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***Boundary Writers: Moral Pragmatism  
in Henry Lawson and Frank Moorhouse***

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This thesis is dedicated to  
Professor F.E. Archer,  
*my grandfather.*

# Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Part I. The Pragmatists</b>	
1. The Social Contract: John Dewey and James Tufts' <i>Ethics</i> .	19
2. "A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking": William James's <i>Pragmatism</i> .	34
<b>Part II. Henry Lawson</b>	
1. "An Interrogatory Cope, Cope, Cope?": Pragmatic Action in "The Iron-Bark Chip"	45
2. "His Brother's Keeper": Provisional Securities in the stories of Mitchell and M'Laughlan and "Telling Mrs Baker."	51
3. Ritual and Meaning	
i. The Union Buries Its Head.	68
ii. "And Not a Soul to Meet": Making Meaning in Empty Places.	81
4. Social Form and Empowerment in "Joe Wilson's Courtship" and "A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek."	96
<b>Bridging the Gap: Bringing Lawson and Moorhouse Together</b>	108
<b>Part III. Frank Moorhouse</b>	
1. "The Ethics and Good Fellowship of this Home": Inheriting George McDowell's Pragmatism.	114
2. Visiting Strange Territory: Balmain and the "Full Anti-Convention Bit."	131
3. The Radical Pragmatist Takes Flight: <i>Tales of Mystery and Romance</i> .	170
4. The Way of Imperfection: Edith Campbell Berry and <i>Grand Days</i> .	194
<b>Conclusion: The Perpetual Pioneers</b>	242
<b>Bibliography</b>	249

## Abstract

This thesis investigates the philosophical and ethical relationship between the writings of Henry Lawson and Frank Moorhouse and demonstrates that their similar approaches are rooted in moral pragmatism. The formal philosophy of Pragmatism, as it is largely understood through the works of John Dewey and William James, creates the framework for the discussion.

In this thesis, the works of Lawson and Moorhouse are seen in the context of periods of social pioneering and their works are focused on society-in-change. Crucial to the study is the idea of meaning and certainty when societies are confronted by changing values. Lawson and Moorhouse both push a vision of society which would privilege a moral method of inquiry over absolute moral standards, and which is self-critiquing, progressive and open to the “other”. In both Lawson and Moorhouse, the dreams of certainty must give way to the embrace of creative possibility.

In Pragmatism, meaning is derived through action and for Lawson, provisional security is derived through the daily meanings obtained from observing the rituals, duties and obligations of the social unit (with an ironic awareness that these responsibilities are contingent and might change). The importance of duties and obligations to others is largely expressed through the consequent guilt and anxiety when Lawson’s men fail in them. Ritual and social role-plays, on the other hand, are typically powerful, positive forces which steady social meaning and alleviate social dysfunction.

In Moorhouse’s fiction, meanings are constructed through role-plays and experimentation with types of being. Moorhouse’s technique is to contrast value systems in order to challenge the locus of meaning. Despite the ontological anxieties such questions create, the ambiguity of the self is given a positive orientation. Moorhouse shows his pragmatic impulses through his dismissal of the possibility of creating one coherent “way” of *being*, in favour of developing provisional “ways” of *going* and *doing*.

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## **Boundary Writers: Moral Pragmatism in Henry Lawson and Frank Moorhouse.**

The following thesis locates a pragmatic moral tradition in Australian literature through analysis of the works of Henry Lawson and Frank Moorhouse. In their fiction, Lawson and Moorhouse both concentrate on characters that inhabit environments where value has become unstable, where old ethics are challenged and new habits of behaviour are under construction. As such, moral competence becomes a key issue in both writers' works as their characters face, fail and sometimes even resolve, moral crises. These characters, standing on the brink of ethical frontiers, are social pioneers, revising and pushing ethical boundaries. The characters of these stories must negotiate the new and unknown moral terrain and do so with varying rates of success. This thesis aims to open a new discussion in Australian literary research by mapping the moral dimensions of the shared pragmatic consciousness that is operating in the works of Lawson and Moorhouse.

Moral crisis occurs under the pressures of competing systems of value; the critical inquiry and open inventiveness required for successful re-evaluations of this kind form the core of this thesis. Lawson and Moorhouse disrupt expected moral values or socially condoned behaviours; these continual challenges to customary ethos and prevailing mores make room to imagine new ways of being. Building up new social values from an old stock of customary values requires an adventurous, conscientious and reflexive creativity. This is the essence of the pragmatic consciousness and it is the vital attitude which Lawson and Moorhouse share.

Gillian Whitlock has commented that in Lawson's stories: "all social, ethical and moral norms and stable reference points recede."<sup>1</sup> By removing or interrupting expected cultural norms, Lawson's work sets the task of reimagining value. Lawson's exploration into moral values and social behaviours reinterprets the popular utopian literary form of the eighteenth century in order to establish the question of value as central to his work. In the imaginary voyages of European literature, (*Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* are examples) the "fantasy frontiers" of the antipodes often present "a topsy-turvy new

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<sup>1</sup> Whitlock, G. "The Bush, The Barrack-Yard and the Clearing: Colonial 'Realism' in the Sketches and Stories of Susanna Moodie, C.L.R. James and Henry Lawson". *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. No.1, 1985. pp. 36-48. p. 41.

world waiting to be discovered.”<sup>2</sup> Maack writes: “In the myth of the antipodes, writers invent a world which in every detail is the reversal of their known environment.”<sup>3</sup> By interrupting typical assumptions of order, the reader is forced to assess the reigning order when it is placed in contrast with a possible order. This kind of writing thus demands a reimagination of value. This element of antipodean writing is often present in Lawson’s work in stories like “Hungerford” where, as a traveller to the border town, the narrator inverts the expected order of things. The reader cannot rest comfortably with an image of a plague of rabbits, leap-frogging over and burrowing under the rabbit-proof fence, laughing heartily at the folly of humankind. The narrator says, “I never saw a rabbit laugh before; but I’ve seen a ’possum do it.” In “The Drover’s Wife” this antipodean world is an anti-Eden; the garden is full of rotten apple trees, there is neither God nor man and the wife is victorious over the snake. When even the mythologies of human beginnings are being rewritten—in particular, a myth which gave birth to Christian concepts of sin and redemption—how are men and women to conduct themselves in this strange, new environment? When so many things have been turned upside-down, how is human value to be maintained? When faced with a circumstance where the human population is being mocked by old buck rabbits, the question must be asked, does human life *have* value here? Can we, in fact, insist on any meaning?

It has been widely argued that the renegotiation of value, where no standard is taken for granted, is typical of colonial literature.<sup>4</sup> It is also part of the post-colonial condition, for Moorhouse also presents the reader with constant negotiations of value, principally through his navigation of personal identities as his characters struggle to find a satisfactory code by which to live. His continual moral contrasts illuminate the standards that guide one’s critical decisions and, it must be remembered, these standards are often dangerously unconscious. It can be likewise said of Moorhouse’s work that all stable reference points have receded. Looking at Lawson and Moorhouse together, the

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<sup>2</sup> Longley Arthur, P. “Capturing the Antipodes: An Imaginary Voyage to *Terra Australis*.” (ed) Harper, G. *Comedy, Fantasy and Imagination*. London: Continuum. 2002. pp. 205-217. p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> Maack, A. “It’s all contrary’—Utopian Projections in the Antipodes.” *Antipodes*. December 2000. pp.123-128. p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> For further reading on this condition in colonial literature see Whitlock’s article referenced above; and Wevers, L. “Inventions of the Real: The Nationalisms of Henry Lawson and Frank Sargeson.” *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*. 12, (1994) (Online) <http://www.arts.uwo.ca/~andrewf/anzsc/anzsc12/wevers12.htm> [date accessed: 2/12/02]; and Sunderland, L. *The Fantastic Invasion: Kipling, Conrad and Lawson*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. 1989.

upheaval of value emerges as a clear thematic trend. It could very well be an ongoing effect of what Moorhouse describes as this “ever-renewing country.”<sup>5</sup>

Such an ever-renewing country requires an ever-renewing philosophy. This thesis offers pragmatism as such a philosophy, one which was developed in that other ever-renewing country, the United States of America. This philosophy is based on experience-funded workable truths, producing a style of living that can accommodate change and shifting values, a lifestyle symbolically characterised by the pioneer. Lawson and Moorhouse both use this pioneer type who ultimately must favour the changeable and insecure over restrictive, and even unhealthy, “isms”. There is a very clear philosophical relation between these two writers, however, there have been no investigations into their ethical, epistemological and ontological similarities. The social philosophies of Lawson and Moorhouse are pragmatic in being experience-based and relational. By applying the philosophy of formal pragmatism to Lawson and Moorhouse, this thesis will chart the moral development in these writers’ works showing that, for them, experience is the source of knowing, the social is the source of being and meaning is derived from doing. This thesis will show that Lawson’s and Moorhouse’s moral understanding is pragmatic: their thesis is that there is no absolute moral reality. Emerson sums up this pragmatic position nicely: “There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees.”<sup>6</sup>

Australians are often described as a pragmatic people, yet what does this precisely mean? Helen Irving locates the development of a pragmatic ethic at the pioneering stages of Australian development when she writes:

The Australian bush myth expressed a type of commitment to the values associated with the rural pioneer: resourcefulness, pragmatism, rough egalitarianism and romanticism. These values, growing out of both dream and experience, shaped what had now emerged as the white Australian ‘type’.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Moorhouse, F. *Forty-Seventeen*. Ringwood: Penguin. 1988. p. 150 Future page references will be to this edition and will be shown in-text.

<sup>6</sup> Emerson, R. W. “Circles” (ed) Goodman, R. *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*. New York: Routledge. 1995. pp.25-33. p.25.

<sup>7</sup> Irving, H. *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia’s Constitution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997. p.15.



David Malouf locates an Australian pragmatism further back than this, with the Indigenous cultures. He discusses Bennelong's imaginative flexibility of mind when he displayed:

an act of accommodation, of inclusiveness, that is an example to each one of us, and, considering all that followed, a shame to each one of us as well... [Bennelong] had behind him the strength of a culture that in being old had developed, in its long view of things, an extraordinary capacity to accept change and take in what was new and must be adapted to.<sup>8</sup>

Here pragmatism suggests openness and creative inventiveness; the pragmatic mindset in these instances creates original responses to new problems. These examples also show the social ethic that informs pragmatic practice. In contrast, "the 'p' word", as it is currently used in political commentary, is used to define a position that sits in opposition to principle. One will often hear the current Prime Minister, John Howard, stressing the necessity to strike "a balance of principle and pragmatism."<sup>10</sup> In the same vein, Mackenzie Wark writes:

There is a distinctively Australian pragmatism is [sic] just trying to hitch a ride with whatever is going. In the 1890s, Australia rode on the sheep's back. In the 1990s, it's Kawasaki jet skis... Who knows what it is we are becoming?... Let's just grab the nearest buoyant concept and dive on in! This is the Australian style - to never let a chance go by. Stuff that jumbuck in your tucker bag. The swaggie sinks in the billabong, laughing at his fate. Such is life, mate. No worries.<sup>11</sup>

Such usage of "pragmatism" is unfortunately reductive both in what the word can mean and what it can offer as a moral charter for a people. In the popular imagination, this Australian pragmatism is almost taken for granted, yet what does it mean for an Australian moral reality? In the three passages quoted above, this Australian pragmatism clearly has an ethical dimension whether it suggests blatant opportunism, a work ethic or the moral grain of community life. Despite what this suggests about Australian ethics, no extended research has been attempted to chart its dimensions and

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<sup>8</sup> Malouf, D. *A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness*. Sydney: ABC Books. 1998. pp. 60-61.

<sup>9</sup> Henderson, G. "Pragmatism is the Order of the Day" <http://www.smh.com.au/news/Gerard-Henderson/Pragmatism-is-the-order-of-the-day/2005/03/14/1110649125079.html> March 15, 2005 [date accessed: 30 September, 2005]

<sup>10</sup> Howard, J. Speech to the Lowy Institute, 31 March 2005.

<http://www.chinaembassy.org.au/eng/xw/t190220.htm> [date accessed: 30 September, 2005]

<sup>11</sup> Wark, M. "Australia: You're Swimming In It."

<http://www.dmc.mq.edu.au/mwark/warchive/Other/ozstyle.html> [date accessed: 27 September, 2005]

effects in our literature. This study uses formal pragmatism to re-examine what pragmatism as a philosophy can offer to social and ethical process and reformation as depicted in the works of Lawson and Moorhouse. The primary sources for this philosophy are John Dewey and James Tufts' *Ethics* (1908) and William James's *Pragmatism* (1907) with tangential references to other pragmatist philosophers and commentators as it is appropriate.

By interpreting Lawson and Moorhouse through the framework of pragmatism, the present study will attempt to enrich a limited understanding of pragmatism with a dimension not typically referred to in its Australian context. Primarily, the pragmatist in this study is a responsive and creative thinker who holds an ironic awareness of the limitations of single worldviews. This study analyses how Lawson and Moorhouse construct moral dilemmas which cannot be solved through appeal to a single, higher or absolute value system—for there is none. The new moral territory—alive with competing value systems and shifting mores and proliferating points of view—must be explored with agility of body, imagination and flexibility of mind and, importantly, a sense of social responsibility, if one is to survive intact. The pragmatic mind is able to cope with the unexpected through this flexibility. This fortifies, in the subject, the necessary agility to cope with ever-changing circumstances in this “ever-renewing country”.

One might question the legitimacy of importing an American philosophy and applying it to two distinct periods of Australian literature with more than half a century between them. There are many similarities between these two “new world” countries and the origins of a shared philosophical consciousness interests us here. Malouf writes: “Australia and the United States are variations, though, very different in tone and constitution, on the same original. This means that we share qualities...[and] forms of social and political thinking”.<sup>12</sup> Pragmatism, then, as America's major contribution to philosophy is a worthy starting point, particularly given the frequency with which Australian culture is tagged as pragmatic. An American philosophy such as this has useful applications to the fiction under question here for several reasons. As Malouf says, we came from the “same original”. A.A. Phillips draws the parallel between the American “frontier” with the Australian “outback”; importantly, he frames this similarity as a psychological parallel and not simply the physical realities of the pioneer. As rural pioneers, early settlers are faced with a “blank canvas” that stretches out before them.

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<sup>12</sup> Malouf, p. 26.

Through the demands of such a life, a specific ethic of opportunity develops, one which requires flexibility of mind as much as it requires muscle. Phillips writes that the American and Australian pioneer shared this sense of opportunity. Typically, the rhetoric says that anyone with enough determination could make a fortune (although, through the ironic eyes of Lawson, the Australian landscape often seems thoroughly indifferent to human toil). Similarly too, communities were theoretically freed from class stratification:

Australia, like America, had largely been created by men who had escaped from the dark Satanic mills of the European slums, or the more endurable, but scarcely less mean, servility of still Feudal villages. Such men had found in the conditions of the new countries a chance to prove their individual worth as men.<sup>13</sup>

Such freedom from tradition-bound Europe has its problems. When Malouf focuses on our shared legacy with America he notes that the troubling questions of value and meaning are shared questions:

Henry James spoke of the ‘complex fate’ of those who are children both of the old world and the new, and of the responsibility it entails for fighting against the ‘superstitious valuations of Europe.’ What James was concerned with was how, in the face of all that Europe represents in terms of achievement and influence, we are to find a proper value, neither brashly above nor cringingly below its real one, for what belongs to the new world; for what is local but also recent, since part of what is ‘superstitious’ in our valuation of Europe has to do with the reverential awe we may feel in the presence of mere age.<sup>14</sup>

This is a central question of this thesis: what is the source of meaning in a “new world”? If so much of the gravity and meaning in the “old world” is entrenched in centuries-old buildings and traditions, where can meaning be found in the new?<sup>15</sup> How is meaning to be developed in a new country that H.P. Heseltine described as “a cultural vacuum without the support of a sanctioned tradition.”<sup>16</sup> Malouf’s concern, in focusing

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<sup>13</sup> Phillips, A.A. *Henry Lawson*. New York: Twayne Publishers. 1970. p. 14. It must be said that Phillips’s use of the male pronoun is decidedly inaccurate given, for example, Lawson’s women in the bush who operate the selections while the men disappear for months on end. True, they might be looking for work but they’re often “knocking down their cheques beautifully” in the wayside shanties.

<sup>14</sup> Malouf, pp. 25-26. For further reading on Henry James’s conceptions of identity in relation to the new-world America, and the operation of pragmatic pluralism in his work, see Posnock, R. “Affirming the Alien: The Pragmatist Pluralism of *The American Scene*.” *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*. Ann Arbor: Cambridge University Press. 1998. pp. 224-245.

<sup>15</sup> Moorhouse takes this question up explicitly when Edith Campbell Berry sets out for Geneva, in awe of old, established, meaning-filled Europe.

<sup>16</sup> Heseltine, H.P. *The Uncertain Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1986. p. 2.

on Australian and American relations with Europe, is with this question of how—and whether—value is related to time:

One of the ‘superstitious valuations’ I wanted to point to in Henry James’s definition of ‘complex fate’ was that of age as opposed to newness; a valuation, as we have experienced it here, that has sometimes made our 210 years seem too small a purchase on time to constitute a genuine history.<sup>17</sup>

Malouf tackles this problem of age by suggesting: “This business of making accessible the richness of the world we are in, of bringing density to ordinary, day-to-day living in a place, is the real work of culture.”<sup>18</sup> Here is a key principle of Deweyan and Jamesian pragmatics. As temporalists, Dewey and James draw focus onto daily events as the only place meaning can reside. John McDermott, a commentator on American pragmatism, describes Dewey’s and James’s temporality thus:

Our activities take on meaning not because they are endowed by the eternal but because they are not endowed by the eternal. It is for this reason that the motif of the journey, so central to American life, turns up our most important metaphor, frontier, along with a host of allied and culturally significant terms: *experiment, chance, edge, and novelty*.<sup>19</sup>

In the following analysis of Lawson’s stories, it will become clear just how much our literature participates in this experimental, frontier philosophy. Dewey prescribes: “a doctrine of creative transiency, wherein the journey is its own mean and does not take its significance from a hoped-for, wished-for paradisaical future.”<sup>20</sup> This prescription provides a meaningful freedom from the conditions of a long-standing customary reality. This idea of creative transiency also provides a link between Lawson and Moorhouse for, symbolically, both the bushman tribe and urban tribe are nomadic. Lawson’s men restlessly wander the outback; Moorhouse’s characters similarly shift about, sharing flats, constantly moving in and out of the lives of other restless wanderers. Such transience questions the value and meaning of life: Lawson continually employs the ironic and defensive refrain that “nothing mattered much”. In Moorhouse, meaning in these transient lives exists on a knife-edge. Jimmy, for example, is an “intellectual Arab in a

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<sup>17</sup> Malouf, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Malouf, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> McDermott, J. *Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press. 1986. p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> McDermott, p. 119.

mental tent on the border of two countries. The countries of futility and hope.”<sup>21</sup>

Through the pragmatism of James and Dewey, this transiency can be seen as most valuable precisely because each present situation is all we have and, therefore, can be the only place where human meaning can reside:

If we are finite, if our experiences are finite, and if there is no higher meaning which transforms these experiences into something other than the way in which we undergo them, then the affairs of time, our things and events, are to be taken at face value. The flow of time is the only setting for judging the worth of human life and human activity.<sup>22</sup>

Reality seen this way is alive with possibilities of future modifications and, importantly, an ever-expanding consciousness:

[James] offers us not the pragmatism identified with *Realpolitik*, but a pragmatism forged from his pluralism, his commitment to irreducible ambiguity and his conviction that the truth of the matter is not to be found in either a definition or in agreement between concepts and the alleged object. Rather the truth emerges from working out a hypothesis as subjected, tested, and revised in the light of ongoing experience.<sup>23</sup>

The feeling in this philosophy, and in these works of fiction, is one of movement, perpetual motion. In the analysis to come, continual movement across borders and resistance to the fixed abode is suggestive of an ever-expanding knowledge and moral sympathy. This is the philosophical perspective Lawson and Moorhouse share. For them, reality offers no lasting fixtures; there are no final ends. This idea is brought to bear in the fiction through the shared metaphor of borders and boundary lines.

Central to both writers' works is the metaphor of the border, a metaphor that proves essential in investigating the concepts of identity and progressive or destructive engagement with the other. In the fiction under investigation, borders—particularly as they pertain to exclusive groups or conventionally held assumptions—function in two important ways. Firstly, the border becomes a site of transgression. Borders signify lines of difference and multiple perspectives; transgression, then, is a powerful act that fuels the decentralisation of power. The act of transgression, however, need not privilege one mode of being over another with a view to eradicate difference. The border has a

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<sup>21</sup> Moorhouse, F. “What Can You Say.” *Futility and Other Animals*. Angus & Robertson: Sydney. 1988. p. 19. All future references will be to this edition and will be shown in-text.

<sup>22</sup> McDermott, p. 114.

<sup>23</sup> McDermott, pp. 112-113

resistant function in that by maintaining sites of difference, potential for moral development remains possible. In accepting difference rather than eradicating it, human sympathy must grow, as does our capacity for ever-advanced, ever-inclusive ways of thinking.

Firmly held positions and tightly managed modes of being are the focus of much of Lawson's and Moorhouse's ironies. Common to both writers is an interest in social groups and how those groups interact at large. In "The Union Buries Its Dead", the impact of an exclusive group of mates "skylarking on the river" is deadly, with the insistent irony that the stranger who dies is, by virtue of his union credentials, supposedly "one of them". Likewise, Moorhouse "forces us to be group wary."<sup>24</sup> Whether it is the dogmatic ethic of the exclusive, conservative Rotarians in *The Electrical Experience* or the hard-line zealotism of the left-wing revolutionaries of the urban tribe, Moorhouse routinely insists on the problems caused when groups inhabit a single, inflexible position. In both Lawson and Moorhouse, the "other", who is on the outer of the exclusive group, is at a disadvantage; what is lacking in these exclusive groupings is, firstly, the extension of sympathy to the outsider and, secondly, a lack of internal, critical reflection within the group itself. Both writers use irony to probe the inadequacies of the group mentality and the single point of view. Legasse writes that Moorhouse's treatment of ethical problems show "that convictions about moral issues lose their certainty and show 'sureness' as arrogance, if not ignorance."<sup>25</sup> The same might be said for Lawson, whose sympathy for the "other" is unlimited.

These writers leave us with the sense that no moral, social or political position can be taken with lasting confidence. Any decision taken to act from a particular position derives from the conditions of unique experiences. Tim Rowse argues that Moorhouse's emphasis throughout his fiction on the discontinuous narrative is suggestive of an interest in promoting the devolution of power. The discontinuous narrative confounds the legitimacy of any single point of view.<sup>26</sup> In an interview with Ray Willbanks, Moorhouse comments:

looking back, one realises that one adopts different codes and that life involves adaptation and modification and refinement and

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<sup>24</sup> Legasse, J. "Telling A Self: More on Moorhouse's Family." *Westerly*. 27:1 March, 1982. pp. 73-83 p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Legasse, p. 76.

<sup>26</sup> Rowse, T. "The Pluralism of Frank Moorhouse." (eds) Docker, J., Modjeska, D., Dermody, S. *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends: Essays in Australian Cultural History*. Malmesbury: Kibble Books, 1982. pp. 250-267, p. 251.

sculpturing of one's self. The book [*Forty-Seventeen*] is very much about sculpturing, shaping a life.<sup>27</sup>

Moorhouse makes the pertinent—and pragmatic—point that, in *Forty-Seventeen*, age differences, or age perspectives, show that: “differing perspectives are witnesses to the testing of thought systems via materialised experience.” The difference between thought systems and materialised experience is a key focus of this thesis, as pragmatism insists on material rather than abstract solutions. Moorhouse comments that whilst humans may crave “a system of thought [that] can be comprehensive”<sup>28</sup> this is impossible. Instead, some tentative security may be assured through the process of inquiry. It is a journey which can have no end. Moorhouse comments that inquiry: “produces temporary positions which allow us to act and behave with some competence.”<sup>29</sup> Whilst this position is pluralist, Rowse makes the interesting point that Moorhouse's attitude of inquiry and self-reflection demonstrates a pluralism with a hierarchy. In his article, “The Pluralism of Frank Moorhouse”, the ironic character, in particular, is one which holds an elite position: “It is an elite not in the sense of having institutional power, but in its capacity to take the wider view, to think critically and ironically about the rest of society, and about itself. This is a qualified elitism indeed.”<sup>30</sup> In Jamesian terms, a system could only be comprehensive if we lived in a “ready-made universe.” James is an emphatic pluralist. McDermott stresses the importance and value of this position for James:

James does not hold that pluralism is a waiting game, a temporary aberration until the archons of clarity—theological, scientific, or ideological—can rescue us from confusion. No, it is quite the opposite, for pluralism is the irreducible characteristic of not only the human presence but also of the evolutionary and developmental character of reality. In James's philosophy, closure and finality “violate the character with which life concretely comes...with an ‘ever not quite’ to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility forever leaking in”.<sup>31</sup>

Dewey's position is equally unequivocal on this point. “Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place.”<sup>32</sup> To the conservative mind, such never-ending change is a

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<sup>27</sup> Willbanks, Ray *Speaking Volumes*. Ringwood: Penguin. 1992. pp. 158-170. p. 169.

<sup>28</sup> Willbanks, p. 170.

<sup>29</sup> Willbanks, p. 170.

<sup>30</sup> Rowse, p. 252.

<sup>31</sup> McDermott, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> McDermott, citing Dewey, p. 119.

frightening thought. Self-modification through routine re-evaluations of being requires one to reflect on past decisions taken under the influence of a particular thought system. Guilt and anxiety over decisions and actions constitute a large part of Lawson's and Moorhouse's work. Ongoing moral modifications also suggest there is no final destination. Such a reality is resistant to any "right" worldview; we are continually in a state of correction. The principle here is pragmatic meliorism and I would argue Lawson and Moorhouse are melioristic in two different ways. Lawson's writing was emphatically concerned with social and political improvement. In his famous rejection of the Paterson-style romantic vision of the Australian outback, he wrote:

In conclusion. We wish to Heaven that Australian writers would leave off trying to make a paradise out of the Out Back Hell; if only out of consideration for the poor, hopeless, half-starved wretches who carry swags through it and look in vain for work—and ask in vain for tucker very often. What's the good of making a heaven out of a hell when by describing it as it really is we might do some good for the lost souls there?<sup>33</sup>

Literally, Lawson sees one of his roles as artist as "doing some good". In Moorhouse's case, this may seem less obvious since much of Moorhouse's agenda has been to tackle established social conventions through so-called and self-confessed "aberration". This is his melioristic streak in disguise. His narrator suggests brightly, for example: "I guess...that really I'm for sin and against Motherhood." He claims "the only solace" is "Volupté! Sensual pleasure! Evil sensuality!"<sup>34</sup> In advancing flexible modes of thinking, however, Moorhouse's work proposes a highly developed ethical model and this will become clear through the textual analysis of his stories within the context of Dewey and Tufts' *Ethics* and the pluralistic program of James's pragmatism. The criticism so far available on Moorhouse's work is largely focused on the "shock value" of Moorhouse's open attack on sexual taboo, or on analysis of his literary form. This thesis aims to extend Moorhouse criticism by offering a comprehensive analysis of the prevailing pragmatist ethic throughout his work in order to develop what Milton might call, "a coherent critique."

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<sup>33</sup> Lawson, H. "Some Popular Australian Mistakes" (1893) reprinted in *A Camp-Fire Yarn: Henry Lawson Complete Works, 1885-1900*. (ed) Cronin, L. Dingley: Landsdowne Publishing. 2000. p. 275. All references to *A Camp-Fire Yarn* will be to this edition.

<sup>34</sup> Moorhouse, F. "The Airport, The Pizzeria, The Motel, The Rented Car and the Mysteries of Life." *Tales of Mystery and Romance*. North Ryde: Angus&Robertson, 1988. pp. 55-63. p. 62. All future reference to *Tales* will be to this edition and will be shown in-text.



Since there has as yet been no extended study into Moorhouse's ethical system, this thesis is timely. In contrast, critical interpretations of Lawson has always emphasised Lawson's ethics, although, readings of this kind have been limited because interpretations have often been driven by a nationalist agenda. The "radical nationalist" critics of the 1950s (Vance Palmer, Phillips and Russel Ward, for example), who were concerned with documenting the "Australian tradition" and "legend", designed their interpretations of Lawson's ethic in order to crystallise a nationalist, masculinist, bush ethic. This was an interesting perspective given that Lawson's contemporary critics, such as A.G. Stephens, criticised Lawson for not presenting a strong, masculine voice that might reflect and encourage the kind of physical and mental hardiness required for life in a tough land. Stephens wrote, for example, that Lawson had "the womanish wail of someone who needed a sturdy Australian backbone."<sup>35</sup> When interest turned to the 1890s as the mythical source of Australian national identity, many of Lawson's so-called weaknesses were overlooked in favour of a representation of Lawson as the quintessential national type, inaccurately casting him as "the centrepiece of a nationalist tradition"<sup>36</sup>. As a writer from the 1890s *Bulletin* school, Lawson was rolled into a tradition, which "identified with what was seen as the robust and optimistic democratic spirit of the nation."<sup>37</sup> As something of an antidote to this overworked nationalism, critics such as Heseltine sought to foreground Lawson's artistic practice rather than nationalist ideas. This was an important movement away from what had been an insistent critical approach to Australian writing, that is, the interest in "thematic patterns, ethical patterns, colonial patterns giving way to nationalist patterns". Heseltine made inroads into destabilising the "Apostle of Mateship" myth and concentrated on Lawson's art rather than his value as cultural artefact. This approach, however, created another problem. By privileging Lawson's artistic practice and, in particular, limiting Lawson's irony to a nihilistic reading, much of his economic, political and social commentary—and his melioristic streak—was under-examined. Michael Wilding's critiques of Lawson have concentrated on rehabilitating this aspect of Lawson's work. It is vital to replace this aspect of the work for, in the current study, the local and immediate practical concerns of the group breed

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<sup>35</sup> Stephens, cited by Lee, C. "Looking for Mr Backbone: The Politics of Gender in the Works of Henry Lawson". (ed) Stewart, K. *The 1890s: Australian Literature and Literary Culture*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. 1996. pp.95-108. p. 108.

<sup>36</sup> Lee, p. 108.

<sup>37</sup> Schaffer, K. *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1988. p. 17.

the ethic, whether that is, for example, a work, family or mateship ethic. It is my interest, then, to revisit the ethical patterns which have already concerned so much of Lawson criticism but from a vantage point that has not yet been tackled: the pragmatist ethic. Lawson's ethics are routinely reduced to the mateship ethic but, as the analysis to follow will show, this aspect of Lawson's ethic is just one arm of his social philosophy rather than his sole concern.

It should be of no surprise that, at different stages, Lawson's work has been situated as central to a nationalist agenda and also in opposition to it. That he has been located in both the positive-nationalist and pessimistic movements of our literature suggests something of immense importance in Lawson's work; that is, his practice of irony. An ironist such as Lawson inhabits no fixed position. Since "irony is in the eye of the beholder", sometimes statements such as: "Australian shearers are certainly the most democratic and perhaps the most independent, intelligent and generous body of workmen in the world" or "nothing mattered much"—can seem like unequivocal positions. Contextualised within his ethic, however, judgements such as these become far less exact.

This thesis offers a fresh approach to Lawson that follows on from the work of critics such as Christopher Lee who unlock Lawson's work from previous ideological readings. Much of the newer criticism has focused on deconstructing the Lawson-as-national-icon discourse which fortunately opens a discussion on Lawson which can be held on different terms. This thesis attempts to move discussion away from nationalist and masculinist questions and to face his ethical program anew. It is important to move away from the traditional binary positions critical interpretation has concentrated on because Lawson's philosophical resistance to fixed positions is central to this thesis. It is not enough to use, for example, the masculine/feminine binary for, to do so, we must always depend on typical roles and types of gendered behaviours. That either/or reading cannot respond to what Lawson's characters do, which is to often become both male *and* female. Personalities in Lawson's outback can at any time be both masculine and feminine as characters are required to constantly morph if they are going to survive physically, mentally and socially in the environment.

This thesis shows how Lawson's moral philosophy disdains the maintenance of absolute "types" or "positions". Lawson's philosophy is inclusive and urges a sympathy

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with the disempowered other; his philosophy is critical of exclusive groupings for the inherent limitations of the customs which bind such a group together. Henry Lawson has always been the target of critics interested in—or anxious about—the forging of an Australian cultural identity. Fortunately, Lawson need no longer be considered the sole property of a nationalist mythology. Instead, we can now look at Lawson as a writer whose philosophies have much broader and much more relevant application than generally allowed. His setting is the bush but his subject is the moral development of people-in-community.

Lawson shows characters negotiating ethical crisis as unprecedented situations emerge and, importantly, traditional moral attributes do not necessarily meet the demands of new situations. In “Telling Mrs Baker”, for example, if a man cannot lie he cannot be trusted. Whilst Lawson’s world is often imagined and remembered as a construct of “old Australia”, a world inhabited by a certain type of man with a certain set of values, close study of Lawson’s prose uncovers flexible forms rather than rigid types. Far from promoting a particular and static set of values, Lawson depicts a functional, dynamic ethical system. This dynamism of value is symptomatic of a post-Victorian modernity and, in addition to this, it occurs within a new colonial environment where the values and certainties heretofore embedded within culture are renegotiated with the terms a new landscape imposes. Lawson’s preoccupations with the question of value and conventional systems of meaning are symptomatic of the post-colonial condition where everything in the new land is under construction. By viewing Lawson through the contemporaneous framework of the American pragmatists, this study will reveal Lawson’s significant contribution to an ethical approach that, far from being solely concerned with Australia, or, even more narrowly, the bush, had an international context.

Henry Lawson, in his most productive phase of the early to mid-1890s, more or less anticipated the key issues of the pragmatist movement. While pragmatism was first discussed in 1878 by Charles Saunders Peirce in *Popular Science Monthly*, the concepts went largely unnoticed until twenty years later when William James brought it to public attention in 1898. By this stage, James notes, “the times seemed ripe for its reception.”<sup>38</sup> It is perhaps little wonder that the solutions pragmatism provides to questions about meaning, value, and its impacts on conduct, were similarly springing up in societies

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<sup>38</sup> James, W. “What Pragmatism Means.” *Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1975. p. 29. All future references will be to this edition and will be shown in-text.

influenced by frontier beginnings in a post-Victorian era. It is also a reflection of the moods of modernism. A new moral methodology became necessary since value systems could no longer make claims for absolute standards, certainties or an idea of Truth. What was required was a methodology that, firstly, could guide behavioural norms without having to resort to dogmatic and, therefore, fallible (because limited) systems and, secondly, one which might also relieve the mounting pressures of negation. Pragmatism potentially offered a new *method* of thinking founded in concrete experience rather than abstract principles through which the validity of conduct could still be tested. It could also reconcile modernism's "apocalyptic ironies"<sup>39</sup> through the practice of a progressive ironic mode that could generate meaning despite, or perhaps because of, forever-incomplete knowledges and indeterminacy. Brian May writes:

[I]n the face of negation one might fairly wish for an alternative that is positive, constructive, and material, not a reclamation of the old contested grounds of belief and action but a divination of new grounds...To transcend negation is to do more than simply undo it. From the old overworked (double negated) grounds to fresh woods, and pastures new; transcendence tends to suggest departure and founding.<sup>40</sup>

Pragmatism's emphasis on experience maintains the open-ended nature of value ensuring its continual construction rather than its negation. Given what William James writes in "What is Truth", that experience has a way of "boiling over" what we know, logically, experience must refuse the limitations of dogmatism. The emphasis here is on unlimited-ness rather than indeterminacy which does not "undo" negation by returning to "old grounds of belief" but surpasses negation via the valuing of the present as a continuing source of meaning. This ethical dimension of experience forms the focus of this study of Lawson's short stories.

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<sup>39</sup> May, B. *Modernist as Pragmatist: E.M. Forster and the Fate of Liberalism*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 1997. p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> May, pp. 7-8.

This thesis is divided into three main parts. Part I outlines the pragmatic philosophy. Chapter one describes Dewey and Tufts's *Ethics*, concentrating on the construction of society and the maintenance of society as it progresses through time. The focus is on the generation of customary morality which, if the society is to become morally sophisticated, develops into a reflective morality. Dewey and Tufts focus on the social network as the generator of morality. This integration of self and society works to improve and empower both self and society and improvement suggests progressiveness and a dynamic field of play. In this discussion we see how morality and values change as society changes. The catch-cry here is: "Not order but orderly progress." Environments are described as "experiential fields" peopled by subjective minds, thus emphasising the dynamic quality of any situation.

Chapter two looks at James's philosophy as outlined in *Pragmatism* where he makes his argument for pragmatism in response to the common criticisms leveled at the philosophy. The focus is on solving problems by looking at *what works*; truth is tackled this way, and through these discussions on truth and Truth, and essays such as "The One and the Many", James also clearly distinguishes pragmatism's position in relation to absolute and relative systems of value. For James, values are found in-relation. Values change but, according to James, do so at such a slow rate as to allow a gentle evolution in morality. To change thus requires a certain plasticity of nature, which means: "the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once."<sup>41</sup> This chapter will also include reference to James's *Principles of Psychology*, which contains the germ of his pragmatist ethic, where he discusses the constitution of the self as a social entity.

Part II looks at a selection of Henry Lawson's major short stories and sketches. Chapter one outlines the ethics in growing practice amongst the men on the track, his nomadic tribe of bushmen. To outline the pragmatic spirit, I will begin with "The Iron-Bark Chip" which illustrates the social impulses within the pragmatic mindset of Lawson's survivors. Chapter two draws mainly from the Mitchell and Peter M'Laughlan sketches where, under the influence of Peter M'Laughlan, the men are called to assess the morality of their actions, thus placing the concept of ethics at the forefront of Lawson's characters' lives. Here, experience is the teacher. The theme is social responsibility and this chapter will discuss Lawson's version of mateship which is built on the inevitable

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<sup>41</sup> James, W. *Principles of Psychology*. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited. 1890. p. 105.

weaknesses of the human condition. This chapter will culminate in a discussion on “Telling Mrs Baker” where sympathy for Mrs Baker and the men’s guilt and anxiety are played out against male loyalties and survival. Here, truth is looked at from a pragmatic point of view.

Chapter three looks at the concept of identity through the social network, this time when the social network is dysfunctional or entirely absent in “The Union Buries Its Dead” and “The Bush Undertaker”. Lawson investigates how his characters pragmatically cope with such absence and the concept of reflective morality. The social impulse is highlighted in these tales through the very absence of the social.

Chapter four looks at “Joe Wilson’s Courtship” and “A Double Buggy at Lahey’s Creek” from the Joe Wilson series. The analysis will focus on Lawson’s pragmatic conceptualisation of self (“Joe Wilson’s Courtship”) placed in ironic contrast with a nagging Romantic self-conception that Joe often labours under. “A Double Buggy at Lahey’s Creek” demonstrates the imaginative consciousness at work.

Part III looks at Frank Moorhouse’s fiction which will be divided into three general areas: the small town, urban bohemia and the international. These zones often clash providing ironic contrasts through which to interpret the different value systems operating in each. The reader is left with very little sure ground to step upon as each world’s limitations threaten self-destruction. At times, Moorhouse’s characters attempt to steady their boats by clinging to worlds in which the rules might be fixed (Conferenceville, Hiltonia, Rotary, the South Coast) and where experience may in some way be predictable or circumscribed maybe for a lifetime or for just one night’s reprieve. Becker thinks: “Motels. A clean, safe passageway around the world. He could be in Manitoba. Or good old Atlanta. The joy of standardisation.”<sup>42</sup>

Chapter one will outline the social values of the provincial Australian town, as described in *The Electrical Experience*. Here, the emphasis is on George McDowell’s ethical system and, ironically, given his insistence on pragmatic entrepreneurship, his resistance to moral change.

Chapters two and three concentrate on the short stories which describe the Balmain scene—Moorhouse’s urban tribe—and will look at the eruptions of moral crisis

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<sup>42</sup> Moorhouse, F. *The Electrical Experience*. North Ryde: Angus&Robertson. 1988. p. 139. Future page references will be to this edition and will be shown in-text. As an aside, Henry James calls America’s “genius for organisation,” that ensures the country is kept “in positively stable equilibrium,” the “hotel-spirit.” James cited in Posnock, p. 228.

and the very complex challenges inherent in developing new moral systems and codes of behaviour. Key figures under consideration in these chapters will be Kim, Carl, Cindy, Milton and the ever-present male narrator, and how they deal with doctrine, social change, gender politics and, especially in the figure of the narrator, the ever-increasing vulnerability of a self confronted with crumbling, alienating or implausible social networks.

The final chapter looks at *Grand Days* and Edith Campbell Berry's pragmatic modifications of self in the constantly changing world of international diplomacy. Edith's Rationalism shows a flaw by restricting her thinking to a monist worldview which is confounded by the irrational, the random and the unpredictable. Positions are continually renegotiated internationally, interpersonally and within the self and traditional hierarchies of power or typical roles are constantly turned upside down. These ironic inversions constantly challenge any assumed repositories of value. *Grand Days* offers a complete model of the pragmatic behaviours under discussion in this thesis and for this reason it is unnecessary to include *Dark Palace* in this particular study except for the occasional minor reference to illuminate a point.

## Part I: The Pragmatists

### Chapter 1

#### The Social Contract: John Dewey and James Tufts' *Ethics*

The aim of *Ethics*, first published in 1908, was to “awaken the vital conviction of the genuine reality of moral problems and the value of reflective thought in dealing with them.”<sup>43</sup> Reflective thought is the key to Dewey and Tufts’ position and is instrumental in practising ethical action. The activities of Lawson’s and Moorhouse’s characters and their social/moral progress will be viewed from this perspective. Where such reflective thought is absent, the irony within the text suggests the power and potential of full, reflective thought, especially when conceived in relation to the social contract, as essential to providing the stuff of a diverse and dynamic social realm.

To illustrate the development of ethical conduct, Dewey and Tufts examine primitive communities progressing towards complex social organisation, providing examples from early Greek, Roman, Israelite, Mongolian, North American Indian and Aboriginal Australian formations. Whilst they acknowledge the difficulties in such a project given there is much that is uncertain and certainly much that is varied between primitive societies, the writers posit very directly the “dominant influence of group life.”(17)

Dewey and Tufts identify that, in the initial stages of community, action is largely instinctive. Survival is the goal of action. People form groups to work together in order to increase the likelihood of survival. Thus, if survival is largely secured by group formation, the maintenance of the group is crucial. Out of successful group maintenance strategies, customs emerge. This model of moral progress gives a clear outline how, out of the initial formations of the practical life, cultural idealisations grow thus creating ethical concepts. By demonstrating that moral development grows out of practical and local concerns Dewey and Tufts emphasise the progressive and dynamic qualities of morality and, in so doing, address the origins of moral authority. “Not order, but orderly progress, represents the social ideal.”(485)

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<sup>43</sup> Dewey, J. & Tufts, J. *Ethics*. London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd. 1914. p. (iii) All future references will be to this edition and will be shown in-text.



Dewey and Tufts identify the social realm as the birthing place of morality since, as the etymology suggests, it is through the *ethos* and *mores* of a social group that *ethics* and *moral*s develop. (51) As they point out, “customs were not merely habitual ways of acting; they were ways *approved by the group* or society.” (1) [My emphasis] Dewey and Tufts then privilege the Latin term ‘mores’ over ‘custom’ since it implies the factor of approval and is, therefore, more than simply habitual. (52) Mores develop over generations and, whilst they may stem from an instinctive origin, they are not merely instinctive but approved. (51)

Techniques, which originate in instinct, that have been tested and ensure survival establish custom. For example, to ensure procreative possibilities, procreative ties, already naturally prohibited by biological laws of kinship, begin to form the moral ideas of married union. Therefore, the techniques which are seen to *work* (healthy, fertile offspring) thus form custom and a customary morality. The “natural forces of instinct lead to activities which elevate men and knit them together.”(51) These social bonds become political, industrial, religious and economic units.

Dewey and Tufts write that the “necessary activities of existence start the [moral] process.”

The prime necessities, if the individual is to survive, are for food, shelter, defense against enemies. If the stock is to survive, there must be also reproductive and parental care. Further, it is an advantage in the struggle if the individual can master and acquire, can outstrip rivals, and can join forces with others of his kind for common ends. To satisfy these needs we find men in group life engaged in work, in war or blood feuds, in games and festal activities, in parental care. They are getting food and booty, making tools and houses, conquering or enslaving their enemies, protecting the young, winning trophies, and finding emotional excitement in contests, dances and songs. These all help in the struggle for existence. But the workmen, warriors, singers, parents, are getting more. They are forming certain elements of character which, if not necessarily moral in themselves, are yet indispensable requisites for full morality. We may say therefore that nature is doing this part of moral evolution, without the aid of conscious intention on man’s part..We may call this a rationalizing and socializing process, though not a conscious moral process. (40-41)

Using the above to describe the roots of moral development, the organic reality of the moral process is evident. It moves with the progress of society and is not absolute or

extraneous from it. That is, the moral develops through the social; the moral process is embedded in social relationships. The individual consciousness arises out of this dynamic.

For Dewey and Tufts, the progress of moral conduct follows a similar pattern to conduct in general. (8) It is distinguished by three stages: (i) instinctive behaviour, (ii) attention or “conscious intervention” (where the consciousness is activated) and (iii) habit. Habits are the accrual of previous experiences that have led to effective action. As a moral process this cycle potentially repeats itself many times over as a developed habit (a standard moral) shows itself inadequate to an unprecedented situation.

But unless the man or society is in a changeless world with no new conditions there will be new problems. And this means that however good the habit was for its time and purpose there must be new choices and new valuations. (10)

Each time the cycle repeats itself, the moral consciousness becomes increasingly sophisticated. “There is deliberation, struggle, effort. If the result is successful new habits are formed, but upon a higher level. For the new habits, the new character, embody more intelligence.” (9) Continuity, a continuous building-upon, is necessary for moral progress. “If everyone had to start anew to frame all his ideals and make his laws, we should be in as melancholy a plight morally as we should be intellectually if we had to build each science anew.”(174-175) This intelligence is cumulative and the critical faculties utilise past experiences to determine future action. Yet, and this is crucial to the current study, it is the conscious awareness of the limitations of moral knowledge that enables the cycle to continue. Expansion of awareness is only possible through a conscious acceptance of our own moral limitations.

In their treatment of the origins of the cycle, Dewey and Tufts illustrate that the survival compact is the chrysalis of social responsibility and, hence, moral awareness. As previously mentioned, rates of survival increase with group effort. The important by-product: individuals bond together through shared experience. These mutual sympathies develop into solidarity where the moral germ is found.

The gregarious instinct may be the most elemental of the impulses which bind the group together, but it is reinforced by sympathies and sentiments growing out of common life, common work, common danger, common religion. The morality is already implicit; it needs only to become conscious. (35)

The sympathetic instincts manifest themselves in cooperative activities and mutual aid. Cooperation implies a shared goal and means that: “each is interested in the success of all. This common end forms then a controlling rule of action, and the mutual interests means sympathy. Cooperation is therefore one of nature’s most effective agencies for a social standard and a social feeling.”(43) Vital cooperation is engaged in such pursuits as industry, defence and the arts such as dance and song. Dewey and Tufts write: “to sing with another involves a contagious sympathy... There is, in the first place, ...a unity of rhythm. Rhythm is based upon cooperation and, in turn, immensely strengthens the possibility of cooperation.”(45) In *Ethics*, sympathy is the powerful leading principle of ethical practice. That which is cooperative: “contribute[s] powerfully to the social basis of morality.”(42)

The concept of sympathy raises a second and equally important issue: the treatment of the other, of those with whom a group has no immediate identification. The more common the standard, the easier sympathy is. (190) In later stages of community growth the exclusivity inherent in instinctive sympathies becomes problematic. With increased levels of individuality or difference the more challenging sympathy becomes and, as an extension, the ministering of justice. Dewey and Tufts recognise that if we are to achieve truly progressive and equitable societies, the instinctive sympathies require transformation from a customary reflex into an active ethical reflection. The reticence to allow transformative sympathy can result in moral scapegoating, a practice indicative of the inadequacies of customary or instinctive sympathies.<sup>44</sup> Dewey and Tufts write that sympathy itself is: “the actuating principle of reasonable judgment” and the “general principle of moral knowledge.”(334-335) If a culture is closed or non-reflective and, therefore, does not practice transformative sympathy, how will the rights of the other be secured? If justice is a reflection of social value and is interested in the conduct of a specific social group, then, logically, an outsider has no natural claim to the justice of the group. They are outside the “charmed circle”. (299) The closed shop must open its doors if social diversity is to thrive and social systems are to develop in sophisticated cultural ways. The charmed circle, which initially secures survival and growth and lays the foundations for morality, must push out in order to keep meeting the challenges of an ever-changing environment.

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<sup>44</sup> Gunn, G. *Beyond Solidarity: Pragmatism and Difference in a Globalized World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2001. pp. 35-36.

In the primitive cultures Dewey and Tufts focus on, they note that sympathy goes hand in hand with a strong concept of group responsibility. All who share in the benefits of a social group also share the responsibilities of each member's actions.(17-35) If all are responsible for the others, a sense of social duty emerges. This duty keeps groups together. Clan and kinship ties predominate and form a customary morality. Duties are discharged when customary morality is observed. A standard of behaviour, adhered to through a sense of duty, regulates the social equilibrium. Given this group morality was "corporate rather than personal", standardised behaviour, the *ethos*, was coercive. Customary morality:

secured steadiness by habit and social pressure, rather than by choices built into character. It maintained community of feeling and action, but of the unconscious rather than the definitely social type. Finally it was rather fitted to maintain a fixed order than to promote and safeguard progress. (73)

At this point of customary morality, "conscious intention" has not been activated; the first stage is the root of morality though not yet consciously so. Consciousness is invoked during the shift to the second stage of the process:

Advance then must (1) substitute some rational method of setting up standards and forming values, in place of habitual passive acceptance; (2) secure voluntary and personal choice and interest, instead of unconscious identification with the group welfare, or instinctive and habitual response to group needs; (3) encourage at the same time individual development and the demand that all shall share in this development—the worth and happiness of the person and of *every* person. (73)

At this stage of the process, habit and instinctive action develops an intellectual, reflective component: "Action under the stress of attention, with conscious intervention and reconstruction." (12) Habit, which includes customary morality (the conventions of the group), may come under review. Since society is continually evolving, no set of standard practices can ever be entirely coherent; a less habitual and more conscious and flexible way of dealing with moral issues becomes vital. Conscious intervention is required to ensure continuing adaptability. This consciousness accepts that no standard is to be taken for granted.

The movement from custom to conscience, then, involves a voluntary act where the individual "recognises the right or chooses the good freely, [and] devotes himself

heartily to its fulfillment.” (73) The awakening of social consciousness is important if progress is to be achieved. Customary morality maintains the status quo. It is a conservative and stabilising agent. Full moral maturity, however, only comes with the reflective, critical mind. Whilst an act carried out in keeping with customary morality is moral, it is a limited morality given that it may be carried out unconsciously. The act does not require analysis or deliberation. It is a kind of reflex. Borrowing from Aristotle, Dewey and Tufts write that “it is not enough to do the act; it is necessary to do them in a certain way,—not merely to get the result, but to intend it. The result must be thought of as in some sense good or right; its opposite as in some sense bad or wrong.” (37-38) The awakening of the consciousness is not only critical to the individual mind but to society in general, since the reflective, morally conscientious mind produces results that lead to the moral advancement of society.

Given the frequency of the “unsolved problems of life” (4), in Dewey’s reflective morality the act of reflection is the crux of the ethical system rather than any strictly codified action based on inflexible rules of right and wrong. That which is known (already defined rules of action) cannot necessarily satisfy that which has not been anticipated (a circumstance that lacks precedence). Hence, where the known meets the unknown in such unanticipated circumstances, consciousness arises.(9) Habit or custom cannot satisfy that which falls outside the actions of habit. Put simply, we are obliged to think. We are forced into acts of thoughtfulness and reflection. Within this process of deliberation, valuation occurs, leading to “the final act of choice.” (9) Action may then be embarked upon with intent. The intent gives value to the action because a particular act has been chosen on merit, as a best alternative, rather than thoughtlessly or through customary habit.

*Rules are practical; they are habitual ways of doing things. But principles are intellectual; they are useful methods of judging things...the object of moral principles is to supply standpoints and methods which will enable the individual to make for himself an analysis of the elements of good and evil in the particular situation in which he finds himself. (333)*

To demonstrate the qualities of reflective action, one example *Ethics* offers is that of a parent guiding a child’s behaviour. The question: how is “good” behaviour measured or arrived at? Dewey and Tufts offer two methods:

- (1) “the parent...may teach his child...what tradition or the accepted standard calls for; or (2) he may consider and examine

the principles and motives involved. Action by the first method is undoubtedly moral, in one sense. It is judging according to a standard, though it takes the standard for granted. Action by the second method is moral in a more complete sense. It examines the standard as well. The one is the method of “customary” morality, the other that of reflective morality, or of conscience in the proper sense. (38)

Here we have a distinction between two types of morality: moral by rote and moral by reflection. In the first case, the moral standard is accepted as a given. In the second case, the method by which we arrive at a moral decision is scrutinised. This method enhances moral attitude. Also, and specifically important for this present study, by accepting this method, the anxiety about continuing to act morally in an environment stripped of any known moral signifiers can begin to ease. The reflective approach accommodates change.

The movement from instinct and habit to attentive reconstruction and intervention involves reason, a reason that both acts “as a means to secure other ends” and is “an element in determining what shall be sought.”(13) This includes gaining consensus through rational dialogue. Dewey and Tufts put premium on the social aspect of this movement. The shift from habit to attention is a “socialising process” and considers the broader implications of action in its social context; in this it is an ethical act since ethics is concerned with judging action in relation to persons. (3) Dewey and Tufts argue that this process of socialisation builds up the social self, contributing to individual power. This socialisation also transforms individual goals into social goals. (11) They write: “Society both strengthens and transforms the individual.” (13) Socialisation influences the idealising component of conduct. Importantly, through these shifts, conduct itself is made “the conscious object of reflection, valuation, and criticism. In this the definitely moral conceptions of right and duty, good and virtue appear.” (13)

For Dewey and Tufts, attentive reconstruction or forethought is counted among “the valuable weapons” that ensures survival. Mental activity must be stimulated. As an example, work carried out with the aid of reason ensures longevity of agricultural projects.

[I]n the pastoral life and still more with the beginning of agriculture and commerce, the man who succeeds must have foresight and continuity of purpose. He must control impulse by reason. He must organize those habits which are the basis of character, instead of yielding to the attractions of various pleasures which might lead him from the main purpose. (40)

Differentiation of labour also encourages mental activity. “If all do the same thing, all are much alike, and inevitably remain on a low level. But when the needs of men induce different kinds of work, slumbering capacities are aroused and new ones are called into being.”(41) The arts and crafts, as idealising agencies, also influence this shift to the second stage since artistic practices require rational, aesthetic considerations.

The textiles, pottery, and skillfully made tools and weapons; the huts or houses when artistically constructed; the so-called free or fine arts of dance and music, of color and design—all have this common element: they give some visible or audible embodiment for order or form. The artist or craftsman must make definite his idea in order to work it out in cloth or clay, in wood or stone, in dance or song... It is part of the daily environment of the society. Those who see or hear are having constantly suggested to them ideas and values which bring more meaning into life and elevate its interests. (42)

Only with increasing avenues for mental activity comes the potential for moral advancement. Increased intellectual activity refines the reflective quality of the mind. As we have seen, it is through reflective activity that moral advancement may come. “To reflect on one’s own behaviour in relation to the existing order is a standing habit of mind.”(182) Building upon this, the individual should only accept current standard if it agrees with his/her own moral intelligence. “The fact that it exists gives it indeed a certain *prima facie* claim, but no ultimate warrant. Perhaps the custom is wrong—and the individual is responsible for bearing this possibility in mind.”(181) The social good thus becomes the individual responsibility. Without this reflective component, standards go unchallenged resulting in social stagnation. “[R]eflective morality is a mark of a progressive society, just as customary morality is of a stationary society. Reflection on values is the method of their modification.”(186) Stagnation easily becomes a reactionary power where those who resist change may “entrench themselves in the ‘righteousness’ and ‘honesty’ of a past generation.”(188) Clinging to a value system when its integrity is under dispute may indicate a lack of critical foresight especially when the customs have become mere convention and where tradition is followed blindly. “It requires a higher degree of insight and a greater initiative to get any moral attitude at all when the forms have become mere forms and the habits mere habits.” (188)

As previously touched upon, the intent which guides action—where one alternative is chosen over another as a *better* course of action—contributes to the value of action. Where is the value in a thoughtless action? Whilst custom followed by rote is, in a sense, moral, as we have seen, higher morality consists of thoughtful intervention. It is this process which lends value to action. This is a positive moral system, based on the value of action and what one can do rather than what one can't do because of, for example, the prohibitions of custom.

The goal of change, undertaken by the reflective mind, is not to undermine existing social institutions or values but to continually seek a moral extension of the order. As Ralph Waldo Emerson writes: “Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series.”<sup>45</sup> This type of social change is constructive rather than destructive and has the social good at its core. The very nature of Dewey and Tufts’ morality and ethics is socially based and funded from local contingencies and does not “come from on high” as an authoritative, controlling mechanism of human action. Values are relative, locally produced and *change*. But this is vastly different to saying the changeability of value leads us to valuelessness. Values change slowly in response to community growth. Ethical systems are social and determine and judge how we are to act *in community*. The social component of action is the source of value and the social becomes the fund, in a sense, of sacredness, or what Dewey and Tufts call the “cosmic roots” of the moral life. (50) Here, we discover the sacred in the prosaic.<sup>46</sup> The social is both the point of departure and the point of return.

The movement from custom to conscience advances the idea of the organic progress of both society and value itself. Two collisions occur in this movement:

1. The collision between the authority and interests of the group, and the independence and private interests of the individual
2. The collision between order and progress, between habit and reconstruction or reformation. (74)

The agent of these collisions is the individual, for it is through a reaction against group standards that new levels of conduct are reached. Moral courage is, therefore, required. Also requisite in the personality is moral sensitivity, a certain responsiveness, “a spring to be touched”, and moral thoughtfulness, a capacity to reflect. (415) Herein lies the importance of the quality of each individual’s reflective mind. With the freedom to act

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<sup>45</sup> Emerson, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> McDermott, p. 115.



voluntarily comes the freedom to act either better or worse than the current custom observes. (75) Dewey and Tufts observe that civilisation is neither melioristic nor upon an apocalyptic path. "If the evolution were supposed to be all in one direction there would be no seriousness in life. It is only in the pressure of constantly new difficulties and evils that moral character adds new fibre, and moral progress emerges."(191)

### **Becoming acquainted with consequences.**

This "seriousness", the onus of social moral development, is very much with each individual consciousness and it is only in the world of action where this development occurs. Dewey and Tufts explain that each individual is always in some form of social contract.

Every relationship in life, is, as it were, *a tacit or expressed contract with others*, committing one, by the simple fact that he occupies that relationship, to a corresponding mode of action. Every one, willy-nilly, occupies a social position. (345)

Thus, each individual moves in a community or network of individual agents where the effects of one upon the other continually change the dynamic of relationships. "Every act brings the agent who performs it into association with others, whether he so intends or not. His act takes effect in an organized world of action; in social arrangement and institutions."(451) The changes extend further than the direct effects of single acts and hence increase the importance of responsible action. In fact, Dewey and Tufts write that it is our "chief moral business...to become acquainted with consequences."(464)

An act is outwardly temporary and circumstantial, but its meaning is permanent and expansive. The act passes away; but its significance abides in the increment of meaning given to further growth. To live in the recognition of this deeper meaning of acts is to live in the ideal, in the only sense in which it is profitable for man to dwell in the ideal.

*Our "ideals," our types of excellence, are the various ways in which we figure to ourselves the outreaching and ever-expanding values of our concrete acts.*  
(420)

Given the "ever-expanding values of our concrete acts", acts of negligence also carry extreme moral weight. Negligence is deeply connected to the concept of reflective

thought. Unless there is continual improvement in levels of thought, the ability to consciously choose best alternatives lies dormant.

Our moral character surely does not depend in this case, then, upon the fact that we had alternatives clearly in mind and chose the worse; the difficulty is that we had only one alternative in mind and did not *consciously* choose at all. Our freedom lies in the *capacity* to alter our mode of action, through having our ignorance enlightened by being held for the neglected consequences when brought to accountability by others, or by holding ourselves accountable in subsequent reflection. (464)

Furthermore, Dewey and Tufts suggest that the neutrality of nature can be read as a kind of indifference to ignorance thus increasing the responsibility incumbent within an act. “Nature does not forbear to attach consequences to acts because of the ignorance of the one who does the deed.”(464-465) The long-standing consequences of single, temporal acts together with the fact that ignorance is no defence against unexpected consequences sharply raises the stakes of action. Intentions, therefore, must be highly realised; the first act is to choose consciously between alternative forms of action.<sup>47</sup> Consequences must be anticipated and played out through the deliberation of a dramatic rehearsal. Then, there must be action. However, it is action in the knowledge that our deliberations, however sophisticated, are still limited by what is known, such is the human condition. Therefore, intentions and consequences are not in a tidy binary but part of an organic trajectory. (246-262)<sup>48</sup>

Since intentions and consequences may not always match one may be victim to undeserved failures but—and this is an extremely important and exciting “but”—the intention and consequence mismatch also accommodates the opposite result: undeserved successes. Dewey and Tufts see this as part of the “game” and ask whether we would be truly better off if all consequences could be safely predicted. Is it better if all effort was accorded its fair share of merit? As an example of a situation where luck and nerve raise the stakes, Dewey and Tufts discuss economic competition and write:

He prefers an exciting game to a sure but tame return of his investment...A game in which every player was sure to win, but also sure to win just what he had put in, would be equitable, but it would not be a game. An equal distribution might rob life of its

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<sup>47</sup> Bawden, H.H. *The Principle of Pragmatism: A Philosophical Interpretation of Experience*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press. 2001. p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Dewey and Tufts criticise the conception that intentions and consequences are in a binary relationship to one another. Theories about whether morality lies in intentions or consequences uphold this false binary.

excitement and its passion. Possibly the very strain of the process develops some elements of character which it would be unfortunate to lose. (548)

“The very strain of the process” of participating in such games develops attributes like initiative, nerve, boldness, *guts*. Yet praise of the attributes that result from the game by no means induces Dewey and Tufts to endorse a kind of survival-of-the-fittest laissez-faire policy where only the strong survive in the brave competition. Pragmatism was influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, responding to that sense of gradual change and the adaptability of flexible organisms. However, to stress the survival of the fittest (strong over the weak) would be a misinterpretation of the relationship between Darwinism and Pragmatism. Dewey and Tufts’ pragmatic philosophy is not individualistic in this sense because the “human *animal* is a *human* animal.”(372) They insist that the products of the sympathetic and gregarious instincts are the “highest achievements, the high-water mark of evolution.” (373) In contrast, strong-over-the-weak theories of individualism, where all receive formal rather than real freedoms “urges a systematic relapse to lower and foregone stages of biological development.”(373)

In *Ethics* we are continually brought back to social responsibility where the growing strength of any one member uses that strength for the social good. Whilst Dewey and Tufts praise the philosophies of individualism for emphasising personal responsibility (which as we have seen contributes, in their scheme, to moral awareness and progress) they argue that it does not secure *real* freedoms, only formal ones. Given that the factors which influence success include that which lies outside of the individual’s initial responsibility, for example, background, family, money, class etc, the survival-of-the-fittest elements of individualism do not necessarily secure the moral good. “It is a misreading of evolution to suppose unregulated competition to be its highest category of progress, and that it is a misinterpretation of ethics to assume that might is right.” (528)

In the pragmatist, through the understanding of the uncertainty of future experience together with the limitations of the individual perspective, an attitude of flexibility obtains. However, the flexible attitude which is less interested in the permanent laws of a customary or settled morality does not negate duty or suggest that all things become allowable. The strength of the social network (which is essentially conservative and slow-changing) resists this. Social duty remains the leading determinant of behaviour. This duty is implicit in the social contract. Dewey and Tufts stress that the highest form

of conduct is that which seeks the social good since ethics is concerned with the impact of one's actions upon at least one other being. If moral practice is thus derived from the social, for action to achieve integrity self-interest must be moderated by its social implications. Although social development can only occur when an individual seeks to move away from accepted and customary practices, that individual is seeking the extension of the moral order rather than a retraction. At the heart of this act must be the social good because by one individual extending the moral range the moral intelligence of the group increases. Dewey and Tufts explain that it is often forgotten that this “distinctly *personal* morality, which takes its stand against some established usage, and which, therefore, for the time being has its abode only in the initiative and effort of an individual, is simply the means of *social* reconstruction.”(432)

Dewey and Tufts describe an ethical society where the highest character seeks the progressive development of society where the strong support the weak to achieve common social purposes rather than an individualistic society where individual members put high premium on seeking individual goals for their own gain. The individualistic doctrine which says one may pursue one's own interests as long as they do not impinge on the freedoms of others only guarantees, they say, a formal freedom. Likewise, individualism's opposite, collectivism, (in its broadest sense), is also criticised. An understanding of the collectivist approach, which routinely subordinates the individual for the good of the group, is also a narrow conception since in doing so, it dissuades progress by achieving a “static social whole”.

An individual variation may involve opposition, not conformity or subordination, to the existing good taken statically; and yet may be the sole means by which the existing State is to progress. Minorities are not always right; but every advance in right begins in a minority of one, when some individual conceives a project which is at variance with the social good as it *has* been established. (484)

The individual's relationship with society—its rights and responsibilities—is integral to understanding this style of organic ethics. The charge of pragmatism's critics—that it is solipsistic and self-serving since it allows for flexible conduct<sup>49</sup>—fails to

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<sup>49</sup> See James, W. “The Notion of Truth”. *Pragmatism*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co. 1946. p. 233: “A favourite formula for describing Mr Schiller's doctrines and mine is that we are persons who think that by saying whatever you find it pleasant to say and calling it truth you fulfil every pragmatistic [sic] requirement.”

consider this cornerstone of Dewey and Tufts' argument for a principled pragmatism.

Here, the term 'individualism' describes:

a person who is individual in choice, in feeling, in responsibility, and at the same time social in what he regards as good, in his sympathies, and in his purposes. Otherwise individualism means progress toward the immoral. (76)

To guard against the kinds of exploitations that go hand in hand with an "every man does what is right in his own eyes" philosophy Dewey and Tufts insist that moral progress can only be advanced when this sense of freedom is taken with its incumbent responsibilities. This is the "reconstructed individual" who, while maintaining an individualist quality, values the social. (75-76) The search for just solutions over private interests indicates the moral willingness over self-interest. Furthermore, Dewey and Tufts demonstrate, as does James in *The Principles of Psychology*, that the individual self can only manifest *through* the social.<sup>50</sup> A self is a self insofar as it is *recognised*. It is recognised through the social compact and activated and empowered through existing institutions. (431) For example, the increasing diversity of modern society increases the opportunities through which the self's individualism may flourish. An environment of reduced circumstances and opportunities has the opposite effect. Satisfactory economic conditions and modes of production must be secured. If conditions are such that prevent mental stimulation or opportunities to develop, then, despite any formal freedoms stipulated, real freedoms, choices, are absent. The self stagnates.

Breadth in extent of community life goes hand in hand with multiplication of the stimuli which call out an individual's powers. Diversification of social activities increases opportunities for his initiative and endeavour. Narrow and meager social life means limitation of the scope of activities in which its members may engage. It means little occasion for the exercise of deliberation and choice, without which character is both immature and fossilised; it means, in short, restricted personality. (430)

The flipside to the self-empowerment, available through an increasingly diverse range of organisations and activities (a growth which is to be regarded as a right), is responsibility and obligation. "But a rich and varied society, one which liberates powers otherwise torpid and latent, also exacts that they be employed in ways consistent with its own interests." (430) Importantly: "The world of action is a world of which the individual

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<sup>50</sup> *Ethics*, p. 428; *Principles of Psychology*, p. 293.

is one limit, and humanity the other.” (430) Again, the “social contract”, where the contract is a free one, the aim of which is to achieve mutual benefit, is useful to illustrate the balance of rights and obligations between the individual and the social group. Although the group will insist on consistency with its own interests, the individual’s progressive development he/she receives through this bargain also enacts change and may change social interests in the pursuit of the social good. This is the difference between customary and reflective morality where, in the former, the moral *is* the social as opposed to the latter which accepts the limitation of any customised system of thought or behaviour and is prepared to extend it.

The good man not only measures his acts by a standard, but he is concerned to revise his standard. His sense of the ideal, of the undefinable because ever-expanding value of special deeds, forbids his resting satisfied with any formulated standard; for the very formulation gives the standard a technical quality, while the good can be maintained only in enlarging excellence. The highest form of conscientiousness is interest in constant progress. (422)

## Chapter 2

### “A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking”: William James’s *Pragmatism*

William James’s *Pragmatism* is the collection of lectures he gave in Boston and New York between November 1906 and January 1907. The purpose of these lectures was to explain his pragmatist ideas in relation to religion, humanism, common sense, monism and pluralism, and truth and reality. Importantly in these lectures, James takes up much of the criticism leveled at the pragmatist movement and clearly lays out the tasks of pragmatism. Pragmatism, he explains, is primarily a *method* rather than a highly conceptualised dogmatic worldview; however, its method allows for a pluralist approach. Given this, James tackles the question of value in relation to truths rather than an Absolute Truth, outlining the balance between old stocks of truth and its negotiation with the new. In short, habit is of a deeply conservative nature; it is between this and the conditions of reality that we are “tightly wedged” thereby maintaining the integrity of old value even as it becomes modified. Through the accrual of habits, slowly expanded or “built out” by new experience, we thus become repositories of history. These ongoing modifications show a plasticity vital to our nature that ensures ongoing adaptability to changing conditions. We build out rather than dismantle: “we patch and tinker more than we renew.” (83) This suggests that, while we are released from an idea of the Absolute, it does not necessarily follow that standards and value collapse into anarchy. “We *are* continuity.”<sup>51</sup> Where a particular sense of value is lost as the idea of a single capital-T Truth is dispatched, value is relocated in a plural set of provisional truths so long as they are found to be useful. As we shall see, a truth’s provisionality does not negate its value. Pragmatism, being experimental in design, is concerned with experience-funded truths; we verify ideas by bringing them back into reality where they may be tested. James at all times stresses the concrete. However, it is not his intention to simply champion an empiricist worldview over a rationalist one; in these lectures, James is promoting pragmatism as the mediator between what he calls the tough- and the tender-minded. An idealist worldview is still *valuable* so long as you bring those ideas back into experience where they can be put into *practice* and made to *work*.

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<sup>51</sup> *Principles of Psychology*. p. 127.

At the time of his lectures, James declared: “Never were as many men of a decidedly empiricist proclivity in existence as there are at the present day.” (14) In saying so, he recognises the pulse of the modernist mind and also goes on to address its quandary: “But our esteem for facts has not neutralised in us all religiousness.” (15) In response, James’s pragmatism is a method of thinking that can mediate between what he sees as the antagonistic split between the ‘tough-’ and the ‘tender-minded’. For the present discussion it is useful to briefly discuss these two worldviews as James identifies them to gauge where pragmatism is placed between these poles. In doing so, we can get at a more thorough understanding of James’s pragmatism and the tightly bonded concepts of truth and reality. Truth and reality are important to the discussion on ethics since one’s worldview dictates action and the assignation of value.

The real anxiety for pragmatism’s critics was its implications for truth.

Summarising this critical perspective, James puts:

These pragmatists destroy all objective standards,” critics say, “and put foolishness and wisdom on one level.” A favorite formula for describing Mr Schiller’s doctrines and mine is that we are persons who think that by saying whatever you find it pleasant to say and calling it truth you fulfil every pragmatist requirement. (111)

This pragmatist talk about truths in the plural, about their utility and satisfactoriness, about the success with which they ‘work,’ etc., suggests to the typical intellectualist mind a sort of coarse lame second-rate makeshift article of truth. Such truths are not real truth. Such tests are merely subjective. (38)

Such criticisms come from the tender-minded, the rationalist<sup>52</sup>, who James describes as regarding the world ready-made, a unified entity, and truth can only be that which corresponds to the already-made world. Truth is what matches a constant reality. For such thinkers truth is immutable. It does not change and, in fact, represents the unity of the higher order of the world. James writes that for the rationalist:

objective truth must be something non-utilitarian, haughty, refined, remote, august, exalted. It must be an absolute correspondence of our thoughts with an equally absolute reality. It must be what we *ought* to think, unconditionally. (38)

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<sup>52</sup> I will use the term ‘rationalist’ as James uses it, in describing those who see the world as dictated by principles – that there is a unified reason for the progress of the world. In James’s theory this rationalist is also religious and monistic.



This idea of truth is problematic since in this conception, truth is *closed* and is removed from the practical and the everyday. This gives rise to two complications of particular importance to the current study: (i) being a closed system of thought, the habit that experience has of “boiling over” our current ideas will continually confound such ideas of Truth, and (ii) being “refined”, the tendency is to value ideas over action. James writes:

The actual universe is a thing wide open, but rationalism makes systems, and systems must be closed. For men in practical life perfection is something far off and still in process of achievement. This for rationalism is but the illusion of the finite and relative: the absolute ground of things is a perfection eternally complete. (20)

An “absolute ground”, an “objective standard”, the “ready-made universe”: all terms which denote a world that modernist thought must concede lost. All systems, being closed, will eventually be thwarted by an inherent fallibility: “Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas.” (106) It is important to note, then, that pragmatism is a method of thinking rather than a system of thought.

The pragmatic method...is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences...What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. (28)

Here we start digging in the dirt of the ordinary: the practical solution. Borrowing from Charles Saunders Peirce, James emphasises that: “the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice.” (29) Pragmatism unapologetically disdains “verbal solutions” (31); it is for James the unabashedly anti-intellectual streak of pragmatism. “[O]ur beliefs are really rules for action, [and] to develop a thought’s meaning, we need only to determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance.” (29)

Pragmatism...asks its usual question. “Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?”

The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: *True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.* That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as.

This thesis is what I have to defend. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *veri-fication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*. (97)

The focus put on possible consequences of action stemming from the truth of particular notions forces us into contemplation of the future. The open manner of the future, only predictable to a certain degree, precludes the maintenance of a closed system:

A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins...It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth. (31)

The resulting difference in temperament between the tender-minded and the pragmatist is telling:

The rationalist mind, radically taken, is of a doctrinaire and authoritative complexion: the phrase '*must be*' is ever on its lips. The belly-band of its universe must be tight. A radical pragmatist on the other hand is a happy-go-lucky anarchistic sort of creature. (124)

We might add that upon the lips of the pragmatist, the phrases *could be* and *what then* linger. While James uses the term "anarchistic" in describing the pragmatic temperament he uses such a term by way of contrast rather than as an explicit assessment. He would be the first to resist anarchy as a true depiction of the pragmatic attitude. For James's pragmatist, the universe is far from a lawless realm. While this will be discussed in more detail when I address James and his attitudes to habit, suffice it to say here that our choices to act and the notions we accept as true follow quite a narrow path from previous knowledge into interpreting the novel experience. To be acceptable, a truth cannot "clash" or be contradictory to the broader stock of old truths. Truths have "this desperate instinct of self-preservation" and a "desire to extinguish whatever contradicts

them.” James writes: “My belief in the Absolute, based on the good it does me, must run the gauntlet of all my other beliefs. (43)

This condition keeps tight rein on ethical behaviour. The process of agreements prevents anarchy. Our theory of value, then, as will become progressively clear, is not contingent upon notions of absolute, immutable Truth. As we saw in *Ethics*, a balance between the socially defined consciousness and the external environment manages this value rather than an abstract notion operating independently. Even though the idea of the objective standard against which values may be judged has been dismissed, ethical behaviour can still be maintained by a particular order. It is not the green light to anarchy critics of pragmatism feared. In fact, its theory of value has a longevity monism lacks. A monistic worldview cannot allow:

any mitigation of its inner rigidity[.] The slightest suspicion of pluralism, the minutest wiggle of independence of any one of its parts from the control of the totality, would ruin it. Absolute unity brooks no degrees...” (78)

In accepting the fact that experience “boils over” our knowledge we must also accept that any “wiggle of independence”, any dissent from the unified whole, is possible and will cause the entire theory of absolutism to crumble. Therefore, pragmatism must be pluralist in its approach: “Every idea must be judged by its own specific purpose as an idea... There is no purely abstract standard.”<sup>53</sup>

A pluralist worldview makes room for a flexible approach to truth and reality. In pragmatism, truth is not an “inert static relation” (96) between things. It can not be a stable agreement between an idea and reality since reality can only be ever understood subjectively: “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything.”(37) It is a dynamic relation between the internal world of consciousness and the external world of stimuli. Moreover, the mere truth of an idea does not assure its value as an idea. An idea’s usefulness or relevance brings value to it:

When may a truth go into cold-storage in the encyclopaedia? and when shall it come out for battle? Must I constantly be repeating the truth ‘twice two are four’ because of its eternal claim on recognition? or is it sometimes irrelevant? Must my thoughts dwell night and day on my personal sins and blemishes, because I truly have them?—or may I sink and ignore them in order to be a decent social unit, and not a mass of morbid melancholy and apology?... Truth with a big T, and in the singular, claims

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<sup>53</sup> Bawden, p. 203.

abstractly to be recognised, of course; but concrete truths in the plural need be recognized only when their recognition is expedient. (111)

As a basic example, James asks that if someone were to ask you the time and you answered by giving your address, what does it matter if you give a true or false address since it has no bearing on the question and is of no use to the inquirer? The answer is useless and so the truth or falsity of the answer is irrelevant. The truth of an idea does not guarantee its value. At this point, Dewey and Tufts might add here that since the relevancy of an idea needs to be subjectively assessed the onus rests squarely with the individual in making choices about truth and consequential conduct. The duty implied in the social contract provides the checks and balances for these assessments of expediency and relevancy. The truth of an idea is also controlled by the negotiation between the habitual old stock of knowledge and the new:

Pent in, as the pragmatist more than anyone else sees himself to be, between the whole body of funded truths squeezed from the past and the coercions of the world of sense about him, who so well as he feels the immense pressure of objective control under which our minds perform their operations? (111-112)

Whilst James puts forth a case that establishes the conservative nature of social evolution, it is nevertheless *plastic*. Pushing his experimental line, James goes on to say: “We can learn the limits of the plasticity only by trying, and that we ought to start as if it were wholly plastic, acting methodically on that assumption, and stopping only when we are decisively rebuked.” (117) Plasticity is also an attribute of the human form since the organic body operates within an environmental continuum. Neither the self nor the environment in which it is found is static. The “happy-go-lucky”, open disposition of the pragmatic character is equipped to cope with the dynamism apparent in this conception of reality. Importantly, pragmatism’s conception of the individual shares this attribute of plasticity. Since the self is socially constituted, social change effects individual change and vice versa. H.H. Bawden discusses at length the dynamic relation between the self, experience and reality and writes that the distinction between experience and reality is not an ontological one, but a methodological and functional one.<sup>54</sup> Referring back to Dewey, he maintains that reality can only be what it is *experienced* as. If this is striding towards

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<sup>54</sup> Bawden, p. 31.

solipsism, as pragmatism's critics suggested, Bawden points out that personal knowledge is really a form and expression of social knowledge:

The human individual is the social whole undergoing readjustment at its points of transition and reorganisation... Consciousness is, what the word suggests, the knowing-together of estranged aspects of the social whole.<sup>55</sup>

Bawden argues that consciousness is not a different kind of reality but a: "mode of experience in the phase of metamorphosis into further experience."<sup>56</sup> Removing such classifications as mind and matter, Bawden puts that: "mind or consciousness *is* what it seems to be—a transformation phase of experience, not a separate entity."<sup>57</sup>

Just as the hypostatising of the distinction of reality and experience gave rise to the tedious detour of the epistemological problem, so the erection of the practical distinction between the psychical and the physical into an ontological chasm has produced the paradox of mind and matter in metaphysics.<sup>58</sup>

By accepting that the mind is not a separate entity to experience we must accept the plasticity of the arrangement. Yet, this plasticity, or what Dewey and Tufts call "flexible adaptability", does not free up practice so much that it becomes misshapen. James's proposition is that: "*Plasticity*, then, in the wide sense of the word, means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once."<sup>59</sup> (105)

The strong structure that does not immediately yield is generated by habit. We are "bundles of habits,"<sup>60</sup> which, given the flexibility of our organism, change gradually over time to suit environmental circumstances:

The habits of an elementary particle of matter cannot change (on the principles of the atomistic philosophy), because the particle is itself an unchangeable thing; but those of a compound mass of matter can change, because they are in the last instance *due to the structure of the compound, and either outward forces or inward tensions can, from one hour to another, turn that structure into something different from what it was. That is, they can do so if the body be plastic enough to maintain its integrity, and be not disrupted when its structure yields.*<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bawden, p. 74.

<sup>56</sup> Bawden, p. 34.

<sup>57</sup> Bawden, p. 32.

<sup>58</sup> Bawden, p. 33.

<sup>59</sup> *Principles of Psychology*. p. 105.

<sup>60</sup> *Principles of Psychology*. p. 104.

<sup>61</sup> *Principles of Psychology*. p. 104-105.

This “maintenance of integrity” is a crucial idea if pragmatism is to withstand the criticisms that suggest pragmatism encourages a collapse of standard and social responsiveness. As Dewey and Tufts write: “A self without habits, one loose and fluid, in which change in one direction is just as easy as in another, would not have the sense of duty.” (343) Hence we are led to consider the “ethical implications of the law of habit”.<sup>62</sup> James writes: “habit is...the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent.”<sup>63</sup> As a basis of knowledge that influences conduct, habit takes on an ethical dimension and, in fact, becomes an anchor of conduct rather than any “objective standard”. As with Dewey and Tufts, James notes that even the most ancient of ethical behaviours and parts of truth: “also once were plastic. They also were called true for human reasons.” (36-37) Such “truths” were developed rather than inherently possessed:

The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently. (34-35)

So far, we have seen how the body, be it individual or social, bends to the new. The monistic temperament, of necessity, disallows this bend and, thus, must be passed over in favour of a pluralistic worldview. Yet, as we have seen, the character of habit maintains the integrity of a being, albeit a slowly changing one. The second problematic aspect of the monistic view—the aloof character of a single Truth—is implicated in this bend and now we must go deeper into James’s attitude to value in an absence of a single truth. As stated earlier, the “refined” version of a Truth threatens to value the idea over action. It is the crux of pragmatist thought to overturn this notion. It should be emphasised, however, that an idea is an action of a kind. It is, as Bawden says, the first

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<sup>62</sup> *Principles of Psychology*, p. 120.

<sup>63</sup> *Principles of Psychology*, p. 121.

movement of a series of actions.<sup>64</sup> The surfacing of an idea is indicative of a point of tension in the consciousness. It is the reflective moment which should prompt progressive action. Yet, if it does not proceed into the world of tangible evidence, it has no value.

James rejects the tender-minded sentimentality that shows itself in the glorification of Ideas. James's emphasis is on hortatory ethics and warns against sentimentality:

But everyone in his measure, whenever, after glowing for an abstractly formulated Good, he practically ignores some actual case, among the squalid 'other particulars' of which that same Good lurks disguised [fails]. All Goods are disguised by the vulgarity of their concomitants, in this work-a-day world; but woe to him who can only recognise them when he thinks them in their pure and abstract form.<sup>65</sup>

James strongly emphasises that activity *must follow* the emotion to act. Without its concomitant action, the thought, however noble, has no value. This quite clearly suggests that value does not lie inherently in noble, or truthful, or lofty ideals but in them being put into practice.

No matter how full a reservoir of maxims one may possess, and no matter how good one's sentiments may be, if one have not taken advantage of every concrete opportunity to act, one's character may remain entirely unaffected for the better. With mere good intentions, hell is proverbially paved...A tendency to act only becomes effectively ingrained in us in proportion to the uninterrupted frequency with which the actions actually occur, and the brain 'grows' to their use.<sup>66</sup>

Meaning is very firmly rooted in the concrete of everyday lived experience so now our attention turns to the conception of matter and spirit. James reproduces the argument between matter and spirit (spiritualism vs materialism) and reduces it to an argument over aesthetics. From the spiritualist point of view: "Matter is gross, coarse, crass, muddy; spirit is pure, elevated, noble; and since it is more consonant with the dignity of the universe to give the primacy in it to what appears superior, spirit must be affirmed as the ruling principle." (50) Critical of this view, James goes on to add that: "To treat abstract principles as finalities, before which our intellects may come to rest in

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<sup>64</sup> Bawden, p. 156.

<sup>65</sup> *Principles of Psychology*. p. 125.

<sup>66</sup> *Principles of Psychology*. p. 125.

a state of admiring contemplation, is the great rationalist failing.”(49) James challenges this conception of matter and demonstrates the possibilities of investing a great deal of value in “coarse” and “crass” matter:

Matter is indeed infinitely and incredibly refined. To anyone who has ever looked on the face of a dead child or parent the mere fact that matter *could* have taken for a time that precious form, ought to make matter sacred ever after. It makes no difference what the principle of life may be, material or immaterial, matter at any rate, cooperates, lends itself to all life’s purposes. That beloved incarnation was among matter’s possibilities. (50)

It must be remembered, however, that whilst James proclaims pragmatism as “empiricism regnant” it does not stop at empiricism. James put forward the pragmatic method as a mediator between the tough- and tender-minded. Pragmatism, James explains: “has no such materialistic bias as ordinary empiricism labors under.” (40) Empiricism’s irreligiousness, for example, constructs a boundary to possibilities which may prove a hindrance in the future. In other words, by making an absolute claim about something—that, for example, there is no room for abstractions which favour faith over fact—positive results may be precluded. Pragmatism has no immediate prejudice against abstractions or theology so long as “they actually carry you somewhere”:

*If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged. (40)*

To conclude, the emphasis in James’s philosophy is that pragmatism is “method only.” It is an open, investigative process that cannot abide absolute systems or inflexible thinking. The social (cultural habits as described in *Ethics* and *Pragmatism*) provides the ballast to such freedoms of thinking; the requisite tensions that exist in the consciousness between conformity and reformation encourage the ethical development of society. As Dewey and Tufts write:

In the organisation of stable character the morality of custom is strong on one side. The group trains its members to act in the ways it approves and afterwards holds them by all the agencies in its power. It forms habits and enforces them. Its weakness is that the element of habit is so large, that of freedom so small. It holds up the average man; it holds back the man who might forge ahead. It is an anchor, and a drag. (72)



Dewey and Tufts and James have outlined the pragmatic process of moral change where society is more or less stable and can develop in a slow and orderly way: “not order but orderly progress.”

We will now take this pragmatic process to see how characters “forge ahead” in environments where the order is far less stable, that is, during periods of immense social change where typical conservative elements are absent or entirely thrown over. In the following analysis on the works of Henry Lawson and Frank Moorhouse, both writers conceive of worlds that have been turned upside down. As we shall see, absolute systems are continually exposed as flawed and typical values are inverted. To set the tone and to demonstrate the pragmatic spirit in operation, where values are renegotiated through flexibility of mind, I will begin with an exposition of Lawson’s “The Iron-Bark Chip” where we see the pragmatic mind operating within the experiential field in a rich and dynamic relationship.

## Part II: Henry Lawson

### Chapter 1

#### **“An Interrogatory cope, cope, cope?”: Pragmatic Action in “The Iron-Bark Chip”**

In “The Iron-Bark Chip”, Lawson demonstrates that flexibility of character is required to survive in an unpredictable environment. In this landscape, mental alertness and physical agility is paramount to participate in what Dewey and Tufts describe as “the game” of life, a game where exertion and reward do not exist in a stable relationship to one another. The importance of this game cannot be overestimated. The unstable equation of effort and outcome underpins the concept of the multiverse that Lawson advances. That cause and effect do not follow predictable lines suggests that there is no reigning, reasoned order but that all is in flux. Any number of unseen consequences can be triggered from one act and thus this unstable and ever-changing environment must be approached without personal rigidity. The physical responsiveness in Dave’s shape-changing in this story, when he ingeniously swaps the chips, has a parallel in the functional ethical system also in operation between the working parties on the railway line. In this tale, Lawson contrasts stiff and flexible systems of meaning through his treatment of the rigid government bureaucracy as it comes into contact with the practical, grassroots realities of smaller communities. Lawson’s treatment of the workers’ situation in this story shows that standard ethical issues like honesty and deception have become morally neutral in the turbulence of the new environment. There are no inherent qualities in terms like these; the quality of an act (committing fraud or telling the truth) is felt only in its consequences.

“The Iron-Bark Chip” endorses a pragmatic philosophy of action, one which functions in contrast to the rigid, useless governmental system of order and control. “You might move heaven and earth in vain endeavour to get the ‘Governmun’ to flutter an eyelash over something of the most momentous importance to yourself and mates and the district—even to the country.”<sup>67</sup> The disengaged inspector represents this aloof

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<sup>67</sup> Lawson, H. “The Iron-Bark Chip.” *Selected Stories*. Pymble: HarperCollins. 2001. pp. 174-179. p. 175. All references to Henry Lawson’s stories will be to this edition and given in-text, unless otherwise stated.

governmental authority. From the men's point of view, the inspector is vague and lacks vitality. He wears a "grey suit", rides an "ashen-grey horse" and was "like a grey kangaroo bothered by a new wire fence, but unsuspecting of the presence of humans." (174) In other words, while he functions within the environment—indeed he is almost dangerously impossible to make out in the "long and grey" grass—he struggles to engage usefully with it: "He stooped, and with an absent air picked up a chip. He looked at it abstractedly for a moment, blinked his threefold blink; then, seeming to recollect an appointment, he woke up suddenly." (176) In contrast to this figure of authority is the foreman who is, significantly, described as "a practical man". (174) The foreman "had been a timber-getter himself" and was "on winking terms with Dave Regan" and his "sympathies were bushy." (174) For authority to be useful, then, it must not only be practical but sympathetic also. This suggests that authority should be based on experience, through which sympathy emerges. The inspector is a danger because no flexibility obtains in his nature. His only concern is that the specifics of the contract are absolutely adhered to and he will not permit any deviance from it.

Seen through a pragmatic perspective, the wood that is of such crucial concern in this tale raises two important issues: the process of moral consensus within a group and the unstable equation between effort and reward. The contract the men have signed "expressly stipulated" (174) that the hardwood ironbark is used in certain beams and girders but the men "came to reckon" something different: "they'd get the last girder from a handy tree." (174) They reach a consensus that deceit of the contract is justified by the fact that iron-bark is not plentiful in that area and there would be only "one cronk log" anyway, plus, they were "about full of the job and place" and had their eyes on "another 'spec'". (174) The process of consensus indicates a pragmatic approach where a particular course of action is taken by weighing up probable consequences. The men know that the inferiority of the timber they use for the final girder may create a safety risk, however, if all but one log is good, the compromise to safety is reduced. The low risk does not then justify the extreme effort required in getting the right log from a distance. This reckoning process focuses on value. How much difference will "one cronk log" make to the whole structure? If it doesn't make a substantial difference, where is the real value in using iron-bark on the final girder? The real risk in the men's minds, though, is the arrival of the inspector. Together, they weigh up this likelihood accordingly: "They had more than half hoped that, as he had visited them pretty frequently during the

progress of the work, and knew how near it was to completion, he wouldn't bother coming any more." (175) The process of consensus shows the men's conscientious valuations at work.

They take the risk. Of course, the inspector arrives. When the inspector takes a suspect chip for further analysis, Dave becomes indignant with injustice. "it's the only cronk log we've had too!...If this had 'a' been the only blessed iron-bark in the whole contract, it would have been all right." Such is the cunning of irony—or the "regular cussedness of things"—where exertion and reward rarely tallies. This sort of "game" may not necessarily be equitable but, as Dewey and Tufts argue, "the very strain of the process" of such risky ventures can develop attributes like ingenuity. Indeed, ingenuity now becomes the key. Jack gives up the cause for dead for he was only: "quick-witted when the track was shown him". (177) Dave, however, is set upon finding a solution. He sees the inspector has put the fraudulent chip on top of a post while he talks to the fencers. With his eyes steady on the inspector's movements: "Dave took in the lay of the country at a glance and thought rapidly." (177) He sees a slim chance and the scene opens before him like a geometric puzzle:

Now the "lay of the country" sloped generally to the line from both sides, and the angle between the inspector's horse, the fencing party, and the culvert was well within a clear concave space; but a couple of hundred yards back from the line and parallel to it (on the side on which Dave's party worked their timber) a fringe of scrub ran to within a few yards of a point which would be about in line with a single tree on the cleared slope, the horse and the fencing party. (177)

The opportunities available to Dave are far from multiple. The environment strictly dictates their chances; in this case, Dave's only hope is the fortunate, yet possibly momentary, configurations of his lines of sight. There is no room for error. The contingency of the set-up leaves no time for hesitation as Dave cannot predict when the inspector might move. If he is going to swap the chips he has to do it now. He yells: "Gimme an iron-bark chip!" (177) With the chip in hand he begins the physically awkward, risky manoeuvre:

Dave...ran along the bed of the watercourse into the scrub, raced up the siding behind the bushes, got safely, though without breathing across the exposed space, and brought the tree into line between him and the inspector, who was talking to the fencers. Then he began to work quickly down the slope towards the tree

(which was a thin one), keeping it in line, his arms close to his sides, and working, as it were, down the trunk of the tree, as if the fencing party were kangaroos and Dave was trying to get a shot at them. (177)

The level of detailed description in this passage emphasises the kind of extraordinary malleability Dave requires. To further increase the pressure, the inspector keeps looking around to check on his flighty horse. The hint that the horse may bolt further intensifies the animation of the scene and the unpredictability of events. Dave must be present and alert in each and every moment. It must also be noted that in order to escape detection as he “works” his way down the trunk he must work blind. He must give over to instinct.

Dave’s particular opportunistic skills and lateral thinking provide the group with the opportunity to survive. This point is important because it suggests the value of individuation within the group setting. All, however, share in the responsibility to protect the group: “It was an anxious moment for all parties concerned—except the inspector. They didn’t want *him* to be perturbed.”(177) Since the unpredictability of the environment prevents its control—now there is also a heavy thunderstorm coming—Dave cannot be left to work alone for, “just as Dave reached the foot of the tree, the inspector finished what he had to say to the fencers, turned, and started to walk briskly back to his horse.” (177) Dave must now rely on the others in his group to come up with an ingenious solution. All available creative forces need to be mobilised: “There were certain prearranged signals between Dave’s party and the fencers...but none to meet a case like this” (177); therefore, the men must find a creative solution to a new problem. Ironically, Jack finds a solution in Andy Page, who was “the hardest grafter, but altogether helpless, hopeless, and useless in a crisis like this.” (176) Given that Andy grew nervous around “funny business”, he would usually be of no value in such a circumstance, but unprecedented circumstances can *change* the value of qualities like honesty. Since Andy “must have an honest excuse” Jack says: “Run, Andy! Tell him there’s a heavy thunderstorm coming and he’d better stay in our humpy till it’s over. Run! Don’t stand staring like a blanky fool. He’ll be gone!” (178) Jack’s experience of Andy assures him that: “It would have taken the inspector ten minutes to get at what Andy was driving at, whatever it was.” This forms yet another situational irony—they must now detain the man from whom they need the most distance. They will try to bring him

closer—into their very tent. Jack’s plan remains undeployed, however, since there are many forces now mobilised for Dave’s success:

[A]s luck would have it, one of the fencers started after the inspector, hailing him as “Hi, mister!” He wanted to be set right about the survey or something—or to pretend to want to be set right—from motives of policy which I haven’t time to explain here. (178)

There is no “luck” in it. Dave’s party and the fencers share in relations of sympathy which improves the likelihood of cooperation. This experienced understanding of local pressures gives the individual groups the ability to support each other: “The fencer explained afterwards to Dave’s party that he ‘seen what you covets was up to,’ and that’s why he called the inspector back.” (178)

Here, then, we have a distinct ethical system taking form. It is not reliant upon innate values but relationships. The integrity of action is not related to any moral immanence of the act itself but the relationships of actors who are immediately affected by the act. Thus, deception, as an act-in-itself, becomes morally neutral, whether it is a contractual breach or delaying a man under false pretenses. Likewise, Andy’s honesty, which is sometimes a liability, can also become an advantage. Deception and honesty, like so many acts and objects in this new land, are emptied of conventional significance.

With the absence of a concept of innate value, stabilisation comes, firstly, through relationships—the mutual understanding of the likeminded— and, secondly, through the build-up of experience. Both of these “stabilisations” are nevertheless dynamic. Firstly, relationships within groups retain the idiosyncrasies of each individual member leaving a certain area of unpredictability, as we shall see in the boss’s behaviour in “Telling Mrs Baker”. Yet it is this idiosyncratic element which also provides creative solutions as Dave’s actions prove. Secondly, experience contributes towards the ability to forecast likely consequences, “it’s always the way”, but room must be left for chance since threats like the inspector appear at “unexpected times.”

In distracting the inspector, the fencer buys Dave more time. Dave then begins to morph into several animals. At this point, Dave is protoplasmic; he is almost pre-form sheer living matter. He gets down on all fours, slips round the tree and through the grass which “luckily” grows tall between the tree and the horse. He approaches the flighty horse and a bolt of fear passes through him. What if it bolts at the sight of a man creeping

up behind it? But Dave, in the thrust of evolution, is no longer a man. In fact, even the horse has more human characteristics than Dave and offers thoughtful help:

Dave ventured an interrogatory “Cope, cope, cope?” The horse turned its head wearily and regarded him with a mild eye, as if he’d expected him to come, and come on all fours, and wondered what had kept him so long; then he went on thinking. Dave reached the foot of the post; the horse obligingly leaning over on the other leg. (178)

Through the first hurdle, Dave is now at the post upon which sits the incriminating chip.

“Like a snake” he rears up:

his hand went up twice, swiftly—the first time he grabbed the inspector’s chip and the second time he put the iron-bark one in its place. He drew down and back, and scuttled off for the tree like a gigantic tailless goanna. (178-179)

In under a minute or so, Dave has passed through many forms: a hunter bearing down on a pack of kangaroos, a four-legged creature, a snake and a goanna. Each form has a different function. It serves a purpose and is then discarded as the situation demands. It is this ability to change that promotes community survival and is set against a rigid style of moral integrity such as that which Andy labours under, which can have a negative effect on a community crisis. (This has to be considered a provocative re-imagining of value from Lawson’s point of view.) Even though the inspector eventually forgets the chip—again destroying the expected ratio between action and consequence—Dave’s action is not altogether pointless. His action retains experiential value. Importantly, this experience contributes to his repertoire of actions for his system of coping. Furthermore, this experience feeds back into his own community and therein lies the significance of the yarn. When the danger has passed, Dave’s party and the fencers discuss it together afterwards. This discussion is not just for pure entertainment. It is the sharing and consolidation of experience that arms them for what may lie ahead.

## Chapter 2

### “His Brother’s Keeper”: Provisional Securities in the Stories of Mitchell, M’Laughlan and “Telling Mrs Baker”

The Australian has not made up his mind about religion, and has never felt himself seriously challenged by it. The continent is vast and it is easy to escape from the inherited traditions. There are wide seas between Australia and the lands where the ancestral religious traditions were fashioned.<sup>68</sup>

The positive insistence throughout Lawson’s work is that the social is the source for salvation and redemption. There is no God here, and Lawson makes no attempts to fill that space with a monism of a different kind—not even the “bush religion” of mateship, for that too is scrutinised by Lawson’s irony. The order of Lawson’s vision is a social order where the emphasis is on critical reflection, and therefore subject to change. Freedom from an absolute monistic worldview does not bring with it moral anarchy (as some critics of pragmatism feared). The great flux of Lawson’s multiverse has ballast in social obligations that, importantly, are routinely tested and critiqued. The absence of a supreme order of morality avoids what James calls taking “moral holidays”. That is, if one cannot defer moral decisions to a higher system, then one must make each ethical decision with a fully aware consciousness. Since the social is the source of all that might be called sacred in Lawson’s world, social responsibility thus becomes a key issue in Lawson’s stories. The extraordinary amount of (male) guilt that permeates his work demonstrates this relentless concern. Like the tribal patterns outlined in *Ethics*, Lawson’s moral framework for these nomadic bushmen develops from a very basic drive—survival. Beginning from this seed, Lawson’s characters demonstrate various stages of ethical development; some develop only a customary morality and others, such as Peter M’Laughlan and Giraffe, move towards a richer, more sophisticated morality. Most, however, are caught somewhere in between.

As Dewey and Tufts illustrate, ethics develop out of the practical and local concerns of a group. In Lawson’s fiction, two men on the track fare better than one man alone. A story like “That There Dog O’ Mine” clearly establishes the interdependence of

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<sup>68</sup> Bishop Burgmann, cited in Nadel, G. *Australia’s Colonial Culture: Ideas, Men and Institutions in Mid-Nineteenth Century Eastern Australia*. F.W. Cheshire: Melbourne. 1957. p. 249.



living beings. Macquarie and his dog present at a hospital for treatment after being involved in a fight. “And this here old dog,” Macquarie tells the staff:

has follered me for—ten years; through floods and droughts, through fair times and—and hard—mostly hard; and kep me from going mad when I had no mate nor money on the lonely track; and watched over me for weeks when I was drunk—drugged and poisoned at the cursed shanties; and saved my life more’n once.(43)

The dog and his master are physically dependent on one another for survival. This is the basic element of their relationship. However, from this basic mutual benefit grows a sense of duty towards one another that extends past the immediate survival instinct. When the hospital staff refuse to treat the dog, Macquarie is ready to forego treatment himself:

No. If you won’t take my dog in you don’t take me. He’s got a broken leg and wants fixing up just—just as much as—as I do. If I’m good enough to come in, he’s good enough—and—and better. (43)

The sacrificial element at work here valorises the relationship, raises it above mutual survival strategies and deepens its ethical dimension. The motivating impulse in Macquarie’s action is sympathy for his dog. They share a common life, face the same floods and droughts and engage in the same battles. Macquarie can therefore sympathise with the dog’s pain because they have shared the same experience. Sympathy, as the key principle in ethical practice, initially arises out of such mutual understanding, which then strengthens the impulse to cooperate. By contrast, the staff have no such automatic sympathy for the dog. They do not share the same dutiful obligation born out of common experience and are ready to turn him out of their grounds.

In Lawson’s short stories, two men together *works* as a survival strategy. (Of course, two men may actually be a man and his dog since, as Macquarie declares, his dog is a better man than he is himself.)<sup>69</sup> This strategy develops into an *approved* custom. If either member fails in the contract of care, the whole system collapses for, in this environment, a breach of friendship can be life threatening. Given the high stakes, this basic bond develops into an important moral principle, a principle grown out of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ken Stewart argues that the solitary figures who do survive, for example, Rats and the bush undertaker, do so by creating the illusion of this gregarious bond from objects in their surroundings. See Stewart, K. “‘The Loaded Dog’: A Celebration”, *Australian Literary Studies*. 11:1. 1983. pp. 152-61. p. 153.

local, material world. The intimacy that grows out of this arrangement suggests that the term “mate” can also refer to its other meaning—life partner. The intensity of the relationship between two men on a track could be seen as a pragmatic compensation for the absent female; “feminine” tendernesses are in abundance in the day-to-day gestures displayed between men on the track. In “On the Edge of the Plain” as Mitchell relates the particulars of his domestic exile to his mate, there is an insistence on “they” and “their”, suggesting an inextricable togetherness. They look out into the endless plain, shouldering each other as much as their own swags. In “The Story of ‘Gentleman-Once’”<sup>70</sup> Peter M’Laughlan is the beneficiary of Mitchell’s tenderness:

About four o’clock Mitchell woke and stood up. Peter was lying rolled in his blanket with his face turned to the west. The moon was low, the shadows had shifted back, and the light was on Peter’s face...Then Mitchell quietly got some boughs and stuck them in the ground at a little distance from Peter’s head, to shade his face from the bright moonlight; and then he turned in again to sleep till the sun woke him. (42)

Although Mitchell is a highly sentimental character, the purpose of Lawson’s ironic excess here is to address the intensity of the fraternal bond rather than simply ironise Mitchell’s sentimentality. This loving tenderness runs against the style of mateship that Emille Salliens described in Lawson’s work. In filling the female void, Salliens describes the mateship: “as befits a virile society...[s]omewhat because of spiritual reserve or through fear of becoming sensitive, the bushmen’s mateship doesn’t exist without something raw in it; it is reminiscent of barrack fraternity.”<sup>71</sup> Yet there is nothing of a raw barrack fraternity in shading a sleeping man’s face from the moon. In the absence of women, the men’s behaviour modifies to fill the breach *with* “feminine” sensitivity. Likewise, women such as the drover’s wife and Mrs Spicer don men’s clothing and their bodies change, becoming flat-chested, wiry and gaunt, appropriating “masculine” roles to replace the absent men. In these absences, the pragmatic reshuffling of roles takes place to fill the complement of human behaviours.

<sup>70</sup> “The Story of Gentleman-Once”, *The Complete Works of Henry Lawson*. (ed) Cronin, L. Vol 2 *A Fantasy of Man* Sydney: Lansdowne, 1984 pp35-42 Future references to this story will be to this edition and given in-text.

<sup>71</sup> Salliens, E. “The Australian Bush and Its Poet”, (translation Roderick, C.) published in *Mercure de France*, October 1, 1910, reprinted in (ed) Roderick, C *Henry Lawson Criticism. 1894-1971*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972. pp. 147-157. p. 152.

The relationships in Lawson's fiction operate under an extremely powerful ethical charge primarily because there is often little else in the outback environment. Put simply, the fewer the people, the more pressure on each relationship. Given the intensity of the obligation, then, it is no surprise that ethics forms a central concern of campfire discussions and the development of ethical consciousness can be tracked through the campfire conversations of Mitchell and his mates. A survey of the titles of many of the Mitchell sketches show the emphasis on ethical theorising: "Mitchell Doesn't Believe in the Sack" (1893), "Mitchell on Matrimony" (1897), "Mitchell on Women" (1898), "The Sex Problem Again" (1898), "Mitchell on the 'Sex' and Other 'Problems'", (1899).<sup>72</sup> Importantly, Mitchell's theories revolve around action. When he berates Harry, the "problemaniac", for brooding too much over and taking notes on the "sex problem" (inter-marital relations) he says: "A pocket-book's to keep your accounts in, not to take notes in (you take them in your head and use 'em in your arms)."<sup>73</sup> In a distinctly Jamesian spirit, against the "verbal solution", Mitchell says:

We might argue that black is white, and white is black, and neither of 'em is anything, and nothing is everything; and a woman's a man and a man's a woman...we might argue that it's a force of imagination, and that imagination is an unknown force, and that the unknown is nothing. But, when we've settled all that to our own satisfaction, how much further ahead are we? In the end we'll come to the conclusion that we ain't alive, and never existed, and then we'll leave off bothering, and the world will go on just the same...You might argue away in any direction for a million miles and a million years back into the past, but you've got to come back to where you are if you wish to do any good for yourself, or anyone else.<sup>74</sup>

In this pragmatic speech, Mitchell's emphasis is on the ethic *in action*. Answers to life are to be found in the physical not the abstract world; it is an ethical act to work the problems out in the day-to-day world because it is in the world where things *happen*, where "good" for others can be done. "You've got to come back to where you are," he says in what could be described as a pragmatic creed. Mitchell has no time for abstract philosophising over problems; solutions need to be tested under the stress of local conditions, not in the overstressed mind of a "problemaniac" like Harry.

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<sup>72</sup> These stories appear in *A Camp-Fire Yarn*.

<sup>73</sup> "The Sex Problem Again" *A Camp-Fire Yarn*. p.545.

<sup>74</sup> "Mitchell on the 'Sex' and Other 'Problems.'" p. 614.

Peter M'Laughlan is such a character who continually operates in the practical world doing good for himself and others. Unlike the inaccessible and mercenary "pianer-fingered parsons" criticised in "The Bush Undertaker", M'Laughlan shares the same world as these travellers and, therefore, cannot only provide practical care but practical advice for their personal, social redemption. He does this by continually prompting thoughtful reflection. He is known as the "bush missionary" and functions as a Christ figure in Lawson's stories:

He had wavy dark hair, and a close, curly beard. I once heard a woman say that he had a beard like you see in some Bible pictures of Christ. Peter M'Laughlan seldom smiled; there was something in his big dark brown eyes that was scarcely misery, nor yet sadness—a sort of haunted sympathy. ("Shall We Gather at the River?" 472)

Peter is a very earthbound Christ and, just as Christ kept company with prostitutes and tax collectors, Peter shepherds the drunkards and philanderers. The devils he casts out in "The Story of Gentleman-Once", for example, are the products of Danny Quinn's horrors: "Peter went to the old man and soothed him by waving off the snakes and devils with his hands, and telling them to go." (39) In this story, Peter M'Laughlan challenges each of the men to review his own conscience. The party has been largely formed by M'Laughlan who, on the way through the countryside, comes across Joe Wilson and Jack Barnes "knocking down their cheques beautifully" (35) in a wayside shanty. Mitchell then joins them as does Danny Quinn who, in the midst of the horrors, "didn't count and was supposed to be dead":

Peter sat on a log by the fire with Joe and Jack Mitchell on one side and Jack Barnes on the other. Jack Mitchell sat on the grass with his back to the log, his knees drawn up, and his arms abroad on them: his most comfortable position and one which seemed to favour the flow of his philosophy. They talked of Bush things or reflected, sometimes all three together, sometimes by turns. (35)

The important emphasis in the above passage is on the men's ability of reflection, the germ of moral development. Even their bodies are used for the task as they sit in ways to "favour the flow" of thought. While they philosophise, nostalgic songs issue from a camp nearby which contributes to their state of reflection. In the first song the lines, "I remember, I remember", are repeated several times, forcing the men to think and this is not always a particularly attractive proposition for the thinkers in question: "I wish they

wouldn't play and sing those old songs,' [Mitchell] said. 'They make you think of damned old things.'" (37) As James explains, uncomfortable thoughts—thoughts that don't "agree"—require rigorous attention. Presumably, these "damned old things" are regrettable past actions and these songs make their consciences ache. In this case, uncomfortable memories will promote a rethinking of past behaviour and—if M'Laughlan has his way—will result in the men's resolve to reform.

M'Laughlan proceeds to tell various stories which are really moral tales or parables prompting the men to reconsider their own treatment of their wives and relations. After the stories, "Jack Barnes got up and walked slowly down the creek in the moonlight. He wanted to think." Likewise, "Joe...wanted to think now" and Mitchell "wanted to reflect." (42) Their conversation is full of the terms in which to address the ethics of behaviour—bad habits, repentance, fault, guilt and, importantly, the obstacles to and tools of redemption:

He drinks from pure selfishness...He drinks because he feels happy and jolly and clever and good-natured and brave and honest while he is drinking. Later on he drinks because he feels the reverse of all these things when he is sober. He drinks to drown the past and repentance. He doesn't know that a healthy-minded man doesn't waste time in repenting. He doesn't know how easy it is to reform, and is too weak-willed to try. He gets a muddled idea that the past can't be mended. (40)

Just as James suggests that the "morbid melancholy and apology" (111) that springs from deep personal reflection can hamper one's energy to act in productive ways, here the narrator speaks of the ease of reform. The thoughtful energy that promotes self-reflection must then be redirected out into the world where reform might be of use. Guilt, as wasted energy, can prevent redemptive acts. Importantly, in this missionary work there is no talk of God or the soul's salvation; the salvation here is the rehabilitation of the social order.

In this sketch, there is significant emphasis placed on the role of others in one's own redemption. This is physically exemplified through M'Laughlan's nursing of Danny Quinn. Likewise, he is subtly coaching them all emotionally towards their own private corrections: "I don't hold that a man's salvation is always in his own hands; I've seen mates pull mates out of hell too often to think that." (41) Here is a clear social duty: through interpersonal care, hell can be avoided. Furthermore, the only hell of concern

here is in the present world. In the pertinently titled “His Brother’s Keeper,”<sup>75</sup> Peter M’Laughlan again saves Jack Barnes from the drink. When they say goodbye, Jack, breathing hard, says:

“I don’t know what to say, Peter.”

“Say nothing, Jack. Only promise me that you will give Clara the cheque as soon as you go home, and let her take care of the cash for a while.”

“I will,” said Jack.

Jack looked down at the ground for a while, then he lifted his head and looked Peter in the eyes.

“Peter,” he said, “I can’t speak. I’m ashamed to make a promise; I’ve broken so many. I’ll try to thank you in a year’s time from now.”

“I ask for no promises,” said Peter, and he held out his hand. Jack gripped it. (34)

Heseltine has argued that Peter M’Laughlan, as one of Lawson’s more virtuous characters, does not share in the mateship bond.<sup>76</sup> Yet, while he is not presented in exclusive tandem with another, like Joe and Jack, he is gregarious. He is not alien to the men’s camps but a welcome member. He is also a union representative and, therefore, an integral part of the working environment. In the network of itinerants, Peter functions as one of the men unlike, say, the stranger in the “Union Buries Its Dead” who, being unknown to the men, is at distinct disadvantage and of small regard:

Peter didn’t preach. He just jogged along and camped with us as if he were an ordinary every-day mate. He yarned about all sorts of things. He could tell good yarns, and when he was fairly on you could listen to him all night. (34)

Like his namesake apostle, Peter is working class. He has shared in the same experiences as those to whom he preaches. He has lived their life unlike the remote members of the clergy:

I am not preaching as a man who has been taught to preach comfortably, but as a man who has learned in the world’s school. I know what trouble is. Men...and women too! I have been through trouble as deep as any of yours—perhaps deeper. I know how you toil and suffer, I know what battle you fight, *I* know. I too fought a battle, perhaps as hard as any you fight. I carry a load and am fighting a battle still. (“Shall we Gather at the River?” 481)

<sup>75</sup> “His Brother’s Keeper”. *A Fantasy of Man*. pp. 26-34.

<sup>76</sup> Heseltine, H.P. “St Henry: The Apostle of Mateship”. *Quadrant*. 1960-61. p. 10.

For Peter, the “beauty in the bush” is to be found in interrelationship. Once again, the gregarious bond is the crutch on which to fall. He implores these relationships be constantly mended and his “missionary” work is not in preaching the word of God but in mending and tending to these bonds. To achieve this, he is always saving men from the bottle and sending them home to their wives. His partiality to “drunken scamps and vagabonds, black-sheep and ne’er-do-wells”<sup>77</sup> suggests that Peter’s missionary work is largely a product of his own previous waywardness. Again, the emphasis is on experience: “He’s got a tremendous sympathy for drunks. He’d do anything to help a drunken man. Ain’t it marvellous? It’s my private opinion that Peter must have been an awful boozier and scamp in his time.” (37) It is not, then, that he does not share in the mateships by being somehow above it. Rather, M’Laughlan has experienced the men’s own circumstances and has managed to survive. This is the source of his sympathy. He has guilt. Phillips writes about Lawson’s preoccupation with guilt arguing that the guilty have an affiliation with the downtrodden. Lawson: “used that figure because the guilty man is impelled to a sympathy with the defeated.”<sup>78</sup> In this way, the sinless Christ takes on a more fallible, prosaic form. Through Peter’s experience, comes the evolution of sympathy. It is not an exclusive sympathy but is ever widening. Lawson’s emphasis on the importance of sympathy is clear:

Sympathy’s a grand and glorious thing, taking it all round and looking at it any way you will: a little of it makes a man think that the world’s a good world after all, and there’s room and hope for sinners, and that life’s worth living; enough of it makes him sure of it: and an overdose of sympathy makes a man *feel* weak and ashamed of himself, and so moves him to stop whining—and wining—and buck up.<sup>79</sup>

### **“Telling Mrs Baker”**

This analysis has so far shown the parameters of social responsibility; it begins with ensuring mutual survival and it extends to accommodate unstipulated weaknesses of others. There is a moral parallel here with the contract in “The Iron-Bark Chip”: a rigid moral system (of formal contracts, etc) where what is right and wrong is clearly distinguishable, is contrasted with a malleable system that can accommodate subversion,

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<sup>77</sup> “Gentleman Once”, p. 37.

<sup>78</sup> Phillips, A.A. *Henry Lawson*. New York: Twayne Publishers. 1970. pp. 94-95.

<sup>79</sup> “The Boozier’s Home.” *A Camp-Fire Yarn*. pp. 616-618. p. 616.

unexpected behaviour, or failure. Ironically, it is this very flexibility that creates some stability for Lawson's communities, and this becomes clear in "Telling Mrs Baker".

Bob by no means deserves the efforts Andy and Jack go to to protect his reputation in his wife's eyes but, following Peter M'Laughlan's imperative, merit has nothing to do with "pulling mates out of hell". The code of mateship in the bush generally seems to work and it is important to maintain this coping system for these relationships provide stability. The lie the men tell Mrs Baker fulfils two important functions in two different realities: it maintains the coping system and it also maintains Mrs Baker's own idealisations. It stabilises her reality too. This is an important story for in it Lawson explores the nature of truth and its relation to ethical action. Of prime consideration in this story is truth as a relation. Rather than an uncompromising ethic of a capital-T Truth, the conditions of truth are explored as a process, as "what works" in a given situation. The process of the story shows that telling the truth need not be standard ethical practice. A hard and fast rule such as this cannot be pragmatic, for unbendable rules cannot respond to an unprecedented situation. Since we know that "reality" is not a stable concept, it follows that "truth" also lacks stability. James argues that ideas are truthful if they correspond with a given reality in order to get from one step to the next. Therefore, when the men provide Mrs Baker with a version of events that correspond with her ideal of her husband, they help her in her grieving process, and the next steps she has to make. It thus becomes an ethical act on their part. It must be remembered, however, that the lie has a double function. When Jack suggests they tell Mrs Baker what really happened, Andy remarks:

"You don't know women, Jack," said Andy quietly. "And anyway, even if she is a sensible woman, we've got a dead mate to consider as well as a living woman." (434)

This is undoubtedly an alarming system of priorities. Andy suggests here that a dead, selfish, drunken, blackguard mate is of more importance than a living woman who is "of the right stuff". However, whilst the dead mate is of prime consideration here, Andy still has in mind the consequences for the woman. (One is more inclined to accept this remark as a provocative exposure of mateship given the strength of the ironic inversion. From the outset of this story, the narrator extends much unequivocal sympathy for the woman for she has suffered at the hands of a moral coward.) By finally committing to the lie they ensure the ongoing workability of a code of conduct that



creates tentative security. Their alternative is to risk security. This situation gives rise to the extraordinary paradox that if they can't lie, they can't be trusted. The task, then, is to find a solution that will benefit both the dead mate and the living woman. The pull of allegiances coupled with Bob's own errant behaviour creates tension for Andy and Jack. The lie in fact becomes an ingenious solution to a hazardous double bind. Andy and Jack, in *coming back to where they are* when confronting Mrs Baker, must negotiate various truths in order to secure a reality that will supply a way to cope. To come to a final judgment about the men's decision to lie to the widow, we must look at the situation pragmatically. We can only assess the ethics of the lie by its effects.

From the outset of "Telling Mrs Baker", mateship is clearly a complex demand. Bob, a drover on a wild bender, finally dies in the horrors on the track. He has been an unfaithful and unworthy husband of Mrs Baker who was "of the right stuff". He has also been a rotten mate. However, when Andy lies, Bob's reputation is saved but not because he *deserves* saving. In no uncertain terms, Jack acknowledges Bob's shortcomings:

He'd been a jolly, open-handed, popular man, which means that he'd been a selfish man as far as his wife and children were concerned, for they had to suffer for it in the end. Such generosity is often born of vanity, or moral cowardice, or both mixed. (429)

Vanity and cowardice are unequivocal moral judgments and yet Bob is protected, not because he was a good mate but because he was weak. As with Joe's personal awareness in "His Brother's Keeper" that he could easily become a "rotten mate to [his] mate", the narrator in this tale is aware of the ambiguities inherent in these relationships:

It's very nice to hear the chaps sing "for he's a jolly good fellow", but you've mostly got to pay for it twice—first in company, and afterwards alone. I once heard the chaps singing that I was a jolly good fellow, when I was leaving a place and they were giving me a send-off. It thrilled me, and brought a warm gush to my eyes; but, all the same, I wished I had half the money I'd lent them, and spent on 'em, and I wished I'd used the time I'd wasted to be a jolly good fellow. (429)

These narratorial qualifications which open this story resist common interpretations that this tale is an unbridled celebration of the mateship religion as if it is an uncomplicated thing. A.A. Phillips writes that it is an "evocation of sentiment" of the mateship code<sup>80</sup>; on the other end of the scale, Katherine Crawford argues that in this story "male loyalty

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<sup>80</sup> Phillips, p. 107.

erases and elevates male misbehaviour/misconduct to the status of the heroic”.<sup>81</sup> Whilst these critics are coming from different sides of a critical divide, I have placed them together because they both miss the same point. As the above excerpts show, the narrator is highly critical of the man they protect. He is also deeply aware of the complicated relationship that is mateship. Both sentimentality and the heroic are uncritical states. The narrator’s critical assessment is a crucial qualification to what can otherwise seem an apology for male misdemeanors. We must then look deeper into the complex operations of this mateship code.

This story undoes the propaganda of the inviolable nature of mateship yet the irony resists a stable reading. Lawson does not attempt to entirely dismantle the mateship system since it is a practical solution to a social, economic and environmental problem. Mateship, in the sense of a Jamesian pragmatics, is a truth because it is useful. It provides practical security to its members. Its truth is not an inherent condition but its truth is borne out, or not, through the day-to-day experience of it. The closest thing to security that could be said to exist in this environment is mateship. Jack acknowledges: “We could have started on the back track at once, but, drunk or sober, mad or sane, good or bad, it isn’t Bush religion to desert a mate in a hole; and the Boss was a mate of ours; so we stuck to him.” (431)

By attaching the term “religion”, this code looks to have every characteristic of moral principles that function unconditionally: “drunk or sober, mad or sane, good or bad”. Such a system would be beneficial to its members by instituting an unconditional and therefore stable principle into an unstable environment. However, as Bob’s errant behaviour shows, there is no “unconditional”.<sup>82</sup> An appeal to absolute rules of behaviour is wishing in vain. For example, when looking through Bob’s letters, Andy finds letters from other married women: ““And one of those men, at least, was an old mate of his!” said Andy; in a tone of disgust.”(435) Adultery, then, is not *in itself* to be spurned, but you don’t do it to your mates. Morality is relational rather than absolute. Bob does contravene this “rule” but the men do not forsake him since the ethic of the code is to accept

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<sup>81</sup> Crawford, K. “Limping Heroes: Masculinity, Anxiety and Paradox in the Works of Morris West”. Thesis (Ph.D) Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Sydney. 2001. p. 211.

<sup>82</sup> In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that the vernacular usage of the phrase, “not in my religion”, popular in days past, referred to codes of conduct and is independent of any religiousness. This is important in unlocking the concept of the mateship “religion” from its unfortunate holy overtones that has built up through nationalist propaganda. “Religion” used in these contexts suggests practical and ordinary daily codes of conduct.

weakness and carry the weakness of one's mates as if it is one's own burden. This type of security relies on the idiosyncrasies of each participating member, thus forming a contingent security. A codified religion rarely brooks modification but in "Telling Mrs Baker" there is a definite critical scrutiny of the code.

The multiplication of realities is a crucial part of this story. In coming to grips with this concept of multiple realities, H.S. Thayer offers a tidy summary of Dewey's subjectivist position: "It is not one situation that exhibits differing qualities from differing points of view. The differing points of view constitute different situations."<sup>83</sup> Again, thinking in terms of experiential fields, the very same actions can have very different qualities from situation to situation, thus, the very same qualities that contribute to Bob's bonhomie amongst mates are the qualities (that is, the characteristics) of his selfishness in the domestic situation. Likewise, the passages quoted previously where Jack criticises the mentality of drinking men, shows a double reality operating. Jack is frustrated, if not oppressed, by the prevailing drinking customs, yet when he is the recipient of this mateship, a "warm gush" springs to his eyes. This is not the detached critique of an ironic eye; Jack is also immersed in sentiment.

The multiplication of realities is in part due to what James regards as the discursive qualities of reality, and this is suggested in the opening line: "Most Bushmen who hadn't 'known Bob Baker to speak to', had 'heard tell of him'." (429) Jack's reference to the painting of the meeting of Blucher and Wellington at Waterloo attests to the part the interpreter of action plays in the representation of experience: "I thought the artist had heaped up the dead a bit extra." (439) The story, told in the first person, is consciously a tale being told and the subjective choices inherent within narratives suggest that there is no single, knowable Reality. Within the story are at least seven versions of Bob's death: as Jack first relates it to the reader; as Andy outlines the new version of Bob's death to Jack, thankful that he "ain't supposed to tell a woman all the symptoms"; as Ned explains it to Mrs Baker in a letter; as Andy explains it to Bob's son, Bobby; as Andy tells this version to Mrs Baker; as Mrs Baker adds her own information to Andy's and Ned's versions; and when Andy "comes clean" with Miss Standish, a version which is still limited:

"Tell me all," she said. "It would be better for me to know."

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<sup>83</sup> Thayer, H.S. *Meaning and Action: A Critical History of Pragmatism*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co. 1981. p. 391.

“Come a little farther away from the house,” said Andy...and Andy told her as much of the truth as he could. (442)

The story focuses on the tension when these differing realities clash and clashes require resolution. Bawden writes: “consciousness arises in conflict, but tends constantly toward the restoration of the organic equilibrium. It points to something beyond itself, to the new coordination, to a more adequate experience.”<sup>84</sup> Regaining equilibrium is the goal. The disturbances have been set in motion by behaviour that is out of the ordinary and such an eruption sparks off a chain of consequences. Mrs Baker is worried that Bob is “drinking again” and exhorts Andy to look after him: I want you to promise me that you’ll never have a drink with him.” (430) Andy keeps the promise showing that his conscience is clearly activated and, importantly, ready to forego the general customs of men on the track: “And, no matter how the Boss persuaded, or sneered, or swore at him, Andy would never drink with him.” In this abstinence, Andy works with the best interests of others in mind, both Mrs Baker and Bob himself. He is taking into account the impact of his own actions and responsibilities in the network of selves that make up his social group. This must be kept in mind when interpreting the lie the men tell later. Importantly, amongst Andy’s valuations is his attitude to Mrs Baker: she was of “the right stuff” and he thought she was “always a damned sight too good for the Boss.” (430) Andy’s valuations of Mrs Baker, that she is *better* than her husband, is important. His sympathy for her is strong so it is very unlikely that he will cease to act in her interests.

Jack’s conscience is not only activated through the plot, but it is also highly active in the narrative discourse. His vocabulary, especially in the critical passages cited previously, suggests the moral mind at work. The crucial thought he has in his ethical considerations is the first real turning point of the story as it identifies the clash of allegiances and sets out the ethical dilemma: “‘Why not let her know the truth?’ I asked. ‘She’s sure to hear of it sooner or later; and if she knew he was only a selfish, drunken blackguard she might get over it all the sooner.’”(434) The boss’s errant behaviour has caused a disruption in the typical male alliances of the bushmen—if this is indeed a “religion” surely Jack, in suggesting such a thing, commits a heresy? Jack’s true sympathy for Mrs Baker is clearly strong. Yet, as we have seen of the survival bonds which develop into custom, Jack needs the male bond equally as much as his anxious conscience spurns his unwanted obligations. Given these moral compromises, Lawson’s mateship ought to

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<sup>84</sup> Bawden, p. 113.

be considered a site of tension which routinely creates moral ambiguities. For this reason, Crawford's and Phillips's assessments of this story are not entirely plausible. If loyalty to Bob was a given, there would be no tension. This tension is expressed through the men's anxiety before and during the lie. Anxiety surfaces when habits such as blind loyalties are disrupted. As Bawden writes:

We do not have to think when things move smoothly. Only when we encounter obstruction do we resort to ideas. Thinking is the sign of the presence of some emergency which we are trying to meet.<sup>85</sup>

The men's habits have been disrupted because they do not endorse Bob's behaviour. In fact, Bob's behaviour runs contrary to the overt principles of mateship. Jack's initial reaction shows his antipathy to Andy's suggestion that they lie to protect Bob, signalling that the habit of mateship has been disrupted.

"I'll have to face her—and you'll have to come with me."  
"Damned if I will!" I said. (433)

It is not the lie *per se* that has them sweating. As Andy remarks, "I'll have to lie as I never lied to a woman before". Whilst lying to women is common enough, it is the peculiar conditions of their present situation that is disturbing their peace of mind. Their anxiety about telling the lie is extreme, suggesting overwrought consciences and hyper-awareness of the morality of their situation. It results in a crisis of action. As the men approach the town in which Mrs Baker lives, they practice all the gestures that signal an unwillingness to carry out the task:

Neither of us was in a hurry to go and face Mrs Baker. "We'll go after dinner," said Andy at first; then after dinner we had a drink, and felt sleepy—we weren't used to big dinners of roast-beef and vegetables and pudding, and, besides, it was drowsy weather—so we decided to have a snooze and then go. When we woke up it was late in the afternoon, so we thought we'd put it off till after tea. "It wouldn't be manners to walk in while they're at tea," said Andy—"it would look as if we only came for some grub."(435)

Here, Andy and Jack procrastinate and invent obstacles for themselves in order to avoid their social obligations. The men are finally sent for by Mrs Baker and they realise they'll "have to face the music now!" But not before they duck into the pub near Mrs Baker's home.

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<sup>85</sup> Bawden, p. 12

“Suppose we go and have another drink first, Andy? We might be kept in there an hour or two.”

“You don’t want another drink,” said Andy, rather short... But it was Andy that edged off towards the pub when we got near Mrs Baker’s place. “All right!” he said. “Come on! We’ll have this other drink, since you want it so bad.”(435-6)

As they approach Mrs Baker’s cottage, Andy repeatedly grabs Jack’s arm: a nervous gesture which expresses fear or the need for encouragement. They are aware that each step they take brings them closer to a worrisome moral act. The narrative becomes very thorough in detailing every move and moment:

They wanted us to have tea, but we said we’d just had it... There was something the matter with one of the children in a back room, and the sister went to see to it... Andy and I sat stiff and straight, on two chairs against the wall, and held our hats tight, and stared at a picture of Wellington meeting Blucher on the opposite wall. I thought it was lucky that that picture was there. The child was calling “mumma”, and Mrs Baker went in to it, and her sister came out. (437)

The hyper-awareness in every description suggests that the men are, firstly, stalling for time and, secondly, feel they are in such a precarious situation that they become incredibly alert in order to stave off danger:

“Let me take your hats. Make yourselves comfortable.” She took the hats and put them on the sewing-machine. I wished she’d let us keep them, for now we had nothing to hold on to, and nothing to do with our hands; and as for being comfortable, we were just about as comfortable as two cats on wet bricks. (437)

This nervousness is typical of Lawson’s bushmen when they are negotiating difficult terrain. They have passed beyond their own experience and are unsure of their footing. Whilst the men’s anxiety never abates during the telling, Jack shows that they are acting in accordance with the reality Mrs Baker has constructed, which means, pragmatically, they are cooperating with the truth of her idealisation. In doing so, the men in fact administer a kindness to Mrs Baker. She twice declares that the men’s story gives her “relief”. Ken Stewart describes the men’s action as protecting Mrs Baker from “the hardness of things.”<sup>86</sup> Andy and Jack give Mrs Baker a way to cope:

I had seen Mrs Baker before, and remembered her as a cheerful, contented sort of woman, bustling about the house and getting the Boss’s shirts and things ready when we started North. Just the

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<sup>86</sup> Stewart, p. 155.

sort of woman that is contented with housework and the children, and with nothing particular about her in the way of brains. But now she sat by the fire looking like the ghost of herself. I wouldn't have recognised her at first. I never saw such a change in a woman, and it came like a shock to me. (436)

Furthermore the kindness extends all along the bush route since:

If I see any chaps that come from the North, I'll put them up to it. I'll tell M'Grath, the publican at Solong, too: he's a straight man—he'll keep his ears open and warn chaps. (434)

Witnessing Mrs Baker's precarious emotional state, we sense that Jack no longer considers it prudent to tell her the actual facts of her husband's final weeks. Where previously Jack had thought that "she might get over it all the sooner" and therefore it would be *kinder* to tell her the facts, seeing her thus it becomes unlikely. In fact, it would be more likely the final blow, a case verified by her sister's veracity that they maintain the lie for her sister's "sake". Kindness and sympathy for Mrs Baker are the driving emotions of Jack's resolution to stick to Andy.

Mrs Baker not only believes the story but corroborates it: "I knew he was not well." Her reality has not been shaken. In contrast, Miss Standish grows suspicious. When the men let her know through a wink that they are lying, she ceases her investigation. Later, she praises the men for their deception: "You are good men! I like the Bushmen! They are grand men—they are noble!" Here we have a typical Lawsonian ironic inversion of value. Nobility is recognised in deception. Lawson intensifies the inversion by using terms like grand and noble rather than stopping at "good". Where Phillips argues that this speech is dangerously bordering on sentimentality, this type of excess carries with it a great deal of irony; yet again, however, it is ambiguous just where this irony might finally come to rest. The men are implicated in the irony because through deception comes nobility. Miss Standish, as a *Bulletin* writer, might also be the target of the irony, as a city woman being swept up in the romanticisation of the bushmen, as Christopher Lee has argued.<sup>87</sup> However, once again the multiple realities are operating: Miss Standish is not only a *Bulletin* writer but she is also a sister counselling her sibling through grief. Miss Standish says explicitly: "I want to thank you for her sake." It is for her sister's "sake", not her defunct brother-in-law's, that she is thankful. The men's nobility comes not from protecting the mate but protecting her sister, thus counteracting the more sexist

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<sup>87</sup> Lee, p. 98.

connotations of believing the *Bulletin* ideal of masculinity. Again, we must look at Miss Standish's role pragmatically. Miss Standish's function in the house is to provide emotional support for her grieving sister. In order to perform this role, she must assist Mrs Baker in developing a way of coping. We must accept that both Miss Standish's knowledge of her sister's mental state (and mental agility) and her experience of the day-to-day reality of Mrs Baker's grief has led her to accept the men's discretion. If Mrs Baker can hardly cope with an honourable death of a loved husband, in her condition could she cope with his dishonourable death reeking of betrayal?



## Chapter 3

### Ritual and Meaning

#### The Union Buries Its Head

For Lawson, all meaning is derived from the social and “The Union Buries Its Dead” and “The Bush Undertaker” both explore how meaning might be consolidated through ritual. Importantly, meaning is not produced by ritual alone. In different ways through these stories, Lawson demonstrates that it is essential to maintain social responsibility, ritual and the quality of social care that this implies because *that’s all there is*. These two stories are often seen as indicative of Lawson’s pessimistic nihilism because of their relentless observation of humanity in states of desolate isolation, poverty and decay. He seems to be making the point that the unique Australian conditions threaten a viable country. In these stories, there is no reprieve from extreme environmental oppression which threatens to destroy all that is meaningful to the communities in question. Furthermore, there is no end in sight—the dawn that finally breaks over the drover’s wife’s vigil, contains a sickly sun. The bush undertaker buries his mate, wipes his brow and walks away. If, in this light, nihilistic readings seem justified, such readings make no use of the progressive irony within these stories. Seen through the prism of pragmatism, one can see a progressive hope in the pessimism and an ironic edge to the nihilism because Lawson is advocating meaning through his investigation into sources of value that might exist outside formalised systems of meaning, such as religion or the empire. It should be noted that this is not to resituate Lawson as positivistic Nationalist: pragmatism’s irony may be positivistic but it is not prescriptive. All that pragmatic irony requires is the never-ending extension of self and community that, by definition, must forego anything as limiting as a national type.

“The Union Buries Its Dead” brings together the three major ethical concepts in Lawson’s fiction: (i) the man alone, (ii) the ambiguities within the customary morality of mateship, and (iii) reflective thought as the catalyst for meaningful action. Interpretations of this story fall into two general camps. Turner has read this story as Lawson’s celebration of the conventions of mateship in the observance of the funeral rituals

despite the difficult and alienating environment.<sup>88</sup> It has also been read as a bleak portrayal of the human condition given the apparent evacuation of emotional involvement in the burial of a fellow man.<sup>89</sup> Both perspectives are attempts to determine the valuations in operation in the outback community. Neither position, however, deals with the narrator's guilt as the key in determining the value of the dead man and his funeral, which will be the focus of this critique. The motif "nothing mattered much" indicates that value is a central theme to the story since it is a phrase that suggests the evaluation of action. This phrase, taken ironically, undoes both typical readings since the guilt suggests that, firstly, the death is a failure of mateship and, secondly, guilt, as evaluation of action, suggests that something must matter. In building the ethical profile of Lawson's fiction, this story is crucial to developing the ideas of guilt and responsibility, action and consequence. Furthermore, Lawson examines the narrator's capacity for self-reflection, which is the essential starting point for moral development in Lawson's pragmatic scheme. Lawson profiles the deadening weight of guilt, that emotion which is ethically counterproductive in so many of his stories.

In Lawson's stories, the lone man is a danger to himself. He needs the mutual protection company affords for psychological as well as physical security. In "The Union Buries Its Dead", the young man working alone is at risk. His death is a direct consequence of his isolation from a group and the privileges of the exclusive group he comes up against:

While out boating one Sunday afternoon on a billabong across the river, we saw a young man on horseback driving some horses along the bank. He said it was a fine day, and asked if the water was deep there. The joker of our party said it was deep enough to drown him, and he laughed and rode farther up. We didn't take much notice of him.

Next day a funeral gathered at a corner pub and asked each other in to have a drink while waiting for the hearse. They passed away some of the time dancing jigs to a piano in the bar parlour. They passed away the rest of the time skylarking and fighting.

The defunct was a young union labourer, about twenty-five, who had been drowned the previous day while trying to swim some horses across a billabong of the Darling. (55)

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<sup>88</sup> Turner, G. "Mateship, Individualism and the Production of Character in Australian Fiction." *Australian Literary Studies*. 11: 4. October, 1984. pp. 447-457.

<sup>89</sup> Phillips, p. 93.

The stranger is put at a disadvantage when he speaks to a group. Being outside the circuit of mateship here, he misses the ironic meaning put forward by the “joker of the party” (with no way of knowing the speaker *is* a joker) and, therefore, takes the man at his word. In the reconstruction of ironic meaning: “[i]t takes at least two to play this game in which the rules are reflexively established.”<sup>90</sup> Ironic meaning can only be reconstructed when ironist and receiver share a culturally contextualised language, ‘culture’ meaning, in this case, a particular sub-group of men. As Wayne Booth writes: “even the most simple-minded irony, when it succeeds, reveals in both participants a kind of meeting with other minds that contradicts a great deal that gets said about who we are and whether we can know each other.”<sup>91</sup> The very pleasure of irony exists in the intimate arrangement of unspoken but shared assumptions of meaning. The stranger, however, is outside the mutually understood speaking practices of the mates. This intimate circuit of understanding contributes to a kind of double irony, an ironic knot typical of Lawson’s fiction. His ironic circuit is constructive, in that it builds intimacy, yet it is limited because those who understand are in and those who don’t are out. “Telling Mrs Baker” shows how this intimate alliance of men can bring positive results and these are results that can spread beyond the group to the widow. Here, however, the fraternal bond that promotes solidarity and safety is also a source of alienation and danger. The multifarious nature of mateship leads me to disagree with Graeme Turner’s assessment of this story when he writes:

What is being acknowledged and celebrated through the ritual of attending the burial is its source—the convention of mateship itself. In this story and others, the convention functions in order to provide solidarity—community—rather than opportunities for self-definition.<sup>92</sup>

This is to overstate the case and to underestimate the irony, given that the exclusive practice of mateship is a causal factor of the death. Here, Turner is mainly concerned with the conceptualisation of the individual within the practice of mateship. Turner’s argument is that, in Lawson’s fiction, the maintenance of the community is always prioritised over the individual self and that the subsequent importance of the community overwhelms any individuality that may surface, citing as an example the

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<sup>90</sup> Booth, W. *The Rhetoric of Irony* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1974. p. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Booth, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> Turner, p. 455.

smoothing over of Bob Baker's misbehaviour in order to maintain the code. Whilst this thesis supports the argument that protecting conventions of mateship is a top priority, since loyalty provides one avenue of stability and survival, it is important to clarify a point here. Turner's is a valid argument but only if we view the code or convention as stable. Ultimately, the concept that firms in "Telling Mrs Baker" is that the code is not stable, principally because it *is* held together by idiosyncratic personalities. This, however, is really a site of meaning, as the analysis of "The Bush Undertaker" will show. Brummy may not be worth much in either a material or public sense but the shepherd's dedication to and knowledge of Brummy brings honour to the funeral. Likewise, the same shepherd can dishonour another burial site through his lack of knowledge of the buried person, the skeleton's lack of "self-definition". This undervaluing is intensified in "The Union Buries Its Dead" because the dead man is "one of them". Put simply, observing communal conventions alone does not a community make. Turner acknowledges: "in this instance, of course, it is clear that the rituals do not honour the individual."<sup>93</sup> If he were to ask *why* the ritual does not honour the stranger, as indeed it does not, he would need to acknowledge that the reason this ritual ultimately lacks integrity is because the individuality of the stranger is absent, a fact not unnoticed by the narrator. Furthermore, the omission of character is a subject of the narrator's lament, albeit expressed in the negative, as we shall see. Whilst the maintenance of mateships will at times insist on personal compromises it does not necessarily follow that the individual must be entirely submerged into it as if it is a depersonalised system. We cannot accept Turner's argument entirely, because the suggestion of the implied author through the ironic first-person narrative is that it is this very lack of individuation that is broadly dehumanising and destructive for the community; it is not its bolster.

Rather than consolidating community through this ritual, the playing out of the funeral shows a community approaching dissolution. Each gesture of the tradition is observed with great struggle. By the time the hearse arrives, "Two-thirds of the funeral were unable to follow. They were too drunk." (55) Unlike the bush undertaker and the drover's wife, these men balk at the obstacles that make it difficult to discharge their social duties, precisely because *they do not know the man*. One drover joins the funeral and then is encouraged away by another mate in the pub. As the mourners peel away from the hearse the funeral is literally *dismembered*. The funeral passes three inebriates who

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<sup>93</sup> Turner, p. 455.

force themselves to pay their respects; two manage to cover their ears with their hats.

The most drunk of the three:

straightened himself up, stared, and reached helplessly for his hat, which he shoved half off and then on again. Then he made a great effort to pull himself together—and succeeded. He stood up, braced his back against the fence, knocked off his hat, and remorsefully placed his foot on it—to keep it off his head till the funeral passed. (56)

The action of standing (remorsefully) on his hat suggests the kind of generated force working against community maintenance. It is alcohol, heat and, importantly, unions in disarray. The animated hat also suggests a devaluing of the human because if a simple inanimate object can be thus enlivened, perhaps human life force ceases to be remarkable. The jumpy hat implies the great force of the drunk's indifference to the deceased. The narrator can, therefore, bleakly declare: "The procession numbered fifteen, fourteen souls following the broken shell of a soul. Perhaps not one of the fourteen possessed a soul any more than the corpse did—but that doesn't matter." (55) The "broken shell" is a glimmer of a more poetically intense ideal of what matters and betrays the evasive narrator's real thought. He gives us a glimpse that something of value is fracturing and may not be repaired. The value of the individual is under threat by that individual's alienation from the communal whole; this in turn depreciates the value of the community because almost all of them engage in unethical behaviour. We can apply Dewey and Tufts' theory on the mutual engagement of self and society here: the self is empowered through social recognition and society is improved by the qualities of its individual members. This is the main point of difference between this argument and Turner's who seems to resist such notions of individualism and this conceptualisation of the self. Correctly, he writes that Lawson's: "mode of characterisation... sees character as overwhelmingly the product of social and ethical determinants."<sup>94</sup> We have seen this to be so. However, he attributes this to: "a basic suspicion of difference and of individuality." Pragmatically considered, for community life to be successful and regenerative, individuality and difference are vital for ongoing development. Furthermore, the negotiation of individuality and difference within the complex of any society—its ethics and conventions—is essential and does not represent a submersion of character. Lawson makes this clear in "Telling Mrs Baker" when the men resist their

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<sup>94</sup> Turner, p. 455.

disapproval of Bob's anti-social behaviour in order to shore up *their* ethic; it is also clear in "The Union Buries Its Dead," because in the lack of value shown to the corpse, the community itself becomes dehumanised.

The narrator, whilst ostensibly maintaining his "nothing mattered much" attitude, is clearly perturbed by those who fall away and by the lack of engagement of the community. The circumscription of his community's sympathy is alarming. A sentence like "[t]hey were too drunk" is clearly a behavioural judgment. It says they were drunker than they *should have* been on an important occasion such as this. In suggesting such, he undermines his counterclaim that "nothing matters". Clearly the funeral matters if he sees men not behaving as they *should*.

It is the lack of "self-definition" of the corpse that is largely to blame. There is an overwhelming emphasis on the lack of relationships within the community. The defunct was "almost a stranger in town." (55) Several boarders at the pub who attend in a borrowed trap, "were strangers to us who were on foot, and we to them." Note that the comment "and we to them" is a curious redundancy; it reinforces the estrangement even within the union. It becomes clear in this story that their solidarity is nominal. The drover who momentarily joins the procession was "a stranger to the entire show." (56) Following the argument that things in relation create value, it follows that if there is no relation, there is no value. The narrator is then correct in saying, at the primary narrative level (that is, its literal level):

The fall of lumps of clay on a stranger's coffin doesn't sound any different from the fall of the same things on an ordinary wooden box—at least I didn't notice anything awesome or unusual in the sound; but, perhaps, one of us—the most sensitive—might have been impressed by being reminded of a burial of long ago, when the thump of every sod jolted his heart. (58)

This example makes it very clear that emotional involvement requires a personal connection of some kind. Value is a function of a relationship. It is imported into objects or people rather than inherently available. Even the hypothetical sensitivity of one of the funeral (who we are tempted to believe is the narrator himself) is sensitive only insofar as he is reminded of one in his past. So, contrary to Turner's argument, a degree of self-definition is required for the convention of mateship to be fully realised and meaningful. The meaning of the funeral is bought through specific knowledge of the individual. Any sensitive reaction to falling lumps of clay comes about through personal knowledge of

the deceased. The self is recognisable only within a social context where it becomes in some way effective. Its value cannot be ascertained outside of the social:

We did hear, later on, what his real name was; but if we ever chance to read it in the "Missing Friends Column", we shall not be able to give any information to heart-broken Mother or Sister or Wife, nor to anyone who could let him hear something to his advantage—for we have already forgotten the name. (59)

In the end, the stranger's value is determined by that aspect of his social status that can be verified—his union credentials:

"So his name's James Tyson," said my drover acquaintance, looking at the plate.  
 "Why! Didn't you know that before?" I asked.  
 "No; but I knew he was a union man."  
 It turned out, afterwards, that J.T. wasn't his real name—only "the name he went by". (59)

Importantly, the mourners at the funeral are present not because he was a fellow human, but because he belonged to a certain subgroup, the union. As indicated in the title, he is specifically one of "*its* dead". Phillips has written that this story's "real purpose" is to "declare the loneliness of the human condition and the deadliness of human indifference,"<sup>95</sup> but this claim is too sweeping. Specifically, the loneliness suggested through the depersonalised funeral is a direct result of being outside groups rather than alienation being man's natural condition. As we have seen the primordial condition of the human is, in fact, to be gregarious. The very real deadly indifference addressed through corrective irony here is the indifference of a group which prizes solidarity above all things, nowhere more directly put than in the following passage:

The secretary had very little information to give. The departed was a "Roman", and the majority of the town were otherwise—but unionism is stronger than creed. Drink, however, is stronger than unionism; and when the hearse presently arrived, more than two-thirds of the funeral were unable to follow. They were too drunk. (55)

Contrary to Turner's argument that suggests solidarity is working here, in this story Lawson identifies the actual stratification that existed within the working classes, and its deadly consequences. It is not simply an indictment of human indifference. Ironically, there is disunion in the union. In *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction*, Michael

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<sup>95</sup> Phillips, "Henry Lawson Revisited" *Meanjin*. 14. 1965. pp. 5-17. p. 11.

Wilding documents the divisions in the union bodies and how these divisions surfaced in Lawson's work.<sup>96</sup> Wilding identifies the difference between those on horseback and those on foot in the funeral procession as essentially class differences. He goes on to say that in "The Union Buries Its Dead" Lawson represents:

the class divisions within the working classes; at the same time the solidarity of the labourers is stressed in their attending the funeral of the unknown man. So we have Lawson's characteristic bitter-sweet plangency, that celebration of the impulse towards solidarity, and the notations of the forces opposed to it.<sup>97</sup>

We can see that Lawson makes no absolute assumptions of solidarity. The human fallibility that Lawson was so conscious of, and sympathetic to, is the genesis of such uncertainty. This uncertainty reflects the "bitter-sweet" omnidirectional pull of his irony. Solidarities like mateship approach their ideal but can harvest no absolute results. This is the tension in Lawson's work. Yes, the members of this union contribute to the death and, yes, their exclusive bond has fatal results, but collective force is still seen as fundamental to ongoing survival. What the narrator's hyperactive consciousness is driving at, or perhaps resisting, is the point that a group who have power should generate sympathy with those outside the group. Whilst the deceased was supposedly a part of the group, clearly this union has within it smaller cliques. The point of Lawson's irony is that for any of the values of a group to be maintained, the group must continually renew its relations through the extension of sympathy. This can only be achieved by ongoing self-reflection, a task that the narrator shies away from. Without the expansion of ethics such as those brought about by sympathy and self-reflection, the use or purpose of certain behaviours—such as funerals—become so habitual, meaning erodes.

The animosity or rivalry between workers is further present and ironised during the commentary throughout the burial:

A tall sentimental drover...asked with pathetic humour whether we thought the dead man's ticket would be recognised "over yonder". It was a G.L.U. ticket and the general opinion was that it would be recognised. (56)

When this story was published in 1893, the Shearers and General Labourers unions had not yet amalgamated; the tongue-in-cheek question whether the man's General Labourers

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<sup>96</sup> Wilding, M. *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction*. Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture. 1997. pp. 54-55.

<sup>97</sup> Wilding, p. 56.



Union ticket would be recognised questions the status of the respective unions. Furthermore, through the drover, Lawson makes the point more generally on the petty restrictions individuals face by identifying with one group or position exclusively since the man, by this stage, is well and truly dead. The “general opinion was that it would be recognised”, formalises the group’s response. When Lawson renders such a response in an indirect and formal tone, he establishes an ironic discursive space where what is articulated by the narrator is significantly different in tone (not content) to that of the speaker’s. Whilst Lawson still manages to maintain his “objective-reportage” edifice he is actually busy creating rifts between realities. This rift is important in this story because it is a tale of evasion. Notating speech indirectly is one way of creating a linguistic smokescreen and offers a chance for the narrator not only to dominate the material being reported but also to reinterpret it defensively. That is, it doesn’t matter what they do because “nothing mattered much”.

Ironic discursive spaces are continually produced in this story, which create the possibility of taking the narrator’s comments that “nothing mattered much” ironically. This is particularly important because such “linguistic smokescreens” allow for the narrator to evade responsibility. This smokescreen is operating from the first three paragraphs where the young man drowns, cited above. The first paragraph utilises the personal pronoun “we” and is delivered in the active voice: “we saw”, “he said” and “he laughed”. The waterway is referred to as “the river”, displaying familiarity with the place. Familiarity, the active voice and the personal pronoun generate a sense of immediacy and a thoughtful subjectivity. The narrator is *present* in the situation. We then see in the second paragraph a noticeable shift in perspective as the narrator distances himself from the drowning. The agents of this paragraph are masked behind the term “a funeral”; the sentence is strangely awkward, signalling a struggle to be untangled from the situation: “a funeral gathered at a corner pub and asked each other in to have a drink.” (55) The pronoun has changed from “we” to “they”. In the third paragraph, the narrator has become even more remote as it becomes obvious just whom they are burying. There are no pronouns; the paragraph is registered in the tone of objective narrative and is written in the passive voice: “The defunct...who had been drowned”. “Sunday” becomes “the previous day” indicating a loosening of chronological proof and, importantly, the familiar term “river” is removed and in its place, its proper, formal name, “the Darling”. In formalising the site thus, the narrator becomes more aloof and erects a psychological

distance between “their” river and the place of the man’s death, the Darling, as if they were not one and the same.

These discursive distances suggest multiple meanings and it is with this in mind that the phrase “nothing mattered much” should be taken. At the first level, the literal level, we can take the narrator’s assessment that nothing mattered as an adequate and bleak portrayal of the life lived in these harsh satellite communities. Even considered in its driest pragmatic sense where we can determine “what matters” by its consequence, we may be inclined to believe the narrator. Since the stranger’s identity cannot be confirmed for a mourning sister, wife or mother no more may come of it. However, Lawson levels harsh ironic blows to the shearers drunk in the public bars:

One or two pubs closed respectfully until we got past. They closed their bar doors and the patrons went in and out through some side or back entrance for a few minutes Bushmen seldom grumble at an inconvenience of this sort, when it is caused by a funeral. They have too much respect for the dead. (56)

The corrective irony active in this excerpt complicates the “nothing mattered much” refrain. It is a damning portrayal of the bushmen’s “respect”. Lawson uses small textual modifiers to bring out the lack of respect unequivocally. Note how Lawson uses terms of amounts to build the ironic picture: *one* or *two* pubs (not all of them) closed for a *few* minutes (only) but the bushmen *seldom* grumble (but have been known to). To heighten the contrast, the stranger’s death is described as an “inconvenience”. Lawson completes the ironic manoeuvre by introducing the opposite amount: *too much* respect. The clergyman and publican also are painted with the same brush. The publican shades the priest from the sun, despite the fact the priest is already standing in the shade. The publican: “couldn’t, as an ignorant and conceited ass, lose such a good opportunity of asserting his faithfulness and importance to his Church.” (58) Clearly, if these men are being criticised for their poor behaviour, something must matter. This evidence must be taken into consideration when determining whether or not “nothing mattered” comes from Lawson the Nihilist, as Heseltine suggests, or a self-evasive, defensive, guilty narrator. Heseltine sees this story as a “depiction of that state of spiritual nullity”<sup>98</sup> and:

[a] recognition of that state of spiritual paralysis which its author could project so tellingly upon his characters because (we must believe) he knew it so well himself. Every significant element in

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<sup>98</sup> Heseltine, H.P. “Between Living and Dying: The Ground of Lawson’s Art”. *Overland*. 88. July, 1982. pp. 19-26. p. 20.

the story testifies to this view—action, setting, comedy, social observation, most of all, perhaps, its rejection of the sentimental comfort of literary convention...Richer and more fully dramatised than “A Day on a Selection,” “The Union Buries Its Dead” yet takes up exactly the same theme... These two stories portray with a thoroughness never surpassed in Lawson’s canon his sense that it is man’s lot to be held somewhere between living and dying.<sup>99</sup>

“Spiritual nullity”, “paralysis” and “man’s lot”: these terms are too final and defined for a pragmatic ironist such as Lawson. If, indeed, the funeral did not matter why is it then rendered in such detail? A stronger argument for the repeated use of the phrase is that it suggests the evasive activity of the narrator’s mind. It is the rhetoric of defensiveness. When the narrator declares that “nothing mattered much” we perceive the self-betraying irony of guilt deferral. The narrator is evasive rather than ignorant to “what matters”. He is also absolutely *aware* of what is absent. If this lacklustre funeral actually didn’t matter, why is his consciousness raised to such a hyperactive level? The narrator’s hyperawareness suggests that this moment is full of importance, it matters incredibly. The over-examination of the physical environment by guilty agents, is used here, as it is used in “Telling Mrs Baker”, to indicate extreme ethical turmoil:

I noticed that one or two heathens winced slightly when the holy water was sprinkled on the coffin. The drops quickly evaporated, and the little round black spots they left were soon dusted over; but the spots showed by contrast, the cheapness and shabbiness of the cloth with which the coffin was covered. It seemed black before; now it looked a dusky grey. (57)

G.A.Wilkes comments: “[the narrator’s] attitude is stoical, without illusion, and yet—in the account of the fumbling attempts of the drunken shearers to show respect to the corpse—there is a hint that his sensibilities are not so much blunted as held in check.”<sup>100</sup> His sensibilities are indeed held in check, but not through stoicism. His self-control is meant to stay his guilty mind. Compare the extent of observation here with the narrator’s blasé recollections of the dead man himself:

‘I didn’t take any particular notice of him,’ I said. ‘He said something, didn’t he?’

<sup>99</sup> Heseltine, p. 21.

<sup>100</sup> Wilkes, G.A. “Henry Lawson Reconsidered.” *Southerly*. 25:4. 1965. pp. 264-275. p. 267.

'Yes; said it was a fine day. You'd have taken more notice if you'd known that he was doomed to die in the hour, and that those were the last words he would say to any man in this world.'(57)

But they weren't his last words. During the last conversation this man has, he asks about the depth of the river and in misinterpreting the ironic answer he is given, fatally moves to its deeper parts. The narrator knows this somewhere in his consciousness since this exchange is related to us in the first paragraph in the first person. At the funeral, however, he conveniently seems to forget. The absence of the man's actual words, which would lead to the direct assignation of guilt, hangs heavy over the entire funeral. There is nothing null and void about absence. It is a negative presence. The narrator cannot afford to reflect fully on the circumstances of the man's death, for to do so, would be to accept blame. The death is a result of the men's negligence. To admit negligence would require a renewal of community ethos by critically reflecting on the exclusive practices of mates-in-groups. Many of the men avoid any kind of critical reflection on the man's death and their responsibility to the corpse (as a fellow unionist) by getting intoxicated. This is an active removal of a thoughtful mind. For the narrator attending the funeral, the thoughtful energy is not so easily overcome. Rather than spend his energy on self-reflection, however, it is almost as if that thought-energy is directed onto other things thus emphasising the absence of responsibility. To illustrate this absence, this tale is full, as it were, of things not there:

I have left out the wattle—because it wasn't there. I have also neglected to mention the heart-broken old mate, with his grizzled head bowed and great pearly drops streaming down his rugged cheeks. He was absent...I have omitted reference to the suspicious moisture in the eyes of a bearded bush ruffian named Bill. Bill failed to turn up...I have left out the 'sad Australian sunset' because the sun was not going down at the time. (58-59)

I agree with the general critical interpretation that this assessment of the funeral scene is typical of Lawson's rejection of overwrought literary artifice. However, as a suggestion of what is not there the wattle and absent friends are nevertheless introduced. They then become a negative presence and, as such, are able to evoke, albeit from a greater distance, the conventional symbols of literary mourning. Lawson thus conjures the maudlin and, as a balance to the other extreme of the mourners' emptiness, produces that ironic poise that refuses to be ultimately definitive.

Out of the two mutually exclusive positions of “nothing matters” or “something matters” both are plausible yet neither seem quite adequate. A claim such as that put by Heseltine that this story registers a “spiritual nullity” is, oddly, to miss the delicate poise that he himself intuits when he writes that Lawson saw man as perched between living and dying. The lack of human engagement at the funeral seems to be a state of spiritual nullity; however, we cannot ignore the overwhelming counterweight of the narrator’s deflected conscience. The spiritual is there by its very obvious literal absence. The narrator defensively defers his conscience and, in doing so, signifies his refusal to take part in the morality of the situation whereas spiritual nullity surely implies an amoral rather than an immoral state.

As Adrian Mitchell writes, “the fact that we recognise the irony says equally that there is another order, another scale of values.”<sup>101</sup> This brings us closer to the third level of meaning in this phrase “nothing mattered much”: the level of the implied author. The values we recognise are also those which we share with Lawson, thus undoing the suggestion we could take this phrase to only represent a nihilistic streak in the work. It is there, certainly; the position is clearly plausible. But there are also forces in opposition to this nihilism, a state of mind which, in this story, is a defensive action to the situation; the force opposed to the statement is the insistence of the narrator’s conscience. Whilst Lawson’s work does operate through negation, that does not mean, as it may imply, a constant movement towards *nothing*. Irony, in this study on Lawson, where it is used philosophically, contributes to the construction of an ideal that, not yet realised, cannot be uttered. Putting off a positive declaration also puts off making an error of judgment. Whilst there are often degenerative elements in Lawson’s work, Lawson’s irony is often an urge towards the expansion of an ideal; a becoming rather than a constant denial or the degradation of that which is valuable. Sympathy is typically the action from which expansion grows and it is an irony in this story that here, in a culture built on solidarity and mutual support, sympathy does not prevail. We can see in this story that Lawson is building up a pragmatic sense of morality. His ethic is critical of exclusive groups that occupy closed positions and Lawson demands a sympathetic expansion of the codes of mateship and solidarity. It is a progressive and pragmatic ethic because of this awareness of the moral limitations of a non-reflective, customary morality.

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<sup>101</sup> Mitchell, A. *Short Stories of Henry Lawson*. Horizon Studies in Literature. Melbourne: Sydney University Press in association with Oxford University Press. 1995. p. 33.

## And Not a Soul to Meet: Making Meaning In Empty Places

All days are much the same to her; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. There is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet. (89-90)

This passage from “The Drover’s Wife” is representative of the dominant urge to practice ritual by the most destitute of Lawson’s characters. Brian Matthews has written that these men and women “are fighting to remain in the human race, to remain members of a stream of existence which, for all its faults, ennobles them, while failure to remain members brutalises and decivilises them.”<sup>102</sup> Matthews’s emphasis here is on how Lawson investigates the value of human life. He writes:

The story implies that human attributes may well be the enabling and enduring consolation in a ruthless and spiritually debilitating environment...the great emphasis on humanity in “The Drover’s Wife” stands as a tempering influence upon such apparent nihilism: life remains hard, cruel, potentially tragic, but human worth rescues it from being a bad joke.<sup>103</sup>

The Sunday walk to nowhere looks pointless since there is nothing to walk to and no-one to meet. The irony, however, is that this seemingly pointless exercise is anti-nihilistic. In this instance, the custom that the drover’s wife practises would have originally sprung from the attendance of a church service, which, as a communal event, is as much about the social as it is about religious ritual. Even though neither the religious nor the social components are available to the woman, the walk confirms her place in the social realm, despite the absence of the social. Whilst the pragmatic system copes with available means it does not automatically follow that the available means limit the ends. That is, when we decide what we want we must enter a process of idealisation. Our choices are not only about what is available but what we actually want. So whilst there is nowhere to walk to in the Sunday best, the action gives meaning to the woman’s existence because she brings an ideal to fruition which frames her daily experience. It is important to keep these

<sup>102</sup> Matthews, B. *The Receding Wave*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. 1972. p. 24.

<sup>103</sup> Matthews, p. 15.

standards of practice in place since the arbitrary dangers of her harsh existence constantly threaten a spiralling away from known orders.

Lawson's investigation into the construction of social orders makes up the core of this study because he is always asking where value might be found and how meaning can be made in contingent and unstable realities. The uncanny laughter of the rabbits and possums and row upon row of meaningless fences in "Hungerford", for example, shows that order and meaning are being contested. Yet, despite the eerie derangement in these isolated environments, the absence of an immediately recognisable order does not necessarily mean order is entirely absent. Lawson's characters do manage to conjure an order of a kind and it is a social order.

"The Bush Undertaker" demonstrates how a single, alienated human adapts pragmatically to isolation. In this story, a dog, a skeleton and a corpse make up the shepherd's social deficit. This pragmatist style secures the ethic which is represented through the rituals of the shepherd's distant community. Here, rituals are maintained and are made manifest through any available mechanism. In this story, two rituals are observed—Christmas and a Christian burial—and whilst these rituals follow a recognisable form they have mutated. Rituals are shared social practices that confirm the identity of a group yet, as this story makes clear, the confirmation is temporary only. There is no certainty of identity and mutations occur to the rituals themselves, through hybridised language, the practices of social supplementation and the physical environment. Identities constantly shift in "The Bush Undertaker" which, pragmatically considered, suggests a degree of latitude in reidealizations. Here there is no sense of immanent value but values-in-relation and a constant reinscribing of functions, roles and identities. Things need to be mutable because they may be required to serve different functions. Mutability of identity does not necessarily denigrate value but allows it to be resituated as determined by practical experience. Indeed, we see in this story the elasticity of both identity and environment in the shepherd's world, which is devoid of social ballast. That is, there is no other living human agent who might balance or hold the shepherd's behaviour in check. There is potentially no limit to the morphing. For example, whilst performing the rituals of the undertaker, there is no reason the shepherd could not give the role of the pastor to a nearby tree (if there was one). There are two pragmatic arrangements operating here: (i) the shepherd's rituals warp in order to fit into the new experience and (ii) the shepherd's idealizations of culture adjust the environment

to the ritual. Both of these positions revolve around the shepherd, the agent of change and establish the “environment” as a subjective field. Yet, not *all* meaning is entirely open for renegotiation; the shepherd’s values, which are still based on the customary morality of his originating culture, are not completely set adrift or deranged. In fact, the shepherd’s “conservative fly wheel” of cultural habit is well and truly operating (for better and worse). On the one hand it provides meaning for Brummy’s funeral in an otherwise destitute scene yet, on the other, it resists the meaning and the valuation of the “other”—the shepherd cannot comprehend the Aboriginal skeleton’s dignity as he does the dignity of his friend’s remains.

The shepherd inhabits a somewhat empty environment, described in the opening paragraph:

He stood just within the door of a slab-and-bark hut situated upon the bank of a barren creek; sheep-yards lay to the right, and a low line of bare brown ridges formed a suitable background to the scene. (115)

The barren creek, sheep-yards which, at the time of narration, are empty, and the bare ridges, form a picture of deficiency. A vacant environment is a stage for a contest of order. Thematically, the physical barrenness is a “suitable” backdrop, the objective correlative to the shepherd’s lack of human contact. For the shepherd in his sparse surroundings, what does remain must modify to supply all that is needed. In a pragmatist context, the constant identity slippage in this story can be read as allowing for such re-idealizations. Typical communal orders have been loosened and reordering has commenced. Importantly, the shepherd needs company. The environment is more than a psychological symbol of lack; it is the weighty agent of loneliness. It must be read as a participant in the drama effecting the shepherd, the subjective mind of the experiential field.

The term “experiential field” conjures the sense of the “immense and operative world of diverse and interacting elements”<sup>104</sup> of one’s surroundings. Dewey privileges the term “experience” over “environment” or “world” to suggest what these terms omit, “namely, an actual focusing of the world at one point in a focus of immediate shining apparency.”<sup>105</sup> Importantly: “How an environment is determined, i.e. interpreted, given

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<sup>104</sup> Dewey, J. *Essays in Experimental Logic*. New York: Dover Publications. 1916. pp. 6-7.

<sup>105</sup> Dewey, p. 7.



meaning, is relative to the sensibility of organisms engaged in activities in that environment. The organism ‘selects’ and picks out what constitutes the ‘environment’.”<sup>106</sup>

In this story, Lawson shows how the shepherd exerts influence over his environment in order to make it work with his idealisations. It is Christmas Day so, as a character with gregarious instinct, the shepherd must people the scene for the celebration. As James explains, the self is recognisable in the social realm; it is in this realm that it is both acknowledged and empowered. It is then furthered in ritual, the idealising social act which confirms the place of the self in the social realm. Social rituals build up notions of self because they establish mutual understanding between people of the same group thus providing a reflection and acknowledgment of self. Rituals allocate value to the individual through their participation in the social and the group is accorded value through the participation of the individual. In the interests of self-preservation, the shepherd, in order to perpetuate a sense of his own value, must participate in social acts. Since he is alone, he must create some supplementary social material which will reciprocate his gestures of ritual.

The shepherd’s supplementary social material is found in the figures of Five Bob and Brummy. In their roles as social agents, they become the only reflection of the shepherd’s own humanity and, as such, gain in value in relation to the shepherd. It is an unsettling irony then that both names represent very low values, suggesting a destabilised human economy. The value/identity relation is at the fore in this story, given narrative priority in the opening line. “Five Bob!” In short, the dog, the shepherd’s only living mate, is named in relation to what the man has paid for him. Initially worth five bob, the dog’s value, not being immanent but relative to experience, has expanded. Likewise, the shepherd’s deceased mate, Brummy, is also known by his ostensible worth. Adrian Mitchell points out that “‘Brummy,’ a contraction of Birmingham—by reputation the producer of cheap and shoddy goods—is a nickname for a counterfeit coin.”<sup>107</sup>

Importantly, a counterfeit coin, if it is passed off, still *functions* as a coin despite its lack of “actual” or registered value. In “The Bush Undertaker” if Brummy’s value equals that of a counterfeit coin, he is worth less in the metaphorical financial terms than the shepherd’s dog; the dog is alive, at least. However, when the shepherd buries the man, he says “there oughter be somethin’ sed...tain’t right to put ’im under like a dog.” (122)

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<sup>106</sup> Thayer, critiquing Herbert Mead, p. 265.

<sup>107</sup> Mitchell, p.18.

Clearly, then, the man retains a different kind of value. From this we can say that there are different modes of value operating, modes which are subjectively managed. As a counterfeit coin has value when it functions, so, too, Brummy has value to the shepherd even when defunct.

In accordance to custom recognisable to us, the shepherd is arranging to have a holiday in the afternoon to celebrate Christmas. That the behaviour is recognisable is important in that it establishes the connection the shepherd is maintaining with civilisation just as the drover's wife's Sunday stroll establishes her place. The shepherd's behaviour that pursues social ideals undermines the "hatter" tag. Whilst his social resources are not typical, he follows a typical form. He has skimmed his rations for weeks in preparation for the day so that he and his "four-legged mate" might have extra for their Christmas meal and he sets about the preparations of the meal with care and skill: "I likes to keep it jist on the sizzle," he said in explanation to himself; "hard bilin' makes it tough—I'll keep it jist a-simmerin'." (115) Whilst there is an immediate irony constructed with our expectations of the feasts of a Christmas holiday and what the shepherd is actually cooking, the reader can easily appreciate the urge that is operating.

The shepherd fulfils the criteria of celebration by sharing the meal: "Dinner proceeded very quietly, except when the carver paused to ask the dog how some tasty morsel went with him, and Five Bob's tail declared that it went very well indeed." (116) This reciprocity of gesture is, like ritual, a mutual acknowledgment of presence.<sup>108</sup> It confirms that a mutually understood language is operating: "This speech was accompanied by a gesture evidently intelligible, for the dog retired as though he understood English." (115) This agreed meaning suggests commonality of experience and, in this context, the dog has been humanised through the process. Five Bob is humanised because the shepherd needs him to be "human". Talking to one's dogs is not necessarily a sign of madness but there are signs here that suggest the discursive relationship goes beyond that of dog and master. It is during an early conversation with the dog that the narrator refers to the shepherd as "the hatter" (heretofore he had been known as "the old man" and "the master"). Christopher Lee writes that this discourse with the dog is an early example of the "weird" in this story given "the lack of modifying irony on [the shepherd's] part" when talking to the dog:

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<sup>108</sup> Thayer, pp242-258

There is an accepted discourse between humans and animals but it is a discourse which signals the recognitions of its own illusion through the device of irony. The deployment of irony allows at once the illusion that the inarticulate is nevertheless cognizant, while at the same time it distances itself from a position which it knows to be illusory, weird, perhaps even 'mad'... The absence of irony in the hatter's discourse indicates a person who has lost the ability to make this distinction and undermines his rational credibility.<sup>109</sup>

The shepherd's rational credibility has indeed been questioned but, as with Rats who can talk rationally of bush matters between bouts with his swag, we cannot dismiss his order out of hand. Lawson's use of the words "weird" and "eccentric" are well meant because whilst the shepherd's behaviour is outside the "normal" range of behaviours, it is not quite insane, since it does follow an order. The intent with which the shepherd acts suggests that he has control of his mental faculties. The shepherd conducts his duties on the property in a highly organised and pragmatic way. To achieve this, he must be mentally present and engaged directly with his environment. In the opening of the story, he, as "master", is issuing instructions to Five Bob, and the dog obeys his commands. He is aware of the time and date. He cooks. He cleans. For a table he uses the lid of a gin case. To preserve his resources, he washes the dishes in the cooking water. He holds down a job and he knows how to put one over on his boss. He knows his way around the bush, which to many would be unreadable. He can shoot straight, even when he's had the better part of a bottle of rum. And, importantly, he remains extraordinarily aware of his social duties and the obligations of friendship. When he comes across Brummy, he constructs a stretcher out of bark and secures it by using strips of cloth from his shirt which he will later reattach as he cannot spare the shirt. So, whilst he talks to his dog as if he is human, he is simply applying the gregarious form to an animate organism with which he can relate in some way. He and his dog share the same life through which solidarity surfaces through commonality, represented here in the collective terms "we" and "our": "We'll yard 'em early and have the afternoon to ourselves... We'll get dinner." (115)

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<sup>109</sup> Lee, C. "What Colour are the Dead? Madness, Race and the National Gaze in Henry Lawson's 'The Bush Undertaker'" *Kunapipi*. 13.3, 1992. pp.14-25 p. 16.

The shepherd relates to Brummy's corpse in the same way. Again, without any modifying irony on the shepherd's part, the corpse is frequently addressed as if he is cognisant:

"Brummy! by gosh!—busted up at last!"

"I tole yer so, Brummy," he said impressively, addressing the corpse, "I allers told yer as how it 'ud be—an' here y'are, you thundering jumpt-up cuss-o'-God fool. Yer cud earn mor'n any man in the colony, but yer'd lush it all away. I allers sed as how it 'ud end, an' now yer kin see fur y'self..

"I spect yer was a-comin' t'me t'get fixt up an' set straight agin; then yer was agoin' to swear off, same as yer allers did; an' here y'are, an'now I expect I'll have t'fix yer up for the last time an' make yer decent, for 'twon't do t' leave yer a'lyin' out here like a dead sheep."(117)

Once Brummy's identity has been established, the shepherd relaxes into an easy address. He is under no illusions as to Brummy's state. That is, whilst he talks as if Brummy were listening he remains perfectly aware that Brummy is dead. His "I told you so" speech is directed at Brummy's mortality itself. In the shepherd's eyes, the state of death hasn't changed much given the extent and intensity of his own idealisations. Just as in "Hungerford" where a rabbit-proof fence has rabbits on both sides of it, typical borders do not guarantee identity or status. Here, in the same way, the borders between life and death are not assured:

There's scarcely an old bushman alive—or dead, for the matter of that—who hasn't been dead a few times in his life—or reported dead, which amounts to the same thing for a while. In my time there was as many live men in the bush who was supposed to be dead as there was dead men who was supposed to be alive—though it's the other way about now. ("Brummy Usen" 272)

It seems as if the mortal status of the entire population is under question. As with Brummy Usen's frequent deaths, this is a land where people don't necessarily stay dead and if they are well and truly dead they may still communicate. The shepherd is startled by the "awful scrutiny" from the rotting sockets of Brummy's eyes. Crucial in the above excerpt is the statement that a 'reported' death "amounts to the same thing" as an actual death. The question and quality of existence is subjective. Heseltine has described this as a life-in-death state.<sup>110</sup> Here Heseltine is referring to the living as if Lawson's characters were suspended in a purgatorial field in which they may as well be dead. Mrs Spicer

<sup>110</sup> Heseltine, p.20

provides a good example: “Mrs Spicer looked very little different from what she did when I last saw her alive. It was some time before we could believe that she was dead. But she was ‘past carin’ right enough.” (352) We might reorient this phrase and say that where there is this death in life, there is conversely a lot of life in Lawson’s dead characters:

On reaching the hut the old man dumped the corpse against the wall, wrong end up...but he had not placed Brummy at the correct angle, and, consequently, that individual fell forward and struck him a violent blow on the shoulder with the iron toes of his Blucher boots. (119)

In fact, that ‘jump-t-up’ Brummy is a “delinquent” practical joker. As Brummy slips and slides around, the shepherd has cause to reprimand him:

I don’t want to pick a row with yer...but if you starts playin’ any of yer jump-t-up pranktical jokes on me, and a-scarin’ of me after a-humpin’ of yer ‘ome, by the ‘oly frost I’ll kick yer to jim-rags, so I will.” (120)

In a Freudian analysis of this story, O’Neill writes, “the uncanny leads to an animistic conception of the world.”<sup>111</sup> This animatism<sup>112</sup> suggests the shepherd has developed the habit of finding even a reflection of his own consciousness in any other body. In such a charged experiential field, it is little wonder that the goanna is multiplied in the shepherd’s mind as a flock. To make up the deficiency in the shepherd’s social poverty, many things begin to “talk”. Just as the dog’s tail “declared” the dinner went well, so too Brummy’s clothing “proclaimed” his European identity. The land itself is personified, becoming a “nurse and tutor” and, in such intimate roles, becomes another substitute for human company, compensating for the lack of company it itself has imposed.

In relation to this story, O’Neill asks the question: “How does the settler in a strange new land minimise the strangeness, appropriate the new land, and make himself

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<sup>111</sup> O’Neill, P. “Aborigines and Women in Lawson’s ‘The Bush Undertaker.’” *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*. 8. 1992. pp. 59-70 p. 61.

<sup>112</sup> I prefer to use the word “animatism” here, rather than “animism” since the former term suggests the “attribution of consciousness to inanimate objects”, rather than “the belief that all natural objects and the universe itself possesses a soul.” (*The Macquarie Dictionary: Second Edition*. 1991. p. 66.) The shepherd may not have a belief structure that conceives of the world animistically, but he certainly attributes consciousness to inanimate things—a side-effect of his social isolation rather than his philosophic conceptions of the universe.

feel at home?”<sup>113</sup> I would argue that it is achieved in two major ways here: firstly, by projecting the human onto the non-human or deceased; and, secondly, through the deployment of ritual. Transporting ritual is one sure way to familiarise the environment, which is, of course, subjective and open to reinterpretation. Yet whilst both O’Neill and Lee argue that the practice of ritual suggests a drive to assert Imperial, masculinist or nationalist power over the land, the results are not quite so stable.

Brummy’s burial completes the spectrum of the shepherd’s repertoire of ritual. If Christmas is a symbol of the birth of the Christian heritage, Brummy’s interment expresses its final rites/rights. Both O’Neill and Lee have argued that this burial and its relation to the exhumation of the Aboriginal remains points towards the assertion of a colonising power in a new land. Whilst this is an important perspective in relation to the skeleton (more about which will be said later) both critics overlook the fact that the ritual itself has been warped. In varying ways, both writers argue that within the burial process, difference is vanquished and with it, the rejection of “new, local subjectivities”<sup>114</sup>. O’Neill writes that the burial of Brummy, as a blackened “mummy”, suggests a fear of miscegenation by a colonising male power, while Lee argues that it is a subjugation of the “weird” from both the Imperialist and nationalist gazes. There are two major points that arise in both analyses that need reconsidering. Firstly, the act of burial establishes an intense valuing of the buried subject—“‘Arter all,’ he murmured sadly, ‘arter all—it were Brummy.’” (122) And, secondly, the form the ritual takes is a hybridised form of the ritual from the originating culture: “Once or twice he muttered the words, ‘I am the rassaraction.’” (122) I would suggest that the shepherd is himself an example of the new, local subjectivity and the originating European culture is itself in process of modification. O’Neill warns that approaching the shepherd as the new subjectivity is too “positivistic” and leans towards a reading of the “celebration of the nationalist Lawson”. Indeed, the common interpretation of Lawson and his nationalist “types” does have a problematic result, given the “failure of the possibility of either a unitary stable Imperial or national self.”<sup>115</sup> However, the problem with this point and why I diverge from O’Neill’s argument is that the “stable self” is not the automatic result in locating the shepherd as a new subjectivity. The overriding point of Lawson’s fiction, particularly expressed in this

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<sup>113</sup> O’Neill, p. 60.

<sup>114</sup> O’Neill, p. 66.

<sup>115</sup> O’Neill, p. 67.

tale, is that certainty or stability of self is only ever momentarily assured and always subject to review since the self is always in dynamic relation to that which surrounds it.

O'Neill writes that the ashes-to-ashes prayer said over Brummy's grave, is "not just conventionally solemn" but comes from the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Book of Common Prayer*. Thus, he writes, it "confirm[s] a univocal identity for English speakers... because such shared language provides a sense of community."<sup>116</sup> It is very difficult to see how the shepherd's actual speech could confirm univocal identity with other English speakers of the Imperium given his speech is not exactly the Queen's English. It has hybridised and, furthermore, Lawson imbues it with a strong comic element: "Hashes ter hashes, dus ter dus, Brummy, — an' —an' in hopes of great an' gerlorious rassaraction!" (122) Whilst shared language does provide a sense of community we must keep in mind with whom the shepherd now shares a language (his dog). Furthermore, Brummy is hardly joining the ranks of those who have received this final rite so that they receive the eternal life promised by the Christian faith. Given the habits of Lawson's dead, Brummy's "gerlorious rassaraction" may instead mean his "jumpt-up" corpse may pop out of the grave at any moment. O'Neill concludes that "[t]he ritual demands of Christian civilization and Empire are met once the unsettling, condensed figure of Brummy has been safely buried."<sup>117</sup> But who is to say he'll stay dead?

Rather than abstract the funeral ritual into the realm of theory as other critics have done, it is worth looking at the ritual in the context of the shepherd's experiential field. What does this ritual mean to the shepherd? Why, during such hot days, would he bother if, as he himself declares "nothin' didn't ever matter"? For the shepherd, engaging in this ritual positions him within an historical tradition. Whilst it has undergone radical change (from, for example, the 16<sup>th</sup> Century *Book of Prayer*) it takes place along a continuum:

Moreover, behaviour directed to certain interests of ends-in-view as goals are conditioned in fairly elaborate ways by past experience, failures and successes, and socially approved modes of action. Thus an anticipated future and patterns of past experience impinge upon occurring situations to give the present a historical character and temporal depth in which past and future events relate to those presently happening. In short, situations are complicated not only as temporal processes of events, ie as a process is of greater complexity than any one of its parts or

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<sup>116</sup> O'Neill, p. 66.

<sup>117</sup> O'Neill, p. 67.

stages, but also because of the element of human behaviour in which past and future (possible) events serve to influence present conduct.<sup>118</sup>

As mad as the shepherd seems to be, there is a strong ethic running through his treatment of Brummy and it is embedded in his language of “ought”, what is “right” and what “twon’t do”: “Theer oughter be somethin’ sed,” muttered the old man, “tain’t right to put ‘im under like a dog. There oughter to be some sort ‘o sarmin.” Since “ought” cannot be derived from fact but is culturally defined, we can see that whilst the language and funeral service has been hybridised, the shepherd is still continuing to operate out of a particular tradition, albeit a tradition which is undergoing local modification. It signifies that despite the modifications, even under the pressure of extreme poverty, the social, manifesting through the personal, still is the arbiter of value. The value comes not from an institutionalised authority since “none o’ them theer pianer-fingered parsons is a-goin’ ter take the trouble ter travel out inter this God-forgotten part to hold sarvice over him, seein’ as how his last cheque’s blued.” (121) The value comes from a particular act by a particular participant through whom the ethics of a society appear.<sup>119</sup> The shepherd declares he’ll “do jestic to it, and see that Brummy has a good comfortable buryin’—and more’s unpossible.” (121)

It is important to point out that there is a clear distinction between religious piety and the ethic which guides the shepherd’s actions. It is less about observing a religious ritual than it is about a social one. The “pianer-fingered parsons” are mercenary and, thus, the “mad” shepherd, in doing justice to Brummy’s remains, operates on a higher ethical order.

Undermining his refrain that “nothing never did matter”, the shepherd practices his valuations despite his poverty. The value of a ritual is located in the expression of an ideal. As an *ideal* it can be enacted in circumstances or environments that may appear to be resistant or inappropriate. It secures, just for a time, some tentative identity. An act is powerful because it is an idealising agency.<sup>120</sup> The value of the act of retrieving the body and burying it can be ascertained by the energy expended to complete the task. In an extreme environment such as this, where one must cover large distances in the boiling

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<sup>118</sup> Thayer, p. 391.

<sup>119</sup> In its Christian context, burying the dead is considered as “one of the works of mercy” along with teaching, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, etc. The shepherd may be “mad” but Lawson is suggesting that this is certainly nothing compared to the mercilessness of the mercenary parsons.

<sup>120</sup> Emerson, p. 29.



heat, any act undertaken will be considered in the light of whether it is *worth* doing. The minute details of each action recorded here bring the reader's awareness to the effort required by the shepherd to complete his task:

Looking round, his eyes lit up with satisfaction as he saw some wastes bits of bark...He picked up two pieces, one about four and the other six feet long, and each about two feet wide, and brought them over to the body. He laid the longest strip by the side of the corpse, which he proceeded to lift on to it...Then he placed the other strip on top, with the hollow side downwards—thus sandwiching the defunct between the two pieces—removed the saddle strap, which he wore for a belt, and buckled it round one end, while he tried to think of something with which to tie up the other...He up-ended Brummy, and placing his shoulder against the middle of the lower sheet of bark, lifted the corpse to a horizontal position; then taking the bag of bones in this hand, started for home. (118)

The pragmatic indelicacy of the burial itself is just as complete in description. The ungraceful machinations ironically bring attention to the real social grace behind the action:

“It’s time yer turned in, Brum,” he said, lifting the body down. He carried it to the grave and dropped it into one corner like a post. He arranged the bark so as to cover the face, and, by means of a piece of clothes-line, lowered the body to a horizontal position. Then he threw in an armful of gum leaves, and then, very reluctantly, took the shovel and dropped in a few shovelfuls of earth. (121)

So that the funeral can be carried out in its entirety, the shepherd, as pragmatist, takes the roles of the undertaker, the gravedigger, the parson and the pallbearer. Yet, for this ritual to be truly social there must be a witness and once again the dog meets the social deficit that makes up the parish. Furthermore, it seems Five Bob clearly understands the implications of the burial: “The dog rose, with ears erect, and looked anxiously first at his master, and then into the grave.” This understanding is necessary for the ritual to be a complete recognition of the human. The dog becomes aware—and anxious about—the shepherd’s mortality. The shepherd is also forced into recognition of it:

“Brummy,” he said at last, “It’s all over now; nothin’ matters now—nothin’ didn’t ever matter, nor—nor don’t. You uster say as how it ‘ud be all right termorrer” (pause); “termorrers’s come, Brummy—come fur you—it ain’t come fur me yet, but—it’s a-comin’.”

He threw in some more earth.

“Yer don’t remember, Brummy, an’ mebbe yer don’t want to remember—I don’t want to remember—but—well, but, yer see that’s where yer got the pull on me.” (122)

This reflection denotes a true engagement with the scene. It is a moment of self-consciousness. It is an unwanted thought because it is confronting, but it is unavoidable since truly ethical action is that which is thought through.

Adrian Mitchell writes: “What the story represents at the end is the struggle to retrieve some aspect of that common humanity; or, to find a place for the ordinary decencies that ought to define our relation to each other.”<sup>121</sup> However, it must be remembered that the shepherd has earlier desecrated an Aboriginal grave. His concept of an “ordinary decency” is an effect of his customary morality. Within his own customary morality, he knows what he “ought” to do and what his duties are to those who fall within this morality. His observation of social ritual confirms his place in a specific context. Richard Rorty argues that solidarity is contingent upon local similarities rather than the status as “human being”, therefore, solidarity is grounded in “a historically contingent final vocabulary.”<sup>122</sup> His sympathies thus circumscribed, the shepherd is unable to register the human value of the Aboriginal remains while he registers the value of the white man’s corpse. The irony operating in this story prompts the investigation into boundaries of sympathy within customary morality. It is impossible to ignore the irony of the unthinking exhumation of one body juxtaposed with the serious contemplation that follows the interment of another.

The first telling challenge to an expected order of human value occurs during the shepherd’s simultaneous ruminations on the potatoes and the exhumation; ruminations accorded equal narrative status. The shepherd, having issued his commands to his dog and begun their Christmas dinner, says:

“I’ll take a pick an’ shovel with me an’ root up that old blackfellow,” mused the shepherd, evidently following up a recent train of thought; “I reckon it’ll do now. I’ll put in the spuds.”

The last sentence referred to the cooking; the first to a supposed blackfellow’s grave about which he was curious. (115)

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<sup>121</sup> Mitchell, p. 17.

<sup>122</sup> Rorty, R. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1989. pp. 191-192. Rorty’s “final vocabulary” refers to the specific discourses (cultural, religious, metaphysical etc) through which the world is interpreted.

As Lee explains, the zeugmatic phrase, “I reckon it’ll do now” unexpectedly levels the exhumation and the meal as the referent “it” could possibly relate to either object.<sup>123</sup> The contrast is unsettling and the reader is confronted by an entirely destabilised system of value. We must note, however, that in such poverty, the potato is in fact a revered object. It is equally correct to say that the potatoes have been promoted as it is to say the bones have been demoted. The unascertainability of these valuations is proof that all value systems are locally realised. In this question between the two objects, we are deep into the investigation of the shepherd’s own values.

Lee writes that this inability to understand the shepherd’s motivations is faced by the narrator, who “copes with the subversive implications of this transgression by failing to show any signs of curiosity or concern over the elusive motivation for the hatter’s actions.” He writes: “The narrative gaze reduces its scope to the purely visual in an effort to demarcate a territory which is small enough to police.”<sup>124</sup> Whilst I dispute the reduction of the narrative voice that Lee claims, the point he makes regarding the general demarcations of territory is a helpful way to articulate the scope of customary morality. What is effective in the narrative voice is precisely the descriptions of action without any overt interpretation of the shepherd’s motivations. In this way, the irony of the situation is allowed to speak for itself. The limitation of the shepherd’s ethic is made clear. In fact, the irony of the narrative voice outlines the territory the *shepherd* has marked out for *himself*, one which is small enough for *him* to police. To cope in such an expanse of uncharted territory, the shepherd sets his moral boundaries in order to relate back to his originating culture. This proscribed ethic prevents him from seeing the irony of this action (as Lee explains, the shepherd lacks self-modifying irony). His disgust at the goanna, which makes a Christmas meal of Brummy is ironic in the same way, since the shepherd’s behaviour towards the Aboriginal bones is motivated by self-interest also. Whilst the shepherd does treat the bones with care, he does not have any human sympathy towards them. The exhumation undermines the dignity of the later burial ceremony and suggests that the ethic operating in the shepherd’s service is limited. The shepherd can’t relate to the identity of the skeleton. It is significant that he cannot tell the race or sex of the bones. In Dewey’s work, “values originate, are located, and persist or pass away among the relations of human beings to one another and to environing

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<sup>123</sup> Lee, p. 16.

<sup>124</sup> Lee, p. 17.

conditions.”<sup>125</sup> These are the relations of sympathy and have been explored in “The Union Buries Its Dead” where Lawson extends his treatment of the irony of the limitations of customary morality. (By looking at these stories from this perspective, it becomes clear that these relations are not only defined along racial lines but lines of sub-cultural custom also, as already seen in “The Iron-Bark Chip”.) Unlike the burial of Brummy, the shepherd’s relation to the skeleton does not prompt reflective thought. And yet like the business with Brummy, the shepherd does go to some effort to retrieve the bones. The question is why does he do this? What is to be gained if the bones do not have Brummy’s value?

The relationship between the Christmas meal and bones established in the language of the shepherd puts the exhumation in context of the Christmas holiday. As a site about which he had been “curious”, the grave is a novelty. The exhumation becomes his chosen leisure activity. This is its value to the shepherd who has evidently spent some time considering his Christmas activities. When he says, “I ain’t spending sech a dull Christmas after all,” (118) it indicates that he has given forethought to the day and has experienced some reservations about its predicted dullness. The fact that he has given it previous thought as the day approached also suggests the importance to him of observing the ritual. The shepherd lays out the bones and “amused himself”. When he finds a second set of remains, he is joyous: “Me luck’s in this Christmas, an’ no mistake!” (117) Not only does he find a second body, but a bottle of rum in the dead man’s hands. Despite its macabre nature, the shepherd is experiencing the bounty of Christmas. In interpreting his experiential field this way, the “treasure trove of death”<sup>126</sup> is re-idealised as the gifts of the season and thus completes the rituals of the Christmas tradition, weird though they seem.

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<sup>125</sup> Thayer, p. 390.

<sup>126</sup> Mitchell, p. 14.

## Chapter 4

### Social form and empowerment in “Joe Wilson’s Courtship” and “A Double Buggy at Lahey’s Creek”

The extended length of the Joe Wilson sequence allows Lawson to further investigate several of his continuing concerns: the functioning and the ongoing development of the individual within the social realm; the development of just relations with the “other”; and anxiety and the relationship between action and consequence. In the two Joe Wilson stories under discussion here, Lawson’s development of a pragmatist ethic is seen in two significant ways: (i) the pragmatic conception of self through socialising agencies: and (ii) the imaginative expansion of ideas through engagement with the other. Also of importance here is the concern with justice and responsibility within the ethics of family as they are practised (or neglected) within the bush paradigm. When Lawson tackles this idea of justice in other stories, notably “Send Round the Hat” and “The Union Buries Its Dead”, the lines of difference which dictate sympathetic understanding of the other are challenged and these sympathies are limited by things like class, race or geography. In the Joe Wilson series, Lawson looks at the boundaries staked out by gender when the “other” is not the stranger but the spouse. Joe is daunted by the ethics of family and as such develops a fatalistic approach to this particular social group. Joe is often crippled by his self-absorption, the impact of which is felt by his wife and child. These are the primary “others” with whom he needs to relate but the weight of his anxieties, born of an overactive and sensitive mind, largely prevent him from doing so. His insecurities about his own masculinity, as it is socially constructed, together with his general resistance to Mary’s efforts to understand him, create successive and alienating failures to communicate and act effectively. To a frustrating degree, we are privy to Joe’s endless and mostly fruitless ruminating via the first-person technique, a narrative style which also brings to mind the natural boundaries of any one perspective and the limitations when such a self-absorbed personality cannot accommodate the perspective of the other. These limitations of self-consciousness are expressed through action and inaction and it is when Joe’s own social desires force his self-consciousness to abate that he experiences successful action. Importantly Joe’s triumphs occur when his male instincts achieve social form as suitor, husband or father, for it is only through the social that the individual is empowered. The various social frames depicted in the series function as empowering forms of self-idealisation and as vivid, if not romantic, social visions of the other. It is in

these moments when Joe best achieves his place in the social realm and is relieved, if only temporarily, from his self-imposed position as misunderstood outsider. The pragmatic conception of self, that is, the self as a social entity is thoroughly investigated in this series. Joe's successes in self-realisation through the social realm are constantly set against another conception of self, what Turner confesses as a "bourgeois individualism"<sup>127</sup>; that romantic concept of self that somehow exists beyond the social (to which Joe is particularly susceptible).

The first-person narrative functions on two time scales: the retrospective voice of an older Joe and the voice of Joe as he is conscious in the past action. This in itself multiplies points of view and highlights the contingent, changing nature of the self. This structure allows for a personal assessment of his past behaviour as he struggles to come to terms with his failures and ethical shortcomings. The older voiced narrative also attempts to function as an apology, documenting the conditions of failure, which are both external to Joe (economic and environmental) and internal, being what he considers the natural weaknesses of his personal constitution:

I wasn't a healthy-minded, average boy: I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake, and grew up to be a Bushman, and didn't know what was the matter with me—or the world—but that's got nothing to do with it. (272)

Through the first-person narrative, Lawson emphasises Joe's brooding, hyperactive consciousness and obsessive sensitivity, yet this can only win him a limited sympathy because he often misses opportunities to remedy his situation. Barnes argues: "[a]s he tells of the past, his own emotions are his central concern—one expects a self-discovery and change, and he knows he is selfish in it, yet he does not change."<sup>128</sup> In contrast, Wilkes has suggested that it is Lawson's intention to win sympathy through this technique. He writes: "Joe's readiness to admit his faults and blame himself becomes almost his way of recommending himself to us, like his constant references to his sensitive temperament,":

Although Joe Wilson's melancholy is meant to be inherent, something is lost from the presentation of "man in his comparative weakness versus the bush in its formidable strength" [quoting Cecil Mann] if the man is given the appearance of a professional defeatist, determined to be unhappy whatever the circumstances. The stories seem to be asking for an attitude of

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<sup>127</sup> Turner, p. 448.

<sup>128</sup> Barnes, J. *Henry Lawson's Short Stories*. Melbourne: Shillington House. 1985. pp. 34-35.

sympathy and indulgence to Joe Wilson that he himself has scarcely earned.”<sup>129</sup>

Obviously it is Joe’s aim as narrator to appeal to the reader’s sympathy but it is the ironic structure of the entire series that disallows our indulgences. It is clear that whilst Joe is overly self-conscious he is far from self-aware. Therefore, corrective irony appears through the rift between narrator and implied author. This is important for Lawson’s continual issue of moral development: Joe knows he has to correct his behaviour though he rarely does. This theme emphasises the need for critical reflection that *must* be followed by action, as James insists, if the thought is to have any value at all. Joe’s indulgent guilt does not earn him respect. He does earn it, however, when he *acts*, particularly when he purchases the double-buggy for Mary and finally fulfils his promise to her.

Once again, the social is required to achieve temporary stability in this dilemma. The intimate portrayal of the sensitive mind as it grapples with the external world illustrates the workings of social frames and their role in stabilising the changing self in a multiverse. In “Joe Wilson’s Courtship” these frames distil social images of both Mary and Joe that allow them, Joe in particular, to overcome the barriers of his oversensitive mind. They act to externalise his person, thus neutralising his overwhelming internalisation and the idea that there was “something the matter” with him.

As Joe admits, he was “always shy with women”. This results in inaction. “Jack had been my successful rival, only he didn’t know it—I don’t think his wife knew it either.” (275) Joe’s fruitless sensitivity ends in paranoia. He indulges in scornful interrogations of women’s motivations:

I haven’t time to explain why, but somehow, whenever a girl took any notice of me I took it for granted that she was only playing with me, and felt nasty about it. I made one or two mistakes, but—ah well! (275)

Similarly, when Joe meets Mary he “reckoned that it was only just going to be a hopeless, heart-breaking, stand-far-off-and-worship affair, as far as I was concerned—like my first love affair...I was tired of being pitied by good girls. You see, I didn’t know women then.” (281)

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<sup>129</sup> Wilkes, pp. 274-275.

The first-person narrative functions as a frame through which we are continually privy to the distortions of Joe's thoughts and the rift between his perceptions and of those around him. These glimpses into Joe's paranoid perceptions show how the internal processes dictate external processes and perpetuate his own failings. He is out of touch with his surroundings and this manifests in an inability to interpret both the spoken and unspoken languages in operation. When Joe is helping Mary hang out her washing, he offers to hang out the last of the things in Mary's basket but she refuses:

“Oh, those things are not ready yet,” she said, “they're not rinsed,” and she grabbed the basket and held it away from me. The things looked the same to me as the rest on the line; they looked rinsed enough and blued too. I reckoned that she didn't want me to take the trouble, or thought that I mightn't like to be seen hanging out clothes, and was only doing it out of kindness. (283)

It is clear to the reader that the last few items must be her underwear and for modesty's sake she refuses his help. Her embarrassment compounds with his to produce an utterly awkward social interaction. Joe is ill-equipped to participate successfully in a dynamic reality where points of view merge to produce a complex reality. Joe's shortcomings in understanding this complex reality show itself in his dependence on the face value meaning of Mary's words. Joe later realises his mistake but, importantly, the reason for her refusal is left implied: “[I] saw Mary hanging out the rest of the things—she thought that we were out of sight. Then I understood why those things weren't ready while we were round.” (283) The reason is not positively identified and yet the reader understands precisely even before Joe himself does. This demonstrates the processes of implied knowledge and the complexity of social arrangements. Joe has much to learn before he can be fully effective in the social scheme and, in turn, be empowered by it. His inexperience shows he is unversed in many languages and shows an inability to read the other. When dealing with Mary he often: “blunder[s] round...feeling like a man feels when he's just made an ass of himself in public.” (279) For Joe, the social is a source of anxiety; his dysfunctional relation to society—the realm of doing and the realm of the empowered self—causes his ineffective action, social blunders and the like. He begins to avoid action altogether.

Jack, on the other hand, is socially well-versed: “[he] knows all those dodges” and proceeds to create Joe's strategy himself. Jack works hard to present Joe to Mary in the best light. He says: “Make a looking-glass of that window, Joe,”:



That window reflected the laundry window: the room was dark inside and there was a good clear reflection; and presently I saw Mary come to the laundry window and stand with her hands behind her back, thoughtfully watching me. The laundry window had an old-fashioned hinged sash, and I like that sort of window—there's more romance about it, I think. There was thick dark-green ivy all round the window, and Mary looked prettier than a picture. I squared up my shoulders and put my heels together and put as much style as I could into the work. I couldn't have turned round to save my life. (277)

In holding up the window, both Joe and Mary are framed for each other, a double representation of self. By squaring his shoulders he attempts to present himself as made from the stuff of a strong man. Similarly, Mary looks a model wife. Importantly, it is through ritualised social representations of self (in this case, a romantic stereotype) that encourages intimacy between people. Joe is made attractive by taking on a recognisable type, in this case, a strong, hard-working suitor. This doubling is entrenched in the narrative with the switching not only between the old and young voice of Joe, but also Joe's thinking self and Joe's social self. The negotiation between these selves is a natural one, although it is typically badly handled by Joe and deteriorates throughout the sequence. In order to have any success at all with Mary during the courtship he must manage this negotiation properly. It is important to note, too, that through Joe's complicated relationship with typical versions of masculinity: "[Lawson] interrogates the social construction of gender."<sup>130</sup> The pressure Joe Wilson experiences in attempting to conform to the masculinist type (promoted by a nationalist agenda) also suggests that these types—as social forms—must also be subject to change. Here, when Joe does conform to a type of gendered behaviour it is a roleplay that facilitates effective action rather than an endorsement that the type itself is the singular way to be.

Lawson plays with the romantic stereotypes of courtship; here, machismo masculinity is emphasised in Jack's presentation of Joe to Mary:

"Did you tell her I was in jail?" I growled.  
 "No, by Gum! I forgot that. But never mind. I'll fix that up all right. I'll tell her that you got two years' hard for horse-stealing. That ought to make her interested in you, if she isn't already...Oh, I told her that you were a holy terror amongst the girls," said Jack. (281)

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<sup>130</sup> Stewart, *The 1890s*, p. 19.

Mary, too, is specifically “framed”. Joe’s memory of his first sighting of Mary and subsequent seminal moments in their courting has all the hallmarks of a great romance.

Again the ivy frames the view:

There was a wide, old-fashioned, brick-floored verandah in front, with an open end; there was ivy climbing up the verandah post on one side and a baby-rose on the other, and a grape-vine near the chimney. We rode up to the end of the verandah, and Jack called to see if there was anyone at home, and Mary came trotting out; so it was in the frame of vines that I first saw her. (276)

The types of staging we see here are meant to induce the courting couple to regard each other as suitable. They have to “fit” the picture of a romantic mate. Jack’s staging of Joe sets the course but the staging must have substance if it is to work. The frames Jack creates for Joe can not take hold until they actually become a true representation of Joe’s social form. The smallest setback sends Joe into feeling “comfortably miserable” and prevents him from acting and becoming successful in these forms. It is not until Romany insults Mary’s honour that Joe is chivalrously roused into definitive action.<sup>131</sup> This is another gesture of the romantic stereotype that is used to galvanise their emerging relationship:

“I’ve met her sort before. She’s setting he cap at that jackeroo now. Some girls will run after anything with trousers on,” and he stood up.

Jack Barnes must have felt what was coming, for he grabbed my arm and whispered, “Sit still, Joe, damn you! He’s too good for you!” but I was on my feet and facing Romany as if a giant hand had reached down and wrenched me off the log and set me there. “You’re a damned crawler, Romany!” I said. (290)

And the fight is on. Joe’s mates all doubt his ability to fight: “I knew I was reckoned pretty soft.” (291) This situation is different from any Joe has been in before; in Joe’s mind this fight represents an opportunity to become a different kind of man, fit to marry Mary. The situation is new to him for he hasn’t been in a fight since he was a boy. We see Joe discarding old habits of behaviour and experimenting with new ways of being. His desire (to wed Mary) fuels the impulse to act and the force of this impulse overwhelms

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<sup>131</sup> Whilst the fight has the successful effect of enhancing Joe’s self-image, Lawson also makes it clear that Romany is something of a fall-guy to gain this effect. Being an even greater outsider than Joe is himself, he is susceptible to the larger, more powerful male group. Joe is sympathetic to Romany’s position too, but the social requirements of the romantic stereotype urge him on.

his otherwise nagging self-conscious commentary. The “giant hand” propelling him into action shows the force of his externalised energy:

I knew something that they didn't know. I knew that it was going to be a fight to a finish, one way or the other...I kept saying to myself, “You'll have to go through with it now, Joe old man! It's the turning-point of your life.” If I won the fight, I'd set to work and win Mary; if I lost, I'd leave the district forever. A man thinks a lot in a flash sometimes...I looked ahead; I wouldn't be able to marry a girl who could look back and remember when her husband was beaten by another man—no matter what sort of brute the other man was. (291)

The concern here, that Mary couldn't marry a man who lost such a fight, is a social concern. Likewise, the impulse to “win Mary” is more than sexual for he is explicitly thinking about marriage, a social form. The references to the social dimensions of their relationship and his self-concept are important—Joe's crippling self-consciousness is overcome through the efficacy of the social form. Significantly, the fight is also carefully staged and it follows a deliberate social form. The impulses to act are harnessed by the social and through this process Joe gains prestige. The harnessed force gives power to Joe in a recognisable (social) setting: “There was a little clear flat down by the river and plenty of light there, so we decided to go down there and have it out.” (290)

The men keep strictly to the customary rules of fighting:

It seemed an understood thing with the men that if I went out first round Jack would fight Romany; and if Jack knocked him out somebody else would fight Jack to square matters. Jim Bullock wouldn't mind obliging for one; he was a mate of Jack's but he didn't mind who he fought so long as it was for the sake of fair play—or “peace and quietness”, he said. Jim was very good-natured. He backed Romany, and of course Jack backed me. (291-292)

When Jim volunteers to second Romany, we see the socialised form of fighting taking precedence over the very men involved. It is important because this validates the fight and, by extension, validates the winner. The customary rules must be obeyed. It is “an understood thing”. This is indeed a major turning point in Joe's life. Where previously he has lamented he was born a bushman by mistake and as such is eternally out of place in his social environment, during the fight he acknowledges that he *becomes* this version of himself:

I had the bushman up in me now, and wasn't going to be beaten while I could think. I was wonderfully cool, and learning to fight. There's nothing like a fight to teach a man... While I was getting my wind I could hear through the moonlight and still air the sound of Mary's voice singing up at the house. I thought hard into the future, even as I fought. The fight only seemed something that was passing. (293)

Joe is liberated from his oppressive sensitivities: "I went down early in the round. But it did me good; the blow and the look I'd seen in Romany's eyes knocked all the sentiment out of me." (292) The impact of Joe's socially realised triumph is felt the very next night outside the dance. Jack has set things up that Mary and Joe meet down at the moonlit river and Joe must do the rest. Far from being a "stand-off-and-worship" affair, he begins to act to gain Mary's hand. The emphasis here is on doing—"I put", "I pressed", "I slipped":

I put my arm round her shoulders, but she didn't seem to notice it... I pressed my hand on her shoulder, just a little, so as she couldn't pretend not to know it was there. But she didn't seem to notice... I slipped my arm round her waist, under her arm.

"Mary," I said.

"Yes," she said.

"Call me Joe," I said.

"I—I don't like to," she said. "I don't think it would be right."

So I just turned her face round and kissed her. (299)

Yet, Joe's social self falters slightly at the last moment, anticipating his future struggle with intention and action:

"Why won't you kiss me, Mary? Don't you love me?"

"Because," she said, "because—because I—I don't—I don't think it's right for—for a girl to—to kiss a man unless she's going to be his wife."

Then it dawned on me! I'd forgot all about proposing. (301)

In conclusion to this section, it is clear that Joe's private self is enhanced when it is influenced by his public roles. Joe's self need not be restricted to his melancholy meditation that he was a poet born a bushman by mistake, for we see in this story the successful effects of submitting to the social forms available to him. He performs dynamically in his experiential field and his sense of self is pragmatically constructed through social rituals and experience. It is important to keep in mind that the "life-changing moments" may come without warning. Joe shows remarkable agility and flexibility in accepting the fight to save Mary's honour and it is in these situations where

ethical impulses overtake his melancholy outlook, that he becomes effective as a social individual.

### **“A Double Buggy At Lahey’s Creek”**

In “A Double Buggy At Lahey’s Creek” Joe triumphantly breaks out of his forlorn, withdrawn mentality which has dogged his marriage. Importantly, it is with Mary’s intervention. Mary shows how to harness and use imaginative force and insists that Joe start to deal with their immediate situation creatively. This is in contrast to Joe, whose imagination takes him into a dream world of what might have been. Mary says:

“Look here, Joe; the farmers out here never seem to get a new idea: they don’t seem to me ever to try and find out beforehand what the market is going to be like—they just go on farming the same old way and putting in the same old crops year after year.”  
(355)

Mary’s criticises bad farming practices such as those described by Lawson in “A Day on a Selection”. From a pragmatic perspective it is significant in the selection sketch that the farmer: “who knows little or nothing about farming, would seem by his conversation to have read up all the great social and political questions of the day.” (40) Here, theory and practice are not in a dynamic, useful relationship to the actual environment. The farmers’ lack of critical reflection and ingenuity destroy the farm: “The selector does not know what makes the [cows]’teats sore but he has an unquestioning faith in a certain ointment recommended to him by a man who knows less about cows than he does himself.” (36-37) The lack of dynamism in this sketch establishes how new problems must be met with new solutions. Mary, as a pragmatic thinker, is aware that there are no fresh ideas coming into the farms to meet the demands of a fluctuating market. As the pragmatic drover’s wife demonstrates, with her makeshift guns and scare tactics, ever-changing circumstances must be met with new ideas. Mary suggests that Joe try sowing potatoes and when Joe refuses saying the ground is not right, Mary replies: “But you haven’t *tried* to grow potatoes there yet, Joe. How do you know.” (356) In other words, Mary insists that Joe’s knowledge ought to come from personal experience of their particular plot of land, not what other farmers have tried on their plots of land. This is the pragmatic spirit needed to make a selection work. If no outcomes can be adequately forecast, then many actions have the potential to succeed just as they have the

potential to fail: “Just try one crop. It might rain for weeks, and then you’ll be sorry you didn’t take my advice.”

When Joe steps out into this new territory of a more novel way of approaching the farm, something tremendous begins to happen. It does indeed rain. Not only does the potato crop prosper but also the grass grows and they take advantage of a poor selector who has to sell off his livestock:

The drought was blazing all round and out back, and I think that my corner of the ridges was the only place where there was any grass to speak of. We had another shower or two, and the grass held out. Chaps began to talk of ‘Joe Wilson’s luck’. (360)

The financial success that began with the potato crop has triggered a string of other, bigger transactions that give him greater freedom to act in creative ways. With the money from the potatoes he buys the neighbour’s sheep. The wool price rises and he sells the sheep on. On top of the profit, out of that money, Mary’s brother James is able to buy a gun. From there, he is able to buy more blocks of land and farm more sheep. All the while, Mary is reminding him of buying a buggy. Yet, once again, Joe’s nerves begin to take over. He is continually reminded of the possibilities of drought which fill him with the dread of action. Yet it seems that it is only in risk-taking that opportunities to prosper appear. The roll of the dice is value-free and it is in Joe’s accepting that it *might* rain, rather than it *might not* rain, that he learns to make the dynamics of his environment work for him. It is important that he engages with the perspective of the other, in this case Mary, to broaden the pool of ideas of what may work. In short, it is the opportunistic spirit crucial to the pioneer.

A more discomfiting engagement with Mary’s perspective, however, comes in the sub-section of this story titled “The Ghost of Mary’s Sacrifice”. Even in this title, we can see that the substance of Mary’s life has really come home to Joe, embedded in this word “sacrifice”. The word “ghost” suggests the guilty paranoia of his married life: that Mary could have and should have done better. He will be forever haunted by it if he does nothing to release this ghost. He has arrived at another turning point. As with the fight in “Joe Wilson’s Courtship” and the race to save Jim’s life in “Brighten’s Sister-in-Law”, this emotion to change and to act must be stronger than the overwhelming pressure of his self-conscious mind. As with the fight, it is his social sense of his masculinity under fire which stirs an impulse to act. Here, the force that prompts him to action is seeing

Mary's previous suitor, young Black, the well-to-do squatter, pulling past him on the street. It hurts his masculine pride. At the sight of what Mary might have had, Joe starts "feeling things". Usually, he would simply brood, but the thought that Mary could have been the "mistress of Haviland" draws him into immense sympathy for her. Significantly, he puts himself in her position:

I thought of the hardships she went through in the first year...of the time she was alone with James and Jim sick; and of the loneliness she fought through out there. I thought of Mary, outside in the blazing heat, with an old-print dress and a felt hat, and pair of 'lastic-sides of mine on, doing the work of a station manager as well as that of a housewife and mother. And her cheeks were getting thin, and her colour was going: I thought of the gaunt, brick-brown, saw-file voiced, hopeless and spiritless Bushwomen I knew—and some of them not much older than Mary. (366-367)

Importantly, he does not think about these hardships through the retrospective eye of the older narrator. He thinks these things in the *moment* he sees Black: "The goods clerk must have thought that Joe Wilson was pretty grumpy that day. I was thinking of Mary, out there in the lonely hut on a barren creek in the Bush." (366) This realisation, in the moment rather than in retrospect, means he has the chance to *act*. He acts immediately: "When I went back into the town I had a drink with Bill Galletly at the Royal, and that settled the buggy."

His decision to act, based on his awakened ethic of sympathy for Mary and his responsibility to her, has reaped rich rewards. So often, Joe has routinely fallen short of even the smallest of Mary's needs, yet this time he is far exceeding them. Rather than buying a second-hand single buggy, he brings her a brand new double buggy and the excess does not stop there:

Mary dived for the buggy. There was a dozen of lemonade and ginger-beer in a candle-box from Galletly...there was a 'little bit of a ham' from Pat Murphy...it was the biggest I ever saw; there were three loaves of baker's bread, a cake, and a dozen yards of something 'to make up for the children',...there was a fresh-water cod, that long Dave Regan had caught the night before...there was a holland suit for the black boy, with red braid to trim it; and there was a jar of preserved ginger, and some lollies...("for the lil' boy"), and a rum-looking Chinese doll and a rattle ("for the lil' girl") from Sun Tong Lee...And James said that the people would have loaded the buggy with 'rubbish' if he'd waited. They all

seemed glad to see Joe Wilson getting on—and these things did me good. (372)

The multiplication of gifts is overwhelming and indicates that social potential has been unlocked. The entrepreneuring spirit that takes a chance on a humble potato has generated a huge, socially positive force: “They all seemed glad to see Joe Wilson getting on—and these things did me good.” A double buggy is literally a vehicle for socialisation. As Mary’s sister hinted to Joe: “Now if Mary had a comfortable buggy, she could drive in with the children oftener. Then she wouldn’t feel the loneliness so much.” (363) Not only does the buggy close the isolating distances but also it allows *more* people to simultaneously do so. The buggy also functions as the symbol of the promises of their marriage: “Ever since we were married it had been Mary’s great ambition to have a buggy.” (353) It had been relegated to the “Ah well, some day” corner of Joe’s thinking. The rich rewards Joe and Mary receive endorse the pragmatic spirit driving their success and implicitly criticises the brooding, non-generative side of his personality. Importantly when this pragmatic spirit is able to flourish, it enhances the social unit; in this case, the family is rewarded and becomes the target of the broader community’s good will. In the purchase of the buggy, not only does Joe declare a social intention (and one which is richly responded to by his society) but he fulfils a hope of his marriage so gently considered in the closing paragraphs of the series:

Then we sat, side by side, on the edge of the verandah, and talked more than we’d done for years—and there was a good deal of “Do you remember?” in it—and I think we got to understand each other better that night.

And at last Mary said, “Do you know, Joe, why, I feel tonight just—just like I did the day we were married.”

And somehow I had that strange, shy sort of feeling too. (373)



## Bridging the Gap: Bringing Lawson and Moorhouse Together

The writing of Henry Lawson and Frank Moorhouse shares significant similarities in theme, approach and form. They can be placed together, also, as writers concerned with charting moral development in a world of relative values, instability and change. For Lawson's time, issues such as the troubled economy, union defeats, the suffragette movement and immigration, to say nothing of the physical obstacles like drought, had their effect on notions of (principally male) personal security and stability. Moorhouse's generation was also confronted by an equally challenging period of change. Bruce Bennett includes the following issues as pivotal to the time: Whitlam's election after the "ice age" of 23 years of conservative government, the Vietnam War moratorium protests, green issues, obscenity changes and the anti-censorship movement, the liberalisation of divorce laws, the first gay and lesbian Mardi Gras (1978) and the first test-tube baby (1980).<sup>132</sup> Bennett writes that these events, "contributed to a climate of feeling which affected thinking Australians at this time. Instability, excitement, dislocation, anxiety and fear were among the responses to these events."<sup>133</sup> The "contemporary experiences of uncertainty and dislocation"<sup>134</sup> that he sees influencing Moorhouse's work are also present in Lawson's. The specific issues may differ but the core sense of instability remains. As with Lawson's men, many of Moorhouse's characters perpetually endure the anxiety of an uncertain state. On reflecting upon his own life during these periods of social upheaval, Moorhouse himself remarks: "the freedom we were discovering then brought massive anxiety—we didn't know what the f... we were doing."<sup>135</sup> Perpetual uncertainty produces a need to stabilise the experiential field in some way. Lawson's men find tentative security in the pull of human obligations rather than in higher orders of absolute systems of meaning. Also, the continued practice of ritual produces meaning in an otherwise destitute environment. These ideas also function in Moorhouse. He goes further than Lawson in his investigation into human obligation and produces some interesting results. Like Lawson, however, Moorhouse's irony is driven by a suspicion of formalised systems of meaning and he also focuses on the uses of ritual in meaning-

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<sup>132</sup> Bennett, B. *Australian Short Fiction: A History*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. 2002. p. 180-181.

<sup>133</sup> Bennett, p. 180.

<sup>134</sup> Bennett, p. 181.

<sup>135</sup> Chenery, S. "Full, Frank and Finally." *The Australian Magazine*. 28-29 August, 1993. pp. 10-15. p. 10. [original ellipsis]

making. For Moorhouse, ritual and role-play momentarily stabilise the otherwise unstable self and also allow for experiments of self. Here, the conventional family might be rejected but certain similar domestic apparatus are pursued regardless. Moorhouse's principal male narrator craves constantly the anonymity and ahistoricity which can be obtained through the rental car, the motel room and the call girl but these forms are comforting because they mimic certain domestic conventions—the car, the home, the wife. These rituals provide ballast whilst the social landscape changes or is rejected outright.

On the surface, a comparison between the philosophical attitudes of Moorhouse and Lawson may almost seem outlandish, particularly given the agenda of Moorhouse's early career:

In my late 20s I rebelled against Steele Rudd, Lawson, Paterson and the Bush Tradition. Young Australian writers wanted now to be urban sophisticates and to write for the *New Yorker* and *Paris Review*.<sup>136</sup>

Moorhouse's attitude, however, can easily be read as the rejection of the Bush Tradition in the context of its role in the oppressive, singular Nationalism prevalent in Moorhouse's early writing career. Wilding makes this point in *The Tabloid Story Pocket Book*: "What we rejected were the false uses of the Lawson tradition and the dubious nationalism."<sup>137</sup> One could go so far as to say that, at the time, Moorhouse was, in fact, pursuing a Lawsonian style against the then trends, such as Peter Carey's and Murray Bail's experimentations with fabulism.<sup>138</sup> As Bennett notes: "Moorhouse is a renovator of realism, in a mimetic tradition extending back to Lawson and Rudd, rather than a revolutionary technical innovator."<sup>139</sup> Elizabeth Webby also draws a strong comparison between Moorhouse and Lawson, arguing for several stylistic similarities, including a "rejection of objective realism", the "conscious recognition of the reader", and a "fondness for a type of first-person narrative which directs considerable irony at the narrator himself."<sup>140</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Moorhouse, F. "Finding Steele Rudd: The Back Door to Australian Folklore." *Bulletin*. December 24.31, 1985. pp. 62-66. p. 63.

<sup>137</sup> Wilding, M. "The Tabloid Short Story." *The Tabloid Story Pocket Book*. Glebe: Wild and Woolley. 1978. pp. 295-316. p. 306.

<sup>138</sup> Bennett, B. "Frank Moorhouse and the New Journalism". *Overland*. 70. 1978. p. 6.

<sup>139</sup> Bennett, *Australian Short Fiction*. p. 184.

<sup>140</sup> Webby, E. "Australian Short Fiction from *While the Billy Boils* to *The Everlasting Secret Family*. *Australian Literary Studies*. 10: 2. October, 1981. pp. 147-158. p. 155.

Common to both Lawson and Moorhouse are their writing apprenticeships in journalism, out of which comes writing with a contemporary social orientation.<sup>141</sup> Their writing is concerned with human action, its responsibilities and consequences under the pressure of contemporary value shifts. Fiction under the influence of journalism locates particular types or sub-groups and shows how those types function in the social scene. The mobilisation of these sub-groups produces ironic contrast, and this strategy shows a similarity in function to the antipodean/utopian literatures that challenge the standing order through the mobilisation of totally new—or back-to front—positions. Old values are thus tested and contemporary movements assessed.

In the works of both writers, the impact of journalism is felt in content and form. Bruce Bennett notes that Moorhouse's early fiction in particular shows the influences of journalism through:

close attention to manners and social setting, an ear for dialogue and a clipped, understated, carefully sub-edited style in the Hemingway manner, implying more than it states.<sup>142</sup>

The same could be said for Lawson, whose early stories especially followed the *Bulletin's* early editorial credo of "Boil it down."<sup>143</sup> Importantly for both of these writers, the concise approach of the journalistic style facilitates the tightly controlled punches of satire. As Bennett notes, this style implies more than it states. "Boiled down" work does not necessarily become simplified; in the hands of writers like Lawson and Moorhouse, the fibres of irony are tightened.

To illustrate the moves of particular sub-groups within the broader social sphere, both Lawson and Moorhouse use short stories that, while being discrete, are often peopled by the same characters and thus invite appraisals within a broader context.<sup>144</sup> These characters reappear at different ages, under different pressures or at different stages along a line of consequences. In this sense, Moorhouse's so-called discontinuous narrative is really a new name for work Lawson had already begun with his string of familiar characters operating in ever-unfamiliar situations, and appearing in stories which do not necessarily need to function in a particular chronological fashion.

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<sup>141</sup> It is important to note that this style of writing, at least in Lawson's case, earned him the title of "objective realist" but, as Webby notes, "he was never a realist in the Zolaesque sense of that term." p. 154.

<sup>142</sup> Bennett, p. 186.

<sup>143</sup> For an interesting discussion on the aesthetic agenda of the *Bulletin* see D.R. Jarvis, "The Development of an Egalitarian Poetics in the *Bulletin*, 1880-1890", *Australian Literary Studies*. 10:1. 1981. pp. 22-34.

<sup>144</sup> Moorhouse draws this comparison in an interview in *Speaking Volumes*. p.163.

The journalistic impulse is to record social action. Lawson and Moorhouse both record what goes on in the public space. Moorhouse extends this inquiry into what *can* be public. The censorship Moorhouse faced early in his career indicates the morally confrontational nature of his work at that time; yet, there is more to this than mere shock value. Old social mores may have been robustly and controversially rejected but in their place a new kind of ethic emerges. After all, the “discipline of indiscipline”<sup>145</sup> is still a discipline. On *Futility and Other Animals*, Wilding writes:

Behind all these stories lies the ethic of being true to oneself, breaking with delusions and deceits: the occasional three- and four-letter words, the occasionally aberrant activities, are all in the service of this quest for the honest way, are presented to us not to shock, but to ask for a new, truer, fairer way of life. His characters would probably arraign him for it, but the impulse behind their writer is that of the moralist.<sup>146</sup>

Moorhouse’s work on the urban tribe plots this quest—and its anxieties—with particular regard to sexual relations and identity. In the unstable worlds of both Lawson and Moorhouse gender ambiguities and the questions of identity are complex and in both these writers we see personal identities continually redefined in relation to other persons or situations rather than in preordained types. Whilst the issues at stake are different, Moorhouse and Lawson share a pragmatic attitude towards identity construction. In short, this dynamic mesh of selves creates reality. Again, this attitude that seems to emerge as a trend in Australian literature, has its parallel with the American pragmatists. Of James’s position, McDermott writes:

The perspective of other persons is partially constitutive of their reality and, therefore, by shared custom, partially constitutive of ours as well. If there is no single vantage point from which the world can be seen or interpreted or experientially had as whole, then every person makes his or her contribution to the ongoing statement as to how it is with the world, and how the world comes to be for me is in some way due to how the world has come to be for the other, for you.<sup>147</sup>

Crucial here is the concept of decentralisation. Being devoid of any “right” single point of view, the universe is really a multiverse, brimming with diversity and in constant evolution. This conceptualisation is commonly seen as a “new world” ethic and is

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<sup>145</sup> *Forty-Seventeen*, p. 8.

<sup>146</sup> Wilding, M. “Living in the Inner City” *Southerly*, 33.3, 1969, pp. 231-236, p. 236.

<sup>147</sup> McDermott, p. 112.

usefully discussed in Baudrillard's *America*. In constant contrasts to a European mind-set, he writes that Europe will never enjoy: "the concrete, flexible, functional, active freedom we see at work in American institutions and [in each citizen]. Our conception of freedom will never be able to rival their spatial, mobile conception, which derives from the fact that at a certain point they freed themselves from that historical centrality."<sup>148</sup> When Baudrillard defines American attitudes, he is describing the pragmatic mind-set. It is a mind-set that is also present in the writers under discussion here. Decentralisation shows itself in a: "primary, visceral, unbounded vitality, springing not from rootedness, but from the lack of roots, a metabolic vitality, in sex and bodies, as well as in work and buying and selling."<sup>149</sup> In contrast, he writes that in Europe, diversification becomes nearly impossible, "centralised by a solid historical process."<sup>150</sup> Freedom from "historical centrality" opens up the future for further evolution. This is the focus of Moorhouse's work. The sense of creative momentum present in "The Iron-Bark Chip" is elaborately recast in Moorhouse where the male narrator of the later stories is on the road to what Baudrillard describes as: "the point of no return. This is the key... The journey has no end... there is no longer any reason for it to come to an end."<sup>151</sup> He continues:

The very possibility of the Eternal Return is becoming precarious: that marvelous perspective presupposes that things unfold in a necessary, predestined order, the sense of which lies beyond them. There is nothing like that today; things merely follow on in a flabby order that leads nowhere.<sup>152</sup>

For Baudrillard's European eye, things might seem to lead nowhere but it is a premise of this thesis that *through* this process of decentralisation and *through* the rejection of absolute meanings, true moral development may start to occur. The journey may have no end but it has this definite aim. The ever-modifying pragmatic, relational sense of self has consequences for moral action. In Moorhouse, the practical position, even when it is ironised in works like *The Electrical Experience*, is always favoured over the abstract position. As with Lawson, Moorhouse's work all the time shows that moral decisions are made under pressure within the reality of changing circumstance. That is, decisions are made with the awareness that one's knowledge is limited. The process of inquiry,

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<sup>148</sup> Baudrillard, J. (trans. Turner, C.) *America*. London: Verso. 1988. p. 81.

<sup>149</sup> Baudrillard p. 7.

<sup>150</sup> Baudrillard, p. 83.

<sup>151</sup> Baudrillard, p. 10.

<sup>152</sup> Baudrillard, p. 72.

reflection and analysis is vital to ensure ethical responses. The dilemma is that knowledge, values and perspectives can change, yet action produces binding consequences that may be more or less permanent. This is potentially paralysing. To investigate these dilemmas of action, Moorhouse's scope is wide. His span covers the moral turmoil that issues when a Rotarian is aroused by a dark-eyed gypsy girl on the New South Wales south coast, to the negotiation between post-colonial guilt and rape in the land called Conference-ville, to diplomacy on an international scale in Geneva.

## Part III Frank Moorhouse

### Chapter 1

#### “The Ethics and Good Fellowship of this Home”:

#### Inheriting George McDowell’s Pragmatism

In *The Electrical Experience* Moorhouse presents a tiny world under construction; a small town, vulnerably perched on the edge of the “endless bush” is struggling to come to life under the pioneering eye and hand of T. George McDowell, self-made soft drinks manufacturer:

He kept seeing in his mind the scattered smoky houses, the long green grass of the unbuilt-on blocks, the shops which still didn’t link to make a solid row, his factory, and the two saw mills nibbling away at the huge endless bush surrounding the town, turning it into building planks. Always in the bush he realised impatiently how little a hold they had yet on the coast. The thin white line of dusty habitation between the sea and the unsettled mountains. He urgently wanted for the land to be cleared and the roads properly made. (74)

George is constructing a new world guided by the “ethics and good fellowship” of his home, yet, even in the process of doing so, the relevance of his world is a poor match for the march of time and social change: “The Bohemian Problem had enveloped his own daughter, Terri.” (2) His world is increasingly vulnerable to change which his ethics cannot accommodate. George’s attitude of pioneering progress, clearly expressed in the above quotation, is in part produced by the sense of experiment and opportunity that also makes up his character as a pragmatic small-businessman. It is also fuelled by his fear of the unknown other that lies just beyond the scope of his control. He is eager to subdue what is still beyond the boundaries of his civilisation in order to shore up stability, a security which is clearly lacking, signified in his impatience about “how little a hold they had”. The fragility of the small town is set against the “endless bush”. George displays a general anxiety about the finite when it is placed this precariously within the infinite and there is a parallel here with what Lee sees as the vulnerability of civilisation in Lawson’s work, when Joe Wilson takes his family into the bush. He writes:

If the domestic is both structured and signified through the presence of the domestic apparatus within the domestic space, then the Bush is located through the absence of not just the domestic or public, but the possibility of making any of the

distinctions which might be associated with civilisation...The Bush is absence, the absence of civilisation, the absence of home, the absence of the personal.<sup>153</sup>

George's impatience with the slow pace of progress in his town demonstrates this very concern about making the distinctions associated with civilisation. To make a distinction is to make a valuation and if civilisation and its values are absent or precarious, where will value now be found? Rather than pursue new valuations, as a pragmatic pioneer might, George's reaction is to exert massive control in order to claim or cling to what are his own bedrock values. Despite his pioneering insistence that he is "always on the side of the new" he inadvertently stems the flow of his own moral progress; this analysis will focus on the irony of his condition. The insistent pressure of the untamed bush reminds George just how much continues to exist outside his restricted worldview, threatening the validity of his own beliefs. George's character is essentially ironic because he has the attributes of the pioneer in his general resourcefulness, ingenuity and readiness to find new ways for new times, yet these skills are hampered by a rigid moral system, the boundaries of which must be protected at all costs.

George's moral system is heavily influenced by an American pragmatic business ethic and this is shown through George's excessive admiration for the American style. He has visited the States seventeen times, he tells Becker, and he admires their "mental tidiness" (133) and the "positive American approach of the *Digest*." (137) An attitude of mental tidiness fits in with a philosophy of practical solutions, unhindered by "verbal solutions" and abstract ideas. George gravitates towards this style through the shared experience of the self-made man at work in the "new world" which is liberated from "the historical centrality" Baudrillard attributes to the old. For example, Becker clings to his motel life because it keeps him "a today-man because there was no yesterday around in a motel. Yesterday held you back." (125) Likewise, George claims that: "To move with Progress one had to shake free of the clutching, bony hand of the past. Men always thought in terms of the past... Inventive men knew how to give the past the slip." (49) George considers himself a philosopher, but not one who spends time in the abstract world. George proclaims to Becker: "But I do not care for words in top hats. I believe in shirt-sleeve words. I believe in getting the job done. We're like that on the coast. We

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<sup>153</sup> Lee, "Looking for Mr Backbone", p. 101.



believe in the right technique and the right machine.” (8) Here, there are none of what Baudrillard considers the abstractions and idealisations of Europe. This is the pragmatic, new world philosophy at work on the south coast.

As discussed in the introduction, Pragmatism allows for reevaluations to occur in the daily activities of the new world outside the traditional value hierarchies of Europe. In this novel Moorhouse takes this pragmatic progression of value to the extreme using the irony of excess to inquire into this new mode of evaluation. When George is asked: “Haven’t you worried about your purpose in creation—about man’s place in nature?” (75) George simply says: “I make things people want.” (76) In so doing, his existence is justified every day. His value is secured (for as long as his products are valued). George’s conceptualisation of self here is a hard-line, literal pragmatism; a man is only what he does and his meaning and value is derived from fulfilling this function. As James says, however: “Pragmatism is method only.” There are many ways to value what one does and pragmatism has no part in determining this criteria. For George, his valuations derive from the business ethic: that is, if a person runs a successful business, then that person’s value is assured. It is beyond his imagination that other people gain their valuations from different sources; to this end, Terri acts as a counterweight in this discussion of value. The Bohemian set, like the endless bush, is the unfathomable other, which cannot be contained by the “ethics and good fellowship” of George’s home. Significantly, George does not critically reflect upon his own ethical system and it is this very blind spot that prevents his ability to evolve as times change. Through the pragmatic perspective, the inability to accept and critique specific cultural limitations creates a stalled ethic that is non-progressive and the boundaries of culture harden. It is an irony that, George, being “on the side of the new” and an advocate for progress, wonders:

When and why did a man lose the faculty of change? Was it some point in the dying of the mind and body. A hardening of the nervous system. He practised keeping his mind agile. Daily he made himself think thoughts he had not thought before. He forced himself to consider the worst. He practised considering the opposite. He tried always to imagine at least two other possible ways of doing something. He fed his mind with maxims and precepts—the how-to-do-it manual of the mind. (49)

Significantly – and this is the source of the irony – his inventive, pragmatic style is hampered by a stern personal ethics which reduces the morally creative drive that

facilitates future becoming. In contrast to the vibrant shape-changing pioneers of “The Iron-Bark Chip”, George lacks spontaneity. Whilst he admits his sternness suggests a “strong character” which appeals to him: “[h]e diligently learned jokes to tell so as to put people at ease, especially staff and such, but, no, he was a stiff man.” (60) The structure of the novel builds, from the outset, the irony of George’s pragmatic practice. The novel opens with George’s complaints of the values of the new generation. Through George’s retrospective eye, Moorhouse demonstrates how George, in his old age, stiffens and is no longer able to adapt, bend or respond to the new despite his continuing rhetoric to the opposite. A cycle emerges through this story and, indeed, through much of Moorhouse’s fiction, where the progressive new reaches a point of stiffness and those characters “on the side of the new” lose their capability of change. This cycle offers a clue in decoding Moorhouse’s description of Australia as “the ever-renewing country”. As one generation’s borders firm and stiffen, the next generation attempts to revolt against these boundaries only to then stiffen again. The building work is never complete. George’s drive to put down or simply deny difference circumscribes his experiential field, thus robbing him of the regenerative, future-oriented position his pragmatic mindset might otherwise offer; he hampers the momentum that creative energy can generate and this is expressed through his battles with the “protestations of his soul.”

George’s stringent business formulae, under the influences of Rotary, Freemasonry and the free market, are applied to all moral problems he encounters. Both the public and private are steeped in the discourse of economics, with an emphasis on modernisation and the enduring value of the self-made man. The productive traits of the businessman are continually cited as man’s highest development and business is exalted through George’s lofty idealisations. Advertising is the “poetry of commerce”, the speech and the business letter are its “practical arts” and even God Himself is described as the “Great Chairman in the Other Country.” George’s excessive application of the rules makes him the target of much irony, yet it is a curious double irony since we are left with the sense that George’s conceptualisation is often as necessary as it is ridiculous if his world is to retain any order or meaning at all. For George, community itself is corporatised requiring a hierarchical structure of discipline and order:

He had been elected District Scout Master. In his speech he had said that the supreme challenge of each generation was ‘holding’ the next generation. Keeping control of the young. That it was possible for a generation to be ‘lost’, for control to slip and for

civilization to be without a generation to take over...nevertheless, while membership of a family can ensure that the values of that family inhere in the children of that family, Community Organizations had to police this and to ensure that 'replacement parts' were available for those families lacking values. (15)

Here, community is a corporation and George, as elected managing director, polices the values of his subordinates. The generational "take over" may only occur when the next generation is trained in the right values. If a problem is discovered within the community machine, a mechanical solution is found: "replacement parts" will be provided where a fault occurs. The point of policing values is to avoid diversification of value systems; George's concept of community is based on similarity and cannot tolerate difference. All social solutions are based on the submersion of the other into the majority. The "problem of the coloured races," for example, will be solved with "a skin bleach for blackfellows" (83)

The leading ideal in George McDowell's ethics is the principle of fellowship and fellowship is the framework for both the Rotary and Masonry platforms. Significantly, however, membership for both organisations is *limited*. It is a tribal fellowship and as such generally secures localised interests, yet does not guarantee broader community cohesion, even in a small country town. George believes that fellowship is the general prerequisite for social and familial harmony (since the family is a microcosm of society.) Significantly, George's emphasis on familial fellowship is based on certain restrictions:

The sacredness and survival of the family, I argue, is largely dependent on the environment of Fellowship that is made around it. That's what Rotary and life are about. Complexes cannot live in the Rotary home... A complex is when people aggravate their differences, while Fellowship is generally interpreted as a development of the principles on which there can be agreement. One is the seeking of conflict: the other harmony. (136)

Whilst social harmony is desirable, George's formulation suggests a repression of difference and a denial of conflict rather than its resolution. "The incident you so painfully bring up", he writes in a letter to Terri, "had all but been forgotten by me, and I see no reason or purpose in your raising it again or telling it to the psychiatrist. I feel these childish acts are best kept within the family." (128) For George, Terri's adoption of a Bohemian lifestyle runs contrary to the ethics of his home because as he sees it, those "artistic types" were "people who put themselves apart." In placing themselves apart,

fellowship is broken. George grows anxious about social difference because the availability of different lifestyles indicates that there is no standard behaviour which will bind the larger community together. The emerging Bohemia directly challenges the validity and sustainability of old standards of behaviour.

It is one of the ironies of George's constitution that he bristles against social difference and change and yet he *is* a pioneer: "Where there is conflict between the new and the old, I'd always be with the new." (76) He is resistant to certain types of attitudinal change yet, as someone on the settled fringes, his living depends on his ability to adapt: "Move with the Times or be moved over by the Times." (48) He is on the frontier: "headed for the uncharted territory." (73). Men who become set in old ways of doing business or who fail to "modernise" disappoint him. It is therefore strange that throughout the *Electrical Experience*, George *never* changes his mind. He is totally unyielding.

The hardness of George's business ethic is disconcertingly clear when Tutman, his long-time friend, approaches him for a loan so that he may avoid bankruptcy. Tutman's ice business is failing because of the new age of refrigeration and so to George, it seems that the Times are rolling over Tutman. George considers, somewhat coldly, that since Tutman's "vocation" as ice-maker was no longer relevant given the advances in refrigeration: "[i]t was the closing of the bank doors for Jim. What he had learned in life was no longer valid currency." The man therefore has served his purpose and it seems he is no longer valuable because he is no longer useful: "A man was nothing more than what he knew and what he could do." (46) For George, success in business translates into life value.

In the terms of pragmatist theory, this scene sets out the difference between an economic-style of pragmatism based on expediency and profitability and a pragmatic morality that is founded upon mutual responsibility and progressive inclusion. George feels entirely satisfied that he has no moral requirement to help Tutman because it does not follow the logic of his ethical model—to be on the side of progress, to advance, to modernise:

"We are but the engine-drivers of progress," T. George McDowell said, moving a paperweight as if by calculation, as if it were a driving-lever, a switch, a throttle.

"Is friendship superseded?" (45)

George evades the issue of friendship altogether and one might ask whether this resistance contravenes George's rules of "fellowship". Tutman says: "You and your damned Rotary guff about the Brotherhood of Business." (47) In his anger, Tutman smashes a photo of them both that was taken in "the rosy days of friendship and the allegiance of equals." In this phrase, "the allegiance of equals," George assesses that the moral obligation to help Tutman has passed because they are no longer equals. Fellowship, for George, is predicated on a peer group of the same values and, by extension, the same successes. Tutman has dropped out of George's peer group and, therefore, can be excluded from his very limited, tribal fellowship: "Tutman had sunk personally through business and other difficulties, maintaining a false sense of superiority by mixing now with inferiors in the public bars." (62) It is clear that George's "fellowship" is very limited indeed.

By describing a man's knowledge and life's work as either valid or invalid "currency" it is clear how immersed George's worldview is in the discourse of economics. The consequence of this is a distancing of the personal. George can only maintain this economic perspective by avoiding the personal and when Tutman suicides, a direct consequence of George's refusal to help, the narrative does not show George engaging directly in the news. The narrative facilitates George's evasion of responsibility in a manner reminiscent of "The Union Buries Its Dead", where the acceptance of guilt is avoided through evasive narrative acts. Just as the "linguistic smokescreens" surrounding the drowning and funeral show the increasing emotional distances in order to avoid responsibility, George's thoughts are likewise plotted with varying degrees of distance. When Tutman is initially only reported as missing, the news is indirectly narrated through George's consciousness:

He learned by telephone message next day that James Tutman had disappeared during the night, leaving his wife, his two almost grown children, and a bankrupt ice-making business.

He was, as a man of feeling, disturbed by the news. It was quite a knock. But as a realist he was somewhat relieved...He did not admire himself for his sense of relief, but on the other hand, did not relish facing Tutman in the street or seeing him decline into god-knows-what. Somehow it was best, he felt in the hours following the news, that Tutman rule off the book at this point. The town could care for his wife.

Tutman was a lesson. (52)

Here, the news is clearly filtered through George's perception. It's "a knock" but it is also a source of relief. However, when Tutman's body is recovered, George shows an absence of emotion. The narrative becomes neutral. The typical markers of indirect discourse are removed, for George has removed himself as a participant in the drama. Reflections that might be accorded to George are noticeably absent suggesting an evasion of responsibility, of guilt. It is strange that George, "as a man of feeling" who had felt "a knock" that Tutman had disappeared, seems to experience no emotion, knocks or otherwise, at the same man's suicide. His presence, however, is certainly again felt in the last line of the chapter: "The local paper incorrectly stated that Tutman had invented the block of ice." (53) In so saying, George steadies his ship by focusing upon a mistake made by someone else, in this case the local journalist, and in turn divesting Tutman of any value at all.<sup>154</sup> If he "was" only what he "did" and that was reported incorrectly, then he *did* nothing and therefore *was* nothing and thus was not a life worth restoring or preserving. He is a "lesson", *tut tut*. Similarly in "The Union Buries Its Dead" the absence of a correct name for the deceased, together with the absence of grieving relatives, threatens to nullify the life. As with the "Union Buries Its Dead", the damning evasions in this episode imply that more should have been done. Moorhouse, like Lawson, clearly illustrates the deadly consequences of limited, unsympathetic fellowships. Through their ironic treatment of episodes like this, both writers imply that through freedom from typical ethical practices, agents like George would be able to act with *more* ethical competence, not less. Both writers are suggesting that true moral competence is brought about through rigorous testing and re-testing of standing ethical practice. In not coming to Tutman's aid, George takes what James calls a "moral holiday"; that is, he defers making a decision and instead relies on his business ethic. To clarify this idea, the risks of responsibility are usefully discussed in *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*, where, borrowing from Derrida, Mark Dooley writes that:

ethical action should never be simply governed by a ritual rule; a responsible decision demands risking the madness and anxiety which the either/or decision requires...A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be a calculable process. It might be legal; it would not be just.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>154</sup> It is also a horrific reality of George's worldview wherein the suicide is the logical conclusion for a man who no longer has life-value.

<sup>155</sup> Dooley, M. "Risking Responsibility: A Politics of the Emigré." *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*. (ed) Pattison, G. & Shakespeare, S. London: Macmillan Press. 1998. pp. 139-155. p. 144.

This is the moral pragmatist's burden: since each moral experience is unique, it must be approached on its own merits. Strict allegiance to systems of meaning—"moral holidays"—denies the ethical development of the moral agent. Importantly, sympathy for the other is reduced and this episode, in particular, shows that George's life formula neutralises the human element of life. This excess of control on the emotion leads to excessive repression of human feeling. It damages his frequent assertion that he tries "to walk the path of goodwill." It is goodwill extended only to a limited male membership. It is the final irony of this situation, that is not levelled until the closing chapter, that we find out George's factory has gone to ruin after being sold and Tutman's sons make a thriving business from selling ice to petrol stations. This final twist acts as a reminder that at any time, fortunes may change and anything might happen.

George's lack of spontaneity does not cope with such contingencies. He understands the vicissitudes of life but he attempts to cope with this state of life through immense control. For George, success can only be the product of emotional and mental control, coordination and order. I will refer to this as George's "theory of coordination". The theory of coordination holds that if the smallest working units are well conceived and in order then everything will run smoothly. George bases his life principle on the idea that the large (be it a machine, a principle or a Life Question) is a sum of its parts. It is thus a source of bemusement that this theory of coordination, applied to the rearing of his children, did not produce a perfect child. This theory relies on the fact that life can be mechanically conceived and controlled:

No, I don't ask [the big questions]. I live by the rules inherent in the job at hand. Every trade has its own rules inherent in it...Every Science too, and every Craft—even, say, the Science of aerated drinks has its rules inherent. I suppose I believe that when you follow the rules of the craft, the big questions look after themselves. That when you arrive at the Big Questions, if you've followed the rules inherent in your craft, the answers will be obvious. (75)

Harmony—from the private to the global—relies on locally coordinated systems of action and behaviour. It grows from the private into the public and begins at the physical level:

Packing the car, he jarred his thumb on the door. He could hardly bear it. He hopped about blowing warm air on his hand, damning and blasting and f-dashing. It hurt like the blazes. It was a bad

sign, lack of inner co-ordination...He had a flat at Fitzroy Falls and skinned his knuckle changing the wheel. He almost wept with the feeling of being so jangled, so rattled. It was the body turning on itself. (38-39)

The multiple effects of George's obsessive application of his theory of control and coordination are demonstrated when Moorhouse describes George's and Thelma's domestic arrangements and their intimate relationship. George lies in bed contently thinking over his "new house [that] was finished in detail right down to the built-in holder for toilet-paper rolls." (15) He goes to sleep happy that everything in his life was "being correctly done." (14) This emphasis on being correct down to the very last detail demonstrates this theory of coordination. Everything must be in order. George even thinks of his sexual performance in terms of a successful small-businessman: "you are a good tradesman, George, and you clean up after the job." (19) When Moorhouse depicts George and Thelma's intimacies, they are trying for a third child because three "seemed to him to be a manageable and modern number." (12) Family planning is akin to business planning. Of their family plan, George thinks: "He himself was a precautionary man, although it was true that all business did involve risk-taking." (12) To exaggerate George and Thelma's system of controls and restraints in their intimate life, Moorhouse lists their excessive methods of birth control and the rules of their intercourse. Thelma uses a diaphragm and also asks that George wear a condom "just in case". Then, "[a]fter, because of germ life, they usually washed, she first, and he second," and she insists that the condom be flushed down the toilet "immediately after". Clearly, Thelma's precautions are for more than birth control. For Thelma, sex is a messy business and it must be contained as far as possible. Curiously, these restraints and rules have a positive effect on George's desire:

He observed that the limitations and restrictions on the matter of sexual indulgence, placed by Thelma in their marriage, sometimes aroused him, her unwillingness, he had perhaps that sort of personality which was, which savoured, well, the restraint she imposed, the limitations on when, and her refusals...It had to do, he speculated, with the basic economic principle of scarcity. (13)

Whilst George's personality may savour restraint, such restriction also has a negative effect. The imposed restraints, which are dedicated to maintaining that everything "was being correctly done", cause a repression of desire and passion that threatens to erupt



out of all of George's known order. As George lies in bed contemplating his correctness, a darker thought creeps in—a close encounter with the gypsies in a field outside of town. The gypsies come to represent the mysterious and unbridled sensuality which George attempts to organise and control out of existence. During the encounter in the field, however, it almost becomes too strong to resist:

A rather pretty gypsy girl just out of childhood, her hair half covering her dark face, and close up he could not judge her age—thirteen?—had flagged him down. Gypsy girl. Had smiled at him in a certain way. He rather thought, self-control slipping, that...maybe...the gypsy girl...would...he had lost his self-control for that instant, she called her mother, his hand on her arm, she had called her mother, groin against her, she called her mother, and the mother was morbidly attractive too, aroused in his trousers, he wanted to offer money to lie down in the bushes with the gypsy girl...maybe an arrangement, but he could go no further than £1. (16)

The gypsies appear in the twilight like sirens, swarming his car, confusing him. Before he can suggest any “arrangement”, the mother, taking things from George's pockets, begins to tell his fortune: “The coming of a female figure, a child, a female dark and of a troubled nature. Thoughts of suicide.” (16) It is thus, in the afternoon dark, in the atmosphere of an illicit sensuality, that Terri emerges. Moorhouse seems to be making the point that the repressive control of sexuality breeds the opposite effect; here, for example, it threatens to lead to paedophilia. These haunting thoughts of the illicit and unrestricted are contrasted with Thelma's control of their intercourse to the point where the reader develops a sympathy for George's desire. This restricted sexuality is a symbol for the denial or removal of spontaneity and creative energy. What becomes clear in this scene is that what is repressed must eventually erupt and here it erupts through fantasy. As the thought of the gypsy girl returns to him, George is aroused:

“Again?” his wife queried, as he rubbed himself against her.  
 “I feel like it again,” he whispered.  
 “All right,” she said, moving apart her legs. “It's not like you.”  
 (17)

It is, therefore, under the influence of these illicit passions that Terri is conceived and she thus becomes the physical manifestation of George's hidden sensuality. Ironically, it is the very strict order his self-discipline imposes which gives birth to a child who will go through life determined “to use the senses 100 per cent.” (148) Terri is George's own

repressed spirit released in the tempest of her birth. She represents that part of him which lies outside the sphere of his coordinated control.

In order to counter the hardening effects of excessive restraints on George's personality, Tutman encourages an affair between George and the policeman's widow: "It might soften you up, George." But George resists and notes to himself: "The flesh, the passions have no special rights or claims on the behaviour." When this passion between the widow and George does emerge it is quickly put down, for the unpredictable nature of passion runs contrary to George's life plans. When he falters, he proposes harsher restraints to recover; he determines to never acknowledge her again: "despite the roaring protests of his body." (48) Likewise, he forbids the gypsies admission to local fairs in order to resist the temptations stirred within him. Avoiding temptation may very well be a sensible solution to maintain his marital fidelity; however, this situation also needs to be taken metaphorically. Through the perspective of pragmatism, George is refusing to admit ideas that confront him and that would challenge his customary standards. The "roaring protests" of body and soul signal the widening gap between his life theory and his daily experiences. His theories are not holding out yet, rather than re-examine his standards, he turns his back on the new. From the pragmatist's view, when a troubling thought arises, the mind seeks to resolve this disturbance in order to regain equilibrium. The flexible mind is able to achieve this by testing new ideas in order to advance the previously held idea that no longer *works*. In Lawson and Moorhouse, however, these challenging ideas are often avoided rather than confronted. The drunken men in "The Union Buries Its Dead" drown their guilty minds. Similarly, when Moorhouse's narrator in *Conference-ville* gains a disturbing insight into his behaviour, he seeks the solace of alcohol: "My mind kept touching the red-hot word in my central consciousness... My mind kept going back to see if the word had gone, or if it was only a self-lacerating mistake."<sup>156</sup> Rather than reflect upon the image with a view to self-correction, the narrator decides to get "bitterly drunk. Specially and privately drunk in the inner room of my head." With the help of alcohol, he "recasts the insight" (90) rather than attempt to recast himself. Similarly, when George is faced with a "miserable" insight that would aid his self-development, he wrestles it down (although without the aid of alcohol):

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<sup>156</sup> Moorhouse, F. *Conference-ville*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson. 1976. p. 87 All future references will be to this edition.

He had a thought about himself which made him miserable.  
 It was this: I am a man held in my interlocking restraints: I am not free to enjoy the fruits of pleasures... Sometimes his spirit cried out, wept, he wanted sometimes to be, just for one day, indolent. To say, drink alcohol, like some of the others. To lay down the burden... He was locked in place. In the yoke. He feared rules. He was frightened that relaxation was irreversible. That, once relaxed, the rules would not return to place. A slide would begin. Into what? What did he fear?...  
 He pulled himself together.  
 Up again, he washed his face, wetted his hair, parted it and went downstairs. (37-38)

George's excessive control is contrasted with several other figures, notably Mr Scribner who is a source of bemusement to George. Moorhouse offers these contrasts in order to test various states of being and evaluate them. Mr Scribner does not follow any life plan yet, to George's amazement, functions regardless. Where George attempts to control as many forces as possible, Scribner seeks to control none:

“Who told you I was planning a trip to the city, Mr Scribner?”  
 “O I came across you simply by chance. Mr McDowell. I was taking a stroll.”  
 That was the whole damn' difference between himself and Scribner. Scribner daily placed himself in the hands of fate. He, on the other hand, worked at making fate do what he wanted. The whole damn' difference.  
 Yet here they were, in the same car, going to the same destination.  
 (97)<sup>157</sup>

Significantly, George finds himself enjoying Scribner's company when he is feeling in “a truant mood”: “He usually fought against this truancy in himself, but yet it did relax him—when he allowed himself to go like a balloon in the breeze. Babbling on with fantasy and speculation.” (95) What surfaces in this contrast is the effect of George's self-imposed restraints. He believes so strongly in the need to curb and control for the success of plans, that the opposing desire stirs tension within him. Not only does he wish to remove the gypsies and the widow from his daily world, he actually wants to play truant from *himself*.

The difference between George and Scribner is important because, despite their radically different mindsets, they find themselves in the same place at the same time.

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<sup>157</sup> The punctuation of damn' is significant as this is George's thought represented indirectly. Moorhouse includes the punctuation marker for the purposes of excess. Even in George's mind “damn”, as an abbreviation, must be correctly used and considered.

George is confronted with the idea that there are many valid ways of being. Scribner's life is unstructured and, in being so, is open to the opportunities of chance. Scribner declares: "we must not undervalue the spontaneous, the ephemeral, the extemporaneous. Why don't people take Delight?" (99) To George's amazement, Scribner's loose playing with chance and the unstructured pays off: "He noticed to his surprise that although Scribner was not a Mason, the doorman at the club knew him and tipped his cap. Extraordinary." (103)

The pull of George's buried desires climaxes when he is named as the executor of H.C. Crowhurst's will ("Old Harry"). George is presented with a unique task that will satisfy his desires but remain within the confines of official correctness. Old Harry's will states that upon his death, his house and all its contents must be burned. In the town, there is a general resistance to the will with townspeople arguing the house could be given to an unemployed family, and its library could be donated to the School of Arts. Certainly these options are both ethically charged by virtue of their being of great benefit to the community. George disagrees and even though he "had at first made some remarks, along with the rest, about the seemingly wanton destruction," he "inwardly found the commission emotionally quickening, lured by its abnormality." (61) As with his reaction to the gypsy girl, his desire is awakened by what falls outside of general patterns of respectability yet here he allows himself to act on his desire because, despite the perversity, the act is legally sanctioned.

The act goes against his general vision for the town because such destruction runs against community benefit. In this sense the act is contrary to George's own ethic: "Such an unnatural act for the town, striving as it was to shape itself. . . to make itself a normal town along with the rest of the State." (61) But this situation comes with legal validation so, in these rather unique circumstances, his desire can for once override his otherwise rigid ethic of construction and progress because he has been "irrevocably deputed." (65) When he drenches the books with petrol, the local journalist remarks:

"A crime, George. Give them to the School of Arts."

He respected reading and agreed with Backhouse about the crime, thinking as he did that he had never committed a crime, and thinking then that this was not legally a crime, yet resembled criminality. However, he told Backhouse, one undertook a commission in every detail and to the detail, or not at all. "I'm that sort of person."

"I know you're that sort of person, George." (62)

George's actions during this episode show the destructive power when repressed passions erupt. The driving force of his action is to satiate his desire – to “give in” to the impulse to play truant from all that is ethically desirable in a small community and this passion is expressed through the complete thoroughness of the “drenching”. The use of kerosene is excessive for the act has: “opened a throttle in him.” He has let himself go: “[H]e vibrated inwardly with the complete unnaturalness of it, the permitted unnaturalness of it.” (63) He drenches lace doilies, rotted brown flowers and receipts and docketts on their bill spikes. He drenches the stamp collections (“opened for easier burning”) and douses random pages. Even this is not enough. George positions large bales of hay throughout the house and he drenches those too.

Importantly, the task also fulfils a second function: “It was, after all, an official act.” (66) The deputation—the social role—empowers George. Like Joe Wilson's fist-fight, George sees this act as a turning point in overcoming self-consciousness. The burning was: “[the] one event, more than all others in his life, [that] had seemed to diminish his shyness, terrorise it even, so that it receded as a factor in his life.” (61) The effect for George is palpable: “His spirit, far from quailing, was empowered.” (63) As in “Joe Wilson's Courtship”, here the self is pragmatically realised as it is empowered through changing social roles, although, in pragmatic terms, here a severe rupture has occurred, in the transaction between self and society. In committing this act George may well have cured some of his shyness, but his actions have had a high social cost. George's tunnel vision for his own personal development prevents him from seeing his *real* social responsibilities; he only sees his formal social responsibilities. From a pragmatist point of view, for the social dynamic to work effectively the self who is empowered by social roles must in some way enhance the social. George sees that the act has “helped to burn away his shyness.” (68) Thelma, however, takes a different perspective: “Thelma said, some people thought he'd become hard and unyielding because of the burning.” (68) Importantly, Thelma's speaks on behalf of society. From a moral pragmatist viewpoint, the ability to be flexible is the key principle in ongoing self-development but, here, George has hardened. The “hardening of the nervous system” he has previously decried in other men is setting in.

Metaphorically, the fire George has ignited has wreaked social destruction. A second fire occurs in *The Electrical Experience* which is also blamed for destroying the

social fabric. George's passionate nature, which he constantly seeks to repress, fully erupts into full physical manifestation when Terri is born. In apocalyptic fashion, there is a terrible bushfire on the day of her birth: "The temperature was 105. Black Saturday. The sky turned black. The sun could not be properly seen. There was something unnaturally fearful about losing sight of the sun...Some mentioned the end of the world." (3) Homes are burned to the ground and the utterly destructive path of the fire turns social objects inside out: "The sight and smell of burned clothes unsettled him...It was as though the occupant's personal odour was being let loose instead of being kept privately within the four walls of a house. Burned personal things...A family burned out and exposed." (5) George thinks: "the day had affected Terri...disturbed her forever." (4)

Terri, as George's "modern" number three is modern in more ways than George could have anticipated: "Terri, even as a child, had a will of her own." (2) She has the urge to question the prevailing ethic of her family home in contradistinction from her parents and older sister. She is "suffocated" by church and Sunday school and we can extrapolate from this that she has an aversion to formal systems of morality in general. Her sister Gweneth asks the question: "Why do some ideas grab a hold on some people and not others?" (149) Ironically, in her pursuit of new ideas, Terri shows a distinct similarity to her father. She has, in fact, inherited his dominant trait. It is George who complains of the narrow-minded thinkers in his community: "They do not allow certain thinking to come out because of their tightly closed demeanour...Some people frighten ideas away." (102) George's new ideas develop to secure a successful business. He experiments with drinks, flavours, gathers information from "great men" and travel. Terri on the other hand, experiments with lifestyle: "alcohol, speeding in cars, sex, and at one time, Yoga." (148) Becker's experiences of the homes of both Terri and her parents are similar:

Becker wondered how he could fit himself into the McDowell house, so much carpet, so much bric-à-brac, so many pieces of furniture, so many clocks, so many standard lamps, so many travel souvenirs, so many barometers, pianos, and palms. (133)

George surrounds himself with items that reflect his values. Here the phrase "so many" indicates an excessive collection of goods which not only suggests wealth and success but an obsession with certain influences. In particular, George is "travel-proud". His travel souvenirs speak loudly. The esteem he has for America and Americans is reflected in

these goods. Terri also demonstrates this trait but her personal effects display alternative influences. Again, this is taken from Becker's point of view, a man who prefers life without such history:

Her flat asked too much for Becker's liking. Not that he objected to art. Or fad art. But he found that he was most at ease in an electronic, twenty-four-hour, functional motel. Nothing talking back at you. In Terri's place everything was talking at you. Everything she'd done to the place was a message. From the time he stepped in, he was warding them off. The pottery, the artefacts, the prints, the posters, the sketches, the photographs, the pinned-up clippings, the dyed drapes, the books, were all like yelping dogs or crying children. Sunburst symbols, assorted carved statuettes from the East, huge signs, and a hashbag hung from a small hookah. (125)

We can see here that both Terri and George attempt to articulate a sense of self through their acquired artifacts. Given the distinct difference between these two sets of personal artifacts, we can also see Terri's very definite rebellion against her father's values. This is made most explicit when she says to Becker, "I shouldn't like you... I don't like Americans theoretically." (127). It is no small irony that not only does she fall for an American, but one who represents the idealisation of George's life endeavour; Becker is a soft drinks man too and Coca-Cola the pure expression of business success. In this context, Becker's following reflection on Terri could be read ironically: "The apple is said to fall not far from the tree. But in this case it seemed to." (138) Rather, it is clear how closely this apple has fallen. In pursuing this American soft-drinks man, Terri pursues George's highest idealisation.

Like George, Becker's work is a measure of himself. He: "believed, among other things, in prowess and the pursuit of excellence." (141) His work is: "doing my simple self-appointed task of selling the best damned soft drink in the world, the best damned way I know how." (141) These similarities, particularly between Terri and her father, are rather curious given, firstly, Terri's rejection of her father's lifestyle and, secondly, George's belief that her generation is "lost." What does this mean for future cultural development as Terri leaves the small town and enters the city? In this "ever-renewing country" will George's shortcomings be renewed and perpetuated? The following section will look at Moorhouse's urban tribe as they find "replacement parts" for the values of their parents and negotiate the terms of their new existence.

## Chapter 2

### Visiting Strange Territory: Balmain and the “Full Anti-Convention Bit”

How, in bed early Thursday morning, do you explain to your father and your mother who you have lived with for twenty-three years, that you do not want to go to work and that you do not want to see your friends? How do you explain that you'd rather not see them, too? How do you explain that the idea of working and the idea of seeing your friends makes you feel sick in the head? How do you explain that you want to lie down somewhere on your own?<sup>158</sup>

The paragraph quoted here, the opening to “Walking Out”, signals a moment of conceptual change for a young man named Thomas. It is the moment when Thomas begins to challenge his prevailing culture and, as such, is the first crucial moral turning point of his young life. The moment is charged with ethical uncertainty, recognised in the repeated emphasis of “how” Thomas might explain himself to his principal social connections—friends and family. Thomas’s sick-in-the-head malaise is prompting a new way of life, a moment replayed in the lives of Moorhouse’s young men and women as they flee the family home, its values and mores, and strike out into new, uncharted territory. They cluster together in the inner city, in the terraces and public bars, with the desire to fashion a new way of living. In grouping together like this they have been described as the “urban tribe” and they are recognised through the shared customs they develop. They are a pioneering people whose self-professed task is to push out the moral frontier. Thomas knows he cannot explain his feelings or his departure to his parents or friends firstly because he is still very unsure of what they are and where to go. More importantly, however, he knows that they will not understand. Their conceptual boundaries are closed and firm and Thomas’s are only just starting to open.

“Walking Out” appears in *Futility and Other Animals*, under the section titled “Bravery”, and whilst Thomas slips out cowardly without confrontation, without a word to his parents or his fiancée, Marj, he has made this decision to act. He is turning his back on all he knows in order to explore a new mode of being rather than hide from his challenging thoughts. In allowing the possibilities of being, Thomas opens himself to the

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<sup>158</sup> Moorhouse, F. “Walking Out”. *Futility and Other Animals*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson. 1988. p. 91. All future references are to this edition and will be shown in-text.



pragmatic mode. He is allowing the unknown and uncertain to enter his consciousness to challenge the known and certain. Thomas is accepting the necessity of engaging with the unknown and developing new practices of being and, significantly, to reevaluate the values he has heretofore accepted. Until this point he has resisted these challenging, discomfiting thoughts having no other system of behaviour to turn to. He has reached the point, however, where he realises his current habits of behaviour are just not *working* and can no longer accept their limitations. In doing so, he accepts the challenge of a more fluid, non-systematised universe: “Having something strange to do or say always bothered me and I would rather shrug out of it if I could. But this time I wasn’t going to do that.” (91) With this he signals an attempt to see beyond the reigning standard. He challenges the authority and the value system of the parental home:

‘Time to get up, Thomas. Father’s up.’  
 Father was always up. How could I tell her? She would be puzzled and scared. Father would come. He would ask what all the nonsense was about me not going to work. He’d be quivering around the lips. (93)

Thomas’s parents’ world is regulated and follows expected patterns of behaviour. Like George McDowell, they cannot brook diversity or even a shift in work routine. Their life follows a plan. His mother lived: “as if she worked by the cogs and springs of the clock.” (91)

In pragmatic terms, Thomas’s aversions have kickstarted his reflective thought. He begins to test his old habits of thought against new thoughts. Here, Thomas overrules his habits of work, the habits prescribed by his father: “I told myself that when I stopped work I could loaf about. And this is just what I wanted to do because I’m a lazy bastard at heart.” (91) Such a momentous decision to go against the family value system and custom is ironically contrasted with his real want: to do nothing much with his freedom at all. The alternative Thomas chooses reveals his work ethic and a moral evaluation (“lazy bastard”). Here the reader is also invited to make a moral valuation about Thomas’s desired style of living. As we witness Thomas walking away, we evaluate his moral act along with him. One of the questions here is: is walking away an act of bravery or cowardice? He calls himself a coward in this soundless disappearance, yet it also must be brave. Accepting the demands of progressive thought requires bravery since, by rejecting the community standard, one is automatically isolated from the social group. Moorhouse does not allow Thomas full sympathy and support, however, suggesting

perhaps that there might be better ways to deal with those who will be affected by this change. But Thomas is not yet this sophisticated. This negativity towards Thomas's perspective is demonstrated through his self-description that he is a "bastard" and his comment that the innocent and devoted Marj is just "a silly bitch". He is, at least, aware of the serious ethical dimension his actions have and he thus "enjoyed condemning himself".

Marj. I wormed back in the bed away from thinking of her...but Christ she drove me up the wall at other times. Then I realised that I had not let the thought about her driving me up the wall come into my head before, or if I had, I more or less pretended that I hadn't seen it. I'd hidden away from the idea...Perhaps I didn't really love her. I nodded to myself in bed and felt relieved that the idea of not loving her had come into my head and stayed. My brain had never really let in ideas against Marj before. My brain keeps telling lies. No, it wasn't always like that—I hadn't been game enough to ask my brain direct questions. Of course, I'd known my brain was lying but I'd been too weak to stop it. It was easier to let it use me and my mouth. (92)

The true cowardice here is in having previously "hid" from ideas. He was not "game" to confront his true feelings. In avoiding his challenging thoughts, he has created false social ties and, as with George McDowell, ignoring troubling thoughts brings moral and personal retardation. Perhaps it is more unethical to perpetuate his standing social ties rather than abruptly abandon them. Even if this is true, it is not resolved—nor is he absolved—by the act of walking away. Thomas does not solve his confusion by merely acknowledging his hidden thoughts. Something must *happen* and Moorhouse does not rest in a romantic solution of a self-awakening that leads one to be wholly true to oneself. Instead, Thomas finds himself faced with a double personality: "I'm two people...one of me is a liar and the other a coward." (93) There are two reasons for his confused or dual sense of self. Firstly, he is unknown to himself—he has been resistant to his consciousness until this point. Secondly, he is faced with the complicated nature of truth. As he packs his things to go, he spots a framed quotation given to him by an uncle, a Rotarian, no less: "This above all: to thine ownself be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

As I read it I thought it was a beaut saying. It was bloody true...I read it again and a bloody strange thing happened...it didn't make sense...I knew what it meant one minute and the next I didn't...I supposed it meant that you had to tell yourself when

you were bullshitting. If you did this then you wouldn't bullshit to others. But this wasn't right. Sometimes a thing was bullshit at one time and not another. I told Marj I loved her when we were loving up and I meant it. But this morning for instance, it had been bullshit. It was hard to catch yourself being honest. (97)

Thomas is forced to see that the truth is no absolute, stable thing. Likewise, the idea of self is equally flexible. Thomas is confounded and confronted by the problem of the changeable nature of the self. He is approaching the idea that an inherent, absolute self does not *work* because the self functions in the highly changeable world of the social environment. Since the self is socially constituted, as the social scene changes, demands are made on the interacting selves. There are many different aspects of self. How can Thomas define the absolute "ownself" to whom he must be true? Who is Thomas when his society falls away? Thomas's dissatisfaction in this scene stems from the type of self he takes on in the social position he occupies. He says: "I was a bullshit artist and I wrote bullshit letters. I was false to every bloody man." (97) However, walking away provokes new and even more problematic concerns regarding the constitution of self. In short, he may be dissatisfied with the "bullshit" self he feels himself to be but, as yet, it is the only self that exists.

The social component of the self is of crucial concern in "Walking Away". Thomas treats his mother and Marj with disdain when he describes their conversations: "Some of the things didn't mean anything. I think they only talked to let each other know they were still around." (93) Yet, he has identified one of the central ways in which we achieve recognition of self: through social interaction. His contempt issues from the fact he does not value their conversation and also has little respect for the communicating selves. He treats this need to be recognised and in-community as a weakness but his contempt is ultimately ironised. As Thomas leaves his social group he is turning away from any recognition of his self. As he slips away he laughs out loud. He is "feeling free but nervous". Despite his devil-may-care laughter he admits: "I knew that I had been laughing to hear myself. Like Marj and Mother. Making noises to show myself I was still there." (98) He crunches loudly on an apple as he walks to the bus stop. Significantly he catches public transport, a public scene in which he is unknown. He quietly takes his place in a bus which is full of "silent, hunched people." (98)

Thomas is already aware that the condition of flexibility has its problems. He is now vulnerable to all the fluctuations in self that fluidity implies. That is, he is no longer

constrained by his former social network and obligations and this raises the danger of a complete unravelling of self. Humans need the connections he is turning away from and his sense of self is quickly rupturing as he leaves everything that he knows. Thomas will need new social ballast if he is to survive.

In the story “What Can You Say?”,<sup>159</sup> we see Thomas thrown into the inner-city scene and finding his peers. To demonstrate his loss of self experienced in “Walking Out”, this story opens with the line, “When I first met Jimmy I was nothing.” (15) He is nothing because his self is outside the social scene. He is nothing because, as yet, he occupies no place. He first sets up in Kings Cross— “the full bit”—and proceeds to immerse himself into the new society: “I first met people in coffee shops and pubs, including a couple of queers who I promptly pissed off. I was very square then.” (15) He begins frequenting the Royal George (the famed haunt of the Sydney Push)<sup>160</sup> “where beatniks go.” He is naïve to the scene, exemplified by his homophobia, yet he is starting to experiment with experiences, testing the waters of Bohemia, in order to create a social pattern that works for him. To achieve this, Thomas operates with an unstructured openness which entertains most influences. This is demonstrated by his reading material and the indiscriminate way he goes about finding it: “Must have read two million magazines. I joined the library...They had racks of magazines.” (15-16) In contradistinction to the required reading of the anarchist set, he reads without discrimination or a “programme” of the kind followed by the radicals he will meet. (Overexposure to too many magazines is a continuing “fault” of many of Moorhouse’s narrators. Elsewhere, Milton says to the narrator, “It’s really piteous how much media you take in...You should get one magazine and stick to it.”<sup>161</sup>) Jimmy first approaches Thomas when he is sitting at the George alone reading:

‘Is Miller out in paperback now?’

I said: ‘What? Who’s he?’

‘Henry Miller—the book you’re reading.’

‘Oh, this book,’ I said, looking at the cover. ‘I just picked it up at the newsagents. I didn’t look to see who wrote it.’

The fellow with the beard seemed to think this was *very funny*...But he sat down and told me a few things about Henry Miller. Evidently Miller is bigtime. (16)

<sup>159</sup> *Futility and Other Animals*. pp. 15-21.

<sup>160</sup> For a discussion on this milieu, see Coombs, A. *Sex and Anarchy: The Life and Death of the Sydney Push*. Ringwood: Viking. 1996.

<sup>161</sup> “Milton Turns Against Champagne”. *Tale of Mystery and Romance*. p. 87.

To Jimmy, Thomas is a “bona fide primitive anarchist”, an empty but willing vessel for his radical ideas: “[H]e spent hours telling me about [anarchism] because he said that I was an anarchist although I didn’t know it.” (17) Thomas seems to belong in this milieu although he lacks Jimmy’s articulate nature: “[Jimmy] talked like a lecturer sometimes.” (The articulate nature of the group is an extremely important feature of their culture and is routinely ironised in these stories.) As yet, Thomas does not have the same verbal skills:

Jimmy took me to parties where I met other people including girls. And they’d talk to you...For quite a few parties I was fairly miserable, though...I had nothing much to say. I couldn’t argue. I’d just listen. Sometimes when I did start to talk it would be so corny and out of place that they’d say: ‘Hold on, I want to get a drink, I’ll be back.’ But they wouldn’t come back. (19)

The question is will Jimmy’s definition of Thomas be yet another conferred form of behaviour for Thomas, like the suburban domesticity he has just left? Or because he “doesn’t know it”, will Jimmy be the catalyst for Thomas’s self-awakening? Moorhouse leaves the question open as Jimmy begins to initiate Thomas into the urban tribe, teaching him their values and mores. He is immersed into the political and social scene as Jimmy’s lectures map out the terrain of this strange new land: “He said that a person who fought against authority was an anarchist.”(17)

It doesn’t matter whether it’s a dictator or a boss or the beloved majority, it is still an imposition on you—you’re being pushed around. That’s why anarchists are against democracy and the boss-worker situation.

The introduction to the scene also extends to sexual initiation and this is important to these urban tales, as sex is posited as the vital site of difference to the previous generation. It is a crucial part of the social differentiation since it goes to the heart of domestic units and the foundations of home:

Jimmy changed my ideas about sex...In his slow, lecturer’s voice, he said: ‘There are a diversity of personalities requiring a diversity of sexual relationships. This society says there is only one—marriage. All right so you want to raise a family—find a girl and go ahead. But it doesn’t follow that you have to sleep with her only or she only with you.’

I used to say that I couldn’t understand how some of his friends could let other fellows get off with their girls. I said it would give me a pain in the gut.

But Jimmy would say: 'You have to overcome jealousy. It's like bad temper—you learn to control it.' (18)

The irony in this speech on sexual practice is that what is promoted as freedom comes with serious controls. You must learn to “control” yourself in order to survive the new doctrine. The sexual world of the anarchists is weighted by as much control as the suburban domesticity they all resist. Thomas must deny his “pain in the gut” reaction just as George McDowell resists the “protestations of his soul” that roar against his own controls. Described this way, as a gut pain, hints that this pain may be instinctive and primal rather than conferred by a more conservative culture. The new doctrine *imposes* the requirement to curb the natural impulses. This is absolutely contrary to their overt principles of freedom, particularly sexual freedom. If Jimmy's anarchists disdain all forms of imposition and control yet formalise their sexual reactions, the principle is inherently flawed. Furthermore, Jimmy shows that action must be divorced from feeling which, in pragmatic terms, signals a breakdown in the dynamic relationship between thoughts, action and the environment in which they take place. For Jimmy, the high-level thought processes he has been honing—a signal of progress in the pragmatic process—has abstracted to such a level that they risk no longer being valid in the practical world. There is the misconception amongst the tribe that highly rationalised theory on every aspect of the living process makes their position valid but, as becomes evident through the stories, the further Moorhouse's characters abstract their position, the more meaningless and invalid they become. A comparison can be drawn here between this intellectual group and Lawson's witless farmers in “A Day on a Selection.” They too are well versed in the economic theories of the day but, because those imported theories do not necessarily work in their distinct environment, their farms crumble.

Eventually, Jimmy's act collapses. The rationale that guides his life opens up the door to meaninglessness. Just as George McDowell suffers a “stumble, not a fall” when a crisis exposes a weakness in his intellectual posture, (“Tell Churchill T. George McDowell is on His Feet” 107-118) Jimmy is defeated by his own dogma:

There is a point...when your experience is wide enough and your grasp of reality such, that you feel you have either experienced the sweetest of joys and some of the deepest of misery, or that you can at least imagine these, and it is then that you see life as a succession of these joys and miseries spaced by petty, intermediate, dullness. The prospect of this no longer excites you. It just tires you. I'm tired. (19-20)

Jimmy's claims to a sophisticated "grasp of reality" and wide experience which leaves him in despair suggests limited powers rather than extended powers. To resist *all* authority and imposition for the sake of it is to resist the social adhesive. In pragmatist terms, by resisting all social habits as imposition, Jimmy foregoes the only source of meaning. By losing faith in the day-to-day joys and miseries of life, Jimmy loses the only source of the "sacred" which might give his life meaning. This is the challenge for Lawson's and Moorhouse's characters—to find meaning in a world that has no "historical centrality" and must be gained by other means. Up until this point of crisis, Jimmy has lived by the following precept: "things were self-justifying. That things don't have to be anything or mean anything... a good relationship with a woman was enough." (20) Interestingly, Jimmy comes to reject this precept and gives away two crucial revelations: "That's irrelevant," he said "except the part about the woman." Firstly, by rejecting his initial claim, he is now implying that things *do* have to mean something. Secondly, in conceding the importance of relationships he accepts that human relationships provide ballast and meaning. His tone, however, is significant and undercuts the potency of Jimmy's revelation: "He sounded as if he was correcting an essay." Jimmy maintains a mental distance and detachment, which would preclude the real engagement with a woman that will supposedly provide meaning. Jimmy is still bound to speak in the language of a logic which does not assuage his despair. Just as Thomas, in "Walking Out", had previously felt resistant to new, challenging thoughts because of their effect upon his life's meaning, we see Jimmy confronting the limitations his intellectual mode has imposed: "All my rational life I have lived as an intellectual Arab in a mental tent on the border of two countries. The countries of futility and hope." (19) Jimmy is caught between mental states and because of this can no longer act decisively. This is why he is passed out, drugged and drunk, immobile. He is defeated by his own limited thought processes.

Jimmy's final appraisal of social interaction runs thus: "[A]ll people do or want to do is push someone around." Ironically, this appraisal includes the dogmatic libertarians themselves. Jimmy's "lectures" are an attempt to indoctrinate Thomas. Given the dogmatic drive of the libertarian scene, which will be illustrated more fully in later discussion, Moorhouse is clearly making a pun on the word "push". The anarchists, the Sydney Push, armed with all the impulses to fight the conventions of the previous

generation, became equally authoritarian, particularly in the relations between men and women.

### The Freedom Police

Armed with new ideals, Moorhouse's characters wage war on the conventional groups they have emerged from. Given their articulate nature, the war they wage is a verbal one. This is intensely ironised in "The Machine Gun"<sup>162</sup>, where the revolution the libertarians refer to and wait for is exposed as hot air. The drama unfolds between the familiar figure of Kim, a schoolteacher and verbal revolutionist, and Turvey, a conspiracy-obsessed revolutionary poet. Here, Moorhouse clearly draws the line between the theory of the revolution and its material reality:

'Here are the magazines from Cuba.'  
 He handed Turvey the magazines.  
 Turvey tossed them on the table which was obliterated by other papers, magazines and books—all of it looked like postponed reading...  
 'Where's your revolutionary zeal?'  
 Turvey shrugged, pulled out a book from the nearest case, as if at random, didn't open it, put it back, and with a wild turn, broke out, 'I want to show you something.' (101-102)

Turvey returns with a machine gun. When asked why he has it, he says: "Things could get hot." With sheer disbelief, his comrade replies: "You've got to be joking." (102) The machine gun is a monstrous absurdity. Its physicality turns talk of "revolution" on its head (topsy-Turvey). The idea that it might ever be put to its intended purpose is painted as plainly ridiculous. Like mischievous boys, the two men decide to test out the gun and take it to the national park, Kim acknowledging that: "[i]t was easier to imagine himself back with the school cadets than guerilla fighting in the streets." (103) Turvey takes two magazines for ammunition. This is a very telling pun: these magazines, full of bullets, are very different from the magazines the revolutionists are familiar with, which lie on Turvey's table unread. The printed magazines are the fodder for their verbal war. A magazine for a machine gun is a different prospect altogether: "They loaded the magazines. The realness of the bullets almost convinced him of the rest, as though the existence of the *material* of revolution was evidence of its reality. They loaded them very quickly." (104)

<sup>162</sup> Moorhouse, F. *The Americans, Baby*. Sydney: HarperCollinsPublishers. 1992. pp.101-111.



On their way to the park, the suburban presence of family picnics is in stark contrast with their radical agenda; the fact that people are freely picnicking deflates any revolutionary urgency. They take the gun to an isolated spot and point it “overlooking the empty Tasman Sea.” (105) Its emptiness once again ironises Turvey’s expectations of the coming revolution and Kim’s theory. There is nothing coming. When they tire of firing at nothing they seek out something real to shoot. Kim goes into the scrub and finds some cans and bottles. As he searches through the “bones of a picnic”, Kim imagines the conversations of picnics past: “Here’s a nice spot, Kim. Find some firewood. I hope somebody remembered the salt.” (105) Not only is foraging for shootable items reminiscent of children playing with an air rifle, but the picnic itself suggests the unlikelihood of street fighting. Here the biggest crisis is forgetting the salt and the only bones are those of leftovers.

When they take the gun to a party, and Turvey drunkly waves it around: “[Kim] couldn’t quite take in the incongruity of it—the suburban house—the party at a standstill, except for the record player, two shouting drunks, and noises from the other room.” (109) He concedes to Turvey: “Our revolutionary legend’s a bit weak.”

In “Anti-bureaucratisation and the Apparatchiki”<sup>163</sup>, Kim’s revolutionary zeal is ironised from the point of view of his girlfriend, the country girl Dell. Her innocence of theory is contrast with his knowledge. Like Jimmy, Kim takes on the task of theoretical instruction:

‘Why do you bother with a girl like me?’ she said... ‘I don’t know anything.’

‘You’re unformed,’ he said, ‘a peasant girl, that’s why.’

‘You don’t love me, though,’ she said sadly, wondering how he thought it was a compliment to call her a ‘peasant girl’. Probably had something to do with him being a Trotskyist. Trotsky-snotsky.

‘Love has too much bourgeois content,’ he said, lying back with his eyes shut.

Of course it would. There’d have to be something wrong with it. Lordy.

‘I said you didn’t have to marry me,’ she said, petulantly thinking she wouldn’t marry him in a hundred years.

‘We’ll have to give you a progressive morality,’ he said, eyes still shut. (220-221)

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<sup>163</sup> *The Americans, Baby*. pp. 217-232.

Her education and “progressive morality” consists of learning communist theory and all the words for sex. The story opens with his sexual demand: “Fellatio.” “She thought she heard something like, ‘Hell’s art below’...He was pushing her head down...He was so unfeeling—expecting her to know all the words.” (217) Kim’s social project is to break all taboos and this forms the impetus behind his demands. Dell becomes for him “a case history of sexual taboo.” (230) Kim is completely disengaged from Dell emotionally and this disengagement manifests through his discourse of social and political science when she is the subject of discussion. He speaks about her as if she isn’t there:

‘Dell and I were just having a talk about contraception.’ Kim said. ‘It’s amazing—she knows nothing....A perfect example of sexual taboo.’ Kim told Carl, tapping his cigar ash into the fireplace....They went on talking about the broad masses and progressivist education. (229)

The new progressive life, as Kim lives it, precludes any real personal engagement due to its overbearing theoretical consciousness. It is not that theory has been divorced from action—a certain amount of their practice is theory based, as the opening fellatio scene illustrates—however, there is a rift between their theory in general and its practical purposes. Dell exposes this rift when she rehearses her communist rhetoric and, in doing so, evacuates all meaning from it. After their instructional lovemaking, Kim reads to her about Lenin. She is bored. He admonishes her for not listening and, as a retort, she quotes a passage back at him she has previously learnt by rote:

‘Well,’ he said, somewhat surprised, ‘at least you’ve learned something.’ He seemed a little dazed. That was from the earlier days when they’d just met. She’d learned that off by heart. But already she was forgetting it. God knew what it all meant. And he was impressed. Would you believe it? ‘You’ll be a good worker for the revolution yet,’ he said. (223)

Here Moorhouse makes the point that to be a “good worker”, low critical faculties are an advantage. This attitude is a long way from a progressive morality which can only be acquired by rigorous reflective thinking. In pragmatist terms, Kim’s morality is more correctly a customary morality where unreflective, habitual and rote thinking is required. Here the so-called progressive life is ironised since it is a limited progressiveness, given that the boundaries of the new lifestyle are zealously guarded. It is a clipped and illusory progressiveness since it is founded upon dogma symbolised by the

same militaristic dress (Cuban army shirts) Kim and Carl both wear. As a result, Kim becomes as authoritarian as the middle class conventional lifestyle he is reacting against. We are reminded here of a principle of Dewey and Tufts' pragmatism, which emphasises at all times moral progress: "Not order but orderly progress." In other words, as soon as a system of thought or pattern of behaviour becomes an established order, the potential for moral progress is stunted. From this position of authority, two inevitable problems arise. Firstly, Kim seeks to exert this power over others, namely Dell; and, secondly, he so blindly accepts the position he inhabits that it precludes him from understanding the other. An unwillingness to see things from Dell's point of view limits any sympathy that may develop and, as Dewey discusses, an ever-widening circle of sympathy is a crucial aspect of moral progressiveness. Rather than challenge his own thinking to incorporate the legitimacy of another position he seeks to subjugate it. In moral terms, this is clearly unprogressive. These issues of power are exemplified in his and Dell's debate over contraception. Firstly, Kim takes his power over her for granted. He takes it upon himself to make her an appointment with a doctor "to get you on the Pill." She refuses to go:

'You can't be 'against pills',' he said.

'I can be if I want to be.'

'You can't be,' he screamed, 'you can't be 'against pills.'

She'd had enough. She left the dishes in the suds and pushed past him.

He followed her to the bedroom. 'I just want to know,' he said, with this bitingly quiet voice, 'what special information you have about the Pill that medical science doesn't.'

She felt trapped in the conversation. He kept putting words in front of her like road blocks. He often forced her to answer questions she didn't want to answer or which were the wrong questions anyhow.

'You only take pills if there is something wrong with you,' she said, 'and there is nothing wrong with me.' (226)

Kim's exasperation comes from the tight bounds of his conventions and assumptions. He is so utterly convinced about his own theories of behaviour that he suffers the blind spots inherent in any total system. In the passage above, he repeats the phrase "you can't be" three times whereas Dell's position is much more free and fluid: "I can be if I want to be." Authoritative phrases like Kim's reveal him to be a hard-line rationalist, struggling for control and resisting an idea that, to him, is too illogical to even contemplate. Ethically, he has stalled. He has this in common with his predecessor

George McDowell, who also claims to be “on the side of progress”. Kim may feel he is progressive, but he is unable to cope with difference and, as such, will never achieve a reflective morality. He claims to have a “progressive morality” but his definition of such is a poor one. To him, progressive simply means different to the last generation’s code of behaviour, but “progressive” suggests ongoing change. Kim’s brand of “progressiveness” has been untested until now. Until now, the group has accepted the customs so no reworking or reevaluating of the prevailing custom has been required. Kim takes it for granted that Dell will take oral contraception. Dell tests his moral sophistication by rejecting his values and cultural assumptions that all women should take the Pill:

‘How are we going to have a good sex life if you don’t take the Pill?’  
 For once she seemed to be winning.  
 ‘Didn’t people have good sex lives before the Pill?’  
 He didn’t reply. (227)

Kim sees her resistance as ignorance. It is true that Dell does not understand all the physical functions and she doesn’t “know all the words”, however the core of her resistance is towards his exertion of power over her:

‘I suppose you could have a diaphragm fitted,’ he said tiredly.  
 Oh my God, she thought, oh my God, what’s he going to have done to me now? She saw him and his friends holding her down on the bed and fitting something into her. (227)

Dell’s experience of this society is in contrast to their teachings to fight authority. She vividly imagines the men “holding her down”. Jimmy’s depressed assessment fits all too well: “[A]ll people do or want to do is push someone around.” In this case, despite the so-called progressive consciousness and anti-authoritarianism, the men are simply attempting to push the women around.

Moorhouse deals with contraception again in “The First Story of Nature”<sup>164</sup>, but from another perspective. In this story, we again see the male attempt to assert his power over the woman and to do so via the controls of verbal war. In this instance, the Pill is the symbol of women’s independence from men and, in retaliation, Hugo has thrown Cindy’s contraception out. Looked at pragmatically, “Anti-bureaucratisation and the

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<sup>164</sup> In *Futility and Other Animals* there are three stories of nature: “The First Story of Nature” appears in the section titled ‘Confusion’. This story also appears in the later publication *The Americans, Baby* under the title, “The Story of Nature” and shows textual changes. I will largely refer to the edition in *FOA* since it has been published with and in relation to the linked stories I also refer to: “The Second Story of Nature” and “The Third Story of Nature” which also appear in *FOA* under the section ‘Bravery’.

Apparatchiki” and “The First story of Nature” taken together, suggest that it is not a *thing* per se (oral contraception, for example) that has moral valency but the thing as it *functions in relation* to other things, that is, a situation.

This is an important distinction since it emphasises that moral values are imported into objects, not inherent within them. In Hugo’s attempt to justify his behaviour, he weights contraception with moral import by showing that his decision comes from his deep care for Cindy’s wellbeing. He says: “I hate contraceptives...I hate to think of your body being twisted by chemicals.” (53-54) In an effort to boost his argument and to further load it with its ethical dimension, he also supplies a theory of love, and an equation:

‘Love goes bad between people when they don’t want children,’ he said. ‘Contraception is a rejection. A rejection of me as a father. It’s hesitancy...Love implies children,’ he said, buttressing his words with a heavy definiteness. ‘Children are the other part of the equation.’(54)

The reality is Hugo wants dependants, Cindy included, over whom he can have paternalistic power. He wants control over Cindy’s body by removing the other control—contraception. By attempting to give contraception an absolute value (anti-love), rather than a relative one, Hugo, like Kim, reveals an assumption of power and a superior and rigid moral position. In response, Cindy calls him an “authoritarian shit”: “you’re—you’re like all men—you think we can be used for your—fantasies.” When Cindy processes this confrontation, the narrative becomes a blend of theoretical rhetoric and emotional reaction. In the following quote, Moorhouse uses a blend of italics and plain type to show the fusion of thought:

*It was male domination.* And she was humiliated by the demoralising power of the things he had said. But they were crazy things. *His attitude was authoritarian. He resented the independence that the Pill gave women.* She wouldn’t become involved again—she would have lovers—but not the involvement of domesticity. *One didn’t have to have children.* In a mental skip she was nauseated by the thought of the sexual act. Instantly she was embarrassed by guilt and severely expurgated the nausea from her mind. She gathered her principles and theories around her like bedclothes. She almost ran down the street in emotional panic. (55)

The text rendered in italics enunciates the kinds of principles and theories Cindy wraps herself in; the text in plain type represents her actual emotional reaction.

Moorhouse's constant irony is operating here but it is gently applied; even in the midst of a desperate, "emotional panic", the self-conscious and articulate Cindy still interprets the events in highly theoretical terms. The difference here, however, is that for once, the theory is holding out. In this case, theory and experience support each other. We can see that her theory of masculine power is useful in assessing her actual situation and creating the verbal armour required for self-preservation. She fortifies her position with theory which also becomes the blankets of comfort.

Moorhouse's characters fight on a verbal battlefield complete with "traps" and "tactics" and the battles are fought and won through definitions. Hugo equates children with love, ergo Cindy's rejection of children is a rejection of love. In the later edition of the story, Hugo says: "Trap you?...I suppose you think love is a trap—and that wouldn't surprise me—you're so hung-up on modern crap about independence—which you mistake as being neuter—that you can't love."<sup>165</sup> Cindy may have saved herself from the first trap—having Hugo's children—but she falls for the second one: his definition of love. She is clearly trapped by his definition because through this interaction she resolves to avoid future domestic involvement with any man. It must be "all men" because she has already trapped herself in an earlier definition of "all men" being the same: "you're—you're like all men". Hugo has revealed himself as an "authoritarian shit" and since Cindy believes he is now the same as "all men", she has to accept all men are authoritarian and all domestic involvement must be avoided.

Hugo sees Cindy as a victim in the thrall of "modern crap about independence", yet he is also under the heavy influences of his own ideals. Earlier in the story Cindy is doing some housework and Hugo kisses her and says: "It warms me to see you cleaning the cave." (52) On cooking, he says: "I argue that there is too much confusion of flavour and too much spicing in modern cooking. I like the meals of the pioneers and the peasants." (49) In favouring peasant ways, the rejection of the new spicing is a rejection of cosmopolitanism and the influences of the other. (The new spices Cindy uses come from *Cooking Greek Style*.) Hugo's ideal is to go hunting and for Cindy to cook what he has killed. (50) He idealises the peasant life. He is indeed suffering under the very fantasies Cindy charges him with and is using her for these projections. He says to Cindy: "I like your simple clothes and I like your graceful ways. I know precisely how you will

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<sup>165</sup> This quote is from the later version in *The Americans Baby*, where the phrase "modern crap about independence" has been added. p. 59.

dress our children and how they'll imitate their mother's grace." (53) Cindy "gag[s] an outcry which rose in her" (52) when he makes such comments. The conflict between the lovers is a conflict between systems of thought. It is not, as Hugo would believe, a debate between normalcy versus "modern crap". He is simply blind to his own system of thought which sees "modern crap" as a fraudulent way of being. He rejects more complicated influences in favour of simpleness. His complaint about spices is telling: "there is too much confusion of flavour".(49) This is a complaint against the increasing complexity of influences changing his way of life. It is an attempt to limit the degree of difference he will allow to infiltrate his life-system. He resists the changes taking place, particularly amongst the women of this new generation.

The social upheavals which Moorhouse's characters generate—a wave which they then must ride unsure of the future consequences—cause considerable tension between men and women. This tension is made most explicit in "The Girl Who Met Simone de Beauvoir in Paris"<sup>166</sup> where Moorhouse specifically addresses the male anxieties regarding female independence and empowerment:

'Mia says she met Simone de Beauvoir in Paris,' she told him.  
'So?'

He was curled in his womb chair. She was reading the Elizabeth David cookbook, *Summer Cooking*. He didn't want to be told about Mia meeting Simone de Beauvoir in Paris. Simone de Beauvoir was a cold draft against his frail, invalid masculinity. But he wasn't going to venture that information. (163)

He is in his "womb chair", a cradle from which he is not ready to emerge. He can also be seen as a conservative old man, an *invalid*, whose norms have been *invalidated*. Both as a child and an old man, he requires the constant attention of a—preferably female—caretaker, either the adoring mother or diligent wife. He is threatened by any other female role. That Mia was even in Paris unsettles him: "He resented it. He resented talk like that which mockingly reminded him of the rich world beyond... Why should a waitress be able to casually say 'Rue Schoelcher in Montparnasse?'" (165)

As with Hugo, the male focus of this story is averse to external influences on women. Moorhouse again uses cooking as a way to demonstrate the new influences appearing in women's lives and that they should come through the kitchen is a marvelous irony. The symbol of female domesticity comes to symbolise a doorway to richly spiced

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<sup>166</sup> *The Americans, Baby*. pp. 163-176.

worlds beyond. The he of this story protests against Elizabeth David as a way to deflect the tension rising from discussion of de Beauvoir:

He shouldn't have said, 'So?' It didn't invite discussion—it rang the bell for a round. The sort of action he could do without. He tried interception and diversion, 'I'm against Elizabeth David cookbooks,' he said, interestingly. 'I rather like the idea of women compiling their own cookbooks from their own experience and their grandmother's—handwritten and pasted together.' (163-164)

The ideal of the simplistic and domestically accomplished woman Hugo has previously fantasised about, is mirrored in this story. Here, this man's "idea of women" is clearly outlined with an emphasis on natural and unsophisticated processes. A tribal pattern is suggested where all knowledge is passed down through generations, though, significantly, he bypasses the mother who is presumably still the enemy. The book should be handwritten and pasted together which is both representative of a low-level mode of production and also would have the benefit of keeping a woman's home crafts up to date. Furthermore, the time spent over such an occupation is time diligently spent on the domestic arrangement. Rather conveniently, a woman would have little time to read and be influenced by Simone de Beauvoir or Elizabeth David if she was busy pasting her own book together.

The verbal war is, again, clearly waged. Despite that the argument is merely a diversionary tactic, his resistance to Elizabeth David is telling. Firstly, and more generally, it is clear that he resists the influences and authority of other women unless it is from within the comforting folk confines of family wisdom. Elizabeth David's cookbook is not handwritten but rather given the authority of the mass produced printed article. He is afraid of how far this unknown woman's powers of influence will extend, just as Simone de Beauvoir worries him. Secondly, and more specifically, Elizabeth David was directly responsible for bringing foreign cooking influences into post-war British kitchens, with titles such as *Mediterranean Food* (1950) and *French Country Cooking* (1951).<sup>167</sup> His resistance to Elizabeth David is a resistance to foreign influences that may change the way women act. From where he sits, rocking in his womb chair, men are fast losing their grip on power and control.

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<sup>167</sup> See *Elizabeth David Classics: Mediterranean Food, French Country Cooking, Summer Cooking*. London: Grub Street. 1999.



His anxiety stems from the fact that “you couldn’t change the role of women without changing the role of men.” (168) He harasses and goads Mia over a series of encounters and becomes more and more adamant and “hung up.” Mia meeting de Beauvoir is a threat—a direct attack—to his masculinity and the conditions of social control. In desperation, he says to Mia: “You can’t change the female role without consulting us.” (172) The situation is hopeless. With the battle all but over, the only answer for him and his male friends, Stockwell and Cooper, is retreat:

Later they were drinking brandy in Stockwell’s study beneath the defeated stare of the antlered head of a buck, their feet on the fur of the bear, lying back low in the leather armchairs, when a banging began on the front door...

‘How long can we hold out?’ Cooper said to Stockwell, who was white. ‘The women have really got us holed up,’ Cooper said grimly, looking through the curtain into the garden, ‘is there a back way out?’

‘Yes, there is a back passage,’ Stockwell said with desperate hope. (176)

The retreat is into homosociality and homosexuality. The sexual pun “back passage” suggests a desperate hope that women can be bypassed altogether. The men will find both social and sexual satisfaction away from women who refuse to play the roles men desire. Together, these men will attempt to address the full complement of behaviours in the closing circle of the “Moses E Herzog lunch club” (164). The buck is hunted and defeated; the accoutrements of their masculinity are deflated like the “fur of the bear”. In this story, “he” rests back in the “womb chair”, a cradle that finally falls to the ground while, in contrast, her “voice had the cock of a gun about it.” (165)

Similar gender role reversals prevail in Lawson; however, Moorhouse’s role reversals are a response to a very different stimulus than in Lawson’s fiction. Whilst Lawson’s men do retreat into homosociality when the responsibilities of domesticity become too much to bear, Lawson’s men often take on feminine characteristics and roles on the track as a response to the absence of women. Likewise, women on isolated selections must take on masculine roles and characteristics to compensate for absent men. In this Moorhouse story, however, the men reject the feminine outright. Femininity is in the process of change and will be a direct threat to their power. If women change, the men must also change. The source of anxiety for the men is the question of what will they change into? Rather than face this unknown courageously, they retreat. They do not

reevaluate past ideals and rework them; they compensate for the absent ideal female by finding a feminine component within each other. The women are left wondering: “Why are the men around us so infantile?...[W]here are the men with pricks like studguns?”

(164)

The Balmain tribe faces a civil war of attrition. Returning to “The First Story of Nature”, the tense standoff finishes with separation. This situation is a clash of value systems but it is not a battle with a clear victor. Cindy’s position is a tense one because she cannot fully relinquish the traditional controls of the past:

She was not a squaw. Yet when he had said it she had felt a warm emotional touch and had roughly and intellectually pushed it away. She was going to be an academic, not just a woman—and never a squaw. She was a woman biologically—because she had a vagina...She was going to be an intellectual with a vagina—like de Beauvoir. She was not going to be like other poor, deluded things.

(53)

Cindy feels warmed by the comforting confines of the male-guarded cave yet she “roughly and intellectually” pushes this feeling away. Her theory cannot accommodate it and her reaction is to create a false binary of self. To accept this warming feeling is high treason against her theoretical agenda and thus she places a limit on her feelings and the experiences she will open herself to. Again there is the uncomfortable pull of tense, inner relations. As seen with Thomas, the self can accommodate conflicting truths simultaneously, but here Cindy has reached her conceptual boundaries. She cannot tolerate her dissenting feelings and so smothers them. Cindy further strengthens this binary when she sees herself as an “intellectual with a vagina”. This reinforces the perception that the typical intellectual is a man, severely threatening the quality of her feminism. She regards the vagina as a qualification of the standard intellectual: “‘I don’t want to be a woman,’ she yelled, sensing too late that it was a bad tactical admission.”(59) Cindy enforces the division between mind and matter within the body thus creating a non-dynamic and abstract field in which she will live out her life as a “serious thinker”. She approaches her life as an experiment, a contrived field of play. Cindy’s decision to live with Hugo is an experiment, just as Kim’s social engagements in the “Aparatchiki” story are like science experiments. This intellectual distancing compromises the quality of the engagement:

She felt that Hugo seriously wanted a ‘cohabitating relationship’—strongly and without nonsense. And she wanted it.

She felt that she had made adequate allowances for her infatuation with him and that the decision was basically rational...It offered her things—experience and a close human relationship etc. (48)

Cindy has a conscientious objective to seek out “experience”. She approaches things like “a close human relationship” as if it was a place of interest to mark off on an itinerary. The self-consciousness this requires would surely work against developing any real closeness since Hugo is fodder for her experience. The enormously ironic “etc” suggests that characters that inhabit this social group keep a mental list of situations that need to be experienced. The group experiences a high level of self-consciousness because the rules of behaving are in the process of change and each “experience” is embarked on conscientiously. In this story Cindy is “sweet twenty” and is undergoing the shift into adulthood in a highly self-conscious way:

Although she wanted to become a historian—or, as she sometimes told herself, a serious thinker—she led an impulsive sort of life and was glad that she could. She was glad that there was still *some* of the child in her, that she hadn’t frozen into a stiff Apollonian. That would come, she guessed. Her impulse to act would be slowed down and increasingly restrained by questions of whether it would be wise. Had she considered alternatives abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz? Was she succumbing to the seduction of mood? Didn’t she have responsibilities. All these sorts of questions. Or perhaps people never became coldly rational but simply replaced impulse and spontaneity with habit, patterns of living, and styles of life. But rational questions raised their frowning heads at her even now. She could act on impulse, but sometimes, say in the morning while showering, or riding the bus to university, she would find herself face-to-face with one of the frowning questions. They frowned like her father. Even thinking like this now after having made an impulsive decision was a sign that the frowning person in her was working against the giggling person—against her decision to live with Hugo. But she had expected it to come. Perhaps all this meant was that she was becoming an intellectual—becoming aware of herself. She would not let it bother her. (47)

Here Cindy faces a conflict of values. Her self is in crisis. Torn between the giggling and frowning persons she has created an internal contradiction. Her decision to live with Hugo is impulsive and satisfies the devil-may-care quotient the new milieu values, being in antipathy to the “frowning father”-style decisions they are rebelling against. The problem arises when other values surface from within. This is the value of

the rationalising intellectual she also must recognise if she is to evolve into a “serious thinker”. She lives with Hugo to experience a certain relationship and she is at pains to remove the emotional content from this decision, for emotional content would de-value her rationalisation and, therefore, disqualify her from becoming her idealised self: “But no, the decision to live with him had been impulsive. The analysis came afterwards and was a summary.” (48)

Cindy has made for herself a very tight bind. In her mind, to become a true intellectual, who she thinks must be a rationalist, she must become her “frowning father”. She does not see that her assessments of consequences can be creative. She equates the consideration of consequences with being responsible to the point of being stiff. But it is only in the consideration of future consequences that we can really start to act with any competence at all. When she considers *abcdefg*... she is assessing the quality of her action when it is matched against its forecast consequences. This is ethical decision-making and has little to do with the “frowning father”-style figure Moorhouse so often depicts. Moorhouse’s frowning father is most often uncreative and not as analytical as Cindy’s projection of her own ethical development. It is a mistake to equate cold rationalisations with the pondering of consequences, since to ponder circumstance and consider alternatives and solutions is a creative and imaginative act. The urban society, in breaking away from previous traditions, is attempting to create a new ethic. They are developing a new morality. But in wanting to remain a “giggling,” impulsive person, Cindy’s behaviour cannot really be regarded as ethical since actions only become ethical when the interaction of people and consequences are considered. When positions become rigid like this—frowning versus giggling—value systems will invariably clash, leaving the agent of the drama struggling for stability. Cindy feels the very palpable shock of “emotional panic” when she leaves Hugo: “‘I had no alternative,’ she said, and she herself heard how positive and how desperate it sounded and the sound frightened her. Oh shit, Oh Christ.” (55) To have no alternative is not a high-level conclusion. It is a failure of the imagination.

### **The Orphan Generation**

Cindy takes on a more creative, open position in “The Second Story of Nature,” and here she loosens her habits of behaviour and experiences new freedoms by removing all constraint. Then, in the “The Third Story of Nature”, she must face the vulnerabilities

such an open system of decision-making brings. In these stories Moorhouse again explores freedom through the issue of contraception. As we have seen, in the first story Cindy secures her freedom by using contraception. In “The Second Story of Nature” Cindy is in a new cohabitation with Roger and she herself throws the Pill away. Seized by passion, she feels as if “she was no longer drugged down or as though her legs were no longer tied.” (151) She tries to convince herself of the “foolish, foolish reaction” but is “overcome”. Roger, too, is aroused by the possibilities. Not only do they simply cease to care about preventing conception, they crave it as a symbol of their freedom:

This was the first time like this. She had furiously cared at all times before this and had never taken a risk—not for years—no, not ever. The problem flickered around outside her mind, just outside her concern. She saw that it was kept away from her by the heat of a kind of pleasure and the pleasure was that of feeling unconstrained. (151)

Just as with George McDowell, the feeling of breaking through the constraints of contraception is an arousing and eruptive force. The increasing similarity concerning freedom and constraint between George and the new generation is no small irony. Like George, Cindy pulls herself up mentally when her mind wanders too far from her theoretical line:

Women are freer now because they control contraception and it is premeditated contraception and they can be free of the fear of pregnancy and unhampered by devices and totally relaxed about it, but it means a daily sexual routine, a medical regimen, and it’s a policing of the body and now suddenly I’ve broken the regimen and lost the freedom and am exposed to pregnancy and I feel a new freedom, a new free feeling, and it comes from being exposed to pregnancy and giving up control of my body and becoming reliant on a man to care for me, to be my...hunter and my soldier...(152)

The excessive length of the first sentence of this quotation symbolises the complete unravelling of Cindy’s previous dogma. She allows herself to confront her regular beliefs with a bold “but”. She exposes the authoritarian impositions of her new world when she uses words like “routine”, “regimen” and “policing”. This is shocking to her. Here, once again, is the uncomfortable pull between old and new ways of life. When Hugo had talked of hunting and primitivism, she had “gagged”, and stifled any feelings she may have had to the contrary; now in the throes of passion, she craves the world where she will be under the man’s protection. Moorhouse returns to these primitive impulses time

and again. "The Story of the Knife" is another example where traditional roles of a man and woman are played out and their actions are erotically charged because the previous styles of man- and woman-hood have become old-fashioned: "Was he playing with manhood or something? Or was she playing with womanhood?...But Christ, feeling this way wasn't a fetish. This was the way he should feel. Like man, it's the real thing."<sup>168</sup> The traditional roles the characters take on are erotically charged precisely because in the current scene, it is subversive behaviour. The lovers go against the grain of their contemporary mores by returning to more traditional role-plays and thus the traditional becomes the subversive. Since constant subversion is the reigning ideology of the generation, Moorhouse turns the traditional into the radical. Cindy does not allow herself to ponder an existence such as this for long. "Mentally she slapped herself, shocked at the words which had come from her. Irrational and mawkish and sickening. I am still for free loving and against conventional marriage and remain firmly so." (152) This return to her corrective and rigid line stabilises her world for a time. But there will be a consequence to Roger and Cindy's contraception-free lovemaking and this produces perhaps an irreconcilable crisis for the third and final story of nature.

In "The Third Story of Nature" Cindy's mother is cleaning Cindy's flat while she sits cross-legged on her bed, cradling her pregnant stomach. In snapping on her rubber gloves, the mother attempts to establish in the flat the order and values of her own middle-class suburbia. For Cindy's mother, if order can be maintained in the home almost all disasters can be prevented. She and Cindy discuss a recent road accident which killed a friend's son: "The road accident was the unpredictable terror in an otherwise predictable society...The siren was the way we announced the conflict between order and disaster." (170) For Cindy's mother, the accident had become "a folk drama" about chaos against which she stands with "her hands on her aproned hips,":

Next time I come I'll bring my new detergent. It's really excellent...Father brought it from the factory. It's for industrial use. I use it around the house.'...Her mother's virtue for cleanliness had become a violent, acidic thing...One day her mother would find a detergent which would keep all things permanently and deeply clean. Her mother would bring it to her and wash out her life and bathe her in it. From then on she would never be able to again feel dirty or have a sweating fuck. (166)

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<sup>168</sup> "The Story of the Knife." *Futility and Other Animals*. pp. 1-14.

Whilst the mother's control is emphasised here, she is not alone in her need to remove chaos. This story is about Cindy's secret desire for her mother's securities. Despite the implicit critique of her "mother's sterilised existence" in its rejection of the sensual and its excessive controls (her mother buys Cindy clothes from David Jones to "serve as a uniform and a correction"), this passage also introduces the comforts and temptations of such a minutely controlled life. The paragraph concludes: "But at least the soles of her feet would not be gritty after walking from the bath to the bed. That would be something." An extreme tension exists between the old and the new. Moorhouse often depicts the young, adventurous generation as casualties as much as they are cavalier. Cindy worries about the social rupture they have created: "Were you in the vanguard or simply impatiently running on ahead—to find yourself without society— isolated and scared with other isolated and scared people?" (165) Cindy is standing at the frontier, "without society", faced with the absence of long-standing tradition. It is in this moment that she realises the quality of custom. On the one hand, the conventions of previous generations are repressive but on the other, they provide security through form. Cindy and Roger have turned their back on these conventional patterns of love but, in doing so, forfeit the rights and obligations that have been developed within the established social pattern.

The abandonment of long-standing custom contributes to the constant anxieties Moorhouse writes about in his short stories. Cindy's mother is equally anxious for her daughter and grandchild who will have to cope in this unstable environment:

"The little mite should have the protection of marriage—even if you don't want it."

"What protection is that?"

"Legal protection. Just in case something happened."

"What legal protection?"

"Well dear, I don't like broaching these things but we have to be practical. What, for instance, if Roger left you. I'm not saying that he ever would—but there's nothing holding him, is there?" (170)

The practicalities of the legal obligations of care are contrasted with Cindy's more idealistic vision of love and cohabitation. "For God's sake, laws don't hold people together... And who wants money that has to be forced out of someone you love?" (171)

Her mother refused to concede Roger the rights of a husband. In his casual way Roger didn't claim them and in the formal sense he wasn't a husband. What rights? The old trap again. The trap of looking for established patterns of rights and explanations.

Established patterns were used by people whose relationships were too weak to generate their own living patterns. Or perhaps all human relationships were too weak to do this? Did they all require social patterns. Was it childish arrogance to think otherwise? Were social patterns congealed wisdom? Social patterns changed. And some people changed faster than social patterns. (164-165)

Cindy is realising here that social patterns, as “congealed wisdom,” may in fact be the only source of meaning and stability. Upon pondering this, Cindy feels, despite herself, an attraction to the middle-class securities of her parents. Those concerns hover and tempt throughout, haunting the heavily pregnant Cindy with their assurances. She practices her mantra of non-conformity throughout in order to remind herself of her choices: “Established patterns were used by people whose relationships were too weak to generate their own living patterns.” “[M]arried people hampered themselves.” Statements like these delivered as authoritative statements in the third-person narrative reveal Cindy’s anxieties, her need to reassure herself through doctrine and theory, that in settling her mind her emotional core may be silenced. However, this disturbed emotional core erupts through her theory several times, breaking the sureness of her academic arguments about marriage: “What was so great about nonconformity? What was so great about independence? What was so good about strange paths?” (169) Her vulnerable position causes her to question the intelligence of her generation’s new orthodoxy. Importantly, however, the mother’s position is so thoroughly ironised, with her obsessions with detergents, gloves and aprons, that her way of life is hardly an alternative: “Perhaps we are creating an orphan generation—no parents and no God.” (169) She kicks her mother out; there can be no retreat into the previous generation’s values. The question for Cindy is—where to from here?

Roger would be home soon. Or would he? Would this be the night when he did not come home—the night he would be with some other girl? It would be only for a night or two—she was sure of that. Was she sure of that? He never had got off but the possibility was always there, built into the relationship. She needed Roger not to get off now, of all times. Her conventional breeding cried for conventional comfort. At least for a make-believe security. Sad she needed to make believe that she was as safe as her mother. She wanted to make believe... I am frightened. Mother, she thought, and I do fearfully wish there was a document which would guarantee love. And if you had asked one



more time perhaps I would have gone home with you, Mother.  
(172-173)

### **The Redfern Delegation**

Years later, Cindy reappears in even more dramatic circumstances, this time trapped by the conditions of justice. When she is raped by a group of Aboriginal men at an academic conference, legal justice, street justice and historical justice all compete for sympathetic reaction. Here, the nature of responsibility becomes paramount since the decisions Cindy must make have wide-ranging implications. On the one hand, she becomes responsible for public safety, but to secure it she fears a perpetuation of racial prejudice and stereotyping. Cindy has finally become Dr Broughton, the “serious thinker” and is attending a conference in Queensland. She does not feel justified in reporting the rape after “what we did to the aboriginals for two centuries.”(97) The drama is played out over several main stories in *The Everlasting Secret Family*: “Yesterday Stone Age, Today Space Age”, “Stockholm Syndrome?”, “Yes, the Stockholm Syndrome, I Think”, “Only the Interaction of Complex Things” and “Only the Interaction of Confusing Things”. A male friend, Cindy’s ex-lover, narrates these stories.

In the story that precedes the rape sequence, “Dance of the Chairs” (83-90), Moorhouse begins to set up the complexity of race relations. Chairs become symbols of submission, authority or equality, depending upon where they are located in relation to the speaker. The consternation regarding the chairs is a “white” fixation and the session stalls as the “white” conference-goers question whether the positioning of the chairs is “feudal” or not. Bisi, an African observer deflates the argument by taking over: “I will chair”. The narrator observes that a white person would “never have got away with” taking over the session in such a way. The chairs become locations of power and, later, Bisi uses them to spark a machismo contest. He holds a chair high above his head in one hand, saying: “Who is the chairman!” The small group of men who have remained drinking all do the same. It becomes a contest of masculine strength. During the contest Bisi calls out a Swahili war cry and the Australians sing an old football song. Bisi then suggests more competitions between the black and white men, to be carried out in the local brothels. “Then we shall see, white man.” (90) This episode is critical to the rape stories in the sense that, to the narrator, the black men attending the conference are not victims of white colonialism but display their male power with pride. Bisi is certainly no

figure for post-colonial sympathy and is disdainful of what he sees as the patronising allowances his white counterparts offer the black participants at conferences such as these. A sense of black agency is critical in looking at Cindy's rape situation.

Bisi's chair competition occurs after all the women have returned to their rooms for the evening. It is, therefore, an exclusive male group attempting to prove their masculinity to one another. This competition will then be contested in the sexual arena: like the chairs, the bodies of prostitutes will become a site of male prowess and power. The exclusive group is of central concern to the narrator who explains his current writing obsession to a fellow conference-goer:

Oh, I'm obsessed at present with what might be called 'exclusive groups', people who live a certain way or believe certain things that they don't want to be made public, don't want others to know. I think we're more and more like that...[including] revolutionaries, sects, religious sects including some aboriginals. Sexually aberrant clubs and secret societies, Elitist groups...(86-87)

There are also exclusive groupings within that male group: black versus white. The result for the narrator is confusion: "I bluffed on, not knowing what the hell we were talking about precisely." (90) The confusion stems from the implicit understandings of exclusive groups. The narrator, ignorant of Bisi's suggestions, represents the figure of the outside other. As such, he is at a disadvantage to the exclusive group. This is a recurring arrangement in the rape sequence when, for example, Cindy is put at disadvantage with the Redfern Delegation. Later she herself forms a secret alliance with the delegation and the narrator, once again on the outer, is left wondering.

"Yesterday Stone Age, Today Space Age" (91-99) explores the division of groups, a division which culminates in an excessive abstraction of the *other* and, at this conference, manifests as idealisation of non-white cultures. Farman, the poet, takes on this figure in a highly ironic way with his conscientious "mixing" amongst groups that, in the narrator's eyes, is practised like a "virtue":

When Farman joined us the jokes about the coloured delegates stopped. He'd probably been drinking with them and had, in turn, stopped their whitey jokes. There was probably a whole reality from which someone like Farman was excluded because people knew that he was a 'life-affirming' poet and would tirelessly take issue, would misunderstand certain styles of humour. (91-92)

A woman at the conference pulls him up, accusing him of continuous “negritude”: “But that stuff today about Bali, my dear, claiming that they, the Balinese, have no stress, no hangups, are something outside the human conditions—that’s pure idealisation, no better than the nineteenth century fiction. The idyllic South Sea islands.” (92) Moorhouse makes it clear, in his treatment of the humourless “life-affirming poet”, complete with “A-line shirt and ethnic sandals”, that the continuing Western patronisation and romanticisation of the non-Western world continues. It has changed only in terms of approach. Instead of seeking to correct, improve or dismantle tribal cultures, poets like Farman uncritically endorse and idealise older cultures: “I’m trying to find my way back to pre-literate modes,” he said. “We’ve lost so much.” (93) By positioning Farman thus, Moorhouse establishes degrees of negritude along a sliding scale. At one end we have Farman, at the other sits Charles, the arch-conservative, who opposes the constant allowances made for minority groups:

‘You’re just middle-class do-gooding,’ Charles called out at Cindy, not bothering to stand, ‘taking your basket of revolutionary groceries to the poor...trying to irradiate your bland existence by associating with...outgroups.’ (“Yes, the Stockholm Syndrome, I Think”, 111)

Cindy and the narrator struggle to take a position somewhere between these extremes. In the end, the narrator, more so than Cindy, is caught in the tension of not being able to define a position at all, taking refuge in the escape that “it was not my rape.” Cindy, on the other hand, must take a position for she is called on to *act*.

It is after the evening drinks described in “Yesterday Stone Age...” that the narrator stumbles upon the rape scene. He is outside Cindy’s room and hears the “muffled scream” and Cindy’s panic. When Cindy tells him she has been raped, the narrator’s response is doubt: “I wondered if she were using the word loosely or figuratively.” (93) This aside again brings our attention to the problems created within a milieu whose environment continually seems exclusively verbal. The narrator questions how she might be using the word but for Cindy, suddenly, the word is intended in all its physical brutality. She has been dislodged from her talking, academic world into a harsher, physical reality where it is actual experience which provides knowledge rather than her theories of culture and behaviour. She wryly quotes Okot p’Bitek, a writer under discussion at the conference: “When a girl moves away from the protective confines of her family and village she is defenceless.”(94) Up until this point, such a statement would

have been taken almost as an impossibility for Cindy. Its context is a distant East African locale and, to a modern “intellectual with a vagina” like Cindy, would sound like a fairly primitive and easily avoidable fate for a woman such as she. A great rift has appeared between her expectations and her actual reality: “I always thought—I had these elaborate scenarios—dark lanes. I had these elaborate coping techniques’.” Her confidence in a projected rape scene has left her vulnerable. Her coping techniques, however elaborate, were for a different scenario and therefore she has limited her ability to cope in the given situation. Furthermore, she discounts direct warnings from female peers, a warning she labels as racist:

I was even warned—this was a danger for nice girls who mixed with drunken, resentful, angry aboriginal men. I was even warned by another woman, an anthropologist, and I thought, and I thought she was full of racist rape fantasies. (97)

Cindy’s quickness to judge another person’s racism leaves her blind to the contributing factors of her rape situation:

‘The full story: we’d been drinking down at the pub and we came back to my room—at my suggestion—and drank the inevitable flagon and then it all began to happen, unlike any rape scenario I had. They actually held me down.’

She asked for some tea.

Why had she taken them to her room? Why not the college lounge?

‘Christ,’ I said, ‘why did you go to your room?’

‘I knew them!’ she said. ‘I worked with the bastards at the Centre last year. And anyhow, why shouldn’t I take people to my room?’ (96-97)

From a racial perspective, this exchange summarises a no-win predicament. The narrator is incredulous that Cindy should take “them” to her room. We are forced to assume that the narrator’s discomfort with Cindy’s invitation comes from the group’s aboriginality. After all, the narrator himself was dropping in on Cindy, deviating on his way back to his own room. If he could expect to be entertained, one way or another, in her room there can be no *inherent* danger in extending invitations to one’s room. His aversion is a racial one. In terms of Moorhouse’s exclusive groups, however, perhaps it is not an aversion to Aboriginal men *per se* but an aversion to difference. Cindy is put at a disadvantage simply by mixing with an exclusive group, since she and that group cannot rely on shared cultural assumptions.

When she reveals to the narrator who her rapists are the dilemma is fully realised. The narrator is instantly drawn into the dilemma of resolving the situation: “I can see your problem...about doing anything about it.”(97) The hyper-sensitivity and self-consciousness regarding race relations activates this dilemma and, because of this, the Aboriginal men responsible for the crime are stripped of individual identity and agency and are immediately cast as the victims of the drama. For Cindy to take this position, she must see herself as the moral arbiter. She says: “I couldn’t bring in the police, not after what we did to the aboriginals for two centuries.”

True to her academic style, Cindy refers to the situation as “a classic textbook dilemma... if you look at it—feminism and racism.” Cindy is resolved not to go to the police and it is significant, as Brian Kiernan points out, that this dilemma occurs in Queensland, “where the police have a reputation for brutality and racism.”<sup>169</sup> This location further funds the impulse to keep the police out of it. Yet the real impulse is Cindy’s own guilt about the injustices inflicted upon Aboriginal people, who, for Cindy, must always be read as continual victims of colonial enterprise. She does not see that here, she too is a victim. For Cindy, any action against the Delegation at all is racist:

‘We could take some private action—get someone like Harvey to heavy them. Street justice.’  
 ‘You’ll have me a racist soon. I even find it tempting.’ (98)

If every possible reaction to the rape is branded as racist, what can she possibly *do*? From what position can she justifiably act when each position she might take is made more farcical by her constant academic posturing? As Cindy slips into sleep, the narrator considers this: “But it seemed that something had to happen after this, something had to follow from this...crime. I could not feel that it was all over.” (98) The issue here is one of consequences. It is Cindy’s turn to act. What will be the consequences of the actions she decides to take? Is the narrator correct when he wonders if the rape only exists in the five minds of those involved?

Cindy tracks two of the Redfern Delegation down and, in what the narrator describes as “faddish therapy”, they come to some form of resolution that the narrator and, by extension, the reader is not privy too. He resents the exclusive group Cindy and the Delegation have become, locked away in Cindy’s hotel room. The narrator can only fantasise about what the outcomes of their discussions might be. Being outside the

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<sup>169</sup> Kiernan, B. *Studies in Australian Literary History*. Sydney: Shoestring Press. 1997. pp. 186-187.

privileges of Cindy's group, we are drawn into judgment of Cindy's subsequent behaviour only through the narrator's observances. This becomes the subject for the later stories of the sequence. It is important to look at the narrator's ethically charged assessments of her relations with the Delegation.

In "Stockholm Syndrome?" a firm contrast is drawn between the narrator's and Cindy's attitude to problem-solving on the morning following the rape. She demands smoked salmon for breakfast and to the narrator, this is "spoiled-brat capriciousness." It is against his "style" to enforce his pre-conceived notions (such as a preferred meal) onto a situation: "Or anyhow it was against *my* adult style, of living within the conditions of a given situation or something. Of *ambling* through life, or, as Cindy might have said, sneaking through life." (102) Here is a distinct attitudinal difference between the two. Cindy is prepared to exert her own idealisations onto a given environment—to make it do what she wants it to—whereas the narrator more dynamically exists in a given situation. It is not so much a decision between whose reckoning of reality is more correct. What Cindy must realise is that even though she orders smoked salmon specifically with no capers and no onion rings—her projected, idealised breakfast—the capers and onion rings arrive regardless. In other words, in spite of her demands and attempts at control she may still get more than she bargained for. In contrast, there is less chance of shock for the narrator if things go awry, because he is living within the conditions of a situation.

The possibilities of the day are manifold. Will the attackers still be at the conference? The narrator assumes they won't be there: "Surely they will have left.' I was about to add, 'in all decency', but realised that the expression belonged to some sort of class attitude." (102-103) There is a very sensitive consciousness occurring that is comical:

In the cab back to the conference she commented sourly that she had probably got VD from last night. "And that's a racist thing to say too. That's another stage of racism—realising that as you say something that it's racist—but still it indicates a rising consciousness, I suppose."

Then she amended it again, saying that maybe it wasn't a racist thing to have said, given the statistically higher incidence of VD among black people—introduced by the whites. (103)

Cindy argues an apologist case to make her anxieties over venereal disease more acceptable. It is the whites who gave it to the blacks; she must ensure that all

responsibility must come back to the colonial aggressor. By continually falling back on statistics and academic arguments, she heightens the absurd rift between feeling and action in processing a violent and violating crime. She is the intellectual with a vagina, stressing two mutually exclusive realities. Her rising consciousness is thus restricted.

Since Cindy has decided not to go to the police, there are many turns the situation could take. The narrator runs through the possibilities in order to arm himself for what may happen next:

I felt some trepidation myself about how we would handle it if they hadn't left. How much aggression would be there in them if they were unrepentant. What if they were arrogantly confident of her not calling the police and paraded this confidence. Or took not calling the police as Cindy's acceptance of the rape, even her passive consent. Or what if they feared she might still call the police and became intimidatory towards her. (103)

The narrator becomes frustrated with Cindy's excessive sympathy for her rapists' position. She is concerned the delegation will be worried that the police are involved. She wants to tell them not to worry:

'No,' I said, 'you don't owe them a damned thing. Let them sweat.'  
'The bastards have done enough sweating. Historically.' (104)

Cindy confronts Alan, one of the rapists, who reappears at the conference. He says it "was the drink, the drink took away our heads." (106) She doesn't accept this and they go away to talk. When she doesn't reappear later, the narrator calls the motel and discovers that at least one of them is back in her room. Since we are outside the closed circle of Cindy and the men, our attention must turn to the narrator's reaction. The terms he uses to describe the turn of events are drenched with judgement. This time, the judgements are aimed at her, a typical twist in rape scenarios:

And I felt held away, discarded, piqued. I faced then my sense of appall at the idea of them together in the motel—all right, middle-class abhorrence. I pictured the flagon of wine, the loosening of formality as what started as a 'dialogue', self-conscious, faddish therapy, weakened into male-female drinking, joking around, undertones of sexuality there all the time, cigarette litter, room-service plates, sprawling on the floor, cigarette smoke, spillings of drink, intoxication. A scene I'd witnessed with Cindy and her friends in the past many times, had participated in. It was not only that they were aboriginals from way outside her social group—my god, they were aboriginal rapists. (107)

The narrator feels abhorrence; he is judging Cindy's reaction under the influence of his own middle-class subjectivity and even though he is conscious of it, this self-awareness does nothing to change his perception. He is only ironically and uncomfortably aware of it. Later in "Yes, the Stockholm Syndrome, I Think", when Cindy sits with the Delegation at the conference, he admits he found her "fraternising with them lurid and vexing". It is no longer Farman's ironic 'mixing' as before: it is *fraternising*, a term which suggests that Cindy is courting disaster, flirting with them even. Her behaviour is therefore 'lurid' and incomprehensible. Here, Moorhouse invites the reader to question the narrator's judgement. Clearly, being "vexed", the narrator is at the absolute limit of his experience. He has no way of understanding this situation. He is pushed into a conservative position. He attempts to take refuge in the possibility of a theoretical explanation but it proves unsatisfying: "While I had read of the Stockholm Syndrome and believed that was a part explanation for what was happening with her, I found this not quite manageable in first-hand living fact." (109)<sup>170</sup> Again, a rift has appeared between the only theory he can think of which may explain Cindy's behaviour, and the physical situation itself. The situation offends his sensibilities. Cindy rejects his help and does not explain her behaviour to him, giving him only the very glib line that "life's very complicated," (106):

Life was complicated enough but Cindy wasn't the sort of person who used that as a reason for trying to simplify. She used it as a release from order, as a reason for allowing complication to multiply and enmesh. (108)

The narrator's confusion and resistance to this "release from order" is ironic given his Libertarian heritage. The narrator has previously reflected that he is equipped to "living within the conditions of a given situation"; however, here he is clearly unable to accept these conditions. He is at the boundary of what he considers respectable. Perhaps he is even reaching the conclusion that Cindy is, to put it in the vernacular, *asking for it*:

Maybe, and this was another thought not previously allowed, maybe Cindy was not all that honest. Maybe she had, in a drunken lapse of control, that night gone past the code and restrictions of her lifestyle and temperament, gone with the situation there in her college room and allowed, encouraged, the dark forces, the lower depths, to take over. (108)

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<sup>170</sup> He earlier attaches the Stockholm Syndrome to her behaviour, where "aggressor and the victim form a special bond, a puzzling alliance." p. 107.



Typically during this reasoning, the narrator pulls himself up, becoming uncomfortably aware of his conservatism. He turns the questioning upon himself:

I say against her lifestyle because, although she led a free life, was sexually permissive, I did not consider this sort of situation... Why not? Group sex situations occurred. Why not she? Why was this out of the question? (108)

His resistance to the idea clearly issues from the fact that Cindy is “way outside her own group.” It seems that the group sex situation is permissible within one’s own group and there is a clear boundary around their radicalism. To the narrator’s taste, to experience group sex with three young aboriginal men would be to go “past the code” and “into the lower depths.” These “other directions” the narrator’s thoughts take us, unveil his prejudices and his own limitations in terms of their sexually permissive lifestyle. Just as their “progressiveness” is limited, so is their “permissiveness”.

Appalled, the narrator retreats. In “Yes, the Stockholm Syndrome, I Think” he sits with Charles, the arch conservative: “[in retreat] towards his conservative style away from Cindy’s flabbergasting behaviour.” (109) Positioned thus, he is in direct opposition to Cindy who takes her position to extreme. During a conference session, Cindy announces she wants to “challenge the format” to “grant more time for aboriginal and other colonial victims, who had, she claimed, not received proportionate time... ‘compensatory time’ for historical wrongs.” (110) The narrator reads this as a displacement of “the intolerable experience of the rape, asking for sympathy and compensation for those who’d done it to her because she could not ask for it herself”. Alternatively, Cindy’s plan might also suggest she sees herself as having made a sacrifice: “rape in a good cause” (101). It will only be a worthwhile sacrifice if some good comes of it, in this instance, more time devoted to their “statements, poems, or whatever”. Cindy’s reaction to Charles’s resistance shows her extreme emotional volatility. Such a reaction reveals that her suggestion to restructure the conference is for more than academic ends. She screams at him: “you conservative deadshit” and pelts him with a chalkboard duster and bursts into tears. This reaction is far from an academic submission.

Again, Bisi stands to contribute, making the significant comment that perhaps white Australia is also a victim: “May I suggest that time be set aside for the white Australians to consider their confusion, their wounds?”(113)

“The question to which the white Australians, including Dr Broughton, might address themselves is this. Do they know, do they have comprehension, of just how much they themselves are injured? How much they are the real victims to colonialism? That they, as the abandoned children of the colonisers, have wounds that they cannot see, that they, having not yet gained a true independence not having, so to speak, been through fire and anger and violence against the metropolitan country, have not yet experienced the anguish of true independence. Have not, as we in Africa, and the United States, historically, and India has, have not yet found an identity through independent behaviour in world politics...” (112)

It is a timely comment for Cindy, given that she is a rape victim who does not seek justice for her injuries. Cindy is quick to take up Bisi’s opinion: “I really think we are basically in agreement—I’ll amend that to whatever you think.” (112) Bisi rejects the idea they are in agreement thus demonstrating Cindy’s anxiety about always being on “their” side. She is ready to change her ideas to “whatever Bisi thinks”. Given this admission, Bisi is certainly right when he says: “Before you white Australians start offering to heal us, or the black people of this country, I might suggest that you are more in need of political healing, of liberation, of growth, that in many ways you remain political children.” (112)

The lack of independent thought Cindy displays is very childlike: “I didn’t mean to be patronising, quite rightly, I should have included ourselves, I mean...” (113) Clearly, she has not felt the full significance of Bisi’s statement: she is *literally* an injured colonial victim. She is close to breaking point. Her position has not been firmed by rigorous argument; for the first time she lacks a strong academic position the very moment it becomes crucial. She is in an environment where intellectual rigour is the main criteria. As before, where she finds herself in a physical reality far beyond her academic imagination, she is taken off guard and out of sorts; here, where intellectual position *makes* the environment, her emotional position disallows her proper participation. Charles says: “We have a program to which we should stick unless there are obvious intellectual reasons why we shouldn’t...And you, Dr Broughton, should not need to be told that.” (111) Further on, Charles says: “And anyhow, you know as well as I do that oppressed groups have to be the instruments—the authors of their own advancement. That’s not our job.” (111) The statements “you should not need to be told” and “you know as well as I do” are a firm indication that Cindy has fallen below the expectations

of this environment and her position is easily weakened with these parental phrases. She remains the “political child” under Bisi and Charles.

Despite these well-argued cases against Cindy’s amendments, the suggestion is taken up by the other political children: “So much for intellectual rigour—the African takes the mickey out of them but they go on with political games.” (113) Cindy’s supporters meet Charles’s criticism with militancy, shouting to Charles: “Don’t get in a lift with us—if you have any sense.” (115) The point Moorhouse makes through the upshot of the academic spat is that the continuing guilt that is driving Cindy’s agenda (and her supporters) blinds her to her continuing patronage of “colonial victims”. There is no room for dissent. There is no room for critical assessment of “post colonialism”. Moorhouse puts this term in quotations marks to emphasise that it is an intellectual *style*. To Bisi’s objections, she apologises for seeming patronising yet when Charles objects, he is automatically branded a racist. Cindy cannot see that she, herself, is such a victim and further, and more condemnably, that she is perpetuating the disempowerment of the black people she is speaking for. She stands in the way of letting the oppressed become their own instrument with her constant apologising and patronising position.

Cindy places herself in the same bind she places Charles: if she reports her rape she will be a racist but if she doesn’t she is an apologist. By not reporting the crime, the attackers avoid taking responsibility for their actions thus leaving them in a childlike state of unaccountability. Cindy’s decision has further ramifications, however, and it is here her benevolence, as it were, takes a terrible turn. The crime does not only exist in five minds, “wondered about by those minds, and left at that” (99) as the narrator previously pondered. Here, Moorhouse turns the final screw. The police become involved despite Cindy’s and the narrator’s silence and the third attacker is in custody. They go to the police station to bail him out and, to do so, Cindy must give a statement that she and her attacker had consensual sex. Not only this, they give him \$50 upon his release. After he walks away Cindy reveals to the narrator what the police told her. This attacker has a record of child-sex offences. Her decision not to report the rape will more than likely lead to future crimes: “Their parting remark was that they hoped I’d watch the newspapers for news of his next rape.” (139) What is the limit to her moral obligation? To what extent is she responsible for his future crimes? Under what system is she obliged to make her moral decisions? As a “lady radical” or as a mother herself? “When you have a child you think simultaneously of their interests.” (139) She doesn’t ask the young man

if it is true. “No, I didn’t want to know.” She doesn’t want to know because such knowledge would surely require a different response and a different level of obligation.

Importantly, the twist at the end of this series emphasises the crucial point that, at any time, our moral decisions are made with limited knowledge and, therefore, the consequences of our actions are not fully predictable. There is always an element of risk. The final two stories in the sequence, “The Interaction of Complex Things”, and “The Interaction of Confusing Things”, sets this moral conundrum against the work of John Anderson, head of the Sydney University philosophy department between 1927 and 1958, who greatly influenced the Libertarian movement, albeit through “pub-Andersonianism”. Significantly for this study, Anderson was influenced by James. From James and pragmatism, Anderson took “the idea that truth entails certain regular ways of ‘working’ in the world, and that the pursuit of knowledge is always a provisional, risk-taking activity that can never produce absolute certainty.”<sup>171</sup> Anderson writes that realism, “rid of ‘meanings’ and ‘purposes’ and other products of ‘vicious intellectualism’...proposes as the formal solution of any problem *the interaction of complex things*.”<sup>172</sup> Anderson, as a realist, rejects the notion of a “total system”.

The narrator in “Complex Things” is following a lecture on Anderson while observing Cindy in the audience. His two observations (the lecture and Cindy), spliced together, offer a theoretical perspective through which to view Cindy’s situation and her dramatic decisions: “For the concept of total system Anderson substituted, one might be tempted to say, the concept of space-time. To be is to have a place not in the unfolding of the spirit, but simply in time and space.” (125) In other words, there is no total system that might validate Cindy’s decisions. She is under the apprehension that she can use the rape to firm up her position in her total system: “Rape in a good cause, the inevitable fate of a lady radical.” In order to remain within the parameters of her post-colonial position, that is, in order to avoid rupturing her value system, she needs to excuse the rape as an “inevitable fate.” Yet, if we look at her position within the context of Andersonianism, we can see that she is attempting to keep her experiences within the bounds of the total system she has constructed for herself. But, as James might say, this experience has “boiled over” her present knowledge and expectation. Cindy must find a way to make

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<sup>171</sup> Kennedy, B. *A Passion to Oppose: John Anderson, Philosopher*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. 1995. p. 67.

<sup>172</sup> Anderson, J. “Realism and Some of Its Critics.” *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson. 1962. p. 59.

this new experiential truth ‘fit’ or ‘work’ with her world view. Her reaction is to squash the experience so that it fits into her value system. In the close of the sequence, she (and the narrator) take the Libertarian-style pose that the authorities (in this case the police) must be defied and distrusted as a matter of course, especially in Queensland because “in this state they can do anything.”(138) They take Jack’s side when he is arrested:

“But we could take some action—file a complaint with the Attorney-General. And what about Jack—false arrest?”

“Shut up,” she cried, “just shut up—you don’t know...in a final effort to get me to lay charges—because he had admitted to the rape—they came up with his record. He had a record including a sex crime with a child. He was released six months ago...But I had to play it through, I just took a deep breath and prayed they were lying. I decided to put my trust in the aboriginal—for no good reason.” (138)

The final comment, “for no good reason” is symbolic of the lack of rational decision making on Cindy’s part. She is blindly following her post-colonial customary morality that maintains the concept of victimisation of Aboriginal people by white authorities, here given the form of the menacing Queensland Police Force. Finally she can see that her reactions, funded by theory, are based on “no good reason.” This concession may be the “rising consciousness” she thought she had previously discovered.

The key to pragmatist thinking is allowing experience to dictate knowledge and truths. For example, it is an experience-funded truth that leads a female anthropologist to warn Cindy about a rape possibility. Cindy’s theoretical knowledge and “middle class do-gooding” sympathy discounts this experience as a racist rape fantasy. Now, she grimly says, “she can talk from the field.”

With every turn in this drama, a new fact appears that must force a reconsideration of future action and also an assessment of previous action. Moorhouse indeed draws a picture of the complex interactivity of elements of experience that makes it impossible to take a position with any degree of certainty. The tension remains between the binding decisions that take place in space and time—such as a statement to the police—and the shifting relations of elements within a situation. Only a reflective morality, which is prepared to relinquish previous values in light of new information, will enable agents to proceed with any confidence into this unstable environment. Customary morality is the perpetuation of cultural blind spots that hinder successful liberation from a total system. Even the narrator comes to the ironic realisation that “we had made

Libertarianism a total system.” (125) By subscribing to total systems, a conscious mind takes a “moral holiday” (127)<sup>173</sup>. By following a total system, subscribers can defer moral decision-making to that system. In *Forty-Seventeen*, somebody admits, “Sydney Anarchism eradicated moralism and replaced it with Higher Libertarianism.” (8)

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<sup>173</sup> The “moral holiday”, quoted in the lecture, is a Jamesian term, taken from “What Pragmatism Means” (*Pragmatism*: 41) and demonstrates James’s influences on Anderson’s thought.

### Chapter 3

## The Radical Pragmatist Takes Flight: *Tales of Mystery and Romance*

In contrast to Cindy's style of an intellectual reality, Moorhouse offers another version of reality, a polymorphous and ever-expanding vision of the world. In *Tales of Mystery and Romance* the fluid self of the pragmatist is taken to the extreme in the figure of the narrator. This radical pragmatist is set against various other types such as Milton, a more conservative pragmatist who, whilst he continues to locate meaning through systems, does so with the awareness that ideas-systems are subject to revision. The narrator's lifestyle is also set against his ex-wife's, whose interpersonal relationships create order in her life. The narrator's position is summed up in the story, "The Airport, The Pizzeria, The Motel, The Rented Car and The Mysteries of Life" (55-63) when he thinks to himself: "How clever the living process was. Oh bloody clever. You couldn't really make a mistake. Whatever you did, wherever you ended up, the mind reshaped to accommodate and even celebrate it." (62)

Moorhouse's emphasis here is on the plasticity of the experiential field. As situations change, the mind reshapes. There is no totality or overall order to living, only action and response, which may or may not be predictable. Moorhouse is arguing the necessity to live outside total systems because of the changeability of the environment and suggests living independently from System. It is only outside systems that his characters are more capable of restyling themselves to cope with ever-changing circumstances. All things are in flux in this non-teleological universe, including the self, given the ability the mind has to reshape itself. It is significant, in the story "A Cat Called Teleosis", that the word teleosis is scrubbed from a conference chalkboard but its faint outline remains. The word becomes like a mascot (a cat) to the conference. But it is a mascot that has *vanished*. The narrator remarks:

Teleology, I knew, was the study of final causes. I was later to read that Zollman in 1740 said that teleology was one of the parts of philosophy in which there had been little progress made. No progress made in 1740 into final causes and into the design and

purpose of nature—I liked that. (*The Everlasting Secret Family*: 140)<sup>174</sup>

To accommodate an ever-modifying reality, a collection of Moorhouse's characters continually role-play and restyle themselves. This is to practice skills and build up repertoires of action which may be required at any point. Role-playing, which is behavioural testing, is a necessary part of learning, especially in a new moral world where all values are shifting and resettling. It is also a core component of the underlying Bohemian philosophy. That is, in reaction to staid values and a customary morality, his characters are philosophically required to push the boundaries of behaviour. A primary goal of the experiments into behavioural styles is to discover what *works best* in this new environment, therefore, role-playing and styling can also be seen as a pragmatic mandate. So far, we have seen how the dogma of the authoritarian left creates a new customary morality intolerant of dissent and subversion in the figures of Kim and Cindy. Moorhouse also offers other possibilities of being in reaction to the previous generation's value system. This alternative style is fluid and, as a style, is always changeable and so avoids becoming bogged in dogma.

We turn now to the Milton stories where experiments of being are constantly conducted. The ever-present unnamed male narrator, who will be the focus of this section, is in varying stages of relations with Milton, his close male friend, and their friendship ultimately dwindles. Narratively, they are set against one another as shown in the following exchange between the narrator and Hestia in “The Oracular Story”. The narrator says:

‘Well, you could live by unpredictability.’  
 ‘Milton tries to sell me predictability and you want to sell me unpredictability. Men.’ (96)

Milton is dismissive of both the narrator and Hestia because they do not have “a coherent critique” yet, as we have seen, coherent critiques can become problematic. Like Hestia, we are faced with the prospect of choosing which position is better. Is the narrator’s position “incoherent” when contrasted with Milton’s? Here the coherency of a theoretical position is set against the seemingly incoherent position of the radical pragmatist, yet, Milton is unlike Moorhouse’s dogmatists. Milton differs from characters

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<sup>174</sup> A link can be made here between the narrator’s anti-teleological penchant and Baudrillard’s discussion of the “journey without end” previously quoted. The new world (and new age) is liberated from these historical ideas of final ends.



like Kim in that he is generally ready to explore different positions and he recognizes the need to maintain a degree of flexibility. Milton, like the narrator, is continually in the process of remaking himself; here he is shown as perpetually donning the theories of the young in order to stay relevant or intellectually viable: “He wants to wait and catch the next cycle, as it were, the next cycle into the station. He is always waiting, saying no, I’ll catch the next ‘younger’ ideas-system. I keep wanting to say, come on, Milton, get aboard, we have to proceed to our destination.” (“Ritual of the Photograph”, 106)

The distinction between the two rests in their approach to theoretical positions. Whilst Milton is ready to change systems, he wishes to operate inside systems to find which works satisfactorily. His position is far more flexible than Kim’s but far less flexible than the narrator’s:

‘What do you support then?’ Milton asked, with a casual aggressiveness.

‘I obey the imperatives of the personality,’ I said.

‘Meaning what? Meaning bloody what?’

‘A man’s got to...’

‘...do what a man’s got to do,’ he cut in. ‘Shit.’

‘Some formative values,’ I began, ‘some modified values, some ideal values, some compromises with everyday reality—survival.’

‘In other words, you lack theory,’ he said, ‘you have no coherent critique.’

Milton orders his living pattern through theoretical perspectives. He is frustrated by the narrator’s willingness to forego “coherency” in favour of survival tactics and the endless modifications to values. When Milton turns to Zen and mysticism a deep rift is created between him and the narrator. This rift is emphasized through discursive means; Milton’s conversation is littered with new words: “‘The only concession I’ll make,’ I say, ‘is that fads, like Zen, refresh the vocabulary. We need new words and expressions. Even if the things we talk about don’t change.’”(108) The narrator, however, is excluded from these new discussions because he does not know how to use these new terms: “He gently, laughingly, criticizes my misuse of counter culture jargon. He says I am dated. I get the emphases wrong. My constructions are wrong. Where is his authority for this?” (107) By never fully endorsing a new theoretical perspective the narrator is left outside this exclusive group. Again, the group cannot admit dissidents into its ranks. Milton patronises his outcast state: “‘Just about every one of your friends has now gone through to satori, meditation, deep relaxation. That’s very sad for you,’ he says with gloating sympathy.” Here, the emphasis on Milton’s jargon along with narratorial asides, like

“gloating”, ironises the Western take-up of ideas like Zen. Milton’s so-called peace has the quality of “gloating” and his supporters are “arse-lickers”. The narrator makes the point:

‘If you people have satori it doesn’t show,’ I say, ‘you appear no different, you do the same things. You drink as much.’  
 ‘Ah, but it is our relationship to what we do,’ says Milton wisely, ‘the why and how.’  
 Hestia’s brother, the wheedling arse-licker, says to Milton, ‘How to explain the taste of sugar to he who has not tasted sugar?’ (113)

The narrator cannot discern any real effects of the new ideology amongst his friends. This raises the pragmatic test: if no difference is noticeable, where is the value in Milton’s ideology? Are Milton’s and his sycophant’s answers useful or simply verbal? We can apply Charles Peirce’s often quoted statement here:

Thus, we come down to what is tangible and practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice.<sup>175</sup>

If there is no tangible difference brought about by their new approach to alcohol, does this approach have any real value? The ironic suggestion, of course, is that it is merely verbal. Moorhouse places a high degree of ironic emphasis on the verbal aspects of new positions. In one case, the narrator and Milton discuss luck, luck being part of a risky, non-systematised universe. The verbosity of Milton’s universe is apparent when he says: “Lucky things happen to people who have supraliminal empathy.” (89) As an aside, whilst the arrow is pointed at Milton’s heavily laden discourse, the reference to supraliminal empathy raises an interesting point and deepens the irony. A person with the ability to empathise with what is beyond the threshold of consciousness would be a pragmatist who cannot sustain coherent critique since that which is beyond consciousness may not necessarily be contained in any present critique.

In an effort to counter Milton’s complaint about his lack of coherency, the narrator appeals to his own bush skills in an attempt to pin his character to *something* that approaches systematized behaviour. Milton replies:

The much vaunted bushmanship - sure we all know you’re an expert bushman...But that’s just the mechanics. You don’t know the soul of it. You don’t even approach the fourth dimension.

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<sup>175</sup> Peirce, C. “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*, pp. 37-49. p. 43.

You are way way way back in the third. ("Milton Turns Against Champagne", 87)

The narrator is stunned by such a revelation and Milton leaves him pondering "in the wind of self-inspection." The sensitive reflection Milton provokes in the narrator is then brilliantly punctuated by Moorhouse's relentless ironic observation: "[Milton] went briefly into the university bookshop ... I watched him moving his colleagues' books back and bringing his own forward." Here, Milton manipulates the books for personal gain, possibly even vanity. This is a very different Milton who elsewhere claims his developed ability of personal detachment:

I was listening to you just then without identifying—totally detached with regard to my personal life—I was enjoying an absolute truce—no intervening voice concerned with my own cares or personal preoccupations—my attention was then removed from you and I saw that bus stop in a way that I never habitually do—it gave me simultaneously a knowledge of the outside world and of myself—no separation between the world and self. (105)

The narrator protests over the Hare Krishnas dancing in the street and Milton defends them, saying, "at least they have a Way." To which the narrator replies: "All beliefs *work*,' I say, straightening my bow-tie, 'they all give you something to *be*.'" (114) This is of course the narrator's central problem. If he is to resist all Ways, who will he be and what is his place in the social scene? Since the narrator is outside his friends' realm of beliefs they become an exclusive group and he is unwelcome. Once again, the exclusive group or, as Dewey and Tufts would say, the "charmed circle" shuns the *other* and is resistant to the narrator's reflections, criticism and dissent. He is left on the outside, and he jumps up to see through the windows of their "commune" or, more correctly, their "simple experiment in shared living with a poly-functional endospace." ("The Commune Doesn't Want You", 121)

The exclusive groupings Moorhouse routinely comes back to set up targets of irony. An exclusive group has distinct boundaries of behaviour which ensures its cohesiveness and exclusivity. For entry into such a group, there must be a submission of complete independence in order to be aligned with group interests. The result is dogmatic practice and, importantly, is *non-ironic*. This creates a dangerous imbalance. A sense of irony is important in belief systems. Irony is: "the bringing in of the opposite, the

complementary impulses' in order to achieve a balanced poise."<sup>176</sup> A "balancing self-irony" or, we might say, an ironic poise, "anticipates and guards against a potential (ironic) attack from without."<sup>177</sup> Without such balance, the group exposes itself to the fallibility of total systems that can be produced when two total systems clash. This clash of meanings produces part of the irony of total systems. That is, to be convinced one Way is right and justified is to imply this Way is *better* than other ways; it is a judgement of value of other systems of belief. The successes of other systems threaten the validation of any one total system being the *best*. If an ironic arrow manages to breach the zealously guarded boundary, the system weakens and its fallibility is exposed.

When the narrator breaches the walls of the "poly-functional endospace", he tries to make conversation with the stern, self-absorbed woman he finds inside. She says:

'I'm a dancer.'

'Oh yes?'

'I'm learning Theatre of the Noh.'<sup>178</sup>

'It's a rich world—I'm learning Theatre of the Maybe Not.'

'Is that some sort of put down?' (123)

The narrator immediately provokes a defensive reaction, suggesting the woman lacks a certain amount of self-critique. She approaches her theatrical endeavours with utter conviction and it is this absence of all doubt that leaves her open to the narrator's ironic barb. Furthermore, her certainty is encoded in the word "Noh" and the narrator's resistance to certainty is explicit and ambivalent: Maybe Not. The narrator will always take the path of maybe, whereas Milton and his followers look for systems that require belief and investment of self. It is unclear which path will lead to contentment and fulfillment, or at the very least, satisfying experience and a sense of meaningfulness, if that indeed is the goal.

Despite his resistance to Ways of Being<sup>179</sup>, his description of the early Libertarian scene suggests that a sense of meaning is an approximate goal. In "The Interaction of Complex Things", the lecturer suggests "the assumption of meaninglessness can itself be a defence mechanism". The narrator thinks:

Libertarianism was an exit visa to avoid the complications of a fully operational life, many of us closed down, rationalised the

<sup>176</sup> Richards, I.A. cited in Muecke, D.C. *Irony and the Ironic*. Methuen: London. 1982. p. 26.

<sup>177</sup> Muecke, p. 26.

<sup>178</sup> Learning Noh Theatre is a curious act of appropriation, for this traditional Japanese dance is primarily a male art form.

<sup>179</sup> Note that the narrator's resistance to total Ways of Being is very different to Edith Campbell Berry's formulations of Ways of Going, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

closure of our abilities and our alcoholism by professing a belief in philosophical absurdity and the futility of endeavour. We promoted a sense of futility to excuse a deficient life, we were even deficient at being hedonist. We thought it wrong to care about what we did. (127)

“Deficient”, repeated twice, suggests the absence of something required. If the Libertarian life is deficient, and the Libertarian style was the response to the previous generation’s conservatism, then what next?

When you turn away from convention, further from the expectations of family and your first childhood friends, those expectations which lay out, landscape, our direction in life, which glue us together as a ‘person’ so that we know what we are ‘supposed to do’ and ‘to be’, you find that the land becomes bare, directions indistinct, and the paths and their turnings of no consequence one way or another, not one more imperative than another, only passivity is left, nothing much happens, except quandary. A cold quandary blows permanently on the moors of abnormality. The cheery lighted house of normality is a distant stage-set. (83-84)

The meaning encoded in the “cheery lighted house” of normalcy has eroded and the narrator has found that meaninglessness is an unsatisfactory defensive reaction to this erosion. Milton and his cohorts fill the space left by the cheery-lighted house by exploring new systems of meaning but the narrator is too conscious of the ironic undercurrent in any meaning-system. How then can the narrator proceed with any satisfaction?

### **Negotiating Style: The Fabric of the Self**

The final section of this chapter will look at style as a reference point for self. The question surfaces: If there is no inherent self, but a socially constituted self, is the human being style and context only? Milton denies the narrator’s “imperatives of the personality”, saying: “Individuality is an illusion—you are purely interaction with others. Your behaviour is purely interaction.” (98) Whilst his argument might feasibly support the thesis of the socially recognised self—there is certainly this negotiable aspect of self—the self is a little more complicated than “pure interaction.” Either Milton’s position is influenced by an anti-ego Zen philosophy, or perhaps it is Milton’s way of justifying his constant repositioning. In contrast, the narrator never takes on a position which has a coherent critique and so never needs to change the ‘position’ he takes.

Anderson has described this approach as that of the artist (significantly, Moorhouse's narrator is a writer):

Seize hold of things, hammer out the issues, abjure dilettantism in any shape. This is the true attitude of the artist, whose mind...permits no ideals or taboos to come between him [sic] and a direct handling of things themselves. No sentimental attachments, no higher meanings, no irrelevant antecedents or consequences, are allowed to affect the positive treatment of things, their presentation as a balance of forces or sequence of phases.<sup>180</sup>

Anderson's idea of the "direct handling of things themselves" points to a crucial part of his philosophy and whose influence may distinguish the narrator from Milton. Anderson, as a realist, resisted relativism and insisted that things do have distinctive, independent qualities and do not just become known through relation, for the simple reason that if things didn't have distinctive qualities there would be nothing to have relations *with*. If we follow this reasoning, Milton's claim is untenable when he says "you are simply interaction." Interaction is no simple thing. The qualities of things-in-themselves, their value and the way situations occur is complicated. This present study has emphasised that values are found in things-in-relation. That is, a value of a thing is subjectively found when it is related to another thing for specific purposes. Because purposes change, values of things change. This, however, is not in opposition to Anderson's claim about qualities of things. To avoid confusion, we can apply the term "attributes" instead of "qualities" since "quality" has strong value connotations. Value, in this study, is suggestive of what things become in situations but that is not to say these things do not exist outside of situations. If we apply this idea to the nature of individuality as Milton sees it, we must disprove him: outside of social relations, the attributes of self—a thinking, conscious mind—is still at work in a body that occupies a place in space and time. Remember Thomas from "Walking Out" who, when he leaves his social group, must remind himself he is still there by laughing out loud. He is still there, but not functioning as a social unit. His function is therefore limited but his potential to function is not limited. Indeed, his potential has expanded because he has begun developing a reflective consciousness by critically analysing his original social group. Likewise, when Moorhouse's narrator is locked out of the commune, and consequentially locked out of interaction with the being with whom he craves interaction

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<sup>180</sup> Anderson, p. 43.

(Milton), he still exists. His existence is not illusory. His consciousness is still activated and, given the level of irony which is operating in his thought, his critical faculties are operating at a rather high level.

So, if he cannot take a position like Milton's, but still exists, what informs his actions? He puts it thus: "I do have answers. Make an arbitrary decision. Respond then to the challenges set in motion by the arbitrary decision." (99) In saying so, Moorhouse's narrator becomes what James termed the "radical pragmatist." The following two quotations, taken from the earlier section on William James, are repeated here to approximately define the type of character Moorhouse presents us with:

A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins...It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth. (31)

And:

The rationalist mind, radically taken, is of a doctrinaire and authoritative complexion: the phrase '*must be*' is ever on its lips. The belly-band of its universe must be tight. A radical pragmatist on the other hand is a happy-go-lucky anarchistic sort of creature. (124)

Moorhouse has provided his reader with countless examples of the restrictive nature of authoritarian total systems and, importantly, it is not only characters like George McDowell who subscribe to a total and coherent 'blueprint' for behaviour. It is the characters from the narrator's own milieu—Kim, Carl, Milton and Cindy—who fall back into the habits of referring to total systems, despite the schooling they "received" in Andersonianism. James's description of the "must be" rationalist is akin to Kim's "you can't be". Perhaps it is the nature of "pub-Andersonianism," where points are made under the influences of shouting booziness and the machismo of the Sydney Push scene, simply to bring down one authority and replace it with another. Nevertheless, Moorhouse presents us with the irony that the philosophy that spurned total systems became a total system and the narrator who resists is left outside, alone. We now turn to this narrator's style and actions to assess his success or failure when pursuing the life of the radical pragmatist.

The principle criticism of the narrator's style, in the eyes of his peers, is directed towards his lack of true engagement with those around him. The narrator typically resists relationship forms which require ongoing obligations. Thorough engagement within these relationships requires impositions of a kind because, as Dewey and Tufts point out, ethical human relationships can only be established when both rights and obligations operate. This narrator, however, is a radical pragmatist, with an emphasis on "radical"; as such this "anarchistic sort of creature" provides a perfect contrast to the authoritarians of his peer group. Milton criticises the narrator's detachment in ethical terms, suggesting his conversations are deceptive:

'You never *experience* anything, do you,' he says to me thoughtfully, but I know the malice is there, 'you are able to mimic by using stage props, you mimic the experience but you don't live it. Your conversations, for instance, are not real - they are imitations of conversations.'

'But fairly perfect imitations,' I say in defence.

'Yes, I'll concede that,' he says, 'and I'll admit that they can be sometimes as enjoyable as real conversations, more so, because real conversations are often not as well ordered as your imitations. Most people can't tell the difference between real conversation and your conversation. But I can.' (108)

Milton suggests that the narrator's conversations are illegitimate as social interaction because they are simulations rather than real experiences. Whilst the narrator admits to this, his style is more than simulacra. The term *virtual* may be more useful here since the narrator's mimicking is regenerative. His virtual persona fulfils a vital social function in that he reflects social values back into the social group. Mackenzie Wark's definition of 'virtual', in his book *The Virtual Republic*, is useful in elaborating this point. Wark describes the derivation of virtual as having its roots in 'vir' (man). The three words he draws our attention to are virtue, virtuoso and virtual. Virtue relates to the best qualities of a person, (despite the values of those qualities changing over time and over culture); virtuoso, as having a highly developed quality of a particular kind; and thirdly virtual, a reflected image of a thing. Wark suggests that our contemporary age:

can only converse...in a virtual space composed of media, rather than in the public square of the old renaissance republics. It is this virtual conversation that produces our sense of the public thing. It is through the virtual that we discuss and confirm what is real to us. Not least the reality of who we are.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>181</sup> Wark, M. *The Virtual Republic: Australia's Culture Wars of the 1990s*. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin. 1997. pp. xv-xvii.



Whilst Wark is intending that various media become the agent for such virtuality, there is no reason we cannot apply the same definition to this narrator who is almost sheer public vessel in the way that he conduits and replays public events such as conversations. Through his varied role-plays, from camp homosexual to accomplished bushman, the narrator confirms styles of being that are real for the community at large. It is for this reason that, firstly, I want to apply Wark's ideas of the virtual and, secondly, argue that through this narrator there is potential for a community of selves to become free to re-imagine ways of being. Wark writes:

[T]he whole point of [the virtual republic] is to create a people aware of itself as a people. Not a people bound to any fixed idea of itself, but which knows something of the many pasts from which it descends to the present. A people aware of its potential, of the things it can make of itself, the things it can do and be. This is a third sense of the word virtual, and the hardest to grasp. We oscillate between the euphoria of thinking ourselves absolutely free and capable of anything; and the pessimism of thinking our lives absolutely determined, ground between the wheels of inexorable laws of history or nature. Neither view is justified. Both views trap us into obedience to someone else: those who claim to lead us to a radical remaking of country in the image of their rational schemes; those who claim to be privy to the secret laws that limit all our futures to be pale copies of our past. In contrast to both, the virtual is that world of potential ways of life of which the way things actually are is just an instance.<sup>182</sup>

This is essentially the position of a socially principled pragmatist and this idea of image reflection is similar to Dewey and Tufts' description of the role that art has in assisting a community's development. In *Ethics*, the arts and crafts are "idealising agencies" since they are beyond the essential habits of community survival and, furthermore, Dewey and Tufts write: "[t]hose who see or hear are having constantly suggested to them ideas and values which bring more meaning into life and elevate its interests." (42) It may be said that Milton's recalcitrant friend, given the time and effort he spends in reconstructing perfect imitations of conversations, has valorised that aspect of community living. He has instigated an artistic practice since, under rational and aesthetic considerations, he has given order and form to an otherwise potentially unstructured yet habitual social thing. It is not that he necessarily makes better

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<sup>182</sup> Wark, p. xvii.

conversation but he turns a general habit into an artistic moment thus reflecting a pattern of behaviour and elevating it as a form *per se*. Through his artistic enactment of the conversational form he valorises one of our most valuable and distinctive human behaviours. This is why Milton “enjoys” it more. It is an artistic experience. The conversation has been thought about; it has form and order.

Of course, the pure amelioration of society is rather too large a claim for a narrator who, in “The Oracular Story”, lubricates Hestia whilst she is heavily drugged and has intercourse with her sleeping body. “Moral advancement” here means the sense of freeing the conscious self from total systems in order to test and evaluate habitual customs of behaviour. It is deep into this circumspect character we must now travel. It should be noted that the nameless male narrator I refer to across these stories is conflated as one. Since the voice is consistent throughout and he holds relations with the same characters across the stories it seems justifiable to read the “I” as a consistent entity.

The circumstances of a reenacted or ritualised event must pass through the conscious agent’s mind and, in doing so, become virtual events reflective of the originating cultural norms. In so celebrating the style of a culture, one becomes enmeshed in it. This is clear in Lawson’s bush undertaker who, in the landscape empty of all cultural signposts, enacts a Christian burial complete with pastor and parish (himself and the dog) in order to project onto his dead mate the dignity of human life even in that wasteland. In so doing, the bushman links himself and Brummy to their originating culture, taking part in communal life in order to salvage and express the meaning of their own lives through the ritual. In Dewey, ritual, as with art, reflects the society back to its participants; it reaffirms its values and strengthens the bonds of those who take part through shared meaning. A similar situation occurs here when Moorhouse’s narrator consciously enacts social rituals. Yet, it is a hyper-consciousness that enacts these rituals, which raises some interesting problems for the narrator in terms of the ritual’s eventual meaning and his investment in it. He wonders whether meaning is accentuated or lessened by a situation’s similarity to countless screenplays.

In “Letters To An Ex-Wife Concerning A Reunion in Portugal” and “The Loss of a Friend by Cablegram” (*Tales of Mystery and Romance*), Moorhouse specifically addresses the issue of intertextuality and social role-plays in an age of endlessly reflected and enacted situations. The question the narrator asks is: where does meaning lie if a

situation takes on the character of a stage-set? Does it have human significance through or despite its similarity to what Moorhouse elsewhere describes as a “bad radio play”?

The narrator’s love of airports may be an answer to this question:

I love airports. I love the opera of airports. People weeping, and how soon people stop their tears. The flare of excessive interest in someone because they are coming or going. Everyone audience to the person. Speechy conversation which no one can remember afterwards, everyone over-laughing...When the airport sanctuary is left, the automatic doors open into the sweaty heat and blown litter, and they also re-open the wounds of the family and the dust blows into the lacerations. (57)

The opera, the high-art melodrama of airports, heightens emotion and, in doing so, sanctifies relationship ties. In participating in this ritual, ties with one another are reaffirmed through the social stage-set. These melodramas occur in a removed, almost holy, environment where bad blood is not welcome. For this reason, there is a purifying element to greeting or farewelling loved ones in this way. Relationships are idealised in this environment and their meaning confirmed.

The narrator practices many acts of idealisation. Contact with his ex-wife triggers his reminiscences about their youthful sexual experiences:

Picnic love making on a flat rock in hot river bushland, shrilling like a whistle...Were we doing it because of the *idea* of it—love-making-in-bush? But not only were the passions indistinctly felt but we also shied away from precise observation of ourselves. I did things partly, and maybe still do, I realise, because of the *idea* of it, to experience something described by other human beings...a ritual for instance...Do I do it as a way of knowing others by doing what others have done? Is it an attempt to identify with ‘humanity’ or sometimes ‘the great’; or to gain ‘humanity’? I bet I had read of love-making-in-bush. She always said I was missing ‘something’ because I wouldn’t let myself be ordinary. (17)

The young lovers enact these scenes in order to pretend “by bravado that nothing was being done by us for the first time...If only we could have admitted we didn’t know and have relaxed in each other’s ignorance. Why do the innocent detest innocence?” (17) Certainly there is the element of bravado, of wanting to take on the skills exhibited in sex scenes in books, yet there is something else operating here as well. The narrator wants to “experience something described” in order to relate to broader human experience. Children constantly do this, when they play “grown-ups”: doctors and nurses, mummies and daddies, school or church. They enact situations they are in some

way familiar with but take on the roles of others in the situation. Instead of being the child they are the parent or the teacher, instead of the patient, the doctor. In this way they practice the skills they see others use who are competent in their position of experience and authority. By mimicking, we fill out our repertoire of human actions; in this way we become prepared for future situations. The two young lovers in this scene are certainly afraid of being exposed as innocent and ill-experienced. To overcome this, they take on the attitudes of those they have seen, read or heard about, and recreate those situations. This can be an empowering experience. Recall Joe Wilson entering into the fight. He was not a fighter and yet the stage was set to fight and through winning the fight he becomes a different person, the kind of person fit to marry Mary. Only by copying behaviour he has witnessed does he pass through this initiation. He is personally empowered through the staging of this man-play. The difference here is that Moorhouse's characters are even more self-conscious than Joe is. When Joe participates in the fight, his self-consciousness abates; indeed, he grows strong because his self-consciousness withdraws during the action. In Moorhouse's universe, there are so many more styles of adulthood to choose from that his characters rarely obtain this relief. Even in Milton's mystical happiness he is dissatisfied, "frightened of being accused of 'being happy' because everyone in our group is supposed to be non-happy, in crisis, freaking-out, traumatised." (106) Social comparisons and copying have oppressive aspects such as this, but copying also prevents us having to reinvent the wheel of social behaviours. Moorhouse's characters experiment with different "Ways" by copying. It is what happens after the rudimentary skills are tried, tested and laid down, that may change the course of human behaviour.

When the narrator seems to have his rudimentary sexual skills under control, he moves onto the next set of behaviours he wants to experiment with. Milton and he experiment with homosexuality and again, the emphasis is on building up repertoires of behaviour. He questions himself whether "making love" was indeed what they were attempting:

Milton fell out of bed...Among other things I suppose we were trying to overcome what we talked about as 'our inhibition'—on principle; to resolve what we felt to be a discrepancy between our feelings and our behaviour; to defy the limitations of our upbringing; explore further what was happening between us and advance it; find a new pleasure; visit strange territory, down among the dark forces...("The Alter-Ego Interpretation", *Tales*, 12.)

The narrator and Milton “try on” homosexuality not only for the experiment of homosexuality itself and to consummate their mutual feelings but also to fulfil their philosophical requirements of experimental behaviour *per se*. No behaviour can be off limits; otherwise they cannot consider themselves progressive. The attempt fails. The narrator objects to Milton’s “form”. “It was not the way to go about it”:

He tried to fuck me up the arse. I sucked his penis but he didn’t relax there. We kissed, fondled nervously. He was erect alright. I could’ve become erect—not that I care that much—if he’d calmed. We should perhaps have gently, slowly masturbated each other. But he scrambled at everything at once. Like a scavenger race. Tried to sample the infinite variety of male sex. It was all too grasping and worried. (12)

The experience is not unlike the love-making in the bush role-play. It is an experiment with assumed forms of love-making. In the bush scenario, it is not until the narrator reminisces about this scene that he wonders: “Did it hurt her backside?” (17) He could not have worried over this fact during the time of his youth because his self-consciousness was concerned with historical, love-making forms rather than physical actualities and personal investment. The passions are “indistinctly felt” because of the level of concentration on “form” and a style of doing. If the feeling is absent and the style fails to satisfy, is there any lasting meaning in the action? For the narrator, the meaning rests in having participated in a human act repeated many times over. It emphasises to him his place in the scheme of things. In experiencing, as others have experienced before him, he becomes linked to the greater field of human drama. He draws his human meaning from this.

Rather than theoretical systems of meaning, the narrator develops methods of living. He has certain preferred modes of operating even though all experience is open to new and ever-changing circumstance. His methods are highly reasoned, thus lending some critical coherency to them. In other words, his living is thoughtful and reflective even though he exists independently of total systems:

In the rented car I breathed freely. A rented car is not an extension of self in quite the same way as a car you own. You are free of the bonds of ownership. The rented car is not your ego, rusting away, corroding, scratched. A rented car renews itself at each renting and renews you with it. Certain things, I said, can be best and freely used when not owned. People? Then they are not tangled with your ego. (“Airport, Pizzeria...” *Tales*, 63)

It is interesting that while the narrator avoids the personal entanglements of the ego, resisting the obligations of human interrelationship, he enjoys the forms of customized behaviour. These forms are thus still endowed with value. The narrator still pursues them but he prefers the rental car, the hotel and the call girl rather than the owned car, the home and the wife. The value he actively searches out suits this transient life. The narrator announces to his ex-wife in Portugal that, under the influence of Anatole France, he believes the only solace in life is volupté: “Sensual pleasure! Evil sensuality!” (*Tales*, 62) She pities him: “[B]ut so much pleasure in life comes from having commitments and trials and worries.” (62) Together these two characters symbolise the extremes of an ethic. The narrator has a “free life” and, in contrast, his ex-wife invests herself into relationships, deriving life’s meaning from the ties that bind: “all she sought from life...was the warmth of the hearth and ‘the sticky fingers of loving children.’” (62) The difference between these two perspectives is one of moral obligation: the ex-wife welcomes the commitment of what the narrator scornfully describes as “loving interpersonal relationships”; she welcomes the obligations commitments bring, supporting Dewey and Tufts’ contention that obligations are the cement of society. Commitments to others in the social network are the social bind; in being so bound, a sense of self is achieved since this placing confers identity. It is this sense of self the narrator is without: he is free but solitary. The source of this lonely prescription may be found in a diary entry in “The Loss of a Friend By Cablegram”. Here, the narrator’s aversion to the exclusive group is articulated and has arisen through his formative human relationships. It might be argued that his resistance to these ties—and the constant longing for their forms regardless—come through unsatisfactory early human relations:

My family— it was not their opinions which made me feel sick, scalding me with frustration, but the delivery of their opinions which was done in such a manner that it was made clear by their manner that anything I had to say would be of no value. I was of no value. This was the dead baby buried there in every conversation. Their conversation was ritualized self-endorsement, (but aren’t all group conversations) but there was something else. I was not included. (73-74)

The narrator thus turns his back, formulating a new way of being that works with his chosen environments and perhaps might protect his ego from the humiliating and demoralizing experience of being excluded from longed-for groups. He strips the

personal from his methodology and develops coping strategies that do not depend on obligatory ties:

I guess I'd call it Sydney anarchism—or Backhouse Mountain anarchism. An interest-conflict interpretation of life rather than a moral interpretation. But taking into consideration that 'moralities' are a fact and operate in the lives of some people. My own and only revolutionary pre-condition is total freedom of communication and increasing flexibility in economic, working, arrangements away from authoritarian family patterns. (22)

Of course, the narrator has the advantage over the ex-wife—and women in general—in being able to pursue this life away from typical family patterns. He has fathered a child with her and has always denied this responsibility. A child is a pressing consequence of action and would threaten his laissez-faire style. The child links his sexual action to real consequence and so he refuses to see her because that would require some engagement and set up a moral obligation. He does not allow himself to think “my child”:

I know that if I allowed myself to think of it as 'my child' I would have had this fruitless obsession, to see and know the child... Even now I am uneasy about admitting its existence to my conscious mind. I have a child. I fathered a child. (21)

It is the ex-wife who draws recognition of self through her commitments to her children and friends. The narrator, on the other hand, refuses these “tangles” of ego. Or so he thinks:

Disconsolation joined me at the bar some 15 or 20 minutes later when I began to ponder on how difficult and confounding it was to find volupté which Anatole France said was the only solace. I pulled my Breton cap over my disconsolate brow. Where *was* this volupté when you needed it??? (63)

He is forced to face the shortcoming of his style. He repeats the name of his quoted source, Anatole France, as if to reaffirm the quality or intellectual integrity of his chosen path. Being let down by the reality of it confounds him. The Breton cap, another appeal to a distinct style of being, is pulled more tightly but cannot dispel the disconsolation. He must face dissatisfaction. The outcome of his radical pragmatism is that, being largely outside the bonds of a social network, his self may completely unravel. His ex-wife sees this possibility and delivers her verdict:

*'One - you arrive on a day's notice after an absence of seven years. Two - you spend an hour with me, mainly insulting me, and then sneak off out of the*

*motel room without telling me and yet return again, the next day. Three - you refuse to see your daughter. Four - you insist on sleeping with me. You beg me to sleep with you - psychologically blackmail me. Five - you order an expensive crate of port. Six - an international cablegram arrives for you from some dirty little homosexual telling you he never wants to see you again in his life. Seven - I read in your note book that you think you're a woman. Thought you were a woman when you were married to me. If I understand it. Eight - you leave me again, after sleeping with me, having spent less than forty-eight hours in Portugal. Nine - your last words to me are "send the port air freight". Is this what happened? Pinch me. You have moved to the very edge of the real world. You are at the very edge. Do you know that???* (78)

Milton perceives the same weakness in the narrator's style:

Milton talked to me in his new quiet way, 'You don't truly *play* - you only play because you fear that too much work will make you a dull boy, you don't play for play's sake...Your dabbling in effeminacy doesn't interest me. But I'll tell you another thing it isn't - it isn't dodging being a real person by hiding in irony, self-concealing humour, hiding behind ambiguity, double-edged humour, switching of persona, self-deprecation - that's all so much shit.'

'Is that style finished?'

'That's all finished.' (85-86)

Through "The Loss of a Friend By Cablegram" the irony encircling the narrator becomes most evident. He becomes unstuck as a result of Milton breaking off their friendship. Clearly, this association is very important to him and demonstrates that he does not have the cavalier attitude towards his relationships he thought he had. The incredible importance of the telegram and its contents is made clear through the style of the scene. His reality "stumbles into a dramatic posture and gives off sensations of being, well, an epiphany, a manifestation." (67)

At first I thought it a shimmeringly pregnant moment...it 'looked' unreally vivid. She was standing in a white, hooded towelling bathrobe with the hood fallen back at the bedroom door with an international telegram in her hand. She was tousled from our love making... "It's for you"...At first I thought this tableau with those standard words had the feel of an 'epiphany' but I had a second sensation which decided me that it felt that way because it came from somewhere else, from another story or maybe a film.

The narrator feels like he is in a "painting, a photograph" and this "overawareness" irritates him. The tableau—woman in the doorway, man propped up on elbow in a messy bed, the words "it's for you" and "no one knows I'm here"—follows the style of hotel-room revelations and it is this awareness of the genre that threatens to block the narrator



from fully experiencing the moment. Yet we can also say that the virtual is operating here rather than a banal sense of a couple acting out a movie scenario. The virtual sense here is that these forms of interaction—which are repeatedly replayed in stories and films—serve to give weight to the unfolding situation. By becoming this virtual scene, participants in the scene feel the vital nature of the situation. In this telegram, Milton is announcing that the relationship is over. The narrator begins to cry: “I was hit. I was bleeding. I was emotionally blocked out. I was banging on the door again.” (69)

The narrator’s upset is the chink in the armour of his personal style. The ex-wife, who believes she has “a right”, sees him weakened and takes the opportunity to thoroughly analyse his character. She reads through his notebook. She asks: “Do you think you’re fully honest with any one person—or just partially honest with a lot of people?” (69) In this conflict, they do not talk as they usually would:

There was a retreat to formality. Or stage language. Or magazine language. Had I become strange, my image disorganised, because of the telegram and its implications? Maybe because I openly wept...Had I been right about the epiphany, the tableau. (69-70)

The notebook uncovers the flexible nature of his self and his pragmatic style: his negative reaction to any sense of certainty, the strong presence of femininity within him that contributes to his flexible persona, and his inventive, analytical mind:

They [ideas] became a passing flash, someone passing by the window, a direction which had to be let go because he did not have the time to follow up. These things, along with a high consciousness of his own ignorance, excited him rather than demoralised him because he could now ‘imagine’ the knowledge which could be found, and brought to bear, on an intriguing phenomenon. He knew now the ‘types’ of insights which were almost inevitably available if you knew where to look, which wasn't hard, and the time, the energy, the life. (75)

This inventive mind, however, also displays an alarming atavistic streak: his is like his father. The narrator’s father shares the same inventive streak as the father figure of George in *The Electrical Experience*. In his notebook the narrator ponders several inventions: “say a wrist counter attached to the watch to count drinks, exercises, calories, small calculations.” (77) His ex-wife shrieks: “You’re becoming like your father.” Thus the cycle has continued just as it did in *The Electrical Experience*. Moorhouse seems to be suggesting that despite seeming progress, human behaviour may never ultimately progress to a new state. In his notebook, the narrator considers the generational paradox:

...there are two age-ego-centric positions, (find a good word for this???) one that Youth is making a fresh beginning with higher values and original ideas—the genesis illusion—and a second, the illusion that we belong to the Last Generation that a tradition, a style, a virtue, a grandeur, a ‘better way’ will end with us. (71)

He has become the Last Generation. His Australia is, after all, an “ever-renewing country.”

Despite the bravado of the narrator and his radical pragmatism he has an unnerving reservation. Whilst he celebrates a flexible living process he regrets “the intrusion, now and then, of ideal forms. Our tormented gift of being able to visualise perfection.” (62) This reflection articulates the limits of a radical pragmatism but it also holds the clue to a more effective pragmatic method that the narrator does not seem to grasp. For him, the ability to imagine an ideal form, or perfection, goes against the concept of a universe that is not pre-fabricated and that which is always in creation. He does not see that these two ideas do not need to be mutually exclusive. As a consequence, he locks himself out of that which may satisfy. Whilst the universe is in such flux, human agency, amongst other things, impacts upon the direction of this flux. In order to make decisions that affect the experiential field, thinking beings reason why certain actions are better than others. We must have some idea of how we want things to be or how we want to change present circumstances. That is, we decide to act through a process of idealization. In order to achieve this ideal, actions must be thoughtfully and responsibly taken and this brings us to the ethical decision. This narrator, as the pragmatist writ large, is a man who cannot accept ordering processes, preferring to cope with each situation as it presents itself. He sees ideals as contrary to this fluid position. Our gift of visualizing perfection is, of course, the germ of moral action.

The narrator may act without regard to higher ideals but whilst he acts, he engages physically in a world, he makes changes, and is responsible for them. He may avoid taking on idealizations but he may not necessarily escape the consequences of his actions. His actions have consequences and even though he does not like to admit it, guilt plagues him throughout the stories. The presence of guilt also signals that he does indeed have a “moral interpretation” of life. The relationship of action and consequence is a haunting problem throughout Moorhouse’s work. For example, in “Jesus Said to Watch for 28 Signs” (*The Americans, Baby*, 233-240) the “signs” Becker refers to are those particular actions that, one after another, spell his downfall. In the end of the sequence of

signs, he is taking LSD with Terri, having been fired from Coca-Cola for being seen in the male toilets with Terri, a “relief” worker in more ways than one. “Becker could list the twenty-eight steps which led him to his first trip and his first mixing with drugs of any kind—Old Crow bourbon excluded”:

The first had been during High School when he’d learned to play piano from a coupon course mailed from the back of a comic book.

The second had been reading the poems of the Earl of Rochester at college.

The third had been carrying the poems of the Earl of Rochester in his head, after college.

The fourth had been a semester of Existentialism which led him to ponder destiny and life. (235)

And so it continues until Becker names all twenty-eight signs which ordinarily would not fit together along a path of cause and effect. Other signs included are “seven hundred miserable Rotary lunches” and “the heat of the forsaken summer of the forsaken country”. Becker’s reality is indeed the interaction of complex things. Importantly, he also sees his as an inevitable fate of being far from his native country. “He’d read of cases. People died from being isolated from their intimates and people lost control that way.” (233) Becker has lost control of himself because he is far from his peer group, who, through the social ties of mutual obligation, would help him control his “lust”. Despite what he sees as his downfall, Becker is free to live out his dream of playing jazz piano for a living. (The process has been a liberating one. Becker has broken free of a George-style cycle.)

The cause-and-consequence relationship is not so positive in the novel *Forty-Seventeen* where the middle-aged narrator is ultimately left with the haunting suspicion that he may have been responsible for his ex-wife’s cancer. When he learns of Robyn’s cancer, he says: “Does she say I gave her the cancer?” It was a joking toughness to block the shock and the pity which were reaching him. “[She] blamed me for everything else.”

This is more than what could be called the crabby humour of the divorcee. Firstly, it is an immediate defensive reaction to a more general sense of guilt at having failed in the marriage. Secondly, and more specifically however, there is cause for a legitimate concern of guilt since the cervical cancer she is suffering is caused by a sexually transmitted virus. While he and Robyn reminisce together she says:

I sometimes wonder what gave me the cancer, was it—this is silly  
I know but I have to say it—could it have been men’s penises not

being clean enough?...I don't mean you...you were a good middle-class boy and clean, but well, others...others after you weren't always good middle-class boys." (156)

This is not completely true, however, even though she and the narrator were married as teenagers. The narrator had moved away a year before Robyn left school, and while they were both still virgins. In her early letters, (collected in the story, "A Portrait of a Virgin Girl"), Robyn writes: "And what is the mysterious story you won't show me? When will I ever 'be ready'?" (128). The story which follows "Portrait", "The Story Not Shown"—a story within *Forty-Seventeen* that has been written by the narrator and withheld from Robyn—charts an evening in Kings Cross where two young men are eager "to have experience." They seek out prostitutes and Ian (the narrator's persona in the story) sums up the woman whose house he enters as "ugly, fat and degenerate." The room is dirty and badly lit. She "produced a basin of water and roughly washed [his] penis" and then washes him again after intercourse. (135) The story finishes with the narrator "thinking about VD." (136) The story within the larger stories is suggestive of the experiences the narrator is having while away in Sydney. His soon-to-be-wife is eager to hear of his experiences but she is not privy to this one. The point here—which can only be intimated by its inclusion in this collection of stories—is that the narrator has a legitimate guilt. He may well have passed on a virus to his girlfriend and he was not the "clean" middle-class boy she thought he was. Importantly, the links between these stories are never made explicit and the story not shown is, after all, only a story. The narrator distances himself in two ways. He does not consciously connect the two situations (they are not placed near each other in the collection) and, secondly, he keeps emotional distance by leaving the story as a slightly distanced fiction. This is similar to the structure of "The Union Buries Its Dead" where all the blameworthy evidence about the events is available to the reader through a narrator who does not consciously accept his guilt.

His more general emotional distance is made clearer through his general emotional reactions to his relationships. During "Disposal", when he hears from a younger lover that she has become a prostitute, he reacts thus:

He supposed he felt he should have an emotionally devastating concussion from all this and was more worried that he seemed deficient than he was worried about her. He'd reacted lubriciously to the conversation—that also worried him. Or he worried that he *should* be worried about it and wasn't. His personal code had no response ready for him. He was uncomfortably skewered by it but could not react. Skewered. (96)

Likewise, his reactions to his wife's death leave him uncomfortable: "He had not been satisfied by his reactions to her death...His reactions had seemed somehow deficient." (147) Once again, the overwhelming focus is on him and his reactions. His over-developed ego precludes real experience. In the story "Beirut", one of several stories in which the narrator is a diplomat, (a set of stories which are the prelude to *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace*) the narrator laments:

he awoke and met the familiar emotional condition which settled on him before every expedition of his adult life. It was a numbed control. There was none of the nervous excitement of childhood. He knew he was over-controlled but that no effort of will could break him free from that. His mind, as he lay there, sensibly prepared lists, rehearsed for exigencies. As he showered he looked at ways the day might possibly go; he would have made a good staff officer. But he had a yearning to be able to enter experience thoughtlessly, to be able to expose himself without armour or caution—to deal with exigencies as they arrived with what was at hand, to meet the world with surprise and then to perform in ways that surprised him. (142)

It should be no surprise that such a hyperactive self-consciousness should finally be symbolised through the diplomat, where the private self is controlled and all interaction is negotiation. For the narrator "the weary exhilaration of negotiation" and "the lateral elegance of the deal" is "compensation for angst." (14) In his "life lessons" he accepts the "imperfect self" and the "imperfect world" and considers it wise to work out how much of this "you have to accommodate" to live with any satisfaction. At forty, he regrets to realise that :

[N]o person with a system of knowledge is going to release you from intellectual dilemma. No book will now come along to seriously alter your life. You feel that you have a fair grasp of the current limitations of knowledge and reason, and the necessary, compromising uses of faith. You recognise that your personal, unstable formulations are held without much confidence to stave off the sands of chaotic reality, that a refinement might take their place but you also fear that the rational shoring might one day give way entirely. You are daily made aware of how little reason and knowledge altered the course of affairs. (74-75)

To progress then, or to even just exist day to day, negotiations between and amongst systems must take place. Volupté, as the only legitimate pursuit, has lost its attraction: "the excesses of life are too easily achieved, are not heroic, and yield less and less." Therefore, he must pull back from his radicalism yet not cave into Last Generation

conservatism. It could be that Milton's style, of taking on systems to form ideals, then changing when new ideas come to take their place, is at least an effective way of negotiating a volatile moral field. It is the practice of negotiation between conscious minds which facilitate "not order but orderly progress". We will now turn to these skills of diplomacy in the figure of Edith and her adventures in *Grand Days*.

## Chapter 4

### The Way of Imperfection: Edith Campbell Berry and *Grand Days*

Edith Campbell Berry is on a train from Paris to Geneva. She is travelling to the League of Nations where she will take up a junior posting. The year is 1926. It is no coincidence that she, like the century, is 26 years old, because Edith Campbell Berry is striving to be a woman of her time. She is leaving behind her provincial Australian past and is plunging headlong into a larger, foreign world of unstable order. It is a world of diplomatic risk and personal daring and she must find her 'Way'. Edith's Ways are underpinned by Rationalism, the philosophy she has inherited from her mother and father and also her political tutor John Latham. *Grand Days* works as a critique of Rationalism as a "Way of Going" and also hints at an alternative way, the way of imperfection. This pointed literary allusion to St Theresa de Avila's work *The Way of Perfection* states clearly Moorhouse's position on absolute systems of meaning. Any way of perfection, whether it is divine or rationalist, suggests a unity of purpose and being within a *universe* of rational, monistic order. It is immaterial for this study whether the rational order issues from one divine being, or from an idea that the world is ordered by irrefutable laws that might be scientifically proven. It is the idea of a centralised source of rational order *per se* that is contested. In the absence of absolute order, inconsistencies and unpredictable consequences abound, leading Moorhouse to write in *Grand Days*: "Life was a series of agile responses. How to modify the response precisely enough was the trick." (238)

Whilst one may not be able to plan for the unforeseeable, one must be prepared for it by arming oneself with a large repertoire of actions that *work*. Just as Dave Regan and his men from "The Iron-Bark Chip" respond to each new circumstance with increasing agility, so too must Edith Campbell Berry expand her experiences to a point where she might cope with anything. This is the "knack and artistry" needed to move through life. In one instance at the League where world peace is seriously compromised, her plans are changed dramatically: "She had learned something about planning. When planning failed, one worked through the emerging events, making order with agility and intuition." (244)

Competing influences within a dynamic field are the source of the unpredictable. Moorhouse always stresses the environment as a dynamic field of play where, at any moment, all expectations may change or the ground might shift. Edith shows all the skills

required of the pragmatist yet, for a large part, she is bound by the Rationalist ideal that order should prevail. When the world tumbles into the Second World War and then, when the League crumbles, (the subject of *Dark Palace*) Edith's faith in order is destroyed. She must then live in the world that remains. Edith eventually learns that order, at best, is only tentatively secured for a particular time and a particular purpose. This is a hard-won lesson and comes at the price of all she ever worked for: her beloved League of Nations, which she always imagined had the power to implement a lasting world peace.

Edith's strong loyalty and love for the League is evident throughout:

While not herself being exactly what someone might describe as a nun devoted to Holy Orders, she had, she sometimes thought to herself, taken vocational vows. There was a clericature to her life. If there had been a League of Nations vow, she would have taken it. It was more that she was, perhaps, a courtier—maybe a priestess—and needed to live in a Palais, if not a temple. She wished the Secretariat could all *live* in the Palais—not, though, she smiled, as if in a monastery—and she had been disappointed when she learned...that this was not to be. (153)

Whilst Edith's love for the League may be testament to her ideal of global harmony, the nature of her love creates a blinding, total system. This is not to say that the progressive, open mind cannot permit ideals. James and Dewey both state that ideals are necessary to motivate action which may be then deemed good. Ideals create a superstructure for ethical action. Ideals form reasons for doing. However, Edith's main difficulty arises out of an unsuspected clash between her reigning ideal of the League in its ability to promote peace, and her Rationalist philosophy, the drive of which is unification (in the sense of universal thought based on a single method of ordering thought). Not only does her Rationalism leave her unprepared for the often chaotic and random condition of the universe but she is also blind to the limitations of her ideal. That is, she cannot fault the deeply held prejudices that instruct her Rationalism.

Throughout his work, Moorhouse has continually depicted a world where there can be no absolute, agreed-upon World System. He then peoples this world with many characters who, nevertheless, pursue an absolute worldview. This is true for *Grand Days* where Edith insists that the League is the *higher order*; that is, she conceives a world that has a centralised source of authority. In *Grand Days* hierarchies of order are stripped down, thus decentralising power and authority, whereupon power and authority are reconfigured and relocated in the negotiation process. In the absence of an absolute,



agreed-upon World System, negotiations must continually take place between competing needs, desires and perspectives. We shall see how the social weaknesses of Edith's initial rationalist posturing demonstrates that the absence of a universal moral standard is actually beneficial for moral progress. To show this, we must first look at Edith's understanding of unity and then, secondly, at Moorhouse's concept of disunity and difference. We have repeatedly seen that it is through negotiating difference, the moral process is invigorated. That is, if all peoples, as if in a tribe, are unified, moral systems become customary. When the environment changes, as change it must, that morality must become reflective if a group is to be able to change within a changing environment. Change and difference, therefore, are vital for moral progress. The importance difference has gathers momentum throughout the novel as a more competent worldview. The 'third position' thus emerges and it is this 'position', which Moorhouse has hinted at in previous work, that is finally seen in its full potency in the League of Nations novels.

Moorhouse alerts us to Edith's quest for global unity in the first scene when she first meets Major Ambrose Westwood. In this first meeting, Ambrose hints at the nature of his sexuality and does so through the metaphor of the borderline. The borderline is a structuring motif for the text as borderlines – national, moral, those of the self – create and maintain relevant identities. At this point, it is useful to recall Lawson's preoccupation with borders in the story of 'Hungerford', where identity distinctions between man and beast, like the identity between New South Wales and Queensland, are hopelessly futile because of the precariousness of those particular borderlines. We see in that story not only the futile pretense of the prevailing borders but of what we are left with when they disintegrate – no recognisable reasons for living. The borderline is a complex metaphor and Edith's early attitude towards borders betrays her idealistic naïvety. Ambrose speaks of homosexuality, a subject far beyond Edith's experience, and, further, describes the "devilish" zones of the transgendered self, saying, "Oh, there are men who can cross the line back and forth, so to speak":

The crossing of the borders. She was nonplussed... This was not an idea she had confronted before, that men might love both men and women.

'And there are those who live damned near the border but just to one side of it. There is another devilish zone there... The free city of Danzig.'

She took his reference, a city belonging to no country, and maybe also the private meaning he was giving it. And, now, now, now, he was talking of himself. (26)

As a credit to her code that requires her to “go to a new place in ideas” (27) Edith begins a liaison with him although she is unsure of what this might mean. After they kiss, “she wondered what a lady should do to give pleasure to a gentleman who inhabited this border place. And did she not believe in the ending of national borders?” (29) This final thought provides a clue to her youthful idealism. By removing national borders, difference is also erased. This may have an egalitarian and humanitarian ring to it, but the dissolution of borders dispenses with a complex moral universe. How could a more simplified morality cope with a man like Ambrose and his so-called feminine disorder? Over the course of the novel we see that dissolving borders is not such a useful ideal to pursue. Whilst Edith has enough daring to cross lines and explore various modes of being, she initially does so with an idea that, one day, all may be united.

In order to accelerate the dissolution of her own boundaries, Edith is driven to relinquish her Australian identity in order to become international, a “citizen of the world”. To this end, she routinely makes time to reflect on her personal progress. In the following example of self-reflection, Edith has already been in Geneva a short while. She is sitting alone in an outdoor café in the “old city”, drinking coffee:

Edith tested herself to see if she indeed felt international, in any bodily way or perhaps, and this was not so silly, whether she was different in style of movement from, say, those at the other table. She moved her mouth to an expression of resolution, cleared her mind of self-consciousness, and when her mind had settled to blankness, she let it pounce on herself. She then looked to the paws of her mind. Though surely such a change in the national sense of oneself and the detaching of oneself would mean a difference in the way she carried herself. Didn't ministers of religion move in ways different to laymen? Didn't royalty move differently? Didn't sporting people? Surely, then, an international civil servant also comported differently. (74)

For the analytical self to pounce on itself at an un-self-conscious moment is an absurdity. Here Moorhouse uses an exaggerated style to emphasise the rigorous methods of development Edith subjects herself to. This peculiar, exaggerated self-consciousness is a constant feature of the characterisation in both Moorhouse and Lawson. This is one fate of the pioneer because old habits of behaviour do not work in the new environment and new actions must be tested. All actions are exaggerated because, as yet, none come naturally. (Here, the term ‘pioneer’ points to social pioneering as much as a life lived on physical frontiers; Edith sees herself as a new ‘breed’ just as the Balmain and nomadic

bushman 'tribes' do.) Edith's construction of self is a highly conscientious practice and this is routinely exaggerated and ironised by Moorhouse throughout the novel. Her conscientious formulations of self are apparent from the opening scene. She is on the train and the gong for the dining car sounds. As she responds, she moves in "what she felt was a gathered-together way" and, in doing so, puts into practice one of her newly formulated Ways of Going. She remembers not to leave anything valuable at her seat whilst maintaining free hands:

To have free hands allowed her to ward and hold, which she considered important in the technique of travelling...she wanted to be a holding person and not always a warding person, and would describe herself as a holding person in all its meaning, which she would one day list. (3)

Quite literally, then, her Self is something she wishes to list, to work out on paper, like a mathematical formulation. She will later come to realise that the self is too slippery for that. For now, however, she attempts to build her identity through strict 'inner-management'. This management is necessary for the plethora of first experiences she now faces. The emphasis in this opening chapter is, indeed, on *firsts*. This is her "first sitting and her first lunch in a railway car", a fact she repeats to herself several times. As James explains, the unfamiliar is by nature rather daunting. In pragmatist terms, we reach out into the unfamiliar armed with what we can take from our familiar experiences. Since everything Edith will now be facing will be unfamiliar, she designs for herself some Ways of Going so that she might navigate the new terrain. It is significant that these Ways of Going have only been very recently formulated. "She had developed most of the Ways on the voyage over from Australia but they now needed refinement and further practice." (3)<sup>183</sup> This is a pragmatic method *par excellence*: her new circumstances are surpassing any habits of action she has heretofore practised. In response, she develops provisional procedures which will be refined by new experience or, if found to be useless, would not be applied. Her relocation from Australia is terribly significant for this process. In comparison to the Europe she is entering, Australia is still very new and, to her, without history. Such history would give Edith already substantial habits of behaviour. She is

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<sup>183</sup> These Ways include but are certainly not restricted to: Way of Companionable Confession (6); Way of the Silent Void (12) (to overcome disadvantages of knowledge, teasing); Tip It All Up (13); Way of All Doors (15); Way of Companionable Directness (17); Way of Compulsive Revelation (23) ("not a way, strictly speaking, because it didn't have to be taken—it occurred...") Way of Cowardly Flight (27) Way of Numbers. (56).

devoid of those because of her Australian-ness. She is ready to start from scratch on the new continent.

Back home, she'd grown up in a brand-new house. Her parents had grown up in a brand-new house, and so had her grandparents. No one had ever lived in old houses. There were no old houses. She yearned to live in a house where people had lived for 'generations'. She wanted ruins which spoke of former habitation, of the sense of habitation built upon habitation over centuries, and lost worlds around her and under her feet. The building beneath the building. Musty cellars of wine. Attics of old things. Home had been without cellars and attics. Her life had lacked the Gothic and the sublime. She had to confess to herself that the aged world of Europe consummated her in some way and that at the same time she couldn't bathe in this feeling yet—she had to fight off pangs of disloyalty to Australia when she felt this way. (77)

For Moorhouse, Australian-ness is a very condition that encourages a pragmatic way of being. The very newness—and self-renewing—nature of the country invites a constant fashioning of self having no long history of white civilisation on which to fall back. George McDowell, who reappears in *Grand Days* as an old school friend of Edith's, is likewise in the process of self-fashioning. When George appears in Geneva, Edith notes to herself that, "He had a rapid manner, reminding her, in recollection, of some of the earlier, jerky motion pictures." (279) George has a naturally *awkward* manner because habits have not had generations to form. Thus, when overseas, his private moments are spent practising to overcome his graceless nature, gracelessness he attributes to being Australian. "After we get things straightened out we'll go in for grace." He works out in his hotel room for the stamina that he not only needs to build Australia but to "wrestle down [his] shyness." (299) (Note that shyness is a symptom of self-consciousness.)

With his breathing broken by exertion, he said that his life did not have time for grace – just yet – but it did have a need for stamina. Stamina was his objective.

'You, Edith, you can afford the time here in Europe for grace. Australia is a country in a hurry – and for hurrying you need stamina.' (299)

George agrees with Edith when she says, "[I]sn't the possibility of regeneration part of our birthright as Australians – the privilege of being able to fashion ourselves." George, however, adds a warning. "I too am a man refashioning himself. In that

refashioning, we take risks. You take your life, and you work on it with your hands... It's as dangerous as self-surgery.” (295)

What will be the outcome of Edith's self-surgery? The question that troubles George when they meet in Geneva is who might Edith eventually become? It is a question which we see her devote much time to over the course of *Grand Days* and this journey begins—as gracefully as she can in the early days manage—on the train from Paris to Geneva. “[A]s she moved along the swaying train, trying not to need to use her hands or to lose her balance, Edith considered that she conducted her body well. In travel and in life. So far.” (3) Edith's hands-free balancing act on a swaying train has the potential for an awkward disaster. Edith successfully manages the risk and, significantly, does so in an open, positive way (holding) rather than a defensive tactic (warding). This tells us that she is prepared to take risks to pursue her ideal of self-development.

Edith's goal is to become international and to become international requires not only that she cross national borderlines but that she cross her borderline of being 'Australian' into some other place altogether. To do this she must forego the defensive warding that an Australian in an entirely foreign place may practice. She has, for example, been advised by her fellow countryman John Latham to avoid eating soup on the train in case of an embarrassing spill. As soon as she sits down to dine, however, she is encouraged to order the soup, something she wouldn't have attempted without the direction of a more experienced guide than her Ways alone could provide. (Later John Latham comments to her: “You've left behind my sober colonial precautions about eating soup.” (262)) It is without caution, then, that her relationship with the elegant Major Ambrose Westwood begins. They are seated at a dining table together and he invites her to join him in a sherry before lunch. Their conversation is her first negotiation on the continent and as such the first opportunity to try out new behaviours. They take an alcoholic drink together and in this “willingness to take a small, subtle risk” they embark upon their shared life of caprice. Edith begins to change.

Edith believes it is imperative for a League officer to become international. Being so will assist the dissolution of borders through example. Being international also represents an unprecedented moment in the conduct of world affairs. The League signals an end to war and national rivalries by promoting a sense of collective action amongst the nations of the world. In her quest for global unity, Edith sees that she too must become more global. She must forego national identification to achieve her aim. The

internationalist she seeks to become is a human identity without precedent. “She was one of a new breed.” (75) The emphasis here is on the unprecedented and comes with the question: if the state of being is new, how is one to act in accordance to this new state? Previous behaviours may not apply. The lack of precedence is, at once, an advantage and disadvantage for Edith. Imaginative thinking is required in unprecedented situations and Edith shows she is progressively open to many ideas and she is willing to experiment widely. However, she also becomes vulnerable to bad ideas, as we shall see when she meets Captain Strongbow. We routinely see that her zeal for the League is stronger than her discretionary powers which she learns may only be acquired through experience. She has a long journey ahead of her. As Edith begins to ‘transmute’ into this new breed, she faces many conflicts in style. Each tiny gesture and action is recorded and analysed so that its style might be properly distinguished, just as a scientist might in the process of nomenclature.

Yet drinking Italian-style coffee outdoors in the old city on a clean spring afternoon was more cosmopolitan than international. That was another transformation. She would also like to be seen as cosmopolitan. She questioned herself about having sugar in the coffee and whether it was cosmopolitan to have it or not to have it. She would have to observe what cosmopolitan ladies did about sugar. (75)

Edith does not see this as a problem with her identity but a necessary step in “becoming.” “I am not confused, she said, I am transmuting. Coming forth. That in itself may be an odd feeling, but it is not the feeling called discord.”(78) The exaggerated analysis here clearly shows the strength of her internationalist fervour. The exaggerated observances of the small detail like sugar is also a cue to Moorhouse’s irony through which he suggests that perhaps her conscientiousness may be over enthusiastic if not misguided. Edith’s progress is being self-checked zealously. Zeal, as Moorhouse shows us time and again, creates a blind spot in one’s behaviour. Edith is being led by and making decisions based on a pure ideal. To Edith, the League of Nations stands for peace and world harmony; it is the “centre of the political world” from which all good will flow, spreading out to all corners of the earth.

Rather than seeing the League as the point of negotiation among different peoples, Edith believes that the League could produce global unity rather than global cooperation, the idea being that if all peoples shared the same moral values, peace may be secured forever. War could be “outlawed.” Edith’s drive to become an internationalist is

a symbol of her greater dream of world unity. This unity would also require this same internationalist fervour from all peoples and Edith expects other nations to dismantle their own cultures in order to adopt a globally progressive one:

It was obvious that for the world to work together it had to have one calendar. It was just as obvious that all cars should travel on the same side of the road in every country so that people could use one set of road rules wherever they were. The League could not achieve agreement even on that. Sometimes she despaired. China had its own calendar and was totally opposed to calendar reform and the Pope didn't want to fix Easter. (248)

Moorhouse's repeated use of the word 'obvious' through Edith's perspective drives home his ironic play; it is something like a *truth universally acknowledged*. Edith's unwillingness here to allow for difference, being insensitive to Chinese and Catholic cultures, shows that the drive for unity is a repressive one. Like George in *The Electrical Experience*, the unity Edith craves cannot countenance diversity for diversity is an implicit challenge to the moral values upon which unity might be based. Unity is values-based and to reach a universal unity, a process of testing the best behaviours would have to occur. The problem here, of course, is one of authority. Who decides? Edith makes it clear that it would largely be from the practices of a civilised Europe that unity might be forged. Edith's drive to achieve unity through the League is a drive for a universal morality; her comment about Ambrose and the ending of national borders shows she is using this term 'border' with metaphorical intent. That is, the ending of national borders is more than a physical task. It is the dissolution of difference. The unity Edith wishes for is based upon shared morality which shows itself through action and culture. She is all the time proclaiming that the League should set the moral standard for the world:

[T]he League was a working model for these things, a machine energising the good forces of the world, an example of how the craft could be practised at its highest level. If the Secretariat had no real power, it still had the power of example. Of setting standards. Standards contained values. (400)

This quote demonstrates that Edith sees the League as the universe's moral hub. She feels also that this is justified. When she arrives in Geneva and is dealing with what seem to be the riddles of an alien place, she evidently feels like Alice in Wonderland and has an ongoing mental dialogue with the Queen. During one of these imagined conversations, her assumptions of the structure of the world are made clear: "This, she thought, is the very centre of the political universe.' 'But only if you think the world is

made up of a centre with all else being periphery.’ The Queen commented.” (34) Edith does not take the question of a decentred reality too far. Moorhouse uses the Queen’s comment as the theoretical alternative through which he ironises Edith’s Rationalist, and narrow, worldview. It is only through the complications of experience that Edith begins to question and refine her position but it is a process which takes many years. Initially, however, Edith desires that the League set the example for all the world. If she can achieve this prestigious world place for the League, all difference will be obliterated. Yet, as we have seen in *The Electrical Experience* and the Balmain stories, when differences are completely dissolved under the influence of one stirring ideal, moral progress stalls into a customary morality.

When George McDowell reappears in this novel he, like Edith, is fascinated with foreign differences that confront him during his trip through Europe. (At this stage of his life, he is not yet married. The difficulties with difference he comes up against domestically in *The Electrical Experience* have not yet taken their toll). When he visits Edith, he shares some of his consternation:

Back home when travelling I always carry a strong electric light bulb because the bulbs in hotels are too weak. But the world has foiled me. Each darned country has a different sort of socket and different voltage. I’ve turned it into a lesson. I will put that light bulb on my desk back home to remind me.’ (286-287)

It is clear that at this point in George’s small-town life he has not witnessed very much cultural difference. In recalling these good old days in *The Electrical Experience*, he remembers:

[Y]ou were known as a person. If you wanted something done you knew who to see, if someone said they would do something it got done, you knew who you were dealing with and they knew you, and if you had something on your mind you said it. The street was filled with faces you knew—Bishops, Youngs, Millers, Ferriers, Watts...The telephone was partly to blame. Before the war you could always get to see the boss of the show and not some underling. Now people didn’t go out to see the problem for themselves, they “got on the telephone.” (*The Electrical Experience*, 2)

Clearly, George’s experience is of a white-‘bred’ monoculture peopled by Bishops, Youngs and Ferriers. People understand each other in this culture because everyone operates under the influence of the same cultural history and information. In short, they share the same values. George’s terror is provoked from the disunity that



comes with cultures that do not implicitly understand each other and, more importantly, do not seem interested in simplifying life to the simple face-to-face dealings which typify his business experiences. Language barriers are troubling for George. George says that learning another language simply means “having to learn two words for the same thing.”

(290) He says:

‘It is not the differences in locks and key and taps and switches that worries me. What gets me down, from time to time, is that people love their differences too much,’ he said ruefully. ‘And, believe it or not, I think the world could learn something from Australia.’ (287)

George thinks that the world can learn from Australia because, in his experience, a lack of cultural difference is the basis for a strong morality: “[Y]ou knew who you were dealing with and they knew you.” More specifically, George’s growing intolerance is to racial difference. When he talks of the days when businessmen conducted forthright dealings, he is speaking of men of English heritage, “the Bishops, Youngs, Ferriers, Watts.” Cross-cultural differences bring about the potential for misunderstanding. George fears being misunderstood on a continent with many languages. He says to Edith:

‘I don’t know about the language of Europe. The one language I do know about that all peoples understand is the language of Usefulness,’ George said smiling. ‘I can get across to people as long as they know I am a man of use to them.’ (288)

Differences are not confined to business. George also says it’s related to beauty:

‘An example: take this key.’ He went to the door and removed the key. ‘The teeth of this key might be the same as in other countries; the shank is the same; but in every country I have visited the finger-turning part is different. Why is that?’  
 ‘I’ve really never thought about it, George.’  
 ‘It has to do with different countries’ ideas of what looks good. Beauty.’  
 She’d never heard him talk of beauty. (286)

Differing ideals of beauty show differences in valuation. The perplexing question that gathers momentum for Edith is: “What are the values to be pursued?” As she becomes increasingly open to choice, new values and moralities compete for her attention:

Somehow good taste in Australia was so much easier because the choice, say, of tea, was so much more limited...She had discovered that Europe had not only more options but also more ways of deciding which options to take...Maybe good taste and

good living were about making good choices within what was materially available to you...and within your learning to date.  
(467)

The problem that arises from such a revelation is the arbitrary nature of who one came to be: “It was a matter of interacting parts. You began with a vague blueprint from your mother and father and then life presented you with options...But that could hardly be called a ‘plan’.” (467)

While conversing with George, Edith sees these limited values from a different point of view, that is, through her critical eye on George. She was not keen to meet George in Geneva and the provincial past which she feels he symbolises. Thus, she vets his point of view with this perspective in mind. It is possible that she does not see that she shares this desire for unity with George due to her League blindspot but, whatever the case, Edith comes to realise something of the potential that exists within cultural differences and this runs contrary to her youthful drive for global unity. For the self, the primary advantage of a borderline is the ability it gives one to experiment with ways of being. One is able to cross a border of behaviour and to be changed by that crossing. She has found, for example, that through living on the continent and mastering French, she has liberated various aspects of her sexuality. Her experience with Jerome the black jazz musician in a club in Paris is an example.

Here in this jazz club Edith is exhilarated by the power of scat singing, a ‘language’ she has never heard before: “It was the voice trying to say something which was beyond words. A sort of warbling. The woman was not singing words at all. She was singing sounds in between the music and words of the song.”(187) A sound “in between” suggests a state liberated from defined borders. Edith, by this time in a rather drunken state, becomes animated by the revelation of scat singing. She has been looking for ways to slip across cultural borders and she thinks scat is the answer. Ambrose invites a member of the band, Jerome, over to their table during a set break to decipher this new sound. Jerome describes scat as a way of “saying the feelings.” She considers:

[Scat] linked to life back at the League...The work at the League was often a use of language that wasn’t argument or even the making of negotiation – it was a way, perhaps, of expressing a presence. Affirmative noise, questing without knowing the questions, hot air. They could turn the hot air to this scat singing.’  
(192)

For Edith, scat singing might interpret the “inexpressible emotions” thus creating a space in which all peoples might understand each other on a human level, since, as Edith says rather archly to a detractor, “Some things in life, Caroline, cannot be done by the Translating and Interpretation Service.” (196) Edith’s obsessive interest in scat singing reveals the ruling ideals of her character. Firstly, there must be a level at which all things, despite cultural colourings, might be truthfully understood (in the sense of Truth). She fervently agrees with Liverright’s drunken quotation of Blake: “If only the perception could be cleaned – correction, cleansed – all things could then be seen as they are, as they truly are – infinite.” (193) The infinite is the order that Edith pins her Rationalism to. The Infinite Truth suggests a unity of reason and within this rationale there can only be one single, correct way of looking at the universe. Secondly, Edith expects the League to supply this single truth, to be the cornerstone of reason. To Edith’s mind, the League “was a unique entity and of a distinctively *higher order* than anything else in the world.” (495) [my emphasis]

In this elevated state, with her sights set on introducing the League to the one language that would cross all borders, she staggers to the bathrooms. There she deeply inhales the “smell of Paris and the smell of women and the smell of animal life...the smell of the human beast coming up from the depths of the ancient city.” (197-198) Her willing submersion into the cultural depths of other places thus becomes erotically charged and it is on the way back from the toilet that she finds Jerome, in “the room *Artiste*.” She enters the room and closes the door, drinks from his flask then sits on his knee. “Time and movement then became slippery” and “in no time at all” she has finished performing fellatio on him. He offers the hip flask as a gift and she leaves the room. She then rejoins her friends and the somewhat suspicious Ambrose.

The following morning, she “permitted herself to face how outrageously she’d behaved...”

[She] examined her inner state and found that she did not feel ashamed. On the contrary, she felt absolutely amazed. Amazed at herself, and at her audacity, and at her carnality. And, furthermore, she said to herself, looking again at her inner state, I think that I am proud of my carnality. She would never do it in Geneva, but she was glad she had been bold enough to do it just this once. With a complete stranger. In Paris. With a black man. Where better to do it than in Paris? With a black man. (202)

In the morning, she realises the unlikelihood of scat becoming a new international language. It was “fanciful” and the idea disappears. Is it only because she has sobered up? Or because the potential of borders has in some way become more meaningful to her? She could not have behaved in this audacious way in Geneva and is glad to have gone to Paris. Yet, for Edith, Geneva and the League is the source of “all the good forces”. It is from Geneva that the world’s standards must come. Surely if this is to be achieved, the amazing behaviours that Paris allows might be forever banished. This is the essential inconsistency in Edith’s make-up: she follows a code that requires her to always go to “new places in ideas” yet, if she were to achieve the total unity she craves, she would reach the end of inquiry. The very distinctions between Geneva and Paris are vital for her erotic experience. So, too, is the difference between white and black skin. To follow a code to go to new places in ideas, Edith knows she will need audacity and, here in this situation, the main proof of Edith’s audacity is that Jerome is black. Not only is he a stranger, but he is black. The emphasis on the exotic other in fact suggests that unity even for Edith is a long way off. If achieved, however, it will be a white-governed unity since despite their apparent international sophistication, Jerome is a difference that would not be borne publicly as becomes clearer in *Dark Palace*. In this novel, a scandal over a relationship between a society woman and a black man demonstrates the racial divide. In *Grand Days*, Edith confesses her actions with Jerome to her fiance, Robert Dole. He never fully recovers from the confession because the stranger in Edith’s story is black. “It was Jerome’s blackness that unsettled him as it had allured her.” (645)<sup>184</sup> As long as those of a different race represent the exotic other, valuations will be skewed. Any idea of unity that Edith entertains could not accommodate the other in an equal role.

The racial overtones in Edith’s pursuit for unity – a cohesive and close-to-perfect human race – is further identified by her interest in eugenics and, with Adolf Hitler appearing in the background, we must read Edith’s interest in eugenics in the darkening shadow of the Nazis. She “accepted that it was a move in the right direction, as long as the weak were sheltered and not ‘driven to the wall’...She thought about it and then said, ‘I suppose it’s only sensible to be concerned with racial hygiene.’” (650-651) She later says: “Well, we can’t go on spoiling the human race.” (651) Edith’s idea of unity,

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<sup>184</sup> Whilst it is beyond the scope of my argument to fully pursue Moorhouse’s ideas of post-colonialism and sexuality, this situation is an intriguing re-working of Cindy’s rape experience with the Redfem Delegation and the narrator’s resistance to her subsequent “fraternising” with the Aboriginal men.

contextualised in this way, once again shows that unity is value-based. Eugenics is the “right” direction and prevents “spoiling”. Clearly Edith is concerned with what is going to be *best*, without showing any awareness at all that her position is a relative one. What are the criteria for perfection in the human race? Her ideals for unity will be based on a sense of superiority of class and race. The values involved here show Edith’s prevailing ethic. Her Rationalism gives her the sense that firstly there is a higher order of the world that must prevail and, given her sense of racial superiority, this higher order will be obtained through cultivating the power of her own race and culture. Her strong opinions reflect this. She is prepared to resign from the League if they do not look into the issue of global population control. This higher order she is convinced of may be brought about through the correct breeding. She admits to herself early on that: “[A]lthough she was an egalitarian through and through, she did not mind the well-bred look or what she took to be a well-bred look. She was, after all, well-bred.” (4) Again, the emphasis on “through and through” undermines the credibility of her egalitarianism.

If white European civilisation is a primary source of good then other cultures threaten to be more ‘sinister’ sources. Just as Edith was able to explore deeper parts of her sexuality *through* her experience of Paris, she wonders what might turn up in her personality if influenced by other cultures:

What of the sinister, nastier traits which might sneak out through the speaking of another language? What if she were speaking one of the less cultivated languages—what would come out then?  
(290)

Primarily, at work here is Edith’s fear of the unknown parts of herself rather than the threat of other cultures. She knows that language is the “key to the door of another culture” and provides “a way of slipping across the border.” She is aware that other cultures, occupying often radically different worldviews, can unlock elements of self. It is an unfortunate irony of her character that she often reaps the benefits of such border crossings yet continues a false sense of proper order. Her relationship with Ambrose will challenge this and, in *Dark Palace*, this relationship ultimately frees her from her sense of predetermined, ‘proper’ order.

A universe with no predetermined order holds many risks. For Edith, the ordering prospects of the League are desirable and her love for the League helps her to choose her goals. There are, however, significant problems: firstly, the League is an unprecedented entity and, secondly, this is exacerbated by her own culture still being in

its infancy. Therefore, Edith cannot follow prescribed ways of behaving. To navigate this terrain, Edith falls back on her science background and her Rationalism, which states ethics must be experienced-based. She thus sets about ‘testing’ ideas in an experimental fashion. She is convinced that the League will bring with it a new style of global living and, therefore, no previous styles of world relations will satisfy her. There is the diplomacy of old-world Europe, but at this stage of Edith’s career, she has too much of the “country-girl” about her to submit to this more protracted way of business. Edith brings an enthusiastic, pioneering spirit to her work at the League. It is both the daring and vulnerable part of her self. Enter Captain Strongbow who approaches Edith as she is meditating on what cosmopolitan ladies did about sugar. She makes it clear to this stranger, who appears on the scene in a chauffeur-driven, disarmed tank and approaches her in the street, that she is “not that sort of woman”.

‘Ma’am... We are looking for a woman to help us in a very special mission. We are hiring. What we are about is legitimate business.’  
(80)

The irony here is that she is indeed an “available woman” in the sense that she is excessively open to all new ideas. Strongbow’s business is too tempting to refuse as he outlines his concerns for the League. He argues that the League needs the protection of an international police force to guard the League against its enemies. Strongbow also suggests a “people’s ballot” which Edith finds immediately appealing. Strongbow’s subordinate explains that the ballot would “give the League a direct mandate—an empowering more direct than any mandate which any government of a nation state could ever have.” (84) Edith is impressed with the idea. “Why hadn’t someone at the League come up with that? Why, with a people’s ballot, you could override national boundaries.” (84) He discusses the uniforms and insignias he has already designed for the army. The incongruity of the disarmed vehicle together with the emphasis on the designed uniforms makes her cautious of Strongbow’s agenda. “She had reservations about people who designed uniforms and flags, unasked... the League had encountered a number of people who designed flags unasked and they were rarely, somehow—well, on the right track.” (82) (Ironically, later she spends much of her private time designing her own League uniforms. This shows that her allegiance to a System has lost all of the important self-modifying irony and self-critique necessary to ensure the ongoing feasibility of that particular mode of being.)

Edith becomes “perplexed about where reasonableness began and ended in the conversation of Captain Strongbow.” (84) Strongbow is planning a cavalcade through the streets of Geneva to promote the people’s ballot. His convoy of vehicles would: “tour the world, growing ever larger, to convey the message of a world court backed with a world force. On the way round the world we will conduct a ballot...the people of the world will vote together.” (83) He invites Edith to join one of the vehicles. Despite the absurdity of the proposal, Edith is intrigued by the idea and, indeed, caught up by Captain Strongbow’s charisma and audacity. “Strongbow had an American flair and that was something else. She could join with the American flair more readily than she could join with the diplomacy of the old world.” (100-101) Edith is swept up in Strongbow’s audacious enthusiasm.

When Athena, the woman from Strongbow’s team, explains that the women who ride in the procession are to dress in “national costume” Edith almost loses her nerve. She had anticipated “a sober parade of serious concern.” (102) Instead, she is given the choice of joining the parade as either a cowgirl or hula girl. Athena explained: “There was a time for attracting attention to an idea and that anything that served this purpose was right.” In short, “[t]hese were show business times” and it was time “to put on a show.” (102) Furthermore, the very logic of her scientific rationale demands that Edith participate in Strongbow’s scheme. Since the League is unprecedented, all previous diplomatic action will be of limited use. For Edith, an entirely new way must be forged. The habits of the “old world” can no longer stand.

She told herself that she had until the next day to change her mind, but she knew that if she did change her mind she would feel that she had betrayed herself and the quest for a new diplomacy. If she did not do this, did not go out into the field and test the situation one more step, she would never know whether the ideas were tenable or not.

Edith is in frontier territory; in order to strike out and create the new world order, she becomes vulnerable to all new ideas. She does not know how to judge new ideas for if all is unprecedented there is no standard against which she can test them.

She had been waiting for places in the conversation to apply the tests, feeling a growing apprehension that she would not be able to find convincing answers which would allow her behaviour to proceed with prudent certainty. Maybe behaviour could only proceed with confidence, never certainty. Maybe behaviour proceeded on the footing of something even less than confidence. She saw now why people needed doctrines and dogma and

effrontery to propel them into action. Maybe the will to action went by hunch and by lurch more than by the Way of Numbers. (99)

Edith realises here that certainty is illusory. If hunches and lurches have more influence over action rather than statistical evidence or reliable tests, how will she make decisions with any confidence of their outcome? Given the risks embedded in the hunch, the unruly element of chance is as much part of a situation as scientific analysis. Whilst this is a point of mild anxiety, Edith is, after all, a pioneer. It is the risky nature of the enterprise that also kindles Edith's interest:

She had also to honour her audacious self, the country girl. She did not want to lose that part of herself. Not yet. There was betrayal enough in her desire to be disguised, but the wilder self was satisfied with that. (103)

Again, it is the "country girl"—the Australian element—within her which responds to risk. She is frustrated with the League's lack of "enterprise" in "unprecedented" times. As we saw with Lawson, the bush breeds a certain pragmatic mind-set which allows and encourages risk-taking. Indeed, it is vital for survival. The risk-taking part of self, being "wild", cannot inhabit a place within the confines of old-world practices and habits. Whilst she makes naïve choices—indeed, she regrets not being able to tell the difference between a good idea or a bad one—the advantage of Edith's nature is a preparedness to trial new solutions, in order to become: "a person who could arbitrate and respond to a vital idea of the times." (95)

A certain amount of audacity is required to find or respond to unprecedented solutions to unprecedented problems. Edith's country-girl audacity gives her freedoms not available to her European friends who are more curtailed by traditions, codes of behaviour and cultures developed over centuries. She responds to the novelty of new situations: "She was interested in Ideas Ahead of Their Time and Ideas Whose Time Had Arrived, as well as Seizing the Moment." (95)

Of one thing I am certain, she said to herself: that this is a historically unprecedented action—an officer of the League dressed as a cowgirl sitting on the back of an open touring motor-car in the interests of the ballot for world government. (104)

In this episode, Moorhouse ironises Edith's style of decision-making by taking it to the extreme. This exaggeration is a typical strategy in *Grand Days* for it is under extreme conditions where ethics are fully tested. Edith has created such a strong ethic around



testing new ideas that she cannot back out of Strongbow's proposal. When she is shown the costume, "Edith was about to get up and go, once again, and once again she was filled with exasperation, disappointed with her reserve." (102) Compare the image of Edith, the cosmo-international sophisticate, drinking coffee in the old city and who was "not that sort of woman" to the Edith dressed as a cowgirl who, in the parade, blows kisses from the motorcar:

She put on the long blue denim trousers, Mexican boots with hand-tooled designs, leather chaps which tied behind the legs, an embroidered satin shirt with pearl buttons, a leather waistcoat and a bandanna. Edith tried to assure herself that there were times when one had to live at a high pitch...[Athena] fitted a blonde wig over Edith's red hair and changed her make-up quite dramatically, though not in a direction that a genteel woman would normally go with make-up. Still, Edith reminded herself, it was all show business...The final touch for the cowgirl costume was a coiled stockwhip which she was to carry over her shoulder. (105)

The gamble Edith takes is that the idea is either Before Its Time or completely ridiculous. Edith remains troubled by the conundrum. How *do* you tell a good idea from a bad one when it is entirely new and cannot be compared to any past ideas? "She wanted to know about the assessing of ideas which were 'unprecedented'." (94)

She prayed that the disguise would work, though should a bullet strike her breast, or if a bomb should take her life, she would be revealed as Edith Campbell Berry of Internal Administration, League of Nations Secretariat. Heroine. Or Nincompoop? (103)

We continually see this moral dualism in Moorhouse's writing. As previously shown in the story "Walking Away", Thomas can either be seen as a coward or a hero when he leaves home. Again we see that the moral truth of an action is subjective, yet it is far more complicated than the difference between single subjective positions. Moorhouse is at pains to emphasise the quantity of positions *within* the self. Edith has a self that is an international diplomat, a self clearly in opposition to her wild and audacious self. The costume she wears hides the first self and brings out the second:

The wig and the make-up brought both a sense of hiding to Edith and oddly, a sense of becoming some other 'Edith'. But then Edith felt she became 'different' every time she had her hair styled by a hairdresser. (104)

Further in the novel, George McDowell comments:

'I suppose, though, that truly we are a Federation of Selves. There's the person within us who goes about the daily affairs and there's the person who goes in to sleep at night alone... All our inner voices must be listened to, paid their due. The final action of the whole must be decided after listening to all...Even the small nasty voices. (294)

One might ask if the Federation of Selves rarely enjoys unity, how could it be achieved outside the self? Rather than unity, the cohesive self, the negotiating relationship between the states of the Federation produces progress. For example, despite its ultimate absurdity, the cowgirl episode is essential to Edith's diplomatic development within the logic of her code. She has paid heed to all her 'inner voices' in order to take the "final action of the whole." The experiment comes to conclusion not with the end of the parade but with the evaluation of the data. "She at least established for herself something about the feasibility of it all [world ballot]. That had been the value and success of her audacity." (108) For an action to be turned from mere movement into a developmental and meaningful occurrence, this reflection is necessary. These reflections throughout the novel give shape to the stockpile of Edith's experiences and give her the tools necessary to advance into the uncharted waters of her new internationalism.

Edith is philosophically bound to submit all her assumptions to the tests of experience and to acquire knowledge only through experiential means. This is the legacy of the inveterate Rationalism of her parents and mentor John Latham. In the historical notes Moorhouse provides, he explains the movement:

[Rationalists] stated their position as the adoption of 'those mental attitudes which unreservedly accept the supremacy of reason and aim at establishing a system of philosophy and ethics verifiable by experience and independent of all arbitrary assumptions or authority.' (679)

We can see here a similarity between Rationalism and Pragmatism; both philosophies are experience-based. The crucial difference here, however, is the Rationalists' idea of the supremacy of reason. Over the course of the companion novels, Moorhouse critiques Rationalism by exposing the primacy of reason as a weakness. As discussed in James, with particular reference to his essays "What Pragmatism Means" and "The One and The Many", the Rationalists' emphasis suggests a unified reason for the progress of the world. In the cowgirl episode, Edith's quest to prove the veracity of an idea leads her to an ultimatum: she will either be a heroine *or* nincompoop. If the idea is

*right*, she will be the former; if it is *wrong* she will be the latter. There is no room in her assessment of the idea for her to be *both at the same time*. For Edith to find an idea to be decidedly right or wrong, she must be making this determination in accordance with a single standard of truth. Edith believes that this truth will ultimately lead the world to unification. (The people's ballot will cross over national boundaries; it will provide the world with a single mandate.) Despite the directions of all her experiences, she has yet to question her leading principle, that is, is world unification and the dissolution of all borders a *good*?

### **Crossing the Border**

Moorhouse dramatises the importance of borders through Edith's intimate relationship with Ambrose whose public and private personalities are seemingly at odds with one another. After Edith dresses up as a cowgirl, she takes the costume home to dress up for Ambrose that evening. It is here that Ambrose reveals his secret proclivities, hinted at during their first meeting:

As they danced she sensed that he wasn't only reacting from a sense of fun. She became aware of something about her being in costume and the wig which was not simple 'fun'. Not only a lark...The fun of the costume had turned now to something entirely different. She didn't quite understand it...She'd thought that dressing up as a cowgirl would be a lark but she had not really thought it through. (110)

The "costume party for two" that Edith has orchestrated takes a twist into a place unknown to Edith for it has created an opportunity for Ambrose to reveal a part of his more private self, tentatively sought out in his question: "May I dress up too?" (111) He explains he'd like to wear her underpants and corset. "'Of course,' she said, more from not having any ready reply than from consent, or from any clear understanding of the enchantment which was in play in his mind." (111-112) Although Ambrose hints, on their first meeting, that he may occupy the borderline between two places, she does not have the experience to forecast just what that might mean. She must release any pre-conceived notions and relinquish her expectations of a known, dependable order. "She also felt intensely that she was on the Continent and all unthinkable and arcane things were possible. And were they also permissible?" (113)

As she watches Ambrose apply make-up to his face, special qualities of role-playing are revealed: "She saw the exhaustion creases from the War disappear, the make-

up made him, once again, youthful, and at the same time, became a mask which unbridled him.” (113) Just as Edith is free to become “some other ‘Edith’” when she dresses as a cowgirl, so too Ambrose becomes another part of himself when he dresses as a woman. This is important. He is becoming another part of himself rather than abandoning his own nature and assuming that of a woman. The woman he dresses as is already a part of him just as the woman Edith experiences herself as with Jerome is irrefutably part of her. In Paris she thought: “She had flexed her own temerity, had taken voluptuous pleasure intuitively and at will. Deep in the situation, her body had known what she wanted to do, and that impressed her. She had been able to confound and ambush herself, confound all her proper feelings.” (202) The emphasis in Paris and in Edith’s apartment with the feminised Ambrose is on intuition. ‘Proper’ feelings and order are released and the intuitive self comes through, which is to say, the self that appears is latent, not instituted through a false role-play. In this text, role-playing is an activity that expresses the latent or, for social reasons, hidden parts of oneself. Ambrose crosses the border of masculine and feminine but, importantly, the border *has to be there* for the experiment to take place. It is an important act of liberation for them both:

She found his newly released effeminacy softened their coupling, and she felt freed from expectations by the collapse of all decorum and at the same time she gained a sureness in her touch and movement. She surrendered to the release which flowed from their costumes, from the surging perversity of the atmosphere and the image of them both, which she kept glimpsing as she opened and closed her eyes....There was also an embrace of herself by herself, her embrace of Ambrose in her underwear which suggested her image back to her...Much merging and confusing of selves and identities overtook them and pleased them both as they lost themselves in a moaning and discharging which seemed out of time, and way, way outside of their orthodox world and the world she had known. (114)

Whilst Edith finds that she slips easily into this style of liaison, her competing ethics surrounding transvestitism are continually tested throughout her relationship with Ambrose. The atmosphere in this first encounter, for example, is ‘perverse’. Although the action is perverse in the sense that it is an act which willfully goes against expectation and cultural mores, one cannot read Edith’s word ‘perverse’ without all of the moral judgement it typically implies. Edith must come to terms with the reorganisation of both of their identities, for when Ambrose modifies his identity, hers must change performance, a point Moorhouse repeatedly makes in emphasising the dynamic characteristics of

interrelationship. This dynamic repositioning is not only a negotiation between selves but within the self:

Sometimes, in fact, with Ambrose she was more the bridegroom than the bride. Although it was sometimes said that the modern bride, or any bride at any time, had to be something of a courtesan as well as wife and mother to the man. (151-152)

Edith's perceptions of their new relationship are further confounded when Ambrose takes her to the Molly Club, a secret, underground club for *travesti* in Geneva. When they are dressing, Edith's more traditional values appear for she is still very much unfamiliar with these particular ways of the world. Ambrose is trying to explain to her the tone of the evening and the appropriate attire:

'Oh – anything goes, really.'

She did not like the sound of that. 'Do you mean a costume party?'

'You could say that. But not fancy dress in the sense of a fancy-dress ball.'

She was having difficulty imagining what it would be 'like'. Her last fancy-dress ball had been as a child in the School of Arts at Nowra. She'd gone as a grasshopper. Maybe she would go to this club as a grasshopper.' (312)

Edith's apprehension stems from a fear of the unfamiliar. The coming event lies far outside not only what she has experienced but it is beyond anything she can even imagine: "I am sure there is no such place in Sydney. Definitely not in Melbourne.' She rose and poured herself another sherry." (313) Ambrose is not so sure of this; Edith's comment suggests her naivety rather than her local knowledge. She adds:

'And I'm sure that if there'd been such a place, the men I knew would not have been habitués.'

He became silent, and she saw how he could be taking her remark as a reproach, as implying that Australian men had a more dependable masculinity... 'I didn't mean it in any derogatory way,' she said. 'I just mean Australian men aren't like that. The ones I know, I mean.' (313)

Edith self-consciously puts away her "patriotic moralism" in order to regain her sympathy for Ambrose and this is a definitive ethical act. By describing her moralism as "patriotic" she acknowledges the rigid boundaries of that morality. Patriotism is a limited, unsophisticated morality and she knows it. Through sheer personal will, Edith is able to wrestle down her "conflicting notions". (314) The struggle shows the strain of her ethical dilemma:

‘You think I’m a little...disordered...as a person?’

That might very well have been the word she would have used. ‘I think you’re a little feminine and I don’t think femininity is a disorder. No, you’re not ‘disordered’, dear.’

‘If it’s not in the right body, femininity is a disorder.’

She moved to sit near him and to touch him, to reassure him, regardless of what conflicting notions moved in her about this matter... ‘We have to live with it, if it’s in the wrong body. If we find we are the one with that body,’ she said, trying to ease him.

‘Some of us have to live with it.’

‘And some of us have to live with those who have to live with it. The secret is, I suppose, for all those involved, one way or another, to enjoy it.’

‘I like your answers,’ he said, returning the affection.

‘I’m sometimes too good at making answers,’ she said. She thought about her wider life. Was she glib? Was she too good at self-justification?’ (313-4)

This conversation concentrates on the concept of “disorder”. It is the exact word Edith would have used because, despite her growing experience of the complexity of reality, she still operates under the presumption of set orders. Both she and Ambrose use the terms “right” and “wrong” and this, together with the kindness she shows to Ambrose in order to placate him, suggests competing moral forces. That is, her presiding ethic is based on what seems to be a natural order of men and women but her compassion for Ambrose supercedes this. The point here is that she has decided to take the more complex ethical road. Privately, she is disinclined to accept Ambrose’s difference for it is too far outside her realm of experience to really understand. If something is very difficult to imagine or understand, one is unlikely to tolerate it well. Yet, rather than judge Ambrose by the morality which issues from her own narrow experience, she chooses the path of compassion. As we saw in Lawson, the moral hero is not the one who lives and dies by one great standard of morality but the one who can accept people in their difference, the social outcast, or accept those in their weakness or, in this case, their so-called “perversity”. Edith comes up with a “good answer” for Ambrose to calm the anxieties he has over her potential judgements.

Edith’s ‘good answer’ is a pragmatic solution; that is, she changes her attitude towards an element of her environment that she cannot alter in order for her to *cope* with it. She wonders whether she was “too good at self-justification” but it is more than this. Edith’s ability to reorient her ideas signals a pragmatic agility. She uses truth *instrumentally*; that is she can take: “Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will

carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, true in so far forth, true *instrumentally*.”<sup>185</sup> These are the experiences that, finally in the end of *Dark Palace*, lead Edith away from a concept of a universal Truth and the existence of an entirely rational universe. It does take time, however, and despite her ability to placate Ambrose and reorient her own perspective regarding him, she has still to experience the club. And this will take even more strength:

Edith sat at a table waiting for Ambrose to return from looking around for another ‘couple’ whom he had planned to meet at the club. She felt insecure, because once in the club, he’d begun relinquishing the male role of looking after things, and she’d had to find a table. She wasn’t going to look after things. Not in a club like this, where everything was inverted. It was his club, not her club. What happened at the toilet door? Who went where? She supposed they didn’t care. She suspected that when the time came, she would care. She would care dreadfully. (315)

Now that Ambrose has relinquished his masculine duties, Edith must take them up, again emphasising the ever-shifting dynamic of relationship. Edith is ‘insecure’ because all stable reference points have disappeared. Not only is she witnessing a mass border crossing, she is facing the final frontier where things that were unimaginable hours before are now permissible:

[S]he saw every possible combination: there were men dancing with men, women with women, and men dressed as women dancing with men, and dancing with women. And inclinations, about which she was not sure...The more she looked, the more she realised that it was a very mixed club indeed, and perhaps more normal, not as confused as she’d first thought. Surely there could not be too many confused people in Geneva? (315)

The Molly Club provokes “many quandaries” (320). She tries to imagine Ambrose with a male lover both dressed as women and wonders “What did they do with their male parts?” Whilst she “made herself imagine the difference” she has no reference point from which to imagine this scene. She is thus adrift in her new experience. All lines have been moved, crossed or broken. Seemingly, nothing is where it should be. Here she meets Mr Hunneus, “the Deputy President and Ambassador-at-large for the Republic of Azerbaijan”. (330) Edith wonders about his masculinity but Mr Hunneus as a “government in exile”, comes to the club for different reasons:

He said, ‘I relax in this place because here all is lost too.’

<sup>185</sup> James, “What Pragmatism Means” p. 34.

'I suppose so. How, though, do you mean, "lost"?'

'These people are outside of it all, lost from the ordained paths...I am lost from the soil of my nation. But these people...they are lost from the natural world. This is a netherworld...I am a man of normal feelings. And here, here I feel double exile and that takes me beyond the pain of the first exile. I am a normal man in pain.' (325)

Mr Hunneus's speech illustrates the value of borders. Borders are required for identity. In the absence of identity, whether sexual, national or any other, a feeling of 'loss' ensues. In the 'netherworld' of the Molly Club, however, traditional borders are not without value. That sexual borders are routinely crossed or subverted does not mitigate the value of the border; it is the value of the border that makes the act of crossing it valuable or meaningful. Ambrose does not cross the gender boundary to sabotage or devalue his manhood. He clearly enjoys being a man. Yet, in crossing the border into his feminine self, he is able to experience what is valuable on the other side. It is an act of valuing the feminine rather than devaluing the masculine.

These relocations of value and dislocations of order and authority are dramatically complicated, however, by the arrival of vigilantes, the Action Civique, who enter the club and harass the clientele. The group represents a very masculine order which clearly destabilises the culture of the Molly and power shifts awkwardly between the members of the club.

'Now look here!' Ambrose said, rising to his feet and stepping forward. 'Easy on.'

His English male voice came through the lipstick and makeup ludicrously and ineffectually. Edith felt embarrassed for him.

The leader lifted Ambrose's dress to reveal his lace underwear and then jabbed at his genitals with the baton. Ambrose instinctively recoiled and pushed his dress down, his hands covering his genitals. One of the youths gave a cry of triumph at the unmasking. In a diminished voice, Ambrose said, 'Please stop!'

She saw that Ambrose had lost his male authority, his English authority. She felt that even she might have more authority as a woman than he did now as a man dressed as a woman. (330)

The action of the vigilantes raises yet another quandary for Edith. Despite their violent means, she is almost on side with them in that they want to preserve the dignity of Geneva. Later: "[s]he nearly said, harshly, that the Action Civique were just trying to clean up the town, to keep Geneva decent." (342) Yet what is the criteria for 'decent'? Again: "[w]hat are the values to be pursued?" (461) After the violent episode in the Club,



the regular clientele organise a meeting to decide what action to take. Ambrose asks Edith to attend. Edith is still confused as to who has the greater moral case, the Action Civique or the transvestites:

Approached from another position, maybe she had a democratic obligation to go to the club and stand up to Action Civique. The Molly Club was not part of the toy town. It could be argued that it was all very well for her to be fighting for world order and peace with letters and memos. What about the threats of disorder now, here and now, in her own life or at least, in Ambrose's, her friend's life? In the town in which she lived. But which was the disorder? The *travesti* who contradicted their nature? Or the Action Civique?...She saw that if she continued to think like this she would have to go to the meeting. Didn't she already give enough to the bloody world?...Throughout the day she felt she was dodging the moral dilemma of attending the Molly Club meeting by hiding behind her personal hurt. She was then more annoyed that she should be troubled by it as some sort of moral dilemma. (344)

A moral dilemma surfaces when a situation houses competing interests within the self and when one finds oneself at the border line of clashing moral systems. The Molly Club defies all of Edith's known order and so she must now learn to operate on this precipitous frontier. The entire situation, along with her relationship to the 'disordered' Ambrose, asks her to question her guiding principle in life which is that all things, however small, must be addressed with the larger goals in mind. "The thing she found sticky and displeasing was that all this had nothing to do with the League. She wanted no outside untidiness or demand in her life. The League was too urgent. She had no time for other things, let alone messy and murky things." (343) This brings us back to the theory of coordination first described in *The Electrical Experience*. Like George, Edith orders her world around the rationale that for good outcomes every detail must be pursued with this good in mind. The Molly Club perplexes her because it is not something she could align herself with publicly. Does this, then, undermine her credibility as a person? Does it affect the internal workings of her integrity? For example, Edith is troubled by what she can reveal about herself to her close friends. When she finally describes the Molly Club to her friend Florence, she is immediately rebuked: "You are doing dirt on your womanhood...I'm a free thinker, Edith, but really, this is going too far. What about your womanhood?" (381) Here, Edith comes up against the harsh reality of a closed moral system from the outside. Florence has a clear and distinct view of 'womanhood'; it does not have a negotiable border. The irony within a phrase like *I'm a free thinker, but...* makes

clear the limitations of Florence's conceptions. Edith realises she has made dramatic changes to her sense of order and that, socially, this can be an alienating thing. Social alienation is the legacy that goes with Ideas Ahead of Their Time.

Maybe her sense of womanhood was changing. Maybe some episodes which occurred in one's life could, in fact, be put aside from one's life, had no bearing on what one really was. Or were we the sum total of all that we allowed to happen to us? Were we made from everything that happened to us?

She arrived at another troubling thought. If her experiences were in fact 'untellable' to her friends, she was doomed to being a liar and a sneak with them, having those parts of her which she could not show. Or was there obligation to tell all? What about if she married? When and how should she explain these things then? She realised that Ambrose was the only person on earth who truly knew her. (391)

What troubles Edith in the above thought is that untellable aspects of self undermine the theory of coordination which we will now look at further.

### Objects, Aesthetics and Dancing with Chairs (again)

Edith's adherence to a theory of coordination is made clear from the outset. As she first converses with Ambrose, she fears that any small misinterpretation may have catastrophic consequences:

"She would not let it pass. Otherwise they might stray further and further from mutual understanding. She always feared that in some unforeseeable way small early confusions led later to giant embarrassments." (8)

Once again, the theory is an inherited trait: "she followed her grandmother's advice that one should begin as one intended to continue." (65) Looking at this as part of a family line, it could be argued that Moorhouse is suggesting that this might be a peculiarly Australian anxiety. As we see constantly in Lawson, the volatility of the Australian environment continually thwarts the best-laid plans. The theory of coordination Moorhouse's characters create is designed to manage risk as far as possible. (Moorhouse's main characters all proceed from small coastal regions, on the very edge of the bush, and thus still at its mercy.) The theory is built upon reason and follows a mechanical logic; that is, if each part of a machine is in working order, then it follows that the entire machine should be in working order and the outcomes of the machine will be predictable.

The ‘working order’ of ideals, the self, or other intangibles is maintained through various means, itemised by Edith during her “dark night of the soul”<sup>186</sup>. Importantly, they include the ‘physicals,’ and the ‘Aesthetics of Objects’. When the Assembly decides to build the Palais des Nations, rather than continuing to work in the Palais Wilson, (a renovated hotel) Edith is moved to tears:

Of course, she would work in a hole in the ground for the League if she had to, but the ‘physicals’—again, her father’s word; he had always stressed the physicals—were the credence of an enterprise. The League had now to affirm itself and build its Palace as a bulwark against human frailty. (149)

As Edith indulgently meditates upon the new physicals of the League, Moorhouse clearly draws up her theory of coordination. Her attention is drawn to her own apartment which she has meticulously created:

The opera played on and she thought to herself, Each of us has a space around us which we could sculpture, and then we could work outwards, each from our gardens, spreading into the world, as in Geneva the League would build a Palais des Nations in the parc l’Ariana, and grandeur and reasoned order would spread outwards, But unless that centre was in good order, no good order could flow out from it. (156)

Again, we are presented with Edith’s idea of the centralisation of good. Edith’s theory of coordination begins from the smallest detail. These details are the very stitching of her life, from which all stability comes. “She firmly believed that what you surrounded yourself with and exposed yourself to helped to make you, although it didn’t always seem obvious how it made you or into what.” (467) Edith’s apartment is a case in point. She spends much time procuring the correct items with which to surround herself. (154-156) These items include hand crafted rugs, furniture chosen for its mechanical ingenuity and various curiosities. She even goes so far as to send for her schoolbooks from Australia “as a way of reminding herself that she did *know things*. It somehow reinforced her as a person to have Porritt’s *Chemistry of Rubber* and Marshall’s *Frog* in her bookcase.” (156) Objects, then, have the job of reflecting one’s personality, taste, role and history.

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<sup>186</sup> The dark night of the soul, a reference to the work of St John of the Cross, is an ironic take on Edith’s internal development. The important point here is that St John of the Cross’ ‘dark night’ is a style of negative theology. That is, at a stage of spiritual enlightenment, those seeking enlightenment realise their own inadequacy to reach communion with God, or an enlightened state. In contradistinction, Edith’s drive is to write down everything that she is in order to see herself revealed. The process is evidently futile: her “dark night” is cut short when she is relieved to hear the dinner bell.

Buildings must also fulfil this function. In her first meeting at the League she makes this contribution:

‘This meeting may only be about the allocation of rooms but how we set ourselves up in buildings is a portrait of ourselves. More than that, even, it is an assertion of the gravity and spirit of the covenant...The physicals incorporate the philosophical.’ (50)

The building of the Palais des Nations brings out much of her aesthetic theory. When debating about the new League building, she argues:

that negotiation was best done in august surroundings because august surroundings calmed passions and diminished egotism. She wanted to work in a building which spoke to her and touched her every day she went to it. Which daily convoked her ideals as she went up its steps. She did not want to work in a building she failed to notice. Or worse a building which touted the personality of its architect.<sup>187</sup> (158)

Edith takes a personal interest in the plans for the Palais and while she is doing so, she discovers a letter from an Annie Dickinson, who is offering a chair made by orphans for inclusion in the new Palais. The letter of offer is in the file for the Palais furnishing but is stranded in the file by administrative apathy. Edith comes across the letter and imagines: “the war orphans working industriously on the chair, [and] she saw the public-spirited, practical Annie Dickinson hovering about, caring for them and guiding them.” (159-160) Edith is inspired:

‘We start with just a chair as this—we start with Miss Dickinson’s chair. I want the Palais to be layer upon layer of the best of human effort and art, a museum of all the best in human experience...I want the new Palais to be an organ of human memory.’ (163)

Layer upon layer – this is how the good work of the League will ‘spread’. Here, Edith applies her “Aesthetic of Happy Latency”: “She believed that Miss Dickinson’s chair had a happy latency which would sponsor a chain of other cheerful and assertive details.” (468) In Edith’s theory of coordination, the chair becomes a necessary anchor that will secure other and greater goods of and for the League. It is therefore morally essential that the chair be brought to Geneva as soon as practicable. To overcome the bureaucratic problems in handling the chair, for Miss Dickinson’s letter has not received a reply in months, Edith takes it upon herself to see that the chair is accepted and given

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<sup>187</sup> She is referring, in particular, to the personality of Le Corbusier.

pride of place in the assembly room. A curious irony of power arises, as pointed out by Florence:

‘Edith, dear, what I’m suggesting is the assumption of command in a situation which requires initiative from a subordinate officer.’  
(168)

In other words, Edith does not have the authority to take control of this situation yet the issue is too small to attend to for those who actually have the authority. Different scales of value appear:

Of course she couldn’t go barging into Sir E’s office about Miss Dickinson’s chair when he had disarmament, opium, the white slave traffic, and God knows what other world problems on his mind. (165)

Her friend Florence encourages her to break into Sir Eric’s office and sign the papers herself: “[Y]ou can become Secretary-General for a couple of seconds. The orphans at least deserve that much.” (167) The concept of deserving orphans is ethically charged. Florence uses the strategy that anyone with any moral sense at all could not deny poor war orphans. Edith does not readily submit to her idea given that even keeping an eye on correspondence about the chair “suggested misty codes of behaviour outside the staff rules.” (166) However, her ethic concerning the orphans and their diligence to the League overrules any consideration for the ethic of the office. “Edith was sickened to see that it was now five months after Miss Dickinson’s first letter. That alone, she felt, justified her taking action.” (169) Edith has thus created a moral crisis and she must find *justification* for any action she is to embark upon. To whom is owed the greater allegiance? Is she justified in bending the rules of office conduct—an office which she is utterly devoted to—in order to build that office, to help it become the “best of human effort.” She decides to commit the fraud and sign the papers on Sir Eric’s behalf. Later she asks herself:

Did forging Sir Eric’s signature make her complete within herself for that day? Not really. Although the action was further justified because, although in the scale of Sir Eric’s concerns it was not a great matter, within another scale and the spirit of the League it seemed to Edith that the matter of the chair was momentous.  
(170)

The emphasis throughout the chair episode is on *how* we justify our actions and what is made clear here is that there is no absolute moral rule guiding her actions. In fact, there are two competing systems of value, just as there were competing ethics

surrounding her attitude to the feminised Ambrose. Again Edith must decide between these two competing ethics. The very clash of moral systems suggest that there can be no 'highest order' since she has already attributed this highest order to the League but now she feels she must act fraudulently within it because of what she sees as even *higher* claims. This reveals the irony of her constitution and suggests a road she might ultimately take. Typically one might think that breaking into a superior's office to commit a forgery is an unethical act. It seems even worse that the very "correct" Edith herself would agree to it. Yet to Edith what the chair symbolises is so much greater than these considerations that she realises the rules must be flexible. Indeed, "she was snapping the rules in two." (171)

Pragmatically speaking, the only way to judge the quality of the act is in the consequences. Edith forecasts good consequences from her act and this becomes her justification. But consequences are not so easily predictable. Just as dressing up as a cowgirl "for a lark" for Ambrose opened an entire new personality within him, Edith may very well end up with consequences she didn't bargain for. Edith is stepping outside of the boundaries of known and acceptable behaviour and thus has little habitual action to ground her. She becomes a loose cannon and the shrapnel may fall anywhere. And so it does. One letter does not solve the matter of the chair. More correspondence follows and she must ward off every letter before Sir Eric sees it, and continually reply back to Miss Dickinson in his name. As her previous experience with Captain Strongbow showed, "the mess was spreading". When the chair is finally shipped to Geneva, one last letter arrives from Miss Dickinson saying it had to go to the International Labour Office instead because "the League of Nations does not accept presents." (172) Edith's frustration is clear:

Ye gods. Was there no end to it? Now she had to involve the ILO and pretend other things to other people to find the wretched chair, and deal with this nonsense about the League not accepting gifts. (172)

When the chair is finally installed, "mission complete" Miss Dickinson again writes to 'Sir Eric', this time wanting to install a plaque on the chair, to be personally delivered by herself and an orphan. Edith "wept tears of frustration and self-recrimination." (175) Edith's one action has caused a host of consequences that then create new situations that must be overcome. Reason alone cannot predict when these things may end. It is entirely up to chance. And Edith, this time, gets lucky. Events

unfold that prevent Miss Dickinson and her charge arriving in Geneva and the disaster is averted, though importantly, through no action of Edith's. It is pure luck. This is what must ultimately defy Rationalist theory. If reason were the centrepiece of all, these situations could be easily managed. Chance and the impact of participating (and often unknown) selves continually change the dynamic of any given situation which puts that situation beyond any sturdy grip that reason might offer. After all: "Every person in a conversation changed the nature of that conversation." (375) Reason is a good starting point but, beyond this, the pragmatic attributes of responsiveness, agility, flexibility and intuition are required.

Disaster is averted in the chair episode, but Edith is troubled over this success. She is still firmly in the grip of her high ideal of League-generated order and this justifies her action. Despite her acts of fraud, she continues to take the moral high ground. At the close of this episode Edith reveals her true arrogance about her morality.

Florence's ways were not the ways of a diplomat but the errant ways of a misbehaving student...What did interest Edith about the whole business was that she now saw how others might use such stratagems within the organisation of the League, might pursue private policies by stealth, and how dangerous this would be. (177)

Yet what is there to distinguish the quality of her fraudulent actions from the quality of others'? She is saying here that her fraudulent acts are permissible because of the quality of her higher goal. Who judges this higher goal? When is subterfuge allowable? Why are her goals better than the goals of others? This will be played out when Ambrose is revealed as a spy.

Edith's self-righteousness continues and threatens her with even greater calamities and, again, this issues from her theory of coordination. Here, it is not chairs, but what goes on the meeting table that is the cause of the potentially damaging consequences. Edith approaches the organisation of any meeting with what is comically portrayed as excessive protocol. At the preparatory meeting for world disarmament, Edith is given the task of organising the table arrangements. As we are told in the opening scene of *Grand Days*: "She had, perhaps, a disproportionate interest in the things that went on tables, and in the decoration and design of things. To put it more precisely, she had an abiding passion for *l'art de la table*." (7) Edith believes that how a table is arranged affects, and effects, what happens around that table. For this important meeting, Edith is given the freedom to exercise her passion. She orders specially made

stationery stands for each delegate, crafted, symbolically, from beech wood from the Jura, a mountain range between France and Switzerland. “She also instructed that bottled water *plat*, together with a crown seal bottle-opener, should be placed at each of the delegate seatings along with the usual carafes of water and glasses.” (395) When questioned on the inclusion of both bottled and carafes of water she says: “I want bottled water because it contributes to the gravity of the work.” The carafes of water are also included, perhaps to assert the safety of Geneva’s water supply and, by association, anything else that may flow from Geneva. Her water rationale also extends to her use of leather instead of leatherette. She explains to Cooper, her dumbfounded colleague:

‘because the objects that people handle determine how they treat themselves, how they treat each other, and treat the things they are treating. The appropriate objects can cause people to be more contemplative...Make people more fertile - ’ wrong word; she didn’t falter – ‘more resourceful in themselves than they might otherwise be. To elevate their political emotions, Cooper. Some rooms, some chairs, even, I believe, coarsen political emotion.’ (395)

Her contribution, then, to world disarmament, she later ‘wryly’ observes is “stationery stands and bottled waters.” (426) Edith’s point about setting the correct tone of a meeting, to encourage the right amount ‘gravity’ is to be taken. Levels of formality are important aspects of social ritual. However, Moorhouse constructs such striking contrasts in this episode between the table water and world peace that it undermines the stability of Edith’s position. The “principle of high contrast” is at work here.<sup>188</sup> It is no small irony that the domestic arts she learnt from her mother in Jasper’s Brush contribute to “the long march to disarmament” when “war as an instrument of international policy would be outlawed, if not ended.” (399) It is from her parents that she has learnt a great deal about “the psychology of meetings”. She is building on their knowledge:

She had a surpassing grasp too of the tone of meetings and the gradations of those tones. She knew when and when *not* to have bottled water or a plain carafe of water. Cooper, unfortunately, might have learned that it was important sometimes to have bottled water. But he would never know when to have both. (398)

The gloating arrogance that finally asserts itself in this passage leaves Edith’s character vulnerable to much ironic play. Here, Edith takes on the figure of *alazon* (“Greek for braggartism”) which, in studies on irony “is shorthand for any form of self-

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<sup>188</sup> Muecke, p. 53.



assurance or naivety.”<sup>189</sup> When Edith takes on this character, being full of confidence she becomes vulnerable to blind spots. As Muecke writes, irony is: “a gyroscope that keeps life on an even keel or straight course, restoring the balance when life is being taken too seriously or, as some tragedies show, not seriously enough, stabilising the unstable but also destabilising the excessively stable.”<sup>190</sup> Edith presents an excessively stable self here and Moorhouse uses irony to point out the dangers of such confidence. In relation to confidence, doubt and certainty, Muecke supplies the helpful quotation from Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony*: “[A]s philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible without doubt, so by the same token one may claim that no authentic human life is possible without irony.”<sup>191</sup> This concept of doubt and certainty is vital to Moorhouse’s League of Nations novels since the effects of personal action may have international ramifications. Here in Geneva, personal actions however seemingly minor (such as how water is served at a committee) may influence the turn of international events. In other words, for Edith to act with such surety suggests a naivety concerning the dynamism of the international field. The reader is aware that with Edith’s increasing self-assuredness, is an increasing blind spot that may prove her downfall. Of her table she thinks: “It was perhaps a masterwork. She had transferred her arts and ceremonies of home life to the League now that she had no real home life.” (399) This table is Edith’s greatest work of diplomatic art and the repeated emphasis, through her perception, of the table’s perfection, sets her up for a potential fall. This is the ironic purpose of the alazon: we are at once privy to the situation as it is generally understood (through her colleagues’ challenging criticisms and questioning) and also through the ironic nature of the narration which shows the strident confidence of the alazon from her point of view.

Muecke writes:

This principle of high contrast applies also to the alazon. Instead of widening the gap between appearance and reality or expectation and event, one can magnify the alazon’s blind confidence or the circumspection, ingenuity or perseverance he [sic] shows in trying to avoid the unavoidable. Assurance and circumspection may be contraries, but in an alazon they amount to the same since his circumspection has a blind spot precisely where it should not. (54)

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<sup>189</sup> Muecke, p. 4.

<sup>190</sup> Muecke, p. 4.

<sup>191</sup> Muecke, p. 4.

The situation of Edith and her stationery stands afford us a perfect example of this literary form. Her love of the League and her “possessive loyalty” to it creates a blind spot in her otherwise analytical assessment of the meeting’s setting. She has an unwavering faith in the work of the League and its authoritative moral position. As stated previously, Edith believes the League has the “power of example. Of setting standards. Standards contained values.” (400)

Here, the love of the League is combined with her love for meetings. “She loved also the way new idiom evolved for each political situation and for each conference” (400):

Back in Australia, she’d like astonishing people by saying that she revelled in a good committee meeting. She thought of committees as parlour games where each person’s contribution was their throw of the dice from which followed certain moves around the board. For her, committees were the Great Basic Unit. When you understood the workings of a committee, John Latham said, you understood the workings of an empire. (44)

Whilst committees might be different in function to this larger preparatory meeting, there is a similarity here. The meeting *per se* is what she loves: it involves the contribution of many different points of view to find solutions. She is also attracted to the formalisation of behaviour. Within meetings, everybody must abide by certain protocol and etiquette. In this way, nothing can exceed expectation. It is a ritual. In this episode, the love of the League and the love of conferencing contribute towards the blind spot that her analytical powers can do nothing to redress.

She loved it all and, standing there in the Salle de la Réformation, she prayed that her work would not ever be taken away from her. She feared, in the way she imagined someone in love might fear, that their loved one might be taken away by cruel fate. (400)

She projects her enthusiasm onto all the participating delegates as if they are all devotees of the same religion. Indeed they *are* enthusiastic about the stationery stands for half of the stands are stolen from the meeting room after the first day. When Cooper tells her what has happened, she is “shocked”:

This more than confounded her. She did not want to show him that she was in any way unprepared for anything that could happen within the jurisdiction of her preparations. But this. This was confounding. Senior diplomats and members of parliament of some of the great nations had taken – stolen – League property? (408)

She is confounded because the delegates have not behaved with the right amount of gravity and integrity. That these people would conform to her table ethic is a moral assumption on her part. A confounded assumption indicates a moral blind spot. A staffer says to her: “You invited theft... You give people things so good, of course they steal.” (410) So begins Edith’s extraordinary manoeuvring not only to salvage the dignity of the meeting but her dignity also. If not, her male colleagues, critical of her “*excessive* womanly concern with unimportant detail” (402) will be vindicated. An attack on the table livery is an attack on her and her diplomatic prowess:

She could simply remove those stationery stands which were left and pretend that they’d never existed.

She *would not* pretend that they had never existed. (409)

Edith does not want to show she has been ruffled, for now she must keep up the pretence of her self-assuredness. Thus the situation escalates and she must go to great lengths to try and regain control of the situation. Her theory of coordination has been turned on its head – the small details are certainly affecting the large yet not in a way she could ever have planned:

Mustering what she hoped looked like *hauteur*, she said that it was perhaps, yes, almost certainly, the importance of this commission that had led to the incident. Yes. The delegates had taken memorials, commemorating the conference, because the objects taken were destined to be historic. She listened to herself with wonder. (410)

Here, Edith herself “marvelled at her facility – not to lie, but to articulate what had been thought somewhere in her head, but not consciously reasoned.” (411) This points to her exceptional pragmatic skill of agility, that is, she is able to quickly reorient her mind-set to deal with the situation. Her problem has stemmed from the certainty that has precipitated this event and she now must call on all her pragmatic skills to deal with the emerging crisis. Her agile responses are even a source of marvel to herself. She lies to her colleagues that she has more of the stands to replace those ones taken because she has “anticipated that there would be, on such an historic occasion, the need for memorabilia.” (410) She therefore must retrieve the stolen stands without official intervention. This is also in order to protect the “honour of the nations which had taken the things.” (412) She realises: “I am not only a liar... I lie myself into impossible situations.” To save herself momentarily, she creates an impossible situation, dealing with

each event on a moment-by-moment basis. She takes a taxi to the hotel where the delegates are staying and speaks to the head of security, M. Dupont. She requests to be let into the delegates' rooms on "a matter of diplomatic urgency." M. Dupont is not convinced by her request or her *carte de légitimation*. "She watched his face and could see that the peace of the world being in balance made little impact on M. Dupont." (413) Again, with this observation, the principle of high contrast is operating. Edith puts the importance of her stationery stands on the same level as world peace. Likewise, M. Dupont places his personal interest at the same level. In order to grant her request, he asks that she recommend him for a job if an international police force is created. She agrees. "She looked away. Now she was appointing people to the League police force." (414) M. Dupont helps her into all the delegates' rooms and realises what has happened. He makes the ironic remark that "These great men steal these things?... On these men, the future of the world rests?" (414)

Edith succeeds, a testament to her extraordinary dexterity and ingenuity, a flexibility that seems to proceed from her Australian-ness. These are pioneering attributes which allow people to cope on the borderline of moral systems. Her sense of assuredness about tables prompts an excessive level of action in order to save her reputation and the face of her beloved League. It is an irony that Edith has had to lie repeatedly and break into delegates' rooms in order that everything is apparently correctly done. Again, two moral systems are competing with each other. Although Edith does not seem to be bothered about breaking into the delegates' rooms, the reader is certainly aware of the irony. We have to ask, if world disarmament depends on a successful meeting and the successful meeting depends on the right number of stationery stands, isn't Edith justified in the act of burglary? In light of the possibilities of world disarmament, it would be immoral not to retrieve the stands. Within her rational theory of coordination, this is self-evident, yet the high contrasts operating lead us to see the folly of her reasoning. It is the lasting irony that the happy latency of good objects, from which good forces proliferate, has been secured by criminal means.

Edith's main concern is that these things must be in place for the right amount of gravity to be achieved, thus facilitating as far as can be expected, world disarmament. The insistence of unpredicted, random actions threaten the usefulness of Edith's theory. In both instances – the stationery stands and the orphan's chair – the small-in-the-large theory is protected but can only be maintained by duplicitous means. This would suggest

that at the base of these coordinations is untruth – that is, not everything is coordinated naturally. There are many flaws to be obscured rather than an operating, transparent and perfect working machine. It is the irony of Edith’s Rationalism that she is the cause of the flaws in order to create a perfect thing. The events suggest that the world does not follow a plan and there may be many unintended consequences to action, however well intentioned. Situations do not follow a blueprint but are a product of unintended consequences.

Edith’s most challenging moral dilemma comes when she discovers that Ambrose has been acting as a spy at the League for the British Foreign Office. She must then decide to whom does she owe the greater loyalty – him or the League? She prepares herself by running through the possible consequences. This will determine her action:

Plainly something had now to happen. Either she confronted Ambrose, and then what? He would admit or deny it. If admitted, then what? And if denied, then what? Should she induce him to stop or to resign?...What kind of loyalty did she owe to Ambrose as a friend—her lover—or to the League? (495)

The long series of questions suggests a moral struggle. She is trying to forecast all possible consequences in order to find the most appropriate course of action. It also suggests how little she knows of the situation and that she may be forced to act with an extremely limited knowledge: “She could not be released from doing something and yet whatever she did, she would suffer for it.” (500) She sides with the League because of her belief of its “higher order”: “Was not an enemy of the League an enemy of hers?” It is in this episode where Edith’s true zeal becomes dangerously clear. When she confronts Ambrose, he defends himself on the grounds that zealots must be opposed:

‘Some in the League are. I am saying that it’s conceivable that the League could be captured one day by zealots. I don’t only mean Paulluci. It could be said that I was helping the League in a way – guarding it. Keeping an eye on it. Helping others to keep an eye on it.’ (525)

He does not mention Edith’s name but the reader is aware that she is implicated. Edith then acknowledges this to herself: “She did tend to be zealous and she sensed she was becoming more so. Time was so short to remake the world. She was impatient. This led her to zeal, or was she just sedulous?” (527) The force of Edith’s zeal leads the reader to sympathise with the spy as he offers a new perspective on engaging with the established order, in this case, the work of the League:

Ambrose said that sometimes people turned into revolutionaries or zealots before your very eyes. One's duty then, he said, was to collaborate with those who opposed zealots. Especially to oppose those zealots who thought they were your friends but who had unwittingly become your enemies. He said it wasn't required by the rules of the game that you told them you were working against them. (524)

Ambrose's perspective is the 'third position', the position of engaged detachment. The third position has also been explicitly mentioned in *Conference-Ville* where a young photographer approaches the narrator and describes his writing as writing from "the third position". Commentator Reid explains it thus: "The third position is on that border, that margin or limbo-line... a personal and social dilemma."<sup>192</sup> It is a common state for many of Moorhouse's characters, particularly the narrator himself. It is also Ambrose's state. The inhabitants of this state are:

fringe-wanderers, or border-riders, outskirters, limbo-dwellers, since none have found a fixed abode of securely central values. Community is variously imagined, but consistently problematic... The position of the most focal and vocal people—latterly, of the narrator himself—is always an uneasy one on the margins between mental countries, between social states.<sup>193</sup>

Ambrose's state becomes intolerable to Edith. The theory of coordination overtakes her ability to make more refined moral judgements: "Perhaps she considered Ambrose inherently dubious, in the deepest sense. If his sexual rudiments were unstable, did not all of him become questionable?" (341) Her zeal for the 'higher order' removes her powers of discretion. In this, she has more in common with the Action Civique than the world of diplomacy she so values. Furthermore, Under-Secretary Bartou, in whom she confides about Ambrose, complicates her attitude to spying, saying that there are ways it could be advantageous to the League: "he could be doing nothing more than being a publicist for the League." (503) The differences between Bartou's analysis of the spying and Edith's are extreme. His experience in diplomatic affairs allows him to see the spying in at least four different ways that pose no threat to the League. Edith does not have this insight. In this instance she can only deal in moral absolutes, a system of morality that we have routinely seen as unsophisticated. Bartou sees this and says "you are not good spy material." (503) Yet, the final irony here is that in undoing a spy, she

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<sup>192</sup> Reid, I. "Writing from the Third Position: Frank Moorhouse's Recent Fiction." *Meanjin*. 37: 2. 1978. pp. 165-170. p. 170.

<sup>193</sup> Reid, p. 165.

must become a spy herself. Again it is not the act *per se* that contains the moral value but the reason behind its action. Bartou says: “To spy on a spy is no crime.” (504) The intricacies of intention and action are such that it becomes impossible to make a moral comment on any of the parties’ actions. This is Moorhouse’s relentless point. This vast tangle of perspectives and actions, however well intentioned, create such a complicated and volatile experiential field that it renders the theory of coordination quite useless. There are always more influences on a situation that can be imagined by any single knowing self. “After all, he has gone on as if everything between you were as you thought it to be.” (503)

The final blow to Edith’s theory of coordination is delivered unwittingly by Ambrose himself when he makes a submission to a directors’ meeting. The following episode is an example of how Moorhouse ironises an idea by playing it out to an exaggerated end. The full folly of this coordination theory, or at least its excessive application, is revealed during Ambrose’s “crack-up”; that is, when he has lost his senses. Through the spying incident, Ambrose falls out of favour with the League’s upper echelons of power but he is not dismissed. Rather, he is sent to “Siberia”, that is, to a lesser department for a token position. During his time as an outcast he spends time philosophising and believes he has the answer to all the world’s ills. He presents it to the Directors’ Meeting:

What has come home to me is that we, in the League, have been dealing with all things in isolation, in compartments, when we should’ve been looking at them as a whole, as a planetary system, with the planets revolving in fixed axes to each other. We have not been thinking universally...I see all international predicaments as linked one with the other, all in cause and effect. If we are to wallop these predicaments, I would now argue that we must begin at one correct and vital place. Not at all places at once. And it is at this one point that we must apply all our coffers. That somewhere, that beginning point, is the key to all our endeavours...There will be a cause-and-effect repercussion through to all the other predicaments – an explosive chain of consequence – through the whole of the universe of predicaments which bedevil us. In medicine we once called it the reflex arc, the theory that one organ can sicken another. (563)

The similarity between Ambrose’s and Edith’s philosophies are evident. The theory that one organ can sicken another is the same as Edith’s belief that the League could be an ‘organ of human memory’, the root of all good. Both ideas are based on the

concept of centralisation. Edith's and Ambrose's theory depends on predictable outcomes, but we have repeatedly seen that any number of unpredictable effects may come from a single cause. Here Moorhouse tests the theory of coordination on the grandest scale possible – the eradication of all human ills. Ambrose locates the problem at a very basic source: “It came to me that all predicaments of the world are linked to a very rudimentary thing – they are all linked to hunger.... good politics comes from good diet.” (565) At this stage, those attending the meeting grow uncomfortable. It is becoming clear to them that Ambrose may be mentally unstable. He pushes on nevertheless with his presentation of “The New Century Hay Sweep”. He submits that if all agricultural communities have access to this “absurdly simple contrivance,” which speeds up agricultural production by eight times, “we can feed eight times more people, roughly speaking. Hence, banishing hunger for all time.” (567) Ambrose is obviously using his analytical powers of reason. For example, he is at a rush to assure them he does not have a financial interest in the hay sweep; he also admits there is a general problem with it – “the sweep is wider than most gates. But in countries with no fences that should not be a problem...” (567) In the broad picture, his reasoning is clearly absurd. He finishes by asserting a logical line of cause and effect: “Hay is the secret to good husbandry, good husbandry is the secret of good farming, good farming is the secret to famine, the elimination of famine is the secret to the ending of disease and war.” (569) Ambrose is at a loss to understand why those at the meeting are not filled with his enthusiasm.

The Hay Sweep will work if all worldly things operate in a unified way. It works within the reason of a *universe*, that is, a world that follows one reason. In opposition to this theory, and it is an opposition that gathers increasing momentum throughout this novel and Moorhouse's work in general, is the reality of the multiverse, just as the Queen suggests. Edith has gradually started to realise the folly of her previous expectations:

She recalled how inflexible her personality had been then as she faced the ordeal of proving herself at the League and yet, for all the rules of the League and all her own rules of inner management, she recalled also how unguided she'd been. (539)

Edith is terrified by the possibilities of chance. Moorhouse seems to be suggesting that Rationalism functioned as a panacea for the times. Edith's practice of Rationalism does not gel well with random, unpredictable occurrences because they cannot be controlled by rational predictions. The rationale can only come after the fact. People whose actions



do not follow Edith's reasoning also confound her rationalism. The 'experience' that is the basis of her rationalist principles in fact takes her away from the tenability of Rationalism at all. Ultimately, Edith's theory of coordination denies the complex reality of things. As she is taking a rest break in Chamonix, "in the footsteps of Shelley and Ruskin", she reads Ruskin, who also would visit Chamonix when:

'Lost in various wonder and sorrow not to be talked of.' Although he seemed to be mainly worried about his liver and his teeth: 'If those would keep right, I could fight the rest of it all', she'd read on the way down here in the train. She thought she knew what he meant. She had a problem with a recurring hand rash. Some days she thought if that could be cured, then she could cope with the rest. Or maybe when she could cope with the rest, it would then be cured? (455)

There is an important play on words in this paragraph that points towards a minor ironic figure in a character called Liverright. Here Ruskin is cited as saying all things would be well if he could get his liver 'right', an idea that Edith understands. It follows her theory of coordination, a rationale of unity which is also the basis of Ambrose's "reflex arc" theory that all things flow from one source. However, Liverright the character, functions in the exact opposite way and is therefore set up as one of the ironic counterparts to Edith's theory. He doesn't seem to mind inner contradictions:

Liverright was fond of saying that because a thing was bad on a large scale it was not necessarily bad on a personal scale and that one's personal conduct didn't change a thing in these matters. That one could enjoy what one believed should eventually be forbidden or erased from human conduct. (461)

There is a significant point to be made here about random chance and the disunity of various reasons. That is, random chance is value free. It can bring good results as much as bad or frustrating results, as we have seen. It is not only reason which navigates successfully through difficult terrain. In fact, random forces are the source of Edith's most important revelations in this novel. Significantly, Edith's main revelations within in this novel come via a random thought brought about by conversing with another self. It rarely comes through self-reflection alone as her dissatisfying "dark night of the soul" makes clear. Here in Chamonix, she sits in her hotel room with the object of writing down all her tenets and aesthetics to articulate her own self order. Answers to the following questions evade her: "What are the values to be pursued? Are some choices, some values, not available at some times?" (461) "How did you avoid the errors that

came from being young? She supposed you could avoid some by imitation of older models, by having wise mentors, and through reading—borrowed, but provisional, wisdom...Why weren't the things of life self-evident?" (465) To her consternation, the answers to these questions and others she ponders are continually "too complicated for this list" (469) Edith is unable to find her answers within her self because there is no external stimulation. This is the crucial aspect of Moorhouse's endorsement of difference. If unity exists, thus breaking down the barriers between nation states, what will propel people to new ways of thinking? It is continually evident in Edith's conversations that she only progresses to a new or more sophisticated position by being in a state of difference with another being.

Moorhouse provides us with two prime examples where Edith finds new ethical ground through random thoughts while in conversation. Firstly, through conversation with Mrs Swanwick whom she dislikes and must disagree with at all costs and secondly, with John Latham, whom she wishes to defer to but finds she cannot. Edith is pushed into new territories of thought through this repulsion of Mrs Swanwick. When the first stone is laid for the new Palais, Edith is disappointed that the 'ceremonials' were rather lacklustre:

She was striving to exact something emotional and historical from the placing of the casket, from the foundation stone, from the occasion. To make herself feel something, to stir her deadness. And now it was over...If she'd been back in Internal, she would've convinced Sir Eric to have a band. (547)

When Mrs Swanwick says she found the ceremony dull and badly managed, Edith balks.

"Oh no," Edith said loudly, involuntarily, pained, 'it wasn't like that.'

'Oh?' said Mrs Swanwick in an encouraging conversational tone used for gals from the colonies. 'And how then should I see it?'

'Well, nothing like this has ever happened – it could never be said to be dull. Surely?...It is to be the first building built and owned by the entire world.'

'But my dear, I felt there should have been pageantry, flags and flowers and singing, didn't you?'

'The appropriate pageantry hasn't been thought of yet. No pageantry would be suitable. Any pageantry would just be borrowed from some lesser activity. There just isn't any pageantry suitable yet,' Edith struggled to say. 'For me, it was a simple event of the most magnificent order,' and then added, rather pompously, 'and we were invited by history to witness it.'

That wasn't really quite what she felt. (549)

Edith's position is tenuous. She admits to herself that: "if she didn't grate so much with Mrs Swanwick, she would have allowed herself to agree with her more." (550) How then do we read the new position she has taken on? Is it a valid position at all? The point to be made here is that new intellectual positions may appear arbitrarily and not through the rigours of reason at all. Edith's position flows from the contingent nature of a dynamic environment. Her position is not the result of an absolute principle with an absolute truth. In such cases, the unity that is the basis of the Rationalist line (unified in the sense that it must follow the logic of rational thought) becomes untenable. It is only by chance she has come to this new position in her thinking but now she has landed there she must reorganise her intellectual attitude to accommodate this new thinking. She must formulate an argument to make her attitude a workable truth. This realisation creates other problems for Edith:

She tried to explain to Jeanne how her exchange with Mrs Swanwick had unintentionally led her to see the stone-laying as 'simple magnificent history', quite properly stripped of all commonplace pageantry. She wouldn't have been forced to see it that way if she hadn't disliked Mrs Swanwick.

That raised other terrors. What if there was a whole false way of seeing things which she and other people customarily had, and which she would have gone on having had she not been tripped or trapped into seeing another way by chance encounters such as this?

It was not because the person you disagreed with saw the world correctly, but that you were forced to see it in an altogether different way, both from how you had seen it and from how the other person had seen it. Through the collision with that person, you were deflected into another third trajectory by the impact. By wanting to distance yourself from that person, you ended up in a new place entirely. But that was hardly a way to find one's position in life. (553)

In Edith's early days in Australia, John Latham, another fellow Rationalist, provides her with her initial training in the world of politics and diplomacy. It is to him she looks to for guidance and advice in all things. When he visits Geneva, however, she finds she has surpassed him in certain kinds of experience. He gives a talk on "plain speaking" to the Assembly meeting. Edith attends "as an Australian...and for an hour or so she allowed herself patriotic feelings..." (255) Put in this way, for Edith, Latham is speaking as an Australian. His speech is an argument against the previous French speaker, M. Loucher,

and therefore becomes a debate between new Australian values and those of the old world:

who wanted blank votes included in the count when deciding whether a majority had voted for the candidate nation. M. Loucher called blank voting '*inertie courtoise*'...John said that courteous inertia was an inconclusive argument and that nations should show the courage of their convictions. There should be more plain talking. People should vote yes or no. (255-256)

At first, Edith is proud of his style and agrees with his argument. That he, as an Australian, has pitched an argument to "call a spade a spade", is certainly meant to distinguish the arguments on national lines (the French preferring courteous inertia.) This is what George means when he says "Australia is in a hurry". Things need to get done. It is Europe that has time for grace, not Australia, given that Parliament House is still to be built and the city of Canberra is as yet, a collection of "dusty paddocks." We can thus sympathise with Latham's rejection of "empty rhetoric" and "double talk". He never wants to be accused of "wear[ing] his underpants the wrong way round." (256) Then, crucially, he mentions to Edith that Mrs Swanwick also agrees with him. Edith has heretofore been eager to agree with Latham given her past deference to him and because, on the face of it, plain speaking seems like the most efficient and most honest way of speaking. The mention of Mrs Swanwick throws Edith into a mental spin. "She leapt to find a position away from that of Mrs Swanwick. She no longer believed that empty rhetoric was empty." (258) Her change is that sudden. We can see here that Edith's initial conventional agreement (based on habit since Latham was always her superior) is entirely reasonable. She is acting within a custom she still respects and adheres to. Latham's mention of Mrs Swanwick blows a hole in this custom and Edith is propelled out of her willing adherence and starts testing any other position that might be different to Mrs Swanwick's. That her move to take a different position is petulant and spiteful is beside the point. The point is that there *are* other positions to be found if she is willing to look, if she is willing to seek beyond her customary bounds. She thus formulates a position against Mrs Swanwick and, as she does, starts to realise she is disagreeing with her old tutor. She argues:

She had come around to seeing that rhetoric was useful, even if unfelt by the speaker, because it contained within it the expression of what was 'acknowledged' as being desirable. That a hypocrite was affirming virtue by paying 'lip service.' Next time the virtue might be harder to disregard. Rhetoric contributed to

the formation of a future consensus...Suddenly she saw that maybe John was wrong about courteous inertia. The French were perhaps wiser on this. There was nuance and that was what she had to learn. The blank ballot was a courtesy containing a comment, a nuance. A yes vote which was cast without conviction was perhaps the true hypocrisy. The courteous inertia created a third type of vote. (258-259)

The third type of vote is akin to the third position. The third position participates in a disengaged way. That is, in resisting taking a position but still active within an argument, this position maintains some critical ability that can be compromised when one takes the 'yes' or 'no' position. It is a suspension, a deferral.

She felt this was a personal breakthrough in her thinking, *une prise de conscience*. She felt she had to digest it before putting it out into conversation, especially with John who was now in her mind clearly wrong. Simple plain speaking was not always the scrupulous way. It tried to pretend that everything could be expressed. But the greater fault in politics and discussion was careless imprecision. Diplomacy was closer to the truth because by creating honest silence it tried to avoid saying things which were untrue through imprecision. Diplomacy could create the 'semi-silence'.

Or it avoided saying things *at that time*, before anyone was ready to say something. It was a way of maintaining verbal relationships while at the same time holding off superfluous statement and unneeded position-taking. The raisings of unnecessary disagreement. Which, she guessed, was also the value of card-playing.

As she registered her thinking, she realised that she was changing her position on something rather important. She felt nicely nervous. (260)

Edith's random rejection of Mrs Swanwick has brought her to an entirely new, more sophisticated approach to diplomacy. She has reached that moment of *productive nervousness* that is her overriding aim in life at the League. It is an irony that this mighty revolution in her thinking has not been initiated or provoked by considered, rational thought but is far more desultory. It is only through the off chance that Latham mentioned that Mrs Swanwick agreed with him that Edith is propelled into a different avenue of thought.

Over the course of *Grand Days* Edith's surety of self and action is routinely questioned. It is largely her youth which leads her to depend on or simply expect order. On the ageing process, Bartou says to Edith: "For a young person the world always

seems a scandalous place. Later in life, the world seems only to be an imperfect place which can be worked on here and there.” (501) Edith is facing the end of the idealised place of her youth. To comfort her in the loss, Bartou says:

‘[W]e take a course of action because there is no better one. Rarely are we able to follow the ideal course. We are forced always to follow some imperfect way. The style of our character is made by how we involve ourselves in the imperfection of the world and how we handle the imperfection of ourselves. How favourably we exploit and conduct the imperfections of our life. (663)

## The Perpetual Pioneers

This thesis has examined the philosophical similarities between Henry Lawson and Frank Moorhouse, and has shown that they share a philosophy of pragmatism. By viewing their fiction through a framework of formal pragmatism, we can see how Lawson and Moorhouse put together a moral framework that is critical of the limitations of moral absolutes and that demonstrates the potential moral sophistication of a world where values and standards routinely change. The practical philosophies of Dewey and James, through which a principled pragmatism emerges, emphasises the social as the source of the moral and that the moral society is one which is open and subject to evolution and critical review. Pragmatism asserts that our moral origins are not found in an absolute moral system derived from some higher order, for an order such as this could not change, and therefore could not be useful for a progressive morality that could meet the ethical demands of a changing world. Lawson and Moorhouse both focus on the moral qualities of change, in their presentations of worlds in which standards of behaviour are highly flexible in the absence – or rejection – of traditional or absolute values.

Lawson and Moorhouse endorse a cultural pattern whereby cultural practices are routinely tested in light of new cultural conditions. The insistent irony operating in stories like “The Union Buries Its Dead” and “Telling Mrs Baker”, for example, shows how sanctioned rituals or behaviours need to be the subject of scrutiny in the ongoing project of moral development. This ironic voice is equally vital in Moorhouse’s work, functioning from “the third position”—the detached yet embedded consciousness, the critical voice from within. It is through such consciousness that real social change can take place, for the agent of the third position is a sympathetic participant in cultural activities, deriving meanings from those activities, *yet* is aware of the moral limitations inherent within any “final vocabulary.”

Lawson’s and Moorhouse’s injunction is to commit to the processes of inquiry. In their respective *multiverses*, there is no set of absolute moral principles waiting to be discovered in order to secure certainty of meaning and action: “our situation is too complex, varying, and tragic for that.”<sup>194</sup> Rather, inquiry and critical reflection hold the solutions to moral problems. In Deweyan terms, this critical reflection is known as

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<sup>194</sup> Gouinlock, J. “Dewey and Contemporary Moral Philosophy.” (ed) Stuhr, J. *Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture: Pragmatic Essays after Dewey*. New York: State University of New York Press. 1993. pp. 79-96. p. 94.

“social intelligence”, which is “founded on neither artifice nor intuition, but upon a searching examination of the entire human condition.”<sup>195</sup> In stories like “The Union Buries Its Dead”, Lawson demonstrates what happens to communities who do not practice moral reflection; in the absence of this reflection, a community bereft of compassion develops. Significantly, in both Lawson and Moorhouse, the very faculties of critical reflection necessary for moral competence are often doused in alcohol, so the reader rarely witnesses any positive effects of critical reflection. The technique of critical reflection is left as implication only. Instead of dramatising a perfectly solved moral dilemma, both Lawson and Moorhouse use irony to imply another, more competent, way of being. Through the use of irony both writers can make moral suggestions and question both old and new standards without supplying a new dogma and new limitations.

Despite the endorsement of reflexive cultural patterns, both writers are sensitive to the anxieties prevalent in such volatility. Change is no easy matter. The issues of certainty and meaning are paramount. A panic-stricken George McDowell asks:

What is the news from Berlin?  
 What is the news from Paris? London? Just how does one know  
 what is really happening? Who to ask? On what does one  
 construct one's actions in these times of allegation?  
 Where are the Rules of Conduct?  
 (*The Electrical Experience*, 108)

Panic and anxiety over action and ethics stems from the awareness of the limitations of one's worldview, which has heretofore been adequate: “When our meaning-constituting practices and ends are shattered, a crisis ensues, for individuals singly or for entire cultures...A disintegrating culture is riddled with anxiety, despair, and confusion.”<sup>196</sup> Both Lawson and Moorhouse investigate the alternatives this crisis leaves us to ponder. If culture or value can radically change, is meaning obtainable? Does anything “matter much”? Lawson and Moorhouse both investigate the effects of nihilism and imply a road elsewhere. For example, the irony of “The Union Buries Its Dead” undercuts the refrain that nothing mattered much; Lawson suggests that something matters very much indeed. So, too, the narrator in “Only the Interaction of Complex Things” admits that the libertarian assumption of meaninglessness was a defensive reaction: “an exit visa to avoid the complications of a fully operational life.” (*The Everlasting Secret Family*, 127). The

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<sup>195</sup> Gouinlock, p. 94.

<sup>196</sup> Alexander, T.A. “The Human Eros.” *Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture*. pp. 203-222. pp. 206-207.



question both writers wrestle with is *where* value and meaning might be located given the instability of their new world and the realisation that no system of thought can be entirely coherent.

These writers show that it is the social contract which invests the self with meaning and identity. This is a pragmatic model: “We are beings who seek meaning imaginatively through each other, and the locus of this transformative encounter is the community.”<sup>197</sup> Thomas Alexander writes: “Culture...is the expression of a drive for encountering the world and oneself with a sense of fulfilling meaning and value realised through action.”<sup>198</sup> This is meaning pragmatically idealised. It is contingent but no less valuable by virtue of that contingency; rather, both James and Dewey emphasise that this temporariness adds value, much like the rose that blooms once.

Culture, however, has an ironic double function in Lawson and Moorhouse. On the one hand, culture facilitates meaning-making; on the other, it can limit the ongoing progression of understanding the world around us, thus proscribing the meanings offered to us. Lawson and Moorhouse investigate the cultural interface and demonstrate the constant ironic tension within the practice of ritual and role-play. The cultural interface is a border place where types of being are negotiated and where the private self is made manifest and activated in the public realm. This border is a source of fascination for Lawson and Moorhouse whose often highly self-conscious characters struggle in their negotiations between types of being. Characters like Joe Wilson labour under the impost of “types”, a poet born a bushman by mistake, and yet these types of being remain crucial ways in which the self is enabled and finds meaning. In a comment on *Grand Days*, Moorhouse says: “the book is...concerned with borders and identity and the meaning of borders, national and other borders, as a way of framing one’s identity.”<sup>199</sup> Again, there is this double function: the border is required, yet it is limiting. Borders must be maintained, but not over-policed. Importantly in that novel, Moorhouse shows that border transgression is a necessary part of moral development rather than a descent into moral depravity (which, in *Grand Days*, is Florence’s fear for Edith’s “womanhood”) or social destruction (as is George’s fear). For within that movement across the line, there is a *conscious intention* to expand one’s consciousness and understanding, through the

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<sup>197</sup> Alexander, p. 203.

<sup>198</sup> Alexander, p. 207.

<sup>199</sup> Moorhouse, F. (ed) Wyndam, S. *An Eloquent Sufficiency: 50 Writers Talk About Life and Literature Over Lunch*. Sydney: Sydney Morning Herald Books. 1998. pp. 150-154. p. 151.

*experience* of the other. The drive to understand the unknown other is an important pragmatic ethic for, firstly, it is based upon the awareness of one's own moral and cultural limitations and, secondly, it is a movement of sympathy which, especially in Lawson's work, is the key to progressive moral competence. The movement towards understanding the other has another crucial effect: in assuming a different position, one can critically evaluate one's own ethic that otherwise lies safe behind the borderline.

McDermott writes:

To participate in the plurality of experiences is personally explosive, for it trims our sails and curtails our arrogant provincialism while it widens our horizons and indirectly sanctions those experiences which are mundane to us, but exotic to others.<sup>200</sup>

In particular, Moorhouse shows that the flexibility required to perform these cross-cultural manoeuvres has serious implications for the way that "self" might be comprehended. After Edith's experimentations with different styles of being, she is trapped by a weighty question: "What are the values to be pursued?" Edith finally realises that, in the absence of a most correct way to *be*, she must accept ambiguity. Catherine Lumby has noted that Moorhouse's particular "view of existence", suggests that: "being in touch with oneself... means accepting that ambivalence, ambiguity and even chaos are rooted in our identity at every pass."<sup>201</sup> The great advantage of this is that, in being freed from the cultural impositions of a certain way of being, styles of being are open for experimentation. Moorhouse's narrator can be camp in the inner-city, but when in a bush camp, Belle calls him "Hemingway".

These enactments, as with Joe Wilson's fist-fight, contribute towards enhancing an individual's cultural profile; that is, self empowerment is derived by taking one's place in the cultural continuum. The task, however, is to see these cultural practices in the context of their contingency, that is, their place in time and space. So, even whilst engaging in prevailing custom, Lawson and Moorhouse emphasise that those customs must be viewed with ongoing critical reflection. The self must remain an ambiguous spectre, over which stable types of behaviour should have loose rein only, for Lawson and Moorhouse also emphasise the possibility – and necessity – of being many things at once. The drover's wife may well dress in her absent husband's clothes to fight fire, but

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<sup>200</sup> McDermott, p. 124.

<sup>201</sup> Gleeson, J., Lumby, C. & Bennett, B. (eds) *Frank Moorhouse: A Celebration*. Canberra: National Library of Australia. 2004. p. 3.

her gaunt, flat breasts can still produce milk. The phallic baton that she will use to kill the snake rests comfortably beside her copy of the *Young Ladies Journal*. In short, her experience demands that she be two types of being *at once*. So, whilst Lawson and Moorhouse both demonstrate how prevailing cultural patterns add value to lives that otherwise echo with Mrs Spicer's "groping in the dark" voice, both of these writers demonstrate that the boundaries of behaviour must be flexible in order to ensure ongoing survival and meaning. Whilst the ambiguity of self engenders panic in characters like George, and the drover's wife's baby who screams at his mother's disguise, the implication throughout all of Lawson's and Moorhouse's work, is that this ambiguity of self also contains the creative, progressive gene for social development.

The creative, pragmatic mode that operates in both writers' works, shows that cultural practices remain the source of meaning-making yet under the caveat that these practices will – and must be allowed to – change. From this perspective, the veracity with which standing practices are upheld, controlled and protected within their works is a continual source of irony. Muecke makes the following useful observation, regarding ironic practice and cultural fanaticism: "When Anatole France complained that martyrs lacked a sense of irony he might have added, with at least as much point, that a sense of irony did not characterize those who felt a need to martyr them."<sup>202</sup> With this and the experiences of the twentieth-first century in mind, we can say that George's personal crisis quoted above has an important and dangerous corollary on the macro level. Alexander writes: "Like individuals, such cultures also may embark upon frantic quests to reassert the values of the past, adopting fanatic ideologies, or may continue to fragment, succumbing to alien values without retaining any coherence of their own."<sup>203</sup> And, from Cronulla to the Gaza Strip, the daily events of this world show the crisis and clash of culture as a continuing and dangerous fact of human existence.

One can sympathise with the defensive urge to protect a particular way of life or custom since, as Alexander points out: "[T]raditions are highly valued largely because they provide such a stable network for guiding and interpreting *future* activity."<sup>204</sup> However, when such custom is violently or relentlessly pursued in the absence of irony and self-critique, the borders between ways of behaving harden and, in so doing, inhibit any future becoming. McDermott writes: "This situation leaves us in a serious quandary,

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<sup>202</sup> Muecke, D.C. *Compass of Irony*. London: Methuen. 1969. p. 246.

<sup>203</sup> Alexander, p. 206-207.

<sup>204</sup> Alexander, p. 213.

for the absence of compromise seems to foretell a permanent and irresolute struggle on the one hand, or the demolishing of difference on the other hand.<sup>205</sup> In either case, the potential for moral progress is lost. Thus, to the concept of self-empowerment through culture, we must also add that the self is empowered, via the critical faculties, by progressing *through* culture and expanding its boundaries to meet changing human needs. Edith wants so much to agree with her old teacher, as customarily she would, but her experience has surpassed his; she must move on. And yet this is only one stage of a never-ending cycle.

What the pragmatic point of view offers the modern mind is that, “understanding is always from some empowering, as well as limiting, perspective.”<sup>206</sup> Since, as James says, “reality is not fixed”<sup>207</sup>, agility is required to transcend one’s own point of view, only to transcend it again, and then again.<sup>208</sup> We saw this pragmatic agility in its symbolic, physical form in “The Iron-Bark Chip,” and we see it throughout the work of Lawson and Moorhouse where the reality of cultures is tested against the individual’s own experiential field. This flexibility is the resource of the pioneer who is constantly confronted with the unknown, the untested and the new. These untried environments are common to both Lawson and Moorhouse as their characters make their uncertain ways into the new moral terrain which has complicated the “rules of conduct”. The vicissitudes of the multiverse is the compelling force for Lawson and Moorhouse. This type of position is effectively summarised by McDermott, when he writes:

It would be far better if we were to develop an epistemology which accepted surprise, novelty, and potential mishap as permanent ingredients of human inquiry. In so doing, our decisions would be more tentative, less absolute, and consequently truer to the actual situation in which we find ourselves.<sup>209</sup>

Rather than exert excessive controls, both authors suggest an alternate, but certainly less safe, route. Joe Wilson’s bounty in “The Double Buggy at Lahey’s Creek” implicitly endorses the pragmatic game of chance and negotiations with the other. Moorhouse takes an even more radical pragmatist line when he writes, “How clever the living process was... You couldn’t really make a mistake. Whatever you did, wherever you ended up, the

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<sup>205</sup> McDermott, p. 112

<sup>206</sup> Wheeler, K. *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction*. Blackwell: Oxford. 1993. p. 38.

<sup>207</sup> Wheeler, citing James, p. 94.

<sup>208</sup> Wheeler, p. 37.

<sup>209</sup> McDermott, p. 114

mind reshaped to accommodate and even celebrate it.”<sup>210</sup> The ethical correlative here is that the unexpected can introduce to us new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving which the imposition of inflexible moralities could not allow us to accept. The disabilities of our limited awareness can be overcome simply by acknowledging those limits.

Emerson writes:

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.<sup>211</sup>

Or, in other words, we are perpetual pioneers with no final frontier.

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<sup>210</sup> “The Airport, The Pizzeria, The Motel, The Rented Car and the Mysteries of Life.” *Tales of Mystery and Romance*. p. 62.

<sup>211</sup> Emerson, p. 25.

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