

Les A. Murray

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## THE HUMAN-HAIR THREAD

It may seem strange, and immodest, for a poet to embark on a lengthy account of one of the elements in his own work. My justification for tackling it is threefold: first, I was asked by the editor of **Meanjin** to do so, second, it will tend to use my writing as a springboard for talking about matters of wider interest, and third, its centre of gravity is not so much what I have been able to do with one of the great Australian cultural heritages, but rather what that heritage has given me, and how it has contributed and may yet increasingly contribute to a richer and more humane civilisation in this country.

Since the demise of the Jindyworobak movement, this resource has been largely neglected by writers; the main effect of Aboriginal culture on the general Australian consciousness in the last twenty-odd years has tended to flow through the conservationist movement and, to a lesser extent, through painting and perhaps music. Growing politicisation of the Aboriginal question has also, perhaps, made many non-Aboriginal writers wary of charges of exploitation, paternalism and the like.

There has been an Aboriginal presence in my work almost from the start. This is natural enough, in one coming from the country. Until quite recently, the original Australians were almost exclusively a country people, and the white culture they had to resist or assimilate with was the Australian rural one. Growing up outside the cities, one couldn't fail to be conscious of them, living on the fringe of things, mostly in poverty, hanging around the pubs in Taree or walking the two hot, dusty miles back out to Purfleet Settlement. In my part of the North Coast of New South Wales, they were not really poorer or more broken down than the poorest farm



families or seasonal workers. All the same, one was dimly conscious of a difference that went beyond the often-slight differences of skin colour. One knew there were special laws about the Aborigines — to some extent, the modern Aboriginal people is a **creation** of discriminatory laws working against the declared policy of assimilation — and one heard they could be treacherous, apt to repay slights exorbitantly after long and patient delay. They had a way of looking stately in tattered clothes, walking along the road to Taree, but one had no idea then of the warmth with which they supported and cared for their own. Nor any idea of their tradition of sharing. Ugly, contemptuous words were used to refer to them: coon, darkie, koori, black-gin. My mother, a city woman, prohibited these words in our house, and it was only years later, in the city, that I learned that **Koori** was what the black people called themselves. About the term gin, I remember hearing the story of Constable Crotty, of Taree, who was caught in flagrante with a Purfleet woman down at the Manning river ferry, in the days before the Martin Bridge spanned the river; a six o'clock curfew was imposed on Aborigines in Taree in those days, and Mr Crotty was supposed to be seeing that all the black people were across the river by that hour. For a long time afterwards, in all the pubs of the town, a gin-in-milk was known as a 'Crotty's'; the word drove Constable Crotty to leave town.

The Aborigines were partly a people, partly a caste, partly a class, though really that last term is inaccurate: they were actually part of a larger class of the rural poor, and it is still often more useful to see them in that light than in currently fashionable radical-racist terms. We, my family, were almost in the same class ourselves. The Murrys were among the earliest white families in the Manning district, but my father was a tenant-at-will of **his** father, who, before letting him rent a hived-off segment of his large property and farm it, had exploited his labour as a bullock driver and timber cutter for eight years with no pay beyond gruff promises of future rewards. Grandfather John Allan Murray, called Allan to distinguish him from his wildly generous and hospitable, if feckless, father Johnnie Murray, the first white settler at Bunyah, was always a man to do well out of family loyalty, but he was not at all unusual in that, in his time and place. Until it was pulled down a year ago, our house on the farm never had a ceiling, or lining on the walls; summer and winter, the wind through the cracks in the plank walls provided us with air conditioning. I suppose we were heirs to the unadmitted guilts of the white conquest of Australia, though I don't remember our being conscious of them at all. Perhaps we were too poor. A certain slight shyness on my part when meeting Aboriginal people may stem from subterranean feelings of this sort, however; indeed, I almost hope they come from there. They may be no more than an outgrowth of learned liberalism, or a residue of childhood fears. Really, I am not at all sure about white conquest-guilt; it may be no more than a construct of the political Left, that great inventor of prescriptive sentiments and categories. It certainly isn't a reliable sentiment for outsiders to invoke among country people.



We may also have been heirs, tangentially, to guilts about miscegenation, a topic on which many older country people of all colours are deeply and ambiguously touchy, in part because of real tension between racial scorn and ordinary decency, in part also because it has been a stick used by urban elites, past and present, to beat us with. Then, as now, the sunny, self-righteous, generalising confidence of urban commentators was inimical to rural Australians. When I was growing up, the injustice of urban attitudes was shifting from the black people (feckless, primitive, a doomed, inferior race) to the white rural population (bigoted, conservative, ignorant, despoilers of the environment, a doomed, obsolete group), though it had not reached its present levels of intensity.

I grew up in what had been the country of the Kattang people, a region lying between the Manning and the Karuah rivers and extending westward towards Gloucester and Dungog. This is the country which formed me, and I have celebrated it many times in verse. Next year, Rigby plan to bring out a book by Mrs Ella Simon of Taree, who is probably the last fluent speaker of Kattang, as well as a recognised keeper of family trees and traditional lore. Mrs Simon was one of the informants in Nils M. Holmer's study, published in two parts by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1966-7, of the Kattang and Thangatti languages. Her own book will correct and greatly amplify anything I could say here about the life of the Aboriginal people Up Home, and people wanting an account, from the inside, of relations between the races in the Manning region are advised, most warmly, to look out for this book when it appears. Mrs Simon is a great lady of my country, a person of immense wisdom and justice, and she knows where all the corpses are buried. She would probably know who the old black man was who stood by the roadside in Purfleet with his hat in his hands and his eyes lowered the day my mother's funeral passed by on its way out to Krumbach cemetery. I was twelve then, but that man has stayed with me, from what may well have been the natal day of my vocation as a poet, a good spirit gently restraining me from indulgence in stereotypes and prejudices. Or trying to. I don't know who he was. It could have been Cecil Bungey, who jumped into the Manning from Queen Elizabeth Park in Taree one night when the police were after him and drowned. This tragedy, in the mid-Fifties, was an important event in the district, because the indignation it caused among black and white people alike led to some curbing of police oppression of the Purfleet community and a beginning of social change in the settlement. Or it could have been one of the Syrons, visiting from Minimbah.

In tracing the black thread as it runs through my work, I am conscious of many mistakes, shortcomings and impositions of myth on the facts. Leaving aside a couple of short stories I wrote while at university, heavily programmatic tales which were really about the tension between individuality and community values, and not about real Aboriginals at all, the first poem of those I have kept which deals with an explicitly Aboriginal subject is one titled 'Beside the Highway', written in about 1962 or 1963. It is an out-



sider's view of an Aboriginal settlement of the old type, and is, of course, based almost entirely on Purfleet and the life I saw or imagined going on there, the heat, the ennui, the sense of dereliction and aimlessness — in other words, very much the conventional white liberal picture, enlivened by an eye for detail. The thing in this early poem which gives it some smidgen of originality is the image of cars on the highway, which 'approach like missiles/and scatter glare as they pass'. Purfleet is bisected by the Pacific Highway, exposed to the constant intrusive passage of cars and trucks that violate its inwardness. It must be a fearfully dangerous place for little children — though they seem to grow up into public-spirited youngsters capable of putting out placards on the approaches to warn motorists of police speed traps — and one can imagine the disruption and chronic restlessness which the endless glittering stream of vehicles must provoke in the people there. Mrs Simon says that Purfleet should be bulldozed now; it had value in its day, and was a step up from the squalid riverbank blacks' camp it replaced, but the need for a refuge, a separate community, in effect a ghetto, has now passed. The poem is stitched shakily together by the imagined figure of Mad Jess, who owes more to Wordsworth and Yeats than to actual observation; this figure is made to bear the burden of Significance in the poem:

'And I was dreaming',  
 says old Mad Jess to herself, 'flash cars was coming  
 at me like hailstones, cutting me to pieces.'

What this highly literary figure allowed me to do, I see now, was to use the rural dialect I had grown up speaking, but which I was as yet too conventional to employ in my verse. Perhaps the most perceptive touch in the picture of Mad Jess, though, is the image of her contemplating her shoes. This image, with its concomitants of remembered barefoot freedom and of lore and magical practices connected with tracks, recurs in a much later poem, 'The Ballad of Jimmy Governor'. Images of the ground and of tracks abound in the poem, and in one place the half-caste outlaw ironically refers to his full-blood accomplice Jacky Underwood as having 'already give back his shoes'. The implication is that the only footwear Underwood ever owned was that given to him by the prison officials in Dubbo for his appearances at court. Now he has been hanged and the shoes have been taken back. The Governor Ballad is written entirely in the dialect, or more properly sociolect, of the rural poor. I have heard it read in an Aboriginal accent by the actor Bob Maza, and the effect chilled even me!

In a poem written while I was living in Wales in 1967, entitled 'The Wilderness', there is a reference to the day my friend Peter Barden and I, watched by curious peak-hour crowds, trotted down Wynyard Concourse in Sydney towards the railway ticket barriers, excitedly pointing out imaginary animal tracks in the dust and pausing to make more with our knuckles in the manner of Aboriginal hunters discussing the finer points of their trade, while all the time exchanging remarks in an Aboriginal-sounding gibberish. We even avoided sibilants in our mock-Aranda, knowing dimly that these don't occur in Australian languages. The yen for



travel to the Outback and for what Barden called the 'clean country' of the Centre was strong on us that day. And it was a good stir. In the poem, which is about a hitch-hiking trip through the Centre which I'd done in 1961 to while away the hungry months of the Credit Squeeze that year, I refer to our gibberish as mock-**Arunta**, and thereby fall into the same sort of error as the old Jindyworobak poets, Rex Ingamells, Ian Mudie, Flexmore Hudson, Max Dunn, Roland Robinson and the rest, who lacked the really first-rate scholarly sources available to us now. The spelling 'Arunta' comes from the writings of Sir Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, who carried out valuable but faulty anthropological studies in Central Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The people these men were principally concerned with were the **Aranda**, who pronounce their tribal name with the stress on the initial A. The common white Australian mistake of pronouncing the 'Arunta' form with the stress on the medial **u** probably stems from popularising material derived from Spencer and Gillen.

The Jindyworobak poets were very prone to romanticise the Aborigines, but their really worthwhile project of fusing Aboriginal and European elements into a new and genuinely Australian poetry was made more difficult by the shaky and incomplete source material they had to work with.\* Many of the best modern studies only appeared at the end of the Jindyworobak period or even later, in the late Forties and early Fifties, and T.G.H. Strehlow's monumental and superb **Songs of Central Australia** only came out finally in 1970. Before the Second World War, for those who read German there were accurate poem-texts in Carl Strehlow's **Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien**, published between 1907 and 1920, and other accurate texts could be found in odd articles by E.H. Davies and the young T.G.H. Strehlow in **Oceania**. Other texts, whose reliability I cannot judge, existed in George Taplin's 'The Narrinyeri', a chapter of **The Native Tribes of South Australia** (1897), in A.W. Howitt's **Native Tribes of South-East Australia**, and in a few other old books. Older texts were often clumsily literal, or else rendered Bill Harney-fashion into totally inappropriate English traditional rhyme and metre, which smothered their tone and flavour and usually made them look merely banal. Mary Gilmore's renderings are a partial exception, as Judith Rodriguez points out in a recent review article in **Contempa**. To digress for a moment, it would be wonderful if we could recover the transcriptions of native, probably mainly Wiradjuri, songs Mary Gilmore's father is said to have made; these were allegedly most painstaking, and were glossed by Mr Cameron in his native Gaelic so as to avoid missing nuances, before he made his English versions. It was not until 1945 that R. and C. Berndt published the results of their early fieldwork in the Ooldea region, and not until 1951 that Ronald Berndt published his study, with sensitively translated texts, of the Arnhem Land Djanggawul cycle. Similarly, the

\*Roland Robinson, the greatest of the Jindies, is of course an exception, largely because he did his own original research.



younger Strehlow's authoritative **Aranda Traditions** only appeared in 1947. The Jindyworobak poets also suffered from too great an emphasis on only one Aboriginal tribe, the Aranda, important and fascinating as the traditions of the Aranda are. Pretty well their whole understanding of Aboriginal metaphysics and philosophy comes, it is clear, from Spencer and Gillen's often shaky understanding of Aranda belief.

If this last point is true of the Jindyworobak poets, it is even more true of the hazy ideas of Aboriginal philosophy and religion held by most white Australians. A particularly good example of this is the term 'Dreamtime'. This term, taken from Spencer and Gillen's studies of Central Australian tribes and applied indiscriminately to all Aboriginal groups in Australia, is analysed incisively by T.G.H. Strehlow in his **Songs of Central Australia**:

Spencer and Gillen's **alcheringa** (altered in **The Arunta** to **alchera**), which has been mistranslated as 'dream time' and popularised by them and others in this sense, owes its origin to a confusion of **altjira ráma** and **altjiranga** (**ngámбакáла**). The English 'dream time' is therefore a vague and inaccurate phrase; and though it has gained wide currency among white Australians through its sentimentality and its suggestion of mysticism, it has never had any real meaning for the natives, who rarely, if ever, use it when speaking in English. 'Dreaming', or rather 'dreamin'', which is commonly used by pidgin English and Northern Territory English native speakers means **totem** only, and is a translation not of **altjiranga** but of **kngánakála** (= someone who has originated). Thus 'emu dreamin'' would be a translation of **ilia kngánakála** (= someone who has originated as an emu). (pp.614-5)

Strehlow discusses the word **altjira** in some detail; it is apparently a rare word used only in a few fixed phrases, and its root meaning seems to be 'uncreated, sprung out of itself'. The suffixed form **altjiranga** means 'from all eternity', and is given as an answer to questions about the origin of the world. In the Aranda view, the earth and the sky have existed **altjiranga**, that is, from all eternity. So have the supernatural beings who created the features of the earth and its human and animal inhabitants, and who continually reincarnate themselves in them. Some of the immense dignity of traditional Aboriginals, when seen outside of degrading circumstances, obviously comes from their sense of being the present forms of eternally-existing beings. A man who 'owns' a certain ceremony or set of verses belonging to a sacred site does so because he **is** the supernatural being who indwells in that site. The only slight connection between **altjira** and dreaming, in our western sense of the word, is through the idiom **altjira ráma** 'to see altjira', that is, 'to dream'.

I place great reliance on Strehlow's accounts of Aranda matters because unlike other scholars to date he speaks Aranda as a native; it is one of his mother-tongues. In a private discussion, Emeritus Professor A.P. Elkin of Sydney University told me that Strehlow was really the **only** white man who had ever learned an Aboriginal language. Spencer and Gillen, on the other hand, had to rely on native informants speaking a limited pidgin English, because they spoke no Aranda at all. This led them into many mistakes, notably their belief that the sacred chants attached to the different



sites (for ritual scarcely exists apart from the places in which it must be performed) were in fact nonsense-verses which the Aborigines themselves did not understand, a sort of ritual glossolalia! As an example of the long survival of misinformation, I remember being told dogmatically by a well-read, rather pedantic and in fact somewhat scary truck driver that sacred Aboriginal verse was all meaningless noise-making. As we were crossing the Nullarbor at the time, I did not persist in arguing with him when he showed signs of irritation.

The first poem in which I attempted to capture some of the rhythm and feeling of Aboriginal poetry was 'The Rock Shelters, Botany Bay', written in early 1968 (we were living in Scotland then) and published, like 'The Wilderness', in my second book **The Weatherboard Cathedral**. It is a rather pallid poem, 'poetic' in a bad sense, and reads like a counterfeit of another culture's poetry rather than a genuine re-creation of it. It fails to catch the tone and style of Aboriginal poetry of any sort, in the way in which, say, Tom Keneally caught them in the short extempore songs he put into the mouth of the young Jimmie Blacksmith in his fine novel based on the Governor outbreak. I was perhaps too far, in every sense, from my sources. The only real point of interest in the poem is the mention of people averting their eyes from the track of a 'kingparrot man', the ill-omened spoor of a soldier dressed in a red coat. It was a guess of mine that, in the first days of contact, people accustomed to ritual body painting would take figures in red coats to be spirit-figures associated with a familiar creature. Apart from possum-skin cloaks for wearing in cold weather, most Aborigines in traditional times scarcely had a concept of what we may call secular clothing. Decoration with blood, paint and the down of birds was a festive or religious act. The poem alludes to the common Eastern Australian idea, reminiscent of Melanesian belief, that the white invaders were actually ghosts, a truly horrifying thing for a people with as deep-rooted a fear of the dead as Aboriginal Australians possessed. Ghosts garbed as crimson rosella (kingparrot) men would thus be an attempt to make sense of white figures garbed in red upper-body decorations.

My next attempt to describe, amongst other things, the effect of absolute culture-shock was in 'The Conquest', written in 1969 and published in **Poems Against Economics**. This is a more successful poem, I think, and deals with black-white relations during the first years of settlement at Sydney Cove, the period of Phillip's governorship. This period is very important, in that events and reverses which happened then went far towards setting the pattern of black-white relations for more than a century afterwards; the poem outlines some of these and then, in its last two sections, moves into a more general depiction of white myth-making about the Aborigines, both in the past and today:

A few still hunt way out beyond philosophy  
where nothing is sacred till it is your flesh  
and the leaves, the creeks shine through their poverty  
or so we hope. We make our conquests too.  
The ruins at our feet are hard to see.



Early in the poem, the failure of understanding on both sides is presented in terms of perception; neither side can **see** the other at all accurately, because neither side can understand what it is seeing. The failure is presented from both sides, with the Aboriginal side predominating in the early sections and then fading away as white incomprehension, brutality and myth-making take over. The tribesmen see, with difficulty, what looks to them like 'blue parrot-figures wrecking the light with change' (the parrot-figures are blue now, because Royal Marines and naval officers, not redcoat soldiers, were in charge in the first years of the settlement!) and they see 'man-shapes digging where no yam-roots were', a solecism against the proper order of things in many ways, not least because most digging was women's work. Later, the Governor addresses the tribesmen in English and they reply, naturally enough, in Dhuruwal, the language of the people south of Sydney Harbour. Marines stand stolidly there, with their firelocks at the ready, obeying the customs of their culture and their service, and the warriors obey **their** customs by ritually biting their beards as a sign of defiance and challenge. Beard-biting with this significance was, it seems, pretty well universal throughout Australia, so it is not inappropriate to cite an Aranda example. It comes from the sacred song associated with Ankóta, a Northern Aranda dingo-totem centre on the Burt Plain in the Northern Territory; 'he' refers to the dingo ancestor Ankótarínja:

Angrily sucking his beard into his mouth

He follows up the scent, moving his head from side to side.

Nothing comes of the confrontation ('glass beads are scattered in that gulf of style'), and soon convicts are crying out for protection against the imaginary violence of naked 'Indians', the common eighteenth century term for all New World indigenes, who 'circle them like birds'. Exasperated with the unresponsiveness and menacing mien of the Aboriginals, the Governor forgets his earlier unrealistic projects of racial harmony and orders that they be driven off, and so they disappear carrying the germs of unknown European diseases which will sweep through them like fire through blady-grass. In the forest, dogs feed on the corpses; 'it makes dogs furtive, what they find to eat'. Later, finding that the colony cannot support itself, Phillip changes tack again and orders that some natives be captured, partly in order to get information about native food resources, and partly to train as emissaries capable of interpreting the benevolent white Governor's wishes and intentions to their fellow indigenes. The poem thus records Phillip's swings from benevolence to exasperation and back, and his final outburst of savagery when his personal huntsman, named McEntire, is speared. The punitive expedition he orders on that occasion is a complete failure, but it sets a deadly pattern for the future:

The punitive squads march off

without result, but this quandong of wrath

ferments in slaughters for a hundred years.

As the Aboriginals themselves fade from view as an independent 'side' in the confrontation, their place is taken by various stereotyped European



views of them. Paralleling the Governor's shifts from benevolence to anger, the image of the Noble Savage in very early drawings and accounts is replaced by scornful pictures of degraded black beggars in Sydney Town, capering drunkenly for pennies or rum in a now totally de-sacralised world. They have gone, in a few short years, from being unencumbered with possessions to being destitute, 'poor for the first time', and their culture goes underground, becoming a matter of fading traditional lore spoken softly in languages which most white men do not trouble to listen to or learn. Colonial reality is something which can be, and is, expressed entirely in the conqueror's language. Perhaps because of a personal interest in linguistic things, I have made more, I think, of the linguistic dimension in black-white relations than most other Australian writers.

Matters of language are very much to the fore in the very next poem I wrote, a few weeks after 'The Conquest'. This was 'The Ballad of Jimmy Governor', and the tension in this poem is between the rough Nineties ballad-metre in which it is cast and the horrific anti-white and anti-pioneer sentiments of the Aboriginal outlaw who speaks it. I tried to write the poem, though, in the only poetic mode Jimmy Governor might have been expected to know, the rough folk-poetry of the settlers and battlers, and there is possibly some pathos in the way his language is precisely theirs, right down to the dialectal forms such as 'give' for 'gave' and 'soon be' for 'it will soon be'; the slang is turn-of-the-century too, as in the use of 'plant' for 'hide'. This, and the other forms, are still current among older people in my region today. There are cruel punning references to Black Velvet (Aboriginal women, as sexually exploited by white men) and White Lady, a dire mixture of methylated spirits and powdered milk still drunk in shanty settlements to this day. The only references to traditional belief are fairly oblique, and refer to traditional lore about the balefulness of tracks and other traces left by evil men and, more specifically, by traditional revenge parties. I've noticed that white readers don't tend to notice or 'hear' these parts of the poem, though a couple of Aboriginal people who have heard or read it have reacted to them. I may just have got something right, and succeeded in creating a real Aboriginal character. Interestingly, Tom Keneally also refers to footprint-sorcery, and to the concomitants of shoe-wearing, in his **Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith**. Tom was writing his novel at the same time as I was writing this poem; this was a subject for mutual surprise and head-shaking later on.

The first poem in which I deliberately incorporated large amounts of actual material of a traditional sort was one called 'Stockman Songs', which forms part of a long sequence entitled 'Walking to the Cattle-Place'. This sequence forms more than a third of **Poems Against Economics**, and goes into enormously ramified detail about cattle and their place in human history and consciousness. The element of surprise in the poem is that the stockmen aren't white Australians singing country-and-western songs, but black men chanting the sort of non-sacred nonce-verses which Aboriginals compose on the spur of the moment to celebrate the casual events of the world around them. The only Aboriginal term I know for this style of song-



making is **djabi-dja**, which comes from one of the languages of the Kimberleys. The place names in the poem are Aranda ones: Pmólankinja is known as Palm Valley in English, Tnórula is Gosse's Range and Rúbuntja (or Urúbuntja) is Mount Hay. There is a reference, of a joking sort, to the grass-seed totem, and a couplet in near-traditional style referring to the semi-sacred Rúbuntja fire totem ceremony. Strehlow tells the story of this ceremony in an article published in the **Inland Review**, vol. 3, no. 12, Sept.-Nov. 1969:

A large group of fire ancestors was living at the beginning of time around Urúbuntja or Rúbuntja, now known as Mount Hay. Some of the fire ancestors accidentally started a bushfire which rapidly engulfed the whole countryside. Finally the fire ancestors themselves were set ablaze. The older men among them thereupon turned into sacred objects. The younger men — who were still wearing their hair tied into long cones in the manner of Aranda novices — rose towards the sky. With their hair aflame and their bodies charred and blackened, they were carried by the fire-heated gales many miles away. Some landed near Tnorula, and changed into grass-trees; others came down in Pmolankinja, where they turned into palms and cycads . . . The mountain of Urubuntja never regained its trees, and the surrounding burnt-out country turned into Mitchell grass plains.

As well as being metaphorically vivid, this story makes good sense as history, and depicts what probably happened many times in the past as Central Australia dried out and became deforested. The Aboriginals almost certainly assisted in the work of dessication and deforestation by careless use of their firesticks — like the Bedouin, they may be as much fathers of the desert as sons of it — and even the picture of the grass trees and palms 'flying' into sheltered places is an accurate image, when you consider that the flora of sheltered, well-watered spots in the Centre consists of remnants of sclerophyll forest and even rain forest. The description only lacks a time-scale, but then mythologised history usually does. Written only a couple of years after 'The Rock Shelters', this poem works very much better, I think, as an attempt to capture some sense of the inwardness of another culture and its ways of looking at things.

There follow a number of poems, written over the next few years, in which there are passing references to Aboriginal themes and culture, or in which Aboriginal figures appear. In 'Lament for the Country Soldiers' war memorials are called 'The stones of increase'; they are as it were sacred sites from which a spirit, if not the spirits of the dead soldiers themselves, can be reborn, and the names incised on them are a sort of tjuringa of a past world. In one of the poems of the cattle cycle, 'Novilladas Democráticas', 'shirts of landless red' refers to the often-gorgeous garb of black stockmen in the Outback, and in the last poem of that cycle, a black woman remarks, after the somewhat puritanical country women have explained the reasons for their narrowness and coercive use of the power of community feeling, that Jesus said all hidden things would be revealed, a profoundly true insight of His in which I have great and even sardonic faith. In 'The Vernacular Republic' (the poem, not the book), I have a suspicion that one



of the two Mitchells is an Aboriginal, because of the 'pain and subtle amusement' with which he announces his name. But this is perhaps a country point. In 'Escaping Out There', there are references to imaginary place names constructed on an Aboriginal model — the Flying-Fox Cooking-Place and Praising White Moth Larvae — along with other local names constructed on a not dissimilar rural white model: Where The Old School Got Burnt and Where The Big Red Bull Went Over. The latter is an actual place on the island of Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic, but it is so like nonce-names for familiar places Up Home that it fitted in perfectly. It may be evidence for a good deal of commonality in rural place-naming in widely separated parts of the world. The name All The Bloodwoods also occurs in the poem, but I would not like to speculate whether that one is white or Aboriginal. The same poem contains a reference to unadmitted, and therefore probably black, grandmothers, and their benign effect on mountain farm families which might otherwise have been too stiffly respectable and hard-working for their own good. In 'The Action', finally, a meditation on history and minorities spoken by a man floating at his ease in Coolongolook river in my country, there is a reference to a sacred flying-fox increase-site nearby. Both Coolongolook River and the red-headed fruit bat are important sponsors of my writing. It was while sitting in the now-vanished timber mill at Coolongolook and contemplating the river, one evening in the mid-Fifties, that I first realised that I was going to be a writer; rivers in my work often have a lot of Coolongolook water in them. The metaphoric appropriateness of the flying-fox, a nocturnal creature who sleeps upside down during the day and flies out for miles at night in search of 'grown and native fruit', to the general situation of poets in this country has a compelling force for me. I examined this in a poem written in 1974 and entitled 'The Flying-Fox Dreaming, Wingham Brush, NSW'. That poem connects the metaphor with the ancient ritual and economic significance of the flying-fox in my country. Along the Manning in pre-white days, there seems to have been a seasonal ecology of native figs, flying-foxes and Aboriginals. The fruit bats are very nearly my 'dreaming', in the half-serious, half-joking way that Douglas Stewart identified his totem animal as the bandicoot while claiming David Campbell's was a big red fox. This is not quite so jocular as it looks, though it can be taken too seriously. I remember, from devouring back issues of **Oceania** in Fisher Library when I was a young student at Sydney, that people of the East Coast tribes were supposed to discover their dreamings for themselves through a sort of waking revelation. I know of a parallel to this, from a very different region of Australia, in which a baby's aged initiate relative discerns its dreaming for it. In a poem called 'Lalai', translated by Andrew Huntley from a prose version by the anthropologist Michael Silverstein and published in **Poetry Australia** no. 58, 1976, the Worora elder Sam Woolagoodjah says:

In its own Wunger place  
A spirit waits for birth —

'Today, I saw who the child really is —'



That is how a man  
Learns to know his child.

Namaaraalee made him,  
No one else,  
No one.  
But not all things are straight  
in this day.

As I looked at the water  
Of Bundaalunaa  
She appeared to me:  
I understood suddenly  
The life in our baby —  
Her name is Dragon Fly.

Without pressing the point farther than it will go, I know I would be most reluctant ever to hurt, a flying-fox. The same poem also speculates about a possible origin for **tjúrunga**, the sacred objects in which ancestral spirits inhere; a dead and shrivelled flying-fox is spoken of as 'becoming a clenched oval stone'. But this is guess, based on little more than the way dead things in a dry country are apt to shrivel and even become mummified in the sun, and it may apply more to the Centre than to the coast.

I suppose the next poem of mine, after the cattle cycle, in which a major Aboriginal component appears is one with the very long title 'Thinking About Aboriginal Land Rights, I Visit The Farm I will Not Inherit', written in 1972. This sonnet describes how the bush would re-occupy and obliterate our old farm, and how the potentials for such an obliteration lie everywhere in the landscape. It does not overtly refer to our having lost the farm — my father was too hurt and proud to buy it when his father didn't leave it to him, and so his brother bought it and gave it to his own son, who eventually evicted Dad from it — but rather counteracts a feeling of dispossession by talking about dimensions, intimacies, knowledge of the place which dispossession cannot touch. The speaker is thus in a rather Aboriginal position, *vis-à-vis* the usurper, and this is underlined by his becoming in effect a totem ancestor in the last line; like the figures in the legends, 'I go into the earth near the hay shed for thousands of tears'.

The human-hair thread thickens as we approach the present. In another, much longer poem written in 1973 after a tour in Western Australia the previous year, and entitled 'Cycling in the Lake Country' (the Wordsworthian echo is not without mischievous intent), there are several allusions to Aboriginal matters, and the Aboriginal presence is pervasive throughout the poem. It is most explicit in sections two and six, though section eight has a reference to the sacred song associated with Ilbálintja Soak, a bandicoot totem site in Central Australia. In the special poetic language used only for sacred verses, the bandicoot initiates chant the words of the great sire Károra describing his **pmára kútata** or 'everlasting home' (cf. Sam Woolagoodjah's **Wunger** place) at Ilbálintja: again and again, he



refers to the rings of soil and clay and stone revealed in the soak as the water dries up in drought time:

The crimson soil is grating under the heel;  
The white creek sand is grating under the heel.

White creek sand!  
Impenetrable hollow!

White limestone band!  
Impenetrable hollow!

Rich yellow soil!  
Impenetrable hollow!

Red and orange soil!  
Impenetrable hollow!

Plain studded with whitewoods!  
Impenetrable hollow!

White salt lake!  
Impenetrable hollow!

When I was looking for a way to describe the successive tide-lines left by water drying up in limestone doline-lakes well south of Kambalda, this was the obvious allusion. It seals, as it were, the description which precedes it, and helps to sustain the sense of Aboriginal presence.

In the second section of this long poem, which is based on an imaginary bicycle trip from about Leonora south to the sea at Esperance, there is a reference to the Central Australian belief that sacred quatrains and couplets (called **tjúrunga rétnja** or 'tjurunga-names' in Aranda; each is regarded as a compound epithet by which the initiate addresses and invokes his spirit ancestor) have no human authors; they were composed by the great sires themselves as they did their deeds of creation, wandering over the country and pausing at various spots to rest and perhaps to dance and shake off thousands of tiny feathers from their ceremonial body decorations. These feathers became the spirits of their myriad progeny, and when their human incarnations shake off their showers of down in ceremonial performances, the totem species are renewed again and made to multiply. This process is described in the poem, which then goes on, in its allusive impressionist way, to invoke one of the most riveting of all Aboriginal ceremonies, the Northern Aranda circumcision rite, and make contemporary sense of it. I am conscious here of falling into the old trap of over-dependence on Aranda tradition, but this was the way the poem unfolded itself to me, and I gather that initiation ceremonies all over the desert regions of our continent tend to be very much more severe than those in the gentler country; Aranda initiates had to undergo circumcision, sub-incision and even sometimes the tearing off of one or more fingernails: no wonder they referred contemptuously to coastal men as **wíá**, or boys! Perhaps the Aranda ceremony is not too much out of place in the context



of the Western Australian desert, though.

The ceremony is a very brutal one, and appears to revolve around the theme of violence, particularly sexual violence and the tension between the sexes. In the timeless creative age, a large party of **lákabára** hawk men were travelling over the country devouring quails on the wing, when they heard the sound of a shield being beaten on the ground and saw a number of female wallaby ancestors, many of them deformed, preparing to circumcise their boys with burning brands of bark. This utterly infuriated the hawk men, who flew down, assuming the form of men, and killed the women. Then, with angry violence, they circumcised the boys themselves with stone knives, after which they released the wallaby men from a ritual ban of silence, flew up into the air and continued on their way. This may well be mythologised history, too, but we have no way of checking that. What is certain is that ever since, the ceremony of circumcision, called **atuélama** (to make a man), **lálnua ultákama** (to cut off the prepuce) or, most suggestively, **pára ultákama** (to cut off the penis), has been carried out among the Northern Aranda with great roughness and violence, reproducing the fury and cruel joy of the hawk men. By contrast, the rite of sub-incision, splitting the urethra, is carried out in a context of rather idyllic verses, some of which have a comic, teasing note.

When I was writing the poem, it seemed to me that the circumcision rite had a significance not unlike that which it has in the Book of Exodus, a sacrifice of a part to propitiate forces which might otherwise demand the whole. Or, perhaps, remembering the idiom **pára ultákama**, it might have a suggestion that the prepuce is 'enough'. Many Aboriginal self-mutilating acts have an element of propitiatory sacrifice in them; one offers one's blood and one's pain to satisfy harsh demands which might otherwise become exorbitant. Central Australian people still gash their heads and bodies after a death to demonstrate their grief and their innocence of murder; without such demonstrations, the dead person's relations might come and kill them. In our own culture, the instinct and need for sacrifice, the whole complex of motive and pattern in it, were for a long time resolved and discharged through the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, as re-enacted every day in the Mass. For many people, especially intellectuals, this is no longer acceptable however, and they are forced to face the question again, willy nilly, and either work their way through it afresh or face destruction by it. As a parallel to my poem, it may be instructive to look at one of the quatrains in David Campbell's superb 'Kuring-gai Rock Carvings' sequence:

The kangaroo has a spear in his side. It was here  
Young men were initiated,  
Tied to a burning tree. Today  
Where are such cooling pools of water?

Well, Christians could tell him — but many people will now not look our way. I may have been disputing with David in this passage of my poem, though I can't remember now whether the argument was conscious or not.



In the sixth section of 'Cycling in the Lake Country', I use the figure of Lionel Brockman, a West Australian Aboriginal who twice escaped from Fremantle Gaol and took to the bush with his family, sparking off the most intensive manhunts in the State's history. This part of the poem does not bring in any specifically traditional material, apart from a slightly tongue-in-cheek allusion to shape-shifting as a method of concealment, but talks about Australian vernacular culture and the need to rid oneself of bossy **gubba** attitudes if one is ever to achieve the humility and the silence necessary to understand Australia and belong deeply to it. The Aboriginal slang word **gubba**, supposedly derived from **governor**, means a white Australian, particularly one who always knows better and wants to push people around. This leads on to the consideration of the true, latent Australian republic in the following section, and the need for much patient listening in order to discern that republic among the faint, shy, ironical or harshly intransigent indications. The whole poem contains a great deal of reference, and relates all of its points to the landscapes in which it is progressively located. It was one of the poems in which I worked out many of my beliefs about Australian civilisation and the opposition between our derivative 'high' culture and our more distinctive 'vernacular' cultures. I am more often a meditative than a lyrical poet, and the organising principle of this, like many others, of my poems was the meditation. It is a whole meditation with colloquy and all.

An even more intensely meditative poem which contains hardly any specific references to Aboriginal culture, traditional or modern, but which is nonetheless relevant here is 'The Returnees', composed in 1975. It is relevant because, as part of its working, it attempts to come to terms with the common ground of human experience on this continent, the ground of perception and influence from which Aboriginal and white reactions to the country necessarily spring. The discovery of this common ground is done in terms of **sound**, the sort of thing filmmakers call 'wild sound', which is to say that low, aggregate susurrus which emanates from living landscape and which has to be put on the sound track of any outdoor film; if it were not there the audience would probably not be able to put their finger on what was wrong, but its absence would probably unsettle them. Down beneath consciousness, we know that nature is never wholly silent, and we are apt to be awed when it approaches silence, but disturbed when total silence supervenes. The poem catches:

a lifelong sound

on everything, that low fly-humming  
melismatic untedious endless  
note that a drone-pipe-plus-chants or

(shielding our eyes, rocking the river)

a ballad — some ballads — catch, the one  
some paintings and many yarners summon,  
the ground-note here of unsnubbing art



If I had to find epithets for this partly synaesthetic signature-note of the Australian countryside, I would probably fumble with phrases like 'beautiful monotony' or 'belonging subtlety' or some such. I hear it very clearly in Aboriginal music and chant, a humming intricately enwoven with rhythmic liquid notes of the clap-sticks and with undulating high-pitched, rather nasalised notes that rise and fade, echoing bird-cries and the sharps and flats of midsummer blowflies. At least, this is how it has come to me, hearing it on recordings and also at odd times in Central Australia and the North West. That peculiar pitch of Aboriginal men's singing, somewhere between a man's voice and a woman's, has long fascinated me. It is the high-pitched light voice of the figure ancient alchemists called the Hermaphrodite, something we might expect in a religion involving the priesthood of all (male) believers. This is of a piece with the strange custom of sub-incision among the desert tribes, by which initiates are given a sort of mock vagina while remaining male. We achieve the same image of the hermaphrodite by making priests remain celibate, and having them celebrate the sacred mysteries in an ambiguous quasi-feminine garb. It is a very deep and necessary thing: a priest, to perform his rites properly, must stand in a difficult balance between the sexes, resolving the primal tension at the heart of all our dualities.

It is probably a decade since I first read R.M. Berndt's translation of the great Wonguri-Mandjikai Song Cycle of the Moon Bone. It stunned me when I first read it, and it may well be the greatest poem ever composed in Australia. Of course, it isn't **one** poem, but a cycle of traditional couplets rendered into long lines by Professor Berndt, celebrating the life of the people and animals around Arnhem Bay in North Eastern Arnhem Land just before the start of the monsoon season:

In here towards the shade, in this Place, in the shadow of the paperbarks.  
Sitting there in rows, those Wonguri-Mandjikai people, paperbarks along  
like a cloud.

Living on cycad-nut bread, sitting there with white-stained fingers,

Sitting there resting, those people of the Sandfly clan . . .

Sitting there like mist, at that place of the Dugong, and of the Dugong's

Entrails . . .

Sitting resting there in the place of the Dugong . . .

In that place of the Moonlight Clay Pans, and at the place of the Dugong . . .

After the prescriptive despairs and alienations of Western literature, which are so often merely matters of class identification, it is good to immerse oneself in this great peaceful poem, with its total acceptance of an intimately known and coherent world. Some may find its Edenic calm almost frightening, for it calls so much human effort and history into question, and presents an idyll wholly opposed to and perhaps impossible in a crowded technological civilisation. Again, it expresses that total harmony and communication of all living creatures which we remember from fairy tales, but which we resist in adulthood because it carries the dangerous nostalgia of Paradise:



At that place of the Dugong, of the Tree-Limbs-Rubbing-Together, and of the  
Evening Star  
Where the lily-root claypan is . . .  
Where the cockatoos play, at that place of the Dugong . . .  
Flapping their wings they flew down, crying, 'We saw the people!'  
There they are always living, those clans of the white cockatoo . . .  
And there is the Shag woman, and there her clan:  
Birds, trampling the lily foliage, eating the soft round roots!

Judith Rodriguez puts the matter well, in a recent book review in **Contempera** (no.2/4,1977):

Is it a sickness of sophistication to long for that 'Always there' which occurs through the . . . ritual cycles, to find in that universalising imagery of climactic annual ritual chant something that makes our own sacramental feast of blood and flesh and our own uses of sex seem secondhand, tawdry and difficult to live by? Certainly in the Aboriginal rituals there is an assurance inaccessible to us; and our civilisation has made it inaccessible to the very people who told it to Ronald Berndt at Yirrkala in 1947.

And yet I would venture to disagree, not only about our own sacramental feast (and I have an abhorrence anyway for our modern uses of sex), but also about the alleged inaccessibility of that assurance. It is perhaps an inaccessibility that is most marked for intellectuals. I know some other white Australians who possess this assurance almost in its purity, in terms that are their own. And it is not a sickness to long for that 'Always there', but a real health of the spirit; it is sickness to reject it. One of the triumphs of Berndt's translation is that it renders the Aboriginal poetry into a language deeply in tune with the best Australian vernacular speech, and reveals affinities. The tone, as well as the images, is profoundly familiar. It has perhaps been the tragedy, the sickness, of poetry here that it has so rarely caught precisely that tone, and that our audiences have been trained not to expect it from us.

Around Christmas 1975, I conceived the idea of writing a cycle of poems in the style and metre of Berndt's translation of the Moon Bone Cycle. As I thought about it, I realised it would be necessary to incorporate in it elements from all three main Australian cultures, Aboriginal, rural and urban. But I would arrange them in their order of distinctiveness, with the senior culture setting the tone and controlling the movement of the poem. What I was after was an enactment of a longed-for fusion of all three cultures, a fusion which, as yet perhaps, can only exist in art, or in blessed moments when power and ideology are absent. The poem would necessarily celebrate my own spirit country, the one region I know well enough to dare comparison with the Arnhem Landers. In the final stanza of a poem called 'The Gallery', I had made what was in effect a trial flight, teaching myself to handle the rhythm and spirit of the Moon Bone cycle. Fairly soon, I lighted on a device by which the projected poem could be launched and ordered: this was the annual exodus of many urban Australians to the country and the seaside resorts, people, many of them only a generation or two away from the farms, or even less, going back to their ancestral places in a kind of unacknowledged spiritual walkabout, looking for their



country in order to draw sustenance from it. Or newcomers looking for the real Australia. Or people going to seek unadmitted communion with the sea, with the bush and the mountains, recovering, in ways which might look tawdry to the moralising sophisticated eye, some fragments of ancient festivity and adventure.

The poem took about six weeks to write, in two bursts approximately a month apart; the hiatus came, I remember, between sections six and seven. It may be relevant to examine each of the sections in turn — there are thirteen of these, as in the Moon Bone Cycle. Section 1 starts by evoking the southern limits of the region and the different styles, interests and ways of speech of small-town people and country people, then moves into a description of the preparations being made for the return of those who have gone away to live in the cities and finally enumerates some of the legendary, and in one case suggestively notorious, associations of their ancestral region. In Section 2, the Pacific Highway in peak holiday time is described ironically in terms of a great fiery but all-giving Rainbow Snake writhing over the country and throwing out deadly little offshoots of excitement into the districts up back roads. Section 3 begins the process of rediscovery of intimacy with landscape and familiar creatures, though there is some residual violence in it. Names of creatures begin to be capitalised, in a way recalling the capitalised substantives in the first section; a sort of affectionate, quasi-totemic empathy is suggested by this, a kind of casual sacredness in well-known things. The process of recovery continues in Section 4, with a growing renewal of powers of observation in the returnees. Section 5 broaches the subject of ancestors. This is a purely white matter; Aboriginal religion with its reincarnationist schema and its taboo on mentioning the dead is quite at variance with white reverence for particular, successive ancestors. In the poem, though, the particular pioneer ancestors are as it were given the aura of the great ancestral sires of the Central Australian sacred sites, and the timelessness of these founding ancestors is stressed as against their successivity, so there is convergence. Premature judgement of them in modern terms they never heard of is rebuked — one may not preach without a sacrifice — but jokes are permitted, because of the affectionate intimacy they evince. Communion with the dead, of a slyly laconic sort, is established through recalling their **words** and the values behind them through the image of their great animal, the horse. Section 6 celebrates genuine popular pleasures of which the conservation-minded might disapprove, but the vigour, the beauty and the meaning of those sports is discerned because judgement is put aside in favour of **looking**, without prejudices. Non-judgemental looking, if you like. In Section 7, there is an unobtrusive mingling of memory and perception which makes it possible in the end to discern a pattern of human work and settlement going beyond the ambit of one person's sight. Section 8 is almost pure celebration, though it is bound together by the image of blood exacted from all the inhabitants of the forest by one creature's need of it. Blood is a condition of reproduction for mosquitoes, and by inference for other creatures as well. In Section 9, a



human type perhaps especially prominent in the New World in recent times, though it isn't confined to the New World, is examined and presented through its characteristic words, the **tjúrunga rétnja** of its values, and the section ends in a sardonic antinomy, with the working men watching boys, new recruits to their non-privileged world, 'who think hard work a test, and boys who think it is not a test'. You can't win in that game, except through real maturity and personal independence. Section 10 is again almost unalloyed celebration, of places and habits of the ibis, with peripheral human figures tentatively rediscovering 'things about themselves, and about the ibis'. Section 11 continues the celebration of places, and describes the almost accidental acquisition of memory and significance by children; the children are learning ancestral things (and communing with them through the act of eating the fruit) which will inform their sense of the world and of their country, and make it just a bit harder for them to become thoroughly alienated or effectively colonial. You might say they are absorbing the accidents of nationality. The very long twelfth section evokes place and season and the great rhythms of the day and the weather. Its central insight is the one about abandoned things 'thronged with spirits'. We will come back to this in a moment. Section 13, of course, is the poem's finale, and links the evoked region with the heavens, what I call the Great Imagery of the stars. The region is **placed** in the universe, and the whole experience of the Holiday, the walkabout quest, is mapped and sealed for the people who now have to go back to their other life. The Southern Cross is evoked emblematically, at each end of the section, and is described in intimately colloquial terms echoing the loving intimacy of the Aboriginal treatment of the Evening Star in the Moon Bone cycle and the vernacular ease and tang of the most characteristic white Australian style of speech.

Apart from quality, my poem-cycle differs from its great model in two main ways. It is progressive, in a loose sort of way, while the Moon Bone Cycle is static and accretive, and it contains irony and social comment, though these are always presented in contexts which have the power to overcome or at least soften them. It would have been treason to the facts of modern Australian life if all conflict, all edginess, had been left out, and only a sugary picture of too-easy reconciliation allowed to remain. Again, there is a time element in my poem, because our white cultures **are** time-cultures, and because one of the great secular religions of Australia is worship of the past and of that which has been made harmless and poignant with the passage of time. Abandoned things, whether in folk museums or compendia of obsolete slang, are thronged with spirits for us. Sadly, it is perhaps a measure of the acculturation of the Aboriginals, a process in which black radicalism may be just another stage, that we now sentimentalise them in much the same way. For good and ill, one of the chief bearers of our new secular Shinto in recent years has been the conservationist movement. Great tributes have to be paid to that movement for, in particular, implanting the Aboriginal concept of the sacredness of the land and of one's native region in the minds of many Australians. This has come about largely as a by-product of the agitation for Aboriginal land



rights — and has begun provoking some white country people to start thinking about **their** land rights, rights to live in places which have formed and continue to nurture their spirit. Where this is merely an attempt to trump the Aborigines, it is to be deplored, but it does point to the inequity of, as it were, releasing one section of our population from the ordinary laws of economics while letting the rest continue to suffer the effects of these. We need to think about the applicability of the principle to all of our people.

In a lecture given to the English Association at Sydney University on 25th May 1973, David Malouf writes:

It is only through Caliban that we get this sense of the richness of the island, its tumbling fecundity. His capacity to name things, and by naming evoke them, is a different sort of magic from Prospero's but no less powerful and real. It might remind us of the extraordinary way our own Aborigines have possessed the land in their minds, through folkstories, taboos, song cycles, and made it part of the very fabric of their living as we never can;

My contention is that of course 'we' can, and some of us do possess the land imaginatively in very much the Aboriginal way. We have recently been awed by the discovery that the Aborigines have been here for thirty or forty thousand years, but I think too much is often made of this. Forty thousand years are not very different from a few hundred, if your culture has not, through genealogy, developed a sense of the progression of time and thus made history possible. Aboriginal 'history' is poetic, a matter of significant moments rather than of development.

In art, in my writing, my abiding interest is in integrations, in convergences. I want my poems to be more than just National Parks of sentimental preservation, useful as the National Parks are as holding operations in the modern age. What I am after is a spiritual change that would make them unnecessary. And I discern the best hope for it in convergence of the sort I've been talking about. In Australian civilisation, I would contend, convergence between black and white is a fact, a subtle process, hard to discern often, and hard to produce evidence for. Just now, too, it lacks the force of fashion to drive it; the fashion is all for divisiveness now. Yet the Jindyworobak poets were on the right track, in a way; their concept of **environmental value**, of the slow moulding of all people within a continent or region towards the natural human form which that continent or region demands, that is a real process. Once or twice, perhaps more often, I have been able to capture a sense of that process in verse. I started from the same liberal position as most white Australian writers, but I think I have got beyond that now. From the earliest days, with few real exceptions I can think of (Thomas Keneally is partly one; Xavier Herbert is another), white Australian writers have written about Aborigines as figures **other** than themselves, as objects almost, figures to be described with perhaps very great sympathy, but figures existing over against the writer and his world. Identification with them has been sporadic, fashionable only during a particular period, and has lately been attempted mainly at the level of



polemic, which can be exploitative, as well as pointlessly divisive. In particular, urban writing has tended to work over against almost **all** kinds of Australians who do not share a certain derivative 'educated' sensibility, and to use Aborigines as a stick to beat the Ockers with.

It is true that ease with Australian imagery has become much more noticeable in our poetry in the last few years. But it is not true to claim, as some do, that the whole question of acceptance of Australia by poets has been resolved and is now old hat. The attitudes, the orthodoxy, of alienation work too powerfully on us for that. It's what I was saying to Lionel Brockman in the Lake Country poem: you, as a primal embodiment of essential Australia, are right to reject people like me. The takeover smell, the gubba smell, is still strong on us, because modernist orthodoxy has changed art from being culture (which is bad enough) to being **a** culture, an enclave of borrowed despairs over against our fellow Australians. I am deprived of my natural audience by the stain of association; for now, and perhaps all my life, I have to live with that and try not to let it distort my work.

I'm out to break that gubba-ism, though. I am grateful beyond measure to the makers and interpreters of traditional Aboriginal poetry and song for many things, not least for showing me a deeply familiar world in which art is not estranged, but is a vital source of health for all the members of a community, and even goes magically beyond the human community, ensuring proper treatment of the natural world by its dominant member-species. Aboriginal art has given me a resort of reference and native strength, a truly Australian base to draw on against the constant importation of Western decays and idiocies and class-consciousness. If it has a weakness, it is in its too-rigid separation of the sexes, and in its secrecy. Of course the parallelisms, the convergences here are fascinating, especially as regards separation of the sexes. This separation seems to have been particularly rigid in Central Australia: the Northern Aranda circumcision story may refer to a historic moment in the past in which the ritual separation was begun, or accentuated. In my region, spiritual adventures, usually under the cloak of alcohol, were a male preserve, while women were expected to preserve a certain fairly narrow Christian (I really mean Puritan) respectability. Venturing was for men: women were supposed to embody stability. Among Aborigines in Eastern Australia, women have often found solace in conversion to Christianity, while men, deprived of the flights and intricacies of their religious preserve, have suffered a crippling inner collapse — and it is the same with white men deprived by fashion of their military and work-ethic themes and scorned for their decency and lack of education. In times of conquest, or repudiation, it is possible that while women suffer more, men lose more.

With responsible scholars like Berndt, Strehlow and some others, one may be sure one is not reproducing anything which should not be published. Strehlow, in particular, was entrusted with the Aranda sacred verses in order that he might preserve them against the day when the old culture



died out, at least in its old pure form. He still has large amounts of material which cannot be released until those who 'own' it are dead. The elders of many tribes have sought to make similar provision, knowing that assimilation and acculturation are facts. It was perhaps the achievement of the Jindyworobak poets that they were almost the first white artists to try to make assimilation a two-way street. Convergence is a better word for that, though; assimilation carries too deep a stain of conquest, of expecting the Aboriginals to make all the accommodations while white people make none. My affinity with Aboriginal art and thought is only partly elective, and goes on into convergences I have yet to explore. The ground of integration, of convergence, is apt to be rocky and ill-mapped; sooner or later, I will have to give some blood for dancing there. What I hope I may have done so far is to promote, and revive, the use of Aboriginal themes and imagery in Australian poetry; I only hope I have got my borrowings right, and done justice to our greatest autochthonous tradition. It may be proper for me to close by quoting from Strehlow again, daringly, though I see myself mainly as a precursor:

It is my belief that when the strong web of future Australian verse comes to be woven, probably some of its strands will be found to be poetic threads spun on the Stone Age hair-spindles of Central Australia.

(SOCA, p.729)