

**‘Shapely Experience’ and the Limits of ‘Late Colonial
Transcendentalism’: The Portrait of the Artist as Soldier in
Roger McDonald’s *1915***

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In his provocative account of Patrick White’s reputation, Simon During attributes the transcendental turn in the Australian novel to the Nobel laureate’s work in the 1950s and ’60s, which he associates with a transition in cultural politics from colonialism to postcolonialism. Colonialism is represented through forms of historical realism appropriate to the egalitarian aspirations of cultural nationalism; postcolonialism is expressed in modernist aesthetic forms that supplant the representative character and politics of realism with transcendental interests in metaphysics and symbol. In this way the ‘emptiness’ of national life is sacralised without the need to acknowledge its sources in the dispossession of the indigene, disenchantment with Europe and the commodification and suburbanisation of everyday life. This line of argument is clearly at odds with another trend in Australian literary scholarship that sees the sacred as a postcolonial revision of European romanticism, which offers, in theory at least, the possibility of an ethical rapprochement with the land’s first peoples. The difference between these pessimistic and optimistic views of the sacred resides in part in their different attachments: politics for one; ethics the other. For Bill Ashcroft: ‘What we learn from a ... secular sacred ... is the possibility of an ‘outside’ that may locate difference beyond the binarism of present global power relations’ (151). The role played by the sacred within postcolonial Australian culture, for Andrew McCann, however, sees it circulating as an aestheticised mode of representation, which ‘attempts to imagine a version of Australian identity uncompromised by, if not magically released from, the fatal entanglements of settlement’ (McCann 152).

In this essay I want to argue that Roger McDonald’s debut novel, *1915*, develops a form of literary modernism which represents the postcolonial turn through a rejection of the aesthetic comforts of ‘late colonial transcendentalism’ (17). The novel entertains and then rejects any sense of revelation which is not both embodied and at the same time cognisant of the subject’s socialisation by a disciplined society. McDonald presents us with an intricate—we might even say ritualised—pattern of subversive counterpoint to ‘reveal and dramatise the failure of the subject to escape its own limits, and hence its own history’ (McCann 155). The result is a highly self-conscious literary novel that seeks to reconcile the art of high modernism with a postcolonial practice interested in the historical and political consequences of public memory.

1915 uses an intrusive third person narrator, whose traditional laconicism is occasionally disrupted by moments of lyric description and bursts of allusive style. These periodic shifts in register represent Woolf-like—and more latterly White-like—aspirations after metaphysical transcendence and the style was singled out for criticism by some reviewers (for example Mc Bride and Pierce). For Peter Childs, Woolf’s attempt to ‘transform the symbolic order from

the inside' is expressed most clearly in 'her transformation of the representation of self and consciousness' (169). Her 'moments of being' differ from Joyce's epiphanies because they represent insight or revelation as a somatic affect capable of sympathetically connecting her characters. Patrick White's interest in the transcendental moment also dabbles in the articulation of the 'world of semblance' and the 'world of dream' but the fleeting inspirations of *1915* never quite go so far as to ground themselves in substance, and somatic affect is a bell that tolls the characters back to their sole selves (White, *Voss* 259). The novel's chapters proceed episodically according to a fairly consistent chronology, comprising short scenes that allow quick transitions in space and time and a mobile narrative perspective. Associations across time and space organise the plot and the theme is developed through a recurring set of subversive juxtapositions, a 'richly-patterned texture', in which one by one characters confront situations which enable the author to reveal his sociological and metaphysical preoccupations (Andrews 180).

The military experiences of the male characters are carefully and consciously linked with their 'domestic' experiences' and this makes *1915* more than just a war novel. The close association of war and society allows a focus upon Walter, Billy and Frances' search 'throughout *1915* for a pattern of meaning to their lives', and according to Barry Andrews, who takes his lead from MacDonald's friend Rodney Hall, *1915*'s characters are 'seeking to create a mosaic out of the fragments of experience' (181). The metaphor is taken from a scene in which Walter, who has been struggling to reconcile his encounters with Australian women with his experience of an Egyptian prostitute, is captivated by the tile mosaic that decorates the dome of an Egyptian mosque. The incident is characteristically presented through analepsis as a recollection in the trenches, which inspires Walter's decision to become an artist:

And an absurd, fanciful thing it was, at the gangling age of twenty-one to have grasped this idea of art and his destiny being intertwined. In the mosque it had expressed itself as a wish to walk obliquely away from all past selves, and yet to retain them. To play with their patterns, to organise, fragment, and reconstruct—otherwise all heartburning and anguish, and bliss as well, might seem nothing but ashes in the wind. And such a thought could not be borne. (244)

This is a pivotal moment for Andrews who uses it to advocate the novel's aesthetic vocation. He notes briefly that the observation might be read historically as an expression of Walter's need to creatively organise his past experiences into a new and meaningful identity. But he is more interested in seeing it 'in Joycean terms as a moment of artistic self-discovery, for ... Walter decides that one way he might order ... the world is as a writer; art and life are entwined in exactly the same way they are for Stephen Daedalus. *1915*, if Walter's decision to become a journalist is serious, is the portrayal of the artist as a young soldier' (179). It is difficult now, in the wake of Patrick White's much cited association of the Great Australian Emptiness with the journalist's rule of the intellectual roost, not to see the association of an artistic destiny with a career in journalism as a failure of the imagination (though of course there are notable historical exceptions) (White, 'The Prodigal Son' 269). Walter's decision at that time *is* serious but that does not stop him from almost immediately realising that it is another misconception, in a series that runs through the novel that repeatedly undercut his aspirations after greater human significance. These aspirations adopt and abandon various vehicles from science (Walter studies geology at University), the military, religion, and then art, with each being explored with varying degrees of enthusiasm prior to an inevitable abandonment. In fact, the characteristic movement of the 'richly patterned texture' of the novel is to aspire after a revelation, which is always surrendered Keats-like on the cusp

through unsettling juxtaposition with the quotidian complications of a material world. Walter's evanescent visions in particular are thwarted with a consistency and vehemence which call the form of the aspiration if not the aspiration itself into question.

A survey of Walter's 'moments' or 'epiphanies' makes my point. The first is taken from when he returns home to hear of Billy's mother's cancer and the 'imminence of death' distorts 'his apprehension of familiar places and things.' He responds by visiting a familiar childhood haunt in the wheat field where the natural seasons of rural production provide a lived Les Murray-like pattern for understanding life and death. For 'fear, which in the city was abstract and confusing and could conjure brick walls only, had ground to contend with in the bush, and on the ground life' (61). Some might be tempted to see this as an example of the local and immanent form of the sacred that Ashcroft sees as the latest transformation of the postcolonial sacred (146). The degree to which the natural cycles of rural life provide a sense of balance rings a little hollow, however, when Walter contemplates the comfort Mrs Mackenzie might draw from the wheat field if she should look out her hospital window. Blacky Reid, who is also focused on the harvest makes the point when he refuses to associate it with any 'divine service': 'I don't go for this religion malarkey...It's all words. All bloody hot air. You've only got to look at a dead cow some time. That's us, boy, skin and bones and guts that go off just like a cow' (63). Walter's metaphysical predicament is to be caught between these evanescent moments of expectation and the brutal existential reality of corporeal existence, and that middle ground—represented as it is by society and history—is a prison house of sorts.

When McDonald gives us the 'Divine Service' of orthodox religion he draws attention to the, at times, comic distance between the ritual's spiritual pretensions and the more pragmatic expectations of the congregation. Billy's cousins' search for masculine attention at Church likens them to pullets looking for food, and the service is a routine expression of social respectability for which women are expected to take responsibility. These women 'knew what they wanted' and while they 'pinched the bridges of their noses ... the men held their hands over their foreheads and looked at the floor'; Walter is confused by his contending hopes, and Billy struggles altogether with the reflexivity necessary for metaphysics (72; 73). As Mr Fox's sermon departs from the present moment of Christmas to 'wrestle with the troubles of the future,' he loses a congregation preoccupied with the heat and thoughts of Christmas dinner (78). Billy slumps along with the rest but Walter is lifted up and struck by Fox's *Voss*-like declaration that 'as we are taken ... and destroyed, so we shall glimpse the destination' (79). What Walter does glimpse, however, is the pine tree outside the window shaken by a breeze that turns out to be his younger brother, Douggie, playing truant from bible class.

Walter's elusive metaphysical moments distinguish him from his peers and their profit is to curse him for it. In the chapter following on from 'Divine Service' Blacky Reid revenges them all for the young man's 'priggishness' by humiliating him for his love of Frances. According to Mrs Pepper, their need to take something from him is prompted by his aspirations after spiritual distinction (91). Walter wonders if she could 'understand dreams—the 'maybe' of not ever shifting, but scrutinizing the life that swirled under motionless things?' (91). But nothing eventuates and his decision to enlist is welcomed because it delivers him from his metaphysical questions by surrendering his fate to history:

Alone and without distractions Walter's senses crackled through the past or raced forward in electric dashes. He tried to add himself up, to make something of his past self to thrust into the future whole and unbreakable. Because the idea of going to war

was a simple one, with its mix of abandonment and submission, of colour, noise, pride, he really did conclude, under a sky of almost deserted imponderables—once upon a time he could have named half a hundred stars—that the clash of history whose noise beckoned had done him a favour. He noted the smudged Magellanic Clouds over to the south, and caught at his back three stars setting in the west—names out of reach, but without mystery now, because all cavities that once tantalized, the gulfs of How Big? How Old? Where Does It Go? When Will It End? Somehow presented themselves for answer in the span of his own actions. To go! His life pulsed forward in this active phrase, which would solve all, and was itself everything. (132-33)

The sublime extent of cosmic space and geological time has been surrendered to the more immediate social call of history. But McDonald is just as sceptical of patriotism as he is of the possibilities of metaphysical transcendence and he represents the rush to war with a wry attention to social detail. He covers the fears of mothers for sons and the confusion over German immigrants who were familiar neighbours and good settlers. He captures the exuberant jingoism as well as the odd oppositional voice which construes the war as an impetuous farce or an imperial swindle. Tom Larsen's facetious offer to 'send a truck load of scholars' to help the war effort suggests the intemperance of the waves of enthusiasm that quickly mobilise local support (137). The rush to war provides the context for Walter's realisation that his enlistment sense of 'the pastel erasure of the ordinary past' (144) was not a moment of transcendence, but a product of the community approval; an approval not so much based on patriotism, as on the awareness that war offered him an escape from the dull routines of their ordinary lives:

Every place, every person, had come to him bearing love. That was the reason why the country glowed specially yellow and green; why his mother had cried the other day ... why flags draped every poor settlement hall; why Ethel kissed him at the sports ... Love, love—only it didn't mean charity or comfort, nor even kindness. It was a torch of passion hurled from the darkness of a million small lives, which Walter was expected to catch and keep alight for others. (144)

It is not until later, following his enlistment, that he experiences what appears to be a genuine vision while listening to an anti-war orator in the Domain. The moment is not a Silas Marner-like catatonia such as he suffered as a child, but a vision of two worlds: 'one of the street ... the other of metaphor rushing vividly to reality'—both representing a response to the orator's injunction: '*Don't go to hell*' (161). Walter's vision of 'the four heavy weights, tombstones?' (161) that trundle down an imagined chute towards him is a moment of surreal rupture which suggests delusion rather than magic realist transcendence or modernist epiphany. The self-conscious reference to metaphor is a well-recognised ironic convention of postmodernist aesthetics.

McDonald uses prolepsis to throw the significance of the domestic action forward into the war and flashback to contextualise it later in the novel in much the same way. Prior to embarkation Walter and Billy take Frances and Diana to one of Sir Douglas Mawson's polar lectures. Mawson appeals to the patriotism of his public and the 'fellow feeling' of the young Anzacs by construing polar exploration as a heroic struggle for the glory of the Empire: 'I was privileged to rally the "sons of the younger son"', the explorer tells them, and 'they knew what he meant' (316). The camaraderie of soldier and imperial adventurer makes Walter feel 'less removed from a meaningful existence' for Mawson's expedition 'was an opportunity to prove that the young men of this young country could rise to those traditions that had made

the history of British polar exploration one of triumphant endeavour as well as of tragic sacrifice' (316). Frances takes his hand and as he leans forward to catch the explorer's commentary she admires his 'romantic' look in the 'cold light':

After that it seemed nothing could ever go wrong—not with Frances, not with the world. Walter told himself that he was made of the stuff of heroes, and for as long as Frances fed him with admiration, he was. (317)

The scene leads to their love-making on the eve of embarkation but it is presented analeptically during the negotiated cease-fire with the Turks on Gallipoli so that both sides could bury the dead. The chapter ends with Walter's sense that they are all 'on stage and out there is an audience seated on dark tiers' (329). In the end the hope that Walter's enlistment would enable him to avoid his anxieties about love and war is not borne out by the narrative events. His status as a soldier paves the way for a temporary triumph in courting Frances but her shallow attachment soon wanes when he leaves for the Middle East. The structure of the narrative ensures that the reader is well aware of it by the time they come to his brief moment of fulfilment.

The important chapter 'The Mohammedan Tile', in which Walter encounters Muslim art in the mosque, occurs some sixty pages prior to the consummation of his relationship with Frances. It begins with him experiencing a wet dream after falling asleep fondling her scarf. This dream is not specifically concerned with his Australian lover, however, but with his sexual encounter with a 'dark-eyed girl of indeterminate nationality' in Alexandria. The flashback identifies the prostitute's physical resemblance to Frances, and Walter pursues her at Ollie Melrose's bidding as a form of revenge for the indifference of her letters. Walter's recollection sets an orientalist fantasy of 'a cushioned and carpeted room' which he invented for Ollie's approval alongside the tawdry actuality of the encounter, during which 'his bought love at the height of their professional entanglement ... actually raised a haunch and scratched herself' (238). The dream that stimulated his unwelcome ejaculation is inspired by the description of the girl that he tailors for his comrade; 'but in the waking world' such 'perfection had not been purchasable'. It is this failure with the prostitute, the failure of life to live up to the expectations of the imagination, which leads Ollie to suggest 'the aesthetic solution' that takes them both to the Mosque.

The subversion of the orientalist fantasy is indicative of a recurring pattern in which McDonald presents an aspiration for transcendence or epiphany only to thwart it with a sobering realisation of the subject's 'own limits'. In the Mosque Ollie 'pedantically' lectures Walter on 'the decorative tendency of Arab art' before 'whisper[ing] away in his smelly socks' (242). The narrator lyrically describes the 'wonderful dome of old geometry' (242), but Walter is 'paraded in the track of Ollie like an assistant school inspector. In their protestant wonder both might have been engaged in an assessment of the place of wall tiles in public instruction' (243). Yet another flashback locates the entire reverie in the trenches where Walter struggles to 'absorb the dome's lesson' only to be distracted by a sudden storm that reveals 'a dead man's leg built into the earthworks':

What was it about 'lessons' that made them elusive? Were they lessons only for the duration of their precipitation in words, later to evaporate, like the storm, and leave things as arid and unknowable as ever? Did nothing stick? Were they just sayings which the body, that alternately ruthless and pathetic companion of the soul, sneered at, rejected, or most terribly, with deadly acceptance, permitted—just to have the

lesson reveal in greatest extremity the washed-clean deadness of the body's lack of understanding? (243)

This then is the lead up to Walter's decision to become an artist. Small wonder 'he felt a fool and dared not breathe a word' about it (244). The shifts in time, and the transitions between 'the world of semblance' and the 'world of dream,' represent Walter's vacillations between a sense of destiny and the realisation of his existential predicament (White, *Voss* 259). The path to this realisation is through the 'room of a whore' whose manner he could not distinguish from those of Ethel or Frances. So what did it matter? In war 'the sensitive type and the clod end up the same.... Ceiling-starer or snorer, they were all 100-1 leapers whose cogitations had not the slightest effect on their fate' (245). The Reverend Potty Fox makes a brief claim upon him by insisting that in the face of death 'the self was never incomplete', and it is here that he prefers Art to the chaplain's suggestion of a career in the Church (281). Neither institution, however, can claim him. It is the inspiration of the Mosque that makes the connection between art and religion, but once again the thought is no sooner expressed than Walter realises that:

it was not Egypt at all that lay at the root of his budding ideas, but Frances. She had talked on and on about art and he had only half listened. The words since then had been percolating insidiously upwards until, needing to build a new soul to oust her, he had spilled her ideas out in a stream coloured as his own. He was nothing but a drab skull of echoes. And worse, he was still bonded insanely to *her*. (282)

Art is a gendered destiny for Frances, which is comparable with the boys' enthusiasm for war. It provides her with an opportunity for distinction which also offers possibilities for sexual expression. 'I sometimes think that people and art are all that matters,' she tells Walter on that first train trip to Sydney (38). When pushed to explain she specifies the theatre, Shaw and Shakespeare in particular, though she had never seen a performance of either. What she did see was Adeline Genée, the Edwardian period's greatest ballerina, who visited Australia to rapturous acclaim in 1913. Frances is particularly captivated by her ability to 'pirouette 'within the embrace of her partner's arms, yet so exactly on the one spot that he never really touched her'. Thoughts of stage talents 'alarmed' Walter's 'Presbyterian soul', but Frances and her friend Diana are stimulated by the associations with sexuality and bohemian freedoms (38, 39). Genée, Harcourt Beatty and 'candid modern girls in books' inspire their fantasies, and Diana uses sexual references in Shakespeare as an excuse to explain to her friend 'the mounting clamour of ecstasy' that occurred when her mother and father retired early and locked their bedroom door (45). Frances' desire for sexual freedom is caught up with her aspirations towards artistic distinction and represents an expression of her own belief in a special destiny. But for Diana the feeling that 'you're *bound* to do something in the end' is merely a biological instinct: 'Nature wants us to try. It's one of the tricks of evolution' (47). Frances' attraction to art aspires to a form of distinction that will deliver her from the gendered repressions of Edwardian Australia, but once again that sense is subverted by the suggestion that it is merely the unconscious function of an evolutionary instinct. Aspiration after the transcendental distinctions of art are returned to the mysterious drives of embodiment and these drives are not sacred.

Frances imagines a bohemian life of cosmopolitan art and culture as a special form of her own destiny (48) and this is not compatible with the 'respectable' attentions of a farmer's son. Mrs Reilly's caricature of Walter as a rural clod recalls her own history of romantic frustration (97): 'He'd ask you to play something for him in the living room. And after Debussy, if he were awake, he'd ask for something jolly. "Polly Wolly doodle", or "Two

Little Girls in Blue” (97). Ironically, Frances does get to play ‘Claire de Lune’ for Walter’s rival, Robert Gillen, and when she does, neither mother nor daughter ‘blinked an eye’ at his request for ‘something jolly’. The one is ‘blinded’ by ‘money and position’; the other by an overwhelming need for masculine attention that is prompted by her growing sense of insignificance (337).

If art as theatre is sex and distinction, then art as music is another thing altogether. After graduating from school Frances helps her mother with piano lessons and the music offers an affective release that reconciles their differences:

One mother retreated, the cloudy one, another advanced, the beautiful one: clear as her vases. The familiar Schubert impromptus did this, with their hesitations, their rollicking advances. And then the way Mum started again, Schubert started again—art started again!—swirling the tiny coloured pieces of the world’s vast jigsaw-puzzle into their correct positions. A cloud here, there the churned wake of a ferry—but soon the notes alone inhabited Frances’s head and she stopped thinking. She bobbed on a phrase, then stroked elatedly up harbour-reaches of sound to a place where emotion needed no object to fix on, but simply was. (52)

In ‘Piano Music’, the concluding chapter of the novel, Frances returns to the instrument after months of neglect in the wake of Diana’s tragic drowning. Both mother and daughter accept it as a sign that she has returned to her old self but Frances’ perspective is a defensive reflection prompted by Ethel Mackenzie’s class based observation that ‘The war’s for those with nothing to do’ (413). Frances now fears that ‘serious’ music such as Mozart is ‘beyond her’ (407) and, having survived Billy’s attempt at vengeance for her role in the death of his fiancé, she realises that her mother’s artful rendering of a Chopin nocturne is now

beyond her own reach—those notes of ivory and glass that had been created in a distant world no different from this one, where contact between people, beginning in kindness and curiosity, suddenly burst into a crescendo of cruelty and destruction. (423)

If *1915* is a portrait of the artist as a young soldier or a portrait of his lover as a young musician then it is an ironic portrait that suggests that the art available to its characters is no more likely than love, patriotism or religion to deliver a hero from the meaninglessness of his or her existence. Burying the dead on the Gallipoli peninsula, Walter is forced to consider Blacky Reid’s nihilism. He ‘was compelled to walk to the mucked heart of the matter, reach out a hand, plunge it into the black pulp and grasp for a slimy bone which itself was only the outer casing of something deeper, darker, more horrible and endless’ (286-7). Set against the sublime vastness of geological time ‘the generations registered as shadows if at all, and the individual was nought but the sound of a footstep fading before the space of life was done’ (291). This is one of the points of both the young woman and the soldier’s predicaments. The ‘sublime’ represents the sacred as an unrepresentable fear recollected in safety. So it is necessarily for those who look on and not those who find themselves embodied in the events of history, whether by accident or choice. Both Walter and Frances face the prospect that their lives will be sacrificed by the ‘audience seated on dark tiers’ to the mythologisation—we might say sacralisation—of a dubious social account. If a path to fulfilment is smuggled into *1915*, and I intend to take this up elsewhere, it is not through an aesthetically crafted sense of ethico-numinous or poetic revelation, but corporeally through the body, which is represented as an agent of experience consistently repressed by the disciplining function of a

materially stratified social formation, organised by the institutions of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. *1915* is a sophisticated and highly self-conscious response to late colonial transcendentalism and that makes it an intriguing intertext for scholars interested in the ways in which our literary archive imagines the problem of Being in a postcolonial country.

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