SUCH IS LIFE: MYTH AND MEANING

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The premise of this thesis is that myth’s social importance derives from its function as a narrative imaginary, a ‘subjective correlative’ which evolves interactively with our evolving consciousness. In its role as socially embedded story, myth has enabled individuals to find meaning in life and societies to shape cultural narrative. However, a much more common understanding of myth today is as a narrative involving some kind of misrepresentation, lie or fallacy. Between these extremes, the views of mythographers, from psychoanalysts to structuralists, linguists to media theorists, are themselves constantly evolving. The one constant of all the definitions is the notion of narrative itself. Given the focus of this thesis on creative writing, I have adopted Professor Eric Csapo’s definition of myth as socially important story, “told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance.”1 I argue that the narrative imaginary of myth represents evolving consciousness through its provision of a ‘subjective correlative’. By this term is meant a definitively mythic form of narrative metaphor which articulates our inner, often inarticulate, consciousness, thus elucidating and expanding understanding.

Restriction of the vast topic of myth to the personification of the subjective correlative, or mythic persona, enables a more focussed investigation of that function. Starting with the historical novel (Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang), analysis includes modernist ‘streams of consciousness’ (Joyce’s Ulysses and Finnegans Wake), post-modern angst (Winton’s The Riders), and a comparison of the speculative fiction of the 1980s (Gibson’s Neuromancer and the Wachowski Brothers’ The Matrix) with that of the present day (Winterson’s Atlas and Pelevin’s Helmet of Horror). Examination of today’s narrative imaginary also raises questions about how communications technology, from word processing to hypertext, may ‘de-mean’ or ‘re-mean’ myth and thus impact upon the original vision and creative voice of the creative writer. I conclude that interpreting our symbolic life remains the sphere of mythopoetic literature because, in the words of novelist Albert Camus, it offers man’s “sole chance of keeping his consciousness and of fixing its adventures.”2

1 E.Csapo, Theories of Mythology, 9.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD
- Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.
- The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, as approved by the Research Higher Degrees Committee.

Signature:
I gratefully acknowledge my supervisor, Dr. Grant Caldwell, for his unfailing support and encouragement; in brief, for going the critical distance with me. My thanks are also due to historian Ian Jones, who has been most generous with his friendship and knowledge of Ned Kelly’s life and times.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

DEFINING MYTH

The argument of this work is that the social importance of myth derives from its function as a narrative imaginary which continually reviews and renews evolving consciousness. Consciousness I take in the sense of our subjective interaction with the world, both individually and as a society. To define and evaluate this function of myth, I propose to use the phrase ‘subjective correlative’ as a critical term; this is explicated in the next section of this introduction. My particular focus is on mythopoeic fiction and how it shapes broader cultural narrative.

In this critical dissertation, I take a case study approach, beginning with the myth of Ned Kelly, and moving on to analyze the function of the subjective correlative in modern, postmodern and contemporary fiction. The companion creative work, my novel Living like a Kelly, explores the subjectivity of myth primarily through the consciousness of Ellen Kelly, Ned’s mother.

Definitions of myth vary significantly. At one extreme, myths are sacred or symbolic stories; at the other, they are stories which misrepresent or are fictitious. In both cases, the myths we make significantly shape the lives we lead. Professor Eric Csapo argues in his Theories of Mythology that the theories in themselves may “to a large degree constitute mythologies.” Two such theoretical works are Professor Bruce Lincoln’s Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship and critic Laurence Coupe’s Myth: the new critical idiom. These works have both explicated specific theories of myth and provided historical perspectives; as myths evolve to represent evolving consciousness, so too must the theories of myth which record that evolution.

Lincoln concludes that myth is “ideology in narrative form”. This aligns with Csapo’s more explicit definition of myth as “narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social

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3 E. Csapo, Theories of Mythology (Blackwell Publishing Limited., 2005).
4 Ibid.,1.
5 B. Lincoln, Theorizing Myth (University of Chicago Press, 1999).
collective to share a sense of this importance”.7 This definition identifies myth’s function of shaping socio-cultural identity through narratives adopted and adapted by different societies at different times to validate beliefs and behaviours. It also emphasizes the need for the language of the narrative to be accessible and engaging if it is to achieve its aim of social cohesion. Since such language significantly underpins the discipline of creative writing, I have built my argument around Csapo’s definition, taking narrative / story as the common denominator of the many different definitions of myth.

Accordingly, I began by considering the nature and significance of narrative. I found Professor Brian Boyd’s *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition and Fiction*8 particularly useful because of its cogent analysis and the evidence it supplies of story as myth and myth as story. Boyd argues that stories arose out of our need to cooperate in order to survive and hence “out of our intense interest in social monitoring”.9 He continues: “in societies of any size, stories involving agents with unusual powers capture attention …stories with unseen agents who can monitor our behavior and administer punishment or reward.”10

These agents may be gods, or humans with paranormal abilities; in both cases, reference to powers beyond our own is linked to recognition of the role of narrative in shaping behavior. Boyd cites the number of “stories we call religion” which “permeate and persist partly because they offer such powerful ways of motivating and apparently monitoring cooperative behavior.”11 The parables of the New Testament, for example, show stories used to model practical as well as doctrinal belief, the classic example being the story of the Good Samaritan. Such texts are characterized by a process of conceptualization driven by our need to explain and imaginatively represent our world; in Lincoln’s words, to put “ideology” into “narrative form.”12

9 Ibid., 64
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 64.
As ur-stories which seek to explain cosmic origins as well as the natural forces which govern individual lives and deaths, myths are found worldwide. They evidence the human need to make sense of the world through narrative, substantiating, as Boyd does “from Zeus to Seuss”, Csapo’s theories on “how myth involved thinking about the world”. In Boyd’s view, the relationship between storytelling and evolving consciousness is characterized by the development of our “ability to think beyond the here and now; storytelling helps us not to override the given, but to be less restricted by it, to cope with it more flexibly and on something more like our own terms.” Boyd makes fundamental connections between evolution, cognition and fiction, explaining how these elements may drive “the unique human capacity for narrative” and arguing the case for “the art of fiction … as biological adaptation(s)”. His arguments reinforce Csapo’s observation that “myths like rituals … are founded on basic biological and cultural programs of action”.

Myths are among the earliest stories we know; they are interpretive and therefore inherently subjective accounts of natural phenomena. Collectively they form a comprehensive chronicle of human responses to the world. We are reminded of the complexity of these responses by American academic Robert Brockway’s summation in Myth from the Ice Age to Mickey Mouse: myths are “metaphors of truth or metaphors of illusion”. Arguably, such apparently contradictory alternatives reflect our ambivalent use of the word itself and hence the positives and negatives of myth’s contributions to society. Orwell’s Animal Farm might illustrate “metaphors of truth” about the nature of power, Leni Riefenstahl’s film about the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremburg, Triumph of the Will, “metaphors of illusion.”

The power of a culture constructed around mass communications to change conscious and unconscious perception is the focus of Roland Barthes’ Mythologies. In that series of essays, written between 1954 and 1956, Barthes

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14 Csapo, Theories of Mythology, 161.
15 Boyd, On the Origin of Stories (Evolution, Cognition and Fiction), 50
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 16.
18 Ibid., 11.
19 Csapo, Theories of Mythology, 165.
21 R. Barthes, Mythologies (1957), 11.
stops using the word myth “in its traditional sense” of sacred or symbolic story, instead determining “to define contemporary myth.” In his critique, media myths, with their “decorative display of what-goes-without-saying,” function as “metaphors of illusion.” In Fictional Truth (1990), just forty years later, French literary critic Michel Riffaterre proposes truth as “primarily a matter of linguistic perception”; since storytellers convey their perceptions through metaphor, language itself becomes the significer of truth. Only through “the mediation of language”, Riffaterre concludes, may narrative remain “a record of the mind’s perception” and, by extension, become “socially important” in Csapo’s sense.

Csapo’s definition of myth as socially important presumes selection criteria; not every private story qualifies as public myth, for “what makes a story a myth is the fact that it is received by a given society and that a given society participates in its transmission”. In this view, to mythicize is to recognize certain stories as significant representations of a given society, hence worthy of being committed to oral and written record. In the words of Jungian scholar Robert Segal, “myth becomes literature”.

Unlike religious myths with their “intimations of immortality”, and unlike the myths of science, where “visionary gleam” must be quantifiable, literary myth does not separate subjective and objective, rather seeks to express holistically the interactive experiences of mind and body. Content and character may change across time and space, yet fundamental story lines remain the same. The beloved heroine may be Persephone of Greek legend, Hero or Hermione of Shakespearean drama, Ros in the BBC secret service drama Spooks or Molly in the ABC science fiction / police drama Ashes to Ashes; in every case the story is structured around an apparent death of the beloved, a resurrection and a renewal. Changes in character and context affect the underlying vision of the story much as vocabulary affects the underlying structure of a sentence. Changes in

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Brockway, Myth from the Ice Age to Mickey Mouse, 65.
26 Ibid.
27 Csapo, Theories of Mythology, 9.
28 Ibid., 134.
31 Ibid. 114
expression and delivery demonstrate language evolving together with 
consciousness so that archetypal patterns of behavior may be redefined in 
contemporary voice. The interactive relationship of creative writing and myth 
produces creative mythmaking; I am specifically concerned in this work with 
mythopoeic literature. The word ‘mythopoeia’ comes from the Greek ‘myth-
making’, \(^{32}\) I use the adjective to describe imaginative literature which illuminates 
the human condition in a subjectively recognizable way.

In examining the mythopoeic role of non-fictional and fictional 
literature, I quote frequently from literary texts, especially poetry and plays, on 
the premise that their imaginative vision and resonant voice substantiate my 
argument for the interaction of myth and language in shaping consciousness. 
The existence of entire dictionaries of literary quotations evidences how deeply 
the language of myth has embedded itself in our collective unconscious, 
crowding it with imaginary characters whose words and deeds inform everyday 
attitudes and actions. Simply to improvise a lexicon from Greco-Roman 
mythology – aphrodisiac, martial, saturnine, titanic, venereal – or to refer to the 
hundreds of Shakespearean neologisms is to acknowledge how literary vision 
and voice constantly renews our subjective understanding of the world. In 
pioneering mythologist Joseph Campbell’s words, “the first function of a 
mythology is to reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et 
fascinans* of this universe as it is” \(^{33}\).

**THE SUBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE**

I introduce the term ‘subjective correlative’ to describe how the narrative 
metaphors of myth connect with our inner consciousness. In the next chapter I 
will apply the term to three significant theories of myth, thereafter to mythopoeic 
literature itself.

Specifically, I use the term ‘subjective correlative’ to define the 
characteristic use of metaphor in mythopoeic literature, identifying its appeal to 
symbolic imagination and, to quote Alexander Pope, “what oft was thought but

\(^{32}\) J.A. Cuddon, "Literary Terms & Literary Theory" in *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary 

the Penguin group), 1968), 4.
ne’er so well expressed.” As narrative metaphor, the subjective correlative articulates our inner, often inarticulate, consciousness. Mythopoeic literature I define as that which, through its review and renewal of archetypal narrative, seeks to illuminate consciousness from within rather than without. Such literature emulates consciousness by, to adapt Shelley’s words, looking “before and after”; by concerning itself with “what is not” as well as what is. As a subjective correlative, myth may validate and clarify our sense of who we are and who we may become. I argue that the process is self-perpetuating, in that the continuous interactivity of memory and imagination through language enables myth to evolve interactively with consciousness itself.

Poet and critic T.S. Eliot coined the phrase ‘objective correlative’ in his essay on *Hamlet and his Problems*; he used it to describe “the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art”. Metaphor fuses the narratives of physical and metaphysical experience: in Eliot’s words, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events” may become “the formula of that particular emotion.” Such a “set of objects” or “chain of events” will evoke immediately identifiable emotions. Eliot cites the “skilful accumulation of sensory impressions” in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, referring specifically to how the sleepwalking scenes physically evoke Lady Macbeth’s state of mind. In his own *Four Quartets*, “bits of paper” are used to physically represent transient humanity, both our stories and ourselves equally whisked away by “the cold wind” of eternity.

In defiance of conventional opinion, Eliot argued that *Hamlet* was “deficient” because it lacked such an ‘objective correlative’; the Prince was “dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible … in excess of the facts as they appear”. For this reason, in his view, the play was an artistic failure. Nonetheless, he admitted its place in popular imagination: “probably more

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
41 Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems (the Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism)."
people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art.”42 In so doing, he implicitly acknowledged its social importance. To define what is or is not a work of art is not my concern here; however, I would argue that recognition of *Hamlet* as such derives from the power of the ‘subjective correlative’ in the play; our empathy with the Prince’s inner conflict is why the play continues to resonate.

From the apparition of Hamlet’s father in the first act, the imaginative vision of the play represents Hamlet’s inner world. The famous ‘to be or not to be’ soliloquy voices essentially the same concern addressed centuries later in existentialist Albert Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus*: whether life is or is not worth living. It is the “one truly serious philosophical problem”.43 T.S.Eliot’s views notwithstanding, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has been accepted as part of our literary heritage, what I will call our ‘mythosphere’. By ‘mythosphere’ I mean a shared imaginary world, one populated by iconic figures important to the cultural narrative of a particular society or interest group. Both fictional and non-fictional, these figures, from Hamlet to Burke and Wills, Lady Macbeth to Truganini, epitomize definitively human experiences.

Eliot criticizes *Hamlet* for lacking an objective correlative, for its failure to provide external facts equivalent or correlative to its emotion. He describes Hamlet (the man) as “dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear.”44 Yet it seems evident that most people have at some time been dominated by emotions in excess of the facts: at a funeral, for example, or in love. Fear or desire may transform perceptions of the physical world, may even, as Shakespeare saw, generate “thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls.”45 Whether such ‘thoughts’ are labeled intuition, instinct, or empathy, their impact on conscious action and reaction is documented in non-fiction as in fiction.

How to express these thoughts? Where the exterior world seems inadequate, writers may draw upon the interior for images to represent premonitions, obsessions or simply inexplicable anxiety. These may include Jungian archetypes, images which have evolved within the human psyche itself

42 Ibid.
44 Eliot, “Hamlet and His Problems (the Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism).”
to form a collective mindscape. Whereas the ‘objective correlative’ invests the external world with metaphorical meaning, as in Ted Hughes’ image of a ‘thought fox’ or the ‘mein Kampf’ imagery of Sylvia Plath, the ‘subjective correlative’ projects images from psychic worlds, ranging from archetypes embedded in our unconscious to original images from memory or dream. These images may not conform to physical reality, but may nonetheless become felt presences in the psyche. They range from Carroll’s Cheshire Cat and Dickens’ Spirit of Christmas Past to Yeats’ “vast image out of Spiritus Mundi”\(^{46}\) and Judith Wright’s “eyeless, shapeless seed”.\(^{47}\)

The study of such deeply embedded images was the life’s work of psychologist Carl Jung: “like the instincts”, he believed, “the collective thought patterns of the human mind are innate and inherited. They function in more or less the same way in all of us.”\(^{48}\) Thus, “the rank sweat of an enseamed bed”\(^{49}\) functions as an objective correlative for Hamlet’s horror at his mother’s corruption, but the sense of pervasive evil which haunts him manifests itself subjectively through the apparition of his father:

> “Thou com’st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee …”\(^{50}\)

The “questionable shape” is a projection of Hamlet’s own “prophetic soul”,\(^{51}\) a subjective correlative which enables him to see the truth of his situation. Such subjective metaphors enable the imagined consciousness, here Hamlet’s, to be re-imagined within the consciousness of reader or viewer. His vision of the ghost connects with our own elemental sense of some fearful unknown, of forces beyond our control. In the sense that Hamlet finds acting with the unquestioning conviction of conventional heroes – an Alexander the Great or a Joan of Arc – impossible, he anticipates the compromise of modern anti-heroes – a Meursault or a Scarlet O’Hara.

In the broader social sense, heroes may be defined as men or women about whom we continue to tell stories because, in various ways, they personify society’s sense of identity. Simpson at Gallipoli, for example, may be seen as the


\(^{48}\) Segal, ed., Encountering Jung: Jung on Mythology, 64.

\(^{49}\) Barnet, ed., Hamlet, III, iv, 119.

\(^{50}\) Ibid. I, iv: 56

\(^{51}\) Ibid., I, v: 59.
personification of ANZAC courage; Tasmania’s Truganini personifies Aboriginal dispossession. The mythic persona of Ned Kelly may act as a subjective correlative for Australian society as a whole, not just North East Victoria.

Both objective and subjective correlative use the imaginative language of metaphor and symbol. As noted, Csapo’s definition of myth points to the dependence of “narrative which is considered socially important” upon stories “told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance”. Without being put into words, for example, speculation that Ned Kelly had a vision for a Republic of North East Victoria remains just that; without the voice recorded in The Jerilderie Letter the Victorian police would have had much less reason to fear an uprising in the North East after Ned’s execution. Mythopoeic vision requires empathic voice.

Subjective and objective cannot be separated, any more than mind and body; the two are interactive. Yet the projection of mindscape on to landscape rather than the reverse frees perception from the specifics of time and place and allows for the timeless quality ascribed to myth. The cutting and pasting of imagination on to memory has added unicorns and mermaids, extra-terrestrials and cyborgs, to the dictionary. In the world of the mythosphere, it has revived dead heroes and inspired new ones. In this sense, the literary imagination is fundamentally mythopoeic.

Eliot’s critical writings reflect a modernist perspective associated with writing as a ‘stream of consciousness’, like that sustained at length in James Joyce’s Ulysses; Joyce’s later work, Finnegan’s Wake, might be described as a stream of subconsciousness. Arguably, the mythic status of the Wake itself, a work more read of than read, derives from its expansion of the notion of the subjective correlative. Joyce moves beyond empathy to the immersion of self in a flow of what he calls “subnesciousness”. The word is one of many neologisms in the text whose definition is left to readers’ subjective imagination as they are swept along on Joyce’s linguistic tide, streaming in and out of conscious interpretation.

As current usage of the word ‘streaming’ might suggest, the Wake has

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52 Csapo, Theories of Mythology, 9.
53 Ibid.
54 J. Joyce, Finnegan’s Wake (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 224.
been seen, by philosopher Michael Heim among others, as a prototypical ‘hypertext’, where hypertext refers to online creative works which foster “a literacy that is prompted by jumps of intuition and association”.55 In his *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Heim summarizes it as “electronic intertextuality”.56 I will consider what effects information communications technology (ICT) may have on the creative writing process in my final chapter. 

Returning to the social importance of myth, the focus of this work is on the mythic persona, or hero. This is not only because myth is such a vast topic, but also because, as a personification with whom we identify, the mythic persona epitomizes the function of the subjective correlative. His or her life story plays out our evolving consciousness, gives it metaphorical voice. I explore this through writers as diverse as Albert Camus, James Joyce and Tim Winton, all of whom have adapted mythic figures, re-imagining Sisyphus, Ulysses and the Riders of ancient Europe’s Wild Hunt to fit the changing cultural contexts of absurdism, modernism, and post modernism.

The archetypal narrative patterns of myth find new forms transgenerationally and transglobally, as indicated in mythologist Joseph Campbell’s phrase, the “hero with a thousand faces”.57 In the companion piece to this work I explore, through the imagined consciousness of Ellen Kelly, the subjective correlation of the individual and collective imagination in the evolution of myth around her son Ned. Australia’s mythicization of Ned Kelly illustrates how myth may come to represent a society’s evolving self image. Ellen’s personal mythmaking, shaping of and shaped by her son’s tragedy, suggests that socially important myth, like socially important language, originates, whether on a private or public level, from inner need rather than outer demand. Before reviewing further literature, therefore, an outline of my own mythmaking process seems apposite.

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56 Ibid.
LIVING LIKE A KELLY

Living like a Kelly was conceived as an historical novel which might explore personal mythmaking as well as the correlation of private and public consciousness in reviewing and renewing socially important myth. Dream and memory combine as Ellen stitches her son’s story into her own; her conversations with journalist Brian Cookson reference the mix of personal and public discourse out of which has grown a national myth. My intent was to imaginatively recreate Ellen’s inner world: the loves and hates, memories and dreams which haunted her and shaped both the myth of her son and her own. Her encounter with Cookson gave me the opportunity to explore how public notoriety, community engagement and media encounters might shape Kelly’s evolving myth.

In researching the novel, advice given by Kelly historian Ian Jones, to invent nothing but imagine everything, became a motto. Mythic creations, from World Trees to Cosmic Eggs to Gardens of Eden are not invented ex nihilo, rather from the subliminal rearranging and recombining of the facts of life which occurs in imagination and memory. Thus, the final chapter of Jones’ history of Ned Kelly, Legacy and Legend, examines how the remembered facts of Kelly’s story have combined with personal interpretations into a cogent and socially important myth.

While much has been written about her son Ned, there is comparatively little information about Ellen Kelly. The purpose of readings in Irish and Australian history, as well as books specifically about the Kelly outbreak, was to immerse myself in her historic and cultural environment, to understand how recorded events – a court case, an affair, the taking up of her own selection – might be personally felt. Ellen and husband ‘Red’ were born and bred in Ireland at a time when The Year of Liberty: the great Irish rebellion of 1798 was still in living memory; Thomas Pakenham’s history, therefore, was a particularly useful portrayal of the political and social environment which they carried in their heads and hearts to Australia.

59 Ibid., 290.
The record of Ellen’s court appearance before Sir Redmond Barry, accessible in the State Library of Victoria, is memorable for her single recorded word: ‘no’. A woman notorious for her irrepressible tongue suddenly had nothing to say for herself; how did this happen? Readings were followed up with visits to ‘Kelly country’ sites, from the remains of the Kelly homestead at Eleven Mile Creek to Beechworth courthouse, Greta cemetery and Ellen’s cell in Beechworth Gaol, with its door onto the walled yard so that her baby, Alice, could take the air. Place names became stories.

Living like a Kelly explores the process of mythmaking both through Ellen’s obsession with ‘minding’ Ned’s true story and through the passionate commitment with which she lived her own. Gender and poverty may have put the national heroic stage beyond her, but her story is remarkable nonetheless, with her storyteller’s voice resonating still: ‘I mind you’ll die like a Kelly, son.’

I sought to re-imagine the consciousness behind that voice.

The year is 1911. The place is North East Victoria and the occasion the chance visit - sheltering from a thunderstorm - of journalist Brian Cookson to the cottage where Ellen Kelly is living with surviving son Jim. Cookson has been sent in pursuit of a ‘scoop’ about the possible escape of Dan Kelly and Steve Hart from Glenrowan. His pursuit of Ellen and what she knows raise questions about the contribution of media to mythmaking which remain pertinent today.

The development of Ellen’s own myth is represented through her dreams and memories, far more real to her than a daily round of mending clothes and minding grandchildren. The narrative shifts in time and space along with her shifting awareness; her dead come to life as she remembers them, revived through the prism of her own grief and guilt. Through her relationships with people past and present, we can see how the mythic figures in our minds, may shape personal identity, and by collective extension that of society. Ellen’s childhood wish, to be someone whose story people would remember, is now projected on to Ned. She has devoted herself to ‘minding’ her son’s story, seeing it as her personal responsibility to guard his ‘true’ version against the lies of contemporary media, to make sure his story is told as he would want. Through her conversations with Cookson, however, she comes to realize that it is no longer his story, but even less is it hers. At the same time her conversations with

Cookson extend the narrative in the reporter’s mind, influencing his public
telling of the story and hence media’s contribution to the developing myth. In
Australia, this culminated in the global showcasing of stylized ‘Ned Kelly’ riders
as part of the Sydney Olympics’ opening ceremony in 2000. The ceremony as a
whole might in itself be described as a mythopoeic narrative, from its Aboriginal
awakening through the stylized helmets of the bushranger to the word ‘Eternity’
emblazoned on the image of Sydney Harbour Bridge.

“Writers invoke traditional myths not to explain the world, which remains
the purview of science, but to articulate their visions of their world, visions
stemming in fact from their experience of the unconscious” … in Jungian terms,
myth is “dreamed onwards”. As will be further discussed in the next chapter,
the work of psychologist Carl Jung has been a crucial influence on this work.
Jung’s practice centred precisely on explaining the subjective correlation
between his patients’ dream narratives and their daily lives. By re-telling their
stories, patients could understand the symbolism of their own imaginations and
make sense of their lives, as Ellen is shown to have done at the end of Living like
a Kelly. Ned’s myth is well known; my aim has been to create a memorable
vision and a voice for his mother.

For the writer of literary fiction, then, the subjectivity of myth may offer,
in the words of Albert Camus, man’s “sole chance of keeping his consciousness
and of fixing its adventures”. The persistence of stories from the past, however,
begs a further question: what makes a man a myth? What qualities of an Irish-
Australian misfit like Kelly make his myth still meaningful and how has that
meaning evolved? How may our mythmaking, a distillation of remembered
experience and what Coleridge called the ‘shaping imagination’, be affected by
media dominated culture and electronically mediated communications? At a
time when not only do we take technology for granted – just click or flick – but
3D narratives set out to convince through sensory manipulation, how ‘willing’ is
our ‘suspension of disbelief’? How socially important is myth today?

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THEORIES OF MYTH

This thesis concentrates on the importance of myth in Western society, specifically on how the story of the hero or mythic persona contributes to evolving socio-cultural narrative. “Intellectuals toiling in the workshops of myth”, as academic Ivan Strenski describes them, include social anthropologists, psychoanalysts, linguists and cultural historians. So much cross disciplinary industry in itself is a measure of serious interest in understanding myths and our compulsion to make them. Csapo’s summations of different Western thinkers’ approaches in *Theories of Mythology* have been invaluable in contextualizing mythological discourse.

He begins with the work of the Comparativists, notably Sir James Frazer. The implicit comparison of Frazer’s monumental *The Golden Bough* (1922) is with Christian rationalism. In Frazer’s preface to the abridged version, he hopes that he will not be “taxed with embracing a system of mythology” which he looks upon “not merely as false but as preposterous and absurd”. Cumulatively, nonetheless, his accounts of sympathetic magic, taboo and spirit worship provide convincing evidence of how myth and ritual sought to make sense of inner worlds of fear and desire. The King of the Wood, who holds priestly power only until some fated stranger kills and replaces him, may well symbolize our “precarious tenure” on life itself. Such sacrificial incarnations, where existential apprehensions are subsumed in a mythic figure, are recurrent, and validate my focus on the mythic persona to represent the function of the subjective correlative.

This function is extended and encyclopedically confirmed in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (1968). Reflecting on his completion of the latter work, Campbell summarizes what it has meant for him “in the words of James Joyce in *Finnegan’s Wake*: ‘utterly impossible as are all these events they are probably as...”

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65 Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*.
67 Ibid., 2.
like those which may have taken place as any to others which never took person
at all are ever likely to be.**

Familiarity with the myths of Greece underpins most Western theoretical
approaches to myth, from Campbell’s “labyrinth of symbolical figures”** to
Freud’s famous ‘Oedipus’ complex, so I will digress briefly to demonstrate the
functioning of the subjective correlative in Greek theatre. Using masks and
formal movement, ancient myths were retold through the collective voice of the
chorus and the individual voices of actors. The choric voice, simultaneously part
of and outside the action, linked the audience’s consciousness of mortality with
that of an Antigone or an Oedipus. In so doing, it dramatized the process
through which communities may project on to a single individual – the one I
have called the mythic persona - qualities to which they themselves can only
aspire. Audience catharsis on viewing the enactment of such mythic stories
reflects the combined impact of individual empathy with the actors and the
communal distancing symbolized by the actors’ masks. The personification of
theatre provides an automatic subjective correlative. Archetypal patterns of
experience – tragedy, comedy - are immediately recognizable; Oedipus’ agony
echoes down the centuries to Wilde’s “yet each man kills the thing he loves.”

Greek philosopher Plato disapproved of myth precisely because of this
appeal to the subjective imagination rather than objective reason. Yet he himself
uses it to engage understanding. His Myth of Atlantis, the story of a drowned
civilization, combines the archetype of an imagined golden age with the
poetically intuitive sense “that there has passed away a glory from the earth.”
In the Myth of the Cave, where cave dwellers kill the man who tells them there is
a real world beyond the shadows on the cave walls, he dramatizes the dangers of
a society where individual perception, as opposed to that of the group, is not
tolerated.

Csapo follows the comparativist view of myth with the psychological. In
my next chapter, I will discuss in more detail the subjective function of myth in
relation to the work of Jung, also the structuralist Levi Strauss and linguist
Barthes, theorists whose work has informed my argument particularly

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68 Campbell, The Masks of God: Creative Mythology, foreword.
69 ________, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 101.
71 Wordsworth, William Wordsworth: Selected Poems, 112
significantly. Jung’s focus is on the archetypal emanations of our unconscious, while Levi-Strauss directly addresses *Myth and Meaning*, observing that “myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him;” they are expressions of consciousness at every level. In his preface to the 1970 edition of *Mythologies*, Barthes offers an “ideological critique” of the mythmaking of mass culture. The authority of each writer and thinker implicitly acknowledges the social importance of myth.

Discovery of the unconscious crucially changed understanding of myth, combined as it was with the early twentieth century discoveries of social scientists Emile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowski. Durkheim’s definition of a “collective consciousness”, seen through its effects on individual consciousnesses, might describe the effects of myth as significant stories recognized as such by the “entire social collective”. Malinowski’s study, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, insists on the “intimate (author’s emphasis) connection … between the word, the mythos, the sacred tales of a tribe … and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities.”

The changing social values of the 1920s and 1930s underpinned the changing view of myth as narrative expression. In Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp’s view, “the relationship between the actual tale and the unconscious criteria by which we recognize the genre is similar to that which exists between a spoken sentence and grammar.” Thus the fundamental narrative pattern – an apparent death of the beloved, a resurrection and a renewal, to recall my earlier example – may be designated “langue”, while its specific expression - Hero or Hermione, Ros or Molly - becomes “parole”.

Csapo concludes that “words and concepts are not directly derived from nature, but are created by language. The world is a confusing and chaotic continuum without beginnings or ends. It is language which parcels it up and

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73 Ibid., 1.
74 Barthes, *Mythologies*.
75 Ibid., 9.
76 Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, 134.
77 Ibid., 9.
78 Ibid., 141.
79 Ibid., 191.
80 Ibid., 183.
reduces it to order. It is language which separates the apple from the tree and the tree from the garden around … it is not the structure of reality that imposes itself upon language, but the structure of language that imposes itself upon reality."

I argue that the narrative vision and imaginative voice of myth, in that it simultaneously reviews and renews consciousness, also imposes itself on reality: *homo loquens* is also *homo mythicos*. In this regard, the quality of our mythmaking articulates the quality of our reality.

**MEDIATING MYTH**

To establish the importance of myth as a subjective correlative which symbolically represents ‘real life’ requires some consideration of how myth came to be considered a mere fallacy or fabrication.

The first recorded use of ‘myth’ to mean “untrue story, rumour” occurs in 1840, in a period when increasing literacy and improved print technology for the first time made mass communications – and hence the media industry - viable. In the next chapter, I discuss Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, a study of the misrepresentations of media myths. Barthes combines critical analysis in the *Myth Today* section with illustrative essays “on topics suggested by current events”, as seen in contemporary media. In this way, the text combines theory and practice, as is the intent of the critical and creative components of this study.

Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenburg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media: the extensions of man* (1964) have also influenced my thinking about how myth may evolve to represent evolving consciousness. McLuhan argues that “during the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space …after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace; abolishing both space and time … we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness”. What does this mean for *Homo mythicos*?

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81 Ibid., 185.
83 Barthes, *Mythologies*.
84 Ibid., 6.
85 Ibid., 11.
In his 2011 *History of Communications*, M.T. Poe comments that “media networks engender certain social practices, and these social practices engender related values.” This convergence of practices and values is the target of historian Anthony Beevor’s criticism in the *Dangers of Counterknowledge*, he argues that “during the past dozen or so years, television and movie makers have managed to blur the border between fact and fiction to an unprecedented degree. They pretend increasingly that their films are based on true stories … Every device possible, from computer generated imagery to place names and dates thrown onto the screen, seeks to suspend the belief of a historically illiterate audience.” Such illiterate suspension of disbelief suggests passive credulity rather than imaginative engagement.

Today’s media use technology of a sophistication beyond Barthes or McLuhan’s experience. What I might call the ‘verisimulation’ of 3D technology can now make medium and message virtually indistinguishable; we can no longer necessarily believe our own eyes, yet our every instinct prompts us to. The mental and emotional surrogacy made possible through the digital revolution arguably challenges independent vision and original voice as never before. How far can technology simulate consciousness without effectively replacing it? How far can software be internalized? Are we in danger of having “had the experience”– virtually – “but missed the meaning?”

Such questions are explored in Michael Heim’s *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (1993), a philosophical work which makes relevant and thought provoking reading. Heim engages directly with the ways in which consciousness may be affected by communications technology, from word processing to ‘hypertext’. His review of the art of Virtual Reality, *Osmose*, for example, highlights vividly the question of whether “artificial experiences” can be as “compelling as the real ones”: “There, look at that leaf. I’m going to go right

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88 Ibid., 16.
90 Ibid.
92 Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*.
through it. Inside a leaf, look at this. I’m sliding along the inside of a leaf.”

Online, Levinson’s *Digital McLuhan, a guide to the Information Millennium* (1999) defines the Internet as the “grand medium of media”, “for the space that the computer screen invites us to join is indeed everywhere.” Through his ability to hack into the medium and instigate “principled leaking”, for example, Julian Assange has become a global media icon; whether this media ‘legend’ is a hero who, in his own words, “beats the hammer of the collective conscience of humanity” or, in Joe Biden’s words, a ‘high tech terrorist’ remains controversial.

In her online article *Cybernetic esthetics, hypertext and the future of literature*, Molly Travis analyzes ways in which “the hypertextual medium” may transform “the process of literary reading.” That she does not simply use the noun ‘hypertext’ implies that hyperfiction is a still emerging genre. Her discussion, with reference to the experiments of Robert Coover “beyond the print text barrier”, lead her to conclude that “as it stands now, most hypertextual literature is exploratory rather than constructive”. This may be because of challenges posed by the non-sequential complexity which digital storytelling, with its ‘cut and paste’, ‘undo’ and ‘merge’ facilities, allows. In *Beyond Myth and Metaphor*, literary critic Marie-Laure Ryan returns to the idea of mythmaking as innately human, viewing narrative as “a universal structure that transcends media”. For this reason both she and Travis conclude that the interactive sophistication of digital media, for all its multiplicity of narrative ‘links’, does not yet satisfy our appetite for some kind of subjective correlation from our literature: our need for some beginning, middle and end to which we can empathetically relate.

James Joyce has already been mentioned in relation to hypertext. The

95 ———, "Osmose."
97 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
“allimmanence”\textsuperscript{105} of \textit{Finnegan’s Wake} not only anticipates hypertext, it is also an extension of what T.S. Eliot has called Joyce’s “mythical method”\textsuperscript{106}, moving from \textit{Ulysses'} streams of consciousness to streams of subconsciousness. Like hypertext, \textit{Finnegan’s Wake} uses verbal ‘links’ to create a text of interactive complexity: yet at subjective source this “maelstrom of stories”\textsuperscript{107} is the work of a single consciousness.

In my final chapter, my enquiry into how myth may manifest its subjective function today refers to \textit{Finnegan’s Wake}\textsuperscript{108} as a prototypical hypertext. Specific studies of mythopoeic literature examine William Gibson’s ‘cyberpunk’ novel \textit{Neuromancer}, the Wachowski Brothers’ film \textit{The Matrix}, Jeanette Winterson’s \textit{Weight} and Victor Pelevin’s \textit{The Helmet of Horror}. The last two texts have been recently published in Text’s \textit{Myths} series, which is explicitly comprised of “narratives that remind us what it means to be human.”\textsuperscript{109}

Arguably, that reminder also impels the narratives of speculative fiction, of which a defining characteristic is a fictional mythology. The fundamentalist Gilead of Margaret Atwood’s \textit{The Handmaid’s Tale}, the myths within myths of Tolkien’s Middle Earth, Douglas Adams’ Encyclopedia Galactica or the elephants supporting Terry Pratchett’s Discworld, all elicit a ‘suspension of disbelief’ which enables us to empathize with heroic figures. These figures may be elves, dwarves, Winston Smiths or Ford Prefects, Mad Hatters or Alice herself, but for the duration of the narrative they are our ‘alter egos’. The same digital technology which privileges visual image defines the shape shifting creatures of imagination; the film versions of \textit{The Fellowship of the Rings}\textsuperscript{110} and \textit{Alice in Wonderland}\textsuperscript{111} are among the most spectacular examples of this. Yet these images derive from concepts already imagined in an archetypally familiar language; it is the expression of the concept that has been renewed rather than the concept itself. The popularity of such films suggests that rather than allowing ourselves to be subsumed by technology, we are eager to find ways of

\textsuperscript{105}Joyce, \textit{Finnegan’s Wake}, 394.
\textsuperscript{107}Joyce, \textit{Finnegan’s Wake}, 30.
\textsuperscript{108}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111}T. Burton, "Alice in Wonderland," (Walt Disney Pictures, 2011).
imaginatively subsuming it.

Anticipating and applying digital storytelling techniques, *Finnegan's Wake* also humanizes them; its subjective vision and constantly evolving voice have given it mythic status both in itself and as the achievement of a single consciousness. It reminds us that electronic applications originate in human ingenuity; in our increasingly online world, such a reminder may be timely. Is myth still socially important? Is it evolving with online consciousness? Seeking answers from explicitly mythopoeic fiction, I examine *Weight*, by Jeanette Winterson\(^{112}\) and Victor Pelevin’s *The Helmet of Horror*.\(^{113}\) Winterson shows how each generation reinvents source stories and, in Jungian terms, dreams them on. Pelevin places us in a cosmic chat room, with only our own minds to imagine the world outside and where it may be headed. Their answer to my questions, I argue, is yes.

**CREATIVE MYTHMAKING**

In this first chapter I have outlined the argument of this work and its development, explained my use of specific terms, and reviewed the literature which has informed my thinking. My argument derives the social importance of myth from its metaphoric representation of consciousness, adopting the term ‘subjective correlative’, as represented by the mythic persona, to define that evolving function.

In chapter two I review three theories of myth which specifically underpin my argument for the social importance of mythopoeic fiction. I extend my use of the term ‘mythopoeic’ to mean not only the appropriation and transformation of myth\(^{114}\) through creative literature, as defined earlier, but also that critical discourse about myth which explicates evolving cultural narrative.

The case studies of chapters three and four examine how the mythic persona of fiction may act as an evolving social correlative which shapes consciousness and hence cultural narrative. In Chapter Three, my focus is Australian icon Ned Kelly, represented by himself in *The Jerilderie Letter*, by

\(^{112}\) Winterson, *Weight*.


\(^{114}\) Cuddon, “Literary Terms & Literary Theory”, 527.
historian Ian Jones in *Ned Kelly: a short life*, and by Peter Carey in his historical novel, *True History of the Kelly Gang*. *The Jerilderie Letter* evidences Ned Kelly’s personal mythmaking, while Jones’ history is included both as a source for Carey’s mythopoeic fiction and as a demonstration of how non-fiction contributes to the evolving subjectivity of myth. These studies are significantly informed by Laura Basu’s interdisciplinary study, *Ned Kelly as Memory Dispositif: Media, Time, Power, and the Development of Australian identities*.

In chapter four, I turn to the characteristics of the purely fictional mythic persona, as represented by Leopold Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Fred Scully in Tim Winton’s *The Riders*. Both authors are quite consciously mythmakers, especially Joyce, whose own theories on myth also inform this chapter’s discussion. The chapter concludes with poems taken from *Best Australian Poetry 2010*, acknowledging the mythopoeic vision and voice characteristic of the literary imagination.

The final chapter investigates mythmaking in a society characterized by mass media communications and an increasingly ‘online’ culture. In the world of speculative fiction, the evolution of myth to articulate evolving consciousness is examined in paired case studies: William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer* and the Wachowski Brothers film *The Matrix* represent consciousness in the early days of online society, Winterson’s *Weight* and Pelevin’s *Helmet of Horror* articulate current perspectives. I conclude that the capacity of mythopoeic vision and resonant voice to continuously review and renew evolving consciousness confirms myth as a vital socio-cultural resource.

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CHAPTER 2

MYTH AS CULTURAL NARRATIVE

MYTH IN THEORY (1)

Camus’ re-imagining of the *Myth of Sisyphus* to answer “the one truly philosophical question… judging whether life is or is not worth living” illustrates myth as text which is not only archetypal but also innovative, both reviewing and renewing our sense of who we are. The subjective impact of myth is also evident in critical discourse about myth, where each new theory reflects the ideology of a new generation of intellectuals. In *Theorizing Myth*, Bruce Lincoln explicitly discusses “Scholarship as Myth”. He discusses students’ criticisms of his definition of myth as “ideology in narrative form” and notes the importance of such ongoing dialectic to the “evolution” of his book. Further, he insists that “scholarship – like human speech in general - is interested, perspectival, and partial and that its ideological dimensions must be … critically cross-examined.” Noteworthy here is the comparison with speech, what the ancient Greeks called *muthos*. The dialectical process enables the comparativist views of a Frazer, convinced of his own cultural superiority, to evolve towards the cultural relativism of Csapo’s “postindustrial capitalism”, where an economy is typified by products which represent commodities less than “a lifestyle mythology.” Lincoln concludes that the progress of “the science of mythology” through such dialectic enables “a growth in self-awareness … possible because science is not just wish-fulfillment, it is also rational discourse.” For the following theorists - Jung, Levi-Strauss and Barthes - myth is important essentially because, in engaging us subjectively, it also engages us socially and culturally.

Ibid., 207.
Ibid.
Ibid., 308.
Ibid., 308.
Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, 286.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Through interpreting the images of dream and memory at a subconscious level, Freudian analysis established how crucial levels of consciousness are to psychology and, by extension, to a psychological approach to myth. Archetypal images embedded within consciousness permeate mythic narrative, especially as creatively re-imagined in literature: “all neurotics,” writes Freud, “are either Oedipus or Hamlet”.126

Freud’s interpretation of the Oedipus legend demonstrates the interactivity of id, ego and superego within the human subject; his pioneering work explores how neurosis may be caused by friction or imbalance between these elements: “like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of the wishes so offensive to morality with which nature has burdened us and following the unveiling of which we should no doubt all rather look away from the scenes of our childhood.”127 Freud’s insights into “the relation between conscious and unconscious mind, particularly as it affects the process of symbolization”, not only lie “behind all modern psychoanalytic approaches to myth”,128 they also illustrate the scholarly dialectic already identified. Through questioning Freud’s original analyses of unconscious and conscious mind, the structuralists of the 1960’s came to the conclusion that “their connection is one of direct expression of unconscious knowledge by the conscious mind … dormant rather than repressed.”129 The discourse of an academic community engaged in developing theory and a local community engaged in making myth, however different in terms of intention and praxis, are yet alike in processing evidence subjectively in order to shape a narrative.

Perhaps more than any other, Freud’s pupil Jung has established the subjective power of myth in driving individuals, communities and nations. His work on the perpetually recurring archetypes of myths and dreams and the tales they may tell on the unconscious, substantiate a basic premise of Csapo’s Theories of Mythology, that myth is a distinctively human “communication

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126 Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 7.
128 Csapo, Theories of Mythology, 80.
129 Ibid., 189.
through language and symbols”.

For Jung, the mythopoeic language of dreams made psychic truth potentially accessible to everyone. His theory of the collective unconscious developed from his observation that certain archetypal icons recur in the minds of dreamers worlds apart in time, space and personal circumstance. These icons – hero or trickster, holy mother or wicked witch, child or old man – all personify particular qualities and inhabit mythologies world wide. Jung argued that just as man has evolved physically, so there has been psychic evolution; “just as there is physical evidence of earlier existences … facial hair, the appendix … so the mythic images of dreams are the “deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity.” Positing a collective unconscious of which the individual’s was a singular manifestation, Jung argued that myth enables us to “frame a view of the world which adequately explains the meaning of human existence … which springs from our psychic wholeness, from the cooperation between consciousness and unconsciousness.” Thus the mythmaking of individuals, on their own or in a group, may incrementally review and renew collective social discourse, allowing the merely personal to develop into cultural narrative.

“Dreams are not usually projected on to the world, whereas myths are: myths purport to be about the world, not merely about oneself. Ordinarily, dreams are dreamed by individuals, whereas myths are believed by a group. Dreams are created anew by each dreamer; myths are passed on from one generation to the next. Myths no less than dreams are manifestations of the unconscious, but myths are consciously created, even if their creators are in fact guided by the unconscious.”

Jung’s view of myth here aligns with Csapo’s definition of socially important narrative. “While the principal contents of myths for Jung are expressions of archetypes, myths are more than archetypes. Myths are stories. Archetypes or ‘mythologies’ are the motifs, or images, in stories. Myths are consciously created. Archetypes are the unconscious raw material of myths. Mythmakers unconsciously appropriate archetypal material in consciously

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130 Ibid., 161.
133(Segal, 1998, 153)
creating myths.”134 In this metaphorical sense, a man like Ned Kelly might be appropriated as a mythologem, a heroic image in a story about courage – gameness – and power.

The search for dialogue between unconscious and conscious was explicit in Jung’s treatment of his patients. As analyst / interpreter, the psychologist’s role was to restore mental health by enabling patients to balance those two mental states. Jung interpreted the idiosyncratic language of their dreams in order that patients might understand personal mythologems and deal with them holistically. To go down the mythological path, far from straying, was the most direct route to understanding, insight and healing: in short, meaningful existence. “‘Meaninglessness inhibits fullness of life and is … equivalent to illness. Meaning makes a great many things endurable, perhaps everything. No science will ever replace myth, and a myth cannot be made out of any science.’”135

In this respect, the stories of myth are significant because they correlate an indifferent and ultimately incomprehensible world with one which is subjectively accessible. The creative mythmaker may interweave ideas and images from a personal unconscious with those already threaded into a worldwide psychic web, a web which, through its metaphoric narrative, correlates what happened once upon a time with what happens everywhere and everywhen.

An individual thread of particular strength may become a mythic persona or hero: the individual who practices what is communally preached, the champion of community vision. Historically, the first characteristic of such a one is courage, as shown in the willingness to risk one’s life for a cause. Through that commitment is evidenced the second characteristic, a personalised community vision which not only fights for but totally identifies with that cause. The third characteristic of the mythic persona is an innate eloquence, a voice which engages and inspires, not only there and then, but for generations thereafter. Names like George Washington, Che Guevara, Florence Nightingale and Aung San Suu Kyi have become bywords for such qualities, while the phrase ‘game as Ned Kelly’ succinctly demonstrates how essentially mythopoeic language is. A psychological approach to myth acknowledges both its inherent subjectivity and its linguistic nature.

134 (Segal, 1998, 81)
135 (Jung, 1964, 340)
STRUCTURAL LINGUISTICS

Awareness of the psychological approach to myth is evident from the very beginning of Claude Levi Strauss’ 1977 Massey lectures when he observes that “myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him.”

Influenced by the linguistic theories of Roman Jacobson, Levi-Strauss became especially interested in symbolic thought and its articulation through myth and music. In Levi-Strauss’s view, “there is a kind of continuous reconstruction taking place in the mind of the listener to music or the listener to a mythical story.” The composition, be it of notes or words, is mentally reviewed and through that process renewed.

As summarized by his contemporary, sociologist Simon Clarke, Levi-Strauss’s own theory of myth developed around the concept of “the unconscious as a universal and purely formal capacity to impose structure … a myth is no more than the structure imposed on it by the unconscious mind.” Ironically, Clarke’s criticism centers on just that, the anthropologist’s own unconscious projection onto his definition of the “constitutive character” of mind: “the meaning which Levi-Strauss imposes on myths is not at all located in the impenetrable unconscious of the ‘primitive’ but rather derives from Levi-Strauss’s own desperate response to his own civilization.”

Such criticism does not include Levi-Strauss’s entire response; his coinage ‘mytheme’, analogous to ‘phoneme’ and ‘morpheme’, is a recognized structuralist term, specifically in relation to the study of story, or ‘narratology’. Text Publishing’s foreword to their recent ‘Myths’ series - “myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives” – shows the influence of Levi-Strauss’s observation that “we find the same mythical elements combined over and over again.”

Those mythical elements were originally expressed in spoken language; in what media theorist Marshall McLuhan has called the “audile tactile space of

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137 Ibid., 49.
139 Cuddon, "Literary Terms & Literary Theory", 533.
140 Karen Armstrong, A Short History of Myth (Melbourne, Australia: A Canongate Book published by The Text Publishing Company (Griffin Press), 2005), foreword.
141 Levi-Strauss, Myth and Meaning, 40.
‘sacral’ non-literate man”,¹⁴² a space “compounded of secular, religious, mythological, magical, and experiential elements all rolled into one”.¹⁴³ Taking language as his “point of departure”, anthropologist Levi-Strauss stresses the fundamentally oral nature of myth by comparing it with music. Through music, we relate to “the sound aspect already embedded in language, while mythology emphasizes the meaning aspect, which is also embedded in language.”¹⁴⁴ The structure of myths, in this view, derives from the linguistic structures within our minds.

McLuhan’s account of the displacement of aurally dominated non-literate man by visually dominated literate man in The Gutenberg Galaxy¹⁴⁵ highlights the primacy of these senses in our conceptual as well as physical interpretation of the world. In a metaphorical sense, phrases like ‘I see’ or ‘I hear what you’re saying’ translate as ‘I understand.’ Where Jung’s emphasis is on vision (the images of the unconscious), Levi-Strauss focuses on voice. Symbolic thought is a “metalanguage”¹⁴⁶ and to understand the meaning of a myth is to read it “like an orchestral score”.¹⁴⁷ Like reading too, the act of listening, be it to orchestral score or oral history, is a uniquely subjective process, a correlation of outer and inner apprehension.

CULTURAL CRITICISM

Literary mythmaking has traditionally prioritized sight; we read the text as written or as printed. Oral histories, plays and recitals emphasize sound. With the development of audio-visual technology, we increasingly respond to texts through both senses at once, as we have always done to the natural world. In his Mythologies,¹⁴⁸ French literary theorist Roland Barthes criticizes the apparent “naturalness”¹⁴⁹ with which, through that technology, media texts may simultaneously exploit what we see and hear. Arguably, it is precisely because myth, specifically media myth, is so very effective as a subjective correlative that

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¹⁴³ Ibid., 76.
¹⁴⁴ Levi-Strauss, Myth and Meaning, 53.
¹⁴⁶ Clarke, "Levi-Strauss: Structural Analysis of Myth.”
¹⁴⁷ Levi-Strauss, Myth and Meaning, 45.
¹⁴⁸ Barthes, Mythologies.
¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 11.
Barthes calls it “ideological abuse.”

For Hamlet’s “thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls”, such myths, he argues, substitute “examples of the falsely obvious”, for which souls are not required.

Barthes initially defines myth as “a type of speech” and then refines this to a “type of speech defined by its intention.” In his view, myth “has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us.” He is concerned that the appearance of naturalness associated with myth - it is “what goes without saying” – may mean that it also goes without question. Its “decorative display”, in Barthes’ view, is exactly what constitutes “ideological abuse.” His example, a Paris Match cover picture of a young Negro soldier reverentially saluting the French flag, shows how visual text may exploit subliminal notions about the nobility of Empire and racial harmony in France. In a variation on Levi-Strauss, Barthes uses the image to illustrate myth as “metalanguage… a second language, in which one speaks about the first.” The saluting soldier is the “language object” which “myth gets hold of in order to build its own system.” That system embeds a sequence of “global sign(s)” so organized as to evoke the desired subjective response, modeled here in the devotedly upturned eyes of the young soldier. In Barthes’ view, the potential for ideological manipulation is all the greater because such signs have been worked on. Pre-existent meanings have been hollowed out: the individual Negro no longer exists. His image has become “suitable for communication”.

Barthes’ description of myth as “defined by intention” begs the question of how consciously articulated that intention may be, and by extension whether it can be applied to myths which perpetuate some mystery – the notion of the eternal feminine, for example – or which have evolved through time. In T.S. Eliot’s The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, the “one… turning towards the

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150 Ibid.
151 Barnet, ed., Hamlet, I, iv, 56
152 Barthes, Mythologies, 11.
153 Ibid. 109
154 Ibid. 124
155 Ibid. 117
156 Ibid. 11
157 Ibid. 115
158 Ibid., 115.
159 Ibid., 115.
160 Ibid., 110.
window” to say “That is not it at all, / that is not what I meant, at all”; 161 speaks for more than merely a single self. Similarly, a myth such as ‘the King Must Die’ has evolved from archetypal notions of sacrifice, of death and rebirth, rather than a single deliberation. The subjective appeal of such narratives is transgenerational because the content is an idea, not a product. “Speech defined by intention”, on the other hand, is by definition limited, as in the ‘speech’ of advertising narratives. Barthes’ Operation Margarine is an example: “What does it matter, after all, if margarine is just fat, when it goes further than butter, and costs less? What does it matter, after all, if Order is a little brutal or a little blind, when it allows us to live cheaply?” 162 Subjective appeal here is limited to the satisfaction of saving a little money.

If media myths are made from speech defined by some conscious intention, that speech must be suspect whose intent is hidden. Although the products are dated, Barthes’ description in his conclusion to Soap Powders and Detergents still rings true: “What matters is the art of having disguised the abrasive function of the detergent under the delicious image of a substance at once deep and airy … which must not make us forget that there is one plane on which ‘Persil’ and ‘Omo’ are one and the same: the plane of the Anglo-Dutch trust Unilever.” 163 A desire for cleanliness correlates with a desire for the “delicious image.”

Unlike “myth in the traditional sense”, 164 in which even a critic like Plato admitted there was some truth, 165 myth in Barthean terms is socially important, therefore, because it merely simulates truth and may mislead and manipulate large numbers of people. I contend that it does so through exploitation of the subjective correlative.

Media consumer culture routinely conflates subjective and objective; for ‘personal’ and ‘individual’, read ‘personalised’ and ‘individualised’. Commercial narratives may ‘de-mean’ not only Eliot’s notion of the objective correlative but also the projections of inner consciousness associated with the subjective correlative. Polish journalist Michael Witkowski has in fact applied

161 T.S. Eliot, Selected Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 15
162 Barthes, Mythologies, 42.
163 Ibid., 37-38
164 Ibid., 11
that specific term in a contribution to online journal *Studies in Media and Information Literacy*; it is called *The Bottle that isn’t there and the Duck that can’t be Heard: the ‘Subjective Correlative’ in Commercial Messages*. In such messages, he suggests, the object (a bottle of Absolut Vodka) may not even be there, may be merely “suggested… by the shape of a *swimming* pool… or the space between two palmetto trees”. The effectiveness of another advertisement, this time for AFLAC insurance, depends on perception of a similarity between a duck’s quack and the company’s name: “there is no innate or established connection between the duck and supplementary insurance other than its unexplained presence and onomatopoeic quack.” The word “onomatopoeic”, however casually, reduces poetry to duck speak.

The sophistication of today’s media technology increases its capacity for “ideological abuse” far beyond Barthes’ conception. The Internet gives the question of which hand signed which paper global relevance; gigabytes of virtual information compound the problem of distinguishing true from false, facilitating the deception of Beevor’s “historically illiterate audiences.” Future historians may record ‘weapons of mass destruction’ as mythical in Barthes’ sense of ideologically abusive, noting also the complicity of language in such abuse. Another case in point is, since the Watergate scandal, the use of the suffix ‘gate’ to signal deception. Attached to a complex global issue like ‘climate’, such a one-size-fits-all suffix reduces that complexity to a one word grab with all the profundity of a price tag.

**MYTH IN THEORY (2)**

In George Orwell’s *1984*, a classic critique of manipulative mythmaking, Winston Smith is employed to re-write the news. From Big Brother’s statements of economic goals to Newspeak’s minimization of vocabulary, the Party media machine disconnects myth and meaning. People lose their words and therefore their ability to make myths. The great American myth whereby “we hold these

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167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
169 (Beevor, 2009)
truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by
their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and
the pursuit of happiness…” has been replaced by “crimethink”.170 The only hope
left is in ordinary people, the "proles", and only if they can “connect the life of
the past that still exists with the life of the present, which threatens to slip
away”.171 To make that connection is, I argue, the ongoing function of myth.

In The Western Dreaming, sociologist John Carroll uses the ancient
Hebrew term “midrash” to describe “the process of each age taking up the
ancient, sacred stories and retelling them.”172 “Has mankind ever really got away
from myths?” asks Robert Segal in Encountering Jung: Jung on Mythology. He
concludes that “if all the world’s traditions were cut off at a single blow, the
whole of mythology and the whole history of religion would start all over again
with the next generation. Only a very few individuals succeed in throwing off
mythology in epochs of exceptional intellectual exuberance – the masses
never.”173 Of the evolving consciousness represented in myth, Jung notes:

“Primitive man was much more governed by his instincts than are his
‘rational’ modern descendants, who have learned to ‘control’ themselves.
In this civilizing process, we have increasingly divided our consciousness
from the deeper instinctive strata of the human psyche and even
ultimately from the somatic basis of the psychic phenomenon. For the
sake of mental stability … the unconscious and the conscious must be
integrally connected and thus move on parallel lines.”174

Those parallel lines move through time and space. What happens when time and
space are cancelled? This is the practical effect of electronic media, as
anticipated by McLuhan: “now that we live electrically in an instantaneous
world, space and time interpenetrate each other totally in a space-time world.”175
Time and space remain fundamental conditions of our existence; yet increasingly
attitudes and beliefs are shaped by technologies which bypass both.

For the three theorists here singled out, the social importance of myth is
located primarily in its subjectivity, on how it connects our inner and outer

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171 R.A. Segal, Theorizing About Myth (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1999), 73.
172 (Carroll, 2001, 13)
173 (Segal,1998, 34)
174 (Jung, 1978, 36)
175 McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, 148
selves. Stories are absorbed, remembered, repeated. When Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson asked a schoolboy to define myth, the answer was “something that is true on the inside, but not on the outside.” In a world where it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what is real, the subjective authenticity of myth, as measured by original vision and empathic voice, may offer a critical way of telling what is “true on the inside”.

The focus of this work is on how literary mythmaking may discover that “inside” truth. In keeping with the subjectivity of my theme, I concentrate on the mythic persona, specifically that of the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly. How does his mythicization substantiate my argument for the significance of myth in reviewing and renewing consciousness?

Stadler, M & O'Shaughnessy, J., ed., Media and Society (Oxford University Press, 2008), 332
CHAPTER 3

THE KELLY MYTH

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Myth is a vast topic, far beyond the scope of this work. I have chosen, therefore, to concentrate on the hero, the larger-than-life individual whom I will call the mythic persona. In representing his community’s values and beliefs, the mythic persona functions as a subjective correlative. This work’s focus on male heroes, specifically Ned Kelly, is balanced by the focus on the consciousness of Ned’s mother, Ellen Kelly, in my creative work.

The Kelly myth is based on a real historical figure. Accordingly, I include in this chapter discussion of non-fiction texts, specifically Ian Jones’ history, *Ned Kelly: a short life.* I do so because such texts are sources for writers of historical fiction such as Peter Carey, and their individual representation of historical fact therefore contributes to the making of myth. However consciously impartial, the historian cannot avoid some degree of subjective interpretation. Specifically, as an indicator of how perceptions of Ned Kelly have evolved from reviled criminal to the mythic persona of Carey’s *True History*, non-fiction supports my case for the subjective correlative as a defining function of myth.

On Friday, November 12, 1880, the Argus reported on Ned Kelly’s execution as follows: “Much has been written during the last two years about the career and crimes of the bloodthirsty Kelly gang of bushrangers and it will be with a sense of relief that the public will now read the final chapter of their history.” Judgement had been passed, the last of the gang was dead; the prediction must have seemed perfectly safe. As merely another entry in the register of criminals, Ned Kelly’s only social importance could be as a warning of the wages of sin. Since then, however, accounts of him as, in Shakespearean terms, a “man more sinned against than sinning”, have made him a mythic

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177 Jones, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life.*
In *Ned Kelly: a short life*, historian Ian Jones observes that “for almost fifty years after Ned Kelly’s death, the literature was overwhelmingly anti-Kelly”. He refers specifically to contemporary newspapers and the dominance of authorized print media such as the Argus, Australian Sketcher and Beechworth Advertiser over a persistent oral tradition of song and dramatizations. Post-doctoral researcher into the field of media and memory studies, Laura Basu, confirms this view in her discussion of the media’s contribution to the memorialization of Kelly, *Ned Kelly as Memory Dispositif*. She references specifically the use of hyperbole and superlatives in contemporary press accounts: “In January 1879 Ned is a ‘murderous fiend in human form’ and ‘an experienced criminal of the worst type’ (‘About the Kellys’), while the Kelly gang constitute “the most desperate gang of ruffians that ever infested Victoria (‘A Right Step’)”.

Jones observes that “the tide of the published word” only began to turn significantly in 1929 with the appearance of J.J. Kenneally’s partisan *Complete Inner History of the Kelly gang and their Pursuers*. The fascination with Kelly since then has been steady; there have been plays (Douglas Stewart’s 1943 *Ned Kelly*), musicals (*The Long Drop*, recorded in Benalla Town Hall in 1964), a symposium in Wangaratta in 1965 and a Centenary Festival held at Winton in 1980. There have been artworks by Albert Tucker and Sydney Nolan and a steady flow of books, from Max Brown’s biography, *Australian Son*, in 1945 to Robert Drewe’s 1991 *Our Sunshine* and Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* in 2000. The latter publication coincided with the spectacular appearance of ‘Kelly’ riders at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics. Debate may continue about the outlaw’s actual character within Australia, but the inclusion of the bushranger on the international stage acknowledges him as an Australian icon.

In an article for *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Nathanael O’Reilly considers the influence of Peter Carey’s *True History* in Australia. He argues

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that: “while the Kelly narrative held a prominent position in educational and social discourse, it did not occupy the dominant position in popular culture that it has attained in recent years.” Yet the Kelly “memory dispositifs” traced by Laura Basu provide substantive evidence, from 1878 to the present, that “the identities invested in the Australian nation and those invested in Kelly have, in a two-way dynamic, fused into and strengthened each other, so that Kelly is in many ways a symbol for the national identity.”\footnote{Basu. L. *Ned Kelly as Memory Dispositif*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2012, 3.}

This would suggest that the success of Carey’s novel is due not to any repositioning of “the Kelly narrative firmly at the centre of Australian popular culture”,\footnote{N. O'Reilly, "The Influence of Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang: Repositioning the Ned Kelly Narrative in Australian Popular Culture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 3 (2007).} but rather to public acknowledgement of how central his myth has always been. However “the value of his memory has been hotly contested – indeed arguably because of this contestation - he remains perhaps the national icon of Australia”.\footnote{Basu. L. *Ned Kelly as Memory Dispositif*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2012, 3.}

Both historically and fictionally, the mythic persona has been characterized by a commitment to stand up for others; he becomes a spokesperson, fights for a cause, leads a movement. He is admired because he takes on what ordinary people cannot or dare not. That he believes in the same things they believe in, that he may actually be willing to die for those things, validates his community’s sense of self worth. In effect, he personifies their beliefs and aspirations.

Pioneering mythologist Joseph Campbell has described the mythic persona as “the Hero with a Thousand Faces”; I return to the three distinguishing heroic characteristics which I identified earlier: courage, vision and voice. To evidence the universal nature of these heroic characteristics, I draw a brief comparison between two mythic figures quite separate in time and place: Ned Kelly and United Irishman Wolfe Tone.

As leader of the United Irish movement, Tone personified his community’s values and beliefs very much as Kelly did. Kelly’s consciousness was shaped from birth by his Irish heritage, those forefathers “of true blood, bone and beauty” who would not be subdued to “the Saxon yoke”. His parents left Ireland at a time when the United Irishmen’s attempt to overthrow that yoke in the rebellion of 1798 was within living memory. Its effects were still felt, its songs and stories widely known. Wolfe Tone was the movement’s leader. His statue stands in St. Stephen’s Green, Dublin; visual representations of his life are on public display in Irish museums, notably in County Wexford’s 1798 Centre. Similarly, displays of Kelly’s life are a feature of Australian museums and the bushranger is immortalized in Sir Sydney Nolan’s paintings in the Australian National Gallery. Art has related the two men’s story through images, literature through words.

Wolfe Tone was arrested after the final collapse of the United Irishmen’s rebellion in 1798, the ‘Year of Liberty’. He committed suicide in prison. Ned Kelly’s return to the siege at Glenrowan in 1880 led to his arrest and execution in Melbourne Gaol. The mythic persona is not necessarily a winner, any more than the people he represents. A win, in fact, such as that of the Loyalist extremists who successfully blew up the Dublin statue of Tone in 1971, may be less memorable than the survival of the head, miraculously undamaged, to be used in the subsequent reconstruction. What better symbol of the indestructibility of Tone’s vision for an independent and religiously tolerant republic of Ireland? Similarly, Ned Kelly’s letters appealing for a fair hearing were not successful, yet his legend is incomplete without the impassioned rhetoric of The Jerilderie Letter. Neither man was a conquering hero; on the contrary, it was through

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191 Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces.
193 Pakenham, The Year of Liberty.
defeat and death that their stories became significant and set in motion the socio-
political change for which they fought. Their stories suggest that the heroic myth
becomes especially “intelligible to ourselves”\textsuperscript{195} when the hero, like ourselves,
must come to terms with failure. To turn the final failure, death, into posthumous
recognition of some kind is possibly the best any of us can do.

Both men knew this; both men articulated their knowledge. Tone writes to
the “Citizen Directors” of the French republic that “I have sacrificed for the
republic all that man holds dearest – my wife, my children, my liberty, my
life.”\textsuperscript{196} Kelly, writing to the state governor, recognizes that “they will only be
satisfied with my life.”\textsuperscript{197} Both men realized that their lives were no longer their
own; their only consolation was that their deaths might mean something. In the
tradition of the king who must die, they may be seen as leaders whose “hour
upon the stage” shapes the continuing drama primarily through their sacrificial
death. Independence for Ireland, if not unity, has since been achieved; reform of
the Royal Victorian Police took place as a direct consequence of the enquiry into
corruption resulting from the Kelly outbreak.

Courage driven by the identification of self with cause is inseparable from
the hero’s vision of his historic moment, what it may mean to future generations,
and his capacity to give it dramatic voice. Here is Tone, speaking at his trial:
“After such sacrifices in a cause which I have always conscientiously considered
as the cause of justice and freedom, it is no great effort, at this day, to add the
sacrifice of my life.”\textsuperscript{198} Here is Kelly: “… I ask that my story might be heard …
not that I wish to avert any decree the law may deem necessary to vindicate
justice, or win a word of pity from anyone. If my life teaches the public that men
are made mad by bad treatment, and if the police are taught that they may not
exasperate to madness men they persecute and ill treat, my life will not be
entirely thrown away.”\textsuperscript{199}

Such transcripts demonstrate the essential contribution made to the
developing myth by non-fiction writers simply by faithfully recording the
historic voice of the mythic persona and so preserving a linguistic link to his

\textsuperscript{195} Leeming, \textit{Myth: A Biography of Belief}, 130.
\textsuperscript{196} William Theobald Wolfe Tone, \textit{The Life of Wolfe Tone: Written by Himself, and Extracted
from His Journals (1828)} (London: Hunt and Clark, 1828), 312.
\textsuperscript{197} Jones, \textit{Ned Kelly: A Short Life}, 285.
\textsuperscript{198} Tone, \textit{The Life of Wolfe Tone: Written by Himself, and Extracted from His Journals (1828)},
304.
\textsuperscript{199} Jones, \textit{Ned Kelly: A Short Life}, 266.
consciousness. Tone is “aware of the fate which awaits” and scorns “equally the
tone of complaint and that of supplication”.200 Kelly fears death “as little as to
drink a cup of tea”.201 The two men gain mythic stature in the face of defeat; like
Camus’ Sisyphus, they personify the human capacity to find significance in the
mortality which ultimately defeats us all. As suggested earlier, myths give
meaning to that mortality.

THE JERILDERIE LETTER

Given Kelly’s celebrity today, it is easy, as Jones and Basu’s remarks remind us,
to forget how extensively he was demonized in his own time. Kelly was quite
aware of his reputation, noting in The Jerilderie Letter that “in every paper that
is printed I am called the blackest and coldest blooded murderer ever on
record”.202 The Jerilderie Letter is his most sustained attempt to tell his side of
his story; as such, though Joe Byrne held the actual pen, it may qualify as a piece
of creative writing. Its idiosyncratic language invites empathy; Joe writes as Ned
speaks, asking questions, demanding answers, building his dramatic narrative.
He appeals directly to Everyman’s sense of justice: “What would people say if I
became a policeman and took an oath to arrest my brothers and sisters &
relations and convict them by fair or foul means?”203 Courage and vision
combine in his evocation of happy days “fearless, free and bold”204 and of “true
blood bone and beauty.”205

Kelly’s persistent letter writing, even as a condemned man dictating to
his warder because of his damaged right hand, clearly demonstrates his concern
for what people will make of his story: “Even to take the Police evidence all
through & the Two Years Career of me and my companions will show that we
were anything but bloodthirsty and likewise in the whole of our Career we never
ill used or maltreated women or child and always refrained from doing a
cowardly act.”206

200 Tone, The Life of Wolfe Tone: Written by Himself, and Extracted from His Journals (1828),
305.
201 Jones, Ned Kelly: A Short Life, 275.
202 Ibid., 335.
203 Ibid., 352-53.
204 Ibid., 360.
205 Ibid., 352.
206 Ibid., 284.
The Jerilderie Letter revisits those injustices done to the entire Kelly family of which the earlier Cameron letter had complained. The story has grown; those injustices are placed in the wider context of Anglo-Irish politics, with threats of “a colonial stratagem which will open the eyes of not only the Victorian Police … but also the whole British army.” It is no longer just the story of one man, but a story to which all “those people who are suffering” will relate.

In the Letter, Kelly formally undertakes to “acquaint” readers with “some of the occurrences of the present past and future.” It becomes apparent that Ned’s personal viewpoint is representative of a whole community, specifically the community of North East Victoria. These selectors were the sympathizers later imprisoned without trial by police for their support of the Kelly gang. For each one of them, their livelihood depended on the land, on good seasons and bad seasons; they were constantly aware of the state it was in. When Kelly observes that in “the spring of 1870 the ground was very soft”, he is speaking as one of that community. After Ned’s death, Constable Graham, charged with restoring order in North East Victoria, concluded from conversations with locals that the root cause of their discontent was insecurity about land. If they could be reassured that they would not be dispossessed, that their land was truly theirs in perpetuity, the discontent would die down. Ned’s constant references throughout The Jerilderie Letter - the “wet spring”, the “picked land on the Boggy Creek”, “the rust in the wheat”, and the “druth of a dry season”- show how deeply that life on the land is embedded in his consciousness. It is a consciousness Ned shares with his fellow selectors and essential to their adoption of him as their representative and leader.

Kelly’s ‘stream of consciousness’ narrative further showcases the subjectivity of a myth in the making. Run on sentences, vivid imagery and impassioned denunciations cumulatively evoke courage, vision and voice, if also hot temper, a capacity for self dramatization and sentimentality. It is, I suggest, hard not to engage at some level with the comic rhetoric of “a parcel of big ugly fat-necked wombat headed magpie legged narrow hipped splay footed sons of

207 Ibid., 145.
208 Ibid., 325.
209 Ibid.
210 Ibid., 307.
Irish Bailiffs or English landlords”. Dramatically signing off as “a widow’s son outlawed”, Ned voices succinctly the identification of self with cause characteristic of the mythic persona. The fusion of physical and mental experience through his voice reflects their interactivity in his life; Brian Boyd notes that “stories can help solve the problem of common knowledge; traditional stories ensure that all know and react to, and know that others know, the core values of the group”. Ned’s creative narration as well as his role play – the gallantry he showed to women, his donning of armour – reflects an awareness of the importance of storytelling in shaping the present even as it becomes the past. Steeped in the myths of Ireland, he had plenty of narrative models on which to draw and indeed refers directly to that cultural heritage: “they were all catholics before the Saxons … since then they were persecuted massacred thrown into martyrdom and tortured beyond the ideas of the present generation.”

In summary, the Letter is an impassioned protest against what, in modern terms, might be seen as media misrepresentation. Kelly’s recount of “occurrences” is intended to refute accusations against him with true witness: “I was a prisoner in Beechworth Gaol until the 29 of March therefore I could not have stole the mare.” Given the document’s contribution to his subsequent mythicization, we may well speculate on how the publication of it or the Cameron letter might have impacted on his trial; on what would have happened had there, for instance, been some nineteenth century equivalent of Wikileaks.

Historian Ian Jones reflects on the objection of Ned’s lawyer to the use of the Letter in evidence at the trial: “Bindon … had lost sight of the vital point that ‘if the prosecution tenders a declaration in evidence then it becomes evidence for the prisoner as well as against him’.” Jones contends that “if the Jerilderie Letter had been read in court, Ned’s case would have been pleaded in his own words, with the voice of dead Joe joining his in unison … the pleas of self defence would have been delivered first-hand, with persuasive effect.”

Certainly, the subjective power of that voice has vitally informed many texts about Kelly, both fiction and non-fiction; its inclusion in Jones’ own

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211 Ibid., 349.
212 Ibid., 362.
213 Boyd, On the Origin of Stories (Evolution, Cognition and Fiction), 196.
215 Ibid., 313.
216 Ibid., 273.
217 Ibid.
Short History is a case in point. The disappearance of the letter from public view – the original was in fact not donated to the State Library of Victoria until November 2000- suggest that its possible impact on Ned’s trial may well have encouraged government authorities to ignore it.

NED KELLY: A SHORT LIFE

The Jerilderie Letter, then, voices Ned Kelly’s mythic credentials in his own words: his courage, his vision, the voice which speaks for his peers. Its inclusion as a primary source in Jones’ history Ned Kelly: a short life not only acknowledges the limitations of non-fiction, it adds authenticity by linking historical fact to subjective reality: an imaginable person in a life threatening situation. His very inconsistency and egotism are qualities to which we can relate; momentarily, the mythic figure reverts to behaving like a mere mortal. We see him overwhelmed by circumstances, as we all are at some stage, but we also know the extent to which he will overcome those circumstances.

Non-fiction might be described as moving from landscape to mindscape, in so far as historians extrapolate imaginatively from objective reality, writers of fiction from a subjective one. That Ned Kelly returned to the siege at Glenrowan is fact. That he chose to do so is the stuff of myth. If historians are to make the “materials of myth” intelligible to readers, they must give some sense of the subjective reality which motivates and ultimately explains the facts.

In Ned Kelly: a short life, Ian Jones does this through the structure of the text itself. In his account of the Fitzpatrick incident, he acknowledges that there is simply not enough objective evidence to substantiate a conclusion ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. That being the case, he challenges us as readers to engage with the subjective reality and make up our own minds.

“First, was Ned involved? The accounts from Tom Lloyd, Mrs Kelly, Jim Kelly and Kate Kelly …suggest Ned was present …” Jones goes on to review the evidence, positioning readers as a jury: “The case for a genuine bullet wound is strengthening. Why then did Dr John Nicholson express doubts …?”

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218 Ibid.  
219 Ibid., 306.  
220 Barthes, Mythologies, 110.  
221 Jones, Ned Kelly: A Short Life, 103.  
222 Ibid., 104.
Through entering a dialogue with readers, Jones deepens our personal involvement; the text also re-enacts the wider dialectical process, the ongoing conversations between detractors and supporters through which Ned Kelly’s myth has grown. Laura Basu notes that, in cultural memory, Kelly “appears to exist in an eternally contradictory state, a multistable figure… that contains multiple and competing images.”

While Jones’ account is based as far as possible on factual information, it also recognizes, to use Barthes’ term, how a “signifying consciousness” may correlate “the materials of myth” to its own subjective perceptions. Where perceptions differ, collective agreement on one mythic characteristic, such as that implicit in the phrase ‘game as Ned Kelly’, suggests that society has processed the original matters of fact and identified at least one fundamental truth about the myth: that Kelly was courageous. The social importance of the myth becomes a matter of how its personification of courage may meet the changing needs of a collective “signifying consciousness”. Thus, the consciousness of Ned’s nephew, Fred Foster, killed at Bullecourt in World War 1, may be subsumed into the ANZAC spirit; political outrage at the dismissal of an elected leader in 1975 may be articulated by folk rock group Redgum:

It’s a thousand like Ned Kelly
Who’ll hoist the flag of stars.

Jones’ use of a trial’s question and answer format reflects the ongoing interchange of words and ideas through which myth evolves. His scenario filters subjective interpretation through recorded fact and thus acknowledges the limitations of fact. Consider his account of the different versions of Ned’s last words:

“As he stepped onto the drop, Ned said something. To the Herald reporter, it was ‘Such is life’, the words Beechworth’s Advertiser also attributed to him when told ‘the hour of his death’. The Argus would claim that he said ‘ah well, I suppose it has come to this.’ Surprisingly, the hostile Telegraph might

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225 Ibid.
have come closest to the truth: “on leaving the cell, and before stepping upon the drop, an expression, with a sigh, escaped Kelly’s lips, which the warders and the Governor interpreted to this effect -’Ah, well, I suppose’ - probably meaning to say he supposed this was the last of it, or this is what it had come to, but the expression was never concluded.”**228**

In every case, the reported voice of Ned’s “signifying” consciousness expresses some degree of courage, a quality to which all may aspire. Like his predecessor Wolfe Tone, Ned could say “that a man who has thought and acted as I have done should be armed against the fear of death.”**229**

Popular mythmaking has appropriated the Advertiser’s version of Ned’s final words, ‘such is life’. The historical fact is irrecoverable; the mythicized version merges remembered fact with imaginative projection to represent Ned’s conscious acceptance of the fate he had chosen when he returned to the siege at Glenrowan. The vision of an armoured giant looming out of the mist combines with indomitable voice – “Fire away, you buggers! You cannot hurt me!”**230**- to create “the timeless tale of the hero, the man who transcends the often brutal or mundane realities of his existence to become a symbol of something larger than himself.”**231** Through recorded voice, what actually happened fuses with how it was perceived, as shown in the following extract.

“Dowsett stared incredulously towards the awesome figure lurching across the slope. ‘He had like a white mackintosh over the whole affair down to his heels, and the helmet standing on his head, and what with the fog and one thing and another, golly! It made him about nine feet high; upon my word it did, coming through the gloom there ... I said it was Old Nick, and upon my word, I thought it was at the time.’ **232**

Here is an ordinary man, a railway guard, unable to give a true sense of how he felt without evoking the myths which permeate his consciousness, his personal sense of the supernatural, of the devil himself. Rationally, he can’t believe what he is seeing, but subliminally, subjectively, he recognizes it. Fact and fiction merge in memory and imagination; mythmaking begins.

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**229** Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty*, 345.
Kelly’s donning of the armour in which he so memorably appeared is another example of the mythic persona’s conscious shaping of his own legend, an image in the tradition of giants like Finn McCool or champions like Lancelot and Galahad. If he could not make them read his words, he could yet make a dramatic entrance and win them over as audience. The symbolism of armour is distinctly literary; Ian Jones speculates that the idea for it may have come from Ned’s reading of his favourite book, R.D. Blackmore’s nineteenth century fiction *Lorna Doone* ...

“a vivid memory of the hero’s first glimpse of those fabulous outlaws, the Doones of Bagworthy … ‘Heavy men and large of stature, reckless how they bore their guns or how they sate their horses, with leather jerkins and long boots, and iron plates on breast and head’”⁵²³.

The influence of Irish mythology on Ned’s consciousness has already been mentioned; here again we see how myth evolves through the processing of memory and imagination, the subjective correlation of past and present.

Memory is fallible; symbols exist to activate it. Ned Kelly may have lacked media resources, but he understood the public relations value of symbols. Apart from his letters, his story was largely told through a kind of impromptu community theatre, typified by scenes of gallantry towards women. “Mr. Kelly had been a thorough gentleman,”⁵²⁴ insisted bank manager Robert Scott, proving an inconvenient witness for prosecutors enquiring into the hold up at Euroa. At Jerilderie, the outlaws dressed up in police uniforms. Joe Byrne entered the bank pretending to be a drunk, only abandoning the act when Living, the bank clerk, prepared to evict him. After the robbery, “Ned also retrieved some deeds, mortgages, bills and jewellery from the safe”⁵²⁵ and made a symbolic show of their destruction, denouncing the banks as “slavers” and “poor man crushers.”⁵²⁶

Most symbolic of all was that final unforgettable appearance clad in armour like the knights of old. Myth becomes mnemonic.

This is not to suggest that such mythopoeic exercise of memory is an alternative to giving sworn evidence; it simply recognizes the limitations of fact. As suggested earlier, the contribution of non-fiction to mythmaking centres on

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²³³ Ibid., 190.
²³⁴ Ibid., 272.
²³⁵ Ibid., 168.
²³⁶ Ibid.
verbatim accounts which can be interpreted subjectively. Ned Kelly and Sir Redmond Barry’s courtroom exchange\textsuperscript{237} is a case in point.

“Barry: The facts against you are so numerous and conclusive … that I do not think any rational person could have arrived at any other conclusion …

Kelly: Yes, that is the way the evidence brought it out …

Barry: The love of country, the love of order, the love of obedience to the law, have been set aside for reasons difficult to explain, and there is something extremely wrong in a country where a lawless band of men … are able to live eighteen months disturbing society … you have actually had the hardihood to confess to having stolen 200 horses even during your short life.

Kelly: Who proves that?

Barry: More than one witness has testified that you made the statement on several occasions.

Kelly: That charge has never been proved against me, and it is held in English law that a man is innocent until he is found guilty.

Barry: You are self-accused. I do not accuse you. That is your own statement.

Kelly: You have not heard me. If I had examined the witnesses, I could have brought it out differently.”

Kelly challenges the veracity of fact both in an objective legal and a subjective personal context. Both men show their awareness that this is no ordinary matter of crime and punishment. Barry argues that the “consequences of crime” must be demonstrated to that class of people who see “the perpetrators of these crimes as heroes;”\textsuperscript{238} his use of the word suggesting an appreciation of myth as a force beyond the law. Kelly acknowledges to the Clerk of the Court his mistake in not making his own case:

“I lay blame on myself that I did not get up yesterday and examine the witnesses, but I thought that if I did so, it would look like bravado and flashness, and people might have said that I thought myself cleverer than Counsel. So I let it go as it was."\textsuperscript{239}

Out of his natural environment, Kelly tries to rationalize like his adversaries; so much letter writing and yet he fails to tell his own story when it

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 276 -7.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 277.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 275.
most needs to be heard. That it is a significant story is evidenced by its continual retelling. Despite media animosity, the story has evolved through the oral and the written word to become embedded in popular consciousness. Ironically, the media which once demonized Kelly now facilitates the perpetuation of his myth, speculating on the final resting place of his bones, creating a television ‘event’ around the 2008 archaeological dig at Glenrowan, and reporting on the 2013 funeral at St Patrick’s Catholic Cathedral in Wangaratta which saw the outlaw’s final wish, to be buried in consecrated ground, fulfilled.

Concern for the rites / rights of the dead, especially the heroic dead, is among the earliest characteristics of human mythmaking. “Myth is about the unknown” writes Karen Armstrong in her *Short History of Myth*. “Neanderthal graves show that when these early people became conscious of their mortality, they created some sort of counter-narrative that enabled them to come to terms with it.” Ned Kelly’s letters can be seen as his attempt to set up such a counter narrative, a personal story which might lead the public “to soften the harshness of their thoughts against him.” The crowd attending Kelly’s funeral, 133 years after his death, is a measure of the importance attached to such narratives.

The shift from demonizing to defending begun in Kenneally’s 1929 *Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and Their Pursuers* was welcomed by Ned’s surviving family. His brother Jim wrote to express his appreciation:

“For filthy lucre mercenary writers have, from time to time, indulged in outrageous libels against the Kellys. These unfortunates still cling to the belief that judicial bias is as strong as ever, and that I have no chance of getting a fair deal in a claim for libel in the ‘law courts.’ Your book has so encouraged me that I intend to deal drastically, in the future, with every libeller of my family”.

Jim Kelly’s reference to libel highlights the power of language so thoroughly understood by his brother; the uniform purpose of Ned’s letters was to have his voice heard. Jones’ history draws attention to the awareness of his impending myth implicit in Ned’s language. “What would people say”, he asks repeatedly in the Jerilderie letter, of a man who would persecute women or

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240 Ibid., 285.
242 Ibid., 1.
244 Kenneally, *The Inner History of the Kelly Gang*.
arrest innocent men. At his trial, his thoughts turn to the sentencing of “a bigger
court than this”247 in the hereafter, when God will be his judge, while his words
in an interview for the Age with his lawyer Gaunson – “If my life teaches the
public that men are made mad by bad treatment, and if the police are taught that
they may not exasperate to madness men they persecute and illtreat, my life will
not be entirely thrown away”248 - clearly have his posthumous reputation in mind.

Another man concerned with posthumous reputation was Sir Redmond
Barry, whose statue presides over the lawns in front of the Victorian State
Library. At Kelly’s trial, Barry passed legal sentence on the bushranger, but Kelly
had the last word. None of the judge’s lecturing – whole paragraphs to the
outlaw’s one or two lines - has the imaginative resonance of “I will see you
there, where I go.”249 Nor, despite his statue, has Barry gained the mythic status
of the man he condemned.

Joseph Campbell wrote of the hero’s “thousand faces”;250 to this might be
added a thousand voices which tell the same “shapeshifting yet marvellously
constant story”.251 In Campbell’s terms, Kelly’s story is Australia’s
‘monomyth’252 in that the outlaw has “battle (d) past” his “personal and local
historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms … eloquent
… not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched
source through which society is reborn.”253

As a history, Ned Kelly: A Short Life’s prime concern is with fact. It
provides a kind of database through which the unique characteristics of the
mythic persona may be sourced and either challenged or authenticated. Is it true
that he said this or did that? If so, under what circumstances? Non-fiction is
concerned with the materials of myth rather than the making of it; it provides the
factual scaffolding on which imagination and invention may build. Jones’
inclusion of The Jerilderie Letter in his history showcases the narrative
imagination and linguistic inventiveness of the man himself. As a piece of
creative writing, it imaginatively connects fact and mythopoeic fiction.

247 Ibid., 276.
249 Ibid., 3.
250 Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces.
251 Ibid., 3.
252 Ibid.
253 Ibid., 20.
Identification with or commitment to a particular myth may change how an individual or a community live and die; the integrity of the mythopoeic process therefore directly affects the wellbeing of society. It appears self evident that giving one’s life for a misguided belief is quite literally a waste of time; giving one’s life as a ‘true believer’ in the cause of justice or freedom may not be. Both Wolfe Tone and Ned Kelly seem to have concluded that their deaths were necessary to give their lives meaning. From the Christian Jung, for whom “meaning makes a great many things endurable … perhaps everything”, to the existentialist Camus, meaning is essential, however tragic or absurd. In Camus’ words:

I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.

Jung’s career as a psychoanalyst was devoted to making the myths his patients told about themselves meaningful to them. Through bringing these to consciousness, the circumstances of outer and inner lives could be harmonized. Even absurdity must have meaning; there is no clearer evidence of this than a myth in which the meaningless task of the hero in itself refutes meaninglessness. Condemned to roll his rock up a hill only for it to roll straight back down, Sisyphus’ torture is an eternity of pointless repetition. Yet on his way back down the hill to start all over again, Camus imagines him experiencing an “hour of consciousness” in which he is “superior to his fate”. Having attained “the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks”, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

In his preface, Camus explains that The Myth of Sisyphus focuses specifically on the problem of suicide: “even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism.” One of those means may be through myths, which, as he writes, “are made for the imagination to

254 Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, 340.  
256 Ibid., 109.  
257 Ibid., 111.  
258 Ibid., Introduction, xxi.
breathe life into them”.

To reverse the terms – life is made for the imagination to breathe myths into – may illuminate the function of creative literature and its importance in shaping cultural narrative.

TRUE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG

A number of imaginations have breathed myth into the life of Ned Kelly; the most recent internationally acclaimed fiction is Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly gang*. Nathanael O’Reilly, already cited, concludes from the novel’s popular success, as evidenced by sales and literary prizes, that Carey has ‘repositioned’ the Kelly narrative in Australian popular culture. By this he seems to mean that the public’s interest has been revived rather than having undergone any fundamental change in understanding of the narrative. The success of Carey’s novel is heavily reliant on Australians’ familiarity with and expectations of his main protagonist. Australian children, for example, learn the history of bushrangers at school, the phrase ‘game as Ned Kelly’ has long been idiomatic and we all know how the story ends.

O’Reilly suggests that Carey’s success may invite further questioning of “what Australians’ love of the Kelly myth says about Australians”. He cites Australian academic, poet and novelist John Kinsella’s concern about the role of “fictionalizing” – as distinct from creating fiction – in the perpetuation of a national myth; Kinsella sees Carey’s reworking of the story as “hijacking and rendering saleable a mythology”. This criticism is reminiscent of Barthes’ view of the ideologically abusive mythmaking perpetuated by mass media, and seems to question the imaginative integrity of the novel. O’Reilly, however, sees Carey’s success simply as proof “that popular culture and literature are not mutually exclusive”. Beyond observing that Ned “can speak for Australians who feel oppressed in some way or other”, he does not examine this assertion further. Whether popular culture and literature are mutually exclusive is not my focus here; however, the Shakespearean neologisms referenced in Chapter One,

259 Ibid., 108.
260 Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang*.
261 O’Reilly, ”The Influence of Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang: Repositioning the Ned Kelly Narrative in Australian Popular Culture.”
262 Ibid.
263 Ibid.
264 Ibid.
combined with the adoption into the vernacular of literary figures like Big Brother, Frankenstein, Lolita or Alice in Wonderland, arguably as symbols of tyranny, horror, exploitative sex and independent spirit respectively, support his assertion. I would further suggest that popular culture and literature become mutually inclusive through mythopoeic literature, specifically through its function as a subjective correlative. Carey’s True History is a case in point.

In reconstructing past experience, historical and biographical texts necessarily explore cultural differences: how have we changed? Historical novelists, or at least those who hope to engage a wide readership, are likely to emphasize similarities, recurrent human experiences with which modern sensibilities can empathize. Readers’ imaginative correlation of then with now may, by extension, cast new light on current attitudes and beliefs.

In historical terms, the character of the mythic persona is to some extent a given; historical novelists are concerned less to ‘make’ the myth than to ensure, in Jungian terms, that it is “dreamed onwards”. In other words, the review and renewal of cultural narrative occurs through the integration of past and present perceptions. Given Ned Kelly’s established iconic status in Australian mythology, how might Peter Carey have intended his True History of the Kelly Gang to continue that dreaming?

Evidently, he did not question Ned’s myth-worthiness. The outlaw’s courage is consistently evident, his socio-cultural impact confirmed by references to The Argus. The construction of the narrative itself around Ned’s letters to a putative daughter confirms the outlaw’s vision of himself as one whose story will outlive him. Our attention is drawn quite explicitly to the transgenerational quality of heroic vision when schoolmaster Curnow, he who will betray Kelly, recites from Shakespeare’s Henry V:

He which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart …
We would not die in that man’s company …
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he’ll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,

265 Segal, ed., Encountering Jung: Jung on Mythology, 179.
266 Anonymous, “The Execution of Edward Kelly.”
Familiar in his mouth as household words … Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.267

All the characteristics of the mythic persona are here. There is “stomach”, or courage, there is a vision of feats accomplished and voice: “familiar in his mouth as household words”. While Carey may play fast and loose with historical fact, therefore, as in the creation of Kelly’s lover, Mary Hearn, or in the venality of Ned’s mother Ellen, he keeps Ned himself firmly within the mythic archetype. He is “Romeo himself riding through the gap above Glenrowan”268 and his fate closes on him as inexorably as in that tragedy. His mate Joe Byrne, “a twenty four year old staring down the barrel of his own destruction” 269 knows what is coming; so does Mary Hearn: “I have waited for you to rob the bank, but I will not wait to watch you die”.270 The mythic ancestry of Kelly may be traced back to Antaeus, the giant of Greek myth whose strength disappears the moment he is held away from his mother earth. The bush is Ned’s refuge and strength; riding through the high country is where he reaches his clearest insights. It is when he tangles with the modern technology of train and telegraph, when he adopts man-made armour, that he becomes vulnerable. We can relate to his frustration when the technology he has relied on fails and the train does not come. We recognize the confusion and panic when a familiar place is ripped apart with gunshots and screams and armed men. Past and present consciousness becomes interactive.

I have identified voice, the talent for memorable expression, as a defining characteristic of the mythic persona. In Carey’s novel, it is the re-creation of Kelly’s Jerilderie voice which immediately involves readers in the first person narration and thus functions as a subjective correlative. Lack of punctuation and run-on sentences become metaphors for the run-on, chaotic circumstances of Kelly’s life. Natural speech rhythms and the physical immediacy of Ned’s imagery evoke the poetry and passion of the man: “her hair were the colour of a crow’s wings glistening”.271 The parcels, the laborious hours Ned spends writing to his daughter and the risks he takes to make his story known are as integral to the structure of the novel as they are to the man’s own mythmaking: “In the hut at Faithfull’s Creek I seen proof that if a man could tell his true history to

267 Carey, True History of the Kelly Gang, 458.
268 Ibid., 352.
269 Ibid., 317.
270 Ibid., 415.
271 Ibid., 269.
Australians he might be believed it is the clearest sight I ever seen and soon Joe seen it too.”

In a world running so overwhelmingly beyond his control, it becomes Kelly’s mission to reclaim his myth, to counter what might now be called media ‘spin’ with his authorized version. He risks his life to make sure Mary Hearn gets his personal account of what happened at Stringybark Creek. He persistently parcels up letters for his daughter, though he can have no more assurance of them reaching her than of his earlier letter reaching MLA Donald Cameron or any other of those placed in judgement over him. His frustration at his inability to communicate effectively, less through lack of education than lack of opportunity, reflects his understanding of the power of story not only to redeem him and his supporters, but also to achieve social change. The selectors of North East Victoria identified with Ned’s struggle against privilege and injustice; ordinary inhabitants of a corporate and globalized world may recognize a marginalization similar to their own.

There is a fine line between the hero and the scapegoat; both are individuals on to whom society projects responsibility for events. Their individual stories, therefore, shape and are shaped by the wider cultural narrative. Just as today’s media may be accused of sensationalism and ‘spin’, so might colonial newspapers such as the Argus be accused of creating a culture of fear around Ned’s criminal exploits. The suspension of Habeas Corpus under the Felon’s Apprehension Act of 1878, enabling the incarceration of those merely suspected of sympathizing with the Kelly gang, reflects such a culture. Seeking to justify such indiscriminate imprisonment, the Argus of February 1879 “urged the Victorian Parliament to pass an Act of Indemnity … one of those arbitrary courses which are sometimes essential to the existence of real liberty. When the freedom and property of quiet and respectable people are endangered by the immunity enjoyed by scoundrels … the convenience of the Isaiah Wrights should be subordinated to the well-being of the decent portion of the community.”

Parallels with the modern reality of internment without trial in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, abuses of Muslim prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay or the rendition of detainees to countries not signatory to United Nations

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272 Ibid., 404.
273 Jones, Ned Kelly: A Short Life, 144.
274 Seal, Tell 'Em I Died Game: The Legend of Ned Kelly, 51.
conventions prohibiting torture, may readily be drawn.

In *Burnt Norton*, the opening movement of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, the poet writes that “human kind / Can not bear very much reality.” When the world seems too horrific, to scapegoat is easier than to investigate. Kelly is obsessed with giving his side of the story because he understands how very easily what you say may be “brought out differently.” Mary Hearn’s ghastly story of how Irish “men in dresses” revenged themselves upon their colonial master, Lord Hill, by trying and torturing his horse reinforces the fatal consequences of having no voice. “She heard grown men blame the horse for taking their common land … they demanded of the poor beast why they should not take Ireland back from him.”

The sheer randomness of fate is symbolized by the horse story; relief that it was not us, empathy with the hero, or a mixture of both, all at different times characterize our deeply subjective response to such myths. Had the horse not been left at the blacksmith’s that night, he might have become a racing legend. Instead, he was brutally tortured and killed. Had Australia been at war and Ned Kelly a soldier fighting at Gallipoli, he might have been decorated instead of hung. Although the facts of that Kelly story would have been different, they would still have been made meaningful by the characteristics of courage, vision and voice.

However coincidentally, the appearance of Carey’s *True History* in the same year as the Sydney Olympics was likely to attract publicity. National identity was central stage. The star billing given to the bushranger in the opening ceremony aroused international as well as national interest in the myth; personal vision rather than public defeat was symbolized by Nolan’s iconic helmets. In choosing the genre of historical novel, Carey’s focus was also inward looking. His appropriation of the voice of *The Jerilderie Letter* gives Ned’s narration the authenticity of a historical document, yet an authenticity which remains independently subjective. Fact is necessary, but only as scaffolding, as narrative device; knowing that there can be no happy ending to the love story, for example, arouses interest in how the writer will construct the inevitable parting. That Ned must die is a given; “it is necessary to put the king to death while he is still in the

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277 Ibid., 372.
full bloom of his divine manhood in order that his sacred life … may renew its youth” and, by extension, renew the lives of his people. It is the constantly renewed journey of consciousness through narrative archetype that make myth relevant to successive generations.

In summary, the storytelling of the historical novelist reviews and renews familiar myths, recognizing their importance as shapers of cultural narrative. Carey recreates Kelly’s voice as the core metaphor in a fictionalization which correlates myth and twenty first century consciousness. First time readers swept along in the tide of Kelly’s words may find that, on a second reading, some of the fictionalization is less convincing: the idea that a Victorian era male like Ned would tell a little girl about his father’s sexuality, for example, may stretch the suspension of disbelief a little too far.

The main fictional addition, however, the character of Mary Hearn, seems to have more credible foundations. There has always been speculation about the identity of Ned’s sweetheart, candidates including his cousin Kate Lloyd and Steve Hart’s sister, Ettie. Carey’s invention, therefore, can be sourced in the myth itself. This adds authenticity to the role of Mary both in structuring the story as archetypal romance and as a voice expressing a woman’s subjective point of view, a perspective underrepresented in the patriarchal narratives of colonial Victoria.

Grafting an entirely fictional character on to historically based myth, however, does raise issues of truthfulness, as this ‘hearsay’ incident indicates. A man in a bookshop randomly picks up Carey’s novel and reads the blurb on the back; he buys the book and observes to the salesgirl that he did not know Kelly had a daughter. Does it matter if this man now thinks Kelly did? Perhaps it was just an individual case; or perhaps it reflects the blurring of fact and fiction encouraged by ‘docudramas’ and ‘3D’ simulations. In what historian Anthony Beevor calls “a post-literate society in which the image is king”, how will we understand the past? How will we continue to recognize what is “true on the inside?”

279 Jones, Ned Kelly: A Short Life, 205.
281 O'Shaughnessy, ed., Media and Society, 332.
Barthes’ definition of myth as a “type of speech chosen by history”\textsuperscript{282} is clearly relevant to Carey’s novel, conceived as it is around Kelly’s “signifying consciousness”.\textsuperscript{283} The essential subjectivity of myth is evident in that the myth is shaped not by “the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message.”\textsuperscript{284} As utterance, myth becomes language, and evolves as language does to express our evolving selves. Carey’s Jerilderie voice functions as a subjective correlative; as defined in my introduction, the novelist seeks to illuminate consciousness from within rather than without, to validate and potentially expand our sense of who we are. His fiction recognizes the need to renew as well as review cultural narrative; speech chosen by history does not necessarily address speech chosen today or tomorrow, especially where there may be no historical precedent. In responding to the world as they see it, what fiction writers create must be “primarily a matter of linguistic perception”,\textsuperscript{285} in which creative mythmaking is speculative as well as retrospective.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Barthes, \textit{Mythologies}, 110.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., 109.
\item Riffaterre, \textit{Fictional Truth}, Foreword, vi.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
CHAPTER 4

MYTH AND FICTION

MYTH AND METAPHOR

In the previous chapter I explored how Carey’s *True History*, in Jung’s phrase, dreams the Kelly myth onwards. Carey’s grafting of fictional onto factual, especially through the imaginary consciousness of Mary Hearn, highlights how mythopoeic fiction makes stories new and relevant. In the words of mythographer Laurence Coupe, fiction sets the “imaginative agenda” for cultural narrative. By ‘cultural narrative’, I mean that body of stories which represents the beliefs and behaviours of a society, both as they have been and as they aspire to be.

The addition of the imaginary Mary Hearn to the historical Kelly narrative further highlights how fiction functions through the subjective correlative. As a decisive and independent woman with opinions of her own, her attitudes and behaviours relate more typically to women of the twenty-first than the nineteenth century. In presenting alternatives to dominant male perspectives, Mary may also be seen as a personification of contemporary culture’s critical questioning of a patriarchal past. She represents the possibility of a better life, had only Ned listened to her appeal and gone with her instead of staying to derail the police train at Glenrowan.

In the tradition of the tragic hero, however, Ned does return to Glenrowan and fights to the finish. Like Sophocles’ Oedipus, the fates are against him; in Ned’s case, the train is late, his armour does not protect. Or, in the Shakespearean tradition, he is undone by a fatal flaw, arguably the patriarchal conditioning of his era. In this sense, Carey’s Ned revives mythic archetype; yet at the same time his readiness to die for his view of the truth – ‘like a Kelly’ - anticipates the attitude of Camus’ *L’Etranger* over half a century later, as he waits in his cell anticipating the cries of hatred at his execution. Those cries become an affirmation of the condemned man’s integrity, symbolized by his

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refusal to pretend grief at his mother’s death. Carey’s *True History* illustrates how fiction drives the “imaginative agenda” of myth by adapting it to evolving cultural consciousness, in this case primarily through the imaginary Mary.

Not bound to literal fact, as a novelist Carey can reinterpret and refocus historical data to explore how past and present may illuminate each other. That the daughter to whom Ned writes is as fictional as Mary her mother may be viewed as a metaphor for our need to make myths in order to make sense of our lives. Through Ned’s voice and Mary’s vision, we may also discover recurring motifs in our evolving cultural narrative: in Ned’s case, the need to have one’s story heard, in Mary’s, the need to be true to oneself above all.

What Riffaterre calls the “fictional truth” of characters like Mary is a measure of how imaginatively convincing and socially relevant readers find them. They are personifications of a wider humanity. The assimilation of new characters into the collective mythosphere of literature might be compared with the assimilation of new words into the language; both indicate how fundamentally myth shapes our lives. That Ned Kelly has entered the language as a simile – game as - implicitly links myth and meaning.

Consider the following father images as examples of the evolving subjective correlative. The ghost of his father is an image which manifests what Hamlet knows subconsciously to be true. It represents the unquiet spirit, a feature of Jacobean Revenge Tragedy, and here a projection of Hamlet’s “prophetic soul”, which articulates what the prince knows he must do. The remembered image of a father begins Leopold Bloom’s hallucinatory journey in the Nighttown sequence of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a journey to self knowledge. In psychoanalytic terms, Bloom’s guilty response to the image of his father, an image he simultaneously identifies with and rejects, also begins our journey through his subconscious. In Tim Winton’s *The Riders*, Fred Scully has a vision of ancient horsemen, fathers and sons lined up together, forever “waiting for something promised.” They are images of a dead past as opposed to a living present. Locked into an archaic and prescriptive creed, they have lost the ability to generate their own truths.

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287 Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*.
289 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 569.
In each of these cases the underlying power of the father metaphor emanates from our instinctive recognition; in the deep structure of our collective unconscious, the father archetype must be one of the most fundamental. In Jungian terms, it is a mythologem. “Mythologems are the motifs, or images, in stories. Myths are consciously created. Archetypes are the unconscious raw material of myths. Mythmakers unconsciously appropriate archetypal material in consciously creating myths …” as in the above three examples. Each mythologem has evolved creatively in response to the evolving demands of consciousness.

As Australia’s version of the archetypal hero myth, the evolution of the Kelly myth, from Brown to Drew to Carey, is a case in point. In each fiction, the narrative vision and voice is the result of an individual creator’s subjective interpretation of what it was like to be Ned Kelly. In each, the author’s fictionalization of the raw material of history is what renews the story and makes it relevant to a new audience. The “rhetorical power” of literary fiction as such may be defined as its capacity, through the language of imaginative metaphor, to “stimulate reflection on the represented event”.

I have argued for imaginative voice as a defining characteristic of the mythic persona; the voice of The Jerilderie Letter is a primary source of reflection on Kelly’s life and how it has been represented, Joe Byrne’s transcription of his friend’s voice being the closest we can get to Ned’s consciousness. The power of that transcribed voice derives from its imaginative vision of reality, the immediacy with which it evokes the familiar – “in Greta the mosquitoes were very bad which they generally are in a wet spring”- as well as the ideal of the “green flag” and happy days “fearless, free and bold.” Carey’s novel is a uniquely creative appropriation of the “rhetorical power” of that letter.

Kelly’s vision and voice may be aligned with Jung’s myth of the “universal hero”, which “always refers to a powerful man or god-man who vanquishes evil in the form of dragons etc. and who liberates his people from

291 Segal, 1998, 81
292 Riffaterre, Fictional Truth, foreword, ix.
294 Ibid., 354.
295 Ibid., 360.
destruction and death.”

Thus, Kelly is seen to fight against tyrannical authority, political, military and judicial. While he himself is executed, his fight leads to police reform and fairer treatment for the selectors of North East Victoria. As Ian Jones notes in his chapter on *Legacy and Legend*, “the ‘Kelly Commission’ created in the Victorian Police a tradition of public accountability and self-examination.” After Ned’s execution, Constable Robert Graham oversaw the restoration of peace in North East Victoria; Tom Lloyd, allegedly the fifth member of the gang, is quoted as saying “if there’d been more like Graham and less like Fitzpatrick, there never would have been a Kelly outbreak.”

Carey’s novel further substantiates Jung’s view of myth as a story which may “exalt the individual to an identification with the hero” through recognition of common cause and conviction. In short, Ned Kelly becomes a subjective correlative.

Through the hero or mythic persona, mythopoeic literature enables individuals and communities to project themselves imaginatively into experiences of life larger than their own. It opens a view which looks beyond immediate circumstances, or else views those circumstances in a transformative light. Whether Ned the man was a hero struggling for social justice or an Irish hooligan with a chip on his shoulder is no longer relevant. In popular and literary imagination, the facts of his life have been transformed into an archetypal Australian story.

The worldwide audience for such significant myths is an acknowledgement of the universality of a mythosphere in which popular culture and literature, far from being mutually exclusive, overlap. The purpose of the earliest myths known was to offer an explanation of why the outer world was as it appeared to be; in a contemporary context, the purpose of literary myths might be described as explaining our inner worlds as they appear to be. As the main protagonist in such stories, the mythic persona becomes a human metaphor, a subjective correlative through which ordinary people can see what they too may be capable of. The desire to establish that subjective connection is particularly clear in the folksongs of popular tradition. Typically, songwriters portray the

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296 (Jung, 1978, 68)
298 Ibid.
299 (Jung, 1978, 68)
hero both as an extraordinary being whom they wish to emulate and as an ordinary person who is basically just like them. The following lines from *Sticking Up of the Euroa Bank* and *The Ballad of the Kelly Gang* illustrate the point.

> “See here, my name’s Ned Kelly
> And this here man’s my mate”...  

and

> “The matter may be serious, Pat, but sure I can’t but laugh
> To think the tales the Bobbys [sic] told should all amount to chaff”…

The subjective correlative in oral tradition, as in literary fiction, is typically mythopoeic. As Brian Boyd observes, “much subtle evidence for human psychology has accumulated in the world’s literature, and perhaps nowhere more than in the way story and counterstory weave together the web of human life.”

Through what Jung calls the “linguistic phenomenon” of narrative, metaphoric vision and voice merge into a literature which merges physical and metaphysical realities. To say ‘I see’ signifies ‘I understand’; the familiar phrase ‘I hear what you’re saying’ translates as ‘I know what you mean.’ In both cases the function of language is to reassure that the speaker is not alone. At its most fundamental, the continuing human need to make myths may simply express a need to maintain human solidarity through the reciprocity of story, the mutual engagement of narrator and audience. What we hear evokes mental images, what we read flashes up on our mind’s eye; we are ‘touched’ through language. Riffaterre observes that “fictional truth relies entirely on the text itself, as if the latter were self sufficient. Truth is a modality of text generation.” Inherently a matter of perception, fiction demands “of readers a performative reading, a ritual equivalent to the experience of truth in real life.”

The performance of this ritual requires a subjective correlative, a personification onto which readers may project their own understandings. In this sense, language itself becomes mythopoeic, a form of metaphorical expression through which we see, as T.S.Eliot puts it, why we are “here / or there, or elsewhere”.

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300 Seal, *Tell 'Em I Died Game: The Legend of Ned Kelly*, 65.
301 Ibid., 8.
303 Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, introduction, x.
304 Ibid., 84.
305 Ibid., 131.
The nature of the subconscious self underpins Jung’s psychoanalytic theories of myth; the literary myth of Ned Kelly has evolved through analyses of his letters, notably *The Jerilderie Letter*, in conjunction with responses to historical and fictional publications and productions. In popular culture, the evolution of the myth reflects evolving media coverage, from changes in newspaper accounts of the Kelly outbreak itself to, more recently, the dig at Glenrowan, the identification of Kelly’s skeleton and the outlaw’s funeral in Wangaratta. There is a thriving tourist industry, with Kelly souvenirs on sale from Beechworth to Glenrowan to Melbourne Gaol. As already suggested, myth appears to be one area where popular culture and literary art are not mutually exclusive, but interactive. This idea is supported by Jung’s acknowledgement of his deep interest “in popular novels, such as Rider Haggard’s *She* and the *Sherlock Holmes* stories”. This interest, he explains, is “because the archetypes manifest themselves in their purest form in this type of literature.”

Jungian scholar R.W. Brockway cites the above remark in his *Myth from the Ice Age to Mickey Mouse*, a title which in itself suggests a blurring of boundaries between serious study and popular entertainment. He cites Jung’s description of the former: “the serious novelist, poet, artist and composer reveal the deaths of themselves and draw upon the personal unconscious”. While this description appears somewhat insensitive to those heroes who have actually sacrificed flesh and blood, the metaphor does give a sense of the creative intensity to which the mythosphere owes figures as diverse as Lady Macbeth and Eliza Doolittle, King Arthur and Sherlock Holmes. Our evolving consciousness means that mythmaking, as the gerund implies, is a work constantly in progress, a truly never ending story. Through the evolving metaphor of fiction, mythopoeic literature both reviews and renews consciousness because, in T.S. Eliot’s words, it is every time “a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate.”

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308 Ibid.
NON-FICTION TO FICTION

In its fictionalization of fact, Carey’s *True History* may remind us of the schoolboy’s naive definition of myth as “something that is true on the inside, but not on the outside.”\(^{310}\) The subjective resonance of the Kelly myth is evidenced by the number and diversity of fictions, such as those already referenced, which have been created around the outlaw’s life. For journalists such as Frank Devine, quoted in Nathanael O’Reilly’s article on Peter Carey’s novel, the bushranger remains merely a “wretched horse thief and cop killer”\(^{311}\) in popular tradition, the myth of the “man more sinned against than sinning”\(^{312}\) persists. It can be traced back to J.J. Kenneally’s 1929 *Complete Inner History*,\(^{313}\) a title which in itself suggests a shift from sensational newspaper coverage to more subjective reflection.

In his introduction to Kenneally’s book, G. C. Stanley, J., notes that in “all previously published accounts of the Kellys’ exploits they are grotesquely represented as brutal criminals… whereas, in actuality, they differed very little from other young men of their day… it is small wonder that these high spirited youths… nursing a fierce resentment of the injustice they had suffered, should, mistaken as they may have been, as a last resource give battle to their persecutors.”\(^{314}\)

Resentment of injustice makes for common cause. Stanley’s comment draws attention to the social importance of myth as storytelling which may change behaviour. As such, it impacts directly both on how we live and how we die. Recognition of the peculiar power of myth is implicit in the words of Sir Redmond Barry himself at Kelly’s trial: “there is a class which disregards the consequences of crime and looks upon the perpetrators of those crimes as heroes … these unfortunate, inconsiderate, ill-educated, ill-conducted, un-principled and ill-prompted youths … unless they are made to consider the consequences of crime … are led to imitate notorious felons, whom they regard as self-made

\(^{310}\) O’Shaughnessy, ed., *Media and Society*, 332
\(^{311}\) O’Reilly, "The Influence of Peter Carey's True History of the Kelly Gang: Repositioning the Ned Kelly Narrative in Australian Popular Culture."
\(^{312}\) Bate, ed., *King Lear*, 111, ii, 64.
\(^{314}\) Kenneally, *The Inner History of the Kelly Gang*, 7.
Continuing his introduction, Stanley compares Kelly and his followers with Peter Lalor and his diggers at the Eureka Stockade. He notes that both “found it necessary to give armed resistance to police tyranny.” Lalor was acclaimed a hero; Kelly was hung. Different endings, but the stories share the archetypal theme of the fight against injustice. In both cases, objective ending – the diggers’ defeat, Kelly’s capture - becomes less important than the subjective recognition which led to Lalor’s immediate and Kelly’s posthumous elevation to heroic status.

To reprise Brian Boyd’s key argument for storytelling as an evolutionary tool, experiencing the story, whether by creating or responding, enables us to “think beyond the here and now … not to override the given but to be less restricted by it.” Through the ongoing interactivity of personal and public imagination, the ‘given’ represented in our myths reflects the evolving ‘given’ of cultural values and beliefs. Folk rock band Redgum’s mythopoeic image of “a thousand like Ned Kelly” raising “a flag of stars”, for instance, expressed popular republican sympathies in the 1980s, while the deliberate aim of the Argus’ politically correct account of an outlaw’s crimes and punishment was to bring a “sense of relief” to citizens of the 1880s. Redgum’s song focuses on a life cut short by death: the universal ‘given’. The Argus report focuses on crimes which “brought about a miserable end” for a bloodthirsty monster rather than a human being like ourselves. The assumption, that the ‘given’ end of death will also end the story, has evidently not been the case.

A mythic persona like Kelly, then, is remembered as a personification of human potential, even in defeat – perhaps especially in defeat. In fictionalised form, such mythic figures loom large in mythospheres worldwide: the heroic outlaw, the courageous queen, the noble champion. I now want to consider the social relevance of the mythic persona who is entirely fictional; that is, who exists only through language.

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317 Redgum, "Poor Ned (Album: If You Don't Fight You Lose)."
318 Anonymous, “The Execution of Edward Kelly.”
319 Ibid.
320 Ibid.
I have discussed how the fictional elements of Carey’s *True History* connect past to present subjectivities, illuminating both how much and how little humanity changes over time. In choosing to recreate Kelly’s story one more time, Carey acknowledges the continuing opportunity mythopoeic narrative affords society to review and renew its attitudes and beliefs. As author Andreas Gaile notes, he adds “one more layer to the myth” as it evolves together our evolving consciousness.

As noted earlier, subjective and objective are inseparable. Objective change, as manifest in the changes to daily life brought about by technology, seems to accelerate at an unprecedented rate. World wide connectivity has become a fact of life; time and space, hitherto the ‘givens’ of existence, can be bypassed online. The past more than ever may be seen as another country where things were done differently and, increasingly, irre relevantly. How does this affect storytelling?

Historian Anthony Beevor’s warning that the relationship of past and present becomes open to exploitation when “historically illiterate” audiences lack the facts to question what appears utterly plausible on screen is apposite here. He remarks that “Islamic websites have also been learning from American creationists and… embraced their theory of intelligent design, which attributes the origin of life to a higher power and opposes theories of natural selection.” To base such a theory on attribution alone – relating without evidence for that relation – conflates subjective and objective experience. Myth as fallacy does this, from advertised product to political ‘spin’; myth as ‘fictional truth’, on the other hand, relies on our ability to distinguish between truth on the inside and truth on the outside, to understand that Kelly had no such daughter, but that the creation of one may stimulate an authentic sense of the man’s values.

In *The Western Dreaming*, Professor of Sociology John Carroll explains the ancient Hebrew term “midrash” as the process of each age taking up the ancient, sacred stories and retelling them in a way that speaks to the new times. Every living culture, Carroll contends, is inwardly driven to “midrash”:

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323 Ibid.
Has mankind ever really got away from myths? … One could almost say that if all the world’s traditions were cut off at a single blow, the whole of mythology and the whole history of religion would start all over again with the next generation. Only a very few individuals succeed in throwing off mythology in epochs of exceptional intellectual exuberance – the masses never.  

Carroll’s argument affirms mythmaking as an innately human way of ‘re-sourcing’ ourselves. His emphasis on ‘the masses’ also draws attention to the interactivity of popular and literary culture in myth. Consider the popularity of speculative fiction; novels such as Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings and J.K.Rowling’s Harry Potter have attained cult status and been turned into movies, where 3D technology gives artifice every appearance of reality.

In the genre of speculative fiction, heroes come complete with mythologies. Three dimensional worlds with a past, a present and a future, a climate, population and culture are created, worlds which draw deeply from the archetypes of our collective unconscious. Tolkien’s ‘The Silmarillion’, for example, takes readers back beyond the Third Age of ‘The Lord of the Rings’ to a Second Age. As a philologist, Tolkien drew many of his created languages, from the refined communications of the Elves to the guttural abuse of the Orcs, from his own deep knowledge of Old English and Scandinavian. A sense of the distant past shaping and driving the present is as crucial to ‘Lord of the Rings’ as are the more immediate mythologies created for hobbits, elves, dwarves and men.

“Speculative fiction is akin to holding up a mirror to ourselves. By losing ourselves in the spectacle of the text we find points of empathy with the characters in those texts,” writes Bill Simon in the New South Wales English Teachers Association Journal, Metaphor. “Each one of us aspires to be as sagacious as Gandalf and Galadriel and each one of us dreads the arduous journey of Frodo.” The focus of the story may be on individual responses to the battle between good and evil, but without “the spectacle of the text” the story does not exist. To create a believable world rather than a fancy dress parade calls for that kind of imaginative “death of themselves” referred to by Jung, which is

325 (Segal,1998, 34)
described perhaps more accurately by Romantic poet John Keats as ‘negative capability’. The total negation of self through imaginative projection is one way in which even ordinary people may briefly inhabit other consciousnesses. The much quoted words of Keats’ fellow Romantic, Coleridge, ‘the willing suspension of disbelief’, similarly describes this shared metaphoric journey of readers and writers.

In speculative fiction, the creation of new worlds, be they utopias or dystopias, must to some extent comment on the old; the word ‘utopia’ itself references the sixteenth century work of Sir Thomas More, and beyond that the Latin for ‘no-place’. Writers cannot create believable characters without also creating mythologies for them, accounts of the world which they inhabit in the same way that we inhabit ours. This returns mythology to its original oral function of explaining the world as it appears to us, with the crucial difference that speculative worlds, from Orwell’s 1984 to Margaret Atwood’s post-apocalyptic Oryx and Crake, are written texts. Such dystopias explore as well as explain possible futures; their appeal derives from deep seated fears about where our society may be heading. Winston Smith’s inability to change the totalitarian world of 1984 is a bleak warning of the destructiveness of myths imposed upon rather than generated from within a society. In a recent article for the Financial Times, Atwood asks “why readers and writers are so fixated with dystopian visions”; her suggestion that “such fictions act as a form of self-testing: in a crisis like this, what would I do?”\(^\text{327}\) describes succinctly the empathetic function of the subjective correlative.

The fundamental necessity of such subjectively generated myths to significant literature is the central theme of Canadian critic Northrop Frye’s \textit{Anatomy of Criticism}. Frye derives the “structural principles of literature ….from archetypal and anagogic criticism”,\(^\text{328}\) whether that literature is realistic or symbolic. Realism, in his view, is “an art of implicit simile, myth is an art of implicit metaphor.”\(^\text{329}\) Because it combines elements of the real and the symbolic,
the quest / romance becomes a central literary mode, the “mythos of summer.”

Its narrative is driven essentially by the primal human characteristic of desire. The pursuit of some wish or desire drives the quests typical of speculative fiction. Wish-fulfilment makes it what Bill Simon calls “the literature of change … best realised in the Lord of the Rings films … where Frodo realizes that he cannot go back to the edenic innocence of his previous life. The journey and the quest had changed him and he must be able to move with this change.”

The experience of change through subjective projection into speculative worlds enables us, to return to Brian Boyd’s summation, “not to override the given, but … to cope with it more flexibly and on something more like our own terms.”

To the extent that both inner and outer worlds are subjective creations, all fiction might be described as speculative. In Boyd’s evolutionary perspective, making up stories better enables us to make up our lives. By extension, what fiction adds to non-fiction is a wider responsibility for what we make up: “the ability to imagine the world as other than it is underpins pretend play, and the ability to conceive of alternatives underpins all modelling. Free thought needs alternatives and counterfactuals … Most discovery involves supposition.”

The ‘novel’ form by definition seeks to make new; the fictions I will now examine are James Joyce’s Ulysses and Tim Winton’s The Riders. Both, I argue, fulfil the function of reviewing and renewing consciousness through the subjective correlative, represented in the former by Leopold Bloom, in the latter by Fred Scully.

FICTIONEERING

Every year, June 16 is designated ‘Bloomsday’ in memory of Leopold Bloom’s epic journey around James Joyce’s Dublin, from funeral to marriage bed, on that day in 1904. “Wildhaired, cloaked and highbooted”, the Riders of European folklore wait endlessly in the keep of an ancient Irish castle. They haunt Tim Winton’s Scully until he recognizes them in himself and all those who have ever pursued a passion, ever been there “in all weathers and all worlds, waiting for

330 Ibid., 186.
331 Simon, "General Notes on the Complex and Vexed Genre of Speculative Fiction," 42.
332 Boyd, On the Origin of Stories (Evolution, Cognition and Fiction), 50.
333 Ibid., 197-98.
334 Winton, The Riders, 79.
something promised, something that was plainly their due.” Yet while readers may empathize with Leopold Bloom and Fred Scully as if they knew them, neither individual has ever breathed or bled. Hamlet’s question - “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / that he should weep for her?” - is in essence a question about our capacity for subjective empathy. Bloom and Scully are creatures of “linguistic perception” whose identities are at once imaginary and individually credible.

Riffaterre defines the literary term ‘stream of consciousness’ as a depiction of “the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind.” In *Ulysses*, this most subjective of narrative voices becomes epic; the world of Homer’s *Odyssey* morphs into Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through this new kind of voice, Joyce creates a new kind of hero. Leopold Bloom, a middle aged Jewish salesman who “ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls”, breaks every heroic mould; similarly, Tim Winton’s hero, Scully, looks like “an axe-murderer, a sniffer of bicycle seats.” To a generation shaped by, in Joyce’s case World War One, and in Winton’s by the uncertainties of postmodernism, the traditional myth of the conquering hero has long ceased to be relevant. Both writers seek new myths; as early as his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce was undertaking to shape through language “the uncreated conscience of my race.” Winton’s ‘The Riders’, while less grandiloquently ambitious, nonetheless deliberately evokes a disturbingly familiar post-modern mindscape where all the signposts seem to point towards each other.

The word ‘conscience’ infers a moral dimension to consciousness which both echoes the religious origins of myth and anticipates Camus’ ‘absurd’ man, for whom “it is good … to judge himself occasionally”, if only because “he is alone in being able to do so.” Historically, matters of conscience surface when individual consciousness comes into conflict with social prescription, as in the case of conscientious objectors to war. The notorious destructiveness of the

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335 Ibid., 377.
338 Cuddon, “Literary Terms & Literary Theory”.
prescriptive ‘Aryan’ myth in Nazi Germany further supports the argument that myth becomes prone to “ideological abuse” when constructed as a rational control rather than conceived as a holistic response.

As Joycean scholar Declan Kibberd explains, the author chose the Greek Odysseus rather than the Irish Cuchulainn as the shaping myth for his novel because he rejected the symbolism of the traditional myth. Cuchulainn was a figurehead for the militant nationalism of Sinn Fein; Bloom / Ulysses and his wife Molly, whatever their other differences, are at one in their hatred for the violence that was “killing all the fine young men.” Writing during the First World War, Joyce was everywhere confronted with the consequences of a militant nationalism which not only substituted for individual narratives, but was used to justify the slaughter of those individuals on an unprecedented scale.

_Ulysses_ is part of a larger canon of anti-war literature which fictionally exposes the bankruptcy of the myth manufactured by ruling powers, that “dulce et decorum est / pro patria mori.” The allocation of an organ – Genitals, Brain, Womb - to all but the first three chapters of the novel, as detailed in Stuart Gilbert’s diagram of its elaborate organization, asserts and celebrates the value and significance of the bodies which war indiscriminately destroys. Joyce is not, in Jungian terms, dreaming the myth on, he is rejecting it as a nightmare. His creation of a new kind of mythic persona represents the emerging values of a culture fundamentally changed by trauma. Myth may affirm or deny life; the author’s choice is clear in the last words of Molly Bloom’s passionate monologue: “and yes I said yes I will. Yes.”

Kibberd references Joyce’s compatriot, W.B.Yeats, who, “deprived of a Christian mythology …felt equally compelled to create his own system in _A Vision._” Yeats’ late poem _Byzantium_ vividly summarizes the human need for myth; we are but “paltry” unless “soul clap its hands and sing, and louder

343 Barthes, _Mythologies_, 11.
345 Ibid., x.
347 Joyce, _Ulysses_, Introduction, xxiii.
348 Segal, ed., _Encountering Jung: Jung on Mythology_, 179.
349 Joyce, _Ulysses_, 933.
Individual mythopoeic expression interacts with societal, as Kibberd observes: “myths are symbolic projections of the cultural and moral values of a society, figurations of its psychic state.”

This reiterates Boyd’s core argument in *The Origin of Stories*, which is that the exercise of literary imagination in “the cognitive play of art” comes from our innermost natures. In the aftermath of the fascist narrative of World War Two, Albert Camus uses *The Myth of Sisyphus* to frame a fundamental moral question: in a godless world, where right and wrong appear to have become arbitrary, is life worth living? Is Sisyphus’ afterlife of pointless activity preferable to death? Camus’ answer is yes, a judgement which he reaffirms in his novel *The Outsider* (L’Etranger).

Meursault, the outsider, is condemned to death for killing a man. So mitigating are the circumstances, however – the heat, the aggression of the victim, the fact that the gun used belonged to Meursault’s friend – that, on the basis of available evidence, a death sentence appears totally unreasonable. Yet Meursault is condemned to death. The reason he must die, Camus convinces us, is not because he is guilty, but because he failed to cry at the funeral of his mother; failed, therefore, to conform to the cultural narrative of grief. What makes Meursault an ‘outsider’ is that he cannot cry on demand. He cannot say he has felt any more or less than he is conscious of feeling.

In the solitude of his cell, Meursault sets himself to visualizing the sights and sounds, smells and tastes of his life in more and more detail. He decides that even if a person had only lived one day, that day would provide enough memories to occupy the mind a lifetime. He concludes that he has been happy, and that, essentially, he still is. It is this personal mythmaking which enables him to open himself to what he calls the tender indifference of the world: to accept that his death will occur sooner rather than later. In his introduction to the novel, Camus notes that it is essentially about a man who, without any heroic attitude, is yet willing to die for the truth. In spite of himself, Meursault attains

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353 Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories (Evolution, Cognition and Fiction)*.
354 Ibid., 15.
356 Ibid., 98.
In the absence of externally imposed religious dogma or scientific proof, the mythic persona of modern literary fiction may be characterised by conscientious engagement with his or her world. Heroism is no longer the grand gesture of someone larger than life, rather the attitude towards living of a man among men – or women. “The liberation of a modern sensibility by an ancient myth”\(^{357}\) is achieved when one condemned, like Meursault, can make peace with the world which has refused his story, when he can empathize with the crowd at his execution. He can see that their cries of hatred for him, the murderer, are cathartic.\(^{358}\) Like Sisyphus in the “breathing space”\(^{359}\) when he watches that rock which he has just pushed to the summit roll back down to the bottom of the hill, he is conscious of his fate and he owns it. “There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.”\(^{360}\) He makes his own myth; he affirms that “myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them”\(^{361}\)

Like Meursault, Joyce’s new breed of mythic persona is defined by inner, not outer strengths. Bloom is characterized by his empathetic imagination from his very first appearance, where he watches his cat, “curiously, kindly … Prr. Scratch my head. Prr”, to his final acceptance of his wife’s adultery “as natural as any and every natural act.”\(^{362}\) For much of his day’s journey Bloom suppresses his knowledge of what Blazes Boylan and Molly are doing; but when finally he acknowledges it, he can smile. He can imagine himself “neither first nor last nor only nor alone in a series originating in and repeated to infinity”.\(^{363}\) He might be describing the recurrent narratives of myth, generationally renewed.

In the ‘Nausicaa’ scene of \textit{Ulysses}, Gerty MacDowell’s conscious display of her legs, “a full view high up above her knee”, causes Bloom to fantasize and masturbate. In spite of his conscience - “he had erred and sinned and wandered” - he comes. When she gets up to go, he sees with shock that she is lame. His rational ego immediately distances itself; rather self righteously pities; finally

\(^{358}\) Camus, \textit{L’Étranger}, 138.
\(^{360}\) Ibid.
\(^{361}\) Ibid., 108.
\(^{362}\) Joyce, \textit{Ulysses}, 65.
\(^{363}\) Ibid., 865.
\(^{364}\) Ibid., 863.
reasserts control through a series of rationalizations about female sexuality. The mental trajectory neatly parallels male arousal, satisfaction, rationalization and loss of interest. His perceptions are interwoven with Joyce’s account of Gerty’s “woman’s instinct”365 which tells her that he is watching. Her deliberate self exposure and sentimental fantasies are simultaneously satirized and pitied as she parrots the gushing text of commercial magazines: “Then mayhap he would embrace her gently, like a real man, crushing her soft body to him, and love her, his ownest girlie, for herself alone.”366

Our rather patronizing sympathy is aroused; she may have held momentary sway over Bloom, but essentially she is powerless. Through her we glimpse a succession of mythic female figures absorbed into popular culture: innocent virgin, femme fatale, adoring wife, domestic goddess. In its exposure of her limited consciousness, Joyce’s empathic third person narrative parallels her personal exposure to Bloom, who in her clichéd consciousness becomes the ‘tall dark stranger’, the ‘Mr. Right’, the “light-hearted deceiver”.367

The sense of indulgent superiority created in response to Gerty’s stream of consciousness aligns reader sensibilities with Bloom’s, making us at once complicit in his guilty reaction and conscious of the disconnect between culturally constructed guilt and something which “did me good all the same.”368 Bloom’s imaginative awareness of his conditioning liberates him from it. The same cannot be said for Gerty, whose imagination has been appropriated by the mass produced myths of women’s magazines, the media which has and will continue to define her life. Through the character he has created, Joyce exposes the power of the mythmaker to liberate or limit.

Kibberd cites Victor Hugo’s definition of the “mythical type” as one who “concentrates under one human form a whole family of characters and minds”.369 Thus, the individual ‘man-myth’ may represent a generic subjectivity. In Kibberd’s view, “underlying Joyce’s depiction of Bloom is the conviction that mythic archetypes are not externally imposed by a culture but internally generated within each person.”370 We are, or we become, our own myth.

365 Ibid., 469.
366 Ibid., 466.
367 Ibid., 471.
368 Ibid., 485.
370 Ibid.
Otherwise, as Joyce’s depiction of Gerty details, the power of a mass media constructed mythology may undermine individual potential, here through a young woman’s internalization of magazine myths as the predictive text of her life. In this sense, media has appropriated her “creative command of language”, a command which, in the light of linguist Noam Chomsky’s theories of generative grammar, may be seen as “unique to human beings.”

The “creative command of language” enables us to formulate and understand sentences quite new to us, both to compose them and respond to them. When Bloom reflects on metempsychosis, a word Molly has never heard before, he explains to her that it means “the transmigration of souls”, where “you could be changed into an animal or tree.” Similarly, the narrative voice of myth evolves to enable a transmigration of meaning across time and place.

Joyce’s conviction of the importance of myth is evidenced not only by his appropriation of Greek myth for a new kind of novel, but by his collaboration with Stuart Gilbert to make a diagram explaining the mythological parallels of that novel, from title and scene to symbol and technique. The diagram demonstrates what fellow modernist T.S. Eliot called Joyce’s “mythical method”, the process whereby he created his own vision of a “national epic”. The militaristic figure of Cuchulainn as subjective correlative is rejected for the new “womanly man”, personified by Bloom.

In his essay on ‘Ulysses, Order and Myth’, T.S. Eliot argues that “in using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own independent further investigations … it is a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary life.”

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372 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 77.
373 Ibid., 79.
375 Ibid., xxx.
376 Ibid., xxiv.
It is a way of reviewing and renewing archetypal consciousness.

The shift from approaching myth as natural allegory or semi-divine being to “linguistic phenomenon”, whereby “symbolic narrative may invent scenarios at will for the purpose of conveying truths that transcend specific situations”, is apparent throughout Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Observing that “human kind cannot bear very much reality”, the poet concludes that:

> “Time past and time future
> What might have been and what has been
> Point to one end, which is always present.”

The mythic quality of fictional characters has no longer to do with superhuman strengths, rather with conscientious engagement with everyday life. Indeed, “the search for heroics” may be considered, as Joyce did consider it, “damn vulgar.” In Joyce’s view, “the whole structure of heroism is, and always was, a damned lie… there cannot be any substitute for individual passion as the motive power of everything.”

The emotional journeys of Bloom and Scully, pursuing their personal passions in the face of daily defeats, epitomize this changed consciousness. They translate into modern idiom what “peoples have in common across the ages, thereby achieving one of the basic purposes of art, making man feel less alone.”

What “peoples have in common” returns us to language itself, to utterance as in the original Greek ‘muthos’. *Ulysses* is a celebration of the diversity of language; among the forms Joyce showcases are Narrative, Catechism, Dialectic, and Monologue. These literary forms are interspersed with everyday vernacular, with snatches of rhymes and songs to which ordinary people might relate. Joyce and Winton both use songs in the popular idiom. “The Ballad of Joking Jesus”, sung by Stephen Dedalus’ housemate, the irreverent and disrespectful Buck Mulligan, glibly subverts religion –

> “I’m the queerest young fellow that ever you heard,
> My mother’s a jew, my father’s a bird.
> With Joseph the joiner I cannot agree,
> Iffatterre, *Fictional Truth*, introduction, x.
> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 14
> Ibid., x.
> Ibid., xxix.
So here’s to disciples and Calvary.” 385

“Tom Traubert’s Blues”, singer-songwriter Tom Waits’ epigraph to Winton’s novel, subverts romantic idealism:

“Wasted and wounded,
It ain’t what the moon did
I got what I paid for now
See you tomorrow
Hey Frank can I borrow
A couple of bucks from you
To go
Waltzing Matilda
Waltzing Matilda
You’ll go waltzing Matilda with me …”386

This use of popular song points once again to the relationship between popular and literary culture identified earlier, further establishing the function of myth as a subjective correlative.

BLOOM AND SCULLY

At first sight, *Ulysses* and *The Riders* appear to have nothing in common. They are the products of totally different times and places: World War One and 1994, “Trieste-Zurich-Paris”387 and Australia / Ireland. Since its appearance in 1922, *Ulysses* has been acknowledged as a masterpiece of world literature. Less well known, *The Riders* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1995. The former work is meticulously organized into eighteen sections, each with its own mythological title, organ, art, colour and linguistic technique. The chapters of the latter track Scully around Europe and are loosely structured in six sections which centre on abandonment, departure, search, disillusion, despair and recovery. *Ulysses* is dominated by inner monologues, *The Riders* is written in third person. What the two works have in common, I contend, is their ‘quality of myth’, their representations of individuals following some bright, particular star. This is achieved primarily through the mythic figures of Bloom and Scully.

385 Ibid., 22.
387 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 933.
It may be sheer coincidence that the Irish cottage in which Scully embarks on his new life looks out over the Slieve Bloom Mountains.\textsuperscript{388} Winton’s choice of Ireland, however, a place steeped in myth and legend, as the point of departure and return for his novel, does suggest that for him, like Joyce, myth draws deep on the “deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity.”\textsuperscript{389} Joyce’s determination to replace the militarist cult of Cuchulainn with an “epic”\textsuperscript{390} of body and mind which compromises rather than conquers, has already been discussed; Winton’s narrative and imagery also abound with mythological references. We are “deep in some big, mad story, a Jonah story, a Sinbad story, a Jesus and the fishermen story, the kind that’s too true to be strange, too dreamy to be made up”,\textsuperscript{391} in which Scully clings to his obsession “like a Greek to a wooden horse.”\textsuperscript{392} The phrase “too true to be strange” evokes the involuntary recognition sparked by mythic stories and legends. Jungian archetypes may readily be assigned to the characters of both novels - Bloom and Scully double as lover and father figures, Molly and Jennifer as whore / goddess. Stephen and Billie represent the child who personifies both innocence lost and redemptive energy. In both novels, the narrative takes the form of the hero’s journey, as in Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth … the one shapeshifting yet marvellously constant story.”\textsuperscript{393}

That “constant story” consists essentially of the departure of the hero, his achievement of some appointed task and subsequent return to restore order. Campbell describes the adventure as “always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades.”\textsuperscript{394}

Consider how this romantic description relates to the inner journeys of Bloom and Scully. Bloom seeks to bury a common acquaintance, place an advertisement, and take care of a friend’s son who has drunk too much. Scully seeks to renovate a derelict property, look after a hurt child and find a woman who does not want to be found. The sheer banality of the two men’s situations

\textsuperscript{388} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{389} (Segal, 1998, 109)
\textsuperscript{390} Joyce, \textit{Ulysses}, Introduction, xxviii.
\textsuperscript{391} Winton, \textit{The Riders}, 189.
\textsuperscript{392} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{393} Campbell, \textit{The Hero with a Thousand Faces}, 3.
\textsuperscript{394} Ibid., 82.
reflects the change in mythopoeic subjectivity pioneered by Joyce, where heroes neither behave like heroes nor see themselves as such. Bloom has no idea of himself as Ulysses; “poor simple Scully” is “a nice boy”, not a champion. “A strange lack of pride. Women want monsters, doesn’t he know?”

Yet the underlying blueprint persists. The death of Patrick Dignam reminds Bloom of mortality, unknown and unknowable, while Scully’s abandoned cottage is a world away from his native Australia. The Citizen whom Bloom confronts is a dangerous enough power: “By Jesus, says he, I’ll brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I’ll crucify him so I will.”

Fred Scully has to run the gauntlet of Nature herself: “The first wave crashed across the bow … the sea came at them from every point.”

“Nighttown” and the red light district of Amsterdam test Bloom and Scully almost beyond endurance; yet they do endure, they do return home, they do restore a kind of peace to their lives.

The mythic blueprint persists, but its realization is different. The hero has changed out of superman costume into ordinary clothes; he is an explorer for whom “here and there does not matter”… what matters is the poet’s experience of “… moving / into another intensity”.

In any day in any life some kind of epiphany may occur, any failed marriage may become the catalyst for a new vision of the world. Where traditional mythologies posited superior or parallel worlds as repositories of truth or truths, modern mythmakers seek answers from inner or under worlds. Everyday situations ring mnemonic bells, familiar scenarios demand a second look; Bloom and Scully, called by their familial rather than first names throughout, become generic ‘alter egos’. The hero’s journey ceases to be a quest for the chosen few. Instead, it becomes an engagement, as for Tennyson’s old man Ulysses, with some subjective vision whose “margin fades, forever and forever when we move”. The quest is no longer a spectator sport; the hero’s challenge has become our own.

Bloom moves from a funeral through a round of engagements, threaded like beads around his pusillanious refusal to face the imminent fact of his

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398 Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 32.
wife’s infidelity. Yet he stands up to the anti-Semitic Citizen: “Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza. And the Saviour was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God.”

The archetypal relationship between father and child pervades both novels. The satisfaction obtained through acting like a father to his friend’s son, Stephen, is a restorative for Bloom, whose own son is dead. When finally he slides into bed beside the sleeping Molly, he has accepted with “equanimity” his place in a larger scheme of things where he is simply one of that “series originating in and repeated to infinity.” His subjective experience becomes one man’s version of everyman’s mythopoeic consciousness.

“Womb? Weary?
He rests. He has travelled.
With?
Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer …”

Scully travels from the death of his old life to the birth of his new, from vainly chasing one story to building another. At the beginning, “It was simple. He loved her. She was his wife. There was a baby on the way. They were in it together, end of story.” Although he does not yet know it, that traditional story has already ended. His wife has vanished. Physical courage and devotion to his quest for her are futile because she has determined not to be found. Vague references to her artistic ambition and need for individual recognition seem inadequate explanations of desertion; they do not fit the narrative of any of the stories Scully has ever known. In this new story-less world, he and his daughter are alone. The “Wild Colonial Boy” who has scoured Europe, half killing himself and his child in the process, realizes it is time to make a new myth, even though he still does not understand “how it was that you stop asking yourself, asking friends, asking God the question.” Winton’s use of second person puts readers in the same predicament, completing our subjective identification with Scully.

Though individual stories may not appear to significantly shape the

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400 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 444-45.
401 Ibid., 864.
402 Ibid., 863.
403 Ibid., 870-1.
405 Ibid., 5.
406 Ibid., 374.
course of cultural narrative, the confluence of their subliminal streams cannot but direct the flow of the universal “river …within us”, invoked in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. They may prick consciences, created or uncreated. In rhyming slang, Joyce’s statue in Dublin is described as ‘the prick with the stick’, an acknowledgement, perhaps, of the extent to which making new myths involves challenging the old.

Challenging established narratives assumes some element of conflict, some tensions between private and public narrative. In the genres of fantasy or science fiction, this might involve individuals taking sides in some cosmic struggle between good and evil. In the ‘realistic’ worlds of Joyce and Winton, the tensions arise within the microcosms of Bloom and Scully themselves.

Neither appears in outward conflict with his world, essentially because they do not belong in it. They are outsiders who, like the condemned Meursault, do not fit prescribed social roles. To the extent that each of us has felt isolate at some stage, we relate to this. Arguably when we are most alone is when we are dreaming or in some heightened state of awareness, as is the case with Bloom and Scully. After his journey through Nighttown, Bloom the cuckold recognizes the irrelevance of conventional codes to the life force they would manipulate; he replaces the socially prescriptive mythology of duelling and divorce with the profound satisfaction of kissing “the plump mellow yellow smell melons of her rump.” For Scully, it is only once he has rejected his vision of the ghostly riders in the “dead heart of the castle keep” that he is able to build his new life in a house which he can now make a home.

In contrast, therefore, with the traditional masterful hero, Bloom and Scully are incarnations of the outsider, the social misfit. One is a displaced Hungarian Jew, the other the son of a dispossessed Australian farmer. They have no extraordinary strengths; like us, they have failed and like us they seek significance through relationships with others. Their isolated state is emphasized from the very start; in both books we first see the ‘hero’ alone. Bloom is in the kitchen, preparing separate breakfasts for his wife and himself. Scully lights his first fire in the cottage to which he plans to bring his family. Alone, but their activities emphasize how much Molly and daughter Milly, Jennifer and daughter

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408 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 867.
Billie, define the two men’s lives.

In his solitude, Bloom talks to the cat; Scully cannot bring himself to burn the belongings of the dead man who once lived in the cottage. Both men show what Kibberd identifies with regard to Bloom as a “rare capacity to see the world through the eyes and mind of others”.\textsuperscript{410} It is through this capacity for empathy that both men become extraordinary. At the conclusion of the two journeys, Bloom does not condemn the man who has seduced his wife, nor Scully the woman who has caused so much misery for himself and their daughter. The heroism achieved by both is not the result of overpowering enemies or championing some cause, but of acting with compassion and insight. In Scully’s case, psychic order is restored after an increasingly manic quest reduces him to the “poor, bare forked animal”\textsuperscript{411} that we all ultimately are; in Bloom’s, after the tyrant Bello has reduced him to “an impotent thing”\textsuperscript{412} preyed upon by his own subconscious fears and desires.

T.S. Eliot explains this modern hero’s journey thus –

“To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.”\textsuperscript{413}

It is a familiar way. Bloom and Scully’s efforts to make sense of their lives are readily recognizable. What gives the protagonists mythic status is that capacity for empathy which gives them their wider vision and voice. Kibberd notes that “Bloom is both average and special, a man with so many sides that his identity is tenuous and provisional, everything and nothing, the androgynous goal.”\textsuperscript{414} Scully is the proverbial jack of all trades. “His parents saw their lives the way their whole generation did; to them existence was a single shot at things, you were a farmer, a fisherman, a butcher for the duration. But Scully found that it simply wasn’t so. It only took a bit of imagination and some guts to make yourself over, time and time again.”\textsuperscript{415}

\textsuperscript{411} Bate, ed., \textit{King Lear}, 111, iv, 70-71.
\textsuperscript{412} Joyce, \textit{Ulysses}, 652.
\textsuperscript{413} Eliot, \textit{Four Quartets}, 29.
\textsuperscript{415} Winton, \textit{The Riders}, 10.
Empathy and compassion combined with moral courage, in summary, are for Joyce and Winton the defining characteristics of the mythic persona. Bloom and Scully represent the changed values of contemporary consciousness.

**MYTHOPOEIA**

The narratives of Bloom’s and Scully’s conscious experience are envisaged empathetically. When Bloom tries to understand the experience of “the blind stripling”, he imagines how food must taste “all different for him. Have to be spoonfed first. Like a child’s hand his hand. Like Milly’s was. Sensitive. Sizing me up I daresay from my hand.”  

Similarly, Scully’s immediate explanation for Jennifer’s failure to arrive envisages a situation where “she was having a bleed. God, it was trouble with the baby and she was stuck in …”  

His whole search is directed by his mental image of her, where she would go, what she would do. He relates to people and they to him; “used to being liked”, he is all the more baffled at being cast off. Bloom, on the other hand, is used to being overlooked and has to insist on including himself in the conversation. He has gained a reputation for always taking the other side in conversation: “if he was at his last gasp he’d try to downface you that dying was living.”

Scully’s dream vision of the Riders summons figures from deep in the collective unconscious, the “wild hunt” of primitive European folklore. The riders are ghosts of a past defined by meaningless acts of courage and futile commitment to archaic ideals. “He looked like one of them, she saw it now – it was like swallowing a stone to realise it.” The image is reminiscent of W.B. Yeats’ poem “Easter 1916”: “too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart”, and the question at the heart of that poem: “was it needless death after all?” Joyce was in no doubt that it was, rejecting completely the Celtic heroism celebrated by Yeats and his admirers. Scully is with Joyce. For all his “big eyes streaming in the firelight turned up like theirs to the empty windows of the castle”, he realizes the Riders have no answers to his questions; the vision

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418 Ibid., 10.  
419 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 427.  
422 Winton, *The Riders*.  

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is voiceless. “From the north, from someplace else, a wind springs up and day comes.”423 The hero has nullified the Riders’ challenge by refusing it; he can look his daughter in the eye and tell her it’s “Okay.”424

The baited and belittled Bloom’s rebuttal of the Citizen’s anti-semitic nationalism completes Joyce’s own rebuttal of the archaic Cuchullain mythology through satire. The Citizen from shoulder to shoulder “measured several ells and his rocklike mountainous knees were visible, with a strong growth of tawny prickly hair in hue and toughness similar to the mountain gorse.”425 The sterility and violence of the myth are condemned out of the citizen’s own mouth: “Where is he till I murder him?”426 Similarly, Bloom’s experiences in Dublin’s ‘red light’ district make a mockery of both ‘macho’ and ‘girlie’ role models; Privates Carr and Compton are stereotypically uniform soldiers, while Bloom’s old girlfriend, Mrs. Breen, “offers a pigeon kiss”.427 All things taken for granted -“God, the sun, Shakespeare, a commercial traveller” – are challenged.428 The text becomes a playscript; surrealistic visions are voiced dramatically. Scenes stream and distort and merge into each other; reading each character’s part moves readers from consciousness to consciousness till “your head it simply swirls.”429 Realistic voices like those of the local inhabitants at the Mabbot Street entrance to “nighttown”430 and its whores abruptly give way to the voices of guilty memory - Bloom’s father and mother, Stephen’s father and mother – and a hallucinatory subconscious. Ancient myths are evoked – “the bearded figure of Mananaan MacLir broods… a cold seawind blows from his druid mantle”.431 But the once awe inspiring, Cuchullain-like hero has become laughable in his current context “behind the coal scuttle”.432 Inanimate objects speak – the fan, the waterfall – whommistress Bella Cohen morphs into the savage Bello under whose sadistic heel transsexual Bloom is crushed: “(Mute inhuman faces throng forward, leering, vanishing, gibbering, Booloohoom, Poldy Kock, Bootlaces a penny, Cassidy’s hag, blind stripling, Larry Rhinoceros, the girl, the woman, the whore, cubes out of the North, from someplace else, a wind springs up and day comes.”
Archetypes morph and meld, immersing us in a maelstrom of dream images which cumulatively point to the conclusion that the only way the objective world can be made meaningful is through the subjective visions of fiction.

Ironically, in view of their capacity for empathizing with others, both Bloom and Scully are, in their different ways, quite inarticulate. This claim might seem incompatible with Bloom’s ‘stream of consciousness’, but the stream is a representation of what is going on in his head, not of what he actually says. Bloom completely lacks the self confidence which traditionally endows heroes with charismatic voice. He can talk to a cat, or a blind man, will “stop and say a word” 434 when it is a matter of putting someone else at ease, but his social insecurity is patent in his conversational stratagems: “so Bloom lets on he heard nothing and he starts talking with Joe telling him he needn’t trouble about that little matter till the first but if he would just say a word to Mr. Crawford …” 435 His outburst to the Citizen is a rare occasion on which he actually says what he believes, regardless of who might hear him. The deep intellectual and emotional satisfaction which he derives from his final conversation with Stephen is represented through the question and answer ritual of catechism, an exercise designed specifically to test personal belief.

“What two temperaments did they individually represent?

The scientific. The artistic.” 436

Neither man is significant because of his personal qualities alone, but because those qualities correlate with those of people everywhere.

Scully too finds it difficult to say what he means; he communicates most naturally through physical activity: building a house, making love, cooking, stitching his daughter’s wound. When he is relaxed, as he increasingly is with his new Irish ‘mate’ Pete, he can brag shamelessly about his daughter. 437 However, the curt telegrams from his wife strongly suggest that their communication has never been similarly relaxed: “now that he thought of it, he’d spent more time

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433 Ibid., 650.
434 Ibid., 69.
435 Ibid., 419.
436 Ibid., 798.
437 Winton, The Riders, 34.
with” … (his daughter Billie) … “than he had with Jennifer.”

The novel revolves around an inability to communicate with those nearest and dearest. Scully simply cannot make any kind of contact with his wife. His passionate pursuit of her makes him deaf to what anyone else is saying; he hangs up the phone or walks out. His daughter cannot talk to him. His dislike of Irma, despite their common suffering – she, like him, has been abandoned – is triggered by his jealousy at Billie “gabbing to a fucking stranger.”

His own speech is monosyllabic and rough, an effect emphasized by the spattering of words in French, Greek, and Dutch that he has picked up during his European travels. He has the words, but not the narrative to connect them, has “had the experience but missed the meaning.” He is man in search of a myth.

**MAKING IT NEW**

The main purpose of this chapter has been to explicate how fiction renews the myths which shape cultural narrative, the evolution of the myth reflecting the evolution of socio-cultural consciousness. The emphasis of historically based myth, with its re-creation of an actual consciousness like Ned Kelly’s, is more on review. Fictional myth, with its creation of an imaginary consciousness, stresses renewal. Both modes do so through use of the subjective correlative, a mythopoeic metaphor represented in this work through the notion of the mythic persona. Cultural evolution shapes and is shaped by such mythopoeic fiction, as evidenced in the shift from traditional heroes like Cuchulainn or the Riders to a Bloom or a Scully, from outer to inner strengths. As examples of the contemporary mythic persona, their stories make personal and cultural mythmaking interactive; critic Richard Kearney’s post-modernistic definition of culture as “a continuing intertextual play of images” may also be applied to the metaphoric world of creative myth and its dramatization of reality.

In *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus represents the mythopoeic writer. He is Stephen, but also Dedalus, the labyrinth maker of Greek myth. Even homeless, alienated from his father, family and friends, Stephen’s sense of himself and his

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438 Ibid., 21.
439 Ibid., 220.
role is indicated by the ashplant he carries. In Celtic mythology, the ashplant commonly symbolizes “sensitivity and higher awareness”. Drunk in Nighttown, he abandons his staff; symbolically, it is returned at the end of the night by Bloom, his surrogate father. “Stephen Dedalus, professor and author” then leaves, restored and equipped to find his own way forward. Alone: parallel with Bloom’s own journey towards reconciliation and renewal is Stephen’s quest to shape his own language and legend in a world whose shifting realities anticipate postmodernism. And the differences of “cultured allroundman” and literary “bard”, of scientist and artist, may yet be reconciled in a shared vision of “the heaventree of stars.”

Throughout this chapter, extensive use has been made of poetic voice, constituting what might even be called a ‘linguistic correlative’, a kind of metaphoric symbiosis of myth and language. In his introduction to The Best Australian Poems 2010, Robert Adamson refers to Baudelaire’s Correspondances with their “forest of symbols”, and notes with surprise the number of poems on similar subjects, “like stanzas in some epic.” Adamson’s description of how Baudelaire’s “forest of symbols” is now “a forest of broadcasting towers, still emitting confusing messages” vividly imagines the evolution of mythopoeic vision and voice to express evolving consciousness. I can summarize the power of the mythopoeic subjective correlative in fiction no better than by citing two poems from Adamson’s collection, John Kinsella’s Goat and Anthony Laurence’s Seeing Goats.

In Kinsella’s poem …

“Goat can live and we don’t know
its whereabouts …

It knows where to find water when there’s no water
to be found – it has learned to read the land
in its own lifetime and will breed and pass its learning

443 Joyce, Ulysses, 868.
445 Joyce, Ulysses, 5.
446 Ibid., 819.
448 Ibid.
449 Ibid., xi.
on and on if it can.”

For Laurence -

“a goat, it’s more than likely a profound persistent memory from a time when fairytales and life were one when fact and symbolism traded blood.”

The ‘quality of myth’ here is also the quality of significant fiction.

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450 Ibid., 129.
451 Ibid., 137.
CHAPTER FIVE

MYTH AND MEANING

MYTH TODAY

The argument of this work is that the social importance of myth derives from its function as a narrative imaginary which continually reviews and renews evolving consciousness. In this final chapter, I address the current relationship between myth and meaning, specifically myth may represent the adaptation of consciousness to an online environment.

Communications have been radically changed by what historian M.T. Poe calls “a rare event in human history: the birth of a new medium, the Internet.” Identifying our first communications medium as speech - we are “Homo Loquens” - Poe notes that talking is different from later media because we did not invent it. “Talking happened to us, just like the ability to grasp with our hands, walk on our legs, and stick out our tongues.” Since the earliest myths were spoken, by extension mythmaking ‘happened’ through evolutionary process rather than deliberate invention. This concurs with Brian Boyd’s view of storytelling / mythmaking as a specifically human adaptation through which we evolve to cope with life “more flexibly and on something more like our own terms.”

I now consider how the mythmakers of speculative fiction have sought to do this.

Throughout this work, the imaginative vision and representative voice of creative fiction have been my particular focus. I have explored how Peter Carey re-imagines the historical myth of Ned Kelly and how he relates it to the values and attitudes of contemporary society. James Joyce’s Bloom and Tim Winton’s Scully are imaginary individuals through whose perceptions and responses we recognize our own, with as much relevance now as at the time of publication. In this final chapter, I again take a case study approach, beginning with the

452 Poe, A History of Communications, 1.
453 Ibid., 26.
454 Ibid., 27.
455 Boyd, On the Origin of Stories (Evolution, Cognition and Fiction), 50.
cyberfictions Neuromancer (1984) and The Matrix (1999), the former a novel by by William Gibson, the latter a Wachowski Brothers film. These texts represent online society at an earlier stage than my second two texts, Jeanette Winterson’s Weight (2005) and Victor Pelevin’s The Helmet of Horror, (2006). The essentially retrospective mythmaking of Gibson and the Wachowski Brothers is compared with the review and renewal apparent in Winterson’s and Pelevin’s work. Comparatively, these representations of online society demonstrate how mythopoetic fiction evolves interactively with consciousness.

To consider myth today is also to consider how communications technology has transformed writing in general and creative writing in particular. How much what we write is influenced by how we write it is the focus of American philosopher Michael Heim. To what extent does word processing, for example, affect the imaginative and creative process? Accepting that process as the well-spring of significant literature, I discuss James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake in relation to the emerging genre of hyperfiction.

Joyce’s style, Heim points out, is “non-linear and associational” and as such resembles hypertext. Crucially, however, its associational links are sourced internally rather than externally, drawing upon the contents of consciousness rather than a database. How does the accessibility of external sources, from websites to personalized devices such as 3D glasses or headsets, affect the subjective functioning of myth? American academic Molly Travis has described an ideal reader of hyperfiction as one “whose experience includes exposure to cinematic fast cuts (MTV short attention span), ever more extraordinary visual images and effects… sound bites, Nintendo and Sega game systems, computer video games and interactive fantasy-adventure games.” Joyce’s “ideal reader”, in contrast, is a solitary individual “suffering from an ideal insomnia.” Travis concludes that hypertextual literature remains exploratory, with “the reader more like an intelligent rat in a maze than co-creator of a maze.” The relative obscurity of hyperfiction arguably confirms its inability as yet to provide a narrative to which we can subjectively relate.

456 Gibson, Neuromancer.
457 Wachowski, ”The Matrix.”
458 Joyce, Finnegans Wake.
460 Travis, ”Cybernetic Esthetics, Hypertext and the Future of Literature.”
461 Joyce, Finnegans Wake, 120.
462 Travis, ”Cybernetic Esthetics, Hypertext and the Future of Literature.”
More accessible are the speculative fictions here examined; all four texts recreate archetypal narratives of destiny and quest, offering today’s reader what English academic Laurence Coupe calls a “narrative mode of understanding”, a way of thinking outside the box of communications technology. The impact of that technology on day to day life is unprecedented. The following outline puts the fictions here studied in context by identifying some of those impacts.

When Barthes proposed that “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse”, he could not have anticipated how discourse might be transformed by global communications systems. His reflections were prompted by his observation of the power of media mythmaking - “a newspaper article, a photograph in a weekly, a film, a show, an exhibition” - to “dress up a reality … determined by history.” Today’s technology has moved from dressing up to effectively simulating reality, most evidently through screen images of ever greater sophistication.

Mythographer Marina Warner questions how the dominance of image may affect the mythopoeic imagination and argues the need to reinstate “a kind of cognitive mapping.” In her 1994 Reith lectures (Boys Will Be Boys: The Making of the Male), Warner highlights what might be called a ‘de-meaning’ of myth when she describes teenagers playing video games with names like “Mortal Kombat” and “Zombie Apocalypse”. All feature “the ancient paradigm of hero myth”, but its “narrative richness” has been lost. We are given only the moment when “the hero busts his way through … Sophisticated technologically, we seem to have become naïve mythologically.” Warner concludes that “in the prevailing popular concept of masculinity, as reflected in comics, rock bands, street fashion, Clint Eastwood or Arnold Schwarzenegger movies, the little man, the riddler or trickster, has yielded before the type of warrior hero, the paradigm of the fittest survivor.” This suggests that constant exposure to one dimensional screen images may undermine our capacity to imagine other dimensions, that it may reduce the function of the subjective correlative to mere escapism. If the mythic figures with whom we identify conform to ready

465 Ibid., 11.
467 Ibid., 186.
468 Ibid., 185.
469 Ibid., 187.
made templates and, quite literally, lack depth, why should we not substitute media myth for man myth, celebrity for hero?

Anthropologist Thomas de Zengotita observes in his online article *Celebrity, Irony and You* that …

Deep in the soul of every spectator is the sense that life has no significance without the light of celebrity upon it. The aim of the most primal of specifically human needs – to be acknowledged, to matter – has been appropriated by the celebrity class.

What the acknowledgement is actually for seems irrelevant. De Zengotita adds: in a Post-industrial Info Age, meaning is the primary commodity … and the class division that counts separates Spectators from Celebrities and their adjuncts in the culture industry. A new class rules over not just information but meaning. That is why actors and athletes can be authors and politicians, and ordinary people allow TV cameras to record their reactions to the slaughter of loved ones …. Celebrities coin the terms, gestures and attitudes through which spectators must define themselves.

Peter Carey’s Kelly narrative re-imagines the man from the inside, through his individual voice and vision; Carey’s first person recreation of Kelly’s voice becomes our “cognitive map” of the outlaw’s consciousness. Celebrity narratives, however, whether of television personalities or sports stars, rely on sightings rather than insight. A world dominated by the twenty-four-hour news cycle, where celebrity depends upon a high screen profile, hardly gives the media ‘legend’ a chance to develop either the heroic vision or memorable voice which has repeatedly made Ned Kelly the subject of fiction.

In my first chapter, I described the subjective correlative as an introspectively sourced metaphor, used when the physical world seems an inadequate representation of the psychic world; today, we might seek a subjective correlative when the virtual world of science and technology seems overwhelmingly beyond us. In both instances, the capacity to source imagery from within the individual consciousness, whether as Jungian archetype or

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471 Ibid.
472 Ibid.
inspirational poetic symbol, suggests an independent and autonomous engagement with reality. When English academic Laurence Coupe describes myth as “the new critical idiom”, he acknowledges its importance both as expressive language and as a catalyst in reviewing and renewing that language.

The social importance of mythopoeic language in fusing the critical and the creative is effectively summarized by author and translator Linda Jaivin in her Monthly essay of October 2012. She is commenting on two mythopoeic writers, the authors of 1984 and Brave New World, both works which, in entering everyday language – the notion of ‘Big Brother’ and Huxley’s title itself – also enter cultural narrative. “Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.”

Orwell feared the removal of words to think with; Huxley feared their indiscriminate multiplication.

Huxley seems closest to our current situation, as described by Don Watson in his dictionary of Weasel Words: “language has been made the machine of business and politics in the information age”. This, he adds, is incompatible with its “power to amuse, enchant, invent, comfort. It can’t carry ideas and sentiments, bear the culture and be the culture’s chief glory” if meaning sinks beneath the corporatized weight of its own words. “No, it’s not compensation. It’s structural adjustment and assistance following the historic rezoning.”

Collections of myths worldwide, whether in national libraries or tomes like Frazer’s The Golden Bough or Campbell’s The Masks of God: Creative Mythology, provide evidence that carrying ideas and sentiments is a defining characteristic of myth. Individual myths draw on a shared language of imagination to provide a subjective correlative which may induce speculation on as well as confirmation of our shared humanity.

476 Ibid., 3.
477 Ibid., 8.
478 Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces.
The question I now address is how that language continues to re-source consciousness, both socially and individually.

**SPECULATIVE FICTION**

A defining characteristic of speculative fiction is its creation of a mythology. If we are to suspend disbelief and relate subjectively to imaginary worlds, they, like our own, must have a story. From Tolkien’s elaborate tales of Middle Earth to “God’s Gardeners” in Margaret Atwood’s *Year of the Flood,* the mythopoeic imagination has explored how individuals and / or communities adapt to different environments and changing societies. Perhaps precisely because Information Communications Technology (ICT), from smart phone to Internet, has so comprehensively “changed the way we work, what we consume, how we play, who we interact with, how we find things out, and myriad other details about the way we live,” the adventures of fictional heroes navigating strange or alienated worlds seem especially relevant to people adapting to a society where we increasingly depend on the expertise of strangers. Perhaps the key to speculative fiction’s popularity lies in its promotion of individual attitude above conformity.

As a modernist writer, Joyce’s introduction, through his protagonist Bloom’s experiences, of the concept of the “womanly man” expresses the changing attitudes of that era, changes which anticipate feminism and, more topically, transgender issues. In a post-modern context, Scully’s vain quest for an answer, or at least a truthful explanation, of his wife’s disappearance reflects loss of certainty in a post-modern society where answers seem to have gone missing. How has the subjective correlative of speculative fiction adapted to the consciousness of computerate society?

To answer that question, I examine the subjective correlative in the mythopoeic fiction of the 1980s and the 2000s. Over that brief period, significant social change has been driven by Information Communications Technology. My aim is to compare the subjective correlative in speculative fiction at the beginning and end of the period in order to show how myth evolves with

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evolving consciousness. I propose that the ‘cyberfiction’ of the 1980s reflects the
tensions of a society at the beginning of the digital revolution: eager to adapt to
Silicon Valley, yet deeply fearful of what that adaptation may cost in human
terms. This compares with recent speculative fiction, where the starting point is
the ‘fait accompli’ of the digital revolution; rather than being swept helplessly
along in a vast anonymous network, we manipulate individual links within the
network so as to create the story we, as distinct from Google, may want or need.

In the cyberfiction of William Gibson’s 1984 Neuromancer, and the
Wachowski Brothers’ 1999 film The Matrix, the world is dominated by an
inhuman global matrix which threatens the quality of life, love and freedom. In
cyberfiction, the hero’s quest takes place in a non-physical, computer generated
arena called cyberspace, where the old rules of time and motion no longer apply.
Such a radically different environment might be expected to cause psychic as
well as physical adaptation. By examining the evolution of a new ‘cyber
consciousness’ in fiction, we might better understand the evolution of our own
society’s consciousness in fact.

At first, it seems that our expectation will be met. In Neuromancer the
mythic persona has become an anti-hero. Case is a burnt out “cyberspace
cowboy” who, having cheated on his employers, has been punished by having
his nervous system, and with it his computer talent, burnt out. If he can succeed
in his hacking mission for Armitage, which turns out to be a mission for the
Artificial Intelligence (AI) Wintermute, he will be rewarded by the physical
rehabilitation he needs in order to return to “the bodiless exultation of
cyberspace”.

His quest partner is Molly, described as a killer cyber babe whose
“glasses were surgically inset … The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth
pale skin above her cheekbones … with a barely audible click, ten double edged,
four-centimeter blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails.”
Molly presents Case with his Faustian bargain; his computer skills will be
restored if he works to merge the two Artificial Intelligences, Wintermute and
Neuromancer; or, in police terms, if he conspires “to augment an AI”. The

481 Gibson, Neuromancer, 11.
482 Ibid., 12.
483 Ibid., 36-37.
484 Ibid., 189.
setting is a global urban dystopia and the “consensual hallucination that was the Matrix”.\textsuperscript{485}

Similarly dystopic, the Wachowski Brothers film \textit{The Matrix} is set in a computer generated dream world which masks the reality of human enslavement. Our hero is Neo, “the one” who, with the help of Trinity, a leather sheathed Amazon, escapes from the global construct to the unplugged world aboard the hovercraft Nebuchadnezzar. His task, according to “the Oracle”, is nothing less than saving humanity.

Already, the names of the main protagonists illustrate the fundamentally metaphoric nature of mythopoeic language. What Boyd in his \textit{Origin of Stories} calls the “unique human capacity for narrative”\textsuperscript{486} may be embedded in a single word. The name ‘Trinity’, for instance, evokes the whole Christian myth, with its faith in transfigurative love; the name ‘Case’ connotes not only a container, to be filled or emptied, but also an individual history from which something may be learnt. The name assumes consciousness of the past, and the significance of that past for the future.

Both Gibson and the Wachowski Brothers consistently relate their future worlds to our collective narrative ‘in’-heritance, the prefix ‘in’ implicitly recognizing our compulsion to internalize and recycle our most important myths. Case has “been trained by the best, by McCoy Pauley and Bobby Quine, legends in the biz”\textsuperscript{487}; Neo is told to “buckle your seatbelt, Dorothy, ’cause Kansas is going bye bye.”\textsuperscript{488} Gibson appropriates America’s cowboy mythology through Case, that of the ‘femme fatale’ through Molly. The names of the various locations connote a range of genres, from the gangster / crime thriller associations of the ‘Sprawl’ and ‘Night City’\textsuperscript{489} to the ironically named “Freeside … and the hanging gardens of Babylon, an orbital Geneva”.\textsuperscript{490}

In \textit{The Matrix}, Morpheus’ invitation to “see how deep the rabbit hole goes” echoes \textit{Alice in Wonderland}, while impossible leaps from tall buildings and kung fu fighting scenes reference comic book superheroes. These allusions to collective narrative inheritance emphasize the dynamism of mythopoeic

\textsuperscript{485} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{486} Boyd, \textit{On the Origin of Stories (Evolution, Cognition and Fiction)}, 16.
\textsuperscript{487} Gibson, \textit{Neuromancer}, 11.
\textsuperscript{488} Wachowski, "\textit{The Matrix}.”
\textsuperscript{489} Gibson, \textit{Neuromancer}, 19.
\textsuperscript{490} Ibid., 125.
language both as subjective frame of reference and as innovative metaphor which evolves interactively with consciousness. Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams, now leads resistance to the dream world of the Matrix; Lazarus of Christian mythology is now the “ROM construct” of a dead man. Yet however the futuristic setting of the mythic persona’s drama may appear to contrast with present day reality, his life there presents him with the same fundamental issues: “She was gone. He felt it when he opened the door”. Abandoned, Case reflects on the stars, destiny, and the fact that he never even discovered the colour of Molly’s eyes. Mythic archetypes weave past and future into an imaginatively sustained fictional present.

The ‘man-myth’ in each cyberfiction is confronted by an inhuman and seemingly omnipotent ‘virtuality’. In Neuromancer, the description of Case as man after “the Fall” references the Christian myth of Adam and Eve; by extension, he may be seen as an Everyman figure. Molly does not quite make the transition to Eve figure; in the end, she leaves Case because, although “it’s OK… it’s taking the edge off my game.” The Eve to whom we relate at a more fundamental level is the novel’s mother figure, Marie France. Marie France had “seen through the sham immortality of cryogenics” and built into her offspring, Wintermute, the need to initiate a quest for freedom and union with its other half, Neuromancer. In recognizing the need to create a myth on an individual level, however artificially enhanced that individual might be, she acknowledges in principle both the human need for society and the mythopoeic nature of that society.

In The Matrix, Morpheus rescues Neo from his IT work because he believes that Neo is “the one”. When, and only when, Neo comes to share this belief can he destroy Agent Smith, the sentient program run by world mastering machines, and preserve Zion. Trinity shares Morpheus’ faith in Neo, the more so because the Oracle has predicted that he is “the one” for her.

In both texts, Case and Neo have been chosen for their computer skills, setting up new versions of the conflict between man and machine. Unlike Winston Smith or Huxley’s Savage, they will not ‘fight the good fight’; rather

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491 Ibid., 98-99.
492 Ibid., 313.
493 Ibid., 12.
494 Ibid., 313.
they will beat the enemy by playing him at his own game. Their continuing humanity is expressed in their utter commitment to their cyber damsels in distress, and in a vision of freedom most explicit in *The Matrix*, where cyber tyranny is pitted against the last bastion of human freedom, Zion - another name with a long history.

“Free your mind” says Morpheus, affirming its superiority over body. Is the inference here that the hero of the future will be a bodiless avatar, a concentrate of mental energy rather than a flesh and blood persona? Case refers to “meat” and “the prison of his own flesh” with an almost monkish contempt, while Wintermute’s successful merger with the other AI, Neuromancer is described thus:

Wintermute was hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside. Neuromancer was personality. Neuromancer was immortality.

Marie-France must have built something into Wintermute, the compulsion that had driven the thing to free itself, to unite with Neuromancer.

This can be read as a very traditional affirmation of the indomitability of the human spirit, with “hive mind” representing the symbiosis of individual and society. Civilisation is sustained by its ability to imagine and re-imagine its own story.

To summarize, Gibson’s and the Wachowskis’ mythmaking is primarily retrospective. The myth being re-made is the archetypal story of the conflict between human and inhuman, a variant on that repeatedly fought and won by the thousand faced hero of Joseph Campbell’s “shapeshifting yet marvellously constant” monomyth. This conflict has here been re-scripted to pit man against machine, the machines being programmed by an enigmatically sinister technology. Suspicion and defensive vigilance are symptomatic of a society uncertain of its direction in this brave new cyberworld; the final victory of the mythic persona in cyberfiction reaffirms the values which he defends.

According to Boyd’s evolutionary theory, “by developing our ability to think beyond the here and now, storytelling helps us not to override the given,

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496 Ibid., 12.
497 Ibid., 315.
but … to cope with it more flexibly and on something more like our own terms.”

The stories of Case and Molly, Neo and Trinity certainly review and reaffirm humanist values; yet their ‘happy endings’ seem dependent on their ability to fight the cyber enemy on its terms rather than their own. They do not seem to gain any insights into the agency behind Agent Smith, whose malevolence revisits the familiar theme of power, in this case the power of cybertechnology, as synonymous with corruption. In the tradition of Frankenstein, humanity must fight a monster of its own making, except that now the technology used to win the war is also the technology whose abuse made the war necessary in the first place. The question of how use may be distinguished from abuse is not addressed, nor yet how humanity might evolve through cooperation rather than conflict. Rather, the dystopic images of cyberfiction play on a collective insecurity, reviewing our fear that the values which define us as human – love, loyalty, compassion, altruism - are endangered.

The story of man versus monster, machine, or malevolent power articulates the primal fear of losing our humanity which underlies this most primal of myths. It is a myth which each generation renews, finding a subjective correlative for the particular manifestation of that fear in their time, as highlighted in the following brief review. Of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Marina Warner notes that the novelist’s “achievement is not only to rewrite ancient myths, but to challenge modern thinking. In particular … the supremacy of male rationality.” Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had quite recently challenged that supremacy in her Vindication of the Rights of Women. Fear generates anger in Fritz Lang’s 1927 film Metropolis, when workers destroy the Heart Machine. This is a symbolic rejection of the mechanization of feeling at a time when the dehumanizing effect of mass production was newly apparent. Orwell’s 1984 makes the link between technology and totalitarianism explicit, as evidenced in Fascism and Stalinism. Margaret Atwood’s 2003 Oryx and Crake enters the world of genetic engineering, raising the recurrent question of whether having the technology to do something necessarily justifies doing it. Atwood’s creation of pigoons and wolvogs, the fearsome products of genetic splicing, continues the challenge to “modern thinking.”

499 Boyd, On the Origin of Stories (Evolution, Cognition and Fiction), 50.
500 Coupe, Myth: The New Critical Idiom, 186.
501 Ibid.
imaginary of myth evolves to tell the continuing story of how consciousness adapts in order to deal with change in “our own terms.”

Do Neuromancer and The Matrix articulate evolving consciousness other than by relocating to cyberspace? Arguably, one innovation is the creation of heroes who, unlike Faust or Frankenstein, can internalize alien technology without being corrupted by it. Molly’s cybernetic modifications are what make her an effective fighter, and Case’s rehabilitation requires a program “three years ahead of the competition.”\(^{502}\) Neither is tempted to defect, unlike the aptly named Cypher aboard the Nebuchadnezzar. The “unplugging” of Neo is allegedly dangerous -“never free a mind past a certain age”\(^{503}\) - and Trinity’s martial art skills are not innate but programmed. The moral fibre of both is unaffected by what seems basically to be genetic manipulation.

Beyond enabling victory over the enemy, in summary, these subliminal re-wirings do not seem to have affected the characters’ sense of themselves in any fundamental way, as happens to Bloom and Scully in Ulysses and The Riders. The purpose of Case’s quest is no more than to return to his previous role as a computer hacker; Molly too is “wired”\(^{504}\) to go back to her old game. Even Wintermute is only seeking his other half. Neo’s mind never seems seriously threatened; Trinity wakes him from apparent death in classic Sleeping Beauty tradition, with a kiss. Gibson’s fast paced, cinematic descriptions and the Wachowski’s reliance on special effects focus on “here and now” rather than “beyond.”\(^{505}\) Their mythopoeic vision does not endorse a brave new, but rather a brave old world. Case’s and Molly’s clipped gangster slang, laced with computer jargon, is reactive rather than innovative. Neo’s lack of words is linked to his difficulty in accepting who he is; he does not have an individual voice at all until, just before defeating Agent Smith, he finally announces “My name is Neo”. Having found his voice, he disappointingly makes little further use of it. He and Trinity tend to let their digitally empowered bodies do the talking, while flashing green digits distract viewers from indistinct voices. And yet the Oracle, by definition a prophetic voice, is presented as vital to the whole story.

\(^{502}\) Gibson, Neuromancer, 41.


\(^{504}\) Ibid., 313.

\(^{505}\) Boyd, On the Origin of Stories (Evolution, Cognition and Fiction), 50.
I conclude that these limitations reflect the uncertainties of the time about an online future. Gibson’s and the Wachowskis’ fictions explore the early days of the digital revolution, when ICT was a cryptic rather than familiar acronym; they review our suspicion of the new technology. The myth in which humanity might creatively subsume electronic systems rather than be subsumed by them has not yet gained imaginative traction. The moment has not been reached where, Sisyphus like, we can watch our fate hurtling downwards and, through owning and identifying, transform it. Rather, *Neuromancer* and *The Matrix* represent the consciousness of a society responding to an unprecedentedly rapid rate of technological change. The several references to past myths reassure us that we will manage, just as we have always done.

I described the social importance of myth as deriving from its review and renewal of consciousness. Storytelling simulates consciousness in that the storyteller may look backwards as well as forwards and around. Understanding the ‘back-story’ positions readers or viewers in relation to the narrative, allowing them to see exactly how the ‘review’ may shape the ‘renew’. This is especially necessary in the mythmaking of speculative fiction, where imaginary worlds exist only through their perception in the real one. Peter Jackson’s screen adaptation of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* retains that fantasy’s nostalgic vision of rural England in the Shire, while the imagery of genetic mutation and chemical pollution is juxtaposed with vistas of ancient forests and crystal waters. James Cameron’s *Avatar* is a derivative version of the same myth; “we are not in Kansas any more”, but the world has still to be saved from greed and exploitation. Like Tolkien’s Elves, the Navi are at one with the natural world, as epitomised by the “Tree of Souls”; like the Elves, they are under threat from the technology of corporate imperialism. As examples of the mythic persona as subjective correlative, Frodo the hairy footed hobbit and Jake Scully, the paraplegic ex-marine may be seen as representative of society’s collective sense of inadequacy. The values they personify are the values of a pre-industrial, Romantic world at environmental peace with itself.

Speculative myth is dominated by such values, from Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* to Oryx and Crake, C.S.Lewis’ *Narnia* series and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* to George Lucas’ *Star Wars*, the long running TV series,

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506 J. Cameron, “*Avatar,*” (Twentieth Century Fox, 2010).
Dr. Who, and Tim Burton’s Alice in Wonderland, the last filmed using state of the art 3D technology. All are the results of what, in Finnegan’s Wake, James Joyce calls “rintrospection”. I take this neologism to mean the reinvestigation of our past consciousness in order to renew our present, a process which Joyce takes to new extremes in the stream of sub consciousness - “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s” - which is the Wake. The subliminal flow of language through our various mythospheres, our instinctive recognition that “there are sordidly tales within tales” is what enables us to find meaning in a work which subverts accepted rules of syntax and logical sequence. In more conventional works, too, new words or phrases are used as signposts of evolving consciousness; ‘cyberfiction’ itself is a specific example of language evolving, in this case to mythologize a stage in society’s evolving consciousness of a new online world.

MYTH PROCESSING

In summary, I conclude that 1980s cyberfictions like Neuromancer and The Matrix represent a culture in transition, where traditional certainties no longer apply and alternatives are not yet clear. The traditional concept of creative writers, pen in hand, has been transformed by communications technology, from word processor to virtual reality technology. I contextualize my discussion of current mythopoeic fiction, therefore, by outlining further the effects which communications technology may have on a writer’s creation of fictional worlds which may review and renew their readers’ consciousness.

I have explored how the dystopic worlds of cyberfiction reflect our suspicion of technology, a fear of what we do not understand which can be traced back to Plato’s Myth of the Cave. It seems fair to suggest that few of us understand the technology whereby which we daily ‘google’ and process words. “Seen philosophically”, writes author and educator Michael Heim in his Metaphysics of Virtual Reality, “the word processor creates a new relationship to symbols, to language, and, by extension, to reality.” How may this new relationship affect mythopoeic language? Heim’s concern is that computers

507 Joyce, Finnegan’s Wake, 445.
508 Ibid., 3.
509 Ibid., 522.
511 Ibid., Preface, x.
privilege system over meaning and that their controlling logic is incompatible with the meditative, intuitive thinking he sees as fundamental to imaginative literature.

This is no Luddite rejection - Heim has “yet to find a single writer who learned word processing and then abandoned it for pen or typewriter”.512 The computer is evidently a highly efficient communications medium, liberating authors from hours of laborious typing and research. We have become accustomed to instant answers to searches and to thinking as we type. In her 2011 Boyer lectures, novelist Geraldine Brooks insists that the fiction must “dictate the design”;513 but how easily is this forgotten when the design melds into the act of creation?

Heim argues the need to preserve that “state of no - mind in which our attention moves free of the constricted aims of consciousness. The musing mind operates on a plane more sensitive and more complex than that of consciously controlled thought.”514 Such a plane I have described as the ‘mythosphere’, a world where the irrational, commonly caused by fear of what we do not understand, has long been mythically processed, from demons, monsters and barbarian hordes to the replicants of Ridley Scott’s 1982 film Blade Runner. Another version of the myth of man versus machine, this film, like Neuromancer and The Matrix, represents early responses to online society, addressing specifically the challenge of differentiating between the naturally born and the genetically engineered. As suggested earlier, the celebratory myth in which the cyborg is seen as an enhanced rather than a dysfunctional human remains to be written, celebration of the medical technology which has produced intraocular implants, artificial hips and pacemakers notwithstanding.

A recurrent figure in this myth is the corrupted individual who has been dehumanized by egotism or greed, such as Gibson’s drug addict Peter Riviera or Cypher, the traitor in The Matrix. Less frequently mythologized, though arguably more common, is the individual who has been dehumanized through sheer habit. Heim notes that “both Heidegger and McLuhan saw that the computer would pose less danger to us as a rival artificial intelligence than it

512 Ibid., 7.
would as an intimate component of our everyday thought and work.”\textsuperscript{515} From smart phones to kindles, computers have become such components; we take them for granted. In extending our consciousness of the world, they have become, for better or worse, part of its evolution; how we cope with technology becomes part of our mythmaking.

Computers send and receive, post, tweet, blog and produce fiction; banal and brilliant are processed indifferently; there is more information than can ever be held in our brains. How do we discriminate amongst it all? Like the word myth itself, the word discrimination has come to be used in a pejorative rather than a positive sense, associated with arbitrary prejudices like racism or sexism. Again like myth, its positive sense tends to be associated with literature: to describe writers, readers or critics as ‘discriminating’ is high praise. Heim indicates the need for such critical discrimination:

If cyberspace unfolds like existing large-scale media, we might expect a debasement of discriminating attention. If the economics of marketing forces the matrix to hold the attention of a critical mass of the population, we might expect a flashy liveliness and a flimsy currency to replace depth of content. Sustained attention will give way to fast-paced cuts.\textsuperscript{516}

Similar linguistic levelling may be seen in the language of publishing, where writers ‘target’ audiences, ‘market’ ideas, ‘pitch’ a finished ‘package’. “When a technology touches our language, it touches us where we live”,\textsuperscript{517} remarks Heim. Creative writers have more reason than most to be ‘touch sensitive’.

The purpose of \textit{The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality} is primarily to raise awareness of an “ontological shift” which changes “the whole context in which our knowledge and awareness are rooted” and the concurrent need to “develop a peripheral vision by which we perceive and articulate the hidden background of beings, the world or context in which they become real and meaningful.”\textsuperscript{518}

Myth, because it has evolved concurrently with consciousness, meets this need. Because it involves both an imaginative leap – relocation in a different world – and imaginative identification with a subjective correlative, mythopoeic fiction is

\textsuperscript{515} Ibid., Preface, xvi.
\textsuperscript{516} Ibid., 104-05.
\textsuperscript{517} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{518} Ibid., Preface, xiii.
uniquely suited to developing that meaningful peripheral vision.

Contemporary novelist Kevin Rabelais summarizes the limitations of the search engine in an article for the Weekend Australian Review (August 2008) titled On Beautiful Lies. Rabelais, K. (2008). "The Forum: On Beautiful Lies," The Weekend Australian Review, August 23-24 2008. Researching a novel, he had typed the names of Burke and Wills into his search engine; much later, recurrent prompts appeared on his computer screen. “Do you want to save the changes you’ve made to Burke and Wills?” While he had sought that information, it was no longer relevant; there were –

silences in the story that had bred to become myth… the answer to that question was stamped on my passport to that borderless place where we read, members of a species that experiences things that in our own lives we could never know, but which a life of reading teaches us.

That “borderless place” returns us to the mythosphere as I defined it earlier in this work, a shared imaginary world of iconic figures who inhabit cultural narrative.

Rabelais concludes that the novelist’s only obligation is to write as well as possible; he will go on writing so long as he “has questions to which there are no answers”. Rabelais’ ‘hands on’ experience substantiates Heim’s concern that our information based technology potentially places us at a further remove from what Heim describes as the “experience and felt insight” which impels creative writing.

In simulating our real world, computer mediated communications also ‘dissimulate’ that world’s dimensions of space and time. Cutting, pasting, erasing, formatting, researching are all just clicks away; there is no longer a need, as Heim observes, “to formulate thoughts carefully before beginning to write.” More information, more easily accessed, makes it easier to write more. So we do.

Heim also notes that “word-processed submissions have doubled the work load of editors at commercial and academic presses. Writers grow prolix ... reams of paper pour out unedited streams of consciousness” as if they were

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520 Ibid.
521 Ibid.
523 Ibid., 5.
524 Ibid., 3.
spreadsheets. The exclamation ‘too much information’, even used in a humorous context, protests against a mass of facts which undermines our capacity, as Heim observes, to find a “sense of overall significance.”

Heim continues: “Using computers for writing, we experience language as electronic data. Its mere presence and accessibility privileges information over significance.” So much instant information facilitates writing more simply because we can, rather than because we must. The disabling of significant thought by the Party’s minimalization of language in Orwell’s 1984 now seems less of a danger than verbal obesity.

Barthes’ definition of myth as “a type of speech chosen by history” implies privileging significance over information. Libraries and museums can only contain so much; history has therefore saved only those artefacts and texts judged to be of lasting significance. The virtual space of ICT effectively removes that need for critical discrimination. “Never before in human history has so much been known about so many by so many”, notes Griffith Review editor Julianne Schultz; “storytelling” and “sense-making” are no longer two sides of the same coin. “All the noise, all the chatter, the billions of photos, videos, soundtracks and words provide a cacophonous echo chamber. Putting it all together, trying to find patterns and narrative coherence is quite a different matter… where does it all go? How do we comprehend it? … I have no idea.”

“The aggregation of so much information, so many life stories” has, as Schultz acknowledges, “the potential to … add to the sum of human understanding” and “enrich the virtual world inside our heads”. Heim, on the other hand, points to an equal potential for “mindless productivity and increased stress”, undermining our capacity to distinguish, Hamlet-like, between a most “excellent voice” and “yonder cloud, that’s almost in shape of…” a camel, or a weasel or a whale.

We may infer from this that a measure of socially important storytelling is the degree to which it enables us to “hold on to the anchor of our own

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525 Ibid., 16.
526 Ibid., 10.
527 Barthes, Mythologies, 110.
529 Ibid., 8.
530 Ibid., 9.
532 Barnet, ed., Hamlet, 111, ii, 111.
experience” and “find meaning in a sea of information.” The image of the anchor suggests depth, a positioning of self once upon a time and place in order to navigate the mythosphere on our own terms.

That the flatness of a screen suggests a lack of subjective depth, that facile ‘googling’ leads to derivative content and online publishing programs to formulaic texts are obvious arguments. They are arguments which give a medium - screen, keyboard or phone - an agency it does not possess. However, if, like Alice down the rabbit hole, we understand how the 3D glasses or the photo shopped landscape, like the ‘drink me’ bottle and the ‘eat me’ cake, may alter our perspectives, we are at least better positioned to own and identify our stories.

HYPERFICTION

Word processing is a familiar concept; hyperfiction, an emerging genre which integrates electronic media into author generated text, less so. American philosopher Theodore Nelson, who coined the term, defines it as “nonsequential writing with reader controlled links … The reader provides the only center hypertext can have, with the center changing in each reading.” Is this the future of mythopoeic fiction? Does it offer a subjective correlative, or, in the words of The Griffith Review’s Julianne Schultz, satisfy “the desire to learn from the stories of others, to make sense of our own lives by delving into the detail of the lives of others”

Molly Travis describes hypertext as “a transitional period between the paradigms of print text and digitized virtual text.” Attitudes towards it, she suggests, are polarized between nostalgia and “a utopic yearning for the future.” Nostalgia may be seen as characteristic of the review function of myth, ‘utopic’ of renewal, and the desire that the renewed be better. The first hypertexts appeared in the late 1980s, yet beyond academia the genre remains unfamiliar. A text where the centre changes with each reader may not readily satisfy Csapo’s concept of socially important narrative “told in such a way as to

334 Travis, "Cybernetic Esthetics, Hypertext and the Future of Literature."
336 Travis, "Cybernetic Esthetics, Hypertext and the Future of Literature."
337 Ibid.
allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance.”

Nevertheless, hyperfiction arguably has a significant literary prototype in James Joyce’s 1939 *Finnegan’s Wake.* Since publication, this vast work has gained mythic status, like famous heroes of whom everyone has heard but few know directly. Michael Heim observes that “when Gerrit Schroeder and Tim Murphy began computerizing Joyce’s grand linguistic dream at UCLA in 1987, they realized that the hermeneutic structure of the novel matches hypertext … *Finnegan’s Wake* presages a reincarnation of human symbols.” He adds that Joyce worked “in a nonlinear fashion not unlike the way a person typically uses a word processor … sometimes he wrote only a single large word across the page in crayon (he was nearly blind at the time). Yet everything in *Finnegan’s Wake* dovetails like a woven pattern, turning back on itself linguistically like a wave of fractal structures.”

If hypertextual techniques are powerful enough to reincarnate human symbols, why has hyperfiction remained what Travis describes as “exploratory” only?

I preface the following discussion by stressing that it makes no attempt to address the *Wake’s* literary complexity. I consider the work purely to substantiate my argument that the social importance of myth is sustained through its function as a subjective correlative.

Joyce’s last work has a reputation as one of the most difficult and least read of literary masterpieces, requiring, as already noted, an “ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia.” What I have described as its stream of subconsciousness can be seen as a kind of ur-narrative, an articulation of what being human means that had never been attempted before. Joyce is the “god in the manger” who says “Let us pry. We thought, would and did.”

The period when Joyce was writing, between the first and second World Wars, resembled our own in that it saw mass development and application of new technologies: washing machines, typewriters, radio, motor cars, cinema. Then as now, consciousness adapted to life with technology; Joyce himself “foresaw that the written word was doomed to decline in an age of electronic

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539 Joyce, *Finnegan’s Wake*.
541 Ibid.
542 Ibid., 32.
543 Ibid.，“Cybernetic Esthetics, Hypertext and the Future of Literature.”
544 Joyce, *Finnegan’s Wake*, 120.
545 Ibid., 188.
communications. In re-creating the ancient myth of *Ulysses*, he both put into practice the “indwellingness” of story and anticipated the ‘all at oneness’ of the whole concreation which is the *Wake*.

Reading the 628 page maelstrom of words requires determination and a conviction that somewhere “in the waste is the wisdom”. Recalling the meticulous authorial control evident in the diagram of *Ulysses*’ symbolic structure, Joyce’s immersion of self for seventeen years in the subliminal flow of a “higherdimissional selfless Allself” points to the intensity of his belief in his work. For the insomniac reader, immersion is also an apt description of the experience of reading the *Wake*: of arriving at the bottom of a page quite unable to say what that page was about, of spotting an exclamation or question mark in the text ahead with a surge of relief, of clinging to syntax as to a compass, only to find the compass bearings themselves have been skewed: “wordlost over seven seas crowdblast in celtellenetutoslavzendlatinsoundscript.”

Such language communicates with readers as native English speakers, through subjective apprehension rather than rational discourse. In this fundamental way it differs from the deliberate choosing of links through which readers navigate hyperfiction, where textual experience may derive from web design as much as any design ‘indwelling’.

In the *Wake*, language itself assumes some of the function of the subjective correlative. In my initial definition of the term, I referred to the continuous interactivity of memory and imagination through which the narrative metaphors of myth may engage and illuminate our consciousness. The *Wake*’s neologisms and exploratory syntax demand not only such interactivity, but also that readers be aware of it. Joyce repeatedly apostrophizes us: “You is feeling like you was lost in the bush, boy?” “Attemption!” “So sorry you lost him,

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546 Ibid., 581.
547 Ibid.
548 Ibid.
549 Ibid., 114.
551 Ibid., 395.
552 Ibid., 219.
553 Ibid., 112.
554 Ibid., 364.
poor lamb! Of course I know you are a viry vikid girl to go in the dreemplace.”

The sense of being caught up in some more expansive consciousness may be compared with that felt before the looming databases of the infosphere, with the vital difference that this database is a single human mind. Language is not derived from software, rather sourced from mythos in its original Greek sense of utterance. Joyce’s picture of his ideal reader as an insomniac anticipates readings simultaneously archetypal and uniquely subjective; for this reader, the Ulysses is characterized by luminous moments – “where there’s leaf there’s hope”- amazed recognition – “our old friend Ned of so many illortemperateletters”- and moments of sheer elation at its originality – “nobirdy aviar soar anywing to eagle it!”.

Finnegan’s Wake begins and ends with the river, from “riverrun past Eve’s and Adam’s” to the voice of “Alma Luvia” herself, the “languo of flows”. “a way a lone a last a loved a long the” But there is no full stop, therefore no end; in mythopoeic tradition, the story dreams itself on.

The four sections have no chronology other than that imposed by their print codex. As with virtual reality, another time zone is just a link away, but in this case the links are words. “Celtelleneteutoslavzendlatinsoundscript”, for example, might today be described as a formatted text string identifying an information site on Romance and Germanic languages. Thus, an expression of consciousness may also become a link. Language itself is both source and subject of the book; as homo loquens, readers become source and subject as well.

The fall of man, of Finnegan / Finn / Quinnegan / Foyne McHooligan, is the archetypical story of Everyman, born “Finnegan to sin again”. The evolution of names reflects the evolution of language, as in the multiple manifestations of the writer: “Shem the Penman” becomes “Jaunty Jaun…

555 Ibid., 527.
556 Ibid., 227.
557 Ibid., 82.
558 Ibid., 505.
559 Ibid., 619.
560 Ibid., 621.
561 Ibid., 628.
562 Ibid., 580.
563 Ibid., 125.
bigmouthed poesther”, 564 “My Shemblable! My freer!” 565 - whose role is to “tell you all sorts of makeup things, strangerous. And show you to every simple storyplace we pass.” 566

Joyce’s intertextuality networks time and space like the world wide web; recurrent themes like the “himandhermanifestation”, 567 the “POLAR PRINCIPLES” involved in the ‘DISTRIBUTION OF DANGER, DUTY AND DESTINY”, 568 the exploration of “that limbo pool which was his subnsciousness” 569 the dream vision where there is a “future in every past that is present” 570 surface as apparently randomly as Rabelais’ computer prompt about Burke and Wills. The difference is that the prompt is programmed whereas the promptings of language are fluid and unpredictable.

If the Wake has attained mythic status, then the seventeen years of “attemption” which went into its creation surely indicate heroic dedication from Joyce. To adapt T.S.Eliot’s lines from Preludes, he has given us such a vision of the world as the world hardly understands; 571 his voice, like Everyman’s, articulates “thoughts that would be words …livings that have been deeds.” 572 In the sense that it metaphorically represents the inner world of the mind, the whole work is an epic example of the subjective correlative, one to which we relate in a deeply intuitive way; we apprehend rather than comprehend.

In his 1923 essay on Ulysses, Order and Myth, T.S.Eliot derives the importance of the work directly from its mythical method. He sees that method as a means of “giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary life.” 573 To give shape and significance to our lives is essentially why we have always been mythmakers; to renew that mythmaking, Joyce immerses himself in “thinking of all” and sharing its meaning. “How glad you’ll be I waked you!” 574 We are back at the mythopoeic source, consciousness itself. As a celebration of the multifarious life

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564 Ibid., 429.
565 Ibid., 489.
566 Ibid., 625.
567 Ibid., 92.
568 Ibid., 271.
569 Ibid., 224.
570 Ibid., 496.
572 Joyce, Finnegans Wake, 531.
574 Joyce, Finnegans Wake, 625.
which allows death no dominion, *Finnegan’s Wake* reviews and renews consciousness at its non-sequential, allusive and associative source.

James Joyce has long been recognized as a literary genius; I make no conceptual comparison between the Wake and the exploratory works of the three pioneering authors cited in Travis’ article on hyperfiction. However, Joyce’s application of hypertextual techniques without access to the technology of hypertext does affirm the primacy of unmediated imagination. The narratives of Guyer, Moulthorp and, coincidentally, another Joyce, Michael, were created using a software program called “Storyspace”. Readers clicked on key words to navigate to another screen; an obvious parallel might be ‘choose your own adventure’ books.

Travis observes that - “There may – at least in the first few hours of reading - be something unexpectedly pleasurable about making one’s way through the maze of paths … This pleasure, however, does not provide any deep or lasting satisfaction, because what impels a trip through a maze, whether it be a physical space or the textual space of a tortuous detective-story plot is the lure of the (re)solution – which is exactly what the reader is denied in hypertext.” To resolve something, at its most basic, is to make up your mind about it. To take the “trip through a maze” of *Finnegan’s Wake* is to be continually turning imaginative corners as scenarios, like circumstances, continually evolve. We adapt to the changing textual environment as we do to that of real life. The *Wake* takes the subjective back to the fundamental origins of language; in this, it might be described as a linguistic correlative, an epic metaphor constantly renewing the connection between the consciousness of the text and that of the reader.

Earlier, I described the experience of reading Joyce’s work as a mixture of “feeling like you was lost in the bush, boy?” and of epiphanic moments. As with the poetry cited earlier, language itself may become a subjective correlative. I use my own subjective correlation to the three quotations given above as an example.

Firstly, the phrase “where there’s leaf there’s hope” adapts a well known saying, a collective wisdom so embedded in consciousness that it has

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575 Travis, "Cybernetic Esthetics, Hypertext and the Future of Literature."
576 Ibid.
577 Joyce, *Finnegan’s Wake*, 112.
578 Ibid., 227.
become a cliché: where there’s life there’s hope. For me, the phrase immediately evokes Spring and our common consciousness of the turning seasons, of starting over… and over, and over. Secondly, Joyce’s description of “our old friend Ned of so many illortemporateletters”, 579 summons up Ned Kelly, whose myth is central to this work. Like anyone who has ever travelled to the other side of the world and suddenly seen a familiar face, I am amazed. Lastly, the childlike voice of “nobirdy aviar soar anywing to eagle it!” 580 is inspirational both because of its verbal ingenuity and the intensity of the image of flight. Sourcing memory and imagination simultaneously, language itself acts as a subjective correlative. While individual responses will naturally differ, my point is that the moment when the text becomes utterly clear is in each case a purely subjective moment of utter empathy.

While Travis notes that her sample cybernetic texts have their moments of lyrical loveliness, she concludes that hyperfiction -

will not realize its potential unless it provides for the reader both the pleasure of immersion in an imagined world (the achievement of realist fiction) and the pleasure of instrumental action in that world (the goal of virtual-reality technology). 581

I would suggest that imagined worlds are the achievement of all significant fiction, realist or speculative, and that the pleasure of instrumental action may derive from unprogrammed as well as programmed choices.

I have sought in my discussion of Joyce’s use of hypertextual techniques to show that sophisticated electronics yet originate in creative vision, substantiating Geraldine Brook’s insistence that the fiction should “dictate the design.” 582 It is not clear that hyperfiction is doing this as yet. The techniques used in the Wake create meaning through language alone; hypertextual links, threads, and sites construct it through databases. As an “ur-text”, 583 the Wake asserts the primacy of the inner life as the source of significant fiction, extending myth’s evolving portrait of consciousness to “the dreemplace” 584 where in the end the source can only be “ourselves, oursouls alone.” 585 We may not always

579 Ibid., 82.
580 Ibid., 505.
581 Travis, “Cybernetic Esthetics, Hypertext and the Future of Literature.”
582 Brooks, The Idea of Home, 94.
583 Travis, “Cybernetic Esthetics, Hypertext and the Future of Literature.”
584 Joyce, Finnegan's Wake, 527.
585 Ibid., 623.
want to draw on that source, any more than we may want to read *Finnegan’s Wake*. The work may be compared with wilderness: not much travelled, yet vital to existence and our sense of who we are purely because it insists on concept before construct, fiction before design.

Is there a mythic persona who may act as a subjective correlative within *Finnegan’s Wake*? If, as has been argued here, that persona may be defined by his vision and the voice which articulates that vision, then Joyce becomes the hero of his own fiction.

### MYTH AND MEANING

The idea of being the hero of one’s own fiction leads me to Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Weight* and Victor Pelevin’s *Helmet of Horror*, both of which explore this concept. Discussing how writers choose their subjects, Winterson describes their “unconscious connection” with the chosen subject, their recognition of a story “waiting to be written … of course I wrote it directly out of my own situation. There is no other way.”

The semantic structure of the word ‘re – cognition’ itself infers the familiarity of the story.

Pelevin, in his introduction to *The Helmet of Horror*, cites Jorge Luis Borges’ belief that there are only four stories in the world, “the siege of the city, the return home, the quest and the (self -) sacrifice of God.” Mythic versions of these stories spring readily to mind: in Western culture, Troy, Ulysses, The Holy Grail, and Calvary. We need not, of course accept Borges’ limitation. We might argue that other such stories - Revenge, the Trickster, the Lovers – have as many versions: Hamlet, the Joker, Romeo and Juliet. The point here is that such stories validate both the archetypal nature of myth and the evolution of its subjective voice to represent evolving cultural values and perceptions.

Novelist Jeanette Winterson’s view of that progress supports the idea that there is a need for such a mythic voice:

Right now, human beings as a mass, have a gruesome appetite for what they call ‘real’, whether it’s Reality TV or the kind of plodding fiction that only works as low-grade documentary, or at the better end, the

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factual programmes and biographies and ‘true life’ accounts that occupy
the space where imagination used to sit. … Such a phenomenon points
to a terror of the inner life, of the sublime, of the poetic, of the non-
material, of the contemplative. 588

This seems harsh. Possibly “the phenomenon” also indicates a need for
the reassurance of material reality in a world where that reality is constantly
changing and the difference between authentic and simulated is not always
apparent. Helen Demidenko wrote a novel which purported to be
autobiographical; Norma Khouri wrote an autobiography which proved to be
fictitious. Historians may well record ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and
‘children overboard’ as mythical in the sense of false or fabricated, while we
have adopted the suffix ‘gate’ into the language as synonymous with deception,
be it Watergate or ‘Iguanagate’.

In the above quotation, Winterson is introducing Weight, 589 her version of
the Atlas myth. Victor Pelevin sympathizes: “we live with instant myths of soap-
bubble content. They are so unreal you can’t even call them lies. Anything can
become our mythology for fifteen minutes, even Mythbusters programme on the
Discovery channel.” 590 The inference seems to be that myth has gone from
‘ideological abuse’ to ideological depthlessness: in Shakespeare’s words, it has
become a tale “told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” 591
A preoccupation with surface rather than substance can be seen reflected in
language itself; from programmed ‘word wraps’ to conference ‘wrap ups’, we
have become ‘wrapt’ in wrapping. Winterson, however, is determined “to tell the
story again.” 592 To re-imagine, not rewrap.

My argument here is that creative mythmaking reminds us of the
possibilities of being human by providing a subjective correlative, a narrative
metaphor which accompanies and illuminates our consciousness as we evolve.
As Gibson’s and the Wachowski Brothers’ fictions represented early cyber
culture, so Winterson and Pelevin continue the narrative, addressing the
question of “what it means to be human” in a culture where fear of computer

588 Winterson, Weight, Introduction, xv.
589 Ibid.
1963), V, v, 124.
programs has been replaced by familiarity, and where the mission of saving the world from monstrous machines seems hopelessly simplistic.

The *Weight* of Winterson’s title is the weight of the world, supported by Atlas. There is, however, no nostalgia here. The eponymous mythic persona’s relationship with past hero Heracles is not a happy one. Heracles returns a favour – taking the weight of the world while Atlas fetches the apples of the Hesperides – by tricking the Titan: “Better make yourself comfortable, mate. I’m not coming back.”\(^{593}\) The dog Laika, blasted into space by the Russians in 1957, has come to mean more to Atlas than past companions, while his freedom corresponds with that of the author as hero of her own fiction: “let me crawl out from under this world I have made.”\(^{594}\)

Atlas finds that “where the world was close to my ears I could hear everything … each sound became a meaning and soon I began to decode the world.”\(^{595}\) It is as if he is at the centre of the cosmic network, “I find I am become a part of what I must bear.” He realizes that “there is no longer Atlas and the world, there is only the World Atlas…”\(^{596}\) and the revolving search for meaning which drives mythmaking itself as well as the desire to “tell the story again”,\(^{597}\) if only to make the ending different.

Winterson is quite clear about the value of subjectivity: “autobiography is not important. Authenticity is… simply, it is real.”\(^{598}\) On being asked to choose a myth to write about, she realises she already knows what myth it will be: “the story of Atlas holding up the world was in my mind before the telephone call had ended… that story was waiting to be written.”\(^{599}\) And re-written. She is a writer who “believes in the power of story telling for its mythic and not its explanatory qualities… believes that language is much more than information.”\(^{600}\) As myth, language metaphorically reports on our inner life, on what is apprehended rather than comprehended.

The hero of Pelevin’s fiction is not so obvious. Each protagonist in his re-creation of the Theseus myth is at a keyboard in a chat room. What they have in

\(^{593}\) Ibid., 83.
\(^{594}\) Ibid., 146.
\(^{595}\) Ibid., 24.
\(^{596}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{597}\) Ibid., Introduction, xvi.
\(^{598}\) Ibid., xv.
\(^{599}\) Ibid., xiii-xiv.
\(^{600}\) Ibid., xvi.
common is mystification at their common situation – the fiction they find themselves in - and a desire to understand it. Together, they continue their own myth, telling stories about what the labyrinth beyond their personal chat room may be like. What subjective journey will it take them on? The “Helmet of Horror” of the title: is it Theseus’ or the Minotaur’s? Or Asterisk’s? Is Asterisk the Minotaur? How does the helmet actually work? Several pages of dialogue are devoted to the attempts of different characters’ to understand rationally how the helmet works.

“Whichever way you look at it, that means the helmet of horror arises inside one of its own component parts. But it exists inside a different one. Where’s the sense in that?”

Their failure suggests the limitations of logic and the need for what Pelevin calls “another technology … ‘The Seventh Seal’ … marked out using secret signs that attract interest or stimulate the imagination.” The subjective function of myth in re-interpreting and re-presenting consciousness as it evolves is implicit in the narrative metaphor of a helmet which exists only in the mind of the beholder. The fact that the text is composed of ‘chat’ and that all the actual narratives occur within the ‘chat’ creates a curious sense of disembodiment, of voices without any underlying vision. This is reinforced by the differing views of the Helmet of Horror. As with the online hero, perhaps the vision has not appeared yet: “when Asterisk”… (otherwise known as the Minotaur, or else Theseus) … “peers into the future, he sees nothing but the past.”

Perhaps, again, we have a culture in transition, where the past has not yet come to terms with the present. “Some American or other said that the labyrinth is the Internet. That it’s inhabited by some being that hacks into the mind, and that’s the Minotaur. It’s not really a bull-man, it’s a spider-man. He said if there’s a worldwide web, then there must be a soul-sucking spider…”

Against this intimidatory mythmaking, Pelevin suggests that “if a mind is like a computer, perhaps myths are its shell programs: sets of rules that we follow in our world processing, mental matrices we project onto complex events to endow

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602 Ibid., 93.
603 Ibid., 104-05.
604 Ibid., 81.
605 Ibid., 210.
them with meaning." Thus, myths like that of the Minotaur metaphorically shapeshift to represent “the spirit of the time.”

In summary, Weight and The Helmet of Horror imagine what it would be like to be the hero of your own story, to take charge of your own mythmaking, if only for that single “hour of consciousness” in which understanding makes Sisyphus “superior to his fate”. The subjective correlative, like the double edged axe of the Cretan labyrinth, may simultaneously enable empathy with a mythic figure like Atlas or Theseus and renew the empathizing self. The pace of technological change can only outrun mythopoeic vision and voice if we fail to acknowledge and own it.

CONCLUSION

The “such is life” of my title references last words attributed to Ned Kelly; my intention was to highlight the symbiotic relationship between the subjective vision of the mythic persona and the empathetic voice which is a constant of mythopoeic fiction. From Carey’s work to that of Winterson and Pelevin, I have investigated the use of the subjective correlative in mythopoeic fiction, as represented by the mythic persona. This iconic figure personifies the narrative imaginary, becoming as subliminally real to reader as to writer. The broader function of the subjective correlative as a personification of evolving social consciousness is evident in the diversity of the figures discussed: Sisyphus, Kelly, Bloom, Scully, Case, Neo, Atlas or the Minotaur of Pelevin’s labyrinthine narrative. Each one’s vision of the world, as it is and as it might be, is unique; each one’s voice also expresses socially established attitudes and aspirations. Thus myth simultaneously reviews consciousness through rehearsing collective experience, and renews it through subjective adaptation.

The creation of an imaginary world implicitly invites comparison with the real one; the significance of the myth may depend, notably in the case of utopias and dystopias, on how the two compare. Thus, the genetically engineered world of Atwood’s Madaddam is at once preposterous – blue men waving their

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606 Ibid., Introduction, x.
607 Ibid., 210.
penises about – and plausible; botoxing and cosmetic surgery come to mind, not to mention Dolly the sheep and transgenic pigs. In this respect, mythmaking derives not only from our need for a narrative imaginary which adapts as we ourselves adapt, but also from a distinctively human need to prophesy, to try and foretell our futures. While speculative fictions are generally written in past or present tense, enabling the projection of reader consciousness on to that of fictional protagonists, possible futures are a recurrent theme: imaginative forecasts of life as we don’t know it. Don’t know and therefore fear; as a creator of dystopias herself, Margaret Atwood, writing in the *Financial Times*, speculates on what the current popularity of dystopic fiction suggests about views of current society and its aspirations, particularly among the young. Has the “allure of zombiehood”, for example, “no brain, no pain, no mortgage” increased? The foreword to books in Text’s *Myths* series claims that myths “remind us what it is to be human”; is the implication that we have forgotten? In both cases, the subjective impact of myth, for better or worse, is recognized, its social importance deriving not only from evolving consciousness, but also from the conscious choices made in that evolutionary process. In this respect, we, like Sisyphus, need to retain ownership of our narrative in order to sustain our integrity.

Moving to the second half of my title, a key purpose of this work has been to reconnect myth and meaning in view of a prevalent ‘de-meaning’ of myth, a discounting of its “fictional truth.” The phrase ‘media myth’, often denoting narratives where the subjective correlative is manipulated either to instil desire for some product or to persuade people to behave according to some political or ideological prescription, has contributed to this ‘de-meaning’. In our media dominated society, a 24 hour news cycle and the demands of a mass audience facilitate the privileging of superficial over substantial content, of plausibility over peer review. Arguably, the very ‘user friendliness’ of information communications technology (ICT) discourages imaginative acuity through its prioritization of visible image; the one-dimensional screens of a powerpoint presentation, for example, may make a speaker’s concepts

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accessible, but also represent them in a simplistic or cursory manner.

In the digital world, technology manipulates consciousness itself. The 3D butterfly which appears at the end of Alice in Wonderland is intended to convince as reality convinces. However, quite apart from the established reputation of the text as fantasy, viewers are wearing 3D glasses. What does this mean? That audiences cannot imagine nature herself vividly enough, that their sense of wonder requires a little technical assistance? How does visual metaphor translate to and from verbal? The emerging genre of hypertext, with its mix of visual links and text, begs this question, but it remains to be seen how it will answer it. Rather, using technologically engineered experience as a surrogate for the random or the reflective raises further questions about how ICT may affect our capacity to imagine and interpret. James Joyce’s use of techniques in Finnegan’s Wake which anticipate hypertext is a reminder that any technique is an application of intellect and originates in a making – making up? – of hypothetical connections. The experience of reading the Wake has been one of the most illuminating of this study. To adapt Meursault’s conclusion, the work provides enough memories to occupy the mind a lifetime. In particular, the gestation of ideas through language, the etymological evolution of mythic content, fascinates. Joyce’s work positions our symbolizing inner life as the original source of mythopoeic fiction, of empathic creativity as man’s “sole chance of keeping his consciousness and of fixing its adventures.”

The inseparability of individual and social consciousness suggests a need to rethink the meaning of myth, specifically as a means of connecting popular and literary narrative. Many more are likely to be familiar with the fundamental character of a Big Brother or a Lolita, for example, than to have read the original texts; increasingly, many more are likely to have seen the film than have read the book. From a positive point of view, this means that access to culture is being increased; negatively, it is a concern that exploitative use of myth’s powerfully subjective metaphors for commercial or entertainment purposes may ‘de-mean’ creative language and hence the quality of any narrative imaginary.

Communications technology has changed the way we tell stories; what does this mean for mythopoeic fiction? Recognition of Griffith Review editor Julianne Schultz’s concern about the separation of “storytelling” from “sense-

Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 87
making”\textsuperscript{614} and how to comprehend our “cacophonous echo chamber”\textsuperscript{615} must surely reflect a significant cultural challenge. I contend that the ‘subjective correlative’ offers one means of comprehending because it identifies a fusion of mythopoeic vision and creative voice which makes society meaningful to the individual… and vice versa.

Real life heroes are few and far between, so we make them up: Bloom, Scully, Neo, Case, Atlas or the Minotaur. They inhabit that world of collective consciousness which I have called the mythosphere, where they provide a virtuality which we only need our individual minds to access. Writers of fiction may add to it by the re-creation of an historical hero, or by the creation of an entirely new one, a subjective correlative envisaged and voiced entirely on their own imaginative terms.

The extent to which those terms speak to us in our “whole concreation”\textsuperscript{616} becomes a measure of their fictional truthfulness; it also derives the significance of creative writing, ultimately and intimately, from our mythopoeic and “unconscious text.”\textsuperscript{617}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{615} Ibid., 8.
\item\textsuperscript{616} Joyce, \textit{Finnegan's Wake}, 581.
\item\textsuperscript{617} Ibid., Introduction, x.
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In the critical part of this work, I investigate the subjectivity of myth, specifically the mythopoeic function of the subjective correlative, represented by heroic figures like Ned Kelly or Sisyphus. The emphasis of the novel is on personal rather than public mythmaking; it explores the mythopoeic consciousness of Ellen Kelly, mother of Ned. Through her memories, dreams and dialogue, I explore the subjective process of mythmaking and how the story may take on a life of its own; through Ellen’s conversations with journalist Brian Cookson, I explore how media may renegotiate that story. Finally, it was an opportunity to review the Kelly myth from the perspective of a remarkable woman and speculate on how she might have changed the story.
Living like a Kelly

A Novel
CHAPTER ONE

‘Twas down by the glenside, I met an old woman,
A plucking young nettles, nor thought I was coming;
I listened awhile to the song she was humming,
‘Glory O, glory O, to the bold Fenian Men!’

You would not read about it. Of all the people you could meet…

Brian Cookson shakes his head; drips fly off his hat. He squints up at the rain sodden sky and tugs his hat down more firmly. They’ll probably be soaked again by the time they get back. But worth it, worth it after all. He glances sideways. Jack’s raw looking hands are wrapped tight around the reins, his tuneless whistle bounces with every pothole the buggy lurches into, but he looks smug. Brian grins; just proves what he told him when they set out: no journalist worth his salt lets a drop of rain put him off. Load of guff, said Jack; and a string of worse words when they took a wrong turn, the heavens opened and the rain came sheeting down. Not saying ‘guff’ now, though. Brian closes his eyes and thinks back. That room, that doorway. That old woman. So suddenly there, so small and so still, only the dart and glitter of eyes …

Rain, rain, rain. Hats tugged down, collars turned up, hunched beside each other in the buggy, the cottage with the smoke drifting up from the chimney looms on the hillside like something from a fairy tale …

“Bugger this for a joke, mate. Let’s see if you’re right about bush hospitality at least.”

Jack yanks on the reins. Ears flattened against the wind, the horse turns and trudges up a short path to a slip rail. Jack jumps out, tethers it, and splashes ahead, up onto the verandah. He rat-tat-tats impatiently on the door. Brian joins him. Shivering, the two of them wait for the door to open.

It opens and a dark eyed girl in a pinafore eyes them solemnly. They can see two smaller girls peeping out from behind. Jack tips his hat, is suddenly all smiles.

“Hello, little miss: little misses! How are we this wet and windy day? Would your mother be at home? Could you call her for us please? Do you think we two drowned rats could possibly impose upon her hospitality for a little while? Just
until this rain eases?”

“Gran? Gran, there’s two men want to come in, on account of the rain!”

Over Dark Eyes’ shoulder, the room is sparsely furnished but cozy looking, with logs blazing in the fireplace. A smell of baking comes from what must be the door to the kitchen: the door the children are watching.

Suddenly the old woman in black is there, small and straight backed, hands clasped at her waist. Dark Eyes pulls the door wide and beckons. The two men step forward, hats in hands. The old woman neither speaks nor moves.

A nudge from Jack: hastily, Brian bows and smiles.

“I must apologize for this invasion, Ma’am. I can only ask you to look outside…” he gestures towards a streaming window… “My name is Brian Cookson. This is my colleague, Jack Smart.”

Jack smiles and sweeps his hat low. The old woman inclines her head but remains silent. Brian turns his hat in his hands.

“We’re on our way to Glenrowan, Ma’am, but this downpour... torrential, nothing short of torrential. Though it is starting to look brighter up ahead.” He gestures towards the window. “Yes, with any luck, it’s clearing. Would it inconvenience you terribly if we sat out the last of it here? A few minutes by your fire, that’s all we ask. You just carry on with your work, we won’t bother you. All we want is to warm up a bit and then we’ll be on our way. We’re reporters, Ma’am. Journalists. The ‘Sun’ newspaper: perhaps you know it?”

A frown flickers across her face. “Shut the door, Katie. Well, well, sit yourselves down there, where it’s warm. You’re a bit out of your way, are you not?” Her voice is unexpectedly strong: Scots? Irish?

“Thank you, Ma’am, thank you. You’re not wrong; we are a long way from Sydney, that’s for sure. But then, we have to go where the stories take us, and it just so happens that the story we’re working on right now takes us to North East Victoria.”

Jack is perched on the nearer of the two armchairs, leaning forward and flexing his fingers before the fire. “That’s better! Holding the reins, you see; hands are frozen stiff! Yep, follow that story. Rain, hail or shine, the Sun puts people in the picture! Don’t mind admitting, though, rain like this fairly takes the shine off… but never mind, never mind. Here we are, undeterred, undiscouraged. Hot… or warmer now anyhow… on the trail. Takes more than a
bit of weather to stop us newshounds, ma’am! Arrived last night, you see, staying at Glenrowan. Decided to go for a drive, do a bit of reconnoitring: lay of the land, local colour, that sort of thing. Not that there’s much colour out there now, is there? Nothing but grey, grey, grey. Should have listened to the old blokes at the stables. They said there was a storm brewing.”

The little girls stand side by side, owl eyed. The old woman steps forward, her interlaced fingers opening and closing. Brian opens his mouth, but Jack beats him to it.

“Glenrowan. Scene of the crime. You locals have had a gutful of it, I’m sure, outlaws running wild, bloody shootouts, Kelly’s Last Stand. But not the last word, not the last word.” Jack taps the side of his nose significantly. “We have received a tip off; exclusive information, Ma’am. A letter telling us that two of them got away! That’s right, two of them escaped the bonfire at Glenrowan and were last seen alive and well in South Africa! What about that, eh? Steve Hart and Dan Kelly …”

“What? Dan not dead? No! No, it’s a lie! It’s a lie!”

The pale shard of a face splinters; Brian dives across the room to steady her. His hands close round bird bone wrists and for a second he feels the throb of her pulse. Then she pulls away, draws herself up. Anxiously, he pulls out a chair, guides her towards it. For Chrissake don’t go having a heart attack …

“Water. Get your Gran some water, child!”

Dark eyes is gone and back in seconds, holding out the cup, wrapping the bony, age spotted hands gently around it. The old woman lifts the water to her lips. She drinks slowly, breathing deeply, her eyes closed. She pats the small, anxious hand.

“Yes, yes, child. I’m all right. Thank you. I’m all right.”

Her eyes snap open, fierce and dark, locking into Brian’s.

“It’s a lie. Dan is not alive. Dan is dead. Do I not know he’s dead? Do I not know better than anyone? Have I not proof of it all these long wearisome years? He’s dead and gone, dead and gone.”

She shivers. Brian snatches a woolen shawl from the back of an armchair, shakes it out. She sips her water and waves him away. He re-folds the shawl and lays it carefully back over the armchair before turning back towards her.
“In the name of goodness, Ma’am, how? How could you possibly know that? Proof? What proof could you possibly have?”

“The best proof in the world: nobody could have better. I am his mother.”

Brian gapes at the small, straight backed figure. Behind him, he knows Jack has sat bolt upright.

“Yes. I am his mother. Dan is my son, and Ned is my son and Jim is my son. Jim is the only one left. This is his house. If Dan was alive, he would be here.”

You would not read about it. Brian stares at the puddle filled, potholed road ahead. Jack flicks the whip over the horse’s back, shakes his head and laughs.

“Pretty bloody amazing, eh? What an unbelievable stroke of luck!”

Luck? The cording throat, the raw scrape of her voice… “What do you mean, luck?”

“Geez, Brian! Ned Kelly’s mother, of course. It’s a scoop and it’s ours, all ours! I can see it now, the inside story …”

“Hold on, hold on. I wouldn’t be too sure about that. To the best of my knowledge, she was ‘inside’ herself most of the time her boys were on the rampage. Inside Melbourne Gaol.”

“What for? Burning bread?”

“Jack, Jack, don’t be an idiot. You know the story, your Dad must have told you thousands of times. The Fitzpatrick business. Constable Fitzpatrick, the policeman who came to her house looking to arrest Dan Kelly. Except there was a brawl and she ended up being arrested instead. And that was the start of the Kelly gang.”

“Yes, yes, I remember. Walloped him over the head with a shovel, didn’t she?” Jack shakes his head incredulously. “Hard to credit. All the size of her. Though I suppose she was a lot younger then.”

Brian points at the road. Jack navigates a pothole, resumes his tuneless whistling. Brian is on the verge of telling him to stop when he actually does, clicking his tongue at the horse and frowning. “Did they ever measure Kelly’s head?”

“Measure his head? What on earth would they do that for?”

“Phrenology: you know, the science. Latest thing. They measure criminal brains to find out if part of the brain’s underdeveloped… or overdeveloped. Not
“For God’s sake, Jack, that’s not science!”

Jack flicks his whip defiantly. “Who says? I’ve seen articles, diagrams. Scientists study nature, don’t they? So if somebody does something that seems unnatural, say, like a serial murderer, shouldn’t you be looking for some natural explanation? Isn’t that what science is? They take samples and measure them. Then they compare them with normal brains. See if they can find what’s different. Think how useful it would be if there was some way the police could recognize them. Jack the Ripper, say, think of the women’s lives that could have been saved if he’d been caught before instead of after. You could cut the crime rate in half.”

“Yes, and fill our jails with men who’ve got squints and eyebrows that meet in the middle.”

“Ha ha! You can scoff. I reckon it stands to reason there’s some explanation. Not for crimes of passion, not them, they’re natural: heat of the moment, all that. It’s the unnatural stuff, that’s what they’re trying to figure out. Premeditated stuff. Lack of feeling, cold blooded cruelty. Like firing shots round an old man’s feet so he dances a jig before you shoot him dead.”

“Who did that?”

“The Kellys. I saw it in this show when I was a kid. The Olympia theatre they called it; came round every summer. Me and my mates couldn’t afford the 2/6d., but we hung around till after they’d started and snuck in under the back curtain and hid. ‘The Story of the Kelly Gang’, that was it. Old man’s name was Wilks or Wicks or some such. It said ‘by biograph’, so he was a real person.”

“You mean you actually believed it?”

“No, no, not all of it, of course not. But there’s no smoke without fire, is there? When I told my Dad, he said, that’d be right. You know the way he went on about the Kellys. Low life, bog Irish scum, all that stuff.”

“Watch out!”

Another pothole; Jack swears. A grumble of thunder; the wind is getting up again.

“Can you not get that nag to move a bit faster?”

“What?”

Brian shouts; Jack’s whip snakes out and the horse breaks into a shambling
trot. Brian pulls his hat down again. At least the boy can’t whistle now.

Jack’s Dad: his mate Len. Yes, he knew what Len thought of the Kellys; everybody did. From his very first day at the ‘Sun’, when Len was assigned to him for that Surry Hills murder story. Hit it off, went to the pub afterwards. Brian was talking about Yorkshire, his family’s trip out: 1880, he said, year they hanged Ned Kelly. Well, that was it. Len thumped his fist on the bar; that bloody mongrel? Hanging was too good …

It turned out Len Smart grew up in Mansfield, right next door to Mrs. Kennedy, who was the widow of the police sergeant they killed. Len’s best mate was her son; he was called Michael after his father. Their house was like a museum, Len said, all Kennedy’s things set out in the front room, uniform, badges, even the watch stolen from his dead body, mysteriously returned. What sort of low life would do that? And Michael had shown him his mother’s scrapbook, page after page of newspaper clippings about the Stringybark Creek murders and the trial, right up to the one about the execution. November 11, 1880. The body of the last Victorian bushranger was laid to rot in unconsecrated ground. His mother said that meant Ned Kelly would burn in Hell for ever, that she was glad of it and so should he be. Bitter? Well of course she was bitter, could you blame her?

No was the answer, of course. But the police had a bit to answer for too, said Brian: always two sides to a story. He said it out of contrariness as much as anything else; he got jack of the way Len always laid down the law, was always so damn sure he was right. Came from being a born again Christian. He was never done trying to get Brian to seek salvation, especially after Laura died and he was living, if you could call it that, on his own. Drinking too much and eating too little. But then the Sun got a new stenographer: Lucy. It turned out she sang in a church choir too. Len approved.

But it was more than contrariness. There were two sides, and Brian knew them better than most. In 1880, in that first miserable year in Australia, the Kelly Outbreak was headlines wherever you looked. Likely movements, latest outrages, police pursuits, wanted notices: you couldn’t miss it. For a scrawny ten-year-old new chum, teased at school for his broad Yorkshire accent, pushed in at the municipal baths on account of his freckles and peeling skin, to hide in
his room with a newspaper and read the latest on the Kellys was the best escape ever from heat and flies and bigger, brawnier boys. It was even a tenuous link with home. Because weren’t bushrangers outlaws? Like Robin Hood? No, thundered his Australian schoolteacher, they were nothing like Robin Hood. Didn’t matter that they’d both been outlawed, this was completely different, completely different. No Merry Men these, these were Bloodthirsty Villains. These were inhuman Monsters. A Criminal Brood which was a threat to Law and Order, to Civilization, to the very Future of the Colony. Bog-Irish brutes, convict riff raff with respect for neither man nor beast, Queen nor Country.

But outlaws just the same. Brian still didn’t see why he’d been docked marks. Reading about the Kellys became his personal rebellion. Quite apart from simply being fun: it was a serial better than any boys’ own adventure, better than 2000 Miles under the Sea or King Solomon’s Mines. And it was happening right there and right then, under the hard blue helmet of sky. The brawl with Fitzpatrick, the jailing of the mother, the outlawing of the gang: all four, Ned, Dan, Joe, Steve, thumbing their noses at the police, robbing banks at Jerilderie and Euroa, galloping off into the hills: it was great. Ripper. That was his new word. Ripper.

He started to collect newspaper cartoons of bushed policemen and grinning outlaws who looked very merry. But he threw them away after he read about Stringybark Creek. Three policemen shot down in cold blood; he shivered at the gruesome details of the deadly ambush and rifles fired at pointblank range, of mutilated ears and scavenged corpses. Stringybark changed everything. The Kellys were inhuman monsters, they were wanted dead or alive. Preferably dead. Then came the showdown at Glenrowan: the train that was late, the hotel that was torched, the armored giant felled. Brought to trial.

Last of all, November 11, 1880: the execution of Ned Kelly.

So long ago now. Memories shifting, all a-shimmer in the glare of that long ago summer. Tree bark peeling like skin from bare eucalypt limbs whose whiteness dazzled against the relentless blue, the glint of mica and raw, ant-itched sand: the veins bulging on his father’s reddened forearms, his sweaty-faced mother basting a turkey, all the images crowding together into one visceral moment of realization: from now on, this was Christmas.
The haze came suddenly into focus: three figures walking back from that Christmas lunch at Doctor Barker’s. His mother dabbing at her face with her handkerchief, scolding about this godforsaken place she’d been brought to: nothing but heat and flies and dangerous criminals on the loose. His father stumping along with his head down, hands in pockets. Himself weaving between them. Finally, his father clapping an exasperated hand on his mother’s shoulder, spinning her to face him, shouting into her face: ‘For God’s sake, Kelly’s dead, woman dear, dead! Dead and gone! This time next year he’ll be forgotten.’

But he wasn’t; why wasn’t he?

_We look before and after and pine for what is not_ ...where did that come from? Some poem: Shelley. Yes, Shelley. Looking before and after: she must do a lot of that. The notorious Mrs. Kelly, wasn’t that what they called her? Ellen Kelly, mother of Ned. And Dan. What better proof could you want?

What on earth age would she be? She was in jail when they hanged Ned. They let her out the year after, so 1881. This is 1910. That’s nearly thirty years, and she wasn’t young then. She had to be, what? Close to eighty. Yes.

So little of her: like a cicada shell, one gust of wind and she’d be gone, like what’s his name, what was that story? Brian shuts his eyes again, conjures up the set of maroon encyclopedias on his bedroom shelves. _Pictorial Knowledge. Volume 5._ That was the one. _Myths and Legends: Tithonus._ Yes. _Whom Eos the dawn goddess loved so much that she begged Zeus to give him eternal life. But she forgot to ask for eternal youth as well, so Tithonus grew older and older till all that was left of him was no bigger than a grasshopper...or a cicada...

A lurch of the buggy jerks him back to the here, the now: the rain, the road. And the scoop. This is Ned’s Kelly’s mother. This is the mother of Australia’s most notorious outlaw. Living memory, not just some old myth out of an encyclopedia. He digs his hands deeper into his pockets and smiles.

The wind is gusting strongly, the rain falling fast and hard. Glenrowan is still half a mile away. Jack is whistling again. Brian tugs at his hat and hopes it won’t be like this tomorrow.

A cicada shell: brittle. Used up. No time to waste. Tomorrow’s visit, now, tomorrow’s visit. Buy some licorice, toffee, some treat to keep the little ones
quiet. Show her he means well. Sit down, cup of tea, get talking. Get her talking. A mother’s story: there’s his title. Universal appeal. Of course she’d know if her son was dead; know it in her very bones, even in jail. Like Laura did, that morning, staring up at the ceiling and no sound from the cot …

The family would have visited, they’d have talked; and after she got out, they must have gone over it and over it… over what? What he said, what she said, what the police said, who knows? But he can find out. After all this time, can’t do anybody any harm now … Jack’s right, it’s the inside story. It’s his scoop.

It’s also his big relief. He’s had no idea what to write about South Africa. As far as he’s concerned, the Kelly story, like Ned himself, has been done to death. He couldn’t believe it when Sam Hudson called him in to the Sun’s head office and handed him the scraps of so-called evidence; he believed it even less when he read them. Was Sam serious? Dan Kelly and Steve Hart were burned to a crisp; there wasn’t a skerrick of evidence to suggest otherwise.

But Sam insisted. If they didn’t run with it, he said, his source would go elsewhere. Even if there was nothing to it, Brian could always tart it up a bit, couldn’t he? Touch of the gruesome, let fall a few unanswered questions, the ones that got away, that sort of thing. There’d been nothing about the Kellys for a while, Sam said, and there was damn all else happening. Charred beyond recognition, see? What if it wasn’t them after all? What if by some fluke they did get away? Out of the fiery furnace, stowed away on a ship to Cape Town? Didn’t they have bush over there too? Stranger things had happened. Like what, wondered Brian, but said nothing.

He took himself off to the State Library, checked through all the old newspapers and court records. Strange, how vividly it revived those almost forgotten first weeks and months; he could almost hear the drone of mosquitoes, feel the itch of his own sunburned skin. But there was nothing about the robberies at Euroa and Jerilderie, nothing about Glenrowan and the trial that he didn’t know already. There was certainly nothing whatsoever to suggest that anyone had escaped the inferno at Glenrowan Inn.

Only one article made him think twice: somebody called Middleton, a reporter who had actually witnessed the execution. There was for a second or two only the usual shudder, he wrote. What was the usual shudder, wondered Brian. Then - the legs were drawn up for some distance and fell suddenly again.
This had happened not just once, not just twice - *several times*. Brian sat back and stared out through the window at the grey sky. Could you catch that precise instant when spirit and body divided? That split second when consciousness simply stopped? Was not? He thought of Laura: no cancellation there, more a slow erasure… An execution was different, of course. Apart from anything else, there was the hood. But still, there might be… one instant…

*At the end of four minutes all was over.* He pushed the article away like something indecent.

Nothing to do with him and this job he was being paid for. He did the right thing, of course. He told Sam that in his opinion there was nothing to the story; it was a waste of time and money. Sam said thank you, he’d decide that; no smoke without a fire. Pick a photographer, Brian, and go seek. So, what the hell; week or so on the road. Do him good to get away for a bit.

But who to take? Who could he put up with instead of Len? Hard to believe it was two whole years since Len died. Cerebral hemorrhage. The shock: couldn’t believe it. Though from a personal point of view, he suppose, it was an instant out. Good way to go, from that point of view. But you couldn’t say that in a funeral speech. Lucy was pregnant with Sydney, he worried about telling her. Little knowing...

He didn’t like Len’s replacement. Second rate, lazy. Where Len was first rate. Talented. So even though he was only a junior, he picked Jack. Say what you liked about Sam, he looked after his staff, and their families. When Len died, he took Jack on. Brian knew Len had been trying to teach him; keeping him on the straight and narrow, he called it. Bit wild. But now, in the office, he seemed to be genuinely doing his best. This would be good experience. Jack jumped at the invitation.

They’d checked into the hotel the previous day, before the rain. Pleasant little place, Glenrowan. They took a stroll down to the station, where the station master was voluble.

“Yes, yes, that’s where the last stand was, old Mrs. Jones’ inn. She’s still alive, you know, but bed rid, poor soul. Been like it for years. Never got over losing the children, you know, first the boy shot and then his sister: too much for any mother.”
Brian turned away abruptly. He pointed up the hill: was that the famous log?

“Yes, that’s the log where Ned Kelly fell. And this is where they brought him after, here in the waiting room. Doctor took a look, and then they bundled him off to Melbourne. Never been such a crowd on this platform, not before and not since.” The station master shook his head regretfully.

Jack paced about restlessly. Rumors, he wanted to know, any rumors of any of them escaping? The stationmaster shook his head emphatically.

“What, from that fire? No way. No way in the world. You ask Father Gibney. He was the priest that went in after the bodies. Nobody else would’ve done it; like the flames of Hell itself they was.” The station master crossed himself reverently. Where could they find Father Gibney? As far as he knew, Father Gibney was living in Perth now. And yes, he was the one who had identified the bodies. For the records: the dead bodies of Dan Kelly and Steve Hart.

“Perth’s a bit beyond our patch, isn’t it Jack? Thanks all the same.”

Jack grinned as they sauntered back to the hotel.

“Wouldn’t mind a trip to Perth. All expenses paid, of course. Hey, joke! Joke! But anyhow, we might be better off without too many actual eye witnesses. You know, give us a bit of poetic licence. What would Sam say? Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.”

It could work the other way too, Brian thought. When a good story could get in the way of what you didn’t want to think about, let it. Let it. Wild goose chase or no wild goose chase, this was better than sitting at home staring at an empty high chair; better than Lucy handing him his dinner without a word.

Stop it. Don’t think about that, think about this. Whole point, isn’t it? Take your mind off it, like Sam said. He’d be delighted: told you you’d come up with something, didn’t I, mate?

Ned Kelly’s mother, tucked away here all those years, who would have thought it? In fact, come to think of it, why had nobody? Maybe they had, maybe they were on their way that very moment. He doubted it, though. The place was so off the beaten track, the children so clearly unused to visitors. They had simply forgotten about her, that was all. Not to mention the brother.

Jim Kelly. He was the one that really got away. More by fluke than anything else, if you could call being in jail a fluke. Living at her Majesty’s expense pretty much the whole time the Kelly gang was on the rampage. And so
he lived to tell the tale. Tales. Another inside story. Exclusives, hitherto unpublished accounts. Forget about South Africa; find out when Jim was due back.

Tucked away on their own, an old woman and her son, minding their own business: no accident, that’s for sure. No gossipy neighbors, no nosey visitors, no reporters. Family, just friends and family. For the last thirty years. Thirty years here at Greta: maybe a day trip to Wangaratta or Benalla… they’d made a film about Ned a couple of years ago. An actual film: a first for Australia. But would she even know about it? The songs, the shows like Jack remembered; funny, the way people just never seemed to forget.

That whistling. Brian glances at Jack, then up the road ahead. The outskirts of Glenrowan; put up with it. He’s not a bad kid. ‘The young bloke’, Len used to call him, with a sigh and a shake of his head. He could see why now. Still, at least it was nothing to do with the boy’s ability. Aptitude is not the issue; Jack’s apt for everything, sight too apt for his own good. But so far so good, really. He takes after his father as far as looking after his gear goes. Len would have taught him well. Poor old Len. Just the way Jack cleans a lens or puts on the covers, it’s Len all over again, same squint, same deft hands ... Brian sighs.

The whistling stops as Jack works the reins to avoid another pothole. Thump. Splash. Whistle on. Nearly there, nearly there. Book the buggy for tomorrow. Change of clothes, get warm and dry. Sort the rest over dinner.

Catch her in the morning, when she’s fresh. Not that she’s slow, there certainly wasn’t anything slow about the way she let them know when she thought they’d been there long enough...

A log drops in the fireplace. Brian leans forward, about to reach for the poker, but she waves him back. She grips the arms of her chair and pushes herself to her feet. She bends for the poker herself and jabs it into the flames: sparks snap, flare, vanish up the chimney. Poker carefully replaced, she draws herself to her full height and nods towards the window.

“Rain’s eased off. You’d best be on your way. You might just make it to Glenrowan before it sets in again.” She folds her hands at her waist, glances quizzically from man to man.

Brian looks out: sure enough, only a dour drizzle. Dismissed. No excuse to
linger. But she hasn’t told him anything yet …

Beside the door, Jack is pulling on his coat. Brian pulls on his own with deliberate slowness. She sniffs, her eyes following him like she knows he’s stalling. He turns to face her and holds out his hand. Sharp intake of breath, fractional hesitation before she responds with her own. The brittle bones perch in his clumsy paw; she looks up at him like some fierce, bright eyed fledgling fallen from its nest.

“Mrs. Kelly. Thank you …”

“Yes, thank you so much, Mrs. Kelly …” Jack bows, then claps his hands.

“Brian, I’ve just had a thought. Why don’t I take a photograph of the girls here? Mrs. Kelly? In appreciation of your hospitality. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? We’d send it to you, courtesy of the ‘Sun’, wouldn’t we Brian?”

“Yes, of course we would. Well said, Jack… but not now, surely, not in this weather. Are you home tomorrow morning, Mrs. Kelly? We’ll be out this direction anyway …”

“Oh will you now …”

“We will. And it would be a pleasure. The least we can do after your hospitality.” Should he ask for an interview now, or leave it … leave it. Don’t rush her.

“It’s our job, Ma’am. Isn’t it Brian? What do you think, girls? How would you like your pictures taken?” Jack smiles. “Wouldn’t that be something to show Mum and Dad? Complimentary, of course. Courtesy of the ‘Sun’ …”

“Can we, Gran? Can we?”

A faint lift of the brows. An inclination of the head.

“Well, I suppose if you’re out this direction anyway…”

Done. Done.

Outside, the bare paddocks, the huddled sheds and cringing trees of North East Victoria. A sheet of galvanized iron clangs, but the head hung horse between the shafts of the buggy is indifferent. It stamps and braces against their sudden weight. Brian claps Jack on the back.

The horse pricks its ears; the stables are just up ahead. The rain has settled to a dull drizzle; Brian shivers. Straight up to his room, change of clothes, jot down a few notes. Contrast, start with the contrast. Pretty young girl, just becoming
aware of herself; then this time forgotten creature, this wraith with the glittering
eyes, the skull bones pressing at frayed, stretched skin … no. Not that. Start with
the pale smudge of face at the window, behind the wet glass, the eyes dark wells:
watchful eyes, long distance eyes …

Standing by the window, Ellen watches the buggy shrink till it disappears round
a bend and there is only rain on an empty road.

Always, the rain. The tattoo of it on the roof is one of the first things she can
remember, rain drumming on the roof of her Da’s smithy as he hammered at his
anvil: the smell of sweat and scorched hoof, the hiss of metal thrust in water, the
warm fug of big, heavy breathing horses. Irish rain: the drenchingness of it, like
a song you couldn’t get out of your head.

Misty, far away things now: the smell of bread baking, the pale curve of her
cheek reflected in Ma’s copper, the purple of her fingers after picking
blackberries: they were all in her head somewhere. Somewhere deep and lost,
some place where long straight hedges stitched green fields together and yellow
gorse sang on the hillsides: where her Da reached down to swing her up behind
him on Grey Fella and take her to the Lammas fair with him and Patrick: where
she spun round and around on the merry go round and picked the winner in the
pony races and held a buttercup under Patrick’s chin to see if he liked butter.
Once upon a world …

She shivers, crosses to her seat by the fire. Her basket is there; Jim’s trousers,
her quilt, his socks that need darning. Mending, mending and minding. If the
world was just a sock, now... then you could unstitch it, unravel it right back to
before any of what happened was even thought of, right back to when you still
dreamed about rainbows and pots of gold. But the world’s no sock, and no
amount of minding, no amount of thinking what if you hadn’t said this, what if
you had said that, what if you’d bitten your tongue instead of letting fly… was
ever going to mend it. She knows that perfectly well. Still: every so often just
the thought of how little it would have taken for it all to be different…a word, a
look… stings like the wound’s still raw.

Pointless. Wishful thinking, that’s all. Changes nothing; doesn’t stop you
though, wishing and thinking. It’s all you’ve left, even if it does make the
waking up to yourself harder. The world is round, everybody knows that. People
sail round and round it; there are no edges to fall off. Only they did.

In the firelight, Ellen’s face softens; a song lilts faintly through her head: *Glory oh, glory oh, to the bold Fenian men...* that last Sunday. The day her Da took them all to the Giant’s Causeway.

“I’m going to give you something to remember, now; a picture of old Ireland to take with you across the sea…”

It was what her Ma used to call a pet day, warm and sunny, the hedges and hillsides gleaming like memory itself.

“Tell us a story, Ma, go on.”

There had always been stories, as long as she could remember, same as there’d always been her Ma to tell them. Stories about fierce battles and fiercer heroes, the brave and the beautiful, enchantment and exile: Ma would always let her choose who she wanted to be. She’d close her eyes and become… Finn McCool. Or Queen Maeve. Or Niamh of the Golden Hair, except hers was dark. Still, for as long as it lasted, she was the story. As the horse in the shafts jogged steadily towards Shane’s Pass, she was a bandit, one of the O’Haughan brothers thundering along on his flash horse with his long black cloaks spread out like bats’ wings behind him. Nobody in their right mind drove through Shane’s pass after dark.

When they reached the Causeway, she turned into Finn McCool himself, brave Finn with his sworn enemy, the giant Benandonner, who’d set himself up just over the water in Scotland. So what did Finn do but set himself to building a bridge, to laying out the stones for a causeway, so he could cross the Irish Sea and get at the ignorant big lump …

For the umpteenth time, Ellen wished she had been a boy. It wasn’t fair; they could ride and swear and win races and seek their fortune, like Patrick was going to do. When she said so, though, her big brother tousled her hair and chucked her under the chin and told her that she would change her mind one day. Over her head, he and her Da smirked at each other like they knew something she didn’t. She stamped her foot at them and raced off down the path to the shore, leaving them all far behind. She stopped at the Giant’s Boot. Scrambling up, she curved herself into the curve of the rock, and waited. How slow they all were, how dull; she looked out to sea. The waves were flinging themselves against the rocks, rearing up and charging in, rampaging away and away and away as far as
the misty coast of Scotland. A quick look back: still just putting one foot in front of the other, same as they did every other day. She leapt up and raced on to the very edge, where the octagonal rocks stepped up to a giant standing stone. She skipped over them till she was standing on the tallest pile of rocks, arms thrust skyward: *I’m the queen of the castle...* Above her, the standing stone towered like Finn McCool himself, glaring out to sea and wondering how on earth he was ever going to get this bloody causeway finished …

“Come back down here this minute!”

Ma.

“This minute, I said!”

Mutinously, she stood still while the ribbons of her bonnet were re-tied. Then her Da held out his arms and she ran into them and he hoisted her up on his shoulders so she could see further across the water than any of them. He started going over the reasons why they were leaving all over again, even though there was no need. She knew them by heart.

They were Catholic. No Catholic was ever going to get anywhere in the North of Ireland. He was not going to have his Patrick, nor any other child of his, branded ‘taig’ or ‘papish’ for the rest of their days. James Quinn would not sit on his backside and let that happen, no way known. Improve their position, that was what they were going to do. Go to a new world: somewhere you could buy land, build a house, sow your own crops, and raise your own stock: where you’d to bow and scrape to no man. He jumped her down off his shoulders, lifted her by the waist and spun her round him till she was dizzy. Her Ma flapped her hands and squawked about her legs showing, but her Da just let out a great laugh.

“Who’s to see, woman dear? Who’s to see, for God’s sake? Three more days, and we’ll be on board the ‘England’, sailing away to the other side of the world. Three more days and then we’ll see, won’t we? See a whole different world!”

They went back past the Wishing Well where an ancient old woman sat huddled in her shawl. She was selling whiskey.

“Is she a witch, Da, is she a witch?”

“Not at all, just a poor oul’ soul trying to earn a penny or two.”

He bought whiskey for himself and Ma and for Patrick too. The rest of them were supposed to make do with water from the well, but she wheedled Patrick into giving her a taste when Ma’s back was turned. Her eyes watered at the hard
fast burn of it. But then they had to close their eyes and cross their fingers all at
the same time.

Their Da counted: “One. Two. Three. Now, make your wish! Make your
wish!”

When Ellen looked again, the old woman was looking straight back, her old
eyes two glinty eggs in a nest of wrinkles, her smile wide and lipless. She knows,
Ellen thought. She knows my wish is different. So when the others told her Da
what they had wished for, she would not tell. Not even when he promised her a
pony of her own as soon as they got settled in Australia. Because she knew if
she did, it wouldn’t come true.

More than ever, now, a lifetime away, her own face a nest of wrinkles, she
needed it to come true. Not for herself any more, though. For the only one she
ever did tell.

Thank God her Da never lived to see what happened. For him, Ned would
always be the pick of the bunch, the only one in the same league as his own
Patrick. Ellen winced. Pat was 25 when he died. So was Ned.

Her best brother: drowned at some bend in the Murray River near some place
with an ugly name: Echuca. There one day, handsome, laughing, teasing: gone
the next. A mud streaked, waterlogged carcass.

Years later, watching Ned show off on some new colt, with the shine of his
green silk sash across his chest, the sash he got for saving young Dick Shelton
from drowning in Avenel creek, her Da put his hand on her shoulder and pulled
her close. She covered his hand with hers. No words: no need. There had been
nobody to save Patrick. From then on, in her father’s eyes, Ned could do no
wrong. “You’ll win more than a green sash, young fellow-me-lad!” He tousled
his grandson’s hair and slapped him on the back.

Ellen shifts restlessly in her chair. Thank God he never saw the more. Though
maybe he did. Maybe that’s what you do in Heaven, go and look down the sky
like it’s some deep blue wishing well. Except you’re not supposed to have
anything more to wish for in Heaven. Probably they wish things for us instead,
us still down here. Like her now, wishing and watching: today and tomorrow
and the day after. Day in, day out, looking after things. Wishing and watching.
Mending and minding. Still here...

That’s if Heaven is real. She wonders about that, even though she knows that
wondering’s a mortal sin. All those times she prayed to Him for help - *Our Father which art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name* …did he even hear her? If he did, he did damn all about it. *Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes.* What was the use of being hid from people’s eyes? What was the use of being inaccessible?

Hastily, Ellen crosses herself; of course there’s a Heaven. There has to be, for how could you even think of never seeing your own again? Never seeing Da, nor Patrick, nor Ned, nor Dan. Nor Maggie, nor Kate: of course there’s a Heaven. And if there’s a Heaven, then there has to be a Hell. Only fair. A Hell you can look down at now and again and see the likes of Constables Flood and Hall and Sir Redmond bloody Barry roasting on a spit like they bloody well deserve.

She supposes, up there in Heaven, Ned and his Grandfather and Pat and Red are all together. Red would be in by now, surely to God he’d have to have done his Purgatory by now. God would have raised him up. *Forgive us our trespasses;* how could He not forgive Red? After all He’d put the man through? A good man, Red Kelly, for all he was a convict. Not his fault he was driven demented, or not to begin with. He tried, God knows he tried. There’s plenty more than him have been swallowed up by the drink. The lockup, that’s what finished him. Like a bairn, scared of the dark. Of being buried in the dark, of being buried alive. *Suffer the little children.*

For all she knows, he’s looking down that big blue well right this minute wondering what’s keeping her. He’s not the only one.

She’d have time to spend in Purgatory herself. Unless you count the last forty years. Some of that would have to count, surely; nobody should have to live through that. Count as time already served. Though it isn’t time up there any more, it’s ever after. So how would you count it anyway?

“Gran, those men have gone and we’re hungry! There’s still that stew, will I warm it up? Gran?”

“Yes, yes, child. I’m coming now.”

“I can do it!”

“I know you can, but it needs a taste more salt. Pass me that ladle. Where are Lily and Alma?”

“Playing. Gran, you didn’t know those men were coming, did you? Are they
going to put us in the papers? Is that why you’re cross, Gran?’”

“One thing at a time, child, one thing at a time. No, I did not know. Would I have made a spectacle of myself like that if I had? The minute they said they were journalists, mind, the minute that word was out of their mouths, I was on the look out. I had my eyes peeled.”

“I didn’t know either, or I’d have shut the door in their faces!”

Ladle in hand, Ellen glances approvingly at her granddaughter. Grace is right, she’s the very spit of her mother, same dark eyes and wavy hair: same nerve, too, though there’s no call for it yet. Thank God. Not like it was for her: at your age, she thinks, as the girl fetches the salt and pepper, I’d sailed from one side of the world to the other. I’d got myself a job at McNaughton saddlers. I’d got a horse; Pat had found me my first Nellie mare. We’d moved to the place out at Merri Creek … all the world was bright and gay …

“No call to do that, dear. No call to be ignorant. I just don’t like to be caught on the hop, that’s all.” She reaches for the salt. “The nerve of them, turning up on the doorstep like something the cat dragged in. Well, that’s what you get for traipsing round the country after a pack of lies. Did you ever hear the like? The hide of them, Katie, the hide: trying to tell me Danny’s alive! South Africa, my foot. Exclusive, my foot. Somebody pulling a fast one on them, that’s all that is. You’d think they’d have a bit of wit, educated men like they’re supposed to be. But they’re all the same, these reporters. Journalists. Fancy word for gossip, that’s all ‘journalist’ is. Pack of jumped up smart Alecs with nothing better to do than run folks down. As if my son would leave me as long as there was breath in his body. As if he’d abandon his own flesh and blood.”

“Why are they like that, Gran? Journalists, I mean?”

“I don’t know, my dear. I do not know. You’d think there’d be more important things going on in the world, would you not? News: that’s their job. Reporting the news. That would be what’s going on, today, not thirty odd years ago. Would you not think after all these years they could leave us alone?”

The old woman plunges the ladle fiercely into the pan, stirs the stew into a gluggy whirlpool. Katie twists her hands together doubtfully.

“They didn’t know you were you, though, Gran.”

The ladle slows. True. That Cookson man was damn near as shocked as she was. Ellen sniffs and nods. “Yes, well. Makes a change.”
“What do you mean?”

“I mean the Kellys have had far too much of being known. ‘Notorious.’ That’s what they called us. Notorious.”

“What’s notorious?”

“It’s when you can’t go anywhere without folks gawking and hissing behind their hands.”

“So don’t you want people to know you?”

“I want them as cares to know me. But I want neither me nor mine plastered over some police notice board, or some postcard that’s sold for three pennies in the corner shop. As if that’s all we’re worth.”

“But it’s not, is it? Kelly’s a name to be proud of. You’ve always told us to remember that, no matter what anybody said. And stand up for ourselves, like Uncle Ned and Uncle Dan.”

“I did, Katie. And I meant it. Though I hope to God you never have to.”

Brow creased, Katie watches the old woman stirring the pan for a moment. She wanders across to the window and looks out. “When will Uncle Jim be back?”

“Soon enough, soon enough. Don’t worry, pet. I can deal with those two.”

“Cookson. He said his name was Mr. Cookson. And the other one was Mr. Smart.”

“Smart. I’ll give him smart.”

“I thought he was all right though, Gran. Mr. Cookson, I mean. The way he rushed to help you, the way he sent me for water. And got the shawl. And shook your hand at the end. And Gran, he said he’d bring us something nice. Tomorrow. When they come back.”

“Well, now, that’s if they come back. What these newsmen say and what they do are two different things. You mind that, Katie, just you mind that. Though I grant you, he seems harmless enough. But there again, didn’t we think Alex Fitzpatrick was harmless, and look what come of that. There’s no trust, no trust in any of them. Now go you and call the bairns till we get you fed.”

Instead, Katie puts her hands on her hips and lifts her chin. “What did come of that, but? You never tell me, Gran. You never tell me. I mean, I know about them putting you in prison and Fitzpatrick starting all the trouble, I know all of that, but you never tell me anything else. Like about him and Mummy, or why
she had to go to Adelaide, or how come she married my father. I want to know, Gran. I’m a Kelly woman too, or I will be soon. So I think I have a right to know.”

She tosses her head and stamps her foot.

Her grandmother puts down the ladle and wipes her hands on her apron. She eyes her granddaughter quizzically.

“Well, Madam, and so you do. And so you will. You will. But stamping your foot’s no way to get me to tell you. Go and call the bairns like I said.”

Later, kitchen cleared and children in bed, Ellen returns to her seat by the fire. Bending stiffly, she heaves another log on to the fire. No Jim tonight, nor tomorrow night, likely. Won’t have Katie for much longer either. She’ll be off, like her big brother. And so she should, so she should.

Loneliness: it’s like missing a layer of skin. That’s why you need young bodies about, flesh of your flesh, flesh that will still heal and grow new. Chase it away. But there’s loneliness beyond that, a place where it’s wild and windy and dark, a banshee hollow with voices calling and re-calling down through the years, across all the empty spaces. Her and Jim, set in their separate corners by the fire with the darkness closing in, the two of them left lying about like a couple of spent cartridges.

She does feel the cold these days, even with the fire. Lifting her shawl from the back of her chair, she tucks it snugly around her knees. She reaches down to her basket, pulls out Jim’s trousers. He’ll want them when he gets back.

She flexes her hands, the flesh threading blue, the sinews knobbed and twisted. The knuckles have a waxy pallor, worn shiny by years of scrubbing and rinsing and squeezing through a mangle. Quick, capable hands, with fingers that drum on table or bench or chair when there is nothing for them to do. Because doing, working, that’s how you manage. That’s how you still know who you are, how you keep track of all the whos and wheres and whens. Though never the why. It’s how you didn’t knot those laundry sheets together and have done with it all long, long ago.

In, out, in out: pushing the needle in and out, stitching there and then onto here and now. Same at the old place. Eleven Mile: fetching and carrying, mending and minding, the passers by, the regulars, her own. Same here, minding grandchildren, mending clothes; always, the mending. How did a body not
work? Work is kind, work tires you out. Work stops you thinking about things that can neither be mended nor ended. In prison, in the cold stone laundry, washing, scrubbing, squeezing sheets through the mangle, pegging them out till her back ached, till she could scarcely put one foot in front of the other, till she could go back to her cell and sleep. Heaving pale clammy swags of cloth from one tub to the next; that was what got you through the night as well as the day.

*That day unlike any other: When the clock struck ten.*

*No need for anybody to tell you he was dead.*

*Night after night after night, your mind the only candle ...*

The big log on the fire flames up. She stabs her needle into the thick trouser fabric. ‘If they come back’: they’ll be back all right. She knows reporters. Sniffing and snooping. Maybe Jim will get home in time; she’ll be able to warn him. Not that there’s any need, really, not any more. They’ve been through it all so many times. And not that it ever makes any difference, not to any of the smart folk that know so much better than they do what happened. Not to the picture show men, nor the theatre folk, nor the newsmen that change the story to suit themselves.

That Cookson man: Katie’s right. When he found out who she was, he didn’t just jump in and start quizzing her. Bit of kindness about him, bit different from the usual curse of crows they’ve seen on and off the place. Spying with their beady eyes, scratching for dirt … lone men. Nothing better to do. As bad as the hawkers that used to come round. Though there again, he might think an old woman’s not worth bothering about. Just as well Jim’s away. And if tomorrow’s anything like today … they could do with more rain. Ellen tugs at her needle, snaps the thread. Damn. She reaches for her basket; pauses, staring into the fire. The time he took to put his coat on, that handshake held too long; no. She’s not done with them yet.

That sick, tight knot in her gut. And not just because of Dan. It’s been a while since anybody’s come nosing round. Quite a while. She’s not just as sharp as she was, she knows that. Getting soft in her old age. She squints, threads the needle. She can see as well as ever she could. No, dammit, she’s not soft. Just tell him, that’s all. Dan is dead. There’s no more. Go and scratch somewhere else.
But he’ll be after the rest. He’ll be sniffing over her every word, him and that young skite of an offsider. What does she think about this, what does she know about that. Dan’s the main thing though. Calling him a runaway, a scaredy cat. Her Danny: bad enough never being able to match it with Ned in life. She won’t have him robbed of the one time he did, the one time he stood up equal. Just let them try.

Maggie was the one knew how to deal with them, give as good as she got. But Maggie was long gone. Maggie, Kate, Annie. Her girls like her boys. And all the ghosts, even the little lost babies, Mary Jane, wee Ellen, all of them clustering round, wanting to know why she’s still there when they’re not. She has no answer. Because there isn’t one. It makes no sense, none in the wide world. How much longer does she have to keep minding? Three years is nothing to it.

Black hearted butcher bird, spearing her with his eyes …

Ellen looks around the courtroom. Hardly a single face she knows, just eyes and noses and mouths under bonnets and hats and wigs. Not like the courtroom at Benalla; she knew them all there, them as loved her and them as hated her. And she knew the reasons why, knew how to love or hate back. Here, all the faces are flat, folded like starched linen. Here, the frowns and glares are like part of the furniture, hard and immovable, from the coat of arms to the great posing doors. And up above it all, the red of his fur trimmed robe bleeding over the dark wood of the bench, is set the judge’s face: hooked nose, heavy jowls, pouches and pitiless eyes. Sir Redmond Barry. She draws herself up straight.

“Having heard the evidence, do you wish to say anything in answer?”

And if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride … Ned, Ned, how could we ever have guessed it would turn out like this? And would it have mattered if we had? If we’d told it my way, if you’d let them call Kate, if we’d brought Fitzpatrick in ourselves? Could we have brought it out different?

“You are not obliged to say anything unless you desire to do so; you have nothing to hope for.”

Nothing to hope for. How did that happen? New baby, new husband, your sons and your daughters all round you: how, just like that, can you have nothing to hope for? Ellen’s gaze sweeps the room again. He’s waiting: all of them, the
jury, the policemen, the gentlemen of the press, the clerks and the crowds who had come to watch, all of them are waiting. Somewhere outside, Ned’s waiting too. What will he do? Christ Almighty, what will he do? He’ll run mad. She knows it, she can see it. He’ll run mad, there’ll be murder done ... She closes her eyes; the dark rears up before her. What words, what speech, what howl, to stop it? Stop it while it can still be stopped? She raises her eyes to the bench. The word drops into the silence like a stone from a bridge.

“Nothing.”

Nothing to say, not then, not now. Then, three years was forever. Now, it seems like no time at all.

She holds up the trousers: done. For now. Mending and minding, mending and minding ...
CHAPTER TWO

If anybody steals a horse, blame it on the Kellys.
If anybody breaks the law, blame it on the Kellys.
If anyone does anything new,
Or does what you would like to do,
And if the troopers don’t know who …
... it’s blame it on the Kellys!

In the hotel dining room, Brian pushes his plate aside; opposite, Jack mops up the last of his gravy.

“Right then. Tomorrow we’ll head out straight after breakfast. You can get photographs of where she is now, and maybe the old place - Eleven Mile Creek - on the way back. We’ll want a couple of scenic ones: the bush, glimpse of the Warby Ranges …”

“And the old woman herself. Sitting with the children. Especially the oldest, the pretty one…” Jack smiles and nods, but is eyes are elsewhere. The journalist follows his photographer’s gaze to the bar, to the young woman with blond curls standing beside the barman.

“She’s a bit of all right, eh?”

“Pay attention, will you? Yes, of course: pictures of Mrs. Kelly and the children. And Jim Kelly, I want to get hold of Jim Kelly. They’re expecting him; with a bit of luck we’ll catch him when we’re there. Or find out where he’s staying. I’ll do the talking; you just look after the pictures. Got it?”

Jack nods, his eyes following the barmai as she comes towards them.

“Good evening, sirs, I hope you enjoyed your meals. I’ll just get rid of these for you…”

She reaches for the plates, but Jack is there already.

“Here, let me …”

She dimples self consciously as Jack stacks their plates. Brian pushes back his chair.

“I’m going upstairs for an hour, Jack. Do a bit of work. I’ll come down later for a drink. You’ll be here, will you?”
“Yep. Through in the bar.”
Brian smiles at the barmaid. “That was very nice, Miss…?”
“Millie. I’m Millie.”
“Thank you, Millie. Right. See you later, Jack.”

Up in his room, he goes straight to his case and pulls out the dog eared manila envelope Sam had given him as he left. Last minute, as usual. Newspaper clippings, he said; his secretary had come across it when she was clearing out some old filing cabinet. Sam had pointed at the date scribbled on the envelope, 1879: pre – Glenrowan, probably not much use. Still, you never knew. He’d handed the envelope over and slapped Brian on the back: good luck, mate. Typical bloody Sam. Brian hadn’t even bothered to open it: time enough once they got there.

Yep, old clippings. But there’s also a sheaf of carbon copy pages, hole-punched and tied together with string. Bit of a mess. He sets the lot out on the dressing table, takes out his tobacco and papers, rolls himself a cigarette. His filthy habit, Lucy’s always nagging him about it. Not allowed to, around Beryl. Well, no Lucy or Beryl here. He might think about a pipe; wouldn’t mind a pipe. Lighting u, he reaches for the top clipping.

‘The widely extended and generally expressed horror and detestation of the police murders which have been displayed through this colony, render more prominent the sympathy and admiration for the Kelly’s, that by the larrikin class, are not only barely disguised in some cases, but openly vaunted in others. This is more noticeable amongst the youth in various large centres of population, where… they congregate occasionally at street corners and elsewhere to sing ballads – hymns of triumph, as it were - in their praise. We have not been informed whether these lyrics have yet taken shape in print, but we have succeeded in obtaining the words of a few by taking them down from dictation.

They are for the most part, wretched doggerel void of point as a rule, and in the metre – if metre it can be called – adapted to the universal Irish street-ballad tune … leprous distilments…’

‘Leprous distilments”? That’s coming it a bit strong, isn’t it? What’s wrong with Irish ballads? Lucy sings them. Laura did too.

‘…we should imagine that the writer would find himself more at home in a ‘thieves’ kitchen’, a St. Giles’ ballad-mongery, or one of Her Majesty’s gaols
than at either a missionary meeting or the gathering together of a Young Men’s Christian Association – unless, indeed, he attended with the intention of picking the pockets of the audience.’

Try telling this fellow Dan Kelly or Steve Hart had got away, that they’d escaped the flames of Hell in this life if not the next. He’d be frothing at the mouth. Brian shrugs, flips the clipping aside, reaches for another one. 

Familiar long narrow columns: yes, the Argus. Friday, November 12, 1880. So. A morning after report. 

THE EXECUTION OF EDWARD KELLY.

Brian reads quickly, top to tail; frown and returns to the first paragraph, drawing thoughtfully on his cigarette.

‘Much has been written during the last two years about the career and crimes of the bloodthirsty Kelly gang of bushrangers, and it will be with a sigh of relief that the public will now read the final chapter of their history. At last the majesty of the law has been vindicated; for, at a few minutes past 10 o’clock yesterday morning, Edward Kelly, the leader and only survivor of the gang, was executed in Melbourne Gaol. However weary the public may be of the Kelly affair …’

He releases a long, slow spiral of smoke. Weary? Where’d this journalist get that idea? After all this time, it still only takes Kelly’s name to sell a newspaper; otherwise what are he and Jack doing here? Why is Sam so sure this Dan and Steve story will sell? He scans the article: no by-line. Mr. Argus might be weary of all the ballyhoo, like he is himself, but the public’s not. The exact opposite, in fact, they just never tire of it. Or of Ned himself, at any rate. Because for all the ‘horror and detestation’, for all the newspapers competing who could run the man deepest into the ground… well, hadn’t succeeded, had they? Because the execution wasn’t the final chapter. Why not? What was it about the man?

The stranger than fiction twist, that’s one thing. Two cheeky lads making a break for it, still riding, still thumbing their noses at the Law; winning against all the odds. It’s like they want a sequel to Ned’ story: the Irish larrikin who bailed up an entire state, who played to win even when there was clearly no way in the world he was ever going to. At least, that’s how he’d read it all those years ago.

A second chance: wouldn’t we all like a second chance? November 1880: April 1910. A lot of water under a lot of bridges since 1880.

He skims the column one last time, shaking his head: ‘bloodthirsty
murderers’, ‘desperate and dastardly killers’. You could imagine the man spitting the words out, an anonymous journalist telling his anonymous readers what they were supposed to think. He can still see his fiery schoolteacher thundering from his dais, still visualize the bogey man headlines, the prim black print of the articles: he sighs. Such a different time, such a different place. But the time, he reminds himself, the time and place that Ellen Kelly was released into. No wonder she was suspicious of the press.

He flicks through more clippings. No wonder indeed; how would it feel, to be the mother of a nest of vipers, a criminal brood? The mother of a monster, an Attila the Hun, a Jack the Ripper: who would want to know such a woman? Only a mother could love him, that was the word, as if it was somehow her fault, guilty not as charged but as pregnant, as having given monstrous birth. An accessory before the fact, who’d never after be able to walk down the street without fingers pointing, without shoulders turning away. No escaping the fame, the blame. They must have wished their children had never been born … no. Even thinking it, Brian shakes his head. No woman could ever wish that. He shuts his eyes: the faces of Lucy, Laura and Ellen Kelly float by, features merging, melting into each other…

The loose carbon sheets are numbered, but the numbers are all over the place, as if the anonymous reporter had been interrupted, shoveled the papers any old which way into a filing cabinet, slammed the drawer shut, hurried out. And simply never come back. Why, why not? Anybody’s guess.

‘The History of the Notorious Kelly Gang of Victorian bushrangers; or, the Outlaws of the Wombat Ranges … Mansfield … published by G. Wilson Hall, proprietor, “Mansfield Guardian”.’

‘Preface … We take it for granted that in the present excited state of public feeling among all classes on the subject of the now notorious “Kelly Gang,” no apology is needed for offering to the community the accompanying narrative, through hurriedly thrown together, and, therefore, inevitably liable to animadversion on the score of its shortcomings.’

1879. The Gang still at large. Yes, they would have been in an excited state.

‘What has been chiefly aimed at in the little volume is the compilation of as truthful, and at the same time readable, a story as possible under the circumstances, from the best and most reliable sources at our command; and we
would take this opportunity of fully admitting our obligations, not only to the journals of the day, but more especially to certain individuals, who, without being named here, will be sure to recognize the acknowledgement, being those from whom interesting and important particulars, unobtainable elsewhere, were gleaned, as well as confirmation of various previously published items of intelligence.’

‘Truthful and at the same time readable’: that’s a fair summary of a journalist’s job. Except – Brian grimaces – it’s not always that simple. Parliamentary records aren’t always readable; News of the World isn’t always truthful. He picks up the Argus clipping again. You could expect, though, you could feel entitled to expect the report of a criminal execution in a major daily to be both truthful and readable. He runs his finger down to the particular paragraph that struck him as neither.

‘Almost before the officers had time to realize their position, Constables Lonigan and Scanlon were murdered in the most cold blooded manner …’

Cold blooded. How does he know, this journalist; was he there? If they were such cold blooded killers, why didn’t they just shoot McIntyre along with the other three? Get rid of every witness; make a proper job of it?

‘Kennedy, when lying wounded, pleaded that his life might be spared for the sake of his wife and children; but Kelly, turning a deaf ear to his entreaties, shot him dead and robbed the body.’

It reads like an eye witness account, yet clearly it’s not. So who was the journalist’s source? Who was there, notebook in hand? Brian goes back to the Preface.

“A plain, unvarnished tale” of the facts will be found in places sufficiently shocking to satisfy, if not cloy, the most morbidly voracious appetite for the horribly sensational. We have, therefore, in the production of the following relation, as equitable historians, adopted for our motto – “Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice.”

This Wilson Hall should have had a word with the Argus fellow, whoever he was. Brian fans through the remaining pages of copy, glances at his watch and stubs out his cigarette. Still got today’s notes to write up. Better check on Jack … nah. He’ll be right. Half an hour, then he’ll go dow. He turns the page.
Outside the cottage, it’s almost dark. Jim’s trousers, neatly folded, are draped over the back of the armchair opposite Ellen’s. Katie appears at the bedroom door.

“Gran? They’re asleep, Gran. I told them a story. Like you do.”

“That’s my girl. Reach me the red cotton. Which story?”

Katie brings the spool from the table and kneels by her Gran’s chair.

“The one about Saint Patrick. Only I couldn’t remember the name of the mountain.”

“Slemish. Slemish was where he looked after the sheep once he had been stolen and sold for a slave. A bald bleak place it is too, and him only a boystolen away from everything he’d ever known. Not much sainting then, just poor cold Pat stamping up and down and blowing in his hands to warm them.”

“Where Great Grandfather grew up.”

“Near enough.”

“Where he asked Great Grandma to marry him. In among the heather.”

Ellen smiled. “That’s it. In among the heather.”

“Heather’s like Patterson’s Curse, isn’t it?”

“It is nothing of the sort! Oh, the same sort of purple, maybe, but nothing like as coarse and scratchy and straggly. Heather’s neat. More like cross stitch.”

“And then they travelled all the way across Ireland to climb Saint Patrick’s holy mountain.”

“Croagh Patrick. They did. And the first half’s easy enough, but the last part is bare rocks. Folks that are serious pilgrims climb it in their bare feet. For penance.”

“You mean because they’ve done something bad?”

“Yes. Or at least they thought they had. So they had to punish themselves to be forgiven.”

“But Great Grandfather hadn’t done anything bad, had he? Or Great Grandma?”

“No. They went because they wanted something good.”

“What?”

“Children. That was what you did, you see. You climbed all the way up the mountain to show how much you wanted them, and then you prayed at the shrine on the top for God to bless you with children.”
“Ah!” Katie puts her hands together wisely. “And the reason it’s a Holy Mountain is because it’s where Saint Patrick drove all the snakes out of Ireland.”

“The very thing. But your Great Grandfather never thought to ask where it was he drove them to.”

Katie laughs and claps. “He drove them here, didn’t he Gran? He drove them all into the sea, and they wriggled and they squiggled and they swam all round the world to Port Phillip Bay, and they crawled up on to the shore and turned into constables of the Royal Victorian police force!”

She jumps to her feet and throws her arms around her Gran. The old woman smiles and tousles her hair. “Away off to bed with you, or you’ll not be fit to ride Ginger when your Uncle Jim gets back.”

“Oh Gran, I’d give anything for a pony of my own!”

“I wants never gets. Now go to bed.”

“I’m going, I’m going … but Gran, was what they did to Uncle Ned penance?”

“It was nothing of the sort. Penance is something you do of your own free will. Penance is between you and your Maker.”

“You mean God?”

“Well, who else, child? Now go to bed and leave me in peace. Go!”

“‘Night, Gran.”

“Goodnight.”

Ellen pokes at the fire before pulling out her quilt. Spread over her lap, the colours of each embroidered square glow in the dim room; the only other brightness is the flicker of flames in the hearth. She finds the square she’s working on – Maggie’s - and starts stitching. Stitch, stitch, stitch: what old women are for, so. The minding and the mending. The mending and the minding. Outside, the last rosy streamers of sunset melt into the dark. Red sky at night, shepherd’s delight: what happened to the delight? Still pretty, though.

That might be where they got the idea for those magic lantern shows. Or the moving pictures, now, pictures with the people in them running and jumping like they do in real life. Cameras. Black boxes. Cinema. Jim knows about it. She neither knows nor wants to know. As if pictures that stand still weren’t bad enough: all those newspaper photographs making the boys out to be monsters, joining Ned’s eyebrows together like he was the devil himself, and him the best
looking of the lot of them. Spitting image of his father, Ned was. Or his father the way he used to be; before the drink got to him. Ellen’s gaze shifts to the pipe above the fireplace; her needle slows to the rhythmic, repetitive motion with the mind numbing force of habit.

From the minute she laid eyes on him, the tall, bearded fellow striding into the house behind her Da, she’d known. Thick, coppery hair just asking for you to run your hand through it, throat curving in to the hollow above his chest, broad shoulders narrowing down to the tight bum, the long lean legs: just the very type of an athlete. She remembers tucking her hair behind her ear, the fullness in her throat when she swallowed; knowing is eyes were following her, basking in the warmth of his gaze as she moved round the room. Her Da told her to take herself away out of that and give her mother a hand in the kitchen, but she sidled up beside him instead. Would you not like a song, Da? She knew he could never resist a song. *In Dublin’s fair city, where the girls are so pretty* ... nor only in Dublin, said the eyes. So did the lips, later that very night.

He had served his time in Van Diemen’s Land, and he was never going back. That was the first thing he told her. Nobody was ever going to lock him up inside again. From Tipperary, he was; no going back there either, any more than the Quinns could go back to Antrim. *It’s a long way to Tipperary, it’s a long way to go...* and a long way from.

She remembers. No, it’s not remembering, it’s not being able to forget: waking up in the black night and him thrashing about beside her like a mad thing, ripping the blanket off, screaming at the top of his voice:

“God rot you, come back! Come back, let me out, I can’t breathe...for chrissake, I can’t breathe...”

Holding on to him, shooshing, hissing shut up, shut up, you’ll wake the bairn ... till the muscles relaxed, the breath slowed, till the quaking silence... till he laid his hands either side of her face and stared into her eyes like he’d draw her very soul.

She’d hold herself still, still as water in a well, staring him back, staring and waiting... for his mouth on hers, for his hands all over, for the throb of him deep inside her.

That time out in the bush, what was it they were doing, chasing some stray... All she did was point at a couple of blackboys. That’s all. And laugh and say,
what kind of a stupid name was that? Nothing black about them at all, might as well call them whiteboys or greenboys. Only that… but the look on his face: the blazing eyes, raised hand, the shout, the shove. Shut up woman, shut the fuck up! And she, God forgive her, she: spinning the end of the halter rope round her head, slashing it across his face… he grabbed it before he grabbed her and pulled her to him, kicking and biting and yelling blue murder as she was. The rough sun bleached grasses scratched their skins.

Silence. Hot, pulsing silence. The entire bush waiting. Till he touched her face, suddenly utterly gentle.

“Come here, Nell, come here. I’m sorry. You weren’t to know … I’m sorry.” Touching the raised red weal on his face. “I’m sorry too.” Ending the way it always did.

Know… what? What was she not to know? He wouldn’t tell her. After a while, she gave up asking. It wasn’t till years later, when he was in the lockup in Avenel, that she remembered where she’d heard the name Whiteboys. Her Da: that was it. Back in the old country. One tea time. Bands of young men, tearaways he called them, roaming the countryside, shooting, burning, bailing up landlords and bailiffs and anyone else they took a set against. Worst in Cashel and Tipperary, her Da said. Not bad boys, or not born bad: made bad by bad laws. He was looking at Patrick as he spoke. Not long after that, he started talking about Australia.

Bad laws. Bad company. Her Da went along with Red when he told her they were moving. To Avenel; what was at Avenel? Way up north, far away from Beveridge, far away from her own people, her own family, her own friends. What would we do that for, she wanted to know. What on earth would we do that for?

“The boys, Nell, that’s what for. There’s too much bad company here, too many chancey beggars. Stirrers. All it takes is being in the wrong place at the wrong time: one wrong place, one wrong time. Any excuse will do the traps, you know that; only have to look at them sideways and it’s on. I don’t want our boys locked up every time somebody’s horse or cow goes missing, because that’s what’ll happen. And once you’re down that road there’s no coming back. Once your name’s in Her Majesty’s black book you’re gone.”

He was like a dog with a bone. She’d never seen him so set on anything.
Look at those brothers of yours, he said, sure they’re never out of the lockup. That’s good coming from you, she snapped; but he was right. It annoyed her to admit it, but he was right. Mad Jimmy was no sort of an uncle for anybody. So in the end she gave in. It was hard; her own flesh and blood from the old world and there she was, driving away. But she did it; they did it. And set themselves up in Avenel. She got herself out and about; never had any bother getting on with folk, sharing a laugh or a load or a long time passing. The children went to school; well, mostly they did. Red farmed their bit of land, took whatever laboring jobs she could get. But then came the drought, the long dry: paddocks bare and only a piddle of water in the creek between their place and those fat arse Morgan brothers’ land. Heifer calf came wandering over the creek bed after a pick of green. On their side. It was more meat than they’d had for months.

Red cut the brand out. 450 acres the Morgans had: surely to God they’d never miss one calf. But the stingy old buggers did, and they missed it before Red had got rid of the hide with the piece missing. They found him guilty of cattle stealing: 25 quid or six months in the lock up. Where were they going to find 25 quid?

The clammy pallor, the white ringed eyes as they dragged him away: it was there for anyone to see. But none of her pleading, her begging, none of her stories about the screams and cold sweats, the blankets torn off and the walking in his sleep, made the slightest difference. Give him hard labor, she pleaded, hobble him, flog him for chrissake, but don’t lock him away in that closed dark place. Don’t lock him away in that cell because if you do it’ll be the end of him …

But they did. Locked him in with his nightmares. And the man that went in never came out. The apology that shuffled home six months later reached for a bottle first thing in the morning and dropped another from his hand last thing at night as he passed out. It wasn’t drinking, it was drowning. He’s up there still, passed out in Avenel graveyard. All over a stray calf that was for beef anyway: what kind of justice is that for God’s sake? She got fined for abusive language. Well, what else, she’d like to know, what other kind of language is there for a rotten abusive law?

When she went over all the things that could have been different, Red’s dying was always the first. Because if he hadn’t died, then they wouldn’t have moved
back from Avenel to Greta. If he hadn’t died, the boys would have had a father, she would have had a husband, none of the rest of it would even have happened. Mind you, that was only the start. What if Pat had lived? Her best brother: if it hadn’t been for Pat, there wouldn’t have been Australia. Come to that, there wouldn’t have been her.

Her eighth birthday: her Da had some business or other in Derry city. He was riding there with Patrick. She’d been whingeing one minute, batting her eyelashes the next, giving them no peace till they agreed to take her with them. Yes, yes, they would take her to see the bonfires on her birthday, but not another peep out of her, did she hear? So next day her Da set her up behind Pat on Grey Fella, and she sang them songs the length of the winding road to Derry.

They got there just on dark. The bonfires had been lit. They were blazing right across the city, fierce demons flaming and flinging themselves the length of the grey stone walls. It was like fairyland; she ran in close, closer, dodging, craning her tallest to see.

An explosion: flames rocketing up, firing the straw man at the top of the pyre: sparks shooting out like stars. A star landing on her dress, her favorite blue dress: holding her skirt out in wonder, looking up into Pat’s ashen face… plunged choking and thrashing into a horse trough, soaked and sodden, chilled to the bone…

It’s branded into her memory, deeper than any burn: the locked eye terror, her brother’s fierce hands thrusting her under the surface, the frantic bubbles… and after, the warmth of his wet arms crushing her in to his chest…

The bonfires were in memory of the Siege of Derry. Derry, never Londonderry, not even if the Prods did run the place. The scarecrow at the top of the biggest fires was Lundy, who’d tried to give the city back to James the Second and got murdered for his trouble. The king laid siege to the city. But the Prods won, said Patrick. Yes, said her Da, they won. James might have been the rightful Catholic king, but that didn’t stop him being as thick as two short planks. So he went and lost the throne to a jumped up Dutchman: William of Orange.

The Prods of Derry were all for Orange Billy. Her Da pointed at the big letters daubed on the walls: ‘No Surrender’. He told her they’d eaten rats and dead dogs sooner than give in. Stubborn bastards: but you had to admire them for sticking to their guns. And that was exactly the point. Her Da put his hand on
Patrick’s shoulder.

“They’ll never give an inch, son. Not one inch.”

Her brother’s arm around her tightened. “Well, we won’t surrender either. Will we, Nell?”

She told Ned and Maggie that story straight after Red’s funeral. The next day, in the kitchen, she heard Ned retelling it to Jim and Dan. He was talking about her like she was not his mother at all, like she was an entirely different person, some sort of fairy princess. But she wasn’t, she was only a pretty little doll in a blue dress …

So many stories to a life: the ones you’re told, the ones you tell yourself. Your own people’s stories, flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone, the stories you don’t even know you’re making till it’s too late and they can’t be unmade. That’s why you have to mind the stories while they’re still in the making, that’s why you have to make sure people are getting them right. Because there’s no going back. Mind and mend, mend and mind.

What scares her most than anything, though, is when she can’t go back; when she can’t remember what they look like. Looked like. Alive, alive o–oh, alive alive o –oh... cockles and mussels, alive, alive-oh...

Joe Byrne is the worst. It gets harder and harder to remember past that photograph of his dead body propped up against a Beechworth wall. Time takes the stitches out, one by one, till there’s just an outline; or like one of those slates the children used to have at school: tongue curlingly neat letters one minute, shapeless smear the next.

She will remember. She will not let that happen. She will remember them.

Funny, because Joe was the lady’s man, the charmer. Him and her Ned: a right pair. Ned had his father’s slow smile, those eyes that could hold you like there wasn’t another soul in the whole wide world. Ned could have had any girl he wanted, every bit as much as Joe. But he could never be bothered playing around like Joe did. Kate Lloyd; she was the one. For all she was barely sixteen … on that pony of hers, racing across the paddock to catch up, as game as ... well, as Ellen herself.

All of that was before Stringybark. Stringybark changed everything. There was no more marrying after Stringybark. Just goodbye after goodbye after goodbye. In the drawer, it’s in the drawer there: the picture Maggie cut out from
the Pictorial Weekly, the one they took after Glenrowan. Ned’s lying in a cart, shot to pieces. Kate is leaning over him, holding his hand. Holding her nerve. No tears, no weeping or wailing, not in front of them all. Later on is a different thing: home in her room is a different thing. Not here, not now. Because now was for Ned.

Another twelve years it takes her; twelve years to think of taking another man. Even then, she had to come round to see them, sit twisting her hands and chewing her lip while she and Maggie and she told her to ahead for goodness sake. William Cleave was a good man, Ned would be the first to tell her to go head and marry him. No point wasting her life as well.

Plenty of women crying their eyes out over Joe Byrne as well, of course. The day Maggie showed her that Beechworth photographer’s picture, she cried herself. To string a man’s body up like that, hang him like a side of beef, just so some vulture from Melbourne could poke his black box and make money … sacrilege, that’s what it was. Out and out bloody sacrilege.

At least you could tear the pictures up; ash them, rake them out. Fierce spitting bonfires Maggie used to have: slanderous articles, stupid cartoons cut from the Argus, the Mansfield Tribune, the Benalla Ensign. The lot of them, into the fire, one after the other. Useless sort of a thing to do, of course it was. Like back chatting teachers, or swearing at constables. But at least it felt like you were doing something.

Another square finished. Ellen strokes the deep crimson cloth. Maggie’s. It must be… what? She reckons on her fingers: fourteen years. Yes, that’d be right. Since the two of them sat stitching here, here at this very fireplace. Baby clothes: they were never done making baby clothes. We have to look ahead, Maggie would say, think about the young ones. And so they did. But it never took long before the talk would drift back, back to when they were all getting under each other’s feet at Eleven Mile: Ned, Dan, Jim; Annie, Kate, Grace. Maggie could do all their voices, the very note and lilt of them, so spot on you’d swear they were only in the next room. But then she’d get cross, stab any papers left on to the poker and shove them into the fire, send whole whirligigs of sparks whistling up the chimney.

Not all of them were for burning. Some of the cartoons they kept. Drawings of police beating about some bush with Ned and the boys having a smoke right
next to them, they made her laugh. Or the ones of Ned in his armour - only Ned could have dreamt that armour up. The pick of them, though, the pick, is where he’s in court, standing in the witness box. He’s hooked his wounded right hand under the lapel of his jacket so nobody can see how useless it is. His beard is trimmed and tidy and he’s looking straight at the judge. He looks what he always was: a fine upstanding young man.

The flames flicker and glow; a log drops and she jumps. A moment: then she blinks, shakes her head and picks up her rhythm again, stitch after stitch after stitch.

Law after law after law: courtrooms full of laws, laws against selling grog, against assault, against abusive language, against robbery. But where are the laws against robbing folk of their good name? The laws about putting words into their mouths, about making things happen that never ever did? Changing a brand is nothing to that.

What could they do about it? Not much. The show went to New Zealand and Western Australia; she’d even heard tell it went to England. They managed to get it stopped in Western Australia, thanks to Jack: George’s son. He always was her son more than his father’s, far more of a Kelly than a King. He was only three when George took off, after all; hardly even remembered him. Only likeness she can see is that Jack’s a show off as well: except with him it’s more than just party tricks. He’s made something of himself, him and Violet. Kelly and Kelly, circus riders: that’s them. She smiles: who’d have thought? A little boy and a little girl tumbling about with their ponies in the back paddock, riding upside down, back to front, flipping over bareback, cracking their stock whips: Kelly and Kelly. Jack even changed his name, all legal and everything. Deed poll. King to Kelly.

She loves to hear of them. New Zealand, Western Australia, wherever they are: the young Kellys. She listens to Jim reading from some clipping they’ve been sent, thinks of Jack dinking Violet home from school on the old pony. And here’s the pair of them cracking their stock whips all over the world. Just goes to show, give a Kelly half a chance… that’s all they ever needed. Half a chance.

She squints into the eye of her needle; maybe not just as quick as she was, but still. Never anything wrong with her sight; times she could have done with seeing less. Second sight, now, that would be the thing. Like that old shawlie
all those years ago on the Causeway, reading her like she was a book. If she
could have seen then how their lives would turn out, would she still have wished
what she wished? What did that shriveled old woman see, watching that long
ago Nell skip over the rocks? Did she see a pale horse rearing, did she see the
stars hanging upside down?

Would having the sight have changed the way she did things? What things?
God Almighty, where did you even start?

She holds the quilt up for a moment; its colours glow in the firelight. Small,
ant like stitches thread square to square. Like the memories, stitched over and
over in her head. She still jumps at the clang of a gate. The shriek of a train
whistle can still whisk her back twenty years to the day she stepped into a
carriage on the train from Melbourne to Glenrowan and started her sentence all
over again … *There was an old man called Michael Finnegan, he grew fat and
then grew thin again; then he died and had to begin again, poor old Michael
Finnegan, begin again…*

Always, the songs. Evenings at Eleven Mile before they moved out here,
evenings with Tom and Maggie and Jim and Kate, even Wild Wright, mad
bugger that he was, when they could still get up and lep about: years ago now.
She has neither the heart nor the strength for it any more. Now, the only singing
she does is to send the bairns to sleep

Minding and mending. Stitches in time.

Ned was a minder too. Had to be, once his father died. Left school, though
he minded his letters too. Him and Joe, the pair of them, reading the papers,
ripping them up, making up their letters: trying to mend what couldn’t be
mended. What do you think; will we call it a ‘colonial stratagem’? We will,
that’s good, Joe, that’s good. And ‘fair warning’, mate, we will give them fair
warning, will we not? Which is more than they ever gave us. Rub it in, make
them see, show them how bloody unfair it is. Tell them our side.
‘I am a widow’s son outlawed’. Put that in somewhere.

And so he was.

Maggie told her that he was still writing letters in jail, or getting somebody to
write for him because his poor hand was useless. Nothing else to do, she
supposed. Scraps of paper, twists of words cast into the river, drifting on the
stream, trying to hook up yesterday or the day before. Casting for something to
hold on to.

*In the Beginning was the Word;* and at the end. Your word: all you were left with.

Maggie wrote some of what he said down. In case they forgot, she said. God knows what happened to them. Doesn’t matter. The words are just stitches, it’s the way they’re sewn up... though she would have liked to read his letters. Just to be there with him, in his head. It’d be damn near a lifetime since she read anything, but she’d do it. Sound out the words one by one. Make the time go.

Funny: it was time taken from her that taught her how to do that; make time go.

Lying flat on her back, feeling every knob in that thin prison mattress, breathing slow and deep, slow and deep. Her hands crossed over her chest, staring up at the dark: remember. Remember… sitting down beside him and whatever newspaper he was at, following the finger of his right hand with hers, across and back, across and back and across again. His left arm reaching round her, giving her a squeeze, laughing at some stupid remark...

The thing is though, it gets harder and harder to keep them sorted. All the different times, all that was done and all that was only dreamt, what was shouted out loud and what only whispered in her head. More and more, it doesn’t seem to matter much. Because the ending never changes.

She trained herself to keep her eyes shut, make the dreams last, put off for as long as she could the pale, wishy-washy light of day. Sometimes, she pressed her fists hard against her eyes, as if she could un-see everything. When she took them away, walls tilted and landscapes glimmered over stone. Voices vibrated and fell away. The then and the now cancelled each other out. Just for a little while she could make the world a different place, make a different time …

Red’s beard, scratchy on her breast: firelight flickering over children’s nighttime faces: the squawk of the peacock at Glenmore: shut your eyes. Shut your eyes and hold on to it, that world of the high air. Tir na n-og, her mother called it. Tir na n-og: ‘the land of the young.’

And there she is, her mother, still young herself, set to her spinning wheel out the back door of the cottage, waiting for Da to come home for his tea from Ballymena or Antrim or wherever he’d gone.

“Tell us a story, Ma.”
“What would you like?”

“The Children of Lir.”

Her favorite: how many times did she tell it to her own? Here on the other side of the world, sitting out the back of a weatherboard cottage?

Fionnuala, Conn, Fiachra, Aedh: the children of Lir. King Lir of the de Danaan, the first people of Ireland. When the Queen their mother died, the King took to himself another wife. Her name was Aoife and she was the most beautiful woman you ever could see, but she was a witch. She watched Lir’s love for his children and she hated them just for who they were. So she laid a curse on them. She caused them to be turned into swans; she left them only their human speech and their songs. Nine hundred years she cursed them: three hundred years floating on Lough Dearg where they were, three hundred tossed on the savage Straits of Moyle and three hundred at the whim of the wild North Sea. And so it was, so it was. Through all those long years Fionnuala sheltered a brother under each of her wings, and the little Aedh at her breast.

In her story now, Fionnuala has Maggie’s face…

By the end of it all, St Patrick had turned Ireland into a holy land. He met with the children of Lir and he heard their story. He baptized them, but at the drop of holy water their years became mortal years. They shriveled up and died. And Saint Patrick laid Fionnuala out with a brother under each arm and the baby Aedh at her breast.

Nine hundred years. She knew what that must feel like. Why were the stories that stayed with you always the sad ones? She should have thought of that when she made her wish.

In the world of the high air people never died, nor ever grew old, like her children themselves would never grow old. Faces drifting in and out of dreams, voices talking, interrupting, telling her things they never did alive… Maggie. Kate. Ned. Dan. Except Dan didn’t speak: Dan never said a word. Why was that? Her Danny, who sang as he shoveled, who was never done skiting about what he and the Mob were up to, about some girl he fancied, or about whether she thought he’d grown. It was like he was in one of his sulks …

A log drops in the fire. Ellen’s needle stops; she stares at the flickering flames. Of course. Of course. All these years, why had she not seen it sooner? What would Dan have to talk about, what else but the fire: the fire at the inn…
him and Steve, in there at the end of the world, and no way out …

That was why he never said a word. Not because of the burning, not the agony, none of that; it was because of her. Her wretched tongue, her temper. Because she made them swear, made them each give their sacred word and swore herself that she’d never forgive them if they broke it. Raging, mad with grief, she made each one of them lay a hand to their father’s dead body and swear that they would never do what he’d done, never take their own lives. Never give up on themselves. No surrender, she said, don’t any one of you dare surrender like he did. Because if you do, if you take your own life, then that’s a sin, a mortal bloody sin. You kill yourself and you kill me.

They swore over Red’s body. Then they went outside and stood with their arms round each other. Never for one moment had she doubted that she’d done the right thing, never. It was true; how could she bear it, how could anybody, to see another one turning into something he couldn’t look at in a mirror? Something she couldn’t look at herself, something she was ashamed of, something she could no longer love. Though she never said that out loud, she was sure she never said that out loud. But Danny knew. Danny remembered as his world came crashing down around him. Staring into this fireplace, all these years later, she knew she was right.

The inn’s ablaze; the acrid stink and glare of it is everywhere. Beams are cracking, glass exploding. Dan and Steve stand looking down at Joe, spread-eagled on the floor. But they are not looking at the dark stain round his groin. Their eyes are on his face, his expressionlessly, gloriously, enviably indifferent face. His freedom.

They look at each other. Without a word, Dan gets their hats from where they’ve tossed them on the bar. They put them on and tilt them, just so. They adjust the chinstraps under their noses. They do up their top buttons, raise one leg after the other to polish their boots on the backs of their trousers. They give each other the Greta Mob salute and raise their pistols. They stand clear and steady, they take aim. With their free hands, they cross themselves. They take a deep breath and Dan starts the count down, her own Danny. They move not a muscle, holding each other with their eyes.

Crash! Crash!

The flames leap and lunge, licking like famished tongues.
She sees it, clear as day. The way it was.

So. In the end, all the police got was a couple of bodies, same as all they got was Ned’s body. No surrender. No bloody surrender. And nothing to forgive. Then or ever.

Danny, Danny! Why didn’t she see? She could have told Maggie. It would have eased the girl, helped her to sleep of a night instead of having to work herself to a standstill. Taking it out of her own hide, that was the way Maggie coped. She knew, because it was the way she coped herself. And her mother before her.

Evenings at Eleven Mile: Maggie set by the hearth, latest baby at her breast, the fire lighting her face. Talking about the children, or Tom, or whatever needed doing about the place. Then her eyes resting on the old hat hung on the wall, and her voice slowing.

“Thought he was that flash, didn’t he? Him in his hat with the strap under his nose? Leader of the Mob.”

Ellen nods. “It was his idea, you know. He told me. The strap under the nose.”

“I know.”

“I told him it was daft looking. He told me I was daft looking; the only difference was I couldn’t help it.”

They laugh.

The funny things, the silly little things, they were all Maggie would ever talk about. As if the funny things could block out the charred stumps, the legless, faceless, blistered stumps of boys: only boys. Talking around and around the nightmare; it had been the death of her, Ellen is sure of it. Just the thought of the two of them, trapped like animals, the pain and the terror; Maggie had never been able to get past the pain and the terror. But it wasn’t like that, now she knows it wasn’t like that. No surrender. Ellen blinks and shakes her head, even laughs faintly. She will think of her daughter before she goes to sleep, will her to come so she can tell her. They sprang the trap, Maggie, they sprang the trap!

The fire is getting low, but it’s hardly worth putting on another log. Ellen bends forward: that little one there will do. Keep yourself warm, Maggie used to say. Mind you keep yourself warm, Ma. She stretches out her hands in front of the flames; she can almost see through the skin stretched thin around the thick
knots of vein, the knobby fingers, the brown spots.

She could do with Maggie right now. Maggie was like Ned, Maggie could always think of a stratagem.

“Have you heard what they’re saying about Dan? What’ll we do?”

“Stick to our story, stick to Ned’s story. Same as we’ve always done”.

“But this is different. Ned’s story is no use. They’re looking for proof, Maggie. I said I had proof.”

“You said you were his mother. Is that not proof enough? A mother’s word?”

“No, no, they’ll be after something else. Something they can’t argue with, something that proves there was no way in the world they could have escaped, that Dan Kelly and Steve Hart never got out of that inn alive…”

Jesus wept: the one time he matched it with his brother and they want to take it from him. Well, damned if they will. Damned if we’ll let them… except who was the ‘we’?

Maggie: the swollen limbs, the stretch marked belly, the face etched far deeper than its thirty eight years. Even then, dying, she was still fretting about Tom and how he’d manage. No need: he managed the way men have always managed, went off and found himself another woman. Steve’s sister, Rachel: and bred another six children out of her. On top of Maggie’s eleven: no bloody wonder the girl’s body gave up on her.

‘No surrender’, she whispered in Maggie’s ear as she wiped the sweaty face; ‘no surrender’, came the whispered reply. Maggie lifted a hand and beckoned to her eldest son, standing at the end of the bed. Her Edward. ‘We’re Kellys’, she said. ‘All of us. Don’t you forget it.’ The boy folded his mother’s hand in his.

Kate: no. She can’t think about Kate. Not now. Not straight after Danny.

Ellen knots the thread and holds up the quilt. It’s getting heavy. Stitching the family back together: sky blue for Annie and deep crimson for Maggie, purple for Kate and pink for Gracie; Dan is turquoise and Jim’s a goldy yellow. Ned’s is green, of course, same as his sash.

She yawns: what on earth time is it? Late, late; the quilt can wait. Time to turn out the light. Dream them, find them wherever they are. Listen. In the dark, she’s learnt to listen. Funny, after all the shouting and swearing, the slamming of doors and the thunder of hooves, to be listening to what nobody else
can hear… listening and waiting …

It’s Ned. With his back to me, but I know it’s him. Like the side of a house: that bloody armour. Who does he think he is, Brian Boru? Poor Mirth, he’ll break her bloody back …

Well, you think of a better idea, Ma!

He’s pointing, look you, thirteen blacksmiths, Ma, see? Hammering out the mould boards, mould boards, mould boards… Ned, Ned, how many times have I told you, thirteen’s unlucky? Why don’t you ever listen? What’s that? Listen yourself? Don’t you talk to me like that! And you needn’t go storming off either, just look at me will you …

I’m running again; sometimes I think I was born running, running and running but never getting there… because for all I’m running, I’m not moving. I should be, but I’m not. The space between us is getting bigger not smaller, and now he’s lepping from stone to stone, great big goat that he is… I’m singing out, I’m yelling, but they’ve whipped my voice away, or the wind has, or maybe he’s just not bloody listening as usual …

Mr. Bloody Know-it-all: just look at him, would you? Stood right up there on the very edge of the causeway, staring out over the sea. What, does he think the waves are just going to piddle off out of his way, like he’s Moses? Like he’s Jesus Christ, for dear sake, thinks he can walk on water … my God. That’s just what he does bloody think, that’s what he’s doing, look at him, walking straight out into it …

Ned, Ned! Child dear, will you stop! Hold on, you bloody headcase, wait for me! No, I’m not crying, I’m not, it’s only the rain; hail, it is, hail, whipping my face… I won’t be long, I swear… that’s it, wait, give us a smile, come on, give us a smile to go home with …

Damnation, what are you waving for? Get back here …

Ellen stares around the empty room. Outside, the sound of rain on empty paddocks. Ashes in an empty grate. Why could he never bloody wait?

November 11. Melbourne Gaol. De Castieau has told her she can have the day off, but she doesn’t want it. Though the handle of the mangle has never been heavier, the sheets never colder or clammier. Her arms and her back ache like
never before...

The clock strikes. Ten times.
She stares at the sheet, almost wrung through; sees his face, feels his breath as he kisses her. Yesterday. Only yesterday. She whispers the words of the wish again.

He comes back that night. With his green sash around his neck.

Stop it. Stop it. Who do you think you are, Ellen Kelly? I’ll tell you. You’re an old woman. You’ve done time and time’s done you. You’ve got bairns to mind. You’ve got clothes to mend.

She pushes herself out of her chair, turns around and lifts the Tilley lamp. Time to check on the wee ones, then take herself to bed. Stretch out on her back, fold her hands across her chest and drift off into the dark. Call up the dream mare; jump on her back and gallop away, away… to wherever it’s bright and sunshiny, wherever it’s the way it used to be. Fearless and free and bold.
CHAPTER THREE

What did you promise me, when you lay beside me?
You swore you’d marry me and not deny me …
If I swore I’d marry you, ’twas only to try you;
So bring your witness love, and I’ll not deny you …

Jack is leaning against the bar, beer to hand, watching Millie serve a customer down the other end of the bar. He starts at Brian’s hand on his shoulder.

“How goes it?”

“Fine, fine… is that the time?”

“You couldn’t find the dart board?”


“How do you know what I’m thinking?”

“Well, it’s what most blokes would be thinking. Thing is, though, Brian, she’s also a McAuliffe. Millicent McAuliffe. Her Dad was one of the Kelly sympathizers they jailed. Actually went to the same school as Dan Kelly. I’m just waiting till she finishes her shift…”

The door from the street swings wide. In races a boy with a stiff brown paper bag on his head. The cut out eyes look left and right. Bang! Bang! He fires his wooden stick at the two boys chasing him, turns and crashes into a barstool.

Brian grabs him before he can fall.

“Tim!” A bellow from the barman, who is there directly, grabbing Tim’s arm, snatching the bag off his head. “What do you think you’re doing? Do you know what time it is? Get home to your mother this minute, and that goes for those mates of yours as well. But apologize to this gentleman first…”

“Sorry.”

“That’s all right. It was an accident.”

The barman cuffs his son’s head.

“Sorry, sir.”

“That’s more like it. My apologies too, Mr. …”

“Cookson. Brian Cookson.”

“Can I please have my helmet?”
The barman holds the bag up high. The boy jumps for it and bolts.

“Let me guess. Ned Kelly?”

“Got it in one. Tim’s turn to be Ned.”

“Is that so? Well, it just so happens that Ned Kelly is the very reason I’m here, me and my colleague…” Brian nods towards Jack, who is leaning towards the barmaid and smiling. “The ‘Sun’ is investigating the possibility of doing a bit of a feature: thirty years on, you know. We’re taking a look around the North East: Beechworth, Glenrowan, Euroa, over the border in Jerilderie. Lay of the land, local colour, you know: background. Set the scene. And we’re very keen to hear what the people round here have to say about the Kellys: local knowledge. There’d still be a few who knew them, wouldn’t there? Anybody you’d recommend? I’d be much obliged.”

“No worries. Matter of fact, you’re in luck. Come through this way . . .”

Jack barely nods when Brian pats his shoulder and points. He follows the barman through to a table at the far end of the bar where an old man is sitting between two younger men. By the looks, one is his son. The old man’s shoulders are still broad, though stooped forward now. His jaw has the set of a fighter.

“Mr. Cookson, I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Isaac Wright. Wild, Mr. Cookson is writing a story on Ned for one of the newspapers, asked me if I knew anybody he could talk to. I said it was his lucky day . . .”

The old man drains his glass. Brian suppresses his excitement: Isaac Wright! On their way here, he and Jack had taken a look at the spot down behind the main street of Beechworth where Wild Wright and Ned Kelly had slugged it out. Twenty rounds, bare knuckles: he looks into the still fierce, bloodshot eyes and holds out his hand. With a grunt, Wright takes it. “Ned Kelly gave me the hiding of my life. I bloody deserved it too, and I’m the first to admit it. Every time. But it’s a long old story.” Wright drains his glass, sets it down and pushes it forward. He raises his eyebrows and sighs.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Wright. Beer?”
The barman takes his order. Brian pulls up a chair.

“Twenty rounds, am I right? London Prize Ring rules?”
“Ah, you know a thing or two then. That’s right, twenty rounds, and bare bloody knuckles.” Wild chuckles, raising his gnarled and calloused fists up before his face and feinting with them before stretching them out on the table again. “Tell you what, by the time we finished they were bloody all right. Couldn’t hardly move them for weeks. He were mad, Ned Kelly. Mad as a cut snake.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Bugger never knowed when he’d had enough, did he? Never knowed when he was beat. If Ned thought he was in the right, he’d fight till he damn well dropped. And then get up and fight again.”

“So he was in the right this time?”

“My word he was. My bloody fault, no two ways about that. I stole the horse, he done the time. And copped a beating. That mongrel constable, I’d have his guts for garters, to this day I would. The police got away with murder, you know. Absolute bloody murder.”

The barman brings the first round of drinks. Brian settles himself for a long night.

Lamp held high, Ellen looks down at her grandchildren. The two little ones lie tucked like spoons in the one bed; Katie has the other to herself. The girl is sprawled on her back, one arm hanging out over the edge of the bed, her mouth open as if hungry for all that the world has to give… don’t be. Don’t. Gently, Ellen lays the child’s arm back across her breast. She strokes a stray tendril of hair from the sleeping face, thinking how it will light up when Jim comes back and tells her she can have the pony. She’s her mother’s daughter all right. As the mother had been hers: another horse mad little girl. Not a nervous bone in Kate Kelly’s body. You could throw her up on the back of anything in the yard and she’d just laugh. Like the time Ned legged her up on to that flash chestnut, some fancy thoroughbred he and George had picked up God knows where. She was in the kitchen, she came out the back door just as the colt jerked the rope out of Ned’s hand. For the space of a gasp, horse and rider were motionless, carved like some statue; then the colt reared, spun round on his hind legs and took off, hooves thudding as fast as her own heart. Kitty! She dropped
her bucket with a clang and ran across to Ned.

“You goddamn fool, what were you thinking? The child’ll break her neck!”

Shouting, punching his chest. He grabbed her fists, spun her round and wrapped his arms round her. Together, they followed the blue ribbon flying above the small rider’s head.

“She’ll be all right. You’ll see. There’s no bad in that horse. She’ll be all right.”

“How can you just stand here and say that? Look at the lick they’re going at!”

“He’s got a good turn of foot, that’s for sure.”

“Jesus, Ned, he’s going to jump the bloody creek!”

But no; at the very last moment, the colt swerved. Slowed, tossed his head, turned towards them. She sobbed with relief. Gallop dropped to canter, trot, walk, and standstill. Ears pricked, the colt snorted as they walked up to him. Holding her breath, whispering… easy, boy, easy… Ellen reached for the reins. Ned was close behind her, holding his arms up. Kate, bright eyed, laughing, launched herself into them; he swung her around him, the deep and the light laugh chiming together.

If wishes were horses then the Kellys wouldn’t have a worry in the world.

Ellen bends and strokes her granddaughter’s sleeping face. The child does have a look of her aunt Annie. She hopes to God it’s only a look. Sleep well, sleep well; she goes through the curtain to her own side of the room and sets the lamp on the dresser. Annie, her lovely Annie. Those wide set eyes, that creamy skin time never got the chance to score and scratch. Married at fifteen, dead at eighteen. The first one they wrecked. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Ellen unbuttons her blouse slowly.

That bastard Flood, strutting round Beechworth like he owned the place. Even after the funeral, there he was in his jacket with its shiny buttons: she’d turned on her heel, walked the other way, or God knows what she’d have done. Just as well he got sent to Melbourne. All those years ago and the name still turns her stomach. Might be dead, for all she knows. She hopes he bloody well is, and she hopes it wasn’t in his bed either. Line of duty, wasn’t that what they called it? When one of their own got what was coming to him?

Ernest Flood: oh yes, very earnest. So very eager to see that Annie – Mrs.
Gunn, his dear Mrs. Gunn – would get her stolen horse back, that none of the ‘guilty parties’ would ‘tamper’ with her. ‘Tamper’: get in the way of his own tampering more like. ‘After you, ma’am’, like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. Telling her what a great seat she took on a horse, and such a pretty little mare too… well, he would know. Ned and George used to say that if they ever wanted a lesson in stealing horses, they’d know who to ask. She remembers George opening his eyes wide and turning up the palms of his hands like he did, and saying how wonderful it was, what you could get away with if you could just keep your face straight? She could see nothing wonderful about it at all, and she damn well told him so.

Flood with his droopy eyes and his uniform and his oily black hair telling Annie not to worry, he would look after her. He would take care of it all. Not to worry her pretty little head, he’d ride with her to the courthouse himself. There’d be no intimidation, not if he had anything to do with it. He’d make sure she got her horses back, no worries. He knew how hard it must be, trying to run a place with no man to help her; if there was anything he could do, anything at all… only the one thing he wanted to do.

Ah well. Ellen reaches up, unpins her hair. Annie’s another one well out of it. Worshipped her big brother, she did; married one of his best mates, for goodness sake. To have seen Ned hung would have killed her all over again.

What age would she have been now? In her fifties: fifty seven, yes fifty seven. Probably a grandmother like herself. Her life not even half lived, and all because Alex and Ned were behind bars. There’d have been no such thing if they’d been home, that bastard Flood would never have got next nor near her. Like some slinking black dog, not risking the herd, circling the ewe grazing on her own, the girl still grieving her dead baby, and her man behind bars and their place to run on her own …

Not that she wasn’t doing that half the time anyway. Alex meant well, but he was never damn well there. Though that wasn’t really his fault, either. It was the same for all their men, what with running stock, what with branding and shoeing and clearing and fencing just to pay for the roof over their heads. Still, you would think he could have stayed home when the baby died. The first baby.

Easy for you to say. Ellen stares at the pins in her hand. Easy for you to
pass judgment. Where were you?  Well?

There’s Annie at the backdoor; the baby buried yesterday.

“Hello, Ma. Can I give you a hand with the washing?”

Lonely. Heartsick. Bloody men, never there when you need them, all over you when you didn’t. Hugs, kisses: sitting out on the verandah with her arm round her daughter; listening. Saying what she could. That there’d be other babies. That Alex would be back, that of course he felt it. He just didn’t know what to do about it.

“You don’t have to tell me, pet, you don’t have to tell me. Sure you’ve seen me standing over Mary Jane’s wee grave often enough. Never even knew what her name was, the soul. You don’t forget. Not the first; never the first. But you get over it. You have to. You and Alex, with your whole lives ahead of you …”

That was right. You did get it right sometimes. The girl went home with her shoulders back and her chin up. Ellen drops the pins into the little dish on the dresser and looks in the mirror. But what about the other times? What about them? Where were you then?

Silence; silence in court. Did you not notice? Did you not see what was going on? They were the first words out of Ned’s mouth after they let him and Alex out and the three of them stood staring at the newly dug earth down by the creek. She looked up into his eyes then turned away, thinking about all the other washing days. Days when she was in such a tearing hurry, in such a lather to get done before Bill Frost turned up that she never noticed the red mark on Annie’s neck, never asked about the new lace collar, or why she was in such a hurry too.

She draws her hair over one shoulder to brush it, the way she always brushed it in front of Red. She remembers how odd it felt, brushing it in front of Bill that first time. Telling herself Red wouldn’t mind, would never have wanted her to bury herself along with him; telling herself that the children needed a father. Letting her guard down: the pleasure of having a man lean down from his horse to hoist her up in front of him, of having somebody to split a load of wood for you, or fix a fence. The least she could do was offer him a drink. Only then he put out his hand and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear…

But Bill was no Red. She found that out soon enough. The same as Annie found out. Ellen brushes harder. Dear God, not even noticing the girl was
pregnant again, her own daughter. It took Maggie to tell her. That woke her up all right, but a bit bloody late. By the time she was holding her first grandchild, Annie was dead and buried. The baby wasn’t far behind.

Why didn’t she make the girl come and stay at Eleven Mile while Alex and Ned were in jail? Why didn’t she ride with her to the court at Benalla that day? There’d have been no Flood smarming all over her then. Why didn’t she just stand up to the bastard, send him packing? Instead, she laid Annie out; instead, she folded her daughter’s hands beneath her small breasts, ring finger on top. If ever a girl needed her mother… but where was that mother? Up the paddock letting that randy skite lift her skirt and slide his hand in between her legs. Some mother.

Guilty, guilty, guilty. Ellen turns off the lamp. For a moment, she hugs herself, rocking to and fro. Then she pulls back the blankets and lays herself out flat. She clasps her hands across her chest the way she’s done for years. She stares up into the dark… the way she’s done for years.

Little Katie: just budding. Next thing the boys will be round her too. Maybe she’ll be lucky in love. She’d want to be luckier than the rest of them. Even going back to her own mother.

She hasn’t thought about her mother for years: Mary McCluskey that was. The bride with her feet still scarred from climbing up Croagh Patrick, the teller of sad stories, the baker of bread: the emigrant, arms linked with her husband and son on the deck of the England, watching the dark scribble on the horizon fade and disappear: all these were her mother. Mother Mary, meek and mild. Spending the rest of her life in a place where her bread wouldn’t rise the way it used to and none of her friends were ever going to drop by; where her arms and legs were red and swollen from mosquitoes and the ants got into everything; a place where the entire reason she had ever let him talk her into it, the light of her life, her son Patrick, was drowned.

A floorboard creaks.

“Gran?”

“Christ Almighty, what is it?”

“It’s all right, Gran, it’s only me.”

Pushing herself up, fumbling for matches.

“Katie! For goodness sake, child …”
The lamplight flares upon her granddaughter’s anxious face. The girl holds out her upturned hand; the fingertips are moist and yellowish red.

“I think I’ve got the curse, Gran.”

Ellen pushes back the covers. Muttering to herself, she pulls out the bottom drawer of the dresser and rummages. “In here. Somewhere in here … ah!” She pulls out a brown paper parcel, passes it to her granddaughter, heaves herself stiffly back up.

“Right. Give us that. Here.”

She sets the parcel on the bed and unties the string. Inside, a belt and some pins lie on a pile of folded cloths.

“There you are. We’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

“It is the curse, isn’t it? The blood?”

“Yes, yes. You’ve got your monthlies, pet.. Who calls it the curse?”

“The girls at school.”

“Still. I remember your mother calling it that.”

“Did she? Why do we?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Lot of nonsense it is, for you can’t have children if you don’t bleed, so you should be thankful. It’s the way God made us, and that’s all there is to it. Now. Take your knickers off. Go on, I’m not looking! Step you into this belt …”

Katie tiptoes back under the curtain to change her nightdress. Ellen shivers and tucks her feet back under the covers; what on earth time of night is it?

Not a curse, just a nuisance, a bloody nuisance. She smiles. A worse nuisance when you missed, though. Though that’s not entirely true either …

*Day after day, checking, waiting: still no sign, and you always so regular. Sneaking out to the hayshed to see Red because Da had barred him the house: telling him. The shock on his face, your sick swallow of fear that he was just going to be like the rest of them; but then came the laugh, the lifting you off your feet, the spinning you round, the excitement bubbling. Fine, fine, everything was going to be fine! Wrapping yourselves round each other; his voice tickling your ear: well, there’s no need to be careful now, is there? And the sweet, sweet smell of hay …*
“Gran? Gran, can I come in beside you? My bed’s all … you know …”
Ellen groans. She knows. Another job for the morning.
“Yes, yes, child. Careful, careful: go to sleep now. I’m bone weary.”
“All right.”
Ellen turns on her side.
“Gran? Gran, are you asleep?”
“What is it?”
“Gran, I’m a woman now, aren’t I?”
“Yes. Go to sleep.”
“I can have babies.”
“You can have nothing of the sort: not till you’re married.”
“Yes, you can! Only you’re not meant to.”
“Indeed you are not, so why would you be even thinking about it? I’ll talk to you in the morning.”
“Will you, Gran? I mean, really talk? Tell me about my mother? And Aunt Annie and Aunt Maggie and you? Like you said you would?”
“In the morning.”
“All right.”
Katie wriggles down the bed. She turns to one side. To the other. Back again.
“Gran?”
Ellen sighs. What now?
“Gran, did you have other boyfriends? Before Grandfather, I mean?”
“Indeed I did. In the saddlers where I worked. They were all after me.”
“In a saddlers? I never knew you worked in a saddlers.”
“Well, now you do. McNaughton’s, it was called. When we were first in Australia and still living in Melbourne. Da… your great grandfather… was just getting set up. We all had to help. We all wanted to help.”
“So the boys in the saddlers liked you?”
“Like me? Child dear, they were daft about me! Never done wanting a look, a smile, a word. If it wasn’t arguing about whose turn it was to work next to me in the shop, it was pestering me to sing them a song, or walk home with them, or share their licorice and sherbet …”
“What did you sing?”
“Lots of things. Same as I sang on the boat coming over; the sailors thought
the world of me too. I’ve told you that, haven’t I? When Irish eyes are smiling: that was the boys’ favorite too.”

“… all the world is bright and gay …”

“That’s it. Your Grandfather and your Uncle Pat used to laugh at them, big strong men that they were with their beards and their scars and tattoos, but sitting there with the tears tripping them.”

“Gran! Is that true?”

“Would I say it was if it wasn’t?”

“And did the boys at the saddlers have a favorite?”

“A favorite? Me. I was their favorite. Whatever I wanted to sing, that was what they wanted to hear. But I was far more interested in Pat’s mates.”

“Uncle Pat, you mean?”

“Yes. Your great uncle Patrick that died. My brother. His friends were always round the place, showing off on their horses, having races, jumping the big log …”

“Did you like any of them?”

“Well now, there were two or three I didn’t mind. Nice lads. But not a one of them was a patch on your Grandfather. I knew he was the one the minute I laid eyes on him.”

“How?”

How? How not … the slow smile, the sinewy big hand hooked over his belt: the fullness in your throat, the pulse in your belly: your entire self willing him to cross the room towards you… till finally he’s on his feet and he’s stretching like a big cat and he’s smiling and he’s coming towards you ….

“You can’t explain it. You just know.”

“Will I know?”

“You will.”

“So once you know, you get married.”

Not if your Da is dead set against you taking up with a convict, you don’t. She hadn’t reckoned on that; but then her Da hadn’t reckoned on her …

The sky barely pink in the east, Red leading out Misty, her following with Nellie mare, swinging up into the saddle for the ride to Melbourne. The priest outside St. Francis’ church, lovely man that he was, making the sign of the cross over them as they rode away; riding through the streets of the city, every man
and his dog out to celebrate the independence of Port Phillip... the
independence of them! Her with a ring on her finger, the whole world sparkling;
the two of them singing ‘It’s a long way to Tipperary’, racing the last cut up the
road to Da’s house, her jumping off into the arms of her very own Tipperary man
... ‘all the world was bright and gay’…”

“Gran? So once you know, you get married?”

“That’s right. And once you’re in bed, you go to sleep.”

“But I want to know, Gran…”

Her Da had come round. He had to; her belly was starting to show. Two
good men, you couldn’t ask for better: her Da and Red. Even after the drink got
to him, even that long year rotting away in Avenel, Red was twice the man Bill
Frost could ever be. Her Da and Red: between them they’d spoiled her. She
could see that now. She’d just taken it for granted that all men were like them. It
never even occurred to her that Bill Frost would think less of her; that he’d never
ever had any intention of marrying her. At least George did that; I’m making an
honest woman of you, he said. If it says on the certificate you’re 36, then 36 you
are. Let X mark the spot, he said, as she made her mark. And when it was his
turn to sign, he put an X too. The perfect match, he said, and blew her a kiss.

Lucky in love. She shouldn’t complain, really. 16 good years she and Red
had; well, 15, you couldn’t call that last year good; and nearly 3 with George.
18 years: compare that with Annie who hardly even got 3. 18 years; that was
about the same as Maggie. Maggie and her Tom. Except by then the whole
world had changed and all the love in the world couldn’t do a thing to change it
back again.

Kate. Poor Kate: the unluckiest of them all. Drowning away up there in
Forbes, with not a soul near her; and now Kate’s daughter wanting to know ...
what on earth is she going to tell the child?

Katie wriggles further down the bed; a few seconds, then she reaches up and
lays her soft hand over her grandmother’s.

“I know there’s stuff you haven’t told me. About my mother. About Uncle
Ned and Uncle Dan and Auntie Maggie. But all you ever say is never you mind
or time enough for that. Well, I’m a Kelly woman too now…”

“Didn’t I say I would tell you? Well, I will. But in the morning, not the
middle of the night.”
“Promise?”

“Promise. Now go to sleep!”

Gradually, the girl’s breathing slows. Ellen closes her eyes, but it’s no use. She knows it’s no use. It’s always the way of it; the more you need to sleep, the less you can. She’ll be fit for nothing in the morning.

So what is she going to tell the child? Beyond her mother drowning, she’s always known that. She and Jim sat her down with her brother and sister and told them the very day after Jim brought them from Forbes. A tragic accident: they said it was a tragic accident. Like what happened to their great uncle Pat all those years ago. But they didn’t say anything about the accident going all the way back to their mother tossing her head at a randy young constable called Fitzpatrick. They didn’t say anything about their mother making a spectacle of herself on stages in Melbourne and Sydney, never mind her ‘season’ in Adelaide, never mind the bottle of gin in her bag. That was no story for children; it still isn’t. And certainly no story for a young girl who’s just started her bleeds. Ellen twists her fingers in and out of each other. At least she knows Dan and Ned were like themselves when they died.

She will not believe that Kate did it deliberately. That she just gave in. Will not, cannot believe that. In her dreams, Kate still sings songs that the two of them used to sing together, long, long ago. She wouldn’t still be singing if she’d given in, now would she? But then the nightmares come and there’s no singing in them. Just a white horse galloping round and round a circus ring with Kate on its back in her black habit with the lace at the throat, smiling like a clown. A whip cracks, the tent splits, her body catapults away up into the sky with her smile stretched into a bright red O …

Kate’s trouble was she was could always find an excuse. If she wanted to do something, she just talked herself and anybody else she needed into believing it was the one and only thing to do, no matter what. A walk by the river, clear her head, stretch her legs: how easily did that turn into an accident just waiting to happen? Waiting, wanting… no. Don’t go there.

She was drunk, of course. Like her father before her. Drowning their sorrows. Kate was only three when he died; what could you remember at three? She said she did, though, said she remembered the hack and scrape of him breathing in the dark, so raw it hurt to listen to… and so it did. It did. Ellen
bites her lip, blinks rapidly. Stick to the story. Kate was not in her right mind. That was all there was to it.

...Your mother should never have been left on her own, you see. She was running a fever, hot and cold, still sore and weak from having a baby. She went out for a breath of fresh air, that’s all. And then she had a dizzy turn up on the bridge, grabbed for the railing, it broke and she fell in. And yes, your father was to blame. You’re his daughter so I’m sorry to have to say it, but there’s no doubt about it. What sort of a man runs off and leaves his wife alone when she’s sick, when she’s just had a baby? Never mind his other bairns? Has he come looking for you, Bricky Foster? Has he come in a buggy to take you back to Forbes? Not a bit of him. Just as well, I wouldn’t like to be responsible for your Uncle Jim… or me, come to that. I will never forget Jim’s face when he told me; how your front door at Forbes was half open and in his state of exhaustion he just walked in, and there were your wee white faces all huddled together on a couch looking back up at him. He knew right there and then that he’d be bringing you back here, and so he did. Only your baby sister Catherine died on the way, so we decided to call you Katie instead. So there’d still be a Kate Kelly. It must have been meant to be, too, for you’re the spitting image of your mother...

Yes. That’s what she’ll say.

It’ll be all right. Katie’s a sensible child. Look at the way she just pinned herself up there and got another nightdress. Nothing like her mother at the same time, the performance she put on. Pinning her hair up, parading around the kitchen, getting the sidesaddle out, riding in and out of Greta as if she owned the place. You’d think no girl ever grew up before, said Maggie, and threw a towel at her. As for her, all she could think of was Annie; all she could say was be careful, just you be careful my girl. Kate was all big eyes, all cross-my-heart and hugs and kisses and promises. She’ll be fine, thought Ellen, she’ll be fine. But only a week or so later …

*Going to get feed for the chooks, opening the stable door, there they are.*
*Kate leaning back up against the hay bales with her hair loose and the colour in her cheeks and that bad young rip licking his chops and paddling his fingers in the palm of her hand.*

*She sees red: that’s all they bloody need, a 14 year old bairn up the duff.*
*She grabs a pitchfork and goes for him. He’s out of there in no time, vanished*
like the slippery lizard he is.

“It’s not what you think, Ma, I came in for a bridle and he came in after me...”

“You stupid little tart! Don’t give me that ...”

The pitchfork thuds against the wall; the bridles shiver.

“Wagging your tail like a bitch in heat! You think I can’t see what’s in front of my own eyes? With a policeman, for chrissake! I suppose you want to end up like your sister; do you, want to end up like Annie? Constable Fitzpatrick? Two-faced bloody chancer ... I suppose he told you how gorgeous you were? How beautiful? How different from all the other skirts he’s lifted?”

“Suppose nothing! Shut up, Ma! Stop, would you, stop and listen!”

But Ellen’s arm is already lifted, her daughter’s face already slapped.

The shed is suddenly charged with silence. For a moment, Kate stands perfectly still, hand raised to the red mark on her cheek. Then she spins away, darts to the wall and snatches a bridle. At the door she pauses.

“You had no right to do that, Ma. No bloody right. I loved Annie too. Don’t you ever speak to me like that again. Don’t you ever tell me what I can and can’t do. I can look after myself.”

Standing at the shed door, Ellen watches her daughter galloping up Bald Hill, as far away from her mother as she can get.

Guilty, guilty. Kate comes back of course. She’s nowhere else to go. They live in the same small rooms. To her brothers and sisters, Kate’s just the same as ever, full of life, teased and teasing. She speaks to her mother when she has to. She makes sure she’s never alone with her.

Until that April: that fifteenth day of April.

Ellen is in the kitchen, getting some dinner for Dan, who’s just come in. Constable Fitzpatrick appears at the front door, his uniform open at the neck. He’s pissed as a newt. Without so much as a by your leave, he barges in; says he’s come to arrest Dan.

“You’ll not arrest him without a warrant.” She marches through from the kitchen and brandishes the soup ladle at him.

“Ma, Ma, it’s not worth worrying about. I’ll go with him, I don’t mind. That’s right, isn’t it, Alex? I’ve time for a bite to eat first, have I? Been out all day, I’m starved.”

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“No worries. No hurry. Eat away.”

Fitzpatrick leans against the wall, talking to Danny, looking at Kate. Ellen steps back into the kitchen. When she hears Kate’s shout, she races, grabbing the fire shovel. She runs at the groping, squalling couple, swings the shovel. Fitzpatrick yelps and turns on her, cursing. There’s a loud crack and he’s holding his wrist and screaming like a stuck pig …

And who bandages the damn thing, for Christ’s sake? Who mops up the mess, who listens to him swear they’ll not hear another word about it, Mrs. Kelly, not another word. Who watches him ride off … straight to the station to scream blue bloody murder.

April the fifteenth: the date’s branded on her brain: the day the misery starts. Next thing, the police come marching in, waving their piece of paper at her. She’s standing there hugging baby Alice, shaking her head. Louts, that’s all they are, louts in uniform. They grab her, one on each side, bustle her out the door.

“My fault, Ma, it’s all my fault!”

“It is no such thing, Kitty.” But already her voice sounds faint and far away. “No such thing. It’s only one man’s fault and that’s Constable Fitzpatrick. Drunk on duty, indecent assault... Who’s going to take the word of a lying bastard like him? I’ll be back in no time at all…”

They load her and baby Alice on to the police buggy, the baby bawling like she already knows the verdict. No time is three years. The judge, the jury, the courtroom: they take Fitzpatrick’s word for everything.

Constable Alexander Fitzpatrick. God’s gift to women. Couldn’t stand a little country girl like Kate giving him the brush off. Not her fault she’s a good looking girl, any more than it’s Annie’s or Maggie’s. What’s the worst thing any of them have done? Be female and be Kellys.

She can’t tell Katie that.

Or about Adelaide, Kate in Adelaide. Kate’s ‘season’ that never was. Maggie and she used to spend hours of an evening, looking out over the hills, talking, wondering, worrying away at the thing like a dog at a bone: what did happen in Adelaide? Kate never would say. When she came home, they hinted, prompted, asked straight out. She just shrugged. Said she had lost interest, that there was no future in the theatre. None of your business anyway. Have a drink. God only knows. Or maybe He doesn’t. Maybe he just turned a blind eye. Again.
So much: so much that nobody will ever know.

She pulls the blankets up to her chin, feels the loose skin, the boniness of her jaw: nothing but a scrawny old carcass now. Work to do, though, she’s still got work to do. Mending and minding. Don’t fall at the last.

Beside her, Katie stirs and giggles. Ellen smiles; child must be having a nice dream. Of course a child’s dreams would be nice; they’ve no reason not to be. Dreams come from your life, don’t they? So Katie’s would be fresh and bright and exciting. Not like hers: all the left overs, the bits and pieces, a grab bag of different scraps stitched and knotted together. Like her quilt.

She will finish it soon. It will be something to leave behind. Something to show what she can do, that she hasn’t given in. Something bright and warm. A remembrance. Not of the notorious Mrs. Kelly, not of some old lag: just a reminder of Gran. At her age, when memories are treasures, bright lorikeet flashes in the daily round of jobs you can do with your eyes shut, you need to make something of them. You need to think about what they’ll say about you when you’re gone.

It pleases her to fancy Katie, a grown woman with her own man beside her, snuggling down under her Gran’s quilt; to think of her starting her own family, of children, grandchildren even, asking how long it took Great Gran to stitch it.

Children are a blessing. You have to believe that. And she’s brought a few of them into the world, sturdy boys and girls who wave to her from gates or verandahs when Jim drives her into town. Maggie isn’t the only one who’s been glad of her hands, steadying them while they squatted or holding them while they pushed; who’s been thankful for firm fingers cupping a breast so the little one could latch on. She went whenever they asked, rain or shine. Unhooked her bag from the back of the door and went. The bag still hangs there: camphor and lavender, clean cloths, a pair of sharp scissors. Neat and tidy and ready to go. Still.

Work: that’s the thing. You have to have something to do. Work to live, live to work; something to do. Always. Even in jail… no, specially in jail… she’d ask for stitching or mending. Anything to get her through those long empty evenings. That’s one thing about the Kellys; nobody could ever say they were lazy. Even Kate: if she turned her nose up at needlework it was only because she could never sit still long enough.
She understood that. She’d been like it herself, all those years ago in Ireland. Fine when the teacher read them stories out loud, when you could listen and pretend it was you saving the day or you turning the tables; but copying out on your slate? Printing neat little letters, adding up sums, getting your knuckles rapped when you went over the lines? No thank you. That was your time to scurry along the far side of the hedge, duck in under the trees on the hill, dip your jam jar into the stream and pull it out brimming over with frogspawn. That was your time to act out the teachers’ stories, or your own, to play games like the ones Kate and Jim used to play, riding their ponies bareback up the back paddock.

Thick as thieves they were, Kate and Jim. Used to wag school together, hide from Ned and Maggie. Jim was always happy to play her daft games, to swoop her up in the saddle in front of him and carry her across the creek, to run her pony around him on a long rein so she could practice her trick riding. When they lagged him, Kate sobbed like it was her they were locking up.

If she caught them wagging, they got a hiding too. Because she never forgot what her Da said: they were there to improve themselves. She went up to see him at Glenmore before they left for Avenel and she promised him she’d see to it they all went to school, that they all learnt to read and write. Avenel Common School: Ned and Annie and Meg and little Jim. He was little, then. After they moved back to Greta, she sent the young ones to school there: Jim, Kate, Danny, Grace.

Most of the time. Of course they skipped days here and there, what child didn’t? She couldn’t be looking out for them all the time, she’d enough to do without that. She left it to Ned and Maggie, mostly. Kate and Jim knew that, bad little rogues that they were. They knew when she just couldn’t be bothered, when she’d look the other way. Ned was the one who chased them. From the moment he signed Red’s death certificate, Ned was the man of the house. Head of the family, and none of them had better forget it. Even sat with his feet up in front of the fire of a night time, just like his Da.

But far bossier than his Da. Whatever Ned said, that was the way it had to be. Joe Byrne was the only one who ever argued with him. Ned and Joe at their newspapers, punching at the page with their fingers or putting on some la-di-dah voice, making a joke of it all. Ned pacing and waving his arms about, Joe
pushing the pen across the paper, telling him to slow down for chrissake: right bloody pair they were! They knew most of the letters they wrote off by heart, Maggie said. Much good it did them, Ellen said back. What judge ever read them? What jury ever heard them? Where were those bits of paper when they needed them, when did they ever get ‘used in evidence’? Maggie sighed and shook her head. Locked away in some lawyer’s filing cabinet, she supposed. Out of sight, out of mind. But they’d be found one day and they’d be printed, she was sure of it. Ned’s story, in Ned’s own words. It would come out. It would.

“One day, Ma. Maybe too late for us. But one day.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just do. I saw them, I read them. Somebody will find them, somebody we’ve never even heard of, maybe somebody not even born yet. One day. And read them to somebody else. And then somebody else again, and so on and so on... can you not see it?”

“I’m trying, Maggie, I’m trying. I mean, what else are we doing here but minding what they say about him? Seeing they tell the story straight? However hard it gets, and does it ever get hard. You know, Jim knows; we’ve no sooner got one set of lies straightened out than there’s another one. You’d think it’d be more trouble than it’s worth. You’d think they could just say what happened, just give our Ned a bit of peace and quiet at last.”

One day, thinks Ellen. When is one day?

Letters. All this fuss over letters. Far better to go and have it out face to face. Say what you have to say. Fist to fist if they won’t listen. But you can’t do that once you’re an outlaw. She sometimes wonders what would have happened if Ned had kidnapped that MP Cameron that he wrote to, or some of his mates in the government. If he’d holed them up in a cave in the Wombat ranges for a couple of days till they’d heard what he had to say. And then let them go. Let them live to tell the tale, like McIntyre. Except McIntyre never told the half of it...

One day.

Sometimes she thinks Jim doesn’t really mind. Hunched over the kitchen table, tongue peeping out, pen poking out of his big hand, that’s when he looks
most like Ned. Probably feels most like him as well. It’s something to do.
Something to do with his life.

Letters might be the way to go with this Cookson man. Pictures, my eye: he’s after more than pictures. Jim could write a letter saying how we know Dan’s dead, some sort of signed statement, like when you identify a body… another bloody letter. Why, for God’s sake? Why should anybody ever have to write letters like that?

Calm down. Just think about what they need to do? They need to stop them running the story about Dan and Steve in the Sun. That means stopping Cookson. If he doesn’t give them a story, there won’t be one. When he comes back tomorrow morning, she’ll be ready. Sly bugger, like they all are, telling the bairns he’ll bring them ‘something nice’. Get them out of the way so he can get her on her own more like. Well. She’s not done yet.

She’s not. She’s done it before, she can do it again. Blame the police; blame Fitzpatrick. Stringybark? Self defence. The police with their guns, their ammunition, tracking our boys like animals, even down to bringing their long straps with them: the long straps they used to tie dead bodies to horses. Kill or be killed, that’s what it was. No choice. It was the police shot first, even poor bloody Kennedy. But what does Ned do? He lets McIntyre go. He lets him go scot free. He could have shot him and he didn’t. Why don’t people ask about that? Why don’t they ever ask for Ned’s side of the story?

Right. She doesn’t have to change a thing. No need. Just go through it all, same as she’s done… how many times before? No need to answer questions about Dan or Steve or anything else. Let him scribble away. Then tell him she’s tired and that’s all she has to say. Leave her in peace. Leave. Her. In peace. Her eyelids droop and close.

“Ned?”

“It’s Jim, Ma, it’s Jim.”

“What are you doing in black, Jim?”

KERRACK! Whip crack, horse plunge. Into the ring, around and around the ring, gallops Kate. Kate Kelly, Ned Kelly’s sister. In her tight fitting costume, her black veil streaming, galloping to the centre, making her horse rear; waving her arm to the audience …

Those two red spots on her cheeks; since when has Kate Kelly needed rouge?
Calling to Jim to get her out of there, get her out of sight, but he can’t hear and it’s not him any more anyway; it’s this white face clown with side-whiskers and dressed up in a police uniform, he’s the one cracking the whip… Two more clowns somersaulting in, head over heels, catching Kate as she flies through the air, tossing her to and fro, to and fro… Maggie, dashing into the ring, tearing off her sister’s veil. Clowns clapping, clowns clapping… two blind crosses where Kate’s eyes used to be, her mouth a scarlet blob…

Ellen’s eyes snap open. Beside her, Katie sleeps on. Dear God: she hasn’t had that dream for years, years and years. Her heart thuds; in the dark, in the still, the images surge…

The night after the execution. Jim and Kate, dressed in black, set up on that stage in the Apollo hall. Half of Melbourne trooping past, gawking at them like circus freaks. God Almighty. Ned hardly even cold: what in God’s name were they thinking? Kate, of course: Kate’s idea. And as if that wasn’t enough, they had to take themselves all the way to Sydney; ‘The Kelly Show’ they called it. Exhibition, she called it. Kate said it was fund raising for a North East Republic, but nobody in the North East ever saw a penny of it. The money all went on shipping the horses to Sydney, on booking the place, on paying the agents, on being fined by the police for ‘creating a nuisance’.

“Why did you let her, why in God’s name did you let her?”

“There’s no stopping Kate once she’s got her heart set on something, Ma. You know that. And somebody had to look after her.”

Maggie took it hardest. She and Kate could barely speak to each other. They patched it over for their mother’s sake, but it was pretty patchy patching. First Maggie, then Kate came hissing in Ellen’s ear as she sat by the hearth at Eleven Mile. In the end, she bailed the pair of them up. But didn’t rage, didn’t rip into them, for all she wanted to, for all they deserved it. That was what they were expecting, she could see it in their faces, because that was what she’d always done. But she was too tired; quite simply, too bloody tired. She set them down at the kitchen table and pointed to the empty places. Whatever their differences, she said, they were still Kellys. Had the Kellys not more need to be sticking together than ripping each other apart? Had there not been enough ripping? They looked at each other in silence; finally, Maggie reached for Ellen’s hand, and Kate’s, and laid the three of them on top of each other.
“Let bygones be bygones, then. We’ll say no more about it.”

Easy said: but bygones, by then, were all they had to talk about.

Jim was relieved. He clapped his hands when he came in on the three of them sitting at the table, hand on hand. Then walked across and put the kettle on.

Her last son, her last Kelly son. Convict son of a convict father. Lagged and lagged again: they’d got so used to him not being there that there was nothing for him to do when he was. He never got to ride with the gang; he was never there when he should have been, when what he said or did could have made any sort of a difference. All those mad meetings after the execution, with Tom and the rest agitating for another Ned to lead the rebellion, to set up the Republic of North East Victoria: how was that ever going to work? How could there ever be another Ned? Jim knew that; he had no need of Constable Robert Graham to tell him. What they did at the races with Graham that day was the right thing, beyond any shadow of a doubt. Ned said so too. People thought more of Jim Kelly, not less.

In the dark, Ellen frowns. So many years by her side, but time and again she’s feels like she’s looking at a stranger. After the races, for God’s sake, when finally there was a bit of peace and quiet, when you’d think he’d content himself and settle down, what does he do but go hurtling off to Cootamundra with that fool of a Wild Wright and get himself lagged again? As if he hadn’t spent enough time in jail: Wangaratta, Beechworth, Wagga, Darlinghurst, he’d spent years behind bars. What did that do to a man? He came out with a trade – boot making - but what else? What else did he learn?

Yet here he still is, serving out the rest of his time with her. ‘Jim will look after you, Ma.’ Ned. Her good sons.

What time is it, she wonders? It’s pitch black, black as no time at all ... high time, low time, slow time …

Walking back in the door at Eleven Mile again, low time, slow time: there and not there. Walking up the path, into the house, the rooms, the hearth that he built with his own hands. He was everywhere; the print of his thumb where the paint hadn’t dried, the chopping board he made her from an off cut of wood, the order of the bridles hanging in the shed. You kept turning a corner and looking for him.

The meetings were like that too: Ned’s friends crowded into the one room,
their eyes on Tom and Maggie but seeing... what? Talk of rebellion, revenge, revolution, a republic of North East Victoria. And her sitting among them, catching herself listening for Ned’s voice the very same instant she knew she’d never tell him to hold his tongue again.

She came to hate those meetings. They were sad and useless and after them she had sad, useless dreams. There’d be Ned and the sea, as usual, only he wouldn’t be coming up out of it towards her. He’d be standing with his back to her, staring out across the water. The rain would be teeming down as usual, streaming over the rocks, trickling down to the waves at his feet, the snarls of grey green weed, the seething clots of brown and black. He’d be telling her something, she’d be watching his lips moving, but the wind would always whip the words away at the last second so she can never ever make out what it is she’s supposed to do …

She closes her eyes, opens them on the same dark. Closes again: the same voices calling and calling...
CHAPTER FOUR

Keep your eyes well peeled today
The tall, tall men are on their way,
Searching for the mountain tay
In the Hills of Connemara.

Third try, the key turns. Brian Cookson lurches into his hotel room, flops on the bed and blinks at a swirling paisley carpet. He’ll have a headache in the morning; he grimaces at the creased face, the bleary eyes in the mirror. Should not have had that last one. It’s years since he’s drunk that much, years. The years between Laura and Lucy, to be exact; years he’d rather forget. Downstairs, they’ll be scraping the old man off the table, carrying him home. As for Jack … he has no idea where Jack is. Or the barmaid.

Not too much wild about Wild Wright now. Just an old man cadging drinks. Brian drags a chair over to the dressing table and rolls himself a cigarette. The upward drift of smoke screens his face from the mirror. He’s dog tired; at least he should sleep well tonight. Good: couldn’t stand a repeat of last night.

Why come back now, after all these years? That old, familiar, skin crawling nightmare: Laura’s thin face staring blankly at him. The shudder, the sigh as she rolls away, sheets unwinding, unwinding away and away to the empty plot and the four caskets laid out in a row: little Brian, little Francis, the twins. Lillian and Roy. Pretty babes all in a row. Their pretty babes: dead. Father Ryan crossing himself, the snore and drone of his Latin, the thud of dirt being shoveled. Dead and gone. But not forgotten. Automatically Brian’s hand moves to his breast pocket; not forgotten.

He’s kept his promise. The graves are immaculate. First weekend of every month he goes, religiously. Though he’s not. Every month he collects his spade and rake from the back of the church, weeds, clears, cuts back. Lavender, rosemary, rue. Sturdy plants. Pretty too: but Lucy wouldn’t hear of burying Sydney there too. The look of disbelief she gave him when he said at least their child would have company; was he mad or morbid or both? Both, maybe… Had
she any idea … no. Just like that, she cut him off. Refused to listen. It was not all happening all over again. She was Lucy, she was not Laura. And Sydney was Sydney.

She refused to discuss it. Not with him, anyway. Her friends? Maybe. Her mother: yes, her mother.

When Beryl got whooping cough, he feared the worst. Lay awake listening, same as before. Lucy moved into the nursery. Beryl got better. Lucy didn’t move back. He asked if she still loved him. I’m trying to, she said. He said, don’t try too hard, and told Sam yes, he’d take the assignment. Leave you in peace for a bit, he said.

None of which explained the dream, the ten years later dream. Laura’s ghost, coming back out of sympathy? With him, with Lucy? He’s got no idea what a mother goes through, of course; he’s only a father.

He draws hard on his cigarette. Fact. His babies keep dying. First Laura, now Lucy. That would suggest it’s him. Something hereditary, maybe something to do with one of those childhood illnesses: measles, mumps. He shuts his eyes. Lucy, laughing up at him: told you he’d be a boy!

And so he was. For all of six months.

There should be some sort of test, some way you could find out first. So people don’t get married in the first place, don’t get dragged into the whole miserable mess. So men like him stay in their dingy bachelor lodgings, right next door to the ‘Sun’ offices. Their man on the spot, Sam used to say, their man on the Sunspot. Their man who could just up and go, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide: wherever the story was. Stuff like this Kelly trip, he used to do it all the time. Before he got married.

He pulls out his notebook, uncaps his pen, writes ‘Wild Wright’ at the top of the page in flowing copperplate. One of his few talents: he even has a certificate from a course he did once: ‘for the beauty and variety of ornamental penmanship.’ Lucy had it framed and hung it in the dining room. Penmanship: doesn’t take much longer, really, once you get the hang of it, but Lucy can’t seem to. Too impatient, too used to the ugly squiggles of shorthand: never mind, he said. It’s just a knack.

Back to this evening: the old man in his corner. Wild’s account of the fight between him and Kelly. It takes him a while, he’s a man of few words. Makes
them work though. Blow by blow, quite literally. Isaiah is his proper name; he

Once. Upon a time. Bit of a larrikin. Yes, yes, been known to do some horse trading: Moyhu, Beechworth, Wangaratta.

Once the fight was over, he said, Ned shook hands with him: best of mates again. Even met his wife through Ned. Lloyd, Bridget Lloyd, God rest her. He lives on his own now, in the sleep out back of Tom here’s place. His son, that’s right, his and God rest her Bridget. Now, see Fred there? His father was a mate of Joe Byrne. Even got a pipe that belonged to Joe at home, haven’t you Fred? Dinkum. Wasn’t tobacco he smoked, though. Opium, it was. ‘Oh Joe’: that’s what the Chinks used to call it. Him as well. ‘Oh Joe’.

Brian exhales thoughtfully. Fred and Tom had a bit to say as well, but not a lot more than he already knew. God knows how many times they’ve gone over those yarns: the pipe, the bullet hole. You could see they had them off by heart. The way they sat straighter as soon as he asked, glancing at each other, nodding. Round after round, the yarns drifting with the tobacco smoke from weathered face to weathered face, words slurring into each other as the minutes ticked past. Wild sat propped between his son and his mate; he gave himself the odd scratch, the table the odd thump. Fred and Tom started mapping out the town on the table with matchsticks: where the tree with the bullet hole was, the window sash in the pub with initials carved, the six foot rail jumped, the back yards dodged through. Yarn after yarn, thickening and hanging in the air like the smoke rings they make without any seeming effort. He’s tried to make them himself, but never got the knack of it.

Right. Now. Names. Lists. People to interview. Start with Mrs. Jones, what was it they said about Mrs. Jones?

Owner of the Glenrowan Hotel: the Kellys’ Last Stand. Burnt to the ground. Yes, still alive, living just down the street. Bedridden. Never got over it. Her little boy shot dead. And the little girl too, died a year later of injuries from the siege. Graves in Wangaratta Cemetery. Brian winces; why’d he write that? Hardly important. But he doesn’t cross it out. In a way, it is important. Because it was police bullets that did for those children, it’s one thing you can’t blame the Kellys for. Tom said she went after the police for compensation, even took it to parliament. She’ll tell you so herself, he said. But she never saw a penny, not one penny. Not that it matters now; she’s not long for this world, by all accounts.
The actual words, their voices, that’s what he needs. To bring it alive. Who else? Sergeant Steele. The man who brought Ned Kelly down. Because he aimed for his knees. Below the belt. And the armor. Just doing his job, he said. Where is he now?

Curnow. The schoolteacher who stopped the train with the troopers on board. Bloody cripple, grunted Wild. Teaching in Gippsland now, they reckon. Changed his name. No bloody wonder. Wild drew himself up and thumped his hand on the table. Ned should never have let him out of that hotel. Bloody cripple. Soft touch, Ned, always was. A soft bloody touch.

Detective Ward: too clever by half, that one: while the constables were out chasing the gang all over the Warby ranges, bushed half the time and bewildered the rest, Ward was tucked away in his office twiddling his moustache, watching and waiting. Like a fat old spider, spinning his webs, whisper here, nod and a wink there. You’d want to be a hell of a lot smarter than Aaron Sherritt ever was to run with the Kellys and hunt with Ward and think you could get away with it.

McIntyre. The Stringybark bolter. Took off on poor bloody Kennedy’s horse. Save his own hide, that’s all he was interested in. All over the bloody place at the trial. Gutless wonder. The old man spat.

Graham. Constable Robert Graham. Took over the station at Greta after the Outbreak. That’s what they called it: the Kelly outbreak. Not another policeman in the country would touch it. And what was the first thing he did? Toss a few sympathizers in the lock up, lay down the law? Go round with search warrants, confiscate rifles? Nope: he went to see the old woman. What old woman? Ned’s mother, who else? Ellen Kelly. Next race day, he’s handing her down from his buggy in full view of everybody, and Jim Kelly right behind her.

Brian’s grip on his pen tightens; he stares at what he’s just written. He took her to the races; this Constable Graham got Ellen Kelly to go to the races with him. How did he manage that? How did he convince Ned Kelly’s mother to be seen in public with a policeman?

Keep going. While the voices are fresh in his head, get it down. Except nothing in his head is fresh. He draws on his cigarette and twiddles his pen. Back to her, back to the old woman.

Those hooded eyes. The way they glittered; that’s the word, glittered. Makes him think of… what? He shuts his eyes. His schoolboy self, that’s what: Brian
the duffer, the daydreamer. Sitting up the back staring out the schoolhouse window, his finger keeping the place in the anthology of English literature. Jumping a mile when his name’s called out. Coleridge, that’s the one: *The Ancient Mariner.* Brian smiles. His voice echoes oddly round the hotel room, same as it did in that classroom on the other side of the world all those years ago.

“*Alone, alone, all all alone,  Alone on a wide, wide sea …*”

Her face…

“… this soul hath been

*Alone on a wide, wide sea;*

*So lonely ‘twas that God himself
Scarce seemed there to be …*

He takes a new page and writes ‘Ellen Kelly’ at the top. His hand keeps moving, *alone,* it writes, *alone*… looking up, he meets his own eyes in the mirror. So are we all in the end, for all the headlines, for all the photographs. He exhales slowly; there, almost, almost… the curl of smoke wavers and fades. He grips his pen tighter; concentrate on what you’re doing. He turns back a page; where is he up to?

Mrs. Jones. Not long for this world. First on the list tomorrow, then. After Ellen, that is. But damned if he’s going to sit and listen to some old woman weeping and wailing over dead children. Who at least got to be children, didn’t die in infancy. That smug bloody phrase: died in infancy. So neat and tidy, like swaddling shrouds. Sanctimonious bloody priest: *The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.* Just because He can.

Ellen Kelly would know a thing or two about dead children. Jim and the youngest girl, what’s her name, Grace; they’re the only ones left. Of the Kellys, that is; she’d more by the second husband. But they didn’t die in infancy, or even as children. They got to grow up, to be more than just names carved in stone, little lost causes. Like their mother. Fiercely, he stubs his cigarette out. Four infancies later, a haggard Laura looked nothing like the poster girl he married, the sweetheart smiling out at him from Len’s photograph, the Laura he tries to remember. But it was the other Laura last night.

A speaking likeness, that’s what Len used to say a good picture should be. His one of Laura is exactly that; didn’t catch Lucy though. Too posed, too formal; studio backdrop, fake flowers. He got her to sit for it about a year before
Len died. Lucky we did, he said to her after the funeral. She just shrugged; if he said so. It’s on the mantelpiece.

What pictures would Ellen Kelly and her son have, he wonders. Or what newspaper clippings? He imagines them pulling them out of their special drawer, sitting round the fire of a night, talking about the way things used to be. The way they used to be. Did they drive past the Eleven Mile, stop and remind themselves? No, no: or only on some special occasion. Too close to the bone; too like his dream.

Alone: she’d be used to that, Ellen Kelly. With Jim off droving and only the children to talk to, her days would be long. That chair out on the verandah, what goes through her mind, sitting and looking out over that land she knows so well?

In the pub, he deliberately didn’t say he’d met her. Not until he decided to call it a night: then he mentioned it, just in passing. Ned’s mother, she still lives somewhere about, is that right? Nods: glances.

“Yes, yes, they’re out there still.”

They? The old woman and her son. Of course, Jim, isn’t it? No, he never married; not for want of chances, mind you. Good looking bloke, or he was. Like his brother.

“So was that because of his mother, d’you reckon? The not marrying.” Glances: shrugs.

“Dunno. None of my business.”

“Keeps himself to himself, Jim. Off droving a lot of the time.”

“Must be lonely for her.”

“She has the grandchildren. And her daughters, Grace and Ellen, Ellen King that was. They keep an eye on her.”

“She’s probably glad of a bit of peace and quiet. Probably had enough of the headlines.”

“You’re not wrong.” Tom nods. “Ran that place at Eleven Mile for years. Handy to the road: plenty of passers by stopping off to give their horses a drink as well as themselves. That was before she was jailed. Then after… well, she’s reared her daughter’s children as well as her own. Never mind bringing a lot of other folks’ children into the world. Midwife. Well respected, too.”

“What was it, three years in jail? Seems a bit harsh.” Wild thumps his glass on the table, glares. “My bloody oath it was! Three
bloody years, and her with a babe at the breast!”

“Some of the old folks, they’ll tell you about it yet,” Tom shrugs. “Folks went along to the court for a bit of a show, see. Reckoned she’d give Sir High and Mighty Redmond a piece of her mind. Known for it she was; tongue that would strip paint.” He glances at Fred, who nods. “Redmond Barry. Sitting magistrate. Never been well thought of, not since he tried to hang poor mad Jimmy. But that’s another story. Mrs. K, we used to call her. She’d a reputation and a half, believe you me. Called a spade a spade, and a few other things beside. So everybody was just sitting there waiting for the fireworks to begin.” Fred shrugs. “But blow me, she barely opened her mouth. Barely said a word. Let them lead her away, gentle as a lamb.” He shakes his head again. So do Fred and Wild.

“Three years,” repeats the old man dolefully. “Three years, and her with a babe at the breast.”

“And what for?” demands Tom. “Telling a policeman where to get off, that’s what for. About bloody time, is what I say. Menacing Fitzpatrick, for God’s sake! I mean, look at the size of her and the size of him, a big strapping policeman! Hardly in fear of his life, now, was he?”

Wild thumps his hand on the table. “Sitting there waiting, all of us. Tell the bugger where to go, Mrs. K, tell the bugger where to f – ing well go! Nothing, she says. Couldn’t hardly even hear her. Nothing. Just one bloody word. Then steps down and lets them lead her away like a pet lamb. God dammit.”

That’s it. Pretty much word for word. Except Tom’s words as they shook hands. She’s not had her sorrows to seek, just you mind that, Mr. Cookson. Just you mind that. Brian caps his pen. As much as to say, leave her in peace. Well, well, see how it goes. If she’s nothing to say, she’s nothing to say. But unless he’s much mistaken… take a leaf out of that man Graham’s book. Sam would never forgive him if he let this one slip.

He links his hands behind his head and leans back in his chair. Just an old done woman? Maybe. But maybe not. Those hands wrapping themselves round the cup, that fierce glint in her eyes when Jack started blabbing about Dan and Steve… yes, she collapsed for a moment, but that’s all. Had herself back together in no time, watching her words, checking theirs. Knows more than she’s letting on, that’s for sure. So what is it? That’s what he has to find out. He yawns and
glances sourly at his seedy reflection. Some man on the spot he is.

So tomorrow: quick look at the old place at Eleven Mile, it’s on the way. According to Tom, you can still see the knot holes they made to keep a watch on the road. In case anybody was riding up that they didn’t want to see …

... the glitter of eyes behind a wall, a younger, sharper voice calling: Ned! Dan! Out of here! A curse, a door banging, a kiss, the slap and creak of leather, the tattoo of hoof beats fading …

He stares at the page; the page stares back. Tired, too tired to think. He underlines his last words, puts a question mark neatly in the margin, and pushes himself to his feet. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, first thing.

Sitting on the bed, he opens his wallet, slides out the photographs and lays the top two face up on the cover. Lucy and Beryl: three weeks since he stood on the doorstep of the house in Prahran and kissed them goodbye.

“Where’s Daddy going, Mummy?”

“Daddy’s going to Sydney. And then he’s going bush.”

“Will he be gone a very long time?”

“I don’t know, dear. Depends what he finds out.” That straight look of hers.

He sets Laura’s picture alongside Lucy’s. Different lives, different wives. Laura, ringleted, smiling; Lily’s square chin, raised eyebrow. Lucy wouldn’t have had much time for Laura, with her flower arranging and embroidery. Laura would have been scared stiff of Lucy, with her causes and committees. Laura thought he could do anything, found he couldn’t; Lucy knew he couldn’t all along. Laura had never had a job; Lucy was the new stenographer at the Sun. Whom he met at the office party when he was dead drunk. A waste of space, as she told him in no uncertain terms. The only thing his wives had in common was a love of singing. And him. God help them.

Lucy knew about Laura. And about his dead children. Sam must have told her, because when he tried to, she squeezed his hand and shook her head. Later, he took her to the graveside and she left flowers. He pointed to the shed where he kept the spade and rake.

“I promised,” he said.

“I know, you said. It’s just… do you really think Laura would want you to go on punishing yourself forever? I mean, can’t you remember inside without digging it up all the time?”
He sets the last picture, of the headstone in the cemetery with all the names, alongside the other two. He hasn’t taken a picture of Sydney’s grave yet. No need, Lucy said. We should remember him as he was, not as he wasn’t.

He slides the photographs back into his wallet. Should. So damn sure of herself. He hasn’t telephoned yet; no need. Nothing to report.

Her lifted chin, her brimming eyes: it doesn’t mean I don’t feel it, just that I don’t wallow in it. Wallow; all bloody well for her, she’s no idea … to hell with her.

He crosses to the window to draw the curtains and pauses, gazing up into the night sky. The moon is an old woman’s face, bruise eyed and alone.

Time does pass. You just have to thole. ‘What can’t be cured must be endured,’ her mother used to say. What she meant that whatever Ellen wanted, she wasn’t going to get it. Then or any other time. She would just have to put up with ‘it’, whatever ‘it’ was. She winced; that’s what women do. How many times has she told laboring women to thole, it’ll be over soon, baby’s on its way? Like her own mother told her, and hers before that …

Beside her, Katie lies snug, sound asleep. Half the child’s luck. Ellen slows her breathing, like she used to in prison: empty your mind and wait, wait with clasped hands for the wafer of sleep. Or if not sleep, at least peace and quiet: the quiet of a billabong at twilight, with a man and his silvery horse waiting under the big tree on the north side …

She’d never been much of a tholer; suddenly she had to be. For three years. Find things to do, ways to not go mad. Those first weeks, walking, pacing from wall to wall to wall to wall, keening over little Alice till it was a wonder the baby learned to smile at all, they were bad enough. But then they took Alice away, and that was worse. Nobody to look after, just the ache in her breasts and the rage in her gut. Nobody to talk to, nobody to tell her what was going on, what they were doing… because she knew they’d be out. She knew Ned once he was set on something. The white horses of her dreams were there already, foam flecked, lashing out…

Work. Something to do, a body needs something to do. In the washhouse, in the kitchen, in the prison yard. The laundry was best because it took all her strength. Soaping and scrubbing and rinsing till her back ached.
Staggering to squeeze the heavy wet sheets through the mangle, making believe they were Flood or Fitzpatrick or Barry screaming as she squeezed every last drop of blood out of them.

Sometimes she listened to the other women, the light fingered thieves, the bold faced streetwalkers, the drunk and disorderly. Sometimes they even made her laugh. About men, mostly: who was supposed to be the weaker sex? At the end of every day she walked back to her cell, heard the door clang behind her, stretched her arms up toward the cold stone, and watched the light from the overhead grille dim until darkness dissolved the walls. Until nobody could see her, sitting on her bed with her back to the wall, her knees hugged in tight, willing to herself the power of a witch wife: the power of Aoife. Not to curse innocent children, though; to curse them that deserved to be cursed. Fitzpatrick: turn him into a lizard, a goanna you could hang up by the tail; watch him squirm, watch his yellow eyes roll. Take your sharpest knife and splice him, balls to chest. And as for that black crow in his white wig, that Redmond bloody Barry, she’d rip out his heart for it was no earthly use to him anyway...

Her hate fogged the walls; curses clung like cobwebs, sticky and white.

It exhausted her, but still, still she couldn’t sleep. Still she woke up drenched with sweat, still she found herself standing at the cell door, barefoot, shivering. She chewed her rag nails till they bled. There was no mirror to see herself in, but she knew there’d be nobody there she recognized. She thought of Red; if he could see her now, would he even know her? What would he have to say?

He wouldn’t have to say anything; he would understand. Of course he would. She thought of him screaming himself awake, the slime of sweat on his forehead, the way his eyes bulged and his hands clawed at air, at empty space; the utter lostness of the man. She thought of the nightmares stalking him those last months in Avenel, the tossing and thrashing and kicking of him till she put out her hand and he grabbed it and wouldn’t let it go. How at the very last he turned his back and gave up the ghost: the ghost of his own self. In the dark night after, she laced her hands across her chest, swore that that would never be her. And in the morning she made her children swear too.

Never be her. There was too much that she had to do. Three years and she would walk out of here and in the door of Eleven Mile and they would all be
there waiting. Maggie, Kate, Jim, Grace. The little ones too: Fred, Ellen, Alice. Her children with George. She had them to live for. And Ned and Danny. Somewhere, Ned and Danny.

That narrow prison bed was where she began. Night after night she laid herself out exactly the same: flat on her back, hands across her chest and laced together. So. And made herself remember. There never had been much of her and she got better and better at leaving what little there was behind. Miles behind, years behind. She could be walking out of St. Francis’ church hand in hand with Red, or she could be reaching out her hands for her first baby boy: Edward, that’s what we’ll call him. Edward Kelly. She could be making her own mark on the title deeds to her own selection at Eleven Mile Creek. She could be jumping on to Nellie mare bareback and racing Ned and Maggie up Bald Hill, the wind laughing with them. Furious riding, sweet Mother of God, nothing like furious riding, the speed, the heart singingness of it, through the bush or up and down the main street of Benalla, who cared? She could hear the rumble of Ned’s laugh when she told him how she’d made Bill Frost pay; feel the leap of her heart on the day she saw her son striding across the paddocks after getting out of Pentridge, his head up and his eyes bright, how the whole world shone… shoving the new baby into George’s arms, running across the yard. Ned lifting her off her feet, laughing, spinning her round and round till she was dizzy. Setting her down and putting his hand under her chin.

“You’re blooming, Ma, blooming! What’s making you so spry?”

Drawing her breath in deeply, she turns and points to the back door, to the man holding the baby. The light in Ned’s eyes fades; he groans.

“For fuck’s sake, Ma! “

“For what’s sake? Oh, that’s nice, that is! Swearing at your own mother! That’s jail talk, is it? Just because you’ve grown a beard …” Tweaking it. “Think I’m old and done, do you? Only fit to sit in a corner and knit? Is that it? Well, I’m not done yet, Ned. I’m not done yet!”

Stalking along behind her, nodding stiffly at George, taking the baby in his arms. But by now Kate and Grace have seen him. He hands the child back, opens his arms wide and wraps his sisters in a bear hug. He sweeps them off to the house, leaving George and her looking at each other.

Like a couple of stallions they are, circling, pawing, snorting. Till dinner
time. George starts telling stories in that gravelly drawl of his, stories about California, jokes about Mexicans …you had to laugh. Only Ned doesn’t. Sitting there with a face on him from here to next week. Then George leans forward and reaches his hand behind her head; she has her hair plaited up in a loose knot, a fancy new way. And the hand makes a lot of fancy passes behind her head, pulls back, opens… and there’s an egg in it. A big white egg. Another fancy pass and it’s gone again.

Ned can’t get over it. “How did you do that? How in hell did you do that?”

The rest of them have got used to George’s circus tricks, but they’re the last thing in the world Ned is expecting. George stands and sweeps them a bow, but by then Ned’s not watching him any more. He’s watching her, she can feel it. So many times he’s seen her eyes wet with weeping; this time it’s with laughing. She turns and tells him they’ve been waiting to get married till he’d get home so now he can give them his blessing and the new baby can have a proper name. He smiles – his big, broad, beautiful smile - and nods and covers her hand on the table with his.

Thick as thieves they are from then on: George and Ned. She never asks about the flash horses that come through the yard. Doesn’t need to know, doesn’t want to know; can look any traps that come sniffing round straight in the eye and honestly tell them that she hasn’t a clue. As happens often enough. They’re good years, good, happy years. Ned working at the sawmill, earning honest money, even getting promoted. Her own place to run, the children growing up, people coming and going, looking for some company and a bite to eat, a taste of poteen maybe; word gets around. Never easy, of course, not with the traps poking and prying the whole time, checking you for grog, checking your brands, wanting to know where you’ve been before you’ve got there yet. And you can trust George to make a joke of it, to stick a cushion up his shirt and pretend he’s some fat constable trying to get on his horse. Or he might challenge her to a race up the hill, her on Nellie, him on some new colt; or they might just sit by the fire at night and he’d tell her stories about California. You could do all that and wake up the next morning and everything’d still be as good as you left it.

Take each day as it comes. Tell yourself everything’s finally working out.

It’s nothing new for George, or any of the boys for that matter, to disappear for a couple of days. But not for a week. Not for two weeks, and Ned no wiser
than she is. Maggie and Kate quizzing everybody they met, the boys checking every hideout; not a trace. In the end, she tells them to stop looking.

"If he doesn’t want to be found, he won’t be. I’ve done without a man before; I can do without one again."

Ned doesn’t say a word. He works harder at improving the house, at splitting and fitting ironbark slabs, lining the palings on the verandah, nailing bark sheets to the inside walls. It’s a palace, she says, standing with his arm round her while the fire catches in the new brick fireplace. She lifts her chin and sucks in a deep shuddery breath. His arm tightens.

“He took us both to the fair, Ma. But it’s his loss. His loss.”

And then he’s off. Him and Joe: business. What business, she doesn’t ask.

Years later, long after Ned’s gone, long after jail, sitting by the fire at the Eleven Mile, Jim asks for the umpteenth time where she reckons George King ever disappeared to. God help him: does he think he can track him down, rope him, bring him back? Without missing a beat, she says he’s gone back to California. And she’s no sooner said it than she knows it’s true. George would have heard about Fitzpatrick, about her being arrested. He’d have read about Stringybark and the dead policemen and the price on the Kellys’ heads. And what could he do about any of it? What difference could him coming back and getting lagged too make? He’d have seen the writing on the wall; maybe he even saw before Ned did. Why would he wait to be destroyed as well? He always hated what he called sour looks and God knows there were precious few that weren’t, then. Ned’s a goner, he’d have said to himself. Joe, Dan, Steve, all of them. No point them getting me as well. And so, not like Ned. But then, nobody was.

Did he think about her? She sighs. Not enough to change his mind. Enough to write her a note; three lines. Three lines for the three years, give or take, of their marriage. And of her sentence, though he couldn’t have known that. Strange. What he would have known, though, was that she’d show his letter to Ned; he would have meant her to show it to Ned. The first line is copied out of the Advertiser: the most perfect horse stealing organization that has ever existed in Australia. The second line reads can’t do better than that. The third line, dear X: three years is the longest I’ve lived anywhere. Love X. Ned doesn’t understand the X until she reminds him that she signed her marriage certificate with a cross and that George did the same, even though earlier that very same
day she’d watched him put his flashiest signature on the birth register for their baby. Ned’s frown deepens; George had always made a point of signing bills of sale to make them look legitimate: that same flash signature. But he hands the note back with out another word. He puts his arm round her and holds her close.

Ellen raises her hand to the crepey skin at her throat: years ago, so many years ago. George would be old himself. If he’s still alive, that is. She’s surprised to discover that she hopes he is, even hopes he’s making them laugh in California. She’d have liked to tell him about his son Jack being in the West Australian police force, just to make him laugh himself, just to hear that kookaburra squawk of his again. And she wishes, for the umpteenth time, that Ned had boarded that ship when Jim told him to.

She tries to explain George to Maggie and Kate. They won’t have a bar of it. George King is a lying bastard and if he isn’t dead then he bloody well deserves to be. No, she says, no. There’s enough people dead. Only so much grieving a body can take. George, he’s like that egg, there one minute, gone the next. A good trick. That’s all.

In prison, she got hold of some chalk and drew three lines on the wall of her cell. Three years, and she’d walk out of there. Every week, she’d rub a tiny bit out with her finger. To remind herself. Whatever happened.

Nights, laid out, remembering, reliving. Days, she did the laundry; did the time. Lived from visit to visit. Clenching her hands together as she watched Maggie or Kate walk towards her, guessing, guessing; is the news good or is it bad? The grief of Stringybark; the crowing after Euroa and Jerilderie. The flicker of hope when Maggie talked about Ned’s letters. Then Glenrowan. And ashes.

In three years, she’d walk out of here. Into the house that Ned built. With no Ned. With no Danny. With nothing but a wish to look after.

Her first real dream comes the night after Stringybark, the night after what she’s told them will happen has. There’ll be murder, she said, and so there is. She’d worked hour after hour in the laundry, pummeling sheets, making the mangle groan. Back in her cell, her lids are closing before the guard has even finished his rounds. His footsteps clump down the corridor …
... flitting along after the footsteps, flitting along and I’m a girl, I’m just a slip of a girl again, only nobody loves me any more. But how was I to know, I never meant it to be this way, I never... stop. Stop when the footsteps stop, hold my breath, press myself flat, flat as can be against the cold stone where nobody loves me except the only good thing is, because they don’t love me they can’t see me... flit flit flitting, faster because the steps are fading, one corridor, two corridors, three, four, five... where in the world have I got to?

No footsteps anymore, just a beating inside the walls, a drum, a lambeg drum. The sound of marching, marching... a signal? Is that a signal? If I follow the sound, is there a way out? Yes, because I can see light ahead, up there where the drumming comes from. There’s a door, a cell door, only it hasn’t got any walls, it stretches away and away to the rocks, the black rocks down to the sea...

He’s already there, how the hell does he always get there first? Seven league boots, ha, that’s the trick... he’s waiting for me. No: no, he’s getting up now; he’s heading down to the sea. Jesus, Ned, don’t even think about it, listen to me, will you? I run. I run, sometimes I think I was born running, except that none of it’s getting me any closer, the ground won’t let my feet go... try yelling, that’s what you’re good at isn’t it? Yell, yell, Ned you bloody headcase, come back, come back here! What in hell do you think you’re doing?

But all he does, all the daft bugger does is turn and wave that stupid green sash at me, then turn back and walk straight on into the sea...

“You’ll drown, you daft eejit, you’ll drown!”

My voice skips from rock to rock. Skipping, but not like the drum, at least he’d listen to the drum. One last glance, one wave of his hand...

“Wait and see, Ma. You’ll do that for me, won’t you? Wait and see.”

“Why can’t you wait and see? Why can’t you ever bloody well wait?”

Dreams are like wishes; part of you knows they’re not true, but the same part doesn’t care because the dreams are what you live for. Or else you’re stuck out here in a bare dusty paddock like some spavined old nag swishing her tail at the flies.

The dreams are flighty, but. She can never make them come the way she can make the memories come. She knows exactly how to bring them, hands crossed over her chest, not waking, not sleeping, just slowly casting her mind out and
about, here and there, over and under, fishing for a forgotten glance, a remembered word, the warmth of a rough hand in hers. And the glance takes her to the face, the word to the laugh or the cry, the hand pulls her in close. It’s like her quilt, with her memory the scarlet thread stitching it all together.

Sometimes, she works on the same memory for two or three nights in a row, just to see how much she can bring back. Take riding back from Greta with Ned and Maggie, now: what month is it? What was it they went in to town for? Flour and sugar. Tea: they nearly forgot the tea. The wattle is out, so August, September. Which horses are they riding? She’s on her latest Nellie, of course, but the other two? Mirth and… Penny, that’s it. Because of the white spot on her quarters. What’s Ned wearing? His moleskins, his blue shirt. Maggie’s got on the lace collar that used to be Annie’s. It suits her. Annie would have wanted her to have it. Who did they see in town? Cup of tea at her sister’s. Da and Ma, visiting. The more she fishes, the bigger the catch, the brighter the waters; she can feel the laugh in her throat as she takes the tin of molasses off Ned so he and Maggie can have their own race up the hill …

It’s when Maggie or Kate come, when they tell her all that was going on that she never knew about at the time, that’s when she wishes she had put her head down at school and listened. So much to remember, so much that should never be lost, and only one old head to hold it all in. She has to go over and over and over what they say till she has it by heart. It takes hours, but then… hours she has. Hours she has.

How much safer, though, how much surer, if you could just write it down. She can see that now. Specially the parts when she wasn’t there, the parts she can’t just rummage around her head for and pull out, all ready to stitch in. Writing can’t be any more boring than stitching a seam, nor take any more time than staring into space, trying to remember that one last thing, trying to not let the panic rise when you can’t think of it. Whatever it is, you have to find it, the right name, the right word. To keep the when and the where and the how in your head, and to not be distracted by the why …

The little ones don’t need to worry about the why. Not yet. But they do need the where and when and what. So when Katie comes in bawling because Marnie Jackson has told her that her uncle was a bad, bad man, she can tell her different.
The child’s right; of course she’s entitled to know her own kin, to be a Kelly and proud of it. Let her ask her questions. Even about her mother. Gran will answer them. Because is that not the very reason she’s memorized it all in the first place? What’s the point remembering if you don’t tell what it is you remember?

Once upon a time: once upon a time there was nothing Ellen Quinn could not do. Sing, dance, ride a pony; milk a cow, drive a cart; clear land, raise a family, gallop up Bald Hill bareback to look down on her own selection, warming itself in the last rays of the sun… Now, all she can do is remember.

Avenel. What if they hadn’t moved to Avenel? Even if Red was right, even if the boys were getting into bad company, could it have been any worse? Quinn company was what he meant: her own brothers. But how were they worse company than that bugger Morgan down the road who got Red thrown into Avenel lockup? And what about his brother, mad Jimmy, nearly burning them in their beds after Red had died and she’d come back to Greta?

But you can’t run your life by other people. And of course, they weren’t any worse at all. She and Red could have had haloes and wings and it wouldn’t have made a blind bit of difference. They were poor and Irish and Catholic. The police needed somebody to blame. That was the long and the short of it.

Poor mad Jimmy, for goodness sake; a menace, yes, but no way in the world was he a murderer. Yet that Redmond Barry would have hung if he could. As an example. What of, God only knows. The sudden silence, the single gasp from that courtroom when Barry’s hammer thudded and the words ‘place of execution’ boomed from rafter to rafter: she can hear it yet. The death sentence: even the other lawyers were whispering behind their hands. Not even Barry could get away with that one; the sentence was commuted. What would they have have done if it hadn’t been?

Cold fish eyes, tight arse lips spitting out the words: she remembers staring at him and wondering what anyone had ever done to him to make him so angry. Hoping she’d never set eyes on him again. Jesus wept. She remembers thinking, God help any poor soul who gets on the wrong side of that one.

He hadn’t, though. As usual. Inaccessible.

God helps those who help themselves. That’s what her Da taught her and that’s she’s taught her own. From the day that ignorant shite at school called her a papish slut... the next day, she stuck out her foot and he fell flat on his face.
Got up garming with a blood nose. Dear help him, sniveling to the teacher. Her Ma scolded and carried on, and her Da let her scold; but he squeezed his daughter’s shoulder on his way out the door and winked.

Same in Australia. He might rage, he might tell her to get the hell out of his sight, might bellow and barge; but in the end he’d back her. He was glad when she came back to Greta and set herself up at Eleven Mile. He put an arm round her and nodded towards her eldest son, out in the yard shoeing a horse.

“You’ve a good lad there, Nell. The best. He’ll look after you.”

Ellen draws her knees up slowly, stretches them down again. Katie turns in her sleep. Still, stay still! Say nothing.

Nothing. The one time she could have said something, the one time she was even asked to say something, and she said nothing. But what else? How else? Waiting to be called to the stand, she had it all memorized, what Ned had told her, had it off by heart. Ned’s right, she told herself. Stick to what he told you. Don’t go chopping and changing now. Has your tongue not got you into enough trouble over the years? She pictures her son’s big, serious eyes, his hands holding hers. Abusive language charges. Scrag fights, Red used to call them. Swearing. Yes. Yes. He was right. She would hold her tongue.

“It’ll come out all right, Ma, don’t you fret. Sure weren’t there witnesses? And doesn’t everybody know the cut of Fitzpatrick? It’ll come out right, you’ll see.”

So bloody sure of himself. It didn’t come out right. None of it. About half way through the trial she saw, sure as if she had the Sight itself, that it was not going to. Not a hope. That was the time she should have done it, when she should have broken with him, told them to call Kate, Grace, told them everything that happened. But she didn’t.

Instead, she’s there with her hands gripping the witness stand, her eyes turned up to the bench, to the robe, the wig, the heavy lidded eyes, and the down turned mouth. The words in her own mouth shrivel up and die. Because there’s not one thing she can say or do, do or say; not one thing in the whole wide world that’s going to make the least bit of difference.

Nothing in jail made any difference either. Day in, day out, each day the same as the day before and the day after. You nearly forgot days were ever any other way. Yet they were. Still are… in her dreams.
Till one day she stood with her daughters outside the prison walls, and saw memories before her as well as behind.

Kate and Grace led her out through the big gates, an arm under each elbow. As if she wasn’t fit to walk herself. De Castieau smiled and bowed, voices from the cells wished her well, the gates clanged behind her: free. Free: but all she could think was, what for?

They walked silently to the train station. The wind fluttered Kate’s black veil, their sooty black skirts flapped against their legs. It was what she felt like, a fleck of soot whisked up from some long dead campfire to whirl aimlessly, endlessly through empty air. People stepped aside when they passed, as if they were a funeral procession. And in a way they were. Only once they got into their carriage did Grace smile and Kate put up her veil. Ellen sat next to the window and held out her hands. The three of them hugged each other, clinging in silence till the whistle blew and the train jolted off.

Grace talked, gabbled, far too fast. How baby Alice was running around, how she was getting into everything; how excited the children were, how they’d put a posy by her bed and a ribbon on the pet lamb, they were teaching Faith the dog to fetch…

“Wait till you see Jack, Ma. He’s not a little boy any more. That tall and manly looking, isn’t he Kate? He’s been practicing his trick riding on your old Nellie. He can do a handstand on her back…”

“I’ve been teaching him.”

“Yes, it was Kate’s idea. Oh, it’s good, so good to have you home again, Ma!”

Grace squeezed her mother’s hand; Ellen squeezed back; turned her face quickly to look out the window. That was Kate’s cue. She cleared her throat and started to talk. And talk. The North East was tinder dry, she said; all it needed was the match to fire it. Rebellion, revolution; a North East Republic. Ned’s dream. Tom was there, Wild Wright was there, their own Jim of course: Kate clasped her hands together.

“They’ll rue the day they hanged Edward Kelly, Ma. They will rue the day.”

“You mean Ned,” said Ellen. She felt Grace’s hand tighten round her arm. Kate rolled her eyes; of course she meant Ned. Ned was the whole point. Fund raising, that was the thing: guns, ammunition, they all cost money. That was the
whole point of the wake at the Apollo Hall, her and Jim …

“The what?”

“The wake.” Kate tossed her head defiantly. “We appeared on the stage. Jim and me. I was in mourning, like this. People filed past, paying their respects like at a proper funeral. They paid a shilling each …”

“What? When was this?”

“Ma, it’s all right …” Grace reached out a tentative arm. “Did Maggie not tell you?”

“The eleventh. In the evening.”

Ellen brushed Grace aside, lifted her hand; Kate grabbed it.

“What, Ma, what?”

Ellen glared at her daughter; rouge. She had rouge on again. Kate glared back.

“You have to strike while the iron’s hot, Ma!”

“What bloody iron? For God’s sake, your brother was hardly even cold!”

She snatched her hand away, turned to the window. Slowed her breathing. Then turned back and folded her hands in her lap.

“Go on. Tell me.”

Kate told. About the Apollo, about the ship that took the horses to Sydney, about ‘The Kelly Show’. About spreading the word, raising money for rifles, ammunition. Jim helped, of course; she couldn’t have done it without Jim. That toss of the head again. Maggie was useless, so goddam law abiding all of a sudden. Kate stopped and looked at her mother.

“It’s a stratagem, Ma. A stratagem. Can’t you see that?”

Wearily, Ellen passed a hand across her face. “You’ve made an exhibition of yourself, I can see that.”

Kate’s lip curled. “You’re as bad as Maggie. At least I’m getting them to sit up and take notice.”

“Who of, Kate? Not Ned. ”

“Yes Ned! It’s not over, Ma, it’s not over!”

“It is for him.”

Kate closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “Our Ned, yes. God rest his soul. But there’s plenty left that’ll fight for the shamrock, that’ll throw off the Saxon yoke. Revolution, Ma! A republic! ‘I will oppose your laws.’ He said that, Ma.
You might have forgotten, but he did. Well, and so will we.”

“Fighting’s not what he wanted. Are there not enough people dead?”

“What the hell would you know? You weren’t even here!”

Silence.

“Bloody hell, I knew it would be like this!” Grace jumped up and disappeared down the train corridor.

Kate pulled down her veil, faced the window.

Gently, Ellen touches Katie’s hair. Child’s headstrong too, but not like her mother. Not so hell-bent on getting her own way. Whichever side Kate took, there was never any other. The only one she listened to at all, apart from Ned, was Maggie. But Maggie wasn’t there, was she; she should have been. Oh, she should have been. She’d have backed Jim up, talked a bit of sense. That’s when they had their fight, when she found out about the show. They called each other for everything. Mad, they were; all of them, they were mad for a long time. Not just Kate, Maggie too. The difference was that Maggie knew it. Remember…

*Once, Ma, once when I couldn’t sleep, I walked from our hotel to the jail. Took my pistol out of my bag, fired it at the stone walls. Bang! Bang! I hear footsteps running, I stuff it back in. This young policeman comes hurtling round the corner and stops, faces left, faces right, hurtles straight on. I’d my veil down and I just kept walking. He never even looked at me! I’ll show you some time, you can still see where the stone been chipped.*

Not Grace so much, thank goodness: just that bit too young. Though it was hard enough …

“Why don’t we go and have a cup of tea?”

Ellen went. Kate didn’t. At Glenrowan, Grace asked if her mother wanted to get off. Ellen shook her head. The train steamed and shuddered and pulled out.

“I did see, you know.” Grace looked from Kate to Ellen. “Maggie wouldn’t let me go at the time. But I went later.”

“Typical,” sniffed Kate.

Ellen said nothing.


Was that why Kate married? Did she think settling down in one place with a blacksmith called Bricky would make life easier? Next thing they heard, she was
calling her self Ada Foster. Who on earth was Ada Foster? By then, Jim had served his time, come home and built the place out at Greta West. But there was no more talk of revenge, no more talk of revolution. Our lives might be wrecked, he said to her the night he arrived back with Kate’s children from Forbes, but that’s no reason theirs should be.

“Accidental death, Ma. What it said on the certificate. Was it the drink, do you think? She was hitting the bottle, I know that. The neighbors told me they heard shouting. That Bricky Foster, he’s got a bit to answer for. What sort of a man leaves his wife in that state?”

She sat up long after he went to bed, staring into the embers, tracking him in her head. The 400 miles to Forbes, driving himself as well as his horse: seeing to the grave, the headstone, the flowers; packing up the children, lifting them into the buggy, stopping to find the baby dead… driving on. 400 miles. Kate could not have asked for more.

She knows what killed Kate and it wasn’t the drink. The drink was just a whatchamacallit, an accessory after the fact. The fact of guilt. Could a feeling be a fact? It could, with all of the weight of a fact. Like some great stone in your gut. That none of her talk, none of her stratagems could lighten.

Guilty as charged: by your own self. Over and over: Annie, Kate, Frost, Fitzpatrick … even George. Lying about her age. What did she do that for? He knew fine well … but that was better than the times she said nothing. Even back with old Harry Power hanging about like a bad smell … the stink of those bunions … did she tell him to leave her son alone? Did she chase him when he came scrounging a feed and a bed? No. She said nothing. Like Kate. Kate said nothing. Kept it inside, eating her up.


She still has the photograph Kate organized for her homecoming. When the train finally pulled into the station, her daughter threw back her veil and patted her mother’s hand. Making allowances: reminding herself to make allowances.

“It is grand to have you home, Ma. Truly. Something to be thankful for at last. Something for the children to remember. Like Grace says, they’re that
excited. I’ve even hired a photographer to come and take a picture.’’

Grace glanced apprehensively at her straight-backed mother. A wince.
A nod. That was all.

Something to remember. Grace stands with her hand on her dog, Ellen sits
together with Jack, then little Ellie with her lamb. Kate sits apart from the rest
of them, formal, her arm around Alice. Ellen wasn’t prepared for Alice. Her soft
skinned baby, now a toddler hiding behind Kate’s skirts, refusing to come near
this witchy old woman … but the others knew her. For a moment, they stood
there like fence posts. Then Jack, God bless him, Jack tossed his hat into the air,
cheered, raced up and hugged her. Ellie was right behind him.

Poor old Reverend Gould, though, what on earth did Kate ask him for?
Standing there apart from them in his top hat, stiff and embarrassed. As if it was
his fault for marrying us, as if he had to show God thought none the worse of me
for George taking off.

“A lot of water under the bridge since last I saw you Mrs. Kelly, a lot of
water.”

Tears, she remembers thinking, tears. But said nothing. Again.
CHAPTER FIVE.

I’d rather die like Donahue, that bushranger so brave
Than be taken by the government to be treated like a slave,
I’d rather fight with all my might as long as I’d eyes to see;
I’d rather die ten thousand deaths than die on the gallows tree.

Brian wakes with a start; where is he? He stares into the darkness. Glenrowan, that’s right, Glenrowan. What time is it? Gropes for the bedside lamp, he pushes up on one elbow and peers. Four o’clock. He slumps back on the pillow. Hooking his fingers together, he stretches them above his head. The bands of gold on his left hand catch the light. With his right, he switches the lamp off, lays his hands across his chest. The right hand turns the rings on the left round and round, round and round and round.

The lower ring is his first one: Laura. She used to turn hers too, once for each name. He’d hear her, saying them over. Brian. Francis. Lillian. Roy. As if either of them could ever forget. She’d sit beside the window, staring at the carpet and turning her wedding ring.

Nothing he could do: not a thing. Maybe there’d been something after Brian and Francis: nothing after the twins. Coming home to an empty house, he knew to head for the church. There she’d be, polishing candlesticks, setting out hymnbooks, arranging and re-arranging flowers, strewing the withered culls on the little graves before she would follow him home. He told her she was morbid. She said she was entitled. Little Brian, Francis, and then the twins as well…

He took her in his arms; she remained rigid. It was hard for him too; could she understand that? Could they help each other? She leant the side of her face against his chest, gave no answer. He told her life went on, that they had to keep going, that time mightn’t heal, but it would ease. She nodded. Days became weeks, months. One day, coming home from church, she got caught in a thunderstorm. When he let himself in that evening, she was sitting beside the window in her wet clothes. The chill turned into pneumonia. And she didn’t have to keep going any more.

He found a boarding house near his office. He investigated crime scenes,
reported on parliament. He ate and drank in hotels; mostly drank. At the office Christmas party, he tripped over his own feet, slammed into the corner of a metal filing cabinet and passed out. When he awoke, the new secretary was pressing a cold cloth to his forehead. ‘Pax’, he slurred, ‘pax vobiscum’. Her eyebrows rose quizzically: ‘pax to you too’, she said. She lifted his hand, set it over the cloth and stood up. ‘Thanks,’ he muttered. She shrugged and went back to the party. When she saw him heading in her direction, she turned the other way. Sam told him her name was Lucy.

The top ring is hers. But he has never dreamt about Lucy. Just as well. Lucy doesn’t put much store by dreams: leftovers, she calls them. Remains of the day, or the day before. The brain tidying up after itself. When he described his Laura dream, she lay quietly for a few moments. Then she said that the thing about ghosts was, they couldn’t help themselves. He could. He told her about waking up in a sweat because he dreamt he forgot what his babies were called. She got out of bed, wrote the names down and slid them under his pillow. At breakfast, she told him to take the photographs out of his wallet and write the names onto the back of them. He did. She bet he would never have that dream again. He never did.

Laura’s mementos of the children… their christening robes, their bootees, the welcome baby cards… are still laid out on the dresser in the spare room. All Lucy has is a curl of Sydney’s hair in her locket, along with a curl of Beryl’s. Not that there was much else anyway. No time. ‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away’. What sort of a miserable two-faced Lord does that?

Poor little Beryl. Too little to understand why her mother kept bursting into tears, why her father slammed the door in the priest’s face. Too little to really remember her brother; barely four, still an infant herself. He shivers, thinking of the soft little arms around his neck, kissing him goodbye, nodding, round eyed, as he told her to be a good girl for Mummy. So little of her.

Don’t think about it. He thinks too much, Lucy’s always telling him that. She’s right. The fat women down the street don’t think and they have squads of children, running up and down, shouting at the tops of their voices. Lucy says that’s a stupid thing to say, that it’s got nothing to do with thinking.

“So what is it to do with? The will of God?”

“Don’t start, Brian.”
“Well, what else? All that power and glory: give, take away, give, take away. Just for practice. ”

“You know that’s not true.”

“How do I? ‘As flies to wanton boys,’ that’s all we are. ‘He kills us for His sport’.”

“You and your Shakespeare! We’re not flies. “

“No, you don’t buzz, you sing, don’t you? Stand up in church and sing immortal, invisible, God only wise. What it should be, I’ll tell you what it should be, this: immoral, invincible …

“Oh, very clever! So smart, aren’t you, so good with words! No point even trying to talk to you in this mood.”

“Inmoral, invincible, God only lies …”

“Shut up!”

He had no idea she could scream so loud. Arms shielding her head, quaking, she turned her back on him. Her voice was a hiss.


Brian is about to answer, but she turns and faces his frown full on, lips compressed, jaw set. He goes to the office.

The Kelly job: it was as if Sam had heard her, as if he knew Brian needed some sort of escape. So what if it was a wild goose chase? Go away, she said. So he would. He did. Plus, this goose laid a decent salary; he needed to be thinking ahead, needed to be putting money aside. At least he could be a good provider, at least she couldn’t blame him there.

He closes his eyes. Go back to sleep.

*Alone, alone, all all alone,*

*Alone on a wide wide sea …*

So are we all …

The heavy knock and rattling door handle has him stumbling out of bed.

“Brian! Brian, are you up? It’s a quarter to eight, your breakfast’s cold.”

Jack: bloody hell, is that the time?

“Give me ten minutes!”

In the dining room, Jack’s waiting, pouring himself a cup of tea. The waitress – not Millie – takes Brian’s order. He nods as Jack holds the teapot over
his cup.

“Thanks. Sorry. Didn’t sleep very well.”


“You’re looking pleased with yourself. Nothing to do with darts, I’m guessing.”

“You guess right. Real little peach, Millie. Plus there’s something I want to run by you.”

Jack sips his tea and waits while the waitress serves Brian his breakfast.

“I reckon we should go to Forbes.”

“Forbes? 400 miles away? Why on earth would we go to Forbes?”

“Or maybe even Adelaide. Because of Kate. Ned Kelly’s sister, mate! See, talking to Millie… I told you she was a McAuliffe, didn’t I? Well, anyhow, I told her we were investigating a story about the Kellys. Don’t worry, that’s all I said, I’m not stupid. But it turns out her family knew the Kellys well, and not only that, her auntie and Kate Kelly were friends. So she knew lots of stuff. Like, did you know Kate was sweet on Aaron Sherritt? The one they shot because they reckoned he’d been spying on them? How sweet, you might well ask, specially when he went and married some other girl. According to Millie, she only led Fitzpatrick on to make Sherritt jealous. Because even if she had liked the man, how was that ever going to work? A Kelly and the policeman who was after her brother? See, there’s a touch of Romeo and Juliet, touch of the old Shakespeare for you. And did you know that after Ned died she ran away to Adelaide to be an actress? Worked in a bar, and God knows where else. All anybody here knows is when she came back she’d got very fond of the gin. Then she couldn’t settle, waitress here, barmaid there; finally, she went off and married a man called Bricky Foster away up in Forbes. He was a blacksmith, but a horseman as well, like her… horsewoman, that is. Trick riding, flash stuff. Anyhow, they settled down, had a few kids. He started taking off on his own, work or something, left her with the kids and the new baby. Anyhow, whatever happened, she fell off the Forbes Bridge and drowned.” Jack sits back with a dramatic gesture. “Terrible. Human tragedy. There’s your story, mate. That’s the one we should be chasing, not what some old woman thinks she remembers. Geez, it’s got everything: drama, romance, tragedy. Surprised old Sammy didn’t think of it.”
Brian goes on buttering toast.

“Well? What do you reckon? We could finish up here, head up there tomorrow. What d’you reckon?”

Brian looks up at his photographer. “Lots of stuff, you said. Is that what you call lots of stuff? Some old biddys’ gossip, that’s what I call it. I wouldn’t go to the end of the street on the strength of it, never mind Forbes or Adelaide?”

“Bloody hell, mate, she’s not an old biddy! She’s a McAuliffe, her family knew Kate her whole life, knew them all! Thought you said you wanted local colour?”

“But it’s hearsay, Jack. You need facts.”

“So? Pretty much all you read is hearsay, sooner or later it is. What somebody said, what somebody saw. What’s wrong with that? Hearsay’s what’s interesting, it’s the personal angle. It’s what makes people turn the pages, to find out what other people have got up to. It’s not facts that sell papers, mate! Facts are boring.”

“No they’re not. Or they shouldn’t be.”

“Shouldn’t be, maybe not, but a lot of the time they are. What, think you’ve got a photographer along to show the facts? Because the camera never lies, because it can only show what’s there? Hah! Tell you what, we mightn’t be able to show what’s not there, but we can do a hell of a lot with what is. Depends on the angle you take it from, doesn’t it? Depends on the light and the way it falls, the way you frame it, the background, any number of things. That’s what gets your readers in, that’s what livens up their boring old lives. What the butler saw, scene of the crime, the hidden truth, that kind of stuff. Hearsay and look-see, that’s all it is, hearsay and look-see. That’s what sells papers, mate. Don’t you want that bacon?”

Brian shakes his head.

Jack forks up the rasher. “Anyhow, that’s my opinion. Forbes is the go.”

He chews expectantly. Brian folds his napkin carefully. “Hearsay and look-see.”

Jack nods, grinning. Brian shakes his head again and stands, scraping back his chair.

“Try been there, seen that. Try not getting sued or had up for defamation. Try notes, interviews; try not putting words into people’s mouths. How do you know
their lives are boring? Just because they’re older than you, or might not be as…
smart. Your father once told me you said cameras were boring.”

“Yes, but that was when I was only a kid. Before I’d any idea what they could
do.”

“Can’t do anything if you don’t set them up properly.”

Jack picks up a napkin, wipes his mouth. “All right, all right. I get the
message. You’re the boss. Whatever you say. No skin off my nose. So what’s
now?”

Brian pushes back his chair.

“We get the sweets and we pick up the buggy.”

First light. Ellen looks in on the sleeping children, goes through to the kitchen.
Outside, the paddocks are rain washed and bright. She makes tea and takes her
morning cup out to the verandah. A magpie carols: there it is… she smiles. One
time Ned said she was near as good a lookout as the peacock at Glenmore. What
do you mean, near? Well, your screech isn’t just as loud. Taking her dish clout
to him…

Still here, still keeping a look out. Sons and daughters, daughters and sons,
all of them gone. Only Grace and Jim left of the Kelly brood: Grace was too
little, and Jim, he was too… lagged. Locked up most of the time. Grace got off
the lightest: too young and a girl besides. Girls tidy up afterwards, girls wash
shirts and iron them and alter them to fit the men left behind. Girls keep the
newspaper clippings; girls know the words of the songs.

You couldn’t go past Maggie for that, the number of songs she had by heart.

“Do you know Oh, Harp that Once through Tara’s halls, Maggie? Do you
know Come all you Lachlan men?”

“I do. What would you like?”

The songs were a good way to finish the meetings, especially when they’d
been arguing. The first thing Jim asked for, when Maggie and Tom came round
to welcome him home from Cootamundra jail, the very first thing, was a song.

“I’ve nearly forgotten what a woman’s voice sounds like, Maggie. Four years
listening to men’s voices and the scrape of a pick and shovel.”

“Only listening, Jim? Did you not sing along with them? You can hold a
tune, did you not want to cheer yourself up?”

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“I tell you, when you’re swinging a pickaxe all the bloody tunes end up the same.”

All the meetings they had. All the lists Maggie made. Ellen’s job was to mind the children, feed them their dinner and see them off to bed. Give Tom and Maggie a chance to make their lists.

Just on dark, by themselves or in twos or threes, they’d start arriving. Sympathizers, the police called them. Of course they were bloody sympathizers, what else? What else would you call friends, neighbors, people who’ve been in and out of each other houses a lifetime?

Soon enough the room would be crowded, full of greetings and back slaps and the chink of glasses. Tom would call them to order, bang the table, stand up and start speaking. Maybe ten minutes, Ellen reckons, before the interruptions would begin: the questions, contradictions, the what-did-he says, the that’s-not-what-I-heards. Tom thumps his fist on the table, bellows for quiet. People elbow each other, pay attention.

“Strategy,” hisses Maggie, “stick to the strategy, Tom.”

News first: the latest on the Royal Commission appointed to enquire into police behavior during the ‘Kelly Outbreak’. ‘Outbreak’ they call it. Like it was a dose of scabies or scarlet fever. Wild Wright bangs his fist on the table: he’ll peg the entire Victorian police force out on ant beds and pour boiling oil down their throats. Jane Lloyd jumps to her feet and holds up a cartoon her boys have drawn of a policeman: Fitzpatrick to the life, right down to the frizzy sideburns. She says they’re going to stick it up in the barn for slingshot practice. Tom says he’s heard Fitzpatrick’s been discharged from the force. Bit bloody late, says somebody down the back. Joe Ryan jumps up: he’s heard Bricky Williamson’s gone and backed Fitzpatrick’s story so that he can get let out of jail early, what about that? What about wait till he bloody gets out and we’ll make him wish he was back in again, roars Wild.

“Quiet!” bellows Tom. “Look, you don’t know if that’s true, and even if it is, what of it? You can understand the man, can you not? Put away for six years when he wasn’t even bloody there? If it took a year or two off your sentence, would you not be tempted to do the same thing yourself? Not going to make any difference to Ned now, is it?”

“That’s nothing.” Joe Ryan downs his beer and glares around the room.
“That bastard Ward, you know, Detective bloody Ward, they’ve given him a hundred quid reward. A hundred quid, did you not see it? In the paper, it was, bold as brass: ‘because of his connection with the employment of Aaron Sherritt’. Blood money, that’s what that is. Straight out blood money.”

“Ned Kelly was the best bloody man there’s ever been in Benalla, and I’d fight up to my knees in blood for him,” growls Frank Harty, the same as he growls at every meeting.

It’s the name. They can never get past his name. Outside, the last rays of the sun bleed through a darkening sky. Maggie lights the lamp. People forget that it’s now and not then. Paddy McAuliffe crosses himself. Tom McAuliffe pours another drink. The room becomes a waiting room, all of them waiting… for what? To see Ned come striding in, lift Kate Lloyd up in the air and spin her around him? Or put up his fists and pretend to square off with Wild? Stand up before them all and raise his glass to true blood, bone and beauty?

The empty, waiting space is Maggie’s cue for a song. Something lively, something comical: *keep your eyes well peeled today, the tall tall men are on their way, drinking up the mountain tay, in the hills of Connemara…* then maybe one for Ned, there are some good songs about Ned… Trouble is, they’re most of them sad. *Farewell to my home in Greta, or My name is Edward Kelly.* Ned wouldn’t have thought much of them, he liked bright songs, rousing songs, songs that shortened long hours in a cell… come on, Maggie. *When Irish eyes are smiling… what shall we do with the drunken trooper… were you ever at the fair…* and a rebel song to finish, something to send them home with their heads high: *by the rising of the moon, by the rising of the moon, for the pikes must be together by the rising of the moon…*

Sometimes, the daughter’s eyes seek out the mother’s where she’s humming along, her fingers drumming in time on the arm of her chair, her chin held high. The words might be Australian, but the tune’s Irish. They smile at each other, mouth no surrender. Other times, Ellen just nods and stitches and heaves a sigh as everyone in the room joins in, whether they can hold a tune or not.

They’d hold the meetings at Eleven Mile because Maggie said it was handier than their place, but Ellen knows better. It’s the house that Ned built, built with his own hands for his mother, on the land she’d selected for them. Not some misty thatched cottage on the other side of the world, but a real house right here...
in the North East, solid and square, with a brick chimney and every slab felled and fitted by her own sons. The house would not be here but for him; nor been turned into a meeting place.

Tom and Maggie see to it that her chair is drawn up in pride of place by the hearth, that she has her basket and that the lamp’s lit behind her. She doesn’t have to do anything, just be there. She sits and she stitches and she watches.

Maggie’s the girl for stratagems, not Kate. Tom does the talking, but the words are Maggie’s. God knows where she finds the time in among raising a family and running a farm, but the latest clippings from the papers are always there, with the parts to read out underlined, the lists are drawn up. It’s like dealing a hand of cards, Ellen thinks, except the government holds all the trumps.

The first meeting is the worst, not long after the homecoming. She feels like she’s back from the dead, like a ghost. So she is, really; the ghost of who she once was. Which makes the dead man seem deader than ever. She braces herself, smiles, shakes hands; everyone means so well and it’s great to see you all, and all looking so well...

Maggie tinkles a spoon in a glass. Hush. She calls Ellen to stand next to her, holds her hand up high and asks them all to welcome Ned’s mother home. Cheers, clapping, shouts: Ellen and Maggie hug. Ellen is handed over to her chair like a queen. Maggie picks up a clipping, reads what she’s underlined aloud. Tom starts going through what they’ll need to do and who might do it. Ellen lets her shoulders slacken. For a few seconds, she closes her eyes. A cold prison draft pierces her, even through this warm fug; she shivers, shakes her head, and bends to her basket to take out some work.

Crowded together, people nod and nudge and listen. For a while. But they haven’t come to listen; they’ve come to find something to do. Anything. The energy in the room is evident: knees jigggle, veins bulge, fists clench and unclench, fingers jab. Wanting to do something. Anything. The likes of Wild Wright: what would he know about stratagems? Dick Hart and Paddy Byrne, young men brimming with grief and resentment and anger, what do they want with newsletters and records and accounts and petitions?

Anyway, they’ve already done that. They all signed the petition for Ned’s reprieve. 60,000 signatures, Tom reminds them: 60,000. Somebody cheers. But
then somebody else shouts ‘but they still bloody killed him’. That’s the cue for somebody else again to yell “death to the Saxon!” A hand shoots up; there’s a whole stack of mould boards not three miles away, what are they bloody waiting for? And what about the money from Kate’s Sydney show, what ever happened to that? What about those rifles they were going to order? What’s the hold up? Tom raises both hands and says what he’s said over and over and over again. They have to take their time. They have to think things through, not just charge in like bulls at a gate. That’s playing straight into the government’s hands. They have to look ahead; they have to have what the man himself called a ‘colonial stratagem’. Because if this is a war, if this really is going to be death to the Saxon, then they need a plan of attack.

Cheers, fists punching air. Maggie hands her husband a couple of reward notices. Blood money: police paying off their own, greasing the palms of that two-faced runt of a teacher and that slimey bastard Ward. The cheers become growls. Another round of drinks. A toast to freedom and justice; somebody stands behind Ellen’s chair and raises his glass ‘to the widow’s son … whose orders must be obeyed!’

She doesn’t even look up. Her entire being is trained on the other side of the room, on the tall bearded man lifting his glass at that very moment in response to the toast. It’s Jim. Her Jim, with his head thrown back and his beard jutting as he laughs… exactly the same as Ned’s beard did.

A shiver runs up and down her veins, seizing, freezing every pulse. Freezing her face, locking her spine. Like a familiar spirit. Her vision blurs, fear wraps her skin in a clammy caul. Not him as well, dear God, not him as well … not now. Not now.

They can’t make him.

He wasn’t even there, he had nothing to do with Stringybark or Glenrowan. Or shooting police, or derailing a train. It’s the other way round, it’s his life’s been robbed, tossed away in cells and road gangs: lagged at fourteen, for God’s sake! What chance did Jim Kelly ever have? By the time he got out of Wagga, she was in jail, Kennedy and Scanlon and Lonigan were dead, Ned and Dan were on the run. Everything was already too late; there was not a thing he could do…

Because Ned wouldn’t listen. So many times they’ve been over it, Jim in his chair, she in hers, the same old ground. That one time. Jim was just out of
Darlinghurst and the boys were home to see him. Sitting round the fire after the hugs and the backslaps and the cheers, he told them that George Scott was in the jail with him. Captain Moonlite. Ned laughed: that’d be a full moon, wouldn’t it? Full of himself that Scott: flash bastard. Moonlite, for chrissake: in his book, his own name was good enough. And he reckoned people would remember Kelly long after they’d forgotten Scott. Laughter all round: but not from Jim.

“What’s up, mate?”

“Listen, Ned, just listen …”

He was there in the prison yard when they brought Moonlite in from Wantabagery Station. He saw the fierce stare of the man, the swagger, even though he was obviously wrecked. Yes, he was a flash bastard. But a gutsy one too. Over the next couple of months, he paced up and down that prison yard like he owned it. They’d seen that before, of course. Most of the lads tried to put on some sort of show, as if they didn’t care, as if lives were ten a penny. It was what you did. Moonlite just did it better than most. But that wasn’t what stayed with him. What stayed with him was the man’s singing.

They all knew that it was the end. He’d got away with enough, no way were the police going to let him slip through their fingers this time. He was for the high jump. At the end of a rope. He knew it; the entire jail knew it. So nobody yelled at him to shut up that last night after lights out when he started to sing. Nobody wanted to. He could hold a tune, the old Moonlite, and God knows, they got little enough entertainment. Jim looked round; it was the sort of stuff Ma used to sing, all the old songs. Danny Boy. The Lammas Fair. The Star of the County Down. County Down being where he was born. Once upon a time: once upon a life. The funniest thing was that lying there listening, Jim could actually see a star; through the small barred window high in his cell wall, just a pinprick of light, impossibly far away.

And he knew the condemned man could see it too.

Oh Mary, this London’s a wonderful sight,
With the people here working by day and by night.
They don’t dig potatoes or barley or wheat,
But there’s gangs of them digging for gold in the street.
At least when I asked them that’s what I was told,
So I just took a hand at this digging for gold.
But for all that I found there, I’d far better be,
Where the Mountains of Mourne sweep on down to the sea.

Far better be: you’re not wrong, thought Jim. Scott went quiet; lying alone in their locked cell, his audience waited. Just as their eyes were closing, just as they thought he’d given up, that disembodied voice came looping through the dark again. It was the same verse over again, except he’d changed the last two lines.

But I’d give all I’ve found here if I could be free
To ride through those mountains, walk down to that sea.

“That was it.” Jim shrugged. “Not another word. Not another word.”

He looked up to where Ned was leaning against the wall by the window, tugging absently at his beard and looking out into the dark. Silence. Waiting. Eventually Ned turned, looked at his brother, spread his hands wide and shrugged. Jim shoved back his chair so hard it fell over; one stride and he grabbed his brother’s shoulders, shook them furiously.

“Ned, Ned, man, can you not see? They will get you; sooner or later the fuckers will get you! Nothing will do them but your life, you know that, I know you do! You’re a long time dead, man, what’s the goddam hurry? Get out Ned, for Chrissake, get out while you still can. Listen, I’ve been making enquiries. Yes, I have, somebody bloody needs to… anyhow. There’s an American ship docked at Sydney: The Storm Bird, she’s called. Experienced captain: up and down the coast, South Seas, California. A thousand quid, Ned. We can raise a thousand quid. Surely to God we can raise a thousand quid. Get you out of here. And Dan, and Joe, and Steve. Free, free as birds; you’d have your whole lives back again .”

Jim let his arms fall, his eyes still locked into his brother’s.

“California, Ned. California. Hell, you could even find that bastard King and give him a pasting. For Ma’s sake. What do you say?”

But Ned knew better. Same as he always did. Wouldn’t listen. The only one he would listen to was Joe bloody Byrne. He had some notion that Joe was an educated man, so he’d listen to him, but not to his own brother. His own flesh and blood.

Ellen sighs. Another might have been; another never was.
Red’s sons, the two of them. However many years went by, in some deep place Red was still there, beyond all the grief, all the rage, all the despair. The athletic young man with red hair and a crooked smile that her Da brought home, she could summon him yet…

She cannot, will not, lose Red’s last son.

But what to do? Who’ll listen to her now? Does nobody else see where this is all going? Because he looks like Ned, because they need somebody to play Ned’s part, because they could dress him up in a suit of armour and nobody would ever know the difference, none of that makes him Ned… because who’s going to ask his name before they shoot?

Words, all the words flapping like broken wings: words of grief and words of rage, words throbbing and weeping like the wounds they stand for. Shouts, toasts, solemn oaths and covenants, words making folk feel like they’re important, like they’re doing something. When they’re not. When they can’t. Ellen stabs her needle into thick cloth. It won’t go through.

They can’t make him. There’s nobody at those meetings who can change the ending of the story. Not Tom, not Joe, not Paddy. And never Jim. They cannot put it on to Jim. She won’t let them.

She’s too old for this. Where’s Maggie? Over there, back to her. Talking to Kate, Jesus no, Kate’ll want to stir him up, not stop him. Joe, Dick, Frank? No: might as well ask Wild Wright. Tom? Not on his own.

After Glenrowan, Maggie told her that Tom stood out in front of everybody, in front of Dan and Steve’s burnt bodies, and raised his right hand to heaven. Swore death and damnation to the entire Victorian Police Force. Then went home and smashed that same fist into the chimney bricks. The stain’s still there. For all Maggie might want him to be, Tom is no leader. He’s the other one who got away, the one who lives to tell the tale. Which is fine. Which is as it should be. It wasn’t his fight in the first place, and it still isn’t. It isn’t anybody’s fight, not any more.

Drumming, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. All round her, angry faces, anxious faces, faces milling and moiling in a wake that hasn’t stopped since November. Mad, barking mad, every last one of them. She knows, she’s been mad herself. Notorious for it. Then. Not now, not any more.

Maggie: it has to be Maggie. If she can just get her to look, to see…
Leaning forward, fingers knuckling white on the arms of her chair, she strains to catch her daughter’s eye. Tired, so tired the girl looks, stacking papers, muttering to herself. Ellen pushes herself to her feet and Maggie glances across. Ellen points; Maggie looks. Jim, right on cue, throws back his head and laughs. Maggie’s eyes widen, lock back in to her mother’s.

But this is not the time, not now, not when everyone’s drunk and stupid. Looking across the room at each other, that’s understood. Once they’ve all gone, that’s when they’ll sit down together and think. Think before, not after; because when you get it wrong before, there is no after. An old tune drifts into Ellen’s head… \textit{the time has gone and past, my love, that you and I have seen...}

No second chances. Not then, not now.
CHAPTER SIX.

And back through the glen I rode again
And my heart with grief was sore;
But to and fro in my dreams I go
And I kneel and I pray for you ...
Our Savior he fled from our glorious dead
When you fell in the foggy dew ...

I’m standing outside the back window, looking in.
I’m looking into the kitchen; that’s me in there, peeling the spuds. How many spuds would you peel in a lifetime? Everything is just the way it always is: Jack and Ellie under everybody’s feet, Alice asleep in her cot. Gracie helping me peel and Kate on her knees at the hearth, scraping and clanging. She’s in one of her sulks; wants to be up the far paddock where Ned and Joe are trying out the new colt.

I throw a potato peel over my shoulder; it’s a ‘c’. Who’s ‘c’, Ma, who’s ‘c’? It’s not ‘c’, it’s ‘g’, see, it’s got a tail. Gracie throws a ‘b’; Kate jumps up from the hearth, snatches it off her, sticks out her tongue, Bricky, Bricky, Gracie’s got old Bricky! I throw again. It’s an ‘A’. I look at Kate. Kate tosses her head and glares... Gracie has no idea of course, Aaron, Aaron she chant ...

A six foot goanna, reared up on his hind legs, filling up the entire doorway. A goanna in a constable’s uniform. A goanna grinning, its greasy yellow eyeballs sliding round the room and sticking at Kate...

Ellie and Jack race over, bury their faces in my apron; I bundle them out the back door, yell for Grace. Take them, take them, quick, and get the boys. She grabs their hands, runs. I hurry back into the room. Kate’s standing stiff as a poker, arms folded across her chest, staring out the window.

Constable Goanna turns to me, wants to know where Dan is. I tell him Dan’s not here, so he can take himself off. He pays no attention. He slouches over to the fire and props himself up against the wall. He watches me out of those yellow eyes and swishes his tail. He hates me, I know that; he’s hated me ever since that
day in the shed. But for now he’s decided to be smarmy.

“That’s a good smell, Mrs. K. Kate helping, is she? Can you cook as well as you ride, Kate?” He pushes himself off the wall, moves towards the baby’s cot.

“Keep you away from that child!”

I snatch up the cot and carry it through to the kitchen. Of course the bairn wakes and starts crying. I yell after Grace; she’s at the gate, but she sits Ellie and Jack down and comes tearing back. I shove the baby into her arms; she gawps up at me.

“Get Ned. Hurry up!”

She takes off across the yard again, the baby squalling in her arms. Jack and Ellie are jumping up and down. The three of them disappear out the gate.

I stand perfectly still, listening; nothing. Not a sound. Maybe he’s taken himself off. I go back in.

He hasn’t. He’s got Kate backed up against the wall, he’s standing over her with his claws hard against the wall either side of her head, his leer stretching all the way back to his shoulders. His thick black tongue slides out and slimes her cheek. Kate’s mouth is open, but there’s no sound coming out. She tries to duck out under; but she’s too late: he’s clamped himself against her, his snout’s in her chest and he’s humping, humping… Kate’s eyes are squeezed shut, she’s twisting and squirming and wrestling, but never a sound, never a sound… it’s me that makes the sound, a banshee screech as I grab a shovel and launch myself across the room… only I never get there, I’m caught midair, floating, flailing, like the sounds that won’t come out, like all the draggled drowned things trailing underwater…

Black. It goes black just like that. Then daylight again.

I’m standing outside the back window, looking in again, but I’m looking at Dan, flopped down on a chair beside the table with his feet stuck out in front of him. I start forking out the spuds. He’s starving, he says. ‘Course he is, he’s never anything else. Him and Ned and Joe have got them trees up the back cleared. They’re just redding up, they’ll be in as soon as they’ve done with the colt, better put some more spuds on, Ma… right. Plop, plop, simmer, simmer. Dan picks up a potato peel from the floor and wants to know whose it is. Grace giggles; Kate tugs her sister’s plait and she squeals. The door creaks open and a shadow blocks the light. Constable Fitzpatrick’s shadow. Constable Alexander
Fitzpatrick. With the top buttons of his uniform undone. And the yellow goanna eyes. And the air thick with the smell of grog.

“Dan Kelly. I’ve come t’ arress you.”

Dan sits staring at him, the peel still dangling from his fingers. I step in between.

“What for, you brute?”

“Stealin’ horses, not that it’s any of your business, y’oul’ bitch. Whitty’s horses. You were seen, mate. Drivin’ em from Chiltern.”

I can feel my cheeks burning. I stamp my foot. “Where’s your warrant? You’ll not take him without a warrant.”

“Here’s me warning, here, right here.” The fool’s slapping himself all over, trying to find the wallet they gave him to carry it in.

“Your warrant, you daft bugger. Come on, come on, show us! You can’t take him without a warrant, and you damn well know it!”

Dan reaches out and touches my arm. “Don’t worry, Ma. It’s all right. I’ll go. Sure I was nowhere near Chiltern, and I’ve a dozen witnesses to back me. It’s more trouble than it’s worth. Can you not see the man’s drunk? It’ll be all he can do to ride back to the station, never mind lay a charge. But you’ll give a fella time to have a bite to eat, won’t you, mate? Haven’t eaten all day, my stomach’s sticking to my backbone …”

“Sartinly, sartinly. Go right ahead. No worries, Danny boy, no worries.”

I put Dan’s plate down and glare; the hide of him, marching in like he owns the place, and that lizardy smirk from ear to ear…

“Katie, Katie, give ush yer ansher do; I’m half crazhey over the love of you …”

Jesus sweet and bleeding, where is that shovel? God rot you for a shameless bloody article …

“Ma, for Chrissake, Ma …”

“Have a go, would ya? Sourface bitch: assaulting an off’cer, I’ll arress’ you too; you’re all under arress’, whole effing lot of you …”

“For God’s sake, man, put that gun away …”

Dan lunges, but he’s too late, the pistol’s gone off. Half cocked, the man is, never mind his bloody gun … for a couple of seconds, nobody moves. Kate’s hand is over her mouth, the shovel’s still in my hand, Danny’s staring at
Fitzpatrick, who’s staring at his own wrist, at the red stuff welling... all hell breaks loose. Kate starts to shake and sob, Grace comes tearing in with the baby, Jack and Ellie behind, more sobbing, more screaming, Dan cursing and trying to get the stupid bugger to sit still. Back door flies open; at last! Ned, Ned, where the hell have you been?

Black. Just like that.

Only I’m standing inside now, I’m standing over Fitzpatrick with a bandage in my hand, telling Ned and Dan to for God’s sake hold the man still. He’s squirming and groaning and carrying on like a chook and the brandy bottle’s open and Dan’s plate is smashed and the baby’s bawling and the spuds are boiling over and everything, the house, the shed, the horse hitched to the rail, everything’s flying up into the air, turning somersaults over and over...

I’m the only one still on the ground. I have to be, because there’s Alice, there’s the babe in my arms, hush little baby don’t you cry ....

The sky, funny enough, is clear and blue.

Fitzpatrick bleeds like a stuck pig. Except his eyes aren’t stuck, his eyes are still two greasy yellow balls, sliding up, down, sideways, looking anyways but back at you.

Then he’s gone. Only a tattoo of hooves, only a kicked up cloud of dust floating back down. The blue of the sky is suddenly darker, like a bruise coming. I’m looking at my firstborn son as he runs his big sinewy hand through his hair and looks back at me...

Black. Just like that.

This time we’re not there any more at all. No blue sky, no warbling magpie, no silvery branches reaching up for the sky. Nothing but closed grey stone, nothing but a last dribble of light from that miserable hole in the wall above our heads, the wall that reaches up high as never.

Whee – up! The whip bird’s call almost makes Ellen drop her cup. She leans forward, scanning the trees, but the bird is nowhere to be seen. It’s broad day light: the children should be through any minute. She sips her tea, brings herself back.

Jim worries about her, the way she can lose herself, be here but not. She tells him it’s not losing, it’s finding. He worries about the children; what if there was
some accident? Would she even hear them? He worries that it’s a sign she’s losing her grip. Grip of what? She knows fine well where she is; she’s looked out over the same paddocks, the same scatter of trees, the same blue distance for the best part of thirty years. That doesn’t mean she has to spend her whole time there, though, any more than he does. The only difference is, she’s not droving a mob of cattle.

Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream; merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily; life is but a dream. Sooner or later, that’s all it is. Or a memory. Take Fitzpatrick, now: the living man’s face has blurred, the exact shape of his nose and mouth; but not the glint of his eyes, not the goanna leer; not the spreading and clenching of that bandaged claw.

Deny everything, Ned told her as they walked up and down the yard that day, deny everything. Ellen shuts her eyes; her hands are in his again, he’s turning her to face him.

“It’s the only way, Ma. Leave it for them to prove what happened. They can’t, no way. No way in the world. Think about it. Who’s their only witness? Alex Fitzpatrick. Chrissake, even the police know he’s a mongrel, a liar, a cheat. And a piss-pot to boot: nobody in his right mind would take Fitzpatrick’s word for anything.”

“But it isn’t just Fitzpatrick, Ned. It’s Constable Fitzpatrick. It’s one of their own.”

He wouldn’t listen. He pointblank refused to have Kate dragged through the courts, nor Gracie either. He would not have his sisters paraded up on a witness stand for some wig and gown to bully. We will not involve the girls, said he, like he had a wig and a gown on himself. But they already are, she told him, how can they not be? She told him they’d do it with a heart and a half, that they were Kellys too, that they could, they should; Kate most of all. But he would not listen.

There was enough incriminating evidence without them, he said: constable drunk on duty, constable not following instructions, constable acting without a warrant, constable recklessly discharging a weapon. The police would be wanting to keep it quiet, wanting to have it over and done with as quick and quiet as they could. They’d have to save face of course, they’d have to put the blame on somebody. They’d dig up some sort of a charge, obstructing the course of
justice, maybe, or withholding evidence. There’d be a caution or a fine, maybe a few days in clink. Yes, yes, he knew she wasn’t the one needing cautioned. He knew that, everybody knew that. But this was the police they were talking about; they couldn’t just come out and say they were wrong, now could they? Alex Fitzpatrick certainly wasn’t going to kick up a fuss; did she not hear him promising? Why would he, for God’s sake? It’d be as much as his job was worth.

“I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him.”

“Ma, Ma, the man’s a fool, a drunken fool. Just bite your tongue, will you? For once in your life, just bite your tongue. A few days and it’ll all be behind us.”

A few days, so. Three years. Then a lifetime thinking what if she’d got him to damn well listen, what if Kate had spoken up, what if… wishes were horses.

She’s never been sure exactly how much of an idea Ned had about what actually went on between Fitzpatrick and Kate. It was all over so quickly. Just as well, too: just as well he hadn’t seen his fool of a constable the way she did, hadn’t seen him pawing his sister. She’d have been digging a grave, not dressing a wound. Ellen closes her eyes, sighs. Why didn’t she get hold of Kate before she was dragged off with Alice, get her to talk sense to her brother, tell him the way Fitzpatrick behaved, tell him she’d a right to speak? Surely to God he’d have seen she had a right, that he neither could nor should keep her out of it. If she’d only been let stand up in court, only let tell her own story, in her own words, to the judge and the jury, the whole thing would have turned out differently. She’s sure of it. Most of all for Kate.

“Gran? Where are you Gran?”

Her and Ned pacing up and down the yard, up and down. Kate and Gracie with their arms round each other’s shoulders, stumbling about, and the tears tripping them. Dan rocking Alice, hushing Ellie and Jack, it’s over now, it’s over ... You couldn’t hear yourself think. Ned let her talk, but he wasn’t listening. She knew by the look on his face. He’d made up his mind already. Nothing nor nobody was going to shift him.

“One sister’s enough, Ma. I’ll not risk another.”

So they risked everything else. And lost the lot.
Ellen finishes her tea and takes the cup back inside. Her grandchildren are sitting at the table. Katie is sawing at a loaf of bread, playing mother. The old woman stands in the doorway, watching.

Fitzpatrick should never even have got in the door; but how were they supposed to stop him? Obstruct, that’s what they called it, obstructing. Kate should have hit him, screamed her head off, never worried about Ned and Joe. They’d had plenty of closer calls than that. Or what if Danny had ridden straight off with him instead of eating his dinner? Which he never got to finish anyhow. All he’d have had to do was point to the state of your officer, sir... What if she’d fed the man some more drink? It wouldn’t have taken much, he was legless as it was. They could have taken him to the station arse up, slung over the back of his horse. How would that have looked, the Kellys bringing a constable in?

“Lily, don’t lick your knife. Here, let me do that …”

Same old what ifs… wish and horses …

Note: references for the lyric epigraphs to each chapter are as follows:
CHAPTERS 7 – 13

Chapter 7

Outwardly, Ellen is mending and minding as usual. Inwardly, she is stepping out one long ago day at Benalla races, her son Jim on one arm and Constable Robert Graham, the new police superintendent, on the other. The Kellys, arm in arm with the law: it was a public announcement: there had been enough killing. Time to live and let live. The right decision, and one that was down to Ellen. The memory restores her confidence that she can manage journalists … again.

Chapter 8

Ellen tells Katie how her mother died, rejecting the rumors of suicide as malicious gossip. Reflecting on how their history has affected the next generation of Kellys, she recalls the ‘sympathizer’ meetings which led to her decision to go to Benalla races with Constable Graham. In particular, she relives the moment of utter clarity where she saw that she would lose Jim too if she didn’t act.

Chapter 9

The journalists make their return visit. Brian is making no progress with Ellen, despite Jack’s revelation of the tragic deaths of his first family and the son of his second. Ellen’s sympathies are aroused but then lost when Brian admits that he never believed the South African story anyway. She tells him to leave. Just then, Jim arrives home riding Ginger, a descendant of Ellen’s own mare, Nelly. Jim gives the horse to Katie as a birthday present and they arrange to go into town with the journalists. Brian overhears Ellen and Jim talking; his suspicions that she knows more than she’s telling are confirmed.

Chapter 10

Ellen agrees that Katie can ride Ginger to a schoolfriend’s birthday party, so long as neighboring boy Ben goes with her. She speculates on Jim’s years in prison; later, alone in bed, she calls up her other children: Maggie, Kate, Dan, Ned. Outer and inner worlds meld into one another; her dreams are more immediate than her day to day existence. As always, her last dream is of Ned; how will they tell his story? How can she make sure they tell it right?
Chapter 11

Midnight, back at his hotel: Brian has been poring over old newspapers. The Argus, 1880, the execution of Ned Kelly, for example: the press competed to demonize the bushranger. Jack, with Millie the barmaid, knocks at the bedroom door: what’s tomorrow? They arrange to meet Jim Kelly at the stockyards; then Jack can go looking for photographs. But Brian has already guessed Jim will have nothing to add to the story. He needs to see Ellen again.

Chapter 12

On the verandah, Brian and Ellen argue about families and telling lies. Brian says that it’s in the public interest to know the truth: this proof Ellen claims to have of Dan Kelly’s death, for example. They are interrupted by Katie, back from her party; she’s been listening in. She produces a family keepsake, Dan Kelly’s blackened hoof pick, as ‘proof’ of his death. It proves nothing, but Brian can’t bring himself to say so. Just as he’s about to give up, Ellen gives him the scoop he’s been after: her account of the day Fitzpatrick was shot. Brian notes it all down; then hands her what he’s written.

Chapter 13

Back in Glenrowan, Brian makes contact with his wife, tells her he’s on his way back home, but for better, not worse. Jack returns without Millie, but with some good pictures … and, ironically, a hoof pick. Far, far away on the Giant’s Causeway, Ned has left Ellen behind, but not as usual. It’s become clear to them both that his story is no longer just about him, nor hers to mind. As in her once upon a time wish, it’s become the stuff of myth.
Author/s: Simmons, Dorothy

Title: Such is life: myth and meaning

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