

## Dwelling Within: Identity and Home in Contemporary Australian Autobiography

TIM BOWERS, AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE ACADEMY

In Barbara Hanrahan's *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973), set in the Adelaide suburb of Thebarton in the forties and fifties, the family 'dunny' is the setting in one chapter for a range of experiences, activities, stories and memories. Seen through the eyes of a morbid and perceptive girl, the perspective of the recollections is 'determined' by the age of the subject 'I'. In the Hanrahans' outhouse, for example, there is a 'mole' which hides inside the toilet bowl ('Once', she says, 'I felt his moist snout up my bottom'); there is a 'pigtailed Chinaman' who lurks nearby at night; and during summertime play the children slake their thirst with handfuls of water from the cistern.

The evocation of family rituals, childhood play and childhood fears creates a complex frame of identities and relations. The house and garden are filled with objects which are frightening for the young girl, and the adults in her life only seem to add to the misunderstandings and fears which she experiences. The recollections of the 'dunny', however, become the vehicle for another memory:

(The journey to the lavatory is perilous. We approach it cautiously—in pairs: my grandmother and great-aunt, my mother and I.)

My mother lighted our way with matches; marking our path with a sooty trail.

...

At night the lavatory became a confessional booth, an altar to the past. My mother told me about my father. She could not see me as she puffed at the cigarette Nan did not like her to smoke in the house. I began to cry.

(*Scent of Eucalyptus* 44–45)

Following this is a short history of her father, referred to by the girl as 'My father who never was'. Although the reader is told something of his childhood, the father's absence remains to a large extent unresolved; what becomes more evident is the way in which the fears of the toilet at night and the pain of the mother coalesce to become the child's perception of her world, and hence herself. The story of the father finishes with a number of unanswered questions before mother and daughter return to the house:

I wiped my eyes as my mother adjusted her clothing and pulled the chain. I clasped her hand—for the path seemed longer, the darkness darker, the dining-room farther away. My mother struck a match, and we began the journey back.

(*Scent of Eucalyptus* 44–48)

The reader is at first drawn into the domestic rituals of the Hanrahans' outside toilet, and this then becomes the setting for the telling of her father's history. The ending of the chapter returns to the setting of the toilet, to the excretory: the business completed, they wipe themselves, recover themselves in their clothing, pull the chain on the story of her father, and make the 'journey' back. The nature of the mother's and child's relationships to the story are framed by the clandestine cigarette, by their intimacy in the toilet, and by their distance from the house.

The outhouse becomes a confessional in which past and present relations converge with the fantasies of the child. The secrets and fears of the toilet are not simply a backdrop for Hanrahan's self-image—they *are* her self-image. Self, here, is indissoluble from space.

Autobiographers, it seems to me, use narrative strategies similar to fiction writers. In autobiography there is a spectrum of referentiality—that is, an assessment of the extent to which the protagonist or narrator can be seen to represent the author; from Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life* (1981) and Jill Ker Conway's *The Road From Coorain* (1989); to the trilogies by Hal Porter (1963, 1966, 1975) and George Johnston (1964, 1969, 1971); to the more fictional Langton quartet by Martin Boyd (1952, 1955, 1957, 1962), and *Poppy* by Drusilla Modjeska (1990); to the autobiographical novels by Christina Stead and Morris Lurie. One of the strategies used by autobiographers to configure identity—as my example of Hanrahan demonstrates—is to describe objects or places in connection with the protagonist in order to create what I shall call an ontological frame around the protagonist.

By an ontological frame I mean a place which is used self-reflexively as a metonym for self. (The examples I am using here all relate to place, but people and objects are also frequently incorporated into this frame.) Space and place are constructions of self-identity in narrative form: depictions of the relationships one forges with place illustrate the fact that one is one's relationships.

If, as I suggest, our conceptions of space reflects our conception of self, then one's sense of belonging—or of not belonging—is integral to the creation of self in narrative. Most contemporary autobiographies involve a negotiation of national, regional, rural, metropolitan and domestic boundaries; one of the ways in which these boundaries are negotiated is through a sense of belonging.

In *Solid Bluestone Foundations* (1983), Kathleen Fitzpatrick describes her life in Melbourne and at Oxford up to about 1930.

The house where my mother's parents lived, called 'Hughenden', was the most solid and permanent fact ever to be known to me. It was my rock of ages. My own home was more like a camp for transients: I was born in a hotel and before I was out of my teens I had lived in another hotel, four houses, a boarding school, three guest houses and a flat. The parental caravan sometimes made long halts, but sooner or later we got our marching orders, packed up our rather sketchy household goods and moved on. But while we came and went 'Hughenden' stood firm: there the ground never quaked under our feet, we felt safe and could count on everything. At 'Hughenden' life was orderly, the gong announced meals at exactly the same time every day, Grandpa sat at his end of the table and Grandma at hers, with the uncles and aunts in between, and it would have been as astonishing if there had not been roast beef for Sunday dinner as it would have been in our house if we had predicted correctly what we might have to eat on any given day. (1)

In this opening paragraph, Fitzpatrick's contrast of the permanence of 'Hughenden' with the instability of the 'parental caravan' prefigures a number of the author's concerns, from family relations and the turmoil behind familial façades, to the vagaries of history and the impermanence of objects. Fitzpatrick situates herself against the backdrop of the values that surrounded her during a period of great change, from the 1890s through WWI to the depression.

Larger forces of history are interwoven with the personal histories of her extended family:

'Hughenden' was a paradise for grandchildren. To begin with, we were never asked why we had come or how long we intended to stay. This made it an ideal place for the purpose of running away from home. Earlier attempts which I had made at running away to nowhere in particular had proved unsatisfactory. When one had eaten the bag of bananas bought with the idea that it would provide sustenance for weeks, and night was falling and there was no prospect of dinner, there was really nothing for it but to run tamely home again. The whole procedure was lacking in dignity and even drama, because Mother, who was absent-minded, had probably not even noticed my absence. But if I ran away to 'Hughenden', as I soon learned to do, my enterprise was richly rewarded. Everyone seemed delighted to see me, I felt more highly valued than at home. It was true that Grandma or one of the aunts would soon be on the telephone to Mother. They lowered their voices but could still be heard because in those days telephones were always sociably located where everyone could hear the conversation. I did not really mind Mother's being told where I was, as being now comfortable and happy, I did not want her punished too severely for whatever she had done to cause my flight.

I could not analyse it when I was a child but was as aware then as now that part of the fascination of 'Hughenden' arose from its comprising a larger and more varied community and a richer storehouse of human experience than was available in what is now called the nuclear home. Our home was perhaps more restricted than most because Mother's shyness and her hatred of domestic chores meant that we had few visitors. (10)

Later, she describes each of the many rooms at 'Hughenden', their function, and the people who used them. Like David Malouf in *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985), or Hal Porter in *Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963), people are connected with different rooms, in which a sense of belonging is inextricable from a sense of identity. Notice here, too, that like Hanrahan and Porter—and as we shall see in Morris Lurie's *Whole Life* (1987)—the mother figures as an emotional and physical centre.

While Fitzpatrick describes a sense of belonging, Lurie emphasises his estrangement and dislocation. Most of *Whole Life* is set indoors: Lurie as a young boy plays inside the house, behind doors and under the bedclothes. 'I love hide-outs, lanes, tunnels and passages in the bamboo in the gardens', he explains (73).

It is not the inside of the house *per se* which is significant, but the comfort drawn from small snug spaces. Inside the house, the young boy gains comfort from 'secret corners made out of wardrobes and walls where you can hide, where no one can get you, where it's tight and narrow and you can stand guard and no one else can get in and touch you and it's safe' (73).

In *Whole Life* the need for a nurturing and secure environment often becomes a feeling of claustrophobia for the protagonist. Likewise, a desire for freedom shifts to become a feeling of isolation and loss. The struggle between these contradictory feelings—of security and claustrophobia, and of freedom and isolation—characterises the family relations. The security provided by the family unit, the cost of that security, and the end of that security, are all part of the ontological frame around Lurie's construction of identity in *Whole Life*.

Throughout *Whole Life*, the narrator connects his mother with the family home. The mother, apart from doing all the domestic chores, is seen as the home improver, the home provider and the home carer: in many respects she is the home.

It was my mother's first house, the first house she ever owned, and she filled it with mirrors and furniture and carpets and lamps and cherished it and kept it

spotless and saw it always painted so that it gleamed like new. It was her first house, and it was also her last, for we carried her out of it eaten with cancer, and then my father too, two months after she died, two months exactly, two months to the day, a brain haemorrhage, and then we sold it, my sister and brother and I, and it was like hacking up her body but it was what you had to do and we did it, and we took our money and went our separate ways. (19)

The narrative shifts quickly from care and comfort to death and separation. The mother's care of the house and family is connected with the cancer that kills her; her death leads to the death of the father; and the deaths of the parents lead to the disintegration of the family. After the deaths of the parents, and before it is 'hacked up', the house is divided between Lurie, his rarely mentioned brother, and his sister and her husband, Joe.

Although there are occasions of mutual play, the relationship between the young Lurie and his sister is characterised by bickering and the competition for attention. But it is only towards the end of the narrative that the extent of the animosity between them becomes apparent. The house is literally divided, 'their rooms and our rooms, lines down the middle, locked doors' (206). Eventually the impasse becomes violent:

I was on the floor at once, being beaten, being kicked. He was a big man, a strong man, orphaned by Hitler, a survivor, made brute by the camps. 'Kill him, Joe, kill him! my sister screamed, and he beat me and kicked me, as hard as he could, but I felt nothing, his useless blows, on the floor, lying on the floor, crawling on the floor, his empty blows, to reach my sister, to get to my sister, where she stood screaming, to tear out her throat, to obliterate forever her hateful face. (207)

This is the family which, the narrator has informed us at the beginning, 'were a family like any other' (25). For Lurie, the house is not just a setting; the relationship of each member of the family to the house is each member of the family.

I have been discussing what are essentially two separate but interrelated notions: the framing of self by place is a narrative device for depicting the self in narrative form; second, this way of configuring identity is common to many lives, although—for many reasons—it has remained largely ignored. Recently, the connection between place and self has been considered outside the realms of autobiography or fiction, in, for example, Peter Read's *Returning to Nothing* (1996), David Tacey's *Edge of the Sacred* (1995) and Michael Jackson's *At Home in the World* (1995). Each of these texts is a demonstration of the connection between place and self and of the incision in identity which occurs when this connection is damaged.

Place—or in my examples the domestic dwelling—is not just a setting, but is metonymic for self-identity. In *The Scent of Eucalyptus* the child's perspective of the house and her mother is constitutive of Hanrahan's self-identity; Fitzpatrick's wrestling with the stability of 'Hughenden' and its secure place in history is her tussle with her own place in history—who she is and where she comes from; and for Lurie, the figurative demolition of the family home is representative of his own psychological fragmentation.

#### Works cited

- Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. *Solid Bluestone Foundations and Other Memories of a Melbourne Girlhood 1908-1928*. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1983.
- Hanrahan, Barbara. *The Scent of Eucalyptus*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1973.
- Lurie, Morris. *Whole Life: an Autobiography*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1987.