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## Hitchens returns to bosom of Left to denounce God

COLUMNS

Scott Stephens



For all of the claims that Christopher Hitchens has abandoned his earlier Leftist proclivities, there is at least one point at which he remains an orthodox Marxist. His recent book, *God is not Great*, is a straightforward reiteration of Marx's own critique of religion, albeit in the most splendidly bombastic fashion.

"God did not create man in his own image. Evidently, it was the other way about, which is the painless explanation for the profusion of gods and religions, and the fratricide both between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilisation ...| Thus the mildest criticism of religion is also the most radical and the most devastating one. Religion is man-made."

Hitchens here evokes one of philosophy's most defiant veins: the reduction of the religious impulse to the product of our basest human instincts. He thus places himself within an intellectual tradition that stretches from Kant ("we cannot conceive God otherwise than by attributing to him without limit all the real qualities which we find in ourselves") through Feuerbach ("man — this is the mystery of religion — projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself"), until it finally reaches Marx himself ("the foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man").

But, as one might expect, Hitchens gives this tradition his own contemptuous twist. He is not content just to strip religion of its nobility, to dislodge it from its pride of place as the founding gesture of civilisation — the moment when Homo sapiens, driven by its emerging thirst for transcendence, takes the first step out of the domain of primates by investing certain ritualised practices with meaning.

He goes further, and dismisses religion as little more than the invention of hucksters and frauds who, at every occasion, aim to exploit our innate fears and profit from our listless servitude. Here, again, Hitchens invokes Marx's authority, citing his famous anti-Darwinian quip that "human anatomy

contains a key to the anatomy of the ape” (though he misattributes it to Engels).

His point is that, even as the later manifestations of a process disclose the true nature of its origin, so too the most notorious historical examples of religious fabrication and plagiarism — from Muhammadism and Mormonism to the preposterous ‘cargo cults’ of Melanesia — provide a window onto religion’s murky beginnings.

For Hitchens, the history of religion remains a sordid tale of outright fraudulence preying on a fearful species still trying to master the use of its opposable thumbs. Both sides are thus implicated in the sweeping verdict, “Religion is man-made”.

The basic problem with this depiction is not that it is unnecessarily pessimistic, reducing religion to a quasi-Darwinian universe of predators and prey, but that it is not pessimistic enough. It fails to go to the heart of the matter, quite literally, and identify the full reach of the religious impulse. And it is at this point that Richard Dawkins is at his best.

The great (and perhaps only enduring) achievement of *The God Delusion* is to have radicalised the definition of “man-made”, by transferring the driver behind the religious impulse from those vulgar, primitive instincts — say, fear or predation — to the solipsism of the meme itself. In this book, Dawkins gives his fullest, though by no means best, account of the operations of the “God-meme”, which he first proposed in the final chapter of *The Selfish Gene*.

The meme, according to Dawkins, is a kind of replicating unit of cultural evolution, capable of adapting and spreading from one brain to another. Its logic is its own and its aim is its own survival, even at the expense of its host.

Much like a virus, the meme ...œparasitises... the brain, ...œturning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation.... This is indeed a strangely speculative notion — which Daniel Dennett describes as properly ...œphilosophical... — to find developed by so hard-shelled an empiricist. For, in effect, Dawkins is ascribing to religion a life of its own, transforming it from mere fiction to malignant idolatry. The meme is, as Marx put it, “full of theological subtleties and metaphysical niceties”.

In fact, it was Marx who first identified the enigmatic operations of the meme within economic and social life. In that most bizarre passage that concludes the first chapter of his *Capital*, Marx insists that in order to

The Christopher Hitchens Web

- [Newly Added](#)
- ["The Catholic Bible" by David Brooks \(New York Times, 5/24/07\)](#)
- ["Atheism: Not the Only Cosmic Force" \(Washington Post, 5/23/07\)](#)
- ["Atheism with Attitude: 'Who Do We Serve Now?'" by Anthony Gottlieb \(New Yorker, 5/23/07\)](#)
- ["Thank God for Christopher Hitchens: For he has written the best of the books with good books," by Mark Warren \(Esquire, 4/25/07\)](#)
- ["Praise Him: The best alternative to monster from Jean-Claude Caron's 'No more words'" \(Slam, 5/23/07\)](#)
- ["Atheism of World Bank development \(Lund lead\)"](#)

understand the existence and function of the commodity-form:

“...we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.”

It is this idolatry — which courses like poison through our veins, accentuating the egotism of the life-instinct and parasitising our mammalian drives — that is the real object of Marx’s and Dawkins’ attack on religion. Theirs is a powerful demonstration of the truth of Marx’s dictum, “the criticism of heaven becomes the criticism of earth”: the fight against evil in our time must begin with the opposition to every idolatry, whether religious or economic. And this is the task to which Christian theology must devote itself today.

## **Rabbit proof fence not Jigalong's only barrier**

### COLUMNS

Capital letter  
*Jack Waterford*



One of the lasting images in my mind of the eternal absurdities in Aboriginal affairs comes from the Jigalong community, about 1500 kilometres north east of Perth and about as remote as can be.

This community, on the Canning Stock Route, was in 1977 about 400 people strong, comprised mostly of people who had come in from the desert to the north and the east, and their children and grandchildren. It had, for a time, been in the charge of an Americanised evangelical mission, and there was not a good deal to show in the way of creature comforts, or even basic items such as running water.

Among the kids, evidence of respiratory disease, trachoma, middle ear infection and skin infestation was virtually universal, and about a sixth of the people aged 60 or more were legally blind, generally from corneal disease and cataract. The only discernable source of water was a tap near an administration office.

But there were some things of which it was not short. On the wall in the admin office was one of a host of attractively presented posters prepared by the Western Australian Department of Health. One should wash one's hands after going to the toilet, it said.

I was discussing this, years later, with a (white) former denizen of those parts, who remembered visiting the community about 10 years later, delivering water by truck as a gesture from a nearby (300 kms away) mining company. In the same admin office, he said, was a delivery of mail which had just arrived, containing an unsolicited Gold American Express card for virtually every resident.

Had these been enthusiastically used to build up a massive pile of debt all over Western Australia, I think I would have cheered, but I very much doubt that the marketing exercise cost American Express much. There are not a great many Amex-taking businesses in those parts, or, for that matter, not an enormous number of people who can sign their own name.

It's quite a while since I've been back to Jigalong, but I would be prepared to bet a fair sum of money that there has not been a lot of discernible material or spiritual progress in the lot of its inhabitants. Sooner or later, however, a man from the Government will be along to offer them what will appear on its face the equivalent of the Amex card, together with some advice about as useful as the Department of health poster.

It will be the prospect of their own individual land title — or at least a 99-year lease over the bit of dirt upon which their shack, if they have one, is constructed. And a very generously subsidised mortgage with which to buy the shack will be offered — perhaps even the money to build a bigger one.

I do not expect haciendas. One cannot, apparently, get a mortgage unless one's income is \$15,000 per annum, at which point the interest rate will be zero, together with various bits of help, such as a thing called a co-payment grant of \$25,000 over ten years, an establishment grant of up to \$13,000 (for legals, furnishing etc), a 'good renters discount' of 20 per cent on the sales price and 'money management education'.

Mortgages can be up to \$300,000 — a bit problematic since it has proven impossible for mining companies, Aboriginal housing trusts, or, for that matter, privatised contractors hired by government appalled at Aboriginal incompetence, to build decent houses for anything like this in such places. Once one buys, of course, maintenance will be up to the buyer, which is somewhat problematic given that one should spend a minimum of about \$25,000 a year in routine maintenance of even well-built dwellings in those parts.

No Aboriginal housing body is funded to do any such thing, of course, one of the reasons why, as the Minister responsible for Aboriginal affairs, Mal Brough, complained late last year that "we have invested around \$2 billion in indigenous housing over the past 10 years without an appreciable increase in the number of houses".

The schemes will turn in part on improving rental housing services, and upping the shanty-ante, or rent, in such a way calculated, no doubt, as to make purchase attractive. That a good many people in places like Jigalong get significantly less than the dole because they subsist on work-for-the-dole schemes may also mean that many will find the \$15,000 income minimum a bit of a glass ceiling.

Given the gap between the cost of providing houses and \$300,000, even for those who can, as it were, smash this ceiling, the chasm between cost and value, and the lack of a real market for houses, it will be a challenge for

banks, valuation agents and others to determine the fair price for a house. My guess is that, willy nilly, government will fund the gap with even less accountability than before, and that building companies, at least, will make a good deal of money.

There may be other conditions involved. Mal Brough was recently saluting the beginning of a process by which a few families in a Northern Territory outstation were put on the path, as it were, to eventual home ownership after being rented some houses. If they are good tenants, and if they send their kids to school, they will be allowed to start buying in two years. My guess is that the notional value of the house on sale will be about a quarter of the cost of construction, and that the length of the heavily subsidised mortgage will be about 10 years longer than the present actuarial calculations of the owners' likely life spans.

It looks, rather, that it is yet another variation of the notion that one can create economies out of everyone taking in each other's washing. If that is to be the case, it will not only be yet another cruel hoax on Aborigines, but a cruel hoax on taxpayers, many who want to see real progress for Aborigines, and who are being conned, by ministers and others, into thinking that this is on the way.

But silly as some of this seems, there may be some good ideas behind it. At the least, anyway, the direction of some of the changes is no more absurd, and no more calculated to fail, than some of the policies it is replacing, and anyone who thinks so is as much the problem as those whose faith in the new system blinds them to what one might charitably describe as the teething problems.

Remote Aboriginal communities suffer greatly from the undeveloped nature of their economies, and the institutional barriers we have created to prevent them developing. A good number of these barriers come from well-meaning but stupid ideas about cooperatives, petty socialism, antipathy to petty capitalism and distrust of markets.

It is, for example, generally agreed that cooperatively-owned stores in remote communities have inferior ranges of items for sale, often nutritionally inadequate, and sell goods for up to 50 per cent more than stores elsewhere. Moreover they are often badly managed, often defrauded (usually by imported white 'professionals' who escape punishment), invariably make no profits to reinvest, and provide little in the way of local employment, or worthwhile experience in self-management.



Organisations such as Woolworths and the Hollows Foundation are working hard to deal with some of these problems, but the biggest problem, it seems to me is that such stores are monopolies and that there has been, at least until Government recently has begun pushing for it, no competition. In even largish communities, moreover, there has been little evidence of the sort of small businesses — hairdresser shops are my favourite example — which even small villages have.



A major part of the Government's thrust is to get competition, and markets, going in such places, which could, or should, itself play some role in increasing the amount of economic activity and stopping the present cycle by which a great deal of the money spent on communities never gets there at all, or is immediately spent, from the community, on something imported from elsewhere. A market for housing, instead of uninspired management of housing cooperatives, is a part of this, not least if the encouragement of some entrepreneurialism brings in outsiders needing housing they must buy.

The cynic, however, must notice that the longest single document on the website of the Office of Indigenous Policy website is a report on how to get rid of red tape in Aboriginal communities. A quick reading suggests that its length is due to the fact that it doesn't think it a really bad problem.

## **Recherche Bay researcher aided natural beauty preservation**

AUSTRALIA

*Peter Pierce*



Out of sight as one looks south from Hobart's wharves is the end of the world, or at least Antarctica. From this point in the city the Derwent has already begun to spread grandly as it nears its mouth in Storm Bay. This mild late April morning we were to head down river by catamaran to the far south-east of Tasmania, to Recherche Bay.

This is one of the French names sprinkled along the coasts of the island. It comes from a ship of Rear-Admiral Bruni D'Entrecasteaux who made landfall in 1792 and 1793 while vainly searching for the expedition of lost compatriot, La Perouse. D'Entrecasteaux bestowed his own names on Bruny Island and on the long, sheltering strait that separates it from the Tasmanian mainland.

The catamaran pulled away from the pier, leaving behind a shipchandler and the art deco Telegraph Hotel, passing the wheat silos that disfigured the southern end of Salamanca Place and are now apartments. Behind the city the mountain loomed blue-black. As the boat picked up speed so did the yellow-billed Australian gannets that playfully kept pace. By the sheer alum cliffs of Tarooma we idled, better to see the sharp geological dividing line between sedimentary rock and red molten dolerite. In the lee of Bruny Island are Atlantic salmon pens, the small, yacht-filled bay of Kettering.

From here on south the industries of the nineteenth century have left traces: observation posts for bay whaling, overgrown tramways that had brought coal and timber down to the water's edge. Pods of dolphins frolicked in the bow waves and a seal indolently basked with flippers in the air. Far behind the mouth of the Huon River (name courtesy of the French) the Hartz Mountains rose into the clouds.

Then we were out of the channel and into Recherche Bay. We cruised past the remnants of the garden that the French had planted here in 1792, a nine by seven metres plot, in the event that they would return. So they did the following year, enjoying two peaceful contacts with large groups of

Aborigines by Little Lagoon Beach. The two French stays totalled fifty days (about the same time that Cook spent far to the north while the Endeavour was repaired).

Here they botanised, collected specimens, made geo-magnetical investigations, and wondered about the 'noble savage' whom Rousseau had tutored them to expect. The French left no traces in stone. These would come later, from whalers, miners, timber-getters, for instance in the ruins of the Sawyers' Arms on Fishers Point looking out into the Southern Ocean and — while it raucously lasted — the most southerly pub in Australia.

By the mid-nineteenth century these industries of the area were in decline. The French presence was barely recollected. Recherche Bay was most famous in popular memory for an act of piracy in 1829 when convicts seized the brig Cyprus on its way to Macquarie Harbour and sailed away into legend and literature, memorialised in ballad by 'Frank the Poet' and in fiction, in an episode in Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*.

So it was that when — five years ago — the North East Peninsula of Recherche Bay was threatened with logging, the heritage importance of the area had to be freshly and strenuously established. Here was one of those familiar and always disquieting Tasmanian conservation fights, between loggers and greenies, owners and interlopers, progress and ideology. Or so it first appeared.



The issue was complicated by the work of a local historian, Bruce Poulson, whose book *Recherche Bay* reviewed more than two centuries of European presence in the district, besides the Aboriginal occupation for thousands of years. It was crucial in confirming the cultural and historical importance of Recherche Bay. If Tasmanian forests could be logged more or less with impunity, the 'past' deserved more tender care, no matter how little of it could be seen.

The ensuing battle was a draw. Leadership of the attempt to prevent logging fell to Bob Brown. With financial support from the entrepreneur Dick Smith, 140 hectares of land was purchased from the owners. In 2006 it passed into the control of the Tasmanian Land Conservancy. Smith's intention is that the money should be repaid, but then diverted to other conservation projects. This sane compromise in a quiet place at the bottom of Australia ought to be exemplary, but is more likely to be singular. As we surfed the ocean swell before finding calmer water, the day closed in. The catamaran travelled in an envelope of grey rain and Recherche Bay was left behind, if not exactly as the French found it, then safe from immediate

harm.

*In memory of Bruce Poulson (9/2/38-4/5/07), who passed away during the writing of this article.*

## Justifying civil disobedience

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*



Suddenly we're hearing talk of civil disobedience. Until recently, the term has been associated almost exclusively with protest movements of the mid to late 20th century. It is easy to recall television coverage of protesters tied to trees, obstructing lawful logging operations in the forests of south-eastern Australia. But in recent days, ABC Radio National has [reported](#) on plans for acts of civil disobedience designed to do the exact opposite — destroy trees.

Rural landowners are said to be planning a day of civil disobedience on 1 July to clear native vegetation from their land, in defiance of laws enacted to counter ongoing damage to the global ecosystem. This follows revelations that a farmer flouted the law by bulldozing a large tract of land in the environmentally sensitive Gwydir wetlands in northern NSW.

I have no hesitation in agreeing with Environment Minister [Malcolm Turnbull](#), who pledged that those who are found to have broken the law will be dealt with through the courts.

"If people are breaking the law, just because they think there's some point of principle involved, there's no protection", he told ABC Radio.

However I must appear slightly hypocritical when *Eureka Street* has consistently supported symbolic acts of civil disobedience in other circumstances. Earlier this year, we interviewed [Fr John Dear SJ](#), who carries on the Berrigan brothers' tradition of non-violent protest against war. Dear, who was visiting Australia from the US, has been arrested more than 75 times.

We also admire the four [Christian activists](#) in court this month after being arrested for trespassing at the Pine Gap intelligence base near Alice Springs. The group, which includes Iraq "human shield" Donna Mulhearn, conducted what they describe as a "Citizen's Inspection" of Pine Gap military base last year. Mulhearn asserts that the group is challenging the Government's

attempts to silence public criticism of US military bases in Australia. On Tuesday, Justice Sally Thomas sided with the defendants when she denied a prosecution attempt to curtail their “political” activities by putting them under house arrest.

The answer to our quandary about apparently supporting the civil disobedience only when we disagree with the laws, has to lie in an assessment of whether the action is fundamentally destructive. We would contend that removing trees and other vegetation from the land is certainly destroying ecosystems and, in the long-term, the sustainability of human life on the planet.



On the other hand, the actions of the Pine Gap Four are symbolic. Trespassing does violate the law, but what they did was essentially an act of free speech. It is true that such protests often involve surface damage to military installations, through graffiti and cutting fences. But the real damage is to the resolve of policymakers to wage war.

## No place for truth in citizenship training school?

HUMOUR

*Erasmus*



*It's an ordinary day at the Citizenship Traditional School...*

*Mr Chips:* You have done admirably well, Ranesh, on the rivers, the animals, the flowers and the Prime Minister. Now turn to the next question. What do we call the heads of state governments?

*Ranesh:* Dickheads, sir, at least that's what all my mates at work call them.

*Mr Chips:* Nothing your mates might say surprises me, Ranesh. But the correct title is premiers. Remember it. Next, tell me where did the first European settlers to Australia come from?

*Ranesh:* Well, I suppose most of them came from England. But can we be sure that some of them did not really come from Ireland?

*Mr Chips:* You are always splitting hairs, Ranesh. They came from England. Where did they come from? England. Remember the answer. Next question: which is the most popular sport in Australia — cricket, table tennis, water polo or ice hockey.

*Ranesh:* It's got to be out of table tennis and cricket, Sir. In my brother's school everybody plays table tennis and hardly anybody plays cricket. Same with my friends. So table tennis must be the most popular.

*Mr Chips:* Nonsense, Ranesh. Only nerds play table tennis. Popular means what sponsors pay big money for on television. The correct answer is cricket.

*Ranesh:* But is that what popular really means, Sir? If this is a test for citizenship, shouldn't they encourage us to use English accurately?

*Mr Chips:* Don't be insolent, Ranesh. Your previous schools have made you think too much. This is a traditional school and insists that you give right answers, not ask questions. Now concentrate on the next questions about values. Tell me which of these are Australian values? Men and women are equal, a fair go, mateship, or all of them?

*Ranesh:* I don't think a fair go can be an Australian value, Sir. They

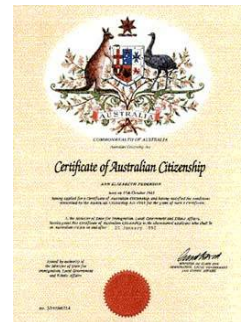
dumped my Uncle Vinu on Nauru. And Workchoices certainly isn't fair. And in the streets people seem scared of one another — they only behave like mates when they're drunk. So mateship can't be an Australian value. So the Australian value must be that men and women are equal. But ...|

*Mr Chips:* Ranesh, I told you to concentrate, not to think. They are all Australian values. The Government has said so, and that's that.

*Ranesh:* But isn't truth an Australian value? Our granny told us never to give untrue answers to Australian officials. And can they really be Australian values if the Government doesn't pay any attention to them ...| OK, sorry sir, I'll try not to think any more.

*Mr Chips:* Good man, Ranesh, you're learning our Australian ways. Last question, then. What are Australia's values based on: the Koran, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Catholicism or Secularism? Quick!

*Ranesh:* We studied a lot about values at my school, Sir. But it's not easy to answer the question. I don't think any of the answers are accurate. Greek philosophers like Plato, Roman law and Roman speakers like Cicero have all helped shape our values. And none of the answers include them. So whichever answer I give will be untrue.



*Mr Chips:* Don't be difficult. It's the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and traditions can include anything you like to put in them. Those chaps you mentioned were honorary Christians.

Now Ranesh I've told you before, and I'll say it for the last time, these citizenship questions are about Australian values. They're not about truth or being accurate or wondering. Our business at the Citizenship Traditional school is to help you pass the traditional Government tests in literacy and numeracy. Numeracy means that you must answer half the questions to pass, and literacy means you need to remember what the right answer to each question is. Now take the questions home and memorise the right answers.

*Ranesh:* If you say so, Sir.



## Few Aboriginal digital citizens 40 years after referendum

MEDIA

The Net

*Margaret Cassidy*



The AFI award-winning film *Ten Canoes* was shown in Sydney to mark the significant anniversary of the referendum that legally recognised the original inhabitants of Australia. It is the first feature film to be shot almost entirely in an Aboriginal language (predominantly Ganabingu).

*Ten Canoes* uses the medium of film to tell some of the collective stories of the Yolngu people from a remote area of the Northern Territory. The film was developed using an approach based on the common experience of the group.

Firstly, the narrative and approach of the movie were developed by the community with the director, Rolf de Heer. The community controlled its content down to deciding on the cast. They used the film to bring to life some of the 4000 black and white glass plate photographs taken by Dr Donald Thomson, an anthropologist who lived among the people of Arnhem Land in the 1930s.

[These photographs](#) held in Museum Victoria captured many aspects of Yolngu culture including the traditional annual bark canoeing expedition to hunt magpie geese and collect their eggs as depicted in the film. The modern Yolngu had not maintained the traditional skills including making the bark canoes and tools used for housing and hunting.

The film makes use of both black and white and colour. The tale of the Yolgnu ancestors from 1,000 years ago is presented in black and white. The main dramatic story — a cautionary tale about the magpie goose hunting expedition — is presented in colour.

This unusual movie became the nucleus for a number of additional canoe projects. *Eleven Canoes* introduced a video media course into the town of Ramingining to teach documentary making to the young people of the community. This contributed content to the interactive *Twelve Canoes*

[website](#) where the people of Ramingining display the aspects of their environment, culture and people they wish to communicate to the outside world .

The digital media project *12 Canoes* is a broadband website that presents, in an artistic, cultural and educational context, the stories, art and environment of the Yolngu people who live around the Arafura swamp in north-eastern Arnhem Land. The Yolngu people of the Arufura swamp are few in number, but their wealth of stories and artwork highlights who they are, and the importance of acknowledging and preserving their culture. In this context the website is an important reference and educational resource.

In *12 Canoes*, Ganalbingu-Yolgnu heritage will be presented through the works and stories of key community members. By way of kinship they are the owners and managers of stories and history and are bestowed with the responsibility for telling them. While they are the keepers for the collective, their individuality will present aspects of their present and everyday lives in their hometown of Ramingining.

In this way, the Yolgnu community's use of new media is very traditional in terms of the level of control they retain as a collective group over the representation of their life. Individuals are not the focus of this approach, nor are individuals encouraged to have their own voices and views.

However, many of the collaborators and key actors in *Ten Canoes* are artists in their own right and have their own online presence away from the movie. Crusoe Kurddal is renowned for his [large mimih sculptures](#) and his works were permanently installed in the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Yiribana Gallery when it opened in 1994.

The [Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation](#) is an Aboriginal owned and controlled community arts centre located in Ramingining which features the work of, among others, actor Richard Birrinbirrin.

[Lead actor](#) Peter Minyngululu paints the story of his father's country — the land around Mirrngatja on the eastern side of the Arafura Swamp and one of the sites visited by the Wagilag Sisters.

The story of the Wagalak (or Wagilag) Sisters, a creation story told across Arnhem Land, is brought to life in the [Dust Echoes project](#) .

Other people of the Ganalbingu include Daphne Banyawarra, didgeridoo maker and academic at Charles Darwin university who has contributed the views, thoughts and memories of the life of the Yolngu in [her profile](#) on the



[website](#) of the iDIDJ Australia.

However, Daphne Banyawarra does not even begin to approach the level of continually updated and expanded thought found in most blogs.

Blogs about Australian indigenous issues tend to be authored by the politically active non-indigenous supporters of Aboriginal rights such as the Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) in order to communicate with their [online supporters](#) .

White eyes looking in on a community is the focus of the [non-political blog](#) of Dianne Isgar who is an Art Centre Manager for the [Papulankutja Artists](#) . Dianne's blog captures some aspects of life for for the [Western Desert Mob](#) in the remote area of Ngaanyatjarra Lands in Western Australia Australia.

Dianne's blog has also been discovered by US-based Aboriginal art collector [Will Owen](#) who is producing an ongoing series of personal reflections and readings on the art of the indigenous people of Australia, their culture, anthropological studies and the art market.

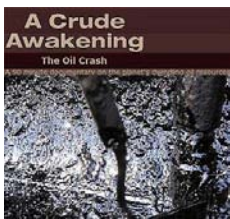
## Inconvenient truths and crude awakenings

FILM REVIEW

Documentary

*Tim Kroenert*

***A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash.* 84 minutes. Rated: G.  
Directors: Basil Gelpke, Ray McCormack**



If Al Gore's global warming documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* could be accused of being sensationalist, no such allegations could be levelled against *A Crude Awakening*.

This is a level-headed, but no less unsettling, documentary in which liberal and conservative voices — primarily scientists and politicians, rather than environmentalists — agree that there's an oil crash coming, and it's coming soon.

If you're looking for pat answers, or even signs of hope, you won't find them here. This film is bleak. It documents compelling economic and cultural arguments that add weight to the warning environmentalists have been sounding for years: when the oil runs out — and it has to, eventually — it will drastically, permanently change our world.

In fact, the only point on which some talking heads disagree is just how severe the fall-out is going to be for our fossil fuel-addicted world once dwindling supplies reach crisis point. Some suggest humankind will win the race to discover an alternative, sustainable fuel source. Others are less optimistic, and predict society as we know it will unravel.

While the film is geared towards the United States, which still consumes some 25 per cent of the world's oil, there's little doubt that there are global implications for the impending oil shortage, especially in westernised countries such as Australia.

And although the suggestion by one interviewee that "oil is the excrement of the devil" initially comes across as melodramatic, as the film goes on to portray the centrality of oil to the major wars of the past century, as well as its lack of long-term value as a natural resource, you may well find yourself agreeing with her sentiment.

Footage of towns now lying decrepit after having previously prospered on the back of local oil industries are emotive, and stand as a frightening allegory for what society could become once it has careened down the slippery slope beyond peak oil production.



Al Gore's film ended with a call for each individual to make a change in their own life; *A Crude Awakening*, on the other hand, puts the responsibility for change squarely with politicians, although it points out that change won't occur from a political level without the general public rallying and demanding that the issue be addressed.

If the documentary is somewhat dry, that's because this is a serious issue that's deserving of straight-faced discussion followed by serious, committed practical response.

## Why is it so hard to say sorry?

### FEATURES

Ursula Stephens



It is a sad, sad situation — indigenous peoples, marginalised since white settlement, living a substandard existence among non-Indigenous Australians who are among the healthiest, wealthiest and best-educated populations in the world.

It's now 10 years since the *Bringing Them Home* report exposed the horror of the stolen generations and 40 years since Aboriginal Australians won the right to vote in the historic 1967 referendum.

Linda Burney, in the 2007 Vincent Lingiari lecture gave a new generation's voice to both the significance of the 1967 referendum and the continuing injustices that Indigenous people endure.

These anniversaries are reminders of the importance of 'sorry' in the reconciliation process.

Why is it so hard to admit that most human of qualities, fallibility? Regret, atonement and forgiveness lie very much at the core of spiritual values. John Howard's refusal to say sorry to Aboriginal Australians is a denial of an unsavoury truth in the face of irrefutable evidence, and as such demeans us as a nation. His intransigence has created an impasse in the Australian psyche, allowing no room for forgiveness, healing or hope.

What mother would teach her child that the right way to deal with a mistake is to sweep the facts under the carpet, ignore the evidence and hope with time no one will remember and all the evidence will have disappeared? Mistakes are made all the time which are neither necessarily intended or directly our fault. They happen in all kinds of relationships and circumstances: each of us can point to an experience when something was done that we wished undone.

Here in Australia, we have before us the possibility of a bright future for everyone, so long as we face the truth. Our young people — indigenous, migrant, and descendants of settlers over the generations — are all entitled to know the beauty and interest of a life that is open, not closed. A life

where questions are valued more than acquiescence, where real difference is recognised as superior to superficial stereotypes, and where saying sorry for wrong actions, hard as it may be, is a necessary step righting the injustice and creating a better world.

What happened to the Stolen Generation was wrong. This has to be acknowledged and the regret articulated, so that as a nation we can face the truth. We owe it to our future Australians to do so with courage. They learn from us, and they in turn will make mistakes — and find themselves having to apologise for the mistakes they have inherited from us.

We can show them other cases where regret and atonement have created an environment where optimism and good will triumph over hopelessness and despair. In the new Northern Ireland Assembly the world rejoices in a situation that not so long ago would have been regarded as impossible. After centuries of sectarian violence and hatred, the Irish people have voted overwhelmingly to sit down together and acknowledge the futility of continuing the hurt. This momentous decision will change Ireland forever.

Since the Mabo ruling in 1992, demands for reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians have been increasing — both for the kind John Howard refers to as practical reconciliation, and for the more progressive substantive kind which will transform the living conditions and opportunities of indigenous peoples in contemporary Australia.



It is always hard to admit to any wrong, and of course much more so to admit to historical atrocities and systematic human rights violations ...] but outright denial is not an option, and sweeping the truth under the carpet leaves a nasty bump that will trip somebody up. The decent thing to do is to issue a formal apology to indigenous peoples for past sufferings and injustices. Let us hope that before his star fades from the political sky, Mr Howard finds it in his heart to do so.

Almost overshadowing these important anniversaries was the media coverage of Therese Rein's underpayment of employees in a company she took over. This is another case of someone required to take responsibility for past wrongs she did not commit. The situation was "embarrassing", but Ms Rein faced the unsavoury truth with courage and candour, apologised and took steps to redress the wrong.

Sorry shouldn't be the hardest word, should it?

## **A nuclear reactor in my back yard**

### FEATURES

*Colin Brown*



In the 1980s, I bought my first house, a fibro cottage situated on the Woronora River which flows through Sydney's Sutherland Shire catchment. The river cuts through Sutherland's sandstone and eucalypt-covered escarpment and runs into the Georges River, then Botany Bay. It is better known as the site of the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor.

Over a quarter of a century later, my memories of life on the Woronora are still remarkably vivid. Just as vivid is my recollection of a meeting I attended at a hall in the Woronora village in 1980.

Speaking at this meeting was Sister Rosalie Bertell, a visiting American nun of the Sacred Heart congregation. I was surprised to discover that this wiry and gentle nun possessed impeccable academic credentials in several scientific fields. She was in Australia to take on the might of the nuclear power industry. It was a Rosalie and Goliath battle.

Before visiting Australia, Sister Rosalie had just completed comprehensive research irrefutably disclosing excessive cancer deaths in humans, particularly leukaemia, linked to exposure to nuclear radiation. The few staff members of the Lucas Heights Atomic Energy Commission who attended the meeting of local residents, reportedly to ...œkeep on eye... on this troublesome nun declined to make any public contribution when invited.

Sister Bertell later testified before the Government's Select Committee on Uranium Resources. She opened my eyes at that meeting to the dangers of leaked radiation, the problem of safely storing and transporting nuclear waste, and to the lack of an emergency evacuation plan for the local community. She shone a light on what had been a place of secrecy — the 'big cracker', as the locals called it.

The nuclear debate is gathering momentum. Should we dig more uranium out of the ground? Should we export it? And should we construct more nuclear reactors in Australia?

I am not a scientist, but as an environmental lawyer I have my own



serious concerns about the morality of building more nuclear reactors in Australia and bequeathing untold quantities of deadly radioactive waste to generations yet to be born.

Recently the Australian of the Year, Professor Tim Flannery said that Prime Minister John Howard was wrong to say that climate change is not the major moral issue facing Australians. Many thousands of Australian men and women, conversant with the contents of the UN's latest Intergovernmental Panel on climate change, the Stern Report on the economics of climate change, recent reports from CSIRO and the Al Gore movie *An Inconvenient Truth* would disagree with the PM.



Most authoritative scientific evidence demonstrates that the planet is heading for catastrophe and unprecedented human suffering unless we radically curb our greenhouse gas emissions.

For the almost one billion fellow humans that go to sleep tonight without adequate food or clean drinking water, the scientists' dire warnings mean little. The struggle to survive another day is the only issue that matters. To remedy this situation is surely a major moral issue facing us all.

It might surprise many Catholics to know that the great Pope John XXIII as far back as 1961, raised his concerns about care for the earth. Subsequent Popes, including Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II and Benedict XVI have all made impassioned addresses on the moral obligation of Christians to respect and protect the integrity of God's Earth.

The late Pope John Paul II, in his many encyclicals, homilies, writings and speeches over 27 years, consistently called for a deeper respect for and increased nurturing of the planet's ecosystems. In his 1990 World Day of Peace address, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation" John Paul II called for "urgent education in ecological responsibility" and added, "I wish to repeat that the ecological crises is a moral issue".

The Australian Catholic church has been actively involved in the environmental debate for some years. The 2005 Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter 'Climate Change - Our Responsibility to Sustain God's Earth' refers to the phenomenon of climate change as "possibly the most critical issue facing humanity".

It goes on to say that, "Every creature, every species, the Earth itself, and the entire expanding universe display the grandeur of God. This means that the wonderful inter-relatedness that ecologists find in the biosphere on

Earth, and the interrelatedness that science discovers at all levels from quantum physics to cosmology, is all sustained at every moment by the Creator. We are intimately interconnected with the whole life-system of the planet and the complex interaction between other living creatures and the atmosphere, the land and the water systems.”

To the meditative mind, the original delight of the Creator continues to be palpable and all pervading in this unfolding of creation.

In the light of these passages, I have an uneasy feeling that in a nuclear power plant, the process of nuclear fission which involves the violent breaking open of a large atom (usually uranium 235) in order to release energy stored in that atom for thousands of years, fails to fully respect the natural rhythms of nature. It is difficult to imagine the Creator taking delight in a process that so blatantly disregards the call for the safeguarding of the integrity of creation as understood in the Catholic Church’s body of social teaching.

Renewable energies such as wind, solar, biomass and geothermal energy, properly supported, harnessed and developed can surely provide Australians with climate friendly energy and increasing employment opportunities into the future.

Rather than export Australian uranium, let’s proudly export our innovative and clever alternative clean technologies to the world to ensure it is a safer and cleaner place.

In a Vatican address that John Paul II gave in 2001, he recalled the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986. This disaster exposed some 5 million people, of which 1.2 million were children, to nuclear radiation. “In recalling the tragic effects caused by the Chernobyl nuclear reactor, one’s thoughts go to future generations represented by these children”, the Pontiff said. ...œIt is necessary to prepare a future for them, without fear of similar threats,... he added. “This is a commitment for all. It is necessary that a common scientific, technical and human effort be made to put energy at the service of peace, in respect of man’s and nature’s needs. The future of the whole of mankind depends on this.”

## Time to plan for migration forced by climate change

### FEATURES

Environment

*David Corlett*



An unseasonal week of warm weather had people in my hometown celebrating the benefits of climate change. We joked that our homes, in fifty years or so, would be prime real estate; that by then, we would live in a tropical climate and with rising sea levels and the erosion of the coastline, we would have beach frontage.

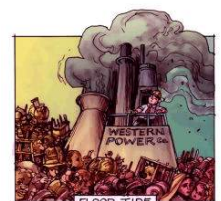
Yet the impact of climate change on the movement of people around the world — more often than not, the poorest — is almost entirely absent from public debate.

A British non-governmental organisation, Christian Aid, recently released a report, [\*Human Tide: The Real Migration Crisis\*](#), describing the impact of climate change on forced migration. If the figures contained in the report are to be believed, there is good cause to be alarmed.

Extrapolating from current trends, *Human Tide* suggests that between now and 2050, one billion people will be forced to leave their homes. One billion human beings! That is equivalent to the entire population of India. Of this one billion people, a quarter — more than the population of Indonesia — will be “permanently displaced by climate change-related phenomena such as floods, droughts, famines and hurricanes”.

During recent budget estimates hearings, Greens Senator Kerry Nettle pressed Immigration Department officials about their planning for climate change-related migration. She was told that the department monitors the literature and the studies on climate change, but that it has no specific contingency for the sort of outcome described in *Human Tide*.

Indeed, reading the transcript of the estimates hearing suggests that the department is not altogether serious about the issue. According to Peter Hughes, Acting Deputy Secretary in the department, “It is not a necessary conclusion that international migration would be the direct consequence of climate change because, for example, in many circumstances



an internal movement within a country — depending on the size and nature of the country — would be a solution, as opposed to international migration.”

There is some truth to the assertion that the effects of climate change may be met in some instances by internal and not international migration. But Hughes’ statement both implies that if forced migration remains internal we ought not to be too concerned, and reflects the most optimistic of positions, underestimating the potential for these internal movements to blow out beyond borders.

In contrast to Hughes, the Christian Aid report asserts that the new forced migration “will fuel existing conflicts and generate new ones in the areas of the world — the poorest — where resources are most scarce. Movement on this scale has the potential to de-stabilise whole regions where increasingly desperate populations compete for dwindling food and water.”

It is possible that the lack of seriousness expressed by senior public servants reflects something of the views of their political masters. In the estimates hearing Liberal Senator Ellison sought to draw links between climate change and the drought cycle in Australia. “We have had our own droughts here”, he said, “Then you have a good season and people are able to recover.”

He seemed to be suggesting that we should not be too concerned about the potential for a massive number of people being forced to leave their homelands due to climate-change, and intimated that it is likely they will be able to return to their homes at some time in the future. This is certainly not what the *Human Tide* report suggests.



There is an urgent need for Australia, and the international community, both to seek to avert the worst aspects of climate change and to plan to respond to the likelihood that very large numbers of people will be forced to flee their homelands due to climate change and related factors.

*Human Tide* calls on the polluters — those of us in the wealthiest countries of the world — to establish a US\$100 billion a year fund to help poor people. According to the British economist, Sir Nicholas Stern, these people are the most likely to bare the brunt of the problems the world may face.

Further, there is a need for the international community to develop the tools — legal, institutional and logistical — to aid people forced to flee their homes for reasons associated with climate change. The international

community responded to the refugee crisis of the Second World War by signing the 1951 Refugees Convention and establishing the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This could be a model upon which to base a system for offering security to those forced to flee their homes due to climate change.

From an Australian immigration perspective, there is a need to challenge some of the assumptions that have underpinned our approach to forced migration for many years. We cannot simply stand, arms folded, on Australia's borders repeating the mantra that we will decide who comes and the circumstances in which they come. We need to be more creative, more flexible and more engaged with the real world.

## 'History wars' propel local yarns into big picture

### FEATURES

Community

*Susan Aykut*

In April, representatives of Monash University's Institute for Public History (IPH) attended the launch of the fifth history book commissioned through them and the third one published under their imprint. The book, *Coming home: A history of Corpus Christi Community Greenvale*, was launched in the Corpus Christi dining room in Melbourne's northern suburb of Greenvale.



The launch of *Coming home* was particularly poignant, not only because it marked the successful completion of an important history about homelessness and how one organisation was established to address that issue, but also because the book serves as a family scrapbook for many of the men who call the Corpus Christi Community home.

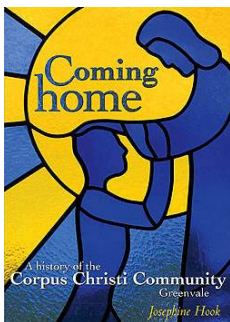
Commissioning a history is a big undertaking, and one that is often hard to justify if you are a non-profit organisation like the Corpus Christi Community (or the Sacred Heart Mission in St Kilda, whose history the IPH is currently preparing.) But both of these relatively young organisations have realised that not writing a history can be even harder to defend as they witness key people in the life of their organisations becoming frail or passing on, taking their stories with them.

A written, organisational history is also a significant challenge for the commissioning organisation. They know it must speak in the first instance to the people who are connected to their organisations, who know its daily operations, successes and failures, but they also know that it must engage with the big questions and debates that help contextualise the place of the organisation in the broader community. It must allow 'outside' readers an entry point into their world. They know that to produce a history that will interest the public at large, it must contribute to a shared historical literacy or conversation, the kind that will hopefully become more wide-spread following the recent 'history wars'.

This conversation should remain diverse and inclusive. In histories like Corpus Christi's it does not diminish the importance of telling the stories of those who founded, staffed or volunteered their time in their communities, or of providing the equally important opportunity for the voices of those who use their services a chance to be heard by a wider audience.

The idea and practice of writing for a 'wider audience' is critical for work produced by professional historians. A key reason for establishing the IPH within the School of Historical Studies at Monash in 2004 was to foster the writing of histories that are accessible and that strengthen public awareness of historical issues.

There are of course pragmatic reasons for universities to solicit commissioned histories. Bringing research money into the Academy is a vital requirement for receiving government funding. But Monash has a long engagement and commitment to training historians who now work in a variety of public arenas and as independent historians.



All Monash histories are written by professional historians. Most are members of one of the state-based Professional Historians Associations (PHA), many of whom have trained in public history programs like the one Monash has run since 1989. Assisting graduates in finding work was another important consideration in setting up the commissioning arm of the IPH.

Not all historians who work on Monash histories are Monash trained, nor is Monash the only place to go if you are looking for someone to write a history. The PHA, which was set up to promote the discipline of history as a profession and set standards for how it is practiced in the public realm, keep its members informed of available work.

One of the advantages in commissioning a history through the IPH, however, is the support and advice these projects get from historians on staff at Monash. Graeme Davison, the Director of the IPH, for example, contributes his broad knowledge on urban and Australian history to various projects.

Social justice histories, like that written for Corpus Christi, receive input from historians, such as Seamus O'Hanlon, who has researched boarding houses and the gentrification of inner suburban Melbourne, or Mark Peel, who has investigated the worlds of impoverished and marginalised groups in our society. Another recently completed commission, a Holocaust memoir, is also in an area that can be ably supported by the Centre for the Study of

Jewish Civilisation which is also part of Monash's School of Historical Studies.

The IPH undertakes commissioned histories from an array of clients, including businesses and schools. We have completed a history on the Castlemaine Bacon Factory and are currently preparing one on the post-war years of Haileybury College. There is, of course, no end of tales to be told, and telling them well is our business.



## Downsizing as a form of modern asceticism

### THEOLOGY

*Paul Collins*

There is a scene in the movie *The Da Vinci Code* where Silas, the mad Opus Dei monk is seen whipping himself in imitation of the flogging of Christ, and using the cilice (a chain wrapped around either the thigh or stomach — *pictured below*) to cause discomfort. In fact the actual penitential practice of Opus is more restrained, but this is what many think of when the word 'asceticism' is mentioned.



You see a much more subtle form in the film *Into Great Silence*. For the hermit-monks of the Carthusian order, the strictest in Catholicism, asceticism consists of silence, slowing down, and of a continuous, life-long daily routine of discipline, prayer and contemplation.

Asceticism was always an essential part of Christian spirituality. The word is derived from Greek *askesis* meaning 'exercise' or 'training'. The term can be traced back to Stoics, Cynics, and to eastern religions including Buddhism.

It is also a core part of the teaching of Jesus. "If anyone would come after me let them deny self and take up the cross and follow me". In the gospels it contains two elements: Leaving the self behind, and following Christ. The call to follow Christ involves a constant watchfulness — "Keep awake for the Lord is coming", a commitment to the poor, and fasting. In the case of some followers it also involves renunciation of possessions and celibacy. The same ideal can be found in St Paul: "I punish my body and enslave it so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified".

In the early church and during the Roman persecutions, martyrdom was the ideal form of asceticism. After Constantine the cult of martyrdom transmuted in a cult of virginity. This began with the hermits in the desert and developed into monasticism.

Not all of these developments led to positive results. A profound devaluation of the body infected Christianity, which continued on into the Middle Ages and in some forms is still with us. Notions of asceticism were rejected at the Reformation and the humanist ideal was resurrected during

the Renaissance, although an emphasis on asceticism continued in the Catholic church.

What does this mean today? Does it have any application to our lives?

Christian asceticism today is not so much about disciplining the body as living in a world where the cultural and religious structures that supported spiritual commitment in the past seem to have been stripped completely away. We live in a time when it is difficult to be a genuinely spiritual person. Post modernism deconstructs our religious symbols, theological mysteries and above all denies any sense of the sacred.

I could not help thinking of this as I watched Richard Dawkins on the ABC's *Compass* being given yet another opportunity to ridicule faith and transcendence. No contrary opinions were offered and Dawkins was given carte blanche to pontificate on spirituality and belief, the most complex issue which has ever confronted humankind, from within the absurdly narrow confines of his own rationalism.



We also live in a world where the dogmas of economic rationalism and consumerism rule supreme. These are based on a naive belief in the infinity of growth. Kenneth Boulding has rightly pointed out that anyone who believes that exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either mad or a rational economist! A radical spiritual commitment to justice and equality seems completely discordant in this kind of cultural atmosphere.

So asceticism today will not involve physical penance so much as a determination to undertake a deliberate downsizing, an abandonment of the notion of infinite expansion as the only way to manage economics and measure success, and a willingness to stand against much which post modern culture believes is true.

Second, it will engage Christians in a form of fasting that is constituted by eating and consuming less. Again, this involves a counter-cultural stance.

Third, Christians must promote a deceleration in the use of non-renewable resources and a halt to infrastructure development that is destructive of environment. This will mean no more dams in a country like Australia!

Finally because these stances seem so idealistic and unrealizable, believers are going to need monumental trust in God's Spirit.

## Aloofness the price for master critic's knowledge and incisiveness

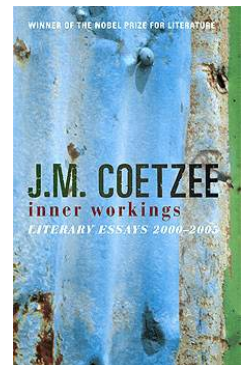
BOOK REVIEW

Non-Fiction

Clive O'Connell

***Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005*, by J. M. Coetzee.  
Random House, Australia, 2007. ISBN 9781 74166 8353. RRP \$39.95**

Of these 21 essays by the South African-born Nobel Prize winner, all but five appeared first in the *New York Review of Books*; of the remainder, all but one appeared as introductions to single texts or collections. The odd man out is a study of Arthur Miller's screenplay for John Huston's film *The Misfits* and this singular instance of toe-dipping is one of the shorter pieces that Coetzee produces as an instance of his recent forensic preoccupations.



As the book readily displays, the critic-writer's devotion to a particular topic is not necessarily linked to the length of his analysis; still, he gives only teasing suggestions of what he finds interesting about the poems of Hugo Claus and his observations on Beckett's fiction leave you thirsting for more — much more.

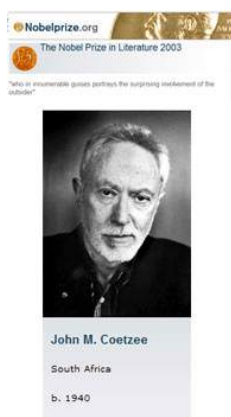
Admittedly, all three of the briefest essays — on Miller, Claus, and Beckett — were written to meet functions outside the NYRB format but their elliptical, inferential qualities leave you wanting amplification on many points. Towards the end of his introduction to Beckett's short fiction, Coetzee makes reference to a philosophical line stretching from Descartes to Derrida which begs for explication; at the same time, he notes that the Irish-born writer began his career 'as an uneasy Joycean and an even more uneasy Proustian'. The first writer is an obvious and well-known influence, but a link with the prolix creator of *A la recherche du temps perdu* waits in vain for any elaboration.

*Inner Workings* falls into two fairly even halves. In the first, the authors treated are almost all central European; all belong to the 20th century. Coetzee examines well-known writers like Italo Svevo, Robert Musil, Paul Celan, Günter Grass and W. G. Sebald, shining his searchlight over their

range of work, not just confining himself to the task at hand; rather than confine himself to a focused discussion of Musil's *The Confusions of Young Törless*, Coetzee presents a compelling overview of the author's life and other fiction which has the odd effect of inspiring research into Musil's period rather than buying the text itself.

In fact, the European essays make for hard reading, chiefly because the writer's detours — to describe social milieux, a writer's peers or family, problems in translation, historical backdrops — dazzle in their demonstrations of Coetzee's polymathic intellect but are all too often more interesting than the context in which they appear. For instance, the five paragraphs towards the end of the Svevo essay that deal with the various versions of the phrase 'malato immaginario' entertain for their account of differing levels of translation (even without mentioning Molière) while the encircling information concerning the Italian writer's works and their content presents in comparison like dour generalizations.

In this first half, an outstanding essay on Grass reveals Coetzee's authoritative and perceptive overview of the author's entire output that satisfies a moderately informed reader, even if the final page seems like an afterword on German dialects and the difficulties of rendering demotic speech in another tongue. Centred round the novel *Crabwalk*, this review involves a fascinating study of how Grass fuses an historical incident — the 1945 maritime disaster of the sinking of a refugee transport, the Wilhelm Gustloff - with the lives of fictional characters in the context of post-World War II Germany and all the tragedy and trauma following that country's partition. Both in these pages and in parts of the extra-European material, Coetzee rouses interest in an author for his/her own qualities, rather than in any incidental material that drops out of the analytic process.



For the collection's second part, we are in more familiar territory, beginning with an all-too-brief report on Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, then changing pace for a deft, wry examination of the context to Whitman's poetry, complete with the writer's contradictions of character and the levels of reception that dogged *Leaves of Grass*, all treated in a context that includes Whitman's fey homo-eroticism.

Other Americans given cordial treatment are Faulkner, Bellow, Philip Roth in an intriguing study of *The Plot Against America*. As a singular Latin foray, an instructively detached review of *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* by Mairquez is included, Coetzee commenting on the author's ability to drift into 'morally

unsettling territory' but giving few clues concerning his own judgements on the novel's unproductive perversity.

Despite the obvious breadth of his knowledge and the incisiveness of his commentaries, Coetzee stays aloof from most of his subjects. As a fair critic, he gives even-handed judgements about arcane authors like Walter Benjamin, Bruno Schulz and Sandor Márai, assessing their work with an assurance that reveals an understanding of its direction and accomplishment but that abstains from proclaiming genius where there is only fitful talent.

The best wine comes late with an appraisal of the collection's only woman subject, Nadine Gordimer, this chapter revealing a level of sympathy for *The Pickup* and a short-story collection, *Loot*, that brings both books to life with unexpected vividness. A similar revelation of different layers of structure and meaning is accomplished in the book's final essay on V.S Naipaul's *Half a Life*, about which Coetzee (for once) probably gives his readers too much direct information.

But in both these studies, as in an extended review by Kingsley Amis, Orwell, or Greene — all master-writers and critics — you are left with a determination to see for yourself, to test the commentator's findings against your own: that desired if rarely achieved outcome of critique in any art-form. Unfortunately, this persuasion to engage with author and critic arose rarely for this reader, especially after negotiating those many pages where Coetzee's edifying knowledge simply got in the way.

## **Grave notes**

POETRY

James Waller

The Palace is silent.  
Corridors tremble and grow still.  
You were born for this.

The Great Peace rustling in his robes.  
Can you climb out of yourself?  
I am struck by symbols.  
Ancient ladders crumbling to dust.

I have shouldered the shadows.  
Stop the cars. Stop them forever.  
Traces of fear in the feather.

Prayer drew me to itself like a chair drawn towards a fire.  
The bells are ringing in the ear of silence.  
The night-hand opens.

The sun sculpts your face, fleetingly, majestically.  
Toward the ghost hour: stumble, reach, fall.  
I create for stillness; for magical stillness.  
Emptiness slides into your bones.

Shadows stalk the burnt interior. Flowers inhabit the shadows.  
And then it begins: the slow feast of the sun.  
To furnish the grave with the note.

We advance across the field burdened with a secret pain.

Deep into the water we lunge, this music full of spray and surrender.  
Choices scratch themselves into the bone of the page which burns and  
dies.

This white fire of loneliness; this hidden flare of hope.  
How happiness rings in the forge of unknowing.  
What can you derive from this blank space?

I am walking upon the threads of your absence.  
A gift has been announced. It is under your eye-lid.  
The earth. Your body.  
The lost fires burning in my palms.  
Ineffable secrets, page of dreams, silence untold.