

The Picaro Encaverned: Peter Mathers' *The Wort Papers*

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VINCENT Buckley wrote of Peter Mathers' *Trap* that "It is a peripatetic novel, in which the novel is even more peripatetic than the hero."¹ Like *Trap*, Mathers' second novel *The Wort Papers* has an extraordinary structure, happy digressions into styles and forms somewhat startling within a novel and a kind of eager elasticity. It has occasioned some critical bewilderment: D.R. Burns, for instance, finds

no signs whatsoever of what might be called a ground plan. It is an extravaganza, a furiously inventive aggregation of physical disasters . . . The most one can say in regard to the sequence is that one thing leads to another but not in any accepted sequence.²

He also believes the novel "cannot be regarded as socially directed," akin to L.J. Clancy's view that

the elements of realism and social concern have almost completely disappeared, and at the heart of the novel is a series of superbly rendered set-pieces, usually involving a journey, narrated by Percy.³

I would like to suggest that Mathers is very much concerned with contemporary society and the ways in which social disorder is perceived and grappled with by those at odds with the mainstream of society, and that, beneath the apparent fragmentation, his novel has a highly integrated if complex structure. I believe *The Wort Papers* conforms substantially to the picaresque mode and is one of a number of contemporary Australian novels in this mode.⁴

Mathers has observed that

There are things, things behind and under things, things within, and within that which is within. In motion, at rest. Changes within changes, exquisitely random . . . these things are protean . . . You watch things change. Or things change when watched.⁵

To embody that sense of the protean, of change that is

“exquisitely random,” of man improbably surviving in a world of accident, infected by disenchantment that is the “Virus of the psyche,”⁵ Mathers employs an elastic structure and a hero on the move. The ubiquitous Trap with his seemingly endless stream of acquaintances allowed, as do the peregrinations of William and Percy Wort, a journey through society that might continue indefinitely. Where in *Trap* the diary form and the presence of David David brought order to otherwise disparate material, in *The Wort Papers* Mathers uses the memoir form. Like the adolescent narrator-protagonist of David Ireland’s *The Chantic Bird* or Muldoon in *A Wild Ass of a Man*, Percy Wort is both observer and participant, a mind groping through its own determining past in hope of making sense of experiences that at the time were perceived only as chaos. Percy reflects that, having decided to “put it all down”, he sounds like “an herculean creature getting from under and depositing his burden — but with a crash or with infinite gentleness?”⁶ That question runs through the novel and, whatever the narrative digressions, Percy’s struggle to make sense of himself in the midst of a disordered world is at its centre.

Like *The Chantic Bird*, *Johnno*, *Trap* and the novels of Barry Oakley, *The Wort Papers* has the characteristics of the picaresque:

The hero of the picaresque novel differs from characters in other types of fiction. His origins are uncertain. He becomes a rogue in a world full of roguery. His roguery differs from comic roguery in being gratuitous. He cannot love or feel strong emotion: he is incapable of anchoring his personality to some idea or ideal of conduct. His internal chaos is externally reflected in his protean roles. This instability of personality is seen in the picaresque novel as a reflection of the outer chaos discovered by the plot patterns. The picaresque character is not merely a rogue, and his chaos of personality is greater than any purely moral chaos. It reflects a total lack of structure in the world, not merely a lack of ethical or social structure.

The picaresque novel generally limits its point of view to the picaresque. It may or may not be autobiographical; the essential thing is that the reader identifies himself with the protagonist and vicariously undergoes the shocks of his chaotic experience. When a reader is shocked and dazed he feels the characteristic emotional effect of the picaresque novel — a temporary disorganisation of feeling. The picaresque novel is typically written in an unorthodox

irregular style in order to enhance its effect. When the picaro or other narrator comments on experience, the comments elucidate and elaborate the vision of universal disorder projected by the more dramatic aspects of the novel. Since that disorder is universal and continuing, it cannot be escaped except in death. Therefore the picaresque novel has a more or less open ending.⁷

Percy's memoirs are written from the wortarium, the underground cave to which he has recoiled, and the novel has affinities too with the portrayal of the underground man (of whom Dostoevsky's figure is the prototype).⁸ In his cave, Percy grapples with the past, sifting through the disorder like Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man*, in hope of finding a way of being in the world that makes sense.

When the hapless Thomas receives the offensive butterbox with its equally offensive and ravaged contents of fifteen years, he is "reminded of recent book made up of hodge-podge of diaries, papers, recollections, an anthology of rubbish and this'll be no improvement, no development" (p. 18). Percy, however, insists that "As befits a person with a somewhat scientific slant of mind, I am going to write this memoir in a plain, straightforward manner" (p. 22). Thomas' recollection of "recent book" (*Trap?*) perhaps points more accurately than Percy's self-mocking intent to the nature of the wortariana, but the papers do have shape and development. Percy writes from the uncertain shelter of the wortarium, itself an ever changing locale according to the proximity of the besieging Thomas, writing while moving from cave to cave, but in each he is

encaverned. Literally in a hole, and see no way out at present. What a situation. Die here unless I escape. Some say holes are essential for human existence, that holes generate the need to escape, that if holes did not exist it would be necessary to invent them . . .

This hole I'm in. Get out of it. To what? Another, perhaps. (p. 257)

While encaverned, Percy writes what has been called "the Notes from Underground writ dirty"⁹ and from his eight foot hole, he tries to "Heap these words against the predicament and climb to safety" (p. 259). He is in recoil from social disorder, from his own bewilderment at the world and, more particularly, from the retribution that must surely follow his

geligniting the bottle heap of the Uppersass Community Hall — his last magnificent deed before quitting the world. Caves have recurred in his experience, ranging from the Jenolan caves sequence to Thomas' entrepreneurial activities with caves. More generally, Percy writes of "Caves of recollection joined with one another by passages sometimes long and narrow" (p. 105). He is encaverned both literally in the present, seeking a way to "climb to safety", and in the past, fumbling along the passages to the present.

In *Trap*, the ever more horrified reactions of David David to the dreaded taint of Trappism hold the foreground of the novel, however tortuous its passages through the past its narrative is integrated by the relation of David and Trap in the present. In *The Wort Papers*, Thomas and Mathers provide the narrative framework but only in a peripheral way. Thomas, business executive, gatherer of accoutrements of high social rank, international traveller to unlikely places, life-long postulant to the world of business magnate and "determined implementor of innovations" (p. 2) as well as sometime aerial hunter of Percy, is also discontented, trapped by his position, wearily despairing (" . . . if only I could become the old I Am," p. 13) and dreaming of a chance to be heroic in a cliché-ridden world. Through Mathers' persecution, Thomas is compelled to submit to his past, what Buckley has described as

a consciousness pushed back into the social consciousness of past Australia; we and Thomas are taken relentlessly toward some notion of a personal beginning.¹⁰

Apart from a general registering of shock and disgust, however, Thomas' presence is limited, as shadowy as that of Mathers. Clancy considers Mathers to be Percy's alter ego, his doppelgänger¹¹; and Mathers' insistence that Thomas read the papers, his involvement with Percy at the wortarium and his own literary activities (as "an unknown, racked writer" p. 10) suggest a role akin to Petersen's in *The Chantic Bird*. He seems a kindred spirit to Percy (even as he asserts "I am beyond risk . . ." p. 282) but, like Thomas, he contributes little to perspective on the narrative. His presence seems

more a device for presenting the papers than a source of literary questions such as the writer's stance to the created beings or the nature of fictive reality, raised by Petersen's presence.

The perspective that is throughout sure and convincing is that of Percy's own stance as at once observer and participant, at once bewildered witness and more bewildered protagonist. Mathers toys deftly with the convention of the dispassionate spectator, faithfully recording for the reader. Percy's journeys through society reveal a diversity of guises and disguises adopted in defence against the assaults of a chaotic world. At the same time, there are increasingly desperate sorties into linguistic and literary fantasies as a shield against despair. Where, in *Trap*, the framework of the narrative militated against Mathers' exploring the changes in Trap's self-awareness, in *The Wort Papers*, the changes in Percy's consciousness are easily accommodated and loom large in the novel.

Percy's childhood was spent "on the run — or at least the move — for years" (p. 123). William's migratory instinct and his "lemming spirit" (p. 125), combined with his determination to keep the Camel Corps out of Afghan hands, to save the Kimberleys from the Zionists and to "get in early" before the government makes the inland sea, require him to undertake numerous journeys across Australia. Further, his pursuit of the ideal farm (according to the tutelage of the ideal — English — farmer) requires numerous but more modest expeditions nearer the coast. Throughout his travels, there is a sense of an innocent abroad, a bearer of futile dreams and incongruous aspirations, ever encountering those akin to himself. In the hilarious Orebul Downs sequence, his dalliance with Mrs. Tyme is punctuated by the activities of Mr. Tyme as that gentleman endeavours to ward off invaders and general menacers, to form a guerilla band and to heighten the efficiency of his armoury. The climactic scene of the station burning and exploding from the ammunition, as well as William's characteristic befuddled dismay, are the culmination of Mathers' parody of journeys into the interior in

search of riches, spiritual and other. (It has been suggested that William is "a sort of comic version of Voss, with undertones of an irrepressible Mr. Micawber."¹²) Like Percy, William is a role-player and adopter of guises: he is sometime newspaperman, saviour of camels, "Wandering Sharefarmer," bicyclist in the desert, seafarer in coffin tramp, soldier, wanderer after rainbows and quester in general. With Green, William discusses sadly the Australian penchant for "lots of airy-fairy schemes, dreams, Utopias, Utopia-NoWhere" as they dwell amid arid, broken land — and their eyes glaze as they see it rich and fecund. Ever out of kilter with the world, ever pursuing the mirage, William embodies the "Great Australian Dream." Part of Percy's later despair is that the world made no sense to William either. Part of his restless discontent springs from a childhood which, mapped out, resembles a giraffe. Yet the sequences pertaining to William are not only significant insofar as they impinge on Percy. In part, *The Wort Papers* is a parody of the family saga, what Wilding calls the "orderly hagiographical family chronicle of distinguished squattocracy or bourgeoisie."¹³ There is much parody material, particularly in relation to William, through the journeys of exploration/discovery, the myths of bush and mateship, the conventions in portraying the founder of the dynasty (as in Penton's novels, *Landtaker* and *Inheritors*, or in the Langton sequence of Boyd). Mathers himself has suggested he has much in common with Lawson, Collins, Clarke and the journals of explorers and visitors.¹⁴ Much of the parody element of *The Wort Papers* derives from its very structure, implicit in the digressions into essays, commentaries, observations on . . . , tales with a moral and the miscellany of such journals.

Like *Trap*, *The Wort Papers*, at least in part, offers a new way of seeing the past, what Buckley has called "a search for the origins of this society, these institutions, the myths which console and the legends which fortify them."¹⁵ Mathers has written of "Old Evil, always inventing new aliases . . . tarted up, disguised, so as to appear only right and proper, inevitable manifestations of the absolutely contemporary."¹⁶ The new

aliases and guises Mathers exposes in *The Wort Papers* are many and various, his targets including small town rivalries like that between Peeny and Uppersass; the grazier mentality; urban attitudes to the bushfolk (and the terrorised tourists Percy plays with); the quest for heroes (such as the inestimable Wentworth and Russell); philanthropic benevolence towards Aborigines which produced Taanish Village (and cochineal coloured soap perfumed with rosemary for the Aborigines); soaring Progress or "Roadism"; the trendies yearning for the simple rustic life; dwellers in communes like Rushcutters Bay aquatic co-op; the fear of invasion by Zionists/Orientals/Communists or all of these; the advertising and business world exploiting with impunity and given to quirks that determine the lives of workers (like the General Manager of E.C.P.A.W.L. issuing World War III memoés and vigilant for saboteurs); the pastoralists holding sway in government. Mathers' exposure of some absurdities in contemporary Australian society is sharpened by a delight in challenging the gentler, more seemly versions of our collective past to which we cling.

The novel's social concerns, however, are embodied more directly through Percy's own experiences, caught up in events on which he can impose no pattern and which have driven him to the refuge of the wortarium. He is a protean figure, donning disguises and playing roles in search of one which might bring order to his experience. He is variously, Uppersass rustic, tiller of humble sods, landowner and foe of the Peenyites; lover of the spouses of uniformed men; fugitive from police, from Thomas and from retribution in general; one-time correspondent of the *Peeny Gazette* ("Our Mountain Correspondent"); essayist, on cows and verandahs, and writer of tales for tots et al.; aspirant to the medical profession and poser as member of same; deliverer of *bon mots* and therefore a subversive of workers; adopter of aliases (including Percy Grudder, notorious gangster); founder of the Vellum Society; terrorist of tourists; enthusiast for botanical bricabrac; hatcher of money-making schemes (untold wealth lies in onions and pineapples?) itinerant Norton-rider and wanderer

of the Woomera; shame and scourge of the Wort family. Within that multiplicity of guises lurks Percy, "an underdingo, larrikinetic motorcycling visionary predicament hunter."¹⁷

At the same time, a mind now encaverned contemplates those guises. Percy observes, "I could not see much logic in my stand but then I could not see much logic anywhere" (p. 24), and again,

"I have plenty of spirit, the trouble is it lacks lumps, coagulations or clots, those bodies of agitation, drive, performance and belief."
(p. 119)

He can find no centre, no "coagulations" for his existence, except perhaps "I exist at this instant to write my impressions" (p. 189). He agonises over the question of "What is the MATTER with me?" (p. 196) throughout the papers, seeking an answer first in William but then shifting uncertainly through his own experience:

I brooded over invoices, statements, reports and cables. What was wrong with me? Every time I put foot to rung of the ladder of success, every time I tried to ascend the ladder of achievement, a rung broke. In fact I stood in a heap of broken rungs. Would it be my fate to turn the ladder upside down and climb from inverted success to a rungless void?

I had no faith. I was like a perforation in an invoice. My father and brother had faith — was it that there was only a limited amount in the family?
(p. 177)

He has no centre to his existence, no foothold, only broken rungs and growing despair — and our awareness of this plays over even the most extravagant and hilarious sequences.

Many of the adolescent and childhood scenes I would like to discuss in detail: the football match against the Marist team in a "Roman town" and its aftermath in the Parthenon Milk Bar with the bewitching (but, lamentably, Catholic) girl; the attempt to seduce Moira and the Jenolan caves events; the seaside picnic and Thomas' commercial enthusiasm for the shipwreck; the school excursion to the Sydney gallery. In each, there is a characteristic blend of the absurd and the painful, the self-mocking aspirations and the ludicrous thwarting of them by forces seen as malign. Perhaps the finest sequence to consider more fully however is that of

Percy's journey towards Sydney on the Norton, in response to the solicitor's letter. His way is strewn with puzzling encounters, adversities and incomprehensible circumstances, and an extraordinary diversity of people. He sets out with noble but flawed intentions:

I INTEND MAKING THIS JOURNEY AS NEAR PERFECT AS POSSIBLE, I thought to myself. Would smile at everyone, succour the distressed and aid the needy. As I travelled south I would be the unfastener on the zip of the dashed centre line — behind me the line would open — its jaws unmesh — and radiance pour out! However . . . jaws? Letting the light out? Am I, therefore, inside a mouth, at the back of teeth, in some vast cavern? And, if travelling south, am I driving down a gullet? THIS IS PESSIMISTIC THINKING I told myself. Continue the journey . . . (p. 209)

As usual, the gap between his intentions and the actuality leaves him anguished and consumed with self-doubt. He encounters Bill Jones, spouse of the soap-maker; inmates of Taanish Village, helpless targets of contempt masquerading as benevolence; Nance the hitch-hiker and source of Percy's dread of exposure as a port-runner; two horsemen who casually intimidate the police; Boot and his thuggish offsidiers; the working lady, Betty; the oyster stall lady and Rosie the gunmoll. An improbable gathering but characteristic of Percy's talent for the improbable and the incomprehensible. These encounters are punctuated by Percy's fading attempts to be altruistic, ever a salubrious influence on all he meets, by his shifting fear of menaces, defined and ill-defined, and by his various attempts at seduction/resisting seduction. This journey, which concludes at the Farmers' Plaza Hotel with suitable absurdity, reflects the picaresque mode at its most overt: the bewildering succession of event and persons in a mesh of tangled purposes, the befuddled consciousness marvelling at bizarre circumstances and the urge to move on in search of something comprehensible. There are, of course, many other journeys in the novel, often journeys within journeys, such as the trip with Ann towards Alice Spings, the visit to the co-op at Rushcutters Bay (which yields a fiancée of the itinerant kind), the many trips to and from Sydney in pursuit of a job — most

of these ignominiously terminated. The Norton carries him through a constantly changing world that leaves him at best incredulous, at worst despairing, yearning for a refuge. Uppersass tends to be invaded by voyeur tourists come to watch the rustics in the hills but it is sometimes a temporary refuge from the disordered world beyond it.

His childhood recollections draw much on the presence of Thomas — and his determination to continue failing by Thomas' criteria. While Thomas labours as entrepreneur — in relation to the caves (p. 109), the shipwreck (p. 113) or guileless children bearing rabbit skins, bicycle tyres, etc., (p. 123) or even William (p. 151) — Percy engages in infiltration of the enemy:

We grew to be a pair of sturdy rustic youths. Tom affected the town manner, I the rural, but as my style was stronger our average rusticity was quite high. He walked as though to the pavement born, I tended to plod. He was the office boy, I the farmer. He could not avoid my rural effluvia. (p. 94)

Whenever the untoward occurs, which is frequently, Percy suspects Thomas' machinations, at least in the less expensive circumstances. Thomas tends to loom larger than life for Percy, as a personification of all that is viciously narrow and conventional, all that is inimical to those who do not conform. As Percy lurks in the wortarium, Thomas besieges him from plane, horseback, van (with loudspeaker deviously announcing forgiveness) and, according to Mathers, has tried to have Percy certified or outlawed, has contemplated bringing in the army or black trackers or an army of black trackers. Thomas poses as guardian of Percy, the partisan in the hills writing "brother-on-the-run" memoirs, but schemes to extirpate Percy and all that is unspeakably Wort from his own nature. The Wort is construed in Uppersass as a general menace, like termites or cancer insidiously undermining all that is decent — and it is this which Thomas would excoriate from his respectable self. The events leading up to the geligniting of the bottle heap are narrated through the device of the "Uppersass Reporting Prize" and the disgust of the local notables about the monstrous Wort is clear — this Thomas must expunge (quite apart from the intrinsic pleasure of

persecuting Percy). The relationship of Thomas and Percy becomes an image of the tight bond of antagonism between the determinedly conventional and the errant, subversive outsider. Both are pushed into extreme positions and, as Clancy points out¹⁸ there is more polarisation of the positions than in the case of the earlier novel. It is a curious relationship, akin to a compulsion to try and eradicate the other as if thereby to eradicate disorder from their own lives and bring the world into shape with a private conception of it.

As the narrative reaches more recent events, immediately prior to Percy's recoil to the underground, there is more and more speculation on Percy's part about where he might live and under what circumstances it might be possible to tolerate a return to the world. He is far from static in the present, prey to growing despair and a heightening sense of trapped futility. Instead of isolated comments like "From such thoughts does derangement come" (p. 201) or "Fortune smiled (LET IT NOT TURN LEERY)" (p. 208), Percy tries to confront and explore his despair, to express it and perhaps overcome it (pp. 257-61). He examines the fact of being encaverned, aware that quitting this cave can lead only to another, then dodges away into fantasies of learning the flute before his dilemma reasserts itself:

Percy, my friend, you should derail this train of thought. such thoughts derange sleepers.

However, I am awake and aware. Which makes it a little less horrible. Correction, a lot less horrible for when I put them to paper I am calmed. A little. (I have just looked over my shoulder.)

When you are in a hole write yourself out of it. For example, think of all the long words beginning with A like Austral-ia, -asian, -orp, -oid, aluminium (etc.) . . . and add and add and assemble at any, at all cost Heap these words against the predicament and climb to safety. (pp. 258-9)

As he broods about emerging or remaining encaverned, he resorts increasingly to verbal springboards to leap out of his dilemma, following through associative digressions and word-plays and wilful contemplation of obscure topics (like verandahs) to find temporary relief from despair. His recourse to such linguistic and stylistic refuges becomes more frequent, though it has been a characteristic of the entire papers in a

more restrained way. Earlier Percy has observed that, as a writer of memoirs, he is quite prepared to "dodge, dummy, feint or forget" (p. 112) where appropriate — and this is the key to the novel's often surprising structure. Many of the apparently random meanderings into essays, fables, pseudo-scientific dissertation and new narrative perspectives (such as the Uppersass Reporting Prize) are attempts to gain distance from his pain by "dodging" or "feinting". The guises of essayist or teller of tales or purveyor of medical bricabrac or even muser on verandahs allow some assuaging of the pain, like verbal games and recreation. As Clancy has argued,

Style, language — in short, words — in *The Wort Papers* are not merely the means of recording the rebellious and independent freedom to which its protagonist aspires, but are also the means of achieving it and demonstrating it.¹⁹

Yet Percy achieves only temporary release this way. In the final section, "Murmuring Off", he is torn between the urge to risk emerging and the knowledge that there is nowhere to go, no place for him. He seeks relief in visions of fantastic visitors and conversations (like William's climactic visions on the coffin tramp). Feeling still and deathly, he decides,

Resuscitation is possible. Subterranean resuscitation is, however, quite hopeless. Therefore, my ascension from this cavity is essential if I am to put my idea to the test. Leave everything behind. Rise naked . . . I do not think I'll do this.

I will get out though, because I am beginning to feel unsettled here After a quick survey, I have re-descended. It was marvellous up there. A visit to a new world, and, like all discoveries, not without pain. (pp. 281-2)

His subsequent death ("Damned heart twittering like a bat") seems highly evasive and brings ambiguity to the novel's resolution, but this period of torment is starkly convincing. His search through the past has not revealed an ordered world in which existence might be possible, but he can at least appreciate "a visit to a new world," can at least venture forth. It is sobering to realise however that there can be no renewal, no resolution, no radical change in his perceptions of existence as disordered and largely intolerable.

Florence Wilkes has written of Mathers' use of "a kind of cinematographic pastiche reflecting the distortions of

society,"²⁰ In *The Wort Papers*, the satiric distortions, verbal slapstick and stylistic diversions are directed more to portraying the consciousness of one displaced from a chaotic society than in the earlier novel. Percy's attempts to make sense of his chaotic experiences and discover a way of being in the world that makes sense suggest a different emphasis from that of the earlier novel, because the perceiving mind itself is in the foreground. While Mathers' delight in challenging our fondest images of ourselves, past and present, is no more merciful in *The Wort Papers*, his attention is also engaged by the questions of how social disorder is perceived and how that perception might be tolerated.

NOTES

¹Vincent Buckley: "Peter Mathers' *Trap*," *Ariel*, 5, No. 3 (July 1974), 122.

²D.R. Burns: *Directions of Australian Fiction 1920-1974*, (Cassell Australia, 1975), p. 249.

³L.J. Clancy: "Peter Mathers' Words," *Meanjin Quarterly*, 33, No. 3 (Spring 1974), p. 274.

⁴See my article "The Picaresque Mode in Contemporary Australian Fiction," *Southerly*, 39, No. 3 (September 1978).

⁵"How It Is", in O. Webster, ed., *Disenchantment* (Melbourne: Gold Star Publications, 1972), p. 187, 181.

⁶*The Wort Papers*, p. 19. All references cite the 1973 Penguin edition.

⁷Stuart Miller: *The Picaresque Novel* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1967), pp. 131-2.

⁸Intr. to Edward Abood: *Underground Man*, (San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp, 1973).

⁹Owen Webster: "Comic Genius", review of *The Wort Papers*, *Overland*, 57 (Winter 1973), 58.

¹⁰p. 118 *op. cit.*

¹¹p. 272 & p. 276 *op. cit.*

¹²Florence Wilkes: *Some Aspects of Satire in The Australian Novel*, Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New England, Armidale 1974, p. 366.

¹³Michael Wilding: "Worts' World: The Great Australian Dream", review of *The Wort Papers*, *The National Times*, January 15-20, 1973, 18.

¹⁴Interview with L. Clancy, *Australian Literary Studies*, 8, No. 2 (1977), 201.

¹⁵p. 117 *op. cit.*

¹⁶"How It Is", p. 188, *op. cit.*

¹⁷"Comic Genius", *loc. cit.*

¹⁸p. 273 *op. cit.*

¹⁹p. 272 *ibid.*

²⁰Florence Wilkes: "The Satirical Climate in Australian Letters from 1950 to 1975", *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, 18, (January 1975), 102-2.