The Drowner is a liquid text. Whilst it ebbs and flows from the outset, however, at no point is it clear whether it is ebbing or flowing; instead, it both ebbs and flows simultaneously, its narrative locus twirling on the eddies of this perpetual paradox. It assumes its position as a text of change, of movement within stillness and of constant self-contradiction. As a result, The Drowner breaks with the modern Australian myth of the beach, both chronologically, be it historical or narrative time, and spatially, be it geographical or textual space. And this is a myth of which Drewe, himself, was amongst the pioneers.

How then should the reader of The Drowner understand Drewe's comment about the gender of water and the sun? Nothing in the novel can support such a clear-cut division; and neither is there any universally tenable grammatical support for this statement, a fact that he is at pains to underscore throughout the text. French readers would readily agree with Drewe's distinction; their associations with the sea are made more acute by the fact that the words for sea (la mer) and mother (la mère), as well as being fundamentally feminine, are also identical phonetically (/mR/). If the Frenchman is born of the feminine beneath a masculine sky and sun, his neighbour from across the Alps, on the other hand, considers the sea to be masculine (il mare). In the novel, the protagonists are, to a large degree, born of their fathers, at
once rooted in the socio-professional backgrounds conferred upon them by their progenitors and in constant rupture with them. Even in English, where gender has become detached from grammar, this dichotomy is unclear: how many readers of the novel, who can relate to the rural customs, accent and heritage of Will’s father, will recall their parents referring to the sun as Phoebe, a feminine name derived either from the Latin word for the moon or, perhaps, from the masculine Latin noun for the sun itself, Phoebus? Tools of the trade, too, in English become feminine; it is not so much the sea that the English sailor refers to as a woman as his vessel, in which he will either master or fall prey to the call of the waves. As King Canute was unable to stem the tide by words alone, the reader of The Drowner finds that even the most basic grammatical precepts are unsteady anchorage points. In fact, the very concept that more than one equals plural is cast into disrepute:

Dour and laconic bush types, the Rhodesians bluntly corrected their idea that animals were plural. It was a herd of elephant, four lion, half a dozen bloody monkey. In Africa where animals abounded, where animals made the landscape, animals were strangely singular.²

Explanations for this confusion of singular and plural, masculine and feminine, in the novel can be found in Drewe’s earlier work. The lure of the beach is a ubiquitous sexual catalyst in his short stories. In The Bodysurfers and The Bay of Contented Men, the beach represents the junction between the water and the sun, the feminine and the masculine, and, as such, stands for coitus, the act that dissolves two distinct subjectivities into one single being. And in The Drowner, too, this junction stands in a very direct relation to Australia, the land that is first mentioned in the text as exemplary of exoticism. This exoticism also stands for foreignness and the attendant loss of identity, expressed here — in a reversal of the above rule — by a stilted description of one Australian grass parrot in the plural:

She was returning from the Phonetic Institute in the Lower Bristol Road and the organ and cage were in her path. [...] Ladies and Gentlemen! [...] These foreign birds will consult the FATES for you! For only ONE PENNY they will predict your FORTUNE! [...] Her fortune lay before her. The significance of the plural. These foreign birds. (61–62)

The importance of this prediction of future plurality and the significance of her sensibility as a perceiver of signals, be they phonetic, natural or paranormal, are multiple, but the concepts of foreignness and of belonging are present; they are also intricately linked to Aus-
tralia. As the undertaker, Felix Locke, explains to the woman he loves: “Everyone here is from elsewhere.” (287) The Drowner takes Drewe’s vision of Australianness, which vacillates typically somewhere between the sordid and the sublime, to a further dimension: from the difficulty of being Australian away from the beach, the reader is translated to a world where the possibility of “being” Australian simply ceases to exist.

In The Coast Dwellers, Philip Drew claims that Australians are first and foremost “verandah people”, a generalisation particularly applicable to Robert Drewe’s short stories, in which verandahs are the meeting points of the interior and the exterior. The concept of the verandah as a shelter belonging to the house but also open onto the exterior is particularly apt in an Australian context. In “The Last Explorer”, Grace is unable to face the desert and spends all her time on the verandah of her house in Cottesloe in Western Australia:

Grace would not face the desert. Grace desired the coast; it was a mistake. A house facing the sea, looking back towards England, was her wish. She refused to turn her back on the coast […] Night after night Grace sat on the verandah facing the ocean and writing letters home.

In Australia during colonial times, the ritual centre was the home country (more often than not, Britain) where a large majority of the settlers had been born. A new Australian psyche had to face remoteness through the image of this now far-off land. Consequently there was a need to create a bridge between two different worlds, to fill and span a cultural gap. A transition and a lifeline to European culture found in a new geography, fauna, and flora, were sought in the metaphor of the verandah. As a place that still belonged to the house, the verandah recalled the traditional British home and protected “down under” the memory of the lost centre; at the same time, its open structure gave a view onto unlimited space, different horizons and to a possible return, via the sea, to “Mother England”.

Drewe exploits this architectural feature in the narrative structure of his short stories, in which the concept of the beach house with its incumbent verandah is pivotal. In “The Last Explorer”, the verandah has the role of reconciling two cultures, that of the immigrants and that of their new country. It also functions as a transitional place between the land and the water, “the bush and the sea”. From a verandah one can look at the sea while remaining attached to the house and to the land. The verandah stands at an extreme, at the edge of identity and the continent, in the interstice between water and air,
land and sea. There is a clinging to old values and a plunging over
new horizons.

The beach is likewise a bridge from self to alterity; it is a natural
element framed in the cultural environment of the city. It, too, is an
edge. By jumping off it, one passes into a world of evasion, dreams
and fantasy.

It is entirely within this fantasy world that Drewe sets The
Drowner. Not only is the verandah implicit throughout the novel,
serving to situate the text “on the edge”; it also recurs explicitly. At
one point the protagonists awake from an opium-induced dream to
find before them the great patriarch in person:

When they eventually awake on the verandah in strong daylight the wind
is sharp, the lions have long ceased roaring and Hammond Lloyd is sitting
on a deckchair in a white linen suit, drinking a cup of tea and looking
down at them. (198)

The verandah figures as junction, as space from which to dream, as
dream space. By steeping his novel in a tradition associated with his
short stories, peopled with beaches and copulating Sydneysiders,
Drewe opens his novel to a line of analysis in which, for instance,
drowning is primarily an act of reflection and, as such, recalls the
second of our two epigraphs, introspection. Drewe, thus, fills the void
between England and Australia by fusing the two: memories, dreams
and delirium blend into a stream of culturally uncertain conscious­
ness. Although linked by direct and indirect allusions to earlier works,
The Drowner in fact recalls, not his Sydney stories but one set in
Western Australia.

“The Last Explorer” is linked to The Drowner by more than a
simple nostalgic look to the past and oneiric escapism; the two texts
are bound within the corpus of Drewe’s work by a complex web of
intratextuality. Grace soon follows the trajectory of her gaze,
rejoining the Motherland and, presumably, her father, Captain Scott­
Bowdler. The explorer would thus seem to lose out to England and to
a patriarch whose name recalls one of that nation’s legendary heroes
(it is difficult to say whether the reference to the Reverend Bowdler
has such an heroic edge). In The Drowner, the famous explorer is not
Captain Scott, but Livingstone, who lost his own wife, it is suggested,
to water. In the entropic breakdown of their relationship, apparently
brought about by the change of waters from Bath to Africa to Western
Australia, Will, too, loses his woman. The pivotal points in the stories
of Livingstone, Will and the last explorer himself come at moments of
juncture, verandahs both real and allegorical. The last explorer finds himself in a hospital bed from where he can gaze out to sea, as had his wife. He elects to turn his bed around, towards the bush, in a final act of exploration, turning his back definitively on a future that belongs to women and water. As for Livingstone, he made his mark on the African landscape at a juncture both between land and water, rock and air:

At the very edge of the precipice Livingstone lay on a jutting rock to lean over the abyss below. [...] He was a very practical man but when he saw the falls he became gushy. He wrote, “On sights as beautiful as this, angels in their flight must have gazed.” (152)

In Drewe’s novel, the moment at which Will recounts the tale of this great explorer forms another junction: until that point, he has been the pragmatist, the man of science, and Angelica the romantic. This same dichotomy, within Livingstone, brought on by the encounter with the alterity of water, forces Will and Angelica to choose their camp. He respects the explorer in spite of this poetic lapse, she because of it. And it is the very expression of this difference that brings about an almost immediate change: whilst the waters of Africa bring out a sudden animal carnality and romantic sensibility in Will, they propel Angelica into morbidity and febrile mysticism. When she leaves Will, crossing the water to rejoin her own patriarchal roots, he finds an emerald soapstone sculpture that they had bought together in Africa. The last explorer was left with a similar relic in the wake of Grace’s departure:

What signs of her existence in the trellised bungalow by the Swan River? [...] The bamboo opium pipe, a cool soapstone statue... [...] They do not say Angelica (211)

Grace was not sitting on the verandah, she was two months gone on the Stratheden. The opal he found for her at Lightning Ridge was on the dresser with her front door key. 7

Misogyny and trust in the old ways of the bush, these values for which the last explorer stands, can be interpreted as a strategy for coming to terms with the loss of his wife. It is fears such as this that Angelica knows how to expel by massaging water. When she massages Will’s feet, she is kneading deep into the heart of the novel:

‘I’m encouraging the movement of congested fluids towards the heart. I’m stimulating the kidney and bladder meridians. They’re associated with the element of water and help to regulate fear.’
‘Fear of what?’
'Sexuality and change.'
'What else is there?' (67)

Water courses and lines of change are in constant flux. The vital points of this heavily charged novel are situated on cusps. As key to the myth of the new Australia, the verandah in the novel provides a continual allegory for the interface between the beach, with its water and promise of the future, and the bush, the ultimate hinterland of the last explorer's dreaming. Despite the literary independence of *The Drowner*, it is always interesting to pinpoint a possible identity of a dreamer behind a dream text. This intratextual reading works in both directions: “The Last Explorer” confers a retrospectivity, lassitude and fear of change, whilst *The Drowner* imparts an affectivity to this intratext. Will's grief explains the last explorer's desires: “He knows what is the only point of day. To see a loved woman bathing at sunset.” (223) This expresses not only the pain of separation, but doubly underlines the importance of juncture in the text: Angelica’s act of bathing erect in the river posits the beauty of the female body at the junction between air and water; similarly, day passes into night at sunset when the sun is both above and below the horizon. If *The Drowner* is the dream of the last explorer then it is a retelling of his relationship with Grace. His fears are of change and of sexuality in a new world where women are taking to the water in a daily *mise en scène* of the act that saw Grace leave his world definitively.

Women were bobbing in the waves in the early morning, chatting to each other.

The penny dropped when he saw them walking up the hill from the beach into the pines, most of them elderly and wearing bathing gowns over their swimming costumes. A couple of them still had their bathing caps on. 8

Interfaces are stages for the narrative climaxes in the narrative. The beauty of a woman bathing recalls the dissolution in union of Will and Angelica, the points in the narrative when they become one and, at the same time, lose their selves inside each other. Their conjunction is one with that of the elements of the landscape and the framework of the text: “She and water. Part of each other, like the river subtly joining the sky.” (208) As the paint runs on Drewe’s canvas, Angelica is caught between two opposing currents, her body the battleground of two desires. And as Will penetrates her where the river meets the sky, Ham takes back his daughter in the same eddy: “In a rustle of sliding newspaper, Ham stands then, the sky and river merging blue behind him, and rocks on his toes.” (213) He affirms his power over
Angelica by shooting Will in the hand at the very moment that that same hand grasps the door handle to cross the threshold into her room. The rustling of the newspaper, as it falls to the ground, marks the breakdown in narrative, the lines on the page cascading into the lives of the protagonists.

By juxtaposing one world with another, by bringing two spaces together whilst holding them apart, Drewe is both highlighting difference and similarity. He is not pushing back one tide to allow the onrush of other waters, he is not changing the tide; rather, he is exposing contrary tides that run permanently side by side, one against the other. This is a work of surrealism. Just as love in *The Drowner* hinges upon the concept of change, beauty in André Breton’s *Nadja* is a shuddering growth of potentiality and, like a train that surges on the track but that will never leave the station, it is both motion and stillness. Surrealism is the superposition of two realities, the world of the waking moment and that of the dream. Drewe’s surrealist text brings together the male desire to turn from the sea towards the desert and the regret of her who gazed from the land across the water. This topos of the verandah is what makes the protagonists shudder in endless bursts of explosive stillness.

And if the novel is the explorer’s dream, its characters take turns to dive into (and drown in) the text. When Will and Angelica have taken the waters in Bath, he explains to her that he is an engineer but that his father is the Hartbridge drowner. Water is his inheritance and his destiny. As Will gazes on the woman with whom he is falling in love, water moves centre stage: “Handel trickles from the piano [and] her eyes are the grey-blue of lakes at first light.” His claims to be a pantheist seem justifiable inasmuch as water is everywhere and, synaesthetically, everything becomes water. Son of a drowner and engineer by trade, he becomes a brook: “So to this young woman, this *actress* [...] Will gushes the family yarns. He babbles anything that comes to mind.” (36) This metamorphosis is both a sign of his immerging love (“to love is to change”) and a reminder of his oneness with the text. Water, the changeling element par excellence, is the fluid in which Will can gain access to Angelica, in which he can dissolve into her to emerge renewed, changed. She, too, dissolves into the text:

Will said, ‘I bet the natives don’t eat crocodile. I think there is a rule: Don’t eat anything that eats you.’

‘It tasted like lobster cocktail,’ she said. She heard her voice as if it were someone else’s. ‘Surprisingly mild.’
He watched the moonlight softening the strong planes of her face. 'The wart-hog was the same as pork,' he said 'Crackling, apple sauce and all.'

Shapes move just within the limits of her vision. Elephants silently materialising. Rows of zebras without fuss. Little sidling jackals. Giraffes angling down to drink. *Sorry, elephant, zebra, jackal, giraffe singular. When I was a girl I had two dog and three cat. Countless guineapig. Three Shetland pony. The aviary was full of bird.*

'I'm glad you're here,' he said. (161)

Here she fades visibly out of the text, her voice running into that of the narrator so that the reader does not know whether the text is free indirect speech or direct speech, or whether she has simply changed into the narrator. Drewe adds italics as if to guide the reader — the novel having begun with an italicised bout of delirium — but the reader is wary, as if being led onto rocks by treacherous light. Will’s final comment is almost comical, the reader being far from sure at this point where Angelica can be said to be. This entropy, the reader is told, is due to malaria; but is it Angelica who is stricken or is this Will’s raving? Or, indeed, is it the last explorer, alone in his sickbed, conjuring these images?

From these questions, one emerges: what exactly is drowning and who is drowning whom? On the boat to Australia, Angelica gives voice to Drewe’s gender distinction, which Will/the narrator has already evoked in an early example of hazy free indirect speech: “The male sun sinks into the female sea.” (172) If anything is certain in the text, it is that the essential keys to drowning lie in the sexual rapport between Angelica and Will. To follow a simplistic line dressed in existentialist terms, Will appears to be attempting to impose his subjectivity upon her, to reduce her to the status of malleable object (and, thus, to control water), whilst she is content to allow him to sink into her depths, to have his being decompose and ebb into her. Certain sex scenes between them sustain this interpretation well, his attempts to love her meeting a cold unresponsiveness that reduces the enterprise to an act of onanism. This reading, however, does not do enough justice to the role of water in the text.

Drewe himself informs the reader that he drew heavily on Gaston Bachelard’s *Water and Dreams* in constructing his text. The leitmotifs of suicide and Ophelia remind the reader that the water that will bring life to Western Australia is also a harbinger of death. And yet, in alluding so clearly to Bachelard, Drewe invites us to consider how his novel of change has inverted Bachelard’s thinking. For, if water neces-
sarily arouses an Ophelia complex, it also harks back to the eternal image of the mother. In this text, where gender and grammar are so perfidiously inverted, the two protagonists are embedded, quite literally drowned, not in their mothers, but in their fathers. Ham is as much a drowner as Will’s own father; Angelica is drowned in him from an early age. Whereas she is embarrassed by Will’s graphic explanation of the benefits of sheep droppings, she takes girlish delight in Ham’s coarse displays of scatological wordplay. Her very name is testament to her father’s Ophelia complex. She owes it to the flora that “was growing in the bank where she was conceived”: “[...] I’m named after a root that grows in streams. Angelica archangelica.” (65) The reader’s suspicions that Ham’s morbid fascination with his little girl must lie in his vision of her as the Ophelia of his own loins are eventually shown to be well founded when the text liberates the primal scene of Ham plunging his daughter’s head beneath the surface of the river. (Indeed, the whole novel may be read as if the story were being recounted from an analyst’s couch by a hypnotised Angelica.) The tension between Ham and the young Angelica is one based in water. It was with her father that she, too, learned the art of drowning: “One of my jobs as a child was to make soda water.” (44) Her other tasks were to draw his bath and, once he was installed in all his nakedness, to keep it topped up. In this juvenile servility she elevated the art of drowning to a rite of alchemy and transformation. On finding the gasogene full of gin, she “tipped in the powders anyway [...] ‘Maybe I thought I was turning it back into water.’” (44) On another occasion, she chilled his bath only to watch him overcome the icy temperature of the water, calmly perform his ablutions and demand a massage. In the massages she performs on Ham the position of control becomes the most blurred. Whilst she is telling Will, who squirms in pain beneath her firm hands, that “we are ninety per cent water and should move and change our lives as fluidly as possible”, the lines of the text change fluidly into a recollection of the massages in which she used to engage in battle for her father’s subjectivity:

A slippery expanse of experience, a moled and dimpled plateau of knowledge, a whole country of human perseverance at her fingertips. And, deliciously, a back strangely vulnerable, too; hers pats setting off little puffs of talcum as its power ebbed from spine and shoulder blades and flowed into her.

Filling her up. She was strong and in charge. Knuckling each vertebra. Pressing harder, squeezing and kneading until it registered. It took a while.
Her hands and shoulders were stiff; her own back ached with the effort. Even then it was hardly a moan of surrender.

His voice rose rich and yeasty from the mat. 'I'm just dough in your hands.' (68-69)

This is an act of transformation: she kneads his body's water until the large, pink Ham transforms into dough and begins to rise. And yet, the power that wells up in his body never entirely passes into her control, and it is she who comes close to yielding, not only in the text's most intense display of drowning, but its most powerful orgasm:

At the fifth twist she heard a faint mutter and, without breaking contact, moved the point of her right elbow into the hollow and leaned with her weight, pressing and twisting so intensely she imagined for an instant she was blacking out. (69)

She learns at an early stage what Will only discovers in Australia, watching young boys learning how to swim, namely that to dominate, one has first to give one's self up: "Dead man's float: the first sign that water requires not only mastery from humans but surrender." (220) In this respect, Angelica's seemingly ecstatic submission before the will of her father can be read in a positive light, as an act of drowning, of control.

Through water Drewe not only inverts the axes of active and passive; he also turns the tables on traditional notions of gender. The two experts on death in Western Australia, Dr Malebranche and Felix Locke, the undertaker, concur that, in the aridity of the desert, suicide is a male, dry business. Drowning is necessarily on the downturn. Water is the life-source needed to restore humanity to the gold fields, whilst, in fact, it is polluted water that is killing the miners. Water seems to signify death only when associated with woman: Ophelia stands as female death in the text, as signified by the death of Angelica's childhood friend and the death mask of the young girl drowned in the Seine, a mask that confers cool sensuality to those fingers that would caress it in the heat of the bush. And yet all the male suicides recounted in the text, be they shootings or hangings, depend on the presence of water. This binary opposition that would have men as dry actors and women as wet recipients is one that sums up the existence of the last explorer, a man who had always flown his wife's side in search of the desert but who ended up unable to contemplate the sea that had taken her from him.

Drewe's text gives narrative voice to a simple axiom: life is all
about give and take, as is its flip side and parallel dream space, death. Gaston Bachelard recounts how, according to ancient pagan rites, kings were cast out to sea on boats, the obsequies a gesture of submission and control, the boat conveying the body at the will of the tides and waves, whilst remaining afloat, out of reach of the cold depths. In life, Will and Angelica combine this duality, she massaging the fluids of the body and surrendering herself to his desire to travel, he controlling the flow of water to the desert and giving himself to her sexually.

The allegory for this coming together is, of course, to be found in the existence of the photographer, Axel Boehm. The reader first meets Axel sitting with the doctor and the undertaker on the “verandah of the Prince of Wales Hotel” (95), where they represent the eyes of history and the triumvirate of storytellers, or three Fates, at the centre of the narrative. Their verandah is the juncture between the protagonists and the narrator, the text and the reader; Axel’s secret is the converging of all the parallel lines coursing through The Drowner. The photographer’s first words fall directly after Locke’s refutation of Pliny the Elder’s remarks on drowning:

‘[...] “The corpses of drowned men float upwards and those of women face down.” He’s wrong. I’ve seen them both ways.’

‘That was a woman just passed by,’ says Axel Boehm. (97)

The reader is far from shocked when this man, so alert to women’s difference and needs in the outback, turns out to be female himself. Axel’s reality in the novel goes beyond transvestism: the photographer’s hermaphroditism is symbolic of change; Axel is transformation incarnate. The photographer’s very art is less one of capturing the moment than of creating and changing it inexorably into something else. It is an art upon which a changeling’s survival in the outback depends:

With subterfuge, light and chemicals Boehm can turn a dusty dryblower into a mining magnate, a laundryman-pimp into a cycling statesman.

It’s with the same careful attention to detail that he presents himself. (240-41)

Here is living proof that nothing lies better than the camera, that the photographer’s art is one of illusion.

Like Axel, Locke stands outside the text, looking in. The undertaker makes the prostitutes’ skin crawl; he does not simply bury the dead, he signifies death. On his rumbling cart, he does indeed appear more like Burke and Hare than a waste disposal engineer. As The
Drowner comes to an end, Locke becomes synonymous with the poem he is writing and the act of writing itself: “He is as avid a reader of the poem as he is its writer.” (300) “The Hands” is a reflection of The Drowner and a reminder to the reader of the creative role s/he is playing in unfolding the text. “The Hands” is also an expression of what the last explorer would have liked to write (if he were not in bed, dreaming the dream that is The Drowner). It is another mise en abyme recounting the impossibility of love without change and the inevitable move away from the (myth of the) old Australia:

It’s a big poem. It tells of unrequited love and of the death of an old drinking companion. It’s neither bush ballad nor traditional lyric. Something different? He hardly knows, but he likes its images. He likes the way he has scattered figures in his own personal landscape. (An odd effect of the poem: from the moment he began to write it his imaginary illnesses dropped away.) It tumbles along, encompassing the simplest and grandest topics in his experience. Lust and loneliness, fevers and fortunes, the mysterious disguises of the private self. Romance in a time of gold and typhoid. (300)

Locke explores Australian life, in all its myths and reality, and writes the text; equally, he is writing life and living the text (and not only his text, but that being dreamed by the (text of) last explorer). For Will, too, there is an implication that his textual being achieves a certain self-awareness; it is as if he himself realises his status as protagonist (in poem within a dream) as he stands on the very edge of his reservoir beside Angelica. His victory in bringing water into the desert has equally brought her back to his side. And even as he gazes into the water, he ponders the weight of his own denouement:

He thought of change, of the way events in the desert had gradually become a becoming. A change in levels had occurred, from potentiality to a higher level of reality. (324)

This is surreality. Will’s dreams have mingled with what the reader has been led to consider as his “real life” or waking moments. It is at this point in the text that Ham arrives, bearing in his arms the fruit of Will’s union with Angelica. In his final attempt fully to live out his Ophelia complex and take his role of drowner to its furthest limits, Ham commits suicide with the child, Ada, in his arms. It is only through united action that Will and Angelica manage to prise her from the patriarch’s drowning fingers. This ending may be read as the realisation of a dual desire on the part of Drewe’s last explorer: in The Drowner, the woman returns and the couple discover love in equality,
their waters flowing together; moreover, their union perpetuates the line. The last explorer and his love of the outback are doomed to extinction, both barren and surpassed by the times. Will and Angelica’s child is a marionnette joyeuse and is referred to in the text as a “changeling.” She has Angelman’s Syndrome and, as such, has her roots both in Angelica and Will. She is also born of the ritual dunkings that marked both parents’ childhood. She is Australian-born with water in her blood.

In conclusion, the reader can rely on the voice of science to justify the progression of the new Australian myth towards water. Given the novel’s oneiric reversal of this movement, the turbulent narrative lines of The Drowner can also be explained scientifically. Malebranche points out that water and change are both inevitable and fundamental:

The other day Malebranche had said something worth passing on to an optimistic philosophical sort of a girl: ‘The water in our blood will be cloud one day. And was a glacier aeons ago.’ (137)

Intratextually, Drewe changes his lines; his short story ‘The Last Explorer’ metamorphoses its dream self into novel form. Even the pagan water rituals, contorted by Ham in The Drowner, may be found in Drewe’s short stories. In ‘Mandalay,’ a couple symbolising fertility, appear to pay homage to Bondi’s gods of the water:

In the cold shallows a gaunt bearded man in saggy underpants and a hugely pregnant woman, her belly and breast bare, are rubbing themselves with kelp. She scrapes the branches of leathery weed over and around her swellings, while he vigorously massages his head and face with more spiky handfuls; now and then their intense ministrations overbalance them in the waves.10

Watching Ham play with Ada in the bath brings Angelica’s analysis to its full term, liberating her from the grip of the drowner. Her introspection summons up a ritual in which Ham simultaneously incarnates the role of the ancient gods of mythology and the avatar of Shakespearean theatre. Torn between forcing Angelica to become Ophelia and eating his own kin, it is finally the role of Neptune that he chooses to play:

Soothing old King Neptune says he’s sorry.
‘I’m such a bad boy.’
Reeds and duckweed hanging from his ears. A big scratchy kiss as she’s still gasping for breath. Tongue thrusting into her panting mouth. (319)
Drewe, then, roots his dreams, deliriums and complexes in the Sydneyese tradition of his early short stories. And for this change to be fully appreciated, he relies on the eyes of the reader. The act of reading itself becomes the medium for change and a symbol of transformation. As Will himself reflects at the end of the novel, “It’s the liquidity in our eyes that makes these fantasies occur.” (323)

Notes:

1 The first of these epigraphs is taken from an interview accorded by R. Drewe to Mlle V. Alayrac on April 23, 1999; the second is a reflection deriving from work undertaken on “‘Sharks versus Dingoes’: The Australianness of Robert Drewe’s Short Stories,” an unpublished master’s thesis presented by Mlle Alayrac at Université de Paris IV — Sorbonne in June 1999.

2 Robert Drewe, The Drowner (London: Granta, 1998), p. 150. NB text first published by Macmillan in Australia in 1996. (Hereafter references to the text will be made in brackets at the end of each quotation.)


5 The term intratextuality is used here to signify the interplay of two texts by the same author; links between e.g. The Drowner and Hamlet would, under this usage, be referred to as intertextuality. For a fuller explanation of the critical potential of such usage of intratextuality, see A. C. Rolls, The Flight of the Angels: Intertextuality in Four Novels by Boris Vian (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999).

6 The Drowner would, indeed, seem to be quite the opposite to a bowdlerised version of “The Last Explorer”.

7 “The Last Explorer”, op. cit., p. 150.

8 Ibid., p. 153.

9 It is tempting to see this act of transformation as one of transubstantiation, the body of the father becoming bread in his daughter’s hands.