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“Reclaiming the Rubbish”: Outcasts, Transformation and the Topos of the Painter-Seer in the work of Patrick White and David Malouf

Abstract I: Colonizzata da detenuti bianchi e spesso da persone con poche prospettive nel Vecchio Mondo, l’Australia è stata talvolta considerata negativamente come una ‘discarica’ di criminali e buoni a nulla. Questo saggio dimostra come, nel dopoguerra, questa percezione è stata messa in discussione nella prosa di Patrick White e David Malouf, che mette in luce versioni locali dell’artista emarginato in discariche reali, e le trasformazioni rigenerative, creative che possono avvenire in quei luoghi.

Abstract II: Settled by white convicts and often by people with few prospects in the Old World, Australia was sometimes thought of negatively as a dumping ground of miscreants and ne’er-do-wells. This paper traces how, post-war, this perception was challenged in the fiction of Patrick White and David Malouf, which depicts local versions of the outcast artist in actual rubbish dumps and the creative, regenerative transformations that can occur there.

One of the most persistent images of Australia, and an abiding source of deep local shame, has been the notion of the country as a rubbish dump. Reputedly a barren waste land inhabited by indigenous peoples doomed to extinction, the country formally entered European history as the last stop for Britain’s die-hard miscreants, and as a potential breeding ground of ill repute where, in keeping with the biblical adage, little good was to be expected of progeny in whom the sins of the fathers were bound to be visited on later generations. Admittedly, over ensuing decades, some observers nourished utopian dreams for the Great Southland, but the naysayers were not to be silenced. Their descendants have scoffed at the outcast, the disinherited, the socially downtrodden and under-privileged, who have found their way to antipodean shores, labelling them variously ‘refos’, ‘\$10-Poms’, ‘wogs’, ‘daggos’ and most recently the dreaded boat people: diverse undesirables whose arrival signalled that Australia remained an inveterate dumping ground from which only rubbish or worse could be expected. Post the Second World War, however, some of Australia’s finest creative talent has revisited these inherited tropes, and sought new ways of understanding and laying claim to the continent. And two of the most prominent, Patrick White and David Malouf, have, as I hope to show, endeavoured to re-envision the eye-sore, mind-sore of the antipodean dump, that quintessential marker of national shame, as a site of regenerative hope and empowerment.

This occurs most prominently in the novels *Riders in the Chariot* and *Harland's Half Acre*, works which focus on a marginalized painter as a representative visionary, in depictions which betray both an indebtedness to European prototypes and the influence of a peculiarly antipodean problematic. White's Alf Dubbo and Malouf's Clem Harland fit effortlessly into the traditional gallery of *poètes maudits/artistes maudits*, popularised in France, while their characters' constant dissatisfaction and ongoing creative travail recall the Romantic advocacy of endless striving as the hallmark of, and pathway to, genius¹. Also Dubbo and Harland's withdrawal to the outer fringes of society to pursue their art has crucial precursors. The most obvious and exemplary is the dedicated life of modernism's first great master, Paul Cézanne, the famed recluse of Aix-en-Provence who spurned the distractions of Paris to paint and repaint Mont Sainte-Victoire. A local equivalent was afforded by the secluded and starkly focused existence of Ian Fairweather on Bribie Island, upon whom Harland is modeled. Fairweather's achievement fascinated both novelists, and his canvases, according to Murray Bail, offer intimations of 'the eternal mystery of the world' and 'its comprehensibility' (128) – an evaluation presumably shared by White and Malouf².

To this rich thematic palette are added dilemmas posed by indigenous creation. Inherited artistic prototypes are deftly transposed by White and Malouf to uncomfortable or unsavoury local habitats, from tips to tropical bushscapes, and infused with aboriginality. These decisions reflect changing local attitudes towards Australia itself, as well as afford challenging, potentially rich, alternatives to empty mainstream norms. Long gone was the period when the *indigène* could be banished or reduced to a diminutive supernumerary, his culture dismissed as unworthy of serious attention (Ackland 1984). Similarly, the colonial notion of the 'unimproved' countryside as virtually worthless had yielded to a recognition that the antipodean landscape needed to be respected, carefully studied, and that in many instances it was best used and 'possessed' on its own terms. In response, White made Dubbo part-aboriginal, Malouf his powerful, life-changing *genus loci* black, while the crucial rite of passage of both painter-protagonists – the seminal turn in their visionary development and augmenting life-knowledge is – conspicuously set in a local tip.

At one level Dubbo's story seems an antipodean tale almost worthy of inclusion in a new, Vasari-inspired *Lives of Antipodean Artists*. It traces a trajectory shared with many masters of *Quattrocento* Italy: from family-less poverty, through chance but fortuitous instruction, towards the unfolding of irrepressible, God-given gifts. His instinctive urge to drawn

¹ Key Romantic writers also identified perennial dissatisfaction and striving as humankind's distinguishing trait and chance of immortality or salvation, perhaps most famously in Goethe's *Faust*, Parts One and Two. It was memorably expressed in Browning's "Andrea del Sarto": "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for" (ll. 96-97, Loucks 187) – that imperfect but glorious reach which allegedly distinguished the ineffable life-force captured by Raphael from the colder, purely technical mastery of Del Sarto. White's prototypal painter in *The Vivisector*, of course, dies reaching upwards and striving: "Only reach higher. Could. And will" (641).

² Bail (1981: 128). Fairweather has proved to be not just the painter's painter but also the writers'. After all, White acquired one of his major works, *Gethsemane*; Malouf drew on his life-story in *Harland's Half Acre*, and Bail wrote a definitive, specialist tome on this painter's achievement, which was reworked and reissued in 2008 with the same title *Ian Fairweather*.

and an amateur training in the arts are ultimately subsumed within an idiosyncratic but recognisable paradigm of genius and spiritual vision³. Dubbo of course is no biblical prophet, but a half-caste aboriginal who appears to the outside world stereotypically as drunken and bruised, or “a brute that no decent man would touch” (White 1964: 309)⁴. He is depicted as a rootless, unformed youth who passes from an initial struggle to comprehend his own intuitions, through moments of searing insight, to “a rage to arrive at understanding” of the divine mystery that surrounds him (371). His work, once he discovers a “tube of supernatural blue” and other oil paints (322), will eventually become “a bonfire”, a “blaze of colour” (35)⁵. Yet Dubbo as artist is no simple *ingénu* let loose with a box of oil paints. Instead, at the hands of a minister’s sister, the lack-lustre Mrs Pask, he passes through an artistic apprenticeship familiar from colonial times on, gaining “technical facility” and learning “the principles of drawing” (315). But thanks to innate gifts his learning is accelerated, his application of the basics masterful and manipulative: “with a few ingratiating strokes the boy might reproduce the whole world as his teacher knew it” (321).

The turning-point in Dubbo’s career occurs at a site traditionally associated with decay, wastage and blighted endings – a rubbish dump. Its location is Mungindribble, a representative country town (only “hotter, dustier and ... drier” than many others [334]), where wealth clusters towards the centre and outcasts around its rim, making this the natural site for a tip. White, however, rather than embroidering on the dump’s distasteful properties, uses its detritus as an ongoing revelation of local character, as well as a spur to creativity. For here “it seemed the inhabitants of Mungindribble had shed their true selves...and he [Dubbo] would lie on an old mattress, where its overflow of springs and stuffing allowed, and dream the paintings which circumstances prevented him temporarily from doing” (336). The tip’s human correlative and virtual custodian is hard-bitten Mrs Spice, who lives in a makeshift humpy at its edge. During daylight hours she is “in the empty-bottle business” (335). At night she turns tricks with an itinerant clientele, who do not balk at a once-white woman, merely because she is scrawny, without teeth and “the colour and texture of mature bacon” (335). Her fierce coupling with Dubbo leaves him barely “wearing his skin, which was all she had left him” (338) – and blightingly diseased. Like Thomas Mann’s Leverkühn (and his likely model Nietzsche) in *Dr. Faustus*, Dubbo is fated to suffer the scourge of advancing syphilis and attendant moments of blinding vision. “The furtive destroying sickness” becomes the accompaniment and precondition of the “regenerating creative act” (341). White’s path to the Blakean palace of wisdom (evoked in the novel’s epigraph from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) leads via an innocuous dump, revelatory of suburban destitution, and via the frenzied cominglings of blasted species (archetypal ‘burnt ones’), which drive Dubbo ever “deeper into himself” and towards “crystallizing ... understanding” (341).

³ This tradition is evoked by the book’s epigraph, drawn from Plate 12 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which recounts a conversation between Ezekiel, Isaiah and William’s Blake precocious narrator.

⁴ All quotations are from this edition.

⁵ Key elements of White’s depiction of the archetypal painter remained stable and remarkably consistent over decades, right to the death as his artist-as-vivisector, who dies “acknowledging with all the strength of his live hand the otherwise unnameable I-N-D-I-G-O” (641).

Ultimately, however, Dubbo remains the focus of numerous artistic traditions rather than a new type of the painter – the full potential inherent in his characterisation and imagination-inspiring surroundings is not realised⁶. On examining the work of a fellow artist he is able, like Browning's Andrea del Sarto, to correct a mis-drawn arm. But Dubbo goes beyond Del Sarto in being capable of infusing a lapidary depiction with deeper spirit: he would paint it "dropping sparks. Or stars. Moving" (320). What he produces in response to his own daemon is shocking to weak and conventional minds. "Things are not like this", expostulates an overtaxed Mrs Pask (326). "It's downright madness", she adds, thereby placing his works in the exalted company of Blake's and Van Gogh's. White prefers, in brief, to evoke the familiar equation of personal affliction as the yin to the yang of high creative endeavours ("They were the two poles, the negative and the positive of his being" [341]), rather than to tap into Dubbo's putative indigenous heritage⁷. In fact, the latter is deliberately gainsaid: even this protagonist's "expected laziness" (that is, the disinterested attitude of the blackfellow) might have been inherited, the narrator is at pains to point out, "from some Irish ancestor" (314). Instead the painter's aboriginality serves primarily as a marker and guarantor of his alienated status, like Jew or feral old woman do for respectively *Himmelfarb* and Miss Hare – all of whom are destined to feel firsthand the evil that resides in mankind, or, as White puts it, to "experience the knife" (309). Thus White creates a familiar *artiste maudit*, who differs from the stereotype principally in being aboriginal, yet does not exploit the native's putative oneness with the land. This would have fitted neither a plot that calls for similar visionary status in four characters, three of them white, nor a conception of the spiritual informed by Judeo-Christian and occult Western heritages.

Three years later in *The Burnt Ones* White completed his trans-valuation of the generic rubbish tip. In "Down at the Dump", the final story of this collection, the stakes are simplified. Aboriginality and the preconditions for vision yield centre stage to a re-envisioning of the austral tip's possible role and connotative range. Starkly different assessments of it are offered and dramatized by antithetical social groups. One group, the Whalleys, live opportunistically from scavenging refuse and bottles (they "did the dumps" [1968: 286]⁸), and gravitate to tips for recreation. They are aligned with authenticity, fecundity, unconditional love and visionary promise. All this repressive, shortsighted mainstream society, represented by the stifled family of Councillor Hogden, would 'dump' or reject, together with the corpse of Daisy Morrow (his deceased sister-in-law), who dared to love a social untouchable out of wedlock. Now, too, the town's tip abuts its cemetery: "only a couple of strands

⁶ Nevertheless, early commentary on White, responding to the innovative characterisation of Dubbo, were usually warmly in their praise of the writer's conception. According to Kiernan, Dubbo was unquestionably "a triumph" (75). Colmar praised the successful mixture of "realism and archetypal symbolism in his presentation" (45), and Burrows both the way White fused stereotypes in him and used him to project aspects of his own dilemmas as an artist (52-60). Fifty years later understanding of and expectations about indigenous characters have changed considerably.

⁷ The thesis that creativity springs from personal wounding or trauma was handled definitively by Edmund Wilson, while more recently McGann, in relation to White's novel, has redefined the thesis as one of the "relationship between abjection and cultural production" (McGann 1947: 153).

⁸ All quotations are from this edition.

of barbed wire" separate them (297). This collocation brings into uncomfortable proximity corpses with domestic waste, as well as orthodox rites with all they try in vain to suppress. Hence Meg Hogden, a fledgling poet-seer, passes easily to the other side, and in the dump exchanges forbidden kisses with young Lum Whalley. Their amorous overtures hint at possible reconciliation and emotional resurgence, while in the cemetery deceased but present Daisy demonstrates to unprejudiced eyes that there is a morrow after physical death, as her spirit stands beside the grave and holds forth to deaf mourners.

The story's other major innovation is in its depiction of the actual contents of the dump. In *Riders in the Chariot* these scarcely extend beyond familiar literary clichés. Smashed bottles and jagged edges evoke the ever-waiting 'knives' and misadventures of existence. A broken clock with its 'insides' on show (334), which Dubbo keeps, suggests that ensuing events occur outside time, yet lends them a fateful inevitability. The short story, on the other hand, describes the accumulated rubbish in much greater detail, embracing a plenitude of objects from sun-buckled footwear and a dismantled doll to mangled mattresses and "stained asbestos" (297). They afford a snap-shot of local conditions, phases, fads and detritus. Occasionally they serve as potential indicators of the individually repressed, the socially disdained, most obviously in 'a disemboweled mattress' that escapes out onto a road, where it "looked like a kind of monster from out of the depths of somebody's mind, the part a decent person ignored" (298). But crucially, among this communal debris, independent eco-systems emerge, as well as suggestions of subtly supportive interaction between human and natural needs:

Here and there it appeared as though trash might win. The onslaught of metal was pushing the scrub into the gully. But in many secret, steamy pockets, a rout was in progress: seeds had been sown in the lumps of grey, disintegrating kapok and the laps of burst chairs, the coils of springs, locked in the spirals of wirier vines, had surrendered to superior resilience. Somewhere on the edge of the whole shambles a human ally, before retiring, had lit a fire, which by now the green had almost choked, leaving a stench of smoke to compete with the sicklier one of slow corruption (297).

Here even metal meets its match. Hard yields to soft, inert industrial matter ultimately succumbs to nature's processes. From amidst the at-first-sight, seemingly intransigent trash, strong grounds for hope emerge.

The hackneyed image of local shame, the rubbish dump, is finally identified as a veritable incubator of true progress and 'superior resilience'. Neither the existence of intransigent, man-produced impediments nor stinking, putrid decay is denied. But they are presented as part of a dynamic pattern, which continually ushers in creative forces of unforeseeable, exciting amplitude. Again, too, Australia's inherited social mores are devastatingly critiqued, together with notions of irrevocable inferiority, through the instinctive, liberating values of a despised underclass to which an indigenous presence is peripheral. Tellingly the shambling 'human ally' is distinguished by neither race or gender. In place of Alf Dubbo the story only offers sporadic references to Darkie Black, a truck-driver of indeterminate race. He appears occasionally in Lum's thoughts, where "his hands, twisting the wheel, appeared to

control the whole world" (297). A vague but potential role-model, Darkie is identified with everything that is lacking but desired in Lum's life: from domestic order to on-the-road freedom and fellowship. Far more important, however, is Lum's budding romance with Meg and his native affiliation with the dump.

Both tip and cementery, then, testify not merely to wastage and corruption, but to renewed life, vigour and what the narrator dubs 'superior resilience'. Here fearful as well as liberating deeds can occur, which unnerve those like Gil the grocer, who only understood what "was punctual, decent, docketed" (313), whereas they teach Meg that she must transcend her prescriptive socialization: "to reach understanding she would have surrendered her cleverness. She was no longer proud of it" (305). For in White's hands this terrain beyond normal controls offers hope of a better society that accommodates difference, fosters rather than suppresses the potential of youth, and opens avenues to unconventional actions and understanding. Overall the indispensability of 'rubbish' to free, vibrant creation is roundly affirmed, in a story that ends with "the warm core of certainty" (316) afforded by the happy Whalleys homeward-bound and, beyond their vehicle, with unprepossessing "flattened heads of grey grass always raising themselves again again again" (316).

A generation later the postponed day of the *indigene* in the complex calculus of waste and enhanced potential came in Malouf's fifth novel, *Harland's Half Acre*⁹. Like *Riders in the Chariot*, this book is concerned with the possibility of a thoroughly unorthodox way of laying claim to the land. The novel first documents shifts in temporal possession of a given terrain: how it passes from aboriginal to white hands after "one brief bloody encounter" (1984: 3)¹⁰, then how the invader-settler, having won it, is in turn dispossessed by his fellows¹¹. Among the progeny of these feckless whites is another painter-in-the-making. Stage one of his *Werdegang* (his coming-into-being), associated with the use of water-colours, involves recording the countryside: "His pictures were a reminder and inventory ... a first act of repossession" that partakes of diluted magic (31)¹². Up till now Harland knows the land visually and through hearsay; it has not deeply penetrated his being. To reach this higher stage he must become one with his subject. Malouf, a careful reader of Patrick White, locates this transformative event in a dump (though this time of derelict cars) on the edge of an unnamed town. There one night, feverish young Harland washes up, unaware that he is on the brink of an epochal life-change that will enable him to realise in his own person a version of the unexplored native potential of Alf Dubbo.

Malouf's dump differs from its literary precursors in its intense identification with a pre-Caucasian, primal state. It exists not merely beyond the limits of a straggling rural township, but has aspects that lie beyond conventional notions of space, time and human

⁹ On the place of this work within the well established tradition of portraits of an artist see Knox-Shaw and Ross.

¹⁰ All quotations are from this edition.

¹¹ As Indyk remarks, the novel depicts a failure of male succession, so that "the whole question of succession [is] now subsumed under the agency of art" (99).

¹² On Harland's artistic development see Neilsen (135-154) and Roslyn. Neilsen's reading is also representative of the usually cursory treatment given to Harland's night among the derelict vehicles (137-138).

agency. Cumulative clues suggest it predates creational schemata. The derelict cars stand less on land than in “infected water puddles” (46) or half-submerged, so that “the least weight, a night-cricket or a fingertip, might take them down” (46). Here normal means of orientation are lost or non-existent: of direction, of the elemental environment, and of assumed teleological purpose. Spreading, all-obliterating darkness evokes intensely untrammelled regression. A putative observer would feel “on the edge”, without a firm foundation underfoot or, more extremely, on a “not-yet-formed or created continent” (46). Yet with each burst of “sickly [moon]light” the recognisable, wreck-blighted paddock reappears. The scene thus reverberates uneasily between the primordial and the decaying present, with the artist poised as potential envisager of present, past and future conditions. In current terms the site is therefore both a “graveyard of journeys” (47) as well as a fluid sphere, in which the gifted individual may be granted a transformative encounter with the original guardians or spirits of the land¹³.

Exploiting the conceit of Harland’s fevered condition, Malouf makes him undergo in the dump an ultimate bonding with the great south land. Quickly the youth’s plan to sleep in an abandoned car is thwarted when he finds a terrifying black apparition already in possession of his chosen wreck (47). He reels back, falls to the ground, then experiences a violent, antipodean version of *Walpurgis Nacht* when he is hurled aloft, shaken, clawed at, has his ribs crushed, and is finally “spat ... out” (48) in an exhausted state. His tormentors, in fact his initiators, are dark regal “spirits, older than the ghosts of cars and their owners” (47-48), to whose overwhelming power he can only submit. Vaguely he intuits that “he had disturbed a rite, or interrupted an assembly of the dispossessed” (48). Malouf stops just short of transforming his painter into an *indigène*, but Harland does become one with the natural surroundings:

When he came to his senses it was daylight. Damp red soil was at his eyeball with blades of blunted, razor-sharp grass sprouting from it, so coarse you could see the crystals that would cut. A host of ants was going about its business all around him, intent and scrambling, as if he were just another element in the landscape they had to negotiate and had been lying here from the beginning, or had dropped from the sky overnight. He lay watching them, their furious, fiercely organized life.

His back, he discovered when he tried to move, was sun-burned right through the shirt, but when he staggered to his feet at last it was into a feeling of wholeness, of renewed power and strength, though he could never be sure afterwards which side he had come out on, or what pact he had made with his native earth (48).

Here, in an evocatively primordial setting (“you might have stepped back into a time before creation” [46]), the primal emergence of humankind from earthly mould or clay is reenacted in terms appropriate to the birth of an authentic local celebrant. His eye stares out from the red, life-sustaining soil onto a heightened vision of the inherent danger, vibrancy,

¹³ On the more general use of place and space in the novel see Dever and Malouf (1989).

beauty and order of antipodean creation. Like Dubbo after his seminal encounter, Harland too is barely left with his skin intact and his body profoundly impregnated. Now red like his native soil, he represents a new kind of 'burnt one', rendered whole and creatively potent through the 'mystery' of intimate union with the tropical landscape¹⁴.

Presiding over the dump, and over Harland's initiation, are black, wraith-like figures of indistinct identity but irresistible strength. Their depiction is intentionally open-ended:

[Harland] tried the handle [of the car's door], turned it, and was hurled back by a blood-curdling cry. Crouched there on the seat was a black devil, all blue-black hair and breathing fire. Its look of prior right and of fierce dark ownership went right through him ... He had no wish to dispute possession with the spirits of the place or with the ghosts of previous owners (47).

Whether itinerant aborigines, their ancestors or the *genus loci*, all are interchangeable as original custodians who were driven from their lands, undervalued and, for a time, profoundly dispossessed. But, as this rubbish dump starkly signals, all is not well with the new claimants' plans. The promise of endless technological advances, commodity improvements and consumer freedom, summarised by the mass-produced automobile, has issued in failed artifacts: charred hulks and "derelict bodies" (47). Rootless, questing Harland is a product of this car wreck. What will save him, and by extension society, is repossession by and bonding with indigenous creation. Its representatives, black "stately figures", sit "behind the webbed and frosted glass of every car" (47). Though usually "watchers", they seem poised to reassume control, as they do in orchestrating Harland's redemptive, nocturnal "accident" (47). After it he, though not black, is no longer merely a floating, impotent figure. Through this serendipitous rite of passage his former self has been broken down, transcended. This supposed "graveyard of journeys" (47) has actually marked their new beginning. Finally, expectations are high as this otherworldly "pact" (48) has been made not with a Mephisto-surrogate, but his native land.

For two centuries, variations played on the topos of Australia as rubbish dump have faithfully reflected the changing attitudes of white settlers to the great south land. Initially the waste land of *terra australis incognita* was deemed a fit dumping ground for England's outcasts. Subsequent attempts to document, master and possess the continent relied heavily on imposing transplanted techniques and methodologies onto an unfamiliar and often unsuited landscape. Generations later reconciliation was sought. Indigenous forces were appreciated in their own right; discovering and tapping into their secrets became a matter of urgency¹⁵. What once had been viewed as rubbish could, in short, yield up lessons, even artistic

¹⁴ The scene is of course open to numerous interpretations. It also deftly evokes and assimilates cognate traditions, such as the spiritual notion of having to lose the self in order to regain it and far deeper insight, invoked just as Harland's harrowing is about to begin: "the silence was wide enough to get lost in" (47).

¹⁵ This Australian turn has an unrecognised Romantic dimension, and specific affinities with Eichendorff's faith in untapped indigenous forces, identified with a slumbering universal song or "Lied": *Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen/Die da träumen fort und fort/Und die Welt hebt an zu singen/Triffst du nur das Zauberwort* ("Wünschelrute", Dieter 1924: 97). Literally translated, Eichendorff's words mean: "A song sleeps in all things which dream on and on, but the world bursts into song, once you find the magic word".

gold. Hence the compositions of modern painters, in the fiction surveyed, seek at their best to replicate and plumb these forces. In White's precursor text Dubbo's artistic firstlings were "scribble[s] on the walls of the shed, the finespun lines of a world he felt to exist but could not yet corroborate" (314). Malouf makes that corroboration and locates their prototype around Harland's Bribie Island campsite. Among the usually hidden doings of nature he has discovered "scribbles under bark that might have been the most ancient indecipherable writing" (186). These reappear on Harland's canvases, together with "the wandering crimson of ant-lines, companionable trickles" (186). Now, too, the Wordsworthian corresponding breeze, that famously buffets the speaker in the opening lines of *The Prelude*, is surpassed by a constant interchange of "spirit that moved back and forth in him ... like the breeze that swung between land and sea, or the tides to which sandfly bites responded with itch and quiet" (187). Ultimately Harland does "not so much" paint nature "as paint ... out of it" (184). The long-despised antipodean dump proves to be a site of wonder, as well as a fit seedbed for supreme artists willing to enter into a daunting 'pact' with this regenerative earth.

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