

The Writer Alan D. Mickle: Serendipity, Vanity and Obscurity in an Australian Literary Career

PATRICK BUCKRIDGE

Griffith University

It would be difficult to imagine encountering the work of Alan Durward Mickle (1882-1969) except by chance. All his books are long out of print; none of his uncollected essays has ever been reprinted; and his name appears in only two of the standard major reference sources for Australian literary studies (*The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* and the AUSTLIT database). He does not figure as a minor inhabitant of any of the major paradigms—regional, generic, stylistic, thematic or sociological—that tend to constitute our contemporary picture of Australian literary history.

Certainly my initial encounter with Mickle's writing occurred not as part of a structured investigation to which his work bore any particular relevance, but rather as a piece of serendipity, the accidental outcome of a random juxtaposition of items in a Sydney *Bulletin* database. It was then a simple matter to discover that he was the author of at least 35 signed articles and reviews for the *Bulletin's* Red Page between 1921 and 1932, ranging across an interestingly broad field. Several are focused on individual writers—Shakespeare, Conrad, Kipling, Turgenev, Melville, Blake, Hardy, Rupert Brooke, Shaw and Mary Gilmore—but most use the review as an occasion for general reflections on a variety of cultural, social and ethical themes such as sport, art, religion, virtue, literary nationalism, and the bestseller. Further inquiry revealed that he was the author of thirty books, and scores of articles and poems in various other newspapers and magazines (Mickle, *My Lady Life* 88-9).

I mention the serendipitous process by which I arrived at the fact of Mickle's existence for two reasons: the first is that others seem to have done likewise. The great cricket-writer Neville Cardus, for example, observed in 1939 (at which time he was living and working in Australia) that he had 'found Mr Mickle's essays quite by accident—no Australian literary critic drew my attention to them'.¹ The implicit rebuke in the last clause suggests that Mickle's marginality in relation to mainstream Australian literature *even at that time* made serendipity—a casual comment, an eye-catching dustjacket, a chance encounter—his best hope of escaping obscurity. The second reason is that serendipity—fortunate but accidental convergences in life—is a recurrent theme of much of Mickle's own reflective writing. It was (and remains) one of the few things the universe seemed able to interpose between him and literary oblivion.

The word 'obscurity' has two oddly dissimilar meanings in literary contexts, connected only through the idea of darkness. The first refers to an impenetrable quality in writing (a condition of semantic darkness); the second to a writer's lack of fame (a condition of reputational darkness). Mickle is seldom if ever obscure in the first sense. But he is—and believed himself to be—deeply and perhaps unrescuably obscure in the second sense. It was almost as if, in a mysterious way, reputational obscurity was a given quality of his writing. In the cant phrase, he was 'always already' obscure. His obituarist, the late radio

playwright Michael Dugan, seemed to touch lightly on this paradox. Writing in *Southerly* in 1970, the year after Mickle's death, Dugan observed that while he had 'one of the longest careers of any Australian author', from his first book in 1910 to his last in 1960—and despite being a full-time author for most of his life—he 'never achieved fame as a writer'. Dugan adds that Mickle was 'a curious figure in Australian letters, an iconoclast who could never be identified with any particular movement' (69). That unassignable quality was certainly a point of some pride with Mickle; but so too, in a slightly perverse way, was his prolific obscurity. As he put it in his final autobiography, *My Lady Life*, published when he was 78 years of age:

[T]his, if it comes to be published, will be my thirtieth published book. Many of these books were published on a royalty basis by some of the world's leading publishers. Yet from them and all the innumerable poems and articles that I have had published in papers and magazines, I very much doubt if I have earned during my fifty-odd years of writing as much as a carpenter or a plumber would earn in two or three years. (27)

The defensive references to a 'royalty basis' and to 'the world's leading publishers' sound a self-justifying, slightly querulous note that can be heard from time to time throughout Mickle's long career, and not just towards its close, when his lack of fame had become undeniable and irremediable. There will be more to say on this theme later; but before getting too mired in Mickle-ana it is only right that we should seriously pose the question: Why bother? Does this now long-dead writer, well-intentioned and earnest though he may have been, really warrant any of our over-committed attention in the early 21st century? I think he does—not as a prize for his perseverance, but because at his best he strikes a note which, if not unique in Australian literature, is at least quite unusual and highly distinctive. That might almost be enough, but I want to make a further claim for him as well: that he is capable of being an *engaging* writer in the literal, almost 'mechanical' way of meshing the reader's thought processes with his own. The following passage, written in Melbourne in 1942 when Mickle was 58, is an example:

I am getting every now and then unpleasant hints that old age is advancing upon me. We were out at some friends a few nights ago and I began to tell a story to a man I know. I was well on with my story when the look I had noticed on his face interpreted itself to me. I had told him the story before. I find myself now all-too-frequently falling into this kind of error, a sure sign I am told of advancing years. When I see that look spreading over a man's face now I think of Shakespeare's 'twice-told tale in the dull ears of a drowsy man'. And I swear that I will be careful next time. Nor is that the only kind of symptom I am getting of the advance upon me of those unwelcome years. I find I am not so nimble as I was not so very long back. And do I hurry up stairs my heart beats and my breathing gets a little difficult. And if I try to lift a weight my lumbago says: 'Here, old man, not too much of that'. And if I lift a suitcase with my right arm my neuritis cries out: 'Now then, my lad, you mustn't forget me you know'. Not very long ago I was out walking in a park and I passed near a rubbish dump. I saw a

large rat. I picked up a stone and had a shot at him. At one time I was accounted a good shot with a stone, but this time my arms creaked, the stone just dribbled up near the rat, and the rat turned his back upon me and went on doing what he had been doing when I came upon him. I am expecting daily now that some pretty young girl will offer me her seat in a bus or tram. That will be just the very last straw. (*Suzanne and I* 84)

This is writing at its least rhetorical, its least assertive of its own merits as writing. Far from striking a dramatic pose, far even from producing definite effects such as humour, whimsy or pathos, Mickle has as it were dismantled the barriers, declaring his mind a kind of open house to passing readers as it sorts coolly through its stock of memories, stories and reflections. The risk for such resolutely unostentatious writing is of course banality, and Mickle does at times teeter on the edge of the mundane and the trite; but by and large—and certainly in the essays of his later career—he manages to avoid them. What nearly always redeems his writing from the kind of limp dullness that makes readers yawn, grumble, and wonder why they are wasting their time, is its uncompromising *self-regard*. I use that term primarily to mean ‘self-focus’, but I let the ambiguity stand because there is also an element in it of what Mickle himself called ‘vanity’.

There are resemblances here to Mickle’s older contemporary Walter Murdoch (who is perhaps always more of a public voice than a private self in his essays). Looking farther afield, there are even resemblances to Fyodor Dostoevsky (more intense and passionate than Mickle, if equally self-focused) and to Michel de Montaigne, the great French essayist of the 16th century. Montaigne, in fact seems to be, of all the great essayists, the one whose sensibility is closest to Mickle’s: equable rather than passionate; amused rather than outraged by human foibles; modest and unpretentious in style, but incapable of hiding his voracious reading; and always ready to embarrass himself with humiliating self-revelations made in the interests of honesty and self-knowledge. As a young man of 29 Mickle wrote about Montaigne, in one of the shorter essays in his second book, *The Dark Tower* (1912). At that time he described him as a ‘truth-seeker’, like Nietzsche but ‘in a lesser degree’:

He told, regardless of beliefs and conventions and theories of life, what his experiences and feelings were. He described truly himself. And if he saw that his description was going to reveal an egoist, he did not pause. All men are egoists and the vast majority of those who know it are ashamed of it, and of those who do not, they are all self-liars who have lied for so long and through so many generations, that now they have come to believe firmly in their own lies. (98)

Mickle may well have moved, in the course of his career, from a self-identification with Nietzsche (he would not have been alone in that!) to one with Montaigne; but the change is more one of tone than of intellectual substance. His own strong sense of his life’s work—a justified sense, articulated at many different points in time—was that it constituted an evolving and integrated whole. For that reason, it makes sense to begin at

the beginning in attempting to gain a substantive sense of his intellectual and literary development.

Alan Mickle was born in Gipps Street, East Melbourne in August 1882, the second child of Melbourne-born parents. He grew up in a 'villa' on Beaconsfield Parade, St Kilda, in fairly comfortable circumstances—his father David was an Inspector in the General Post Office and a friend of Alfred Deakin. He attended Melbourne Grammar School, and later the Melbourne Workingmen's College, where he studied (or declined to study) electrical engineering for a year before resolving to devote the rest of his life to writing. It was a resolution from which he never retreated, and together with his wife Ida (whom, in various memoirs, he names 'Suzanne'), he led a somewhat austere but never impecunious life, apparently on an independent income, in many parts of Australia, Britain and Europe. After the Second World War, he and Ida moved from King's Cross in Sydney back to St Kilda in Melbourne, where he continued to write (and also to paint) until his death in 1969, at the age of 86.²

Mickle's first book was a series of philosophical essays entitled *The Great Longing* (a phrase Nietzsche had used to describe humanity's yearning for the future.) It was published in 1910 by the firm of Walter Scott in Britain, and by Lothian in Melbourne. *The Great Longing* is not an immediately appealing book, and the author's personal contact with Thomas Lothian himself probably explains its acceptance: in a short Introduction to *My Lady Life*, Lothian wrote that he met Alan Mickle on a P&O liner returning from Britain to Australia in December 1908. The two young men talked long and earnestly about books, and bonded even more closely when they discovered, on arriving in Port Said, that the ship had passed through the Straits of Messina a mere six hours ahead of the deadliest earthquake and tsunami in European history, in which 100,000 were killed. What followed, in any case, was that Lothian agreed to publish his new friend's manuscript, professing himself deeply impressed by its 'intellectual quality' and its 'profusion of original ideas' (Mickle, *My Lady Life* n.p.). It is certainly true that nearly all the main ideas with which Mickle worked for the rest of his life are present in some form in this volume. How *original* they are, in a strict sense, is hard to say: there are ideas and attitudes freely borrowed from Nietzsche, and also from Schopenhauer, Blake, Plato, Emerson, Carlyle, Herbert Spencer and Croce; but they are certainly given an idiosyncratic twist and an overall coherence that bespeaks an actively synthesizing mind at work.

The seventeen essays in *The Great Longing* are not professional philosophy, but they are not quite popular wisdom either; they are an extended and connected series of reflections, pronouncements, and arguments on topics such as 'the art of life', 'the will to expression', 'the modern age', 'posterity', 'prayer' and 'socialism'. At intervals over the next fifteen years or so—from 1912 to 1927—Mickle published another five books of reflective essays in which he elaborated his ideas in tandem with contemporary world events and ideologies as they unfolded, and also with the humdrum scenes and sentiments of his own life, and with the authors and characters of world literature and drama in which he was already deeply versed.

It is possible to anatomise Mickle's thinking in this early, intensively intellectual phase of his long career in terms of a cluster of key concepts: **discontent, pleasure, serendipity, dreaming, expression, vanity, curiosity**. As with any relatively coherent body of thought, the meanings of the individual concepts can be illuminated by mapping their connections with one another. The resulting intellectual schema looks something like this: Individuals and civilisations progress into the future when their **discontent** with current arrangements drives them to seek **pleasure** in superior arrangements. Such discontent can be passively assuaged and remedial action temporarily postponed by **dreaming** that better arrangements already exist, or by enjoying **serendipity**, finding entertainment in the spectacle of desirable outcomes, achieved without effort or agency. The more active and productive source of pleasure for human beings, however, is **expression**, the articulation of aspects of the inward self in outward forms such as works of art, games, legal and political systems, and religious ceremonies and rituals. Expression is experienced partly as a pleasure in its own right, but partly also as the pleasure of receiving applause (the approval of others), which gratifies **vanity**. Vanity and **curiosity**, in turn, are the two fundamental components of that creative, self-transforming discontent that produces maturity and complexity in individual and social organisms alike.

Curiosity seems an unremarkable inclusion here, except for the fact that Mickle makes a point of insisting—with characteristic provocativeness—that the curiosity of the research scientist, explorer or scholar is no different from the curiosity of gossips, nosey-parkers and stickybeaks (his terms). Whether it is called intellectual inquiry, idle curiosity, or prying inquisitiveness, it is always 'the desire to find out and know trivial or important things on the chance of gaining the reward that is somewhere and at some time granted for all knowledge'.³

Vanity is a more surprising component in this dynamic of human development. Conventionally disparaged as a vice for two thousand years, despised even by Mickle's early preceptor Nietzsche, vanity (by which he does mean self-regard, not futility) nonetheless emerges as perhaps the key factor in the whole process, and many pages are devoted to its moral 'transvaluation'. His first book, *The Great Longing*, is sub-titled 'a book for vain people', and in a section on vanity in his second book, *The Dark Tower* (1912), another Walter Scott/Lothian co-publication, Mickle says:

It is vanity that is really the motivating [sic] and controlling force that influences human and animal evolution. It is the fear of what people will think of us that makes us more than anything else, what we are . . . It is hope of the approval of men that will cause us to act at times grandly and accomplish great things; it is fear of their disapproval that will prevent us from doing what we often greatly desire to do. (51)

Vanity, Mickle seems to be saying—and I take the liberty of inserting some modern analogies here—keeps people out of jail, sends them to church, the moon, and Iraq, and sells designer-clothes and slimming diets.

For vanity is stronger than all the human passions, and love, and hate, and fear, and hope, must all give way in time to it. It alone controls, guides, dominates and disciplines the vast majority of men and women, and makes possible an orderly advance of the whole human race . . . It is the only power which the most discontented and greatest men bow their heads before and always conform to. (52)

Vanity is the chief progenitor of dreams too, both real dreams and also those dream-selves and dream-worlds—idealised and perfected versions of the real self and world, and of the real relationship between them—which give pleasurable expression to human discontent and desire. Mickle's thoughts about the reading of novels derive from this cluster of ideas: to derive pleasure from reading a work of fiction, he says:

a man must be able to slip himself—his real self or an imagined self—inside the skin of the hero of the work . . . That hero must be what the reader is or what he would greatly like to be. There are two main classes of such works—the works wherein the authors' real selves are described, and those wherein are described the authors' dream selves. The first works are introspective, psychological, philosophical. They describe their authors' experiences and ideas. The second are works of romance [or imagination]. They are more or less truthful descriptions of the imagined selves their authors would like to be real. ('Novels and Readers')

This duality among fictions corresponds to a cognate duality among readers: the inward-living and the outward-living classes of reader, which he sees as providing natural markets for, respectively, the introspective and the imaginative classes of fiction. These categories form the basis for another interesting essay, on the 'bestseller'—the kind of book he was beginning to see he was never going to produce, but for which he had considerable respect—noting their importance as 'popular dream-forms', and dismissing the (then) common claim that they are badly written: on the contrary, he argued, 'the best-seller writer must be able to write brilliantly and picturesquely' ('The Bestseller').

Perhaps enough has been said to convey some sense of the main directions in Mickle's thinking, though I have not really touched on its directly political dimension. This could probably best be described as 'Deakinite liberal', moderately anti-socialist, and Anglophile, though not without a very strong streak of cultural nationalism. Alfred Deakin himself figured memorably in Mickle's early life, first as a close friend of his father David. In his biography of Deakin, Walter Murdoch devotes several pages to an account of the intensely intellectual friendship between Deakin, David Mickle, and another young post office official Arthur Patchett Martin (well-known to Australian literary historians as the author of one of the earliest critical surveys of Australian literature), who had left Australia under a cloud before Alan was born (Murdoch 31-32). As a result of that friendship, Deakin was one of Alan Mickle's earliest and most encouraging critics. In 1907, the then Prime Minister commented at length in a letter to David Mickle upon a pair of young Alan's essays on Shakespeare and Browning that the proud father had sent to his old friend (Mickle, *My Lady Life* 18-19).

The system of ideas sketched out above shaped Mickle's critical engagements with literature throughout this early part of his career. Essentially he regarded world literature and drama not as something separate from human history and civilisation but as part of it, a rich permanent storehouse of human thought, human types and human experience. Not only the authors but also the characters of great literature he treated as available for understanding and illumination in the same terms, and using the same conceptual lenses, as for real individuals, nations and epochs. This gives rise to a familiar but for many years now unfashionable style of criticism whereby complex, believable characters are discussed and analysed as complex believable people—but also as individuals with representative significance, as embodiments of larger forces or principles. The characters Hamlet and Macbeth, for example, are analysed and compared in Mickle's first book as exemplars of different forms or 'phases' of the Great Vain Man; later, in his second book, he orchestrates a somewhat differently conceptualised three-way comparison between Hamlet, Mr Pickwick and Don Quixote, which works rather well (*Longing* 139-155; *Tower* 66-71).

Shakespeare's characters insinuate themselves into much of Mickle's writing—the philosophy and criticism, but also the poetry and reminiscences. And although Mickle never wrote a play himself—or at least never published one—he had a continuing interest in exploring the live dramatic experience, and he and his wife were constant theatre-goers, especially when in London. He wrote several pieces about Ibsen and Chekhov, his favourite modern dramatists, and saw many performances of their plays; and in the 1920s became an early admirer and interpreter of the American playwright Eugene O'Neill, some of whose early plays he attended in their London premieres. After publishing a couple of review-articles on O'Neill for the Red Page, he later put them together with four more essays to produce a substantial critical monograph on O'Neill in 1929, the first-ever book-length study of the dramatist who went on to win the Nobel Prize seven years later.

Mickle was immensely proud of his O'Neill book, and told the story several times in print of having sent O'Neill himself a copy of an early unpublished version of the book for comment. O'Neill wrote back very enthusiastically that 'to say I am immensely pleased with it is putting it mildly', and to express 'my deep gratitude for your sympathetic understanding of what I have tried to do'. Understandably pleased, Mickle sent the manuscript off to Jonathan Cape who accepted it forthwith. As Mickle later discovered, Cape's acceptance resulted from a recommendation from the critic Edward Garnett who was reading for Cape at that time, and to whom Mickle had happened to send a copy of his first book, *The Great Longing*, because he (Mickle) had come across a book on Turgenev by Garnett which he felt resonated strongly with his own much earlier book. Garnett agreed that they seemed to be on the same wavelength, and told him in a letter that he had recently read his O'Neill book for Cape (Mickle, *My Lady Life* 30).⁴

Looking back fondly and philosophically across thirty years, Mickle presented the whole O'Neill/Garnett episode, in a piece he wrote for the Red Page in 1951, as a remarkable illustration of the part played by chance, or serendipity, in 'the writing game' ('Chance in

the Game'). But in 1932, wounded by the mauling the book had received from most of the English reviewers, and boosted by O'Neill's sympathetic assurance, and that of the Australian expatriate poet and critic W. J. Turner, that his nationality had 'done him in', Mickle sent a self-serving article to the Red Page about the impossibility of getting a fair reception as an Australian writer in England ('Australian Writer' [1]). This provoked a savage lampoon two weeks later by 'F.S.', almost certainly Frederick Sinclaire, in which he made enormous fun of Mickle's self-praise, name-dropping and frank immodesty (F.S., 'Australian Writer' [1]). Mickle, unfortunately, replied intemperately, accusing 'F.S.' of personal vindictiveness, resentment and cowardice. Rejecting the conventional cloak of mock-modesty, he declared 'I know that I have done quite exceptional literary work that some day will gain due recognition in this and other countries' (Mickle, 'Australian Writer' [2]).⁵ To which 'F.S.' responded—who wouldn't?—with a blast of ridicule that left Mickle looking conceited and silly (F.S., 'Australian Writer' [2]).

Mickle had made himself an easy target for a witty and practised antagonist. Then a few months later, he did so again in a series of exchanges about the merits of George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. Mickle was not a fan of Shaw (Mickle, 'Shaw's Joan'). His antagonist, 'Sundry Showman', may have been Frederick Sinclaire again, under a different pseudonym, but it may also have been Mervyn Skipper. Both were prolific Red Page reviewers in the early 1930s, and both were enthusiastic Shavians;⁶ and again Mickle came off second-best, if only because the 'Showman' was funnier than he: in a clever mock-Socratic dialogue which begins, in proper Athenian-street style, 'Hail, O Mickle! How goes it with you?' he reduced Mickle's (actually quite interesting and not entirely un-persuasive) critique of Shaw to apparent absurdity ('Sundry Showman'). This seems to have been enough for Mickle, who thereupon disappeared from the pages of the *Bulletin* for nearly twenty years.

The significance of this protracted, obviously fairly painful episode in Mickle's career is that it seems to have been the first and last time he allowed his lifelong process of internal self-fashioning as a writer to become visible in open public debate. What the Red Page clashes reveal about him—whoever his antagonist or antagonists were—is the extent to which the philosophical synthesis he had developed for the last twenty years had become inseparable from his private personality, and vice versa. This was not just a matter of cultivating a *persona*, but a question of deep, psychological self-formation. The personal vanity he displayed in the earlier of the two clashes, for example, was at one level just that; but at another level it was also a conscious and deliberate expression of the life-affirming, necessary vanity of the artist's creative self-belief.

In a different but related overlap between thought and life, his reverence for the emotional power and palpable humanity of the great characters of Shakespeare and Euripides, as contrasted with the shallow, talky cleverness of Shaw's characters, is expressed in his refusal to differentiate systematically between real and fictional persons in his essays on life and literature. Hedda Gabler and Falstaff rub shoulders in his writing with Emerson and Whitman, Nelson and Napoleon, and with the varied human types Mickle encountered in his travels.

There is a third such overlap: in Shakespeare, Euripides and O'Neill—but not in Shaw—Mickle found what he called 'the ever-present suggestion of inevitable fatefulness' ('Shaw's Joan'), a quality to which he attached great artistic value, and the same theme is constantly echoed in his repeated insistence on the role of fate, chance, or serendipity, in his own life. A fourth overlap occurs with Discontent, which he regarded as the 'supreme virtue' and driving force of human development, and which is enacted in the restless, wandering lifestyle he and his wife Ida lived—a few years in Melbourne, a few in London, then Majorca, Brussels, London again, Sydney and again Melbourne. It was a lifestyle made easier, no doubt, by the absence of children; but it was foregrounded, in his many reminiscence pieces, as the existential epitome of his identity as a writer.

Curiosity—that other great force of human intellectual and artistic achievement—finally is existentially expressed in his tireless experimentation with genres and styles: not just the essay (the expression *par excellence* of the curious mind), but also travel writing, autobiography, family history, poetry, fiction, satire, humour, fantasy, nonsense verse, slang writing, children's literature, and sporting memoirs. At the age of 70 he even taught himself to paint, and exhibited oils in the *Herald* Outdoor Art Show for eight years (Anon.).⁷

What I have just been enumerating are the many ways in which Alan Mickle might be said to have shaped and lived his life according to a certain template of what, ideally, a writer is and does. The template is his own, and it has certain eccentric elements in it, but most of its intellectual features are recognisably post-Romantic and liberal-individualist, with more than a hint of Nietzschean vitalism—comparable in all those respects with the likes of Norman Lindsay, Kenneth Slessor and Brian Penton, all of whom nonetheless integrated their writing lives in very different ways from Mickle (and from one another). The point of interest is not the intellectual design of the template so much as the fidelity with which he adhered to it, and the thoroughness with which he allowed it to shape the details of a long life.

Alan Mickle's career, he proudly admitted, was that of a non-bestselling-author. Many of his books were well reviewed, however, and two of them sold reasonably well: an illustrated book for children called the *Trio from Rio and Other Quaint Folk*, which went through five editions in 1943; and a book of reminiscences called *Appartement in Brussels* (1939), which was written, as the title suggests, while he and his wife were living in an apartment in Brussels for a few years just before the outbreak of war. It is a diary of sorts made up of reflections, reminiscences, anecdotes and character-sketches prompted by their day-to-day life. It contains some extended discussions of literature and drama, which are absorbed into what the *Bulletin* reviewer called 'a steady flow of good conversation' touching on cricket, Hitler, Ned and Kate Kelly (whom his father accompanied in the train to Melbourne after the Glenrowan shootout), dogs, Mussolini, fishing, nationalism and girls' eyelashes ('Australian Essayist'). It is not quite as 'all over the place' as that might sound, but it is certainly a whimsical and—to use the term I started with—serendipitous piece of writing that is strangely cheering and comforting to read. The poet Stevie Smith (of 'Not waving but drowning' fame) loved its 'charming, easy style' and thought it was a 'friendly, attractive book that now and again hits on the

head a nail that wanted hitting'.⁸ It is probably the book he was born to write, since in a way it puts into successful practice all his ideas about being an unsuccessful writer, a theme to which he devotes a delightful chapter. He tried the diary format again four years later, while living in Melbourne during 1942, with *Suzanne and I*, which was just as serendipitous, just as engaging, whimsical and self-regarding, and just as marbled with his wide and continuous reading. For whatever reason—the War may have had something to do with it—it was much less successful in the bookshops. Given his investment in his own continuing failure he would no doubt have felt thoroughly vindicated, if not gratified, by that outcome!

I posed the question earlier as to whether Alan Mickle's work deserves more attention than it now gets, and I suggested that the question was complicated—or at least ironized—by the author's teasing complicity in his own 'forgotten-ness', in his seeming at times almost to invite it, revel in it, and offer it as a condition of his 'authenticity'. Rationalising responses to the experience of failure in the literary marketplace are hardly news. What is unusual and interesting is the extent to which Mickle wove his own 'obscurity'—his lack of recognition—into the texture of his style and sensibility as a writer. By itself, this would not make a strong case for spending scarce dollars on reprints of his work; and some of it is uncomfortably of its time in a few potentially offensive respects. Under the new e-publishing dispensation, of course, the threshold of demonstrated 'significance' needed to justify reproduction is, and ought to be, considerably lower, and I believe the general literary quality of Mickle's writing does justify the cost of digitising at least some of his work. Comparisons with Walter Murdoch and Montaigne, if modestly circumscribed, are not inappropriate; and the *historical* interest attaching to an Australian writer who engaged so intensely with so many of the intellectual and literary currents of the early 20th century almost goes without saying.

NOTES

- ¹ The observation is excerpted from a longer quotation (sourced simply as 'Neville Cardus') printed on the back of the dustjacket of Mickle's 1941 book of essays *Of Many Things*, and referring to his slightly earlier book *Appartement in Brussels* (1939). I have not traced it, but it will almost certainly have come from a review in either the Melbourne *Herald* or the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Cardus worked as a reviewer for both in sequence, after moving from Melbourne to Sydney in 1941.
- ² Biographical details in this paragraph have been selected from *Appartement in Brussels* (1939), *Of Many Things* (1941), *Suzanne and I* (1947), and *My Lady Life* (1960).
- ³ Alan Mickle, *The Dark Tower* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1912) p. 45.
- ⁴ Xerox copies of the letters from O'Neill and Garnett are in the NLA, 'Papers of Alan D. Mickle,' MS 1886, Ser. 1, Folder 4.
- ⁵ Alan D. Mickle, 'The Australian Writer in England,' Red Page, *Bulletin*, Sydney (6 April 1932).
- ⁶ The evidence is slightly ambiguous. An inspection of the 'annotated Bulletin' preserved in the Fryer Library identifies 'Sundry Showman' as Skipper; but the only basis for this appears to be an article by Skipper in the 1950s called 'Sundry Shows'. The sentiments, style and opinions are very close to Sinclair's, but the balance of probability must still point to Skipper.
- ⁷ 'Author is Painter,' in *The Herald*, Melbourne (7 Mar 1962).
- ⁸ The review, written for *John O'London's Weekly*, is quoted on the dust-jacket of his next book, *Suzanne and I* (1947).

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