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Voicing and voices in two Australian short stories: "The hairy man" (Henry Lawson 1907) and "The curse" (Katharine Susannah Prichard 1932)

Denise Ginfray

- 1 In an essay entitled "De la parole à l'écriture", Roland Barthes exposes the economy of gain and loss that rules the shift from the oral to the written message, and which he calls "*la trappe de la scription*". The critic analyses the relationships between "*la parole, l'écrit et l'écriture*" (utterance, transcription and *écriture*) in terms of discursive strategies: syntax, expressiveness, impact on the receptor:

Voici d'abord, en gros, ce qui tombe dans la **trappe de la scription** [...] En premier lieu, nous perdons, c'est évident, **une innocence** ; non pas que la parole soit d'elle-même fraîche, naturelle, spontanée, véridique, expressive d'une sorte d'intériorité pure ; bien au contraire, notre parole (surtout en public), est immédiatement théâtrale, elle emprunte ses tours (au sens stylistique et ludique du terme) à tout un ensemble de codes culturels et oratoires: la parole est toujours tactique ; mais en passant à l'écrit, c'est l'innocence même de cette tactique, perceptible à qui sait écouter, comme d'autres savent lire, que nous gommons ; [...]

Autre perte : **la rigueur de nos transitions**. Souvent, nous "filons" notre discours à bas prix. Ce "filé", ce flumen orationis dont Flaubert avait le dégoût, c'est la consistance de notre parole. [...] Lorsque nous parlons, lorsque nous "exposons" notre pensée au fur et à mesure que le langage lui vient, nous croyons bon d'exprimer à haute voix les inflexions de notre recherche ; [...] de là, dans notre parole publique, tant de mais et de donc, tant de reprises ou de dénégations explicites. Ce n'est pas que ces petits mots aient une grande valeur logique ; ce sont, si l'on veut, des explétifs de la pensée. L'écriture, souvent, en fait l'économie ; elle ose l'asyndète, cette figure coupante qui serait insupportable à la voix, autant qu'une castration.

Cela rejoint une dernière perte, infligée à la parole par sa transcription : celle de

toutes ces **bribes de langage** – du type “n’est-ce pas” – que le linguiste rattacherait sans doute à l’une des grandes fonctions du langage, la fonction phatique ou d’interpellation ; lorsque nous parlons, nous voulons que notre interlocuteur nous écoute ; nous réveillons alors son attention par des interpellations vides de sens (du type : “allô, allô, vous m’entendez bien ?”) ; très modestes, ces mots, ces expressions ont pourtant quelque chose de discrètement dramatique : ce sont des appels, des modulations – dirais-je, pensant aux oiseaux : des chants ? – à travers lesquels un corps cherche un autre corps. C’est ce chant gauche, plat, ridicule, lorsqu’il est écrit – qui s’éteint dans notre écriture.¹ (emphasis mine)

- 2 My purpose here, is to show how the art of short story telling, so deeply rooted in the tradition of folk tales and in oral transmission, can cope with the constraints of written communication—a mode where both sender and sendee belong to a different space-time continuum, where the literary *énoncé* is submitted to a twofold process of de-contextualization and re-contextualization, where two desires mirror each other and eventually meet.
- 3 In this paper, I will examine the oral quality of “The Hairy Man”², a short story that belongs to the bush yarn tradition, i.e. a form of narrative whose main focus is the “yowie”, the equivalent of the *yeti*. With its rhetoric that consists mainly in voicing a sense of national identity, it revisits the oral past through a poetics grounded on the rich flavour of vernacular language, on the story-teller’s know-how, on the integration of authorial comments that manipulate the plot through strategies of omission or suggestion.
- 4 “The Curse”³ serves as a counterpart to Lawson’s yarn. It reads like ‘a theatre of voices’: structurally speaking, it is an innovative piece of poetic prose where sketchy descriptions of the bush landscape alternate with elliptic dialogues that tear through the textual space/fabric. Linguistically speaking, Prichard’s story relies heavily on the plastic and acoustic dimension of words, and subordinates the plot to the dramatized presence of human utterance. It also revolves around the discrepancy between wording and voicing; as it is, its “written orality” emanates from the interplay of silences, implicit statements, as well as from the mesh of voices that enhance the overwhelming presence of vacuity, dereliction and loss.

“The Hairy Man”

Voicing national identity

- 5 In Lawson’s Australia, it was the bush that stirred the imagination, and it was the bush yarn—a tale conveyed by word of mouth—that provided both a realistic view of life there and a voice to turn-of-the-century Australian nationalism. The bush yarn had a style of its own, midway between speaking and writing; its dominant feature was calculated casualness, its favourite subject-matter, the celebration of the basic Australian virtues confronted with “*the weirdly melancholy and aggressively lonely Australian bush.*” (64). In spite of their highly referential dimension, bush ballads were acknowledged as pieces of fiction, as “true lies”, “make-believes” so to speak, i. e., stories whose main function was first to entertain generations of listeners. And it is precisely the relay of so many “*reliable liars*” across decades that legitimates the ‘reality’ of the tale. This is what happens with the Hairy Man:

He had been heard of and seen and described so often and by so many reliable liars that most people agreed that there must be something. (64)

- 6 Henry Lawson is still a reference today in Australian literature and there is still perhaps a bush mystique that surrounds his name. Born in 1867, he was a militant, a nationalist icon and a regular contributor to *The Bulletin*⁴, nicknamed "*The Bushman's Bible*", a weekly journal founded in Sydney in 1880. He did consider himself as a spokesman for his country and culture:

From the age of seventeen, until now, with every disadvantage and under all sorts of hard conditions, I have written for Australia, and all Australia, and for Australia only. I was the first to introduce the Bushman to the world. I believe that I have done more than any other writer to raise the national spirit and the military spirit in Australia.⁵

- 7 In his tale, local colour stems from the repetitive references to the country itself, to its environment, to its landscapes, to its patterns of thought and behaviour. Referential illusion is achieved through the evocation/depiction of a specific mode of living with its trades and people often confined to types: "*the mounted constable*", "*the young doctor*", and Andy, "*the hairiest and the ugliest man in the district*" with his "*peculiar shade of brogue*." (72). Each detail – each "*effet de réel*", to use R. Barthes's categorization – appeals to the native audience's⁶ historical, geographical and cultural background:

It was the day after Anniversary Day. Dave and Jim were patriots, and therefore were feeling very repentant and shaky. (65)

It's young Foley", said Jack, "the son of that old timber-getter that's just taken up a selection long the road near Home Rule." (70)

- 8 The mood behind it is to make of the story a playground for the recognition and projection of a national consciousness and an Australian patriotic feeling. For the bush yarn was originally more than a mere social intercourse and cement: its aim was also to construct a collective national subject: the bush hero, half factual, half fictional.

- 9 The narrative itself contains all the *topoi* of the genre: insistence on class rather than race or gender, on male bonding rather than on marriage links, on rural life rather than urban life; it also includes ideological clues, "*idéologèmes*"⁷ (in Mikhaïl Bakhtine's terminology) dictated by some aspects of socio-political life in Australia at the beginning of the century. They take the form of common sayings or ready-made sentences that integrate the frame narrator's discourse and may eventually be overheard as authorial comments: "*Bush mateship is a grand thing, drunk or sober*" (67); "*Andy, like most slow-thinking men, often did desperate things in a crisis*." (70)

- 10 The tale relates anecdotes about commonplace people, "*simple-minded, honest, good-natured fellows*" (66), mainly 'bush mates' (for Australia at that time was a man's world) portrayed with humour:

[...] an angel came along on horseback. It was Jack Jones from Mudgee-Budgee, a drinking mate of theirs, a bush-telegraph joker, and the ne'er-do-well of the district. (67).

- 11 The story dramatizes everyday experience and is full of practices (gambling, heavy drinking), domestic imagery (kangaroos, pubs, huts), ghosts of all sorts, "*spooks and bogies*", and legendary figures like the Hairy Man, a riddle that gives rise to harsh speculation:

The most popular and enduring theory was that he was a gorilla, or an orang-outang which had escaped from a menagerie long ago. He was also said to be a new kind of kangaroo, or the last of a species of Australian animals which hadn't been discovered yet. (64; see also 67-68)

- 12 For the Hairy Man does belong to national memory; of course, it is nothing but a fantasy whose function is to channel collective fears of the racial, ethnic, cultural other. In Lawson's short story, the Hairy Man as motif appears and disappears like the Loch Ness monster; it sometimes gives the impression of getting lost in the proliferation of minor stories (68-69) that forms the intricate pattern of the main narrative, before it springs up to the surface of the text, like the return of the repressed. (68)
- 13 On closer reading though, it soon becomes clear that the enigmatic Hairy Man serves also as a pretext for the bush yarn as folk-tale and as a pre-text to Lawson's narrative. In other words, both stories are involved in an intertextual relationship where the yarn is the hypo-text and the short story the hyper-text. The motif dear to the tradition runs like a *leitmotiv* in Lawson's story. And it is the presence in filigree of the 'monster' that sets it within its cultural context, within space and time altogether ("As far as I can remember, the yarn of the Hairy Man was told in the Blue Mountains district of New South Wales.", 64); it is it that generates a multiplicity of digressions, speeches and dialogues where a great many distant and different voices intersect and interplay, penetrate the frame narrative. In the whole process, it summons figures that belong to a collective imagination where everything is dramatized and intensified.

The bush yarn revisited

- 14 Lawson's short story is a first-person narrative that is conspicuously reader-oriented, i. e., it rests mainly on a special type of encoding that privileges the phatic function of language. It can be argued that the truth of Lawson's story lies not so much in the contents itself as in the various stylistic devices that all aim to arouse the receptor's curiosity and pleasure.
- 15 The story-line is quite easy to grasp but far from being straightforward, it lingers here and there between analepses and prolepses, meanders across embedded stories (67), subplots, digressions (68), *apartés* (66, 70), and pieces of dialogues (70). All those textual units spin the yarn of the Hairy Man; all of them comfort the illusion of the narrator's presence and fuel the audience's desire for the plot. Apart from a few misunderstandings and a type of humour that rests mainly on low comic devices like exaggeration⁸, Lawson's discursive strategies rely on the fine blend of private conversations with collective discourses as well as on the combination of the codes of story-telling with the qualities of informal conversation. And yet, in spite of its apparent directness, his tale is no random talk at all: instead, it is a most elaborate mode, namely a written *énoncé* that strives to keep alive the qualities of oral speech. Not only did Lawson choose the outside reality as a framework for his fiction; it is his special care for the immediacy of oral narratives that prompted his pragmatics of fiction-writing. His major stylistic gambit was twofold:
- 16 1/ to perpetuate the bush yarn tradition and become a national voice in his turn – which he did.
- 17 2/ to shape a mode of story-telling that would combine the parameters of oral speech constitutive of folk tales, fairy tales and yarns with the formal elements characteristic of written productions. Lawson was certainly well aware that the shift from one mode to another might endanger the specificity of a literary genre that must respect the codes of verbal exchange, even though it strives to go well beyond them.

- 18 The narrative technique adopted by Lawson was first and foremost a means to reproduce the expressiveness of oral speech and to compensate for the absence of the many forms of non-verbal language proper to oral transmission, such as body language, (gestures, movements, hesitations, pauses, silences) and the human voice whose modulations and inflexions constitute a major marker of oral communication that regulates the receptor's activity and maintains connection. For the *schéma interlocutif* that serves as a model to the written text cannot be restricted to linguistic communication *stricto sensu*: it is a semiotic process/activity whose modes of reception are part and parcel of its own modes of production.⁹ To sum up: Lawson's poetics of story-writing is not exactly a matter of transcription, of paring down the narrative discourse and getting rid of the superfluous present in oral speech (which Barthes calls its "scories"); it is rather, a matter of integrating the vividness of verbal exchange so as to seduce and entertain through the mimetic powers of language.
- 19 In the role of the story-teller ready to regale his audience with savoury stories about the bush, the narrator of "The Hairy Man" puts his know-how to the test: he codifies his discourse most carefully, inviting his potential receptor to share his nostalgia for the "rare old times" when story-teller and listener would meet by the camp-fire. The result is this: far from being monologic, his *énoncé* is, by essence, dialogic¹⁰ each time the narrative voice introduces fragments of reported speech¹¹ in its discourse, or each time it sprinkles the national idiom with different lexical registers and adopts both its characters' and audience's *clichés* and idiolects with a view to making his tale more realistic and the proximity of the voice more perceptible. For, like many pieces of fiction that belong to the realistic mode, "The Hairy Man", is grounded on an illusion of phonocentricity that matches character with voice in order to create an impression of immediacy. Here, the voice of each protagonist is both identifiable and identified. In this talkative text full of verbs of utterance (chatter, murmur, lisp, mutter) and of terms that qualify the modalities and intensities of the human voice, the variations in height and intensity proper to each locutor are constantly foregrounded. Here is a fine selection of them:
- Where Mahoney said "shtone" Foley would say "stawn" – a brogue with a drawl which sounded ridiculous in an angry man. He drawled most of his oaths. (72) [...]
It seems that he was splitting fencing timber down 'beyant the new cimitry". (72)[...]
]
He didn't bargain for "thim blankly hail-sta-w-ns". (72)[...]
"I thawt the wimmin would stop."
" Whoy did ye think that?" asked Mahoney. "What would they shtop for?". "How th'hell was I to know? Curiosity, I suppose. (72)

- 20 In many places, the "natural" syntactic bonds proper to oral speech are maintained. In Lawson's tale, the repetitive use of "but" and "so" hints at a deliberate intention to imitate the simplistic syntax of yarns: those seemingly insignificant grammatical words, ("*des explétifs de la pensée*", Barthes) signal the spontaneous flow of thoughts characteristic of verbal communication:

They weren't sure with whom, that was the trouble, **but** had a drink-lurid recollection of having got off their horses several times on the way home to fight each other. They were too sick to eat or to smoke yet; **so** they sat outside the hut with their nerves all unstrung and their imaginations therefore particularly active. (65; emphasis mine)

- 21 It also happens that the syntactic line is dropped to leave room for metaleptic fragments or parentheses that signal the story-teller's presence and control over the narrative – a mode that does not exclude the rhetoric of oral speech:

The day before they had both sworn to him—solemnly, affectionately, **and** at last impatiently, **and** even angrily—that **they wouldn't** get drunk, **that they wouldn't** bet, **that they wouldn't** draw a penny on the contract, **that they'd** buy a week's provisions first thing, **that they'd** bring the things home with them on their horses, and **that they'd** come home early. **And** now—they'd spent his money as well as their own! Andy made no remarks and asked no questions when they woke at midday; **and** they took his silence in a chastened spirit. (66; emphasis mine)

, honest, good-natured fellows whose ideas come slowly, who are slow at arriving at decisions (**and whose decisions are nearly inevitably right**), when he'd once made up his mind nothing short of a severe shock of earthquake could move him. (66-67; emphasis mine)

Some said there were stones as big as hen's eggs; **some said** the storm lasted over an hour, **and some said more**—but the time was probably half or three-quarters of an hour. (69; emphasis mine)

- 22 All in all, what Lawson tries to do here, is nothing but imitate the syntactic pattern characteristic of the discourse of the yarn, such as it appears in so many reported dialogues:

[Andy speaking] "He stood up in the cart **and** hammered into the horse, **and** galloped it all the way home, full-bat up to the door; then he jumped down, leaving the cart and horse standing there, **and** went in **and** lay down on the bed, **and** wouldn't speak to anybody for two hours." (68; emphasis mine)

"The Curse"

- 23 In startling contrast to "The Hairy Man", Katharine S. Prichard's "The Curse" offers another facet of Australian literature that focuses in its own way on what Lawson himself called "*the bush with its haunting ghostliness*".

A theatre of voices

- 24 Reading Prichard's short story we first find ourselves at grips with the conspicuous dialectics between three compact blocks of narrative prose and a set of three dialogues written in a minimalist style. In many places, blank spaces break through the textual fabric and mark the alternation of a first-person narrative (a very discrete "*we*") and sketchy utterances. The passages in paratactic prose form a sequence of three *tableaux* introduced by the homodiegetic narrator in the role of the eyewitness/listener. In company with his friends he is riding across the bush and as they reach a clearing, they are faced with a beautiful stretch of land, some kind of multi-coloured patchwork that surrounds a hut: "*Azure, magenta, tetratheca, mauve and turquoise: the hut, a wrecked ship in halcyon seas.*"
- 25 The story opens and ends with a description of the whole place that can read like stage directions and where negative notations ("*wrecked*", "*No sign or sound of life*") combine with the motifs of absence ("*leaves*") and utterance ("*chatter*", "*lispering*", "*whispering*", "*gossiping*"):

Azure, magenta, tetratheca, mauve and turquoise: the hut, a wrecked ship in halcyon seas.

Sun steeped the valley among folding hills, dark with red gum and jarrah. No sign or sound of life, but the life of the trees, squirt of a bird's song, a bird's body through stirring leaves. Chatter of leaves. Clatter and chatter of leaves, husky, frail. Small green tongues, lipping and clicking together, twisting over and licking each other; whispering, gossiping, as we rode into the clearing. (175)

- 26 In between: an enigmatic and reflexive *énoncé* that knits together different levels of utterance that all revolve around evil and malediction, in the form of the "curse", "Patterson's curse", at the origin of Alf's misfortune. At the diegetic level, "The Curse" tells the story of a bush man imprisoned for a minor offence. It is full of voices and sounds, but quite paradoxically, the human subject seems to be totally absent. In a way reminiscent of the "Interludes" of *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf, the fictional world seems to be "a world without a self" where the narrative consciousness/instance is overwhelmed by the commanding power of visual and acoustic *stimuli*.
- 27 The dialogues are highly stylized and carefully framed by the main discourse as if to prevent them from getting lost, dispersed. There are no reporting verbs (say, declare, answer, ask, add, claim...) – except in one place – and the subject-matter is Alf: the chap is the right opposite of the bush hero: "Gutless", "Lazy", "Didn't like work.", "Liked reading". As the locutors' laconic speeches gradually fill with information, we learn first that Alf has been sent to jail for he has stolen "a rifle, harness and bridle", and that a "fawn-coloured bitch" is waiting for his return:

'He's in gaol'
 'In gaol.'
 'In gaol?'
 'Ayeh!'
 Harness, a rifle and bridle.' (175)
 [...]
 'And the bitch...'
 'Tawny, fawn-coloured.'
 'Eyes like Alf's...'
 Light, empty eyes.' (176)

- 28 The whole account remains enigmatic in spite of the insistence on a few recurrent motifs:
1. the harshness of Australian everyday life:

'Rough-haired, chestnut...'
 'Weedy and starved looking.'
 'Alf?'
 'No, the brumby.'
 'Both of them.' (176)
 1. the hostility of natural landscape where "a noxious weed" turns dreams into nightmares and kills all hopes:

'The curse!'
 'Patterson's curse?'
 'A noxious weed...',
 'That's what it is, he says.'
 'Salt and poisonous as the sea.'
 'An enchanted sea.'
 'Sea of dreams.'
 'Dead sea.'
 [...]
 'Starved.'
 Took to stealing.'

'Little things at first ...'

'Bridle and tommy-axe.' (177)

1. Life in the bush with its traditional figures: the hut, kangaroo-dogs, kangaroo-tail soup, mates...

'Drowned, was he?

'Daft?'

'Not a bit...'

'Touched they said.'

'To let a place go, like this.'

'No.'

'Only done for.'

'gutless.'

'Lazy.'

'Liked reading.' (177)

- 29 They have no faces as if identity were erased; they are mere voices *over*, rootless voices that utter truncated segments of speech made of mono-syllabic words, nominal clauses and paratactic sentences that often lead to nowhere but to zones of silence materialized by dots and dashes in the text. (175, 176, 177, 178) As for Alf, he is essentially a ghostly presence, the subject of his friends' *énoncé*.

- 30 The dark core of the short story emerges from the second *tableau*. In it, the visual instance/narrative voice focuses on the landscape around Alf's derelict hut: we learn that "*the blue*" is in fact the meadow infested by a weed with blue flowers, originally an ornamental plant introduced into Australia in 1880 by a settler named Patterson and which soon proved to be "*a noxious weed*", a plague for native grasslands and woodlands. The plant is soft to the touch ("*Blue and purple, the silky tissues swooning to [Jim's] grip*", 176), and is a treat to the gaze, with its bright colours ("*turquoise and azure, or fading mauve and magenta*") but it is invasive, aggressive, too:

Crowding upon us, reaching up to shin and calves, they thrust themselves against walls of the hut, lapping the doorstep; swirled under a fig tree and down through the orchard. (176)

- 31 Alf was lazy; he would not till the land to eradicate the plant and keep control over hostile wilderness. In his absence, the blue flowers that look so beautiful from a distance ("*halcyon seas*"), have proliferated and turned the whole place into a "*Dead sea*," "*Salt and poisonous as the sea*." For the plant is both a real scourge and a predator:

Feeding, ravening on the earth, spread over ploughed land set to the mould of an old furrow, and under the fruit trees . The curse, sucking all the life blood from their soil, elixirs, manganese, phosphates, ammonia, and flaunting them in her seas - blue, sulphate of copper and magenta, as the sari of a Tamil dancing girl. (176)

- 32 The last *tableau* provides a vision of the place dominated by dereliction, emptiness and silence. As the locutors leave the diegetic scene, the narrative stance resumes its description, insisting on the "*dead trees row by row to make walls*", on the "*rusty share of an old plough*", on a "*barrow of bush timber falling to pieces*". The last two paragraphs reshuffle the elements present in the opening sequence: the rumours coming from the trees, the valley and the hills, the hut:

Laughter of leaves, inhuman, immortal. From time immemorial into eternity, leaves laughing: innumerable small green tongues clacking, their dry murmur falling away with the wind. [...] But the leaves still chattering, lisping and muttering endlessly of Alf and the fawn-coloured bitch straining over her puppies down in the sunshine. Gone from back-sliding eyes the sun-steeped valley between folding hills, and hut,

dim, ghostly, in calm seas, fading tetratheca and turquoise; birds flying across with jargon of wild cries. (178)

"Displaced vocality"¹²

- 33 What is remarkable in Prichard's story, is certainly the responding pulse of nature to those scraps of talk. What is overheard by the homodiegetic narrator is the multiplicity of (fantasmatic?) voices that emerge from the whole place and that are invested by the non-human, essentially by the vegetal and the animal.
- 34 Beyond the anthropomorphic dimension of the scene where it is nature that is speaking, what is striking is the fact that those verbs of utterance that pin down vocality in all its guises, (*laugh, chatter, lisp, mutter, gossip, whisper*), qualify non-articulate speech where signifiers are freed from signifieds and where meaning is blurred. The finest examples of those "extra-linguistic zones of meaning" (Yaeger 204) are the bird's song that expands into "a jargon of wild cries" (178), and the disquieting "chatter and clatter of leaves" playing *crescendo* until they become "Laughter of leaves, inhuman, immortal." (178)
- 35 A growing sense of the uncanny stems from the combination of inarticulate speech – "the chatter of leaves" – with metallic noises associated with the horses present in the second tableau: "Small green tongues, lisp and clicking together, twisting over and licking each other." (175); "Horses nudging, reins chinkle-chinkle over a post by the gate." (176). By the end of the third one, the obsessional motif of the leaves is still there (it is repeated 8 times throughout the story): it is as if it had spread over the whole narrative a little like the "noxious weed": "From time immemorial into eternity, leaves laughing; innumerable small green tongues clacking, their dry murmur falling away with the wind."
- 36 The echo-chamber of "The Curse" depicts a world where language is in excess of representation and where words are in deficit of meaning. As voices rise from both everywhere and nowhere, from the wilderness, from the margins of the civilized world perhaps, all those speech acts produce nothing but cries and murmurs. They are not so spectral as the locutors' voices but they form a cacophony, a mesh of reverberations that create a disconcerting impression of circularity and entrapment.

A modernist aesthetics

- 37 In the last part of my paper, I want to insist on the modernist aesthetics present in Prichard's short story, and I would first argue that the polyvocal discourse of "The Curse" exemplifies the shift, in literary history, from phonocentric illusion to dialogism and *heteroglossia*.
- 38 At the textual level, the story is saturated with voice effects that rise from stylistic devices like repetitions and 'repetitions-with-slight-modification', a basic feature of D.H. Lawrence's poetics much favoured by Prichard herself.

Azure, magenta, tetratheca, mauve and turquoise: the **hut**, a wrecked ship in halcyon seas.

Sun steeped the valley among **folding hills**, dark with red gum and jarrah. No sign or sound of **life**, but the **life** of the trees, squirt of **a bird's** song, **a bird's** body through **stirring leaves**. **Chatter of leaves**. **Clatter and chatter of leaves**, husky, frail. Small green tongues, **lisp** and **clicking** together, **twisting over** and **licking** each other; **whispering, gossiping**, as we rode into the **clearing**. (175)

Laughter of leaves, inhuman, immortal. From time immemorial into eternity,

leaves laughing: innumerable small green tongues clacking, their dry murmur fall **ing** away with the wind. [...] But the **leaves** still **chattering**, **lisp**ing and **muttering** endlessly of Alf and the fawn-coloured bitch **straining** over her puppies down in the sunshine. Gone from back-sliding eyes the **sun-steeped valley** between **folding hills**, and **hut**, dim, ghostly, in calm **seas**, **fadingtetratheca** and **turquoise**; birds **flying** across with jargon of wild cries. (178)

39 Those patterns of repetition that reify words on paper and ruffle the textual fabric let the reader hear what Roland Barthes calls "*le bruissement de la langue*"¹³ that stems from the sheer materiality of linguistic substance. In "The Curse", the syntagmatic/metonymic flow of words is constantly barred by the playful use of signifiers. The discursive mode operates along several lines:

1. Lexical repetitions: semantic clusters of words related to colour, to utterance and to nature plus the systematic use of verbal forms in ING: *twisting, whispering, gossiping...*
2. *Glissandos* that generate a slight shift from one signifier to another and their migration from one textual unit to another; in some places, this is achieved through a change in grammatical categories :
 - - the hut -> hut -> the hut
 - - chatter -> clatter; clicking -> licking -> clacking; trooper -> tracker; halcyon seas -> dead sea -> calm seas
 - Sun steeped the valley among folding hill -> the sun-steeped valley between folding hill.
 - Dark with red gum and jarrah -> Dark in the forest, under the red gums and jarrah
1. A peculiar phonic pattern that skilfully merges alliterations, consonantic repetitions with paronomasia, as in this paradigmatic example:

Longslope of hill-side facing the hut, with scrub of saplings, tall, straight-stemmed, symmetrical fleece of leaves, younggreen and gold, tight-packed as wool on a sheep'sback. (175-176)

40 4/ Equivocacy/ambiguity:

41 In some places like the transition between the metaphoric/poetic description of "*the blue*" with its connotations of sadness ("to feel blue") and the third set of dialogues, meaning seems to vacillate, to become uncertain:

Chatter and clatter of leaves; a vague, sly gibberish running through all the hills:
 'The curse!
 'Patterson's curse?'
 'A noxious weed...,' 'That's what it is, he says.' (176- 177)

42 Now one question is this: does the segment "*a vague, sly gibberish running through all the hills*" apply to "*Chatter and clatter of leaves*", or to the short replicas that follow? The punctuation is of no help and my own view is that it can apply to both statements provided we remember the polysemy of "curse": it is not only an evil, a misfortune, but also any type of utterance marked by malediction or execration. In other words, it is a *speech act*, where the semantic contents of the word combine with its phonic quality to produce effects and affects. For using language is performative, it is an act in itself — here, a "*perlocutory act*."¹⁴ It does not seem far-fetched to go beyond the literal meaning, and consider that it might also refer to the sentence passed on Alf, namely the verdict uttered by the judge whose name might be "Patterson". The narrative provides no definite answer; as a modernist text it exposes the artist's awareness that there is no full utterance as such, no definite truth in language.

- 43 "The Curse" is an experimental piece of poetic prose that encloses nothing but vacancy and loss, even though, in the meantime, it tries to give consistency to a vocal object, the enigmatic object that points to the division between self and Other. It simply revolves around a missing centre before it reaches an aporetic ending where the last word is to the "birds flying across with jargon of wild cries." (178)
- 44 In it, Prichard's linguistic practice consists also in mapping moments of silence, blank spaces that integrate the syntagmatic chain. Her discursive strategies disclose the dialectics between the obtrusive presence of words with their phonic quality, absence, and the circularity/erasure of meaning so characteristic of our disenchanting modern world. As the narrative/poetic voice vanishes in the density of the vocal pattern, meaning becomes hermetic and of minor importance; what seems to matter most is the 'reality' and music of words as if the weird wailing of birds and trees present in the imaginary scene impinged on the text itself so as to conceal, but not to fill in a void.
- 45 As the story progresses, it is as if the dislocated narrative discourse duplicates the inarticulate speech of nature. Those voice effects that rise from the vortex of words constitute a fictional trick that makes absence audible, perceptible, tangible. They also provide a means to compensate for the emptiness of the imaginary scene (*empty, derelic, dim, ghostly*), for the aloofness of the human voices and for the muteness of "the fawn-coloured bitch" one of the figures of otherness subdued to silence in the Australian context:
- But the leaves still chattering, lisping and muttering endlessly of Alf and the fawn-coloured bitch straining over her puppies down in the sunshine. (178)
- 46 For it is certainly no accident that the domesticated she-dog is mute; she has perhaps lost her instinct and will not survive her master's absence in the wild bush:
- But prowling beside the door, she sprang at us, the fawn-coloured bitch. Fell back, snarling, too weak to stand, belly sagging, a white bag beneath her. Starved, she crouched waiting for Alf's return. (178)
- 47 Beyond the political metaphor that is never absent from Prichard's novels and short stories, I would argue that "The Curse" is a piece of fiction whose sonorous texture strives to veil the gaping void caused by all forms of curse/malediction that endanger man and his environment. Susannah Prichard was a prolific writer and a militant; in her mind "Patterson's curse" was perhaps an apt metaphor for both the evil of World War I and the inequities between races, nationalities and classes that have paved the way for democracy in Australia.

NOTES

1. . Roland Barthes, "De la parole à l'écriture", *Le Grain de la voix. Entretiens 1962-1980*, Paris, Points Seuil, 1981, 9-11.
2. . Henry Lawson (1867-1922), "The Hairy Man", *Humorous Stories of Henry Lawson*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1982, (1907), 64-72; all subsequent references are to this edition.

3. . Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969), "The Curse", *The Penguin Best Australian Short Stories*, Edited by Mary Lord, 1991, (1932), 175-178; all subsequent references are to this edition.
4. . For a detailed account of the importance and role of *The Bulletin* in Australian culture, see Martine Piquet's article "Le Bulletin de Sydney: Agent de création d'une identité nationale à la fin du XIXe siècle", *Cercles* 4 (2002): 163-175.
5. . Letter to Dr. Frederick Watson, 31 March 1916, in *Henry Lawson's Letters 1890-1922*, Edited with Introduction and Notes by Colin Roderick, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1970, 239.
6. . Whereas the word "reader" designates the agent of the reading process itself, "audience" applies to the specific group, the contemporary reading public, to whom an author originally addresses the text. It is the audience that plays an active role in the creation of the work itself; ideally, the text comes as a response to the audience's desires and expectations: "Un texte postule son destinataire comme condition sine qua non de sa propre capacité communicative concrète mais aussi de sa propre potentialité significatrice.", Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. Le rôle du lecteur*, Biblio essais, 1985 (1979), 64.
7. . *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, 152-153.
8. . For example : "Mahoney winked at Regan—a wink you could hear—and it comforted them mightily. (72); [...] "he had enough hair on his chest to stuff a set of buggy cushions." (71).
9. . See Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. Le rôle du lecteur*, op. cit., most particularly chapter 3 entitled "Le lecteur modèle", 61-83, and chapter 4 "Niveaux de coopération textuelle", 84-108.
10. . "Le dialogue - l'échange de mots - est la forme la plus naturelle du langage. Davantage: les énoncés, longuement développés et bien qu'ils émanent d'un interlocuteur unique [...] sont monologiques par leur seule forme extérieure, mais par leur structure sémantique et stylistique, ils sont en fait essentiellement dialogiques.", M. Bakhtine's *Écrits*, in *Mikhail Bakhtine. Le principe dialogique*, Paris, Seuil, 1981, 292.
11. . For example: "One more drink for the last.", 66; "It was too much like shooting at a man.", 70.
12. . I borrow the term from Patricia S. Yaeger's essay on Kate Chopin entitled "'A Language Which Nobody Understood': Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*", *Novel*, 1987, Spring, 20 (n°3), 197-219.
13. . "Et de même que, attribué à la machine, le bruissement n'est que le bruit d'une absence de bruit, de même, reporté à la langue, il serait ce sens qui fait entendre, une exemption de sens, ou - c'est la même chose - ce non-sens qui ferait entendre au loin un sens désormais libéré de toutes les agressions dont le signe, formé dans la 'triste et sauvage histoire des hommes', est la boîte de Pandore.", Roland Barthes, "Le bruissement de la langue" (1975), *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV*, Paris, Points Seuil, 1984, 101.
14. . See J.L. Austin's "speech acts theory" exposed in his *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1982, especially pp. 109-120.

ABSTRACTS

Cette étude prend en compte deux types de discours fictionnel, et en analyse les modalités discursives à la lumière de la notion de "written orality" et de ses variations. Les deux exemples retenus appartiennent à la fiction brève australienne. "The Hairy Man" s'inscrit dans la tradition du 'bush yarn', et privilégie une rhétorique destinée à donner voix à l'identité nationale. Cette nouvelle de Henry Lawson, qui repose autant sur le savoir-faire du conteur et sur l'héritage de la

tradition orale, sait également tirer parti de la langue vernaculaire pour le plus grand plaisir du lecteur. Dans un tout autre genre, la courte pièce de prose poétique intitulée "The Curse" adopte résolument une esthétique moderniste qui atteste l'influence des auteurs anglais (dont D.H. Lawrence) sur K.S. Prichard. L'intrigue s'efface devant le traitement accordé à la substance langagière : paradoxalement, la texture phonique de cette nouvelle, les effets de voix, les silences qui ponctuent l'énoncé, échouent à masquer le sentiment prédominant de vide et de perte.

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