

Writing the “Fatal Moment”: Crisis,  
Community and the Literary  
Imagination in M. Barnard  
Eldershaw’s *Tomorrow and Tomorrow  
and Tomorrow*

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Ord thought, the way we say things is so much more significant  
than what we say. The forms betray us.

(M. Barnard Eldershaw, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* 80)

M. Barnard Eldershaw’s novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* was written during and just after World War II. This was a fraught period for Australia’s writers. People questioned what role the writer could play in a world at war; perhaps more than at any other time in Australia’s history, there was a great deal of public soul-searching as to the ethical and political place of literature in Australia. *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (hereafter referred to as *TTT*) is very much a novel of its time in this respect. It has not always been read in these terms; it has often been read either as a brilliant realist novel inside an awkward futuristic frame, or as political polemic or prognostication. In this paper I suggest a reading of *TTT* as a novel about writing and writers, and how they fit into the world around them.

Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw were both involved in efforts to mobilise Australia’s literary community against the excesses of a conservative wartime government. At the same time, they were working on what was to become their last collaborative novel, *TTT*. Barnard describes the impetus for writing the novel in terms of the contemporary political situation: “In 1941 the whole thing precipitated. It was the culmination of a time of anguish for me as for many other peo-

ple” (328). It seems that Barnard thought of the novel itself as a crisis point; indeed, as an expression of the sense of culmination, of imminent catastrophe, felt by many in the lead-up to the war. This social crisis was often considered in terms of the failure of community: the alienation of individuals from each other and from processes by which decisions about their lives were made. Within *TTT* moments of crisis are presented as fleeting opportunities for people to feel empathy and community with one another. In many respects *TTT* is, then, also a novel about crisis: the desire for it and the complicity of the literary imagination in perpetuating the attraction it holds.

Barnard wrote that she hoped *TTT* would “clarify” her “approach to her times” (330). As such it is not surprising that the resulting novel takes as one of its thematic concerns the question of whether or not the novel is an appropriate form in which to think through aspects of politics and history. This concern is evident both in discussions between characters within *TTT* and in its narrative structure. *TTT* offers an examination of the role of the novel in this respect through the metafictional strategy of an outer, futuristic narrative within which an inner, realistic novel is discussed at length, and in explicitly political and philosophical terms, by the novelist and an interlocutor. As such, Barnard and Eldershaw’s attempt to express the “whole problem” of the “forces at work” (Barnard 329) in their society ends up being a fascinating presentation of a particular problem: that of what the realist novel can offer to understandings of contemporary public affairs.

*TTT* opens in the twenty-fourth century, in a peaceful society run along “scientific socialist” lines: a novelist, Knarf, has just completed a work in the by then “ancient” form of the realist novel. This novel, “Little World Left Behind” (hereafter referred to as LWLB), tells the story of a family in Sydney living through the Depression, the Second and Third World Wars, and a revolution in which Sydney is destroyed. Whilst Knarf has been writing his novel, his son, Ren, has been heavily involved in a push to have a vote on the organisation of their society. This vote is to take place via a device called the Votometer, which records the “unadulterated will of the people” by measuring the “thought waves” of everyone standing within a certain radius (28). People from outlying areas are coming into the town square on this day to stand together and have their opinion counted.

While Ren is running around organising the plebiscite, Knarf reads LWLB aloud to his good friend, the archeologist Ord. One aspect of the inner novel which has not often been remarked upon by critics is that it is not an entire novel at all, but rather a performance of parts of one. When Knarf reads LWLB to Ord, there are gaps and ellipses, and the reading is interspersed with long rambling dialogues between the two on history, liberty, narrative, and a great many other things. Early critics in

particular write of the “intrusion” of the outer story into LWLB, assuming that this inner novel existed as a discrete entirety, and also disallowing the possibility that these discussions might have anything to do with the project of *TTT* as a whole (Mart 227). Knarf and Ord discuss the history and politics of the twentieth century, but they also discuss the novels of the twentieth century, the relationship of the form of the novel to the society and politics of the time, and the contribution that this particular novel can make to their understandings of that time and their own.

Knarf’s novel is presented as an example and test case of the pair’s discussions. Ord speaks explicitly about the possibilities of the “antique” form of the realist narrative for informing his historical knowledge of the period. By using an embedded narrative within a (fictional) contemporary context of its own, Barnard Eldershaw is able to dramatise the relation between a work of fiction and the world in which it is produced. This strategy also enables some questioning of the relationship between ideology and personal circumstance. We can read the efforts of both narrating voices, that of Barnard Eldershaw and of Knarf, as movements from the abstract to the concrete: each transmutes the questions they see argued around them into the lives of characters living either in the future or in the past.

As David Carter has argued, readings of *TTT* have often focused solely on the literary merits of the inner novel, to the exclusion of the futuristic sections and their political implications, or have made political/historical readings of *TTT* without considering its literary strategies (“Current” 176). In this respect, the inbuilt literary criticism of LWLB offered by Ord and Knarf has been rendered invisible or at least irrelevant by many of *TTT*’s real-life critics. Indeed, some of *TTT*’s early reviewers inadvertently make very similar criticisms to those made by Ord in *TTT* itself. Ord accuses LWLB of “peevisishness” and “gloom,” and suggests that Knarf presents history in an unnecessarily dramatic and desolate tone. The *Bulletin* declared *TTT* “gigantically and monstrously dismal, exactly like those ‘domestic tragedies’ which Hazlitt judged to be inferior art because they ‘weigh the mind with a load of misery it is unable to shake off’” (“Fish and Chips” 2).

Arguing that *TTT* is a novel about writing is in some ways stating the obvious, but it is an issue that has been overlooked in the tendency of critics to equate a futuristic narrative with ideological and technological concerns. The structure of the novel raises difficulties for reader and critic. A representative of Georgian House, who first published the novel, wrote to Flora Eldershaw: “I do not suppose you and Miss Barnard would be disposed to extract the present-day story and offer it as a novel in itself . . .” (22 March 1944). In another letter he asks, “Are you willing to risk your reputation as front-rank Australian creative writers for the sake of an ideology?” (19 August 1944). The publisher was in some ways justified

in his concern by much of the early criticism of the novel, which regarded the futuristic section as an unnecessary political appendage. The futuristic part of *TTT* has been read primarily as politics; it has either provided interest for scholars of futuristic writing, or been regarded by literary critics as a didactic casing for the inner novel, acting to drag its literary merits down into the gutter of politics. Patrick White, for example, recommended lopping off the book's "boring prophetic shell" (Rousseau 10). I'd suggest that this kind of reading ignores the fact that *TTT* as a whole is about the life of a writer and his place in society.

The futuristic narrative contains two crises or turning points: Knarf's completion of his novel, and the test of the Votometer. These two developments mirror one another in a manner that explicitly sets up the question of the position of the creative writer in his society. Knarf's novel is judged by himself and others in light of the vote and the activism of his son, and as such in political terms. In this respect the novel offers a condemning self-portrait: Knarf and Ord are so busy with LWLB that they miss the vote. Thus, for all their talk and good intentions, they fail to contribute to the political life of their society at the one clear opportunity that presents itself.

Knarf includes in his novel an equally unflattering self-portrait. There is a scene in LWLB where the "starving poet of Kings Cross—who is also a well-paid public servant" has a vision of an epic he will write. It will be an epic in blank verse of "Man climbing up out of black depths of nature into his bright eyrie of civilisation" (Eldershaw, *TTT* 193). His talk of machines, the "hegemony of the expert," sounds suspiciously like the world in which Knarf and Ord live. The starving poet/public servant also envisions a war that would pull the old world down:

There is bound to be change. I stand now upon the peak of the doomed world. It is doom that makes the lights so bright, that heightens the tempo. The fiery crest shines because we see it against the overhanging night. Somewhere, far away, probably in Europe, a fatal moment will come, a shot will be fired that is not like any of the other shots, one man too many will be killed, one more slogan lie upon the laden scale and bear it down. . . . This new Paradise Lost. The skyscraper of modern poetry. The dance of words. He walked like a prophet and his spirit was lifted up. (194)

Here we have Knarf writing about a poet's dreams of destruction, lifted up on the euphoria of his ability to foresee doom for the world. He is also prophesying World War II and the future in which Knarf and Ord live. Knarf writes a novel about the past; his self-portrait in the novel is of an egotistical poet who can see the future. The "starving poet" is excited by destruction, looking forward to the "fatal moment" in which things will change.

This character is the stereotype of the “ivory tower” writer, the writer who is cut off from the mundane world. It is no accident that Knarf reads his novel to Ord on the roof of his house! The starving poet

became in his own way demoniac and possessed by his own poetry.  
He no longer read the news, he no longer cared. He was quite apart.  
. . . So consumed was he that he lost his world and came only to live  
in its conception. In moments of exhaustion he glimpsed it again,  
like a haggard unshaven prisoner looking through a barred window  
upon the unconcerned world he had left for ever. . . . In current  
events he had lost all interest. (316)

This is clearly a self-portrait on Knarf’s part, which points us unambiguously to the novel’s concern with the role of the writer in public life. The epic for which the starving poet forgoes the world ends up abandoned—destroyed, along with the city of Sydney, in the fire: “The pages were carried along like dry autumn leaves. Some rose above the houses and were consumed by fires in neighboring streets. Others took fire in mid-air, burned for a second and fell. No word of it escaped.” This suggests that literature is no more enduring than the material effects of a society, and is tied to its own time and place. Knarf imagines this epic disappearing with the fall of the city. His own novel is both resurrecting and condemning it.

The conflict between writing and political action might also go some way towards explaining the curious presentation of gender in *TTT*. Critics have often pointed out the lack of sympathy with which Barnard and Eldershaw treat their female characters in the novel. Perhaps some of this harshness relates to a sense that as writers and as women, they were not, or were not able to, effect change in the political life of their society in a time of crisis to the extent that men were. There are female characters in both *TTT* and *LWLB* whose lovers are men who are politically active, leaders or revolutionaries: these women are all alienated from the political work carried out by their men. Ruth accepts that she cannot marry Sid Warren and becomes, as Ian Saunders puts it, his “helpmeet,” blanching at the violence Sid sees as necessary to the revolution (“Most Difficult” 219). Paula writes about her new relationship with the leader of the Peace Party, Archie Castles, in a diary. When he reads it he is angry at her single-mindedness: “If we all thought so much nothing would ever be done” (356). Illil, in the futuristic section, wants to be involved with the vote, and with Ren, but is too unwell. I’d suggest that Barnard and Eldershaw are harsh on their women in much the same way in which they are harsh on their writers—both in anger and frustration at their not being more involved in public life in times of change and conflict.

Although Barnard and Eldershaw were both deeply committed to the cause of literature, as is evidenced by their work with the Fellowship of Australian Writers

and elsewhere, there are in these portraits some difficult questions about the role of creative writing in public life. Elsewhere Barnard and Eldershaw argue forcefully against the stereotype of the writer as cut off from the world. In “The Writer and Society” they write: “There are still a good many people who think that writers live in ivory towers. We don’t even use them as holiday resorts. In a crisis you can observe for yourself how many writers become pamphleteers and imagine how many others fill the censor’s w[aste].p[aper].b[asket]” (225). In this article Barnard Eldershaw advances an argument as to the public usefulness of writing, suggesting that it:

makes life comprehensible and manageable by packing it into an image, by putting in the round what was scattered and broken. It attempts to fuse men and circumstance, it synthesises the raw material of life, by passing it through the fire of an imagination, into something which can be readily assimilated by the minds and imaginations of other men. (225)

The “fusing” of “men and circumstance” is a clear concern of *TTT* in its attempt to suggest how public events impact on the individual. Included within *TTT*, however, is a critique of effect of the imagination’s “fire” on the presentation of circumstance or history in novels. The discussions between Knarf and Ord, as well as the events played out in *LWLB*, hint at doubts about the drama the artist brings to her portrayal of current events. There is an explicit nod to Plato’s banishment of the poets, when Ord thinks to himself: “We have built the world out of chaos and held it up. He [Knarf], out of no more than some vague yearning atavism, would bring it down again. Plato knew better, no poets in Utopia, but we in fatuous generosity kept the poets and let them breed” (374).

What Ord suggests to Knarf, and what we see in the portrayal of the starving poet, is perhaps an expression of the doubt Barnard and Eldershaw harboured towards their own project: that the portrayal of society in crisis is a particularly literary view of that society, and might actually be damaging to it. This concern implicates not only Barnard and Eldershaw’s own writing, but also that of many of their contemporaries. As David Carter argues, a sense of “social crisis” was common amongst Australian novelists and critics during the period of the early 1930s to the early 1950s. He notes that the “linking of an artistic break from bourgeois fiction with a compelling sense of social crisis is shared by a wide range of fiction and commentary” from this period (“Documenting” 370). Ord’s unease regarding the dramatic crisis-vision of Knarf’s novel may also express something of the tension between Barnard and Eldershaw’s commitment to a liberal humanism that is most often associated with “bourgeois” fiction, and the urgency and sense of social crisis compelling many of their contemporaries to break from this into a more overtly politicised social (or socialist) realism.

*TTT* can be read as an examination of the philosophical or ideological implications of the representation of history in the form of the realist novel. *LWLB*, as it is presented to us in *TTT*, is a realist novel of broad scope, with a modernist slant. Knarf and Ord speak of how this form can encompass both the depth and breadth of human experience by following individual characters that become, in their own way, archetypes. The critical opportunity *LWLB* offers—and that is taken up by Ord—is to think about the nature of literary presentations of individual and public life, their possibilities and pitfalls for informing our understandings of a particular society.

The defining aspect of the crisis of their society as portrayed by Barnard Eldershaw in *TTT* is that of the alienation of individuals from the community at large. Leaving aside the notion of the writer as alienated from the rest of the community—as is clearly suggested in the situations of both Knarf and the starving poet—*TTT* and *LWLB* present individuals who are alienated from one another and from involvement in public life. As James Walter has argued, “at every point” in *TTT* “the relations between individual, community and social pattern are debated and explored” (25).<sup>1</sup> *LWLB* abounds with modernist depictions of individuals in relation to people as a mass. There are several richly detailed crowd scenes in which individual details are picked up, and thoughts of individuals are followed then dropped. Characters are presented as lonely figures in relation to the mass of people surrounding them in the crowded city of Sydney.

Through this presentation of *LWLB* and Knarf and Ord’s discussions, Barnard Eldershaw is able to explore the relationship between the literary form of the realist novel and ideas about how individuals relate to one another within a society. Among the thematic concerns of *TTT* are questions about involved democracy and collective action, and also the role of literature in enabling people to feel they are part of a community. This opens the novel up to be read in light of the arguments of Martha Nussbaum and other philosophers who argue that literature is essential for developing an ethical understanding based on empathy or commonality with others.

The moments of solidarity in *TTT* provide an illustration of some of the hopes and pitfalls for this kind of ethical understanding. Within the inner and outer novels there are moments of crisis in which alienated people feel that they are members of a community with common interests and responsibilities. These are all moments in which people are in temporal unity with one another. The incident with the Votometer in *TTT* is the culmination of all of the incidents in *LWLB* of the failure of the crisis, the “fatal moment” at which everyone is brought together to bring about any change. There is a fraught lead-up to the vote. People

travel from great distances for their opinion to be counted. Everyone stands in the town square and for two minutes of silence they all think about the same thing. This is the ideal of democracy as marker and guarantee of the nation. Their thoughts are measured, the vote is counted and it fails, because the overwhelming number of people registered indifference to the question of whether they want a say in how their society is run. This is a crushing disappointment to Ren, made all the more bitter by the fact that his father is so caught up in reading his own novel that he forgets to even attend the vote. Ren's hopes of the Votometer—that the public will be decisively and instantly mobilised for change—are reflected in the continued failure of mass movements in LWLB. People seem to have, like Ally, “a deep-rooted prejudice against being mixed up in anything” (261).

In *TTT*, Barnard and Eldershaw ask questions about what it is that makes people want to become “mixed up” in the affairs of a community. The test of public opinion with the Votometer is an ideal of consensus that is explicitly tied to the temporal. Knarf and Ord speak about the resonance of the Votometer's methods with the “old custom” of two minute's silence for the war dead. As Benedict Anderson has argued, a conception of time that allows for simultaneity, that is, others living in temporal unity with but physical distance from yourself is necessary to a sense of national community. He considers this conception of time as being enabled by newspapers and novels.

A traditionally novelistic example of this is Knarf's account of characters in LWLB all listening to the abdication of Edward the Eighth on their wirelasses. It is “a lonely voice going out to the world, the traffic of the ether stilled for a moment” (151). Mrs Blan is throwing an Abdication Party. Ally, thinking about Harry, “Never gave a thought to the sort of life she led or how she felt about coming down in the world . . .” (153). Harry is outside on the stairs, listening through the wall, thinking, “Poor little bugger. . . . Funny sort of world when no one lives the life he meant to live. He didn't know anyone who did. The Prince of Wales couldn't . . .” (152). Ally's brother and his wife, Chris, are listening in whilst addressing Christmas cards. They are moving up in the world, and know that Harry and Ally are moving down. Chris sends them the biggest card in the pile—“No harm in letting Ally know they were prosperous” (155). Elsie Todd, with whom Harry had a brief affair, is listening in her poor and dirty flat. “Have a heart,” she says, “Give us something a bit more cheerful” (155). In Toongabbie, Harry's old neighbors “meant to listen in” but are embroiled in a dispute over an inheritance. Another neighbor, gossiping over the teapot, clucks “it's the poor hardworking sods like Harry Munster that have got to go, ain't it pa?” (159). Meanwhile, Paula Ramsay is having an argument with her mother about wanting to move out of home. Paula doesn't know how to explain to her mother why she



wants so desperately to live on her own. “Different people want different things,” she pleads. Her mother replies, “Turn on the wireless, dear. It’s time for the King’s broadcast. We ought to listen, it’s an historic occasion” (157).

The abdication broadcast—the “historic occasion”—works here as a substitute for the word “meanwhile.” An event of national significance, broadcast by radio or printed in the newspaper, can bring everyone into a “common thought.” There is a sense that one “ought to listen,” that everyone else is. This is a kind of imagined community, although it is interesting to note that Barnard Eldershaw uses this moment to snapshot the extent to which thinking about others makes most people either more disappointed with their lot or more eager to protect their own fortune. Such moments in which people are in temporal unity with one another highlight the way in which forms of national community can prove to be hollow.

Knarf and Ord’s discussion of nation and community in the context of the two minutes’ silence takes place after Knarf reads a passage in LWLB about the Anzac Day Dawn Service. There are clear parallels between this situation and that of the Votometer:

The crowd was denser, the silence denser, waiting, suffocating, for the dawn and the intolerable bugles. . . . The wave lifted the crowd up, up. Its great crest curled but did not break. The bugles ceased, the wave fell dark and slow; men and women felt it leave them, dragging their hearts. You cannot hold the sea with your hands; salt and black it fell away from the dawn, drained into the streets on a long sigh. . . . The crowd fell apart. (123–24)

This moment of silence, of unity, is a dramatic one. It holds within it the possibility of change: Harry sees the gathering at the Dawn Service as “the cauldron . . . the closed vessel. A revolution might begin here” (123). The moment when peoples’ minds are so collectively focused is pictured also as the moment of decisive change.

The reflection of these two moments, the vote and the dawn service, the raising up and dashing down of hopes for people to speak with one voice—the false ideal, if you like, of democracy—suggest that Barnard and Eldershaw are aware that the desire for crisis to bring about communality and change might be a false one. Yet the desire persists. Within LWLB this desire for crisis to change things is presented as an expression of Depression and wartime frustration. Knarf describes the moment when World War II is announced as one of the

“moments when, out of saturation, coalescence, the whole brew of factors, change precipitates . . . that moment was historic. It may have been the nearest thing to a miracle—men’s minds bristled with

the realisation of their hour. . . . It was today. Men's thoughts crystallised upon a point."

Ord didn't say, as he would certainly have said at any other time, "You are elevating a local and fortuitous occurrence into a historic moment. You're indulging yourself at the expense of the truth." This was part of the book, it had its own sort of truth, he admitted that. (241)

Although Ord acknowledges the novel's "own sort of truth," he is not convinced that this kind of dramatic elevation of events into crisis points does the world at large any good. Let us return to Ord's speech about Plato to suggest that Barnard Eldershaw hints at the complicity of the artist, the literary imagination, in perpetuating this desire for crisis. Knarf and Ord are discussing the way in which collective action failed and succeeded in the past, and in LWLB. Ord accuses Knarf of lingering on the dramatic, the violent, the sudden, as opposed to the slow movements that brought about real change:

He arraigned Knarf in his mind, "you put on this tragic mask, you reach back 400 years into history to find this image of disaster to suit yourself. You have nothing to complain of, no tragedy, no mortal struggle. Society gives you everything . . . and you repay society with this peevishness, this gloom, this fleeing midnight story." . . . All this for himself alone and not for society. (374)

Ord sees the conflict, gloom, and crisis portrayed in Knarf's novel as something that the novelist brings to society, pulling it down in his wake. And yet in LWLB he sees the life of the past portrayed as "desperate and ugly and sweet and full, in a way the careful, measured life of today was not" (416).

The arguments between Ord and Knarf revolve around what role this novel he has written can play in their society. They know all the arguments about how novels don't translate into political action, and yet they feel that LWLB has given them something they didn't have before, and something they needed. Their world lacks drama. *TTT* suggests that crisis enables people, if only for a moment, to feel part of a community. It provides them with a sense of purpose. As is also amply illustrated by the novel, the desire for such moments of crisis can also be deceptive; it rarely brings about the desired action or release.

*TTT* has been read as an unwieldy, messy novel, a novel with many extraneous bits and false starts. I'd suggest that the novel's coherence lies in the resonance between the inner and outer novels, of moments that promise community, change and collective action but fail to deliver them. Knarf's novel prefigures what is about to happen with the failure of the vote: the moments of brief unity, hope and disappointment imagined in the dawn service and in the abdication broadcast suggest

that Knarf knew all along that such an ideal of collective action would fail. Reading the incidents in LWLB through the idea of community and crisis embodied in the test of the Votometer provides some insight into the effects of a literary reading of contemporary life. As such, *TTT* can be read productively as a novel about a writer and the relationship of his novel to the challenges facing his society.

If the starving poet of King's Cross is Knarf's self-portrait—and, in turn, a self portrait of Barnard and Eldershaw themselves—this portrait of a novelist in a society in which the novel itself has become an anachronism suggests that Barnard and Eldershaw's approach to their times was more complex than it first appeared. There is in *TTT* an awareness of the complicity of the literary imagination in the desire for crisis, for the decisive moment that will bring about dramatic change. *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* suggests the limitations and possibilities of the role that the literary imagination can play in public life.

#### ENDNOTE

- 1 Since I first presented this paper, I came upon Ian Saunders' "Memory, Community, and Writing in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*," which takes up an investigation of the role of community in *TTT* in a similar but more detailed manner than this paper. Saunders and I read several of the same passages of *TTT* in light of theories about community and nation.

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