

BOOK REVIEWS

René Guénon, *The Lord of the World*, with a biographical note by Pietro Nutrizio (DuVersity Publications, 2018 [1958]); pp. vii + 71; ISBN 978-1-9164833-0-9.

René Guénon (1886-1951) is a major figure in the twentieth century spiritual current called Traditionalism, other important members of which are Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Fritjof Schuon (1907-1998). Traditionalism is adherence to a form of perennial wisdom (*sophia perennis*) that is fundamental to all religions and transcends them. *The Lord of the World* was first published in French in 1927 and reflects certain intellectual currents of the early twentieth century, most notably the identification of patterns and connections between the languages, beliefs and rituals of the Indo-Europeans. Guénon seeks to trace the existence of the spiritual and temporal 'Lord of the World' throughout various cultures. In India he is Manu, "the primordial and universal legislator" (p. 5), who rules from the initiatory centre Agarththa. Manu is linked by Guénon to Metatron in the kabbalistic tradition, with the light and dark aspects of Mikael and Samael, and Melchizedek in the Jewish and Christian Bible.

Guénon's short study takes as its departure point Ferdinand Ossendowski's *Beasts, Men and Gods* (1924), an account of "a thrilling journey made across central Asia in 1920 and 1921" (p. 1) which apparently confirmed an earlier tale of a mysterious ritual centre called Agarththa, ruled by the Brahmatma. In the Kali Yuga, the last and inferior age in Hindu cosmology, Agarththa is underground, in retreat from the corrupt world. The bulk of Guénon's material is Judeo-Christian or Hindu-Buddhist, although in certain chapters these cultures are brought into relation with ancient polytheisms and other religious traditions. So, in Chapter 9, 'Omphalos and the Sacred Stones', he observes that Agarththa is the centre of the world, *Pardes* or "the spiritual centre *par excellence*" (p. 49) and thus has obvious connections with stones erected to identify sacred sites, like the *omphalos*, the navel stone found at the shrine of Apollo at Delphi, the sacred mountains of China "built in the centre of every kingdom, or feudal state" (p. 53), and the stones conferring sovereignty and marking the centre of the five kingdoms of Ireland.

The last two chapters examine the question of spiritual centres and how they are identified and represented. Throughout Agarththa, Paradesha (paradise) and Salem were considered; Guénon also adds Thule to the mix and mentions the idea of “white isles” (p. 58) as a general designation for such spiritual sites. The conclusion brings other mysterious places, like the ‘Land of the Saints’ from the early medieval *Voyage of Saint Brendan*. For the twenty-first century scholar the free association of motifs and willingness to accept resemblances as evidence of deep causal links appear naïve; nevertheless, *The Lord of the World* is still fresh and invigorating to read and will have a strong appeal for seekers and general readers of spiritual literature. This reissue is welcome, and the biographical note by Pietro Nutrizio at the close of the book introduces Guénon’s life and thought to a new audience.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

James Bridle, *A New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2018); pp. 304; ISBN 978-1-78663-547-1.

What will the end of the world *look* like? What will be the aesthetic atmosphere that consumes us? Bridle’s book is not directed specifically at considering the aesthetics of our near future, but there is nevertheless much in this work that provides well-researched prognostications of what will soon hit our eyes and senses. As such this book is very much worth considering from an aesthetics perspective; we find issues of ecological degradation combined with the development of inscrutable technologies and the possibility of a coming singularity, where all global computing capacity will be linked and not only mimic human intelligence but swiftly overtake it. A stable of writers, Adam Greenfield foremost amongst them, have covered much of this field already, for example in *Radical Technologies* (2018). Where Greenfield focuses on design, designers, their intent, and how that intent gets politically hijacked as their new technologies are deployed, Bridle unveils his own personal fascination with urban space, climate, airflight, pollution, and the stratospheres to argue why life will soon look, feel, and seem radically different.

The phantoms are multiple and even the possibility of a new dumbness that will accompany our future urban atmospheres like an unseen miasma of stupidity seems quite likely: “At 1,000ppm, human cognitive ability drops by 21 per cent. At higher atmospheric concentrations, CO2 stops us from thinking clearly. Outdoor CO2 already reaches 500ppm regularly in industrial cities: indoors in poorly ventilated homes, schools, and workplaces, it can regularly exceed 1,000ppm - substantial numbers of schools in California and Texas measured in 2012 breached 2,000ppm” (pp. 74-75).

The idea of the *homos* being much less *sapiens* whilst the machines about us only become more capable is only a tiny part of the greater problem Bridle presents. The ability of machines to be left on their own and simply run riot without human intervention is adding a new dimension to popular culture that provides a depressing and highly inappropriate new aesthetic that adds to the miasma – cat photographs (extremely popular on the web) become melded (via ever-consuming algorithms) with images of human eyes (also extremely popular images) – to increase image deployment and upscale web-site hits and thus revenue. This intensity of automatic image, text, and product melding allow us to purchase, for example, phone cases decorated with photos of fungal toes and automatically designed t-shirts for sale with the slogan, “Stay calm and rape more.” Bridle’s section on the automatic production of children’s videos on YouTube which get automatically edited together with violent rape scenes is quite disturbing. Yet it just the algorithm doing what it is told.

Perhaps Bridle is most fascinating when he writes about the skies; whether it be how investment firms buy out the roof spaces of Government hospitals so they can establish hyper-fast communication systems to react immediately to the market, or if he is trailing secret flights used to transport refugees out of the UK. Each affects how we approach the built environment with a new aesthetic that reflects our highest concerns (banishing the unwelcome and maximising market returns). But one example from his substantial range of arguments will have to suffice. Bridle notes the rapid recent increase in injuries from in-flight turbulence. Explaining this fact takes us in one hell of a very dark direction. To start Bridle mentions that the aviation industry itself has contributed significantly to the heating of the skies and the unpredictability of weather conditions then require planes to battle those conditions by using more fuel.

Thus, a feedback loop is established where one problem (and its immediate solution) only bolsters the conditions that worsen the initial problem. These feedback loops appear throughout the book. It could be that we have reached ‘peak knowledge’ on our ability to understand and study weather. Bridle points out that this point of ‘peak knowledge’ may also have been reached in our abilities to predict crop growth, fishing times, and a range of other, once dependable, agricultural outcomes. One could use this book to indeed sketch a new aesthetic for the dark age that approaches.

In concluding we may say that the essence of the book asks us to consider firstly the active agency and even the personhood of emerging intelligence technologies: “technology can be an excellent lesson in the agency of non-human actors” (p. 14). Then, secondly, he proposes that humans can be essential in this world not as the possessors of all knowledge, but as a significant player in a new relationship we develop with our tools (which become through their intelligence, our collaborators). He provides two examples to highlight this possibility. The first is the already well-explained concept of Centaur/Cyborg/Advanced Chess, in which machine and human can co-operate to win out over machine-only chess systems. The second is what the experimental power company Tri Alpha is seeking to do with advances in nuclear fusion. As the plasma heart of a nuclear fusion reaction remains unstable, longer and more energy-producing runs can be established by machine calculations augmented by human over-control. I do not know if these examples are enough to provide a solid hope for the future of the machine/human relationship and what it may resemble. It is clear, however, that the possibilities of what may go wrong continue to mount.

Bridle gives us a range of problems and outlines their consequences if not their solutions. In doing so he provides a thoughtful examination of what the future may *look* like in an aesthetic sense. So, whilst this book is not centrally concerned with aesthetic questions it is, nevertheless, a work that deals with some of the key issues concerning what we may be forced to accept from the new atmospheres of existence that will be soon upon us.

Christopher Hartney
University of Sydney

Antoni Diller, *Stuart Holroyd: Years of Anger and Beyond* (Nottingham: Paupers' Press, 2012); pp. 56; ISBN 978-09466-5014-9.

In 1950s Britain, a group of young, male authors from the working and lower-middle classes became known as the 'Angry Young Men' for expressing disdain for the class system, frustration, and hostility towards post-war austerity, and a desire for radical change across broad fields including social and sexual *mores*, education, politics, and the arts. In 1956 John Osborne's (1929-1994) play *Look Back in Anger* was a hit at the Royal Court Theatre and the label 'Angry Young Man' was given to the young authors. Others who were grouped under this label by critics or who self-identified as such included the novelists Kingsley Amis and Alan Sillitoe, and two young writers who were close friends for some years, Colin Wilson (1931-2013) and Stuart Holroyd (b. 1933). Diller's short book is a reprint of two articles he wrote on Holroyd, whose play *The Tenth Chance* had a single performance at the Royal Court Theatre on 9 March 1958. Holroyd's two plays, *Chance* and the unperformed *The Prophet* were never published, though he was a prolific author, producing: books of literary criticism like *Emergence from Chaos* (1957); works on the paranormal including *Psychic Voyages* (1976) and *Briefing for the Landing on Planet Earth* (1979); and autobiographies including *Contraries: A Personal Progression* (1975) and *His Dear Time's Waste* (2013).

Diller's essay 'Becoming Angry' (first published as 'Holroyd in London' in 2007) is focused on Holroyd's life in the 1950s, detailing his early life, first marriage at age twenty to Anne in 1954 (the year he met Colin Wilson), and its break-up just before his twenty-fourth birthday when Anne left him for the playwright Michael Hastings (they married on 21 February 1959). He went to Munich and wrote *The Tenth Chance*, which mined the diary of the Norwegian editor of the clandestine paper *London Nytt*, who was arrested and tortured by the Germans in early 1944 and drowned on 8 September that year when the prison ship *Westphalen* sank. Holroyd dramatised Petter Moen's torture by Nazis, and the betrayal of his comrades in the Resistance as a result. Diller notes that Moen's sanity begins to fragment, and in dreams or hallucination "figures from his past appear and remonstrate with him... Whilst being portrayed as dreaming, Moen has a religious conversion which prevents his descent into madness; what happens in reality is left open" (p. 12). Holroyd wrote another play about World War II, *The Prophet*, based on the life of the spiritual teacher

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G.I. Gurdjieff in 1940s Paris, and a television play, *Two Blind Mice*, neither of which were performed or published, and an unpublished novel, *Evil be my Good* (1960-1961).

The majority of these two essays is given over to Holroyd's biography: after his marriage to Anne ended, he had an on-and-off affair with a young actress named Joan (with whom he had a son); he then married a young divorcee, Sue Rowland. His memoir of youth, *Contraries* (1975), has his relationship with Sue at its core. Diller's second essay, 'Expanding Horizons', opens with Holroyd working at the BBC and scoping a television series on H.G. Wells. When that job ended he and Sue moved to Hastings, where he wrote the first draft of his novel while teaching in a language school. By 1963 he and Sue had three children in addition to her child from her first marriage. In 1965 at the invitation of former 'angry', young, and Welsh writer Bill Hopkins (1928-2011) he became involved in writing for *Penthouse* on the subject of the sexual revolution. Holroyd worked in the 1960s setting up a language school and continued writing without success, though his memoir of the 1950s, *Contraries*, was well received in the mid-1970s. His old friend Colin Wilson published *The Occult* (1971) and Holroyd, too, by 1974 was drawn into writing on the paranormal for publisher Aldus Books.

In 1980, with his marriage to Sue disintegrating, he began a Masters degree in English at Sussex University, and in 1981 he began an affair with Gyll, whom he had met two years earlier. In 1982 the Holroyds divorced and by 1983 Holroyd's friendship with Wilson was more or less over. Diller leaves him and Gyll moving to France in 1990 and enjoying travelling to India. Holroyd is now 85 and devotes most of his time to writing poetry. He is a near-forgotten literary figure, though the updated memoir *His Dear Time's Waste* (2013) attracted some attention. For this reviewer, who has developed an interest in Holroyd's plays and in the ways he and Wilson created a popular market in Britain for books on the paranormal and esoteric spiritual subjects, Diller's detailed portrait of a very interesting and thoughtful man, creative and unconventional, yet moral and responsible, a writer and artist by calling despite his lack of commercial and financial success, is a fine achievement. Stuart Holroyd is a writer who merits a wider audience, and Antoni Diller is a critic whose contribution to Holroyd's reputation deserves praise. This is a fascinating book.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

Simone Celine Marshall and Carole M. Cusack (eds), *The Medieval Presence in the Modernist Aesthetic: Unattended Moments* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); pp. xii + 196; ISBN 978-90-04-35702-0.

One of the more contradictory elements of modernism is that the expression “Make it new”, so commonly associated with this era’s aesthetics, actually stems from an ancient Chinese inscription. In fact, modernism may be better understood in terms of Pound’s original translation of the text as, “Renovate!” As opposed to ‘make it new’, the word ‘renovate’ implies an existing body of work to improve upon - a ‘making it new’ of something that is actually quite established. In *The Medieval Presence in the Modernist Aesthetic: Unattended Moments*, Carole Cusack and Simone Celine Marshall have edited a selection of essays that collectively demonstrate many ways in which modernist aesthetics are very much grounded in the distant past.

The Medieval Presence argues that common, everyday occurrences in modernist literature can take on special and sometimes even spiritual meaning when studied in light of their medieval influences. Resulting from an international conference, each essay in the collection presents a unique take on previously unstudied (‘unattended’) medieval references in modernist literature. In the editors’ words, the collection demonstrates how a kind of “rhetorical machinery translates the ordinary into the extraordinary” (p. 2), specifically when the modernist text employs an “image that integrates the medieval, the mystical, the mechanical, and the artistic” (p. 2). Some essays in the collection (such as Cusack’s essay on Wagner, Eliot, and the holy grail legend) focus on how modernists reworked medieval thought, while others (like Mendes’ essay on Yeats and Irish mythology) document modernism’s medieval influences and the impact those can have on our interpretation of modern works.

One of the collection’s greatest strengths lies in its truly interdisciplinary nature. Here, texts spanning opera, poetry, manuscripts, novel, myth, legend, philosophy, and more convalesce to show how the sacred aspects of medieval life can many times inform our understanding of secular modernist references. What is further impressive is the variety of backgrounds represented by the collection’s authors, with expertise ranging from philology, religion, literature, language, linguistics, music, and drama.

The essays in this collection are fairly even in their appeal and strength. Certainly, there are standouts like Mark Byron’s essay on medieval Arabic philosophy and Ezra Pound, and Chris Ackerley’s essay on the influence of medieval biblical interpretation on Russell Hoban. However, all

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essays provide unique perspective and work well together to contribute to the overall whole of the collection.

To be fair, some references to medieval religious influence resonate more strongly than others. Octavian Saiu's link between Eugene Ionesco's Eastern Orthodox upbringing and his novel *Rhinoceros*, while excellently written, lacks the overt connections to the medieval that most of the other essays contain. Saiu himself acknowledges that his link is "implicit" rather than "explicit" (p. 112). The essays that most directly support the collection's theme are ones that clearly ground their argument in specific medieval texts or ideologies like Gro Bjørnerud Mo does in her essay on Proust and medieval dream theories.

The essays collected here make a clear case for the medieval influence on the modern mind. What remains to be studied, however, and what the essays somewhat disagree on is this: Is the medieval a panacea or a poison for modernism? While some like Cusack see aspects of modernism that call for a return to faith, piety, and hierarchy, others like Mendes document modernism's rejection of these concepts outright. Further, a note on methodology may be in order. How do we arrive at the illuminating moment? And how many layers of influence are appropriate in getting us there? All said and done, however, Cusack and Marshall's collection is a very useful one that will help provide scholarly discussion on the topic of modernism by reinforcing the idea that modernist aesthetics reach just as much into the ancient past as they do into the future.

Kristen Marangoni
Tulsa Community College

Jiri Havran, *Norwegian Stave Churches: A Guide to the 29 Remaining Stave Churches*, trans. Tim Challman (Oslo: ARFO, 2010); pp. 160; ISBN 978-82-91399-35-5.

The stave churches of Norway are a special aspect of that country's heritage. There are wooden buildings in Europe that may be older (the remarkable St Andrew's at Greensted-juxta-Ongar, in Essex, UK has timbers from 1060 and there is evidence of two earlier structures dating from the sixth and seventh centuries on the site), and the stave church as an architectural form appears elsewhere in Scandinavia (Sweden has Hedared,

a beautifully preserved late stave church). Norway's surviving examples are all that remains of up to 1,000 such churches (p. 12). The greatest tragedy is that the bulk of those lost were demolished in the modern era; author Jiri Havran estimates there were 270 still standing in 1650, and 70 in 1800. This book is written as a guide for tourists and is lavishly and beautifully illustrated. The introductory essay, 'Norwegian Stave Churches', gives a potted history of the architectural form, identifies different styles of construction, and observes that although the churches are now well-maintained, as recently as 1992 Fantoft church was destroyed in an arson attack.

The oldest stave church is Urnes, dating from the second half of the eleventh century, but Borgund a century later is the classic, with "cascading tier-roof design, protruding dormers, external galleries, and carved dragons on the ridges of the roofs" (p. 20). Heddal church in Telemark, dating from the mid-thirteenth century, is the largest existent example. A stave church differs from the earlier palisade church (St Andrew's Greensted is a palisade church), in that the palisade church had posts "embedded in the ground" (p. 18), whereas the stave churches had stone foundations, which aided their preservation and resulted in the central part of the sanctuary being raised. However, many much-loved Scandinavian churches are not technically stave churches, as their basic construction is different (Seglora church, now in the Skansen folk museum in Stockholm, and the seventeenth century Flåm church near Bergen, Norway are very popular with tourists who are often unaware that they are not technically 'stave' churches). Further, the situation is complicated by the replacement of Fantoft with a perfect replica (which is nevertheless deemed inauthentic), and the fact that quite a few of the churches that Havran (who bases his classification on a bibliography of eight books by reputable scholars) includes are churches in which those aspects of the 'stave' construction that remain are difficult for non-experts to recognise.

Some have very plain exteriors, with no dragons and outer galleries, yet the internal pillar construction qualifies them. For example: Undredal church was not identified as a stave church until the 1990s; Rollag has lost its medieval interior; and Flesberg "does not have the appearance of a stave church, neither on the outside nor on the inside" (p. 66). Vang church is not even in Norway, but in Karpacz, Poland after it was pulled down in 1841 and "purchased by the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV" who re-erected it (p. 122). Garmo church was demolished in

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1882, and “the parts that were preserved were pieced together again and raised at Maihaugen in 1921, but in a highly reconstructed form” (p. 128). This church is now part of a museum, the Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer, as is Gol church, which now stands in the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History (NMCH) in Oslo. Haltdalen and Grip churches are both small in scale and have plain exteriors, but their internal stave construction is intact.

Special features of stave churches include elaborately carved portals that often depict pre-Christian mythological and legendary stories. For example, the north portal of Urnes church was from an earlier church and features a snake and a four-footed animal. A Christian interpretation identifies these as the serpent representing Satan and the lion representing Christ, but reference to Norse myth might suggest the Miðgarðsormr (World Serpent) and Níðhöggr, the dragon that gnaws the roots of the World Tree, Yggdrasil. The panels from a no longer extant church, Hylestad in Setesdal, Norway, are now in the NMCH, and depict the story of Sigurd the dragon slayer, which is told in the thirteenth century *Völsunga Saga* and forms the basis of the *Ring* cycle of Richard Wagner, among other cultural products. There are indications that stave churches had exquisite medieval Catholic church furnishings, but very few still feature these as the Protestant Reformation resulted in the adoption of Lutheranism across Scandinavia. The Medieval Gallery in the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo has a number of beautiful artefacts, including a replica of a statue of the Virgin Mary from Hedalen church (the original was on display but was later returned to the community and the replica put in its place). Havran’s book is a visually splendid, well-informed guide that deserves a wide readership. A mark of its success is that this reader wanted nothing else than to travel around Norway to see all of these remarkable buildings.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

Ron Butlin, *The Magicians of Edinburgh: Recent Poetry* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2015 [2012]); pp. xiv + 115; ISBN 978-1-84697-236-2.

Ron Butlin (b. 1949) is Edinburgh's Makar or Poet Laureate, and this collection of poems is introduced by the Lord Provost of that city, Donald Wilson. Butlin's city is his inspiration; his warmth, wit, and radical politics are everywhere evident in his charming compositions. *The Magicians of Edinburgh* has three sections. The first, 'Magic Edinburgh', opens with 'A Recipe for Whisky', which counsels stoic acceptance of life's vicissitudes, with friendship and a dram for comfort. 'The Magicians of Edinburgh' reflects on the city's transformation since the 1970s, and celebrates the whole of its inhabitants; "Together, we are the magicians and we make the city" (p. 4). Poems referencing Greyfriars Bobby, trams, the Scottish Parliament, and dancing on Princes Street are uplifting, but the darker side of twenty-first century life in Scotland is evoked in 'EH1 2AB' (an elegy for a homeless woman who found a 'home' only in the grave after her death), and 'Nicolson Square' about a girl of about sixteen "bleached hair, bleached skin, fear" and the man swearing at her, all "badly healing cuts and anger clenched into a face" (p. 25).

The second section, 'Music Edinburgh', is much shorter, with only six poems ('Magic Edinburgh' contains twenty-eight compositions). These are linked by the theme of music. One poem, 'The Time for Miracles', was written to accompany Edward Harper's second symphony. Harper was inspired by family donations of the organs of those who died in violence (both suicide bombings and Israeli military) in the Middle East, to those who might be seen as 'enemies'. Other poems speak of composers Butlin likes or is intrigued by; Joseph Haydn, John Cage, and Arnold Schoenberg. The third section, 'Virtual Edinburgh', has twelve poems, and famous Edinburgh personalities like the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), and the populariser of all things Scottish Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), feature. Images such as global warming, Calton Hill's unfinished national monument, and the complex and possibly unnecessary improvements foisted on the city's denizens by over-zealous councils and parliaments are whimsically and wittily unpacked in poems like 'A Proposal for our City's Digital Upgrade' and 'Somewhere in these Sky-Blue Streets'. That Edinburgh has a Poet Laureate shows the respect its citizens have for the arts and culture, and Butlin's small book of poems shows the depth of his

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love for his city. These poems are to be read and savoured often, especially by lovers of Edinburgh and Scotland, like this reviewer.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

Catherine A. Runcie (ed.), *The Free Mind: Essays and Poems in Honour of Barry Spurr* (Sydney: Edwin H. Lowe Publishing, 2016); pp. 334; ISBN 978-0994168214.

Professor Barry Spurr and I were in class together with Dame Leonie Kramer in the early 1970s. Then, as a friend and student colleague, he was always a wonderfully strong and committed champion of Australian literature, especially poetry. I have watched with awe and wonder his rise to academic distinction at the University of Sydney as Australia's first Professor of Poetry and Poetics. I was particularly interested in his passion for religious poetry in English and his deep and searching expertise on T.S. Eliot, especially the *Four Quartets*. The sad circumstances of Barry's retirement from the University of Sydney in 2015 after forty years of service at that institution are perhaps well known. These circumstances illustrate the illusion of so-called academic freedom in this country, which allows the digital hacking of a private correspondence to become the basis for a politically motivated vendetta against some of Barry's probably misperceived attitudes. The fact that this situation was never brought to a fair hearing and was the direct cause of Barry's enforced retirement sent shock waves through the academic community at the University of Sydney and more widely in this country.

In any event, Barry Spurr's academic stature and the value of his contribution to literary scholarship and debate during his forty years at Sydney have not been tarnished by these events. The volume *The Free Mind: Essays and Poems in Honour of Barry Spurr*, edited by one of the Sydney English department's most distinguished academics, Dr Catherine A. Runcie, is a testimony to Barry's wide-reaching influence, the respect which he has been accorded by a vast range of scholars, and to his own broad interest in literature and the arts. The book is prefaced by an epigraph from George Steiner which goes to the heart of the academic injustice which Barry Spurr has had to endure: "A true university serves neither

political purposes nor social programmes, necessarily partisan and transitory. Above all, it rebukes censorship and correctness of any kind. ... And it should honour anarchic provocation” (‘Universitas’, Lecture Part III).

The contributors to this *Festschrift* are a veritable ‘who’s who’ of the established writers and academic leaders both in this country and overseas. There are poems and stories by Bruce Dawe, Robert Gray, Geoffrey Lehmann, and Christine Townend; and there are many serious academic studies that fall into the domain of Barry’s interests. Kevin Hart, Professor of Christian Studies at the University of Virginia, contributes an essay on theology in Eliot’s ‘Burn Norton’, and there is also Professor Gerald A. Wilkes’ essay on ‘The Strategy of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*’ and Dr David Brooks’ essay on ‘Shakespeare’s Moral Wisdom’. Other chapters include Michael Wilding on a political reading of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, Associate Professor Jenny Gribble’s essay on Dickens’ *Little Dorrit*, and Professor Carole Cusack’s essay on Carmel Bird’s ‘Mandala Trilogy’. These local colleagues are joined by Professor David Jasper of Glasgow University, writing on ‘Liturgy and Language’ and Regius Professor of English at Glasgow Stephen Prickett’s essay ‘Why Study the Humanities?’, among others. The list goes on, with contribution after contribution echoing Barry’s own vast contribution to the literary world, with his particular emphasis on the religious and moral impact of literature and the arts in the modern world.

I myself have had the good fortune to have had Barry Spurr giving a keynote address at one of our recent The Sacred in Literature and the Arts (SLA) Conferences at Australian Catholic University, at which he received a standing ovation for his powerfully illuminating paper on T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. More recently he has generously given talks to our undergraduate students at Australian Catholic University both on T.S. Eliot and on Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. Barry’s presentations have always been received with great acclaim because of the clarity and directness of his insight into the ways in which literary language can so powerfully create a fresh understanding of human experience. The *Festschrift* ends with a wonderful Occasional Address that Barry himself gave at a graduation ceremony in the Great Hall, Sydney University in 2011 in which he celebrates the future lives of his graduating audience with a quote from Milton: “He who would... hope to write well... in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem.” And Barry sends his audience in to the world

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with the blessing: “As you go on your way justly rejoicing today, from this Great Hall, may your lives, too, be true poems: inspired, beautiful and meaningful.”

It is worth thanking all the contributors to this wonderful volume for the generosity with which they have embraced their friend and colleague with creative words emanating from the portal of their vision of truth, a vision which is profoundly in harmony with Professor Spurr’s own and which stands as a challenge to the undemocratic and restrictive practices that are entrenched in the bureaucracy of modern universities. The volume is completed by a massive bibliography of Barry’s publications across the full range of his literary and religious interests and his wide engagement with the community of learning at both high school and tertiary level.

Michael Griffith
Australian Catholic University

Bernadette Brennan, *A Writing Life: Helen Garner and Her Work* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2017); pp. 334; ISBN 978-1-92549-803-5.

I bought Bernadette Brennan’s informative and entertaining *A Writing Life: Helen Garner and Her Work* second-hand in Ganesha, a bookshop on the main street of sleepy Sanur, Bali in December 2018 (having run out of holiday reading). Garner had fascinated me since the film of her debut novel *Monkey Grip* (1982), directed by Ken Cameron and starring Noni Hazlehurst as Nora and Colin Friels as Javo. I had also been fortunate to know Dr Brennan during her tenure at the University of Sydney, and it was exciting to find such a book among piles of romance novels and crime fiction. *A Writing Life* has a chronological structure and incorporates biographical detail about Garner in order to illuminate aspects of her writing and it treats all her outputs, fiction, non-fiction, and the film scripts for *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992) and *Two Friends* (1986).

Brennan clearly is sympathetic toward and admiring of Garner, but she has taken care to nuance her analysis of the controversial ‘true crime’ books: *The First Stone* (1995) which unpacked a sexual harassment scandal that took place at the University of Melbourne’s Ormond College; *Joe*

Cinque's Consolation (2004), the tale of the trial of ANU student Anu Singh, who with her friend Madhavai Rao (who was tried separately and acquitted) was found guilty of the manslaughter of her boyfriend, Joe Cinque; and *This House of Grief* (2014), the harrowing tale of Robert Farquharson, who was found guilty of murdering his three sons after his marriage broke up and his ex-wife Cindy Gambino re-partnered. For this reader, Garner's accounts of these very public trials are compelling, despite (or perhaps because of) her open sympathies for certain of the *dramatis personae*. However, the three books drew criticism from various quarters, with one particular fault line being attitudinal differences between feminists of Garner's age (born 1942) and younger women, and academic Maryanne Dever also critiqued Garner for her lack of sympathy for the women in the public eye, and interest in details of their appearances. This criticism does not always hold; Garner is unfailingly kind to Cindy Gambino, and often expresses concern or empathy for women she finds inexplicable or unsympathetic. Brennan's discussion of these issues is balanced and fair.

For many readers, Helen Garner is primarily a novelist, and the analysis of her fictions in *A Writing Life* is superb and one of the book's highlights. In hindsight *Monkey Grip* is a masterpiece, and Garner's powerful and beautiful writing style, that is expressive though never florid or overdone, is evident in *The Children's Bach* (1984), *Cosmo Cosmolino* (1992), and *The Spare Room* (2008). It is true that Garner uses details of her life and the lives of friends and family in her fiction (I was truly shocked to learn that *The Last Days of Chez Nous* 'really' happened, that her second husband left Garner to marry her sister), but Brennan keeps the reader fixed on the ways that the novels and film scripts work as *fictions*, and is concerned that Garner is not reduced to a diarist chronicling "reality". Brennan writes well, and Garner is an interesting woman, in part because she is a talented writer, but in part because she is one of the voices of her generation, born more or less mid-way between Germaine Greer and Wendy Bacon, and one who took a different path to both of those academic commentators. *A Writing Life* is warmly recommended to all readers with an interest in Australian literature, Australian history, feminism, and biography. It is an excellent addition to any bookshelf.

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Book Reviews

Denis Saurat, *Death and the Dreamer*, with drawings by Edward Bawden (Brush Creek, TN: DuVersity Publications, 2019 [1946]); pp. ii + 93; ISBN 978-1-9164833-2-3.

Denis Saurat (1890-1958) was an Anglo-French scholar and writer who jointly held the positions of Professor of French at Kings College, University of London and Head of the French Institute in London. He is remembered now as one of the first commentators on the teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff, though he was not himself a follower of the Fourth Way. One of Gurdjieff's pupils, the publisher C.S. Nott (1887-1978), became a friend of Saurat's after publishing *The Three Conventions: Metaphysical Dialogues, Principia Metaphysica, and Commentary* (1926). *Death and the Dreamer* was originally published in 1946 in English; the French edition appeared the next year. The book is a collection of five short texts that Saurat assures the reader are true in "every detail" (p. ii). The themes are death, time, dreams, and the end of the world. The first text, 'Peasant Fears', takes place in 1936 in Toulouse, and involves conversations between a mother and her son one week after her husband (and his father) had died. Customs such as viewing the corpse are discussed alongside superstitions or beliefs about the supernatural (the dead being outside in the dark during the night, the desire of dead spouses to return to their beloved, living partners), along with information about life during World War II and practical matters like going to market. The reader is drawn along by Saurat's surreal tone and the unexpected shifts in the action. The story ends with some dreams of the characters, and the contemplation of life after death, whether by reincarnation or some other means. Saurat reminds the reader that "Without suffering and death one learns nothing" (p. 27).

The second text, 'The Heart's Nightmares', opens a year after the death of the father, in November 1937. The mother and son dream of the father injured, and in a second dream he appears to them cured. A little over a year later, during a visit by the son to the mother who has been unwell, they dream that although he is dead, the father is threatened by a stranger who wishes to kill him in dreams. In February 1939 the father's body is perceived to be flying atop of the church clock in the village, and the son takes his mother to London for medical care. The third text is 'The Life-Time of Christ' in which Saurat meets seven individuals. He is told by an elderly canon, a theologian in northern France, "The world was created exactly nine months before the birth of Jesus Christ" (p. 37). The point of

this meditation seems to be that Christ cannot be placed in time, and the fact of his birth means that is the only real present. Saurat enigmatically states: “Our knowledge of BC is only our knowledge of AD flung backwards into an absence of Christ” (p. 41). Six further interlocutors, an official, an “anti-clerical peasant” (p. 4), an ivory seller, a professor, an old king and an “enemy” (p. 68) all tell him of strange events and experiences which connect them direct to the life of Christ.

The fourth text, ‘High Dreams’, begins with the German army in a forest in 1942 and quickly shifts into what might be a UFO visitation, in which a man from the stone hut that is described is taken up by a purple beam. The second vignette is a young man judged by three women of varying degrees of sympathy and severity which ends in him finding a bride. The final two brief sections deal with children running up a staircase and insects. The final story is titled ‘The Bomb’ and tells of a soldier injured by a bomb in the war, and his time in the Princess Beatrice hospital receiving treatment for his injuries. It is difficult to convey the impact of this strange, short book; the origin of the tales in dreams is clear from the sharp shifts of viewpoint and subject matter, and the surreal images that Saurat paints in worlds. It should appeal to readers interested in modernist literature, near-death experiences and the interpretation of dreams, and the Gurdjieff tradition. This reprinting by DuVersity Publications is thus very welcome.

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