A Registering of Transformations: Alex Miller's *The Passage Of Love*

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1. *The Passage of Love* and Alex Miller's Fiction

Alex Miller has compiled one of the most challenging oeuvres in contemporary Australian fiction. It is a body of work accessible and complicated in different ways, and presents the danger of generating either too little or too much critical attention. In this light, all readers of Miller can be grateful that he found a rigorous, sympathetic, and discerning scholar to write on his work. Robert Dixon's book on Miller, *The Ruin of Time* (2014), is not only a masterful exploration of a major oeuvre in contemporary Australian literature, it is a vindication of how the single-author study can be a powerful interpretive tool, not just to explain a body of work, but to take stock of theme, genre, and philosophical stance, and to register the transformations of the modern and contemporary. In the spirit of Dixon's work, I will discuss Miller's latest novel, *The Passage of Love* (2017), and analyse how it is at once the capstone of Miller's earlier fiction and also a radical conceptual departure from it in being overtly autofictional. Indeed, *The Passage of Love* affirms its identity as autofiction not only as a genre-defining trait but also as a key hint of its thematic purport. In thinly veiled terms, the novel relates Miller's migration to Australia in the late 1950s, his experience in rural Queensland, and his exposure to the life-changing cosmopolitanism of Europe-inflected Melbourne. Yet as both capstone and prologue to much of Miller's other fiction, *The Passage of Love* also presents what would otherwise be the unwritten substrate to the tangles of ecological, ethical, cosmopolitan and romantic relationships in Miller's more outwardly dramatised fiction and, as such, represents a number of risks on the author's part, as we shall see.

The Passage of Love is self-revealing, and the reader hears Alex Miller's own voice in the narration. Yet the gaps it presents between memory and experience, third and first person, Europe and Australia, life and art, culture and authenticity, and male and female make the novel difficult as well as capacious. In his monograph, Dixon speaks of the way Miller chronicles astonishing changes in time and space, the measure of transformation that the thread of a single—and simple—human life can accommodate and comprehend. Miller's conclusive novel both augments Dixon's sense of how vexatious and contested this registering of transformations can be, and yet how resilient its potential for imaginative power can remain. In *The Passage of Love* Miller also returns to a frequent subject of his: the way the awareness of settler culture's dispossession of Indigenous Australians interacts with the European genocides in the twentieth century. This leads to a further horizon, also sampled by Miller's novel, of how questions over the sovereignty of Australian land are indicative of the traumas of global modernity as a whole. These will be the subjects of later sections of this article. We will begin, however, with Miller's practice of autofiction, and how it impacts the formal, ethical, and political aspects of his work.

Though much of Miller's oeuvre is inspired by stories or personalities in his own life, *The Passage of Love* can be described as 'autofiction' in ways not quite applicable to the earlier work, even

books like *Journey to the Stone Country* and *Coal Creek*, which were clearly inspired by situations and personalities encountered in his early years in Australia. Dixon called Miller's early novel *The Tivington Nott* (fictionalised in this book as Robert Crofts's first novel, *Hunted*) 'fictionalised autobiography.' There is a slight difference between fictionalised autobiography and autofiction. *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* are fictionalised autobiographies because not just the names but also the circumstances are fictionalised, although we are left in little doubt that the author means us to identify each major character with the autobiographical narrator. Autofiction, on the other hand, may change some names but keep constant the circumstance and effects. Miller has said he has changed some names but not all, almost a key to the distinction between autofiction and simple autobiographical fiction. If no or few names are changed, it is nonfiction or memoir; if all names are changed, it is autobiographical fiction. Autofiction, tantalising with its resemblance to the real but never just equivalent to it, changes some but not all. This is not a hard and fast rule, but it is useful not just in identifying *The Passage of Love* as autofiction but in understanding the unique role the novel plays, being both a fulfillment of Miller's writing career and a return towards the source of his many previous fictions.

The protagonist, Robert Crofts, is a minimally concealed version of Alex Miller; Lena Soren is a minimally disguised version of Miller's first wife, Anne Neil; and Martin, the European émigré intellectual, is a minimally disguised version of Max Blatt, the man Miller has referred to many times as his literary mentor and guide, and about whom he published a memoir in 2020. The story takes Robert Crofts from years in rural Queensland to the Melbourne of the 1950s, where he seeks to find himself in terms of thought, relationships, and vocation. The action of the novel revolves around his tumultuous relationship with Lena Soren, with whom he falls deeply in love but with whom he is, after a strenuous series of efforts—including trying to farm together near Braidwood in the Araluen Valley—unable to achieve a permanent peace, caught between sociality and landscape, 'the patio and the paddock' (284). Having launched his literary career, Robert then meets and marries another woman and begins to place his experience in perspective.

2. The Paradoxes of Autofiction

What makes *The Passage of Love* autofiction? Serge Doubrovsky coined the word 'autofiction' in 1977, perhaps indicatively speaking of his own fiction. Autofiction is as much an authors' as a critics' category. Although, as Philippe Gasparini has argued, authors of autofiction often have a sophisticated line on their own fiction, it is not a category that demands a certain theoretical formulation or even privileges a theoretical outlook. Philippe Vilain, one of the genre's leading contemporary French practitioners, noted that some practitioners see autofiction as 'a simple resurgence of the autobiographical novel' (5–6) but that, more amply, its 'indefinable character' (6) is the subject of 'content questioning.' Some would say that autofiction has to use the author's real name. This would disqualify *The Passage of Love*. Yet, in truth, Robert Crofts is a barely concealed Alex Miller with little attempt at disguise. Indeed, in this instance changing the name is the purer gesture of autofiction. To call Robert Crofts 'Alex Miller' would be playful and self-referential, extending the book into the fabric of its own composition rather than giving it matter-of-fact solidity. Autofiction is not self-referential in the same way that metafiction was, in its practice of what Wenche Ommundsen calls 'reminding the reader of the book's identity as artifice' (16), laying bare the literariness of the novel as aesthetic device. Indeed, autofiction, for all its self-consciousness, avoids metafiction and more or less asks the reader to credit the truth of the narrative as a constitutive element of its genre.

One way of unpacking this is to say that autofiction actually relies on a stable personal presence, the same kind of identity that life writing, whether autobiographical or biographical, nearly always presumes. As Claudia Gronemann points out, autofiction has roots in 'the existentialism of Sartre' and 'the sessions of psychoanalytic therapy' (241), with their different privileging of the experiencing self. This is a rather different origin to the textual abysses of deconstruction or the ludic taunts of metafiction. There is a sense in which autofiction is more accessible to the experiential side of reading than is metafiction, as autofiction breaks down even further the boundaries between life and imagination.

Autofiction has certainly been theorised, but it comes mainly out of novelistic practice, by writers who want something more dense, intricate, and multi-dimensional than memoir yet also want a narrative that is more open and less constrained by conventions of representation than the realistic autobiographical novel. But, to reiterate, it belongs to the author more than the critic, and even projects, not entirely successfully or wholeheartedly, a certain indifference to theory. What Dixon as a critic discerned, though, is that even though Miller does not espouse a particular sort of contemporary speculation, his books are open to being informed by this because they acknowledge the racial, gendered and perceptual issues that are at the root of the relevance of contemporary speculation. In his book on Miller, Dixon frequently cites Derrida, particularly in his analysis of hospitality in Miller's *The Ancestor Game.* Miller, in his 2015 collection *The Simplest Words*, has offered a direct and emotional account of his literary practice, saying, of his father's reaction to his first novel, 'he was not impressed. Writing for him was not an advance on telling' (Miller, *Simplest* 1). Dixon, via Derrida, stresses not the loss of orality, as Miller does in the above quote, but how Miller's novels are 'substantial, technically masterly and assured, intricately interconnected, and of great imaginative, intellectual, and ethical weight' (2). Miller seeks wholeness in an almost Tolstoian manner, as Brenda Walker has observed (Walker 44), and finds it many-sided. Dixon excavates fragmentation and finds an abiding ethical imperative speaking through it. Both Miller and Dixon are fascinated by Australia's complicated European inheritance, and the Australian continent's tragic history of oppression and domination, along with its residues. They share a certain openness both to literary realism and a radical questioning of the operations of the real. That they do so from noticeably different intellectual orientations, and with very different attitudes towards theory and advanced thought, is precisely why the interplay between author and critic is so fascinating.

Autofiction as a genre has a kinship with this dialogue of the direct and the reflective, the experiential and theoretical, found in the dialectic between Miller's fictional work and Dixon's critical exposition of it. While autofiction is not in itself theoretical, or even a gesture toward theory, yet it is equally not a continuation of the conventional realistic novel, and the questions it raises often are resonant in the aftermath of the questions theory has raised. Autofiction has some kinship with the *roman à clef*, where the reader is supposed to uncover the relation between characters in the book and real people. Alison Lurie has remarked that the *roman à clef* was a privileged genre of modernism: 'From time to time, instead of creating characters, writers have kidnapped real people and imprisoned them in novels. In the last century the preferred method was to write a *roman à clef*.' Nowadays, however, novels frankly admitting their basis in real events have assumed this role. Lurie goes on to say that, 'in many successful novels, the methods of literary abduction are less subtle. Their authors do not look among their friends for characters, or disguise identities—they use real names and events, though sometimes with considerable flexibility' (Lurie). The note on the copyright page for the Europa Editions printing of Miller's book puts it

deftly: 'This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously.'

The Passage of Love begins in Carl Schurz Park in New York, where an elderly writer takes stock of his life and wonders if he has enough in him to write one more novel. He reflects on a time he had spoken to a writing group in prison. One woman 'of around forty' was 'making notes in an exercise book' (17). The note-taking woman challenges Crofts on the theme of absent mothers in his work, and forces him to confront the way that much of his fiction had been taken from his own life. Spurred to self-questioning and self-exploration, Crofts then turns to recounting his own story. It is never revealed what the note-taking woman had been in prison for, nor does she ever appear in the story again; but Roberts's reflection on his past is for its entire duration placed in opposition to the inquiry of this particular imprisoned woman reader, who acts in a way as the surrogate for the book's readers in general.

Since Miller has taken real people and disguised them with fictional names, we might associate him with the *roman à clef*. But his work, in the way that it openly admits the links between fiction and reality, is more akin to Lurie's second category, which broadly overlaps with autofiction. Miller has always been quite forthcoming, on his website and in interviews, about the real people who inspired his books. Unlike the *roman à clef*, then, the reader is not involved in a guessing game which privileges those with esoteric knowledge. The *roman à clef* actually privileges the autobiographical subject by indicating it is worth being swathed in opacity. Autofiction, in comparison, is more self-exposing. Gasparini has even seen autofiction as comprising an act of resistance because it tends to subvert classic autobiographical form.

The branching between the *roman à clef* and autofiction probably begins with Proust. Proust based his characters on real people but, for him, the affective reality of the related experience was more important than focusing the reader's attention on the particular resemblances between fiction and reality. Anthony Powell, Elena Ferrante, Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti, and Karl Ove Knausgaard have each continued this tradition, all the while adding a compulsive readability to autofiction which Miller's work also sustains. The compulsive readability is where autofiction and metafiction diverge; autofiction makes self-awareness epistemologically unexacting, instead folding it back into the seam of the book and making it more palatable and consumable. Miller makes no pretense that he is not Robert Crofts. When he interviewed Miller on ABC radio, Michael Cathcart described Robert as 'playing' Alex Miller in the novel, as an actor undertaking a role.

Autofiction has some risks. The first is the potential damage done to the real people one is writing about, whether they be living or dead. The younger Robert worries that his 'two worlds,' of writing and of life, 'did not know one another and had no desire to know one another' (249). By the time Robert reaches old age, though, those two worlds dovetail, and fiction becomes autofiction. When Robert tells Martin's story of Poland during the war, he tells it in Martin's own voice. The editor of the journal that accepts it recognises in this the technique of a true writer. Robert worries that Martin will feel resentful he has appropriated and profited from his suffering. But Martin in fact has just discovered he had living relatives in Israel when he thought all had perished in the Holocaust. Thus at that point he does not care whether he is appropriated or not. He is continuing to live his life and is content that his past has been fictionally represented as long as it is done in a competent and faithful way. But the ethical dilemma continues: does the writer shed light upon the world by writing what they know, or is the writer stealing and misusing other people's life-

experience? In other words, is the gratifying sense of felt reality in such a book achieved morally on the cheap?

There is a more general risk in autofiction, especially autofiction late in an oeuvre. Miller has already abraded the rules of the contemporary literary *cursus honorum* by starting so late. Indeed, the one aspect of his life that he fictionalises the most in *The Passage of Love* is the publication of Robert's first novel, *Hunted*, which he puts decades earlier than when Miller's own first novel, *The Tivington Nott*, actually appeared. For someone to have their first novel published in their fifties would totally shatter the bildungsroman.

This mass of autobiographical material subtends Miller's previous books. He has used his years in Queensland in *Coal Creek* and *Journey to the Stone Country*. He has drawn upon his immersion in the artistic milieu of Melbourne in *The Sitters* and *Autumn Laing*. He combined both milieus in *Conditions of Faith*. In *The Passage of Love* Miller could, in this light, have gone several ways. One would have been to write a straight autobiography. The epiphany in Carl Schurz Park in New York City at the beginning of *The Passage of Love* precludes this. In this opening, the narrator decides the material is better in a fictionalised novel. However, the real aesthetic temptation would be to leave the unstated aspect of his oeuvre unwritten, to leave it tacit and implicit like a deep aquifer beneath the surface of his other texts. *The Passage of Love* reveals what had been a partially occulted substrate in Miller's other books. Its author might have assumed the reflective posture of his cat, Gus, 'an old gentleman reclining on a *chaise longue*, the shadow of his spectacles on the end of his nose,' but the stance of the older Robert is not just one of reflective repose. In his remembering he knows he is not telling just his own story, but the stories of others that he does not necessarily have the right to tell. This presents something at once peculiarly gratifying for the reader and peculiarly risky in artistic and moral terms, all because of this sense of exposure. The ethical risk lies not just in using the names and experiences of real people who are now dead as grist for one's own novelistic mill. The risk lies in telling a story to the public whose signal virtue may have lain in the fact that Miller did not tell it previously, but filtered his novelistic oeuvre through that sense of the untold. In aesthetic terms autofiction often involves the potential vulgarity of realisation.

3. Autofiction and Australia

Though it would be both tendentious and essentialist to posit a specifically Australian flavour to autofiction, Miller's practices in *The Passage of Love* are readable as an Australian intervention in a transnational context. Notably, the internationally successful autofictions—Knausgaard, Ferrante, to a lesser extent Powell—are sequences or novel-series. But Miller's autofiction is a single book. Perhaps, since he was in his early eighties when he wrote it, he felt he had little practical choice to do it otherwise. But it is notable that Australian autofiction has tended to transpire in books that are not explicitly part of a series. Miller himself has pointed to two single-volume works: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*, as inspirations for his approach. Both these books are by women and centered on female experience. They constitute an interesting offset to the largely male genealogy of autofiction indicated above. Both are also concerned with the problems of artistic representation that have preoccupied Miller. There are other possible strategies here, some of which have been practised by Australian writers of Miller's generation. Jeanine Leane's novel-in-progress about Canberra in the 1980s is autofiction written from the perspective of an Indigenous woman. Nicolas Rothwell has brought together

Mitteleuropa and Indigenous Australia in a mixture resembling, if quite different in mien from, Miller's own compound of influences. Gerald Murnane started to write a massive autofiction novel, *The Only Adam*, in the early 1980s, only to stop because he felt it would harm people close to him; much of what he published in the ensuing decades might well be outtakes and transmutations of this work. J. M. Coetzee, an Australian since the early 2000s, has been one of the world's most vigorous practitioners of heteronymic autofiction, using both his own name and that of others in delineating the problematics of his own experience. Julie Mullaney has noted that Coetzee's work can be usefully compared to Miller's. As she puts it, 'both writers divulge a common set of difficulties in addressing the fabric of postcolonial settler cultures, where questions of complicity, responsibility and restorative justice now take centre stage' (1). In Mullaney's unfolding, Miller and Coetzee share a transnational subject but do not adhere to a given set of dogmatic presuppositions about that subject.

Barbara Hanrahan wrote fiction very close to her own experience but which was nonetheless fiction. Eventually, after her death, the understory of the novels was revealed in her diaries. That would have been another option for Miller: he could have published journals of the years concerned. More inventively, he could—as a writer such as the Argentine Ricardo Piglia has done under his heteronym of Emilio Renzi—forge fictive diaries that would in effect operate as autofiction. Or Miller could do what, conjecturally, Peter Carey has done: encrypt his personal experience in his work. This encryption can be seen in Carey's use of his mother's maiden name, Warriner, in *Jack Maggs*. His insertion of referents from his own American experience in *Parrot and Olivier in America* is another example. These encryptions function in ways undecodable by superficial reader guesswork, but they nonetheless subtend the works' fictional artifice. Another model of Australian autofiction is John Kinsella. In a series of novels he has deployed chief characters who undeniably resemble him but are given different names and identities. To not turn into glossolalia, autofiction needs a central intelligence. But that central intelligence always then feels the need, out of both propriety and literary interest, to ironise, shade, or fracture itself.

When deployed against these various alternatives, one might conclude that Miller's procedure in *The Passage of Love* entails two possible further risks. One is the risk of spilling out too much truth in autofiction. The other is the risk of aesthetically hoarding truth by leaving it tacit. In all likelihood, the second strategy would work for most writers. But Miller's peculiar strength of honesty combined with his discursive willingness to accept moral and epistemological complexity means that the first option works well for him. Particularly important is that Miller is aware that the autobiographical voice has traditionally been a privilege exercised by the white, Christian, culturally comfortable, and heterosexual male. Not only does the entire idea of retrospection and the telescoping of one's own experience into narrative inevitably distort truth in the strict sense, but in his writing Miller writes about people of other identities in such a way as to pose the danger of appropriating their experience. In *Journey to the Stone Country* he used the love story of two of his friends to furnish the basis of his tale of the romance between a Janggi man from Queensland and the white woman who returns to his life after a long absence. Similarly, Miller has made clear that the character of Martin in *The Passage of Love* is based on his Polish-Jewish friend, Max Blatt. Interestingly, Morag Fraser, in her *Australian Book Review* piece on *Journey to the Stone Country*, notes that one can Google the real identities of Bo and Annabelle, but does not herself disclose them. In this way, Fraser is mirroring Miller's own procedure, to indicate that there is a real but not to parade the actual identity of the real.

Autofiction both traces and preempts autobiography. In *The Ruin of Time*, Dixon spoke of the 'absence of a definitive autobiography' (ix) of Alex Miller. *The Passage of Love* is what will have to do for that. Indeed, one of the problems of autofiction is that the writer is appropriating his own experience as he might appropriate the experience of others. Not only are they forestalling, for the most part (the case of Philip Roth is an exception) the possibility of writing a conventional autobiography, they are also disclosing material that otherwise could, refracted, nourish and source a series of disguised fictions. Is autofiction revealing your deeper self to the world or effectively giving yourself away? In other words, similar ethical questions that arise in representing the realities of other people also arise in representing oneself.

The Passage of Love tells the story of Robert's coming to Melbourne after some years spent 'in the vast hinterland of the Australian north' (29), working in rural Queensland among both Indigenous people and rural whites, where in turn he had arrived at sixteen after growing up in southwestern England. The main narrative armature is twofold: Robert's self-discovery as a writer, and his tempestuous romance with cosmopolitan, Europe-influenced Lena Soren, which reaches its apogee and crisis when they try to farm together near Braidwood in the Araluen Valley, where Robert and Lena's relationship becomes so strained that 'he began to wonder if he had walked into a trap when he had agreed to come and live on the farm with Lena, becoming the cowboy of her dreams' (395). The novel takes place across three different Australian states, Queensland, Victoria, and New South Wales, but Miller is not trying to 'write Australia' as a grandiose totality. Robert Crofts's trajectory is not just about his own problems as an individual but also concerns constitutive problems of Australian identity, and more generally white European identity in the twentieth century. Thus the thematic agenda of Australia and the formal devices of autofiction spiral around each other in a kind of heuristic doubling.

4. Failure on the Land

Lena Soren, whose name combines Kierkegaard's first name with the name of the tragic heroine of Joseph Conrad's *Victory*, combines the aftershocks of twentieth-century Europe, its political and aesthetic revolutions and catastrophes, along with the attempt to forge an enduring settler identity on Australian soil, especially in the Braidwood section. Ann, the woman Robert turns to in the wake of the dissolution of his life with Lena, says of the Braidwood area that, 'people like us can never belong in a place like this' (544). But Robert and Lena make a concerted attempt to work a farm and live on the land. There is indeed some of the deliberately rural standpoint of Patrick White's *The Tree of Man*, as the couple befriend the country-wise local, Ray McFadden, 'a gentleman of the old school,' the Greek café-owner Dom Alvaros, and the more experienced Ed and Mary. From Toby the dog to the birds that soar within the woods, animal life is celebrated and the inherent vitality of that life acknowledged. But just as Lena is 'still a mystery to him' (382), the land is still a mystery to the both of them: 'The dream they had shared of the cottage in the country had become his nightmare' (395). This is not just an interpersonal dream, but a white settler dream.

Although Robert mentions the exploitation of the Indigenous men he worked with in Queensland, the book does not foreground issues of race. It really helps to have read *Journey to the Stone Country* to understand the role race plays in the novel's tacit argument, just as it helps to have read Miller's 2013 prison novel *Coal Creek* to understand the significance of the fact that the note-taking woman who is a surrogate for the audience is a prisoner. But if racial issues are absent in

overt terms, the Indigenous presence is always at the back of the anxieties about returning or belonging to the land. The failure of Robert and Lena's sojourn in the bush is therefore about more than their interpersonal relationship. It is about a failure of a white, modern quest to integrate a settler identity into the Australian landscape.

For Lena and Robert, going back to the soil is not the answer. Their attempt at farming is not conducted in a hippie back-to-the-land way. In temporal terms, that phase is denoted by the boutique, bespoke hobby homes that are beginning to be built when Robert and Lena leave. Instead, the couple go bush in a half-Lawrentian, half socialist-realist way. (Notably, Robert's first girlfriend, Wendy, was a propagandising socialist.) Their relationship has no explicit politics, but they are making claim to the Australian landscape, albeit in a mystical way:

> They stood very still in the shade of the casuarinas watching the great bird gliding over the country. Its cry a sudden warning or lament as it swung abruptly away and gained height and was gone.
>
> She said, 'I feel we've been welcomed here. First Ray and now the eagle.' (386)

Here we have a conflict of two readings of the Australian landscape. One is the twentieth-century sense that Australians had to embrace the land, become one with it, in order to unshackle any vestigial European identity. This can be found in the Jindyworobak movement and the early-to-middle Patrick White. Such nativism is common in settler societies. It is also seen, transnationally, in gestures such as the building of Brasilia as the capital of Brazil in the late 1950s. Here, the point was not just to build a third city as capital to bypass the rivalry of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, as Canberra was built to bypass the rivalry of Sydney and Melbourne, but to get Brazilian identity away from the coasts, away from Europe. In the twenty-first century, though, the sense is that oneness with the land is unattainable for descendants of white settlers. We admit today that the land has been stolen from its owners; any attempt by whites to identify with Indigenous land on which sovereignty has not been ceded is a usurpation. Miller, writing from the twenty-first century about people still inhabited by twentieth-century assumptions, masterfully, if implicitly, shows that in his view Lena's expectation of being welcomed by the land ignores the existential reality of Indigenous dispossession. The Araluen/Braidwood part is the most concentrated part of *The Passage of Love*. It contains a compact, psychologically tense situation free from the sprawl of the overall narrative. But the sprawl may be artistically necessary to lead up to this concentrated catharsis.

There is no apodictic or melodramatic tragedy in the land. Ray McFadden, the local friend of the couple, is old when he dies. But there is nonetheless a sense that the unsustainability of their presence on the land matches the unsustainability of the Robert-Lena relationship itself. Indeed, towards the middle of the Braidwood episode the reader begins to know both that their residence there will not be viable and that Robert and Lena will break up. Here Miller takes advantage of the resources of time and perspective at his disposal and radically surprises the reader. We expect the dissolution of the Robert-Lena bond, but what shocks the reader is not that Robert does not stay with Lena but that he does not stay with Ann. That Lena herself is the fictionalisation of someone named Anne (Anne Neil, Miller's real-life first wife) adds to the curlicue of fiction and irony here. The book builds up to a realisation that the Robert-Lena relationship was shaky from the start and prepares the reader for the steadier relationship with Ann, only for a prolepsis to reveal that Robert

ends up with a third women and that Ann is as much in the past as Lena. Christina Stead flirted with this strategy in *For Love Alone*—a type of autofiction—by having Teresa Hawkins, her autofictional protagonist almost go off with Harry Girton, after Stead has set the reader up for the evisceration of Teresa's obsession with Jonathan Crow by proffering the superior, more mature option of James Quick. Miller pulls off what Stead avoided. By doing this, he upends a sense of organic teleology that most relations of life tend to assume despite the self-conscious vigilance of the author, especially when they end in marriage.

The Passage of Love, for all its captivating candour, is cagey about where it starts or ends. It has two beginnings. One is when Crofts is confronted by 'the note-taking woman' who asks what he is working on next. Crofts tells her he has essentially completed his oeuvre, but then on a visit to New York decides to write the book we are now reading. These two beginnings make allegorical both reasons why to write the book and why not to write the book. Miller both justifies and gets away with the risk of realising the unwritten substrate of the rest of his oeuvre. Part of this achievement may well be the way the note-taking woman represents the audience. After all, she has already discerned truths in Crofts's writing about which he himself has not spoken publicly. In this way, she mimes the way the audience of this book might see it as the unwritten truth tacitly expressed in Miller's previous works. That the note-taking woman is a prisoner speaks to the book's sense of social mission and justice beyond the lived experience of its protagonist but, metaphorically, it also suggests the constraints on the audience who know only the unwritten in the written. Even the most gratifying, riveting, and absorbing manifestation of the unwritten is risky. Yet the note-taking woman, the first of the male narrator's many female interrogators, promotes the idea that exposure, after all, might be liberating. There is thus a complex dialectic between encryption, exposure, and liberation. The note-taking woman, a prisoner, unlocks the riddle that Robert's failed utopian venture much earlier in his life—to live with Lena on the land—has first posed. This encounter with an anonymous woman, anchored in the non-space of prison rather than the beauty of Braidwood, stands in contrast to the intense passion, rancour, and trauma of his relationship with Lena. Yet, on two temporal levels, they represent how knowledge, reality, and attachment transform themselves through time.

Miller's oeuvre, more than many of his peers, constitutes a register of transformations having at their core a post-Holocaust and post-*Mabo* questioning of categorical, Eurocentric assumptions. This includes those that have tacitly subtended our very assumptions about narrative. As Joseph Slaughter has pointed out, the bildungsroman is the privileged genre of decolonisation because it chronicles the realisation of the achieved individual self, free from external social control. Given that an Australian national identity has so often been described in terms of becoming adult, it is interesting then that Miller emigrated to Australia from Britain at sixteen, just at the transition point between childhood and adulthood. The recognition of Indigenous land rights in the *Mabo* decision and its intellectual aftermath have foreclosed the traditional sense of becoming-Australian. In addition, as the late Andrew McGahan showed in *The White Earth* (chosen for the Miles Franklin award by a judging panel that included Robert Dixon), *Mabo* redefined what the act of growing up from childhood to maturity as a white person in Australia can be. Miller is writing across the seams of time and perspective. But he is also writing after the doctrinal collapse of a certain sort of white privilege, a fall of which Miller is well aware.

It is interesting here to think about the word 'passage.' (Perhaps significantly, the last major work of the coiner of the word 'autofiction,' Serge Doubrovsky, was *Un homme de passage*, published

when Doubrovsky was eighty-three.) The book encourages us to think of the work in affective terms or in terms of the sheer amount of time embodied in the book. Passage, thus, would deal with the passage of time, or the passage of this particular relationship. But 'passage' has also been used, particularly in Australian poetry, to denote the voyages attendant on colonisation. In 'The Family of Love' James McAuley spoke of traversing 'the foggy Greenlands of the Soul' to find 'A desperate North-East Passage of the mind' (McAuley 42). Kenneth Slessor speaks in 'The Country Ride' of 'so many passages / Of April air, so many marriages / Of strange and lovely atoms breeding light / Never may find again that lost delight // In the sharp sky, the frosty deepnesses' (Slessor 88). Slessor and McAuley, and their settlement-preoccupied generation that was at its peak when Miller came to Australia, looked to the idea of passage as a signal of the possibility, though not the assurance, of Australian identity. Miller's novel chronicles another sort of passage, one not just from a love the narrator once thought would be permanent and self-defining, but from an idea of the Australian land that the narrative perspective knows must be relinquished.

And what of 'love'? Miller has already used this word, effectively but riskily, as a title in *Lovesong*. Going to the well of love twice might seem to be really tempting the fate of orotundity. Love is always a fraught word to use in both individual and collective circumstances, and often, alas, an empty or sloppy one. Still, Miller is more willing to risk sloppiness than an aesthetic self-implosion. Robert and Lena's tragic love affair is indelibly personal, but it takes place against the background of their joint love of the Australian landscape, a different sort of love which also ends up being tragic. Whereas there were alternative scenarios in terms of the levels of heartbreak in the love of Robert and Lena, contact between the European and the land in the certainty of Indigenous sovereignty is fraught with a certain inevitable tragedy no matter how ardent the settler's love. Though love in Miller's novel is mainly individual, interpersonal love, there is therefore also an awareness of the love which people of European descent have for the Australian continent, and that the failure of this love (in light of anterior Indigenous presence on the land) stems from the tragic flaw of extreme belatedness.

5. Deprovincialising Australia?

Robert Dixon has insisted on the centrality both of a deep awareness and a rigorous critique of the European intellectual tradition in Australian literary life. Miller's oeuvre has stitched Australia and Europe together, not just their alternative awareness, each of the other, but their analogous sense of crisis. It has carved a path for deprovincialising Australia, which in Miller's terms means not just relating it to Europe but to Asia and also to Australia's own too-unacknowledged pre-European past. Miller's oeuvre also plumbs the paradoxes of Australia's relation to Europe, something that is evident throughout *The Passage of Love*. Crofts's first novel, praised to the skies by a Melbourne publisher, was nonetheless rejected because the publisher said they could not distribute it. While this may just be the book trade equivalent of keeping a potential lover in the friend zone, why was the Australian publisher unable to distribute it? Is Ann right that they were saying they could not distribute it because it was British? Can Australian publishers only distribute Australian literature to the world, not British literature 'back' to the world, including Britain? Is it that Robert had to go to Paris in order to become a writer or is it that he had to leave Paris and go back to Australia? These are questions that Miller, as somebody born in Britain, coming to Australia as a teenager, and writing books that address transnational issues of identity, diaspora, deracination and belonging, has wrestled with intimately in his own career. Dixon has addressed formally and

theoretically the same questions that Miller addresses both in the grain of his work and its discursive articulation.

One of the questions Dixon has asked is why Australian literature is not consistently included in contemporary discussions of world literature and the global (see, for example, Dixon and Rooney xv). There are various answers to this question. Australian literature might be perceived as too like Anglo-American literature. Perhaps it is too minor in a world literary discourse that, despite Deleuze and Guattari, privileges the major. Yet the global Anglosphere also might want to provincialise the white fragility of settler-colonial Australia by insisting it is only a problem for Australia. Nevertheless many people around the world profited not only economically from the colonisation of Australia but also from the ways in which whiteness was authoritative, including in Australia.

In Miller's book reference is constantly made to continental European thinkers and artists such as Thomas Mann, Kathe Kollwitz and Arthur Koestler. These were generally people with minimal connection to Australia. Nor did their own countries colonise Australia, although every major European power, and the US as well, had colonies in the South Pacific at some point. But the traumas they wrote about and the tragedies of Australian history maintain an insensate connection. Miller's novel makes clear the links between the treatment of Indigenous Australians, Papua New Guineans, and black Africans, as Robert juxtaposes his life in tenuously white Australia with: 'Kenya, the Mau Mau, Jomo Kenyatta. The Kikuyu's fight for freedom' (265). We speak of settler colonialism and white fragility in one way, and white fragility and the Anthropocene in another. But we tend to see the first as only regional problems that are 'over there,' and the second as global ones that we are unashamed to say are also ours. This ends up provincialising settler cultures like Australia in ways that deny them a full share in globality. When Miller responds to imperialism and modernity, he does so recognising they are linked. His version of what Rebecca Weaver-Hightower has termed postcolonial guilt is not to evade his own responsibility for this predicament but to acknowledge and creatively confront it.

We know that Australia was colonised later in the era of the Enlightenment and romanticism; that Kant, for example, commented on Australia; that Wordsworth, whose *Prelude* was arguably the first autofiction, knew Australia to the point of allowing Barron Field, author of *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* (1819), to compile a biographical 'manuscript for comment—and reject it' (North 43). But we seldom think about the intellectual and attitudinal consequences of this fact in the metropolitan West, or that Australian autofiction might present the coevality of the post-romantic self with colonialism. European expansion in the Americas, Africa, and Asia preceded the settlement of Australia by two centuries. Shakespeare would have recognised the names of Virginia and Florida; he would have understood what 'Mexico' and 'Peru' meant. By the time he began to write, Sir Francis Drake had already explored the coast of California. The Philippines were part of what was then, to use the term popularised by O. H. K. Spate, the Spanish lake of the Pacific. Spate indeed says that 'The Pacific' only became a concept after Magellan's landfall in the Philippines in 1521 (Spate 1)—and thus that by Shakespeare's time it had existed as a concept in European discourse for a few generations. The Dutch and Portuguese were already in what is now Indonesia. All but the southernmost tip of South America had been claimed by Europeans. This earlier colonisation can be attributed to, or blamed on, Eurocentrism and whiteness. But it cannot be tied to the Enlightenment or modernity. In Alex Miller's fiction, the European emerges in a certain way in Australia that is different from how the European emerges anywhere else. This in

turn hints how Australia might matter in world terms as a kind of inverse mirror of the metropolitan and normative. Australia's colonisation goes hand-in-hand with 'The Age of Reason.' Much of the timidity and reluctance of global thinkers to engage with Australian material has to do with confronting this minatory avatar of the Dialectic of Enlightenment (to borrow Horkheimer and Adorno's title).

To provincialise Australia within a world literature context is to ignore how the glory and evil of the modern West are intimately intertwined. It is to deny the truth of what Martin instructs the young Robert Crofts with respect to Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*: that literature is dangerous as well as elevating. To read the Australian literary canon is to explore the consequences of this complicated and ambivalent but instructive investment of Australia in modernity. That to be fully honest Robert Crofts has potentially to hurt the people he loves registers this tragic association of the modern will to know with violence, imperialism, and a failure to respect the lives of others. Crofts's delicate use of autofiction might evade culpability in the literal sense, but he knows that he is implicated in the interaction of settler colonialism and modernity. These constitute the fault lines of the Australian literary endeavour. The work of Alex Miller unfolds a registering of transformations that suggests that our passages are lived within these fault lines: fault lines laden with the possibility, though certainly not the assurance, of love, both interpersonal and something larger.

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