

# The City and the Contemporary Australian Long Poem

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When I request 'the city'  
the West Indian bus driver asks, incredulous,  
'You want to go the sea?' (65)

This moment from Laurie Duggan's *Memorials* not only comments on the condition of the travelling Australian, but also (perhaps accidentally) comments on the status of the city in cultural discourse. Despite cities' immense physicality they undergo strange transformations in their representations. Rather than fixity, cities represent flux: you can't step into the same city twice.

The absence of the Australian long poem in discussions of the cultural formations of the city is understandable. *Lyric* poetry's appropriateness for such a project is seen in its intensity, emphasis on subjectivity, and attraction to the quotidian. Freed from the 'anti-realist' structures of narrative it can represent the momentary, discontinuous flux of urban life. The Australian long poem has also, until recently, been a rare bird, and the representation of the city in this is sometimes only ghostly (as in Murray's *The Boys who Stole the Funeral*, or Tom Petsinis' *Inheritance*) or absent (as in Duggan's *The Ash Range*, or Philip Hodgins's *Dispossessed*). Even in the texts discussed here the city takes on a thematic fullness (as in, say, *The City of Dreadful Night* or *The Bridge*) with frustrating rarity. My examples – John A. Scott's *St Clair*, Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask*, Alan Wearne's *The Nightmarkets*, and Duggan's *Memorials* – are diverse and offer insights into the aesthetics and conditions of the long poem. They are of interest not only for what they say about the city, but also what the city says about the long poem.

These texts are generically heterodox. Each differs from the others, as if seeking to redefine what a contemporary long poem is. While heterodox, each uses, parodies, and deconstructs a number of genres: Scott uses dystopian fiction; Porter uses lesbian detective fiction, Wearne the political saga; Duggan the anatomy. The works range stylistically from the realist to the anti-realist. Representations of the city, and implied poetics of the city, are modelled differently in each work.

Scott's work is the most *outré*, something he himself notes. In his 1993 *Meanjin* essay, which is a valediction to poetry, Scott is struck by the exotic quality of his poems' locations: 'cities overarched by skies of flesh; streets lapped by floodwaters,

gardens of 'half-digested' lawn, sparking with electricity' (400). Matched with this is a fluidity of space and time and a tendency to associate locations with mist, smoke, and especially water (400-1). Scott's aesthetic is one of occlusion, obscurity, and a self-conscious attitude to the contingency of meaning.

These features, along with Scott's preference for ellipsis and digression, could be viewed as apposite for representing an urban subject. Certainly, some critics have viewed the spatial characteristics of the city in terms of rhetorical style. 'Cities promise plenitude, but deliver inaccessibility' (8), Hana Wirth-Nesher writes in *City Codes*, going on to describe how partial views and gaps lead to imaginative leaps for the urbanite (who is always to some extent an outsider). In *Signs Taken for Wonders* Franco Moretti writes about the relationship between urban movement and narrative indirection. The sense of occluded views, indirection, and the sometimes-fluid, sometimes-fixed relationships between public and private space fits with stylistic elements in Scott. But this leads to something of a paradox: while Scott is stylistically anti-realist, such a connection between stylistic and spatial features of the city implies a mimetic model of structure.

Useful here is Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 'The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations' (101) he writes, arguing for a model of urban walking that is a kind of rhetoric, which is in turn related to the subconscious, and the oenieric. The model is ultimately anti-narrativistic:

The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates, makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place – an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City. (103)

This is a late expression of the modernist city, a model harking back to Walter Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's city, where shock – the unpredictable, the momentary and the intense – is its condition.

The sense of shock and of the named, but never placed, city is apparent in *St Clair*. The work's first word is 'Sydney' (the heading for Part 1 of 'Preface'), but this is an 'other' Sydney. The narrator's hieratic tone blends the contemporary with the ancient: 'surely this city is a desert' and 'the first traffic was calling its devotion through an undisturbed air' (17). The other two cities of 'Preface' are Fès (Fez in Morocco) and London. The former is an orientalist, eroticized place reminiscent of Durrell's Alexandria. The pop groups and drug subculture of London, though, are barely less exotic than the Moroccan scenes. Indeed, the sense of fluidity between time and place, and the relative homogeneity of style, suggests that the cities are not as discrete as they first appear.

This status is a feature of the cities in 'Run in the Stocking' which parodies thriller and dystopian fiction. The accommodation towers that surround the city

are part of a familiar battery of dystopian *topoi*, though interestingly for an Australian, 'North' and 'South' represent Sydney and Melbourne, something the poet seems to be aware of: 'A familiar geography, laced with its bitumen / grid, upon which another city had settled' (130). Scott estranges the city for us by choosing recognizable places (and literary *topoi*) and then producing almost illegible texts, radicalized by alterity.

Scott's characters are often similarly at a loss. The social control wielded by the totalitarian state in 'Run in the Stocking' is dramatically played out in Dover Andersson's search for his own identity. Thinking himself a murderer he finds that he has been part of a state-controlled experiment. Here urban space and the self are both sites of government violence. But the bizarre unfolding of Andersson's narrative suggests that even more than in material cities, the imagined cities here are, in fact, unimaginable.

Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* also uses parody within an urban context, but here the city is more legible. The central character, Jill Fitzpatrick, is a private detective who lives in the Blue Mountains, mostly working in Sydney's western suburbs. It is made clear that Jill's status as a lesbian with a Catholic, working-class background also puts her metaphorically at the city's edge. The work begins conventionally with the detective out of work, but a need for work is also a need for the urban: 'I need Sydney / I need a job' (5). The Sydney of *The Monkey's Mask* is mostly the suburbs, a few pubs, Gleebooks, a threatening suburban park, and North Shore values described in heavy-handed satire through the couple who hire Jill to find their missing daughter, who is subsequently found dead in a nearby national park.

Despite Sherlock Holmes's assertion about rural criminality, the city remains the classic site of crime fiction. Is, then, the representation of the city in *The Monkey's Mask* simply a function of genre? Probably not. Firstly, because, as suggested, the text goes to some lengths to place characters (in terms of class and sexuality) through urban space. Secondly, structure is significant. The work's short, first-person 'lyrics' suggest in their contiguity a filmic (or televisual) organization of information. The tableaux offer discontinuity stitched together by the voice of the detective-narrator. Similarly, the diverse settings are held together by the presence of the city. Such discontinuity is also apparent in the imagery. For instance, in the North Shore house 'we sit on the balcony / floating in black air' (249).

These two points come together: disconnection is produced by the way the city marks out the social spaces of class. Only Jill, the professional risk-taker, is found in all of the settings, and to do so she often has to put on an act. Unlike earlier urban literature, the pedestrian (let alone the *flâneur*, that leisured peripatetic connoisseur of the city) is not central. Rather, the car and the telephone (machine) drive the narrative: 'My place is my car' (6) Jill says. The car is necessary for movement and detection, and is also a site of the erotic (in this case, female eroticism). The mixture of the mobile subject and the choice of urban sites makes the city a kind of displaced centre, ever present but rarely seen or discussed.

The city, just like the detective narrative, is constructed by a series of imagina-

five leaps. Such invention is marked here by ambivalence. The queer erotics of Sydney is undermined by a fear of the transgressive power of sex. The work's climax is an attempt to re-enact, by the murderer, the deadly sexual climax that brings about the death Jill is investigating. In this case it is Jill who suffers (but survives). The work ends, then, with an 'anti-climax', and it forces Jill to pull away from the case, from the truth and from the lesbian relationship she has entered with the killer's wife: 'reckless, careless sex / nearly killed me' (245).

The Sydney of *The Monkey's Mask* is both discomposed and something to desire. After the case Jill puts her Blue Mountains house on the market so as to head to the city. But the poem also ends with an image of the city's loss. The image of the flooded city is a primal one, and one previously imagined in Sydney: 'rain, rain, / forty days, forty nights // and the inner city drowns // and Diana's terrace floats out to sea' (256). The image of the flood takes the city back even further, to a prehistoric time, where the trees outside the Art Gallery become primordial, despite their close proximity to the central business district. Jill's final vision is to see the trees as housing the ghost of the murdered girl: 'Mickey's ghost walks / in this tropical rain [ . . . ] // she's growing dark // she's wearing a monkey's mask'.

In *The Nightmarkets*, which focuses upon Melbourne, plot is secondary to voice and characterization. Where Wearne's earlier work, 'Out Here', uses monologues to voice the suburbs, *The Nightmarkets* voices the whole city, through multiplicity, simultaneity, and complicated interconnection. As Martin Duwell points out, the work's scope is based on its enormous accumulation of detail, only partially accounted for by plot considerations. The poem is full of proper nouns: streets, suburbs, institutions, and popular songs. Such detail is related to the voice speaking, so that any particular place takes on its own resonance. These characters all comment on one another, suggesting vast patterns of interconnection and interdependence, so that the figures of narration and urban life again begin to merge. At the same time, however, this threatens to overcome the organizational aspects of the long poem. Duwell writes that the manuscript of *The Nightmarkets* shows that 'character achieved mastery over narrative' (130). One might add that the city of Melbourne – its particularity, its plurality of suburbs, names, associations – achieves mastery over character.

The city here acts as a character, rather than simply background, in a way similar to Jane Augustine's description of the narrative features, found in work by novelists as diverse as Dreiser and James, that make a city a character: when characters are travelling; when characters are confused; when the city determines characters' actions; when a real city is used; and when characters discover the erotic (74). Certainly the erotic subplots of *The Nightmarkets* are more important than the failed detective story involving a death in a massage parlour. If the characters are confused, as they often are, they nevertheless continually seek meaning, patterns and the predictable.

There are other strategies used to save the work from being merely sequential. As suggested, character and its relationship to place is crucial. Ian Metcalf, whose two monologues bookend the intricate collection of stories, says to himself to-

wards the end, 'Each tale is a culture. Want to learn / how many more may be obtained starting from us? Finally all the world' (285). The city is an endless index to character, and therefore endless narration. Suggestive of this is Sue Dobson's description of 'her' Melbourne: 'late afternoon on Beaconsfield Parade still sunny but / after a cool change, container ships queuing on the bay, / children scooting around the sand-sprayed footpath; / then crossing to the Bleak House for a counter tea' (64). As this illustrates, though, characterization and a realist delight in description are not clearly defined. For instance,

She drove around the port  
 onto the bridge, out over dinosaur-sized scrap metal heaps,  
 dockweed in harvest proportions: this city's junkyard rimmed by the  
 obscurer streets  
 of obscure suburbs. That glass and grey fort-  
 like CBD rose behind us,  
 while before, antique shops were closing, restaurants opened, gulls  
 hovered  
 and Lou in overalls strode, scarf covered,  
 along Williamstown jetty. (283)

Here synecdoche, and the connection between the narration of events and the passing of virtual time, show how closely the city is to the work's poetics. As this suggests the personal, the city and the erotic are all related to the political. In addition, the personal, the political and the erotic are closely related to the city.

The work tends to the condition of paradox. As many critics have noticed, *The Nightmarkets* seems to be both many voices and one voice. Wearne is the master of what we could call 'vernacular formallesque'. One might say that *The Nightmarkets* is a factitious, formalized version of naturalism. The numerous stories about sex, politics, and work are naturalist in that, like autobiographical narratives, they are interconnected but eschew teleology. For our purposes the paradoxical feature of note is the degree to which this narrative poem takes on the features of the lyric – dealing with momentary and individual details as ends in themselves. All these works show how the long poem's ambivalence over lyrical and narrative imperatives operate especially well in the context of the city and urban experience.

Laurie Duggan's *Memorial* takes the naturalist project a step further, doing away with plot and replacing action in the poem with the confessional subject. The commonplace idea that the city is a place of action not contemplation is here complicated: contemplation becomes a kind of action. Here the poet is in the world but somewhat apart from it. The urban poetic life, so characterized by stimuli and multiplicity, paradoxically turns out to be a kind of contemplative life.

The technique of a narrative voice bringing together the *bricolage* of quotation, found text and cultural commentary is common to a number of Duggan's works, though this is the most sustained example. It is not, as *Under the Weather* shows, only an urban technique, though it does work well in such a context and may, in

any case, always imply an urban sensibility.

The city is the source of metaphor ('I've realised it's futile to expect support from your forebears / – when the light says 'walk' that's what you do / and unless you're rescuing a shoe from the median strip / it's pretty straightforward', 16), invocation ('Melbourne though is not the dullest place / on the continent', and 'In London / the British Australian Studies Association / want me to read – for nothing – with Les Murray', 17), and of parody ('Mick's power tools / grind through the apartment ceiling / [The Price of Liberty is Eternal Renovation]', 42).

Just as the city is known for its juxtaposition, and its encouragement of digression, here cultural references range from Miles Davis to Daffy Duck in half a page. The manic associations of 'Well You Needn't' suggests the organisation of the whole book, but the sense that the associations in some way cohere also becomes prevalent through certain repetitions: the interest in jazz, in the relationship between art and one's memories, and between art and authority. The whole collection uses motifs that operate contrapuntally, appearing and reappearing in different contexts.

This confessional mode turns out to sponsor a documentary rather than autobiographical project. As with *The Nightmarkets*, *Memorials* is full of proper nouns. In this respect, the long poem becomes an elegiac project, designed to attend to the loss of the momentary and the quotidian, a loss which in this case occurs through (and is perhaps heightened by) the experience of living in a city. In other words, the lyric/narrative tension occurs through the discontinuity of losses and events produced through living continually in time and space. This elegiac condition is made explicit in the final section, 'Ornithology' (another jazz tune). This considers three dead colleagues: Robert Harris, Martin Johnston and Jas Duke, and opens with Harris's memorial services (not attended by the poet) and the loss of Johnston's 'In Memoriam', which works as a motif, cropping up in its absence a number of times. In addition, a watch reminds the poet of the dead Buckmaster ('I never met him', 99). This toying with the effects of elegy without the elegiac tone (in a book entitled *Memorials*) suggests an accepting pessimism of the redemptive features of art even as it records life going on.

But amid this, Duggan's humour and eye for the telling detail means that the work is never weakly elegiac. And many of his observations seem especially telling of urban life. In the English section of the poem we find:

In the paper, a couple, returning,  
drunk, from Margate,  
fucked in the train.

No-one objected  
until they began to smoke afterwards. (60)

More so than *The Nightmarkets*, *Memorials* risks becoming a succession of events. But the hidden law of poetic organization (through motifs and repetition), as well as the movement through different cities with different social concerns means that

even here the city can never wholly overcome the long poem.

In what way, then, are these poems instructive about the relationship between the city and a poetics of the contemporary long poem? My readings suggest five points. The first is that the heterodoxy of the city finds expression in the heterodoxy of the long poem. Secondly, the demands of spatial organization required in representing the city are expressed in the poems in terms of complex structural (and also rhetorical) organization (something apposite for the project of writing a long poem). The third point is that the city – with its multiplicity and air of factitiousness – is commonly a source of parody, one of the determining features of many contemporary long poems (especially the postmodern kinds). Fourthly, the city is a site used to play out the long poem's ambivalence towards narrative, so that the lyrical aspects of the city – its momentariness, contiguity and so forth – can be highlighted. Lastly, this leads to the city as a site which simultaneously attracts mimetic and non-mimetic approaches. What these poems suggest is that works thematically concerned with the city (whether realist or not) suggest a certain mimetic relationship between urban organization and experience and poetic organization and experience. But such a relationship is never predictable, so that at times the city may well come to resemble the sea.

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