Christopher Pollnitz lectures at the University of Newcastle, to support an interest in poet-novelists like D.H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy.

Australian Verse Novels

Some thirty verse novels have been published in Australia since the mid 1970s, the number accelerating through the nineties into the turn of the millennia, yet little has been written about this phenomenon. Even in the USA, where Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate* (1986) made a considerable splash, discussion of the verse novel has focused on Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (1823–31), with the occasional scholar worrying how to define the paradoxical genre. For the purposes of this essay, a verse novel is defined as a work the poet has chosen to call by that name, or any extended verse narrative that can be assessed in terms of both its versification and its handling of basic novelistic properties like character, plot and point of view. It is not difficult, using these means, to determine that what Douglas Stewart called the ‘Voyager Poems’ of Slessor, FitzGerald, McAuley and Webb were not prototypical verse novels; that Rex Ingamells’s *The Great South Land* (1951) is a nationalist epic with no novelistic allegiances; that Laurie Duggan’s *The Ash Range* (1987) is a William Carlos Williams-style documentary. The input of the Australian poetic tradition into the Australian verse novel has been oblique, the stronger lines of influence descending from the central English canon.
Like a bright youngster, the Australian verse novel has a precocious interest in its own genesis. Poet-novelists indulge in self-reflexive digressions about the rules for what they’re doing as they discover them. In Solstice (1994) Matt Rubinstein takes a Mount Lofty view of twenty-four hours in Adelaide, one December 21st. In the morning, a Danish backpacker drops into a Rundle Street bookshop to browse the shelves:

With true delight she finds the most
Impressive rhyming book to date,
Through which she thumbs and reads, engrossed:
It's Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate.
Responsible for the revival
Of history's most proud tradition
Of epic poems, its arrival
Fulfils its chivalrous ambition
To reinstate the sonnet form
Unto its former glory, saving
Tetrameter, too, from the storm
Of faceless history, and paving
The way for others on the list
(At least one is known to exist).

Rubinstein forgoes the Pushkinian sonnet's oscillation of feminine and masculine rhymes, and makes do with the octosyllabic Shakespearean sonnet, though his verse is most light-footed with a tailwind of multiple rhymes. In his imitation of Seth, Rubinstein constructs a neatly symmetrical plot, but his romantic leads are too whingeing an artistic male and too well-laminated a material girl to hold reader interest. Solstice has an agreeable lightness, but the characters lack the intensity, the capacity to shock, that may be expected of the Australian genre.

Getting his time scheme from Joyce or Woolf and his stanza from Seth, Rubinstein casts a shallower net for models than the inventors of the Australian verse novel. The Golden Gate came out a decade too late to serve as a template for the first experimenters this side of the Pacific. In 1980, Les Murray gave The Boys Who Stole the Funeral the subtitle A Novel Sequence. While his biographer, Peter
Alexander, claims *The Boys* as root and origin of both Australian and American developments, the first Australian work worth calling a verse novel, Alan Wearne's 'Out Here', appeared in 1976; and a year earlier, Dorothy Porter's 'Rat-Tower' made up part of her first volume, *Little Hoodlum* (1975). 'Rat-Tower' is a narrative poem rather than a verse novel, a modernising of Robert Southey's feisty ballad, 'God's Judgement on a Wicked Bishop'. I have Porter herself to thank for identifying her source; she remembers her parents reading it aloud from *The Oxford Book of Narrative Verse*, where Iona and Peter Opie retitle it 'Bishop Hatto'. Legendary and rat-obsessed, Hatto was a partial model for Browning's Pied Piper, and perhaps for those other episcopal renegades who pour their sins out in Browning's monologues. Porter's Hatto is an offhanded sociopath, quick to envy and to bore. Some of his traits he passes on to later Dorothy Porter monsters – the protagonist of *Akhenaten* and Peter Cyren in *What a Piece of Work*. Hatto sets fire to a barnful of peasants; Cyren negligently incinerates a wingful of asylum inmates. After taking lessons from Browning's monologues, Porter, Wearne and Murray qualified as drivers of the verse novel, and each has gone on to produce more than one novel in verse.

Before *Wild Summise* (2002), Porter constructed all her fictions from the protagonist's interior monologues. Borrowing Projectivism's short, stepped lines and typographical tricks, Porter frees her free verse from the look 'Old Hippety-Hop o' the accents' gave to his pages of blank or rhymed verse, but in the course of a fiction her single speakers display egos as distended as any in Browning's portrait gallery. Alan Wearne's 'Out Here' is a wheel of nine monologues spoken by the relatives, mentors and friends of a high-school student, Brett Viney, who has mutilated himself in the school toilets. The model for Wearne's verse novella is Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69), in which Browning writes of the different colours of the twelve epic monologues spinning together to generate the white light of truth, the truth about the wife-murderer, Guido Franceschini. For Wearne, the jostle of monologues does not even build to a muddy whiteness: the composite of the opinions and ruminations resists unification into a single thesis. Brett Viney himself wonders why he
CHRISTOPHER POLLNITZ

did it - 'suicide? No I never intended it' - and reaches no conclusion. Neither does Wearne's plot reach a conclusion, the trickles of action sinking into a watertable of rumour and speculation. How to reconcile the high-density language of poetry with the fluency of novelistic action is a problem Murray tackles head-on in The Boys Who Stole the Funeral, with what seem very different results. Accelerating the plot to full throttle, Murray moves the action on to a mythic, psychosexual plane, while a reader struggles to keep up with, or suspend disbelief about, the characters and their motives. Yet The Boys and 'Out Here' pose similar questions about testosterone and the outlets that young males require or find, to vent their surplus energy.

The sonnet sequence is the other gate by which Australian verse novelists process up the steps of their Parnassus. Murray wrote the cycle, 'Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato', before embarking on his 140-sonnet The Boys Who Stole the Funeral. John Scott built up to 'Narratives 1982–1984' through the shorter sequences in his Selected Poems - 'Three Sonnets: Before Her Death', for example, or 'Five Sonnets: History'. No Petrarchan or Elizabethan sonnet sequence is free of narrative: if the mistress's hair is angelically golden in one sonnet, and her eyes nothing like the sun in the next, the sequencing floods the hiatus with narrative implication. Sixteenth-century sonnet sequences can seem startlingly filmic and postmodern in their narrative constructions. Since Murray does not, however, use the sonnets to dislocate the linear narrative, the breaks seem simply to punctuate the action, or better, to permit pockets of concentration. In an essay preparing the ground for The Boys' reception, Murray recalls how he was blocked until deciding on the sonnet as a compositional unit; then the narrative he was writing appeared to unfold itself, 'moving at a rapid underlying speed but containing...stillness, the timeless pointing quality which poetry reconciles with movement'.

The accolade of having written the first novel in English sonnets rests with the Victorian poet-novelist, George Meredith, whose Modern Love (1862) deals with the breakdown of a marriage not unlike Meredith's own. Meredith devised a sixteen-line sonnet, four abba quatrains, to avoid the closure which the concluding couplet stamps on a Shakespearean sonnet. In The Nightmarkets (1986) Wearne again
salutes a Victorian predecessor by having his protagonist, Ian Metcalfe, mull things over in sixteen-liners. For their formal model, Murray in *The Boys* and Scott in his sonnet sequences go back no further than Ted Berrigan; and from Berrigan they take none of the parodic playfulness, just the idea of a sonnet as a fourteen-line room in which to condense as much action, dialogue and atmosphere as possible. In the opening octave of 'Five Sonnets: History', for instance, Scott invokes the topos of the expulsion from Eden to surround a mysterious art work with narrative implications of nature denatured, of ecological barbarism, of a crime against humanity or some ghoulish medical malpractice. The short sequence takes on a blurred allegorical force that would be writ large in 'Narratives 1982–1984'. In composing narratives extended enough to be called verse novels, 'St Clair' for instance, Scott nevertheless abandoned the sonnet. Indeed, Peter Porter once remarked to me that, fine as 'St Clair' was as *writing*, it wasn't poetry, wasn't verse. But the line Scott evolved in the eighties is a verse – a roughly dodecasyllabic line, with two or three syllables added to keep the ghosts of pentameter at bay. This syllabic staple can be adjusted to blank verse and made to sound *vieux jeu*. Unadjusted, the line avoids the singsong of English pentameter and the sonorousness of the French Alexandrine without eschewing the sense of a contemplative measure – a measure that recalls the surreality of nineteenth-century prose poetry. The edgily dreamy rhythms of this verse are the mark of a well-read intelligence holding explosive sexual and political themes at arm's length.

It is worth returning a moment to Murray's account of how the writing of *The Boys* took on a momentum of its own. In his biography of Pushkin, Henri Troyat argues that, as he composed the last chapters of *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin experienced an afflatus which carried him in the direction of a new psychological realism, deepening the portrait of Tatyana and making possible an ending in which she becomes a conflicted figure worthy of a full-scale novel. Peter Alexander records Murray's discomfiture at finding how a fiction that came so inevitably – of young men searching for a way to 'blood' themselves, for some ordeal which the harpy feminists who dog their tracks are anxious to deny them – disaffected readers and cost him friends. Detectable within Murray's essay about *The Boys* is an unease at being dragged...
involuntarily, as if by the genre, into areas of religious and psycho-
sexual controversy he might, with hindsight, have preferred to avoid.
Signs of a struggle to wrest back control of the narrative are fossilised
in the text. Some sonnets from The Boys are, not monologues, but Waste
Land washes of argots and voices in which speakers are identified by a
typographical 'signature'. In Sonnet 57, a media man interrogates
Father Mulherin just before he conducts the funeral for the Digger
whose body the Boys have (reverentially) hijacked:

*But wouldn't you agree, Father, that the First World War
was in part a post-Christian en-masse human sacrifice?*

*No. It was warfare. Don't make it an even worse thing.*

*But surely you believe, Father, in the efficacy of sacrifice:
'Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins?*

*That is completed in Christ's blood, comes the answer.*

*Isn't sacrifice still, though, the great guarantor of sincerity?*

*Doesn't it seal and commit, transform spirits, involve godhead?*

*Murder can do all that, snaps Mulherin at the journalist.*

The two speakers are sufficiently differentiated (the journalist blabbering
popular anthropology, the priest barely suppressing his anger in the
effort to speak plainly) not to require further designation. The point of
'snaps Mulherin' must therefore be to ensure that the priest's words are
not taken for what in one sense they are, authorial voice-over. At this
stage of the blood-psychology debate Murray is having an argument
with himself and battling, not wholly successfully, to maintain
distance from his characters. He appears disconcerted by the lurid play
of sex and violence in which his verse novel is immersing him. What
it is in writing verse novels that precipitates poets, used enough to
working beyond what they consciously know, into even deeper
currents, no doubt varies from writer to writer. Whether cast as first-
person monologues or third-person narratives, verse novels nonetheless plunge their authors into quasi-confessional intensities. It is as if the verse novelist cannot rest content with Conrad/Kurtz's hoarse 'The horror, the horror', but must go to the length of a Guido Franceschini, articulating what the inarticulate horror is that fuels a long and usually unavailing confession. The poetic intensity of the revelations fuels the articulation, and the articulation discovers or hints at further horrors, still surfacing through the irresistible speech.

Sociological critics who wish to define the Australian verse novel as a commercial genre will presumably fasten, not on its narrative tone, but the statistic that over a third of those published are Young Adult verse novels, the bulk of them offered by the University of Queensland Press for secondary-school consumption. A survey of these adolescent fictions can be found in a 2002 number of mETAphor; here I shall confine myself to discussing the doyen of the YA verse novel, Steven Herrick. Herrick professes himself an admirer of such American verse fictions as Karen Hesse's Out of the Dust (1997) and Robert Cormier's Frenchtown Summer (1999), though both these YA novels overlap with publication of Herrick's first two, the dyad Love, Ghosts and Nose Hair (1996) and A Place Like This (1998). The verse novels Herrick began producing in the nineties — narratives in which a protagonist's free-verse monologues become progressively more intercut by monologues of other characters — must have been largely his own invention. Other YA writers who have taken up the burden since — Catherine Bateson and Michelle Taylor, Margaret Wild and Libby Hathorn — are not mere followers. Each introduces a new inflection to her fictions, though none is impervious to Herrick's lead.

Herrick's virtuosity is apparent in his fixing young characters' ages by their voices. He creates the illusion of letting the young speak for themselves. If he has a danger topic it is teenage sex: he is upfront, though not unrealistic, about its prevalence and pleasures. It may be why, though his early verse novels were short-listed by the Children's Book Council, he had to wait until The Spangled Drongo (1999) — in which twelve-year-old Sam is mainly interested in playing soccer with his new friend, Jess — to receive the award. Most of his plots use the formula of a missing or abusive parent, to the point where, in his most
recent fiction, *Tom Jones Saves the World* (2002), Herrick makes a running joke out of dead parents. The verse in *Love, Ghosts and Nose Hair* is based on a sometimes witty, sometimes predictable, rhetorical parallelism. Not until the sequel, *A Place Like This*, in which teen lovers Jack and Annabel make friends with a still younger girl, Emma, the daughter of an orchardist whose wife has deserted the family, does the free verse take on a firmer dramatic structure. The issues for sixteen-year-old Emma are teenage pregnancy and the need to escape from a farm with which she has a passionate love-hate relationship. At the close Emma reasons through her options with her father. The line-endings reflect the tacks and turns of her argument with herself, a self emerging as she makes her decision:

I start talking to Dad  
about my baby  
about Mum leaving us  
and never coming back.  
I tell him about school  
and the long afternoons in Maths  
when I dreamed myself away,  
away anywhere.  
And about Jack and Annabel  
smart and ready  
and I’m wondering where all that smartness comes from  
and I figure some from parents,  
some from school, and some from a place inside you.  
I tell Dad  
I got smart from him,  
and I’m smart deep inside,  
but from school I got nothing but pregnant.

The lines continue, straight-talking and taut, as Emma explains why she is sending Jack and Annabel on their way, 'like young lovers', and will return to school after her baby is born. Herrick's trick is to persuade us that his admirable youngsters have the self-reflective maturity to make decisions that few teenagers can, or do, make.
The adult focus of Philip Hodgins, in Dispossessed (1994), and Geoff Page, in The Scarring (1999), is again rural life. Hodgins confines himself to a few days in the eighties, while Page manages a sixty-year historical sweep, from the 1930s to the nineties. Both fictions are third-person narratives that reproduce a generation's stories in that generation's idiom. One reason for the third-person is that both poets' tales are of marital failures of communication. To couch these stories as interior monologues would imply that Hodgins's and Page's couples have an access to their feelings that they are denied. Sally remembers confiding freely in her husband before his departure to New Guinea with the AIF, but the silences that multiply between them invade and destroy their intimacy. Hodgins's Len and Liz, hanging on before the bank repossesses their rundown farm off the Calder Highway, occupy the other end of the rural spectrum to Page's Hal and Sally, who breed stud Herefords on the Upper Clarence. Yet more than economic stresses fracture the relationships in Dispossessed and The Scarring: Hodgins and Page calibrate the antagonism and misogyny implicit in speech acts and the masonic rites of mateship, and show how these stresses bring their women and their men to grief.

In The Scarring Page starts in a clckettty-clack iambic tetrameter but is soon using it as a base-line over which to play jazz variations. What most needed breaking in post-Victorian poetry was not the neck of pentameter but the iambic vertebrae. Demobbed, Hal returns to the marital bed and broods on how he has colluded with a Sydney gynaecologist to have Sally sterilised for adultery:

You have a little problem there.
No problem with two skins
and all their beautiful conjunctions,
not a problem with the urge,
not one either with performance.
Just a certain pointlessness...
Spay the bitch, was what he said.
There is no way to tell her that.
Nothing joined to nothingness...
And soon they'll try it once again.
Page slips in and out of Hal's and Sal's points of view in verse that is sufficiently flexible in its cadences, whereas in Dispossessed Hodgins's mechanical pentameters remain an impediment to appreciating the subtleties of his imagery.

Once the imagery is attended to compensations are on offer. On the novel's second-last day, the pregnant Liz is glad to be left alone by her husband Len and father-in-law, the Aboriginal- and woman-hating Max. As she walks by the creek, Liz comes across an eviscerated ram and a gum trunk used as a strainer post, with 'ruby sap...crystallised in lines' on the fence wires. Such items hold more information for a reader than for Liz; they plot her attempts to come to terms with a failing marriage, and they imply her dissociation, her inability to understand why images of ringbarking attract her. The night of the storm she quarrels with Len over his dalliance with propaganda that is anti-bank and anti-Semitic. Next day, she walks again along the engorged creek, and this time, the images build suspense over whether she is consciously contemplating suicide. She is left standing by the creek, 'undecided and subdued'. Next chapter sees her decision: Len returns from a day of humiliation inflicted by Max and finds Liz has packed and left, taking their daughter with her. Hodgins's laconic technique is that of the short story; it builds to an open-ended, sour-mouthed close. Both verse novels tell of couples torn apart by silence and family history; both generate a powerfully understated pathos.

John Tranter and John Scott contrive different subtleties to handle similar psychological extremities in their fashionably self-reflexive verse novels. Both violate the border between character and narrator psychology. Tranter constructs fantasies of madness from which there is no clear exit; Scott's shock tactics hold up a mirror to the represented violence and deviance so as to arraign the reader and the writer for prurience. Monologic in tendency, Tranter's 'Gloria' is a palimpsest of charades, of narrative game-playing with affinities to the nouveau roman. The melodramatic implausibility of Gloria's first-person narrative eventually snaps a listener's suspended disbelief, but her self-disguises fall away without revealing a clear motive for her self-revelation or attention-seeking. This dismantling of confessional premises makes for a satisfyingly sceptical set of beautiful lies but an
unconvincing set of verse lines, when, for instance, the group therapy leader inspects the typescript Gloria is threatening to read:

Masterson held a page up to the light
as though something semi-transparent
were hidden underneath the layers of erasures
and white-out, behind the second thoughts
and reconsiderations, a drift, an argument
that might unravel and explain itself
if he stared through it thoughtfully enough.
He puffed an old pipe, the grey-blue smoke
almost invisible in the hazy light –
dark green tweed, with elbow patches –
from an old British movie – a murder mystery
set in some sleepy village before the war –
a doctor, a serious reader, a teacher, perhaps –
and that this message was a kind of pleading:
see me as an uncle, a tutor, a friend,
but not as the fraud I fear I am.

The lines play syntactical games with an aplomb handed on from Auden and Ashbery, but the half-dozen lines of pentameter which Tranter allows himself exorcise accentual-syllabic ghosts less skilfully than in Scott's work. Between the poles of formality and free verse, the line seems to sag like so much familiar washing. By contrast, Gloria/Marjorie/Karen's confession, while it might be interpreted as the symptoms of a multiple personality disorder – she purports to be relaying a kid sister's story, as told to a twin sister – fascinates with its unreliability. 'Gloria' is the narrative of a mediumistic aetiology, or – in a Lacanian age – the study of the personal instability that makes us play to self-images. What disturbs most in this verse fiction is how calmly, as if Gloria were Conrad's Russian Harlequin, the veils of self-disguise play over the Punch-and-Judy theatre of murder and dismemberment.

Scott's 'Narratives' are tied together through their grotty, *Nineteen Eighty Four* settings. 'St Clair' takes place in a futuristic Britain
of yesteryear, a Britain that has worked overtime to become more repressive than it was under Thatcher. Psychiatric hospitals have been converted into jails in which prisoners of conscience are, by primitive methods trialed in the USSR, tortured into adopting 'sane' beliefs. Though narrated in the third person, the sections of 'St Clair' function as monologues which, at each re-reading, yield further insights into Scott's triumvirate of characters. There is Warren, the psychiatrist who holds back from resigning while his asylum is reduced to a house of inquisition and he to a self-loathing sadist; Sheehan, the principled university teacher, who brings his volume of Henri Michaux and 'map of Ecuador' to the hospital, but is soon lost in the political geography of St Clair; and Finchley, 'the last of the legitimate patients', a neurotic wimp who stages the only protest against the new regime. Eventually, all three succumb to their roles as torturer and victim. Scott's sense of history is tinctured with Foucauldian premises, and the libertarian references which stud the text include Blake's 'satanic mills'.

The compression and intensity of 'St Clair', on which the claim for rating this nineteen-page narrative a verse novel is based, involve readers in a meta-fictional struggle to determine what is real, what delusion, as Warren's mind disintegrates. A bullyingly intrusive narrator repeats the formula which Warren and his 'guards' use while torturing dissidents: 'Do you understand? Do things seem clearer now?' In his peroration the narrator exhorts readers to 'resist this murderous care, this history', then rounds out this injunction with the cry, 'Resist these poems'. Presumably the imperative relates to Blake's, about resisting the chains of another's system. Given the Orwellian torture methods of St Clair, this concern with the ethics of the narrative method can seem a touch highfalutin.

'Run in the Stocking' is set around 2040, after a nuclear holocaust. Disappearance of the northern hemisphere has reduced Australia to North (formerly Sydney) and South (formerly Melbourne). With the coming of the 'petrovoid', steam trains link the two cities. While other technologies have regressed, neuroscience has advanced to the point where surgeons can replace the memory banks of obstreperous dissidents, effectively implanting new identities. Dover Andersson emerges from hospital in North after what he believes has been an operation on
his spleen (hence the many allusions to Baudelaire). He suffers recurrent nightmares in which he re-enacts the murder of a prostitute, Ingrid, when he was working in South. He confesses to a disbelieving police inspector — a latter-day Quixote in search of his true self — then journeys to South to visit the site of Ingrid’s burial. This turns out to be a nuclear waste; the South he ‘remembers’ is buried under fifteen years of social engineering. Guided by a shard of anomalous memory, Andersson discovers his ‘spleen’ operation has remodelled his face and reprogrammed his brain. His identity as Andersson has been recorded over his past life as Terry Rutherford, professor of philosophy at the University of South and outspoken critic of the government. As Rutherford, Andersson has witnessed the murder of his lover by state thugs. The recovery of that memory, in the room in which he was made to watch the murder, unravels the identity pulled down stocking-like over his mind. Judith Anders is the Frankensteinian psychologist who created Andersson in North, who embedded her image in his memory, and who named it ‘Ingrid’ in an allusion to Hitchcock’s Spellbound. In a parody of Spellbound’s ending, Rutherford returns to North to murder his creator, Anders/Ingrid, so fulfilling his role as Andersson. ‘Run in the Stocking’ may be read as a parable about the survival, against futuristic odds, of political conscience; as a nouveau roman about the deconstruction of ‘character’ by a postmodern ‘writer’; as an intertextual metafiction about the death of the author. This prismatic play of interpretative possibilities is juxtaposed with the grisly exhumation of the murdered prostitute, a procedure that, ‘Run in the Stocking’ assures the postmodern reader, never happened. Such a narrative ‘flaw’ or puzzle perfectly balances the highly charged poles, of Gothic horror and symbolist artifice, in this beautifully devised verse fiction.

Whereas Scott turned in his verse auteur’s badge after the eighties, Murray, Wearne and Dorothy Porter have continued to explore the genre’s possibilities. The ambition of the repeat verse novelist and the contribution this makes to the intensity and scale of the fictions produced should not be overlooked. Murray’s declared objective, in writing The Boys, was to reclaim ‘narrative for poetry’ and recapture ‘the ground which the senior literary form’ had lost to fiction in the nineteenth century and ‘film and TV’ in the twentieth. His fascination
with the linguistic families of Western and Eastern Europe – snippets of Welsh, Turkish and many languages between are incorporated in Fredy Neptune – gives his second verse fiction an affinity with Joyce's Ulysses. Wearne's comprehensive urban realism in The Nightmarkets also twins his Melbourne with Joyce's Dublin. The ease with which a poet-novelist like Michael Ondaatje has moved back and forth between prose poetry and fiction in his work appears to owe something to another modernist, D.H. Lawrence. Postcolonial novels like Ondaatje's The English Patient, or Stow's Visitants, or Malouf's Remembering Babylon – novels that tell of postcolonial horror with a gracile elegance – are cast in a poetic prose that belongs on the same shelf as Porter's Akhenaten or Murray's The Boys.

The ambitious verse novelist does not stop short at pillaging the canons of prose fiction and verse. David McCooey has proposed of Dorothy Porter's Wild Surname (2002) that her writing libretti for Jonathan Mills's operas has raised the drama of her verse novels to a still higher pitch. The best approach to Porter's latest offering is to see it as an allegorical danse macabre with the devil (a nihilist astronomer for whom the universe is black holes and dead matter) and an angel-psychopomp (a husband dying of cancer). The best novelistic moment in Wild Surname, a widow's rediscovery of the suburban garden her husband had loved, stands outside this allegory by virtue of its pathos and realism. In Porter's What a Piece of Work (1999), an exposé of seventies psychiatry set in Sydney's Callan Park, the inmate and poet Frank is a caricature of Francis Webb. Porter may be gesturing to Webb's radio dramas as precursors. Webb's Birthday (1953) foreshadows Fredy Neptune, and perhaps the voices in The Floor of Heaven owe something to Tranter's time producing radio plays for the ABC. Murray's The Boys and the second half of Tranter's 'Breathless' steal, embarrassingly or defiantly, from B-grade action and rebel movies. One apparent ambition of the Australian verse novelist is to synthesise all narrative genres and medias, from opera to sacred allegory, radio drama to film.

For a writer whose talents seem to be for refining the Romantic sublime to the still higher octane of her short lines, Porter has unexpected novelistic talents. She has an ear for idiom and can build with the better blocks of popular culture. In The Monkey's Mask (1994), her
female PI has 'plenty of stomach for trouble...I want you trouble/ on the rocks'. Digging up information on a young murder victim leaves the detective, Jill Fitzpatrick, stranded among university freshers. As she hears 'fun fun fun', Jill is appalled to discover 'I'm a mono 'Beach Boys record/ my heart breaks// like surf. Porter rings bells for detective thriller aficionados: the murdered girl, Mickey Norris, gets her first name from Spillane's Mike Hammer series, her surname from Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep (1939); and Jill is the same age as Philip Marlowe in the Chandler classic. As she uncovers details of her secret life and poetry, Jill identifies ever more closely with Mickey. The INXS sex scenes Jill has with Mickey's former creative writing lecturer, Diana Maitland, are suspiciously similar to those that killed Mickey. A reader solves the mystery ahead of Jill, the structural irony working like a Jane Austen novel in which a too-naive Elizabeth Bennet finds herself shackled up with Wickham. There is a moment of Marlovian disillusionment - 'I was part of the nastiness now' - before Jill snaps back into irrepressibility, puts on her ape costume and exits swinging through the jungle of Sydney's underworld. Throughout, Jill injects streaks of irony into her homages to Diana as the Triple Goddess, as when Diana offers to replicate the extremes of Mickey's last moments, and Jill's honesty about blacking-out undercuts the titillation: 'her lips grazing my eyes/ her knee in my cunt// jerking between suffocation/ and coming// I can't remember if it was nice/ or not'. Stroke by novelistic stroke the detective plot and hard-boiled diction build up the personality of Jill Fitzpatrick, the most complete of Porter's characters.

Porter's male protagonists are maniacal Hattos in their spheres. The young pharaoh and sun god of Akhenaten (1992) is a self-destructive, dangerous-to-know egotist. However, in Porter's account, Akhenaten's downfall is his polymorphous sexuality, not his religious iconoclasm. Akhenaten has his self-confidence corrupted by incest with his daughters, even though, in anthropological likelihood, pharaonic incest was a ritual expectation of him. To make Akhenaten into a libertarian whose daring is contaminated by self-loathing is more than a fictional recreation of the archaeological evidence: it reduces the verse novel to historical romance. In What a Piece of Work the incest fantasies work in the other direction. Peter Cyren is a Push
male and a psychiatrist, whose ideas on ethical practice are a match for Diana Maitland's: Cyren does what he likes with his power and his patients. What he likes is to be loved, Mother never having given him enough. Although there are amusing sidelights to his Oedipal complex - Cyren is a Jungian, and his ex-wife, who doesn't understand him, a Freudian - his character is founded on a psychoanalytic cliché. Cyren’s wrecking of lives adds incident but not surprise to the plot, and his desire and self-loathing are not mixed enough to give his monologues variety.

Addiction and prostitution, teenage sex and middle-aged adultery, ambition and burn-out, political, police and public-service corruption - there ought to be plenty of intensity in the two long verse novels, since 'Our Here', which Alan Wearne has seen through the press - The Nightmarkets (1986) and The Lovemakers (2001 and 2004). Intensities are muted, however, first by the non-judgmental gossip in which all Wearne’s personae indulge, and finally by his monologists’ conviction of their ordinariness. Wearne is no Juvenal, avoids shock tactics and leaves a residue of comic surprise at how recognisably human are the knaves and fools, times and crimes, he records. His is an un-ideological fascination for stories and for people, for how we articulate our own and others’ experience. In an issue of Scripsi that weighed Seth’s The Golden Gate against The Nightmarkets, David Carter described the 'intricate plotting and unplotted sprawl' of Wearne’s verse novel as couched in a Melbourne vernacular, which Carter thought he had grown up with but had to 'learn to read'. Wearne’s private languages create an alienation-effect that makes Bruce Dawe’s demotic sound constructed, but he does not stop at poetic diction. He is a writer who reinvents every literary convention he needs to do us a poem.

Analysing drafts of The Nightmarkets in Australian Literary Studies, Martin Duwell graphs how Wearne veered away from a formulaic detective plot, like that of The Monkey’s Mask, and instead adopted a story-line in which (in his own words to Michael Sharkey) 'nothing really happens'. The investigative reporter uncovers nothing; there is no driving main plot; and the many subplots peter out into urban sprawl. If The Nightmarkets has a centre it is composed of five characters: Ian Metcalfe, the easily distracted investigative journalist;
his brother Robert Metcalfe, a Labor candidate; Sue Dobson, who risks prostituting her political principles when she forms a liaison with a renegade Liberal; John McTaggart, the Don Chipp renegade whom Malcolm Fraser has come to resemble; and Terri Lockhart, the 'hostess' Ian goes to, first to dig up dirt, then out of obsession with her. The Nightmarkets' detective plot gets nowhere, that is. In Wearne's prose fantasy on Australian Rules, Kicking in Danger (1997), the detective plot is an excuse for a string of 'interviews' with personalities from Victoria's football fandom, but is eventually capped off by a comic-fantastic denouement. By comparison, The Nightmarkets' lack of a major plot robs it of narrative-seductive power and requires a reader be as interested in the people as is the author. On wavelength, Wearne exposes the artificiality of the literary conventions that make novel-reading possible, but when he drifts off frequency, the very idiom of his monologues becomes unrecognisable.

At the close of The Nightmarkets, Wearne has Ian Metcalfe muse: 'Each tale is a culture. Want to learn/ how many more may be obtained starting from us? Finally all the world.' The lines are a clue to the large, but not shapeless first installment of The Lovemakers. This tale of two cities, Melbourne but also Sydney, works on a Venn-diagram pattern—three 'starting-from-us' rings of friends whose sets and subsets increasingly intersect. Part 1 begins in inner Melbourne, the criminal and brothel district, where two prostitutes take in a runaway, the Kid. No Part 1 characters recur in Part 2, which is set in Sydney's deep south, The [Sutherland] Shire. There the three musketeers, Neil, Kim and Ray (aka GoGo, Spacey and Frenchy), are making a name for themselves with Catholic schoolgirls. A parallel with Part 1 emerges when the boys also make a criminal name for themselves, robbing the shop of a generational enemy. Part 3 travels to the east Melbourne suburb of Blackburn, and offers a new grab of characters, either school-age or connected with the Price family. Lindsay Price is fascinated when his schoolfriend Julie has an underage relationship with a character from Part 1; another crawls out of the woodwork and tries to rape Lindsay's friend, Karl...again, parallels. Part 4 has The Shire characters moving on to university, marriage, careers, lives of crime. Part 5 returns to Blackburn, the Prices and cousin Barb — 'just out of
Matric' and already dubbed 'the Little Goer'. The two suburban sets, gathering stories as they roll through the decades, have been parallel universes. Not until Part 6 do they converge: Barb moves with her husband Roger to Sydney, joins the public service and meets The Shire's sympathetic listener, Neil.

Neil and Barb's affair is the dramatic core of Book One. As Wearne draws his plot-lines together, my receptive capacities tune on- and off-station, but the signal comes through loud and clear whenever Barb is talking. Whatever sex Barb thinks about — premarital, marital or adulterous — she does it with an honesty and humour that deserve the name of thinking:

I could only feel
what I’d been told or read: the necessity of
just getting to know someone, wanting to ask
Don't know what we were hoping for, do you?
Love? Well it needsn't be that and procreation ditto.
Sex? It's not mere 'sex' and as for fucking well of course
but not for everyone and hardly all the time.
Intimacy? But so much else is, whilst intercourse sounds
more textbook. For all our terminology, slangy and evasive,
I once knew a woman who'd never accept much more than
Oob-abh-oob-abh. Then there's my favourite 'the unnameable',
but imagine asking your partner (and that's another stupid term)
How about a touch of the old unnameable? No doubt
there is a language where one word reins in the lot;
or better, if none satisfy, make your own
Oob-abh-oob-abh.

Without a langue of her own, Barb will have to make love in the chains of another person's 'marriage' or 'adultery'. Her libertarianism articulates one of the The Lovemakers' recurrent themes, articulation. She is as concerned with how to tell her story as Wearne; and beyond her Wearne poses a metanarrative question: why are we driven to tell stories that not only articulate the theme of 'us' but of 'others'?

In 2001, Penguin insisted Wearne split The Lovemakers in two.
When Book One, *Saying All the Great Sexy Things*, sold badly, Penguin rejected Book Two. *Money and Nothing* remained in limbo until ABC Books brought it out in 2004. Peter Pierce has already acclaimed the complete work in the *Bulletin* as 'the crowning achievement of a career that has been stubbornly original'. With both books now available, the originality and brilliance of Wearne's structuring of one of the longest poems in the language is apparent. He has refashioned the monologue, recasting many chapters in a free indirect style. The 'voice' and preoccupations of a character identify the movement of point of view from one focaliser to the next. On the sleeve to the aurally spectacular CD of Wearne reading from *The Lomemakers*, Martin Duwell suggests the new narrative style is particularly apt for representing relationships. Certainly it has a speed and precision that make the Browning monologue seem obsolete. Although the breaking of the complete *Lomemakers* into two eight-part books was forced on Wearne by the exigencies of publication, it highlights a symmetry already in the vast, sixteen-part structure. In Part 9 The Kid returns, a recurrence carefully prepared for in Part 8. Now known as 'Mr A' or 'The Alien', in his travels through Thailand he meets up with Kevin Joy, a big-time drug dealer going through a crisis of confidence. With Joy is the dealer's understudy, Kim Lacy, and Chrissie, who had married and has now divorced Ray—a link to two of The Shire's musketeers. When Sophie Cross (daughter of a QC who acted as counsel, in Part 1, for an armed robber convicted of murder) conspires with Lacy to have her lover and his boss, Joy, removed, Wearne combines a dextrous re-knotting of the plot and recycling of his characters with a brassy epiphany of the eighties and their ethos—not 'love or money' but 'money and nothing'.

The interlacing plots of *The Lomemakers* make for an elegant and powerful dance, the lovers changing but the dance the same—major characters in Book One retreat back stage in Book Two. While Peter Pierce finds *Money and Nothing* a searing indictment of 'the nihilistic emptiness...embedded in Australian consciousness', none of Wearne's characters quite correspond to satirical type. Sophie weeps after betraying Kevin Joy to his death; the sexist, racist Joy becomes a tragic figure, calmly cooperating with the Asian hitman, whom he knows as a colleague and friend from the 'old days'. Like his charac-
ters, Wearne's tragicomedy fits no generic pigeonholes, and it has never been so unpredictable as in *The Lovemakers*.

The new edge in *The Lovemakers* is also attributable to the sharper handling of the *recitativo* of the free indirect narrative (which sounds nothing like Shakespearean blank verse, but owes something to its study) and the formal set pieces or arias. In Book One a QC sums up in villanelles; the ocker Phil Price tells his story in limericks; Roger Heath complains of jealousy in a sonnet sequence; and a party is related from the perspective of Anglican clergyman, Geoffrey Cattermole, in *ottava rima* - the stanzas destabilised enough to make a tribute to Byron without imitating his rhythms. Since 'St Bartholomew Remembers Jesus Christ as an Athlete' (1972), Wearne has had a preoccupation with the religious, but in *The Lovemakers*, the ministers and curates who scout the fringes of the baby boomers try (unlike the heroic Barb) to ape their charges' language. Cattermole finds himself at an inner-city homosexual rave, an out-of-his-depth buffoon, but, with the priest focalising, the narrator pays tribute to the Stones' music.

And to their rivals from some decades back:

John, Paul, George and Richard nicknamed Ringo.

Who caused upheavals equal to the sack
of ancient Rome, they certainly did by jingo!
But I must get *The Lovemakers* back on track,
for few, I fear, can understand this lingo;
nor rhymes which getting Wearnier and Wearnier
could give the English language quite a hernia.

Wearne sees lyricists as the hierophants of their generation. Like the best writers for popular music, Wearne has honed a language that articulates his generation's experience, but he has worked in a major scale, and his innovations have remade the verse novel and solved its endemic structural problems. The longest Australian verse novel is also the best.

In *Freddy Neptune* (1998), Les Murray stares down the twentieth century's ultimate horror, the genocides bracketed by the two World Wars. His protagonist being a merchant sailor (unlike Conrad's Marlowe, a mere able seaman), the conflict between labour and capital,
left and right, is added to genocide. His protagonist-narrator being a German Australian from the rural working class, Fredy's own experience of persecution and guilt is superadded to racial and class war. Fredy Boettcher is victimised for his class and ethnicity, yet feels vicariously responsible for those victimised in the name of his race, nation and gender. He is a damaged seer with an uncanny instinct for the troubles of others, none for his own. Having witnessed an atrocity, a Turkish mob's burning of Armenian women, Fredy asks, 'How could I bear to be in a world where that could happen?' The question is answered by his subconscious inflicting on him an anaesthesia which makes him prodigiously strong. Fredy's comic-book powers enable him to mix with the crooked rich and the Hollywood famous, and empower him to put right a few injustices at the individual level. They do nothing to ease his agony of guilt-by-association. Murray's solution to the verse novel's besetting problem, its accelerating intensity, is to drive straight into it and so break through into what can only be described as states of spiritual vision.

Both in the metre of *Fredy Neptune* and some of the quieter moments (when, for example, Fredy brings the world home to talk over with his wife), Murray takes his foot off the floor of this juggernaut narrative. He implies that spiritual ecstasy, madness and despair do not exhaust the possibilities of living through history's nightmare. In a recent *Australian Literary Studies* Bruce Clunies Ross suggested, on the face of it implausibly, that Murray's eight-line stanzas in *Fredy Neptune* were a gesture to Don Juan. The mockery in Byron's comic epic is hardly suited to a theme like genocide. Yet if a reader can believe in the prayer which frees Fredy from his anaesthesia, then Murray's poem must be allowed to have a reconciling, comic resolution. Looking back on the catalogue of horrors which he has, at some level, succeeded in putting into language, the returned sailor affirms, 'there's too much in life: you can't describe it'. The long lines of Murray's blank ottava stanzas are composed of flexibly dipodic, four-and five-stress lines - the metre, derived from labour songs, of Paterson's 'Man from Snowy River'. The working tour Fredy takes of five continents has little in common with Don Juan's jaunt around Europe and the Middle East. Hand over hand, Murray's long lines haul
Christopher Pollnitz

Byron's sophisticated anti-militarism, and his anti-imperialism, into a world of swearing matelots.

Murray tracks twentieth-century persecutions and exterminations to the ideologies (the 'big poems') which sanction a 'police' mentality. Persons with 'police' mindsets (not all of them police) deem themselves appointed to bully or erase those of a certain race or religion, class, gender or psychological diagnosis. In Fredy Neptune, no people can claim immunity from this mentality - 'If Russians could do it, my own folk could' - and Fredy runs into examples of Australians, including his mother, who admire the ideology of the genocidal bully. Prophylactic against such monomania are, for Murray, the small poems or visionary art works that offer glimpses of the eternal and so recall viewers to their humanity. Viewers rather than readers, for twentieth-century cinema is the narrative art form with which Freddy is best acquainted. In his biography Peter Alexander quotes from a postcard Murray wrote to Philip Hodgins about handling action and stream of consciousness in a verse novel. 'Move technique is the answer: 'not "he walked across the yard & got into the ute" but show him doing sth. or seeing sth. as he crosses the yard, then show him in the ute'. Film references stand out like trig points in Fredy Neptune, Fredy being of a class for whom poetry, as Murray puts it in an essay on the rediscovery of Raymond Langford's The Sentimental Bloke (1919), seemed 'a bit of a luxury'. It is to Langford's adaptation of Dennis's narrative poem that a courting Freddy takes Laura. To eke out a living in Hollywood, Fredy acts as an extra in the pacifist All Quiet on the Western Front (1930). A final example of the film industry's capacity to create non-ideological 'poems' arrives in Izmir/Smyrna after the Armistice, when the first reels of Chaplin's movies arrive in the city after hostilities have ceased, Turks and Greeks unite in laughter at the antics of the 'little battler'. Freddy adds, 'I told Chaplin about it, years later...he smiled and guessed what I meant by the word.' Where Chaplin's mime erases cultural and linguistic difference effortlessly, Freddy's macaronic German-English and Murray's multilingual puns, if they erase divisions, do so with maximum effort. Bravura linguistic displays, in this first-person merchant seaman's narrative, do nothing to cool the verse novel's feverish temperature.
In *The Boys*, Murray had thought striking a balance between ‘underlying speed’ and ‘stillness, the timeless pointing quality’ of poetry, was the solution to the verse novel’s narrative problems. In *Fredy Neptune*, ‘speed’ and ‘stillness’ are symptoms of the protagonist’s neurosis. ‘Speed’ is how atrocities overwhelm Fredy’s consciousness, ‘stillness’ the anaesthesia that paralyses his emotions. During his Hollywood days, Marlene Dietrich quotes ‘Der Panther’ and ‘Verborgenheit’ to Fredy, and he is excited at the poems’ ‘stillness’ which, he intuits, is opposed to the ‘poems’ that ‘get men killed’. But Dietrich recites the German poems to Fredy because she has seen in him the paralysis of Rilke’s panther, the insentience of Murcay’s persona to what causes pain. She has divined that the anaesthesia, which Fredy has donned like Quixotic armour to shield him from the world’s careering madness, is a self-alienation. The crisis of Fredy’s sojourn in the States comes when Fredy witnesses the army breaking up a strike. He seeks help for a casualty, a union activist with his face torn off, but the man dies horribly. From there, as Fredy tries to escape via Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia, the narrative spirals into a surreal maelstrom. The pace and horror of phenomena do not permit their sane cognition.

In *Fredy Neptune* Murray confronts some of the largest, most terrible events of the last century and faces up to a subjective correlative for them – the dissociation he himself has suffered. He also incorporates in his novel something more than the confessional intensities which threaten to turn it into one unbroken aria. Set in King Edwards Park, in Newcastle, the penultimate scene in *Fredy Neptune* is down time. With a married couple who are old friends, Fredy’s Laura and Fredy picnic in the park and conduct a Sunday story-market. Each gives the others a tale. Laura’s is a quite raunchy Byronic anecdote that leaves Fredy somewhat bewildered; and after it he tells ‘some sort of story’. It cannot be thought that, like Marlowe aboard the yawl, Fredy relates the whole verse novel in a few hours; and it is, of course, a modest fraud for Fredy, whose storytelling powers will enable him to articulate the unspeakable annals of the century and his own depression, to pass over his story as negligible. But it is, by this point in the fiction, a necessary fraud: Fredy cannot be erected into a composite of Homer, Achilles and Odysseus without disturbing all the verse
novel’s fictive premises; and he needs to be re-inserted into his non-heroic, domestic context. The Australian verse novel requires such powerfully un-powerful episodes, and must find ways to accommodate them skilfully, if it is to develop as a genre.

**Bibliography**


