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## Strategies of the Frontier in *fin de siècle* Australia

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Historians of Australian culture have never been entirely at ease with the 1890s. On the one hand, the period has served as the privileged source of a nationalist mythology still in circulation. On the other, the same years bore traces of an international modernist culture, represented most saliently by the poet Christopher Brennan and the group of painters nominally headed by Tom Roberts. Separating the national from the international, so it would seem, were the French cultural influences known as Symbolism and Impressionism.

Any appreciation of the nationalism and internationalism of the Australian 1890s requires an understanding of these French influences. And yet there remains a certain reluctance among comparatists to return to the analysis of influence, even within the relatively enlightened frame of postcolonial studies. I have elsewhere dealt with this problem with respect to the Spanish-American *fin de siècle* (1992), where I analyzed influences in terms of receptive strategies able to constitute and manipulate cultural frontiers. I now hope to show that the same notion of influence can be made historically respectable in the Australian case as well.

My hypothesis is that Symbolism and Impressionism were used in Australia as strategic third terms that enabled Australians to lever certain regionalist ideals away from British metropolitan culture. The French influences entered the internal logic of an Australia that was both nationalist and internationalist, and did so in both painting and literature. To grasp the workings of what we might call a general strategy of "cultural leverage," an adequate comparatist approach cannot separate any of these terms.

### **The Problem of Influence**

The apparent contradiction between 1890s nationalism and internationalism has led to two long-standing streams in Australian cultural interpretation. John Docker (1982) has analyzed these in terms of the opposition between Radical Nationalism, which gave context priority over text, and New Criticism, which found its object in the text. For Radical Nationalists, a poet like Brennan was a bizarre minor tangent to the main themes of the 1890s, the major French influence on the period becoming, at least for Geoffrey Searle (1973: 79), the importation of a few million Marseilles tiles. Various New Critics, however, valued Brennan as an isolated aspiration to serious literature. For them, the few million tiles were neither here nor there. Behind these

methodologies lay a profound ideological divergence. Between them, Brennan was caught as something of a test case, the importance of which had little relation to the inherent qualities of his verse.

Docker's analysis could now be extended to include the partial dissolution of both camps. The kind of critical historicism dating its force from Humphrey McQueen has made idealization of the 1890s a dangerous exercise. Having identified the racism and belligerence of certain nationalist ideals, critical historians now freely admit that a good part of Australia's regional specificity was either adopted from British imperialism or exoticized for the British market. There was no easy escape from colonialist influences. As for the purely textual appreciation of isolated poets, the same international contacts for which Brennan was first esteemed have been progressively denounced as "influences," leaving little behind once they are separated from the text. James McAuley, who in 1957 had spoken of Brennan as "the only Australian poet of the past about whom the question of greatness can even be raised" (334), had to admit a few years later that "there is not a Brennan style: there is simply a period conglomerate, which can be separated into its components." (1967: 34) Although their essential opposition is still with us, both these approaches to the 1890s have undone their initial mythologies in much the same way. Both have separated foreign influences from the common ideal of organic unity - of society, of text - until, in the end, very little of value is left in the hands of Australians. And so, having presumably exhausted all the local past can offer, one begins to talk about the discontinuity of postcolonial history, about regional identity as transitory invention, and about the 1890s as a miscarriage rather than the birth of a culture.

The undoing of myths can be a valuable activity. In this case, the prime myth to be dismantled is the concept of organic unity as substantial identity. This ideal should have little to do with modernist culture and even less to do with Australian history. In order to overcome it, we must accept the paradoxical unity of nationalist and internationalist tendencies. The starting point can be neither the local soil nor the foreign ideal. We must instead begin from manipulations of the frontier between the two. In this case, our points of departure are two individuals who worked on the Franco-Australian border: Tom Roberts and Christopher Brennan. The painter and the poet, each in their own way, deployed significant strategies of cultural leverage, and did so within quite significant cultural networks.

### **Roberts and the Heidelberg School**

Tom Roberts (1856-1931) studied at the Melbourne National Gallery School and then the Royal Academy School in London. In 1884 he spent a few weeks at Cormon's and travelled in France and Spain, where he met the Catalan painters Casas and Barrau. The following year he returned to Melbourne, where his knowledge of Impressionism had a profound influence on fellow painters including McCubbin, Condor, and Streeton. In the late 1880s this group organized artists' camps around the village of Heidelberg, near Melbourne, for which they are commonly

called the “Heidelberg School.” Their major exhibition, held in Melbourne in 1889, was the “9x5,” named after the dimensions (in inches) of the cigar boxes they used instead of canvases. Although the group dispersed soon after the exhibition and worked with more conventional materials, the paintings they produced in the following decade or so formed the basis of a strongly regionalist vision of Australian landscape. Reproductions of their work now grace the walls of many middle-class Australians who remain entirely unaware of the initial French influence and believe wholeheartedly in Australian cultural identity.

Academic evaluations of Tom Roberts tend to assess to what degree he can properly be called an “Impressionist,” with all the international stature the term can connote when applied to a painter of the 1890s. Yet examination of Roberts’ itinerary as a traveller suggests he knew little of the social context of French Impressionism. Whether seen from Melbourne, from London, or from the meeting in Spain, his Paris was a *distant* center of intellectual activity; the land and sea separating Heidelberg painting from Parisian Impressionism should discount any direct mode of influence. This means Roberts cannot really be written off for not having understood real or true Impressionism because he failed to use he divided palette (as argued by Robert Hughes, 1970: 53-54). Nor, however, should his work be praised as a representation of an equally real or true Australian context. Two points need to be made with respect to the quite specific French aesthetics from which he took his lead.

First, there can be no question of associating the French influences on Heidelberg with use of a divided palate. Seurat’s divisionism became known after 1885, by which time Roberts had returned to Melbourne. The meeting in Spain - to judge by Casas’s later work - would have conveyed a certain enthusiasm for the style of Manet and Degas, as indeed would have the limited French sympathies of the London critics of the time. But the divided palate was not even a candidate for a position of direct influence. So why should a historian like Robert Hughes condemn Roberts for not having appreciated this aspect of Impressionism? One might nevertheless condemn Roberts’ friend John Russell, an Australian painter who remained in Paris and sent him news of “. . . darned fools spotting canvases with small points of pure color” (Letter of Oct. 5 1887, in Smith 1975: 191). No artist is likely to adopt the aesthetics of fools.

Second, it would be wrong to reduce Impressionism to divisionism or pointillism. Seurat’s was a positivist aesthetic based on the analysis of light. As a rationalist attempt at a painterly system it corresponded to an ideological juncture that none of the Australians was in a position to appreciate. Further, the invocation of positivist optics had little to do with Manet’s decorist naturalism, Monet’s experimental lyricism, or Degas’s compositional concern with space and movement. Seurat’s relation to Impressionism was rather like Ghil’s position with respect to Symbolism. Both systematized certain latent tendencies, but did so within positivist ideologies that remained on the fringe of the French artistic milieu.

At its most general level, the French influence on the Heidelberg School belonged to a moment when the relations between object and subject were posed as a problem of subjective interpretation. The later Whistler had one solution to the problem - the independence of artificial

representation - ; Seurat had another - analysis of the optic bond between subject and object - ; but the Impressionist response, at least in the years 1875-1885, was essentially recognition of the object as an independent and changing entity. In this sense Francastel regards the analysis of light as a secondary problematic, thus excluding Seurat and divisionism from his definition of Impressionism (1974: 52).

These precisions enable us to accept the “9x5” landscapes as what they claimed to be, a series of “Impressions.” More important, if the moment of French influence can be defined in terms of the independence of the object, we might also explain how its reception gave rise to the decidedly regionalist painting of the Australian 1890s. We might locate one strategy by which internationalism helped produce a kind of nationalism.

### **The International Extension of *Plein Air***

The Melbourne “9x5” exhibition was by no means an isolated case. The German Max Liebermann, influenced by Barbizon aesthetics and Manet while in Paris from 1873 to 1878, returned to Berlin and cofounded Gruppe XI. The group’s 1892 exhibitions were violently attacked by both press and public, with Liebermann himself being accused of “extreme, savage naturalism.” Similar reactions greeted Ramon Casas - the same Casas whom Roberts met in Spain - when, with Santiago Rusiñol, he exhibited his French-inspired naturalism in Barcelona in 1890 and 1891, instigating Catalan regionalist modernism. The dates are significantly close to the Melbourne exhibition of 1889. In Australia, as elsewhere, French influences were leading to confrontations with established public taste.

The Melbourne exhibition received severe criticism in the press. Richard White has associated this conflict with the 1878 clash between Whistler and Ruskin, in support of his general argument that Australian regionalism was imported from Britain (1981: 91). But were the Australians necessarily acting out a dated English script? Their debate with tradition is more interestingly compared with the Berlin and Barcelona encounters than with memories of Britain. Although the Heidelberg painters owed much of their broad brush technique to Whistler, their ideology was by no means a version of Aestheticist individualism and artificiality. On the contrary, as the following fragments collected in Smith’s Documents show, their starting point was shared respect for a substantial object:

Go in, forget style and tackle our stuff, for love.

(Russell to Roberts, c. February 1885)

. . . any effect of nature which moves us strongly by its beauty, whether strong or vague in its drawing, defined or indefinite in its light, rare or ordinary in its colour, is worthy of our best efforts.

(Roberts, Condor, Streeton, The Argus, August 30 1889)

I feel more than sorry that those days are over, because nothing can exceed the pleasure of that last summer, when I fancy all of us lost the “Ego” somewhat of our natures in looking at what was Nature’s best art and ideality.

(Condor, in Paris, to Roberts, August 1890)

These painters were not looking back to any outdated principles. They were instead going out to confront nature as an object that surrounded their subjectivity. The essential element of this confrontation, the decisive step towards experimentation, came from what Berlin and Barcelona had also learned from Paris: the import of plein air.

The consequences of open air painting were far from banal. It stood at the base of the early Heidelberg concern with transitory effects of light, expressed in the speed of broad brush strokes. Too easily analyzed in terms of the subject’s momentary presence, the aesthetic also involved awareness of an object in process. Nature was no longer a static scene. It became a changing environment. A relatively small step then led to the regionalist painting of the 1890s, particularly those landscapes-with-figures in which with the land is accorded more importance than the subjective intervention of human work. Plein air technique both captured and paralleled the conflict to be portrayed. In the studio, as in the city, subjective transformation exceeds the natural object, the scene becoming the sign of control. Open-air work, like work in the Australian interior, reverses this relationship, the object always extending beyond the moment of control.

Open-air painting also promoted a certain audacity. The “9x5” exhibition presented finished works that the public could only accept as preparatory cigar-box sketches. One doubts that such an affront to academic tradition would have been possible if the Heidelberg painters had felt alone. Theirs was not the audacity of a few outcasts fighting against entrenched conservatism. The image they had of Impressionism - simplified and unified by distance - was of an extensive and progressive revolution in which they were participating. They imagined the support of an international milieu.

Less than imaginary, however, was the social effect of plein air work itself. Painters left the individual interior of the studio and put themselves alongside other painters confronting a common object. The Heidelberg painters, all men, worked together in artists’ camps, no doubt smoking numerous cigars. The function of the camps perhaps paralleled that of the French group that in the same years formed around Bernard and Gauguin at Pont-Aven. Just as none of the Pont-Aven artists were natives of Brittany, so none of the Heidelberg painters belonged to rural Australia. They were urban intellectuals in search of non-urban modes of participation. Their regionalism partly ensued from the originally French aperture towards the object.

The nationalist mythology developed by Australian painters after 1890 was largely an application of their Heidelberg experiments, albeit refined in accordance with the criteria of commissions. Work and mateship were discovered in the artists’ camps; the dominance of the object was something that painters, like workers in the Australian interior, had to labor against.

The fact that “open air” was said in French by no means contradicted its transfer to a nationalist context.

### **Sydney Urban Nationalism**

In 1890 Roberts moved from Melbourne to Sydney. There he made contact with the political and literary circles promoting nationalist idealization of “the bush,” broadly the Australian interior. Roberts knew the rising leaders of the political left and became a friend of John Feltham Archibald, editor of the *Bulletin*, the weekly at the heart of the political drive to make Australia a nation (federation would not be achieved until 1901). Yet this strongly nationalist milieu did not contradict the use of French influences. Jose notes of the younger Sydney artists of the time that “their jargon was nearly all French - *plein air* and *nature morte*” (1933: 24). Even the American influence on Australian nationalism carried echoes of Paris. Sidney Dickenson, visiting in 1888-1890, urged Australian painters to “acquire the accomplished methods of a school like the modern French” (in Smith 1975: 250). The Sydney artists gathered at the “Café Français” and the “Paris House.” Their world was a mixture of francophilia and nationalism. And this social complex was not without its literary strand of French influence, most saliently represented by Christopher Brennan.

### **Brennan and the Reception of Mallarmé**

Christopher John Brennan (1870-1932) was a second-generation Australian, born into a working-class Irish Catholic family. He studied at Sydney University and, from 1892 to 1894, in Berlin, where he was influenced by the poetry of Mallarmé. After his return to Australia he worked at the Sydney Public Library and wrote the poems published in 1897 in a limited edition under the title of *XXI Poems: Towards the Source*. Also in 1897 he married Elisabeth Werth, a German girl he had met in Berlin. In 1908 he joined the Modern Languages Department of Sydney University. He eventually brought his verse together as *Poems 1913* (published in 1914), which, as noted above, has probably attracted more critical attention than it merits. Brennan has nevertheless justly been recognized as “the first English-speaking poet to be profoundly influenced by Mallarmé, and one of the first to produce pertinent commentaries on the works of his master” (Austin 1981: 203).

The important biographical point is that Symbolist influence on Brennan did not come through London. What we know of Brennan’s early readings (Marsden 1977, Clark 1980) includes no British mention of Mallarmé before the Australian’s time in Germany. The contact must be attributed not to the metropolitan culture of British Aestheticism, nor to what was happening in Paris, but to whatever was going on in Berlin.

Brennan left Sydney for Berlin in 1892, three years after the “9x5” and one year after Roberts’ move to Sydney. He arrived there at the same time as Liebermann’s naturalism and

Stefan George's first published translations of French Symbolist poetry. From somewhere within this network Brennan found and read Mallarmé. He purchased a copy of *Vers et prose* in September 1893; he wrote to Mallarmé asking for a list of further works; Mallarmé replied, sending a list of some eleven texts in January 1894 (letter reproduced in Foulkes 1978). Brennan would eventually acquire all the rarities on the list, and then some. If nothing else, his passion for Mallarmé was that of a bibliophile. Yet this does not explain why he should have turned towards this particular French poet.

One of the few German-speakers who had heard of Mallarmé was Max Nordau. His main critical work coincided exactly with Brennan's time in Berlin: the first volume of *Die Entartung* was published in 1892, the second in 1893; both were reprinted in 1893. Here Brennan would have found massive condemnation not only of Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites he already admired, but also of the French Symbolists Nordau had discovered through Jules Huret's *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* of 1891. Brennan would have been interested to learn that Verlaine, Moréas and Mallarmé manifested

... all the symptomatic traits of degenerates and idiots: unbound vanity, exaggerated opinions of their own worth, high emotivity, confused and incoherent thought, babbling, and complete incapacity for serious and prolonged work.

(*Entartung* I, 201)

He would also have discovered that Mallarmé had "long, pointed ears, like those of a satyr [...] as is so often the case with criminals and lunatics," and that this little-known poet was "the troupe's least contested leader" (232). What better recommendation could the Australian have been looking for? Nordau's polemics represented everything Brennan disliked about Germany: rampant nationalism, analytical positivism, scientific racism, and vulgarity. Mallarmé thus entered as a voice opposed to - and opposed by - the society around him. The French master was first and foremost the negation of German anti-Symbolism. Only after this negativity did Brennan try to sort out what Symbolism was in itself.

Considerable negativity was to remain in Brennan's image of Symbolism. His articles and lectures of around 1904 would justify Mallarmé through opposition to the Parnasse, to Hugo, or to "his detractors" in the press. Yet such justification could not be a simple negation of Nordau's positivist evaluation of hard work. Brennan in fact integrated the German's main criterion for virtue: serious and prolonged work. He always made it a point of honor to indicate that Mallarmé, despite his quantitatively meagre *œuvre*, was a poet whose quality came from carefully condensed labor (1962: 131, 134, 143, 153, 299, 315, 326). He was, says Brennan, "no *décadent*" (281). The Australian's task was therefore carefully to separate his poet from much of his Parisian context, as well as from the similarly suspect mores of British Aestheticism. He extracted a Mallarmé who could be appreciated in terms of hard work, an ideal that had as much to do with working-class Australia as it did with German positivist aesthetics.

## The Uses of Distance

Like the Heidelberg painters, Brennan was influenced from a distance. He never set foot in France. The world of Mallarmé was for him an exclusively written reality. This made Brennan's strategic separation of text from context all the simpler, since no extensive social problematic travelled with the books received in Berlin or Sydney. Further, since books are more easily reproduced and transported than paintings, Brennan's sources of influence could be acquired and worked on indoors, isolated from external life. Unlike the painters, Brennan was remarkably alone when back in Sydney. He was separated from context by his mode of reception, becoming one of those young men of whom Valéry supposedly said to Mallarmé, "He isolates himself from everyone through the love and confidence he places exclusively in your work, difficult to find, to understand, to defend." (1957: 644)

Yet the Sydney poet was not above turning isolation to his own advantage, inventing a purely written personality for himself. In the letters he wrote to Mallarmé in 1897-98, Brennan imitated his latter's syntax and went so far as to declare himself "entirely cut off from the legendary tradition of my Celtic ancestors" (August 9 1897, ed. Randolph Hughes 1947). From the same letter we read, "It was appointed that I should use a language which must seem foreign to me." This foreign language was of course Brennan's mother tongue, English, supposedly alien because of the Australian's Irish ancestry. But who was going to check the story? The written word sent to France had little chance of meeting the spoken personality living in Sydney. The most significant phrase in Brennan's letters to Mallarmé is quite probably the one where he situates himself "at this distance and unseen" (Jan 2 1898).

The literary milieu of Sydney saw Brennan as what Jose terms a scholar "for the most part a recluse in the depths of his great brain" (1933: 28). His knowledge appeared esoteric by virtue of the distance of its sources. The reticence with which Brennan maintained this distance of course repeated the strategies of Mallarmé himself. Just as the Mardi disciples were sure their master would inscribe all suggestive silences in the Grande Œuvre, so Brennan's friends never doubted he would write the definitive historical study of Symbolism. Yet all Brennan achieved of this study were isolated lectures, readings, and translations. The aesthetic of hard work became a restrictive perfectionism, leading too often to strategic silence.

Brennan's readings of Mallarmé were based on the methods of classical philology (Kirsop 1970, 1979). There is something quite deadening in the resulting commentaries. Poems become objects of work, valued for the complexity of their construction but rarely intersecting with any social life. The pertinent modes of interpretation had been learned from books. Brennan's 1894 commentary on "L'Après-midi d'un faune" (ed. Marsden 1971), for example, was derived from a patchwork of Huysmans, Wilde, and Mallarmé as theorist. In the same text his brief explanation of Symbolist aesthetics was drawn from Huysmans' *A Rebours* and Mallarmé's "Avant dire" to Ghil's *Traité du verbe*. Immense labor was involved in the application of these

abstract principles to an equally abstract text like “L’Après-midi d’un faune.” Yet the exegete was working for the texts rather than for any living public.

Brennan’s orientation toward the written rather than spoken word contrasted sharply not only with the popular Australian verse of the period (Paterson in particular was then tapping the sources of oral tradition) but also with the Parisian circle from whence it had been derived. Whereas Dujardin claimed that Mallarmé’s writings were “but faint echoes of his spoken teachings” (1936: 5), Brennan insisted that his inscribed Mallarmé was “intelligible out of himself” (1962: 147). This may have been so. But the Australian never wrote the book that would make it universally evident. The definitive critical study he was no doubt capable of producing was written elsewhere, in England, by Arthur Symons, whose *Symbolist Movement in Literature* of 1899 was to have a significant influence on Yeats and Eliot.

An idea of Brennan’s reception of Mallarmé can be gleaned from his translation of the “Scène” from *Hérodiade* (1962: 138-141). Comparison with Symons’ 1896 translation of the same text (ed. Beckson 1981: 159-161) shows Brennan giving a far more literal version, often at the expense of gallicisms and archaisms. He is also given to using indirect analysis to cover over erotic reference. Consider, for example:

Mallarmé: “le frisson blanc de ma nudité”

Brennan: “white shudder of my birth”

Symons: “white quiver of my nakedness”

Or again:

Mallarmé: “J’aime l’horreur d’être vierge”

Brennan: “The horror of a heart untaught / woos me”

Symons: “The horror of my virginity / delights me”

At these particular points Symons is the more faithful to the original. Brennan’s Mallarmé is heavy and worked, turning the aesthetic of suggestion into a process of literary plastering. The Australian made *Hérodiade* a respectably abstruse monument to the years Mallarmé had spent on the poem, while Symons’ relative freshness came from the world where Wilde wrote a version of the same theme - *Salomé* - in a matter of months, heightening any risk of indecency by adding Beardsley’s illustrations to the 1894 English version. The vitality of the British *Yellow Book* milieu had little influence on Brennan’s image of Mallarmé, nor indeed on the Australian’s own verse.

### Three Moments of Reception

Mallarmé certainly became a kind of personal ideal for Brennan. He functioned as a psychological protector against the “decadentism” the Australian saw in British imperialism, in his own country “already degenerating, for want of foreign leaven” (1962: 221) and, quite probably, in his unhappy private life, tragically hidden behind a written personality.

The use of Mallarmé in this prosaic context can be approached in terms of three moments:

- Analysis, whereby Brennan sought to engage in a difficult and transcendent poetic sphere through his commentaries and notes, not for presentation to a public but as a private mode of understanding. Externally, this moment appears as a mode of initiation into a world of esoteric knowledge.
- Imitation, by which Brennan, at a “distance and unseen,” pretended to be a kind of Mallarmé, particularly in his letters to the latter.
- Parody, resulting from the irony of despair with which Brennan looked back on the social place he could leave spiritually though not materially. This is most clearly seen in the 1897 pastiche of Un coup de dés, accorded the magnificent title of Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle-Musico-Poematicographoscope and rendering Mallarmé’s principal phrase as “I DON’T GIVE A TINKER’S DAMN FOR THE PUBLIC . . . AND THEY RETURN THE COMPLIMENT.”

These three moments can provide interpretative guidelines for the parts of Brennan’s major text, Poems 1913. Although Hodge and Mishra (1990: 182-187) see the inner psychological content of this work as his unhappy marriage to his German wife, Brennan was not always writing for what the same authors call “a society of one” (187). In the moment of initial expression, he was quite probably writing for a distant and ideal reader, located in the imaginary esoteric sphere that he associated with Mallarmé, significantly French rather than German. If we accept that this second person was of psychological importance for Brennan-as-poet, we should not be surprised to find it producing large-scale consequences throughout Poems 1913, over and above the problems of Brennan’s family life.

The first part of this composite text, Towards the Source (1897), was the work by which Brennan translated a basic symbolism into his own situation and then sent it back “towards the source.” He did indeed reach world of his ideal reader, sending the poems to Mallarmé, to their mutual acquaintances Sébastien-Charles Leconte and Gustave-Charles Toussant - Symbolists voyaging in the South Seas (Foulkes 1978: 38) -, and to the Mercure de France, since it was there that Henry Davray publicly criticized the poems as containing “ideas that are almost always insignificant” (Mercure October 1897, 299). Although very small, this network of readers was not quite a “society of one.” Nor was it entirely passive. Mallarmé sent a note of encouragement, calling Brennan “Poète et poète merveilleux” in a letter dated September 16 1897, and he is reported as having rebuked Davray for the harsh comment in the press (Austin

1969: 155-57; Foulkes 1978: 38-39). The ideal reader, reached through intermediaries, was also a mildly supportive reader.

Brennan lost this support when Mallarmé died in September 1898. The loss should be associated with the bulk of The Forest of the Night (1897-1902), which sinks into inner problematics. Here we do indeed find expression of an unhappy marriage and the temptation of infidelity, expressed through the myth of Lilith, Adam's first bride. Yet these poems also imitate much of the dramatic form and subject matter of Hérodiade, perhaps also suggesting something of the Grande Œuvre that Brennan probably believed destroyed upon Mallarmé's death.

The final sequence of Poems 1913, called The Wanderer and written mostly in 1902, sees the poet recover a first-person voice in freer verse forms, addressing the people of urban interiors to whom he is now exterior. From this latter section and the apocryphal poems added to it come several of the texts nowadays cited and anthologized as respectable Australian poetry.

There is of course a wide discrepancy between parody as the third receptive moment and the poetic voice of The Wanderer. No trace of irony enters the verse. And yet the poet's prosaic personality was quite capable of joking about the distance between poetic ideal and social reality. We find this ironic voice in Brennan's translation of Verlaine into American journalese (1962: 351) and again in the less innocent working title dated 1897: "DISPOSITION OF THE BOOK OF LILITH (TO BE PVBLISH'D GOD-KNOWS-WHEN, BECAUSE IT'S ALL BLOODY ROT)" (cited in Wilkes 1972: 7). Brennan was very able to perceive himself from the perspective of his immediate milieu. Indeed, it was probably from that social group that his irony came. I cannot read the above title without being reminded of the Dawn and Dusk Club's project for the building of ancient monuments in Australia. The lighter moments of Brennan's irony converge with Daley's symbolist parody "Narcissus and Some Tadpoles" (The Bookfellow April 29 1899); the darker aspects recall Lawson's well-known advice that any young writer who could not leave Australia should "shoot himself carefully with the aid of a looking-glass" (1969: 78).

Such dark humor has a lot to do with Brennan, if only because his French looking-glass, named Mallarmé, allowed no reflection of it in his poetry. For the Sydney writers of the 1890s - and for humorists like Clive James almost a century later -, self-deprecating irony was a way of traversing precisely the distance at the center of Brennan's aesthetic, the discrepancy between "the imperfection of our life and the fact of possible perfection" (1962: 68). The path of irony was chosen by Furphy in his creation of Tom Collins, the intellectual whose carefully fractured phrasing occasionally recalls Brennan's letters to Mallarmé. It was also the strategy underlying Miles Franklin's quixotic treatment of distanced English romance. Brennan, however, had no literary alias capable of handling problematic discrepancies. He was a serious poet. His path admitted no facile escape. His hard work led to a quest for perfection.

If Brennan as poet could not reproduce the humor of the *Bulletin* milieu, his tentative solution to the problem of distance was nevertheless not without relation to the group's more serious ideology. His final figure of the Wanderer, like an idealized swagman, is a negation of urban

enclosure. Like the Lawson of “Faces in the Street,” Brennan opposed space and movement to the urban enclosure of “prison homes.” In both cases the ideological import was a rejection of urban life, formulated at a time when Australia was about to become the most urbanized country in the world. As an attempt to locate an ideal in a regional and spiritual interior, *The Wanderer* foreshadows the symbolism of Patrick White and Randolph Stow. Within Brennan’s personal context it looks away from the Mallarmé of the room of books, seeking a literary equivalent of *plein air*.

### **The *Bulletin* and Francophile Nationalism**

In dealing indirectly with the problem of being in Australia, Brennan was very Australian. Further, when dealing with the problem of not being French, he was as Australian as his contemporaries George Lewis Becke, pleased to be known as “Louis,” Charles Withers, who wrote in Western Australia as “Andrée Hayward,” and John Feltham Archibald, editor of the *Bulletin*, who in the 1880s took to calling himself “Jules François.” The weekly at the center of Australian nationalism was in the hands of a decided francophile. It was not by accident that Brennan should publish in its pages. Nor was it entirely by caprice that Australian nationalists turned to France. The *Bulletin*’s worldview merits a few citations.

In 1887 we find the paper adopting France as living proof of successful protectionism, opposed to “the decadence of Free-Trade England” (Dec. 3 1887). In the same edition, in preparation for the centenary celebrations of Australia’s colonization, the *Bulletin*’s account of history pauses to mention La Pérouse’s unfortunately mistimed visit to Botany Bay: “But Providence, which designed the country for Caliban, had arranged that the future of Australia should not fall into the hands of a people fresh from the partial awakening of the French Revolution.” The strategy is of some interest. In attempting to dissociate itself from British colonialist culture, the paper adopted France as a lever by which it hoped to affirm a socialistic and perhaps revolutionary Australian identity.

The cultural lever first appeared in the 1880s, before Roberts and Brennan started working in Sydney. It was initially important for political reasons. France was opposed both to British imperialist stability and, significantly for Brennan, to Prussian expansionism (*Bulletin* August 13 1887; July 7 1888). Lawson declared that in the 1880s he “dreamed of dying in the barricades to the roar of the Marseillaise - for the Young Australian Republic” (*Bulletin* June 18 1887). Whatever its inherent contradictions - few in Australia knew much about the France of the Third Republic -, the image of French political vitality provided the basis for the cultural translations of the 1890s. O’Dowd’s poetic socialism was touched by it; Brennan became quite excited about the Dreyfus Affair (1962: 202, 346); and his verse of 1903, published as *The Burden of Tyre*, was an undisguised attack on British and Australian involvement in the Boer War.

This political background enabled the Sydney nationalist milieu to bring together several important francophile strands. Brennan met Roberts (Clark 1980: 83); Roberts knew Archibald;

and when A. G. Stephens arrived from England in 1896 to become the *Bulletin's* literary editor, he brought with him an informed appreciation of French literature in which Brennan would find encouragement for many years to come. Stephens had Brennan - and with him, Mallarmé - published in the Australian nationalist weekly, although he later admitted that "general readers requested something more amusing" (Stephens 1969: 142).

Brief note should be made of Stephens' largely forgotten role as a master strategist. His French sympathies never opposed the regionalist basis of Australian writing. His position was instead founded on tacit compromise. In his introduction to *The Bulletin Story Book* of 1901, Stephens does indeed depreciate the mimetic level of the local contributions, placing realism "on the lower level of art - which is at its highest not imitative, but creative, making anew the whole world in terms of its subject" (1901: v). The Symbolist influence is evident. And yet, in this same introduction, Stephens denounces the imposition of English colors on Australian landscape, thus compromising his praise of subjective independence. To avoid absolute contradiction he then rhetorically justifies fidelity to regional nature in terms of an alternative subjective tradition: "Verlaine's cult of faded things, extolling the hinted hue before the gross colour, finds a natural home in Australia . . ." (vi).

Once again we find the basic strategy of the cultural lever, French sources being used against English tradition in order to identify and legitimate Australian particularity. The fact that the reference here is to painting is by no means gratuitous. Like Roberts, Stephens was given to working with others on the basis of the available material; unlike Brennan, he did not allow his ideal to draw him away from the concrete. And yet Stephens remained a critical participant. If Roberts and Brennan can be seen as opposed poles of the one general strategy of cultural leverage, Stephens would stand somewhere between them, using knowledge of other cultures without falling into the trap of relative isolation.

One might be tempted to attach this mediated polarity to the later development of Radical Nationalism (building on Roberts) and New Criticism (appreciating Brennan). But the painter and the poet should retain their specificity. Along with Stephens they knew, better than many of those who came later, that modern identity can be created from the strategic use of intercultural influences. Whether painting cigar boxes, suffering at a distance, or indulging in tongue-in-cheek journalism, they were able to manipulate frontiers and turn international influences into significant cultural leverage.

### **Influence in the Postcolonial Frame**

The above analysis has not assumed any general theory of influence or postcolonialism. Yet some reflection on such theoretical aspects seems called for, if only because postcolonial studies are likely to return the notion of influence to academic respectability. I would like to direct a few concluding comments toward, first, Harold Bloom's theory of influence, which remains

important in the American context, and second, the notion of postcolonialism that frames Hodge and Mishra's comments on Brennan, which have a certain importance in the Australian context.

Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) posits that the relations between poets operate in terms of a Freudian family. Bloom's study is of "strong equals, father and son as powerful opposed forces" (11). Poetic history thus becomes part of each poet's "family romance," analyzable in terms of the six "revisionary ratios" that Bloom puts forward as modes of reception or misreading. It is a powerful theory. But can these "revisionary ratios" take in our less spectacular "strategies of the frontier"? Or are our transcultural influences simply too benign to exert the appropriate psychodramatic force?

The main problem here is that Bloom's family model presupposes a degree of spatial closure that is difficult to find in the cases we have been considering. Where would any of the Australian painters have found a spiritual father to oppose? As for Brennan, he may have seen Mallarmé as a paternal figure, he may well have been orphaned prior to any effective patricide, but did Mallarmé really occupy any space that Brennan ever thought of claiming for his own? The distances were simply too great, across languages, social structures, land and sea. And the final ambitions of the Australian poets and painters were in some way too regional, too concerned with their own space within their own society. They ultimately failed to live up to Bloom's theory. Yet theirs was not a specifically Australian problem.

In more general terms, the later nineteenth century is peculiarly lacking in poets strong enough to wield major poems in mortal combat. The *chefs d'œuvre* of the period were perhaps the literary periodicals; the key imaginary relation was perhaps brotherhood, both within and between languages (Pym 1993). Antagonistic relationships were often resolved by the opening of more space: one founded another periodical, another movement, or hailed a forgotten master of the distant past or the distant present. This period is as rich for a sociology of intercultural relations as it is poor for a vision of Titanic battles. The values of purely individual strength tend to run aground. When Barbara Johnson, for example, claims that "Mallarmé always wrote in order to kill Hugo" (1979: 172), the statement is interesting from the perspective of Bloom but willfully reductive in the context of late-nineteenth-century Paris. Why Hugo instead of Zola? What of Baudelaire? Wasn't Mallarmé a Parnassian, a member of a group? Wasn't he also the strangely passive master of his own independent and very internationalist circle? All these questions are possible because, as Taine said of Paris in 1868, "the city is so big and so culturally diverse that it has a little church for every god" (1964: 173). There was enough space for artists to form their own coteries, resurrecting masters as they were needed for group identification. The imaginary international milieux operative in Australia were thus not entirely absent even at the center of the fin de siècle network.

Bloom's approach fails to account for this period simply because he defines influence as working exclusively between poets as strong individuals. Since the theory accords little weight to any sense of belonging to a living society, it excludes the kind of influences that might result in what I have been calling strategies of the frontier.

An obverse kind of exclusion ensues from recent postcolonial studies, where the operative influences tend to be located in historical relations between societies, before any individual poet or painter enters the scene. This does not mean that Freudian models become irrelevant. Hodge and Mishra (1990: 182-187) try to explain Brennan's poetry not in terms of parricide but as a result of forced exogamy ensuing from a social prohibition of incest. Taking seriously Brennan's claims to be spiritually Irish - although A. G. Stephens (1969) did not take the claim so seriously - Hodge and Mishra portray the poet as an "upwardly mobile second-generation Australian" who, in his marriage to Elisabeth Werth, crossed boundaries of class, nationality and religion. As we have noted, his poetry is then analyzed as "a twenty-year meditation on the difficulties of his marriage," expressed in a private antilanguage, considered typical of "the literature of oppressed peoples in a colonial context" (187).

The problems with this kind of reading are fairly obvious. Why didn't all second-generation Australians with unhappy marriages send verse to Mallarmé? And how might the notion of "oppressed peoples in a colonial context" explain all the young European poets who were writing similarly obscure verse at the time? The postcolonial frame tends to divide the world into metropolitan and peripheral cultures in such a way that one half is socially condemned to oppose the other. Everything is already in the frontier. This approach misses the strategies by which such vast oppositions were often manipulated and sometimes overcome on the literary level. Worse, it misses the crucial divisions that, within European culture, provided the complexity necessary for properly strategic thought. Did Brennan claim to be spiritually Irish simply because of his postcolonial context, or because the French and German influences on him were significantly anti-British? Did he turn to Mallarmé in search of a surrogate father, or because French Symbolism was opposed by the Prussians he knew when in Berlin? The unhappy marriage would seem to be just one further element in these complex strategic relations. As a poet, Brennan simply had more scope for action, more space, perhaps even a little more *plein air*, than postcolonial determinism would allow.

Just as Bloom curiously continues the values of New Critical individualism, Hodge and Mishra write within and against Australian nationalism. Neither of these approaches fares much better than did the traditional opposition with which we began our account. On the level of general theory, the initial division perhaps has yet to be overcome. This is why complex peripheral areas like the Australian 1890s are worth analyzing in terms of a few relatively subtle strategies of the frontier.

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