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HYSTERICAL LANDSCAPE: LOUIS NOWRA'S *INSIDE THE ISLAND*

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Describing the sense in which he considered his work 'epic', Louis Nowra once spoke of 'trying to add an extra dimension to [his] plays, a dimension that is rarely included in a definition of Epic Theatre - the landscape'.¹ Certainly in much of Nowra's theatre, landscape figures as a complex metaphoric field which accommodates a recurrent concern with the interactions of inner and outer worlds, with the relationship between the individual psyche and the national history. In several of these plays, landscape is textualised as a vast, mysterious presence which compels the figures within it to 'read' it in order to survive in it. As Nowra says:

The Australian landscape is so individual that you either love it or hate it. It is as if it was the creation of a maddened King Lear who wanted a largely flat, worn land that made you earn its love, only if you could survive and understand the kabala of its rocks and stones. Figures in such a landscape seem to me to be both insignificant yet potent (an oxymoron, I know) and I've always been more fascinated to see a figure in a landscape than in a living room because the potential for psychological action is grand technicolour 75mm compared to the grainy black and white 8mm of the living room.²

Nowra's fascination with the exterior physical landscape, however, and its relation to the interior psychological landscape has been less evident in his most recent work, in which interior settings feature more prominently than in his plays of the 70s and 80s.³

One of these earlier works, *Inside the Island* (1980), actually depends centrally on a transition from interior to exterior locations, tracing a broad movement from a domestic interior to an external rural landscape. Landscape is constructed in this work as the centre of a complex signifying field, such that its representation brings together a range of other discourses concerning the human body, empire, gender and writing. This complexity of landscape representation, however, also leads to a number of tensions within the play as a whole. For in condemning the colonialist project in Australia, the

¹ See Louis Nowra, 'Inner Voices and the First Coil', *Australian Literary Studies*, 9, 2 (1979), p.190; reproduced in Veronica Kelly, ed., *Louis Nowra* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1987), p.47.

² See Paul Makeham, "'The Black Hole of our History': A Conversation with Louis Nowra", *Canadian Theatre Review*, 74 (Spring 1992), p.30.

³ See for example *Cosí* (1992); *The Temple* (1993); and *Miss Bosnia* (1995).

play also re-inscribes, through landscape, the nature/culture dichotomy which has historically sustained colonialism.

Inside the Island is set in the summer of 1912, on a remote wheat station in north-western New South Wales. The property belongs to George Dawson, but it is his in name only. De facto, it is owned and managed by his wife Lillian, who had to sign everything over to her husband in marriage; the farm, the house, the flour mill and so on had all been built by Lillian's father. A company of fifty soldiers arrives to do exercises on government land adjoining the property. At their Captain's request, Lillian makes the men a gift of flour milled from wheat grown on the property, which is then made into bread for a picnic cricket match held by the soldiers. It transpires that the wheat is infected with a fungal parasite which induces a range of symptoms in the men, including hallucination, delirium, convulsion, self-mutilation and unprovoked violence. These behaviours are consistent with ergot poisoning, accounts of which have been documented for centuries, although Nowra admits to some dramatic licence in combining symptoms from different types of ergotism. At the end of the play, nine of the men, along with George and his daughter Susan are dead, others have been blinded or otherwise injured, and the wheatfields, the mill, the house are all destroyed, burned in what might be described as a typically Nowra-esque apocalyptic fire. The play is very clearly divided into halves: Act One establishes the dramatic world presided over by the matriarchal figure of Lillian, a world of civilised propriety; Act Two shows the destruction of that world, as the soldiers enact the scenes of chaotic violence.

One specific episode at the end of the first scene provides an early indication of the play's primary concerns. Peter Blackwood, an itinerant worker, sings a song about Big Black Jack, a man whose fighting got him thrown out of the pub. Enraged at having been ejected, Black Jack 'lit a big fart/ And blew the pub apart'.⁴ Peter's song obviously has a comic function. Nevertheless, Black Jack's fervid retribution can also be understood as participating in the play's larger metaphoric discourse, by signalling, as Veronica Kelly suggests, 'the suppressed emotions of anger and frustration [which]...may yet erupt in fiery destruction'.⁵ Kelly's point is worth remarking, because *Inside the Island*, like other plays by Nowra, is centrally concerned with forces of oppression and repression, but equally with the consequences of such repression: the irruption, through the surface of reality, of the unsaid and the unacknowledged. And Big Black Jack's outburst is an especially useful figure for these concerns, because it is so essentially a corporeal action, in a play preoccupied with the human body and its associated actions and processes: ingestion, transformation, expulsion. That which is consumed, absorbed, or in some

⁴ Louis Nowra, *Inside the Island*, published together with Nowra's *The Precious Woman* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1981), p.23. All further page references to this text appear in parentheses in the body of the essay.

⁵ Veronica Kelly, *Louis Nowra*, p.111.

other way received - whether it be bread, or language, or culture - is seen always to re-emerge, though rarely in the same form and rarely without dire effects. The play explores, therefore, what might be termed the 'dynamics of process': the transformation or conversion of things from one form to another.

This concern in *Inside the Island* with forces and modes of repression augments the play's indictment of the British colonial enterprise in Australia. This, as other commentators have already shown, is the play's motivating political impulse. Helen Gilbert observes that '*Inside the Island* provides a direct and sustained challenge to romanticised narratives of settlement (read invasion)...It is [the] sense of colonial *droit de seigneur* towards the landscape and its inhabitants that *Inside the Island*...aims to question.'⁶ In order to achieve this political end, the play adopts a fairly elaborate arrangement of thematic and imagistic strands, each of which attaches to this central project. It has already been suggested that one of the most important of these sets of images concerns the human body, or to put it another way, corporeality and somatic actions, especially those of eating and drinking. Here though, a relation can also be identified between the play's concern with human bodies and its landscape discourse: the various appearances, behaviours and meanings of human bodies in *Inside the Island* become inseparable, ultimately, from the physical spaces they occupy. Humans and the physical world in this play are interdependent to the point that the characters become not figures *in* the landscape, but *of* it - consubstantial with the earth. This is not to suggest, however, that the characters are harmoniously integrated with their environment; much of the play's meaning is generated by the violence of the relationship between bodies and landscape.

This interaction of bodies and spaces is also explicable as a textual process, and of particular interest in this regard are various manifestations in the play of inscription. These are evident, for example, in instances when humans 'write' themselves - their psychic and cultural selves - into the landscape (as with the planting of wheat or the clearing of trees), but also when bodies are themselves written on by the landscape (as when the ergot, produced by the land, manifests itself as physical symptoms). Such writing is processual, since it is a means of giving symbolic shape to an idea or a condition by transforming it into a sign. As such, the various instances of writing in the play contribute to its broader exploration of the dynamics of process referred to above.

One of the principal means by which a type of writing is made manifest is through the central figure Lillian. In some respects, Lillian is a typical Nowra female protagonist: resolute, intelligent, powerful. And although individuated as a fully-drawn character, she

⁶ Helen Gilbert, 'Ghosts in a Landscape: Louis Nowra's *Inside the Island* and Janis Balodis' *Too Young For Ghosts*', *Southern Review*, 27, 4 (December 1994), pp.435-436. This paper offers post-colonial reading of these two plays, with a particular emphasis on questions of staging and spatial relations. With regard to Nowra's play, Gilbert asserts that 'apocalypse is the telos of empire imaged by *Inside the Island* and theatricalised through its spatial grammar'. (p.438)

also has an emblematic function, standing for the repressive and destructive forces of British colonial rule and tradition. Veronica Kelly characterises Lillian as:

...the figure of the 'invader' seeking to justify control of an 'uncultured' land by bogus 'culture'....Her grande-dame assumption that inferior flour is good enough for the ranks highlights the poisoned legacy that British class hatred and colonialist arrogance have left this country.⁷

Lillian manifests a writer's impulse. She is motivated, that is, by the colonialist drive to inscribe herself, and her heritage, into the landscape. This impulse becomes apparent in Act One, during which her domestic domain is featured. As she explains, the house had been built forty years earlier in what was then 'wilderness', 'a huge plain of Aboriginals and gum trees'. (p.24) Containing a variety of signs of English bourgeois culture - pianola, music-box, visitor's book and so on - the house is an 'island' of civilised British order, an enclave of imported values standing fortress-like against 'life in this backwater with riff-raff'. (p.33) Within its walls Lillian tends an indoor garden, nurturing such fragile European exotica as fuchsias. Here is a sign of the ethos which deems that nature be controlled by culture, that natural order and growth be replaced by a rigid yet genteel human order. It is largely through various bathetic episodes in which this veneer of civilised propriety is rudely fractured that the play achieves its comic effects. George's drunken pratfall in front of the Captain (p.30), for example, seems all the more gormless in the rarefied atmosphere of Lillian's domestic realm.

Lillian's house, standing at the centre of the cultivated landscape, can be understood as a kind of complex written sign, or set of signs, which physically asserts the British cultural tradition. But from the house, the centre of this signifying complex, Lillian's writing extends outwards to mark the open landscape;⁸ the careful sense of order created by the imported domestic icons extends into the larger scale of the wheatfields. So the pristine, authentic land has been made to give way to Lillian's landscape - it is repressed, transformed, re-written - such that its original character is replaced by the signs of her transplanted culture, or more specifically, agriculture. As a representative figure, Lillian stands for a people very adept at writing on the land: 'Every Old World hectare has been ridden over, written over, inscribed into an elaborate, all-engrossing national culture. Virtually every region is a signifier in the chain of English history.'⁹ The wheatfields in

⁷ Veronica Kelly, "'Lest We Forget": *Inside the Island*', in her *Louis Nowra*, pp.105-106.

⁸ Helen Gilbert describes the transition from inside to outside as action moving 'in a broad sweep from the relatively safe confines of the Dawsons' living room through a number of ambiguous spaces which I term "verandahs" - the verandah itself, the *rear* of the church, *outside* the mill, and the *edge* of the cricket ground - before being concentrated in the open fields'. See 'Ghosts in a Landscape', p.436.

⁹ Ross Gibson, 'Camera Natura: Landscape in Australian feature films', in Frow and Morris, eds, *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), p.211.

Inside the Island fulfil an elaborate metaphoric function. They not only represent an inauthentic, because imposed, European farming tradition, but also evoke the foreign battlefields, especially those of World War One, on which Australians fought and died in defence of British imperial interests.¹⁰

The cricket ground functions similarly in the play as a physical manifestation of British cultural tradition. The oval had once been an Aboriginal campsite, until Lillian's father 'converted' the Aborigines, and those who survived the conversion 'just disappeared'. (p.60) Richard Fotheringham, comparing the figure of the cricket ground in this play to a similar trope in George Landen Dann's *Fountains Beyond* (1944), remarks that the 'idea of the cricket ground as the white "sacred" site replacing an Aboriginal one is a motif taken up by Louis Nowra in *Inside the Island*...; he too sees it as the imposition of an alien and absurd spiritual ceremony in place of an authentic one.'¹¹ Although not actually represented on stage but indicated through language and gesture, the ordered, circular, defined character of the cricket ground is familiar enough as a locus of traditional English (male) gentility. The cricket match, which heralds the beginning of the ergot poisoning in the long first scene of Act Two, is a key sequence, described by Dennis Carroll as the play's 'structural fulcrum'.¹² It is during the game that real cracks appear in the carefully ordered surface of reality. A transitional scene, it occupies a liminal space in the play, marking a shift from 'civilised' order to a kind of pre-civilised or primal disorder. From this scene on, it becomes clear that the imperial centre cannot hold, and 'the repressed' begins to assert itself most menacingly. Neil Armfield remarks that with this scene, the 'surface has been burnt through and images run and wildly collide'.¹³

The primary collision is that of human bodies. And the cricket scene, with its focus on sporting activity, and on eating and drinking, signals the special importance of the human body and somatic process throughout *Inside the Island*. Examples of corporal imagery from the first act include: George's whisky drinking; the Sergeant's sherry-guzzling and biscuit-gobbling (scene two); Lillian's surrealistic account of the Chinaman's mouthful of gold teeth (p.26); the story of 'The Tiger and the Butter' (pp.38-39); and the incentive of a beer for Private Higgs to load bags of flour (scene seven). There are many others. In Act Two, human bodies are even more explicitly foregrounded as signifying sites as they enact the violence and chaos of the soldiers' descent into delirium. And as the chaos unfolds, these bodies become densely textualised. That is,

¹⁰ These ideas are explored more fully by Veronica Kelly in "'Lest We Forget": *Inside the Island*'. Kelly's discussion refers to Nowra's reading of Gavin Souter's *Lion and Kangaroo*, which Nowra describes as a key moment in the play's development. See pp.101-105 of Kelly's article.

¹¹ Richard Fotheringham, *Sport in Australian Drama* (Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.197.

¹² Dennis Carroll, *Australian Contemporary Drama* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1994), p.319.

¹³ Neil Armfield, 'Director's Notes', in Louis Nowra, *Inside the Island* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1981), p.93.

both the actual and imagined marks which appear on the soldiers' bodies as they begin to hallucinate become readable as the outward signs of complex inner crises. These signs - tongues, feet and hands turning black, eyes put out, convulsions, flowers growing from the chest, roots growing through the body, a head full of snakes, and so on - are all consistent with ergot poisoning, and hence are realistically motivated. At the same time, they function as metaphors, representing an abstract inner conflict. Ultimately, though, the precise significance of these inner crises remains unclear. Through several levels of metaphor, the men's delirium points to a generalised reaction against an unspecified psychic and cultural condition. The signifying burden which the soldiers' bodies are made to bear is a measure of the play's complex achievement, but also, perhaps, of its compromising of its political concerns. In order to argue this, it is necessary first to examine some of the ways in which the soldiers' bodies might be read.

In the article "'Lest We Forget': *Inside the Island*" referred to above, Veronica Kelly traces two main figurative strands involving the soldiers. The first concerns the men as images for Australians soon to be killed in imperialist campaigns. Bearing in mind that the action is set in 1912, it is understood that the play anticipates World War One, and the disastrous campaign at Gallipoli in particular; but it also 'remembers' other wars, including the war in Vietnam, and Kelly makes a point about 'the image of maddened drugged soldiers mentally devastated by their environment'.¹⁴ The second main figurative strand concerning the soldiers is centred on the original inhabitants of the land, the Aborigines. As noted earlier, the cricket ground had been an Aboriginal campsite, until Lillian's father arrived and 'got rid of the blacks'. So when the men appear in the second act coated in the flour they have rolled in - bizarre parodies of cricketers in whites - they also embody the spirits of the slain Aborigines. The violence and injustice of the Aborigines' fate, repressed beneath 'the bland pastoral myth of settlement',¹⁵ is manifested now in the terrible forms of these soldier-ghosts, returned to reclaim their place and seek vengeance on their dispossessors. Thus the soldiers' bodies are inscribed with the outward signs of a repressed history, that is, 'settlement', as well as a grotesque history soon to be suffered by young Australian men in defence of empire - mass warfare.

But the force and presence which emerges as the true site of the repressed is not human, and bears no direct resemblance to the human form. Rather, the land itself - in the play's discourse, the authentic essential land - is shown as most profoundly violated by foreign occupation, and it is the land which emerges as having the most potent means of resistance and retaliation. In the final moments of performance, as Lillian surveys the devastation wrought by the previous night's chaos, she recognises the land's capacity to endure: 'The grass will soon grow back - at least the soil is never ruined by fire.' (p.90)

¹⁴ Veronica Kelly, "'Lest We Forget'", p.105.

¹⁵ Veronica Kelly, "'Lest We Forget'", p.99.

Even Harry Kippax in his vituperative review understands that the scenes of devastation enact 'the revenge of the land and its life against the aliens';¹⁶ and Dennis Carroll refers to 'an expropriated outback striking back in vengeance'.¹⁷ Contrary, then, to Lillian's claim that the 'strong forget, the weak remember' (p.91), the land's 'memory' is its strength, galvanising it into retaliatory action.

The nature of this vengeance is diffuse, encompassing fire, destruction of property, violence, and murder. Yet all of these are effects, ultimately, of a primary stimulus: the land's production of the infected grain. It is in these terms that the land can also be understood to write, only here it is the empire writing back to the imperial centre. The repressed original land re-inscribes Lillian's landscape, as it were, with its anger. And if it is true that you are what you eat, then the men, by eating the wheat, become it, and in turn become extensions of the land itself, their bodies literally incorporating its text. Beyond this writing on the men's bodies, though, there is another, related textual process at work in the play. For in addition to the individual soldiers' bodies bearing the signs of the land's repressed resentment, the men themselves - all of them collectively - become signs on the body of the landscape. It is as if they are symptoms, visible marks on the personified land's ailing body. In this way, the violent chaos of the second act becomes a form of hysterical reaction.

Historically, discourses surrounding hysteria have been highly contentious. Despite substantial clinical and theoretical investigation, no consensus exists as to the causes or symptoms, nor even to the existence, of hysteria. Although traditionally thought to affect females almost exclusively, especially in the form known as 'Briquet's syndrome', or more recently 'St. Louis hysteria', contemporary views suggest that this is a patriarchal construct: 'Men have little instinctive aptitude for empathy with women; and they are in any case liable to write off specifically feminine ways of thinking, feeling and acting as "hysterical"'.¹⁸ Where there is some consensus, however, is in the view of hysteria as a *processual* disorder. That is, following the pioneering work of Charcot and Freud, it is understood to be a phenomenon in which the subject unconsciously converts an inner psychic crisis (usually sexual in nature) into any of a variety of external, somatic symptoms. This too, then, is an illustration of the dynamic of process at work in the play. Hysteria is a process of symbolic displacement, in which the functional manifestations of the hysteric derive from his or her unconscious. 'Conversion hysteria' is a clinical term denoting a wide range of neurological signifiers, including convulsive fits, 'spells', hallucinations, aphonia, dancing manias, and many other manifestations. All these signs,

¹⁶ See H. G. Kippax, 'Angry ambitious play that fails', *Sydney Morning Herald* (August 15, 1980), p.8.

¹⁷ Dennis Carroll, p.236.

¹⁸ Eliot Slater, 'What Is Hysteria?', in Alec Roy, ed., *Hysteria* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1982), p.39.

variously displayed by the soldiers, are 'produced by the "conversion" of (unconscious) anxiety...into a symptom with symbolic meaning for the patient'.¹⁹

These observations have an important bearing on landscape discourse in *Inside the Island*. By means of an anthropomorphism reflecting the Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind, the land is attributed with a psyche as well as a body, and this psyche writes its crisis, through the soldiers' bodies, into its own body. Again, the dynamic of process explored in the play manifests itself when the land's writing is understood in terms of symbolic process:

The mechanism of conversion signifies the passage, the transport, the transposition of something from the psychical domain into another that is heterogeneous to it, the body. The passage has to be conceived as a symbolic shaping, a transcription.²⁰

It is worth also observing that a characteristic frequently ascribed to hysteria is a thespian impulse, a histrionic desire to act out the intrapsychic crisis. So unlike neurosis or hypochondria, for example, the hysterical display is supposed to be quite rare without an audience as witness. This has interesting implications in the context of this discussion, since it suggests that the soldiers' bodies, seen on the stage, might themselves be understood as theatrical sites. Kay Ferres explores a similar notion with specific reference to women in melodrama.²¹ She argues that 'the conventions of melodrama - the mute role, the primacy of gesture - potentially allowed a means of escaping the constraints of rational and scientific discourses and made possible an (irrational, hysterical) discourse of feminine desire'.²² Ferres cites Tania Modleski, who suggests:

If women are hysterics in patriarchal culture because, according to the feminist argument, their voice has been silenced or repressed, and if melodrama deals with the return of the repressed through a kind of conversion hysteria, perhaps women have been attracted to the genre because it provides an outlet for the repressed feminine voice.²³

¹⁹ R. E. Kendell, 'A New Look At Hysteria', in Alec Roy, p.28.

²⁰ Monique David-Menard, *Hysteria from Freud to Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.11.

²¹ Kay Ferres, 'Women making a spectacle of themselves: Rosa Praed's *Ariane*, melodrama, and marriage reform', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 23 (October 1993), pp.56-64. Ferres claims that 'in the public spaces of the theatre...women made a spectacle of themselves, articulating a bodily discourse outside the constraints of rationality' (p.56), and illustrates her argument with a discussion of Rosa Praed's 1888 drama *Ariane*.

²² Kay Ferres, p.63.

²³ The Tania Modleski quotation cited by Ferres is from 'Time and Desire in the Woman's Film', *Cinema Journal*, 23, 3 (1984), p.21.

There is nothing to suggest, of course, that the soldiers in Nowra's play are acting out their own repressed *feminine* desire; nevertheless, Ferres' general point about the hysterical display as a form of resistance to rational discourse is very useful given the extent to which the soldiers' bodies are foregrounded in performance. Just as women in melodrama could express physically a resistance to the dominant symbolic order, so the men's bodies in *Inside the Island* become counter-discursive sites, grotesquely re-writing imperial law in a violent textualising of repressed anger. If the soldiers are in one sense signs on the body of the land - expressions of that body's crisis - then there is also the sense that they are acting out the feminised land's resistance.

A second general point concerning hysteria relates to the socio-political commentary implicit in *Inside the Island*. Outbreaks of mass hysteria, or 'collective hysteriform manifestations' in the medical terminology, similar to those in the play, have been recorded for centuries. Of these, though, only a minority has been attributed to ergotism. In many cases, these outbreaks have afflicted lower socio-economic groups, and have been precipitated by a state of ideological or cultural transition, as well as periods of uncertainty and social stress such as wars. Many combat-related disorders - hallucination, disorientation, fits, psychosomatic blindness, and so on - are highly characteristic of hysteria. In this regard, the soldiers' behaviours are consistent not only with ergotism, but also with their participation in the play's metaphoric battle(s). The setting of the play in 1912 places it squarely within a period of major social change - a few years before World War One, a decade or so after Federation. This contrivance of the dramatic action such that it functions through multiple figurative and thematic levels is the play's principal achievement.

The figurative complexity of *Inside the Island* might, however, also represent its weaknesses. For close examination reveals a conflation and confusion of ideas concerning 'the repressed', a tendency to collapse disparate states or conditions into an amorphous (w)hole of Repression. This too-general construction of the repressed stems ultimately from the use of the soldiers as figures for the Australian post-colonial condition, insofar as they represent the crisis of being both the 'coloniser and the colonised...victors and victims both'.²⁴ This split identity, which has psychic, cultural and political dimensions, is finally realised through a simple dichotomising of civilised and savage, where 'civilised' is associated with all that is repressive, and 'savage', with all that is repressed.²⁵ The opposition is reflected in the play's two-part structure: Act One, as noted earlier, presents a world of culture, Act Two shows its disintegration. The signs and rituals of Lillian's domestic order in the first act give way to a night-time world

²⁴ Veronica Kelly, "'Lest We Forget'", p.105 and p.99.

²⁵ Peter Fitzpatrick claims that throughout all of Nowra's plays is an interest in 'primary oppositions of good and evil, innocence and experience, which resist all rational explanations and received structures'. See Fitzpatrick, 'Modern Drama', in Laurie Hergenhan, ed., *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988), p.531.

governed by a fierce primal logic, and constituted of elemental matter. Images of earth and fire predominate. The soldiers become 'wild men' (p.71) and 'savages' (p.76); they are seen 'running in circles near the fire' (p.83), their manic dancing accompanied by primitive rhythms of feet, hands and sticks.

The play, then, traces a reversion to a pre-invasion, natural/primitive state, and a dialectical tension is generated between Lillian's cultural system and repressed nature. And this tension is played out in the figures of the soldiers, simultaneously the repressors and the repressed. The men thus represent the Australian subject in crisis, the split consciousness arising from the uneasy mix of allegiance to empire and the impulse towards autonomous national identity. In addition, the men enact the settlers' slaughter of Aborigines (insofar as the play's metaphoric battle evokes Australia's 'first' war, fought against the Aborigines - 'the war for the land itself')²⁶ as well as the Aborigines' retaliation. Finally, through the soldiers, nature is valorised and culture impugned, and the 'Australian' part of the men is aligned with repressed nature. Repressed nature, though, is a very generalised formulation in the play, encompassing not only the authentic land, and Aboriginality, but also colonial subjectivity and even the unconscious.²⁷ The 'English' part of the men, heroicised in Lillian's poem to 'her troops' (p.61), is that malignancy which their captain realises was 'inside of them, like when people go crazy on drink'. (p.90) The imperialist culture embodied in Lillian - and in some aspects of the soldiers - is exposed as ruthlessly self-serving, arrogant, and finally moribund. Lillian's sanctimonious moral code emerges as a code of immorality, and she departs for Home. The signs of her occupation are exposed as fragile and superficial, destroyed by the blaze which, in the play's movement towards closure, cauterises the imperial wound.

In all of this, it does seem an ambitious, and self-defeating, political task to totalise so many aspects of Australianness and Australian history within so generalised a conception of repression. It is as if the play constructs one all-encompassing signified - 'the repressed' - but that this single concept is over-determined by an agglomeration of signifiers (marks on bodies, violent display, burnt earth, and so on). Accordingly, a very wide range of disparate conditions is collapsed into this one overarching concept. One of the problems inherent in this is that the play appears to identify the repressed Australian part of the Anglo-Saxon subject with repressed Aboriginality, such that the play might itself tend towards a kind of appropriation of historical experience. Discernible also is an

²⁶ Veronica Kelly, "'Lest We Forget'", p.105.

²⁷ An episode from Act One, involving the Dawsons' daughter Susan, illustrates the play's construction of an unconscious condition of repression (identified in this instance with dreaming) which is contradistinct from the rational, surface reality of Lillian's imperial culture. Having overheard Susan's restless sleep the night before, Lillian remarks: 'Perhaps you were dreaming?...When you're in England you'll learn more restraint; cultivation will follow.' (p.36). It could of course be the case that Lillian had in fact heard Susan masturbating, and that the girl's moaning indicates the expression of a repressed sexuality.

implicit elision of Aboriginality with the landscape, in the fashion of much colonial and some contemporary literature. However, the crisis of Australian identity - allowing that such a unitary condition exists at all - cannot properly be reduced to binary oppositions. Yet even as *Inside the Island* condemns the colonialist project and exposes its shameful consequences, the play also powerfully reinstates the nature/culture dialectic which is deeply embedded in, and which sustained, that project.