

**Erratum, *ADS 56*, April 2010**

Somewhere in the production process of Jasna Novakovic's essay 'Dorothy Hewett's Sacred Place', in *ADS 56*, an error of fact was made in the first sentence of the second paragraph on page 204, wherein the wrong play was mentioned. The sentence should have read: 'In *The Man from Mukinupin*, commissioned for the sesquicentennial celebrations of the state of Western Australia, Hewett goes back to a traditional mode of storytelling, a model she borrowed from Shakespeare, and yet she retains many narrative elements applied in her short stories.' We apologise sincerely to Dr Novakovic.

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52 Philip Zarilli, 'Introduction: Between Theory and Practice' in *Acting (re)Considered: Theories and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1995) 1–4.

## Dorothy Hewett's Sacred Place Jasna Novakovic

Dorothy Hewett saw her 'Jarrabin Trilogy' as the crown of her life's achievement and yet it ended up in the archives, neither produced nor published to this day in its original version. She set it in a landscape remarkably similar to the settings of some of her short stories collected in *A Baker's Dozen* (2001), the book that closes with a post-modern travel log entitled 'Homeland'. The recurring landmarks in all of those narratives suggest that Hewett was seeking to uncover the roots of a specific form of collective identity tied to the sense of place. That place is indeed always iconic: a small town appears in a kind of circular narrative and so does the garden or the orchard that has all the attributes of the Garden of Eden and the resultant power of a mythic paradigm. It is no coincidence that the town bears the same name all along. Derived from 'jarrah', the 'untameable' tree,<sup>2</sup> it suggests toughness and endurance, with the only exception appearing in *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979), where the town is just 'Mucka'. Even then, Hewett's narrative is set in a familiar Australian landscape and draws on temporal realities, and yet its framework is mythical. Thus the created dialectic works as a stimulus to social imagination to look for a breakthrough, beyond the inherited order and its limitations. What keeps fuelling it is not only a larger-than-life vision of Australia, but also the author's personal story.

Hewett kept saying that two places were central to her imagination: the state of Western Australia and the city of Sydney. Her portrayal of both was a colourful mixture of myth and reality, always larger than life. Of Western Australia she wrote: 'It had a dream of itself as a kind of eternal, unpolluted Utopia, a world of mild eyed, slightly melancholy lotus eaters staring seaward towards the Indian Ocean.'<sup>3</sup> Sydney, where she spent most of her adult life, struck her as a complete contrast: 'vulgar, articulate, unashamed' but 'easier to bear, easier to live with ... possibly because it [didn't] carry for [her] quite the same burden of the past'.<sup>4</sup> Despite this liberating effect, Sydney features in just three of Hewett's plays – *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, *The Tatty Hollow Story* and *Pandora's Cross* – and none of her writings in prose. Instead, the open space of the wheat farm where she spent her early childhood keeps resurfacing in her works of imagination in the form of an earthly paradise, the eviction from which has engendered a sense of permanent loss and displacement. The natural and urban landscapes of Western Australia remain Hewett's preferred settings even in her old age, a perfect background for showing how real the contradiction is between

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freedom and repression or, rather, between the myth of freedom and the reality of cultural, economic and political constraints. Striving to resolve it all her life, she pondered the causes and effects of this contradiction in her writings and acted upon her conclusions in her life practice. But it was in both, the life praxis and the writing, that she saw the means of educating the public. For a socially engaged writer – who, for a period of time, sought the possibility of realising her ideals in politics – free choice or the expression of individuality is inextricably bound up not only with the questions of style and form but also with the artist's role in society. Conceived at the time of the French Revolution, the concept of the artist expected to play 'a vanguard role' – alongside scientists and engineers – 'in the construction of the ideal state and the new golden age of the future'<sup>5</sup> kept attracting followers well into the twentieth century, and 'The Jarrabin Trilogy' provides ample evidence of Hewett's attempt to play that same mythical role. What it also reveals is the relation of her mythical view of the world to memory and the sense of identity. Because the trilogy is set in temporal reality that begins in the same year as that in which *The Man from Mukinupin* folds, we need to examine briefly the connection between one of her most celebrated plays and the totally neglected one.

In 'The Jarrabin Trilogy', commissioned for the sesquicentennial celebrations of the foundation of the state of Western Australia, Hewett goes back to a traditional mode of storytelling, a model she borrowed from Shakespeare, and yet she retains many narrative elements already applied in her short stories. An iconic country town, for instance, takes a clear shape in the story 'The Wire Fences of Jarrabin' first published in 1964: 'Two streets of red gravelly roads and one asphalt, a glimpse of corrugated-iron roofs under a clump of spindly gums, and a rock hill – that was Jarrabin.' To this image Hewett adds 'a rickety pub and a Town Hall built of local granite with columns in front, two main stores, as well as the Co-op'.<sup>6</sup> The similarity with Mukinupin could not be starker. But the Jarrabin of Hewett's early story is a much more politicised place; it is a breeding ground for a specific set of problems related to class, gender and, above all, race. These are to blame for the attachment of 'a snapped wire on the railway fence [between] the respectable houses at the foot of the hill and the workers' homes by the railway line'<sup>7</sup> on the edge of the town, where the navvies and the 'half-caste' children live. While the theme of place is revived in *The Man from Mukinupin*, there it is situated in real time. This new dimension permits Hewett to adopt a historical view of the tension between mythical narratives and cultural performances in her homeland, and at the same time to suggest a new possibility outlined in a myth of her own making.

Don Cupitt posits that 'a myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual'.<sup>8</sup> Of those

'features', only one does not apply to Hewett's play – 'anonymous authorship', since hers is a literary myth. All the rest are identified and analysed in some detail below. The logic of reason dictates that we start the investigation by examining the overarching framework of this play, because myth is also paradigmatic,<sup>9</sup> it has a figurative meaning. When its purpose is to revive the life forces, myth takes fertility for its key paradigm. *The Man from Mukinupin* indeed opens with the competing voices of the life figures – Zeek searching for water, the source of all life, immersed in a ritualistic chant; Harry and Touch of the Tar, the young couple in love calling to each other; and The Flasher, the sex symbol – and the death figures – Widow Tuesday chanting 'Moth and rust ... Rust and moth;' and Edie Perkins moaning 'Wash your hands', in an evocation of Lady Macbeth.<sup>10</sup> A morris dance that follows is, according to Weston, closely related with sword dances and mumming plays, which are, in turn, 'intimately connected with the ritual ... designed to preserve and promote the regular and ordered sequence of the processes of Nature'.<sup>11</sup> The two most prominent symbols traditionally used in the dance, cup and lance, were originally fertility emblems that have subsequently become 'sex symbols'. Anthropological studies of rapidly developing societies confirm that narrative knowledge often draws on ethnological description for the purpose of its justification.<sup>12</sup> The take on events in *The Man from Mukinupin* is Miss Clemmy's, one of the artist figures who bridge the realms of the fictional and the real by her association with J. C. Williamson's (The Firm) and Wirths Circus. That the narrative is told in her perspective is, however, masked by the surrounding dialogue, yet it is Miss Clemmy and her *doppelgänger* Miss Clarry, one of the 'Five Man's Morris' dancers, who bring Mukinupin to life. The context is a warning:

CLARRY: The alarum clocks are ringing.

CLEMMY: Across the salt lakes.

CLARRY: East of the rabbit proof fence.<sup>13</sup>

As they sit sipping coffee, the familiar ritual has a soothing effect, but their exchange is anything but soothing. Miss Clemmy announces yet 'another scorcher', Miss Clarry rejoins with, 'Dust in summer' and Miss Clemmy concludes, 'Mud in winter', then they pronounce in unison: 'That's Mucka'.<sup>14</sup> And they laugh delightedly at their little routine showing that they have become fully accustomed to the degrading conditions. What follows accentuates the danger. When Clarry and Clemmy declare: 'No rain about, Mr P.?', Eek replies, '(*mournfully*) Not a cloud in the sky, Miss Clarry, Miss Clem'. As they all shake their heads the three of them conclude, 'So bad for the crops'.<sup>15</sup> The connotation of fertility is thus sustained, despite ominous undertones that threaten to undermine it. Reminiscing on the state of Western Australia in her essay 'The Garden and the City', Hewett wrote: 'Every now and again this society of lotus eaters found the crock of precious metals at the rainbow's end in its desert places, and this was both its wealth

and its downfall.<sup>16</sup> In her celebratory play, however, she still draws on the epistemological tradition established in the Old Testament where the desert is a place of miracles, magically fertile, as the Jews were to discover after their Exodus from Egypt. Its closing scenes reinforce the sense of permanent possibility, of an opening on to other worlds, which transcend the limits of the one enacted before the audience. *The Man from Mukinupin* thus folds with a triple wedding, Touch of the Tar and Harry Tuesday leaving for the salt lakes, a metonym for the desert that they need to cross in search of a new beginning. Another just-married couple, Polly and Jack Tuesday, leave Mukinupin to join the world of art symbolised by the Firm. Inductively, Mercy Montebello – who has just left that world for good – and Cecil Brunner stay put in the small town. What all three couples leave the reader or the spectator with is a sense of renewal, of a promise of new life. What is more, the very last image is that of the Mukinupin carousel that the playwright wanted to be circular and reconciliatory in mood. On this carousel of time, life and death whirl inexorably as indeed they do in all fertility rites, and the sacred time and profane time collide. T. S. Eliot identified ‘myth with that “eternal return” by which history recovers the dimension of cosmos’<sup>17</sup> and it is this sense of a higher order with which the play closes.

While in *The Man from Mukinupin* Hewett envisages some degree of reconciliation between the Indigenous people and the settlers, connoted by the marriage of the white male rebel to the ‘half-caste’ beauty, in ‘The Jarrabin Trilogy’ written sixteen years later, her optimism fades away. In it, the treatment of the Aboriginal woman Ruby Bindi is closely bound up with the fate of Jarrabin. The trilogy opens, indicatively, in the year *The Man from Mukinupin* closes: 1920. But while Hewett’s celebratory play began with the enactment of a fertility rite, ‘The Jarrabin Trilogy’ opens with a vision of a ghost town; that is, from the death end of a life cycle. Outlined behind the scrim curtain is the empty unlighted street, completely surreal despite its iconic buildings that can be traced back to *The Man from Mukinupin* and the short story ‘The Wire Fences of Jarrabin’. Indeed, the title of Part One is also ‘The Wire Fences of Jarrabin’, which is no oversight but Hewett’s deliberate strategy to bring attention to the historical dimension of her writings in which the small town has a symbolic function. As the scrim rises, the events start unfolding in retrospect, at dusk, in the form of an epic narrative or, more precisely, a chronicle handed down by the narrator, ‘Claude Rodder, scholar, scribe and local pisspot, [who] read Greats at Balliol, sailed like Noah across a sea of scrub to land at the arse-end of the universe’.<sup>18</sup> Thus connoted is the ‘edge’ of the world rather than a town and a dual perspective, local and mythical. But since Claude’s introduction is a monologue, it is experienced as a personal account of Jarrabin’s cultural history covering three generations of Australians, as the subsequent events

will reveal. The subject of his narrative is a gradual dissolution of Jarrabin’s social fabric that ends in the town’s demise. Inasmuch as a fictional Western Australian country town is a synonym for the suburbia across the country, the subject of the trilogy is Australian cultural practices in general.

‘The Jarrabin Trilogy’ even has its signature song: an elegiac variation on the ‘Ode to Westralia’ with ‘a mighty land of salt and sand/Westralia Westralia’ rewritten as ‘sand sin sorrow and sore eyes/in Jarrabin in Jarrabin’. It is sung by the townspeople’s ghosts who move around the stage in a circle invoking the sense of ritual, and is repeated minutes later, as the narrator takes his audience back in time, to the days when Teddy Cracker was still the owner of the general store and Kel Callacott, a ‘blow-in’, arrived in Jarrabin. As Teddy raises a toast to ‘a good Rexona town’,<sup>19</sup> the chorus responds with the menacing song that echoes the exchange between the Hummer sisters in *The Man from Mukinupin*, undermining the myth of an idyllic place. What is more, this time it is Ruby Bindi who has the last word: the song ends with her solo. The town’s narrative is also her narrative, and the resolution of the one is tied up to the resolution of the other. For the audience to register that neither the song nor the townspeople’s subsequent actions ever reach the present, it is of critical importance that the surreal setting of this scene, conceived as a Prologue, is reproduced in performance. Only that way can the critical distance between the narrator – who alone does not have a ghostlike appearance – and the subject of his critique be visible. This is not just a formal necessity. Through this distinction, the narrator’s project – of putting in perspective the townspeople’s elegy, in which the sun is down and the doorways in Jarrabin are ‘silted up with sand’ – becomes discernible, too.

The narrative formula in ‘The Jarrabin Trilogy’ is as conspicuous as it was in Hewett’s short stories. It begins with an ironical self-introduction that is a sign of the narrator’s objectivity – required if his competence and a sense of trust between him and the audience are to be established. Lyotard argues in his famous essay ‘The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge’ that the formula is necessary since ‘the narrator’s only claim to competence for telling the story is the fact that [s]he has heard it [her]self’.<sup>20</sup> The mere act of listening grants the narratee potential access to the same authority. The telling and retelling can go on ‘forever’, with each cycle implying the similarity of human condition. Hewett, however, shows that, while the traditional storytelling modes indeed remain fixed, the social conditions surrounding the storyteller do not. New social conditions open new possibilities and these in turn invite new solutions. The process of renewal begins with the identification of critical issues in society and, in the trilogy, they start to crystallise as the chorus of ghostly figures dissolves, each figure becoming an individual characterised by a single line: a personal response to the environment. The picture that these responses create is one of oppressive

climate and, by extension, an oppressed state of being. But since the ghosts come to life through the agency of the narrator, his critical framing of their wistful expectancy of the 'Albany Doctor' – a cooling breeze – gradually shows that the little bush town, situated at a mythic distance from any urban centre, is not obliterated on the map of the world by the tyranny of distance. Rather, the townspeople's neglect of the inherent potential of their environment is the only real threat to their existence.

The cultural origin of the epistemology critiqued in 'The Jarrabin Trilogy' comes to light already in the verses that Hugo Sweeney, the figure imported from T. S. Eliot, recites in the closure to the Prologue.

SWEENEY: (*recites*) And of afternoons in cities when the rain is  
on the land

Visions come to me of Sweeney with 'is bottle in 'is hand  
And the rainy night behind him and the pub verandah post

And I wonder why he haunts me more than any other ghost.<sup>21</sup>

Intertextuality is a device that Hewett often applies in her writings as a reminder of the tradition that informs the dominant life praxis in Australia. The nature-culture relation being just one of its aspects. The haunting image of Hugo Sweeney's clutching 'is bottle in 'is hand' – invoked over and over again in all three plays of the trilogy, as a persistent cultural ritual – demonstrates how the process of telling and retelling often works. For, while Sweeney is a cultural import, his verses are a variation on 'Clancy of the Overflow' by Banjo Paterson, who together with Henry Lawson helped to create the bush myth. Before long, it became one of Australia's 'sacred' narratives. Hewett, a generation younger, sets out to interrogate that myth and the model of social performance it legitimises. But twelve years of exclusion from the professional theatre<sup>22</sup> meant that, for her voice to be taken into account, she first had to reassert her competence as a playwright and, to do so, she used the same narrative strategy as the Australian classics: the strategy of putting a strong emphasis on ethnographic detail, which had a certain truth-value to the public. The impression of authenticity thus created passes for knowledge and since that knowledge is narrative, not scientific, the power of the recounted story is the only proof of the narrator's competence. Lyotard argues that '[t]he various ideas of competence remain enveloped in the unity of a tradition'. Once granted, competence is unlikely to be compromised by 'specific innovations, debates, and inquiries'.<sup>23</sup> The formulaic mode of narration and ethnographic detail thus enable Hewett to negotiate the position of competence with the reader/spectator within the bounds of her own culture and at the same time to interrogate the constructed values of human kind, to penetrate a closed circle of thinking and open it up for debate.

What makes the ethnographic detail so convincing is the gallery of play figures that Hewett builds in the trilogy. Claude Rodder is an ex-convict and the legitimisation he seeks for his story is contingent upon moral redemption. His role in the play is, therefore, predominantly reconciliatory – he exonerates people from the convict past of their shame. Claude himself still possesses both the virtues and the vices, in equal measure, and is aware of their tension in others. He has the mindset of a learned man whose education is heavily influenced by the classics; he has the experience of a rogue and his gaze at the town is shrewd, kind and honest. In addition, he is the most 'rounded' of all Hewett's seers built as Father Time figures – he is a hero with a past and a mission to complete in the present. At first sight, Claude Rodder appears to be a new embodiment of the Old Man (*This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*) or Miss Clemmy (*The Man from Mukinupin*) or Mo (*Catspaw*). But as the events start to unfold, it becomes apparent that he is also the memory of the townspeople and their historian driven by a single goal: to record truth and by so doing to create a written source of information that would encourage a reassessment of the past. In the late 1970s it was still widely believed that, if given free access to the databanks, the public would be able to master language games previously inaccessible to them that would then, as Lyotard put it, turn into 'games of perfect information at any given moment'. The sense of empowerment would come

from arranging the data in a new way ... usually achieved by connecting together series of data that were previously held to be independent. This capacity to articulate what used to be separate can be called imagination.<sup>24</sup>

It follows that whether implicitly urging the audience by the non-naturalistic techniques of representation or quite explicitly, like in her play for children *Golden Valley*, to pay greater attention to the development of the imagination, Hewett always sought to open new avenues of communication. That way, the discussion would never stall, as it would never exhaust its stakes. For Lyotard, such a programme 'sketches the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown'.<sup>25</sup> For Hewett, both had cardinal value, too.

The unknown at which Hewett arrives in 'The Jarrabin Trilogy' emerges from exploring the life stories of the stereotypes in Australian culture – something which is no paradox but a way of demonstrating that the unknown lies hidden in the everyday. Not only is the narrator profiled as an ex-convict, but the majority of the trilogy's cast materialise against the images of objects, businesses and institutions which function as their respective symbols: behind the counter, at the piano, in front of Cracker's General Store and the Rural Bank, behind the bar in Grogan's Pub, silhouetted against the church and the skyline. Only after this emblematic introduction does the Prologue fold and the narrator resumes the formulaic mode of storytelling,

this time in the third person singular: 'So let's start again. Twenty miles from the rabbit-proof fence as the crow flies there was once a little bush town called Jarrabin.'<sup>26</sup> Set in the historical period between 1920 and 1970, the story begins to unfold from a male perspective, that of a scholar whose knowledge is badly needed in the community but who shows no desire of subscribing to the middle-class values. On the contrary, he stays on the margins of society, unperturbed by his wretched condition, observing and recording truth from the position of a seer.

While all play characters in 'The Jarrabin Trilogy' are built to represent either iconic figures or a cross-section of society, only two of them – one female and black, the other male and white – demonstrate full awareness of the lurking presence of the unknown. The female is Ruby Bindi and the male is Jack Brand, Jarrabin's war hero haunted by the memory of piles of dead bodies at Gallipoli and on the Somme. The two of them are pushed to the edge of society for different reasons and yet it is in them that Hewett discerns a germ of new possibility. Ruby and Jack alone are willing to explore the extreme states of being and sacrifice themselves for the salvation of their family and their neighbour. They alone are capable of reaching the mythic potential of humanity. Both characters are modern embodiments of the 'perfect' victim or scapegoat, and so the 'perfection' of sacrifice<sup>27</sup> or, in the perspective of pagan religions, of the dying and reviving gods whose magical power of renewal had to be annually restored by the Nature Cults.<sup>28</sup> Ruby has indeed all the character traits of an archetypal mother with her protective, life-supporting instincts that even her abusive husband cannot suppress. It is to her that Hewett attributes the nobility of a redeeming hero, but one whose time has not yet come. Ruby is prepared to put up with abuse due to her sense of gratitude to the white man, the archetypal alcoholic Sweeney, for marrying her, the black woman, in the local Baptist church. When Sweeney starts sexually abusing their teenage daughter, Ruby rushes in brandishing a long knife, a poetic sword, to save her child. In a post-colonial society ill equipped to help the marginalised, Ruby has no one to turn to except the kind and yet essentially indifferent narrator. Not even his female successor, Hewett's New Woman who is the narrator of Parts Two and Three, will be able to convince the townspeople to reassess their core values. Jarrabin's establishment – the old guard – has no nurturing instincts and is, moreover, completely unaware of this lack, just like the inhabitants of T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*.<sup>29</sup>

In her most comprehensive work for theatre, Hewett suggests that the lighting, as much as music, be used as a poetic device to highlight racial discrimination and the resultant division of social space into two clearly demarcated sites, to accentuate emotional pain and illuminate its metaphysical implications. Already when re-entering the play – after the initial introduction in the Prologue – Ruby takes a position outside the circle

of light staring in wisfully at the townspeople, as they gather around the piano and begin to sing, 'In the sweet bye and bye/We shall meet on that beautiful shore'.<sup>30</sup> The closest Ruby gets to joining in the spiritual expression of community and hope of redemption is during Christmas celebrations; that is, during a ceremony that is another important element of mythic narratives. The shop – now customarily decorated with Christmas bells, mistletoe and silver glitter – is fully lit throughout this scene, like a mystical vision, numinous and sacred to the seer. As Claude turns around on the piano stool and begins to play 'Silent Night', with all present joining in the carol, the sense of magic heightens. 'Ruby, crouched in the dust, takes up the words in her high, sweet voice.'<sup>31</sup> As the carol dies away, the townspeople stand grouped around the piano as in an Edwardian photograph. This is an image typical of the featured period, a stereotype. What the society captured in a nutshell was like at the time, from the Indigenous person's point of view, Ruby shows in a brief exchange with Sweeney. The cruelty of separating little children from their mothers, the limits of social integration defined by the centrality versus marginality paradigm, the meaning of civilisation to the coloniser, and the government's role in the drafting and eventual implementation of racist policies – those are all issues raised in a colloquial manner and then left to resonate by a silent enactment of the guests' departure. The only goodbye comes from Jack Brand in the form of yet another mythopoetic statement: 'Goodnight, dear Bernie. Where have you been all my life?'<sup>32</sup>

The call for mating sublimated in a romantic utterance is just one of many similar utterances in the trilogy, all of them complementary to the central tree symbol that supports the overarching framework of fertility. Jack will produce no offspring; instead, he will plant the sugar gums in Jarrabin's Main Street, with the assistance of Kel Callacott, and will then water them for years until they grow tall and strong. Ruby will, however, give birth to the twins, non-identical, a boy and a girl. Her regenerative power springs from being attuned to nature and from her ties with the land. For the townspeople, she is nevertheless just a victim. What makes Ruby the 'perfect' victim is the myth of progress that has marked both of her strengths for destruction. Two crucial songs she repeatedly sings in the trilogy close with the question, 'who am I?'<sup>33</sup> One of them is a lullaby that she sings softly, as she rocks the weeping Sweeney in her arms.

Nightfall

moonrise

boobook call

she-oak sigh

where d' peoples

who am I?

For Ruby, there was no hope in the decades between 1920 and 1960 (Parts One and Two); she dies deep inside long before she meets her physical demise. Her daughter is saved in Part Three of the trilogy that folds in 1970, but her son is not saved.

If Ruby is a modern embodiment of archetypal mother or, in the language of myth, the earthmother, Jack is built as the earth goddess's valiant soldier. Such framing of character begins with his offering of neither a poem nor roses – he dismisses both as 'a load of old rubbish' – to Bernie, the girl he is in love with; instead he offers her a bunch of wild flowers. 'The sandplain's blazing with everlasting in the spring',<sup>34</sup> he says, moved by the beauty of the land that has put on a sudden show of fertility. Then, after the Christmas party, drunk and unguarded, Jack sings:

I think that I shall never see  
a poem lovely as a tree  
A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed  
against the earth's sweet throbbing breast.<sup>35</sup>

Jack's vision and his desire find expression in a song that, due to its figurative meaning, reads like a language game but the townspeople's limited knowledge stands in the way of its decoding. Rather than winning credit for seeing the hidden truth, he becomes the subject of jokes. The soldier settlement block he gets from the government attests to the same incompetence of the authorities responsible for the communication of *imperfect* information. Wishfully called Jittarning Soak, his farm is nothing but 'the bloody sandplain', the symbol of aridness and death, not of life and fertility.

The mythopoetic overtones last for the duration of the Christmas scene, singled out for textual analysis because of its exemplariness. They come out after each critical insight: into army life, Bible bashing, social injustice. Jack's last line before exiting reads: '(bawling out) Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.' And Kel winds up: '(laughing) Well, merry Christmas everybody.'<sup>36</sup> God, magic and ceremony, the key features of mythopoia, are all encoded in the dialogue. The tension of life and death remains visible in the graphic and bawdy images that bring this scene to a close, but while the take on the story is the narrator's, the call for revival is Jack's.

CLAUDE: Jack Brand is lying out in the scrub with his eyes full  
of blood and salt and the round white rump of Bernie  
Cracker.

JACK V/O: (*sepulchral*) I am a voice crying in the wilderness.  
Beware for the end cometh, the salt rises, the trees begin to  
die and the wire fences spread over the land. (*whispering*)  
Marry me, marry me, Bernie.

CLAUDE: Jarrabin sleeps, the sleep of the quick and the dead.<sup>37</sup> Jack, like Ruby, assumes in the narrative the power of the dying and reviving god, but his inarticulate sexuality makes him unfit to complete his mission. Even after his marriage bond to Bernie is sealed, Jack stays 'out on the farm trying to bring the desert back to life'<sup>38</sup> but fails to do so. His narrative is, however, not the only warning. The wedding ceremony, which sees Kel and Daisy get married as well, ends on the note of requiem with 'the brides disappearing] like ghosts flitting amongst the shadows'.<sup>39</sup> From this moment onwards, the reviving force takes a spiritual form. It is subsumed in other kinds of narratives: cosmology, deliverance and superhuman heroism. In Part Two of the trilogy, Jack, who of all of his nine brothers alone did not have the call, becomes the lay preacher intent on baptising adult Jarrabinians in the trickle of muddy water that is left of the creek, in an attempt to make them feel as if they were dying to their former existence and were reborn from out of water. Driven mad by vain attempts to single-handedly resuscitate the land, he prophesies the coming of aliens from the fallen star to save the townspeople and himself from the torments of this world.

Inquiries into spirituality such as this one, into the Saving narrative – one of the most popular sites of mythopoia – and into the passions which shape the content of romantic discourses, make the exploration of the repetitive patterns of human behaviour possible for Hewett. Through them, she reveals the nexus between myth and ritual and, by extension, between mythical narratives and cultural performances in a given period of time. Some similarities between the ideas attributed to Jack Brand and 'a mixed bag of mystical teachings, New Age philosophies and old-fashioned Christian values'<sup>40</sup> espoused by The Universal Brotherhood and their guru Fred Robnison in the 1970s, are deliberate, as are numerous other references to historical events in Australia over the fifty years covered in the trilogy. They attest to the consistency of Hewett's view of the world in which mythical possibility can only be discovered in reality. The green surroundings of Jarrabin featured in her short story 'The Wire Fences of Jarrabin' as a garden, where the 'half-caste' children are allowed to run free, seem as nothing but a utopia for a middle-class girl, but The Universal Brotherhood community did attempt to build a utopia on a 300-acre farm south of Perth at about the same time the story was written. Many scholars maintain that myth, when defined in terms of a 'social imagination', is driven by the dialectic between 'ideology' and 'utopia'.<sup>41</sup> When taking the form of ideology, social imagination has the function of preservation of an order. When taking the form of a utopia, it works as a breakthrough or, as Coupe puts it, 'it is always the glance from nowhere'.<sup>42</sup> In the Hewett narrative, ideology shapes up at the plane of the profane, utopia shows its promise at the plane of the sacred, and the two are locked in permanent tension.

The profane in 'The Jarrabin Trilogy' is centred on the small town's general store, its owner and his family. Over time the family grows, so that in Part Two we have three generations that make visible the shifts in the way social problems are first 'symbolically plotted, or framed' and then 'performed on the scene'.<sup>43</sup> The shopkeeper, Ted Cracker, who 'owns the town' and has had a vision in his dream that he should stand for Parliament, for instance, confidently states:

TEDDY: I don't need a platform, Claude – amongst the half-starved cockies east of the rabbit-proof, I'm red as blood, amongst the rich farmers of the Avon Valley, I'm white as the driven snow and here at home in Jarrabin, I'm the palest of pinkos. I mean to say, I'm unbeatable, mate.<sup>44</sup>

As he fails to win the election, Ted's political register translates into the lack of political vision. Hewett denies such a character any credibility: Ted has been fooled into investing in a bogus gold mine, he is also an alcoholic and, what is more, he is unable to reconcile himself to the changing spirit of time. When he finds out that his shop assistant, Kel Callacott, has taken up the position of manager of the farmers' Co-op, he puts a stop to Kel's marriage to his daughter, Bernie, and then suffers a stroke. Ted is, however, more than an emblem. Hewett gives him human complexity by delegitimising his language games and the values that inform them, and yet profiling him also as a victim. Nonetheless, Ted has no regenerative power, nor does his wife or his daughter, embodiments of the establishment. The small business ethos, corporate morale, health care, the banking system, pre-election campaigns, war mongering and returned soldiers' plight, the secularisation of society and land conservation – these are all issues imported from history and canvassed in the trilogy from the point of view of an isolated small town, insular to change. For the Saving narrative to take effect in such a place, a vision that bridges, not widens, the gap between the profane and the sacred needs to be projected.

Back in *The Man from Mukinupin*, the figure who had the power to ignite the imagination and inspire change was Mercy Montebello, the artist with an aura. Hewett's life experience, however, kept undermining her belief in the power of art to change the world. Therefore, the agent of change in the trilogy is no longer an artist but an Everyman, Kel Callacott, a 'fly-in' portrayed as a recently freed prisoner of war who, unlike Jack Brand, brings with him the sense of vitality.<sup>45</sup> Whereas to the narrator of the bush town's story the art of storytelling serves as a tool for establishing his or her credibility, this man-on-the-make has to measure up against the clichéd narratives of cultural identity: the lip service paid to the diggers, the resentment of 'them Eastern Staters' in the lands lying on the other side of the rabbit-proof fence, the distinction made between people with the convict past and those free of historical guilt. Although he passes the test, Kel keeps

his individuality and dreams big without losing his grip on reality, which makes him fit to become an instrument of change: 'I'm the joker in the pack, the odd man out, always was, always will be.'<sup>46</sup> In addition, he alone is fully reconciled with his past and carries no baggage. Other townspeople all do.

Hewett suggests that the prospect of change is real by shifting the perspective on events from male to female that corresponds to the revival of feminism in the post-World War II Western world. Part Two ('The Memory Theatre') and Part Three ('Pleasures and Palaces') of the trilogy are both narrated by third-generation Australian Ellie Brand, the New Woman of the 1960s willing to fight for her ideals and convinced that truth has a liberating force. She has rewritten Claude's chronicle after the Jarrabin establishment burnt his ledgers, taking it upon herself to tell the rest of the town's story. The uncertainty about the extent to which Ellie has inevitably altered the original story encourages the exploration of the gender position in the discourse, be it central or marginal. It also invites a fresh analysis of the forms in which the dominant value system is passed on from one generation to another. Ellie, for instance, believes in the equality of all people and is prepared to defy the social norm that stands in the way of her emotional and physical union with Hugo Sweeney's son, the young 'half-caste' Wally Sweeney. Ellie's fortitude is attributed to her intellect and her education, for not only does Kel Callacott reveal that she has attended a 'fancy ladies' college' but he is also willing to 'pay 'er way at the university'.<sup>47</sup> On many an occasion, from the story 'The Wire Fences of Jarrabin' to her play for children *Song of the Seals* (1983), Hewett refracts education through a critical prism; this is not to say that she objects to education *per se*, only to the type of education that alienates (wo)man from nature and seeks to suppress life instincts. Ellie stands in sharp contrast to both her mother and her grandmother, who predominantly relied on their natural abilities, who imposed chastity on their husbands and harboured 'dark secrets'. Education, for Hewett, is directly linked with the state of consciousness and the system of moral values. Ellie is – in her mother's view – 'capable of anything'. Except murder, she snaps back, referring to the killing of Jack Brand in Part Three that her mother, the prototype of femininity, got away with because the community turned a blind eye. The symbolic import of Ellie's reprieve reaches its full force in the arson scene in which her grandmother Bessie Cracker, blinded by the loss of power, launches an attack on the new social order symbolised by Jarrabin's Co-op – which has taken over Cracker's General Store – and herself perishes in the fire. The manager of the incinerated farmers' Co-op, Kel Callacott, comes out unscathed. To read such a narrative in the melodramatic mode would be highly reductive, since it would ignore the wider mythical framework imposed on the narrative of the real, the magical allure of possibility and its horizon beyond which a new world is to be discovered.



By the end of the trilogy, Ellie indeed emerges as little more than an emblem of possibility. What stands in the way of its realisation is the establishment's materialistic vision of the world, uneducated and static, limited by the lack of understanding of the causes of things that threaten their existence. As a consequence, they also lack a fertile social imagination. Although Jarrabin, a paradigmatic community – small, closed and resentful of difference – meets its demise, this is by no means a fatal ending. In having it 'listed as a Heritage Town', Hewett ascribes the small community and, by extension, her homeland a magical force that needs rekindling. This mythical place she builds carries with it, to borrow from Coupe, 'a promise of another mode of existence entirely, to be realised just beyond the present time and place'.<sup>48</sup> Kel, the very man who brought the wind of change to Jarrabin, is shown in the Epilogue watering the trees planted years before by the town prophet Jack Brand, the New Woman Ellie's surrogate father, and by Kel himself, Ellie's biological father. The question of parentage is, actually, never resolved and this mystery could also have a paradigmatic import. It suggests that the character traits of both men – Kel's larrikin, pragmatic and good-natured spirit and Jack's sombre idealism – are equally important for the regeneration of community. In 'The Jarrabin Trilogy', Hewett thus records an era that follows the rhythm of a temporal experience but morphs with time into a myth which, by virtue of its organisation, approximates to a timeless paradigm. What each new generation will make of a permanent possibility that such a paradigm connotes is largely the question of vision.

Hewett has left plenty of evidence that myths, symbols and other forms of figurative language, as well as history, have the power to assist in the mediation of consciousness. She, however, has also shown that the life instinct, the desire to be or, as Paul Ricoeur calls it, 'the task of existence',<sup>49</sup> invariably leads to the scripting of an individual story that gathers together the perceptible, the untold and the repressed narrative fragments constitutive of personal identity. The consistency of Hewett's frame of reference and of her themes indicates one more thing: that story, symbol and myth aided her efforts to exist with integrity.

## NOTES

- 1 Dorothy Hewett, interview with the author (Blue Mountains, 2000).
- 2 Dorothy Hewett, 'Western Australia: No Ratbag's Eden', *Meanjin* 38 (July 1979): 234.
- 3 Dorothy Hewett, 'The Garden and the City', *Westerly* 27, 4 (1982): 99.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Henri de Saint Simon (1825) in Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 4.

- 6 Dorothy Hewett, *A Baker's Dozen* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books Australia, 2001) 53.
- 7 *Ibid.* 65.
- 8 Don Cupitt, *The World to Come* (London: SCM Press, 1982) 29.
- 9 Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997) 5.
- 10 Dorothy Hewett, *The Man from Mukimupin* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1979) 5.
- 11 Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, [1920] 1983) 81.
- 12 Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge' in *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 10 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) 19.
- 13 Hewett, *Mukimupin* 7.
- 14 *Ibid.* 7–8.
- 15 *Ibid.* 8.
- 16 Hewett 'The Garden and the City' 99.
- 17 In Coupe 66.
- 18 Dorothy Hewett, 'The Jarrabin Trilogy: Part One' (Manuscript 1995) 4.
- 19 *Ibid.* 9.
- 20 Lyotard 20.
- 21 Hewett, 'Jarrabin Trilogy: Part One' 6.
- 22 Hewett's last professionally premiered play was at the time *Song of the Seals* (1983).
- 23 Lyotard 19.
- 24 *Ibid.* 51–2.
- 25 *Ibid.* 67.
- 26 Hewett, 'Jarrabin Trilogy: Part One' 6.
- 27 Coupe 8.
- 28 On Hewett's treatment of the myth of the dying and reviving god, see Jasna Novakovic, 'The Chapel Perilous: The Paradigm of Fertility Overshadowed by the Quest', *Double Dialogues* online journal (Winter, 2009).
- 29 Coupe 32.
- 30 Hewett, 'Jarrabin Trilogy: Part One' 16.
- 31 *Ibid.* 41.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.* 17, 50.
- 34 *Ibid.* 24.
- 35 *Ibid.* 42.
- 36 *Ibid.* 43.
- 37 *Ibid.* 50.
- 38 *Ibid.* 109.
- 39 *Ibid.* 101.

## Alec Coppel: Australian Playwright and Survivor

### Stephen Vagg

During his lifetime, Alec Coppel was one of the most successful Australian authors in the world. He had hit plays on Broadway and the West End, wrote popular novels and worked with luminaries like Alfred Hitchcock, Alex Korda and James Stewart. Yet today he is mainly remembered, if at all, for one credit – and a disputed one at that: the film *Vertigo* (1958) – which seems a little harsh for the first Australian writer to be nominated for an Oscar. There are several reasons for this neglect. One was his choice of genre: Coppel specialised in light-hearted thrillers, mysteries and sex comedies, the sort of writing which rarely receives serious critical appraisal. Another is the fact his work was devoid of a nationalistic impulse: he rarely featured Australian characters or dealt with Australian culture. Finally, much of Coppel's work was simply not of sufficient quality to warrant serious critical attention: he frequently repeated himself, and often resorted to clichés. However, at his best, he was a highly skilled practitioner who helped to produce some marvellous entertainments. The purpose of this article is to draw some attention to the life and work of an unfairly forgotten writer.

#### Biography

Coppel was born on 17 September 1907, in Melbourne,<sup>1</sup> where he attended Wesley College from 1920 to 1925. He went to England to study medicine at Cambridge in 1927, but dropped out before graduating;<sup>2</sup> he then began working in advertising, writing in his spare time. His first two produced plays – *Short Circuit* (1935) and *The Stars Foretell* (1936) – had only short runs, but *I Killed The Count* (1937) became a West End hit, racking up 185 performances;<sup>3</sup> it premièred at the Whitehall Theatre on 10 December 1937, later transferring to the Duchess Theatre. This led Alex Korda to hire Coppel to work on the scripts for two films, *Over the Moon* (1937) and *Just Like a Woman* (1939); the writer also adapted *Count* into a screenplay (1939) and had another play on the West End, *Believe It or Not* (1940).<sup>4</sup>

Coppel returned to Australia in July 1940 to direct Marie Ney in a series of plays for J. C. Williamson Theatres Ltd. He struck up a friendship with Kathleen Robinson, an Australian actor with London experience; Robinson (1901–83) had grown up on a station near Bourke, in New South Wales, and gone to London to study at RADA before returning to Australia in 1940. She met Coppel on the opening night of *Ladies in Retirement*, which he had

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40 *Compass*: 'The Brotherhood', ABC TV (22 February 2009).

41 Coupe 1997; Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard* (London: Harper Collins, 1991); Paul Ricoeur, ed. G. H. Taylor, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, [1972] 1995).

42 Coupe 96.

43 Alexander C. Jeffrey, 'Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy', in Alexander C. Jeffrey et al, eds, *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 64.

44 Hewett, 'Jarrabin Trilogy: Part One' 75.

45 *Ibid* 7.

46 *Ibid* 49.

47 Hewett, 'Jarrabin Trilogy: Part Two' 12.

48 Coupe 8–9.

49 Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 16.