

2 The General Contradiction

Prichard's next two novels, *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks*, demonstrate a sense of maturity and confidence, and readers cannot fail to notice the increased complexity of these narratives. By this I do not mean that they have a more complicated plot or cast of characters, for in these terms *The Pioneers* is arguably her most complex novel. Rather, the interrelation and contradiction of influences have become more pronounced and the process of overdetermined dialectical discourse acquires greater importance within the narrative structure. These novels are discernibly closer to a state of *revolutionary rupture*. The same elements evident in the first two novels are again evident in these next two published works (for example, the recurring character types and the problematic position of matrimony). Even though these elements recur in *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks*, and indeed in all of Prichard's novels, their role in the narrative structure has altered. The presentation of a strong woman who subjugates herself to the authority of a weak and inadequate husband, for example, remains but no longer carries the significance it enjoyed in *The Pioneers*. Its impact is obscured by the newly introduced narrative components, in particular those which contribute to the novels' political momentum. In particular, the established marital relationship (which is first introduced in Prichard's earlier novels) is set in sharp relief by the introduction of a new and important character type: the revolutionary political hero.

It is apparent, however, that the new complications introduced in *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks* increase the dramatic tension. In particular, a

single contradiction within these novels exercises a considerable influence. This “general contradiction,” between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism, cannot in itself explain the tension evident in her early novels. But as Richard Wolff has demonstrated, “[t]o set out to construct overdeterminist analysis entails [...] immediately and unavoidably, its own annulment by an initial essentialist moment.”¹ In my analysis of Prichard’s novel canon, the initial essentialist moment (which is given only momentary priority) is marked by a subset of overdeterminants housed in the “general contradiction” between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism. As we shall see, because this “general contradiction” is part of an overdetermined dialectical process, it enjoys only momentary priority. The relations that bind the second and subsequent subsets of overdeterminants to it, in the sequence of moments, impel it to change.

Moralist Socialism and Rationalist Marxism

The heightened intensity of the politics in *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks* is unmistakable. For the first time, politics plays a pivotal role. By far the most significant political elements are two forms of apparently similar but ultimately incompatible socialist theories. The politics is distinctly left-wing, but it is derived from two separate traditions. The first is moralist socialism, informed by Romantic metaphysical organicist humanism. The second is a rationalist Marxism informed by the practical concerns of agitation and revolution.

The influence of moralist socialism on Prichard’s work can be traced to Romantic socialist political theory, particularly in Great Britain at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The social democratic movement in Great Britain generally avoided Marxist theories (which concentrated on more long-term goals), focusing instead on the short-

¹ Richard Wolff, “Althusser and Hegel: Making Marxist Explanations Antiessentialist and Dialectical,” *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, ed Antonio Callaric and David F. Ruccio (Hanover: UP of New England, 1996) 156.

term issue of social justice. Whether it is identified as moralist socialism or as Romantic anticapitalism (as Gavin Kitching prefers)² this movement is characterised by a desire for inclusion within the established parliamentary system. In its reformist (as opposed to revolutionary) approach to socialism it was particularly opposed to the theories espoused by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Marxist theory had little or no influence on this strand of socialist theory which was informed by a long Christian heritage.³ R. N. Berki notes that this moralist tradition in British social democracy incorporates the “Christian” principles of socialism:

The chief values for moralism are social justice, peace, co-operation, brotherhood. Its critique of capitalism concentrates on the latter's inhumanity, its institutionalized *exploitation* of the people, especially those who have to sweat, toil in order to earn their livelihood. Capitalism is a fundamentally unjust system of society in that it inflicts misery and suffering on the very people who produce society's wealth. [...] The moralist ideal - and this tendency is above all characterized by the stress it places on high 'ideals' - seeks to bring about justice by replacing enmity with mutual help, and fostering feelings of brotherly love and understanding among human beings.⁴

British moralist socialist theory had a considerable influence on Australian progressive politics.⁵ The influence of this tradition of socialist thought on Prichard's texts is unmistakable. The Christian heritage which informs this tradition is particularly evident in the evangelical fervour which often accompanies socialist commitment in her novels. But the influence of a more agitational and practical political paradigm is also evident.

The Russian revolution, in particular, is highlighted as a significant event in her autobiographical writing. The theories of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, which informed the Revolutionary movement, clashed with orthodox western Marxism and socialism, particularly the social democratic movement and the Second International.⁶ In fact, Berki positions Leninist theories as a point of transition between European and non-European socialism, and between the “early egalitarian momentum of Russian Marxism

² Gavin Kitching, *Rethinking Socialism: A Theory for a Better Practice* (London: Methuen, 1983) 64-77.

³ See Graham Maddox, *Religion and the Rise of Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1996) 170-199; see also Henry Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1972) 16.

⁴ R. N. Berki, *Socialism* (London: Dent, 1975) 26.

⁵ See Graham Maddox, *Australian Democracy in Theory and Practice* 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1991) 266-272.

⁶ See Berki, *Socialism* 105; Robert Kilroy-Silk, *Socialism Since Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1972) 112-141.

[and] its subsequent rationalist development.”⁷ He defines rationalism as representing the “principle of the *Enlightenment* in socialism.”

Here the chief values are individual happiness, reason, knowledge, efficiency in production, the rational, purposeful organization of human society in the interest of progress. The human race, rationalism maintains, has now grown up and at last freed itself from the age-old yokes of ignorance and superstition. We have in our possession ‘science’, the rational, ordered knowledge of the laws of nature: we can progressively domesticate, mould nature so as to make it serve our own ends, and we can apply this knowledge also to human society. Since it is primarily material wealth (objects gained through the process of subjugating nature) that conduces to our happiness, we should so organize our lives, our relationships as to secure the maximum technical, economic and administrative efficiency in all our social activities.⁸

Sometimes referred to as scientific socialism, this tradition is based on an intensive reading of the Marxian texts and a rigorous application of the theory of dialectical materialism in praxis. The ultimate aim of rationalist Marxism is the implementation of the practical requirements of socialism as the necessary precursor to Communism and it had its most significant impact amongst Russian socialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This tradition views a movement towards revolution as the appropriate focus of political agitation and activism within a capitalist society. The inevitability of the collapse of capitalism and the urgency of organised proletarian activism and agitation are its primary concerns.

A preoccupation with the “figures and facts of the crimes of Capitalism”⁹ and progressive political agitation in her autobiographical writing indicates the impact which rationalist Marxism had on Prichard. She frequently refers to the influence of Engels’s theory on her own political development. His contribution to the tradition of rationalist Marxism is fundamental, primarily because he itemises the historical conditions which contribute to the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the rise of the proletariat. He argues: “To make a science of socialism, it had first to be placed upon a real basis.”¹⁰ Engels’s “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific” was a significant influence on Prichard. The presentation of her early political involvement in her autobiographical writing emphasises her

⁷ Berki, *Socialism* 107.

⁸ Berki, *Socialism* 27.

⁹ Katharine Susannah Prichard, *The New Order* (Perth: People’s Printing and Publishing, 1919) 8.

¹⁰ Frederick Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works in Two Volumes*, Vol 2 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing, 1958) 128.

particular attraction to those aspects of socialism which had a “real basis.” This response to rationalist Marxism was fairly typical of left-wing activists immediately after the First World War, especially those who became CPA members.

It is clear that Prichard’s fiction is at best unconcerned by and at worst unaware of the contradictory nature of the relationship between rationalist Marxism and a moralist socialist theory. But Prichard was not alone in her acceptance of these two traditions as two halves of a unified progressive socialist movement. It was not until investigations were conducted into Marxist theory in the middle of the twentieth century (primarily by Althusser, Macherey and Eagleton¹¹) that these contradictions were widely exposed and seriously investigated. The various proponents of these two traditions of socialist thought have participated in the long and fruitful discussion which has characterised Marxist theoretical investigation over recent decades.¹² It is worth examining, briefly, some of the components which contribute to these theoretical discussions in order to indicate the complexity of their contradictory relationship. My investigation is heavily indebted to the research of John Docker and in particular to his article “The Organicist Fallacy: Jack Lindsay, Romanticism and Marxist Aesthetics.”¹³ As the title suggests, Docker discusses the significance of the relationship between Romanticism (specifically organicism) and Marxism with respect to its impact on Jack Lindsay’s literary criticism. Lindsay provided the first attempt at a Marxist analysis of Prichard’s writing and she held his criticism of her work in high regard.¹⁴

An investigation of the relationship between Marxist theory and Romanticism is important to my reading of Prichard’s novels because it demonstrates that contradictions became manifest in her work in a variety of

¹¹ See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978).

¹² Much of this discussion was conducted in the pages of *New Left Review* in the early to mid 1970s.

¹³ John Docker, “The Organicist Fallacy: Jack Lindsay, Romanticism and Marxist Aesthetics,” *Arena* 47-48 (1977).

¹⁴ Apparently Prichard was so impressed by Lindsay’s analysis of her novels that she carried a copy of his article with her constantly and would read it to improve her spirits if she ever felt them to be flagging. Personal communication, with Bob Mackie, Brisbane, July 1996. This is possibly corroborated by the fact that the edition of *Meanjin* in which Lindsay’s article was first published is collected with her papers in the National Library of Australia. The pages of the article are well annotated in her own hand.

ways. Even though many of the contradictions evident in these novels arrive within the texts independently of each other, there are still other theories and influences which affect her texts that are *in themselves* contradictory. For example, the tradition of British Marxism, based on a Romantic humanist, organicist Marxism, is riddled with internal contradictions. These elements not only contribute to the “tangle” of contradictions in Prichard’s novels, but also highlight the complexity of the relationship between these contradictory elements. This investigation into the contradictory relationship between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism assists in the identification of those elements which group together to form the subset of overdeterminants which make up the initial momentary essentialism under investigation in this chapter.

Antiorganicist Marxist theorists (particularly French Structuralists and “second wave” British Marxists) argue that the penetration of Romanticism into western Marxism is indicated by a series of faults in Marxist theory of the 1950s and 1960s: an over-reliance on Hegelian notions of dialectical unity; an idealistic stress on the historical role of the consciousness and the importance of the individual as the subject of history; a reliance on “historicism” which sees capitalist society as an “expressive totality” and which focuses on one central contradiction such as “alienation.” The result, they argue, is a failure to see either the “relative autonomy” of levels in capitalist society or the objective character of social formations.¹⁵ Docker observes that “when British marxists or ‘para-marxists’ in the fifties and the early sixties tried to break away from the rigidities of the Communist Party or the more reactionary bearings of Leavis’s critical theory, they could only fall back on the romantic literary tradition.”¹⁶ Hence, the likes of Raymond Williams were forced to subscribe to what Terry Eagleton refers to as a “left-Leavisism.”¹⁷ The theoretical heritage of this reaction can be found in Romantic humanism. The relationship between Romantic humanism and Marxism was never going to be a simple one. On the one hand, Gareth Stedman Jones argues that Romanticism is “Janus-faced,” with the potential

¹⁵ Docker, “The Organicist Fallacy” 47.

¹⁶ Docker, “The Organicist Fallacy” 48.

¹⁷ Terry Eagleton, “Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams,” *New Left Review* 95 (1976): 8.

to be assimilated by both socialism and fascism.¹⁸ Eagleton, on the other hand, regards Romanticism as an attitude of “almost uniform political reaction.”¹⁹ Either way, its affinity with Marxism is not secure.

The implications of this confused and compromised tradition for Prichard's novels are numerous and significant. The tradition of Romantic humanism, which influenced British Marxism, has a heritage in organicism. The influence of organicism in Prichard's writing is intricately connected with an admiration of affinity with nature and the primitive. Docker observes that “[t]he counter-cultural ideal involved a notion of community felt to be harmonious, unified within itself, and organically at one with the natural environment, a community often seen as pre-capitalist and ideally post-capitalist.”²⁰ According to Eagleton it is this organicist notion that has been responsible for sustaining the hold of the dominant ideology. In his view,

the destruction of corporate and organicist ideologies in the political sphere has always been a central task for revolutionaries. The destruction of such ideologies in the aesthetic region is essential not only for a scientific knowledge of the literary past, but for laying the foundation on which the Marxist aesthetics and artistic practice of the future can be built.²¹

He argues that the Romantic tradition is incapable of challenging industrial society with its ideals of unified wholeness and natural harmony, and in fact “an impoverished empiricist liberalism exploits the symbolically fertile, metaphysically coercive resources of Romantic humanism, with its nostalgic, reactionary, quasi-feudal social models, to stabilize and ratify bourgeois property relations.”²² E. P. Thompson's approach to the Romantic humanist tradition in British Marxism (in direct opposition to Eagleton's) admires its “reassertion [...] of pre-capitalist values of community.”²³ This view of a

¹⁸ Gareth Stedman Jones, “The Marxism of Early Lukacs: An Evaluation,” *New Left Review* 70 (1971): 36. Jones argues that both ideologies and the reception of them are “*labile*.” He suggests: “because of its looseness of articulation, a single ideological position is consistent with a variety of possible readings; and secondly that the precise *mélange* of ‘progressive’ and ‘reactionary’ sentiment clustered around one pole or the other will vary according to political circumstance” (37).

¹⁹ Eagleton, “Criticism and Politics: the Work of Raymond Williams” 9. In particular, Eagleton refers to William's *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958) arguing that “[t]he English Marxism available to him was little more than an intellectual irrelevance” (9).

²⁰ Docker, “The Organicist Fallacy: Jack Lindsay, Romanticism and Marxist Aesthetics” 46.

²¹ Terry Eagleton, “Ideology and Literary Form,” *New Left Review* 90 (1975): 109.

²² Eagleton, “Ideology and Literary Form” 81-82.

²³ Edward Thompson, “Romanticism, Moralism and Utopianism: The Case of William Morris,” *New Left Review* 99 (1976): 92.

precapitalist, primitive Communism as an ideal model for a postcapitalist or post-revolutionary society signals a particularly important point of contention between the more populist and humanist beliefs in societal change posited by Romantic humanism and the more rationalist and radical beliefs put forward by Eagleton and his colleagues. The conflict revolves around the opposition of evolution/revelation and revolution. As we shall see, this opposition is the fulcrum on which the contradiction between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism balances in Prichard's writing. Eagleton's attitude to this opposition is that the "creation of new values" is "only enabled by revolutionary rupture."²⁴ Thompson, on the other hand, argues that Romantic-Marxist figures are valuable precisely because they "encourage and enlarge new 'wants' in the present, and imbue the socialist movement with an alternative notation of value, *before* the 'rupture.'"²⁵ The Romantic humanist desire to return to a precapitalist form of Communism collapses the spiral of human evolutionist development (based largely on Engels's materialist replication of Hegel's "negation of negation") in its return to the primitive. Even though Thompson's and Eagleton's opinions do not, as Docker observes, "represent exhaustive polarities,"²⁶ they nevertheless give some indication of the main points of contention between two traditions of socialist thought.

The relationship between an organicist affinity with nature and an admiration of the primitive is emphasised in Lindsay's analysis of Prichard's novels. It is apparent that his argument is informed by a British Romantic humanist organicist socialism which is distinctly opposed to a structuralist approach to Marxism. Lindsay's attitude to Althusser's interpretation of Marxism is that it is "the most deadly perversion of Marxism possible, the

²⁴ Eagleton, "Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams" 12. Thompson takes exception to this point in Eagleton's argument. He insists that it represents "quite serious dangers, in that it may encourage an élitism of Theory (whose sociological location is of course among intellectuals), which affirms (very loudly) its allegiance to a theoretic revolutionary working class, but which also affirms that living working men and women generate no experience or values from which Theory has anything to learn. So that the allegiance is in effect to a post-'ruptural' hypothesis [...] and in fact the revolutionary intellectuals can carry on, subject to no experiential controls or humility, very much as élitist bourgeois intellectuals have always done." Thompson, "Romanticism, Moralism and Utopianism" 111.

²⁵ Edward Thompson, "Romanticism, Moralism and Utopianism" 111. Thompson here refers specifically to William Morris.

²⁶ Docker, "The Organicist Fallacy" 53.

breeding-ground of all that is most sectarian, dogmatist, mechanist.”²⁷ Throughout *Decay and Renewal* organic wholeness determines literary worth and Lindsay’s analysis of Prichard’s novels reflects this. For example:

It is the concreteness of the situation that absorbs and kindles her. And this means that, with all her group-focus, she does not belittle or underestimate individuality. For, in the naked and simple relations of the concrete labour-process, a man is shown for what he is, for what he is truly worth, without any chance of appealing to adventitious aids or disguises.

[...H]er political conclusions have not been imposed upon her material, but have organically grown through the depth and force of her penetration into the human situation.²⁸

By stressing the unity of culture with nature in Prichard’s work, Lindsay plainly endorses the organicist Romantic humanism which informs it, in particular the ability to adapt to and have an affinity with the surrounding natural environment. In its admiration of these components of her novels, his research does not address or acknowledge the inadequacies of a Romantic humanist approach to social reform. These inadequacies, however, cannot be ignored and they surface unconsciously in his analysis. For example, his optimistic apprehension of Australian organicism conflicts with his somewhat hesitant and at times even downright pessimistic attitude to non-Aboriginal Australians’ ability to appreciate and adapt to the Australian natural environment. In contrast, he argues that Aboriginal Australians enjoy a primitive and hence organic relationship with the natural environment. This relationship, he argues, is not only difficult for European Australians to appropriate but is also directly threatened by them. For example, in his analysis of *Coonardoo* he suggests: “Coonardoo has become the very spirit of the Australian earth, which the whites of the cash-nexus are murdering.”²⁹ As Docker has observed, this yearning for the presumed harmonious relationship between the Aboriginal Australian people and the Australian natural environment combines “a sense both of hopeful recovery” in a precapitalist primitive communism and “fear of irremediable loss.”³⁰ Lindsay’s decision to employ Marxist terminology in his discourse further emphasises the contradictory nature of the theories through which he conducts his analysis.

²⁷ Jack Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* (Sydney: Wild and Woolley, 1976) 437. Docker notes that Lindsay “rather spoils his anti-Althusserianism by suddenly using Althusser’s concept of ‘relative autonomy’ in the book’s last paragraph.” Docker, “The Organicist Fallacy” 54.

²⁸ Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 306-307.

²⁹ Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 320.

³⁰ Docker, “The Organicist Fallacy” 69.

An examination of Lindsay's analysis of Prichard's novels emphasises that it is precisely a clash between a metaphysical, organicist, evolutionist, historicist, Romantic humanist notion of a culture-nature nexus and a rationalist Marxism (based on a rigorously theorised reading of Marx) which is evident in *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks*. The elements which contribute to this contradiction are: notions of the primitive and the pre-capitalist; an affinity with the natural and especially the bush; the threat to these two elements by the ever-encroaching and necessarily destructive cash-nexus of capitalism; notions of alienation; the relationship between the individual and society; and the relationship between community and industry. As we have seen, these kinds of contradictions are evident in *The Pioneers* where the narrative gives support to both the pioneering spirit responsible for the clearing, and hence conquering, of the Australian bush, and also the retribution enacted by the "avenging spirit" of the bush on those responsible for its subjugation. They are also, as we shall see, important components of Prichard's next two novels: *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks*. But in these novels the political dynamics are instrumental in the destruction of the bush rather than the pioneering spirit. The position of this "avenging spirit" has, as a result, altered in relation to this new threat.

A significant representation of this threat to the Australian bush in *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks* is the contradiction between organicism and its direct antagonist mechanism. As we have seen, organicism is one of the fundamental components of Romanticism. Moreover, it is precisely mechanism's potential to alienate the individual which provides the motivation for rationalist Marxism. G. N. Orsini investigates the connection between the historical development of organicism and mechanism in an essay called "The Ancient Roots of a Modern Idea."³¹ He traces the original understanding of the term "mechanical" to Aristotle who defined it as "the designation of the art of invention, i.e. the construction of machines."³² He notes, however, that the relationship between organicism and mechanism has been a complicated one. Citing the ideas of Descartes and Coleridge, he observes that the two ideas have evolved from a stage where they "originally meant almost the same thing" to a point where "they came finally to stand in

³¹ G. N. Orsini, "The Ancient Roots of a Modern Ideal" in *Organic Form: The Life of an Ideal*, ed. G. S. Rousseau (London: Routledge, 1972).

³² Orsini, "The Ancient Roots of a Modern Ideal" 9.

almost complete opposition to each other.”³³ Moreover, just as the historical development of organicism runs parallel to the development of what he calls its “almost inseparable opposite,”³⁴ mechanical unity, so too do the organic and the mechanical oppose and parallel each other within Prichard’s texts.

The contradiction between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism has been of great interest to a number of critics and commentators on Prichard’s novels. But it is rarely defined in these terms. It has been identified as a contradiction between the poetic and the didactic, or between the lyric and the dogmatic. These contradictions have particularly occupied the attention of critics of *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks*, because the notions of propaganda, Marxism, realism, romance and Romanticism fall neatly under its aegis.

As we have seen, Tony Bennett discourages literary analysis which is preoccupied with discovering a text’s objective historical meaning. He argues: “[i]t is no longer enough, if ever it was, to stand in front of the text and deliver it of its truth.”³⁵ Instead he suggests:

A politically motivated criticism [...] must aim at making a strategic intervention within the determinations which modulate the text’s existing modes of usage and consumption. It must aim to mobilise the text, to re-determine its connections with history by severing its existing articulations and forging new ones, actively politicising the process of reading.³⁶

In the analysis of *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks* a new connection can be forged between these novels and Althusser’s observations regarding one overriding “general contradiction” between the forces and relations of production embodied in the contradiction of two antagonistic classes. In Prichard’s novels a “general contradiction” between the conflicting demands of moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism is evident. But just as the “general contradiction” in Althusser’s explanation of revolutionary rupture cannot “of its own simple, direct power induce a ‘revolutionary situation,’ nor *a fortiori* a situation of revolutionary rupture and the triumph of the

³³ David Stempel quoted in Orsini, “The Ancient Roots of a Modern Ideal” 11.

³⁴ Orsini, “The Ancient Roots of a Modern Ideal” 9.

³⁵ Tony Bennett, “Text and History,” *Re-Reading English*, ed. Peter Widdowson (London: Methuen, 1982) 235.

³⁶ Bennett, “Text and History” 235.

revolution,”³⁷ so too the “general contradiction” between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism is insufficient *in itself* to account for the dramatic tension which characterises Prichard’s novels. According to Althusser, for this “general contradiction” to become influential in a movement towards revolutionary rupture it must be accompanied by “an accumulation of ‘circumstances’ and ‘currents’ so that whatever their origin and sense [...] they ‘fuse’ into a *ruptural* unity.”³⁸ In other words, the “general contradiction” remains important and influential in the movement towards revolutionary rupture, but it does not contain in itself sufficient force to instigate revolution – “we can no longer talk of the sole, unique power of the general ‘contradiction.’”³⁹

Althusser explains the influence of the “general contradiction” on the other “vast accumulation of ‘contradictions’” which come “into play *in the same court*”:⁴⁰

Of course, the basic contradiction dominating the period [...] is active in all these ‘contradictions’ and even in their ‘fusion’. But, strictly speaking, it cannot be claimed that these contradictions and their fusion are merely the *pure phenomena* of the general contradiction. The ‘circumstances’ and ‘currents’ which achieve it are more than its phenomena pure and simple.⁴¹

Althusser’s insistence on the impact and significance of the “general contradiction” does not signal a return to simplistic determinism with a *reliance* on a single, simple or “general contradiction.” This antiessentialist approach indicates that Althusser is not attempting to replace or discard generally acknowledged and established philosophical understandings of Marxist theory. Instead, Althusser’s theory of overdetermination, by accommodating the “general contradiction” and acknowledging its importance, augments or expands Marxist philosophical research to the point where it provides a rigorously antireductionist explanation of dialectics and the movement towards *revolutionary rupture*.

³⁷ Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” *For Marx* 2nd ed., trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1979) 99.

³⁸ Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” 99.

³⁹ Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” 100.

⁴⁰ Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” 100.

⁴¹ Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” 100.

The General Contradiction in *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks*

In *Black Opal* the two traditions of moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism are in a direct opposition. Because of their antagonistic relationship, the narrative feels obliged to endorse one rather than the other in order to resolve dispute. This conclusion is, however, an artificial or arbitrary attempt at resolution which glosses over the irreconcilable nature of their relationship. In *Working Bullocks* the two traditions are even more overtly antagonistic but they do not meet in a direct confrontation. Instead the two traditions remain unresolved at the conclusion of the novel. Although I am by no means suggesting that an organic or Romantic closure to a narrative is important or even desirable, it is clear that these two novels do aim for resolution. The fact that closure is undercut by antagonistic and irreconcilable contradictions does not lessen the narrative's desire for it. In other words, the narratives of *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks* do not deliberately resist closure but nevertheless find it difficult and perhaps impossible to achieve. This tension between a desire for closure and its inhibition or prohibition by the irreconcilable contradictions operating within the narratives, results in conclusions which are necessarily ambiguous.

Lindsay's analysis of *Black Opal* provides an insight into the operation of this "general contradiction." He correctly observes a contradiction in the text between a form of natural, primitive or "bush" socialism and a more organised form of Marxist political agitation or activism. He also observes their combined resistance to a common enemy in the form of a cash-nexus: "The *abstract* labour-process arrives when the cash-nexus makes labour-power itself a *thing*, a commodity, an aspect of the market, and thus alienates man from his own creativeness."⁴² Lindsay argues that the problem which Prichard presented to herself, consciously or unconsciously, in the composition of *Black Opal*, was to

depict the pangs of change as the rule of money comes in, gradually and violently upsetting and perverting the original systems. In doing so, she has to show further how the element of comradeship, obvious and dominant in the early phases, is not destroyed despite the distortions, but reasserts itself in new

⁴² Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 333.

forms, which slowly become adequate to the changed situation and finally threaten the values of the cash-nexus.⁴³

Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore the struggle between a nostalgic desire to retain a form of natural socialism and the acknowledgment of its necessary obsolescence. The working people of the mining town are forced to reappraise their mode of production. But it is significant that the narrative allows only this form of resolution for the problem confronting them. This problem is emblematised in the trial of Michael Brady at the climax of the novel. The solution to the political problem facing the Ridge, then, is based on a metaphysical and organicist understanding of a universal and fair order within which humanity is destined to operate according to natural laws.⁴⁴

Michael's trial coincides with a direct confrontation between the old order of operations in the mining town and the new and threatening system proposed by John Armitage – referred to in the narrative as the “new order.”⁴⁵ Rumours of a secret treaty between Brady and Armitage contribute to the apprehensive mood which has engulfed the gathered workers. The apprehension is fuelled further by Armitage's acquisition of information which correctly links Michael to the theft of a collection of opals. The narrative conflates the two issues to the point where the decision between the old and new orders of operation in the mining town becomes dependent on the trial of Michael Brady's character and virtue. The justice system which prevails in the trial, however, is natural or bush justice: Mark is tried by his mates under the law of fair play.

The crowd outside the hall is split into two groups: “Men who were prepared at all costs to stand by the principle which had held the gougers of Fallen Star Ridge together for so long, and whose loyalty to the old spirit of independence was immutable”; and others who have fully accepted or are sympathetic to Armitage's “proposition for reorganisation of the mines” (BO 182). The narrative is decidedly sceptical about the propositions that

⁴³ Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 307.

⁴⁴ See Van Ikin, “The Political Novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard: 1 - The Metaphysical Perspective: *The Black Opal* [sic] and *Working Bullocks*,” *Southerly* 43. 1 (1983): 88.

⁴⁵ Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Black Opal* (1918; Sydney: Calson, 1946) 182. All further references to the text of *Black Opal* will be denoted in the body of the thesis abbreviated as *BO*. This reference to Armitage's proposal as the “new order” directly contradicts the title of Prichard's pamphlet *The New Order*. In *Black Opal* the “new order” is the imposition of capitalism whereas in the pamphlet the “new order” is the establishment of socialism.

Armitage puts forward, declaring that he never looked “more of another world than he did when he stood up and faced the men that night” (*BO* 183). A “thin, bluish haze” of cigarette smoke falls over the crowd and provides a symbolic curtain between Armitage and the gathered men: “It veiled the crowd below him, blurred the shapes and outlines of the men sitting close together along the benches [...]. Their faces swam before John Armitage as on a dark sea” (*BO* 183). Armitage’s “immaculate” clothing is contrasted sharply with the men of the fields in their “working clothes, faded blueys, or worn moleskins, with handkerchiefs red or white round their throats” (*BO* 183). Not only does their clothing distinguish them along class lines but it also demonstrates the difference in their relationship with the earth and refers back to the organicist principles of moralist socialism. Armitage’s colleague, an American mining engineer, is a distinctly uninspiring prospect for the potential leader of the reorganisation in the mines: “a meagrely-fleshed man, with squarish face, blunt features, and hair in a brush from a broad, wrinkled forehead [...]. His knees jerked nervously and his face and hands twitched all the time he was speaking” (*BO* 183-184). With the two “sides” of the dispute clearly delineated, the meeting takes the form of a dialogue. As we shall see, the motif of a gathering of people listening to a series of speakers recurs throughout Prichard’s novels. The implications of dialogic form in these works are enormous and present an as yet unexplored area of research. Dialogism and heteroglossia share many characteristics with dialectics and overdetermination, particularly in the way that they both challenge essentialist approaches to explication and celebrate multivalent understandings of meaning and knowledge. The resonances of these two expository forms will be explored in more detail in Chapter Three, but they also share a discursive site in the narrative of *Black Opal* as it relates the events of the meeting.

Even though Armitage and his colleagues are portrayed in a less than flattering light, their proposal is distinctly attractive to the men of the Ridge: “an offer to buy up the mines for £30,000 and put the men on a wage, allowing every man a percentage of 20 per cent. profit on all stones over a certain standard and size” (*BO* 184). Those uncertain about their decision are few by the end of Armitage’s speech. Speaking after him, George Woods, who has an “equable temper [...], downright honesty and sincerity, and [...]

steady common-sense,” addresses the crowd (*BO* 185). Woods’s discourse is brimming with colloquialisms and he repeatedly refers to the authority of his mates. He recognises that Armitage’s offer is made in good faith, but he also sees it as a threat to the way of life and work on the Ridge: “He tried to point out that if Fallen Star miners accepted Armitage’s offer they would be shouldering conditions which would take from their work the freedom and interest that had made their life in common what it had been on the Ridge” (*BO* 185). Initially the narrative appears to endorse this attitude. But it is quite clear by the end of Woods’s speech that the miners of the ridge do not: “a guffaw of laughter rolled over his last words” (*BO* 186).

M’Ginnis, a supporter of Armitage’s scheme, speaks next and declares that the only freedom which he has observed amongst the miners is “the freedom to starve” (*BO* 186). He asserts that “[a]ny fool could be master of a rubbish heap if he was keen enough on the rubbish heap” and that “[w]hat they wanted was capital, and Mr Armitage had volunteered it on what were more than ordinarily generous terms” (*BO* 186). Although M’Ginnis’s speech attracts derision from the crowd, by the end of his speech “the pendulum had swung in favour of Armitage and his scheme” (*BO* 187). The men are apprehensive as they call for Michael Brady’s opinion on the matter.

Early in the novel Michael Brady is established as a morally exemplary figure: the “next-of-kin to all lonely and helpless men and women on the Ridge” (*WB* 10) and the “court of final appeals in quarrels and disagreements between mates” (*WB* 11). But more importantly we learn that “[i]n all community discussions his opinion carried considerable weight” (*BO* 11). As Ikin observes: “Although Michael’s ‘do-gooder’ qualities may be related to the Ridge code of mateship, his superadded intellectual qualities separate him from the other miners.”⁴⁶ The narrative endorses Michael’s authority, asserting “what Michael was going to say would sway men of the Ridge, either for or against the standing order of their lives on which they had staked so much” (*BO* 187).

The apprehension affects all men differently depending on their involvement with Michael, the theft and Armitage’s offer. Michael himself is

⁴⁶ Ikin, “The Political Novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard: 1 - The Metaphysical Perspective: *The Black Opal*[sic] and *Working Bullocks*” 100-101.

apprehensive, realising, like all others in the hall, that the future of the Ridge rests with his oration but that the threat of Armitage's knowledge about the opal theft could render his words impotent. Michael speaks forcefully and with confidence. He reinforces Woods's argument in saying "the things we've stood for are better than anything he's got to offer" and concludes with the exclamation: "[w]e'll eat bread and fat, but we'll be our own masters!" (*BO* 189). Michael's argument is convincing but is immediately disrupted by Charley's accusation that he is "a liar and a thief!" (*BO* 189). At this point the main purpose of the meeting swings away from a decision between the old and new order of operation on the Ridge, towards a decision about the guilt or innocence of Michael Brady. Because the two issues have become conflated, however, the one decision will affect both. Choosing to endorse the innocence and virtue of Michael Brady, the crowd would simultaneously legitimise an old order of operation. Alternatively, a vote of no confidence in Michael Brady would amount to a vote for a new way of working on the Ridge. In other words, the choice is between the endorsement of an old order based on primitive, precapitalist notions of mateship, comradeship, fair play and trust, and a new order based on a capitalist cash-nexus which involves competition and wage labour. The acceptance of the new-order of operation on the Ridge would disempower the workers to an extent that they would have to rely on organised political agitation and activism to ensure their survival. The men must decide which of these two systems will better protect them from the threat of capitalist infiltration into their collective way of life. The choice, then, is one between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism. But the enormous significance of the fate of the Ridge is not reflected in the relatively incidental nature of the event which eventually decides it: the guilt or innocence of Michael Brady

Michael is obliged to repeat his account of the theft of the opals to the crowd of men. He sums up his oration with the following words:

"That's the truth, as far as I know it," Michael said. "There's been attempts made to injure the Ridge, our way of doing things here, because of me, and because of those stones. ... What happened to me doesn't matter. What happens to the Ridge and the mines does matter. I done wrong. I know I done wrong holding those stones. I'd give anything now if I – if I'd given them to Paul when Sophie went away. But I didn't ... and I'll stand by anything the men who've been my mates care to say or do about that. Only don't let the Ridge, and our way of doing things here, get hurt through me. That's bigger – it means more than any man. Don't let it!" (*BO* 192)

Backed by the knowledge that his theft of the opals is justified, he must place his trust in the sense of “bush” justice prevailing amongst the men in the hall. This is a logical extension of his belief that a primitive and natural form of operation must be maintained on the Ridge. The fact that he is prepared to fight for this cause even at the risk of endangering his own position on the Ridge is indicative of the selfless way in which the character of Michael Brady functions. The end of Chapter Sixteen indicates the extent to which the trial of Michael Brady displaces the consideration of Armitage’s proposal. The decision to meet the next evening for Michael’s “trial by his mates” has caused such excitement that “Armitage and his proposals were forgotten” (BO 193).

The trial follows prescribed and recognised procedures which are governed by an overriding authority of fairplay and natural justice. The narrative emphasises the distinctly colloquial jurisprudence which operates within the “bush court” where decisions are endorsed and enforced by a sheer weight of numbers. Eventually, the meeting moves a vote of confidence in Michael Brady, passed by acclamation with cheers that “roared to the roof” (BO 202). Michael stands in the same space that Armitage had occupied the night before. But Armitage saw the men through a fog of smoke, swimming before his eyes, and Michael’s eyes shine as he looks out to the men. He receives the congratulations of his mates offered “with that assurance of fellowship and goodwill which meant more to Michael than anything else in the world” (BO 202). No official decision is ever made on Armitage’s proposal. In fact, from the moment that Michael is accused of theft, the proposal is not given any further consideration by the men of the Ridge. In the concluding passages of the novel, the narrative observes:

For weeks, troubled and disturbed thinking, arguments, and conflicting ideas, had created a depressed and restless atmosphere in every home in Fallen Star. But to-night it was different. The temptations, allurements and debris of Armitage’s scheme had been swept from the minds - even of those who had been ready to accept it. Hope and pride in the purpose of the Ridge had been restored by Michael’s vindication, and by reaffirmation of the principle he and all staunch men of the Ridge stood for, as the mainstay of their life in common. [...] The crisis which had come near to shattering the Ridge scheme of things, and all that it stood for, had ended by drawing dissenting factions of the community into closer sympathy and more intimate relationship. In everybody’s mind were the hope and enthusiasm of a new endeavour. (BO 207)

The restoration of certainty at the conclusion of the novel, regardless of the romantic assertions of the narrative, is not convincing. The struggle to retain the old order of operation in the opal mines ignores the fact that such a method of operation will not withstand capitalism for long. Lindsay quotes a note written by Prichard in 1946 as saying “Michael Brady [...] would be the first to say that men of the Ridge are behind scientific progress in industrial organization.” He augments this assertion by noting that “[t]his is a rather heavy way of putting the fact that the opal-miners think they can maintain the values and methods of small-production despite the manifest demonstration of the impossibility of so doing.”⁴⁷ Van Ikin agrees:

when the Ridge comes under attack from outside, such a vague “she’ll be right” attitude is no longer adequate; the maintenance of this way of life becomes a political act - a deliberate clinging to one alternative as opposed to another. The Ridge is forced to become “politicized”. Thus the primitive world, in order to protect itself, must sacrifice some of its primitiveness [...]. As Lindsay observes, this need for “politicization” confronts Prichard with “the problem of developing this community beyond its pioneering levels without loss of its finest elements” [...]. Her solution to this problem is romantic, unconvincing and – ultimately – no solution at all.⁴⁸

Even though the narrative shares this delusion, it cannot escape the fact that the mining community will find it difficult to avoid being overwhelmed by the enormity and even impossibility of the task it has set itself.

The reaffirmation of a form of “bush” socialism at the conclusion of *Black Opal* and the difficulties it is sure to face as it defends the workers of the Ridge from the threat of capitalist infiltration emphasise the fundamental nature of the “general contradiction” between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism. The two traditions of socialist theory come into direct conflict in the final chapters. The narrative’s impetus towards closure provides a conclusion which is little more than a gloss. Because the narrative is forced to decide between the two traditions, the conclusion is arbitrary and ambiguous. To make this kind of deconstructive move is particularly valuable in reading Prichard’s novels which, as we shall see, often resolve in ways which are significantly ambivalent.

⁴⁷ Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 308.

⁴⁸ Ikin, “The Political Novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard: 1 - The Metaphysical Perspective: *The Black Opal*[sic] and *Working Bullocks*” 100.

The contradiction between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism is also evident in *Working Bullocks*. Again, the notion of “bush” socialism is important. As Pat Buckridge has observed, the “proto-socialism” in *Working Bullocks* occupies a rather precarious position within the narrative because it is both supported and rejected by the text.⁴⁹ Similarly the endorsement of rationalist Marxism is undermined by a contradiction between the theoretical correctness but apparent impracticality of Marxist political activity in the Australian context.

The notion of “bush socialism” is again informed by Romanticism, specifically organicism. In a similar way to *The Pioneers*, the trees of *Working Bullocks* are imbued with a spiritual power. This power can come in the form of both retribution and redemption, and even salvation. Early in the novel the trees take their first victim: Chris Colburn, a young timber worker. His body is smashed by a log which breaks free from the wire ropes restraining it. The ominous nature of the trees and their capacity to kill and maim is constantly reinforced in the novel. The image of trees as noble and powerful, felled and slaughtered by the conquering timber industry, is a recurring motif. The organicist preoccupations and concerns of the novel are carried by the character of Deb.⁵⁰ In Chapter Twenty-Five the narrative follows her:

Power of the trees she understood and respected. Her life had been governed by the trees. They had surrounded her home. Deb had seen the greatest of them felled, split, sawed and hauled away by bullock teams, yoked

⁴⁹ Pat Buckridge cites the hilarity raised after it is discovered by the gang of timber workers that their mate 'Orey Smirke has composed a poem: “The poem, which he is made to recite in full for their amusement, is not merely bad. With its extremely localized references and colloquial speech it is also a parody of the bush literature of the earlier period [...]. The good humour that prevails throughout the episode conveys something of Prichard’s attraction to the social values of the small labouring community, but it also suggests two characteristics of the bush tradition which limited its usefulness as a literary resource for a contemporary committed writer: its essentially oral character and its predominantly comic register.” Pat Buckridge, “Katharine Susannah Prichard and the Literary Dynamics of Political Commitment,” *Gender Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Women’s Novels*, ed. Carole Ferrier (St. Lucia: U of Queensland Press, 1985) 87-88.

⁵⁰ This acknowledgment of some kind of power or force of nature which is beyond the scope of human consciousness appears as a recurring motif in Prichard’s novels. It is first introduced in *The Wild Oats of Han* where Han actually hears the voice of the bush which is articulated in the narrative as calling her, “crying to her, crying and singing softly, subtly, insistently: ‘Come, Han!/Han, Han!/ Come, Han!’”(WOH 29). In another part of the narrative Han’s relationship with a wild goat develops to the point where they are apparently able to communicate and the goat is mysteriously able to lead Han back to a secret cave which she discovered at their first meeting. The narrative implies that the relationship between Han and the goat is made possible by Han’s affinity with nature.

abreast. As a child, she had seen a king karri felled and had never forgotten the thunder of his pitching to earth. The hills had shaken with it. It was a terrible thing men had done to the great tree, she thought.

Law of the country was very like 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' As a child, Deb believed the trees would never forgive what men had done to them.

Men looked so small and weak beside the trees. The trees were so old and strong. She wondered how men had the courage to approach them; put an axe into them. At the back of her mind, always, she had dreaded the vengeance of the trees. As she grew older she had seen the trees strike, again and again. There was Chris — ⁵¹

Deb considers the felling and milling of trees to be an horrendous practice. The spirit or essence of the trees is personified by the novel's frequent use of the masculine third person to refer to them. Characters who recognise and respect this "forest spirit" are admired and their adoration of the forest is distinctly religious:

In the forest the fallers, bullock drivers and men at the bush landings treated great trees respectfully. They watched trees and logs as though they were animated, and at any moment might be expected to crush a man out of existence. In the bush men were reverent of a great tree. They gathered to utter oaths of admiration, standing off to appraise his stature, do him homage, before bringing him down. They celebrated his measurements and magnificence with yarns, legends of great trees, at crib time, smoking and gossiping dreamily.

But in the mills there was no time for rites to appease dead trees. Deb had never heard of rites to appease the manes of dead trees; but she thought vaguely the men's admiration and reverence for a tree they were going to fall did appease the tree in some way. The trees were not so angry, their vengeance so rapacious and implacable, when they were worshipped as they fell. It was the brutal and callous way great logs were torn up under the steam-saws which dazed and amazed her. [...]

Looking back, Deb could see men under the shadow of the long iron roof moving with a steady twitch and flow. She could hear the scream of the saws, moan and howl of logs under the saws, and shuddered. (WB 206-207)⁵²

Deb's affinity with nature is confirmed, as in so many instances in Prichard's texts, through her affinity with wildflowers. In particular we read that she notices, as if unconsciously, the leschenaultia and trigger flowers which line the path through the bush as she walks. Her first "flirtation" with Red occurs when she decorates his bullock whim with "wild flowers, scarlet runners, sky-blue leschenaultia, strings of fly-catches, white-starred honey flowers, the

⁵¹ Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Working Bullocks* (1926; London: Cape 1944) 206. All further references to the text of *Working Bullocks* will be denoted in the body of the thesis, abbreviated as *WB*.

⁵² A little later the narrative observes: "No one spoke of the girth and height of great trees with more wonder and awe than Deb Colburn. There was a god-like quality about the trees to her" (*WB* 212).

brown, saffron and gold of granny-bonnets, and branches of scrub blossom, all downy yellow" (WB 104-5)

Deb's affinity with nature is reinforced by her connection, in Red's eyes, with the brumby mare and its primitive and instinctive mating ritual. The narrative follows Red's observation of the brumby mob at a water hole: "Red could see her among the trees when the brumbies had splashed through the pool and spread out feeding along the bank of the creek. Taut and quivering, she stood, as the stallion came towards her: whinnied, stepping proudly, head flung back, wild eyes aflame, breaths blasting from his nostrils" (WB 25). The connection with Deb appears several chapters later: "Deb's eyes lay in his. They made him think of the pool where he had first seen the Boss come to water. They were dark and shining like that" (WB 96).

Prichard's preoccupation with nature worship and mysticism suggests a number of similarities with the work of D. H. Lawrence. Although Prichard admired his artistry, she was keen to distance herself from his ideology.⁵³ It

⁵³ Prichard goes to some lengths to articulate her response to Lawrence's writing and the extent to which his novels influenced her work in an article entitled "Lawrence in Australia," *Meanjin* 9.4 (1950): 252-259. In this article Prichard claims to be infuriated by *Kangaroo*, taking particular offence at his discourse on democracy which, according to Prichard, is "the vaguest, wildest conception of what democracy amounts to in Australia" (255). Prichard, writing retrospectively in "Lawrence in Australia," deliberately emphasises that her attraction to Lawrence's novels was concentrated on the stylistic rather than thematic aspects of his work. She claims, however, to have been "dissatisfied with the diffuseness, arrogance and morbid mysticism which had become associated with his work" (252). Written nearly thirty years after their correspondence, Prichard's article may have been motivated more by a desire to protect herself from association with a writer who was regarded by many as fascist than by a desire to detail accurately her genuine response. She expresses considerable disgust at Lawrence's portrait of Kangaroo which she claims "camouflages an idealised d'Annunzio or Mussolini, skilfully drawn sur-realist fashion with resemblances to our national animal" (255). She also comments on the inclusion of the first stirrings of the New Guard in Australia. Keith Sagar is, however, surprised by the detailed presentation of this political movement in *Kangaroo* which he claims is "extraordinarily, mysteriously, accurate" (136). He insists that Lawrence had little time to embark on any detailed research beyond reading the *Sydney Bulletin* and a few old newspapers, "yet he was in possession of detailed information about the right-wing secret army which had just come into existence in Sydney, made up almost entirely of ex-servicemen and dedicated to resisting the spread of communism" (136). Lawrence was, according to Sagar, privy to information which the Australian population itself was unaware of until several years later. Keith Sagar, *The Life of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Methuen, 1982). Keith Amos speculates "as to whether the White Guard may have provided some inspiration for [...] *Kangaroo*. [...] Fictional though it is, Lawrence's novel presents an accurate picture of trends developing in Australia at that time." Keith Amos, *The New Guard Movement 1931-1935* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1976) 11. Alternatively, Andrew Moore suggests that "Australian knowledge of fascism was limited. International travellers from Italy, like the British author D.H. Lawrence, may have brought

is well known that she read his work enthusiastically.⁵⁴ Yet, by all accounts, she did not appreciate the suggestion that her novels had been influenced by his writing. Her relation to Lawrence has inspired considerable comment. Richard Sadlier argues that Prichard was “strongly influenced” by Lawrence, especially in her “passionate conviction in the natural goodness of the elemental life, seen as largely amoral and amorous” and in her rhapsodic celebration of the urge to life that is characterised mainly by “the need for uninhibited sexual fulfilment.”⁵⁵ Aidan de Brune agrees, noting Prichard’s Lawrentian ability to find “poetry in physical reproductive power, in man and in beast.”⁵⁶ Jack Lindsay does not provide a direct comparison between Lawrence and Prichard, but highlights similar characteristics in their work. He argues that Lawrence is convinced that “what matters” is not only “the earth in its own right” but “the people who move upon it”: “For the movement of people is not simply “upon it,” it is through it and in it, and transforms what it invades. The tension between the people and the earth is what enables us to realize the formative energies at work everywhere.”⁵⁷ Similarly, he observes that in Prichard’s work, “Nature is both landscape and inscape, a friend and a foe, pervading all human experience and at the same time pervaded by human hopes and fear; it never is a mere background, something vaguely added-in now and then.”⁵⁸ The Romantic organicist nature of this comparison is unmistakable and holds important implications for the bush setting of *Working Bullocks* which is repeatedly positioned as a site of redemption or regeneration.

A storm passes over the mill town and Deb is caught out on a walk in the forest. She has set out in a mood of intense jealousy. As the storm lashes around her she ponders the elemental forces, especially the way they manifest

information.” Andrew Moore, *The Right Road? A History of Right-wing Politics in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1995) 30.

⁵⁴ Although Prichard tried to meet Lawrence while he was in Australia, she was unable to make contact with him until he had travelled across the continent to stay in a bungalow named “Wyewurk” in Thirroul. Lawrence’s interest in the whimsical names given to cottages in Australia is obvious in the opening chapter of *Kangaroo* where the cottage in question is named “Torestin.” D. H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1950). The name of Lawrence’s cottage in Thirroul bears a striking resemblance to the beach cottage in *Intimate Strangers* which is named “Ywurrie.”

⁵⁵ Sadlier, “The Writings of Katharine Susannah Prichard - A Critical Evaluation” 31.

⁵⁶ Aidan de Brune, “A Gallery of Australian Authors: Katherine [sic] Susannah Prichard,” *Book News* 20 Sept. 1933, 15.

⁵⁷ Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 117.

⁵⁸ Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 312.

in patterns of regeneration. The connection between the forest and the “primitive” is reinforced by a comparison between the movement of the trees in the storm and the “black people of the north-west dancing [...]. Men in long lines, their dark bodies streaked with white clay, trembling and jiggling, singing: old women squatted a little distance away, going over and over the melody, a few notes beaten out monotonously, rhythmically” (*WB* 275). The link between the precapitalist ideal of “primitive” society and the natural environment is here explicit. In its contemplation of the bush and nature, Deb’s pondering provides a direct analogy to her own fertility and instinctive sexual drive.⁵⁹ Just as the storm soothes and cleanses the forest, so it soothes and cleanses Deb’s spirit: “All her clothes were wet; but she did not feel wet or cold. Her body was warm and she was strangely happy. Why? She wondered. The storm within her was over as it was in the world about her. [...] She was peaceful: her thoughts moving quietly, clearly” (*WB* 276-277).

In direct contrast to the Romantic ideal of harmony with nature, the industrial mill is a site of degeneration and alienation. It is also the site where the spirit or essence of the trees exacts its revenge. The description of the mill and its machines, as observed through Deb’s eyes, is laden with images of slaughter and death. The logs “scream and moan” as the saws pass through them, the “bright shark’s teeth” of the saw are “cruel” and the machines are “great devouring monsters.” Most potently, the “[s]mell of what she had always called ‘blood of the trees,’ their ruddy resinous sap, was everywhere” (*WB* 202-211). The opposition between the organic and the mechanistic is a direct one:

Overwhelmed, she sat wondering why work in the mills was so different from what she had expected. She did not know quite what she had expected. Perhaps it was the natural gait of work in the bush. Not this speed and shrieking clangour of machinery. Deb had a horror of machines and the way they ate up everything before them, making all that men did look insignificant. (*WB* 205-206)

The alienating power of machines is consistently declared “inhuman” (*WB* 205), “resistless” (*WB* 211) and “mock[ing] men and all they did, making it seem of no consequence – although the machines themselves were man-made” (*WB* 211).

⁵⁹ This analogy is extended further when Red and Deb’s instinctive connection is paralleled by the brumby stallion and mare.

The influence of rationalist Marxism is particularly evident when the mill and the town around it become the site of strike action. The strike is initiated after the unsafe working conditions (which bring about the deaths and serious injuries of several mill workers) are not rectified by the mill owners. The focus and initiator of the strike action is Mark Smith,⁶⁰ whose love of reading (combined with an educated and inquisitive mind) and his devotion to progressive or radical political theories, link him to Michael Brady in *Black Opal*, Rocca in *Haxby's Circus*, Tony Maretti in *Intimate Strangers*, Tom and Bill Gough in the Goldfields Trilogy and David Evans in *Subtle Flame*. (Similarities can also be found with Dan Farrell in *The Pioneers*, although he is not particularly devoted to progressive or radical politics.) All of these characters are deemed virtuous and admirable mainly because their appetite for reading translates directly into a hunger for knowledge and wisdom. Mark Smith, for example, reads “as though he were eating, hungrily” (*WB* 169).⁶¹ The rationalist goal of social justice through reasoning and knowledge is a distinctly masculine domain and stands in direct opposition to the feminine realm of Romantic organicism guided by instinct and intuition. In each of these rational male characters there is an apprehension of the injustices of the world. The novel suggests that this is especially desirable in a prospective leader of political agitation or activism – such as Mark Smith.

Mark demonstrates a devotion and singlemindedness. He is seen soon after his introduction in the narrative working diligently to master a form of labour with which he is unfamiliar:

⁶⁰ Pat Buckridge has argued that the name Mark Smith can be read as an example of the cryptic naming of characters in Prichard's novels. He asks: “Is ‘Mark Smith’, the evangelist of the common man, merely ‘Mark Myth’ - a familiar but not particularly compelling historical fantasy?” Buckridge, “Katharine Susannah Prichard and the Literary Dynamics of Political Commitment” 89.

⁶¹ The motifs of teeth and eating recur throughout the novel. Mark Smith is characterised by the way he devours books and the regularity of his oral hygiene habits. Similarly, the narrative observes that Mark Smith's feeling for the working people of the Mill Town was a love “in the hungry, yearning way of a mother” (*WB* 223). Further, Red's desire for Deb is emblemised in the eating of a loquat as well as by the brumby stallion biting the flank of his mate. As we have seen the teeth of the mill saws bite into the flesh of the timber and the final image of Red in the novel likens his teeth to saws. It is interesting to note that the motif of teeth, biting and eating provide both positive and negative dimensions in the narrative. They are equally active in elements which support the moralist socialist and rationalist Marxist elements of the texts.

When the men saw Mark Smith in the bullock yard next day they guessed he had never put yoke on a beast before. They knew Red guessed that too, but it was his business. The new swamper learnt his job quickly, alert and eager to show how well he could do the work when he got used to it. He was not scared of Red Burke. (*WB* 168)

He also displays other characteristics which define him as civilised and modern: he doesn't drink or smoke; he is "always cleaning his teeth" (*WB* 169); he rises early in the morning and washes regularly in the creek; he can take a joke and even tells stories against himself; and he works cheerfully and diligently. He is not, however, physically or emotionally weak. Red observes "Mark was younger than he, but harder. The youth seemed to have been hammered out of him. He had been a miner and a sailor: had worked his way round the world, sweated through cities and over seas" (*WB* 169). He is a well travelled and widely read man who stands "alone among men of the Six Mile by the fearless energy of his mind and utterance" (*WB* 169). His reading, of both books and people, is important. Its motivation is clear: "All his life he had been gathering up information, seeking to know the facts of life and trying to find some reasonable explanation for the fuss of existence" (*WB* 170). Reading is related to gathering and communicating information. In town he falls in with the mill-workers, yarning with them "in the same way as he read, wanting to know their wages, the hours they worked, the chances men took at benches under the big saws, the age of boys working in the mills, and the dividends the company paid its shareholders" (*WB* 171). But the gathering of information through reading and contemplation alone does not provide sufficient skills or tools for his quest as the "forerunner of a new creed, a John the Baptist, come to bring the dulled consciousness of his time to realization of finer, truer, more useful and beautiful conceptions of life" (*WB* 169). His evangelical charisma is particularly evident in his speech: he "had such a way of putting things, clean cut and clear, as a matter of such common sense that men who heard him talking found themselves agreeing with him, whether they wanted to or not" (*WB* 171). We can see in the character of Mark Smith a curious conflation of a rationalist Marxist, who is keen to initiate political organisation, and a moralist socialist, who evangelically bears witness to his cause.

Regardless of the contradictory nature of this conflation, Mark appears to fit neatly into the mould of the socialist or proletarian hero prescribed by

the theory of Socialist Realism. This, perhaps, is what has motivated commentators like Drusilla Modjeska to argue that Prichard demonstrates characteristics of Socialist Realism in her writing *prior* to 1933. As I have suggested, however, this kind of assertion is inadequate. The role of Mark as socialist or proletarian hero is frustrated by the failure of the strike which he is instrumental in initiating. Here, again, the novel's commitment to a radical and progressive form of political agitation and activism contradicts its lack of faith in the possibility and relevance of proletarian revolution in the Australian context. Mark, as evangel, attempts what is little more than a religious conversion of the people of the mill town to the cause of socialism. He is unable effectively to convert the majority of workers to the cause and watches helplessly as the motivation of the strikers evaporates. Even though he recognises that his message has been received and understood by the people of the Mill Town, he also knows that he must win the fight against the lethargy and apathy inhibiting political action amongst the workers. This is emblematised in Red's reaction to Mark's strike plans. In answer to Mark's question "What are you going to do?" Red simply says "Scab" (WB 227). The narrative follows Mark's reaction: "Mark understood that. He realized Red Burke had got his creed clearly enough. He had accepted it: it made common sense to him. But he did not want to bestir himself, throw off his lethargy, drugged invulnerability to any further jolt fortune might have in store for him" (WB 228). Mark's only true convert "to this religion of his— 'service to humanity', he called it, and 'the fight for a better world'" (WB 227) is Mary Ann Colburn. No one is more surprised by her conversion to the cause of socialist political activism than Mary Ann herself. Even though her commitment is genuine it is motivated by unusually drastic circumstances: a second child killed within the time-span of the novel in an industrial accident. Her conversion rings with religious overtones and is likened to "a curtain [being] lifted before her eyes" (WB 229).⁶² Her marriage is not developed as a prominent component of the narrative, but is nevertheless set in relief by her professional political relationship with Mark. Her support for him is primarily domestic – arranging meals and food supplies. It is clear that whilst political paradigms are being actively

⁶² The image of a curtain being lifted from before eyes resonates with Prichard's recollection of lifting the curtain in London to reveal the poverty stricken and starving people on the Embankment (CH 131-132).

challenged gender roles are not. It is appropriate that the platform for both Mark and Mary Ann's political oration is an old karri stump. This one image reminds us of the industry for which they are fighting and provides a motif of the spirit of the bush which is being conquered by that same industry.

The contradiction between a commitment to rationalist Marxism and a questioning of the effectiveness or even appropriateness of strike action is underlined by the fact that the bulk of the narrative concerned with the activities of the strike occurs *after* the blunt statement: "The strike was over" (WB 229). The narrative concedes that "[t]he idea, the method, was all right" (WB 230) – indeed "[t]he way Mark put it, you could not help seeing he was right" (WB 231) – but it is also clear that the theory, in this instance, does not translate into fruitful practice.⁶³

The distinctly organicist presentation of the opposition between the bush workers and the industrial mill (especially as it contradicts the theoretical foundations supporting Marxist philosophy) is precisely the kind of thing that Eagleton and his fellow anti-organicist Marxist theorists find troublesome in moralist socialism. To put it simply, the spiritual or mystical religion of the bush contradicts the materialist philosophy of Marxism. This provides a direct contradiction between Marxist materialism and the metaphysical adoration of nature. This contradiction has been transplanted directly into Prichard's novels. The ambivalent positioning of rationalist Marxism is particularly evident in the conclusion of *Working Bullocks*.

⁶³ Pat Buckridge investigates the ambivalent attitude to scientific socialism in the narrative of *Working Bullocks* in "Katharine Susannah Prichard and the Literary Dynamics of Political Commitment." Buckridge analyses the political dynamics within the novel in terms of the "textualisation of commitment". He draws attention to a triadic tension in the novel between an ambivalent attitude to "bush socialism," propaganda and a romance structure. He argues that each of these three elements is simultaneously supported and challenged by the narrative (which he equates with Prichard) and by each other, but that they collaboratively carry a commitment to the cause of socialism in both the stylistic and thematic levels of the novel's structure. Whilst Buckridge's argument contributes some important ideas to the study of Prichard's work, it fails to adequately account for the intensity of the tensions in her writing, and particularly in *Working Bullocks*. He suggests, for instance, that while supporting this triadic source of textual tension, the novel is also refusing them. They stand, then, as products of a dialectic of acquiescence and refusal. He fails to consider, for instance, the possibility that their emergence in the text and the tension which results between them may be the result of overdetermined dialectical activity which, because of its distinctly contradictory and antagonistic motivation, forces the narrative to refuse or reject them even as it is apparently committed to them. This ambivalence to the effectiveness of strike action stands in marked contrast to the writing of other Australian Communist writers, in particular Jean Devanny's *Sugar Heaven* (Sydney: Modern Publishers, 1936).

Red and Deb's partnership fulfils the romantic requirements of the plot, but is simultaneously challenged by the political elements which have, in direct contradiction of each other, also influenced the narrative. When Deb and Red announce their betrothal, "[t]he bitterness of defeat" whips Mary Ann (WB 284). She cries:

'It's what Mark said. ... You're not better than the beasts you're driving - the pair of you. You'll be driven ... worked like them.'

Red laughed, throwing back his head. She saw the sun-red column of his throat, the gape of his mouth and the saw-edged teeth.

'But we'll breed,' he yelled, 'like you done!'(WB 284)

There is no question that Mary Ann's accusations are accurate and profoundly important. They are motivated by her objection to the exploitation of human labour and are informed by Mark Smith's evangelical socialism. Her concern for Red's claim on Deb is, ironically, that he does not yet own his own team of bullocks. In other words, because he does not own any part of the means of production, she fears (with some justification) that he will necessarily be controlled by those who do. The sheer inadequacy of Red's own response is significant. The notion that solutions will be found in breeding carries Romantic and organicist overtones which are underlined by the concluding words: "Red and Deb moved with [the team], and the forest flowed on, over them, with its silences, whisper of leaves, murmur of small birds, flung through by the laughter of a butcher-bird, melodious and cruel" (WB 285). The butcher bird laughs, with a distinctly organicist authority, at the absurdity and despair which surrounds their situation. Their relationship, formed through a Romantic notion of instinctive companionship, is now cemented in a sense of comradeship. Like Mary and Donald in *The Pioneers*, Red and Deb are irretrievably paired as "yoke mates." This passage indicates that neither rationalist Marxism nor moralist socialism has succeeded in rescuing them from their fate as working bullocks. In this way, the resolution of *Working Bullocks* is distinctly ambiguous.⁶⁴ It is significant that the conclusion of *Working Bullocks*, unlike that of *Black Opal*, does not make a decision between the two forms of socialist theory. The ambiguous

⁶⁴ As Ikin observes, the narrative "regards marriage as one of the factors drawing people away from the earth and into the coffin-like 'wooden boxes' of the townships. [...] Yet it is difficult to determine whether [this...] amount[s] to a rejection of marriage (because it draws men away from 'the fundamentals' of living) or if [it is] simply a comment on the fact that marriage has become a stultifying social institution." Ikin, "The Political Novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard: 1 - The Metaphysical Perspective: *The Black Opal* [sic] and *Working Bullocks*" 99.

conclusion of *Working Bullocks* resists closure rather than providing one which is arbitrary, artificial or a mere gloss over the demands of the narrative.

In both *Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks* there is an endorsement of moralist socialism and an acknowledgment of its inadequacies. There is also an endorsement of rationalist Marxism (particularly its preoccupation with organised industrial action) and an acknowledgment of *its* inadequacies. It is important to recognise the implications of the conflict between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism as a “general contradiction” in Prichard’s writing. Rather than affecting what Burchill calls “a kind of inertia”⁶⁵ or concluding with “an overwhelming impression of impotence,”⁶⁶ the irreconcilable contradiction offers a palpable tension.

With the “general contradiction” it is apparent that a process of overdetermined dialectical discourse has become increasingly important in these two novels. The two antagonistic forces are left to negotiate their own point of balance. A process of negotiation between rationalist Marxism and moralist socialism resolves that both are capable of making a valuable contribution to the Australian working environment, yet their appropriation and use must be carefully balanced. Within these novels the increased tension is significant. They have moved discernibly closer to a state of *revolutionary rupture* for they are rendered by the “general contradiction” both aesthetically and politically more powerful.

⁶⁵ Sandra Burchill, “Katharine Susannah Prichard: Romance, Romanticism and Politics,” diss., U of New South Wales (Australian Defence Force Academy), 1988, 103 and 155.

⁶⁶ Burchill, “Katharine Susannah Prichard: Romance, Romanticism and Politics”, 155.

3 The Hamartic Axis

In addition to the “general contradiction,” Althusser stresses the importance of a vast tangle of other, smaller contradictions. Their interrelation is complex. As Resnick and Wolff indicate:

These contradictions are the complex effects of all the other similarly constituted aspects or processes. Overdetermined in this complex way, each aspect or process of social life includes a particular set of contradictions that impose a correspondingly particular tension and momentum upon that aspect or process. Each such changing process or aspect is thus constituted as relatively autonomous from the others in the sense only of the particularity of its overdetermination. Thus, relative autonomy cannot be understood in any sense as independence. Each social process is relatively autonomous precisely because of the way it is socially determined i.e. overdetermined. And its relative autonomy is the basis upon which it exerts its influence upon all of the other constitutive processes or aspects of the social formation.¹

From this relational explanation we can conclude: first, that social aspects act on or influence each other; and second, in contradicting each other, they produce “change.” It also indicates the exact nature of the relative autonomy and interdependence of these social aspects.² For as Resnick and

¹ Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, “The Theory of Transitional Conjunctures and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism in Western Europe,” *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 11.3 (1979): 6.

² To fully understand these notions of autonomy and independence it is useful to consider what “overdetermination” does *not* mean. Resnick and Wolff itemise two common misunderstandings of the precise meaning of the term: “First, overdetermination does not signify the existence of more than one sufficient causal explanation for any aspect of a social formation. Thus, for example, to understand the economic aspect requires specifying the relative autonomy and the effectivity of the ‘political and cultural superstructures’ upon one another and upon the ‘economic base’ since that base (the economic aspect) is *conceived* as the site, the intersection, of all social determinations. Any understanding of the economic, political or cultural aspects of any social formation requires understanding the precise mutual effectivities of all aspects of that formation. Second, overdetermination does not refer simply to multiple determination or causation as exemplified in a set of simultaneous equations. The latter provides a solution to a given specified set of variables and functional relationships among variables. There is no ordinary notion of solution in the concept of overdetermination. There are and can be no

Wolff remind us, “overdetermination” in action or practice is a dialectical procedure:

[...] contradictoriness is expressed in part by the formation of different conceptual frameworks or knowledges or sciences. It is also expressed in the internal inconsistencies constantly produced and resolved and reproduced anew within such sciences. Each science clashes with, i.e., counterposes itself to, the others; each exposes internal inconsistencies in the others; and each challenges the others to take account of what it designates as important facts. These quite different interactions between scientific or theoretical processes comprise theoretical criticism.³

Acknowledging the centrality of dialectics (“change”) in this manner suggests that “nothing about any social formation is still or stable” but rather “depends on the specific web of mutual effectivities.”⁴

This chapter investigates the web of contradictions evident in *Coonardoo* and *Haxby's Circus*. The influence of biblical, psychoanalytical, mythological, evolutionist or anthropological, Marxist and feminist theories is of primary importance. Attic tragedy and the carnivalesque also contribute to the “web.” This “second subset” of overdeterminants has its own specific relation to the Prichard novel canon. But the relations which bind it to the initial momentary essentialism (“an initial approach to the object of explanation”⁵) of the “general contradiction,” in the never ending overdetermined dialectical process, impel both to change. As we shall see, this relationship between the two subsets of overdeterminants both illuminates and obscures, renders them both true *and* false.

The positioning of these two subsets of overdeterminants, at the beginning of the “sequence of moments,” is by no means arbitrary. As we have seen, the “general contradiction” between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism impels the narratives of both *Working Bullocks* and *Black Opal* to resist closure. The contradictory impulses of Romanticism and rationalism, organicism and mechanism, moralism and Marxism make

givens in overdetermination, for all the ‘variables,’ all the ‘relationships amongst variables’ are conceptualised as constituted in a process of change. The concept of ceaseless change or process both produces and is produced by the complex of contradictions, not ‘solutions.’ If we were to use multiple causation, we would risk inadequately conveying the centrality of contradictions and process to Marxian theory.” Resnick and Wolff “The Theory of Transitional Conjunctions” 6.

³ Resnick and Wolff, “The Theory of Transitional Conjunctions” 7-8.

⁴ Resnick and Wolff, “The Theory of Transitional Conjunctions” 8.

⁵ Richard Wolff, “Althusser and Hegel: Making Marxist Explanations Antiessentialist and Dialectical,” *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, ed. Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio (Hanover: UP of New England, 1996) 156.

neat and unambiguous, romantically satisfying conclusions impossible in these novels. Instead of altering her narrative construction to accommodate romantic closure, Prichard uses these unreconcilable contradictory impulses in her next novels, *Coonardoo* and *Haxby's Circus*, to provide a tragic momentum and resolution.

Many commentators have characterised *Coonardoo* as a tragedy,⁶ and *Haxby's Circus* has been described similarly.⁷ In both cases, however, the identification of tragic processes is not immediately obvious. As John Docker points out, Jack Lindsay considered that his own "distinctive contribution to Marxist aesthetic theory" was a formulation of tragic structure that extended Lukács's theory of totality. Yet Prichard shared Lindsay's attraction to a concept of "optimistic tragedy": "[n]ot optimistic because some sort of happy ending or interpretation is illogically tacked-on at the end; but optimistic because in the very forces that rend and destroy we divine organically the pledge of the new life."⁸

Tragedy is [...] a ratification that the old error or crime will not be repeated; life is given a further chance on a new level of understanding. Hence the element of exaltation that we feel in a Shakespearean tragedy as in a Beethoven symphony; despite setbacks and dooms the struggle has not been futile; life begins afresh with renewed energy and deepened comprehension on the other side of conflicts with their heavy price to be paid. If this element of exaltation is not present, the work does not deserve the name of tragedy, the goat-song, the fertility-song of sacrificed but resurrected life.⁹

This optimistic augmentation of the Aristotelian notion of catharsis highlights one of the components in the tragic structure of Prichard's novels. In both *Coonardoo* and *Haxby's Circus* an optimistic factor resists the impetus of tragic peripeteia which ensures that there is a residual sense of hope at the resolution. As we shall see in both novels, this optimistic factor works directly against the elements which contribute to the tragedy in the first place.

⁶ See Aileen Palmer, "The Changing Face of Australia: Notes on the Creative Writing of Katharine Susannah Prichard," *Overland* June (1958): 28; J. A. Hay, "Betrayed Romantics and Compromised Stoics: K. S. Prichard's Women," *Who is She?* ed. Shirley Walker (St. Lucia: U of Queensland Press, 1983) 106; G. A. Wilkes, "The Novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard," *Southerly* 14.4 (1953): 224; Henrietta Drake-Brockman, "Katharine Susannah Prichard: The Colour in Her Work," *Southerly* 14.4 (1953): 218; J. J. Healy, "Recovery," *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia - 1770-1975*, 2nd ed. (St. Lucia: U of Queensland Press, 1989) 147.

⁷ See Hartley Grattan's commentary on *Haxby's Circus* reproduced in Ric Throssell, *Wild Weeds and Windflowers: The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1975) 60. See also Jack Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* (Sydney: Wild and Woolley, 1976) 322.

⁸ Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 187.

⁹ Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal* 188.

The close relation between optimistic tragedy and catharsis underscores the problem of definition, implicitly questioning the modern validity of the Aristotelian model. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye re-examines Aristotle's *Poetics* in the light of the "two thousand years of post-Aristotelian literary activity."¹⁰ In his first essay "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes" Frye identifies five modes of literary construction which are classified "by the hero's power of action."¹¹ The fourth of these modes he calls "low mimetic" where "[i]f superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience."¹² In tragic fiction, Frye argues, this results in "pathos":

Pathos presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience. I speak of a hero, but the central figure of pathos is often a woman or a child [...]. Pathos is usually concentrated on a single character, partly because low mimetic society is more strongly individualized. [...] Pathos is increased by the inarticulateness of the victim. [...] The terrible figure of this tradition [...] is normally a ruthless figure strongly contrasted with some kind of delicate virtue, generally a helpless victim in his power.¹³

This is clearly relevant to *Coonardoo* and *Haxby's Circus*. Both are studies of conflict between inner and outer worlds. Both novels are focused on a single and relatively inarticulate female character. Hugh in *Coonardoo* and Dan in *Haxby's Circus* are both terrible figures and helpless victims in their power. I have adopted the Aristotelian terms *hamartia* and *peripeteia* in this chapter in clear recognition of the pathetic nature of Prichard's tragic fiction.

Considering the tragic momentum or "cause" in both *Coonardoo* and *Haxby's Circus*, it is essential to identify the *hamartia* or tragic flaw. Marx, writing in 1859, comes close to what I mean here by *hamartia* when he refers to the "axis on which a modern tragedy turns."¹⁴ But it soon becomes apparent in *Coonardoo* and *Haxby's Circus* that the identification of a solitary "*hamartic* axis" is not possible. In both novels, the tragic momentum is "overdetermined." That is, a number of tragic impulses or

¹⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1957) 14.

¹¹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 33.

¹² Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 34.

¹³ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 38-39.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, letter to Ferdinand Lassalle 19 Apr. 1859, *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Vol. 40 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983) 419.

“*hamartic* forces” come together and, by their contradiction and interdependence, overdetermine the “axis” on which the tragedy turns.

The Tragic Structure of *Coonardoo*

The first of the “*hamartic* forces” contributing to the tragic momentum of *Coonardoo* results from the convergence of two incompatible family structures. The convergence occurs within the character of Coonardoo as tragic hero, travelling the peripatetic journey to her inevitable death. This convergence is best examined in light of the influence of evolutionism inherited from Marxist theory, and specifically the writings of Engels. In particular, Engels’s investigation of the Australian Aboriginal and European Australian family structures in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is particularly valuable to an analysis of *Coonardoo*.¹⁵

In *The Origin of the Family* Engels argues for an evolutionist anthropological view of human societal development. In doing so he places the objects of his study on a developmental continuum. His discussion of the family and marriage structures of Aboriginal Australians is conducted in terms of his examination of the Punaluan family. Engels regards this family as the first to eliminate inbreeding, by disallowing sexual relations first between parents and children, and then between natural brothers and sisters (on the maternal side) and finally between collateral siblings (first and second cousins). The Punaluan family structure is situated on Engels’s evolutionary scale after the Consanguine family (the first family with marriage groups arranged by generations) and before the Pairing family (the first stage of family structure where a certain pairing takes place for a period of time which demands strict fidelity on the woman’s part but which allows polygamy and infidelity on the part of the husband). So the stage of family development where Engels places the Australian Aboriginal family structure involves a kind of marriage where the fidelity of wives has not yet been strictly enforced. Engels identifies it as the last stage in the development of the family where the women were able to exercise a limited degree of sexual

¹⁵ I have explored the influence of Engels in *Coonardoo* already in my article “A Tragic Convergence: A Reading of Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo*,” *Westerly* 40.2 (1995): 63-71.

freedom. What distinguishes the Australian Aboriginal family structure, he argues, is the predominance of class marriage.

In Chapter Three of *Coonardoo* the description of class mating practices corresponds closely with Engels's view:

From her birth every girl was destined to pass, Mrs Bessie knew, within defined lines of tarloo and descent to mateship with one of her kinsmen. Families on the creek were Banniga, Burong, Baldgery and Kurrimurra. A Banniga woman might be given to a man who was Kurrimurra. Their child would be Burong and could not mate with either a Banniga or a Kurrimurra. Beyond that there was room for choice. The men who were nuba, or noova, to her might never touch her; but they were permissible husbands in case of the death, or absence of the man to whom her father had given her.¹⁶

A much more important aspect of *Coonardoo*, however, stems from Engels's understanding of the practice of lending wives to strangers. Again, this is detailed in Chapter Three: "[h]er husband, by way of hospitality, might lend her to a distinguished stranger, or visitor, to the camp; but any children she might have would be her husband's children. The blacks, unenlightened by white people, do not associate the birth of children with any casual sex relationship" (C 23). Within Engels's explanation of the Australian Aboriginal family structure, any children born into a marriage are automatically considered to be parented by the couple who form the marriage, regardless of whether the wife has had other sexual partners.¹⁷ It follows that what, by European Australian standards, would be denounced as adultery or infidelity and accompanied by anger and jealousy, is judged by Engels as natural hospitality. Genetic inheritance has nothing to do with conception and everything to do with parenting. But because the Australian Aboriginal family structure is part of a precapitalist society, Western notions of property inheritance have very little importance.

In *The Origin of the Family* Engels traces the development of capitalism as it parallels the growing importance of heredity and legitimacy and the rise of monogamy. He observes that, by the industrial capitalist stage of societal development, monogamy did indeed exist, but only for women. Husbands were still able to enjoy polygamy by having affairs and buying prostitutes: "What for a woman is a crime entailing dire legal and social consequences, is regarded in the case of a man as being honourable

¹⁶ Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Coonardoo* (1929; Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1990) 22-23. All further references to the text of *Coonardoo* will be denoted in the body of the thesis, abbreviated as C.

¹⁷ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family Private Property and the State* (Moscow: Progress Pub., 1948) 39-46.

or, at most, as a slight moral stain that one bears with pleasure.”¹⁸ And with respect to infidelity on the part of men he states:

Although, in reality, it is not only tolerated but even practised with gusto, particularly by the ruling classes, it is condemned in words. In reality, however, this condemnation by no means hits the men who indulge in it, it hits only the women: they are ostracized and cast out in order to proclaim once again the absolute domination of the male over the female sex as the fundamental law of society.¹⁹

In *Coonardoo* we witness the converging of these two very different attitudes to infidelity and extra-marital sex: the Aboriginal attitude of lending wives to strangers and a European attitude where men are involved in hetaerism.²⁰ In *Coonardoo* Aboriginal wives are lent to “visitors” (in this case, all of the “visitors” are non-Aboriginal) and each male member of the non-Aboriginal family, through two generations, has an “affair” with an Aboriginal woman or – within the idiom of the novel – “takes a gin.”

The intricacies of class marriage, the lack of connection between maternity and conjugal liberties, and the practice of lending wives to male visitors are also detailed in Prichard’s acknowledged anthropological source Herbert Basedow.²¹ Basedow’s anthropological research adds two significant complications to the convergence of family structures. At the conclusion of his discussion of class marriage laws he suggests: “it will be realized how easily any white man, who is in the habit of having indiscriminate intercourse with native women, can make himself guilty of a criminal offence, when he cohabits first with a woman of one group and then with one of another.”²² In his discussion of the practice of lending wives to “visitors” he suggests: “If the visitor appreciates the hospitality of the tribe, he receives the women and, in his turn, offers presents to the old men and to the husbands of his temporary consorts.”²³ A stranger who refuses such hospitality would in fact cause considerable offence.

¹⁸ Engels *The Origin of the Family* 75.

¹⁹ Engels *The Origin of the Family* 67.

²⁰ Engels explains his understanding and use of the term *hetaerism* in a footnote: “This word was used by the Greeks, when they introduced it, to describe intercourse between unmarried men, or those living in monogamy, and unmarried women; it always presupposes the existence of a definite form of marriage outside of which this intercourse takes place, and includes prostitution, at least as an already existing possibility.” Engels *The Origin of the Family* 32.

²¹ Herbert Basedow, *The Australian Aboriginal* (Adelaide: Preece, 1925) 62, 217-222, 224. The influence of evolutionist anthropology on Basedow’s research is apparent and has a considerable impact on his argument. See in particular page 216.

²² Basedow, *The Australian Aboriginal* 221.

²³ Basedow, *The Australian Aboriginal* 224.

Basedow is, in effect, suggesting that a non-Aboriginal male visitor to an Aboriginal “tribe” is in a “no-win” situation.

In *Coonardoo* two societies’ family structures converge and the result is tragic. The relationship between Hugh and Coonardoo is the crucial example of the incompatibility of these two notions of marriage. Coonardoo and Hugh are childhood playmates. They establish a connection of mateship and mutual admiration early in their lives. After Hugh’s fiancée leaves him and his mother dies, Coonardoo is lent to him by her husband Warieda. Coonardoo conceives a child whose biological father is Hugh but whose custodial father, according to the Aboriginal beliefs outlined in the novel, is Warieda. Hence Coonardoo’s child has two different fathers and each acknowledges paternity according to his own cultural beliefs. Mollie uses the knowledge that her husband is Winni’s biological father to justify leaving the station and travelling to Perth. Her response to the knowledge is deliberate and calculated:

When she told Hugh that she knew what he wished to hide, she could make terms, Mollie decided. Her own terms. Terms, he would not, could not, consent to. She knew what almost any woman in her position would do. She would declare it was a shame and a disgrace for Coonardoo and the boy to remain on Wyaliba, while she was there. [...] Mollie could not quite persuade herself she was justified in asking Hugh to do that. She knew very well he would not do it. Her natural good sense assured her she would be asking him to do what even she could not imagine his doing. But she was determined to go away; to make him suffer for all the suffering she had endured because he refused to live anywhere but on Wyaliba. (C 140-141)

Race and gender converge here as Mollie feigns jealousy but is genuinely disgusted by miscegenation. After Warieda’s death Hugh takes Coonardoo as his wife, to stop her being claimed by Warieda’s brother and leaving Wyaliba with him. But under the pressure of white society and its attitudes to miscegenation, he does not re-establish their sexual relations. Although both Hugh and Coonardoo regard their union as a marriage, they also recognise that it is not properly qualified as such according to either of their traditions because of the lack of sexual consummation. When Sam Geary visits the station during Hugh’s absence, Coonardoo consents to his demands for sexual intercourse, despite loathing him, because of her state of severe sexual frustration. It is in this event, which in many ways is the climactic point of the plot, that the inherently tragic convergence of these two family and marriage structures is most starkly visible.²⁴ The sexual

²⁴ Ruth Morse investigates the sexual encounter between Sam Geary and Coonardoo in her article “Impossible Dreams: Miscegenation and Building Nations,” *Southerly* 48.1 (1988): 80-96.

union of Coonardoo and Geary coincides with Aboriginal notions of lending a wife to a stranger as well as with European Australian notions of hetaerism. At the same time it parodies both societal beliefs, because both characters are aware that she has not been offered as an act of hospitality and that he physically enforces his sexual advances.

Hugh's vicious attack on Coonardoo (dragging her through the fire) follows from his rage at the discovery of her sexual union with Geary. The passage detailing the attack continually reinforces the perspective of the silent Aboriginal observers:

While it was understood a black should treat a gin who behaved badly like that, they could not understand Hugh doing the same sort of thing. He was beyond himself in fury against Coonardoo and what she had done. Hugh was within his rights, the boys recognized. Coonardoo was his woman, and had given herself to Geary, whom Hugh hated. Everybody knew Hugh hated Sam Geary. Hugh might give his woman to Geary, or any other man and no harm would be done; but everybody in the camp knew Warieda, himself, would have punished Coonardoo for consorting with a stranger without his permission. Not as harshly as Hugh had done, perhaps. But the boys would not interfere. (C 210)

It is clear from this that the convergence of family and marriage structures in Hugh and Coonardoo's relationship is by this time radically deranged. The roles of husband and wife, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, master and subaltern have collapsed under the pressure of this confusion.

Coonardoo is both literally and symbolically the focus of the convergence between two incompatible societal structures. This is her tragedy and it means that she cannot survive. She does, however, retain her dignity. Hugh is an equally symbolic figure, a settler-invader who, despite benevolent intentions, is unable to escape the class struggle of capitalism and is powerless against the forces of tragedy. Instead he is a destructive agent within these forces. It is significant that Coonardoo calls him "Youie," or "You" almost as though she were pointing out of the pages and directly addressing the reader.

In *Coonardoo* the contradiction between the primitive and the civilised has changed considerably from earlier novels. No longer does it simply constitute two halves of an irreconcilable contradictory dialectic. Removed from a predominantly romantic plot structure, this contradiction has now assumed tragic proportions. I have noted already the influence of anthropological and sociological research on *Coonardoo*, and Prichard herself acknowledges this in her foreword to the novel.

Basedow in *The Australian Aboriginal* says, "Anthropological relationship connects the Australian (including the proto-Australian) with the Veddahs and Dravidians of India and with the fossil men of Europe, from whom the Caucasian element has sprung." They are only a few generations removed, after all, Coonardoo and Andromache. "In other words, the Australian aboriginal [sic] stands somewhere near the bottom rung of the great evolutionary ladder we have ascended." His and our "racial development was very early disassociated from the Mongoloid and Negroid lines." (C xiii-xiv)

This was written, she claims, in response to the "controversy as to whether *Coonardoo* is altogether a work of the romantic imagination" (C xiii).²⁵ But the discussion of anthropology here is interrupted by the classical allusion connecting Coonardoo to Andromache. Much of the pre-functionalist evolutionist anthropological research from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries incorporates a considerable amount of mythological analysis and data. But Prichard's connection of these two otherwise separate fields of research has significant ramifications for the main text of the novel and it is here that we find the second "*hamartia* force": the influence of classical mythology.

To analyse this connection between the two characters it is useful to turn to Prichard's own acknowledged source, *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary*. The similarities between the two characters are numerous and significant. Both Coonardoo and Andromache are happily married yet both lose their husbands at the hand of another man (Warieda is boned by a moppin-gara and Hector dies in battle). Both Coonardoo and Andromache are removed from their native land, both are sensible and passionate women confident about their feelings and both suffer from the inaction of men who are essentially weak and indecisive. Both women become concubines to a

²⁵ The circumstances of the publication of *Coonardoo* were indeed controversial. The novel, after winning *The Bulletin* novel competition, was published in serial form in the magazine during 1928. The magazine was overwhelmed with responses from readers, many of whom were offended by the suggestion of sexual relations between Aboriginal Australian women and European Australian men. Other respondents were disbelieving of Coonardoo's characterisation, in particular her sexual desire. Cecil Mann reviewed the novel in *The Bulletin* 14 Aug. 1929, and made special reference to Prichard's foreword. He asserts: "the support of such an expert as Mr. Mitchell is useful, because it answers the bulk of the criticism that I have heard levelled at the story, which, in effect, said the picture was untrue. Some other critics - profane and otherwise - have shrunk from the associations of whites and blacks in the novel, apropos of which I am told that J. F. Archibald, when he edited THE BULLETIN, laid down as an axiom for his contributors, 'Keep away from the black velvet.' Apparently there was not much of the Australian character that that keen observer did not understand. In not 'keeping away,' Coonardoo's author has tried to do the almost impossible - tried to make a figure for romance out of an aboriginal. With any other native, from fragrant Zulu girl to fly-kissed Arab maid, she could have done it. But the aboriginal, in Australia, anyway, cannot excite any higher feeling than nauseated pity or comical contempt" (2).

man who subsequently marries a woman more socially acceptable but of a more “irrational disposition.”²⁶

The story of Andromache is told in Homer’s *Iliad* and in Euripides’s play *Andromache*.²⁷ Prichard hints at a connection between *Coonardoo* and *The Iliad* when Phyllis observes Hugh’s penchant for reading Homer: “Whatever else there is or isn’t in his pack, there’s bound to be *The Iliad*. He lies stretched out, reading by the camp-fire, spouting yards of it” (C 194). This at the very least indicates that Hugh is familiar with the story of Andromache. But it is also worth taking up Justina Williams’s suggestion that Prichard “had consciously used [Greek drama] to build the stark bones of *Coonardoo*” and examine it in comparison to Euripides’s play.²⁸

Both *Andromache* and *Coonardoo* are concerned with the problematic nature of sexual and emotional passion which falls outside the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour. Both are also critical of the denial of instinctive passion between a powerful man and a woman who is his slave/servant/subaltern. In both works, the dignity and virtue of these women enables them to transcend their lowly positions and both tragic heroes are absent from the main action towards the conclusion. The similarities between the two are so striking that it is not unreasonable to suggest that Prichard based the tragic structure of *Coonardoo* on that found in Euripides’s *Andromache*.²⁹ D. Biggins, however, suggests that Prichard may have had another Euripides play, *The Bacchae*, “at the back

²⁶ Keith M. Aldrich, *The Andromache of Euripides* (University of Nebraska Studies: April 1961, no. 25): 10.

²⁷ Lemprière’s Dictionary notes: “[Andromache’s] parting with Hector, who was going to a battle, in which he perished, has always been deemed the best, most tender and pathetic of all the passages in Homer’s *Iliad*.” John Lemprière, *Lemprière’s Classical Dictionary of Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors*, rev. ed., ed. F.A. Wright (London: Routledge, 1948) 47.

²⁸ Justina Williams asserts with some confidence that Prichard had a “splendid knowledge” of Greek drama. Justina Williams, “Rage That Engenders: The Last Decade of Katharine Susannah Prichard,” *Southerly* 32.1 (1972): 20. The influence of classical mythology on Prichard’s writing is further investigated by D. Biggins in “Katharine Susannah Prichard and Dionysos: *Bid Me to Love* and *Brumby Innes*,” *Southerly* 43.3 (1983): 320-331. Biggins argues that the early influence of *Lemprière’s Classical Dictionary* marked the beginning of Prichard’s interest in mythology and that a number of allusions to classical myth can be found in Prichard’s writings. In particular he cites the minor character Aggie, or Agamemnon, who appears in *Working Bullocks* and the direct and indirect invocation of Dionysos in the plays *Bid Me to Love* and *Brumby Innes* (324).

²⁹ Susan Sheridan asks the interesting question: “What would Prichard’s novel have been like if, instead of imagining Coonardoo as captive object of exchange between warring men, she had imagined her as Cassandra, the visionary avenger of her defeated people?” Susan Sheridan, “Coonardoo: A 1988 Reading of a 1928 Novel,” *Blast* 6-7 (1988): 5.

of her mind” when writing *Coonardoo*.³⁰ In either case, it is apparent that the tragic structure of Prichard’s novel resonates with that employed by Euripides.

There are other classical allusions in *Coonardoo*. Little consideration has been given to Prichard’s naming of the horses after classical figures, presumably because most critics have considered them to be somewhat arbitrary. They provide, in the first instance, an indication of Mrs Bessie’s education and intellect.³¹ There appears to be no correlation, however, between the genealogies of the classical gods and those of the Wyaliba horses.³² (For instance the narrative gives one genealogy as: “Pluto out of Juno by Hector from Ceres”(C 168).) This is, perhaps, Prichard’s way of suggesting that just as the genealogy of the Wyaliba horses is a rewriting of classical mythology so too *Coonardoo* is a rewriting of *Andromache*. More generally, and in accordance with Frye’s theory of modes, *Coonardoo* is a re-writing of high-mimetic tragedy in low-mimetic or pathetic form.

By acknowledging her debts to both evolutionist anthropology and classical mythology in the foreword to *Coonardoo*, Prichard unwittingly draws attention to some of the contradictions operating in the novel. Both provide master narratives for speculating on the origins and processes of humanity’s physical and societal development. The evolutionist anthropological research of both Engels and Basedow professes a scientific and empirical foundation. As her comments in the foreword suggest, Prichard places her faith in their findings as scientific truths. Of course at the time *Coonardoo* was written, the deeply problematic nature of this research had not been uncovered. As we are now aware, this research upholds a tradition of racism and ethnocentrism. The unsound nature of this approach to anthropology is again an element which is *in itself* inherently contradictory. The fact that Prichard foregrounds this tradition of evolutionist anthropological research in a novel which self-consciously challenges racist and ethnocentric values results in the kind of “double

³⁰ Biggins, “Katharine Susannah Prichard and Dionysos: *Bid Me to Love* and *Brumby Innes*” 325.

³¹ Hugh suggests that the naming of horses is a particular skill of his mother’s, conceding that he’ll “have to read up these Dago goddesses a bit” (C 48). This suggests also that the naming of the horses is carefully considered.

³² There is, perhaps, some significance in the relationship between the horses and their riders, with *Coonardoo*’s mount being Thetis the Second (named after Thetis who offers sanctuary to *Andromache*) and with Phyllis’s admiration of Dionysus saying “[y]ou can’t expect me not to be crazy about a horse like that, dad” (C 168).

vision” which Drusilla Modjeska draws attention to in her introduction to the 1993 edition: “On the one hand there is the radical and passionate view from 1926 [...]. On the other hand there are the assumptions and procedures she accepted and we do not [...].”³³ This “double vision” adds another element to the tangle of contradictions in *Coonardoo*. So on the one hand evolutionist anthropology professes to offer empirical truth but on the other hand, classical mythology is part of a mystical and metaphysical tradition. Prichard’s appropriation of these stories (and the tragic framework in which they are told) acknowledges them as fictional. Yet she also draws attention to the influence that classical mythology has had upon epistemological inquiry, and more particularly upon the epistemic traditions which inform her own writing. So the slippery notions of fiction and truth provide the contradiction between these two approaches to human societal development.

The third “*hamartic* force” on *Coonardoo* is biblical. As J. A. Cuddon suggests, it is plausible (“[o]n the plane of reality”) to read the life and death of Christ as a tragedy “His death was foreseen and forecast, and was a ‘foregone conclusion.’ And even Christ was very nearly without hope. His cry of agony and despair from the Cross was the final proof, so to speak, of the authenticity of his human nature.”³⁴ (Similarly, Northrop Frye refers to the story of Christ’s life and death in his discussion of divine or Dionysiac tragedy.³⁵) The structure of the story of Jesus’s life, as it is portrayed in the Bible, has a considerable influence on the tragic structure of *Coonardoo*.

Even though it is not immediately apparent, the details of Coonardoo’s conception are ambiguous. Indeed, a vital aspect of the novel’s problematic is the difficulty of identifying Coonardoo’s parents. In the first instance her conjugal parents are named Joey and Maria, which immediately positions her as a kind of Christ figure in the narrative. But, as we have seen, conjugal parentage does not necessarily equate with biological parentage. Sam Geary certainly believes that Joey and Maria are her parents, but he also provides the first indication of a controversy. “Coonardoo, old Joey Koonarra’s kid, isn’t she?” he asks. “Maria, her

³³ Drusilla Modjeska, “Introduction,” *Coonardoo* by Katharine Susannah Prichard vi.

³⁴ J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd ed, (London: Penguin, 1992) 985-986.

³⁵ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 35-6.

mother ... the one that died and there was all the fuss about, couple of years ago?"(C 5). This initial hint is followed up shortly afterwards:

A shy, graceful little creature of more than usual intelligence, Mrs Bessie had thought Coonardoo. But now she looked at the child as if she found something of greater value in her. Mrs Bessie prided herself on treating her blacks kindly, and having a good working understanding with them. She would stand no nonsense, and refused to be sentimental, although it was well known she had taken the affair of Maria to heart. Ted Watt was as good-natured a man as stepped, until he got drunk, everybody agreed. But he could not stand liquor, went mad, ran amuck like an Afghan, or a black, when he had got a few drinks in. (C 8)

At many points in the novel the narrative follows the train of thought of a particular character. (For example, when the narrative follows the train of thought of Coonardoo, Hugh is referred to as You or Youie.³⁶) In order to accomplish this, the narrative slips into the style of Free Indirect Discourse.³⁷ The opening sentences employ direct discourse and use the device of anaphora³⁸ to establish that the following narrative is angled from Mrs Bessie's point of view. By Free Indirect Discourse we follow her thought processes. We enter into her memory of the events surrounding Maria's death. Her recollection differs from the story that is generally accepted by the Aboriginals on Wyaliba. But she is presented as an authority on the subject: "Few people knew what had happened about Maria, except Mrs Bessie, and she held her tongue" (C 8). So we now know that the Aboriginals' story is not the whole truth. Undoubtedly their explanation contains certain factual observations, that Maria had been "badgee" about something and that Ted Watt kicked her off the verandah. However, their knowledge of the motivations for Ted's anger are less

³⁶ Susan Lever explores the shifting perspectives in the narratives of *Coonardoo* in "Aboriginal Subjectivities and Western Conventions: A Reading of *Coonardoo*," *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 10 (1993): 23-29.

³⁷ Michael J. Toolan defines Free Indirect Discourse as "styles of thought and speech representation, neither direct nor indirect according to orthodox prescriptions, but mixings or mergings of narratorial indirectness with characterological directness." Michael J. Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1988) 122. See also Michael J. Toolan, *The Stylistics of Fictions: A Literary-Linguistic Approach*, (London: Routledge, 1990) 74. The narrative begins to take on these characteristics in the middle of the fourth and at the beginning of the second sentence in the first and second paragraphs respectively. It is at these points that the language becomes devoid of reporting clauses and collapses into a connected series of multiple clauses which combine to make the narrative resemble free speech or spoken narrative. This is augmented by sentences which begin with conjunctions, further emphasising the resemblance to free speech. In addition, these sentences are constructed with third person reference to Mrs Bessie and are past narrative tense - both of which are characteristic of Free Indirect Discourse. The use of after-thought constructions ("everybody agreed"), emotive language ("went mad, ran amuck like an Afghan, or a black") and idiolectal distinctivenesses ("Badgee" for 'sulky') also correspond to the distinct formal characteristics of Free Indirect Discourse.

³⁸ The meaning of anaphora is taken from linguistic discourse analysis rather than from rhetoric.

reliable than Mrs Bessie's. So it is doubtful that the cause of the dispute was the shooting of a dog. I believe that Prichard is hinting that Maria's death was the result of a more sinister event: that perhaps Ted and Maria were sexually involved and that he became violent with her. A comparison of the two violent acts, Ted Watt's assault of Maria and Hugh's attack on her daughter Coonardoo, confirms this. On the basis of this evidence, I suggest that Ted Watt is almost certainly the father of Coonardoo – which makes her, of course, Hugh's half-sister.

The significance of biblical imagery goes beyond Coonardoo's conception. The description of Coonardoo's death, for instance, sees her adopt a crucifix position, lying prone on the earth with which she is so closely associated: "She crooned a moment, and lay back. Her arms and legs, falling apart, looked like those blackened and broken sticks beside the fire" (C 232). Beyond this relatively superficial imagery and symbolism Coonardoo is cast in the role of a kind of saviour. In many ways, she carries the moral weight of the other characters of the novel, and eventually she dies for their sins.

The biblical imagery in the novel contradicts most obviously the evolutionist anthropological elements discussed earlier. As two sides of a long and sometimes bitter dispute over the origins of human development, these two traditions are inherently antagonistic. Evolutionist anthropology and Christianity stand opposed as science and faith. As we have seen in the contradiction between the evolutionist anthropological and classical mythological traditions, such notions of "truth" and "fiction" are problematic. Yet the redemptive theme of the novel is intrinsically connected to its anthropological concerns. By establishing Coonardoo as a Christ figure, the novel argues for the redemptive power of "primitive" and precapitalist human society. This is, as we have seen, a fundamental concern of Romantic organicism; but is also supported by Engels, subscribing as he does to the myth of the "noble savage." Of course the biblical imagery is also connected to the classical tradition that informs *Coonardoo*. The central narrative of both traditions is tragic. The stories of ancient Greek mythology, translated into theatre and verse, celebrate the cathartic power of their tragic dimension. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the biblical story of Christ is also tragic, although the focus is on the redemptive power of the resurrection (in other words, upon the optimistic aspect of the tragedy).

The fourth and final “*hamartic* force” that I will examine here derives from Jungian psychoanalysis. In Chapter Thirty-Two Phyllis and Bill discuss the relationship between Coonardoo and Hugh. Earlier this relationship is likened to a French proverb “*Un coeur cela veut un os à ronger*” (translated as “A heart must have a bone to gnaw” (C 194-3)). Here Phyllis draws on psychoanalytic theory to intellectualise the relationship:

“I say, Bill,” Phyllis exclaimed as they rode home together. “Ever hear of a chap named Jung?”

“Jim Young—keeps the pub in Carnarvon?” Bill asked.

“No. Not that one,” Phyllis said thoughtfully [...]. “Do you know, Bill, it’s my belief our dear Youie took my mother like most men take a gin, and Coonardoo’s been a sort of fantasy with him.” [...]

“Cripes!” Bill exclaimed irritably. “A man doesn’t love a gin, not a white man.”

“Doesn’t he?” Phyllis reflected. “Some men don’t love any woman, do they? They love women, look at ’em to lust after ’em, as the Bible says. That’s Hugh. Just a good ordinary little man who’s tried to make a Galahad of himself. And his repressions have rotted in him.”

Bill looked thoroughly miserable. “I don’t know,” he said. “I suppose you’re right. It’s beyond me, seeing under the skin like that—Galahad, repressions....” (C 223)

Despite the difficulties Bill has with it, Phyllis’s image of Hugh as a knight attempting to fulfil the expectations of his society yet rotting within his shining armour as a result of his repressions is perhaps the best summation of his character to be found anywhere in the novel. It is significant that this is one of the very few instances anywhere in Prichard’s writing where a theory or influence is directly named. Also significant is the fact that the focus of the Jungian reference is Hugh rather than Coonardoo. It is clear that this tragic influence has an enormous impact upon the tragic hero, though the flaw is Hugh’s rather than her own.

Carl Jung (1875-1961) and Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969) were almost exact contemporaries. As we are aware, *Coonardoo* was composed during the mid to late 1920s. Hence the Jungian psychoanalytic theories to which Phyllis refers must be those from the early stages of his career before his break with Freud. Phyllis refers to Jungian notions of fantasy and repression, but there are also suggestions of libidinal blockage and desire in the novel. Each of these elements is discussed in detail in Jung’s essays on the Freudian studies of neurosis and hysteria. In these early essays, Jung repeatedly challenges the emphasis which Freud placed on the sexual. Freud’s postulation of the notion of libido is: “energy [...] underlying the transformations of the sexual instinct with respect to its

object [...], its aim [...] and with respect to the source of sexual excitation.”³⁹ Jung extended the notion of libido “to embrace ‘psychical energy’ in general, present in every ‘tendency towards’ or *appetitus*.”⁴⁰ In his 1916 essay “Psychoanalysis and Neurosis,” he writes:

All psychological phenomena can be considered as manifestations of energy, in the same way that all physical phenomena have been understood as energetic manifestations ever since Robert Mayer discovered the law of the conservation of energy. Subjectively and psychologically, this energy is conceived as *desire*. I call it *libido*, using the word in its original sense, which is by no means only sexual.⁴¹

While the sexual element remains significant in Jung’s theory of libido, it is not the only instinct to influence its development.

This Jungian understanding of the psyche is particularly applicable to the character of Hugh. According to Jung, the libido is vital to the maintenance of psychological stability. He observes:

[The development of the libido] is continued into adult life and is accompanied by constantly increasing adaptation to the external world. Whenever the libido, in the process of adaptation, meets an obstacle, an accumulation takes place which normally gives rise to an increased effort to overcome the obstacle. But if the obstacle seems to be insurmountable, and the individual abandons the task of overcoming it, the stored-up libido makes a regression. Instead of being employed for an increased effort, the libido gives up its present task and reverts to an earlier and more primitive mode of adaptation.

The best examples of such regressions are found in hysterical cases where a disappointment in love or marriage has precipitated a neurosis.⁴²

According to Jung, the “obstacle” that creates a libidinal block is usually some form of unrequited or forbidden love. But anything which contributes to “disappointment in love and marriage” can be substituted for it. In Hugh’s case the socially unacceptable nature of his desire for Coonardoo (reinforced by his mother’s instructions to him on her death bed not “to go mucking round with gins” (C 64)) provides the “obstacle.” Jung argues that when “the way to adaptation is blocked,” so that the libido fails to find “its appropriate outlet or activity,” the result is an “abnormal or primitive” form of adaptation.⁴³ Because of the insurmountable nature of

³⁹ Jean Laplanche and J. B Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis* (London: Hogarth, 1980) 239.

⁴⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis* 239.

⁴¹ C. G. Jung, *Freud and Psychoanalysis: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 4, eds Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, trans R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1961) 247.

⁴² C. G. Jung, *Freud and Psychoanalysis* 248.

⁴³ C. G. Jung, *Freud and Psychoanalysis* 249.

his “obstacle,” Hugh’s regression issues in his violent assault on Coonardoo:

Hugh struggled with her, trying to wrench the thin, strong arms from about him. To escape her desperate grasp he dragged her across the fire. Screaming, as the fire bit into her flesh, Coonardoo clung to him. Flames squirted up from the dry rag of the trousers wrapped round her legs. Hugh twisted her wrist back, thrusting her away from him. Coonardoo fell back into the fire. He strode off among the trees. (C 210)

The inappropriate, abnormal and remorseless nature of this attack indicates the extent of his libidinal regression.

This does not account, however, for Phyllis’s reference to his repression. There is a difference between regression and repression. Regression involves “a return from a point already reached to an earlier one,”⁴⁴ whereas repression is “an operation whereby the subject attempts to repel, or to confine to the unconscious, representations (thoughts, images, memories) which are bound to an instinct.”⁴⁵ Although repression is more recognisable as a Freudian term, it does play a significant part in Jungian theory. In his 1928 essay, “On Psychic Energy,” Jung continues his investigation into libidinal blockage. The similarities between these ideas and the notion of overdetermination are not coincidental. The Freudian essays to which Jung is referring present the original applications of overdetermination, condensation and displacement. It is here also that the influence of Hegelian dialectics on Jung’s theories is most apparent. The similarities between Jung’s exploration of neurosis and Hugh’s psychological condition towards the end of the novel are so striking that it is worth quoting at length:

The stoppage is always marked by the breaking up of the pairs of opposites. During the progression of libido the pairs of opposites are united in the co-ordinated flow of psychic processes. Their working together makes possible the balanced regularity of these processes, which without this inner polarity would become one-sided and unreasonable. We are therefore justified in regarding all extravagant and exaggerated behaviour as a loss of balance, because the co-ordinating effect of the opposite impulse is obviously lacking. Hence it is essential for progression, which is the successful achievement of adaptation, that impulse and counter-impulse, positive and negative, should reach a state of regular interaction and mutual influence. This balancing and combining of pairs of opposites can be seen, for instance, in the process of reflection that precedes a difficult decision. But in the stoppage of libido that occurs when progression has become impossible, positive and negative can no longer unite in co-ordinated action, because both have attained an equal value which keeps the scales balanced. The longer the stoppage lasts, the more the value of the opposed positions increases; they become enriched with

⁴⁴ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis* 386.

⁴⁵ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis* 390.

more and more associations and attach to themselves an ever-widening range of psychic material. The tension leads to conflict, the conflict leads to attempts at mutual repression, and if one of the opposing forces is successfully repressed a dissociation ensues, a splitting of the personality, or disunion with oneself. The stage is then set for a neurosis.⁴⁶

The damming of Hugh's libido, as I have said, is instigated by the "obstacle" of societal disapproval. His resulting loss of "balance," as the conflict between his desires and social forces becomes increasingly intense, creates a tension in the novel. The overdetermining pressures include Sam Geary's jibes, Coonardoo's despair, the loss of his favourite daughter to marriage and the impact of drought on the land, to which Coonardoo is intrinsically connected. It is here that his repression originates. The splitting of his personality (or disunion with himself) is shown by the deliberate nature of his attack on Coonardoo and by his remorseless composure at its conclusion. The next morning, and for several days afterwards, Hugh represses thinking about the assault: "Hugh would not allow himself to think of her; to ask questions about her" (C 212). The Free Indirect Discourse which follows ("[b]ut he began to remember what had happened by the fire: and to be ashamed" (C 212)) suggests only a glimmer of remorse, and he immediately represses that too. It appears that Phyllis's diagnosis of her father is extraordinarily accurate.

This Jungian reading of Hugh could be extended to investigate the role of fantasy⁴⁷ as well as other psychoanalytical influences discussed by both Freud and Jung (the role of the animus and anima, psychological types, the collective unconscious and the Oedipal complex).⁴⁸ Suffice to say the impact of Hugh's psychological disturbance directly affects Coonardoo as the tragic hero. A tragic irony lies in the fact that the act for which Coonardoo is so severely punished (her sexual encounter with Geary) is directly caused by Hugh's repression.

The influence of Jungian psychoanalytic theories on the novel contradicts the other "*hamartia* forces" already examined. In the first instance, the suggestion that the origin of the tragic flaw is internal to the psyche contradicts classical and biblical concepts such as salvation, *hubris*

⁴⁶ C. G. Jung, "On Psychic Energy," *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche: The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* Vol. 8, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, trans R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) 32-33.

⁴⁷ Jung discusses fantasy in "The Freudian Theory of Hysteria" (1908) and "The Theory of Psychoanalysis" (1955). C. G. Jung, *Freud and Psychoanalysis*.

⁴⁸ Sue Thomas's Jungian analysis of Hugh investigates a number of these avenues in "Interracial Encounters in Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo*," *World Literatures Written in English* 27.2 (1987): 242.

and *nemesis* (whereby ignoring the warnings of the Gods results in tragic retribution). In other words, Jung's theories focus on psychical cathexes whereas Attic tragedy is concerned with metaphysical catharsis. Jungian psychoanalysis shares an epistemological and scientific heritage with the evolutionist anthropology that also influences the novel. But again, while evolutionist anthropology suggests that human tragedy stems from flawed or incompatible family and societal structures, Jungian psychoanalytical theory looks instead at unstable psychical activity. A "double vision" is involved in the reading of both of these scientific authorities.

As suggested earlier, Lindsay's concept of optimistic tragedy is important to the tragic structure of *Coonardoo*. The notion of the "primitive" is also important, as part of the Romantic tradition which informs both the art and politics of Prichard's work. The narrative of *Coonardoo* places its faith in the instinctive practices of the Australian Aboriginal characters and especially in their connection with the earth. The well in the shadow, after which Coonardoo is named, dries up and Wytaliba's fortunes crumble because she has been forced to leave her land. Towards the end of the novel the narrative articulates the effect of Coonardoo's absence on the fortunes of the station: "Not that she would wish any evil to befall [Hugh], or make magic against her own people and Wytaliba. Simply, the withdrawal of those spirit forces bound up with her made the place sterile. There was no secret source of joy, no growth for man or beast" (C 225). By presenting Coonardoo as a symbolic force the narrative relies on an organicist understanding of her position within a "noble savage" tradition. Towards the end of the novel the symbolic elements ascribed to her overpower the figurative, and the character of Coonardoo is transposed into a different mode. The well in the shadow gives her "some mysterious affinity with that ancestral female spirit which was responsible for fertility, generation, the growth of everything" (C 225).

It would seem that at Coonardoo's death the prosperity of Wytaliba is doomed to bankruptcy, drought and despair. But this is not the case. The conclusion of the novel supports the romantic attachment of Phyllis and Bill. In proposing to Phyllis, Bill carves a heart from a rock of asbestos and talks of prospecting for gold. The merging of Wytaliba with the neighbouring Nuniewarra into a larger and more viable property rich in mineral resources serves as the optimistic conclusion to the tragedy of

Coonardoo. Yet this emphasis on property as an indication of prosperity contradicts the Marxist and socialist philosophy which underscores the novel. The emphasis that has prevailed throughout the novel on metaphysical, societal and psychical strength as the cornerstones of human development, does not sit comfortably with this last-minute turn towards a capitalist economic notion of success. The reliance on property to provide an optimistic resolution signals a return to the capitalist notion of inheritance. Phyllis and Bill's ownership of the combined properties reinforces the structures of capitalist society in the midst of a "primitive" (pre-capitalist) Aboriginal community: a convergence which, as we have seen, has tragic consequences.

The cumulative impact of these "*hamartic* forces" upon the tragic dimensions of the novel is enormous. Yet the overdetermined tragic structure does not result simply from this accumulation; it is also a result of the interrelation and contradiction of these influences. As we have seen, the narrative is engaged in a rewriting or inversion of established tragic paradigms. In the allusions to classical mythology and Christian theology the figure of Coonardoo is inverted from "civilised" to "primitive" and from male to female respectively. The influence of the biblical story of Christ and of ancient Greek mythology and literature more directly informs the tragic structure of *Coonardoo* but the spiritual and metaphysical paradigms of both traditions operate in terms of contradiction. Engels's Marxist evolutionist anthropology and Jung's psychoanalytical theories are linked by a common epistemology stemming back to Hegelian dialectics. Yet neither is an overtly tragic paradigm. In other words, the *peripeteia* of Coonardoo's fate is affected by influences which are not normally associated with tragedy. The mutual effectivities, contradictions and interrelations of evolutionist anthropology, biblical imagery, classical Greek mythology and literature and Jungian psychoanalysis are extremely complex. None of these "*hamartic* forces" is sufficient explanation for the tragic momentum of *Coonardoo*. Instead, they act together to form an overdetermined "*hamartic* axis", and it is upon this that the tragic resolution of the novel turns.

The Tragic Structure of *Haxby's Circus*

The tragic structure of *Haxby's Circus* is complicated for different reasons. Just as the tragic structure of *Coonardoo* is overdetermined by a number of interrelated and contradictory influences, so too is the tragedy of *Haxby's Circus*. But each of the “*hamartic* forces” share a common element stemming from the confusion and inversion of identity and role. This confusion and inversion contributes to the dialectical contradictions within the narrative and ultimately overdetermines the “*hamartic* axis” on which the tragedy turns. With its circus setting and with the important role played by laughter in the narrative, *Haxby's Circus* invites an explanation in terms of Carnivalised fiction. Bakhtinian dialogics shares many characteristics with Althusserian overdetermination, not least of which is a movement away from essentialism and reductionism towards a multivalent and polyphonic philosophical position. It is only in their aims or objectives that heteroglot dialogics and overdetermined dialectics differ. Bakhtinian dialogics offers an antiessentialist theory for the interpretation of discourse in the novel (although its scope has broadened dramatically in recent years in accordance with the more expansive boundaries of literary and critical theory). In other words, dialogics does not profess an emancipatory objective in the same way that the theory of dialectics does. The distinction between dialogics and dialectics might be explained by Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach which declares: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.”⁴⁹ All dialectical relationships are also dialogical (but not all dialogic relationships are dialectical). Although Bakhtinian dialogics bears little resemblance to Hegelian dialectics, the dialogic relationships examined in this study of *Haxby's Circus* can also be read as overdetermined dialectical relationships. Indeed, a dialogic analysis of Prichard's novels would be in many ways complementary to my own dialectical approach. As we have seen, dialogic relationships are evident in Prichard's earlier works. But in *Haxby's Circus* they take on a tragic momentum. The dialogical exposition that follows is intended to add a new dimension to my reading of the Prichard novel canon as dialectically overdetermined.

Bakhtin's initial definition of Carnival – “the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms of a Carnival type”⁵⁰ – is extended in his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*:

⁴⁹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works: In Two Volumes*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1958) 405.

⁵⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1984) 122.

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.⁵¹

Because all of the carnivals to which Bakhtin refers were also linked to feasts of the church, he regularly contrasts it with Lent. The sobriety of the Lenten period is defined negatively in terms of abstention from bodily pleasures, such as sexual intercourse. In contrast, Carnival celebrates the suspension of laws, rules and hierarchies:

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. [...] This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life.⁵²

The focus of dialogics on the novel form or genre makes available a wide range of reading practices. In particular, Bakhtin's notion of Carnivalisation acknowledges the penetration of Carnival activity into everyday life and language. Carnival and Lent are the two sides of a dialogic relationship. In his understanding, Carnival is a means of displaying otherness and of making familiar things strange. Beyond the specific and historical instance of Carnival, it is also the immaterial force embodied or displayed by these instances.⁵³

It is precisely this dialogic relationship between the Carnival and Lenten atmospheres which characterises the narrative of *Haxby's Circus*. But it is in the dialectical or contradictory relationship of these two atmospheres that the novel achieves its tragic dimension. The factors which contribute to the Lenten atmosphere of the circus as an industry are similar to those already apparent in Prichard's novels, particularly concerning the suffering of workers as they are alienated from the means of production, and the depravity of capitalism. *Haxby's Circus* is unusual in Prichard's novel canon because of its setting. The nomadic and artistic existence is far removed from the mining, timber milling and agricultural industries which

⁵¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 10.

⁵² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 11.

⁵³ See Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990) 89.

provide the basis for her other novels. The narrative clearly demonstrates, however, just how similar the circus is to these other industrial sectors in the sense that all are affected by the power of the boss and are subject to the control of profit. A dubious presentation of female emancipation, condemning rather than celebrating a woman's escape from the domestic sphere, also contributes to this Lenten atmosphere. These elements act as "hamartic forces" similar to those in *Coonardoo* and the novel again resolves in the manner of Lindsay's notion of optimistic tragedy. In this instance the narrative turns away from Lenten sobriety and denial towards the festivity of Carnival. Just as overdetermined dialectical antagonists converge in *Coonardoo* condemning her to a tragic fate, so too do the contradictory forces of Carnival and Lent converge in Gina and she is tragically caught between them. As indicated earlier in this chapter, this convergence contributes to the "second subset" of overdeterminants and, as we shall see, indicates a movement of her novel canon closer to a state of *revolutionary rupture*.

The contrast between Carnival and Lent is highlighted by laughter. Bakhtin writes:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of Carnival.⁵⁴

In this way laughter takes on a dialogic form, engaging in carnivalesque discourse. As Bakhtin observes: "Footlights would destroy carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While Carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it."⁵⁵

In the Carnival atmosphere of *Haxby's Circus*, it is laughter which dissolves any distinction between performers and audience. Observed by the circus performers, the audience provides a performance of their own: "People laughed till they wept, shrieked helplessly. All the stolid red faces split in half, mouths gaping and bellowing, emitted strange helpless cries of glee and exhaustion. A woman had to be taken out in hysterics and a fat

⁵⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 11-12.

⁵⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 7.

man in the front row shook and howled as if he would never stop laughing.”⁵⁶ Perhaps the most striking aspect of Carnival laughter, however, is its bitterness. Consider for example the laughter that assails Rocca during his manic performance after Gina’s accident:

There might have been some shame and pity in the laughter which inundated him; but Rocca never caught those notes. He was made to be laughed at, and lived on the laughter he stirred, though he cursed laughter and hated the crowd that laughed, as all men hate the gods whose puppets they are. His face was a suffering mask, under its paint, on nights like this when the hard-working country folk laughed themselves to hysterics and tears. He was Life’s little joke at itself, he believed. His mind as fine and straight as the bodies of these people. Their minds as deformed, childish, undeveloped, paddling soft and helpless as his limbs.

But that night as he saw the faces he loathed, blurred and boiling together with laughter across the ring, beside himself with rage and grief, Rocca shrieked and screeched at them in all the languages he had ever heard, one of those tempests of insane fury to which he was liable, shaking and overwhelming him. [...]

And the crowd rocked with laughter, roared and yelled at the fury of the little man. It was titanic; but his arms and legs so absurd as he ran about shouting and spluttering. (HC 38-39)

Conceding that the crowd is laughing at rather than with Rocca, the narrative highlights the capacity for Carnival laughter to be deriding and mocking.

Rocca, in the role of the clown, is the instigator of laughter. He takes his role seriously: “Rocca liked to think he was a comedian of the first quality and had transformed his disabilities into natural advantages. To make people laugh by the drolleries to which he could put his body; to mock his own tragedy constituted for him the highest form of his art” (HC 10-11). He fulfils a specific role within the Carnavalesque: to mimic social ritual and participate in comic protocol.⁵⁷ But Rocca sheds the clown’s role as soon as his performance is complete. Out of his exaggerated make-up and garish costume, he is impeccably groomed and lavishly dressed. Like Mark Smith in *Working Bullocks* Rocca is admired for being well read, intellectually accomplished and obsessive about his dental hygiene. As Bakhtin observes, clowns and fools “were the constant, accredited representatives of the Carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival

⁵⁶ Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Haxby’s Circus: The Lightest, Brightest Little Show on Earth* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1973) 32. All further references to the text of *Haxby’s Circus* will be denoted in the body of the thesis, abbreviated as HC.

⁵⁷ Bakhtin observes: “Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals mimicked, serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight. Minor occasions were also marked by comic protocol, as for instance the election of a king and queen to preside at a banquet ‘for laughter’s sake’,” Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 5.

season.”⁵⁸ Rocca’s role in the novel provides the first example of the confusion and inversion of identity and role which contributes to its overdetermined tragic momentum. But Rocca, the circus clown, holds a mirror to the character who most clearly plays the parodic and satiric role of fool: Dan Haxby. As the circus owner, Dan continues the pattern of physically powerful yet emotionally incompetent men in Prichard’s novels. But in this instance the contradicting characteristics of power and irresolution are taken to a new extreme and his capitalist depravity assumes the proportions of caricature. This provides another example of the contradictory dialectical relationships stemming from the confusion and inversion of identity and role in *Haxby’s Circus*. In this parodic role, Dan is crowned as the Carnival King. This follows the Carnavalesque motif of “a reversal of the hierarchical levels” where the “jester [is] proclaimed king.”⁵⁹ The significance of this motif is, according to Bakhtin, that it emphasises “[t]he element of relativity and of becoming” in opposition to “the immovable and extratemporal stability of the medieval hierarchy.”⁶⁰ Dan’s hyperbolic orations eulogising the circus as “The Lightest, Brightest, Little Show on Earth” (*HC* 275) confirm the parody; and the satirical foundation of his character is exemplified in the absurd rigour of his capitalist work ethic.

A demanding taskmaster, Dan Haxby controls the employees of the circus with an iron fist. He is devoid of compassion and sees his family and employees alike as “workhorses.” Dan’s affection for his long-suffering wife Lotty amounts to little more than an admiration for her capacity to breed “circus riders, trapezists to feed her husband’s ambition” (*HC* 200). Dan’s view of his wife and other family members as “workhorses” contrasts sharply with his adoration of show-ponies. This is most apparent when he grieves for the loss of his favourite horse, Beauty, more than he does for his wife. A passage of Free Indirect Discourse establishes Dan’s train of thought at the time of his wife’s death.

No time would be lost in useless fuss or grieving. Dan would grieve. Give him his dues. In his way he would be broken-up about Lotty. He would miss her, and want her beside him; he would bear her a grudge for leaving him in the lurch after so many years. It was too bad of a woman to go back on a man by dying like that. Dan would never forgive her for it, really. Always he would have it against her in his thoughts, that she had died on him without a ‘by your leave,’ or ‘kiss me behind’ and - without so much as a word of warning or regret. (*HC* 206)

⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 8

⁵⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 81.

⁶⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 82.

In contrast, the narrative which recounts the death of Beauty is full of sentiment and the narrative authenticates the sincerity of Dan's emotions on this occasion:

Dan talked of Beauty: must have been twenty-two or twenty-three if she was a day, he said, but such a pretty docile creature. The number of somersaults his girls had thrown on her back. Thousands at least! How he had found and trained her when she was a two-year old. The cuteness and reliability of the old mare. [...] The manager of Tara Station wondered to hear this fat well-set up little man who looked such a hard-doer, so wrought up about a horse. It was the way with theatricals and circus folk to be emotional, he imagined, although he recognised true feeling in the way Dan's voice trembled as he talked of Beauty. (*HC* 222)

The satirical foundation of Dan's character emphasises the presentation of alienation in the novel, where "the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production."⁶¹ The struggle between Gina and Dan provides a constant tension throughout the novel. Their struggle has been described as Oedipal,⁶² but a more accurate explanation is that it is the struggle between an authoritarian boss and an exploited worker. The lack of organised industrial action or agitation amongst the circus workers sees each of them exploited to an extreme extent. Lotty is little more than "[a] machine for churnin' out acrobats and bare-back riders" (*HC* 105); Lin is killed because of inadequate safety procedures, and Gina's labour resembles the working bullocks of Prichard's earlier novels (*HC* 215). The fact that these three characters are also members of Dan Haxby's immediate family emphasises the extreme conditions to which the circus workers are subject as well as Dan's lack of compassion and inadequacies as a father and husband. Alienated from the capital rewards of their labour, the workers fluctuate between indignant but impotent outrage and dumb, resigned acceptance. Gina's decision to keep the proceeds of her fortune-telling enterprise rather than pass them on to her father is regarded by Dan as daring but he concedes that she deserves the rewards of her capitalist initiative. The fact that she then chooses to use her savings to pay for the hospitalisation of her mother for the birth of a child indicates the kind of desperation and deprivation which she and her co-workers suffer.

⁶¹ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: Estranged Labour," *The Marx Engels Reader* 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton 1978) 70.

⁶² Sneja Gunew, "Katharine Prichard's Political Writings and the Politics of Her Writing," *Katharine Susannah Prichard Centenary Essays*, ed. John Hay and Brenda Walker (Nedlands: Centre of Studies in Australian Literature, U of Western Australia; London: Australian Studies Centre, U of London, 1984) 56.

The dissatisfaction evident amongst the circus workers results in numerous threatened or actual desertions, including those of Lily and Jack the acrobats and Rocca the clown. Even Gina and Lotty escape the drudgery of circus life for several years. The narrative inverts a traditional romantic trope by having them run *away from* the circus. Living together in a small town, Gina helps Lotty raise her daughter, Max. Surviving on the money she earns working in a boarding house, Gina falls neatly into the pattern of Prichard's strong female characters who only ever gain financial independence from their husbands/fathers because of the men's inadequacy and in order to support a small child. Significantly, Gina's financial independence is derived from domestic employment.

During their time away from the circus, the Carnival atmosphere comes into play only once. During a holiday to the beach the normal Lenten repression and hierarchy is suspended: "It had all been such good fun, each one doing as he or she liked, going her own way; not bothering much about what anybody else did, just eating, sleeping, fishing, lying about reading on the sand, or chatting together" (*HC* 148). In the Carnival atmosphere of the holiday, Gina is swept up in an ill-fated romance, liberated temporarily from the constraints of her malformed body. As she acknowledges, "it won't last. You see. It's ... just for here ... and now" (*HC* 152). But her self-esteem is tragically damaged by the pain of desertion and disempowerment when the Lenten atmosphere once again descends. From this it is apparent that Gina's deformity is inextricably linked with a Lenten world.

It is Max's natural acrobatic ability that eventually convinces Gina and Lotty to accept Dan's invitation to rejoin the menagerie. After such a prolonged period of deprivation and denial, however, all three find the attraction of the Carnival atmosphere of the circus difficult to resist. Max, who has never experienced circus life before, settles quickly and comfortably into its routine. Lotty is overjoyed to be reunited with her husband and even Gina is overwhelmed by nostalgia for the nomadic life. After the sustained period of Lenten abstinence, the narrative returns enthusiastically to celebration.

Dan Haxby assumes the role of ringmaster and circus owner. Gina returns to her alienated and exploited state with dumb uncomplaining resignation. But the circus suffers a series of blows, including Lotty's lonely death in a barn during childbirth and a rioting audience which

disrupts the show, damages the main tent and injures some of the performers. The show limps pathetically along and seems in danger of imminent collapse when Gina finally enjoys a bit of good luck. Rocca, who has long since left the circus in disgust at Dan's treatment of Gina, dies and leaves £100 000 to her. His will declares her to be "[t]he most perfect soul I ever met in my life's wandering" (*HC* 232). The inheritance has been criticised as a clumsy *deus ex machina* device,⁶³ but it is an important indicator also of the link between Gina and Rocca. As we have seen, inheritance is a motif which recurs throughout Prichard's novels but this is the first time it performs a distinctly condemning role.

Gina undergoes a series of transformations throughout the novel. The first and most obvious of these is her accident, which changes her from a strong and supple acrobat to a disfigured humpback/working bullock. The moment of Gina's inheritance signals another significant transformation in her character. A change of ownership is signalled by her decision to pour her fortune back into the circus. Despite Gina's designation as "the perfect soul" and early indications that her management of the circus will be more democratic than her predecessor's, the alienation of the workers continues. This movement from single to communal ownership is made explicit by a change from Haxby's to Haxbys' Circus (*HC* 260 and 274). Even though the working conditions improve and the circus is more financially successful, Gina, as boss, is soon indistinguishable from Dan. This merging of their characters is prefigured shortly after the circus's change of ownership, when Gina reassures her father: "Everything'll be the same, Dad [...] except that we'll all share in profits – and there have got to be profits" (*HC* 242). So even though she espouses the democratic and perhaps even proto-socialist principle of profit-sharing, her insistence *on* profit and her desire that nothing should change condemn her to a capitalist fate.

As suggested, Gina takes on the characteristics of both Rocca and Dan. In doing so, the confusion and inversion of identity and role intensify. The convergence of these two in her own character becomes most obvious after their deaths. It is at the point of Rocca's death that their fortunes are linked. But the two characters are connected by more than their finances. As his will suggests, they share a long affection. Their

⁶³ Ric Throssell, *Wild Weeds and Windflowers: The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1975) 60-61.

relationship is strong even before Gina's accident, but her injury secures their bond in mutual disfigurement. The narrative makes it clear that regardless of the calamities and personal hardships he has faced, Dan does not learn his lesson and leaves the novel as he entered it - as an absurdly depraved capitalist. And it is from him that Gina inherits the role of Carnival King. As the relationship between Carnival and Lent is dialogical so is that between Rocca and Dan. But the moment these two converge in the character of Gina the relationship also becomes dialectical. A contradiction emerges as the two forces struggle within a single character, and it is at this point that Gina acquires the role of the tragic hero.

After Dan's death, Gina rapidly degenerates both morally and physically:

No one who had known Gina as a girl could understand her these days. Her whole nature seemed to have changed. Her temper flared passionately, unexpectedly. She was fond of beer, drank too much; and again and again during the following year, a passion for some good-looking boy in the band, or among the keepers, made her ridiculous in everybody's eyes. (*HC* 330-331)

She is frequently likened to her father, especially in her management of the circus, and she enjoys her sense of power. Her collapse is so extreme that it becomes caricatural. Condemnation of her character comes from two sources. In escaping the exploitation of alienation, she has herself become a capitalist exploiter; and by assuming the role of owner and manager, she has exercised a feminist determination. Gina is the first of Prichard's strong female characters to decay into a fat and gaudy capitalist. She is also the first to achieve financial independence outside the domestic sphere. As we have seen, the domestic environment is considered exclusively feminine in Prichard's writing. But it is the *only* exclusively female domain. Because she decides or even dares to step outside this domain, Gina is forced, by default, to operate within a masculine paradigm and is thereby condemned. Selecting and discarding young lovers, drinking beer, eating to excess and giving free reign to her temper, she becomes depraved and "unladylike." But her appetites also draw attention to the grotesque body which is an integral component of the carnivalesque, with its images of "eating, drinking [and] copulation."⁶⁴ The location of these preoccupations in the "lower stratum"⁶⁵ of the body leads Bakhtin to differentiate between upper body - "the face or the head" - and the lower part - "the genital

⁶⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 39.

⁶⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 23.

organs, the belly, and the buttocks” – as “absolute topographical connotations.”⁶⁶ Carnival degradation is intrinsically connected with these bodily preoccupations: “To degrade [...] means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs.”⁶⁷ Yet, despite her degradation, Gina remains clearly caught in a Lenten atmosphere. As the two atmospheres converge on her in a distinctly dialectical manner the contradictory nature of her confused identity becomes apparent.

It is from this contradictory position as Carnival King in a Lenten environment that Gina acquires the role of a tragic hero. Like Coonardoo, Gina’s tragedy is influenced by forces outside her control. Unlike Coonardoo, she does not retain her dignity and integrity. Indeed, it is Gina’s collapse into a fat, lazy capitalist that traces the tragic line of peripeteia in the novel. One of the earliest and most telling indications of trouble is the loss of laughter: “Everybody recognised [...] there had got to be more fun in the show. People went away without the rollicking sense of a jolly evening. Laughter was flat and lukewarm” (*HC* 275). By the beginning of the final chapter, a tragic resolution seems inevitable. Gina, as tragic hero, suffers from “dissatisfaction, unrest and discouragement with life” (*HC* 327), is tormented by nightmares and admits to a “sort of misery and despair” eating her insides out (*HC* 332). But perhaps the most accurate indication of her degraded condition is that she becomes known as the “Boss of Haxby’s” (*HC* 330) with the apostrophe heralding a return to single ownership. Jack pinpoint the source of her degradation: “it’s the blasted money’s destroyed you” (*HC* 331). Gina agrees: “Billy was right after all. He said to me once: ‘Life’s a three volume novel, Gina. The first’s the book of ideals and illusions; the second’s the book of realities and noble resolutions; the third’s the book of the senses and breakdown of the will.’ [...] It’s the third book I’m up to now” (*HC* 331). In tracing her life in Haxby’s Circus with a literary metaphor, Gina’s story also reviews the literary construction of her life in *Haxby’s Circus* and in so doing anticipates a tragic denouement.

The downward direction of tragic peripeteia mirrors that of the degradation which is so fundamental to Bakhtin’s theory of the Carnavalesque. But, as he argues: “Degradation digs a bodily grave for a

⁶⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 21

⁶⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 21

new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one.”⁶⁸ Because the strictly topographical connotations of the bodily aspect are “not clearly distinct from the cosmic,”⁶⁹ any preoccupation with the lower stratum of the grotesque body finds a direct parallel in a physical connection with the earth. Early in the novel Rocca’s clown performance indicates the parodic nature of this dialogic relationship between the earth and the heavens: “The children had shrieked at Rocca and his antics; the heavy, fat faced or weedy, thin and melancholy farmers and their wives laughed till the tears ran down their faces, to see the dwarf trying to imitate Jack’s and Lily’s feats on the trapeze” (*HC* 19). Bakhtin emphasises the connection between laughter and degradation in the carnivalesque:

the unofficial aspect of the world, unofficial in tone (laughter) and in contents (the lower stratum). All of them relate to the world’s gay matter, which is born and gives birth, is devoured and devours; this is the world which continually grows and multiplies, becomes ever greater and better, ever more abundant. Gay matter is ambivalent, it is the grave and the generating womb, the receding past and the advancing future, the becoming.⁷⁰

It is from the dialogic relationship between laughter and degradation that regeneration and rebirth emerges. This double-edged or Janus-faced nature of Carnival laughter as a degenerative and regenerative force is positioned, by Bakhtin, in the Carnival hell:

Carnival’s hell represents the earth which swallows up and gives birth, it is often transformed into a cornucopia; the monster, death, becomes pregnant. Various deformities, such as protruding bellies, enormous noses, or humps, are symptoms of pregnancy or procreative power. Victory over fear is not its abstract elimination; it is a simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, a gay transformation. Hell has burst and has poured forth abundance.⁷¹

So it is for Gina, whose uncrowning as Carnival King leaves her in the role she has inherited from Rocca, as a clown:

The Punch and Judy act Gina put on with Dennis who owned the dog, beat out something like the old hearty laughter for which Haxby’s had been angling for so long. It flew gushing and unrestrained. Punch had only to stand and show his hump, run across the ring, or fall sprawling on the ground, for laughter to neigh o it and bellow round him. (*HC* 338)

⁶⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 21.

⁶⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 21.

⁷⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 195. Earlier he suggests: “Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts)” (21)

⁷¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 91.

Having fallen from the heights of horseback acrobatics, Gina finds her salvation or regeneration through a connection to the earth.

Gina's regeneration is supported by the Carnival imagery of the final four pages. Her performance relies on the carnivalesque preoccupations of parody, the grotesque body and its procreative power: symbolised by her humpback. "She just ran on, clumsy and lumbering, parodying the juggling and tumbling act with a gleeful cry: 'I can do that!' Or, 'Show you how it's done!' making herself look as ungainly and repulsive as possible" (*HC* 337-338). It is clear that Gina has inherited not only Rocca's capacity to exploit the deformed body, but also his ability to exploit the grotesque body for laughter. She recalls Rocca's approach to clowning: "All you got to do if you want to make the crowd laugh, is stick out your belly, and shake your back-side at it" (*HC* 338). Unlike Rocca, Gina does not shed her role as clown at the end of her performance. She remains clad in motley and revelling in the grotesque body: "Gina liked her food, grew fat and fond of bright colours" (*HC* 340).

Yet Gina has not escaped her degraded state. Although her clown act returns laughter to the circus, it also delivers economic prosperity. So, despite the redemptive power of the carnivalesque, Gina is still a capitalist: "She began to enjoy a sense of power: The circus, and every detail of work on it, moved as she directed. [...] An exacting taskmaster, very strict and finicking about her instructions being carried out, she raged [...] at anybody who slacked or did not train systematically" (*HC* 339-340). Also, because her ownership of the circus sustains her in a male domain (removed from the domestic sphere), Gina retains her problematic relation to feminism. This is most strongly emblematised by her adoption of a male clown persona "Punch." The narrative is explicit in its attribution of her masculine-capitalist heritage: "at forty-five she was very like Dan Haxby" (*HC* 340). The fact that Gina is able to find redemption in her grotesque degradation does not erase the critique of capitalism and feminism nor the impact of alienation on the working people. Inheriting two different roles from Rocca and Dan, Gina is caught in a tragic impasse – trapped as a clown in a Lenten environment. Her contradictory situation is captured in the novel's final sentence which, like a Shakespearian rhyming couplet, offers a synthesis of the tragedy:

She seemed happiest really when, in her clown's dress, made-up with plastered face and rouged mouth, she waddled into the ring and tumbled about, making herself grotesque and hideous, to get the brittle crashing

merriment of the crowd that could hurt her no more, in whose laughter she could join, at the order and harmony of a world to which the circus held the dim surface of the mirror. (HC 340)

In this last utterance, *Haxby's Circus* transcends its realist narrative to assume its position within universal human tragedy. In doing so, the novel acquires symbolic significance and exercises a political potency and aesthetic power. Along with *Coonardoo*, this novel moves considerably closer to a state of *revolutionary rupture*.



Prichard claims that she discovered the only “logical explanation of poverty and injustices in the social system under which we are living” in the works of Marx and Engels.⁷² Yet her novels do not appear to be quite as easily convinced as their author. The novels encounter problems which are, in many ways, bigger than those accommodated by Marxist or socialist theories. (For example, the problematic of *Coonardoo* – interracial relations in a colonial social system – is not, in any real sense, addressed by these theories.) This, necessarily, leaves her novels searching or questing amongst other theories and ideas for solutions to the problems of the human condition. The overdetermined dialectical relationships meet in the novels’ central characters. As the focal points of the convergence of these “*hamartic* forces” both protagonists – Coonardoo and Gina – are established as tragic heroes. In this way the “*hamartic axes*” on which these tragedies turn are overdetermined.

The contradictory theories and ideas which contribute to the overdetermined tragedies of *Coonardoo* and *Haxby's Circus* make up the second subset of overdeterminants in the sequence of moments. As such they establish the position of these novels on the trajectory of Prichard’s novel canon as being considerably closer to a state of *revolutionary rupture*. But, as we have seen, they also connect with the subset of overdeterminants which make up the initial momentary essentialism investigated in Chapter One. The initial essentialism of the “general contradiction” between moralist socialism and rationalist Marxism and the

⁷² Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Why I Am a Communist* (Sydney: Current Books, c. 1957) 3.

second essentialist moment of the second subset of overdeterminants are both illuminated and obscured in their connection. In other words, both essentialist moments are shown to be both true *and* false.