

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

**Remained: Post-ing "The Drover's Wife"**

**by**

**Elizabeth Dozois**

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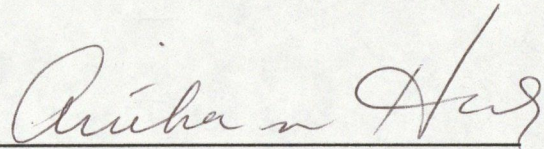
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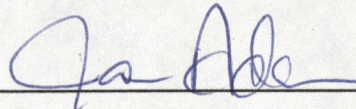


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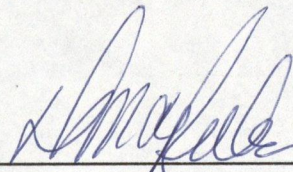
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled, "Remained: Post-ing 'The Drover's Wife'" submitted by Elizabeth Dozois in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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## ABSTRACT

Scholars identify the origins of a distinctly Australian literature in the prose and poetry of the *Bulletin* writers, and particularly in the work of Henry Lawson. Lawson, according to critical orthodoxy, was the first to articulate the geography, the ethos and the national mind of his country. For many years, his "bush realism" was embraced by both publishers and academics as a literary yardstick of sorts, a touchstone for The Standard Australian Short Story. Today, this genre is less rigidly defined. Nonetheless, Henry Lawson continues to be venerated as Father of the Australian Literary Tradition.

"The Drover's Wife," written in 1892, is often considered the best of Lawson's prose. Appropriated by nationalists who insist upon the "Australianness" of this story, "The Drover's Wife" has had a paradigmatic force, not only within the literary tradition of Australia, but also within the popular culture of that country. To some degree then, it has come to circumscribe both a nation and a literature.

In 1945, artist Russell Drysdale appropriated the title of Lawson's story and made its famous protagonist the subject of his painting. More recently, four Australian authors have done the same in short story form. But whereas Drysdale's work does not overtly contest the Lawson Tradition, the parodies of Murray Bail, Frank Moorhouse, Barbara Jefferis and Anne Gambling do. These

authors explicitly situate their stories within Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" in order to challenge the tradition to which their work has been assimilated.

If, as one critic suggests, Henry Lawson is "the master," and "all who come after him are to some extent imitators" (W.M. Sherrie), Bail and the others strikingly reify this pronouncement: they flaunt their status as "plagiarists." Ironically, with this gesture, these authors manifest their continuity with Lawson, (re)affirming the centrality of "The Drover's Wife." At the same time, however, their parodies are contestatory. They engage the tradition--*via* the story that has been placed at its fore--in order to make salient a system of hierarchical oppositions which pits the rural experience against the urban one, male subject against female Other, and realism against alternative forms of prose. Challenging the reductive hermeneutics which have long circumscribed "The Drover's Wife," Bail, Moorhouse, Gambling and Jefferis propel the story toward other readings, rendering *The Drover's Wife* a shifting and viable (poly-)narrative site.

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Above all, I am so grateful to Christopher, who cared for our child and tended to our home while I was off drovin'. You have been so generous with your time, your energy and your devotion. With gratitude and love, I dedicate this thesis to you.

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## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The epigraph which prefaces this thesis is taken from Henry Lawson's "Remailed," page 162.

I am indebted to Dick Roughsey's *Rainbow Serpent* for its recounting of the legend of Gorialla. I appropriate parts of this myth for use in the story which concludes this study.



It is supposed to be something to have your work published in an English magazine, to have it published in book form, to be flattered by critics and reprinted throughout the country press, or even to be cut up well and severely. But, after all, now we come to think of it, we would almost as soon see a piece of ours marked with big inky crosses in the soiled and crumbled rag that Bill or Jim gets sent him by an old mate of his--the paper that goes thousands of miles scrawled all over with smudgy addresses and tied with a piece of string.

-- Henry Lawson, *Remailed*

### Introduction: "The Paper That Goes Thousands of Miles"

Henry Lawson has written a story entitled "Remailed," in which he tells of a "time-honoured" tradition "prevalent in Australasia" (159). The custom to which he refers involves the "remailing of newspapers and journals from one mate to another" (159): Bill, when he has read his paper, passes it on to Bob; Bob lends it to Jack; Jack gives it to one of his mates. By the time Bill sees his paper again, its smirched and wrinkled pages evidence the number of hands it has seen. Bill carefully folds those pages, for he "wants that paper to send to Jim" (160); but the parcel, despite his efforts, looks "more ugly than neat" (160). He finds a piece of string and ties it round, so it won't fly open. With black ink, he inscribes Jim's address in two or three places around the border. But Bill's markings are by no means restricted to the margins: often he'll take his pen to one of the articles. You see, there are points upon which Bill and Jim have always quarrelled, and that misshapen paper becomes a site for their contest. Words are struck or underscored. Bill wedges cramped sentences between straight, typeset lines. Jim reads it over and crams his rebuttal in an upper corner. The "paper that goes thousands of miles scrawled all over with smudgy addresses and tied with a piece of string" (162) alters with every remailing.

Perhaps this Australian custom has had an impact on the fiction of that country, for there is, I would argue, a literary parallel to that paper "that goes thousands of miles." Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" is just such a circulating text. Having travelled a great distance, it is probably more misshapen and marked up than even Bill's old crumpled rag. Lawson's story first appeared in the *Bulletin* in 1892. It has

been "remailed" at least five times since then. With each post-ing, the story becomes larger. First folds must contend with new ones; now, it little resembles its original form. The story, over time, has been prised loose from the narrow, nationalistic discourse in which it has long been encased. Mobile, "The Drover's Wife" is released to other meanings, so that it becomes a site for competing narratives which challenge the unipartite interpretation it has been given. Just as Bill's old rag resists the twine that would enclose it, Henry Lawson's classic text will no longer be bound by a reductive hermeneutics.

Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" centres on a woman of fortitude and stoic perseverance, who defends her small family against the dangers of Australia's outback. Her husband has been away for six months now, and she alone must care for their four children. One afternoon, the oldest, Tommy, eyes a snake slithering through the woodheap to the shade beneath the house. His mother tries to draw out the intruder with two saucers of milk, but an hour passes and the snake does not show itself. With night approaching and a thunderstorm imminent, the woman herds her children into the kitchen and onto the table, where they spend the night. As they sleep, she watches for the snake, club at her side. At any time the brute might slide through the cracks in the slab timber walls. Her night-long vigil is passed with memories of former struggles. Alone, she has confronted fire, flood and disease. Mad bullocks, cunning crows and dishonest "blackfellows" are just a few of the challenges she must face from week to week. When her husband is home, she returns to her domestic duties. She "gets him something good to eat and tidies up the children" (179). More often than not, however, the drover is absent, and his wife

must act in his place. The narrator (omniscient and implicitly male) suggests that there is something unnatural or unfortunate about the role this woman must play. Her acts of heroism are juxtaposed with the pleasure she takes in fashion plates and Sunday walks with the children. "Her surroundings," the narrator tells us, "are not favourable to the development of the 'womanly' or sentimental side of nature" (179). Presumably, her fortitude and endurance are to be measured against the norm (civilized, middle-class woman) invoked by these asides. This woman is to be praised for her ability to act on her absent husband's behalf to save family and farm. Lawson's narrative ends with the conclusion of the woman's vigil: at daybreak, the huge, black snake slides its head through a crack in the wall. Alligator, the family dog, catches it between his teeth as the woman batters it dead with her club. When Tommy sees his mother quietly crying with exhaustion, he throws his arms around her neck. "'Mother,'" he says, "'I won't never go drovin': blast me if I do!'" (181).

Lawson's story has attained a prominent place not only in the literary tradition of Australia, but also in the popular culture of that country. In the course of a century, from the year of its first publication until now, "The Drover's Wife" has enjoyed a wide readership. Every Australian schoolchild encounters it at some point in his or her education. Over the years it has been, in the words of Brian Matthews, "relentlessly anthologized" (15). Many stories mythicize life in the Australian outback, but few have played a more significant role in the construction of a national identity. The drover's wife has become a cultural icon, property of "The Australian Imagination." A symbol of courage and determination, she is fancied an Australian Achilles (Moore 25), a national saint.

Livio Dobrez, in his assessment of the story, resists the temptation to "discuss the drover's wife as if she were a reality outside the bounds of Lawson's story" (376), but in a sense, it is impossible to do otherwise: that figure is perpetually invited to trespass those borders. Often, the drover's wife is extracted from the confines of her story and made to stand as a symbol of the Australian national character (as in Moore, above). Sometimes, she is lent historical reality as the "self-sacrificing lonely ... bushwoman, who in those days helped to lay the foundation of our prosperity" (Roderick "Fifteen" xi). In essence, the drover's wife has become as "real" a character as Lawson himself. Notice how A.A. Phillips speaks of her in the following passage: "Do you think the Drover's Wife didn't understand 'the insane horror of the Australian bush' and what it could do to you if you let it--understand it in every fibre of her being?" ("Reassessed" 23). Phillips is arguing that it does not take the "special awareness" ("Reassessed" 23) of an artist to appreciate the metaphysical terror of the bush. The drover's wife, he says, understood that horror as well as Henry Lawson himself. The ontological confusion in this passage is profound. Phillips essentially awards Lawson and the drover's wife equal palpability, citing the character as an example of the Common Man with whom her creator is here aligned. *Pace* Livio Dobrez, then, it is utterly impossible *not* to speak of the drover's wife as if she were "a reality outside the bounds of Lawson's story," for she is perpetually compelled to violate ontological and historical boundaries.

Perhaps this makes the drover's wife a prime target for parody and reinscription, for she has trespassed fictional borders as well: since the publication of Lawson's story, the drover's wife has become the subject of four stories and a

painting.<sup>1</sup> Russell Drysdale was the first to respond to this national figure. In 1945, he produced a painting entitled *The Drover's Wife*. His subject, a huge and fleshy woman, dominates the foreground of the painting, just as the drover's wife has dominated the Australian tradition; everything is dwarfed by her presence. The drover is not absent in Drysdale's representation, but neither is he prominent: he stands in the distance, a stooping silhouette. Notably, there are no children, no snake and no hut. Drysdale is not faithful to the narrative elements of Lawson's story. He has, in fact, released the drover's wife from the narrow confines of her house in the bush. The suitcase in her hand attests to the mobility she has been accorded by this artist. The drover's wife is on a journey--between destinations.

Drysdale's painting invites a number of readings. Traditionally it has been constructed as an extension of bush mythology, as a visual correlate to Lawson's stories. It is possible, however, to view *The Drover's Wife* as a challenge to that tradition. The woman of this painting, for instance, is not placed within a domestic sphere. Perhaps Drysdale is contesting the fetishization of motherhood in Australian cultural discourse. Lawson's protagonist is trapped within a hut, while the subject of Drysdale's painting is in transit, roaming the outback. This kind of licence is usually associated with the male, not the female, in bush realism. Still, the woman's journey is somehow circumscribed by the man who stands in the distance: he is aligned with the horses and wagon which permit the wife her mobility. To some

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1 A fifth story, Olga Master's "A Henry Lawson Story," similarly gestures toward Lawson's place of privilege in Australian literary discourse. It is not, however, a *Drover's Wife* story *per se* and will not be included in the sequence (although it will be discussed briefly in this introduction).



degree, then, Drysdale's work might buttress Lawson's: in each, the identity and actions of the woman are defined in relation to a man. Does Drysdale's painting challenge or affirm the bush tradition? It might do either--or both.

In Murray Bail's "The Drover's Wife," this national property becomes privatized. The narrator of his story, a suburban dentist named Gordon, claims the drover's wife for his own: "There has perhaps been a mistake--but of no great importance--made in the denomination of this picture. The woman depicted is not 'The Drover's Wife'. She is my wife" (47). Gordon recognizes in Drysdale's painting, Hazel, the wife who left him thirty years ago. One day, he says, she simply "vamoosed," leaving two children behind (48). The dentist takes a magnifying glass to the painting, hoping his investigation will yield a clue to her whereabouts. Bemused, he searches for some indication of her reasons for leaving him. By the end of the story, the reader has come to understand Hazel's desertion, even if Gordon has not.

While presumably it is Drysdale's painting that generates this story, Lawson's narrative sounds out like a bass note beneath Bail's. Bail takes the conditions of Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" and reverses them: here, it is the wife who roams the bush while the husband is at home with the kids. Whereas Lawson endows his protagonist with the virtues of endurance and stoicism, Bail constructs a woman who rejects her role as mother. She opts for freedom over duty. Her husband also differs significantly from the bush hero who has come to be associated with Lawson's work. He is a suburban, white-collar worker who hates the outback. It is Hazel, not Gordon, who performs the physical work around the house. In fact, she seems to take great pleasure in manual labour. Gordon is profoundly irritated by this. The "sight of sweat

patches under her arms" annoys him (50). Perhaps he feels redundant or in some way unnecessary, for Hazel is utterly self-sufficient. Once, Gordon tells us, she even killed a snake:

And then of course she killed that snake down at the beach shack we took one Christmas. I happened to lift the lid out of the incinerator--a black brute, its head bashed in. 'It was under the house,' she explained.  
(50)

The climax of Lawson's story is mentioned only incidently here. Positioned in such a way, it is robbed of its weight and importance. What is central to Lawson's narrative becomes peripheral to Bail's. In several ways, then, this parody reverses or reassesses the conditions of Lawson's "The Drover's Wife." It draws attention to the ways in which the bush tradition is restrictive and exclusory. While Hazel is "in her element" in the bush, Gordon feels "left out" (51)--and indeed he is: there's no room for a city-loving dentist in Drysdale's picture. "Hazel and the rotten landscape ... dominate everything" (52).

With her next post-ing, the drover's wife becomes a sheep. Frank Moorhouse's story<sup>2</sup> fuses popular humour with high culture. His narrator, an Italian student of Australian culture named Franco Casamaggiore, argues that "The Drover's

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2 Moorhouse's story first appeared in the *Bulletin* in 1980. In 1985, he republished the work in his *Room Service: Comic Writings of Frank Moorhouse*, adding to it several letters, a newspaper article, a reproduction of a *Bulletin* cover, and a cartoon from the *National Times*. The later edition is also prefaced by a "memo" from Francois Blase, the character who narrates each of the stories in *Room Service*. Aside from these changes, the two stories are identical (except that, in the title of the first, Moorhouse draws attention to his ironical use of the word "wife" by placing that word in inverted commas). Except where noted, I will be referring to the 1985 version of this story.

Wife," in all its forms, is "an elaborate example of a national culture joke, an 'insider joke' for those who live in that country" (100). Drawing on his knowledge of Australian folklore, this scholar explains that conditions of isolation in the outback necessitated or promoted "a close and special relationship" between the drover and his charges, "who became an object for emotional and physical drives" (101). The wife represented by Lawson, Drysdale and Bail, then, is actually a coded substitute for the drover's *de facto* sexual partner, the sheep. Franco has never in fact been to Australia. Like many scholars, his research is limited by funding constraints, so he is compelled to base his theories on books that he has read. He also gathers valuable information from Australian travellers ("almost always men" [101]) who visit the bar in Milan where he works. Nevertheless, his study, by his own account, is groundbreaking. He introduces to the discourses of academia a subject that has hitherto remained unacknowledged "for reasons of national shame" (101). As the representative of one of the "older cultures" (107), Franco counsels Australians to "[s]ee in these happenings the beginnings of your own mythology" (107). Roman mythology, he says, acknowledges "such happenings of interspecies reciprocity (cf. Jason and Search for Golden Fleece)" (107). When in Australia, do as the Romans: be not ashamed.

Moorhouse has a good deal of fun re-mythologizing the drover's wife. He introduces sex to this puritan mythology, and, in so doing, draws attention to the ways in which cultural discourses that legitimize and authorize also censor and discriminate. "[T]aboo material--or material of national shame" must travel "underground routes" because it is repressed in high art (106). Moorhouse, then, like Bail, focuses

on what the bush tradition leaves out. This author also looks at ways in which art is critically processed. His story takes the form of a paper that is presented at a "Conference on Commonwealth Writing in Milan" (99). Thus, he implicates critics and academics in the perpetuation of bush mythology. Just as Casamaggiore re-encodes his primary texts, other critics re-encode theirs, creating meanings and determining readings. Moorhouse reminds us that Lawson's work is not read in isolation, but is embedded within a culture and a tradition. To a large extent, the historical, social and critical positioning of this story determines how it will be read.

In Barbara Jefferis's "The Drover's Wife," this female object of male discourse is at last given a narrative voice. She is permitted to say "who I am" (156). She claims that the stories that have been told are incomplete. Some men "say just enough to give the wrong idea and then never a word to put it right" (159). Bail's dentist, for instance, doesn't mention that Kay and Kev (sic) are the product of another marriage. "I'd left a husband, all right, and *his* children, which is a different thing. Isn't anything a woman can do blacker than leaving her own kids, and that's what he was trying to make you believe" (159). If the dentist's story is misleading, however, Lawson's narrative is "true enough" (156), although he made the incident with the snake into a "great and terrible night" (156) and it wasn't. What, for this narrator, constitutes a genuinely "great and terrible night" is referred to only incidentally by Lawson, who writes: "One of the children died while she was here alone. She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child" (177). Shifting the emphasis of Lawson's story, Jefferis's narrator expands upon this briefly related event, telling her reader that she lost not only her baby on that terrible day, but also the unborn

child she was carrying at the time. That she has coped with such torment, she says, is truer and greater testimony to her strength than any story about a snake.

By this drover's wife's account, the other men who have represented her are relatively harmless. Russell Drysdale does no more than offend her vanity. And Casamaggiore is simply a pretentious fool who has fallen victim to the tall tales of a few crude Australians. All the same, his gullibility is disturbing when it allows him to write women out of history: he "got his facts wrong and said there weren't any women in the country for the first 100 years. I had to laugh. I don't know why; it isn't funny when you think about it" (156). Each of these storytellers--Lawson,<sup>3</sup> Casamaggiore, Bail's dentist--is ultimately dismissed by the drover's wife as chauvinistic or biased (for the most part, Drysdale escapes her censure). The narrator concludes by rejecting the denomination these men have given her. "I'm not the drover's wife," she ex/claims (160), extracting herself, finally, from a male-constructed identity.

With this post-ing, the reader is alerted to the othering of women within the bush tradition. Although the drover's wife has been presented as the subject of these stories, she has in fact been constructed as object of/for the male gaze. She reverses this by "answering" (156) the tradition that has fetishized her. She takes on each of her creators, so that Lawson, Drysdale, Bail and Moorhouse become the objects of *her* fiction. Women, she says, "have a different history. Someone ought to write it

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<sup>3</sup> As Jefferis's protagonist refers to "Mr. Lawson," and not to his narrator, as the teller of this story, I have done the same.

down. We're not sheep or shadows, or silly saints the way Mr. Lawson would have. There's more to us. More to me than any of them have written, if it comes to that" (160). Jefferis presents the "othered" side of the story, reclaiming female subjecthood in her representation of the drover's wife.

The final story in this sequence (to date), Anne Gambling's "The Drover's De Facto," gives us a glimpse of life *with* the drover. Her protagonist meets a "real bushie" (150) at "one of those singles bars where you can choose your meat" (149). The "romance of the bush" overtaking her (150), she agrees to live with him, purposing to work on her Masters thesis while her lover is off droving. But the enchantment and excitement of the first night soon turn to horror and abasement. When the drover is home, she cooks and cleans for him, and submits herself to his rather brutal advances. She remains passive for some time, numbly enduring mental and sexual mistreatment. At last, she challenges the tyrannical power of the drover, albeit in an indirect manner: one night while he is away on a run, she goes drinking and dancing with some "oilies" from town. The drover, hearing of this from some of his mates, comes home "spitting fire" (157). He strikes the woman and calls her a slut. "Get out, pack yer bags an' get out," he screams (157). The woman stays, puts a salve on her swollen face, and serves the man dinner. The next morning, the drover leaves for work, expecting to find his lover once again docile upon his return. But the woman packs her bags as soon as he is gone and ships them off on a Greyhound bus. Because she doesn't have the money to accompany them, she walks to the highway and tries to hitch a ride. Ten miles out of town, the drover finds her and asks her to come back, with an "I didn't mean it" and an "I need you" (159).



When she refuses to return with him, he does not beg, but rather wishes her luck and drives on. The story closes with the woman continuing down the road.

Gambling's title differs from that of the others, and in some ways her story marks a departure from the rest. This author explores the bush mythology with none of the humour and play of her precursors. "The Drover's De Facto" begins by recreating the dynamics of Lawson's story: the wife lives in isolation in the bush while her husband is away. Because this drover occasionally comes home, however, we are allowed to see the underside of the bush hero. Gambling's title implies that this is the "real" story, the drover's *de facto*. If the simple and desultory life of the bushman has been romanticized by balladists, storytellers and nationalists, her story will allegedly present the unidealized, the unauthor/ized version. The narrative ends with the woman deciding to "change the topic of her thesis" (159). Presumably Gambling, too, is attempting to change the topic, to recast the conditions and values of this male-inscribed tradition. Her protagonist leaves the bush, and heads for the city; she abandons the drover, opting instead for independence and self-possession.

These five works--Drysdale's painting, and the stories of Bail, Moorhouse, Jefferis and Gambling--comprise a sequence which looks back to Lawson's text even as it looks forward to new forms and new meanings. The literary past, contracted into the rubric, "Henry Lawson," seems to present itself to these artists as some sort of bogey that must be confronted before the literary present or future can be written. The compulsion to exorcise the ghost of Henry Lawson, however, does not end with this sequence. Olga Master's "A Henry Lawson Story," published posthumously in 1988, further gestures toward the centrality that Lawson has been historically granted.

Unlike the parodies of Bail and the others, "A Henry Lawson Story" does not explicitly rewrite "The Drover's Wife" (although it does make reference to that text). Nevertheless, Master's story is worth glancing at, however briefly, because, like the Drover's Wife parodies, it strikes against the parameters of the bush tradition.

"A Henry Lawson Story" centres on the male-constructed ideals of Mother and Wife, and implicates Lawson in their perpetuation. Mrs. Lil Warwick is a woman as isolated as the drover's wife herself, though she lives, not in the bush, but in town. Lil avoids any form of social contact, finding even a trip to the store a terrifying prospect. Instead, she focuses her attention upon her home: sewing, gardening, dusting her crockery, washing up. This "obsession with staying at home" began, the narrator tells us, when Lil became pregnant out of wedlock (100). Presumably, then, her debilitating diffidence is borne of a sense of mortification. Lil fears social censure, although the narrator clearly indicates that, between the wars, many women shared her predicament (100). If Lil's notions of chastity and virtue have no true social basis, from what do they arise? The answer comes to us indirectly, through the ruminations of Councillor Fisher. Fisher sometimes sees Mrs. Warwick, walking with her children, as he drives along the back road that leads to his farm. One day, catching her lovely smile in the rear-view mirror of his car (a clear reference to the male "gaze" constructing its version of femininity), and knowing her penchant for solitude and reserve, Fisher is reminded of "The Drover's Wife," his "favourite story" (104).

That woman, little Mrs Warwick, who never went anywhere with her husband and had most of her shopping done for her by her mother ...

made him think of the drover's wife, whom he would have liked as a mother. He used to see himself killing the snake for her, then flinging himself on her bosom and being nursed and rocked. (104-105)

Masters acridly marks the extent to which Lawson's sentimental representations have circumscribed women socially and culturally, despite obvious incongruities between fictional women and their secular counterparts. Notably, Councillor Fisher's own mother was a very "different kind of woman" and bore no resemblance to Lawson's idealized matriarch (105). The word "Story" in Master's title, then, might signify not only an entrenched narrative form, but also an untruth--a Henry Lawson "Story," or lie, about women.

Masters's work, though not a Drover's Wife parody *per se*, does constitute another instance of exorcism: like others before her, she too must confront the all too vital Lawson ghost. But if she conjures the literary phantom, Bail and the others intrepidly enter the haunted house. They deliberately situate their stories within Lawson's, simultaneously borrowing and challenging its authority and power. I have referred to this configuration of stories as a post-ing of sorts. I use the word in two interrelated ways. First, post-ing describes the recirculation of the text, based on the model which I have appropriated from Lawson. Just as Bill's old newspaper, passed from one mate to another, alters with every remailing, so *The Drover's Wife*, similarly "passed" from one author to the next, has been refigured and reinvented.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I will refer to *The Drover's Wife* in three ways, each of which will be reflected in my punctuation: as a particular story ("The Drover's Wife"); as a character (the drover's wife); and as the sum total of all of these stories (*The Drover's Wife*).

Each parody sets in motion a narrative that has traditionally been fixed by/within a limited nationalist discourse. Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" is post-ed in a second sense as well, in that Bail and the others offer a postmodern critique of both the bush tradition and its exemplary story. Later, we will examine the four contemporary Drover's Wife stories in terms of Linda Hutcheon's theory of postmodern parody. Hutcheon contends that the postmodern text celebrates its contradictory nature, simultaneously affirming and subverting the form(s) that it targets. The Drover's Wife stories, I will argue, do the same. They challenge and critique the bush tradition, even as they profess its centrality.

By propelling the text forward toward new readings, the critic can offer another form of post-ing (or s/he can stop the text with a rigid and reductive hermeneutics). Later in this thesis, we will examine the ways in which Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" has been (re)configured critically. For the present, however, I would like discuss only those critics who treat the sequence as a whole.

Although most of the Drover's Wife parodies were written ten to fifteen years ago, they are just now beginning to receive critical attention. Of the work that has appeared, very little can be called thorough or detailed. For instance, nowhere did I find an article that addressed all of the authors introduced above. We can perhaps attribute this to the entrenched patriarchy of Australian literary discourse, for it is almost always the women writers, Gambling and Jefferis, who are excluded from critical discussion. In *The New Diversity*, for example, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman fail to consider Barbara Jefferis's story when they examine the others in the sequence. They contend that a sub-tradition (consisting of Bail, Moorhouse and Gambling)

developed in response to the sexism that has come to inhere in the short story genre in Australia. (How odd, then, that they should disregard Jefferis's story, a work which addresses this concern directly.) Gelder and Salzman consider the Drover's Wife parodies within the context of the Australian short story in general, with a particular view to the shape this genre acquired in the seventies and eighties. The Lawson Tradition maintained ascendancy for so long, they contend, because established journals refused to print anything that deviated from the bush formulae. Thus, although many writers were pursuing new and innovative avenues of fiction, they could find no outlet for their work. As a result, authors of short fiction took to publishing in "girlie magazines" (Wilding qtd. in Gelder and Salzman 11), where radical or newfashioned fiction was welcomed. The Drover's Wife parodies, these critics argue, were written in response to the sexism in which the early practitioners of the so-called "new writing" were necessarily implicated.<sup>5</sup>

None of the parodies is analyzed in any depth, as Gelder and Salzman purpose to provide a survey of the Australian Short Story, not a study of the Drover's Wife sequence. Bail's story is briefly introduced as a parody of the narrator's "chauvinistic sense of possession" (16). They argue that "another reading might note that ... [Bail's story] replaces the narrator's suburban sexism with a more confident, rural-based Australian masculinity personified through the 'indistinct' but controlled and deci-

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5 The "new writing" consists of the experimental work of such writers as Frank Moorhouse, Michael Wilding, Peter Carey and Murray Bail. From what I understand of the term's wide and varied usage, it designates anything from fabulist writing to fiction which flaunts and celebrates sexuality--anything, it would appear, that does not conform to bush realism.

sive drover" (16). Their observation is intriguing, and valid to a point: the drover certainly elicits from us more sympathy than does the dentist. But notably the bushman of this narrative is rendered almost dreamlike. "He is indistinct," the dentist says (52). If the drover of Drysdale's painting is "nothing but brush strokes" (49), Bail's drover is similarly insubstantial, a chimerical expression of the Australian Dream. This Drover's Wife story, then, does not unquestioningly reinforce the bush tradition. In fact, as I will later argue, Bail is more interested in deconstructing the rural/urban opposition than he is in perpetuating it.

Gelder and Salzman have less to say about the stories of Moorhouse and Gambling. Aside from offering a synopsis of the former, these critics merely intimate that Moorhouse's "The Drover's Wife" might further perpetuate the sexism that it supposedly attacks: "Just how amusing Moorhouse's version of 'The Drover's Wife' is is another question, but at least it responds to the representation of the wife as victim (of male neglect and abuse)--although this is all framed by the recognition that the subject matter is a 'joke'" (17). Gambling's story, according to these critics, does not parody the story "from within," but instead "turn[s] its back on the maleness of 'The Drover's Wife' tradition altogether" (17). Gelder and Salzman's study is more useful for its documentation of publishing strictures than it is for its analysis of Bail, Moorhouse and Gambling. However, it does provide an historical and material context for our examination of the Drover's Wife sequence.

Recently, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra published a postcolonial analysis of the Australian Literary Tradition, entitled *Dark Side of the Dream*. In it, they include a study of the Drover's Wife stories, excluding those of Gambling and Moorhouse.



Their purpose is to demonstrate the ways in which "the Australian legend was introduced accompanied by its critique" (172).<sup>6</sup> Hodge and Mishra contend that Lawson's classic, although traditionally read as a conveyance of the national mythology, in fact subverts the legend. First, they say, the story assigns the "core virtues" of the legend--loyalty, ingenuity and perseverance--to a woman (169). I would argue, however, that this is entirely consistent with the customary representation of women in bush mythology. Surely the stoic wife, maintaining the safety and sanctity of the domestic sphere, is a classic Australian image. Mishra and Hodge then argue that "the text is full of males, real and transformed, who together add up to something like the repertoire of the legend, and almost all are vicious or contemptible" (169). (Included in the "vicious" category are Alligator, the dog that saves the day, and Tommy, the son who seeks to comfort his mother at the story's close). By this logic, the woman is not simply a provisional substitution for a man, because "no man has these virtues in the world of the story" (169). Mishra and Hodge are selective in their examples of male characters, however. They fail to consider, for instance, the brother-in-law who brings provisions to the woman and her family every month (177); neither do they mention the four men who, arriving "in the nick of time" (178), assist the drover's wife when a bush fire threatens to "burn her out" (178). On the

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6 For this reason, they include a study of Barbara Baynton's "The Chosen Vessel" (1896) which, they say, offers what is essentially a feminist critique of the Legend. While Baynton's story has in common with Lawson's a number of thematic elements, it does not refer explicitly to that text; nor does it give any indication that it is intended to be read through "The Drover's Wife" (as the other stories do). I'm not sure, then, how useful it is to read it together with the Drover's Wife parodies, although it serves Hodge and Mishra's purpose well inasmuch as it clearly demonstrates a critique of the Bush Legend.

basis of this, I cannot concede that Lawson's story is a "swingeing critique of the masculine form of the legend" (169), as these critics assert.

Bail's story, according to Mishra and Hodge, is a response to Drysdale's construction of woman as land.

Drysdale's painting represents a huge woman arising from the earth, earth coloured, a spirit of the land: not doing, like Lawson's woman, but simply and massively being.... [Drysdale] has taken the image of the desert as a symbol of woman and used it as an affirmation of woman and country alike. (171)

While Bail attacks "the mythic claims of the painting" by situating the character in a much less idealized setting, his story, in the opinion of these critics, does not attack the Legend, but targets instead "the suburban Australian lifestyle" (171) and specifically, the suburban Australian male. While I concede that this author certainly makes light of his chauvinistic narrator, I find it difficult to accept that he is attacking only the sexist middle-class male. His story operates on a number of levels, and a deconstruction of bush mythology certainly comprises one of them. Surely his final reference to the drover's wife and the landscape "dominating" everything is an indictment of the ways in which the Legend has governed nationalist and literary discourses. As I will later argue, Bail makes salient the system of discriminatory oppositions which operates within the Bush Tradition and seeks to inscribe alternative hermeneutic practices. His attack is much larger in scope than these critics allow.

Hodge and Mishra refer to Jefferis's story as a "brief piece" (171), although it is the longest story in the sequence. In fact, it is their analysis which is "brief," for

they merely glance at Jefferis's work. They say that, in one sense, Jefferis is "simply recovering a text which was latent in Lawson's original, which constructed the mother as powerful and reassuring" (172). Given that Lawson's story ends with the child comforting the crying mother, I would argue that the image of a "powerful and reassuring" mother is not in fact "latent" in "The Drover's Wife." However, it is certainly true that Jefferis inscribes woman as powerful and resilient.

I have taken issue with most of what Mishra and Hodge have to say about the Drover's Wife sequence, and, indeed, I think the strength of their study lies elsewhere. While some of their readings might be limited, however, their emphasis on hermeneutical closure is sound. They write that, "[a]t the moment of production," such classics as "The Drover's Wife"

were read as popular texts which also possessed an inexhaustible if subterranean meaning potential, though they were also inscribed in much more limited polemical discourses. But within decades they had become 'classics', texts suitable for study in classrooms. And so a process of closure began, shutting off whole avenues of interpretation that had become inconvenient for their pedagogic function. (167)

Bail and the others, by adopting a metafictional mode for their stories, foreground reading, "the instrument by which the closure of the classic texts was achieved" (172). I might have found Hodge and Mishra's analysis more satisfying had they developed this point further. However, the remainder of *Dark Side of the Dream* provides a very insightful and original look at the Australian Legend, one which will prove invaluable to our study of the Bush Tradition.

Two critics--both European--have devoted an entire article to the sequence. Werner Arens, in his "The Ironical Fate of 'The Drover's Wife': Four Versions from Henry Lawson (1892) to Barbara Jefferis (1980)," proposes the use of the stories as an "introduction to the development and the possibilities of the Australian short story in general" (119). Unfortunately, Arens is unable to accomplish such a feat in the twenty-three pages that he has allowed himself. His discussion of both the sequence and the short story genre in Australia is considerably truncated. He briefly points to the influence of the *Bulletin*, which "set out to revitalize creative writing" by running short story competitions in the 1920s, "thus strengthening the old Lawson tradition of conciseness and realism, of simplicity, directness and dramatic force" (123). This comprises Arens's summary of the Australian short story prior to World War II. A second paragraph is devoted to the genre after that period when, he says (drawing from Beatrice Davis), the focus shifted from stories of the land to fiction concerned with personal relationships. "The results were subtle and more complex tales" (124). Arens briefly offers an historical context for both Bail and Moorhouse (he does not do the same for Jefferis). Murray Bail is situated among the experimental writers of the sixties and seventies. His story, Arens says, is innovative and iconoclastic, particularly when considered within the context of other short fiction of that time:

The old legend of the bush had already been abandoned long before this by novelists such as Thea Astley, Thomas Kenneally, Randolph Stow and Patrick White, that is, from the mid-fifties onwards. But the short story followed suit only twenty years later and in that respect

Murray Bail must be called an iconoclast, a Destroyer of Images.  
(125).

Arens puts Frank Moorhouse in a similar category, noting the novelty and unconventionality of his work. Moorhouse (together with Michael Wilding) was largely responsible for introducing sexuality and "the 'alternative life style' of the inner-city suburb" (126) to Australian short fiction, and has had a "dominating influence" (126) on the genre for the past twenty years.

If Arens's discussion of "the Australian short story in general" is highly truncated, his examination of the Drover's Wife stories is equally sketchy and enigmatic. Some insights that might prove valuable are simply not developed. He refers to Bail's story, for instance, as a piece of "surrealistic experimentation" (24) but, aside from telling us that Bail is "playing a game with perception, aiming 'to transcend the accepted limitation of reality'" (24), he offers no further explication. Moorhouse's story, he says, is a response to the heavy censorship of previous decades and is "obviously designed to subject the allegedly puritan mentality of the fifth continent to a shock therapy" (128-29). Jefferis takes aim at the distortion with which the bushwoman has been represented in literature. She seeks to "correct and demythologize a false cultural picture of women as the other half of mankind" (131). Arens's article is bewilderingly inconclusive. He ends by saying that these stories indicate the "vigour and vitality of the contemporary short story scene down under" (132), but he never says how or why. I wonder if Werner Arens has not undertaken a book-sized project in an article-sized format.

John Thieme's witty and provocative "Drovers' Wives" is much more successful, although it too is very broad in its scope. Thieme examines the way the Drover's Wife stories (Gambling's excluded) represent two subjects at the fore of Australian national identity: landscape and gender. Specifically, he looks at "various kinds of absences and presences that can be (un-)seen in these texts" (68). Like Mishra and Hodge, Thieme argues that Lawson himself subverts the bush legend to some extent (his premise, however, is more convincingly substantiated than theirs). According to Thieme,

even in Lawson's classic *Bulletin* piece which founded the sub-genre, the drover's wife story proves to be an ambivalent narrative site, offering an interrogative approach to popular versions of the Australian myth which were crystallising in the 1890s. (69)

Both woman and landscape in this story are defined negatively, Thieme says. The drover's wife, though she is allowed a physical presence, is denied a linguistic one. Characterized as she is according to her "genitive dependence on the drover" (69), the woman falls victim to "an absence of signification" (70). Furthermore, narrative details such as the fashion plates in the *Young Ladies' Journal*, serve to accentuate her alienation from "dominant late nineteenth-century notions of womanhood" (70). Thieme suggests that with such gestures, Lawson challenges certain prevailing representations of gender in bush mythology. I would maintain, however, that Lawson is contesting European or American middle-class notions of womanhood, and not necessarily those ideals inherent within bush mythology. Notably, the *Young Ladies' Journal* is an American, not an Australian, publication. Lawson, further-



more, has chosen words, such as "princess" (177), which clearly invoke a *European* model of femininity--one which is utterly alien to the Australian outback.

In Thieme's estimation, the land, like the woman, is also cast as Other. It is defined against a civilized norm (again, is Lawson not invoking British standards, and defining the bush against those norms?). Words such as house and civilization are placed within single quotation marks,<sup>7</sup> suggesting that these signifiers "have been wrested from their normal context" (70). For Thieme, "the narrative voice demonstrates a clear preference for 'civilization' in trying to locate the bush 'house' in relation to it" (70). Certainly, the narrator presents the bush in anything but glowing terms. As Thieme notes, the second paragraph of the story places an "emphasis on negation: the paragraph opens with several negative formulations--'no horizon', 'no ranges', 'no undergrowth', [sic] '*nothing* to relieve the eye' (my italics)" (70). He argues that Lawson's averse portrayal of the bush challenges popular versions of the outback, although he does not indicate how or where the bush is presented positively in nineteenth-century literature.

Thieme notes that in Bail's story, the woman, while physically absent, is "more of a presence in linguistic terms" (71) because she is given a name. The manifest chauvinism of Bail's dentist serves to emphasize the more subtly partisan voice of Lawson's narrator: "in both cases the drover's wife figure is constructed, labelled, and judged by a male authorial voice tha[t] can only define her from outside as other"

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<sup>7</sup> These appear in the original version only. They were edited when the story was republished in 1901 (Thieme 75).

(71). Thieme points to further similarities between the two stories in the way that each represents rural Australia. In Bail's story, as in Lawson's, the bush is a decidedly "rotten landscape" (Bail "Drover's" 52).

When Thieme turns to Frank Moorhouse's story, he seems to abandon his intended thesis, for he mentions neither landscape nor gender, absence nor presence. In fact, he tenders no critical insights whatsoever, although he does offer a very humourous summary of the story. Jefferis's work also receives rather scant analysis. With her narrative, Thieme says, the drover's wife "emerges from being constructed by the gaze of patriarchy to argue for a vision that has not blinded itself to half of the human experience" (74). Thieme cannot comment on landscape as absence with regard to Jefferis's work. However, the story does afford him a fine conclusion to his discussion of gender: with Jefferis's "The Drover's Wife," absence becomes presence as woman emerges as subject, countering previous representations of the drover's wife as alien Other.

Two other articles are worth mentioning here, although neither deals with the sequence as a whole. The first, Brian Edwards's "Alberta and the Bush: The Deconstruction of National Identity in Postmodern Canadian and Australian Fiction" refers briefly to Bail, Drysdale and Lawson. Edwards offers Foucault's metaphor of the archaeological dig as a model for a postmodern approach to national identity. Postmodern fiction, he says, tracks a course "through a labyrinth of possibilities" and "layered depths," celebrating indeterminacy and "the impossibility of ending" (72). When postmodernism meets nationalism, collective myths are not dismissed, but are

engaged and rendered precarious, shifting and negotiable. Bail's story follows such a course, tracing the Australian myth through layers of texts:

Through Bail's story we read Drysdale's painting..., and its predecessor text Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife,' icon of Australiana with its version of nineteenth-century outback life and considerable responsibility in fixing identikits of the laconic Aussie wanderer, whose absence can't be helped, and the battling woman who waits. A proliferation of texts, of reading frames. (78)

Bail's text, by bringing into conjunction Lawson's story and Drysdale's painting, creates an "inter-text" (78), a stratified narrative site. It is through these layers of texts, and not through any linear progression, that the myth must be accessed and interrogated. Edwards's reference to *The Drover's Wife* is very brief, but his article is thoughtful and provocative and merits our attention.

Robert Kroetsch's essay proceeds from Edwards's, creating a critical site that parallels the layered narrative site of *The Drover's Wife*. Kroetsch writes that Edwards's article first introduced him to the *Drover's Wife* sequence, and he points to that work as a frame for his own. In "Reciting the Emptiness," Kroetsch proposes to compare two works of art that have acquired "the status of icons" (34), Drysdale's *The Drover's Wife* and Tom Thomson's *The Jack Pine*. Peculiar to both Canada and Australia, Kroetsch contends, is the problem of great distances. This anxiety is reflected in the work of Drysdale and Thomson who, physically decentring their subjects, create a "gap" (37). In Drysdale's painting, human figures exist only at the peripheries, leaving the middle space "empty" (36). Tom Thomson similarly off-

centres his magnificent pine. Thus, according to Kroetsch, "[t]he middle space becomes, if you will, unquotable. Quotation of course implies gaps, the quotation cannot be a quotation of the whole, it must become fragment. But here the gap is in the middle" (36). Bail's work performs within this gap. His "The Drover's Wife" constitutes a misquoting of the "original," a radical insistence "that the longed-for coherence of the story is not available. The story is precisely the story of its own disruption, that dwelling with the gap in the middle ground" (40). Drysdale and Bail, according to Kroetsch, locate the interstices and silences that allow the icon to "recite the emptiness," to speak the gap.

Each of these critics provides a good introduction to the Drover's Wife sequence, but in the space of an article or survey, they can do little more. In my opinion, a thorough analysis of these stories necessitates not only an understanding of the cultural and historical positioning of Lawson's "The Drover's Wife," but also a critical appreciation of the bush tradition, for the stories of Jefferis, Moorhouse, Gambling and Bail rely on a complex of codes. They "write back" to Lawson's famous story, but their target is essentially the bush tradition and the way that it has come to define both a genre and a nation. Ideally, any detailed analysis of the Drover's Wife sequence would further include a brief theoretical study of this construct we call a national literary tradition, and it is to this that we will now turn our attention. The model that I am about to put forth will serve as a conceptual basis for this thesis, for, as I will later argue, *formally* the Drover's Wife parodies imitate the structural composition of a literary tradition. They offer a backward-glancing prose to parallel a backward-formulated construct.

A literary tradition is comprised of texts which are thought to have in common certain thematic or formal qualities. These characteristic features, as the word "tradition" implies, are purportedly handed down by, or in some sense inherited from, a source-author. In Australia, Henry Lawson has been named the "Father" of a national literary tradition. But while this rhetoric bespeaks a genealogy of sorts (as if one text is borne of another, as if one author is related to the next by some sort of familial tie), a tradition does not evolve naturally from an originating source. Henry Lawson did not in fact father a national literature. It is because we think of the literary tradition as a type of bequeathal that we envision this progressive or forward-looking movement (from beginning to end). I would contend, however (without denying the possibility of influence), that the thematic or stylistic similarities that comprise a tradition do not simply evolve, but rather are critically constructed *retrospectively*. Scholars fix upon a source-author *ex pro facto* and then assimilate the work of subsequent authors to that of the so-named originator. The model for a literary tradition, I would argue, is less the pedigree than the plot.

Peter Brooks offers a psychoanalytical model of narrative in his *Reading for the Plot* that will serve to clarify my position. Appropriating a phrase from Sartre, Brooks maintains that we read "'from death to birth'" (95); "beginnings are chosen by and for ends. The very possibility of meaning plotted through sequence and through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending" (93). The end is always present in the beginning; it is what makes "It was a dark and stormy night" important and worthy of our attention. We know that seemingly inconsequential details early introduced are in fact laden with meaning, and that the ending will

reveal their significance. A story, then, entails a movement through contingency toward totalization and closure.

If plot is a series of metonymic episodes made cohesive by an ending, the model for plot, Brooks suggests, is the metaphor. Working from Tzvetan Todorov's concept of "the-same-but-different," Brooks argues that plot

is constituted in the tension of two formal categories, difference and resemblance. Transformation--a change in a predicate term common to beginning and end--represents a synthesis of difference and resemblance. (91)

Narrative forges linkages, assimilating disparate units to aggregate cohesiveness. Through the structuring force of closure, mere succession is read as *repetition*, same-but-different manifestations of the whole:

An event gains meaning by its repetition, which is both the recall of an earlier moment and a variation of it: the concept of repetition hovers ambiguously between the idea of reproduction and that of change, forward and backward movement.... Repetition creates a *return* in the text, a doubling back. (99-100)

We find meaning in a plot because we identify sameness within difference (101). Narrative is structured through closure, allowing us to read contingent episodes as a coherent series of recalls and repetitions.

Similarly, a literary tradition is "read" or constructed backwards or historically. Origins--meaningful and demarcated beginnings--are composed by endings; they are "recognized" or constructed in hindsight. A tradition is the perceived

repetition of its originating moment; it consists of same-but-different thematic or stylistic manifestations of the source text/author. Critics spot, in the "off-spring," characteristic traits of the "parent." In the case of Australia, writers from Federation to the present have been placed on a Lawson continuum.<sup>8</sup> They have been read reductively, through the closure that this process imposes.

If a literary tradition is created retrospectively, with its component fictions read as repetitions of an originating moment, the authors of the Drover's Wife sequence could have found nothing more appropriate than parody to contest the tradition to which they have been assimilated. Parody is quite literally a form of repetition, a same-but-different manifestation of an earlier work. Bail, Moorhouse, Jefferis and Gambling situate their stories within Lawson's classic text in order to foreground the ways in which bush realism has circumscribed the critical and readerly reception of their work, naming it an echo of Lawson's prose. Ironically, with this gesture, these authors manifest their continuity with Henry Lawson. To some extent, they reinscribe his position as originating father: his story is the prototype for theirs. Parody is complicitous, then, invoking, and to some extent reifying, the forms it would contest.

If parody is conservative in its identification with a prior Other (Hutcheon *Parody* 77), however, it is at the same time oppositional, marking a departure from

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8 H.P. Heseltine, for instance, argues for thematic continuity from Henry Lawson to Patrick White ("Heritage"), while Elizabeth Webby maintains the presence of a stylistic or formal continuity extending from Lawson's *While the Billy Boils* to Moorhouse's *The Everlasting Secret Family*. In each case, the work of contemporary authors is assimilated to Lawsonian themes or technique.

its target text. Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" provides the background--the sameness--against which the later authors might celebrate difference and nuance. By invoking this classic of bush realism, Bail and the others predicate fiction (and tradition) as "answerable" and ultimately transformable. Their stories foreground readerly and critical processes, calling attention to the closure that has been imposed upon Lawson's "The Drover's Wife," and propelling that text toward other readings. Like the newspaper of Lawson's "Remailed," the "original" is circulated--refigured, reclaimed, regenerated. In the process, *The Drover's Wife* is rendered a shifting and viable (poly-)narrative site.

In the next section of this study, I will briefly situate Lawson historically and attempt to account for his eminence within Australian nationalist and literary discourses. We will then consider the ways in which bush realism has been critically defined and institutionalized. Even fifteen years ago, when the *Drover's Wife* parodies began to emerge, the outback story was venerated as a model for The Standard Australian Short Story. By coming to understand the chief characteristics of this form and the ascendancy that it has had, we might better appreciate the stories that target it. Before moving to those parodies, however, we will first consider the contribution of Russell Drysdale, whose work is commonly construed as an extension of the Lawson Tradition. I will argue that his *The Drover's Wife* is more ambiguous than critics have allowed. It may well endorse the Australian Legend, but it is also possible to read the painting as a subversion of the bush tradition. I examine Drysdale apart from the rest of the sequence because his painting is not conspicuously parodic or overtly contestatory, whereas the fictions which follow it are. The four contem-



porary Drover's Wife stories will be studied in terms of a postmodern theory of parody which emphasizes bi-directionality, simultaneous subversion and reinscription. By backgrounding Lawson's seminal story, *Bail*, *Moorhouse*, *Jefferis* and *Gambling*, seek to inscribe their own distance from the bush tradition, and to challenge hermeneutic prescriptives which have historically circumscribed Australian literature. Ironically, however, with this gesture, they (re)affirm the centrality of Henry Lawson and signal their continuity with that tradition. Clearly these authors are not simply rejecting their literary "heritage." Rather, they engage that tradition in order to render it mutable, pliant, maneuverable. This tradition that has been so rigidly perpetuated and defined will comprise the next section of our study.

### The Bush Tradition

IN THE BEGINNING, according to Australian critical orthodoxy, was the Holy Trinity, identified by the well-worn phrase, "Lawson, Furphy and the *Bulletin* school." The authors who fall under this rubric--Joseph Furphy, Banjo Paterson, Steele Rudd, Henry Lawson and a host of lesser deities--were writing in the 1890's, a decade that is often referred to as the Golden Age of Australian culture. During this time, scholars tell us, an indigenous literature began to evolve, one that issued from distinctly Australian forms of socialism and egalitarianism. Writing of gum-trees and bushmen, and not of heather-covered moors, Lawson and the others rendered articulate a hitherto voiceless nation--or, at least, this is the story; this, in Vance Palmer's phrasing of it, is the Legend of the Nineties.

The term "legend" might signify an uneasiness on the part of literary and cultural historians with the way that this decade has been fetishized. Nonetheless, many argue for the kernel of truth within the chaff of myth. Vance Palmer himself insists upon the Legend's "close connection with historical reality" (1). Whether or not the Legend is historically and verifiably grounded in fact, its significance culturally has been, and continues to be, substantial. Popular notions of Australian national identity are indebted to the *Bulletin* school writers--or, more accurately, to the way these writers have been represented, consolidated and enthroned within literary and cultural discourse.

Initially, the Sydney *Bulletin* was one of the few domestic publications to give space to Australian writers. Under the editorship of J.F. Archibald (and his influential

associate, A.G. Stephens), the *Bulletin* maintained an emphatically nationalistic and socialistic platform. Politically, Australia was ready for such a publication. Questions of national identity and independence animated the populace. The Federation of the states, in fact, was imminent: Australia achieved nationhood in 1901, just twenty-one years after the *Bulletin's* first printing. Culturally as well, conditions proved favourable for the promotion of an assertively nationalistic literature. In the nineteenth century, European critics began to think of literature as the expression--not to say essence--of the national mind (Kiernan "Perspectives" 3). Undoubtedly, Archibald's nationalistic programme was somewhat indebted to current European thought.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, his publishing policies, according to cultural history, facilitated the development of a literary tradition in Australia. Archibald himself insisted upon the centrality of the *Bulletin* to the cultural development of his country. He even sub-titled his weekly, "Australia's National Newspaper." The name that the *Bulletin* acquired informally, however, has had the greater staying power: early in its run, Archibald's paper became known as "The Bushman's Bible." This appellation attests to the *Bulletin's* long-standing place of privilege among the nation's sacred texts. Small wonder, then, that many of its more prominent contributors ultimately found their way to canonicity.

Chief among those writers is Henry Lawson, whom many critics place at the fore of Australia's literary tradition. From early in this century, nationalists seized upon Lawson's work--and the writer himself--as a medium through which Australia

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9 If this seems ironic, one is reminded that nationalism itself is a Europe-initiated construct.

might be known. David McKee Wright, in his now-famous pronouncement, declared Henry Lawson "the first articulate voice of the real Australia" (qtd. in Prout 274). Thirty years later, Vance Palmer pointed to Lawson as a "portent" of "the coming sungod's race" ("Legend" 3). Although Lawson's reputation has taken as many beatings as strokes, he continues, even today, to occupy a prominent place in nationalist discourse. The use of his portrait on the ten dollar note might attest to his enduring cultural significance. (This tribute, however, is somewhat ironic, as Lawson allegedly never had ten dollars to his name. Perhaps the gesture is compensatory, lending him a respectability which his fiscal irresponsibility could not.) The number of statues and book-length biographies devoted to this man further evidence his eminence in the national imagination.<sup>10</sup> Despite increasing critical censure of Australia's bush mythology, Henry Lawson lives on as a cultural hero--although not by unanimous consent.

What makes Lawson such an enduring national presence? One can only speculate. As he has been biographically constructed, this writer is conflated with the image of the Typical Australian as the unaffected, egalitarian "mate." As a literary figure, Lawson might have been aligned with the ever spurious Intellectual, but this has not been the case. On the contrary, critics have been very careful to minimize

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<sup>10</sup> Kay Schaffer points out that these biographies outnumber monographic critical studies of Lawson's work by five to one (140). This suggests to me that a greater value has been placed on Lawson's life than on his literary achievements (although, of course, the two converge). The stories that comprise this character may be more interesting to the public than those that he wrote.

Lawson's artistry, and to affiliate him with the Common Man.<sup>11</sup> Even his recorded weaknesses--drunkenness and insolvency--are well within the parameters of this stereotype: the Typical Australian, Russel Ward tells us, "drinks deeply on occasion" (16) and "tends to be a rolling stone," not tied to the responsibilities of work and home (17). As this stereotype has currency even today, Lawson's association with it might be one of the factors which ensures continued public attention and devotion.

Another would certainly be his historical positioning. Lawson was writing at the time of Federation, when cultural and political sovereignty was aggressively promoted. He himself identifies the genesis of his craft with the colony's first gesture toward independence:

Then came the unexpected and inexplicable outburst of popular feeling (or madness)--called then the Republican riots--in '87 when the Sydney crowd carried a disloyal amendment on the Queen's Jubilee, and cheered, at the Town Hall, for an 'Australian Republic'. And I had to write then--or burst. The *Bulletin* saved me from bursting.

("Pursuing Literature" 203)

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<sup>11</sup> In "The Literary Heritage Reassessed," for instance, A.A. Phillips creates a voice for Lawson in order to contest the claim, made by another critic (to whom he refers as an "artist's patriot") that, as an artist, Lawson possessed a "special awareness" (23). Lawson, says Phillips "might have replied: 'Look, mate, don't run away with the idea that what I know about the bush my mates didn't know too--and know it a damn site better than any scribbler from the blue-moulded littoral will ever know'" (23). Given the alleged suspicion of "intellectual and cultural pursuits" in Australia (Ward 17), it is perhaps not surprising that Phillips is anxious to align Lawson with the Common Man and with the world of experience. As a literary figure, Lawson does not conform to the bush stereotype. As one of the "mates" who knows no more than any shearer or drover would, he does.

Often, we look to the past--to "origins"--to construct patterns for the present. Lawson, affiliated as he is with the Golden Age of the 1890s and with the decade of Federation, is one of a number of cultural heroes credited with making Australia what it is today.

In drawing attention to circumstances that might be favourable to Lawson's continuing allure, I am in no way dismissing the effect that his work has had on the reading public. In his lifetime, Lawson enjoyed a wide readership in both his poetry and his prose. It is particularly for his stories, however, that he is nationally acclaimed. (In fact, critics often dismiss his poetry as didactic and naive.) His prose renderings of the Australian outback won him high praise as a unique and indigenous voice. "Australia was born in spirit," Vance Palmer announces, "when Lawson began to write" (qtd. in Barnes 489). Lawson's choice of the short story as a formal vehicle for his work was fortuitous. The genre was relatively new at the time.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as Maurice Dunlevy contends, "it presented Lawson with a unique opportunity to stamp an Australian personality on the formative stages of the only literary genre that has been created since the first settlement" (411). And this is precisely what Lawson is said to have done. In his short fiction, critics detect the genesis of the Australian Bush Tradition. It is this tradition that is targeted by "The Drover's Wife" parodies. Requisite to a successful reading of these stories, then, is an understanding of the critical definition of bush realism, and an appreciation of the ways in which the Lawson Tradition has come to circumscribe both a literature and a nation.

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<sup>12</sup> The short story has of course existed in one form or another for centuries. As it exists in its present form, however, the short story is usually considered to have acquired its shape in the last half of the nineteenth century (see Yelland, Jones and Easton 171-72).

"In the short story Lawson is at home," A.A. Phillips says; "but only because he has rebuilt it to suit himself" ("Craftsman" 64). What shape did this allegedly unique form take? According to Phillips (one of the first to systematically analyze Lawson's style), the most distinctive aspect of this writer's work is its proletarian nature ("Craftsman" 63). In "Henry Lawson as Craftsman," Phillips maintains that in both content and style, Lawson's stories are informed by a profoundly socialist ethic. Whereas his British contemporaries were writing for a middle-class readership, Lawson wrote "of the people, from the people, and even--by grace of the *Bulletin*--for the people" ("Craftsman" 63). For Phillips, this constitutes a "revolution in attitude and audience" ("Craftsman" 63), an innovative turn from the conventions of prose writing abroad. Lawson wrote for the common man (sic), developing a simple, inerudite style and addressing the reader as an equal. And while this seemingly unsophisticated form has been construed by critics as artless and naive (Phillips's article, in fact, is a response to these charges), Phillips maintains that Lawson deliberately developed the form to suit the subject of his material ("Craftsman" 63).

That the content of Lawson's work, like the form, embraces socialist values is a point that Phillips need not defend. It has become a truism of Australian literary criticism that Lawson's work encapsulates the egalitarianism which makes his country unique. According to many critics, this distinctly Australian ethic is particularly manifest in Lawson's espousal of mateship. Mateship--a prefiguration of what we now smilingly call "male-bonding"--is the term used to describe the solidarity between men that allegedly emerged in response to the harsh realities of the bush. Lawson, derisively referred to by one critic as "Our Apostle of Mateship" (Heseltine

"St. Henry" 5), effectively delineated the doctrine in such stories as "Telling Mrs. Baker," "Send Round the Hat" and "A Sketch of Mateship." In these works, mateship consists principally of loyalty to one's mates, no matter what the cost. The bushman's noble gestures of fidelity and allegiance, however, are not indiscriminately apportioned. The construct of mateship rigourously excludes Chinese and Aboriginal persons, for instance, functioning on behalf of White Australia only. And even this small constituency is cut by half: women, white or otherwise, have no place within this construct. In fact, as Dorothy Jones points out, "the ideal of mateship is essentially based on freedom from women" ("Mapping" 65). The valorization of this peculiar brand of "egalitarianism" in the national literary tradition has made the position of women writers in Australia highly problematic, a point to which I shall return shortly.

The first characteristic of Lawson's social realism, then, is this socialist ethic that is regarded as unique to Australian literature. A second feature of this type of prose is the use it makes of a rural setting. The bush is not featured in all of Lawson's work; however, the stories which exploit the outback have typically been given more attention (both public and critical) than those which take the city for their setting.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, Lawson has often been castigated for his (some say) excessively bleak depictions of the outback. And indeed, his landscapes are harshly drawn, as can be seen in the second of the paragraphs which begin "The Drover's Wife":

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13 The "best" of Lawson's work is usually considered to be such stories as "The Drover's Wife," "A Day on a Selection," "The Bush Undertaker," and the "Joe Wilson" series, all of which are set in the outback.



Bush all around--bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. (175)

Elsewhere in the story, Lawson's narrator refers to "the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees--that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ships can sail--and further" (179). But if, as these passages suggest, Lawson sees the bush as a barren, and often cruel, expanse, he simultaneously regards it with fierce national pride. His paradoxical ambivalence toward the outback is evident in another of his stories, "The Bush Undertaker." That sketch concludes with this oft-quoted phrase: "And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush--the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and of much that is different from things in other lands" (111). If this terrain is in some way grotesque or peculiar, it is nonetheless distinctive, "different from things in other lands." Perhaps this is why Australian identity or typicality has been so rigidly affixed to this landscape--not just in Lawson's fiction, or in the criticism that has accrued to it, but also in other writers, and in other cultural mediums.

The "Typical Australian," as "he" has come to be defined in nationalist discourse, is an inhabitant of this harsh, but distinctive, terrain. As this figure has been so enthroned within the Bush Tradition, he is worth examining in some detail. Russel Ward's delineation of the bush hero is probably the definitive one. In his 1958 study of the legend, he writes:

According to the myth the 'typical Australian' is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing 'to have a go' at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is 'near enough'.... He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion.... He is a 'hard case', sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, probably a good deal better.... [A]bove all, [he] will stick to his mates through thick and thin, even if he thinks they may be in the wrong.... He tends to be a rolling stone, highly suspect if he should chance to gather much moss. (16-17)

Ward goes on to say that these qualities are generally attributed to "the bushman of the last century, not, primarily, to Australians in general" (17). The Typical Australian, in other words, is in no way typical. What purpose, then, does this construct serve? Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra offer very astute commentary on the bush hero and the Australian Legend in their *Dark Side of the Dream*. They contend that the Typical Australian is strictly offered as "an object for the gaze" (173). That is, the Typical Australian is a paradigm to be identified with ideologically, not a model to be emulated literally. Essentially, the construct functions less as a yardstick and more as a bulwark, establishing and maintaining rigid parameters which exclude as much as they admit.

At the most surface level, this figure exists to suppress from the national image recognition of what he isn't. He encodes a class, race and gender identity which classifies women, Aborigines and new migrants as 'unAustralian', a potent fact which is immediately recognized by all those who are subjected to this symbolic annihilation.

(Hodge and Mishra xv)

The bush hero has been placed at the centre of the Australian Literary Tradition; he has come to mark the "Australianness" of Australian Literature. This, then, creates a problem for those authors--women for example--who are marginalized by the national image.

The romanticization of the bush hero, and the glorification of mateship, determined the formation of a national mythology that is essentially androcentric.<sup>14</sup> This, in turn, fostered a literary tradition in which women are either problematically situated or utterly excluded. Particularly in the first half of this century, the literary academy valorized fiction which promoted the bush ideal, in order to effectively distinguish the colony's literature from that of Britain (Jones "Canon" 71). This means, as Dorothy Jones points out, that "the substantial contribution of women authors, who did not usually view their art in such nationalistic terms, was largely dismissed" ("Canon" 72). This is not to say that women have no place within Australia's literary tradition. However, it is interesting (if not disturbing) to note that

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<sup>14</sup> It is also terribly ethnocentric, but I have chosen to limit my discussion to the marginalization of women, as the parodies we will consider do the same. For an excellent study of the way Aborigines have been excluded from the Australian Tradition, see Hodge and Mishra (1990).

legitimacy is often awarded to women who write under male pseudonyms (Langer 70), or to those who inscribe a male perspective (Langer 79). Beryl Donaldson Langer remarks that books "which focus on the domestic and social life of women" are rarely taken seriously; often, they are dismissed as "'women's books', which stand *outside* legitimate literary discourse and are not seen as relevant to the 'national literature'" (79). Notably, the scholars who were instrumental in compiling and consolidating Australia's national tradition (Vance Palmer, Russel Ward, A.A. Phillips) were almost exclusively male. Nettie Palmer is the exception, but she wrote as part of a husband and wife team. It might not be surprising, then, that bush realism, with its patriarchal versions of egalitarianism and national identity, has historically been privileged as the only valid expression of "Australianness."

Thus far, we have discussed two characteristics attributed to Lawson's brand of social realism: first, his stories are informed by egalitarian principles, and, second, they embrace a national ideal which favours the rural experience over the urban one. The third, and final, hallmark of Lawson's prose is its simple, documentary-type realism. Henry Lawson himself draws attention to the lack of sentimentality or floridity in his work. The following paragraph, from "The Union Buries Its Dead," is often quoted in support of this writer's lean and bridled prose: "I have left out the wattle," Lawson's narrator says,

--because it wasn't there. I have also neglected to mention the heart-broken old mate, with his grizzled head bowed and great pearly drops streaming down his rugged cheeks. He was absent--he was probably 'Out Back'. For similar reasons I have omitted the reference to the

suspicious moisture in the eyes of a bearded bush ruffian named Bill. Bill failed to turn up, and the only moisture was that which was induced by the heat. I have left out the 'sad Australian sunset' because the sun was not going down at the time. The burial took place exactly at mid-day. (134)

Presumably, Lawson is writing in response to other popular writers of his time who were not so quick to resist the "wattle" and the tears. But he need not have drawn attention to his own restraint, for many critics were happy to do this for him.

Lawson has often been called an "artless" writer.<sup>15</sup> While this is sometimes considered a negative quality, more often it is applauded by critics, who create a dichotomy between truth and craft. Consider for instance, the pronouncement of one of Lawson's contemporaries: "Mr. Lawson is real, not artistic" (Anon. "A Voice" 55). Artistry for this reviewer seems to bespeak falsehood. Another devotee, E.V. Lucas, asseverates that Lawson is "trustworthy" because he writes with "*unadorned* veracity" (65, my emphasis). By these standards, anything but a barren and restrained prose is suspect. It seems that "faithful reportage" (O'Leary 278) is (or perhaps *was*<sup>16</sup>) the mark of good fiction in Australia.

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15 Lawson's imagination and craftsmanship is recurrently minimized, even while his work is praised for its authenticity and truthfulness. See, for instance, the reviews of E.V. Lucas, "Touchstone," "P.M.," and A.G. Stephens.

16 "Artless" realism is slowly giving way to the validation of other forms in Australia. Still, its force is undeniable, and was particularly puissant fifteen years ago when the *Drover's Wife* parodies were being written.

This, again, might have something to do with nationalist impulses. Mishra and Hodge contend that white settlers vying for possession of a land already occupied by Aborigines, might have felt a particular need "to *represent* the country, to provide a set of images that can substitute for this country that they have an obligation to read and know and to possess..." (144). Perhaps the impulse toward documentary-like prose is connected to a desire to possess, or imaginatively inhabit, the "new" land. Early Australian criticism reflects an eagerness for literature that might be deemed, in the words of one Lawsonian critic, a "transcript of things Australian" (Warung 49). Lawson's simple, anecdotal prose was thought to provide such an encapsulation. In fact, his fiction was often likened to a photograph, to a visual medium that distills time and place: Lawson's work

throws a strong vivid flashlight upon Australian life, and the literary photographs--little more than snapshots as they are--which are thus presented to the mind, must do much to correct false and create fresh impressions of Australian life among all who are amiably or earnestly interested in learning what our National Characteristics are and towards what they may be tending. (P.M. 59-60)

In likening Lawson's stories to "snapshots," this critic praises their lack of posturing and deliberation, suggesting that this type of prose effectively reflects or captures the nation in a way that a more corpulent and artistically clever prose might not.

This documentary-type fiction is what Murray Bail refers to as "the barren anecdotal realism of the local literature," the "negative sourc[e]" which has so influenced his work ("Author's" 187). Other writers have similarly fulminated

against the "Lawson line of the bush/outback realist story [that] was dominant as a central, monolithic tradition for so long" (Wilding 123), maintaining that the "formula" restricted their scope, not only critically, but materially as well. For years, work which deviated from this form was simply not taken seriously. In fact, as Gelder and Salzman have shown, established journals and quarterlies refused to print anything but *The Standard Australian Short Story*, which meant that many innovative writers turned to the so-called "girlie" magazines in order to find readers for their work (11-12). These conditions, of course, have slowly changed over the last fifteen years. Nevertheless, the Lawson Tradition is neither a trifling nor unempowered construct. If Henry Lawson's *Australian Voice* has since been qualified by the word "colonial,"<sup>17</sup> he has by no means abdicated his throne. His work still comprises the first chapter of Australian Literary History and, from this place of privilege, continues to exert an influence on literary and national discourse. *The Drover's Wife* authors, in writing back to Lawson's seminal story--*The Standard Australian Short Story*--expose a system of hierarchical oppositions which pits the bush against the city, the male voice/experience against the female voice/experience, and documentary-like realism against other forms of prose. In so doing, they challenge the rigid parameters of both their nation and its literature; they deface that first chapter of literary history.

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17 Peter Pierce reminds us that in 1972, when Patrick White was awarded the Nobel Prize, the judges remarked that "'for the first time he [White] has given the continent of Australia an authentic voice that carries across the world'" (67). By implication, Pierce argues, Lawson might now be considered a colonial voice (67).

### Nationalizing "The Drover's Wife"

As a dramatic and truthful piece of prose, "The Drover's Wife" has been highly regarded. Often, it is referred to as the best of Lawson's work. "In its way," says W.M. Sherrie, "what more powerful story is there in the language than 'The Drover's Wife'--a story which pulsates with tragedy and pathos" ("Poet" 225). Nettie Palmer, the very influential Australian critic, singles out Lawson's story as "a definite standard of truth" which "opened the eyes of other writers to what was really poignant and dramatic in the life around them" (235). Even in this early comment, we see the construction of "The Drover's Wife" as a paradigmatic work, a yardstick for Australian short fiction. Lawson's story is inscribed as original, indigenous and prototypic, an example to other Australian writers.

"The Drover's Wife" succeeded overseas as well. British critic Edward Garnett applauded Lawson for the universality of his story:

There is a little sketch in *While the Billy Boils* called 'The Drover's Wife,' a sketch of a woman in the bush, left for months alone with her four children while her husband is up-country droving. If this artless sketch be taken as the summary of a woman's life, giving its *meaning* in ten short pages, Maupassant has never done better. (125, his emphasis)

Garnett's review was instrumental in establishing Lawson's international reputation, and, if the prodigious number of references to the piece is any indication, it has had an impact on the critical construction of "The Drover's Wife." Garnett seems to have



nothing but praise for Lawson's story. Invoking a European norm, he establishes the story's universal value: the sketch, he says, "can be taken as a summary of a woman's life." At the same time, Garnett's diminutive reference to the story as a "little sketch" minimizes its significance as a literary work. Like its author, "The Drover's Wife" has been constructed as "artless," rather an odd critical configuration for a story so venerated. But perhaps this is tendered as some sort of testimony to its truthfulness, for, historically, "The Drover's Wife" has been chiefly valued as an accurate and reliable reflection of life in the Australian outback.

Lawson wrote many stories set in the Australian bush, but none has achieved a more prominent place in the discourses of nationalism than this one. The drover's wife is the Uncle Sam of the antipodes. In T. Inglis Moore's estimation, she looms as large in Australian mythology as Achilles does in Greek. He refers to the story as a "miniature *Iliad* of the bush," with the drover's wife emerging "as a battler no less brave in her struggles than Achilles [is] in his" (25). Manning Clark has bestowed upon her the status of sainthood: "Lawson knew," he says, "that her heroism, the halo of glory with which he endowed this bush mum, was of a high order" (52).<sup>18</sup> Unquestionably, this story has contributed significantly to a sense of Australian identity. What, then, makes this particular work such a prime vehicle for nationalism?

Brian Kiernan, in his introduction to a selection of Lawson's stories, writes that "The Drover's Wife" has obviously been structured "to present general experi-

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<sup>18</sup> This halo became standard headwear in subsequent discussions of "The Drover's Wife." Werner Arens, for instance, refers to "Lawson's romantic image of the bushwoman with the halo" (130); but the drover's wife was canonized by Clark, not Lawson.

ence through a particular instance" (xv). Kiernan does not elaborate on this observation, but his comment might serve as a starting point for our investigation. "The Drover's Wife" lends itself easily to a paradigmatic reading. The very fact that the woman is never named allows the reader to imagine that character as a type, rather than an individual--and specifically as a *national* type: "Her husband is an Australian," the narrator tells us, "and so is she" (177). Regardless of whether or not Lawson intended his work to be given a nationalist interpretation, three features of "The Drover's Wife" might be cited in support of such a reading: the story's archetypal imagery, its iconography of order and definition, and its structural movement toward closure and consolidation. Each of these accommodates the work to a paradigmatic interpretation.

Drawing on archetypal symbols of Christian mythology, Lawson has fashioned an Australian version of Creation, an Antipodal Genesis. The bush in this story is a parched anti-Eden, complete with "stunted, rotten native apple-trees" (175). Lawson has placed a snake in his garden, a huge black one that slithers below the house. Fearing that the brute will make its way through a crack in the timber wall, the wife maintains an all-night vigil. At dawn, an "*evil* pair of small bright bead-like eyes glisten at one of [the] holes" (180, my emphasis). The woman, like Eve before her, is transfixed by the serpent: she "sits as one fascinated" (180). While in this instance Adam may be off droving, his dog functions as his surrogate: taking the snake between his teeth, he shakes it "as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind" (180). Order is restored.

*Pace* Edward Garnett, there is nothing artless about Lawson's use of imagery here. References to "evil" and "the original curse" suggest that Lawson's appropriation of biblical symbols is deliberate. And while this may unite Australia with the rest of the Christian world, it also serves to distinguish that nation from others, for Lawson is fashioning new archetypes--indigenous ones. In Lawson's humanist schema, evil resides, not in woman/man, but in the natural and elemental forces which threaten her/him. A new Adam, a new Eve, will restore order in a vicious and sickly garden.

The bush, however, proves a formidable adversary, one that is overwhelmingly ubiquitous: "Bush all around--bush with no horizon" (175). Human presence within this landscape is always precarious, always in danger of being absorbed by the bush. The drover's wife and her children have taken on the qualities of their environment: she is "gaunt" and "sunbrowned"; they are "dried-up-looking," as stunted as the trees themselves. The hut that has been erected to differentiate and protect them from the bush is not a sure fortress. There are cracks in the walls and floor large enough not only for intruding snakes, but for the elements as well: "The thunderstorm comes on, and the wind, rushing through the cracks in the slab wall, threatens to blow out her candle" (176). At any time, Lawson's outback might overwhelm its occupants. Significantly, the word "bushed" is an Australian colloquialism for madness: to get bushed is to "lose one's bearings, to get lost in every sense, to fail to attain an identity against the landscape of the bush" (Schaffer 126-27). The possibility of madness in this territory is always present. If the drover's wife is

to save herself from "the horrors" (178), she must somehow impose order upon the "everlasting, maddening sameness" of the bush (179).

The imagery in this story suggests a concern with striking boundaries and achieving definition in the new land. The narrator begins by detailing the only mark of human presence for miles around: "The two-roomed house is built of round timber, slabs, and stringybark, and floored with split slabs. A big bark kitchen standing at one end is larger than the house itself, veranda included" (175). The house seems very small, however, when it is contextualized by the next paragraph:

Bush all around--bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple-trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization--a shanty on the main road. (175).

Lawson's bush seems to be defined by the very impossibility of definition. The land has "no horizon," "nothing to relieve the eye":

You might walk twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind unless you are a bushman. This is because of the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees--that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ship can sail--and further. (179)

This landscape offers no coordinates by which one might mark one's place; coordinates must be fabricated. Against the monotony of time, the drover's wife erects rituals to differentiate the days:

All days are much the same to her; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. There is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet. (179)

The drover's wife invokes the forms and ceremonies of "civilized" city-life to differentiate herself from the land. Her weekly ritual imposes structure and order on the "maddening sameness" of the bush.

If this story is, as I have argued, about defining oneself *against* the landscape, it is also about defining oneself *within* the landscape. While the bush is viewed with a good deal of ambivalence, it has been constructed as "the authentic location for the distinctive Australian experience" (Turner 26). As Nicholas Jose observes, the outback, by its very difference, announces a departure from the milder terrain of Britain, and has come to stand for "a quality of innocent, doubting resistance to urbanity, internationalism and the European mind" (320). On this terrain, British models collapse. Lawson's references to European constructs serve to accentuate their inappropriateness: as a girl, the narrator tells us, the drover's wife built "the usual castles in the air" (177). The metaphor seems wholly unsuited to the context

described here. This land is a challenger and a leveller (Turner 36). Notions of princesses (Lawson "Drover's" 177) and castles will not survive in this new classless society where egalitarianism and collectivism are said to rule. The old paradigms are obsolete; new models must therefore be created. The final tableaux of "The Drover's Wife" presents such a model: "And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush" (180). This image is central to the Australian imagination, presenting as it does two people united against the bush. In popular mythology, the harsh Australian terrain, acting as an equalizer, is believed to have essentially created Australia's egalitarian society because it necessitated strong alliances. The final tableau of "The Drover's Wife" serves to underscore and perpetuate this tradition.

Lawson's story, then, constructs indigenous archetypes and defines the Australian within and against her environment. Its themes and images allow the story to be easily appropriated to the discourses of nationalism. Its *structure* is similarly suited to such a function. If, as Peter Brooks argues, every story is organized through its ending, this story makes that process explicit. Comprised of a series of flashbacks, "The Drover's Wife" is, in a sense, a backward-glancing construction. Each memory is a repetition--a same-but-different manifestation--of the one before. In each, the woman is alone (that word runs like a chorus throughout the story). In each, she confronts a physical threat presented by nature: bushfire, flood, dying cattle, mad

bulls, bushmen in "the horrors" and dishonest aborigines.<sup>19</sup> Every one of these episodes gives greater weight and definition to the hardship she now confronts. The narrative, then, follows a very controlled course, each flashback serving to *consolidate* the figure of the drover's wife. The past is used to define the present so that the story moves toward determinateness and closure.

For this reason, it is easily read reductively, its closure taken at face value. Moorhouse, Jefferis, Gambling, Bail, and even Drysdale refuse such a reading. They prise open this tightly structured story and locate within it gaps and fissures, destroying the hermetic cohesiveness that "The Drover's Wife" has historically enjoyed. Russell Drysdale is the first to take on Lawson's classic text. Before offering a reading of his painting, however, I would like to address the critical configuration of this artist, and consider the ways in which his work has been constructed as a visual correlate to the literary tradition.

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<sup>19</sup> These last two may seem out of place here, but in the context of this story, both the bushman and the "blackfellow" are treated as products of the bush. Neither is aligned with the civilizing force of the drover's wife and her family.

### Russell Drysdale

Russell Drysdale has been called "a kind of twentieth-century Lawson of painting" (Smith 247). Perhaps the comparison has something to do with Drysdale's appropriation of "The Drover's Wife" as subject of and title for his 1945 painting. Critics, at any rate, have composed a catalogue of parallels between these two Australian figures. As Bernard Smith sees it, Drysdale possesses Lawson's

compulsion to tell the truth as he sees it, his sense of the absurd, his humour, his craftsmanly respect for form, his humanity and, though Drysdale restrains it more thoroughly, Lawson's sentiment. Like Lawson he has sought to cut down the over-romanticized and over-glamorized image of the Australian bush to true size.... Drysdale, too, recalls Lawson by the economy with which he visualizes a scene. (247)

Like Lawson, Drysdale often chose as his subjects the outback and the breed that peopled it. In this, says Geoffry Dutton, Drysdale was unique. The "interrelation between man [and particularly woman] and this harsh environment" had not formerly been tackled by any Australian painter (Dutton 57, 70). Drysdale did, however, have many examples in literature upon which to draw (Dutton 70).

For this reason, Drysdale has often been credited with extending the Lawson Tradition. Smith certainly views him this way. Drysdale, he says "finds his true literary parallel in Lawson" (247). Geoffry Dutton, on the other hand, argues that his work is an "improvement" on Lawson's. In Dutton's estimation, Drysdale's vision is the more authentic and honest one. He ascribes to Lawson and other literary figures



some sort of agenda which he claims is absent in Drysdale: "Drysdale saw it all, and recorded it with an honesty unattempted by the writers, who wanted to stir sympathy or indignation" (71). Drysdale, then, is removed to a sphere free from ideology and didactic intent. "The painter simply took" his subjects "for what they were" (Dutton 67). Thus, in a sense, Drysdale, like Lawson, is deemed artless; he is constructed as one who works from a value-free position.

Drysdale, like his literary predecessor, has become a national (and nationalist) figure. Ironically, he was born in England, not Australia. The details of his foreign birth, however, are usually qualified by an account of "Australian associations"--near and distant kin--that go back to the 1820s (Smith 242). Drysdale did not settle in Australia until he was eleven years old. Nonetheless, he is considered a truly indigenous artist. Sidney Nolan once said that "'in the only sense that matters, Tassie Drysdale is the most genuinely Australian of us all'" (qtd. in Dutton 13), the "only sense that matters" presumably being some kind of impalpable national quality or vision.

Drysdale's paintings have always been given a nationalist interpretation. Like Lawson, his work is often evaluated in terms of its implications for Australian identity. In 1949, for instance, when Drysdale was awarded the Melrose Prize for *Woman in a Landscape* (a painting which parallels *The Drover's Wife* in many ways), people were outraged. The painting was considered unrepresentative of Australia: "'No outback Australian woman of white blood would be found, except perhaps in the most remote area of our country, with such hideous proportions and apparel as the artist portrays'" (qtd. in Dutton 74). Some were in fact concerned that Drysdale's

painting, should it be displayed abroad, would "defeat the immigration policy, as any decent person would abhor the idea of his wife or mother appearing like the picture in a few years after arrival in this country..." (qtd. in Dutton 74). This "genuinely Australian" artist was told he "simply could not tell the truth" (Dutton 78-9). Significantly, Drysdale's response to the controversy was simply "But it was only Big Edna, that's all" (qtd. in Dutton 79). Drysdale was painting an individual; Australia was looking for an idealized national type.

*The Drover's Wife* fulfilled this function. With this painting, Smith argues, Drysdale's figures "begin to acquire a heroic quality" (248). In its critical construction, Drysdale's work reinscribes the themes and images of Lawson's story. "*The Drover's Wife*," Dutton says, "has lost her grace, but has certainly kept her decent, womanly standards" (71). Smith sees this figure as "an image of fortitude, devotion and survival" (248). The sheer bulk of this woman might signify fortitude, but what in the narrative of this painting bespeaks "devotion"? Does Smith see in the face of this woman some sort of transmundane commitment to the tiny silhouette in the distance? And what has been survived? Clearly Smith is reading Drysdale's representation through Lawson's. He draws on the story to interpret and complete the painting, ascribing values to the woman that are visible only when viewed through the Lawson frame.

And surely the artist invites such a reading. Drysdale's painting motions us toward Lawson's story, toward a conjunction of the two works. By appropriating the title of Lawson's classic text, Drysdale invokes all of its attendant fame, all of its implications for a national mythology. But to what purpose? Does Drysdale's *The*

*Drover's Wife* reinforce the bush tradition? Does it simply comment upon it uncontentiously? Or does the painting somehow contest or subvert the Lawson Tradition?

### A Reading of Drysdale's Reading

Given that Drysdale has not closely adhered to the narrative elements of Lawson's story, it is interesting that his painting has been read as an extension of that tradition. It is entirely possible, I would argue, to read the painting as a subversion of bush mythology. Consider some of the differences that Drysdale constructs. First, he includes no children in this picture--a significant omission, given that the heroism of Lawson's protagonist is measured in terms of her ability to care for and protect her children. Sue Rowley, in "Inside the Deserted Hut: The Representation of Motherhood in Bush Mythology," writes that women were allowed to participate in the furtherance of the nation by bearing sons. The discourses of pronatalism and nationalism, then, intersected (88) and the role of women became narrowly defined. Increasingly, "it became difficult to represent women within nationalist mythologies except as mothers" (76). Drysdale has denied his drover's wife this privileged role. Is he challenging the fetishization of motherhood? This woman is altogether removed from a domestic sphere. Far from taking refuge in a house, Drysdale's drover's wife is in transit, suitcase in hand. If the wagon represents the temporary "contraction of the domestic space" (Rowley 92), it is aligned with the husband, not the wife. Why does Drysdale release this woman from a domestic sphere and set her in motion? Is she leaving the drover? Why else would she carry her suitcase so far from the wagon? (Of course it might not be a suitcase at all. It could just as easily be a large handbag.) Perhaps, as Robert Kroetsch suggests, Drysdale is reversing the traditional conditions

of the male narrative, positioning the drover between the horse and wagon and rendering the wife mobile (37).

The painting is ambiguous: if it is possible to point to ways in which this work differs from Lawson's, it is also possible to construct thematic similarities between the two. Drysdale's bush, like Lawson's, threatens to absorb its occupants: the wife has taken on the utterly monochromatic colours of the landscape. The bush represented here is as monotonous as the outback of Lawson's story. Coordinates must be formed for this borderless land. Against interminable sameness, the figures form a frame: the wife occupies the left foreground, while the drover stands in the background, to the right. Their presence imposes definition on the limitless horizon.

The relationship between the two figures is intriguing. Despite the presence of the drover here, I would argue that Drysdale is recreating the dynamics of Lawson's story. In the earlier work, the drover is absent, but is nonetheless "there, at the centre of the story" (Dobrez 376). The woman acts on his behalf, but only provisionally; when he returns, she will once again assume her proper place within the household.<sup>20</sup> The husband, then, despite his absence, maintains a strong semiotic presence. Similarly, the drover of Drysdale's painting, though a mere silhouette in the distance, substantially circumscribes the presence of the woman. The wife does not stand in her own right as subject of the painting, but rather, is represented in relation to her husband, as the title of the work suggests. Her body is turned inwards, toward the

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<sup>20</sup> The wife resumes her domestic duties when her husband is home: "She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children" (179).

centre of the painting, and her shadow tracks a course to the drover, as if directing her back to that figure. The suitcase that signifies a movement away from the drover, then, is counterbalanced by the line of the shadow that connects the wife to her husband. The potential success of her journey is thrown into question. She is turned inward: perhaps she is *returning* to the drover. Her husband, furthermore, is aligned with the horses and the wagon, two things that allow the wife freedom of movement within the bush. If Drysdale has rendered the drover's wife mobile, he has made her journey dependent on her husband's.

Perhaps, then, *The Drover's Wife* is in fact an extension of the Lawson Tradition. That is certainly the way the painting has been critically constructed. Drysdale, however, does not simply reaffirm Lawson's narrative. His painting comments upon the mythical significance that has accrued to the figure of the drover's wife. The subject of Drysdale's work dominates the landscape, just as the drover's wife has dominated the bush tradition. She towers above the drover, the horses, even the trees; everything is dwarfed by her presence. In one sense, she is a part of the landscape. She seems more deeply rooted than the trees: they consist of thin lines which extend skyward, whereas the weighted curves of her figure draw our eyes down. Compare the size of her head to the size of her feet! Her figure describes an upside-down 'v', a configuration opposite to the outline of the trees. Her fleshy curves and heavy limbs render the trees almost insubstantial by contrast. In this sense, then, the landscape seems to be defined by the wife, and not the reverse. Has she taken on the colours of the land, or has the land assumed the colours of the woman? The drover's wife towers above the bush, the horizon intersecting her knees. The

vertical figure of the woman challenges the linear infinity of the horizon in a way that the crouched drover and covered wagon do not. Drysdale seems to be commenting on the way Lawson's story has come to map the Australian outback and to define the character of its people. His painting presents a sharp image of the drover's wife as she has dominated the Australian imagination. This figure continues to stand at the fore of the tradition, casting her long shadow over the landscape and dwarfing everything in her proximity.

Ultimately, however, Drysdale's representation is ambiguous. He does not *overtly* contest the Lawson Tradition. It is possible to interpret this painting as a contemplative but ultimately conservative reading of Lawson. At the same time, one might argue that Drysdale reverses the conditions of Lawson's story and challenges the conventions of bush realism. Perhaps it is the ambiguity of this painting that attracts writers like Bail. Whether intentionally or not, Drysdale has ruptured the tightly structured narrative of Lawson's story. He has created the cracks and fissures by which other authors may gain entrance to a critically guarded narrative site.

**Parody: Distance = Doubts**

Drysdale's representation, then, comments not only on Lawson's story, but also on the importance it has had for the imaginative and mythological construction of Australia. If his painting challenges the Lawson Tradition, however, it does not make its resistance conspicuous. In this way, it differs from the work of Bail, Moorhouse, Jefferis and Gambling. These stories flaunt their rebellion, loudly announcing their difference from the ubiquitous "bush/outback realist story." At the same time, however, they signal their complicity with that construct. By using parody to challenge the prescriptions of bush realism, they necessarily invoke--and to some degree reinscribe--the power and centrality of that tradition. The stories, then, problematize and question the success of their own departures. To what degree can these authors distance themselves from the Lawson Tradition?

"The Drover's Wife" has been named a critical yardstick for the short story in Australia. Recall Nettie Palmer's pronouncement: the story, she says, is a "standard of truth"; Lawson "led the way to the real short story in Australia" (235). "Truth" is defined in relation to its opposite, "untruth". If Lawson's work comprises what is "real," any departure from that norm constitutes the untrue, the unreal. As practitioners of the short story in Australia, Jefferis, Gambling, Moorhouse and Bail are at least partially measured against Lawson; their work is potentially defined in terms of a sanctioned standard. However, they are not simply excluded by its prescriptions; they are *included* as its *Other*, as the "not-real" by which the "real" is defined. Bail and the others explicitly include this norm within their work. In so



doing, they make this network of discriminatory evaluations conspicuous and contestable. They engage the Bush Tradition--*via* the story that has been placed at its fore--in order to bring into recognition its prescriptive power. By making explicit its relation to history, power, ideology and representation, these authors render the Lawson Tradition "answerable," and ultimately transformable.

If this fiction is contestatory, however, it is also conservative. To some extent, it reinscribes Lawson's position as founding father: his fiction has somehow generated the stories of Gambling, Moorhouse, Jefferis and Bail. His "The Drover's Wife" is the prototype. The authors who follow him are plagiarists of a sort: they have pirated an "original." If, as one critic suggests, Henry Lawson is "the master," and "all who come after him are to some extent imitators" (Sherrie "Voice" 197), these authors overtly reify this pronouncement. They toy with the notion that a tradition is comprised of same-but-different manifestations of an originating moment: literally "imitating" their precursor, they reinscribe his place at the top of a literary hierarchy. In so doing, they not only register their irritation with this construct, but also mark their position within it, thereby signalling their own complicity with its perpetuation. Each author conspicuously situates him/herself *within* the complex of reading strategies, critical practices, publishing dictates and literary texts that has composed the bush tradition. And although they challenge the dictates of this construct, they simultaneously reinscribe them. Lawson is validated as "master" even as he is dethroned.

This, says Linda Hutcheon, is the paradox of postmodernism, "which ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the

conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge" (*Politics* 1-2). Hutcheon's interpretation of this broadly defined term might further our understanding of the Drover's Wife sequence. The postmodern text celebrates its contradictory nature. It draws attention to the fact that it both reinscribes and subverts the forms that it questions. Postmodern literature, Hutcheon says, is fundamentally self-reflexive (*Canadian* 1). It "is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present" (*Canadian* 1). One of the ways the postmodern text flaunts its status as art, and draws attention to its own discursive context, is through the use of parody.

Parody, says Hutcheon, is the preferred ethos of postmodern art (*Politics* 93). By making critical use of the "image reserves of the past," parody signals "how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (*Politics* 93). Structurally, the parodic text best illustrates the paradox of postmodernism, for it includes, and is generated by, its target, while at the same time marking a departure from that prior form. In *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon refers to the etymological roots of the word to emphasize the bi-directional function of parody as it operates in postmodernism.<sup>21</sup> The word parody comes from the root word *parodia*. *Odos* (song) indicates the essentially discursive nature of parody: its target is always textual (32). The prefix, *para*, means "counter" or "against." This is the formulation that parody is usually given: histori-

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21 Hutcheon quite clearly states that her definition is specific to postmodern art. To her mind (and mine), no transhistorical definition of parody is possible, although the parodies of all ages might have certain identifiable elements in common (10).

cally, it has been considered a "counter-song" of sorts. But *para* has another definition: it also means "beside." There is, therefore, the suggestion of accordance (32). Parody offers a critique that is unavoidably complicitous (*Politics* 44). It positions itself both against *and* beside its target text.

The dentist of Bail's story unwittingly offers a very concise formulation of parody. Observing the distance between Hazel and the drover in Drysdale's painting, he concludes that the two have had an argument. "Distance = Doubts," he says (48). This is precisely the way that postmodern parody functions. It inscribes distance in order to generate doubt. Bail and the others distance the drover's wife from an orthodox narrative and critical site. By parodically "trans-contextualizing" (Hutcheon *Parody* 8) this figure, they make salient the system of hierarchies which operate, inconspicuously, within Australian cultural and literary discourse. Distance yields other points of vantage, alter(s)/native perspectives. Fiction which appropriates familiar images, Hutcheon says,

denaturalizes them, makes visible the concealed mechanisms which work to make them seem transparent, and brings to the fore their politics, that is to say, the interests in which they operate and the power they wield. (*Politics* 44)

The contemporary Drover's Wife authors wrest this icon from the tradition in which it has been ensnared, from the discourses which have named it an artless, photograph-like representation of Australia. They inscribe distance, and so generate doubt.

Distance is a relative term. It marks an interval or an expanse between two points, simultaneously invoking a "here"/"now" or a "there"/"then." Parody is

similarly double-focused. If the parodic text is defined by its relation to a targeted text, the "original" is similarly (re)defined by its relation to the departure. If, that is, these works are somehow circumscribed by Lawson's--and by the bush tradition that they target--the reverse is also true: our reading of Lawson's "Drover's Wife" is wholly altered by the stories which target it. They construct (another) frame through which we must view the original. Parody, says Hutcheon, is "repetition with critical distance" (*Parody* 6). Distance, says Bail, equals doubts.

## Frames

If these stories are parodic, what is their target? Certainly they draw on Lawson's text, but their decipherability depends not only on a prior reading of that story, but also on the reader's familiarity with the entire *énonciation* of that text. The reader, that is, must have some understanding of the way bush realism has been privileged in the Australian literary tradition, of the way the drover's wife and "the rotten landscape" have come to "dominate everything" (Bail "Drover's" 52). These things comprise the "text" targeted by the Drover's Wife parodies, the implication being that Lawson's story can only be accessed through a proliferation of frames,<sup>22</sup> through a complex of cultural and critical codes by which its meaning has been determined.

The interpretation of any text is subject to a number of factors, among them, the historical and social positioning of both the reader and the text. A reader negotiates the meaning of a narrative with reference to the meanings that have already been fashioned for the story, the subject matter, or the author. Even the Canadian who picks up "The Drover's Wife" with no prior knowledge of the bush tradition will interpret its meaning through a frame which constitutes her idea of an Australian, or of a mother, or of the outback. The Australian who confronts this story today will probably have some notion of its national and historical significance. This will then comprise one of the frames through which he reads the sketch. The Drover's Wife

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22 I borrow this phrase from Brian Edwards.

parodies draw attention to the existence of these frames. They problematize the notion of a "primary" text, accentuating the ways in which the "picture" alters with every new frame.

If a tradition is created retrospectively by a series of critical formulations, the stories of Bail, Moorhouse, Jefferis and Gambling parallel that process. Appropriately, they offer a backward glance at a backward-constructed figuration, a reading of the cumulative readings of that text. By drawing attention to the frames which delimit "The Drover's Wife," they problematize any notion of a "primary" text. The picture changes with each new frame; the story is (re)constituted, (re)encoded with every reading. If we examine these stories chronologically, we see that each (with the exception of Gambling's) explicitly incorporates the story that has preceded it. Bail, for instance, begins with Drysdale's representation of the drover's wife. His reference to Lawson, in fact, is oblique: he simply recounts an episode in which a snake is killed (and this, the key event in Lawson's story, is not even allotted an entire paragraph in Bail's [50]). Drysdale's reading of Lawson, then, becomes paramount. The primary text, in effect, becomes secondary. Lawson's story is accessed through Drysdale's construction of it, the frame, in this instance, overwhelming the picture.

When Frank Moorhouse takes up "The Drover's Wife," he adds Bail's "reading" to Drysdale's. Significantly, neither work is treated as derivative, but is given as much attention as the Lawson story itself. Again, the so-called frame is accorded a status that is equal with the original, suggesting that the drover's wife is the sum of all her creators. But here, Moorhouse adds an artful twist: all three, according to his version, rescript an old Australian joke, in which a sheep replaces

the wife as the object of man's lust. By this account, the drover's wife acquires symbolic status in folk humour, long before Lawson is supposed to have originated the myth. Lawson, then, becomes as much a plagiarist as Bail. His famous figure, the drover's wife, is an appropriation. Lawson merely lends authority and respectability to the joke by introducing it, in coded form, to the discourses of "high culture." Moorhouse, by this manoeuvre, humourously challenges the originality of Lawson's work, at the same time robbing it of its centrality. The famous story becomes merely another frame, a reading of popular mythology. We begin to lose sight of the original. What stands at the centre of these stories? Is there anything that can be called primary? Perhaps there is no picture at all, only a series of frames.

In Jefferis's story, Lawson, Drysdale, the dentist and the "Eyetalian" are all interrogated by their own creation, the drover's wife. Her narrator is more explicit than Moorhouse's in naming Lawson a thief. She claims that Henry Lawson "took" her narrative and "turned it into the story about the snake" (156). Lawson's story is a second-hand account then--another rewrite, another frame. Jefferis virtually places her own story at the centre, and points an accusatory finger at Lawson, the thief. A crime has been committed: women have been robbed of their voices, of their stories. The "original" belongs to them.

Frames are erected by critical discourse as well. Unquestionably, the writers of these parodies have a license which critics do not. However, these overt instances of re-writing draw attention to the way that fiction is (less visibly) re-encoded by critical discourse. Every reader participates in an act of (re)construction. A text's meaning is "the result of a 'circulation' between social formation, reader and text"

(Belsey 69). Inasmuch as the critic's reading becomes inscribed and is vested with a certain degree of authority, that reading might be particularly enduring. The critic's inscription becomes another frame which alters our reading of the text.

Moorhouse's playful look at academia manifests the ways in which critics have manufactured meanings for *The Drover's Wife*. His story exposes the power inherent to the act of interpretation. Critical readings are not disinterested, value-free constructions. They do not simply reveal the natural or self-evident significance of a narrative. Moorhouse's story accentuates the slippery and plural nature of the medium--language--with which the critic works. His numerous references to "codes" emphasize the systematic, substitutional nature of language and stresses that words are arbitrarily chosen signs for which meanings have been determined consentaneously. Casamaggiore's rather capricious re-encoding of *The Drover's Wife* illustrates the malleability of semiotic codes. His analysis implicates the critic in the manipulation of language and narrative. Although the critic's work is always substantiated, Casamaggiore's ludicrous study proves that anything can be proven: his thesis, well supported by evidence from the primary texts, "clearly" establishes (104) the drover's wife as a coded substitute for a sheep.

The 1985 version of Moorhouse's story, included in his collection entitled *Room Service*, differs significantly from the story as it originally appeared in the *Bulletin* in 1980. In the later version, Moorhouse includes seven items, five of which were generated by the story to which they are appended. Readerly frames, in this instance, quite literally become part of the composition. His story includes news items, letters of inquiry, even inscriptions of outrage which call for the censorship of



his fiction. The story, it seems, is transformed by the discourse it generates. Moorhouse deliberately blurs the boundaries between fiction and commentary. Where does this story begin and end? Are we to interpret the appended items as a part of the fiction? Certainly Moorhouse problematizes any notion of a primary text, literally demonstrating that context is text. *The Drover's Wife* is not an ontologically stable referent, but is a product of fictional, critical and readerly discourse.

One of the letters included in this later version is addressed, not to Moorhouse, but to Casamaggiore's alleged translator, Suzanne Kiernan. Her presence in the story points to another instance of interpretation; the narrative does not come to us "directly." Perhaps the writer of this letter, Guo Zhuzhang, acknowledges the privileged position of the translator, for he looks to Kiernan to give him the "key" (110) to the stories of Moorhouse and Jefferis as they were presented in the *Bulletin* in 1980. Significantly, however, his queries do not arise from the stories themselves, but from the editorial comments which frame them.<sup>23</sup> Guo Zhuzhang singles out such words as "transcription" and "excitable," and asks Kiernan of their significance. The words, Kiernan replies, have "the function of signalling to the reader that the writer's intention is ironic and satiric" (112). That is, they direct our reading of the fiction. The editorial comments that preface the story, then, comprise a part of the

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<sup>23</sup> When the stories were first published in the *Bulletin*, each was briefly introduced. In the case of Moorhouse's story, the "paratextual" comments were in fact written by the author himself (Suzanne Kiernan reveals this in the 1985 version of the story [112]). They read (in part): "This is a transcription of a paper on Australian culture given, excitedly, by an Italian student, Franco Casamaggiore, at a recent conference on Commonwealth Writing in Milan. It comes to us from writer Frank Moorhouse and we acknowledge also the inspired assistance of Suzanne Kiernan of the Department of Italian, University of Sydney" (160).

encoding process, offering an auxiliary set of "signals." Guo Zhuzhang's letter (and Moorhouse's "editorial" note) draws attention to these instances of critical (re)encoding, and to the ways in which so-called secondary material constitutes and comprises the primary text.

By way of a conclusion to this chapter, I would like to point briefly to an illustration that visually encapsulates this notion of frames. On the cover of the Faber edition of Murray Bail's collection of stories is a cartoon-like rendering of Drysdale's painting. The illustrator faithfully quotes the original, except that he has added a frame. The sky, the land, the shadow of a tree all slip outside this border. The frame itself is a part of the composition; like the drover's wife, it casts a shadow over the landscape. Just as this illustrator conspicuously points to the frame *within* the picture, Moorhouse, Bail, Gambling and Jefferis bring into view critical and readerly borders. Their parodies profess the impossibility of ever accessing the "The Drover's Wife" without also encountering the frames that surround--and comprise--that text.

### Deconstructing the Rural/Urban Opposition

Perhaps the frame that most conspicuously encloses Lawson's story is the bush tradition. "The Drover's Wife" has been positioned at the centre of a mythology that privileges the bush as the "authentic location for the distinctive Australian experience" (Turner 26). Despite the fact that Australia is one of the most urbanized countries in the world,<sup>24</sup> the bush continues to hold force in the Australian imagination. The popularity of the *Crocodile Dundee* films evidence its purchase even today. Those films are successful because their humour draws on a semiotics that most Australians (and non-Australians) recognize. Even now, the image of the rough and ready bushman continues to circulate in the discourses of nationalism. Those qualities manifest in the character of Paul Hogan--unaffectedness, insouciance, loyalty--are those associated with this tradition, for the bush signifies more than just geography. As Shirley Walker attests, it refers to "a social reality characterised by egalitarianism, collectivism and 'mateship'" (162). Bail, Gambling and Moorhouse interrogate the mythology that has set up an opposition in which the urban experience is defined negatively. Questioning the appropriateness of the bush tradition, each author deconstructs the rural/urban binary and challenges the system of values inherent to it.

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24 Even when Lawson was writing, the Australian population was predominantly urban. In her "Perceptions of Australia, 1855-1915," Shirley Walker points out that in 1891, "over two-thirds of Australians lived in cities or large towns" (162).

Bail's story reverses the mythology. The narrator of his fiction is a suburban dweller, not a bushman. He fights flies, not crocodiles--and has a trying time even of that. The intuitive navigational skills of the bushman elude him: a trip to the wilderness finds him camped alongside the Adelaide - Port Augusta railway line (51). To his mind, the bush defies logic (51). Ironically, it is his wife, Hazel, who possesses the skills traditionally associated with the Australian male. Unlike Lawson's heroine, who merely survives the hateful bush, Bail's Hazel loves the outback. The bush is the site of a family holiday, not the ground upon which a (typically Australian) woman's fortitude and endurance is tested. But while Hazel is clearly "in her element" in the bush (51), she was not born to it. Bail makes this paradigmatic outback type a "city girl" *posing* as a "country woman," as if she'd been one "all her ruddy life" (47).

Bail further subverts Lawson's story by reversing its values. In this version, Hazel is not blessed with the virtues of passivity and stoicism. Hardly the stern and long-suffering pioneer figure of Lawson's story, this woman throws snowballs and "like[s] to paddle in water" (49). This her husband imputes to a preponderant "silly streak" (49). The dentist, Gordon, does not measure up to the bush standard any better than his wife does. He is a fussy and exacting city-loving professional completely lacking in any of the niceties of mateship. He'll sit in a hot car before he'll share a cup of tea with a drover. Worst of all, perhaps, he cannot keep his wife at home. Significantly, it is Hazel who is off roaming the bush, while her husband is stationed at home with the kids. The dynamics of the bush tradition are thus reversed. Woman is rendered mobile, unstable, irresponsible. Man becomes the

stationary keeper of order. The drover's wife has relinquished her sacred trust, passing the halo to a man--and one, I might add, who is wholly unsuited to the task.

Like Bail's Hazel, the woman of Gambling's story ultimately leaves her husband. However, "The Drover's De Facto" begins by recreating the dynamics of Lawson's story, with the drover mobile and the woman trapped within his house. In this instance, though, it is not a snake that forces her to stay within those four walls (unless, of course, we are speaking metaphorically). Here, it is the drover who poses the central threat, who keeps the woman house-bound. The wife of Gambling's story marries the Lawsonian myth: not one of those "emaciated city boys" (149), but "a real bushie" (150). Her reading of the tradition draws her from the city to the outback: "The romance of the bush overtook her sensibilities. Paterson and Lawson combined to urge her toward a life for which she was uneducated and unprepared" (150). She expects to find an experiential correlate to Lawson's fiction in her bushie's cabin in the country. Instead, she discovers the unauthor/ized story, the drover's "de facto." In this version, the physical threat moves indoors: whereas Lawson's heroine fights snakes and bushfires, Gambling's must contend with physical and sexual abuse, and it is the drover's presence, not his absence, that poses a threat. Gambling exposes the private side of the bush hero's public image. The bush that she discovers "isn't like in the books" (151).

Moorhouse's story, like Gambling's, calls attention to the essentially fictional nature of the myth. His narrator, in fact, has never seen Australia "first hand" (101). He tours the discourse, not the country--and he believes what he reads. He accepts, for instance, the absence of women in colonial narratives: "Now the length of the

journey," he explains, "and the harshness of conditions precluded the presence of women and the historical fact is that for a century or more there were no women in this pioneering country" (100-101). In a sense, Casamaggiore is entirely right: women have been "precluded" by "historical fact." Australian history would have us believe the myth of self-replicating man, as would the Australian literary tradition: the "gospel of mateship" also precludes the presence of women. And it is this gospel that Henry Lawson is said to have preached. With heavy irony, H.P. Heseltine comments on the way this author has been constructed as an "Apostle of Mateship":

In the Australian legend, both the greatness and the typicality [of Lawson] are often ascribed to a single source, the fact that he preached the gospel of mateship. Indeed, in so far as articulate literature is concerned, Lawson may almost be said to have invented mateship.... And, in taking mateship as a major theme of his fiction, so runs the received scripture, he gave us a uniquely Australian vision, a vision of a happy band of brothers marching bravely forward to a political and social Utopia, united in their hatred of tyranny, their love of beer, their rugged manliness and independence. ("Saint Henry" 5)

This is precisely the legend that Moorhouse debunks. His Italian scholar takes this myth to its absurd, but logical conclusion. Mateship replaces wedlock in this country destitute of women: "Australian historians acknowledge the closeness of men under this condition of pioneering and have described it as mateship, or a pledging of unspoken alliance between two men, a marriage with vows unspoken" (101). Moorhouse is certainly playing with the notion of homosexuality, and in so doing, further

undercuts the myth, for the Typical Australian is, first and foremost, heterosexual. More obviously, perhaps, Moorhouse is pointing to the utter absence and fear of women in a country where the female gender is excluded even from *mate*-ing or marriage.

Other values implicit in the bush tradition come under attack by the assiduous Casamaggiore. Through his references to his brother, Giovanni, he constructs another, more contemporary Typical Australian, one who knows "nothing of the droving and culture" (102). This modern Australian is only connected to his rural ancestry by "the weekly ritual called 'mowing the lawn'" (106)--the urban equivalent to the "'hay-making ritual'" (106), according to Franco. Here, Moorhouse is invoking a national stereotype that has recently emerged in popular culture. The new Australian is a suburbanite with a beautifully manicured lawn. He (the typical Australian continues to be male) is a materialist (105) and a sports fan (103). He does resemble his pioneering counterpart in one respect, however: the new Australian, like the old, can always be found wherever fine lager is served (101). In light of the Holden automobile and soccer football (103), the outback legend seems wildly inappropriate. What connection can there be between the noisy, crowded GMH factory where Giovanni works and the lonely, barren bush? Even the sheep have gone urban: today they are housed, Franco tells us, "in the cities in high-rise pens" (100). The image metaphorically speaks to the tenacity of an anachronistic pastoral myth. Despite the fact that the Australian population is overwhelmingly urban, the iconography and values of Lawson's bush continue to be perpetuated.

I said earlier that these stories draw on a complex of codes. Crucial to any reading of this fiction is an understanding of the tradition that it parodies and subverts. Bail, Gambling and Moorhouse test the values of the bush mythology that have come to frame Lawson's story. Their work exposes the limitations of the characteristics and principles that have been constructed as typical and enduring.



### Outside the Frame(s)

In addition to defining a space within, a frame constructs a space without (to be included, I suppose, by another frame which demarcates this lesser space). The othering of women within the bush tradition is by now well-documented.<sup>25</sup> Mateship, the most entrenched and orthodox tenet of social realism, establishes a community from which women are rigourously excluded. Russel Ward's description of the Typical Australian begins: "According to the myth the 'typical Australian' is a practical man..." (16). First and foremost, this figure is *male*. If man constitutes the "space within," woman constitutes the "space without," the margin by which the centre is defined.

Is it significant, then, that the story that has come to typify Australia centres on a female, and not a male, character? Notably, the husband is absent in "The Drover's Wife." This story is not about mateship, but about a woman and her children trying to survive in the lonely Australian outback. While a woman appears to occupy the centre of this word-picture, however, her identity is constructed in relation to a (superior) male norm. The identity of the drover's wife, as her denomination suggests, is circumscribed by the (presence of) the absent drover; she is constructed as Other, as not-male. Bail and Moorhouse, but particularly Jefferis and Gambling, all deconstruct the representation of woman in "The Drover's Wife," exposing the

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<sup>25</sup> Kay Schaffer offers a very detailed analysis of this in her *Women and the Bush*. See also Anne Summer's *Damned Whores and God's Police* and Sue Rowley's "Inside the Deserted Hut: The Representation of Motherhood in Bush Mythology."

ways in which this story has contributed to the othering of woman in Australian cultural discourse. By distancing the reader from Lawson's representation, they de-naturalize the hierarchical system of differences by which woman has been constructed as absence in the bush tradition.

Recall once again Edward Garnett's review of "The Drover's Wife." He writes: "If this artless sketch be taken as the summary of a woman's life, giving its *meaning* in ten short pages, Maupassant has never done better" (125, his emphasis). Perhaps his review can be taken as a summary of a woman's circumscription in literary and critical discourse. One of the uses to which "The Drover's Wife" has been put is the definition, the "summary," of the Australian woman. The discourse that has been generated by Lawson's "ten short pages" has certainly determined her "meaning."

In one way or another, all four contemporary Drover's Wife authors deconstruct the representation that has been formulated for women by the Lawson Tradition. Bail subverts the image. His drover's wife has rejected a matriarchal position. Whereas Lawson's heroine puts her children's safety before her own, Bail's leaves hers to pursue other interests. The drover's wife of this story, furthermore, does not substitute for an absent male. Hazel chops wood and hauls ice because it gives her pleasure, not because her husband isn't there to do it for her.

Moorhouse, on the other hand, dismisses altogether the association made between the drover's wife and Australian women. In Casamaggiore's reading of Lawson, Drysdale and Bail, in fact, women are utterly absent. "The Drover's Wife," he tells us, is a story about a sheep, not a woman. Moorhouse's parody serves to

make explicit the construction of woman as substitute, as the object which poses as subject. Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" signifies the *absence*, rather than the presence, of woman, as Casamaggiore's scholarly study maintains. While Moorhouse draws attention to the anonymity of women in Australian cultural discourse, he does nothing to reverse these conditions. Jefferis and Gambling, on the other hand (perhaps because they have a little more at stake than Moorhouse), do more than simply scrutinize and expose the system of oppositions by which woman is negatively defined. Their stories give weight and importance to the othered half; each of these narratives constructs a presence for the gender that "don't exist" in Australia (Jefferis 156).

Significantly, the drover's wife is almost wholly a male-constructed representation. Prior to 1980 (the publishing date of Jefferis's story), the critics who responded to Lawson's work were, with few exceptions, male,<sup>26</sup> as were the artists who contributed to that discourse. Jefferis's narrator specifically states that her agenda is to "answer" this tradition: "It ought to be set straight," she says. "All very well for them to spin yarns and make jokes but nobody has written any sense about me" (156). Jefferis attempts to wrest this figure from androcentric narratives that have turned women into "sheep or shadows, or silly saints" (160). Hers is the only story to position the drover's wife as narrator. The use of the first person voice here is significant: the gesture draws attention to the ways in which the drover's wife has emerged as "the shadowy other of male investigation" (Thieme 73). Though she has

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<sup>26</sup> I discovered only one female critic: Nettie Palmer.

been presented as the subject of that discourse, she has in fact been its *object*. Jefferis writes into the tradition an opportunity for the drover's wife to reclaim her story: "I better say first who I am" (156). She seizes the position of subject in this rewrite, usurping a hitherto male-possessed right to the power of representation.

Gambling's narrative strategies are less overt. Nevertheless, she too centres on the way women have been othered by the bush tradition. When the protagonist of her story follows her "bushie" to his cottage in the country, she becomes the object of whispers and stories. The neighbours' remarks are not set apart by quotation marks. They are given the same weight and authority as the narrator's comments; both are implicated in the representation of this character. This woman tries to seize control of the narrative: "Can't I tell my side of it?" she asks (157). But her story has already been told: "I heard all I wanna hear from the blokes in town" (157). Significantly, the woman leaves, not because of the sexual and physical abuse, but because she is denied credibility. Her story is accorded no weight in relation to slanderous (*male*) representations of her.

At the end of the story, the drover's wife leaves the bush. Presumably, she will "change the topic" (159), alter the terms of this male construction. The hope inherent in this promise, however, is countered by the suggestion that the story will start again: "Next run to Brisbane," the drover mentally notes, "ask that Katie at Lu-Lu's if she'd like a taste o' the country life" (159). The drover's wife is endlessly replaceable. Her leaving merely creates an opening to be filled again. The "position," then, exists separately from the women who occupy it. "Drover's wife" signifies a function, not a person--a capacity, not a subject.

Gambling's narrative makes conspicuous the construction of woman as office or function: object of male desire, adjunct to a man's story. As Moorhouse so cleverly suggests, woman has been constructed as substitute or code in Australian cultural discourse. His narrator professes that "historically" there was no wife (104), and, indeed, woman has been effectively written out of history.<sup>27</sup> The presence of women has been "precluded" by this tradition (100). In her very detailed and insightful study, *Women and the Bush*, Kay Schaffer examines the ways in which women have been constructed as objects of male discourse in Australia. Citing a number of titles that Lawson has given his stories,<sup>28</sup> she argues that, in bush mythology, women are featured as "appendages to men" (118): "Women are excluded as subjects of representation," she says. "Identity, autonomy and authority are denied them in their own right" (63). Another of Lawson's titles might sum up the position of the female in this discourse: the bush, as Lawson can attest, is "No Place for a Woman."

However, woman is "never simply that which is excluded" (Schaffer 28). She is encompassed in the bush tradition by a series of manoeuvres which assimilates feminine difference to masculine sameness. We see one of these tactics operating in "The Drover's Wife," where woman is placed in the position of man. The drover's

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27 On this subject, Kay Schaffer offers a fitting aside: "Wherever one looks--in the ... cultural studies by Palmer, Hancock, Ward and Phillips, in the writings of literary critics, historians and sociologists throughout the twentieth century--the texts are notable for the absence of reference to woman. This attribute within the texts on Australian nationalism is so pronounced that Humphrey McQueen, in his history *A New Britannia?* ... facetiously includes in his Index the item: 'Women, ignored, page 13'" (30).

28 "His Mother's Mate," "The Drover's Wife," "The Selector's Daughter," "His Adopted Daughter," "The Shanty-Keeper's Wife," "Brighten's Sister-in-Law" and "The Pretty Girl in the Army" (118).

wife acts as her husband's substitute, at one point even donning a pair of his trousers (178). But her role is strictly provisional, and must be relinquished upon her husband's return. Because she is defined in relation to the drover, each one of her accomplishments is evaluated in terms of a male norm. This is precisely the type of "blinded sight" (Jefferis 158) that Jefferis challenges: "men can only see women as being heroines when they do something a decent man would do for them if he happened to be around, like killing a snake or an injured calf, or hauling a rotting sheep carcass out of the well" (156). While the drover's wife is praised for her fortitude, she is constructed as inferior in relation to her absent husband. The drover is the norm against which her efforts are measured.

Constructed as Other, woman becomes an object that is easily mastered. On this point Schaffer bears quoting at length:

when one reads a text or interprets the meaning of landscape or woman as object/other, one takes up the position that it is possible to know it, to master it--the text, the land, the woman, the unknown. This knowledge of the other must be read into the object, then taken away from it and appropriated by the speaker. In a critical gesture, its difference is denied. The otherness of the land/woman or of a text, the multiplicity of meanings, the infinite referentiality of signs are reduced, censored and suppressed in the act of interpretation. Thus, the act of interpretation establishes a relation not only to knowledge but to power. To know the other is to control it by purging its plurality of meanings into a singular representation of 'truth'. (50)

Jefferis's narrator considers the many seemingly innocuous ways that women are constructed as object. Even in casual speech, women are successfully othered. Taking her cue from Casamaggiore's academic treatment of women as sheep, she says:

Our fellows don't go as far as that but often enough they talk about women as though they were animals--'She's in pup,' they'll say, or 'She's running round Bourke like a slut on heat,' or 'Got to get home to the mussus, she's due to drop her foal any minute.' Reason's plain enough; these are things you can own, use, brand--better or worse, batter or curse. (160)

If women are objects, they can be possessed, mastered. Their identity is revoked when they are denied status as subjects.

Jefferis attempts to write for women "a different history" (160). Her incorporation of the work of Lawson, Drysdale, Bail and Moorhouse signals her awareness that she cannot transcend the discourse that has constructed the image of the drover's wife and named it a "summary of a woman's life." She must manoeuvre within and between these narrative prescriptions in order to somehow negotiate a place for women in the bush tradition. Jefferis does this by making evident binary systems of difference embedded within this discourse. Kay Schaffer, in her reading of Lawson's "The Drover's Wife," notes that his story reinscribes a binary which associates woman with the private or domestic sphere, and man with the public one. The wife is able to save the hut--the private sphere--from flood, Schaffer notes, but is unable to save the dam--the public sphere (135). "There are things that a bushwoman cannot

do" (Lawson "Drover's" 178). Sue Rowley provides a further analysis of the "differentiation of gendered space" which she says is "integral to the heroism of the woman": "She does not extend her domain into the bush beyond the yard, and nor is she successful in her struggle against fire, flood or pleuro-pneumonia. But she repels intruders, protects her family and maintains the integrity of her own sphere"(82). If, as many feminist critics have noted, the public sphere is the preferred or dominant half of this binary (a parallel to the male half of a male/female binary), Jefferis makes this conspicuous. But rather than placing women in the public sphere--in the position of the male--she gives weight and importance to the othered half. Her narrator devalues the central plot element of Lawson's story and ascribes value instead to those things that have traditionally been the domain of women, the work that "goes down people's throats or under dirty boots" (158).

Notably, her wife's bravest achievement involves the birth of a child, something a man can never hope to undertake (156). Childbirth, in fact, is shrouded in mystery and secrecy when it is represented by male writers such as Lawson (Rowley 84). The process is one from which men are altogether excluded:

The house becomes a black box, alluring and threatening, but inaccessible and illegible. Men neither observe nor participate in the child[bearing], and nor do those inside respond to their home-comings. The babies are born inside, and the exclusion of men from domestic space seems virtually absolute during childbirth. (Rowley 83)

Jefferis shifts focus to this act exclusive to women, devaluing the central dramatic action of Lawson's story. The night of the snake wasn't "a great and terrible night,"



she says. "Terrible" is losing two children in one day (157). That's the story she told "Mr. Lawson," but he was "more taken by a snake story, the sort that happens to everyone two or three times a year" (157). Snakes become banal in this rewrite, while childbearing, something that, traditionally, has been represented as a commonplace occurrence (a mystery to men, but nonetheless a natural and ordinary phenomenon) is treated by Jefferis as a "great and terrible" event.

Jefferis's narrative replaces the snake in the woodstove with the corpse of an aborted fetus. In so doing she disrupts the Garden imagery of Lawson's story. The archetypal myth which names a *Father* creator (and, significantly, assigns man the role of nomenclator) is overturned by the symbolism of this story which points to woman as the source of life. Jefferis's reference to Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" is, I assume, a further attack, albeit a covert one, on the construction of woman as Eve. In Rossetti's poem, there is no Adam, and the Redeemer figure is a woman, not a man.

The Lawson Tradition ascribes value to the woman who "thinks like a man, acts like a man" (160). Jefferis's story exposes this tendency, deflating the currency that it has had. Both she and Gambling attempt to reclaim the representation of women from the structures of a male-dominated discourse. Gambling ultimately removes her narrator from her debasing and subordinate position within the domestic sphere. The wife's passivity--a quality ascribed to "good" women in bush mythology--is effectually retracted by her final ability to act. She leaves the bush, the hut, and the husband. She will "change the topic"--the dynamics--of a male-inscribed tradition. Jefferis, on the other hand, does not reposition her protagonist. Rather, she

alters the frame, giving weight and significance to the sphere associated with the female gender. She seeks to formulate and institute an identity for women that is not defined negatively in its relation to men. "I'm not the drover's wife," Jefferis's narrator emphatically concludes (160). The stories of both Jefferis and Gambling inscribe woman as *presence* in the Bush Tradition.

## Composing the Picture

In order for Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" to be put to nationalist uses, it must be deemed representative; it must be considered an honest reflection of the land and its people. For this reason, I have argued, Lawson and his stories are dubbed artless in critical discourse. The role that invention and imagination necessarily plays in his stories is minimized by the rhetoric which likens his work to a snapshot. The logic of this simile might run thus: Lawson is trustworthy because he does not fabricate. He documents. He records. Mirror-like, his sketches show Australians who and what they are.

The contemporary Drover's Wife stories dismantle the construction of Lawson (and Drysdale) as faithful reporter. They distance the reader from the conventions of realism. By making salient those operations which, through over-familiarization, have become invisible (Hutcheon *Narcissistic* 24), these fictions remind us that a story is an imaginative construct, not a life-mirror; that words do not reflect the empirical world, but rather construct it. Postmodern parody, in explicitly taking as its referent another instance of discourse, another text, draws attention to these issues, problematizing the relationship between language and experience.

Catherine Belsey gives an especially useful post-structuralist analysis of expressive realism in her *Critical Practice*. Realism, she says, is a theory that functions with the assumption that "[o]ur concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience" (7). Experience--one's encounter with the world--is seen as separate from, and prior to, language (10). The realist text, then, is regarded as a

formulation of something that is anterior to it (13). Saussure's theory of language disrupts the notion of words as nomenclature identifying a given entity (40). "The most revolutionary element in Saussure's position," Belsey says,

was his insistence that language is not a nomenclature, a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms. He argued that far from providing a set of labels for entities which exist independently in the world, language precedes the existence of independent entities, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts. (38)

Our thoughts and experiences, then, cannot be separated from this socially-devised system of signs: the world "would be experienced as a continuum" if language were not created to provide differentiation (40). "Reality" is always mediated by language. To say that a text "reflects" the world, then, is tautological:

If by 'the world' we understand the world we experience, the world differentiated by language, then the claim that realism reflects the world means that realism reflects the world constructed in language. This is a tautology. If discourses articulate concepts through a system of signs which signify by means of their relationship to each other rather than to entities in the world, and if literature is a signifying practice, all it can reflect is the order inscribed in particular discourses, not the nature of the world. Thus, what is intelligible as realism is the conventional and therefore familiar, 'recognizable' articulation and distribution of

concepts. It is intelligible as 'realistic' precisely because it reproduces what we already seem to know. (46-47)

Postmodern parody signals an awareness that experience is mediated through language: the parodic text explicitly refers to another set of signifiers, another text. Bail, Moorhouse, Jefferis and Gambling accentuate the discursive nature of Lawson's story, thereby reminding the reader that Lawson's words do not reflect the nation; they invent it. His Australia is an imagined land; his people are discursive inventions.

Playfully emphasizing this point, Barbara Jefferis creates for her protagonist a house of words: in her story, the wife's hut is "papered floor to roof with pages from the Bushman's Bible" (158). The Bush, she suggests is constructed of stories in the *Bulletin* tradition; the "rotten landscape" was created by Lawson from within his city lodgings in George Street (158). Jefferis is having fun with the fact that the "Voice of the Bush" spent most of his adult life in the city. Nevertheless, Lawson has been named spokesman for the Australian outback. It is this construct that Jefferis dismantles. In her story, Henry Lawson is given the same ontological status as the drover's wife herself, for he is included as a character in that story. The drover's wife essentially meets her maker, "a nice little bloke" who "really listened" (156). With this manoeuvre, Jefferis draws attention to the fact that the author himself has been created by nationalist and literary discourses. The Voice of Australia is a fiction. Like Jefferis's drover's wife, "Henry Lawson" lives in a house of words.

At the foundation of this construct is the discourse which labels Lawson an artless writer--an artist aligned with the "world," not the "word." Jefferis playfully subverts this portrayal. Her narrator tells of the transformation into "Literature" of

an episode in her life. Lawson adds drama and flair to a rather commonplace event: "Mr Lawson made it a great and terrible night," she says. "It wasn't" (156). Nevertheless, the drover's wife tells us, the story was "true enough" (156). The veracity of Lawson's story is judged here by one of his own characters, making any notion of "truth" highly problematic. The drover's wife, furthermore, claims to be the original source of his story. With a gesture that appears to validate the representation of Lawson taking "straight from life," Jefferis suggests that his stories have no "real"--that is, non-discursive--referent.

Murray Bail uses a similar device to foreground questions of truth and representation. His story addresses the critical constitution of Russell Drysdale, who, as we have seen, has been assimilated to the Lawson Tradition. Bail's narrator, Gordon, evaluates Drysdale's painting in terms of the accuracy with which it depicts "real life." The likeness to Hazel, he tells us, is "fair enough" (47), but the painter has not truthfully drawn the landscape of his country:

Drysdale has left out the flies. No doubt he didn't want Hazel waving her hand, or them crawling over her face. Nevertheless, this is a serious omission. It is altering the truth for the sake of a pretty picture, or 'composition.' (51)

Bail's attack here is double-fisted. He is, of course, subverting the traditional construction of Drysdale as an artist with a truly Australian vision. The Drysdale of his story subordinates truth to beauty. At the same time, Bail emphasizes the *fictionality* of any such representation. Like Jefferis, he allows a character in his story to assess the accuracy of Drysdale's art. This manoeuvre undercuts the notion

of art reflecting real life. Bail, like his dentist, holds a magnifying glass to this icon to show that it is "nothing but brushstrokes" (49). The drover's wife can be found on a canvas, "20x24 inches, signed 1/r 'Russell Drysdale'" (47), not in a hut somewhere in the outback of Australia. The artist creates an *imagined* Australia: "You could never find [the] spot" depicted in Drysdale's painting (48), because it does not exist.

By eliminating the existence of an extra-textual referent, these authors upset traditional notions of representation. Literature has been valued for its purported ability to express, through specifically narrated circumstances, general or universal truths. Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" has been applauded for precisely this quality. One critic, as we have noted, calls it a "standard of truth" (Palmer, N. 235). The story, Brian Kiernan explains, "has been structured to present general experience through a particular instance" (xv). Whether or not this is true, Lawson's sketch has certainly been made "universal" by the critical discourse that surrounds it. This construction is targeted in Bail's story. His narrator seizes personal possession of a very public icon--a "universal truth." He makes literal the discourse which claims that the drover's wife is The Australian Wife: as an Australian, he claims her for his own. Bail's story disrupts traditional notions about the relation between art and life. "Universal truths" do not exist independently of language. Lawson's story is considered true and universal because it re-inscribes familiar discursive formulations.

If Lawson's story does not in fact "reflect" the land and its people, his representation may be contested. His stories are narrative contrivances; they are not objective depictions or mirror-like reflections. They are as precarious as language

itself, and thus subject to challenge. The Drover's Wife authors do just this. They strike at the walls of the Australian Literary Tradition, seeking to topple the institutionalized valorization of documentary-type realism, and to construct in its ruins other forms of prose.



### Conclusion: The Circulating Text

When Henry Lawson penned "The Drover's Wife," Australian Literature was hardly an institutionalized tradition. To a certain extent, his stories facilitated the construction of a mythology that might be erected against a dominant British tradition. The harsh and arid bush that he created stridently announced its difference from heather-coloured moors and picturesque lakes, from Dickens's London and Wordsworth's daffodils. Nationalist publications like the *Bulletin*, the *Worker*, and the Brisbane *Boomerang* made the most of Lawson's talent. In a literary market which privileged British material, however, these were the exception, not the rule. Because the values of Britain were so deeply entrenched within the cultural practices of its colony, most Australian writers had difficulty getting published. In a great many of his essays and letters, Lawson fulminates against Australian publishing houses for their perpetual capitulation to British standards. In his "'Pursuing Literature' in Australia," Lawson writes of the economic impossibility of writing in that country. With the exception of the *Bulletin*, he says, Australian periodicals invariably gave space to British writers, dismissing their Australian counterparts with a charge of parochialism (208-209). The writer who stays in Australia, Lawson sullenly predicts, will find his genius "turned to gall, or beer" (210). Writing to Earl Beauchamp in the hopes of procuring a supplement to his exiguous literary income, Lawson says that the

position of purely Australian literature is altogether hopeless in Australia--there is no market. The oldest and wealthiest Daily in Australia

fills its columns with matter clipped from English and American magazines.... Nothing 'goes' well here that does not come from or through England. ("Letter" 225)

He might have added that nothing is read "here" that is not read through the British tradition. Elsewhere, he comments on the practice of evaluating and interpreting the Australian writer in terms of his British and American antecedents:

The Australian writer, until he gets a 'London hearing', is only accepted as an imitator of some recognized English or American author; and, so soon as he shows signs of coming to the front, he is labelled 'The Australian Southey', 'The Australian Burns', or 'The Australian Bret Harte', and, lately, 'The Australian Kipling'. Thus, no matter how *original* he may be, he is branded, at the very start, as a *plagiarist*, and by his own country, which thinks, no doubt, that it is paying him a compliment and encouraging him, while it is really doing him a cruel and an almost irreparable injury. ("Preface" 155, my emphasis)

Lawson rails against being named a "plagiarist" here, but no work is read in isolation. A text is intelligible precisely because it *does* conform in some way to identifiable conventions. The function of the literary critic or reviewer has traditionally been to construct similarities--to fashion continuity. Every writer, in this sense, is dubbed a plagiarist: his or her work is read *through* the work that precedes it; it is read as a repetition of sorts.

If Lawson was, at one time, assimilated to a British tradition, writers in

Australia today must contend with a new colonizer.<sup>29</sup> The Lawson Tradition has been set up as another centre against which all digressions are measured. Lawson is now identified as the "original," while the short story writers who follow him are named "plagiarists"; their work is constructed as a repetition of an originating form. Continuity and coherence are forged by just such a practice, but a tradition becomes a tyrant in its demand for repetition. If Lawson experienced difficulty publishing work that deviated from a British norm, authors sixty and seventy years later encounter similar restrictions when their fiction transgresses an Australian norm. Bruce Clunies Ross notes that even as late as 1972, the Lawson Tradition continued to determine publishing practice--so much so, in fact, that one author indicated that "although he lived in Australia, he had come to regard himself as an alien writer, because he found it so difficult to get his work accepted for publication in the face of the dominant traditions...." (168-69).<sup>30</sup> In his introduction to *The Tabloid Story Pocketbook*, Michael Wilding tells us that in the 1960s and 70s, with the exception of erotic magazines, there was no outlet for anything that did not conform to "the old outback tale and other formulae" (qtd. in Gelder 11). Wilding, together with Frank Moorhouse and Carmel Kelly (joined later by Brian Kiernan and Colin Talbot), established a publication called *Tabloid Story* to "provide space for the variety of stories that weren't being catered" (Wilding qtd. in Gelder 14). Their magazine ran "piggyback" in a variety of host journals. Murray Bail's "The Drover's Wife" was

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29 And, given that a British presence is still manifest in Australian culture (not to mention a profound American influence), these writers are at least doubly colonized.

30 Ross refers here to Dal Stevens.

first published in this way. In an ironic "meeting with history" (Brian Kiernan qtd. in Gelder 13), the host publication for that first issue of *Tabloid Story* was the *Bulletin*, the magazine in which Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" had first been published almost a century before.

The publishing route that Bail was compelled to take sixteen years ago parallels the formal structure of his story: parody is necessarily parasitic. Bail's story rides on the back of Lawson's. In effect, it situates itself within his text, as do the stories of Moorhouse, Jefferis and (to a lesser degree) Gambling. These authors self-consciously flaunt their status as plagiarists. They cannot transcend the discourse that names Lawson the originator of the Australian Tradition; their work is read through the critical constitution of that author and his prose, and their parodies draw attention to their discursive identity as imitators--same-but-different manifestations of Lawson--within that tradition. To a certain extent, then, the Drover's Wife authors reinscribe Henry Lawson's position of canonical privilege.

At the same time, however, they challenge any notion of an original work. Appropriation of another's "property," Hutcheon says, "questions art's accepted status as individualized commodity" (*Parody* 75). These stories contest Lawson's ownership of "The Drover's Wife." Even with the use of his title, they collapse the association typically made between author and story: one must now identify one of four authors when referring to "The Drover's Wife." Legally, a title constitutes the exclusive right to a property. Lawson is not sole proprietor of "The Drover's Wife." He is not the lone source of its meaning(s). And he never was. These stories only make that conspicuous. Meanings lie, "not with the text, nor within past history, but

in the determinate and changing sets of discursive and social relations in which they are continually reproduced in present history" (Widdowson 13). "The Drover's Wife" is a product of its shifting historical, social and ideological positionings across time. Its meanings cannot be attributed to its author alone. In this sense, then, "The Drover's Wife" does not "belong" to Henry Lawson.

Drawing attention to the mutability of language and meaning, Bail, Moorhouse, Jefferis and Gambling interrogate Lawson's story, as well as the discourse which names it a national paradigm, in order to challenge existing readings and to generate new ones. Undercutting the univocal interpretation it has been given, they make "The Drover's Wife" a site of competing discourses. The Australian Tradition is more than just a series of texts. It is a "number of readings and reading assumptions" that have been authorized institutionally (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 176). To restructure this tradition, then, involves more than simply changing its canon of legitimized texts; it entails changing "the conditions of reading for all texts" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 176). The Drover's Wife parodies distance us from hermeneutic practices which, through over-familiarization, have become invisible. As Bail's narrator reminds us, Distance = doubts. We have examined the ways in which these writers distance us from hierarchical oppositions which pit the rural experience against an urban one, male (subject) against female (object), realism against any other form of fiction. These binaries comprise some of the reading strategies perpetuated by Australian literary discourse. By displacing these systems, Bail and the others prepare the way for alternative hermeneutic practices.

At the same time, these authors inscribe their own distance from the tradition. Parody, as we have seen, is to some degree conservative. It signals its continuity with the past. But it also inscribes difference: "Parody," Hutcheon says, "is normative in its identification with the Other, but it is contesting in its Oedipal need to distinguish itself from the prior Other" (*Parody* 77). The target text provides a background against which any departure becomes increasingly visible and defined. This inscription of distance can be seen as an act of emancipation: parody engages the past in order to exceed it. These authors cannot transcend the bush tradition; it comprises one of the frames through which their fiction might be read. But they can, in the words of Anne Gambling, move toward changing the topic. Parody is transformational, liminal; it inscribes a journey from one discourse to another.

Linda Hutcheon has defined parody as a form of "inter-art discourse" (*Parody* 2). This, I think, provides a particularly useful description of what is happening here. These stories predicate fiction as "answerable," and ultimately transformable. Criticism, as it has traditionally been practised, seeks to stop the text: to fix it with meaning, to tie it down with determinacy. Perhaps this is why the authors of the *Drover's Wife* parodies choose fiction as a vehicle to challenge the readings that have been given Lawson's classic text. Most critics proceed with the assumption that the text is a stable referent from which one "gleans" meaning. These stories profess that any fictional work is a site of *reconstruction*. "How much can you tell by a face?" the dentist of Bail's narrative asks (47). His *reading* of Drysdale's painting generates his story. The interpretive act is essentially a creative one. Like the historian, the critic works with textual evidence. While Lawson no doubt intended something quite

specific when he wrote his story, "The Drover's Wife," like any historical event, has been reconstituted in interpretive narratives. These stories attend to the *imaginative* element inherent to any reading. By disrupting notions of objectivity and impartiality, they subvert the authority that has been invested in critical practice. This allows them the leverage with which to prise Lawson's story from its critical and cultural enclosures.

Distance evokes both a there/then and a here/now. In the tension between the two, meaning is formulated. These authors celebrate the inter-space, the *process* of the text. "The Drover's Wife," like the newspaper of Lawson's "Remailed," has travelled "thousands of miles." With every post-ing, its meanings are renegotiated. Bail, Moorhouse, Jefferis and Gambling do not deny the implications of Lawson's work for Australian identity; they simply extend or redraw the imaginative borders that have circumscribed the nation. Australia is still in the writing, even as it is being read. In his *Border Dialogues*, Iain Chambers splendidly articulates this process. "At this point," he says,

tradition, historical memory, 'roots', become important less for themselves, as though tokens of a vanished 'authenticity', and more as suggestive, active signs, stimulating a personal and collective confidence in assembling effective passages through the possibilities of the present. (46)

The story, the tradition, the heritage is set in motion--"circulated"--by the work of Jefferis, Gambling, Moorhouse and Bail. With each "remailing," the Text changes shape--becomes larger, more pliant, almost incapable of being contained by the bit

of string that once held it so tight. "Thus is the magic of the imagination"! (Moorhouse 107).



**Postscript: Another Drover's Wife**

Like the chicken--you know the joke?--I was just trying to get to the other side. To be honest, I had no intention of harming the drover's wife (although you, Mr. Lawson, would make it seem otherwise). And I didn't give a damn about her hut. It was in the way, that's all. I might have gone around it, but all of a sudden she's picking up a stick and coming after me. Baby in one hand, club in the other, she's tripping over her skirts and cussing like the devil himself. The kids are in a frenzy. They're throwing dirt and rocks and everyone is screaming. The earth pounds as I pull across it. Then I see the dog. Before, I could only hear him, behind me, gasping and choking each time he tried to jump beyond his tether. Now I see him coming for me, broken chain trailing behind. A chain is a treacherous ally.

What am I to do, woman? I've got your big black brute of a dog on my tail. Do you expect me to try to outrun him? You give me no choice. I head for the woodpile, which by some miracle is hollow (this I take as a sign: your gods are on my side). I'm safe, for now. But I know I can't stay here. The child--the biggest one--is prepared to tear this pile apart. It's a quick dash to the house, with the dog all of a sudden breathing on my tail, he's that close. But I make it (as the dog crashes into the wall). I make it between the timbers and I'm under the house.

They're still yelling out there. The woman is screaming at the kid to get away from the house. The kid is hitting the outside wall, screeching in a high, thin voice, "I was this close--*this* close!" All of this above a clamorous canine tantrum. The dog is hysterical.

And me? It's been days since I've rested on dirt this damp, this cool. A snake's paradise. Except for the dog. He makes me uneasy. And that woman is deadly vicious. Best just to leave when I can. So my plan is to stay until things quiet down and then I'm out of here, quick smart.

But all this changes when I smell them, same moment as I hear them. They're everywhere scratching and gnawing, little hearts pounding. They know I'm here. Mice. Mmyssssssssss. And possums too I figure. Two, maybe three or four days worth. Can you believe it? She's been hoarding them under her floorboards! Greedy bitch. Don't count on me going anywhere until I've had my fill.

No noise from outside now, and that worries me. I think they are whispering. Yes. They are whispering. Fretting and fussing. They strategize and they deliberate and the best they come up with is this: two tiny saucers of milk. Bait. These are supposed to tempt me out so that the drover's wife can club me to death and feed me to her dog. Barbaric. But in this case it's also funny because I'm lying here so full of mice I can hardly move. BIG temptation. It takes her a full hour to figure out I'm not biting. I'm here for the night, woman. Consider me your guest.

Now she's above me, tearing the blankets off of the beds--shaking them like you would an hysteric. She thinks I'll come flying out of a bedsheet, but I'm not in the house. I'm under it, watching through the cracks in the floor.

Her little family will not stay in the house. They have evacuated, leaving it to me. It's all mine now. It's *my* house. Except the kitchen. The drover's wife thinks she is safe there, because the kitchen has a ground for its floor--no boards for me to slither through. So she herds the children inside, the dog too. She gives them

tea and then makes a bed of the blankets she's collected. All very innocent except that she makes them sleep on the table--the *dinner* table. Am I to interpret this as an offer? A sacrifice to propitiate the snake? I'm not interested in your children, you nasty woman.

Almost midnight. I must have drifted off. Next door, in the kitchen, someone lightly snores, but it isn't the drover's wife. She sits by the fire, compounding her misery. I know her story. She passes the night with memories of bushfires and floods, pestilence and plague. You didn't quite leave out "the wattle" in this story, did you Mr. Lawson? The "heart-broken old mate" and the "sad Australian sunset" are there in every line. Bushfires and floods! Where is your famous sense of restraint? You're a devious man. I see what you're doing: aligning me with calamities and disasters, turning your readers against a poor snake.

Do you know the story of Goriolla, Mr. Voice of Australia? I thought not. Let me ask you a question, writer. Why are you so hard on snakes? Goriolla was a snake. Huge and powerful. His skin glistened purple, green, yellow, orange and red. "The Rainbow Serpent" they called him. He lived in Dreamtime, when Australia was utterly flat. No mountains, no rivers, no gorges, no hills. You say not much has changed. Everlasting, maddening sameness is how you put it, I think. But the legend: Goriolla was anxious to be with his people, so he raked through the land, from South to North, in search of his kin. Beneath his mammoth weight, the flat earth wrinkled and puckered. Creeks were ploughed; valleys were gouged; mountains groaned into being.

The Serpent created Difference. DIFFERENCE!

And so I put it to you, Mr. Henry Lawson: if you truly abhor that everlasting, maddening sameness, why are you so hard on snakes? Snakes start stories--just look at the Bible. Kill the snake and the story ends. I just want out alive.

It must be near one or two o'clock. The dog is farting in his sleep. The woman will not open the door, though, however bad the smell. She holds a handkerchief to her nose, and then laughs like a lunatic. It's full of holes and for some reason, she finds this funny.

She's looking very tired now, very old. Her night of bushfires, floods, pestilence and plague has worn her out, I fear. As for me, I'm feeling rejuvenated. Snakes never grow old. With the first sign of age, we shed our skin. If you weren't so insistent on keeping yours, drover's wife, you too might stay vigorous and young.

There is much you can learn from a snake.

Almost morning, I think. Time for a stretch--once around the hut. It drives the dog crazy when I move, which gives me a distinct sense of satisfaction. I slink close to the wall, close enough that he crams his snout into the crack and risks getting it caught--wouldn't we have fun with that! Such power I have. I move, they move. I'm still, they're still. I get comfortable and, within a few minutes, the woman eases her fist and lets the club fall to the ground. Relax, I won't hurt you. You have my word. I'm afraid that isn't worth much, though. After all, I'm a snake--I speak with

a forked tongue. But then, everyone does. You don't know that yet, but you'll learn. Everyone. Nothing that comes from the tongue is unidirectional.

Daylight approaches. Time to go. I'll thank my host and be on my way. The dog goes wild when I peer through the crack. Barking and bristling and throwing himself at the wall. His fierce yellow eyes are wild with the thought of a chase. The woman scoops up her stick and runs over. She tightens her grip, she lets out a shriek, and then she clubs the dog. "This is between me and the snake," she says.

I didn't realize this was war. I've treated the whole thing too lightly. The woman is looking a little crazed. Her club is poised above her head. She's concentrating on the wall, *willing* me to poke my head through the crack. Someone has to make the first move. I ease out a couple of inches. Her eyes widen, her arm jerks. Preemptive strike: I've swallowed her.

This puts a whole new slant on our relationship. Now I am the host and you are the guest. You slow down my journey--you're hard to digest. But soon I'll be vomiting up your bones. Beneath a stunted, rotten apple-tree, I will spit out whatever remains.

Why did I swallow you, drover's wife? To get to the other side.

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