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## Laszlo's Testament

### Abstract

'The dominant impulse in the new writing in Australia is now an internationalist one (wrote Michael Wilding in 1975) '... younger writers are concerned with being writers, with creating verbal artefacts, with relating to other writers, in California and Argentina and Europe and New York and Asia'. He expressed a similar view in his editorial of the Australian Stand and developed it in the recent ALS devoted to new writing.'

# Laszlo's Testament

OR

STRUCTURING THE PAST AND SKETCHING THE PRESENT IN CONTEMPORARY SHORT FICTION, MAINLY AUSTRALIAN

'The dominant impulse in the new writing in Australia is now an internationalist one' (wrote Michael Wilding in 1975) '... younger writers are concerned with being writers, with creating verbal artefacts, with relating to other writers, in California and Argentina and Europe and New York and Asia'. He expressed a similar view in his editorial of the Australian *Stand* and developed it in the recent *ALS* devoted to new writing.<sup>1</sup>

The trend which Michael Wilding isolated, one of several in recent Australian literature, is best exemplified by the work of a number of writers of short fiction, including Wilding himself. It has 'internationalist' affinities if only because it is part of an evolution which has occurred in the modes of short fiction being written in many parts of the world, and particularly in Latin and North America, following the example of writers like Jorge Luis Borges. Yet the Australian variant has distinctly regional elements, particularly in the work of Peter Carey and Frank Moorhouse, while at the same time seeming to stand in opposition to a well-defined indigenous tradition of short-story writing. Most of the prose writers included in the *ALS* survey admitted a lack of interest in what Frank Moorhouse called 'the humanist tradition of the Australian story – sympathetic to the working-class and kind to kangaroos'.<sup>2</sup> With one exception,<sup>3</sup> they also ignored the example set by the

novelists of the late fifties and sixties, and sought to relate their work to a wider context of English-speaking literature and sometimes to recent writing in Latin America and Europe. The bypassing of such writers as Patrick White, Randolph Stow and Thomas Keneally (amongst others) is puzzling, because there is a strain of individual innovativeness running through their work which often brought it into conflict with a set of critical assumptions which represented the Australian tradition in fiction as essentially a naturalistic (or realistic) one. *Voss* and *Tourmaline* were just two examples of a more generous and flexible conception of the novel than some critics at the time were ready to accept. Innovative short story writers of the present decade still sometimes provoke similar hostility. Recently, a reviewer of collections by Murray Bail and Michael Wilding employed something called a 'crucible of reality' in which their pieces were tested and found wanting, and an untenable distinction between *realistic* and *anti-realistic* modes of fiction (abused fifteen years ago to garble *Tourmaline*) was re-invoked<sup>4</sup>. Fifteen or twenty years on, the controversy stirred up by innovations in the novel which seemed incompatible with a local tradition of realism, has surfaced again over the short story, exposing the blind assumption that the same general conventions of representation necessarily apply to both forms.

Many of the writers who share the 'internationalist' outlook recognise as a source of influence, or at least interest, a number of American authors who came to prominence in the sixties. These range from the Argentinian, Borges, whose influential work was produced two or three decades before it became widely available in English translations, to younger writers from the United States as diverse as Richard Brautigan and Donald Barthelme. These three, with many others, in various permutations, belong to what American critics have seen as an extensive movement, multifariously labelled the literature of exhaustion, new fictionist, black humourous, fabulist, literarily disruptive, fantasist, absurdist, futurist-fictionist, anti-novelistic, innovative, surfictionist, metafictional . . .<sup>5</sup>. Out of this diverse assortment of writings emerge

two contrasting tendencies which result from a split in the main components of the traditional novel: on the one hand, the assimilation of fiction to history and memoir, such as occurred in the work of the Beat Generation – in the novels of Kerouac and subsequently in the writings of Norman Mailer and E.L. Doctorow, for example; on the other, a revival of interest in the *invention* of stories – in the element of fiction Dr Johnson called ‘the fable’. This does not always issue in stories which have the quality of fables. Sometimes it is present as a concern with the problems of invention and the function of story telling. As we shall see, it takes this form in some of Michael Wilding’s fiction.

At a very general level, there has been a loosening up of the fairly rigid division of prose fiction into categories according to length, and an increasing variety in the shorter modes which have appeared in the last decade or so. Along with this has gone a rejection, or at least a questioning, of many of the conventions associated with the novel, in particular, the manner of creating an integrated illusion and probable account of life. On the surface, recent fiction sometimes appears to be self-consciously contrived; it draws attention to its own artifices. Yet this is rarely mere gratuitous cleverness, but a recognition that prose fiction has other functions and possibilities besides the communication or representation of common experience (whatever that may be). It may also take the form of fantastic tales, the truth disguised as lies, philosophical speculations, wishes, dreams and nightmares, mock-learned essays, mythologies and fairy stories, for example. Perhaps realism is an aberration in the history of literature, as John Barth once suggested<sup>6</sup>.

The open, critical approach to technique evident in much recent short fiction has a thematic function. Once a writer begins to tamper with the conventions by which fiction renders a model of ‘reality’ and is distinguished from it, the whole question of our perception of reality is thrown into doubt. Tony Tanner has shown how this has been a developing theme in American fiction since the war<sup>7</sup> up to the point where novelists became concerned

with finding escapes from versions of reality which they conceived as being imposed by others. The process of creating fiction can thus serve an urgent need which is, in the widest sense of the word, political. The innovative modes which have evolved recently enable writers to capture and explore problems with which they are increasingly pre-occupied.

One of these problems – the question of what happened, what the story tells us happened and the impossibility of actually finding out what happened – is a dominant theme in Michael Wilding's fiction. Many of his stories capture an acute sense of the dilemma of living in the second half of the twentieth century, where it is not always possible to find out what is 'really' happening, where we are inundated with data which are not always verifiable, but which somehow document our existence. We are (depending on where we live) more or less at the mercy of others' versions of 'reality'; paranoia sometimes seems the only logical response. 'Hector and Freddie', published in *The West Midland Underground* (1975) but conceived and drafted some years earlier<sup>8</sup>, illustrates in its style and theme the development of this awareness. It is a transitional story, rooted in the 'novelistic' mode, but with elements of recursiveness (in the interlarded stories for example) consistent with its theme.

Like Michael Wilding's first published novel, written about the same time, it is concerned with living together in unconventional, *ad hoc* situations. Hector copes by making up stories about it and Freddie accepts the imposition of this version of what is happening; he innocently allows himself to be Hector's major character. The arrangement seems to work because Hector's fictions control it, while Freddie is generally the willing victim. Certain elements in the story reinforce this: Hector is allowed to enter the bathroom at all times and may see Freddie naked, but the reciprocal right is denied Freddie. Hector always presents himself at least partially apparelled. Freddie tells his friend, Marilyn about an occasion when he danced naked, Hector whipping him with his tie.

The process of domination in the situation can operate in re-

verse too. Freddie senses that by accepting the role of character and victim he nourishes Hector's fictions, and thus protects him. Moreover, Hector's version of Freddie is sometimes actually helpful. The arrangement is threatened whenever Freddie tries to break out of the role Hector creates for him – by seeing Hector naked, for example, or by usurping the position of raconteur, as he does in relating the story of the lady who said "Whoopie!"

The story is at least partly about the business of telling stories, and this is rooted in the psychological reality it depicts. We all make up stories to cope with our reality and control it (if we can) and power belongs to those who can get others to suspend their disbelief. 'Hector and Freddie' exemplifies this function of fictionalising both thematically and formally.

The fact that it is a recursive story has a number of implications. It raises the question of the relation of fiction to the life it presents, and suggests the complexity and indeterminateness of that relationship. Poets are supposed to be licensed, self-avowing liars, and their stories are said to distort reality in all sorts of ways, but perhaps this is no more than an historical record does. Recent recursive fiction, like Michael Wilding's, is conceived out of the intuitive conviction that the creation of fictions is a means of survival in someone else's version of reality. It is not an escape into fantasy: fantasy is what it is escaping from. The intuitive wisdom of fiction over-rides the evidential truth of history.

This insight into the political function of fictive invention is explored in Michael Wilding's two recent books which are otherwise very different from each other. *The Short Story Embassy: a novel* (1975) has certain aspects of a fable, or rather of a gothic tale – in its names, setting is a mysterious house, Edgar Allan Poe graveyard, and the like. In fact, the author has pointed out that the opening paragraph is an allusion to *The Turn of the Screw*<sup>9</sup>, and it is the atmosphere of tales like this that the book evokes, in a distorted form. In this respect, it is somewhat like Donald Barthelme's 'Views of my Father Weeping', though Barthelme's gothic alludes to Karen Blixen, rather than Henry James<sup>10</sup>. *Scenic Drive*

(1976) is a cluster of short, connected pieces which express a narrator's anxieties about the 'reality' behind the images which confront him, and the way other writers create them. Appropriately enough, pornographic pictures symbolise his dilemma.

Through both these books there is an insistent emphasis on the ways in which stories expose or conceal reality, and perhaps actually create it. This emerges as a pre-occupation with other writers (real and imagined), with journalists and photographers, with characters who complicate relationships because of their own fictionalising activities, with the story and what actually happened, with stories which might confirm unmentionable truths or enmesh the narrator in another's fiction. The act of telling a story is not simply a matter of selecting, recording, shaping and rendering experience. It is a psychological and political necessity – a way of coping with baffling experience which threatens the identity. In *Scenic Drive* the fictionalising process recurs constantly: the narrator is typing up his 'fantasies about a journalist showing people pornographic pictures'<sup>11</sup>, Dexter, the pornographer, is endlessly striving to reduce the gap between his photographs and the situations they depict, other writers like J.W. Holmes and the magazine lady, and possibly, but dangerously, the literary barmaid are threatening to write the narrator into their fictions<sup>12</sup>, and always

The relationships are ambiguous; ambiguous not only to the viewer, but to the characters themselves.<sup>13</sup>

In a rather different way, the work of Frank Moorhouse also exemplifies this pre-occupation with the way people make up stories to cope with reality, but here it is connected with the contrasting pressures of the two tendencies I mentioned at the beginning: fiction as a form of imaginative history, which 'structures what has happened to us', and fiction as the invention of fables. The discontinuous narrative form which he has developed is exactly right for this, for it is in clusters of linked stories that the emphasis can be adjusted between the two tendencies, while retaining the integrity of the book as a whole.



His second collection, *The Americans, Baby* (1972) charts the intrusion of American presuppositions and attitudes into the consciousness of urban Australians. As the story 'The St Louis Rotary Convention 1923, Recalled' reprinted in his next book and mentioned in his latest, makes clear, this is not something which happened suddenly in the post-war decades, but it is important that most of the stories take place around events of the late sixties, when the impact of the United States on Australia took a strong, new and overt form. At this level, the book presents an aspect of American cultural imperialism, and it is ironically apt, from the subordinate Australian perspective, that it ends with a story about a man writing to Twiggy, one of the last symbols of the mini-Britain, while at the same time he is marking fifty-five essays on 'The Decline of British Imperialism'. His pathetic, regressive dream is set against the pervasive, if ambivalent images of America in the rest of the book.

*The Americans, Baby* is a fiction closely linked to history, and here, as in his other books, the author introduces actual people and events, not all of them publicly known. But the stories also capture the conspiratorial fables a generation of young Australians have invented about Americans, based on *Coca-Cola*, the C.I.A. and economic imperialism in Asia, on the one hand, and upon beat writers, black culture and jazz on the other. They present the uncomfortable confrontation of the fable with an American version of themselves, and undermine the secure sense of this on both sides. When Becker, the American *Coca-Cola* salesman tries to escape the Australian's definition of him by disclosing that he is actually a jazz pianist, Kim, the Australian assimilates this to his idea of decadent white jazz, not part of the black struggle, thus destructively framing Becker within his American fairy tale. The contrasting tendencies, towards history and fable, are developed in opposite ways in two of Frank Moorhouse's subsequent books. *The Electrical Experience* (1974) returns to an earlier period; the generation of the parents of the young people in *The Americans, Baby*. It records the coming of the American dream

of success by industry and progressive thinking to small-town Australia in the interwar years, and its obliteration by post-war economic imperialism. It relates directly to the previous book, and sets T. George McDowell's American dream, inspired by the St. Louis Rotary Convention of 1923, against the equally delusive fantasies of his daughter Terri (one of the young people from *The Americans, Baby*). It is not so much like contemporary American writing as it is like the work of John Dos Passos. Like *U.S.A.*, it approaches history in its use of fragments of documentary material and its explanatory demonstration of the connection between the present and the recent past. Even the old photographs in *The Electrical Experience* serve an evidential purpose. However, where Dos Passos kept the four modes of *U.S.A.* strictly apart, Frank Moorhouse allows history, the documentary record, private memoir and fiction to merge. In the novels of John Dos Passos, the elements relate sequentially, while in the discontinuous narrative as Frank Moorhouse has developed it so far, they inter-relate reciprocally, hence the appositeness of the purely formal endings, on stories which introduce an element of self-consciousness, distance the reader from the fiction, but do not conclude it: 'The Letters to Twiggy', which is an outwardly spirally recursive story; the account of 'Filming the Hatted Australian' which with glossary and notes rounds off *The Electrical Experience*; the endlessly extending and branching 'Chain Letter Story' at the end of *Tales of Mystery and Romance* (1977). The historical (or novelistic) tendency in these books is balanced by an open-ended or recursive structure which causes them to operate like fables. They do not tell us conclusively what happened, but give us rather complicated models to work upon.

The latest book, *Tales of Mystery and Romance* exemplifies this tendency very clearly. The stories are all voiced by a narrator who readily admits his own inadequacies, which he sees as both self-defeating yet basically honest when set against the excesses and brilliant trendiness of others, in particular, his first ex-wife, and his sometime friend, Milton. He thinks he knows what reality is,

and his stories are attempts to capture it and free himself from the fictions of others. He is, in this respect, like the narrator in Michael Wilding's *Scenic Drive*, and as a matter of fact, there are veiled allusions in both books which connect them to each other, and a story in Moorhouse's which alleges the truth behind the account of the Jack Kerouac wake in *The West Midland Underground*, but these private connections are of no great consequence. What is important is the process of creating a version of reality for himself in which the narrator is engaged. The story 'The Loss of a Friend by Cablegram' actually demonstrates this by introducing passages from the narrator's journal which relate to events we have heard about in earlier stories, but which in this story are questioned or contradicted by his ex-wife. What actually happened sometimes seems to be indeterminate, but we recognize the need on the narrator's part to assimilate experience by fictionalising it, so that his fabled version has primacy (at least for him). It is impossible to know precisely how the narrator is transforming his memories and experience, or whether some of the incidents 'really' happened or were speculations about what might have occurred, but this is essentially the point of the book. Hence its visual elements do not document or illustrate the fiction (as in *The Electrical Experience*) but relate to it suggestively and symbolically. The rediscovery of the tale (or the fable) with its emphasis on action, plot and invention, restored another power to prose fiction. In a plausible story having a dominant 'historical' or 'novel' tendency, the probable events are calculated to confirm our rational expectations, not to arouse our surprise. In a tale, the improbable can happen and excite our sense of wonder. This gives back to the writer of fiction an aspect of art always allowed to the painter, the poet and the teller of fairy tales. While it is true that the sense of wonder can be aroused cheaply – the depiction of the marvellous is subject to a law of diminishing returns – this sets a criterion for judging tales of wonder, not for rejecting them altogether. The tales, of Borges for example, sometimes tend too far in the direction of fancy (as William H. Gass pointed out) so that

they demand our admiration *at* their author's marvellous inventive power, but there is another kind of wondrous story which implicates the reader in a mystery which continues to reverberate for him <sup>14</sup>. The action may be simple, but its power to evoke this mysterious resonance is enduring. Fairy tales are a good example of this. Such stories are models, metaphors, or poetic analogies by which the writer works upon the reader, by engaging the reader to work upon it too <sup>15</sup>. The true-told tale is as much the reader's as the author's.

Fables like this extend our sense of the mysterious and disturb our comfortable notions of the distinction between fiction and reality, but the modern tales of writers like Borges, Barthelme and others do this in something like the opposite way to fairy tales. Instead of introducing us to a world of marvels, they disclose the mystery and the terror on the surface of ordinary life. Amongst Australian writers of this decade, Peter Carey and Murray Bail show close affinities with this kind of fiction.

*The Fat Man in History* (1974) by Peter Carey bears a superficial resemblance to the work of the American 'fabulists' but has a distinctive integrity of its own which suggests it was composed in isolation from any such influence. It is less diverse than the collections of Barthelme; it shows little sign of tentative development or experimentation, but reveals a powerful imagination, confidently concentrated. From the gentle yet incisive observation of 'Happy Story' to the surreal nightmare of 'Peeling' there is a unity of tone such as we sense in the work of Borges (though the voice, of course, is quite different). All the stories are highly finished in both their invention and verbal exemplification. This draws attention to their quality as 'verbal artefacts' and gives them a self-contained distinction, so that we feel they have come into existence fully formed, like fairy tales, untouched by the pressures and temptations in the work of Carey's Australian and international contemporaries.

These tales also meet the test proposed by William H. Gass; they work upon us because they give us something to work upon.

They are put together from elements we relate to effortlessly. Peter Carey often recreates a recognizably Australian suburbia of heat and sharp sunlight, nondescript buildings, vacant lots, driveways, superhighways and clapped-out cars. These are all specified in precise detail, not in the interest of creating a plausible illusion of reality, but in a manner which brings out their frighteningly surreal quality. By these means he captures the ordinary terrors of everyday existence and the logic of paranoia in mid-century life. These stories invite comparison with the work of contemporary American writers, yet at the same time disclose insights into a predicament which has its specific origin in Australia. They are closer to Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* than to the worlds of Barthelme, Borges and the like. This makes Carey's work 'international' in the best sense.

Murray Bail's *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* (1975) also reveals varied affinities with recent Australian and American short fiction. Some of the pieces in the book are concerned with systems, obscurities, linguistic conundrums or the technical problems of fiction, and in their baffling cleverness are sometimes reminiscent of Borges. The story 'Heubler' for example, is like Borges' 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote' in that it is a philosophical speculation, or the kind of imagined counter-example that might occur in an essay in conceptual analysis. 'Heubler' is a sequence of twenty-three situations which counter general hypotheses. For example, the anecdote about the one person who may outlive art, killing himself in the process, challenges the proposition *ars longa, vita brevis* and also, paradoxically, confirms it.

Some of Murray Bail's other stories have a quite underivative similarity to the work of Donald Barthelme – fables like 'Life of the Party' and 'The Dog Show' (amongst others) deliberately employ slightly stilted language and awkward juxtapositions of incident to capture the verbal and behaviourist clichés of white-collar suburbia. Like Peter Carey, Murray Bail has a gift for uncovering weirdness in the ordinary, often by projecting his

worlds through bizarre and sometimes hypothetical viewpoints which re-structure the dimensions of the familiar world, like the man up a gum tree in 'Life of the Party' the staff racing along the partitions in 'Partitions' or the cartographical travels of Roy G. Biv in 'Cul-de-sac (uncompleted)'.

The visions of Carey and Bail are not, in fact, other-worldly or marvellous, but *surrealistic* in the precise sense of the word. Neither is concerned with exploring the recesses of the unconscious; they delineate the horrors on the surface of ordinary life and uncover the menace in the barely noticed superficialities of existence. This is not too far away from some of the more disturbing sketches of the satirist Barry Humphries<sup>16</sup>. Of course, some American writers are engaged in a similar process, and there is a wide overlap between the surreal urban and suburban worlds projected in the stories of a number of writers in the United States and Australia. But there remains an important distinction, not just in the details of gum trees and heat in the Australian pieces and thirteen channels of television in the American, but also in tone. Both are threatening, yet the quality of menace is different. This difference must ultimately remain inexplicable and mysterious, but the Australian stories seem to point more insistently to the thinness of the familiar world, perched on the very brink of the void.

A less menacing but related sense of being on the edge of something was implicit in Michael Wilding's *Stand* editorial where he specified a precise location as the focus of the 'international' strain in recent Australian writing:

'... there were always internationalists; the renaissance Jack Lindsay looked for was in part to be a rebirth of the spirit of classical Greece, lured to the comparable Mediterranean climate of Sydney. In the 1970s the climatic analogy sought is no longer Mediterranean but Californian.'

He goes on to emphasise the contemporary relevance of the 'technological sophistication, the flat surfaces, the instant consumerism, the history-free ease of a parallel, sunny frontier society'. California instead of Greece might seem at first an odd substitu-

tion, but during the sixties it did emerge as the focus of a cluster of elements significant in contemporary western culture. As the historian William Irwin Thompson put it, California stands *At The Edge of History*<sup>17</sup> and prefigures our future. To substitute it for Greece is to move from a cultural perspective shaped by the past to one shaped by the future; to discover that 'history-free ease' Michael Wilding mentioned. We learn from Laszlo's papers in *The Short Story Embassy: a novel* that

'The novel structures what has happened to us; with the short story we sketch our future actions.'<sup>18</sup>

A move away from the 'novelistic' or historical dimension of prose fiction to the short story side of Laszlo's distinction entails a move away from national traditions which by their nature are historically determined. Tales and fables float free in a way that realistic fictions do not, but this does not make them internationalist or 'cosmopolitan' in a derogatory sense, as Randolph Stow showed fifteen years ago in *Tourmaline*. What it indicates is a different conception of the function of the art. It is not aimed at interpreting how we got where we did, but with showing us some of the ways we are deceived about where we are.

## NOTES

1. *Meanjin*, 1, 1975, p.106. *Stand*, 16, 2, 1975, p.5. *ALS*, 8, 2, *Australian Literary Studies* 1977, p.117.
2. *ALS*, 8, 2, 189-90.
3. Murray Bail, *ibid*, p. 188, where he pays tribute to Patrick White, while rejecting much Australian literature in terms which echo White's twenty years ago in 'The Prodigal Son' (*Australian Letters*, 1, 3, 1958.)
4. F. Zwicky, 'Make or Fake? Some Current Fiction', *Overland*, 63, 1976, 52-6.
5. e.g., see Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions*, Urbana, 1975, Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators*, New York, 1967, Max F. Schultz, *Black Humour Fiction of the Sixties*, Athens (Ohio), 1973, Terence Malley, *Richard Brautigan*, New York, 1972, Peter J. Reed *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* and Joseph W. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon*, New York, 1974, among many others.

6. Interview with J.D. Bellamy, *The New Fiction*, Urbana, 1975, p.4.
7. *City of Words*, London, 1971, *passim* and especially 372-392.
8. Private communication.
9. *ALS*, 8, 2, 1977, p. 119.
10. Note the Danish names (which locate the story in Copenhagen) and the anachronistic quality of the story mentioned, and more specifically, his 'Several Garlic Tales', *Paris Review*, 36, 1966.
11. *Scenic Drive*, p.13.
12. Cf. The Merry Pranksters idea of people trying to get others into their movies, discussed in Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, New York, 1968, *passim*, and Tony Tanner, *City of Words*, 372-392.
13. *Scenic Drive*, p.12.
14. William H. Gass, 'In Terms of the Toenail: Fiction and the Figures of Life', *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, New York, 1972, 73-5.
15. *Ibid.*
16. There was one in which the flat voice of Sandy Stone simply rehearsed, with occasional catches, the advertisements on the railway stations between Box Hill and Melbourne: *Dickie's Towels - Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills - Berger's Paints (prepared) Keep On Keeping On - 9 Miles to Griffiths Bros. Teas . . .*
17. The title of his book, published New York, 1971
18. p.123.