

Mapping and Mythmaking: Women Writers and the Australian Legend

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IN HER VOLUME OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *The Envoy From Mirror City*, the New Zealand writer Janet Frame has described how overwhelmed she felt, on first visiting London, by a place so densely swathed in the intricate webs of human imagining.

Looking down at London I could sense the accumulation of artistic weavings, and feel that there could be a time when the carpet became a web or shroud and other times a warm blanket or shawl: the prospect for burial by entrapment or warmth was close.¹

This awareness was important in her ultimate decision to return to her own country to write:

My reason was literary. . . . the prospect of exploring a new country with not so many layers of mapmakers, particularly the country where one first saw daylight and the sun and the dark, was too tantalising to resist. Also, the first layer of imagination mapped by the early inhabitants leaves those who follow an access or passageway to the bone. Living in New Zealand, would be for me, like living in an age of mythmakers; with a freedom of imagination among all the artists because it is possible to begin at the beginning and to know the unformed places and to help to form them, to be a mapmaker for those who will follow nourished by this generation's layers of the dead. (Frame, pp. 151-52)

A newly settled country affords profound stimulus to the imagination, but its women writers may find themselves mapping two territories simultaneously — the new land, and the nature of female experience within it. In recent years it has become apparent that women's lives themselves constitute a country still in the process of exploration, many of whose existing maps and

myths are as misleading, as inaccurate, or as tentative as portrayals of *Terra Australis Incognita* by early cartographers. So, while helping form the unformed places, women writers must also seek to define and establish within national myth the area of their own experience as women.

What Janet Frame describes as "the first layer of imagination" mapped by early settlers in a new country results from attempts to accommodate the alien and unfamiliar within myths and images derived from European culture. Rich and ancient mythic traditions are also available to those who explore the nature of female experience, and attempts to accommodate the realities of women's lives in relation to them generate tensions and contradictions comparable to those involved in creating a new myth of place. Ross Gibson has explored the important part ancient images of a terrestrial paradise played in establishing early perceptions of Australia, and how, despite the harsh realities of the land, "people developed a paradoxical ability to tolerate disappointment while continuing to expect some Australian felicity."² Women writers have had to deal with comparable discrepancies as they came to terms with painful ambiguities inherent in so many traditional mythic images. As Marina Warner points out, there is little comfort in discovering that abstract virtues such as Wisdom, Truth, Justice, and Liberty are allegorized as female figures in cultures which regard women as foolish, devious, incapable of judgement, and unfit to control their own destinies. Myths of women devised in accordance with a male view of the world are likely to present hostile or contradictory attitudes enabling even a great goddess like Athena to be subverted into a masculinized, patrilineal figure upholding the authority of a male dominated society.³ Consequently, women writers participating in the mapping and mythmaking of a new country may find themselves overturning or dismissing mythologies inappropriate to the realm of female experience, while in Australia they have the added problem of responding to an emergent national myth which, for geographical and historical reasons, has accorded women little place, generally dismissing them with indifference or hostility.

Although rural industry has been essential to Australian pros-

perity, low rainfall and vast distances mean that, to be profitable, most land holdings must be very extensive; throughout the nineteenth century, a few wealthy landowners or landowning companies employed large numbers of itinerant workers who moved from property to property as the seasonal needs of the pastoral industry — shearing, mustering, sheep-dipping — dictated. The historian Russell Ward has analyzed the attitudes and behaviour of this group of men in *The Australian Legend*, claiming that because, in the harsh isolated conditions under which they had to work, individuals often depended for survival on the help and support of their mates, a powerful male camaraderie developed among them. He also claims that these men were irreverent or hostile towards authority and social pretension, displayed initiative and ready improvisation in a difficult, unfriendly environment, and were mutually supportive in the face of natural hardship or social injustice. He considers that they exerted “an influence, completely disproportionate to its numerical and economic strength, on the attitudes of the whole Australian community,”⁴ and this view of life “working upwards from the lowest strata of society and outwards from the interior, subtly influenced [that] of the whole population” (Ward, p. 12), with the paradoxical result that large numbers of highly urbanized Australians perceive their national character in terms of a very male self-image created by nineteenth-century rural workers. Whether or not this myth of the noble bushman corresponds with historical reality, it is still extremely potent.

Scarcely any employment was available for women in the outback, and since, from the early days of white settlement, men greatly outnumbered women throughout the entire country, the majority of bush workers had little opportunity to marry or even to associate with European women. This led to defensive, even contemptuous attitudes, for the ideal of mateship is essentially based on freedom from women. Even Henry Lawson, who in *Joe Wilson* or stories like “The Drover’s Wife,” portrayed the heroic endurance and the suffering of women in the bush with insight and sympathy, resorts to cliché in presenting most of his female characters. Brian Matthews has pointed out how they are for the most part idealized creatures in comparison to whom men

feel themselves unworthy, but should they enter into the world of men, "the real and unideal world."⁵ they suffer decay and decline as a result.

Expecting impossibilities of women, Lawson was doomed to disappointment. Descending into the world of men his women, even the best and most admirable of them, become like men.

(Matthews, p. 51)

In the story "Some Day" Lawson's character Mitchell confesses himself too abashed by his rough, uncouth ways to propose to the tiny, beautiful, delicately nurtured eighteen-year-old for whom he harboured such romantic yearning. But in "A Camp-fire Yarn" we read how he proposed to an extremely ugly woman with "feet like a Lascar, and hands about ten sizes too large for her, and a face like that camel — only red,"⁶ just to see if she would have him, going on the run to escape her enthusiastic acceptance, haunted by fear she might be humping her swag after him on the track. In the bush, male sexual hostility has been further intensified by liaisons with Aboriginal women where misogyny is compounded by racism:

To satisfy his sexual urges he [the bushman] must turn to the Aboriginal woman, but with an acute feeling of demeaning himself by this action.

From this attitude has sprung the savage, brutal, anti-aboriginal ballads that are so popular with the Australian bushman. By their recitation he imagines that he is getting his revenge on a race that he feels has forced him by his own sexual actions, into a humiliating position.⁷

Disregard for women, originating with the conditions of early settlement, still persists in modern urban Australia:

The whole tenor of society is directed towards male companionship, so that in general men do not expect or look for this sort of communication with women. . . . [T]he extraordinary prevalence of phrases such as "they're all the same in the dark" and "makes no difference with a bag over her head" illustrates an attitude to women which is narrow, cynical and immature.⁸

Such social attitudes and the cultural background engendering them are daunting material for a woman writer to come to terms with in her art. One solution may be for her to sidestep it alto-

gether, by evoking her own mythic image of the land, drawing directly on European mythological tradition. For Elizabeth Jolley, who emigrated to Australia in adult life, the land is in a sense virgin territory. She writes: "The landscape of my writing is not to be found clearly on any map,"⁹ and her image of Australia is as much a country of the mind as the representation of an external reality. In her novel *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* she portrays it as an image of free nature, territory of the goddess Diana. A harsh terrain and an uncertain climate signify how difficult and uncompromising the region ruled by the goddess can be, but if love is to flourish or creativity to develop and reach fulfilment, it is necessary to come to terms with the realm of free nature over which she so vigorously and dynamically presides. The novelist Diana Hopewell, a key figure in the book, is associated with the goddess whose name she bears, and the farm she describes herself cultivating through the drought of long hot summers becomes a symbol of literary activity, for the novel she creates must be cared for and cherished with the same vigilance as a farm in the arid Australian countryside. Rosemary Dobson, with gentle irony, locates Greek myth in an Australian setting in her poem "The Rape of Europa," as beautiful Europa, the squatter's daughter, sets out on a picnic on the riverbank:

The cattle come down to the sand by the river
 Europa is plaiting green willows and buttercups,
 Daisies and water-weeds: mocking, she crowns them
 With wreaths and festoons, with dripping green garlands,
 And climbs to the back of the dark one, the leader.

Europa, Europa, the billy is boiling,
 Down from the woolsheds your brothers come riding.
 There's a splash in the shallows, a swirl, a commotion,
 He has leapt, he is swept in the rush of the current,
 And the riders draw rein on the hillside astounded . . .

* * *

Oh wave to Europa for far she is faring
 Past farmyard and homestead, past township and jetty,
 And many will say that they saw them go riding,
 The girl and the bull on the back of the river
 Down to the harbour and over the ocean.

And distant indeed are the coasts of that country
 Where the god was revealed in splendour and ardour.
 Europa, Europa, as you lay quiet
 In sunshine and shadow, under a plane-tree,
 Did you remember the river, the she-oaks?¹⁰

Although this poem is primarily concerned with the relationship between Australian and European culture, and in particular the theme of the expatriate artist, it is perhaps not surprising that the poet presents an image of the woman departing and being glad to do so. Many women writers, nevertheless, have felt it necessary to take account of aspects of Australian national myth in their own work, and a number have dealt with it in relation to the situation of the woman artist in Australia.

Beverly Farmer's novel *Alone*, set in Melbourne in 1959, explores the situation of an aspiring young woman writer attempting to survive in an almost totally alienating environment. Shirley Nunn, on the eve of her eighteenth birthday, has decided to kill herself, no longer able to bear the break-up of a passionate lesbian relationship with her former schoolfriend, Catherine, who has refused to tolerate her single-minded obsession any further. The novel records Shirley's experiences that night and the following day as she considers and rejects various methods of suicide, ending as she lies on the floor of her rented room, knife in hand, ready perhaps this time to end it all. Despite a sympathetic portrayal, it is hard to take Shirley's adolescent posturings altogether seriously as she self-consciously turns the events of her life into literary material. Half in love with easeful death, she is always ready with the pat literary allusion: "I read, much of the night, and go mad in the morning,"¹¹ even declaring, "I am a palimpsest of purple prose" (p. 53).

For much of the novel she clings desperately to memories of Catherine. But for all her importance in Shirley's life, Catherine is a curiously shadowy figure. On their first night together she feeds Shirley with spoonfuls of honey and hot milk sprinkled with cinnamon, and when they share a rented room in Carlton, Shirley in turn brings her milk and honey. Life with Catherine represents the promised land, a clinging to girlhood as a refuge from a harsh world of brutal experience which appears so destructive and

dangerous. The two girls are physically very similar, with tawny hair and long slender bodies, and Shirley's obsession with Catherine, "*Ma semblable, ma soeur*" (p. 78), is essentially narcissistic rather than sexually fulfilling. Her first poem to Catherine describes a swan dying above its own frozen reflection in an icy lake, and in another poem she describes their love-making as a form of mirroring:

Slowly you bared me and silent,
 smiling, twined
 your gilt shanks about me,
 mirroring with yours
 my pendant breasts
 and valved deep thighs. (p. 31)

Shirley loves lights and mirrors, and in Catherine she has found, then lost, her mirror image. After Catherine's departure she spends much time naked in her candle-lit room gazing, Narcissus-like, at her own reflection in the watery glass.

As a writer, Shirley reflects what she sees — her eyes are frequently compared to mirrors, and her middle name is Iris — but her vision is filtered through the lens of literary experience. For her, Melbourne is a real and unreal city, permeated by the poetry of T. S. Eliot, transformed into a wasteland not by the romantic squalor of its slums and docks, in which she delights, but by the inescapable presence of male predators who threaten her both as an individual and as an artist. Her ambition to make a film, which she has already scripted, of a silent ship leaving port at night is shattered:

I was there taking photos when a man came up behind me muttering wannafuck and in my terror, leaping, pedalling off, I let the camera swing and smash against the frame of the bicycle. The film I extracted was pure black. (p. 6)

To experience those aspects of the city which inspire her artistically, she must place herself in continual danger, for the guardians of law and order are merely a further threat to safety. As she and Catherine wander down by the wharves, a policeman threatens to charge them, and when Shirley asserts she is a virgin and can prove it, he replies: "You listen ter me fer a change, sister. Once we got you up to the station we can prove

anything we wanna" (p. 68). Their shared room becomes a safe retreat where the two girls embrace each others' long candid bodies. But sexual menace lurks even in the rooming house. From the window Shirley sees her landlady's bony black puss surrounded by bristling toms, one of whom "leaps snarling and claws her down and rapes her" just as Mrs. O'Toole's fancy man, Bob, tries to molest the Greek girl, Koula. In the backyard, an eviscerated hen images the fate of another Greek woman, Maria, who dies of a miscarriage after her brutal husband abandoned her, kidnapping their first child back to Greece.

But it is during her holiday hitch-hiking with Catherine that the wasteland image becomes for Shirley an embodiment of Australia — desert, jolly swagman and all:

Hitch-hiking along the red dust road she told me all about Venice, on our way to Tibooburra and the black stone desert. I think for the sake of the sound of water only, she talked about Venice. Here is no water but only rock. Red dust coated us. A truck came. The bones, the sea shells there have turned to stone. In a dusty truck we arrived at a dusty homestead with tanks and iron-roofed verandahs and prancing kelpies yelling. There were a few scorched gums at the lip of a crazed creek bed. We slept out under the full moon. Don't sleep in the creek bed, girls, whatever yer do. Swaggie camped there a few years back. Never found a trace of 'im even after the water went down. Yer never know when there's a flood cumun. Sure yer won't sleep up at the house? Righto. It's your funeral. We cringed into our sleeping bags under the white moon. And his ghost may be heard. *Le spectre en pleine lune.* (p. 67)

On their trip, safety is equated with the prison cells where they seek shelter, but these too are hazardous places. In Wollongong prison they are told how a twelve-year-old boy once wriggled his way from the next cell through the small judas in their cell door to get at a prostitute who had been held there; and as they start out hitching the next morning, a patrol car tries to book them for vagrancy.

Shirley's longing for death represents her terror at male sexuality's intrusion into her life, a sexuality she attempts to escape through her association with Catherine. The girls become lovers the night after Catherine is raped down "some stinking lane in

the city"; when Shirley decides to kill herself once Catherine abandons her, she also endures a gross and pathetic rape to which she half submits, even informing her assailant that her name is Catherine. Rape, defloration, and death are associated with recurring images of sun or moon impaled and bleeding: "The fang of the cathedral spire prods the low sun. Its bladder of blood bursts asunder, at sunset" (p. 66). Whether or not Shirley kills herself at the end of the novel, the rape has rendered suicide superfluous, for it is in a sense the death she has been moving towards, severing her from the female realm of girlhood and forcing her into the world of male cruelty and brutality. Her attacker assures her: "'Dere's a lot worse'n me aroun'. Dere's gels bin sunk in dere wiff a rock roun' dey necks before now. Yer was askun fer it'" (p. 77). It is more from this experience, which for her is a kind of *rite de passage*, than from Catherine's rejection, that she has "taken the wound that might make a writer" of her (p. 87).

As a writer, Shirley is divided between the desire to romanticize her world and the urge to record its rawness and crudity in precise detail. Her lushly symbolist poems strike a mildly decadent note, and her one short story, written in a mode of cosmic realism, has been rejected by *Meanjin* and the *Women's Weekly*—a sardonic comment on the limited outlets available to writers at the time. But these magazines represent two possible ways of life Shirley has rejected, that of an intellectual, summed up by her abandoned university course: "Analyse, dissect, account for, compare, appreciate, estimate, discriminate, calculate, explicate, elucidate, expatiate: repudiate" (p. 28), and that of life in suburbia:

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of stunted brains,
Of endless vapid villas
And clotted, leaking drains. (p. 54)

But these rejections leave her without any recognized or acceptable niche in society, a situation symbolized by her life in the sleazy Carlton rooming house full of misfits and outcasts presided over by the gross and garrulous Mrs. O'Toole, "who fancies she has a mission to seamen" (p. 1). Her uncertain identity is further

indicated by her choice of pseudonyms — Simon I. Noone for the short story and Shelley I. Noone for the poems. The puns on her surname, nun and none, also emphasize her sense of her own insignificance, her virginal, relatively inexperienced state, and an existence isolated from the mainstream of society. In discarding the relatively secure existence offered by university on the one hand, and her suburban home on the other, because both are stifling and neither will nourish her as an artist, Shirley also dis-cards as role models her coldly critical English teacher Miss Jones, and her mother who, anxious about appearances, urges an ideal of “niceness” on her daughter. This leaves her with the looming figure of Mrs. O’Toole, who, like a number of her tenants, is an image of indomitability. A richly comic figure, she is the complete antithesis of Shirley’s self-indulgent, decadent romanticism. Although battered and bruised by the world of experience, she has managed to hold her own against it, and it is her persona Shirley adopts in her short story “Heroes” to condemn and ridicule ideals of mateship and military glory:

Heroes. We cheered them off to the War. They killed and they got killed and had their bit of honour and glory and look at them. We’ll all die soon enough. I don’t know.

Heroes. You’re telling me. (pp. 44-45)

Mrs. O’Toole’s ageing flesh is a reminder that no one remains a golden girl for very long, and if Shirley continues the marginal, rootless existence she sees as essential to her development as a writer, she must accept the emotional and physical bruising it will bring, and which she doubts her capacity to endure. Back in her room after the rape, Shirley contemplates the candlewax melting and disintegrating round its black, seed-like wick and wonders: “Is there a black seed burrowing into me?” (p. 83). The experience of rape and her association with Mrs. O’Toole both lead to a deeper awareness of her own mortality than her various imagined suicides and the fantasies they engender.

In Thea Astley’s novel *An Item From the Late News*, a woman artist also contemplates death. Considerably older than Shirley Nunn, with a past containing a husband whose name she has forgotten and a succession of lovers, Gabby Jerrold has already

endured severe emotional bruising when the novel opens. Like Farmer in *Alone*, Astley associates deathliness and corruption with the crass brutality of the male world of mateship; women are either marginal or mere pawns in conflicts where men seek to prove themselves against one another. Gabby's tragedy is that although she recognizes the appalling corruption of this world, she is too contaminated by its values to oppose it wholeheartedly. Astley challenges the Australian male myth quite directly by setting her novel in the outback. The town, Allbut, in northern Queensland, is now slowly dying because the tin mines responsible for its existence have been exhausted:

The town. Just to think of it. Hardly a town.

A cluster of thirty buildings, a blackened fringe of aboriginal humpies as far out as we can persuade them and the carcasses of seven dead cars. Metal junk rusts easy under the scrub beside the bitumen and has become part of the landscape this town cannot bear to part with.¹²

It is an imprisoning place where those who fail to conform are treated with suspicion and a contempt which flares readily into hatred. Women are precariously situated there. As Gabby reflects: "I come from a long line of men. This country tells me this. Rams this home. Well, women enter into it, but peripherally" (p. 133). The aboriginal, Rosie Wonga, is utterly vulnerable, subjected to whatever indignity any white person in authority imposes on her. Disguising oneself as a man is a possible, though drastic, form of protection, as in the case of Archie Wetters, who after a lifetime of boundary-riding and boozing with the boys at the local pub, is discovered, on death, to have been a woman. Doss, who keeps the local pub, is perhaps the most successful survivor with "a string of lovers and husbands littering the years" behind her. But she has abandoned all romantic illusions and expectations, turning on a suitor who dismisses her as unwomanly because she won't remarry:

"Listen, buster, it's always been the same for your lot to have it your way. No sweat. No pack-drill. Not a tuppenny cuss for the woman you sleep with, the kids you sire. If there's anywhere in the world one of you who actually likes women or kids, the rest of you think he's unnatural, a poof. It's manly not to care. My

God, how manly! So I play it your way and I'm the unnatural one. According to you. But believe me, oh do believe me, I'm not playing. I just am that way. Am. And you don't like it. Well, we've had to put up with centuries of it played your way and now you can't tolerate one little outbreak of honesty from the other side. The enemy. Buddy, you'll just have to tolerate it. Shove off!" (p. 52)

Despite such self-assurance, however, Doss is powerless to mount any effective opposition to the male brutishness so deeply ingrained within the community. Gabby, for all her relatively privileged squatter background and her contempt for the values of Allbut, is made vulnerable by a yearning for love and understanding, and thirteen-year-old Emmie Colley, living in a shack by the lake with her feckless, irresponsible father, is more vulnerable still, a desired treasure and an object of prey.

The town is paradigmatic both of Australia and some of the most characteristic aspects of its society. Gabby imagines a landscape dominated by those in authority who would like to imprison the very countryside if they could:

I can vision cops and councillors striding the upland country of the Australian nightmare, lurching over dream canvasses of drought-rind with the whole throbbing blue of the zenith trapped behind bars. (p. 63)

Her father also sees the land as a place that submits readily to domination:

"... all Australia has done for two centuries — you know that old joke about rape? — is lie back and think of England. No. I'm not quite right there. Now she thinks of the States, Japan and France as well. Even West Germany. . . . She's a regular scrubber of a country, eh? Not even a good tart. Does it with anyone anywhere any time — and doesn't get paid. . . . This country's like a dame with hot pants — give give give to any takers. . . . I speak of course of her economic ploys, not the sexual habits of her country-women." (p. 39)

But the male identification of women with the land is suggested very forcibly in the novel. Gabby's father talks about a country of myth-fits, and Doss later says: " 'Islands might sound marvellous, lovey, but that's another myth. Like men. They're the biggest myth of the lot' " (p. 51). Australia is an island continent with

myths created by men who have largely mythologized themselves.

In her exploration of the myth and the myth-fits, Astley focuses on the figure of Wafer Wax who, haunted by the imminence of world-wide nuclear disaster, has returned to Australia, "the perfect bomb shelter," and then retreated to Allbut, "the shelter within the shelter." His interest in books, his gentleness and his readiness to side with outcasts and unfortunates in the face of local opinion arouse in the town an uneasiness, which changes first to resentment and then to venomous hatred when a piece of rock he has picked up on the way to Allbut because of its beauty turns out to be sapphire. The townspeople, refusing to credit Wafer's inability to remember where he found it, demand that he lead them to the site so they can stake claims and make their fortunes. The gemstone's inner gleam corresponds to Wafer, who, with his inner vision, "moves in his bone cage like a torch of shuttered light." His indifference to material values and aspirations makes him appear, to Gabby and particularly to Emmie, a shelter, a fortress against the violence and brutality of the world. For Wafer the piece of sapphire is a symbol: "finding it and this place came more or less together. I saw it as my luck" (p. 80). But it is also associated with Emmie in the portrait Gabby paints of her "with its hazy blues, a stilled light within its centre" (p. 55); the ambiguous relationship developing between Wafer and the young girl finally forces him into the clutches of the hostile town as she becomes identified with the gem-field which other characters seek so eagerly.

The fever of fossicking which surges through the town is the pursuit of a mirage, the dream of the big strike bringing instant riches without having to give anything in return. Wafer challenges the assumption that it is possible to pick up a fortune straight off the ground: "Nothing comes that way." But his own find, his luck, makes him appear special, and consequently an object of resentment: "What's so special about you, you don't have to grub away for years?" (p. 86). Astley implies that gold fever and its attendant fantasies have played a significant part in the development of Australian consciousness, marking it with a belief that success is dependent largely on luck, and her images of a ravaged landscape and a raped land are a comment-

ary on men who take without giving, either to the land or to other people. The country, like St. Lawrence's rack, "provides terrible tensions between landscape and flesh" (p. 97). For Wafer, the bare, bleak landscape around Allbut is a place of vision: "'Do you think . . . that the desert fathers were fossickers for more than the gold of God?'" (p. 86) and the success with which he cultivates his inner vision is represented by his few acres with fruit trees and vegetables which to Gabby's eyes appear "obscenely green."

Wafer's fate is linked to that of his counterpart and antagonist, Moon, another stranger to the town — their backgrounds oddly comparable. Wafer, son of an Australian journalist and a Swedish woman, saw his father blown to pieces in the London blitz. Moon, son of a G.I. and an Australian war bride, grew up in Louisiana, abandoning home after his father's death, ending up a conscript "with a licence to kill" in a combat unit in Vietnam, where Wafer served as stretcher-bearer in a medical corps. During his life as a roaming adventurer, Moon, tormented by sexual desire and sexual loathing, has committed murder more than once, whereas the peaceable Wafer is both relaxed and detached about sexual encounters. Even their names link the two men together, for the round white circle of the moon is comparable to the round white circle of the eucharistic Wafer. Moon's treasure is his gun, "which turned a lovely cold blue in the torch beams," a phallic symbol that also expresses his ferocious puritan conscience. But it is he who recognizes what the lump of gemstone is, understanding that it represents more than material wealth. He deeply resents Wafer's vision and inner peace, believing paradoxically that he can be forced, at gunpoint if necessary, to hand these over to others:

"Look at him. Some delicate-blooded reader who's come to a god-forsaken place like this drummed on by a dream he's got of finding his own fucking Eden. A two foot thick concrete sheltered Garden of Paradise. Oh God, I know. I've heard the crazy stories from Colley. Some kind of gentle nut making it for himself. He can make it for us, too, the sod. If this place is his shelter, his bloody Eden, by God I bet he remembers the portals." (p. 92)

In his belief that he can seize by brute force whatever will bring

him fulfilment, Moon tries to rape Emmie who, after fighting him off, tells Wafer and Gabby how he kept repeating the words *verte desnuda* which Wafer interprets: “‘To see you naked is to remember the earth’” (p. 68). Emmie, the landscape, and the sapphire are all identified with one another as objects of male lust and desire for dominance.

The conflict between Wafer and Moon assumes its most bizarre form in an obscene male ritual conducted in the town, unknown to the women, every two or three years just before new year, whenever the time seems ripe. Two men with bull's horns attached to their heads fight on all fours, each seeking to gore the other. On this occasion, Gabby, Emmie, and Doss all insist on being present as Moon challenges Wafer, and the other men compel him to participate. An excoriating attack on the corrupt aspects of mateship and the value men attach to conflict and competition, the scene sums up every contest in male prowess, from sporting matches to the most violent and destructive militarism. The cuckold symbolism of the horned heads and the animality of the encounter render it ludicrous as well as loathsome. Sexual tensions heighten the struggle as Moon seeks to punish Wafer for his relationship with Emmie, revealing the homosexual impulse behind such conflict when he gores Wafer in the thigh. Because “certain things are sacred,” the police sergeant intervenes to prevent permanent damage: “‘The old crown jewels. . . They ought to be on the national emblem along with the beer can’” (p. 130). The scene echoes those ritual contests in antiquity when communities believed their fertility and prosperity depended on the defeat and killing of the ceremonial king by his successor, as the Christlike Wafer is vanquished by the diabolical Moon, prefiguring his ultimate death at the hands of the police sergeant. But the town is headed for decay and ultimate ruin as the majority of its citizens align themselves with the psychopath Moon. The world of male camaraderie, with its perverse values and inhuman rituals, is also linked with destruction on a much wider scale:

I've watched women on the telly crying in Israel and Syria and Palestine. I've watched them emptied out of their houses in Cambodia, Afghanistan, Soweto. I've watched them in the bread

queues in Poland. And I've thought, "If only the men would go away." (p. 132)

But for all her revulsion, Gabby in the end aligns herself with the town against Wafer. As an artist she creates her own story, for she is the painter dabbling on light and colour, and the town is a collection of her sketches: "This whole horrible canvas will have the detail of a Breughel and the alarm of a Goya" (p. 50). Initially, she attempts to create something positive, beautiful, and solacing out of the ruin of her own life and its unpromising context in Allbut. "Somewhere, I told myself, there is wit and gentleness and grace" (p. 4), and it is almost as if she has conjured up in Wafer a man who might meet her innermost needs.

I am drawing Wafer and this sketch, done from the flesh, not my memories of it, will be the only record I am ever to have. (p. 63)

But Gabby feels unequal to the image she has conjured up, for her faith in herself has been totally eroded by her dismal love-life and her existence in a milieu where she is marginal and unvalued: "The only gentleness I ever found was in people who could do nothing for me in the way society would want: Archie Wetters gone now, and Rosie Wonga in a tin humpy the town hated to see me enter" (p. 185). As an artist, she is at her best with colour, but colour is also the word a fossicker uses to describe traces of a valuable mineral, and Gabby is driven by the same desire for possession as the men in the town when they go looking for the pipe of sapphire. Seeking a grand passion, she craves Wafer's total involvement and concern, bitterly resenting the bond he develops with Emmie, who, associated throughout the novel with vision, is also a potential artist, writer of words that touch unknowns. The note Wafer leaves behind for Emmie confirms Gabby's sense of her own inadequacy:

There is a pool of light on my table, a golden circle. I am turning it out. (p. 145)

She feels she has no place within the circle of golden light signifying the communion of spirit between Wafer and Emmie, representative of that youthful innocence which has gone from her forever. Tormented by a sense of lost blessing in much the

way that Moon is driven by sexual guilt, Gabby's desire for Wafer turns to such hatred that she precipitates the final act of violence which brings about his death, for Gabby has conjured up Moon the psychopath through her art just as she has Wafer: "I paint Moon into jungle landscapes like a Rousseau tiger" (p. 36).

Gabby's failure as a human being is bound up with her failure as an artist, for the society she grew up in moulded both her personality and her art:

Oh for five years now I have been painting the very heart of boredom and no one has recognized it: the ennui of landscapes yawning stale-breathed before the inevitability of seasons, the weltschmerz of battery people, cloned cars, the lassitude of coastal tides mumbling the same things over and over to an equally uninterested shoreline. All that clichéd wrack! My leaves droop with green tedium, city skylines collapse in exhaustion and even my abstractions of those things secrete what I can only call an interesting fatigue. (p. 7)

Gabby's meagre act of restitution at the end of the novel is a desperate attempt to give some kind of meaning to her shattered life. Ten years later she returns to the now deserted town, and settling herself in the ruins of Wafer's bomb shelter, she writes out his note to Emmie word for word, places it under a piece of stone and sits down to wait. She has learned at last to accept the fact of her own mortality, and made some reconnection with her youthful self, believing that she too might still have some place within the circle of golden light from which she felt so excluded on reading Wafer's note to Emmie. There are faint suggestions in the novel that Emmie may fare better than Gabby because her early exposure to male treachery and brutality has forced her to develop a faith in herself and her own values which the association with Wafer has further confirmed. This ray of hope, however, is clouded by the way Emmie is associated with Wafer's aunt Clancy, who was raped at fifteen, and ran away from home never to be heard of again, but who may be the same person as Archie Wetters, whose name we are told was originally Clancy. The price of Emmie's survival might well invoke the denial of her own womanhood.

In a society where men are the myth, women must be myth-fits. Standing outside the myth, the woman artist may choose to ignore it, creating her own independent mythic vision. On the other hand, she may seek to confront and expose the male oriented values which form so important a part of Australian national myth, in an attempt to assert the validity of her own experience as artist and woman, though, as Beverley Farmer and Thea Astley suggest, this may prove costly, even putting at risk her own survival. There is, however, a third possibility whereby she takes hold of the myth, adapting it to fit female experience. In her play *The Man From Mukinupin*, Dorothy Hewett suggests how Australian national myth might be redeemed through the efforts of women artists. As in *An Item From the Late News* the setting is a tiny outback town, this time in Western Australia where rain is uncertain and the wheat harvest precariously gathered on the edge of the great salt plain, with the action covering a period from just before until just after the First World War. Humour combines with fantasy to undermine some of the crudities of national myth, and our belief in the possibility of its redemption is encouraged by the tender mockery with which it is presented.

The bleakness of the surrounding landscape is a reflection of the attitudes imposed on land and society by European settlers. Many of the women characters regard themselves as exiles from a life of hope and creativity. Edie Perkins laments:

I was a city girl. I'd never *seen* the real country. At first we lived in that tin humpy at the back of the store, and I hung up all the family portraits, tinted to kill. They stared down at us, night and day; and sometimes I heard the dingoes howling from the salt lakes and the blacks... The willy-willies blew the dust and the sheets of corrugated iron along the main street. Sometimes I thought, "I'll die of the loneliness"—but, of course I didn't. They were such long, hot summers; but I must have got used to them.¹³

Even the disreputable Widow Tuesday claims: "I was a civilised 'uman being before Mr Tuesday brought me to this God forsakin' 'ole" (p. 37), while Miss Clemmy, the former circus artist describes herself and her sister Miss Clarry as "exiled here like shags on rocks" (p. 61), and the actress Mercy Montebello

finds the town unchanged on her return after a five-year absence: “dust still as thick, silence still as deep, flyspots still as various” (p. 74). Harry Tuesday’s song suggests it is the men, with their attitude to material gain, who have made the place a wilderness:

New Holland is a barren place,
in it there grows no grain,
nor any habitation
wherein for to remain.

She is my gold, my darling,
she gives me drought and rain,
when I plough and sow her
upon the saltbush plain,

She is my bitter heritage,
she is my darling one,
she drowns me in the winter
and she bakes me in the sun.

I’ll plant her and I’ll rape her,
I will not run her down,
upon her gold and torment
I’ll build my shanty town,

Cut her plains with sheep pads,
mine the black beach sand,
push the iron ranges down
and salt the Great South Land.

And then she will repay me,
for she will give no grain,
nor any habitation
wherein for to remain. (pp. 62-63)

Mukinupin is a divided world where daylight life has its dark underside, with the worlds of light and darkness represented by paired characters played by the same actor. But in the moral framework of the play, the world of darkness redeems the world of light, creating hopes that the wasteland may become fertile once again. The patriarchal authority which represents the main threat to human values in the play comes not from men bonded together in rituals of mateship and heavy drinking but from a narrowly puritan materialism, endorsed by characters who crave and assert ideals of bourgeois respectability. Such attitudes also give rise to pressures sending young men off to die in the war:

Face the test of nationhood,
 Keep Australia free,
 England needs you, Jack, to fight
 For me, and me, and me.

Your country needs you in the trenches,
 Follow your masters into war,
 And if you cop it we'll remember
 You at the Mukinupin store. (p. 43)

The town is later proud that although "not the faintest breath of these horrors ravaged our fair young shores . . . we gave our sons to face the test of manhood . . ." (p. 67). The social conformity valued by the daylight world is perceived as sterile and life-denying, while vitality and future promise are generated by the despised outcasts in the world of darkness which is its mirror image. Eek Perkins, with his materialistic values and emotionally repressed nature, is paired with his mad twin brother Zeek, stargazer and water-diviner, for whom the bush is a place of vision:

He hasn't been right since he did that perish in the desert, and they brought him in with the skin shrivelled off him like bacon rind. They said he followed a mirage for days, crawling naked under the sun. (p. 45)

The travelling salesman, Cecil Brunner, a sad and faintly perverse figure who yearns for Polly and carries a line of manchester goods and ladies' underwear round remote country towns, has his counterpart in the Flasher down by the creek whose manifest perversity is represented as a form of sexual energy. The hero and heroine of the daylight world, Jack Tuesday, the grocer's boy, and Polly, Eek Perkins' legitimate daughter, are characters with lives in the process of formation, threatened with the denial of love and malformed souls, for Polly is terrified of sexuality and losing her social position, while Jack is faced with the choice of becoming a mere conformist or else an outcast. Their doubles are Jack's wild brother Harry, a shearer with a prison record that links him to Australia's convict past, and Lily Perkins, generally known as Touch of the Tar, Eek's bastard daughter by an aboriginal woman. For Mukinupin is haunted by a deed of darkness — the massacre of the local aboriginal tribe, carried out under Eek's leadership at the instigation of his jealous wife

Eddie — from which Touch of the Tar is sole survivor. This massacre is later linked in the play with the slaughter of Harry Tuesday's platoon in the war, which he alone survives.

Another group of characters are key figures in reconciling the worlds of light and darkness. They are theatre people, the touring actors Max and Mercy Montebello, who present a performance of *The Strangling of Desdemona* in the Mukinupin town hall, and the two sisters Miss Clemmy and Miss Clarry Hummer who have now retired to Mukinupin at the end of Miss Clemmy's career with Wirth's Circus and Miss Clarry's as wardrobe mistress with J. C. Williamson's. The world of art, although comically presented, helps to heal the divisions within the town. It reflects the community to itself, as when Max and Mercy hold up a mirror to racial tensions past and present through their travesty of *Othello*, and it also indicates alternative possibilities to the narrow choice between living a life of social conformity or becoming an outcast when Mercy Montebello offers Jack and Polly a chance to leave the world of Mukinupin through a career in the chorus with J. C. Williamson: "they'll never come back. They're playing *Chu Chin Chow* with Oscar Ashe" (p. 121). While healing and reconciliation are achieved through art, it is women artists who become the source of power in the play, with Mercy Montebello bringing happiness to the daylight world and Miss Clemmy presiding over the rituals of the night people. But Hewett, along with Farmer and Astley, envisages the woman artist as a survivor who generally has to endure injury and hard times. Miss Clemmy was a tight-rope artist: "I couldn't dance much, y'know Clarry, I couldn't really hit a high C, and my legs were terrible, but by God . . . I could walk that high wire" (p. 61). For Hewett, the image of exaltedly maintaining a precarious balance sums up the woman artist's predicament:

CLEMMY: . . . I only hung by my teeth from the Big Top in dyed pink, see-through muslin.

CLARRY: You were a marvel, dear. If only you'd used a net.

CLEMMY: I ascended in a balloon above Melbourne, singing tra-la-la-boom-de-ay.

But the heights are dangerous and Miss Clemmy fell from glory,

returning crippled to live out the rest of her days in Mukinupin: "I could see the five Wirth sisters playing at statues on their powdered horses, looking up, everybody looking up . . . and then . . . suddenly . . ." (p. 60). In the latter part of the play Mercy Montebello has also fallen upon hard times. Her looks are fading and her income greatly reduced since her husband collapsed into the footlights while strangling her as Desdemona. But she is an old trooper, determined to try her luck yet again in Mukinupin.

Through her insight the artist gathers together and focuses the revitalizing powers of nature and the human potential for goodwill to restore harmony within society and infuse it with creative energy. The ceremonies of the night people are concerned with growth and fertility. Zeek the water-diviner laments the absence of water, which he associates with the chaos of creation, proclaiming the local water too salt to drink, but at the play's opening he and his companions mingle references to pagan fertility rituals, harvest-festival hymns and Australian landscape images in a promise of fertility and abundant harvests.

The bells will toll and gold will roll
 Around us in a ring
 We'll bless all Mukinupin
 When we bring the harvest in.

We'll dance the Five Man's Morris
 We'll hear the teams roll by
 When the evening star has vanished
 And the cross hangs in the sky.

Bringin' in the sheaves, bringin' in the sheaves
 We'll bless all Mukinupin bringin' in the sheaves. (p. 6)

But for the blessing to be conferred, Touch of the Tar and Harry Tuesday must be drawn out of their love/hate relationship into one based on mutual love and respect. They can love each other truly only if they value themselves, and in their movement throughout the world of daylight and darkness this is what they eventually learn to do. Harry represents the rebellious, lawless element which infused such energy into the early history of Australia, and although he returns broken and shell-shocked from the war, the play suggests he will be restored to wholeness by joining

his fortunes to Touch of the Tar, who herself represents the vital energies of the land:

Lily Perkins is me name, the creekbed is me station,
I am the spirit of the place, the colour of the nation,
Oh! boomerai an' mind yer eye an' don' kick up a shindy,
We'll all waltz in and out agen an' dance the wild corroboree.
(p. 106)

It is during one of the scenes with the night people that Harry finally commits himself to Touch of the Tar. The rains fall, ensuring the harvest promised at the opening of the play, and Miss Clemmy and Zeek Perkins between them celebrate the union of Harry and Lily in language drawn from the marriage masque in *The Tempest*. This act of reconciliation in the world of darkness also makes possible the wedding of Jack and Polly in the daylight world, brought about through the good graces of Mercy Montebello, who also rescues poor Cecil Brunner from a life of emotional deprivation by marrying him herself. The former tight rope dancer and the faded actress, who will now retire from the stage to settle in Mukinupin, have restored harmony and established the possibility of new beginnings through acts of mercy, for Miss Clemmy's name, Clementine, also means mercy.

Women writers in Australia share that exciting freedom of imagination which Janet Frame asserts is available to writers in a new land who, able to begin at the beginning, can play a major part in its mapping and mythmaking. In helping form the unformed places they also, by charting the still relatively little known territory of female experience, extend the countries of the mind and offer greater access to them. By establishing their own mythic tradition, they also help nourish the imaginative life of future generations of women readers and artists. But the woman writer has to contend with an existent national myth which is heavily male-oriented; by participating in this, she puts herself in danger because of the constant threat it poses to her self esteem. In exposing its limitations she reveals herself to be a myth-fit, but in refusing to fit the myth, she may, through redeeming it, enable it to fit her.

NOTES

- ¹ Janet Frame, *The Envoy From Mirror City: An Autobiography*, vol. 3 (London: Women's Press, 1985), p. 19.
- ² Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1984), p. 32.
- ³ Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1985).
- ⁴ Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958) p. v.
- ⁵ Brian Matthews, "Eve Exonerated: Henry Lawson's Unfinished Love Stories," in *Who Is She? Images of Women in Australian Fiction*, ed. Shirley Walker (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), p. 50.
- ⁶ Henry Lawson, *Collected Prose*, ed. Colin Roderick, vol. 1: *Short Stories and Sketches 1888-1922* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972), p. 139.
- ⁷ Ron Edwards, *Australian Bawdy Ballads*, Australian Folklore — Occasional Paper No. 2 (Holloway Beach: Rams Skull Press, 1973), p. 7.
- ⁸ Craig McGregor, *Profile of Australia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), p. 61.
- ⁹ Elizabeth Jolley, "Self Portrait: A Child Went Forth," in *Stories* (Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1984), p. 306.
- ¹⁰ Rosemary Dobson, *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980), pp. 89-90.
- ¹¹ Beverley Farmer, *Alone* (Carlton: Sisters Publishing, 1980), p. 27. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.
- ¹² Thea Astley, *An Item From the Late News* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 10. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.
- ¹³ Dorothy Hewett, *The Man From Mukinupin* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1980), p. 101. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.