

The Language of Sport

BARRY SPURR*

In Memoriam Bernard Kilgour Martin

The language of sport, broadly defined, is the linguistic representation of sporting activity—that is, physical exertion in the contexts of identifiable games with procedures and rules, and of competition. It has an ancient history. One of the great lyric poets of antiquity, the fifth-century Boeotian, Pindar, celebrated stupendous feats both in battle and in sporting competition, in horse and chariot races, in his odes. Victory, for him, had moral and religious connotations, entailing praise of the gods. Maurice Bowra writes that Pindar often had some difficulty elevating the victor's character and achievements to this pious domain.¹

In English literature, there are numerous examples of the celebration of extraordinary physical feats. In Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, Hero, separated from his beloved by the Hellespont, prays that it will 'part in twain, that he might come and go' to her:

But still the rising billows answered 'No!'
With that he stripped him to the ivory skin
And crying, 'Love, I come' leapt lively in.
(ll.152–54)

Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, in parody of the epic feats of Homeric and Virgilian literature, journeys from Hell to this world, with strenuous physicality:

so eagerly the fiend
O'er bog or steep, through strait, rough, dense, or rare,

* Dr Barry Spurr is a senior lecturer in English at the University of Sydney. This is an edited version of a lecture delivered to the Arts Association on 30 May 2001.

With head, hands, wings, or feet pursues his way,
And swims, or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies.
(Book II, ll.947–50)

The irony is that, for all this activity, he does not travel at all. The embodiment of Hell, Satan brings it with him and, in that sense, remains in the same place, subverting the journeying of true heroism.

These texts remind us that in spite of numerous such examples of the presentation of striking physical undertakings in English literature, there is a remarkable absence of notable texts about sporting competition, in poetry or prose. In Sir Philip Sidney's prose romance, *Arcadia*, a tennis court and match is used, on a couple of occasions, to describe the relations between the protagonists. But this is only metaphorical. Then, every schoolchild used to know Sir Henry Newbolt's poem, 'Vital Lampada':

There's a breathless hush in the Close tonight -
Ten to make and the match to win -
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

Yet for all the details about cricket, this is the 'game' as a metaphor for the game of life, as the title of the poem indicates: the torch of life. The second stanza moves from the cricket pitch to the battlefield, and the third to the moral battlefield of life.

The language of sport, in English, belongs principally to the history of journalism, which we derive ultimately from the eighteenth century. In its modern form, journalism had its birth a mere hundred years ago with the emergence of the industrialisation of the newspaper at the end of the nineteenth century. In the development of mass-circulation newspapers, sport reporting was usually confined to the last section of the journal.

Sport has long since ceased to be confined to the back page. It now typically encloses a newspaper, often to the point where no

other news is visible or, if it is, it has a subordinate role. Similarly, it frequently opens and closes a news programme on radio and television. It is now *de rigueur* in introducing a 'news' program to highlight three items—the leading story, another prominent item and then a sporting story. The reasoning behind this is obvious. Like children at dinner, the audience can be detained with the prospect of the dessert course which, in any case, often takes half of the program.

Why should sport be the second half of every news bulletin, every day of the year, for every year of our lives? Why not news about education, social issues, the arts on three nights of the week and no sport at all, for a change? If sport were just a part of the rich social fabric of Australian society—as those who attempt to counter criticisms of its dominance of Australian life always contend—rather than its essence, it would take its place among these other elements, instead of taking their place.

II

My focus in this paper is the language of sport as we encounter it in contemporary Australian journalism, especially in print. Its subject matter is not confined to Australian sport. The American golfer, Tiger Woods, is hero-worshipped in Australian sports journalism as much as a home-grown talent, such as Pat Rafter. Nor are the characteristics of sports language in Australia peculiarly Australian. On the new Higher School Certificate English syllabus, in an elective called 'The Language of Sport', two of the texts are *The Picador Book of Sports Writing*, edited by two Englishmen and including a wide range of essays by British and American writers, and John Feinstein's *A Good Walk Spoiled*, his 500-page account of a year on the professional golfing circuit in the United States—the best cure for insomnia I have yet to encounter. Characteristics of the language of sport in both of these works—as well, of course, in the media throughout the English-speaking world—have many features familiar in Australian sports journalism. But it is to our local media that we are inevitably most exposed and what is of interest to me is the

way in which characteristics of contemporary sports writing, in particular, promote the image of sport and sportspeople and their roles in Australian society. It is in this dimension that local peculiarities of emphasis emerge, entailing, I argue further, particular problems for our culture and for its future well-being and prosperity.

III

The dominant mode of the language of sport in Australian journalism today is religious discourse. Specifically, Biblical language and references, from both the Old and New Testaments, and concepts from Christian theology, such as the Atonement, the Redemption and the Second Coming have now proliferated to the point where this vocabulary has become automatic. On one reading it is merely a species of hyperbole. So the front-page *Herald* headline, 'Surf-worship—it's a Sydney ritual', with two words from religious discourse, 'worship' and 'ritual', and a photograph showing a surf-swimmer with his arms lifted heavenwards, is substantially a tongue-in-cheek overstatement.² Richie Benaud is the 'venerable'—no, not Bede or archdeacon—but 'leader' of Channel 9's cricket commentary team, Rex Hunt, fisherman, is a 'sage' and when mighty St George beat North Sydney it was a 'miracle'. Melbourne, on Grand Final Day, has the atmosphere of several religious solemnities combined: 'you notice the quietness of the streets', a writer has portentously recorded,

a mood shared only by Anzac Day, Good Friday and Christmas Day ... the weather stops changing, dogs stop barking, roulette wheels come to a standstill. And then the game begins. The battle where no one dies.³

Dugald Jellie tells us that Melbourne is 'a town where sport is a religion and the shrine of worship is a colosseum they call the Melbourne Cricket Ground'.⁴ But even here there must be losers, and when teams or individual sportspeople do lose, they now always engage in 'soul-searching'; it is 'Judgment Day' at the Melbourne Cricket Ground when the Socceroos meet Iran, and the Sydney Cricket Ground has 'hallowed turf' with an 'inner

sanctum' otherwise known as the dressing room. When a sporting team has a religious name, the opportunity for elaborating the metaphor is irresistible, so the 'Saints capitalise on Swans' sins'.⁵

Religious allusions have become the most common metaphorical writing in the language of sport, followed closely by references of a classical kind to heroes and heroism: as the MCG is a shrine and also the Colosseum. But it is a mistake to dismiss this phenomenon as simply a colourful use of language. It is certainly no longer inventive, as it has become platitudinous. And it is worth considering why the language of spirituality has been appropriated in this way to the discourse of physicality. Does it reflect the journalists' perception of the fundamental triviality of games, so that they sense that it is incumbent upon them to elevate their importance in this manner and, thereby, their own importance as sports writers? Or is it, rather, the case that sport has indeed become the Australian religion (or religion-substitute, at least) and with no other vocabulary in which to convey its solemn significance, that of the Bible and Christianity must be borrowed?

It is in those instances where the language of sport as religion is not hyperbolic, let alone ironic, that it does present an instructive insight into the priorities of our culture. One of the ABC's network identification 'promos' during 1997 had young boys playing cricket on the sacred turf of the Bradman Oval in Bowral to the accompaniment of the 'Hallelujah Chorus' from Handel's *Messiah*. Filmed in black and white and with nothing immediately obvious by which to date it, it had the aura of an eternal verity.

The messianic conception of Bradman reached its expected peak in eulogies after his recent death. Journalists who were not even born when he gave up cricket strove to outdo themselves in language of religious adoration. Stuart Littlemore recently devoted one of his segments to lashing this phenomenon. So I will just content myself with one example. Michael McKernan in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in a full-page spread introducing four pages of idolisation, commented that Bradman outshone every hero Australia has ever produced. He was Australia's Churchill, 'a leader of his country ... a saviour'.⁶ Unhistorical nonsense,

such dithyrambic rhapsodies pass unscrutinised, become 'gospel'. In fact, at least as many Australians, in the 1930s, were inspired by 'Our Glad' as by 'Our Don'. In that golden age of movie-going, when many more Australians went to the pictures, as they called them, week by week—or more often—than went to the cricket grounds or listened to cricket on the wireless, women's pulses, at least, were much more likely to be quickened by Clark Gable or Robert Taylor and the sight and sound of Nelson Eddy than by Don Bradman. In the middle of the 1930s, in 1936, Katharine Susannah Prichard wrote that

if we love Australia, and the Australian people, we must realise, surely, that Australia will only have a culture with any roots in reality... when the foundations of our national life are based on... what the artists, writers and musicians of the country have to say about it.⁷

Apparently, for Prichard, too, Don Bradman was insufficient as the representative and interpreter of Australian life.

The most disturbing aspect of the religious variety of the language of sport is not simply its reduction of the Bible and Christianity to the banalities of games, but its relentless blasphemy, the trivialisation of a faith that is still held by many Australians. The current advertising campaign for rugby, 'rugby heaven', clarifies the issue. In one advertisement, the image of the pearly gates is surmounted by a cross and the emblem of a football resembles the portrayal of souls in Renaissance paintings, spherical entities with wings, flying heavenward. Supporting the idea of rugby heaven, an ABC 'promo' in March, 2001, ran 'Get your heavenly dose of Saturday afternoon rugby on ABC-TV'.

Even more offensive is the advertisement using the hymn, 'O come all ye faithful'. This is a poem of praise of the Christ-child: 'come let us adore Him'. The Christian symbol of the cross is again used, but in a circular configuration which conflates it with a football. If, shall we say, the synagogue chants and the Star of David of Judaism were used in this way, or the sacred legends and songs of the Aboriginal dreamtime, there would be an almighty outcry over the tastelessness and insensitivity.

The most common single term from religion that has now



Sydney Morning Herald, 24 March 2001, p.72

been appropriated in the language of sport is 'icon'. Let us remember what an icon is—an 'image', 'statue', 'painting' or 'mosaic' of a 'sacred personage' which, especially in the Orthodox tradition, is 'itself regarded as sacred'. The Orthodox faithful bow reverently before their icons, usually of Christ, the Virgin and the saints, especially on the iconostasis, the great screen which separates the sanctuary from the rest of the church; they kiss them and burn candles before them. The image magnifies and expresses God. Now debased literally beyond all supernatural and transcendental belief, the term is used indiscriminately and pervasively, ignorantly and—with regard to the body of Orthodox believers—insensitively in the language of sport. So Peter McKay 'speaks to some walking talking icons', former Test cricketer Mike Whitney and golfer Ian Baker-Finch among them, to find out what is 'the *real* Australian car'.⁸

Such vocabulary and images support what is often simply stated: that sport is the Australian religion. But in no other religion is the non-participation of the worshippers in the ritual so pervasive. The Australians who are watching more sport than ever before, have never taken less exercise. Participation by males in sport fell from twelve per cent to nine per cent between 1992 and 1997 and, by females, from five per cent to four per cent. Immobile before the tube, for hours on end of worship, the self-proclaimed Aussie 'good sport' is an overweight couch-potato whose most vigorous activity is pressing the remote control knob as he goes from one sports ritual to another. 'The truth of the matter', writes Professor David Kirk of the University of Queensland,

is that Australians have never been particularly keen on participating in sport, preferring instead to be entertained by watching others exert themselves.⁹

Television programmes with titles like 'Our Sporting Country' perpetuate the national myth of Australians as sportspeople. 'Our Sport-Watching Country' would be closer to the mark. More than half of the adult population never participates in any form of sport or physical activity, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Yet these sedentary, overweight 'good sports' talk

animatedly and critically about this or that bowler's or batsman's form, of Plugger's hamstring or Ian Roberts's groin.

IV

The second inflated dimension of sports language is that of classical origin, in reference to heroes and heroism. Shane Warne, according to the *Australian's* Malcolm Conn 'outstripped many heroes to be man of the series against South Africa',¹⁰ which means, of course, that he is a super-hero. But even Piggy has feet of clay, as the Indian betting scandal showed and Warne's ongoing abuse of opponents plainly reveals. So far from being a hero, according to Mike Carlton, Piggy is 'a fat-arsed, foul-mouthed yob, a national embarrassment, with silly bleached hair and the brains of a gnat, who should no longer be seen or heard on a cricket pitch or anywhere else'.¹¹ But even Mr Carlton has difficulty negotiating the troubled terrain created by this national disposition to turn every successful sportsperson into an instant hero. In 1998, he celebrated 'our latest local hero', Lleyton Hewitt, 'the tennis whiz-kid from Adelaide'.¹² A year later, the scales had fallen from Carlton's eyes, and Hewitt, misbehaving in spectacular style at the 1999 French Open, was a 'nasty little dork'—from hero to dork in 12 months.¹³

Heroes receive heroic remuneration. There was jubilation when it was announced in May that Australia not only has the best cricketers but the 'best-paid cricketers' in the world. Test cricketers now receive a million a year, ten times the salary of a university professor. The Australian Cricketers' Association chief executive said that this was 'great news' and serves as a great sign to kids out there who now view sport, and particularly cricket, as a career.¹⁴ We might concomitantly remark, having the developed world's worst paid professors, what kind of 'sign' this represents to 'kids out there' about the scholarly and academic life and how it is valued in our society. The story about cricketers' millionaires' remuneration appeared in the same days as the revelation of the country's vice-chancellors' salary packages, with monetary components a fraction of what a cricketer is paid. There was the

implication that over-generous provisions were being made for the vice-chancellors. But not a single comment was made about cricketers receiving more than twice as much in a society which aspires to become 'the knowledge nation' and 'the clever country' if it is going to have any future worth experiencing. In such moments, what is truly valued in our society is clarified, and Professor Martin's comments to the Arts Association in his inaugural lecture last year about Australia as 'the most anti-academic country in the world' are substantiated.¹⁵

It is not only the image we present of ourselves to ourselves, but at least as damagingly for the future of our economy and, therefore, quality of life, it is the image we present to the world:

ANZ chief economist Saul Eslake ... said Australia's obsession with sport was adding to the negative perception that many international investors had about Australia. 'Over the last twelve months, international observers of Australia will have seen a country that is obsessed by sport and almost completely indifferent to success in any other field of endeavor whatsoever, including, in particular, success in business and economic endeavors', he said.¹⁶

Sporting heroes, whose heroism is universally applicable, are not only omnipresent but omnicompetent, and receive plaudits well beyond their sporting domains. Olympians Susie O'Neill and Kieren Perkins were awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Queensland in 2000, while Greg Norman received the highest academic award of Griffith University, Doctor of the University. Presenting Mark Taylor for the award of the degree of Doctor of Science at the University of New South Wales, Vice-Chancellor John Niland commented that Taylor was 'a role model to young and old Australians' for being a 'plain talker'. Once, in the dear dead days beyond recall, someone being presented for a higher doctorate would have been a role-model for complexity of thought and subtlety of discourse about issues of profound significance in learning and scholarship. In dumbed-down modern Australia, to talk plainly about cricket is now deserving of the highest academic accolades. I propose that former young Australian of the Year, our brilliant Sydney University astro-physicist, Bryan Gaensler, be awarded an honorary gold

medal for—shall we say—diving, by the Australian Olympic Committee. It would make as much sense as these proliferating, absurd doctoral degrees for sportspeople.

Meantime, super-talented young men and women worthy of earned doctoral qualifications are quietly departing our shores. Our Sydney University composition student, Nicholas Vines, setting out to read for his doctorate at Harvard recently, left with a parting shot at the country's general 'cultural malaise': 'What I do is high art and therefore it's assumed it is not in the public interest'.¹⁷ Harvard has presented him with a \$400,000 award, precisely the figure paid to icon, hero, national living treasure, superstar and legend Dawn Fraser, as an advance for her autobiography, *One Hell of a Life*. It is a record in Australian publishing history and was launched as a 'literary event' by Gleebooks, overshadowing all others. Now Ms Fraser can add the competence of 'author' to her list of accomplishments even though, as a matter of fact, she appears not to have written the book at all.

Some might argue that the use of terms such as 'icon' and 'hero' for sporting champions is merely a development of language, which is a living, changing entity. But a development that is a debasement is not progress to be relished. Where such words, referring to ultimate concepts of human achievement and spiritual elevation, are debased, so ideas about those values are diminished, and thereby, so too is society. Sir Roden Cutler, VC, has simply stated that 'a footballer is not a hero'. If you argue that he is, then what term do you use for someone who gives his life for his country, for a volunteer bush-fire fighter who risks his life to save a member of the community, or for a person who bravely endures years of illness? This is true heroism which has a moral and ethical impact resonating beyond the immediate physical actions and courage involved. While admirable, scoring a try or winning a race are simply not in the same category of importance and effect. They are not heroic and it is an abuse of language and thought to call them so.

The simply compelling reason why the terms 'hero' and 'icon' should never be applied to sportspeople is that, as human beings,

they are certainly not of superior character to anybody else—the necessary qualification for hero-status. The myth that participation in competitive sport builds character is exposed in all its fraudulence every day. The media apology, by a national treasure, contrite, in a dark suit, after the latest bout of on-field violence or drunken or drugged hooliganism off-field, has now become a standard ritual of the Australian sports-religion.

The most recent case was of John Hopoate, of digital penetration fame. Covered in apparent contrition, he was led, be-suited, to his media confession, at which he was speechless as his minders from the league made the ritual apologies. Had Hopoate's actions taken place in any other walk of life, journalists would have scaled the heights of the vocabulary of shock and revulsion. But, in the topsy-turvy world of sport, Hopoate became an instant celebrity, the subject of a hundred urban jokes. Hopoate's fame has reached Britain, where he has been offered six-figure wrestling contracts. In New Zealand, he is the toast of the prostate surgeons. Images of his probing fingers—without protective surgical gloves, but such clinical niceties may be overlooked—are currently being used to promote regular prostate examinations for New Zealand men. The convolutions of the reasoning behind this campaign are fascinating. Men are reluctant to go to the doctor even when they're sick, let alone for a routine examination such as this. All real men love sport (or need to pretend that they do), so if they can see that a prostate examination is part of football, they'll line up at the surgery. If these same men's men were so much as touched by another man in the street or in the workplace, they would be enraged. But digital penetration of one footballer by another, on-field and transmitted around the nation, is merely hilarious. One waits for the first New Zealand university to offer Mr Hopoate an honorary doctorate of medicine for his services to prostate health.

V

Because of the ultimate value now placed on sporting achievement, every other aspect of Australian life is described in terms of

sport. In this sense, the language of sport has become the Australian language. Just recently, on the ABC news, the item about the visit by the Test side to Gallipoli was announced in terms of the cricketers visiting the site of the ultimate example of the 'team spirit'; and the Anzac legend, with its heroic bravery and sacrifices in the cause of international freedom is minimised to a cricket match. Describing artist Mike Parr's 'combined graphic and philosophical enterprise'—in another dimension, you would have thought, from sport—*Herald* art critic Bruce James in a double sporting reference, with a pun for good measure, says that Parr is 'On a Parr with Bradman': not superior, mind, for it is impossible to improve on perfection. The comparison is made tremblingly, in religious terms:

If I invoke the legendary cricketer, it's not with a wish to demean.... I was moved by the individuality of his stance, to the inventive, yet easeful, manner in which he met the ball ... with the instinctual complicity of his whole body, ending in that upswing hieroglyph of a pose which has come to incarnate the highest aspiration of Australian sport.¹⁸

In case, in the context of this verbal onanism, we had forgotten what the article is meant to be about, James explains that 'it's no great leap [of faith, understood] from this proposition to the one Parr inscribes in the welter of texts decorating his drawings ... I see no impropriety in estimating artists and athletes by the same standards as each other'. But why do it at all? Why can't an artist's achievements be described in terms of art? What has sport got to do with it? The most refreshing essay in the *Picador Book of Sports Writing* is by the dramatist Harold Pinter. He talks about cricket as cricket, nothing more nor less. The 'accenture' company deals in high tech consulting. They claim to be able to recognise talent in this complex field. But how do they present their skills? Not with a shot of someone poring over a computer, but with an athlete in silhouette. Taking it literally, what the advertisement says is that they will supply you with an athlete when you want a computer whiz. But as sportspeople are omniscient, that will probably suffice.

VI

The argument in defence of the doctrine that ‘too much sport is never enough’, and the rebuttal of the criticism of the domination by sport of Australian life, is that this is our popular culture. In fact, it is an insult to popular culture to present contemporary sports-spectatorship in these terms. A culture is something that is alive. Popular culture is something alive in which people participate communally and find their humanity expanded and community enriched thereby. One of the centres of popular culture in Australia in times past was the pub. Our colleague Peter Kirkpatrick has conducted extensive research into the inner-city pub culture of Sydney between the wars. He has shown that the pub was a stimulating forum for political debate and organisation, and even for literary discussion and creativity.¹⁹ At a less elevated level, it was a place of conversation and yarn-spinning. I am not romanticising this pub culture, which had many less appealing elements, including the exclusion of women. But whatever its aspects, good and bad, no-one would deny that it was alive. Writing of a London working man’s pub in the same years to which Dr Kirkpatrick refers, T. S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, takes himself to Lower Thames Street and hears

The pleasant whining of a mandolin
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fishermen lounge at noon.

(ll.261-3)

It is one of the few inspiring moments in that despairing poem. Recently, I walked past a typical-enough pub in Cleveland Street, in the early evening. It was half full. No-one was gathered at the bar, but men were sitting, scattered, either alone or in groups of two or three, at little chrome tables. In the psalmist’s phrase, ‘there was neither speech nor language’, as the patrons looked up in dead silence at a series of large screens, strategically placed around the pub, so that wherever you were you could not fail to see and hear what the screen was offering. It was, of course, sport—not even live sport, but endless replays of matches, with a strident commentary. Once, men would go to the pub and talk

about sport, the match they had attended or played in. It didn't matter, in fact, what they were talking about. What mattered was that they were talking, engaging with other human beings, spinning yarns, in a fine Australian tradition, being alive. That was a popular culture worthy of the name. What has taken its place is simply a junk culture, which is like junk food, mass-produced for you: the more you consume the less you are nourished, and at the centre of that junk culture is cable television sport, where anything and everything is offered, continuously, 24 hours a day. It is a slander of popular culture to equate it with this void-filler, this opiate.

Popular culture is something active, in which the people participate with other people—Welsh coalminers in their choirs, Scottish and Irish dancing, making an American quilt, dressing up for a corroboree, having a jam session round the piano, showing your pet: doing something which uses and develops your skills, engaging your intelligence, imagination and creativity. As Raymond Williams argues in his famous study, *Culture and Society*, culture can only be understood 'within the context of our actions'.²⁰ But it is the inaction of the passive observers of the sporting culture that strikes one repeatedly in Australian life today, the irony being all the more obvious when that detached, silent observation is focused on the hyper-activity of groups in teams. Life? Be out of it. Williams comments that 'a culture can never be reduced to its artifacts while it is being lived'.²¹ But the relentlessly consuming, uncreative, transfixed inertia of the sports-spectator—as often as not sitting at home alone—is reminiscent of nothing so much as the collective passivity of the comatose zombies of Aldous Huxley's dystopia, *Brave New World*. For Lenina, in that book, there must be perpetually provided diversions to fill the vacuum where her mind and imagination should be.

Paul Sheehan has pleaded for one day in the year when our bread and circuses culture could be unplugged, but the malaise is apparently ineradicable. Stuck behind a taxi, you will see Lleyton Hewitt's charming form, with fists clenched in angry victory, advertising furniture; turn away to a bus shelter, and there's the enormous dial of Michael Klim telling you: 'Am I with Ansett?'

Absolutely'. Waiting for a ferry at Circular Quay, I noticed two other ferries pull out before ours. They were named *Susie O'Neill* and *Evonne Goolagong*. Why not *Ruth Cracknell* and *Joan Carden*? Why is it assumed that the only people Australians today can and want to identify with are sportspeople? Look up to the sky and there is a huge hoarding telling you to buy a brand of fizzy drink because it will revive and inspire you, like the footballer quaffing it in the accompanying larger-than-life photograph. Look further into the distance to the city, and the tallest object dominating the metropolis is not the new spires of St Mary's Cathedral or the Opera House roof, but the Centrepont tower with its Olympic athletes, like the saints and apostles in the Vatican City or the learned classical heads around the Sheldonian in Oxford—images looking down on the societies committed to what they represent. So far from being a multicultural society in which diversity is valued, ours is a monocultural society obsessed with and saturated by sport.

Do we really want to be living in a vast theme-park of sport while the arts and education continue their decline? Is this the legacy we would leave to future generations? One thing is for sure, they will bitterly resent us if we do. One city in Germany spends more on one orchestra—the Berlin Philharmonic—than Australia spends annually on its entire (and declining) arts funding budget. 'No money available' said the State Government, when the conductor of the Sydney Symphony, Edo de Waart, noted that the acoustics in the Sydney Opera House concert hall were so poor that audiences heard only 60 per cent of what was happening on stage. In the same week as Maestro de Waart's complaint, that same government could find \$2.7 million to build a temporary berth for the super-yachts of billionaires visiting Sydney for the Olympic Games. Yet we expect our top-class musicians to perform in sub-standard conditions.

The junk culture of the passive consumption of endless bread and circuses, diversions from the profound issues of life, reflects the larger Western cultural malaise of the retreat from seriousness. As Susan Sontag has written, 'simply to defend the idea of seriousness has become an adversarial act' in the West today.²²

The problem is uniquely acute in Australia because, as James Murdoch has observed, there is such 'a lack of any spiritual qualities' in our cultural life. Unless this is changed in the next generation, he predicts, it will be a very empty society. As long ago as 1958, Patrick White described 'the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions' and 'muscles prevail'.²³ John Carmody's comment that Australia is the most 'anti-intellectual' of societies indicates that not much has changed over that half-century. Indeed, there is good reason for supposing that the situation has worsened. In her Sydney Institute lecture in 1997, Shirley Hazzard warned Australians that 'to live where excellence is esteemed in athletes only ... would be a loss of consciousness'.²⁴ Neatly combining Hazzard's phrase and Katharine Susannah Prichard's comments about the roots of reality, we find a passage in D. H. Lawrence's novel, *St Mawr*, which, although unwittingly, presents an accurate vignette of contemporary Australian life, dominated by images of sporting activity, and, in its criticism, implies the real challenges ahead if Australian culture is to be enriched for future generations:

There were no roots of reality at all. No consciousness below the surface, no meaning in anything save the obvious, the blatantly obvious. It was like life enacted in a mirror. Visually, it was wildly vital. But there was nothing behind it. Or like a cinematograph: flat shapes, exactly like men, rapidly rattling away with talk, emotions, activity, all in the flat, nothing behind it. No deeper consciousness at all.²⁵

Notes

- 1 'Pindar', *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford, 1970, p.834.
- 2 8 February, 1999.
- 3 Vin Maskell, 'Has someone moved the goalposts?', the *Australian*, 23 September, 1998, p.18.
- 4 'MCG runneth over', the *Sydney Morning Herald* [*SMH*], 'The Guide', 26 July, 1997, p.25.
- 5 *SMH*, 7 May, 2001, p.22.
- 6 'Behind the mystique', *SMH*, 3 March, 2001, p.4.
- 7 In Don Edgar, *Men Mateship Marriage*, Sydney, 1997, p.122.
- 8 'The *real* Australian car', *SMH*, 27 September, 1997, p.63.

- 9 'Quote Unquote', the *Sun-Herald*, 15 June, 1997, p.60.
- 10 'Warne to miss NZ after series win', the *Australian*, 4 February, 1998, p.24.
- 11 'Warney going ballistic is the ultimate deterrent', *SMH*, 3 February, 2001, p.28.
- 12 'Judgey's fine farewell', *SMH*, 17 January, 1998, p.34.
- 13 'Counting the Costa', *SMH*, 29 May, 1999, p.34.
- 14 'The world's best and best-paid cricketers to fill their boots', *SMH*, 10 May, 2001, p.48.
- 15 J. R. Martin, 'Grammar Meets Genre: Reflections on the "Sydney School"', *Arts* 22 (2000): 91.
- 16 'Dollar trampled', the *Age*, 16 March, 2001, p.4.
- 17 'Budding composer set to flee "malaise"', the *Australian*, 9 May, 2001, p.39.
- 18 'Spectrum', *SMH*, 12 September, 1998, p.12.
- 19 *The Sea Coast of Bohemia: Literary Life in Sydney's Roaring Twenties*, St Lucia, Queensland, 1992.
- 20 *Culture and Society*, Harmondsworth, 1961, p.285
- 21 *Culture and Society*, p.310.
- 22 Quoted in Don Anderson, 'Like getting blood out of a Vanstone', 'Spectrum', *SMH*, 17 August, 1996, p.12.
- 23 'The Prodigal Son', in *Patrick White Speaks*, eds Paul Brennan and Christine Flynn, Leichhardt, NSW, 1989, p.15.
- 24 'Lest we forget our humanity', *SMH*, 15 August, 1997, p.15.
- 25 *St. Mawr and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth, 1997, p.131.