

Chapter Nine

LOVE and its 'mysterious but far from illusory power'

Love, as well as being what Dark's character, Valerie, called the individual's 'first spiritual necessity' (*SD*, p. 238), is also a principal element in what constitutes a harmonious society and one of the basic needs of humanity. In activating the emotions, love frees the individual from the constraints of rationality, encourages unselfishness and compassion and does much to promote spiritual growth. The novelist had commented on 'the infinite variety and freshness of love',¹ and one of her enduring protests throughout the novels was aimed at society's failure to encourage fraternal love - the sympathetic and generous social feeling which she saw as being capable of uniting humanity. She paid, too, particular attention to 'that complex relationship' (*SD*, p. 35), heterosexual love, demonstrating that 'with their souls or spirits in fusion [man and woman] create a mysterious but far from illusory power' (*RC*, p. 303), which was not only capable of destroying the artificial barriers between the sexes,² but which bestowed reassurance and a sense of security on questers on the life journey. For many of Dark's 'new women' heroines, their seemingly strong-minded demand for sexual freedom often concealed the longing for a love which possessed this kind of spiritual force.

'Romanticism *is* so very romantic,' wrote Howard E. Hugo, arguing that, for the romantics, love in the form of 'tender passion' came to dominate all other feelings. He proposed that the romantics saw love as 'a route by which the time-bound individual might learn a vision of ultimate truth', and catch 'a glimpse of that world which stands behind or above' our existences:

Hence love was a state of being that was eagerly to be coveted, not for purposes of physical satisfaction, but rather because the attraction of one soul for another was a guarantee that the entire universe was permeated with similar energy and spirit.³

¹ See Dark, 'Naughty Children,' *The Triad*, February 2, 1925.

² D. Brydon, *Christina Stead*, London, 1987, p. 157.

³ H. E. Hugo (ed.), *The Portable Romantic Reader* (1957), New York, 1964, pp. 6, 7-8.

In his novel, *The White Thorntræe*, one of Frank Dalby Davison's characters described romantic love as 'a dream that haunts the world', while another wondered whether it was just a trick for leading the young into marriage.⁴ Katie Holmes endorsed the latter cynical view when she pointed out that, for the young women of the interwar period, more than for those in previous generations, 'heterosexual romance was offered as *the* path to fulfilment'.⁵ In this way, she claimed, officialdom conditioned women to choose, rather than a career, a romantic relationship followed by marriage, thus keeping them out of the workforce and diminishing their chance of invading the power structures of society. Dark's novels implied, however, that the concept of 'romance' could be 'a vague and fugitive thing' (*SD*, p. 284), merely 'a chimeral ideal concocted by poetic souls',⁶ and suggested that, for some, it could be a false ideal if, in its pursuit, they cheated themselves of love which might lack the elements of romance but which was enriching and sustaining.

Even in those far-off years, when Stephen Mannion's callousness destroyed the love which his wife, Conor, was prepared to give him, Conor reflected that one injury 'that could never be atoned was the mutilation of first love', for there was that in it which had the capacity

... to reduce unworthiness and magnify virtues; to stimulate energy and reinforce courage; to awaken in the most egotistical a capacity for selflessness, and endow the most foolish with a potential wisdom. (*ST*, p. 415)

More recently, musing on her feelings for Jim, her first love, Dark's young doctor, Valerie, told her colleague and would-be lover, Heriot, that Jim 'has been Romance to me.' (*SD*, p. 284) To the mature, experienced Heriot, the conservative Jim seemed 'a very average young man' (*SD*, p. 260) and 'the last man one would have expected [Valerie] to love' (*SD*, p. 288), yet, as she asked, 'How could one describe romance? How put so sacred and fragile a thing into words?' (*SD*, p. 288) When the venom of the town gossips tempted her to choose another direction on her life journey, however, it was Heriot's unselfish love with its 'overpowering desire to help and comfort her'

⁴ F. D. Davison, *The White Thorntræe*, Vol. I (1968), Sydney, 1970, p. 568.

⁵ Holmes, in Dever, *Wallflowers and Witches*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁶ Hugo, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

(*SD*, p. 279) which supported her, so that 'in the dimness of her thoughts there was nothing sure and reliable save Heriot.' (*SD*, p. 284) After Jim's marriage to Kitty, Valerie had believed that, for her, 'romance [was] finished.' (*SD*, p. 284). Dark had her demonstrate a practical turn of mind, however, when she decided that, even though her relationship with Heriot lacked romance, with their shared, cultivated tastes, professional interests and liberated ideas, they were well suited.⁷ As she admitted to Heriot, 'I should be happy to be with you, and glad to work with you. I should respect you and need you, and want you.' (*SD*, p. 284)

They both found their brief trial marriage rewarding, and, their harmonious relationship became a significant aid in their advance toward self-realisation. Valerie conceded that the 'strangeness of her adventure had warmed her blood and set life running in her heart again' (*SD*, p. 286), while Heriot learned to know 'the real Valerie as no one had ever known her before - as she had never known herself.' (*SD*, p. 287) War had made him 'a cynic, a sneerer, a disdainer of Life' (*SD*, p. 147), but now he drew strength from her as love eroded his resentment and he grew in selfhood, feeling 'his whole being expand.' (*SD*, p. 206)

Romantic love, Dr. Oliver Denning granted, did have spiritual value, in that it entailed 'emotional moments and states that one never quite escapes, or forgets.' (*W*, p. 337) Dark made it plain, however, that there was nothing of the romantic ideal about his love affair with Lois - as a painter her 'individual perfume' (*W*, p. 46) was turpentine, while she accused him of smelling of anaesthetics. It was strange, he mused,

... how merely by living in a community you collected,
whether you liked it or not, some of its prejudices, some of
its conventions (*SaS*, p. 50),

so that when he spent his first illicit but joyful night with Lois, he discovered that he was such a captive of conventions that he was unable to escape 'an irrational feeling that his heart should have been more seriously involved than it was.' (*SaS*, p. 50) As an entirely practical doctor who gave no credence to the romantic ideal, he insisted,

⁷ Cp. B. Shaw, 'Arms and the Man', in *The Complete plays of Bernard Shaw, op. cit.*, in which Shaw contrasted romantic love with the love of a practical man.

Your heart is your own exclusive property, and it is through other organs less romantic, more ruthlessly and relentlessly practical in their reproductive urge, that there comes the impulse to mate which was called, in less enlightened times, 'falling in love'. (SaS, p. 51)

Thrown together through loneliness as they were, theirs was a supportive, comforting kind of relationship. For Lois, her growing love for Oliver was like 'finding a fire and realising ... that one has been chilled to the bone for a long, long time' (SaS, p. 95), while he realised that there could be mutual fulfilment in the gaining of 'perfect ease of the spirit as well as of the body' (SaS, p. 121), and 'a unity of thought perfect enough to need no words.' (SaS, p. 160)

In *Waterway*, the character, Lesley Channon, was a 'tough and resilient' (W, p. 191) quester 'intrepidly advancing upon life' (W, p. 15), accepting existence as a contest, 'to be reckoned with violently, and perhaps with pain' (W, p. 159), yet treating difficulties 'like friendly antagonists.' (W, p. 92) Increasingly attracted to Roger's socialist ideas, on her life journey Lesley intended to search for those flaws in the social system which had led to the Great War, having concluded that society could not improve unless peace were maintained and the worship of power and money moderated. 'If we don't find the true causes of this thing and destroy them it will happen all over again' (W, p. 192), she decided

Because she mistook for love her intense physical attraction to the wealthy playboy Sim, however, Lesley was in danger of losing her direction in life, with materialism diverting her from her quest. If she married Sim she would soon learn to accept the wealth which, as a socialist, she presently regarded with aversion, 'as if it carried with it some obscure contamination.' (W, p. 193) She would escape the ordeals of the journey, 'with the good things of life not battled for, not striven or sweated for, but just handed to [her] for nothing.' (W, p. 257) Despite the 'chasm between their ideas and their beliefs' (W, p. 231), in her passionate affair with Sim Lesley became 'willingly helpless', swept along 'in a kind of emotional drunkenness by a force that she didn't even want to resist.' (W, p. 74) In the face of her imminent self-destruction, Dark had Roger persuade Lesley that her attraction was only 'a biological urge' (W, p. 252), and she was forced to agree that physical love,

'the one union which is so easy, so complete, so poignantly lovely, so wildly sad', was 'so useless' (*W*, p. 231) without a deeper spiritual understanding.

When she was caught with Roger in the midst of the workers upon their confrontation with the socialites, Lesley realised that the 'reek of humanity' about her, 'the endeavour, the fear and the hope' of the crowd were 'parts of another struggle in which, whether she liked it or not, she was involved.' (*W*, p. 257) Deciding that she was truly committed to the fight for economic equality, that she could not 'embrace one creed and live another' (*W*, p. 190), she made her choice, knowing that '[t]he escape Sim offered was an illusion', and that she must follow not his, but Roger's way, for that 'was the real escape, the only escape, by endurance and achievement, into peace.' (*W*, p. 257)

Although Sim was 'seriously attracted' to Lesley, he was disturbed about her 'fierce uncomfortable convictions' and feared that, with her, life would become too complex because, as he expressed it:

These convictions of hers went too deep, attacking convictions of your own which resisted violently; they sought to undermine the very foundations upon which your life had been built. Worse, they threatened to undermine your self respect, your peace of mind. (*W*, p. 65)

This gave rise, eventually, to 'a shadow of resentment' in his feeling for her as his possessive instinct was aroused and he resented 'that part of her which was not his, and would never be his.' (*W*, p. 66). Almost unconsciously he began to reject what could have been a saving love shared with Lesley and to turn his thoughts with 'some barely defined regret' to the superficial Lorna, with the thought that 'if it had not been for Lesley he would probably have proposed to her by now.' (*W*, p. 69).

Lesley's sister, Win, who loved Ian and knew that only the possibility of being with him and their children 'made sense, and harmony' (*W*, p. 168), seemed to have no chance of fulfilment when her husband was intent on frustrating any such hope. When she and Ian snatched an hour together in the city before the ferry accident, their 'brief illusion of joy' (*W*, p. 339) approached the romantic ideal in that they both experienced 'the febrile

intensity of a delirium.' (*W*, p. 340) The practical Ian was forced to admit, however, that, being 'normal mortals craving normal life', for them such an intense state could have 'no substance, no strength'

... unless it were possible to descend from it to some sober level of everyday existence in which there would be cares and quarrels, children, bills, and anxieties, and long, passionless nights filled with the quiet contentment of a shared life. (*W*, pp. 340-41)

With Arthur's death after the tragic collision in the harbour, Dark made that fulfilment a probability.

In *Prelude to Christopher* Dark stressed again the sustaining power of love, for, despite the misery which Nigel's eugenicist theories inflicted upon Linda, his love was her only support on her perilous life journey. It provided 'her one unfailing guarantee of sanity' (*PC*, p. 34), while the normality of the sexual emotions and feelings which he aroused in her effected 'a miraculous sort of eleventh-hour rescue into a land that was never promised.' (*PC*, p. 92) 'Mysterious', Linda reflected, 'that there could pass from one human being to another so much strength and confidence, so much faith in an unfaithful world.' (*PC*, p. 133) Her feeling for him was a 'no less amazing love' which, despite her furious, grief-stricken tempests, 'she discovered (always with an awed sense of the miraculous) still alive.' (*PC*, p. 135) For all her deceits and betrayals, Linda revealed the selfless, supportive aspect of her love with her decision to commit suicide if she suspected that her sanity was crumbling, so that Nigel could find 'some quiet and orderly path' (*PC*, p. 146) to fulfilment without the added burden of a mad wife.⁸

In her last moments Linda was comforted by the thought that they had grown to love each other 'more intensely as [they] grew older, more surely as the years grew harder.' She saw this as no mere romantic idyll but as a sacred experience, a 'nameless beauty... lovely and imperishable':

What had it been, that strange, immortal bond? A mutual reliance, a friendship Something beyond man's clumsy speech, beyond his greedy intelligence, coming into his

⁸ Cp. G. Greene, 'The Heart of the Matter' (1948), in *Graham Greene*, London, 1988: As with Greene's character, Scobie, death for Linda became the means of redemption.

ken only rarely, like a miracle, so that he knows neither whence nor how nor why it comes, but only with awe and gratitude that it is. (*PC*, p. 203)

The novelist used the psychologically imbalanced character, Bret, in *Return to Coolami*, to show how confused human beings often resist the use of love as an aid on the life journey. Because he had jealously resented the way in which the fun-loving Susan could 'take Jim so easily from him and from Coolami' (*RC*, p. 296), Bret blamed her unconventional attitudes and sexual involvement with his younger brother for his death. The vital Susan had not loved Jim, regarding their affair more as an adventure, a means of engaging with life and gaining experience. Instead, much against her will, she had grown to love Bret. After their marriage of convenience, her unrequited love became just a 'dull, unpleasant ache, so different from her imagined ecstasies' (*RC*, p. 80), while the marriage itself seemed like a 'nastiness ... smeared over something fundamentally lovely'. Before their wedding she had told Bret of her love, but he stifled his growing admiration for her with a 'few clinging wisps of pride [and] resentment', and 'a queer tangle of vague masculine prejudices and inhibitions ... insubstantial but dangerously strong.' (*RC*, p. 58) Susan saw the dead Jim 'as the barrier between them', just as she saw in Bret's

... evasions of the subject, in his tortured desire to forget or ignore it, an attempt to creep round the barrier and leave it standing - no longer between, but everlastingly before them. (*RC*, p. 269)

When, with their shared sense of humour and love for Coolami, he began to feel drawn to her, he was able temporarily 'to dam back the tides of his resentment, his dislike.' (*RC*, p. 256) Admitting to himself that 'nothing in the world had ever got under his skin as surely as Susan' (*RC*, p. 95), he was unable to communicate with her because 'the obscurity of his feelings had been too much for his powers of self-expression' (*RC*, p. 86), while, at the same time, he had an inkling that the marriage had in it somewhere, 'if one could only find and cherish it, the germ of a beautiful simplicity.' (*RC*, p. 186) Susan's personal growth was frustrated because, without Bret's love, on the life journey she was 'as blind as a man lost in some underground tunnel, groping instinctively toward a light he cannot see.' (*RC*, p. 315)

It was while travelling back to Coolami, when the car slipped on the wet road toward the cliff edge and death, that Bret experienced a sense of waste,

... the agonising knowledge of something which he could have grasped and hadn't - of some opportunity missed, of some transcendent beauty left untasted. (*RC*, p. 120)

Later, when he felt a sudden 'stirring of the heart' (*RC*, p. 186) as they talked, still 'the mere mention of his brother's name had been enough to destroy in a second the sense of well-being' and 'of pleasant companionship which had just now enwrapped them.' (*RC*, p. 265) The sight of blood on Susan's face on the dangerous climb down the mountain finally banished his inhibitions when he felt his heart 'turn over with anxiety, compassion, [and] remorse.' (*RC*, p.251) Remembering that emotional release next morning, he found that the sensations linked with it were

... unaccompanied by the instant alarms and excursions, the warring and jarring, all the mental turmoil, stress and confusion to which he had become, in this last year, unwillingly accustomed. (*RC*, pp. 253-54)

The adventure had purged him of all animosity, and he realised that 'the healthy human being had the waste products of his feelings to get rid of as well as the waste products of his digestive organs!' (*RC*, p. 271) Now he discovered that 'he could remember Jim without anger or resentment', and that there had been accumulating in him for a long time the feelings toward Susan 'which only to-day had been fused into the one grateful and beneficent gladness which now pervaded him.' (*RC*, p. 297) When, nearing the end of the car trip, uncharacteristically he confided in her a childhood secret, he sensed that some 'last barrier in himself had broken away with that impulsive confession', and he experienced a feeling of 'some mysterious fusion' (*RC*, p. 309) with Susan. Jolted by the thought of love wasted and 'the destruction of beauty before its blossoming', he was 'irrationally ashamed of those things in himself which had made their life together so barren and so hard.' (*RC*, p. 318)

In *No Barrier* the novelist told the story of Johnny Prentice and Emily Rocks, whose love most emphatically fell short of the romantic ideal. As

Dark's character, Oliver, was to say later, however, 'the heart's comfort is in the love of another being whose humanity joins hands with yours' (*SaS*, p. 120), and it was this kind of reassuring love, born of the most unlikely circumstances, which brought about the salvation and spiritual regeneration of an outcast and an orphan. As a child, Johnny had deserted the European colony and made his life with the natives, and Emily was one of Sydney's many street children in the first settlement, 'wandering alone, hungry and neglected' (*NB*, p. 97) before being taken to live at the Orphanage.⁹ When she was fourteen - pretty, shrewd and sharp-tongued - she was engaged by Conor Harvey as a servant, and it was while shopping in the Markets that she became involved with the sinister settler, Joseph Dean.

Pregnant and fearful, she married this 'fastidious bully' (*NB*, p. 168), lately one of a party of white men who had murdered Ngili, Johnny's Aboriginal wife. As the couple travelled along the road to Dean's farm, Johnny ambushed and shot the murderer, then found himself encumbered with the terrified, yet vociferously defiant, Emily. On the verge of dispatching the frantic girl, he fell prey to 'a fascination which held him rooted to the ground', and stirred within him an 'agony of confusion' (*NB*, pp. 198-99) at this first encounter with a white woman for more than twenty years. Furiously quietening her struggles with a blow, he decided against releasing her in case she informed on him, and dragged her to his hut. Despite the unforeseen result of his vengeance, he was practical enough to be glad that 'he had a woman again.' (*NB*, p. 200)

Dark described subtly and convincingly the couple's growing rapport, a bonding which would hardly have been possible before Johnny's friendship with the convict, Finn, 'for there had been no comprehension of love in the outlaw he had been.' (*NE*, 381) As time passed and they grew less wary of each other, Johnny realised that 'she did not claim his attention merely by her sex', and found himself 'watching her for the mere pleasure of it', even experiencing 'a moment of almost painful happiness' (*NB*, p. 221) when she admired a flower spray which he picked for her.

Emily was unable to clarify her feelings. Still fearful of him as a killer,

⁹ See E. V. Timms, *The Beckoning Shore* (1950), Sydney, 1954, a novel which described the plight of a gang of abandoned children who lived in the Sydney streets in 1836.

'she felt her hostility weakened by sudden waves of compassion', while ideas of escape were 'dissipated by the fierce, primitive protest of her body at the thought of leaving him.' Pleading to be set free, sulking,

... she was, all the time, adapting herself, transmuting dread into resignation, and resignation into something that was near enough to contentment. (*NB*, p. 225)

'Not content with a physical intimacy', however, she 'sought to invade the privacy of his mind'. Her persistent questioning provoked Johnny to angry words and the occasional blow, after which he discovered in himself, 'with alarm and disgust, an actual impulse to abase himself for having caused her distress.' (*NB*, p. 222) After a particularly violent scene when she placed around her neck his treasured 'totem', the necklace of buttons, his dawning sensitivity allowed him to understand that 'she had only made a playful pretence of adorning herself to please him', and that she 'laughed to beguile and invite him.' (*NB*, p. 223)

Life for Johnny began to assume another dimension, for Emily, 'instead of merely filling the niche left vacant by Ngili', seemed 'to threaten invasion of his whole life and thought.' (*NB*, p. 220) Ashamed of his attack on her, 'he dragged out his most cherished reticences as atonement' (*NB*, pp. 222-23) and told her the story of his long-past introduction to Aboriginal life. So she effected 'the first breach in his fortress of reserve' (*NB*, p. 222), and although he forced her away when he retreated behind what appeared to be 'a locked door', she knew that 'every now and then it yielded a little to her pressure', and found that, with the slackening of tension between them, they achieved a 'closer understanding.' (*NB*, p. 226) Her 'warm compassion' prompted in Johnny the realisation that 'tenderness had never touched him till now', and, having exposed his childhood wounds, he was afraid of what he had revealed, 'not only of his life, but of his heart' and 'not only to her, but to himself.' (*NB*, p. 224) Her interest triggered in him a deeper self-awareness, so that Johnny was tempted 'to venture farther ... along the beguiling path she trod so gaily into a union where all things were shared' (*NB*, p. 246), and he admitted to himself that 'he had begun to seek a union which could only be achieved by the abandonment of all reserves.' (*NB*, p. 224)

Thus, with Emily's help, he advanced gradually along the path to self-realisation, feeling 'spent, but peaceful, in a relaxation and fulfilment not unlike the aftermath of passion.' (*NB*, p. 224) Because peace is an element of sustaining love, Johnny was 'nearer to contentment and tranquillity than he had ever been before.' (*NB*, p. 243) Her pain in childbirth brought home to him his feeling for her when 'her suffering became, because he loved her, his own' (*NB*, p. 266), and he was at last completely convinced that she loved him when she refused a chance to return to her old life. When Miles Mannion asked him for help in crossing the mountains, he was struck by Johnny's air of authority and 'suppressed elation', for the youth was no longer alone on his life journey,

... no longer outcast, but cherished, no longer frozen by loneliness, but warmed by companionship, and no longer bedevilled by hatred, but fortified by love. (*NB*, p. 285)

The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate Dark's conviction, as expressed in the novels, that love motivates human beings and reinforces their courage on the adventurous quest for self-realisation. Although they found little peace together, Nigel's devotion to Linda was an indispensable aid in her struggle. Yet Dark showed many of her characters rejecting this valuable support by either destroying love or doing their best to deny themselves its comfort. Mannion's cruel treatment of his assigned workers and his involvement with the convict, Ellen, eroded Conor's love; Valerie, nostalgically remembering her 'romantic' feelings for Jim, was bent on sacrificing Heriot's supportive care for the false ideal of romantic love; Lesley came dangerously close to rejecting Roger's love by succumbing to what was merely her physical attraction to Sim; Bret's jaundiced attitude toward Susan blinded him to his gradually deepening affection; and, in the beginning of their relationship, Johnny did his best to lock Emily out of his heart.

Dark, as practical idealist, made Valerie decide that achieving a marriage ideal in all its aspects was all but impossible. Oliver dismissed the romantic ideal with his down-to-earth admission that the reproductive organs, rather than the heart, instigated what was often called 'falling in love', and Ian

concluded that unless the practical details of life - 'the solid backbone' of everyday experience - were balanced with the delirium of 'romantic' love, there could be 'nothing real or lastingly beautiful.' (*W*, p. 340)

Out of failure comes regeneration. Dark indicated that, from her failed relationship with Jim a new life would unfold for Susan and Bret, one which must run its own course, for

... new loves and preoccupations would gently force out old ones - inevitably, rightly and beautifully as the spring leaves of some trees push off the dead ones of last year. (*RC*, p. 281)

Ian, too, was convinced that 'there must be at least one personal love, one personal loyalty, one personal union in which to find renewal' (*W*, p. 247), while Oliver, spending his waking moments each day in the dream of being with Lois, was confident that '[o]ut of such moments something must be born at last. They were not barren and their seed must grow and blossom at its appointed time.' (*SaS*, p. 161)

In *Sun Across the Sky*, Oliver recalled an incident during the Great War when he had lain with other injured men in a ruined church and heard a man's voice singing in the shadows, and they had listened, 'a hungry instinct straining up out of their shattered bodies toward the abstract beauty of sound', so strange 'after the insane noises of conflict.' (*SaS*, p. 55) Now I intend to illustrate Dark's belief that the creative mind had the power to alter the course of events, and that artists must offer to the people a message capable of bridging the cleft between their material and spiritual lives, of affirming the joy of life and elevating the human mind as it continually thirsts after meaning.

Chapter Ten

ART - 'a light and a benediction on their way'

'Mankind has ... only one power, the power of his creative spirit' (*W*, p. 304), one of Dark's characters claimed, and the novels suggested that it was a power which, with intellect merging with the imagination and expressed through the emotions, was capable of inspiring harmony in the human psyche. Like Christopher Brennan, Dark contended that artists must use this power as a means of 'carrying humanity forward' and contributing to 'our sense of progress towards the eternal harmony',¹ thus stimulating in the individual an insight into the place of humanity 'in the vast pattern of the cosmic scheme.' (*SaS*, p. 153)²

The novelist celebrated the romantic ideal of the artist as prophet and saviour through her character, Oliver, who regarded the painter, Lois, and Kavanagh, the poet, as 'strange, creative beings ... out of whom beauty vagrantly and mysteriously blossomed.' (*SaS*, p. 10) Yet, as a practical idealist she rejected, as Brennan did, 'the view of the artist as a privileged being, exempt from common obligations and responsibilities', and separated from the public world. Convinced that art should be used for the good of society, Dark commented:

The writer's observations, his experiences in contact with the streams of social life, with all sorts and conditions of people, his creative, artistic analysis and examination of things and conditions and events, are of first importance in energising and stimulating the masses of the people.³

¹ See C. Brennan, 'Philosophy and Art', *Scutherly*, Vol 10, No. 4, 1949, p. 205. In her depiction of the artist, Dark reflected much of Christopher Brennan's aesthetic theory. See also unnamed author, 'Brennan in Fiction', *Southerly*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1949, p. 194: '...Eleanor Dark ... portrays Brennan as Patrick Nicholas Kavanagh ... directly in her *Sun Across the Sky* and retrospectively in its sequel *Waterway*.'

See also Giuffre, *op. cit.*, p. 85. Eric Dark stated in this interview, 'I think her Patrick Nicholas Kavanagh is an absolute straight picture of Christopher Brennan.'

² See A. Clark, *Christopher Brennan, A critical biography*, Melbourne, 1980, p. 154: Brennan believed that poetry is 'the way to a true understanding of the universe'; and p. 70: that it 'offered a means to the recovery of an Absolute, of a sense of organic wholeness - Eden'.

³ Dark, in Devanny, *Bird of Paradise, op. cit.*, p. 250.

See also J. Wells, 'Literature and Social Responsibility', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 20, May, 1987, p. 70, where the writer quoted Nettie Palmer's statement in *Fourteen Years: Extracts from a Private Journal, 1925-1939*, Melbourne, 1948, p. 150: 'Perhaps a painter or a musician can cut himself off in his work from what's going on around him, but a writer can't.'

David Carter pointed out that, in those years, for the 'literary intelligentsia' - as he called a group of Australian writers consisting of Dark, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Barnard Eldershaw and some others - 'above other literary forms and modes of knowledge, the novel could reconnect the individual and the social'.⁴ As Dark insisted, 'creative writing ... is one of the most important natural sources of a nation's morale',⁵ and, in the face of encroaching Fascism and its denial of intellectual freedom, those writers felt that they had a moral imperative to clarify the underlying ideas of the society of which they were a part. By defining social inadequacies and making people aware of them they hoped, particularly, to stimulate resistance to the looming war which they were convinced would be a devastating obstacle to human progress.⁶

In *The Little Company* Dark linked the novel with past literature, 'a continuous human record', and the writer with other writers, each trying to interpret 'even a trivial fragment of this enormous world-story' (*TLC*, p. 318):

No matter where you begin, someone else has brought the story to that point; no matter where you end, someone takes over from you and carries it on. (*TLC*, p. 90)⁷

For she regarded the writer as

... no clever puppeteer pulling strings, but merely a fragment of human mind, groping in the chaos of 'your' art as you grope in the chaos of the life it mirrors (*TLC*, p. 90),

yet with the power to imaginatively illuminate the social scene, 'fill it in, colour

⁴ D. Carter, '“Current History Looks Apocalyptic”: Barnard Eldershaw, Utopia and the Literary Intellectual, 1930-1940s', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, October 1989, pp. 180-81.

⁵ Dark, in Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

⁶ See F. Capp, *Writers Defiled*, Ringwood, 1993, p. 37: 'Many of the best-known writers of the 1930s, '40s and '50s were dissident voices who openly questioned the prevailing political values of the time. For Security [such as the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation], the writer was a dangerous cultural icon whose sphere of influence radiated far beyond an immediate social or political circle.'

See also M. Holroyd, *Barnard Shaw, Volume II, 1898-1918, The Pursuit of Power*, London, 1989, p. 368: '[Shaw] believed it was the duty of representatives of art and literature in all countries to keep moral considerations above the nationalistic level of the war.'

⁷ Cp. M. Barnard Eldershaw, *Plaque With Laurel*, London, 1937, p. 183: Imogen said, 'Any literature was a composite effort. ... Hundreds of people each did their small part, added their stroke, insignificant in itself, yet part of the design.'

it, endow it with speech, fears, hopes, the capacity of joy and suffering.' (*TLC*, p. 49)⁸ To the sensitive novelist, Gilbert, the power of the writer lay 'not in the pen alone, but in the contact it was able to establish between the minds of writer and reader', for 'the words it inscribed were dead till they lit a spark behind the eyes that read them.' (*TLC*, p. 86)

With the clever but cynical writer, Elsa, 'barricaded behind her armour of egotism' (*TLC*, p. 221), Dark furthered her point about the artist's responsibility to society. The self-engrossed Elsa, in whom 'mental activity [was] wedded to spiritual inertia', would not tolerate having her intelligence 'dragged out of her and set to forced labour on problems not to be resolved by wit and satire' (*TLC*, p. 268):

She could enjoy her own intelligence only if she sabotaged it by refusing the demands of life made upon it. She must keep it locked up inside her, using it as a toy to make existence acidly amusing, referring experience to it only for ridicule, dipping her pen into it to write with edged irony, and cruel wit, and sour humour. (*TLC*, p. 268)

Elsa, who 'cared not a hoot about the world and its problems' (*TLC*, p. 191),⁹ wanted only 'a personal life' (*TLC*, p. 260), but Gilbert assured her that 'no human relationship can exist in a vacuum', because, like it or not, 'no human activity is independent of the social system.' (*TLC*, p. 316) Of her 'inaccessibility to the world' (*TLC*, p. 221) he commented:

She would find that every road which promised escape, no matter how alluringly it might seem at first to lead away from all she wanted to avoid, sooner or later took a sly turn, and led her back to confront her world. (*TLC*, p. 262)

She would never be, as he was, a natural reformer, one who could not do otherwise than speak out against social injustice with novels 'full of anger and unsettling ideas.' (*TLC*, p. 174) When he admitted that a challenging

⁸ Cp. Barnard Eldershaw, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *op. cit.*, p. 81: The character, Ord, looked back on the surge of novels in the interwar years as 'an attempt to get the chaos of circumstances into some sort of shape, using every method of attack, every ingenuity.'

⁹ Cp. G. Greene, *The Comedians*, London, 1966, p. 312, where Dr. Magiot, referring to the protesters, said, '... at least they have not stood aside like an established society and been indifferent.'

letter he had written to a newspaper would probably never be published, he answered her question, 'What's the good of a protest that nobody sees?' with the statement, 'It's made.' (*TLC*, pp. 257-58) Gilbert balanced his reforming idealism with practicality, however. Dark showed him putting theory into practice when, upon discovering the sorry condition of the slum properties which he had inherited from his father, he carried out the long-needed repairs, thus disclosing a more praiseworthy reaction than that of Trench, Bernard Shaw's character in *Widowers' Houses*, who, in the same situation, jettisoned his conscience and continued to reap the profits from his inherited slums.¹⁰

Discussing how best they could enlighten people by showing them 'what things mean in terms of individual experience' (*TLC*, p. 147), Dark had her writer-characters debate whether 'art should be divorced from propaganda' (*TLC*, p. 146), with Gilbert - remembering Shelley, the romantic poet and rebel - insisting that art and politics were 'inextricably entangled.' (*TLC*, p. 65) He appreciated, particularly, the power of fiction as propaganda, because there the political message need not be explicit. Dark had written:

Any art inspired by genuine feeling must of its very nature be propaganda; it is an invitation - *not* a demand or an appeal - to the hearer, the reader, or the observer to consider an affirmation of faith. But the propaganda-content of any work of art is incidental, a by-product of the art and it is precisely this which gives it power,¹¹

a sentiment which she had Marty echo:

It may be true that the better the art the less one is conscious of the propaganda - but it's there in all the best art, and always has been. (*TLC*, p. 146)

Displaying that 'strong, sound instinct that prefers its propaganda humanised' (*TLC*, p. 147), the Masseys' zestful Aunt Bee told them, 'If I have to be preached at ... I like to be preached at in a nice, interesting story', and Dark had Gilbert agree, as he recalled 'that insistent propaganda, that rabid agitation, that ranting bitterness which made so much fiction of the late

¹⁰ See B. Shaw, *Plays Unpleasant - Widowers' Houses, The Philanderer, Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1898), Harmondsworth, 1946.

¹¹ Dark, untitled fragment, undated, Box 10 (25), ML MSS 4545.

'thirties awkward and embarrassing.' (*TLC*, p. 17)¹² Barnard Eldershaw endorsed this attitude when the character, Frances, argued that 'surely the function of the novel was not didactic'.

A novel with a purpose presents a cut-and-dried aspect of life, and therefore it fails in its true purpose - to illuminate life. Art discovers life; it isn't just a dissertation on it.¹³

Dark took exception to the power elite, 'the purveyors of slogans' (*TLC*, p. 125), who dishonoured words by using propaganda as an instrument with which to obfuscate and coerce. She wrote:

The power of propaganda is one of the most disturbing developments of modern life. It is a power which could be used for the benefit and enlightenment of mankind, and which is, in fact, used cynically and deliberately for its bamboozlement. It is easy to dress ugly, false, illogical ideas in resounding phrases so that they seem fine and stirring and magnificent. As the mass of humanity cherishes at heart an honest desire that life shall indeed be fine and stirring and magnificent, this works very well, for the majority of people are too mentally indolent to distinguish between a fine phrase and a fine-sounding one.¹⁴

Gilbert remembered how decisively Germany acted upon the outbreak of the Great War: 'Phrases must be marshalled quickly to arouse anger and hatred. Blood and Iron! Deutschland uber alles!' The allies did likewise and, as he recalled,

... phrases were the flags we flew in our minds to their bemusement and confusion. The Lion's whelps. The lads in khaki, the boys in blue. The last man and the last shilling. A World fit for heroes to live in. The War to end War. (*TLC*, p. 125)

Modern technology in the form of radio and the press had given the ruling minorities new instruments with which to constrict public comprehension.

¹² See also J. Wells, 'Literature and Social Responsibility', *op. cit.* : '[W]riters and intellectuals opposing the imposition of American values could be equally repelled by socialist realism and its connotations of Soviet totalitarianism.'

¹³ Barnard Eldershaw, *Plaque With Laurel*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁴ Dark, 'Women and Fascism', *op. cit.*, pp. 133-34.

Propaganda became especially destructive during the Second World War. Betraying a low standard of political intelligence, the Australian government defeated its own purpose by undermining public confidence, with the people 'finding no reason to doubt themselves until the voice of the Department of Information in radio talks bade them to do so':

Hate propaganda of the crudest sort insulted their humanity; fear propaganda insulted their courage; querulous scolding, impertinent jibes, and sickly sentimentality stabbed viciously at their nerves. (*TLC*, p. 171)

Dark deprecated also, the newspapers' ongoing failure to provide wise guidance for the people. Referring to the *Sydney Gazette*, the colony's first newspaper during the early settlement years, she had the historical character, William Wentworth, complain,

When it prints nothing but what has first passed beneath the eye of Government, it can afford but little exercise for the enquiring mind. (*NB*, p. 152)

The situation was little improved in the contemporary world. Roger described the editorials of the fictional '*Messenger*', as being not merely 'sedative', but 'emetic' (*W*, p. 202), while the questioning Lesley Channon 'could often only stare in unbelieving horror' at some of the 'ideas expressed in print by the great ones of the earth.' (*W*, p. 192) Marty, too, had 'learned to distrust headlines'. Yet when she read the account given out regarding Hess's flight to Britain, even she was tempted 'to succumb to the authoritative appearance of the printed word', and 'to accept it at its face value - particularly when it cried so enticing an encouragement to one's hopes.' (*TLC*, p. 79)

Eric Dark was highly incensed at what he saw as a biased press, claiming that 'news and opinion are to a very great extent controlled by the dominant group, giving them an immense propaganda power'.¹⁵ He wrote:

The public importance of an unbiased Press can hardly be exaggerated in a modern democracy, since in the democratic State policy should be shaped largely by the force of public opinion, which, in its turn, is shaped by what

¹⁵ E. P. Dark, *Medicine and the Social Order*, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

the public believes to be happening. Obviously, if its Press continually feeds it misstatements or untruths, the opinions it forms must be worse than useless; they must be dangerous, since they will be formed on a false view of events, and no policy based on an untruth can be anything but disastrous.¹⁶

In her fiction the novelist made Lesley emphasise the dangers of a commercialised press being concentrated in the hands of the few.¹⁷ Referring to the newspaper proprietor, Manning-Everett, the young woman remarked, 'I don't like his papers', and Oliver's admission of his own dislike for them pointed to the conservatism and restriction of information which characterised the actual newspapers of the time. 'If you own a newspaper it's your *business* to be responsible for its influence', Lesley insisted, but the tolerant Oliver was made to look at the matter from another angle when he retorted that perhaps the proprietor 'sincerely thinks its influence is good, and its policy right.' (*W*, p. 335)

The little company of writers went on to debate the position and power of artists in various social systems. Eric Dark claimed that the 'most damnable thing about capitalism is the wealth of talent, probably often genius, that it smothers',¹⁸ and, through the Marxist character, Nick, the novelist protested that artists achieved what they did only 'in the teeth of capitalism', that for 'one-tenth of the world's creative energy that has been effective', probably nine-tenths had been 'frustrated and lost.' (*TLC*, p. 315) At this point the reader remembers the warped potential of the unemployed worker, Jack, who had a vision of the shipwreck, 'a flash of perception, a violent, irrelevant functioning of an imagination almost atrophied by long disuse.' (*W*, p. 138)

Dark demonstrated that the power of the artist as a helping agent in the life journey was often thwarted by a widely-held popular attitude. Gilbert exulted in 'a curious feeling of triumph' when he had occasion to 'realise

¹⁶ E. P. Dark, 'Political Bias of the Press', *Meanjin*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1949, p. 23. See Strahan, *Just City and the Mirrors*, *op. cit.*, p. 123. Strahan claimed that Eric Dark's exposure of 'the compromised integrity of the press ... became one of the most contentious articles ever printed in *Meanjin*.'

¹⁷ Thus anticipating the fears of the late twentieth century.

¹⁸ E. P. Dark, *Medicine and the Social Order*, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-2.

afresh that the moment man has a belief to communicate he turns to the printed word' (*TLC*, p. 86), only to have his elation deflated when Elsa countered that, in Australia, in peacetime the writer was generally regarded as 'a sort of entertainer', and in times of war as 'almost an object of contempt.' (*TLC*, p. 107)¹⁹ Nick maintained that 'artists will never be regarded as effectives under a capitalist system', but would always be seen as

... hangers-on, entertainers, proteges of wealthy people who want to satisfy their own vanity by acquiring a reputation for 'culture' as they'd acquire a motor-car. (*TLC*, p. 315)

Osbert Sitwell once observed that 'the artist ... makes the best growth, *does* best, in an atmosphere of affection and encouragement',²⁰ and Gilbert wondered whether the lack of any bond between writers and the general public in Australia was responsible for his writer's block.²¹ Believing as he did in the worth of his writing as a means of exposing to his readers the pitfalls which plagued them in their quest for self-realisation, he complained that there was 'a psychological strain in preserving one's own faith in something against a mass opinion that says it isn't important.' (*TLC*, p. 152) As he admitted,

We haven't ever been made to feel that there's a population demanding our products, just as it demands food or clothing. So that when life falls into chaos as it is now, there is no established bond between the public and its writers. (*TLC*, p. 151)

He blamed this general attitude on the failure of small-minded authorities who supported an education system which turned people 'loose on the world at fourteen with no more sense of values than a bunch of chimpanzees'

¹⁹ See also Cusack, *Culture in Wartime, Being Proceedings of [Fellowship of Australian Writers] Conference*, *op. cit.*, p. 16: Referring to the industrialised community, Cusack stated, 'There seems to be no place for [the artist ... and] when war comes, culture is regarded as a luxury.'

See also the attitude of Gilbert's wife, Phyllis: 'He was going quite the wrong way' (*TLC*, p. 77), and compare it with that of Ida Crale, the writer's wife, who described her husband as 'queer' in Barnard Eldershaw's *Plaque With Laurel*, *op. cit.*, p. 55 .

²⁰ Pritchett, *op. cit.*, p. 22, where Elizabeth Bowen was quoting Sitwell.

²¹ Cp. Barnard Eldershaw, *Plaque With Laurel*, *op. cit.*, p. 68, wherein Owen Sale's writer's block was one of the principal causes of his suicide: 'Month after month this terrible aridity had gone on, while he watched his reputation and his bank balance dissipate.'

(*TLC*, p. 207), thus giving rise to 'a world of semi-to-uneducated people.' (*TLC*, p. 81)²² Intellectually comatose, their literary taste 'stops short at the comic strips', and Gilbert worried that the wartime paper shortage would cause 'honest writing' to disappear and allow imported mass pulp magazines to capture 'a bemused and escapist public' and fill the void with 'printed dope.' (*TLC*, p. 62)²³

In *Waterway Dark* presented Roger Blair not only as an idealistic social reformer, distinguished scholar and practical man who, 'seeing what he conceived to be wrong, was all for action' (*W*, p. 63), but also as one whose convictions were, to him, 'important enough to demand and receive sacrifices.' (*W*, p. 199) Infuriated by the general public's philistinism, Roger had put theory into practice by sacrificing a brilliant academic future 'to a life devoted solely to the advancement of culture in a country where culture was almost sublimely disregarded.' (*W*, p. 200) He published a radical journal, *The Free Voice*, in which he exposed instances of social injustice and, with a 'tenacity of purpose' (*W*, p. 200), launched himself on a 'valiant crusade', an 'attempt to release the lovely maiden called Culture from the jaws of the commercially-minded dragon', on the way tilting at the

... ignorance and vulgarity and apathy and all the other ignoble qualities which are busily trying to stifle the things of the spirit. (*W*, p. 79)

Roger remonstrated that most Australians showed no interest in developing a culture of their own, while being only too eager to accept that of other countries, especially those ideas introduced by American movies. Idly inspecting his landlady's daughter, barely out of childhood yet aping glamorous actresses by plastering her face with cosmetics, he snorted:

How were you to impose culture upon people of this mentality, concerned only with clothes, and the silly anaemic flirtations of adolescence, and the latest Clark Gable talkie? (*W*, p. 81)

²² See Adelaide (ed.), D. Cusack, *A Window in the Dark*, *op. cit.*, p. 41. As a teacher, Cusack commented, '... we were not encouraged to read our writers.'

²³ See J. Docker, 'Culture, Society and the Communist Party', in A. Curthoys and J. Merritt, *Australia's First Cold War 1945-1953, Vol. 1: Society, Communism and Culture*, Sydney, 1984, p. 193, where the writer stated that the mass culture audience was 'predominantly urban and predominantly working class.'

Dark used Roger to censure the lack of perception and sensitivity in Australia which was forcing artists and scholars to go abroad for recognition, with the consequent loss of creativity and learning to their own society.²⁴Fuming at the thought of 'singers who were not acclaimed till some other land had set the seal of its approval upon them', of scholars 'who fled to communities where scholarship was not an eccentricity', and of musicians, writers and painters who preferred 'the struggle abroad to the slow starvation at home' (*W*, p. 77), Roger protested that the people must be made to realise 'that a country can't go on indefinitely exporting its talent and its ability any more than a human body can go on indefinitely losing blood.' (*W*, p. 201)

The novelist went on to denounce wealthy pastoralists and the leaders of the commercial world who did nothing to encourage and support the country's artists. Bemoaning the incipient demise of his debt-ridden magazine 'in which the nation [could] become articulate without having to compete with cheap syndicated trash' (*W*, p. 76), Roger was well aware that he would get no money out of 'the sheep barons and the cattle kings' (*W*, p. 81), or from prosperous businessmen like Arthur Sellman, who had already rejected his wife's suggestion that he invest capital in a poetry-publishing business with the excuse, 'I'd lose money on it.' (*W*, p. 20) So the property developer, Gormley, feeling the 'resentful awe of the unlettered man for the scholar' (*SaS*, p. 109), unsympathetically dismissed the poet, Kavanagh, as a 'poverty-stricken scribbler of rubbish nobody had heard of' (*SaS*, p. 111), with 'no fame except possibly among a few dotty highbrows.' (*SaS*, p. 112)

In *Lantana Lane* the narrator ironically compared the 'anti-social recklessness' of the small farmers with 'the irresponsibility of artists.' (*LL*, p. 140) Unlike the ever-optimistic farmers, however, the serious artist had little expectation of anything more than 'a few ha'pence and some kicks.' (*LL*, p. 140) As the narrator saw the situation,

²⁴ This state of affairs was generally recognised at the time. See also P. R. Stephensen, *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 86: 'In no other country in the civilised world is literary genius so badly treated, so humiliated and crushed and despised and ignored, as in Australia.'

See B. Penton, *Think - or Be Damned, A subversive note on national pride, patriotism, and other forms of respectable ostrichism practised in Australia*, Sydney, 1941, p. 81: The writer referred to Australia as a country 'which assesses intellectual and spiritual activity at a lower rate than technical or material efficiency.'

... if you let loose upon the world some fruit of your mind which proves tasty to vast numbers of other minds, you may win acclaim, and even some pecuniary advantage; but the provision of nourishment for the few - however wholesome it may be, and however great their hunger - is a dilettante occupation which modern society regards with disfavour and suspicion. (*LL*, p. 141)

Looking ahead, Dark had the narrator fantasise about the future when 'the paints, pianos and typewriters [werə] provided, the concert-halls, theatres and galleries [were] prepared' but the artists had disappeared. For the *zeitgeist* had triumphed, and, like 'the dinosaurs and the pterodactyls, these dopes have failed to mesh with their environment - and they are gone.' (*LL*, p. 143) Then science would invent 'a machine to deliver works of art as needed - and not unsettling ones, either.' (*LL*, p. 143)²⁵

It was a romantic assumption that the human personality was an evolving consciousness, so that any expansion of that consciousness must benefit the development of the individual and of humanity itself. In proposing that humanity's progress involved this spiritual growth, Dark followed the line of Christopher Brennan's thought. This proposed that human beings had advanced part of the way to the achievement of self-consciousness in that at least they recognised the existence of the sub-conscious, and were able to explore it to some extent.²⁶ It was suggested that, by extending the self, the human being would eventually achieve the ideal of full consciousness and full human stature, a state of complete harmony incorporating intellectual enlightenment, emotional contentment, and spiritual fulfilment. Dark's Oliver demonstrated the romantic exaltation of the creative imagination with his contention that artists were most adept at providing access to the inner self, thereby contributing to the evolution of the human mind as it reached for those ever higher planes of consciousness. The novelist had him believe

²⁵ Cp. Walker, *Dream and Disillusion*, *op. cit.*, p. 30: In a letter to her Marxist brother, Esmonde Higgins, Nettie Palmer asked 'whether collective action was planned for the production of works of art on the assumption that the individual artist was a bourgeois phenomenon.'

²⁶ See Brennan, 'Philosophy and Art', *op. cit.*, p. 204: Brennan thought that by achieving self-consciousness, the human being 'shall have taken up unto himself the whole world that is outside him, and the whole world that is within.'

See also Clark, *Christopher Brennan*, *op. cit.*, p. 128. Brennan was interested in 'the psychology of self-exploration, and in the unconscious, hoping that within himself he might find satisfaction of his needs, and access to the infinite.'

that the desired full consciousness was expressed in art,²⁷ which he regarded as the true, transcendental form of imaginative self-expression, a manifestation of the human spirit and the 'translation into words, music, colour, form, of man himself.' (SaS, p. 55)²⁸

With her character, Lois, Dark examined the effect of the sub-conscious on the artist. When her daughter, Chloe, was a baby, Lois had felt 'an unreasoning compulsion' (SaS, p. 74) to sleep beside her at odd times of the day and, in doing this, it seemed as though she were 'setting out upon any other unknown journey' into a place 'latent with momentous power.' (SaS, p. 74) The creative potential of this pattern of living was obvious when, upon awakening, Lois experienced 'flashes of vision disconnected from reality.' (W, p. 245) It was as if the sub-conscious had nourished her imagination ²⁹ and she felt herself 'flooded by creative force as a vast machine is flooded with electric power' (SaS, p. 28), 'a tide of energy demanding outlet', which she expended in 'an orgy of self-expression':

Her canvasses flamed into life. Strange life, unfamiliar in form, startlingly familiar in essence. The freshness and intensity of her released emotions pervaded them. (SaS, p. 75)

Lois, however, despite this almost mystic experience, had a practical streak regarding her art, and could not see herself as any kind of romantic visionary being. A naturalist painter with 'a quaint matter-of-factness', she was not aware of the revitalising element in her work, that its 'other-worldliness ... lay in her capacity to present a new, an entirely fresh and original conception of familiar things.' (W, p. 245) She was annoyed at the way people frustrated true understanding of her paintings by attaching all kinds of 'silly meanings' and then crediting her with their own interpretations. One of her pictures, *The Ant*, 'from which she had won her nearest approach to popular approval', caused much comment. 'Apparently it had been an allegory, a satire, a message, a sermon', while, to her, 'it was just an emotion

²⁷ See Brennan, 'Philosophy and Art', *op. cit.*, p. 205.

²⁸ See Chisholm and Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 6: 'Poetry makes the self hidden in the subconscious explicit and accessible to knowledge. Thus poetry and the imagination potentially make man whole.'

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 160. Brennan believed that nature's 'laws, rhythms and forms are secreted deep within us.'

she had translated into paint', (SaS, p. 92) and she asked,

Why couldn't they understand that it was an ant she had painted, not suffering humanity? Was it so obviously ridiculous to notice the tortures of a dying insect, that every one realised there must be something else behind it - some 'significance', some 'symbolism'? (SaS, p. 93)³⁰

Oliver tried to convince her that she must not object if people read a meaning into her work that she did not intentionally put there:

You did put it there, or they couldn't have seen it. I think that's what makes greatness in art. It isn't enough to look at a picture, read a book, hear music, with delight, or with interest or admiration. You must take some thing away from it. You must go back to your life with your emotions stirred, or with thought quickened in you. (SaS, p. 159)

Dark suggested that the artist, in stimulating the individual to see, hear and feel more sensitively, was helping to illuminate that full consciousness which would give meaning to existence. The exercise of the creative imagination was 'not one single act, but the beginning of an endless, an absolutely illimitable influence.' (SaS, p. 159) Of the artist Oliver contended:

He's a fire that lights a thousand other fires. His thoughts put life into the thoughts of other people. They see not only what he shows them, but what his power has made it possible for them to discover for themselves. The fertility of genius is endless - inexhaustible. (SaS, p. 159)

He believed that great art 'always mingles elements of terror and beauty'. With their 'perpetual hunger for beauty', through Oliver Dark indicated that human beings put limits on their own development by seeing beauty as something outside themselves, 'far, mystic, aloof, foreign as the stars are foreign, a torturing secret of unattainable beatitude.' She had him, on the other hand, entertain the romantic belief that, for the individual, harmony lay within 'that ultimate beauty and magnificence which is himself' and which housed 'the life-spark of that miracle of miracles, mankind.' (SaS, p. 55) Oliver claimed that the imaginative power of the artist was evidence

³⁰ Cp. Chisholm and Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 69: Erennan claimed that there was 'too much tendency to try and hear what art says'.

that humankind, 'alone of all things created', and 'struggling to its expression through words or through music or through form' (SaS, p. 139), had the daring to progress, 'to go beyond his bodily reproduction' and 'to adventure into the realm of godhead, where creation is a function of the spirit.' (SaS, p. 55)³¹ He explained to Lois,

... if we'd gained nothing else there would be the arts -
there would be the fact that we have created beauty - and
where does that put us? Somewhere ... near divinity.
(SaS, p. 52)³²

As the Romantic poet, Blake, wrote, 'All deities reside in the human breast',³³ and Dark, ever the humanist, made Oliver, convinced that 'there is nothing of any value in you but yourself' (SaS, p. 139), echo that maxim when he humanised the divine and made his own humanity his god.

Convinced that all human beings were potentially creative, he held that it was in self-expression - which was symbolic of every person's impulse to create - that the individual contributed to the on-going welfare of the race. In his opinion, people expressed themselves through living joyously, so that living, itself, became a creative act:³⁴

You only had to live with joy and die with undiminished
zest, and the infinitesimal line of your existence would lie

³¹ Cp. B. Shaw, 'Preface', *Androcles and the Lion*, *op. cit.*, p. 57: 'It is through this spirit within that we evolve towards greater abundance of life, ... that ... we are gods though we die like men.'

The ideas which Dark expressed in *Sun Across the Sky* have much in common with Bergson's concept of Creative Evolution as propounded by Shaw. Cp. Shaw, *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch* (1921), London, 1945, p. 9: 'Imagination is the beginning of creation.'

See also McQueen, *Gallipoli to Petrov*, *op. cit.*, p. 88: 'There is good reason for supposing that Bergson was far more influential in Australia than Nietzsche - or Freud, Einstein and Joyce put together.'

³² Cp. Ellmann and Feidelson, 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, where the writers pointed out that, for the poet, Blake, '[t]he visionary imagination, independent of physical nature and the organs of sense, is the divinity in man.'

³³ See M. H. Abrams, 'Apocalypse: Theme and Romantic Variations', in J. Stillinger (ed.), *The Correspondent Breeze, Essays on English Romanticism*, New York, 1984, p. 243, where this quotation appeared.

³⁴ Cp. A. A. Phillips, 'The Literary Heritage: Re-assessed', *Meanjin Quarterly*, No. 2, 1962, p. 179. Phillips agreed with Dark's conception of the artist: '[U]sing the word "artist" in the broadest of its senses to indicate membership of the aristocracy of the especially sensitive', Phillips claimed that it was immaterial whether the member 'sets down his sensitivities', because '[h]e is an "artist" by virtue of his response to life.'

clearly and harmoniously in the vast pattern of the cosmic scheme. (SaS, p. 153)

Oliver saw human beings willing themselves on to higher things by means of their own efforts,³⁵ so that 'the thought of mankind flowed onward in a steadily expanding mass' (SaS, p. 138); therefore the wisdom which the individual had gathered 'from the converging past ... he must not hand on unreplenished to the diverging future.' (SaS, p. 138)³⁶ Dark gave him the conviction, also, that regeneration co-existed with death:

Your body dies and is gone, but the thing which is yourself
has made a thousand other homes on earth. Your child,
your work, your thought, that essence of yourself which
they call your personality; a memory of something you
said or did; a record in some lovely thing you made. We
come - we never go. (SaS, p. 176)

His contention that the artist aided the advance of humanity by contributing to the elevation of consciousness was strengthened by his realisation that when he was with Kavanagh

... there would burst out of him like a flame some crude, embarrassing force of intellect, as if his brain were a tinder from which the old man's genius could strike fire. (SaS, p. 42)

Thus the visionary poet conveyed through his imagination something of the potential, transcendent harmony which dwelt in the fully conscious self. Although debilitated by illness, he possessed a creative power which enabled him to tear from himself 'with agony and toil some thought shaped at last into immortal words' (SaS, p. 65), and to enrich his readers with moments of transcendence when, as Oliver expressed it, 'you won a sense of ... being sustained for a while ... in a realm beyond the reach of your own unaided spirit.' (SaS, p. 98)

³⁵ See also M. Roe, *Nine Australian Progressives, Vitalism in Bourgeois Social Thought 1890-1960*, St. Lucia, 1984, p. 2.

³⁶ Cp. B. Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-74: '... the best of us ... regard civilization and learning, art and science, as an ever-burning torch, which passes from the hand of one generation to the hand of the next, each generation fanning it to a farther reaching glow. ... The individual perishes; but the race is immortal ... making gains in stature from generation to generation, from epoch to epoch, from barbarism to civilization, from civilization to perfection.'

Yet he knew that few appreciated the 'healing strength' which derived 'from man-created beauty', and from the belief that 'in the beauty we have wrought we can find peace and hope again' (SaS, p. 55), for, with their dulled imaginations, 'nine-tenths of mankind never realises the power and the influence of a man like that.' (SaS, p. 159) When the poet died, authorial anger at the Australians' cultural sterility was projected through Oliver's furious denouncement of the philistinism of 'the thousands ... who had never even known he had lived', who went on 'toiling and grubbing like gnomes in the underground caverns of their own unlighted spirits' (SaS, p. 175):

But he had lived, and whether they knew it or not, he had added a little to the stature of mankind. They walked because of him with their heads a little nearer to the sky - not only for the genius which dwelt in him, but for that quality in themselves out of which he had created beauty, as a potter creates symmetry from the shapeless clay. (SaS, p. 190)

'The world of art', as V. S. Pritchett described it,

... is the great secret order with which all human beings have, from time to time, a private relation. It is the world of what has been experienced, but not noticed.³⁷

Undermining their status as romantic prophets and saviours was the inability of Dark's artists to reveal that 'world' to people who were more appreciative of practical activity in everyday life. Looking back at the cultural scene of those years, David Carter ³⁸ found 'a perceived division between the intellectuals ... and the people.' Oliver admitted that most Australians 'care nothing for pictures' (SaS, p. 30), while Lois was unnerved by people who entertained the 'odd, and, to her, quite incomprehensible idea that an artist - a worker in any one of the arts - was someone of not quite adequate mentality.' (SaS, p. 93) The Australian cultural cringe also impeded the recognition of that 'experienced world' of art and Dark mocked it with the pretentious woman in the art gallery who talked 'eccentric nonsense' (W, p. 275) and claimed that the Australian environment was 'inimical to art', in that

³⁷ Pritchett, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³⁸ Carter, ' "Current History Looks Apocalypt c": Barnard Eldershaw, Utopia and the Literary Intellectual, 1930s-1940s', *op. cit.*, pp. 179-80.

it lacked the graces and traditions which belonged to culture. 'Can you', she asked Lois, 'explain why this country is culturally a desert?' To which Lois replied, 'Could it be ... because there are too many people like you in it?' (*W*, p. 278) For, Lois thought,

... what was environment to any artist, but the negative pole to his own positive, and what was his work, but the crackling spark which leapt to life between them? (*W*, p. 279)

Gilbert acknowledged the estrangement between artists and the public, protesting that, as writers, they were 'kept at arms length by the community' (*TLC*, p. 151),³⁹ and Dark took exception to this separation with Elsa's complaint, 'It's not as if our writers have lived in ivory towers.' (*TLC*, p. 151) Necessarily isolated to some extent by their need for privacy in which to create, writers like Dark acknowledged the importance of immersing themselves in, and identifying with, their society. As she wrote:

Until our writers can put their writing first - not second or fifth - the cultural life of the community must suffer. But that does not mean that I think the writer should devote the whole of his time and energy to writing. He must devote a considerable part of them to living in his community, observing it, perhaps even working part-time at some other job than writing, but his community should understand that when he chooses to withdraw himself he must be allowed his period of solitude.⁴⁰

She made this point in *The Timeless Land* with the Aboriginal song-maker, Wunbula, who, 'when the mood for making a song came upon him, ... would go away by himself', an action of which his tribesmen approved, 'for they understood that the words of a great youara-gurrugin come to him most easily in solitude.' (*TTL*. p. 16)

Dark was acutely aware that artists were a beleaguered little company,⁴¹ but she shared the idealistic belief that well-meaning elites could instruct and elevate the masses, possessing as they did the sensibility to

³⁹ Pritchett, *op. cit.*, p. 50: Graham Greene contended that 'privilege separates and we can't afford to live away from the source of our writing in however comfortable an exile'.

⁴⁰ Devanny, *Bird of Paradise*, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

⁴¹ See also McQueen, *Gallipoli to Petrov*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

uphold culture and create art, as well as the ability to, if not effect a crisis in society, at least bring about a more equitable socio-political formation.⁴² She had her character, Professor Channon, talk of ‘a tremendously strong *intellectual* sense of brotherhood’ among scientists and artists, and express the belief that they, ‘and not diplomats trained from the nursery to think in terms of “my government”, can, and ultimately will, lead us into peace.’ (*W*, p. 79)

Elizabeth Bowen once commented, ‘A healthy animal indifference to art probably is endemic in human nature’,⁴³ and the philistinism of some of the novels’ characters would seem to give credence to this theory. They were concerned wholly with earning a living and with the pleasures of sport - Roger pictured them ‘yelling themselves hoarse over a Melbourne Cup, or getting hysterical over a Test Match.’ (*W*, p. 76) Dark, however, obviously believed that they could be taught to enjoy art when she criticised second-rate leaders who failed to foster an appreciation of, and provide access to, ‘high culture’:⁴⁴

Did our so-called ‘leaders’ protest during the last twenty years while the cult of beauty mounted to a frenzy, wrenching our common-sense askew that the pockets of the clothes and cosmetic manufacturers might be filled. ... Did they raise their voices to warn us that our minds were being doped and our very souls debauched by the synthetic glamour of fantasies in celluloid? (*TLC*, pp. 206-07)

Access to culture is, to a large extent, unfairly determined by class, and Dark demonstrated ‘another cleavage in the adult world’, when her character, Marty, meeting again her childhood friend, the underdog, Sally Dodds, unhappily recognised ‘the mistrust of the “worker”, who knew by experience, for the “intellectual”, who knew by observation, by mental effort, by imagination.’ (*TLC*, p. 256) Roger pointed out, ‘A national culture isn’t a luxury, a toy of the intelligentsia - it’s a necessity.’ (*W*, p. 201) Dark’s novels

⁴² Cp. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (translated by H. Iswolsky) (1965), Bloomington, 1984, Prologue, p. xiii: ‘In every society there are social groups whose special task it is to provide an interpretation of the world for that society. We call these the “intelligentsia”’. Bakhtin is quoting from K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, New York, 1964, p. 10.

⁴³ Pritchett, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

⁴⁴ Cp. Horne, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-46, where, writing of the 1960s, Horne commented, ‘Many of the nation’s affairs were conducted by racketeers of the mediocre.’

indicated that society needed a culture which enriched its members, both rich and poor, equally, which allowed them to enjoy works of art and so realise their mental and emotional potentialities. The arts, Roger insisted, were a part of the fabric of society and could not be separated from it, yet, as he despaired to see, the real-life situation fell short of the ideal. The novels revealed the lack of any fruitful interaction between artists and the people, with Dark presenting groups of sensitive characters of similarly attuned tastes who formed enclaves.⁴⁵ Every week Dr. McNab and his wife, together with the artistic Leighs, visited the young doctor, Valerie,

... with arms full of books, and talked long into the night of music and literature and art, of religion and psychology, of sport, medicine, marriage and gardening. (*SD*, p. 115)

In the same way Kavanagh, Oliver and Lois met to talk, and then, 'mentally fed, mentally satisfied', to enjoy another feast, 'the singing triumph of Beethoven's music.' (*SaS*, p. 64) Lesley remembered the gatherings of her father's friends, and the dissecting, 'ruthless and witty, of creeds, motives, conventions and superstitions' (*W*, p. 190), while Marty and her husband, Richard, together with Gilbert and the political pamphleteer, Nick, engaged in airing what Phyllis called 'their unnerving, preposterous, extravagant ideas' in 'interminable discussions.' (*TLC*, p. 73)⁴⁶ Forever optimistic, however, and confident that vitality prompts creation, Dark looked forward to the end of philistinism. 'Genius', she had Oliver reflect, 'does not need circles or self-conscious intelligentsia.' (*W*, p. 116) Perhaps, 'slowly and imperceptibly', he suggested, there was forming in hedonistic Australians

... that passion and romance, that ebb and flow of intense emotion, that fierce love of life for the sake of living which is the true environment of all great art. (*SaS*, p. 30)

Art is one of the last refuges of the human spirit, and, for Dark, hope lay in the belief that, as Professor Channon expressed it, 'spirit, finally, is the one thing that *can't* be stifled.' (*W*, p. 79)

⁴⁵ Cp. Barnard Eldershaw, *Plaque With Laurel*, *op. cit.*, p. 140: One of the characters said of a visiting academic, 'It's a form of snobbery, you know. ... Thinks writers should be a sort of priestly caste, writing for a few and turning fancy fits to do it'.

⁴⁶ Cp. the spiritual affinity of Max, Thea and Emily in Elizabeth Harrower's *The Long Prospect* (1958).

There has been some exploration in this chapter of Dark's celebration of the type of artists who foster the growth of the imaginative, intellectual and spiritual life of society. In several of the novels Dark indicated that, as they added their 'grain of comprehension to the world's sum' (*TLC*, p. 318), artists were able to deepen the questers' understanding and consciousness of mundane things, not only providing them with a clearer perception of the necessary individual journey, but bestowing on them, as ordinary human beings, a sense of participation in a common destiny. Thus they enlightened the wayfarers' way ahead, making their trials more endurable as they coped with the life journey which, at times, threatened to lead into a chaotic wilderness.

'It didn't even seem to matter', Oliver decided about Kavanagh's poetry, 'that nine-tenths of mankind didn't want it, didn't know they had it - there it was, a light and a benediction on their way.' (*SaS*, p. 98) Yet the novelist, through her characters, revealed her regret that, in a sterile, materialist society, most people denied themselves this comfort, and she held responsible those mediocre legislators who failed to encourage any appreciation of culture, so that, in Australia, uninformed public opinion dismissed artists as ineffectives and hastened their departure for more cultured climates.

Through Oliver, Dark projected her disappointment at humanity's propensity to undervalue itself by not recognising the divinity of the life-spark within each individual and its ability to inspire that joyous living which, in itself, became a creative act. She showed, too, that the creative imagination could be an instrument of regeneration with artists producing the seed from which came the renewal of humanity's faith in, and hope for, itself.

The chapter has also found Dark, the practical idealist, undermining the romantic ideal of the artist as a privileged being set apart from communal responsibilities by presenting her writer-characters immersed in everyday practicalities, intent on revealing social inadequacies and stimulating their readers to promote change. She further confuted the romantic notion of artists as prophets and saviours when she demonstrated the general public's failure to respond to them. Aiming for a realisable goal, however, she held

out the hope that, in time, there would be an end to philistinism, when the sheer gusto of the Australian psyche would lay the foundation for the 'exotic and unique ... blossoming' of genius 'which asks only to feel the thrusting urge of growth about it - a clamour and a flood of life.' (*W*, p. 116)

Spiritual identification with one's own land promotes in the individual a sense of place and security, providing on the mortal journey 'sustenance and unflinching refreshment.' (*TLC*, p. 224) In the next chapter, I shall consider Dark's response to the complex relationship with their country which has engaged white Australians since they first set foot upon it.