

Ken Kesey, David Ireland and a Portrait of Australian Freedom

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*The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*¹ (1971) is a complex novel that has been somewhat forgotten in recent years but was clearly recognised as an important contribution to Australian literature at the time of its publication, winning the Miles Franklin award in 1971. The novel encountered mixed reviews when published because of its perceived unconventional and fragmented narrative technique. Although new to Australian literary circles, such fragmentation had been used by William Burroughs ten years before the publication of Ireland's novel, and stylistically *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* has much in common with Burroughs *The Naked Lunch*. In regard to themes, characters, main metaphors and outline, however, Ireland's novel so closely parallels Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*² (1962), it is a wonder the comparison has not been made before. Given Ireland's own concerns, the popularity of Kesey's novel, and the fact that he was writing during the late '60s it is more than likely that Ireland had read the Kesey novel before he commenced writing his own. Both *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* are novels foregrounding issues of freedom and individualism, with Ireland's Puroil refinery offering an example in microcosm of society's ills, like Kesey's mental hospital. Ireland's obvious use of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is significant in that it shows he found in Kesey's work a certain resonance with the Australian experience. In these two novels, which use such similar character studies and metaphors to present issues of individual liberty, the subtle differences that may be found between the two are suggestive of differences in American

¹ David Ireland, *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, 4th, 'Arkon'ed. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1979).

² Ken Kesey, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Signet, 1962).

and Australian cultural attitudes towards freedom – a theme I intend to explore here.

Much postwar American fiction echoes the popular sociological theories of the time, imagining the Self in opposition to a society of grand conspiratorial design. A number of literary critics have identified a certain cultural paranoia present in American literature of the period.³ In particular Timothy Melley's study *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, traces what he refers to as 'agency panic', a set of anxieties regarding organisations, mass communication and technology, through a number of contemporary American novels. 'One of its most important cultural functions', he suggests, 'is to sustain a form of individualism that seems increasingly challenged by postwar economic and social structures'.⁴ Indeed this is a defining aspect of the work of well-known American authors such as Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs and Don DeLillo.⁵ *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* uses the mental hospital to allegorically outline the encroachments of the state on individual rights, and this sense of paranoia is particularly captured in the character of Chief Bromden.

This sense of paranoia, however, is not, generally, a recognisable or discussed aspect of Australian literature. And yet it has an obvious presence in the work of David Ireland. Ireland's first novel, *The Chantic Bird*, abounds with images of small confining spaces in which the narrator is frequently trapped. The narrator becomes so obsessed with the idea of freedom that he is convinced that it is constantly under threat. He believes he is being followed and is so worried about maintaining possession of *his* story that he murders his biographer. *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* offers a more explicit example of 'agency panic' in which individuals must struggle to maintain integrity in a society controlled by an all-encompassing corporate structure that determines all aspects of their lives.

³ Critics such as Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), David Seed, *Brainwashing: The Fictions of Mind Control, a Study of Novels and Films since World War II* (Kent State University Press, 2004), Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970* (London: Cape, 1971), Patrick O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), Katherine Hume, *American Dream, American Nightmare: fiction since 1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

⁴ Timothy Melley, p.6.

⁵ Timothy Melley also discusses Kathy Acker, Joseph Heller, and Margaret Atwood.

Not only is Puroil ‘always watching’ but there seems to be no escape from its long arms of influence as an international company in collusion with the Australian government. Interestingly, electro shock therapy, which in Kesey and Burroughs offers the most extreme illustration of paranoia regarding the loss of individualism (as it compromises one’s freedom of thought), also makes a brief appearance in Ireland’s novel. One worker is committed and submitted to electro shock treatment to modify his behaviour:

I remember coming out of the twenty-four hour sleep they gave me at the hospital after the shocks... They can do what they like, it wouldn’t matter if they killed you – snuffed you out in disgust. (The Unknown Industrial Prisoner, 243)

In *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* individual freedom is curtailed in order to further the interests of the Puroil plant. Even books are banned because of their ability to engender liberal thought – ‘Puroil preferred zombies’(6).

Although similar to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* in regard to themes, characters, main metaphors and outline, stylistically Ireland’s novel has more in common with the literary innovativeness of the work of William Burroughs. Referring to its structure, Helen Daniel comments that Ireland’s novel, ‘appeared without warning or precedent, broken into fragments in a way which even *The Chantic Bird* was not’.⁶ As well as being broken into many seemingly incomplete narrative fragments, *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* introduces some hundred odd characters, all workers at the Puroil refinery, and mimics an anthropological study, describing the various ‘types’ to be found in an industrial workplace. The multiplicity of perspective that is created by the myriad of some one hundred characters is reminiscent of Burroughs’ *The Naked Lunch*, which similarly liberates the reader from potential confinement to any one perspective. Furthermore, the importance of maintaining one’s integrity of mind seems as prevalent a theme for Ireland as it was for Burroughs: ‘[T]he only place they can hope for freedom is in their minds’, states one of Ireland’s characters (193). As it did in *The Naked Lunch*, the theme perhaps also provides a possible motive for the unconventional narrative technique in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*. Such fragmentation has the effect of

⁶ Helen Daniel, *Double Agent: David Ireland and His Work* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books Australia, 1982), p.47.

freeing the reader from preconceived reading habits and systems of thought, while the postmodern structure of the novel is also intimately tied to its themes, its narrative fragmentation imitating the stop/start staccato of the machinery described.

As I have indicated, like many of Ireland's novels, *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* is concerned with definitions of freedom and the boundaries of this freedom. As Adrian Mitchell comments, 'All Ireland's work is concerned with individual freedom – how to obtain it, how to preserve it, what gestures can be made, including the vulgar ones'.⁷ Principally, the novel elaborates the perceived impact of industrialisation and capitalism on individual liberty, while also reflecting on the apparent failure of democracy to protect or uphold the freedoms it promises. The greatest injustice is that the industrial prisoners are unaware of their imprisonment, thinking of their ability to work as a freedom.⁸ The novel offers an extended commentary on this subject. A lengthy discourse on page three sets the tone for the rest of the novel:

prisoners were allowed to drift jobless to the few large coastal cities from all over Australia as soon as they left school, to choose their place of detention. Since wherever they looked the land was owned by someone else, the only place they were not trespassers was on the roads and there were laws about loitering and vagrancy. You had to keep moving and you had to have money or else. There was an alternative. Without alternatives there was no democracy. There was an infinite freedom of choice: they could starve sitting, standing, asleep or awake; they could starve on a meat or vegetarian diet. Any way they liked as long as they didn't bother anyone... The word Democracy had been heard for centuries on political platforms but was nowhere to be seen in the daily earning lives of citizens. (3–4)

Daniel notes Ireland's allusions in this opening section to Russian literary and political contexts, and its immediate effect of casting aspersions on our assumptions about liberty and Western society.⁹ Indeed one of the characters is named the Volga Boatman, a reference to a Russian folk song

⁷ Introduction by Adrian Mitchell. David Ireland, *The Chantic Bird*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973).

⁸ Helen Daniel, p.50.

⁹ Helen Daniel, pp.49–50.

sung by the suffering barge haulers on the Volga River at the height of Tsarist Russia.

The workers at the Puroil refinery remain there for the term of their working lives, until they are granted or forced retirement from the factory. Each longs for freedom from Puroil but is at the same time terrified of it, being so long conditioned to servitude. Besides the fact that the industrial workers are consistently referred to as 'prisoners', except for the one known as the Samurai they also all bear an

inch-wide residual scar of chains passed down from father to son, from ankle to ankle for half a dozen generations, their legacy from the bloody and accursed empire which, to the amusement of its old enemies and its powerful pretended friends, had since died a painful, lingering death. Though you would not know this if you had examined the laws of the colony: all were promulgated in the name of the sovereign of another country. (2)

Referencing the country's first decades as a penal colony, the passage also indicates a continued sense of colonial humiliation. Indeed we are told about the

Head Office in Victoria which was a backward colonial outpost in the eyes of the London office, which was a junior partner in British-European Puroil its mighty self. (5)

Compounding this sense of humiliation is the colonial exploitation of native soil as Puroil was able 'to persuade Australians to pass an Act of Parliament subsidizing their search for more oil'. (12) A further and familiar criticism is also made regarding the inability of the colonists to appropriately manage the Australian environment:

Then Herman moved out of his line of vision, obscured by large projections on the southern side of the Termitary, designed to shield the offices from the direct rays of the sun. It was designed in the Northern Hemisphere. (116)

Despite its Southern Hemisphere location, the refinery has been thoughtlessly designed for a Northern Hemisphere sky. It has also clearly been designed with no thought to the sustenance of the local environment:

‘Eel River ... gummed up with – not to be admitted – petro-chemical residues’ (117). It is also worth noting the factual existence of an American petroleum company called ‘The Pure Oil Company’ (renamed in the mid 1960s). If, historically, a shared sense of colonial oppression has been a significant reason for Australians’ identification with the American experience,¹⁰ here there is the implication that America has begun to adopt their prior oppressor’s imperialistic tendencies:

Sure enough the men on the vessel made the monotone drawling noises that denoted the use of the American tongue. There was a confidence about them, the manner the English used to have. ...Now and then they looked down at the watching natives. (76)

The novel depicts a tug-of-war between the ‘system’ and its prisoners. Ireland depicts the comical ways in which the prisoners attempt to gain some freedom, yet any small advancement or victory by the workers results in harsher retribution or retrenchment. For those who have read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, this framework, despite the differences of setting, is familiar. The parallels between the Kesey and the Ireland novels are too numerous and too significant to be merely coincidental. The similarity that first strikes the reader is the humour, the biting satire with which each author portrays ‘the system’ and the humorous guerrilla tactics of the prisoners. The first sentence, for instance, of the chapter titled ‘Crashdown’ describes ‘the Puroil mental asylum run by its inmates’ and is evocative of a similar occurrence in Kesey’s novel, in which the inmates run the ward for a night. As Foucault observes in *Discipline and Punish*, ‘prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons’.¹¹ In this regard the difference in setting between Kesey and Ireland is less important, each writing what they knew, the former having worked in a mental hospital, the latter having worked at an oil refinery. Like the work of Burroughs and Kesey, the diversity of human voices portrayed in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* must contend with the single, uninflected monotone of the corporate or state entity. To emphasise

¹⁰ Marilyn Lake holds that ‘[Alfred] Deakin’s identifications with American manhood were fuelled by colonial humiliation’. Marilyn Lake, “‘The Brightness of Eyes and Quiet Assurance Which Seem to Say American’: Alfred Deakin’s Identification with American Manhood’, *Australian Historical Studies* 38.129 (1997): 50.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

this point both authors make great use of the familiar metaphor of the controlling corporate or state bureaucracy presented as a machine, which is the extreme contrast to spontaneous emergent life highlighted by individual characters. While Chief Bromden in Kesey's novel figuratively sees and describes the workings of the mental hospital in terms of machinery, Ireland's anonymous narrator literally describes the mechanics of the Puroil refinery. In both novels certain characters are described as being replaceable parts of a machine. In the world of Puroil, 'humans were plant accessories', (342) in *Cuckoo's Nest* the ward is described as a 'factory' where broken 'components' are 'adjusted' and the 'completed product goes back out into society'. (40)

The metaphoric association of the machine with the 'unfree' has a long history in Western literature. Ireland's first chapter, 'One Day in a Penal Colony', makes obvious reference to Kafka's famous short story 'In The Penal Colony'. The complex workings of the vast Puroil plant allude to the intricate machinations of Kafka's torture/execution device. Indeed many of the 'industrial prisoners' are mortally wounded or at the least gravely disfigured when caught up in the plant's machinery – both literally in the case of Herman the German who loses an arm, and figuratively in the case of The Glass Canoe who is mentally destroyed and then killed. Contrastingly, in both novels the wilderness posits a space in which the inmates can explore their humanity – in *Cuckoo's Nest* this is demonstrated in the boat trip organised by McMurphy and in *Industrial Prisoner* by the characters' daily escape into their oasis hidden among the mangroves.

In Australian culture, the bush, much like the American west, has become an imaginative reference. Russell Ward in his seminal study of the Australian national character, *The Australian Legend*, explains the 'Australian pastoral workers ... disproportionate influence on that of the whole nation' by introducing American historian F.J. Turner's 'frontier theory'. Ward holds that in countries like America and Australia, the frontier offered new experiences and indigenous influences, and promoted national unity and democracy. 'There is every reason to think then', states Ward, 'that the frontier tradition has been, at least, not less influential and persistent in Australia than in America'. Richard White further highlights that words such as 'squatter', 'homestead' and 'the bush' were in fact borrowed from America.

As Thomas H. Fick suggests however, the 'disappearance or degeneration of a literal frontier' has subsequently led to the abstraction of

the frontier geography into the psychic categories of radicalism and conformity.¹² Ireland's novel illustrates such psychic categories in its juxtaposition of the anarchic freedom of the bushland against the conformity that the plant inflicts upon its workers. The frontier is a border zone less governed by the laws of men than by the laws of nature. The freedom of its open spaces offers an escape from the 'cramping, foetid city' and all that it represents (ie the establishment).¹³ Indeed there is a long history of the association of anarchy, freedom and the bush in Australia. In his chapter 'Bohemians and the Bush', White details a new generation in the 1890s of writers and artists who were attracted to the idea of bohemia but in 'rejecting the values of the cultural establishment' (particularly British cultural values) they removed this bohemia from its traditional urban setting and took it to the bush: '[T]he sense of freedom, comradeship and youthful spirits associated with the bush overlapped with the values which they infused into their bohemia'.¹⁴ They presented the bush and these values as the 'real' Australia. Yet there is of course an even longer history of the association of anarchy, freedom and the wild in America, which may in fact offer a point of origin for the Australian reference. Most obviously Thoreau's *Walden* comes to mind. Interestingly, Murtho, the 1894 cooperative 'ethical socialist' experimental community on the banks of the Murray river (not unlike an Australian version of Brook Farm), reportedly held regular reading groups where members, thinking themselves to be part of a global movement,¹⁵ recited aloud American writers such as Emerson and Thoreau.

Yet although this historical context may help to explain the parallels between the two novels in regard to their cultural symbolism it does not explain the proximity with which Ireland's main characters resemble Kesey's. There are three main characters in *Cuckoo's Nest*: the outlaw hero, McMurphy who leads his men to freedom, the observant, powerful yet silent Chief Bromden (whom we discover has much to say), and the destructive and malicious character who is so misguided as to believe in the

¹² Thomas H. Fick, 'The Hipster, the Hero, and the Psychic Frontier in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*', in *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol.43, No. 1/2 (1989), 19.

¹³ White, and Ward also, cite Patterson's 'Clancy of the Overflow' as the most popular example of this association. Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688–1980* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981) p.102.

¹⁴ White, p.99.

¹⁵ Melissa Bellanta, 'Feminism, Mateship and Brotherhood in 1890s Adelaide', *History Australia*, 5.1(2008): 7.5.

system, the Nurse. Out of the myriad of characters introduced to us in Ireland's novel, three similarly stand out and are attributed the most narrative space: the Great White Father, the Samurai and the Glass Canoe. Like Kesey's Randle McMurphy, the Great White Father offers a contemporary rendering of the outlaw hero or rather its Australian manifestation, the bushranger. Indeed the Great White Father displays all the tell tale signs of the universally resonant outlaw hero (almost to the same comic extent as Kesey's McMurphy). These motifs, suggests Graham Seal, can be 'referred to in shorthand as: friend of the poor, oppressed, brave, generous, courteous, does not indulge in unjustified violence, trickster, betrayed, lives on after death'.¹⁶ In Kesey's novel the frontier legend is inverted, as it is McMurphy who must show the Indian how to 'get back to nature'. Ireland's derivative character leads his flock to the bush in an attempt to help them to discover the nature of themselves, through 'mateship', albeit primarily through sex, and alcohol. Still, this is perhaps an attempted return to earlier ideals, as Ward argues that conditions on the Australian frontier encouraged 'mateship' and a much more collectivist ethos compared to the individualistic nature of the American frontier. White, in his chapter 'The National Type' further affirms that '[t]he emphasis was on masculinity, and on masculine friendships and team-work, or "mateship" in Australia'.¹⁷ The Great White Father's self-professed aim is to re-educate the men in their humanity:

Where had they all got off the track? Was it when they were children, forced to knuckle under in the schools, made to leave their humanity outside the well-drilled classroom with their lunchbags, hanging on a nail? Why did they have to be taught again later that their humanity could be brought inside the classroom and the factory fence? Sooner or later someone has to teach them freedom. (20–21)

And he later explains to Cinderella (one of the regular prostitutes):

¹⁶ Graham Seal, *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, American and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.11.

¹⁷ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne Oxford University Press, 1965) pp.228, 27. White, p.83. The Australian understanding of 'Democracy' thus revolved around similar lines, and Australia's protectionist economic policy (from federation up until the 1980s) perhaps further reflects this attitude.

The only way is to teach them to enter the kingdom of oneself.
Oppose everything, not outwardly but in their heads. Never
oppose themselves. (194)

It is perhaps not surprising that two novels with such similar concerns for freedom and individualism would make use of such an archetypal figure of resistance as the trickster/outlaw hero. Seal's study, *The Outlaw Legend*, which details American, Australian and British manifestations of the legend and their cultural significance, argues that despite the often specific local circumstances in which social banditry may arise, there are deep continuities in the general qualities and characteristics of the outlaw hero which transcend local and even national boundaries.¹⁸ Traditionally the outlaw hero is to be found in the bush, frontier or fringe area where the rule of the oppressor is weak or non-existent. Importantly the Great White Father references the 'specific local circumstances' in which such a figure arose in Australia. The term 'bushranger' began being commonly used in the 1790s as a term for convicts who had escaped into the bush. Indeed Australia's convict heritage has been immensely influential in the popular belief in an inherent rebelliousness in the Australian national character. Adding to the legendary status of the escaped convict turned bushranger was their apparent ability to survive in the harsh environment of the Australian bush.

Constantly described as a 'prisoner', the Great White Father, who escapes to the Home Beautiful built in the bush surrounding the plant, obviously references this historical context. Indeed the narrator is surprised, given the Great White Father's libertine attitude, to 'see how blue the scar was on his right ankle'. (377) Yet, while the figure of the Great White Father seems unique to his Australian locality, Ireland also appears to make particular references to an American context. 'The Great White Father' was supposedly the term used by Native Americans in the 19th century for the American President, and the 'Home Beautiful' (an ironic reference to an interior design magazine) resembles a 1960s West Coast hippy commune, with the Great White Father trying to instill in the men the values of 'beatness':

Beware the evils of temperance and sobriety and embrace the
worship of the bottle. Beware the dangers of isolation from

¹⁸ Graham Seal, p.11.

your fellow man in haunts of coot and hernia. Every man needs homeopathic exposure to germs and windy ideas. (30)

The Great White Father in attitude and speech is rendered in the guise of real life American trickster heroes like Allen Ginsberg. He is set apart from the other characters in that his speech appears to mimic the rhetoric of American freedom. We also discover the Home Beautiful is a small enclave of writers and artists. Besides the Great White Father's obvious gift of oration, three separate characters appear to be diarising the events at Puroil: the Two Pot Screamer, the Samurai and the anonymous narrator, and The Rustle of Spring sketches all over the plant walls. (370)

Various critics have discussed Kesey's McMurphy as a Christ-like figure leading his 'flock' (305) to salvation. Ireland's character the Great White Father may be seen in a similar light. With the obvious religious connotations of his name, the Great White Father preaches sermons to his disciples in his paradise amongst the mangroves. Like McMurphy, the Great White Father comes to an unfortunate end. No longer able to sustain his fight against the system he dies only to become a martyr in the memories of the other prisoners. As in Kesey's novel where one is struck by the religious imagery of the scene of McMurphy's electrotherapy (he is anointed with a conductant, a 'crown of silver thorns', 237), the scene involving the Great White Father's death also seems a parody of religious ritual:

Their heads leaned inward like girls examining a ring, aunts inspecting a new baby, wise men and shepherds over a manger or surgeons over a patient cadaver. There was a healed incision in his right side. I was surprised to see how blue the scar was on his right ankle. I didn't look at his hands. (377)

In most images of the crucifixion, Jesus' body is marked by an incision below his right breast (one wonders what the narrator may have found had he looked at the Great White Father's hands). The passage goes on to describe his disciples all singing different hymns and songs so as to create the impression of 'extremely involved contrapuntal church music' (378). Yet the reader is invited to question to what extent the Great White Father's benevolence towards his fellow prisoners has come at his own expense: 'A third time the Great White Feather struggled to rise and a third time the weight of their devotion kept him down' (378). Similarly, McMurphy towards the end of *Cuckoo's Nest* appears exhausted by the

weight of his responsibility to the other patients. Indeed, towards the second half of each novel both characters display a marked loss of the vitality they displayed in the first half of their respective narratives.

In the novel's last chapter we are told that the Great White Father did not get up to the plant on the day of the explosion but stayed at Home Beautiful in the midst of a four day bender. Consequently he is renamed the Great White Feather (371), as a white feather has traditionally been a symbol of cowardice. He has failed the men in their true hour of need. The Great White Feather dies soon after and it is left unclear what will be his legacy. No one is quite selfless enough to take his place. Despite his sacrifice, it is unlikely Home Beautiful and his vision of a communal drunken utopia will survive without him (372). All appear too selfish to devote the necessary attention or money to his bizarre vision. Thus, unlike *McMurphy* it appears that the Great White Feather has achieved nothing; he has failed to liberate his flock, perhaps because he too bears the scar of servitude, dependent on his salary to indulge himself and his men. He has not taught them to think for themselves but merely to 'set out fresh everyday to lay hands on and hold the greasy pig of pleasure' (372).

At the opposite end of the psychic spectrum of radicalism and conformity is *The Glass Canoe*, the embodiment of all that is wrong with the system. Like Kesey's *Big Nurse*, he asserts his authority over the prisoners of lower rank through malicious acts of intimidation or violence. Rather than resisting the system, he enforces it, seeking further advancement. Daniel refers to him as the "'Hollow Man" in the Puroil wasteland', substituting his dedication for Puroil for an authentic self which he is unable to find.¹⁹ He is an empty vessel, which reflects the company line and its requirements. Interestingly, while Kesey depicts the *Nurse* as pure mechanised evil, *Ireland* demonstrates that the *Glass Canoe* is himself a victim of the system, a mere pawn in a much larger game that he is too stupid to comprehend. He absurdly wears a list around his neck of what the narrator ironically refers to as his 'symptoms' (written upside down so he can read them). 'The symptoms of his disease were the aims, ambitions, resolutions, promises and cautions he wanted to bear in mind in his rise to the top' (166). However, while so many of the other characters appear to use language to their benefit, plastering the walls with ironic posters, recording the injustices of Puroil, or offering sermons on the nature of freedom, the *Glass Canoe* is tormented by language. Unable to

¹⁹ Helen Daniel, p.59.

command his own language, he falls victim (in a very Burroughs-like manner), to ‘the word’ and to his ‘symptoms’:

it is words that cause all the trouble; they dictate what I think, they dictate what happens to me, they dictate what might happen to other people. If I could get rid of words I might get better. I might feel more comfortable. Breathe forehead, think stomach, sing eyes ... They were all over me, those words, I couldn’t shake them; crawling up my arms, running through the hairy forests of my legs, popping out of my hand when I made a fist. (243–44)

In many places in the novel words and language offer a small hope, yet here we are warned of their danger through their ability to confine via labelling and categorisation, (Indeed the characters are only known by nicknames, which reference their situation or ‘group behavioural patterns’²⁰). The Glass Canoe comes to a gruesome end, falling from the top of the reactor. He climbs the reactor with the intention of jumping, in order to show the other prisoners that he was made of metal and as strong as the refinery, that he was a ‘whole man’ and Puroil’s threats couldn’t take that away from him (280). Significantly though, even the choice to jump is taken away from him as Far Away Places, the main target of the Glass Canoe’s sadistic harassment, sneaks up behind him and bites him on the arse, at which point he loses his balance and falls to his death. (In *Cuckoo’s Nest* the Nurse also suffers extreme humiliation at the hands of McMurphy). The character of the Glass Canoe is a comment on the extreme alienation perceived to be the result of industrialisation. His death suggests the fallacy of wholeheartedly believing in a system that ultimately fails all individuals. Although McMurphy’s exposure of the Big Nurse displays her vulnerability, she nevertheless remains a somewhat two dimensional ‘bad guy’. However, with Ireland’s character, the Glass Canoe, it is suggested that the bully is merely another victim of the ‘system’.

Like Kesey’s Chief Bromden, the Samurai is physically a very powerful man, a trained martial artist with quick reflexes. His physical presence and capacity for independent thought make him a natural leader. ‘Everyone liked the Samurai, he was like the bigger boy in class, who shouldered the responsibility for other kids’ adventures and, if need be,

²⁰ Helen Daniel, p.49.

stood up and swapped punches with the teacher' (76). Yet, it is a position he has little interest in (9). The Samurai is a character much in the guise of Kesey's silent Indian or Ellison's invisible man. For the most part he is quietly restrained, silently observing and documenting everything around him for the day when he will finally take decisive action. The reference to Ellison's novel is evident in a section titled 'White Negroes' (also a reference to Norman Mailer's essay of a similar title), in which the Samurai recognises an affinity between the repression of the workers and the historical repression of blacks:

[I]n walked the biggest brass the men had ever seen. Instantly the Samurai yelled: 'Quick! On your knees! They might chuck us a dollar!' Several lowered themselves to this position immediately. (89)²¹

But such ignorant posturing is the reason he dislikes his fellow men and 'was convinced nothing comes about by the efforts of the people, the beasts of burden, but by individuals' (361). And so despite his intensity of feeling for the plight of the downtrodden, he intentionally alienates himself from the others (9, 362). This paradox lends a certain ambiguity to the Samurai's character, compounded by the fact that he places self-conscious doubt on the authority of his own writings:

Was he writing about the men he'd worked with? Did they exist? ... Were those men he knew or thought he knew, were they projections of himself? (362-63)

In Kesey's novel Bromden may be read as a similarly ambiguous character. On the one hand he may be read as a violent mental patient who kills another, thus calling the authority of his narration into question. On the other, and it seems the novel encourages us to read him this way, he is a compassionate narrator concerned with the welfare of his fellow man, who euthanises McMurphy to put him out of his misery.

The differences between Chief Bromden and Ireland's derivative character, the Samurai, betray distinctive differences between the novels themselves and perhaps offer an indication of differing cultural conceptions of freedom. At the conclusion to Kesey's novel we are left with an

²¹ There is a parallel here to a scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* where a group of black soon-to-be college students are made to scramble for coins on an electrified carpet at the hands of their white beneficiaries.

indication of hope: in a symbolic show of immense individual physical strength Bromden lifts a concrete and steel control panel, throws it through a window, and vaults himself to freedom. Furthermore his transition from silenced Indian to narrator is equally symbolic for he has found his voice. The novel also ends with Bromden making the decision to return to his homeland and native community. This exercise of choice, alongside his creativity as narrator, is a further example of his newfound status as democratic individual. Apart from McMurphy's death and the unfortunate death of another inmate who hangs himself, the rest of McMurphy's flock, in a show of newly found strength and self-confidence, release themselves from the hospital to return to the community. As a Native American, the fact that Bromden finds himself, his voice and his freedom in Kesey's novel is an important comment on American race relations and racial equality. This aspect of Kesey's novel, however, is glaringly absent from Ireland's. There are a few instances within *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* which may have lent themselves to a discussion of race relations but instead they work to reinforce Ireland's overriding concern with the injustices of industrial capitalism. References are made to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and 'white negroes' but only to equate the plight of the workers with slavery. Significantly, Ellison's novel similarly uses the metaphor of a machine to depict the controlling corporate or state bureaucracy.²² While Ireland's narrator occasionally refers to the factory workers as 'natives', it is in relation to the appearance of a foreign plant manager who unlike them is not a native born Australian. Unlike in the case of Chief Bromden, there is no reference to the Samurai having a racial or ethnic background. His name and the fact that he is trained in judo, may vaguely suggest a Japanese background but even if this is the case it would have little bearing on the issue of Australian race relations. It is more likely that his name is a reference to the popular 1960s television series of the same name. While Kesey's novel ends with a positive gesture towards a future of racial equality in the United States, *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* does no such thing.

Ireland's novel appears to offer little if any hope. Although the Samurai begins to 'believe in himself', we are further told he begins to give in to 'the dark forces rising from within him' (362). He reaches the

²² The prologue of Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* establishes the African American narrator's metaphoric struggle against the forces of Manipulated Light and Power, the systematised and far reaching bureaucratic structure of a national electric company that symbolises in the novel the systemic influence of *white* power (alongside the Liberty Paint Factory).

conclusion that it is pointless ‘to work through the wantless ones’, rather he himself must ‘bring about a chaotic state of affairs in which his unfortunates and the industry that half-heartedly employed them would be pulled into gear and made to work’. ‘Yes. He would go about the country, making panics’, he decides (361, 362). While Bromden sets off to rejoice and perhaps rebuild his community, the Samurai makes the anarchic decision to create ‘chaos’ (363). Furthermore, although he underhandedly picks away at the plant’s productivity, the Samurai fails to take any real decisive action. Unlike Bromden, the Samurai was still ‘[w]aiting for his voice’ (312). Indeed on the same page we are told it is unlikely he could father children. A sterile Samurai is ineffective. Significantly, and as mentioned previously, he is not even present when the refinery finally explodes. The novel offers a glimmer of hope when we read that the Samurai has been diarising his time at Puroil and that he believed ‘[a] writer was a dangerous man, substituting words for crimes’ (363). That is until we are given a brief paragraph of his work and realise that he too has been seduced by industry (363). We discover that he does not hate Puroil but hates the inefficiency and incompetence of its management.

‘I wonder what your slant is’, said the Great White Father. ‘You’re not against this’ – he waved an arm round at the evidences of progress – ‘this rubbish. You’re for it. You try to get it to work better. You’re a company man’.

‘I’m an industrial man. And yes, I want the filthy place to work. I want the whole army of industry to work’.

‘There you are, then. You’re one of them. Production is your god’.

‘You too. You help them’.

‘How?’

‘Taking the mob’s attention from grievances – making them forget. Oblivion. Stupor’.

‘A side effect. My way is like religion, which offers Eternal Life and gets its followers to train for it now. I offer Eternal Oblivion and my followers can *have* it now’. (363)

As readers we begin to see the possibility that Ireland has written a critical adaptation of Kesey’s novel. The novel appears quite clear in placing blame for the perceived downward societal turn upon foreign interests. At the time the novel was written Australia had become embroiled in the American war in Vietnam and American cultural values were fast displacing the old sense of Australia’s essential British identity. As a result

Anti-Americanism burned bright in 1960s Australia with anti-Vietnam demonstrations and cries against American imperialism.²³ Yet at the same time, notes Don Watson,

Americans provided most of the music for the revolution. And the clothing, hair and lifestyles, heroes, role models, buzz-words, artwork, poetry, novels, journalism and comic books.

The paradox as Watson sees it is that ‘they have been a mighty force for freedom. Flawed, contradictory, murderous, outrageous; yet what empire in history was less malevolent?’²⁴ Ireland’s novel perhaps points to a mere switch of masters and modes of subjection – from colonialism to cultural imperialism. Ireland might be seen to have purposefully adopted Kesey’s well-known American allegory of the irrepressibility of freedom and democratic individuality, and then subjected it to the forces of American/capitalist cultural imperialism.

Ireland’s novel would seem to demonstrate the American model to be unworkable in an Australian context. The American privileging of individualism does not appear to provide an appropriate solution for Australia and the perceived American tendency to cling to cultural myths and figures of resistance in times of difficulty is perhaps naïve (as is suggested by the Great White Feather’s failure to achieve any lasting legacy). Indeed by comparison Australia lacks the kind of resonant symbols or ‘sacred texts’ with which Americans draw the sentiment to continually revive and reinvent their cultural myths.²⁵ For Americans the West has always symbolised promise and possibility and Kesey plays on such symbolism when the inmates in *Cuckoo’s Nest* make a westward boat trip giving them a taste of this freedom. Close to the end of *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, the Samurai looks West towards the Blue Mountains only to ironically conclude: ‘but they were no help. Just rocks and trees. The refinery, for all its frustrations, was a product of strength and vitality’ (361). We are told that the Samurai is the only worker who does not bear the scar upon his ankle. We at first assume this is because of his ability for individual thought but the real reason is perhaps because he desires to remain at Puroil. He is not a prisoner at all but is secretly ‘in love with

²³ Frank Moorehouse’s devastatingly humorous account of this, *The Americans, Baby*, springs to mind.

²⁴ Don Watson. ‘Rabbit Syndrome: Australia and America’, *Quarterly Essay*. No. 4 (2001); 14, 22.

²⁵ Don Watson, pp.47–51

industry' (361). The lack of an ankle scar symbolises his freedom. He is free because he exercises his right to choose and is not, unlike all of the other workers, compelled by the necessity to earn a living (361). Thus the only character to display any sign of freedom is the one who embraces the capitalist ethos at the heart of liberal democracy, and so has no real choice at all.

Ireland illustrates the idea of democracy to be a fallacy because the liberal capitalism at its heart does not create community but destroys it, alienating, isolating, pitting worker against worker. There can be no hope in the idea of a people's champion, a true 'democratic individual' who will lead members of his community down the right path as seen in Kesey's novel. Nor does developing a skill for ironic comment and anarchic debauchery achieve anything long lasting. Both the Great White Father and the Samurai, have their own failings and their own selfish agendas. Indeed the last line of Ireland's novel reinforces this sense of selfish individualism as the narrator and Volga the Boatman meet each other on a narrow path 'each, for the sake of a tiny inconvenience, wishing the other had never existed' (379). There is a lesson to be learnt in the way in which the plant explodes – the result of a combination of unrelated acts of sabotage and incompetence by various individuals. It is the *combination* of these acts of individual resistance that destroys the plant, not the acts themselves. The destruction of the plant has been the desire of many, yet one wonders if, had there been some communication amongst the workers, the explosion would have not resulted in so many deaths.

What is missing in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* is the sense of community that we find built upon the democratic individual in Kesey's novel. What is perhaps also missing, however, is any hope that community is possible in an age of industrial capitalism, which promotes possessive individualism. Is it at all possible to return to the sense of collectivism that supposedly once demarcated the Australian experience? Some critics such as Brian Kiernan have described Ireland's novel as pessimistic, suggesting that there is no hope to be found in the industrial drudgery described. Adrian Mitchell on the other hand argues that, despite the apparent nihilism, there is the 'intimation of a preferred moral order'.²⁶ The severe irony and seeming fatalism of Ireland's adaptation, in stark contrast to the apparent hope and optimism of Kesey's novel, is perhaps precisely the

²⁶ Adrian Mitchell (June 1975), 'Paradigms of Purpose: David Ireland's Fiction, *Meanjin Quarterly*, 34(2); 189.

point. American democratic individuality cannot simply be transplanted from one continent to the next. As Don Watson surmises in his *Quarterly* essay 'Rabbit Syndrome: America and Australia': 'we could aim to be as full of hope and confidence as they are, but only at the risk of losing that weary fatalism by means of which we understand each other and charm the world', or 'we could do the sensible thing – we could make the guiding principles of Australia its diversity and pluralism, its inorganicness, the absence of oppressive and constraining symbols'.²⁷ Indeed Ireland's novel illustrates the very differences in cultural make-up and historical contingency, which suggest the impossibility of the American model for Australia. We are reminded that the link Americans have cemented between economics and the pursuit of liberty and happiness is perhaps an artificial one at best. What comes to the foreground in Ireland's novel is precisely its irony, its 'pluralism', its 'inorganicness' and an underlying nostalgia for Australia's lost socialist spirit.

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²⁷ Don Watson, p.51.