoccupations. Auden says elsewhere of poetry that 'if the historical world were the creation of saints only, there would be no need for art or impulse to become an artist'. And I am going to suggest in these lectures that we can trace in the history of Australian poetry the truth of this dictum. I suggest that, upon the whole, poetry in Australia has acted as what the psychologists call a compensatory function—a function which can oppose, where necessary, the values of everyday, and can thereby point to truths that otherwise might go unheeded and suggest angles of vision not otherwise attainable.

Australia did not begin to have anything classifiable as poetry until the nineteenth century was well launched—until, in fact, Charles Harpur began to writ. Harpur's first book was published in Sydney in 1845, though he had of course published verse in such periodicals as Australia then boasted, much before this; he died in 1868, but his collected poems were not published until 1883. The range of his writing mainly covers the period from about 1835 to 1860.

During this period the colony, though small, was growing rapidly; in Harpur's youth the first of the great explorations inland were beginning, and during his life-time the cattle-men and pastoralists were travelling inland and taking up new country, and during the fifties, when he himself was growing old, the goldrushes brought a breeze of freedom and excitement into a land which until then had been predominantly pastoral and seemed in danger of becoming stagnant at that level. But all this development was of a material nature. The pastoralists and farmers were engaged solely in the job of extracting from the land as much as it would give; conservative English farming methods went by the board when it seemed that more money could be made by flogging the land to produce wheat crop after wheat crop; and the miners were not concerned with any sentiments of affection for the land into which they flooded and which

they left stripped and hideous. In Harpur, born near the Hawkesbury and himself a country boy, and deeply influenced by the Wordsworthian view of nature, something very unusual for that get-rich-quick period was born. He loved the country for itself, and his dream in youth was, not merely to be a poet, but to be an Australian poet. Just how strange a dream this was in those times it may be hard to understand. Australia was a forgotten colony, an outpost far from everything that was considered beautiful and desirable, a country without a past and even, to many, without a future—since to return rich to England was the ideal so many set themselves. For anyone, even a poet, to identify himself with it and to desire to describe its so-called harsh ugliness, to see in it anything more than a place that might yield wealth, was quite beyond the conception of most people—even of those who had come to the colony of their own free will. They had little time for such nonsense, just as in their hard and usually grasping lives they had little room for poetry, even if they could have brought themselves to believe that the colony might produce a poet.

Harpur, in fact, was entirely out of tune with the feeling of his time. But he held tenaciously to his dream, in spite of hostility; though this hostility wounded him deeply we know from his desperate invocation to Poesy—

> Yet do not thou forsake me now,
> Poesy with Peace—together! …
>
> Ah misery, what were then my lot
> Amongst a race of unbelievers:
> Sordid men who all declare
> That earthly gain alone is fair,
> And they who pore on bardic lore
> Deceived deceivers.
>
> …Still let they grace
> My being leaven!
>
> Thy mystic grace, that face to face
> Full converse I may hold with nature,
> Seeing published everywhere
> In forms, the soul that makes her fair;
> And grow the while to her large style
> In mental stature.

The poem in which Harpur attempted to fuse narrative with Australian background—'The Creek of the Four Graves'—is, in spite of some excellent descriptive passages, rather artificial in its whole impression. His more-purely-descriptive poems, such as the brief 'A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest', and the longer poem, 'A Storm in the Mountains', are better poetry, because in them his gift of observation shows to more advantage. The Wordsworthian method which he uses casts a curiously-foreign shade over his landscapes, yet through that

shade (as through the paintings of Louis Buvelot, his near-contemporary) emerges an authentic vision. In a 'Storm in the Mountains' he describes such a summer storm as he must often have experienced as a boy.

> 'a lonely boy far venturing from home
> Out on the half-wild herd's fair faint tracks…
> Mid rock-browed mountains, which with stony frown
> Glare into haggard chasms deep adown',

And he describes it with real force; the dingoes in their dens howling as the storm approaches, the cattle gathering frightened in the shelter of a cliff, the birds ceasing their song and flying to refuge, as

> 'the airs that played
> About the rugged mountains all are laid:
> While drawing nearer far-off heights appear,
> As in a dream's wild prospect, strangely near!
> Till into wood resolves their robe of blue,
> And the gray crags rise bluffly on the view.'

This poem, and 'A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest', are purely descriptive; he attempts no interpretation; but I think that such pure pieces of description were the most-valuable work that he could at the time have done. They might at least have taught his contemporaries to look at their surroundings with observation and understanding; and their Wordsworthian influence was, I think (in opposition to other critics of his verse) the best he could have chosen. His problem, after all, was that of creating somehow an environment of sympathy. It is possible to write poetry when nobody particular want poetry to be written and when you have little or no audience; but when in addition to that handicap you have, as Harpur had, no true mother-country for which to write and no appreciation in your audience for your attempt to create one, your difficulties as a poet become almost insuperable. And I think that the Wordsworthian attitude towards nature—that almost-pantheistic feeling for woods, mountains, lakes and streams—provided Harpur with an excellent footing from which to begin his work.

Here, for instance, is a brief description taken from 'The Creek of the Four Graves', of western mountains (probably the Blue Mountains) at sunset.

> '…The heights rose crowding, with their summits all
> dissolving as it seemed, and partly lost
> in the exceeding radiancy aloft;
> and thus transfigured, for awhile they stood
> like a great company of archaeons, crowned
> with burning diadems, and tented o'ver
> with canopies of purple and of gold.'

You might say that such a description might be placed in any other country; but I think that Harpur has seized the quality of summer-light—

the haze which at sunset one may see growing luminous so that mountains bathed in it do appear to dissolve in light—in an unmistakable way. A few such moments of vision, even if there were nothing else to praise in is poetry (as there is), stamp Harpur as Australia's own first authentic voice among the white invaders. And he knew that this was the best he could ask from himself. In his poem, 'The Dream by the Fountain', he sets before himself the goal of becoming that voice, in an imaginary dialogue with a personified Australian Nature; who addresses him

> 'I am the muse of the evergreen forest,
> I am the spouse of thy spirit, lone bard! …
> Then would I prompt, in the still hour of dreaming,
> Some thought of thy beautiful country again,
> Of her yet to be famed streams, thro' dark woods far-gleaming—
> Of her bold shores that throb to the beat of the main…
>
> Be then that bard of thy country! O rather
> Should such be thy choice than a monarchy wide!
> Lo! 'tis the land of the grave of thy father;
> 'Tis the cradle of liberty! Think and decide!'

Now, though it is not a very good poem even when you accept the conventions of the day, this was a very-important poem to have written in a somewhat-despised colony founded on little more than half-a-century before. Not only does it contain a vision of the country as beautiful in and for itself, but it voices—what was an idea which can hardly have been popular among the most literate of the small audience Harpur might hope to command—the idea that this country born of a convict-settlement and given over, as he himself so bitterly complains, to the material pursuit of gain, would nurture something new in history: would become a land of freedom. This was, of course, a note that spread and deepened among Australians and Australian writers as the independent men of the gold-rush days came back to ordinary life with little taste for the English inheritance of upper-and-lower-class distinction; but when Harpur wrote it was daringly new, and this should be remembered.

Harpur's lack of worldly success, either in his various avocations of farming, teaching and public service, or in his writings, and his feeling that life had been less than just to his abilities and his nigh calling, haunt much of his later poetry and make sad reading, though he never lost his conviction that his voice would be a lasting one in the future literature of Australia. He wrote a long poem, 'Genius Lost', in which he bitterly compares his own lot with that of more opportunists who had obtained higher advancement and regard than he had ever been accorded. It is an old story, of course, and repeated no doubt, from one civilization to another, with one or two honourable exceptions such as the Greek, but no doubt Harpur lived in a particularly-unfavourable climate for a writer,

visionary, and fiercely honest man such as he. Yet he did not lose faith in eventual justice to his name and to mankind as well; and he took refuge in his dreams of a time when

> '…all men shall stand
> proudly beneath the fair wide roof of heaven
> as God-created equals, each the sire
> of his own worth…'

and in what he calls

> '…the same old promise, that when o'er
> My country's homes shine fair those riper days,
> Her better sons shall learn to prize
> my lonely voice upon the past.'

For Kendall however, a generation later, the environment had changed in so far as the colony had grown and had absorbed much that was new, from gold-rush and other migration; and the poetic influence of the Old World as well as its moral influence had altered too. There was in Harpur a kind of granitic harshness which did not render his poetry attractive to the lusher sentimentality of that Victorian outlook which Australia's literate-class were already succumbing to in his later days. Wordsworth was dead, the new poets—Tennyson, Swinburne and their innumerable lesser imitators, - had taken over the Romantic outlook and changed it into something more acceptable to the spirit of the times. Kendall, unfortunately, had little of Harpur's strength and resolution; he was essentially a lyricist, not a descriptive and narrative-poet like Harpur; and the transplantation to the Australian background of that loosely-articulated fin-de-siecle style of Swinburne's did not help him. A contemporary critic called him 'Australia's first poet'; but he himself acknowledged Harpur as his master and regarded Harpur's work as better than his own, and with this opinion I would concur.

I should like to read you one of Harpur's poems, on a subject which seems to have fascinated him and later, Kendall—the sound made by that dark strange unattractive tree, the river-oak, in the wind. The sound seems to have meant to Harpur, as it later meant to Kendall, the very voice of that Australia, so foreign yet so fascinating to both, which they were trying to capture; it is as though both of them felt that its very darkness and difference from the English oaks for which it is named, its thin sad-coloured foliage, marked for them the difference they sought to express. Harpur often mentions the 'swamp-oak' as it was called in his verse; in ' The Creek of the Four Graves', for instance, he uses as background-scenery for the tragedy of which he writes,

> 'a creek … duskily befringed
> With upward tapering feathery swamp-oaks,
> The sylvan eyelash always of remote
> Australian writers…'

and Kendall attempted the subject twice, in an immature poem in his first published book, and twelve years later when despair had overcome him.

These are the first and last verses of Harpur's poem:-

> The Voice of the Swamp Oak
>
> 'Who hath lain him underneath
> a lone oak by a lonely stream,
> He hath heard an utterance breathe
> Sadder than all else may seem.
> …Some lonely spirit that hath dwelt
> For ages in one lonely tree—
> Some weary spirit that hath felt
> The burden of eternity.'

And here are extracts from Kendall's early poem, 'The Wail in the Native Oak',

> … and I caught a glimpse of sunset fading from a far-off wild,
> As I sat me down to fancy, like a thoughtful, wistful child—
> Sat me down to fancy what might mean these hollow, hopeless tones
> Sooming round the swooning silence, dying out in smothered moans.
> What might mean that muffled sobbing? Did a lonely phantom wail,
> Pent among those tangled branches, barring out the moonlight pale?
> Wept it for that gleam of glory wasting from the forest aisles,
> For the fainting gleam of glory sad with flickering, sickly smiles?'

This is an early poem, but I think it is significant that it is, to our ears at least, so clearly inferior to Harpur's treatment. It is, of course, simply Harpur's idea worked over in lax imitation of Swinburne (Swinburne was Kendall's besetting sin).

Twelve years later, Kendall returned to the same theme,

> 'Twelve years ago when I could face
> High heaven's dome with different eyes
> In days full-flowered and hours of grace
> And nights not sad with sighs
> I wrote a song in which I strove
> To shadow forth thy strain of woe,
> Dark widowed sister of the grove—
> Twelve wasted years ago.'
> '… but I who am that perished soul
> Have wasted so these powers of mine
> That I can never write that whole
> Pure perfect speech of thine.'
>
> 'But ah! conceptions fade away,
> And still the life that lives in thee
> The soul of thy majestic lay
> Remains a mystery!'

These two poems of Kendall's epitomise his life's work. The first and immature poem is sadly weak; it is full of weak words and falling cadences (words like 'dim', 'swooning', 'fading', 'dell' (an archaism revived by only the minor Victorian poets even then) and cadences which while they imitate Swinburne's do not succeed in imitating his strengths but only his weaknesses, 'sooming round the swooning silence', 'sad with flickering, sickly smiles'. Kendall needed an astringent influence; his attempts at the long, loose Swinburnian-line leave his verse almost disarticulated. Wordiness is his besetting sin; he falls into useless repetition too easily of his own accord to be able to handle the Swinburnian use of repetition as enhancement of the languid late-Victorian atmosphere. It is no use speculating whether he would have been a better poet if he had lived at another period, when verse-forms were less relaxed and prettiness was not sought after for its own sake; but there is no doubt, at any rate that he was not strong enough to cope with the period he did live in. that harshness of Harpur's, though it kept him from being to his time a popular or attractive writer, was at least a strength; it kept him robust and prevented him, even at his lowest depths of depression, from the real despair and failure that overtook poor Kendall.

It was a pity; the more so that Kendall's failure was not merely personal. He did, after all, leave behind a few poems which satisfied him, or at least a few parts of poems; he was modest enough to keep his claims for his work low, even though he had been called the First Australian Poet by those who underrated Harpur. But their range is pathetically slight, for a time when there was so much to experience and record, and of which so much, alas, has slipped away almost unknown. Mary Gilmore, who was born in 1865, when Kendall was twenty-six, and who was seventeen years old when Kendall died, has recorded much from her own remarkable memory, but little else remains of that time before the nineties, when Australia began to become articulate. In her book, *More Recollections,* she says, 'When I think of what tens of thousands of people of my age have seen and known here, and which no-one has looked upon, with the eye of wonder, and none has written with a pen of fire, I cry in my heart, 'What loss! What loss! The sun never sets on the drama of human effort. But there has been a curious drought of the mind in regard to it, in Australia.'

Of course it is ridiculous to reproach Kendall with not having been, what he knew too well he was not, the lacking poet of his time and country. The very fact that he was what he was—an unhappy dreamer and writer unable to gain an audience or enough money to live by, a man who, as he says, wasted his own gifts, beating weakly against the current of society too callous and too self-occupied with its task of conquering the country for its own ends, to listen to his weak self-pitying strains—

this fact is itself significant of the time. Harpur's work had, after all, laid a broad and encouraging basis for the younger generation; of that generation, much more numerous than Harpur's had been, only Kendall answered the challenge to build. Where were the other men of imagination? There were others; but they were too much engaged in the business of everyday, for it was, after all, an absorbing business in those days. They were the days for which Lawson yearns nostalgically—'the days when the world was wide', when new country was being discovered and thrown open for settlement, when, although the big gold-rushes were almost over, new fields were still being discovered and new rushes taking palce, with all the excitement and intensity of the old, when railways were being built and cattle overlanded to destinations scarcely yet described or located on the map; when the business of displacing and of exterminating the land's original owners and the animals that crowded its hills and plains was in full swing; and, moreover, when work was hard and grinding, communications primitive and books rare and precious, read, when they were read at all, only when outside works was made impossible by weather, or else at night by the poor light of the fat-lamp and the tallow-candle, when weariness after the day's work was often too great for concentration. The silence that hangs over those generations is, after all, a speaking silence; it has its meaning and its implications. But certainly poor Kendall in his imitative poeticisms and his limited horizons is not fitted to express their brutalities, sorrows and occasional heroism.

And after all, it was not really Australia that Kendall loved, or that he understood. The beautiful scrubs and streams of the Eastern Rivers of New South Wales (in particular, of New England)- these he loved and described as no-one has done since; but of Harpur's wider vision of a country, of a future nation, he has little indeed. His preoccupation, unfortunately for him, was with his own sorrows and failures; he drew little consolation from the notion of future and kinder generations hearing his lonely voice upon the past. Even his description of those hills and streams—the Orara, for instance, which many of you may know—sounds strange to us, who know them only as they are now, denuded of their old beauties. What remains of Kendall for us today is those few verses in which the pain of his life is distilled at last in a music as sincere as it is pathetic. I shall not quote them, for the few poems that contain them are in almost every anthology, and repetition has sickened us of them.

Kendall, as a man who never found it easy to get on with his fellow-men and who was miserable in the world of action that surrounded him, admired and envied Gordon, that moody Englishman who could ride and rhyme with equal facility, whose strength and endurance were famous in his circle and who, unlike Kendall, was accepted as a man among men in spite of, even for, the easy ballads and verses he struck off.

It was a surprise to Kendall, perhaps tinged with a sorrowful triumph, that the man he had regarded as so far from sharing his own sad poetic lot was not after all immune from life's failures and disappointments, and Kendall, after Gordon's suicide, paid in a poem on the event perhaps a sincerer tribute to him as a poet and a brother than he would otherwise have felt free to do. Gordon's life in the world which then counted as most important—that world of horses, cattle and stockmen which we are apt to forget was then the spearhead of Australia's progress—gave him a wider and more active experience of Australian life and the Australian outlook than Kendall ever had, and in his ballads he catches something of the spirit of the time; but being, after all, not himself an Australian he never had that sense which animated Harpur, and to some extent Kendall himself, of being not merely a poet, but an Australian poet; he had an assured background of his own and his education and whole upbringing did not spring from sources tainted with a homesick over-valuation of English culture and under-valuation of all things Australian, as Kendall's and Harpur's had done. It was for this reason that in poems of action and narrative-poems he can use the Australian background with a careless ease of acceptance that was quite beyond Harpur and Kendall; for him it was a background, strange perhaps and interesting, but no more and no less so than the background of the medieval English ballads he loved to write. Here is an illustration of his method of using it, which comes from his long narrative-poem 'From the Wreck'—a poem, by the way, that is so shameless a crib from Browning that one wonders it was ever published in his collected works:

> 'In the low branches heavily laden with dew,
> In the long grasses spoiling with deadwood that day,
> Where the blackwood, the box and the bastard oak grew,
> Between the tall gumtrees we galloped away.
>
> We crash'd thro a brush fence, we splash'd thro a swamp,
> We steered for the north near the 'Eaglehawk's Nest'
> We bore to the left just beyond the 'Red Camp',
> And round the black tea-tree belt wheel'd to the west –
>
> We crossed a low range sickly scented with musk
> From wattle-tree-blossom—we skirted a marsh.
> Then the dawn faintly dappled with orange the dusk,
> And peal'd overhead the jay's laughter-note harsh,
> And shot the first sun-streak behind us and soon
> The dim dewy uplands were dreamy with light,
> And full on our left flash'd the 'reedy lagoon',
> And sharply the 'Sugarloaf' reared on our right.'

Here the Australian landscape is made to provide the landmarks and obstacles for a wholly-unconvincing imitation of Browning's poem; but at least it is used, and that in itself was a step forward; it gave rise to a

number of more-Indigenous ballads in which the Australian background was used to better effect.

Myself, I would dispute that Gordon really comes into the question as an Australian poet. The proportion of Australian to European backgrounds in his not very large number of verses is low; he was already a grown man when he came to Australia, and his character was not formed in any way by our conditions; what he found congenial in Australia—its freedom and adventurousness—met a need in his nature which might equally have been satisfied in any other new country, and although he entered Parliament he seems to have had little or no sense of serving his adopted country, or of recognizing her potentialities, as his predecessor Harpur had. In addition, I cannot help feeling that all in all he is a remarkably-poor poet, scarcely worth our disputing his possession with Scotland, his true native-country. We may accept his specifically-Australian ballad-verses for their undoubted influence on the later development of Boake, Paterson, Lawson and the lesser balladists, and we may recognize too that his rather-sentimental byronism and his ironic devil-may-care swagger, though they seem nowadays rather adolescent, met a need in ourselves and have helped to form, to some extent, the Australian's idea of himself—that taciturn, swaggering, heroic outback-figure who, with his horse, his dog and his faithful mate, seems to us the archetype of Australians. Gordon, in fact, is not really a poet, he is a legend, and I think he would better regarded as such.

But Gordon had made the ballad-form respectable; he had brought it from its despised state into favour with the ladies and gentlemen; and from this fact sprang the Australian school of balladists which at last, in the nineties and the early years of this century, did begin to record something of the life of the land before it vanished forever. The balladist-school is limited in its subject and its technique; much of what was happening and being thought and done was quite outside its scope; but it did valuable work in helping to establish an atmosphere in which people could begin to think of themselves, not as colonial Englishmen, but as Australians with a life and values of their own.

The typical figure of the early balladists was Barcroft Boake, and he joins the ballad-school to the school of poets, as it were, both by his contribution to the note of social protest which Lawson and O'Dowd later developed, and by his depth of feeling. His was a lonely and despairing personality, in spite of his attraction towards the rollicking and swaggering horseman-type of ballad that Gordon wrote so easily; and like Gordon, he ended by suicide, still very young and with not much work to his credit. What he has left, however, shows that he was in fact rather a poet than a balladist by temperament; and a comment made after his death, to the effect that if he had lived he might well have become a poet of considerable importance, seems to have been well-founded. Mary

Gilmore in her reminiscences gives us an interesting glimpse of him, a hunted and haunted-looking young man, shy of young women, (Mary herself was about eighteen at the time), and clasping wherever he went the handsome bone-handled whip with which his name in connected in our minds records unforgettably one aspect of outback life in the Far West which he knew of his own knowledge—the dreadful incidence of death. At the time when he wrote, the far-outback stations were still being taken up and consolidated, often by city men who provided the finance to buy the cattle with which they had, under the conditions of their taking up, to be stocked within six months. They would hire stockmen and managers to take the cattle out to their faraway stations, and to build the necessary huts and yards; but often they did little more than this, and the men on their arrival found themselves stranded in practically-waterless country, where communications were so bad and infrequent that the teams might not get through with provisions for a year. And no doubt there were many grasping men among the owners who cared little what happened to their employees so long as the drafts of cattle came forward regularly. Boake's ballad, 'Where the Dead Men Lie', forms the only elegy of these men who lived and died, often of thirst and malnutrition, on the fringe of Western settlement. No doubt the picture is a dark one, but Boake's life itself was as dark.

Here are a few verses of 'Where the Dead Men Lie', which will serve to show what the balladists could do in the way of recording the life of the time (though of course few of them have the bitter passion of Boake); and will I think also show that Boake himself had sufficient power and technical achievement to have done much more important work, if the circumstances of his life and his personal temperament had permitted.

Where the Dead Men Lie

Out on the wastes of the Never Never—
That's where the dead men lie!
There where the heat-waves dance forever –
That's where the dead men lie!
That's where the Earth's loved sons are keeping
  Endless tryst: not the west wind sweeping
Feverish pinions can wake their sleeping—
Out where the dead men lie.

Where brown Summer and Death have mated—
That's where the dead men lie!
Loving with fiery lust unsated—
That's where the dead men lie!
Out where the grinning skulls bleach whitely

Under the saltbrush sparkling brightly;
Out where the wild dogs chorus nightly—
That's where the dead men lie!

…Only the had of Night can free them –

That's when the dead men fly!
Only the frightened cattle see them—
See the dead men go by!
Cloven hoofs beating out one measure,
Bidding the stockmen know no leisure—
That's when the dead men take their pleasure!
That's when the dead men fly!

Ask, too, the never-sleeping drover:
He sees the dead pass by;
Hearing them call to their friends—the plover,
Hearing the dead men cry;
Seeing their faces stealing, stealing,
Hearing their laughter pealing, pealing,
Watching their grey forms wheeling, wheelig
Round where the cattle lie!

Strangled by thirst and fierce privation—
That's how the dead men die!
Out on Moneygrub's farthest station—
That's how the dead men die!
Hardfaced greybeards, youngsters callow,
Some mounds cared for, some left fallow,
Some deep down, yet others shallow;
Some having but the sky.
Moneygrub, as he sips his claret
Looks with complacent eye
Down at his watch-chin, eighteen-carat—
There, in his club, hard by
Rocks not that every link is stamped with
Names of the men whose limbs are cramped with
Too long lying in grave-mould, camped with
Death where the dead men lie.

The macabre terror of this ballad scarcely appears again in the work of any of Boake's successors. As the depression of the early nineties passed, Australia entered a period of good seasons and high prices; the boom had begun, and following, as it did, on a period when the first great strike in Australia' history had awakened her social conscience, the boom meant better times not only for the rich, but for everyone. The conditions Boake wrote of so bitterly had almost passed away for the outback-stations, when the great droughts of the early nineties relaxed their grip; prosperity changed the note of many of the ballad-writers who followed Boake, and they were legion. The ballad-period of Australian literature was at its height.

This new development in the Australian scene of course paralleled and formed a climate for those other developments which have made of the nineties in retrospect the most fertile field for romantic reminiscence and scholarly squabbling in Australian history. The nineties have now a

literature of their own, most of it published during the last few years, and though a good deal of it is occupied with debunking and assertions of other people about that Golden Age, enough remains to make it clear that there really was at that time some kind of climacteric; some new feeling of unity and promise, some gain in assurance and hope for the future, some ideas that Australians could stand on their own feet and begin to look to the world as a people with a contribution to make, rather than as a semi-parasitic dependency of a country overseas.

With this development, of course, the problems of the poet changed. The basic situation was still the same, as it is always the same—the poet at odds with his environment, striving to find a reconciliation—but it is no longer the harsh unwelcoming environment of Harpur and Kendall, which offered no foothold at all to the writer and no ear to speak of to what he said. The poet's problem, with the problem of Australia herself, now split into two; the relationship of Australia with English and European influences which so far had moulded her, and the question of what aim she should set—or her visionaries should set—before her.

The men who typify these two different problems before the poet, and who show at the same time how much the climate of Australia had changed for writers, are on the one side the scholar-poet Chris Brennan, and on the other, Bernard O'Dowd and Henry Lawson. If I were, in these lectures, intending to make purist distinctions between poets and non-poets, I should probably have to leave both these latter out of consideration—Lawson because he is really a balladist, O'Dowd because in his earlier verses he is no better than a maker of political-idealist doggerel, and even in his later work Alma Venus and the long poem called 'The Bush', his style is generally excruciating and his preoccupations are not often poetic. One cannot in any way compare either of them with Brennan from the standpoint of literary value. But—whatever the verdict on their work may be –they had far more influence on their time and on the thought of their time than Brennan ever had, and where he remained unknown except to the connoisseur, and his works once vanished from print were, and have remained to the present day, unobtainable except in the larger libraries, their verses were widely read and had their influence on many of the younger men of their day.

This, then, is the situation at the end of the nineteenth century—a century which began for Australia in the hard and bitter climate of convict-settlement, in floggings, famines, an iniquitous traffic in rum, and all the misery of a small confined colony subject to every vice and woe exportable from its mother country and practically none of the virtues and amenities. In1900, all of its earlier writers—Harpur, Kendall, the unhappy Deniehy, Boake, and Gordon—are dead, most in poverty, all in misery, two by their own hand. Each was pursued by what we may call the poet's fate—the fate of the heart in opposition to the mind and the

hand, of the poet in opposition to his milieu, but that milieu—Australia as it was in the nineteenth century—was surely one of the most hostile and the least opportune for poetry that history can afford. Nevertheless, as the century ends an Australian University shelters a poet—Christopher Brennan—who, if we have not yet conceded him greatness, was at least among the almost-great; and Harpur's long-ago prophecy of Australia as the 'cradle of liberty' has been taken up vigorously by all manner of men and is being voiced, in particular, by the young O'Dowd in stanzas of much contemporary celebrity. As the nineteenth century ends, Australia's poets are no longer echoes of their English mentors; they are learning to be Australian.

Lecture II: Learning to be Australian

I have said that Chris Brennan, though we must use the word 'great' with the utmost care, was, putting him at this lowest, among the very-nearly-great poets of the world. This means, of course, that in a survey of the development of Australian poetry in relation to the growth of Australian consciousness, he towers out of our sight rather too far to be discussed among his minor confreres. This is the more true in that his books are planned as wholes, each poem balancing and carrying on the thought of its predecessors, so that we cannot extract a poem for inspection without half-killing it in the process. So I am not going to discuss Brennan as a poet (in any case I doubt my ability to do so); but from our rather-lower angle of vision two points about his work are interesting. Firstly, he had attained an unusual detachment from the problems of Australian poetry purely *as* Australian. His work, unlike that of all his predecessors and practically all of his followers, is European in it tone in this way—it is subjective in tone, not objective. Landscape in his poetry is no longer something to be struggled with; the whole life that went on around him, and its setting, are either absent altogether from Brennan's poems, or so attenuated that it is quite an academic triumph to identify here and there a recognizable scene, such as the skyline of Sydney seen at night from Newport. And of course it was not the skyline of Sydney that Brennan was seeing; it was an impersonal symbol of civilisation, drained of its local reference. That is the important thing about Brennan's poetry; it is concerned quite frankly with symbols rather than actualities, with the inner rather than the outer life. The problems that had distracted Harpur and Kendall were solved in Brennan's work simply by transcending them.

In Australian poetry Brennan remains the great—the only—exponent of this method. He has echoes in later poets—sometimes R.D. FitzGerald sounds a little like Brennan, in his use of the long closely-articulated sentence that runs on from verse to verse like a tense wire holding the poem together, or in one or two of Brennan's tricks of speech—but no

poet that I can think of has approached Brennan's triumphant subjectivity. It is quite outside the Australian development; it is even alien, so far, to the Australian character. It marks Brennan as belonging, not only to us, but to the world, and in particular to the European tradition of poetry. His mentors were the French Symbolists, Mallarme and Verlaine in particular, but he is nowhere and in no way an imitator.

Naturally enough, Brennan had few readers and little influence in his time, and that is the case today too, though I hope that when his *Collected Works* are at last published things may alter. For all that, he was no recluse; he had plenty of contact with fellow-writers, who admired if they did not take much interest in his work, and he even descended into the market-place at times and stated his views on current affairs. Here he is rather more accessible to this survey, and I can hardly introduce you to the beginning of the twentieth century in Australia better than by quoting a poem from the ferocious cycle called *The Burden of Tyre*, which he wrote at the time of the Boer War.

All that ferment of the nineties, that talk of freedom and that general feeling that at last Australia was becoming a nation in her own right and should begin to make her own decisions, culminated in the outbreak of the Boer War, rather unworthily one cannot help feeling, in an outburst of jingoism that rivalled England's own. 'I tell you the Star of the South shall rise in the lurid clouds of war', Lawson had written not many years before; and the words were quoted on all hands as Australia's troops sailed to join those of England in subduing the Boer forces. The war was highly popular, as of course it was in England at first; Australia seemed to entertain no doubt of the justice of her rushing to the assistance of the Mother Country. But Brennan was bitterly disappointed and thoroughly disgusted by the whole attitude of his confreres; and his reaction makes memorable reading. Here is one of the poems he wrote between August 1900 and March 1901, from *The Burden of Tyre*.

> Why are these streets aflare?—Today
> We are born a folk.—what love begot?
> - Our Mother's need.—Whither?—To slay!
> See now wherewith our hand is hot.
>
> The old harlotry of right and wrong!
> One thrives, whereby another ails;
> The little jealous gods are strong,
> The Divine Image fades and pales.
>
> Then count not me of yours; I stand
> Alone, save for whose gaze I meet
> Like mine in yearning for that land
> That ne'er may rest our questing feet.
>
> Or had I here to choose a kin,

I think, though scant my hardihead,
I would not stand with you who win:
Rather with them, the sore bested…

With them in heart at least, since here
I sicken, seeing the driven herd
Run with dropp'd eye and craven ear;
- O people, and as this thy word?

Of course, the fact that Brennan so furiously repudiated his countrymen's actions, and the fact that both as scholar and poet he stands above his contemporaries and most of his successors also, do not mean that he did not in reality have any special significance in the development of Australian verse. Firstly, as we have seen, it is the characteristic, perhaps even the task, of the poet to be in opposition to this age in so far as he is emotionally in advance of it; and secondly, the very fact that Brennan's work could be written at all in Australia at the time when it was written is symptomatic of the country's growing civilization. A hundred years before, if Brennan had been in existence, work like his could never have been written; the times were too hard, the scope too narrow. But by the end of the nineteenth century it was possible for Australia to support a scholar and a poet, both materially with a University post and libraries to hand, and with a mental climate which, though it was unsympathetic enough yet left room and possibility for Brennan's growth. Australia had, in fact, achieved since Harpur's vision of her as the cradle of liberty, a good deal of liberty; though Harpur's hopes of a time to come when all Australians might stand as God-created equals had not yet been wholly realised, they had gone much closer to realisation than the early nineteenth-century would have believed possible. Brennan's very disgust and disappointment at the Boer War excitement goes far to prove the liberal security of the atmosphere he had at least believed himself to inhabit.

As I have said, two other men who wrote at the same time as Brennan—O'Dowd and Lawson—typify the other side of the problem of Australian poetry—the question of what aim Australia should have set before her, in her rise to nationhood; they typify, in fact, the objective poetic view which had always proved so much more immediately popular and understandable to Australia. They are much more in the line of development from Harpur than Brennan was; but neither of them is his equal as a writer. Lawson, of course, was primarily a short-story writer and balladist, though his verses were taken more seriously than those of Paterson, and his themes were often deeper. In such ballad-verses as 'Faces in the Street' he cried out against the growth of slums, the harsh life of the poor, unemployment and poverty contrasted with the growing wealth and security of the rich and of the country itself:

> ‘But ah! to dreader things than these our fair young city comes;
> For in its heart are growing thick the filthy dens and slums
> Where human forms shall rot away in sties for swine unmeet,
> And ghostly faces shall be seen unfit for any street—
> Rotting out, rotting out
> For the lack of air and meet—
> In dens of vice and horror that are hidden from the street.’

Meanwhile O’Dowd was preaching a fashionable intellectual radical rationalism, in stanzas which I shall not inflict upon you; and in his later and greatly-admired poem, ‘The Bush’, attempting to force a most unsuitable marriage between the most famous of Greek historical themes and personalities, and contemporary Australian themes and personalities. I confess that I find it difficult, if not impossible, to admire any of O’Dowd’s verse as such; this may perhaps be partly due to the fact that even for his own time O’Dowd’s poetic-conventions are fustian and outmoded, and today’s poetic-conventions are wholly opposed to his methods; but I think that few, if any, writers can ever have equaled his smashing disregard of the values and subtleties of language, and few can have indulged in more-painfully-meaningless abstractions and cloudier rhetoric. After all, language is the only tool of the writer; and those who willfully blunt and mishandle it deserve no quarter from their fellows. However, no matter what O’Dowd’s failings as a writer were, the fact is that in his time he was highly regarded, and that in his sonnet ‘Australia’, and in a few stanzas from ‘The Bush’, he made a considerable historical contribution to the understanding of his country.

But I think a much-greater contribution has been made, in a much less-pretentious way, by contemporary Mary Gilmore. Her output covers a much wider span of time, for her first book was published n 1910 and her latest in 1954; and it is uneven in quality, perhaps because it is so considerable in quantity. But without Mary Gilmore we should know little indeed of the country-life of her younger days, and we should lack some of the most limpid and sincerest lyrics ever written in this country.

Her themes are universal, covering as they do a wide range of the personal and immediate life of the individual; but perhaps the most characteristic of them is her memory of and regret for the old Australia that has gone down before the advance of white civilization. Herself a friend and intimate of the tribes of her childhood, she lived half-unknowing through that dreadful period of slaughter in which men whom she knew and whom society respected decimated the tribes by every means from poison and outright killing to forced suicide. Her elegies for them mingle with elegies for the rest of the creatures of her childhood. ‘The conquest of this country’, she writes, ‘embraced the slaughter not only of man, but of everything that was naturally prolific… This continent was furred and feathered to an extent unbelievable…the land was fat with life.’ In her book *The Wild Swan*, particularly, and in other

poems, she has a word for all these creatures; and hers is the only voice in Australian poetry that has been lifted up on their behalf by one who saw their passing.

Here is one poem, 'Three Swans Went By',

> Whither, ye wanderers in the heights your wings sill dare,
> Crying as though forgotten things mourned in your keenig?
> Our hearts are broken as we hear you go,
> So few in flight—so slow.
> Now, in the lonely verge, scarce can the ear ensnare
> The thin sad notes that downward fall; that leaning
> On the shouldering air seem but a breath
> Of sound haunted by death!
> Out of the land long swept away, from woods laid bare,
> Surely the wonder of our youth went with them there.

And from another poem, 'The Aboriginals',

> Who is this that cometh here,
> Bent and bowed and in the sere,
> Who is this whose ravaged frame
> Seems to speak of wrong and shame?
> Child of people we betrayed,
>
> Name him man, and yet a shade …
> Burned in the ash of the fires the conqueror lighted,
> Driven to drown in the swamp; but the wind their dirge;
> The hunted of the dogs; whom no man ever has righted;
> Their blood is black on our hands that nothing can purge.
>
> O the lost tribes!
> There came a ghost
> Where once there walked a host.
> O the lost tribes.

And the last verse of another poem, 'The Birds',

> They come no more. The cities have laid waste
> The land where once the hosted wings flocked home.
> The trees are felled—or ash. Seedtime of grass
> And blossoming of flower wake not again
> As harvest of the wild. And we? Are we
> More permanent than these that we displaced?
> The wilderness returns; the dust of time
> On Tyre and us alike heaps up; the thing
> Man slays, slays him. To us the desert creeps,
> And as it creeps, what debts, what debts it makes us pay!

But Mary Gilmore is not so narrow in her sympathies and sentimental in her outlook as to reject the possibilities of good in our invasion just because of what it has destroyed. All her life she has taken a passionate interest in events, and the wisdom in which her life is ending has come from long personal involvement in both private relationships and public

causes. In her work the objective tradition of Australian poetry, its direction towards the outer world, is justified; for however slight her individual poems, her whole achievement is large. Perhaps she is not a poet in the sense in which we call Shaw Neilson and Brennan poets; rather she is a great figure who has expressed much of herself in verse. She is a bridge between our day and that ferment of the nineties in which she herself took part, and she has herself become a tradition.

When the first world-war broke out, these were the chief figures in the literary scene—Lawson and the other balladists, O'Dowd, Mary Gilmore, and aside from them Chris Brennan, whose most-important book had appeared in 1913. From the War itself not much emerged, except a few clear bitter lyrics written by Leon Gellert, who was not again to equal this achievement. I shall quote you one of these, though you have probably heard it before: 'These Men'

> Men moving in a trench, in the clear noon,
> Whetting their steel within the crumbling earth;
> Men, moving in a trench 'neath a new moon
> That smiles with a slit mouth and has no mirth;
> Men moving in a trench in the grey morn,
> Lifting bodies on their clotted frames;
> Men with narrow mouths thin-carved in scorn
> That twist and fumble strangely at dead names.
>
> These men knew life—know death a little more,
> These men see paths and ends, and see
> Beyond some swinging open door
> Into eternity.

I quoted that because it seems to me to represent an interesting comment on Lawson's swashbuckling 'I tell you the Star of the South shall rise in the lurid clouds of War', and to mark another step along the road of consciousness, as the War itself did. And in fact after the War there appeared a curious split in Australian poetry, a kind of schizophrenia.

There appeared several new poets. The first of these, Frank Wilmot, who called himself 'Furnley Maurice' in his writings, had published a book before the war, but his more-important work began to appear in the 1920s. We may characterize his work as carrying on a tradition already laid down; the tradition of Australian minor-verse. His work is objective in its trend; there is nothing introspective about it; and it deals—allowance being made of the changes in external circumstances—with the same kind of subjects that Harpur, Kendall, Lawson, and O'Dowd had used; with social oppression, love of country and description of landscape, and aspirations for a better future. Much of his work is slight; he is often rather slipshod in his thought and in his use of words; but at

his best he is really moving. As he grew older his technique improved and he became a better poet.

I should like to read you a few extracts from a long poem published soon after the Great War, which he called 'To God: From the Warring Nations',

> We pray for pity, Lord, not justice; we
> Being but mortal, offer mortal tears,
> For justice would mean further cruelty,
> And we have had enough inhuman years.
> Guard our repute! We have grown gross and mean,
> Who hoped to tell the future something clean!
> We come debauched, hoping and hoping not,
> Drunken with blood, burdened with all distress,
> Craving for pity, Lord, who have forgot
> The name and manner of sweet gentleness.
> We being mortal, love may come again;
> Hold back severity—we are but men.
> Ah! pity, Lord! Can all indulgence find
> Hope in the devious, devil-ways to Peace,
> Of shamefaced, shuddering remnants of manking
> All murdering, none brave enough to cease?
> Redeem us by Thy hope, lest thy disgust
> Makes future empires violate out dust.

and a second extract:

> …God, let us forget
> That we accused of barbarous intent
> The foe that lies in death magnificent.
> How can we hate forever, having proved
> All men are bright and brave and somewhere loved?
> For every man has courage, all are peerless;
> Each man reigns in his region, sovereign, free;
> But we have broken blessed men and fearless,
> Each in his deep and separate agony.
> …Oh we have murdered hope and babes and things
> Wrought by inspired fingers joyously;
> Earth and her vines may shroud our murderings,
> But what shall kill immortal memory?

Perhaps his best work is contained in the loosely-linked sequence called *The Gully*, published in 1929, in which he describes a journey into the Dandenongs, which is a spiritual as well as physical journey, bringing him into touch with the Australian Nature—that Muse of the Evergreen Forest that Harpur had vowed himself to—and renewing his dedication to poetry.

Here are a few extracts:

> …The things I've seen:
> A baby bracken-spray
> That lifts a lump of clay

And stretched fearless fronds into the day;
The things I've heard
Have drenched imagination, still the tone
Of speech until it seems speech cannot burst
The tiger-bonds of the heart's deathless thirst
To draw the miracle from this dark stone
Or hold the music of a hidden bird.

…if some devoted wanderer could devise
This passage through the scented underwood,
May not man's thoughtful habit, dumb yet wise,
Bring back a careless people to its good?

And a splendid lyric,

There breaks upon my sight
A low magnificent light
Green as the core that in a green fire burns;
Each leaf is a green lamp, glowing,
Swung to illume my going
Down the moist colonnades of mouldering ferns.

Here is a spirit deep,
Stirring in lonely sleep,
The windswept hills have heard my nameless fear;
Till by great love oppressed
I stilled my heart's unrest,
And spoke my love, and speech has brought its tear.

There is a spirit bound
Within this holy ground;
A chrysalis cares not what freedom brings,
But, without love or sight,
Breaks its way into light,
Not knowing it will some day move with wings.

I am quoting rather a lot from Maurice, simply because he is, as I said, so clearly in the Australian poetic-tradition that he makes an excellent illustration of it. Here is another significant poem from *The Gully*, which shows us a good deal of the feeling of Australian writers at that time that they were building towards some kind of culmination, laying foundations for something that had not yet appeared, in Australian literature.

If I could take your mountains in my heart
And tell the wonder in another land,
As to some mariner mumbling o'er a chart
Strangers would hearken and not understand.
For you, without a poet or a past,
Await establishment; the years seem long
While we by hope and search, by feast and fast,
Prepare the passage for our king of song.
He will not suddenly burst into our day,
He will not come till we have cut the way;
Tis more than one man's life to strike the reef,

> To delve the precious ore, crush out the gold,
> Hammer the metal into delicate leaf,
> Or link by precious link forge chains that hold
> The wandering passions of men in one vast fold.

I think this poem shows clearly what the general attitude of Australians towards their literature was in those days. I myself remember being told that Australia had produced nothing worth any attention from serious students of literature; and Furnley Maurice's humility, at a time when both Chris Brennan and Shaw Neilson were producing work that I do not hesitate to call immortal, shows that Australian writers themselves were rather in accord with this view. Probably much of it came from England originally; English critics had taken up the strange standpoint that only Gordon had produced any valuable work in Australia, and indeed little enough of what was valuable had seen the light of day in England at all. Brennan's books were published in Australia in very small editions, and only an occasional ill-chosen anthology found its way overseas to represent Australian work. In fact, it has not been until very recently that Australian literature has attracted any attention overseas except hostile attention and since we have, I think it is true to say, always suffered from a serious feeling of inferiority to practically every other country, but particularly to Great Britain, it has taken nearly as long for us to appreciate our own writers.

I said that after the Great War a curious divergence appeared in Australian poetry. On the one hand Furnley Maurice continues the Australian tradition—the search for reconciliation with the landscape itself, the protest against the ills of society and the semi-political tradition of preaching and prophecy in the cause of individual freedom. But on the other hand a few quite-new voices began to be heard; they are quite outside the tradition, as much outside it as Brennan was, if for different reasons. Two of them are the voices of pure singers, unconcerned with either prophecy or landscape-painting—the voices of Hugh McCrae and Shaw Neilson. The other is the voice of a prophet and preacher par excellence—a harsh and theoretical voice, but a strong and individual one, the voice of William Baylegridge.

Now, although in McCrae and Neilson it is no longer possible to trace more than the most-tenuous connection with what I have called the 'Australian tradition', either in their overt subject-matter or in their apparent motivations for producing verse, their appearance in our literary history, like that of Brennan, is of the greatest importance. They mark, not only a certain kind of maturity in us, but a certain kind of freedom as well; you might say, the freedom and self-confidence of youth. They contrast very strangely with Maurice's earnest search for reassurance in a landscape seen only on holidays from his everyday city-tasks, and in a future which he clearly does not quite believe in. The difference is this—

Maurice wrote *poems*, Neilson and McCrae, like Brennan, *are* poets; they need no reassurance that what they write is worth writing because it helps to prepare the way for some future 'king of song'. They simply sing. And their voices are the voices of spring. Probably in another twenty-years' time, the period in which these two wrote their songs will be regarded as another Australian Golden age; even though it leads up to and includes the Great Depression, it was still possible for these men to be so detached from the somber happenings in the outside world that their songs sound to us almost childlike in their exuberance, in McCrae's case, or in Neilson's case, in their gentle purity.

Of course, McCrae was influenced by—formed in fact a large part of—the Lindsay group, which went back to Greek mythology for its inspiration and returned dragging with it the luckless and rather-unconvincing fauns, nymphs, satyrs and Venuses with which they tried to make a new Australian Renaissance. But McCrae seems to have taken from them as much as suited himself; if he had not himself been the fantastic, exuberant and world-forgetful singer that he is, he might have rejected their gods and goddesses as factitious; but all was grist to his mill.

Here is one typical poem, which I think sums up from the point-of-view of our survey what McCrae means in Australian poetry:

> Here will I lie
> Under the sky,
> Green trees above me,
> All birds to love me.
> Nature and I.
>
> Wish me good-den,
> and leave me then…
> This sweet forest wind
> is more to my mind
> Than cities ore men.
>
> And, in the morn,
> I will see born
> That doe's dappled young
> Whose father was sung
> To death by the horn.
>
> Here I will lie
> Under the sky,
> Green trees above me…
> Nature and I.

But of the nature of which he sings, McCrae is quite unobservant; a bird is a bird to him, and trees are simply green; their species, their differences, their uses and even the details of their appearance are left in a poetic haze, except in a few of the later poems, which tend to be more

localized. McCrae is a poet of the senses, of physical love, of physical well-being; his almost medieval robustness attracts him towards the more-robust periods and the more-decorative phases of European history and art. He springs on the Australian scene in the book Satyrs and Sunlight, published in 1909, full-blooded and apparently full-grown; he was to publish only two or three more books, the most important of which is *Columbine* which appeared in 1920, and in them, though his singing-note changes a little, he shows practically no development of thought or technique, in the sense in which FitzGerald for instance, was to develop. McCrae is often condemned for his failure to sing the songs and take up the themes of modern civilisation. This, of course, is always ridiculous; what a poet has to say, that he says, or at least he does his best to do so; and about modern civilisation McCrae simply has nothing to say. We would do better to accept the pleasured that his music and his sensuously-lovely verse can often give us; and I think we might well be proud at the same time, that our environment has found room and nourishment for McCrae and Neilson, these two lovely and careless lyric-voices. They are a mark of our achievement, precisely in so far as they have nothing, overtly, to do with it; just as the beauty of the flower has nothing intrinsically to do with the activities of the roots of the plant.

That's all very well, you may be saying, but what have these two to do with the thesis that poetry springs from the poet's non-reconciliation with the world? Surely in McCrae at least that motive is not recognizable—surely here we have a poetry of pure joy in the world, without a hint of inner trouble or rebellion? And it is quite true that to McCrae, the creation of art is a joyful thing, a matter of delight. But I don't think that invalidates the idea at all. McCrae's art, in fact, is not merely a rearrangement of events; it is practically a rejection of events; he refuses the themes of everyday-life and returns to the Greek mythologies, or to the medieval figures of legend, or if he is writing about the present-day he takes refuge in the physical world of lovers—lovers idealised out of all resemblance to ordinary people. It is not in the world that McCrae rejoices, it is in the creations of his own fancy. The world, you will remember, is explicitly rejected in the poem we read—'This sweet forest wind is more to my mind than the cities or men'; and this attitude, in effect, he maintains throughout all his poems. Nothing is allowed into his poetic-world that might chill his fantasies with a breath of what we are accustomed to call 'harsh reality'. No, McCrae is not an exception to our rule; rather, he is its most-outstanding example in Australian literature.

Shaw Neilson is a simpler and less-boisterous singer than McCrae, but his poetic world has some slight resemblance to McCrae's, in that neither has much to do with events, and both are unclouded by any kind of patriotic fervor or straining towards 'understanding Australia'. But where McCrae is hearty, Neilson is wistful; natural beauty touches him nearly,

because it seems to him to have some kind of meaning; children and women he loves because they seem to share in that beauty and pathos of the vanishing, that meaning which is never quite grasped, that sense of 'the tears of things' that haunts his verse. Like Lawson, he was brought up in the country, on a poverty-stricken farm; but what he remembers of that life is wholly different from what Lawson remembered. Lawson recalled the grinding tasks, the heat, the discomfort; yet he loved the Bush, as a kind of abstract entity—'the mother-Bush that nursed you', and he liked to remember the old days before 'the curse of the town and its railroad' had come; he thought sentimentally of the days before 'the girl, and the chum, and the old home were gone', 'of the hazy old days on Eurunderee Creek.' Lawson, in fact, turned the Bush into a sentimental ballad; but Neilson transfigured it into poetry, as in the song called 'The Poor, Poor Country'—

> Oh 'twas a poor country, in Autumn it was bare,
> The only green was the cutting grass and the sheep found little there,
> Oh, the thin wheat and the brown oats were never two foot high;
> But down in the poor country no pauper was I.
>
> My wealth it was the glow that lives forever in the young,
> 'Twas on the brown water, in the green leaves it hung;
> The blue cranes fed their young all day—how far in a tall tree!
> And the poor, poor country made no pauper of me.
>
> I waded out to the swan's nest—at night I heard them sing;
> I stood amazed at the Pelican, and crowned him for a king;
> I saw the black duck in the reeds, and the spoonbill on the sky,
> And in that poor country no pauper was I.
>
> The mountain ducks down in the dark made many a hollow sound,
> I saw in sleep the Bunyip creep from the waters underground.
> I found the plovers' island home and they fought right valiantly.
> Poor was the country, but it made no pauper of me.
>
> My riches all went into dreams that never yet came home,
> They touched upon the wild cherries and the slabs of honeycomb,
> They were not of the desolate brood that men can sell or buy,
> Down in that poor country no pauper was I.

But Neilson did not, as McCrae had done, turn away from 'men and cities'. Fundamentally, it is McCrae's sophistication, his knowledge of evil, that makes him reject the world of man in favour of the world of Hugh McCrae. Neilson, one feels, though he saw much of evil and felt pity and indignation, never attained the sophistication that elevates evil into a principle and condemns a world because of it. He took the world as he found it, and cried out against evil, as he praised beauty, as a child might do. I think that this is perhaps the secret of the curious charm that Neilson exercises over some of us; in his presences we need no defence, no argument; we are free to slip back into the simple acceptance of the

child-world, before which shines the inexhaustible depth of nature, concealing always the marvel, the meaning, that just escapes our grasp. And this is too, no doubt, the reason why some people simply cannot like Neilson's work; usually they are the people for whom 'life is real, life is earnest', and poetry is a means to an end. Whereas for Neilson, and perhaps for nearly all artists, poetry is an end in itself.

How that saying would have jarred on William Baylebridge! His is the third name on our list—the name of Australia's most-dedicated, and most-neglected, prophet. He stems from our national tradition in quite a new, and rather an alarming direction. Here O'Dowd dissipated his energies between rationalism, spiritualism, radicalism, and study of the classics, Baylebridge felt his high mission was to work out a political philosophy for Australia, and by becoming her leading poet, prophet and visionary, to guide her into that philosophy, and keep her feet on the right track.

He had published a small book of verse, overseas before the War, and another called *Selected Poems* in Brisbane in 1919. Another, a sonnet-sequence called *A Wreath*, was also privately-published soon after the War, and in it his peculiar style is first unmistakably to be seen. It was a kind of distillation of the Elizabethans and the seventeenth-century poets, a stiff rhetorical embroidered style which can nevertheless rise to great heights of expression. But it was after this—in a book called *Life's Testament*, later to be, as was most of his earlier work, severely and not-always-judiciously revised that he began his lifetime-project. This culminated in 1939 when he issued his large volume, *This Vital Flesh*, which embodied in verse and gnomic prose his philosophy and his programme for Australia.

I am not going to try to outline that philosophy here. It was influenced by Bergson and by Nietzsche, and it led him to the conclusion that what was lacking in the modern mind was faith. He attempted to set up a kind of rather-muddled conception of the Life-Force as an ultimate; man is to have faith in the purpose of the Life-Force and to attempt by all means, as far as he can understand them, to further his aims. The dangers in this kind of philosophy are obvious; it allows for any kind of interpretation of the aims of the Life-Force, it involves the setting-up of one or other interpretation as the correct one, and once that interpretation has been set up it is clear that its opponents can be regarded as opponents of the Life-Force itself and swept out of the way regardless of any individual rights, or any individual suffering. In fact, Baylebridge advocated, among other things, a system of eugenics, a cultivation of certain virtues which he regarded as essential instruments of the Life-Force, and a form of nationalism which does not differ materially from any of the totalitarianisms which have flourished in our time.

His writings have been almost-wholly disregarded, luckily; but this is not to say that his poetry as such does not deserve our study. Often it does; for though he put his poetic personality in second place to his prophetic and philosophic aims, yet there was much of the poet in him. If he had been content simply to live, to suffer, and to express his experience in verse, as most poets do, I think he would have been perhaps our foremost writer. But in him that element of preaching and political fervor which has always haunted the Australian poetic-tradition grew till it overbalanced the poetry. He took, in fact, exactly the opposite path from McCrae and Neilson, and from the point of view of the critic of poetry it was his downfall.

It would not be really fair to quote any of his poems here. Whatever I might choose, I should probably rather misrepresent him; for like Brennan, he planned his books as wholes, and it is hard to understand or appreciate any poem taken by itself, except for a few of the sonnets from *Love Redeemed*, which hardly suit the purpose of these lectures, and one or two poems in the volume *This Vital Flesh*. But in his smaller, less-ambitious late volume, *Sextains*, which is made up of brief detached six-line poems, and which seems to have escaped him, as it were, in spite of himself, he does offer a more-human and more-poetic personality to the reader. The brief poems are, as it were, asides, written not by the prophet and visionary he liked to appear as, but by the almost-strangled yet still-living poet within. The book, once again, should be read as a whole, when the autobiographical thread that connects the verses becomes apparent; and then, I think, the really-important thing about Baylebridge emerges—his final almost-savage disappointment with the human-race, which had neglected his work and, as he thought, shown personal spite against him, and his acknowledgement, almost against his own will, of his own failure; a personal failure, a failure of himself. Seen thus, he becomes a much-less-unattractive figure; and in case I have left you with too dark a picture of him in the brief time I have given to his work, I shall read you one or two of these sad and terrible, yet at times splendid verses.

This Sextain is called ‘The Master-Foe’:

> This let who hate me know, and much admire—
> They need not toil to mock me, overthrown:
> Long have I led, who ‘gainst myself conspire,
> And for my wreck suffice I can alone.
> Of all that hate me, no thrust as my own
> Is half so dire.

In the next sextain I shall read he is reflecting, after a bitter outburst against the spite of humanity, that he too is part of mankind and shares its sorrows and frustrations:

> Must I then hate who hates me? Bare that breast;

> There, too, the old martyr braves the ancient ills—
> The passionate hope turned to the piteous jest;
> The grief, the suffering, that no juggling stills;
> Shall I, his brother in the thing that kills,
> Not pass the rest?

and here is the last sextain, perhaps the most-tragic and honest verse he ever wrote,

> Too much upon the world my courses wait;
> Too long have I forgone self-loyalty;
> And desparate now, one good I ask of fate—
> Since, by the grace that is, this hard decress
> Transcends at least the next, that late it be
> And not too late.

With these four poets—Furnley Maurice who carried on the tradition of Australian verse which Harpur had established and Kendall, the balladist and O'Dowd had continued; McCrae and Neilson who had simply disregarded it and made their own poetic-worlds; and Baylebridge, who had developed one element in it in what I have called a most-alarming direction, but—so far at least—without achieving success or popularity—we reach the end of the nineteen-thirties; the end of that between-wars period in which Australia had changed so much. Except for memories of the Great War—from which, after all, Australia emerged without much physical loss in comparison with that of other countries beside which she had fought, the twenties were a prosperous and careless period; their end in the great depression was a shock from which we have not yet recovered. It is difficult to imagine another McCrae emerging from our history since 1929. His is the voice of that Austral Pan the Lindsay group hoped to find, the voice of careless sensual youth in a young country. The problems of his time affected him as little as they affected Neilson. But Furnley Maurice, the radical, felt and knew them, and even thought about them, though his poetry is not that of a very-complex mind. His meditation and his protest are provoked by the immediate world with its injustices and uncertainties, he was not a philosopher, and if he theorized at all it was along paths already well-worn. But Baylebridge is a new phenomenon in Australian literature—the prophet who seeks for material power. O'Dowd's sermons had had no such comprehensive intention; he had not dreamed of laying down for Australia a whole philosophic-system and a set of political slogans. Baylebridge is an alarming phenomenon not just because of his nationalist leanings, but because he was, in spite of his muddled thinking, really a modern man; he had experienced, it is clear, a good deal of the dilemma that confronts the world today, of the choice between a faith in which many have lost all confidence, and a reason which seems to be plunging us into the abyss. His choice of a way out rested ultimately on the appeal to force rather than to faith, in so far as his philosophy was to

be imposed on men, if it did not convince them, and in so far as it was arbitrary in its choice of paths and actions.

Yet Baylebridge had at least experiences and faced that dilemma, and for this reason, he is important in our literature. As I said, he is an example of modern man, in a way in which we cannot say that McCrae, Neilson, or even Furnley Maurice is modern. He shows us how the problems of the world were now beginning to become Australia's problems. Austral Pan is beginning to retreat before atomic physics; and the implications of this tremendous change in ourselves will begin to become more obvious in Australian poetry from the end of the thirties, onward.

Lecture III: Contemporary Period

With the end of the nineteen-thirties period, and the outbreak of war, began perhaps the most-overwhelming period of change in Australian history. At the beginning of that period, Australia, in spite of the political independence she had gained, still stood in the shelter of British power and the corresponding security that went with it, and she had little voice in world-affairs and little interest in them. The fifteen years since the outbreak of war have seen a complete alteration in her position—so fundamental a change, perhaps, that our mental attitude has not yet caught up with its full meaning and implications. But the war-years, with their sudden approach of a danger of war within our own country—saw a quite-remarkable upsurge of poetry—most of it minor—and of interest in Australian literature, fostered of course by the fact that the flood of overseas books into the country had been cut off, and also by the interest of the American forces in things Australian, which made for considerable addition to the boom in Australian publishing.

When war broke out, the two most-interesting and influential of Australian younger-poets were Kenneth Slessor and R.D. FitzGerald. As it happened, Slessor, whose output was not large, had almost come to the end of his brief writing-period by that time, but FitzGerald continued to write, and his influence over the Australian literary-scene has remained considerable until the present day.

Both Slessor and FitzGerald were fare more involved with present-day problems than any of their elders, except perhaps Baylebridge, had been. Slessor's is a spiritual involvement; the modern scene drives him increasingly to pessimism and despair. He had begun, under the influence of McCrae and Norman Lindsay, with an almost-rollicking note of rich sensuous enjoyment of life; like McCrae's, his early poems are apt to deal with irruptions into ordinary life of the more-exuberant Greek Divinities; Mercury tumbles the maids in a country-inn; Venus visits Norman Lindsay at Springwood.

These poems reveal a splendid enjoyment of the values of words; Slessor plays with their riches as no one else has done here, or has done since, and his appreciation of their value and his skill in handling them lend a force and beauty to his poems that of their own internal-order they might otherwise lack.

Yet the note of disillusion, of world-weariness, soon shows itself. Slessor's is essentially a poetry of the city, in spite of his occasional fine poems with country-settings; it is the poetry of modern sensual man, and the disillusion that gradually sours and sharpens its beauty is not that of the thinker or even, essentially, of the poet, but rather of the man bound down by time and responsibility. His is the frustration of modern-man with a job in the city, whose glimpses of beauty and fulfilment are caught through the bars of a never-ending treadmill.

Here is an early poem in which Slessor's fundamental dichotomy begins to show itself—a dichotomy between the sensuous poet and the modern-man who knows too much for his own comfort—the man who sees through his own fantasies and sees himself against the black background of a universe from which faith has receded:

Stars

'These are the floating berries of the night,
They drop their harvest in dark alleys down,
Softly far down on the groves of Venus, or on a little town
Forgotten at the world's edge—and O, their light
Unlocks all closed things, eyes and mouths, and drifts
Quietly over kisses in a golden rain,
Drowning their flight, till suddenly the Cyprian lifts
Her small, whit face to the moon, then hides again.

'They are the warm candles of beauty, hung in blessing on high,
Poised like bright comrades on boughs of night above:
They are the link-boys of Queen Venus, running out of the sky,
Spilling their friendly radiance on all her ways of love.

'Should the girl's eyes be lit with swimming fire,
O do not kiss it away, it is a star, a star!'
So cried the passionate poet to his great, romantic guitar.

But I was beating off the stars, gazing, not rhyming.
I saw the bottomless black cups of space
Between their clusters, and the planets climbing
Dizzily in sick airs, and desired to hide my face.

But I could not escape those tunnels of nothingness,
The cracks in the spinning Cross, nor hold my brain
From rushing forever down that terrible lane,
Infinity's trapdoor, eternal and merciless.

I think that this poem, though Slessor wrote it before 1926, was almost a perfect augury of his later development, and sums up for us his meaning in the larger development of Australian poetry. Unlike his mentor, McCrae, he cannot prevent the terrors and preoccupations of modern life and thought from entering his poetic-world; and in the end they prove, I think, too great for him to wrestle with and force him into silence. He was yet to write his most-important poem—'Five Visions of Captain Cook', a much-admired poem which gave rise to a number of imitations; the sonnet-sequence *Out of Time*, a lament for the flux that carries us endlessly past our best moments; and 'Five Bells', his elegy for a friend.

The terrible impact of this poem comes, I think, from the essential emptiness behind the splendid veil of words. It is the same emptiness that haunts Slessor's poetry everywhere—the unanswering silence of the universe to man who has lost his faith, the silence of the 'bottomless black cups of space' between the stars. I think that Slessor's most-characteristic later-poem is this one, in which he bitterly compares his own fate, and the fate of man, to that of Gulliver caught by Lilliputians:

> I'll kick your walls to bits, I'll die scratching a tunnel,
> If you'll give me a wall, if you'll give me simple stone,
> If you'll do me the honour of a dungeon—
> Anything but this tyranny of sinews.
> Lashed with a hundred ropes of nerve and bone
> I lie, poor helpless Gulliver,
> In a twopenny dock for the want of a penny,
> Tied up with stuff too cheap, and strings too many,
> One chain is usually sufficient for a cur.
>
> Hair over hair, I pick my cables loose,
> But still the ridiculous manacles confine me.
> I snap them, swollen with sobbing. What's the use?
> One hair I break, ten thousand hairs entwine me.
> Love, hunger, drunkenness, neuralgia, debt,
> Cold weather, hot weather, sleep and age—
>
> If I could only unloose their spongy fingers,
> I'd have a chance yet, slip through the cage.
> But who ever heard of a cage of hairs?
> You can't scrape tunnels in a net.
>
> If you'd give me a chain, if you'd give me honest iron,
> If you'd graciously give me a turnkey,
> I could break my teeth on a chain, I could bit through metal,
> But what can you do with hairs?
> For God's sake, call the hangman.

It is clear that Slessor embodies in himself that problem which Baylebridge set himself to solve—the problem of modern-man. Baylebridge puts the matter rather ponderously, but we may express his

thought thus. In the course of his arrival at the present point in his mental and spiritual history, man has somehow lost or been stripped of one belief after another—of what Baylebridge calls man's 'fundamental facts', and, Baylebridge says, 'in this precarious liberation he has found less contentment than chaos.' I think we may take Slessor as typifying the appearance in Australian literature of this modern nakedness to the impact of chaos; the situation expressed overseas by Eliot's early poetry in particular.

This is, of course, the fundamental situation of modern-man, and after Slessor's expression of it in Australian terms it becomes, as it had to become, the chief preoccupation, whether overtly or not, of most Australian poetry which aspires to be considered major.

The poetry of R.D. FitzGerald, as I have said, has been greatly admired and has had much influence on the general trend of Australian poetry, particularly since the appearance of his long poem, 'Essay on Memory', in 1937. And since FitzGerald is a major poet, we would expect his work, too, to have felt the impact of that problem which we have taken Slessor as typifying: the nakedness of modern-man to a universe from which faith has been withdrawn, and the question, which Baylebridge tried to solve, of providing, or finding, some new faith which may enable life to be carried on.

I shall try to the best of my ability to summarise FitzGerald's long-poem, or series of poems, Copernicus, in which his attitude to this whole question is expressed and made manifest.

The first poem in the series if about the primal struggle of earth and the elements expressed in the contours of the country:

> \- where with locked horns the hills engage
> and primal warfares wage.
> Conflict of shaggy rams of stone,
> Savage great ridges, jarring, test
> strength upon strength, crest reared at crest,
> spur jolting spur's flint forehead-bone;
> and these gaunt profiles are upthrown
> Knitted and twined against the mark
> where olden seethings lurk.

and he likens still conflict to some struggle of the gods for the earth and the souls of men, at the dawn of time. Yet the human-traveller crossing the hills is himself engaged in this primal struggle.

> Go your way: why should you look or heed
> Who inherit also the strife? What breath
> Drawn by mane but is aimed at death?—
> Arrows unequal to the need.
> In your own contest, this, good speed!
> Behind you, the hooves charge, skulls break:
> Old cries shudder and wake.

This first poem sets the scene—the play is that of man in battle with the elements for his own bare subsistence and also, beyond this, for his own meaning and his faith in life. The second poem, significantly, is about chance and chaos. 'Chaos, not Justice, lets the balance nod this side and that in one extended hand'; and though in a thousand tosses of a coin that balance levels and equals out, Chaos is none the less present in the instances themselves. FitzGerald sees the universe, as the statistician or, nowadays, the atomic-physicist sees it, not as governed by order, but by 'an infinite conflict of ungoverned forces.'

> 'Such is the unstable balance of what thought
> has told us is our world, whether indeed
> thought lie or no. but what of our poor tribe?—
> our substance shadows, shadows dreams, dreams nought…
> What can we hope to gain with our best toil?
> with life itself? What wring from this bleak place?
> We are despoiled and spoilers, but what is the spoil?'

The scene changes; we are in Fiji, where FitzGerald himself had been for some time, among a dark happy people 'pressed against a new meaning, a strange mode unparalleled in the old path they forsake'—the impact of white-civilisation. He sees them as faces with a new road which must be travelled, if they are not to 'go decked in paper garlands down to death'. They are, of course, an epitome of mankind itself, which must adjust itself to harsh outer-circumstances if it is to survive; and in the fourth poem, FitzGerald meditates on the infancy of man, and the awakening in him of the sense of wonder and mystery, a horizon, as it were, beyond the immediate pressure of needs; a sense of mystery which recurs in modern man as a kind of atavism. The fifth poem in the series is concerned with the mystery of sexual-love, which unites man with depths and tides beyond his own, and carries on some half-sensed wider purpose:

> Wherefore in the night is wrought
> the night's long struggle towards thought,
> to bring out of the dark some worth—

and rather like Baylebridge, FitzGerald sees mankind as carrying on this struggle, the daring and the dream and the wonder of life battling onward.

> 'It is but vision than can teach
> clay to be hands and hands to reach
> past sense and aught that sense may hold,
> striving and seeking.'

The sixth poem in the series, 'The cock that crowed this dawn up', is a poem I do not want to spoil by summarising or quoting from it; it is (what FitzGerald does not often achieve) a poem unquotable because it is

a perfectly-integrated whole. Its theme, however, is a further advance of the argument—that the toil of attaining thought and proclaiming it is worth while for its own sake; that the work of carrying on the world is its own justification. And the series ends with a triumphant poem celebrating this struggle as timeless and man as unconquerable, wielder of FitzGerald's symbol both of wonder and the urge towards the unattainable—'the moon's curved sword'.

The same them is carried on and elaborated in the later 'Essay on Memory', of which I shall quote only the final lines:

> Whatever the task, it lies in front: we must
> build upward though we guess not what skies,
> and though the eruptive Babels that we thrust
> vital in air will fritter back to dust;
> else we betray the lamp behind our eyes,
> the quickening in our veins, both held in trust
> since long before the scumming of the germ
> upon first seas. We will serve out our term:
> not yeat the impetus flags whose course began
> when at the blank mouth of our stinking lair
> we saw night's infinite curtain shake with grey,
> and so went forth determined to be Man,
> standing at last erect, and watched new day
> wrap back the dark and strip the valley bare.
>
> So, should our best work fail us, walls we planned
> Stifle in years blown over fine like sand,
> Or life itself reach gulfs and lorn extremes—
> Even some crag of ending—where bled dreams
> Kite in the wind weightless and the past
> Unclaws our very world, lets go at last,
> But still remains, being Memory, one live link
> Of gone with all-to-come, and from the brink
> Peers out beyond; then, launched above that steep,
> Venture shall cant bold wings and with their sweep
> Splinter such clogging silence as they met
> In older abyss where time slept stirless yet.

FitzGerald's answer to the question first posed by Slessor for the Australian poet is, then, an uncompromising and masculine assertion that mankind's effort and achievement are in themselves enough to justify his further effort and achievement. It is, in fact, the very reverse of Slessor's despair and suffering; it is the other side of the same coin, a Yes to Slessor's No. It's resemblance to Baylebridge's solution of the problem is obvious, for it is, in effect, a trust in the life-force which lies behind FitzGerald's affirmation; and such a solution, of course, has its dangers, which I have glanced at when discussing Baylebridge, and which FitzGerald, though warier and wiser than Baylebridge, often seems likely to succumb to. A few passages sound strangely in our ears, and make us remember Baylebridge's ruthless disregard of the individual and

glorification of the impersonal achievement of wider movements; for instance, these verses from the eighth poem in *Moonlight Acre*: -

> Fell the tree to pluck a leaf
> Mow with swords a mangled sheaf:
> Life itself were cheaply spent
> For the frail accomplishment.
> Dreams are precious; earth is fair –
> Throw them in the hollow air;
> Count as dirt the race of men—fungus, trampled, thrives again.

I think it is true to say that FitzGerald's basic attitude has not changed over the years since he wrote 'Essay on Memory'; he remains the champion of action, of objective achievement, of the specifically-masculine virtues, and of an affirmative attitude to life. His objectivity is well in the Australian tradition of poetry, and indeed may be said to be its culmination. Yet I think that his uncompromising solution of the modern problem, as it were, by denial, not of its existence, but of its importance, is not a satisfactory way out of our difficulties. It involves the ignoring of too many aspects of modern thought and feeling, it makes for too shallow an outlook on questions of ethics which have assumed tremendous importance for us since the arrival of the nuclear bomb, and it is too one-sided a view of the question to answer the deeper doubts of today.

Whatever one's private opinion may be of FitzGerald's success as a thinker, there is no doubt that, as I say, he has achieved very considerable influence among today's writers; and as the doyen of the Bulletin's contributors his influence has been widely propagated.

After Douglas Stewart took over the Red Page of the Bulletin a few years before the war, an increasing flood of minor poets began to appear and achieve print. Since the Bulletin is the only verse-publishing periodical of importance to cover the span of years between 1935 and 1955, it is quite instructive to glance through its files and see this extraordinary increase in verification. In the years up to 1940 verse is far-between in its pages, and little of interest is published except by names already well-known, such as Furnley Maurice, or by Stewart himself and a few early adherents such as Eve Langley. With the outbreak of war the spate begins and increases, to reach its height about 1944 to 1945; it still continues, but some of the energy and youthful excitement has been lost. Throughout these years Stewart and others had been publishing regular criticism and encouragement of Australia's younger-writers, to an extent not equaled by smaller magazines limited either by cost of paper and printing, or by an editorial policy of rather-different scope to the Bulletin's. It is clear then that the Bulletin's influence, and hence the influence of its more-outstanding contributors, has been much wider than any other, and that young writers who wanted recognition and payment for their work have tended to turn to the Bulletin as mentor and critic as

well as mere channel for publication. The influence of FitzGerald and Stewart is clear, for instance, in the appearance of a number of narrative-poems, such as John Blight's 'Pyramid', Francis Webb's 'A Drum for Ben Boyd' and 'Leichardt Theatre', Rosemary Dobson's 'The Ship of Ice' and a number of others, and in the dramatic and objective trend easily traceable in Angus & Robertson's anthologies of Australian poetry since their inception in 1941.

The influence of the Bulletin criticism and example has been very much in the Australian tradition. Emphasis on landscape, descriptive-verse about country or city-life, drama and narrative and a revival of the ballad, were the chief features of its most-important period, and though Australian writing as a whole now tends away from these directions, the Bulletin's policy remains much as before.

Because their appearance was significant of the times, it seems right to mention here a number of other smaller periodicals, almost all of them non-commercial and therefore brief in life and sporadic in their issue, which came into being during the Australian publishing-boom of the nineteen-forties—Flexmore Hudson's magazine *Poetry*, chiefly devoted to the work of the Jindyworobak school of minor writers, Cecily Crozier's *A Comment*, much more sophisticated and Europeanised in its outlook, *Meanjin Papers*, since granted Commonwealth subsidy and supported by the Melbourne University Press as the magazine *Meanjin*, and Max Harris' journal *Angry Penguins*, influenced by the Apocalyptic school of writers in England and by European surrealism. All of them were useful in presenting some angle of view to Australian writers, though not much important work was published at that time. Perhaps periodical-publications are not good for poets. They tend to encourage the writing of shorter pieces suitable for this kind of presentation, and by definition they also encourage the writing of poetry that fits in with their often rather-narrow editorial-policy.

Perhaps this was one reason for the remarkable number o short-poems written over the war and post-war years, for their curious evenness of quality and for the number of young writers who appeared, many of them to cease writing within a few years. Nevertheless, the judgement has been made—and I think it is on the whole a true one—that over the nineteen-forties Australian poetry came of age. No Australian poet would now echo Maurice's pious hopes that a great writer might emerge from the basis we are now laying, and this is not only because we now recognize the nature of the achievement of Brennan, Neilson, McCrae and others, but because that hope of Maurice's arose ultimately from a feeling that the country, as such, lacked an authentic voice in our literature. The same feeling led the Jindyworobak school in the nineteen-thirties to extremes such as attempting to write whole poems in aboriginal dialect, or using aboriginal mythological-figures (stripped, of course, of their background

and meaning by their translation into terms of white-civilisation). The uprush of feeling for the country that took place during the years of war when Australia was directly threatened found its channel in these various periodicals, especially the *Bulletin*, in verse which, though in itself it was seldom highly-important or memorable, added up altogether to a complete statement; and this perhaps was the chief achievement of those ten years.

However, although the war-years to some extent distracted attention from deeper problems, by emphasizing action and unity, and by the hope which many people held of the achievement of some vaguely thought-of New Order at the close of hostilities, the problem of faith and reason which Baylebridge had grappled with still remained.

It is always difficult to comment with any real cogency on the work of one's contemporaries, partly because their contribution is not yet complete and more importantly, of course, because one is oneself involved in the same problems that they are facing, and one has one's own attitude towards them. To be an impartial critic of contemporary writers, in fact, one ought not oneself to be contemporary with them; which being an impossibility, it is always wise to accept such criticism with considerably more than a grain of salt. If you will remember this and accord me no more than a grain of salt. If you will remember this and accord me no more than a minimum of agreement, I shall try to trace the threads that we have followed from the nineteenth century, through the thought of a few of today's younger-poets.

Perhaps they appear most clearly in the work of James McAuley; and since he has published enough for us to trace a certain development in his thought, he forms a convenient starting-point for my examination.

Technically McAuley is a highly-accomplished poet. The earliest pomes in his book, *Under Aldebaran*, show a high degree of sensitivity to words and cadences and their poetic-relationships, and also a high degree of sophistication in thought. This means that McAuley confronted comparatively early I his development as a poet, the problem of that modern dichotomy between faith and reason to which I have pointed as the chief emotional, and hence the chief poetic, preoccupation of our time. His solution of the problem (I do not sue the word 'solution' as meaning anything final or acceptable to everyone, but as meaning a personal solution, a personal adherence to some principle or dogma)—McAuley's solution of the problem, then, began as an impassioned choice of beauty and order, of discipline in all things, as against the chaos of the modern-world which had defeated Slessor, and which FitzGerald had dismissed as merely the old opponent of the human-races' climb upwards. I should like to glance at a few quotations which show the development of this aspect of McAuley's thought.

First of all, it is worth remarking that McAuley was not unaffected by the upsurge of feeling for Australia, her history and landscape, that I have pointed to as the chief poetic-development of the 'forties. His response, however, was rather a critical response than a response of enthusiasm, in accordance with the temper of his mind; and his identification of himself with Australia and her people has led him rather in the direction of satire and debunking of the popular self-glorification that some poets were then indulging in, than towards celebration of the national virtues.

Here, then, is an extract from an early poem, 'Envoi', in which the uneasiness of his feeling is made clear:

> 'There the blue-green gums are a fringe of remote disorder
> And the brown sheep poke at my dreams along the hillside;
> And there in the soil, in the season, in the shifting airs
> Comes the faint sterility that disheartens and derides.
>
> Where once was a sea is now a salty sunken desert,
> A futile heart with a fair periphery;
> The people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them;
> The men are independent, but you could not call them free.
>
> And I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body,
> I know its contractions, waste and sprawling indolence;
> They are in me and its triumphs are my own,
> Hard-won in the thin and bitter years without pretence.
>
> Beauty is order and good chance in the artesian heart
> And does not wholly fail, though we impede;
> Though the reluctant and uneasy land resent
> The gush of waters, the lean plough, the fretful seed.'

This is not one of McAuley's best poems, but I think that, like Slessor's also-early poem, 'Stars', it sets the note for much of his later and better work and shows clearly what preoccupations and what contradictions most concern him as a poet. 'I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body', he writes; and indeed his criticism of Australia in later years often does seem like a concealed criticism of himself. This identification of himself with the Australian landscape and attitude has nothing about it of fulfilment or of refuge in a larger whole: 'the blue-green gums are a fringe of remote disorder', he writes, and in view of his emphasis throughout his work on 'order and good chance' this piece of observation loses its purely-visual and descriptive character and takes on a different significance. It seems to mark a deep-seated quarrel in McAuley himself—since after all one can scarcely criticise the arrangements of Nature as disorderly. I think the disorder that McAuley perceives in the Australian landscape is a projection of a disorder that he felt at that time remotely in himself, and which was to prove the chief motivation and driving-force in his later work. His desire for beauty and

order as a solution of the chaos of the outer world is also a desire for beauty and order within.

This is a new note in Australian poetry; the note, of a criticism of the outer scene which is also whether McAuley realized it or not, a note of individual self-criticism. Brennan in his exhortations to 'the souls that serve' to emerge into the freedom of 'the homeless dark' and find a new dream seems comparatively naif, and also comparatively optimistic; for McAuley's satirical-poems such as 'The New Discovery of Australia' never seem to be addressed to an audience which may conceivably be altered by such castigation of their ways, but rather to be a kind of bitter meditation, a piece of self-analysis as much as an analysis of the sins and disorders of the world.

Here is another extract form his most-ambitious early poem, 'The Blue Horses', a poem in which McAuley contrast the disorder and flux of the external world he knows with the beauty, order and permanence of art. The poem is headed 'In honour of Franz Marc', the leader of the expressionist-group of painters in Germany who called themselves 'Der Blaue Reiter', or 'The Blue Horsemen'.

> … Naked you lie and your own silence keep,
> The arms of love are laid aside in sleep.
> Soon it will be day like other days;
> I cannot hold this hour in my hand
> Nor press
> Its image on a substance beyond time.
> Possess!
> But we are never in possession
> And nothing stays at our command.
> Possess!
> Yet day comes on.
> The delicate steel cranes manoeuvre
> Like giant birds above their load;
> The high song of the tyres is heard
> Along the whitening road.
> Possess!
> All things escape us, as we too escape.
> We have owned nothing and have no address
> Save in the poor constriction
> Of a legal and poetic fiction.
> He that possesses is possessed
> And falsifies perception lest
> The visionary hooves break through
> The simple seeming world he knew.
> Possess!
> His wife hangs lace across the view
> And all they know of lucid lithe Septembers
> is guilty dreams and itching members.
>
> The harbor derricks swing their load upon the shore.
> The sacred turbines hum, the factories

Set up their hallowed roar.
Men must awake betimes and work betimes
To furnish the supplies of war.
For some shall work and some possess
And all shall read the morning papers
And from the world's ripped entrails there displayed
Haruspicate the trends of love and trade.

Sleep no more, for while you sleep
Our live is stolen by the cheating sun
And angry frightened men destroy
Our peace with diktat, pact and gun.
The old men of the tribe go mad
And guard with malice, fraud and guile
The sacred enzymes of a world gone bad.
The hoof-beats thunder in my ears.
Leave to the councilors the garbage-plot,
The refuse and the greasy tins
Of this slum-culture—these are not
The area where love begins.
The brutal and the vile are set
As watchers at the gate,
But the Blue Horses scream aloud:
A sudden movement shakes the crowd
Stampeded on the hooves of fate.

In this poem the solution of the problem of disorder is in terms of art and of the emotions that lead to art—in terms of personal creativity, in fact. But this is a note that McAuley scarcely strikes again; the solution was a temporary one. I think this may be partly because McAuley's own creative-impulse—his own poetic make-up is less emotional than intellectual and analytic, so that the fulfilment that art presents for him is always subject to the intellectual objection that art does not go deep enough or wide enough to provide a basis for universal reconciliation. Like Eliot's, McAuley's mind can be satisfied with no reconciliation of lesser breadth than the universal; and in fact he has taken the same way out of his doubts and uncertainties that Eliot has taken, the way that leads back into the Roman Catholic Church. It remains to be seen what effect this further solution may have on his poetry.

There is another major poet of today through whose work blows the same air as through McAuley's—the 'faint sterility that disheartens and derides' which McAuley early felt in the Australian landscape, and hence in his own inner-landscape as well. This poet is A.D. Hope, whose book *The Wandering Islands* has not long appeared, but whose work has long had a reputation of its own. With Hope's work, however, we step out of the Australian tradition, in which McAuley's work clearly has its place, in the tortured inner-world of modern-man himself—man whose 'fundamental facts', as Baylebridge put it, have receded so far that nothing any longer exists except man himself in the desperate world of

his own fantasies, praying still that some purpose may be revealed in the universe but scarcely able to turn his head from his own preoccupations to look for it if it should indeed appear. With Hope's work, Australian poetry has indeed caught up with the predicament of the modern-world; here is mankind confronting chaos, naked in his essential helplessness and horrified at himself, yet shown with a strange splendor and a desperate wit. Hope's book is surely the final statement of the modern-situation; terror can go no farther than in his poem 'The Sleeper', whose motif is *Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting*…

> When the night comes, I get
> Into my coffin; set
> The soul's brutal alarm;
> Pull the green coverlet
> Over my face; lie warm,
> Deaf to the black storm.
>
> Ah, but the truce is vain:
> Then chaos comes again
> The Mind's insatiate eye
> Opens on its insane
> Landscape of misery,
> And will not let me die.
>
> A gunshot tears the brain—
> That one quick crash of pain
> Pays for a lasing sleep.
> Be finished with it then!
> What argument can keep
> You from that step?
> The argument of fear,
>
> A whisper that I hear,
> A voice that haunts my bed:
> 'The only sleep is here;
> Suffer your nightmare; dread
> The daylight of the dead.'

This is, I think, the ultimate statement of Hope's poetry; but it is far from being the only statement, of course; particularly because Hope's mind is clearly a sensitive, passionate mind, almost painfully receptive to beauty and hence to ugliness as well, and above all a mind which constantly seeks a way out of the terrible impasse in which it finds itself. It is precisely Hope's honesty which leave him open to the tortures of his own dichotomy; he gives both sides of life their due, but cannot reconcile them, as McAuley attempts to do, by the application of any dogma. The very fact that he recognizes the claims not only of despair but of love and hope, carries him into a hell beyond that of Slessor, whom in some ways he resembles. His is, I think, that creative form of doubt which, if it can be sustained long enough, may issue in some form of regeneration; a

possibility which, indeed, Hope himself hints at in another poem, 'Invocation', from which I shall give extracts:

> You near, you watchful, you invisible one
> In whom all just desires arise and end,
> Inscrutable presence, guide, deliverer, friend,
> Whose will against my will, at need, is done!
>
> In the great dark behind me I see well
> Purpose, beyond my purpose, draw me here
> Towards what end? Now, in my fortieth year,
> I look into the light and cannot tell.
>
> Little by little a wisdom that I lacked
> Grows in this hear, to see and know your sign;
> But not the habit of courage that should be mine:
> Damnation still hangs on that naked act
>
> By which the few, the free, the chosen light
> Our way, and deeply live and proudly move,
> Renew the uncompromising choice of love,
> Engender power and beauty on our night……
>
> Then, as the poets, who alone defend
> That darkness out of which our light is won,
> Strengthen my love—but flash no beam upon
> The future; show the meaning, not the end!
>
> Lest the mind, knowing too well the things to be,
> Lose its blind courage and forget its part,
> And no more trust its lightnings, nor the heart
> Kindle and quicken at the mystery.

It is in Hope's work, then, that the increasing involvement of Australia and Australians with the problem of modern civilisation finds its most complete and personal statement. It is an involvement, of course, as much on the personal as on the national level; and it finds expression directly or indirectly in the work of a number of today's younger poets, such as Francis Webb's more-recent work, that of Vincent Buckley, and that of Barrie Reid. But the younger the poet, of course, the more difficult it is to form any kind of estimate of either his importance as a poet or the direction in which he may travel.

It is interesting that the political thread we have followed through the decades since, in the nineteenth century, Harpur saw Australia as 'the cradle of liberty', has almost-wholly lapsed from the work of these poets. Its place has been taken by disillusion and the sense that more than political action will be needed to cure man of his ills. There is, however, one poet—John Manifold, - in whose work we can still see this political trend, in his case of the extreme social-realist school. Manifold regards himself as carrying on the balladic-tradition of the bush-workers and as

following in the footprints of Henry Lawson. On the other hand, David Campbell has produced, as well as a number of excellent lyrical-poems, a few narrative ballad-style poems that might have come from a more sophisticated and wittier Paterson.

Only one other elder-poet remains to be mentioned, Peter Hopegood. Hopegood's work, though its subject-matter makes it extremely difficult to understand, is some of the most interesting to be produced in recent years from our point of view, because, like Baylebridge, Hopegood is fully aware of the situation of modern-man, and seeks to provide a basis from which man may renew his faith and find regeneration. His interests, however, run in quite a different direction from those of Baylebridge, for like the modern school of analytical-psychologists, he seeks the point of regeneration in man himself, in his capacity to traverse with the help of the symbolism of dream and mythologies the path that leads to a new wholeness and a new vision of life. I shall not quote any of his poems, since without the key to the meaning of the symbols he uses they are difficult to decipher. I am not going to defend his poetry on the charge of obscurity; but I think it should be pointed out that Hopegood's particular obscurity is not willful (indeed he writes with perfect clarity), but is the result of his using symbols which, whether one likes it or not, have dropped out of use to such an extent that, rack our brains as we may, it is hard to see what they can once have meant. The hound with one red ear, the Green Huntsman and the rest seem to need translation into new terms if Hopegood is really to apply their meanings to modern-man. But I shall read you an extract or two from the preface to his book, *Circus at World's End*, which may give you some idea of the scope of his vision and researches:

> Recently…I made acquaintance with the recorded traditional ballads, thus discovering a readymade form of expression especially suitable for stating psychic-problems and adventures, once the key to the ballad symbology has been recognized and made one's own. And a decade's intensive reading in comparative mythology and dream-analysis had given me this key—a key that yet appears to be withheld from the psychologists, though their labours often bring them within its immediate territory, and the fact that most ballads deal with climacterics (symbolized by noon, midnight, midsummer and so on) should at least have provided them with a strong hint as to their nature…Here was the unconscious mind of a whole culture, telling the one essential story of humanity in native English symbology, the dream-alphabet of my own people. It was telling the story of the process known as Regeneration or Redemption…into a larger sphere of awareness… Being more or less aware of the problems of my age, I obey in making these songs an impulse to help promote a complete fusion of all cultures in a world-wide and world-recognised Culture that shall yet tenderly preserve all that is valid in all local variants.'

Whatever one may think of the method Hopegood uses in his poems (and I remember that A.D. Hope once remarked in an exasperated review that his mythologies proliferated like convolvulus growing over a cowshed) he clearly represents a new and interesting development in Australian poetic-awareness of the problems of modern man. He represents also a new development in Australian poetry itself, which I think we can trace especially over the years since Slessor began to write—an increasing tendency away from the objective and descriptive elements we have noted in what I have called the 'Australian tradition', a tendency to turn away from the outer world and its problems, to the problems of the inner world, of the experiencing subject, of the poet and of man himself. I think that Slessor's development typifies this tendency, that FitzGerald represents a resistance against it, that McAuley, unable to resist it, seeks a bulwark against it in orthodox religious-dogma, and that Hope presents it in the form it takes when man sees the conflict between outer and inner, between reason and faith, as an unresolved personal-dilemma.

It is a far cry from the eighteen-forties to the nineteen-fifties—form Harpur's sufferings in a landscape wholly alien to his poetic-tradition, to McAuley's restive acceptance of his identification with that landscape and its people: from Harpur's Australia, which was an unloved and disregarded cluster of widely-separated colonies in a hostile and largely-unexplored land, colonies which had no meaning except as dependencies of a country six-months away on the other side of the world, to our Australia which is involved with every other country in the world in a mutual dependency and close inter-communication which is frightening in its implications and in the responsibility they bring. Australia's poets have followed and expressed this development, in terms of the questions it raises for human personality. What I have said of their work had necessarily been superficial, at times over-simplified; but I hope that I have made it clear at least that poetry, for the race as for the individual, is not an outmoded discipline, a drawing-room recreation, something that more-leisured times could afford but we must neglect—rather it is of the very stuff of our existence.

* * *