

## A peculiar aesthetic': Julia Leigh's *The Hunter* and Sublime Loss

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In a review of Julia Leigh's novel *The Hunter* (1999), suggestively titled 'Tasmania Appropriated', Elizabeth Dean lamented Leigh's depiction of the Tasmanian wilderness: 'flat, unreal and, *except for the tiger* [emphasis added], could be anywhere' (110). In 2006 Peter Pierce, in the course of tracing a litany of appropriations of Tasmanian heritage and landscape, tacitly endorsed the general censure of Leigh's 'caprice' in engaging in a 'fictional manoeuvre—the retrieval of an essential (because lost) part of the Tasmanian identity only to dispose of it again' (109). The novel's apparent disregard for Tasmanian identity has been a long-running critical theme, perhaps the most strident example of which was provided by Martin Flanagan in a review of the novel for *The Age*. There, Flanagan referred to a sinister connection between the 'new global imagining' required to address environmental destruction and 'clear-felling local cultures. We all know where that leads'. Flanagan's image of a clear-felled local culture naturalises Tasmanian identity as if that identity were an organic production and, therefore, a bulwark against ecological catastrophe. This paper, repeating, to some extent, Leigh's presumed disregard, will explore the way *The Hunter* articulates the idea of place (an idea which, in this instance, happens to be Tasmania) with a globalised ecological consciousness: it will not be about Tasmanian identity as such. Flanagan's vision of the local as ecological refuge shares an investment in the idea of place with movements like bioregionalism, which holds that place-consciousness nurtures a nascent, eventually globalised ecological consciousness: as poet and essayist Gary Snyder writes, 'our relation to the natural world takes place in a *place*, and it must be grounded in information and experience' (42). *The Hunter* also disarticulates this relationship between the local and the global by exposing both place and ecological consciousness to their shared limit in extinction. Something of this is caught in the unintended irony of Dean singling out the tiger as the only thing 'Tasmanian' about *The Hunter*. Strictly speaking, the thylacine is no longer a local. Accounting for what is properly no longer in the landscape is a problem for both place and ecological thinking: for the former, because it privileges a normative, verifiable reading of place; for the latter, because of a tendency towards metaphoric and atemporal abstraction. The problem of extinction, as the novel draws it, is an aesthetic one—a question of representation. By viewing the novel's resolution of this problem through the aesthetic of the sublime, this paper aims to show how, by intensifying metaphoric abstraction and pointing towards the gaps in our representations of place, *The Hunter* constructs a peculiar aesthetic of loss.

In an article which considered *The Hunter*'s implications for biocentric ethics, published in 2002, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth identified 'the heart of the novel's problematics of loss' (25). Leigh's protagonist M returns from an unsuccessful hunt for the thylacine only to find the small farm on which he makes his base camp has become a staging point for new-age wayfarers. Invited to join them for a meal, he witnesses the following exchange between two men he later dubs 'the immortals':

'Everything is about energy,' says Bike's friend, 'it's all about transformation of energy, I mean, everything is transformed. Jarrah Armstrong had it right: energy and matter, that's what it's all about. No beginnings and no ends...'  
'Bodies have an end, you fucking genius,' says another.

‘Dust to dust my fine friend, and dust is earth and earth is beautiful, and the rest, the real thing, that goes on too.’ (Leigh 107)

The immortals present a version of ecologically informed interrelationship operating through a metaphor of transformation. There is nothing especially problematic, or new, about ecology’s contamination with metaphor. Environmental historian Donald Worster, in a preface to the reprint of his 1977 work *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, is retrospectively explicit about the presence of metaphor in ecological thinking: ‘The omnipresence of metaphors in the ecological enterprise, and the extent to which they have shaped research, surprised me and made me realise how intimate is the relation between science and other creative, imaginative, human activities’ (viii). The immortals, however, entangle ecological metaphor with the actual environment: transformation is transferred to the environment; the environment, dissolved into energy and matter, is then itself transformed into a pliable metaphor. M’s unspoken response to the immortals—‘if everything is transformed then what is extinction?’—draws attention to the limits of this metaphorisation. This question of extinction would have the same effect on the immortals’ metaphor as the modified ‘realist’ approach Kate Soper advocates in her work, *What is Nature?: a clarifying disjunction through which we realise that nature has an ‘extra-discursive reality’* (9)—‘it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer’ (151)—which can, however, only be accessed discursively. The question of extinction would disrupt the immortal’s conflation of nature and its discursive construction. However, for M, the question of extinction is literally unspeakable: ‘he could ask but tonight he does not want to open his mouth, tonight he wants to listen’ (107). While Hughes-d’Aeth adroitly traces the ethical implications of *The Hunter*’s ‘problematics of loss’, M’s silence indicates that, in addition to an ethical dilemma, disrupting this problematic is also a problem of representation.

Through the immortals’ metaphor of transformation, the novel presents an ironised version of ecological metaphor; one which, in attempting to transform environmental understanding and forestall environmental loss, effaces the very possibility of loss. It is perhaps an exaggerated version of ecological thinking. The metaphor of transformation still, however, points toward a more general difficulty in ecological thinking—that of representing loss through an atemporal metaphor. For instance, for writers such as Carolyn Merchant past metaphors of environmental consciousness can be circled back on and re-thought so that ‘we may begin to discover values associated with the pre-modern world that may be worthy of transformation and re-integration into today’s and tomorrow’s society’ (19). In addition to usefully raising and changing environmental consciousness, Merchant’s approach carries with it a disconcerting atemporality. It is as if ideas can be set free of their historical contingency and can, in turn, set nature free from the grip of history. *The Hunter* alludes to this ambivalence toward the irrevocability of time both through the immortals’ transformations and the ambiguous title of Jarrah Armstrong’s work on energy transformation, *Bioethics for Another Millennium*. The novel’s critique of ecology’s atemporality is figured in Lucy Armstrong’s reaction to the death of her author husband. She attempts to sleep through his loss, prompting M to think ‘it was a brave move, perhaps a reckless move, placing all your money on sleep—she’d want to be lucky’ (35). Lucy’s coping strategy is an oblique commentary on the impossibility of accessing loss through an atemporal framework. The persistence of memory traps Lucy in a circuit of somnolent mourning: ‘she no longer knows which is more important—her memories past or her experience in the present. The difference between the two is papery-thin’ (85). This ‘papery-thin’ difference is in fact stark: the loss of her husband is a decisive but unthinkable break between an idealised past and an intolerable present. It is the failure to acknowledge this break that Lucy shares with ecological metaphor. The past

waits only to be transformed. Ecological metaphor, however, is not monolithic; there are ecological thinkers for whom the break between a (now historical) environmental purity and a world altered through global and technological forces is not unthinkable. Felix Guattari writes, in *The Three Ecologies*, that ‘after the data-processing and robotics revolutions, the rapid development of genetic engineering and the globalization of markets, neither human labour nor the natural habitat will ever be what they once were’ (42). *The Hunter*’s resurrection of the thylacine forces atemporal ecological metaphor to encounter the processes of genetic engineering and globalization to which Guattari points. M’s mission to harvest the genetic code of the thylacine for transformation into biological weapons ‘capable of winning a thousand wars’ (40) is a nightmarish obverse of ecological continuity: the thylacine returned from history only to become an instrument of further destruction.

This problem with ecological metaphor which *The Hunter* explores—that is, its inability to adequately account for loss—provides an opportunity to question some current manifestations of thinking about place. The novel is clearly concerned with ideas of place—even if only, provokingly for Tasmanian critics, to ignore them. Ecocriticism has lent much impetus to resurgent interest in place. In the context of impending environmental crisis, place-attachment emerges as a nursery for a broader ecological consciousness. In the introduction to the recent collection *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers* (2007), the editors endorse a close attention to place in order to fine critical abstraction. They suggest an ecocritical approach ‘might engender anxiety in theoretically oriented scholars’ because, for such an approach, an engagement with the ‘natural sciences’ demands that ‘one must test one’s theories against physical reality’ (13). One can see how such an ecocritical approach, in its desire to take the text (and the critic for that matter) back out into the world, is allied to the kind of aggrieved local response with which critics greeted *The Hunter*. Alongside the unobjectionable particularity that ecocritics advocate in much writing about place tends to run a submerged normative tendency—which the editors evidence by turning the authority of the natural sciences against ungrounded theory. One can be closer to the text if one is closer to the place and, through a familiarity with scientific fact, closer to the way things really are—hence naturalising what is simply another theory of reading. Further, any opposition between theory and ecocriticism carries more rhetorical than actual force; ecology is, as Worster points out, an admixture of real physical forces and metaphors of understanding those forces. The editors are, however, also careful to note the productive possibilities of a dissonant relationship between place and text; that is, the ecocritic reading-in-place can have ‘an experience of lacunae and ecological change’ (13) through the discrepancy between place and text that might otherwise ‘remain text-bound’ (13). Oddly, in this approach the text, once tested against a debased environment, becomes more like the place than the place itself. This slippage between text and place as the locus of critical authority suggests that the gaps in the present state of the environment are actually accessible only through the text. The text unlocks a loss that is place-bound, rather than the reverse. If theory can be read in other ways than the broadly pejorative sense in which the editors use the term—if it can be read, rather, as an approach which moves from the text toward other approaches that do not find resolution in nature or place—then theory might be necessary to any elucidation of a loss which can no longer find resolution in the landscape. One might then be ‘theoretically oriented’, yet travel in the same direction as ecocriticism.

Calls for a lyrical idiom which would express the essence of place are a particular example of the way in which an attempt to move language closer to nature results in the exclusion of that which is lost from the landscape. For instance, while poet and critic Mark Tredinnick embraces ‘diversity’ within the ‘terrain of the text’ (46) in his introduction to *A Place on*

*Earth: An Anthology of Nature Writing from Australia and North America* (2003), he avers that ‘the time has come now ... for an authentic language to emerge from these, our own, places’ (44). One mark of this authenticity is the rejection of a misplaced European aesthetic, ‘for the land defie[s] notions of the sublime’ (39). Rallying calls for an authentic language of place seem to arise cyclically in Australian writing, reaching perhaps their most programmatic formulation in the work of the Jindyworobaks. Rex Ingamells, ‘clearly the founding father of Jindyworobakism’ (Elliot xviii), wrote, in 1938, of the ‘distinctive qualities of an environment which cannot be satisfactorily expressed in the conventional terms that suit other environments, scrupulous care being necessary for the indication of their primal essence’ (11). The ‘conventional terms’ and ‘other environments’ Ingamells and the Jindyworobaks railed against are, like Tredinnick’s, European. If, for Ingamells, ‘the speeding up of communication’ and the ‘stupendous strides of science’ were factors which ‘opposed the flowering of a culture which must in many ways be *primaeva*’ (2), it is only more difficult to see how, now, an authentic union of language and place, a union that differs in each incarnation as ‘each of these places, differs’ (Tredinnick 46), could be delimited from global relations. This is an acute problem for the ecological movement which Val Plumwood notes, drawing attention to the ‘shadow places’ that support local life, ‘most of which, in a global market, are likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility’ (139). That is, not only would it be impossible to disentangle place from its global complicities: it is also possible that a close attention to place would obscure those ‘shadow places’ on which constructions of place rely. Testing theory against the physical reality of place becomes increasingly difficult when the networks, and the aesthetics, that underpin an understanding of place are not present in the landscape itself. Extinction is just one, albeit telling, instance of the limitations of place: in what authentic language of place would extinction—an absence—speak?

*The Hunter* challenges ecological metaphor and place through a self-conscious elaboration of the aesthetic. Much like the immortals’ theory of transformation and metaphoric interconnectedness the aesthetic approach deployed by the novel circuits around a constitutive but inaccessible kernel of loss. M discovers the remains of Jarrah Armstrong, the one who ‘had it right’ about energy transformation, while on the hunt for the thylacine: ‘This was Jarrah Armstrong, he thinks, this is a dead man’ (114). He marks the location on one of his ‘beautiful’ maps and writes J. A. in the blank margin. Loss has been mapped onto the landscape, but, importantly, only in the blank spaces. This mapping of loss in the blank spaces, just beyond representation, recurs through the novel, and will become the dominant image of the novel’s version of the sublime. A different inflection of this same representation of loss occurs when M carves designs into the bones of a thylacine pup he has discovered in what he presumes is the thylacine’s lair. There he makes ‘his home between the boulders’ (160) while waiting for the thylacine to return. As he waits, he carves designs into the white space of the ‘pale and clean’ (159) skeleton, and ‘in time he has quite a collection lined up like fence posts at the back of his lair’ (160). Here, an idea of place—replete with a perverse white picket fence—is written over a past loss. The lair becomes ‘his’ through an act of inscription which hints at the way an ‘authentic’ language of place might fence in and elide the loss which enables it. M earlier configures the ultimate transformation of the thylacine and the men who hunt it as another instance of representation overwriting loss:

—aside from one slim volume, a transcription of trapper tales, both tall and true—  
with the old brutish men will pass the best first-hand knowledge of their prey: first  
one, then the other. There is a symmetry to this that pleases M, a peculiar  
aesthetic, and that he is part of it, and knows it, only makes the pleasure more  
exquisite. (38)

M's reflexive awareness of his part in the 'peculiar aesthetic' of extinction suggests the novel's self-conscious approach to the aesthetic: *The Hunter* is itself a 'slim volume'. This self-consciousness intercedes between the landscape and its specular representation, introducing a pervasive asymmetry between landscape and depiction that allows the aesthetic to be seen as a mode of transformation. In this, the text pre-empts Dean's accusation that the novel depicts a flat and unreal landscape: "'Here,'" the middleman had said, jabbing his finger onto a map, carelessly punching a crater into a grassy valley, "we believe National Parks confirmed the sightings roundabout here. You'd be looking at twenty square kilometres." *Roundabout*: how that had grated, the imprecision' (29). Slipping between depiction (the map) and real (the grassy valley) with grating imprecision, M's brief interplay with the 'middleman', an agent of mediation, emphasises the disjunction between landscape and representation operating in the novel. Hence, the 'physiographic maps (how beautiful they are)' (29) are also literally flat and unreal. Frequently, vision is the shorthand used to remind the reader of this mediation: M's night vision goggles are 'heavy, omnipresent, and despite years of experience he still is overawed by the massive change it effects on the world around him, his only world' (51). Rather ironically, M is obsessed with the protection of his eyes, fearing the damage a physical encounter with nature might entail for his precious vision: he wears a cap to avoid injury. He cultivates his 'all-seeing eye, his own godliness' (37), conflating imagination and vision as his vanguard: 'My imagination is my companion, my man who does the hard yards and reports back to me what he has seen' (55). The novel's insistence on the disjunction between real and representation—represented here by M's personified imagination, a homunculus split from M yet determining, godlike—establishes an echo which ironises claims to an authentic, natural, and properly 'placed' vision.

The term 'peculiar' relates to what is one's own—whether of property or person. The persistent irony of the novel's 'peculiar aesthetic' is that it constantly unsettles notions of what is proper to a place or person through the disjunction between vision and reality. The frequency with which M re-imagines his identity in the novel is another outworking of this peculiarity. M, both 'the natural man' and 'Martin David, Naturalist' (5), is de-stabilised as a site of identity, anything but natural: 'I am always being introduced' (18). Fittingly, M's introduction to the novel is teasingly suspended; a hollow pronoun at first—'Now the little plane drops and the fat woman next to him yelps' (3)—he then becomes a contingent Martin David: 'And who—today—is he? From now on he is Martin David' (5). The context in which M is finally revealed as (or reduced to) M for the reader, though the extent of that revelation has already been undermined by the poverty of that stark capital letter, is telling: 'The giant—for M now sees himself as a giant—the giant doesn't talk while he eats' (8). This is just the first of a number of re-imaginings of M's identity, which include a cowboy (40), family man (132) and, more diffusely, the thylacine. Given the novel's association of imaginative vision and a de-stabilised aesthetic, we can see how M's shifting identity is itself constructed in aesthetic terms. M exists only in transformation, and another term for such a thing is (capital M) metaphor. Which, maybe a little too self-evidently, stands out: much like a giant in the land of children. The novel mimics the logic of revelation from Derrida's 'The Purveyor of Truth', where such appropriations are always already staged: *The Hunter* points toward the metaphoricity of identity in the same move that it exposes a reader imaginatively appropriating the landscape of the text. Just as the reader is uncomfortably implicated in the narrative arc of the hunt for the thylacine, a reading of the novel is trapped in the exposure of its own tendentious transformations.

M's shifting identity seems to stabilise around his fantasies of becoming a family man. The focal point of this transformation is the house that forms his 'base camp', and the family that occupies it: 'he has thought that maybe one day he might like to grow old on a farm, with loved ones around' (132). Figuratively, the house stands on the littoral between nature and civilisation, 'the last house at the end of the last road' (5)—a position further amplified by the farm's decline back into nature: 'The weeds, mainly a sunny yellow ragwort, have stolen the paddocks' (5). From this home-place, M journeys onto the plateau that borders the Armstrong property to hunt the thylacine, providing the novel with a repetitive structure of return: 'He carries out his hunt: twelve days up, two days down. Twelve days up, two days down. Continual rain, merciless rain, and still he searches, twelve days up, two days down' (75). The house becomes the resting point for this structure. It is, however, never straightforwardly idealised as a refuge from the hunt—M both 'almost always looks forward to hovering over the steaming stove' (72), and conceives of the house as a continuation of the battle: 'he returns from the front line, only to find himself in the blood-soaked, rat-infested trenches' (102). Similarly, the house offers M affirmation of the worth of his mission while establishing a bass-line of dubiety. The boy, Bike (significantly, he has chosen a new name), draws a thylacine; M draws out of the boy—and the mother's 'stillborn smile' (80)—that the boy's father had seen a thylacine on the plateau. For M, this is 'a coded message' that proves 'he is not alone' (80). Conversely, the mother's addled state and the house's derelict condition provoke M to question whether the company wishes the thylacine's extinction or his: 'Has he been sent as some kind of test? Do they want him to succeed or is this—what?—a fool's mission? Is he expendable?' (19). M's doubt stems from the visible trace of the loss that the house has suffered through: the father/husband, Jarrah Armstrong. He is the 'magic man' (22) for whom the girl still holds out the hope of return: 'Her father is up there on the plateau, lost, yes, but wanting to find his way down' (22).

The novel draws together the strands of place, identity and return around the figure of the house. This is especially fitting, given the etymology of 'ecology'—from the Greek for house, *oikos*. This same root also gives rise to the somewhat antonymic 'economy', and it is returns of this kind that unsettle the possibility of M romanticising the small farm. About to leave the farm, M realises that the multinational which funds his mercenary activities also supports this home-place: 'She wants to know if the payments that have been made every week since his golden arrival will now be coming to an end. The woman is a lot more practical, he thinks, than I gave her credit for. A mistake' (127). In contrast, no money will rent M a room at 'Ye Old Tudor Hotel, with Bottle Shoppe' (41)—which, along with its quaint orthographic nightmares, serves up the oddly partnered 'Reef 'n' Beef' with a 'sorry sprig of parsley between the two' (41). Told there are no vacancies after offering to pay double—"Pay me triple if you want, mate, same difference" (63)—M is taunted by the drinkers at the bar, who associate the hardened mercenary with the 'greenie cunts' (63) out at the Armstrong place. A business refuses money while a 'greenie' enclave is sustained by it; a mercenary out to kill the last thylacine is taken for an environmentalist: the novel coaxes out these complicities. All that stands between the two—'Reef 'n' Beef', greenies and mercenaries, ecology and economy—is a sorry sprig of green. The home-place, rather than an ideal site of stable identity, is a knot of economic, social and ecological networks determined by fragile and often illusory boundaries. The construction of those boundaries, the novel suggests, relies on a sure vision: a proper aesthetic. The surety of this vision both depends on, and can be undermined by, the logic of transformation.

*The Hunter's* staging of the sublime offers a view of this process of transformation; much like M's night vision goggles, it offers a way to see what is hidden darkly in the landscape.

Unlike M's night vision, the sublime illuminates both presence and absence; both the seemingly stable transformation of place into identity through an elided loss, and the otherwise unrepresentable loss which underwrites this transformation. The sublime is provocatively un-local—as Tredinnick's disavowal of its presence in the Australian landscape indicates. Though associated with the Romantics and a European landscape, one of the elements that characterises the sublime is its estrangement from the landscape it is used to describe. There is already an element of this estrangement in the derivation of the aesthetic from an originally narrow rhetorical base in Longinus' *On the Sublime*. Fittingly, for Longinus the sublime style initially rests in an appropriation: 'Our spirits are naturally mastered by the truly excellent and, acquiring a sort of vigorous exaltation, are filled with a sense of happy attainment, as though they had themselves produced what they hear' (152). While appropriation carries a certain ambivalent circularity, the sublime tends to be constructed in one direction, appropriating and constructing nature as a demonstration of the supremacy of human reason or the imagination. This quality of estrangement has troubled even those who have sought to rehabilitate the aesthetic for ecocriticism. As William Cronon suggests in a discussion of the sublime construction of American wilderness, 'any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature—as wilderness tends to do—is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behaviour' (87). Even writers who see in the sublime's movement from humbling fear to ennobling reason a viable construct to engage ecological consciousness—'part of the sublime experience, in other words, is the realisation that we are mortal creatures, "beings of nature" whose lives are entirely dependent on forces greater than we are' (Hitt 606)—tacitly accept the destructive core of the sublime 'in which the external world is domesticated, conquered or erased' (Hitt 611).

Immanuel Kant is typically taken to be the sublime theorist who exemplifies this dangerous separation between mind and nature. In the sublime moment, reason intervenes to assure the corporeally endangered self of its own supersensible and moral superiority over the nature which threatens it. Accordingly, for Kant the sublime is not in nature, an object of passive appreciation, but is rather an internal effect of psychic disturbance, 'for no sensible form can contain the sublime properly so-called' (83). The kernel of this sublime disturbance is the threat of loss: either in the 'dynamic' form of corporeal fear or the 'mathematical' form of imagination's failure to comprehend infinitude. This threat must be quarantined for the vivifying aesthetic experience to take place. As Edmund Burke suggests, 'It is impossible to find satisfaction in a terror seriously felt' (100). But within the sublime moment loss must haunt the experience if it is to recur. Something of this is caught in the way in which the sublime occurs out of an *aporia*: as Jean-François Lyotard glosses, 'one cannot ... represent the power of infinite might or absolute magnitude because they are pure Ideas. But one can at least allude to them, or "evoke" them' (85). Unrepresentable infinitude can only be conveyed in the form of a negative presentation predicated on the loss of the external world:

The satisfaction in the sublime of nature is then only *negative*, viz. a feeling that the imagination is depriving itself of its freedom, while it is purposely determined according to a different law from that of its empirical employment. It thus acquires an extension and a might greater than what it sacrifices. (Kant 109)

Thus loss has been appropriated in the sublime moment; sacrificed so the business of representation can continue.

*The Hunter* stages this schismatic sublime as a dual structure metaphorically positioned in the landscape. Significantly, this staging occurs when M discovers a thylacine print. He finds the print despite a disruption in the vision he obsessively guards: a stick catches his eye underneath his protective cap, and ‘the swollen eye undermines his certainty: he watches his step’ (92). As he pursues the trail a vision, ‘in his mind’s eye’ (95), of the thylacine caught on the plateau above forces him to ascend a rock-face. He falls: ‘Then it happens, the surprise: the world drops out from underneath him and he falls, tumbles, rackets down the slope’ (95). The novel opens with the same sense of vertiginous loss—the plane carrying M to the island drops, splintering the comfortable unreality of the flight. Injured from the fall, M retreats to a cave: ‘Everything beyond this little cave will disappear beneath a layer of fine white snow and sitting there, quiet now, he will declare himself a long way from home’ (98). This layer of snow that blankets the world transforms the landscape into a ‘white world’, where any way of envisioning the world is completely lost: ‘How easy it would be to lose one’s bearings in the white world, to look straight at a landmark and think you had never seen it before; not to recognise your own house or your own hand’ (99). The connection between this white world and loss is strengthened when M recalls being lost as a child, finding his mother and tugging at her dress when ‘she’d spin around and stare at him: now some horrible other woman with orange lipstick and a cigarette in her mouth’ (100). This falling away of the supposed mother for the real of the lipsticked other strikes the child dumb. Similarly, the room for lost children to which he is consigned ‘robbed them all of speech’ (100). The white world is a figure of radical loss that cannot be spoken.

M opposes this ‘white world’ to the abyss: ‘Some said staring into the abyss was the worst thing possible, but in his little cave M thinks otherwise: at least the abyss is contained, with towering sides, but when you are lost the nightmare is truly infinite’ (100). The abyss is an infinitude that can be walled in; however, the white world is loss unbound, aligning it with a sublime that breaks down and fails to restore the demand of reason. M has another experience with this radical loss when he returns to the island, full of qualified fantasies for domestic bliss with the Armstrong family. Instead he finds the family gone. His discovery takes place after a suggestive break in the narrative—the novel, like M’s hopes, is effectively split by something lost. Another tragedy has befallen the family—this time the girl has been burnt while the mother slept. M’s fantasies evaporate. The house, M’s fantasised home-place, is now impossible as a site of return, and he is spurred ‘up’ (141), back to the plateau for the final time: ‘Up there change was graceful: the moon waxed and waned, gums shed their leaves, the miry tarns rose—or fell ... not like a man’s life, thinks M, if a man’s life were an island it would be uninhabitable’ (139). The irony, not to be lost, is that M is about to effect an irrevocable change by harvesting the thylacine. At the moment that nature is idealised as an unchanging ‘island’ steeped in natural rhythms, M unconsciously challenges that idealisation. The extinction of the thylacine will enact precisely the kind of temporal break that M seeks to escape. In walling in the white world of his own domestic fantasies he will create another:

Or perhaps he had been the blind one, with a thousand fish scales layered over each eye. What he sees now is that he has been tested, steeled, and seduced, and that his true purpose is the one he first set out to achieve: to be a hunter, to harvest the tiger. (148)

The combination of M’s revelation with the now familiar figure of vision in the novel amounts to an aestheticisation of his experience—a sublime movement in which the white



world of radical loss has been contained and parlayed into a recognition of his supreme mission.

The white world of M's loss persists, however, as the novel stages M's final hunt for the thylacine. As M follows the National Parks service—in the form of the immortals, those prophets of 'transformation', newly hired—to a new location in search of the thylacine, he 'faces a white border which marks the vacuous end of the world' (156). Beyond the borders of his beautiful maps M locates the thylacine's lair, a 'safe house' to which M is sure the tiger will return 'for sleep and company' (160). Paralleling M's now lost *oikos*, the lair contains the bones of a pup and the remnants of domesticity: 'So, lonesome, is this where she comes for company?' (159). M imagines himself at home in the lair, covering the floor 'with warm wallaby skins' (160) and inscribing the bones of the thylacine pup. He kills the thylacine on 'a day of clarity' (161) and the action takes him, like the white world, beyond speech: 'Words big enough for the beautiful terribleness of the deed, are long lost and out of reach' (164). This is a sublime evocation, in Lyotard's sense, of an otherwise unrepresentable loss. It is also the answer to M's question 'what is extinction?': the tiger 'looks nothing like the creature he knew before. There is an impassable, unimaginable gulf between life and death' (164). In the novel's figuratively dense staging of the thylacine's extinction, the one thing that can no longer be figured, except negatively as a gap or break in figuration, is loss.

*The Hunter's* deployment of the sublime—in which a figurative or metaphoric transformation contains an allusive gap pointing to loss—reaches its apogee in the novel's concluding passages. On his way back down from the plateau, M encounters the immortals. They offer him show of human concern and he 'joll[ies]' them along, fearing that 'what he carries will give him away, that it will emit a high-frequency sound, or glow like a radioactive sample' (168). There is a discontinuity between the terrible deed of extinction, the precious viscera M carries, and the outside world. There is also, like the radioactive sample, a sense of contamination. Extinction is incommensurable with the world which surrounds it, but it underpins a spreading resistance to transformation—evidenced when one of the immortals spies a piece of quartzite, 'an anomalous sight on the dolerite plateau' (170). M mistakes the immortal's excitement at discovering the quartzite for recognition of his act. Instead, the immortal 'tosses the rock into the grass so that for two seconds, maybe three, it tumbles over and over, and for those two or three seconds it is a miraculous new thing: a rock in air' (170). The mesmerising 'rock in air' possesses a curious material resistance: it is literally out of place, and attempts to re-place the rock through a figurative reading (as the immortal does physically) risk veering into the bathetic. Similarly, the oranges the immortals give M simply stay awkwardly there—both for M, who 'stands clumsily with an orange in each hand' (169), and for this reading. The circle of transformations approaches breakdown at the limit of ending. The only order M can summon to structure his experience is the fittingly arbitrary coffee that superstitiously bookends his missions: 'After, when it's all done, he'll sit up there and, *with all the time in the world* [emphasis added] ... brew himself one fine cup of coffee' (25). Extinction becomes a sublimely contained abyss with familiar atemporal trappings. But extinction can now also be seen, through the operation of the sublime, as an absence contained within incommensurable objects—objects that break down and resist transformation under the exposed pressure of loss.

*The Hunter* interrogates some of the bases on which globalised ecological thinking stands, breaking down metaphoric interconnection into unassimilable singularity, and distinguishing place through an extinction no longer proper to place. It is, however, still a peculiarly ecological novel. To encounter the novel's representation of loss is to encounter the 'white

world’, to ‘not be able to recognise your own *house* or your own *hand* [emphasis added]’ (99) —an encounter which destabilises the naturalisation of place and identity in the landscape. Against this naturalisation, the novel stages a reflexive aesthetic where one cannot be blind to the construction of vision. Applying the sublime to this reflexive approach, the novel can be seen to offer both another reconstruction of loss, in the shape of identity and belonging, and a vision of the breakdown of those reconstructions. It is this latter vision, no less constructed, that enables a sobering and frightening contact with irrevocable environmental destruction. *The Hunter*’s peculiar aesthetic of the sublime is not in the landscape; its presence cannot be verified or ‘tested’. However, it grants access to an absence which might only be available in theory.

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