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A LOCALE OF THE COSMOS

An Epic of the Wimmera

Exegesis and Text

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This thesis is submitted in total fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of PhD.

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EXEGESIS

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ABSTRACT

This project has, for its central component, an epic poem, *A Locale of the Cosmos*. The accompanying exegesis examines epic as an ancient, but continually evolving form. It argues that, as a contemporary example of the genre and, as a sustained poetic rumination on landscape and memory, *A Locale of the Cosmos* represents a significant development within the modern tradition of autobiographical epic.

In broader terms, *A Locale of the Cosmos* privileges the landscape and history of a region of Australia, the Wimmera region of north western Victoria and, in doing so, explores the cumulative effects of the physical environment as a site for sustained poetic treatment. The poem is, therefore, an epic of both historical narrative and philosophical reflection, giving meaning to and interpreting ideas of space, place and locale.

Furthermore, it explores, in particular, the psychological and spiritual effects of vast horizontal distances, created by a landscape in which endless plains and immense horizons form an analogue of the wider cosmos. The poem's themes, therefore, bear not only on the prominences of the visible locale, but also explore the salients of an interior world, a landscape of the mind to which the poetry gives shape and meaning.

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INTRODUCTION

In this project my primary interest has been to explore the idea of landscape and, in particular, to discover in what ways ideas of landscape may provide an avenue for the composition of an autobiographical epic, in which landscape itself is seen to form the central axis of a sustained philosophical rumination. The resulting work, *A Locale of the Cosmos*, while it evokes and explores a particular Australian landscape, the Wimmera region of north western Victoria, also addresses the issue of how landscape, more usually keyed to the genre of eclogue and bucolic verse,[1] may be made the central focus of a contemporary epic poem.

As part of this undertaking, I have also set out to explore in what ways certain Romantic conceptions of nature,[2] when translated into an Australian context, may provide a grid for exploring ideas of space, place and locale, both as reflected in the region's history and also as forming part of what I would call the Wimmera's spiritual ecology. The region may be seen, broadly speaking, as being the subject of the poem; at the same time, however, it also the poem's psychological environment. The region's physical dimensions and vast topographical contours on the one hand and, on the other, its historical and legendary background offer themselves, it seems to me, as an inviting context for a large scale work of art. Such a work demands an appropriate form whose poetic compass and range of preoccupations circumscribe orders of magnitude consonant with epic, but that also correspond to the fastnesses of the Wimmera itself and to what Robert Hughes has called 'the monumental antiquity of Australian landscape.'[3]

Whether as a work of the imagination or as repository of historical and legendary memory, epic has always been vital in the history of cultures, perhaps supremely so, not least as a template by means of which we may ascertain how cultures view themselves and in what ways their identity acquires authoritative shape. As Louise Cowan has observed, epics become 'a part of the body of metaphysical and moral resources that poetry represents'.[4] As such, they play a significant role in formulating a culture's perceptions of the world, both the world it finds itself in and the world it seeks to create. Cowan identifies among the vital functions of epic its role as the articulator and transmitter of what she describes as 'an ideal cosmos'[5] since, as she points out, 'even minor examples [of the genre] contain keys to the larger image of human experience poetry seeks to adumbrate'.[6] As the expression of a tribal or national ethos this function has always, it seems to me, been central. At the same time, however, epic may serve

what are perceived to be more modest ends, by registering the dominant key of the wider culture in its regional modulations. Through the narrower, though no less illuminating lens of a limited, yet well-defined cultural subset, aspects of the national ethos may be distilled in the alembic of one privileged region, in the particulars of its landscapes and its people, their history, values and way of life. This is the goal to which *A Locale of the Cosmos* has aspired.

The poem addresses precisely such a circumscribed arena and, by focusing its energies upon a particular region, it demonstrates how contemporary epic may retain its links with the older functions and conventions of the tradition while, at the same time, opening up new paths of thematic interest and introducing fresh stylistic elements into the methodology and broader poetics of the genre. This process of thematic and stylistic innovation has, for a period of more than two centuries, seen the genre overhauled and renovated in significant and, even radical fashion, not least by its transformation into the vehicle of an increasingly personal poetic vision such as has been brought into play by the autobiographical epic, as conceived originally by Wordsworth in *The Prelude*. As Cowan has observed, 'epic is a phenomenon both more frequent and more diverse than the recognized canon tends to indicate'.[7] The canonical parameters have been sufficiently enlarged, indeed, to accommodate works of prose fiction such as Melville's *Moby Dick*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. To cite a more recent example, one may observe the critical acclaim surrounding the contemporary German novelist William Vollmann's *Europe Central*. Vollmann's *opus* has been described pointedly as constituting 'a kind of epic poetry: a flamboyant conflation of the real and the visionary that depicts history as a vast, endlessly unfolding mythical narrative'.[8] Such descriptors (dispensing with the flamboyance) certainly apply to and are richly suggestive of the central preoccupations of *A Locale of the Cosmos*.

In the pursuit of such reforming conceptions of the genre, I have aimed for a language that does justice to those older, more elevated perceptions attaching to the form, particularly in matters of diction and tone, without resorting to a slavish (and hence unconvincing) imitation of ancient and classical models such as have marred, I believe, a considerable number of post-Miltonic ventures in the genre. I have attempted to create a prosody that reflects fidelity to the nature of both the subject (or perhaps, I should say, subjects) of my poem and also to the patterns and usages of contemporary speech. I have

aimed, in particular, to render the specifically Australian cast of my work, to be true to native speech patterns and regional linguistic idiosyncrasies.

My goal has to been to capture the character of the Wimmera itself, but also to convey the multi-layered character and tenor of my own ruminations upon it, factors that of themselves form a complex music of intertwined moods and shifting reflections. Added to this, *A Locale of the Cosmos* also creates an imagined landscape, one springing up from and intimately connected to the perceived world of the Wimmera and yet, at the same time, shedding light on the interior life of the observer. In short, the poem embodies a deeply personal vision, one in which are refracted significant autobiographical elements and undercurrents of feeling that percolate through the poem and inform its shape and direction. Even as an evocation of landscape, the poem is never mere transcription; as Catherine Lumby, addressing the question of landscape painting, has noted (and this remains no less true of landscape poetry): 'Landscape…is never simply a transparent rendering of natural scenery but is always framed by larger forces…'[9]

It was the power of these 'larger forces' and their framing potential that played a decisive role when I came to consider the choice of genre. I decided, at an early stage in the project that the exploration of a specific landscape, in terms of both its natural and spiritual topography was not only worthy of epic treatment, but indeed, called for it. And, furthermore, it seemed to me that epic, however formidable a form, presented itself as the most receptive genre for the kind of philosophical exploration, with its admixture of historical and personal elements such as I had in mind. As Larry Allums has observed, 'the poetic imagination always responds in its work of "poesis"— of making—to fundamental movements of the soul within distinctive landscapes of human experience'.[10] Such a perspective reflects an aesthetic tradition that reaches back to Aristotle's *Poetics.* As Allums has pointed out:

> According to this way [Aristotelian] of approaching a text, literary genres constitute far more than descriptive labels denoting external, structural properties; rather, each represents an interior angle of vision and makes possible a critical orientation that situates the reader within a given text for the crucial act of interpretation.[11]

Not only Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, but also the epic ventures of Whitman, William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson in the American tradition and, among Australian poets, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Rex Ingamells, Les Murray, Alan Wearne, Laurie Duggan and Dorothy Porter provided varying degrees of impetus for my intentions.[12] They have fortified my confidence not only in venturing into relatively uncharted waters (in terms of contemporary poetic tastes and ambitions) but in the continuing integrity and richness of epic as a form, one that remains potent in a period of cultural iconoclasm and widespread impatience with large and demanding forms. Their powerful precedents have also reinforced my belief that varying species of autobiographical epic are now not only legitimate and honourable variations of the genre, but also, in terms of the prevailing literary climate, perhaps the genre's most authentic expression.[13] I consider my modern antecedents in the genre, as listed above, to be exemplary and persuasive in respect of both the epic's continuing credibility and its capacity for renewal. Furthermore, when appraised in the context of the postmodernist period, an era in which the contestation of genres and the wholesale deconstruction of literary modalities have threatened not only the identity of works of art, both past and present, but the very nature of the creative process itself, epic has met the challenge with a resilience equal to that of any other form.

We may add to the genre's continuing challenges the indisputable supremacy of the novel in the past century and a half, a literary form that has expropriated the large-scale narrative and plundered from the treasury of epic both its wider cultural functions and, more significantly, its cachet as the pre-eminent literary vehicle by means of which the sensibility, if not the entire mindset of an era, may be gauged. As Ian Watt has observed, the novel has come to be regarded as being, to all intents and purposes, the prime vehicle of modern dramatic narration; 'in this sense of the term', he notes, 'the novel may be said to be of the epic kind'.[14] Following Hegel's lead in *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, it would not be inaccurate, as Watt himself has suggested, to propose that the novel is indeed, the representative 'manifestation of the spirit of epic under the impact of a modern and prosaic concept of reality'.[15]

It is my contention that this way of conceiving the novel, as a 'prosaic concept of reality', points to and, in fact, underscores the epic's enduring capacity to encapsulate precisely that other and equally representative manifestation, the *poetic* 'concept of reality' and to do so in a manner, I would suggest, beyond all other literary genres. The fact that the

novel is seen to derive a large part of its historical momentum by virtue of being 'a manifestation of the spirit of epic' is, itself I would argue, an admission of the centrality and continuing feasibility of epic as the supreme articulation of a cultural continuum. Epic may have been displaced by the novel as the primary narrative of the tribe (some might even say 'marginalised') but as a digest of personal exploration, as well as an epitome of those currents of thought and feeling running through a particular culture at a certain period, it still has the calibre to give memorable expression to the psychological and historical forces at work in the world it addresses. Even as a conduit of contemporary narrative, it offers rich opportunities to any literary project that aims to supplement, *pari passu*, the novel's probity and storytelling concerns, without subordinating the linguistic and metrical resourcefulness and emotional compression of poetry to the more commodious requirements of prose.

A Locale of the Cosmos is then, in part, personal rumination, historical and legendary narrative and amplified version of pastoral. It is also, perhaps, in H. G. Wells's notable formulation, a species of 'experiment in autobiography'. It does not seek to concentrate upon specific biographical episodes or to give any detailed account of earlier periods in my life; rather, it concerns itself with the nature of my own mental and emotional states and processes. It maps the history and explores the landscapes of the Wimmera with a view to registering and tracing their effects on the mental and spiritual terrain of the author. In doing this, the poem also addresses the psychological and spiritual energies at work in landscape. These factors, in combination, furnish the poem's *raison d'être* and provide the parameters within which it stakes its claim to autobiographical epic.

The poetical shape and linguistic character of *A Locale of the Cosmos* should be seen, then, as being cognate with the geographical and historical profile of the region itself. At the same time, I also argue that the poem turns to account broader notions of Australian identity as encapsulated in, or reflected through such landscapes. In attempting to essay such wider cultural notions within the confines of a sustained personal meditation, I have looked to a number of significant developments in the history of epic composition in the post-Romantic period and to works that have set precedents, in both thematic and stylistic terms, by way of introducing some important departures from the traditional rubrics and conventions of the genre. The history of modern epic is, in part, a history of

resistance to and, indeed, rebellion against a view of genres as immobile and inflexible moulds.

However, at the same time, *A Locale of the Cosmos* should not be seen as a work that is hostile to the conventions of the genre, or whose departures from these conventions are indiscriminate. On the contrary, such departures as it makes for instance, in respect of traditional metrical arrangements (based on the dactylic hexameter) or traditional thematic signatures (the mythological machinery, the warrior ethos, the relations between heroes and deities) also reflect, I would suggest, a desire to extend even further the range of epic subject matter, a process of change that the history of the form, in any case, amply reveals.

Furthermore, I have been equally interested in experimenting with the dynamics of the form as well; in contributing to the ongoing revival and restoration of the genre as a compelling work of art, registered in a convincing contemporary idiom and not, therefore, to be viewed mistakenly as being merely an antiquated and lifeless monument, however reverentially approached, to a glorious but fossilised past. No less than other literary genres, epic has evolved; its metamorphoses have not been confined only to shifts of emphasis or mere variations on familiar themes but have, since the appearance of *The Prelude*, set out to plot a new course, through daring to address new themes and establish new stylistic criteria.

Epic has never been unvaryingly limited to a single and unchanging hegemony of thematic interests and stylistic conventions, however preponderant these may appear to have been. Otherwise, the calcification of the form would long ago have been complete and the genre consigned to oblivion as a curiosity. This is a fate that epic in the twentieth century has confounded, decisively. Epic has not only survived but also flourished, in part precisely because it has resisted conformity to sets of conventions that have, in the past, threatened (as a result of blind adherence) to turn the form into a literary behemoth. The sheer antiquity of the genre and the weight of expectation attaching to the genre's pedigree have also, however, contributed in no small degree to epic's perceived degree of difficulty and inaccessibility.

As I shall discuss in the following chapter, the history of challenge and departure from the original template may be observed even within the Homeric canon itself and, in Virgil's abrogation of the Homeric model, becomes a palpable issue, despite all of the superficial resemblances between the *Aeneid* and the Homeric prototypes. While it is true that the genre evinces a hierarchically ordered and contoured development (after all, this is, surely, part of what it means to *be* a genre) this has not prevented the form from taking on any number of variations of theme, metre and literary device in the post-Miltonic period. Even in the long period stretching from Virgil to Dante and later, between the *Commedia* and *Paradise Lost*, one may observe to what extent epic had, in fact, shown itself to be a remarkably resilient and capacious *portmanteau* genre; it had, for instance, absorbed elements of the ode, panegyric and elegiac verse, of medieval romance, nascent national chronicle, hortatory invective, grammarian peroration, apocalyptic literature, proto-novelistic phantasmagoria and personal lyric.

The skeletal outlines of epic may certainly have hardened over time; however, within and around the genre, the flux of contending appropriations reflected both the changes wrought by the transformative processes of time itself and also the significant differences in perspective of widely differing cultural *milieux*. This process, it seems to me, has gradually accelerated since the time of Milton and has, since Whitman, led to the rise of departure and deferral from the genre's conventions as acquiring the status of the normative.

One may observe this burgeoning process plainly in the history of twentieth century epic and, in particular, in the work of Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson.[16] Their epics have breathed new life and relevance into the form and demonstrated a willingness to explore new avenues and to see in what ways the genre may be released from the gridlock of its own reputation. That reputation had, for a long time, been based upon a notion of epic as being a kind of literary monolith, embedded in the morass of its own 'deep structures';[17] or, otherwise, as one whose pedigree had been perceived, along with those of other so-called 'high genres',[18] as providing evidence of their status as closed systems, resistant to change and innovation. Indeed, to employ the language of Bakhtin, they have been seen as being mired in their own 'stilted heroizing…narrow and unlifelike poeticalness, their monotony and abstractness, the prepackaged and unchanging nature of their heroes'.[19] Such polemical strictures lead, I

would argue, to a distorted view of the variety of dynamics available to epic, such that the above reproofs are hard to uphold without doing serious injustice to the form. The charge sheet may, indeed, reflect dissatisfaction with the form; however, it also feeds into a larger, less well-informed current of indifference to and hostility towards the genre, one that is widespread and difficult to dislodge.

Both the perceived sacredness of epic tradition and its venerableness of age, play, perhaps inevitably, into the hands of those for whom the genre represents an outmoded form, one incapable of revitalization and no longer of relevance. In the following chapters I argue, however, for just those capacities of replenishment, vitality and congruity with contemporary experience. Equally, I argue the case that no example of a genre can pretend to have dispensed with the history that lies behind it and, correspondingly, that a part of the strength and conviction of any work of art lies precisely in openly acknowledging this fact and in investing the form with a new and powerful charge.

In *A Locale of the Cosmos* I have attempted to do just this. At the same time the poem may, perhaps ironically, be said to defer to the tradition at least as much as it departs from it. It is, in the first place (as one would expect of epic) a substantive and storied work of art, incorporating the history and legendary lore of the region it addresses. In keeping with earlier examples of the genre, it addresses the heroic, in as much as it privileges the landscape itself as the heroic focus of its concerns. It offers a sustained historico-mythic narrative, within which it identifies and commemorates the ancestral traces of the region's aboriginal and pioneer communities. Likewise (as in a number of earlier epics) it articulates both a way of life and a view of life. In doing so, it also gives voice to versions of personal and communal identity. These, in turn, resonate with the life of nature and the rhythms of natural cycles, with the play of chance and fateful consequence, all of which is woven into the fabric of the poem. The poem gathers within its litanies of place names, family names and generational linkages, as well as among its inventories of tools and implements, the cumulative effects of the human presence on the landscape itself. It celebrates (and also mourns), the works of human hands. It gathers into its embrace and gives dignity to the entire life of a locale (a term whose denotations I discuss in detail in Chapter Three) and makes of it, as the poem's title suggests, a theme of cosmic stature. What form, other than epic, ventures this?

It is in this light that I have, so to speak, entered my poem in the epic lists. It is my intention, as the following chapters will demonstrate, to show that one of its chief aims is to underline the continuities of epic, even as it adds its voice to the inventions (or as some might perceive them, the deviations and deflections from custom) of other examples of modern epic. In this respect, my own poem, along with its precursors, follows an older route—in spite of appearances to the contrary. It does so, in part, in much the same way that later art-literary epics[20] reflected the continuities of the Homeric and Virgilian tradition, even as they subverted it. *A Locale of the Cosmos* mirrors that process of change as part of a wider and ongoing movement of transformation in the modern history of genres and, indeed, in genre theory itself. The current state of fluidity in the philosophy of genres and of conflict and upheaval in debates over canonical texts, points not only to a more diverse and diffuse interpretation of literary forms, but also to an underlying and trenchant renovation within genres themselves.

The Wimmera is, I believe, a site of considerable interest for epic treatment and offers, in specifically Australian terms, a rich ambience for the exploration of what I would call the idea of 'yonderness' (one of several of the poem's central tropes) where orders of magnitude reflect not only the physical landscape, but also a range of psychological and emotional equivalences of similarly powerful magnitude.[21] *A Locale of the Cosmos* explores the rich and complex effects of a landscape that embodies places of remove, whose monumentalities of topographical scale are the corollary of 'distancing' forces equally at work in the mind.[22] In the poem, they give rise, on the one hand, to the sense of absence and separation and, on the other, to moments of illumination and acceptance. These tensions form pressure points around which the interior world of the poem, as autobiography, is linked to the exterior world of the poem as landscape epic. That landscape is one that embodies in its vast horizontal planes and cloudy *glissades*, what Gaston Bachelard has described as a 'before-us' quality, a condition of such immediate and yet permanent presence that, like giant forests and other natural majesties, it 'reigns in the past'.[23]

Broadly speaking, the Australian landscape has long been subsumed in the generic term, 'the bush'. This concept has formed an established, indeed stereotyped image of the natural setting, against which various conceptions of the idea of 'Australia' have been moulded. From the beginnings of white settlement, the bush has been seen as being the

quintessential Australian environment; the idea of 'Australia' as a cultural construct is, in some fundamental ways, still encapsulated in the word.

The bush, it has sometimes been claimed, is where the so-called 'real' Australia is, (or was) to be found; it is where its plainest accents were (and arguably still are) best heard and where the integrity of its notions of identity remains unalloyed and intact.[24] If this is, indeed, true, then it is so, in part, as Russel Ward has observed, by virtue of the idea of the bush as being inseparable from the semi--mythical figure of 'the noble bushman'.[25] This figure has been invariably cast, not as a person, but rather as 'a character', a dramatis persona, 'the individualist', *nonpareil*; 'the romanticized figure' as Ward has recalled him, who is 'at home on horseback anywhere in the interior and standing as a symbol of emergent nationalism'.[26] He is also a figure who embodied so-called 'bush values', a set of attitudes and an outlook seen as epitomising both Australians themselves and 'Australia' as a country. They formed, in effect, the markers of a national sensibility and, equally, the matrix of a nostalgia that had already, as Robert Hughes has remarked, in addressing the shaping of American values, become a potent factor in the emergence of a distinctively Australian sensibility.[27] These values were widely popularised, particularly in numerous short stories and poems published by *The Bulletin* in the last decade of the nineteenth century.[28]

The question as to what the 'real' Australia consisted (or still consists) in, remained problematic not only because of conflicting and contradictory images of metropolitan and rural Australia, but also because versions of landscape, as much as versions of the iconic Australian, had become matters of deep contention.[29] A D Hope's antinomies, in their measured scorn and uncompromising candour, still resonate powerfully more than fifty years on, in both their relevance and accuracy:

> A Nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey
> In the field uniform of modern wars,
> Darkens her hills, those endless, outstretched paws…
>
> They call her a young country, but they lie:
> She is the last of lands, the emptiest…

…Her rivers of water drown among inland sands,
The river of her immense stupidity

Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth.
In them at last the ultimate men arrive
Whose boast is not: ‘we live’ but ‘we survive’,
A type who will inhabit the dying earth.[30]

Although my poem addresses these issues, it is not at lengthy pains to do so. Its approach is tangential and calibrated by its interest in one specific region, whose landscapes may be seen as providing a useful context in which some aspects connected to those larger questions of a national ethos may be observed and from which a set of underlying values may be extrapolated.[31] The poem demonstrates, to some extent, how the Wimmera contributes to and reinforces certain traits that have come to be associated with the Australian character and with broader perception of the Australian landscape.[32]

The idea of ‘the bush’, then, in both my poem and in the Australian imagination at large, remains a potent presence. As a cultural marker the bush has come to be regarded as embodying many of the most valued and most cherished elements of national and regional identity. It also, perhaps inevitably, produced during the colonial period and for long afterwards, a high content of what I shall call ‘Arcadian’ elements, although these were increasingly counter indicated by tropes of alienation, loneliness and, indeed, terror. Nevertheless, as the subject of romantic myth, the idea of ‘the bush’ has been accorded an almost unique homage. It has been perceived as a ‘space’ (in the imagination) a ‘place’ in the mythography and a ‘locale’ in the folklore, so naturally good and fundamentally decent as to be nothing less than the matrix of the nation’s moral values and of its purest and most idealised conceptions of itself. And yet, the national literature is replete with depictions of the bush as a hostile environment, inimical to human settlement, fraught with peril, an arena of struggle and privation. Henry Lawson’s prose rendering of it is a case in point:

> Bush all round – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten, native appletrees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization – a shanty on the main road. The drover, an ex-

squatter, is away with the sheep. His wife and children are left here alone. Four ragged, dried-up looking children are playing about the house…"[33]

The landscape presented here is not a secluded spot, loving and protective, but a remorseless place, antagonistic towards human assimilation and offering no ready embrace. As a stark illustration of a *mal du pays*, it undercuts those effulgent renditions of the bush as 'Ultima Thule' and, indeed, of Australia as a shimmering utopia in the antipodes, important and alternative motifs that weave a counterpoint threnody through the history of the colonial period. Nevertheless, such negative perspectives added not only a high degree of realism to the portrayal of Australian landscape but also a dynamic charge to mythographic conceptions of a landscape *in extremis*.[34] It was, at times, as in the desert vistas and hallucinatory nightmares of the early explorers, landscape seen as cauterised. However, more often and no less unflatteringly it was landscape as a chiasmus, one that stood in abject contradiction to 'the old country' [mother England] and, despite evidence to the contrary, remained, in the currency of Mrs. Hubert Heron, 'bare, bald, prosaic':

A township like
All others, with its houses, church and school—
Bare, bald, prosaic— no quaint wild tower
Nor ancient hall to add poetic touch,
As in the dear old land— no legend old
Adds softening beauty to the Budawong Peak,
Or near-home ranges, with too barbarous names.
But everything is cold, new, new, too new
To foster poesy; and famish'd thought
Looks back with longing to the mountain dream.[35]

Just how widely shared this sentiment was, may be judged by the fact that Adam Lindsay Gordon, in derogation of the landscape, allowed himself as nugatory and dismissive a judgement as this:

They are rhymes rudely strung with intent less
Of sound than of words,
In lands where bright blossoms are scentless,
And songless bright birds;

Where with fire and fierce drought on her tresses,
Insatiable Summer oppresses
Sere woodlands and sad wildernesses,
And faint flocks and herds.[36]

While it is true that his friend, the poet Henry Kendall, in his review of Gordon's volume, *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes*, had taken the poet to task, noting that: '…while his successes in other directions are always remarkable, his failures in the school of which Wordsworth is, perhaps, the great leader are complete and immediately evident';[37] nevertheless, Kendall was equally sure that 'the fact remains that he [Gordon] laid Australia under a deep and lasting obligation.[38] The obligation, however, seems to me to have been heavily diluted by Gordon's preoccupation with Gaelic and quasi-classical myth.

To those who did embrace it, however, both the land and, in time, the landscape became not only habitable, but a loved possession, a place iridescent in the mind as much as to the naked eye. Both poets and painters were led, gradually and by the example of pioneers[39] and settlers, to observe a landscape to which one might, at first, be resigned, then reconciled and finally, richly attached.[40] Such a congeries of attitudes and perceptions acquired an important place in and also lent their own emphatic rhythms to, both the historical and mythographic worlds of *A Locale of the Cosmos*.

Lawson's portrayal of the landscape, as depicted above is the more eloquent by virtue of its honesty. Its power to convince us resides partly in the negative romantic pathos with which it invests the landscape, at a time when poets were inclined to see Australia in messianic terms, as the stage upon which a glorious future was to be played out. Australia was, according to this view, the last of lands, the halcyon hope, of limitless promise, no less than the 'new Jerusalem'. However, at the same time, all was in the balance; in Bernard O'Dowd's memorable strophe, the question was put thus:

Are you a drift Sargasso…
Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?
…lurks millenial Eden 'neath your face? [41]

Earlier colonial poets such as Charles Harpur, had been inclined, it is true, to see the Australian landscape through English and, in particular, Wordsworthian eyes. In 'A Flight of Wild Ducks', for example, Harpur's perspective and the tropes he employs for his 'antipodean' scene have strong Wordsworthian overtones:

> Thus seen o'erhead
> Even while we speak—ere we have spoken—lo!
> The living cloud is onward many a rood,
> Tracking as 'twere in the smooth stream below
> The multifarious shadow of itself.
> Far coming—present—and far gone at once!
> The senses vainly struggle to retain
> The impression of an Image (as the same)
> So swift and manifold: For now again
> A long dark line upon the utmost verge
> Of the horizon, steeping still, it sinks
> At length into the landscape…[42]

A Locale of the Cosmos offers a corrective to the kind of language traditionally applied to Australian landscape; it also explores the metaphysical implications of this landscape, tapping into a wider vision of Australia as a land of hard, flat horizontals, flecked with gullies and creek beds and lost in the vanishing points of an immense horizon. In such landscapes, the observer arrives at the threshold of an older and more disturbing idea of Australia, as a minatory and forbidding environment.

Further, the poem addresses not only the intimacy, but also the tensions that prevail between the human and natural worlds and, therefore, the dislocation of the earth from its traditional metonymic functions as a mystical and maternal source of new life, of nature's fecund and efflorescent powers. Australian poets and painters have had to grapple from the beginning with the perception of Australia as the final frontier, the furthest and the most unlikely of lands. Since the beginnings of white settlement, the idea of the land as parturient has been the province of the dreamtime memories of its indigenous peoples. By contrast, European visions of Australian landscape were deeply ambivalent and couched (in the patriarchal language of explorers and pioneers alike) in terms of conquest and domination.

It is this ambivalence towards the landscape that *A Locale of the Cosmos*, in part, seeks to address. As autobiographical epic, furthermore, the poem explores and enlarges on these equivocal responses at a personal, as well as cultural level, since a poetic rendering (of the visible landscape) is also, surely, a rendering up (of an interior and invisible landscape).[43]

The poem gives voice to both sides of the argument concerning the relations between people and their environment. On the one hand, nature is seen as being endowed with fructifying and regenerative powers; on the other, it traps its human inhabitants in a cycle of unremitting struggle in which, though nature's beneficence is acknowledged, there remains a deep unease. The place of the Wimmera in this scenario is of great interest, as both its history and acquired layers of reputation disclose. The region is, for instance, neither as flat nor as featureless as commonly supposed. On the contrary, it offers to the observer an experience of landmass and landform rich in gradations and in calibrations of great subtlety. The lie of the land, despite appearances, is not without great complexity and variety. At the same time, it does not easily persuade the casual observer of such impressions. It is thought of as a region which is essentially treeless and in which apparently unvarying vistas become a metonym of the void. The vastness of the open sky, of the 'wide blue yonder', across which drift great galleons of clouds, forms as imposing a meteorological architecture as any to be seen by the observer who (like Mrs. Heron) 'looks back with longing to the mountain dream'.[44] Such landscapes are, however, likely to impose upon observers the possibility of confronting the question of the significance of their own small and finite presence. This question of the individual's place in the scheme of things is a theme familiar to, historically bound up in and, without doubt, central to the oldest traditions of epic verse.

This same question is also apposite to what the poet Les Murray has described as 'a profound difference in cultures',[45] a difference that goes back to the very beginnings of epic and also to Hesiod, in whose *oeuvre* (in particular *Works and Days*) we find highlighted the contrasting values and beliefs of the 'Athenian', as against the 'Boeotian', way of life. 'From the time of its rise in the sixth century BC', Murray writes:

> urban-minded, slave-holding Athens was always scornful of rural, tradition-minded, predominantly small-holding Boeotia. The Boeotians, living to the north-west of Attica, were held to be rude, boorish, and stupid, their country swampy and cheerless, their arts old-fashioned and tedious. The conflict went deeper than mere rivalry…Even the great Boeotian Pindar, honoured all over the Greek-speaking world for his eulogies of victors in the great Pythian and Olympic games, fell foul of this enmity. When he wrote his famous lines in praise of Athens:
>
> O thou shining, violet-crowned, most-worthy-of-song
> Bulwark of Hellas, glorious Athens, city of gods…
>
> his own city-state of Thebes imposed a fine on him.[46]

The dominance of Athens was, it would seem, sufficiently great to forever obscure, if not totally eclipse Boeotian cultural achievements, even though, as Murray points out:

> There is evidence that a specifically Boeotian style of poetry, called by that name, may have existed in Homeric times and later. Some elements in the *Iliad*, especially, may be Boeotian. The famous catalogue of ships is a case in point. The catalogue seems to be a typically Boeotian device. Athenians *count*, we may say, while Boeotians *list* and *name*.[47]

These considerations are not without telling and peculiar relevance to *A Locale of the Cosmos*, a poem that privileges a 'rural, tradition-minded' region which, like Boeotia, lies north-west of the cosmopolis and which, within the inventory of Australian archetypes, lends its own peculiar slant to that enduring icon: 'the bush'. Furthermore, A *Locale of the Cosmos* is replete with catalogues, enumerations, litanies, refrains and repetitions; in generic terms, it is *tout suite* in its preoccupation with this aspect of the tradition, though not by way of servile imitation but, rather, as recognizing and exploiting both the solemnity and the thrall of chant, as the following passage vividly demonstrates:

> what road was it that Stuart Bolton was going down
> that bad Dan Morgan had not gone down?
> what road Carl Rasmussen slaughterer and of fearful temper?
> what road McDonald of Wonwondah?
> what road McClounan builder of bridges?
> what road John Langlands what road Thomas Edols?
> winding from Nhill to Dimboola west of Lochiel Bridge
> through rocky country and scrub plains
> what road from Horsham to Stawell laying the culverts
> at Ledcourt Bridge?

what road Andrew Scott at Werricknebeal
obstructed by dogwire?
what road John Chester Jervis? what timber bridge at Burnt Creek
at Rose's Gap at Burrum Burrum
crossing the 't's' of McClounan's tender?
how many chains of plough furrow to Lawloit and Albacutya?
what road to Half Way House to Deep Lead
and Pleasant Creek?
what road metalled or unmetalled secondary or of earth formation?
what road to the horizon - to the horizon beyond that - ?
back of it lies Dunmunckle
its dusty patchwork of dwellings of smithies and honest toil fields
unfolding like a rodomontade of mirages
on the only road you never asked: Pray stranger- what road is that?
with its smattering of sugar gums and ungathered hills
its ruts and potholes smelling of long-buried water
redolences of spring in the Orkneys
of summer in the Hebrides
of autumn in the Shetlands still sapid
in the memory [48]

These poetic strategies: of naming and listing, of calling forth and casting back, of litanous celebration and catalogic reminiscence, are not only staples of epic device but also conduits for the poem's emotional charge; furthermore, they play a crucial role in the poem's function as a transmitter of memory, 'this most fundamental and elusive of human powers', as Frances Yates has observed.[49] They are also integral not only to the traditional architecture of epic (historically speaking) but to the symphonic design of my own poem, with its measured and deliberate recapitulations and reiterated motifs acting as analogues of a manifestly 'Boeotian' world. It is a world much like that described by Murray. 'Boeotia, in her perennial incarnations', as Murray points out:

> subordinates [philosophy] to religion and precept, and in politics she habitually prefers *daimon* to *demos*…If aristocracy is her besetting vice, that of Athens is probably abstraction. Each has its price, artistically, and it may be that poetry, of all but the dramatic sort, is ultimately a Boeotian art…celebration and commemoration [are] modes that perennially appear in spacious, dignified cultures.[50]

The exception to this rule, as Murray points out, is Virgil who, as he observes:

> worked his way as it were backwards through Arcadian art— an Athenian style evolved to deal with Boeotian material in an emasculated way—in his Theocritean *Ecolgues* to the pure Boeotian mode of his *Georgics* and thence to epic.[51]

And, I would add, Virgil also makes landscape important and, therefore, not merely incidental or ornamental to his epic purpose, such that in, for example, Book One of the *Aeneid*,[52] we may observe what has been discerned as 'the fully-developed epic *topographia*'.[53] Virgil both cultivates and amplifies, 'in a consciously 'poetic' manner,' as Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter have suggested, 'all the themes of landscape description present in Homer.'[54] The method of treatment, as they have pointed out, is 'like the difference between an artist's sketch and the amplitude of the finished painting'[55]; in short, Virgil's method of approach to natural scenes and to what are now loosely called 'scenic vistas', combined with his absorption in the wider subjective and symbolic possibilities of landscape, are reflected in *A Locale of the Cosmos*. That poem pays homage to, but also explores the darker emotional contours of the Virgilian *locus amoenus*.[56]

Dante's enlistment of Virgil as his guide in the *Commedia* is, then, entirely fitting and marks a significant change in the direction of epic;[57] this shift is incipient in Dante's preoccupation with physical and moral landscapes. As Murray concludes:

> Dante's evocation of him [Virgil] was…not culturally disruptive in the Middle Ages—a period in which the highest Boeotian civilization in Western history flourished. Classical allusion, when passed through a Virgilian filter, did not interfere with Dante's deeply Boeotian purpose of creating a vernacular poetry capable of handling sublime matters. [58]

The creation of 'a vernacular poetry capable of handling sublime matters' lay at the core of Wordsworth's poetical aims and achievements in the composition of *The Prelude*, a theme I shall develop further in Chapter One. It is also with 'sublime matters' (though not with some abstracted notion of 'the sublime', as a formal category)[59] that *A Locale of the Cosmos* is often deeply concerned. Murray's phrase may also serve as a reminder of the extent to which it has become an established Australian custom to downplay, if not to

openly abjure ‘the sublime’ even as, in the same breath, the sublime is embraced. It is the Boeotian, rather than Athenian response, self-effacing rather than self-regarding. It is also, if one considers Walt Whitman (‘a deeply Boeotian poet’)[60] according to Les Murray, a response to the world that enables an epic poet to create as Murray says, in the case of Whitman, ‘a distinctively American poetry’.[61]

An Australian essaying of the genre is, *ipso facto*, open to the realisation of a similar goal; that is to say, not only the revitalization of the ‘vernacular’ but the achievement of a distinctively Australian poetry; one that is, as Murray insists, ‘continually recreated, always writing afresh about the sacred places and the generations of men and the gods’.[62] *A Locale of the Cosmos* certainly privileges specific places within the broader Wimmera region as being of deep significance, sacred to memory and rich in personal association. Their importance is reflected in the titles of individual books and is defined by their historical traditions as townships or sites of settlement, such as ‘Jackson Siding’, ‘Ashens’, ‘Sheep Hills’ and ‘Marnoo’; others, such as ‘Mutton Swamp’ have, by their very isolation, become preserves of the ‘sacred’; others again, reflect in their names a tegument of spiritual connections that may be formed not only between ‘the generations of men,’ as in ‘Florida Villas’, but between the human and natural worlds in an all-encompassing sense, as in ‘Aldebaran and Beyond’. This is, in short, nothing less than the brief of epic. It is also a measure of the compass of my own poem, working as it does from the original template of epic to find new ways of bringing these themes to life. It is, in a sense, an undertaking not unlike that faced by the translator of a poem from one language into another, an ‘amphibious movement between languages’ as Peter Fallon has observed, in discussing the wide-ranging work of the Irish translator, Michael Hartnett.[63] What I have endeavoured to give voice to is not only the history of the Wimmera itself (central as that is) as mediated through its landscapes, but also a sense of ‘a culture still in its Boeotian phase’.[64] The Wimmera region provides, I believe, a rich context in which to observe the disparate elements of a region that, to employ Humboldt’s term, precisely in their *Zusammenhang*, or ‘hanging together’, reflect the correlation of the human world with the geography in which it is situated.[65] In the case of the Wimmera, that geography bears the geomorphic imprint of all massive horizontal planes. But over and above that, in psychological and spiritual terms *A Locale of the Cosmos* also augments Murray’s declaration that: ‘…in any sense broad enough to admit the great majority of Australians…any distinctiveness we possess is still firmly anchored in the bush’.[66] This

is not only a position that my own poem adopts, but also a melodic key that is sustained throughout the course of its ruminations. It also echoes the wider truth of landscape, as summarized by a late nineteenth century Russian geographer who observed that he 'could not conceive a physiography from which man had been excluded'.[67]

The epic as a genre has, over the past century or more, re-established itself as a potent form of poetic discourse. While epic's traditional distinguishing features have been associated with monumentality of scale and grandeur of language and theme, it has become more widely recognized that the scope of epic's narrative interests and, indeed, its tonal range extend much further than the traditional high seriousness of songs of war and of heroic prowess. Such themes have embedded themselves so deeply within the genre and, indeed, in the minds of the genre's audience that, together with what Cowan has described as 'the assumption of epic sublimity and awe',[68] they have created an historical obstruction for poets and readers alike. It is, however, a poem's pattern—what may be classified as its ontological imprint, or as Cowan suggests, its 'genetic imprint'—that establishes its place in the order of genres.

A Locale of the Cosmos is, then, a *tour d'horizon*, a symphonic work of multiple motifs, whose verbal instrumentation and orchestral colouring constitute a poetic language addressing an array of states of mind, as well as of ideas. As epic, my poem must inevitably run the gauntlet of its own ambitiousness. It must contend with a prevailing postmodernist scepticism towards not only what are sometimes seen to be, in broad terms, the otiose claims of genres but towards epic in particular. This is so, in part, because epic's lineage is very ancient and, therefore, claims as to the obsolescence of the form make it more vulnerable to the polemics of dismissal or indifference. How to give voice to a grand conception, without being grandiose; how to register a sense of grandeur, without striking a pose or resorting to the hoary superfluities of 'the grand manner'; how to achieve rich and complex poetic effects in a sustained and comprehensive fashion, without artifice and yet with artistic integrity? And, above all, how to invest words with precisely that original charge and resonance implied by the term 'grand manner', such as was achieved at an earlier stage (perhaps in the Homeric prototype) a language both formal and also entirely natural and at ease, which remains 'grand' by virtue of its memorable speech and by reason of the universality of its

conceptions? These are challenges of singular difficulty and I cannot pretend to have met them entirely.

A Locale of the Cosmos, both as neo- Romantic *and* contemporary epic, represents an attempt to bring to life a mythography of the Wimmera beyond a mere quotidian verisimilitude and is, therefore, confronted with questions of universal scale no less than any of its predecessors in the genre. It is also concerned with landscapes that are themselves of a correspondingly large ambience. However seemingly local or regional the poem's concerns may appear at first sight, the parochial element is constantly giving way to a sense of 'locale'; this, in turn, gradually opens up to reveal a 'cosmos'.[69] As Jenny Zimmer observed, in her review of the contemporary Wimmera painter, Philip Hunter's *Continent Cycle*: 'The psychological intrigue of Romanticism has universalising qualities built-in'.[70] Of Hunter's aesthetic ambit, no less than of my own, it would not be inaccurate to observe, as does Gary Catalano, in his review of the same exhibition: 'As he [Hunter] aspires to the grand manner, it is fitting that…these concerns should rest in an attempt to adjudge the conflicting claims of fact and legend, history and myth.'[71] In my own case, I have been concerned to discover the correlations that exist between these categories. Either way these notions are, after all, in a strong and continuing sense, the provenance of the genre (whether in painterly or literary terms) and, by extension, reflect the wide elliptic of those subjects to which the epic poet is irresistibly drawn.

In discussing his poem, *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot argued for the musical structure of the poem and for the use of what would normally be regarded as certain musical devices:

> I believe that the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure…The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different moments of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject matter.[72]

At the same time, *Four Quartets* explores, with great subtlety, complex philosophical issues, although Eliot has made plain that the poet is not (in any professional sense) to be thought of as a philosopher. 'It is not the poet's job to think' he claims, ' it is his job is to express the greatest emotional intensity of his time, based on whatever his time happened to think."[73] Both of these observations have some relevance to *A Locale of the Cosmos*. That poem is, however, as much a Poundian 'tale of the tribe'[74] as a reflective venture and is, in fact, closer in my own estimation to Pound's symphonic conception of *The Cantos*, an ideation that extends back (as the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* points out) to Virgil's *Aeneid*.[75] It may, like Pound's work, more fruitfully be read and heard as the verbal articulation on an epic scale of a tone poem, bodying forth both a landscape of the eye and also what Cowan has described as a 'psychic terrain'.[76] The following passage from *A Locale of the Cosmos* may serve to illustrate the effects I have sought for, in combining all three of these factors: philosophical rumination, musical effects and the coursing of a narrative grid, whose psychological and spiritual contours run parallel to the traditions and memories retrieved from the landscape:

gone now beyond the reach of beyond
beyond sweet Bailleul Park with bluey and a bag of chaff
or a fetch of fat rabbits freshly skinned and cleaned
straight from the meat tree
all gone now the him and the likes of him
all gone into sunrise into sunset
all gone the voice gravelly among the almond trees
trailing its silvery laugh
all gone the tanned hands sprinkling sugar or pepper
or droplets of sap and rosewater
like divine tears[77]

Epic continues to confront the poet with the daunting task of meeting, but also of reinventing the demands of its original paradigms. Its field is still panoramic in scale, but its preoccupations have become more diversified and increasingly more autobiographical and even deeply personal; at the same time and, for these very reasons, its dynamics are now in several significant respects perhaps closer to those of novelistic narrative and to elegy and extended lyric.[78] It is, in part, as Peter Sacks has observed of elegy, a problem for other genres (including epic) that may be put thus: whether, in fact, we are now trying

‘to describe rather than interpret’ the conventions and protocols of a genre. The distinction may only be a fine one but it points, I would suggest, to a richer understanding of the purposes of such conventions and protocols. What it is does is put them at the poet’s service, rather than the other way round. It is a principle that informs the shape of much that appears in the following chapters.

As part of this debate, Cowan has identified epic accurately, I believe, as a genre pulled in opposing directions, caught up in, as she puts it, ‘a double mode of vision, both elegiac and prophetic’.[79] While I am not claiming any ‘prophetic’ status for my own poem, certainly not in any Blakean sense at least,[80] the presence of these modes, in some form or other, seems to me incontestable. Their diatonic tensions and corresponding energies work within the poem to register the power of personal and historical experience. It is the attempt, as Cowan has observed:

> to tell a story in which a people honour and sin against their gods, one in which they transcend ordinary limits—and in the telling to create a world large enough to contain the full dimensions of the story. This viewing of the old sacred pattern from an unfamiliar perspective reshapes the myth, bringing into being a new reality.[81]

A Locale of the Cosmos, when measured on this scale of values meets the criteria that have shaped modern epic, whose chief components I have already alluded to. It does so, I believe, both as the evocation and visioning of a landscape in historical time, but also as a record of poetic rumination, a contemporary patterning of what Susanne Langer has described as being, ‘not merely a receptacle of old symbols, namely those of myth, but…a new symbolic form, great with possibilities, ready to take meanings and express ideas that have had no vehicle before.[82] Such a perspective would, I believe, reveal, in the case of *A Locale of the Cosmos*, that the poem is not merely a work of restoration, addressing a lacuna in the history of Australian landscape poetry; rather it is one that incorporates, in Cowan’s words, ‘a poetic cosmos’ (a *mundus imaginalis*) arising from what might seem, to the superficial observer, to be a source that does not suggest itself as being immediately obvious. It is, in some respects, a profoundly Australian predicament, a *leit-motif* that the following passage takes up, not for the last time, in the long curve of the poem’s trajectory:

you see he says this country is older
than any other
the oldest one of all
this catalepsis of rock and sand
their spells cast in rock ruins and sand pans
in clay beds and sluggish billabongs
where onion weed is the watercress
where those who came first
found only the bladderwrack of a dream
in the sleepy shallows
and prying eyes between the trees
looking for lime weed
among confusions of memory[83]

In the chapters that follow, I have had in mind the primary function of a work of exegesis, which is to provide an exposition of a particular text or work of art.[84] In order to provide as much access to the work as possible and to assist in leading the reader towards a fuller interpretation of *A Locale of the Cosmos*, I have chosen to discuss questions of genre and historical developments both within the epic genre and within the context of Australian poetry, in separate chapters, only then turning to a detailed consideration of the poem itself.

I open by examining the question of epic from several points of view, beginning with an exploration, in Chapter One, of definitions of the genre and of problems posed by developments within the history of epic, especially those reflecting significant shifts or departures, in both theme and style, from the genre's governing conventions. I identify Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as a benchmark of the epic project in the post-Miltonic period and, therefore, as a critical turning point in both the thematic direction of epic and its compositional treatment.

In Chapter Two, I examine the development of modern epic and, in particular, the contribution of Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, to radical realignments within the genre. These poets have, in several ways, established a number of important precedents within the genre, some of which have been central to my own enterprise and have encouraged me to pursue certain modest innovations of my own. I discuss those particular aspects of their legacy that have shaped my own thinking about

epic and that have influenced my approach to the solution of certain problems raised by expectations grounded in the genre's conventions.

In Chapter Three, I address the specifically Australian cast of my work. I examine the weight of historical record and its significance, (a traditional function of epic), as well as notions of 'place, 'space' and 'locale', themes anticipated by, and echoed in, the title of the poem. I explore the question of landscape itself as a central focus of epic, as conceived in post Romantic and contemporary terms, together with a consideration of certain philosophical issues raised by the idea of landscape, both as privileged topography, (the Wimmera region of north western Victoria) and as a terrain of the mind. I discuss the rich potential of the genre as a vehicle for the mapping of an imagined world, an interior landscape confirming the work's status as a species of autobiographical epic.

In addressing the importance to my own work of this Romantic theme, I examine a governing trope of the Australian imagination, the idea of 'the bush', as refracted in the work of several Australian artists, including the contemporary painter, Philip Hunter, who have turned their attention to the Wimmera as part of a wider preoccupation with landscape. The discussion of their work leads to an examination of the broad context of colonial and modern poetic representations of Australian landscape, insofar as these bear on the poem's fundamental interests and inform its central concerns.

In Chapter Four I examine questions relating to the poem's tenor and style and the development of its principal motifs, particularly within the historical tradition of landscape poetry in Australia. I argue for the poem's status as a representative example of how modern epics have signalled changes in the inventory of epic's central preoccupations. At the same time, such examples of the genre, including my own, have engaged the generic conventions, whether by degrees of conformity or by acts of subversion, itself a rich tradition within the genre. In this light, by examining a number of precedents, I outline how the poem's philosophical interests reflect ongoing shifts of direction not only in the themes and styles of epic, but also in versions of landscape and the changing language of epic.

NOTES

[1]Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 149. The *Encyclopedia* defines 'bucolic' as: 'the ancient term for that type of poetry which would now generally be called pastoral'; and expands on this by pointing out that '…Virgil's ten pastoral poems, to which he refers as "pastorem carmen" in the fourth georgic…and to which the term "eclogue"…is now generally applied, were called [bucolics] by the Latin grammarians.' The broader term 'eclogue' points to pastoral poetry in general, usually short poems in the form of a dialogue, set in some Arcadian or similar idyllic rural context.
[2] Such as those enunciated, for example, by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1800 and 1802 in *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, see D. J. Enright and Ernst De Chickera, eds., *English Critical Texts*, London, Oxford, University Press, 1962, pp. 162 – 189.
[3] Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1970, p. 92.
[4]'The Epic As Cosmopoesis' in Larry Allums ed., *The Epic Cosmos*, Dallas, The Dallas Institute Publications, 1992, p. 2.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] James Ley, 'Exploring History's Crossroads' in 'A2: Culture And Life', Melbourne, *The Age*, 24 June, 2006, p. 22.
[9] Catherine Lumby, *Tim Storrier: The Art of the Outsider*, Sydney, Craftsman House, 2001, p. 18.
[10] Larry Allums, 'Editor's Introduction', in *The Epic Cosmos*, p. ix.
[11] Ibid.
[12] In respect of the Australian authors listed I refer the reader to *The Nightmarkets* (Alan Wearne), *The Ash Range* (Laurie Duggan) and *The Monkey's Mask* and *Akhenaten* (Dorothy Porter); John Kinsella's *The New Arcadia* (2005) the back cover of which describes the work as being 'an epic book-poem' appeared at a point in time when the composition of my own poem had been completed.
[13] The increasing number of novels in verse in recent years indirectly points to a renewed interest in epic, or at any rate, in epic-like poems of large scale and broad canvas; see, for example, the novels in verse of Australian authors such as Dorothy Porter, Alan Wearne and Les Murray. See also, Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, New York, Vintage, 1999.
[14] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966, p. 249.
[15] Ibid.
[16] In the case of Zukofsky, the final book of '*A*' (Bk. 24) consists of the musical score for an elaborate Masque for five voices, a procedure that goes further than any architectonic claims that I shall make for the symphonic nature of *A Locale of the Cosmos*. See Louis Zukofsky, "*A*", Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978, pp. 585 – 803.
[17] As argued, for example, by M. M. Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 4.
[18] Ibid., p. 20. Bakhtin describes such genres, somewhat harshly in my view, as '…all authority and privilege, all lofty significance and grandeur…[they] abandon the zone of familiar contact for the distanced plane (clothing, etiquette, the style of a hero's speech and the style of speech about him)'. These characteristics were formed over the passage of time, I would suggest, as a patina of qualities that attached themselves like barnacles to the generic ship and which, therefore, tell us more about the perceived, as distinct from the real nature of epic.
[19] Ibid., p. 10.
[20] To use the term applied to Virgilian and, more broadly speaking, post-Virgilian epic; see C. Hugh Holman, ed., *A Handbook To Literature*, Indianapolis, Indiana, Odyssey Press, 1972, p. 195.
[21] This concept is addressed in detail in Chapter Three and also in End Note 49 to Chapter Four.
[22] Shirley La Planche has spoken of the negative responses such landscapes may evince and how such responses run against the grain of romanticized versions of Australian landscape: 'But not everyone,' she has pointed out, ' loves the Outback. There are people who are terrified by so much open space with such meagre vegetation and intense heat.' See Shirley La Planche, *Stepping Lightly on Australia: A Traveller's Guide to Ecotourism*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1995, p. 6.
[23] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994, p. 188.
[24] A measure of the complications surrounding the question of 'the real Australia' may be found in Fred Davison's savage judgement on Henry Lawson in 'The Henry Lawson Myth' (*Australia*, February, 1924): 'He didn't know Australia—not the real Australia—so couldn't write about it.' Quoted in Denton Prout,

Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer, Adelaide, Rigby, 1973, p.298. Many might argue, to the contrary, that Lawson knew 'the real Australia' all too well. The hostile nature of the judgement is the more surprising when one recalls the verdict of H. M. Green: 'If we were set the impossible task of finding some single book to represent Australia, it would have to be one of Lawson's. For an Australian to read him in another country is to breathe the air of home.' Quoted in *The Grey Dreamer*, p. 299.

[25] Russel Ward, 'The Creation of an Image', in Bryce Fraser ed., *Australia: This Land— These People*, Sydney, The Reader's Digest Association, 1971, p. 21.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Robert Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays On Art and Artists*, London, Harvill, 1991, p.6; 'in America,' Hughes has argued, 'nostalgia for things is apt to set in before they go.'

[28] *Australia*, p. 21. As Ward notes, 'Banjo Paterson's first book of verse, "The Man From Snowy River", first published in 1895, sold over one hundred thousand copies.'

[29] To a significant extent this was part of the wider conflict of loyalties between one's own country (Australia) and 'the mother country' (England), a conflict that centred, in part, on the charge that Australian culture was derivative, if not philistine, that the way forward—towards cultural vitality and originality—could only occur if Australians were to stop believing that (as Clark, discussing Vance Palmer's 'plea for a living culture' had scornfully observed) 'nothing was important unless it came out of England, Europe, or the Greeks and the Romans'. See C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia Vol. VI: The Old Dead Tree and the Young Tree Green 1916 – 1935*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1987. p. 11. 'Australians', Clark had concluded, 'should stop spending their time reading second-rate Elizabethan dramatists and read Bernard O'Dowd's *The Bush* or Price Warung's *The Ring*'. Ibid. See also, Vance Palmer, 'Towards A Living Culture', *Fellowship*, May 1916.

[30] A. D. Hope, 'Australia', in John Tranter and Philip Mead eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, Ringwood, Vic., Penguin, 1991, p. 17.

[31] The national ethos and a nation's values may mutate with the passage of time. Certainly for most of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the iconic description of Australia was summed up, as Russel Ward noted, in the following observation: "Australia, men said then [1901, the year of Federation], and for long afterwards, 'rode on the sheep's back'"; see Russel Ward, *A Nation For a Continent*, Heinemann Educational Australia, Richmond, Vic., 1977, p. 20.

[32] In this respect, reaction to the recent death of a contemporary Australian folk hero, the so-called 'Crocodile Man', Steve Irwin, is instructive. Irwin has been described by one journalist as a man who really did 'seem to personify much of the spirit that is usually thought to have its antecedents in the travails of the early explorers, the men and women on the goldfields, the testing of mettle at Gallipoli…' See Steve Waldon, 'Hunt Continues For the Elusive Dinkum Aussie—Or Is the Notion Just a Crock?'. *The Age*, Melbourne, 8 September, 2006, p. 7. Even more apposite to my poem are the opinions of the historian, Geoffrey Blainey, aired in the same article: 'Historian Geoffrey Blainey', Waldon wrote, 'says modern Australia has not entirely dismissed its outback heritage as no longer relevant, even though a character like Steve Irwin seems increasingly remote from the cosmopolitan nature of city life. "When [says Blainey] we talk about the quintessential Australian, we still largely think outside the cities, to our history on the land—we retain the memory of adventure."' Another observer, Labor politician Lindsay Tanner, is quoted in the same article describing Irwin as 'a kind of "modern Clancy of the Overflow".'

[33] Henry Lawson, 'The Drover's Wife', in Douglas Stewart ed., *Short Stories of Australia: The Lawson Tradition*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1967, p. 6.

[34] I have in mind not only Randolph Stow's and Patrick White's landscape mythography, but also, for instance, Sydney Nolan's desert landscapes and, more pertinently to the *locus* of my own interests, the haunting abstracted Wimmera landscapes of Philip Hunter.

[35] Mrs. Hubert Heron, 'Australie', quoted in Bill Wannan, *The Australians: Yarns, Legends, Ballads*, Melbourne, Currey, O'Neil, 1980, p. 224.

[36] 'Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes: A Dedication' in Frank Maldon Robb ed., *The Poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 115.

[37] Leon Cantrell, ed., *Bards, Bohemians and Bookmen: Essays In Australian Literature*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1976, p. 52.

[38] Ibid., p. 51.

[39] I acknowledge the prior occupation of the land by the indigenous peoples of the region and their deep attachment to the land. The rich history of their mythic stories and songlines lie beyond the circumference of my poetic aims, a matter that I shall elaborate upon in the following chapter and in also chapter five.

[40] Judith Wright has written of the 'the European consciousness' being negated by such landscapes and, hence, of reconciliation as being 'a matter of death—the death of the European mind, its absorption into the

soil it has struggled against'; see Judith Wright, 'The Upside Down Hut', 1961, in John Barnes, *The Writer In Australia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 335.
[41] Bernard O'Dowd, 'Australia', in *Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, p. 95.
[42] Charles Harpur, 'A Flight of Wild Ducks', in Les Murray ed., *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 34.
[43] As Stendhal once said: 'to make an experience live artistically one must bury it psychologically.' Quoted in *The Grey Dreamer*, p. 235.
[44] *The Australians*, p. 224.
[45] 'On Sitting Back and Thinking about Porter's Boeotia', in Les Murray, *A Working Forest*, Sydney, Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997, p. 123.
[46] Ibid., p. 122.
[47] Ibid., p. 123.
[48] H. Rieth, *A Locale of the Cosmos*, (hereafter *LC*), Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 2, pp. 18 - 19, unpublished manuscript, 2006.
[49] In *The Art of Memory*, Yates had emphasized the importance of memory in the earliest stages of the history of epic. 'Mnemosyne, said the Greeks, is the mother of the Muses: the history of the training of this most fundamental and elusive of human powers will plunge us into deep waters.' The depth of these waters may be measured not only in terms of historical antiquity, but also in the power of epic to articulate communal memory on a vast scale. See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978, p. 11.
[50] *Working Forest*, p. 123.
[51] Ibid., p. 124.
[52] *Aeneid*, Book One, ll. 158 –169, in *The Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. C. Day Lewis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 137.
[53] See Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World*, London, Paul Elek, 1973, p. 6.
[54] Ibid., p. 5.
[55] Ibid., p. 6.
[56] Pearsall and Salter have noted that the *Odyssey*, which in their view is 'as much romance as epic', 'introduces into Western literature the idealised landscape. It was only much later, in Chaucer for example, that landscape motifs assumed an importance independent of their narrative function.
[57] The question of the change in tonality introduced by Virgil is of interest in itself in the light of later Romantic approaches to epic themes and, in particular, to the tone of *The Prelude*. Panofsky makes the following observation: 'In Virgil's ideal Arcady human suffering and superhumanly perfect surroundings create a dissonance. This dissonance, once felt, had to be resolved, and it was resolved in that vespertinal mixture of sadness and tranquillity which is perhaps Virgil's most personal contribution to poetry'. He could as easily have been speaking of Wordsworth. See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Harmonsdworth, Penguin, 1970, p. 346.
[58] *Working Forest*, p. 124.
[59]Weiskel offers this definition: 'The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human—God or the gods, the daemon or Nature—is matter for disagreement. What, if anything, defines the range of the human is scarcely less sure'. See Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 3.
[60] *Working Forest*, p. 125.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Peter Fallon, ed., *Michael Hartnett: Translations, A Selection*, Loughcrew, County Meath, Ireland, The Gallery Press, 2003, p. 126.
[64] Ibid.
[65] S. W. Wooldridge and W. G. East, *The Spirit And Purpose Of Geography*, London, Hutchinson & Co, 1967, p. 19. '*Zussamenhang*', as the authors point out, is ' a recurrent key-word' both in Humboldt's *Cosmos*, 1845, and also in Ritter's, *Erdkunde*, 1817. Together, these were pioneer texts on the psychological and spiritual influences of geography and on the notion of a 'sense of place'.
[66] *Working Forest*, p. 126.
[67] Quoted in C. R. Twidale, *Geomorphology, with special reference to Australia*, Melbourne, Nelson, 1968, p. 341.
[68] *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 2.
[69] The emotional and psychological ramifications of this process, as Edward Said has pointed out, are demonstrably the stuff of poetry. 'The geographic boundaries,' Said has observed, 'accompany the social,

ethnic and cultural ones in expected ways. Yet often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is based on a very un-rigorous idea of what is "out there," beyond one's own territory…So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here. The same process occurs when we deal with time. Much of what we associate with or even know about such periods as "long ago" or "the beginning" or "at the end of time" is poetic- made up.' See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 1995, pp. 54 – 55.

[70] Jenny Zimmer, 'A magical Hunter', review, *The Sunday Herald*, 10 December, 1989, quoted in Ashley Crawford, *Wimmera: The Work Of Philip Hunter*, Fishermans Bend, Thames & Hudson, 2002, p. 50.

[71] Gary Catalano, 'A shared ambivalence', review, *The Age*, 20 December, 1989, quoted in *Wimmera*, p. 50.

[72] T. S. Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry', in *On Poetry and Poets*, London, Faber and Faber, 1957, p. 38.

[73] T. S. Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', in *Selected Essays*, *1917-1932*, London, Faber and Faber, 1965, p. 137.

[74] Quoted in Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, p. vii.

[75] As the *New Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 372, observes, 'Virgil uses Homer as a sounding board rarely for simple harmony but to secure extra and discordant resonance for his modern symphony.'

[76] *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 3.

[77] *LC*, Book. II, 'The Road to Wal Wal', Part 1, p. 27.

[78] See Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies In The Genre From Spenser To Yeats*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, p. 1.

[79] *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 5.

[80] Blake's contribution to the epic tradition is formidable in its density of meanings (as well as in size) and does not invite either assimilation or imitation easily.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy In A New Key: A Study In The Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, New York, Mentor, 1951, p. 165.

[83] *LC*, Book VIII, 'Mutton Swamp', Part, 1, p. 150.

[84] I draw a distinction between exegetical presentation and critical analysis, bearing in mind that qualifiers operate in either case for, as Empson rightly explains: 'I admit that the analysis of a poem can only be a long way of saying what is said anyhow by the poem it analyses'. See William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1961, p. 254.

CHAPTER ONE

THE QUESTION OF EPIC

Epic as a literary genre occupies, perhaps, a unique place both within the history of literature and of civilisations. Over many centuries it has established itself as the prototype, if not the very archetype of poetic expression. As the voice of a people, it gave expression to their beliefs and values, commemorating and glorifying their past, endowing their present with stature and continuity and investing their future with the aura of legend. Cumulative layers of *epos*, as 'word, speech, tale, song',[1] were gathered, firstly through oral recitation and later in written form, and then combined into grand narratives, to give strength and permanence to a cultural identity. Epic, then, was from the beginning, poetry at the apogee of its circumscription: the articulation of a rich and comprehensive vision of the world.

The term 'epic' has long stood for an artistic work reflective of a significance equal to its size; but also, it should be added, possessed of more various qualities than long standing habits or mere conventional acceptance have led us to believe. *Webster's* informs us that the term, as an adjective, embraces the following notions: 'specifically a) heroic; grand; majestic; imposing; b) dealing with or characterized by events of historical or legendary importance.'[2] These, I would argue, are qualities that may readily be observed in any one of several genres. As a noun, *Webster's* begins with the usual suspects:

> 1. a long narrative poem about the deeds of a traditional or historical hero or heroes of high station; typically, a) a poem like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with a background of warfare and the supernatural, a dignified style, and certain formal characteristics of structure (plunging in medias res, catalogue passages, invocations of the muse, etc.); *classical epic*; b) a poem like Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, in which such structure and conventions are applied to later or different materials; *art epic; literary epic*; c) a poem like *Beowulf*, *the Nibelungenlied*, and the *Chanson de Roland*, considered as expressing the early ideals, character and traditions of a people or nation, as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* expressed those of the Greeks; *folk epic*; *national epic*. 2. any long narrative poem, regarded as having the style, structure, and importance of an epic; as Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the *epic* of the Ages of Faith. 3. a prose narrative, play, motion picture, etc. regarded as having the qualities of an epic. 4. a series of events regarded as a proper subject for an epic.[3]

This much seems reasonably clear: that the definition of epic is, like that of any other literary genre, subject not only to modification, but also to ample demonstrations of any number of acquired characteristics, often more easily identified with other and distinctly

separate genres. The borders between genres are not clear-cut and are, to some degree, porous; moreover, epic poetry in particular has always been a form whose constitutive elements include and, indeed, embrace qualities or features not only cognate with other genres, but ones usually identified as being definitive of them, as being genre-specific.

Epic is, and in fact has always been, an osmotic genre, incorporating elements of narrative, lyric, elegy and panegyric, eulogy, satire, hortatory address and private rumination, fantastic lore and richly layered fairy tale. The episodic nature of the Homeric epic, for example, points to its origin in rhapsodic and spontaneous peroration. In similar fashion, the Nordic and Icelandic sagas, as also the Balkan songs of Serbo-Croatian antiquity, for example, Avdo's *Osmanbey Delibegovic and Pavicevic Luka* provide further testimony of this process.[4]

Not surprisingly, therefore, when one is asked to define epic, it is clear that the question is beset with problems and that many answers to it are likely to meet with objections, often tinged, in matters of scholarship, with a territorial colouring. Some of these are in relation to the ambits of the term's definition; some are in respect of challenges to the permeable nature of its supposedly core characteristics; others, again, are more or less openly hostile not only towards what may or may not qualify as 'epic', but to the very idea that such literary productions may continue to be viable, or even possible in the modern age. In short, any work of poetry that today lays claim to the epic form, is liable to meet with a certain degree of resistance. This is a matter of some significance for my own purposes, when considering a poem such as *A Locale of the Cosmos*, which, as a contemporary epic, represents my own contribution to modern ventures in the genre and which forms the central component of this doctoral dissertation. In this and the following chapters I shall enlarge on the reasons why I believe this resistance manifests an insufficient awareness of significant changes that the form has undergone in the modern period. These changes, in turn, reflect the qualities of adaptableness and fertile invention that have now long been in evidence in epic poetry, together with a continuing responsiveness on the part of epic poets in meeting new challenges in the area of both the genre's form and content.

The proliferation of epic in the modern period suggests that the resistance met with by modern epics is more likely to be found among traditionalists, for whom change is unsettling and therefore unwelcome. It is equally true, however, that *The Cantos* and *Paterson*, for example, while they may have proved difficult and even confounding in their non-adherence to convention, have also met with respect and admiration. They are examples of the genre that are manifestly alive and that continue to intrigue and to give pleasure to readers. Perhaps more than anything else it is both its visibly imposing monumentality and its reputation for being lofty and ceremonial, that has contributed to the perception that any change or innovation within the genre should not result in any diminution of these qualities. Epic, in this etiolated view remains (and must be doomed to remain) impervious not only to change but also to any meaningful or dynamic development. The fate of any genre is all but sealed if new growth and bold experimentation are checked or meet with contumely.

In its earliest stages epic poetry served both as a vehicle for the celebration of a group or tribal ethos, as embodied in the legendary exploits of certain outstanding individuals and also as a hallowed repository of historical record and immemorial legend, incorporating pregnant conceptions of the sacred and profane, of the human and the divine. *The Oxford English Dictionary* adumbrates these features in its various entries under 'epic':

> (L. epicus; Gr. έπικός: 1. Pertaining to that species of poetic composition (see EPOS) represented typically by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which celebrates in the form of a continuous narrative the achievements of one or more heroic personages of history or tradition. 2. Such as is described in epic poetry… The typical epics, the Homeric poems, the *Niebelungenlied* etc., have often been regarded as embodying a nation's conception of its own past history, or of the events in that history which it finds most worthy of remembrance. Hence by some writers the phrase *national epic* has been applied to any imaginative work (whatever its form) which is considered to fulfil this function.[5]

From these entries we may see that it is not surprising that historical accounts of the genre and of developments within it have been, in relation to Western literary history, invariably measured against the Homeric models. Equally, by its use of such qualifiers as 'typically' and 'typical' and such expressions as 'have often been regarded', 'some writers' and 'which is considered to fulfil,' these entries silently imply the presence of

atypical examples of the genre, based upon variations and departures from the form and content of the standard model.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have occupied for such a length of time so high a prominence, that any attempt at a definition of the genre that begins to stray outside the compass of their folk lays and bodies of legend or that seeks to challenge the narrative and stylistic categories established within and by these poems, risks being seen as guilty not only of iconoclasm, but of apostasy. Whether the argument be, for instance, over metrical fidelity to the Homeric models or to the employment of their standard literary devices, or about the preoccupation with the heroic ethos, or, again, the relations between mortals and deities, there seems little hope of arriving at universal agreement as to what epic is, or what epic ought to be about.[6]

In her book on Milton's epic, Joan Mallory Webber observed that the only agreement that appears to have gained universal assent may be reduced to this minimalist formula: epic is 'long' and 'narrative'.[7] This is an attractively simple formulation, but of limited use, since 'long' is sufficiently inexact and 'narrative' sufficiently broad, as to make the former appear applicable to any lengthy poem, for example to Basil Bunting's 'Briggflatts',[8] while the latter, in turn, may incorporate almost any literary text, from a child's bedtime story to a weighty tome such as *The Lord of the Rings*. Over and above that, the term 'narrative', when topologically considered, would appear to have as its chief provenance the novel. That said, it has been cogently argued (by Tomas Hägg for example) that Homer's *Odyssey* is the first novel in world literature.[9] All of which points to an underlying problem: namely, how are definitions of genres consolidated and, to what extent, as genres, do they remain distinct from each other?

In the case of epic, arguably the earliest and therefore (as one might be forgiven to expect) the most likely to be settled of literary genres, the question has been and continues to be in dispute. As W. F. Jackson Knight had observed: 'It is hard to know what epic is, because Homer set the pattern of it, and it is it very hard to be sure what are our own thoughts of Homer, however reverent and delighted our adoration'.[10] The problem, it would appear, is compound: it is one not only of scholarly definition, but also of paralysis induced by admiration, together with a perception of inescapable influence.

Despite this, the imitation and essaying of the protocols that gathered around epic was considered to be not only a normal literary procedure for a poet venturing on a grand poetic design but was held to be the only acceptable or even allowable way of doing so. Hence, in their departure, or degree of departure from such practice, later examples of epic (especially those belonging to the Romantic and modern period—ventures that challenged or openly opposed the tradition) have not infrequently been greeted with derogation, or have otherwise been judged in hostile terms. They have been seen as having failed to conform not only to established codes but also to a conception of genre as a timeless and unalterable category, in which expectations are forever heightened and at the same time deflated, by the overshadowing presence of a venerable but imposing past.

Disagreement among scholars and commentators on the question of the definition of epic is therefore rich in historical antecedents; it forms a debate that continues unabated and whose resolution is not likely to be settled. As Jackson Knight, commenting on Virgil's *Aeneid* had observed, almost despairingly: 'The *Aeneid* is epic, whatever epic may be; though scarcely three poems exist which fit any available definition of epic equally well'.[11] On matters of composition, on questions of style and of authorial aims and intentions, the argument shows no signs of reaching any wide consensus. Both in technical terms and in respect of its themes and preoccupations, epic poetry evinces numerous and often substantial changes in prosodic development and thematic direction. It is worth being reminded of the fact that Virgil himself was seen as making a radical departure from tradition (in his case, the native Italic epic tradition, represented by Polybius, Naevius and Ennius) in modelling himself on Homer. As Jackson Knight somewhat wryly pointed out, in taking the direction he did 'Vergil made a bold decision for great poetry, on a great scale'.[12] 'Simple as though the idea at least may seem,' Knight went on to argue, 'it was an act of brilliance in Vergil's time to desert fashion and be Homeric at all'.[13] This must surely represent one of the more extraordinary paradoxes in the history of Homeric influence.

The attraction of diluted descriptions of epic, such as those that confine the genre to poems that are examples of 'a long narrative'[14] is to be found in the convenience with which numerous poems of great length, written in direct imitation of, or out of rivalry with the Homeric models, form a specific class. Such works include, for instance,

Virgil's *Aeneid* and the *Lusiads* of Camoen. The crucial factor uniting such works is that they share many significant resemblances, especially, as Bowra had observed, 'in scale or temper or subject'.[15] Furthermore, as Griffin has observed, such resemblances were already underlined in ancient times in 'the vast mass of Greek commentaries on Homer'.[16] The value of the earliest commentaries, Griffin suggests, lies partly in their acting as a 'check' and counter-weight to the so-called 'Parry-Lord hypothesis' whose centrifugal view of epic composition has, as Mouton claimed, called into question 'at a deeper level, all literary criticism of the Homeric poems'.[17] Indeed, Griffin has pointed to equally telling parallels in shared resemblances among Near Eastern literary texts (including Old Testament texts) contemporaneous both to Homer and Hesiod and, furthermore, to important correspondences in motifs and conceptions to be found in Germanic and Celtic literature.[18]

In light of these considerations I propose the following as a working definition of epic that I have adopted, as one labouring in the field: Epic is a long narrative in verse, the scale of whose conception is matched by a comprehensive exploration of its themes. Such a work, I would argue, registers, in poetic terms, a wide-ranging, perhaps compendious view of a particular world, one that reflects a vision of life, as it has been, as it is now lived and as it may be dreamed of. The genre, in these terms, is well suited (precisely because of the pliancy and resilience of its *modus operandi* as a long and narrative construct) to knitting together the fabric of a particular world and to weaving an historical tapestry that highlights patterns of communal and personal memory on a large scale.

Just as, in thematic terms, epic's central concerns have not always been confined to war and heroic exploit (though these may have been the staples of the traditional epic storyline) so too the generic meter itself may be seen to have undergone a similar process of change. What, then, are we to understand by the term 'epic verse'? The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for example, were composed (whether orally or in written form, or in some combined way) in dactylic hexameter, which has been called the 'epic meter',[19] a measure that allows little in the way of variations or departures from its norms, since, as has been observed, 'the meter is based on pronunciation time [in Greek] not, as in our language, [English] on stress'.[20] Yet, as Webber had rightly suggested, 'the epic escapes whatever boundaries it may be assigned'.[21]

The characteristics of epic have, then, as the above considerations make clear not only evolved, but also been in dispute from the beginning. *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*[22] defines epic as:

> a long narrative poem that treats a single heroic figure or a group of such figures and concerns an historical event, such as a war or conquest, or an heroic quest or some other significant mythic or legendary achievement that is central to the tradition and belief of its culture.[23]

I regard epic to be a form of sufficient resilience and adaptability, however, as to combine some of the more traditional elements of the genre (as mooted in *The New Princeton* definition above) with significant innovations and departures, such as those belonging to post-Miltonic epic and, in particular, to the philosophical and autobiographical epic increasingly prominent from the Romantic period up to the present day.

As the *New Princeton* entry on 'Epic' points out, the form 'incorporates within it not only the methods of narrative poetry…but also of lyric and dramatic poetry…It includes and expands upon panegyric and lament'.[24] Further, as the *New Princeton* also observes, eighteenth century English and German Shakespearean critical theory[25] had resulted in an even more conspicuous 'breach in the "rules"'.[26] The *Encyclopedia's* use of inverted commas for 'rules', signals both their fluid state and the systemic vulnerability of genre formation to historical influences. As the *Encyclopedia* notes, from a period as early as that of Aristotle's successor at the Lyceum one may discern important changes in the direction and definition of epic since the description of epic attributed to Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus already 'shifts the emphasis from form to content'.[27]

In the wake of the eighteenth century Shakespearean studies alluded to above, the Augustan mock-heroic had already, it seems to me, fired a shot across the bow of classical epic (both heroic and Miltonic) exposing the traditional thematic material to parodic treatment and introducing unconventional metrical and other devices. Furthermore, as M. H. Abrams has pointed out in his discussion of Wordsworth and, as I shall argue shortly, *The Prelude* as an epic venture may fruitfully be approached as being, in Abrams' words, 'an epic expansion of the mode of 'Tintern Abbey'.[28] That is to say, the epic at this Romantic juncture in the history of the genre might plausibly be

thought of as a substantial extension of the longer lyric, incorporating the ruminative and profoundly introspective elements of that particular mode on a greatly expanded scale. This is one reason why I am somewhat inclined to take issue with C. Hugh Holman in his *A Handbook to Literature*, where he has defined epic as:

> A long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race.[29]

The characteristics enumerated by Holman were, it is true, long regarded as being more or less definitive. However, they were never exhaustive, either of the genre's subject matter or of its imaginative possibilities. Since Milton, epic has come to be seen as a literary genre highly suited, for instance, to sustained poetic rumination and to the elaboration of a highly personal and even idiosyncratic vision. In similar fashion the 'heroic proportions' of the central figures of post- Romantic and modern epic have been treated, more recently, in subversive terms or, as in the case of my own poem, have been concerned to explore new grounds upon which to base the idea of the heroic.

It was Aristotle who had originally pointed to certain characteristics of epic that were judged to be closely related[30]: its sheer scale and monumentality on the one hand and the organisation of its narrative action, plucked from a store of loosely differentiated episodes or fragments, on the other.[31] Epic, in Aristotle's view, was a narrative poem of action, in which the nucleus of the story represents an organizing principle for a whole series of radial episodes. The emphasis is clearly on the underlying, but all-encompassing character, or to use the term of an early Renaissance commentator on Aristotle, Robortelli, the overriding 'thesis',[32] rather than on the taxonomy of its storytelling details, however variegated and interesting in themselves. Thus, it was the 'wrath' of Achilles or the 'quest' of Aeneas in search of a new home that generated the power, as well as providing the frame of reference, for the poet's vision. The storyline of the poem, or in Robortelli's terms, the narrative's 'taxis' of interwoven sub-plots, was of secondary significance, however dramatic or inventive in execution these may have been. Such matters point to the sense of narrative urgency in formal epic, noted as early as Horace,[33]

in contradistinction to the more relaxed development of the story in later epic, where latitudes are taken with the Aristotelian categories.[34]

If, as Northrop Frye has claimed, epic incorporates a concept of 'total action', then such a poem is primarily concerned with that portion of the total action that conveys the essence of the narrative material. According to James Nohrnberg, something in the nature of a cultural law operates, whereby the mass of narrative material not exploited in epic itself is diffused into other, though related genres, such as romance.[35] Conversely, in the case of my own poem, something of its impetus may be said to derive from the romance of, for example, nineteenth and early twentieth century versions of Australian landscape. *A Locale of the Cosmos*, in the variety of its interests and preoccupations, reflects some of the strategies described above and, while mindful of the traditional Aristotelian categories, is geared to a repositioning of the genre in such a way that questions of traditional meter, unity of action or the focus on a single heroic figure are no longer primary concerns.

Epic has, to a considerable extent, developed by the interlacing of a series of smaller narratives, forming a necklace of episodes, each in turn adding to those before and anticipating those that follow.[36] This process shares some affinities with the cumulative nature of chronicle and legend both of which are, in historiographical terms, precursors to the writing of history itself. The more literary the fashioning of the epic, I would suggest, the more complex and subtle the degree and quality of the design became. 'The ideas are heuristic in any case', as Brian Edwards has observed. 'Most of the grand works of world literature', he has argued, may be seen as:

> either formally complete or as essentially fragmentary, both at the same time. Homer's model epics (or Virgil, Dante or Milton) are constructions built of fragments (which is to say pieces, selections, shifts in place, event, attention). For every realist or modernist masterpiece there will be a 'postmodernist' reader. Either we accentuate the whole or the parts of which it is composed. There may be big things at stake here—to hand over to the parts, linguistically, philosophically, historically, politically is (I think) the better to give more of the voices a part of the play, a piece of the pie, recognition in the great matrix of human possibility. If it is a democratic or levelling process, it also affirms the delights of heterogeneity (the many and the divided) against the reductive claims of homogeneity (with its claims to authority and to power).[37]

It follows, then, that the nature of the narrative itself must inevitably change in the process.[38] As Bowra had suggested: 'there is a tendency in post-heroic poetry to make the story more than a story'.[39] The literary epic, including such modern examples as *Paterson*, demonstrates an increasingly more complex and innovatory type of treatment, while retaining in large measure the detachment and dignity of heroic epic; as Bowra added: 'post-heroic poetry tends to give a new dimension to its story by making it, in some sense, symbolical or allegorical.'[40]

There are, then, quite distinct differences to be observed between oral or folk epics (such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Mahabharata*, the Old English *Beowulf* and the Spanish poem of the *Cid*) and the large body of literary or as Holman describes it, 'art epic',[41] of which Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* are major representatives. The folk or heroic epic is an early prototype of the genre and, for centuries, established the pattern of epic theme and style. The traditions of oral epic may be traced from Homer, through the medieval period in poems as diverse as the *Song of Roland*, the Finnish *Kalevala* and the Germanic *Nibelungenlied*. By contrast, the literary, or art epic, of which Virgil's *Aeneid* is the pre-eminent example, is a form of the genre that, while it shares many of the interests and emphases of oral or folk epic, reflects a kind of elaboration in its artistic design and execution quite different from that of epics redacted by editors at a later stage.[42] It also reflects, perhaps, a greater degree of literary sophistication, of ambivalence in the author's mind, especially in respect of certain themes that were treated with more directness and candour in the earliest examples of the genre.[43]

Even within the literary epic tradition, however, a poem such as *The Divine Comedy* already signals important shifts away from the Virgilian model, both in thematic material and in treatment. Such differences may be observed not only between various epics but also between their degree of conformity to, or divergence from, the earlier tradition. Virgil, for instance, wrote consciously within the Homeric tradition. *The Aeneid* dutifully begins with the traditional invocation to the muse and incorporates many other of the conventional stylistic features of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, among them the use of extended simile and stock epithet and the enlisting of an elaborate theology and divine machinery. At the same time, however, it is a more self-consciously meditative and

philosophical work, suggesting that the heroic ethos of earlier folk epic was, in fact, becoming problematical.

For all its conformity to the Homeric model *The Aeneid* represents a significant shift in the direction of epic poetry. Although the *Odyssey*, in terms of complexity and subtlety, loses nothing in comparison to the *Aeneid*, the latter is arguably a more complicated and, in psychological terms, more problematic work. Nevertheless, its continuity with Homeric epic is clear and, in the main, it follows the folk epic patterns of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* Milman Parry, in his wide-ranging study of the origins and characteristics of Homeric epic,[44] had correctly pointed to a number of themes central to early epic and to a range of devices usually found in the composition of epic verse, some of them arising out of the oral nature of the earliest traditions. That tradition enshrined as epic's original distinguishing features monumentality of scale, grandeur of conception and elevation of style.

Equally significant to the tradition of heroic epic was the fact that, while focusing on war and heroic exploit, epic also concerned itself with many of the most fundamental and enduring themes of universal human experience, such as love and death, suffering and joy, the nature and origins of good and evil, the links between the natural world and the human world and between both of these and the world of the supernatural. Ancient epic was informed by a powerful sense of fate and destiny, in which the relations between humans and the gods, especially heroes beloved of the gods, were of central importance and in which the mythic dimensions of divine and human action alike were paramount. As Walter Otto had observed: 'In that early age man could see the world and his own existence in the mirror of genuine myth'.[45] Divine action and intervention in human affairs was commonplace and both Homer and Virgil showed themselves to be profoundly receptive to the imaginative realisation of the supernatural. As Otto had pointed out: 'The Greek at every turn of life saw the visage of a god…'[46] Furthermore, ancient epic invariably set itself to tell a story of origins (whether of tribes or nations) and their conflicts, in which the narrative is located in a distant past (the 'glory days') a period which the oral and formulaic Homeric poems and Virgil's sophisticated literary narrative both richly evoke.

The role played in the development of epic by memory was, therefore, a vital one. However, memory was not only a storehouse of recollection but also a key to epic's imaginative and intellectual pleasures. One effect of this process was the emergence of epic as a matrix of knowledge, as the touchstone of the culture; another was the sacred function of epic as preserver of the celebrated exploits and lineages of the tribe. However the aesthetic dimension of memory, I would argue, may have been paramount. As the medieval author of the *Poetica Nova* observed (in his colloquy on 'Memory')— memory is deeply bound up with 'delight in knowing'.[47]

The artistic accomplishments of Greek and Roman epic are, indeed, astonishing and reveal, among other things, an impressive array of narrative and imaginative powers. The ultimate effect of these was to create an exceptionally vivid and intense impression upon the genre's audience. The artistic methods of the epic poets included—the maintenance of a tone of great solemnity; the use of apt and recurring epithets; an ordered rhythmic flow founded on the rhythms of the dactylic hexameter; the wholesale employment of formulaic phrases and stock epithets, of metonyms and similes, many of extended length and complexity—all of which contributed to their poems a host of potent and unforgettable images. The inventory of epic has been drawn up from a storehouse of such abundance and variety as to be almost inexhaustible. Nor does the above list complete the quantity and variety of devices available. Homeric scholars such as Bowra have also pointed to the power and subtlety of the paratactic method of composition as adding further dramatic effects, including a heightened sense of immediacy and suspense within the narrative.[48] And, last but by no means least, the early epics were conveyed through the voice of an omniscient narrator whose identity remained hidden and whose majestic style of story telling, as may be gathered from the internal evidence of the poems themselves, was spellbinding.[49]

In her discussion of the genre, Louise Cowan has drawn attention to the fact that epic is a form cognate with what she calls 'its function as 'cosmopoesis'',[50] a claim that has contributed, inadvertently perhaps, to the misconception of the genre as transfixed and locked in the past.[51] All poetical successors to the classical tradition were confronted with the task of matching what Cowan has described as 'the assumption of epic sublimity and awe',[52] a prospect so intimidating that, as Cowan argued, it has misled some poets (and no doubt, many readers) into thinking of epic as an alien and uninviting genre. Epic

poetry became typecast as being of a kind that demanded artificially high levels of formality, both of tone and diction, as well as obliging poets to adhere to an unrelenting and, in effect, paralysing application of metrical uniformity, as well as to other stylistic restrictions.

Problems of generic definition and attribution within the genre are such that even the barest definition of epic, however typecast it may appear, is likely to raise more questions than it answers. How long, for instance, must a poem be to qualify as epic?[53] It seems that there is more to epic than mere size; at the same time, definitions of the genre (including Jackson Knight's)[54] have become so plastic that epic verse is many things to many people. As to its length, Cowan, for example, has argued that comprehensiveness is, on the contrary, a more accurate index:

> What gives the epic its cultural priority [is] its making of a cosmos wherein the other genres find their place and within which human life may be envisioned in its varied dimensions. A cosmos is a self-enclosed state of order which must be intuited; and certainly the epic cosmos—a poetic image—cannot be logically encompassed or defined, nor can all its components be listed.[55]

Cowan has nominated four features pertaining to what she has described as 'the world in which epic action takes place'; these are: the 'penetration of the veil separating material and immaterial existence'; an 'expansion of time'; the 'restoration of equilibrium between masculine and feminine forces; and, 'one that is no doubt paramount…the epic's sense of motion…its linking of human action to a…destiny, toward which it senses history moves.'[56] I find this inventory to be fertile in its suggestiveness and my own epic praxis reflects its broad concerns.

On the question of 'narrative', confusion reigns.[57] J Hillis Miller has argued that in order to qualify as one:

> Any narrative…must have some version of these elements: beginning, sequence, reversal; personification, or more accurately and technically stated, *prosopopoeia*…bringing "to life"; some patterning or repetition of elements surrounding a nuclear figure or complex word. Even narratives that do not fit this paradigm draw their meaning from the way they play ironically against our deeply engrained expectations that all narratives are going to be like that.[58]

This definition would, in broad terms, serve my poem and do justice to its historical and philosophical aims. The problem of the definition of epic is not a question of defending spurious distinctions between different forms of comprehensiveness within different genres. I am not arguing, for instance, for any superiority of epic over other genres in relation to depth or profundity of themes. Seventeenth century Metaphysical poetry, for instance, can be shown to address themes and to employ literary devices of great philosophical complexity and poetic sophistication. To suggest that epic alone is, or ought to be the genre, even the preferred genre, for an essaying of profound or abstruse questions, or for the tackling of what may be described as cosmic themes, would be to misconstrue what modern examples of the genre, such as *The Cantos*, *Paterson* and *The Maximus Poems* have aimed at.[59]

The narrative of *A Locale of the Cosmos* may well be perceived as belonging to a class of those that, in Miller's terms, 'do not fit this paradigm'[60] and whose anti-narrative (in terms of the traditional narrative expectations aroused by the epic genre) 'plays ironically', as Miller has suggested, 'against our deeply engrained expectations'.[61] Its narrative structure and direction are not palpably shaped and directed towards telling a story with an ostensible beginning, middle and end.[62] In fact, following a lead first suggested by Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and developed by his post-Romantic and modern successors, modern poets venturing into the genre have been able to rescue the form from what W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks had aptly described as 'a recipe for epic in vacuo'.[63]

While it is not my intention to labour at length over the wider arguments surrounding the application of the comparative method, any reasonable examination of the method's application makes it clear that comparisons in the genre quickly lead to contradiction and confusion. This may be observed, for example, in the debates over Homer, stretching from Abbe d'Aubignac in 1664 to von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf and on to the present day. The further reaches of this argument have touched the status of many different kinds of epic; for example, poems such as *Beowulf*, the *Song of Roland* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, all of which have been shown to share much in common with the Homeric epics, though in size they are barely a quarter as long and in theme and treatment reveal important departures or shifts of emphasis. Together, these poems immediately call into question the orders of magnitude and length associated with the genre. The question

becomes: of what order of magnitude must the work be? And, indeed, just how long? The Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and the Norman-French *Song of Roland* are manifestly heroic, no less than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and this is a characteristic of sufficient importance, in comparative terms, as to suggest that questions of scale and length, though of considerable significance are, nevertheless, not the sole consideration in arriving at a judgement of the genre's most compelling characteristics. Be that as it may, size in the field of epic has always mattered and continues to matter, in a manner similar to the concept of the heroic that, however much it may have mutated, continues to exert an undeniable influence on our perceptions of epic.

The whole field of Homeric criticism may be taken as a paradigm in any attempts to reach agreement about the nature and character of epic. Arguments between the so-called 'Analysts' and 'Unitarians' in Homeric studies have not satisfactorily resolved the question either of the nature of epic or, in the case of Homer, his identity.[64] Bowra has described the whole imbroglio, rather dispiritingly, as leading to 'a dead end'.[65] However, I am inclined to think that all such arguments have value, insofar as they contribute to our continuing interest in and fascination with epic poems and with the broader questions that the genre raises. It seems to me a matter of considerable importance, for instance, that epic may be distinguished from other verse narratives by certain qualities of tone and diction, by what Bowra and others have identified in the Homeric epics as the signature qualities of detachment and dignity.[66] This is not to say that all subsequent epics must be shown to embody only these qualities, but that such tonal characteristics may be said to adhere as a generic characteristic, no less than conceptions of the heroic, however much the notion of the heroic or the quality of the detachment may alter over time.

The high-powered language of Miltonic epic (easily mistaken, perhaps, as high-flown) together with the *ersatz* diction and contrived sonorities of Milton's imitators have contributed significantly to perceptions of the genre as long-winded and monotonous. This regrettable state of affairs arose, in some measure, as a result of a failure (or a failure of nerve) on the part of his immediate successors to desist from aping Milton by producing 'official heroic poetry'.[67] As Harold Bloom has pointed out, 'Milton's most characteristic stance is his *davhar* or word that is also an act and a thought'.[68] The style and texture, as well as the themes of Milton's epic do not, I would suggest, lend

themselves readily to modern eyes and ears. Milton's *modus operandi* was, as Bloom has argued, to 'station himself, with radical originality, in an anxiously emptied-out present time, between a culturally wealthy but error-laden past and a weird problematic future'.[69] In fact, as Bloom has declared, '*Paradise Lost* is the most resolutely archaic of literary works, more archaic even than Hesiod, or Genesis, or Freud's *Totem and Taboo*'.[70] Furthermore, those verbal qualities of narrative diffuseness and verbal density that actually were galvanizing features of the genre in Milton's epic were (as Bloom also observed) evidence of Milton's 'rhetorical or psychic strength, poetic power proper'.[71] 'Milton's power', Bloom argued:

> is not what our current School of Resentment loathes yet purports to study; not social, political, economic power…Milton's power is *potentia*, pathos as the capacity for more life. Blake, Whitman, D. H. Lawrence were heroic vitalists, but compared to Milton they can seem involuntary parodists of his effortless and more sublime vitalism. They were compelled to be programmatic, while mere being provided him with heroic argument.[72]

In considering Milton's epic prosody one is inevitably drawn (as Matthew Arnold was) to the singularity of Homeric plainness of speech;[73] it is a quality with which I have endeavoured to imbue my own work. At the same time, however, as I shall presently argue, the language of epic, as with other verse forms, has become increasingly more complex and opaque. Epic has become a more personal and idiosyncratic genre than ever, as may be gauged most strikingly by the example of *The Cantos*, arguably the least unambiguous epic, if not poem in the language. Yet, Wordsworth had embarked on a language that would speak to ordinary men: the predicate on which modern poetry (and therefore epics) would be shaped was also both a form of homage to the genre's distant past and also a warning against its corruption and decline.

The Prelude marked the first great turn in epic praxis in the modern period. In this poem, although Wordsworth had set out to address the theme of a lost paradise, it is not to Milton's heaven, but to the paradise of human innocence stranded in the world of lost childhood that he turned his attention. In *The Prelude* we can hear the opening chords of a new symphonic style, the first great stirrings of new notations for epic.

The style represented an experiment in plain language (or at any rate in a relatively unembellished language free of Miltonic ornateness). It is a style reflective of a radical artistic choice: a deliberate commitment to simplicity and sincerity of expression and to the conscious rejection of stale conventions and of language removed from the speech of ordinary people. I should immediately add that Wordsworth's own poetic language is one of demonstrable subtlety and intelligence. Wordsworth's theme, however, points to the new centrality of the autobiographical element in literature and, in particular, in epic. As such, it marks an important moment in the rise to pre-eminence of the psychological dimension in modern poetry. As Geoffrey Durrant has observed: '*The Prelude* is a psychological poem, in the sense that it deals with the 'vital soul' of the poet, the inner resources on which he can draw in his task of giving significance to man's life.'[74]

The new style and the new theme were coterminous with the dawning realisation among poets, especially those intent upon a composition of epic dimensions, that no longer could they presume upon a shared familiarity with and conformity to the established body of literary and religious tradition. Furthermore, it had become obvious that both the ethical and aesthetic presuppositions connecting authors and their readers in a mutual compact of shared cultural values could not readily be taken for granted.

The strengths of traditional epic, whether as a tapestry of folk lays or as a highly wrought literary construction, rested, in large part, on the recognition and acceptance of a shared view of the world and of the centrality of the human drama in the greater scheme of things. It also relied on a language rich in historical associations and on governing tropes that corresponded to and reflected that shared outlook. As Bruno Snell had observed, referring to the relationship between Homeric language and the world of the Homeric poems:

> The style of writing characteristic of the epic, the exposition of life as a chain-like series of events, is not a mechanism artfully designed; Homer did not from among several methods of portraying the existence of man, purposely choose this particular one because it seemed most appropriate to the epic…Homer's style is a necessary function of the perspective in which he discerns man, his life and his world.[75]

The scope demanded by the genre and the architectonic nature of the form certainly impressed upon Wordsworth the necessity of discovering in what new ways the encyclopedic tendencies of epic and its power to absorb or to exploit other genres might best be harnessed. At the same time Wordsworth had been interested in opening up the genre to new kinds of poetic invention and improvisation. While it is true that the observance of traditional epic practice since the Romantic period has become increasingly oblique, this does not signify any absence of epic customary but rather a reinvigoration of them and also, surely, the revitalization of the very assumptions attaching generically to epic. In *The Prelude*, for instance, there are discernible elements of mock-heroic (in Book First) of romance (in Books Fifth and Sixth) and of pastoral (in Book Eighth). Not only their formal attributes (separately) but the very forms themselves (as integrated wholes) combined in *The Prelude* to create a new constellation of themes and styles, in which the codified procedures of Miltonic and other earlier modes were radically disassembled and made to serve the interests of sustained lyrical rumination.

The Prelude, then, reveals how Wordsworth had found a language consonant with the cultural impulses of his time. In this poem Wordsworth was, to all intents and purposes, re-inventing the idea of the epic poet and, in so doing, reconstituting the genre. The claim that it was Milton from whom 'Wordsworth draws most freely and most effectively' does not contradict this; in fact, it serves to show how the forces at work upon a poet are almost entirely those of influence, however 'original' the poet may be.[76] In structural terms, *The Prelude* bears all the signs of the architectonic range and breadth demanded of the form. This remained true even though the poem evolved, as M. H. Abrams has observed: 'from being 'a constituent part to a "tail-piece" to a "portico" of *The Recluse*, and Wordsworth's late decision to add to the beginning and end of the poem the excluded middle: his experiences in London and in France'.[77]

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth had gone beyond his earlier maxims of plain speech, as they had been amplified in the 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads'.[78] The newly invigorated and charged language employed by Wordsworth and Coleridge was put to the service of restoring the relationship between the human and natural worlds and, at the same time, of reinvesting poetry, including the epic, with revitalized powers of philosophical as well as sensuous persuasion.[79] As Stuart Curran has observed:

> his ultimate goal was not a country churchyard but a cathedral, as he expresses it in the preface to *The Excursion*. *The Recluse*, if it had ever been completed, would have been at least as long as *The Divine Comedy*. It seems likely, too, if only from Wordsworth's analogy with a Gothic cathedral, the most complex and venerable of geometric forms, that it would have been a major example of the 'composite orders' of generic mixture he refers to in the preface to his 1815 *Poems*.[80]

This fusion of philosophical perspective and passionate rumination was to become an identifying characteristic not only of epic poetry in the Romantic period but of modern epic as well, as the work of Pound and William Carlos Williams, for example, amply demonstrates. It was predicated on the pre-eminence of the artist's own emotional and spiritual states in the realisation of a work of art. The German Romantic painter, Casper David Friedrich, for whom the natural world embodied 'a divine presence',[81] echoing Wordsworth's conviction that in Nature alone is there to be found 'the soul of Beauty and enduring Life',[82] had captured the dynamic of this process in a memorable formula. 'The artist's feeling is his law. Genuine feeling can never be contrary to nature, it is always in harmony with her'.[83]

Wordsworth had taken himself as the central subject of his epic, a strategy that indirectly invited succeeding poets either to follow suit by making the autobiographical element decisive, or else to locate some other central focus of interest beyond those familiar to the genre. In either case what this entailed was providing the framework for a major shift in direction. As Abrams has observed:

> We are discovering what a number of Wordsworth's major contemporaries acknowledge—that he has done what only the greatest poets can do. He has transformed the inherited language of poetry into a medium adequate to express new ways of perceiving the world, new modes of experience, and new relations of the individual consciousness to itself, to its past, and to other men. More than all but a very few English writers, Wordsworth has altered not only our poetry, but our sensibility and our culture.[84]

It is in this connection between the landscape on the one hand (both Abrams' 'new ways of perceiving the world' and also a new world being perceived in new ways) and, on the other, the poet's autobiographical obsessions (the ruminative flow and its resultant moods within the poem) that the central motifs of *A Locale of the Cosmos* reveal

Wordsworth's cardinal influence. By means of this thematic shift, Wordsworth may be said to have revolutionized the nature of epic. His claim that the exploration and discovery of the self and, that epic was in effect, the archaeology of memory, were themes of no less universality than any that had traditionally been associated with or held to be indispensable to epic. *The Prelude* traced, as its sub-title points out, 'the growth of the poet's mind'. Wordsworth made the process of growth itself the key to his poem, showing in what ways memory and imagination are related. His poem unfolded, therefore not only as autobiographical confession and analysis but also as a new template, in terms of language and feeling, for epic itself.

A new kind of epic, then, had become possible, a medium for not only a new kind of sensibility (in its rejection of the rationalist Augustan and neo-classical synthesis) but for a new apprehension of 'Nature' (which, for Wordsworth, could only mean 'the world') and, therefore, of human life and what it may mean. Wordsworth had turned into an epic theme the human condition as shaped by Nature's restorative and replenishing powers, rather than by God's providence, under whose cold Newtonian hand the human estate and the character and texture of the material world had been disinvested of spiritual meaning and organic wholeness. As Graham Hough has observed: '…meaning by romantic here something that grows according to an inner organic law, not something that is composed from outside according to a predetermined scheme'.[85] For epic poetry, this meant that the range and scope of themes was now greater and more deeply personal; that the manifold ways in which those themes could be explored made it inevitable that a new kind of epic language was needed.

It was now possible to subordinate the epic's conventional preoccupations with heroic action, with the will of the gods and the workings of fate, to the exploration of the inner or spiritual domain of the individual and, in the process, to make of epic a psychological and spiritual drama. Epic would become the poetry of what has been aptly described as 'impassioned contemplation'.[86] Furthermore, this contemplation would be focused on the individual's own inner life and creative development; the sub-title of Wordsworth's poem conveys a notation that signals a powerful counterpoint, as Graham Hough has observed, to the generalising and representative tendencies of Augustan poetic discourse, such as one finds in Pope's 'Essay on Man'; 'the emphasis', he noted, 'shifts from social man to the individual man, when he is alone with his own heart or alone with nature'.[87]

Wordsworth's epic demanded, then, a highly individual style in which the personal and autobiographical elements would be pivotal. It was to be a poem that would both observe and also depart (dramatically) from the canon; in fact, it was to be no less than an epic, *sui generis*. Alexander Pope's epical concerns, connected to Miltonic ideas and images derived from *Paradise Lost*, might please and amuse; however, as Margaret Doody has pointed out, 'Milton's Paradise as "scene of Man" becomes in *The Essay on Man*, a gentleman's estate and, indeed a rather surreal one'. It was, as she pointed out:

> full of strange life which can be observed at leisure and laughed at by modern gentlemen who act as naturalists but also as sportsmen, shooting folly as it flies by like some colourful but stupid pheasant. The tone, the idiom, the new style, have changed everything. We as readers are moved through parody to a recognition of the poem's new and unique quality; that is what the parody signals, and not in any way a triviality of subject or treatment.[88]

Stuart Curran has shown how, in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth 'plays against the traditions of the classical genres' by reassembling, as Curran has observed, 'the generic mixture' of the poem.[89] The term 'epic' in its widest adjectival sense, may mean anything monumental; however Wordsworth was pursuing a specifically poetic goal: a poem on an epic scale, but not necessarily limited to, or bound by the thematic and stylistic canons of the genre. 'It has become increasingly common to speak of *The Prelude* as Wordsworth's epic poem', Curran has noted, 'but to do so loosely is to elide exactly how it constitutes itself an epic without heroic exploits, divine machinery, or formative national history'. Curran has enumerated each criterion in turn by which the poem shows itself to be, definitively and not only figuratively an epic, beginning with the requirement for a central hero. 'There is indeed a hero', as Curran concluded, 'yet even Wordsworth acknowledged it "a thing unprecedented in Literary [sic] history that man should talk so much about himself"'.[90]

After this, the inventory of acquired characteristics progresses rapidly according to Curran's formula. In a manner similar to Milton and Dante, Wordsworth too, as Curran has pointed out, began *in medias res*. Wordsworth consciously echoes the last line of Milton's epic in his opening cadence, 'The earth is all before me' (Book 1, line 14). And, where Virgil had guided Dante and Milton had formally invoked Urania, Wordsworth

has as his 'guide' the presence of Coleridge whom, at significant moments in the narrative, he addresses directly.

Continuing in this vein, Curran has invited us to observe that Wordsworth's underworld is London, the archetypal urban nightmare, as against the aesthetic and moral excellence of nature in the wild. As the poem unfolds, we witness Wordsworth traversing England from south to north, encountering its people or drawn into the ambient moods of its landforms and climates. The traditional catalogues of epic are echoed in the lists of the poet's books and in the breadth of his reading. Finally, the war between England and France (a conflict that would decide the fate of the nations) was being prosecuted as the poet wrote his epic. Thus, by a series of concordances and analogies Wordsworth's poem is placed, demonstrably, within the genre even if by, at times, a somewhat strained process of thematic inversion, a procedure Curran refers to as one whereby 'Wordsworth uses epic conventions by turning them inside out'.[91] What is important to note here is that Curran is not suggesting that Wordsworth was simply playing with the epic genre by way of employing a series of clever substitutions; on the contrary, Wordsworth had addressed with great seriousness the question as to how epic, as a genre, might be transformed, so as to make it serve the insights and preoccupations of a new age, as well as the tenor of a new sensibility.

I am not certain that Wordsworth stands in need of a defence based upon a strategy of such dexterous ingenuity, in which judicious parallels, inventive juxtapositions and adroit correspondences are marshalled as a felt requirement for the argument, establishing beyond doubt the epic credentials of Wordsworth's poem. However, that said, it seems to me that Curran has convincingly laid the foundations for precisely such a case.

Along these lines a similar mapping of coordinates and correspondences in *A Locale of the Cosmos* may be executed (in Curran style) demonstrating how the poem begins *in medias res*; how it incorporates catalogues and litanies; how it treats of war—in this case, both World Wars— and peace; how it preserves and commemorates an historical era; how it combines mythological, legendary and historical elements; how it foregrounds the drama of landscape as an heroic theme in its own right; how it also presents more conventionally identifiable heroes and heroines (including indigenous people, pioneers and early settlers); how it establishes and maintains a language of decorum and dignity

despite the presence of the vernacular; and how it constructs a storied narrative of anecdote, folklore and reminiscence, an important element of epic that is interwoven, in Wordsworthian fashion, with extended ruminations on the interior states of the author. And, indeed, I have yet to touch on still weightier and more abstruse issues: 'metaphysical' notions, such as the poem's preoccupation with time past and with mortality, with fate and divine providence, and with the larger enigmas of birth, life and death, to suggest but a few of the thematic clusters that may be found in the poem.

Putting Curran's map of *The Prelude* aside, I think there is little doubt that the poem represents a new kind of epic and a new way of writing epic. In Wordsworth's hands epic had become a genre in which poets discovered the pattern of themselves and, by extension, of an imaginative world that rose out of the observable one, but also superimposed itself upon it. The form was now to serve, more than ever before, the poet operating within it, rather than the other way around. As Curran had observed:

> Whether conditioning his mind to a small scale or enlarging its vision to epic proportions, Wordsworth, as if by instinct, consciously shaped as he saw. And what in sum he shaped as well was the subsequent direction of British poetry. If it is initially discomforting to think of the exponent of spontaneity and passion as a supreme artificer, the more one contemplates the idea, the more liberating it becomes. [92]

Hence it ought not surprise us that the opening lines of *The Prelude* consciously echo the concluding lines of *Paradise Lost*. Milton had closed his great epic with a vision of the world after the Fall:

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.[93]

For his part, Wordsworth announces his own project as resting on a vision of the world as an open book:[94] it is a world of liberty, one that is full of promise, now with Nature, rather than the 'Muse' of traditional epic, or the figure of Virgil, (as in Dante), as a trusty guide:

> The earth is all before me. With a heart
> Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
> I look about; and should the guide I choose
> Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
> I cannot miss my way.[95]

In Coleridge's estimate, Wordsworth's was to be an epic like no other, a master poem of unmatched proportions whose 'philosophical and political burdens', as Kenneth Johnston observed, would be reflected in what he describes as its 'generic complexity'. The poem would answer to the various designations of 'epic', 'narrative' and 'meditative verse essay', as these mutually incorporate each other.[96] Not only in terms of length, but in the breadth and range of its preoccupations, it would represent a fully worked out *Naturphilosophie* of profound and universal significance, offering a *summa* of the sublime relationship that existed between the human and natural worlds. Such a poem, Coleridge implied, would have a status the equal of Milton's epic. Even in the absence of achieving a similar cultural hegemony to that gained by *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth's poem would, Coleridge believed, be seen as the vessel of a grand secular myth, in contrast to Milton's transmutation of existing biblical 'mythic' narratives.

Coleridge, as Johnston had noted, saw *The Prelude* as being 'the first great philosophical poem' in English, in contradistinction to 'the last great religious epic in the language, Milton's *Paradise Lost'*.[97] Such monumental new conceptions were an indelible part of the atmosphere of the Romantic period.[98] They unquestionably formed what Johnston described as 'a central example of one of the deepest impulses of literary Romanticism'.[99] In the case of Wordsworth, this meant the construction of a coherent philosophical framework in which his cherished views about both the immanence and transcendence of Nature's powers would be formulated and in which the beauty and sublimity of the natural world would become synecdoches of moral truth and feeling.[100] In a certain sense, Wordsworth's project was in fact, and also perhaps paradoxically, not unlike Milton's, with the significant difference being that Wordsworth's aim was to restore and reanimate the ways of man to Nature itself; as Abrams has pointed out: '…the interesting thing is that Wordsworth described the process of his spiritual development[101] within a system of reference which has only two generative and

operative terms: mind and nature.'[102] It was to Nature, rather than to God, that his imaginative energies directed and from which, he believed, they were sprung:

For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A corresponding mild creative breeze
A vital breeze which travelled gently on
O'er things which it had made, and is become
A tempest, a redundant energy,
Vexing its own creation. 'Tis a power
That does not come unrecognised, a storm
Which, breaking up a long-continued frost,
Brings with it vernal promises…
The holy life of music and of verse…
To the open fields I told
A prophecy: poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services.[103]

Hence Wordsworth's perorations are frequently clothed, as in the passage above, in the full-blown language of Nature mysticism, replete with the solemnities of tone necessary to convey both Nature's sacred and pristine powers and also the holiness of the poet's vocation as the priest of Nature.

Both the role and function of epic, in other words, were to be restored to their original grandeur and glory, in part by reinvesting the genre with its former universalising function. The process was, however, more complex; it heralded a new theory of the imagination. The renewed form of epic was to be achieved by what was tantamount to a substitution of theodicies, a supplanting of notions of the sacred. Nature was now seen to reveal herself primarily to the individual heart and, therefore, Romantic ideas of moral goodness (as inhering in Nature and reflected in her sublime beauty) would supersede the divine (Biblical) machinery of Milton and Dante and the clockwork universe of Newton. As Abrams has observed: '…the mode in which Wordsworth conceived his mission evolved out of the ambition to participate in the renovation of the world and of man.'[104] By extension, it would do away with the entire supernatural machinery and mythological

trappings of heroic epic. As Johnston has pointed out, this metaphysical notion of a 'new religion of humanism' was embodied in 'a huge cultural epic', which was, in Wordsworth's own words, to focus "on Man, on Nature, and on Human Life"'.[105]

The transformation effected was contingent on a withdrawal of oneself, on close introspection and quiet recollection. Wordsworth addressed the world of nature itself as an epic arena and transferred the drama of epic action to the relationship between the individual and his consciousness of nature's powers. *The Prelude* addressed the question both of poetic creation itself and its origin (formerly the epic poet had invariably been in the thrall of the muse[106]); as well, it redefined the nature of the poet's vocation. None of these issues had traditionally formed part of the central concerns of epic poetry. The traditional "muse' of Homeric and Virgilian epic was a divine presence behind and the implied source of heroic epic and the poets themselves were, or saw themselves as, conduits of a sacred inspiration. At one blow Wordsworth had turned the epic poem inside out. According to epic tradition, furthermore, inspiration was not in the poet's personal possession but was seen as being a gift from the gods. The bards were 'keepers of the flame' and the flame they kept alive emblazoned with glory a civilisation, its immemorial values and beliefs, and the destiny of its heroes. In *The Prelude* it is the individual, rather than the collective, memory that matters. The stream of self-consciousness, not bardic utterance, generates the flow of the narrative.[107] It is the poet's own past, recollected or reconstructed and, of even more crucial importance, the history of his evolution as an artist, that becomes the principal focus of interest.[108] All of this was, in generic terms, unprecedented.

This, then, is the critical shift that Wordsworth brought about. The epic poet is now primarily a poet of personal recollection and reflection and is no longer confined to the role of mouthpiece, as traditionally conceived. However, the past remained central to epic perhaps, in part, because the force it exerts on the human imagination is still so deeply compelling and, in part, because even the poet's interior life has a wider history that must be told in order for it to be fully realised. The following passage from *A Locale of the Cosmos* may serve to illustrate how this Wordsworthian conception of epic and of the epic poet has influenced my own compositional aims and methods. These will be among the subjects for further consideration in the following chapters:

the six team horses he says are a thing of the past
but I can still hear the tap of their hooves
on the drum of the dark
and the sheep now are bred from Peppin blood
and eye off the chick pea paddock
when the truck goes into reverse among the greens
and sometimes you hear someone whistling
as if the world really is an oyster
and its pearl is his
a snatch of a tune such as you don't hear now
with a melody to it and meaningful words
something of the old country
of Londonderry or of Tipperary or Cork
and gradually you enter into a golden silence
like that hanging over Lemuria
where the wind is the quality of softness
and the light the pitch of a primitive instrument
played upon by water
and in the house the rooms still echo
with cries of living cries of dying
cries of being born [109]

NOTES

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[1] Jean L. McKechnie ed., *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary Of The English Language*, New York, World Publishing Company, 1959, p. 611.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] See Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, New York, Harper & Row, 1968, p. 36.
[5] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 324 - 325.
[6] It is of interest to see how this problem has exercised the mind of any number of authors and not poets alone. The novelist Henry Fielding in 1742, for example, in the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, felt it incumbent to connect the then new genre of the novel to epic and, hence, no doubt, to epic's reflected glory. 'Homer', he wrote, 'who was the father of this species of poetry…gave us a pattern…' and then moved quickly to add: 'though it [the novel] wants one particular, which the critic enumerates in the constituent parts of an epic poem, namely meter [sic]; yet, when any kind of writing contains all its other parts, such as fable, action, characters, sentiments, and diction, and is deficient in meter only; it seems, I think, reasonable to refer to it as epic…' However, as Ian Watt has rightly pointed out, the fact that any narrative at all must surely include, in some manner or other, 'fable, characters, sentiments, and diction' makes the argument look less impressive; see *Rise of the Novel*, pp. 259 - 260.
[7] Joan Mallory Webber, *Milton And His Epic Tradition*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1979, p. 3.
[8] Cyril Connolly said of Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* that it was 'the finest long poem to have been published in England since T; S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', see Richard Caddell, ed., *Basil Bunting: The Complete Poems*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996.
[9] As Hägg points out, 'Antiquity never created a special term for its "novels".' In Aristotle's time, there was no such genre; hence "the novel" does not appear as a term in his *Poetics*. See Tomas Hägg, *The Novel In Antiquity*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, p. 3.
[10] W. F. Jackson Knight, *Roman Vergil*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966, p. 175.
[11] Ibid., p. 164
[12] Ibid., p. 190.
[13] Ibid.
[14] The descriptors are hollow; Webber's observation is acute: 'Just so, epic is a long narrative, but the *Aeneid* is something more.' See *Milton and His Epic Tradition*, p. 4.
[15] C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, London, Macmillan, 1978, p. 552.
[16] Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. xv.
[17] Ibid. See also C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems*, Götinggen, 1977.
[18] *Homer*, p. xv. See also J. R. Pritchard (ed), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts related to the Old Testament*, Princeton N. J., Princeton University Press, 1969, *passim*; T. G. H. James, *An Introduction to Ancient Egypt*, London, The Trustees of the British Museum, 1979, pp. 97 - 127; Henri Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, et. al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977, pp. 3 – 27 and pp. 363 – 388; Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978, pp. 193 – 219.
[19] Bernard Knox, 'Introduction', Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles, Bath, Softback Preview, 1997, p. 12.
[20] Ibid.
[21] *Milton And His Epic Tradition*, p. 3.
[22] *New Princeton Encyclopaedia,* pp. 361 - 375.
[23] Ibid., p. 361.
[24] Ibid., p. 362.
[25] In particular, Samuel Johnson in England and, in Germany, the Schlegels, who, as the *New Princeton Encylcopedia* points out, exposed 'the deficiencies of normative criticism,' introducing in their place 'the inductive study of how great poetry is related to its national roots'; p. 374.
[26] Ibid., p. 374.
[27] Ibid., p. 371.
[28] M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co. 1984, p. 79.
[29] *Handbook*, p. 194.

[30] The following discussion is concerned only with epic; however the broader canvas of Aristotle's theory of art (and Plato's) lies in the background. As Zeller has observed: 'Art, according to Aristotle, has a double function, to transcend nature and to imitate it. Hence imitation consists not in a simple reproduction of the sensible appearance of things by art; it has rather to represent their inner reality…In this sense poetry…has the right and duty to idealise[*Poetics*, 9, 1451a, 36ff.]. Thus poetry is more philosophic and serious than history[*Poetics*, 9, 1451b, 5].' See Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, trans. Wilhelm Nestle, New York, Dover, 1980, p. 197.

[31] Aristotle, *Poetics*, xxiii (1459a); xxvi (1462a); xxiv (1459b), in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, trans. S. H. Butcher, New York, Dover, 1951. On the question of imitation (a central notion in both Aristotle's and Plato's theory of art) it is interesting to see how Wordsworth's aesthetic arises, in part, from the idea of the function of art as representing an 'inner reality' and also as touching on the moral character of the individual. On the question of the latter, Nettleship, in his discussion on Plato has observed: 'Ought the poet, he[Plato] asks…make a selection and throw all his force into representing realistically what is great and good in human nature? To Plato there can be only one answer. Only that in human nature which is worth making part of one's own character is worth artistic imitation…'see Richard Lewis Nettleship, *Lectures on the Republic of Plato*, London, Macmillan, 1964, p. 103.

[32] Francesco Robertelli, *De Arte poetica explications*, 1548, quoted in James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of 'The Faerie Queene'*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 6 – 7; see also Baxter Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism: The Late Renaissance in Italy*, Ithaca, New York, 1962, p. 169.

[33] Horace, *De Arte Poetica* (*Epist. Ad Piso*) 148, quoted in *The Analogy*, p. 7.

[34] I refer in particular to Aristotle's unities of time and place.

[35] James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of the Faeirie Queen*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 7.

[36] A postmodernist critique, such as that of Lyotard, for example, promotes the 'little narrative', or *'petit récit'* as a way of signaling antipathy towards system-building and allegedly authoritarian 'grand narrative'. Postmodernists resile from the canonical and the grandiose in all its forms. Their hostility towards epic as grand narrative derives naturally from their perception of it as a work of literature draped in the authority conferred upon it simply by virtue of its status as a classic. Grand narrative's proclivity towards elaborating some kind of *Weltanschauung* only increases their unease, since history, myth and legend are, in their view, manipulated by grand narratives, in order to justify a ruling theology or metaphysic. In our time, grand narrative, Lyotard claims, breeds only 'an incredulity towards meta-narratives.' The *petit récit* challenges the monumentality of epic and, hence, its cultural reach. On this view, the *petit récit*, by a process of infiltration, enters into the body politic of epic, reflecting the *petit realitè* of the quotidian world, with its familiar armature of routine and customary. Above all, it opposes the intimidating tendencies of high cultural artifacts and recoils from their monolithic power in favor of diversity and difference, not least by privileging, for instance, the provincial culture of small and relatively isolated social groups or the argot and eccentricities of an insular but cherished locale. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Toward the Postmodern: Philosophy and Literary Theory*, New York, Humanity Books, 1999.

[37] Brian Edwards, reflections on author's conference paper, 'Fields of Vision and Visionary Language: The Chiasmus of Landscape', notation to the author, on file, 29 October, 2004.

[38] This process has sometimes resulted in upheavals such as occurred, for example, as an outcome of F. A.Wolff's theory (in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* of 1795) of 'popular "lays" later assembled by editorial labour; see *New Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 374. As the *New Princeton* notes, the fallout of Wolff's claims included 'the unfortunate consequence of breaking up the transmitted text of Homer into many sometimes incongruous layers'; Ibid., p. 374. It was only a small step from this to the raising of doubts over the single authorship of the Homeric poems, if not to the dissipation of authorial identity altogether. As Bloom has lamented, 'Homer has been all but destroyed by a life of "pure speculation"; see Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, London, Papermac, 1995,
p. 474. It would be safe to say that problems of identity in its various manifestations have long been part of the history of the genre.

[39] *Heroic Poetry*, p. 560.

[40] Ibid., pp. 560 - 61.

[41] *Handbook*, p. 194.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44]Adam Parry, ed., *The Making of Homeric Verse*: *The Collected Papers Of Milman Parry*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, *passim*.

[45] Walter F. Otto, *The Homeric Gods: The Spiritual Significance Of Greek Religion*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1979, p. 175.

[46] Ibid., p. 232.
[47]Expostulating on memory in unassuming and homespun fashion, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, fl. ca. 1200, had observed: There are some men who wish to know, but not to make an effort, nor to endure the concentration and pain of learning. That is the way of the cat; it wants the fish, but not the fishing. I am not addressing myself to such men, but to those who delight in knowing…' Quoted in O. B. Hardison, Jr., Alex Preminger, Kevin Kerrane, Leon Golden, eds., *Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*, New York, Frederick Ungar, 1974, p. 143.
[48] C. M. Bowra, 'Devices of Composition', *Homer*, London, Duckworth, 1979, *passim*; see also Jasper Griffin, *Homer On Life And Death*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, pp. 36 - 39; Bernard Knox, 'Introduction,' *Iliad*, *passim*; Robert Fagles, 'Translator's Preface', Homer, Ibid., pp. ix - xiv.
[49] A notable example is to be found in the *Odyssey*, Book Eight, ll. 51 – 112; see trans. Robert Fagles, New York, Softback Preview, 1997, pp. 193 - 94.
[50] *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 10. As Cowan has observed: 'Epic has traditionally been considered so monumental and grand a mode of poetic expression that literary authorities have dared make few official additions over the years to the fixed Homer-Virgil-Milton pantheon'; Ibid., p. 1.
[51] At the same time this tendency has obscured the contemporaneity (or as some would put it, the 'timelessness') of Homer. Bespaloff, in a chapter of her book on Homer entitled 'Troy and Moscow' has observed: 'It is impossible to speak of an Homeric world or a Tolstoyan world in the sense that one can speak of a Dantesque world, a Balzacian or Dostoievskian world. Tolstoy's universe, like Homer's is what our own is from moment to moment. We don't step into it; we are there.' See Rachel Bespaloff, *On The Iliad*, trans. Mary McCarthy, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1962, p. 85. The distortions produced by stereotypes affect the reputation and reception not only of literary genres, but also (inevitably) the accurate transmission of the artistic vision. Pétrement has noted in her biography of Simone Weil the similarity of T. E. Lawrence's vision of war (as revealed in his book *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*) to that of Homer, as evidenced by Weil's famous essay: '*The Iliad*: Poem of Might'; see George A. Panichas, ed., *The Simone Weil Reader*, New York, David McKay Company, Inc., 1977, pp. 153 – 183. In both cases, the vision had been distorted or the message misunderstood or even lost on the reader altogether: 'Like the author of the *Iliad* he[Lawrence]was able to describe war as it is seen by a man whose real values are those of peace'; see Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, Oxford, Mowbrays, 1977, p. 344.
[52] Ibid., p. 2.
[53] *The New Princeton Encyclopedia*, for instance, refers to Aristotle's demand for 'organic unity' in epic; also that one of its requirements be that it is *eusynopton* (easily grasped in its totality) and that it not exceed the length of dramatic shows at one sitting, a period of time usually calculated at six or seven thousand lines'; p. 371.
[54]. Knight's definition is equal to the minimalist standard: 'Epic' he writes, 'is, of course, long narrative poetry.' See *Roman Vergil*, p. 164.
[55] *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 10.
[56] Ibid., p. 11.
[57] The sheer profusion of theories is itself evidence of the difficulties besetting the issue; to name only some theoretical models: Russian formalist theories of narrative; dialogical or Bakhtinian theories; neo-Aristotelian, Chicago school, psychoanalytic, New Critical, tropological, semiotic and structuralist theories; phenomenological, hermeneutic and sociological and Marxist theories; poststructuralist, deconstructionist and reader-response theories.
[58] J Hillis Miller, 'Narrative', in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin eds, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 75.
[59] Williams himself elaborates on this issue: 'The poet does not, however, permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context of that with which he is dealing: no ideas but in things. The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity'; quoted in 'The Poem *Paterson*'; see 'Author's Note', in William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963, unpaginated.
[60] *Critical Terms*, p. 75.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Such restrictiveness as this narrative model offers is, in fact, much closer to the limits imposed by the strictures of medieval expectations of epic; during that period, Virgil's *Aeneid*, as Cowan has pointed out, was 'a quasi-sacred text to be emulated by any aspiring poet'; *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 7. According to Springarn, the *Aeneid* became for the duration of the medieval era a template for the 'rules' of epic—its form and subject matter were turned into a prescribed syllabus: 'such conventions as invoking the muse, stating the theme… beginning *in medias res*, depending upon supernatural agencies, and dividing the work

into twelve books'; Joel Springarn, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1924, quoted in *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 7.
[63] W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, New York, Knopf, 1957; quoted in *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 7.
[64] See for instance, Bowra, *Homer*, pp. 4-9; Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, p. .ix - lxii; Alan J. B. Wace and Frank H. Stubbings, eds., *A Companion to Homer*, London, Macmillan, 1962, pp. 234 - 265.
[65] Bowra, *Homer*, p. 8.
[66] Ibid. p. 2.
[67] 'Dryden', as Cowan has pointed out, 'spoke of epic as 'the greatest work of human nature'—a forgivable exaggeration—and went on to declare that to prefer tragedy to epic was to prefer a mushroom to a peach'; *The Epic Cosmos*, p. 7. That Aristotle had shown a limited interest in epic, apart from declaring that it ought to be, in terms of externals, 'grave and stately, massive, elevated and entertaining', as Cowan had summarized it, may have stirred Dryden's wit, but it did little for epic in the period after Milton. It was not until Wordsworth had freed the genre from the clutches of the neo-classic style that epic began to change and, with it, there changed the orders of genres themselves.
[68] Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 96.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., p. 111.
[71] Ibid., p. 91.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Lionel Trilling, ed., *The Essential Matthew Arnold*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1949, pp. 211.
Arnold enumerates for the translator of Homer the four characteristic qualities of the original: rapidity, plainness, directness and nobleness of speech.
[74] Geoffrey Durrant, *William Wordsworth*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 115.
[75] Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, New York, Dover, 1982, p. 43.
[76]Quoted in J. C. Maxwell ed., *William Wordsworth: The Prelude, A Parallel Text,* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, p. 27.
[77] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1973, p. 76.
[78] William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads', in *English Critical Texts*, pp. 162 - 189.
[79] In the case of Wordsworth, one might add also: subject to the limitation put upon musicality for its own sake, when in the service of developing or clarifying the philosophical burden of *The Prelude*. There was a view held of Shelley, for instance (though now discredited) that in those works concerned with ostensibly philosophical themes (for instance, *A Defence of Poetry*) Shelley was not always inclined to allow precision to stand in the way of melapoeia. The cogency of Shelley's theoretical writings may readily be shown to be of an order no less than that of his poetical *oeuvre*.
[80] Stuart Curran, 'Wordsworth And The Forms Of Poetry', in Kenneth R. Johnston and Gene W. Ruoff ed.s, *The Age of William Wordsworth: Critical Essays on the Romantic Tradition,* New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1987, p. 129.
[81] Caspar David Friedrich, in 'Some Thoughts on Art', quoted in Richard Friedenthal, *Letters of the Great Artists*, Vol. 2, London, Thames and Hudson, 1963, Vol. 2, p. 34.
[82] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: A Parallel Text*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, p. 294.
[83] *Letters*, p. 33.
[84] M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co. 1984, p. 157.
[85] Graham Hough, *The Romantic Poets*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1970, p. 57.
[86] Nigel Wood, *The Prelude*, Buckingham, Philadelphia, Open University Press, 1993, p. 14.
[87] *Romantic Poets*, p. 8.
[88] Margaret Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 81.
[89]*The Age of William Wordsworth*, pp. 128-132.
[90] Ibid., p.131.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., p. 132.
[93] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, London, Longman, 1971, p. 642.

[94] However, a book that also reveals, as Hazlitt (in a review of 'The Excursion', Examiner 21, August-Octpber, 1814) observed in relation to Wordsworth's mind, 'an evident repugnance to admit anything that tells for itself, without the interpretation of the poet…'; see Graham McMaster, *William Wordsworth: A Critical Anthology*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972.

[95] *The Prelude*, p.34.

[96] *The Age of William Wordsworth*, p. 143.

[97] Ibid., 138.

[98] Madame de Staël's indictment of the extravagances to which some German Romantic exponents of *Naturphilosophie* were especially prone, (she had in mind, in particular, the poet Heinrich Heine), may serve as a monitory example, however, of the perils to which Romantic and modern epic are exposed. Some Romantic poets, Madame de Staël observed, were guilty of fashioning a language that, as she put it: 'spreads over all things the darkness which preceded Creation but not the light which followed.' Quoted in *Ascent of Science*, p. 71.

[99] *The Age of Wordsworth*, p. 138.

[100] I am conscious of a dissenting tradition (of sceptics, or satirists such as Swift) whose common cause is to have little or no truck with the notion of 'the sublime', as being as being a superior folly. As Martin Kallich has observed in his discussion of Gulliver's Travels: 'they [the Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver's Travels*] are incapable of an *O altitudo*; they have no sense of the sublime mystery, no special reverence for…matters religious'. See Martin Kallich, The Other End of the Egg: Religious Satire in 'Gulliver's Travels', Bridgeport, Conn., University of Bridgeport Press, 1970, pp. 76 – 77, as quoted in R. D. Stock, *The Holy and the Daemonic from Sir Thomas Brown to William Blake*, Princeton N. J., Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 148 – 149. Stock has amplified this in his observation that: 'Numerous are those who are unattracted to Milton's God or Dante's Beatrice,' Ibid. p. 149.

[101] To speak of the poet's 'spiritual development' can only properly make sense if it is assumed that the poet believes in and recognises the spiritual dimension—from which are derived spiritual values: all of these aspects coalesce into a key tenet of Romanticism. Hence the poet may be said to bear witness to the sacred. As Simone Weil has observed, this is an ancient motif: 'The poet of the *Iliad* loved God enough to have this capacity [of bearing witness]. This indeed is the implicit signification of the poem and the one source of its beauty. But it has scarcely been understood.' See Simone Weil, 'Last Thoughts', in *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 107.

[102] F. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1973, p. 90.

[103] *The Prelude*, p. 36.

[104] *Correspondent Breeze*, p. 75.

[105] *The Age of Wordsworth*, p. 139.

[106] It may be said that Milton's invocations (in *Paradise Lost*) do address sources of inspiration autobiographically; however, both the tone and direction of the poet's involvement in his creative powers remain detached and at a significant remove from the self-reflexiveness of Wordsworth's modalities of feeling:

I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. (Paradise Lost, Bk. I, ll. 12 – 16).

[107] It is worth pointing out, however, that a particular 'stream-of-consciousness' is at issue here: that which issues forth from the poet, whatever the genre in which the poet writes. There are other kinds of poems which, in Montale's words, amount to'…the art that is technically available to everyone: all it takes is a piece of paper and a pencil and the game is up.' What Wordsworth had set in train by virtue of *The Prelude* was a conception of epic no less formidable, it seems to me, than the earlier equally imposing epics of Milton and his classical predecessors stretching back as far as Homer. See Jonathan Galassi ed., *The Second Life of Art: Selected Essay of Eugenio Montale*, New York, The Ecco Press, 1982, p. 57.

[108] As Auden has remarked: 'All art, verbal, visual or musical, is personal utterance.' See 'Foreword' to Ilona Duczyńska and Karl Polanyi, *The Plough and the Pen: Writings from Hungary: 1930 – 1956*, London, Peter Owen, 1963, p. 10.

[109] *LC*, Book VII, 'Marnoo', Part 1, pp. 122 - 123.

CHAPTER TWO

MODERN INFLUENCES

The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics,[1] under its entry 'Modern Long Poem' cites Walt Whitman's 'Song Of Myself' to be the 'most influential example of this "modern" form"'[2] with the inverted commas surrounding the term being indicative of both the state of flux in which epic had found itself and a gauge of the 'central 'tension' (as the Encyclopaedia observes)[3] at work in modern epic. Whitman's *tour de force* demonstrated the extent to which the conventions of older epic could be not only challenged but also overturned.

Whitman's driving impulse was self-realisation and, as with Wordsworth, the 'egotistical sublime' (that preoccupation with the self and with one's own spiritual history) is manifestly at work. In the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman wrote: 'The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem'.[4] For Whitman this kind of poem could only be conceived of, like the nation and the poet himself, in terms that were suggestive of the scale of epic. This scale was amplified by a grandiloquence of phrasing and an expansive rhythm, 'its flow, its forward thrust' as Marjorie Perloff described it,[5] which loosened the conventional metrics of epic or by-passed them altogether.

'Song of Myself' is a resolutely autobiographical poem. For Whitman, the epic mode was the natural one through which to give voice not only to his own identity, the truth 'of myself', as he said, but also to what he held to be true as a representative of mankind: 'Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son'.[6] This points the way to epic as dynamic process. Far from conforming to the strictures governing the genre, Whitman resisted the formal qualities of epic, expanding its thematic and stylistic elements and investing them with an unaccustomed degree of self-referential insistence:

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.[7]

Whitman, as Roy Harvey Pearce had noted, ‘had arranged the whole of *Leaves of Grass*, and ‘Song of Myself’ with it…in order to make it into a total image epic—the full and complete surrogate for the traditional epic.’[8] Whitman’s procedure offers a blueprint for the aims and concerns of my own poem. The upshot of such an approach, as Pearce observed, was that it demonstrated: ‘…the clearest, surest, most self-contained and complete, and most widely-gauged product of Whitman’s desire to create an American epic and of the metamorphosis of genre which that desire necessarily brought about’.[9] Epic could, then, offer itself as a narrative not only of the poet’s world, but also as a meta-narrative of the poet’s interior life.[10]

In his 1855 ‘Preface’ Whitman had declared: ‘If he [the poet] breathes into anything that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe’.[11] A little further on he added: ‘…folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects…they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls’.[12] This obsession with 'process' may have resulted in ‘Song of Myself’ descending into, as Charles Feidelson objected, ‘Whitman's characteristic disorder and turgidity’.[13] It is a fine line that separates this perceived verbal profligacy from what Richard Chase saw as Whitman's 'marvellous plenitude’, which I take to include his breadth of vision as it is embodied in the abundance of the language.[14] A passage such as the following from ‘Song of the Open Road’ brings together these opposing impulses, with their exclamatory litany of praise. Whitman exploited such lists for their rhetorical effects and later Pound was to adopt a similar procedure; it is one that I have also employed to effect at various moments in my own poem.[15] Whitman’s roll call in the passage below also reveals his metrical and structural innovations, both of which undercut the traditional epic style:

> You air that serves me with breath to speak!
> You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give
> them shape!
> You light that wraps me and all things in delicate equable
> showers!

> You paths worn in the irregular hollows by the roadsides!
> I believe you are latent with unseen existences, you are so
> dear to me.[16]

Of equal significance was Whitman's subversion of traditional epic speech, his unremitting determination to turn song into argument and, conversely, argument into song.[17] As Bloom had observed:

> Whitman's originality has less to do with his supposedly free verse than it does with his mythological inventiveness and mastery of figurative language. His metaphors and meter-making arguments break the new road even more effectively than his innovations in metrics.[18]

The Cantos of Ezra Pound have been equally influential to my poetics. Marjorie Perloff has observed that they reflect 'a new conception that… no longer privileges lyric over narrative (or even drama) that can incorporate the contemporary and the archaic, economics and myth, the everyday and the elevated'.[19] It is in the combination of several of these elements that *A Locale of the Cosmos* also finds its shape. Pound's vision of 'all ages' as being 'contemporaneous in the mind'[20] is one that I share and which is reflected in my poem's interlocking temporal and spatial frames of reference. Davenport's observation of how these shifting frames of reference help to create a dynamic charge for poets is apposite:

> To know the season we must understand metamorphosis, for things are never still, and never wear the same mask from age to age. The contemporary is without meaning while it is happening: it is a vortex, a whirlpool of action…treating time as if it were a space over which one can move in any direction.[21]

Such considerations are central to the making of autobiographical epic. Max Harris had raised this question in its Australian context by drawing attention to the psychological truth of autobiographical epic:

> Poetry is not concerned ultimately with visual sensation, although all poetry uses to some measure visual sensation. But poetry primarily emerges as the expression of attitude or emotion towards the facts of experience. It concerns itself with that which is peculiar and individual in the artist's vision of his surroundings. His fundamental environment is himself.[22]

While a significant portion of *A Locale of the Cosmos* conveys the past and present life of the Wimmera region, the poem also turns inward, towards that 'fundamental environment' of which Harris speaks. It is the substance of 'that which is peculiar and individual in the artist's vision of his surroundings' that the poem addresses, an objective that goes well beyond the goals of historical recreation in the narrative sections of the poem.

Corresponding to this new sense of plenitude attaching to the genre, W. B. Yeats had drawn attention to Pound's own observation of the fugal arrangement of *The Cantos*: '…it will', Pound had observed, 'when the hundredth canto is finished, display a structure like that of a Bach Fugue. There will be no plot, no chronicle of events, no logic of discourse…[23] The title of Pound's work pointed not only to its musical structure and architectonic shape, but also to its disengagement from the conventional rules of epic form. Pound's work offered examples of varying patterns of organization; a passage such as the following from 'The Pisan Cantos' serves as a model for my own poem:

> Corn flower, thistle and sword-flower
> to a half metre grass growth,
> lay on the cliff's edge
> …nor is this yer *atasal*
> nor are here souls, nec personae
> neither here in hypostatis, this land is of Dione
> and under her planet
> to helia the long meadow with poplars
> to Κύπρίς

the mountain and shut garden of pear trees in flower
here rested.[24]

A Locale of the Cosmos also follows Pound in his wide variation of meter, an important procedural shift as Perloff has observed, of *The Cantos*.[25] Pound's method had made available an opportunity of executing, on a scale beyond the range of personal lyric, closer perhaps to the novel (such as Joyce's *Ulysses*) the building up of '…its dream association of words and images, a poem in which there is nothing that can be taken out and reasoned over that is not a part of the poem itself'. [26] The objective that Pound had set himself was to move, by long and circuitous routes, towards a metamorphosis of the genre.[27] Such a goal was to be reached by means of what Yeats, echoing Pound, had referred to as 'archetypal events'.[28] The following passage from Canto II exemplifies Pound's approach:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,
There can be but the one "Sordello."
But Sordello, and my Sordello?
Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.
So-shu churned the sea.
Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash,
Sleek head, daughter of Lir,
eyes of Picasso
Under black fur-hood, little daughter of Ocean;
And the wave runs in the beach-groove:
"Eleanor, ελέναυς and έλέπτολις!"
And poor old Homer blind, blind, as a bat,
Ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men's voices:
"Let her go back to the ships,
Back among Grecian faces, lest evil come on our own,
Evil and further evil, and a curse cursed on our children,
Moves, yes she moves like a goddess
And has the face of a god
and the voice of Schoeney's daughters,
And doom goes with her in walking,
Let her go back to the ships,
back among Grecian voices."[29]

A Locale of the Cosmos should not, however, be seen as a poetic cipher for the dismantling of the contents of the unconscious mind, nor for that matter for the heaping up of historical fragments. *A Locale of the Cosmos* also conforms to Pound's sense of epic in being, as Pound defined the genre, 'a poem including history.'[30] Epic is preeminently suited to a sustained exploration of how the world may disclose itself— to itself. It is in this sense that the phrase 'dream association' may usefully throw some light on the direction my own poem.[31] The narrative flow of extended rumination is inevitably derived from quite different sources and takes on a very different shape and tonality from the flow of action, of set speeches and dialogues familiar to conventional epic. The Poundean paradigm offered, it seems to me, an interesting framework for the creation of a world rooted in history and memory, even if, in the case of *The Cantos*, one is more often than not left bewildered by the profusion of historical and mythological allusions.

In a manner similar to *The Cantos*, the narrative of *A Locale of the Cosmos* moves beyond the conventional subject matter and structure of traditional epic. Pound had spoken of his poem as excluding, for instance, the conventional inventory of heroic epic: prescriptive godlike individuals, the customary narrative of valorous deeds, the glorification of tribal genealogies, the eulogizing of a national identity and of certain fundamental psychological and moral characteristics that single it out for greatness. Such ideals, for Pound, were no longer part of the viable currency of epic and the modern poet was in a position where the norms of the genre had become not only inappropriate, but also irrelevant. Pound had demonstrated that modern poets could compose epics that ran counter to the conventional assumptions attaching to the genre, without derogation to the tradition.

The modern epic poet is, I would argue, much in Pound's debt. The epic poet in our time is able to address themes that embrace historical subject matter which, though it may be fore-grounded and propel the 'action' of the poem, can also be subordinated to the exploration of the poet's own interior states. The two can coexist not least by

means of a compositional technique that demonstrates, as Perloff observed, the Poundian 'principle of juxtaposition, of intercut, of cultural overlaying…'[32] It is a technique that I have widely employed in my own poem, as a way of rendering what Pound had called 'the tale of the tribe'.[33]

Pound had shown that a critique of the culture, a reassessment of its underlying assumptions and avowed ideals, is hardly something new to the genre. Such considerations were, after all, implicit in the artistic aims of epic poets as far back as Virgil. Pound had demonstrated that one could genuflect to the tradition and to its time honored protocols at the same time as one was showing them the door. The genre itself had become the object of the poet's *guerre de plume* and the goal now, in the wake of the experiments of Pound, Carlos Williams and others, was to renovate the tradition. Pound (in however eccentric a fashion) and his immediate successors had signaled that the genre could be employed to invest new themes with a new dynamic and, furthermore, without any loss of the sinuousness and pictorial intensity of language for which epic was justly famous.

Those qualities of plain speaking, yet also of graceful and noble speech alluded to by Arnold in his landmark essay on Homer need not be sacrificed.[34] In fact, their presence in epic (perhaps even their predominance) as hallmarks of the genre, were reinforced by the idiomatic riches that Milton had bequeathed to his successors. All this could still be achieved without jettisoning the most durable and attractive characteristics of epic, among which are, not least, its concern with the mythic. The modern epic would henceforth be not only personal in its vision but also avowedly eclectic and adventurous, both in its themes and in its treatment of themes. In 1953 Pound had made the point in the following way: 'My *Paradiso* will have no St Dominic or Augustine, but it will be a *Paradiso* just the same, moving towards a final coherence. I'm getting at the building of the City, that whole tradition.'[35]

The epic today, no less than previously, can articulate a vision of life, exploring enduring themes and motifs that still have power to captivate, however far removed its images or turns of language may be from the epics of the past. This is the goal that

I have set myself in *A Locale of the* Cosmos and the unconventional form of the poem serves to underline the fact. As Pound himself had admonished: 'As to the *form* of the *Cantos*: All I can say or pray is: *wait* till it's there. I haven't an Aquinas-map; Aquinas not valid now'.[36] The prosodic elements of *A Locale of the Cosmos* reflect Pound's influence not only in broadly poetic terms (as may be said to be true of a good deal of modern poetry) but particularly in relation to epic. Donald Davie, in discussing the *Cathay* poems has written:

> It is important to understand what is involved. From Edmund Spenser onwards in English verse, the finest art was employed in running over the verse line so as to build up larger units of movement such as the strophe, the Miltonic verse paragraph, or in Shakespearean and other theatrical poetry, the sustained dramatic speech…the grammatical unit, the sentence is draped over the metrical unit, the line…It was only when the line was considered as the unit of composition, as it was by Pound in Cathay that there emerged the possibility of "breaking" the line, of disrupting it from within.[37]

These comments show that Pound's approach not only to the poetics of translation, but also to the problem of epic as embodied in *The Cantos*, was to feel his way towards a re-shaping of epic, rather than to impose from above, a revolution in form and subject matter. The epic, in his view, was not a one-dimensional form; indeed it was far from being so. Such limited conceptions reflect a misunderstanding of how genres are not only open to, but rely for their momentum on periodic transformations. The sustained and comprehensive treatment of large poetic conceptions in the epic mould did not in the past, nor does it now, require of poets that they model their epics on one model only, but rather that they proceed by means of innovative and even audacious modulations and variations of older patterns, compositional methods and rubrics of invention.

One may as well argue that the sonnet, since its prototypes were, for instance, Petrarchan or Elizabethan, must continue to reflect the topical crux as well as the compositional strategies and poetic devices to be found in the Italian or in the Spenserian form, or in Shakespeare or Ronsard, to name but a few examples. As with epic, the sonnet has also, I would argue, frequently found itself an endangered poetic

form at precisely those moments when hackneyed diction, exhausted metaphor and various other jejune or uninventive forms of imitation have prevailed. ‘If’, as Borges had argued, ‘you attempt a sonnet’:

> you believe in the illusion that you really have something before you, and that is the framework of the sonnet, whether you choose the Italian form or the Shakespearean form. This form exists before you’ve written a single line of verse. Then you have to find rhyming words. These rhyming words limit what you are doing and make things easier for you.[38]

While it may appear to be a simpler procedure (perhaps a less ambitious one, although this would be more apparent than real) to conform to long held conventions and imitate prescribed modes, nevertheless a fresh essaying of authority—laden genres is by no means an easy undertaking, whether or not one is intent upon ignoring or rejecting (however comprehensively) the genre’s settled patterns and established orders. In both thematic and stylistic terms I have, indeed, adopted in *A Locale of the Cosmos*, a course that demonstrates the poem to be both a respecter and preserver of tradition on the one hand and, on the other, to represent a significant challenge to the hallowed expectations that such traditions embody.[39]

Epic has been, then, at certain phases in its long history a form which like any other, is not only receptive to adaptation but overdue for renovation, for a fundamental reconsideration and re-configuration of its keynote features. As Perloff, echoing Davie’s suggestion, had observed: ‘ Pound’s great contribution to modern prosody was his focus on the line, rather than the larger stanzaic block, “as the unit of composition”’.[40] It is a lead that I have followed in my own poem and one that, as Perloff rightly noted, is more in Pound’s debt than in Whitman’s.[41] A rupture similar to that involved in focusing on the line and how it might be scanned, rather than on the stanza had also been achieved by Pound. British poet Charles Tomlinson recalled in his memoir the initial powerful impression made on him by the phrasings and rhythms of Pound’s verse:

> Scansion had figured prominently in one’s education— in English, French and Latin. I am grateful that it did. But here [in Pound’s verse] its only use was to point the

> difference, to suggest, with the Mauberley extract, that perhaps some type of syncopation was at work…it was a sense of cleanliness of the phrasing that drew me, still puzzled, to Canto II…I returned many times to:
>
> Lithe turning of water
> sinews of Poseidon,
> Black azure and hyaline,
> glass wave over Tyro…
>
> The canto closed on the word 'And…' That was also something to think about.[42]

The epic genre, in Pound's estimation, was, I would suggest, under practitioners', as well as wider theoretical notice, no matter how ancient or sacrosanct its traditions. It was a view that had already been telegraphed by the ongoing debate among Homeric scholars over the nature and composition of heroic and folk epic, a debate whose complexities, as I have already indicated in Chapter One, were addressed comprehensively in the work of Milman Parry.[43]

According to Perloff, 'the most interesting side of the Pound legacy' was the structure of *The Cantos*, which she went on to claim as his 'chief gift to the contemporary poet'.[44] The gift was, in part, a matter of diversifying and expanding the fund of available or possible modes of epic—as she observed:

> his recovery for poetry of 'the comic, the satiric, the grotesque, the narrative', his move beyond the isolated lyric poem…toward a larger, more capacious poetic form (*poesis)* that could once again accommodate various levels of discourse.[45]

At another level, Pound saw, in the renovation and re-molding of the epic form, a means whereby poetry could seriously challenge the pre-eminence of the novel, as Bernstein has argued, as a genre that could embrace the wider horizons that had once been the province of epic itself.[46] In Canto VIII, Pound had introduced seemingly alien elements into the epic fabric, as Bernstein observed, 'without privileging either medium [prose or poetry]'.[47] 'It represents' Bernstein declared, 'one of the decisive turning points in modern poetics, opening for verse the capacity to include domains of experience long since considered alien territory'.[48] The epic could, in Perloff's terms,

‘engage’ and ‘re-appropriate’ the entire field of ‘realities’ (even at the political and economic level) and ‘absorb them into the lyric fabric’.[49]

A trenchant example of this breakthrough, as Perloff and others have noted, may be seen in the modern reemergence of epic, occurring in particular, as Perloff noted and ‘most obviously’, in the work of those poets who were Pound’s immediate heirs, ‘in Williams’s *Paterson* and Olson’s *Maximus Poems*’.[50] In these works the overriding and unifying factor that makes sense of both the historical material and the imagined landscape, is no less than language itself. This has also been one of my central aims. As Don Byrd has noted in his discussion of Louis Zukofsky’s epic poem, *A*, ‘the structure of history is not to be found in logic…but in language and the complex web by which language is involved with perception’.[51] This, it seems to me, is why notions of time and space in *The Cantos* appear so fluid, since as Guy Davenport has pointed out, ‘to say that *The Cantos* is “a voyage in time” is to be blind to the poem altogether…In Pound’s spatial sense of time, the past is here, now; its invisibility is our blindness, not its absence’.[52]

The influence of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* on the shaping of my poem is reflected in common preoccupations and shared assumptions. Pearce had noted Williams' attempts to make central the idea of ‘invention’ and ‘to give new life and meaning to this term out of traditional rhetoric and poetics’:[53] This has been an important plank of my own poetics. As Pearce observed: ‘The poet must firmly root his invention in its locale, so that it will prove to *be* that locale’.[54] The governing term here is, I would suggest, ‘proved’: that is to say, the landscape cannot be simply looked at or mechanically reproduced, but must be brought powerfully to life.

A Locale of the Cosmos, in a manner similar to *Paterson*, is concerned on the one hand, to render in all its complexity a particular topographical and cultural setting: a milieu, with its own distinct and vividly drawn character. On the other hand, it represents an imaginative possession both of the observable landscape and of a fictive one: a poetic creation that is related to and may, in fact, resemble the observable landscape, but is not confined to it. What is at stake here is the question of discovering

the layers of truth that inevitably accumulate around a subject. As Randall Jarrell has observed of *Paterson*: 'The subject of *Paterson* is: How can you tell the truth about things? In other words, how can you find a language so close to the world that the world can be represented and understood in it?'[55]

The answers to these questions occupy a significant part *of Paterson*. And, according to Jarrell, the achievement of Williams was not only to have found a compelling argument for the truth of his 'locale' (Paterson, New Jersey—a place that, as Williams reminds us—'lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls'), but also a compelling poetic structure for epic, rich in suggestive juxtapositions and free of the obscurantism that had, in his view, flawed *The Waste Land*:

> If you want to write a long poem which doesn't stick to one subject, but which unifies a dozen, you can learn a great deal from *Paterson*. But I do not know how important these details of structure will seem to an age which regards as a triumph of organization that throwing-out-of-blocks-upon-the-nursery-floor which concludes 'The Waste Land', and which explains its admiration by the humorless literalness of believing that a poet represents fragments by eliminating meter, connective, and logic from the verses which describe the fragments.[56]

Williams had chosen for his theme the city upon the Passaic River. 'I took', he said, 'the city as my "case" to work up, really to work it up'.[57] In doing so, his aim was, as he insists, 'to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me'.[58] It was this seemingly unprepossessing world and his knowledge of it that claimed the larger part of his poetic interest. Its history, including the pioneer period, as well as its geography, became focal points of his narrative, which also incorporated fragments and occasional pieces from local histories of the region, as well as newspaper articles, legends and other local curiosities and even personal reminiscences and details from his private life and his occupation as a family physician.[59] At the same time, *Paterson*, as Robert Lowell has observed, 'is an interior monologue'.[60] This factor alone has made the poem an important template for my own project. And, in no less significant a fashion, it has raised in my own mind, from the beginning, the possibility of attempting, through the prism of a similarly

regional poem, the task of accomplishing what, in *Paterson*, Lowell had seen as 'an attempt to write the American Poem'.[61] As an Australian contribution to the genre, time alone will tell whether or not *A Locale of the Cosmos* may come to be regarded as its representative Australian counterpart. Whatever the case, a crucial difference remains: it is a rural myth (the myth of 'the bush') that informs my poem, in contradistinction to the governing urban myth of *Paterson* which is, overwhelmingly, the myth of superabundance and surfeit, that is, the megalopolis myth of America. As Lowell has observed:

> It [*Paterson*] depends on the American myth, a myth that is seldom absent from our literature—part of our power, and part of our hubris and deformity. At its grossest the myth is propaganda, puffing and grimacing: Size, Strength, Vitality, the Common Man, the New World, Vital Speech, the Machine, the hideous neo-Roman persona; Democracy, Freedom, Liberty, the Corn, the Land. How hollow, windy and inert this would have seemed to an imaginative man of another culture! But the myth is a serious matter. It is assumed by Emerson, Whitman and Hart Crane…For good or for evil, America is something immense, crass and Roman. We must unavoidably place ourselves in our geography, history, civilization…[62]

The simple substitution of some of the above categories with their 'Aussie' and 'ocker' equivalents,[63] a substitution all the more plausible in light of the frontier and 'New World' mythologies of both nations, would serve to underline some of the motifs of *A Locale of the* Cosmos: namely that, as Lowell concluded, 'myth is a serious matter'[64] and also, as my own poem makes clear, 'We must unavoidably place ourselves in our geography, history, civilization…'[65] Over and above these, is the poem's preoccupation with the idea of community, the human presence (living and dead) of shared memories and common values and beliefs that form the essence of a locale. As Hugh Kenner has observed, in *Paterson* the idea of community is also a central preoccupation. 'He has a sense of that unique thing', Kenner observed of Williams:

> The American community, a community built upon no past or fragments of a past…united by symbols held unexpectedly in common…not the remnants of former order the best modern poetry has learned to express by using shards of older forms, the 'unreal city' of 'The Waste Land' or the *spezzato* paradise of *The Cantos*, not a great order smashed but a new one so far voiceless.[66]

It is toward this aim of giving voice to the 'so far voiceless', that *A Locale of the Cosmos* is similarly directed.

Williams's celebrated dictum: 'no ideas but in facts' is, in this respect (as Lowell has pointed out) 'misleading'.[67] 'His symbolic man and woman', Lowell argued, 'are Hegel's *thesis* and *antithesis*. They struggle towards *synthesis*—marriage. But fullness, if it exists at all, only exists in simple things…'[68] This shows that metaphysical concerns were never far from his mind, even if only as *points de repère*: a kind of reaction noted by Jarrett, for instance, against heavily abstracted language, such as the sometimes occluded speech of 'The Waste Land'. In one of his letters Williams confessed: 'I have no interest, as far as observation goes, in the cosmic', and in another he says, '…art has nothing to do with metaphysics- I am aiming at the very core of the whole matter.'[69]

Both of these comments place the whole question of art as a transfiguring and visionary process, a description close to my own position on the matter, at the very center of his concerns. I would argue that *Paterson* is a poem much taken up with the problems of poetics and that as the poem grew and its perspectives widened, its author moved closer to a neo-Romantic conception of poetry, one that acknowledged the power of the imagination to transcend and also transform the material world and to endow it with a mythic status. A passage from Book Two of *Paterson* reveals this relationship between language and landscape as critical:

> unless there is
> a new mind there cannot be a new
> line, the old will go on
> repeating itself with recurring

deadliness: without invention
nothing lies under the witch-hazel
bush, the alder does not grow from among
the hummocks margining the all
but spent channel of the old swale,
the small foot-prints
of the mice under the overhanging
tufts of the bunch-grasss will not
appear: without invention the line
will never again take on its ancient
divisions…[70]

As he prepared the materials for a fifth and final book in the *Paterson* sequence (the 'pendant', as he called it) Williams revealed what lay behind his method: 'I thought, over a period of many years, about the artistic form of the poem [*Paterson*]. The idea was a metaphysical conception; how to get that into a form probably came gradually.'[71] *Paterson* and *A Locale of the Cosmos* share, then, a mutual pre-occupation with the problem of appearance and reality. Despite Williams's concern to present objects in language concretely, untainted by the gloss of the visionary, his language is, in fact, often elusive or richly suggestive. *Paterson* is a work that reveals a poet for whom the 'metaphysical' matters after all. As Conarroe has observed: 'Home is…where man has his experience, thereby shaping his life and thus contributing to the source of any creative act, of any writing that is good. Place, more than just place, is the only source of the universal';[72] and Williams, in a revealing letter, declared: 'One has to learn what the meaning of the local is, for universal purposes. The local is the only thing that is universal…The classic is the local fully realized, words marked by a place'.[73] Even his most adamant denials, such as one finds in his letter to Marianne Moore, the metaphysical prevailed by default. Alluding to the importance, for the poet, of unalloyed concentration on the thing itself, he confided to her: 'I feel as much a part of things as trees and stones. Heaven seems frankly impossible.'[74] In both *Paterson* and my own poem, the reader has occasion to observe how the narrator finds himself saying more than either attempted plainness of diction or any ostensible understatement would suggest.

The architecture of any form (not only of epic) reveals, over long periods of time, an array of changes and modifications. Few would doubt that compliance with long-standing metrical rules and stanzaic conventions has become less important than in the past; of more significance to epic has become the desire to arrive, as may be seen in the work of Hopkins and others among the early modernists, at a kind of poetry that, while addressing a particular genre, is organically shaped and organised according to its own inner and often unpredictable dynamics. As Ellen Frank, has observed of Hopkins's approach:

> constructed and organic things both have insides and outsides…The act of perception, either as sight or cognition, becomes concretised into a kind of literal penetration to what we might call essence, the structural or soul "inscape" of person or thing.[75]

In *Paterson* (as in my own poem) the objective is to find meaning not only in the visible world but also in the work of art as the expression and reflection of the artist's inner world. To do this Williams needed to shed an earlier antipathy towards the transcendental. By the time he came to compose *Paterson*, he was, as Revell perceptively suggested, trying to write a poem that contained 'a metaphysics without divinity'.[76] At the same time, the creative arrangement and structuring of the relationship between the physical and metaphysical orders of experience, the articulation of this process and the comprehensive scope and ambition of the enterprise create, as Revell pointed out, a new poetics of the journey. I would add only the caveat of a 'locale' for Revell's choice of 'local':

> The quest for meaning in *Paterson* is thus not a descent into the subconscious of its hero in any Freudian sense but a penetration of the externals, the outer reality that at once shapes and expresses him. The journey of discovery is of this kind, an endeavor to identify and assert the true nature of his 'local'.[77]

In a manner similar to *Paterson*, my own poem also takes on a shape and adopts a language that confirms it is not trying to outdo earlier epic models. Its claim to epic status is (as with *Paterson*) based on breadth of vision and range of concerns, on the basis of a new poetics centering upon a detailed treatment of the marginal and the

fragmentary as central and decisive, rather than as peripheral elements. The scenes from daily life that form so much a part of the memorable but decorative detail of traditional epic, have gradually assumed a central significance in the modern period.

It is in this special sense, I would suggest, that both my own poem and *Paterson* establish their reach, albeit that the respective locales are as widely divergent as the city and 'the bush'. In the case of *Paterson*, the brief that Williams had set himself encompassed, in his own words:

> a long poem in four parts- that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody- if imaginatively conceived- any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions.[78]

The poet enters into and embraces a quotidian world, the predicate and *sine qua non* of the world that the poem will construct. In such ways, the closer the poet comes to the mundane, the more closely the poem reflects a universal experience. Consciously echoing Dewey's dictum: 'The local [and, by extension, the 'locale'] is the only universal, upon that all art builds',[79] Williams asserted in the introduction to his own poem: 'That is the poet's business. Not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal'.[80]

Likewise, in *A Locale of the Cosmos*, the landscape may be seen to inspire deeply conflicting responses, to be both beloved heartland and arena of betrayal, generating a sense of unease that makes 'the wind turn and look over its shoulder'.[81] In both poems the landscape is something of an enigma, since it is at the same time the psychological landscape in *Paterson*, as in my own poem, that forms the parameters of what is essentially, in the case of both poems, a venture into autobiographical epic. However, whereas *Paterson* sets out to accomplish its aim of addressing 'all that any one man may achieve in a lifetime',[82] *A Locale of the Cosmos* adopts a more circumspect stance.

In both *Paterson* and *A Locale of the Cosmos*, there exists a binary opposition between contending attitudes. In the case of *Paterson*, it is, according to Walter Scott Peterson, 'actually a celebration of the power of love', by which I understand him to mean, in particular, love for one's locale, as against the desperation of the disconnected self, at sea in the urban wilds of modern America.[83] Williams himself identified this in his correspondence with Horace Gregory:

> Of mixed ancestry, I felt from earliest childhood that America was the only home I could ever possibly call my own. I felt that it was expressly founded for me, personally, and that it must be my first business in life to possess it; that only by making it my own from the beginning to my own day, in detail, should I ever have a basis for knowing where I stood. [84]

In *A Locale of the Cosmos* 'the sense of place' is shaped not only by a vision of landscape but also by a long-established antagonism between 'the city' and 'the bush', an historical preoccupation that was pivotal to the development of Australia in the colonial period and which bore directly on the divergence of outlook between, for instance, Lawson and 'Banjo' Paterson at the end of the nineteenth century.[85] There is an important sense in which the poem's preoccupations reflect the continuing influence of this bifurcation.

My debt to the later poems of T S Eliot, and in particular to *Four Quartets* is considerable. While *A Locale of the Cosmos* does not attempt the kind of cultural synthesis Eliot aimed at, it does nevertheless concern itself with spiritual questions. It would not be unjust to describe *A Locale of the Cosmos* as a religious poem, though not in any narrow doctrinal sense. In *Four Quartets* the mysticism of Dante and of St John of the Cross may be seen to have coalesced, describing what appears to me to be no less than a modernist poetic *summa*.[86] However in the case of my own poem the term 'religious' may be applied in those particular senses given to it by Carroll Terrell. In the preface to his *Companion to The Cantos* he declared:

> To me, *The Cantos* is a great religious poem…it is a revelation of how divinity is manifested in the universe…the dynamic energy of the seed in motion (*semina motuum),* and the kind of intelligence that makes the cherrystone become a cherry tree. [87]

Book III, Part 1 of *A Locale of the Cosmos* was shortlisted for the 2003 Romanos the Melodist Prize for Australian Religious Poetry.[88] This may have been reinforced, in part, by the presence of direct echoes of Christian themes, such as the New Testament story of the meeting of Christ and the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35):

Tells me he does that if you took the road wrong road
it was a way of finding the right one
if on the road you fell in with a stranger
it would seem unprovidential
but springing up out of the ground
a calm light spreads across the windrows
suddenly it would be as if that road
was one that he had walked
passing this way
and you were not aware of him
the road you always dreamed of taking
with its fork at Callawada its dog-leg at Pine Plains
going the way to Emmaus the long way round [89]

Equally, there are in this section of the work antiphonal echoes of liturgical motifs drawn, in particular, from the great prayer of the Roman Church, the *Magnificat of the Blessed Virgin* (Luke 1: 46-55):

at that moment I am to compare her
not to any summer's day
but to this one only
dusty nondescript wind-worn
a dullard weather
and that *the Lord* giveth
and we forget much sorrow
and I am to say this too

that among the pepper trees
out in the wide blue yonder
she is a willow
not weeping but bending down before his glory
at Rainbow Rise at Nhill
and Sheep Hills
her soul
magnifying the Lord [90]

Broadly speaking, *A Locale of the Cosmos* may be considered as an epic treatment of religious themes or else of themes that have always been part of the history of religious contemplation. I am thinking here, in particular, of two perspectives that may not appear to be immediately related at first sight. There is, firstly, the religious conception of nature and poetic treatments of this conception that derive not only from the matrix of Romantic associations as exemplified by Wordsworth in *The Prelude* and 'Tintern Abbey' but also to those traceable, in part, to much earlier medieval conceptions, to which Jean Hagstrum had drawn attention. In discussing the relationship of poetry to painting (and the point touches on my own poetics) Hagstrum had suggested that 'Nature' was not, for Aquinas, 'merely the objective world' but rather:

> a vast allegorical embodiment that reveals meaning. So conceived, it could not be appropriated by the eye, nor could it be thought of primarily as a subject for painting. It could only be appropriated by the mind. For the medieval thinker exemplary form is not in nature but in the mind of the artist.[91]

This distinctively religious vision of nature is germinal to the cast of mind that informs *A Locale of the Cosmos* and it gives to the verbal energies of the poem and to its tonalities, much of their coloration. However, *A Locale of the Cosmos* also owes (from the spirituality of the same period) a debt to Dante and, in particular, to that flowering sense of intimacy with the natural world which is to be found, as Kenneth Clark had noted, in the *Commedia*. The part played by natural beauty in Dante's mind', Clark had suggested:

> is infinitesimal compared to the part played by the divine beauty of theology. But in the course of his poem we can feel the change from the menacing world of the middle ages, to the gentler world of the *microtheos*, when God might be manifest in nature. [92]

There is no doubt that 'the world of the *microtheos*' occupies an important place both in the wider conceptions of my poem and in its minutiae. An example of the first may be seen in the following passage:

at last you find an amount of absolutely nothing
so great as to be nothing short of all
where paddocks greet the culverts and ditches
where hay bales in rows are hooped
against the stubborn wild-oat wind
and the smell of rain is only the sprat smells
of stagnant pools
and yet he says that's where you'll find it
the hemp of contentment
a soul grows docile almost dominical
you become he says such as you once were
and always dreamed of
perfect in your own imperfection
surrounded by lumpen sheep and the usual bijou
and farmyard crap
a serenity strong enough to bring the supplest light
to a sudden standstill
like dogwood enduring alongside creek stone
there's nothing he says that isn't elemental [93]

As an example of the second, the passage below focuses upon and celebrates the minutiae, a largely unheeded world that is, however, very much alive:

strange mixtures waft away of wild sassafras
of barley sugar and rye
pulsing through the sullen paddocks
oaten-coloured under the first acacia blossoms

there he says if you get down low
you'll hear the bass clef humming
of a brambled continuo
improvising the simplest of *divertimenti*
tiny string sections of snail and slug
trombones of worms
and the grasshopper tinkling away on a leafy clavicembalo
leaving weightless drops of water
hanging like serifs among the grassy sharps and flats
here he says there are no imaginary toads
in real gardens
only imagined gardens that real toads dream of [94]

Such passages reflect the importance of the *microtheos* and of related mystical notions (not only medieval ones) that are visible (or sometimes not so visible) in the metaphysical dimensions of the work. The view of nature articulated there is developed in the course of the poem and is not confined to the overtly Christian or biblical allusions to be found in Part 1 of Book III. Rather, the poem's spiritual interests may be said, ultimately, to form the woof and warp of its language. In its wider reaches, this facet of my work touches on what Hagstrum had referred to as the 'naïve naturalism'[95] (evinced with such dignity and simplicity, for example) in Homeric epic where, as he observed, 'the work of art is more natural than nature itself, the material has been conquered to produce verisimilitude, art conceals itself, and nature has triumphed'.[96] While I have not achieved anything like this, the *inspiritus* at work in my poem moves ineluctably in this direction.

The philosophical dimensions of a poem are to be found not only in what it has to say about certain things (for example about time, meaning, memory) but also in the way that these themes are handled in terms of language. From this standpoint, *A Locale of the Cosmos* does, I believe, make a modest but telling contribution to the continuing evolution of epic. It puts the language of poetry (as, for instance, Wordsworth had done) at the service of philosophical thought and, conversely, renders philosophical issues in the language of poetry. This kind of exchange may, no doubt, invite mutual antagonism and suspicion among the particular academic coteries; it also, however,

opens up the potential for significant and even new (or what I surmise are re-discoverable) insights.

I have, then, felt empowered, like those modern precursors whose works I have already discussed, to write an epic whose shape and subject matter run counter, in some respects not only to the grain of literary tradition but also of a too narrowly conceived notion of the genre's available or discoverable idioms.

As the passage from *A Locale of the Cosmos* quoted above suggests, there is to be found—in and through the fabric of things—not only life, hidden or revealed, but also a character, an ineluctable identity, of which we are cognizant and which I believe perdures even within the most insignificant and seemingly inconsequential things of this world. As Père Teilhard observed: 'A principle of universal value appears to emerge from our outer and inner experience of the world, which might be called the 'principle of the conservation of personality'.'[97] Through our experiencing of the world, we stumble upon its strangeness and, in the process, our own strangeness to ourselves and to others. It is the 'strangeness' to which Bloom has referred as being 'a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange.'[98]

It is for such reasons, therefore, that I consider my project to be not one of iconoclastic disrespect but of contributing, in a considered and historically aware fashion, to the ongoing process of *aggiornamento*—a renovation and re-visioning of aesthetic values,[99] within the tradition undertaken by my Romantic predecessors and continued and enlarged by their modern successors. It is within the *purlieu* of a life of creative thoughts and thoughtful creations, that perilous but adventurous exchange I have alluded to above, that the poem makes its claim to have added, in however minor a mode (though not, I hope, in an inconsiderable fashion) not only to the sum of human knowledge in general, but to the strength and resilience of a great literary tradition, rich in both of these attributes. After all, as Shelley famously proclaimed, poetry is not only the undeclared legislation of mankind but also 'connate with the origin of man'.[100] It seems to me, then, that poets can have no more responsible (and

perhaps formidable) task than to put their hand, without temerity, to epic, that genre which above all others is nothing if not connate with the origin of poetry itself.

In the following chapter I shall go on to address the poem in its Australian context, in more detail, and also to examine the praxis at work in the literature of landscape in Australia. And, in considering that process of renewal and revitalization to which I have just referred, I will examine the forces of tradition operating both within the history of poetry in Australia and also within the history of versions of Australian identity. It is to these that I now turn.

NOTES

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[1] *New Princeton Encyclopedia,* pp. 791-792.
[2] Ibid., p. 791.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ellman Crasnow, ed., *Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, London, J. M. Dent, 1994, p. 484.
[5] Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays On Modernist And Postmodernist Lyric*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1990, p. 208.
[6] Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', in Francis Murphy ed., *Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986, p. 86.
[7] Ibid..p. 63.
[8] Ibid., Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1987, p. 72.
[9] Pearce considers the theory behind this to be 'almost psychoanalytic', *Continuity*, p. 82; and although resulting in a kind of union of the poet and his language, to represent also the 'unity of psychic exhaustion, of an act of self-discovery, self-involvement and self-creation carried through to completion.' Ibid. I should add that this is not, however, a direction taken by *A Locale of the Cosmos*.
[10] The poem takes on, therefore, as Barthes has observed, 'a double mode of existence, and superimposes upon the content…a second-order meaning …so that with the situation of thought is mingled a supplementary fate…the fate of the form.' See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, New York, Hill & Wang, 1981, p. 84.
[11] *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, p. 488.
[12] Ibid.
[13] In *Symbolism and American Literature*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953, quoted in *Continuity*, p. 73.
[14] In *Walt Whitman Reconsidered*, New York, 1955, quoted in *Continuity*, p. 73.
[15] For example in the litany of names preceded by the phrase 'what road…'; see *LC*, Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 2, p. 20.
[16] *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 179 –180.
[17] Such inversion in Whitman reflects his inventiveness and allows him to make of his own personality and indeed the ordinary things of this world legitimate subjects for epic treatment. In doing so, we are invited to discover (or re-discover) the possibilities of epic, to renew or make new the deeper pleasures of the genre. In such instances there is a vital exchange between author and reader, an exchange which the weight of authority attaching to epic has served to discourage. As Barthes has observed: 'The bliss of the text is often only stylistic…However, at times the pleasure of the Text is achieved more deeply…whenever [it] transmigrates into our life…whenever a co-existence occurs.' See Roland Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, New York, Hill & Wang, 1976, p. 7.
[18] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon,* pp. 265- 266.
[19] Ibid., p. 122.
[20] Quoted in *Poetic License*, p. 158.
[21] Guy Davenport, 'Persephone's Ezra', in *The Geography Of The Imagination: Forty Essays*, San Francisco, North Point Press, 1981, p. 56.
[22] Max Harris, 'Directions In Modern Poetry: Dance Little Wombat', in Clement Semmler, ed., *20th Century Australian Literary Criticism*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 23.
[23] As quoted in W. B. Yeats, *A Vision*, London, Macmillan, 1981, p. 4.
[24] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, p. 458.
[25] *Poetic License*, p. 122.
[26] *A Vision*, p. 4.
[27] Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, London, Faber & Faber, 1982, p. 210.
[28] *A Vision*, p.5.
[29] *The Cantos*, p. 6.
[30] Quoted in *Poetic License*, p. 122.

[31] As Mair has observed: 'Style is not an optional extra or an added decoration. It is a way of recreating a world of experience.' See Miller Mair, *Between Psychology and Psychotherapy: A Poetics of Experience*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. xi. Mair refers to C. K. Stead's apt remark that 'style' in fact 'is the poet's way of knowing the world', see C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot*, London, Hutchinson, 1964, as quoted in *Poetics of Experience*, p. xi. In a similar vein, Barfield has observed that: 'without the continued existence of poetry, without a steady influx of new meaning into language, even the knowledge and wisdom which poetry herself has given in the past must wither away into a species of mechanical calculation' since 'poetry…is…the progressive incarnation of life in consciousness'; see Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, London, Faber and Gwyer, 1928, as quoted in *Poetics of Experience*, p. x.
[32] Ibid., p. 123.
[33] Ibid., p. 122.
[34] Matthew Arnold, 'On Translating Homer' in Lionel Trilling ed., *The Essential Matthew Arnold*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1949, pp. 204 ff.
[35] *Continuities*, p. 30.
[36]In Guy Davenport, 'Pound and Frobenius", in his discussion of Ezra Pound in *Carta da Visita*, Rome 1942, p. 52.
[37] Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet As Sculptor*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. 44 – 45.
[38] Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Daniel Halpern, Frank MacShane eds, *Borges On Writing*, London, Allen Lane, 1974, p. 70.
[39]I agree with Borges that the formal characteristics of genres have a powerful, almost magnetic appeal (the pull of reinforcement and reassurance) that poets— if they choose to do so—ignore at their peril. 'I discovered,' Borges had observed, writing of the sonnet form, 'that there is something really magical and unexplainable about the sonnet. This form, which in itself seems to be half-haphazard with its various patterns and rhyme schemes—Italian, Shakespearean, Spenserian—is capable of producing very different kinds of poems.' Ibid., pp. 71 –72. Quite so—'very different kinds of poems'— although all of them are (in this instance) examples of the sonnet. The situation is no less true and no less transparent in the case of epic. There are many epics and there are also many different kinds of epic, complying with all or some or a limited number of the generic conventions, while others manifest varying degrees of incongruence with, or resistance to, or even bring about a radical dissolution of these same conventions.
[40] *Poetic License*, p. 126.
[41] Ibid. Perloff concedes that: 'Whitman, one might object, had already done the same thing, but the Whitman free-verse line is still inherently iambic (or anapaestic)…In contrast Pound's line repeatedly violates the iambic norm…'
[42] Charles Tomlinson, *Some Americans: A Personal Record*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981, pp. 1- 2.
[43] See *The Making of Homeric* Verse, pp. ix - lxii.
[44] *Poetic License*, p. 133.
[45] Ibid., pp. 133 –134.
[46] Michael Bernstein, *The Tale Of The Tribe: Ezra Pound And The Modern Verse Epic*, Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1980, quoted in *Poetic License*, p. 134.
[47] Ibid.
[48] *The Tale Of The Tribe*, pp. 39 –40.
[49] *Poetic License*, p. 134.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Don Byrd, 'The Shape Of Zukofsky's Canon', Louis Zukofsky Issue, Paideuma, 7, (1978): 464, quoted in *Poetic License*, p.135.
[52] *The Geography Of The* Imagination, pp. 150 –151, quoted in *Poetic License*, p. 137.
[53] *Continuity*, p. 112.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Charles Tomlinson, ed., *William Carlos Williams: A Critical Anthology*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972, p. 152.
[56] Ibid.
[57] in 'Author's Note', *Paterson,* unpag.

[58] Ibid.
[59] Similarly *A Locale of the Cosmos* incorporates, for example, material such as the following: a noted passage from the journals of Major Thomas Mitchell, an important early explorer of the Wimmera region, (see *LC*, Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 1, p. 10); see Thomas L Mitchell, *Three Expeditions Into the Interior of Eastern Australia* (1839), facsimile edition, Adelaide, Libraries Board of South Australia, 1965; the lyrics of a traditional Hebridean folk song, 'An Eriskay Love Lilt', English.adaptation collected & arranged by M. Kennedy-Fraser (see *LC*, Book VI, 'Florida Villas', pp. 98 – 119, *passim*); see sleeve notes to LP, (PE 714), Melbourne, World Record International, British Folk Songs: Lois Marshall (soprano), piano accompaniment by Weldon Kilburn, undated.
[60] *Critical Anthology*, p. 164.
[61] Ibid., p. 166.
[62] Ibid., pp. 166 –167.
[63] For non-Australian readers, Wilkes' dictionary defines 'dinkum' as 'authentic, genuine, esp. in the expression, 'fair dinkum' ('on the level')'; 'dinky-di' is 'the playful form of 'dinkum'; 'ocker' is defined as 'the uncultivated Australian…Australian boorishness is known as Ockerism'; see G. A. Wilkes, ed., *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*, Sydney, Fontana, 1985, pp. 116 –117; pp. 236 –237.
[64] Critical Anthology, p. 167.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., p. 188.
[67] Ibid., p. 166.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Peter Revell, *Quest in Modern American Poetry*, London, Vision and Barnes & Noble, 1981, p. 207.
[70] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, p. 50.
[71] 'Author's Note,' unpag.
[72] Joel Conarroe, *William Carlos Williams' Paterson: Language and Landscape*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970, pp. 11 – 12.
[73] *Language and Landscape*, p. 12.
[74] William Carlos Williams, *Selected Letters*, New York, New Directions, 1974, p. 147.
[75] Ellen Eve Frank, *Literary Architecture: Essays Toward a Tradition*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979, pp. 56 - 57.
[76] *Quest,* p. 212.
[77] Ibid.
[78] 'Author's Note,' unpag.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81]*LC,* Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 1, p. 5.
[82]'Author's Note,' unpag.
[83] In Walter Scott Peterson, *An Approach To Paterson*, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1967, quoted in *Language And Landscape*, p. 145.
[84] Ibid., p.1.
[85] see Leon Cantrell, ed., *The 1890's: Stories, Verse and Essays*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1982. Cantrell asks: 'Is it possible that in a search for a national identity we have seized upon particular aspects of an age and have given them a centrality which they never really had? And what of the writers themselves? Were they deliberate social chroniclers? Noble frontiersmen? Or were they consciously or unconsciously, mythmakers themselves, creating a legend which has passed for substance? It seems an odd coincidence that many of those whose work has been cited as enshrining the tradition were, in fact, city-dwellers, urbanites, whose lives were often a rejection of a rural past'; p. xx.
[86] Robert Lowell had observed that the combination of such mystical elements in *Four Quartets* 'gives his [Eliot's] experiences an air of the occult' and this complements the character of the poem as being one that is 'a quasi-autobiographical testimony of the experience of *union with God*, or rather, its imperfect approximation in this life.' See Robert Giroux ed., *Robert Lowell, Collected Prose*, New York, Noonday Press, 1987, p. 45.
[87] *Companion to The Cantos*, p. viii.

[88] The Romanos the Melodist Prize for Australian Religious Poetry, which was instituted in 2001, is a major award in the field of Australian poetry, offered under the auspices of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Canberra. The prize is named after the great sixth century poet and theologian St Romanos (born in Homs, Syria) who is regarded as one of the great liturgical poets of Christendom, credited with the composition of one thousand hymns and other vivid liturgical poetical works.
[89] *L C, Book* III 'Wide Blue Yonder, Part 1, pp. 47 - 48.
[90] Ibid., p. 51.
[91] Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition Of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 46.
[92] Kenneth Clark, *Landscape Into Art*, London, John Murray, 1979, p. 8.
[93] *L* C, Book X, 'Aldebaran and Beyond', Part 1, p. 184.
[94] Ibid, p. 185.
[95] *The Sister Arts*, p. 24.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969, p. 160.
[98] *The Western* Canon, p. 3.
[99] I am of the party of Bloom in this matter: ' "Aesthetic value" is sometimes regarded as a suggestion of Immanuel Kant's rather than an actuality, but that has not been my experience during a lifetime of reading.' See *The Western Canon*, p. 1. I can only add to my assent the following caveat—'and during a lifetime of writing'.
[100] P. B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in David Lee Clark, *Shelley's Prose*, London, Fourth Estate, 1988, p. 277.

CHAPTER THREE

AUSTRALIAN SETTINGS

A Locale of the Cosmos privileges the Wimmera region of western Victoria as the setting for an epic evocation of landscape. In wider terms the poem both reflects and reinforces the centrality of landscape in Australian literature. This tradition is also embedded in an immemorial body of indigenous myth. Stories of the land, its origins and evolution are held by Australia's indigenous peoples to be decisive not only in giving shape, in broad terms, to their own vision of landscape, but also in establishing the significance attaching to numerous examples of their sacred sites.

While my poem acknowledges this at several points,[1] its centre of interest lies primarily in coming to terms with and articulating a European vision of the Australian landscape. I think this distinction is an important one to draw, since it is this tradition that has been formative in my own development as a poet and also since I do not feel equipped to address the immense constellation of material contained in the songlines or in the mythical and pictorial texts that so profoundly express indigenous accounts of cosmogony and other aetiological narratives within the arcana of immemorial aboriginal tradition. Nevertheless I shall, at a later point in this chapter, give due consideration to my engagement with and representations of Wimmera history, particularly as these may be viewed from the perspective of Aboriginal people. The relevant critical discourse I shall address later in this chapter centres upon two related matters: firstly, the conflict between the Wimmera's indigenous inhabitants and the 'European invaders', secondly the legacy of that conflict, both at the psychological level (that is to say in the minds of both invaders/settlers and also the surviving Koories) and in relation to post-invasion non-indigenous understandings and conceptualisations of 'the land'.

In light of the limits that I have set for myself, I would argue that the history of the treatment of landscape in Australian poetry (and in Australian art) since European settlement brings the broader question of landscape into dramatic focus. To this end, I have found Edward Casey's history of the concept of 'place' useful to my aims. According to Casey, the idea of landscape emerges as a psychological response to a conception of place, to a grounded 'active desire for the particularity of place'. As Casey has observed:

> This is not just a matter of nostalgia. An active desire for the particularity of place—for what is truly 'local' or 'regional'—is aroused by such increasingly common experiences. Place brings with it the very elements sheared off in the planiformity of site: identity, character, nuance, history…[2]

There are many ways in which a sense of place develops and, over time, comes to form part of a wider field of attachments, culminating in the sense of a recognizable 'locale'. The idea of 'place' as a site of particular and personal significance and of 'locale' as the broader regional context of place, connecting 'a sense of place' to a wider community of feeling, is culturally reinforced, through family history and folklore, but also in oral tradition, family anecdote, written records such as letters and memoirs and in the literature and art that a place and a locale generate. A sense of place and identification with a locale are, at an early stage, often embodied in the values attaching to a desire for permanence and putting down roots, overcoming obstacles and triumphing over hardships and tribulation and, not surprisingly therefore, with the history of pioneering courage and resilience, as Hugh Anderson has observed in his biography of the Wimmera poet, John Shaw Neilson.[3] Therefore, both a sense of place and of locale answer to a spiritual need; the shape and strength of such needs is, in large measure, established by the particular and, perhaps unique qualities to be found there.[4] In coming to feel part of a 'place', in embracing and in being embraced by a 'locale', the meaning and significance of individual experience becomes grounded in the wider history of a community and, in the longer run, of a nation and its mythology:

from The Outlet across impenetrable scrub
Joseph Jardine gritted his teeth
hauling the bodies of his wife and new-born child
until the axles gave way
and with his own hands buried them
within sight of the lake
and also at Yerre Yerre at Mathoura
at Langley Vale
and at a hundred other specks on that endless horizon
they counted their dead O the cost
they counted the cost
and the sweet missus wrote in her own blood

the climate- 'wretched, miserable'
the land- 'wretched, miserable-
have to begin the world again'
and yet in that vast place where nothing grew
she put down on paper the Watchegatcheca
land of the wattle land of the buloke land of the cockatoo
of figs and wild honey
and sundowners coming home on their horses
whistling *Dimdamboola* [5]

In the course of its history, then, ‘place’ (where one lives and belongs) becomes ‘locale’ (a setting receptive to and reinforcing notions of identity) and inherits further layers of significance. ‘Place’ may come to be seen as a formative influence in the shaping of the ‘character’ that attaches to a particular region and which, in time, comes to acquire an almost proverbial status. A ‘locale’ is, then not only a geographic entity, with its familiar topography and topical place names, but a term reflective of and conveying those powerful emotional associations that are formed, in the first instance, in migration or settlement, in the struggle for survival and in the ties that hold individuals, families and communities together in a mutuality of interests and responsibilities:

that place became their place
at Dart Dart at Kornheim at Gerang and Lochiel
they kept their bibles lovingly wrapped
in best cloth or safe in sea chests
among saws and spades and blunderbusses
and laid the trees low
ringbarking pulling wrenching
digging them out
piling the limbs high for burning
but in seed time the wind took their hopes away
at harvest time they saved pitiful straw
for mud and daub
milled and sacked the crops in jute
and the murmurers the doubters threw down their tools
and cursed the useless land

land without water a land without bread
but to those who believed to those who stuck it out
O land of bread and water [6]

It is this that distinguishes a 'locale' from what would otherwise be no more than a locality, an empty, though efficient, summary of certain cartographical coordinates. By contrast, a sense of place and a strong identification with a locale are the preconditions for a fuller and more satisfying sense of self, in which meaning is arrived at through the integrity of attachments and bonds pertaining to individuals and the communities they form. It is the resulting communal experience that comes close to the essence of what is meant by the term 'locale'. It is, in the end, a landscape of the mind, having a particular resonance and flavour and with its own spiritual contours:

the land will only yield so much and then no more
or will yield but once and never
or else be beyond all yielding
you see he says these acres are no islands of the blessed
more like circles of the damned
the waterhole or the creek is but the lure
the artesian emptiness of the sky
is what you die of
the alchemy of words like wind or tree or water
making their sounds without a trace
of interpretation
there's a world where everything comes out right
where the purest motion
is in the stillest tree
there's a world where good prevails
where the seed comes to life
like an exploding star
but only one god so help you
the god of weather [7]

A locale, then, engenders and fosters certain attitudes and values that people living within its ambience have and share in common, or which are gradually established as being characteristic. In due course, a locale comes to include the assumption, usually

un-stated and perhaps unconsciously accepted, that the land itself in those parts has a crucial and even fateful influence in the shaping of character and also of a way of life. Shaw Neilson's response to it may not have been typical, but represents an acute example of the shaping powers of landscape. Neilson found it difficult to think of landscape without those spiritual influences that, for someone of his cast of mind, are constantly at work, both in it and also through it: 'October' he wrote, 'is a wonderful month out of doors in Australia. It seems hard to write a good lyric without bringing in the idea of God'.[8] Thus the landscape itself is seen as giving rise to what may be described as a cast of mind, a certain disposition and temper. In this way, the gradual transformation of 'space' (the amorphous context of being) into 'place' (the locus of lived space and of belonging) and, in turn, of 'place' into 'locale' (into family and bonded communities—as indicated on the previous page—in short, a nexus of interlocking identities) contributes to the sense of not only a shared, but also a precious bond:

looking out across the empty range
towards the grassy horizon
he thought he had caught a glimpse of an incline
perhaps a ridge or a gentle rise
the land came to the man
as the man came to the land
the clouds circled his dreaming
or shifted back and forth across a big sky
as if looking for somewhere to settle down
you don't just live in a place like this he used to say
you learn to live in it and learn to live with it
maybe in time you learn something about living
about how much it takes to carve out a niche of your own
how little it takes to lose everything [9]

The Wimmera region, though a municipal entity, is not, strictly speaking, gazetted as a compact geographical zone, whose parameters are a settled matter The more closely one examines the term, the less settled such questions become.[10] Even the name has been thought a likely misnomer, since it has been shown to derive from the aboriginal word *woomera*, the term for a throwing stick.[11] There are, however, dissident voices to be heard, even on this matter. The Wimmera seems more akin to those places (or

place names) that live in the interstices between history and legend not only in Australian, but also in numerous other cultures. Of the term 'Wimmera' it could be said that, while it loosely denotes a geographic region (perhaps 'agricultural region' might be a more useful, if also more mundane term) what it connotes and reifies is another matter.

The answer to this is something much closer, I would suggest, to storied reminiscence; a corpus of chronicle, folklore and artistic imagining, springing up from an accumulated body of expressions, partly historical, partly anecdotal, of communal identity. This store of memory is largely centred on an almost mythical, or quasi-mythical saga of pioneering struggle, of the battle for survival in the face of drought, flood, disease and every kind of privation, a story of heartbreak and despair, of hope and triumph, of generations whose lives are preserved in local histories, commissioned shire centenary publications, agricultural and produce society records and, not least, in local yarns, in pub talk, farm talk and bush anecdote; in short and also in its fullest sense, in the voice of 'the locale'. It is not only worthy, but also incontestably natural material for epic,[12] a term which, even in the coldest of lexical usages, is the one locution indelibly associated with the related genres of saga and chronicle and with the time-honoured (perhaps it might be better to say 'timeless') concepts of 'the legendary' and 'the mythic'. *A Locale of the Cosmos* is, then, an epic that registers the life and environs of an outward and also of an inward world, both the visible and the imagined landscape. This gives the poem, in part, its mythic dimension, a note that has been sounded in epic since *The Prelude*. As Ashley Crawford, in his book on the painter of Wimmera landscapes, Philip Hunter, has observed:

> There is something decidedly odd about the Wimmera. As a region it exists as an ever-changing site of imagining. Rather than a set of formalised boundaries, the Wimmera shifts and changes, a concept or a legend more than a geographic site and one of constantly evolving shape and size.[13]

Encompassing one of Australia's, (and the world's) great wheat belts, a region without any clearly defined borders, an area of such concreteness and yet of intangible borders, 'the Wimmera' remains an elusive entity,[14] one that, as Crawford noted, 'shifts and changes'.[15] This is, in fact, the burden of the final cadence of the poem itself:

a land without weather
of stops and bellows of shag and thorn wind
forever shifting key[16]

Correlated to this notion of intangible boundaries is the idea of landscape as something that is, in a profound sense, 'unnatural', something that is, which has been made by man. As Simon Schama has observed, there is a distinction to be made not only between nature and culture, but also between nature and what man has, as it were, 'naturalised'.[17] The enigma of 'place' as registered in *A Locale of the Cosmos*, has, in the case of the Wimmera, been richly augmented not only by its fluid boundaries and the evanescent contours of its vanishing horizons, but also by the human desire to reconcile nature to human needs:

and you he says fill that which never was to overflowing
with that which can never be
making a space for time out of sap and buloke shade
a time for space out of the bud light
the imperishable swept off its feet by the fleeting [18]

As an area on the map of Australia the Wimmera spreads over much of the northern and western parts of the state of Victoria, occupying an area of such vast expanse as would appear to compromise the notion of a 'locale';[19] however, the region's chief topographical features (flat, apparently unremarkable expanses)[20] and the isolation of its communities, have forged a powerful sense of identity. Their attachment to their 'locale' is palpable and real, in spite of that 'surreal sense of landscape' that Crawford connected to the literary genre of magic realism,[21] as evidenced in the work of the contemporary Australian writer, Gerald Murnane. In Murnane's novel, *The Plains*,[22] as Crawford and others have pointed out, the Wimmera is 'often assumed to be the unnamed locale'.[23]

Such considerations make it obvious that, as a term, 'the Wimmera' goes well beyond being convenient shorthand for geographers or meteorologists. It is incontestably layered with all the power and significance associated with the term 'locale' and is grounded in that compelling sense of place already alluded to and which the historical record, the composite strata of legend and story and the authority of anecdotal evidence, both past and contemporary, make convincingly clear:

here in this wattled wilderness
this matchless monotony
roughing it
among the sand pans and the euclaypts
in the thick of white clover
dreaming of sheep runs
vast green spreads
all forage and bridal brass jingling
and the smells and sounds of settlement
a place fresh a place unmarred
but do such places exist
without a history and without gods[24]

The paradox that this question invites is in keeping with the shimmering nature of the region;[25] the Wimmera, while it is celebrated in the poem as a richly-defined and multi-layered 'locale', is also the tableau of a vanishing point that is, however baffling, seemingly ever present. This extremity of time and space is, in part, a point both of outward topographical reference and of inward confrontation, a psychic vertex that the poem explores through the idea of 'the beyond', a concept that, by definition, is difficult to pin down. As Schama has observed of these unsettling shifts of perspective:

> Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock. But it should also be acknowledged that once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery.[26]

This sense of the region's mercurial quality, of the elusiveness of those very properties that give to the idea of landscape its substantive meaning, is vividly captured in Philip Hunter's response to the question posed by the curator of his 2001 exhibition, *The Plains: Wimmera and the Imaging of Australian Landscape*. As related by Crawford, when asked by Peter Haynes what it was that 'constituted the shape of the Wimmera',[27] Hunter's reply was: 'It was one of those moments of embarrassment where you think, 'I should know this'.[28] According to Crawford, Hunter went on to say that:

> After speaking to half a dozen government departments it became clear that it had quite transitory boundaries, that no one could name them. It didn't correspond with Parish boundaries. When it was initially gazetted in the 19th century it actually included what is now the Mallee as well, so it has been changing its shape continuously.[29]

This uncertainty and the ambivalence it arouses, are a powerful source of the region's almost magnetic attraction for me as an artist. They give shape to the poem, both as a philosophical excursus and as an extended poetic rumination. This process of rumination is at home in the epic genre and, in terms of allowable scale, lends itself to a breadth of vision that is consonant with the physical parameters of the region itself. At the same time, both landscape and place, as Lucy Lippard has observed, can be broken down into their local components:

> the vortices where people and place work on each other. But place is where we stand to look around at landscape or look out to the (less familiar) view. The word place has psychological echoes as well as social ramifications. 'Someplace' is what we are looking for. 'No place' is where these elements are unknown or invisible, but in fact every place has them, although some are being buried beneath the asphalt of monoculture, the 'geography' of nowhere'. 'Placeness', then, may simply be place ignored, unseen or unknown. [30]

As the very title of the poem suggests, 'looking around' and 'looking out' may mean looking for different things, or for different forms of the same thing; the minutiae and the overwhelmingly large are, in Wimmera landscapes not only interconnected, but mirrors of each other, translations of experience as both imagined and observed, sensed and made sense of. The Wimmera, as its painters have demonstrated, is more suggestively understood when considered as a node of powerful emotional

associations, rather than as a locus of geomorphic and cultural markers, tangible as these may be. The very imprecision of the region's borders, the impalpable weight of its distances, its sweeping arcs of apparent emptiness, are pointers to the oneiric states of mind it inspires:

this world they said is but a figment
of its own fevered loss
no more than cloud no more than shadow
forever changing shape
forever vanishing
and such things as one might call
my place or *my* space
the ancient geography of the heart
were to them only points on a map [31]

That 'ancient geography of the heart' is what the poem maps and the coordinates it finds there: a dry creek bed, a dead tree, a battery of wheat silos piercing the horizon, are both singularly present and also indeterminate, almost hallucinatory. It is part of the poem's neo-Romantic cast that such ambivalences are not only engaged but are developed into obsessions with vanishing points, with mirages, with the almost reachable and the never reachable, the near and the faraway, those contending categories that had been identified by J. L. Koerner in his book on German Romantic painting as reflecting, on the one hand, a 'subjectivity bordering on solipsism' and, on the other hand, 'a morbid desire that the self be lost in nature's various infinities…'[32] The combined effects of such contradictory states is registered in *A Locale of the Cosmos* in the strange admixture of rapture and melancholy that they induce:

let us say that something can be redeemed
that something roseate remains
suspended in the hydrosphere velvety and vespertine
forever reachable but just out of reach
crystalline yet obscure
not half but more than less
or as much that you couldn't have
had you tried
brushed it with your fingertip
like God

Adam's finger
or felt his breath on your face
at such a moment you would know
that this is a life of infinite fractions[33]

In establishing a framework for the poem, I have also felt drawn to the issue of the region's identity as part of the wider conundrum of 'Australian identity'. In historical terms, the Wimmera's contribution to this debate has been puissant, in literary as well as painterly terms, not least by virtue of its being the locus of a considerable tradition of artistic imagining. This praxis extends to Murnane and, in poetry, to John Shaw Neilson[34] as well as to important phases in the *oeuvre* of artists such as Sydney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Hunter himself, for all of whom contact with and responses to the Wimmera landscape reflect artistic turning points and moments of epiphany. The source as well as the subject of their work lies in an Australian icon, the idea of 'the bush' and its metaphysical cousin, 'the outback'. The enduring conception of 'the bush' as a kind of sacred site (a white man's rejoinder, perhaps, to a fundamental indigenous belief) is one important element of this epiphanic experience; another is the historical conception of the bush as a tough environment, a hard school, breeding rugged individualists and stoical communities for whom survival is a watchword. When confronted by extremes or desperate failures, they may even come to see the bush as a place of terrors, a theatre of the grotesque.[35] Both notions have rich application to the Wimmera, as the following passage, one of many in *A Locale of the Cosmos* that enlarge on this theme, illustrates:

there where your wretched dreams lie
like sand on dead men's faces
this is the place you had always imagined was your own
what is it if not the point of no return
there's nothing tender about it he says nothing meek
they that tell you otherwise would wouldn't they
but they lie
you see he says here the world is not all
that you might have called the case
here cause waits around forever for effect
motion loses its force
north and south their bearings

here the only perpetuity is the riddle of no rain
or rain at the wrong time
or rain by the bucket load drowning you up to your eyeballs
in your own sorrows [36]

It may be argued that the Wimmera does not properly qualify for consideration as an example of 'the bush'; however such doubts ignore the wide currency of a term as rich in its slang associations as it is loose in its applications. The Wimmera, I would argue, taps into and is intensely associated with the idea of 'the bush', with notions of 'bush culture' and 'bush life'. It is, in fact, as suggestive a location as any in Australia, of which it may be said that when one has fled the metropolis, one has left 'the big smoke' and 'gone bush'. So steeped is the Wimmera in the idea of 'the bush' that, with its etiolated towns and isolated farms lying in a far-flung expanse of emptiness and silence, it may cogently be argued to occupy a metaphysical as well as physical space that Australians are prone to bracket with the idea of 'the outback'. At a further remove, as *A Locale of the Cosmos* more than once suggests in imaginative terms it may even be linked to the notion of 'the interior' (another Australian iconic abstraction) and its cluster of stark desert associations:

there is water enough above the lithosphere
grief has tears
all that grieving you do is not in vain
the confusion and the pain
change the way the seasons themselves
know of change
the way they sense the dryness of soil the depth of the root withering
bringing with it a wish to be leaving all this
once and for all behind
and upon some open road wander down
into the eternal daze of the wombat and the wallaby
to hear some strange sound underfoot
the flintlock of rush and unmoving streams
a whoosh in the high trees of the kestrel's wings
the speed at which a sound vanishes
being much slower than that at which it arrives
there is enough water he says
grief has tears

and there are the graves to be kept
the names cleaned of rust and verdigris
the dead to be tucked back in
and told another story
and kissed goodnight again
there is enough water
never enough [37]

The point is reinforced when one considers the contrast between the European imagination's confrontation with mountain crags, lonely summits and vertiginous chasms and ravines on the one hand and, on the other, the vast horizontal prospect of the Australian plains, their seeming endlessness and their immense horizons receding into a far blue haze. The delineation of Romantic feeling has had such a layered history[38] that it is with some trepidation that, as contemporary poet, I acknowledge the appropriation of Romantic categories as being salient to the exegesis of my work.[39] Nevertheless, such categories are at work in my poem. In broad European (or, more specifically, English) terms, the drama of landscape is predicated on verticality and the impressiveness of the vertiginous. In broad Australian (and, more specifically, Wimmera) terms it is ruthless horizontality that unremittingly shapes the observer's response. Confronted by such monumental 'space', ideas of 'place' and 'locale' as 'where we stand and look around', or where sense of self and sense of community merge, may appear to be threatened, if not swallowed up. Landscape as site of epiphany becomes an arena of counter-intuition and betrayal, of separateness from nature[40] and loss of innocence:

not the smoky mountain with its burning cloud
just long flat endless forgeries
of hope [41]

It is not surprising, then, that the Wimmera has been seen in negative terms, as it was by many of the early settlers, who were struck by its appearance as a blank and forlorn region and who therefore relegated it to the inventory of Australian deserts, as I have previously suggested. This preoccupation with deserted regions and their attendant spiritual ancestry of suffering, loneliness and loss, is an emblematic theme

in Australian poetry;[42] it colours the work, for instance, of the so-called Jindyworobak poets,[43] such as Rex Ingamells, as may be seen in the refrain to his poem 'Australia':

> This is the oldest land,
> Wisest, most stoic,
> Where rock-hearted ranges stand,
> Archeozoic.[44]

While it would not be accurate to regard the Wimmera as a *locus classicus* of suffering, nevertheless the story of its early pioneers sometimes makes for grim reading and its landscapes deterred many not only on account of its perceived unsuitability either as pasture or as arable land, but also, in part, due to its seemingly monotonous terrain, a panorama of the plains, whose subtle undulations are almost imperceptible and whose horizons are forever receding.[45] Privation and suffering have invariably been regarded as part and parcel of colonial pioneer experience and both the history of the Wimmera in general and, in particular, the record of hardship and misery engendered by its intractable climate and un-giving soil, serve to underline this fact.[46] As many as rose to the challenge, it needs to be said, also lamented bitterly the hand that fate had dealt them. Nevertheless, the poem focuses attention on the spirit of sardonic acceptance:

> but there was always another misery to replace an earlier one
> mice eating through stacked bags filled to the brim
> or the bags exposed to wind and rain
> slowly the grain elevators of Winnipeg and Manitboa
> started to make more sense than hessian bags and grain sheds
> soon every town had them
> rising like pyramids over the wide blue yonder
> over tracks and shunting yards filled with locomotive smoke
> from Antwerp to Lubeck to Lillimur
> from Dimboola to Marnoo the glory days had come
> soon horses halting to take on fresh water became a shadow
> of themselves and of their passing
> and so too log fence and chimneys and baling yards
> all fading into a grainy photogravure
> in the end it came down to water or the lack of it
> all other plenitudes are as nothing he says in this parched land

even if it meant digging a dam or a well
with your bare hands[47]

The sufferings and hardships were not, I suspect, simply a question of location, but also of predicament. Distance, its immunities as well as its tyrannies, has been a formative influence on the Wimmera's acquired reputation. The problems posed by distance reflect the proverbial vastness of the Australian continent; these were compounded, however, by the sense of physical and cultural isolation from Europe. Furthermore, when natural disasters struck, such as drought, flood or pestilence, the savagery of their effects could bring the toughest to the brink of despair, as Robert Stainthorpe's Wimmera memoirs (dating from the early years of the 20th century) indicate. The complex weave of melancholy isolation on the one hand and, of pertinacious humour and community resolve on the other, is reflective of the region's rich history of ambivalence. *A Locale of the Cosmos* addresses these issues and gives voice to their psychological and spiritual ramifications:

God give us water they cried
and tells me he does
that God gave them water
though never enough it seemed
and the soil turned to dust
the dust to cockle under the hooked shoot cutters
give us water they said for our sheep
for our goats for our cows
for wheat for barley and oats
let us throw grass seed like caution
to the apocalypse of the winds
yes
let us throw guano and bone dust
let it blow back into our faces
and laugh at us
only give us water O Lord
give us of your rain [48]

Such passages invite the reader to be less trusting of hagiographical depictions of the bush and of pioneering settlement; they point up the gruelling life of isolated communities, where separation and isolation were, and, to some extent still are, watchwords for a way of life:

where are they now he says
your Buvelots your civilised shades
the sharp refreshing tang of temperate latitudes
here there's only the original lithic
the solemnities of caves
their cool confines and hollow leads
flashing with grudge-growing gold
leading nowhere but to perdition
a place full of shards
of dust and ash heaps
mullock heaps for an immemorial cairn
beyond the snake miles [49]

Such communities, nevertheless, did prevail. It was a world in which individuals and communities developed a sardonic acceptance of the vagaries of nature and reserves of stoical courage which were axiomatic of rural life in nineteenth-century Australia and which have, in fact, persisted into the present day. Lines from two brief poems in Mary Gilmore's 1930 collection, *The Wild Swan*, illustrate how definitively Australian these qualities were seen to be. In 'Never Admit the Pain' she reflects what had become a stoical trait almost native to the country:

Never admit the pain
Bury it deep;
Only the weak complain,
Complaint is cheap.[50]

And in 'Nurse no long Grief' she celebrates the spiritual values of courageous acceptance and quiet determination, qualities that the Wimmera, for instance fosters:

Nurse no long grief,
Lest thy heart flower no more

Grief builds no barns, its plough
Rusts at the door.[51]

A similar note is struck at certain points in *A Locale of the Cosmos* and points to continuities in mood and tone in the history of Australian poetry that may be traced back to the colonial period and are, arguably, reflective of the national temperament:

this lime tree I remember he says
gladdening the old back shed with its bric-a-brac
in my grandmother's backyard
long ago at Rufus River
and oranges dangling like pompoms
from her Valencia tree
there are some things he says you never forget
you see up there they'd always make sure
to keep on side with the god of rain
a god nobody believes in around here
here the only god at whose feet we bow
and proffer incense of saltbush and bundy-eye
is the god of smallest misfortunes
very relatively speaking
after no rain for months
no rain for what seems like years
a god we remember in the absurdity of hope[52]

Even when the idealization of the bush as a kind of arcadia was at its peak, such sentiments voiced the more sober realities of life on the land and caught the opposing and equally prevalent mood of acceptance and quiet endurance that have come to be associated with the Wimmera-Mallee. The reverential tone and lyrical sweep of perorations such as those of Thoreau on *Walden Pond*, or W. H. Hudson on Uruguay in *The Purple Land*, might seem out of place in the Wimmera,[53] especially in light of the Australian predilection for sarcasm and understatement. However, *A Locale of the Cosmos* conveys a spirit of acceptance of the fact that the natural world is both benevolent and hostile. The emotional ambivalence that such tensions can lead to and the way in which this ambivalence is accepted or even resolved, is also captured in the poem:

they found the Loddon snoozing between its banks
and not a fence in sight or shadow of a road to show the way
they kept to a westerly course counting every incline every declivity
the clouds like lignotubers their roots at the Four Posts Inn
where Gleeson talked their Dundee language
and wiped their tears with a bar-towel
and it rained my God it rained
where they said it never did
it rained so much they couldn't move
and sank to the ground with sinking heart until the horizon reappeared
and the hoar frost hung in their throats
and burned their frost-bitten lips
a dour determination was all they had left to see it through [54]

In *A Locale of the Cosmos* the bush is, then, treated as a cultural salient, as well as a geographic one. It becomes an arena in which romantic dreams are played out and romantic illusions are shattered. This process is connected, I suggest, to what Harry Heseltine, in discussing Charles Harpur's 'The Creek of the Four Graves', has identified as 'the source of a modern Australian phenomenon: the production of a poetry largely given over to a kind of Romantic idealism in the midst of a pragmatic, even sardonic society'.[55] This is a complex matter and the poem is constantly exploring ways of modifying these conflicting notions, a process made the more difficult by the fact that they are so closely connected. When combined with the tradition of narrative in Australian verse, of which Harpur was an early and serious exponent, what we may observe, Helsetine argued, is 'a principal manifestation of the attachment of our culture to some of the basic tenets of Romanticism',[56] as the following passage from my poem reinforces:

a snake coils and uncoils its rainbow vows
a bellbird pipes to an invisible other
driftwood does what it does best
it drifts
but secretly and with such seeming purpose
as makes the river's motions stick
in its own dead craw
and the banks to fear the overflow
but not here he says

where the snake coils and uncoils its vows
and the invisible other pipes
to the brittle bellbird
on either side of the indifferent stream
whose are these acres bludgeoned
with the blunt instrument of heat
and hear how the gully is a perfect echo chamber
for a truth that's too close to call
nearby lie the cock-eyed ones the dreamers
they came to indulge in badinage
were undone before the day was out
by the brutality of a simple truth
a cold reflection conjured up by camp fire
by the flickering stars
for here he says night does not arrive
of its own accord
it is slowly conned into falling
and the heart must
as day does
break[57]

A passage such as the above highlights one of the impulses at work in *A Locale of the Cosmos*, one that may be traced back as far as Harpur. Both the tropes and the narrative mode of the poem to some extent echo what Heseltine has described, in examining Harpur's work, as 'a myth of Eden'. This is a myth, he says, that has become, in Australian poetry, 'a central preoccupation', one which has 'risen to the surface of the work of at least two of our landmark poets—Brennan and Hope—and has provided images and a controlling frame of reference for scores of others'.[58] At the same time, *A Locale of the Cosmos* also explores the characteristics of the controlling mind at work in the poem. This is an important, perhaps crucial consideration, in understanding how the poem establishes itself as an autobiographical epic. Equally, as a sustained rumination, the poem connects to a tradition that Heseltine identifies as being peculiarly Australian. 'The processes of consciousness are among the universal and unavoidable concerns of all poetry', and, he argued:

> it is, I believe, the 'musing' quality of the Australian imagination which gives it its special flavour. In Australia the reflexive fascination of the poet with his own perceiving powers less often reveals a stream of consciousness than something like a static, contemplative mode of knowing the world…its implications for an understanding of personality have resulted in some of the still unresolved problems of perception and technique of our contemporary verse.[59]

The Australian bush was not only an environment upon which one could inscribe a version of arcadia: it was also a purgatorial site, as Henry Lawson's short story, 'The Drover's Wife', illustrates.[60] Despite this, as a key element in what may be classified as one of the nation's core romantic myths, it has been accorded a special kind of reverence. It has been perceived as a place so naturally good, so intrinsically uncorrupted, as to be the repository of the nation's moral values and of all that it holds dear in its conception of itself. If Australia was ever to be the Utopia of, for instance, ardent dreamers and socialist revolutionaries, then it was surely in the Australian bush that their expectations would most likely find fulfilment.[61] As Anne Whitehead has observed: 'Perhaps it is the voyaging beyond the frontier—the daring to transcend everyday experience, the hope of bettering ourselves, the dreaming—that makes us truly human'.[62] This said, Lawson's portrayal remains potent precisely because he refused to romanticise the landscape, at a time when Australian poets were doing just that and were translating the bush into versions of 'Australia Felix' and 'Ultima Thule,' a land whose promise was virtually biblical.

In 'A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest', Harpur also saw, through a Wordsworthian lens, an 'antipodean' version of the English countryside, one removed from the testimony of his eyes. Harpur was a child of his age and his work, perhaps inevitably, reflects this:

> Every other thing is still,
> Save the ever-wakeful rill,
> Whose cool murmur only throws
> A cooler comfort round Repose;
> Or some ripple in the sea
> Of leafy boughs, where, lazily,
> Tired Summer, in her forest bower
> Turning with the noontide hour,

Heaves a slumberous breath ere she
Once more slumbers peacefully.
O 'tis easeful here to lie
Hidden from Noon's scorching eye,
In this grassy cool recess
Musing thus on quietness. [63]

Here the poet reveals himself as caught in the cultural contradictions of his time. The prosody of his bush idyll is distinctly Wordsworthian and its descriptive energies are in the direction of the quasi-religious overtones of 'Tintern Abbey' or *The Prelude*. Harpur had resigned himself, it seems, to a world in which spiritual values had notably diminished, or had become debased. 'Nature' is embraced primarily as a source of relief and solace to the troubled soul and, only secondarily, as the medium through which the numinous presence that inhabits the Wordsworthian universe may be apprehended. In the lines from 'A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest' quoted above, the shock of recognition comes in 'Noon's scorching eye', which intrudes upon the scene at the close of this passage; it is a harsh and discordant reminder of the threat posed by landscapes that might otherwise pass for Australian versions of pastoral. Such landscapes serve to undercut that surely exaggerated emphasis placed upon utopian visions of Australia,[64] as embodied not only in the Edenic bush, but in a political conception of Australia as the context for a social experiment in justice and equality, as Russel Ward and many other historians have noted.[65] Even O'Dowd's celebrated sonnet, 'Australia', his paean to the future, is marked by diacritical interrogatives of doubt and apprehension:

Are you for Light, and trimmed, with oil in place,
Or but a Will o' Wisp on marshy quest?
A new demesne for Mammon to infest?
Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face? [66]

The development of a distinct and recognisable, indeed of an assertive Australian 'identity', went hand in hand with the development, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, of an equally distinctive conception of Australian landscape in the work of Australian painters and poets. This sense of identity was imbued with a more accurate and literal awareness of landscape and it was through landscape that many artists

found a way to counteract the prevailing habit of seeing the Australian landscape through Euro-centric eyes. The painter Fred McCubbin recalled the influence of Louis Buvelot in his own search for a truer perspective of the landscape:

> There was no one before him to point out the way. He possessed there, in himself, the genius to understand and catch the salient living features of the country. I remember as if it were yesterday, standing one evening a long time ago watching the sunset in the trees at Studley Park; and it was largely through Buvelot that I realised the beauty of the scene.[67]

In the case of nineteenth century Australian poets, the prevailing colonial tenor meant that literary versions of Australian landscape would be compromised not only because the English countryside still largely inhabited the imaginations of poets, but also because the available idioms that operated were largely conventional mid-Victorian ones, that filtered the landscape and the language of landscape alike, as may be seen in the work of Harpur and Kendall.[68] Out of this struggle, however, there gradually emerged a home-grown sense of identity, of strident Australianness, a term that increasingly seemed to be interchangeable with 'the bush' and with 'bush values'. Leon Cantrell has declared that this emerging identity 'marks the first full flowering of a native-born literature, as it marks the growth to a united nationhood by the Australian people'.[69] It is a view, he adds, 'that has been hard to dislodge'. This is of significance to my own project, including my decision to engage with the epic genre, since as he goes on to observe:

> This interpretation of the period [the 1890's] has been a potent force for conservatism in Australian literature and culture generally. During the early decades of this century [the 20th century] the popular styles and themes of the nineties came to be regarded by many as the natural and appropriate norms for Australian writers and artists. For a period of some fifty years the local cultural scene was notoriously conservative and resisted departure from these earlier models.[70]

During this decade, a turning point in Australian literary history, whose impact Cantrell describes as being one of 'mythical proportions',[71] an efflorescence of bush ballads and short stories appeared that soon established themselves as the benchmark of a distinctively Australian literature. At the same time, this literature acted as a medium for articulations of a distinctive national identity. One set of literary and

cultural stereotypes (genteel mid-Victorian ones) was replaced by another; redolent, as Christopher Brennan intimated, with the attars of the Australian bush.[72] Brennan felt that this bush-worship was too limiting an identification and, in artistic terms, might turn out to be, however poplar and populist, a *cul-de-sac*:

> As Nature had not been good enough to hurry up and fashion a race pervaded with the spirit of the soil, the Australianity of this literature, which largely dealt with and was mainly addressed to mythical individuals called Bill and Jim, was painted on, not too laboriously, from the outside. What ruined the school was that it forgot its main (and only) object after all and took to celebrating imported fauna such as the horse and jackeroo.[73]

In discussing the same problem, Cantrell observed of the leading figures, Lawson, Paterson and Furphy:

> [Their writings] disparate though they are, were hailed as enshrining an Australian way of looking at the world. Concepts of mateship, democracy, and nationalism, deriving their basic stimulus from the bush, were seen as integral and necessary parts of the Australian ethic…it was easy to cite the weekly Bulletin, which had begun publication in 1880, as the principal polemical organ of the nineties' legend. It was widely suggested that the pictures of up-country life…contained all that was representative and generically Australian.[74]

The relationship between the bush and 'all that was representative and generically Australian' is summed up in the notion of the bush as being, not merely a passive backdrop in the works of Australian poets, but the vital 'stimulus', the active ingredient in their creative achievement and, in the process, in the creation of no less than a national identity itself. The significance of these considerations to *A Locale of the Cosmos* lies partly in the weight of the tradition that the poem has had to bear or refuse to bear and partly in the gravitational pull of cultural influences and, in particular, of Australian cultural stereotypes that the poem has had to adjust to, to incorporate into its orbit, or else to resist. Not only have I had to contend with a long record of resistance (in literary history) to narrow formulations of a poetic genre, I have also (along with other Australian poets) had to overcome some of the more conventional expectations attaching to treatments of the Australian bush and, more broadly, of Australian landscape.

Isolated at the periphery of English culture, colonial versions of identity were ripe for re-shaping. Consequently, a number of (presumably) identifiable 'Australian' traits, representative of the 'essence' of Australian 'identity', were, in turn, projected onto the landscape. The result was that on the one hand, there developed 'the cultural cringe', noted by many observers, a response common to the broader history of imperial annexations and not strictly, therefore, peculiar to the Australian experience. On the other hand, the connection of Australian 'identity' with 'the land', or more accurately with the idea or construct of Australian landscape,[75] as exemplified in widely varying and sometimes wildly inaccurate depictions of 'the bush', reflected, in however capricious or misleading a fashion, a growing sense of 'place', of ownership and attachment to a 'locale'. In discussing the engravings of Joseph Lycett, who, with Thomas Watling, another early convict artist, was 'addicted to forgery',[76] Bernard Smith has noted how, in a manner similar to his immediate predecessors, Lycett 'continued to modify Australian scenery according to the picturesque and topographic conventions'.[77] He concludes his remarks on Lycett with the wry observation that:

> Lycett's was the first important illustrated book to hold out a direct appeal to the prospective migrant to settle in Australia. Such literature has always sought to depict the country in the 'most favourable' light. Lycett was transported to Australia for forging English bank notes. How many migrants he induced, by forging landscapes, to settle freely in the country, will never be known.[78]

Watling's contribution to this artistic sleight-of-hand (or since I am quite willing to give him the benefit of the doubt) his unwitting double-exposure, is neatly summarized in his own observant and despairing lament that 'The Landscape painter may in vain seek here for that beauty that arises from happy-opposed off-scapes'.[79] It is an aesthetic tension, I would argue, that has never been entirely absent from any encounter with, or rendering of, Australian landscape and, in wider historical terms, has a pedigree of its own in the diorama of imaginings of the 'antipodes' that may be observed over many centuries, as Peter Beilharz has shown.[80]

Over a century ago, De Libra alluded to this when he suggested that a poetic element had infiltrated the central space of the national identity, partly in response to the perceived 'dire prosaicism [sic] of Australian life in general'.[81] He flagged the idea of landscape, even when seen in hostile terms, as the product of a kind of spiritual distillation:

> The landscape of a country is the distilled aroma of her being, and when truthfully translated upon canvas remains her esoteric own and essentially none other's, even when passed through an alembic so phenomenally individual as Turner's. it is this poetic distillation of Australia apart from mere literal transcription or excellence of technique, that painters are learning to excel in.[82]

A Locale of the Cosmos is an attempt at such a distillation and is, therefore, concerned among other things with the forging of a poetic language that portrays the Wimmera region as a richly textured and culturally invested site. That said, I have been at pains to avoid the poem being seen simply as a stock addition to this conception of 'the bush'. The poem, in fact, challenges the stereotype;[83] it posits the Wimmera, in an important sense, as an analogue of those spiritual deserts that have long inhabited the Australian imagination. Reflecting on the effects of flatness and distance, for example, in the shaping of such deserts of the mind, Roslynn Haynes has recalled her early childhood and the configuration of the primary school map of the world at that time:[84] 'No one appeared to live in this place [Australia] with virtually no names on it, and certainly none of us ever wanted to go there' [places discovered by the early explorers of the continent]. But the dawning realisation follows quickly:

> Australian literature, as represented in school anthologies, was depressingly similar [to the geographical map]. Paterson's drovers and the down-and-out swagmen of Lawson's poems inhabited the same hostile territory where only men ventured, all too often leaving their bones as testimony to blinding sandstorms and death from thirst. Australian landscape painting seemed similarly preoccupied with the presentation of a drought-ridden land where no one went and nothing happened.[85]

It has not infrequently been implied, as for instance, in the numerous folkloric collections of Bill Wannan and others,[86] that it is essentially in 'the bush' that the so-called 'real' Australia still survives; that it is enshrined, in part, in the role played by

'the bush' as the setting for many legends of Australian outlawry. It is in the bush, according to this mythography, where the land's authentic accents may be heard and where a certain template of the national character may be recovered from beneath accumulated layers of historical sediment. The question as to what constitutes the 'real' Australia is as problematical as the idea of 'the bush' itself and the poem can only hint at an answer to such questions. It is more concerned to capture the truth of a particular locale, while also creating its own imaginative world:

you learn how to live and how not to live
chains at a time cleared and space turning slowly
into particulars of place
miles by the chain cleared and time turning slowly
into and out of the grain of the land itself
these were men with burnt faces full of lines and creases
plains men who rode all day in the glare of the sun
or took a pick and shovel to the infinite emptiness
spreading before them in all directions
rough as guts he says [87]

Even when the land looks promising and all appears to be well and nature's beneficence is demonstrable, there remains, therefore, a continuing ambivalence in the poem's response. It is a mark of its resilience as a mythic idea that the desert has penetrated so deeply into the Australian psyche, such that any portion of the Australian landscape that peels away towards an endless and flat horizon, is thereby regarded as 'featureless,' a metonym of places of desertion.[88] Such places are seen as analogues of a void in the soul; they are landscapes that capture the nullity of cosmic space. It should hardly be surprising therefore, that as a poet addressing such themes I can vouch for Gaston Bachelard's claim that the poet may become 'the author of his solitude'.[89] It is, I should add, a solitude not entirely connected, however, to the loneliness of the landscape but also to a deeper sense of one's vocation as a poet,[90] to what Bloom, alluding to Nietzsche's contemplations on the origins and meaning of metaphor, has described as:

> the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere. This partly means to be different from oneself, but primarily, I think, to be different from the metaphors and images of the contingent works that are one's heritage: the desire to write greatly is the desire to be elsewhere, in a time

> and place of one's own, in an originality that must compound with inheritance, with the anxiety of influence.[91]

Bloom's assertion that 'the aesthetic and the agonistic are one'[92] (a notion which among the Greeks was held to be axiomatic) is a claim that resonates powerfully in the landscapes of the Wimmera, where beneath the surface appearances of emptiness and inertia, such as an oblate terrain may readily denote, there broods, I would argue and, as the following passage from *A Locale of the Cosmos* demonstrates, 'a poetics of conflict':[93]

> bones weeping at the edges of a waterhole
> glassy water that looks you in the eye
> standstill of wind and cloud
> nowhere to turn and run
> nowhere to hide
> light that leaves no shadow
> loss that knows no name
> like death beautiful untouchable
> reach beyond reach [94]

At the same time, it seems to me undeniably true that such places are also arenas of transformation that, paradoxically, offer the possibility of spiritual nourishment and even of salvation. St Jerome, iterating a favourite theme of Patristic literature (a literature of monastic isolation) had expressed the view that '…a town is a prison, and the desert loneliness a paradise'.[95] And long after the nineteenth century explorers had discovered to their dismay that the centre of the Australian continent was a desert waste, the vastness of the Australian landscape (of which the Wimmera landscape is a potent example) continued to haunt the artistic imagination. Marcus Clarke's 'weird melancholy' could be found not only in the remotest and most forbidding places, but even in relatively settled areas, with their manifest loneliness and brooding silence. Harry Heseltine is one of many commentators who have identified this as being a critical aspect of the Australian poetic tradition. In discussing the work of Charles Harpur, he finds 'two pivotal concerns' that the poet 'transmitted to his successors':

> the awareness of a mysterious and inaccessible centre to human life may well lead to doubt, disillusion, at worst, despair. The hope of a hidden paradise, together with a knowledge of the experientially extreme rendered Australian poetry from the outset peculiarly susceptible to those agonies of consciousness which normally characterize the latter stages of a Romantic movement. In Australian poetry, these qualities have, paradoxically, enough, been less a terminal symptom than a continuing and permanent tradition.[96]

A similar set of preoccupations informs the work of Randolph Stow, as well as the poetry of Les Murray and John Kinsella, for example,[97] where both the antipathy and the disillusion of some of those earlier responses to Australian landscape[98] are counterbalanced by a growing awareness of the deep spiritual attraction of such landscapes. This contradiction harks back to the debate over the alleged virtues of the bush carried on between Lawson and Paterson. Randolph Stow, for instance, resolves the tensions in overtly spiritual terms: 'the land' he declared, and 'the Tao are one'. In an article dating back to the early 1960's he claims that:

> what, in the end, I see in Australia…is an enormous symbol: a symbol for the whole earth, at all times, both before and during the history of man, and because of its bareness, its absolute simplicity, a truer, broader symbol of the human environment than, I believe, any European writer could create from the complex material of Europe.[99]

Here 'that unchanging observer' alerts us to the spiritual dynamics of the landscape:

> The boundary between an individual and his environment is not his skin. It is the point where mind verges on the pure essence of him, that unchanging observer that, for want of a better term, we must call the soul…The environment of a writer is as much inside him as in what he observes.[100]

This points directly to a central motif of *A Locale of the Cosmos*, since I have addressed the Wimmera landscape not only for its own sake, but also as the context for a mapping of an imagined world, an interior landscape whose ramifications, as I have indicated earlier, go straight to the heart of my claim for the poem as belonging to autobiographical epic. I should add that, in keeping with similar modern epic projects, such as those I have discussed in Chapter Two, the autobiographical component is to be located, not primarily in the outward details of a life (such as the

conventional autobiography enlists) but rather in the pattern of self-reflexive states that have been integral to my formation as a poet and, equally, have informed my poem.[101] To paraphrase Wordsworth's well-known formulation, *A Locale of the Cosmos* is as much a poem about the texture and the propensities of this poet's mind, as it is about the history of the Wimmera or the rendering of its landscape.

In following this train of thought, I have also been interested to see in what ways and to what extent broader notions of Australian landscape may reflect what Australia's pre-eminent landscape poet, Les Murray, with an intriguing religious embellishment, refers to as 'Strine Shinto'.[102] By this, I understand Murray to mean the landscape's capacity to offer, through a talismanic or totemic veneration of its geomorphic features, the means of arriving at an experience of the numinous. As Murray himself ventured in his essay, 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia', this sense of the landscape's spiritual dimension is notionally cognate with Wordsworth's (his celebrated 'spots of time'—of 'a sense sublime/ of something far more deeply interfused'—) resulting in the kind of psychological and spiritual insight that I have discussed in Chapter Two.[103]

For Murray 'Strine Shinto' as he calls it,[104] is a somewhat ingenious if dubious way of abrogating the spiritual impact of Australian landscape, in ways that he appears to posit as being closer, if not commensurate with, indigenous notions of 'the sacred' and 'the land'. 'The sort of Shinto I am talking about', Murray says:

> is almost obsessed by style, by manners, but it has nothing to say about Last Things. On the other hand, it does fit in, in a way which ought to interest Christians, with the oldest spiritual traditions existing in Australia in its celebration, now formal, now casually familiar of special sites and objects and particularized animals held in emblematic, partially mythologized poses of contemplation. The Aborigines accorded this kind of veneration only to natural phenomena—they didn't, for example, venerate their spears or their digging sticks, and their *tjurunga* were held by them to be not objects at all, but the actual bodies of the great creative ancestors—but Australians of overseas ancestry have added human monuments of all sorts to the list of what a Catholic might call the 'sacraments' of identity, while still reserving their most serious regard for the natural features of 'our' fragment of the primordial Gondwanaland continent.[105]

A *Locale of the Cosmos* is not, or at least not consciously, an attempt at some related manifestation of the 'Shinto' of the Wimmera. While Murray's observation that: 'It is probable that many Australians now spend more of their spiritual energy on the quest for national and communal identity than on any other theme',[106] is a timely one, I am not sure whether it follows that such spiritual energy is directed, in poetic terms, towards a totemic veneration of landscape, a mode more germane to indigenous art.[107] It seems to me to be not the sort of way in which European Australians regard nature, even in their presumably more sublime moments and, as Brian Elliot has suggested, 'The tables are now quite turned. It is the European image now which appears exotic'.[108]

Murray's juxtaposition of 'Shinto' and 'Strine' is resourceful but perhaps ultimately misleading. It implies that a genus of Zen, 'the Zen of the bush' (which may or may not be either identical to, or resemble Stow's proposition that 'the land and the Tao are one') is as local and autochthonous to the Australian landscape as 'Strine' is to Australian speech. The first—'the Zen of the bush'— may answer to the spiritual link between art and Nature, the *innerer Klang* (or 'soul of nature') of which Kandinsky speaks, in his treatise *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*;[109] nevertheless, it does not, I would argue, ring true upon the weather bell of any specifically Australian religious experience (if we can talk of such a thing). Even as a description of the indigenous sense of the sacred it must surely be contentious. The second—the status of 'Strine' as an accurate stipulation for Australian speech—appears to me, quite simply, to be no longer the case.

Neither 'Shinto' nor 'Strine' bears much relation to Australian articulations of landscape, whether in art or literature. Furthermore, the language of modern Australian poetry has gone well beyond the knockabout artlessness of 'Strine'. However, in its preoccupation with 'space', 'place' and 'locale' and the extent to which it canvasses contending conceptions of these ideas, my poem does represent a redressing of a cultural balance whose loss is highlighted in one of the final observations of Murray's essay: 'Space,' he concluded, '…is one of the great, poorly explored spiritual resources of Australia'.[110]

The language in which landscape in Australian poetry has been couched has been more accurately identified, I believe, by Paul Kane as belonging to a mode he labels as the discourse of romantic negativity. Discussing their range of attitudes towards Nature, he observes of the early European settlers:

> This matrix of attitudes towards nature is one the early settlers carried to Australia with them, and then largely had to abandon: nature, it turned out, no longer corresponded to *Nature*, to the complex preconceptions that defined the physical world for them. In Australia, at the underside of the globe, not only were the seasons backwards, the plants and animals strange, but the land itself was thought by many to be irredeemably ugly…[111]

By the same token, as Andrew Taylor claimed, the source of this negativity may well be traced to a failure on the part of Australian poets (and of artists in general) to establish a specifically Australian romantic tradition.[112] This was the failure of Charles Harpur, as Taylor sees it, a failure that was, in his estimation, to have long-term repercussions. Unable to feel at home, let alone at one with their surroundings and filled with a sense of alienation and exile, early Australian poets, in Taylor's view, were unable 'to inscribe into the beginnings of Australia's poetic tradition their so-called 'antipodean' version of romanticism in which Nature is a sentient female power nurturing and cherishing humanity'.[113]

I would argue that both these older and more contemporary versions of Australian landscape are, in fact, almost without exception, expressions of a *leit-motif* of absence and separation (as Kane and others have noted); they are also (it is a recurring refrain in my poem) versions of a sardonic refusal to allow such absence and separation to be taken too seriously:[114] It is a feature of what might be called 'the Australian ethos' evinced, as Kane pointed out, in the negativity surrounding the spiritual legacy of the Romantic Movement in Australian poetry. Moreover, any exploration of 'place' and 'locale' must include a corollary version of alienation, resulting from a sense of being or being seen as not belonging, and 'out of place', of having come from somewhere else. That everybody may be said, in the end, to have come 'from somewhere else,' may be all there is to assuage both the sense of separation and of marginalisation.[115] Such considerations have also never been far from the surface of the experience of,

perhaps, the majority of white Australians; my poem points to this with considerable emphasis:

in that beginning that never was
there came from out the legend land
the dragon teeth stars
out of the womb of time
where the heart knows not what to speak of
but only that a great silence fills the spaces
where this place or that place
made out of the clay of time a habitat
what wind what dust tailing one horse towns
each a day's ride from the next
what ash cloud drifts down Main Street in the haystacked noon
down Petering Street down Morris and McLeod
drifting towards Slaughter and Degenhardt
and down the Rupanyup Road
no more than a haze over Molyneaux and Devereaux
a shining rain of echoes hanging like icicles
over Saint John's octagonal belfry
over Kirchheim and Saint Stephen's bells
outcrying the cockerel on the day you were born
singing *Die ganze Welt ist Himmelblau*
and the sun that day wore a hat hung with corks
and wooden shoes[116]

When laconic indifference or stoic determination broke down[117] in the face of nature's antagonizing unpredictability then, as Stainthorpe's reminiscences remind us, one could easily fall prey to bewilderment and despair. It is a note that the poem strikes more than once:

beyond that
only a scribble of bog gums
rock spurs
the flint of the next rise
the hypochondria of a river without water
how easily you're fooled by those clouds
agents provocateurs
ahead you hills that aren't even there
once a week a concertina

freight train rattles
through Mutton Swamp
black stump
paper bark
pepper tree
crack
in the heat
the char
of the Wal Wal road [118]

The note of perplexity, in particular, is one that may fruitfully be taken as a *leit-motif* of my poem. This perplexity derives, in part, from a feeling of uncertainty that the poem tacitly acknowledges and, in part, from that astonishment produced in the observer by the landscape's more powerful effects. Writing in *Meanjin* in 1942, at a time when it appeared that Australia was at the mercy of the Japanese invaders, Vance Palmer lamented on whether much had been achieved since white settlement and on what this might mean. 'The next few months may decide', he wrote,[119]

> not only whether we are to survive as a nation, but whether we deserve to survive. As yet none of our achievements prove it, at any rate in the sight of the outer world…we could vanish and leave singularly few signs, that, for some generations, there had lived a people who had made a homeland of this Australian earth…[120]

Palmer's reservations were, however, reassured by the realisation that a distinctive Australian 'spirit' had developed, one formed in no small measure by her artists and poets. 'But there is', he continued, in a more redemptive vein:

> an Australia of the spirit, submerged and not very articulate, that is quite different from these bubbles of old-world imperialism…sardonic, idealist, tongue-tied perhaps, it is the Australia of all who truly belong here…And it has something to contribute to the world…That is the Australia we are called upon to save.[121]

Palmer's sentiments bring into sharp relief, even today, the continuing struggle on the part of poets and artists to articulate notions of landscape and identity that accurately register what Palmer has memorably troped as 'an Australia of the spirit'. In *A Locale of the Cosmos*, I have attempted to reconcile, in spiritual terms, the impersonality of

vast ‘space’ on the one hand and, on the other, that sense of the personal and reassuring, offered by the domestic and communal routines of a ‘place’ and a ‘locale’. The poem gradually unfolds its belief in the preserving and also nourishing function of the landscape as both repository of memory and source of vision and inspiration. It records, in the words of Simon Schama, ‘a journey through spaces and places, eyes wide open, that may help us keep faith with a future…’[122]

It also moves, through historical self-doubt and distrust of the land, towards a view closer to that identified by Douglas Stewart as belonging to ‘The Banjo’ himself: According to Stewart, Paterson had ‘lifted the settled gloom from our literature of the bush’. [123] This shift in emphasis has, perhaps, considering the centrality of space in the physical and social geography of Australia, been somewhat undervalued in Australian poetry, although, as Brian Elliott has reminded us, there is a long Australian tradition embodied in what he characterizes as ‘the habit of formulating, then savagely checking, the romantic impulse’. [124]

Nevertheless, I think it is also true that the land invites this impulse, just as much as it inspires a language that demands a truthful account of it. As Elliott observed: ‘…the authentic sound of Australian speech…creates its own atmospheric place-sense. Tones of speech are allied to landscape inasmuch as they belong inalienably to the known and familiar environment’.[125] ‘We have come’, as Les Murray declared, ‘to the sense, which the Aborigines had before us, that after all human frenzies and efforts there remains the great land’.[126]

Palmer had once claimed that it is the artist's particular gift to reveal the hidden truths of landscape. ‘It is natural’, he wrote:

> to a human being to love the scenes among which he was bred, the hills and valleys on which his eyes first opened, yet this feeling may weaken or vanish, unless it find a sanction in art: particularly if the general influences of life are against it.[127]

And, to underscore the argument, he went on to add:

> Only the work of artists, looking around with fresh eyes, could lift this imaginary burden. To the artist, in so far as he has an original gift, beauty and significance are not a matter of sentimental associations; they are something to be discovered and revealed.[128]

It is 'place' as discovered, but not as yet fully discerned. Whatever lies 'beyond' and at the 'back of beyond' is therefore uncharted, that which 'space' is, before it becomes 'place'.

This search for and discovery of a sense of 'place' (at once so palpable and yet elusive) broadening into a sense of 'locale', into the richness of its historical past and its accumulated customs and traditions is central to the meaning of my poem. It demonstrates to what extent, in giving epic treatment to landscape, I have gone beyond simply the imaginative reconstruction or interpretation of rural and regional *choses donnèes*. Although I am not entirely sure that Elliott was right when he declared that: 'The struggle is over, the landscape has, for the present, fulfilled itself';[129] what remain true is, however, as Elliott observed:

> throughout the whole period in which the Australian poetic temperament was engaged in clarifying itself, landscape images, whether manifested as topographical vista, simple sense-impression, or as figured allusion, provided the indispensable foundation of poetry.[130]

I demur at the suggestion of closure in this struggle. At the same time, however, the encomiums for Kenneth Slessor's achievement are richly deserved.[131] It represents the 'complete assimilation', Elliott said of Slessor's poetry, 'and functional application of landscape to consummate poetic ends'.[132] This is a description that I can only hope to live up to. Notwithstanding the notorious shadow of Bloom's touchstone 'anxiety of influence', I do, however, feel justified and confirmed in my choice of genre. It has been one of my aims to address these Australian literary preoccupations on a scale rarely, if ever attempted. My choice of genre also signals the importance that attaches more than ever before to landscape in the modern imagination.[133] This development may be located in the light of an ever-growing awareness of and deepening concern for the environment and a widening consciousness of the fragility and interconnectedness of ecologies. Over and above these considerations, there remains the issue of what I hold to be the continuing centrality of landscape in Australian poetics. This project includes and extends what

Elliott had referred to as Slessor's 'lyrical reflection upon themes of time and personal identity'.[134] Such themes are present in my own work and form the larger part of the philosophical ruminations in the poem.
In a fashion no less true than it is of 'Five Bells', *A Locale of the Cosmos* is, as Elliott said of Slessor's poem, 'a philosophical, in some sense even a metaphysical poem'.[135] As a number of my Australian predecessors, including not only Slessor but also Robert Fitzgerald for instance, have done, I have attempted in Elliott's phrase, 'to bring together the visual orientation and a valid element of intellectual process';[136] in short, what Elliott ripely summed up as 'intellectual substance'.[137] As such, my epic reverberates at length with a thematic chord struck in an earlier collection of my poetry, in which the narrator in the poem 'Bearings' speaks of belonging 'without release', 'in a dream world/of bush geometries and river eucalypts',[138] lines which echo a long-standing and ongoing obsession with this issue in the larger *oeuvre* of my work:

> a deep drone from the north drifted down,
> perhaps the dirge of the mulga flats,
> or the hard and brindled dunes;
> you got used to this land, broken in by it;
> finally you succumbed to its moods…[139]

While I have not aimed in any deliberate fashion to put before Australian readers a text that would, in Bernard O' Dowd's words, create 'mythologies our own',[140] *A Locale of the Cosmos* may be said to address, in substantial terms, the mythic dimensions of its chosen landscape and to give voice, among other things, to what are arguably emblematic Australian themes.

In light of such emblematic themes I would like now to turn, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter, to the question of my engagement with and representations of Wimmera history and, in particular, as these might be viewed from an Aboriginal perspective. The historical period that forms the broad chronological context of the poem's narrative (particularly in the earlier books of *A Locale of the Cosmos*) encompasses the earliest European exploration of the region, the arrival of the first settlers and the subsequent history of the region's pioneers. However the poem ranges

both forward into the twentieth century history of the Wimmera and also back into the mythopoeic past of the region's indigenous inhabitants. Its interest in the latter is primarily bound up in a body of aboriginal tradition that is richly reflective of the connection of the aboriginal people to their land. The poem highlights this connection and alludes to these mythic stories at a number of points,[141] in part to underline the nature of this intimate relationship and, in part, to provide an ironic sub-text to the story of the arrival of the first Europeans. Whether seen as pioneering settlers or as invaders (or both) the poem's handling of this issue should be understood as an instance of its wider preoccupation with the moral ambivalences attaching to notions of 'land' and 'landscape'. *A Locale of the Cosmos* does not aim at or pretend to be a history of the region (it is not, strictly speaking, a history), however much the raw materials of the poem include a vast array of historical persons and incidents. By the same token, in privileging the Wimmera region and exploring the wider ramifications of European ideas of landscape, it must inevitably come up against indigenous (and hence contending) articulations of place and time.

The European dream of discovering 'arcadia' (as evinced by Major Mitchell's choice of 'Australia Felix',[142] his descriptor for the newly-discovered areas of south-eastern Australia of which the Wimmera forms a part)[143] is, therefore, inextricably connected to and ironically juxtaposed with indigenous loss and suffering.[144] For aboriginal Victorians, the depth of such loss and suffering was aggravated by the ignorance and broad indifference of the first Europeans **as** to the legitimacy of their land and way of life. Theirs was an arcadia no less valid and indeed, paradoxically, more real. What were in the eyes of the first European settlers matters of heroic conquest and new beginnings resulted, for the aborigines, in their land being forcibly abrogated (or stolen) and their way of life (including the cultural continuity embodied in their traditions diminished or altogether destroyed. As Richard Broome has observed:

> The European arrival created a land and cultural struggle that still continues. We must try to imagine the depth of feeling of this contest between original owners, who saw the land as life, as their cultural essence and identity, and newcomers, who saw it as an arcadia, the reward for their uprooting from distant homes and hearths. The subsequent interactions of these groups were diverse, complex and deadly serious…[145]

The trajectory of *A Locale of the Cosmos* shows the poem to be alive both to the poignancy and the bitter ironies bred of this collision of cultures; the following passage, from 'Jackson Siding' is representative:

> here are the ancient markings the boundaries of time
> here is space as a geometric measure of emptiness
> burnt beyond recognition re-entering its own atmosphere
> here is the face of love itself obliterated
> the touch of human hands in a pile of shards
> here is a knowledge of the land
> as something recondite
> even the Jardwa struggling south
> could not keep intact such things as bores and songlines
> what records we have
> show that the place was wooded
> that brush fires were common enough and the corroborees
> lasted all night
> the women beating possum rugs with their sticks
> and the camp fire smoke rising over roasted game
> you don't have to look too hard he says
> to find the middens and in the most unlikely places
> on the wing of a football oval
> or under the shady tarps of a riverside resort
> the implements all gone or most of them
> an axe here a flint there a precious bead or a message stick
> where poor fella me shrank back
> from the white glare but could find no solace
> in brown shade either
> the vanquished are safe now in their anonymity
> such abundance there was once
> now such desolation[146]

In *Dark Side of the Dream*,[147] Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra make clear the difficulties attending any Australian (indeed, any postcolonial) literary project whose imaginative site is located at the confluence of conflicting or mutually antagonistic histories. The imaginative territory of *A Locale of the Cosmos* must, of necessity, both reflect this encounter and deal with the cultural contradictions that such encounters expose. The methods by which it does so, however, are primarily imaginative rather

than critical. The poem strives for and serves a different kind of truth, no less demanding and difficult than the truth that in an historical work drives the historian. I have been conscious throughout of my artistic responsibilities; these were given shape, in part, by the wide range of historical materials upon which the poem draws and which it interprets and evaluates.

If the poem implies any theory of history of its own (including a theory of indigenous/settler history) it is not one that is tied to any conventional historical categories or adopts (at least not consciously) any partisan position within the ambit of the so-called 'history wars' that have become part of the broader political debate in Australia. The challenge for the artist and the poet is to arrive at the truth of their own vision, on the basis of **a** wide and sympathetic an understanding of the record in all its forms, including gaps, omissions, falsifications and deliberate destruction.

The culture that *A Locale of the Cosmos* addresses is, then, (perhaps unavoidably) a 'hybrid'[148] culture—one arising from the fault lines of impacts made by the conflict of cultures—and this has implications for certain technical and thematic decisions in regard to the poem. As a literary creation dealing not only with events in time but also, importantly, with time itself as the subject of a wider philosophical rumination, the very architecture of *A Locale of the Cosmos* and the shifting modalities of its narrative voice underscore the extent to which it does not conform to any consistent chronological organisation of its thematic material. The governing voice of the poem (whose signature phrase is 'tells me he does') is, admittedly, neither clearly identified nor easy to determine. Several readers have assumed it to be the voice of an original pioneer or else of an old man intimately connected to and steeped in the stories of pioneer history. Others have speculated that it is a divine voice or otherwise the autochthonous voice of the land itself. These, and other conjectures are certainly valid and reasonable; however, there lies behind the anonymity of the narrative voice the foil of a cryptic persona.[149] This persona (both in its presence and by virtue of its prescience) may be said to possess the aura of a mythical being,[150] whose physical bearing and spiritual mien are suggestive of metempsychosis.[151] Whatever conclusions readers arrive at in relation to this central figure, his evolution and development (perhaps, I may venture, his archetypal origins[152]) may be found not beyond the timeframe of the poem's composition. Whatever the case may be, my

intention has been to invest this voice with a degree of mystery and authority, deriving in part from the broadly metaphysical and religious tenor of the poem but also, more significantly, from a desire to allow the poem to transcend such limitations as identity imposes, whether that identity be human (indigenous/European) or divine, natural or supernatural.

A further significant issue relates to the strategy adopted in respect of the poem's physical appearance on the page: the decision to 'centre justify' the entire text. Not the least of the advantages of such technical innovations is that it has allowed me to capture a sense of what Ian Irvine has aptly described as the Wimmera's 'spatio-temporal perplexity.'[153] Irvine has included here the region's inhospitable climate, the subtle characteristics of its light and the enigmatic qualities of its vast horizontal planes, disturbing in their unendingness and apparent absence of direction. These in turn, as he has pointed out, may be made to symbolise 'the psychic terrain'[154] of indigenous and European inhabitants alike, including in no small measure, the psychic terrain of the region's inhabitants today who remain (as the poem strongly implies) vulnerable to the dreams and hopes, the illusions and delusions of those who came before them. The elaborate layering of the poem, line by unequal line, now amplified and now compressed, acts to reinforce these spatio-temporal perplexities. As Irvine has noted:

> The sense that all human endeavours have been, and probably will be, absorbed, inevitably, into the land, stems from the use of this and other techniques that draw the reader into an altered temporality where narrative amounts to layers of happenings across a less universalistic/global time zone than we currently occupy—thus recreating something of the importance of localised spatio-temporal indicators to nineteenth century Wimmera communities.[155]

Another aspect of the poem's spatio-temporal perplexity is connected to my use of the ancient trope of 'the road'. I have left unsaid, or only hinted at, the time and place at which the roads of the Wimmera are taken; the identity of the road itself, like that of the narrator, remains largely hidden and relies upon the pressure of implication to draw the reader into the dramatic web of the narrative or the forks of its ruminations. Such a manouevre, in concert with the totally unpunctuated textual flow of *A Locale*

of the Cosmos,[156] with its many falling cadences across sections of varying length serves to ramify the 'projectivist' leanings[157] of the underlying poetics and contributes, as Irivine has suggested, to the 'pluralising' tendencies of the narrative. Its foci of interests are dispersed among the numerous characters that inhabit the poem and make of it a work whose influences are not only to be looked for in Romantic antecedents but also in the tradition of realism:

There remain difficult questions of acquired attitude and unconscious influence that no amount of theorising may resolve. Despite all the efforts my poem has made to acknowledge conflicting and sometimes mutually antagonistic histories of the land, I am conscious of the misfit (such as it is) between the privileged landscape and certain European significations (both Romantic and Modernist) that have attracted me powerfully, both in idiomatic and spiritual terms; that these have left their impress on the poem is both undeniable and, in my view, not without justification.

It seems to me to be a mistake of postcolonial polemic, that it is tempted to expropriate the monuments and modalities of an indigenous culture, in order to assuage the cumulative guilt of erstwhile misunderstanding and indifference. To the original violence, another is done in the name of cultural harmony; thus, by a sleight of hand, Enlightenment hegemonic impulses are revived. That is one reason why I have been at pains to confine my own mythmaking to the continuum to which I belong and within which I can speak with authenticity. In this way I have been able to articulate and explore certain questions that the poem discloses as being germane not only to its historical range of interests but also to a field of wider and deeper meanings. As Recoeur has observed, there is a disproportion:

> …between time that, on the one hand, we deploy in living, and that, on the other, envelops us everywhere…There is the real paradox: on a cosmic scale our life span is insignificant; yet this brief period of time when we appear in the world is the moment during which all meaningful questions arise.[158]

While I agree that a number of important contemporary poets and theorists such as David Tacey, Andrew McCann, Caitlin Punshon and John Kinsella in Australia and, in the United States, Charles Bernstein, for instance[159] have advocated and indeed

championed hybrid and pluralistic visions of the Australian landscape (either implicitly challenging or explicitly rejecting Euro-centric visions) I remain unconvinced that contemporary non-indigenous Australian poets may easily enough divest themselves of the 'taint' of Euro-centricity. That is not to say, however, that they must remain hidebound to myopic conceptions of Australian landscape. On the other hand, while I rejoice in the newfound exploration of what Tacey has described as 'an Australian spirituality',[160] I hold deep reservations as to whether this can be anything other than a further accretion of Euro-centric modes of feeling and orders of discourse. To some extent the problem is mired in the depths of a corollary ambition—what Tacey (along with many others) has nominated as 'the search for Australian identity.'[161] This has not been part of my brief, not least since I believe that such large and inflated claims would impoverish the spiritual dimensions of the poem. The spiritualisation of landscape, in many of its forms, is a key motif of the poem.[162]

If *A Locale of the Cosmos* may be said to include 'an encyclopaedic treatment of the material circumstances of life in Western Victoria since the mid-1800s'[163] and to have recreated 'the psychophysiological experience of…vanished nineteenth century 'vocations,''[164] it is, as Irvine has noted, 'the seamlessness with which the historic material has been incorporated into the symbolic and thematic dimensions of the work' that enables *A Locale of the Cosmos* to break new ground. It is not a work that meekly submits to an adjudication between what Hodge and Mishra have distinguished as being, on the one hand, the 'Nationalist model' for the construction of an Australian literary history and, on the other, the 'Eternalist model'.[165] As an epic of landscape the poem attempts to combine both the historical and the contemporary Wimmera landscape. Personal and exploratory—rather than, in O'Dowd's terms, political and programmatic—it stakes its claim to having made a significant contribution to Australian letters. In doing so, it may take its place in O'Dowd's dream of 'epics new.'[166]

The Australian novelist George Johnston once ventured that, 'nothing human has yet happened [in Australia] which stands out above the continent itself'.[167] In the concluding chapter I shall explore, in detail, some of the artistic problems that are raised in this judgement and examine what I shall call the anxiety of geographic

influence. I conclude this part of my discussion, by way of linking the past of Australian poetry to its future. Across the span of a century since O'Dowd laid down his challenge, it seems appropriate to conclude this chapter with a passage from *A Locale of the Cosmos* that, in joining the poem's historical and geographical spheres, emphasises the Wimmera's distinctive contribution to arguably Australia's most influential national myth: the Anzac legend— forged on the shores of Gallipoli. That story unfolded on the plains of another land, on plains whose legendary 'locale' incorporates no less than the 'cosmos' of Homeric epic itself:

glistering over Eski Hissarlik
over Suvla Burnu over Teke and Helles Burnu
over Kum Kale and Karba Tepe
over Saros hard by Ghenikos
over Saribair and Sed el Bahr
where Homer sang that first great grief-stricken song
at the Scamander Gates
and on Mount Ida where the slopes are bathed
in honey-milk and herb
as if any war he says could be a war
to end all wars
not for all the red poppies in the world
they sleep now just a stone's throw
just a gnarled ghost gum's ungathered shade
from old Ilium
they lie there in Beach Cemetery
listening to the rolling sea
the drum tap of the tide holding the long chords
of the Dardanelles
its grey-blue waters its white horizons
fading over the bugles of the gulls
and carved forever in stone on Scott Street
Glasson and his company [168]

NOTES

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[1]See, for instance, *A Locale of the Cosmos*, Book II, 'The Road To Wal Wal', Part 2, pp. 37 –38.
[2] Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998 p. xiii.
[3] Hugh Anderson and L. J. Blake, *John Shaw Neilson*, Adelaide, Rigby, 1972. John Shaw Neilson's father was himself a poet, who reflected that 'The thorniest paths may be the best'. He was in a position to know. As Anderson and Blake have observed of the early pioneering days in the Wimmera: 'The work methods were primitive, arduous and time-consuming. Cows had to be milked daily and the few sheep they acquired shepherded until sufficient fences could be erected. The brush fences served to make a yard for the night but also harbored the rabbits which infested the Wimmera. They burrowed easily into sandy fringes of the Little Desert and bred prolifically in the wombat holes east of Mount Arapiles. They destroyed pastures, crops, and vegetable garden…' Ibid., p. 21.
[4] The ancestry of such needs may be found in or, perhaps, connected with ancient notions, (as, for example, those found in Greek myth), of cultic place and the worship of a local god. See, for instance, Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, London, Merlin Press, 1980, pp. 322 –324; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985, pp. 24 – 34.
[5] *LC,* Book. II, 'The Road to Wal Wal', Part 2, p. 37.
[6] Ibid., pp. 37 - 38.
[7] Ibid., Book VI, 'Florida *Villas'*, Part 2, p. 115.
[8] Quoted in *John Shaw Nielson*, p. 101.
[9] *LC,* Book VI, 'Florida Villas', Part 1, pp.106 - 107.
[10] *Wimmera*, p. 106. Crawford summarizes the currently accepted view of the region's geo-political fabric as follows: 'In a report prepared by the Victorian Government Land Conservation Council in 1985 the Wimmera is defined as covering 16,700 square kilometres adjoining the South Australian border. According to this report the region includes the shires of Arapiles, Birchip, Charlton, Dimboola, Kaniva, Kowree, Lowan, Wimmera and Wycheproof'. The geological formation of the region is described as having resulted from the sea's retreating 'into what is now known as the Murray-Darling Basin approximately five million yeas ago, leaving behind a sandy coastal plain'; Ibid.
[11] Peter Pierce ed., *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 402.
[12] The naturalness referred to finds its justification and, hence, its metier, in the precedent set by Wordsworth and also by modern poems such as *Paterson* and *The Maximus Poems*.
[13] *Wimmera*, pp. 16 –19.
[14] Conventional definitions of the region invariably sound the note of ambiguity, even when they aspire to little more than a perfunctory and prosaic description. See John H. Phillips, *Poet Of The Colours: The Life of John Shaw Nielson*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1988, p. 2.: '…the Wimmera, a region of flat expanses dotted with lakes and occasional high country. Father north its grey soils merged into the red sand ridges, dunes and hummocks of the vast semi-desert plain of the Mallee, which derived its name from its characteristic, stunted eucalypt vegetation'. Even the lexical origins of the Mallee, unlike those of the Wimmera, are firmly agreed upon.
[15] *Wimmera*., p. 16.
[16] *LC*, Bk. X, 'Aldebaran and Beyond', Part 2, p. 198.
[17] Simon Schama, *Landscape And Memory*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, p. 53. In discussing the career of Baron von Brincken, *conservateur-en-chef* of the nineteenth century Polish wilderness, Schama makes the adroit distinction between 'the starch-collar imperial bureaucrat', on the one hand and, on the other, the 'loose-blouse Romantic'; von Brincken's vision for the forests of the kingdom was both an enlightened conservationist one and also one driven by the need for an economically productive blueprint for Białowieża, based on a proper application of the principles of *jardinage.*
[18] *LC,* Ibid., p. 198.
[19] The region is sometimes subsumed under the even broader designation of the 'Wimmera-Mallee', although, partly, I suspect, since both regions share so much in common, in terms of climate and vegetation, that the melding of the names reflects the coalescence of their topographical settings.

[20] Neilson's poetry alone, however, offers a number of decisive counterfactual instances. As Phillips remarks: 'Living and working in the open air drew him [Neilson] into intimate contact with the sounds, scents and the great primary colours of the Wimmera…He could run the red earth through his fingers and reach out and touch the green and gold vines and crops. Above him, in the clear light, soared the blue and white skies', p. 89. I think the point is not unduly qualified, even if we allow Phillips's judgement that: 'his [Neilson's] writing is characterized by a sensual refinement that has led many to declare him a mystic'. Ibid.

[21] *Wimmera*, p. 19.

[22] In *The Plains* we read: 'What had first seemed utterly flat and featureless eventually disclosed countless subtle variations of landscape and an abundance of furtive wildlife. Trying to appreciate and describe their discoveries, the plainsmen had become unusually observant, discriminating, and receptive to gradual revelations of meaning'. See Gerald Murnane, *The Plains*, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 1982, p.12.

[23] Ibid., p. 19. In the wider field of literary surrealism, the names of Borges, Calvino and Marquez come easily to mind.

[24] *LC*, Book VIII, 'Mutton Swamp', Part 1, pp. 146 - 147.

[25] I posit 'shimmering' in several senses including the particular quality of the Wimmera light, both its diaphanous properties and its severity and also its intensely numinous quality. Images of light and its effects abound in *A Locale of the Cosmos* and take on a status of no less importance in my own epic than is the case in Dante's *Commedia*. The Dantisti have, over the centuries, concentrated on the numinous quality of Dantean light as being expressive of Dante's broader preoccupation with the light of divinity and the illumination of the soul. I am upon a similar path, though without the eschatological emphasis. In other words, it is not a matter of simply rendering up vivid descriptors for the photons invading the atmosphere but, rather, of suggesting the psychological and spiritual effects and, by extension and more importantly still, the spiritual qualities of the landscape. As Allen Tate has observed: 'It was scarcely necessary for Dante to have read, though he did read, the De Anima [of Aristotle], to learn that sight is the king of the senses, and that the human body, which like other organisms lives by touch, may be made actual in language only through the imitation of sight. And sight in language is imitated not by means of "description"—ut pictura poesis——['as a painting, so a poem'] but by doubling the image: our confidence in its spatial reality is won quite simply by casting the image upon a glass, or otherwise by the insinuation of space in between. I cannot undertake to examine here Dante's double imagery in all its detail, for his light alone could lead us into complexities as rich as life itself'. See Allen Tate, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays, 1928 – 1955*, New York, Meridian Books, 1955, p. 93.

[26] *Landscape And Memory*, p. 61.

[27] *Wimmera*, p. 19.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Lucy Lippard, *The Lure Of The Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, New York, The New Press, 1997, p. 91.

[31] *LC,* Book IV, 'Ashens', Part 1, p. 63.

[32] Joseph Leo Koerner, *Casper David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, London, Reaktion Books, 1990, p. 23.

[33] *LC,* Book III, 'Wide Blue Yonder', Part 1, pp. 44 - 45.

[34] Judith Wright, in paying homage to Neilson, refers to his willingness to be 'naked to life', a stance in keeping with the starkness of some of the Wimmera landscapes several of his poems celebrate; see Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 119.

[35] By the same token, it must be borne in mind that 'the bush' was at that time (and has, I think, remained) a matrix of sentimental values, particularly as they touch upon the question of 'Australian identity'. The contending claims made for this identity have reflected, in the past fifty years in particular, the dilution of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Celtic traditions resulting from both the increasing marginalisation of rural Australia and the continuing cultural complexity of the nation's demography. An anecdote recalling an event as far back as 1914 (as related by Clark) firmly establishes, however, the long pedigree of the nexus between the bush and versions of Australian sentimentality: 'The representatives of the 'country' in Australia', Clark wrote, 'were just as distinguished for their sentimentality as the other pioneers of the Australian bush—the itinerant workers, the selectors, the Dads and Mother Rudds, the Mrs Spicers, the Jack Mitchells and the Joe Wilsons of rural Australia.' These so-called 'representatives' it should be noted were, in fact, (as Clark observed with some

astringincy): 'the people of blood and breeding as those words were understood amongst the gentry and the titled nobility of the old country [England]. See C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. V: 'The People Make Laws 1888 – 1915*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1988, p. 361. This anecdote also serves as a cautionary tale, for Clark went on to point out that: 'Despite the prestige of mateship and egalitarianism [the supposedly defining qualities of 'the Australian character'] preoccupation with class differences pervaded all walks of life from the highest to the lowest.' Ibid. The love-hate affair between Australians and 'the bush' is clearly not governed by the severities of the environment alone.

[36] *LC*, Book. I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 1, pp. 7 – 8.

[37] Ibid., Book VII, 'Marnoo', Part 1, pp. 121 - 122.

[38] See Arthur. O. Lovejoy, 'On the meaning of "romantic" in early German Romanticism', Modern Language Notes, xxxi (1916), pp. 385 – 396; and xxxii (1917), pp. 65 – 77, as quoted in Lilian R. Furst, *Romanticism*, London, Methuen, 1969, *passim*.

[39] Certainly, it enjoins an organicist vision of Nature, such as lies at the core of both Romantic and post-Romantic theory, not only in the sphere of poetry but now, also, in the broader cultural theatre of ecological concerns, as Jonathan Bate and David Abram have amply demonstrated; see Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, London, Picador, 2000; David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, New York, Vintage, 1997. Both authors argue, along roughly parallel lines, for poetry's apocalyptic role (a dimension beyond my own aims) and, in particular, for poetry that restores human beings both to the earth (as fundament) and to planet Earth, in relation to the looming ecological crisis. In the words of Jonathan Bate, 'If mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth'; *Song of the Earth*, p. 283.

[40] Not only a form of Romantic negativity, therefore, but also, perhaps, an expression of a wider Western cultural alienation from the natural world, as Oelschlaeger argues. See Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991, pp. 55 - 56.

[41] *LC*, Book. IV, 'Ashens' Part 1, p. 70.

[42] The spiritual associations brought to mind by desert landscapes have a rich history. As Rene Voillaume has noted: 'Every place has its own spiritual meaning inasmuch as it stamps its mark on our spirit through our senses. St. John of the Cross had long ago realised the importance of places as means conducive to contemplation. A desert is not simply a lonely and silent place, like so many places throughout the world, even in the heart of cities. It is more than a place of retreat; its extent and its extreme harshness give it a quality of its own…It brings man to the edge of his weakness and impotency…' See René Voillaume, *Brothers of Men: Letters to the Petits Frères*, London, Dartman, Longman & Todd, 1966, p. 129.

[43] The Jindyworobak movement dating from the 1930's and incorporating several Jindyworobak anthologies that appeared well into the 1950's, gave expression to a poetics of national pride that, at the same time, sought to go beyond nationalism and to articulate and merge indigenous Dreamtime myths with a new symbolic poetry centred on the immemorial spiritual power of the land, as it had been expressed in aboriginal myth and ritual. According to Brian Elliott, Rex Ingamells was 'the first, the most passionate and perhaps in the high moments of his success the most effective' of the Jindyworobak poets, or 'joiners'; see Brian Elliott ed., *The Jindyworobaks*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1979, p.xxxvii – xxxviii.

[44] Ibid., p.22.

[45] 'This kind of landscape', writes Alex Selenitsch, (discussing the work exhibited by Hunter in 'Changing Landscape—New Perspectives'), 'which comes and goes, offers only one stable feature—the horizon, perceivable but unattainable'. See Alex Selenitsch, 'Atmosphere and Virus', exhibition catalogue, Fitzroy, Meridian Galleries, 1995, as quoted in *Wimmera*, p. 72.

[46] At the same time the region has always proved to be attractive, if not irresistible, to farming, however fraught the climatic conditions or the suitability of the soil. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, 'the colonies' were opened up to large-scale settlement. 'Between 1880 and 1900', as Clark has observed, 'the area under cultivation almost doubled from four and a half million acres to eight and three quarter million acres'. See Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, New York, Mentor, 1963, p.155. In Victoria, the Wimmera came into its own as a new frontier.

[47] *LC*, Bk II, 'The Road to Wal Wal', Part 1, p. 31.

[48] *LC*, Book III, 'Wide Blue Yonder', Part 1, pp. 50 - 51.

[49] Ibid., Book VII, 'Mutton Swamp', Part 1, p. 142.

[50] Mary Gilmore, *The Wild Swan*, Melbourne, Robertson & Mullens, 1930, p. 122.

[51] Ibid., p. 136.

[52] *LC*, Book IX, 'Tap Roots', Part 2, p. 174.
[53] I have placed great emphasis throughout the poem on the incandescent powers of the vegetal, mineral and insect worlds and their myriad evidences of order and harmony, as these are felt (if not always seen) to operate, even at a miniscule level; see, for example, Bk II, 'The Road to Wal Wal', Part 2, pp. 33 – 34; Bk III, 'Wide Blue Yonder, Part 1, p. 51; Bk V, 'Sheep Hills', Part 1, pp. 90 – 91; Bk IX, 'Tap Roots', Part 2, pp. 176 –77; Bk X, 'Aldebaran and Beyond', Part 1, pp. 183 – 85. Although the dry 'sward' of the Wimmera plains tends much of the time towards dun or a dusty olive colour, nevertheless Tompkins' and Bird's encomium to: 'the pasture—or what the ancient Hellenes called *botane*,'— namely that it is the 'true matrix of human life…the green sward covering mother earth'— holds good, both for the landscape of the poem and for the poetics that informs it. See Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, *The Secret Life of Plants*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978, p. 7.
[54] Ibid., Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 2, pp.113 - 14.
[55] *Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, p. 32.
[56] Ibid., p. 31.
[57] *LC*, Book V, 'Sheep Hills', Part 1, p. 88.
[58] *Penguin Book Of Australian Verse*, pp 31- 32.
[59] Ibid., pp. 32 –33.
[60] Leon Cantrell, *The 1890's Stories, Verse And Essays*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1982, p. 234-242.
[61] It is a sentiment that echoes Oscar Wilde's pungent observation that 'Utopia is the one country at which Humanity is always landing', quoted in Anne Whitehead, *Paradise Mislaid, In Search Of The Australian Tribe Of Paraguay*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1997, p. 582.
[62] Ibid., p. 582.
[63] *Penguin Book Of Australian Verse*, pp. 63 – 64.
[64] Visions of a kind that even Paterson, who hymned the bush as eloquently as any Australian poet, had his doubts about. As Vance Palmer wrote, 'Paterson was not, like many of his contemporaries, carried away by visions of a paradisal future'. See Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1966, p. 111.
[65] Russel Ward, *Australia*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1969, p. 98: 'The importance of this utopian theme has often been exaggerated by later writers…' Ward suggests, and goes on to add: 'So has the extent of the influence on events exercised by radicals and visionaries in the working-class or 'Labor' movement'. Ibid.
[66] *Penguin Book Of Australian Verse*, p. 95.
[67] Quoted in Vance Palmer, *National Portraits*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1968, p. 79.
[68] See, for example, Henry Kendall, 'The Glen Of Arrawatta', in *Leaves From Australian Forests*, Willoughby, NSW, Weldon Publishing, 1975, pp. 43 – 50.
[69] *The* 1890's, p. *xv*.
[70] Ibid., p. *xv*.
[71] Ibid., p. *xii.*
[72] James McCauley, *A Map Of Australian Verse*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 1.
[73] A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn eds, *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, pp. 222 – 223, as quoted in *A Map of Australian Verse*, p. 1.
[74] *The 1890's*, p. *xvi*.
[75] Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting: 1788 – 1960*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1962. p. 20.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., p. 23.
[79] Quoted in Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, London, Pan, 1987, p. 93. Hughes offers this explanatory note for 'happy-opposed off-scapes': '[meaning the beauty of romantic contrast, *à la* Salvator Rosa]'.
[80] Peter Beilharz, *Imagining The Antipodes*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998. As *Terra Australis Incognita*, Australia was a region of ancient conjecture and surmise, a mystery of the ages, located somewhere in the greater exotica of the Southern Ocean, itself the stuff of fantasy, poetic fable and cosmic dreaming, as may be gleaned from Dante's *Purgatorio*. There, the poet, led by his guide, Virgil, emerges 'at the other pole' (in 'the antipodes') upon the shores of an ocean from which arose the mount of Purgatory. From there, would begin the poet's ascent towards the empyrean:
I turned towards the right, and fixed my mind
On the other pole, and there I saw four stars,
Never yet seen except by the first people.

The sky seemed to be glad in their sparkling:
O northern hemisphere, you are a widow
To be deprived of any sight of them!
(Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto 1, ll. 22 – 27, trans. C. H. Sisson, London, Pan, 1981, p.199.

[81] In 'The Poetry of Our Painting', Australasian Arts review, Sept., 1899, quoted in Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 131.

[82] Ibid., p. 173.

[83] As Gary Snyder has observed, '…the poet articulates the semi-known for the tribe…The creative imagination…keeps growing and getting ready to strike deeper into the basic relationships between the personal perception, the social ritual and movements, and nature.' See Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964 – 1979*, New York, New Directions, 1980, pp. 5 - 6.

[84], Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking The Centre: The Australian Desert In Literature, Art And Film*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. x. See map, Appendix B.

[85] Ibid.

[86] See Bill Wannan, *Tell 'Em I Died Game: The Stark Story of Australian Bushranging*, Adelaide, Rigby, 1974, Preface, unpaginated.

[87] *LC*, Book II, 'The Road To Wal Wal', Part 2, p. 36.

[88] And yet, paradoxically, such places of desertion or states of nullity may lead to serenity and illumination. 'As we read in the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux: 'All was dark around me, but there was a fresh infusion of light within.' See Thérèse of Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*, trans. Ronald Knox, London, The Harvill Press, 1958, p. 195.

[89] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Reverie: Childhood, Language And The Cosmos*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, p. 173.

[90] And, one may add, connected to the desire for solitude; as John Venard has noted in his commentary on the poetic meditations of St John of the Cross: 'The desire for solitude is the most important of the three signs given by St. John [of the Cross] to indicate that God is calling us…' See Saint John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, trans., John Venard, Newtown, NSW, E. J. Dwyer, 1990, p. 75.

[91] *The Western Canon*, p. 12.

[92] Ibid., p. 6.

[93] Ibid.

[94] *LC*, Book. V, 'Sheep Hills', Part 1, p. 90.

[95] Cited in Robert Payne, *Jerome the Hermit*, New York, Viking, 1951, p.99.

[96] *Penguin Book Of Australian Verse*, p. 34.

[97] See in particular Randolph Stow, *Tourmaline,* Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1983 and *To The Islands*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1985; Les Murray's 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle' in Les Murray, *Collected Poems*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1991, pp. 122 – 130;John Kinsella, *Night Parrots*, Freemantle, Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1989; also John Kinsella and Dorothy Hewitt, *Wheatlands*, Freemantle, Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 2003.

[98] For example, Barcroft Boake, 'Where The Dead Men Lie', pp. 111 – 113; Henry Lawson, 'Ballad of the Drover', in Russell Ward, *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, pp. 141 – 143.

[99] Randolph Stow, 'Raw Material', 4, p. 5, quoted in *Seeking the Centre*, p. 202.

[100] Stow, Ibid., 'Raw Material' 3, p. 4.

[101] 'Poetry,' as Gary Snyder has observed, 'is a life's work.' See *The Real Work*, p. 6.

[102] Les Murray, 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia', in *A Working Forest: Selected Prose*, Potts Point, Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997, p.133.

[103] William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', in W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson, *Romantic Poets: Blake to Poe,* New York, Viking Press, 1969, pp. 195.

[104] For 'Shinto', Murray provides the following definition: '*shinta*i being 'god-bodies', or *mitamashiro*, 'divine-soul-objects'; 'Strine' is a corruption of 'Australian' and refers, in particular, to Australian pronunciation, famously parodied by the pseudonymous Afferbeck Lauder in his two-volume lexicon *Strine: 'Let Stalk Strine'* and *'Nose Tone Unturned'*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1982. See also John O'Grady (Nino Culotta), *Aussie English: An Explanation of the Australian Idiom*, Sydney, Ure Smith,1973.

[105] Working Forest, p. 135.

[106] Ibid., p. 134.

[107] Charles Mountford, in his researches into the totemic routes of the aboriginal tribes of north-west central Australia had noted '…how intimately the philosophies of the aborigines are linked with the

topographical features of a particular locality.' See Charles P. Mountford, *Winbaraku and the Myth of Jarapiri,* Sydney, Rigby, 1968, p. xvi.
[108] Brian Elliott, *The Landscape Of Australian Poetry*, Melbourne, F. W. Cheshire, 1967, p. 304.
[109] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*, (*Uber das Geistige in der Kunst)*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler, New York, Dover, 1977, p. *xiii*.
[110] *Working Forest*, p. 134.
[111] Paul Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism And Negativity,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 12.
[112] Andrew Taylor, *Reading Australian Poetry*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1987, p. 30.
[113] Ibid.
[114] It is arguably a signature quality of Australian humour and is rarely, if ever, absent in any discussion of 'Australian identity'.
[115] Marginality, however, may be an advantage for poets. Although, as Michelle Yeh has noted, it often 'results in a profound sense of loss', nevertheless 'The autonomy that comes with marginality leaves poets alone to search for their own rules, thus not only making experimentation possible but also ensuring the intellectual and artistic distance necessary…' See Michelle Yeh, ed., trans., *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, pp. xlix – l.
[116] *LC*, Book X, 'Aldebaran and Beyond', Part 2, p. 195.
[117] Edward Kinglake in 1890 described the 'typical' Australian as follows: 'The Australian, as an individual, will be found less willing to show his feelings than either [the Englishman or the Frenchman]. More than one hundred years on, his observation is still widely held to be definitive (despite far-reaching changes to the Australian demographic in the past fifty years, particularly through more liberal immigration and refugee policies initiated by various federal governments since the Second World War; see Edward Kinglake, 'Colonial Youth—1890' as quoted in Bill Wannan, *My Kind of Country: The Making of the Australian Character*, Melbourne, Currey O'Neil, 1981, p. 153.
[118] Ibid, Book II, 'Ashens', Part 1, p. 71.
[119] Quoted in Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country,* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966, p.240.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] *Landscape And Memory*, p. 19.
[123] quoted in Clement Semmler, *The Banjo of the Bush: The Life and Times of A. B. Paterson*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1974, p. 252.
[124] *Landscape Of Australian Poetry*, p. 325.
[125] Ibid., p. 312.
[126] *A Working Forest*, p. 136.
[127] *National Portraits*, p. 76.
[128] Ibid.
[129] *Landscape Of Australian Poetry*, p. 302.
[130] Ibid.
[131] I am thinking in particular of 'Five Bells' but also, more generally, of Slessor's later work.
[132] *Landscape Of Australian Poetry*, p. 292.
[133] The Passaic River in Carlos Williams' work, for instance and Gloucester in *The Maximus Poems*.
[134] *Landscape of Australian Poetry*, p. 294.
[135] Ibid., p. 295.
[136] Ibid., p. 292.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Homer Rieth, *The Dining Car Scene*, Melbourne, Black Pepper, 2001, p. 4.
[139] Ibid.
[140] quoted *in Place, Taste and Tradition*, p. 173.
[141] See for instance *LC*, Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 1, pp. 8 – 9;Book II, 'The Road to Wal Wal', part 2, pp. 33 –35; Book VI, 'Florida Villas', Part 1, p. 105; Book VII, 'Marnoo', Part 1, pp. 123 – 124; Book IX, 'Tap Roots', Part 1, p. 168.
[142] See J. M. Powell, *The Public Lands of Australia Felix: Settlement and Land Appraisal in Victoria 1834 – 91 with Special Reference to the Western Plains*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. xxv.
[143] The Latinate designation, 'Australia Felix'**,** is itself (for the indigenous inhabitants) freighted with cultural implication. In his peroration on the beauty of the land opening up before him south of the Murray River in June 1836, Thomas Mitchell was moved to write: 'I saw a region more extensive than Great Britain, equally rich in…soil and which now lies ready for ploughing in many parts, as if

specifically prepared by the Creator for the industrious hands of Englishmen'; as quoted in Carol Odell, *Famous Australians: Thomas Mitchell*, Sydney, Hodder & Stoughton, 1984, p. 15. The emphasis on 'Englishmen' underscores the Anglo-Saxon bias of Mitchell's vision which, it would seem, excluded not only the indigenous inhabitants but any others whatsoever (whether European, Asian or otherwise of non-Anglo-Saxon extraction) from reaping the fruits of 'the promised land'.

[144] It should be added that the region, as alluded to in earlier chapters, presented as an arena of suffering (though of a different order) for the early settlers as well. As Powell has pointed out, the Inspectors' Reports 1868 – 70 (MS) (La Trobe Library) included, among a welter of glowing predictions as to the rich farming potential of the region, the following observation: 'The free selector…unfortunately…will meet with no water, dams and tanks will require to be made before anything else'; see *The Public Lands of Australia Felix*, p. 165. This significant admission was given little airing.

[145] Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2005, p. xi.

[146] LC, Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 1, p. 8.

[147] Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1991.

[148] I adopt Ian Irvine's term here, since it accurately conveys the complex admixtures of the culture under discussion.

[149] Nathaniel Tarn, drawing upon his ethnographical study of Burmese Buddhism has spoken of "a model of poetic *making* with three operative levels: 1) the *Vocal*, being that of the single poetic voice as self or ego in competition and sometimes conflict with all others in a Babel of voice; 2) the *Silence*, most often thought of consensually as 'underlying' the Vocal,, from which the single poetic voice appears to arise; and 3) again 'below' that, the *Choral*—being a co-operative, *non*-competitive 'my-voice-in-all-and-all-in-my-voice' level representing the ideal peace of non-self with all of creation…"; see Nathaniel Tarn, "Voice Politic/Body Politic", *Talus* 10 (1997), 43 – 47, as quoted in Shamoon Zamir, ''On Anthropology & Poetry: An Interview with Nathaniel Tarn, in James Taylor (ed.). *Boxkite #2: A Journal of Poetry & Poetics*, Sydney, The Poetics Foundation Inc. August, 1998, pp. 156 – 57.

[150] I have in mind some primal presence, such as 'the archetypal wise old man' Clifton Snider has explored in his discussion of a particular nineteenth century preoccupation—among poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, Scott, Tennyson and Swinburne—a preoccupation centring on Merlin or other wizards or dread figures resembling 'the Ancients of Days'. Snider has ascribed this to the crisis of religious belief engendered by Darwinian ideas and to the subsequent need for an alternative (pre-Christian or otherwise) body of supernatural lore as a form of spiritual reassurance. In respect of my poem, it is conceivable (I leave it to the individual reader to judge) that the narrator (or his voice) may be thought of as being related to such figures, to a treatment that may be described as 'visionary', in the Jungian sense, that is to say: '…that derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind, as if it had emerged from the abyss of prehuman ages, or from a superhuman world…'; see C. G. Jung, Psychology and Literature, CW 15: 84 – 105. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966, as quoted in Clifton Snider, *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made On: A Jungian Interpretation of Literature*, Wilmette, Ill.: Chiron Publications, 1991, p. 32.

[151] For this suggestive figure I am indebted to Ian Irvine (hereafter 'Irvine'); see personal communication to the author, 19 December, 2006.

[152] While I do not intend to make of this a detailed Jungian argument (I do not regard myself as competent to do so) I am, nevertheless, struck by the force and relevance of Morris Philipson's observations on the application of Jungian principles to works of art: '…a psychological interpretation' Philipson has noted, 'can be offered in answer to such questions as: What was the significance [to the artists under discussion] of realism and naturalism to their age? What was the meaning of romanticism, or Hellenism? They were tendencies of art which brought to the surface that unconscious element of which the contemporary mental atmosphere had most need.' See Morris Philipson, *Outline of a Jungian Aesthetics*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1963, p. 130.

[153] Irvine.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid.

[156] A procedure that owes a stylistic debt to e. e. cummings.

[157] See 'Projectivist Verse *and* Letter to Elain Feinstein', in Robert Creeley ed., *Charles Olson: Selected Writings*, New York, New Directions, 1966, pp. 15 – 30. I discuss Olson's poetics and his theory of 'projectivist verse' in detail in Chapter Four.

[158] Paul Recoeur, 'Narrated Time', in *A Recoeur Reader*, p.344.

[159] See for instance David Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia*, North Blackburn, HarperCollins, 1995, *Re-enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*, Sydney, HarperCollins, 2000 and *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*, Sydney, HarperCollins, 2003; Andrew McCann, 'The Literature of Extinction', *Meanjin* 65.1, March 2006; Caitlin Punshon, 'The Escaping Landscape: Perspective and Perception in the Landscape Poems of the Generation of '68', APIN Network, 2005; Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory 1880 – 1939*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1997; Martin Harrison, *Who Wants to Create Australia?: Essays on Poetry and Ideas in Contemporary Australia*, Broadway, Halstead Press, 2004; David Brooks, 'A Land Without Endings: Judith Wright, Kenosis and Australian Vision', in *Southerly*, Vol. 60/ no. 2 2000; John Kinsella, 'Landscape Poetry', 'Towards a Contemporary Australian Poetics', 'The Pastoral and Political Possibilities of Poetry', 'The Hybridising of Poetry', 'A Patch of Ground', 'A Different Kind of Light Though Something's Not Quite Right in Paradise', 'Multicultural Poetry' and 'Fens Rivers and Droughts', articles/extracts from *John Kinsella: Poet, novelist, critic and journal editor*, website. See also John Muk Muk Burke and Martin Langford, eds., *Ngara: Living in this Place Now*, especially Martin Harrison, 'Country and How to Get There'; Martin Langford, 'Country, Poetry, the Narratives of Self'; Anne Brewster, 'Revisiting the Idea of Home', Carlton, Five Islands Press, 2004; see also Charles Bernstein, 'Pound and the Poetry of Today', in *My Way: Speeches and Poems*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.
[160] *Edge of the Sacred*, p. viii.
[161] Ibid.
[162] An underlying aesthetic principle of this poetic is summed up in Simone Weil's declaration: 'A poem is beautiful to the precise degree in which the attention whilst it was being composed has been turned towards the inexpressible'; as quoted in *The Spirituality Revolution*, p. 55.
[163] *ER*, p. 2.
[164] Ibid.
[165] *Dark Side of the Dream,* p. 3.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Quoted in Les Murray, *A Working Forest*, p. 136.
[168] *LC*, Book IX, 'Tap Roots', Part 2, pp. 172 - 173.

CHAPTER FOUR

FORM AND MEANING: THE CONTEMPORARY EPIC OF LANDSCAPE

My aim, in undertaking this project, has been to produce a literary work within the epic genre, one that is both demonstrably contemporary and distinctively Australian. As I have argued in the preceding chapters, *A Locale of the Cosmos* does not claim to be an epic shaped according to the traditional pattern, nor does it concern itself with the elaboration of traditional themes. In its departure from the heroic and classical patterns laid down in the earliest forms of the genre, it is representative of another kind of tradition, one of generic renewal and innovation, that may be traced back to *The Prelude* and to the influence of that poem upon a number of subsequent works composed on an epic scale. Furthermore, in keeping with Wordsworth's project, it also reflects the increasingly autobiographical and, indeed personal, character of epic, indicative of the genre's changing functions within its broader historical spectrum.

In considering the poem's compositional elements I have aimed for a style that, despite certain departures from the rubric, retains some of the traditional features of epic. Not least among these is a calm, measured, self-effacing quality, of a certain stoical dignity in the speaking voice. The tenor of this voice amply conveys a cast of mind given to brooding (perhaps even to regret) and to what Bloom has described as the process of 'self-overhearing':[1]

this morning a mist shrouds the stream of Orpheus
I hear shots across the paddocks
and wonder what innocent sleep
is being disturbed for the last time
light rain is falling
and souls are leaving bodies
I am all aflame and yet unmoved
the moon take its bearings from the silos
the wind looks over its shoulder at Sheep Hills
the land he says remembers you
as mind reflecting on it like sunlight
this is the moment of illumination
the mind and the landscape
are one[2]

A central motif within the epic narrative of *A Locale of the Cosmos* is to be found in its concern with the heroic: the imaginative reconstruction and commemoration of a new found world (the 'land') and pioneer settlement (inchoate landscape). The poem traces the history of early white settlement in the Wimmera region and the struggles and hardships of its frontiersmen and women. In doing so, the poem demonstrates a concern for maintaining the continuities of the epic tradition. It explores the heroic, albeit in a rural context and, in doing so, gives voice to a body of regional customary and its attendant values, to a way of life that is recognizably Australian, yet of universal reach.[3] As in ancient epic, it brings into bold relief both individuals and communities (as ancestors and harbingers) and, in the process, reveals the distinctive features, social and psychological, that give shape to a cultural identity.

At the same time the poem gives heroic expression to the character of a privileged landscape, the Wimmera region of Victoria, presented not only as a geographical entity, whose monumental dimensions find their corollary in those of the genre itself, but also as an imagined landscape. At both of these levels the poem incorporates the emotional and spiritual, as well as the topographical dimensions of place and locale, as they have been gathered up in the history and chronicles of the region and in the cumulative power of legend and memory attaching, in particular, to places of isolation and remove. One of the poem's primary impulses is to sing in the heroic key of traditional epic, but in order to capture a more complex heroic note, one whose tonalities, given the Australian and, specifically rural, context of the poem and indeed, the proverbial gentle self-disparagement that is part of the Australian character, nevertheless register a restrained and ironic (perhaps even austere) grandeur, a reluctance towards displays of bravura or self-importance, in keeping with its subject and with the temper of the landscape itself.

A Locale of the Cosmos is, then, an epic of landscape located within a broader tradition of poetry in Australia long dominated by images of the land. This question has been arguably the continent's central artistic preoccupation and is reflected in the history of indigenous songlines. 'Australian poetry', Brian Elliott has observed:

> has taken well over a century and a half to establish its quality and define its character. In all, or during most of this time, it has been in one way or another preoccupied with definition either of the landscape itself or the relationship between landscape and society.[4]

Nevertheless, as I have indicated in Chapter Three, the poem does not treat the landscape or its historical acculturations in indigenous terms, for reasons that I have already discussed.[5] Rather, the poem reflects, within the purview of European settlement, the region's historical and cultural setting and its geography through European-Australian eyes. Within these parameters it addresses the wider question of the psychological and spiritual effects of landscape and the persistence of memory. Such themes are and have always been, manifestly epic concerns.

A *Locale of the Cosmos* does not pretend to be a history of the region, or of a particular period; in keeping with the traditions of epic, it attempts, however, an imaginative rendering of a chosen world, whose realities are at once, local and specific, but also universal. For instance, in Book Two, 'The Road to Wal Wal', the Ebenezer mission[6] becomes, in poetic terms, the site of a meditation on human transience and mutability, rich in irony. As Bachelard has said: 'For facts to go as far as the archives of the memory values must be rediscovered beyond the facts.'[7] The character of a remote locale may reflect the coloration of its local and regional elements, yet also convey something important about the author's feelings towards the wider cosmos:

> only broken English
> for your last words
> so the pigs were let go and the draught horses
> the spring dray and the treasures of flock and kapok
> bedsteads mattresses fenders looking glasses
> lamps and fly-proof doors and tanks and utensils
> even the lovely harmonium
> all gone in a waste of tears
> all gone the cart upset of apples
> all gone pastor Bogisch of the blazing eyes and jet black beard
> all gone into the rock-hard soil
> all gone the church its windows blown out
> its walls a shambles

all gone
gone
all gone[8]

The tenor of this passage is reflective of the wider scale of ironies dealt with in Book Two, where the reader may observe how the language of the poetry itself works to subvert the stereotypes of history and genre alike.

'The Road to Wal Wal' offers the reader the opportunity to observe the ways in which ironic subversion may be seen to operate in epic as a generic constant. As Webber has pointed out, each epic invariably subverts the assumptions of its antecedents, as may be seen, for instance, in Virgil's handling of Homeric themes.[9] In her discussion of the tradition (as I have observed in Chapter One) Webber highlighted a number of ways in which the original functions of epic have been altered or distorted, in order to reflect significant changes in the preoccupations and interests of poets. It is, perhaps, partly due to this history of ironic subversion, that epic has sometimes been regarded as a mixed genre.[10] In *A Locale of the Cosmos* ironic subversion works itself into the historical record in order to calibrate the idea of both the 'heroic' and of 'heroic proportion' in a recognizably Australian mode, as the following passage suggests:

remember sweet mother England her green meadows
chill smells of the old country
a carillon of bells drifting over the fens
here over crab-holes at Murra Warra and Pimpinio
over seed wheat and shag
church pitchin' on Hospitality Sunday
counting shorthorns counting clydesdales you know he says
they counted them at Dadswells Bridge
the Berkshire pigs at Wallup
the truncheons of vines and olives to bursting
nature's hand of hidden powers by her fruits shall you know her
that said this fetch of God's earth so sparse
the sussurations of a hidden stream
are a kind of hesitation in the flowing water's flow
wimmera wimmera wimmera[11]

Here, landscape is the overt focus of the passage, but it would be misleading to limit the energies of the passage to the details of its function as 'a formal and structural description of topography'.[12] On the contrary, in a passage such as this, the poem explores the emotional effects of ‘place’ within a particular locale, such feelings of loss and separation as are, nevertheless, intimately bound up with the memory of other places. At the same time the poem scrutinizes the vernacular by means of which such emotional effects may best be achieved.[13] The passage addresses, simultaneously, both outward and inward ‘space’, the physical plane and the emotional plane, a *modus operandi* anticipated in ‘House with Fields, Railway Siding and Silos’, a signature poem from an earlier collection of my work.[14] The syncopation of these ‘outward’ and ‘inward’ realities is a procedural as well as metaphysical trait of traditional epic verse.[15] Furthermore, as Justin Clemens has observed in discussing the Wimmera landscapes of Philip Hunter, no amount of psychoanalytic reductionist explanation can fully account for the distortions of representational truth that the artist executes in the attempt to get at a deeper truth, one that is often and compellingly autobiographical, even in its apparent contradictions, though these are not always consciously present to the artists themselves. ‘There is’, he says:

> a whole set of returns in the work [Hunter’s paintings], a return to childhood memory, which is quite weird because it’s not imaginary, it’s real…He in some ways never left home…there’s actually something else that is being worked out and that is about an identity that is neither childhood nor a return. I always recall a Beckett quote where he said ‘a nomad is someone who is at home everywhere.[16]

In my own case, the tensions are, perhaps, in the opposite direction: the poem moves increasingly towards an inversion of Eliot’s dictum (in the concluding lines of (‘Little Gidding’):

> The end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time. [17]

A Locale of the Cosmos reflects a growing realisation on my own part that (as a Wimmera voyager) having arrived for the first time, I feel as if I have always belonged. The region and the state of reverie in which I behold it and which sets me

free, have become one.[18] The architecture of the poem is premised on this realisation and the direction taken by the radials of its various books bears this out, shifting gradually away from the recoverable past of the region itself and towards an exploration of what I would call ‘orders of being’—of ‘space’, ‘place’ and ‘locale’—as belonging not only to the visible world, but also to a landscape of the mind.[19] As such and, in its own fashion, it follows both *The Prelude* and more recent antecedents insofar as it ‘incorporates,’ as Abrams has observed, ‘the discovery of its own *ars poetica*’.[20] It telescopes the outward and inward landscapes where they meet at moments of personal discovery[21] and such moments are the principal focus of the poem's autobiographical dimension:

and there you might have looked
into the face of the heat
or hanged yourself in its haze
or turned away at the last minute
from its gaze
hearing the mockery of the kookaburras
every tree here he says
knows about a journey that has no beginning
a journey that has no end
about that horizon forever beckoning
but never reached
a thing that belongs neither to the land
nor to the sky
but to the hoodwink of lines and planes
clues to yonderness itself [22]

A Local of the Cosmos answers to the description ‘long’ and ‘narrative’, a bald definition of epic whose limitations I have already noted.[23] Neither of these descriptors, although they amalgamate around expectations aroused by the term ‘epic’ are, however, central to the poem's claim to epic status. That claim is more firmly grounded in other features I have already pointed to, not least the poem's architectonic qualities. Such attributes, in high degree, are germane to the genre and are by no means limited to certain poetic devices such as the extended simile (itself often a virtual lyric) or stock epithet. Nor should such properties be allowed to

condemn epic as a species of literary gigantism. Rather they are inherent and majestic components of epic composition.

A Locale of the Cosmos aims, in part, to evoke the Wimmera's landscape in terms of which, though their meaning has altered, may still invoke (and also provoke) the memory of Longinus.[24] It is one of the poem's compositional ironies that it plays the planar horizontals of the Wimmera in the vertical key of height. It is a height of speech that not only this landscape warrants and overwhelmingly invites, but also that the genre, with long-established governance, preserves and promotes.

From the beginning I set out to write well and to do so richly and inventively across a wide expanse, with every intention of applying the resources of vocabulary and tone to full effect, but without affectation. I aimed at incorporating and giving a new lease of life to less used, curious, antiquated and exotic words, a procedure of which Auden was fond.[25] Furthermore, I broached a style that might maintain a sense of balance (both of language and mood) between the past and the present;[26] I wanted to find a wavelength of tone, rhythm and diction appropriate to an epic conception, but without compromising the natural ebb and flow or the syntactical elisions and evasions of bush talk. In short, I set out to captivate and enthral, as much as to recollect and bear witness to. In the words of Longinus I sought 'to entrance…against what is merely…persuasive…like a flash of lightning'.[27]

I have aimed, in my poem, to avoid treating the genre as a reliquary from which to disinter thematic and stylistic elements merely for the sake of conformity to tradition. As Bloom has pointed out, there are far more interesting and fertile questions for poets and, surely, for epic poets in particular, to consider:

> How can one measure the disruptions of a tradition as they occur within an individual poem? How can one establish the precise senses in which any single poem tells lies against time, so as then to be able to describe what kinds of composite lie against time we are reading? How do you classify anomalies without violating their status as anomalies? These questions verge upon a single question: what is a poet's stance— rhetorical, psychological, imagistic—as he writes his poem? [28]

This is not to say that, in the case of *A Locale of the Cosmos*, it is the critic who wishes to hold on to the term 'epic'; it is my own desire and intention, as the author of the work, to do so as well and, indeed, to establish the poem's credentials as epic. Throughout this exegesis I have been very conscious of my double role as both poet and exegete. It seems clear to me that the kinds of questions posed by Bloom are central to any proper understanding of what the writing of a modern epic must necessarily involve. They touch on what Bloom goes on to describe as 'The figure that a poet makes, not so much in or by his poem, but as his poem relates to other poems…'[29] And, I would add, to other poems within the specific genre to which the poet's project belongs.

Contemporary epics, then, my own included, may be seen as being concerned not only to introduce new thematic shoots, but signal changes in the inventory of epic's central preoccupations. Perhaps it is hindsight, more than anything else, that leaves readers with the impression that the grandeur of traditional epic, in purely compositional terms, appears to be grounded more firmly in the aesthetic effects gained by a particular majesty of tone or richness of design, than in the range of philosophical and artistic conceptions addressed. If so, then, for the modern epic poet, perhaps the most powerful effects may be achieved not only by adumbrating new themes, but by exploring further innovations in style and opening up a new imaginative territory for the genre. It is a development in the range of what Emerson, in referring to a poet's creative procedures, described as 'the order of his thoughts and the essential quality of his mind'.[30]

Poems are permeable creations, self-governing and, in their utilization and exploitation of forms, inexhaustible. They have also, since the opening years of the twentieth century, been overwhelmingly preoccupied with the personal, with structural deviation and thematic divagation and (perhaps surprisingly to those addicted to the postmodernist turn) with religious issues in the broader sense of the term. As David Perkins, in summing up the modernist tradition, has observed:

> Pound's *Pisan Cantos* were a response to the *Four Quartets*, for Eliot's poem helped to instigate the exploration of personal memory and tradition, and the religious themes. Williams' *Paterson* would not have been written without the earlier poems of Eliot, Pound

> and Crane on which it builds, but it makes a formal innovation by abandoning the ideal of a finished, perfected and coherent work. A similar theory of "open" form underlies Olson's *Maximus Poems* (1953 - 1968), and Olson also took from Williams the idea of concentrating for his subject matter on the "local" place.[31]

A Locale of the Cosmos relies for its effects, in part, on the careful orchestration of its motifs and on the spiraling movements by which the poem proceeds. Allied to this are the asymmetrical size (and sometimes accompanying tonal fluctuations) of the poem's subsidiary configurations (separated by the symbol '§').[32] At the same time its leit-motifs, for instance, the 'rain' motif ('the riddle of no rain/or rain at the wrong time/or rain by the bucket load drowning you in its own sorrows') [33] or the road motif[34] ('the road goes on and dreams of tracks/of where it might have gone/had it got there')[35] work their way through the poem with the powerful insistence one expects of a patterned and controlling form.[36] As Lowell has observed of 'Four Quartets': 'Given such a structure, irregular meters are appropriate'.[37] And, in a similar fashion, though by means that differ somewhat from Eliot's poem,[38] *A Locale of the Cosmos* reflects Lowell's dictum that: 'Form is nothing else than unity and integration'.[39] As Lowell has pointed out, in respect of such large-scale works: 'Each part is written as a reflection or modification of the preceding parts'.[40] Over the course of the poem, both the subsidiary figurations alluded to previously, as well as the more broadly arranged books and parts of the poem, become markers for the work's larger underlying structure, reflecting the pattern of the world as the narrator sees it, but also the pattern of the poetic mind perceiving that world.[41]

There is a vital sense in which the poem may be said to describe a landscape of the imagination. 'Each man', Wordsworth had written, 'is a memory to himself'[42] and, in so far as this is true, my poem recreates not only the ordinary everyday world that it observes but also the inner world of the observer. As Olson has observed: 'There are laws, that is to say, the human universe is as discoverable as that other. And as definable.'[43] It is a point that is quietly underscored by the title of my work and whose implications pervade it, since locale and cosmos[44] have, in epic, invariably become synecdoches of each other and have transcended both historical time and place. *A Locale of the Cosmos* is, then, a poem that represents a fusion of memory and landscape moving among what may be, for many readers, unfamiliar territory. It

aspires to reveal what is thought of as being a familiar world in a new light, a world that reverberates with verbal energies that have escaped the dead weight of certain clichés associated with the Australian outback and that are in need of being freed from the stereotypes of its colonial past.

In *A Locale of the Cosmos*, the conserving and mnemonic functions of epic remain intact. The past is continually evoked not only as being, in itself, an important focus of interest, but also because of the ways in which it controls how the observer perceives and interprets the landscape now:

O burnt out land
oldest of old flames
washed up acres that have only heard of water
abandoned settlement of uneasy scores
in love once with all the elements
with wind-leaf of chevalier
O orphan child of unremembered time
what has become of you [45]

So too, the evocation of landscape is, *mutatis mutandis*, incorporated into a revelation of the interior landscapes of the mind:

tells me he does appearances matter
being all too real
that cloud that never rolls your way
is a chain of madder in the glass-eyed noon
between one threshold and another
one slipstream pluming into view
another fading from sight
there alone he says
lies the real[46]

In passages such as those above, I have tried to show how both the natural and human worlds may be brought together to form the central axis of an epic conception not only of the region's most quotidian and commonplace qualities, but also of its larger forces and linear magnitudes, its power to deceive and overturn expectations:

the yonderness will have deceived you yet again
the road will come to meet you half way
a chimera of cloud and moistures and tree line
nothing if not a rainbow
nothing doing but the road to nowhere[47]

Anchored in 'a locale' the poem nevertheless presents itself as an *imago mundi*, drawing the gaze of the reader or listener towards an horizon, both real and imagined, that is itself a further vanishing point, a 'beyond' that lies at 'the back of beyond[48]:

there it is he says there's your land
your heartburn and backfire
your locale your law of unintended consequences
a torus of infinite amplitude
a constant that reassures the sublunary world
all-encompassing camouflage stripped bare
in the silence of transfigured night
ruthless and absolute whether upstream or downstream
on the river of Wimmera light[49]

It is appropriate, therefore, to speak, in the poem's own terms, of the Wimmera landscape as being open to and intimately connected with the experience of the numinous. This conception of nature, however, is not only traceable to the canon of Romantic beliefs, but has been part of the mythic repertoire of epic poetry from the beginning.[50]

Epic poets are able, then, to exploit the genre's size and range in ways that are eminently suited to sustained contemplation. In choosing the fastnesses of the Wimmera region as the locus of my work, I take these advantages as the starting point for the development of a personal enquiry, along broadly metaphysical lines, into what life may mean and what it may have to offer. I do so without pretension, but rather by keeping in mind how epic conveys the past, as Webber has observed, 'in at least two different ways—in recovering the history of its own action, and in providing recollections of epics of the past'.[51] In the case of *A Local of the Cosmos*, one may adduce a significant measure of its aims from how it locates itself within the

Wordsworthian tradition as ‘a philosophical poem’. As such, it shares in what Webber has recognized as a traditional feature of the epic poet’s predicament, ‘a sense of incompleteness’ about the poem in the face of its own ambitions. One thinks of the dying Virgil at Brindisium requesting that his ‘unfinished poem’ be burned.[52] It is for this reason, perhaps, that the proverbial observation that epic commences *in medias res* is, as Webber has justly observed:

> one way to describe the whole of an epic, not just its beginning…The epic allows this preoccupation [of minds turned to chronology and climax] to be satisfied; at the same time, it insists upon the inadequacy of such a viewpoint…[53]

Such perceptions are not in themselves confined only to epic but are inescapably part of the epic apparatus. However, what has changed is, I would argue, the tenor of epic speech or what may be described as its angle of attitude. The ‘grand manner’ of epic syntax, identified by Matthew Arnold as being germane to heroic and classical epic up to and including *Paradise Lost*, may now be said to have had its day.[54] Because the author's interior states are central to autobiographical epic, the tensions at work in modern epic are more personal and therefore, perhaps, less likely to lend themselves to the brilliant artifice and formality of the old language of epic. This is, in part, I would argue, why contemporary epic has acquired a quite different psychological and spiritual stress, when compared not only to the more heraldic and hieratic conceptions of earlier literary epics, but even in comparison to the sometimes convoluted language of Wordsworth.

Those qualities of 'rapidity' and 'nobleness' of speech that Arnold had found, for instance, to be of the essence of Homeric style[55] are, nevertheless, present in Wordsworth and only appear to reverberate less in his successors by virtue of an increasingly more spare and compressed prosody. Modernist epic is more attuned to a colloquial and intimate speech, one that is as averse to ornamentation for its own sake as it is receptive to ironic play and cultural subversion. The drama of landscape, as a central epic motif is no less appropriate a theme for these qualities of language than heroic prowess and towering spectacle had been in former times. In one form or other, landscape has always been at home in epic narrative, whether as an arena of combat or as a site of epiphany and revelation.[56] It continues to remain an essential

preoccupation of epic to broach such moments of transfiguration. In choosing the Wimmera region as the locus of my work, I have been confident in exploring the idea of landscape through the medium of a genre well able to match the largeness of scale upon which the landscape itself can be conceived and of which it is, itself, emblematic:

the road melts into a vague distance
like a streak of sand soap
one day like that we'll vanish
into an everlasting haze
from which no light escapes
no shadow
and there on the last horizon
the sky itself will vanish [57]

In such lines the traditional *gravitas* of epic is maintained but without orotund flourish; rather, it is in the pared-down image that layered imaginings are more powerfully expressed.

In respect of the debate over complicity of literary forms, including epic, in such nineteen century ventures as imperial annexation, hegemonic oppression and the colonisation of so-called 'inferior races'[58] (such terms have application to Australian history[59] and hence to the Wimmera), *A Locale of the Cosmos* represents, I believe, an example of how the application of modernist European forms need not be vulnerable to either the pitfalls of cultural supremacies or the rationalising vindication of beliefs, behaviours and attitudes which would be considered untenable today. Particularly in the light of evidence that a number of early European settlers in north western Victoria formed part of a wider sweep of oppression against 'excluded others' (the indigenous inhabitants), the poem is not afraid, at intervals, to portray the cruelty and futility of European arrogance, not only as this was played out against the aboriginal populace, but (and this is equally significant) against the environment itself, no less an 'excluded other'.

In the matter of relations between aboriginals and the European arrivers/invaders, a considerable literature now lies to hand and I have made use of it at various stages throughout this dissertation. The question of the exploitation and misappropriation of the environment (whether out of ignorance, cupidity or sheer necessity) and, in turn, of the environment's capacity to punish the early settlers is also a well documented story, many of the details of which are to be found in the poem's historical narrative. The transmutation of (or mutations inflicted upon) the land[60] by unsuitable or excessive farming methods, the unsustainable demands of grazing, the depredations of scab, footrot and catarrh on flocks and herds, debt and financial ruin as a result of the vagaries of weather, the upheaval and dislocation of immemorial habitats and micro-ecologies, the spread of fungi, thistles and weeds, the disregard for the checks and balances of the natural order, the visitations of dust storms and plagues (especially rabbits, locusts and mice) and outbreaks of disease (such as smallpox and scarlet fever) have not only left their mark today, but were plainly visible to the first generations of European settlers.[61] They were, in their own day, to become increasingly aware of the cost, not only to 'the other', whether in the human or natural world, but also to themselves.[62] The contemplation of their folly is a recurring theme of the poem:

the land will only yield so much and then no more
or will yield but once and never again
or else be beyond all yielding
you see he says these acres are no islands of the blessed
more like circles of the damned
the waterhole or the creek is but the lure
the artesian emptiness of the sky
is what you die of
the alchemy of words like wind or tree or water
making their sounds without a trace
of interpretation
there's a world where everything comes out right
where the purest motion
is in the stillest tree
there's a world where good prevails
where the seed comes to life
like an exploding star

but only one god so help you
the god of weather[63]

Both the texture of the language in *A Locale of the Cosmos* and its tone are grounded, then, in the landscape itself. *A Locale of the Cosmos* measures the ambience of the Wimmera as a site for the exploration of the 'beyond' and finds behind the historical disenchantment a gritty realism that undercuts the colonial idyll:

the horizon was always there to mock you
yonder it said look yonder
over here it said over there it said
and played you like a pair of twos
like a fever on the Litchfield road
drowning your last miserable days on Bullfrog Flat[64]

This sense of place is not a settled thing; it has its other side in the rebarbative aspects of landscape that Romantic transcriptions have sometimes muted, or even denied:

the ideal is not water but the dream that in water
all will be well
a shower here or a shower there he says
one way or t'other we're sunk
O mother Mary we know not what we do
we know not what we say
to be sunk without water[65]

The methodology that lies behind the composition of A Locale of the Cosmos is based, in part, on what Charles Olson has outlined in his seminal essay, 'Projective Verse'.[66] Olson defines this as 'verse that is composed in open form'.[67] It correlates to a stance in which poets keep to a minimum any conscious declarations of their own presence, even in work of a patently autobiographical cast. Following a lead established by Pound and Ernest Fenellosa[68] and, at a later stage, put into practice by Louis Zukofsky in the composition of his epic poem, '*A*',[69] Olson's method focused on the actual breathing rhythms of poets as they write and which, in turn, according to Olson,[70] conveyed the corresponding energy transmitted from the poet to the reader.

Both the overall design and layout of *A Locale of the Cosmos*, as well as issues of line-length and line-break, reflect the influence of this technique. The reader is confronted by a text that is located in the middle, instead of at the left margin of the page. The line lengths and line-breaks, although they may appear to be *ad hoc* are, in fact, carefully calibrated and arranged for effect. Olsen contended that it is not only desirable, but also necessary for contemporary poets to free themselves from the constraints of stale conventions and to breathe life into old forms. Epic, as arguably the oldest poetic form might, superficially, appear more resistant to change than other genres; however, the history of epic in the modern period reveals that the genre is rich in diversity and creative daring.

Using the method of composition by field, a contemporary poet may gain access, as Olson pointed out, to at least three fresh advantages: a new kinetics, a new principle of extension in composition and a new process of phrasing and modulation, based on the natural movements and pauses of oral rendition, the method which was, after all, native to epic.

It is all very well, I submit, for a genre's conventions to be held in esteem because they are time-honored, but time also encrusts those conventions with the barnacles of stale plots or the lumber of dead cliché until, in the end, the form is in danger of suffocating under the weight of its own cumulative achievement. In short, the genre is by-passed; it is accorded perfunctory admiration, but is no longer read. Modern epics may now, increasingly, neither look nor sound like their classical predecessors. However, the following passage from *The Maximus Poems* demonstrates that these changes (especially in respect of structural elements and layout) matter less than the continuities of complex and evocative narrative and a kind of writing that is, as Webber has observed, 'always outstripping itself in impressive attempts to conceive and grasp new wholes':

> So he went off carrying his house until night when
> he came to a hard-wood ridge near a good spring of
> water and put it down. Inside was a wide bed covered
> with a white bear-skin, and it was very soft, and he
> was tired and he slept very well. In the morning, it

> was even better. Hanging from the beams were deer-
> meat, hams, duck, baskets of berries and maple sugar,
> and as he reached out for them the rug itself melted7
> and it was white snow, and his arms turned into wings
> and he flew up to the food and it was birch-boughs on
> which it hung, and he was a partridge and it was spring.[71]

Epic is then (no less than the shorter forms) an artefact that represents what Robert Frost has memorably described as a 'a momentary stay against confusion';[72] in fact, it is arguably more than this. Epic poems, as their provenance demonstrates, may be said to share (in however limited or humble a fashion) some tinge of the acquired authority that has made of them a mainstay in the histories of the cultures to which they belong.[73]

Olson's aim was not only in Webber's phrase, to 'grasp new wholes', but also to connect both poet and reader (or in Olson's case, 'audience' to be more exact) in 'a compositional field' in which native speech rhythms and patterns of imagery would be pressed into the service of an epic, whose discursive mode would be as natural to modern (as it was to the most ancient) forms of the poem. This foreshadows an approach that goes to the very heart of the compositional methods and methodological principles that I have adopted in writing *A Locale of the Cosmos*. As Olson has pointed out:

> [to] step back here to this place of the elements and minims of language, is to engage speech where it is least careless—and least logical. Listening for the syllables must be so constant and so scrupulous, the exaction must be so complete, that the assurance of the ear is purchased at the highest- price.[74]

For Olson, the syllable and the line (and only these two) are the governing categories in the progression of a poem. 'And together, these two,' he proposed:

> the syllable *and* the line, they make a poem, they make that thing, the- what shall we call it, the Boss of all, the "Single Intelligence." And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes…[75]

Olson's notion of composition by field has been a creative spur to my own poetics. By emphasizing and privileging the syllable and the phrase; by giving a critical importance to nuance and to the inner tensions of unpunctuated phrasing and, by promoting the employment of lines of varying length and stress as belonging to units of breath rather than to fixed metrical units, *The Maximus Poems* has influenced both the shape of my poem and my thinking about the poem. Something of Olson's cadences are reflected in the rhythms of *A Locale of the Cosmos* and these are, to an extent, of a kind with those that Pound himself had developed in which, as Perloff has noted, it is 'the musical phrase, not the sequence of the metronome' that matters.[76]

It is what this voice,[77] in part, through its rhythms tells us that shapes our responses to what we are invited to understand as being the mythic, as against the purely historical and descriptive dimensions of the poem.[78] My argument is that, within the poem, this mythic dimension is a work in progress:

a world of astonishing shape
of perpetual shift
of unpredictable motion
brought to a standstill by wind and cloud
like death beautiful untouchable
reach beyond reach[79]

Pound had famously declared that 'the history of a culture is the history of ideas going into action'.[80] Concomitantly, 'ignorance of locality' (Pound's term) 'enforces a realization', as Pearce in his discussion of *The Cantos* had observed, 'that men do not know themselves in terms of the very places which give them their culture'.[81] Seen in this light, *A Locale of the Cosmos* makes the claim for epic that Pound made for it and, in fact, makes it with the same Pound-inspired conscious intent of apotheosizing the locale. Language has the capacity to stir the emotions and to unlock deep-seated memory and arguably nowhere more so than in poetry. In the case of epic this process may extend to the unlocking of not only individual memory but also the wider repository of communal recollection and remembrance. As mnemonic lightning rod, *A Locale of the Cosmos* transmutes the landscape, in more than one sense, into a spiritually charged and unified world.

In its evocation of the Wimmera landscape, *A Locale of the Cosmos* highlights some of the ways in which landscape connects the human world to the spiritual topography of the greater cosmos. As Olson in his essay 'Human Universe' had observed: '…art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic'.[82] *A Locale of the Cosmos* is a poem that grew, in part, out of a compulsion to understand how a region takes shape within the formlessness of indiscriminate space and thereby acquires territorial limits; of how, in turn, these frame the limens of other worlds, whether neighbourly and reachable, or alien and beyond the visible threshold.

From such considerations I have been led to examine how at certain points of threshold there may occur epiphanies, revealing not only place itself, but also things above and beyond a particular place, making of the site a zone of attachment and devotion, of enduring experience, that sense of affinity with one's own locale, one's own 'turf' or 'patch'. In short, the idea of 'locale' as an ensemble of points of contact replete in correspondences, a unified field of ingrained memory. As a work of art, *A Locale of the Cosmos*, in the totality of its aims and in the concentration of its powers, hazards no less than the realisation and preservation of a world that is circumambient with (to borrow Olson's signal phrase) 'a human universe'.[83] As Eugenio Montale has observed:

> there are now two poetries that cohabit together; one of these is consumed immediately and dies as soon as it is expressed, while the other may sleep quietly. One day it will awake again, if it has the strength to do so…what remains unpredictable is its true "begetter," the person for whom it is written.[84]

The questions that *A Locale of the Cosmos* ultimately puts forward then, include the following: how may a locale come to inherit the mantle of universality? And, furthermore, how and why does the Wimmera in particular, lend itself, as it seems to me, so richly and with such puissance to an imaginative synthesis of all that the terms 'space', 'place' and 'locale' imply? The poem itself, I am sure, invites a number of answers to these questions and, in the sum of its parts, furnishes clues to the aggregate of a world in which memory and landscape are shapers of a vision that speaks both to my own time and also to a future in which that vision, no less than epic itself, will endure.

NOTES

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[1] In discussing the originality of Shakespeare, Bloom has identified the process of 'self-change' and 'self-overhearing' as two related aspects of the reason why Shakespeare, in his view, 'surpasses all others in evidencing a psychology of mutability.' From the creation of Falstaff on, Bloom argued, Shakespeare 'adds to the function of imaginative literature, which was instruction in how to speak to others, the now dominant if more melancholy lesson of poetry: how to speak to ourselves.' This process was given its own stamp by Wordsworth and has, I would suggest, been central to the modern and contemporary repertoire of epic. See *The Western Canon*, p. 48; p. 49.
[2] *LC*, Book V, 'Sheep Hills', Part 2, p. 96.
[3] As I have indicated in the opening Acknowledgements, I am indebted to a number of local records and histories of the region and its towns, whose accounts have furnished details (that I have subsequently fleshed out or utilized as raw materials for the imagination) in the broader narrative of the poem; see, for example, Helen Boyd, *On With The Show: A History of the Minyip Agricultural and Pastoral Society*, Warracknabeal, Barry Jolley Printing, 1986; A. K. Campbell, ed., *The Fruitful Years: A History of Marnoo, 1873 – 1973*, Horsham, Wimmera-Mallee Times, 1973; John A. Cromie, *Minyip: One Hundred Years Young*, Horsham, Wimmera-Mallee Times, 1972; Anne Longmire, *Nine Creeks to Albacutya: A History of the Shire of Dimboola,* North Melbourne, Shire of Dimboola in conjunction with Hargreen, 1985; L. H. Rable, ed., *Murtoa Centenary: 1872 – 1972,* Murtoa, Murtoa Centenary Committee in conjunction with J. K. Slattery, Dunmunckle Standard, 1972; C. E. Sayers, *Shanty at the Bridge: The Story of Donald*, Melbourne, Shire of Donald in conjunction with W & K Purbrick, 1963; Robert H. Stainthorpe, *Early Reminiscences of the Wimmera and the Mallee,* Warracknabeal, Barry Jolley Printing, undated.
[4] Brian Elliott, *The Landscape of Australian Poetry*, Melbourne, F. W. Cheshire, 1967, p. 4.
[5] It is not a question of rejection but of reluctance, based on the principle that discretion, in artistic terms is, as in most other cases, the better part of valour.
[6] By 1850 most of the Wimmera's northern reaches had been settled. 'Reverends Spieseke and Hagenauer had returned', as Broome observes, 'and initiated the Ebenezer mission on the Wimmera River near Antwerp in January 1859.' Antwerp is near Lake Hindmarsh, north of Dimboola and the presence of the Moravian pastors reflects the considerable presence of Lutheran elements (including religious exiles) in the population during the early years of white settlement in the Wimmera. See Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800,* Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2005*,* pp. 1261, 126, 195 – 196.
[7] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1960, p. 105.
[8] *LC*, Book II, 'The Road to Wal Wal', Part 2, p. 35.
[9] *Milton And His Epic Tradition*, p. 38.
[10] I follow Nohrnberg here in relation to Tasso's *Three Discourses*, in which Tasso discusses the *Gerusalemne Liberata* and the program of the poem in the wider context of the heroic poem as a genre. See Nohrnberg, *Analogy*, p. 19.
[11] *LC*, Book II, 'The Road to Wal Wal', Part 1, p. 29.
[12] As a literary term it is defined thus in J Turner, *The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry 1630-1660*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 8.
[13] As Webber has pointed out: 'Epic has commented on language, and its own language, from the very beginning—that kind of self-scrutiny is one of its characteristics'; see *Milton and His Epic Tradition*, p. 35. It may be said of a community that its morale is intimately connected to the language in which it conveys what it most cherishes.
[14]*The Dining Car Scene*, pp. 41 – 44.
[15] A process that may be observed equally in the 'epyillion' or 'minor epic', as discussed in Elizabeth Story Donno, *Elizabethan Minor Epics*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, pp. 6 –7.
[16] *Wimmera*, p. 117.
[17] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems*, London, Faber & Faber, 1963, p. 222.
[18] 'Psychologically speaking,' according to Bachelard, 'it is in reverie that we are free beings.' See *The Poetics of Reverie*, p. 101.
[19] This may serve as an analogue of the mythical space that is to be found in ancient epics. As Lawrence Hatab has observed: 'Mythical space must be distinguished from the abstract space of geometry. [Mythical] Space is therefore really a 'place' which is disclosed only insofar as it is filled with a certain significance. The mythical 'here' is…a *significant* here…We can get a feel for such a

demarcation of space by considering the Greek word *temenos*…a sacred precinct…' See Lawrence J. Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths*, La Salle, Ill., Open Court, 1990, p. 37.
[20] *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 78.
[21] Such moments as they occur in the poem are, perhaps, closer to St Augustine's sense of awe and perplexity: 'For I wondered how it was that I could appreciate beauty in material things on earth or in the heavens'; see *Confessions,* trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, p. 151. Wordsworth's celebrated 'spots of time' are, as Abrams has observed, closer to 'a prophetic *spiritus* or inspiration that assures him [Wordsworth] of his poetic mission…' See *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 75.
[22] *LC*, Book IV, 'Ashens', Part 1, pp. 64 – 65.
[23] *Milton*, p. 2.
[24] I am thinking here, not of the problematical 'sublime' as a formal aesthetic category, but rather of the original meaning of the Greek term, περί ύψους, that is, 'on high', or perhaps, 'on the height of eloquence'. See T. S. Dorsch ed., trans. *Aristotle, Horace, Longinus: Classical Literary Criticism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987, p. 100.
[25] Heaney remembers the 'lexicon-oriented Auden of the last years, when he had begun to resemble in his own person, an ample, flopping, ambulatory volume of the OED in carpet slippers'; this was the Auden who, in Heaney's estimate, blemished his last volume, *Thank You Fog*, with 'permissive' and 'late-comerly' literary tropes, such as 'festination', 'daunters', 'volants' and 'witching'— all used with a relish that was, Heaney claimed, 'tinged with tedium'. I must voice my disagreement. Auden's diction was not an abacus of oddities nor 'permissive' and 'late-comerly' but, rather, sovereign and a lifelong gift. See Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978 –1987*, New York, Noonday Press, pp. 123 –124.
[26] Indeed a 'balance' closely aligned to Wordsworth's own desired frame of mind and falling within the provenance of how Coleridge had defined joy: '…a consciousness of entire and therefore well being, when the emotional and intellectual faculties are in equipoise.' Quoted in Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, New York, Harvest, 1975, p. 143.
[27] Quoted in *The Man of Letters*, p. 177.
[28] Harold Bloom, *The Breaking of the Vessels*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 7.
[29] Ibid., p. 7.
[30] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Essay on Rhetoric' in Mark Van, Doren (ed.) *The Portable Emerson*, New York, Viking, 1968.
[31] David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*, Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 212.
[32] This visible corkscrew or watch-spring movement, which is registered notionally by the centring key on the computer keyboard, may be thought of as a series of helix-shaping lines in the of stanza formation of the poem (may I suggest a 'Homerian' helix?) as distinct from the hexameter-ordered, book-length, unimpeded narrative circumscription of traditional Homeric verse. Needless to say, the centring appearance of the poem on the page is by no means random or haphazard, but follows where the initial surge of inspiration led or was otherwise sculpturally turned.
[33] *LC*, Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 1, p. 8.
[34] This motif is connected to that of the journey or quest motif, which in Jungian terms is regarded as an 'unconscious archetype' or, in Bastian theory as belonging to the *Elementargedanken* or 'elementary ideas' which are held to be universal in the mythologies of the world. See Adolf Bastian, *Das Beständige in den Menschenrassen*, Berlin, 1868, as quoted in Joseph Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and Religion*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1986, p. 99. While I am not deeply acquainted with Jungian psychology, as a poet I am certainly interested in the hidden workings of the creative process. Campbell has pointed to the importance of certain images in works of art: 'The first task of any systematic comparison of the myths…should therefore be…to identify these universals…and fas as possible to interpret them; the second task then should be to recognize and interpret the various locally and historically conditioned transformations of the metaphorical images through which these universals have been rendered'. Ibid. This is, indeed, part of what occurs in *A Locale of the Cosmos*, since the poem may be seen, in some important respects, as the gradual unfolding and exploration of precisely such images.
[35] Ibid, Book VII, 'Marnoo', Part 2, p. 138.
[36] In keeping with the analogue of the symphonic or tone poem, the various sections of each part of each book of *A Locale of the Cosmos* may be seen as working in concert by means of a process similar to the *durchkomponiert* principle in music, in which the melodic character changes at each stage or section, according to the thematic development within that component or its prevailing mood.
[37] Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose*, New York, Noonday Press, 1987, p. 47.

[38] As Lowell has pointed out, 'his [Eliot's] metrics, are for instance, both 'formal' but also, 'casual''—'in loose unrhymed iambics varying from two to seven feet', *Collected Prose*, p. 46.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] The poem as a work of art is, then, something much more, I would argue, than what is denoted in R.A. York's description of poetry as a kind of 'utterance',[41] a notion that points to a level of spontaneity, but also implies an absence of deep consideration of the ideas in question. Over and above such visceral responses, when poets ruminate they are perhaps, closer to something that is the revelation of a truth more deeply felt and wholly experienced, than logically demonstrated.
[42] *The Prelude*, p. 110.
[43] John Olson, *Human Universe and Other Essays*, New York, Grove Press, 1963, p. 3.
[44] See my discussion of these terms in Chapter 3, pp. 70 -71.
[45] *LC*, Book VII, 'Mutton Swamp', Part 2, p. 156.
[46] Ibid., Book. X, 'Aldebaran and Beyond', Part 1, pp. 185 -186.
[47] Ibid. Book VI, 'Florida Villas', Part 2, p. 117.
[48] Joseph Campbell has pointed to 'the beginning and end of the ultimate non-dual "Wisdom (prajna) of the Yonder Shore…" as finding a supreme articulation in *The Book of the Secret of the Golden Flower*: 'Emptiness comes as the first of the three contemplations. All things are looked upon as empty. Then follows delusion…' See Richard Wilhelm, trans., *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938, p. 66. Of this yogic commentary, Campbell has observed: 'The term "emptiness in a text of this kind is to be read as pointing beyond its usual meaning, "emptiness" as the opposite of "fullness". It is intended, in fact, to point beyond all categories altogether—including even the category "beyond." See Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image*, Princeton N. J., Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 315. Of this same phenomenon, D. T. Suzuki has observed: 'Emptiness…does not mean "relativity" or "phenomenality" or "nothingness" but rather means the Absolute, or something of transcendental nature, although this rendering is also misleading…an ultimate reality is hinted at…' See D. T. Suzuki, Manual of Zen Buddhism, London, Rider and Co., 1950, p. 29. How close this comes to the question of 'the beyond' as I have treated it in the poem, I leave the reader to judge. I do not think it appropriate to impose strong interpretations upon my own work.
[49] Ibid., Book X, 'Aldebaran And Beyond', Part 2, p. 197.
[50] The mythic repertoire of epic remains central, I would argue, to any proper understanding of the genre. Epic as voyage of self-discovery and self-revelation (in the post-Wordsworthian mould) relies upon a mythic repertoire differing from ancient epics principally in its locus of interests. As Thompson has observed: 'Myth is the history of the soul'. See William Irwin Thompson, *The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light: Mythology, Sexuality and the Origins of Culture*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1981, p. 247.
[51] *Milton and His Epic Tradition*, p. 90.
[52] John Boardman, Jaspin Griffin, Oswyn Murray eds., *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 626. One is also reminded of how painfully Tasso wrestled with his epic, through endless revisions, prompted by unsatisfied critics; in the case of Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* remained unfinished. As Webber has pointedly remarked: '…its [*The Faerie Queene's*] total openness is epic'; *Milton and His Epic Tradition*, Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Matthew Arnold, 'Essays on Translating Homer' in Lionel Trilling, ed., *The Portable Matthew Arnold*, New York, The Viking Press, 1972, pp. 204-228.
[55] Ibid. p. 211.
[56] *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, pp.53-64; see also, Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol.1, trans. Gilbert Highet, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1965, p.44-56.
[57] *LC*, Book IX, 'Tap Roots', Part 2, p. 177. The apprehension of nature as a totalising phenomenon leads perhaps inevitably to a sense of spiritual affinity, to a sense of wonder, in opposition to the kind of Hobbesian materialism that would reduce the natural world to a quarry or an industrial site. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes applied to the natural world a lifeless and inert conception: 'the *Universe*, that is the whole masse of all things that are, is Corporeall, that is to say, body; and hath the dimensions of magnitude, namely length, breadth and depth; also every part of body is likewise body, and hath the like dimensions; and consequently every part of the universe is body, and that which is not body is no part of the universe; and because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is *nothing* and consequently *nowhere*'; see *Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan*, Harmondsworth, Penugin, 1988, p. 86.
[58] This was a charge laid at the feet of Pound, whose *Cantos*, in light of the author's advocacy during the Second World War of Mussolini's fascist agenda, fell under a cloud of critical suspicion in some

quarters as a literary instrument of a larger political hegemony. Pound's subsequent trial on charges of treason against the United States and his committal to a psychiatric institution have contributed to the wider reputation for subversion and eccentricity his epic has enjoyed ever since.

[59] Richard Broome has described a scenario that is typical of the period in which Wilsone' concluding dismissal of the aborigines from the family of man, though extreme, was not an exception: 'The skirmishes over sheep, the pushing of the Aborigines from their lands and the bad relations over Aboriginal women led to violence sustained by a great fear. The Europeans, isolated on their scattered sheep runs, erected huts with rifle slits in the walls.[*see LC*, Book I, 'Jackson Siding', Part 2, p. 12.] Several even had swivel guns. The shepherds who in England carried crooks now carried rifles and muskets. The squatters and their men were fearful because they were pitted against expert hunters who could throw half a dozen spears while they reloaded their unreliable and inaccurate flintlock pieces…In many areas an intense struggle developed as tribesmen sought to protect their lands from invasion and squatters tried to prevent the loss of all their investments. David Wilsone, up to his neck in debt and losing sheep through disease and Aboriginal raids, wrote home to Scotland that the Aborigines were 'one link removed from the ourang outang', and should be exterminated as they are 'unworthy of life'…Such thinking drove men to violence and massacre.' See Richard Broome, *The Victorians: Arriving*, Sydney, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1984, p. 31.

[60] It must be remembered that the Wimmera, together with the Mallee, occupies that large tract of the Murray basin plains which, unlike the plains of north-central Victoria, is not fed by the Ovens, the Goulbourn, the Campaspe, the Lodden and the Avoca, rivers of varying but substantive size, all of which gather within their purview smaller streams and rivulets as they flow from the Victorian highlands on their way to the Murray.

[61] The following vignette of the period may be taken as typical: 'George Brodie and Andrew Cruickshank took up a run alongside the Wimmera River in 1844. Within a year, 1,800 of the 3,300 sheep with which they started had been killed or driven off. The two men calculated that these losses combined with the extra weapons and men needed for defence cost them £1,000.' See Tony Dingle, *The Victorians: Settling*, Sydney, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1984, p. 26. Added to these difficulties was conflict between pastoralists and sheepmen and the Aboriginal people.

[62] However, the early promise that the region held for European settlers, despite all such obstacles and discouragements, should not be underestimated. As Susan Priestley has observed: 'During 1875 and 1876 the rush into the Wimmera began in earnest. Horsham [the principle city of the region] had just two hundred townspeople servicing three times that number on the surrounding selections [small farms of 320 acres]. Five years later the town had grown tenfold and there were more than twenty thousand people in the district; see Susan Priestley, *The Victorians: Making Their Mark*, Sydney, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1984.

[63] *LC,* Book VI, 'Flordia Villas,' Part 2, p. 115.

[64] *LC*, Book VI, 'Florida Villas', Part 2, pp. 110 – 111.

[65] Ibid., Book VII, 'Marnoo'. Part 1, p. 131.

[66] Robert Creeley ed., 'Projective Verse *and* Letter to Elaine Feinstein' in Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, New York, New Directions, 1966, pp. 15 – 30.

[67] *Princeton Encyclopaedia*, op. cit. p. 977.

[68] See Ernest Fenellosa, in 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry', (1920) in *Continuity*, p. 294.

[69] Louis Zukofsky*, 'A',* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975.

[70] 'Because breath,' as Olson pointed out, allows *all* the speech-force of language back in …'; see *Selected Writings*, p. 20.

[71] 'Maximus Letter # whatever', quoted in Robert Creeley (ed.), *Selected Poems: Charles Olson*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, p. 151.

[72] Quoted in *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 93.

[73] As Ivar Lissner has observed: 'We know that Homer's songs, once passed on by word of mouth alone, have survived longer than the civilisation that produced them.' See Ivar Lissner, *Man, God and Magic*, tran. J. Maxwell Brownjohn, London, Jonathan Cape, 1961, p. 15.

[74] Ibid., p. 18.

[75] Ibid., pp. 18 – 19.

[76] *Poetic License*, p. 129.

[77] For my own part the voice in question should reflect, as Ian Hamilton has observed in discussing the poetry of Robert Frost, 'The effort for a truly natural speech…', one that would admit 'into a traditional framework what one might call the superfluities of talk—the hesitations, qualifications, repetitions,

false starts, parentheses, and so on.' See Ian Hamilton, ed., Robert Frost: *Selected Poems*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, p. 16.

[78] Hatab, in respect of this contradistinction, has observed of the mythic: '…it is the *coextensiveness* of language, world and existential response that gives mythical disclosure its form and content…' See *Myth and Philosophy*, p. 35.

[79] *LC*, Book V, 'Sheep Hills', Part 1, p. 91.

[80] In Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, New York, New Directions, 1970, quoted in *Continuity*, p. 97.

[81] *Continuity*, p. 86.

[82] *Selected Writings*, p. 61.

[83] Ibid., p. 53.

[84] Nobel Prize 'Acceptance Speech', 1975, in *The Second Life of Art,* pp. 53 - 54.

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