

**Allusive Rhetoric of Nationality:
Development of Australian Literature from 1890s to 1980s¹**

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On the whole, but with some interesting exceptions, literary criticism in Australia has tended to be essentialist in its assumptions about Australia, and about literature, treating both entities not as historical constructs, but as self-defining objects. Literary criticism of this kind is not generally very useful for our purposes, though of course the body of Australian criticism, historically considered, contains a great deal of information and insight that we would not want to be without. What are needed are ways of talking about Australian writing which are informed by an awareness of cultural construction as a primary process, even at the level of the individual text. The purpose of this paper is to provide some examples of developing appropriate styles of formal literary analysis.

There have been some promising possibilities opened up in the last few decades. Richard White's book *Inventing Australia* (1981), with its emphasis on the construction of successive images of Australia, provides a more useful starting-point than traditional criticism, but the generality of his observations on Australian culture does not translate directly or easily into ways of dealing with individual texts. One book that does engage with them is Graeme Turner's *National Fictions* (1986), in which the theoretical perspectives of structuralism and semiotics are brought to bear upon a range of Australian literary and film narratives. The same approach, somewhat trimmed of its theoretical trappings, is used in his study, with John Fiske and Bob Hodge, of some representative sites of Australian popular culture, *Myths of Oz* (1987).

The approach adopted in this chapter is a rhetorical approach, and it parallels the structuralist/semiotic approach of Turner and his collaborators in a number of ways: for example, it shares its major theoretical premise, concerning the constructedness of cultural meanings in general, and even some of its methods of applied textual analysis. It differs from it chiefly in its deliberate retention, even revival, of an older, more traditional technical vocabulary, and perhaps too in its greater emphasis on the persuasive functions of writing and other forms of cultural expression and communication.

The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton (1981) has argued that because of its inbuilt assumption that speech and writing are first and foremost persuasive activities, rhetorical criticism—originally the ancient study of oratory—provides an appropriate model for a politically aware mode of literary analysis, alert to the irreducible *politicality* of constructions such as “the nation,” “Australia” and “literature.” In its original form, rhetorical criticism aimed to show how a given text had used, combined, or modified conventional themes (*topoi*) and figures of speech (*tropes*) from a pre-existing inventory of such items. A contemporary rhetorical criticism might well adopt somewhat similar procedures, not using all the technical terms of the ancient rhetoricians of course, but recognising and taking account of the ways in which writers constantly and deliberately make use of pre-existing models and examples.

Part of what we shall be looking at in our discussions of Australian writing will be the development, within and across particular historical moments, of a “rhetoric of nationality,” where “rhetoric” refers both to strategies of persuasion and to an inventory of conventional tropes and *topoi*. A simple rhetorical method of analysis is illustrated by applying it to some literary texts chosen from a variety of forms and periods.

National Culture in the 1890s

1890s formed a crucial period in Australia’s history, and it may be useful to look at some examples from that period, partly in order to demonstrate the compatibility of the proposed rhetorical approach to individual texts with the institutional approach to writing adopted there. There is another reason for doing so as well. This is that although John Docker (1984) has argued cogently against any over-unified conception of the 1890s—whether it be one of celebratory nationalism or gloomy nostalgia (see 110-140)—there can be no doubt that nationality, in association with a variety of political interests and in various cultural forms, was a central preoccupation of the period. An interest in the national theme was by no means restricted to the radical republicans associated with the *Bulletin* (1880-Present) and *The Worker* (1890-1974) newspapers; it was equally characteristic of more moderate political groupings (Blackton 1961), for whom nationality was more a matter of wattle, waratahs and lyre-bird motifs in cast-iron lace than of mateship, campfires and booze

(White, 1981: 73-75). Moreover, it had been as actively pursued in other arts as it had in literature, especially in landscape painting—most notably the work of the Heidelberg school from the early 1880s—and also, more obscurely, in the musical compositions of Isaac Nathan and Henry Tate (White, 1981: 73; Covell, 1967: 68-69, 103-107).

How might a rhetorical approach to the writing of the 1890s work, and what might it contribute to our understanding of the period? We shall postpone the second part of the question until we have completed a couple of worked examples of rhetorical analysis to demonstrate an answer to the first.

What literary and other cultural texts of the period often seem to do is to epitomize Australia using certain carefully selected and highly condensed icons of Australianness and in doing so to suggest, demonstrate or assert the largely inexpressible virtue of the icon, and hence (by a metonymy which is often implicit) of “Australia.”

A useful example is a poem called “The Austral ‘Light!’ ” (1897) by Harry Morant (b. 1864 – d. 1902)—better known as “The Breaker.” It is reprinted in Leon Cantrell’s anthology *Writing of the 1890s* (1977) but, as we shall be saying quite a lot about it, it will be convenient to quote it in full:

We were standing by the fireside at the pub one wintry night
Drinking grog and “pitching fairies” while the lengthening hours took
flight,
And a stranger there was present, one who seemed quite city-bred—
There was little showed about him to denote him “mulga-fed.”

For he wore a four-inch collar, tucked-up pants, and boots of tan—
You might take him for a new-chum, or a Sydney city man—
But in spite of cuff or collar, Lord! he gave himself away
When he cut and rubbed a pipeful and had filled his coloured clay:

For he never asked for matches—although in that boozing band
There was more than one man standing with a matchbox in his hand;
And I knew him for a bushman ’spite his tailor-made attire
As I saw him stoop and fossick for a fire-stick from the fire.

And that mode of weed-ignition to my memory brought back
Long nights when nags were hobbled on a far North-western track;
Recalled campfires in the timber, when the stars shone big and bright,
And we learned the matchless virtues of a glowing gidgee light.

And I thought of piney sand-ridges—and somehow I could swear
That this tailor-made young johnny had at one time been “out there.”
And as he blew the white ash from the tapering, glowing coal,
Faith! my heart went out towards him for a kindred country soul. (“The
Austral ‘Light!’ ” [Cantrell](#), 142)

There are a number of things to notice about this rather engaging piece of nostalgia. The first is that the nostalgia itself is constructed, not simply evoked. The poem might be seen as an example of “illocutionary” utterance, a term used in “speech-act theory” to denote statements (like “I now pronounce you husband and wife”) which *do* what they say; in somewhat similar fashion, this poem both describes the arousal of the speaker’s nostalgia for the bush—by means of the bushman’s “mode of weed-ignition”—and offers to arouse the reader’s nostalgia by the same means.

Whether or not Morant expected the bulk of his original readership to know what a “gidgee light” was, the poem implies a collective male reader whose own bush culture enables him, like the speaker, to recognize a whole ethos in an isolated action which is supposed to signify nothing to the excluded majority, just as the stranger’s “light” conveys nothing to the rest of the “boozing band” in the pub. Their slick, “city-bred” slang—“pitching fairie,” “mulga-fed” and “tailor-made young johnny”—contrasts with the laconic punning of “matchless virtues” and the gentle self-mockery of “mode of weed-ignition.” The crucial paradox, though, is that in suggesting qualitative differences between town and country, the poem also purports to reveal a close relationship between them. The stranger, after all, is to all appearances a townsman himself, apparently at his ease among the drinkers; and the speaker, too, is at home in that company, though he is able to detect the bush ethos and identify with it .

The poem, that is, constructs a relationship between the bush and the town which is only superficially one of polar opposition (Williams, 1973: 289-298). At another level, the relationship is one of inward essence (the spirit or “soul” of the outback) to outward existence (the “body” of everyday life), as it might be found anywhere between Sydney and the bush. And just as the speaker discovers the bushman, well but not perfectly disguised in his city “clobber,” so the implied reader of this poem (and of many others like it) discovers the bush in a secret part of his own city-bred consciousness, and values it as the abiding reality of Australian society.

The rhetoric by which Morant’s poem achieves these effects of fantasised identification is not, of course, something achieved by this poem alone. It can function as it does partly because other cultural texts were working in much the same way at about the same time. We need only think of Paterson’s office-bound lawyer with his jealously guarded “visions of Clancy” for a very similar instance ([Lee, 75](#)). Similarly, the whole carefully staged verse “debate” in the *Bulletin* in the 1890s between (among others) A. B “Banjo” Paterson (b. 1864 – d. 1941) and Henry Lawson (b. 1867 – d. 1922) (see [Lee, 355-366](#)) about the predominance of pleasure or suffering in the bush, repeats the pattern in a collective mode: the vehement disagreements about the quality of bush life, however sincerely felt on both sides, nonetheless function as a sort of cover for the deeper agreed truth about the bush, namely the quality of moral and spiritual character it breeds.

Read as an exercise in the “rhetoric of epitome,” Paterson’s “Clancy of the Overflow” (1889) is a somewhat subtler piece of writing than Morant’s poem. The text actively makes Clancy into an epitome, not by reporting what he did or does, but by describing and framing him in a certain way. The first two stanzas will give some indication of the processes at work:

I had written him a letter which I had, for want of better
Knowledge, sent to where I knew him down the Lachlan, years ago,
He was shearing when I knew him, so I sent the letter to him,
Just “on spec,” addressed as follows, “Clancy, of the Overflow.”

And an answer came directed in a writing unexpected,
(And I think the same was written with a thumb-nail dipped in tar)
'Twas his shearing mate who wrote it, and *verbatim* I will quote it:

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“Clancy’s gone to Queensland droving, and we don’t know where he are.” (“Clancy of the Overflow” [Lee, 75](#))

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Clancy’s essential characteristic, from the poet’s point of view, is his elusiveness, not only geographically but also epistemologically, that is, as an object of knowledge. At any given time his precise whereabouts are unknown, his exact occupation is uncertain. He exists for the poet (whose own phrases—“on spec” and “verbatim”—categorize him immediately as the city lawyer he is) in an ideal outback of nostalgic memory. The “thumbnail dipped in tar” and the grammatical error (“where he are” is hardly bush slang) are both mildly comic *naivetés* rather than the stuff of legend; they are the incongruities that result from confusing everyday life with the ideal realm of myth and epitome. And their rhetorical function, arguably, is to act as a kind of decoy for the “real-life” cynicism that would otherwise erode the credibility of the bush ideal Clancy embodies, and to enforce at least a temporary assent to its implicit claim to the representation of ultimate moral and social values.

As in “The Austral ‘Light!’ ” the idea of the bush is validated dialectically, by being presented as the synthesis of an opposition between the mixed realities of the bush and the city. In both poems, furthermore, the ideal is first “objectified”—given a particular material representation in the external world—then “subjectified”—made an integral part of the speaker’s mental and imaginative equipment; and in this way even more thoroughly democratised as a resource potentially available to all, even while the poems affirm, on another level, its special and exclusive nature.

In both these examples, then, we can point to comparable rhetorical strategies for securing the value of an emergent cultural icon of Australia—that of the bushman. This is in itself an epitome of the nation, but the two poems take the epitomising impulse a stage further, invoking ever more condensed synecdoches—the mode of weed-ignition, and the digital mode of bush writing—though, as suggested in the commentaries, the latter is more obliquely related to the central epitome of the bushman than the former, where the relation is quite direct, both rhetorically and logically. In general terms, however, the epitome is used in a strongly *celebratory* fashion in both poems, and of course in many others like them. Another set of examples will suggest somewhat different, more analytical functions for some of these same national epitomes.

In one of Lawson's best-known short stories, "The Union Buries its Dead" (1893), the Australian bush icons abound, but in a heavily ironic context:

I left out the wattle—because it wasn't there. I also neglected to mention the heart-broken old mate with his grizzled head bowed and great pearly drops streaming down his rugged cheeks. He was absent—he was probably "Out Back." For similar reasons I omitted reference to the "suspicious" moisture in the eyes of a bearded bush ruffian named Bill. Bill failed to turn up, and the only moisture was that which was induced by the heat. I left out the "sad Australian sunset" because the sun was not going down at the time. The burial took place exactly at mid-day. ([Lee, 316](#))

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Critical debate will no doubt continue as to the exact force and direction of Lawson's irony in this and similar stories, some of the debate revolving around the degree to which the narrator himself is taken to be an implicit target of irony. An awareness of contemporaneous Australian epitomes might suggest, for example, that the narrator's posture of anti-sentimental detachment in the passage just quoted (like the intemperate anti-clericalism he displays in the paragraph that precedes it) is itself a version of a then recognised national characteristic, in this case taciturnity and understatement. The story might even be taken, following Brian Matthews's (1976) argument on the "radical uncertainty" in Lawson's fiction, as an exploration of the writer's problem of perceiving the limits of a given cultural frame, and being unable to speak outside it.

A different, perhaps less reflexive instance of the critical use of national epitomes is Barbara Baynton's (b. 1857 – d. 1929) story "Squeaker's Mate," first published in her collection *Bush Studies* (1902). Here the epitome in question (very literally "in question") is the one announced in the title, the "mate." The story describes the domestic aftermath of an accident in which a working woman, Mary, is crippled by a falling tree and loses her hold over her good-far-nothing sexual partner Squeaker, who takes advantage of her bedridden and paralysed state to recruit a younger partner or "mate," whom he flaunts in the presence of the older woman. The story ends with the new mate barely escaping with her life, the silent fury of the old one, and with Squeaker being attacked (possibly killed) by the old mate's loyal dog. The term "mate" has a key function in the story. On the one hand it points outside the

text to the masculine code of mateship, one of the most popular epitomes of the national character; on the other it shifts around inside the text, providing what amounts to an implicit ethical commentary on the quality of human relationships so designated in the story, and in particular on the relative quality of people's relations with one another as compared with animals. The code of mateship, externally considered, is not directly or unambiguously attacked, but it is used as the iconic linchpin for a trenchant analysis of sexual and social relationships in the bush.

It is important to stress the range of social meanings being articulated around these national epitomes in the writing of the 1890s. It is equally important, though, to notice the relatively uniform rhetoric within which these differences are made evident. It might even be argued that in accommodating a diversity of meanings that rhetoric generates and regulates the diversity of meanings by focusing social and political debates on one or another of the currently popular national icons—mateship, the bush, unionism, laconic humour, language, realism—and weaving these into cultural discourses of very different tendencies.

Literature in the 1890s was conditioned by specific social and cultural factors, and there is no reason to doubt that the epitomising rhetoric worked then in ways that were distinctive to the period. It is true nonetheless not only that certain particular icons of Australianness survived in literature and elsewhere long after the 1890s, but also that, more generally, an epitomizing rhetoric has continued to inform a great deal of Australian writing ever since. The main interest is not so much with the validity of this as a general proposition as with the analytical purchase it provides on a range of literary texts. However, it might be wise to mention some general qualifications to this thesis.

There is no reason to suppose either that the rhetoric of epitomes originated in the 1890s or that it was distinctive to Australian culture. Similar patterns may have developed in comparable national cultures. The concern is emphatically not with locating distinctive features or patterns in Australian culture but with examining how the notion of national distinctiveness has been deployed within it. Nonetheless certain features of the 1890s context would have been especially conducive to an intensification of a rhetoric of just that epitomising kind: for example, the popularity of the short-story form in this period, especially in the *Bulletin*, and the consequent drive towards thematic condensation and the kinds of literary device that facilitated it.

In the decorative and plastic arts the vogue for what Richard White calls “nativist fetishes”—furniture and fittings designed as wattle, lyre-birds and the like—is clearly congruent with a literary interest in national epitomes. The nativist vogue itself can probably be given a political dimension in that the very absence of a distinct political identity or of a revolutionary history created a patriotic focus on objects rather than events or broad principles as the national symbols readiest to hand. It may even be appropriate to invoke the residue of the convict culture to account for writers’ and artists’ interest in secret codes and barely accessible signs of community.

This discussion seems to lead towards the very old-fashioned conclusion that the writing of the 1890s formed a crucial foundation for the literary themes and practices of subsequent generations of writers; and at least as far as the theme of nationality in our literature is concerned, the conclusion may well be a sound one. It remains to be seen, though, how useful an approach by way of national epitomes will be for the literature of later periods.

Fiction and Nationality: The 1930s and 1940s

In many novels of the 1930s and 1940s single icons of Australianness perform key functions in the narrative, often acting as points of thematic intersection or articulation, and also at times as points of ideological disturbance or contradiction. In Miles Franklin’s (b. 1879 – d. 1954) prizewinning novel *All that Swagger* (1936), the image of “swagger” functions in both these ways. The novel is a pioneering chronicle, following the fortunes of the Irish Delacy family through four generations of rural life in the Monaro district of New South Wales. Franklin draws frequent analogies between the family’s history and the nation’s, and it is clear that the novel’s “ideological project” includes an extended demonstration of the virtues of that pioneering society, virtues that needed to be revived in the period of cultural stagnation and political inertia in which she was writing (Modjeska 178-179). “Swagger” is used with significant frequency throughout the novel, primarily to denote the quality of masculine social and sexual irresponsibility which a mature nation can no longer afford to tolerate. As Drusilla Modjeska (1981) puts it, “while the men swagger, it is the women who are the true progenitors of the legendary Australia and who lay the foundations, holding the pioneering society together” (178).

But the social connotations of the term are more diverse and contradictory than her remark suggests.

The swagger, for example, also signifies the jaunty insolence of the rebellious Irish immigrants in their new relation to the English ruling class; it stands for the liberating process by which (thanks largely to horse-riding!) European “bumpkins” could attain to the habits of the gentry, and the social rigidities of the Old World be rendered more flexible (*All that Swagger* 99). And while it certainly typifies Robert, the carefree seducer of the second generation, and his wild companions (see *All that Swagger* 92, 102, 135, 147), it also expresses the aristocratic nonchalance of Mrs. McHugh (*All that Swagger* 134) and the fighting spirit of Della Delacy (*All that Swagger* 238). The upper-class swagger of the English gentleman is even placed on the same historical continuum as the spirit of Anzac:

The Australian, whether clerk or yokel, had taken the English county gentleman as his pattern and lifted his wife out of the furrow for ever: and though using beasts in some places was an incredible feat, it was accomplished with the swagger brewed by such feats and grew into the psychology of a people to blossom later in daring exploits in South Africa or on Gallipoli. (*All that Swagger* 240)

What emerges from this brief analysis is, on the one hand, the enormous task of rhetorical synthesis that this simple epitome is being called upon to perform and, on the other, the multiple ideological contradictions and uncertainties it exposes as it attempts to do so.

A much later example, neatly comparable with Franklin’s hefty novel, is the poem “The Quality of Sprawl” (1983) by the contemporary poet Les Murray (b. 1938). Like Franklin, he seeks to epitomize Australian nationality in the image of a (male) physical posture (McDougall 1987). There are many other examples of Australian literary texts in which particular physical gestures or mannerisms are invested with the same kinds of national meanings as Franklin’s swagger or Murray’s sprawl. Certainly there will be no difficulty in thinking of examples from Australian film and television, where the visual nature of the media puts a premium on signifiers of this kind. A moment’s reflection will suggest how crucial the recognisably Australian gesture is to the popular appeal and commercial success, both here and overseas, of actors such as Paul Hogan and Bryan Brown.

One of the best-known instances of this in the literary field is the figure of the “cultural cringe.” When the critic Arthur Phillips (1950) first coined this phrase in an essay, he clearly had a definite posture in mind that of an obsequious member of the Anglophile middle class physically cringing in willing self-abasement before some personification of assumed British cultural superiority. The “postural” image is only the starting point for a concise history of habits of reading and writing, in the course of which Phillips draws a distinction between the “cringe direct” and the “cringe inverted.” This blurs the original figure considerably, but the image of the cringe remains very much at the centre of Phillips’ analysis and probably accounts for much of its rhetorical force and lasting influence. Like the notion of the “tall poppy syndrome,” and like Franklin’s “swagger,” it serves as a national epitome whose function seems to be not so much to unify national consciousness as to provoke or incite debate and discussion around the question of national identity.

But the figure of the cringe, striking innovation though it was, did not spring fully-formed from Phillips’ brain in 1950. It has its own history, and not only as the always-implicit antithesis to the proudly upright stance of the bushmen and diggers of nationalist iconography, both republican and imperial (White, 1981: 63-84). It was also, arguably, a variation on the figure of the cringing convict, which some writers in the 1920s and 1930s regarded as an important key to understanding the so-called “Australian psyche.” Robert Hughes (b. 1938) has expressed a similar view in his narrative of Australia’s convict past, *The Fatal Shore* (1987).

Novels and stories about the convict period have been a constant presence in Australian writing, from the convict narratives of the early years of the colony, through the classic mid-nineteenth-century epics of Marcus Clarke (b. 1846 – d. 1881) and James Tucker (b. 1808 – d. 1888), the short stories of “Price Warung” (b. 1855 – d. 1911) in the 1890s, the historical novels of Brian Penton (b. 1904 – d. 1951) and Eleanor Dark (b. 1901 – d. 1985) in the 1930s, to the recent fiction of Thomas Keneally (b. 1935) and Jessica Anderson (b. 1916). The idea of the convict, however, has carried very different social and political meanings at different times. In the 1890s, for instance, Price Warung’s tales of life under a brutally repressive system emphasised the inhumanity of the system itself, and were related to political struggles against what was seen, especially by the more anti-imperialist groups, as a system of colonial domination that was still oppressive to the true Australian spirit. In Brian

Penton's novel *Landtakers* (1934), by contrast, the psychology of the convict is a central concern. Through the characters Joe Gurse and Emma Surface, the "convict mentality" emerges as an epitome of the contradictory structure of Australian radical consciousness, its smouldering resentment of authority and hierarchy continually undermined by a broken-spirited inability to act against them.

Hardly surprisingly, this diagnosis of Australia's problems in the 1930s did not meet with unanimous agreement, and Penton (a popular Sydney columnist at the time) was attacked by cultural nationalists such as P. R. Stephensen (b. 1901 – d. 1965), Miles Franklin and Xavier Herbert (b. 1901 – d. 1984), who saw "convict literature" generally, and Penton's novel in particular, as being outside any true Australian literary tradition, and as accepting and perpetuating an essentially English attitude to Australia as a dumping-ground for its social refuse (Barnes 232-236). There were also other positions taken on "convictism" and national identity during this same period. In 1938, for example, the poet Rex Ingamells (b. 1913 – d. 1955), best known for his leadership of the Jindyworobaks, a group of poets who devoted their energies to developing a genuinely "native" Australian culture, wrote a manifesto for the group in which he argued (*pace* Stephensen, whom Ingamells greatly admired) that the convict tradition should be embraced, together with Aboriginal folklore and mythology, as a valuable part of Australia's cultural heritage. Both sources contained a record of that directly experienced contact between the individual and the physical environment that stood at the heart of the Jindyworobaks' cultural enterprise (Barnes 260-262).

Since the previous decade the figure of the "old lag" had functioned in another way as well, as a symbol of resistance to Establishment respectability. During the 1920s in particular, it became fashionable for bohemian artists and journalists in Sydney and Melbourne to boast of the "convict stain" in their ancestry (Nelson 498-499). In short, the image of the convict was functioning in very complex, even contradictory ways in Australian culture at this time: it became a focus, a point of intersection and intensification, for current debates about, for example, the British colonial connection (past and present), people's relationship to the land, Australia's much-discussed national character and the future of nationalist politics in Australia. In a novel like Penton's *Landtakers*, these various issues are articulated (not merely expressed, but linked together) by an image of the convict as an Australian epitome.

This image performs a crucial narrative function within the novel itself: the “convict mentality” emerges, gradually but inexorably, as the buried truth about colonial Australian society in general, its free settlers, politicians and bureaucrats as well as the real emancipists and escapees in the community.

Equally important, though, are the implications and effects—politically and culturally—which radiate out from the rhetorical claim this novel, and a few others like it, seemed to be making: the epitomizing claim that the figure of the convict is Australia; or as the convict Joe Gursej puts it to Derek Cabell, ‘It’s only convicts in chains could make a new nation ... It’s only them who want one.’ (*Landtakers* p. 54). Stephensen, we saw, took up the claim in one way, Ingamells in another; for the culture generally it continued for some years to stand as a claim against which similar or rival syntheses and epitomes of the nation could define and test themselves.

All through the fiction of the 1930s and 1940s the search for national epitomes was pursued vigorously, in ways which are revealing both about the fiction itself and about the culture that was producing it. It has been generally agreed that the traumatic historical sequence of Depression and war engendered a revival of the radical nationalism of the 1890s, as an actively utopian response to the crisis of national self-confidence (see White, 1981: 144-154). A valuable complement to this utopian emphasis is provided by Ian Reid’s 1979 study of Australian and New Zealand fiction in the Great Depression, which stresses rather the analytical work done on the social and economic problems of the Depression in the fiction of Katharine Susannah Prichard (b. 1883 – d. 1969), Christina Stead (b. 1902 – d. 1983), [Frank Dalby Davison](#) (b. 1893 – d. 1970), Vance Palmer (b. 1885 – d. 1957) and other Australian writers, and in the work of Frank Sargeson (b. 1903 – d. 1982) and others in New Zealand. An initial focus on the use of epitomes in these writings (as well as providing a practically useful way in to the texts) has the advantage of bringing these two perspectives on the crisis together: epitomes in literature tend to be both utopian and analytical—perhaps because in the very act of epitomizing Australia in some traditional image the writer necessarily becomes aware of the ways in which the image no longer quite fits the facts. In the reflective context of the literary text the epitome’s very explicitness and singularity of image raise doubts about its value as an epitome.

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The familiar figure of the bushman appears in numerous poems, stories and short literary forms published in *Bulletin*, *Smith's Weekly* and other magazines and newspapers during this period. So too mateship, that old shibboleth which even in the 1890s, in stories such as "The Union Buries Its Dead" and "Squeaker's Mate," had been used to focus serious doubts and questions about contemporary national values, re-emerges in the 1930s and later as a key term in an ongoing critique of gender relations in Australian society. In Hergenhan's anthology, *The Australian Short Story* (1988), stories written thirty years apart, Gavin Casey's (b. 1907 – d. 1964) classic "Short-Shift Saturday" (1937) and Thelma Forshaw's (b. 1923 – d. 1995) "The Mateship Syndrome" (1967), both adopt the same epitome—mateship—from the national inventory, and use it to articulate different areas of social concern with the continuing, systematic oppression of working-class women in Australia. Casey's story, set in a small mining town, uses mateship to make precise and intricate connections between the slowly disintegrative effects of exploited labour on marital relations, and on male relations in and off the workplace. Interestingly, the mateship topos also allows a relieving glance at the parallel development of closer and more durable relations between married women: as individuals usually change rather than die under the pressure of oppressive working conditions and routines, so too their relationships change. New, unfamiliar and, from a patriarchal viewpoint, somewhat threatening forms of human intimacy begin to emerge.

Forshaw's story uses the mateship epitome in a similar fashion, as a way of articulating a range of social issues as themes: the male culture of booze and violence, men's emotional exploitation of women, male fear and contempt for "intellectual" women, and the blocks to effective ambition-formation in the Australian workforce, both male and female. Most of these issues are fairly specific preoccupations of the late 1950s and early 1960s; they are central, for example, in the work of Elizabeth Harrower (b. 1928), especially her novel, *The Watch Tower* (1966), just as the uneasy apprehension about imminent transformations in the moral order detectable in Casey's story is very much a preoccupation of the 1930s (see, for example, the novels of Brian Penton, the early Christina Stead, and the stories of Vance Palmer). As time passes national agendas change, but the inventory of types, topoi, and epitomes which Australian writers have turned to as ways of addressing and interrelating the issues

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that arise on successive national agendas has not changed at anything like the same rate.

Other epitomes also work to focus, rather than evade, contentious issues in Australian life. Linguistic epitomes, for example, figure prominently in the work of many writers in this and other periods.

The fiction of Dal Stivens (b. 1911 – d. 1997), especially his early short stories and his first novel *Jimmy Brockett* (1951) show how Australian language idioms (including the Great Australian Adjective) can be actively complicit with that blurring of ethical boundaries which many other writers of the period also feared as the worst consequence of Depression and war (Stivens 1969). Stivens's work provides a particularly clear instance of the tendency for "serious writers" to use traditional national epitomes as instruments with which to question rather than merely affirm, received national values.

In the work of several other novelists of the same period, however, national icons function similarly. Eleanor Dark and Marjorie Barnard (b. 1897 – d. 1987) both use the well-established image of "sunshine" in the same problematising way, and in their immensely popular *Come in Spinner* (1951), Dymphna Cusack (b. 1902 – d. 1981) and Florence James (b. 1902 – d. 1993) make gambling, the national pastime, into a complex emblem of Australia's historical experience and post-war prospects. The novels of Frank Hardy (b. 1917 – d. 1994) foreground the same "national obsession" (Williams 1987); so, for that matter, does Peter Carey's (b. 1943) prize-winning novel *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). The national inventory, it might be suggested, has remained remarkably unaffected by the Bicentennial.

Realism and Australian Literature: Patrick White

We have spoken thus far about various *images* and *practices* as epitomes of the nation; and because epitomes tend, almost by definition, to be simple and concrete things rather than complex abstractions, it is hardly surprising that the historical examples that come most readily to mind are of the former type. Mateship, by no means a simple notion, is perhaps the obvious exception here, but there is at least one other instance of an abstract and complex concept which has figured, no doubt within narrower, more intellectual contexts, as an Australian epitome in much the same way as those already discussed. This is the concept of "realism."

Like so many of the epitomizing ideas and images in Australian culture, this one too has its origins in the 1880s and 1890s, in the reading habits and writing practices associated with the *Bulletin*. Australian realism in this period was clearly a crucial instance of nation-formation at the level of systematic literary practices; and yet, as with that other complex epitome, mateship, Australian realism seems to have been always ~~already~~ in dispute. If, as Jarvis (1983) contends, this writing shows a significant sharing of fictional subjects and methods, there is nonetheless ample evidence of equally significant disagreements, even among the *Bulletin* writers themselves, as to general principles and rationales for a national realism.

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The fierce controversy over the work of Zola is an early example of the tendency for literary realism, as an idea, to provoke cultural and political debate (Jarvis 1983). A somewhat different and slightly later example is the famous “bush debate,” involving Paterson, Lawson and others in the *Bulletin* in the 1890s. The ostensible point at issue in this extended verse debate was simply whether “modern poets” (i.e. Paterson et al.) who purported to describe the beauties of the bush were describing it “realistically,” that is, “accurately” (Nesbitt 1971). Lawson denied it, but Paterson’s response, to the effect that his ideal evocations captured the “real essence” of the bush, effectively broached the larger question of what constitutes “realistic” representation anyway—surface accuracy or deeper truth? That philosophical question bulks large in debates about the nature and effects of literary realism in Europe, the United States and Australia for most of the twentieth century.

The history of realism in Australian literature is yet to be written, a fact which is not altogether surprising despite the prominent place the concept always seems to have occupied on the national cultural agenda. For an adequate history would need to include, and to interrelate, accounts of the different forms of writing that have gone by the name of realism at various times as well as the changes both in the intellectual content of the term itself and of its sub-variants (social realism, socialist realism, psychological realism, critical realism), and in its shifting political (especially nationalist) alignments and ideological affiliations.

One of the most useful discussions of literary realism is Raymond Williams’s entry in *Keywords* (1976), in which he draws a distinction between realism as “lifelike representation” and realism as a “general attitude.” This distinction, which corresponds roughly to the two main meanings we assign to the word “realistic” in

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ordinary speech, namely “true to life” and “practical,” has often been ignored in recent discussions of realism in literature and film, which have restricted its meaning to the first of these, in effect equating realism with “plausibility” (MacCabe 1974; Belsey 1980). The “classic realist text,” said to be characterized by narrative closure and a lack of interpretative ambiguity, is associated with conservative politics in these discussions, while the “interrogative text” by contrast (usually modernist films or novels) is characterized by its challenging openness and ambiguity, and associated with progressive or revolutionary politics.

Literary-critical debates on Australian realism have been conducted largely around questions of *whose* realism or what *kind* of realism should be given the national imprimatur, rather than whether realism as such should be put to the question. The history of these debates has been touched on more fully elsewhere (Carter 1985; Buckridge 1986), though no complete account of them yet exists. On the political left, especially, realism became closely identified with the Australian tradition in literature, the tradition of the 1890s and of the social realists of the 1930s and 1940s. Many of its main apologists—Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny (b. 1894 – d. 1962), Jack Beasley (b. 1921), Judah Waten (b. 1911 – d. 1985), Jack Blake (b. [ca.1910](#) – d. [1991](#)), Bernard Smith (b. 1916), for example—were Communist Party members themselves, and many of the writers they endorsed as both genuinely Australian and true realists were also on the political left. But realism, psychological rather than social, has also been invoked by critics from the political centre and on the right in support of certain writers and against others. Patrick White (b. 1912 – d. 1990) has been an interesting historical object of criticism in this respect, falling foul of leftist critics like Beasley and Prichard in the late 1950s and early 1960s for his sins against the canons of social realism (Buckridge, 1988: 206-208), and offending critics on the right, such as Leonie Kramer and Adrian Mitchell in the 1970s and 1980s, for his departure from the norms of psychological realism (see Kramer 1973 and 1981).

Of greater immediate interest than the critical debates, however, are the ways in which conceptions of literary realism, and of its close relation to the idea of the nation, have fed into and modified the literary practice of Australian writers, especially novelists. Patrick White, for example, in a well-known essay, “The Prodigal Son,” written for the journal *Australian Letters* in 1958, made it clear that

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the stylistic idiosyncrasies of *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1958) were in part a direct counter-practice to what White perceived as the dominant realist tradition in Australian fiction. His novels, with their heightened awareness of the textures and surfaces of language—“the rocks and sticks of words”—embody his determination, announced in “The Prodigal Son” (1958), to “change the course of the Australian novel tradition from one of “dreary, dun-coloured [. . .] journalistic realism” (White, 1989: p. 15). Equally clearly, the frequency with which freaks, perverts, eccentrics and other non-typical characters occupy central positions in his novels expresses his rejection of that “exaltation of the ‘average’” (p. 15) which he saw as implicit in Australian realism and in the national culture as a whole in the 1950s.

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It is worth bearing in mind, though, that the outsiders who inhabit so much of White’s fiction have a more positive general significance as well. Many of them evoke or directly represent the plight of the visionary artist in an uncomprehending and unappreciative society, and because of this they embody, to a degree, White’s own early hopes for a critical, prophetic role in Australian society, one in which (as he put it in the essay “The Prodigal Son”) he would be “helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding” (White, p. 17). Such sentiments tend to situate White squarely within the Australian realist tradition as defined by a general attitude of commitment to telling the truth about contemporary social life in Australia, and it was on this basis that some of the “soft-line” leftist critics, like Mona Brand and Jack Blake, hailed White as a realist writer despite his stylistic and formal eccentricities (Buckridge, 1988: 207).

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It could be argued, for example, with reference to *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), that so long as the abstruse symbolism and the unflattering depictions of Australian workers could be seen as integral aspects of a wide-ranging critique of social relations and consciousness in Australia (and there is no doubt that they can be so seen) the novel could be defended as a work of realism, and hence assimilated to the Australian canon. It remains important, nonetheless, to remember the sense in which White’s writing in the 1950s was written *against* Australian realism as he perceived it. In *Riders in the Chariot*, to stay with the same example, the natural, everyday perspective on ordinary realities is repeatedly disrupted and displaced by presenting them through the eyes and minds of a group of four extra-ordinary characters (and one fairly extraordinary narrator) whose perceptions and

interpretations of reality are skewed away from the normal, largely by way of a “wise-foolish” literal-mindedness about people and things. Characters like Mary Hare and Ruth Godbold and also, in more sophisticated ways, Alf Dubbo and Mordecai Himmelfarb, demonstrate the spiritually transcendent possibilities of ignoring, or consciously refusing, the ordinary duplicities and received hierarchies of everyday existence. This probing, destabilising naïvety appears in a multitude of guises in the novel: thematically, in the implied comparisons between “crimes” as incommensurable, in conventional moral terms, as Nazi genocide and Australian philistinism (Kiernan 69-70); and stylistically, in the significant frequency with which the semi-comic figure of zeugma is used. At the same time, and as part of the same process, certain national shibboleths—notably mateship, sympathy for the underdog, and the “fair go”—are exposed as fraudulent by placing them in juxtaposition with the much more *literal* instantiation of those ideals provided by the “un-Australian” and/or “un-male” quartet of visionary simpletons.

The general point is that Patrick White, like all of the writers [considered in this chapter](#), uses established epitomes of Australia’s national identity as fictional tools for a critical analysis of Australian society. In this sense, his practice differs less than he himself probably imagined at the time of “The Prodigal Son,” from the practice of many of the more critical novelists of the 1930s and 1940s—Penton, Dark and Barnard Eldershaw, for instance. Where he differs from most of them is perhaps in the degree of his disenchantment with the traditional Australian icons, and also in his early use of realism itself as a national icon requiring critical scrutiny and ironic distancing; and producing, in this way, a systematically “anti-realist” set of writing practices within the broad tradition of Australian realism.

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National Tropes and Epitomes: Fiction of the 1980s

It has not been the purpose of this paper to provide a history of the “national theme” in Australian writing. The aim has been rather to exemplify, by selective illustration, a way of approaching the theme *rhetorically*, as something that is written into literary texts by way of a relatively constant inventory of tropes, formulas and epitomes, any one of which might serve to articulate the question of nationality with other political, social, philosophical or psychological themes. One or more of these articulated themes, rather than the national theme itself, will often be the main focus of interest in

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a given text, yet the marginal presence of the latter may inflect the whole in subtle but sometimes important ways.

The fiction of 1980s has shown no marked tendency to abandon the established inventory. There are large and important differences between Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" (1892) and Murray Bail's (b. 1941) story of the same name (1970), but the fact that their point of reference is the same is significant too. Writers such as David Ireland (b. 1927), Thea Astley (b. 1925 – d. 2004), David Malouf (b. 1934), Roger MacDonald (b. 1941), Eric Rolls (b. 1923), Gerald Murnane (b. 1939) and Peter Carey have also had frequent recourse to the established repository of national tropes and epitomes, sometimes (as in Ireland and Carey) as a source of satiric targets, and sometimes (as in Malouf and MacDonald on the [First World War](#)), as focal points of qualified affirmation.

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There are also, however, some directions in these writings which seem to be veering away from the traditional inventory. Not surprisingly, those in question here include ethnic and Aboriginal writers, whose command of different cultural mythologies makes the construction of alternative inventories for writing in Australia a feasible project; though even these writers find the traditional tropes useful for mapping the interface between their own minority cultures and that of the dominant Anglo-Australians.

Women's writing is a somewhat more ambiguous case. It is a moot point whether writers such as Helen Garner (b. 1942), Elizabeth Jolley (b. 1923 – d. 2007), Kate Grenville (b. 1950) and Jessica Anderson, for example, might best be described as engaging in the construction of a "counter-inventory" to the heavily masculinist tropes and epitomes of the nation already in place (compiling, in effect, a register of figures, voices and values more consistently relevant to women's interest in, and experience of, Australian society and history); or as continuing to draw on the resources of the established inventory for figures with which to conduct new critiques and different valorisations of the national culture (Walker 1983; Schaffer 1988). There are elements of both strategies in the field of contemporary women's writing in Australia, and to the extent that the implied alternative represents a dilemma in the cultural politics of gender, it is perhaps worth seeing it as a variant of debates in the international women's movement around concepts like the "mother tongue" and "women's language" (Whitlock 1985).

Writing which is strongly regional in orientation also shows signs of an attempt to extend and modify, if not abandon, the national inventory. David Malouf and Thea Astley are both interesting cases in point here. Both have described themselves as “Queensland writers” rather than Australian writers (Astley 1976; Malouf 1983); but more importantly their fiction provides evidence not just of a preoccupation with distinctive Queensland settings and social types, but also—this is especially true of Malouf (Buckridge 1986)—of a sustained and systematic compilation of motifs, tropes and epitomes of “Queenslandish-ness!” In story collections like Astley’s *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (1979) and Malouf’s *Antipodes* (1985), the inventory of regional epitomes—mangoes, flying foxes, pineapples, “oddballs,” timelessness—is functioning not merely as a list of imputed Queensland characteristics, but as a source of rhetorical figures with which to explore and articulate a range of moral and psychological themes, not entirely displacing the master-inventory of Australian epitomes in this function, but operating as an important supplement to it (Buckridge and McKay, 2007).

Conclusion: Allusive Rhetoric of Australian Epitomes

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The argument pursued with some relentlessness throughout this paper is that much Australian writing since the 1890s has dealt with the theme of nationality, often critically, by means of an allusive rhetoric of Australian epitomes. Since no comparisons with other national literatures have been drawn, no assumptions can safely be made about the distinctiveness or otherwise of this process, though some speculative suggestions were offered as to why the epitomizing habit became popular with writers in the 1890s. There is thus no sound basis here for claiming that Australian literature, as a historical institution, has been more conservative than other national literatures in the particular sense of remaining closely connected (whether by affirmation, negation, or simply recognition) to a relatively stable core of postulates concerning the national character. It does seem possible, however, that further investigation, including some rigorous cross-national comparisons, might indeed show that to be the case.

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In any event, it is questionable whether the term “conservative” is appropriate, since an essential part of the argument proposed here is that by conceptualizing “national reference” in literature in terms of multiple epitomes rather than a single

mythic narrative (Turner 19, 50-51), the possibility of writers radically questioning and resisting the politics and ideologies of nationalism from within the system of national reference is explicitly recognized. The national inventory, in other words, would seem on the whole to have functioned rhetorically rather than ideologically, though to the degree that it has functioned not just as a rhetoric but also as an agenda, its ideological effect cannot be entirely discounted, and recent moves to displace or modify it may be well-founded. It remains true: nonetheless, that it has sponsored an exceptionally wide variety of literary forms, styles and themes in the course of the last hundred years - from Katharine Susannah Prichard to Patrick White, from Breaker Morant to A. D. Hope (b. 1907 – d. 2000)—so that to say that Australian writers seem to have been extremely interested in what it means to be Australian is not to detract from the value and variety of what they have written.

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Endnote

¹ This article is a revised version of “Australian Literature and Nationality,” *Australian Studies: A Survey*, ed. James Walter (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1989) 136-155.

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