

Peter Mathers' Trap

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NOT surprisingly, the various attempts to specify "the Australian tradition" have failed. In these matters, there is always the problem of getting the proper question asked; and we Australian critics have tended to fumble around trying to ask it in terms of "themes," of a dominant communal "spirit" (affirmative, of course), "subject-matter," typology, or even ideology. Only a narrow and monolithic literature could permit these exercises; and Australian literature has for a long time been neither monolithic nor narrow. Still, there persists a feeling among critics that *something* can be said by way of generalizing the concerns (a pleasantly vague word) of our writers, even if the result may be unpredictable. In an era of black comedy, existentialism, and alienation—talk, it is not surprising that critics should look to each of these to supply the terms of their accounts; what is surprising is that the results have been so strong and immediate.

Max Harris among others has argued that Australians in general are existentialists to the extent that they have a Mediterranean concern for the moment. H. P. Heseltine, dealing with Australian writers, has stood this argument on its head by seeing "Australia's literary heritage [as] based on a unique combination of glances into the pit and the erection of safety fences to prevent any toppling in;" our literature "has little to tell us about the life of politics — except its cruelty," even for *Such is Life*, "society is an act, a decent bluff, which makes bearable the final emptiness, the nothingness of the honestly experienced inner life," we have arrived at "an investigation of the horror of primal experience."¹ All this carries an emphasis echoed by Brian

Matthews in his comparison of the seeming nihilism in Henry Lawson with that in Camus.²

It is usually just as foolish to confuse the ethos of any group of writers with that of the "average man" as it is to sever them entirely; and I am not suggesting that we do so here. If, for example, we find in Herbert, Stone, or Mathers a recognisably Australian strain of larrikinism, it may answer to quite different psychic depths from those we are used to finding in various areas of society, may be merely one strain in a tremulous complex of feeling and pressure which is itself far removed from ordinary structures of feeling. To belong is not necessarily to be typical.

Heseltine's thesis does not rely on any identification of writer with society, and it has not yet been properly discussed in Australian literary journals. To anyone who, like myself, thinks our chief prose writers to be Lawson, Furphy, Richardson, Stead, White, Herbert, and Mathers, it is likely to have some appeal. In many of these writers, chief characters confront, and the prose itself tries to dramatise, an abyss which is not merely personal, nor merely societal, nor merely within nature. In several of them (including White) there is a strain of pressing and unusual humour, which is concerned with hypocrisy but is not reformative; which sees society as a crazy jigsaw to which people nevertheless *belong* (which is therefore not merely an index of "alienation"); which holds most social pretensions to exist somewhere between the quaint and the grotesque; which insists that, for good or ill, people are very seldom what they seem or say.

To speak of it like this is to refer to what must seem a familiar (a depressingly familiar) modern syndrome: that of "black humour." And it is significant that when in Canada I gave readings of Furphy, White and Mathers the recurrent questions had to do with this homely category. All literatures, we might say, have sections, or sub-literatures, or tendencies which invite such a description. In Australian writing, however, they have two strong features:

first, the accent of the analysis is very harsh, almost croaking, with a recurrent violence in the rhetoric, and without, on the whole, any overt sadness or compensatingly indulgent lyricism — the work suggesting, in all its elaborative and rhetorical procedures, that it is foolish to entertain any large expectations of life; second, it is concerned quite openly and centrally with a search for real origins and a sceptical investigation of claimed origins. Its dominant question is: what are the origins of this society, these institutions, the myths which console and the legends which fortify them? How do its origins provide origins for these individuals, its late inheritors? In Herbert and Mathers, even (patchily) in White and (surprisingly) in Furphy, this sceptical concern with origins has an intriguing complication, which has in turn to do with the sense in which Australia is claimed to be, and the other sense in which the creative imagination may discover her to be, a classless, an egalitarian society.

The general claim, whether in official ideology or in conventional wisdom, is that Australia is an egalitarian society: not that all are equal in fact, but all have or had equal opportunity. At the same time, there is a wide-spread pre-occupation with and readiness to talk about family origins in terms of occupation, class, place of origin, and ethnic composition (with wry and paradoxical pleasure in a good mixture, so long as some of the ingredients are exotic). If anyone, then, searches for the roots of his family's success, its present standing, he will expect to find them somewhere in the qualities manifested in that family's origins, the social and genetic adventure which brought them so far. His concern will be historical, but his "history" will have a strong genetic flavour; luck, daring and hardiness of stock will be taken to explain much, and will add a certain swagger to the "history." Present qualities will be seen as stemming from qualities clearly visible in the past posited by this personalising history. And so we will get as an ethos a blend between an oddly individualistic egalitarianism and

an oddly anxious and paradoxical élitism. The common yet private process of mythologising which arrives at this result is much more potent than that more simple one which gave us Eureka, Ned Kelly and Anzac, myths which have their effect only as they find resonance in the family myths of the individual.

Peter Mathers is concerned to conduct a search for origins by showing with elaborate and unsettling care the hypocrisy inherent in current notions of how and why to conduct such a search. In one way, this leads to simple results: you want to find a sea-captain, Mathers will find you a slaver; you desiderate Spanish blood, Mathers provides Indian; you postulate inherited wealth, Mathers shows it stolen; you dream of an ancestry born to rule, Mathers reveals it to have many of the components of everyone else's, including your present victim. Done systematically enough, however, this venture proves to be anything but simple and reassuring; there is layer on layer of "reality," layers too of legend and false consciousness; a proper search into the past, undertaken without sentimentality of any kind, will discover grotesqueries in the ancestry of every one; that way, the egalitarianism *is* established, but on an utterly disconcerting basis; bad dreams under the skin.

In his second novel, *The Wort Papers*,³ this retrospect is forced on the reader by the fact that Thomas Wort, a business executive, has abandoned his past by abandoning his old parents. A persecutor calling himself Matters insists on sending him the "papers" of Percy Wort, his ne'er-do-well artist brother; these are a form of autobiography, and include the reminiscences of William Wort, failed but lovable Pommy settler, father of Tom and Percy. So a consciousness is pushed back into the social consciousness of past Australia; we and Thomas are taken relentlessly towards some notion of a personal beginning.

In *Trap*, the earlier novel, the venture is more elaborate, more spasmodic, and more overtly concerned at once with the hypocrisies of contemporary Melbourne and the senti-

mental grotesqueness of what often passes for an interest in origins and in a nation's history. Mathers reinforces his point by sending his characters through a very wide spectrum of Melbourne society; and for this purpose he uses David David, social worker and narrator, lickspittle of the wealthy Mrs. Nathan, and interviewer of Jack Trap, part-aboriginal iconoclast.

It sounds like a set-up for nihilistic irony of the "black humour" sort. But in fact it contains nothing remotely resembling a parable of aloneness or meaninglessness, and it has nothing of that dandyism of despair sometimes attributed to Beckett. Society is its theme, quite overtly, and its concern is to establish the appropriate social range and depth in time.

This is done, as I have said, by layers of retrospect which are also corrections of false consciousness: contemporary falsities are shown up by seeing their sources which they themselves deny. David David, social worker, is getting Jack Trap to define his present sociological status by talking about his past: who is he? what components went into him? and so on: Trap is a totally disconcerting character, yet not at all the nihilist or tearaway we are used to in novels which sympathetically support "the individual" against "society;" he is a fine dialectician, independent, irreverent, brusque, manly, sceptical, aware of the class war, but strangely amenable and lacking in wanton aggression. David David is dependent on him, self-doubting, conventional, sycophantic, petulant, with a penchant for hysteria. Almost everyone who has anything to do with Trap gets a touch of hysteria. Witness Mrs. Nathan on the first page:

Twenty minutes ago I telephoned Mrs. Nathan and told her of Trap's plan. She was furious.

He'll ruin everything, she screamed. Why didn't you tell me earlier? Since you've known him you've become hopeless. He's a malign influence.

A few minutes afterwards she rang back. Frantic. I cannot see the reason for her fear. She over-estimates Trap and his capabilities.

He'll ruin all, she wailed.
I do not think wail too strong a word.⁴

This David is pedantic and suggestible, but in the beginning he does not feel Trap's power which so frightens Mrs. Nathan. By the last page he is hysterically fighting off a violent non-conformism which he attributes to Trap's influence:

I doubt. I am full of doubt. I exude it. Doubt is earwax, snot, sweat, piss, shit, breath.
In fact I *know* that I still have the Trap taint with me. Psychoanalysis, I think, is my only chance (p. 298)

Trap is clearly a catalyst; and he is aided in this fictional role by his own inner calm, his observant lack of hysteria or random violence. Much of the comedy of manners which Mathers achieves comes from the contrast between Trap's ironic naturalness and David's excitable stiffness, both in speech and reflection:

If not, why trap her? Or was Mrs. Nathan trapped? Was she a destitute pensioner, an abandoned wife, an evicted tenant?

The town clerk glanced at me with the contempt I so dread. The air of disciplined man scorning his undisciplined subject.

Mrs. Nathan, he explained, of Circle Investments. Then he added, You *have* heard, haven't you?

I ventured an apologetic smile, but it got out of hand and became a sort of sub-normal laugh. (p. 8)

But any individual may appear grotesque when he or she is under observation: even Mrs. Nathan:

She laughed — about ten sucking sounds, amusing at first, then annoying. I was about to frown, when, with her last suckkk, I was overwhelmed. (p. 9)

David's associates, who are also his allies in coping with (that is, subduing or negating) Trap, range across the social spectrum; they include bureaucrats, speculators, astrologers, journalists, academics, minor and major capitalists, all of whom are in sinister though intermittent league, represented bizarrely by an astrological circle as well as by their social and psychological need to confine Trap. This need is imaged in changing ways. Mrs. Nathan, capitalist

and art-patron, jovial-malignant centre of the conspiracy, coven-leader of the astrology group, sometimes speaks of redeeming him from the corruptions of the city ("Trap, the criminal, will be redeemed for society," p. 51), though what the redemption would amount to is seen on the very next page, where the group's meeting at the pretentious Copper Pot is hilariously described. Everyone seems to know Trap in some way (how and why? are not worth asking in this socially permissive world of Mathers' imagination); to each of them he is an impediment of a psychological rather than an institutional kind. They cannot psychologically overcome the fact of him; he is irreducible factuality. David David and Mrs. Nathan make the most gallant efforts, one in the name of "social science," the other in the name of personal patronage. The general implications of all this are obvious; Mathers' characterisation implies a view of the alternative techniques of political repression used on such groups as Australian and American Aborigines.

Perhaps the greatest single force perceived and excoriated in the book is patronage. Everyone seems to be mentor or favourite — or, in some cases, both. The connections go right across usual class and occupational boundaries, linking everyone in a complex of what seems to the observer mere chance, contingency, coincidence, but to the participant observer like David David a quite "natural" pattern of acquaintanceship. Further, everyone has others to look down on. So Trap:

Then I heard this lugubrious, Hang on a minute! — behind me. It was Trap.

Had the wind been following I would have known of his presence long before. He was noisome. He was generally shocking.

He wore short, black football shorts, navy-blue Jacky Howe singlet, one sock, enormous black boots and a shabby cricket cap. Bits of scour offal stuck to him. His general messiness seemed to lighten his skin.

He nodded towards the now straining men who were heaving the stump onto the tray of the Bedford.

I hope they rupture themselves, he muttered.

Oh, I don't know, I answered. Why wish them ill?

He did not answer.
They're only doing a job, I said.
Bloody savages, he spat. (p. 42)

If David David is, as we can see here, a finely conceived comic figure, Trap is by no means so firmly in control of all encounters with him that he can force David into the role of straight man. Nor is Trap wholly attractive. He was at one time, for example, a "scaffoldwright," building scaffolds for official hangings, but sabotaging the business by making the scaffolds "too deadly." About such men develop popular legends, vaguely approving, but based on a stereotype, which can be placed against the simple facts (p. 73). When this is done, all socially approved notions of achievement or heroism or self-making are seen to be pointless; yet they persist, until there is layer upon layer of supposition and false expectation to be exposed. This enterprise is also one of the chief concerns of the novel; every separate view which people have of Trap is an example of false consciousness; the venture itself involves constant movement back and forth across the whole society; so what happens to Trap or to his associates or to the people who talk about him covers a large spectrum in time, class, and occupation. It is a peripatetic novel, in which the narrative is even more peripatetic than the hero.

The general Australian attitudes to Aborigines are marvellously and hilariously caught, as is the forceful and ironic personality of Trap, in the chapter, "Trap at Steelcyl," from which it is worth quoting at length:

Trap clocked-on and reported to Section U. He found himself with two others beside a twenty-foot by five-foot steel cylinder. They congratulated Trap on his new navy-blue boilersuit and pointed ruefully to their own shabby ones. Gesture was the only communication in the clamorous building.

The day was overcast without and, despite the arc lights and welders' lamps, dim within. Welding flashes splashed everything, shot up the corrugated walls and were lost in the smoke under the roof. The foreman watched Trap noting his surroundings.

Pretty good place, this, he shouted cheerfully.

More like hell, replied Trap looking at the roof.

The foreman thought, Well wadaya know! A boong on hell. He answered: Arseholes — good place here — money and conditions

The third man, Charlie, hadn't heard their conversation, but he guessed its nature, and nodded quickly. They set to work on the cylinder. Charlie welded gussets to attachments at one end while Trap and the foreman fitted the manhole flange to the top. After smoko Trap was told to chip some slag from a run near the flange. He attacked it with his hammer and the metal rang. Suddenly, the foreman screamed and slid to the ground, clutching his face. To Trap's genuine commiserations, he shouted:

A fuggenbida fuggenslag in me eye!

Jack apologized again. And would the foreman like him to call the ambulance attendant? Snorting contemptuously the foreman rejected the offer and decided that as well as being an airy-fairy boong, the rat was also a malingerer. Do anything to get away from the job. Squinting fiercely, he resumed work. Trap tapped away at the dull crust of slag. The metal he exposed was bright grey. He wondered what he was making. He looked up and down the shed. There were dozens of different sorts of work in progress. Some pieces bizarre enough for any chemical plant, others surely meant for atomic reactors. But he didn't think there was much chance of him working on anything secret. Not that he worried — weapons and tines were the same to him. The bloodier wars became, the more striking the lesson. Somewhere in this adage a flaw existed, but he hadn't found it. Still The stainless steel tubes of the F-shaped structure along the line could be equipment for breeding the plague for all he now cared.

And soon the shop steward would arrive and ask the usual questions. And Trap would parry them. And the steward would bring pressure to bear. And Trap would murmur, OK, OK, I was just testing, I'll pay. And then the man would probably harangue and tell of how he and his supporters were doing all in their power to help the likes of Trap and just look at the thanks they got.

The shop steward arrived and Trap went with him to the wall, where the anticipated dialogue occurred, was finalized and Trap left the poorer, and the man richer and feeling that in Trap there was good material if only it could be organized. It just needed bringing out. But in spite of it all there was no doubt that the Abos lacked go. Not of course that he wanted them as keen and grasping as the Balts who abounded in the works — Christ, what if it happened! He was sud-

denly appalled by the idea of a black board of directors. As he hurried away, he glanced behind and saw Trap slowly returning to the whaling job.

Jack resumed chipping. Across the line someone used a descaling tool and the shattering forced the foreman to almost kiss Trap's ear.

I wouldn't have too much to do with the shop steward, he shouted, he's a Com.

Trap nodded. The foreman warmed towards him and felt ashamed of his previous behaviour. He decided to invite him home for a meal sometime. But. But what if Trap's wife was one of those scrawny, thin-legged Abos with a dozen kids — perhaps she was even a full-blood? What if they all came, yelling as though it were a corroboree, dancing down the street from the bus stop, bouncing off the new prunus shrubs the Council had just planted, walking along the Adams' new cream brick wall and then the Jones' white picket fence — perhaps even leaning over and picking the flowers? And what if they played with some local kiddies and hadn't washed proper or something? Jesus, he groaned. What if if they gave a neighbour's kiddie the jack or something? God. Next thing you'd know the bastards'd be moving into the street. Turn it into a slum and knock values to hell.

Yes, there was no doubt about this Trap character, he looked a tricky sod. Probably be like the dagos — get a leg in today, and all the mates are in tomorrow. Live on the smell of an oil-rag, too. Yams and nettles and that. See 'em digging yams in parks now, even. Taking over the country, the bastards. One thing about the boong, though — you can always pick 'em. Not like lots of Europeans, who're like the Poms. Yes, the boongs stand out. Bleaches won't help 'em, either, as they've still got to get the noses done up.

As this shows, Trap is not a mere victim of the society which would alternately repress and patronise him; he is smarter, more watchful, more daring, and above all more inner-directed than those around him; in a sense, then, he triumphs, even in the mind of the foreman whose growing panic reflects Trap's power over his imagination. He unsettles people. As Nina says, "You go to him a reasonable conservative sort, a defender of established things and you leave fermenting with ideas of — wait for it — anarchism, nihilism, Buddhism, allisms, and wild, general revolt." (p. 10); or, as David muses in his own panicky way, "There is something about Trap — appeal? menace? mystery? Al-

ready I see several people in a new light." (p. 15); or, "I think Trap is basically an experimenter. His life alternates between trance and experiment." (p. 101). Really, though, Trap's strength, and the basis of his triumph, is that he *doesn't care*. He energetically doesn't care.

In an introduction like this, which is little more than a note, it would be impossible to attempt any full-scale criticism. Something ought to be said, however, about two obvious features of the book's development.

First, the novel opens out backwards, and runs all the dangers involved in doing so. Positively, it creates a sense both of variable histories and of variable interpretations of the one history; the implication is that you *can* piece together a past if you have the documents and the will to understand what they say (Trap is one of the few who have both); most people do not have the will, and most present identities are therefore built on euphemising hearsay. In addition, the retrospective method has the virtue of showing how people *may* have a common ancestry, the denial of which falsifies history; Trap the part-aborigine shares an ancestry with the capitalist Peters and the aristocratic settler Sancty-Mony; but this is no cause for self-congratulation, for the history of the Peters and the Sancty-Monys, as it is known to Trap, has large sleazy patches; there is ambiguity everywhere.

So, no doubt, there should be. But it is in these reticulations back into origins, into the roots of the now flourishing lies, that the book's weaknesses occur; too much is postulated; lengthy answers are offered to questions never asked; and a certain amount is merely asserted as a matter of bizarre irony: as, for example, that Colonel Sancty-Mony, fount of the respectability of later ages, made a packet out of shrunken heads. To say this, however, is simply to say that the chief strength of the book clings deeply to its attendant weakness: the sense of a society proliferated revealingly in time and space (Trap is related to an astonishing number of people) is bound to go with a

sense that some of the detail offered has relatively little meaning in relation to what we have already apprehended as the book's centre, Jack Trap and the society he lives in.

Second, the prose is directed towards this proliferation. There are no lyrical passages whatever (as there were even in Herbert's *Capricornia*); the texture of the prose is terse, jagged, the syntax generally simple, frequently broken and exclamatory, the sentences mostly short. There is, in fact, no narrative *flow* of any sort; Mathers has not sought a single one of those myriad methods of creating flow which the modern novel shows. What dominates the narrative structure is the possibility, even certainty, of moment-to-moment interruption; in this, the prose presents edgy and distracted lives. We may have a diary encapsulating conversations encapsulating further diaries or reminiscences encapsulating stretches of experience whose source is sometimes known, sometimes not; there is always something *more* to be told, corrected, or explained. Hence the movement through dislocation.

Yet it is in no way a mean or cramped book. One's sense is of great amplitude and generosity of concern; that amplitude is found not in the rhythm of the prose but in a multifariousness of perspectives. If we think of Dickens, with the self-perpetuating energy in his prose, its almost fulsome presence, its structure of plot and sub-plot and its habit of elaborating incident as such, Mathers' approach may seem meagre; but an important principle of economy is at work. Nor is it like *Ulysses*, to take another pole and model, where everything flows into and out of everything, and we are conscious above all of flux; in *Trap*, edges are kept sharp and distinct. Nor is it like the world of Donleavy, in which the hero is the barely resistant centre of the many things that happen to him; *Trap*, by contrast, happens to many things.

If *Trap* hasn't any of these kinds of familiar abundance, neither has it anything like the picaresque structure which, in many forms, the modern novel attempts. It is not about

Trap as a single travelling consciousness experiencing a various world and moving from place to place in it. It is about Australian history as it reticulates into the present Australian society. Although Jack Trap does move around a lot, we are conscious less of his mobility than of a powerful fixity, settledness, which has to do with his personality. He is not so much an adventurer as a centre of significance and ambivalence who is encountered or sought by others.

NOTES

- ¹H. P. Heseltine, "Australian Image," *Meanjin*, 21, No. 1 (1962), 35-49.
- ²Brian Mathews, *The Receding Wave* (Melbourne: Melbourne Univ. Press, 1972).
- ³Peter Mathers, *The Wort Papers* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1972).
- ⁴Peter Mathers, *Trap* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1966), p. 3. Further page references to *Trap* appear parenthetically.