Lingo and Literature

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I considered the invitation to speak at the ASAL Conference in Sydney last year a once-in-a-lifetime honour, and as I left I remember thinking, a bit sadly, that this would never happen again. Now I am caught doing a Melba. I use the phrase on purpose, because it's just such colloquial coinages, epigrammatically compressing Australian history and expressing the pithy, salty national character, that I am going to talk about. In fact, my talk is about speech rather than writing, and it will try to show how literature in Australia derives from the unique quirks and illicit inventiveness of the Australian Language. Walt Whitman, putting his ear to the ground, said he could hear America singing, which it did in relaxed, conversational blank verse. I am trying to listen in on the noise Australia makes when it's talking – or should I say skiting, barracking, chiacking, earbashing, and above all shouting? My subject is jargon, argot, slang, pidgin English, and the literature they have made possible.

The rowdy vitality of Australian speech is something English literature can only envy. A century ago Oscar Wilde, who had the good fortune to come from the vocal, lyric culture of Ireland, uttered an admonition which was probably discounted then as a facile paradox. 'Writing,' he said, 'has done much harm to writers. We must get back to the voice.' You need only review the history of English literature to see how right he was. The great period of literary creativity in England happened thanks to lively speech rather than toiling, silent script. Shakespeare prodigally made words up, allowed characters to play punning games with them, and had so little concern for writing that he never settled on a definitive spelling of his own name or bothered to publish the texts of his plays. Marlowe created a 'mighty line': a mode of declamation which resembled a megaphone. Ben Jonson's plays were a babble of crazily specialised idiolects, including the criminal cant which the convicts brought to Australia with them. Jonson sneered that Spenser 'writ no language', which from Spenser's point of view might have been a compliment: he saw *The Faerie Queene* as a polylingual exercise, and in attempting to describe the wedding of two rivers wished that he possessed 'an hundred tongues to tell,/And hundred mouthes, and voice of brasse'.

During the seventeenth century this vocal tumult was suppressed, chastened by classic rules. The discipline of writing restrained the impetuosity of speech. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* censoriously standardised a language which he thought of as a dying thing, engaged in a long, degenerate departure from Latin norms. By the time Wordsworth attempted to revive the voice in his *Lyrical Ballads*, it was too late. Wordsworth argued that the poet was 'a man speaking to men', who should employ the language of common speech, but his own efforts at informality sound awkwardly unidiomatic. In 'Resolution and Independence', addressing a leech-gatherer on the moor, he asks 'How is it that you live, and what is it you do?' An Australian poet would have found it easier to versify the encounter: 'How are you going, mate? All right, are you?' – it almost scans!

After Wilde's pronouncement, modernism experimented with the creation of private languages, conspiratorially intelligible to only a few speakers, or sometimes just to one. Hence the blather and bluster of the Dadaists, or the aria in Esperanto chanted by Chaplin when he's employed as a singing waiter in an Italian restaurant in *Modern Times* (1936):

> El pwu el se domtroco
> La spinach or la tuko
> Cigaretto toto torlo
> E rusho spagaletto
> Senora ce la tima ... and so on, until he arrives a vaguely negroid conclusion:
> Ponka walla ponka wa

Finnegans Wake, elaborating its own polyglot personal world, even managed two punning references to Tasmania. Van Diemen's Land is chosen by Glugg as the answer to a riddle, because it's the location of a coral pearl, and as Tossmania it recurs as a nasty winter ailment, which the Ondt in the fable thinks he might have contracted. Yet the modernists still paid homage to a standard, written not spoken, which colonial variants of English could not match. I have always been amused by Virginia Woolf's attempt to get inside the head of an Australian character in *The Waves* (1931). This is a specimen of his expatriated speech – or rather it's not, because shame prevents him from speaking out, leaving Woolf to transcribe muffled thought:

> 'I will not conjugate the verb,' said Louis, 'until Bernard has said it. My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent. I will wait and copy Bernard. He is English. They are all English. ... They laugh at my neatness, at my Australian accent. I will now try to imitate Bernard softly lisping Latin.'

Or should I say thoftly lithping Latin? It's a catastrophic attempt – by a writer for whom the voice was nothing more than a metaphor, the signal for *sotto voce* solilo-

quising – to imagine Strine. And the fact that the poor colonial boy is being made to learn Latin has its own baleful relevance: the mother tongue bases its authority on a classical pretext.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the language actually spoken in remote Australia remained a closed book, requiring translation. Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh came out on tour with the Old Vic in 1948; they even visited Hobart, and performed *The School for Scandal* at the Theatre Royal, just across the road from the hospital where I was born a couple of months before. (The coincidence always seemed profoundly auspicious to me!) Stepping ashore in Perth, Olivier announced 'We know practically nothing about Australia'. Wanting to be polite, he said he was eager to see a black swan, and wondered why there were none on view at the docks. Leigh inquired, with a tinkling giggle, 'What is a billabong?' She and Olivier had been studying the words to *Waltzing Matilda* during the voyage across the Indian Ocean, but they were none the wiser about billabongs, swagmen, jumbucks, tucker bags, or the identity of Matilda herself. They found Australia as bewildering as the nonsensical lands of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear, which are populated by snarks, boojums and slithy toves – a realm of regression, whose official idiom was Jabberwockian baby talk.

On Australia's part, the mystification was deliberate. A language – at least if its purpose is something other than the lubrication of international commerce, like the Americanised English now spoken all over the world – is a conspiracy, relying on tacit agreements and protocols which are meant to deter auditors from outside the tribe. Hence the riddling metrical subdivisions of Aboriginal chants, designed, as the anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow argued, to ensure that 'no uninitiated person can readily understand a verse that he has not had explained to him by his elders'. Strine, even more forbiddingly encrypted, has its origins in the occult jargon of the convicts. Talking among themselves, they relied on arcane paraphrase, or sequences of crazily logical substitution. A chocolate frog was a dog, which means an informer (or alternatively, if you want to rhyme, a cobber dobber). To rob the coach meant to be in charge – a bushranging phrase still available for use by contemporary politicians, who are the lineal descendants of those highwaymen. Because criminality and creativity have much in common, colonial Australia therefore applied one of its cant terms, the 'talent', to an underworld of cardsharps, larrikins, flash spielers and fancy women, consolidated by a jargon only they understood.

James McAuley, whose shade I can't help affectionately arguing with in these surroundings, was wrong to think that Australia should admire and learn from Dryden's literate disciplining of the rowdy, disputatious English tongue. McAuley wanted to re-enact in Australia that linguistic revolution which altered English literature after the Restoration, to replace the lively, vocal word with the biblical Word – capitalised, abstract and silent. In 'An Art of Poetry' he questioned whether it is absurd for 'an art of words' to seek instruction, albeit discreetly, from 'the Word', holy and unspeakable. Likewise his 'Letter to John Dryden begins' by addressing the 'Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives'. By contrast with Wilde's recourse to the voice, McAuley mortified the humble tool which gives its name to

language: in 'To Any Poet', he issues the commandment 'Take salt upon the tongue'.

McAuley hadn't reckoned on decolonisation, which has prompted native writers all over the world to reject the written languages drilled into them by their conquerors and to raise their voices in dialect. Patrick Chamoiseau, who lives in Martinique and writes a spicily Creolized version of French, calls himself a meagre 'word scratcher', and in his novel *Solibo the Magnificent* he defers to the loquacity of the bard Solibo, who chokes on his own words during a riotous carnival. The demise of this sonorous teller of tales represents the death of what Chamoiseau calls 'oraliterature', struck down by the tyranny of print and its mortifying silence; Chamoiseau, writing a novel about a Master of the Word who remains proudly illiterate, accuses himself of the crime. But even after such vernacular voices made themselves audible, the ears of the world – or at least certain territories in it – remained closed to the sound of the Australian voice. On its first release in the late 1970s *Mad Max* had to be dubbed for the American market; it was only this year, when the film was re-released, that Mel Gibson was given back his accent. The year 2000, it's safe to say, marked the final enfranchisement of the Australian voice – not so much because of Mel Gibson, whose speech was always mid-Pacific, but thanks to Russell Crowe. Playing the ward of Marcus Aurelius in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, Crowe keeps his gravelly Australian/New Zealand drawl. And why not, since the Roman empire was a multicultural enterprise? As last, amends have been made for homesick Louis's efforts to acquire a Latin lisp!

Joseph Brodsky once called Les Murray 'quite simply, one by whom the languages lives'. It is a noble tribute to a poet, but it's truer if you switch it back to front. Language enables the poet to live. Though T.S. Eliot, like Dryden, wanted to 'purify the dialect of the tribe', neither of them had any right to do so. Language is a collective creation, invented by speakers and only later bequeathed to writers – which is exactly what happened in Australia.

Officially, we are a laconic people. We deign to open only a corner of our mouths when we talk, and the words spool out in a lazy drawl. When I was growing up, we mistrusted those who spoke with their hands: gestures were the preserve of unassimilated 'new Australians'. The truth is very different. This is a voluble country, uproariously so. Learning how to shout, in both senses, is the start of Nino Culotta's acclimatisation in *They're a Weird Mob*. In Aboriginal lore, even sticks talk, and in the bush there's a tree called a scribbly gum, written on by the burrowing of insects beneath its bark. The insects are writing illiterately, but that doesn't matter. The Australian lingo prefers the noisy, living word – which Saussure's linguistics called the *parole* – to the silent, written sign. Hence the punning transformation of the alphabet's procession of letters into a droning lecture by a fusty academic called Professor Afferbeck Lauder. In Australian speech, a spell has nothing to do with the schoolroom's regimented spelling bees: it means a rest. Pen and ink are not writing implements but rhyming slang for a drink, which might sweeten your spell, and there is nothing literary about the man referred to as a bookie, whose book-keeping tabulates bets. In *The Tree of Man* Patrick White refers to 'Bernie Abrahams, the book,

whom nobody had met yet, because Bourkes did not go for bookies': the sentence has a unique colloquial poetry, energised by its bouncy alliteration and equilibrated by its internal rhymes.

By contrast with speech, in Australia reading and writing are synonymous with improbability, designed to describe events that lie beyond immediate experience: hence the wonderful locution which registers disbelief by declaring 'You wouldn't read about it'. In my day, getting what was known as a write-up in the *Mercury* was a mark of shame, unless it commemorated birth, marriage, death or the presentation of a sports trophy. The Australian opinion of books is summed up in the formations associated with the good book, whose exponents are defined as Bible-bangers or Bible-pounders. This prejudice against a language locked up inside covers provoked one of the great rhetorical spasms in Australian political history, when Gough Whitlam, transported by alliteration, called Joh Bjelke-Petersen, a 'Bible-bashing bastard'. If you want further evidence of the low esteem in which Australians hold this archetypal book, and of the imaginative delight they put into their derision of it, think of that disease known as dry bible: a jamming of the stomach, fatal to cattle, so called because the overwhelmed maw looks like the compressed folds of pages in a book.

The voice, raised in street cries by itinerant hawkers in eighteenth-century London, transplanted to the southern hemisphere the habit of adding a loud, exclamatory '-oh' to the end of words, just to project them further. But in Australia that extra syllable was applied more indiscriminately, as an all-purpose suffix. It enabled Australian tongues to roll words into balls and relish them: hence smoko sarvo, or secko (a sex offender, conveniently rhyming with gecko). The added vowel is a joke, a colloquial slur, so its suits the Australian contempt for those who bash the above mentioned book. Quarrelsome religious sects are equalised by this habit, which by eating up final syllables refuses to see much difference between a Presbo, a Metho, a Congro or a Salvo. The tendency is lyrical – because it liquefies stolid, end-stopped English words and makes them sound like ersatz Italian – but also satirical, and in the convergence of those two motives you can find a clue, I think, to the Australian character. Everywhere else in the world Garbo names the woman whose face represents the Platonic idea of beauty. In Australian, demoted by the lack of a capital letter, garbo is the garbage man.

Aware, like Wilde, of the harm done by writing, Australian literature takes its cue from the voice. The source of Australian poetry is the work song or the fire-side ballad: our founding poet is nicknamed after his banjo. Poetry is not a pining mental soliloquy; it is the sound made by the body, as eruptive as a burp or as vividly coloured as one of Barry McKenzie's technicolour yawns. As Henry Lawson put it, using his own transcription of the Aboriginal word 'bin jie' for belly, 'They're patting their bin jies with pride, old man, and I want you to understand/That a bin jied bard is a bard indeed'.

The Australian novel, likewise, derives from the yarn and remains true to it. At the start of *Eucalyptus*, Murray Bail ventures 'Once upon a time there was a man'. After a pause to take account of our disapproval, he demands 'What's wrong with that? Not

the most original way to begin, but certainly tried and proven over time.' Both the song and the yarn, then as now, are vocal. Translation into text, by contrast, is something to apologise for. Peter Carey's garrulous con man in *Illywhacker* says 'I have also been written up in the papers. Don't imagine this is any novelty to me – being written up had been one of my weaknesses.' When it came to publication, Australia devised its own unique modes of launching the voice over the country's arid distances. One was the bush telegraph, with its transmission of rumours and gossip; bush telegrams or mulga wires were mute warnings, speaking with the aid of a fire or a carefully positioned slip-rail. The other, since it's hard to keep an account of the Australian lingo away from matters of scat, was the latrine wireless, where the soldiers kept themselves informed in wartime. These means of transmission turned out to be as effective as indigenous musical instruments like the wobble board and the largerphone (a tambourine for drunks, studded with bottle-tops and also know as a jingling johnnie). In the Australian language, even the nose is a bugle, broadcasting brassy music. My father, whose vernacular poetry I'll get to later, used to call the catarrh from which he suffered guitar.

Those who first settled in Australia had to abandon or adapt the language they brought with them. The imperative in those early days was to find a way of translit-erating the new noises they heard. Marcus Clarke described the mental travails of the bushman, at least as arduous as the Latin lesson in *The Waves:* 'Whispered to by the myriad tongues of the wilderness, he learns the language of the barren and the uncouth, and can read the hieroglyphs of haggard gum-trees.' In *We of the Never-Never,* Jeannie Gunn listens to the bush talking in its sleep. The onomatopoeic 'song of the frogs' is mimicked by Mac, who gurgles a nonsensical refrain in quavers on the words 'Quar-r-t! Quar-r-rt pot!' or 'More-water, hot-water!', while a pheasant moans 'Puss! Poor Puss!' and a dove connubially coos 'Move-over-dear'. The words are mere vocalises. We should not imagine that the owl known as a mopoke is actually calling itself a mope hawk, or asking for more pork. The din could sound atonal to ears trained to audit other harmonies: McAuley thought the cockatoo's shriek was provoked by 'demoniac pain'. But Mrs Gunn, better attuned to its strange cadences, utters her own quiet benediction of the new country in the form of a half-quotation. 'The night,' she says, 'was full of sounds': she is remembering Caliban's musical sense of affinity with his own desert island, when he tells the colonists that 'The isle is full of noises'. Interestingly, Clarke, in his essay on the Gothic grotesquerie of the bush, called the fabled Bunyip a 'monstrous sea-calf', akin, I suppose, to the moon-calf, that hybrid label applied to Caliban by the newcomers from the mainland. Mrs Gunn had begun to understand that Australia's indigenous species are not monsters, and that the unorthodox noises they make might perhaps be beautiful.

Eventually, Australia began to write, and its first parchment was the bush. There's a touching moment in *We of the Never-Never* when Dan finds a water-hole, and is encouraged to name it after himself. He does so by carving his initials into a tree trunk. Perhaps because the imported alphabet doesn't suit its new surroundings, he finds it hard: the D goes easily but he hesitate over which way to turn the S and scratches lines in both directions. He comments, with typical Australian disgruntle-

ment, 'Can't see why they don't name a chap with something that's easily wrote': M, T and O are letters which don't require such bothersome decision making. 'Reading's always had me dodged', he remarks, though the Quiet Stockman, to Mrs Gunn's amazement, says 'There's nothing like reading and writing'.

American painting begins when Tom Sawyer in Mark Twain's novel sets out to white-wash a fence. Australian writing, it could be argued, begins with Dan's painful signature on the bark. Mrs Gunn ventured to 'begin at the very beginning of things', which in literary terms means that the writer must fabricate his or her instruments before putting them to use. As Robinson Crusoe discovered, writing required the prior invention of ink, which her 'lubras' – as she calls them – cooked up by burning water-lily roots. But what was this ink, once manufactured, used for? 'To make guiding lines on the timber for [a] saw', which cuts up trees to build a house. And that house in the Northern Territory, once constructed, remains 'unpapered': it is definitely not a house of fiction.

Despite all these efforts, the reality of Australia obliged Mrs Gunn to concede the inadequacy of words. Hence her tribute to her Chinese cook and gardener, who can only converse with her in pidgin. 'Cheon,' she says, 'was Cheon, and only Cheon; and there is no word in the English language to define Cheon ..., simply because there was never another Cheon'. Words also failed Sidney Nolan during a tour through the outback in 1948 with his Tasmanian wife Cynthia. Nolan was in quest of images for his paintings, but he found some of the places he visited easier to depict than to speak about. At Tennant Creek, he concluded 'This is a bugger of a town. Lots to paint – but a bugger.' Australian speech relies on expletives, like the so-called great Australian adjective, because they pay sputtering tribute to what the Romantic poets called the sublime, the awesome, the inexpressible.

Everything in Australia was as idiosyncratic as Cheon or Tennant Creek, and therefore as unnameable or indescribable. That was the initial linguistic challenge. The flora and fauna made those who first confronted them resort to the poetic technique of metaphor, which compares one thing to another which it does not resemble, like Shelley denying that the skylark is a bird and likening it instead to a high-born maiden in a palace tower. The koala was called a bear because it was thought to resemble one, not because it belonged to the ursine species; that bane of the Australian picnic, the bulldog ant, was an equally metaphorical being – an insect with a bite belonging to another species. With some creatures, the metaphors were anxious exorcisms. The mountain devil looks like a dwarfed dragon; in taxonomic Latin, it is referred to as *molochus horridus*. And Latin, which Louis is so desperate to learn, came in handy when explorers had to affix a name to Australia's blinding emptiness. What the Aborigines called Judara – a vacancy whose dust storms were the tantrums of a totemic snake – was rechristened the Nullabor plain in 1866. Until I thought about it, I always imagined Nullabor was a native word. Of course it's Latin, and it means no trees: as dismaying a summation of the landscape as the first account of a section of North America by the Portuguese navigators who looked around, decided 'Ca nada' (meaning 'Nothing here'), and sailed home. (Don't, I advise you, try telling any Canadian about this invidious etymology.

In 'The Names of the Humble', Les Murray criticises 'a meaningful lack in the mother-tongue of factories'. He demands 'How do you say one cattle?, pointing out that 'Bush people say beast'. But in my experience, people in the bush only call a cow a beast when they have killed it, which rather damages Murray's point about their affectionate empathy with nature. His idyllic pastoral simplification is deceptive: in the bush, men had to make complex choices between the singing vowels of native speech and clipped terse English, or between Latin slang, and these negotiations, especially when immigrant voices were mixed in later on, helped to establish the linguistic genius of an entire people. Let me give you two examples of coinages, bizarre and witty metaphors for which no writers are responsible. Fancy naming a sports team the Kangaroosters! Just imagine the hybrid creature which the word envisages – though a kangaroo which crows and flaps its wings while bounding along on the pogo-stick of its tail is no more outlandish than a koala or a platypus. Then there is the Australian seagull, which like Shelley's skylark is not a bird at all. This creature is pure metaphor: it's the pejorative name formerly applied to non-union wharfies, who swooped down and stole jobs from registered labourers on the waterfront.

The act of naming involved expropriations: Judara became Nullabor, Uluru turned, for a while, into Ayer's Rock. Our cities were named after ignominious British politicians, but Australians reclaimed the towns they lived in by exercising their ribald linguistic gifts. Thus Hobart was slangily identified as Slowbart, the capital of Flyspeck Isle of the Holy Land (a nickname which jokily ignored the fact that Van Diemen, our Dutch discoverer's boss, was not at all demonic); on what some Tasmanians – I mean my rural aunties – still refer to as 'the other side' there was the metropolis of Smellbourne, populated by Yarra yabbies. Sydney may have had to take the name of a hurriedly ennobled Home Secretary, but its first citizens, as Thomas Keneally remembers in *The Playmaker* (1987), preferred to call it Lagtown, Felonville, Cant City or Mobsbury. Thanks to whimsies like these, Australians attained a self-sufficiency which was both geographical and linguistic, transforming local habits and habitations into symbols whose meaning was clear all across the country. A Woolloomooloo became a blue, which is rhyming slang for a brawl. Places on no map, like Bullamakanka or Woop Woop, stood for the perimeters of possibility. Nearer home, people shot through like Bondi trams; perhaps they still do, though trams no longer run to Bondi. And I wonder if anyone still gets out at Redfern, which – as well as being the last exit before the train reaches Central Station in Sydney – also designated a scrambled act of coitus interruptus, disembarking before the terminus of ejaculation?

In 1845 a British visitor called Alfred William Howitt wished that Wordsworth could have extended his research into 'the poetry of common speech' to Australia. Here, Howitt reported, people spoke in similes, calling themselves 'poor as a bandicoot' or miserable as a shag on a rock'. To say that your skin is cracking elliptically acknowledges your craving for a drink (and not a drink of water); it also likens your thirst to that of the dessicated, drought-stricken Australian earth. Perhaps, if you scrounge a drink, it will come inside another ice-cold metaphor, poured into one

of those thin-stemmed glasses known as a lady's waist. And if you should shoot through without paying what you owe at the bar or elsewhere, then you leave with a dog tied up. Both the howling of the bereft mongrel and of the aggrieved creditor resound in the metaphor.

Before an Australian literature could be written, an Australian language had to be spoken. That language marked the founding of a new civilisation, whose triumphs were announced by neologisms. Separating wildness from culture as if planting a nature strip between them, Australia imagined and then made up names for the roo bar, the rabbit-proof fence, and also the Cyclone gate, which mythically claimed the power to debar cyclones. To this list, I must add the fly-door. Keeping the flies out of your house or off your body became the defining preoccupation of civilised man in this challenging new country. With a wry irony which is inimitably Australian, it's still a high compliment to say that there are no flies on someone. European culture, having been superseded, could be laughed at. Its debility is summed up in the ailments known to sceptical locals as Mediterranean back or MGA, short for Mediterranean gut-ache; and Australia's defensive pride in its own harsh terrain is made clear in the habit of referring to scrub congealed in mounds as Bay of Biscay country – a bay whose waves are dry clay. Aristotle is not honoured here as a canonical sage; his name is rhyming slang for bottle. In Australia, a London fog is not the muffling atmospheric veil painted by Whistler or Monet. It was a term of abuse used for loafers on the waterfront who, like the fog in London, would never lift.

Ours is, of course, an aggressively demotic language. Acknowledging that man-made hierarchies do not apply to nature, we call a local variety of crimson apples Democrats. (Allow me to show off my expertise as an amateur orchardist, since my mother's family grew apples. The Democrat was an uplanned hybrid, first cultivated in Glenorchy, in the northern suburbs of Hobart where I used to live; in New Zealand the name they give it is the Tasma.) Marcus Clarke remarked that 'Europe is the home of knightly songs'. In Australia, by contrast, chivalry ironically graces lowlier or less lawful trades. A knight of the blades is a shearer, and a knight of the road is a swagman, who might be wearing Prince Alberts: toe-rags for those who could not afford socks, suggesting that Victoria's consort – like his successor Phil the Greek – arrived in England skint, in search of an heiress to marry. To be duchessed means to be grandiosely entertained, or not as the case may be. The Sydney *Sun-Herald* in 1978 reported that 'it could not be said that Malcolm Fraser was "duchessed" during his memorable stay in Peking'. How could he have been, since communist China had quite rightly disposed of duchesses? Another British monarch is a synonym for being frigged, washed up, chucked out. If you've had the Richard, then you've been treated like Richard III; decipher the slang rhyme, you've been given the bird.

Australia loves to tug the lofty back to earth, but it also matily honours those who are downcast. The most telling Australian noun is battler, which recognises the warrior-like resilience, of people in wretched circumstances (especially women, accorded a valour they enjoy in few other cultures). And my own favourite Australian adjective is ropeable, which describes bad temper as if it were the frenzied cavorting

of an unbroken steer. Even the most passive of activities can be humorously described as a heroic struggle: the verb to spine-bash turns sleep into hard work, as a rebuke to those who nod off on the job. Shuttling between high and low, mock-epic is the Australian mode. The mock-heroic idiom, when used here, is not honorific, as it was for eighteenth-century English poets who aggrandised fish or deer by rounding them up into finny herds or antlered tribes; initially, it offered settlers a formula for closing ranks against those who came from herds or tribes considered alien. The Chinese were jeered at as celestials because they claimed to come from a celestial kingdom. I needn't explain who the sable brethren were, though it's worth noting that the phrase was anything but brotherly. I won't bother to lament the political incorrectness of these labels. I'd rather celebrate the runic involution of such formulae, and the suppressed yelp of delight which attends their unriddling: jumbuck barber for a shearer and water-scorcher for a hopeless cook, shiny-arsed chair jockey for a bureaucrat and Dickless Tracy for what the English more genteelly and less wittily call a WPC.

The condition of dicklessness compels me to admit that ours is a priapic languages engaged in a male game of self-augmentation, butting heads like rival members of the antlered herd. It's remarkable how much linguistic creativity has gone into the ennoblement of the Australian penis, whose daily routines, with the aid of metaphor, have been turned into Herculean chores. In *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, Barry tells his uncomprehending English hosts that he needs to splash the boots, strain the potatoes, water the horses, go where the big knobs hang out, shake hands with the wife's best friend, drain the dragon, wring the rattlesnake, unbutton the mutton, and point Percy at the porcelain. (He could have added that he wanted to syphon the python.) A local girl translates: 'I think he wants to go to the loo.' No wonder the Duke of Edinburgh, amusing himself on tour here this year, did a double take when shown a water-measuring device called, I believe, a piezometer. 'A pissometer?' he cried, and was only appeased when the word was spelled out for him. I hope his wife was out of earshot.

Despite his swaggering bravado, Barry McKenzie laughs at itself in an endearingly Australian way. The dragon and the rattlesnake are epic adversaries, but mutton isn't, and he concedes that his lance may have an unreliable aim when he talks about splashing his boots. And why call the organ in question Percy? The answer perhaps has to do with chivalry and those 'knightly songs' mentioned by Marcus Clarke. Percy, who's pointed at the porcelain, is a diminutive of Percival. This Arthurian knight was renamed Parsifal by Wagner, who claimed that the word's etymology derived from 'far parsi', meaning 'pure fool'. If there's a better way of personifying the penis, marvelling at its feistiness while also apologising for its shortfalls and its dim-wittedness, then I don't know it.

The festive obscenity of all this is unavoidable, because the Australian language applies its most dazzling virtuosity to bodily matters which in other English-speaking countries are more or less unmentionable. Think of the dunney, the dumpty-doo, or that most grandiloquent of outdoor privies, the flaming fury, whose contents were incinerated rather than being carted away. Think too, if it doesn't put you off your

morning tea of the rhyming indisposition named after Edgar Britt (who was a jockey, and therefore accustomed to moving fast) or Jimmy Brits (an American boxer, whose name also entitled you to assume that Brits equalled shits just as yanks in Australia are septics in homage to those tanks which predated the water closet). Under less immediate pressure, think about the extra local meanings of date, quoit, rissole and golden doughnut. The spirit of the mock-epic is present in another stoical Homeric rhyme: 'comic cuts' refer to your guts.

Australians use language playfully, sportively. It's not surprising that righteous, in the Australian lexicon, is a synonym for riotous. Our slanging matches conduct warfare by other means – by softer means, since words can't break your bones. Or can they? In his letters, Patrick White excoriated Clive James as an 'archturd', called Hal Porter 'a sac of green pus throbbing with jealousy', and summed up Keneally as 'a revolting bog-Irish almost priest married to a renegade nun'. Here is literary criticism at its purest and finest! It took an Australian, Baz Luhrmann, to make sense of the thumb-biting volleys of mockery which lead to gunplay and the explosion of petrol tanks at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's carnival of abuse could easily be translated into Strine, with the Montagus and Capulets calling each other dubbo, droob, dag, dingbat or drongo, or using terms like bludger, hoon fuckwit and mug lair. I mentioned Caliban earlier when discussing Mrs Gunn and the noises of the bush. Paraphrasing another of his comments in *The Tempest*, you could say that the British taught us Shakespeare's language, and our profit on it is that we know how to curse, which we do with such affectionate eloquence. This country, after all, in which birds like the kookaburra, otherwise known as the laughing jackass, indulge in fits of hysterical merriment rather than singing. Even vomiting is liquid laughter. A man in Australia is a bloke, a mate, but also, perhaps most crucially, a joker.

In 'The Conquest', Les Murray laments the dispossession of the Aborigines, despoiled of both their lands and their language. With the white take-over, Murray announces that 'the age of unnoticed languages begins.' But those moribund languages are not only Aboriginal. Some of us were in an ungrateful hurry to forget our native language, and to learn another means of self-expression or self-advertisement. In his book on expatriate literati, Ian Britain ponderously documents and prissily rebukes the glossolalia of his subjects. Barry Humphries is caught using words like stercoraceous and tetralogically, Clive James calls something autoschediastic and Germaine Greer calls someone purulent, while Robert Hughes uses terms like chthonic, haptic and telluric. It never occurs to Britain to wonder why writers like these assembled such arcane vocabularies. He takes it to be mere exhibitionism; in fact it was a means of deracination. If you used words never heard before on home ground, you were experimentally translating yourself elsewhere. I remember asking my parents to buy me a dictionary for Christmas in 1962, when everyone else my age was demanding bicycles. Bolstered by that book, I too began collecting words and conducting experiments in self-translation. Once at school I was made to move some furniture around – probably a punishment for obnoxiousness. I informed the teacher that I couldn't do it all on my own, because it was 'a laborious exercise'.

Anyone else would have said it was 'hard yakka', or just 'a bugger'. I took the dictionary with me to Oxford, where a section of Latin tags at the end came in handy. When anonymously entering essays for university prizes, you had to identify your work with a motto. Like Virginia Woolf's Louis, I got the chance to use half-understood fragments from a dead, learned language.

But despite the arcane terminology I acquired and flashily deployed, I'd like to think that – like James, Hughes and co. – I never lost contact with the slangwidge which was my birthright, and that I'm able to operate along the full, contradictory breadth of the wave-band which constitutes Australian English, veering from high to low in the same sentence if I please. In one of the stories in *Postcards from Surfers*, Helen Garner drops off her daughter to a Talking Heads concert, then drives home listening to a cassette on which Elisabeth Schwarzkopf sings Richard Strauss's *Zueignung*. Moments before, Helen's sister has been heard calling the driver of a dawdling car on Punt Road a 'fuckhead'; now the soprano rhapsodically cries 'Habe dank!' and Helen joins in, though her voice cracks as she speeds past the Richmond football ground. Mix all these sounds together – metallic rock and the romantic symphony orchestra, a curse and an ecstatic cry of thanksgiving, with perhaps some imagined barracking from the Richmond oval – and you can hear the polyphonic sound of Australia.

I want to end with a few more personal memories. My parents spoke a forgotten Australian language, or rather two different languages, now equally obsolete, which I began to piece back together when thinking about this talk. My father's idiom was the heroic uproar of the bar. After he knocked off work, he shouted and he chiacked, and on Friday nights reeled back from the RSL as full as a goog. Sometimes, on those Fridays, he found that his tea of lamb's fry (to be eaten with a smattering of red ned) was spoiled. Then he went crook; he also often took crook, which was different. His ailments forced him to learn words of another kind, inimical and academic – words like sciatica, diverticulitis, diabetes. He had an armoury of epic epithets. He addressed me as 'young shaver', long before I had any facial hair. Chamber pots were thunder mugs, and whenever he noticed a policeman on the highway he'd comment 'There's the long arm'. He disapproved of lairizing, and if he had to drive me anywhere he always left early so as not to have to go tear-arsing through town. He shared the national skill at pejorative rhyming: I remember that he disparaged Nan Chauncy by calling her (not to her face) Nancy Chancy. There was, I now realise, just one French word in his otherwise staunchly native vocabulary. That word was plonk, a pejorative term applied to sherry or to cherry brandy which were my mother's tipples, though originally plonk mean white wine: its source, amazing enough, is 'blanc'.

My mother, who came from down the Huon but migrated to town, left her sisters behind on the orchard shouting 'Cooee!' across the lonely valley or rounding up cows to be milked by calling 'Soo-ee'!, as if they still lived in Mrs Gunn's onomatopoeic Never-Never. Settled in a new world of laminex and lino, fibro and galvo, bitumen and brick veneer, she had to cope with neighbours who either stick-ybeaked through their kitchen windows or earbashed her as she operated the clothes

hoist. Each time I returned to Tasmania she brought me up to date on the raffish doings of my country cousins: I remember her once saying, as she drove me back from the airport, 'That young Shane's been in trouble again. They reckon he shook some sheep.' My jet-lagged brain formed the wrong image. What was wrong, I wondered, with giving sheep a shake? She sometimes got her tongue in a twist, but I came to treasure her malapropisms, because the substitution of one word for another produced an inadvertent poetry, better than my more studied flourishes. I asked about a declining aunt. 'Oh,' said my mother, 'she's still got all her facilities.' Since plumbing was a crucial medical issue in the case, this was exactly the right way to put it. After a fancy dinner at the bowls club, she reported that there were cravats of wine on the table. On a drive through Glenorchy she clucked her tongue over the graffarti on the walls. Her coinage improved on the original: it found a rude fart in graffiti, yet at the same time reluctantly conceded that the daubs might be art, or at least arty-farty. Australian English, after all, defines art as an activity which requires no talent, or as a synonym for vice. An illywhacker is a bullshit artist, and a drunk is a booze artist.

The last few times I visited, my mother was at war with inanimate objects – dropped bottles, mislaid car keys. I used to hear her giving them a piece of her mind in the next room, using her own favourite Australian adjective. 'You mongrel thing!' she'd exclaim, or, if she got really angry with the truant item, 'You flaming mongrel thing!' I loved that particular personification. Ours, you have to admit, is a mongrel language, and therefore spunkier, more savoury, genetically richer, than the thoroughbred kind – just like the dog I had during my childhood in Glenorchy euphemistically described by my father as an Australian terrier even though it too was a mongrel thing, and no less lovable for that. At my father's suggestion, the dog was called Bimbo. When, much later and long after the dog's death, I began to be inquisitive about words, I assumed that this was the Italian for baby. Perhaps he picked it up from one of those new Australians at work? Only the other day, fossicking through the *Australian National Dictionary*, I discovered that the word meant something else in the bush: a bimbo was a male lover, a mate with whom you also slept. Did my father know that? Sometimes I think it's true that language speaks us, rather than the other way round.

Unfortunately it's now too late to tell my mother and father how grateful I am for the logomania which all unknowingly, they bequeathed to me. Since I can't thank them, I thank you for inviting me to come home.