'O RARE YOUNG MAN': DAVID McKEE WRIGHT'S *BULLETIN* DEBATES WITH JACK LINDSAY, 1922-25

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DURING the early 1920s, David McKee Wright and Jack Lindsay engaged in a series of debates in the *Bulletin*. The topics included the character of Australian poetry, the definition of poetry, and the poet's role. In the background were contentious theories entertained by both writers about the relationship of literature to society.

Wright was more broadly concerned to protect Australian writing. In July 1923, in the same week that Professor J.W. Mackail gave the inaugural Australian English Association lecture on popular errors concerning Shakespeare, Wright addressed the National Club in Sydney, refuting Mackail's claim that 'these are our little days, and . . . most of the work being done today will soon be forgotten'.[1] Asserting Australians were 'as much heirs to Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Tennyson as those who lived in London', Wright declared 'the last 10 or 15 years of Australian production have been its best and by far its greatest years; [. . .] the same 10 or 15 years in England have been marked by work very much worse' (*SMH* 11/7/23,14). He traced a 'local' tradition from Gordon through Daly and Quinn to Zora Cross, and rated Gellert, 'in spite of Professor Mackail', the best of the war poets. He considered Australian poets 'singularly orthodox[;] . . . very few attempted to work in free verse'.

These views had been attacked at the end of 1922 by Adrian Lawlor, and Hector Dinning (Queensland contributor to the *Bulletin* and Australian correspondent for the *London Mercury*). Dinning stated 'Australia has not yet reached that pure Intellectualism which inspires the best English writing'; and he particularly criticised the *Bulletin*'s fostering of a 'distinctive Australian spirit', and 'even a distinctive Australian literary language' (*RP* 14/12/22; *London Mercury* Oct 22, 420). For his part, Lawlor accused the *Bulletin* of promoting arid poetic formalism.

It is true Wright and his Red Page protegé Hilary Lofting favoured 'irregularity within the bounds of regularity' and promoted the 'accepted forms' of rhyming (*RP* 23/1/19; *RP* 27/11/19). On the other side, Frank Wilmot and the youthful Kenneth Slessor were sceptical of the 'accepted codes of scansion' (*RP* 3/7/19; *B* 13/12/19, 36). Slessor, who would shortly join forces with Jack Lindsay, criticised Lofting's admonition of the Georgians' 'uneven matter', and claimed Zora Cross's 'blank verse may be read backwards or forwards without any evident difference in either its beat or its blankness' (*RP* 18/12/19). The ensuing row lasted two months, when Slessor sparked fresh disputes over the place of dialect in poetry and the distinction between poetry and 'verse'. In the course of these arguments, Slessor insisted that dialect was 'fatal to poetry', that it was not possible to think in 'slang', and that poetry had nothing to do with 'everyday thought' (*RP* 8/1/20; *RP* 19/2/20). When, supporting Slessor, Nathan Spielvogel claimed that 'in thought there is no language' (one's brain contained 'pictures'; language was 'the medium of speech or writing'), Wright ended the debate with the pronouncement 'inarticulate thought is practically impossible[; . . .] all our silent

thinking is done in words which never come to utterance' (*RP* 26/2/20). Aiming at those who were preoccupied with nationalist propaganda, and those who asserted all writing was self-expression, he added 'all words are social, all true speech is altruistic in its motive': writers provide the 'backward look' which could 'link up the ages'.

So far as promotion of local writing was concerned, Wright had a degree of support from the Palmers, Louis Esson, and Hugh McCrae. In October 1922 Vance Palmer listed royalty arrangements, publishing costs, tariffs and import duties as barriers to English publication of Australian novels. He noted that an Australian Authors' Association proposal to get Australian publishers together was hampered by inexperience, smallness and lack of trade organisation (*RP* 1/6/22; *RP* 19/10/22). Reflecting on this and on the fate of Henry Lawson and Bertram Stevens, Wright proposed the establishment of an Australian Academy, to support young writers and older worthies. He repudiated claims that the French Academy was a model for cabals and opposition to change, and that governments would exact their pound of flesh from any support given to writers (*RP* 25/1/23). Primarily concerned that Australian money was going out of the country 'to import worse literature than that manufactured at home', that the best local writing was failing to find Australian publishers and was handicapped abroad, Wright observed '[t]he author is generally lucky if he can put it permanently *on record* at his own expense' (*RP* 15/2/23). His ideal Academy would comprise 'a dozen writers of creative work' of 'average not less than 40 years', chosen by the New South Wales Government, to be supplemented each year with four more such writers. When it was suggested '100 literary men of standing in New South Wales would make us the laughing stock of the world', Wright retorted 'I should like to see 10,000 where it is one today; and it would worry me very little to think that all the long ears in three distant continents were waggling over the spectacle' (*RP* 15/3/23; *RP* 5/4/23). His concern to foster Australian writing and protect the interests of writers curiously prefigured aspects of later State patronage.

At the same time, grounds for further attack on Wright resurfaced. In 1920, reviewing Thomas J. Looney's *'Shakespeare' Identified*, Wright had accepted the view that Shakespeare's works were written by Edward de Vere (*RP* 6/5/20).[2] By December 1921 Wright and 'Athos' on the 'Looney' side were joined against 'M.M.P.' and Louis Esson (*RP* 27/10/21; *RP* 8/12/21; *RP* 2/2/22; *RP* 9/2/22; *RP* 16/2/22; *RP* 23/2/22). Jack Lindsay joined the attack in 1923, in response to Wright's review of George Hookham's *Will o' the Wisp, or The Elusive Shakespeare* (*RP* 22/2/23) Lindsay invoked Byron, Beethoven, Wagner and other artists whose interest in cash did not prevent them from manifesting a 'high mind' in their productions; he supposed Wright would keep poets 'starving in garrets . . . refusing contamination with the vile world in order that they might gladden the hearts and stir the compassion of future generations' (*RP* 19/4/23). The following debate led Wright and Lindsay into allegations of mutual misrepresentation and to ultimate estrangement.

Lindsay had begun his brief *Bulletin* association in 1922, publishing twenty-two poems (as well as articles and a short story) in the paper (Arnold). Little in his output suggested he was advancing Modernist practice any more than his *Bulletin* opponents. Similarly with *Vision*, the first issue of which in May 1923 proclaimed its aim was 'to provide an outlet for good poetry or for any prose that liberates the imagination by gaiety or fantasy'. The founders hoped to 'vindicate the youthfulness of Australia, not by being modern but by being alive. Physical tiredness, jaded nerves and a complex superficiality are the stigmata of Modernism' (p. 2). Against this credo, the *Bulletin*, *New Triad*, and *Art in Australia* were positively cosmopolitan.

While *Vision* published numerous writers familiar from the *Bulletin*'s pages, it was,

as John Arnold has said, 'very much Norman and Jack's magazine'. Arnold is slightly off the mark when he estimates that *Vision*'s 'satyrs, nymphs [. . .] poetry and prejudices' 'must have shocked the reading public used to the *Bulletin* and the Paterson/Lawson tradition'. By 1923, nymphs, satyrs, Paterson and Lawson were what Wright would have called 'tired commodities'. What annoyed Wright and other reviewers was the complacent inanity of the *Vision* manifesto and content. Wright was surely correct in identifying the *Vision* poets' '[s]tableyards and minor Greek deities and swashbuckling highwaymen' as 'stage properties'. Slessor and Jack Lindsay were to eventually play down this element of their early work. Wright was also astute in perceiving the forced nature of the sensuality of the Visionaries' effusions: '[t]hey are not the fancies of the well-bathed and life-drunken youth, but the heavy imaginings of gloating, mottle-faced age' (*RP* 17/1/24). Much as D.H. Lawrence was later to castigate the *London Aphrodite*, Wright mocked the Visionary fetishism: '[o]n page 115 there is a lady – and it is a lady's work – who begs Corin in very good verse to strip her of all her clothing, if he must, but to leave her shoes on'. This comment does not make Wright out to be a prude but a critic of absurdities: it is at one with the apocryphal response of members of the English royal family to Norman Lindsay's works; one viewer asked why the artist had left the stockings on some of the figures.[3]

Perhaps it stuck in Jack Lindsay's craw to be patronised by one he had hoped to shock. In his first *Bulletin* essay for 1923, Lindsay had assailed responses to a poetry questionnaire in Harold Monro's *Chapbook*. He dismissed comments by Binyon and others on poetry's ability to endure: Clifford Bax alone saw 'something of the significance of rhythm, [. . .] the structural basis by which the material is given an organic form'. Bax believed 'the rhythm of poetry' vibrated 'at a deeper level of consciousness than that which represents us in daily life'. Lindsay agreed: 'It would have been truer if he had said that it is in this depth, where life is given form by rhythm, that there lives the core and essence of consciousness, and that if Man ceases to commune with the energies of this depth and lives merely on the upper and determined levels of consciousness, then the spiritual stability of mankind must be disintegrated' (*RP* 25/1/23).

Wright rejected Lindsay's accusation that he believed 'poetry has no form and is constructed by some mysterious "singing power" ': he effectively agreed with Lindsay on the rhythmic origins of poetry (*RP* 31/5/23). Lindsay's eventual withdrawal from the *Bulletin* was not so much a matter of disagreement with Wright's theories: they simply were not phrased in Norman Lindsay's formulae. In 1923 Jack Lindsay published two poems in the *Bulletin*; thereafter, disgust with Wright, and immersion in efforts to propagandise his father's philosophy led him to offer verse elsewhere. His major 1923 *Bulletin* contributions were polemical essays and letters on literature and culture. One paragraph struck directly at Wright: '[i]t is only the small man that finds his dignity involved in the exteriors of life; for, since he lives entirely on the surface, once he loses touch with the surface mechanism of his humanity he has nothing to hold on to'. Such a 'small man' was typified by Macaulay, or Tennyson (a 'vaporish abstraction, a harmonious nonentity limned in all the popular terms of virtue and greatness'). By contrast, the 'high mind' disdained conventional values (*RP* 19/4/23).

Asked by Wright to define the 'high mind', Lindsay rehearsed Nietzsche: 'the people exist by a system of moral valuations which are necessary to them as a staff is to a cripple. But when the humanity of a mind is perfected it no longer needs these staffs' (*RP* 2/5/23: *RP* 17/5/23). Wright, in Lindsay's opinion, was one of the 'humanisers, those who express the people's values and so civilise the people'; he would 'naturally not believe that the humanity of a mind can be perfected'.

Wright's response to the 'rare young man' restated the view which had initiated the exchange: 'great men have shown many eccentricities without losing their greatness; no one doubts that little men continue to display similar absurdities without achieving any touch of greatness'. He also rejected misrepresentation of his stance on form: every Red Page reader knew that he had 'insisted more upon form than any other writer in Australia'. These remarks related to two incidental issues Lindsay had raised in the 'high mind' debate: the first concerned Hellenism; the second, the relationship between the poet and society.

Lindsay had declared Australians 'the inheritors of the centuries' who, because they enjoyed a 'Mediterranean' climate, could react to Homer and Theocritos with even greater right than Keats (*RP* 2/6/23). Hellenism 'the element of mental exaltation that accepts Life, as opposed to the Primitivism which expresses either rage or hate for it, . . . or resignation to it . . . All imagery of passion, all poetry that seeks to define a concrete vision of emotion in action, goes back to the Greeks, because the first definition of man was made here'. Lindsay defended evocation of the Greek gods in whom 'for the first and only time, an image of Man as divinity' had been projected: in contrast to Aristophanes and Shakespeare ('more Greek than the Greeks'), Shaw 'has not even a single actual woman let alone a vital one; he has no real contact with Life at all'.

Wright had touched a raw nerve in mocking Lindsayan Hellenism: two years earlier, he had observed that '[t]he Greeks longed for "the restoration of a Golden Age", since their hard, cruel gods had displaced those of an older branch of their race: Prometheus and Hyperion, representing their fathers, had 'stood for man against the all-powerful freakishness of the Olympians' (*RP* 24/3/21). Such remarks diminished the Visionaries' beloved Olympians – as did another unwelcome comparison: '[g]oing eastward the defeated deities turn into devils – Satan of the Hebrew, Tiamat of the Babylonians, Ahriman of the Iranians – but the story of war in Heaven is pretty constant'. This hardly chimed with Norman and Jack Lindsay's theology.

Lindsay responded by conflating his opponents John Bede Dalley, Wright, and the *Bulletin*, and urging those whose goal was 'getting security and a full belly' to shamelessly do so without protestation, and to leave unmolested those who sought the 'only other goal – self'. Poetry's goal was not 'the relatively easy problem of seeing man in terms of his environment', but 'definition of the essence of self' and the destruction of complacence. Referring then to Wright's review of the 1923 *Vision* anthology, Lindsay fathered on Wright an attempt to associate 'the automatic response to sex in the animal' with what he called 'dreams of desire' and 'laughter and delight in the embrace' which remove sex 'to a happy heaven of beauty which is the furthest ascent from the animal'. Wright, he concluded, was the poet of the '"refined", tamed, etiolated' and repressed animal, which would 'fight to the last against all that would force vitality and passion upon it, since, as it has no self-knowledge and self-control, it knows in the dark strata of its unconsciousness that if it abandons itself to an emotion, it will become irresponsible and return to the blood-lusts of the jungle from which it has so lately escaped'. The poetry favoured by such a repressed creature 'will be that in which it talks about abstract virtues, abstract emotions and all the little tendernesses that give it a feeling of good-will, generosity and humanity . . . In short, its poetry is that of David McKee Wright' (*RP* 31/1/24).

Lindsay saw repression in Wright's response to Slessor's poem on Sterne's 'wooing a girl with gay imagery of beauty'. Unfortunately, the exemplary lines Lindsay quoted are distinguished by self-conscious personifications, quaint spellings, and peculiar similes. The 'breasts/ Like ivory fruits' and soon relating to the girl annoyed (or amused) Wright for other reasons than Lindsay supposed. Wright declared 'I certainly don't hate

Mr Jack Lindsay, as he very well knows; I certainly don't hate Mr Norman Lindsay, whose work I very much admire; I certainly don't hate the verse in the anthology referred to; and I certainly don't hate the preface, which deserves to be preserved in some future anthology of Australian humor'. What he disliked was 'the obvious sham which attempts to foist something on the reading public for the thing it is not' (*RP* 7/2/24).

Lindsay came back in humbler mood, apologising to Wright for 'anything personal' and insisting he had taken Wright only as 'the creature of a universal emotion'. But he reiterated 'those who seek abstract emotions are those who *need* to escape all that stirs too strongly'. Wright abandoned the matter in February, leaving others to go over familiar ground: 'Is one ever allowed to feel fed up with the Lindsayan insistence on the merits of the female chest, ivory fruits and all?' (Dartle *RP* 21/2/24). Another anonymous critic asked Lindsay for more information about the connection between Beethoven and 'the laughing dance of naked girls'('Hassan' *RP* 6/3/24). The debate was becoming a parody of seriousness.

Writing at a later date, Lindsay acknowledged his father's influence and 'the sharp limitation of the ideas I had been struggling to grasp and develop' (Lindsay 366). Nietzsche was the most important element in his *Vision* era reading: 'the Hegelian dialectic was narrowed down to an existentialist ethic of the Free Spirit (whom we identified with the Artist) opposed to the servile masses'. Nietzsche 'thus strongly reinforced the very worst aspects of the N.L. aesthetic, its elitist and racialist components'(366-7). Fustian as it doubtless sounded to Lindsay, Dalley made it clear that he and Wright were concerned with the relationship of the artist to society in any period. Dalley asserted that Aristophanes wrote as persistently about his own period and city as any modern journalist: *Lysistrata* was a 'pacifist propaganda play that was as topical as any revue' (*RP* 14/6/23). He and Wright hoped Australian 'classics' might arise through similar representation.

Poetry, in Wright's and Dalley's view, might provide counterbalance in a world preoccupied with the cheap sensations of the best-seller, the American cinema and the gramophone. Wright located one cause of the decline in the conduct of literary critics, who could not perceive anything good in their contemporaries' works, but manufactured a canon of writers who could be conveniently grouped or compared; '[t]o say that there is nothing in the work produced on this continent that is comparable with that of Flecker, Grenfell and Owen is ridiculous; yet that is just the impression Professors Strong and Wallace convey. If Australian professors of literature ignore their own, the public naturally accepts the notion that it is ignored because it is no good' (*RP* 1/11/23: *RP* 18/10/23).

Lindsay eventually came to see the poet's role in a similar way to Wright. In October 1923, criticising the 'obscurity' of much contemporary verse, Wright had asserted '[s]peech is a social thing; and poetry, the rhythmic essence of the best speech, must surely be a social thing also'. The new poetry had grown up 'with the knowledge of the writer that he is almost without an audience. He got into the habit of making verse for his own pleasure or as a means of self-expression.' Wright believed the contemporary public still demanded something of the prophetic function from poets, that they should foretell the future and 'probe the inner secrets of life'; in 'a rather indefinite way', said Wright, the poet 'really does these things'. His final remark summed a position with which Lindsay might have later concurred: '[t]he high ethereal song of one generation may easily become the daily bread of the next; and so the least didactic of all poetry in the end teaches most' (*RP* 4/10/23).

NOTES

1 Mackail proceeded to deliver a series of public lectures in July, on Virgil, Milton, Tennyson and others: *SMH*, 13 July 1923, 10; 16 July 1920, 10; 20 July 1923, 10.

2 Claims for de Vere's authorship were hardly new; nor were they put to rest in Wright's time. Prompted by the publication of Charles Ogburn's *The Mystery of William Shakespeare* (London: Sphere, 1988), the current Lord Vere resurrected the claim at a Shakespeare Moot in December 1988. Critical opinion on Moot and book was summarised by James Wood (*Punch*, 16 December 1988, 50): 'every idiom has its idiot'.

3 In 1927, even Jack Lindsay would admit that Norman's illustrations (for Fanfrolico publications) were 'only a bit of bird-lime for fools' (Letter to P.R. Stephensen, n.d. (October 1926?)), quoted in Craig Munro, 'Two Boys from Queensland', Bernard Smith, ed., *Culture and History*, 50). D.H. Lawrence considered the Lindsayan insistence on confronting the Philistines with dogmatic vitalism and nudes adolescent: 'All that silly twiddling with girls! – it isn't even really sex – I have the [*London*] *Aphrodite* – and it's very much that twiddling business – sticky and feeble' (Letter to P.R. Stephensen, 15 February 1929, quoted in Munro 64).

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