

Non-Australian Settings in Michael Wilding's
Selected and New Short Stories
Somewhere New

Where is "somewhere new"? As denoted by the title in his new collection of short stories, Michael Wilding perceives it in a symbolic sense, as a place of potential, away from the centre on the decentralizing margin, a place that enables a fresh new start, a future. It can be just anywhere, in Australia on a Sydney beach or the Balmain part of the harbour, in the United States on Jack Kerouac's beloved Mississippi river which really stands for the river Severn in Wilding's native England, or in North Africa. Michael Wilding's (born 1942) recently published collection of twenty new and selected short stories *Somewhere New: New and Selected Stories* (1996) shows just how very much alive the short story tradition still is on the Australian literary scene. It draws on seven previous volumes from over thirty years of writing, including classics like, for example, "The Man of Slow Feeling" (1986) and "Reading the Signs" (1984), the title stories of two of his early short story collections, as well as new, previously uncollected pieces on drugs, politics, sex and the literary life.

This new book is only one in a series of books Wilding has produced (and managed to get published, which is an achievement in itself) over the past few years, including short stories (*This is for You*, 1994; *Book of the Reading*, 1994) and brilliant socially-conscious literary criticism which sets out to reevaluate some of the major Australian literary *oeuvres* and which would prove useful to the students and scholars of Australian literature (*Social Visions*, 1993; *The Radical Tradition: Lawson, Furphy, Stead*, 1993; *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction*, 1997). He also edited a

selection of Australian short stories *The Oxford Book of Australian Short Stories*, 1994). It has to be noted that Wilding in 1990 had his first book of short stories published in England by the prestigious Faber & Faber publishers (cf. Maver 1991: 125-6) and that he became Elected Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1988.

Michael Wilding has just finished a novel based on his experience of the literary scene in Australia during the past thirty years, *Wildest Dreams*. It may turn out to be history or fiction, or something in between, tracing the author's literary career including the seething Balmain years in Sydney, when sub-culture and the influence of the American fabulists such as Barth, Barthelme, Borges, Brautigan was particularly significant. As Wilding says in a recent interview: "It's really my version of Balzac's *Lost Illusions*. The rise and fall of a young writer. It's based on my thirty years in Sydney. It is focused on different aspects of the literary life - book reviewing, the alternative world, publishing. It's a memoir" (Maver 1997:9). It remains to be seen what Wilding has in stock in this forthcoming novel on the literary market: it is sure to stir some of the waters of the Australian literary "billabong" (which has to be taken as a term of endearment). During the recent years Wilding also has been working on a fictionalized biography of the English alchemist Dr Dee and his assistant Edward Kelly from the sixteenth century, who started off with their practice in England and then moved to Europe, Poland and eventually to Bohemia, where they found favour with the emperor Rudolph II and then fell from his grace.

It is true that Wilding's short stories published in the new collection *Somewhere New* still retain some of his earlier "minimalist" themes and techniques, although those written more recently show a certain development and are clearly superseded. Frequently they bring together two sets of experience, two continents, two cultures, two system of values, Europe and

Australia, Australia and the United States, Europe and North Africa. After all, his life has been split between England and Australia and he is thus an Englishman who has during the past thirty years become an Australian. However, the English influence clings and Wilding sees England as the place where “the Civil War began and ended and where they are still fighting it” (Rolfe 152). Wilding has during the past three decades or so published more than a dozen books of fiction, frequently semi-autobiographical, both in Australia and England, not to mention the numerous publications of his stories in the most prestigious world literary magazines, e.g. *The New Yorker*, *Harpers*, *London Magazine* or *Meanjin*, and a host of others. His fiction has been initially for the most part linked with *Tabloid Story*, “a magazine for experimental ‘imaginative prose’” (Kiernan xii), since he was, together with Frank Moorhouse, one of its editors. He was hailed as the chronicler of the urban inner city Sydney lifestyle, but one of the features of his new collection is that his original minimalist, experimental (parody, collage) and “post-modernist” meta-fiction has greatly (d)evolved and became refocused during his writing career, to which *Somewhere New* bears testimony. In the late sixties and early seventies there was “a period of vigorous activity in many art forms in Australia, and there was a sense of “newness” in the air” (Kiernan x).

The title story of the new collection, “Somewhere New”, is the first one featured in the collection and it is not put there gratuitously. It symbolically introduces the theme of the book, the theme of the author’s life: departure and arrival, a new beginning “somewhere new”, in Australia. The English-born Wilding who had first come down under in 1963 to take up lectureship in the English Department at Sydney University. The narrator of the story, evidently echoing himself as an aspiring young writer, is asked by the radio editor Gavin Mulgrave to speak on one of the recently deceased minor writers of the 1920s. There is a strong

autobiographical element present in Wilding's own writing attempts, when he arrived to Australia as a young academic and aspiring writer. His descriptions of the stifling, heavy Sydney climate with heat being "still and thick as if you could slice it and take it away as trucks cart snow in New York", symbolically stand for the stifling literary climate in Australia, the "Australian Dream", about which he is subtly and at times openly ironic, Mulgrave saying tongue-in-cheek, for example, that "Australia's a young person's country. There's a lot of young talent in Australia. the initiative lies there" (9).

London and Sydney are constantly juxtaposed and Mulgrave sees the London literary scene in a very stereotypical manner, trying to deride the little literary magazines from an Australian "nationalist" point of view: "'It doesn't even have any cultural vitality,' he said. 'What are the magazines? You can list them on one finger. In the States every tin-pot university has its quarterly review'" (10). Mulgrave maintains that there is a shortage of little magazines in England and thus he prefers to send "everything directly to America" (11). Mulgrave's mockingly bitter humour in seeing the publication outlets and possibilities in Australia reveals not only his self-irony but also echoes a new kind of "cultural cringe", which has become originally from England re-directed towards the United States:

'It would be suicide,' he said. 'Apart from the petty jealousies and the rivalries and ratbaggery here which makes it absolutely essential to keep well clear if one wants to preserve one's skin, who would ever *read* anything one published here? You might as well put it in a bottle and throw it into the harbour. No one in England or America has ever heard of the Australian magazines' (11).

Suggestive descriptions of Sydney in the early seventies with “early model Holdens with inverted surf boards strapped to their roofs” (12) make a delightful and most visual reading. It seems as if Mulgrave voiced the narrator’s innermost thoughts. He praises the “utterly healthy culture” and extroverted “hedonism of the beaches”, arriving even at some sort of “climatic theory of literature”, for “can you imagine a Kingsley Amis in Australia? Or a Brigid Brophy? It just isn’t possible” (12, 13). The sardonic humour and biting irony about the low general cultural and literary standards in Australia gets sometimes quite explicit: “No one agonises about culture or class or religion here, they get on living with their bodies. The body is culture and religion here. They don’t have to write or read books and identify with seedy psychopaths” (13). Mulgrave gradually unveils his own and, possibly, the narrator’s ambivalent feelings about Australia, for one even starts to suspect that the two of them may not be so far apart and that they are simply one and the same person: Australia is the land of potential, having a healthy beach culture with a slow cultural life outdoors, by European standards, of course. He concocts another very funny “meat” theory of literature, for “you can tell the vitality of a culture by the amount of fresh meat eaten. Everyone I knew in London subsisted on sausages, fishcakes, and faggots” (13-14).

The first turning-point in the story occurs when Mulgrave does not turn up for dinner he was invited to have with the narrator and his companion Barbara. Instead, they eventually turn up in his flat for dinner, which he forgets about altogether. He is then invited by the couple out to dinner, where he does turn up and again speaks very highly but also ironically about the vitality of Australia, “it’s untouched, it’s forward looking, it’s alive and vital” (20). He parodies W.B. Yeats’s Byzantium poems, since the narrator (like Wilding himself), too, sailed eastward to find Australia, a land “caught in that sensual music”, which neglects the “monuments of unageing intellect” (20). He baffles the couple by saying how he

can at any time write a book on a topical thing such as “Australian Studies”, or a piece for the “Living Abroad” series in *London Magazine*, since everything that is topical the States would literally lap up; because “they’re fascinated with Australia” (20).

In the following months the young writer who is the narrator of the story and his companion see a lot of Gavin Mulgrave, who gives the writer a number of items to appear on his broadcasting programme. Then one day he is off to the United States. He is enthralled with it and hopelessly wants to go back, but the writer leaves instead, which Mulgrave resents and does not even answer his letters any more. Upon his return to Australia the writer finds Mulgrave utterly changed: he smokes marijuana and asks him questions about America which Mulgrave (ironically) describes as “the only place. Once you’ve been there you can’t tolerate anything less. ... The wealth is simply incredible. The possibilities are limitless. The whole scene is continually expanding, new forms, new media” (29). That’s the last the writer sees of Mulgrave. He is told by his flatmate that one day Mulgrave caught a Pan-Am flight and went off to America. This second, unexpected turning-point towards the very end of the story shows just how past master Wilding is in arranging his textual material to keep the reader in suspense and constantly wondering. This is what makes his fiction so deliberately enigmatic and open to various interpretations while at the same very readable and entertaining in its maze of little ironies. Under the guise of simple wording and simple dialogues, a non-identified narrator (in this particular instance a Conradian one) pushed to the background, where it is not difficult to perceive strong biographical resemblances with the young Wilding, Wilding’s short fiction appears far from being simple, or even self-referentially postmodernistic, as it has been all too frequently described. “Somewhere new” thus eventually turns out to be America, not Australia, as the reader would initially have expected.

Michael Wilding's Short Stories

In the second story of the book, "Joe's Absence", the protagonist is once again an aspiring young writer, who is also attracted by beautiful women. The division between reality and fiction is drawn as a very thin line, fact and fiction are depicted as an interpenetrating existence, for reality assumes the contours of a story - and vice versa. The writer is a thief; he wins Joe's girlfriend, "during his absence", and, since Joe is obviously feared to be a more successful writer, also completes "the rape of /his/ stories", appropriating individual elements as his own in a shack on the beach in the midst of an immense expanse of sand:

He unclothed the stories, taking them from their covers as if he were prising open oysters. He glanced at their titles and then softly flicked through their pages, flicking at the sheets, unopened since they'd been corrected, flicking sometimes five or six times before catching at an edge that would open for him. ... His fingers turned the pages gently. He was not rough. They were the same fingers that had stroked Margot's buttocks, that had held off from fondling her nipples. But they did not hold off here (45).

Wilding is frequently unobtrusively ironical. He has an uncanny English-like ability to laugh at himself at all times, while at the same time appearing dead serious - just like the kookaburra which calls out in the story, and another one that picks up its cry, then they fly off "into the bush, still cackling" (41). It is easy to agree in this instance with Bruce Clunies Ross, who suggests that despite the fact that Wilding has been most frequently described as "the chronicler of the urban lifestyle", the pastoral element is significant in connecting his work with other pastoral images of Australia" (Clunies Ross 19). In his Edenic vision of the Australian beach, he sees the beach house as some sort of Paradise with the lazy hedonism of the young Australians, a temple of love, a latter-day

Xanadu, where everything is permitted to one's pleasure, including the "stealing" of Joe's stories, as well as his girl-friend. As in a number of his other stories, Wilding is in "Joe's Absence" also concerned with fictionality, the sheer process of creating fiction which borders on the various levels of reality, reality as it is experienced by frequently "unreliable", paranoid or frustrated narrators.

In all Wilding's stories about young people pursuing a life of pleasure and ease, they are imagined as the inhabitants of a potential Paradise, usually in its aspect as Lotusland, complete with narcotics; but it is always a tawdry Paradise. Its earthly realisations do not match the idea, but the idea remains a potent force. Wilding's Australians are motivated by it, at the same time as he depicts them from the perspective of the dream of Paradise Regained (Clunies Ross 21-22).

"The Phallic Forest" is in part an allegorical biblical paraphrase, where Paradise is again a temple of love, and a fairy-tale where "serpents", "naked monkeys", "fauns" and Snow White reside (49). The couple, Julia and Oliver, have a free sexual relationship, which includes both the exchange of partners and voyeurism. But the interesting part is not in the realistic descriptions of their sexual mores; rather, it is to be found in the depiction of the dichotomy between freedom and non-freedom of the social conventions. They are described as "unimprisoned" and "emancipated" intellectuals, who derisively observe "through the patterned iron the imprisoned regularity of their neighbours' lives" (50). However, they are not aware of being trapped themselves, of being the prisoners of their own freedom. This is symbolically represented by the fact that their trees in their "imaginary Garden of Eden" grow increasingly "menacing" only to be brought back to

life growth by the sprinkling of male semen. This almost vision-in-a-dream piece concentrates on a garden, a tropical garden which is not only pleasant but also horrifying, laden with sexual imagery. But as it is typical of Wilding, nothing is quite as simple as it seems in his short stories on the surface level. The deliberately aberrant narrative line of development in the story can be at times seen as artistically intriguing, although it is sometimes simply chaotically baffling.

The utterly successful story "The West Midland Underground" explores the (im)possibilities offered by the language and shows Wilding's bent for formal experimentation in his early years of writing, relying on his native Worcester experience back in England, while "The Man of Slow Feeling" recounts a story of a man who had lost almost all sensation. It is a man of Decadence, one who has been suffused with the life of sensation, whereby Wilding implicitly parodies such a life. His blunted senses are not completely dead, though. At the beginning he relies on the memories of his past sensuous experience:

They made love at noon, not because he could experience anything, but because in his dreams and his waking nerve memories, he so often re-experienced the ecstasy in actuality denied him. He perhaps half hoped to recapture the experience. But never did (69).

His were delayed sensations and so he starts to jot down and tape the sensations he is to feel some three hours later. He gradually realizes that life is nothing but sensations and decides to take his own life. His companion Maria finds him dead in the white, still bathroom and thus the author rhetorically expresses his final touch of irony:

He had cut his arteries in a bath in the Roman way, the hot water, now rich vermillioned, to reduce the pain of dying.

Between Europe and Australia

Though, she told herself, he would not have felt anything anyway, he had no sensation.

But three hours afterwards, what might he have felt?

The story "Bye Bye Jack. See You Soon" testifies to Michael Wilding's unabashed admiration of Jack Kerouac and the Beats. The story is about the Sydney "Push" or, according to Frank Moorhouse, "the inner urban tribe". It was certainly full of immediate allusions for the contemporary audiences, less for those reading it today. It was, like its companion piece, written by Frank Moorhouse "The True Story of the Jack Kerouac Wake", a story first "published" at various readings where the audience "could enjoy recognizing real-life models for the characters, most of them being present..." (Kiernan 206). Wilding in it mourns the death of Jack Kerouac and describes his own experience of being appalled at the fact that his university students do not realize that Kerouac's death is "the death of an era". One way to define this "new writing" from the seventies, as it has been suggested, is to see these two pieces as examples of whodunnit, where the reader is to assume the role of a detective who is after the "evidence" to decode the mystery, contemplating pieces of a plot and trying to make sense of them, for the stories are full of gaps, red herrings, multiple possibilities and ironies: "The narrator travels in 'real' space from England to Australia more than once, the first time with his Henry Jameses, and another with a cargo of Kerouacs. He also looks for clues in mental journeys into memory and imagination" (Gillard 168).

The narrator of the story wants to organize a wake paying homage to Jack Kerouac but the students ask him what "a kerouac" is. A kerouac with a small letter, a common name, a phenomenon, "a magic incantation", "a registered code name" (74), not an actual person and his work. But the author of the story despite this ignorance nevertheless seems to like the idea that there is now,

after Kerouac's demise, going to be a Kerouac event and wants to hold a wake, a reading. He is sorry, recalling his own arrival to Australia for not having taken with him a copy of *On the Road* or *The Dharma Bums*, which would come in handy to him much more so than all of Henry James he shipped over from England. Kerouac's books remind him of his early carefree youth when he was reading them in a canoe floating down the river Severn, which was then to him "like the Mississippi" (74), Kerouac's "beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up" (74). Wilding in fact incorporated whole passages from the Jack Kerouac wake story, as a sort of tribute, without actually signalling that they were (unattributed) quotations. The Jack Kerouac wake story continues with whole sections being written in the stream-of-consciousness technique of writing, a flow of random ideas without punctuation marks, thoughts that go through the protagonist's head, chaotic, though in some kind of order in a random disarray: chaos also has its laws and patterned order, as it has been established only recently in the theory of chaos. The following stream-of-consciousness section is a transcription, without punctuation and line breaks, of his thoughts running through his head when looking at the back cover of the Pan Books paperback edition of *On the Road*:

What are you reading? she asks, what is this? Pan Giant On
The Road Jack Kerouac Explosive epic of the Beat
Generation Wild and unrestrained Evening Standard 3/6 Jack
Kerouac Photo William Eichel: Courtesy 'Mademoiselle'
'Crazy-mixed-up novel about frustrated youth getting
nowhere fast' Manchester Evening News This is the odyssey
of the Beat Generation, the frenetic young men and their
women racing furiously across America to wherever life is
fastest, where girls are hottest, parties wildest, 'bop' is to be

heard, marijuana to be smoked, or a road to be taken at ninety plus-a neurotic hunger for Sensation and Experience. Pan Books 8 Headfort Place, London Great raw slices of America...(75).

Since to the narrator's amazement nobody turns up at the wake, neither readers nor listeners, he decides to go to the pub. He eventually learns that some people did, in fact, turn up much later, so he is coaxed into throwing a party instead. The ensuing description of the Sydney's Balmain scene and its (pseudo) bohemian scene, which Michael Wilding was part of in the early seventies, is just so very visual: "And we drove all over Balmain, stopping cars when we knew the people, leaving notes in kitchens, big N. rolling a joint beside me, until when we got to the house the whole street was full of cars and bikes, and sitting round the verandah like old chooks the heads all sat in the warm night air, grooving on the ferns and the 727s coming in to Kingsford Smith overhead..." (80). The last paragraph, taken from Kerouac, is in stark contrast with the earlier debonair and light atmosphere of the "Australian Dream" scene in Balmain, which is a typical example of Wilding's turning-point adding vividness and suspense to the narrative: the narrator starts being haunted by death, Kerouac's "Shrouded Traveler", "a strange Arabian figure that was pursuing me across the desert; that finally overtook me just before I reached the Protective City" (82). It is the snake in the Australian paradise, the awareness of the Existential *néant* and Sartrean nausea appearing at the moment of utmost bliss. The story beautifully establishes the tension between the lost, the remembered, the blissful, and, on the other hand, the fact that "death will overtake us before heaven" (82). There is some sort of yearning for death present, too, which would enable life to come full circle (an unattributed quote from Kerouac):

The one thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (though we hate to admit it) in death. But who wants to die? In the rush of events I kept thinking about this in the back of my mind (83).

Dexter, the narrator of "The Vampire's Assistant at the 157 Steps" is a pornographic photographer, who tries to run counter to the concept of his "art" as the process of mimesis (just like Wilding himself whose early writing has been labelled as non-mimetic): not only does he want to make his erotic dreams come true, he also wants to influence and master the fantasies of his audience. Thus the story points to a significant element in Wilding's fiction, his belief that it is sometimes difficult if not downright impossible to draw a line between fiction and reality. Thus it is no wonder that his fiction has often been described as non-mimetic, fiction that does not (only) imitate real life but one that does actually influence real-life experience. The story "Reading the Signs" traces Wilding's memories of youth spent in England. He pays a graceful homage to his father, an iron-moulder. It seems that the author has inherited some of his father's bent to go beyond, to break the established patterns and social taboos. In the story the father writes a letter to the local paper about a flying saucer or a meteorite the family has seen from their house; speculates on this phenomenon, trying to decode its meaning. However, the parents end up talking at length not so much about the actual sighting as about the father's letter to the paper where it was published, that is about "the shame of being a manual worker and the ridicule for having seen a flying saucer and the breaking of the taboo in revealing these things in print" (101).

The same sort of preoccupation with class stratification in England is to be found also in the story "Class Feeling" dedicated to Deborah Thompson, who was evidently not of the same social background as the narrator for she belonged to the "cultured and literate bourgeoisie". The author tries to push the story forward "as a punch in the face of the bourgeoisie" (104) and it gives him the opportunity to relive part of his youth back in England as seen in a series of static frozen shots, from his Royal Grammar School years onwards, where he, putting on his cap and blazer, "put on a new set of behaviour" (105). The image of his father haunts him once again in a remorseful way in this story. The fact that his father was an iron-moulder and that there was a time he did not want to acknowledge him in public for shame, for he was, dressed poorly, cycling clumsily on his bike home. The author has never seemed to forget or get atoned for this early disavowal of his father and his menial occupation, not even much later when he wrote "Iron-moulder" for his father's occupation on his entry papers to a college at Oxford. More information about the relationship between Wilding and his father can be found in an interesting book of interviews on father-son relationship with some of the contemporary Australian writers, *Fathers & Sons*, which came out only in 1996 (Williams 177-189).

It was impossible for me to apologise, impossible for me even to admit that it had occurred. And he never told me he knew. But he must have known I knew he knew. I can't remember what happened, what red silences there were that night (111).

The stories "Beach Report" and "Under Saturn" bring in a whole different matter, which is typical of Wilding, too: the question of politics, power and fiction as an expression of political surveillance paranoia. "Beach Report" is a grotesque science

fiction vision of politics and the manipulation it entails. It also is an apocalyptic vision of Australian history and national myths, such as Gallipoli ("So a lot of people enlisted, getting bored on the beach, and they figured they might as well see Europe while it was still there, particularly it is was a chance to see Europe go up in flame and smoke..." 113), and the "Australian dream" as a land of plenty ("Out beyond the surf was a flotilla of yachts where the rich were drinking gin and snorting coke."). The rest of the people on the beach, Australians, simply enjoy the beautiful climate and deceitful *dolce vita*. But this sweet somnolescent joy also means a surrender of the mind. Manipulated and brainwashed as they are, they readily succumb to the idea of total passivity, not to think any more, to give up control of their own thought ("It was so beautiful. Saucerlings to think for us. Now it was all beyond our control" (114). And finally these manipulated easy-going people on the beach gladly accept their own annihilation as the form of some ultramodern sacred rite. The aliens, who do not seem so alien after all, and who can perhaps be identified as politicians, leaders, promise them "instant disintegration into particles of electromagnetic energy", which the people hail as "the final solution". And the last sentence in this short but extremely effective parable of *homo politicus* as a breed on the road to extinction is a good example of Wilding's sense of humour: "And they were doing it all for us, for free, we didn't even have to lift a finger" (114).

"Under Saturn" is a story of considerable length which dates back to Wilding's Balmain years of the pervading "drug culture", the impasses of the flower-power generation of the late sixties and early seventies. One senses the feeling of fruitlessness of such bohemian day by day existence. It is the yuppie call to this somewhat "lost generation" at a crucial point in Australian history at the very beginning of the seventies - the anti-Vietnam war stance and its consequent anti-American feeling which was largely generated by the Australian literary scene:

Bohemia's great for a while and then suddenly you wake up one morning and find it isn't there any more, everyone's gone back to the suburbs, they've had their playtime, now they've all got mortgages and wives and kids and they don't go out any more and they're all paying superannuation and getting promotions (116).

The drug culture generation increasingly comes to realize that it has, perhaps, too long been in a "cocoon of somnolence" (119). The author then sinks into the political conspiracy theory, a paranoia of "them" versus "us", of the big business monopolies controlling the individual, of being constantly under surveillance, with bugs on the phone, etc. It is a paranoia that leads the main character not to distinguish any longer between fiction (imagination) and reality. However, the hisses and clicks on the phone are still there... ("Once the suspicion had been planted, the target would create its own prison, connect any dots in the picture to make its own cage" (154). Wilding describes his writing intentions in the story as follows:

With the stories "Under Saturn" and "Way Out That Summer", I was able to explore a sense of social unease and draw on the ambiguities and uncertainties of postmodernism. There is always the possibility that the whole vision is a construct, a projection of the protagonist: that what we are seeing is paranoia in the clinical sense. The uncertainty, the irresolution, of the suspicions that may or may not be true and that can never be proved generates a powerful force of ambiguity and doubt for these stories (Obradovic 11).

The topical "ecological" story "For Trees" in an elegiac manner discusses "timber terrorism" (157) in a most original way. Trees are made to speak and are personified as "aliens", just as humans are to them, since they fell them constantly and without any

hesitation, without thinking about the future. The story entitled "Kayf", begins with a lengthy quotation from Richard Burton (1855) on the Arab concept of kayf: "the voluptuous relaxation, the delicious stupor, produced by the smoking of hemp" (159). Burton was the first translator of *The Arabian Nights* into English and a connoisseur of the East. He defines kayf, the state of mind and body which Wilding then transposes to the contemporary feeling of the "drug culture" in Europe (in the late sixties and early seventies), juxtaposing it with a similar experience the protagonists have in North Africa. Of course, this is the kind of feeling the author can also sense down South, in Australia, but which is not there in the Northern regions, in England, for example:

And this is the Arab's Kayf. The savouring of animal existence; the passive enjoyment of mere sense; the pleasant languor, the dreamy tranquility, the airy castle-building, which in Asia stand in lieu of the vigorous, intensive, passionate life of Europe. It is the result of a lively, impressible, excitable nature, and exquisite sensibility of nerve; it argues a facility for voluptuousness unknown to northern regions, where happiness is placed in the exertion of mental and physical powers; where Ernst ist das Leben;... (159)

The place to find this cherished feeling is, according to the author in a place "somewhere new", in this case North Africa (my guess is that it takes place in Morocco), "somewhere warm, somewhere to get stoned away from cold weather and cold wars, somewhere to relax" (160). The protagonists Marcus and Lydia are there approached by the young Mustapha, a self-appointed guide who eventually takes them to a hashish smoking café, then provides them with majouna and kif. The superb description appears as if it were taken from Camus's *L'Etranger*. Existential idleness and

passivity are in the air and one can actually savour the North African colours, odours, sounds: "They walked down from the café, down from the dusty road to the market below, they waited there for a cab, rectangular buildings, women in kaftans, their faces covered to the eyes, men in djellabas, others in western clothes, the rest just a blur, a warm golden glow" (165). The discussion of politics with a local student soon proves to be a risky business in the typical political paranoia manner, since anyone "who looks like they might agree with you you have to suspect at once of being a provocateur" (178). The arrival of the American submarine makes Marcus ironically absorb as much hashish as possible, for the "days of the imperialist decadence were numbered, who knew how long it would last" (178)? This is certainly one of the most artistically suggestive stories in the collection, especially as regards the forcefulness of its single effect.

The story "Pioneers" is likewise set "somewhere new", this time in a small coastal town of Santa Teresa on the Pacific ocean rim in California, "a tight little town". It can be said to echo Michael Wilding's experience of being a visiting professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1987. He sees the new pioneers in America no longer as idealists who had pushed the border to the extreme West, but as people whose "drug" has become money and wealth. Also, he is disappointed with the state of Californian writing:

They wrote books about sailing across the Pacific and about how to service your Mercedes-Benz and about sex, jealousy and marriage and about bullfighting and about fighting alcoholism, and thrillers. There were a lot of crime writers in Santa Teresa.

'Now those guys know what they want,' said Col. 'They have no existential doubts. They know what writing's about. Money'(183).

Particularly interesting for American readers is the story "I Like Him to Write" which records the friendly relationship and acquaintance between Michael Wilding and the Australian writer who had spent a considerable period of time abroad, Christina Stead, as Wilding confirmed in a letter to the author of this study (Wilding, May 1997). Christina Stead is now an acclaimed writer in Australia and worldwide, after "the years of neglect, after the twenty years in which she could get nothing new published, after she was dead" (185). The writer (also the narrator and Wilding himself) learns at some "pointless symposium" that his name had turned up in her correspondence, now that all the biographers are busy working on her life, tracking down her correspondence. There are apparently letters from her to him in which she speaks very generously about him. He is glad about that, for he now "felt good that he was in the literary archives. Even if he was left out of the bibliographies" (186). Wilding then traces the history of his knowledge and relationship with Stead, which is a most interesting and, I trust, hitherto little known piece of biography about this major Australian author.

The narrator (Wilding) first wrote to Stead in the early seventies when he was as co-editor preparing together with David Malouf, Shirley Cass and Ross Cheney, the book of literature *We Took Their Orders and Are Dead* (1971), which condemned the American and Australian involvement in the Vietnam war and which was part of the anti-war movement that eventually made Australia step out of the war. He was pleasantly surprised at the fact that she "responded promptly and wrote a piece specially for the collection, which he hadn't expected" (186). He admits to having read some of her books, but being interested in the "new" and its "focus on form, on manner, the agenda of exclusions, they were not the sort of thing he was writing himself at that point". Despite the fact that she later dies, the books remained there to learn from them about "the lesson of commitment" (187). He quotes

from one of Stead's letters to him in which she speaks about America and her role as an Australian expatriate there:

'I trust I did not pass as any American agent,' she wrote to him in one of their first exchanges of letters. She was explaining why she had said 'somewhere (in one of my several asinine speeches) that the Australians should not look quite so much to their past; but think of other countries, too, and I mentioned the U.S.A., comparable if very different. I trust I did not pass as any American agent for that remark. But with the Americans having so much influence now in Australia and using our men for their wars, it would not be a bad idea for Australians to know something about this great, fierce, turbulent, gifted and dangerous country....' (187)

Wilding continues by saying he was glad Stead was now a subject for discussion after having been for so long obliterated from the literary record. However, he finds, she is now being again subtly washed away, her committed work, blacklisted in the fifties, is misinterpreted in the "wave after wave of new literary theories whose one coherence was the displacement of a discourse of the left" (189). Still, he believes, better for Christina Stead to be present and dealt with clumsily in the literary history and theory than to be elided altogether (as he himself sometimes is, he feels). He regrets that during Stead's absence from Australia they did not want to publish her, "those cadaver publishers, those vampire corpses"; one of her books was banned, the country gave her a prize and then withdrew it on the grounds that she wasn't living there, "that was the official story, but the hand of the cold warriors was obvious" (191). The author regrets he had then lost touch with her, but "the books were always there" (198).

The new book of Michael Wilding's short stories, *Somewhere New*, will hopefully incite even more people interested in things

Australian, especially in the United States, to read his short stories, each a little pearl and a world in itself. After all, Australia has during the recent years become a major tourist destination and it should also become a "literary destination". Michael Wilding's case proves that the tradition of the Australian short story is still very much alive and kicking. Since the 1970s Wilding has been trying to make his fiction international and cosmopolitan: he certainly succeeded in it, making it highly "internationally" readable. However, the term "international" is in his case always, by some means or other, consciously or sub-consciously, tied to his "national" space or experience, be it English or Australian. Some of his major (long) short stories bear testimony to an important era in Australian (cultural) history, the Balmain literary scene in Sydney in the early seventies, the period which, now after a certain lapse of time and distance, offers and warrants new research and reconsideration.

Recently Wilding's new short story collections were also described as being "laid-back and repetitive", although it was also suggested that "each of the stories was a gem". It is hard to claim the former, neither do they appear typically postmodern in tandem with Wilding's "incisive though dysfunctional criticism" (Syson 100). His recent critical output has been brilliant, and his short stories have gone beyond the sheer narcissistic preoccupation with the form and postmodern mannerism as was the case with some of his early fiction. They are now increasingly concerned with ethical, social issues, committed, environmentally sound, erotic, comic and apocalyptic, the author acting as a sociologist and photo-realist, whose writing is nevertheless elusive and symbolic (Wilding's "realism" has been mentioned for the first time in criticism only most recently, only after this manuscript was sent off to the publisher; cf. Syson 1988: 276). In fact, the new collection of short stories shows Wilding's "non-postmodernist" selection of the stories, he selected those that are less typically "post-modern",

especially in terms of form but also the issues addressed. As Wilding himself admitted in the story on the Stead-Wilding relationship "I Like Him to Write", when he was in his early creative stage he "had yet to see the reactionary consequences of that aesthetic of the new..." (186). Simone Vauthier even goes so far in her analysis of Wilding's postmodernism as to claim that his fiction is ambivalent, for it perhaps exemplifies a trend in contemporary Australian fiction, which, "however 'experimental' and subversive of story-telling conventions, however delegitimising, often seems to articulate, even as it deconstructs, narrative's link with 'reality'" (Vauthier 139).

Critics hasten to stress that Wilding in the seventies described his own fiction and that of contemporary Australian writers as post-modern or metafictional as "fiction interested in, self-conscious of, its own evolution, aware of its generative processes" (Hauge 51), while he later wanted to "guarantee the continuing *modernity* of the Australian literary heritage" (53) by quoting H.P. Heseltine in Wilding's essay "Write Australian" (Wilding 28). The new selection of short stories is a case in point of Wilding's ambivalence, being "post-modern", whatever the term itself entails, in a peculiar Australian situation, having no real "tradition to rebel against" (53). Just very recently Wilding has in one of his brilliant critical pieces traced the development of modern Australian short story. When referring to modern Australian stories, he indirectly speaks also of his own fiction and says that, along with sheer fictionality, modern(ist) Australian short stories might "show something of modern Australian life. Modernism may mean formalism and self-referentiality to some of its adherents, but we also read stories to be informed about things: story telling as telling tales" (Wilding 172). One always learns something from his own stories that straddle the border between fiction and reality - and enjoy them, too.

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