LOVE AND PAIN AS PORTALS TO THE CENTRE

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Last year RLA organised a series of four public lectures presented under the title *Mysticism and the Muse*.[1] These were commissioned from two poets, Les Murray and Chris Wallace-Crabbe; a contemporary artist, Ross Mellick; and the literary scholar, Roslynn Haynes.

All the RLA speakers seem to agree on one thing: that the arts generally are a medium for exploring, expressing (and even perhaps in the first place, experiencing) the conjunction of the ineffable and diurnal living that, for want of a better phrase, we call mystic experience. Chris Wallace-Crabbe talks about lyric poetry and its 'raids on the ineffable, the mysterious'. Les Murray speaks of discerning 'a spirit in things' – 'you can certainly see given a sense of [their] inner life and I've done a lot of that in poems'.[2] Roslynn Haynes investigates the ways Aboriginal poetry draws upon the indigenous concept of land as the 'vital nexus between the physical and spiritual, between the temporal and eternal',[3] and Ross Mellick recalls that in collaborating with composer Ross Edwards over their *Raft* project he sent the composer George Steiner's statement that

> All good art and literature begins in immanence but they do not stop there, which is to say very plainly, that it is the enterprise and privilege of the aesthetic to

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[1] Rayment, Colette. (ed) *Mysticism and the Muse*, Sydney: RLA Press, 2001.
[2] *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.24.
[3] *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.62.

> quicken into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and other...[4].

When I think of a *centre,* I mean in mystic terms, that space or place in which, or moments when, the Eternal impinges upon one's individual experience in time. I mean an experience of joy or consolation or love so overwhelming that it is discernable as an intrusion of the divine into human time and human life.

Entry into this *centre* can be thought of as accessible not so much by stringent ascetic or meditational practices, but by crossing willingly or unwillingly, two bridges or portals in succession. The first is love – love for someone or someones; and the second is the portal of pain – severe pain at the loss of, or damage to, or unrequited love for, the loved one(s). Having entered the *centre* via these portals one is stripped, reduced to such basics: there are no pretensions, there is no camouflaging of the real self, no masks, no ego, no illusions, this *centre* is in fact a relationship between the self and God or Love itself. The world is a new place. The *centre* opens out to become the newly apprehended vision of a world, which for many, is ripe for the creative exploration and expression of it in cadence, text or pigment.

It is the purpose of this paper to hold this concept of a such a centre up to the four RLA lectures to see what reflections might be cast on the subject of mysticism and the arts. To do this it will be necessary to search for the centre of each speaker's gnosis, a knowledge acquired either first hand through personal experience or on trust from the arts themselves.

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[4] *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.14.

Mellick

Contemporary artist, Ross Mellick, entitling his address *Journey to the 'Fair Jerusalem' of the Human Heart*, locates the milieu for spiritual experience as a process of a pilgrimage of self-transformation. He approaches the spiritual journey in terms of his own remarkable *Raft* pieces in bamboo, designed in collaboration with Ross Edwards' *Raft Song at Sunrise* for bamboo flute. Mellick is mindful of Thomas Merton's 'it is second nature for the human to go on pilgrimage in search of a centre, a source...' and takes as his starting point the First of Rilke's *Duino Elergies:* 'Who if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?' – a poem Mellick regards as 'the first definite step on [Rilke's] journey' undertaken in the spirit of 'a pilgrim seeking an inner homecoming.'

More originally, Mellick takes this capacity of the pilgrim to be broken open into more insightful ways of being, and yolks it to a viewer's ability to enter into the inner consciousness of a work of art. He speaks of 'the art experience' as 'the depth of the rare encounter'; something like a

> deep friendship [in which] shared stories with artworks are commonly fragmentary, more poignant and potent sometimes because of that, [and where] each associative response [can be seen to be] lighting up corners of consciousness which may then fade with promise of a return later.

This is something with which both Murray, with his insistence on poetry as a concert between the conscious and the dreaming[5] mind, and Wallace-Crabbe, with his evocation of Empson on Marvell's state of ecstasy as

[5] 'Contemplative', but with particular significance in Australian Aboriginal spirituality. See *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.30.

'neither conscious nor not conscious'[6] concur. Influenced by Kafka's image of a frozen sea, Mellick describes the process in this way:

> ...we, in a sense, can be thought to walk on a frozen sea – the hidden region of our non-conscious mind. On occasions a frozen surface cracks. Not because we break it – it breaks up from within in response to inner poorly understood pressures, exposing hidden wonders. Imagine walking on such a frozen expanse towards a distant horizon and suddenly, in front of you the ice cracks, burst from underneath, and a great blue whale surfaces, pauses for just a moment. Looks at you and crashes down into the sea again and disappears. A small event in a sense, yet the world is forever altered. The art experience for the artists and for the viewer, may rarely occur in that way.

For Mellick this moment, in which the unexpected occurs and propels the observer into insight concerning the observed art form, is not only available to the viewer of art but is responsible for the creative act in the first place. Rilke, Mellick says, was confronted by just such a catalytic experience.

> ...picture Rilke, a young man of twenty-two ... standing on a high cliff above the Adriatic in a raging storm, thinking about a business letter. Suddenly, without bidding, he described a sense that a voice called to him out of the roaring gale: 'Who if I cried out would hear me among the ranks of angels...?' This anguished question arose from a soul at the beginning of a long journey and became the first line of the first Duino Elegy....

Mellick is also aware of the continuing nature of illuminations on the inner journey and reminds us that

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[6] *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.49.

Rilke composed only four of the *Duino Elergies* in the six years subsequent to the cliff-side experience. The great literary output which saw the completion of the ten *Duino Elegies* as well as the sixty-four *Sonnets to Orpheus* was in the immediate aftermath of two acute experiences in Rilke's life. Mellick ponders the significance of the Orpheus myth and the human tendency to yean for 'union with an absent love' and for 'completion', and describes these two events:

> ... in January 1922, his lover left him at Muzot. She had come across a postcard reproduction of an Italian Renaissance drawing of Orpheus, sitting under a tree playing to an assembled group of animals. She tacked it upon the wall opposite his desk before she left. At about the same time Vera Knoop, a nineteen year old daughter of a Dutch friend died. He barely new her, yet he was profoundly shocked by the news of the ...death. Suddenly on the 2nd of February, the poems began again.

Quite prophetically Rilke had written in the first elegy both of love: 'when you feel longing, sing of women in love; for their famous passion is still not immortal'; and of 'grief': 'so often/ the source of our spirit's growth' and more astonishingly, of his belief that his mission was, to act on behalf of 'those who died young', and to

> ...gently remove the appearance
> of injustice about their death – which at times
> slightly hinders their souls from proceeding onwards.[7]

I would call both this love and this grief which Mellick so highlights in Rilke's creative process, portals to the mystically potent centre – that country of the creative mind and spirit in which Rilke wrote the greater part of elegies and all the sonnets.

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[7] *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.4.

Wallace-Crabbe

In his lecture, Wallace-Crabbe's milieu for approaching the mystical in poetry is pre-eminently English Romantic and Post-romantic poetry. He centres his own proximity to mystic experience in a poignant piece of autobiographical detail. Citing his own poem, 'A Lowly Cattle Shed' which concludes:

> ...I just can't help
> thinking along with hairy shepherds or eastern kings
> as they get up close
> to that shelter where the Baby lies in straw:
> all for a moment so real,
> stone walls, timber, donkey, amiable ox
> and in the midst,
> his pink arms reaching up to the simple music,
> my dead son
> Decembring round again.

Wallace-Crabbe says the poem invokes his own ' "thinking along" with ... feral shepherds and ambiguously gorgeous Magi'. He continues, 'So is my dead eldest son, verbally there for a verbal instant, as he was and as he never was, infantile in the Christmas crib.' Here it is the case, he says, that 'this lyric has created a small habitation for the ineffable' – 'a brief concatenation of feelings, which could not be named in any linear logic.' This is not Christian piety or secular sentimentalism: the poet declares his own bafflement at the process he has recorded in verse by explaining how the lyric's 'Christian materials do their serious gesturing for all that I am not a Christian myself.'

> Once more, while the milieu for the mystic experience is an expertise in the criticism of English poetry and a latter-day Romantic sensibility for landscape, (something comparable to Murray's mixed milieu of Catholicism and love of the land, and Mellick's a

> proclivity for self-transformation represented by pilgrimage), the approach to centre from which the ineffable intrudes into the December world of the non-Christian poet, is the portal of love and the portal of pain – 'my dead eldest son.'

Murray

In a sentiment reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's lament for the loss of the hearth from contemporary houses,[8] Les Murray bewails the developers' putsch of the sixties 'that drove me out of Sydney, the fact that it was so full of a kind of warfare against the past.' Murray's reading of poems about cranes[9] and concrete structures[10] iterates Yeats' interrogating lament:

> How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heartstrings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times?[11]

Murray's adopted Catholicism and his return to his beloved Bunyah provide him with the milieu in which to contemplate the ineffable. Peter Alexander reminds us that Murray wrote to Penny Nelson that

> I'm concerned with relations between human time and eternity at the odd points where they meet and illuminate each other, eg. Where matter becomes immortal, or spirit enters time 'for a season'. (It happens.) ... the Mass is 'an incarnate pause between

[8] Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Center*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999, p.5.
[9] 'Machine Portraits with Pendant Spaceman'.
[10] 'The Hypogeum'
[11] W. B.Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, New York: McMillan, 1961, 162-63. Cited by Tobin, p.6.

> this and timeless time.' Joints and junctions like that, arising in the oddest places, are my meat...[12].

And from Bunyah he can write:

> The stars are filtering through a tree
> Outside in the moon's silent era.....
>
> The future is right behind your head:
> Just over all horizons is the past.
>
> The soul sits looking at its offer.[13]

This Bunyah has the same kind of significance for him, something like, Murray says, 'what Rilke calls the poetry of the soul in space'.[14]

Formal religion and luxurious countryside, however, do not provide Murray with his centre from which to observe and word these conjunctions of time and eternity. His entry into the centre of his mystic apprehension of the world is via the portals of love and pain.

He recalls the depths of his own personal depression extending over many years: 'What a hell hole it is to wake up at four in the morning and really have a bad bout of depression.'[15] He refers not only to the autism of his young adult son, but observes knowingly that 'from that you learn to see autism in everyone.'[16] He reflects upon his poetry lamenting the deaths of three thousand in a Papuan earthquake, reads his account of the deaths of thirteen in a ballooning accident, speaks of war 'in which I and boys my

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[12] Unpublished letter Les Murray to Penny Nelson (née McNicoll), 20 July, 1961 cited by Peter Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.91.
[13] 'Predawn in Health.'
[14] *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.45.
[15] *Mysticism and the Muse*, pp.45-46.
[16] *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.25.

age were killed',[17] and reiterates his famous lines about the weeping man who:

> cries out
> of his writhen face and ordinary body
> not words, but grief, not messages but sorrow,
> hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea.[18]

Overall he deplores the harsh Calvinist ethos of his youth and latterly the politically correct milieu in which these things cannot be spoken about in an ethos of human compassion. 'Earth', after all, he says, not Venus, 'is the planet for lovers.'[19]

It is not surprising that Murray includes in his lecture these lines which in fact, have become his *poesis*:

> You can't pray a lie, said Huckleberry Finn;
> You can't poe one either. It is the same mirror:
> Mobile, glancing, we call it poetry,
> Fixed centrally, we call it a religion...[20].

While Mellick speaks in terms of the *Raft* voyage, Murray gives insight into his own journey as he recalls his forty years as a poet, his fifty odd published pieces that would, he says, rate as relevant in any discussion of poetry and mysticism. Wallace-Crabbe recalls Christopher Brennan's 'peregrine sequence, 'The Wanderer':

> Where star-cold and the dread of space
> In icy silence bind the main
> I feel but vastness on my face,
> I sit, a mere incurious brain,

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[17] 'The Chimes of Neverwhere'. See *Mysticism and the Muse*, p.29.
[18] 'An Ordinary Rainbow'. See *Mysticism and the Muse*, pp.21-23.
[19] 'Ernest Hemingway and the Latest Quake'. See *Mysticism and the Muse*, pp.44-45.
[20] 'Poetry and Religion'. See *Mysticism and the Muse*, pp.30-31.

Under some outcast satellite, some Thule of the universe,
Upon the utter verge of night
Frozen by some forgotten curse,
The ways are hidden from mine eyes
That brought me to this ghastly shore
No embers in their depths arise
Of suns I may have known of yore.

Claiming Brennan to have deconstructed both the planet and human knowledge, Wallace-Crabbe says: 'He speaks, who cannot speak, in a place which is not a place, outside time. Can the persona, who feels "but vastness on my face" also be the poet, a human being lodged in society in discourse...?'

Haynes

It is exactly this timeless sublimity and exteriority to society with respect to the Australian desert that Roslynn Haynes takes as her prevailing metaphor (and major field of investigation) in the lecture based on her book *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film.* Haynes rails at those early Australian settlers who not only sustained what she describes as an *I-it* relationship with the land, but who also brought with them 'other cultural baggage' such as 'literary fashions of Romanticism'.[21] These, she maintains, were indicative of the Europeans' preoccupation with ownership or at the very least, visual ownership of the land – something anathema to Aboriginal cosmology. At the same time there is the suggestion, at least in her book, that the Romantic perception of the desert to painters (such as Ludwig Becker)[22] is perhaps the nearest the early nineteenth

[21] *Mysticism and the Muse,*p.63.
[22] Haynes, R. (2000) *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

century could come to giving a spiritual (timeless) context to landscape perceived as useless:

> For an artist such as ... Becker, fixated on notions of the sublime, the desert, with its ghostly mirages, its potential terrors to survival and the lure of mystical enlightenment, was the counterpart of the alps for the Romantic artists, especially Caspar David Friedrich.[23]

Whatever Haynes' ultimate verdict upon colonial Romanticism, it is sanguine to remember the late H.W. Piper's contention in the sixties that Romanticism came late to these shores and never really left them, thereby preparing the nation for a certain receptivity of Aboriginal spirituality.

Haynes uses the desert to examine the collective spiritual state of the nation. In her lecture Haynes looks to the desert to probe the delusions and mythologies of explorer-heroes returning empty-handed, if at all, from the desert. She alleges that such delusions of heroism taught the nation to regard the desert centre of the country as alienating, malignant and antagonistic. More importantly, they validated in the public mind the acceptance of *terra incognita* and more significantly of *terra nullius* – two false premises on which were based the decimation of Aboriginal Australia.

It is significant that in dismissing these colonial and imperialist mythologies, Haynes touches upon Patrick White's post-war indictment of western civilization as 'highly desirable existence [dismantled into] something parasitic and pointless' – a lament which Les Murray's

[23] Ross Mellick in his address gave as art historical contexts for his own work both Friedrich's *Wanderer Above a Sea Fog* which he says connotes for him Pico della Mirandola's great oration, 'You are confined by no limits and shall determine for yourself, your own nature in accordance with your own free will into whose hand I have placed you...'. *Mysticism and the Muse,* p.9.

lecture reiterates constantly. She also recalls White's motivation in writing *Voss*: '[his] experience of desert terrain in the Middle East during the war was ... a factor in transforming a novel about explorers into one about a spiritual quest.'[24] Haynes goes so far as to speak of the explorers' '*hubris* and incompetence' which subsequent generations of European Australians were taught to regard as heroism, if not martyrdom.

For Haynes, facing into the pain of the collective guilt of a nation is only a bearable exercise in light of the evidence of trends emerging since the nineteen thirties and forties. Citing Eckhart's 'be like a desert as far as self and the things of this world are concerned, in order to discover the desert of the Godhead', Haynes recalls both Cavan Brown's paralleling of the desert's awe, terror and fascination with the sensations of *mysterium*, *tremendum* and *fascinans* and Rudolph Otto's 'Empty distance, remote vacancy, is, as it were, the sublime in the horizontal.'[25]

So where, in thinking about 'love and pain as portals to the centre', can we find 'love' in Haynes' thesis? It is clear from her study that Australia is not yet comfortable with its centre. After having come some distance in facing the pain of the past, the love element is yet to be learned. There is as yet no centre from which an integrated mystical apprehension of the nation can come into full play. Her title, after all, is *Seeking* the Centre: she is observing a trend and expressing a hope that a nation will learn to love and thus find its true centre. She concludes her lecture with lines from Francis Webb whose persona, she says, is 'like a Hebrew prophet who has received the Word from beyond'; and with Les Murray's 'Equanimity'. But the last chapter of her book expresses her hope at greater length:

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[24] *Seeking the Centre*, p.240.
[25] Haynes, in *Mysticism and the Muse*, pp.70-71.

> Aboriginal paintings [and as she has shown earlier, writers also] have led many white Australians not just to an appreciation of the aesthetic value of indigenous art but to a new awareness of the depth of aboriginal culture, and as a result, to a new understanding of the land. In this book we have seen that an increasingly spiritual relation to the land has formed the art of several contemporary desert artists, including John Coburn, John Olsen, John Wolseley and Many Martin. The concept of Dreaming is increasingly understood at least at a basic level, and valued by non-indigenous Australians.

Haynes cites anthropologist, Derel Mulvaney, who claims the Papunya artists

> have illuminated the mythological interactions between people and nature, for white viewers, in a more deeply humanized manner than those landscapes offered by the European myth-making painters and authors.

And with his role in educational and reconciliatory movements in mind, she concludes with Geoffrey Bardon's vision:

> The [Papunya] painting movement points for all of us towards a great resurgence of the human spirit in his country. The Western Desert painters have, by their insight of artistic form and towering compassion toward their land, provided for us all, and for all time, a re-reception of the continent.

If we recall the homiletic statement of Brad Collins' fictitious priest cited by Haynes, 'God... watches... not from the heavens... but from the red earthy beneath your feet, from the tall white gums',[26] it is clear that Haynes'

[26] *The Soul Stone*, cited by Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p.278.

thesis implicates the nation in learning to love and reconcile itself with the desert and its peoples, with the result that the nation might one day be ready to enter a centre which is also a mystic awareness of the Love of God.