

Being Elsewhere: Aesthetics, Identities and Alienation in Peter Austen's Life and Poetry

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Sixty-seven years ago, under the headline BRISBANE POET WHO TURNED MOSLEM DIES IN EGYPT, the *Courier-Mail* teased its readers with what must have seemed a slightly familiar scenario:

Aly Azir-el-Din is dead. He died in Cairo.

But there are businessmen in Brisbane today who will recall Peter Austen, their schoolmate at the Normal School, their fellow student at the Queensland University. For once, Egyptian Aly Azir-el-Din was Australian Peter Austen. (1)

The life and work of Peter Austen, an Australian poet and participant in the First World War, exemplify the defamiliarising function of the single instance, and suggest the possibility of unfamiliar, even “strange” ways in which people could live out the conventional role of the “soldier-poet.” This paper offers an account of his brief writing career from that perspective. Austen’s “take” on the war, though praised by some of his contemporaries, seems nonetheless to fall well outside the main spectrum of valued poetic responses. His poetry, to put it bluntly, is distinctly odd, and I have tried to understand, appreciate, and account for its oddity partly in terms of his particular personal experience of the war itself, and partly in terms of the specific cultural *milieu* in which his unusual sensibility was formed, that of Brisbane in the early years of the twentieth century.

Peter Austen was born Rudolf Novak Augstein, the eldest of three boys and three girls, in South Brisbane in 1892. His grandparents on both

sides were Austrian immigrants. He attended local public primary and secondary schools, and left, probably after tenth grade, to work as a clerk in the Customs Office across the river. Shortly afterwards he found more congenial employment a few doors further down William Street at the Queensland Public Library. In October 1914 he enlisted, and served with the Australian Army Medical Corps (1st Field Hospital) in Egypt, Gallipoli, Greece and Flanders for a period of almost three years, before obtaining a medical discharge with a defective mitral valve in the heart (and also, as it happened, a fractured finger) in May 1917.

After trying, without success, to obtain a repatriation scholarship to enable him to study medicine at Sydney University, Rudolf heeded the advice of a family friend and changed his “foreign-sounding” name by deed poll to Peter Austen late in 1917—the same year in which his father died, which perhaps made it seem less of a family betrayal. However this may be, his two younger brothers, Leopold and Gerrard, also changed their surname to Austen soon afterwards. (Leo went on to become a respected Pacific Island anthropologist, a disciple of Bronislaw Malinowski, and a Chief Administrator in New Guinea.) Rudolf/Peter’s attempts to study medicine having come to naught, he returned to Cairo in 1920 and there, within two years, changed his name yet again, this time to Aly Azir-el-Dinh. A year later he became a convert to Islam, and died in Cairo in 1939, never having returned to Australia.¹

Peter Austen published two books of poems about his experiences in the First World War: *Bill-Jim* in 1917 and *The Young Gods* in 1919. He also published some poetry before the war (as Rudolf Augstein), and some stories and reviews after it, including an undetermined number in Egypt under his Arabic name. But the “Austen” poems constitute his main claim to literary recognition as a significant but “minor” poet. This is the status he was accorded at the time in reviews of his books by, for example, A. G. Stephens (28) and Bertram Stephens (18), both of whom praised his work warmly, while acknowledging its inferiority to the best work of Leon Gellert and Harley Matthews. As far as I know nobody has revised—or indeed revisited—that assessment since. He is not mentioned in any of the national literary histories, and is represented in only one national anthology that I know of (Pizer 140-41). Being a Queenslander, he scores some paragraphs in the two Queensland literary histories, those by Henry Arthur Kellow (230, 234) and Cecil Hadgraft (13-14), and a couple of poems in two of the older Queensland anthologies (Stable and Kirwood 73; Byrnes and Vallis 44).

The literary archives have a way of throwing up individual writers who, even if they made no waves, somehow manage to stand to one side of the mainstream literary values, moral categories, and life-narratives retrospectively normalised and celebrated by national historiography and nationalist politics. Such writers can illuminate some of the less usual ways in which people live their lives and survive their history. (This pluralising effect is of particular interest when the history in question is as saturated with myths of national self-creation as the First World War is for Australians.) My main objective in this article, therefore, is to consider Peter Austen's work historically, as the record of an encounter between a certain kind of literary sensibility and the experience of active service. I am interested, in other words, in the process by which he "wrote his war," in the cultural capital and aesthetic assumptions he brought to the confrontation, and in how these may have enabled him to come to terms with it and survive it. I shall also touch, finally, on the question of how the prolonged assaults on his sensibility changed his personality and his life; but the absence of detailed information about his life in Egypt makes it difficult to do much more than speculate about that.

Austen's best known poem—perhaps one should say his least unheard-of poem—is called "Valse Triste." It appeared in his second published volume (1919), and was also included, thirty-five years later, in Marjorie Pizer's *Freedom on the Wallaby*.

Valse Triste

Art thou wan with grief, oh moon?
 Are the stars, thy woeful tears,
 Falling thro' the weary years?
 Laugh, oh laugh! For see the dead
 Men are dancing with the dead
 In a wondrous rigadon—
 Laugh, oh moon!

Hark, the music soft and low
 Rumbles thro' the acrid air;
 Is the sound of guns not fair?
 Is not death a worthy spouse?
 Come, shall we not make carouse?
 Hear the woman's song of woe,
 Soft and low!

How the glazing dead eyes stare!
 See, a man with shattered chest,
 Clutches to his bloody breast
 Some brave youth whose eyes are gone!
 How they gaily whirl upon
 All the dead ones lying there;
 How they stare!

How a grinning khakied boy
 Winds about his gaping throat
 Strips of some blood-spattered coat,
 Timing some unholy band
 With his dead mate's severed hand,
 To that madd'ning dance of joy,
 Oh, the boy!

Listen to the scamp'ring rats;
 There, one nibbles at a lip—
 Here, one gnaws a finger tip;
 There, one perched upon a knee,
 Combs its whiskers greedily,
 Ready for the banquet that's
 For the Rats!

Up and down and round about
 This way, that way, with their mate
 Ruin eyed and desolate;
 See, they dance the waltz of death,
 Never pausing for a breath;
 Grinningly they, in and out,
 Dance about!

Oh, the joyous holiday!
 Here, a boy with bloody hair
 Dances with a musketeer;
 Here a youth with shattered feet
 Stumbles through the waltzes sweet.
 Everywhere they gaily sway
 Thro' the day.

See, the stars are hung with smoke,
 Garlanding the glist'ning sky;
 How the silken banners fly!
 Hear the cannons' crash and roar;
 That's the music of the war!
 That—and that wild sob that broke
 Thro' the smoke!

Art thou wan with grief, oh moon?
 Listen to the dead men's song;
 Hear them gaily trip along,
 Watch the ruby blood that drips
 Drips from holes that once were lips.
 Oh, the wondrous rigadon,
 Laugh, oh moon! (*Young Gods* 41-42)

This poem stands at the slightly hysterical end of Austen's emotional spectrum. One reviewer called it “disturbing and perhaps disturbed,” and the naïve juxtaposing of pain, horror and playful gaiety does indeed produce a whiff of Charenton. Be that as it may, it shares with many of his calmer and saner-seeming poems a pronounced musicality, here signalled by the allusion to the composer Sibelius in the title, but also expressed, here and elsewhere, in patterns of repetition and in complex and unusual verse-forms and slightly “strange” rhythms. Kellow found these features a little oppressive, giving rise to “a lyricism perhaps too emotional and unrestrained” (234).

The poem also exhibits a characteristic fondness for sharply pictorial images. Usually these images are beautiful, even “pretty”—ironically so, if only in the passively ironic sense that they occur in the midst of ugliness, pain and horror. Sometimes, indeed, the “pretty” images are actually constitutive of the horror, as in the image of the ruby blood in the final stanza of “Valse Triste,” but even more strikingly in a short poem. “The Zeppelin,” here quoted in full:

Twitching, she lies;
 Her yellow hair, red with her blood that wells,
 And wells from where her eyes
 Once glowed like faint bluebells,

How still she lies. (*Young Gods* 30)

That same chilling, Hardy-esque effect is repeated, with variations, many times in Austen's second volume. It occurs, for example, at the end of "Victory," a brief narrative poem in which an infantry patrol discovers a young family in a rose garden in Flanders: both parents have been killed by shrapnel, and there is a child surviving, a baby, who

with its tiny fingers bold
Plays with the mother's torn silk scarf,
And catches at her hair's red-gold,
With mischievous laugh!

He, chuckling, scrambles thro' the door,
And grasps a loosened, bloody braid;
A lizard slides across the floor,
With wond'ring eyes of jade! (36)

My reference to Thomas Hardy was intended to suggest that poet's pessimistic focus on nature's obliviousness to human suffering—as here in the laughing baby and the jade-eyed lizard. It surely also brings to mind that potent brand of active or *critical* irony (sometimes tragic, sometimes satiric in emphasis) that we tend to value so highly in the great combatant poetry of the First World War, especially that of British poets such as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon, where goodness and beauty are mindlessly destroyed, and noble ideals exposed as pious or sentimental frauds. Because critical irony generally provides such an emotionally rewarding, morally satisfying, and biographically plausible way of reading those poets, there is a natural (modern) tendency to use it as a strategy for reading wisdom and value into any and all war poetry which is not straightforwardly heroic or patriotic in tone, and certainly into much of the other combatant poetry of the First World War.

This can perhaps be described as a *redemptive* reading strategy, which is to say the kind of reading that can make an ironic silk purse out of a patriotic sow's ear. What is at stake, after all, where someone like Peter Austen is involved? One is tempted to say that if finding critical irony in a largely forgotten Australian war poet can give him a new lease of life, then why not? But for most of his poetry there is, I believe, a real and interesting question as to whether such a reading provides the "best fit." What is at issue is the nature of the relationship in his poetry between the depicted facts of suffering, horror and putrefaction, and the

beauty—both physical and spiritual—from which it is sometimes almost inseparable.

Kellow makes the call in favour of critical irony, acknowledging that Austen “can see beauty in sordid places,” but insisting that “mainly he sees war after the fashion of Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon” (234). It seems to me, though, that the ironies in Austen’s poems are by and large not critical, but passive and transcendental in nature: the beauty is not there to be destroyed, or the noble ideals to be mocked; they are there, rather, to point *away from* the horror and the pain to something or somewhere beyond or above them. On such a reading, Peter Austen’s answer to Wilfred Owen’s famous question “Was it for this the clay grew tall?” might almost have been “Yes”!

The nature of this type of irony becomes clearer in “Sursum Corda,” addressed to the grieving loved ones of the dead soldiers, to whom the poet puts a series of short questions.² It begins:

Why do ye weep?
 Beyond the grave he lives, he is not dead!
 No longer from Life’s poppy-petalled glass
 He drinks, sinking to heavy-lidded sleep.
 He lives! For as the storm-strewn rain clouds pass
 Across the sky at morn, e’en so, his deep
 Dull dreams of poppy-poisoned sleep are fled,
 Why do ye weep?

The third stanza takes the poem into a realm of Gothic horror beyond the Shelleyan idealism of the first:

Why do ye shrink?
 If o’er those lips which once were pressed on thine,
 The cold grey worms now crawl, and eat its red,
 And if, on that dear form once held by thee
 Dank, noisome horrors feast, ’tis but the dead
 And empty shell they eat. It is not he!
 So though his rounded throat something entwine
 Why do ye shrink?

The poet's answer, given in the next stanza, is the purest transcendentalism.

Ah, do not weep!
 For as the purple-winged butterfly
 Bursts in its glory from the frail cocoon,
 So has his struggling soul its trammels burst.
 If, for a while, its beauty of the moon
 Glowed through the earthy shell with which 'twas curst,
 Surely 'twas this ye loved? This did not die!
 So, do not weep! (23-24)

Over and over, Austen insists on the aesthetic or spiritual beauty which exists within, or beside, or beyond both the horrors he describes in such gruesome detail and the pain and grief he evokes with such intense sympathy.

This sensibility even informs his larger sense of his role as a war poet, as a would-be bard who aspires to

Tell the proud Tale of Anzac's splendid host,
 To weave the wondrous tale in wondrous rhyme,
 Paint it with colours that would gleam and glow,
 Play it on hoarse-stringed, sobbing zithers sweet and slow.
 ("Anzac" *Young Gods* 19)

Austen's aspirational sense of himself as a Homeric bard is common enough among non-combatant war poets, but was more unusual among the combatant poets on all sides, who tended to lose their aspirations and become critical ironists, or cynics, or worse. Austen served as a medical orderly in field hospitals for three years, so he saw plenty of ugliness and horror and heard about a lot more, much of which is faithfully recorded in his poetry. Yet his aesthetic idealism—by which I mean his love of beauty and his ability to find it—seems to have survived this prolonged exposure intact. Still more, in an odd reversal of the usual combatant's progress from innocent optimism to disenchantment and pessimism, his aesthetic idealism seems to have flourished and intensified after starting out with the somewhat more jaundiced and cynical view of things expressed in his earlier book of war poems, *Bill-Jim* (1917).

The *Bill-Jim* poems look and sound surprisingly different from those of *The Young Gods*. Whereas the poems in this volume are all written in standard

English, with some Edwardian artificialities of diction (“thou,” “e’en,” “yea,” “neath” and so forth), all but a couple of the *Bill-Jim* poems are written in the full-blown Australian vernacular of C. J. Dennis, whose *Moods of Ginger Mick* (1916) was an obvious inspiration. Austen adopts the voice of a common Australian infantryman, the “Bill-Jim” of the title, and he does the phonetic spelling and the Aussie slang pretty consistently and well. He sometimes uses it, as Dennis did, to deflate the rhetorical heroics of propagandising war journalists—“these ’ighfaluten tikes”—

They writes about us blokes an’ makes er chap
Yap like some silly poitisin’ chump.

We got no time ter shout “Ter do er die!”
Wi’ orl them star-shells burstin’ in th’ sky,
Th’ bloke what tried them kind er dodges on,
Be cripes! ’ed be a silly sort er guy!

(“These ’igh-faluten Tikes” 27)

The Australian vernacular, and the no-nonsense ethos it carries with it, cast a mildly satirical perspective on noble sentiments and fancy words, and there are a couple of poems in which the Bill-Jim and his mates exercise their larrikin defiance of “kiwied” (boot-polished) staff officers.

But the tough realism of *Bill-Jim* is really only skin-deep: like Ginger Mick himself, the Bill-Jim ends up accepting the essential truth of the journalists’ heroic descriptions. Furthermore—and not even Dennis tries this—one of Austen’s favourite effects in this volume is the uneducated soldier’s awkwardly authentic encounter with aesthetic and emotional intensities that take him by surprise:

Wi’ ’air orl wet an’ tangled like
’Er close orl torn—a ’clutchin’ at ’er Beads,
Down in th’ slimy pool—ah strike!
Me mate an’ me, we foun’ ’er floatin’ in th’ weeds.

(“The Pool” 26)

Australian reviewers in *Aussie*, the *Lone Hand*, the *Triad* and *Town and Country* praised the direct “realism” of this and similar poems in the *Bill-Jim* volume. Bertram Stevens thought Austen’s second book, *The Young Gods*, was “an advance on the first, and one of the most poetical products of the Australian

army” (18); but it remains the case that, from a modern standpoint, the shift away from the realistic vernacular of the earlier book implies a very unusual progression—a movement from realism to idealism rather than in the opposite direction. Given his three years of active service, how could this have happened? I can suggest three possible reasons.

The first is that, because he served as a medical orderly rather than a direct combatant, he may well have been spared some of the more brutalising and terrifying aspects of actual trench warfare—the artillery barrages and close combat—while witnessing at first hand the suffering, physical horror, and waste of life that were its consequence. And the second possible reason is that, in the period between writing his first and second volumes of poetry, Austen fell in love with Rupert Brooke: *The Young Gods* is dedicated to Brooke; the second and third poems in the volume are called “sonnets to Rupert Brooke”; and the last poem is called simply “Brooke!” To say that these poems praise Brooke, who died of septicaemia at Lemnos in April 1915, is to understate the case; they worship him—indeed, the last poem explicitly so:

“Hush,” wails the sea,
 “Hush, for a god lies dead.”
 From the cold carelessness of you he fled—
 Disturb not then his rest; his young feet sped
 Up the cold paths with glee.
 “Hush, for a god lies dead.” (46)

The sonnets reveal an intimate familiarity with some of Brooke’s wonderful pre-war poetry, as well as the patriotic Brooke standards of the early months of the war. They also reveal an erotic *cum* aesthetic fascination with his legendary physical beauty. Austen was not unusual in this: Rupert Brooke’s untimely death had an impact on the Western world comparable with Princess Diana’s nearly eighty years later, and in Brisbane even the young (and very straight) Jack Lindsay wrote melting panegyrics for the *Queensland University Magazine*, praising his poetry and quoting with approval Edmund Gosse’s rhapsodies on his personal magnetism (27).

One reviewer of *The Young Gods* remarked that, for all his admiration of Brooke, Austen does not seem to have been much influenced by his poetry; and certainly Austen’s work lacks the Englishman’s sardonic whimsy (Morton 18). But their poetry shares at least one important expressive feature, and

that is the deliberate juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness. Brooke's *Poems 1911* contains a notorious "ugly group" of half a dozen poems dealing with ugly people, body odours, old age, violent seasickness and post-coital self-disgust. The seasickness sonnet, "A Channel Passage," is probably the best-known, if the least disturbing:

Do I forget you? Retchings twist and tie me,
 Old meat, good meals, brown gobbets, up I throw.
 Do I remember? Acrid return and slimy,
 The sobs and slobber of a last year's woe.
 And still the sick ship rolls. 'Tis hard, I tell ye,
 To choose 'twixt love and nausea, heart and belly. (85)

Austen translates that slightly perverse idiom into some of his own more bravura descriptions of wounds, dying and decay. He also resonates strongly with the same-sex desire guiltily implicit in Brooke—what he called, in his first "Sonnet to Rupert Brooke," Brooke's "sweet despair born of scarce known desire."³ A similarly confessional impulse may have driven him to write an "ugly sonnet" of his own with the same title as one of Brooke's—"Lust"—in the *Bulletin* a few months before returning to Cairo. Brooke's "Lust" is the better poem, but both seem like "cruising" poems, and both are suffused with shame, self-loathing and a studied lack of gendering pronouns.

Two of the possible reasons, then, why Austen's poetry maintained and even intensified its aesthetic idealism up to and beyond his extended experience of the horrors of the field hospitals relate to the period of his war service. The third relates more to the period before 1914, when he was deeply influenced by an interesting and unusual mentor, the Reverend Douglas Price, M.A. The young Rudolf Augstein published numerous poems from at least as early as 1912 in various publications, including the *Sydney Bulletin*, the *Brisbane Daily Mail*, the *Queensland University Magazine*, and an obscure little Brisbane magazine, published in the inner northern suburb of Woolloowin, the *Modernist*, a bi-monthly magazine that ran from 1912-1916. It was edited and largely written by Price, a feisty young English cleric who was the leader of the Modernist Movement in Brisbane (also known as the Progressive Christian Church). Price had been appointed Rector of All Saints Church and Principal of the Anglican Theological College in Brisbane in 1903. During his very popular ministry his ideas broadened to the point of rejecting the doctrines of the Trinity, the Atonement, the Virgin

Birth, the Resurrection and the Divinity of Jesus. Against superstition and sectarian bigotry, he preached that the true object of religion was to foster our moral passion through an appreciation of the wisdom, goodness and beauty of the human heart as manifested in the moral, intellectual and artistic achievements of human beings of all ages and creeds (Ralston 5-6). He was also favourably disposed—as were many liberal intellectuals at the time—to the “science” of eugenics, and to a belief in reincarnation. He made common cause with liberal Unitarians in Sydney and Adelaide, and with the Theosophists, whose world leader, Annie Besant, he publicly defended from attacks by Fundamentalists on the occasion of her visit to Brisbane in 1908 (Roe 319-20).

Price was expelled from the Church of England for his heterodoxy in 1910, to the sorrow and outrage of his large and loyal congregation, and went off to Europe to lick his wounds and mentally regroup. He returned to Brisbane the following year, started up the *Modernist*, and resumed his ministry outside the Church in 1912.⁴ The Augstein family were Anglicans, very probably Price’s parishioners before his expulsion, and Rudolf contributed several poems and at least one review to the *Modernist* in its first year. The review is of one of Douglas Price’s own novelistic fables, *The Soul of Judas: A Tapestry of Tales*, which he praises in an exaggerated version of the kaleidoscopic register he was still using to convey beauty in *The Young Gods*: rubies, sapphires, amethysts, malachite, opals, moonstones and chalcedony comprise just one of several such multi-coloured paradigms.

If the “Brooke poems” in *The Young Gods* seem to sublimate desire into hero-worship, these earlier effusions barely manage to keep desire safely on the page. The object of desire in the following poem may well have been Douglas Price:

The lazy moon! The yellow moon! The dripping moon!
 Your strained cheeks, my madly pulsing throat,
 Your clinging sun-browned hands, your beating heart,
 The sweeping curve of beach, the convent lights
 That distant gleamed, and fading, gleamed again,

...

Those far, faint hills, the thick, damp, creeping mists
 That came and went, the flapping dim-lit tent,
 Where you and I slept nightly side by side,
 The fired stump, the sweet, soft smell of earth,
 The thousand noiseless sounds that make the night,
 And over all the sea, the sea, the sea,
 The sobbing sea! And you, my friend, and you,
 And all! The moon! The stars! My throbbing throat!
 And you!

(“Song of the Weed” 18-19)

Austen’s cultural and intellectual environment in pre-war Brisbane, during his late teens and early twenties, seems to have been dominated by the charismatic influence of Douglas Price and his brand of Christian Modernism, which cultivated and channelled very intense states of religious, aesthetic, emotional and sensual experience, and connected them through literature. Price delivered many sermons on classic literature and literary style, which were later published in the *Modernist*.⁵

What Price admired in writers like Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Walter Pater, Gustave Flaubert, and Edgar Allan Poe was their love of “rare words, musical words, words redolent of mystic lands, and heavy with the tears and laughter of many centuries.” “The secret of a beautiful style,” he said, “lies in . . . a vivid imagination, a great sensitiveness to rhythm, a subtle alliteration, a tropical use of analogy, a power of personifying all things, and, above all, a frightful, torturing sympathy” (13-14). That frightful, torturing sympathy was certainly something Rudolf Augstein took with him to the war, and so too was the highly object-focused conception of literary beauty Price celebrated—that now almost scandalous idea of a poem as a beautiful thing made of beautiful words and sounds, arranged in a beautiful and satisfying form. Austen also took with him a conviction that the love and beauty in art and life pointed directly towards the love and beauty of the world beyond this, and that in the larger, transcendental scheme of things the ugliness, suffering and death he saw all around him in Egypt, Greece and France, far from cancelling out love and beauty, made it doubly important to keep them in view. This “Higher Perspective” on the slaughter, largely devoid of critical irony and therefore somewhat uncongenial to later liberal thought and anti-war sentiment, was adopted by a number of high-ranking soldier-theosophists, including Major-Generals Kenneth Mackay and Sir C. B. B. White, Lt-General H. Gordon

Bennett, and Major Jack Bean, the historian Charles Bean's younger brother, who went on to become general secretary of the Australasian Section of the Theosophical Society (Roe 218-32).

So Peter Austen's progression as a war poet towards, rather than away from, aesthetic idealism can be read, up to a point, as a reversion to a style and sensibility first formed in association with the particular religious and literary environment surrounding Douglas Price and the *Modernist* in pre-war Brisbane, and reinforced perhaps by the generally patriotic (if increasingly elegiac) tone of some of the journals he published in, like the *Queensland University Magazine*, throughout the War years. In this sense, the "Dennis-ism" of *Bill-Jim* represents a brief experimental departure from the "beautiful" style of both the pre-war poetry and *The Young Gods*. Thus the writer of the Foreword to *Bill-Jim* felt he needed to inform the reader that "[w]hen the spirit moves Mr. Austen he writes verse in a style very different from that with which Bill-Jim is accredited; and I am sure that a future awaits him in his literary expression" (3). The writer was Ernest N. Merrington, M.A., Ph.D., Chaplain Colonel, and President of the Queensland Branch of the Returned Servicemen's League. He was also the founder of the (Presbyterian) Emmanuel College at the University of Queensland, a Protestant theologian and philosopher of considerable achievement, and a passionate advocate for conscription. Even if Austen only knew Merrington slightly before asking him to write the Foreword (and he might have known him well through a variety of channels), the latter would clearly have stood as a bulwark against any tendency on Austen's part towards cynicism, defeatism—or for that matter, the wrong kind of irony.⁶

Peter Austen returned to Cairo in early 1920, and in the following year he converted to Islam and changed his name to Aly Azir-el-Din. His anonymous obituarist in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* gave this account of the remaining eighteen years of his life:

He did nothing by halves. As a follower of Islam, Peter Austen disappeared. In his place was Aly Azir-el-Din, seller of carpets and curios in Cairo. His partner an Egyptian. But Aly Azir-el-Din was probably no businessman, for in 1924 he started a private school. Later he became a teacher in a government school. Finally he joined the staff which edited the reviews in English of the Al Azhar University. (1)

For the first few years after his arrival, he wrote reviews of books, theatre and musical performances in Cairo for the *Egyptian Mail*, the daily newspaper

of the British community, and the *Sphinx*, another Cairo newspaper. The reviews reveal an enthusiastic immersion in classical Arabic art and literature, and a keen interest in following and promoting the career of Amsen Rihani, a young Syrian poet and translator, with whom—reading between the lines—he seems to have formed a romantic relationship (“Syrian Poet” 6).

Aly Azir’s attitude to Middle Eastern culture is a curious mix of passionate nativism and European condescension:

In the front of the stage was a pleasant fountain; in the wings were many shady trees; in the distance the garden stretched in delightful dimlit vistas, but—and here’s the rub—the marble-pillared balcony from where the strains of the sad Kanoun, and of the birdlike Oud floated—this balcony (Oh horror of horrors!) was filled with the musicians in their hideous European clothes.

I have spoken, I have written before of this overwhelming mania of the Muslim of today to discard his beautiful gowns and the “emma” of his religion for the ugly Ferhengi clothes and the tarbush; but surely here, in a company of enthusiastic amateurs, one might expect a better sense of the fitting, a realization of the beauty and the pathos of their religion. (“Oriental Music” 6)

The lordly fastidiousness of the reviewing tone conveys a sense of a new personality, or at least a new *persona*, emerging from the psychic traumas of the war. It is not an especially attractive persona, but it does sound coherent, mature and stable (if also somewhat pretentious)—and perhaps that could only have been achieved in an environment where the past could be selectively banished, and where he could embark on a radically new and different life, but in a familiar place. And in his last phrase, “the beauty and the pathos of their religion,” we glimpse the one continuity Aly Azir did value, and was able to experience, beneath the almost complete transformation to which he had subjected himself.

The year 1921 was the eve of the restoration of Egypt’s nominal independence from Britain, and in the English-language Egyptian newspapers of that time there is a palpable political anxiety abroad. Aly Azir’s writings show no direct interest in the political tensions of the society and culture he had chosen to inhabit. They do, however, show a consistent interest in the aesthetic quality, sensuous immediacy and spiritual power of what he experienced in it, just as he had in Brisbane before the War, and in the field hospitals of the Middle East and the Western Front. It seems, though, that the aesthetic idealism that

enabled him to write about his wartime experiences, and even to make some precarious sense of them, failed to sustain his poetic creativity in the longer term. He died at the age of forty-seven after falling down a flight of steps and fracturing his skull. His obituarist in the *Sphinx* noted, reasonably enough, that “the promise of his early years was never fulfilled.” (qtd. in the *Courier-Mail* 1). Whether this was because, as the same writer opined, “the poet forgot his role under the spell of his new-found religion,” or because a sensibility so unaccommodated to the realities surrounding him was bound, sooner or later, to fall silent, is a difficult and probably unanswerable question.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Biographical information on Peter Austen (Regimental #87) is derived from the following sources: Obituary, *Courier-Mail*, 14 June 1939; Australian War Memorial, National Archives of Australia (Item #149534); John F. Williams, *German Anzacs and the First World War* 107; and J. H. Hornibrook, *Bibliography of Queensland Verse, with Biographical Notes* 2. I wish to thank Pauline Sainsbury, a relative of Peter Austen, for her valuable information and advice, as well as some documents.
- 2 The title is a phrase from the Latin liturgy where the priest calls upon the faithful, “Lift up your hearts,” as did the risen Jesus to the grieving women at the tomb.
- 3 According to Pauline Sainsbury (telephone conversation, October 2005), Rudolf/Peter’s sexuality was recognised and accepted (though not discussed) by his family.
- 4 Strictly speaking, he took over, or rather resumed and re-named, the *Cygnets*, the Brisbane diocesan magazine he had edited while he was still within the Church.
- 5 Douglas Price died in 1916, at the age of forty-two. A year later Florence Fuller conducted thirteen conversations with Price in the spirit in which he described the processing of the war dead, the apparent absence of a single Deity, and meetings with the (then living) Theosophist leaders C. W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant on the astral plane. These were published a year later as *Continent of the Death*.
- 6 Merrington was a figure of real intellectual substance. Having studied philosophy at Sydney University (under Francis Anderson), then at Edinburgh, he subsequently read for his Ph.D. at Harvard with William James, Josiah Royce, C. I. Lewis and others of note. He left Brisbane in the 1920s to take up an appointment at the University of Otago, and remained there for the rest of his career.

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