

# Literary Vaudeville: Lennie Lower's Comic Journalism

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It is entirely possible that vaudeville never really died—at least not in Australia. Susan Lever, for one, has observed that vaudeville-style, self-consciously performative ‘characters’ have had a surprising afterlife in Australian culture. Against the scarcity of successful home-grown sitcoms, she notes the preference of local audiences for revue-style sketch comedy, as well as ‘character’-based variety shows centred upon such diverse comic figures as Graham Kennedy, Norman Gunston (Garry McDonald), and Roy and HG (John Doyle and Greig Pickhaver)—to which might be added Paul Hogan and Shaun Micallef. Even Jane Turner and Gina Riley’s caricatural *Kath & Kim* suggests that ‘the Australian taste for comedy remains firmly on the side of vaudeville’ (238).

The comic writings of Leonard Waldemere Lower (1903–1947), better known as Lennie Lower, had a role in extending something of the energy and style of vaudeville into later media. Lower was a very popular humorous columnist on Sydney newspapers from the 1920s until his death at the age of forty-three, and he retains a toehold in the annals of Australian literature on the basis of a single novel, *Here’s Luck*, which has reputedly never been out of print.<sup>1</sup> His biographer Bill Hornadge asserted that it was ‘widely acclaimed as Australia’s funniest novel’ (90), while Keith Willey saw it in somewhat more complex terms as a classic example of what he called *Australian Humour in Hard Times*. Such claims about the representative status of the novel normally avoid saying very much about the precise strategies of Lower’s humour. Some years ago when I wrote on *Here’s Luck* I found Mikhail Bakhtin’s work a useful touchstone, and his ideas on heteroglossia and carnivalesque inversion allowed me a way of describing Lower’s wordplay, allusions and parody (Kirkpatrick 2009). But I also became conscious that I had somehow failed to account for what I felt was really distinct about the book, and that was its modernity, even its *modernism*: what made it new and different, rather than ‘classic’ or in some other way safely canonical.

In this essay I focus on Lower’s humorous journalism: those ephemeral pieces he wrote so prolifically throughout his career. In the seven years from 1933 that he worked for Frank Packer on the *Australian Women’s Weekly* and, later, the *Daily Telegraph*,<sup>2</sup> Lower wrote nearly three thousand columns: ‘an incredible output [that] has not been equalled by another humorous writer before or since’ (Hornadge 113): one reason why his career as a fiction writer never developed beyond *Here’s Luck* and a lost, unpublished novel called ‘The Boarding House’ written shortly afterwards (Hornadge 96–102). Many of Lower’s columns were gathered in collections both during his lifetime and long after it as a mark of his enduring popularity, or nostalgia for his particular brand of old-style ‘larrikin’ wit.<sup>3</sup> If that popularity has waned, and Lower’s humour now seems dated, that is not to understate its influence and importance. It is time, therefore, to reconsider what elements comprised it: what it was about his columns that once made them a byword for modern comic style.

Narrowly literary explanations of comedy are not necessarily helpful in understanding humour that was originally written for popular newspapers and magazines. In order to identify what was innovative about Lower’s style, then, it is more profitable to look at what was happening

in those adjacent media which were themselves the products of industrial technology and mass culture. In what follows I read Lower's humour in the context of his journalistic career, but extend this to the transnational frame of early twentieth-century modernity within which the local mediascape operated. In particular, analogies with the popular cultures of vaudeville and cinema—the one in decline just as the other was learning to talk—will prove revealing, as will comparison with Lower's contemporaries who wrote for the *New Yorker*, notably S.J. Perelman. Both Lower and Perelman were agile wits who had an ear for the discursive promiscuity of modern life, drawing from what media scholar Henry Jenkins has called a 'vaudeville aesthetic' in order to give it shape.

### Vaudevillian Emusements

Accounts of Lower's compositional methods suggest that being funny on a daily basis did not necessarily come easily. Fellow humorist Alexander Macdonald wrote that Lennie 'habitually wore the slightly haunted expression of the literary flagellant who is obliged to thrash some five hundred words a day out of himself to supply the highly critical demands of every type of reader, from the dustman to the dowager' (Macdonald 1977, 207). Not surprisingly, Lower frequently parodied the discourses of journalism itself, from sensational news reporting, popular science and the social pages, to advice columns, classifieds and advertisements. If Lower also tried the larger canvas of the comic novel with considerable success, the daily grind of manufacturing jokes led him into habits of absurdism that mostly undermined any sustained narrative drive. With all the ironies of modern life that he exploited, his humour is intrinsically more verbal than situational, and predisposed to punning, comic incongruities and burlesque.

Lower began his career as a freelance, and among his earliest pieces are some humorous sketches published in the racy weekly *Beckett's Budget* in 1927. These are somewhat in the style of Ernest 'Kodak' O'Ferrall's stories of inner-city working-class life, and not all of them are funny, but there are flashes of the farcical turn of phrase that would characterise *Here's Luck* just three years later. 'Personality, Character, Determination' begins with a striking simile: 'It looked good to me. It stood out from the rest of the "Positions Vacant." It struck your eye like a wart on your girl's lip' (4). The tissue-thin plot of 'The "Dook" Raises Thirty Bob,' about two friends trying to extend their drinking spree, manages to work in a comic anthropomorphism: 'Outside, a motor horn snorted joyously, and a sunbeam side-stepping a wowser-cloud, slipped through the half-open door, streaked along the floor, and placed one dazzling foot upon the bright brass rail' (15).

Lower started to find his metier for absurd wordplay in pieces accepted by the *Daily Telegraph Sunday Pictorial* from October 1927. The first paragraph of an item titled 'How To Be Refined: What Would a Gentleman Do?' begins with droll zeugma and ends with a joke about marriage:

Culture and refinement are things that everyone should have. Like pants and catarrh. Some people are as common as pyorrhoea [sic]. They have no refinement; they consider that it is manners to leave a room when a lady enters it; whereas it is only prudence, as many a married man can tell you. (22)

The line about pyorrhoea (pus around the tooth) is a nice touch, enacting its own 'commonness' in even mentioning the condition. In December 1927 Lower became a regular columnist for the *Labor Daily*, where his wit was at the service of J.T. Lang's faction of the New South Wales Labor Party. 'Facts About the Earth: Told in Simple Language' parodies the discourse of popular science:

The earth was formed out of gaseous vapours, which coalesced into a dirty lump, something after the same manner as the Nationalist Party. It was then a hot molten mass, but after a while it cooled off. It is still cooling off, and although the inside of the earth is very hot, the outside, as it gets cooler, is shrinking. Therefore, when laying out a garden plot it is always best to allow for shrinkage, same as laying out next week's wages. (4)

Lower's pieces in the *Labor Daily* ceased in October 1928, and he began to appear regularly in the *Daily Guardian* by July 1929. The progeny of *Smith's Weekly*, the sensationalist *Guardian* (1923-1931) was every bit a child of the Roaring Twenties, and Hornadge rightly asserts that 'It was in this period that [Lower] really "hit his straps"' (71) and arrived at his mature comic style. His pieces now took their cue from topical human interest items in the news, and display amusement with the rapid transformations of modernity in a prose style that mimics the discontinuities of urban life. He wrote about everything from becoming a lounge lizard (3/7/29), the Newtown incinerator (11/7/29), and the ukulele craze (26/11/29), to Music Week (12/5/30), Health Week (22/10/30), and the difficulties of buying a stamp and sending a telegram (24/9/29). In 'Men Must Pay Heavily to be Beautiful: Hard on Pocket and Face,' Lower goes to an ultra-modern barber:

The shave, with eleven hot towels and three varieties of face cream.  
The hair-cut with the electric tooth-drill; the shampoo—these are mere preliminaries.

The hair is dried with hot air, both electrical and human. (1)

By then, Lower was appearing on the front page. May 1930 also saw the publication of *Here's Luck*, so he was riding high.

Emus were a source of fascination. In March 1930 he reported that at Wangrabelle in Victoria emus had been killing sheep and pigs 'by repeatedly jumping on their backs': 'They are merely emusing themselves' ('Cruel Tactics of the Emu' 16). In January the following year Lower celebrated the release to Taronga Park Zoo of an emu held by Redfern police. The bird had been kept in the police garage and had eaten 'portions of Constable Neary's motor cycle.' Lower wrote:

. . . it is a lesson to all that a garage is not the proper place for an emu.

We have not yet read the advertisement which says, 'Furnished flat, with garage. Suit married couple, or business man and emu.'

Neither have we seen, 'Hot and cold water, phone, refrigerator, and all mod. conv., including separate bath and emu.'  
(*'Now Look What Lower's Done'* 1)

'Emu' becomes a floating signifier for both a wife and a bathroom appliance.

Amphibians could elicit an even more absurd response. This is 'Lower is Poetic About Frogs,' published on 10 February 1931, just a few days before the *Daily Guardian* folded, a victim of the Depression:

A Brisbane frog arrived at Mascot on the tail-plane of the Brisbane mail plane yesterday morning.

This is probably the longest hop ever taken by a frog.

The frog is a strange animal which lives in creeks and croaks.

It also lives on water and hops.

One frog is spawn every minute. The stages of the frog are interesting to be interested in.

First the spawn. Then the rod, tadpole, or perch. Then the frog on its log in the bog. (Poetry).

We have the bullfrog. The cowfrog and the calf-frog were last seen at the battle of Blenheim (1345, A.D.)

The tadpole is an apprentice frog. Tadpoles born in May are Maypoles.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?

The barberspole is a frog which comes out in red, white and blue stripes when fully matured. It costs 6d in most places, or 9d with a hot towel.

In France, people eat frogs—fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong.

Eat more frogs. Of course, in the case of there being a death in France since the time of writing, there is a possibility of fifty-nine million nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine Frenchmen being misled.

But let it be here stated that the frog which arrived on the Brisbane mail was a bull frog [sic], because it was a mail frog.

And if it wasn't a bull frog that rode on the mail plane, it must have been toad. (1)

The heavy use of puns here is typical of Lower's newspaper style, and it allows him to slip almost instantly out of the narrative mode suggested by the first sentence into a series of freely associated gags, which are asserted in the manner of scientific 'facts.' The presumption that he is writing popular science permits him to make equally ridiculous assertions about the Battle of Blenheim and French eating habits. He also takes a swipe at poetry ('Then the frog on its log in the bog') and advertising clichés ('fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong,' 'Eat more frogs').

What accounts for the seeming disparity between Lower's flirtations with narrative, in the *Beckett's Budget* stories, and in *Here's Luck*, and this extraordinary, almost stream-of-consciousness wordplay, with its comic juxtapositions, rapid-fire code switches, non sequiturs, and constant punning? The restrictions of his newspaper column—around two hundred and fifty words—accounts for some of the need to be funny in a hurry, for when he was given more space in the *Women's Weekly* a couple of years later he returned to narrative devices, as we

shall see. But where did Lower get his particular burlesque style? Hornadge's biography is silent on his reading habits. In any case, literary models are probably irrelevant alongside the dynamic media environment in which he worked and the popular culture it served, including vaudeville and cinema.

Henry Jenkins coined the term 'vaudeville aesthetic' in his 1992 book on early talking-picture comedies, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* He compares vaudeville, with its modular structure of variety acts, with the increasing emphasis in 'straight' theatre on verisimilitude and the subordination of all elements of a production to its dramatic unity; what the modernist innovator Bertolt Brecht would contemptuously call 'culinary' theatre, which is consumed with a view to sensory harmony, like a well-planned menu. Vaudeville, conversely, was based on rapid sequences of acts that offered constant sensation and surprise. As Jenkins writes:

These individual acts were juxtaposed together with an eye toward the creation of the highest possible degree of novelty and variety rather than toward the logical relationship between the various components of the program. Each act was conceived as a discrete unit that could be slotted into a customized program and play opposite many different acts in its career. The program as a whole offered no consistent message; individual acts might offer conflicting or competing messages. In the end, what vaudeville communicated was the pleasure of infinite variety in infinite combinations. (63)

Jenkins notes the influence of vaudeville on such diverse avant-garde phenomena as Italian futurist theatre and Russian cinematic montage: 'The fragmented, frenetic, and emphatic style of variety performance spoke to modernists of all nationalities, to many seeking alternatives to the conventionality of theatrical realism and the banality of the commercial cinema' (62–63; (one might also add Brecht's episodic, metatheatrical 'epic' theatre here). Thus Jenkins references F.T. Marinetti, who could write of 'The Variety Theatre' as generating 'what I call "the Futurist marvellous", produced by modern mechanics,' whose elements include:

(a) powerful caricatures; (b) abysses of the ridiculous; (c) delicious, impalpable ironies; (d) all-embracing, definitive symbols; (e) cascades of uncontrollable hilarity; (f) profound analogies between humanity, the animal, vegetable and mechanical worlds; (g) flashes of revealing cynicism; (h) plots full of the wit, repartee, and conundrums that aerate the intelligence; (i) the whole gamut of laughter and smiles, to flex the nerves; (j) the whole gamut of stupidity, imbecility, doltishness, and absurdity, insensibly pushing the intelligence to the very border of madness . . . (Marinetti 117)

And so on. Lower is hardly an avant-gardist, but there's common ground here in terms of an absurd 'marvellous,' as well as a certain of spirit of *épater le bourgeois*.

Richard Waterhouse has described the ways in which Australian variety theatre by the early twentieth century combined attenuated elements of the American blackface minstrel tradition with ingredients from English music hall (Waterhouse 1990). By the 1920s two of the great stars of local vaudeville were Nat Phillips and Roy Rene, who performed as Stiffy and Mo. One of their sketches was recorded in 1927 as *The Sailors*,<sup>4</sup> and a strangely eclectic performance it is by modern standards, combining snatches of comic song, including Gilbert and Sullivan, punning repartee with local references, and culminating in an extended joke about a cow.

Although it was already struggling under growing competition from radio and talking films, vaudeville was still a vital theatrical presence in Sydney when Lower began his career. The public appetite for variety theatre was strong enough in 1932 for Queenie Paul and Mike Connors to open a New Tivoli Theatre in Castlereagh Street which ran successfully under different managements until 1966, in later years interspersing revue with seasons of straight plays and musical theatre (Thorne 606). A further mark of vaudeville's continuing presence in the popular imagination was the comic strip 'Smith's Vaudevillians' which appeared in the pages of *Smith's Weekly* from 1928, a paper as famous for its humour as for its rampant sensationalism. Initially drawn by Stan Cross, the strip featured the toff Norman and his sidekick Rhubarb, a drunken sailor, and they joined a cast of *Smith's* comic characters who would, from time to time, riot across the paper's news items and advertisements.

Because of its origins in Victorian popular theatre, it is perhaps easy to overlook the impact and influence of vaudeville's lively variety structure on other, later cultural forms. With the ebbing of that *fin-de-siècle* fascination with the notion of postmodernism that characterised the 1980s and 90s has come a recognition that modernism might in fact comprise a wider field than was formerly assumed. It has become increasingly respectable, therefore, to describe the innovative tendencies within twentieth-century popular culture as what Miriam Hansen styled *vernacular modernism* (Hansen 1999). For its audiences, vaudeville's pageant of novelties was attuned to the rapidly transforming world in which they lived, and its finale only played out when film technology learned some of its tricks. Even then vaudeville-like forms re-emerged in radio and television review shows, and in the varied entertainment line-ups of the Australian club circuit.

Lower also learned from variety theatre and, like the vernacular modernist that he was, in his newspaper columns made it into something new: literary vaudeville.

### Verbal and Cinematic Slapstick

No-one else in Australia wrote literary vaudeville like Lower. In a search for contemporary comparisons the closest I can find is the American humorist S.J. Perelman, who was born not long after Lower, in 1904, and managed his career much better, living on into a comfortable old age until 1979. But then Perelman moved in more exalted circles, being known for his long association with the *New Yorker*. He was also influenced by modernist writing in general—his best friend and brother-in-law was the novelist Nathanael West—and by Joyce's *Ulysses* in particular, which he called 'the greatest work of the comic imagination that exists for me' (cited in Gale 5). His style is thus more self-consciously literary and rococo than Lower's is, but, like Lower, Perelman's style derives much of its wit from the parodic juxtaposition of popular discourses, as though mashing up the contents of a newspaper or magazine.<sup>5</sup> Steven H. Gale notes the use of clichés, allusions and puns as key elements (183–84). An example from Perelman's first collection, *Dawn Ginsbergh's Revenge* from 1929—a book he later disowned—is a sign of more sophisticated things to come, while also resonating with Lower's work at this time. 'Those Charming People' is an account of a fanciful 'reptile expedition':

Seven days later pythons were sighted, and the python traps were baited. To lure the tricky reptiles to the snares, a man named Leeds was tied to a tree and smeared with honey. But the cautious pythons refused to bite. Another man named Leeds was smeared with honey and tied to the same tree, but still without results. Lieut. Weinbloom's entry in his log for that day reads: 'Gave the pythons lots of good Leeds but without effect. Perhaps we are wrong to use traps and snares? Will try muted woodwinds, tympani, and oboes tomorrow.' But the oboes did not work

either, for it is notorious that oboes never do work. That, kiddies, is why they *are* oboes. (26–27)

A sample of Perelman's more evolved, not to say experimental style, is 'Entered as Second-Class Matter,' which first appeared in the second series of the short-lived modernist journal *Contact* in 1932, edited by Nathanael West and William Carlos Williams:

What has gone before: Poultney Groin, disillusioned and middle-aged playboy, member of Manhattan's 'upper crust,' tires of Simone Dravnik, beauteous model whom he has been protecting. Womanlike, stung to the quick, she stares into her hand-mirror in her lavishly appointed apartment on Park Avenue and asks herself the age-old question: *Finished your dinner? Now it's acid's turn to dine! These small food cavities filled with your decomposed food morsels rapidly hatch bacteria. In a few hours your formerly healthy system is a mass of putrefaction. Ask Dr. Fritz P. Tanzpalast of the German Deaconess Hospital in Chicago. Or ask Mr. Fred Dahlgren of Norfolk, Virginia. Dog mah cats, folks, jes' give me mah spoon vittles, mah side-meat an' yams, an' dat little blue tin of Edgeworth, sho sho.* Down the dusty Chisholm trail to Abilene rode taciturn Spit Weaver, his lean brown face an enigma and his six-gun swinging idly from the pommel of Moisshe, the wonder horse. (Perelman 97)

Here the manner of a radio serial rapidly and absurdly modulates into a series of other voices, including that of a society novel, a dental hygiene advertisement, *Amos'n'Andy*, and a pulp western.

The English humorist Frank Muir went so far as to describe Perelman as 'arguably the most original—and funniest—comic prose stylist of the [twentieth] century' (590). That may be so, but Perelman's only novel, *Parlor, Bedlam and Bath*, co-written with Quentin Reynolds, and published in 1930—the same year as *Here's Luck*—was a conspicuous failure, in large part because it sacrificed plotting in favour of wordplay (Muir called it 'awful' [591]). Perelman 'excel[led] at the smaller canvas' of the short story-cum-essay (Gale 29), and although Lower's only published novel was a conspicuous success, he also came to prefer a smaller canvas—smaller even than Perelman's, given that he was writing for the dailies.

It is unlikely that Lower was influenced by Perelman, whose greatest fame came after 1934, when he began contributing regularly to the *New Yorker*. As noted, his earliest books, *Dawn Ginsbergh's Revenge* and *Parlor, Bedlam and Bath* were failures, and his first collection of *New Yorker* pieces, *Strictly from Hunger*, did not appear until 1937, by which time Lower had already established his style. In any case, I am wary of pushing the comparison with Lower too far. According to Douglas Fowler, Perelman also drew on an American Jewish tradition that included Yiddish theatre—with all its vaudeville elements—as well as the figure of the *shlemiel*, later famously embodied by Woody Allen both in his stand-up and cinematic roles (Fowler 98–99, 103–05). As well, Perelman was unabashedly elitist in his mockery of mass culture; he was more self-consciously intellectual and allusive, and fond of obscure words that displayed his learning. 'I classify myself as a writer of what the French call *feuilletons*—that is, a writer of little leaves,' he once said (cited in Cole and Plimpton). Lower, on the other hand, was wholly incorporated into the marketplace of popular journalism, so his attitude was correspondingly less distanced, his vocabulary more demotic.

As well as vaudeville, what both men had in common was cinema as a central experience of modern life, and each regularly made fun of it in his columns. Hornadge records that in 1926 Lower wrote a film synopsis (59), but provides no details. Perelman, however, and rather in spite of himself, was a genuine screenwriter. Although he heartily disliked working in and for Hollywood, he co-wrote screenplays for two early Marx Brothers films, *Monkey Business* (1931) and *Horse Feathers* (1932), and would go on to win an Oscar for *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956). Both Lower and Perelman developed their comic style during the last years of silent movies, when film comedians like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton were developing ever more sophisticated elaborations of the sight gag, with its ‘switch movements,’ and visual metaphors and puns.<sup>6</sup> Like slapstick comedy, Lower’s style persistently generates risible incongruities—a mode of humour well adapted to what Ben Singer in *Melodrama and Modernity* has called ‘the commerce in sensory shocks’ (91) of the urban mass media.

The early history of screen comedy shows an evolution from slapstick humour based around a series of ‘gags’—defined by Steven Neale and Frank Krutnik as ‘non-linguistic comic action’ (51)—towards more story-based structures. It is a pattern that marks a growing sense of the potential of the new medium, from brief comic ‘turns’ deriving from vaudeville, to an understanding of how cinematic narratives might be told. As such, the earliest comic films belong to what Tom Gunning in an influential 1986 essay called ‘the cinema of attractions’ in which:

Fictional situations tend to be restricted to gags, vaudeville numbers or recreations of shocking or curious incidents (executions, current events). It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to film making. (58–59)

Gunning sees this kind of exhibitionist cinema peaking around 1906–07. After then, with the rise of the feature film, slapstick was increasingly yoked to narrative purposes, although it would remain a significant component of silent comedies. The arrival of talkies, however, so changed the ground rules that new approaches were initially sought in cinema’s lost links with variety theatre.

The focus of Henry Jenkins’s study of the vaudeville aesthetic is precisely this period of transformation from silent film comedies into talkies:

The recruitment of vaudeville and revue performers in the early sound period and the effort to construct appropriate vehicles for their talents represented a conscious return to an aesthetic previously rejected, a new effort to appropriate devices from variety entertainment and to integrate them into the classical system. (97)

Early Australian sound comedies also drew on the performance styles of old vaudevillians. George Wallace’s successful features for Efftee in the early 1930s were all based on his stage revues of the 1920s (Byrnes). On the other hand, Roy Rene’s one film for Cinesound, *Strike Me Lucky* (1934), styled ‘A Farce with Music’ in the opening credits, was a relative flop, partly because of an incoherent plot designed to show off the versatility of Rene’s talents. As it turned out, ‘Mo’ felt he owned neither the material nor the medium. As Neale and Krutnik observe:

Because gags so often constitute digressions within a story or story-based action, and because there is a degree to which they are inherently incompatible with coherently organized and tightly motivated plots, they have at times formed the

basis of comic structures marked neither by developmental narratives nor even by happy endings. (57)

Indeed, even today there remains a tension between slapstick and story in films starring strongly visual comedians like Will Ferrell and Jim Carrey.

While an enormous gulf yawns between the sight gags of early cinema and the wordplay of written humour, the analogy holds in terms of their effects, for there is something of this same tension evident in the work of both Lower and Perelman: a tension which is always resolved in terms of the immediate gag, the vaudeville aesthetic, rather than narrative coherence. Indeed, most of Lower's pieces end abruptly, often with barely a punch-line. Even of *Here's Luck*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer in 1930 wrote: 'The plot is fragmentary. But that does not matter. What there is of it is forgotten in the diversity of comic characters and hilarious comedy with which the extravaganza rattles along' ('An Australian Humourist' [sic] 8). Compare Lower's work to that of P.G. Wodehouse and the difference is clear. Wodehouse's humour is intrinsically novelistic, being based on character and situation within a coherent, if nonetheless comic, social world; whereas Lower's tends to be generated more at the level of language itself, and so continuously, even recklessly, seems to invent its absurd universe as it goes along.

With all that said, the relationship between cinema and literature is far from simply mimetic. It is not as if abrupt shifts in tone and focus are like jump cuts, or that a sequence of puns is comparable to montage. David Trotter has warned that 'Any account of the literary use to which a writer may or may not have put a cinematic device must be based on an understanding of the uses to which that device was put, at the time of writing, in cinema' (239), and is especially dubious about easy analogies between modernist writing and montage. More recently, Andrew Shail has questioned common assumptions about the 'influence' of cinema on literary modernism, preferring 'a history in which modernism was not an aesthetic reformation in response to cinema, but a consequence in literary practice of its appearance' (3). If screen comedies were influential on Lower and Perelman it was because they retained strong elements of vaudeville and, as a consequence, strong vestigial elements of the cinema of attractions. In both cases, however, the tendency as the 1930s wore on was to embrace a somewhat more coherent character-based style while retaining an eye for absurdity and wordplay.

### **The Secret Lives of Lennie Lower**

When the *Daily Guardian* folded in 1931 Lower went to work for the *Daily Telegraph*. As a gimmick, in mid-1932 it was announced that Lennie, like Henry Lawson fifty years before, would travel to Bourke and report back on what he found along the road. The answer was *not much*, but Lower had a knack of making a little go a long way, and the journey unfolded as a surreal discontinuous narrative. Reporting from Trangie on 6 July he wrote: 'Having arrived at Trangie the first thing we thought of was a cigarette—having no opium with us. So we struck a match, lit our cigarette, walked around the town, came back to where we started from, and blew out the match' ('Yes, There are No Firemen at Trangie' 7). The following day he wrote: 'Mullengudgery! That's one of the places we passed on the way to Nyngan. It's a lovely place to pass' ('One More Goat is Found in Nyngan' 9). If the editor's plan was to encourage Lower to write in celebration of the mighty bush and its inhabitants, it failed dismally. The effect is more like *Wake in Fright* than *While the Billy Boils*.

Lower would finish his second novel, 'The Boarding House,' in March 1933, but owing in part to contractual wrangles it failed to see print. Hornadge also speculated that the book might not

have been ‘up to standard’ (Hornadge 89, 96–98), although the single surviving chapter that is reproduced in his biography reads well enough, with a diverse range of characters, all inhabitants of the titular boarding house. Whatever the case, in the same year a degree of straightening, of narrative coherence, re-emerged in Lower’s columns when he began writing for the new *Australian Women’s Weekly*, where he was advertised as ‘Australia’s Foremost Humorist.’ In the polite pages of the *Weekly* he was given more space and, initially freed from his commitments to the *Telegraph*, more time, so began developing his pieces around two narrative devices: the fractured fairy tale, and the imaginary persona.

Lower wrote his subversive fairy tales somewhat against the *Weekly’s* child-friendly milieu, filling them with blokey diction and references. The National Library’s *Trove* database of digitised newspapers shows that James Thurber’s work was becoming well-known in Australia by 1940,<sup>7</sup> but there seems little in common between the style of his droll modern fables and Lower’s horseplay. This is the opening of ‘Little Jim and the Wizard’ from 9 March 1940:

The full story of Little Jim, the collier’s only son, whose cottage was a thatched one, has never been told. Very well! Uncle Lennie will tell it to you. Ready?

In due time Little Jim also became a collier like his father before him. On his first day down the mine, he noticed a furtive-looking man staring at him in a strange manner.

‘Lldw cwl yolticklylw?’ asked Jim of a companion.

I forgot to mention that this was a Welsh colliery.

‘Shh!’ answered his friend. ‘He might hear you. He’s a wizard.’

‘And what does he do in the mine when he’s not wizarding?’

‘He sells race tips. We have races down here every day with the pit ponies. Seeing that you’ll be in charge of the ponies hauling skips, you’d better watch him.’

‘Hmm,’ said Jim, thoughtfully. The evil seed had been sown.

One day, as Jim had expected, the wizard spoke.

‘Nice pony you’ve got there,’ he said.

‘She can break even time for seven furlongs with two tons of coal behind her,’ replied Jim proudly.

‘Poof!’ sneered the wizard. ‘If I had two tons of coal behind me I’d break all records. That nag has got to get a move on or be run over.’

‘Please yourself,’ said Jim and as he turned haughtily away he struck his head on a piece of coal jutting from the roof. He turned on the wizard, his eyes blazing. It’s a very foolish thing to let your eyes blaze in a coal-mine, but James was a quick-tempered youth.

‘Did you do that?’ he cried. (23)

Much of the humour here relates to contemporary wartime industrial relations, and to the growing threat of a national strike of coal miners. Jim and the wizard go into a profitable partnership as trainer and bookmaker, allowing Jim to buy the coalmine and so become Sir Jim, whereupon the wizard, seeking a bigger share, becomes a red-ragging union organiser.

But by now Australia’s Foremost Humorist had another favourite mode. Besides his fairy tales, he would also take on different imaginary personas, seeming to experiment with a range of comic identities from phrenologist to bushranger, exhibition dancer to radio announcer:

I have a confession to make. I was once a radio announcer. No! No! Not a crooner. I got this black eye chopping wood.

I was in charge of the studio at the time when the big strike commenced. My head gramophone-winder downed needles and held a stop-work meeting with the crooner, two Uncles, the noise manufacturer, Aunty Mabel,<sup>8</sup> and the household hinter. The upshot of it was that they walked out on me.

It was very awkward because there was a radio play on the programme, but I said to myself, 'The show must go on!' and on it goed . . .

I was Lord Rowchester [sic], the hero, Lady Pamela Banthwaite, the heroine, also her stern father and dissolute brother. On top of this I was the little child that was to bring them together, and Fido, the faithful spotted Damnation dog (Eh!) Dalmatian dog, the equally faithful old Butler, Stubbs, and the villain, Vernon Fitzwaite. ('Lower Stages a Radio Play' 11)

The comic absurdism is still present, but linked to escapist fantasies which now threaten to become epidemic. It is in the creation of a daydreaming 'Little Man' persona that Lower perhaps comes closest to the contemporary *New Yorker* school—including Thurber and Robert Benchley as well as Perelman. As Gale has written of the type:

They are average men, victims of an illogical outside world epitomized by that frightful generic monster, woman. Perelman's art and contribution to the Little Man genre is to use that persona as a vehicle for expressing his essential attitude toward modern life, an attitude at once jaundiced and hopeful, expecting the unexpected as well as the expected, and encyclopaedic while self-centered. (178)

This could be a description of Jack Gudgeon, the comic anti-hero in *Here's Luck*, but it might also apply to the numerous other guises that Lower adopted in his pieces for the *Women's Weekly* and, from 1940, *Smith's Weekly*. Cyril Pearl favoured both sets of these later columns in *The Best of Lennie Lower* in 1963 and, in an obvious reference to Thurber's Walter Mitty, he devoted the first section to Lennie's so-called 'Secret Lives.'

Michael Sharkey writes with great verve on what he calls the 'male romances' of these years: Australian stories and novels in which male characters struggle to break free of genteel domestic restraints and regain a lost, 'authentic' masculine identity unsullied by suburban conformity. 'Daydreams and alcohol are the preferred modes of their Walter Mitty-like vacationers from mundane torment. Their dream of flight is put into action, only to break on the rock of recognition of life's circularity' (112). In *Here's Luck* Lower produced one of the key works in this genre and, in a way, the later columns return to the dream of escaping one's fate as a modern breadwinner into other, more exciting modes of being, but which are also absurd by virtue of the wholly improbable excitement they offer. Comparing Lower's humour to Thurber's, Kylie Tennant thought it 'welled from the same desire to escape from that same "all-devouring female rigidity" which [he] and many other Australian men found so stultifying in the Australian society of their day' (cited in Willey 48). Jack Gudgeon's methods involve drinking and gambling, which he can indulge to the full only when his wife and her wower sister depart the family home. If, at the end of the novel, Jack and his wife have reconciled, it is on a suburban ground zero: the family home has burned down, the interfering sister-in-law has been banished, and he is seeking to expel his spivvy son to a lighthouse.

But behind Lower's later work, as behind the narrative voice of Jack in *Here's Luck*, is the comic 'character' of Lennie himself. It is a character that can dress itself up in other guises—Lennie the lion-tamer, Admiral Lennie, Bloodhound Lower the detective—but remains essentially the same vaudeville act, just as much as Roy Rene, who appeared as comic versions of such well-known stage characters as Dick Turpin, Good Queen Bess and even Hamlet, still with the same trademark black-and-white 'stage Hebrew' make-up each time (Macdonald 1972). In this way, Lennie Lower remains in good company. For all his time at the *Women's Weekly*, Lower's humour was never really family-friendly—he could never inhabit the gentle 'funny-father' persona of later columnists such as Ross Campbell or Richard Glover—but belongs to an older, edgier, more boisterous and more masculinist mode of comedy. And yet his work continues to matter: not merely as a record of that bygone world, but because the mashups of his literary vaudeville still speak to the fragmented disposition of so much of the best Australian humour.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Prion, an English publisher of humour books, brought out an edition in 2001, replacing the previous Angus & Robertson edition of 1993. Since 2000, however, the most readily available copy of *Here's Luck* has been Sydney University's SETIS (Sydney Electronic Text & Image Service) electronic version, followed in 2001 by another produced by Project Gutenberg. HarperCollins, who owns the Angus & Robertson imprint, republished the novel in 2014 as part of its A&R Australian Classics series. The SETIS text can be found and downloaded here: <http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/id/p00078>

<sup>2</sup> Lower wrote for the *Daily Telegraph* during two periods: from 1932, when the paper was owned by Sir Hugh Denison's Associated Newspapers, until he left in 1933 to write for Frank Packer's newly-created *Australian Women's Weekly*; and then from 1936, when the *Telegraph* was taken over by Packer's Consolidated Press, until 1940.

<sup>3</sup> The first such collection, *Here's Another*, appeared as early as 1932, its title playing on the fame of *Here's Luck*. Later collections were: *Loweritis* (Sydney: Australian Consolidated Press, 1940), *The Bachelors' Guide to the Care of the Young and Other Stories* (Sydney: Frank Johnson, 1941), and *Lennie Lower's Annual: A Side-Splitter* (Sydney: National Press, 194-?). Cyril Pearl later edited *The Best of Lennie Lower* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1963), and Tom Thompson *Here's Lower* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1983) and *The Legends of Lennie Lower* (Sydney: Collins, 1988). *Here's Another* can be downloaded from SETIS here: <http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/id/p00037>

<sup>4</sup> *The Sailors* is available as an audio file on the *Australian Screen* site, with notes by Graham McDonald: <http://aso.gov.au/titles/spoken-word/the-sailors/>

<sup>5</sup> Gale quotes Russell Davies, who said that 'Perelman's prose must surely be the richest treasury of available levels of discourse, what analysts of style like to call "registers", that has yet been assembled' (cited in Gale 182).

<sup>6</sup> A switch movement occurs when one slapstick gesture immediately morphs or 'switches' into another with a completely different meaning. Noël Carroll in 'Notes on the Sight Gag' gives the example of Charlie Chaplin's 1916 film *The Pawnshop*, in which the Tramp's pugilistic stance is transformed into scrubbing the floor: 'we start out initially unaware that we are interpreting an action, and we only become retrospectively aware of our initial interpretation when it is undercut . . . For we are delighted by the way in which one line of movement may be made to yield two, often conflicting, glosses' (35). Something like this takes place in Lower's columns, which begin as informative news items but rapidly mutate into serial parodies of other discourses. Perelman's 'Entered as Second-Class Matter' offers a similar case in point.

<sup>7</sup> The first significant review of Thurber's work, as distinct from brief notices, appeared in the *Argus* in 1937 ('"The Argus" New Book Reviews').

<sup>8</sup> Popular announcers were once known as radio uncles or radio auntsies.

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