

# Editor's Introduction

## Carole M. Cusack

It is a pleasure and an honour to commence my term as Editor of *Literature & Aesthetics* in the twenty-fifth year of this journal's production, and I thank Dr Catherine Runcie, Honorary President of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics, for the opportunity to contribute to the SSLA and the journal. This twenty-fifth volume is a milestone that merits celebration, as the SSLA (while being formed in 1990 with a seventeen member Executive drawn from various departments in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney), has always been an independent organisation, separate from the University that has provided it with a home.<sup>1</sup> *Literature & Aesthetics'* flourishing over two and a half decades is testimony to the goodwill and hard work of previous Editors, members of the Editorial Board, office bearers of the SSLA, and the scholars who have published their work in it. Catherine Runcie wrote a short history of SSLA to 2005, which showcased the activities of the Society to that date: these included evening seminars, local conferences, and hosting the highly successful First and Second Pacific Rim Conferences in Transcultural Aesthetics in 1997 and 2004.<sup>2</sup> In the years since 2006, the date of the history's publication, *Literature & Aesthetics* has been the vehicle for much exciting research in literary, philosophical, aesthetic, religious, and cultural studies. From 2011 the journal was digitised and it is now available as a free, open access resource for scholars the world over to consult. In the five years since the establishment of the *Literature & Aesthetics* website (<http://openjournals.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/LA>), half a million articles have been downloaded, a resounding popular vote on both the journal's quality and relevance.

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<sup>1</sup> Carole M. Cusack, 'Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics', in *Companion to Philosophy in Australasia*, eds Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2010), pp. 528-529.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Runcie, 'A Short History of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Literature and Aesthetics and its Affiliate: The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics, 1990-2005', *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, vol. 10 (2006), pp. 1-23.

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Volume 25 of *Literature & Aesthetics* opens with Sarah Balstrup's 'Interpreting the Lost *Gospel of Mary*: Feminist Reconstructions and Myth-Making', an article that examines the non-canonical *Gospel of Mary*, which was discovered in the mid-twentieth century. Balstrup reviews the history of this text, which is known from three separate, incomplete manuscripts, concentrating particularly upon the feminist theologians who wrote on the text from the 1980s on. Identification of the 'Mary' of the gospel text as Mary Magdalene has led to revisionist studies of the Catholic Christian legends that surround this mysterious figure (such as the identification of her with the repentant adulteress in John 7: 53-8: 11 or the nameless woman who anointed his feet with ointment in Luke 7: 36-50). Such revision is praiseworthy if it clears away historical errors or draws attention to legends that are not supported by textual evidence, but Balstrup's concern is that the attempt by feminist scholars to 'recover' the 'real' Mary Magdalene result in competing legends and a different, though equally mythical, Mary.

The second article is Sybil Jack's 'Shedding the Earthly Crown Imperial for a Heavenly Crown'. This detailed research work considers issues of death and burial of royal individuals in early modern Europe. The funeral of King Henry VII (1457-1509), founder of the Tudor dynasty in Britain, is the case study; Jack notes that Henry VII would have been aware that his funeral "would either confirm or destabilise the new dynasty."<sup>3</sup> The construction of a large new chapel at Westminster Abbey, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, but intended as the resting place of Henry and his Queen, Elizabeth of York (d. 1503), was but a small part of the expensive and complicated preparation for the funeral. Much fascinating detail regarding the will, the cost of the funerary furnishings and tomb, the role of the executors, and the effect of mourning the dead King on the whole realm, is provided in this painstakingly scholarly article, which brings together evidence from many and disparate archival sources into a comprehensible whole. It is a particular delight to have Sybil Jack contribute to this milestone issue, as her term as the last elected Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney, 1986-1989, coincided with the period in which staff in the faculty were planning the launch of the SSLA.

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<sup>3</sup> Sybil Jack, 'Shedding the Earthly Crown Imperial for a Heavenly Crown', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2015), p. 25.

The SSLA has maintained cordial relations with scholars the world over, and it is a privilege to feature the work of Henry Jansen, formerly of the Theology Faculty, VU University Amsterdam. Jansen's article, 'Beautiful Truth and Truthful Beauty: On the Cognitive Value of Art', was earlier published in Dutch and has now been adapted especially for *Literature & Aesthetics*. The cognitivist approach to art, literature, and other areas traditionally understood as the purview of 'the Arts' or 'the Humanities', is one that is increasingly popular. In 2013 *Literature & Aesthetics* published three review articles about Stephen Davies' *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art and Evolution* (Oxford University Press, 2013), a book that sparked controversy over the apparent erosion of Humanities scholarship by proponents of the hard sciences.<sup>4</sup> Jansen focuses on literature and narrative, areas that have seen more work done using cognitive approaches than the visual arts, or dance and music. Jansen's deceptively gentle prose style and reasonable approach to vexed questions make this a solid contribution to an emergent field.

The next contribution is Raphael Lataster's 'Pantheistic God-Concepts: Ancient, Contemporary, Popular and Plausible Alternatives to Classical Theism', which follows on from two articles this author published in both issues of *Literature & Aesthetics* in 2014. Lataster is here concerned to expose the tendency among philosophers of religion to argue for a deity that resembles the Judeo-Christian God, rather than to acknowledge the possibility that the identification of a cause, a creator, or a maximally-great being might point to a type of being that differs radically from the God of the Bible. Lataster discusses the types of pantheism that could indicate such a deity, one that is part of the universe, including pandeism and panentheism. An important contribution of this article is the survey of ancient and contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> These articles are: Carole M. Cusack, 'Religion-Making and Art-Making: Identifying Convergences Between Cognitive Evolutionary and Social Constructionist Models of Human Evolution', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2013), pp. 97-110; John Powell, 'Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art and Evolution* (2013)', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2013), pp. 111-118; and Elizabeth Burns Coleman, 'The Artful Species (2013) by Stephen Davies: An Answer to Scepticism?', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2013), pp. 119-127.

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religious perspectives that are compatible with a pantheistic god-concept, including Daoism and the 'New Age'.

Matthew J. McMartin's 'Investigating the Civil Religious Phenomenon in America: A Content Analysis of HBO's *The Newsroom*', shifts the reader's attention to television, a cultural and entertainment medium that has enjoyed a 'golden age' of quality and influence since approximately 2000. *The Newsroom* was created by Aaron Sorkin, best-known for *The West Wing*, a political drama that ran from 1999 to 2006, and starred Martin Sheen as Democrat president Josiah Bartlet. *The West Wing* and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) are the two series that are most often associated with the commencement of this 'golden age'.<sup>5</sup> *The Newsroom* ran for three seasons (twenty-five episodes in total) from 2012-2014, and focused on Atlantis Cable News, a fictional agency seeking to present the news ethically. McMartin argues that 'civil religious' issues in America are a major theme, and connects his analysis of the television series with empirical data collected by bodies such as the Pew Research Centre to interrogate the state of Christianity in America today.

Alexander Noel Ivan Polunin's 'Eliot, Yeats, and the Anthropologists', is the sixth article in this issue. Polunin's focus is on the interest in the 'World Religions' that both T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats shared, and to advance the notion that Modernist poetry was an artistic form that was underpinned by work done in anthropology at the time. Eliot is viewed largely through the works of near-contemporaries J. G. Frazer (1854-1941), the author of *The Golden Bough*, the anthropologist, poet, and psychiatrist William H. R. Rivers (1854-1922), and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939). Polunin approaches Yeats via Frazer as well, and analyses Eliot's *The Waste Land* and sundry works by Yeats as poetry that functions in certain ways as ritual and initiation.

The next piece, Cressida Rigney's 'Tourmaline and Trauma: Spiritual Leadership, Salvation, and Disillusionment in Randolph's Stow's Novel', considers a classic work by an important Australian novelist from an original methodological position, that of Religious Studies. The tale of Michael Random, the *soi disant* water-diviner who fetches up in Tourmaline, an arid Western Australian town where the townsfolk are

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<sup>5</sup> Luke Buckmaster, 'West Wing Director Reveals the Secret to the "Golden Age" of TV', *The Drum*, at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-16/buckmaster-the-secret-to-the-golden-age-of-tv/6944276>. Accessed 15/11/2015.

torpid and neurotic, and project their collective longing for salvation, water, and a new life for the community onto the stranger, may be usefully interpreted through such religious ideas as the messianic paradigm, myth-dreams, and the dynamics of cargo cults. Rigney traces Biblical themes in Stow's novel, his use of Taoist ideas in the character of Tom Spring, and notes the novel's conclusion that even false messiahs may provoke change.

Asmahan Sallah's 'Remembering as a Revelation Discourse: Sacred Memory Narratives in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*' is a study of the way that notebooks in the novel function to record memory, and extends scholarship on this important novel by linking the two themes discussed by critics, that is the spiritual aspects of the novel, and the multiple notebooks and journals referred to therein. Sallah uses the work of Paul Ricoeur on hermeneutics, and this article reinforces the emphasis found in several earlier contributions on the power of narrative to change and even create reality, as the almanac of the title is a text of resistance, through which Native Americans can write a story of themselves that is other to the narrative of colonialism.

The remainder of the volume consists of a review essay by frequent *Literature & Aesthetics* contributor Norman Simms, 'Jewish History in a Hostile World', which analyses Alan Levine's *Scattered Among the Peoples: The Jewish Diaspora in Ten Portraits* (2002) in the light of its intended purpose as a popular book for a wide audience, and also in light of the events of the years since 2002 when it first appeared. Simms evaluates Levine's contribution as praiseworthy, but omitting certain crucial – and controversial – themes and issues, to maintain its 'homely' style. There are also a number of shorter reviews to inform readers of new and interesting books of relevance.

I thank the anonymous referees who gave of their time to make sure that the articles published in this issue were up to standard. Special thanks are due to my doctoral student Raphael Lataster, the production editor for this issue. His prompt and efficient work, professional communication with authors, and good humour make him an ideal comrade. My appreciation of his assistance is profound. I congratulate Catherine Runcie, and all the great participants and supporters of the SSLA over the past twenty-five years, including (but not limited to) Rick Benitez, Will Christie, Mabel Lee, Garry Trompf, Paul Crittenden, Vras Karalis, Chris Hartney, Alex Norman, the late Denis Dutton, and the late Eric

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Sharpe (my own revered supervisor and mentor). I hope I may live up to their example during my term as Editor of *Literature & Aesthetics*.