

Born of Fire, Possessed by Darkness: Mysticism and Australian Poetry

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is structured around five Australian mystical poets: Ada Cambridge, John Shaw Neilson, Francis Webb, Judith Wright and Kevin Hart. It examines the varieties of Western Christian mysticism upon which these poets draw, or with which they exhibit affinities. A short prelude section to each chapter considers the thematic parallels of their contemporaries, while the final chapter critically investigates constructions of Indigeneity in Australian mystical poetry and the renegotiated mystical poetics of Indigenous poets and theologians.

The central argument of this dissertation is that an understanding of Western Christian mysticism is essential to the study of Australian poetry. There are three sub-arguments: firstly, that Australian literary criticism regarding the mystical largely avoids the concept of mysticism as a *shifting notion* both historically and in the present; secondly, that what passes for mysticism is recurrently subject to poorly defined constructions of mysticism as well as individual poets' use of the mystical for personal, creative or ideological purposes; thirdly, that in avoiding the concept of a shifting notion critics have ignored the increasing contribution of Australian poets to national and international discourses of mysticism.

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Introduction: Working with Contested Traditions, Old and New

In order to clearly demonstrate how an understanding of Western Christian mysticism is essential to the study of Australian poetry, the context and parameters of the research field, terminological considerations, acknowledgement of other mystical traditions and a chapter guide will first be outlined.

Original Contribution to the Field

Mysticism of any tradition can prove a precarious topic, subject to distortion and contradiction. With this in mind literary scholars might be excused for avoiding tropes and themes more comfortably consigned to the domain of theology. The problem for studies of Australian poetry is that major Australian poets do not subscribe to the same systematic avoidance. Ada Cambridge, John Shaw Neilson, Francis Webb, Judith Wright and Kevin Hart in particular have directly engaged and represented Western Christian mysticism and thematic parallels are discernable in their respective contemporaries Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall, Mary Fullerton, Zora Cross, Christopher Brennan, Lesbia Harford, James McAuley, Vincent Buckley, Roland Robinson, David Campbell, Robert D. FitzGerald, A.D. Hope, Gwen Harwood, Les Murray, Peter Steele, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann and Maisie Cavanagh. This spread of twenty-four poets—many canonical and recurrently anthologised—provides the impetus for the claim that an understanding of Western Christian mysticism, however elementary, is essential to the study of Australian poetry. With some poets this understanding may be limited to certain mystical figures, imageries or themes. For others, it encompasses a deeper, abiding, transformative relationship variously incorporating the metaphysics and poetics of

land, the inexpressible, inner journeys and contemplations of spiritual progression towards the divine. This deeper relationship can be found in each of the five selected poets and this is why they constitute the central foci of this thesis.

Australian poetry critics have not always avoided the topic of Western Christian mysticism in Australian poetry *per se*, but Australian criticism engaging the mystical typically contains three major oversights this thesis seeks to address. The first of these is a failure to disclose or construct a definition for ‘mystical’ or ‘mysticism’, which is the task of Chapter 1. The second is a failure to contextualise how the mystical is demonstrated or expressed and by whom. One critic might be influenced by Platonic or biblical sources, another the Catholic saints, another solely English mystical poets, another recent mysticism scholarship, yet there is often no way to determine the full extent or effects of such biases. Chapter 2 of this thesis contextualises its argument by exploring ancient and modern innovators in Western mystical poetics. The third critical oversight lies in the lack of recognition of mysticism as a shifting notion (whereby what is considered mystical in 1900 may not be so in 1999) and related lines of continuity and cross-influence across multiple, intergenerational poetries. While this may be symptomatic of the larger educational disregard for the mystical noted by Hart in Chapter 7, it nonetheless compares poorly to international scholarship. Notable works with no corresponding Australian examples include Nicholson and Lee’s *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (1917), Eliot’s 1926 Clark Lectures which appear in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (1993), Cohen’s *The Ryder Book of Mystical Verse* (1983) and Paranjape’s *Mysticism in Indian English Poetry* (1988). Australian poetry criticism is yet to broadly consider its own national tradition in mystical terms, a situation which belies the abundance of mystical tropes and themes in the work of Australian poets. This

study seeks to address this long-standing impasse by asserting that an understanding of Western Christian mysticism is essential to the study of Australian poetry, that what critically passes for mysticism is era-specific, and that the critical failure to comprehend mysticism as a shifting notion has facilitated a lack of awareness of the increasing contribution of Australian poets to national and international mystical discourses.

Which Mysticism? Practical Considerations

The Western Christian mystical tradition has been selected for this study for practical rather than essentialist or evangelical purposes. Mysticisms of other traditions, including Indigenous, pagan, Vedic, Buddhist, Judaic, Islamic and Eastern Orthodox, are not examined here, although it is hoped this study may encourage further research, including from interfaith perspectives, into these traditions and their respective Australian mystical poetries. Even within this study's parameters, there remain points of convergence. W.B. Yeats's 'Celtic Twilight', for example, inspired Brennan, Neilson and Cross. The Islamic mystical influences of Omar Khayyam, Rumi and Hafiz of Shiraz can be found in Neilson and Wright. Hinduism (Brennan and Wright), Taoism (Wright) and Shintoism (Murray) are likewise evident. This study acknowledges the ancient and ongoing spiritual heritages of Indigenous Australia, and in accepting that its author is neither initiated nor authorised to comment on matters of Indigenous metaphysics, Law or ritual, will not expound any ill-defined 'Indigenous mysticism'. Indigeneity in Australian mystical poetry is another matter, however, and this will be discussed, along with the challenges to Western Christian mysticism by Indigenous Christian poets and theologians, in the final chapter.

Western Christian mysticism has been selected because it has proved recurrently attractive to Australian poets since the colonial era. As Rowland Ward and Robert Humphreys (1995) note, the influx of clergy from 1788 reflected the British Empire's religious hierarchy with Anglican (1788), Methodist (1815), Catholic (1820), Presbyterian (1822), Congregational (1830) and Baptist ministries (1834) arriving as part of the colonisation process which included the Christianisation of Indigenous peoples discussed further in Chapter 8.¹ By Federation in 1901, 74% of the population identified as Protestant and 23% as Roman Catholic. Although this census is methodologically unsound by today's standards, it does indicate the predominance of Christianity among those polled. A more reliable, updated figure appears in the 2006 Australian census where 64% of the population identified themselves as Christians (down 7% from 1996), while non-Christian faiths totalled only 5.6% (up 2.1% from 1996).² Demographically, Australia from at least the nineteenth century population surges to the present has been a majority Christian country. Thus, with the influence of Eastern Orthodox Christianity virtually unsighted in Australian poetry until the post-1945 European migration (such as the poetry of Crete-born Greek Orthodox Archbishop S.S. Charkianakis [1935-]), Western Christian mysticism is the practical choice, given that Indigenous poetic voices were largely unpublished until the 1960s and many of these negotiate their own Christianity.

Most of the Christian mystics referred to in this study are consequently Hellenistic, Roman, Western European or English (see Chapter 2) and most of the

¹ Rowland Ward & Robert Humphreys, *Religious Bodies in Australia* (3rd edition), New Melbourne Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 14.

² Jane Holroyd, 'Census Gives Snapshot of A Nation', *The Age*, 27 June 2007 at <<http://theage.com.au/news/national/snapshot-of-a-nation/2007/06/27/1182623949953.html>> retrieved 27 June 2007.

non-Australian critics French and Anglo-American, with particular reference to the pre-eminent historian of Western Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn (1937–). Establishing a cogent definition of mysticism with reference to these sources is the subject of Chapter 1.

Contested Traditions (1): Western Christian Mysticism

While not as innately elitist as Gnosticism, Rosicrucianism and other forms of Christian esoterism, accessibility to Western Christian mysticism in Australia has never been equitable or uniform.³ Although the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *King James Bible* were central to many Australian educations, the mystical content of the Bible and indeed the larger Western Christian mystical tradition could remain obscured without further theological, ecclesiastical or philosophical training with and there were class, gender, racial, geographical and linguistic barriers inherent in these. The methods through which the earliest proponents of Western Christian mysticism in Australian poetry came into contact with the mystical confirm these barriers, but also the triumph over them. Ada Cambridge, for example, drew on devotional literature, her marriage to an Anglican minister and her own spiritual crisis to forge her mystical poetry. John Shaw Neilson, despite his poor rural upbringing, used family connections, libraries and subscriptions to create a highly literary metaphysics of presence. Yet the deep depressions each faced attest to something more sobering: Cambridge was ignored as a poet and recorded two near-death experiences; Neilson was tormented by broken relationships, effects of a nervous disorder and his mother's harsh Presbyterian God with whom he could not reconcile. For Australian

³ Esoterism is a separate tradition to mysticism, though they sometimes draw on similar traditions, such as those of the Gnostics. Since at least the time of St Augustine however, Gnostic and esoteric practices have often been attacked by Christian contemplatives, theologians and mystics. For a wider discussion of esoterism and Australian poetry, see Katherine Barnes, *The Higher Self in Christopher Brennan's Poems: Esoterism, Romanticism, Symbolism*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2006.

mystical poets, as in the lives of the mystics themselves, personal and metaphysical coincide; thus every poet in this study uniquely engages mystical sources and contexts, even if they do so while cross-influencing one another. A greater site of cross-influence occurs between Australian mystical poetry and Indigeneity, whereby contemplative and mystical poetics include a transformative Indigenous aspect from the colonial era of Charles Harpur to Maisie Cavanagh in the twenty-first century, examined in Chapter 8.

Neither should the twenty-first-century rise of Christian fundamentalism be excluded from the applications of this study. Christian mysticism, despite its pillars of theological and papal orthodoxy, also contains what Bernard McGinn calls ‘inherent issues, pressure points if you will, in the relation of mysticism and magisterium in the history of Christianity’ and the convictions of many mystics beyond the limits of ecclesiastical or state strictures have variously resulted in execution (Marguerite Porete), imprisonment (St John of the Cross), and condemnation for heresy (Origen, Meister Eckhart).⁴ However, more challenging to Christian fundamentalism is mysticism’s long-held insistence on a *polysemous* interpretation of scripture whereby allegorical, moral and anagogic readings add depth to the more literal approach. Furthermore, as Michael Sells (1994) observes, the mystics’ use of double semantics and languages of *unsaying* likewise evade and subvert literalist, singular or fundamentalist ideologies.⁵ It may be through language, therefore, that Western Christian mysticism has most to offer twenty-first-century Christian and interfaith dialogues.

⁴ Bernard McGinn, “‘Evil-sounding, Rash, and Suspect of Heresy’: Tensions Between Mysticism and Magisterium in the History of the Church”, *The Catholic Historical Review* 90.2, April 2004, p. 193.

⁵ For Origen’s polysemous reading, which in turn affected Dante, see Ewert Cousins, ‘The Fourfold Sense of Scripture in Christian Mysticism’ in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 123. For Sells’s theories of double semantics and languages of unsaying, see Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, pp. 1–4, 21.

The title of this study is drawn from Judith Wright's Heraclitean poem 'Patterns' ('We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness') which, though arguably both pre-Christian and post-Christian, also evokes the ancient mystical tropes of fire and darkness which have resonated throughout Christian mysticism and Australian mystical poetry.

Contested Traditions (2): Australian Poetry

Terminologically, Australian poetry is also not without its complexities. As Paul Kane (1996) discusses at length, it may be reduced to poetic works in the English language by a certain person identified (or identifying) as Australian printed in a book or on paper, or it may 'expand exponentially' to include hypertext, multimedia, street art, prayer, song in any language (or hybrid thereof) in any way associable with Australia to the point of Kevin Hart's (1993) assertion that 'it is very doubtful whether some poetic gestures can rightly be ventured as more authentically Australian than others'.⁶ By contrast, earlier critics such as Vincent Buckley (1969) do not consider Australian poetry a problematic or contestable term, preferring instead to discuss the 'tribal', anti-intellectual, land-based aspects of its development.⁷ Kane's approach is to investigate the gap, or *aporia*, between 'Australian' and 'poetry' he identifies as integral, at least 'emblematically', to Australian poetry as a whole.⁸ John Leonard (1998) goes further by actively celebrating the interplay of contested identities and languages (*across* the gaps) in his *Australian Verse: An Oxford Anthology* on the basis of two observations which might be extended to poetry and Christianity themselves—one, that such definitional

⁶ Paul Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp 1–3. Hart cited in *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁷ Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian*, Books For Libraries Press, Freeport, 1969, pp. 1–2.

⁸ Kane, *Op Cit.*, p. 3.

tensions are not uniquely Australian, and two, that these tensions are in fact beneficial. He states, 'Poetry is written from an extreme diversity of experience and background, and from conflicting ideas about its proper subject and language. That diversity *enlivens* reading'.⁹ Leonard's anthology contains one hundred and forty-six poets, while Kane, despite his recognition of the fluid perimeters and 'exponential' scope of Australian poetry, centres nine of his eleven chapters around canonical Australian poets Harpur, Kendall, Brennan, Slessor, Hope, 'Ern Malley', Wright, Harwood and Murray. Yet this is hardly a contradiction, for an exegesis is not an anthology and any discussion of Australian poetry must encounter its major or most critically lauded poets at some point, even if only to rail against the hegemony of their position. The verticality of this study with its five selected poets is tempered to some degree by a short prelude section to each chapter examining the engagements with Western Christian mysticism of two to three of the chosen poet's contemporaries. This, combined with the Indigenous poets in Chapter 8, allows for a broader section of Australian poetry to be considered in terms of its era-specific critical notions of the mystical while maintaining a high level of critical scrutiny for each of the five poets.

To date, there are no multiple-poet surveys of mysticism in Australian poetry. Structurally, Kane's *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* (1996) is the nearest book-length parallel, while Kevin Hart's journal articles on the mystical in Webb and Wright are more congruent content-wise, though on a smaller scale. Other scholars in the chapters ahead consider the mystical in various ways, though rarely with an explanation of their own understanding of the term. Reputable literary histories such as *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), *The Oxford*

⁹ John Leonard (ed.), *Australian Verse: An Oxford Anthology*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998.

Literary History of Australia (1998) and *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000) avoid it entirely, other than a brief, abstract consideration of Neilson's 'The Crane Is My Neighbour' as a 'mystic pastoral' by Ivor Indyk in the *Penguin*.¹⁰ Critical discourses of mysticism were more popular (and obtuse) around the time of Federation, reaching a fever pitch during the life of John Shaw Neilson (1872–1943)—the least understood and most feted Australian 'mystic' poet—and after World War II, when poets such as Francis Webb and Judith Wright drew upon their own identification with saints, mystics, the Greek and Hebrew origins of Christian mysticism and poetic ventures into the mystical such as T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. In each chapter of the thesis, the associated criticism surrounding each poet will be examined, with a special emphasis on the case of Neilson.

Methodology

This study adopts a multilateral approach to identifying poetic engagements with the mystical. The poet may explicitly refer to mystical figures, such as St Francis in Francis Webb's 'The Canticle' or Kevin Hart's 'Reading St Gregory of Nyssa'. These provide the most literal entry points for mysticism into Australian poetry, even if a mystic's broader theological system is not incorporated. None of the poets here claim to be mystics, and this study makes no claims of its own in that regard. The difference between mystical poets and poetic mystics is examined in Chapter 2.

A second consideration is an individual poet's own use of the terms 'mystic', 'mystical', 'mysticism', 'contemplative' or 'mystery' particularly in relation to the divine, as well as renowned mystical imagery such as the divine marriage or union, sober drunkenness, dazzling light or darkness, fire, ascent, inexpressibility, singing

¹⁰ Ivor Indyk, 'The Pastoral Poets' in Laurie Hergenhan (gen. ed.), *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1988, p. 357.

silence, mortification, temporality and the like. These reveal the poet's positionings of their own work in relation to the mystical both conceptually and creatively.

The third and most compelling consideration is the poetic demonstration of mystical consciousness of God, Godhead or Christ as defined in Chapter 1. Further considerations are also made relative to the individual poet's mythopoeic, religious, philosophical, biographical and bibliographic standpoints.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 will establish a workable description of Western Christian mysticism via related arguments in twentieth and twenty-first-century mysticism scholarship which reveal mysticism as a shifting notion. Chapter 2 will contextualise the thesis by exploring the relationship between the mystical poetics of paradigmatic mystics and Anglo-American and French sources available to Australian poets and scholars.

Chapters 3–7 are devoted to the five Australian poets, Ada Cambridge, John Shaw Neilson, Francis Webb, Judith Wright and Kevin Hart, with a short prelude section for their respective contemporaries. Cambridge is the first categorical example of Western Christian mysticism in several works, especially her seminal essay 'The Lonely Seas' (1911). Neilson's early works and later 'The Gentle Water Bird' and 'The Orange Tree' in particular display a strong affinity with biblical and medieval mysticism as well as the French symbolists who also inspired Christopher Brennan. Francis Webb engages figures of the mystical tradition, particularly St Francis ('The Canticle'), Socrates ('Socrates') and St Therese of Liseux ('Before Two Girls'), from his own increasingly schizophrenic Catholic perspective. In *A Drum for Ben Boyd* he explicitly refers to the 'mystic Centre' of Australia, a sentiment he later pursues in his Exodus-based 'Eyre All Alone'. Judith Wright is

referred to as inheriting the Christian mystic tradition by her daughter Meredith in *Equal Heart and Mind* (2004).¹¹ ‘The Blind Man’, ‘The Pool and the Star’, ‘Reading Thomas Traherne’ and ‘Grace’, philosophically and intuitively draw upon what English mystic William Law calls the ‘fire, light and spirit’ and models of ascent in the Christian mystical tradition.¹² Kevin Hart has consistently pursued Western Christian mysticism in his poetry and critical writing to the point that his inclusion is integral to this study. In *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989), he asserts that ‘negative theology is a type of deconstruction’ and attempts to reinstate mysticism within post-modernity via the phenomenology of Jacques Derrida. In an Australian context, Hart’s work on the mystical in Webb and Wright offers mysticism as an effective form of critical and literary enquiry for the twenty-first-century.¹³ His poems explicitly engage tropes and themes of canonical mystics St Gregory of Nyssa, Simone Weil and his ‘patron saint and poet’ St John of the Cross (‘Nineteen Songs’).¹⁴

Chapter 8 investigates the relationship between Indigeneity and the mystical in Australian poetry from non-Indigenous colonial poets to Indigenous Christian and non-Christian poets. The challenge of Indigenous Christian theologians and poets to Western Christian mysticism is then examined as a site for future Australian Christian mystical discourses and poetics. Chapter 9 will conclude the thesis.

¹¹ Judith Wright & Jack McKinney, *Equal Heart and Mind* (eds Patricia Clarke & Meredith McKinney), University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2004, p. 1.

¹² William Law cited in Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, Methuen, London, 1960, p. 114.

¹³ Kevin Hart, *Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 186.

¹⁴ Kevin Hart, *Flame Tree: Selected Poems*, Paper Bark, Sydney, 2002, p. 173.

1. Stately Dances and Shifting Notions: Defining Mysticism

In Australian poetry criticism, explicit disclosure of what is meant by ‘mystic’, ‘mystical’ or ‘mysticism’ is the exception rather than the rule. By contrast, the definition and later non-definition of these terms has been a central obsession of twentieth-century French and Anglo-American scholarship. This chapter reviews the shifting notions of this scholarship, considering recent non-definitional perspectives of Australian and non-Australian scholars in light of the definitional projects of their predecessors. A two-part definition of Western Christian mysticism is then established for contextual and methodological purposes.

Definition and its Discontents

‘Mystic’ in the early twenty-first-century is a diffuse, often problematic term. While Western Christian mysticism scholarship thrives with McGinn’s multivolume history, new feminist interpretations and the late-Derridean fascination with negative theology (see Chapter 7), popular culture continues to endow the term with vague intimations of the ancient or enigmatic. ‘Mystic’ and ‘mystical’ are by no means exempt from the marketing techniques of hypercapitalism, whether promoting a basketball franchise (Washington Mystics), children’s toys (Mystic Force Power Rangers), or a Melbourne restaurant’s ‘mystic sauce’, each of which carry their own connotations for the inquiring consumer. Yet, as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Etymology* (1996) reveals, this popular usage is merely the latest addition to the longer, absorptive etymology of ‘mystic’, which became especially saturated in the seventeenth-century:

mystic spiritually symbolical (14th century); occult, enigmatical; pertaining to direct communion with God (17th century); substantive exponent of mystic theology; one who practises mystical communion (17th century).—Old French *mystique* or Latin *mysticus*—Greek *mustikós* formed on *mústēs* initiated one, formed on *mūein* close (of eyes, lips), *mueîn* initiate. Hence mystical secret, occult, symbolical (15th century); pertaining to mystics or mysticism (17th century). mysticism (18th century).¹

Three centuries after this saturation, one of the major projects of twentieth-century Western Christian mysticism scholarship has been to clearly define mysticism. Evelyn Underhill (1911) considers it

one of the most abused words in the English language, it has been used in different and often mutually exclusive senses by religion, poetry and philosophy ... for every kind of occultism, for dilute transcendentalism, vapid symbolism or aesthetic sentimentality, and bad metaphysics.²

Like William Ralph Inge (1899) and William James (1902) before her, Underhill feels obliged to establish a concise definition for mysticism, a project which continued in earnest until the late twentieth-century when critics including Bernard McGinn (1991) and Grace Jantzen (1997) began to deconstruct the definitional imperative as itself symptomatic of a field more concerned with rhetoric than its primary sources, the mystics themselves.

McGinn admonishes attempts to separate the eighteenth-century term ‘mysticism’ from mystical theology, reminding his readers that the latter predates the former by

¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, (ed. T.T. Hoad), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996 at <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.lib.deakin.edu.au/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry:t27.e9977> retrieved 6 January 2007 (abbreviations expanded).

² Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. xiv.

over a millennium, while ‘mystical’ (late second century) pre-dates them both.³ He advocates a back-to-the-text approach, stressing ‘no mystics (at least before the present century) believed in or practiced “mysticism”’ and that, although elements of mysticism are present in the origins of Christianity, ‘the first great tradition of explicit mysticism came to birth when a theory of mysticism first fully laid out by Origen (c.185–c.254) in the third century found institutional embodiment in the new phenomenon of monasticism in the fourth century’.⁴ Origen is also the first to use ‘mystical’ in terms of direct knowledge of God and to propose a polysemous interpretation of the scripture where, following Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215), the allegorical is the mystical. Recognising the chronological and epistemological gaps between any given ‘mysticism’ and its chief proponents, McGinn instead proposes three headings: ‘mysticism as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God’. These coalesce into his most defining statement that

the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, consciousness of, and the reaction to the immediate or direct presence of God.⁵

The feminist scholar Grace Jantzen, by contrast, is more interrogative towards

a particular picture of mysticism, inherited largely from William James, which involves them [scholars] in a stately dance of claims and counterclaims about experience and

³ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, Crossroad, New York, 1991, p. xvi. Derived from Michael De Certeau’s research into the seventeenth century French term *la mystique* in *L’Homme devant Dieu*, Aubier, Paris, 1964, vol. 2, pp. 267–91.

⁴ McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. xvi. Louis Bouyer (1980) agrees that, although Clement was the first to use ‘mystical’ as a synonym for ‘allegorical’ or ‘mysterious’, the first uses of the word ‘applied to a certain way of knowing God, directly and as it were experimentally, are clearly found in Origen’ (Louis Bouyer ‘Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word’ in Richard Woods [ed.], *Understanding Mysticism*, Image, New York, 1980, pp. 46, 50).

⁵ Bernard McGinn, *Op Cit.*, pp. xv–xvii.

interpretation, language and ineffability, credulity and doubt. The movements of this dance are by now well-defined; but what is hardly ever noticed is how little resemblance they bear to the things which preoccupied the medieval men and women whom they themselves would consider paradigm mystics. Nor is it at all usual for modern philosophers discussing mysticism to pay close attention to the issues of power, let alone gender, which I suggest are essential to adequate analysis.⁶

Since Jantzen's *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (1997), Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (2002) and Australian initiatives such as Julie Barton and Constant Mews's *Hildegard of Bingen and Gendered Theology* (1995) have also addressed this imbalance. Jantzen's 'stately dance' commences with James's four-fold description of mystical experience in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) as ineffable, noetic (illuminative), transient and passive.⁷ Unlike Inge and Underhill, James's consideration of mysticism entails only one chapter of a larger project, but like his British contemporaries he is far more partial to the inclusion of poets than subsequent scholars. Furthermore, despite his presumptuous attempts to sketch 'the general traits of the mystic range of consciousness', James's account identifies paradox and musicality as important tropes of mystical poetics:

In mystical literature such self-contradictory phrases as 'dazzling obscurity,' 'whispering silence,' 'teeming desert,' are continually met with. They prove that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best

⁶ Grace Jantzen, *Power Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 3.

⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Collier-Macmillan, New York, 1961, pp. 299–301.

spoken to by mystical truth. Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions.⁸

Thus the instigator of Jantzen's 'stately dance' is not entirely divorced from his sources, nor is he oblivious to mystical language. Yet his prescriptive approach towards the constitution of mysticism also foreshadows the definitional quarrel between the dawn and dusk of twentieth-century Anglo-American scholarship. For the earlier and mid-century critics, a definition for mysticism, however difficult, provides a crucial referential framework and a research tool; for many later critics, a thorough enough excavation of the primary sources uncovers plenty of frameworks and tools created by the mystics themselves relating to divine mystery, contemplation or the way to God, which are the basis for the later term 'mysticism'. Declining to offer a definition can *empower* mysticism scholarship in light of Jantzen's 'stately dance' or McGinn's subdivided approach. While neither McGinn nor Jantzen speak explicitly of mysticism as a shifting notion they are clearly aware of its effects: McGinn surveys twentieth-century theological, philosophical, comparativist and psychological approaches in *The Foundations of Mysticism* and Jantzen criticises issues of ecclesiastical power relating to mysticism for not shifting enough.⁹ In effect, they advocate a return to that which shifts the least, the primary sources, the earliest of which are pre-Christian Greek and Hebrew ritual, religious and philosophical texts. Of course, Jantzen and McGinn also have the luxury of James, Inge and Underhill's pioneering work which succeeded in re-establishing mysticism as a discernible field, distinct from occultism, esoterism and spiritualism.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁹ Jantzen, *Op Cit.*, p. 2.

This thesis has a two-fold purpose in constructing its own definition of mysticism. First, the advantage of explicitly identifying mysticism as a shifting notion means a self-aware definition of mysticism can be established cognizant of its own contribution to such a notion, while using its awareness as a critical tool to illuminate era-based conventions and ideologies in Australian poetry and criticism. Second, in reviewing the mysticism scholarship of Inge, James, Underhill, French theologians and counter-traditions and the post-1945 Anglo-American trends there are multiple connections with Australian poets which become increasingly relevant through chapters 3 to 7. Some examples of these include Charles Harpur and Mary Fullerton's attraction to Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose injunction 'mysticism finds Plato in all its texts' is strongly endorsed by Inge; James McAuley's visionary experience while reading an Inge essay on mystic William Law; Francis Webb's personal copies of the works of French scholar Jacques Maritain and Underhill's mentor Friedrich von Hügel; Les Murray's familiarity with Maritain and German theologian Rudolf Otto; and Kevin Hart's comprehensive knowledge of the sources and scholarship via his critical work in the field.¹⁰ This is by no means an exhaustive list, for many of these poets are lifelong bibliophiles. Christopher Brennan in his Sydney university and library posts, for example, was well positioned to absorb early twentieth-century scholarship, though in his own lectures on mysticism and symbolism he pre-empts many of Underhill's points, for instance those on Blake, by several years (see Chapter 4). The best part of a century later, Peter Steele combines the roles of poet, scholar and Jesuit priest. Poet-scholars such as T.S. Eliot, who also lectured on mysticism, were especially important for post-World War II poets such

¹⁰ William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, Methuen, London, 1899, p. 79.

as Francis Webb and Judith Wright. Thus Australian mystical poets are often, although by no means exclusively, in touch with international mysticism scholarship.

Early British Critics: Inge and Underhill

William Ralph Inge and Evelyn Underhill adopted different approaches to a shared concern about mysticism's obtuseness as a term in the new century. Inge, the Dean of St Paul's, famously provided twenty-six definitions of mysticism and, while maintaining that the definitions need not disagree, he argues that 'no word in our language—not even "Socialism"—has been employed more loosely than "mysticism"'.¹¹ He bases his own interpretation on mysticism's connection to the Greek Mysteries—esoteric, often agricultural rituals, alternately of Persian, Egyptian or local origin at Eleusis, Delphi, Southern Italy and Athens centred around secret initiated knowledge and modes of 'communion' with Apollo, Demeter, Persephone, Zeus, Dionysius and Orpheus.¹² In keeping with the Greek etymology of 'mystic', Inge notes that in this earliest of contexts, a mystic can be one who is initiated or about to be initiated and must 'keep his mouth shut', or one 'whose eyes are still shut', who is not (or is incompletely) initiated. In a later lecture, Inge makes the case for the 'degrees of initiation' in 2 Corinthians 7:1 ('let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God') and while he labels St Paul a 'hierophant', there is a crucial difference: 'the Christian mysteries are freely communicated to all who can receive them ... [even] the carnal must still

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹² See Louis Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery from Pagan Myth to Mysticism*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1990, pp. 23–74.

be fed with milk'.¹³ Inge's sources are somewhat homogenised, however, adhering too closely to mysticism's Greek lineage at the cost of its Hebraic one, the Hebrew Bible and associated cultural practices of the Second Temple period (515 B.C.–70 A.D.).¹⁴ Thus Inge's Pauline and Neoplatonic urge to 'look not at the things that are seen, which are temporal, but on the things that are not seen, which are eternal' clash with his condemnation of the influence of The Song of Songs upon mysticism as 'simply deplorable', which says less about The Song of Songs than it does about Inge's aversion to feminine eroticism.¹⁵ Love does feature as the last of Inge's four propositions of faith upon which mysticism rests, whereby the true hierophant of the mysteries of God is love.¹⁶ Yet, given Inge's understanding of the slipperiness of the subject, his most direct definition of mysticism proves somewhat underwhelming:

the attempt to realise the presence of the living God in the soul and in nature, or more, generally, *the attempt to realise, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal and of the eternal in the temporal.*¹⁷

Inge's inclusion of nature is clearly influenced by 'the ardent piety' of English mystical poets including Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw, but it is Wordsworth he advocates as the greatest representative of what he calls 'Nature Mysticism', a diffuse term which resurfaces in Neilson criticism two decades later. Inge's contribution to the definitional project, while clearly opinionated, laid the conceptual groundwork and theological framework for other early twentieth-century initiatives

¹³ Inge, *Op Cit.*, pp. 63–4. Biblical quotations are from the *New International Version* unless demanded otherwise by the sources (as here with Inge's *King James Version*). In keeping with biblical and mysticism scholarship, Bible chapters are neither italicised nor signified by apostrophes.

¹⁴ McGinn, *Op Cit.*, pp. 9, 23.

¹⁵ Inge, *Mysticism and Religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1948, p. 10; Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, pp. 43, 115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8. The other three propositions state the soul as well as the body can see and perceive, man in order to know God must be a partaker of the Divine nature, and that without holiness no man may see the Lord (Matthew 5:8).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

in the field. At the same time, his Victorian values which reject *The Song of Songs* and commend Wordsworth as a ‘sane and manly spirit’ provide feminist critics like Grace Jantzen with more than enough antiquated stateliness.¹⁸

Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (1911) popularised the subject for scholarly and non-scholarly audiences alike with her journalistic style and unprecedented wealth of sources. In a major departure from Inge, Underhill asserts that religion, poetry and philosophy, often represented as the guardians of the ‘old meaning’, are themselves culpable in reducing mysticism to a term of deception and contempt. Poetry is spared further condemnation (not least because Underhill is also a poet), but features very little in the text independent of the ‘poet of the Trinity’ Julian of Norwich and the poet-saint St John of the Cross ‘who represents the spirit of Western mysticism at its best’.¹⁹ William Blake is the major anomaly: unlike the rest of the English literary canon, he is repeatedly cited in Underhill’s stream of quotations. In later works, however, she favourably compares the ‘artistic language’ of Ezekiel and Revelations with ‘the best effects of the mystical poets’ identified as Wordsworth, Blake, Whitman, Francis Thompson, St John of the Cross and Gerard Manley Hopkins.²⁰ Yet these poets and ‘nature-mystics’, with the exception of St John, are still separated from the ‘great mystics’ by the sorting-house of St John’s ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ where ‘we part from the “nature mystics”, the mystic poets, and all who

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹⁹ She features, for example, in Percy Osmond, *The Mystical Poets of the English Church*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1919, pp. 410–9. Underhill, *Op Cit.*, pp. 112, 236.

²⁰ Underhill, ‘The Mystic as Creative Artist’, in Richard Woods (ed.), *Understanding Mysticism*, Image Books, New York, 1980, p. 404.

shared in and were contented with the illuminated vision of reality. Those who go on are the great and strong spirits, who do not seek to *know*, but are driven to *be*'.²¹

Underhill's distinction is an important one: many artists and contemplatives have emulated, or been inspired by the great mystics, but that does not reserve them equal standing with those who progress beyond knowledge and art at the point of the Dark Night which, like mysticism, exists long before its naming ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' [Matthew 27:46]). Underhill also makes a significant departure from Inge in her argument for the primacy of erotic love in her definition of mysticism, for

all true mysticism is rooted in personality; and is therefore a science of the heart. Attraction, desire, and union as fulfilment of desire; this is the way Life works, in the highest as in the lowest things. The mystic's outlook, indeed, is the lover's outlook. ... The language of human passion is tepid and insignificant beside the language in which the mystics try to tell the splendours of their love. They force upon the unprejudiced reader the conviction that they are dealing with an ardour far more burning for an Object far more real.²²

The attraction, ardour and desire which horrified the Dean of St Paul's coincides neatly with Underhill's own influential definition which is used by subsequent scholars as late as Steven Fanning (2000):

Broadly speaking, I understand it to be the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency, in great

²¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 383.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their life and, in the experience called ‘mystic union’, attains its end.²³

Evelyn Underhill’s rigorous, innovative approach represents the high watermark of the early twentieth-century revival of the study of Christian mysticism with far-reaching effects for poetry. T.S. Eliot’s college notes on Underhill’s *Mysticism* read ‘vision through the senses is imperfect, capricious, often a delusion’, the stirrings of what Shira Wolosky (1995) calls Eliot’s ‘linguistic asceticism ... moving away from the illusions of the temporal world’.²⁴ Inge and Underhill’s contributions demonstrate how a similar concern for the abuse of mysticism has led to two diverging definitions, emphasising Neo-Platonism and divine ardour respectively, with differing views on the roles of poets.

Post-1911 and Post-1945 French Theological and Secular Perspectives

Western Christian mysticism scholarship expanded between 1911 and 1945. Significant European interpretations included those of psychologists and philosophers, which, although McGinn downplays the ‘ambivalence’ of Freud and Jung and the ‘inexplicit, peculiar, and not directly helpful’ insights of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, still influenced Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood and Kevin Hart respectively.²⁵ The definitional impulse also continued through French theological critiques including Marechal (mystical experience as direct, intuitive, unmediated contact between intelligence and its goal of the Absolute), Blondel (mysticism as a

²³ Underhill, *Op Cit.*, p. xiv. Steven Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 2, 221. Fanning combines Underhill’s definition with that of Carmody & Carmody (1996).

²⁴ Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett and Celan*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, p. 21. Wolosky here is citing Paul Murray (*T.S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of Four Quartets*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1991) who defends Eliot as an orthodox Christian poet in the tradition of the negative ‘doctrine of transcendence’.

²⁵ McGinn, *Op Cit.*, pp. 332, 313.

prolongation of ordinary Christian life, and mystical ‘knowing’ as an aim of all authentic human action towards beatific vision), Bergson (mysticism as the direct expression of the *élan vital* at the heart of all general and religious reality, and the creative source of dynamic religion), Maritain (mysticism as ‘experimental knowledge of the deep things of God’), and De Certeau (‘mysticism’ [*la mystique*] as a seventeenth-century term linked to the rise of a new ‘scientific’ mysticism which ‘has slowly detached itself from traditional theology or Church institutions and which characterizes itself through the consciousness, acquired or received, of a gratified passivity where the self is lost in God’).²⁶

In post-World War II France, Western Christian mysticism also proved attractive to secular intellectuals. Amy Hollywood’s *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (2002) traces the ‘crucial role’ of mysticism in the works exploring the associations between women and mysticism (Simone De Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray) and issues of mysticism, absence and the unknown (Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida).²⁷ What distinguishes the post-war French scholarship is the attempt to reconfigure mysticism from its traditional conventions and ecclesiastical superstructures towards a more personalised, radical relationship with a revised deity, absence or unknown. Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), for example, proposes mysticism as a justification for women’s existence, along with narcissism and romantic love.²⁸ Yet, according to Hollywood, while De Beauvoir asserts that ‘mysticism is the sole place within the history of the West where women

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 299, 303, 304, 307, 309, 311–2.

²⁷ Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122. In her notes, Hollywood also includes ‘motherhood’.

have achieved full and autonomous subjectivity' it is ultimately 'a compensation for their secondary status, a compensation grounded in their belief in a delusory divine and therefore one that renders women unable to challenge actual social conditions'.²⁹ For De Beauvoir mystical transcendence is just an extension of gendered identity, which women, in men's absence, cannot realise without turning to and 'marrying' a male God.³⁰ Furthermore, as Hollywood details, the cultural conflation of mysticism and hysteria (also covered by Lacan) has led to a 'pathological' treatment of many women mystics, a scenario echoed by the (male) critical pathologies surrounding Australian female mystical poets such as Ada Cambridge, Zora Cross and Judith Wright.³¹

Since *The Second Sex*, the number of women in mysticism scholarship has gradually increased as has the interest in women mystics, many of whom, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Brabant, and Mechthild of Magdeburg, are also poets. Other new research fields in the study of mysticism, power and gender identity include same-sex desire in medieval mysticism.³² The French secular tradition challenges mysticism to respond to its own history, which may in turn prove integral to mysticism's survival in the twenty-first century. Where the French theologians seek to define mysticism, the secular tradition radically redefines it, renegotiating mysticism in terms of their own social and spiritual world. Similarly radical renegotiations can be found throughout the history of Christian mysticism, in the 'atheistical mysticism' as Kevin Hart puts it, of Bataille, Blanchot and Derrida (see

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 127. Hollywood continues 'Beauvoir insists that this divine Person is male'.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³² See Michelle Sauer, 'Cross-dressing Souls: Same-sex Desire in the Mystic Tradition', in Susannah Mary Chewning (ed.), *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, pp. 157–81.

Chapters 2 and 7) and again in the Indigenous Christian poetics and theologies in Chapter 8. Renegotiation is a prime driver of shifting notions of mysticism.

Post 1945 Anglo-American Definitions

Post-World War II Anglo-American scholarship saw a revival of interest in Western Christian mysticism and fresh inquiries into the nature of mystical experience in a more diagnostic manner than that of the French secular tradition.³³ The critical debates over how mysticism could be defined produced highly-structured mystical schematics such as the separation of inward and outward experience in German theologian Rudolf Otto (1932), introvertive and extrovertive experience in Walter T. Stace (1960), and four types of extrovertive experience William Wainwright (1981). The mid-century inclusion of other religious traditions, particularly Buddhism and Sufism, and controversial quasi-spiritual experiences within the broader parameters of ‘mysticism’ only blurred the definitional project further. Aldous Huxley’s likening of his mescaline experience to mysticism in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and his melding of religions in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), for example, was denounced by Robert C. Zaehner (1953, 1957) as ‘fictitious’, ‘loose-minded’ and detracting from theistic experience to the point of tainting it with lunacy.³⁴ The English poet W.H. Auden similarly downplays the mystical claims of mescaline and LSD based on his own uneventful consumption where ‘in the case of the Vision of God, it does not seem to be granted to anyone who has not undergone a long process

³³ This period is briefly surveyed by McGinn, but more comprehensively examined by Paul Marshall (2005) in his ‘trek through a hundred years of explanations’ in Marshall, *Mystical Encounters With the Natural World: Experiences and Explanations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 279.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 208–9. Zaehner is also one of the first to explicitly associate mysticism with psychosis, along with W.H. Auden (in Woods [ed.], *Op Cit.*, p. 394). For some psychiatric perspectives, see Group For the Advancement of Psychiatry-Committee on Psychiatry and Religion, *Mysticism: Spiritual Quest of Psychic Disorder?*, Group For the Advancement of Psychiatry, New York, 1976 and Charles T. Tart (ed.), *Transpersonal Psychologies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975.

of self-discipline and prayer, but self-discipline and prayer cannot of themselves compel it'.³⁵ Flaws in the 'perennialist' method are best exemplified, however, by Colin Wilson's disastrous *Poetry and Mysticism* (1970) in which mysticism is little more than a grab-bag of citations from religions and gurus around the world, hardly complimentary to the spiritual commitment of those it claims to represent.

A more pragmatic approach is attempted by Steven T. Katz (1978, 1983, 1992, 2000) who, rather than appropriating extra-Christian perspectives *ad hoc* for his own work, invites authorities in the relevant fields to contribute to his publications, whereby Professors of Islamic Studies discuss Sufism and so forth. Katz also refutes what he calls the 'essentialist' model of Huxley and others, introducing a 'contextualist' model that ties mystical experience to a person's sociocultural, historical and religious background. Importantly, he also denies that all mystical experiences are the same:

in order to understand mysticism it is *not* just a question of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but of acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by the concept which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his [sic] experience.³⁶

Mystics, in short, *do not* transcend their cultures; they are ultimately bound by religion and language, the two focal points of the subsequent *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (1983) and *Mysticism and Language* (1992). Katz's influential contextualist approach heralds the arrival of a later, third strain in Anglo-American

³⁵ W.H. Auden, 'Four Kinds of Mystical Experience' in Woods (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 382.

³⁶ Katz (1978) in Steven T. Katz. (ed.), *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 3–4. The use of 'his' here, twenty-nine years after De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and two years after St Teresa of Avila was declared the first female Doctor of the Church by the Vatican, is particularly regrettable. From this point, lapses in gender inclusivity such as Katz's will go uncorrected, leaving it to the reader to intelligently discern the (sometimes ancient) historical context of gender (mis)use.

scholarship, that of *competing contextualisations*, be they literary (Patrick Grant, 1983; Fanning, 2001), philosophical (Hart, 1989; Jantzen, 1995) historical (Bouyer, 1990; McGinn, 1991; Bruno Borchert, 1995; Ursula King, 2001; Hollywood, 2002) or linguistic (Sells, 1995; Wolosky, 1995). Like Jantzen and McGinn, not all of these contemporary critics establish or pursue distinct definitions. Bouyer uses early (pre-) Christian history to highlight the origins of the term ‘mystical’. Sells defines only sub-sections and attributes of mystical language, such as ‘mystery’ and ‘apophasis’; Hollywood lets her sources tackle a definition for her; Wolosky feels no need to define mysticism at all. As mentioned earlier, McGinn prefers a subdivided approach as does Kevin Hart in his *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989):

“Mysticism” has proved to be one of the most elusive yet most recalcitrant words used in discussing religious experience and discourse ... To facilitate discussion, though, we may resolve “mysticism” into five areas: mystical experience; mystical testimony; mystical theology; the *via negativa* [the “negative way”]; and the mystical (or allegorical) hermeneutic.³⁷

Australian perspectives will be examined in the subsequent chapters, for some of Australia’s strongest voices on the subject are indeed those of poets or literary critics. Veronica Brady’s *The Mystics* (1974) deserves particular mention, however, for its independence of thought towards mysticism as experience, practice and consciousness. She provides almost a *scala perfectionis* of definitions, progressing from insight to insight, context to context, until she reaches a point of pure confirmation: ‘we do well today to be interested in mysticism’.³⁸ Her attempts to sketch a canon of modern mystics, including some poets, are likewise laudable, but it

³⁷ Hart, *Trespass*, pp. 184–5.

³⁸ Veronica Brady, *The Mystics*, Dove Communications, East Malvern, 1974, p. 38.

is an insight late in the piece—‘I noticed again, too, how history affects belief’—that places her on the cusp of explicitly depicting Western Christian mysticism as a shifting notion.³⁹ Certainly she recognises the fluidity of the mystical canon in her efforts to include more poets, activists and Anglicans; in addition, she renounces the definitional project for an affirmation of what mysticism stands for, rather than how it is identified:

What did it matter whether I could define the kinds of mysticism and trace out the various stages of the ascent to God, the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive ways? What matters finally is that state of silence, simplicity and humility the great mystics achieve and its effect on them and on all those with whom they come into contact which renders them loving, compassionate and prepared to give themselves entirely for others.⁴⁰

It is a salient point which goes right to the heart of this chapter: why define the *is* when the stately dance of claim and counterclaim distract from what mysticism *does*? Yet the empirical and methodological value of a definition and the critical insights that the path to a self-aware definition affords cannot be understated for an original study of this nature. The task, then, is not to construct some kind of mystical Geiger counter which crackles at particular poems or themes, but to seize upon the insights of two things largely absent from Australian poetry criticism, namely the acknowledgement of mysticism as a shifting notion and how that notion is characterised at the time of writing. This is facilitated by the construction of a two-part definition of mysticism, comprising of active and contemplative components reflecting the active and contemplative lives of the mystics (the Mary-Martha split of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Luke 10:38–42), a central allegory for Western Christian mysticism from the time of Origen.⁴¹

Consciousness or Experience? Towards a Twenty-First-Century Definition

Negotiating a two-part definition first requires a brief overview of the definitional project. Twentieth-century French, British and American scholars construct mysticism as ‘the attempt to realise the presence of the living God in the soul and in nature’ (Inge, 1899), ‘the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order ... in the experience called “mystic unio”’, (Underhill, 1911), ‘experimental knowledge of the deep things of God’ (Maritain, 1932), ‘a direct apprehension of the Deity ... union with God’ (Zaehner, 1961), ‘an experimental knowledge ... through the consciousness, acquired or received, of a gratified passivity where the self is lost in God’ (De Certeau, 1968), ‘an experimental knowledge of God in which ordinary perception and discursive thought are transcended by a sense of union’ (Grant, 1983), ‘the experience of a reality that soars above anything we can understand’ (Borchert, 1994).⁴² Themes of experience, direct or experimental knowledge, transcendence towards or union with God, and extraordinary modes of reality, language and consciousness are recurrently emphasised. While various arguments can be made over the sample field, some vindication is provided by perhaps the most Australian of sources, *The Macquarie Dictionary* (2005):

⁴¹ In Luke 10:38–42 Jesus praises Mary, read by Origen to represent divine praise for the contemplative life, although he stresses they must work together. See McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. 126.

⁴² Inge, *Op Cit.*, p. 5; Underhill, *Op Cit.*; Jacques Maritain cited in McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. 309; R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, Oxford University Press, London, 1961, pp. 31–2; Michel De Certeau cited in McGinn, *Op Cit.*, pp. 311–2; Patrick Grant, *Literature of Mysticism in the Western Tradition*, Macmillan, London, 1983, p. 152; Bruno Borchert, *Mysticism: its History and Challenge*, Samuel Weiser, York Beach, 1994, p. 34.

Mysticism (n.): 1. belief in the possibility of attaining an immediate spiritual intuition of truths thought to transcend ordinary understanding, or of a direct, intimate union of the soul with a deity or universal soul through contemplation and love. 2. Contemplative practices aimed at achieving such union. 3. obscure thought or speculation.⁴³

The Macquarie's preference for 'belief in the possibility' rather than 'experience' is significant. Experience is problematic from a methodological viewpoint. A mystical experience may not be able to be communicated, or if it is, it may transform in the telling. McGinn is adamant 'there can be no direct access to [mystical] experience for the historian' and suggests a critical shift from mystical experience to mystical consciousness and indeed the *language* of consciousness to provide a less speculative method of research.⁴⁴ David Tracy (2003) lauds McGinn's shift towards consciousness, or awareness, and identifies the contemplative and the prophetic as the two major strains of mystical awareness in the Christian tradition. In one sense the definitional project continues on here, but Tracy's thoughts also reflect recent challenges to experience as a term in itself, not least by Kevin Hart's and Jean-Luc Marion's different uses of mystical 'counter-experience', Hart's 'non-experience' (see Chapter 7) and his own positive limit situations.⁴⁵

Consciousness rather than experience is also more methodologically sound in regard to poetry. The advent of a momentary mystical experience is more difficult to ascertain, especially from creative pieces, than the advent of mystical consciousness which may last a poet's lifetime. Furthermore, if, as McGinn stresses, mystical

⁴³ Colin Yallop (ed.), *Macquarie Dictionary* 4th ed., Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, Macquarie University, 2005, p. 948.

⁴⁴ McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. xviii.

⁴⁵ David Tracy, 'Afterword' in Michael Kessler & Christian Sheppard (eds), *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003. Hart, 'The Experience of Non-Experience' in *Ibid.*, p. 194.

experience cannot be examined then the role of writing, including mystical poetry, becomes of heightened importance. As Hans Penner (1983) reflects, ‘we must remember that all we have for understanding mysticism is language, not experience. It is not mystical experience which explains mystical traditions or languages, rather it is mystical language which explains mystical experience’.⁴⁶ Mysticism’s language, including poetics, is therefore integral to its survival. Even constructivist critics such as Steven T. Katz (1978) who argue for the primacy of ‘concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape his [sic] experience’ are left to do so through a fusion of the mystic’s pre-experiential writings, secondary sources such as biographies, and their own critical speculations.⁴⁷

The characteristics of mystical consciousness are proposed in the writings of the mystics themselves. McGinn’s concession that ‘obviously consciousness can be used just as ambiguously as experience’ is countered somewhat when applied to these works, for to have survived in text form their mystical awareness must at least be partly literary and unambiguous enough to be expressed before or after mystical experience.⁴⁸ Furthermore, a shift to mystical consciousness allows Western Christian mysticism a greater dialogue with parallel mystical and scholarly traditions such as that of Makarand Paranjape (1988) who defines Vedic mysticism in Indian English poetry as ‘the quest for, and the attainment of, complete self-realization’.⁴⁹ ‘Consciousness’ also engages dialogues emerging from Western science’s late twentieth-century discoveries in the nature and prowess of subatomic consciousness, described by some commentators as mystical experience for phenomenologists,

⁴⁶ Hans H. Penner, ‘The Mystical Illusion’ in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 91.

⁴⁷ Steven T. Katz cited in Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, p. 3. See prior Katz footnote for notes on his gender usage.

⁴⁸ McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. xvii.

⁴⁹ Makarand Paranjape, *Mysticism in Indian English Poetry*, B.R., Dehli, 1988, p. 14.

mathematicians and quantum physicists.⁵⁰ The adoption of ‘consciousness’ over ‘experience’ is thus an expansive act for Christian mysticism scholarship, re-affirming the literary, the inter-religious and the interdisciplinary. Ursula King’s (2001) definition of mysticism as ‘the communication of an extraordinary experience of great transformative potential for individuals as well as the church and the world’ anticipates this expanded dialogue and addresses the reservations of the French secular tradition, feminist scholars such as Grace Jantzen and those wary of Jantzen’s ‘stately dance’ by including transformation at mysticism’s core. In doing so, she constructs mysticism as both a shifting notion and a shifting agent at personal, ecclesiastical and international levels of renegotiation.⁵¹

The Two-part Definition: Active and Contemplative

In consultation with the scholarship, therefore, the *active* definition of mysticism for this thesis reads as follows:

Western Christian mysticism is direct, experimental, or unitive consciousness of Christ, God or ‘Godhead’ transcending regular modes of knowledge and language.

The *contemplative* definition serves to complement the active by disclosing the various conditions under which any singular definition is rendered problematic or inadequate:

Western Christian mysticism is a shifting notion for the communications of particular contemplatives and theologians in the Western Christian tradition who have been

⁵⁰ See William Arntz & Betsy Chasse (dirs), *What the Bleep Do We Know?*, 2004, at <<http://www.whatthebleep.com/>> retrieved 17 January 2007. For defences of mysticism by Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Einstein, De Broglie, Planck & Eddington see Ken Wilber (ed.), *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World’s Great Physicists*, Shambhala, Boulder & London, 1984.

⁵¹ King, *Op Cit.*, p. 7.

retrospectively labelled “mystics”, an act in itself subject to gender and power relations. These communications necessarily contain as their ultimate reality union with, or the direct presence of, Jesus, God or Godhead, which transcends the very language they need to be considered mystics to begin with. Mysticism cannot be reduced to a singular definition because a chronological, linguistic and epistemological crevasse increasingly separates its most influential critics and practitioners. The mystics, on one hand, cannot engage any unknown future “mysticism”; observers of mysticism, on the other, cannot engage the total experience of any long-dead “mystics.” This impasse, however, is based on divergences. Without commonalities of language, spiritual needs and sacred consciousness the works of these designated mystics would not have been created, nor indeed would they persist.

While this two-part definition is naturally subject to the shifting notions of its own twenty-first-century construction, its self-awareness as such also improves its overall effectiveness as a vital critical tool.

2. Poetic Mystics, Mystical Poets: Tradition, Innovation and Influence

This dissertation argues that an understanding of Western Christian mysticism is essential to the study of Australian poetry. The Introduction and Chapter 1 sought to clarify terms of reference and provide an informed, scholarly definition of mysticism. This Chapter will contextualise the definition by examining ways in which Western Christian mysticism, in particular its mystical poetics, are expressed and by whom. Australian poetry criticism largely avoids this, as it does the recognition of mysticism as a shifting notion, and as a result limits itself by relying upon a vague, undemonstrated, approximation of the mystical. Consequently, Australian poetry criticism also fails to differentiate between its own shifting notions of mysticism and the more ancient and influential tropes of mystical poetics, including those of ineffability, transcendence and love, which in turn inspire their own innovations. Tracing such innovations through Eliot and Dante to Platonism, biblical sources, early mystical theologians and finally English and French poets informs the Australian content of the thesis in three ways. First, it contextualises the ancient relationship between mysticism and language which underpins the writings of medieval mystics and English metaphysical and Romantic poets upon which Australian poets often draw. Second, Australian poets engage mysticism selectively, often disorientating or isolating the reader from a broader comprehension of the relevant mystical traditions. Third, it introduces key themes and concepts as well as the questions ‘who speaks?’ and ‘which Christian mysticism?’ faced by the Australian poets themselves.

Who Speaks?

Australian poets encounter Western Christian mysticism predominantly through its Greek and Hebrew roots, the Bible, the writings of the mystics themselves and Anglo-American mystical poetry. Mystics, of course, are frequently poetic, and poets are frequently drawn to the mystical, for example in English metaphysical and Romantic poetry which, as Frank Kermode (1967) says of Henry Vaughan, ‘makes a poet’s use of the mystic’s language’.¹ While post-war Australian poets such as Webb, Wright, McAuley and Hart favour a return to the primary texts of mysticism, their predecessors tend to pursue the mystical via Wordsworth (Harpur, Cambridge), Yeats (Cross, Brennan) Blake (Brennan), Brontë (Harford) Whitman (O’Dowd) and Dickinson (Fullerton) in keeping with the scholarship of the era which accepted some poets as mystical authorities.² Yet by the late twentieth century, poets of the English literary canon rarely feature in mysticism scholarship, the mystical, as it were, shifting away from them. One exception is the inclusion of poems by Herbert, Traherne, Blake, Hopkins and Plunkett in Bernard McGinn’s *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (2006) which in turn prompts the question: who speaks in regard to poetics of mysticism? Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), St Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210–1297), Hadewijch of Brabant (thirteenth century), Richard Rolle (c.1300–1341) and St John of the Cross (1542–1591) are all poets, some the cornerstones of their national traditions (St John in Spanish, St Francis in Italian). Each of these sources influences Australian poets in specific, highly-personalised ways, but pre-existent to each encounter is the ancient,

¹ Kermode cited by Christopher Dixon in Henry Vaughan, *A Selection from Henry Vaughan* (ed. Christopher Dixon), Longmans, London, 1967, p. 19. As no date is supplied for Kermode’s work, its last possible date of 1967 is given.

² Later poets such as Buckley and Harwood defy this trend, and few overall are strangers to the Bible.

fertile tension between mysticism and language which informs the Western Christian mystical poetics of negation, inexpressibility, vision, transcendence and love.

Looking Back: Eliot and Dante

In 1961, four years before his death, T.S. Eliot was asked by *The Yorkshire Post* ‘are you yourself not, perhaps, a failed mystic?’ His reply is pertinent to any general inquiry regarding poetry and mysticism:

I don’t think I am a mystic at all, though I have always been much interested in mysticism. But I seem to remember that somewhere Yeats said, in answer to a question, that he wasn’t a mystic but a poet. Rather implying that you couldn’t be both. With me, certainly, the poetic impulse is stronger than the mystical impulse. There have been poets whose poetic inspiration depended on some mystical insight, at one time or another, of an unsystematic kind. No doubt Wordsworth and Vaughan and Traherne and even Tennyson, I believe, had had some curious mystical experiences. But I can’t think of any mystic who was a fine poet, except Saint John of the Cross. A great many people of sensibility have had some more or less mystical experiences. That doesn’t make them mystics. To be a mystic is a whole-time job—so is poetry.³

Decades earlier in his Clark lectures, Eliot is reluctant to use the term ‘mystic’ for Donne, Tennyson and even Dante, due in part to this contradiction:

A genuine mystical statement is to be found in the last canto of the *Paradiso*; this is primarily great poetry. An equally genuine mysticism is expressed in the verses of St

³ Eliot cited in Murray, *Op Cit.*, p. 1. See Chapter 4 for further discussion of Yeats.

John of the Cross; this is not a statement, but a riddling expression; it belongs to great mysticism, but not to great poetry.⁴

Eliot would, of course, warm to St John of the Cross, incorporating a passage from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* into his *Four Quartets*. His own shifting notions aside, does Eliot's reading of Yeats, that one must be 'one or the other', prove accurate? In a biographical sense St John of the Cross can be read as a mystic with poetic tendencies which he used allegorically to promote the *via mystica*, while Dante, for all his beatific vision in *Paradiso*, can be read as a poet inspired by the mystics of *Paradiso* (Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Francis, Bonaventure and Bernard of Clairvaux) more than a mystic himself, a supreme poet rather than a poet of the supreme, especially given his quest to bestow upon Beatrice 'what has never been written of any woman'.⁵ Nonetheless, Dante's 'genuine mystical statement' also reveals something further about the relationship between mysticism and poetry:

What little I recall is to be told,
 from this point on, in words more weak than those
 of one whose infant tongue still bathes at the breast
 ... How incomplete is speech, how weak, when set
 against my thought! And this, to what I saw
 is such—to call it little is too much.
 Eternal Light, You only dwell within
 Yourself, and only You know You; Self-knowing

⁴ Eliot cited in *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵ In this way, biography can work *against* inclusion in the mystical tradition. Some of the more pedantic scholars of mysticism, having placed such emphasis on *experience*, can concur with Marshall (2005) that Dante 'may express contemporary philosophy rather than an experience the author may have had' (Marshall, *Op Cit.*, p. 42). This view, of course, completely avoids the centrality of Beatrice about whom Dante, at the end of his *Vita Nuova* [New Life], wrote: 'may it please Him who is the Lord of courtesy that my soul may go to see the glory of my lady, that is of the blessed Beatrice, who now in glory beholds the face of Him *qui est per omnia secula benedictus* ["who is blessed for ever"]' (Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova* [tr. Barbara Reynolds], Penguin, London, 2004, p. 64).

Self-known, You love and smile upon Yourself!”

(*Paradiso* XXXIII: 100–126)⁶

Intrinsic to the study of mysticism and poetry is the complex relationship between mysticism and language. Recalling Hans Penner (1983), language is ‘all we have for understanding mysticism’.⁷ Union with, or the presence of, the divine is typically presented as ineffable, transcending human sense or speech, and yet it ultimately befalls language to describe and preserve something of the experience itself, a *scala perfectionis*, or reflection upon what the experience has impressed upon its subject. Describing the indescribable may at first seem a stultifying paradox but, as the rich tradition of Western Christian mystical texts reveal, it is ultimately a fertile one. Ineffability does not abolish language; rather it humbles it, makes it acutely aware of its limits, its discriminatory assumptions. This, in turn, challenges the writer to reach beyond language into what Pseudo-Dionysius calls ‘the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence’ where, as Ninian Smart (1983) notes, ‘a failure of words may actually be a powerful use of language’.⁸ Dante’s example shows that although, as Eliot and Yeats sensed, poet and mystic rarely coincide, the poetic and the mystical are not so constrained. Mystics who, as Hart asserts, ‘know what they do not know’ fused the mystical with their own negative capability long before John Keats coined the term and Dante’s negative capability in *Paradiso*, combined with his ‘grace-granted’ experience allow him to pass ‘beyond the human [that] cannot be worded’ writing

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (tr. Allen Mandelbaum), Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995, p. 540.

⁷ Hans H. Penner, ‘The Mystical Illusion’ in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, p. 91.

⁸ Dionysius the Areopagite, *On The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology* (tr. C.E. Rolt), Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1957, p.191; Ninian Smart, ‘The Purification of Consciousness’ in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Op Cit.*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 127.

what he cannot write, led by his muse and spirit-guide Beatrice.⁹ Negative capability in the author also brings the abilities of language to the fore, particularly the ability of words to *suggest* the ineffable.

Contemplative Illumination and Transcendent Love: Platonism

The *aporia*, or gap, between Dante's 'Eternal Light' and the limits of language recalls a more ancient dilemma in Greek and Hebrew poetics of revelation, ineffability, paradox, allegory, parable, *catachresis* (an inspired use of words which are consciously, before the ineffable, incorrect) and instructive models of illumination and ascent. These poetics are traditionally split into the *via positiva* of praise, vision, sacrament or symbol and the *via negativa* championed by Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, which approaches the divine via a series of negations of language, even the negation of negation itself:

He Who is the Pre-eminent Cause of everything intelligently perceived is not Himself any one of the things intelligently perceived. Once more, ascending yet higher we maintain that It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture reason or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding ... nor can reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is It darkness, nor is It light, or error, or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation apply to it ... It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique cause of all

⁹ Hart, 'The Experience of Nonexperience' in Kessler & Sheppard (eds), *Op Cit.*, p. 202. Dante asserts in *Paradiso*: 'Passing beyond the human cannot be worded ... until grace grant you the experience' (1:70–2; Dante, *Op Cit.*, p. 381). For Keats and negative capability, see Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, p. 1015.

things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature—free from every limitation and beyond them all.¹⁰

Yet Pseudo-Dionysius is not the first to use such a technique. In Plato's *Symposium* Diotima reminds Socrates that correct judgement is not oppositional (as in good/bad, beautiful/ugly) but rather 'in *between* understanding and ignorance' then proceeds, through a series of negations towards the Form of Love:

First, it always *is* and neither comes to be or passes away, neither waxes nor wanes
 Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here and ugly there ... It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always in one form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change ... This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs...¹¹

Although not the same as the Judeo-Christian God, the Form of Love shares a similar ineffability (birthed by virtue, not images) beyond that of the waning Greek gods, who while immortal, *can* be described.¹² *Symposium* also qualifies some key Platonic

¹⁰ Hart, *Op Cit.*, p. 201.

¹¹ Plato, *Symposium* (tr. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff) in Plato, *Complete Works* (ed. John M. Cooper), Hackett Publishing Co., Indiana, 1997, pp. 493–4.

¹² Plato's creator god, or *demiurge* ('craftsman'), is explicitly evoked in the later *Timaeus*, using the Forms as patterns to make the image of the universe, and calling upon the Greek gods to 'weave what is mortal to what is immortal, fashion and beget living things. Give them food, cause them to grow, and when they perish, receive them back again' (Plato, *Timaeus* [tr. Donald J. Zeyl], in *Ibid.*, pp. 1244–55). This shift, while perhaps not as radical as it might initially seem given the influence of the Greek Mysteries (especially the spiritual return of one person to one god), *is* radical in its consequences for 'imitative' poets who are rendered suspicious in *Republic*, while the hierophantic responsibilities of such knowledge are transferred to contemplative, philosophical dialogue and instructive myth (such as the chariot of *Phaedrus*) which, as Bouyer (1990) notes 'Plato thought the highest form of philosophical utterance' (Bouyer, *Op Cit.*, p. 33).

themes: the distinction between the temporal world of appearances and the unchanging, immortal world of Plato's Forms; the Form of Love, which is identical to the Form of the Good (206D) that connects heaven and earthly realms; the 'great nonsense' of 'polluted' mortal sense-images before divine virtues; and the endless need for the *nous*, or divine part of the soul, to ascend, through contemplation (*theōria*, which is the fruit of purification [*katharsis*, *askēsis*]), towards a permanent possession of its immortal source—variously referred to as the One, the Good, the Beautiful, and the Absolute.

Plato, by drawing a sharp, if incomplete, distinction between the temporal and the infinite, by proposing contemplative methods of ascent or return to the infinite by a fallen, longing, uncreated soul, by identifying Beauty, Love, the Good, the Absolute, the One as not beyond language but indeed beyond *imagery* (and corporeality), provides a crucial template for aspects of Neoplatonism, Gnosticism and Christianity that sought to detach themselves from their immediate 'impure' sense-surroundings (the bodily 'shell' of *Phaedrus*) in favour of ascent, return to, or union with, the meta-reality of Good beyond Being.¹³ Fanning (2000) views the Plato of 'purificatory asceticism' (*Phaedo*), 'revelation of the divine' (*Symposium*) and 'dazzling illumination' (*Republic*) in such terms:

Plato saw this divine illumination as a mystical experience and employed the language of the Mystery Religions, especially the concept of initiation in the mysteries, throughout his dialogues. He described revelation in terms of divine possession and ecstasy and even provided [in the *Seventh Letter*] what is often regarded as a personal account of such an experience, 'only after long partnership in common life devoted to this very thing [philosophy] does truth flash upon the soul,

¹³ For *Phaedrus*, see Plato, *Op Cit.*, p. 528. Borchert links this directly to the Eleusinian mysteries (Borchert, *Op Cit.*, p. 34).

like a flame kindled by a leaping spark, and once born there it nourishes itself thereafter.’¹⁴

Accordingly, just as non-initiates were not to be admitted to the ‘unutterable revelations’ of the Mysteries, higher Platonic realities were not to be meddled with by ‘imitative’ artists, including the traditional, purveyors of knowledge, the Greek poets.¹⁵ The *aporia* between experience and language and the ‘powerful failure of words’ are temporal, mortal limitations which necessarily indicate the world of the Forms and beyond, and are not to be filled with pleasing images. Nowhere is this hostility more evident than in *Republic*, where Socrates warns ‘if you admit the honeyed Muse, whether in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law and the thing that has always been generally believed to be best—reason’ (607A).¹⁶ It is ‘not in accord with divine law’ that ‘holy, amazing and pleasing’ poets should be admitted into Socrates’s Kallipolis—they are to be banished in favour of a more austere, less pleasant poet who will make their works fit the designs of the state (398A). ‘The holy, amazing and pleasing’ imitative poetry appears in stark contrast with Socrates’s reticence to discuss the highest Form, the Form of the Good, with the (philosophically ‘uninitiated’) Glaucon—Socrates only consents to discuss ‘what seems to be a Child of the Good [the sun] ... or otherwise to let the matter drop’ (506E) and upon further urging, reverts to perhaps his most

¹⁴ Fanning, *Op Cit.*, p. 10. *The Seventh Letter* is ascribed to Plato, and is, for example, included with many editions of his collected works. However, the authorship, compared to his other works is less certain (see Cooper, *Op Cit.*, p. 1635).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Jantzen provides a gendered reading of early and pre-Christian mystical concepts, notably the links between the female body and the earth, particularly through the goddess Demeter in the Eleusinian Mysteries (it is unknown whether or not women become initiates or hierophants in the Greek Mysteries, but priestesses and sibyls certainly influenced Greek culture of the period). Jantzen also investigates the Platonic, and later mystical Christian, construction of the soul as feminine ‘humble, passive, female, waiting the good pleasure of her Lord’ (Jantzen, *Op Cit.*, pp. 28, 42).

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic* (tr. C.D.C. Reeve), Hackett, Indianapolis, 2004, p. 311.

famous instructive myth, the Myth of the Cave, an account of which, is recounted within the context of Western Christian mysticism by McGinn:

In no other text does Plato so poignantly (and pessimistically) describe the contrast between the dim and illusory nature of life in our world of shadows and the possibility of a life lived in the supernal world of Forms where the Good, the Form of Forms, reigns like a supreme sun making all things visible ... The famous “Allegory of the Cave” is essentially an account of the spiritual path that begins with awakening (without the stress on the erotic element in this case) and proceeds through painful purification and gradual illumination to end in vision.¹⁷

The Good, the Form of Forms, the supreme sun, illusory images: there is much to digest in Plato’s cave. For Christian mysticism, it is important as an early *scala perfectionis*, an allegory for transcending temporal images to an ultimate illumination and, importantly, model of *bodhisattva*-like social responsibility which resurfaces in the lives of St Francis, Meister Eckhart and St Catherine of Siena as well as Australian poems such as Francis Webb’s ‘Socrates’ (see Chapter 5). Yet Plato’s greatest contribution to Western Christian mystical poetics lies in his fundamental assertion that the Form of Forms, his Ultimate Reality, could not be reduced to even the most inspired use of any language. Centuries later, Neoplatonists such as Plotinus (204–270 BCE) would portray Plato’s inexpressibility topos as symptomatic of unitive experience itself, because although ‘effectively before Him [the Supreme], we lift a choral song full of God’, upon full union

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 201; McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. 29. Troy Organ (1991) retells Socrates’s paying of the debt by non-verbal means: ‘The Father of the Good cannot be stated or imaged. The word debt is also significant. Glaucon reminds Socrates he has a debt to pay [*Republic* 506E]. Debt was the last word Socrates spoke on this earth: ‘Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?’ A cock was offered to Asclepius, the god of healing, upon recovery from a disease. Socrates’ death was his recovery from the disease of life. His life was also the payment of another debt, the debt to Glaucon and Adeimantus. His death revealed the Father of the Good. His life could only reveal the Child of the Good’ (Troy Wilson Organ, *The One: East and West*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1991, p. 14).

The man is changed, no longer himself or self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it: centre coincides with centre, for centres of circles, even here below, are one when they unite, and two when they separate; and it is in this sense that we now (after the vision) speak of the Supreme as separate. This is why the vision baffles telling; we cannot detach the Supreme to state it; if we have seen something thus detached we have failed of the Supreme which is to be known only as one with ourselves ... There were not two; beholder was one with beheld; it was not a vision compassed but a unity apprehended.¹⁸

Plotinus's point is one of experience—how can a person describe that from which they were divinely inseparable? In another passage, he makes distinction even clearer: 'How then do we ourselves speak about it? We do indeed say something *about* it, but we certainly do not speak it, and we have neither knowledge nor thought of it'.¹⁹ For Plotinus, language is not only temporal but discriminatory. As soon as language is attempted, immanence or union is, by definition, interrupted, a point taken up by Hart in Chapter 7. Furthermore, *what* would language describe when the soul 'is in nothing but itself; self-gathered it is no longer in the order of being; it is in the Supreme?'²⁰ To a Christian mystic in union with a more personal, intimate Godhead or Trinity, the answer may have recourse to divine will or gift of grace, but for Plotinus union means:

no movement now, no passion, no outlooking desire, once this ascent is achieved; reasoning is in abeyance and all Intellection and even, to dare the word, the very self: caught away, filled with God, he ['the man formed by mingling with the Supreme'] has in perfect stillness attained isolation; all the being calmed, he turns to neither this side nor that, not even inwards to himself; utterly resting he has become

¹⁸ Plotinus, *The Enneads* (tr. Stephen MacKenna), Faber & Faber, London, 1969, pp. 622, 624. [VI.9]

¹⁹ Plotinus cited in Organ, *Op Cit.*, p. 28.

²⁰ Plotinus, *Enneads*, p. 625 [VI.9].

very rest. He belongs no longer to the order of the beautiful; he has risen beyond beauty; he has overpassed even the choir of the virtues; he is like one who, have penetrated the inner sanctuary, leaves the temple images behind him.²¹

By taking Platonism deeply into his experience of unitive states, Plotinus identifies a state to which Plato seems to have paid little attention, that of stillness and supreme silence. Plotinus here also highlights a major divergence between poets and mystics which echoes down the ages. As Yeats's contemporary, the Irish poet AE (1867–1935) describes it, the poet dwells in the many mansions of heaven while the mystic 'who is interested more in life than the shadows of life' seeks 'the real nature of one who has built so many mansions'.²² Poets follow with wonder the revelations of language, whereas for mystics language is something to be surpassed. But poets can also go beyond images, as in John Shaw Neilson's 'The Orange Tree' in Chapter 4.

Darkness and Fire, Eroticism and Prophecy: The Old Testament

The other pre-Hellenistic source for Christian mysticism is of course Judaism. As the larger part of Judaic scripture and liturgy has rarely been available to Christian mysticism (Philo, Origen and St Teresa of Avila are possible exceptions), the Hebrew contribution to the tension between mysticism and language is limited here to the Old Testament, itself a foundational thematic and lyrical influence for many Christian mystics and Australian mystical poets.

The first five books, or Pentateuch, of the Bible are ascribed to Moses, for Fanning the 'arch-mystic' of the Hebrew tradition.²³ Given the widespread practice of pseudonymity, who the authors might have been is less important than the events

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 624.

²² AE cited in Patrick Grant, *Op Cit.*, p. 35. St Teresa's *Inner Castle* features a similar symbology.

²³ Fanning, *Op Cit.*, p. 11.

recounted. In Genesis, God creates heaven and earth in six days, during which He separates light from darkness (Genesis 1:4), and creates man (1:27) and woman (2:22) in His own image and from the rib of his own image respectively.²⁴ God brings the newly created birds and beasts to Adam for naming, a scenario replicated in the explorer accounts in Chapter 8. After the Fall of the corrupted Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the generations of Adam (including Enoch, who ‘walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him’ [5:24]) and Noah ‘spread out over the earth’ (10:32) employing one language and few words (11:1), and the tower of Babel (Hebrew *balal*, confuse) is co-operatively built ‘with its top in the heavens’. God’s reaction is a telling one:

The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. (Genesis 11:6–8)²⁵

God intervenes, in terms of language, to preserve the impossible, to maintain the *aporias* between language(s) and the unknown. It is also a manifestation of one of the broader themes of the Old Testament: God’s constant dismay at the conduct of his creations, which, after the direct interventions (and annihilations) of Genesis and Exodus, is primarily communicated through angels, apocalyptic prophets and ultimately, for Christians, the Son of God on earth.

²⁴ Adam’s protopoem in Gen 2:23–4 (the first such poem of the *Bible*) ‘This is now bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh; / she shall be called “woman” [heb: *ishshah*], / for she was taken out of man [*ish*]’ is also proto-unitive — ‘for this reason a man will leave his father and his mother be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh’. More troubling is Gen 2:18 where God muses ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him’ (*New International Version*).

²⁵ All biblical quotations are from the *New International Version* unless demanded otherwise by the sources. The capitalisation of LORD is verbatim.

In Exodus, the pre-apocalyptic boundaries and points of access between God and man are somewhat solidified, as is the desert motif. While God previously appears to Abraham (Genesis 12:7) Isaac (26:24) and to Jacob atop his dream-ladder of angels linking heaven and earth (28:12), it is towards Moses that God first becomes explicitly unnameable ('I AM WHO I AM ... The LORD, the God of your fathers' [Exodus 3:14–5]) unseeable ('you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live' [33:20]) and imageless ('you shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below' [20:4]).²⁶ The presence of God is more closely aligned with holy fire and cloud, such as the voice from the burning bush (3:2–7), the guiding pillar of cloud and fire (13:21–22), and the cloud of devouring fire on Mt. Sinai (24:15–18). Symbols of power such as the pillar of cloud sealing the tent of Moses's meetings with God, and later the voice from the whirlwind of Job 38:1 set a precedent for a more elemental representation of the presence of the Judeo-Christian God. But, as the prophet Elijah, who would later ascend to heaven on a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11–2), discovers, after wind, earthquake and fire, the Hebrew God can also be imagelessly represented by 'a gentle voice' (1 Kings 19:12).

Moses's songs of victory (Exodus 15:1–18), warning and blessing (Deuteronomy 32:1–43, 33) reveal another dimension to the man traditionally perceived as grand patriarch and lawmaker. These are the first hymns of the Bible, and while there are many subsequent Hebrew poet-singers, not least the authors of Job and Psalms (the latter celebrating a God before whom one can cry out, dance and sing [Psalm 150]), it is The Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, with its mix of

²⁶ The *New International Version* notes that 'The Hebrew for LORD sounds like and may be derived from the Hebrew for I AM in verse 14' (*Holy Bible: New International Version*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1984, p.42). 'I AM' does not denote ownership, hierarchy or gender, whereas 'LORD' does.

eroticism, longing, and rapturous emotions that has proved integral to Christian mysticism from at least the time of Origen. Biblical historians such as Robin Fox (1991) suggest it may well have originated from ‘a collection of secular love poetry which later readers tried to present as a religious, not an erotic, text’.²⁷ But from the opening lines of *The Song*, here in the especially lyrical *Revised Standard Version*, the religious and erotic are inseparable:

O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! (1:2)

I opened to my beloved,
but my beloved had turned and gone.
My soul failed me when he spoke.

I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.

The watchmen found me,
as they went about the city;
they beat me, they wounded me,
they took away my mantle,
those watchmen of the walls.

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
if you find my beloved,
that you tell him

I am sick with love. (5:6–8)²⁸

²⁷ Robin Lane Fox, *The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible*, Viking Penguin, London, 1991, p. 97.

²⁸ Regrettably, the *New International Version* is laden with romantic clichés better suited to a Mills and Boon novel. Compare, for example, the *Revised Standard Version*’s ‘my soul failed when he spoke ... I am sick with love’ (5:6, 8) to the *New International Version*’s ‘my heart sank at his departure ... I am faint with love’.

Immediately The Song of Songs distinguishes itself from the majority of the Old Testament. It is lush, intimate, disarming—biblically, an oasis of love between exile and apocalypse. Who is loved or who is loving is not ultimately identified, allowing the text to be interpreted in the highest terms by both Jews and Christians, making it, as McGinn (1992) asserts, ‘the mystical text par excellence ... not some excuse for the surreptitious use of forbidden themes, but the authorized model that guided their personal appropriation of the divine-human encounter’.²⁹ It is also arguably the first appearance of a feminine lyricism in the Bible; earlier heroines such as Esther and Ruth are too desperate to be ‘sick with love’ and their exploits are presented in a narrative manner echoing that of the patriarchs. The Bride and Bridegroom and the Daughters of Jerusalem, however, are not under siege from man, state or God, and the ‘mysticism of the kiss’ of St Bernard of Clairvaux, and the bridal mysticism of the Beguines in particular all draw from this oasis of love and longing whose mystery is only increased by the fact that no other biblical text refers to it, though Christ continues the connubial theme.³⁰ While The Song of Songs employs a more positive, or *cataphatic*, use of allegory and praise open to mystical interpretation, Psalms combines this approach with an abiding sense of an Almighty more powerful than words or images:

The heavens declare the glory of God;

the skies proclaim the work of his

hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;

²⁹ Bernard McGinn, ‘The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism’, in Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Language*, p. 217.

³⁰ See *Ibid.* McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 20. McGinn cites the Jewish apocalypse 5 Ezra 5:24–6 as a possible exception, but there is a minor scriptural link regarding the authorship more than the content of the Song—compare 1 Kings 4:33 (‘the cedar of Lebanon’) to, among others, Song 5:15 (‘His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars’).

night after night they display
 knowledge.
 There is no speech or language
 where their voice is not heard.
 Their voice goes out into all the earth,
 their words to the ends of the world.
 (Psalm 19:1–4)³¹

The apocalypses and books of the prophets adopt a different symbology and tone, preparing the way for ‘all nations and tongues’ (Isaiah 56:14, 66:18—one counterpoint to the tower of Babel) and providing the blueprint for Revelation as well. The wilderness is turned from a place of sacrament, exile and law to a pure, incorruptible place of redemption where one can ‘see the glory of the LORD, the splendour of our God’:

then will the eyes of the blind be opened
 and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
 Then will the lame leap like a deer,
 and the mute tongue shout for joy.
 Water shall gush forth in the wilderness
 and streams in the desert.
 The burning sand will become a pool
 ... And a highway will be there;
 and it will be called the Way of Holiness.
 The unclean will not journey on it;
 it will be for those who walk in that

³¹ *New International Version*. For a cross-textual analysis between Psalm 19, William Blake and Francis Thomson, see Geoffrey H. Hartman, ‘The Discourse of A Figure: Blake’s “Speak Silence” in Literary History’, in Sanford Budick & Wolfgang Iser (eds), *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989.

Way;

wicked fools will not go about on it.

(Isaiah 35:2, 5–8)

These notions were not simply expounded, they were being lived. Ascetic communities such as the Essenes in Palestine and Therapeutae in Egypt were living outside the major population centres and establishing strict codes of contemplation and self-discipline to, as Fanning puts it, ‘prepare and purify themselves for an attempt to gain a vision of God, or rather, using the language of Ezekiel, a vision of the Glory of God, which would transform them into angelic or divine beings’.³² Visions of God, such as Isaiah’s throned Lord with face and feet covered by the wings of seraphs (like those later seen by St Francis) and Ezekiel’s *Merkavah*, or chariot, mysticism (with God as a mix of human likeness and fire, light and bronze) provide a more *cataphatic* representation of a ruling power, the King of Heaven, Lord of Hosts. These are but (divine) glimpses however, not all is to be revealed to the prophets or to the people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving’ (Isaiah 6:9), ‘I heard, but I did not understand’ (Daniel 12:8). Language, and in these cases visions, are mere indicators of something more infinitely powerful that ‘those who are wise will understand’ (Daniel 12:10). The wise, of course, are not necessarily the educated, especially given the advent of a new form of religious communication, the parable.

³² Fanning, *Op Cit.*, p. 12. Fanning goes on to cite a fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumram: ‘I am seated in ... heaven ... I am reckoned with gods and my abode is the holy congregation ... I am with the gods ... my glory is with the sons of the King’.

New Mystery: Jesus and Paul as Hellenistic Innovators

The Fourth Gospel of John concludes ‘Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written’ (21:25) and the conundrum is the same for the scholar of Christian mysticism: there is always more to say about Jesus, however carefully or determinedly one may delve. Certainly great sages and mystics, East and West, preceded him, and there is nothing in his supernatural prowess (including the unstageable resurrection) that is not comparable to the miraculous feats of mytho-religious paragons of other cultures, past and present.³³ As a teacher of humanity, however, Jesus *is* unique. As Thomas Boomershine (1994) demonstrates, while the parable form has a long and rich Hebraic tradition, it is Christ’s innovations within the form of the parable (The Rich Man, The Prodigal Son) which invite the audience to enter into the predicaments of real-world characters in a short narrative featuring hyperbole and/or reversals of expectations. While hyperbole involves extremes of emotion (such as love, judgement or celebration), its reversal ‘forces the listeners to stand back from preoccupation with ‘the real world’ and to think from a radically different perspective’.³⁴ Boomershine further elaborates:

The effect of the parable, then, is what could be called an alienation effect: it creates a high degree of separation or mental distance between the listener and everyday experience. The ones who are seeking knowledge about the Reign of God are

³³ Louis Marin, ‘The Women at the Tomb’, in Harold Bloom (ed.), *The Gospels: Modern Critical Interpretations*, Chelsea House, New York, 1988, p. 78. As Bartlett (1990) observes, ‘the gospels do not describe the resurrection; they describe the disciples’ experiences of meeting the resurrected Jesus, and theologise about them’ (John R. Bartlett, *The Bible, Faith and Evidence: A Critical Enquiry into the Nature of Biblical History*, British Museum Publications, London, 1990, p. 198). The Gospels also pre-empt, and ridicule, future scepticism in the doubting disciples (Matthew 28:17, Luke 24:38) and John’s figure of the ‘doubting Thomas’ (and Jesus’s response, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe’ [John 20–9]).

³⁴ Thomas E. Boomershine, ‘Jesus of Nazareth and the Watershed of Ancient Orality and Literacy’, *Semeia* 65, 1994, p. 27. Boomershine is referring to the parable of the Rich Man in Luke 12.

suddenly distanced from the object seeking to be known and are forced to think and reflect about their own assumptions ... Jesus' parable makes the same basic epistemological move in knowing the Reign of God as Socrates' dialogues in knowing the world of the forms. It is the foundational epistemological move of the literate culture of Hellenism: the turn away from the experiential ways of knowing associated with oral culture to reflective ways of knowing associated with literacy.³⁵

Jesus, at the 'watershed' of orality and literacy in an epoch of interblending languages and epistemologies, thus introduces to the parable form the Socratic shift towards hidden, contemplative knowledge. His imagery, such as the mustard seed and the bridegroom (Matt 13:31, 9:15), has inspired mystical poetries in the Middle Ages and beyond.³⁶ And while Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection *is* the Christian mystery, it is his role as the Word of God, present since Genesis (John 1:1–5) that has also fascinated theologians and poets. In the chapters to follow, Australian mystical poets including John Shaw Neilson ('He Was the Christ') and Francis Webb ('Poet') are especially drawn to the actions of the Word as geo-poet in John 8:3–11 where Jesus, refusing to condemn a woman accused of adultery writes twice on the ground with his finger, stopping only to utter the famous dictum 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be first to throw a stone at her' (8:7). What Jesus is writing remains unknown, but he does not sketch or dig. The Word writes.³⁷

Jesus's incarnate agonies also restore, for better or worse, the body as a site for suffering and transcendence as opposed to Plato's 'shell'. St Paul, quite literally man of letters, also invokes this aspect. During his famous conversion on the road to

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ The bridegroom is the subject of bridal mystical poems of the Beguines while the mustard seed can be traced to 'The Granum Sinapis' ('Mustard Seed') and Australian poems by Vincent Buckley and James McAuley.

³⁷ This section of the Fourth Gospel is missing from some sources, even the *Revised Standard Version* of 1952. The *King James Version* and *New International Version* include it.

Damascus where he is blinded ‘seeing nothing’ (Meister Eckhart is particularly drawn to this) and hears the voice of Jesus (‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ [Acts 9:4]) is matched by his reminiscence in 2 Corinthians 12:2–10:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell ... To keep me [the man is indeed Paul] from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” ... That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.³⁸

Such revelations of the inexpressible were sufficient for a Jewish audience (sufficient to amaze or infuriate them), but for a Gentile audience these revelations were couched in the pre-existing language of the Mysteries, as Steven Fanning (2000) observes:

to Gentiles in the Hellenistic world, Paul presented Christianity as a Mystery Religion possessing its own mysteries, ‘the hidden wisdom of God which we teach

³⁸ Eckhart reads this in a four-fold manner. See Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher* (tr. Reiner Schurmann), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1978, p. 122.

in our mysteries.’ Paul declared that ‘it was by revelation that I was given the knowledge of the mystery... the message that was a mystery for generations and centuries has now been revealed to his saints.’³⁹

It is during an early instance of oratory, however, that Paul boldly unites Jerusalem and Athens at the Areopagus (where Pseudo-Dionysius also situates himself), citing the Greeks’ own poets to drive home his point:

Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD ... though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’ [Epimenides]. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are indeed his offspring’ [Aratus]. Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man’s design and skill. (Acts 17:22–9)

Paul’s use of the poets reveals their continued public regard, despite Plato, while further intertwining the Greek and Hebrew traditions of poetry and mysticism. His own imagery and mystical themes also directly inspire Australian works such as Gwen Harwood’s ‘Bone Scan’ (see Chapter 7).

Drunkenness, Via Mystica, Scala Perfectionis, Cataphasis: Philo to Origen

Paul is not the only mystical figure to see the potential of the Hellenistic confluence of languages and liturgies. Philo of Alexandria (c.25 BC–c.50 BCE), a Jew highly

³⁹ Fanning, *Op Cit.*, p. 18. Fanning limits himself to two Pauline citations, but scripturally there are many more, for example ‘the Spirit of God dwells in you’ (Romans 8:9), ‘men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and those entrusted with the secret things of God’ (1 Corinthians 4:1), ‘Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we all be changed’ (15:51), ‘we fix our eyes [most Platonically] not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal’ (2 Corinthians 4:18).

educated in Greek philosophy and a mystic who described his own illuminative experiences in great detail, sought, as Fanning puts it:

to demonstrate that Judaism was fully compatible with and indeed superior to the highest standards of Greek philosophy. Moreover he found that the language of the Mystery religions was appropriate for Judaism, properly understood, for the literal sense of the Scriptures obscured the deeper truths hidden within them for the scrutiny of the unworthy.⁴⁰

Philo also suggested that the Old Testament prophets received divine insight through a state of a ‘sober’ spiritual drunkenness, to be distinguished from the wine-induced variety of the Dionysian mysteries.⁴¹ Philo’s incorporation of Greek elements into Judaism and allegorical method of scriptural interpretation were adopted into early Christian mysticism by two fellow Alexandrians, Clement (c.150–c.215) and Origen (c.185–c.254 B.C.E.) where a mystical vocabulary was introduced to the literature, including ‘mystical’, ‘mystically’, illumination, divinisation (becoming like God), dispassion (*apatheia*), *gnosis*, and a *via mystica* or ‘mystic stages’ (*tas prokopas tas mystikas*) leading to the vision of God.⁴² God for Clement is ‘above all speech, all conception, all thought, can never be committed to writing... inexpressible even by His own power’.⁴³ He also pioneers a feminine aspect of God more often associated with the Middle Ages (though the soul has a feminine aspect in Augustine), incurred by God’s love for *us*—‘The Father by loving became feminine: and the great proof of this is He [Jesus] whom He begot of Himself; and the fruit brought forth by love is

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴¹ Borchert, *Op Cit.*, p. 41. Other (and earlier) Greek mysteries did not promote alcoholic intoxication, and, in the case of the later Orphic mysteries, sometimes represented ‘a complete reversal of the meaning hitherto given to Dionysiac ecstasy’ (Bouyer, *Op Cit.*, p. 65).

⁴² Fanning, *Op Cit.*, pp. 23–4, McGinn *Op Cit.*, pp.102–5.

⁴³ Fanning, *Op Cit.*, p. 23.

love'.⁴⁴ Femininity in Christian mysticism endures mixed associations of divine fecundity and corporeal inferiority exacerbated by the silencing of women mystics until the early Middle Ages.⁴⁵

While Clement introduced the terms for the future tradition of Christian mysticism, it was Origen who brilliantly wove the terms into a detailed, cohesive exegesis palpable to future mystics of the tradition such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart.⁴⁶ In his hands the Fourth Gospel becomes a revelation of divine Logos in the form of Jesus Christ, the forty-two stages of Exodus become 'something by which ... we are taught in mysterious descriptions the ascent of the soul to heaven and the mystery of the resurrection from the dead', and the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Songs are reconfigured to fit Origen's conception of the Christian life as a *scala perfectonis* of purgative, contemplative and *unitive* states. Origen's equation of Christian *agape* (love as charity) with Greek *eros* (love as desire) is just one example of an inspired divergence from Clement that would change the nature of the relationship between mysticism and language. As McGinn observes:

Origen's use of erotic symbolism – such as the wound of love, the kiss of the lovers (Song 1:1 and elsewhere), the embrace (Song 2:6) — introduces us to one of the most complex and controversial aspects in the history of Christian mysticism. The Alexandrian stands at the head of those Christian mystics who have argued that of all the positive or cataphatic modes of speaking available to the mystic, erotic

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* See Jantzen, *Op Cit.*, for a feminist reading of this, especially the trope of the passive soul.

⁴⁵ Despite the acknowledgement by male authors of the possibility for female mystical experience (such as Augustine's mother in *Confessions* 9:X), poet-mystic Hildegard of Bingen is the first woman recognised for her creative and critical agency. For an analysis of the growing prominence of women mystics, including the Beguines, from 1200, see Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200—1350*, Crossroad, New York, 1998, p. 15. 'Without denying that there have been important women, and even women writers, in Christianity from its beginning, it is fair to say that the great age of women's theology begins in 1200'.

⁴⁶ Hans Urs Von Balthasar in Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works* (tr. Rowan A. Greer), SPCK, London, 1979, p. xi. Von Balthasar is also a major influence for Peter Steele (see Chapter 7).

language is the most appropriate way of using speech to surpass itself ... God himself must be Eros if the eros implanted in us is what returns us to him.⁴⁷

Thus Origen, aware of The Song's importance to Jewish mysticism, weds eros to the positive or *cataphatic* mode of Christian mystical language just as centuries later Pseudo-Dionysius weds renunciation to its negative or *apophatic* mode. Yet, as is often the case in such a complex tradition, appearances can be deceiving: Origen's promotes a rigorous 'protomonasticism' and was himself castrated, while Pseudo-Dionysius devotes several pages of The Divine Names to 'Divine Yearning' which he equates to Love.⁴⁸ Origen's innovations are nonetheless profound, and a comparison with Pseudo-Dionysius shows that despite recent phenomenological excursions into negative theology (or *mystical* theology, as Jean-Luc Marion rightly insists), there is more than one 'speech surpassing speech' endemic to Western Christian mysticism.⁴⁹

Synaesthesia, Charity, Apophasis, the Via Negativa: Augustine to Pseudo-Dionysius

In terms of language St Augustine, so often regarded as a pillar of orthodoxy, was also an innovator. Ursula King (2001) calls him 'a master in using the language of paradox to express the essentially inexpressible, the knowledge of the Unknowable, the incommunicable joy of divine life'.⁵⁰ McGinn, however, is more expansive:

⁴⁷ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 118–9. For a more thorough investigation of the languages of love of Richard, Bernard and Teresa, see Bernard McGinn, 'The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism', in Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Language*, pp. 203–27. Similar 'wound' imagery occurs in Isaiah 49:2; Song 2:5, St Francis's stigmata, and St Teresa of Avila's 'dart of love'.

⁴⁸ H. Crouzel, 'Origène, précurseur du monachisme' cited in *Ibid.*, p. 110; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Op Cit.*, pp. 102–5.

⁴⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, 'How to Avoid Speaking of "Negative Theology"', in John D. Caputo & Michael J. Scanlon (eds), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1999, p. 21.

⁵⁰ King, *Op Cit.*, p. 53.

his mingling of the language of vision and metaphors drawn from all the other spiritual senses creates what may be a deliberate confusion in order to convey something of the obscurity of all such encounters ... Tactile images are omnipresent in his writings, not only the language of touching (*atingere*), but especially that of clinging and cleaving to, embracing and sticking to, suggested by a favorite Psalm text, *Mihi autem adhaerere Deo bonum est* [‘But for me it is good to be near God’] (Ps 72:28). Another theme that emphasises the obscurity of consciousness of the immediate presence of God is that of “spiritual drunkenness” (*sacra vel sobria ebrietas*) ... The images he used, whether those of vision or of the other spiritual senses, were all strategies meant to suggest and not to circumscribe the inexpressible ... his emphasis on a form of synaesthesia as helpful in conveying the inexpressible richness of immediate consciousness of the divine presence made an important contribution to the history of Western mysticism.⁵¹

To the existing mystical poetics, Augustine adds *synaesthesia* and a jubilatory singing silence linked to holiness. Marjorie Boyle (1990) traces how this coloured the Augustinian view of words. He struggled with figurative language, including metaphor and parable, before conceding ‘It is not a lie when truth is passed over in silence’ and that such techniques did not represent falsehoods, but mysteries.⁵² The archetypal Word, was, of course, without syllables due to its immortality, but to be understood by human weakness ‘it descended temporarily to the particles of sounds’, and those sounds comprised Christ’s use of allegory, which signified the ‘silence of the divine discourse’, the Word beyond words, the Truth ‘which speaks noiselessly within’. In a theme later reprised in Eliot’s ‘Words, after speech, reach / Into the

⁵¹ McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. 252.

⁵² Marjorie Boyle, ‘Augustine in the Garden of Zeus: Love, Lust and Language’, *Harvard Theological Review* 83.2, 1990, p. 131.

silence' (*Four Quartets*), Augustine outlines his case for wordless worship of the ineffable:

Truly he is ineffable whom you cannot tell forth in speech; and if you cannot tell Him forth what else can you do but jubilate? In this way the heart rejoices without words and the boundless expanse of rapture is not circumscribed by syllables.⁵³

Augustine diverges from Origen's endorsement of eros by depicting *caritas* (love-charity) as a divine fire, the ultimate imageless image essential to the Australian mystical poets Cambridge, Neilson, Webb, Wright, Hart and Cavanagh:

We are inflamed, by Thy Gift we are kindled; and are carried upwards; we glow inwardly, and go forwards. We ascend thy ways that be in thy heart, and sing a song of degrees; we glow inwardly with Thy good fire, and we go; because we go upwards to the peace of Jerusalem.⁵⁴

Much has been written about Pseudo-Dionysius of late, particularly in regard to deconstructive and negating elements of his mystical theology (see Chapter 7). His insistence upon the surrender of both affirmative *and* negative language before 'dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence' and an 'earnest exercise of mystic contemplation ... upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence' were of tremendous importance to mysticism in the West, popularising the term 'mystical theology' and influencing a host of medieval translators including John the Scot Erigena and the English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* to write their own mystical theologies. Such was the popularity of this sixth-century Syrian monk pseudonymous with the Dionysius of who 'joined and believed' Paul in Athens (Acts 17:34) that one medieval English commentator wrote *The Mystical*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 138; T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, Faber & Faber, London, 1974, p. 194.

⁵⁴ Augustine cited in Grant, *Op Cit.*, p. 29.

Theology had ‘run across England like deere’.⁵⁵ John Bowden’s (2005) observation that ‘mystics often seem to be dealing with language at the full stretch of its meaning’ is nowhere more true than in Pseudo-Dionysius, and McGinn confirms ‘more than any other patristic author, Dionysius used language (indeed a very special language of his own) to subvert the claims of language—a position that has remained controversial’, but it is also important to remember Pseudo-Dionysius advocated a scripturally-based, highly-systematic *via mystica* of initiation and ascension. One was not to spontaneously leap into the ineffability of Godhead, nor divulge the mysteries to non-initiates.⁵⁶

In contrast to the erotic *cataphasis* of Origen’s Song of Songs, Pseudo-Dionysius’s *apophasis* finds its scriptural-allegorical basis in the language of darkness, cloud and silence in Exodus 19–20, where Moses on Mt Sinai ‘plunges into the truly mystical darkness of unknowing’. This interpretation followed in the steps of Philo and St Gregory of Nyssa (330–95) who challenged the light-drenched imagery of the Neoplatonists.⁵⁷ Nonetheless eros still features in the Pseudo-Dionysian conception of God as ‘yearning on the move, simple, self-moved, self-acting, pre-existent in the Good, flowing out from the Good onto all that is and returning once again to the Good’, a movement from and back to God in *mutual*

⁵⁵ For commentary upon Pseudo-Dionysius’s identity, see C.E. Rolt’s introduction to Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and The Mystical Theology* (tr. C.E. Rolt), Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1957, p. 1; for ‘deere’ see D.H.S. Nicholson & A.H.E. Lee, *Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1917, p. v.

⁵⁶ John Bowden, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 818; McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. 126.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

yearning which would inspire radical medieval innovations such as Meister Eckhart's compelling God by means of 'detachment'.⁵⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius places himself at the fusion of Hebrew and Greek traditions, at the foundation of Christian mysticism under Paul (the first mystic to be called 'Christian' after Acts 11:26), but in effect he draws the first era of Christian mysticism to a close before the explosion of Anglo-European mystics and poet-mystics in the Middle Ages, who drew upon the theologies and poetics of their predecessors and in some cases laid the foundations for their respective national literary traditions.

Medieval Poetic Mystics and English Mystical Poets

In the introduction to *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (2006), Bernard McGinn provides an excellent synopsis of the role of poetry in Western Christian mysticism from the Middle Ages, noting in particular the gravitation towards poetry of mystics seeking a means to convey the ineffable:

The relation between mysticism and poetry is not as strong in the Christian tradition as it is in Islam, though a number of mystics have turned to poetry as a way of trying to convey what is beyond description but can suggested, or pointed to in human words. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries several mystics used poetry along with prose to express their love for God. Examples can be found in Hadewijch, Mechthild, Marguerite Porete, and Richard Rolle. In the case of the Franciscan Jacophone de Todi (c. 1236–1306) we have a mystic whose message was put forth solely through the medium of his moving vernacular poem 'The Lauds.' Among the

⁵⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Op Cit.*, p. 107. For Eckhart's thoughts on the return to God/God's return via detachment, see Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons Commentaries, Treatises and Defence* (eds Bernard McGinn & Edmund College), Paulist Press, New York, 1981, p. 198: 'I praise detachment above all love. First, because the best about love is that it compels me to love God, yet detachment compels God to love me ... God's own natural place is unity and purity, and that comes from detachment. Therefore God must of necessity give himself to a heart that comes from detachment'.

sixteenth century Spanish mystics, we find perhaps the premier mystical poet of the Christian tradition in John of the Cross, as well as other distinguished poet-mystics, such as Luis de León (1527–91) ... English mystical poets have been particularly insightful, as William Blake once put it, for their ability to see “a World in a grain of sand, And Heaven in a wildflower” (‘Auguries of Innocence’).⁵⁹

Thus there are significant instances of reciprocity between medieval mysticism and poetry where mystics have turned to poetry well in advance of the mystical poets of their national traditions, including the English tradition. For his English mystical poets, McGinn selects George Herbert (1593–1632), Thomas Traherne (1636–74), William Blake (1757–1827), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89) and Irish republican Joseph Mary Plunkett (1887–1916), all taken from Nicholson and Lee’s *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (1917), still relevant some ninety years later. To these five, Richard Rolle, John Donne, Henry Vaughan, Emily Brontë and the Americans Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot could reasonably be added, especially in the context of Australian poetry which variously draws upon most of these through Harpur, O’Dowd, Cambridge, Fullerton, Harford, Wright, Harwood and Steele in particular. Rolle, the metaphysical poets and Hopkins are largely ecclesiastical poets, adapting their personal and professional knowledge of the Western Christian mysticism to the burgeoning English language. Regina M. Schwatz (2004) charts George Herbert’s ‘mystical eucharist’ via the seventeenth-century resurgence in interest in Pseudo-Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology* and English works such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but in the same period even more ancient sources including Plato, Origen and Plotinus were being revived in the work of the

⁵⁹ Bernard McGinn (ed.), *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, pp. 298–9.

Cambridge Platonists, the first philosophers to regularly write in English.⁶⁰ The metaphysical poets thus prospered during a period of exceptional expansion of the English language and unprecedented interaction with the ancient and medieval phases of the Western Christian mystical tradition.

The Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, despite strong religious educations, were not tied to the clergy and this independence, laudable as it may be, invited a greater crosspollination of aspirations and influences. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) for example, while acknowledging a debt to mystics Johannes Tauler (c.1300–1361), Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) and George Fox (1624–1691), stresses that the poet, bringing 'the whole soul of man into activity' does so 'by that synthetic and magical power' of imagination rather than any *via mystica*, a project which Shelley and Keats adopted with gusto.⁶¹ As for Blake, the case remains a contested one. Respected Blake authority Kathleen Raine (1986) unequivocally asserts:

People thought—and WB Yeats gave currency to the idea—that Blake made it all up; that he was a mystic ... he wasn't. He was a Gnostic ... It was gnosis. It wasn't mysticism. He was a Gnostic and he was enormously deeply read.⁶²

By contrast, Vincent Buckley's view in *Poetry and the sacred* (1968) that 'gnostic conceptions are only part of the real Blake, and they are transcended, if not positively denied, by his greatest short poems' appears to hold some currency with McGinn,

⁶⁰ Regina M. Schwartz, 'From Ritual to Poetry: Herbert's Mystical Eucharist' in Kessler & Sheppard (eds), *Op Cit.*, p. 149. For the Cambridge Platonists, see <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cambridge-platonists/>> retrieved 24 February 2007. The Platonists also influenced the Romantic poets, appearing in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*.

⁶¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Everyman, London, 1956, pp. 80–3, pp. 173–4.

⁶² Raine cited in Sean Martin, *The Gnostics: the First Christian Heretics*, Pocket, Harpenden, p. 119. McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. 299. Yeats is especially influential to early twentieth-century Australian poets including Bernard O'Dowd, Zora Cross, Christopher Brennan and John Shaw Neilson (see Chapter 4).

who refers to him as ‘a great independent’.⁶³ In keeping with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Anglo-American scholarship, Australian poets from at least the time of Christopher Brennan considered Blake mystical, and before that Charles Harpur and Ada Cambridge revered Wordsworth in a similar manner (see Chapter 3). As noted in Chapter 1, however, Romantic poets in particular fall foul of the shifting notions of mid-to-late-century mysticism scholars. The Wordsworth of ‘Ode to the Intimations of Immortality’, ‘Tintern Abbey’ and *The Prelude* is described as ‘mystical ... like all mystics ... in and out of ecstasy’ as late as Mark Van Doren (1950), but the same critique, while neglecting to mention that mystics by Origen’s definition must progress *beyond* illuminative experience, still acknowledges that ‘Wordsworth’s great subject is himself’, a crucial point of divergence applicable to other mystical poets such as Walt Whitman and proponents of Hart’s ‘atheistical mysticism’.⁶⁴ Amid such transitions, Emily Brontë’s ‘No Coward Soul is Mine’ and Emily Dickinson’s ‘The Soul That Hath a Guest’ hold firm and in turn influence the Australian poets Ada Cambridge, Mary Fullerton, Lesbia Harford and Judith Wright.

⁶³ Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1968, pp. 135–6.

⁶⁴ Mark Van Doren, ‘Introduction’, in William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems* (ed. Mark Van Doren), The Modern Library, New York, 1950, pp. xviii, xxi. Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), influential in his own right for early Australian poets such as Charles Harpur, met Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1833 and went on to strongly influence Whitman. For ‘atheistical mysticism’, see Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2004., pp. 9–10.

Bataille's (Atheistical) Mystical Theology

In *Eroticism* (1957), the French philosopher, poet and novelist Georges Bataille (1897-1962) claims that he and the novelist-philosopher Maurice Blanchot represent 'la nouvelle théologie mystique' loosely defined as encountering the unknown.⁶⁵ In his earlier *Inner Experience* (1943), Bataille makes his case for the unknown as distinct from 'God':

I hold the apprehension of God—be he without form and without mode (the "intellectual" and not sensuous vision of him) to be an obstacle in the movement which carries us to the more obscure apprehension of the *unknown*: of a presence which is no longer in any way distinct from an absence.

God differs from the unknown, in that profound emotion, coming from the depths of childhood, is in us bound to the evocation of Him. The unknown on the contrary leaves one cold, does not elicit our love until it overturns everything within us like a violent wind. In the same way, the unsettling images and the middle terms to which poetic emotion has recourse touch us easily. If poetry introduces the strange, it does so by means of the familiar. The poetic is the familiar dissolving into the strange, and ourselves with it. It never dispossesses us entirely, for the words, the images (once dissolved) are charged with emotions already experienced, attached to objects which link them to the known.⁶⁶

Bataille offers a superb, if unnerving, non-deific counterpoint to the poetics of Christian mysticism. He also unwittingly addresses T.S. Eliot's concerns about 'the inability to *feel* towards God and man as they [our forefathers] did' post-1945, and brazenly attempts to relocate mystical experience in the sacred unknown, rather than

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁶ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* (tr. Leslie Anne Boldt, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988, p. 5.

in the religious.⁶⁷ Kevin Hart expands upon this in his *Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (2004), placing Bataille in some interesting poetic company:

Bataille and Blanchot are equally concerned with reaching the limits of experience, although they adopt different ways of attaining it. Like Bataille, Blanchot rejects the notion of a transcendent being (or being as transcendent, Saint Augustine's *idipsum*) with which one can merge, and seeks instead an obscure point beneath the world, as it were, rather than above it, which withdraws as one approaches. To feel the attraction of this point is to experience nonexperience; it is a phased counterpart of the ecstasies to which some Christian mystics have testified. Blanchot develops not a mysticism of exegesis so much as a displaced mysticism of writing: to write is to transform the instant into an imaginary space, to pass from a time in which death could occur to an endless interval of dying. I take this movement to illuminate the 'atheistical mysticism' that one variously finds in the poetry of René Char, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabés, and Roberto Juarroz and the fascination with dying or other states that one finds in the fiction of Samuel Beckett, Robert Brock, Franz Kafka, and Robert Musil. In its linking of creation and fall, it bears witness to the return of Valentinian gnosticism in modern times, while also partly clarifying the more formal meditations on the alterity of *la différance* that preoccupy Jacques Derrida and the figures associated with him.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ This becomes a matter of urgency for Eliot in 'The Social Function of Poetry' (1945): 'The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but in the inability to feel towards God and man as they did. A belief in which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless ... It is equally possible that the feeling for poetry, and the feelings for which are the material of poetry, may disappear everywhere: which might perhaps help to facilitate that unification of the world which some people consider desirable for its own sake' (T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, Faber & Faber, London, 1965, p. 25). Judith Wright subscribes to similar concerns about loss of feeling through a Jungian perspective (see Chapter 6).

⁶⁸ Hart, *Op Cit.*, pp. 9–10; For Rilke's 'passionate' withdrawal from Christianity, see Rilke's letter to Witold Von Hulewicz dated November 13th, 1925, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, (trs J.B. Leishman & Stephen Spender), Hogwarth, London, 1939, p. 158. For Valentinian Gnosticism, one of the more popular forms of Gnosticism, see Sean Martin, *Op Cit.*, p.47. For more on Derrida and Hart's discourses of 'non-experience' and 'counter-experience' see Chapter 7.

Bataille, here along with Blanchot, acts as a critical entry point to an ‘atheistical mysticism’, one of the twentieth century’s great challenges to the question of who speaks for or with Western Christian mysticism.⁶⁹ Is Bataille’s interpretation of the sacred in fact more suited to re-interpret mysticism for a more secular age? Are its varying claims heretical, disingenuous, or part of a greater metaphysical progression, a repositioning of limits of mystical experience towards, as Bataille puts it, the ‘unknown’? Following Bataille’s assertion that encountering the divine is like the experience of poetry, a point which recalls the sacralising of poetics in Blake, Shelley, Mallarmé and Yeats, Hart recognises something of an impasse in his thought whereby

Christian mystics fall short of inner experience, it would seem, because they refer their raptures to what they have been told of God instead of entrusting themselves entirely to their transports. And poets do not achieve inner experience because they cling, at least in part, to events they have already lived.⁷⁰

Blanchot, by contrast, is to be ‘prized’ for attending to the unknown in his novel *Thomas l’Obscur* (1941), which involves the sacrifice of words before the unknown rather than the attempt to experience the unknown poetically. Yet, if Blanchot develops, as Hart claims, ‘a displaced mysticism of writing’, then Bataille develops a displaced mystical theology or *mysticism of displacement*—displacement from the Christian God (who gets in the way), from predetermined metaphysical structures, from socio-linguistic restraints on the body at the limits of experience, displacement indeed from all but poetry which in turn proves its own limitation.

⁶⁹ Hart, *Op Cit.*, p. 235 cites Blanchot’s argument for the atheist’s closeness to God in ‘Affirmation (desire, affliction)’ and ‘Atheism and Writing’ in *Infinite Conversation* (tr. Susan Hanson), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993.

⁷⁰ Hart, *Op Cit.*, p. 25.

From its inception, Bataille's atheistical mysticism relies on the Christian mystical tradition as much as it does on Rimbaud and Nietzsche. Bataille defines his inner experience as the 'states of rapture, ecstasy, meditated emotion' of mystical experience minus the confessional experience, which presumably, obscures 'an experience laid, bare, free of ties, even of an origin, of any confession whatsoever' which is why he doesn't like the word 'mystical'.⁷¹ And yet the excision of confession does not remove emotion, in fact quite the opposite. *Inner Experience* dissolves into fragmented paroxysms, metaphysical histrionics, and ultimately, poetry ('I am dead / dead and dead / in the pitch-black night / arrow shot / at him' ['God']).⁷² Emotion, amplified through the body, is tremblingly reinstated and given precedence over the known. Bataille answers Eliot's concerns about the modern age thus: one can in fact feel *more* than one's forefathers towards the displaced body (of writing) apprehending the 'unknown'. Past mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius, St Teresa and St John of the Cross initially inform Bataille's displacement from the known and he subsequently echoes, among others, Meister Eckhart, who in his radical battles against sense-conceptions, famously petitioned God to free him of God. Bataille asks: 'Can one not free from its religious antecedents the possibility for mystical experience ... free it, in a word, from mysticism?'⁷³ It is an enduring query that shadows mysticism in Australian poetry: can (post)modern mystical experience stand alone, isolated from over two millennia of religious discourse and

⁷¹ Bataille, *Op Cit.*, p. 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁷³ For Eckhart, see Meister Eckhart, *Op Cit.*, p. 219: 'Where man still preserves some place in himself, he preserves distinction. This is why I pray God to rid me of God, for my essential being is above God insofar as we comprehend God as the principle of creatures'. For Bataille, see Bataille, *Op Cit.*, p.169. Peter Tracy Connor (2000) adds 'The mysticism without mysticism that Bataille envisaged represented not the extinction of philosophy but the liberation of thought from the tyranny of understanding' (Connor, *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2000, p. 165).

superstructures, or, as Hart believes, is the ‘atheistical mysticism’ of Bataille et al. a throwback of its own, to a Gnostic tradition?

Along with its religious antecedents, Western Christian mysticism’s entry points into Australian poetry always includes a secular component. As such, the question of ‘who speaks’ becomes subject to the larger poetic tensions of ‘which Christian mysticism?’—the (Neo)Platonic, the biblical, the various streams of Christian mysticism, the metaphysical, Romantic and non-deific poetics, or something independent, a personal mysticism? These are the very dilemmas which confront and inform Australian poetic encounters with the mystical from Ada Cambridge to Maisie Cavanagh.

Chapter 3: Ada Cambridge and the Lonely Seas

For Australian mystical poetry, Ada Cambridge (1844–1926) is not a pioneer but *the* pioneer. Between 1875 and 1913 she produced a far more rigorous exploration of mystical themes and imagery than her fellow colonial poets well before Christopher Brennan's *XXI Poems* (1897) and a full generation before John Shaw Neilson's *Heart of Spring* (1919). As the mystical for Cambridge shifts in relation to her own experiences of piety and loss, her poems will be examined chronologically, as will those of the poets to come. Unlike John Shaw Neilson, Cambridge was not critically designated as 'mystical' in her lifetime and so the era-specific significance of such a designation cannot be examined. However, *The Bulletin* editor A.G. Stephens's dismissals of Cambridge's poetry as a vehicle for the kind of insipid femininity he also saw in mysticism reveals the often derogatory Federation-era associations between gender, nationalism and mysticism. Late twentieth-century Cambridge scholarship has deconstructed such claims and briefly suggested some grounds for Cambridge's consideration as a mystical poet. This chapter investigates how and why an understanding of mysticism is essential to the study of Cambridge's poetry. A short prelude section explores the mystical in nineteenth-century Australian poets Charles Harpur and Henry Kendall.

Prelude: Harpur and Kendall

The word 'mystic' appears in Australian poetry as early as 1823 in 'Australiasia' by explorer and statesman William Charles Wentworth (1790–1872). Amid the pomp and grandeur of a divinely-charged imperial quest to unlock 'the mystic casket' of Australia, its original inhabitants are arrogantly brushed aside:

Untutor'd children, fresh from Nature's mould,
 No songs have ye to trace the times of old:—
 No hidden themes, like these, employ your care,
 For you enough the knowledge that ye are:—
 Let Learning's sons, who would this secret scan,
 Unlock its mystic casket if they can...¹

In a similar vein, in *Aurora Australis, or, Specimens of Sacred Poetry for the Colonists of Australia* (1826) Scottish Presbyterian minister John Dunmore Lang (1799–1878) invokes the prophetic example of Elijah calling down fire from heaven in 1 Kings 18:38 to compare Aborigines to the ill-fated priests of Baal, 'Great God! here too a rebel race / Insults the Almighty to his face!' ('Elijah's Appeal').² While Wentworth's 'mystic casket' and Lang's antipodean Elijah yield little in the way of poetic engagements with mystical consciousness, they confirm two colonial pre-occupations which continue into twentieth century Australian poetry: the 'mystic' Australian land-based secret lying in wait for 'Learning's sons', and the appropriation of prophetic themes of interactions with God as a sign or element, including a divine fire. Furthermore, Wentworth and Lang both use their notions of the mystical to deny Indigenous connections to land, ingenuity and divinity, the start of a series of interactions between Indigeneity and Christian mysticism in Australian poetry further examined in Chapter 8.

Charles Harpur (1813–1868) is the first Australian poet to recognise, however clumsily, the need for Australian poetry to become independently Australian, 'For we are neither English, nor Irish, nor Scotch;—but Australians: and our career as a

¹ Wentworth cited in Michael Ackland, *That Shining Band: A Study of Australian Colonial Verse Tradition*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1991, p. 32.

² John Dunmore Lang, *Aurora Australis, or, Specimens of Sacred Poetry for the Colonists of Australia*, G. Eager, Sydney, 1826, p. 25.

race should be full of boldness and invention, and as little imitative as possible'.³ As Elizabeth Perkins (1984) elaborates, this 'son of emancipist parents, transcendentalist, republican in theory, poet and aesthete ... interpreting the new physical and spiritual landscape' sought to combine his classical, biblical, Miltonian, Wordsworthian and Emersonian influences ('Thou giant-minded Mystic, Emerson') with his strong sense of personal, national and spiritual liberty.⁴ A firm believer in God, yet suspicious of religion, he is also the first Australian poet to engage themes of ineffability and contemplation in overtly mystical terms:

In vain would Thought in words, though rich

And rare as gems, reveal

That mystic grace of passion which

We feel — and *can but feel*.

('The Ineffable')

Yea, it is well amid the cold and grim

Realities of the world, to steal an hour

For mystic meditation unconfined

To this dusk point, the Earth — to die awhile

In body, and with all the powers of mind,

Thus freed, to bridge with mighty beams of thought

³ 'Notes to "The Kangaroo Hunt"' in Charles Harpur, *The Poetical Works of Charles Harpur* (ed. Elizabeth Perkins), Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1984, p. 506.

⁴ Perkins in *Ibid.*, p.xii; 'Emerson', p. 633.

The spirit's perilous essays to span

The depths of the Eternal...

(Chorus of the Hours III, 'Looking Beyond')⁵

Harpur also endeavours to celebrate divine presence in 'Happiness and Faith', 'The Hand of God', 'Vision of an Angel' and engage biblical sources in 'The Babylonian Captivity' (from Psalm 137) and 'Love in the Springtime', a tepid version of The Song of Songs ('With the light of the morning, a Voice, like a ray, / Came saying My Fair One, arise; come away').⁶ 'The World and the Soul' lumberingly details the nature and progress of the soul ('a spark / From God's own brightness') from and to God theologically coinciding with mystical themes such as Meister Eckhart's spark in the soul and Origen's *scala perfectionis*:

the million-featured modes

Of His omniscient Power; — each several mode [sic]

A shining link in *one* eternal chain

Of progress — to Perfection.⁷

The poem's conclusion of ascension to 'a state yet more / Exalted, as nearer his own / internal excellence and central peace' after death recalls the 'modeless being' of the Flemish mystic Jan Van Ruusbroec (1293–1381) 'an eternal state of rest in a blissful embrace of loving immersion... This is that modeless being which all fervent interior

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 392, 851. *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* notes 'While, he [Harpur] said, nothing could shake his belief in God, he rejected all Christian sects, Unitarianism coming nearest to his conception of religion' (James Normington-Rawling, 'Charles Harpur' at <<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A010472b.htm?hilite=charles%3Bharpur>> retrieved 11 March 2007).

⁶ Harpur, *Op Cit.*, p. 662.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 302–4. 'I have sometimes said that there is a power in the spirit that alone is free. Sometimes I have said it is a guard of the spirit; sometimes I have said it is a light of the spirit; sometimes I have said it is a spark ... It is free of all names, it is bare of all forms, wholly empty and free, as God himself is empty and free' (Eckhart, *Op Cit.*, p. 180).

spirits have chosen above all things', though Harpur privileges perfection over love. Judith Wright in her *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965) remarks that 'the mystical evolution ... for higher and later forms of consciousness' in the 'World and the Soul' makes it the poem by which Harpur should be judged as a thinker.⁸

Equally, Harpur's philosophising can prove detrimental to his poetry. His speculative works are regularly encumbered with classical and Romantic staples of Bard, Muse and Nature to the point where Perkins (1984) takes him to task in the Whitmanesque 'A Coast View' for not avoiding 'the stance of an uninspiring lecturer'.⁹ Nevertheless, Harpur's most enduring contribution to Australian mystical poetry is an innovative one when he pre-empts the shift in Kendall, Webb and Wright from the sublime to a far more confronting presence-absence of the pre-colonial unknown in 'The Creek of the Four Graves'. The poem opens with a sunlit mountain:

fanning leaves in the descending rays
 Danced interdazzlingly, as if the trees
 That bore them, were all thrilling, — tingling all
 Even to the roots for very happiness...¹⁰

This, of course, has its own ecstatic qualities reminiscent of Protestant mystic Jacob Boehme's burnished pewter dish which, as fellow mystic William Law recounts,

⁸ Jan Van Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works* (tr. James A. Wiseman), Paulist, New York, 1985, p. 152; Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, Oxford, Melbourne, 1965, p. 17.

⁹ Perkins in Harpur, *Op Cit.*, p. xxxi. For a brief examination of Wordsworthian and Emersonian conceptions of a female Nature as a 'spokeswoman for the Father. She is the language He speaks and she signifies His divine plan ... she signifies not herself, but the Father, who remains ineffable without her mediation' see Andrew Taylor, *Reading Australian Poetry*, University of Queensland Press, 1989, pp. 28–30. See also 'The Dream by the Fountain' where the Muse ('a lofty-souled maiden' or 'the Lyrist') declares to the narrator 'I am the Muse of the evergreen Forest —/ I am the Spouse of thy spirit, Lone Bard' (Harpur, *Op Cit.*, p. 263).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

‘reflected the sunshine with such marvellous splendour that he fell into a deep inward ecstasy and it seemed to him as if he could now look into the principles and deepest foundations of things’.¹¹ But after the sun sets the narrator Egremont is plunged into a moment of silent terror by a mysterious sound and strains to listen:

With a strange horror gathering in his heart,
As if his blood were charged with insect life
And writhed along in clots, he stilled himself,
Listening lost and heedfully, with head
Bent forward sideways, till his breath grew
A pang, and his ears rang. But Silence there
Had recomposed her ruffled wings, and now
Brooded it seemed even stiller than before
Deep nested in the darkness...¹²

This is a founding moment for non-imitative Australian poetry, a detailed depiction of Egremont’s sudden, auditory merging with his surroundings as he listens ‘long and heedfully, with head / Bent forward sideways’—an image of contemplation if there ever was one. Silence itself settles and ‘broods’ in the darkness, and a sense of calm is restored to this contemplative experience, before the sound is revealed to be that of a group of Aborigines. While earlier poets such as Wentworth and Dunmore invoked the mystical to sanctify the subjugation of land and its Indigenous inhabitants, in ‘The Creek of the Four Graves’ Harpur constructs Indigenous presence-absence as a catalyst for deeper, even terrifying, settler contemplations of the unknown. Through this crucial innovation, Harpur successfully translates his theory of ‘mystic meditation’ into an Australian colonial context.

¹¹ William Law cited in Boehme, *Op Cit.*, p. ix.

¹² Harpur, *Op Cit.*, p. 166. Punctuation Harpur’s.

Henry Kendall (1839–1882), by contrast to his mentor, was lyrically deft but lacking the fortitude of Harpur’s convictions, mystical or otherwise. In one letter to Harpur, the young Kendall confessed ‘I think that there is a fearful gap between thought and language’ a belief which, as Paul Kane (1996) observes, both provided the impetus for many of his poems and shadowed him throughout his career.¹³ His own turbulent Anglicanism likewise contributed to his poetic negations as the one who weeps for the unbestowed Harp of Australia (‘The Muse of Australia’), who isn’t answered by the Spirit of the Mountains (‘Mountains’) or the Aborigine in touch with the oak’s secret (‘The Wail in the Native Oak’), and who remains isolated from the unknown in the river poems of ‘Mooni’ ‘Orara’ and ‘Narrara’.¹⁴ Kane further notes how Kendall’s conflation of *the unattainable* and *the negative* serves ‘to place oneself in a double-bind since it twists the inexpressible into the unexpressed, and hence becomes an occasion for self-doubt and failure’.¹⁵ Certainly what Kane calls Kendall’s ‘disabling myth’ compares unfavourably to the *enabling* negativity of Pseudo-Dionysius, which explicitly employs negativity as the advanced way of progression in an inexpressible, imageless *via mystica*.

Despite such incapacitations, poetry remained central to Kendall’s personal and spiritual renegotiation of faith from the 1860s, reflected in ‘To Damascus’ and ‘Faith in God’:

¹³ Kendall cited in Ackland, *Op Cit.*, p. 115. The date of the letter is not satisfactorily given, although a related letter is dated at 1862, the year of Kendall’s first publication and his early correspondence with Harpur, his senior by some twenty-six years. Kane, *Op Cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁴ Ackland cites excerpts from several of Kendall’s letters to this effect in *Op Cit.*, pp. 121–2: ‘I fear I have a long road to travel in the dark yet; and the hand of God has not been reached’; ‘A sorry Christian ... saying “there is nothing certain, but Doubt and Death”’. Ken Goodwin (2002) takes these letters to the wife of a Church of England minister to suggest ‘the most likely interpretation is that he [Kendall] was nominal Church of England (probably of a Latitudinarian or Broad Church inclination)’, despite the intimations by some of Kendall’s contemporaries that he may have been Catholic (Ken Goodwin, ‘Henry Kendall’s Religion’, *Australian Literary Studies* 20.3, 2002, p. 227).

¹⁵ Kane, *Op Cit.*

I recognize in Poetry a revelation of Divinity beyond all revelations: a religion past religion. Mind you I do not include in this name Verse alone but all Harmony, whether it be through Music, Verse or Prose. When I face the face of things, through the eyes of this Agent I am as it were, an *Aboriginal* man. I look about me, as one might have looked on the first morning of Creation, with a surpassing wonder. The Visible becomes everlastingly new — everlastingly suggestive.¹⁶

By contrast, his third collection *Songs from the Mountains* (1880) appears to end on a note of resignation, ‘my spirit fancies it can hear / the song I cannot sing’ (‘After Many Years’).¹⁷ Yet the dedicatory poem ‘To a Mountain’ is something else entirely, a far cry from the Kendall of 1862 ‘yearning for the mystic Aidenn, built beyond this mountain range’ (‘Mountains’):

I take thee for my Teacher. In thy voice
 Of deathless majesty, I, kneeling, hear
 God’s grand authentic Gospel! Year by year,
 The great sublime cantata of thy storm
 Strikes through my spirit — fills it with a life
 Of startling beauty! Thou my Bible art,
 With holy leaves of rock, and flower, and tree,
 And moss, and shining runnel.
 (‘To a Mountain’)¹⁸

The poet who formerly took great pains to listen to and acknowledge the ineffable without reward has changed. The Kendall of ‘To a Mountain’ is a different poet with

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁷ Henry Kendall, *The Poetical Works of Henry Kendall* (ed. T.T. Reed), Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, p. 231.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 143.

a different objective and the result is an *enabled* negativity, a *fearless* gap between thought and language without the histrionics of abandonment for ‘Thou my Bible art’. He does not ask, expect, or complain. Rather, he dedicates his greatest verse or line in the collection to the ‘Father of the stately peaks’, he admits fault and declares that it is his own ‘broken words of blind occasions’ that have come between him and his Dream (a stunning reversal of Poetry as the key to Divinity) and he praises the majesty and ineffability of the Mountain which has transfigured him:

In the psalm
Of thy grave winds, and in the liturgy
Of singing waters, lo! my soul has heard
The higher worship
... I have paused like one
With all the life transfigured; and a flood
Of light ineffable has made me feel
As felt the grand old prophets caught away
By flames of inspiration; but the words
Sufficient for the story of my Dream
Are too splendid for poor human lips!

Kendall’s enabling negativity reaches its climax as he admits ‘Thou hast the Song complete of which my songs / Are pallid adumbrations!’. Judith Wright (1965), after savaging the poet who ‘did not quite know what poetry meant’ and his ‘conventional and not deeply felt’ Christianity, lauds this ‘final self-mastery’ in moving beyond the unattainable guilt-laden Edenic river themes of ‘Mooni’ and ‘Orara’ to the more Wordsworthian ‘To a Mountain’, where ‘a depth of feeling, which flows, not back to an impossible Eden, but now towards an image that is strikingly like that of the

Father whom Adam once disobeyed'.¹⁹ Indeed, 'To a Mountain' concludes with little separation between God and the Mountain as holy intermediary:

On thy awful brow
Is Deity; and in that voice of thine
There is the great imperial utterance
Of God for ever; and thy feet are set
Where evermore, through all the days and years,
There rolls the grand hymn of the deathless wave.

Kendall asks only to repent and to praise; he does not seek to possess, nor does he alienate himself. As a result he is united with the subject of his worship as well as that which emanates from it. If Harpur pioneers a poetic representation of a contemplative experience in 'The Creek of the Four Graves', Kendall can be said to pioneer a representation of a unitive experience, or at very least a *cataphatic* poetics of presence in 'To a Mountain' more compelling than his earlier disabling negativity, depictions of holiness ('Elijah', 'To Damascus', 'On a Spanish Cathedral', 'Leichhardt') or God's voice ('Doubting').²⁰ In addition to the mystical themes of ineffability, prophetic illumination, praise, transformation and unitive consciousness, 'To a Mountain' certainly traverses apt subject matter: mountains from Moses's holy mountain, Mt Verna (the site of St Francis's stigmata) to St John's Mt Carmel have all been sites of tremendous significance to Western Christian mysticism, particularly

¹⁹ Wright, *Op Cit.*, pp. 40, 46.

²⁰ See Kendall, *Op Cit.*, pp. 299, 81, 207, 228, 57. In 'Doubting' the lines of God 'through the wind' are: 'Shake off that gloom of Fear, / Your fainting soul who could not see / That I was near. / Why vex me crying day and night? — / You call on me to hark! / But when I bless your world with light, / Who makes it dark? / Is there a ravelled riddle left / That you would have undone? / What other doubts are there to sift?' / (I answered — 'None.') / My son, look up, if you would see / The Promise on your way, / And turn a trustful face to me. / (I whispered 'Yea.'). Kendall also carries on Harpur's interest in biblical subject-poems with 'To Damascus' ('he tumbled, and / turned aghast at God's whiteness') and 'Elijah'.

as allegories of ascent to the divine. Kendall masters himself before and with Deity in a manner comparable to the ascents, though not the ultimate heights, of these paradigm mystics.

Ada Cambridge

It is no surprise that Ada Cambridge (1844–1926) with her six books of poetry, twenty-seven novels and two biographical works is a subject of continuing interest in the Bradstock-Wakeling and Tate biographies (both 1991) and the online preservation of works by Sydney University Library's Electronic Text and Image Service (SETIS).²¹ However, her failure to secure an enduring reputation as a major poet in her own era permitted A.G. Stephens, the influential and quixotic editor of the Red Page of *The Bulletin*, to declare after her death that she had 'strangled her dreams, silenced her mind and conformed', a ridiculous assessment, rejected outright by Audrey Tate in particular.²²

Cambridge simply did not fit Stephens's chauvinist-nationalist ideal of the poet as a 'potential knight of Romance ... who grapples with the Australian desert [and] who might sing a Homeric chant of victory, or listen, baffled and beaten to an Aeschylean dirge of defeat' more conducive to the bawdy, secular strains of the ballads.²³ Cambridge's poetry, by contrast, is often placeless, meditative or erotic. Furthermore, despite her male poetic personas and open religious doubts, she presented *The Bulletin* editor, a former speaker at the Gympie Secular Association, with an untenable mix of women's poetry, non-nationalism and mysticism, dismissed

²¹ See <<http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/oztexts/ozlit.html>> retrieved 20 March 2007.

²² A.G. Stephens cited in Audrey Tate, *Ada Cambridge: Her Life and Works 1844–1926*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1991, p. 245.

²³ A.G. Stephens cited in Ackland, *Op Cit.* While 'the saltbush sparkling brightly' of Barcroft Boake's 'Where the Dead Men Lie' and recognitions of silence ('Where Silence Reigns') feature in the ballads, as Michael Ackland (2000) observes 'the focus is resolutely secular, mundane and materialistic. The balladist is the matter-of-fact recorder of the daily given, be it humorous or tragic, not a prober of metaphysical depths who evokes uncanny or mystical presences' (Michael Ackland 'Poetry from the 1890s to 1970' in Elizabeth Webby [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, 2000, p. 78; Douglas Stewart & Nancy Keesing [eds], *Australian Bush Ballads*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1971, pp. 141, 207). The uncanny is present in the ghosts of Paterson and Boake, but the mystical, even the devotional, is frowned upon in ballads such as 'Holy Dan' (*Ibid.*, p. 224). Yet balladeers such as Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833–1870) influenced John Shaw Neilson, as did the ballads of his father, John Neilson (1844–1922).

by Stevens as only ‘accidentally’ Australian.²⁴ Indeed, Cambridge’s final collection *The Hand in the Dark* (1913) continues to suffer from a stigma of poetic depreciation which can be traced back to the same man who declared women’s poetry ‘has (naturally) neither the mass nor the quality of the men’s work’ and, perhaps more revealingly of the times, ‘to weak and feminine minds mysticism will always appeal’.²⁵ Stevens’s equation of mysticism with ‘weak and feminine minds’ will be further discussed in the context of his association with Neilson in Chapter 4. For Cambridge, her poor reception as a poet was ameliorated somewhat by her stronger standing as a novelist. In the meantime, her poems explored mystical subject matter in a more direct and personal manner precipitated by a series of life crises that shadowed her final three collections, *The Manor House and Other Poems* (1875), *Unspoken Thoughts* (1887) and *The Hand in the Dark*. A late autobiographical essay ‘The Lonely Seas’ (1911) also served as a manifesto for her own poetics of Christian mystical consciousness.

The Manor House: Trauma, Mystic Light and Language

Ada Cambridge does not explicitly refer to mystics of the Western Christian tradition. Her bibliographic influences included an intimate knowledge of the scripture and liturgy of the Church of England, while the poetry of Walter Scott, Alfred Tennyson, Emily Brontë and Edgar Allan Poe are in evidence by the time of *The Manor House*.²⁶ Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling (1991) note Cambridge’s eclectic taste in theology, poetry, philosophy, agnosticism (via Thomas

²⁴ A.G. Stephens cited in Ackland, *Op Cit.* Stephens says of her novels, ‘her men and women might be staged anywhere’. For the Gympie Secular Association, see Max Richards, ‘Shaw Neilson: Simple Singer or Complex Artist?’, *Meridian* 9.2, 1990, p. 146.

²⁵ A.G. Stephens cited in Ackland, *Op Cit.*, p. 77; A.G. Stephens cited in Richards, *Op Cit.*

²⁶ Tate, *Op Cit.*, p. 85 traces Scott and Tennyson to ‘The Legend of Lady Gertrude’. The influence of Poe and Brontë is likewise discernible in the gothic tones of ‘The Baptistry’.

Huxley), Thoreauvian transcendentalism, and Protestant evangelism, although they stress she remained Anglican, despite ‘shopping around other more exotic organisations’.²⁷ ‘The Lonely Seas’ draws on Wordsworth and Schiller, and publications such as *Atlantic Monthly* in which it appeared allowed Cambridge to keep abreast of the international literary scene. At a national level, Christopher Brennan’s mystical reading of Mallarmé (1898) and A.G. Stephens’s column linking symbolism, mysticism and decadence (1900) were both accessible via *The Bulletin*.²⁸ Cambridge’s decades of orthodox and eclectic reading in philosophy, poetry and religion increase the likelihood of some familiarity with Western Christian mysticism, as does her recurring use of ‘mystic’, ‘mystical’, ‘dazzling’, ‘ineffable’, ‘soundless’ and ‘transcending’ from *The Manor House* poems. Her strongest claims to mystical consciousness, however, occur much later after a series of traumatic life crises.

The Manor House and Other Poems is Cambridge’s fourth collection, after her more dogmatic juvenilia *Hymns on the Litany* (1865), *Hymns on the Holy Communion* (1866), and *Echoes* (1869), the last of which (by ‘A.C.’) has only recently surfaced, but whose textual links to Cambridge poems strengthen the case for her authorship. If the findings of Bradstock’s (2005) investigation of *Echoes* are added to Michael Ackland’s chronology of later poems, a strong pattern emerges of poetry precipitated by trauma emerges: *Litany* dedicated to ‘the memory of a beloved brother’; *Communion* ‘a thank-offering for restored life and health after a time of painful and dangerous illness’; *Echoes* according to Bradstock containing ‘the

²⁷ Margaret Bradstock & Louise Wakeling, *Rattling the Orthodoxies: A Life of Ada Cambridge*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1991, pp. 78, 124.

²⁸ Max Richards, *Op Cit*.

subject matter of ... personal illness, possibly a breakdown of some kind'.²⁹ This is no minor detail, for nervous breakdowns are unfortunately the fate of many other Australian mystical poets including Kendall, Neilson and, most acutely, Webb. Cambridge's periods of breakdown or illness date from the 'brain fever' she recounts when as a girl she saw 'unmistakably visible ghosts'.³⁰ Two seismic biographical moments, a period of apostasy ('If only I could believe and trust and pray as I once did!') and the second of two near-death experiences described in 'The Lonely Seas' are linked by Ackland (1991) to *The Manor House* (1875) and *Unspoken Thoughts* (1887) respectively.³¹ *The Manor House* also coincides, chronologically at least, with the death of her second child Edith (aged ten months in 1874, followed by four-year old Arthur in 1876), producing a pattern, as Tate (1991) notes, of 'emotional honesty and her struggle to find God in all things, even grief'.³²

Grief and melancholia appear in *The Manor House* through the fatally broken-hearted Lady Margaret of the title poem, the medieval romantic tragedy of 'The Legend of Lady Gertrude' and the more personal appeal to God in 'Seed Time and Harvest':

I shall rest,

And after weeping have my fill of joy.

Thou breakest down to build up, not destroy;

Thou doest right, O Lord! Thou knowest best. (280)³³

²⁹ Margaret Bradstock, 'Echoes of Ada Cambridge,' *Southerly* 65.3, 2005, p. 171.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

³¹ Ada Cambridge, 'The Lonely Seas', *Atlantic Monthly* 108.2, 1911, p. 96; Ackland, *That Shining Band*, p. 158

³² Tate, *Op Cit.*, p. 86.

³³ As they are reviewed collection by collection, all citations from Cambridge's primary sources are hereafter given by the initial page number. For collection citations, see bibliography. 'The Old Manor House' and 'The Legend of Lady Gertrude' possess some parallels to Mechthild of Magdeburg's poems of courtly love, but it is too general an association to be pursued here.

Despite her growing religious reservations, including ‘unChristian regrets’ after Edith’s death, there is enough of the early hymnmaking Cambridge to carry many poems into the kind of devotional territory that would be passionately challenged in *Unspoken Thoughts*.³⁴ Still, the familial lends itself to one of Cambridge’s first uses of ‘mystic’ in a haunting picture of ‘a little shadow of a childish [girl’s] face’

The light wherein the little features shine,
Strange, mystic light, so undefined and faint,
So far too pure for any words to paint —
‘Tis a reflection of the Face divine.
(‘After Our Likeness’, 251–2)

Although the date of composition is unclear, this does refer to a child absent beyond its image, the ‘lucid waters’ of which will ‘resettle in the face of death’ to become ‘truly God’s likeness,’ a consolatory motif of a soul’s return to a state of perfection. Other poems in *The Manor House* reflect a confidence in Divine Providence set to church surroundings, the ‘cloven tongue of fire’ of ‘The Candle of Our Lord’ (‘Our spirit with Thy perfect light inspire!’ [283]), the pouring of ‘Our dear Lord’s stainless life into my own’ of ‘Holy Communion’ (where the mediation of Jesus before God *is* necessary because ‘I dare not come alone / Into Thy presence for that sin to plead’ [241, 243]), and another, more gothic approach to death in ‘The Baptistry’, where ‘one winter eve, at twilight’ the narrator steals into ‘the deep stillness’ of the baptistry to muse upon the form of a dead acquaintance:

And as I listen’d, I hear music sweet
Trembling and swelling through the soundless air,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45. ‘Some friends ... upheld the attitude, “It was the Lord’s will”, and “We feel so honoured to have a child in Heaven”, but Cambridge found that she could not’.

Threading dark aisles, as if an angel's feet
 Were bidden bring God's message to me there,
 Ah! and the echo of those anthem notes
 Wanders and whispers in my heart for aye:
 In all my life the mystic language floats,
 Fitful and faint, as in my ears that day
 ... Looking up then, I seem'd to see my life,—
 A long, dim vista, where rays descend —
 Where light and darkness wage continual strife;
 But only light — the full light — at the end. (152–6)³⁵

For Cambridge, while the death of child yields 'mystic light', the death of an acquaintance yields 'mystic language'. 'The Baptistry' also goes further than 'After Our Likeness' in its greater affinity with the works of Christian mystics in its 'full light' where rays descend (recalling Pseudo-Dionysius's 'the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance') and the sweet music of threading silence (recalling Mechthild of Magdeburg's 'deepest silence is her [love's] highest song' and Hildegard of Bingen's 'threads' of air purifying itself).³⁶ Equally, the poem may be indebted to more gothic sources such as Poe's 'The Haunted Palace' or 'To Silence', but the tussle between mystical light and mystical language is one that continues in Cambridge's work until *The Hand in the Dark*.

Though *The Manor House and Other Poems* establishes Cambridge's poetic use of 'mystic', there still is a sense of Cambridge faltering before 'the long, long passage of the twilight of the awakening mind' ('The Lonely Seas'), hoping divine

³⁵ The poet often uses archaic punctuation in this manner.

³⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Op Cit.*, p. 191; Mechthild of Magdeburg ('The Paradoxes of Love') cited in Bowle (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 101; Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings* (tr. Mark Atherton), Penguin, London, 2001, p. 103.

mystery and mortal lowliness will keep things neatly allegorical.³⁷ Even in ‘By the Camp Fire’ when she exclaims ‘O mystery! As I learn thee more, the more thy deeps are dark to me’ (231), she immediately counters ‘But who am I, that I should scan the Divine Maker’s mighty plan?’ *The Manor House* represents the high-water mark of Cambridge’s orthodox, *cataphatic* affections. In ‘A Sermon’ (dated 1867) ‘We’, presumably Cambridge and her Anglican minister husband George Cross, wander ‘the summer silence and the solitude ... only filled with God’ who is ‘a father, not a foe’ (105,106). God is a friend in ‘The pulse that vibrates from the heart of God, / ... Wherewith my prayers are fain to blend and mingle — / Whereto I set my dreams for evermore’ (‘Dawnlight on the Sea’ [66–7]), a prelude for the future poetic importance of ‘the ever wonderful and mystic sea’.³⁸ Yet while Cambridge praises and pauses, there is also a sense of reinforcement for the ‘bitterer trial’ ahead:

Learn, learn, learn,—
 The mystic beauty and the truth of life;
 Search out the treasures whereof earth is rife,
 Search on all sides, with pain and prayer and strife;
 Search even into darkness. Do not fear.
 (‘Learn’, 63)

Unspoken Thoughts: The Dark Night and the Beloved

Unspoken Thoughts emerged from a period of social and theological ferment marked by the glittering largesse of 1880s Melbourne and critical and evolutionary challenges to orthodoxy from new biblical criticism and Darwin’s *The Origin of*

³⁷ Cambridge, *Op Cit.*

³⁸ Cambridge cited in Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 23.

Species.³⁹ For Cambridge, the ups and downs of this period were compounded by her own increasing invalidism, including struggles with melancholia and depression.⁴⁰ Poetically, she abandoned hymns and allegories for more direct forms, and her subject matter scrutinised the full spectrum of society beyond the consolations of ‘Thou knowest best’. Catherine Martin (1848–1937), having abandoned her Calvinism, had attacked the orthodoxy in *The Explorers* (1874) for ‘cheap schemes of salvation, and your niggard doles / Of man’s eternal Rights, dealt with Charity’s lean hand’ but she, while faced with the same suffocation of ‘unconventional’ women’s poetry as Cambridge, did not have the added complication of being a practising pastor’s wife.⁴¹

Cambridge adopted a male poetic persona and published anonymously to some critical acclaim (the publisher George Robertson told A.R. Chisholm it was ‘the high water mark of Australian poetry’ only to add ‘I meant of women’s poetry’), but her anonymity was compromised, not least by the prior publication of some of the poems.⁴² Yet A.G. Stephens’s conjecture that ‘the shock to the Rev. George Cross was overwhelming’ belies a far more complex situation in which, despite Cross’s own radicalism which asked ‘of what worth are our Faith and Peace, if they will not bear testing?’ he still had to run a parish, and Cambridge’s depiction of women who marry for gain as prostitutes (‘Fallen’), the condemnation of young priests as hopelessly inadequate (‘Ordained’), and fervent calls for broader culpability regarding drunkenness, poverty, free love, suicide and euthanasia all

³⁹ See Tate, *Op Cit.*, p. 117 for a description of ‘Marvellous Melbourne’.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴¹ Catherine Martin cited in Michael Ackland, *That Shining Band*, p. 112.

⁴² Tate, *Op Cit.*, p. 138.

served to endanger their family's prime source of income.⁴³ Some of Cambridge's more passionate social rebukes including 'Vows', 'An Answer' and 'A Wife's Protest' also lent themselves to public misconceptions that the poems were solely critical of her husband rather than the nature of marriage itself.

Just as *Unspoken Thoughts* bore witness to Cambridge's changing mindset, so did its removal from circulation three years later. In 1904 Cambridge wrote it was 'really a suppressed book, which I have a double-reason for keeping so'.⁴⁴ Could one of those reasons have been her own spiritual evolution? In 1911, Cambridge retrospectively put her soul 'on the Lonely Seas' during the second near-death experience which preceded *Unspoken Thoughts* (the first is attributable to the period 1875–1884).⁴⁵ While she experienced what Elizabeth Barrett Browning and women mystics such as Mechthild of Magdeburg knew, that the sick-bed 'became an excellent refuge', it provided only a brief taste of the peace that would resurface in 'The Lonely Seas'.⁴⁶ Instead, in 'Midnight', Cambridge records her version of a Dark Night of the Soul:

For *me* the night has come — the day is done —
 A wall of darkness hides both sea and shore;
 My little lamps have failed me one by one —
 I grope and crawl no more.
 Where am I? — oh, where am I? I can feel —
 To feel my pain — but neither hear nor see;

⁴³ A.G. Stephens cited in Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 94; Cross cited in R.J. Dingley, 'Ada Cambridge, G.F. Cross, and the "Modern Pulpit"', *Australian Literary Studies* 15.3, 1992, p. 218.

⁴⁴ Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 115.

⁴⁵ Cambridge, *Op Cit.* Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 124. A short poem by Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210–1297) 'How God adorns the soul with its sufferings' also shows how such a refuge can be a place of bridal mysticism: 'We wear our everyday work clothes when we are healthy / And, when we are ill, our bridal dress' (Mechthild cited in Fiona Bowle [ed.], *Op Cit.*, p. 84).

⁴⁶ Browning cited in Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 56.

My heart is faint, my brain begins to reel —
 O God, speak thou to me!
 ... But I? I choke in this grief-laden air.
 I turn and weep — I close my window now.
 One voice breaks forth from my profound despair —
Beloved, where art thou? (41–42)⁴⁷

God, however, does not respond, and ‘the mocking moon shines on’. It is left to the figure of the ‘beloved’ to respond to the despair of Cambridge’s male persona (‘Her spirit answers to my spirit’s call, / And I take heart once more’) and their subsequent union allows soul and body to ‘rest, / Swim in deep seas of bliss’—a temporal, sexual substitute for the lost transcendent rest and bliss. Who exactly is this ‘beloved’? Despite some overtones which might suggest the soul, or higher soul, itself (female for some Christian mystics), or a figure of divine femininity such as Lady Sophia, Mary, Nature or Julian of Norwich’s ‘Mother Jesus’, it is far more likely a feminized or idealised version of her husband who had restored her with brandy from her first near-death experience.⁴⁸ As such, the beloved ‘makes me strong’ and becomes a figure of earthly resilience: ‘O my true mate, in thee alone I hope! / In thee alone I live’ (43). Alternatively it could be read as an attempt to inhabit or imitate the voice or manner of Cross himself, to empathise with (or idealise) his ‘true mate’ in the same manner as she empathises throughout *Unspoken Thoughts* with society’s outcasts. ‘The Shadow’ (1–22) also features a masculine voice, and reaches a similar conclusion:

⁴⁷ For St John of the Cross’s Dark Night (‘Why, since You wounded / This heart, don’t You heal it?’) see St John of the Cross, *The Collected Works* (trs Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez), Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, 1964, p. 713.

⁴⁸ ‘And though our earthly mother may suffer her child to perish, our heavenly Mother, Jesus, may not suffer us that are His children to perish: for He is All-mighty, All-wisdom, and All-love’ (Julian of Norwich *Revelations of Divine Love* cited in Grant, *Op Cit.*, p. 71); Cambridge, ‘The Lonely Seas’, p. 98.

Keep me from falling! Keep me from despair!

Keep me true man, if only man I be,

Faithful and brave to bear what I must bear.

For what else have I, if I have not thee?

The melancholic ‘shadow’ which ‘numbs my passion when I need it most’ and calls into question her/his relationship with God (‘Him – or It ... whate’er He be – hath made us thus ... Shall He not, then, be justified in us?’) likewise finds its catalyst in the paradox of God’s presence-absence (‘A sacred instinct guides each living thing’; ‘no voice cries for me or calls for me now’).⁴⁹ A share in the woes of others, a recognition of the wisdom of nature and the comforts of ‘no sexless angel – only thee / my human love, with all thy human faults’ become, in turn, the compensatory trophies of non-mystical, or indeed *pre*-mystical, union that can only endure until ‘blood is cold and brain is dust’ (‘Midnight’). Temporal eros and charity thus exist as substitutes for the divine eros and grace that will not come, although perhaps a measure of grace is bestowed on the ‘silver city’. The pain of divine longing is assuaged by a human lover, who can only provide comfort unto death, and not (as themselves) in heaven. ‘For what else have I, if I have not thee?’ is not ‘sacrilegious’ or about a human ‘saviour’ (in the Judeo-Christian sense) as Bradstock and Wakeling claim, so much as it is *rhetorical*—it asks itself, in a fit of passion, what might lie beyond a human eros, particularly now (given ‘Midnight’) that the original ‘O God, speak thou to me’ has apparently been ignored.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Cambridge’s point ‘justified in us?’ is not lost on Meister Eckhart: ‘God has such a need to seek us out — exactly as if all his Godhead depended on it, as it in fact does. God can no more dispense with us that we can dispense with him. Even if it were possible that we might turn away from God, God could never turn away from us’ (Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher*, p. 80).

⁵⁰ Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 97.

Cambridge pursues two irreconcilable agendas in *Unspoken Thoughts*: is it the poet's higher duty to 'still the cry of self ... To share our brother's toil and dry his tears' or to interpret 'the mystic wonders no tongue may tell' ('The Shadow')? It is a crisis which echoes the classic division between active and contemplative lives that has confronted Western Christian mystics since Origen. For Cambridge, the former represents a tendency towards sharing toil, advocating compassion and teaching 'Truth's message', rewarded with enough social and physical contact to temporarily alleviate despair. The second agenda is governed by an attraction to the contemplative life, to 'leave the Good whereof we are possest [sic] ... for some unknown Best' ('Cui Bono?' [78]) necessarily beyond language. While 'Cui Bono' decries the hopelessness of such a 'pathless' quest, contemplative and unitive impulses begin to emerge in 'Nightfall in the Fens', 'Listening' and 'At Liberty'.

'Nightfall' might at first seem a curious choice, given its terrestrial orientations ('This sweet / world is enough for me'), but its 'bright disc' moon that burnishes the river to a mirror with a bridge of light 'fit for angel's feet' revisits the theme of mystical light found in *The Manor House*, now leading to 'ecstasies of peace':

The widening track of glory streams to this low margin
 where we sit;
 My sight swims in its dazzling beams, and heart and
 brain are steeped in it —
 Are washed from all the dist and grime, the smears
 and tears, of working time
 ... Like [a] long-bound captive free at last, I bask in ecstasies
 of peace;

Like [a] tired child I lie at rest upon my unknown
parent's breast. (33)

Unlike Jacob Boehme's burnished-dish ecstasy, however, Cambridge is not inspired to gaze into the divine essence of nature. Rather, nature inspires her ecstasy as she imagines angels and merges with the mystical light of 'glory'. Another *Manor House* theme, that of mystical language, is likewise reprised in the 'mystic voices' of the April rain in 'Listening', creating an experience of 'bliss and anguish both — divine, ineffable!':

Like a leaf I quiver
With responsive thrills —
Ache, and burn, and shiver,
As the Master wills
Whose mysterious message all my being fills.
Dreams of grace and glory,
Always out of reach —
Truths untold in story,
That no book can teach,
Past all human language, find their native speech. (68)

The identity of 'the Master' is left open to interpretation; but if any doubts remain about Cambridge's mystical developments in *Unspoken Thoughts*, they surely vanish in the 'wordless worship' of 'At Liberty' (46–7) whose 'mystery that no thought can teach! / O language that no tongue can tell' serves as a vital record of the tug-of-war between Cambridge's active and contemplative instincts:

Are we not strong enough to take
The course by conscience marked so plain?
Faithful till death, for manhood's sake,
Unspurred by coward fear of pain,
Unbribed by hope of selfish gain.
... Standing in this tremendous space
Of starlit sky and whispering sea,
With my great Maker face to face,
His countless worlds surrounding me,
Eternity — Infinity —
Humble, but confident, I dare
To let these bitter questions be.
We, too, are creatures of His care.
The voice that called us forth forbids us to despair.

The ocean imagery is supremely important: an untamed expanse of space and liberty where the poet's soul is 'at home' with 'Thou, friend ... my comrade, that hast house and home / On that illimitable breast, / Thy spirit in the wind and foam / Meets mine beneath this starlit dome' in stark contrast to the land which is 'captive, sold and bought' by 'dusty customs that disgrace / Mart, chamber, church, and judgement place'. To set out from shore to what will become the 'Lonely Seas' is 'to pass a prison door' to the place of 'the free soul at its own command':

In Him — whate'er He be — to trust
Who holds us in His mighty hand,
And guides each star and grain of dust —
Or to renounce all hope and comfort if we must.

Bradstock and Wakeling (1991) interpret the final line of this stanza as a renunciation of religion before doubt and despair.⁵¹ Certainly a renunciation is advocated (should it prove imperative) and the misgivings of the poet are plain to see, but this is anything but a poem of despair. It is one of release, of painful but 'humble but confident' spiritual evolution. How can a poem which concludes with poet and Maker 'face to face, / His countless worlds surrounding me, / Eternity — Infinity' be characterised as doubtful, despairing or in any way irreligious? In *Unspoken Thoughts*, Cambridge breaks with the orthodox, not the mystical. This break in turn inspires her progression towards an independent, personalised Christian mysticism.

The Lonely Seas

The second part of Cambridge's 'double-reason' to withdraw *Unspoken Thoughts* may have had more to do with a change of tactics than a change of heart. Between *Unspoken Thoughts* and 'The Lonely Seas' (1911), the full gamut of the former's social, ecclesiastical and metaphysical concerns were played through the characters of her novels, especially Richard Delavel who refuses the priesthood 'on conscientious grounds' in *A Marked Man* (1890) and Kingscote Yelverton in *The Three Miss Kings* (1891) who explains he has given up the shifting notions of 'churchism', proposing instead an independence based on absolute sincerity:

Your Church creed ... is just the garment of religion ... they are all little systems that have their day and cease to be — that change and change as the fashion of the world changes. But the spirit of man — the indestructible intelligence that makes him apprehend the mystery of his existence and of the great Power that surrounds it

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

— which in the early stages makes him cringe and fear, and later on to love and trust
 — that is the body ... If you honestly believe what you *do* believe, and follow the truth as it reveals itself to you, no matter in what shape, and no matter where it leads you, you will be all right. Be only sincere with yourself, and don't pretend — don't, whatever you do, pretend to anything. Surely that is the best religion, whether it enables you to keep within church walls or drives you out into the wilderness.⁵²

These passages allow Cambridge to test her social concerns under the guise of fiction and to envisage a religiosity beyond church strictures. Some twenty years later in 'The Lonely Seas' her social concerns pale before 'the relative proportions of things ... how preposterously overestimated ourselves and our affairs, in presence of the majesty here unveiled, the Power that gave us being and is our fate!'⁵³ Yet she is also resolutely committed to her independent spiritual credo, '*be true*'.⁵⁴

On face value, 'The Lonely Seas' is a late minor work published outside Australia comprising just six pages of *Atlantic Monthly*, and the Wakeling-Bradstock and Tate biographies treat it as such, although with some amazement—the former acknowledging Cambridge's 'mystical conception' of the 'Spirit' (only to wrongly term 'pantheistic' Cambridge's 'Him — It — the Something that has no shape and needs no name' [96]) and the latter lauding 'her courageous surrender to the Unknown which surely must be the stuff of saints. Not that Ada would have considered herself as such'.⁵⁵ Yet for Australian mystical poetry it is a vital, founding document which, true to form, details a mysticism which is not 'mysticism' by name, opting instead for an image from *The Prelude*:

⁵² Cambridge cited in Tate, *Op Cit.*, p. 116.

⁵³ Cambridge, 'The Lonely Seas', p. 100.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵⁵ Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 198; Tate, *Op Cit.*, p. 217.

Wordsworth's metaphor of the Lonely Seas, where nothing comes to you, but you yourself go forth, untrammelled, independent, to voyage where you will, — far and wide in the quiet sanctuaries of thought, with only the god you know for God, Spirit of the illimitable Universe, without form, but not void, nay, living in every breath of air, every pulsing wave, every shining star, — a still, deep, surrounding Sympathy, beyond the definitions of human sense, — this answers satisfactorily to the name of freedom, if any figure of speech can do so. (95)

Beyond its debt to Wordsworth, 'The Lonely Seas' is rarely imitative, based on a retrospective contemplation of Cambridge's own life, including her two-near death experiences, the second of which culminates in her refusal to be consoled by a clergyman:

Though it were my last breath, I had to use it to defend my soul's sanctuary at such a solemn time ... My soul was out on the Lonely Seas, with the One Who Knows All; and never did official religion with all its complicated dogmas and impossible demands, seem more purely official, more unreal, and out of place. (98)

From her 'place of peace' at the age of sixty-six, Cambridge spends much of 'The Lonely Seas' reconfiguring her life crises in terms of a spiritual pilgrimage from 'passionately devout girl' to 'inward wails' of apostasy, to the origins of her 'break with ecclesiastical authority' through her reading of biblical criticism and her search for answers from the religious spirit 'with its one clear call to be sincere at every cost.'⁵⁶ To reach the place of peace, however, is to challenge both the theological orthodoxy and social constructions of women in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Australia, and Cambridge is acutely aware that a berth on the Lonely Seas does not come painlessly:

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 96–7.

But, O Heaven! What it costs to arrive at this ... hard indeed to bear when it is his [sic] own nearest and dearest with whom he must live, spiritually, an utter stranger. But a bitterer trial is the long, long passage through the twilight of the awakening mind, when he cannot himself see whether he is a renegade or not. (96)

Whether or not this ‘twilight of the awakening mind’ conforms to the purgative-illuminative-unitive conventions of a *scala perfectionis* becomes clearer in *The Hand in the Dark*, but what this passage reveals with greater certainty is the extreme seriousness of Cambridge’s inner pilgrimage. Tate (1991) declares ‘this is the most explicit comment Ada ever makes of the chasm which existed in her relationship with George [Cross],’ which, while Cross’s own progressive spirituality is too easily marginalised, appears never so vast as when the ‘Lonely Seas’ is compared to his own sea imagery of 1879: ‘What does it matter if we are blinded occasionally by waves of doubt and difficulty, if we are buffeting through them to the firm mainland of Truth?’⁵⁷ His wife instead finds Truth in the waves:

If I perish, I perish — that is all. Evening falls and the shadows deepen, and in all this measureless expanse no saving cross is visible sticking out of the waves. But waves are calm under the darkening sky, and the voyager does not feel himself [sic] drowning. Too long has the soul been sailing open water to be afraid of it now. The ‘Ocean of His Love’ has become its home, and no place could find it less lonely. Everywhere, everywhere, — in every breath of air, every pulse of sea, every glint of star, — lives the Spirit of the illimitable Universe, the One who knows All, never missed or lost. (100)

For Cambridge, the necessity of ‘obedience to what, for me, has been the divine call ... is my course laid down, and whither it leads is not business of mine’ (99–100). It

⁵⁷ Tate, *Op Cit.*, p. 217; Rev. George Cross cited in Dingley, *Op Cit.*

is enough to reach the place of peace, on the Lonely Seas but not alone, awake to the possibility

it is they who have thought and sought for themselves, the technical unbelievers, who have 'fought the good fight' and 'kept the faith,' who have got 'religion' and 'found God.' (100)

This represents the final clause of Cambridge's ultimate metaphysic. Given this, two tasks remain: to examine its correlations with Western Christian mysticism and examine these correlations through Cambridge's final collection, *The Hand in the Dark*.

'The Lonely Seas' and Mysticism

In the Introduction to this study, a multilateral methodology is established for identifying mystical terms, figures, tropes and consciousness in Australian poetry. Ada Cambridge in 'The Lonely Seas' does not use 'mystic' as a term or mention any mystics, though Wordsworth can be read as a mystical poet. An application of the active definition of mysticism from Chapter 1 reveals an intriguing, close-fit:

Western Christian mysticism is the direct ['with the only god you know for God', later 'out in the open'], *experimental* ['to voyage where you will – far and wide in the sanctuaries of thought'], *or unitive knowledge* ['a still, deep, surrounding Sympathy...only in that company and away from all other'] *of the presence* ['in every breath of air...'] *of Christ, God (or 'Godhead')* ['God, Spirit of the illimitable Universe'] *transcending regular modes of language* ['if any figure of speech can do so'] *and consciousness* ['beyond the definitions of human sense'].

Points of resistance include Cambridge's substitutions for 'God' (also 'The One Who knows All. Him — It — the Something that has no shape and needs no name', 'the Power that gave us being and is our fate'), her doubts that 'no saving cross' (her own image) will be 'visible sticking up out of the waves'; and her admission that the divine call is 'my course laid down, and whither it leads is no business of mine. I do not know – I cannot know – I do not want to know. It does not matter in the least' (100). None of these points, however, is prohibitive to mystical consciousness: replacing or transcending the human terms for the divine is part of the Western mystical tradition, from 'I AM WHO I AM' (Exodus 3:14) to Ruusbroec's modelessness 'where all the divine names ... pass away into simple ineffability', Eckhart's 'I pray God to rid me of God' and beyond.⁵⁸ Likewise the transcendence of temporal images, the renunciation of ambition and contemplation of human unknowing, all present in 'The Lonely Seas', are strongly represented in the earliest mystical figures and poetics examined in Chapter 2. On the subject of faith, furthermore, Cambridge refers to her two near-death experiences as tests of her 'negative faith', but by *The Hand in The Dark* she claims to have attained a faith 'no preacher ever taught' ('Faith').⁵⁹

Cambridge's points of convergence with the images and tropes of Western Christian mysticism are equally relevant in a multilateral approach. Her use of the language of spiritual progression certainly coincides with Origen's model of the *scala perfectionis*, particularly when she speaks of a divine call that 'must seem incredible to the dweller in the tabernacles, for who, the door has never opened to invite him forth' (97). Furthermore, her account of her soul's first voyage on 'The

⁵⁸ Ruusbroec, Jan Van, *Op Cit.*, p. 152; Eckhart, Meister, *Op Cit.*, p. 219.

⁵⁹ Ada Cambridge, *The Hand in the Dark and Other Poems*, William-Heinemann, London, 1913, p. 121.

Lonely Seas', bears thematic parallels with the unitive phenomenon known as 'mystic death', which, as St Catherine of Siena describes it 'is that superb state in which the soul even while still mortal shares the enjoyment of the immortals. In fact, she often attains such union that she hardly knows whether she is in the body or out'.⁶⁰ No 'mystic death' is required for a Dark Night of the Soul, but there is something of the 'mystic death' in the prerequisite Dark Night of the Sense, in which, as King (2001) explains, 'the sensual part of the soul is purified'.⁶¹ In Cambridge's first near-death experience, she is rescued by the attentive care of her husband, which may include a role for eros as per the beloved of 'Night' and 'The Shadow'—a purifying by the senses (and sensuality) of another. In the second near-death experience, the purification is spiritual: her 'soul was out on the Lonely Seas' and it is the withdrawal of that mystical experience and the ensuing personal and spiritual tumult that partially informs the tormented poetics of *Unspoken Thoughts*.

Cambridge's imagery in 'The Lonely Seas' also coincides with that of some Western Christian mystics. As McGinn (1994) observes, ocean imagery, while not as popular as desert imagery as a symbol of mystical absorption, does appear in the works of major mystics with associated qualities of divine silence, depth, reflection and presence-absence.⁶² Catherine of Siena and Blaise Pascal provide two examples:

O abyss! O eternal Godhead! O deep sea! What more could you have given me than the gift of your very self? ... Truly this light [of faith] is a sea, for it nourishes the

⁶⁰ St Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* (tr. Suzanne Noffke), Paulist, New York, p. 158. Elsewhere, the voice of God tells her 'From the body she [the soul] did not depart, because that cannot be, except in death; the bodily powers alone departed, becoming united to Me through affections of love'. (St Catherine of Siena cited in Paul De Jaeger [ed.], *An Anthology of Mysticism*, Burn & Oates, London, 1977, pp. 68–9).

⁶¹ King, *Op Cit.*, p. 155.

⁶² See Bernard McGinn, 'Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition', *The Journal of Religion* 74.2, 1994, pp. 155–81.

soul in you, peaceful sea, eternal Trinity. Its water is not sluggish; so the soul is not afraid because she knows the truth.⁶³

We sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end. When we think to attach ourselves to any point and to fasten to it, it wavers and leaves us; and if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips past us and vanishes forever. Nothing stays for us. This is our natural condition and yet most contrary to our inclination; we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses.⁶⁴

St Catherine of Siena's Godhead, light of faith, and Trinity are the deep, nourishing and peaceful seas respectively (and her voice of God refers to St Paul as 'a chosen vessel in the very depths of me'); for Pascal, flux is our 'natural condition' despite our deluded yearning for solid ground.⁶⁵ Jan Van Ruusbroec goes further, however, utilising oceanic imagery to evoke mystical union with 'the fathomless modeless being of God... the abyss of the ineffable' where

a blissful crossing over and a self-transcending immersion into a state of essential bareness, where all the divine names and modes and all the living ideas which are reflected in the mirror of divine truth all pass away into simple ineffability, without mode and without reason.⁶⁶

Cambridge's 'still, deep, surrounding Sympathy' certainly corresponds with the blissful states of modelessness, fathomlessness, and ineffable bareness advocated by Ruusbroec, as well as the unafraid soul of St Catherine ('Too long has the soul been

⁶³ St Catherine of Siena, *Op Cit.*, p. 365.

⁶⁴ Blaise, Pascal, *Op Cit.*, p. 183.

⁶⁵ St Catherine of Siena, *Op Cit.*, p.152.

⁶⁶ Ruusbroec, *Op Cit.*, p. 152.

sailing open water to be afraid of it now' [100]) and the natural condition of Pascal ('which forever defies the ingenuity of man to bind it' [96]). Yet the *open* is a far more important concept to Cambridge than any suggestion of the sea as a mystical mirror; an *open* that can be rough or clear ('with nothing to deflect the message or confuse my ears' [99]), but tends towards the calm waves of a night 'one can float out into' where, mostly importantly, one is the company of The One Who Knows All and 'away from all other' (96). The pulse of the ocean prefigured in *The Manor House* remains integral while keeping in sympathy with Ruusbroec:

This flowing forth of God always demands a flowing back; for God is a Sea that ebbs and flows, pouring without ceasing into all His beloved according to the need and the merits of each, and ebbing back again with all those who have been thus endowed, both in heaven and on earth, with all they have and all that they can. And of some He demands more than they are able to bring, for He shows Himself so rich and so generous and so boundlessly good; and in showing Himself thus He demands love and adoration according to His worth.⁶⁷

Cambridge's claim that 'nothing comes to you, but you yourself go forth' (95) is countered somewhat by the ubiquity of the Spirit of the illimitable Universe and the ultimate unknowability of her course, but the sense of independence and freedom to say as St Francis says 'let nothing hinder us / nothing separate us / or nothing come between us' is to have amongst the ebb and flow a place of peace 'far and wide in the quiet sanctuaries of thought'.⁶⁸ Hadewijch of Brabant, a thirteenth-century Beguine poet who influenced Ruusbroec, provides an apt parallel in 'The paradoxes of love'

⁶⁷ Ruusbroec cited in Jaegher, *Op Cit.*, p. 7. For a psychological perspective via Freud's 'oceanic feeling' see McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 332.

⁶⁸ St Francis & St Clare, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (trs Regis J. Armstrong & Ignatius C. Brady), Paulist, New York, 1982, p. 133.

Her going away is her coming near,
Her deepest silence is her highest song,
Her greatest wrath is her warmest thanks,
Her greatest threatening is remaining true,
Her sadness is the healing of all sorrow.⁶⁹

On the basis of Cambridge's consciousness of the presence of God (by various titles) with whom her soul is at peace, alone, surrounded and united; her personal versions of a *scala perfectionis* and mystic death; and her mystical oceanic imagery, 'The Lonely Seas' is a Western Christian mystical text. The final section of this chapter will examine how Cambridge's mystical consciousness in this text translates into her final collection of poetry.

The Hand in the Dark: Lyre, Lightlessness and the Word

To some, not least A.G. Stephens, *The Hand in the Dark* represents a capitulation on Cambridge's part, and the nature and tone of its twenty-six reworked poems from *Unspoken Thoughts* has likewise been a source of critical conflict between parallel biographers.⁷⁰ Wakeling and Bradstock deem *The Hand* an 'almost propitiatory collection' where 'changed circumstances, the passage of time and, perhaps, a strengthening of the need for spiritual faith ... appear to have eroded Cambridge's anti-establishment beliefs' so that 'stoicism has replaced the earlier impulse towards reform ... the attitude to a woman's place in society asserts a feminine stereotype'

⁶⁹ Hadewijch of Brabant cited in Bowles (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 101.

⁷⁰ It is also cause for disagreement among anthologists, for example Les Murray (1996) includes only two poems from *The Hand* in *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* while John Leonard (1998) selects no poems from *The Hand* in his *Australian Verse: An Oxford Anthology*.

and, while preserving the ‘skeleton’ of *Unspoken Thoughts*, Cambridge has lost her ‘sacred fire’.⁷¹ Tate’s appraisal, by contrast, is virtually antithetical:

The *Hand in the Dark* retains the radical stance of *Unspoken Thoughts*, but there is no longer any need for Ada to hide behind anonymity ... Gone is the linguistic timidity of her earlier volume, to be replaced by a quietly confident tone and a philosophical acceptance of much that had agonized previously. There is a surer handling of language, though she still errs on the side of length. Structurally the volume reveals a new sophistication ... the linguistic changes in many of the reworked poems reveal a new serenity and a more mature acceptance of things.⁷²

For the former, drawn to Cambridge’s social radicalism, it represents a regression; for the latter, with a sharper focus on the ‘spiritual voyage’, it is a triumph. In their different ways, both may be true: Simone De Beauvoir’s theory of mysticism providing a compensatory subjectivity for women denied political agency is particularly relevant to Bradstock and Wakeling’s interpretation of *The Hand*. Yet, as Cambridge repeatedly stresses, it is a consequence of the enormity of her new-found vision in ‘The Lonely Seas’ that the social concerns of *Unspoken Thoughts* begin to shrink in significance, or are reconfigured by humility and compassion. ‘Cui Bono?’ becomes ‘The Vain Question’ and is reproached ‘We must not ask — we must not ask again ... The last assessment of the loss and gain / Is not a task for thee’ (85). ‘Cui Bono’ (‘who benefits?’) renders its own *cui bono* — who benefits from lamenting ‘who benefits’? Other social commentaries such as ‘Outcast’, ‘Drunk’ and ‘Individuality’ are mellowed by rhetoric and lose their immediacy. ‘Ordained’ is given a more compassionate, yet satirical flavour in ‘The Watchman’, now written

⁷¹ Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, pp. 200, 204, 206, 207.

⁷² Tate, *Op Cit.*, pp. 224–5.

from the perspective of the young priest's incredulous mother 'who cannot bear to see it [the ordination] done' (39). If these are capitulations, they are also the contemplations of a woman 'Filled with a faith no preacher ever taught' who owns 'that Power divine beyond my ken' and simply asks her clay-shaping creator in 'Faith' (121) 'O my God, that madest me to feel! / Forgive me the anguish of the turning wheel'.

The beloved and the mystic child, two major figures from *Unspoken Thoughts* and *The Manor House* respectively, are also transfigured in *The Hand in the Dark*. The title poem, a fusion of 'The Shadow' and 'Midnight', envisages the world of mortal lovers as 'a lighthouse in the Infinite':

Yet we are men — details of the design,
Set to our course, like circling sun and star;
Mortal, infinitesimal yet divine
Of that divine which made us what we are.

And yet this world, this microscopic ball,
This cast-up grain of sand upon the shore,
This trivial shred and atom of the ALL,
Is still our Trust, that we must answer for.

A lighthouse in the Infinite, with lamps
That we must trim and feed until we die;
A lonely outpost of the unseen camps
That we must keep, although we know not why. (14)⁷³

⁷³ Although, *The Hand in the Dark* was published under Ada Cambridge's name, many poems retain a male persona from their antecedents.

The beloved becomes ‘my beacon-lamp till need of light is past’ (16), but is also given a leave of absence (‘I blame thee not. I know what must be must. / Nor shall I suffer when apart from thee ... Bereaved and lonely, while possessed of all’ [9]). Significant also, is the substitution of ‘the mocking moon’ of ‘Midnight’ for ‘The Infinite – alive with watching eyes’ (4). Yet the lighthouse, still part of the land, also has an illusory quality with tragic results for free spirits in ‘The Winged Mariners’. The lighthouse ‘that we must trim and feed until we die’ (14), like the beloved, cannot venture where ‘We have no further need of light’ (‘The Night’ [45]), it can only point the way.

In ‘An Old Doll’, a five year-old girl ‘by some mystic extra-sense’ hears long-silent footsteps and ‘lineaments invisible / As is the face of God’ (69), a reprisal of the mystic child motif, but also the interplay between mystical light and sound in *The Manor House*. As *The Hand* progresses, Cambridge emphatically chooses imageless silence, divine voice and song in a jubilant, *cataphatic* manner. Though criticised at the time for presenting a poetic voice ‘not the voice of the bush ... [of] lost faith, broken ideals and ruined joy’, Cambridge’s new poem ‘On Australian Hills’ reveals the poet’s ‘mystic concord’ with deep, transcendent sound:

Whereto, responsive as the vibrant wire
 Of some aeolian lyre
 Fanned by celestial wings,
 The summoned soul in mystic concord brings
 The deep notes latent in its trembling strings,
 Joining the choir divine
 Of all the worlds that in the ether shine.

O sacred hour! ... lift me up, a Moses on the Mount,
 To the pure source and fount
 Of law transcending law,
 Of life that hallows life. I know no more
 Of life's great Giver than I knew before,
 But these His creatures tell
 That He is living, and that all is well. (21)

The lyre image is magnified further in 'The Magic Wand' (formerly 'Listening'), where the relationship between poet and 'life's great Giver' is more immediate. In fact, 'The Magic Wand' replaces one auditory mysticism with another: gone are 'the mystic voices' of 'Listening' and the ineffable union the Master's message, and instead

Through the poet-spirit,
 Touched with heavenly fire,
 Heavenly voices whisper
 In the wood and wire.
 God is the musician, and my soul the lyre. (94)

This is no minor substitution. It not only recalls Psalm 108 ('Awake my soul! Awake O harp and lyre!') but the figure of the harpist in her earlier hymn-derived poetry from *Hymns on the Litany* ('So tune all our hearts in this world below, / And let Thy Hand waken the music now' ['XIII']) to *Echoes* ('Magician among heart-strings!' ['To a Harpist']) to *The Manor House* ('And the fire of His own spirit, that shall make you dry and warm; / And your harp-strings shall be strung and tuned again')

['Grey']) to 'Listening' and 'The Magic Wand'.⁷⁴ In keeping with her own spiritual evolution, this motif has evolved to the point of God as the musician of the poet's soul, rather than a healer of heart or ear. Thus God plays through the 'poet-spirit', through heavenly fire, through the surroundings, but most importantly, *through the poet*. The poet's soul is literally the instrument of God, rather than a receptacle for some mysterious message—a unitive consciousness of greater, more direct specificity, due, in part, to reflection over time.

Ultimately, Cambridge's most dramatic adoption of mystical sound and versification of 'The Lonely Seas' occurs in 'The Night' (41–5), a reworking of 'At Liberty', itself one of the most overtly mystical poems of *Unspoken Thoughts*, ending 'with my Maker face to face'. The ocean imagery, the absent cross uprising in the sea, images of terrifying openness and the conviction of the Divine Call are all consistent with 'The Lonely Seas':

What will the voyage cost?
 We are already lost
 Who turn from land and love, to face
 This blank immensity of space.

 Push out. We have to go,
 Whether we fear or no.
 And why stand shiver and appalled?
 We go because the Voice has called. (41)

There is also the feeling of estrangement from the tabernacled 'Captain of the Quest' (previously the subject of 'Ordained'), who 'was never put to sea'. Nonetheless, the

⁷⁴ See Bradstock, 'Echoes of Ada Cambridge', pp. 173–4.

journey to the ‘Port of Rest’ must proceed without him. Through its fusions with ‘The Lonely Seas’, ‘The Night’ becomes more a response to, than a revision of, ‘At Liberty’, although there are corresponding metaphors of the uncharted course, ‘His’ hand, the babe-bosom imagery, and the tolling bell of the heaving ocean, the last of which no longer ‘shakes the earth beneath my feet / The solitude ineffable!’ (‘At Liberty’), but evokes ‘Silence transcending sound, to make / High courage falter and heart quake’. ‘The Night’, in fact wholly reverses the ecstasy-to-confusion dynamic of ‘At Liberty’, and gradually, out of the sea that is ‘His — safe as the land / Within the hollow of His hand’, ‘The Night’ begins to address the ‘bitter questions’ of ‘At Liberty’ in answers infused with the language and imagery of ‘The Lonely Seas’:

The open — heart of grace,
 It is a lonely place!
 No light on any onward track!
 Too far — too late for turning back!

... Changed, changed, for ever changed,
 Since hitherward we ranged,
 To vision in a space so vast,
 All the perspectives of the past.

How infinitely small
 The once so broad and tall —
 The aims, the pursuit and the strife
 Shut in the sheltered grooves of life!

... Night — and the drifting soul
 Still without path or goal.

Yet was the voyage worth the cost.

We are not drowned. We are not lost. (42, 45)

Cambridge's unspoken questions of 1887, her fears of human frailty, insignificance, and failure to comprehend the 'great design' are directly engaged in three ways. First, the recognition that indeed 'the heart of grace ... is a lonely place' and one does not venture there without a Dark Night of the Soul or sense of tumult and loss, for 'the night is dark / Beyond that only ark!'. Second, in the contrast of 'a space so vast' against the 'infinitely small' wrangles of human affairs. Third, although 'The rock of ages cleft for me [Exodus 33:22] / The Cross uprising in the sea' are 'gone, gone — forever gone!', the Maker of 'At Liberty' is present not in images of the 'countless stars' but in *voice*, and in a radical counterpoint to the absent cross, it is Christ's voice of Revelations 1:17 reinforced by the Gospel of John (6:9, 8:12):

'Tis I. Be not afraid.

Moonlight and the stars may fade.

One walks the ocean and the night.

We have no further need of light.

What matters where we go?

We do not ask to know.

He called us, and we came. The quest

For us is ended, and we rest. (45)

As in 'The Magic Wand', this is a more authoritative, refined expression of a mystical theme which has moved beyond illuminative experience one in the direct presence of Christ. To receive Christ's voice in a 'space so vast' replaces the grandiose pre-unitive 'face to face' with a more precise, more *humble* sense of

presence, but a presence that is given agency rather than left to the vagaries of a final stellar metaphor. Cambridge's preference for the auditory over the visual in the 'heart of grace' and elsewhere in 'the fiery cross ... borne unseen' ('Sic Vos Non Vobis', 63) aligns her with one of the most ancient and abiding tenets of Western Christian mysticism whereby the signing silence or voice of the divine is trusted over temporal imagery, as the ear, especially in the contemplative life, is considered less capricious than the eye.

In *The Manor House*, through *Unspoken Thoughts* to 'The Lonely Seas' and *The Hand in the Dark*, Ada Cambridge records her dramatic spiritual evolution in a mystical poetry of conviction. Her reading combined with metaphysical and social insights forged in harsh life (and near-death) experiences inform her refusal of orthodox Anglicanism for a personal Christian mysticism of presence and divine union compellingly recounted in 'Night' and 'The Lonely Seas'. Her ecstatic, unitive and oceanic imagery and divinisation of the auditory strongly align her with mystical tropes and themes exhibited by Jacob Boehme, St Catherine of Siena, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Jan Van Ruusbroec, Blaise Pascal and St Augustine. Though she regularly employs the term 'mystic' in her mid-career works, it is the greater denouement of her personal poetics of mystical consciousness in 'The Lonely Seas' and *The Hand in the Dark* that firmly establishes Ada Cambridge as the major nineteenth-century pioneer of Australian mystical poetry.

4. John Shaw Neilson: ‘Something of a Mystic’

The period between Federation and World War II saw a surge in poetic responses to a sense of national destiny. This combined with the influx of international templates of English, Irish, American and French mystical poetics inspired the first explicit attempts to contribute to international discourses of mysticism by founding an Australian mystical poetic identity. Interpretative and ideological divergences in national visions and engagements with mysticism resulted in a variety of poetic responses, detailed in the prelude section to this chapter. Competing representations of mysticism as bold or passive, masculine or effeminate, dogmatic or independent, Australian or foreign, drove the shifting critical notions of this era culminating in the generalist designations of John Shaw Neilson (1872–1942) as Australia’s all-purpose mystical poet. Neilson *is* a mystical poet; yet the basis for this has been subject to a number of distortions from Neilson’s time until the late 1990s. This chapter will examine how an understanding of mysticism is essential to the study of Neilson’s poetry with a prelude section for three of his contemporaries.

Prelude: Cross, Fullerton, Brennan

The competing Australian conceptions of Western Christian mysticism from 1901–1939 reflect a larger international contest between ideas of spirituality, socio-politics and philosophy in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. An understanding of mysticism is essential to the study of poets such as Zora Cross, Mary Fullerton, Bernard O’Dowd and Christopher Brennan who all drew upon mystical themes of international poets to empower their creative interpretations of these ideas in the context of national destiny.

Zora Cross (1890–1964) was one of a raft of poets who founded what Brian Elliott and Adrian Mitchell (1970) term Australia's 'own version of the Celtic Twilight' replete with Celtic, druidic and pagan themes in solidarity with William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), who imagined Christ posed against a background not of Judaism but of Druidism.¹ Among its chief proponents were Victor Daley, David McKee Wright, Roderic Quinn, Marie Pitt and the more Bacchanalian Hugh McCrae. Though Cross's Yeatsian influence is strong enough to rival her Anglicanism in 'The Land of Heart's Desire' where faeries meet seraphs, Cross distinguishes herself from others of the Australian Celtic project in her attempts to augment her erotic love poems for McKee Wright, a married man, with the respectability of divine consecration. Her love sonnets in *Songs of Love and Life* (1917) are vehemently religious to the point where 'God' begins to resemble a code word of its own in the greater worship of 'O Love ... Love ... Love ... Dearer than God / to me'(29).²

Cross repeatedly uses the language of erotic union to claim 'Love, you have brought to me my perfect soul' (15), 'We melt within each other without fear ... we link our love to the Almighty's will' (22) and 'My mind drew God from your eternal soul' (60). Yet Cross does more than simply appropriate the language of divine eros for her own personal agenda. In 'The Vision of Jehovah' (61) she adopts a prophetic, anti-war stance, but a more cogent synthesis with Western Christian

¹ Brian Elliott & Adrian Mitchell (eds), *Bards in the Wilderness: Australian Colonial Poetry to 1920*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1970, p. xxv; W.B. Yeats, *The Yeats Reader* (ed. Richard J. Finneran), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2002, p. 428. Yeats's Rosicrucian esoterism, his preference for the Muse over Plato and Plotinus in 'Sailing to Byzantium' and his refusal of mystical scholar Baron Von Hügel (1852–1925) and St Teresa in 'Vacillation' problematise any inclusion of him as a Christian mystical poet, although this does not prevent many Australian poets, especially Christopher Brennan, from interpreting him as such. Yeats himself nominated his contemporary AE (George William Russell, 1867–1935) as 'the chief poet of the school of Irish mystics' whose poetry 'finds its stories and symbols in the soul itself, and has a more disembodied ecstasy than any poetry of our time' (W.B. Yeats [ed.], *A Book of Irish Verse*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. xxvi).

mysticism appears in her own version of St Bernard of Clairvaux's 'mysticism of the kiss' from the Song of Songs 1:1 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth' (1:1).³ In Sonnet IX this theme is proposed ('if God kisses me some starry night, / And leads me to the lip of other shores, / Where there is neither hate nor love' [9]) and in 'The Sisters of Sorrow', through 'an awful dream' of the crucifixion, it is actually linked to chastity:

I looked ... And from the elder's thorn-bruised head
The face of Christ smiled faintly over me,
Making the room, where Lust had hourly fed,
Breathe the ambrosia of chastity.
I wept ... I felt the passioned tear-rills roll
Like drops of blood from wounds where beasts had trod
... The Christ had brought to me my own sad soul
Across its gleam, I kissed the lips of God.⁴

Zora Cross pioneers an Australian mysticism of the kiss through a divine eroticism closer to the Western Christian mystical tradition than that of Ada Cambridge. Yet this eroticism can also stem from chastity ('The Sisters of Sorrow') or 'the sacred silence of my soul' described in Sonnet XLIX where, in 'a wide, still vale of solitude and light ... Silence echoes into ebbing space' (49), Cross's own version of Cambridge's 'Lonely Seas' is starkly contemplated.

Mary Fullerton (1898–1946) might have considered Cross's work, as Kate Chadwick (1994) notes, 'degenerate' and 'depraved', but there are parallels in Fullerton's and Cross's use of mystical language as a cipher for the socially

² All page references are from Zora Cross, *Songs of Love and Life*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1917.

³ For Bernard of Clairvaux, see Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, Crossroad, New York, 1994, pp. 206–7; 'Grief' (101) contains a similar prophetic poetics of divine presence.

inexpressible and the influence of international mystical poets.⁵ Fullerton's poetic engagement with Western Christian mysticism has its origins in a strict Presbyterian upbringing not dissimilar to that of John Shaw Neilson. Joy Hooton (1993) observes that 'although Fullerton on occasion expressed her conviction that the struggle with Calvinism was important for her eventual release into an Emersonian transcendentalism, it is clear that religious terrors were a very real part of her childhood'.⁶ This release takes on many forms including her eventual preference for 'a certain vagueness' over 'the cramping of creed' in her memoirs, but it is a vagueness which entails contemplative seclusion ('Oneness of being takes long to attain to, and when achieved must not have its integrity hurt by outward intrusions').⁷ Furthermore, Fullerton also develops the notion, during 'the release of mind and imagination when matter is under eclipse', of a type of *scala perfectionis*: 'From humanity drawn by sorrow the mortal passes into the realm of loneliness, on the farther side of that he [sic] finds his own soul'.⁸ The injunction, however, that only the strong get through 'the arid realm' adds credence to Chadwick's view that Fullerton drew upon esoteric and philosophical themes of the Platonic guardians, Manichean Perfecti and the Nietzschean Superman.⁹

⁴ Zora Cross, *Songs of Love and Life*, Tyrells, Sydney, 1917, pp. 40–1. 'The Sisters of Sorrow' is absent from the Angus & Robertson version.

⁵ Kate Chadwick, "'Sweet Relief": The Politics of Erotic Experience in the Poetry of Lesbia Harford, Mary Fullerton and Zora Cross' in Susan Lever & Catherine Pratt (eds), *Proceedings, ASAL Sixteenth Annual Conference, ASAL-ADFA*, Canberra, 1994, pp. 72–3. Michael Sharkey (1990) also records the criticisms of Norman Lindsay who found he could not illustrate Cross's 'plaintive effort to assure herself that fornication is all the misleading things that poets say it is' which indicates Cross's code was an open secret to some, and the commercial success of *Songs of Love and Life* may indicate it was an open secret to many more, under the guise of religious love poetry (Michael Sharkey, 'Zora Cross's Entry Into Australian Literature', *Hecate* 16.1–2, 1990, p. 69).

⁶ Mary Fullerton, *Memoirs*, Fullerton Papers Mitchell Library, p. 74; Joy Hooton, 'Pioneering and Feminism' in Kay Ferres (ed.), *The Time to Write: Australian Women Writers 1890–1930*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1993, p. 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹ Chadwick, *Op Cit.*, p. 73.

Fullerton's earliest conceptions of 'mystic' in *Mood and Melodies* (1908) are nonetheless derived from personal and environmental acquaintances as much as philosophical speculation. The subject of 'The Mystic', for example, who 'breaks luminous from the cloudy veil' (13) is based upon the pantheist-Calvinist poet John Parker of *Bark House Days* (1921) and it is likely, given Fullerton's emphasis upon memory, that others have similar origins.¹⁰ Her allegorical poems replete with vague notions of 'the mystic midnight moon' ('Colour II', 15), 'mystic rites' ('Intuition', 25) and 'the Hidden' ('The Prophet', 26) merely prepare the way for later excursions into Christian mystical themes such as the mingling with the 'Aggregate Soul' in 'Coal' (1921) and the 'God kiss' of the Woman Soul to knightly self in the medieval-style romance 'Consecrated' (1921). Fullerton's later works also feature a spider-soul in 'Threads' (1946) which, in an inverse manner to Pseudo-Dionysius's vision of prayer as 'resplendent chord hanging from the height of heaven', spins a 'mystic rope' which 'flung forth / Reached God'.¹¹

For Fullerton, like Cross, the ineffable incorporates an interpersonal dimension which opens it to mystical tropes of eroticism. Sylvia Martin (1997) notes that while Fullerton found 'an Arcadian space of female sensuality' in nationalist images of the bush, she was more cautious in her love sonnets such as 'A Bunch of Bush Violets' which can be read 'as a coded narrative of lesbian desire'.¹² Indeed, Martin cites inscriptions on some of Fullerton's unpublished love poems to her companion Mabel Singleton such as 'with more love than can be spoken or written',

¹⁰ Mary Fullerton, *Bark House Days*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1964, pp. 152–5; Fullerton's reliance on memory is addressed by Hooton, *Op Cit.*, p. 45. Page references are from Mary Fullerton, *Moods and Melodies: Sonnets and Lyrics*, Thomas Lothian, Melbourne, 1908.

¹¹ Mary Fullerton, *The Breaking Furrow*, Galleon Press, 1921, pp. 19, 89; Mary Fullerton, *The Wonder and the Apple*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1946, p. 38; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Op Cit.*, p. 82.

¹² Sylvia Martin, 'Becoming-violet: Desire in the Love Poetry of Mary Fullerton', *Hecate* 23.2, 1997, p. 97.

and it is in this sense that the lines between mystical transcendence and inexpressible real-world love become blurred:

Dearness, Dearness
 Thy voice is in mine ear.
 Thy face is always before me;
 They talk of far and near —
 I only know thy nearness.

Dearness, Dearness,
 The warm love's on my mouth;
 Thy hand is close in mine;
 They only talk of north and south
 I only know thy nearness.

Dearness, Dearness,
 Thy heart is in my breast;
 I have changed souls with thee;
 They only talk of east and west —
 I only know thy nearness.¹³

'Dearness' successfully inhabits the Judeo-Christian ambiguity between divine and earthly beloved which has been treasured for its mystical potential since the Song of Songs. A Western Christian mystical reading of 'Dearness' is further supported by thematic confluences, for example in 'thy nearness' (with St Augustine's 'thou wast within, I was outside'), 'the warm love's on my mouth' (St Bernard's 'mysticism of the kiss') and 'Thy heart is in my breast; / I have changed souls with thee' (Bernard's bridal imagery: 'O headlong love, vehement, burning ... You have claimed her heart

and tongue for your own').¹⁴ In her later collections *Moles Do So Little with Their Privacy* (1942) and *The Wonder and the Apple* (1946), Fullerton, under the pseudonym 'E', aligns herself with an apotheosised Emily Dickenson ('You whose mere crumbs / leave us less poor').¹⁵ Despite her assertions as philosopher-poet ('Ecstatic thought's the thing' ['Poetry']), the mystical potential of 'Dearness' is discarded for a strict asceticism in 'The Heart's not yet a Neighbour', 'Withdrawal' and 'Conscience'.¹⁶ While not, as T. Inglis Moore would have it 'an Australian Emily', 'E' makes some significant claims ('My shut eyes saw Creation' ['Impermanent']) which personalise her long-held feminist belief that women can be prophets and mystics 'with sufficient power / For ten evangelists' ('Communal').¹⁷ Fullerton, like Cross, uses mystical poetics of ecstasy, transcendence, eroticism and prophecy to empower her visions for personal, national and religious destiny.

By contrast, Christopher Brennan (1870–1932) presents something of an anomaly: a masterful scholar and symbolist poet who by his own admission was 'very unpatriotic ... I might have made my verse in China'.¹⁸ Brennan fused Stéphane Mallarmé's Symbolism to the mystical elements of Catholicism, resulting in, as Kane (1996) observes, 'an extreme form of internalised quest-romance ... a quest for literalized vision, a redemptive experience both poetic and mystical'.¹⁹ Brennan considered his symbolist poetry a medium of communication with the

¹³ Martin, *Op Cit.*, p. 95; Fullerton, *The Breaking Furrow*, p. 52.

¹⁴ Augustine cited by C.E. Rolt in Pseudo-Dionysius, *Op Cit.*, p.185; St Bernard of Clairvaux cited in McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. 203.

¹⁵ Mary Fullerton, *Moles Do So Little with Their Privacy*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1942, p. 60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61; Fullerton, *The Wonder*, pp. 28, 32, 48.

¹⁷ T. Inglis Moore, 'Preface' to Fullerton, *Moles*, pp. 6–7. Inglis Moore invokes Blake, Francis Thompson, Donne and Dickinson while simultaneously conceding 'evolution replaces the mystics' God as the philosophic pivot'. For 'Communal', see *Ibid.*, p. 19; for 'Impermanent' see Fullerton, *The Wonder*, p. 41. For Fullerton's feminism, see Hooton, *Op Cit.*

¹⁸ Brennan cited in James McAuley, *Christopher Brennan*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1973, p. 47.

¹⁹ Kane, *Op Cit.*, p. 81.

transcendent 'placed, with all its mystical paradise, in ourselves'.²⁰ His inner Eden is contextualised in terms of his Catholicism by colleague and friend A.R. Chisholm:

Brennan, though he was estranged from the Church from late adolescence until the last period of his life, was always a Catholic at heart, even a mystical one; and he is Catholic, very often, even in his terminology and his imagery ... What was he seeking? Eden, he said, and Mallarmé helped make his search more subtle. But ultimately, Eden is one of the many names that a man uses when he is looking in vain for God.²¹

Yet as Katherine Barnes (2006) has detailed at length, Brennan's quest was also bibliographical, absorbing agnosticism, Gnosticism, hermeticism, esoterism, Judaism, ancient and continental philosophy, criticism and Symbolism, the last of which *was*, according to Brennan, Mallarmé's religion.²² Mallarmé's dictum *Peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit* ('Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces') structurally coincides with *cataphatic* modes of the mystical tradition where the effects of God are celebrated, but Brennan sought a more radical synthesis:

Now, as a matter of fact, symbolism is historically a cross-fertilization of poetry by mysticism ... What poetry has to do with this world is merely to use it as occasion and symbol of the ineffable. In this sense *while mysticism has become poetry, poetry has in a way become mysticism*. There has been a rewriting of the signs before the two factors. The old laws persist, under new forms. Ruysbroeck, and many other mystics, tell us that there are two kinds of contemplation, the lower through the images, the higher, above the images. Well Mallarmé takes poetry which is an art of

²⁰ Brennan cited in *Ibid.*

²¹ A.R. Chisholm in Christopher Brennan, *Selected Poems* (ed. A.R. Chisholm), Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1966, p. vii.

²² See Katherine Barnes, *Op Cit*; Christopher Brennan, *The Prose of Christopher Brennan* (ed. A.R. Chisholm & J.J. Quinn), Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1962, p. 145.

images and tells us that its duty is to suggest that which is nameless and irreducible to form; song is, for him, a medium for making silence perceptible ... mysticism has changed its nature and has been absorbed by poetry [my italics].²³

In keeping with the mysticism scholars of his era, Brennan confers authority upon mystical poets, positing Yeats beside 'the greatest of them' William Blake.²⁴ Like Inge and Underhill, though characteristically in his own manner, he also seeks to define mysticism as 'an inner, personal, informal religion, consisting entirely in a direct relation between the worshipper and the worshipped—quite the opposite of church religion and therefore quite rightly regarded by church-rulers and church-goers as dangerous'.²⁵ It is a founding moment, for few Australian poets or critics have attempted such a definition. For Brennan, however, it is part of his project to identify symbolism's 'cross-fertilisation' by mysticism, so the latter may in fact depend upon the former:

when direct experience is claimed, as by mystics like Plotinus and Porphyry when they state they attained to [sic] contemplation of the divinity beyond conception, they can only give us symbolism, they can only speak of a light such as that which shone round Saul on the road to Damascus.²⁶

In *Poems* (1913), Brennan aligns himself with Western Christian mysticism in his themes of silence, revelation, spiritual progression and divine union. These themes become less obtuse when they combine, such as 'meditation, wed / with love, in

²³ Stéphane Mallarmé, letter to Henri Cazalis dated October-November 1864 cited in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé* (tr. Anthony Hartley), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p.ix; Brennan, *Op Cit.*, pp. 157–8.

²⁴ Brennan, *Op Cit.*, p. 23. 'Vision, Imagination and Reality' (1903) showcases Brennan's familiarity with Plato, Plotinus, Pascal and Ruusbroec, although the 'mystical lore', vision and Symbolism of Yeats is 'more sympathetic to me personally'. This address as retiring president of the Sydney Philosophical Society concludes with a 'plea' for mystics such as Blake.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

gold-lit cells, / absorbs the heaven that shed / sweet silence after bells' (3), 'What do I know? myself alone, / a gulf of uncreated night' (42), or 'Behind the veil of burning silence bound, / vast life's innumerable [sic] busy littleness' (54).²⁷ Spiritual progression is given a Blakean flavour on Dies Dominica ('the Lord's Day') where 'this hour is my eternity! the soul rises, expanding forever, with ... the visible whole / of beauty mingled in one dream of light' (6), but a more sobering journey is also envisaged towards the end of the collection:

Deep in my hidden country stands a peak,
and none hath known its name
and none, save I, hath even skill to seek:
thence my wild spirit came.
... The gift of self is self's most sacred right:
only where none hath trod,
only upon my secret starry height
I abdicate to God.
(*'Epilogues: 1897'*, 104)

This may indeed be Brennan's strongest point of cohesion with Western Christian mystical themes of ascent, inner progression and incomprehensibility of the absolute, closer in some ways than Kendall's 'To a Mountain,' although Brennan sets conditions upon his emancipation. The 'fire from heaven' when 'my foot hath touch'd the topmost height' and the sacrificial overtones are overtly biblical; yet 'I

²⁷ All page references are from Brennan's table of contents cited in the appendix to Christopher Brennan, *Poems (1913)* (ed. G.A. Wilkes), Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1972. The original was published in 1914. A more radical approach to silence as absence appears in Brennan's *Musicopoematographoscopes (1897)*: 'the fair white page / whose candour / illumines / the mystic signs / Abracadabra ... the zeroes that would mimic speech' (Christopher Brennan, *Musicopoematographoscopes*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney, 1981, pp. 17, 20). For Mallarmé's self-consciously mystical 'musician of silence' in 'Sainte' see Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems* (tr. Henry Weinfield), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, pp. 11, 186.

alone may know the joy of the quest' seems to preclude mystical union, although there *is* a God to abdicate to.²⁸ Nonetheless 'Epilogues 1897' offers a rare display of negative capability amid the more prophetic tones of Cross, Fullerton and the earlier Brennan himself, who

saw my life as whitest flame
light-leaping in a crystal sky,
and virgin colour where it came
pass'd to its heart, in love to die.

It wrapped the world in tender harm
rose-flower'd with one ecstatic pang:
God walk'd amid the hush'd alarm,
and all the trembling region rang... (13)

By the later 'The Wanderer' sequence, Brennan seems consigned to the negative capability of his 'hidden country' in his frank admission of 'no home, no goal ... I feel a peace ... settle, somewhere far in me' (99).

Images of divine presence and ecstatic nuptial union with the divine throughout *Poems (1913)* are increasingly attributed to Love, Beauty and Eden, the last of which was 'my own, my bride' in 'Epilogue: 1908' (105).²⁹ But are these in any way more Christian mystical than they are Romantic, polytheistic, Gnostic, esoteric, Judaic, or just plain idiosyncratic? Brennan could be worshipping any number of intimate dreams, including that of symbolism itself. Brennan's Lilith is a

²⁸ A Judaic influence is detected by Margaret Clarke (1949), who asserts the hidden peak to be a Kabbalistic symbol of 'that region of the mind where it is in harmony with the highest' (Margaret Clarke, 'The Symbolism of Brennan and of Mallarmé: A Comparison', *Southerly* 10.4, 1949, p. 226).

²⁹ See for example the Love who 'set his fire in my hands, / I clasped the flame unto my heart' or the Beauty who 'bares her secret breast. / Hasten, O night with nuptial breath! / O hour remote from any face! / vain-glories fade to sweetest death / heart-whelm'd in her divine embrace' (Brennan, *Poems [1913]*, pp. 37, 38).

case in point: Katherine Barnes's comprehensive examination of 'The Shadow of Lilith', which laudably focuses on the poetry rather than the poet's marital woes, suggests a link with the German mystic Boehme:

In my view, Lilith is Brennan's central symbol of the possibility that a higher self might be constituted by the union of the human mind with Nature ... Romantic and mystical ideas of an inner route to the transcendent are linked with Brennan's exploration of an inner abyss. I suggest that the figure of Sophia appearing in the writings of seventeenth-century German mystic Jakob Boehme became an important paradigm for Brennan's Lilith.³⁰

Barnes outlines this Sofia as 'the "mirror"' or 'looking glass' of the godhead, a powerful paradigm of the imagination as mediator between noumenal and phenomenal realms and in 1899 Brennan himself imagines his Lilith, via Yeats, should convey 'a whole drama of contemplation, yet never lose the flesh and savour of woman'.³¹ In this duality, however, mystical and mythic influences become confused. As a result, Lilith veers from Boehme's Sofia towards female stereotypes identified by Dorothy Hewett (1980) as 'woman as Muse but not Maker, woman the Destroyer and Bitch Goddess'.³² Vincent Buckley's 1957 observation of the 'gulf between aspiration and performance' in Brennan is best informed by an acknowledgment of his prodigious aspirations to merge symbolism and mysticism, to establish a poetics of mysticism outside the church and to attempt a transcendent nuptial union with both higher Nature and abysmal woman simultaneously. In doing so he establishes one of the earliest Australian definitions for mysticism, fuses

³⁰ Barnes, *Op Cit.*, p. 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.53; Christopher Brennan cited in Brennan, *Poems (1913)*, p. 14.

³² Dorothy Hewett, 'Isis in Search', *New Poetry* 28.1, 1980, p. 50.

mysticism with poetry and incorporates images of spiritual progression and revelation.³³ Yet in his quest for an inner Eden, he also freely admits that

To justify symbolism, that is, poetry, in its claim to possess a religious element, I have had to be rather uncompromising: but it is open to everyone, and I habitually do it myself, to colour this somewhat abstract principle with one's own intimate dreams ... For I do go beyond the limits which Mallarmé wisely set himself: I do break with him as to certain fundamental principles. And I throw the mystics overboard.³⁴

While he hopes 'we shall find in the long run what we threw away', this is not realised in his poetry.

³³ Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry Mainly Australian*, Books for Libraries, Freeport, 1969 (orig. 1957), pp. 12–13.

³⁴ Brennan, *Prose*, p. 162. Clarke (1949) confirms 'nuptial symbolism was a part of Brennan ... it is absent from Mallarmé' (Clarke, *Op Cit.*, p. 222).

John Shaw Neilson

Scholars of John Shaw Neilson in the twenty-first century have a tremendous advantage over their earlier counterparts due to misrepresentations of Neilson's poetry and biography during his lifetime and beyond. His poetry was altered, in some cases with Neilson's consent, by family members and his mentor A.G. Stephens, then by a series of editors including A.R. Chisholm, Judith Wright and Robert Gray.³⁵ Studies such as this one, by contrast, draw upon Margaret Roberts's *John Shaw Neilson, The Collected Verse: A Variorum Edition* (2003) which compiles over seven hundred Neilson poems with acknowledgement of alterations and preference to Neilson's 'fair copies' where possible. Twentieth-century Neilson criticism was further hampered by what Roberts calls 'the paradox of the naïves', the representation of Neilson as a simple, often child-like innocent which Neilson himself indulged in his *The Autobiography of John Shaw Neilson*.³⁶ Cliff Hanna's *Jock: A Life Story of John Shaw Neilson* (1999) combined with his *The Folly of Spring: A Study of John Shaw Neilson's Poetry* (1990) used original research to dispel this faux paradox, and Helen Hewson's *John Shaw Neilson: A Life In Letters* (2001) conclusively exposes the gulf between Neilson myth and reality.

In the event of these later publications, how can the figure described by Wright (1963) as 'simple and uncomplicated' be reconciled with the poet who not

³⁵ Cliff Hanna (1999) criticises Stephens, James Devaney, A.R. Chisholm, Judith Wright and Robert Gray for altering Neilson originals and Margaret Roberts (2003) takes Hanna to task for his inconsistencies (Cliff Hanna, *Jock: A Life Story Of John Shaw Neilson*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, pp. 293–4; John Shaw Neilson, *John Shaw Neilson, The Collected Verse: A Variorum Edition* [ed. Margaret Roberts], 2003, p. 22,

<www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/ASEC/Neilsoncomplete.pdf>, retrieved 25 June 2007).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

only digests and critiques Brennan, Whitman, Rabindranath Tagore, Hafiz of Shiraz and Verlaine but instructs one emerging poet 'Don't be frightened of Knowledge ... your world is too small. Get in touch with the great minds'?³⁷ Worse still, of what critical value is John Phillips's (1988) claim that because Neilson was too isolated to have read the French symbolists 'something akin to miracle occurred' when Neilson's letters cite an Australian translation of Verlaine from a literary journal which contained Rimbaud's 'Voyelles' and an article on Baudelaire?³⁸ Yet it is precisely these types of distortions prior to Hanna's research which reveal the anxieties and assumptions behind critical discourses of Australian mystical poetry which reached their zenith in H.M. Green's designation of Neilson as 'something of a mystic' (1950) and later 'in fact a mystic, perhaps the most noticeable of all Australia's mystic poets' (1961).³⁹

³⁷ John Shaw Neilson, *Shaw Neilson* (ed. Judith Wright), Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963, p. vi; letter to Victor Kennedy dated 21 July 1916 in John Shaw Neilson, *John Shaw Neilson: A Life In Letters* (ed. Helen Hewson), Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2001, p. 66, hereafter cited as *Letters*.

³⁸ John Phillips, *Poet of the Colours: The Life of John Shaw Neilson*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 105; *Letters*, pp. 13–14, 92.

³⁹ H.M. Green, *Fourteen Minutes*, Halstead, Sydney, 1950, pp. 93–4; H.M. Green cited in Laurie Clancy, 'City of Sighs: The Poetry of John Shaw Neilson' in Susan Lever & Catherine Pratt (eds), *Proceedings, ASAL, ASAL-ADFA*, Canberra, 1994, p. 48.

'Mystic' as a Derogatory and Complimentary Term

A.G. Stephens's association of mysticism with 'weak and feminine minds' appears during his 1900 *Bulletin* review of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* by the English poet Arthur Symons. After isolating the Literary Mystic 'brahmically contemplating his navel' from 'the ordinary eating-drinking-loving-swearing individual', Stephens concludes

To weak and feminine minds mysticism will always appeal, and with its appeal comes the emotion requisite to the achievement of the highest Art. But while blood is red, pulses full, and brain strong, no man wittingly adopts the creed of individual renunciation, of worldly denial, and of living death. Mysticism is associated with individual decay and racial decadence.⁴⁰

His suspicions are numerous: mystics are introverted, feminine, foreign, elitist and mentally insipid, the antithesis of his poetic nationalist 'knights of Romance' in an Australia already involved in the Boer War and a year away from Federation and the White Australia Policy. But Stephens could also use mysticism in a complimentary sense, such as in his praise for one of the most popular poets of the era, Bernard O'Dowd (1866–1953), as 'the stuff of prophets and martyrs ... at once learner and teacher, studying law, history, and religion, interested in spiritualism, socialism, communism, anarchism, and mysticism'.⁴¹ Mysticism as a field of learning mitigated by the public pursuits of law, history and social politics was to be

⁴⁰ A.G. Stephens, 'Symbolist Poetry', *The Bulletin*, May 19 1900, p. 2.

⁴¹ A.G. Stephens cited in Kate Baker, 'Bernard Patrick O'Dowd: Poet, Philosopher, Mystic', *Southerly* 14.2, 1953, p. 81. O'Dowd was considered a mystical poet during and after his lifetime (Stephens, *Op Cit.*, Baker, *Op Cit.*, and A.A. Phillips [ed.], *Bernard O'Dowd*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963, p. xii). Although he claimed visionary experiences during poetic composition and there are glimpses of St Teresa of Avila, Plato, The Song of Songs, and German mysticism in his 'Poet Militant' (1909), his poems offer little more than a crowd theosophy in a similar manner to Zora Cross's 'Man and Woman' (Victor Kennedy & Nettie Palmer, *Bernard O'Dowd*, Melbourne

commended, assisted in O'Dowd's case by his rousing oratory skills, nationalist-theosophical project *The Bush* (1912) and correspondence with Walt Whitman, whom he addressed as 'my beloved master, my friend, my bard, my prophet and apostle'.⁴² Nonetheless, in Stephens's correspondence with Neilson from late 1906, he attempted to add 'strength, speed and blood' to Neilson's poetry, at one stage boasting to H.M. Green that 'a bold ringing masculine line' of a Neilson poem was his own.⁴³ His editorial remarks to Neilson are especially revealing in this context:

I like light that passes into twilight, but in places your twilight passes into darkness (for me) ... Your divinity must come forth definitively from her cloud, though the cloud remains her background and encircles her feet. (1917)

Don't get too mystical and cloudy — or not all the time: your dreams go so deep that people awake can't follow. (1920)

You seem to be bothered with religion — is it necessary? (1926)⁴⁴

In his preface to Neilson's first collection *Heart of Spring* (1919), Stephens's misogynistic, nationalist and neo-Darwinist obsessions come to the fore as he celebrates the 'strong blood of his [Neilson's] race, and the high heart of his ancestry ... it affirms the Celt ... to these gifts are added vision and fancy, sympathy with humanity and the passion of a man'.⁴⁵ Despite this, Stephens also infantilises Neilson in his one reference to a mystical poet by insisting 'the pure depth of his feeling

University Press, Carlton, 1954, pp. 182–3; Zora Cross, *The Lilt of Life*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1918, pp. 12–76).

⁴² O'Dowd cited in Hugh Anderson, *The Poet Militant: Bernard O'Dowd*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1968, p. 39. Prior to his death, O'Dowd gave tribute to 'the wonderful stimulus of my communion with Walt Whitman'.

⁴³ Max Richards, 'Shaw Neilson: Simple Singer or Complex Artist?' *Meridian* 9.2, 1990, p. 147. In 1926 Stephens writes 'You mustn't get so fine and thin that you can't be heard by ordinary ears sometimes. Want speed and strength and blood in poetry' (*Letters*, p. 141).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 90, 143.

⁴⁵ Stephens cited in *Ibid.*, pp. 406–7.

recalls Blake; his verses come like Blake's children, "with innocent faces clean". Nonetheless, in a final nationalist-Darwinist flurry, Stephens lauds Neilson as 'First of Australian poets, he reflects lasting honour on the land that bred him'.

Neilson's reputation as a mystical poet increased with his four subsequent collections between 1922 and 1937. Stephens set the standard by invoking Blake and suggesting 'his poems were long meditated ... in Neilson the mystery is made lucid'.⁴⁶ The pantheist poet Hugh McCrae subsequently compared his 'spiritual escapes' to Coleridge, or rather 'what Coleridge has missed'.⁴⁷ Poet and Verlaine translator Nettie Palmer linked Neilson's poetics of timelessness to Verlaine's 'Chansons sans Paroles' and *Birth* magazine remarked at his ecstatic, infantile and seraphic qualities.⁴⁸ While the mystical was certainly implicit in such observations, it wasn't explicitly evoked until H.M. Green made the first of his increasingly confident designations of Neilson's 'mysticism' in 1928:

He is a symbolist to the border of mysticism and over it, and simply as he expresses himself, the meaning of occasional passages is hard to fathom... his best work springs from his intimate contact with nature, or with those human emotions and instincts which are so old and deep-rooted that they blend with nature ... ['The Birds Go By' contains] something that can be felt but not expressed...⁴⁹

Neilson would improve in Green's estimation to become 'something of a mystic' and 'in fact a mystic' by 1961, while Tom Inglis Moore (1941) and John Phillips (1988) ventured similar claims. More recently Neilson's poetics of circularity and unity

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 407–8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

have yielded designations of 'the possessed mystic' and 'mystic pastoral' by Ken Goodwin (1986) and Ivor Indyk (1988) respectively.⁵⁰ Other critics such as Laurie Clancy (1994) have objected that 'Neilson, as it were, has mysticism thrust upon him' and Robert Gray (1993) goes so far as to term such associations 'woolly minded' citing Hanna's discussion of 'what is apparent: Neilson's uncertainty and unease about the Divine, the ambivalence in his concept of Love, and his increasing agnosticism'.⁵¹ Yet none of these critics acknowledge that mysticism is a shifting notion, whereby what passes for mysticism in the 1990s is not the same as what passes for mysticism in the 1960s or 1920s.

Notions of Western Christian mysticism during and immediately after Neilson's own lifetime shifted significantly. Judith Wright asks: 'Was Neilson a mystic then? Towards the end of his life, his friend Frank Francis suggested to him that his poem "The Orange Tree" had that quality. He laughed and said he did not know what mysticism was'.⁵² Yet, as H.M. Green notes, this hardly disqualifies him.⁵³ The naïve persona Neilson constructed was not given to such intellectualist overtures and, like Neilson's 'eye trouble', this construction was a psychological defence which spared him literary scrutiny while giving the literati precisely what they wanted, a mystical innocent, a 'peasant saint' (O'Dowd), 'a feeler rather than a thinker' (Wright).⁵⁴ One exception was A.D. Hope, who found Neilson's verse to be 'mannered and literary. It employs the idiom of a refined bookish culture; its rhythms

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 413–4.

⁵⁰ Ken Goodwin, *A History of Australian Literature*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1986, p. 86; Ivor Indyk, 'The Pastoral Poets', in Laurie Hergenhan (ed.), *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1998, p. 357.

⁵¹ Clancy, *Op Cit*; Robert Gray in John Shaw Neilson, *John Shaw Neilson: Selected Poems* (ed. Robert Gray), Angus & Robertson, Pymble, 1993, p. 24.

⁵² Judith Wright, *Because I Was Invited*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1975, p. 90.

⁵³ Green, *Op Cit*.

⁵⁴ *Letters*, pp. 102–3; Wright, *Op Cit*.

are studied and of epicene delicacy'.⁵⁵ Nonetheless even H.M. Green was guarded about Neilson's apparent mysticism until after World War II, and Christopher Brennan qualified his own poetic relationship with mysticism by claiming to have gone beyond it. Neilson, for his part, possessed neither Brennan's scholarship nor O'Dowd's public zeal, and any association with mysticism without these authoritative checks and balances risked critical emasculation. As it was, in 1926 Robert Crawford wrote 'there seems to be

something lacking in his [Neilson's] verse—the measure of a man. 'Tis so often like a girl's whimpering ... Australia's big poet (when we get him) will be more than this'.⁵⁶ Similar attitudes towards women as little more than afterthoughts in Australian poetry were prevalent even in Judith Wright's time (see Chapter 6). Neilson's own response was initially self-deprecating ('there seems to be an overdose of the tearful in my little book ... His contention that I lack the measure of a Man is to a certain extent true') but being regarded as 'what schoolboys call [a] "cissy"' after years of physically punishing labour became a source of resentment in his later years:

When my first book came out, *The Bulletin* critic [Cross's husband David McKee Wright]... said I was effeminate. I thought that was very amusing, especially after all the years of toil I had put in with my father and brothers trying to scrape a living from a farm in the Mallee...⁵⁷

Even with his increasingly implicit approach to the mystical, and despite Stephens's 'strength, speed and blood', Neilson risked falling foul of gender and nationalist

⁵⁵ A.D. Hope cited in Cliff Hanna, *The Folly of Spring: A Study of John Shaw Neilson's Poetry*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p. 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

expectations in post-federation Australian criticism. To have exacerbated this by overt association with a mysticism all too easily conflated with mental haziness, personal weakness, deficient femininity or racial inferiority, particularly by his own agent and editor, would have not only contradicted his poetic persona, but spelt professional suicide.

'Mystic' and 'Mystery' in Neilson's Verse

Neilson's conceptions and use of the mystical for personal, creative and ideological purposes can be found in his poetic terminology. While Neilson was unwilling to discuss mysticism directly, he did sparingly employ the term 'mystic' as noun and adjective throughout his career, including in his correspondence with A.G. Stephens. It can represent a figure of despairing renunciation in 'Leg Pulling' ('the mystic doth the skies forsake' [380, c.1907]), a giddy fever in 'The Lad who Started Out' ('October, and the open air / Put wondrous thoughts in him ... a mystic fever ran / in the little lad' [528, c.1909]), the symbolic white rose in 'Roses Three' (455, 1913), a transfigured rider who listens 'for bells about the Blackwoods' in 'For Lindsay Gordon' (707, 1927) or an abstract reference to Persian poet-mystics in 'The Power of the Bells' (578, 1940).⁵⁸ 'Mystic' for Neilson can entail something, or someone, transcending or scorned by the temporal, a contemplative watcher or listener, or an ambassador between physical and metaphysical. However, ambassadors here are not

⁵⁷ Hanna, *Jock*, pp. 301, 278.

⁵⁸ All page references are from Neilson, *The Collected Verse* (ed. Roberts), the initial page number for each poem is given. 'As moths move the mystics / Above the hay, / So give they of gladness / On the bride's day' ('The Power of the Bells'—a possible reference to Fitzgerald's *Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam* v.23 ['And beauty is a flame where hearts, like moths, / Offer themselves a burning sacrifice'], see <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basic/omarkhayyam-rub2.htm>> retrieved 30 June 2007).

necessarily intermediaries (for Neilson has plenty of other intermediaries), nor are they necessarily Christian, although they are in many ways inseparable from the framework and poetics of Christianity with which Neilson, raised as a strict Presbyterian, was deeply familiar.

'Mystery', by contrast, appears in an explicitly Christian context in his earliest poems before broadening during his time with Stephens towards a more general usage. As Cliff Hanna (1999) observes, Margaret Neilson was 'a fierce Covenanter who believed with all her being in a hellfire brand of Protestantism' who clearly instilled in her children a sense of fear and divine punishment for humanity's fallen state, until John, the eldest,

spent his days riddled with guilt, and his nights terrified of every shadow... the divine curse was total, no area of life was spared. The majestic trees, vibrant bird and animal life and unceasing fertility surrounding him were now his enemies, since the life of fallen nature was in reality a snare to trap his immortal soul.⁵⁹

The effects of this were divisive and enduring. A terrible conflict between religion and nature was forged. God became associated with terror, wrath, and after the deaths of Margaret (1897) and daughters Maggie (1903) and Jessie (1907), punishment, death or evil. A deep familiarity with the *King James Bible*, particularly the Old Testament, became the centrepiece of the young Neilson's learning and would later dominate the language, symbolism and metrics of his poetry. As Helen Hewson (2001) observes, the rhythmic 'lining out' of the hymns from *Metrical Psalms and Paraphrases*, *Scottish Psalmody* and *Church Praise* by a member of the congregation with a 'pitch pipe of tuning fork' in the absence of an organ is

⁵⁹ Hanna, *Op Cit.*, pp. 34, 36.

particularly relevant to the formation of Neilson the poet.⁶⁰ Even as late as 1941, when Neilson told Jim Devaney 'No, I can't say I'm any particular religion now. I don't go to any church and I don't belong to any sect. My religion is that I don't know anything definite of an afterlife. I believe in a Creator of the universe, but apart from that...All I know is that we know nothing', he also dictated a short opinion piece 'Free Verse Old and New' where he states

The first verse was free verse, which is much older than rhyme. Since early childhood the Book of Ecclesiastes has seemed to me the greatest poetry. It gives a glow to me, and lifts me above mean things. The Book of Ecclesiastes might fairly be called free verse.⁶¹

The 'free verse' of Ecclesiastes inspired at least four Neilson signatures: the joy of youth versus fear of judgement ('Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth ... but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgement' [11:9]), mortal unknowing before the divine (3:11), the 'sweet light' versus 'oppression' of the sun (11:7, 4:1) and transcendent messenger birds ('a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter'[10:20]).⁶² The earthy, cyclical wisdom of Ecclesiastes has been roundly ignored by critics such as Hanna who prefer a mythic, pagan, or Dionysian quality in Neilson.⁶³ Many of these signatures are indeed contradictory, but as they developed so did Neilson's attraction to a prophetic engagement with Christian mystery.

In Neilson's first poem of note 'When are the Angels Nearest?' (275), the poetic armoury for his future metaphysical battles is already in evidence: angels,

⁶⁰ *Letters*, pp. 27–36.

⁶¹ Hanna, *Op Cit.*, p. 244; *Letters*, p. 396.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 29; the *King James Version* is used here for contextual purposes.

⁶³ See the epilogue to Hanna, *Folly of Spring*. Hanna admits there is no explicit basis for his theory.

ecstatic 'chatting' birds, a child's dream, animated trees, waning light, death, tears, prayers, stillness, the moon, and the negative capability that would later serve him well in 'The Orange Tree'. The Neilson of his twenties is already engaging the ineffable ('There are words we cannot utter, / There are tales we cannot tell' ['The Tales We Never Hear' (240)]) and invokes a hierarchy of colour where red is beautiful, green recalls youth and pleases tired eyes, blue is the sky where 'God himself looks through / All space that seemeth blue', and white is the lily, angels and Paradise ('Which Colour?' 279). His early ambition is to adhere to the path of prophets and apostles, to listen for 'God's deep whisperings' ('Two Little Dreamers', 272), to acknowledge 'Man only sees in part, / And God alone looks down into the heart' ('With Tears', 284), and to pledge himself to a redemptive God of 'great mysteries':

Lord, I am struggling through the gloom,
 And watching very closely if I may
 Catch but a glimpse of light far away
 And longing much to hear the angels say
 That for a pardoned sinner there is room.

Lord, I am watching, watching through the night
 And listening for the heavenly harmonies,
 Guessing and wondering at great mysteries,
 At all my poor dim darkened vision sees.
 Lord I am watching, watching for the light.

('The Earth Born', 188)

As Neilson admits, he is guessing, but he is committed to the task. He accepts St Paul's Neoplatonic dictum 'For now we see through a glass, darkly' (1 Corinthians

13:12), but he is listening and watching for the glimpse or whisper which reveals the Lord's mysteries. In another early piece, he pledges himself even more directly:

My search will be for Truth —
 And come what may let Fortune frown or smile.
 God helping me I shall not turn aside
 Until I solve these mysteries.
 ('A Friendless Youth He was but Full of Hope', 76)

In 'Love and Life' (127), a piece reminiscent of Blake's 'London' (although there are conflicting accounts as to whether Neilson had read Blake), significant alterations begin to appear.⁶⁴ His path becomes tied to social injustice ('I heard the cry of all who cry') rather than the direct appeal to God in 'The Earth Born', and although he feels Love and Life are 'wed together' and death is 'a happy change', Neilson concedes 'I may not learn the mystery' but puts his faith in the redemption of repressed lovers ('surely there will come a time / When those who love will not be hated'). The divine mystery in early Neilson evolves from a guess, to a quest, to a melding of suffering and love augmented by poetics of ineffability and transcendence.

Trauma, Love and Neilson's Metaphysical Paradox

As traumatic life experiences were integral to the spiritual progression of Ada Cambridge, so too was the case for John Shaw Neilson. The death of his mother and two adult sisters between 1897 and 1907 left his path to divine mystery in ruins. He sought consolation in the Jesus 'who felt it all ... still, in every age and land, / His heart beats for the little child, / He writes of mercy on the sand' ('He was the Christ',

115), following the Gospel story of John 8:6–8, yet the poem was later withdrawn from publication.⁶⁵ A more telling work is 'The Sacrifice' (233), possibly written with the death of his sister Maggie in mind:

Yet in her rest she shall not see grey hairs,
Nor children trampling on the holy things.
Though every day be dark, still in the dark
Love looks for light — the old hope climbs and clings
Up through the tears. In the black gloom and pain
My torn heart shrieks — give me my love again
O, God of pity!

Here Neilson's youthful idealism is ravaged and refined by grief. Again, he is forced to guess, but now in the most painful of circumstances. Only love 'the old hope' 'climbs and clings' and there is no other surety—not even mercy or pity—amid his cries of 'why, why?' Love 'looks for light', but in subsequent poems the ideal of the endangered, angelic child combines with themes of the lover, song, dream, colour, sun and death until they are so inextricably interwoven Neilson's path becomes a confusion of them as much as it seeks the mystery behind them. Two poems from his 1906 notebook, 'The Dream is Deep' ('Sing me the song that never dies, / Of little Love blinded and bold' [186]) and 'The Lover Sings' (206) demonstrate this change, but also certain moments where Love and the prophetic path coalesce:

Listen, and ye shall leave the earth,
Brooding no more o'er baser things.

⁶⁴ Hanna, *Jock*, p. 278. Neilson was compared to Blake by many critics, including A.G. Stephens.

⁶⁵ *Letters*, p. 204. In a letter to A.G. Stephens dated 26 July 1931, Neilson requests this poem be withdrawn from a collection because 'it does not represent my present outlook'. In 'To a Child at Christmas Time', Neilson revisits John 8:6–8 in terms of tolerance rather than mercy.

His lily-love hath tears and mirth
 Like to a running flower she clings.
 Glories have come up in her eyes —
 Wrapt in a fire, he flies.
 Not for himself the lover sings

 ... Mourners move inward from the gloom —
 Not for himself the lover sings —
 Give us, they cry, the buds, the bloom,
 All paradise and many Springs.
 Star follows star in the dull grey,
 Deep is the dark, it drinks the day.
 For the very love of God he sings.

Hanna (1990) considers this poem metaphysically the most important poem of what he calls the Morning period (1900–1910), and 'Neilson's most ambitious statement on the divine function of spring'.⁶⁶ Yet the Lover also contains Christological qualities:

Down a green shadowy path he goes
 And in his hand he bears a rose,
 Still singing that his heart is true
 ... and doth he grieve
 For red-lip kisses three days gone?
 Hark how he sings, high heavenly clear,
 Chief messenger of the light to cheer
 The brown earth and [all] that bides thereon.

⁶⁶ Hanna, *The Folly of Spring*, p. 61.

Certainly 'three days gone' suggests the resurrection, 'chief messenger of the light' engages John 1:4 ('In him was life, and that life was the light of men'), and rose-heart imagery recalls Christian artistic as well as Yeatsian tropes. The poem begins 'It is not dark, it is not day'—the Lover dwells beyond light and the dark, beyond the temporal world of life and death, as 'Singer of Summer uncontrolled' who flies 'wrapt in a fire'. The Lover is also undoubtedly the dying and reborn sun, and Neilson's attempt to unify his natural and religious worlds is achieved, though a greater cost: if Christ is the sun, who or what is the dark that 'drinks the day'? In his new poetic quest for 'the song that never dies' Neilson celebrates the divine singer, but in doing so he also ties his figure of salvation to the rhythms and dangers of the earth. As Hanna (1990) argues, the Lover may also serve as an affirmation of this quest:

the Lover is the hope of Neilson's world. He is the god of poetry, and his divine song inspires all Neilson's singers ... One can see now how Neilson built a personal metaphysic around his deep desire to be a poet. While he always saw poetry as a divinely-inspired vocation ... His obsession with a benevolent Deity, and his need to counteract the Fall, led him to combine them in a natural way and provided divine reassurance to his deeply felt belief in himself as a poet.⁶⁷

That Neilson saw poetry as divinely-inspired is certainly evident in his earlier pieces, informing the Lord that he is ready for mysteries and 'Truth'. Yet in 'The Lover Sings' Neilson shifts from a receptive, contemplative mode to one of declaration in the prophetic mode ('Listen, and ye shall leave the earth ... Hark how he sings'), boldly melding religious and natural worlds in the hope that his Christ-sun's-lover's song will inspire their cohesion, despite the magnified threat of 'the dark'. This

newly emboldened Neilson with his tropes of divine love is spectacularly poised for a greater engagement with Western Christian mysticism. He has infused his biblical lexicon with contemplative and prophetic themes, pledged utter commitment to God-in-sky ('Which Colour') and God-in-heart ('The Dream is Deep', 'With Tears'), illuminated his natural surroundings with a life force recalling Hildegard of Bingen's *viriditas*, or 'force which gives life to the body and renewal in nature'.⁶⁸ He has also evoked heavenly ascent, an Augustinian 'clinging' in 'The Sacrifice', and a transcendent Christ 'wrapt in fire' who 'sings for the very love of God'.⁶⁹ Yet the fire of love was about to consume everything around it, and the metaphysical paradox it left behind ensured all future mystical consciousness for Neilson relied upon the presence of intermediaries.

The re-orientation of Neilson's divine love towards a temporal equivalent was a gradual process. 'In the Street' (121, 1906) reprises themes of social empathy, where upon observing a weary mother 'slowly into our hearts there crept / I know not what — it flamed, it leapt, / Was it God's love than in us slept?' The maternal love theme combines with the emergence of a utopian sexual desire in 'The Fire Unquenched' ('out of whose womb came love that is a fire?' [506]), but this is a fire that 'burned between our eyes — and we were blind' in a world 'crazy gone a-blossoming'. Mystery returns, but like love, its designs have changed. 'Triolet 2' where God 'left us Love, the mystery' (662) is closely followed by 'My girl is veiled in gossamer / To meet the kiss of Spring' ('Triolet 3', 663), and intimations of heaven in love, kisses and dark eyes ('Surely God was a Lover', 'Early Kisses', 'The

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–4.

⁶⁸ Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings* (ed. Mark Atherton), Penguin, London, 2001, p. x.

⁶⁹ 'When in my whole self I shall cling to you united, I shall find no sorrow anywhere, no labour; wholly alive will my life be all full of you. Those whom you fill, you raise up' (*Confessions* 10:28 cited in St Augustine of Hippo, *Selected Writings* [tr. Mary T. Clark], Paulist, New York, 1984, p. 14).

Window to the Heavens', 'Her Eyes' [455, 33, 631, 346]). The final, heretical break from Christianity comes in Neilson's apotheosis of Florence Case, a young Sea Lake woman with whom he was clearly besotted:

What should I know of God? he lives so far

In that uncanny country called the blue.

Sweetheart, I cannot worship moon or star,

I'll worship you.

(*'The Worshipper'*, 635)

Neilson's proto-mystical methodology is permanently altered in *'The Worshipper'*. God is displaced and so is mystery, being 'down in this world' where 'Sweetheart, my longing is for thee' (*'The Turning of the Year'*, 615). Yet, as in *'The Lover Sings'*, the enduring ramifications of Neilson's metaphysical modifications are extreme. When the relationship sundered, possibly due to religion (Case was Catholic), Neilson was devastated and affected by the same 'nerves' that had debilitated him after Maggie's death in 1903.⁷⁰ His spiritualised desire, his 'honeythirst' (*'Honeythirst'*, 351) thwarted, he cries 'Tear my heart out, O God, hear me! I struggle' (*'Lament for Sadie'*, 535) in a similar vein to his 'My torn heart shrieks — give me my love again / O, God of pity!' in *'The Sacrifice'* but now it is to a God he has abandoned for 'Sadie'.

Strange and severe representations of divinity follow. *'To the Thick Darkness'* (937, c.1915) warily attempts a reconciliation with the 'Jester, merciless with the dead':

⁷⁰ Neilson, *Op Cit.*, p. 67.

Always I feel you as the breath
 Of a dull tyrant in the dew:
 I have been questioning long — is Death
 But a poor journeyman for you?

 ... Oh, Jester, merciless with the Dead
 That as a hastening child I knew,
 In the impatient deeps ahead
 How shall I make a friend of you?

Likewise 'The Emperor' (500) posits a 'loveless, waxen deity' as a God of Law, but not love which has become associated with bittersweet suffering ('Let Us Consider Love', 'The Loving Tree', 'Tell Me and Tell Me All' [384, 541, 458]). Conscious that his failure to apotheosise a temporal love only confirms his mother's interpretation of the Fall, and reminded again of the nerves associated with 'mother's side of the family', he addresses her directly:

Did you too have the dream?
 Seek for the sign?
 Did you hear devils scream
 Mother o'mine?⁷¹

Neilson continues to construct himself as a troubled religious seeker. His mother's absence ('We could have lived so long, / Your heart to mine') and lingering 'wound that time can hardly heal' ('A Mother's Sin', 556) were only compounded by the failure of the Sea Lake farm. Furthermore a series of poeticised visitations from 'a pure voice' ('My Prisoner', 415), 'my friend Night' ('The Black Friend', 467) and a

⁷¹ Neilson cited in Hanna, *Jock.*, p. 151.

portentous whisper ('There Came a Whisper', 637) reveal an increasingly desperate need for spiritual intermediaries.

In 'The Uneven Singer' (904) the Christological recourse Neilson sought after his earlier trauma in 'The Lover Sings' is reconfigured via the musical context of 'The Mad Listener' (856) where the interconnectivity between singer-poet and listener-seeker reaches beyond 'darkness or noises of God' as they 'seek sweet sounds at the back of the Day'. It is as transcendental musician that Christ reappears as the Player:

Have I not clearly seen him

At the foot of a song?

Oh the Uneven Player,

Playing so long.

... Church men full glibly

Tell all that they know,

Sit fast in high places

As the cocks crow.

Oh, the Uneven Player,

Him I have seen

Playing harsh tunes and mellow

With the unclean.

On stricken lovers

He will play so fair;

In the dark or the moonshine

He shakes the air.

He plays the loud Scarlet
 In the Blue so dim;
 Sunlight cannot tell us
 The Heart of him.

Again, there is a shared project of affirmation of the poet who composes, as Verlaine wrote in *The Heart of the Rose*, a journal in Neilson's possession:

Music still, music ever! Your verse should be the winged Something that is felt to flee from a soul on departure for other skies, other loves. It should be the good Fortune that is shed abroad on the fresh morning wind, bearing the fragrance of mint and thyme — all the rest is literature.⁷²

The Uneven Player founds and outlasts versification ('the foot of a song'), is beyond vision, speech ('sunlight cannot tell us') and beyond 'even' uniformity. Though the night, the dark, the dim, indeed, any time after the noon-midsummer are often periods of uncertainty and evil in Neilson's cyclical metaphysics, but a similar unity to that proposed in 'The Evening is the Morning' (818) where 'the evening is the morning dear, but in a sweet disguise' indicates something greater than the cyclical is in effect. The uncapitalised 'him' represents a more personal Jesus who the Church men don't know but the poet, the cockerels, the unclean and the lovers *do*. Furthermore, Neilson does not simply rely on negative capability to engage his Uneven Player. To his own question 'Have I not clearly seen him?' he replies 'Him I have seen', both at the silence at the foot of a song/poem and playing *with*, not *to*, the unclean. A sense of divine, uniting presence emerges in keeping with both Socrates's assertion in *The Republic* that what the sun (or 'Child of the Good') represents no language can describe and the *synaesthesia* of Augustine, for at no point does

Neilson say he is merely seeing the Player with his eyes. At this moment of great mystical potential, however, Neilson's terrors and doubts suddenly intervene:

Yet have I not seen him

Weak with his pain

On a girl's body

In a dark lane?

... But have I not seen him

Burned with his song?

Oh the Uneven Player

Playing so long.

'The Uneven Player' may be as close as Neilson gets to a direct affinity with Christian mysticism—a benevolent, omnipresent Christ above the temporal, beyond the seasons, finally darkened and 'burned' in keeping with Neilson's increasingly bitter poems about the fire of love. The 'dark lane' is also the realm of the Rhymer in 'The World as a Rhyme' ('call him old Destiny, / Blue Death or Time' [914]) and here, as in the 'untuneful dark' out of which 'came God' ('To the Untuneful Dark', 939), the omnipresent Christ-figure is interrupted and disbanded. Neilson's decision to leave the poem at twelve rather than six stanzas foreshadows the terrible grip his compromised metaphysics would assert over his final poems. Hanna summarises Neilson's double-bind thus:

The fusion of pagan and Christian religious beliefs clarifies Neilson's confused attitudes towards the Deity. The metaphysical darkness of Jehovah/Lucifer is opposed to the God of light, who is a blend of Christ, the sun, and spring. At noon,

⁷² Paul Verlaine (tr. Nettie Palmer) cited in *Letters*, p. 14.

or summer, the benevolent God becomes satanic. The ensuing debilitation and death attest to the Presbyterian creed of the corrupt heart, with its guilt and "thunder-blue" God. The childhood battleground endured in this way to the end.⁷³

One system tragically reinforced the other: spring-Christ-light would redeem the child's Eden-world, only to suffer the Fall into corruption again and again. Neilson was ultimately unable to transcend this, rooted as it was in his own world-creation and the massive backdrop of the Mallee. His subsequent consolations 'we live by the folly of spring' ('The Bard and the Lizard', 1045), 'the green is the nest of all riddles' ('You Cannot Go Down to the Spring', 1168) and 'joy is your playmate, all we know / of these unknowables of Time' ('To a Little Girl at Christmas', a revision of 'He was the Christ' [1140]) only adds to his dilemmas which culminate in 'Rob Me No More' (759, c.1930) where, as Hanna (1990) asserts 'Neilson has moved beyond Christianity', albeit in a confused manner.⁷⁴ In a letter to Neilson in 1938, Mary Gilmore observes 'you have, more or less, done what the old Spanish poets loved to do: and that is you have written poems indivisibly one, and yet divisibly two ... Accidental, but more the curious for that'.⁷⁵ St John of the Cross, one of the pillars of Spanish poetry, delighted in a metaphysics of paradox in *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*, while by contrast Neilson endured a paradoxical metaphysics which disrupted his Christianity thereafter, let alone Christian mysticism of any kind.⁷⁶ Yet in poems such as 'The Crane is My Neighbour', Neilson constructs birds and trees as intermediaries to bypass these disruptions.

⁷³ Hanna, *Folly of Spring*, p. 148. The name Lucifer also means 'light'.

⁷⁴ Hanna, *The Folly of Spring*, p. 131.

⁷⁵ *Letters*, p. 354. Gilmore is referring to 'The Crane is My Neighbour'.

⁷⁶ St John's use of paradox such as 'To arrive at all / desire to be nothing' is further examined in Chapter 6 (St John of the Cross cited in Kevin Hart, 'Darkness and Lostness: How to Read a Judith Wright Poem' in Judith Ryan & Chris Wallace-Crabbe [eds.], *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge [Mass.], 2004, p. 312).

Intermediaries: Trees

In his pursuit of 'mystery' Neilson occasionally constructed himself as an intermediary or conduit for others. In 1912, he wrote to Mary Gilmore 'I may be the means of suggesting to you something I cannot understand myself' and in 1914 'there seems indeed to be a mystery behind many things'.⁷⁷ Yet his own intermediary role became progressively externalised as Neilson turned to trees and birds for his transcendent 'lift'. In 1930 he comments 'there always seems to me something baffling about birds, as there is something baffling about trees ... In the way they lift us. It is hard to describe in words'.⁷⁸ In the process there were other attempted intermediaries, notably the blue 'Kinsman of God' in 'The Blue Man and the Barley' (805) and the wind in 'In Praise of the Wind' (990).

Trees such as the 'wizard tree' of 'Honeythirst' (1912) place Neilson in the same position as Kendall's 'The Voice in the Wild Oak', where the poet can address a tree (or flowers in 'I Spoke to the Violet' [987]) or sense its consciousness ('he saw that the daisies saw' ['He Sold Himself to the Daisies', 717]), but cannot decipher the voice therein. 'The Flight of the Weary' (824, 1925), an escapist, utopian poem where woes are abandoned for 'beloved October', exhibits Neilson's ideal representation of trees through the prophetic tones of Isaiah 35:5:

The silent shall speak, and the ears of
 The deaf shall be shaken with sound —
 There shall be a forest and lovers
 Shall make it the holiest ground.

⁷⁷ *Letters*, pp. 57, 59.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

... Our God shall be drowsy and think out
 His thoughts like a beautiful tree,
 And you shall be weary, how weary,
 With all that is weary with me.

Holy, hymn-singing birds complete the picture, just as they are available in 'Stony Town' (779, 1927) to confirm 'that the eldest Song is a forest thought / And the Singer was a tree'. Whether Christian, pagan or a fusion of the two, the image of the forest as a divine mind persists.

Prior to this, in 'The Orange Tree' (878, c.1919), trees operate as ways to deity rather than deity itself and the key which allows Neilson to overcome what A.G. Stephens called 'Kendall's bewailing insufficiency' is not to renounce ability in the manner of Keats, nor to listen *to* in the manner of Kendall, but to listen *with*, in union with the 'eldest Singer' of 'God's thoughts':

Silence, the young girl said. Oh, why,
 Why you talk to weary me?
 Plague me no longer now, for I
 Am listening, *like* the Orange Tree [my emphasis].⁷⁹

If mysticism is taken in Aldous Huxley's perennialist, non-theological context, here it is achieved: a communion with 'a light not of the sky', 'no voice, no music ... but it is almost sound', 'a light, a step, a call' a cross between Verlaine's 'music ever' and Mallarmé's 'musician of silence' ('Sainte').⁸⁰ Yet there is a great deal more to this poem which strongly aligns it with the Christian mystical consciousness

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸⁰ Mallarmé is not mentioned in Neilson's primary sources, but he was acquainted with Brennan's work (and later Brennan himself) and 'Paint Me a Petticoat Green' is virtually a short course in Mallarmé's 'paint the effect'.

specifically outlined in Chapter 1. In his autobiography, Neilson explains that beyond the vibrant orange trees he witnessed under evening light, 'there was also something which I tried to drag in, some enchantment or other. I have seen prints of Botticelli's wonderful picture "Spring" ... It has lovers, it has maidens and greenery and I think a robber in the background'.⁸¹ Botticelli's painting gave some creative impetus to the interplay of romantic, even naïve, poet and the young girl who experiences the unitive state. This interplay also allowed Neilson to test his own metaphysical obsessions: 'Is it of East or West?', 'The heartbeat of a luminous boy', 'a mad escapade of Spring', 'does he ... see in the full gold evening / All happenings of the olden time?', 'Does the compulsion of the dew / Make him unknowable...?', 'Is it... a waste of love?' and finally

Is it a fluttering heart that gave
 Too willingly and was reviled?
 Is it the stammering at a grave?
 The last world of a little child?

Neilson receives his answer: not yes, not no, but listen *like*, be one *with*. It is a reply that shares an *apophatic* affinity with the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, and a negative theology of 'The Orange Tree' can be ventured in this vein: *the light, the step, the call is neither East nor West, not the heartbeat of a luminous boy nor a mad escapade of Spring, not a waste of love nor a fluttering heart that gave too willingly and was reviled, not the stammering at a grave, nor the last word of a little child.* Pseudo-Dionysius did, of course, refer his initiates back to the scriptures, but as Hewson (2001) demonstrates the same can be said for Neilson:

⁸¹ John Shaw Neilson, *The Autobiography of John Shaw Neilson*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1978, p. 106.

In biblical depictions of divine manifestation, three phases are common. First, the dramatic revelation, often a fire or bright light associated with purification, followed by 'the call' and then the communication of a consolation or task. With this in mind, Neilson's evocation 'There is a light, a step, a call this evening on the Orange Tree' is analogous to Moses' epiphany [the burning bush of Exodus 3]. The impatient tone of the young girl in the final stanza of 'The Orange Tree' recalls God's exasperation at Moses' failure to see that God would provide all the answers. It is not surprising that Neilson should write in the same poem 'Plague me no longer now', when we consider the subsequent involvement of Moses and Aaron in a series of plagues [Exodus 10].⁸²

To the biblical connections in 'The Orange Tree', Hewson adds a second, ecclesiastical link to Neilson's Christianity, that of the Presbyterian Church's 'most famous symbol' of the burning bush on church documents and interiors, including those of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Penola, South Australia, which Neilson attended to age seven.⁸³ There is also the possibility of a third, poetic connection through Andrew Marvell's poem of praise 'Song of the Emigrants in Bermuda', included in Neilson's copy of *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*:

He [God] gave us this eternal Spring
 Which here enamels everything,
 And sends the fowls to us in care
 On daily visits through the air.
 He hangs in shades the orange bright
 Like golden lamps in a green night...

⁸² *Letters*, p. 30.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

As Hanna observes (1999), Neilson's line 'And soon the little globes of gold / Sat in the orange tree' also appears in 'Julie Callaway' (372, c.1907), written while Neilson was mourning his sister Maggie's death and the idea of the vision of light may have derived from 'an experience of one of his sisters—probably Maggie—at a revivalist meeting'.⁸⁴ This biographical context prompts the question whether or not 'The Orange Tree' seeks to preserve Maggie or indeed *her* illuminated Christianity, which Neilson might have felt superior to his own. 'The last word of a little child' is especially crucial here: Maggie's last moments, shared only with her brother, are related by Neilson himself thus:

I suppose we talked for something over an hour and I thought she began to look tired. All at once she said 'What is wrong with the light it is going dim'. I knew the end was near but did not have the heart to rush away at once and waken the others. Presently her head went back & she said, 'I think, I think' very faintly.⁸⁵

Here is the fourth connection to Christianity, the familial connection. It indicates the potential for a different kind of unitive experience in the poem, that of the living and the dead, Neilson and his sister's memory, even their Christianities or mystical experiences. Thus 'The Orange Tree' contains biblical, ecclesiastical, poetic and familial links to Christianity in addition to its mystical themes of divine illumination, singing silence, transcendent unknowing and negative theology. It demonstrates direct, experimental and unitive consciousness of Christ, God or Godhead transcending regular modes of knowledge and language through the figures of the girl, the poet and the tree respectively. More than an iconic poem of the ineffable, it is an iconic Australian Christian mystical poem.

⁸⁴ Hanna, *Jock*, p. 200.

⁸⁵ Neilson cited in Hanna, *Op Cit.*, p. 118. Ampisand Neilson's.

Intermediaries: Birds

The spiritual intermediary in 'The Orange Tree' is the tree, but it is also the girl who urges the poet to listen for 'a light, a step, a call'. Throughout Neilson's corpus there are strong associations between young girls, angels and birds. Early objects of affection are—quite tediously—angels ('To Mary Jane', 'To Sarah Ann' [256, 264]), but more substantial angelic allusions are conferred on the figure of Maggie in 'The Sacrifice' ('White for the grave ... Love looks for light—the old hope climbs and clings') and begin to manifest in later child-sky poems such as 'The Little Girl of the Sky' (389). Further, during Neilson's Melbourne period (1928–1942), young mothers leave him 'with God in a reverence' ('The Road to the Hospital', 1088) and 'school girls hastening through the light / Touch the Unknowable Divine' ('School Girls Hastening', 761). However, the young girl of 'The Orange Tree' has greater powers to move between the temporal and eternal in the context of Maggie's death. Imbued with this quality, she also assumes the principal power of Neilson's birds to 'carry the voice ... tell the matter' (Ecclesiastes 10:20). Ecclesiastes 12:4 speaks of the days of trouble where men 'shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low', a further link between transcendent birds, girls and music. For Neilson, pounding out his metre as he walked to and from jobs in the amplified silences of the Mallee, watching the wings of blue cranes 'so long until I saw only the sky' ('The Poor, Poor Country [2]', 881), birds were the great intermediaries between God and man, creations biblically exempt from The Fall. This is made explicit in 'The Birds Go By' (800, c.1927) where 'After the flight and the fall, the defeat of the pilgrim ... I dream they bear to the dead the thoughts of the living'. As Margaret Roberts (2003) shows, in various drafts this was also 'who knows what they bear from the dead to the living' and 'the dead can take hold of the

living', clearly showing Neilson's dream of birds as the poet's link between worlds.⁸⁶ 'The Birds Go By' is also the poem singled out by H.M. Green to support his initial judgement of Neilson's 'symbolism to the border of mysticism and over it' as it contains 'something that can be felt but not expressed'.⁸⁷

Birds for Neilson were a lifelong obsession. In 'The Flight of the Weary' there are two kinds, the hymn-singing forest birds and the water birds, and in later works a third type emerges in flightless hens and peacocks. All have holy qualities, as opposed to evil ravens who 'have the devil's speech ... and the devil's work to do' ('How Bitter are the Ravens', 727), the sea curlew with its 'imported mind' ('To a Sea Curlew', 1175) and 'the prince of pessimists / The Uncrowned king of Calvinists' the mopoke ('The Mopoke and Others', 871).⁸⁸ Forest birds are the resplendent intermediaries between heaven and earth, God and man. The smoker parrot is 'not of the Earth, / He only falls below' ('The Smoker Parrot [2]', 895) and the red lory is implored 'Do thou from thy look-out to Heaven, O Lory, come down' ('To the Red Lory', 936). They are also sweeter singers, at one stage inciting the poet's ire in 'Song in the Yellow' (767): 'How shall a poor man sing / When all the birds compete?' Neilson confers ideas of unbridled holiness on forest birds such as 'the cackling kingfisher with throat a-quiver / Eager to sing for us a morning hymn' in 'Along a River' (308, c.1906). The kingfisher is not only his friend, but is also unafraid of 'the wicked foe' in the sky who would become indistinguishable from a wrathful Jehovah. 'The Song and the Bird' (592, originally titled 'The Bird is Bold') further develops this crucial relationship:

⁸⁶ Neilson, *Collected Verse*, p. 802.

⁸⁷ *Letters*, pp. 413–4.

⁸⁸ Regarding the 'Calvinist' mopoke, Ursula King notes, 'It is true that many Protestants, especially Calvinists, have been strongly antimystical' (King, *Op Cit.*, p. 175).

He hath his Heaven got,
 For Love he shakes the tree.
 Happy he heedeth not
 The many gods that be.

... He fears not wind or sky,
 He counts not moon or year,
 Or the many men who die,
 Or the green wheat in the ear.

He knowest the false and fair
 And the deeps of deep things:
 How shall I know this bird
 Who sings and sings and sings?

As in 'The Orange Tree', one answer might be to listen to the bird which is already in its Heaven, ignores the animistic 'gods that be', doesn't fear 'the foe' of wind and sky, exists *beyond* the cycles and seasons, and knows both truth and the deep. The bird serves as intermediary for seeker and singer in its divine reality and sweeter song.

Water birds, such as the cranes who disappear into the heavens ('The Poor, Poor Country') are also Neilson's friends unafraid of God, but in 'The Gentle Water Bird' (831, c.1924) the 'courtly crane' is explicitly constructed as an intermediary sent to reveal the mysteries of God:

One day there fell a bird, a courtly crane:
 Wisely he walked, as one who knew of pain.

Gracious he was, and lofty as a king:
 Silent he was, and yet he seemed to sing
 Always of little children and the Spring.

God? did he know him? It was far he flew —
 God was not terrible and thunder-blue —
 It was a gentle water bird I knew.

... Sober apparelled, yet he caught the glow:
 Always of Heaven would he speak, and low,
 And he did tell me where the wishes go...

Like the orange tree, the crane catches a divine glow and exudes a silence that is almost sound. Yet the crane goes further, he actively instructs the poet 'till the dark fear was lifted far away' and Neilson's paradoxical metaphysics are temporarily overcome. There is a direct communion 'for many a day' and the poet is adamant 'he did tell me', though he can only 'half define / All the quiet beauty of that friend of mine'.

The porous identity of the crane yields at least three Christian mystical readings. In the first, the crane represents God ('not terrible and thunder blue — / it was a gentle water bird') whom the poet knows and communes with in a classic example of mystical union. In the second, the crane represents Christ who 'knew of pain', pities the suffering, sings of little children and literally suffers the Fall to tell the humble the way to heaven. The Christological reading is further supported by references to the Creation (Genesis 1:20) for which Christ was theologically present (John 1:2):

Kinsfolk of his it was who long before
 Came from the mist (and no one knows the shore)
 Came with the little children to the door.

Was he less wise than these birds long ago
 Who flew from God (He surely willed it so)
 Bearing great happiness to all below?

If the crane is Christ, then the same themes of mystical union apply. But there is also another 'friend' in the poem who might equally be Christ:

Sometimes when watching in the white sunshine
 Someone approaches – I can half define
 All the quiet beauty of that friend of mine.

If the crane represents God, the revealed 'Someone' might be Christ, and if the crane represents Christ, the revealed 'Someone' might be God or the spirit of Christ, even an angel given the 'white sunshine'. Neilson's assertion that the crane 'flew from God (He surely willed it so)' lends itself to a Christological reading, but also a Franciscan reading supported by Neilson's letters.

Two months before Neilson sent 'The Gentle Water Bird' to Mary Gilmore he wrote to Kate Baker: 'I daresay you know Katharine Tynan's poem "St Francis and the Bird" [sic]. Very beautiful is it not?'⁸⁹ Tynan (1861–1931), an Irish Catholic poet and friend of Yeats, opens her poem in a manner appealing to Neilson ('Little sisters, the birds / We must praise God') and concludes

⁸⁹ *Letters*, p. 127, dated 25 May 1924.

Now depart in peace:

In God's name I bless each one;

May your days be long i' the sun

And your joys increase.

And remember me,

Your poor brother Francis, who

Loves you and gives thanks to you

For this courtesy.⁹⁰

At the end of 'The Gentle Water Bird' the crane departs, and 'Someone' approaches in white sunshine. The crane's monastic 'cloak of grey' is another distinguishing feature, but beyond this it is impossible to separate Christ and the medieval mystic renowned for his imitation of Christ to the point of stigmata.⁹¹ Alternatively, as A.R. Chisholm (1965) suspects, Neilson's writing may simply resemble 'the deep and abiding sense of mystery' of St Francis evident in the saint's words in Celano's *First Life*:

"My brothers, birds, you should love your Creator very much and always love him; he gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly, and whatever else was necessary for you. God made you noble ['a courtly crane'] among his creatures, and he gave you a home in the purity of the air; though you never sow or reap, he nevertheless protects and governs you without any solicitude on your part." At these words, as Francis himself used to say and those too who were with him, the birds,

⁹⁰ Katharine Tynan, *Twenty One Poems of Katharine Tynan Selected by W.B. Yeats*, Dun Emer, Dundrum, 1908, pp. 19, 20. The poem is titled 'St Francis and the Birds' (plural).

⁹¹ See Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, p.59; a further point of cross-identification occurs in the event of the crane being an Australian white ibis (*threskiornis molucca*) which has a patch of skin under each wing which can turn a deep scarlet. The white ibis has historically been confused with the sacred ibis (see <http://www.amonline.net.au/factsheets/australian_white_ibis.htm> retrieved 19 July 2007).

rejoicing in a wonderful way according to their nature, began to stretch their necks, extend their wings ['he puts out his wings for the blue' in 'The Crane is My Neighbour'], open their mouths and gaze at him.⁹²

Convergences between St Francis and 'The Gentle Water Bird' (and 'The Crane is My Neighbour', 1050) are matched by innovative divergences, such as Neilson's reversal of Francis's instruction for the birds to worship by having the birds instruct him. This reversal is based on experience:

I didn't just make it up about that bird ... It seemed so confident and happy without any fear. It wasn't frightened of God like me. That's what gave me the idea for this rhyme, and my first idea of right religion too.⁹³

Yet even if the crane is read as neither God, Christ, nor Francis(can), it still leads the poet to consciousness of the presence of a holy 'Someone' beyond ordinary modes of knowledge and language. 'The Gentle Water Bird' in these four ways is a Christian mystical poem, making explicit what is implicit in 'The Orange Tree': a way from God, to God.

Regarding his flightless birds, Neilson in a 1923 letter repeats the Franciscan notion that 'tiny things close to the earth have special value'.⁹⁴ In 'The Hen in the Bushes' (837, 1930), Neilson turns away from the crane's skies:

⁹² A.R. Chisholm in John Shaw Neilson, *Selected Poems* (ed. A.R. Chisholm), Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1984 (orig. 1965), p. 6; Francis also refers to birds as sisters, such as 'my sisters, swallows' (Celano, 'First Life' in Marion A. Habig [ed.], *St Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1973, pp. 278–9). There is also the episode of Francis and the angelic lute, 'the holy father enjoyed so much the sweetness in that melodious song that he thought he had been transported to another world' (Celano, 'Second Life' in *Ibid.*, p. 466).

⁹³ Neilson cited in Hanna, *The Folly of Spring*, p. 23.

⁹⁴ *Letters*, p. 108. 'Those who are closest to the earth, the poor and simple who are dependent on the goodness and generosity of God, teach Francis the true meaning of life. It is this intense identification with their condition that allows him to look on all creatures in a new way' (Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady in St Francis & St Clare, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* [eds Regis J. Armstrong & Ignatius C. Brady], Paulist, New York, 1982, p. 7).

Call me the man seeing
 Too much in air,
 Low by the little hen
 Love it is there.

The motherly hen, despite the threat of the 'Old Tyrant', knows size or proximity to *terra firma* may have less to do with transcendent qualities that they might seem in keeping with the logic of the 'small voice' of 1 Kings 19:17. 'Love is a Microbe' (395) affirms this, as does 'To a Lodging House Canary' which, unlike Blake's caged robin putting all heaven in a rage, simply whistles away, being 'close to the Maker' (922), as are the poor of 'The Poor Can Feed the Birds' (1079). A late unfinished poem 'To the Peacock's Lady' (1156, 1939) serves as a fitting conclusion to both Neilson's intermediaries and his tangled metaphysics:

Your Lord is rich, he loves the sunniest weather;
 I doubt not that he gives to God a praise
 For all good things — he jumbles them together,
 Moonlight and orange leaves and golden rays.
 I often wonder much as one who strays
 Which road is God, which road should we be choosing?
 The guides are everywhere and all confusing.

The prophetic impulse remains ('I shall be prophet in this courtyard shady') but in a prophet who lost his 'road' in a scenario no better than 'The Earth Born' ('I cannot tell which way I ought to turn'). Ultimately all Neilson can do is revisit his earlier themes of the Emperor, the crane, forgiveness and orange trees with one addendum 'the world is well, it needs not any cure', an embattled consolation far from the

certainty of Julian of Norwich's 'all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well'.⁹⁵

John Shaw Neilson is integral to the study of Western Christian mysticism in Australian poetry. Throughout his career, the conjunction of mystical poetics, use of 'mystic' and 'mystery', critical discourses of what passes for mysticism and shifting notions of what mysticism *infers* is unprecedented in Australian literature. In Neilson's poetry, 'The Orange Tree' and 'The Gentle Water Bird' serve as prime examples of Christian mystical poetry through his use of intermediaries to transcend his dysfunctional metaphysics. Unlike Ada Cambridge, the first major Australian mystical poet, Neilson was critically feted as a 'mystic' which in turn reveals the nationalist, literary and gender implications of public recognition as a mystical poet in post-Federation Australia.

⁹⁵ Julian of Norwich cited in Ruth Caspar, "'All Shall Be Well": Prototypical Symbols of Hope', *Journal of Ideas* 42.1, 1981, p.143.

5. Francis Webb and the Search

Francis Webb (1925–1973) is the first Australian poet to consistently engage Western Christian mysticism in his poetry. He draws on the prophets, saints and mystics of the Catholic tradition via his trope of the ‘Search’ (‘Sturt and the Vultures’), which has its origins in his childhood experiences and early poems.¹ Though Webb was celebrated as a devotional poet during his lifetime, his corpus has only recently been critically appraised in terms of Western Christian mysticism, due in part to the shifting critical notions between eras. This chapter asserts that an understanding of mysticism is in fact imperative to the study of Webb’s poetry, with particular emphasis upon the biographical and bibliographical factors which fuelled Webb’s long-term attraction to Western Christian mysticism, including his extensive reading of individual mystics and theologians. A short prelude section traces the parallel redistribution of mystical authority from poets and commentators towards the mystics themselves for three mid-century Catholic poets.

Prelude: Harford, Buckley, McAuley

Christopher Brennan is the first of a long line of Catholic mystical poets including Webb, James McAuley, Vincent Buckley, Les Murray, Peter Steele, Kevin Hart and Maisie Cavanagh. Although Protestant mystical poets abound in equal share to Catholics in Australian poetry, Catholics are over-represented demographically, indicating the greater receptivity to mysticism in the Catholic tradition.² The mid-century Catholic poets, to which Lesbia Harford (published 1941) can be added,

¹ For ‘Sturt and the Vultures’, see Grace Perry (ed.), *Poetry Australia* (Francis Webb Commemorative Issue), 56, 1975, p. 28.

² See King, *Op Cit.*, for an account of ‘antimystical’ sentiments within Protestantism.

diverge sharply from Brennan, Fullerton and Cross in their refusal to claim mystical qualities for themselves as poets and their return to the mystics themselves as mystical authorities. These trends reflect changes in, and improved access to, international mysticism scholarship and international poetic interest in Western Christian mysticism exemplified by Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Yet these trends are also qualified: Harford lauds Emily Brontë as a contemplative, Buckley supports Blake's reputation as a mystic and McAuley valorises Eliot, Pound and Hopkins for resisting what he considers to be the heretical tendencies of the Romantic and symbolist poets.³ Buckley and McAuley are also quite prepared to use mystical tropes of erotic union for their own romantic, even misogynistic ends. Nonetheless, the mid-century Catholic poets succeed in reappraising the terms and conditions by which a poet might be termed 'mystical' in Australian poetry through a renewed focus upon the lives and works of the mystics themselves.

Lesbia Harford (1891–1927) was finally published in what Drusilla Modjeska (1985) describes as 'a small and curious volume' and more comprehensively by Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer in 1985.⁴ Even in the latter stages of her short life Harford resisted publication, declaring to the anthologist Percival Serle 'You see, I take my poetry seriously, and am in no hurry to be read' and later 'a poet should still be good at seventy or eighty'.⁵ While Harford's envisioned longevity did not come to pass, her resistance to publication within her own era allowed her to more freely explore themes of bisexuality ('In the Public Library', 44), working class women

³ Harford 'A Brontë Legend' in Lesbia Harford, *The Poems of Lesbia Harford* (eds Drusilla Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer), Sirius, North Ryde, 1985, p. 121. For Buckley's views on Blake, see Chapter 2. McAuley makes these claims in James McAuley, *James McAuley: Poetry Essays and Personal Commentary* (ed. Leonie Kramer), University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 185.

⁴ Drusilla Modjeska in Lesbia Harford, *Op Cit.*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7. As Modjeska (1985) notes, some Harford poems were published in her lifetime, though her publications tailed off in the 1920s as she attempted a novel, *The Invaluable Mystery* (*Ibid.*, pp. 30–1).

(‘Machinists Talking’, 72) and spirituality without resorting to the ciphers and conceits of her female contemporaries.⁶ While Harford’s engagement with mysticism is at its most pronounced in her final years, there are a number of discernible precedents. The first is her estrangement from the Catholic church for what she saw as its oppression and denial of sexuality. This, as Modjeska details, did not curtail her interest in the philosophy and spirituality of early Christianity or her use of religious imagery, in fact it may have intensified them.⁷ A second precedent is in her reading, which, as Gary Catalano (1998) observes, mainly ignored poets of her own era for ‘older and deeper sources’ such as Shakespeare and Donne, to which can be added the older pre-Christian mysticisms of Heraclitus and Plato.⁸ Ultimately, however, Harford’s engagement is a personal and artistic one. In ‘I can’t feel the sunshine’ she imagines confiding upon her lover’s breast ‘Many a secret thing / God has whispered to me / When my soul took wing’ (51). This ascent from the temporal is matched by the descent of the holy in the process of making poetry:

I live in a deep world of angelhood
 Afar from men.
 And all the great and bright and fiery troop
 kiss me agen [sic]

⁶ All page references are from *Ibid*, initial page numbers given. Poems without titles are indicated by the first line. Harford also pursues lesbian erotic themes in ‘I can’t feel the sunshine’ (50) and ‘Lie-a-bed’ (54). Her multiple machinist-themed poems form her strongest commentary on working women, in addition to her personal exhaustion in ‘A Prayer to Saint Rosa’ (129).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸ Gary Catalano, ‘Lesbia Harford’, *Quadrant* 42.12, 1998, p. 57. Harford’s familiarity with Heraclitean fragments can be found in her letter to Percival Serle, and Platonism appears in ‘Deliverance through Art’, ‘To Plato’s dictum’, ‘Child Sun’ especially on the nature of vision and beauty in ‘We climbed that hill’ (Harford, *Op Cit.*, pp. 7, 61, 66, 90).

With love. Deathless Ideas! I have no need
 Of girls' lips then.
 ('Deliverance Through Art', 61)

Although this angelic eros might operate as cipher of its own for the poetic process by substituting angel for muse, it is also representative of Harford's preoccupation with holy 'friends' as intermediaries which continues into her later work.⁹ Almost seven years later, God is imagined to ask forgiveness and petition the poet for friendship to which she agrees on the condition He 'make amends / For things you've done' ('A Deity', 177). Yet imagination proves insufficient and although Harford 'learns to love the little saints. / 'Oh hear me sigh, / St Anthony, / Find this for me', her appeal to the Paduan saint (c.1195–1231) soon gives way to a more direct affirmation:

The Mother and the Holy Child
 Are friends to me.
 I pray, "I am my mother's child.
 I trust you'll see
 That days are bright
 And all goes right
 With her and me."
 ('Polytheist', 122)

In December 1926, after over a decade of spiritual poetry and with her health failing, Harford reaches her point of reckoning. Again it is conditional, but the condition is

⁹ See also 'I have two wings' and 'Summer Lightning' from this period (*Ibid.*, pp. 50, 52).

one of prayer and hope. She declares 'I am no mystic. All the ways of God / Are dark to me', but

when I hear the Angelus, I say
 A Latin prayer
 Hoping the dim incanted words may shine
 Some way, somewhere.

 Words and a will may work upon my mind
 Till ethics turn
 To that transcendent mystic love with which
 The Seraphim burn.

 ('I am no mystic', 129)

This is a bold departure from the Brennan who threw the mystics overboard, the Cross who kissed the lips of God or the Fullerton who claimed the power of ten evangelists. Harford, realising her spiritual quest may not be realised, responds to the Catholic liturgy of the mystery of the Incarnation by hoping 'words and a will' might turn her social ethics into the mystic love of the seraphim. Harford distinguishes herself from the mystical poets of her age, including Neilson (who claimed not to know what mysticism meant) in three ways: first, by identifying the mystical as a way to the knowledge and love of God rather than the express domain of mystical poets; secondly, by constructing herself as *not* a mystic, though aspiring to mystic love; and thirdly, by her explicit recourse to saints (and Mary) as intermediaries, culminating in her final poem 'A Prayer to St Rosa of Lima' where the saint, herself inspired by the example of St Catherine of Siena, is called upon to deliver the sleep she went without when she 'talked with God and made a heaven so'. Harford's

realigning of the mystical, and poetic access to the mystical, with traditional Catholic sources precedes similar shifts in Buckley, McAuley and Webb.

Vincent Buckley (1925–1988) produced a number of works portraying mystical figures and themes, especially in his first collection *The World's Flesh* (1954). 'The Death of St Catherine of Siena' (25), for example, provides an example of an Australian poetic representation of a major mystic, though the subject's mystical credentials also allow the poet to keep the ineffable at a safe distance:

Seeking at first to conquer, she became
 God's temptress, wrenching each immense decree
 To break the strong-whorled shell, and in His name
 Seize the fierce coil of immortality.

Dared sweetness, dared and gone. The chains of God
 Bound honour in the high unchanging wall
 Of His mysterious deed in her, and trod
 Her flesh to spirit in the vertical

One light of stone and silence. Yet the door
 Swings wider, wider there. Gave last to Him
 Her generous body, darkening to adore
 The ice-bound heaven of the Seraphim.¹⁰

There are overtones of bridal mysticism as 'God's temptress ... Gave last to Him / Her generous body', but also problematic overtones of divinised patriarchy where even one of the foremost women Christian mystics (and Doctor of the Church in

¹⁰ Page references are from Vincent Buckley, *The World's Flesh*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1954, *Masters in Israel*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961 and *Selected Poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1981 as appropriate.

1970) is subjected to the Madonna-whore dyad.¹¹ ‘Abelard at Troyes’ (25) with its fire and desert imagery superceding the luxurious ‘eyes’, ‘silk’ and ‘breasts’ of Abelard’s ‘Mistress’ contacts Australian mystical poetry in its own way through Gwen’s Harwood’s satirical response ‘Eloise to Abelard’, and her later, heartfelt elegies after Buckley’s death (see Chapter 7). ‘The Flight into Egypt’ (21), an adaptation of Matthew 2:14-16, is more effective when Buckley turns to negative capability to address Christ the Word at Mary’s breast:

O love that have found a space
 To lie in, that have found flesh to inhabit,
 ... what do you inherit
 Of memories, what of the turbulent air
 Beaten with angels? What do you glimpse, who hear
 That ruin through her breathing call
 Like the vast ocean fluttering in a shell,
 And feel, in the stroke of every breath,
 ... The edgeless sword of love.

That is, the poet asks, how does it feel to be human, the Word, the world’s flesh? Fittingly, no answer comes and Buckley’s tone gradually turns from one of negative capability to a *cataphatic* liturgy in ‘Eucharist’ (30), ‘Mater Crux Lucis’ (35), ‘Song for Resurrection Day’ (‘Cleave, soul and body, to that waking’ [38]) and ‘To the Blessed Virgin’ (‘move in me, both flame and seed ... Sway of my heart, O cause / Your tears in me, the lightning-flash / That comes to eyes unshadowed by their love’ [38]) from *Masters In Israel* (1961). The last poem of *The Word’s Flesh*, however,

¹¹ For St Catherine of Siena as a Doctor of the Church, see King, *Op Cit.*, p. 86.

evokes a passion, even an ancestral stigmata, for an immigrant son, his ‘honeyed night ... taken / By silence that my father’s hands have wrought, / Lost in his eyes like dark astonished wounds / That open their grief in me’ (‘Land of No Fathers’ [36]). The final abysmal image of his father’s well as ‘a deep unanswering face’ (Genesis 1.2) finds some scriptural continuity in *Arcady and Other Places* (1966) where

Words like a fever bring
 The pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire
 Travelling the desert of the mind and face.
 ... Dying, he grows more tender, learns to teach
 Himself the mysteries I am left to trace.
 As I bend to say “Till next time” I search
 For signs of resurrection in his face.
 (‘Stroke’, 71)

In ‘Impromptu for Francis Webb’ (44) Buckley envisages the poets’ shared Christological task of ‘Visioning an age without barrier or taint, / The resurrected body in its peace / Walking its heaven; and have our first success / in most attempting the impossible’. *Golden Builders and Other Poems* (1976) subsequently refigures Blake’s Jerusalem through the immigrant story of inner suburban Melbourne. The title poem also recalls St Catherine of Siena’s mystical union in its lines, ‘Yet the door / Swings wider, wider there ... “the gates are open, father”. / The gates are open’ (111).¹² Despite this, Buckley’s strongest connections to Christian mysticism remain those of *The World’s Flesh*, while his *Essays in Poetry, Mainly*

¹² ‘Let that fire burst the seed of my body and bring forth blood; then with that blood, given for love of your blood, and with the key of obedience, let me unlock heaven’s gate’ (Catherine of Siena, *Op Cit*, p. 364). Buckley uses similar flame and seed imagery in ‘To the Blessed Virgin’.

Australian (1957) also attempts to trace the mystical, or ‘quasi-mystical’ in Australian poets including Judith Wright, which will be further examined in Chapter 6.¹³

James McAuley (1917–1976) converted to Catholicism in 1952 after an intensive period of theological engagement which included a Christological vision while reading William Ralph Inge in 1949:

Some weeks ago (while reading in the Public Library an essay of Inge’s on [the English mystic] William Law) I had a vivid imagination of a figure of Christ standing diagonally above my right shoulder; light shone slanting down from his eyes and penetrated me and I felt as if *rinsed and scoured with light*.¹⁴

Later in life he recalls a dream vision from his early twenties of being ‘a single cell of life in an absolute dead desert’, relating it to St John of the Cross’s all and nothing (*todo y nada*) state of ascetic detachment from the world where union with God can be realised.¹⁵ Though he declares ‘I pretend no knowledge of these matters, and have long ceased trying to read the mystics or pursue the mystical way’ he still insists ‘there are some passages in the writings of the mystics which suggest that this transforming union with the divine may result in the soul receiving back the created world as well in a transfiguring light’.¹⁶

McAuley could be dogmatic as well as prodigious, and the application of what Michael Ackland (2001) terms his ‘crusading zeal’ can be seen in McAuley’s

¹³ Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry*, p. 158. Blake, Yeats and Eliot are also discussed in terms of the mystical in his *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968).

¹⁴ McAuley cited in Michael Ackland, *Damaged Men: The Precarious Lives of James McAuley and Harold Stewart*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2001, p. 90.

¹⁵ McAuley, ‘A Small Testament’ in James McAuley, *James McAuley: Poetry Essays and Personal Commentary* (ed. Leonie Kramer), University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 128.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

repudiation of Brennan's 1904 lectures which linked symbolism to mysticism in 'Journey into Egypt' (1975):

Blake and Novalis called their new revelation Christianity, but it was their own autonomous creation, not responsible to any authority other than their own imagination. Mallarmé offered a replacement of Christianity ... Brennan rightly sees a kinship between the pretensions of this kind of symbolist theory and those of ancient gnosticism.¹⁷

McAuley parts company with Brennan by insisting that if the Gnostics were the first Christian heretics, then post-enlightenment poets were their industrialised equivalents and those who had succumbed to the 'Magian Heresy' of the 'ancient mysteries of occultism or gnosticism' included not only Blake, Novalis and Mallarmé, but Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Rilke, Yeats, Valéry and Surrealists such as André Breton.¹⁸ A feature of this 'Heresy' was that poetry 'sought to be the principle of its own mysticism, to divinise itself: poetic imagination itself was to become the Logos ... the poets went to Egypt to become Magi'.¹⁹ Brennan, of course, can be vindicated by an understanding of mysticism as a shifting notion: in Brennan's era the foremost mysticism scholars included poets such as Blake as mystical authorities.²⁰ McAuley's stance is itself supported by later twentieth-century mysticism scholarship which rarely includes poets, yet beneath his bombastic overtures for 'a new poetic Moses who, having overcome the magicians of Egypt, will lead us, laden with the spoils of the Egyptians, to the Promised Land' lies a

¹⁷ Ackland, *Op Cit.*, p. 145; McAuley, *Christopher Brennan*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1973, pp. 12–13.

¹⁸ The Magian Heresy is also discussed along the same lines in an earlier essay 'The Magian Heresy' (1957), written just prior to the composition of *Captain Quiros* (1964).

¹⁹ McAuley, 'Journey into Egypt' in *James McAuley*, p. 185.

²⁰ Underhill (1911) for example portrays Blake as one 'at the point where the mystic swallows up the poet' (Evelyn Underhill, *Op Cit.*, p. 235).

different project whereby McAuley retrospectively places his own poetry on the ‘only road’ of Hofmannsthal, Hopkins, and Eliot (‘Meditation’, 99; ‘In Regard to T.S. Eliot, 239) as opposed to the Rilke, Hölderlin, Valéry, and ‘Gnostic Prelude’ (8) of his pre-conversion collection *Under Aldebaran* (1946).²¹ In his attempt to police mystical poetry in such a stringent manner, McAuley provides some valuable insights into the changing nature of what passes for mysticism in Australian poetry criticism.

McAuley’s attraction to mysticism was both scholarly and experiential, the latter coinciding with his discovery in New Guinea of ‘the mystical way’ of the French Catholic missionary Marie-Therese Noblet (1889–1930), who as ‘the locus not only of apparent divine action but also, apparently, of violent and outrageous demonic action’ in part inspired his conversion.²² The poet ‘found Marie-Therese’s case personally important’ in more ways than one: according to Ackland, ‘McAuley believed he was possessed ... this was his best kept secret, which explains much of the attraction exercised on him first by mysticism, then by New Guinea’.²³ For the poet, ‘the saints gained a certain proficiency in casting out devils’ and as many saints were also mystics, mysticism was bound to appeal.²⁴ In McAuley’s later works, ‘poems are prophecy / Of a new heaven and earth, / A rumour of resurrection’ (‘Credo’, 235), but the Jesus of *Under Aldebaran* who touched Ezekiel and walked

²¹ McAuley, *Op Cit.*, p. 194. All initial page references from James McAuley, *Collected Poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1994.

²² James McAuley, ‘My New Guinea’ in McAuley, *James McAuley*, p. 28.

²³ McAuley cited in, Ackland, *Op Cit.*, pp. 98, 85-6. McAuley’s ‘secret’, may help to explain the contested nature of a man who extensively studied mysticism and wrote hymns still used in the Catholic liturgy yet was fondly referred to by Gwen Harwood as ‘the Devil’ for his bouts of malevolence and schadenfreude. (Leonie Kramer in McAuley, *Op Cit.*, p. xii; Ackland, *Op Cit.*, pp. 215, 233).

²⁴ McAuley cited in *Ibid.*, p. 87.

among the ‘real faces, seen by God alone’ of stones, beasts and flowers (‘Jesus’, 26) ‘cannot walk in a poem, / Not in our century’ (‘The Twentieth Century’, 242), and McAuley regularly seeks solace in his mystical poets. In ‘The Hazard and the Gift’ (268), he turns to John Shaw Neilson to reveal, as McAuley reflects, ‘what cannot be fully expressed: the strangeness of the precarious gift of poetry in a precarious life, and the relation of the gift to those intimations of the mystery of being which visit at moments the unguarded heart’.²⁵ By *Time Given* (1976), however, McAuley has by his own admission abandoned the mystics and the mystical way. Spiritual concerns persist, but just as *Captain Quiros* is a reinvestigation of earlier sources (such as Quiros’s vision in ‘Terra Australis’ where ‘angopohra preaches on the hillsides / With the gestures of Moses’) many of these concerns can be traced to McAuley’s most explicitly mystical collection, *A Vision of Ceremony* (1956).²⁶

A Vision of Ceremony, dedicated to Marie-Therese Noblet, is forthright in its aims and influences, stripped of the conceits of epic poetry and supercharged with McAuley’s intensive research into mysticism, liturgy and theology. ‘New Guinea’ (98) is a tribute to one of his conversion’s heroes, Noblet’s exorcist Archbishop De Boismenu, and also to New Guinea itself, ‘bird-shaped island, with secretive bird-voices’ where ‘the doors of the spirit open’ and ‘The forest-odours, insects, clouds and fountains / Are like the figures of my inmost dream ... A wordless revelation is

²⁵ McAuley ‘The Rhetoric of Australian Poetry’ in McAuley, *Op Cit.*, p. 116; the notion of the ‘gift’ (‘I do not give to you as the world gives’ [John 14:27]) resurfaces in Kevin Hart and late Derrida.

²⁶ Francis Webb sensed he might have had a hand in enticing McAuley, a poet he felt was ‘the big time ... with just that romantic — or better, mystical — element that I love in poetry’, to the explorer poem (Michael Griffith, *God’s Fool: The Life and Poetry of Francis Webb*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1991, pp. 272–3, 300). *Quiros* (137) contains a wealth of scriptural, theological and liturgical sources, angels, Franciscans, a Mystical Adam, New Jerusalem, and tropes of singing silence, timelessness, bridal imagery and inner pilgrimage collected ‘in ceaseless meditation ... according to the method called Ignatian’ but like Charles Harpur’s longer theological poems the overall conceit of the poems separates it from a deeper investigation of the mystical, whereas *A Vision of Ceremony* is more direct.

their theme'. Here several important devices appear and resound through the collection: portentous birds, inexpressible revelation, transformation through Christ as miracle-worker and the intermediary role of saints:

Whence that deep longing for an exorciser,
For Christ descending as a thaumaturge
Into his saints, as formerly in the desert,
Warring with demons on the outer verge.

The descending Christ is echoed in the descending Bird of Paradise in 'To the Holy Spirit' ('Let your drab earthly mate that watches in morning calm / Unseen, be filled with the nuptial splendours of your desire' [84]), but there are crucial differences between bird and Christ. The prophetic bird is invoked to act, to dance, to fill, to inspire its 'dull earthly mate' towards a state of mystical, nuptial union with the fire of the Holy Spirit; Jesus has already acted, delivering his 'saint' De Boismenu to eternal union. Both Holy Spirit, via the bird, and Jesus, via De Boismenu, act through other forms. If Christ 'cannot walk in a poem / Not in our century' ('The Twentieth Century' [242]) He can, however, be present through intermediaries, a position reminiscent of Neilson's birds and trees.

Christian mystical eroticism depends upon an ambiguity of identity sufficient for an allegorical interpretation of union between the soul and the divine. In *A Vision of Ceremony*, however, this ambiguity is regularly undermined by McAuley's over-identification with temporal desire. In 'Canticle' (82) for example, the lover who dies in delight and is reborn in love, and the wagtail who 'cannot sleep for love' because 'only love can fill the heart' recall some testimonies of mystical union including those of St John of the Cross and The Song of Songs but if the figure of the lover is

read as a sexual partner who receives ‘the deep pulse of love’s will’, the phallus, then mystical interpretations founder.²⁷ ‘Canticle’ arguably retains some measure of ambiguity, but in other poems this problem becomes increasingly pronounced. The ‘mysterious night’, wounds of love, ‘commingling’ and ‘deep intimacies of fire’ of ‘Cantilena’ (118) are set within the context of the ‘mating’ realm of ‘the emperor moth of pleasure’ and ‘To One Alone’ (121) is especially manipulative in its use of mystical language for seductive purposes (‘Your body is that paradise God planted ... That higher life the mysteries impart’).²⁸ The Christological zenith of McAuley’s eroticism appears in ‘Nuptial Hymn’, where bodily ‘rapture’ becomes a holy, redeeming, ‘appointed’ act through which the nocturnal earth sings to the Christ of Light (‘O Lumen Christi, leading all things home’ [125]), yet even this is interrupted by the ‘holy rite’ of the ‘thick candle with the golden flame / Dipped in the womb of waters’, which despite its ‘secret light’, seraphs and risen dead becomes almost satirically phallogentric.

‘Celebration of Divine Love’ (89), by contrast, substitutes an allegory of spiritual progression for that of compromised eros. Lyn McCredden (1992) details some precedents in *Under Aldebaran*, which ‘seek a mystical, at times apocalyptic, image for love’ where ‘conventional tropes and stances are pitted against what emerges as an overwhelming absence’.²⁹ ‘Celebration of Divine Love’ is no less subject to such tropes and absences in its post-Fall evocation of a contemplative child ‘fled from his own disaster’ receiving visions. Yet beyond the ‘mysterious symbols’

²⁷ For example ‘In killing You changed death to life ... How tenderly You swell my heart / with love!’ (‘O Living Flame of Love’ [St John of the Cross, *The Collected Works* (trs Kieran Kavanagh & Otilio Rodriguez), Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, 1964, p. 718]). The resurrection to eternal life is, of course, the scriptural model.

²⁸ The stigmata of St Francis aside, the wounds of love appear for example in St John of the Cross’s *The Spiritual Canticle* and, also, for ‘intimacies of fire’, *The Living Flame of Love*. See *Ibid.*

²⁹ Lyn McCredden, *James McAuley*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p. 52.

and sacred Virgin in whom 'Love that is most human grows divine', McAuley unveils his cosmic Christ:

The figure on Eternity's gold ground,
 Behold Christ reigning on the cosmic tree,
 His blood its sap, his breath its respiration,
 In him are all things in perfection found.
 He is the bond and stay of his creation,
 Unmeasured measure of immensity;
 The nails that pierce his hands and feet make fast
 The axis of the world, his outstretched arms
 Give falling nature its stability.
 Now is the three hours' darkness of the soul,
 The time of earthquake; now at last
 The Word speaks, and the epileptic will
 Convulsing vomit forth its demons. Then
 Full-clothed, in his right mind, the man sits still,
 Conversing with aeons in the speech of men.

To some degree this is merely a reworking of the Jesus's death in Matthew 27:51, the exorcised epileptic of Matthew 17:18, even the fig tree of Matthew 24:32 given 'his summer heat of love' at poem's end. But McAuley also finds mystical correlations in his depiction of Christ as the 'unmeasured measure of immensity' which recalls Johannes Tauler's abyss that 'God alone can fill ... in His Infinity' or Pascal's 'infinite sphere' of God and Christ's continuing 'garden of agony'.³⁰ Crucially, the

³⁰ Johannes Tauler cited in Grant, *Op Cit.*, p. 17; Blaise Pascal, *Op Cit.*, pp. 181, 268.

saints and mystics themselves are directly addressed as the poet's voice overtakes that of the child:

You gentle souls who sit contemplative
 In the walled garden where the fountain flows
 ... he shall come at last for whom you yearn
 And deep and silent shall be your communing.

The contemplatives shut off at the fountain, a major Ignatian symbol for the abundance of God (see Steele in Chapter 7), are thus called upon to rejoice for they commune with Christ both silently and in 'a sacrificial fire'.

The cosmic Christ of 'Celebration of Divine Love' who receives contemplatives for mystical and sacrificial union represents McAuley's most successful transposition of the tropes and themes of Western Christian mysticism into his own poetry: 'a summer heat of love' more transcendent than 'the wounds of desire' in 'Cantilena'; a Christ descending not to exorcise or dance, but unite with contemplatives; a 'measureless measure of immensity' uncompromised by lapses into temporal desire. However, the twin conceits of the child and the fountain serve to keep mystical consciousness at a distance from the poet. And yet could 'Celebration of Divine Love' be related to McAuley's 1949 vision of the 'rinsing, scouring' Christ of light? McAuley's project is by his own admission 'the search for, and the struggle to express, an intuition of the True Form of Man', either the True Form of a post-Fall Man that *includes* uncertainty, fallibility and eroticism or, if the True Form of Man means the divine, only an intuition of it.³¹ In 'The Celebration of Divine Love', any Christological mysticism is ultimately outside the poem due to the

³¹ James McAuley, *Selected Poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963, p. vi.

poet's exteriorising of the *scala perfectionis* and mystical union into the child and contemplatives respectively. When the poet's voice finally inhabits the poem it is only to remind the contemplatives that they are walled off, preparing for communion with Christ. The poet, by contrast, gains only the echo of a prophetic tone, as in Neilson's 'To a Peacock's Lady', although in a poem dedicated to Vincent Buckley he recognises 'Only the simplest forms can hold / A vast complexity' ('The Art of Poetry') which endures in the 'beauty pointing past itself' in his poem for Neilson, 'The Hazard and the Gift.'³² In McAuley's final poems this is reconfigured into the lives of two saints, St Francis ('At Assisi', 313) and St Cecilia ('The Martyrdom of St Cecilia', 323), the musician-saint also the subject of Mallarmé's 'Sainte'.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 33. 'To Any Poet' proposes St Gregory of Nyssa's 'sober drunkenness', a trope important to Wright, yet in 'An Art of Poetry', a sobriety of the *image* is sought. This enduring concern, present in the 'Journey into Egypt' equips McAuley with a sense of literary asceticism and *via negativa*. For Noel Rowe (2000) the asceticism is the stronger impulse: 'McAuley's use of the *via negativa* encourages instead those activities by which his poetry participates in uncertainty, qualification, deflation, and rupture in order to save its desire for the Word' (Noel Rowe, 'Giving a Word to the Sand', *Westerly* 45, 2000, p. 153).

Francis Webb

An understanding of Western Christian mysticism is crucial to the study of Francis Webb (1925–1973). Ada Cambridge, an Australian pioneer of the Search motif ('Learn', 'The Vain Question'), is comprehensively mystical in 'The Night' and 'The Lonely Seas', as is John Shaw Neilson in 'The Orange Tree' and 'The Gentle Water Bird'. Others such as Harpur, Kendall, Cross, Fullerton, Brennan, Harford, Buckley and McAuley have variously engaged mysticism, ineffability, contemplative or unitive experience in their poetic and critical work. Webb, however, is the first Australian poet to comprehensively engage mysticism on each of the methodological levels of this thesis: that is, he explicitly refers to mystical figures, deliberately uses mystical terminology and imagery (not to mention theology), and demonstrates mystical consciousness of Christ, God or Godhead in his poetry. This multilateral engagement is grounded in biographical, religious and bibliographic factors, each of which will be analysed in relation to Webb's mystical poetry. Webb's vehicle of the 'Search' is critiqued here in terms of an Explorer Search, comprised of his multiple explorer sequences, and what can be called his Mystic Search, directed towards mystical figures such as St Francis of Assisi, Gerard Manley Hopkins, St Augustine and St Therese of Liseux, with recurring emphasis upon the Christian mystery itself, the resurrection of Christ.

Origins of the Search: The Star Myth

Even before 'the Search' was twice employed by Webb himself in a late poem 'Sturt and the Vultures', the Search as a pilgrimage or (anti-)heroic explorer quest was a central trope for his sequences *A Drum for Ben Boyd* (1948), 'Leichhardt in Theatre'

(1952) and ‘Eyre All Alone’ (1961). Bernadette Brennan (2005) contextualises the Search in terms of her critiques of Judith Wright and Kevin Hart, two poets of major importance to this study:

Francis Webb’s poetry is always involved in “the Search for something” (‘Sturt and the Vultures’). That “Search”, as Judith Wright has noted [in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*], is directed towards an understanding of “the truth about man and his relationships, to himself, to other men, and in the end, to God.” It is by necessity a linguistic search, an attempt through words to locate the incarnate Word. Kevin Hart’s explanation of his poetic engagement with the word/Word relationship could equally apply to Webb ... Webb’s poetry is one of quest and questioning. It is the experience of the search. It is the experience of the attempt to write ‘God.’³³

Webb’s poetic Search for the Word and the writing of God has its origins in his parental relationships. Webb’s mother, a singer, died when he was two and his musician father was institutionalised at Callan Park Mental Hospital with severe depression shortly after, remaining in contact only through letters until his death in 1945.³⁴ The Webb children were placed in the care of their paternal grandparents where, as Michael Griffith (1991) recounts, an embryonic form of the Search appeared:

Their mother, they were told, had gone to heaven, where she was the biggest and brightest star in the sky. Daddy had become very lost without her and couldn’t play his music any more and this made it worse for him. So he had gone searching for the brightest star and he himself was now the wandering star. This story made a

³³ Bernadette Brennan, ‘Recognizing the “Face of Love” in Francis Webb’s “The Canticle”’, *Antipodes* 19.1, 2005, p. 31. Brennan cites Hart as follows: ‘To say “God” is to explode immanence ... As soon as it enters the world, the Word is lost. Writing poems is a search for that Word’.

³⁴ Griffith, *Op Cit.*, pp. 10–11.

profound impression on Webb. Many of his poems embody a reaching out for a stable point of light or sound beyond the unpredictable flux of experience.³⁵

The effects of this familial myth of earthly loss and transcendent love cannot be underestimated, especially given Webb's direct response to it decades later in 'Hospital Night' ('that star ... It is pain, truth, it is you, my father, beloved friend' [164]) and the 'parent galaxies' of 'St Therese and the Child', where the feminine is finally included as an *aspect*, rather than *object*, of the Search.³⁶ This founding myth, hereafter referred to as the Star Myth, serves as the creation story of the Search, impressing mystical tropes of transcendence and the quest for union upon the poet at a young age.

Webb thus *inherited* the Search, complete with his mother 'the brightest star' as the first object of absence and immanence and his father 'the wandering star' as the first Searcher, compelled to wander for three reasons: to avoid the hellish limbo of being lost, to regain the music dependent upon their union, and to be reunited with his love. Dramatic tropes of the Star Myth which underscore Webb's early poems and explorer sequences include those of being found rather than finding (for nowhere is it indicated the stars will be joined); those of regaining lost voices, music and poetry through revelation or epiphany; and those of unification with oblivion, as transcendence, disaster, disappearance or landscape, and in some cases, such as 'Eyre All Alone', return (or progress) through immeasurable transformation. In the early

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁶ All page references are from Francis Webb, *Collected Poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1969, cross-checked with the extensive errata identified by Leonie Meere in Francis Webb, *Francis Webb, Poet and Brother* (eds Leonie & Peter Meere) Sage Old Books, Pomona, 2001, p. 291. 'St Therese and the Child' is reproduced in Perry (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 25.

poems and *A Drum for Ben Boyd* especially, the Search is a Search for the Searchers, for wandering fathers rather than shining mothers. The Searcher must, even sacramentally, encounter or embody beauty, joy, pain and truth. This is clearly the case in 'Hospital Night', and the sequences on Leichhardt and Eyre whose expeditions were partially reconstructed from their own biblically-inspired journals.³⁷ While the characteristics of Webb's Searcher and Search, like his Explorer and Mystic Searches, become ultimately inseparable, there is a clear attempt in the poet's early writings to distinguish and identify the two. Michael Griffith (1991) traces Webb's obsession with desolate, embattled heroics back to 'The Hero of the Plain', an extraordinary poem written at age seven in the same year the poet's father was permanently removed to Callan Park Hospital.³⁸ In it, a little child 'looking / for his home again' becomes the hero of the plain by lighting a warning beacon when danger stirs, for which he is shot and dies beneath the mourning trees and, implicitly, the stars.

From Star Myth to Christian Mysticism

While the origins of Webb's Search are biographically evident, it is less apparent where his enduring engagement with Western Christian mysticism begins. An early grounding in the Bible, Catholic liturgy and a familiarity with the lives of the saints were both important, as was a growing affection for English mystical poets including Francis Thompson (who, according to one of the books in the young Webb's possession, 'reached the "smouldering core of mystery"') and Gerard Manley

³⁷ See Roland Boer, 'Explorer Hermeneutics, or Fat Damper and Sweetened Tea', *Semeia* 88, 2001, pp. 71–96.

³⁸ Griffith, *Op Cit.*, pp. 11, 17.

Hopkins, to whom Webb later addressed ‘Galston: Hopkins and Fosters Dam’.³⁹ Bill Ashcroft (1996) describes Webb’s Catholicism as a ‘unmistakably a Catholicism of solitude’ complemented by extensive reading of the mystics St Augustine, St Francis, Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, and the Catholic poets Richard Crashaw and Robert Southwell, though *when* these were read remains unclear.⁴⁰

Some bibliographical clues can be found in Webb’s letters, such as his 1951 visit to the Benedictine library at New Norcia, Western Australia, where he unsuccessfully ‘tried to sell (spiritually, of course) G.M. Hopkins’ and in the following year he accessed Franciscan materials at a monastery in Wahroonga, north of Sydney.⁴¹ ‘The Canticle’ and ‘Galston: Hopkins and Foster’s Dam’ follow shortly after. Upon his first visit to England in 1949, Webb was temporarily institutionalised, a situation which became virtually permanent upon his second visit in 1953. Transferred from English to Australian hospitals in 1960, Webb requested the shipping of some of his books from England, notably Plato, Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*, Jacques Maritain’s *Prayer and Intelligence* (1928) and Dom Cuthbert Butler’s *Western Mysticism: The Teachings of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life* (1922). Griffith (1991) also records Webb’s subsequent fascination with St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, St Ignatius Loyola and his meditations on Eliot’s *Four Quartets* toward the end of his life.⁴² Reading was vital for Webb not only for research but as part of a literary

³⁹ See for example ‘unless you fresh the mind from time to time you cannot always remember or believe how deep the inscape in things is’, journal entry 1871, reproduced in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 204; Griffith, *Op Cit*, pp. 24–5.

⁴⁰ Bill Ashcroft, *The Gimbals of Unease: The Poetry of Francis Webb*, Centre for Australian Literary Studies (UWA), Nedlands, 1996, p. 29.

⁴¹ Letter dated 30th November 1951 in Francis Webb, *Op Cit.*, p. 44; Griffith, *God’s Fool*, p. 208.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 290.

Search for this self-described ‘strict, if not puritanical Catholic’.⁴³ Aside from extensive works on music and art, Webb’s surviving volumes according to Griffith (1980) and Willoughby Library include several biographies of St Francis, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, *The Letters of St Paul*, and works by St Francis De Sales, St John of the Cross, Blaise Pascal, St Therese of Liseux, Pierre Teilhard De Chardin and Evelyn Underhill’s mentor Friedrich Von Hügel.⁴⁴ Dante, Blake, Wordsworth, Thompson, Hopkins, Baudelaire, Whitman, Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Lowell, and Australian mystical poets such as Neilson, Robinson, Buckley, McAuley, Campbell, FitzGerald, Wright, Hope, Harwood and Murray are all represented, an impressive list to which any number of lost or borrowed books might have been included. Webb was keenly aware of his contemporaries, commenting in a letter to Gwen Harwood that ‘nowhere save perhaps in the Middle Ages has there been such an efflorescence of poetry as this here in Australia’.⁴⁵ While Australian mystical poets such as Harpur, Cambridge, Brennan, Neilson, McAuley, Buckley and Wright demonstrate compelling cases for bibliographical access to mysticism and mystical poetics, Webb’s solitude allowed him to read broadly yet precisely in a manner few of his contemporaries or predecessors could match.

Literary criticism of Webb during his life was markedly more deft and scholarly than that afforded to John Shaw Neilson. Webb was more often depicted as devout, transcendent or monastic than ‘mystical’, one indicator of the post-war criticism’s shifting notions away from the term (though not completely, especially

⁴³ Francis Webb, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *Southerly* 21.2 (Norman Lindsay number), 1961, p. 47. In this letter Webb also refers to the ‘mystic’ in Lindsay ‘which makes his illustrations deride time in being at one with their subject’ while refuting Lindsay’s anti-Christian and anti-Semitic statements.

⁴⁴ Michael Griffith, ‘Francis Webb’s Library’, *Southerly* 40.3, 1980, pp. 348–58; author’s correspondence with John Muzzatti, Manager Reference Services, Willoughby City Library, dated 19/2/07 to 2/3/07.

⁴⁵ Webb cited in Michael Griffith, *God’s Fool*, pp. 273–4.

concerning Neilson and Wright).⁴⁶ From the mid-1990s however, critics such as Bill Ashcroft, Andrew Lynch, Bernadette Brennan and Kevin Hart have ventured Augustinian, Franciscan and negative theological readings aligning Webb with the Western Christian mystical tradition, as this chapter will outline.⁴⁷ Webb, like some of his subject matter, can also prove elusive in his ability to assume a multiplicity of voices and roles in the longer poetic sequences and, as A.D. Hope (1975) warns, ‘with Webb the difficulty is that one needs more clues than the poet thinks to give to a private world and very personal associations. The associations may not only be private; they may be quite momentary and ephemeral’.⁴⁸ Though Webb’s initial contact with mysticism proves difficult to isolate, two very personal clues emerge in the *Star Myth* and Webb’s bibliographic access to the mystical. These two underscore a third clue, the recurring use of mystical tropes in his early poetry to 1946.

Early Poems: The Poet as Searcher

Webb’s poems leading up to *A Drum for Ben Boyd* are engaged in the joint project of establishing the character of Searcher and Search. The Boehmean ‘burnished disc’ of ‘A Sunrise’ and ‘eyes, timeless as stars’ of ‘Disaster Bay’ hint at themes of the Searcher as mystical witness.⁴⁹ A two-fold process of identifying the Searcher ensues: in ‘Cap and Bells’ (4), ‘Images in Winter’ (7) and especially ‘Palace of Dreams’ (1) the poet-Searcher is refined and joined to ‘mystery’; in ‘Compliments of

⁴⁶ Perry (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 4

⁴⁷ See *Ibid.*, Ashcroft, *Op Cit.*, Brennan, *Op Cit.*

⁴⁸ A.D. Hope, ‘Talking To God: The Poetry of Francis Webb’ in Perry (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ These uncollected poems reproduced in Perry (ed.), *Op Cit.*, pp. 10, 19.

the Audience' (5), 'To A Poet' (2) and 'Poem for Easter' the poet is isolated from Romantic and atheist contemporaries and hears the divine voice in 'Poem for Easter', crying 'Be still' (Matthew 8:26).⁵⁰ The influence of mystical poets also materialises in 'Disaster Bay' (linked by Griffith [1991] to Hopkins's 'Wreck of the Deutschland'), Eliot's 'hollow men' in 'Images in Winter' and Yeats's themes of lover joined to loved, stars growing out of air, and the soul as blue in 'Cap and Bells'.⁵¹ In the latter, amid the stars, trains and waters of Sydney harbour, the 'messages of the hidden heart' are also linked to a fool's deathless power:

But I have chosen the little, obscure way
 In the dim, shouting vortex; I have taken
 A fool's power in his cap and bells
 And know that in my time the haggard Prince will discover
 A blunt shell of Yorick, that laughs for ever and ever.

Webb's 'little, obscure way' has biblical resonances in the narrow gate of Matthew 7:13 and the 'still small voice' of 1 Kings 19:12, but its greater mystical realisation comes in Webb's later development of this theme beyond Shakespeare and Yeats to St Francis and Socrates.⁵² Along the way there are a host of haggard princes in the explorers, the leper, the anti-Christ and death itself. In 'Images in Winter', another defiant pledge is made before candles Platonically writing 'cunning shadows in the air' to 'pin my faith on slipping images / Twisting like smoke or a fish caught in the

⁵⁰ 'Poem for Easter' reproduced in *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵¹ 'Disaster Bay' reproduced in *Ibid.*, p. 19; for possible links to Hopkins's 'Wreck of the Deutschland' see Griffith, *Op Cit.*, p. 22. Matt 8:26 is the story of Jesus calming the storm ('Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm' [*King James Version*]).

⁵² As the *King James Bible* was foundational for Webb, it is used for the remainder of this chapter.

hand'. This bold declaration is rightly the subject of enduring critical attention, but often its source is forgotten: the source is the harbour, the realm of his harbour-master and co-protector grandfather which ensures the up-keep of the stars ('Sluggish spirals of darkness dusted the sky'), the transcendent realm of his vanished parents. Two enduring themes emerge in 'Images in Winter', a literary asceticism which refuses the seductions of words or images and the presence of a mysterious figure: 'And someone wading through the tumbling whiteness / Wore mystery with the air of an ancient ship' (7). This 'someone' recurs in 'Henry Lawson' (59), watching at the door after the colonial poet's death.⁵³ By 'Eyre All Alone' it is a capitalised 'Someone' of the spiritual magnitude of Neilson's 'Someone' in 'The Gentle Water Bird' that greets the transfigured explorer in Albany.

Of all the early poems, 'Palace of Dreams' represents Webb's most determined invocation of the poet-as-Searcher where 'Far from grace of winds and stars, / Enmeshed in immortality, / I tread these stairs, and none but I'. The esoteric ('hieroglyphed with secret sign'), the monastic ('cloisters, lost in mazing glooms'), the ancestral ('a distant organ') and indeed the mystical ('with nameless knowledge in my soul') are solipsistically negotiated before 'Warded locks of mystery, / Oblivion the only key'. The final stanza bears keys of its own:

Alone, in one night's spacious years,
Beset by crowding hopes and fears,
I have yearned and thought to see,

⁵³ The figure of the dead Lawson between worlds in this poem can be read with particular reference to Lawson's 'The Never-Never Land (The Never-Never Country)', where 'the clustered stars / The dreamy plains extend' to 'A phantom land, a mystic realm! / The Never-Never Land' (Henry Lawson, *Collected Verse: Volume Two, 1901–1909* [ed. Colin Roderick], Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1968, p. 13).

Through moon-starts, fitfully,
 Another wanderer slowly climb
 These worn steps of Loss and Time —
 No voice-music, no hand-caress,
 Spans my silent loneliness:
 Enmeshed in immortality,
 I tread these stairs — and none but I.

Notions of eternal time in ‘one night’s spacious years’ and the yearning, solitude, and silent contemplation beyond speech or touch endow the poem with common Western Christian mystical tropes. But who is ‘another wanderer’? As with the ‘someone’ of ‘Images in Winter’ it is not resolved for the reader’s benefit, keeping to its own private world. Three distinct possibilities include the wandering father-figure (‘haunted by the driving moon ... [I] heard a distant organ pour’), a resurrected Christ, or, as Andrew Lynch (2001) proposes in the context of Ben Boyd’s ship *The Wanderer*, another Sydney poet who was irrevocably drawn to loss, time and the relationship between mysticism and poetry, Christopher Brennan.⁵⁴ Ultimately the ‘other wanderer’ is a phantasm the poet has ‘yearned and thought to see’ but concedes ‘I tread these stairs — and none but I’. Nonetheless ‘Palace of Dreams’ defines the poet-Searcher as alone, ‘enmeshed’ beyond the temporal with ‘nameless knowledge’ in his soul, seeking both ‘oblivion the only key’ and the one who has already faced oblivion. Webb’s attempts to access ‘warded locks of mystery’ recalls the young Neilson’s ‘I will not rest until I solve these mysteries’ (‘A Friendless Youth He was but Full of Hope’), but the two poets are at vastly different stages of their development. Neilson was about to be rocked by death, then near-heretical

infatuation, while Webb grew into a pre-existent family tragedy with its own wards and locks, and restricted his poetic infatuations to his reading, with some minor exceptions.⁵⁵ The early Webb is particularly conscious of the seriousness of his role as a transcendent poet and rails against the quasi-religious ‘prophecies’ of his predecessors and contemporaries (‘To a Poet’), while struggling to balance his affinity for ‘warded locks of mystery’ with a version of the Search which will not yet reveal its beyond nor its other.⁵⁶

The Explorer Search: Absence, ‘Mystic’ Centre and Union with the Beyond

Webb was not the only poet of his era to give explorer poems a religious dimension. His elder contemporary Douglas Stewart, who considered explorer poems a ‘search for the basic myths of the nation’, gave this a spiritual dimension in the ‘fourth man’ of ‘Worsley Enchanted’ analogous to the figure in the flame of Daniel 3:25, and William Hart-Smith paraphrases St Augustine (‘things of spirit are seen by spirit!’) in his ‘Columbus’.⁵⁷ *A Drum for Ben Boyd* (17) is introduced by ‘Our Roving Reporter’ amid a swarm of absence and negative capability:

What shall we tell you? That a swaying gate
Is no open invitation? That our adventurer
Wades in a foreign element, past scope of headlines,

⁵⁴ Andrew Lynch, ‘Francis Webb’s White Swan of Trespass — A Drum For Ben Boyd and Australian Modernism in the 1940s’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 36.1, 2001, p. 36.

⁵⁵ There are at least three exceptions: ‘For Ethel’ (whose hair ‘remembering gold’ can be traced to the yellow-haired girl of a late poem ‘Ward Two: Wild Honey’ [53, 231]), ‘Serenade to the Favourite Movie-Actress’ (47) and more obliquely ‘Achilles and the Woman’ (91).

⁵⁶ Lynch suggests this poem may also be addressed to Brennan (Lynch, *Op Cit.*, p. 42).

⁵⁷ Douglas Stewart (ed.), *Voyager Poems*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1960, p. 12, 50; William Hart-Smith, *Poems of Discovery*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1959, p. 3. Fanning includes Columbus in his list of mystics (Fanning, *Op Cit.*, p. 258).

A passionate, immeasurable darkness?

Anyway, here's our story.

Even before the author's prologue can devastatingly propose 'truth itself is a mass of stops and gaps', the Roving Reporter lays bare the crux of Webb's use of explorers and land as sites of reciprocity, both self *and* other, subject *and* author, interior *and* exterior, for 'what is imagination / But oneself flying back at unsuspected angles?'⁵⁸ Boyd's town of Twofold Bay, while historically-based (like his home Eden and ship *The Wanderer*) further hints at this inherent duality. Boyd, unlike Leichhardt, does not speak; he is variously a picture, a thought ('one thought's a drum for Ben Boyd'), a shadow, 'a giant / rolling boulders aside, daring nature', gossip, a ghost, a grab-bag of memories, a missing part of the brain, a missionary, a rogue, a builder of lighthouses, (mistakenly) a skull, in reality 'no more human than air we breathe'. If the object is to dismantle the Search through absence, it is disrupted somewhat by the presence of the author in the prologue:

My thoughts hang perilously, in silver cliffs:

Huge symbols featuring strangeness: the sky's edges,

Ships toppling, and rigid, green, dead seas;

Striking out so blindly, so often, I clasp some shape

Tortured into beauty, with wet frozen lips,

Only that I, too, stiffen; that the will freeze...

This process of 'torturing into beauty' is an example of Blakean contraries that was also intensely personal. Webb later told Craig Powell that 'his life was chaos and

⁵⁸ Brennan (2004) suggests a similar trope of 'interactive rather than binary terms of difference' in Brennan, *Op Cit.*, p. 42.

horror, but that he had tried to create order and beauty in his poems'.⁵⁹ Yet by his own admission in *A Drum For Ben Boyd*, chaos and horror were part of the writing process. Peace, therefore, becomes increasingly, even desperately, vital to the Search, and Ben Boyd's final emblem, like the dawn vision after the storm of 'Easter Poem', provides it:

Boyd that morning started off alone
 With a cheerful warning to all game within gunshot;
 His blurred shape grappled with the outskirts of the
 unknown,
 I [John Webster] saw him pause a long moment, like a swimmer
 Before the plunge into green, opaque density.
 Would not that have pleased him? (unpredictable,
 As he called himself, not to be tied down),
 That his final appearance was not as the half-corpse
 In tangible bedclothes with an odour of crepe and tears,
 But as the shadow at the distant end
 Of a tunnel of sunlight; for his last office
 A couple of shots rapped out like sharp commands;
 And a moment's peace over the whole island.⁶⁰

Boyd's disappearance in Guadalcanal establishes the theme of disembodied communion with the unknown which suggests that one may reach 'the source' through death. At the same time, absence in *A Drum for Ben Boyd* plays an epiphanic role as Lynch observes, 'the poem's abandonment of an externally verifiable

⁵⁹ Dr Craig Powell in Perry (ed.) *Op Cit.*, p. 84.

⁶⁰ Sister M.F. Fitz-Walter provides some further biographical insights to Webb's need for peace in *Ibid.*, p. 74.

meaning is partly a validation of the task of uttering interior, visionary consciousness'.⁶¹ The 'Pioneer of Monaro' juxtaposes the visions of 'the mystic Centre' with the unitive, though colonialist, impulse towards a land-based source:

Here, between the beach and the mystic Centre
I shape a forming foothold and the future;
If I have grown quiet as my land, remember
That to conquer mountains one must think like a mountain.

In Webb's first explorer sequence, the Search uncovers the interplay between visionary consciousness and union with the beyond, the latter of which becomes increasingly important to 'Leichhardt in Theatre' and 'Eyre All Alone'. For the Pioneer of Monaro the 'mystic Centre' is equivalent to illusory notions of an inland sea, but for Sturt and Eyre in particular the Centre will transfigure and punish them.

Ludwig Leichhardt (1813–1848) first succeeded in crossing Australian south to north, and failed on his attempt to cross east to west. On his second attempt west, he disappeared. For Griffith (1991), Leichhardt's letters 'have a touch of the poet and mystic' including Webb-like stars which 'enter unconsciously into the composition of our souls', causing 'homesickness' and 'painful longings' in their absence and a love of nature which leads to being 'confronted subconsciously by many voices speaking to you about an eternal Supreme Being'.⁶² While Leichhardt's intimations might have attracted Webb, he details his major source for 'Leichhardt in Theatre' as A.R. Chisholm's *Strange New World*, based on the diary of the botanist Gilbert who

⁶¹ Lynch, *Op Cit.*, p. 40.

⁶² Leichhardt cited in Griffith, *Op Cit.*, pp. 60, 68; Leichhardt's letter dated May 15, 1843 in Ludwig Leichhardt, *Leichhardt Letters* (ed. L.L. Politzer), Pan, Melbourne, 1944. A.R. Chisholm's introduction notes Leichhardt's 'touch of fantasy'.

died on the first expedition.⁶³ Chisholm was the first critic to recognise a Franciscan ‘timeless and universal order’ in Neilson and he contextualises his fascination with ‘anthropological time’ in terms of a return to the ‘source’ in the Jindyworobak publication *Merringlek* (1953):

Anthropological time being [unmeasurable] as it is, we cannot measure the age of man or of a people. We have not the necessary two fixed points. The point of ‘departure’ ... is that unknowable period in which mankind originated. And what is most important, all peoples go back to the source ... every human individual, whether his [sic] birth, goes right back to the source. He is infinitely older than his biographical self, which is measured in terms of chronological time.⁶⁴

Returns to Webb’s own ‘source’ are to be tested by the Centre and the beyond, for which he recruits two explorers, Sturt and Leichhardt.

Charles Sturt (1795–1869) was an Evangelical Anglican who felt he had not only a divine mission to explore Australia, but as Roland Boer (2001) observes, he imagined the Centre as the ‘hidden, mysterious, divinely charged place, the holy of holies’ analogous with the veil of the temple torn at the moment of Christ’s death in the Synoptic Gospels which, ‘like Christ, his duty was to break through ... to this mystery’.⁶⁵ This self-appointed colonial-revelatory role was punished as it were by blindness, hunger, thirst, and near-death:

⁶³ Webb’s notes to ‘Leichhardt in Theatre’ in Stewart (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 122.

⁶⁴ A.R. Chisholm, ‘Time, Man and Poetry’, *Merringlek* 1, 1953, pp. 7–10; for Chisholm’s review of Neilson, see John Shaw Neilson, *Selected Poems*, p. 7

⁶⁵ Boer, *Op Cit.*, p. 92.

The spotlight wanders about, falters for a moment on Sturt —
 Senseless, the flare: he stands blazing in his own white world.
 Light has rapped at his skull, flooded into his heart,
 Shrivelled, consumed him. Light has tracked and curled
 Its searing wake over touch and vision and retreat.
 Still light lashes at his eyes, people are questioning:
 Shall he answer? Open their veins with a bitter lancet of heat,
 Ash in his crucible their ambitions and trafficking?
 The inland sea. Yes! There were sea-length waves and surge,
 Sand's arched and massive velocities topped with a foam
 of glitter;
 And where sun grazed salt-glazed rock and the light's
 discharge
 Circled its fabulous rings of tremor, there was water.
 Here is the centre of their island. Shall he tell them of Poole,
 of death?
 ...Fused-out, brittle the limbs, dazzled in darkness the stare,
 No rain will fall for Sturt. He burns back there.
 Impasse at the Centre.⁶⁶

'Light' occurs six times as the spotlight, the light that consumes, the light that tracks and curls on the temporal, light still (or still light) lashing his eyes, the light of the hallucinatory inland sea and the light that 'racks and drags'. He is frail, but not dead unlike the unfortunate Poole. Sturt burns 'back there' between life and death, blindness and vision, madness and prophecy at his impasse at the Centre. In a later

⁶⁶ For Sturt's own version of the Search, see *Ibid.* Boer suggests the possibility of 'a queer desire' precipitated by men travelling together becoming 'homosocial bands'.

poem 'Sturt and the Vultures' (1970) he is a raving, oblique figure, calling out to 'the Void, the sand, the pebbles', his team, and birds of prey 'crying like children ... poets of dry upper nothingness' in the Void. Only the neutralities of the wrath of man ('or is it God!') resist the vultures above and ultimately only Death cowers below.⁶⁷ The struggle to endure defines Sturt, the Search 'always ... for something, / An opal, a prisoner' is all that remains of him in one sense, yet he is surrounded by 'Him', the Void, birds with 'tongues of fire', the 'following, chanting' wind, the Sacrament of a 'Virgin' creek bed, Words and Madonna-faces in the 'pure sand and pebbles'—a vast Christian ascetic system with which he has become not united but indistinguishable, on his delusional, colonial quest to imitate Christ's unveiling of mysteries.

Sturt experiences the Centre, but he is defeated there. The Sturt of 1970, surrounded by religious iconography, still clings to the *theatre* of the Search rather than the transcendence of it. The Sturt of 1952, in raising the curtain to Leichhardt's story experiences the Centre and the hallucinatory inland sea but is barred, blinded, even impaled by six points of light. Like John the Baptist, Sturt prepares the way as the voice crying in the wilderness (John 1:23), but New Testament themes also resonate in Sturt's blindness 'in his own white world' (Acts 9:4–8), the 'rappings at the skull' ('I stand at the door and knock' [Revelations 3:20]) and 'lancets of heat' (the spearing of Christ [John 19:34]). Webb's tropes of fire, light and blindness also echo tropes of the mystical tradition such as Pseudo-Dionysius's 'dazzling obscurity

⁶⁷ Webb cited in Perry (ed.), *Op Cit.*, pp.28–9.

of the secret Silence' and 'Ray of that divine Darkness' and Meister Eckhart's mystical interpretation of Saul's 'seeing nothing'.⁶⁸ Francis Webb's letters and library make no direct mention of these mystics, though Webb did possess several commentaries on mysticism and works by other mystics, notably Augustine and St John of the Cross. Bill Ashcroft (1996) reads Webb's Centre as Augustinian and his use of the humble as Ignatian:

Webb's poetry is balanced upon the two complementary impulses of Catholic thought; the Ignatian concern with proximate reality and its attendant themes of time and music; and the Augustinian vision of God at the centre of self, with its recurrent metaphors of Centre and Light. On one hand there is the full acceptance of the simple and ordinary reality as the avenue to God ... On the other hand, the Augustinian impulse, with its theme of the inner journey through the soul underlies Webb's vision of the divine at the centre of life ... With the union of the extrinsic and intrinsic journeys he can maintain the importance of the tangible as well as the pervasiveness of the mystical.⁶⁹

Ashcroft identifies the recurrence of the Centre metaphor in 'The Canticle' and the later radio play 'The Chalice' (155), where St Peter proclaims 'Light is the Centre of our darkness. I am to tell you / Of all light, all love, fast to the Cross and bleeding'.⁷⁰ Ashcroft also makes the important point that Webb is not just a poet of mystical themes and imagery, but also a poet who adopts whole mystical systems including the Augustinian, the Ignatian, and the Franciscan. Yet inner and allegorical journeys

⁶⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Op Cit.*, pp. 191–2; Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher*, p. 122. Eckhart finds a fourfold meaning Saul's blinding in Acts ('Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes he saw nothing'): 'First, when he rose up from the ground, with his eyes open he saw nothing, and this nothingness was God. Indeed he saw God, and that is what he calls a nothingness. Second, when he rose up, he saw nothing but God. Third, in all things he saw nothing but God. Fourth, when he saw God, he saw all things as nothingness'.

⁶⁹ Ashcroft, *Op Cit.*, p. 58.

are by no mean exclusively Augustinian, they exist from the beginning of Christian mysticism in Origen's reading of Exodus as an allegory for the stages on path to God (recreated in 'Eyre All Alone') through to St John of the Cross's *The Ascent of Mt Carmel* and beyond. Yet Webb might just as easily be writing *between* mystics, exploring their convergences and divergences. Ashcroft also claims that Sturt's impossible Centre appears to be traversed in 'Eyre All Alone', when logistically this is not the case. Eyre has previously tried and failed to reach the Centre; having learnt his lesson on that front, his spiritual journey coincides with his expedition *parallel* to the Centre, which 'has rolled him like a dice'.⁷¹ The section 'From the Centre' with its retrospective regret about pride and the Promised Land suggest Eyre, gazing inland, has learned to move *with*, not *at*, the Centre.

'Leichhardt in Theatre' (35) reaches its Christological climax in Leichhardt's final ill-fated expedition running parallel to the Centre, from east to west. Prior to this, his opening speech praises Providential 'fresh stars / Lovely and cruciform' on his way to Australia and, upon his arrival, 'a battery of brilliance that the spirit / might learn the ways of the sun'. His proclamations then turn to the 'source':

Southward the new, the visionary!
 This is a land where man becomes a myth;
 Naked, his feet tread embers for the truth:
 Desert will claim him, mountain, precipice,
 ... Living as a bird lives

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

I try my wings, alert, until the heart
 Echoes a migratory fleck of spring,
 That lonely source whose waters seek no sea.

The first expedition revisits symbolism from the earlier Webb poems, such as the gull of 'Images of Winter' ('a gull in a green storm clear as the maker's name') representing the journeying self.⁷² Gilbert the doomed naturalist can 'talk as gulls talk' and immerse in the 'wings' of the sea, embodying the Pioneer of Monaro's pseudo-unitive idea to 'think like a mountain'.⁷³ Like Boyd, Leichhardt is magnified in the public imagination 'striding above tree-level', but his second expedition is a debacle and he is consigned to 'The Room' where he wonders 'Has Gilbert found the source? or do his bones / trudge nightly towards Port Essington?' The result is the terrifying acceptance of his fate to be 'taken, stripped, and bound' like the Promethean Sturt by the three galahs of the first expedition who dipped arrowlike into the 'sacrificial red' of the sunset:

Space bunts at the doorway. Wash of darkness
 Save for three shining things. The Furies circle:
 Desert with bleached eyes, mountain with the hawk's mouth,
 Sea with her witching falseness; cordon him.
 He is taken, stripped and bound.⁷⁴

Thus Leichhardt vanishes from the poem, consumed by the desert, mountain and sea he could bear in the Golgotha of 'this death's head continent', but not in the mirror of

⁷² See also *Ibid.*, pp. 141–2.

⁷³ Griffith (*Op Cit.*, p. 61) depicts Gilbert as an ornithologist, which might carry some significance for 'Sturt and the Vultures'.

⁷⁴ This also has personal significance, see Webb's 'Hospital Confession' cited in *Ibid.*, pp. 82–102.

the room. The third expedition is one of recovery, but Leichhardt has eluded them, taken the little, obscure way beyond world and words, the gate of Matthew 7:13–14:

Cross to the field pitched beyond world and words.
 Snapped wire jabs at the wind: the gate is down:
 Where some bribed fearful entry one guards.
 The sphinx upon the capital is known.
 Around the gateway footprints, ruts are found.
 Men meet here now, quiet on familiar ground.⁷⁵

Webb cites anecdotal evidence that Leichhardt was killed by his own men (and indeed the sphinx's answer 'man' and Christological overtones of Judas's betrayal in Leichhardt's 'binding' imply this), but ultimately it is Leichhardt's disappearance into the beyond which proves more significant:

In such clean space the man and his shadow ride,
 See them upon the hills, life-sized and breathing,
 Where they will go, how perish — this is nothing.
 ...All that is life comes here. Beyond the gates
 Only storm, drowned things, rock in the surly straits.⁷⁶

Leichhardt's disappearance, like that of Boyd, points to the Christian mystery without naming it. Leichhardt, however, is more Christological: in seeking the 'source' both of life and beyond he has found the 'gate' to the beyond; his death, like that of Christ (with 'Cross' the first word of the third expedition), represents all life,

⁷⁵ Matthew 7:13-14 reads: 'Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it (*King James Version*). Note Webb's pun on 'strait' in the final line of the poem.

⁷⁶ In Webb's extended notes for 'Leichhardt in Theatre' reproduced in Webb, *Poet and Brother*, p. 23.

while Sturt still burns at the Centre. The temporal is transcended and, in contrast to Sturt's theatrical impasse, the constructs of the theatre—orchestra, audience, clown—and even the poem itself all vanish. Leichhardt is transformed, but it is the transformation in Webb himself around the time of 'Leichhardt in Theatre' which both endangered and secured his future as the most consistently mystical Australian poet, the second time that biographical factors intervene to intensify his attraction to mysticism.

Acknowledging God and the Redemption in 'The Canticle'

Webb's 'Hospital Confession' (1965) recounts the spiritual and poetic crisis which consumed him in Canada in 1948–9. 'The Room' of 'Leichhardt in Theatre', where Leichhardt's Passion is forged parallels Webb's own experiences:

On arrival in Vancouver, I spent a rather terrifying few days in my furnished room ... Again I seized upon the heroic as something concrete in my poem on Leichhardt. And the section 'There may be agony in furnished rooms' owes something to my own examinations of conscience. I had seized upon an episode in which my gravest sin, a grievous moral cowardice born of excessive good manners, had led me to hear, without comment, a really rough bit of post-war anti-Semitism attributed to my friend Norman Lindsay.⁷⁷

The strain of Webb's guilt over his 'gravest sin', his personal shock at the horrors of the Holocaust and his reading of Robert Lowell, an American poet also troubled by mental illness who explicitly wrote of God, led to Webb's revelation:

⁷⁷ Webb's 'Hospital Confession' cited in Griffith, *Op Cit.*, p. 82.

now my poetry must openly acknowledge God and the Redemption ... Question followed question. What of the love of the heroic, which had made my name? Worse, what of such friends as Norman Lindsay and Douglas Stewart: would they not ... forsake me altogether if God came stumbling into my poems? And race-hatred. Accounts of the concentration-camps filled me with panic: race-hatred was the most unnatural hatred in man. Did it not flourish in Aussie?⁷⁸

Webb's trajectory towards the redemption of man as a central theme became a matter of urgency when his falling out with Lindsay, like Stewart a father-figure from the older generation of Sydney artists and poets, precipitated a life-threatening turn of events. Lindsay's anti-Semitism was the likely source for Webb's anger at a comment he thought directed at his poetry and Lindsay ended their correspondence, explaining to his son Phillip 'I refuse any longer to read obscurantist poetry, which is not the effect of mystic profundity, as the moderns pretend, but is simple a mental muddle', a similar complaint about modernist 'mystic profundity' to that of McAuley and Harold Stewart in the Ern Malley hoax.⁷⁹ Lindsay's response demonstrates how mysticism continued to carry derogative connotations in post-1945 Australian poetry and criticism, while in 1961 Webb himself uses 'mystic' in a complimentary way about Lindsay's illustrations which 'deride time in being at one with their subject'.⁸⁰

Post-1945 shifting notions of mysticism in Australian poetry thus rely upon the mid-

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89. 'Hospital Confession' was written and signed at Ward Two, Callan Park Hospital in 1965. See Lowell's deific references in 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket', 'Mr. Edwards and the Spider' and later 'The Flaw' in Robert Lowell, *Selected Poems*, Faber & Faber, London, 1965, pp. 7, 13, 60.

⁷⁹ Lindsay cited in *Ibid.*, p. 102. See Ern Malley ('I have split the infinitive. Beyond is any thing' ['Petit Testament' in Ern Malley, *Op Cit.*, p. 92]). Paul Kane (1996) considers the Ern Malley hoax to be indicative of 'a more profound attraction to forms of mysticism, particularly those theorised by negative theology' (Kane, *Op Cit.*, pp. 152–3). Malley's 'Preface and Statement' includes complaint that should he mention a non-linear 'level where the world is a mental occurrence' he should be 'accused of mysticism. Yet it is so' (Malley cited in *Ibid.*, p. 149). The satirical, even derogatory contexts of Malley's associations with mysticism prove less insightful than those of A.D. Hope in Chapter 6.

⁸⁰ Webb, 'Letter to the Editor', *Southerly* 21.2, 1961, p. 49.

century return to traditional sources but also the shift in *poetries* associated with the mystical from symbolism to modernism.

Following his break with Lindsay, Webb's transition towards 'The Canticle' was marked by a near-fatal incident. In Montreal, prior to his planned return to Australia via England, Webb read some notes on Freud at which point 'Old Nick showed his full hand' as the poet transplanted the full gamut of Freudian neuroses and phantasies into an interrogation of his own life and troubled parental relationship at the core of the Search.⁸¹ Unable to pray, he arrived at his aunt's house in England, where

I went to a furnished room and gashed one of my wrists with a razor; thanks to Our Lady whose Rosary was in my pocket, Satan didn't put on any further acts while I waited for death. There was no God, nothing; just the urge to be out of this life at all costs.⁸²

Webb was institutionalised, the first of a series of episodes which lead to near-permanent hospitalisation from late 1953 in England and Australia. In 1957 he wrote 'I think my certification rests upon persecution mania with a strong tendency towards violence', while Dr Craig Powell recalls his diagnosis in 1966 as 'chronic paranoid schizophrenic'.⁸³ Even at the stage of his first period of institutionalisation (1949–1950), the need to 'acknowledge God and the Redemption' became a matter of personal salvation. Upon his release in 1950, he returned to Australia with his sister Leonie where he continued to receive treatment, including for epilepsy, a condition

⁸¹ Griffith, *Op Cit.* In 1961 Webb describes Freud as 'that great explorer who couldn't help becoming intoxicated by his discoveries and seeing them as the be-all and end-all' (Webb, *Op Cit.*).

⁸² Webb cited in Griffith, *Op Cit.*, p. 106.

⁸³ Webb, *Francis Webb: Poet and Brother*, p. 124; Powell in Perry (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 83.

he wrote into Hitler's character in 'Birthday' (1953, 101).⁸⁴ En route to Australia, Webb visited and prayed at four basilicas in Rome, where his poetic affiliations with Catholic saints, including St Francis, could thrive in an environment of pilgrimage, liturgy and iconography.⁸⁵ Prior to 'The Canticle', Webb's poetry had been characterised by an increasingly explicit Christianity in 'Vlamingh and Rottneest Island' (90), 'Five Days Old' (150) and his Canadian explorer poem 'A View of Montreal' which concludes with the cross on Mt Gaspé above Montreal catching fire (60). Webb was already acknowledging Christian themes, but to do so 'openly' with his own redemption also on the line, Webb began his Mystic Search with St Francis.

'The Canticle' (69) from *Birthday* (1953) is a watershed for Webb, his first explicitly mystical poem based on the legend and writings of St Francis of Assisi (1181–1226). St Francis stressed humility and Christ's humanity which inspired the first Franciscan theologian, St Bonaventure (1221–1274), to 'Franciscanise' the more dominant Neoplatonism by, according to Ewert Cousins (1983), 'placing the incarnate Christ at the centre of the cosmos, of history, of the soul, and of the spiritual journey'.⁸⁶ Cousins observes a new kind of dramatic, imitative mysticism in Francis and later in Ignatius:

This devotion to the humanity of Christ issues in a form of mysticism which I will call 'the mysticism of the historical event'. In this type of consciousness, one recalls a significant event in the past, enters into its drama and draws from it spiritual energy, eventually moving beyond the event towards union with God...⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Webb, *Op Cit.*, p. 66.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸⁶ Ewert H. Cousins, 'Francis of Assisi: Christian Mysticism at the Crossroads' in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 187.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Francis re-established the importance of the Hebraic visionary and prophetic traditions by re-integrating Isaiah's seraphic mystical experience into the Middle Ages by receiving the first historically-recorded stigmata upon Mt Verna.⁸⁸ Cousins interprets the stigmata as the climax of Francis's mysticism of the historical event, the event being his active, mystical life:

In the prophetic visions of the Bible and in *Merkabah* [the chariot and throne symbology of Ezekiel and Isaiah] and apocalyptic visions, the mystic is lifted up from the earth to receive a glimpse of heaven. In Francis' vision, heaven descends to earth, for the Seraph comes down to manifest the union with the divine and the human in the crucified humanity of Christ. Bonaventure describes Francis' psychological state during the vision as follows: 'When Francis saw this, he was overwhelmed and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He rejoiced because of the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph, but the fact that he was fastened to a cross *pierced his soul with a sword of compassionate sorrow*'.⁸⁹

Centuries after the Incarnation, heaven *descends* for union with its mystics, and the seraphs are synonymous with Christ. Francis's vision taught him that 'the weakness of Christ's passion was in no way compatible with the immortality of the Seraph's spiritual nature', and as one who already saw Christ in 'the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside'.⁹⁰ The stigmata was Francis's holy seal that his life would be a passing over, a *transitus*, into the final Christological centre, where Dante, deeply influenced by the Franciscans, would also place him in the tenth

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 174–5.

⁹⁰ St Francis & St Clare, *Op Cit.*, p. 19.

and highest heaven of *Paradiso*.⁹¹ Francis's reaction to the stigmata was initially speechlessness, but he subsequently resolved to compose a *cataphatic* hymn of praise 'a new hymn about the Lord's creatures' who would become the Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the stars, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Sister Mother Earth and Sister Bodily Death of 'The Canticle of Brother Sun' (*Cantico di Frate Sole*).⁹²

Francis Webb drew heavily upon 'The Canticle of Brother Sun' as well as biographies of St Francis in his own library and at the Franciscan monastery at Wahroonga for 'The Canticle'. Webb's sequence situates itself at Assisi and features consecutive voices from various characters of the St Francis legend—some speaking for a second time after being redeemed by the saint—concluding with Webb's innovative use of voice of the Sun. So much critical attention has focused on the poem's origins and characters (Griffith devotes over fifty pages to the subject in *God's Fool*) that this discussion will be limited to the major characters of the Leper, the Knight and the Sun. The Leper in the St Francis legend was embraced at the roadside by St Francis, who by overcoming his revulsion uncovered the receptivity and humanity which would ultimately lead him to the stigmata.⁹³ Looking back, St Francis saw the Leper had disappeared. Andrew Lynch (2001) identifies Cousins's 'mysticism of the historical event' in *A Drum for Ben Boyd*, but it is in 'The Canticle' that Webb personally and poetic most closely adheres to Francis's model of

⁹¹ For Francis's 'seal', see Cousins in Katz (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 173; Dante, *Op Cit.*, p. 533, Canto XXXII.

⁹² Francis & Clare, *Op Cit.*, pp. 6, 37.

⁹³ See Brennan, *Op Cit.*, p. 32 for this legend's translation into Webb's poem.

dramatic imitation.⁹⁴ By 1953 Webb had attempted suicide once and been incarcerated in England. His identification with the Leper is portrayed by Griffith in terms of a Search for personal redemption:

Webb's comment on the poem 'A Leper' as 'type of my guilt' is the strongest indication that he saw his involvement with the St Francis story as a personal quest for grace, and a 'A Leper is one of the most graphic self-portraits we have from this period.'⁹⁵

The Leper speaks twice, before and after contact with St Francis, transformed from 'the graceless utterance, the question, the thought' to

Lamp in the spectrum's tent,
 Homing shades to the one mirror
 And white of embodiment.
 Given, the kiss of peace,
 Given, a white way,
 Love aloft in those hands
 ... Forgiven by the road, forgiven
 By a man and many lands.
 I too have forgiven.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Lynch notes 'Webb's metaphysic always remains historically implicated. For all the strength of his religious impulse, his poetic imagination is not simply projected beyond history to rest on a "transcendent" and sublime authoritative meaning. Rather, it involves itself in the [Cousins's] "mysticism of the historical event", *seeking immanent or incarnate truth through the historically and culturally specific experience of time* [and, indeed, timelessness]. Intense consciousness of the "modern"—present experience—lies at the roots of Webb's poetic search, however far the search takes him' (Lynch, *Op Cit.*, p. 31).

⁹⁵ Griffith, *Op Cit.*, p.169. Webb's 1951 experiences of attempting to walk from Fremantle to New Norcia Monastery in Western Australia covered in sores and flies may have also provided a biographical dimension for the Leper character (Webb, *Op Cit.*, p. 43).

⁹⁶ For the biblical contexts to 'Lamp in the spectrum's tent' see Exodus 33, Matthew 6:22, John 1:4.

But this is just the beginning of a redemptive *scala perfectionis* in the Leper's purgative, Knight's illuminative and Sun's unitive experiences. The Knight, too, is transformed from his young man's dreams '[in] other words – my desire / As knight, as man' to one

Slashing the canvas of dreams, I have entered the dream
 And dismount within it, observing, not from the stirrup,
 Its signs and seconds, truthful core of the idyll
 ... All beauty, all joy? Yes, — and all pain and disfigurement.

Having entered the core of the idyll and realising Francis's fusion of joy and pain atop Mt Verna, the Knight binds his vision of the Centre to the need to engage 'not from the stirrup ... a poor man walking, a man / Above and below my reverie ... the pleading, forgotten Face / Of my vows':

I saw kingdom and ruin, quick blood and still, and you,
 Punctual in my broad jogging noon-hour;
 And sometimes, perhaps, the Centre — but rather as a face
 Among the circling faces,
 ... Enter: see the many faces come closer:
 When I was looking down, these were looking upward
 But here, on this level, there is also land
 Laid waste, dying mist, fire's desperate subsidence,
 Swift glittering ankle bolted to ice,
 And you, and in the last place myself.
 Not for the rhymer? Unmoving, they are his quill's
 In-and-out, his very breathing. They are the adventure.

The ‘mystic Centre’ of *A Drum for Ben Boyd*, here with a similarly absent hero, is also transfigured through the Franciscan prism to glimpse ‘a face / Among the circling faces’, an illuminative, visionary experience influenced by medieval cosmology, even Dante’s circle of spirit-stars around Christ the Sun (*Paradiso* XXIV). The Knight is illuminated, but not yet united with the divine, firmly tied to the earthly humility on the level of the rhymer’s ‘adventure’—that is, the poet’s Search.

Webb’s most radical poetic innovation in ‘The Canticle’ appears in the unitive conclusion to the poem where he replaces Francis’s praise of Brother Sun with the voice of the Sun itself.⁹⁷ This represents the culmination of the saint’s Christ-like presence-absence drawing the (staged) characters and (unstaged) epiphanies of ‘The Canticle’ to a spiritual Centre, which, as Brennan (2005) notes, is also intentionally ambiguous, blurring Christ, Francis, divine and human, eternal and temporal.⁹⁸ Before the Brother Sun speaks, several characters intercede. ‘The Mother’ (‘I watch him again tonight, / One sure star there’) can represent both Star Myth and Sister Mother Earth. ‘The Companion’ and St Clare (‘A warm Word that arranges / Kindling from thorns and cold’) console Francis as he faces his own ‘Door of the Dead’. Then Brother Sun, who for Francis ‘bears a likeness of You, Most High One’, prepares the saint for the eternal:

⁹⁷ According to Andrew Lynch (1999) Webb also invents the episode of the Saint walking side by side with the Brother Ass to give it a rest (an image, perhaps, of mind relieving its strain on the body), although there are vaguely similar legends. See Andrew Lynch, ‘Remaking the Middle Ages in Australia: Francis Webb’s “The Canticle” (1953)’, *Australian Literary Studies* 19.1, 1999, p. 52.

⁹⁸ Brennan, *Op Cit.*, p. 43.

Small hours fattening, darkness losing
 To the day that is begun,
 The lean hours, and the vesper dowsing,
 These are only the sun.
 ... But five times we shall rise in the night
 When the halo over the hill
 Is not of my own light
 Five Wounds, and the Canticle.

In Francis's 'The Canticle of Brother Sun' the Sun is singled out as first of the 'creatures' to be embraced like the Leper. Sister Bodily Death, the last, is similarly praised, but here Webb also intervenes, linking it to St Clare's 'Door of the Dead', which is another reference to spiritual liberation, being the name of the exit Clare used to flee her father and join Francis.⁹⁹ Webb's 'The Canticle' ends not only at the beginning of 'The Canticle of Brother Sun', it speaks *through* Brother Sun, banishes Sister Bodily Death, and while stressing that hours and thoughts are only sun and man respectively, 'rises five times in the night' with the second set of five-dot stigmata in the halo over the hill signifying the saint's final *transitus* to Christ.¹⁰⁰ For Webb, the unitive experience here is not explicitly with Christ, but with St Francis as poet, whose canticle Webb attempts to co-habit by passing through the Leper and Knight stages into a radical synthesis potent enough to open the very mouth of Brother Sun.

In transforming himself, transforming his vision, and transforming 'The Canticle of Brother Sun' itself, Webb returns the Mystic Search to its Centre, the

⁹⁹ Lynch, *Op Cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁰ The first is immediately after the Knight's 'all beauty all joy' illumination reflecting Francis's mystical joy and sorrow atop Mt Verna.

Face of love ‘among the circling faces’ which could be any face, that of Francis, Christ, or even God.¹⁰¹ The event of mystical progression and union with the Centre belongs as much to Assisi as it does to Webb’s beloved ‘Aussie’ due to the universal humanity of Christ. It is this Franciscan undertaking which compels Webb to reach out to the ostracised, the powerless and the dying (even the ‘human’ Hitler in ‘Birthday’), to poetically engage the Passion and the Franciscan-based devotions of the Stations of the Cross, the Christmas crib and the Angelus, and to proclaim in ‘Five Days Old’ ‘I am launched upon sacred seas, / Humbly and utterly lost / In the mystery of creation’.¹⁰² G.K. Chesterton, whose *St Francis of Assisi* (1923) was a major source for Webb, argues that Francis ‘could only be understood as a poet’ and was in fact ‘a poet whose whole life was a poem’, sentiments that surely resounded with Webb who, as Griffith (1991) suggests, found in Francis ‘not merely his namesake, but also his confrere and exemplar’.¹⁰³ Francis’s reputation as one of the most Christlike mystics who used ‘The Canticle to Brother Sun’ to not only praise Christ but to embody him poetically, provides the perfect vehicle for Webb to ‘openly acknowledge God and the Redemption’, not least through the saint’s death which forms a conduit between the Redeemer at the Centre and those in need of Redemption such as the Leper.¹⁰⁴ In ‘The Canticle’ an Australian mystical poet for the first time explicitly operates within and beyond the works of a poetic mystic.

Someone Again: Eyre All Alone

¹⁰¹ See Brennan, *Op Cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁰² King, *Op Cit.*, p. 75.

¹⁰³ Chesterton cited in Griffith, *Op Cit.*, pp. 169, 170.

¹⁰⁴ King, *Op Cit.*, p. 72.

In 'Eyre All Alone' (1961) the Search of Edward John Eyre (1815–1901) across the Nullarbor Plain is transfigured into the desert of Exodus:

Walk, walk. From dubious footfall
 At Fowler's Bay the chosen must push on
 Towards promised fondlings, dancings of the Sound.
 Fourth plague, of flies, harries this bloodless ground.
 Cliff and salt balance-wheel of heathen planet
 Tick, twinkle in concert to devise our minute.
 But something on foot, and burning, nudges us
 Past bitter waters, sands of Exodus (181).

Unlike *A Drum for Ben Boyd* and 'Leichhardt In Theatre', 'Eyre' is explicitly biblical and thematically coincides with mystical interpretations such as Origen's polysemous reading of Exodus whereby

the ascent from Egypt to the promised land is something by which ... we are taught in mysterious descriptions the ascent of the soul to heaven and the mystery of the resurrection from the dead ... One is the means of training the soul in virtues through the Law of God when it is placed in flesh; and by ascending through certain steps it makes progress, as we have said, from virtue to virtue, and uses these progressions as stages. And the other journey is the one by which the soul, in gradually ascending to the heavens after the resurrection, does not reach the highest point unseasonably, but is led through many stages. In them it is enlightened stage by stage; it always receives an increase of splendour, illumined at each stage by the light of wisdom, until it arrives at the Father of lights Himself [James 1:17].¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Origen, *Op Cit.*, pp. 252–3.

Webb himself links Exodus to James 3:6–12 ('We evolve our own flies and flames / In the never-never, Says that rugged fisherman James') and Eyre's crossing of King's River is rendered analogous to the River Jordan at Jericho ('On towards Jericho' [Numbers 38:50]), where for Origen the soul 'crosses the river of God and receives the heritage promised it'.¹⁰⁶ After the ahistorical removal of Wylie (see Chapter 8) Eyre, finally 'alone' declares 'I am coming, I am rainfall' and imagines himself as the pilgrim, or the soul itself, at the gates of a new Jerusalem:

But their faces will be golden when the doors open

Their dress shining

... How shall I face their golden faces, pure voices?

O my expedition: Baxter, Wylie!

But the rain has stopped. On the main road Someone moves.¹⁰⁷

This 'Someone' is no longer the private, enigmatic figure of 'Images in Winter' or the Someone of 'Henry Lawson' who 'watches at the door', while doors are far from the 'narrow gate' between living and dead of 'Leichhardt In Theatre'. Supporting Webb's case for Eyre's universalism, Andrew Taylor (1989) marks this as

a moment of epiphany, when someone becomes Someone, when the human cannot be distinguished from the divine, when speech ceases to signify, when language has

¹⁰⁶ Other references to James include 'agnostic ribaldries of an ocean' [James 1:6], 'the huddled works / of my soul' [James 2:26], 'my torn stinking shirt' [James 2:2] and extensive references to horses ('turn the horses loose'), ships and the banksia's epiphanic 'forked-lightning-fruit of pain' [3.3, 3:17, 1:2, 5:18]; even 'the rain has stopped' at journey's end corresponds to James 5:16; for Origen see *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁰⁷ See Revelation 4:1, 21.

gone as far as its divided nature can go and thus says no more ... in the fullness of silence, which is the other of speech.¹⁰⁸

Scripturally the Someone is Elijah, who parted the Jordan ('we struggle through the last ditch of Kings River') and ascended to heaven from its banks on a chariot of fire in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11–12) or the post-resurrection Christ who appeared on the road to Emmaus, particularly given the 'shining dress' (Luke 24:4, 13–32).¹⁰⁹ Critically, it may be the Risen Christ of heaven, new Jerusalem or, as Taylor notes, the Celestial City of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.¹¹⁰ In the mystical tradition, following Origen, it is the Father of lights himself to whom the pilgrim soul must be 'truly alone. And hardly visible now' to reach the soul's goal, the final stage of unitive experience. A great deal of 'Eyre All Alone' is devoted to this template of mystical pilgrimage ('Man to man. Which is sometimes / God to man, under all seven stars westward') and the stripping back of Eyre's party to five, two, then one provokes a series of deeply spiritual revelations ('lay open the bight of my soul to a groping beauty'; 'Cape Arid ... quotes me God / On my pilgrimage'; 'On the main road Someone moves').¹¹¹ Furthermore, the fourfold repetition of 'Walk, walk ... sands of Exodus' allows an ascetic and contemplative sense of endurance, almost to the point of spiritual exercises. Ashcroft (1996) combines Ignatian progression towards Christ through the temporal and Augustinian progression towards God at the centre of the soul in his interpretation of the Search for 'Someone' in Webb's poetry:

¹⁰⁸ Andrew Taylor, *Reading Australian Poetry*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989, p. 108; for pre-existent links between the 'never-never' and 'Someone', see the earlier discussion of 'Henry Lawson'.

¹⁰⁹ Elijah, Moses and the voice of God also talk to and become one with Jesus in Mark 9:4.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ See also Leichhardt's Southern Cross in Ashcroft, *Op Cit.*, p. 147.

On one level the Someone symbolises the vision of Christ which is the goal of the Ignatian journey. But the Someone is also just a person, any person, and this is true to the goal of seeing “God our Lord, in his essence, presence and power, in all creation.” A similar perception had been made in ‘The Canticle’ where the Centre had been simply [!] “a face / Among the circling faces”. When Eyre had staggered out to the sea, the importance of the senses themselves had burst upon the vision of the poem like an epiphany. Now we see why Eyre’s aloneness had been so important—for the vision of the divine is also the vision of the Other. Man’s communion with God is both symbolised and actualised in his communion with others ... What the Australian landscape means as a topography of the spirit, is that the explorer will pass over this symbolic terrain, but never find the inland sea in quite the way he had expected. The Augustinian desire to plunge through the soul to find the Centre to find that Light which is the true source of all vision, is constantly dissolving, in the poetry, into a rediscovery of the importance of the temporal and the proximate, the importance of everything outside the symbolic terrain of the soul.¹¹²

In ‘Eyre All Alone’ there are several theological systems at play, including the scriptural and the *via mystica* of Origen, Augustine, Francis Ignatius, and even that of geologist-mystic Pierre Teilhard De Chardin who wrote the following in his *Phenomenon of Man* (1940), contained in Webb’s library:

To confirm the presence at the summit of the world of what we have called the Omega Point [*a distinct Centre radiating at the core of a system of centres*], do we not find the very cross-check we are looking for? Here surely is the ray of sunshine

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 155. Eyre also travels between two environments of traditional mystical absorption, that of sea and that of land (which, in the Nullabor’s case, *was* sea). See Bernard McGinn, ‘Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption’, pp. 155–81.

striking through the clouds, the reflection onto what is ascending of that which is already on high, the rupture of our solitude. The palpable influence on our world of *an other* and supreme Someone ... Is not the Christian phenomenon, which rises upwards at the heart of the social phenomenon, precisely that?¹¹³

Webb is a poet of whole systems, sometimes meshing several together. The Search, therefore, is 'always the Search for something' precisely because it is the Search for, within and between these systems. Add to this the unfathomable effects of near-orphanhood, paranoid schizophrenia, confinement and shock treatment and it is little wonder that Webb's reputation for his own 'warded locks of mystery' persists. Even Webb's professorial contemporaries such as A.D. Hope were forced to admit he was 'talking to the only audience who knows the hearts of men and needs no commentator. He was in fact always and only talking to God'.¹¹⁴ In 'Eyre All Alone' the Explorer Search and Mystic Search become finally indistinguishable.

Search's End: Christian Mystery, Negativity and Female Saints

The Mystic Search includes Webb's poetic engagements with figures associated with Western Christian mysticism from St Francis to Gerard Manley Hopkins, Socrates and St Therese of Lisieux. There are also extensive references to resurrected Saints (Peter in 'The Chalice' [155], Michael and Tobias in 'Ghost of the Cock' [233]) the Gospels (John 7:53-8:11 ['Poet', 152], Mark 7:34 ['Ephpheta', 196] and the Catholic liturgy ('The Stations', 94). The Christian Mystery as incarnation ('Vlamingh and Rottneest Island', 'Five Days Old') and resurrection, often as a sunrise ('The

¹¹³ Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (tr. Bernard Wall), Collins, London, 1960, pp. 263, 298–9. Sister M.F. Fitz-Walter observes 'The "Christogenesis" of Teilhard De Chardin was just an ordinary concept for Francis Webb' (Perry [ed.], *Op Cit.*, p. 77). Webb may have encountered St Ignatius through his reading of Thomas à Kempis (see King, *Op Cit.*, p. 157).

¹¹⁴ A.D. Hope in Perry (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 35.

Stations’) course through much of Webb’s middle to later work, where God’s Word eclipses the poet’s word:

It is achieved. Over the Place of the Skull
 A darkness; and I slouch among our trees,
 Tasting green and gold of His darkness. Bid the sun
 Withdraw into seismic coma; have interval
 Of rootless vacancy enwrap the hill
 As vineyard and marshland, mountainside and man:
 How the star of the camel-train, the lector seas
 Strew antiphon from their substance if but one voice,
 The known, dry tongue,
 Mould those dismantled words about the Cross.
 (‘Around Costessey: Good Friday, Norfolk’, 209)

Webb’s England was a site of piety as well as institutionalisation. Norfolk (‘Around Costessey’ where the poet ‘tastes’ darkness) and Norwich (‘Bells of St Mancroft’, 139; ‘Mousehold Heath’, 175) are major historical sites for English Catholicism, home to poets, philosophers, churches and mystics such as Julian of Norwich. Webb does not mention Julian directly, but rather, buoyed by his Augustinian interpretation of Socrates’s sacrifice (‘Tight to the breast of cold dark upright night / Cleaves the immanence, the Form of living light / as light is of the returning immortal soul’ [‘Socrates’, 133]) he turns to the transcendent in the ruins of an Augustinian priory:

Dust is the silent labours of the men in their long robes,
 But they are here, they move,

Genuflect, tell their beads in the dancing light,

They are risen, they shall rise.

(‘Beeston Regis’, 145)¹¹⁵

Death is the idiot before the Christian Mystery at the Place of the Skull, explicitly extending and Christianising idiot-death and Golgotha-skull themes from earlier poems such as ‘Night Swimming’ and ‘Leichardt in Theatre’ respectively. This chapter will conclude with an examination of Webb’s later work where the Mystic Search progresses from the saintly manifestation of the ‘fool’s power’ (‘Cap and Bells’) in ‘The Canticle’ to Gerard Manley Hopkins and St Therese of Liseux, followed by an analysis of new critical readings of Webb within a discourse of negative theology.¹¹⁶

Webb’s poems to Hopkins and St Therese are both explicitly tied to the Star Myth. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) is engaged in ‘Galston: Hopkins and Foster’s Dam’ (1953, 87) through his poem ‘The Starlight Night’, which turns from the stars (‘O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air’) to a starlit country barn, where ‘the spouse / Christ’ and his mother are envisaged.¹¹⁷ Webb’s version is more reticent: no breeze, no net, no bird stirs and the dam and stars have fallen asleep ‘awaiting the order from below’, while Hopkins, the master of the in-scape, combines ‘look, look!’ with ‘prayer, patience, alms, vows’. Webb sees that his face (or Hopkins’s, or the face of the stars) is ‘also the face of waiting’ and both face and falling water are ‘as the face of waiting’, a contemplative interplay between subject,

¹¹⁵ For ‘Socrates’ and the *via negativa*, see Andrew Lynch, “‘While I Wrestled With The Sun, The Sun’”: Francis Webb’s “Socrates”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33.2, 1998, p. 45.

¹¹⁶ For Francis as the ‘court fool of the King of Paradise’ see G.K. Chesterton cited in Griffith, *Op Cit.*, p. 176. Chesterton’s evocation of Francis’s dislodgement from the horse (like The Knight and Saint and Brother Ass) and his recognition of himself as very small and distinct ‘like a fly walking on a window pane’ are also crucial to the saint’s humility in ‘The Canticle’.

¹¹⁷ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, Penguin, London, 1985, p.28.

water, stars and ‘the wide reaches’. This, in turn, reorients Hopkins’s *cataphatic* tone (‘look!’) to an *apophatic* one in the Pseudo-Dionysian sense, where subject and setting are neither one nor the other, and a higher contemplation is proposed.

In 1969, four years before his death, Webb finally engaged women mystics in two poems featuring St Therese of Liseux (1873–1897), ‘Before Two Girls’ and ‘St Therese and the Child’.¹¹⁸ As Patricia Excell (1993) observes, in ‘Before Two Girls’ Therese’s fearlessness towards her untimely demise (‘after my death I will let fall a shower of roses’) serves to console the poet.¹¹⁹ Her death from consumption is framed by Christocentric faces, waters, love and finally the ‘knots stars of stars that pause overhead’, all as one prayer which petitions its origin, the Centre of ‘His Heart’:

Darkness, the sun, the moon. Time has begun.
 For He is His pattern: one prayer, twisting and turning
 Among the amphibious pleading
 Forms and faces, compels the waters and the bleeding
 Of His Heart: as for ever the mangled hands and breast
 May ponder into flower the hot tumuli of dust.

 And He is the slave of those prayers He has lent;
 And we are the slaves of the secular word, the vision
 And the treasure and the terror

 ... Roses on the streets, lilies on the autobahn...¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Patricia Excell, “‘Before Two Girls’: A “Lost” Poem by Francis Webb’, *Southerly* 53.3, 1993, p. 54.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹²⁰ ‘Before Two Girls’ reproduced in *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Therese herself described her ‘little way’ of prayer as ‘the way of spiritual childhood, the way of trust and surrender’.¹²¹ In ‘St Therese and the Child’ she is invoked to care for an infant who has inherited the mirror opposite of Webb’s own childhood (*‘mother insane, father unknown’*) and who reminds the aging poet of the infant ‘Five Days Old’ he captured in ‘his pride, his prime’. Webb constructs himself as ‘the sun on ticket of leave’, giving the child his ‘last threads of fire’ as ‘my parent galaxies / Solicit your calms, times, musing tributaries, / and your Saint’. As Webb feels himself fading, Therese is implored to ‘disengage from the One ... open, open and close / About this so delicate, inviolable rose’, transposing the esoteric and biblical symbol of the rose through Therese to the child, who is also a progenitor for Webb’s last poem ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’, an even younger female Saint.¹²² The Webb who in his prime had assumed the voice of Brother Sun and recruited the systems of male mystics and theologians to fuel his Explorer and Mystic Searches, turns to feminine proponents of mystical to console him at Search’s end, echoing the Star Myth’s original goal, that of a lost wife and mother’s love and consolation.

Ascetic approaches to tropes of returning resurface in ‘Ward Two: Wild Honey’ (231), where erotic imagery serves as an allegory for Webb’s metaphysics of negativity, transcendence, Centre, and stars:

Shall ascent

Be a travelling homeward, past the blue frosty feet

Of winter, past childhood, past the grey snake, the will?

Are gestures stars in sacred dishevelment,

¹²¹ King, *Op Cit.*, p. 223. This may have influenced the ‘little way’ of ‘Cap and Bells’, though it is unclear when Webb first encounters St Therese.

The tiny, the pitiable, meaningless and rare
 As a girl beleaguered by rain, and her yellow hair?

Kane (1996) argues that in 'Wild Honey' 'Webb is a poet of renunciation, and the fierceness with which he acts out his *kenosis* [emptying of self] is quite unparalleled' and in the process his *via negativa* is 'a mode of negation which may well prove to be the most characteristic feature of the strongest Australian poetry of the twentieth century'.¹²³ This is especially true in the context of the placement of the girl 'combing her hair before the grey mirror, / the golden sweetness trickling' at the end of a series of mentally-ill patients as a consoling image of nectar-like fecundity. 'Down with the mind a moment, and let Eden / Be fullness without the prompted unnatural hunger' can be read as a call to desist from poetry itself, to let the beauty of world and mind be, although Webb cannot avoid wondering what such a renunciation implies for his metaphysics of return. In 'Wild Honey' the erotic and ascetic, through the extensive biblical references and honey imagery (The Song of Songs 4:11, 5.1), maintain a transcendent reciprocity. The erotic inspires a wordless *via negativa* towards ascent and origin, while the ascetic joins the erotic to the divine eros of return and union of wordless peace at Search's end. The negative capability of the final stanza suggests that this reciprocity may be subject to its own tensions, that its transcendence will not be achieved while the mind cannot be overcome, or that its transcendence in fact moves beyond the poet in his final appeal for the meaning of stars as 'the gates of death scrape open'.

¹²² Reproduced in Perry (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 29. In it Brennan (2004) observes 'God of the poetry refuses to be framed' (Bernadette Brennan, "'Death and the Woman": Looking at Francis Webb's "Lament for St Maria Goretti"', *Australian Literary Studies* 21.3, 2004, p. 289).

¹²³ Kane, *Op Cit.*, p.208. Taylor (1989) also considers 'Wild Honey' as evocative of the Edenic state 'in which the human and the divine could come together in an erotic union' (*Op Cit.*, p. 110).

Negativity features strongly in recent critical associations between Francis Webb and Christian mysticism.¹²⁴ Kevin Hart (2000) for example, reads the ‘unsaying transcendence’ of ‘Poet’ as ‘an apology for writing poetry ... The writing life can be a religious life’.¹²⁵ Bernadette Brennan (2005), who opened this chapter with the assertion that ‘Webb’s poetry ... is the experience of the search ... the attempt to write “God”’, concludes her discussion, via Hart, as follows:

Webb writes God under erasure. His manipulation of language, of multilayered metaphors — most significantly the metaphor of incarnation — breaks open the name and the meaning of God. His poetry, like the metaphor of incarnation, understands the divine and the human, creation and destruction, affirmation and negation, presence and absence, as interactive rather than binary terms of difference.¹²⁶

Webb’s long-term refusal to be enchanted by his writing which can be traced back to ‘Palace of Dreams’, the Knight of ‘The Canticle’ “slashing the canvas of dreams” and the *apologia* of ‘Poet’. This fine line represents a maturing of the way Australian poets and critics engage the mystical, which in the post-Federation era could mean anything from fey occultism to theosophical nationalism and was far more likely to be claimed by poets, including the younger Neilson. Webb utterly refutes this and, like Harford, Buckley and McAuley, delves back into the Catholic mystical tradition for his systems and sources. Webb’s other fine line between *cataphasis* and

¹²⁴ Brennan, *Op Cit.*, p. 290.

¹²⁵ Kevin Hart, ‘Francis Webb: Unsaying Transcendence’, *Southerly* 60:2, 2000, p. 17; Hopkins’s sermons are also one source for Christ as the poet-hero, developed explicitly in Johannine terms in ‘Poet’ (John 7:53–8:11, see also Neilson’s ‘He Was The Christ’). Hopkins’s Sermon dated 23rd November 1879 reads ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, my brethren, is our hero, a hero that all the world wants ... He is a thinker, that taught us divine mysteries. He is an orator and poet, as in his eloquent words and parables appears. He is all the world’s hero, the desire of nations’ (Hopkins, *The Major Works*, p. 276).

¹²⁶ Brennan, ‘Recognizing the “face of love”’, pp. 31, 42.

apophasis, presence-absence, inexpressibility and unstageability is mitigated by their interactivity, as Brennan observes, but they also feature in Webb's Search outside his own poetics to that of explorers, mystical poets and saints including St Francis, Gerard Manley Hopkins and St Therese of Liseux. His Christological and Franciscan recognition of a universal humanity and holiness in humility allowed him to emphasise the anti-heroism of national explorer myths and extend his poetic range to those on the national periphery including Aborigines (see Chapter 8), explorer's wives, immigrants, homosexuals, the unemployed and the mentally ill.¹²⁷ Furthermore, Brennan's convincing comparison between Webb and negative theologians, Pseudo-Dionysius first among them, posits Webb as a poet *par excellence* of the mystical and inexpressible and serves as fitting end to this chapter's Search.

Francis Webb is the first Australian poet to actively, explicitly and substantially engage Western Christian mysticism in his poetry. Though he rarely uses 'mystic' or 'mystical' in his poetry, 'mystery', 'soul' and other terms of ineffability and transcendence combine with mystical tropes of timelessness, fire, light and darkness to create a language which both celebrates and negates itself before the divine. Webb amassed a formidable reading list of mystics, saints and mystical poets and imitated Francis's own mysticism of the historical event by engaging and innovating within the works of St Francis. He demonstrates direct, experimental and unitive consciousness of the presence of Christ through his vehicle of the Search, grounded in the Star Myth of his childhood. Webb's corpus reflects a more scholarly, text-based approach to Western Christian mysticism among

¹²⁷ See 'The End of the Picnic' (98), 'Eyre All Alone: Aboriginal' (186), 'The Explorer's Wife' (51), 'Song of the New Australian' (97), 'Ward Two: Homosexual' (227), 'Laid Off' (88), 'Ward Two' (223), 'Death at Winston Green' (153).

Australian poets aided by the proliferation of international scholarship and a more direct engagement with the mystics themselves by poet-scholars such as Hopkins and the Eliot of *Four Quartets*.

6. Judith Wright, the Fire of Love and the Dark Star

Judith Wright is the first major non-Christian Australian poet to engage the language and themes of Western Christian mysticism. Her imagery of the fire of love and the dark star intimately address her increasing distress at the effects of Australian colonialism and Western destructiveness. While the mid-century Catholic poets sought a greater engagement with the mystics of the Catholic tradition, other poets of the same era turned to the incarnate, ascetic and erotic imagery of mystics and mystical poets to renegotiate their own mystical poetics. This chapter will investigate how an understanding of Western Christian mysticism is essential to the study of Judith Wright in this context.

Prelude: Robinson, Campbell, Hope

Roland Robinson (1912–1992) envisioned a natural synthesis between Indigenous approaches to the ‘mystery of Australia’ and his own Protestantism exemplified by ‘the God within me’ he describes directing and speaking for him in his autobiography.¹ His journeys across Australia influenced his land-based religious poetics, particularly his use of the inexpressible:

I had no human speech. I heard
the quail-thrush cry out of the stones
and cry again its crystal word
out of the mountains’ crumbling bones.
... The speech that silence shapes but keeps:
a ruin and the writhe of thin

¹ Roland Robinson, *The Shift of Sands: An Autobiography 1952–1962*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1976, p. 168.

ghost-gums against their rain-blue deeps
of night and ranges I drank in.
('Deep Well XVI')²

'The speech that silence shapes but keeps', an experience 'beyond all words' is a key trope for Webb in his explorers of 'the mystical centre' (*A Drum for Ben Boyd*) and even the 'sandy tongue-tied barren ground' of 'Eyre All Alone'.³ Robinson's 'Tumult of the Swans' sequence ties the inexpressible to his own balance between contemplative and active poet—'let me be, in alternation / flower, and rock, and voice at last'.⁴ In 'Grendel' the poet-exile is granted a 'secret flower of flame / inside you' that 'finds a tongue to speak', a holy fire, present also in the burning banksias in 'Del Espiritu Santo':

Fierce and holy flower
burning, in the drenched
depths of blue-grey bush,
solitary, unquenched.
... Holy, holy flower,
through centuries, again
sprung from the mould to burn,
burn in the bush and rain.⁵

Robinson himself recounts the compositional background to this poem as follows:

In a deep gully on the south coast of NSW, a solitary waratah burning unquenched in the rain. The chalice flame of the Holy Spirit rising in resurrection out of the earth

² Roland Robinson, *Tumult of the Swans*, Edwards & Shaw, Sydney, 1953, p. 36

³ Francis Webb, *Collected Poems*, pp. 28, 187.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵ Roland Robinson, *Selected Poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1971, pp. 32, 11.

year after year, century after century, long before ever de Quiros [Portuguese explorer (1563–1614)] dreamed of *Austrialia del Espiritu Santo*. The light of the storm passes over it like the light streaming through the stained glass window of a church. Surrounded by the spears and swords of Spain's militant church. The waterfall, the hushed litany in the shrine. Fierce and holy flower, holy, holy, the Holy Grail, the flower: totemic, holy the aborigines' hushed chanting in the sacred place of the holy spirit. All right. Seek out the music and form for this holy chant.⁶

Robinson's enraptured 'chant' bears comparisons with Christian mystical poetics in the 'unquenched' burning of the resurrected flower, a mixture of the burning bush of Exodus and the resurrected Christ. The inexpressible, as the Holy Spirit no less, is celebrated in a *cataphatic* sense, in a psalm of praise based on Robinson's vision of the waratah similar to Webb's banksia in 'Eyre All Alone' ('Banksia, carry fire, like the thurifer / Over my sandy tongue-tied barren ground').⁷ It is more than coincidental that both poems attempt to contact, or convert, an Aboriginal spiritual presence. Whether or not this constitutes inclusivity or appropriation will be examined in Chapter 8. Robinson does not involve himself poetically with Western Christian mystics *per se*, nor is he particularly bothered with Protestant doctrine or theology. Like Judith Wright, he seeks a unity with his own poeticised, often inexpressible notion of the eternal influenced by a deep affinity with the land itself. In 'Beyond the Grass Tree Spears' Robinson identifies his 'pure religion' and claims his own gentle unitive state, with a connubial *eros* reminiscent of The Song of Songs:

Last night I spoke to you from where I lay
 under a banksia-tree at the top of the gully.
 Come, I said, out of the distances of cliffs

⁶ Roland Robinson in Colin Thiele (ed.), *Australian Poets Speak*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1961, p. 112.

⁷ Webb, *Op Cit.*, p. 187.

in the mists of after sunset, out of the gully
filled with the light of the soaring insects, come
out of the saplings standing against the sea,
against the mountains of clouds, come from the south
with first cold breath; and then above the sea
appeared the evening star, pale golden, swimming
with its smaller companion into the trailing rain.
Come, I said, and you stirred the trees and wreathed
the smoke of my fire and came in the night with rain.

And, looking up, white flowers were outspread
into the darkness all about my tent;
making a pure religion of this place,
a prayer that came unbidden except by Spring
and rain that left the sandy ridges cool.
So that I lay with all the width of land,
in pause and flow of gullies, slopes and hills,
open to the stars and the faint cold dew,
at one with the night and the flowers and stars.⁸

Taken in isolation this might constitute pantheism, but Robinson's explicitly biblical use of similar imagery (fire, trees, flowers and darkness) throughout the rest of the sequence and the larger metaphysical implications the sea 'that will not die ... that lies beyond ... at evening limitless' suggest that its unitive tropes might also coincide with Western Christian mysticism as one of the poem's many readings, supported by its parallels with the mystical yearning of Kevin Hart's 'Prayer' (see Chapter 7).

⁸ Roland Robinson, *Deep Well*, Edwards & Shaw, Sydney, 1962, p. 23.

Birds and trees, of crucial importance to Neilson and Webb, are also given transcendent qualities by non-Christians David Campbell (1915–1979) and Robert D. FitzGerald (1902–1987; ‘The Sea Eagles’, ‘The Hidden Bole’). FitzGerald is notable for his emphasis on the ‘Unseen’, the flame of self and ruminations on eternity in ‘Essay on Memory’ and ‘The Face of the Waters’. In his critical work he recognises ‘the deeper symbolic and still deeper mystical meanings’ of poetry, but qualifies this with ‘other meanings must also be taken into account: the meaning which is form, and the meaning which is music’.⁹ Campbell is significant for his biblical references (‘We Took the Storms to Bed’, 67) and interest in mystics such as ‘the tree the mystics burn’ in ‘Far Other Worlds’ (19) and the Wolf of Gubbio from the St Francis legend in ‘Red Bridge’ (208).¹⁰ In ‘Morning Rise’ the poet and the black sally tree both catch the dawn sun upon the horizon, the former projecting himself *like*, not *at*, the tree in a Neilsonian manner (161). As R.F. Brissenden (1983) outlines, the light imagery of Welsh mystical poet Henry Vaughan extensively influenced Campbell’s ‘Stars speak. Night / Is infinitely deep’ (‘River Music’) and

From a wreck of tree in the wash of night
 Glory, glory sings the bird;
 Across ten thousand years of light
 His creative voice is heard
 ...And to the heartbeats of the light,
 Now from the deepness of the glade

⁹ Robert D. FitzGerald, *Robert D. FitzGerald* (ed. Julian Croft), University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1987, pp. 5, 75, 80, 89, 32. Some of these are listed as ‘meditative poems’ by the editor.

¹⁰ All page references are from David Campbell, *Collected Poems* (ed. Leonie Kramer), Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

Well up the bubbles of delight
 Of such stuff stars were made.
 ('Speak with the Sun', 20)¹¹

The glory of the bird slips through the atmospheric net to 'myriad galaxies' and supports the cosmic unity of land, bird, song, listener and universe in a *cataphatic* hymn of celebration. Yet Brissenden is careful to note that Campbell 'merely takes Vaughan as a starting point and launches into something wholly individual and new'.¹² The renegotiation of mystical influences into individual poetic consciousness is a feature shared by Campbell and Wright, as is the recognition of Indigenous spirituality and a personal shift from Western to Eastern forms of mysticism.¹³

Similar renegotiations assume a satirical form in the poetry of A.D. Hope (1915–2000). Satire in Australian poetry has a long history of subverting the implicit designs of dogmatism and theology. Francis MacNamara's 'Convict's Tour to Hell', the anonymous ballad 'Holy Dan', the Ern Malley hoax and Gwen Harwood's 'Eloisa to Abelard' all undermine the implicit themes of damnation, puritanism, modernist hubris and the blatant chauvinism of their targets respectively.¹⁴ For Hope, however, satire is no side project; he relishes his role as post-war iconoclast of national, sexual, literary and religious orthodoxies. In the process, he establishes a counter-discourse to the mid-century Catholic poets in particular. 'Easter Hymn' (15) frames the Christian mystery as a delusion facilitating sexual and social repression, while 'House of God' rails against 'God's domesticated creatures' which

¹¹ R.F. Brissenden, 'The Poetry of David Campbell', *Quadrant* 27.10, 1983, pp. 67–9. Brissenden notes that 'Speak With the Sun' derives its title from Vaughan's 'At Midnight Speak with the Sun' and suggests Vaughan's 'I saw Eternity the other night' may have given this an astronomical flavour.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³ See Leonie Kramer, 'The Surreal Landscape of David Campbell', *Southerly* 1, 1981, pp. 3–16. References to Indigenous spirituality (Baiame) and Indian mystics (Sri Ramakrishna) can be found in 'Ku-ring-gai Rock Carvings' (114).

sycophantically purr and rub against his shins (51).¹⁵ ‘Lambkin: A Fable’ (116) rivals ‘Holy Dan’ for its lampooning of zealotry and Lambkin’s journey to ‘new-won grace’ operates as a cautionary tale against frivolous claims to any *scala perfectionis*. Western Christian mystics are directly targeted in ‘The Martyrdom of St Teresa’ (1946, 63) where the saint, ‘a holy / Titbit upon the butcher’s block’ is cloven by Death the sunset which ‘Pours down on every true believer / The mystic blood of martyrdom’. Rather than decry ‘the flesh that had been joined with God’ as another delusion, Hope allows the historical exhumation and souveniring of the saint’s body to represent a more earthly reality, the frenzied greed of superstition and fanaticism. This is echoed in ‘The Mystic Marriage of St Catherine of Alexandria’ (1973) where, after the saint’s legend is whittled down to ‘what is true / Is this: she outlived the people of her time. / A perpetual beauty lies within reason and rhyme’ and her union with Jesus ‘terrible in his naked might’ is ridiculed by a series of double entendres, Hope returns to the legend for the satisfaction of her beheading.¹⁶ St Augustine is also at the receiving end of Hope’s derision as less a mystic than ‘optimistic / About the rout and ruin of pagan gods’ in ‘A Letter From Rome’ (129) where, as in ‘Easter Hymn’, his City of God is rendered obsolete.

Hope’s scepticism towards modes and tropes of mystical Christianity provides a valuable counterpoint to this study by demonstrating that what passes for mysticism for some poets and critics constitutes a cautionary tale or sexless conspiracy for others. As an erudite provocateur he also gains telling reactions from contemporaries such as Vincent Buckley who described him as ‘sexually obsessed,

¹⁴ MacNamara cited in Leonard (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 378; ‘Holy Dan’ in Stewart & Keesing (eds), *Op Cit.*; Harwood, *Op Cit.*, pp. 110, 111. Harpur and Neilson also wrote satirical verses.

¹⁵ All page references are from A.D. Hope, *Collected Poems 1930–1970*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972.

¹⁶ A.D. Hope, *A Late Picking: Poems 1965–1974*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1975, p. 66.

and obsessed in an unpleasant manner'.¹⁷ Yet Hope also uses his biblical knowledge to renegotiate his own sacralised eros. Xavier Pons (2000) identifies 'an almost mystical dimension to the erotic experience' in 'The School of Night' (253) where 'sex is sacralised as a pilgrimage to the very sources of spirituality' and the poem is riddled with 'mystical intent' culminating in Hope's imagery of visiting his lover's 'holy land'. Such overtones exist, as do those of life-giving female fertility ('The Cheek', 37) and oneness in sexual union ('Sonnets to Baudelaire', 234), but Pons's case stalls when he fails to specify what he means by 'mystical', a common oversight in Australian poetry criticism. Kevin Hart (1992) also acknowledges Hope's construction of the female body as a site for his vision of a higher, primal mystery of love, but goes further by noting Hope's debt to St Thomas Aquinas, including the saint's applications of Pseudo-Dionysian 'divine rays' to metaphor and imagery.¹⁸ Ultimately, however, A.D. Hope's most enduring legacy to the mystical in Australian poetry lies in his resolute secularising of transcendence, illumination and eros. As subsequent poets such as Robert Adamson (1943–) have acknowledged, Hope operates *between* secular and the sacred, form and formlessness, to establish a template for 'faith in our own mystery'.¹⁹

¹⁷ Buckley cited in Xavier Pons, 'A.D. Hope and the Apocalyptic Splendour of the Sexes', *Australian Literary Studies* 19.4, 2004, p. 373.

¹⁸ Kevin Hart, *A.D. Hope*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 24, 32, 60, 64, 94.

¹⁹ Robert Adamson ('Lady Faith: For A.D. Hope on his 80th Birthday') cited in *Ibid.*, p. 60. Mystical absorption, including ocean imagery, and tropes of negativity also appear in Adamson's 'The River' cited in Kevin Hart (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 1.

Judith Wright

In Australian poetry, the most extensive use of the language and themes of Western Christian mysticism by a long-term non-Christian occurs in the poetry of Judith Wright (1915–2000). In *The Moving Image* (1946) and *Woman to Man* (1949) Wright constructs her major trope of the fire of love in explicitly biblical, and sacramental terms. In subsequent collections this trope is subsumed by the dark star, culminating in the sober drunkenness of ‘Grace’ in *Alive* (1973). Both tropes have a strong affinity with Western Christian mysticism and Wright establishes them through her engagement with figures variously associated with the mystical tradition including Heraclitus, Plato, Thomas Traherne, Henry Vaughan, William Blake, Emily Brontë, T.S. Eliot and John Shaw Neilson.²⁰ Despite Wright’s significant interest in Eastern mystical traditions, notably Sufism and Taoism, Christian mystical influences continue to be present in her poetry until her final collection *Phantom Dwelling* (1985) where she also claims somewhat pessimistically ‘we are all born of fire, possessed by darkness’ (‘Patterns’, 426).²¹ Still, throughout her career Wright invokes the fire of love to balance that of destruction and the dark star to balance the colonial and nuclear shadows which endanger ecology and humanity. As a self-described Jungian, Wright also attempts to unite dark and light in *Shadow* (1970), but her interactions with Christian mystical presence and union occur, with the exception of ‘Grace’, well before this.²²

²⁰ Judith Wright, *With Love and Fury: Selected Letters of Judith Wright* (eds Patricia Clarke & Meredith McKinney), National Library of Australia, Canberra, pp. 73, 92, 125.

²¹ All initial page references from Judith Wright, *Collected Poems 1942–1985*, Angus & Robertson, Pymble, 1994.

²² Judith Wright, *With Love and Fury*, p. 216.

Wright, the Clergy and the Critics

Post-1945 critical assumptions about mystical poetry are exposed by Wright's work in two ways. First, her status as a non-Christian forces critics to consider her use of the mystical poetics independent of any attributable Christianity. Second, her overall success as a poet ensured that Australian women poets of the transcendent and mystical could no longer be ignored, which in turn led to the surge in male critical hostility towards Wright examined later in this chapter. Since the conclusion of Wright's poetic career in 1985, critics such as Nella Bureu, Paul Kane and Kevin Hart have interpreted her corpus in terms of Western Christian mysticism without the overriding gender assumptions of their post-war predecessors.

Critical hostilities towards Wright's use of the mystical as non-Christian poet and as a woman were often interrelated. In 1976 she wrote 'I've never felt the need to posit an "outside" deity when there's so much to be discovered about the "inside" ... A Creator, a personal God, a separate soul, don't seem necessities to me' and her enduring rejection of organised Christianity can be traced to her childhood response to the clergy:

I noticed that the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God figured a lot in church services and the afternoon-tea conversation of the visiting clerics, as they sat in their wicker chairs and took little iced cakes from the best china plates, they didn't seem to know much about the real fate of sheep and the duties of those that bred them. The life of action and the life of rather perverted feeling did not match.²³

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 291; Wright cited in Veronica Brady, *South of My Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 1998, p. 36.

The incongruity between Wright's pragmatism and the unworldly 'Good Shepherd' developed through her poetry and her marriage to the philosopher John McKinney who traced what Wright calls 'separation between man and world enforced by the intellectual analysis' to Socratic enquiry:

like Jung, he thought that much personal breakdown was in fact a search for other ways of viewing the world (religious rather than materialist and rational) and that art, as an expression of the feeling side of man, could act as a kind of bridge towards the next development, and into the neglected inner world of feeling.²⁴

Wright and McKinney's preference for an inner unity with nature developed by human thought contextualises the poet's emphasis upon experience, particularly women's experience, in restoring 'the feeling-side of man', where 'women are much more inclined to rely on their basic experience ... The basic touch with life probably is women's main strength'.²⁵ But as Wright (1989) herself notes, her shift from the traditional mix of rural and philosophical in *The Moving Image* (1946) to a transcendent femininity in *Woman to Man* (1949) met with fierce critical resistance:

Having produced in *The Moving Image*, a collection of poems which [Ern Malley publisher] Max Harris described as "comparatively free of ... biological self-centredness and physical passion", I veered right off track in the next two books into "biological hysteria", causing everyone problems of classification. No-words like "rhetorical", "paradoxical", "hysterical", "vague", "metaphysical", "impersonal" pervade later reviews — in Australia at any rate, where my failure to write

²⁴ Judith Wright, *Op Cit.*, p. 276. She continues 'Jack's own work implied that we are part of a unity with "nature" and that human thought is the development of that relationship which seems to me enough'.

²⁵ Wright (1967) cited in James McAuley, *A Map of Australian Verse*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 165.

‘Bullocky’ more than once has weighed heavily against me in male critical scales.²⁶

‘Bullocky’ with its mad pioneer emulating Moses is lauded in Vincent Buckley’s *Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian* (1957) for carrying ‘the sacred cachet of history’ but in the same publication Wright’s ‘quasi-mystical bent’ and ‘mystical significance of love’ are constructed as conditional:

When she is content to be a woman, enduring the profound incidents of a woman’s life, she is able, paradoxically enough, to transcend her womanliness and be a very fine poet. When she attempts to be not a woman, but a bard, commentator or prophet, she becomes a bit of a shrew — which is the worst and most unwomanly of all things a woman may become.²⁷

Buckley proceeds to take Wright to task for her ‘spiritual melodrama’, ‘cosmic symbolism’, ‘facile optimism of ... a contemplative-at-will’ and thinking ‘of nature in such terms as savages use ... suspiciously close to a kind of sophisticated animism’.²⁸ For Buckley, Wright is only mystical in a complimentary sense when she paradoxically remains within and yet transcends her womanhood; when she strays elsewhere, denigratory associations little different from those of A.G. Stephens are unleashed with the mystical poet as symbolist, pagan, racially inferior, and ‘contemptuous of ordinary human life’.²⁹ One notable discrepancy exists in regard to

²⁶ Judith Wright, ‘Transcending Womanliness’ in David Brooks and Brenda Walker (eds), *Poetry and Gender: Statements and Essays in Australian Women’s Poetry and Poetics*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989, p. 71.

²⁷ Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian*, Books for Libraries, Freeport, 1969 (reprint from 1959), pp. 163, 159, 172, 174–5. Wright became so frustrated at misinterpretations of ‘Bullocky’ she traces back to Buckley that she later refused to allow it to be anthologised (Wright, *With Love and Fury*, p. 410.)

²⁸ Buckley, *Op Cit.*, pp. 173, 174, 176, 163.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 164.

gender: for Stephens, the more suspicious forms of mysticism strip away his prescribed masculinity while Buckley's suspicious mysticism strips away his prescribed femininity. Either way, the poet's credulity is compromised.

The complimentary criticism of the era reveals further gender assumptions. Phillip Lindsay (1950) praises Wright for avoiding both the mystical celibacy of Brontë, Rossetti or Dickinson who were just 'sexually inexperienced ladies, transmuting their desires', while G.A. Wilkes (1965) favourably compares Wright to Neilson only to condescendingly add 'this is not to suggest that Judith Wright is a mystic — though perhaps she might wish that she were'.³⁰ As Wright (1989) reflects 'Well, clearly yer can't win ... womanliness, whatever womanliness is, has to be transcended if a woman is to be regarded as a fine poet'.³¹ For Buckley, this means being paradoxically content with womanliness; for Lindsay it means distinguishing oneself from 'sexually inexperienced' mystical women poets, while for Wilkes it means relinquishing the desire to be a male 'mystic' of Neilson's post-war standing. To be seen as too 'womanly' is to also risk Max Harris's charges of 'biological hysteria' which, as Amy Hollywood (2002) observes, has a long association with women in Western Christian mysticism scholarship, where

a distinction is made between good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable, non-pathological and pathological mysticism, with the first category in each case associated with masculinity and men and the second with femininity and women.³²

Wright's 'yer can't win' is doubly so for Australian female mystical poets until the late twentieth century. In the male-dominated provinces of both mysticism and

³⁰ Phillip Lindsay 'Poetry in Australia' and G.A. Wilkes 'The Later Poetry of Judith Wright' in A.K. Thomson (ed.), *Critical Essays on Judith Wright*, Jacaranda, Milton, 1968, pp. 35, 115.

³¹ Judith Wright, 'Transcending Womanliness', p. 71.

³² Hollywood, *Op Cit.*, pp. 7–8.

Australian poetry scholarships women are either safely feminine in a derogatory sense, or dangerously pathological, hysterical or paradoxical, especially in regard to the gendered body, or earth-body.³³ Furthermore, Wright's non-Christian status exposes her to further 'suspicions' from Buckley, although it also allows other non-Christian poet-critics such as A.D. Hope (1975) to propose the existence of 'something beyond ... mystical elevation of the spirit' in her poem 'Grace'.³⁴

The Fire of Love

Wright's experience, while anti-ecclesiastical, is often framed in Christian terms. The undergraduate who believed in the soul not the church, the hospital patient who had 'wild long dreams involving the whole of life and death and God', and the poet who was able to weave other's experiences, and her own, into mystical themes of love all facilitate Christian mystical readings by later critics such as Nella Bureu, Paul Kane and Kevin Hart.³⁵ To these Wright's daughter Meredith McKinney adds a biographical addendum in *The Equal Heart and Mind* (2004):

In her occasional 'little talks' to me as a growing girl, my mother always impressed me by telling me that love between the sexes could be one of the purest, deepest and most joyous experiences. It used to make me wonder what other experiences she might be including in this category. (I now think it was probably a version of the

³³ See *Ibid.*; Grace Jantzen, *Op Cit.*, p. 28. Jantzen links the association between women's bodies and the earth back to the Eleusinian mysteries. Australian feminist theologian Elaine Lindsay (1994) in her reading of the writer Barbara Hanrahan (1939–1991) as 'a mystic in her garden' detects similar connotations in male theologians for whom, 'tragic male heroes are [the] spiritual heroes and Christ-models, Father God is the locus of power and the feminine, when it is made present, is linked to the land which is to be subdued, or to Mother Mary, the unobtrusive homemaker in the household of faith' (Elaine Lindsay, 'A Mystic in her Garden: Spirituality and the Fiction of Barbara Hanrahan' in Morny Joy & Penelope Magee (eds), *Claiming Our Rites: Studies in Religion by Women Scholars*, The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Adelaide, 1994, p. 20).

³⁴ A.D. Hope, *Judith Wright*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1975, p. 24.

³⁵ Wright, *With Love and Fury*, pp. 116, 92.

mystical experience, which is another form of Love, at least in the Christian tradition she inherited).³⁶

In correspondence with the author dated 31st January 2007, McKinney further qualifies this statement by explaining that ‘the influence of Christian mysticism is of course strongly present in her work’ based upon a foundation of personal experience with the concept of Love at its centre.³⁷ Wright’s debut collection *The Moving Image* (1946) contains some precedents in ‘Trapped Dingo’ (9) and ‘love’s whole eternity’ in the Platonic title poem (3), but *Woman to Man* (1949) introduces love as a more dynamic principle through Francis Bacon’s *Wisdom of the Ancients* which posits a Love impressed by God to counterbalance Chaos, and largely beyond minds of men.³⁸ The mysterious God-given Love in nature which ‘some faint notion may be had thereof’ (26) is a recurring theme in *Woman to Man*. Arboreal images of mother as tree and root appear throughout the collection, but ‘The Maker’ includes the flame of spirit which in Wright flickers between Love and Chaos, transformation and destruction (‘The Bushfire’, 46), Christian-Hindu (‘Song’, 154) and Heraclitean destinies (‘Patterns’, 426):

All things that glow and move,
all things that change and pass,

³⁶ Meredith McKinney, ‘Memoir of Jack and Judith’ in Judith Wright & Jack McKinney, *The Equal Heart and Mind: Letters Between Judith Wright and Jack McKinney* (eds Patricia Clarke & Meredith McKinney), University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2004, p. 1.

³⁷ Meredith McKinney elaborates the following, though she asks her reluctance to do so be noted, preferring the poems to speak for themselves: ‘I think what can be said is that Judith had a very strong innate religious sensibility. She had deep quarrels with the Christian Church, and would not have called herself a Christian as such, but the influence of Christian mysticism is of course strongly present in her work. She was drawn to Eastern mysticism, particularly the Upanishads and Sufism, and this grew on her with age. But the foundation of her mystical apprehension of the world was, I’m sure, personal experience, and as such not a thing she ever spoke of directly, although she did make a number of indirect references to it. The mystic concept/experience of Love was at its centre, as far as I can tell, and this is why I wrote as I did in the Introduction to “The Equal Heart and Mind”’. Correspondence with the author dated 31st January 2007.

³⁸ All page references are from Wright, *Collected Poems 1942–1985*.

I gather their delight
 as in a burning glass;
 ... since love, who cancels fear
 with his fixed will,
 burned my vision clear
 and bid my sense be still.
 ('The Maker', 29)³⁹

While 'The Maker' is not explicitly Christian, the Golgotha-like 'wrecked skull' hill, the bush 'filled with fire' and sacramental themes of 'Flame Tree in a Quarry' (60) more emphatically point to a Christian mystical conclusion:

Still is the song made flesh
 though the singer dies —
 flesh of the world's delight,
 voice of the world's desire,
 I drink you with my sight
 and I am filled with fire.

Out of the very wound
 springs this scarlet breath —
 this fountain of hot joy,
 this living ghost of death.

If the 'song made flesh' is indeed the Word made flesh (John 1:14) or a Neilsonian singer-Christ, then the flame-tree eucharistically drinks the Word and is filled with

³⁹ Wright, *Op Cit.*, p. 277.

the fire of the Holy Spirit, 'the living ghost of death'. If this living ghost is read to be from the 'very wound' of Christ, a liturgical unitive experience with the Christian mystery itself is implied. An ecofeminist reading, however, might just as easily interpret the poem as a conjunction of ecological and corporeal fertilities, in equal parts blessing and mourning them. 'Dream' (39) operates in a similar manner to 'The Maker' and 'Flame Tree in a Quarry' whereby any critical adoption of the recognisably Christian tropes invites a Christian mystical reading, though 'Dream' further distinguishes itself by negating the world of the senses and even the natural world in the protagonist's search for the eternal rose:

Travelling through a strange night by a strange light

I sought upon the hill a crimson rose

that without age and in no acre grows;

and I was caught by silence at that sight.

The burning wires of nerves, the crimson way

from head to heart, the towering tree of blood —

who travels here must move, not as he would,

but fed and lit by love alone he may.

O dying tree, I move beneath your shade;

and road of blood, I travel where you lead;

and rose unseen, upon your thorn I bleed;

and in a triple dream a dream I made.

I travel through this night and by this light

to find upon a hill the unsought rose

that out of silence into silence grows;

and silence overtakes me at that sight.

Whether or not the roses are Dantean, Yeatsian or Eliotean, the hill Golgotha or the 'triple dream' trinitarian are ultimately surpassed by 'the crimson way ... fed and lit by love alone' that grows from silence to silence, an example of Bacon's God-given love that 'can scarce possibly find full admittance in the thoughts of men', overwhelming the poet's love-lit journey. Love in 'Dream' is also dynamic beyond the temporal; it transports, illuminates and nourishes through the rose, for Bureu 'the traditional symbol of earthly and divine love' which reappears as a thornless symbol of divine union in 'The Pool and the Star'.⁴⁰

Love in *Woman to Man* cancels fear in 'The Maker', drinks the 'fire' of the 'living ghost of death' in 'Flame Tree in a Quarry' and leads the way from sought to unsought rose beyond the temporal in 'Dream'. The love that 'burned my vision clear / and bid my sense be still' ('The Maker') is further extended by the darkness of 'Night and the Child' which tells the child 'Only in my heart can you hide' (61), and this theme of a sentient, eternal darkness underpins the relationship between the child and the blind singer in 'The Blind Man' (62):

Oh, I,
 red centre of a dark and burning sky
 fit my words to music, my crippled words to music,
 and sing to the fire with the voice of the fire.
 Go sleep with your grief, go sleep with your desire,
 go deep into the core of night and silence.
 But I hold all of it, your hate and sorrow,
 your passion and your fear; I am the breath

⁴⁰ Nella Bureu, 'Mysticism in Judith Wright', *BELLS (Barcelona English Language and Literary Studies)*, 2, 1989, p. 71.

that holds you from your death.

I am the voice of music and the ended dance.

Jimmy Delaney, the 'singer of love' does more than continue the omniscient tone of 'The Maker' or eucharistic song of fire in 'Flame Tree in a Quarry'; he sings mystical themes to 'no one but a child or a fool', who, as in Neilson and Webb, can have their own mystical qualities consistent with Meister Eckhart's 'God is not seen by blindness, nor known except by ignorance, nor understood except by fools'.⁴¹ Jimmy Delaney's origins are also twofold, as Wright describes in a 1951 letter to T. Inglis Moore:

['The Blind Man'] is not finally a poem about 'a family called Delaney...' but an attempt to relate the life of the unconscious, the poetic mythmaking imagination, the Eros principle, to the problem of this generation and its ordinary life; the 'blind man' is in the end an image of Eros himself and he speaks throughout the series.⁴²

The blind singer as Eros mythically encapsulates the ancient generative power born of Chaos ('O singer, son of darkness') who bore Psyche up to Olympus in an early allegory for the union of the soul with divine love. Yet to the Eros as myth and as the unconscious, Wright adds Delaney's blindness which may be drawn from *The Waste Land's* Augustinian fusion with Buddha and the prophet Tiresias ('Burning burning burning burning / O Lord thou pluckest me out'), or the holy fire of 'Little Gidding' ('To be redeemed from fire by fire') which she later drew upon for 'Song'.⁴³ Delaney's regenerative divinity and prophetic blindness allow him to sing Neoplatonic and Christian mystical themes including Plato's myth of the cave ('all

⁴¹ Meister Eckhart cited in Grant, *Op Cit.*, p. 44.

⁴² Wright cited in T. Inglis Moore, 'The Quest of Judith Wright' in Thomson (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 76.

⁴³ See for example R.F. Brissenden, 'The Poetry of Judith Wright' in *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7; Wright, *With Love and Fury*, p. 277.

are but shadows between the earth and the sun'), the ascent of the soul ('Who will ... join lover to loved, and raise from the ash the blazing bird?') and the burning bush of Exodus and tongues of fire in Acts 2:4 ('sing to fire with the voice of the fire').⁴⁴

Yet while the blind Eros recites tropes of mystical consciousness, the split between the child and the singer represents a change in direction for Wright's mystical poetics from the fire of love to the dark star. Fire is common to both of course, as it is to the greater share of Christian mysticism; but from *The Two Fires* (1955) it also is the 'man-created fire' of war which endangers the 'flower' of the bridegroom and the bride in the title poem (119). The 'separation between man and world' that Wright envisaged at the heart of Western civilisation is localised through an ancestral context in 'At Cooloola' where the revelation 'I know we are justified only by love / but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none' is challenged 'by a driftwood spear/ thrust out of the water' (141).⁴⁵ The fire of love of Wright's earlier work sits uneasily with her own family's connection to Indigenous presence-absence, and although she declares the coloniser is 'justified only by love', it is the image of the twilit spear which heralds her new direction towards a stronger engagement with Western Christian mysticism via the trope of the dark star.

⁴⁴ For Platonic themes, see also 'The Cage', first published in Wright & McKinney, *Equal Heart and Mind*, pp. 57–8.

⁴⁵ Wright, *With Love and Fury*, p. 276.

Lostness and Stillness: Towards the Dark Star

Few critics have examined 'The Blind Man' and fewer still have praised it.⁴⁶ One exception is T. Inglis Moore (1958), who also identified the influence of mystical poets in Mary Fullerton in Chapter 4. He observes Wright's 'metaphysical pilgrimage' and 'quest for reality' in 'The Blind Man' and notes its place within a wider trend of allegories of ascent and pilgrimage to the divine between *The Moving Image* and *The Two Fires*.⁴⁷ Wright's 1951 letter to Inglis Moore regarding 'The Blind Man' provides some impetus:

What finally I am trying to express is my own experience that the modern journey into darkness is, if it is honestly and completely taken, a journey into a new kind of light; or to quote an unpublished commentary on *Woman to Man*, that life is the basis of truth and for life love is the dynamic principle.⁴⁸

In a rare instance of critical disclosure of what is meant by 'mysticism', Inglis Moore cites Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* and even Christopher Brennan's 1904 lectures to contextualise his view that Wright's journey into darkness 'does not pass through the common and definitely marked stages of the mystic pilgrimage' although he finds resemblances in her use of symbol.⁴⁹ By contrast, Nella Bureu (1989) interprets Wright's turn towards a dynamic, death-defeating love as 'a change of emphasis from the metaphysical towards the mystical' demonstrated in 'The Lost Man' and 'The Pool and the Star'.⁵⁰ Both critics are in fact correct, for the climbing child of

⁴⁶ See Thompson (ed.), *Op Cit.*, especially R.G. Hay's 'the writing dissolves into inkblots, and I am lost', p. 104.

⁴⁷ T. Inglis Moore 'The Quest of Judith Wright' in *Ibid.*, p. 75; see 'The Flood' in *Woman to Man* and 'The Cicadas', 'The Journey' and 'The Lost Man' in *The Gateway* (1953) in particular.

⁴⁸ Wright cited in Bureu, *Op Cit.*, p. 66.

⁴⁹ Inglis Moore in Thomson (ed.), *Op Cit.*, pp. 81–2.

⁵⁰ Bureu, *Op Cit.*

'The Blind Man' leads the negations of 'The Lost Man' towards the revelations of 'The Pool and the Star' through Wright's turn to the dark star:

Is the boy lost? Then I know where he is gone.

He is gone climbing the terrible crags of the Sun.

... Through the smouldering ice of the moon is he stumbling
alone.

I shall rise from my dark and follow where he is gone

... Is the boy lost? Then I know where he is gone.

He is climbing to Paradise up a river of stars and stone.

('The Blind Man', 66–7)

The child's ascent through light and darkness reflects the mythological journey of Psyche, but also that of the soul or the unconscious given the transcendent role of the child through darkness and fire in 'Night and the Child' (61) and 'To a Child' (106) respectively.

In 'The Lost Man', this model of ascent becomes a detailed *via mystica* based on the negations of St John of the Cross. Paul Kane (1996) reads Wright's use of silence in 'The Lost Man' and 'Silence' in terms of negativity, as *kenosis* (emptying of self) and *aporia* respectively; the latter poem less a way to the divine than a reconciliation with the silent hauntings of the colonial past in 'Nigger's Leap'.⁵¹ Kane also cites Carl Jung (1875–1961), a major influence upon *The Gateway* (1953), for his association of Christ with water, though Kane also accepts that Jung, like Webb's explorers, merely provides a vehicle through which an inexpressible inner

⁵¹ Kane, *Op Cit.*, pp. 161–4.

world could be successfully distanced and poeticised.⁵² ‘The Lost Man’ details a path of renunciation which leads to ‘the pool’ by the ‘way he went’ which thematically continues the Hamilton boy’s ‘lostness’ into ‘silence ... that fierce country’ from which he climbs ‘the terrible crags of the Sun’, stars and stone to Paradise in ‘The Blind Man’. Yet, as Kane notes, ‘The Lost Man’ (112) describes a *descent* rather than the more typical mystical ascent (or *anabasis*), and the way, as in ‘Flame Tree in a Quarry’, also recalls the Passion:

You must go the way he went — the way of the bleeding
 hands and feet, the blood on the stones like flowers,
 under the hooded flowers
 that fall on the stones like blood
 ... where the priest stinging-tree waits with his whips and
 fevers
 under the hooded flowers
 that fall from the trees like blood...⁵³

Kevin Hart (1994) proposes two other sources for the poem. The first is St John of the Cross’s mystical negativity in *The Ascent of Mt Carmel* (‘To come to the knowledge of all / desire the knowledge of nothing’) possibly via its paraphrasing in

⁵² ‘Christ as the “Word” is indeed the “living water” and at the same time the symbol of the inner “complete” man, the self’ (Jung cited in *Ibid.*, p. 162). In the process of this Wright’s ‘distancing’, Jungian concepts could fuse with the biblical, as Shirley Walker (1991) observes in ‘Eli, Eli’ (Shirley Walker, *Flame and Shadow: A Study of Judith Wright’s Poetry*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1991, p. 61). Jung’s writings also spanned an eclectic range of interests variously associable with mysticism, including Christianity itself, the Eleusinian mysteries, Gnosticism, esotericism, quantum physics and Eastern mystical traditions.

⁵³ Kane, *Op Cit.*, p. 164.

Eliot's 'East Coker'.⁵⁴ The second source is Bernard O'Reilly's *Green Mountains* (1941) in which plane crash survivors are lost men spared by 'miracles' and 'divine intervention'; a third man who had died in 'a deep black pool' at the base of the waterfalls is reported as carried by Christmas Creek 'to the mystic circle of trees where he now lies'.⁵⁵

If *Green Mountains* is a source for 'The Lost Man' as Hart suspects, then Wright may have readily combined O'Reilly's lostness, pool and 'mystic circle' with the sanjuanist renunciations of 'East Coker' to address her galling postcolonial query in 'The Blind Man': 'How can they die / who live without a country?' Shirley Walker's (1991) assertion of an 'overlay' of Christian symbolism 'to generate some sort of spiritual excitement' in 'The Lost Man' is refuted in this context by the Christian mystical themes pre-existent in poem's likely sources.⁵⁶ But neither is 'The Lost Man' itself an overlay upon these sources: Hart concedes that Wright's 'map ... of lived experiences' contradicts St John's 'map of the spiritual life which has no sensory dimension whatsoever' and her *imitatio Christi* hovers between the man who tries to save the others and dies in the pool, the one who follows the lost man, and the allegorical path of renunciation. Hart suggests a different mystical dimension to prior critics through St John's *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*:

'The Lost Man' does not mark "the figuration of a new venturing religious mysticism" [Brian Elliott] or "the mystical union of the psyche with the eternal

⁵⁴ Kevin Hart, 'Darkness and Lostness: How To Read a Judith Wright Poem' in Ryan & Wallace-Crabbe (eds), *Op Cit.*, pp. 308–14. For more on Eliot's use of St John in 'Four Quartets', see Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets*, Faber & Faber, Oxford, 1978. Wright notes 'Jack was particularly impressed by "Four Quartets", which he thought the greatest poem of modern times' (Wright, *With Love and Fury*, p. 277).

⁵⁵ Hart, *Op Cit.*, p. 310.

⁵⁶ Walker, *Op Cit.*, p. 77.

cycles of nature” [Walker] but refers to a modern, specifically Australian understanding of Carmelite spirituality in which second-order directions are taken as first-order experiences and in which Jim Westray [the lost man] is remembered in his “mystic circle of trees.”⁵⁷

Hart’s interpretation suffers, however, from his dismissal of the Jungian value of the pool. The pool need not represent Christ *per se*, more the living water or the inner ‘complete’ or contemplative self, ‘the last and faceless pool’ from where the fall ‘between breath and death’ to find the ‘sun by which you live’ might be attempted. For Bureu (1989) the pool represents the ‘innermost recess of man’s soul... the mysterious realm which only the wise have reached’.⁵⁸ Yet ‘The Lost Man’ is more a model of mystical renunciation rather than the renunciation itself, which is reserved for ‘The Pool and the Star’.

The Dark Star as Illuminative Consciousness

Stars have a powerful presence in Wright’s poetry from *Woman to Man*. In her letters, she describes how ‘Night’ derived from ‘a personal experience, almost unbearable, of being part of the galaxy, and of the galaxy itself as being part of the consciousness of man’.⁵⁹ The ‘shadowless and burning night / Of darkness where I find my sight’ in ‘Midnight’ (59) is linked by Walker (1989) to the ‘deep and dazzling darkness’ of Henry Vaughan’s ‘The Night’, a place of encounter with ‘the pure state of love; the still centre at the heart of eternal flux from which all creations flows’, suggesting at least one mystical-poetic current from ‘Midnight’ to ‘The Pool

⁵⁷ Hart, *Op Cit.*, pp. 314–7; Walker, *Op Cit.*

⁵⁸ Bureu, *Op Cit.*, pp. 67, 70.

⁵⁹ Wright, *With Love and Fury*, p. 275.

and the Star'.⁶⁰ Bureu (1989), who frames Wright's mysticism as 'a constant search in the mystic direction' rather than 'the final union with the world of absolute love', nonetheless considers 'The Pool and the Star' (92–3) the pinnacle of Wright's 'mystical concentration':

Let me be most clear and most tender;

let no wind break my perfection.

Let the stream of my life run muted,

and a pure sleep unbar

my every depth and secret.

I wait for the rising of a star

whose spear of light shall transfix me —

of a far-off world whose silence

my very truth must answer.

That shaft shall pierce me through

till I cool its white-hot metal.

Let move no leaf nor moth;

sleep quietly, all my creatures.

I must be closed as the rose is

until that bright one rises.

Then down the fall of space

his kiss the shape of a star

shall wake the dark of my breast.

⁶⁰ Walker, *Op Cit.*, p. 68; see also the bee to honey imagery of 'Stars' (52). Such themes recur in Neilson's 'Honeythirst', 'The Emperor', Webb's 'Wild Honey' and Les Murray's 'Sunflower' in Chapter 7.

For this I am drawn from far —
 for this I am gathered together.
 Though made of time and of waters
 that move even while I love
 I shall draw from the living day
 no hour as pure, as bright,
 as this when across the night
 he stoops with his steady ray
 and his image burns on my breast.⁶¹

The contemplative aspirations of ‘Night’, ‘Dream’, ‘Midnight’, ‘The Lost Man’, ‘For Precision’, ‘The Real Dream’, ‘The Other Half’ and ‘Return’ are realised in ‘The Pool and the Star’ through its stillness in preparation for the star ‘whose silence / my very truth must answer’. A non-Christian reading of this poem is certainly possible, but its secret silence, stigmatic ‘piercing’ ray, and the star as ‘he ... that bright one’ with a mystical kiss which burns ‘the dark of my breast’ recalls major Christian mystical tropes of St Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, St Francis, St Bernard of Clairvaux and the Beguines and the star, of course, in the nativity story signifies Christ’s arrival (Matthew 2:2). ‘I must be as closed as the rose is / until that bright one rises’ affirms Wright’s contemplative determination for unitive experience with the spear, the ray and the kiss but, as Bureu observes, this determination also disturbs the poet’s progression:

The star is the principle of pure light, common to mystical symbolism. The poet’s inflamed desire for the final union takes the form of a rose, its redness being the traditional symbol of earthly and divine love. This passion impregnates every line

⁶¹ Bureu, *Op Cit.*, pp. 66, 71.

and creates a climate of fusion with the beloved which the continuous use of the future suggests is never reached.⁶²

Bureau argues that the *climate* for mystical experience is created, but the final result is a projected experience *until* the star *shall* burn his image—it has not, and in fact *does* not, although the use of ‘shall’ can also indicate prior consciousness or ritual re-enactment. Wright’s concern that absolute stillness is impossible for one ‘made of time and of waters / that move even while I love’ and her reward of ‘no hour as pure or bright’ rather than divine answering, kissing or union indicate that only purgative and possibly illuminative consciousness are achieved in ‘The Pool and the Star’. This is especially evident when Wright’s poem is compared to the unitive consciousness of Christian mystics, particularly female mystics who are among the greatest exponents of the language of love in Western Christian mysticism:

I do not complain of suffering for Love,
 It is right that I should always obey her,
 For I can know her only as she is in herself,
 Whether she commands in storm or in stillness.
 This is a marvel beyond my understanding,
 Which fills my whole heart
 And makes me stray in a wild desert
 (Hadewijch of Brabant [c.1250], ‘Knowing Love In Herself’)

By dark of blessed night
 In secrecy, for no one saw me
 And I regarded nothing,
 My only light and guide

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

The one that in my heart was burning

... Upon my flowering breast

Entirely kept for him and him alone

(St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*)

I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me that this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought that he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness of this great pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal.

(Teresa of Avila (1512–1582), *Life*, Chapter 29)⁶³

It is a testament to the spiritual intensity of Wright's mystical climate in the 'The Pool and the Star' that it bears comparison with Hadewijch's filling of the heart, St John's burning breast, or St Teresa's 'dart', though Wright may indeed owe a sizeable debt to St John in constructing such intensity. Equally, it is clear that these mystics have progressed further, describing themselves as filled by Love beyond understanding, recording or allegorising a dialogue with God's voice or being wounded and 'all on fire with a great love of God' while 'The Pool and the Star' can only promise a presence that *shall* come, or has come in a prior, unspecified experience. As Bureu observes, it is not a Christian mystical poem in the strictest

⁶³ Hadewijch cited in Bowle (ed.), *Op Cit.*, p. 121. St John of the Cross, *St John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry* (tr. Lynda Nicholson), Cambridge University Press, London, 1973, p. 145. St Teresa cited in Bernard McGinn, 'The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism', pp. 204–5.

sense, but rather one that searches in the direction of the Western Christian mystical tradition. Yet Bureu's suggestion that in this poem Wright 'seems to be as far away from physical reality as she ever gets' is challenged by the dark star's return, via the mystical trope of sober drunkenness, in 'Grace'.⁶⁴ Stars in the meantime, like love and fire, adopt a more threatening creative-destructive aspect in *The Two Fires*, possibly informed by Wright's 'wild long dreams involving the whole of life and death and God and firmaments of screaming stars' while under anaesthetics in 1954.⁶⁵

Renegotiations and Intermediaries

From *The Two Fires* (1955) Judith Wright's engagement with Western Christian mysticism wanes dramatically. Her attraction to Eastern mystical traditions and themes of unity with nature were accompanied by an awareness of religious relativity in the 'Sun, my God' of 'The Wattle Tree' (142), the 'wisdom ... outside the word' of 'Gum Trees Stripping' (133) and 'earth is spirit' of 'At Coololah' (140). Furthermore, her aversion to what she saw as Christianity's 'dividing' intellect separating 'godhead from the Many' and 'the arrogant polished eye' of humanity 'trying to be God' ('Flesh', 145), led her to the elemental unity of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, which she considered less divisive.⁶⁶ Her husband Jack McKinney, who strongly contributed to Wright's interest in Western mysticism, is posthumously valorised as a philosophical adept 'more rapt, more held, and less

⁶⁴ Bureu, *Op Cit.*, p. 71.

⁶⁵ Wright, *Op Cit.*, p. 92.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 265, 276; McGinn (1991) notes Heraclitus 'may or may not be termed mystical' (McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 24). See for example G.S. Kirk & J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 204: 'views about men—their soul, institutions and ideas ... for Heraclitus this subject was in no way separate from the study of the outside world; the same materials and the same laws are found in each sphere'. A Christian mystical interpretation of Heraclitus can be found in Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection' (Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, p. 65).

alone, given more utterly to your own communion / than I, who struggled with my own desire' in 'The Vision' (262, 1970). At no point, however, is Wright poetically finished with the language and tropes of Christianity, due in part to her continuing correspondence with Christian contemporaries.⁶⁷ Like Zora Cross and Lesbia Harford before her, Wright also renegotiates the religion she acknowledges has been corrupted more by convenient interpretations than any one passage or doctrine.⁶⁸ In her poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, God the Father does not punish but weeps 'the blood-red flower that saves us all' ('Against the Wall', 221) and she engineers a powerful ecofeminist re-evaluation of the Genesis story in 'Eve To Her Daughters', 'Eve Sings' and 'Eve Scolds' (232, 358, 359). These reinterpretations include a significant response to what Kim Power (1995) calls the 'divided image of woman' in the Eve-Mary dyad and the Martha-Mary split of Luke 10:38–41 in a late poem where the sun-orchid is aligned with a contemplative Mary:

Another poet [Blake], staring,
 saw the sun in your centre, burning
 core of fire, and, dazzled
 closed eyes upon that secret.

Wrapped in your Mary-blue,
 veined with a flush like roses,
 you stand in contemplation
 of a spring as cold as winter,

⁶⁷ See, for example, 'For Jack Blight' (225).

⁶⁸ Wright, *Op Cit.*, p. 218. 'Though I agree that Christianity and Judaism, as we have interpreted them, have been one of the biggest influences in our present attitude to nature, it is still a matter of interpretation rather than anything else; i.e. We chose the Old Testament ['Bullocky'], not the new, because it fitted the rational-material attitude we had already, for other reasons'.

but, blessed from your creation,
 the calm of your robe encloses
 a gold like revelation.
 ('Sun Orchid', 414)⁶⁹

Rather than immediately severing all ties with Christianity, Wright gradually withdraws, reshaping the scripture to her own world-view.

Blake is one of Wright's long line of mystical poets 'I sing ... to my side' ('The Slope', 336) which also includes George Herbert, Vaughan, Emily Brontë ('Rosina Alcona to Julius Brenzaida', 282), Rilke, Eliot and Neilson ('For John Shaw Neilson', 235). Blake's dazzling core of fire recalls his epigraph in *The Gateway* describing the Eternity's 'ever-during doors' at the mysterious centre of flowers (70). Wright's continuing fascination with the inexpressible and concerns about her own inabilities ('For Precision', 129) spur her towards these poetic intermediaries, of which 'Reading Thomas Traherne' represents the most direct appeal to Christian mysticism.⁷⁰ Yet even amid 'light's ladder' reaching 'from love to Love', the poet is still distanced from this love at the spiritual impasse of 'The Pool and the Star':

Can I then lose myself,
 and losing find one word

⁶⁹ Kim E. Power, 'Body and Gender in the Fathers of the Church' in Barton & Mews (eds), *Op Cit.*, p. 40.

⁷⁰ Veronica Brady (1998) records Wright's description of *Fourth Quarter* (1976) as an uneasy attempt to 'express in it the inexpressible' (Brady, *Op Cit.*, p. 351). See Chapter 4 for Wright's assumptions regarding John Shaw Neilson.

that, in the face of what you were,

needs to be said or heard?

(‘Reading Thomas Traherne’, 206)⁷¹

As in the transition from the ‘The Lost Man’ to ‘The Pool and the Star’, Traherne’s vision only becomes realised when it is *implemented* rather than declared. ‘Interplay’ from *Five Senses* (1963) achieves this via a reconciliation of ‘what is within’ with ‘what is around’ and a vision of the poet as an extension of ‘let there be light’ (Genesis 1:3) with a Trahernian progression in the stars (‘Flame by flame ... there light—there love begin’ [190]). Wright’s ultimate willingness to embody Christian mystical poetics rather than sing them ‘to my side’ is the key to her most significant engagement with mysticism in ‘Grace’ (1973).

The Dark Star and the Wine of ‘Grace’

After ‘Interplay’, ‘Prayer’ (1966, 229) represents a more daring implementation of mystical poetic tropes. ‘While every flower swings open its eternal door’ is Blakean; ‘earth’s choirs and messengers’ Franciscan, even Neilsonian; and ‘I pledge to the night and day my whole truth’ carries overtones of McKinney’s philosophy and Traherne’s ‘Let the Spirit of Truth dwell in me’, chosen by Wright for her husband’s headstone.⁷² In ‘Prayer’ Wright pledges herself to love, but also to the dark, where

⁷¹ This popular mystical trope of the ladder can be traced back to Jacob’s ladder in Genesis 28:12, given allegorical emphasis by St Bonaventure in *The Soul’s Journey*: ‘Since we must ascend Jacob’s ladder before we descend it, let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, presenting to ourselves the whole material world as a mirror through which we may pass over to God, the supreme Craftsman’ (Bonaventure cited in Cousins, *Op Cit.*, p. 178). Bonaventure also constructs St Francis in such terms: ‘he followed his beloved everywhere [Job 23:11, The Song of Songs 5:17] making from all things a ladder by which he could climb up and embrace him who is utterly desirable [5:16]’ (*Ibid.*, p. 180).

⁷² Wright, *Op Cit.*, p. 180.

‘the owl, the poet’s bird and the saint’s white moth’ dwell, recalling Yeatsian and Neilsonian influences (in the ‘Lost Man’ and ‘At Cooloola’ respectively) and nameless saints drawn to divine flame. These mystical themes are common enough in Wright’s poetry from *Woman to Man*. Yet ‘Prayer’ also introduces three new tropes which underpin their greater development in ‘Grace’: imbibing (‘let me tilt and drain / the last drop of life before I go’), grace itself and the direct address to the source of grace:

And you, who speak in me when I speak well,
 withdraw not your grace, leave me not dry and cold.
 I have praised you in the pain of love, I would praise you
 still
 in the slowing of the blood, the time when I grow old.

This can be read as an appeal to poetry itself, Jung’s creative unconscious or the dynamic life-force. The imbibing and saint imagery may also derive from Sufi mystics (‘To Hafiz of Shiraz’ [215], ‘Winter’ [425]), though it also appears eucharistically in ‘Flame Tree in a Quarry’, and ‘To Hafiz of Shiraz’ concludes with the Christological imagery of ‘the blinding original Word’. Grace itself is synonymous with Christian mysticism, often as a permissive example of God’s will. In Augustinian theology, the presence of the invisible God who cannot be found except through love, *can* be seen ‘through a grace of meriting ... for it is not in our power to see, but in His to appear’ and later mystics, male and female, attribute their unitive experiences to grace. Julian of Norwich (1342–c.1423), one of the most reassuring of all mystics who lived at the time of the Black Plague, explicitly combines love and grace for

he [for Julian God was Father *and* Mother] wants to give us grace to love him and to cleave to him, for he beholds his heavenly treasure with so great love on earth that he will give us more light and solace in heavenly joy, by drawing our hearts from the sorrow and the darkness which we are in ... Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love.⁷³

In 'Grace' (1973, 331) Wright frees herself from the mystical expectations of 'The Pool and the Star' and claims a different kind of illumination from an ineffable agency beyond time, intention, contemplation and temporal love. Her tropes of grace and spiritual drunkenness are integral to Western Christian mysticism, the latter introduced to mystical literature by Philo of Alexandria and celebrated by Plotinus, Origen, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius well before the rise of similar concepts in Sufism.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the ineffable force 'plunges a sword from a dark star' in a variation on the spear/ray/kiss of light in 'The Pool and the Star', but being from the dark it also contains the mystery of the life-force, 'the dark source I long to find' ('Silence', 121). Grace for Wright, therefore, is ineffable *and* imperceptible but, like Augustine's grace, may allow itself to be seen:

Living is dailiness, a simple bread
 that's worth the eating. But I have known a wine,
 a drunkenness that can't be spoken or sung
 without betraying it. Far past Yours or Mine,

⁷³ St Augustine, *Op Cit.*, p. 376; Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (trs Edmund College & James Walsh), Paulist, New York, 1978, p. 342; See Jean Leclercq 'Preface' in *Ibid.*, pp. 7–14 for Julian's use of trinitarian femininity and a brief account of God as feminine the Western Christian tradition from the time of Clement of Alexandria ('The Father by loving became Feminine: and the great proof of this is He whom He begot of Himself; and the fruit brought forth by love is love' [Grant, *Op Cit.*, p. 71]).

⁷⁴ McGinn, *Op Cit.*, pp. 39–40, 48, 116, 179, 208, 253. Scriptural tropes of spiritual intoxication appear in The Song of Songs (5:1), Acts (2:13), and the liturgical and Christological association with wine especially in the Johannine Gospel (2:9, 15:1–9).

even past Ours, it has nothing at all to say;
it slants a sudden laser through common day.

It seems to have nothing to do with things at all,
requires another element or dimension.

Not contemplation brings it; it merely happens,
past expectation and beyond intention;

takes over the depth of flesh, the inward eye,
is there, then vanishes. Does not live or die,

because it occurs beyond the here and now,
positives, negatives, what we hope and are.

Not even being in love, or making love,
brings it. It plunges a sword from a dark star.

Maybe there was once a word for it. Call it grace.

I have seen it, once or twice, through a human face.

Unlike the ray of the 'Pool and the Star', this grace does not just seek to burn on the breast but 'takes over the depth of flesh, the inward eye, / is there, vanishes', a union with the subject which *does* occur and *is* known. Whether or not a unitive experience is implied through this force, which, like Hart's unnameable God 'cannot be spoken or sung / without betraying it' (or in Hart's case, 'exploding immanence'), is complicated further by the duality of the final image 'through a human face', which could mean the face of others or that of the self.⁷⁵ Ultimately, the emphasis on 'human' transcends such distinctions and 'what is within becomes what is around' ('Interplay'). The wine of divine presence causes 'drunkenness that can't be spoken

⁷⁵ Hart cited in Bernadette Brennan, *Op Cit.*, p. 31.

or sung', a state beyond the daily bread of the Lord's Prayer yet sacramentally united to a higher humanity.

'Grace' surpasses the mystical aspirations of 'The Pool and the Star' by claiming a direct, experimental or unitive knowledge of the presence of Christ, God or Godhead transcending regular modes of language and consciousness. It is at very least a theologically and thematically Christian poem. A.D. Hope suggests it moves 'beyond experience, contemplation, mystical elevation of the spirit ... beyond here and now ... beyond poetry' which marks an 'extreme point' of her metaphysical journey, with 'a hint of the end of the trail', yet surely these are qualifications for a mystical poem, one composed *after* though never beyond mystical consciousness, which is by definition an ineffable connection with both the beyond *and* the after.⁷⁶ Hope's observation that 'Grace' represents the culmination of Wright's metaphysical journey is certainly true in regard to her Western Christian mystical journey from the fire of love in 'Flame Tree in a Quarry', 'A Dream' and 'The Blind Man' to the *via negativa* of 'The Lost Man', through the contemplative impasse of 'The Pool and the Star' to the later engagement with poets and mystics, and her personal reappraisal of mystical consciousness in 'Interplay', 'Prayer' and 'Grace'. 'Grace' constitutes a significant milestone: the first categorical example of Western Christian mysticism in Australian poetry by a non-Christian. As a corollary to this, it should be noted Wright's concept of grace was more than a passing theological fancy; like love in 'At Cooloola' and later 'Two Dreamtimes' it coincided with her literary, environmental and Indigenous activism. Wright's commitment to an active as well as contemplative life echoes, though does not replicate, the *via mystica* of major figures such as St

⁷⁶ Hope, *Op Cit.*, p. 24.

Teresa of Avila, for whom the active form of love supersedes contemplation at the heart of Christian mysticism:

When I see people very anxious to know what sort of prayer they practise, covering their faces and afraid to move or think lest they should lose any slight tenderness and devotion they feel, I know how little they understand how to obtain union with God since they think it consists in such things as these. No, sisters, no; our Lord expects *works* from us. If you see a sick sister whom you can relieve, never fear losing your devotion; compassionate her; if she is in pain, feel for it as if it were your own and when there is need, fast so that she may eat, not so much for her sake as because you know your Lord asks it of you. This is the true union of our will with the will of God.⁷⁷

In the authoritative view of this major mystic and Doctor of the Church, the empathetic, nurturing qualities often ascribed to post-Federation and post-war ideas of ‘womanliness’ become, as St Francis knew, the ultimate means of transcendence.⁷⁸ In any study of Wright’s mystical poetics, her activism must be acknowledged for its contribution to a corpus responsible for the first Australian Christian mystical poems by a long-term non-Christian and the belated critical recognition of Australian female mystical poets.

⁷⁷ St Teresa cited in Grant, *Op Cit.*, p. 20.; St Teresa was for Simone De Beauvoir the only female mystic to transcend her ‘compensatory’ subjectivity. See Hollywood, *Op Cit.*, p. 16.

⁷⁸ Buckley in one sense also suggests this, but his prescriptive divisions between ‘woman’ and ‘shrew’ problematise his own self-consciously ‘paradoxical’ view (Buckley, *Essays in Poetry*, p. 175).

7. Beyond Reach of Language: Kevin Hart

No Australian poet has contributed more to discourses of mysticism than Kevin Hart (1954–). In his critiques of negativity in Wright and Webb, he demonstrates how an understanding of mysticism is essential to the study of Australian poetry. Hart's linking of deconstruction to negative theology in *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989) parallels and is mutually informed by French philosopher and theorist Jacques Derrida who engaged mystical themes in his later works. This chapter traces Hart's far-reaching interactions with mysticism, from his critical applications of mysticism to deconstruction and Australian poetry, to his poems, which are investigated thematically through his gestures beyond language and extension of Simone Weil's 'attending to God'. Western Christian mysticism's creative tensions between presence and absence, cataphasis and apophasis, the celebratory and the ineffable, resurface in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Australian poetry and are examined via the liminal in Harwood, presence in Murray and ubiquity in Peter Steele.

Prelude: Harwood, Murray, Steele

Mysticism for Gwen Harwood (1920–1995) was informed by, but not limited to, her 1945 discovery of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). Some four decades later she recalls this 'new religion' which spoke directly of the mystical:

I was enchanted. I didn't understand it at all. When I came to the end I felt like someone who'd come upon a new religion ... when I read in Wittgenstein's 'Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is' I took my first step towards becoming a poet.¹

For Wittgenstein God is not revealed in the world, though the world's very existence is mystical, as are ineffable things and the experience of feeling the world *sub specie aeterni* (from the viewpoint of eternity).² Yet the mystical as it appears in Harwood's poetry is not simply that of the *Tractatus*, which Bernard McGinn (1991) dismisses as 'peculiar to his [Wittgenstein's] own system of thought and, like Heidegger, not directly helpful to modern theories of mysticism', but Harwood's synthesis of Wittgenstein with her own readings of the Bible ('I always have the Old Testament ringing in my ears'), St Augustine, St Teresa, St Therese of Lisieux and English mystical poets.³ Harwood's extensive reading, combined as it was with her own Anglicanism, propels her closer to an affinity with Western Christian mysticism than the Wittgensteinian influence alone.

In Harwood's early work, the 'spirit's dazzle of love' ('Past and Present', 176) is most effectively invoked in Harwood's liminal shorelines where, recalling Genesis 1:1 and Matthew 14:25, 'The wind walks on the sea / printing the water's

¹ Harwood cited in Jennifer Strauss, *Boundary Conditions: The Poetry of Gwen Harwood*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992, p. 14.

² 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists [6.44]. To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is the mystical [6.45] ... There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical [6.522]' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [trs D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness], Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974, p. 73).

³ McGinn, *Op Cit.*, p. 313; Strauss, *Op Cit.*, p. 107. Andrew Weeks, by contrast, posits Wittgenstein as the inheritor of German mysticism in his *German Mysticism from Hildegard of Bingen to Ludwig Wittgenstein* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993). It should be noted, however, that McGinn is himself an authority on German mysticism, especially Meister Eckhart. Heidegger, one of the few major twentieth philosophers to take (German) poetry seriously, is a major influence for Kevin Hart who dedicates a poem to him in *The Departure* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1978).

face with charity' ('At the Sea's Edge', 70), 'my spirit ... is gone / Walking on water' ('Sunday', 114), and 'I / walk light' ('Littoral', 187). Jennifer Strauss (1992) detects in 'Alla Siciliana' what she opaquely refers to as a 'mystical moment'

I see that lost enchantment wake
 in light, on water, and the spirit
 like a loved guest on earth can take
 its needs and its delights, and wander
 freely. (189)⁴

Certainly the spirit 'like a loved guest on earth' contains broad mystical implications before 'The dazzling moments burn / to time again'. While the figure of the 'loved guest' recurs throughout Harwood's later poems, the 'windfall silence, / another tongue' in 'Alla Siciliana' points to another poem from the same 1968 volume, in which the 'mystical moment' fades only to be salvaged by 'pure / silence in a dialogue of grace':

Mystery grows lifesize as I'm brought to meet you.
 (Loved, as Donne says, before your face or name ...)
 A day like any other, with the same
 things to be done, and soon after I greet you
 I have to take my leave. Others demand
 your presence, and walk, away from you,
 on the fine edge of *now*, as we all do,
 with an eternity at either hand.
 Wearing by folly or necessity
 without horizons somehow we endure

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102. All initial page references are from Gwen Harwood, *Op Cit.*

until one day a wound is bounded by
 the simple rightness of a human face.
 Nearness is joy, and distance is the pure
 silence in a dialogue of grace.
 ('Sonnet', 186)

'Sonnet' with its mystery-infused 'meeting', presence and 'fine edge of *now*' is mystical in the Wittgensteinian sense, feeling the world as a limited whole that exists, containing things, questions and answers cannot be put into words. While the Donnean reference implies the angelic ('Aire and Angels'), in Harwood's hands the addressee may be something closer to the source rather than the messenger of joy before, in an echo of Judith Wright's 'Grace', much is found in the 'rightness' of a human face.⁵ In 'Sonnet' things that cannot be put into words begin to cohere with things that cannot be put into *worlds*, heralding the arrival of a new type of 'guest' and a new liminal space of dream consciousness in later poems, where the mystical becomes even more pronounced.

'In Articulo Mortis' ('At point of death', 84) serves as the precursor for the dream poems, especially given the esoteric circumstances of its composition where 'exactly as Blake says, it was dictated ... THEY spoke into my inmost ear a religious poem which I wrote down'.⁶ Its Corpus Christi imagery of 'Christ the Falcon' and tropes of *anabasis* (ascent), sharing in Christ's vision and compassion beyond the speechless, *inarticulate* world and counter-eucharistically becoming 'the noble

⁵ Two kinds of mystical marriage are implied in this poem: the 'walking away' comprising of what Harwood (1975) describes as the 'mystic marriage' of experience to a newborn baby's 'unalterable disposition'; and the mystical marriage which is also hinted at in the 'minimal version' of 'The Lion's Bride' ('Bride / Inside') and the union of Harwood's 'Goldenchild' with the elemental Father Aether ('This Artifice of Air', 433). 'I have to take my leave' suggests the more earthly of the two mystical marriages must at this time prevail (Strauss, *Op Cit.*, p. v of appendix). See Donne's 'Aire and Angels' in Hugh Kenner (ed.), *Seventeenth Century Poetry: The Schools of Donne and Jonson*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1966, p. 12.

⁶ Strauss, *Op Cit.*, p. 581.

Falcon's food' all invite mystical parallels, but there is also the fascination with 'guests' which would later include James McAuley ('Infant Spurwing' [342], 'A Memory of James McAuley' [344]) and Vincent Buckley ('Scenic Lookout' [312]).⁷ In 'The Present Tense' (459), one of her elegiac poems to Buckley, Wittgenstein becomes 'Saint Ludwig of Vienna' who first intimates '*you are known*' ('Seven Philosophical Poems', 286) before the phrase is applied to the glittering bones that 'the God who goes with me' reveals in 'Bone Scan' (373). As Paul Kane (1996) notes, 'Bone Scan' also invokes the Pauline mystery of 1 Corinthians 15:51–2: 'Behold, I shew you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet'.⁸

The body also features in Harwood's synthesis of Wittgenstein's 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul' ('I am the Captain of My Soul', 40) to disrupt Western body-soul and mind-heart dichotomies ('Boundary Conditions', 55). Desire, the body, and the body's 'grace' are implicated in the spiritual, even if, as Strauss notes, a kind of *via negativa* ('I must be absent to myself' ['The Wine is Drunk', 6]) must be occasionally employed to distance the contemplative self from the physical lover.⁹ However 'Love's mysterious core' ('Boundary Conditions') cannot be defined and the result, according to David Malouf (1981), is that Harwood 'is at once the most passionate and intellectual of poets, the most openly sexual, and

⁷ See, by way of social contrast, the final lines of 'In the Park', 'they have eaten me alive' (65).

⁸ Kane, *Op Cit.*, p. 182 (*King James Version*). This also reveals the inadequacy of designations of mysticism along purely Wittgensteinian lines, such as that of Richard King, 'A Symphony Complete', *Meanjin* 63.1, 2004, p. 186.

⁹ Strauss, *Op Cit.*, p. 90. This takes on a Platonic-Orphic aspect in 'In Plato's Cave' (339).

the most ecstatically religious'.¹⁰ In fact, it is through Harwood's argument for the role of the emotions that she directly invokes St Teresa's *via mystica*: 'Could anything be worse than the feebleness of our days? Most people shut down all doors leading into what St Teresa of Avila calls The Interior Castle and live on the surface of life, afraid of sorrow and joy'.¹¹ In the 1981 poem 'A Valediction', a feminine sublime 'between sanctity and liberation' is brokered between Christian mystic St Therese of Liseux and Lou Salomé, 'One mistress of half Europe, one / enclosed with a transcendent lover':

Lou's ravishing forgetfulness
 Will rock my soul with saving laughter,
 and the singlehearted saint will braid
 all loves into one everlasting. (335)

There are clear indications that the mystical remains a central preoccupation in Harwood's late poems such as 'The Class of 1927' (the final word of the spelling contest recounted in the poem being 'MYSTIC' [365]) and in the 'mystical acceptance' of her last uncollected poem 'Late Works' (571). In keeping with the unbounded nature of the liminal in Harwood, the negative capability of last line 'whose hand is it that holds the pen?' accompanies the capable negativity in 'He', the second element of her 'Tetragrammaton' (436), the quietude of God:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92. Strauss also notes that earlier poems such as 'Littoral' carry on themes of initial works by continuing to ask "'How shall the heart's true shape be known, / spirit made manifest" ['Alter Ego', 3] thereby both establishing and problematising a link between emotional and spiritual elements that are opposed to the literature of asceticism, if not in that of mysticism and pietism' (*Ibid.*, p. 55).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Beyond all words, beyond all names
 there waits immeasurable silence.
 Beyond the pulse of sound exists
 the wellspring, the invisible fountain
 from which all notes and rhythms flow

The never-ending
 quest for the self is done. We know
 question and answer meaningless,
 and then, beyond all symbols, peace:
 the not-I. The eternal Other.

But, as the resultant, final 'He' adjures,
 while
 you live you are part of earth.
 Accept. Affirm. Rejoice.¹²

The unboundedness of Harwood's liminal walks and guests allows ineffable presence, grace and consciousness of the 'life that lies beyond' to be accessed through the poet's role as intermediary, 'To show with love / much that can not be spoken of' ('On Poetry', 440).

Divine presence for Les Murray (1938–) is an enduring obsession from the present silence of 'The Noonday Axeman' (3) and 'the is-ful ah!-nesses of things' in 'Recourse to the Wilderness' (1969) where his own youthful expedition to 'the Outside country ... the far, still Centre' is retraced (24).¹³ In later works he is more dismissive of the Australian tendency to cling to an abstract spiritual Centre in 'the three quarters of our continent / set aside for mystic poetry' ('Louvres', 238) as

¹² 'Capable negativity' is also used as a term by Kane, *Op Cit.*, pp. 170–84 for similar purposes.

¹³ All initial page references are from Les Murray, *Collected Poems*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2006.

presence increasingly interpenetrates the sacraments of daily life. Nonetheless in Murray's prose, poetry becomes 'the prime channel through which I ever achieve (or am given) any apprehension of ultimate and divine things' and Jesus-as-poet is even recruited in Murray's war on modernity ('a Luciferian poem') and its clinical 'Narrowspeak':

In that unique Divine embodiment for which we reserve the term Incarnation, Jesus lives from the first in a wholeness no mortal artist can sustain; he lives on the level of poetry, and thus shows us to that quality of life which he calls the Kingdom. This Kingdom is Jesus's own poem, and He embodies it fully, while revealing it as an aspect of God's poem. He never speaks in abstractions; there seems to be no Narrowspeak in Him ... His words constantly go beyond the unexpected, and dazzle us with their quality of paradox, and of discovery; every 'line' is better than you expected, and deeper, and truer Like any great poem that of Jesus is inexhaustible, and not all the books in the world could contain a sufficient meditation on it [John 21:25]. Meditation would not be enough, anyway; this is meant to be not merely a poem we can appreciate and gain spiritual strength from, but one we can join.¹⁴

This joining with the Divine Poem occurs either through *integration* with 'all the dimensions of our life, each of which is good and holy, with the Divine' or *infusion* where 'God can reach us' particularly through the dream 'channel' and at the polarised psychic states of wholeness and disintegration.¹⁵ In Murray's poetry the

¹⁴ Les Murray, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Potts Point, 1997, p. 310; Murray ('a Luciferian poem') cited in Hart, 'Our *Other* History', *Overland* 122, 1991, p. 70; Murray, *Op Cit.*, pp. 324–5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* For some aspects of Murray's connections between the domestic and the sacred see Gary Catalano, 'Les Murray's Ark', *Meanjin* 62.1, 2003, pp. 10–16.

wholeness and disintegration of language which concludes the Hopkinsian ‘Bent Water in the Tasmanian Highlands’ as it swirls from ‘a continuous round ocean round a planetary stone’ to ‘translucent honey-glazed clerestories—’ (177) is echoed in ‘The Mouthless Image of God’ where

spirit is the round earth bringing our flat earths to bay
and we’re feasted and mortified, exposed to those momentary Heavens
which, speaking in speech on the level, we work for and deny. (208)¹⁶

Lyn McCredden (2005) claims that the recurring impossibility of speaking of God, ‘even as God is represented, imaged, mimicked, and called on’ is the closest Murray comes to the sacred and this certainly applies well to Murray’s mechanics, but there may be greater value in her depiction of ‘The Mouthless Image’ as ‘a modern, rural version of the Pentecost’.¹⁷ The implication that the poet is speaking with/of/for the mouthless God or Holy Spirit ‘on the level’ (as Jesus lives ‘on the level’ of poetry) indicates an apostolic relationship with the divine which is less inhibited and certainly readable as mystical, though the roles of speaker and listener-follower before the ‘old prime divider’ remain fluid.¹⁸ Murray’s melding of poetry and his own Catholicism ensures that any discernible mysticism is also subject to a private coalescence of poetics and theologies. This is not to suggest Murray is unaware of Western Christian mysticism, in fact he praises it as ‘the harder path, the higher standard’ than Eastern mysticism and demonstrates some familiarity with early to

¹⁶ For a reading of Murray in Hopkinsian terms, see Peter Steele, ‘Les Murray: Watching With His Mouth’, *Australian Literary Studies* 20.2, 2001, pp. 1–9; for an overview of the Hopkinsian ‘language of mysticism’ see ‘Dennis Sobolev, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Language of Mysticism’, *Christianity and Literature* 53.4, 2004, pp. 455–72.

¹⁷ Lyn McCredden, ‘The Impossible Infinite: Les Murray, Poetry and the Sacred’, *Antipodes* 19.2, 2005, pp. 167, 173.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

mid-century scholars in his ‘old master’ Rudolph Otto and Jacques Maritain.¹⁹ Rather, Murray prefers the far-reaching nature of his bardic role which emulates his Poet-Christ by ‘working beyond intelligence’, as well as sanctifying his egalitarian themes of the Common Dish, People’s Otherworld and Vernacular Republic while supporting parallel ventures into Shintoism and Indigenous song-cycles (see Chapter 8).²⁰

If for Murray it is bountifully impossible to speak of God, it may be possible to speak of presence, the ‘is’ which indicates ‘something beyond imagining’ (‘The Noonday Axeman’). But the final clause in *Fredy Neptune* that ‘there’s too much in life: you can’t describe it’ and lines such as ‘everything except language / knows the meaning of existence’ (‘The Meaning of Existence’, 551) also appear to support a final ineffability as trees, planets, rivers and time ‘express it / moment by moment as the universe’.²¹ *Translations From the Natural World* (1992) showcases Murray’s most radical challenge to such ineffability, combining presence and the poetic ‘I’ in non-human subjects. In ‘Bats’ Ultrasound’ stigmatic and contemplative themes of the divine ‘ray’ and ‘arrow’ are woven into a translated sonar which mimics communications beyond human language:

err, yaw, row wry — aura our orrery,
our eerie ü our ray, our arrow
A rare ear, our aery Yahweh.... (355)

¹⁹ Les Murray, *Peasant Mandarin: Prose Pieces*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1978, p. 112; ‘old master’ cited in Kane, *Op Cit.*, p. 187. Kane suggests ‘Otto’s idea of the numinous is very close to Murray’s understanding of poetic experience’. Otto’s relatively abstract, yet influential, tying of the numinous to mysticism is recorded in McGinn, *Op Cit.*, pp. 327–9. For Maritain’s equally abstract and significant contribution, see *Ibid.*, pp. 305–10.

²⁰ Murray, *A Working Forest*, p. 136.

²¹ Les Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1998, p. 265.

Such play, of course, also defines the human ‘streamed in language far down time’ (‘From Where We Live on Presence’, 378) while of greater concern is ‘the weave of presence’ (‘Mollusc’, 361) which ‘blazes’ from the great bole or imbues a mote of DNA. To this end, it is a dialogue between sunflower and bee in ‘Sunflowers’ which contains Murray’s greatest reserve of mystical nectar in its use of divine dialogue and images of honey (Song of Songs 5:1), centre, union and love:

The more presence, the more apart. And the more lives circling you.

Falling, I gathered such presence that I fused to Star, beyond all fission —

We face our leaves and ever-successive genitals towards you.

Presence is why we love what we cannot eat or mate with —

... You are more intense than God, and fiercely dopey, and we adore you.

Presence matches our speed; thus it seems not flow but all arrivals —

We love your overbalance, your plunge into utterness — but what is

presence?

The beginning mirrored everywhere. The true indictment. The end all

through the story. (371)²²

With ‘You are more intense than God’ the tiniest manifestation of presence overcomes both word and concept, while ‘Star, beyond all fission’ may indicate God, in which case the divine voice is that of Christ, or an intermediary. Despite such ambiguities, or perhaps *because* of them, ‘Sunflowers’ successfully represents presence held in the promise of divine union, achieved through the same techniques

²² Aspects of a divine dialogue, prevalent in the prophetic-apocalyptic traditions of the Bible and medieval mysticism, can be seen in many Murray poems, not least the dialogue between protagonist and his ‘inner man’ towards the end of *Fredy Neptune*.

of allegory, biblical symbolism and divine dialogue which are typical of the literature of the Western Christian mystical tradition. If the 'authentic infusion' Murray identifies in Judith Wright's 'Grace' can be located in his own poetry then 'Sunflowers' constitutes the most explicitly mystical candidate for it.²³

Peter Steele (1939–) is another contemporary poet for whom presence is 'within and beyond the names we give'.²⁴ As a Jesuit priest he is also the only member of the clergy to be examined in this study, although Ada Cambridge was also deeply involved in several Anglican parishes which, it should be added, would not have accepted her as a woman priest. For Steele, poet-priests including Donne, Traherne and Hopkins are a recurring influence, while his reflective and ecclesiastical prose pieces respond more directly, sometimes warily, to Western Christian mysticism. Collette Rayment in the *The Shapes of Glory: The Writings of Peter Steele* (2000) wastes no time in calling Steele

a mystic, a contemplative in action ... in accordance with the Ignatian system of practical mysticism, and under the additional influence of other mystical apprehensions of the world from Dante to [the Swiss theologian] Hans Urs Von Balthasar in our own times.²⁵

Rayment's assessment is largely based upon 'a mysticism of service' drawn from the American contemplative Thomas Merton (1915–1968) in contrast to what she calls the more 'grandiose' depiction offered by Evelyn Underhill of a mysticism 'of ultimate and adorable reality, sustaining and urging them on'.²⁶ Rayment draws on

²³ Murray, *A Working Forest*, p. 322.

²⁴ Steele cited in Colette Rayment, *The Shapes of Glory: The Writings of Peter Steele*, Spectrum, Melbourne, 2000, p. 242. Rayment provides the most substantial critique of Steele to date.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶ Underhill cited in *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Steele's regard for university teaching as a mysterious interconnection between student, teacher and a world 'being created momentarily by God' to best serve her claim that 'the mystic ... is also the academic', while mystical scholarship is largely glossed over.²⁷ Steele himself is more deft in his treatment of the subject, advising that the mystical may only be one of various ways to speak of God which must ultimately cohere, just as God is many and one:

As I have implied, the Presence of presences has been seized in myriad ways. Within Christianity, God may be spoken of in Hopkinsian fashion as the animator, and the agitator, of the natural world, or in Donnean fashion as the swayer of human hearts. Once again though, the experience of the one melds with the experience of the other, and perhaps in principle it must be so ... the presence of "It", the presence of "Me", and the presence of "She" are all intensified and transmuted when the divine presence is transmuted. The autobiographical accounts of the mystics are among other things a tracing of that development ... It may be though this very compounding of experiences makes for a major difficulty in the writing of religious poetry ... If you ask language to do too much, it will not do anything. It is well enough to write in a highly, even densely metaphorical way.²⁸

While not acknowledging a shifting notion of mysticism *per se*, Steele clearly demonstrates his awareness of the shifting modes of representing the 'Presence of presences' in Christian mystical testimony and poetry.

A *cataphatic* ubiquity, rather a mysticism of service alone, characterises Steele's poetry. These, however, are not mutually exclusive because for Steele Jesuit

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Steele cited in *Ibid.*, pp. 199–200, 200–1.

spirituality is in itself dialectic ('we believe ourselves to be addressed, and thereupon seek the adequate words for response') and because of the very nature of ubiquity:

There is ... no point in being a priest, nowadays at least, unless one is a haunted man. To be enveloped by God is, I believe, the common condition: but to attest, salute and celebrate this, for oneself and with others, is a priest's *raison d'être*.²⁹

'Deus Absconditus' is a prime example of a celebrated God that, even hauntingly, cannot be absent to unaverted eyes:

Perhaps you seem absent now because this place
Is too contrived for you to come.

... You who were here when the mountains first were
flung

To lodge like upturned hulks in tides of air:

When the frost wedged in their sides, and water hung
All down their flanks to trouble and to tear.

A likely story? Fluent in those, I know

The presence haunting me has not the place

To blame for any absence. You must show,

To any unaverted eyes, your face.³⁰

A contemplative *without* action and a ubiquitous God of Genesis who must show his face emerge, echoing Meister Eckhart's radical injunction that a state of detachment can compel God's presence.³¹ Traherne's felicity and ocean imagery give rise to

²⁹ Steele cited in *Ibid.*, p. 46; Peter Steele, 'The *Hieroglyphique* of Silence', in Venetia Nelson (ed.), *On Being Human: Meditations on Experience*, David Lovell, Melbourne, 1990, p. 170.

³⁰ Peter Steele, 'Deus Absconditus', *Quadrant* 24.2, 1980, p. 55.

³¹ See Eckhart, *Op Cit.*; also Bernard McGinn, 'Lost in God: What Can We Learn from the Mystics (Bernard McGinn Interview)', *The Christian Century*, 120.6, 2003, p. 26.

cataphatic representations mystical absorption with this ubiquity in ‘Felicity’ and ‘Traherne with Blackbird’.³² However, Ignatian mysticism provides a greater share of Steele’s tropes: the fool as holy vehicle, Christ or Psalmist (‘Fool’, ‘April Fool’, ‘Dancers’); the pilgrim (‘laden / flesh beginning to take fire’ [‘Praying’]); and the image of the fountain as the divine source ‘aspill with its own amplitude, / nothing to get and all to give’ (‘Fixing the Fountain’).³³

Radiance, that ‘something shining through’, is also traceable to the Ignatius who ‘saw with the inner eyes of the soul something like white rays that come from above’, but while earlier poems convey similar themes it is not until Steele’s ekphrastic collections—*Plenty* (2003) and *The Whispering Gallery* (2006)—that the ‘coming through’ of the artist is reflected in poetry, which ‘had better allow for the fact that its reach is beyond its grasp, its vista beyond its gaze’.³⁴ In ‘Ceiling’ the poet is particularly Ignatian, ‘watching the maze of light and praising its coming’.³⁵ Yet Steele’s greater contribution concerns the idea of the reaching poem, explicitly linked to images of mediated radiance in ‘The Bridge’:

Tugged by the earth it vaults, forever unfinished,
the Bridge salutes its bathing light,

³² Peter Steele, *Invisible Riders*, Paperbark, North Ryde, 1999, pp. 45, 89.

³³ ‘Fool’ in Peter Steele, *Word From Lilliput*, Hawthorn, Melbourne, 1973, p. 21; ‘Dancers’ in Peter Steele, *The Whispering Gallery: Art Into Poetry*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 2006, p. 40. ‘April Fool’, ‘Praying’ and ‘Fixing the Fountain’ in Steele, *Invisible Riders*, pp. 49, 60, 51.

³⁴ Rayment, *Op Cit.*, p. 9 (Ignatius); 146 (artist); Peter Steele, *Plenty: Art into Poetry*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 2003, p. 127. Many of the selected works of art depict examples of biblical mysticism, so may therefore qualify as mysticism in Australian poetry through the intermediary of the artist. Some mystics have produced devotional or theological art, especially Henry Suso (1295–1366) who sought to use images to cast out images on the path to divine union. See Bernard McGinn, ‘On Mysticism and Art’, *Daedalus* 132.2, 2003, pp. 131–4.

³⁵ Steele, *The Whispering Gallery*, p. 32.

the blue stubborn of course, and the knotted shadows,
but reaching the name of the game.³⁶

Steele's overriding attraction to the positive, *cataphatic* way is reinforced by this injunction that although the ubiquitous, immanent God may inspire or transcend the poet's art, the poet's art can in turn transcend its human creator 'reaching the name of the game'.³⁷

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113. See, as a precursor, 'the mind's dark fire' in 'Dreaming the Bridge' (Steele, *Plenty*, p. 48). Although unlikely to be Steele's inspiration here, Christological bridge imagery also appears for example in Catherine of Siena, *Op Cit.*, p. 66.

³⁷ Steele is adamant in this context that 'Beyond apophatic theology, silenced mysticism the fumbling gestures of love, there stands the luminous, vivifying sweetness of God. Behind the labour, the armoury and the thunder of the hive, there brims the honeycomb ... The conditions of Christian hope have always had to do with transparency, luminosity, something shining through' (Steele cited in Rayment, *Op Cit.*, p. 115).

Kevin Hart

One of the major drivers of Western Christian mysticism as a shifting notion is its reciprocity with shifting international discourses of mysticism. The export, rather than import, of the mystical is traceable to the American publication of Ada Cambridge's 'The Lonely Seas', though for the most part Australian poets have synthesised European and Anglo-American concepts into their poetry rather than influence these concepts directly. The case of Kevin Hart is another matter. While not espousing a shifting notion of mysticism *per se*, he has in effect facilitated shifting notions of international theological discourse since *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* successfully sought 'to bring deconstruction into conversation with Christian theology', by establishing a synthesis between negative theology and deconstruction.³⁸ In doing so, he has become the first Australian poet to significantly influence international critical theory and theology.

The Trespass of the Sign and Mysticism in Late Derrida

The Trespass of the Sign hinges on Hart's central assertion that negative theology is a hitherto marginalised form of deconstruction with significant implications for the future of mysticism and philosophy.³⁹ It is no accident that his argument at this point also involves presence and representation, two key elements for his poetry:

³⁸ Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. x. Hart's contemporary, the French Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, makes the point that 'negative theology' is a modern term alien to early canonical mystics except Pseudo-Dionysius, who only uses it once in his *The Mystical Theology* ('In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of Negative Theology' in John D. Caputo & Michael J. Scanlon [eds], *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1999, p. 21).

³⁹ Hart makes it clear that although he is not the first to suggest this, his argument is his own (*Trespass*, pp. 183–4).

Derrida does not maintain that presence is a modification of absence but that presence is always already a representation. Similarly, the negative theologian is not so much concerned with the existential problem of God's absence as with the double bind that God imposes on man: Represent me, but on no account represent me ... we do not need a third theology, one neither positive nor negative—a theology of paradox—for negative theology, properly understood, *is* that theology: a discourse which works at once inside and outside onto-theology, submitting its images of God to deconstruction. My position is not that deconstruction is a form of negative theology but that negative theology is a form of deconstruction.⁴⁰

The dense philosophical and theological branches of *Trespass* are less relevant here than the origins and destinations of the text. The germination of Hart's argument can be seen in his dissatisfaction with the 'common view' of the 1980s that deconstruction is 'counter-theological' and 'atheistic' and therefore 'has a case to prosecute against religious belief and against Christianity in particular'.⁴¹ For Hart, a Catholic convert in 1980, these critical conventions were clearly untenable, especially when his poetry of the early 1980s was already engaging Western Christian mystics of the *via negativa* such as St. John of the Cross, who would later become 'my patron saint / (My patron poet too)' ('Nineteen Songs', 171).⁴² Negative theology presented Hart with the opportunity to propose a mutually beneficial conversation, whereby deconstruction 'can illuminate how mysticism and negative theology work as discourses: certain concepts and manoeuvres developed by Derrida can be used to analyse the mystical theologian's use of language and his or her

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 185–6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

⁴² All page references are from Hart, *Flame Tree: Selected Poems*. For Hart's conversion and his upbringing as a 'nominal Anglican', see David McCooey, "'Intersecting Worlds": An Interview with Kevin Hart', *Meridian* 15.1, 1996, p. 34. *Your Shadow* (1984) opens with an epigraph from St John of the Cross (Hart, *Op Cit.*, p. 44).

attitude to it' and mysticism, as Western philosophy's excluded other, can provide deconstruction with one of the unnameable sites from which, according to Derrida, deconstruction can question philosophy.⁴³

The ramifications of Hart's thesis have been extended by Jacques Derrida's late works, which have facilitated the return of certain aspects of Western Christian mysticism to the forefront of Western philosophy. Just as *Trespass* appeared internationally, a series of events in Derrida's personal life, namely the death of his mother, led to the following in his *Circumfession* (1997):

That's what my readers won't have known about me ... my religion about which nobody understands anything any more than does my mother who asked other people a while ago, not daring to talk to me about it, if I still believed in God... But she must have known the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist, the omnipresence to me of what I call God in my absolved, absolutely private language being neither that of an eyewitness nor that of a voice doing anything other than talking to me without saying anything, nor a transcendent law or an immanent *schechina*, that feminine figure of a Yahweh who remains so strange and so familiar to me.⁴⁴

Though typically evasive, the effects of this passage were far-reaching. John D. Caputo (2001) for example, responded ecstatically 'What religion? What God? What a surprise! We knew nothing of this!', though his subsequent characterisation of Derrida as 'more in touch with Jewish prophets than Christian Neoplatonists, more messianic and more eschatological than mystical' also discounts any attempt to claim

⁴³ *Trespass*, p. 174.

⁴⁴ Derrida cited in Robert Dodaro, 'Loose Canons: Augustine and Derrida on Their Selves' in Caputo & Scanlon (eds), *Op Cit.*, p. 81. For a postmodern feminist approach to a female deity, see Ann-Marie Priest, 'Woman as God, God as Woman: Mysticism, Negative Theology and Luce Irigaray' in *The Journal of Religion* 83.1, 2003, pp. 1–24.

Derrida for Western Christian mysticism.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Derrida's admission of personal religiosity, his use of St Augustine's *Confessions* as a model and his attraction to the *neither nor* of negative theology precedes his subsequent fascination with mystical union in 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' (1992) and mystical poetry of Angelus Silesius (1624-1667) in *On the Name* (1995).⁴⁶ While Derrida 'objected in vain to the assimilation of the thinking of the trace or of difference to some negative theology', his love of philosophy's margins and the deconstructive qualities of negative theology greatly enhanced Hart's reputation in the fields of philosophy, literary theory and phenomenology.⁴⁷ If, as Hart insists, his own creative and critical roles entirely cross-fertilise, it is quite reasonable to assume that it is also Hart the poet who is petitioning Derrida, especially when Derrida is also reading Hart's poetry.⁴⁸ By aligning the pre-eminent *fin de siècle* theorist with negative theology, Hart sought both an internationally-recognised place for mysticism in postmodernity and a creative mechanism for his own poetics informed by a late Derridean discourses on 'the gift' and 'the impossible'.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Dodaro, *Op Cit.*, p. 80. John D. Caputo, *The Prayer and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without a Religion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1997, p. xxiv. Derrida does, however, adopt some aspects of Plato, such as the khôra of *Timaeus* as 'a nameless name for the desert of difference' (Derrida cited in Charles E. Winquist, 'Materiality and Theoretical Reflection' in John D. Caputo [ed.], *The Religious*, Blackwell, Malden, 2001, p. 256).

⁴⁶ For Derrida's discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius's *mystika theamata* see Harold Coward & Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992, p. 80. Silesius (Johannes Scheffler) is a German poet who, although clearly influenced by Bohemian mysticism, is rarely included in discourses of mysticism.

⁴⁷ Derrida cited in Coward & Foshay (eds), *Op Cit.*, p. 82.

⁴⁸ 'I have never felt this conflict between "criticism" and "creativity" you and others talk about' in Lee Spinks "'Sketching the Horizon": An Interview with Kevin Hart', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.2, 2000, p. 7. Hart refers to Derrida as 'a generous reader of whatever I have sent him' who observed of the 'motif of naming and namelessness' that runs through *Peniel* in McCooey, *Op Cit.*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ For the gift see 'The Gift' (120). For the impossible see 'Soul Says' (161). Some later destinations of Hart's critical work have included the 'displaced mysticism of writing' of Maurice Blanchot, Derrida and religion, postmodern Christianity and the operation of scripture within a deconstructed theology (Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, p. 10).

Bringing it Home: Mysticism as a Critical Tool for Australian Poetry

No Australian poet before Hart has ever *exported* discourses of Western Christian mysticism in such an influential manner. Yet Hart also goes further by applying tropes, techniques and poetics of mysticism to Australian poetry criticism. In a discussion of the untaught, interdisciplinary nature of mysticism in ‘The Ins and Outs of Mysticism’ (1991) he observes ‘students of mysticism feel more at home with the philosophical and theological aspects of their subject than with its literary dimensions’ and therefore the literary dimensions require special attention.⁵⁰ As seen in the previous chapter, Hart’s ‘Darkness and Lostness: How to Read a Judith Wright Poem’ (2004) draws upon St John of the Cross’s *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* to propose ‘a modern, specifically Australian understanding of Carmelite spirituality’ in Wright’s ‘The Lost Man’, demonstrating how an understanding of mysticism is essential for the study of Wright.⁵¹ In ‘Francis Webb: Unsayings Transcendence’ (2000) Hart invokes the prime negative theologian Pseudo-Dionysius to read Webb’s ‘Poet’ as a Christologically-charged apology for writing poetry.⁵² In doing so, he offers clear points of resistance to the marginalisation and misrepresentation of the mystical in Australian literary criticism both individually and in conversation with other critics of negative theology in Australian poetry including Bernadette Brennan and Paul Kane.⁵³ Furthermore, he recognises that these conversations must also cross from the literary to the interdisciplinary if mysticism is to thrive in Australian universities, because it ‘falls between disciplines ... it requires an interdisciplinary approach’.⁵⁴ As Western Christian mysticism often ‘falls between’ the artifices and

⁵⁰ Hart, ‘The Ins and Outs of Mysticism’, *Sophia* 30.1, 1991, p. 10.

⁵¹ Hart, ‘Darkness and Lostness’, p. 317.

⁵² Hart, ‘Unsayings Transcendence’, p. 7.

⁵³ See Kane and Brennan on negative theology in Chapter 5, Kane and *anabasis* in Chapter 6.

⁵⁴ Hart, ‘The Ins and Outs’, p. 8.

strictures of the Australian tertiary model, collaborative responses are proposed as one remedy, especially in light of the burgeoning international mysticism scholarship represented by Bernard McGinn, Amy Hollywood, Steven T. Katz, Grace Jantzen, Ursula King, Jean-Luc Marion and Hart himself. Thus Hart is not only exporting the mystical discourses in a unique manner, but *importing* international conversations between mysticism, literature and philosophy to demonstrate the underutilised insights of mysticism as modes of critical, disciplinary and interdisciplinary enquiry in Australia.

Attending to God Beyond Theory and Negativity

Since the chapbook *Nebuchadnezzar* (1977), Hart's poetry has openly and persistently engaged Western Christian mystical figures and themes.⁵⁵ By contrast, the greater share of Hart criticism tends to only vaguely acknowledge Hart's interest in mysticism if it is mentioned at all.⁵⁶ The epigraph by St John of the Cross in *Your Shadow* (1984) is never linked to 'my patron saint / (My patron poet too)' ('Nineteen Songs' [1999, 171]) to properly underscore the importance of this 'mystic of mystics' to Hart's poetry, and no shifting notion of mysticism is at any point entertained.⁵⁷ Even Peter Steele (1991), perfectly positioned to consider Hart in terms of the mystical tradition, prefers to observe his 'falterings and flickerings ... when words are being put to silence or when silence makes its claim to be worded'.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ See Kevin Hart, *Nebuchadnezzar*, Open Door, Canberra, 1977.

⁵⁶ See for example Lachlan Brown, 'Exploring the Shadow of Your Shadow' in *JASAL Special Issue 2007* (<<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/286>>, retrieved 24 September 2007), where 'the Christian mystics Hart was reading in the early 1980s' is secondary to the 'being towards death' of Heidegger (114).

⁵⁷ King, *Op Cit.*, p. 153.

⁵⁸ Peter Steele, 'Hart's Thought and Art', *Overland* 122, 1991, p. 70.

David McCooley (1995) reverses this trend by explicitly considering Hart's *New and Selected Poems* in terms of his 'mystical imagination', Donnean and Herbertean poetics of mystery, eroticism, the unnameable, the unlanguageable, negative theology and the *via negativa*.⁵⁹ Two of McCooley's findings are of particular relevance to this study. The first observes 'In Hart's poems the *via negativa* is not ascetic or rigorous, but a finding of delight and mystery in earthly things'.⁶⁰ Hart's *via negativa* can in fact be ascetic, but in the tradition of St John of the Cross (and mysticism more generally), he combines biblical and secular sources, though his 'earthly things', including his eroticism, aspire to be earthly *and* allegorical. McCooley also makes a compelling point regarding 'The Gift', a poem rich in Christian and Derridean overtones ('Is the gift still coming, on its way?' [120]):

"The Gift" demonstrates both the orthodoxy and the utter originality of Hart's negative aesthetic when writing religious verse (which, one senses, he is doing most of the time). It is both traditional and idiosyncratic; seeming to both *call up and dispel past images of God*, and in doing so Hart makes clear his own skill.⁶¹

This calling up and dispelling is characteristic of negative theology, and, in conversation with his philosophical experience, Hart employs the mechanics of negative theology in his constant refining and rejecting of images and poems. 'Three Prayers', for example, which posits 'Master of light, my God' as 'beyond reach of language', was in 1981 'Five Prayers' containing the deleted 'you come / Master of

⁵⁹ David McCooley, "'Secret Truths': The Poetry of Kevin Hart" in *Southerly* 55.4, 1995, pp. 110, 112, 120. McCooley repeatedly draws on *The Trespass of the Sign*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118. For more on Derrida's translation of Heidegger's *es gibt*, see Caputo, *Op Cit.*, p. 167, Caputo & Scanlon (eds), *Op Cit.*

Solitude' and before this, as Gary Catalano (1986) notes, it was entitled 'The God Poems'.⁶² Hart has regularly called up and dispelled his own past images in this way.

Hart's Search, as he defines it, is for 'the Word, the unique master word that underwrites all other words' but as the Word upon entering the world is lost one must *attend*, through faith and love, to an imageless God.⁶³ In 'The Experience of the Kingdom of God' (2005) this 'rich notion', drawn from Simone Weil's 'attention, taken to its highest degree is the same thing as prayer', is defined in three major ways, all essential to Hart's poetry.⁶⁴ First, to attend to God is to *accompany* him, go to him, stay with him, even watch with him as his beloved companion. Second, to attend to God, via St John of the Cross, is to *wait* in silence for 'a quality of silence that surrounds the soul, a silence that is also calm'.⁶⁵ This produces Hart's more ascetic *via negativa*. Third, the Latin *attendere*, 'to stretch', corresponds to the image of the soul stretching itself in Phillipians 3:13, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Augustine and German theologian Karl Rahner.⁶⁶ Attending by accompanying, waiting, and stretching also circumvent Hart's interviews, for example regarding his poem 'The Gift', Hart tells McCooey (1996) 'Poems open themselves to the unknown by attending to and caring for the known'.⁶⁷ Extrapolated in terms of the above, this becomes 'poems open themselves to the unknown by accompanying, waiting for, stretching and caring for the known', a reciprocity based on faith and love, and supercharged by the insights of Western Christian mysticism.

⁶² Gary Catalano, 'The Weight of Things: The Poetry of Kevin Hart', *Overland* 104, 1986, p. 24.

⁶³ Hart cited in John Kinsella, 'Interview with Kevin Hart', *Salt* 10, 1997, p. 260.

⁶⁴ Hart, 'The Experience of the Kingdom of God' in Kevin Hart & Barbara Wall (eds), *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Approach*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2005, p. 80

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ David McCooey, "'Intersecting Worlds'", p. 34.

Hart defines his faith as both ‘supernatural’ in the theological sense and key to his notion of the *counter-experience* of God whereby ‘If we meet God in prayer it is as absolute subject, not as intentional object ... the encounter does not take the form of an experience; at the most we could call it counter-experience’.⁶⁸ Similarly, the overall project of *The Trespass of the Sign*, as Hart reflects in the 2000 edition, was to preserve the *aseity*, or non-derivative nature, of God.⁶⁹ Hart’s individual theological negotiations ultimately diverge little from the mystical tradition: counter-experience is still a divine encounter and a supernatural faith is simply a faith beyond one’s comprehension. More problematic, however, is the issue of theory within the poetry: in ‘The Gift’, for example, there is a whole raft of theory involving Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Heidegger on the concepts of ‘the gift’ through which mysticism is recurrently implicated, as are the more direct scriptural avenues of John 14:27 (‘I do not give to you as the world gives’).⁷⁰ Yet to consider the poems outside their own *attending*, to *attend* to theory rather than the poem’s own mystery, is to disrupt their ability to accompany, wait and stretch on their own. As Hart’s experience, or counter-experience, of God does not take the form of an experience and is itself ‘a movement we cannot inaugurate or control, a rupture in the immanence of our lives’, any attempt to regulate it with theory proves counter-productive, by rupturing the *attending* of divine rupture.⁷¹ The influence of mystics within the poetry is a different

⁶⁸ Hart, ‘On Faith’ in *Meanjin* 65.4, 2006, p. 3. Hart, ‘Experience’, p. 80. In his footnotes Hart differentiates his concept of counter-experience from that of French Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion (pp. 224, 225).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22. See Gregg Taylor, ‘The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy’, *The Journal of Religion* 81.4, 2001, pp. 667–9 for a comparative review of the two editions.

⁷⁰ See Caputo & Scanlon (eds), *Op Cit.* Mystical interpretations of the gift theme include St Catherine of Siena’s ‘O eternal Godhead! O deep sea! What more could you have given me than the gift of your very self?’ (Catherine of Siena, *Op Cit.*, p. 152).

⁷¹ Hart, *Op Cit.*

matter, for this is either sparing ('Pascal', St Teresa in 'Gacela') or implicated in *attending* itself (St John of the Cross, St Augustine, St Gregory of Nyssa).

Attending to God as Accompanying

Attending to God by accompanying, waiting or stretching are by no means mutually exclusive tropes, but they do provide excellent organising categories for examining the mystical in Hart's poetry. 'To the Spirit', 'Facing the Pacific at Night', 'Wimmera Songs' and 'Nineteen Songs', for example, draw on canonical and scriptural mystical tropes of the ocean, desert and connubial eros in attending to God by way of *accompanying*. 'Facing the Pacific At Night' is not Hart's only poem to invoke the ocean as a symbol of mystical absorption: 'In Memoriam W.H. Auden' combines images of death as a journey into the desert while forming a mouth 'like a river entering the sea', and 'A Silver Crucifix On My Desk' concludes with Christ with arms outstretched, ready to dive 'In this cold ocean / With its lost treasure / Its gorgeous fish, all blind as jewels, Gliding through the darkness' (87).⁷² As in Cambridge's 'Night', these images recall Western Christian mystical motifs of rivers entering the sea or journeys in or upon the ocean signifying the soul's absorption in God.⁷³ 'To the Spirit' likewise employs this long-standing trope before broadening into a Steele-like ubiquity:

You find me as the ocean receives a stream widening

Beyond itself, becoming the beaten foam, a rain

⁷² 'In Memoriam W.H. Auden' in Kevin Hart, *The Departure*, p. 52. Auden also wrote on mysticism in 'Four Kinds of Mystical Experience' in Woods (ed.), *Op Cit.*, pp. 379–99.

⁷³ See Bernard McGinn, 'Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption', pp. 155–81.

... And so I find you, both then and now; I am within you
 Always, as within the whole of language; always, as
 The universe forever forms itself... (71)

Hart's unitive imagery and conviction 'You come so suddenly, as something long forgotten, / taking me over completely' contrasts sharply with his later poems of *waiting* such as 'Prayer' (203) where language, like the Spirit, is not deferred but encompassing. 'Facing the Pacific' from *Peniel* (1991) is different again in its insistence upon a physical ocean:

The ocean quietly moves within your ear
 And flashes in your eyes: the silent place

 Outside the world is here and now,
 Between two thoughts, a child that does not grow,
 A silence undressing words, a nameless love. (103)

A limitless vitality beyond words and names, a synthesis of the Bohemian life-force ('the thing itself, an energy') and silent, uncreated omnipresence ('a child itself ... No parent there') results. It is love, which like Wright's 'The Blind Man' may refer to Eros, who in different traditions was born of primordial Chaos, or Night in an egg that split into Earth and Sky, and later came to be represented as a child; but as 'the nameless one, the surname of all things' and a transcendent calm which transports the subject outside birth and time to the silent place beyond in the 'here and now', the nameless love is more likely the Judeo-Christian 'I AM' of Exodus 3:14. The accompaniment of God in this poem is one of mystical presence, 'the nameless one' being 'here and now' between thoughts, outside of language and time. The desert of 'Wimmera Songs' (1999) explores similar themes of presence and ineffability, as

‘the soul rejoices, remembering that light / Over burnt grass / That utters nothing you can say / But gives you life to act it out’ (163). Themes of mystical absorption continue in ‘The River’ with ‘*I and it dissolved*’ (153).⁷⁴

Attending as *accompanying* also engages Hart’s eroticism through the oppressive, sensual heat of Brisbane which melds objects of worship and affection in *Dark Angel* (1996) and *Wicked Heat* (1999) particularly. Adolescent memories of a picture of the Virgin Mary in ‘Her Name’ (128) sent ‘one steamy day’ with ‘on the back / A scarlet lipstick kiss signed “You Know Who”’ or the ‘fire I felt whispering her name’ are innocent enough, but they also lend themselves to a different kind of *accompaniment*, where, as in Cambridge, Neilson, Webb and Wright, the lover begins to blur with the divine. At a distance from the subject this is seemingly innocuous, proposing a different kind of *waiting* across time and space; but the lover who creates ‘a strange and nameless world’ and through whom ‘my soul must pass’ (‘You’, 146), or who says ‘drink from my mouth’ with ‘a lick of honey hanging from your chin’ (‘Nights’, 166) begins to sharply diverge from those of the Song of Songs or St. John of the Cross’s *The Spiritual Canticle*.⁷⁵

‘Nineteen Songs’ takes this trend to its carnal extreme, and in doing so disrupts any notion of the divine romance.⁷⁶ The mouth, so important to Christian mystical interpretations of The Song of Songs including those of Bernard of

⁷⁴ Hart, as a former winner of the John Shaw Neilson prize and anthologist who included nine Neilson works in his *The Oxford Anthology of Australian Religious Verse*, is clearly familiar with the Wimmera poet. Hart’s debt to Parmenides in ‘Wimmera Songs’ (163) disguises a larger debt to Neilson and the final exhortation ‘listen to a blue wren / And learn its lesson: / Think like a cloud / Go where clouds go’ echoes Neilson’s bird poems and ‘The Orange Tree.’ A later poem ‘Those White, Ancient Birds’ who ‘cry their hallelujahs’ (152) and prior images of a light-charged lemon tree (‘Dispute at Sunrise’, 104) are also distinctly Neilsonian. For Parmenides and mysticism, see McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 24, 61, 297.

⁷⁵ ‘Nights’ contains references to The Song of Songs 7:9, 4:11 in its mouth and honey imagery, but these are limited by their transplanting into the temporal lover.

⁷⁶ For an analysis of eros and the divine romance, see Bernard McGinn, ‘The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism’ in Katz (ed.), *Op Cit*.

Clairvaux and the Beguines, becomes the property of the delving tongue rather than ineffable deity and the final claim ‘God will look at us / And know himself at last: / and you will kiss his lips’ is even more presumptuous than Zora Cross’s ‘I kissed the lips of God’ in Chapter 4. It may be that Hart is deliberately using slivers of mysticism to enhance an otherwise whimsical love poem, or it may be that his prolonged immersion in mysticism seeps into even his rawest love poems in a manner traceable to ‘Three Prayers’ (39). Either way, the result is self-defeating: St John of the Cross is loosely evoked in the fifth song (*‘God’s captured by a hair! ... An eye has wounded me!’*) to declare that the subject knows how God feels, and knows how St John of the Cross feels under the spell of a lover’s neck hair and freckle. The related passage of *The Spiritual Canticle* sees the Bride speak to the divine Bridegroom thus:

With flowers and emeralds
gathered on cold mornings
we shall weave garlands
flowering in your love
and bound with one hair of mine.

That single hair of mine
waving on my neck has caught your eye;
you gazed upon my neck,
and by it captive you were held
and one of my eyes has wounded you.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle* (tr. John Venard), E.J. Dwyer, Newtown, 1990, pp. 10 (poem), 228–30 (commentary).

St John subsequently explains that the hair and the eyes refer to the joining of God and the soul by love, virtue and faith. By contrast, Hart proceeds to portray himself as a love-sick animal that ‘wants to enter you’ like a lion pounces on an antelope (171). This is antithetical to *The Spiritual Canticle*, which includes lions as symbols of the strength of the perfect virtues of God, not the prowling libido.⁷⁸ It also contradicts The Song of Songs where the divine bridegroom is gentle like a stag or gazelle. As in James McAuley’s ‘Cantilena’, the intervention of temporal desire ruptures the ambiguity between lover and divine lover necessary for eros to be read as an allegory for mystical union. If, as Hart explains elsewhere in the manner of Origen, ‘eros is the best image we have of agape’, it is not the eros of ‘my semen hot and wild inside your cunt’ which merely demonstrates how far removed ‘Nineteen Songs’ is from mysticism of any kind.⁷⁹ A more convincing example of divine eros can be found in the attending as *waiting* through the yearning of ‘Come Back’ and ‘Prayer’.

Attending as *accompanying* for Hart is mystical primarily in the unitive imagery of ‘To the Spirit’ and ‘The River’, the ineffable, nameless love of ‘Facing the Pacific’, and technically only in St John of the Cross’s appearance in ‘Nineteen Songs’. ‘The Companion’ provides a Christological counterpoint to these where ‘each night he comes and trembles by my side ... He cannot touch yet shadows cover me, I hide within myself and he draws close’ (84).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁷⁹ Hart in Kinsella, *Op Cit.*, p. 271.

Attending to God as Waiting

The second kind of *attending*, that of *waiting*, tends towards absence rather than presence, asceticism rather than eros in 'Prayer' and 'Soul Says'. This is not to say yearning and *waiting* are not compatible, for The Song of Songs itself is an example of *waiting* and *stretching* after *accompanying*. In 'Prayer', the final poem of *Flame Tree* (2002), the divine is implored to return as in previous experiences:

O come, in any way you want,
 ... Come as you used to, years ago,
 When I first fell for you... (205)

The Adamic pun on 'fell' hints at the human desire for reunion with the divine from its fallen state, which dates back to the very foundations of Western Christian mysticism in the Old Testament and Greek mysteries, and has impelled canonical mystics for two millennia. Hart lists at least nine ways for the deity to come, of which a lover's absence is but one. Ultimately, however, this gives way to an unconditional yearning:

Or if that's not your way these days
 Because of me, because
 Of something dead in me,
 Come like a jagged knife into my gut

Because your touch will surely cut

 Come any way you want

 But come (205)

The poem's climax recalls not only the Christ of the 'The Companion' ("I come to wound you and to heal the wound"[84]) but also *The Spiritual Canticle* which raises the stakes even further by asking 'Reveal your presence / and may the vision of your beauty be my death'.⁸⁰ In this sense, mystical tropes of yearning, return and receptivity appear in 'Prayer'. Hart's other poems from *Peniel* such as 'The Black Telephone' (118) and 'The Gift' (120) exhibit a contemplative, even ascetic stillness, but there is also a strangely companioned waiting, an abiding with the soul, in the two 'Soul Says' poems:

Soul says well let us watch the old night sky

Until the darkness gazes back:

... The sound you heard above your head was me

Soul says

And for a moment I was almost free:

Now let us go

Now you have felt the darkness gazing back

('Soul Says' [1], 151)

Come children, now —

Your ear and eye and mind, you others too —

I say,

Come and be gathered in a word

...That feels the blank beyond what words can bear

(Poor word, soul says,

That lets the sunlight through)

⁸⁰ St John of the Cross, *Op Cit.*, p. 77. 'You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live' (Exodus 33:20, *New International Version*).

... One day, soul says,
 One day, I say,
 One day
 The eye and mind will listen, and abide
 ('Soul Says' [2], 161)

These gentle dialogues have their more galling progenitor in 'Your Shadow's Songs' (76) where the shadow as an indecipherable other sings of the angel of death knowing 'the mind of God' and adoring 'the God behind God's face', adding 'Who knows if God will come to you / As fire, or a woman's touch' before in effect advising the subject not to *stretch*, when the honeycomb and fragrant field are 'within your reach'.⁸¹ The soul, by contrast, plays the intermediary, conversing and teaching, revealing truths in proportion to the subject's readiness for them. The darkness gazing back, the word 'beyond' (the object of Hart's Search) and the impossible are all synonymous with mysticism, but so is contemplation, receptivity and peace and the soul ensures these are treated with equal importance. Hart's association of *waiting* with St John of the Cross's 'silence that is also calm' is perhaps most obviously on display in 'The Calm' (155) where 'there are those times / when I become a yes / (And they are moments of the Calm)'. The overall result is an innovative and fecund *waiting* conducive to mystical progression through the mingled identities of contemplative self and soul. Whether or not the soul can be sustained as an intermediary when it is ostensibly part of the self does not diminish the poem's affinities with the mystical tradition of self-soul dialogues found especially in female mystics such as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite

⁸¹ Hart says 'I've never fully understood those shadow poems [in *Your Shadow*]' in Kinsella, *Op Cit.* See Brown *Op Cit.* for further analysis.

Porete.⁸² ‘Prayer’, the ‘Soul Says’ poems and ‘The Calm’ *wait* with an ascetic, less disrupted mystical yearning than the eros of ‘Nineteen Songs’.

Stretching and the Mysticism of Darkness

The third form of *attending* to God is that of *stretching*. The nocturnes of *Night Music* (2005) feature a more active, restless Search for ‘words that murmur only in the dark ... when the silence seems a kind of food’ (‘Some Words Will Murmur Only in the Dark’), which involves corporeal, ecological and theological *stretching*:

Some nights I walk the streets when I can’t sleep

But what I want is never there to see:

I know the streetlights like to stretch my bones,

I know the universe is moving fast.

There’s nowhere that I really want to go:

The truth is just as hard in my own house,

The grass puts down its roots right where I live.

And when at last I reach the river bend

I tell myself, as though I were a child,

God is the dark before the shadows came.

(‘Some Nights I Walk the Streets When I Can’t Sleep’)⁸³

In ‘In Brisbane Death was Always Very Big’, Hart indicates that death and mortality imply their own *stretching*, even a shrinking, as his father ‘looks hard’ for his own

⁸² See Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, pp. 240, 246.

⁸³ Kevin Hart, *Night Music*, Lexicon House, Brunswick, 2004. No titles or pages numbers accompany the publication.

death.⁸⁴ Beyond *Night Music*, several poems explore and continue themes of *stretching* into the dark. In ‘Snow’ (2005) for example,

I turn off every light
 And watch the snow
 Enjoy the dark, moving lushly
 Through spiky air,
 Finding more time
 In time
 That when I stretch myself
 And am
 My father’s father. Oh yes,
 There is
 A sparkling choir, there surely is,
 And dark ice air
 Through which we fall⁸⁵

The *cataphatic* celebration of the sparkling song in the flakes which have fallen through the dark in ‘Snow’ serve as a resting calm from the stretching for ‘more time / In time’ as his father’s father (‘I am the God of your father’ [Exodus 3:6]). Another snow poem ‘Reading St Gregory of Nyssa’ more directly draws upon the mystical theology of St Gregory of Nyssa (c.330–395) who, as Ursula King (2001) explains, combined tropes of the soul’s progression with a mysticism of darkness:

Gregory was perhaps the first to describe the mystical life as an ascent to the soul of God, an unending journey leading to an even greater realization of God’s ultimate

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Kevin Hart, ‘Snow’ in *Harvard Review* 29, 2005, p. 94

mystery. In each human soul there exists a divine element, a kind of inner eye capable of glimpsing something of God, for there exists a deep relationship, an affinity between human and divine nature. Thus the mind can progress even further towards the contemplation of God, and yet the more one knows of God, the greater becomes the mystery, the “darkness,” the hiddenness of God’s face.⁸⁶

Apophysis, which under Pseudo-Dionysius would become mystical or ‘negative’ theology, was of crucial importance to Gregory not least because, as McGinn (1991) observes, he decisively broke with Origen’s concept of a limited deity and proclaimed God’s limitlessness and incomprehensibility before the soul.⁸⁷

‘Reading St Gregory of Nyssa’, like Francis Webb’s ‘St Therese and the Child’, presents another case of an Australian poet turning to a major Western Christian mystic as a means of returning to God. While Webb is preparing himself for death through the affirmations of a young saint, Hart invokes the first Christian theologian of mystical darkness to recover his earlier directness with God, which is proposed at the poem’s end:

So snowflakes fall between the sentences
 And make me see that it’s like this, at first,
 On life’s far side: no words, souls in suspense
 In gray-blue light that does not let you breathe,
 A time that’s void of time, except for snow
 That floats, each flake made fresh with timeless care.
 Perhaps in time we will all come to bliss,

⁸⁶ King, *Op Cit.*, p. 48.

⁸⁷ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 141. See Dionysius the Areopagite, *Op Cit.*, especially *The Mystical Theology*.

Perhaps we will be turned around, and touch
 The face of God, as do the stones and trees
 ...How many souls hunch there, in that black wind
 That screeches like torn steel! Dear God, may death
 Not be like this for anyone on earth.⁸⁸

The snow falling ‘between the sentences’, thoughts of touching of the face of God and projections into death all act as textual markers of *stretching* to re-establish a personal relationship with God. The intertextual markers come of course from Gregory himself, whom Hart cites as saying ‘we stretch forward endlessly into God throughout eternity’ amid references to St Augustine, Karl Rahner, St John of the Cross and Simone Weil in Hart’s discussion of Weil’s *attending* to God.⁸⁹ Gregory’s theology influences Hart’s own *stretching* in the revelatory negations of ‘life’s far side’ but also more generally through his role in Hart’s attempt to poeticise *attending* in full by combining *accompanying*, *waiting* and *stretching* in the subsequent ‘Dark One’ poems.

Attending the Room and the Dark One

Attending as a united whole does not, in itself, equate to a stronger claim to the mystical. An *accompanying*, *waiting* or *stretching* poem may more effectively demonstrate or engage mysticism especially if it is fortunate enough to be an effective poem. The triple-bond of an *attending* poem simply gives a poem more opportunities, more avenues into the mystical while simultaneously ensuring there

⁸⁸ Hart, *Op Cit.*, p. 95.

⁸⁹ Hart, ‘On Faith’, p. 7; ‘Experience’, p. 80.

are fewer such poems. Prior to the ‘Dark One’ series, ‘The Room’ from *Wicked Heat* (1999) is one poem where the poet accompanies, waits *and* stretches in one:

It is my house, and yet one room is locked.
 The dark has taken root on all four walls.
 It is a room where knots stare out from wood,
 A room that turns its back on the whole house.

 At night I hear the crickets list their griefs
 And let an ancient peace come into me.
 Sleep intercepts my prayer, and in the dark
 The house turns slowly round its one closed room. (136)

As with the greater share of mystical poetics, much here relies on a multilateral interpretation. The locked room ‘that turns its back on the whole house’ could be just a room and the subject falls asleep. But when some of the biblical resonances are examined, such as God turning his back on Moses in Exodus 34 and Christ’s references to the temple as ‘my Father’s house’ (Luke 2:49), the poem’s mystery broadens. In John 14, the house motif leads directly to one of the most celebrated passages in Christianity:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would not have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you ... I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:1–2, 6)

‘My Father’s house’ is one of many domestic images employed by Christ to impart the divine; for ‘The Room’ it provides greater weight to a biblical reading of the poem where two major sites of Western Christian mysticism fuse in Moses’s

experience of the back of God and Christ's assimilation of prophet, intermediary and deity into a new kind of visionary experience whereby 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). Hart's 'knots that stare out from wood' also support this and may in themselves have biblical or apocryphal resonances in the building of Noah's ark (with rooms of wood and sealed in pitch, the ark alone with God in the 'blotted out world' [Genesis 6:14, 7:23]), rejecting idolatry (Wisdom of Solomon 13:13) or Christ's Incarnation as the son of a carpenter. The case for the house as a kind of ark is reinforced by scriptural precedents in which the ark is borne up (and presumably spun) by waters 'high above the earth' (Genesis 6:17). However, the four walls can also be read as the four angels at the four corners of the earth in Revelations 7:1, and the crickets recall Ecclesiastes 12:5–7 where 'desire is no longer stirred' and 'man goes to his eternal home' after death, a possible source for Hart's 'ancient peace'.

While biblical interpretation of this kind clearly runs the risk of becoming obtuse, it also points to something of the obtuse in Hart whereby the reader, like McCooey (1996), suspects he is writing religiously 'most of the time' but must rely upon their own knowledge of Hart's greater corpus for a certain level of confirmation.⁹⁰ This is not to say that the mystical in this case resides outside the poem, but rather the craft of the poem ensures that *any* context, be it biblical, mystical, psychological or somnambulistic, is led through its corridors by threads of religiosity like 'prayer', 'ancient peace', 'one' and 'dark' only to conclude in an image open to several readings, including parallels with Dante's *Paradiso* and St Teresa's *The Interior Castle*. Whether or not Hart is completely *attending* in 'The Room' is similarly, even symptomatically, dependent upon a knowledge of Hart's

⁹⁰ McCooey, 'Secret Truths', p. 118.

corpus where a single word can even accidentally trigger a landslide of biblical, philosophical and theological meanings. While mysticism is evident throughout, so is the implicit injunction that no one poem can, nor should, represent it, informed by Hart's awareness of mysticism's affinities with multiplicity, ambiguity and paradox.

'Three Poems From *Dark Retreat*' (2005) and 'Colloquies' (2007) represent a return to Hart's earlier style of directly addressing God, though Hart is no longer the Hart of 'Three Prayers' and God is now 'Dark One'. Hart's long-held fascination with the dark, his yearning in 'Prayer' to reconnect with the *accompanying* of 'years ago', and the mysticism of darkness of St Gregory, St John of the Cross and others (including practitioners of 'atheistical mysticism') are among the more obvious precedents for this change, while local influences include his Australian contemporaries such as Peter Steele, whose 'Covenant' appears in Hart's *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse* (1994):

Dark one, light one, dark as the heart of a flame,
 If you can't speak in silence, practise your art.
 Be a pillar of fire or a pillar of smoke, or the small
 Voice of a mountain pouring in sand through an hourglass:
 Be grave if you choose, or turn in joy
 Like a tree tipped with light, or the first
 Wave of the sea, exulting in its planet.
 Bright one, dark one, speak to us out of our silence.⁹¹

⁹¹ "Atheistical mysticism" ... one variously finds in the poetry of René Char, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, and Roberto Juarroz' (Hart, *Dark Gaze*, p. 10); Peter Steele, 'Covenant' in Kevin Hart (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse*, Oxford, Melbourne, 1994, p. 196.

‘Three Poems from *Dark Retreat*’ echoes Steele’s yearning and the *attending* of ‘The Room’ (where God may indeed be the dark), but with Hart’s signature touches of eroticism and domesticity:

Your voice —
 I would give up this champagne light
 To know it just once more,
 Even if sheathed in a sparrow’s song,
 A flash
 Of a sparrow’s outstretched wings,
 Or the memory of that sparrow
 That smashed into my windowpane
 In a black storm
 ...You’re here as well, Dark One, so where’s
 Your hidey hole? The kettle’s hiss,
 My daughter’s drawing of our cat,
 That crumbling wasp nest by the door?⁹²

Hart’s approach diverges from Steele when he asks the Dark One not simply to speak or show, but to speak or show *again*, indicating an earlier experience, or counter-experience dependent on ‘supernatural’ faith. ‘Where’s / Your hidey hole?’ also recalls St John of the Cross who begins *The Spiritual Canticle* with ‘Where have you hidden away, / Beloved’ before adding in the older translations ‘Having wounded me

⁹² Kevin Hart, ‘Three Poems from Dark Retreat’, at http://australia.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw_cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?.obj_id=6168&x=1, retrieved 12 August 2007.

you fled like the hart', a personal touch from the Australian poet's patron poet-saint.⁹³ The sparrows especially recall Matthew 10:29:

There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight: what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.

The revelation of mysteries, a Christological Dark melding with God as the One, themes of daylight, whispering ('Your voice ... To know it just once more'), and holy will in singing, flying and dying sparrows all tie this passage to 'Three Poems'. The Dark One is present, *accompanied*, liminal, *waited* on, and ubiquitous, thus leaving the subject *stretched* as he tries once more to discern the undiscernible with mystical and scriptural techniques.

Hart successfully leads Simone Weil's attention equivalent to prayer through the mystical insights of 'Snow' 'Reading Gregory of Nyssa', 'Prayer', 'Soul Says', 'Facing the Pacific at Night', 'Poem to the Sun' and 'Three Poems', the last an example of *attending* to God as *accompanying*, *waiting* and *stretching*. Given the interdependent relationship between (some) discourses of mysticism and Hart's poetry, 'Colloquies' (2007), a series of forty quatrains, may represent Hart's mystical poem *par excellence* in the sense that it is also an interdependent poem *par excellence*. Like 'The Room', 'Colloquies' operates as a prayer, the highest level of attention:

⁹³ St John of the Cross & Gerald Brennan, *St John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry* (tr. Lynda Nicholson), Cambridge, London, 1972, p. 149.

There are no words,
Dark One, no words at all
Just these black marks
These stretched and knotted
sounds

So you must come
And brood upon my page
And warm those words
Until fine cracks appear

I talk to you
And all my words black out
You talk to me
In words like morning snow

There are no words,
Dark One, no words at all
I read your book
But you compose in white⁹⁴

This is a highly personalised, questioning discussion with the ineffable presence of God. 'I talk to you ... You talk to me' in such a context is mysticism at its sheerest, and the absence of God's response in the text itself (as opposed to mystical dialogues such as that of Julian or Norwich or St Catherine of Siena) is amended by receiving God into the writing process with an air of Meister Eckhart's deific compulsion in

⁹⁴ Kevin Hart, 'Colloquies', *Meanjin* 66.1, 2007, p. 66.

'you must come'.⁹⁵ God is framed in the language of paradox as both the fire who bakes words so that the subject may later 'look for you / In every crack of is' and the one who speaks in snow. There are no words for the God Poet who composes in silence and light, who begins everything with just one word, the affirmation after death 'Ah yes, that word / the darkest one, that waits / Beneath the rest', the Christian mystery of the resurrection. The God Poet is a step beyond the Jesus Poet of Neilson, Webb and even Murray, and his apparent infusion with the writing process seeks to transfer a powerful mystical trope of unitive experience into the creative element in Australian poetry.

Aside from the considerable theological-poetic ramifications of 'So you must come', there are two significant interrelated currents running through 'Colloquies'. The first is an almost elegiac recollection of what appears to be past mystical (counter) experiences or episodes of *accompanying*:

wind in leaves
 That rushes through each vein
 As once it did
 When there were just we two

 ...You're up above
 In those old rings of light

 Or deep inside

 My feelings, thoughts and loves

⁹⁵ See Eckhart, *Op Cit.* McGinn ties this process to kenosis in 'Lost in God', p. 26: 'it's the soul that compels God, that calls the shots, that conquers. Eckhart even says of God, "He cannot shut me out" ... it's in the process of emptying yourself of your self-will that you compel God, because God can't come in if there's something else there, meaning yourself'.

That secret night
 That slipped away from days⁹⁶

Whether this relates to a mystical experience or personal nostalgia remains ambiguous, but the recurrence of this theme in ‘Prayer’ and ‘Three Poems’ suggests a significant event inspiring, or inspired by, mystical consciousness. If the God of Poetry is read as more Poetry than God then the subject may simply be reliving, even chastising, a lifelong relationship of ‘secret nights’ with poetry. But if the Dark One is God, as is strongly implied, then John Shaw Neilson’s spectacular fallout with the lover of ‘The Lover Sings’ into the bitterness of ‘To the Untuneful Dark’ and Ada Cambridge’s metaphysical rebukes in *Unspoken Thoughts* are paralleled in ‘Colloquies’:

Don’t speak, Dark One,
 You never do, you know,
 I’m better off
 Just listening to clouds
 ...The whole thing’s mad
 And don’t you say its not

 ...You want a game
 Of hide-go-seek with me
 But I grow up
 And there’s no time for time

 ...I wake and look
 I wake and look for you

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

(Even the Good
Casts shadows before noon)⁹⁷

A comparison with Hart's earlier deific poems such as 'Three Prayers' reveals a growing dissatisfaction for the Dark One who once was the master of light, who passed through the dark rather than preceding it, who dispelled rather than cast shadows. The 'You do not speak to me of death. / You do not pester me' of 'Three Prayers' becomes 'don't speak ... you never do' in 'Colloquies' and the latter poem's rebuke 'But I grow up' is both elegiac and acerbic towards the Platonic sun-Child of the Good (Chapter 2, see also 'Poem to the Sun' [90]). The God of 'Three Prayers' who was 'beyond reach of language' remains so, but his increasingly pestering silence is also mitigated by his absorption into the writing process as a God Poet who writes in cracks and silences. Ultimately in 'Colloquies' the mystical prevails, particularly if its castigations are viewed within the mystical tradition of the Dark Night of the Soul poeticised by St John of the Cross.

Hart's awareness in *The Trespass of the Sign* of the 'double bind that God imposes on man: Represent me, but on no account represent me' undergoes a further permutation in 'Colloquies' where the unrepresentable Dark One 'must come' into the writing process to deconstruct the poem, to ensure 'there are no words' save the darkest, hidden one.⁹⁸ This in itself warrants consideration, for what Hart is proposing represents a radical moment for Australian mystical poetry characterised by four stipulations from poet to God: although we talk, you never speak; although there are no words, you will help me deconstruct them; although the mysticism of youth and light is lost, the mysticism of age and darkness must outgrow them; and

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Hart, *Trespass*, p. 185.

through the awe and rupture of my (counter-)experience of you as absolute subject, negative theology can itself be deconstructed and the mystery of 'The Room' revealed:

And so to turn

The moment's heavy lock

And know the dark

And eyes that cut through bone.

Kevin Hart's poetic and critical contribution to discourses of mysticism and Australian poetry repeatedly demonstrates how an understanding of mysticism is essential to the study of Australian poetry. A deeply-nuanced understanding of mysticism's relevance to postmodern phenomenology allows him to deconstruct and contextualise major Australian poets through the mystical theologies of Pseudo-Dionysius and St John of the Cross. His poetry cannot be separated from his multiple, enduring engagements with mysticism and mystical poetics. Hart is also an innovator, suggesting new approaches to the mystical in the three facets of *attending*, 'The Room' and the 'Dark One' poems, all of which take the relationship between mysticism and Australian poetry into new territory by ultimately proposing a Poet God beyond language but infused in the writing process. Like the other poets in this study, Hart asserts that beyond reach of language does not necessarily mean beyond reach of the poet, for just as God works in mysterious ways, so might the mystical poet with or before the Divine Poem. Maricke Van Baest (1998) makes a similar point in relation to medieval mystic Hadewijch of Brabant's 'God talk':

Language is not just a framework of categories we employ to arrange our view of the world into near order. Language has creative potency ... God remains elusive, ever

beyond us. But the wonder of language is that it can evoke what it cannot express, it can mention what it is unable to mark out. This is what makes God-talk possible.⁹⁹

If the testimonies of Western Christian mystics have imparted nothing else it is that the mysteries of language can attend the ineffable, that creative beings may transcend their creative works (and vice versa) into the mystery of the uncreated. This revelation has clearly infiltrated Australian poetry through the works of Cambridge, Neilson, Webb, Wright, Hart and their contemporaries. For Hart in particular it is an ongoing infiltration, and cross-fertilisation, between disciplines and, as he may be far from his writing's end, there is still the possibility of more to discover, attend or negotiate beyond even that of 'Colloquies'.

What Hart is missing though, starkly at times, is a wider reading of female mystics. As a leading authority on mysticism and theology, he must know that adherence to a men's club of mystics with an honorary chair for St Teresa or Simone Weil can only be considered incomplete by twenty-first-century scholars and poets. Critically, he is awake to this, but poetically, it limits him: his eros, for example, would benefit from the Beguines and the trinitarian consolations, even the Mother God, of Julian of Norwich might counter his later frustrations.¹⁰⁰ When he does turn to a modern female mystic in Simone Weil, the result is an immensely positive one and, Dark One willing, the beginning of his, and Australian's poetry's, long-delayed gravitation towards the female mystics integral to Western Christian mysticism's

⁹⁹ Maricke Van Baest, *The Poetry of Hadewijch*, Peeters, Leuven, 1998, pp. 10–11.

¹⁰⁰ *The Experience of God* contains several feminist theologies, but few which mention women mystics. *Derrida and Religion* (2005) contains an essay by Grace Jantzen on the seventh-century legend of St Mary of Egypt, who rather than being the voice of the first woman mystic (Augustine's mother does not have her own narrative agency), 'in fact ... is a legend that shows a good deal about male assumptions and preoccupations regarding female holiness' (Jantzen, 'Touching the Desert' in Kevin Hart & Yvonne Sherwood [eds], *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 389). Hart is surrounded by scholarly perspectives regarding female mysticism and discourses of women's holiness yet seems unwilling to engage them poetically.

twenty-first-century identity. Aside from Simone Weil, this study of Australian poets yields engagements with only three female mystics: St Teresa of Avila (in Hart, Harwood, Hope), St Therese of Liseux (Webb, Harwood), St Catherine of Siena (Buckley) and five less canonical examples of St Rosa of Lima (Harford), Emily Brontë (Harford, Wright), Emily Dickinson (Fullerton), St Maria Goretti (Webb) and St Catherine of Alexandria (Hope), plus a variety of perspectives on biblical women such as Mary and Eve. As twenty-first-century mysticism scholarship seeks to replace fragmented legends of female mystics with more authoritative collected works, there is a clear opportunity for Australian poetry to expand in this direction. In the meantime, Australian mystical poetry's under-represented directions towards and within Indigenous Australia warrant particular attention for their shifting notions from the works of Charles Harpur to those of Indigenous poets and theologians.

8. Mysticism Beyond the Poetics of Empire

Biblical tropes and themes integral to Western Christian mysticism are implicated in the ideologies and processes of the colonisation of Australia which were devastating for Indigenous people. This chapter explores mysticism in and beyond the poetics of Empire through four contexts: Providence versus Indigenous poetics of loss and outrage; the poetics of the colonial self; later points of cross-influence and resistance; and Indigenous Christian perspectives. Each of these engineers or interacts with shifting notions of Western Christian mysticism. As stated in the Introduction, no attempt to construct an Indigenous mysticism or to discuss Indigenous notions of the sacred will be pursued. Indigenous Christian mysticism is another matter, however, and its analysis in the fourth section will bring this dissertation to a close by demonstrating how an understanding of Western Christian mysticism is essential to the study of Indigenous Christian mystical poetics and how such poetics might constitute a site for future Australian mystical discourse.

'Providence' and Indigenous Poetics of Loss and Outrage

Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra (1990), drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, describe Australian culture and its literature as 'still determined massively by its complicity with an imperialist enterprise, coexisting in a necessary but compromised symbiosis with moments and forces of subversion and resistance from within the society'.¹ The term 'enterprise' is particularly valid given Dorothy Lane's (2001) depiction of Australian colonial origins, which unlike America and Southern Africa 'did not depend on "religious legitimation" ... economic rather than spiritual forces

impelled colonization' and the first Christian presence in Australia 'began as a state-controlled agency ... employed by the government to aid in the administration of the colonies; they were answerable to secular leaders'.² Lane compares the outpouring of praise and worship upon the 1620 landing of the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth Rock to the absence of such in 1788, where it took a full week to hold a chapel service. Roland Boer (2000) identifies competing Edenic themes among explorers in their 'frenzy of Adamic naming', whereby Australia could represent exile from an English Eden or an untouched Eden itself spread before them by Divine Providence.³ For Boer, Providence is a dubious concept, as it is for Judith Wright ('intended by Providence as a sheep run'), but for colonial explorers such as Sturt, Mitchell, Grey, Eyre and Giles it implied a speculative relationship with the divine, which in Giles's case allowed him to blur the distinction between explorer and God.⁴ Identification with biblical figures, particularly Old Testament prophets, also informed their interactions with Indigenous people, as did evolutionist attitudes contemporaneous with Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859).⁵ Boer notes that the 'biblical imaginary' of the explorers as it applied to Providence, landscape and Indigeneity 'played a fundamental role in conceptions of Australia' including those of Australian poets.⁶

The Old Testament served to situate Aborigines within the myths of exile from an English Eden or those of a civilised Christianity stumbling upon a lost or cursed Australian Eden which God did not necessarily bless at creation. These

¹ Bob Hodge & Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1990, p. x.

² Dorothy Lane, "'Deliver Their Land from Error's Chain": Conversion, Convictism and Captivity in Australian Fiction' in Jamie Scott & Paul Simpson-Housley (eds), *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, Rodopi, Amsterdam–Atlanta, 2001, pp. 96–7.

³ Roland Boer, 'Explorer Hermeneutics, or Fat Damper and Sweetened Tea', *Semeia* 88, 2001, p. 81.

⁴ Les Murray & Judith Wright, 'Correspondence', *Southerly* 63.1, 2003, p. 170; Boer, *Op Cit.*, p. 90.

⁵ Boer, *Op Cit.*, p. 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.72; Roland Boer, 'Vanishing Mediators?', *Semeia* 88, 2001, p. 10; Boer, *Last Stop Before Antarctica: the Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia*, Sheffield Academic, Sheffield, 2001, p. 118.

themes are evident in Australia's first published poet Barron Field (1786–1846), who abhors 'this fifth part of the Earth ... Not conceiv'd at the Beginning ... But emerg'd at the first sinning, / When the ground was therefore curst' ('Kangaroo').⁷ Michael Ackland (1991) observes that while Field leaves the Indigenous subject 'virtually untouched', he still advocates a role for poets and explorers to lift the 'curse', to purify a land born from sin.⁸ This is precisely the shift Boer identifies from Eden to its 'doppelganger' the Promised Land, though it appears earlier in Australian poetry than he suggests through explorer-poet-statesman William Wentworth (1790–1872) in an 1823 poem celebrating his discovery of a path through the Blue Mountains:

The boundless champaign burst upon our sight
Till nearer seen the beauteous landscape grew,
Op'ning like Canaan on rapt Israel's view.
(‘Australiasia’ [sic])⁹

As discussed in Chapter 3, this poem ties one of the earliest uses of 'mystic' to the subjugation of Indigenous people as 'Untutor'd children, fresh from Nature's mould' who are merely an obstruction to Providence and should 'Let Learning's sons, who would this secret scan, / Unlock its mystic casket if they can'.¹⁰ While Wentworth disregards the rest of the Exodus story, Boer's statement that 'one cannot have the nomadic without imperial settlement, Diaspora without land, wilderness wandering without conquest', suggests the mystical and Providential are narratively linked.¹¹ Bernard McGinn (1991) counters this by noting 'in the history of Western Christian mysticism the ways in which the books of the Bible were read is more important than

⁷ Field cited in Michael Ackland, *That Shining Band*, pp. 25–6.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Wentworth cited in *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰ Wentworth cited in *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹¹ Boer, *Last Stop*, p. 106.

the determination of what these texts may have meant in their original context', that is, the mystical lies in the interpretation rather than the scripture, and the explorers and early poets are not attempting, or claiming, McGinn's standard of mystical interpretation.¹² Instead, familiarity with biblical imagery melds with a certain degree of opportunism, both of which carry dark colonial undercurrents. Field's rites of purification and Wentworth's 'unlocking' of the Promised Land neatly cohere with colonial project of Indigenous dispossession and the imposition of a *terra nullius* myth, the scriptural precedents for which are explained by Robert Carroll (1992) :

The myth of the empty land read as an ideological story controlling membership in the new community, needs also to be read in conjunction with another myth, that of the land polluted by its Canaanite inhabitants. These aboriginal peoples had to be annihilated before Israel could possess the land (Exodus-Deuteronomy), and it was failure to do so that polluted the land and undermined Israel's possession (Joshua-Judges) ... Polluted land-deportation-restoration-purification of land seem to be the main elements in the myth of the empty land ... But such holiness and purity could only be maintained by strict purificatory acts and the resolute avoidance of polluting assimilation with the people of the land. Strategies of purification can be seen in Leviticus and strategies of non-assimilation are to be found throughout much of the Hebrew Bible, especially in Deuteronomy and Ezra-Nehemiah.¹³

'Elijah's Appeal' by John Dunmore Lang (1799-1878) contains a similarly genocidal subtext by comparing Aborigines to the priests of Baal slaughtered by the prophet

¹² McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 4.

¹³ Robert Carroll, 'The Myth of the Empty Land', *Semeia* 59, 1992, pp. 79, 84.

Elijah in 1 Kings 18:40.¹⁴ Though these brutal undercurrents do not implicate mysticism directly, they are derived from the same sources and poetics as some mystical theologies.

The colonial poetics of English superiority and Indigenous dispossession as Providential can be read as part of the wider story of Australian colonialism in which Christianity was also specifically used against Aborigines in colonial and federal law. The historian John Harris (2003) notes after the Myall Creek massacre of 1838 the NSW attorney general could not bring charges against many of the culprits because the only witnesses were Indigenous ‘heathens’ who were considered unable to swear an oath on the Bible, thereby removing their right to testify.¹⁵ Veronica Brady in *Can These Bones Live?* (1996) details the selective use of Genesis and Revelation to support the imperialist claims of *terra nullius*; and there are doubtlessly other cases, given Aborigines did not have the legal protections of citizenship until at least 1948, nor those of the Racial Discrimination Act until 1974.¹⁶

The enormous gulf between Christian word and deed as experienced by Indigenous people is a major, enduring source of lament and outrage for many Indigenous poets. As the first published Indigenous poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920–1993) observes in regard to racial segregation, word without deed remains an empty gesture:

¹⁴ Lang, *Op Cit.*

¹⁵ John Harris, ‘Hiding the Bodies: The Myth of the Humane Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia’, *Aboriginal History* 27, 2003, p. 85.

¹⁶ Veronica Brady, *Can These Bones Live?*, Federation, Annandale, 1996, pp. 33, 73. Brady also cites Darwin’s reflections on his impressions of Aboriginal Australians thus: ‘The varieties of men seem to act in the same ways as the different species of animals, the stronger always exploiting the weaker ... The survival of the fittest is nature’s law and must be obeyed’ although he also added there was ‘a certain amount of evidence to the contrary’, a hazy injunction which, in a manner akin to the colonial selectivity regarding the Bible, was conveniently ignored (p. 5).

As long as brothers banned from brotherhood

You still exclude,

The Christianity you hold so high

Is but a lie.

Justice a cant of hypocrites, content

With precedent.

(‘Colour Bar’)¹⁷

Many Indigenous poets envisage themselves as not just perceiving but *living* the often stark contradiction between the realities of the biblically-based Anglo-Australian rule of law and the purported messages of the Bible. The poet and activist Bobbi Sykes, in her elegy for an infant who died when a doctor refused to treat her in the night, exemplifies the position of many Indigenous poets in regard to what they see as Christian hypocrisy: ‘the Bible / That good and holy book / The people who brought it / Need to take a closer look’ (‘Rachel’).¹⁸ Kevin Gilbert’s anthology *Inside Black Australia* (1988) is filled with examples of similar outrage at Australian Christian hypocrisy, variously through lament, satire (Russell, ‘God Gave Us Trees to Cut Down’), direct appeal (Watson, ‘Memo to JC’) and wry role reversal (Everett, ‘The White Man Problem’).

Indigenous poetics of loss and outrage particularly address the culpability of Christian missions in the assimilationist destruction of language and culture. The sheer variety of missions—Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Lutheran, Methodist, Franciscan, Benedictine, Dominican—combined with the estimated two-hundred-and-fifty distinct Indigenous language groups at the beginning of the

¹⁷ Noonuccal cited in Kevin Gilbert (ed.), *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Australian Poetry*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1998, p. 96.

nineteenth century make for innumerable, diverse scenarios, some representing the destruction of people and language, others the partial preservation of them, some the nadir of Social Darwinist ideology and outright abuse, others innovative syntheses between two or more languages and cultures.¹⁹ Many charismatic ‘maverick’ priests, some inspired by Protestant and Catholic mystics, were all too aware of the contradiction between word and deed, and took great personal and professional risks to speak out against what they perceived as injustice, in some cases translating the Bible into local languages and training Aboriginal priests.²⁰ The effects of these mavericks and anomalies, however, proved largely localised against the greater disaster of assimilation. The terrible ramifications of the gulf between Christian word and assimilationist deed are attested to in Eva Johnson’s ‘Letter to My Mother’:

White fulla bin take me from you, I don’t know why
 Give me to Missionary to be God’s child.
 Give me new language, give me new name
 All the time I cry, they say — ‘that shame’

But this is also a poem of spiritual resilience:

My Mother, the earth, the land — I demand
 Protection from aliens who rule, who command
 For they do not know where our dreaming began
 Our destiny lies in the laws of White Man

¹⁸ Sykes cited in *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁹ Bill Arthur & Frances Morphy (eds), *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia*, Macquarie Library, Macquarie University, 2005, pp. 78, 88. For specific mission cases, see Tony Swain & Deborah Bird Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Bedford Park, 1988.

²⁰ See Neville Green, ‘The Cry For Justice and Equality: Some Exceptional Protestant Missionaries in Western Australia’ and Eugene Stockton ‘Maverick Missionaries: An Overlooked Chapter in the History of Catholic Missions’ in *Ibid.* Mystics of note in this context include St Francis, John Wesley, St Ignatius among others, yet the degree of influence remains uncertain. See also John Harris,

Two Women we stand, our story untold
 But now as our spiritual bondage unfold
 We will silence this Burden, this longing this pain
 When I hear you my Mother give me my Name
 I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.²¹

There is also a gulf between Indigenous and non-Indigenous poets' experiences of the missions. In 1951, in the period leading up to his Franciscan sequence 'The Canticle' (1953), Francis Webb visited the Benedictine mission at New Norcia, Western Australia. In a freshly optimistic mood after his 1949 breakdown he wrote to his sister, an aspiring missionary:

With orphanages for aboriginal boys and girls, full-scale colleges for boys and girls, a hostel, numerous huts for aboriginal farm-workers ... it is a fully autonomous community, with a special spirit of simple friendliness, hospitality, and humour which presides over Fathers, Brothers, natives and kiddies alike.²²

Webb passed through the site feeling rejuvenated as a poet and spiritual tourist. But for the Nyungar poet Alf Taylor (1947–), the experience could not have been more spiritually debilitating, which he claims he only survived *because* of poetry.²³ He was no orphan, but one of the Stolen Generation who was taken from his mother, who was later informed that her son was dead. Decades later, Taylor reflects:

Op Cit., pp. 79–104.

²¹ Johnson cited in Gilbert (ed.), *Op Cit.*, pp. 24–5.

²² Francis Webb, *Francis Webb: Poet and Brother*, pp. 43–4. Letter dated 30 November 1951.

²³ Alf Taylor, 'From *God The Devil and Me*' in Anne Brewster et al. (eds), *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember: An Anthology of Aboriginal Writing*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle, 2000, p. 253.

Walking back down that lonely road of childhood I think, did I actually live through all that torment, sadness, loneliness, depression, hunger for love and food; physically flogged, racially tormented? And they say Christ had a terrible death. The only thing they didn't do to us was stick that spear under our rib cage and crucify us ... Religion was the top priority in our lives and that was all we had learnt. Why couldn't they teach us something to qualify and assist us in real life society? What the fuck will you achieve philosophising and quoting the life of Christ and his disciples? I mean, the stupid fucking government should have sent us to Europe in exchange for some of those poor Jews, not into missions in Australia. I reckon I would have stood a better chance with Hitler than with these missionaries in Australia.²⁴

Though he senses 'there is a ray of unseen light that follows me. It directs me on my journey, guiding me to people of all kinds' it is

Not the
Morning
Prayers, school
Jesus
and floggings
I want
But the
Beautiful sounds
Of the
Didjeridoo and clapsticks
Forever

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 258, 262.

In my heart
 And soul
 ('Didjeridoo and Clapsticks')²⁵

The missionary conflation of Indigeneity with spiritual and moral error and their subsequent efforts to correct this left a gulf of frustration, trauma and animosity in Indigenous poets like Alf Taylor. The Bunitj elder Bill Neidjie (c.1913–2002) recalls in his deeply unitive *Story About Feeling* (1989) how he refused to denounce his own cultural story for to make way for a separate Christian one:

I used to go church but I hang on this.
 Because I can't say liar ... e's true
 E's very true this story.²⁶

Unsurprisingly, personal and intergenerational outrage at such demands and the dire results of the socio-political ignorance behind them is a dominant theme for major Indigenous poets such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal ('The Teachers', 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights'), Kevin Gilbert ('Mister Man', 'The Flowering'), Jack Davis ('The Drifters', 'Real Name'), Mudrooroo ('Lord Help Us') and Samuel Wagan Watson ('labelled').²⁷ Colonialist-assimilationist attitudes which invoked Providence to

²⁵ Taylor in Josie Douglas (ed.), *Untreated: Poems by Black Writers*, Jukurrpa, Alice Springs, 2001, pp. 66–7.

²⁶ Bill Neidjie, *Story About Feeling*, Magabala, Broome, 1989, p. 165.

²⁷ Oodgeroo Noonuccal (as Kath Walker), *My People*, Jacaranda, Milton, 1970, pp. 26, 36; Kevin Gilbert, *The Blackside: People are Legends and Other Poems*, Hyland House, South Yarra, 1990, pp. 8, 105; Jack Davis, *The First-Born and Other Poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1970, p. 35; Jack Davis, *Black Life: Poems*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p. 59; Mudrooroo (as Colin Johnson), *The Song Circle of Jacky and Selected Poems*, Hyland House, South Yarra, 1986, p. 86; Samuel Wagan Watson, *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p. 48. Mudrooroo's genealogy has been the subject of some critical debate (see Maureen Clark, *Mudrooroo, A Likely Story: Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia*, Peter Lang, Brussels, 2007). He has also been attracted to Buddhism.

sanctify annihilation, assimilation and dispossession of land, language and cultural identity are rebuked for their hypocrisy and non-Christianity, not least because their effects remain unresolved. Pronouncements of non-Indigenous Christianity are understandably treated with suspicion, though Christian mysticism is not explicitly implicated, possibly due to a lack of Indigenous access to it. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the rise of Indigenous language scriptures and liturgy, the Pope's 1986 Alice Springs Address and new Indigenous Christian theologies combined to radically overhaul Indigenous Christian identity and inspire initial examples of Indigenous Christian mystical poetics.

Interrogating the Colonial Self: Harpur to Webb

In Judith Wright's 'The Dark Ones' Indigenous people briefly appear in a town on pension day as 'mute shadows' who drift away amid anxious shudders and whispers from the non-Indigenous residents.²⁸ Such peripheral existences, as Samuel Wagan Watson puts it, 'along the blackened fringes / of this sunburnt country' ('the night house'), are mirrored in the marginalisation of Indigeneity in Australian Christian mystical poetry.²⁹ For Mary Fullerton, Zora Cross and Lesbia Harford Indigeneity appears only in their prose—disdainfully in Fullerton's *The Australian Bush* (1928; 'The religion of the aborigines is chiefly a belief in demons; they have no idea of worship, no idols, only some sort of belief in a future life'), paternalistically in Cross's *Daughters of the Seven Mile* (1924) and distantly in Harford's *Invaluable*

²⁸ Judith Wright, *Collected Poems 1942–1985*, p. 354.

²⁹ Watson, *Op Cit.*, p. 124.

Mystery (1924).³⁰ Aborigines were not encountered on Christopher Brennan's quest for an inner Eden, nor in John Shaw Neilson's poetry, though in his correspondence with Mary Gilmore, he wrote 'I noticed one poem about a professional Killer of Blacks I think you are doing good work by telling the truth about our natives. Quite recently I believe it has been found out that these people had religious beliefs of their own...'³¹ David Campbell ('Sugarloaf', 'Weapons') and Gwen Harwood ('Oyster Cove') describe the situations of Indigenous people with genuine pathos, but as Peter Read (2004) notes, it is a pathos not far removed from 'The myth both of "the last of his tribe" and of lost history [which] lies deep in White Australian poetry' as opposed to the Indigenous permanence of Wright.³² Other post-1945 poets such as McAuley, FitzGerald and Hart, while variously aware of Indigenous issues, do not incorporate them into their poetry. So too Vincent Buckley, though his own lack of awareness is twice exposed in his skewed critique of Judith Wright's 'Bullocky', once in the 1957 remark 'Miss Wright tends to think of nature in such terms as savages use—as something to be feared, even propitiated, as the main agent of destructive time' and again in his inability to see that Bullocky's Promised Land exists only as a tragic delusion.³³ A.D. Hope is uninterested, while Peter Steele is different again, for despite the absence of Indigeneity in his poetry, he advocates an

³⁰ Mary Fullerton, *The Australian Bush*, SETIS, 2003, p. 62, retrieved 8 May 2007, <http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au.setis/id/p00026>>. Fullerton embraces the pseudo-evolutionary position that the Aborigine is 'the third lowest on the human scale' and that 'he will linger on, a wretched remnant to be cared for by the whites, for fifty years or so yet; when he must disappear, leaving hardly a mark of his poor vagrant existence on the face of the land'. Cross is more clumsily maternalistic while Harford has one of her characters unnerved by popular poems lamenting the decline of a romanticised people.

³¹ John Shaw Neilson, *Letters*, p. 195. Letter dated 15 November 1930.

³² Peter Read, 'Grandfather grandmother sing sweet tune' in John Muk Muk Burke & Martin Langford, *Ngara: Living in this Place Now*, Five Islands Press, 2004, p.134.

³³ Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry*, p. 163; Wright notes regarding 'Bullocky' that 'the way in which this one has been interpreted is outright bad (Vincent Buckley's fault, largely) ... shorn of context, the text was taught as an uncritical praise of the pioneers. The fact is, the old man in question (who was *not*, as Alec Hope said, Jack Purkiss) was mad insofar that he was a religious maniac, though of a gentle order as I personally knew him. Yes the pioneers were mad all right, and often wicked too' (Judith Wright, *With Love and Fury*, p. 410; letter dated 1 June 1986).

innate sympathy between Christ and the dispossessed in his homily to Indigenous people at the Daly River Mission in the late 1980s:

It's a hell of a business, being pushed out of one's own land, or in one's youth, or in one's happiness, or having one's health [affected]. But I must say to you that Jesus ... had exactly those experiences.³⁴

While the absences of Indigeneity in the mystical poetics of these poets are not in themselves sinister, they invite further critical scrutiny. On one hand, poetry and spirituality are highly personal, multilateral phenomena in which certain subject matter may be suggested, but not prescribed. A non-Indigenous poet might prefer to avoid potential misrepresentation or appropriation, though it can be counter-argued that further points of absence also exacerbate these.

While Indigeneity might be a marginalised subject across Australian mystical poetry as a whole, its various points of convergence are extremely significant. Prior to Charles Harpur (1813–1868), the mystical is alluded to in name only by Wentworth and scripturally gestured towards by Field, Wentworth and Dunmore to sanctify popular colonialist attitudes. But, just as for Hodge and Mishra Australian literature's complicity with the imperial enterprise also contains points of resistance, Australian mystical poetry demonstrates both complicity and resistance from Charles Harpur's 'The Creek of the Four Graves' where a credible mystical consciousness is for the first time linked to Indigeneity, to Henry Kendall's and Ada Cambridge's variations upon this theme, to Francis Webb's exposure of colonialist poetics of Indigeneity as projections of the self in an interrogative environment.

³⁴ Steele cited in Colette Rayment, *Op Cit.*, p. 81.

Charles Harpur challenged the Edenic and Pentateuchal overtures of Wentworth and Field by insisting on a transformative role for Indigenous presence. In Harpur's Genesis, the colonist was frequently Cain instead of Adam, and the Promised Land was already home to Aborigines or, as Hodge and Mishra observe, a Wordsworthian "spirit of the past" that then becomes generalisable into a kind of mystical experience which is nonetheless accepted as distinctly Australian'.³⁵ Harpur admonished colonial attitudes which portrayed non-European land or people as absent, demonic, inferior or incapable of religious profundity. Though a firm believer in Providence, he defied one of the most intrinsic conventions of Australian colonial poetics by refusing to incorporate Providence into a *carte blanche* for unbridled colonisation of an Edenic or Pentateuchal *terra nullius*. Providence, rather, endures 'though the wilfulness of Man / May sometimes mar its just design' ('Providential Design') and this combined with his preference for post-Edenic themes of Cain's fratricide forged the biblical basis for his condemnation of the murder and enslavement of Aborigines.³⁶ As Ackland (2002) stresses, for Harpur 'the spiller of blood is of the devil's party and, in Harpur's view, of the very lowest order of creation, irrespective of whether he be conventionally ranked among the outlaws or the lawmakers, the "Christians in Europe" or the "godless savage[s]"'.³⁷ Despite Harpur's occasional use of 'savages', it was the mostly the white Cains of the colonies who marred Providential design. And just as the land was not empty ('Creek of the Four Graves'), its first peoples were not evolutionary throwbacks or children

³⁵ Hodge & Mishra, *Op Cit.*, p. 150.

³⁶ Charles Harpur, *The Poetical Works of Charles Harpur* (ed. Elizabeth Perkins), p. 565.

³⁷ Michael Ackland, 'From Wilderness to Landscape: Charles Harpur's Dialogue with Wordsworth and Antipodean Nature', *Victorian Poetry* 40.1, 2002, p. 32.

(‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament’) and neither were they spiritually inferior.³⁸ Harpur, however clumsily, includes a broken ‘circle of the Seers’ in an ‘An Aboriginal Death Song’ and privileges what he believes to be Indigenous deities over their classical counterparts in ‘The Kangaroo Hunt’.³⁹ Drawing on early Wordsworth and Milton’s death of Abel in *Paradise Lost*, Harpur sought to reorient colonial attitudes towards a prophetic synthesis with a pre-existing natural sanctity rather than yoking Providence to the murderous project of Wentworth’s Canaan.⁴⁰

While Harpur’s conception of the mystical is somewhat obtuse (see Chapter 3), his most striking synthesis of Indigeneity and contemplative experience occurs in ‘The Creek of the Four Graves’ where the anticipated intercession of ‘painted Savages’ plunges the subject Egremont from a comfortable vision of ‘all serene and beautiful and bright / And lasting things of Nature’ into a far more terrifying contemplation, joined to the ‘shuddering dark’, ‘His spirits thitherward in wild surmise’:

But summoning caution, and back stepping close
 Against the shade-side of a bending gum
 With a strange horror gathering to his heart,
 As if his blood were charged with insect life
 And writhed along in clots, he stilled himself,
 Listening long and heedfully, with head
 Bent forward sideways, till his held breath grew

³⁸ Harpur, *Op Cit.*, pp. 161, 368.

³⁹ Charles Harpur, *Charles Harpur: Selected Poetry and Prose* (ed. Michael Ackland), Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, p. 86; Harpur, *The Poetical Works*, p. 453. Bernard O’Dowd (1866–1953) also attempted to include Indigenous deities in *The Bush* (1912).

⁴⁰ For Wordsworth see Ackland, *Ibid.* For Milton, see Charles Harpur, *Charles Harpur: Selected Poetry and Prose*, p. 150, ‘Poetic Descriptions of Violent Death’: ‘But I know nothing so terrible in this kind, as Milton’s account in *Paradise Lost* of the death of Abel. There is a destructive selectness [sic] in every word of it’.

A pang, and his ears rang. But Silence there
 Had recomposed her ruffled wings, and now
 Brooded it seemer even stillier than before,
 Deep nested in the darkness ...⁴¹

Egremont's experience of the sublime is shattered by a more frightful, yet genuinely contemplative unknown within his immediate, Australian environment, his blood charged with its insects, and the 'wild surmise of his spirits' leading to a deeper, stiller darkness. Ultimately it is not the 'painted Savages' per se, but the immediacy and magnitude of presence in darkness which precipitates this seismic shift for Indigeneity in Australian mystical poetry. When the Aborigines do emerge it is as a curious inversion of the last lines of Wright's 'Patterns', emerging as if born of darkness, possessing the very campfire:

Their bounding forms! — full in the flaring light
 Thrown outward by the fire, that roused and lapped
 The rounding darkness with its ruddy tongues
 More fiercely than before, — as though even *it*
 Had felt the sudden shock the air received
 From those dire cries, so terrible to hear!⁴²

Ultimately Egremont becomes in turn the transfigured agent of fear, withdrawal and silence due to 'the mystery of some crude / Old fable of their race' and the Aborigines depart, apparently to 'despoil the yet warm dead' of Egremont's companions. 'The Creek of the Four Graves' is a muddle of Harpur's twin conceits of poeticised survivor's account and vehicle for his own Miltonian standpoint where

⁴¹ Harpur, *The Poetical Works*, p. 166.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 167.

‘erring or wise / savage or civilised’ the bloody deeds of Man as Cain have spread evil over the earth, although ‘the original unity of Love ... under God’s hand, in the beginning’ remains untouched by man’s folly.⁴³ Despite this, Harpur’s great innovation in ‘The Creek of the Four Graves’ remains his positioning of Aborigines, real and imagined, as a catalyst for a hitherto unknown contemplative state.

Harpur’s protégé Henry Kendall (1839–1882) continues this theme in a more presumptuous manner in ‘The Wail in the Native Oak’ where, in a role reversal of the flight of ‘The Creek of the Four Graves’, a tribesman silently drinking at the river flees the protagonist’s mad hunger for the ‘Secret in the Oak’:

Shake that silence from you, wild man! I have looked into your face,
 Hoping I should learn the story there about this fearful place.
 ... When your tribe about their camp-fires hear that hollow, broken cry,
 — Do they hint of deeds mysterious, hidden in the days gone by? —

But he rose like one bewildered, shook his head and glided past;
 Huddling whispers hurried after, hissing in the howling blast!
 Now a sheet of lurid splendour swept athwart the mountain spire,
 And a midnight squall came trumping down on zigzag paths of fire!
 Through the tumult dashed a torrent flanking out in foaming streams,
 Whilst the woodlands groaned and muttered like a monster vexed with dreams.
 Then I swooned away in horror. Oh! that shriek which rent the air,
 Like the voice of some fell demon harrowed by a mad despair.⁴⁴

As in ‘The Creek of the Four Graves’, Indigeneity is associated with profound and terrible silence, the ability to appear and disappear as one with the natural

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴⁴ Kendall, *Op Cit.*, p. 27

environment, mysterious knowledge gained from implied communion with that environment, the ability to effect horror, deeper contemplation and the despair of the unknown via appearance, disappearance, silence, darkness and fire. Kendall also continues Harpur's sentimentalised themes of Indigenous religiosity, suffering and blamelessness in 'Urara', 'Kooroora' and 'The Ballad of Tanna', but these, like Kendall's galling experiment with 'blackfellow' squibs ('Black Lizzie', 'Jack the Blackfellow', 'Black Jemmy', the last 'dedicated without permission to all "Nigger" Missionaries') are kept separate from his most pronounced mystical aspirations in 'To a Mountain'.⁴⁵ Only in 'The Wail in the Native Oak' is there any confluence between Indigeneity and the mystical, and only then as a dual projection—the desire for knowledge of 'deed mysterious' projected onto the indigene and the protagonist's own monstrous vexation projected onto the landscape.

Indigenous presence-absence as an elemental, transformative agent for solitude, despair and spiritual progression appears in a more implicit manner in Ada Cambridge's shadowy shapes, whisperings and sound of feet in 'By the Camp Fire' (1875). Although Cambridge dismisses the dynamic darkness as 'my own dim dreams, wandering / among the woods and streams' and comforts herself with thoughts of England, husband, Providence and God above ('I can see Him in the stars'), for a brief moment she also senses a presence born of darkness, possessing fire:

The tangled trees seem full of eyes, — still eyes that
watch me as I sit;

⁴⁵ J.J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989, p. 105. Kendall, *Op Cit.*, pp. 24, 10, 21, 141.

A flame begins to fall and rise, their glances come
and go with it.⁴⁶

The scratching of bark which follows hints at a possum, yet ‘a slow step / through the darkness’ emanates from human feet, recalling those of her husband. Remarkably, the poet then adopts the transformative role by interrupting herself, turning her reflections to the well-worn themes of love, God, ineffable truth and ‘sea without bottom ... O mystery!’⁴⁷ The surrounding mystery of the glancing darkness alternating in flame is swiftly replaced by her inner mystery, the future Lonely Seas. Aside from this fleeting reference, Aborigines do not appear in Cambridge’s poetry and in her memoirs she is repulsed by the ‘hideous creatures, poor things’ she variously represents as lazy, dirty, half-witted and threatening to the point of learning to shoot ‘to protect myself from the marauding black or bushranger’.⁴⁸ Nonetheless in her recognition of animated darkness as a projection of the self, she uncovers a layer of self-analysis crucial to Francis Webb’s exposing of such projections in ‘Eyre All Alone’.

Francis Webb graduates from acknowledgements of Indigenous holiness in ‘Balls Head Again’ and ‘End of the Picnic’ to a deeper interaction in ‘Eyre All Alone’.⁴⁹ His masterstroke is to have not one Indigenous presence but three, though

⁴⁶ Ada Cambridge, *The Manor House and Other Poems*, pp. 228, 230.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁴⁸ Cambridge cited in Bradstock & Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 38. Cambridge’s account in regard to threatening ‘gins’ challenges Dale Spender’s (1988) claim that ‘there is nothing in the literature of white women which symbolises black women as the “enemy”’. White women did not live in fear of black women, they did not see them as a physical threat, a force to be subdued’ (Spender cited in Helen Thomson, ‘Gardening in the Never-Never’ in Kay Ferres [ed.], *Op Cit.*, p. 36). Margaret Bradstock & Louise Wakeling (1991) concede ‘Ada comes across as less racist in regard to the Chinese’ (Bradstock and Wakeling, *Op Cit.*, p. 39).

⁴⁹ Eyre himself in a sudden turn towards the *apophatic* tradition of Western Christian mysticism, declares ‘Such are the mysteries and inscrutable ways of providence and so impossible is it for man’s private comprehension to estimate the result ... [instead] place full reliance on the wisdom and goodness of God, who can, and in his own good time often does, make plain and clear what once seemed dark, inexplicable or unimportant’ (Eyre cited in Boer, ‘Explorer Hermeneutics’, p. 91).

his decision to discard history for allegory in the death of Wylie also undermines this innovation. Webb, who had previously compared the colonial treatment of Aborigines to the Holocaust, justifies his choice thus:

My insistence upon Eyre's aloneness is not an overlooking of Wylie, but comes from my seeing such a journey of discovery as suggestive of another which is common to us all.⁵⁰

This allegorised approach in which Eyre's three Indigenous companions are spoken over and represent not themselves but various parts of Eyre's dissolving self-nature on *his* journey to the Promised Land can be read as a continuation of explorer selfishness or Wentworth's imperial Christianity. This is supported by Webb's recurring references to the 'heathen planet' converted by the explorer's passing into 'sands of Exodus'.⁵¹ Furthermore, Eyre's companion Wylie, who accompanied him to Albany and King George Sound (ensuring he never was, in fact, alone) is ahistorically killed off in the fourteenth and final part of the sequence to make room for the allegorical trope of a single soul encountering the divinised Someone at journey's end. Yet, in keeping with the mystical trope of suggesting what cannot be worded, Webb maintains that the allegorical and indeed the psychic journey must transcend the historical model if the (universal) subject is to progress spiritually.

Whether or not the mystical reward is worth the historical distortion is ultimately a moot point, because Webb's efforts throughout 'Eyre' to reveal Indigeneity as projections of self raise a greater question, namely is Wylie Wylie?

⁵⁰ Webb, *Collected Poems*, p. 251 (author's notes). In *Hospital Confession*, Webb writes 'Accounts of the concentration camps filled me with panic: race-hatred was the most unnatural hatred in man. Did it not flourish in Aussie?' (Webb cited in Michael Griffith, *God's Fool*, p. 89).

⁵¹ Webb, *Op Cit.*, p. 181.

Webb differentiates between three different modes of Indigeneity in the familiar (Wylie), the omnipresent external (the two who have mutinied and fled, but remain at large), and the distant external (the traditional owners of the land Eyre sees reflected in Wylie). These three modes are also allegorically ‘parts’ of Eyre, which allows the poem to consider Indigeneity as familiar, omnipresent and distant while admitting that these are also Eyre’s projections of himself ‘the huddled works / Of my soul, in motion’, as he battles himself on the way to mystical union.⁵² On this level, a *kenosis* or emptying of self, is the object, a process integral to Meister Eckhart’s concept of detachment, which can then compel God. Eckhart’s model for this process is summarised by McGinn (2003) as

a gravitational model—that is, water has to flow downhill, but it can only flow into what’s empty. So it’s in the process of emptying yourself of your own self-will that you compel God, because God can’t come in if there’s something else there meaning yourself. And the self here means the selfish self. Eckhart and his disciples are always preaching to get rid of the self that’s concerned with its own desires, wishes, characteristics, success, fulfilment—everything that centres on us.⁵³

In the segment titled ‘Wylie’ this projection of the selfish self is clearly intended: ‘Mistrust, and hate, and a dark gargantuan sorrow / Are Wylie who will walk with me tomorrow’.⁵⁴

It is no accident that Wylie, as the projection of the familiar self, is the last of the Indigenous presences to be excised. Eyre’s farewell to Wylie, though ahistorical, is one of humility and love.⁵⁵ The changing nature of the Indigenous presence

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵³ Bernard McGinn, ‘Lost in God’, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Webb, *Op Cit.*

⁵⁵ As Webb was aware, it was in fact Wylie who remained in Albany and Eyre who departed (see <www.davidreilly.com/australian_explorers/eyre/edward.htm>, retrieved 2 October 2007).

reflects Eyre's own psychic progression towards this, from the distant 'where have you sprung from' to the omnipresent 'All my days and nights / You haunt me ... You are everywhere at once ... Love? It is for dry bread like a stone in my mouth' to the familiar ('O my expedition! Baxter! Wylie!'). Wylie crosses the last river and becomes abundant life-force returned to the earth of the Promised Land which belongs, as far as the land is concerned, to his tribes past and to come ('sons and daughters germinate in your eyes'). Ultimately, Eyre's 'neighbour on the road to the Sound' is neither the literal figures of the Aborigines nor the revelatory 'Someone', but who they represent—'Man to man. Which is ... God to man', the Godliness in all people and things.

Indigeneity is also associated with water. Wylie is asked 'where have you sprung from?' at his first appearance in the poem, he is a 'muddy vital river' and his body is finally 'gathered up' by his tribe at the last river and he is 'growth ... a gallant tree in flower ... unbound geometries of the good soil'. Even the terrifying omnipresent Aborigines reveal 'water, water, on the fifth day', and Eyre's journey ends at the Sound where the rain stops over the town and 'On the main road Someone moves'. Whether or not Webb was influenced by Eckhart's gravitational model is not important as Eckhart's theme of overcoming the self can be variously found throughout Christian mysticism and water imagery is abundant in the Old Testament and beyond. Yet 'Eyre All Alone' is hardly utopian, Eyre is an emotional wreck until the last line and Webb's 'Sturt and the Vultures' (not to mention Eyre's notorious Jamaican governorship) serve as cautionary postscripts.⁵⁶ Bill Ashcroft (1996) regards Webb's discarding of imperial history for the limitless, land-based Australian consciousness as 'a luminously post-colonial moment', but just as Eyre

⁵⁶ Bill Ashcroft, *Op Cit.*, p. 156.

was ahead of his time in many ways, Webb's 'Eyre All Alone' outstrips its own poetic imperialism to disclose some powerful truths about Indigeneity in Australian mystical poetry, in the middle of Webb's most overtly mystical explorer poem.⁵⁷ In terms of Indigeneity and Australian mystical poetry it suggests both an awareness of Indigeneity as projections of the terrifying, infantile and omnipresent parts of the self and a formula to progress beyond such illusions to spiritual and psychic unity which proclaims the holiness of all humanity. Rather than accepting a transformative Indigeneity born of darkness, possessing fire, Webb interrogates these assumptions by imposing then stripping away a multilateral representation to create a more independent position from which to consider ancient and continuing Indigenous realities beyond the projections of the colonial self.

Points of Cross-influence and Resistance

Early Indigenous translators of traditional stories such as Ngunaitponi (David Unaipon [1872–1967]) sought a spiritual convergence based on his own experience as what John Alexander (1997) calls 'the star pupil of a paternalistic mission culture'.⁵⁸ Ngunaitponi's 'Voice of the Great Spirit' features Narroondarie as an Indigenous Moses sent to show the people that 'the Great Spirit is in all things and speaks through every form of Nature' and Western Christian mystical tropes of inexpressibility, presence, mystery and temporality abound in his 'The Song of Hungarrda':

Thus in wonder I am lost. No mortal mind can conceive. No mortal tongue express
in language intelligible. Heaven-born Spark, I cannot see nor feel thee. Thou art

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁵⁸ John Alexander, 'Following David Unaipon's Footsteps', *Journal of Australian Studies* 54–5, 1997, p. 28.

concealed mysteriously wrapped within the fibre and bark of tree and bush and shrubs.

Why dost thou condescend to dwell within a piece of stick?

As I roam from place to place for enjoyment or search of food,

My soul is filled with gratitude and love for thee.

And conscious, too, of thine all pervading spirit presence.⁵⁹

As Adam Shoemaker (1998) and Penny Van Toorn (2006) have shown, Indigenous poetry in English including that relating to God, stretches back almost to the time of the first Australian poetry and certainly to Harpur's time.⁶⁰ A surge in translation from the 1960s brought with semblances of Western mystical tropes in traditional Indigenous songs. God's charity, grace and the soul's return not to mention St John of the Cross's radiant, wounding erotic imagery in 'The Dark Night', (echoed in Judith Wright's 'The Pool and the Star') find a powerful resonance in T.G.H. Strehlow's translation of 'The Urumbula Song' from Central Australia:

The great beam of the Milky Way

Quivers with deep passion forever.

The great beam of the Milky Way

Trembles with unquenchable desire

The great beam of the Milky Way

Draws all men to itself by their forelocks

⁵⁹ Ngunaitponi (David Unaipon), 'The Song of Hungarrda' in Les Murray (ed.), *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, Collins Dove, Blackburn, 1986, pp. 230–1. For 'Voice of the Great Spirit' see David Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (eds Stephen Muecke & Adam Shoemaker), Miegunyah, Carlton, 2001, pp. 150–1.

⁶⁰ Van Toorn, *Op Cit.* Adam Shoemaker, 'White on Black / Black on Black' in Bennett & Strauss (eds), *Op Cit.*, p. 20.

The great beam of the Milky Way

Unceasingly draws all men, wherever they may be.⁶¹

Yet as Barry Hill observes in *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* (2002), Strehlow's translation from oral to literary modes created 'the great paradox of *Songs of Central Australia*. It is a book of songs that Strehlow's translations have appropriated as poetry ... to what extent are these old songs strangely of his own making?'⁶² Similar concerns regarding the mechanics of literary appropriation might also apply to Ngunaitponi whereby apparent points of synthesis between Indigenous traditions and Christian mysticism may rely more upon the poetics of their translators than those of the original sources.

Like Ngunaitponi, Roland Robinson (1912–1992) firmly believed that Indigenous notions of the sacred were equally valid and in harmony with his own Christianity. To this end, he not only castigates a Catholic mission priest for preaching to Aborigines who already had 'their own Father, Son and Holy Ghost ... their own masses ... their own Host', but remarks quite emphatically that he 'received more comfort, more enlightenment, more religion and poetry ... from the Aborigines, than any of the wise books of the white man'.⁶³ Yet Robinson freely admits that in his presentation of Indigenous material he 'went to the Authorized Version of the Bible for my model' both in rhythm and 'manner', because he felt 'the pidgin English versions I had in my notebooks troubled me. My Aborigines had a

⁶¹ Urumbula People of Central Australia, 'The Urumbula Song' (tr. T.G.H. Strehlow) in Kevin Hart (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse*, pp. 214–5.

⁶² Barry Hill, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, Knopf, Sydney, 2002, p. 435. Hill also notes Strehlow's attempts to translate the Bible into Aranda from 1947, which may in turn have influenced his translations from oral traditions (p. 531).

⁶³ Robinson, *The Shift of Sands*, p. 175; Robinson, *The Drift of Things: An Autobiography 1914–52*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1973, p. 352.

dignity, and a profundity which I wanted to express'.⁶⁴ Thus the myths were 'dignified' by a biblical tone and metre, which may have also carried with them other biblical, lexical and semantic implications. Robinson's use of 'my Aborigines' is also revealing: while it may simply refer to Aborigines he met, the subtext might also read 'Aborigines as I see them', a troubling notion for the critical reader. Nonetheless, in Robinson's poems 'related by' Aborigines, access to the holy is available for all, most strikingly in 'The Sermon of the Birds (Related by Alexander Vesper)' where the lyre-bird's call is a sermon of praise and summoning 'to sing in praise of the grace and the reckoning day' and 'the Scriptures was [sic] / hitting me all the time'. Furthermore, in his introduction to *Altjeringa and other Aboriginal Poems* (1970) Robinson attributes the poem's mixture of literary and colloquial language to Vesper himself, 'who will not be parted from his old Bible in which he finds parallels with his own religion'.⁶⁵ But why then include 'The Sermon of the Birds' in a collection by Robinson when it is Vesper's poem? In Robinson's earlier works such as *The Feathered Serpent* (1956) he is more cautious, attributing all chants and translations to the appropriate tribes and including an introduction by the most respected translator of the era in Strehlow, with whom he shared a penchant for well-intentioned literary and biblical appropriation.⁶⁶

Despite Robinson's resolute case for the importance of Indigenous spirituality, in poems such as 'Del Espiritu Santo', 'The Blue Gum Forest' and 'The

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁶⁵ Roland Robinson, *Altjeringa and Other Aboriginal Poems*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Artarmon, 1970, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Roland Robinson (ed.) *The Feathered Serpent*, Edwards & Shaw, Sydney, 1956. For Strehlow, see Barry Hill, *Op Cit.*, p. 434: 'He assembled "broken songs" as if he were Homer ... he claimed to have found the secret of the songs'.

Creek', Christian, often Edenic, associations bind the final product.⁶⁷ But even in 'Beyond the Grass Tree Spears', where Robinson is perhaps at his most unitive in a Christian mystical sense towards the limitless ocean, it is part of an elegiac sequence of ancestral spirits, fires and singing trees which mourn with him: 'And the blacks are gone, and we are not more than they, / to-night as I make my camp by the rain-stilled sea'.⁶⁸ Robinson's 'pure religion' is in fact easier to separate from Christian mysticism than it is from Indigeneity, not least because his poetry is part negotiation, part yearning for a pre-colonial consciousness. But is this a yearning for identity, ancestry, deity, or all three? In a fierce rebuttal of scientific evolutionism, Robinson declares:

There is a difference between hearing music and listening to it. Why will we not listen? What a waste it is that we will not listen to our ancestral voices. The Aborigines do. And we think that, with all our scientific knowledge, we are superior to them. Let me tell you that we are the new Barbarians. We are committed to a long progression of ignorance and self-extermination.⁶⁹

Robinson's sense of double dislocation as an abandoned child and young Irish migrant shadow these musings and might ultimately inform his attraction to the strong ancestral themes he encountered.

For Judith Wright and Les Murray, the ancestral and the familial are also overtly implicated in the role of Indigeneity in their poetry. In 'At Cooloola' from the *The Two Fires* (1955), Wright's dictum 'we are justified only by love' is firmly established with an eye to her grandfather's experiences in *The Generations of Men*

⁶⁷ 'Del Espiritu Santo' in Roland Robinson, *Selected Poems*, p. 11; 'The Blue Gum Forest' and 'The Creek' in Les Murray (ed.), *Fivefathers: Five Australian Poets of the Pre-Academic Era*, Fyfield, Manchester, 1994, p. 90.

⁶⁸ Roland Robinson, *Deep Well*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Roland Robinson, *The Shift of Sands*, p. 132.

(1959). ‘At Cooloola’, ‘Two Dreamtimes’, and many other poems indicate how love and grace might reach across the divide between Indigenous people and one ‘born of the conquerors’ (‘Two Dreamtimes’), but these do not explicitly coincide with her Christian mystical interests, however they might be implied or in the case of the active life, *applied*.⁷⁰ In *Because I Was Invited* (1975) Wright is acutely aware of the distortions and absences regarding Indigeneity in Australian poetry that have preceded her, and this combined with a marked decrease in Christian themes in her poetry after *The Two Fires* indicate a deliberate distancing of Christian mysticism and Indigeneity. Her long-held suspicion of the clergy and opportunistic interpretations of Christianity facilitate this, but more so it is a case of non-appropriation, of not further compounding the colonial trauma by blurring Christian and Indigenous notions of the sacred, as had often been done without permission or in violation of Indigenous Law.⁷¹

Wright’s resolute distancing of Indigeneity and the Christian mystical is the source of a revealing dispute with Les Murray in their 1980–1983 correspondence. Wright, newly ‘stunned and sickened’ by her research for the story behind her grandfather’s diaries in *A Cry for the Dead* (1981), takes issue with Murray’s use of Indigenous initiatory practices in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1979) because ‘poetic licence within our own culture is one thing, but beyond it is another’.⁷² Murray defends himself thus:

⁷⁰ Wright, *Collected Poems*, pp. 140, 315.

⁷¹ Les Murray & Judith Wright, ‘Correspondence’, p. 170. All letters are between 1980 and 1983. Strehlow, it should be noted, was permitted in the sense he was asked and initiated.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 160.

while my rite has a strongly Aboriginal flavour and contains Aboriginal elements, e.g. the crystals, flying into the sky with the aid of magical cords etc., it also contains many Western and Christian themes, and its real centre is the Common Dish, the democratic grail of common experience ... I haven't quoted anything verbatim from any existing or past Aboriginal rite, but have created what in music would be called a fantasia or set of variations involving some Aboriginal themes and elements. And surely one must be free to do this sort of thing. If all Aboriginal culture is to be locked up in sacred secrecy, how can it contribute its richness and flavour to the conversation of mankind?⁷³

In his quest to unlock the 'sacred secrecy' of Aboriginal culture, Murray does not appear to countenance the possibility of future Indigenous translators, poets or artists. Furthermore, while claiming to be the 'last of the Jindyworobaks', Murray diverges from Robinson by relying upon accounts such as those of A.P. Elkin, Strehlow and R.M. Berndt rather than Indigenous people themselves.⁷⁴ In doing so, he adds a further layer of distortion for the original sources by absorbing into his ideas of Indigeneity A.P. Elkin's perennialist confluences with Tibetan yogis in *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, Strehlow's literary appropriations and what Bruce Bennett (2006) calls R.M. Berndt's 'Anglophone background ... from the King James Bible'.⁷⁵ By employing 'a sharper pick and more oblique stroke than the original Jindies brought to the job' Murray also moves beyond the limits Robinson set

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁷⁴ Murray cited in Lawrence Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State: Les Murray and Australian Poetry*, University of NSW Press, Kensington, 1992, p. 125. Murray discusses Elkin, Berndt, Strehlow and others in terms of his poetry in Les Murray, *Persistence in Folly*, Sirius, Sydney, 1984, pp. 9–11.

⁷⁵ Bruce Bennett, *Homing In: Essays of Australian Literature and Selfhood*, Network, Perth, 2006, p. 19. He identifies 'echoes of the Song of Solomon and the Book of Job' in Berndt's phraseology, rhythms and repetitions. For Elkin's comparisons with yogis and unspecified usage of 'mystical experience', see A.P. Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree: Initiation and Sorcery in the World's Oldest Tradition* (revised), University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994, pp. 59–68, 141–52.

himself, such as leaving the accounts of ‘clever fellers’ to poems ‘related’ by Indigenous men (‘Mapooram’, ‘The Bunyip’, ‘The Whalers’).⁷⁶

Murray has not included Indigenous practitioners of the sacred in his poetry since 1983, although ‘Evening Alone at Bunyah’ features a similarly ritualistic use of quartz to that depicted in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*.⁷⁷ Murray protests that he is not revealing initiated knowledge, but attempting his own poetic variations on certain Indigenous themes (and later on Indigenous poetic structures in ‘The Buladelah-Taree Song Cycle’).⁷⁸ As early as ‘The Human Hair Thread’ (1977), Murray states ‘there has been an Aboriginal presence in my work almost from the start’ drawing on the oral translations of Strehlow and Berndt, various contact accounts and anthropological works, even Indigenous art.⁷⁹ Another point of convergence lies in Murray’s sacralisation of poetry, for the very act of incorporating Indigenous themes into poetry which is inherently Catholic (‘Distinguo’) hints at a role for Indigeneity in Murray’s Divine Poem.⁸⁰ Yet Murray has gone even further, recruiting pre-colonial cultures for his utopian ideal of ‘rule by poetry alone’:

The continent on which I live was ruled by poetry for tens of thousands of years, and I mean it was ruled openly and overtly by poetry. Only since European settlement in 1788 has it been substantially ruled by prose. The sacred law which still governs the lives of traditional Aborigines is carried by a vast map of song poetry attached to innumerable mythic sites ... the Law is a match for the mythologies of Greece and Rome or any other ancient culture. And it is interesting as a particularly pure

⁷⁶ Roland Robinson, *Selected Poems* (ed. Robert Gray), Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989, pp. 31, 43–4.

⁷⁷ Les Murray, *Collected Poems*, pp. 93, 12

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁷⁹ Murray, *Persistence in Folly*, pp. 4, 10, 11, 22, 28.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

example of rule by poetry alone, before secondary constructs are allowed to rise and obscure it.⁸¹

As in the sweeping generalisations of ‘Distinguo’, what might seem correct in Murray’s expansive definitional universe falls flat with just a few examples of his elisions. What, for instance, of Indigenous storytelling (including in modern form such as Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* [2006]), performance, dialogue, daily tasks, the discussions of Elders?⁸² Only in the vaguest sense could these constitute ‘rule by poetry’. Lapses of this nature reveal a fundamental danger of Murray’s approach: the strived-for synthesis between cultures is always subject to the exuberance and idiosyncrasies of the poet, however minor or gross. In ‘The Human Hair Thread’, Murray declares that while ‘mistakes and distortions are probably inevitable’ they may be ‘fruitful in artistic terms’ and do more justice to ‘our greatest autochthonous tradition’ than what he sees as the divisive, self-serving protectionism of the urban educated elites.⁸³ In what he sees as the absence of ‘the future Great Aboriginal Poet’, Murray feels obligated to make his variations and distortions, including those involving Indigeneity and Christianity, however much this obligation might coincide with his own theories of pseudo-Indigenous rural belonging.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Les Murray, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, 1998 at <<http://www.lesmurray.org/defence.htm>>, retrieved 13 November 2007.

⁸² See Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, Giramondo, Artarmon, 2006.

⁸³ Murray even suggests to Wright that the motivation for political gestures such as an Aboriginal Treaty derives from the need for a cathartic, illusory resolution among ‘people like us, writers and philosophers’, a conspiratorial broadside she chooses to ignore, despite Murray’s prior use of this theme to lament the ‘lower standard’ of Indigenous poets whose publication she supported (Murray and Wright, *Op Cit.*, p. 168; Murray, *Persistence In Folly*, pp. 30, 37).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38; Murray & Wright, *Op Cit.*, p. 172.

Indigenous poetic resistance to the non-Indigenous enthusiasm for translation, cross-influence and hybridisation attempts to expose the assumptions inherent in such practices. Lionel Fogarty (1958–) combines Murri language, culture and religion with a firm belief that ‘I know how white Australians write and I know how they talk. They’ll never come near the fourth world. White man will never know—and the only way they will know is through Aboriginal tongues that dominate in our lingo’.⁸⁵ Thus he can write how the Great Spirit has moved him (‘Moved Me’) or of inexpressibility stirred by the mighty ancestor Biame while maintaining:

Don’t breathe injury to yourself and wash relation
 with half christian bizarre
 we do not trod shame prowling violent spirits
 of a written religion.
 (‘Ode: Renewing to Spiritless’)⁸⁶

Samuel Wagan Watson (1972–) bristles at the annexation of Indigenous culture whereby

comatose totems litter the landscape
 bargains and half-truths simmer over authenticity
 copyright and copious character assassination on the menu
 sacred dances available out of the yellow pages

⁸⁵ Lionel Fogarty, *New and Selected Poems: Munaldjali, Mutuerjaraera*, Hyland House, South Melbourne, 1995, p. x. Biame/Baiame also appears in David Campbell’s ‘Ku-ring-gai Rock Carvings’ in David Campbell, *Collected Poems*, p. 114.

⁸⁶ Fogarty, *Op Cit.*, pp. 99, 140.

and
 cheap white-goods at the Dreamtime sale!
 ('cheap white-goods at the dreamtime sale')⁸⁷

While for Fogarty, the white man is spiritually compromised by a refusal to learn Indigenous languages, for Watson the mass marketing of Indigenous culture simply confirms a continuing colonial 'infection' he exposes with iconoclastic directness in 'for the wake and skeleton dance'

the white man didn't bring all the evil
 some of it was here already
 ... welcoming the tallship leviathans of two centuries ago
 that crossed the line drawn in the sand by the Serpent
 spilling dark horses from their bowls
 and something called the Covenant,
 infecting the dreamtime with the ghosts of a million lost entities...⁸⁸

Watson's 'journey beyond ... beyond this secular world' is Aboriginal, liturgical and ancestral, consecrated through smoke and fire quite apart from a Covenant stripped of its Providential and Edenic pretensions by its cohesion with pre-colonial evil.⁸⁹ Mudrooroo (1938–) in 'Did Wandjina Mark Out the Land' raises a similar dilemma for those of the newer, written religion:

What is this Christian god,
 What is this domination of puny humans?
 When they die to whom do they return?

⁸⁷ Watson, *Op Cit.*, p. 56.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸⁹ 'Authors notes—conclusion' in *Ibid.*, p. 170.

When they die how shall they face
 Wandjina who marked out this land?
 Didn't he, didn't they? – he did!⁹⁰

Like Watson, Mudrooroo asks if Australian Christians can ever consider the dire consequences of blithely transposing their religion over ancient spiritual bonds, laws and entities. Fogarty, Watson and Mudrooroo propose a different kind of obligation to that of Murray, an obligation to Indigenous reality.

Indigenous Christian Poetries and Theologies

Not all Indigenous voices are adverse to Christianity. Indeed, the 2001 census found 238,000 Indigenous people, a majority of the Indigenous population, claimed a Christian religion affiliation (34% Catholic, 33% Anglican, 9% Uniting, 8% Evangelical, 4% Lutheran and Pentecostal).⁹¹ On a cultural level, the disastrous imposition of Western Christianity and Westminster law and continuing issues of racism, hypocrisy, poverty and dispossession understandably dominate Australian Indigenous poetry. Rejection of Christianity's spiritual world, however, does not. There are few, if any, poems which declare outright that a Creator is impossible, the Resurrection preposterous, the soul absurd and Christian mystical consciousness a colonialist fallacy. Given this context, the question remains: what if the Creator Spirit and the Christian God are one and the same, or one implies the other?

Late twentieth-century non-Indigenous authors have variously constructed such a relationship in terms of Western Christian mysticism: James Cowan's *Mysteries of the Dreaming* (1991) employs the writings of mystics and poets such as

⁹⁰ Mudrooroo (as Colin Johnson), *Op Cit.*, p. 110. Jacky is a kurdaitcha man ('Song Two', 13) in touch with the spirit world and the Wandjina ('Song Thirty Four', 49).

⁹¹ 2001 Census results cited in Arthur & Morphy (eds), *Op Cit.*, p. 102.

St Gregory of Nyssa, Dante and Rilke to explain his encounters with the ‘mystical tradition’ of Indigenous Australia; Augustinian Father Rod Cameron (1997) explicitly connects Western Christian mysticism with the *Alcheringa* (“eternity touching time ... the eternal now”) of the Aranda people of Central Australia, with poetry as a pathway into the Dreaming, the “primary mysticism to which all are called” complete with Western saints as spirit ancestors.⁹² Barry Hill attempts a more rigorous poetic integration of T.G.H. Strehlow’s *Songs of Central Australia* and The Song of Songs in *The Inland Sea* (2001), described by David Malouf as ‘a work of spiritual convergence, the mystic marriage of two desert traditions’:

Bringing the Song of Songs into our wedding service, what was I
doing?

Placing a Hebrew lotus beside the Buddha’s.

Floating a flower on the ancient pool of Yapapla, a place of
genesis in Central Australia.

Planting one desert in another desert.

In the haplessness of translation, in the hope of love.⁹³

Hill’s volume-long contemplative and erotic journey creates a fresh site for dialogue between traditions which includes the yearning, eroticism and vulnerability largely ignored by explorers, missionaries and poets before Strehlow’s time. It also embraces

⁹² James Cowan, *Mysteries of the Dreaming: the Spiritual Lives of Australian Aborigines* (revised), Unity, Lindfield, 1992, pp. 2, 41, 143; Rod Cameron, *Opala: A Search For Desert Water*, St Pauls, Strathfield, 1997, pp. 26, 48, 68, *Karrigal: A Search for Australian Spirituality*, St Pauls, Strathfield, 1995, pp. 27, 75.

⁹³ Barry Hill, *The Inland Sea*, Salt, Applecross & Cambridge, 2001, p. 5. Malouf cited on back cover.

Judaism and Buddhism, a sign that future mystical interactions in Australian poetry need not be merely two-sided. Given the injustices suffered in the missions, Indigenous attractions to other religions and the religious infusions of an increasingly multicultural nation, a multi-traditional dialogue incorporating various mystical traditions may prove both imperative and fertile.⁹⁴ This is already the case for Christian mysticism internationally as it experiences what Bernard McGinn terms a 'worldwide ecumenism' where 'spiritual traditions of the world are in conversation with one another in a way they never were before ... because they're no longer "out there", far away'.⁹⁵

Indigenous Christian perspectives have been empowered by a belated series of shifts in cultural, ecclesiastical and theological inclusivity in Australian Christianity. Translations of the Bible and liturgy into Indigenous languages have been integral in this regard, preserving language and providing a focus for Indigenous pride, and as Van Toorn (2001) details, Indigenous resistance.⁹⁶ Biblical translation is more than a linguistic transition, rather it makes the biblical receptive to Indigenous reality, identity, and cross-cultural re-negotiation. This re-negotiation pervades ritual, liturgy and Indigenous Christian theology assisted by initiatives such as the shift to community councils in some missions, the renewal movement of the

⁹⁴ For an account of Anglican and Uniting Church multilingual and interfaith initiatives in Melbourne, see Katherine Kizilos, 'Old Church, New Church', *The Age*, September 18, 2007, at <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/old-church-new-church/2007/09/17/1189881425874.html>> retrieved 18 September 2007.

⁹⁵ Bernard McGinn, 'Lost In God', p. 23.

⁹⁶ Penny Van Toorn, 'Before the Second Reformation', *Semeia* 88, 2001, pp. 67–8; For difficulties encountered and power relations transformed in biblical translation, see Roland Boer, 'Dreaming the Logos' and '(E)Strange Dialectics' in *Last Stop to Antarctica*, pp.150–88; also Deborah Bird Rose, 'Jesus and the Dingo' and Kalus-Peter Koepping, 'North Australian Kriol and the Kriol "Holi Baibul"' in Swain & Rose (eds), *Op Cit*.

1970s and 1980s traced in Max Hart's *A Story of Fire, Continued* (1988) and the creation of Indigenous theological colleges, such as Nungalinga College in Darwin.⁹⁷

A seismic shift in Indigenous Christianity can be found in the writings of an increasing number of Indigenous theologians and clergy most prominently in the Anglican and Uniting Churches, but in Catholicism too.⁹⁸ In Alice Springs in 1986, six years before *terra nullius* was overturned in the Australian High Court, Pope John Paul II acknowledged (while not apologising for) past injustices, the need for land rights, and a universal Gospel that 'speaks all languages'. Importantly, he dispelled the long-held denigration of traditional Indigenous culture as pagan, sinful or demonic by emphasising the centrality of the Dreaming to Aboriginal Christian mystery:

for thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day. And during *all* this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Your 'Dreaming', which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain forever people of your culture, is your *only* way of touching the mystery of God's Spirit in you and in creation.⁹⁹

In the same year the Arnhem Land theologian Djijiniyi Gondarra wrote in *Let My People Go*:

⁹⁷ Max Hart, *A Story of Fire, Continued: Aboriginal Christianity*, New Creation, Blackwood, 1997. For Nungalinga, see <<http://www.nungalinga.edu.au/College/History.htm>>, retrieved 3 December 2007.

⁹⁸ This is also reflected in wider regional shift to Melanesia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. See G.W. Trompf, *The Gospel is Not Western: Black Theologies from the South Pacific*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1987. Trompf traces black theology back to Sudanese and Ethiopian figures in the Bible and even St Augustine, who 'in all probability ... was black' (p. 8).

⁹⁹ 'Address of John Paul II to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Blatherskite Park, Alice Springs (Australia), 29 November 1986' at <www.natsicc.org.au/popes_speech.htm>, retrieved 6 December 2007.

We Aboriginal leaders are called to plant Christ in this Aboriginal Australian 'fertile soil' rather than transplant western forms of Christianity. We must promote Christ as a living and acceptable part of our ceremony and culture.¹⁰⁰

Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology (1997) by the Rainbow Spirit Elders takes this further by seeking to establishing a framework for an Aboriginal theology that posits an Aboriginal Christ who reveals 'the mystery, the victory and the love of God' *in spite* of the missionaries concealing his true nature behind a European form:

What the Creator Spirit was doing in Jesus Christ was becoming fully one of us. The Creator hunts with us, shares our food, camps with us, speaks our languages, dances our ceremonies and sleeps by our fires. This Christ is not a foreigner but an Aboriginal person like us. The Creator Spirit belongs to our country. For us, Christ is not European but one of our own, from our land, and present whenever our people are struggling, sick or suffering ... Through Christ, we come to understand an ever deeper meaning to the work of the Creator Spirit. With Christ, we are called to explore the mystery of the Rainbow Spirit which is revealed fully to us in Christ.¹⁰¹

Rainbow Spirit theology is also a matrix for the recontextualisation of biblical passages to be more inclusive of an Indigenous world-view, creation stories, Law or to re-orient themes which have been used against Indigenous people. In this way, the Elders offer a Creation more tied to the land than the sky, a Fall in which Adam,

¹⁰⁰ Gondarra cited in Bishop Saibo Mabo, 'Indigenous Spirituality and the Church: A Cultural Faith' at <http://www.ncca.org.au/natsiec/theology/light_of_australia/talk_Saibo03>, accessed 7 December 2007.

¹⁰¹ Rainbow Spirit Elders (Nola Archie, Dennis Corowa, William Coolburra, Eddie Law, James Leftwich, George Rosendale with Robert Bos, Norman Habel & Shirley Wurst), *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology*, Harper Collins, Blackburn, 1997, pp. 61, 90.

having disrespected the landowner, is charged with keeping rather than tilling the land, and the respectful Abraham is lauded as a better model of peaceful co-existence than the warlike Joshua who captured the Promised Land of Canaan. ‘The blood of our ancestors cries out in anguish, like the blood of Abel in Genesis 4’ also aligns them with Charles Harpur’s Miltonian break from the colonial designs of Field, Wentworth and Dunmore, revealing how Indigeneity in Australian mystical poetry can pre-empt, or operate towards, future Indigenous theologies.¹⁰²

The Rainbow Spirit Elders are not the only theologians to repeatedly refer to a relationship with the divine in terms of mystery; Bishop Saibo Mabo (2003) asserts

the wonders and mysteries that are expressed in our stories and in our traditions are those same mysteries and stories that are expressed in Anglo-Celtic Christianity ... May I suggest that you allow and support us to explore our Indigenous spirituality, our sacred symbols, cultural stories, cultural designs and ceremonies? This is our inner world. A world in which we discover the mystery of our Creator — God, who Christ revealed.¹⁰³

Christ for Bishop Mabo can be found in the story of the Mer Island ancestor Malo who has become ‘a symbol of the mysterious power and presence of Creator God revealed in the Bible’. Father Eugene Stockton adopts a different approach by explicitly reading the Indigenous inner world in terms of Western Christian mysticism. Specifically, he challenges Deborah Bird Rose’s (1992) distinction between two mystical traditions of Indigenous immanence and Western transcendence. He asks:

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁰³ Mabo, *Op Cit.*

- a) Are there no elements of personal transcendence in a religion of immanence?
[and indeed vice-versa]
- b) Is there such incompatibility between a religion of immanence and a religion of transcendence that it is impossible for the mysticism of one to influence the mysticism of another?¹⁰⁴

Stockton suggests that there is indeed transcendentalism in traditional religion and immanence in Western Christian mysticism and Rose's claims are best considered on a case-by-case basis. Certainly, in terms of the active definition of mysticism from Chapter 1, there are clear and consistent correlations between the consciousness of the Western Christian mystics and those of many Indigenous Christian theologians who undeniably draw upon pre-colonial Law, culture and metaphysics. Yet this is also a study of Australian poetry, and while the Indigenous translations and theologies will undoubtedly influence, and perhaps even create, future Indigenous Christian mystical poetics, there are three indications which suggest these poetics have already arrived.

The first derives from the Daly River (Malfin clan) poet, writer and artist Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman (1951–) whose *dadarri* is described by Stockton as 'a bridge between Aboriginal mysticism which is thoroughly at home in the Catholic tradition'.¹⁰⁵ Ungunmerr-Bauman (1988) herself puts it thus:

Quiet listening and stillness—*dadirri*—renews us and makes us whole. There is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware. My people are not threatened by silence. They are completely at home in it. They have lived for thousands of years with Nature's quietness. My people today recognise and

¹⁰⁴ Eugene Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation*, Millennium, Alexandria, 1995, p. 102.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

experience in this quietness the great Life-Giving Spirit, the Father of us all. It is easy for me to experience God's presence. When I am out hunting, when I am in the bush, among the trees, on a hill or by a billabong; these are the times when I can simply be in God's presence. It is natural that we will feel close to the Creator ... there are very deep springs within each of us. Within this deep spring, which is the very Spirit of God, is a sound. The sound of Deep calling to Deep. The sound is the Word of God—Jesus.¹⁰⁶

Ungunmerr-Bauman's art features a fusion of biblical and tradition subject via Indigenous patterns and designs including the striking 'Australian Stations of the Cross' sequence, 'The Woman of Genesis', 'The Marriage of Mary and Joseph', 'Our Lady—The Woman of Genesis', 'The Eucharist' and 'The Joyful Mysteries (The Rosary)'. Like the Rainbow Spirit Elders, Ungunmerr-Bauman uses art to represent her interpretation of the Christian mystery, and while her art has been incorporated into iconography for Catholic liturgy, she continues to link 'the contemplative way of *dadarri*' to traditional liturgical practices such as the Smoking Ceremony.¹⁰⁷ Ungunmerr-Bauman influences Australian poetry in at least two ways: first, through her poetry of her own words, particularly that referring to her paintings and *dadarri*, secondly through the poetry she has inspired, including a Bruce Dawe poem based on her painting 'The Light of the World' (1987).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman, 'Dadarri' in *Ibid.*, pp. 181, 184.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁰⁸ Ungunmerr-Bauman is referred to as a poet in Patricia Derrington, *The Serpent of Good and Evil: A Reconciliation in the Life and Art of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman*, Hyland House, Flemington, 2000, but few examples are provided of this. See this source for a selection of plates, including some of the Australian Stations of the Cross. The Dawe poem appears on p. 64 and begins 'The star is the tall star of the Nativity' though no title or source is supplied. Citations from Ungunmerr-Bauman's 'Dadarri' also appear on an Australasian website next to passages by Julian of Norwich, Teihard De Chardin and local poets (<<http://www.sgm.org.nz/ArchSumm98-9.htm#SAYINGS>>, accessed 14 December 2007).

The second indication is a brief yet significant one found in ‘Footprints in the Sand’ by Edie Larkin Buk where three times she refers to ‘this mystic land’:

My people came from far and wide
 through the great divide
 through the centre, north, south, east and west
 across this mystic land, our footprints in the sand.¹⁰⁹

What ‘mystic’ means here is open to interpretation, but its very usage and emphasis in repetition allow for a reclaiming of poetics whereby ‘mystic’ is no longer a purely non-Indigenous term nor, over time, non-Indigenous shifting notion.

The third indication comes from the Wiradjuri poet Maisie Cavanagh, an active member of the Aboriginal Catholic Mission whose descriptions of Indigenous spiritual consciousness appears beside passages from St Bonaventure and St Francis’s ‘Canticle to the Sun’ on a Catholic environmental website:

My mother’s land can be dry and harsh. Yet every tree, every cluster of rocks, mountain, waterhole, river, cave is sacred—every feature. The billabongs and the places where the spirits live are all landscapes of the soul. For we as people see these mountains, rivers, trees, animals, wind, as brothers and sisters, and we are part of one thing.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Edie Larkin Buk (dates unavailable), ‘Footprints in the Sand’ cited in Roger Bennett (ed.), *Voices from the Heart: Contemporary Aboriginal Poetry from Central Australia*, IAD, Alice Springs, 1995, pp. 12–13.

¹¹⁰ Maisie Cavanagh (dates unavailable) cited in Michael Gormly, ‘Our Quest For Ecological Integrity’, *Catholic Social Justice Series* 37, 2000, p. 21 at <http://catholicearthcareoz.net/pdf/2002_new_earth_environmental_challenge.pdf>, retrieved 15 December 2007. In a similar vein, Eugene Stockton in his ‘Mysticism in the Australian Environment: Calls to a New Consciousness’ (*Compass* 36.4, 2002, pp. 8–10) draws upon Karl Rahner, Teilhard De Chardin and Ungunmerr-Bauman to propose ‘a mysticism of the environment ... reaching out to God through our environment’.

In her poetry collection *The Rock and the Tree* (1996) she calls for the same state of fraternity and sorority towards all things,

to feel as you belong
to a mystery, such as this,
and feel the spirit lift you up,
as you find perfect bliss.

('A visitor')¹¹¹

In a similar way, the Wollemi Pine of Cavanagh's eponymous poem not only has a powerful, watchful presence but is 'extended family'.¹¹² Her allegory of 'The Rock and the Tree' describes an even more unitive interrelatedness. The Rock, enabled to grow by the Indigenous Spirits, protects the little Tree from a gushing river. When the Rock fears for its own foundations:

the Tree began to wrap itself around the Rock ...
And when the clouds gathered in the sky,
and the rains came
and the waters came
rushing down the mountain,
it went around
the Rock and the Tree.
for the Rock and the Tree
are
so
locked together
that nothing

¹¹¹ Maisie Cavanagh, *The Rock and The Tree*, St Pauls, Strathfield, 1996, p. 19.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

can part them

So ... every time

that we Aboriginal people visit the Rock and the Tree

we see two people

who have a perfect kindness for each other.

For perfect kindness is true love.

(‘The Rock and the Tree’)¹¹³

Cavanagh’s syntheses with Franciscan mysticism and unitive allegory suggest two further sites for Indigenous Christian mystical poetics, or simply Indigenous poetics which coincide with particular mystics or aspects of mysticism. Like Ungunmerr-Bauman, Cavanagh also ties her mystical consciousness to ‘our Aboriginal liturgy in the bush, where we can have a fire, walk through the smoke, sit in a circle and have the earth beneath our feet, and feel the sun and the breeze, and see the clouds in the sky as we celebrate our smoking ceremonial liturgies’.¹¹⁴ In ‘The Rock and the Tree’ this liturgical observance extends to the Aboriginal Spirits called by the Rock and Tree whose first act is to make a fire, sit in a circle and listen; to contemplate, then discuss. In this way, Cavanagh’s poem ‘Fire’ represents an apt conclusion to this study with its purgative and illuminative themes seeking to restore the broken circles of culture and tradition beyond the proto-mystical fires of colonial and explorer poetics, the strange self-reflexive fires of Indigeneity in non-Indigenous Australian mystical poetry and the first fires of Indigenous Christian mystical poetry. Like the Franciscan ‘Canticle to the Sun’ the simplicity of the poetry speaks to a higher vision within:

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹⁴ Cavanagh cited in Gormly, *Op Cit.*

You're not just here to keep us warm
or cook our food to eat,
or make us feel more comfortable
by giving us your heat.

But for us, us Aboriginal folk,
you're an entity by far,
a very important person to us,
that's what you are.

Our camp fires are a sacred place
where heritage is handed down,
family life, mythology,
like a spiral going around.

When a fire is made in a circle we sit,
to see each other's eyes.

When the flames grow dim leaves are put on him
so our fire won't fade and die.

Leaves entice the fire to send up smoke
that will settle the spirit within,
to purify, and to cleanse the souls
of people and their kin.¹¹⁵

The healing role of poetry, like that of ritual and liturgy, cannot be underestimated here. It helps the poet survive and come to terms with injustice as Alf Taylor testifies, but it also provides a larger platform to reach out for healing between

¹¹⁵ Cavanagh, *The Rock and The Tree*, pp. 56–7.

divided cultures.¹¹⁶ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, whom Judith Wright addressed in her own poem of healing ('Two Dreamtimes'), makes this point in 'All One Race' ('I'm for humanity, all one race') and the respectful harmony of 'Integration—Yes!'.¹¹⁷ Jack Davis, like many Indigenous poets and theologians, seeks to reconcile the gap between word and deed by reminding non-Indigenous people 'survival through sharing and sharing my friend / was a carpenter's way of believing'.¹¹⁸ Indigenous poetic representations of healing often approach the sacred through a shared humanity. Romaine Moreton (1969–) echoes Bishop Mabo's sentiments in her appeal for 'space to be human / to walk towards the Creator / and declare there / I gave it all I had' ('Do not colonise freely').¹¹⁹ John Muk Muk Burke (1946–), a poet from a background of both Indigenous and Christian identities, sets this theme within the proximity of the mystical by suggesting a sharing of sacraments between cave and cathedral:

You inspect my cave.
 Reading my reality.
 Recording my reality.
 Writing my reality.
 But see how all your Bread dries up
 In the shadow of the Serpent.
 And see, the serpent cloud dissolves
 In the shadow of your Bread.

¹¹⁶ Taylor, *Op Cit.* See also Lisa Belleair, 'Healing Through Poetry' in Kerry Reed-Gilbert (ed.), *The Strength of Us as Women: Black Women Speak*, Ginninderra, Charnwood, 2000, pp. 70–1.

¹¹⁷ Wright, *Collected Poems*, p. 315; Oodgeroo, *Op Cit.*, pp. 1, 23.

¹¹⁸ Jack Davis, *The First-Born*, p. 33.

¹¹⁹ Romaine Moreton, *Post Me to the Prime Minister*, Jukurpa, Alice Springs, 2004, pp. 87–8.

Taste the echo of my Rainbow
Feel his flesh fade into the Nothing
Like a Wafer on your tongue.

Come, we feast Silently together.
(‘Us’)¹²⁰

Mysticism beyond the poetics of empire can begin here, but it is one of many beginnings. The relationship between Australian Christian mystical poetics and Indigeneity is a deeply complex one, involving the full scope of genocidal undertones of Wentworth and Dunmore; Harpur’s transformative Indigeneity born of darkness, possessing fire; Webb’s exposure of the projections of the colonial self in ‘Eyre All Alone’; cross-cultural (mis)translations, fusions and resistances from Indigenous and non-Indigenous poets; and the emergence of Indigenous Christian mystical poetics within the greater Indigenous and non-Indigenous poetics of healing and humanity. Not all ramifications have been expounded, nor all stories told. Still, as Burke insists ‘we feast Silently together’, and Maisie Cavanagh tends a fire of unitive consciousness with that which transcends speech. Whether in poetry or the poetry of silence, a greater dialogue between Western Christian mysticism and Indigenous poetics is taking shape, born of a shared fire.

¹²⁰ John Muk Muk Burke, ‘Us’ cited in John Leonard (ed.), *New Music: An Anthology of Contemporary Australian Poetry*, Five Islands, Wollongong, 2001, pp. 149–50. For Burke’s account of his identity, see John Muk Muk Burke, ‘The Past Must Face the Future’ in Burke & Langford, *Op Cit.*, pp. 177–184.

Conclusion: At the Limits of the Thesis

In seeking to demonstrate that an understanding of Western Christian mysticism is essential to the study of Australian poetry, this thesis has progressed from the recognition of an existing gap in the field to addressing oversights in the literature, to a detailed analysis of Australian mystical poetry from the nineteenth century to the present. Clear research parameters, a multilateral methodology, a scholarly definition of mysticism and its subsequent contextualisation have provided the necessary framework for critically investigating notoriously evasive subject matter. As a result, the thesis can confirm that an understanding of mysticism is essential to the study of the poets in question, essential to the study of the criticism, and essential to the study of the broader socio-political themes in Australian representations of Western Christianity, including those in a global context.

By analysing Australian poetry criticism via the concept of mysticism as a shifting notion, this thesis offers insights into ideologies of race, gender and nationalism behind the application of ‘mystic’, ‘mystical’ and ‘mysticism’ in Australian poetry. In Ada Cambridge’s colonial era, these terms implied the transcendent, the otherworldly, or the unknown, whereas in John Shaw Neilson’s Federation era they were variously associable with Anglo-American poets, femininity and symbolism, often in a derogatory context. In the post-war period of Francis Webb and Judith Wright, a Catholic-inspired return to the sources and a claiming of mystical poetics by non-Christians were equally evident. In recent years, the mystical has been more cautiously engaged through theological and philosophical perspectives, while poets such as Kevin Hart have increasingly contributed to international discourses of mysticism. Mysticism is essential to the study of

Australian poetry in this context as its shifting notions expose era-specific anxieties, obsessions and ideologies in Australian literature, religion and society.

Perhaps the most confronting, yet important, shifting notions occur in relation to Australian mystical poetry and Indigeneity. Chapter 8 demonstrates how the mystical in Australian poetry has shifted from colonialist to cross-cultural to Indigenous Christian identities and contexts. The role of Aborigines in relation to the mystical from Wentworth to Harpur to Webb, Robinson, Wright and Murray is almost always transformative for the poetic self, though sometimes undermining the Aborigines themselves. By contrast, Christian and non-Christian Indigenous poets construct the convergences between Christianity and their Indigenous poetic selves, where the transformative role of the Christ-espousing colonisers is often one shrouded in tragedy, hypocrisy and cultural destruction. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, Indigenous Christian poets and theologians have begun to renegotiate their relationships with Western Christian mysticism and its poetics, creating a site for future Australian Christian mystical discourses where an understanding of mysticism is also essential.

This thesis also argues that what passes for mysticism in Australian poetry is subject to individual poets' use of the mystical for personal, creative, or ideological purposes. The five poets examined at length provide examples of how an understanding of mysticism is essential to the study of major Australian poets, with supporting examples in their contemporaries. While only five poets are subject to the full multilateral methodology of this thesis, the wider cross-section of forty poets (including eighteen in Chapter 8) adds weight to its argument that an understanding of mysticism is essential to the study of Australian poetry as a whole, through individual poets' interpretations of and with Christian mystical poetics.

Finally, this thesis asserts that in avoiding the concept of mysticism as a shifting notion, critics have ignored the attention and contribution of Australian poets to discourses of mysticism from Ralph William Inge to Bernard McGinn. Australian poets who have directly followed these discourses include James McAuley, Francis Webb, Les Murray, Peter Steele and Kevin Hart, with many more engaging Anglo-American and French mystical poets. While Cambridge's 'The Lonely Seas' is notable for its American publication, Kevin Hart offers the most direct and influential contribution to international mysticism scholarship. Furthermore, Indigenous poetry is rarely examined in a Western Christian mystical context. This thesis suspends any appropriation of Indigenous notions of the sacred in order to examine the subjects, subversions and shifting notions of colonialist and assimilationist poetics prior to the inception of Indigenous Christian mystical poetry in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

In the globalised, multi-cultural environment of the new century, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian contributions to Christian and interfaith mystical dialogues will require an understanding of mysticism, including its foundations, for just as Christian mysticism was first created in the Hellenistic merging of cultures and faiths, the current convergence may similarly revive and transform it. Cross-cultural mystics in the Christian tradition appear as far back as St Paul, but the twentieth century has also witnessed a rise in Hindu-Christian interfaith mystics such as Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri le Saux, 1910–1973), Bede Griffiths (1906–1993) and the Anglo-Indian mystical poet and scholar Andrew Harvey (1953–).¹ Bernard McGinn's 'wordwide ecumenism', therefore, is not only being discussed but being lived, and it is asserted at the limits of this thesis that Australian mystical poets will

¹ King, *Op Cit.*, pp. 238–40; For Andrew Harvey, see Andrew Harvey & Mark Matousek, *Dialogues With A Modern Mystic*, Quest, Wheaton, 1994.

increasingly engage inter-faith, inter-Indigenous and inter-mystical dialogues with profound results for twenty-first-century Australian poetry and identity.

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