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Abstract

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PAT DOBREZ

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*When Blackbirds Sing*¹

Dominic Langton's conversion to pacifism in *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962) links Martin Boyd's novel of protest about the conduct of the 1914-18 war to the autobiographical narratives of Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and Siegfried Sassoon in *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937).² Boyd had already borrowed Sassoon's incarceration in a military hospital for the major plot development of *Lucinda Brayford* (1946), a fictional narrative which ends with the martyrdom of a conscientious objector to the pacifist cause – the setting, however, being World War II. *Lucinda Brayford* was written at Cambridge where Boyd, disillusioned by his World War I experience as a British infantry officer, sought the company of Quakers and left-wingers intent on doing what he 'had not the courage to do' in 1914. As he listened to the voices of conspicuous pacifists like the Duke of Bedford, his position became one of, as he put it, 'qualified pacifism' and he blamed Churchill for prolonging the war and so causing unnecessary killing and destruction. He also thought that Australia was being deceived by the British military and had 'better turn its eyes to America'. At the end of *When Blackbirds Sing* the hero Dominic Langton, safely returned from the Western Front, throws his medals, one of which is inscribed 'The War for Civilization', into a waterhole on his Australian farm. In this act of 'repudiation of the social order as well as of the war' (pp. 186-87), he mimics Siegfried Sassoon's throwing his Military Cross into the Mersey in 1917.³

Boyd's pacifist ideas developed over a number of years and the writing of several books. The 1928 novel *The Montforts* gives an unsympathetic portrayal of a conscientious objector. *Such Pleasure* (1948) examines, through the characterization of Maurice Bellamy, ways in which soldiers grew to mistrust authority during the protracted campaigns of the First World War. As in *When Blackbirds Sing* (whose

title is taken from Julian Grenfell's 1915 poem 'Into Battle'), Boyd is drawing on material rehearsed in *A Single Flame*, his 1939 autobiography dedicated to another generation on the brink of war. The autobiographical self-portrait is of a young World War I volunteer not untouched by pacifist and socialist ideals. This means that, despite his youthful acquiescence, Boyd was primed to reject the rationale of military solutions. Shaw and Morris had been early mentors, and the *fin-de-siècle* call to embrace a 'new Hedonism' had won his approval. While others on their way to the front occupied themselves with *Infantry Training*, he read Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*. Like this young man of utopian imagination, the fictional Maurice Bellamy and Dominic Langton are aesthetes who find themselves in the trenches before they have come to terms with the reality of having to kill. They face the war in Rupert Brooke's 1914 *carpe diem* mood, prepared to encounter beauty on the battlefield and to enjoy themselves when on leave. Both come into conflict with their company commanders in circumstances resembling those given in Boyd's account of his struggle with an officer of the career type who accepts the war machine. In the *When Blackbirds Sing* episode which describes an atavistic Dominic – 'full of antique conventions' (p. 110) – who has to be saved from duelling with his C.O., the actual officer appears as Harrison, one of the numerous secular puritans in Boyd's novels who are consistently allocated destructive roles. Dominic comes to a disturbing conclusion, subversive of the allies' war aims:

The Germans are only my artificial enemy. I know nothing about them except what I read in the papers. When I see them, when the prisoners come in, they are not my enemies. They are the same as everyone else. They are just like the people you see in the street – in London or Melbourne or Paris or anywhere. They are not my real enemies. Harrison is my real enemy. (p. 113)⁴

At this moment the war is internalized for Dominic, his own psyche becoming the battlefield. It is a convulsion of conscience which, in its sympathetic treatment, illustrates how far Boyd has come since *The Montforts*.

Extrapolated as they are from the novelist's actual experiences, *Such Pleasure* and *When Blackbirds Sing* analyse the conduct of the war in the same socio-political terms employed in the autobiographies. Both novels castigate Lloyd George (for the 'knock-out blow') and all those who, motivated by social revenge or profiteering, contributed to the general 'fighting-lust'.⁵ These are the representatives of a newly dominant bourgeoisie. In a chapter from the second autobiography *Day Of My Delight* (1965), entitled 'The Upper Middle Class', Boyd blames the new English commercial class, with its public school veneer of civilized values, for the delinquencies of the war. The opposition is between the old landowning aristocracy and the new Etonian

businessmen whose 'defects have affected the whole country': 'They have created an artificial caste, based on money, and the caste mark is conformity. The caste marks of the aristocracy were individual taste and independent judgement; and blood was more than money'.⁶ Later, in a protest pamphlet written during the Vietnam War, Boyd was to describe the two modern European wars as Civil War I and Civil War II – such was his conviction about the self-interested class motivation of war leaders on both sides.

The framework that Boyd constructs for Dominic's conversion to pacifism is a system of values in which pleasure and beauty are given primacy. All the life-ambitions projected in Boyd's writing, from his first published work *Retrospect* (1920), a book of war-inspired poems in a Brookean vein, to his anti-war pamphlet, *Why They Walk Out*, which he himself published in 1970, are predicated on an ethic of pleasure. In the early fiction – in *Love Gods* (1925), for example, or *Scandal of Spring* (1934) – his attempts to draw the parameters of a modified *fin-de-siècle* hedonism are inconsequential. However, in later novels, most significantly in the Langton books, which address the issue of *pain* from the standpoint of an ethic of pleasure, Boyd is persuasive in challenging the tradition of western puritanism. There are affinities with the Oscar Wilde of *De Profundis* who, not forgetting his love of physical beauty, wrote in neo-Platonic fashion of a new dimension opened out to him by his religious conversion. As someone who, as he said, 'hated Good Friday', Boyd rejected abnegation as the focus of a religion whose stories of wine-from-water and harlots forgiven appeared to him 'a clear guide to a life of pleasure'.⁷ By temperament he was an 'incarnationalist',⁸ as *Much Else in Italy* (1958), his Socratic dialogue on the subject of Christian and Classical approaches to the sensible world, makes clear. Joan Lindsay (of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* fame) recalled in her autobiography the specific way in which her cousin Martin expressed his resistance to the war: 'he had embellished his dugout in France with a large statue of his favourite Dancing Faun, dragging it from one filthy hole to another'.⁹ The protagonists of Boyd's fiction exhibit a similar belief in the supremacy of beauty and pleasure.

As Boyd sees it, the ideal of a pleasurable existence is the only guide available to human beings in their search for fulfilment. Moreover, it is an ideal associated with the aristocracy. Yet, while confessing to class bias, and making clear that his hedonistic values are pursued at the expense of bourgeois ones, Boyd stresses that it is a vision of a satisfying life he wants to salvage from aristocratic forms – not class privilege. In the words of Maurice Bellamy's mentor in *Such Pleasure*:

The truth is ... there is no aristocracy and never has been one. There is a class of people which approximates very crudely to the aristocratic ideal, and among them are a few genuine aristocrats. Imagine half the great noblemen if there

had been no architects, nor painters, nor writers, or the great generals if there had been no tailors or band music ... The real test of aristocracy is disaster. It's only when a king is dethroned that he ceases to be vulgar. How incredibly shoddy the French aristocrats were before they went to the guillotine. Again it's only the superb work of the artists who gave them any distinction.¹⁰

The novelist's stance, as it emerges in his autobiographies and occasional writing, is not a simple one. While consistently presenting feudal structures as superannuated, Boyd focuses on the fact that aristocratic culture has successfully projected images of human fulfilment. The point is not to perpetuate outdated and oppressive structures, but to avoid the other extreme, the modern iconoclasm which would generate a European equivalent of the Cultural Revolution. In practical terms this means not giving up in the face of 'the difficulty which confronts the man who has been brought up in a traditional culture, but also has a genuine desire to see the end of social and economic injustice'.¹¹

When Blackbirds Sing is the last novel in a sequence which traces the fortunes of an Anglo-Australian colonial family from the mid-nineteenth century to the post-Federation period culminating in the First World War. An amalgam of the novelist and his elder brothers Merric and Penleigh, the character Dominic represents Boyd's delayed coming to terms with his participation in the European struggle he came to regard as a disguised civil war. Dominic is an Australian Briton (to use W. K. Hancock's and Manning Clark's expression) who spontaneously springs to the defence of the 'home' country. What is more, he joins a British regiment. This is exactly what the novelist himself chose to do in order to secure himself a position as a commissioned officer. Had he enlisted with the Australian forces, he would have been obliged to work his way up through the ranks. His brothers, who submitted to the egalitarian Australian system, did not gain commissions. Merric, who had pacifist sympathies acquired through the influence of his Christian Scientist wife and mother-in-law, enlisted late in the war and never saw action. Penleigh, who thought Merric a 'shirker',¹² was stationed like Martin on the Western Front but was less exposed to the horrors of trench warfare in his position as a sergeant with a transport unit. In 1917, however, he was gassed and, after being invalided to England, became 'oppressed by the thought of the accumulated pain of the war'.¹³ The author's own experience as a British officer, Merric's pacifist ideals and Penleigh's depression gave *When Blackbirds Sing* the major plot elements it required.

As the final novel in Boyd's tetralogy *When Blackbirds Sing* sets out to dramatize the confrontation of the Langton family's pleasure ethic and the fact of pain. Dominic's experience of a psychic division in which the pleasure-seeker faces his own murderous self represents the apex of the Langton family's self-knowledge, its coming to an

awareness of its instinctive values and of their limitations. As colonists, the Langtons find the conditions of a life satisfying to the senses in a country which appears to them not unlike Italy or the south of France. As in all Boyd's novels the emphasis is on the pleasures of outdoor activities like horseriding, fishing and swimming. The archetypal Australian is envisaged as a natural hedonist, someone like the character Lucinda Brayford whose declaration 'I like people who live for pleasure' astonishes members of her *nouveau riche* family who see their social activities as obeying 'some obscure moral purpose'.¹⁴

In the first chapter of *When Blackbirds Sing* we encounter Dominic on his way to join the British forces. He begins to reflect on his life with his wife, Helena, on their New South Wales farm. His remembered experience of a harmonious, unthreatened existence begins to assume the status of a myth of the Golden Age:

He filled his mind with pictures of her, in the dairy skimming the cream, or doing things with plums and apricots and tomatoes, drying them in the sun to use in the winter, or shaking the seeds from the pods of poppies. She was always engaged in country activities of this kind. Sometimes she was waiting for him, leaning over the gate when he came in from riding, or even sitting on the flat top of the gate post, which made him laugh. (p. 8)

Since he never married, Martin was presumably drawing on his brothers' strong attachments to their wives and nostalgia for their newly-established homes. At the time Penleigh enlisted, he and his family had just moved into a self-designed house at Warrandyte, on the outskirts of Melbourne, a place which the painter Clara Southern had established as an artists' colony. Penleigh's letters from the Front described his longing for the familiar scenes of home which he pictured in all the sensuous detail of an Australian impressionist landscape of the Heidelberg school.¹⁵ Like David Malouf's narrative in *Fly Away Peter* (1982), Boyd's makes maximum use of the geographical division underlying the colonial experience. Australia in both instances stands for Arcadian Innocence and Europe in the grip of war for traumatizing Experience.

Elaborating the idea of Helena as the figure in an innocent landscape, Martin Boyd begins to associate Australia, the Sunny South, with a utopian vision, establishing one counter in an antipodean version of the familiar North-South, Gothic-Classic debate which, in the nineteenth-century literary context, coloured the imaginations of Arnold, Pater, Swinburne and Wilde. In all Boyd's novels about colonial families, beginning with *The Montforts*, Australia represents the values of Matthew Arnold's Victorian Hellenism, articulated in anti-puritan terms in *Culture and Anarchy*:

Hebraism and Hellenism, - between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at

another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them.¹⁶

Pater argues in *The Renaissance* that, not content with its 'underground life', a suppressed 'Hellenic element' in our culture will periodically assert itself: 'Hellenism is not merely an absorbed element in our intellectual life; it is a conscious tradition in it'.¹⁷ Wilde's plea for a 'new Hedonism' in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a teasing, *enfant terrible*, version of Arnold and Pater. In a direct line of descent from the Hellenic Victorians, Martin Boyd gives us 'Helena', the gentler side of Dominic, who in *A Difficult Young Man* (the novel of the Langton group concerned with Dominic's childhood) is himself associated with Gothic values. In both novels, Dominic's attachment to Helena is seen in the same light as his appreciation of beauty and order in nature.

An important incident in the first chapter of *When Blackbirds Sing* centres on Dominic's desire to join young men diving for coins at Teneriffe, a desire which scandalizes the Melbourne matron with whom he has found some companionship on the voyage. Dominic is rapt in the privileged moment:

The bodies of the young men were a golden brown, and as they fell like arrows into the sea, and moved about in marvellous patterns deep down in the opal clarity, Dominic's eyes glowed and darkened, as always when he saw something supremely beautiful, above all when it showed the freedom of men in the natural world. (p. 11)

Mrs Heseltine restrains him on the spurious grounds that he is 'an English gentleman' and 'can't dive for coins with natives', to which Dominic replies: 'I'm an Australian; and they're not natives. They're Spaniards, so am I partly' (p. 11). The intensity of these feelings of human equality is evident in Durban where Dominic refuses to take a rickshaw: 'As they walked in search of a cab, this feeling of affinity with the negro ... produced a slight smouldering in him, that the man's splendid body should be exploited' (p. 10). Boyd's novels are full of such images of physical health, Apollo figures whose effect is to disclose the *numen*, the divinity suffusing the visible world. As it happens they also disclose the homosexual element in the author's aestheticism.

The sensation Dominic experiences contemplating the Spanish divers 'that there was no division between man and the natural world' (p. 77), returns to him as he listens to blackbirds announcing the end of a bitterly cold period spent in the front line. Dominic and his friend Hollis, a nineteen-year-old subaltern, are possessed by a euphoric emotion which prompts them to strip off their clothes in a blossoming orchard: 'Hollis was going to say: "We are like the Greeks", but he could not speak. There was something in the night far beyond this

allusion' (p. 79). (Again, the subtext is homosexual, though Boyd chooses not to explore it.)¹⁸ After a brief respite from fighting, the characters are returned to the battlefield where Hollis loses half his face in an artillery barrage. As a *doppelgänger*, he touches that area of Dominic's psyche which clings to the possibility of wholeness of being, even in the midst of violence. Disorientated by Hollis' injury, Dominic is precipitated towards a crisis in which he explores to the full the violence in his own nature.

This psychic struggle relates to the already established division of Dominic's personality between 'southern' and 'northern' attributes. On arrival in England, Dominic re-establishes relationships with members of the English gentry with whom his family are connected and who are known to him from a previous visit 'home' as a child. 'Home' is Waterpark, his family's estate near Frome, on the border of Somerset and Wiltshire. As a guest at a neighbouring house – Dilton – he renews his sense of English upper-class life. Since he is someone for whom 'the present actuality has most power' (p. 41), he immediately shifts his allegiance from his Australian to his English home, writing magisterial letters to Helena about moving back to Waterpark after the war. Submitting fully to the change of hemispheres, he returns to his old fiancée, Sylvia, who is now married. A figure of 'northern' will, in contrast to Dominic's 'southern' spontaneity, Sylvia functions to escort Dominic from Eden. His attachment to her originates in a passionate desire for knowledge of the world. When they become lovers, he feels 'that at last he possessed all that he rightly owned, the other part of his double world, making it complete' (p. 64). This feeling dissipates, however, when he begins to observe Sylvia's expedient callousness in human relationships. For her sex is not love but adventure and titillation. Finally, Dominic recognizes in Sylvia's behaviour the arrogance behind the prolongation of the war.

Sylvia's barbarism, manifest in the savagery of her taunt to a young subaltern about to depart for the front – 'Have you been over the top yet?' (p. 104) – is viewed by the novel as typical of secular puritans caught up in their own self-interest. Through her insolence, Sylvia is aligned in Dominic's mind with callous military figures like the staff captain overheard complaining about notions of fair play in war. The captain's assertion that 'the only good Boche is a dead one' (p. 105), sparks off Dominic's recognition that 'She [Sylvia] and the staff captain were the same type' (p. 106). It is an epiphany which links sexual adventure and the conduct of the war.

Dominic has two major experiences at the front which serve to demystify the war effort. Both experiences reinforce his belief in personal responsibility – however limited the possibilities of its exercise. Thereafter he is more disposed to listen to voices raised in public outcry against the policies of punitive war leaders like Lloyd

George, whom his friend Lord Dilton criticizes for his puritan hatred of the forms of traditional society. Until his awakening from ignorance of the factors determining the conduct of the war, Boyd's blundering searcher resembles the mass of the fighting force: 'Dominic had never thought where the war was leading, nor had any of the men in his regiment. They concerned themselves with their immediate duties, and had a vague idea that afterwards there would be an earthly paradise for those heroes who had not gone to a heavenly one' (p. 99).

The first intimation that he has been deceived about the morality of the war is a cruel one, and one which links his part in the struggle with the brutality of Harrison and the blood-lust of his childhood mentor in the military arts, now a warmonger, Colonel Rodgers. After his disillusionment with Sylvia, Dominic has disturbing dreams in which he gives himself up to violence: 'He ... was somehow Harrison and also Colonel Rodgers. He was saying: "We must have the orgasm of killing. Never mind the women. Pierce another man with a sword. Don't release the seed of life, but the blood of death"' (p.107). Dominic's dream is actualized when officers like himself are ordered to 'give their men lectures on the physical pleasures of fighting'. Boyd interrupts his account of Dominic's moral and psychological breakdown to evoke the historical context:

The government and the generals on both sides must at this time have been on tenterhooks lest the soldiers woke up to the futility of their lives, that some common humanity such as that of Christmas 1914, or the sheer weariness which the French were beginning to show, might lead them simply to stop fighting. It would have been a disaster for either High Command if the enemy had walked away. There would have been no glory attached to victory. At Christmas 1914, this disaster had been prevented by a high-ranking English officer firing into the German lines while the opposing troops were dancing together round bonfires in No-man's-land. At Etaples there had been a riot and the soldiers had killed five military policemen. Always there was fear of the psychological uncertainty of a million men, and everything possible was done to prevent peace breaking out. Lloyd George addressed those Old Testament exhortations to the armies which so disgusted Lord Dilton. He would not consider an armistice 'as it might be difficult to get the nations fighting again'. Raids like that in which Hollis was wounded were ordered 'to keep alive the spirit of the offensive'. A general came to inspect the battalion. He asked each subaltern: 'What were you in civilian life?' When the young man answered modestly: 'I was at school', or 'I was reading law', the general replied: 'Well you're going to be a soldier for the rest of your life, remember that'. (pp. 114-15)

Surrendering to the pressures of the moment, Dominic makes 'violence his god', inciting his men with an extremism which exceeds expectations:

When he spoke of the pleasure of killing another man, his words had the strength and impact of a work of art. He did not merely give them a few facts

to which they could listen in half-hearted boredom. He touched their imagination. Their fundamental decency was disturbed. They came out of the barn silent, not knowing what to say to each other. Even the bloody-minded sergeant thought he had gone too far. (p. 116)

In his autobiographies, Boyd describes how in 1917, when 'no private soldier had the faintest idea what he was fighting for, so that the generals ordered more and more raids to keep the blood-lust simmering, and to try to key up the necessary hatred of the enemy', he himself lectured his men in this brutish way.¹⁹

Interestingly, there is a direct comparison with *Memoirs of George Sherston*. In Sassoon's account of the events of 1916 Sherston is subjected to a lecture on 'The Spirit of the Bayonet'. A major speaks with 'homicidal eloquence', taking the *Manual of Bayonet Training* as his text. He is assisted by a sergeant, who 'had been trained to such a pitch of frightfulness that at a moment's warning he could divest himself of all semblance of humanity':

With rifle and bayonet he illustrated the major's ferocious aphorisms, including facial expression. When told to 'put on the killing face', he did so, combining it with an ultra-vindictive attitude. 'To instil fear into the opponent' was one of the Major's main maxims. Man, it seemed, had been created to jab the life out of Germans. To hear the Major talk, one might have thought that he did it every day before breakfast. His final words were: 'Remember that every Boche you fellows kill is a point scored to our side; every Boche you kill brings victory one minute nearer and shortens the war by one minute. Kill them! Kill them! There's only one good Boche and that's a dead one'.²⁰

Boyd's version of the story suggests that *When Blackbirds Sing* combines memory of actual events and a reinforcement coming from Sassoon.

The author wrote of *When Blackbirds Sing* that his chief preoccupation in writing it was 'to spotlight as clearly as possible the iniquity of the individual act of murder, which multiplied by hundreds of thousands was the reality of war'.²¹ What simpler means of spotlighting this than to represent a specific act? Shortly after his 'dedication to violence' (p. 118), Dominic finds himself facing a young German on the battlefield. He kills him, but not before he has seen the boy as another Hollis: 'Dominic did not stay the instinctive movement of the hand, and in that instant of mutual recognition, with eye open to eye, he shot the boy, who fell dead a yard in front of him, rolling over and over as Hollis had rolled in the dew' (p. 119). This is the second intimation of evil: in his killing of the *doppelgänger*, Dominic kills the thing he loves, and so his moral self. The treatment of the episode echoes Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting', in which a dreamer journeys to hell to face a stranger whose suffering mirrors his own. The stranger reveals himself:

I am the enemy you killed, my friend,
 I knew you in this dark: for you so frowned
 Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
 I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.²²

Dominic suffers from what are described as periodic 'jams in the brain'. He cannot keep his mental compartments separate: allies like Sylvia and Harrison appear as the enemy, the enemy as ally. Injured at the moment of killing the German boy, he is invalided to England and finds himself billeted with a friend of Sylvia's whose house has been converted into a hospital. This house is a symbolic Heartbreak House, a shell of European tradition emptied of meaning. Untouched by its eighteenth-century opulence, Dominic continues to reside 'in the half-second in which he exchanged with the German boy that glance of human recognition, and at the same time shot him dead' (pp. 121-22). Letters from Sylvia and Helena exacerbate his sense of deadlock, the impossibility of reconciling extremes of pleasure and pain, innocence and experience. The outcome is a pacifist conversion.

Its catalyst is the man to whom he owes his commission, Lord Dilton, whose unguarded confidences about his own hostility to the war leadership provide Dominic with the logical framework he requires. When Sassoon's Sherston was about to take his stand against the war, he set out his reasons:

Something must be put on paper ... and I re-scrutinized the rough notes I'd been making: *Fighting men are victims of conspiracy among (a) politicians; (b) military caste; (c) people who are making money out of the War.* Under this I had scribbled, *Also personal effort to dissociate myself from intolerant prejudice and conventional complacency of those willing to watch sacrifices of others while they sit safely at home.* This was followed by an indignant afterthought. *I believe that by taking this action I am helping to destroy the system of deception, etc. which prevents people from facing the truth and demanding some guarantee that the torture of humanity shall not be prolonged unnecessarily.*²³

Dominic is not, like Sherston, an intellectual, but he can appreciate intellectual arguments, and the ideas he receives from Dilton are close to those of the *Memoirs*. In one respect, however, they are distinctive. Dilton's views return the reader of *When Blackbirds Sing* to the opening chapter of the first novel of the Langton sequence, *The Cardboard Crown* (1952), where the narrator wittily reverses conventional political categories of Left and Right to produce the following model of class division:

I am ... not concerned with the horizontal divisions of society, but with the vertical, which is down the middle, 'per pale' ... At the top on the Right is the duke, at the top on the Left is the international financier. At the bottom on the Right is the peasant - on the Left is the factory worker. On the Right between the Duke and the peasant are all kinds of landowners and farmers, all artists

and craftsmen, soldiers, sailors, clergymen and musicians. On the Left side are business men, stock-brokers, bankers, exporters, all men whose sole reason for working is to make money, and also mechanics and aviators. We on the Right cannot make money. When we have it, it has only come to us as an accident following on our work, or from luck.²⁴

Boyd's major social conflict of Right and Left is one of landowning aristocracy and middle-class commercialism, of feudal values and the commodity values of capitalism. Appealing to just such a model of society and social tensions, Dilton argues that the escalation of the war is motivated by class spite. While people like himself and Dominic believe they are fighting to preserve their way of life – that of the 'Right' – Lloyd George is fighting to destroy it. Dilton is outraged by the latter's leadership: 'He wants a "knock-out blow" and he'll knock out Europe, England included. He hates us. He declared war on us long ago' (p. 99). Conversely, Lord Lansdowne is praised for his outspokenness about the threat of the war to the social fabric of Europe. Comparable views emerge from chapter fourteen of *Such Pleasure* where Lansdowne's historical stand for a compromise peace is given sympathetic fictional treatment in the actions of the character Lord Kirriemuir:

Lord Kirriemuir's offence was to make a speech in the House of Lords, pointing out that there was no prospect of the war ending for years, and to settle down to a 'War of Attrition' which seemed to be our policy, might well end in the collapse of European civilisation. He continued with surprising accuracy to foresee the disastrous sequence of events which has actually happened since that date.²⁵

With obvious authorial approval, this chapter goes on to elaborate notions articulated in *When Blackbirds Sing* of the war as a class rather than a national conflict. Of course acceptance of these notions presupposes social allegiances few modern readers are likely to endorse fully. But it is interesting to note that Lenin, approaching the question from an entirely different political standpoint, likewise came to the conclusion that World War I was a class war.

Lord Dilton, like Paul Brayford – *Lucinda Brayford's* last exotic bloom on the feudal tree – stands for a class and a tradition. This is also the case with Dominic, whose conception of a soldier is of a chivalric knight defending his demesne, whether it be Dilton or Waterpark. However, the extremity of Dominic's war experience forces him to enter a no-man's-land of faith beyond class and cultural allegiances. Convalescing at Dilton, he visits Waterpark where for the first time he senses their contingency:

The ethos created by long association between one people and one stretch of land, or between a family and their dwelling place seemed to evaporate. The tie which bound his blood to this land had broken. It had not snapped suddenly,

but the cord had slowly perished, and now fallen soundlessly apart. (pp. 153-54)

When Dominic returns to Australia he carries with him a new detachment, and a new sense of freedom to choose, which is not understood by Helena. Change, for him, has come about as a process of unlearning.

Dominic fails to find an adequate language to describe what has happened to him. He appeals to notions of 'the Holy Ghost', natural law and the 'essential self', but always it is the war experience itself which returns to him: 'What made it impossible for him to fight again was the brief exchange of human recognition as he shot the German boy' (p. 137).

This change brings Dominic's divided psyche to the threshold of wholeness. At a home for shell-shocked soldiers in view of St. Michael's Mount, Cornwall, where he had previously spent time with Sylvia, he meets Hollis and for a time suffers once more the confusion which had caused his periodic mental convulsion:

Everything here was double and confused. Even the view of St. Michael's Mount had become a sort of hallucination of duality, which had its exact and dreadful counterpart in Hollis' face. Outside of this place Venus and Mars had kept their separate identities, but here they were united into a horrible hermaphrodite. (p. 167)

Love and war, male and female, innocence and experience: however we choose to view it, Dominic is in need of the Coleridgean miracle of synthesis to make sense of a world divided between Sunny Pleasure Dome and Caves of Ice. He finds it. Usually ashamed of and secretive about the injured side of his face, Hollis, in a pleading gesture, turns it towards Dominic, who contemplates his choice:

Should he like St Francis have bent and kissed that hideous cheek? Then he thought what a beastly thing that would have been when the boy offered him his whole face, to kiss only that side that was distorted and horrible, ignoring what he still had of life and health, the smooth fresh skin of his youth. And that was what everyone was doing. They would only caress youth when it was wounded. The whole and the sane must first pass through the Moloch jaws. (p.70)

By caressing the unblemished side of the boy's face, Dominic restores himself to grace and finds once again innocence, hope and belief.

The pattern of spiritual growth in *When Blackbirds Sing* is completed in the movement from Sylvia and war-torn Europe to Helena and Australia, but without any comforting sense that the answer lies in the 'south'. When Dominic finally leaves Europe it is the outward expression of an inward catharsis. The return to Australia is a return to the innocent hemisphere, corresponding to the touching of the

unblemished side of Hollis' face. But Dominic, daydreaming about Helena, is in fact deceiving himself, for the springs of life are more hidden than he imagines, residing somewhere in the obscure region of his relationship with self. He has yet to learn that he will never again be able to inhabit Eden in the unselfconsciousness of his former existence. Helena herself, when she steps out of the myth of innocence into a new conjugal life, is found wanting as Dominic begins to perceive the void of incomprehension which lies between them. Helena's response to Dominic's act of self-determination when he throws his medals into the waterhole is an incredulous 'You are not serious?' Whereas for Dominic 'these medals were given him for his share in inflicting that suffering, that agony multiplied and multiplied beyond the possibility of calculation. And this Military Cross was awarded for what to him was the worst thing he had ever done, when he had violated his own nature at the deepest level' (p. 187-88).

The abruptness and inconclusiveness of Boyd's ending may to some extent be explained by the fact that the author planned, but never wrote, a fifth novel in the series. What its subject matter might have been can be guessed from hints in *The Cardboard Crown*, references to some kind of breakdown suffered by Dominic, as well as to generous but eccentric behaviour, scandalous in the eyes of Melbourne society. The fact that the writing of the story of Dominic's conversion to pacifism presented difficulties is evidenced by a lapse in *When Blackbirds Sing* from Boyd's previous habit of employing a narrator through whose memories and surmises he was able to project a multi-viewpoint approach to events and characters. The other Langton novels are distinguished by Boyd's successful implementation of a technique of literary Impressionism comparable to that of F. Scott Fitzgerald or Ford Madox Ford. *When Blackbirds Sing*, for all its seriousness of intention, lacks the density of texture characteristic of the best of the tetralogy.

Boyd's difficulty is simply the challenge presented by the war to his lifelong preoccupation with an ethic of pleasure. Dominic and *When Blackbirds Sing* focus what Boyd elsewhere designated the reality of Good Friday, of suffering: 'In the trenches ... Good Friday became one of the facts of daily life'.²⁶ Hence Dominic's legacy repugnantly but fascinatedly described by the narrator in the opening chapter of *The Cardboard Crown*:

I look ... at the huge crucifixion painted by Dominic, the tortured body, the face hidden by hanging hair, the conspicuous genitals. It was not a thing that could properly be shown, except to Trappist monks on Good Friday, and yet I could not bring myself to paint it out.²⁷

The narrator's ambivalent feelings about Dominic's painting reflect Boyd's own attitude. Throughout his writing life, the novelist was

concerned to portray a reconciliation of opposites, and *When Blackbirds Sing* is his nearest approach to a synthesis. Here we find a summary of the major preoccupations. The espousal of an ethic of pleasure is modified by the confrontation with pain; an obsession with Europe is explored and exorcised. In *Dominic* we have Boyd's last statement of a resolution of the varied contraries of pleasure and pain, good and evil, Australia and Europe, South and North, Classic and Gothic, Right and Left, male and female. The result is the portrait of someone no longer at home with family, class or country. Boyd himself remained an expatriate to the end, lived in genteel poverty and died in solitude.

NOTES

1. Martin Boyd, *When Blackbirds Sing* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1971). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960); Siegfried Sasson, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).
3. Martin Boyd, *Day Of My Delight, An Anglo-Australian Memoir* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1965), pp. 202,201; Martin Boyd quoted by Brenda Niall in *Martin Boyd, A Life* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), p. 125; *Goodbye to All That*, p. 215; and *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, p.508.
4. See also Boyd's autobiographies, *A Single Flame* (London: Dent, 1939), p. 116; and *Day Of My Delight*, pp. 83-84.
5. Martin Boyd, *Such Pleasure* (London: Cresset Press, 1949), p. 245.
6. *Day Of My Delight*, pp. 156-57.
7. Martin Boyd, 'Preoccupations and Intentions', *Southerly*, XXVIII (1968), p. 83.
8. See *A Single Flame*, p. 190; and *Day Of My Delight*, p. 137.
9. Joan Lindsay, *Time Without Clocks* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 169.
10. *Such Pleasure*, p. 311.
11. *A Single Flame*, pp. 127-28.
12. See Brenda Niall, p. 68.
13. *Day Of My Delight*, p. 93.
14. *Lucinda Brayford* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1969), p. 149.
15. My source is Hamish McDonald, *Penleigh Boyd, 1890-1923*, M.A. thesis (University of Melbourne, 1986). For the Boyds' connections with the Australian 'Heidelberg School' see Patricia Dobrez and Peter Herbst, *The Art of the Boyds* (Sydney: Bay Books, 1990).
16. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy, An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: John Murray, 1956), p. 90.
17. Walter Pater, 'Winckelmann', *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 209.
18. For Boyd's observations and opinions about homosexuality in the army see *A Single Flame*, pp. 120-21; and *Day Of My Delight*, pp. 85-86.
19. See *Day Of My Delight*, p. 88; and *A Single Flame*, p. 123.
20. *Complete Memoirs*, pp. 289-90.
21. 'Preoccupations and Intentions', p. 87; see also *Day Of My Delight*, p. 276.
22. *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed., C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto and

Windus, 1967), p. 36.

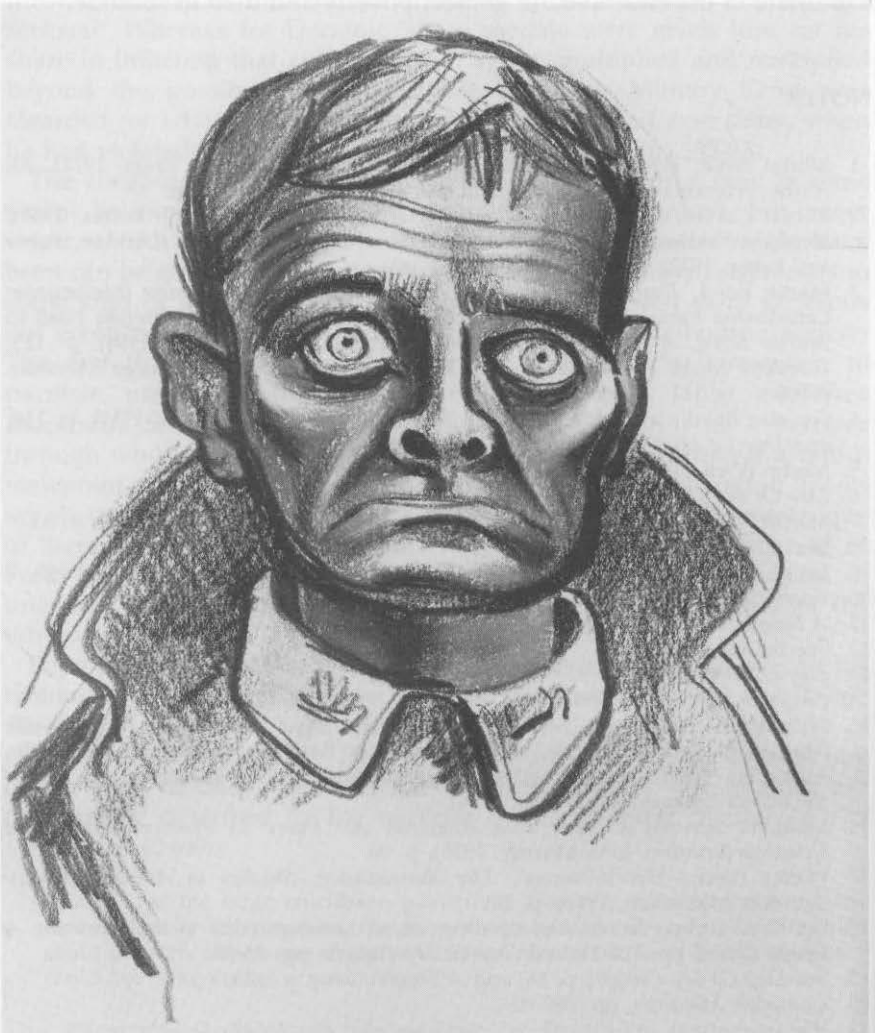
23. *Complete Memoirs*, p. 481.

24. Martin Boyd, *The Cardboard Crown* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1971), p.13.

25. *Such Pleasure*, p. 243. Boyd's handling of criticism of the war leadership may owe something to his association with the pacifist M.P. Leonard Outhwaite, an Australian expatriate. See *A Single Flame*, p. 111; and *Day Of My Delight*, p.201.

26. 'Preoccupations and Intentions', p. 83.

27. *The Cardboard Crown*, p. 15.



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