The Idea of a Colony: Eliot and Stevens in Australia

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THAT MODERNIST LITERATURE encountered a frequently hostile reaction from its earliest audiences, whom we tend now to reproach in retrospect for their "shortsightedness" and "provincialism," is true just about everywhere. But in the antipodes, those reproaches have tended to be both more severe and more literal: "provincialism" isn't but a metaphor in the provinces, let alone the colonies, and therefore we—good, tasteful cosmopolitans—tend to round on our ancestors who expressed those "provincial" tastes with extra force. So much force, in fact, that we rarely pause to complicate reproach with explanation. Why would we, when the cultural prestige of what we now call literary modernism is at an all-time high? And yet, there is some circularity here: Australian readers rejected modernism because they were provincial, and the evidence of their provincialism is their rejection of modernism. In this essay, I will show that Australian anti-modernism has a livelier and more complex intellectual genealogy than the cliché of provincialism would suggest, and that this background helps to account for the very different receptions accorded to the poetry of two of the twentieth century's major modernists, T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. I will begin by describing the Nietzschean-inflected anti-modernism of the *Vision* group in the 1920s, and suggest that their ambition should be read as an attempt to articulate a specific cultural project for Australia in the postwar world. Modernism, they concluded, was inimical to that project. Shortly thereafter, however, the site of modernism's reception shifted from the public sphere of practicing poets and critics to the academy, where the increasing influence of the Leavisites—whose own cultural mission dovetailed in some interesting, if accidental, ways with the *Vision* group—made a version of the modernist canon a *fait accompli*. But that canon was circumscribed in certain ways, notably by the availability of texts: in the first half of the twentieth century, Australian readers relied on London publishing houses for their imported reading matter. For an American writer's work to be disseminated widely in Australia, their work would have to be anthologized, or released by a British publisher. This is how Stevens's work came to be known in Australia during the 1950s. That Stevens's poetry was disseminated at a

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moment when Australia was shifting its cultural and political allegiances from Britain to the United States was its good fortune: against the intellectual backdrop of anti-modernist vitalism, it could be received and read as a potential escape from the Eliotic impasse.

One of the first expressions of modernism in the antipodes was, fittingly enough, a kind of anti-modernism: I am referring to *Vision: A Literary Quarterly*, edited by Frank C. Johnson, Jack Lindsay, and Kenneth Slessor, and published in four issues beginning in May 1923 and concluding in February 1924. *Vision* shares many of the essential characteristics of the modernist little magazine, not least the brevity of its lifespan and the pugnacity of its tone. Reflecting on his own experiences with little magazines, Ezra Pound famously recommended "a program—any program. A review that can't announce a program probably doesn't know what it thinks or where it is going" (703). On a rhetorical level, at least, *Vision* would not have disappointed:

> The object of this Quarterly is primarily to provide an outlet for good poetry, or for any prose that liberates the imagination by gaiety or fantasy. Unless gaiety is added to realism, the pestilence of Zola or the locomotor ataxia of Flaubert must finally attack the mind. We would vindicate the youthfulness of Australia, not by being modern, but by being alive. Physical tiredness, jaded nerves and a complex superficiality are the stigmata of Modernism. We prefer to find Youth by responding to the image of beauty, to vitality of emotion. ("Foreword" I: 2)

Its contemptuous vision of "Modernism" sees the malign influence of Zola and Flaubert extending into the 1920s, alongside a host of contemporary offenders:

> When Picasso hung a geometrical pattern in gold paint in the last Autumn Salon, or Satie put typewriters in the orchestra of "Parade," they were both as old as any other form of Egyptianism. ("Foreword" I: 2–3)

To train the artist's attention on life as it is lived (Zola and Flaubert) or to allow the sounds and shapes of modernity to enter the charmed circle of art (Picasso and Satie) is equally to descend into the "morass of primitive sensibility" (I: 3), and refuse "gaiety," "fantasy," "life," and "sensation" (I: 2–3).

Hostility toward several of the writers whom we now regard as canonical modernists radiates from the pages of *Vision*. The first issue contains an essay by Norman Lindsay called "The Sex Synonym in Art," which attacks James Joyce's *Ulysses* from an utterly original angle: according to Lindsay, Joyce has "laboriously compiled a list of colloquial sex syn-

onyms, and has dotted these about his verbiage as a species of sauce, very much as a poorly inspired cook might drop pickles into a mass of dough, to startle an unwary palate" (25). Lindsay's objection is not that the novel refers to or depicts sex, but rather that it does so in such vulgar terms, borrowed from the "lower orders of society," who have "no real love or reverence for sex, therefore they either shamefully repudiate all mention of it, as in the middle class, or ridicule it by the use of brutal or ludicrous imagery, as in the lower orders" (26). "Sex," Lindsay asserts, "is the function which produces Life, therefore it must be of first importance to Art" (23). A more puerile kind of contempt is registered on the pages in Issues One and Three called "Screamers in Bedlam," where writers and artists including Joyce, E. E. Cummings, D. H. Lawrence, Augustus John, Paul Gauguin, and Edith Sitwell (twice) are lampooned for their artistic styles as well as their physiognomies.

Clearly, by "modernist" the *Vision* group meant something more capacious than what literary scholars in the present mean, but not to the extent that they included writers and artists whom we would fail to regard as in some sense pre- or proto-modernist. This, after all, is one of the challenges and rewards of wandering in the archive: to glimpse a world prior to that in which our current categories have settled into their cozy delineations, and to remind ourselves that they could have done so differently. Such separation as exists between modernism in literature and modernism in the visual arts, for instance, is more the consequence of contemporary disciplinary divisions than historical experience. In interwar Australia, for instance, "high culture" seemed "to have become almost synonymous with visual art" (Williams 6). Moreover, artistic circles (broadly conceived) tended to be comprised of both artists and authors, or indeed merged in the same person. Such was the case with the *Vision* group, whose *éminence grise* was Jack Lindsay's father.

Norman Lindsay was a prolific novelist and, in his guise as a contributing editorial cartoonist to Sydney's *The Bulletin*, one of Australia's most recognizable illustrators. During the 1890s, *The Bulletin* had been at the center of a national literary renaissance, expressed through realism in fiction and bush balladry in poetry, that was inseparable from the political nationalism that led to Federation in 1901 (Kramer 10). From its origin, *The Bulletin* was intensely conscious of Australia's position in the British Empire and the related question of race; as of 1886, its banner read "Australia for the White Man," and an editorial from July 2, 1887, asserts,

> By the term Australian we mean not those who have been merely born in Australia. All white men who come to these shores—with a clean record—and who leave behind them the memory of the class-distinctions and the religious differences of the old world;…all men who leave the tyrant-ridden lands of Europe for freedom of speech and right of personal liberty

> are Australians before they set foot on the ship which brings them hither. Those who…leave their fatherland because they cannot swallow the worm-eaten lie of the divine right of kings to murder peasants, are Australian by instinct—Australian and Republican are synonymous. (qtd. in Lee 89)

The strident republicanism here was untypical of Australian nationalism as it would develop into the twentieth century, but it is a salutary reminder that at least some ambivalence toward the notion of an Empire was always present among Australians, even if for the time being a thoroughgoing racism prevented us from imagining a different place in the world. The nature of that place in the world, and Australian literature's possible articulations of it, would be tested by the outbreak of the First World War, only thirteen years after Federation. Norman Lindsay, who would lose a brother in the war, put his art in service of the national enlistment effort by producing cartoons and propaganda posters that remain, for most Australians, among the indelible images of that conflict. Lindsay himself has summed up the importance of *The Bulletin* to Australia's national life: "The *Bulletin* initiated an amazed discovery that Australia was 'home,' and that was the anvil on which Archibald [its founding editor] hammered out the rough substance of the national ego" (*Bohemians* 5).

By 1923, when *Vision* began publication, Norman Lindsay was already quite famous in Australia; in addition to his propaganda efforts, he had spent part of the war years at work on *The Magic Pudding* (published in 1918), a children's book that remains popular today. In other words, it was useful for Norman Lindsay to lend his imprimatur to a small avantgarde concern like *Vision* (and his pen: the whimsical drawings of fauns that appear throughout the magazine are his). Moreover, the range of venues in which Lindsay's work appeared—from national magazines to coterie publications—suggests the possibly salutary effects of a literary scene too small to stringently police any boundary between "high" and "low." Lindsay's brother Lionel was also a visual artist of some stature, likewise associated with both *The Bulletin* and another magazine, *Art in Australia*; the crisscrossing literary and artistic ambitions of the Lindsay family and the circle around them resemble those of various avantgarde coteries. Indeed, *Vision* was intended from the outset to give voice to the next generation of that coterie:

> At least, the thing will be a test of the assumption I made to you, that there was a spirit seeking expression in the coming generation in Australia, if a place was offered in which to give it voice. One particular reason why I am standing completely apart from any movement regarding the paper itself is that I am naturally anxious that Jack should prove his capacity, and so rid me of the despicable accusation of parental prejudice so

> unhesitatingly bestowed on me by all my friends for my having assumed to them that he had an intellect quite independent of mine. (Lindsay, *Letters* 226)

Norman's good intentions notwithstanding, *Vision* would unmistakably bear the mark of his interests and preoccupations: the Nietzschean vitalism that animates the editors' foreword was redoubled in some of Norman's contributions to the magazine, notably a two-part fictional travelogue titled "Hyperborea," referring to the opening of Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* (Nietzsche 127).

Lindsay's passionate engagement with Nietzsche was already apparent in his 1920 manifesto (of sorts), published under the auspices of *Art in Australia* and titled *Creative Effort: An Affirmation*. There, Lindsay annexes Nietzsche's figure of the "Superman" (*Uebermensch*), not without some justification, to that of the creative artist: "If creative effort is the one human achievement by which man surpasses man; if creative effort is the one thing that endures; if the creative effort is the stimulus to fresh effort; then the creative effort is Morality in the highest" (26). Norman transmitted this intellectual passion to his son quite directly by introducing him to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Mackie and Morpeth 83). A "Nietzscheanism" of sorts had been current in Australia prior to the First World War, bolstered by widespread admiration of Germany's recently acquired industrial prowess and the model it might offer for Australia (Williams 62). A 1913 article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* declared that "Nowadays we are most of us Nietzschean" ("The Philosophy of Nietzsche" 7). "In 1913," John Frank Williams remarks, "Nietzsche and modernity were synonymous" (75).

By the end of the war, however, the role of Nietzsche had changed, along with so much else in the Australian cultural landscape. Nietzsche had become, not the epitome of the modern, but the "apostle of reaction" (Williams 165). In his reading of the *Vision* project, Williams aligns the politically reactionary attitudes of the older Lindsays (Lionel, in particular, became a virulent anti-Semite) with the anti-modernist aesthetics of the magazine and the larger atmosphere of postwar cultural conservatism (172). Other interpreters, though, are inclined to see *Vision* as having, in spite of its avowed anti-modernism, an ultimately progressive effect on Australian poetry (Tregenza 18). Partly at issue here is the tight imbrication between the visual arts and literature mentioned earlier: in retrospect, there are important distinctions between a modernism centered on the visual arts and a modernism centered on literature. In the case of the former, the years 1910–1913, spanning the Post-Impressionist Exhibition and the Armory Show, and coinciding with most of "High Cubism," are modernism's high watermark. In Australia,

> Coloured post-impressionist reproductions had come to the attention of some younger artists, who seem to have greeted them enthusiastically. Australians generally were becoming fairly well-informed of recent European cultural developments. In 1913 Marinetti's Futurist Manifestos could be found in the weekly *Sydney Mail*, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* was reproduced in the *Sydney Sun*, and the *Bulletin* told its readers that Arnold Schönberg was the leader of a new school of Viennese music.…(Williams 20–22)

That the war brought this moment of incipient possibility to an end in Australia and instituted a new national myth of heroism and sacrifice (a myth to which Norman Lindsay contributed directly), which was inimical to the putative cosmopolitanism of modern art, aligns well with a British history of modernism in which "by 1919, except for literature, the tide was running out" (Williams 241). Amidst the chaos of postwar Europe, the disillusionment expressed in Eliot's early verse took on a proleptic aspect. As we are about to see, however, for some Australian writers, the war only made a project of cultural revival more urgent.

But much still hangs upon that caveat about literature, including the vexed question of the belatedness (or not) of Australian modernism. Criticizing Williams's account, Bill Ashcroft and John Salter assert that "Australian 'modernism' was neither less nor more than the European model, neither prior nor belated. It locates a range of cultural practices characterised by a profound difference from that model, a different agenda, a different range of interests, purposes, content and strategies" (302). But where literature in general, and *Vision* specifically, are concerned, the situation is a good deal more complex; above all, we cannot claim that an avantgarde coterie producing a little magazine represents "a profound difference" from the European model.[1] Moreover, 1913 is undoubtedly a watershed in the modern visual arts, and therefore in the history of what we call modernism as a whole; but in the domain of literature in English, 1922, the year of *Ulysses* and "The Waste Land," seems to loom larger. With that in mind, for *Vision*, beginning publication in 1923, the question of belatedness hardly seems pertinent at all.

A different agenda from European modernism, nevertheless, is easy to credit, especially if we choose to read *Vision*'s vitalism *not* as a belated and provincial holdover from an expired intellectual vogue, but rather as a deliberate intervention in a particular cultural context. The main characteristics of that context are well summarized by Williams:

> Australia faced 1919 with a kind of almost naive optimism. The comparison with continental Europe is striking, and not only because Australians seemed to be celebrating what Europeans—if the press of Berlin and Paris is a guide—were

> desperate to put behind them. In Europe, surrounded by the ruins of their desperately crippled societies, many young ex-conscripts and ex-volunteers alike now felt, despite the prevailing political oratory, that it might all have been in vain.…(239)

In other words, despite the nation's troop losses, Australian culture's distance from the landscape of catastrophe left by the war allowed it to maintain its faith in a notion of civilization that the postwar modernist writers would seem, to many of their earliest readers, to undo.

The kind of intervention *Vision* makes, therefore, is one that turns Nietzschean vitalism into a rationale to invert the usual colony/metropole hierarchy. The foreword to the magazine's second issue says as much, laying blame for the war at the feet of the Victorians in terms that seem reminiscent of many modernists:

> We must first see the War in perspective. It was only a surface expression of a devitalisation that went far deeper than political causes or all the laws of the belly stated by Marx. The last century saw the apotheosis of complacency and hypocrisy. In England, such people as Macaulay, Ruskin and Matthew Arnold hardened all moral values to their limit in smugness and self-satisfaction. ("Foreword" II: 3)

And in the foreword to the third issue, taking up Nietzsche's call for a *fröhliche Wissenschaft*, we read, "It may seem futile to try to answer that voice from Australia where so little of the mechanism of culture exists. No matter: in the sterility of Europe, a response here would mean that Australia alone maintains stability and vitality" (III: 4). This was a vital strand within the Australian culture into which the writers we now think of as constituting modernism would be received.

It is worth noting that between 1916 and 1919 the war had seen almost 300,000 young Australian men pass through Paris and London, though the total effect of their experiences in the metropole on the national culture, while difficult to measure, must nonetheless have been real (Williams 230). The conclusion of the war did, however, permit the resumption of a process begun in Australia in 1911, that is, the establishment of specialist "Chairs of English Language and/or Literature" at Australian universities, and the attendant cultural interchange between Australia and Britain through the appointment of British scholars to Australian posts and the training of Australian scholars at British universities (Dale 88). The immediate effects of this process on the Australian assimilation of modernist poetry were mixed, as in the example of A. T. Strong, the inaugural holder of the Jury Chair in English Literature at the University of Adelaide. *The Advertiser* reports on a public lecture in June 1928, when Strong exhorted his audience to

> compare with some of the work of [William] Watson, the Yodelling song of Gertrude Stein, a modernist, with its babyish rhymes and absence of thought and imagery [sic]. It read like something less than that of a kindergarten moron. The work of Miss Edith Sitwell and her two brothers was also far from being true poetry. It lacked imagination, and was disjointed. The same applied to the acknowledged leader of the modernists, T. S. Eliot. They seemed to be concerned not with the creation of poetry, but with its disintegration. ("English Poetry" 21)

Ardently imperialist, and thus inclined to reject the *Vision* outlook on its premises, Strong belonged to a generation of Australian scholars trained in Britain prior to the First World War and conditioned to reject modernism by reflex. But in Australia, as elsewhere, English studies "lacked a clear methodological programme"; English "was a Macaulayan mission still in search of a method. A fertile ground for Leavisite and practical criticism had been prepared" (Dale 91). During the 1940s, the Macaulayites gave way to the Leavisites, as the earlier generation of scholars vacated their professorial chairs and were replaced by candidates who were, in many cases, *au fait* with theoretical and methodological innovations in Britain. As such, Leavisism began to percolate through Australian academe, and even though Oxford-trained scholars continued to predominate, Cambridge English set the terms of debate within the discipline. In this way, Eliot's emphasis on canon formation as an active process, inasmuch as it inspired Leavis, was disseminated widely. In other words, to a certain extent, Eliot the critic and prose writer was canonized in tandem with Eliot the poet, and in both instances the universities were the site of that canonization.

F. R. Leavis and his followers, like Eliot himself, tended to subordinate national differences to a single English-language "great tradition," which could (in the case of the novel) run through Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad (Leavis, *Great Tradition* 1). The putative unity of such a tradition suited the agenda of Australian scholars when they turned to Australian works, which could be evaluated according to how successfully they absorbed that tradition and inserted themselves into it. One example of the Leavisite impact is to be found in the University of Melbourne's approach to teaching modern poetry beginning in the 1940s, as embodied in the English Department's own *Three Modern Poets* anthology. Here one finds Eliot represented alongside Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Butler Yeats. The rationale for including Hopkins in such company is essentially Leavis's: that regardless of what his actual influence on the development of modern(ist) poetry could have been—and the vulgarly empirical question of influence is treated as something of an embarrassment—Hopkins was "one of the most remarkable technical inventors" (Leavis, *New Bearings* 159), whose "startlingly original language" (*Three Modern Poets* 19) has permanently expanded the possibilities of

English poetry (regardless of who had read him). About Eliot, meanwhile, the anthology states that an "examination of the fundamentals of Eliot's poetry would necessarily be an examination of modern poetry itself" (24). But even though the anthology does make passing reference to Eliot's American background, he was nevertheless, "as he would dearly have wished,…thoroughly assimilated into English poetry," in the words of the Australian poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe, who passed through this curriculum as an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne ("Quaker Graveyard" 135). In other words, Eliot's absorption into the canon and the curriculum, in tandem with the spread of a Leavisite methodology in literary studies, did nothing to decenter Britain in the Australian cultural imagination.

Outside the universities, younger Australian poets were beginning to absorb "modern verse," while established poets were beginning to make their peace with it. Despite his early affiliation with *Vision*, Kenneth Slessor (along with Harold Stewart and James McAuley) is widely credited with assimilating Eliot's influence into Australian poetry. As Michael Ackland comments, "To these fledgling modernists, Eliot's example confirmed not the need for free verse, but for artistic excellence achieved through sustained discipline, which would become a hallmark of their careers" (86). Indeed, Slessor's settings and subject matter tended to echo Eliot more clearly than his forms, as in the example of "Five Bells," an elegy to the drowned artist Joe Lynch and title poem of a collection published in 1939, "considered Slessor's most sustained achievement" (Smith 359):

> But I hear nothing, nothing…only bells,
> Five bells, the bumpkin calculus of Time.
> Your echoes die, your voice is dowsed by Life,
> There's not a mouth can fly the pygmy strait—
> Nothing except the memory of some bones
> Long shoved away, and sucked away, in mud;
> And unimportant things you might have done,
> Or once I thought you did; but you forgot,
> And all have now forgotten—looks and words
> And slops of beer; your coat with buttons off,
> Your gaunt chin and pricked eye, and raging tales
> Of Irish kings and English perfidy,
> And dirtier perfidy of publicans
> Groaning to God from Darlinghurst.
>
> (Slessor, *Poems* 103–04)

Surveying the development of Slessor's work, we notice that one of Eliot's chief influences upon him was the realization that urban experience could be the legitimate object of poetic representation—a particularly important lesson when *The Bulletin*'s bush balladry had had a formative impact on

the Australian literary scene, and when, more recently, the proto-eco-ethnopoetics of the Jindyworobaks still loomed large (Smith 367–69).

The divided reception of Eliot that Ackland describes, in which Eliot's political and cultural commitments resonated while his formal innovations were largely shunned, although not quite true of Slessor, was certainly accurate in the case of A. D. Hope, one of the major Australian poets of the twentieth century. Hope was a devoted formalist, and as late as 1960 he was denouncing Eliot's influence on poetry in an essay called "Free Verse: A Post-Mortem," published in *Quadrant*:

> The democratic rhetoric of *Leaves of Grass* had given way to the coy, allusive, intellectual mannerisms of *The Waste Land*. And this corruption of the garrison from within succeeded where the barbarian assault from without had failed. The snob-appeal of the new free verse was effective where the democratic intransigence of the old had made no headway. (40–41)

And yet, Hope was deeply in sympathy with some of Eliot's underlying cultural and political commitments, at least the ones he declared openly in 1927; both aspired to achieve "an Archimedean point of view on modern western civilization"; both wrote in a constant dialogue with the western tradition; and both came to accord Dante a central position within that tradition (Smith 379). Moreover, in what is perhaps Hope's most famous early poem, first published in 1939, the same year as "Five Bells," Australia is depicted in terms reminiscent of the Fisher King's blighted lands, cut off from the wellspring of culture:

> They call her a young country, but they lie:
> She is the last of lands, the emptiest,
> A woman beyond her change of life, a breast
> Still tender but within the womb is dry.
> . . . . . .
> Her rivers of water drown among inland sands,
> The river of her immense stupidity… .
> ("Australia" 523)

It is difficult not to hear in these lines an intimation of those visionary and imagistic passages from "The Waste Land" in which "the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, /And the dry stone no sound of water," while the country as a "woman beyond her change of life" recalls the description of Tiresias as an "Old man with wrinkled female breasts" (Eliot 55, 63).[2] But "Australia" turns in its final two stanzas to a vision of regeneration that, though equivocal, is still more powerful than anything of the sort to be found in "The Waste Land":

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilization over there.
("Australia" 524)

With war looming, Hope had, in his own surprising way, posited himself as an heir not only to *Vision*'s anti-modernism in his formal commitments, but also to its vitalist account of Australian culture—here invoked, in some desperation, as the antithesis of a Europe superficially self-absorbed and seemingly bent on self-destruction. In other words, the very simultaneity of the poem's scorn for the Australian present and its lacerating contempt for Europe strongly recalls the doubleness of *Vision*'s polemics.

In cultural as well as in economic and geopolitical terms, the Second World War brought about a profound reorientation of Australia's sense of itself and its position in the world. During the 1920s and '30s, defense planners saw an expansionist Japanese Empire as Australia's greatest regional threat. But every discussion of how to respond to such a threat was framed by Australia's (and New Zealand's) status as a Dominion within the British Empire, which would continue to have primary responsibility for the Dominion's defense (Long 2–3, 9). In practice, this meant the construction of a naval base at Singapore, which would be the Empire's bulwark in Southeast Asia against threats from the north. Britain reassured its colonies in the East that, in the event of war in the Far East, a large fleet would be dispatched to Singapore, and as such Singapore became something of a symbol for the Empire's commitment to this part of the world. When Singapore fell to the Japanese on February 15, 1942, therefore, the ramifications for Australians were not merely strategic but cultural. Even before the island city fell, the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, had forecast the need for American aid; in his 1941 New Year's message, he wrote, "Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom" (qtd. in Long 137).

It is extraordinary, from our contemporary viewpoint, that in a declaration of wartime strategy the Prime Minister should have felt compelled to describe the Australian relationship with Britain in terms of "pangs" and "kinship," but his choice of words reveals the extent to which Curtin could sense the symbolic significance of his request. Although his plea was received with some hostility in Washington, where the administration regarded it as a breach of diplomatic protocol, by March 21, 1942, General

Douglas MacArthur, having been evacuated from the Philippines, had arrived in Melbourne and been appointed "Supreme Commander of all Allied Forces in the South-West Pacific Area" (Long 176). From July of that year onwards, MacArthur would make his headquarters in Brisbane. Just as the First World War had sent roughly 300,000 young Australians to Europe and the Middle East, during the Second World War over one million American troops passed through Sydney on their way to fight in the Pacific. The cultural effects of this encounter between Australians and Americans, unprecedented in its scale, would continue to play out beyond the war. As Dennis Altman puts it, "Succeeding generations of Australians grew up seeing the United States as having saved us from invasion" (27). Gavin Long concludes that the war's effects on Australia included "a drive towards more rapid and adventurous development and more assertiveness, a weakening of political and economic links with Britain and a strengthening of links with the United States" (480). For many Australians, a classic account of these years is the novel *Come in Spinner*, by Dymphna Cusack and Florence James, published in 1951 (Altman 27). The novel was originally published in a censored version, focusing as it did on the seamier consequences of the war for three young women in Sydney whose entanglements with the visiting Americans were predominantly erotic.

The erotic aspect of this cross-cultural encounter was also registered by the poet and novelist David Malouf, who grew up in Brisbane during the war, in his coming-of-age novel *Johnno* (1975):

> Brisbane had, for a time, the heady atmosphere of a last stopping place before the unknown, and there were service clubs, canteens, big dancehalls like Cloudland and the Troc where girls who might otherwise have been teaching Sunday school were encouraged by the movies they had seen, the hysteria of the times, the words of sentimental Tin Pan Alley tunes, and the mock moonbeams of a many-faceted glass ball that revolved slowly in the ceilings of darkened ballrooms, to give the boys "something to remember" before they were mustered (forever perhaps) into the dawn. (28–29)

Here, Malouf also draws our attention to the influx of American popular culture that accompanied the visiting troops; for Australians born or growing up in the immediate postwar era, what we would come to call "Americanization" was an everyday reality. *Johnno*, whose titular character loses his father to the war, is concerned with Brisbane in the postwar years, which Johnno and the narrator, Dante, experience as provincial and stifling. In this respect, Australians hardly stand apart from other English-speaking peoples: Americans' ideal of suburban normalcy and Britons' grappling with bleak postwar privations come to mind. But the Australian

experience would seem to fit into a great cycle of Australian culture—a period of stepping out into the world followed by a period of retrenchment. Having finished his university studies in geology, Johnno flees the complacency of Australia in the 1950s to work at a copper mine in the Congo, a peculiar juxtaposition of familiar colonial stories. Before his departure, he gives Dante a going-away gift, "a book of translations from Rimbaud." A moment later, Johnno inveighs against his fellow Australians: "'You'd need a fucking bomb,' he hissed bitterly. 'And even then they wouldn't notice. They'd decide someone had let off a particularly thunderous fart and pretend they hadn't heard'" (104). Thus, Johnno invokes a trope of expatriation as the remedy to Australian insularity, which retains its currency even today. Indeed, Malouf's own writing career would begin in earnest only after many years spent in Britain and Italy.

The novel's Johnno was based on Malouf's friend and schoolmate Johnny Milliner, who did indeed give Malouf a copy of "the 1952 bilingual edition from Rupert Hart-Davies of *The Drunken Boat*, thirty-six Rimbaud poems translated by Brian Hill" (Malouf, "On Recommendations"). Appropriately enough, bearing in mind the great impression left by Nietzsche on Australian literature, Malouf and Milliner renewed their acquaintance in 1951 by reading *The Birth of Tragedy*. Milliner also gave Malouf another book in the course of their acquaintance, one that goes unmentioned in the novel: "the 1953 Faber edition of the *Selected Poems* of Wallace Stevens, who has been along with Auden, among twentieth-century poets, the most constant companion of my writing and reading life as a poet" ("On Recommendations"). Malouf describes the circumstances of Milliner's "gift":

> Johnny and I were off for a week to Stradbroke Island. We had rented a house this time, rather than one of the bunk bed cabins at the Wallers'. I was at the ferry landing, looking anxiously at my watch, Johnny was late as usual. They were already pulling up the ropes when he appeared at the top of the steps leading down to the ramp and we had to leap the gap between the throbbing ferry and the wharf. "Sorry," Johnny panted, "I had to wait for Barkers to open"—our preferred bookshop—"to get us something to read. This one's for you." (I knew, and have described elsewhere, Johnny's boldness as a shoplifter. I did not enquire what "get" might mean.)
>
> Stevens was not new to me but the *Selected* was. The first Stevens from an English publisher; which meant the first extended selection of Stevens' poetry to be available to Australian readers. ("On Recommendations")

Malouf's choice to include the Rimbaud anecdote but not the Stevens one in *Johnno* suits the novel's concern with expatriation, but to learn that

Stevens is also an implicit presence here is illuminating: it is as though he and Rimbaud stood for a dialectic of exile and homecoming that has always been central to Australian literature.

That dialectic is apparent, too, in the arrangement of Malouf's own oeuvre: in 1974, the year before *Johnno* was published, a book of Malouf's poems called *Neighbours in a Thicket* appeared, his second collection. The book's title is taken from a poem called "An Ordinary Evening at Hamilton"; like many readers of Stevens, Malouf was clearly drawn to the poet's irresistible gift for titles. The influence of Stevens is readily apparent: the poem is written in tercets, though with more variable line lengths than is typical of Stevens, producing much more aggressive—though altogether fitting—enjambment effects (as in "The Pacific / breaks at our table," below). Moreover, whereas Stevens's "Ordinary Evening" is among his longest poems, Malouf's is a short lyric, only five stanzas long.[3] But Stevens's central concerns are entirely in evidence, namely the transfiguration of the commonplace into a source of respite and regeneration:

> The Pacific
> breaks at our table,
> each grain
>
> of salt a splinter of its light at midday, deserts
> flare on the lizard's tongue. Familiar rooms
> glow, rise through the dark—exotic islands; this house
>
> a strange anatomy
> of parts, so many neighbours in a thicket:
> hair, eyetooth, thumb.
>
> (*Revolving Days* 27)

"Familiar rooms" are transformed into "exotic islands" by being subjected to the poet's attention. There is a latent sense of uncanniness in the familiar that arises in some of Stevens's poems, for instance in "The Auroras of Autumn":

> We were as Danes in Denmark all day long
> And knew each other well, hale-hearted landsmen,
> For whom the outlandish was another day
>
> Of the week, queerer than Sunday.
>
> (*CPP* 361–62)

We "were" once in such a state, but no longer; now even the homely is inflected with its opposite. Such a sense of doubleness was perhaps inevitable in this poem: Hamilton is the suburb of Brisbane to which Malouf's

family moved during his upbringing, but in *Johnno* he records that "It is a house I have never got used to.…My loyalties remain where my feelings are, at the old house" (49–50). And yet the evening falling on the house in Hamilton "opens / windows in the earth," and discloses "a strange anatomy" in which inner and outer worlds collapse into one another (*Revolving Days* 27), a deeply Stevensian play with synecdoche, turning the ordinary into an object of wonder.

If the 1950s were, for the postwar generation, a period of cultural stagnation—a generalization that has been contested, in any case—it was for Australian literature a period of consolidation. The journal *Southerly* had been established in 1939 under the editorship of R. G. Howarth, and by the 1950s it and *Meanjin* (established 1940) had become the sites of a vibrant, often contentious, debate about Australian literature, which naturally encompassed some retrospective self-justifications and settlings of scores. It was in this vein that Jack Lindsay appeared in the pages of *Southerly* in 1952 with an article titled "Vision of the Twenties," in which he claims for himself a progenitor's role in what, by the 1950s, he judged to be a confident Australian national literature. He mounted this claim, oddly enough, through a critique of Kenneth Slessor's development as a poet, putatively under foreign influence. As a late convert to Marxism, Lindsay bemoaned the "abstraction" of the *Vision* aesthetic (67), but maintained that Slessor and others ought to have labored to solve *Vision*'s contradiction between "joy" and "alienation," rather than to submit to other influences (a strange objection, in some respects, for a Marxist). "Instead," Lindsay complained about Slessor's poetic evolution, "he turns to T. S. Eliot and dies the death that any poet dies who turns to the man who (as Gordon Bottomley once said to me) withers the poetic impulse at the root by trying to create out of inhibitions" (69). In his rejoinder a couple of issues later, titled "Spectacles for the Fifties," Slessor begins by noting that Lindsay's anti-modernism has been far from consistent. Slessor juxtaposes the profoundly unkind caption for Edith Sitwell's portrait on *Vision*'s "Screamers in Bedlam" page ("course, peasant-like ossification of the image"; "equine lineaments") with Lindsay's later remarks in an introduction he contributed to Sitwell's *Façade*: "When one considers the enormous importance of Dr. Sitwell's poetry in modern English literature, it is astonishing how little to the point has been written about it" (Lindsay, "Introductory Essay" 7, qtd. in Slessor, "Spectacles" 215). Lindsay, after all, had emigrated to the United Kingdom in 1926—then, as in the 1950s, and as now (though for how much longer remains to be seen), one of the rites of passage for an Australian writer.[4] There, fidelity to views expressed in a short-lived little magazine years before presumably mattered far less than getting along.

In the course of his rebuttal, though, Slessor makes a revealing remark about his own development:

> Nor is it true to say that I "turned to" T. S. Eliot or to any other poet. It was not until 1927 that I first came into contact with any of Eliot's major work, in the second edition of *Poems 1909–1925*. Until then, all I had known of Eliot was a few rather bleak anthology pieces, such as "La Figlia che Piange" and "Sweeney Erect," which I heartily disliked. ("Spectacles" 218)

If Slessor's claim not to have turned to Eliot "or to any other poet" seems unduly defensive, we should remember that he is referring to the forces that may or may not have impelled him away from the *Vision* trend. Besides, the relative lateness of his encounter with Eliot's "major work" is attested to, appropriately enough, in a letter to Norman Lindsay.[5] What Slessor reminds us of here is the crucial influence of the material availability of foreign texts in the story of a poet's international reception, in addition to the intellectual context I have described so far. In Australia, as elsewhere, anthologies had a decisive influence on the dissemination of contemporary writers, particularly when, following the Second World War, they emerged in the widely accessible form of Penguin paperbacks.

In other words, modernism's reception in Australia was in large measure determined by the accessibility of texts, according to the vagaries of the publishing industry. A sense of modernism's transatlanticism, in particular, was stymied by Australian publishing's filial ties to London. As Chris Wallace-Crabbe recalls in an essay appropriately titled "The Quaker Graveyard in Carlton,"

> The copyright agreements which covered book distribution affected our reading habits in ways that are unimaginable today. Since the American copyright *imperium* was entirely separate from that of the British Commonwealth (with the partial exception of Canada), American books were only available in Australia if they had been published, or republished, by British houses. Then, as now, some bookshops broke the prevailing rules, but all this meant was access to a few Meridian, Harvest or Galaxy paperbacks. The general picture was that American poetry was filtered through to us by the taste and judgement of English editors. Faber was king, of course, and its imprint made Stevens, Marianne Moore and the young Robert Lowell available to us. A few other firms played their part also: Eyre and Spottiswoode for instance with the Southern Agrarians. But our sense of American poetry remained limited and selective. (135–36)[6]

In the context of those separate "copyright *imperiums*," the anthology becomes an even more vital form for the dissemination of American literature. Hence, Wallace-Crabbe recalls, "the first edition of *The Penguin Book*

of Modern American Verse has for me a recapitulatory power like Marcel's tea-dunked madeleine: between its sombrely laurelled covers we first had access, we felt, to the poetry of the United States" ("Quaker Graveyard" 136). Geoffrey Moore's anthology certainly produced an impression in Australia, moving the Melbourne *Age* to declare in a review, "American poetry exists" (I. M. 17).

The Age's declaration (snobbish, winking, or both) reminds us that there remained an Australian ambivalence toward the United States during these years for a variety of reasons and from a variety of quarters. The turn toward America begun by the exigencies of the war moved unevenly in different spheres of life. In particular, the influx of American popular culture, which had begun even before the war and registered most strongly in cinema, prompted objections from "Australian film producers, Empire loyalists, and sundry anti-Hollywood moralists" in a debate that has never fully ended (Bell and Bell 77). And yet, in the postwar era, ineluctable socioeconomic forces such as "Wider access to consumer credit, the expansion of mass advertising, and a revolution in consumer expectations drew Australia's growing middle class towards a real or imagined American model" (157). With Britain only gradually relinquishing its position as "crushing parent," the United States could still appear in the guise of, as Wallace-Crabbe puts it, "a glamorous stepmother" ("Quaker Graveyard" 134). For young poets, then, many of them left-leaning, hostility toward American capitalism and its pop-culture avatars was not sufficient to disqualify American literature, as long as it offered some help to escape the impasses of our lingering cultural fealty to Britain. *The Age*'s review succinctly captures the contrast: the poems chosen by Moore "illustrate a nation newly equipped with its own way of seeing and feeling life. Their way of seeing is realistic. Their way of feeling is adult. And there is any amount of life"—that shibboleth again. "In comparison with these American poems, a great part of modern English verse seems out of touch and uncertain" (I. M. 17).

In his introduction, Moore notes that the anthology begins with Emily Dickinson, and makes a direct analogy between her belated significance to modern American poetry and Hopkins's to British poetry. He then briskly sketches three broad lines of descent for American poets: the Line of Poe, the Line of Whitman, and the Line of Dickinson. He continues:

> In his attention to form, in the singing quality of his lines, in his "essential gaudiness" Mr Stevens is, as I have said, in the Line of Poe; in his concentration, his complex humour and his philosophical concern with man's place in the universe he is in the Line of Emily Dickinson.…His verse…shows that it is not necessary to go off at a tangent and write aggressively about America in a style which attempts to sever all connexion with

> the poetry of tradition in order to write genuine American poetry. (24)

Moore's praise of Stevens is, by coincidence, reminiscent of the more general remedy prescribed by A. A. Phillips for Australia's "cultural cringe"—that is, the unthinking and reflexive assumption that Australian art and literature must be inferior to that of Britain. In a celebrated essay published in *Meanjin* in 1950, Phillips wrote, "the opposite of the Cringe is not the Strut, but a relaxed erectness of carriage" (9). In this sense, and considering the lineaments of the literary debate I have sketched here, one can appreciate what an appealing figure Stevens might have cut for Australian readers. Moore prints Stevens's "The Plot Against the Giant," "Sunday Morning," "Bantams in Pine-Woods," "Credences of Summer," and two cantos from "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" (sic), namely cantos IV and V from "It Must Be Abstract," nicely encompassing both the linguistic exuberance of the early poetry and the philosophical somberness of the late.

The effect of first encountering Stevens in the context of an anthology like this is difficult to reconstruct, but certain points stand out. First, due to his age, the late efflorescence of his poetry is somewhat obscured; the volume is organized chronologically by date of birth, so Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot appear later (as it were) than Stevens, even though, arguably, the significance of their later writings for what we have come to call modernism diminished whereas Stevens's did not. But this chronological aspect cuts in two directions because, second, the anthology is strikingly prescient in its inclusion of younger poets: not only does it present Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, but it concludes with James Merrill and W. S. Merwin, two poets who would carry Stevens's influence across the twentieth century. The effect of this is not only to read Stevens alongside his modernist contemporaries, but indeed to see him as in some sense contemporary with the Southern Agrarians, the Confessionals, and the New York School. Third, the conception of the volume itself stresses Stevens's Americanness rather than the transatlantic context with which many scholars have come to associate modernism. This may be entirely appropriate insofar as Stevens, unlike some of his contemporaries, stubbornly resisted expatriation. Indeed, for Australian readers who, as we have seen, were more interested in the United States' potential as an alternative to Great Britain than in their interconnections, it may have been an advantage.

Wallace-Crabbe notes the "welcome shock of *strangeness*" that accompanied young Australians' encounter with American poetry in the 1950s ("Quaker Graveyard" 137); but bearing in mind the examples of his poetry and of Malouf's, it seems to me that what Stevens was able to provide was, above all, a language for the strangeness of the Australian ordinary. His relish for sound and the exuberance of his diction, as well as the relaxed ease with which he handles heady abstractions (not a skill

Australians tend to credit themselves with), suggested an altogether new way of working the Australian experience into verse. A poem by Wallace-Crabbe from 2012 called "You, Wallace Stevens"—an admiring pastiche of Stevens's early style—gives a powerful example of this:

> After the flim-flam and that hullabaloo
> When Doubtful slouches past the lagunaria
> To scratch out moments of ascendancy
>
> Or peace, the butcher's curse, like precedence,
> He wishes he could sip an iced kachang
> Under some academic's pergola.
>
> (19)

Lagunarias, pergolas (as opposed to Stevens's pagoda), and iced kachangs (a kind of South-East Asian dessert whose popularity in Australia betokens a further cultural shift from the northern hemisphere to our near neighbors) are pieces of the Australian everyday, and yet they compose an exotic soundscape that recalls *Harmonium*. There is an uncanniness in this everyday, however, brought about now not by "The holy hush of ancient sacrifice" (*CPP* 53) but by environmental degradation, which, though relentless, rarely seems to intrude upon the ordinary:

> Your polar bear will never scan these lines,
> Nor metaphysical orang-utan;
> Our fiery weather spirits them away
>
> With dolorous drip and fatal forest-falls
> While we lounge, reading their anatomies
> In bronze Novembers near Apollo Bay.
>
> For so retentive of their feral selves
> Are men, that Doubtful puts his doubt to bed
> With lazy glances at the fiscal news.
>
> (19–20)

As Wallace-Crabbe's example shows, Stevens's work continues to reverberate in Australian poetry well beyond the initial moment of encounter. In a nation reshaped, in ways that "You, Wallace Stevens" bears witness to, by the forces of global capitalism, by climate change, and by its increasing engagement with Asia, Stevens's casual exoticism continues to offer a language for the traces of the extraordinary within the Australian ordinary.

In this essay, I have addressed the question of Eliot's and Stevens's reception in Australia. I began by examining an early example of Australian

artists and writers responding (vituperatively) to modernism within a characteristically (though not exclusively) modernist form, the little magazine. I argued that *Vision*'s adoption of a Nietzschean vitalism as a cultural mission for Australia became a trope that would be invoked at crucial moments during modernism's reception here. In the interwar years, Eliot's reception suffered among poets who, despite their sympathy for his underlying political and cultural commitments, rejected his experiments with form. I examined these debates by considering poems by Kenneth Slessor and A. D. Hope. At the same time, however, Eliot was quickly absorbed into university curricula by a generation of scholars influenced by F. R. Leavis; he was therefore read in Australia as entirely a British poet, and could easily be caricatured as the spokesperson for an exhausted Europe. Events during the Second World War exemplified a shift in Australia's cultural and political orientation away from Britain and toward the United States. In the postwar years, American literature became more accessible in Australia, and young poets could read Stevens more widely than ever before. Finally, I considered the consequences of this accessibility for two of the earliest Australian poets to respond to Stevens's influence, David Malouf and Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Throughout, we saw that Australian writers have always sought, and very often found in their encounter with transatlantic modernisms, a means and an idiom through which to invert the colony/metropole dyad, and that, beyond the cliché of provincialism, the particular historical contingencies of the Australian experience allowed for a unique and creative engagement with modernism.

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Notes

[1]As a corollary to the point about distinguishing literature and the visual arts, we should also note that the *Vision* group, Williams, and Ashcroft and Salter, all concur in according "primitivism" a central place in modernist aesthetics, and indeed it was a term often flung at modernist writers in their own time. Today, however, we would struggle to recognize most of the major modernist writers in the term.

[2]It has always seemed to me that Australians must be particularly prone to reading the desert passages of "The Waste Land" with an uncanny sense of recognition. An Australian voice does find its way into the poem, just before Tiresias announces himself: "O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter / And on her daughter / They wash their feet in soda water" (62). Eliot notes simply that "I do not know the origin of the ballad from which these lines are taken: it was reported to me from Sydney, Australia" (74). Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue's commentary notes that "the ballad…was popular among Australian troops during the Great War," albeit with the daughters washing their "cunts" rather than their "feet" (Eliot 655). It is indicative of the importance of the Great War as a moment of cultural encounter that this should be both the context in which Australia appears in the poem and one of the poem's most explicit evocations of the war.

[3]There is also, it seems to me, a tacit acknowledgement of Stevens's formative influence in the position accorded "An Ordinary Evening at Hamilton" in *Revolving Days*, Malouf's 2008 selected poems, where it appears sandwiched between "Dark Destroyer" and "Unholding Here," the two earliest poems to appear in the collection.

[4]For a contemporary account of Australian expatriation and the enduring capacity of Eliot's poetry to speak to the experience, see Pryor.

[5]Slessor writes, "I was glad you liked Eliot's poetry, as it confirmed my own impression. He is, of course, terribly over-loaded with ethnological irrelevancies. He seems to enjoy making his works resemble a treatise on an obscure science. But provided you don't pay serious attention to the Notes, I don't see how one can fail to be impressed by his perfect handling of form" (*Poetry* 265). Slessor is clearly referring to "The Waste Land"; that Norman Lindsay should approve of the poem, in spite of his vituperation for Joyce, only goes to show the extent to which he was, in his reading as well as in his art, utterly idiosyncratic.

[6]Hence Malouf's remark, quoted earlier, that Stevens's Faber and Faber *Selected Poems* represented "the first extended selection of Stevens's poetry to be available to Australian readers."

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