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Veronica Brady: ‘A Thick Crumbly Slice of Life.’ “The Fortunes of Richard Mahony” as a Cultural Monument

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Every literary text, it can be argued, is a cultural object “with a causation, persistence, durability and social presence quite its own”.¹ *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, Henry Handel Richardson’s monumental attempt to construct an Australian classic, is quite particularly concerned with this social presence, and expresses it as much perhaps at the unconscious as at the conscious level. For not only does Richardson consciously set herself the task of documenting with meticulous precision the circumstances of colonial life in mid nineteenth century but also, unconsciously, she reflects the pressures of the culture she describes, though admittedly at a later stage of its development. Attempting to speak for and about Australians, yet writing as an expatriate, she may well be more aware of her audience and more influenced by their expectations than many writers. Certainly, her work seems to me to suffer from a curious ambivalence. On the one hand, the naturalistic method she adopts signals a determination to tell the truth but also to limit the definition of truth to what can be verified empirically or rationally, a determination as responsive to the pressures of her society, if also as heroic as Flaubert’s or Balzac’s to theirs. But on the other hand, there are clear indications within the novel that she has other designs than those of naturalism upon her material and that in another time she might in fact have written a tragedy. No doubt there are also personal factors at work here as well, since the story of Richard Mahony is substantially the story of her own father. However, it is my contention that it is pressures from her society which deflect her from the full tragic vision implicit in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.²

Potentially, Mahony’s story is the classical stuff of tragedy. Gifted, sensitive and imperious, he is destroyed by these very gifts which are not merely in excess of the actual needs of his situation which is the note of the tragic hero. The construction of the novel, in particular the division into three novels and within these novels the subdivisions into parts, also indicates a bias towards the dramatic, implying a grouping of subject matter around high points of the action and of characterisation and an interest in architectonics as well as in narrative.

Yet in execution, the story becomes more like a case study, an unrelenting account of Mahony’s decline into madness, of the effects of this decline upon his family and of the colonial society in which his ideas and behaviour seem so preposterous. Significantly, it seems that most of Richardson’s readers support this naturalistic approach, regarding the book as a triumphant example of realism, and critics generally have confirmed this reading. In the discussion that follows, however, I should like to look at the impulse to another kind of novel which also exists within the trilogy and argue that the work as a whole is seriously flawed by the ambivalence which exists within the writer and within her culture as well and disables her from realizing either the perfection of naturalism or the perfection of tragedy.

As the trilogy is structured, the intention to delineate a tragic action seems clear. The Proem to *Australia Felix* sets the story in a cosmic perspective, announcing a conflict between the human spirit and powers which control its destiny, in this case the powers of the land. Furthermore, in the image of the miner buried alive, the novelist predicts Richard’s end, sounding a note of tragic inevitability. Throughout, in scenes like the encounter with Tangye and the fate of the wretched carter in *Australia Felix*, in Cuffy’s nightmare about the drowning dog in *The Way Home* or in the beating of the horse in *Ultima Thule*, the novelist keeps Richard’s fate before us, predicting it in Tangye’s words and in exemplary images like the dog and the horse. So, at the end of *Ultima Thule* in the description of Richard’s grave, we return to the idea in the Proem of the man buried alive. But here the novelist turns it to positive ends, implying, as at the end of a tragedy, that

the hero's spirit is now at rest, all passion spent; "the rich and kindly earth of his adopted country [having] absorbed his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, vagrant spirit".³

Moreover, as in classical tragedy, the hero's fate seems meant to be exemplary. The Proem suggests that the story is about a situation which is trans-individual; if the miners are to be destroyed on account of their greed for gold Mahony's destruction echoes theirs, though his greed is for wealth of mind and spirit. So Australia becomes a kind of stage where the conflict is played out between man's aspirations for wealth and power and what Lawrence, speaking of Hardy's novels, calls the "terrific action of unfathomed nature". Thus the book reflects that vision of Australia as the Utopia that failed which is so strong in writers like Lawson and, much later, Patrick White or Thomas Keneally. For if the quest for Utopia arises from a "revolt against the human condition in the shape of existing circumstances, which meets the obstacle of impotence and evokes in the imagination an 'other' or a nowhere, where all obstacles are removed",⁴ Australia, for all its promise, is the place in which existing circumstances prevail. As Tangye, the failed chemist whose failure predicts Mahony's own, tells him, this, "the hardest and cruellest country ever created",⁵ gives the lie to all the illusions of "the Land o' Promise and Plenty" which drew people to it from the Old World. Here "every superfluous bit of you—every thought of interest that [isn't] essential to the daily grind—[is] pared off" (A.F. pp. 285–6) and one thought alone prevails; "to keep a sound roof over our heads and a bite in our mouths" (A.F. p. 265). The description in the Proem also insists on this grim view, suggesting indeed that this defeat of hope is justified. For the settlers are convicted here of a particular kind of hubris which leads them to defy the proper order of things. In their search for gold they have violated the proper relationship with the natural world, tearing the earth apart, and the opening description of the diggings at Ballarat presses his point strongly. "The whole scene had that strange, repellent ugliness that goes with breaking up and throwing into disorder what has been sanctified as final...All that was left of the original 'pleasant resting-place' and its pristine beauty were the ancient volcanic cones of Warrenheip and Buningong" (A.F. p. 5). Moreover, this violation is the direct product of the "dream ... of vast wealth got without exertion ... a passion for gold" (A.F. p. 8) which leads them to disregard everything else but its satisfaction. "The intention of all alike had been to snatch a golden fortune from the earth, and then, hey, presto! for the old world again" (A.F. p. 8).

A naturalistic writer might have recorded these facts, of course, but Richardson also introduces another dimension, attributing a life of its own to the land, making it a kind of moral presence and endowing it with a will of its own. "Lying stretched like some primeval monster in the sun, her breasts fully bared" (A.F. p. 8), it has already judged these intruders, has already, without their knowing it, taken "them captive—without chains, ensorcelled without witchcraft" (A.F. p. 8) and is only waiting her moment to destroy them, in spirit by the crass materialism which the novelist appears to despise almost as much as Mahony himself, or in body, as with Mahony.

Now it is in this vision that I locate the origin of the ambivalence we are discussing and of the consequent disjuncture within the novel. Tragedy depends upon that sense of values beyond the material evident here which gives rise to its vision of suffering nobility. But even the world Richard Mahony inhabits will not support this vision since it has little knowledge of anything but material values. More seriously perhaps, Richardson herself owed intellectual allegiance to that strain of scepticism which filled educated Europeans of her day with the overwhelming sense of inner despair and melancholy which is also apparent in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, particularly in the unsparing realism with which she details the decline of a proud and sensitive man into helpless madness. Therefore, when, early in the story, Mahony wrestles with questions of religious belief, the writer may well be rehearsing her own problems, attracted to faith but committed to intellectual honesty. In this sense Tangye's assertion that Australia "is no place ... for the likes of you and me," (A.F. p. 283) [i.e. Mahony] his words illumine more than the situation within the novel. A culture which questions the existence of God or the gods and insists instead on circumscribing the truth to what can be empirically observed or explained in rational terms allows no place for the tragic vision to which the Proem suggests Richardson's work is aspiring and clearly her conscious loyalties lie with empiricism and rationality.

Yet it remains that, unconsciously perhaps, she is drawn to another vision of life. Apart from the evidence of the Proem, this is apparent also in the strange complicity with her protagonist. In truth, Richard

resembles a Madame Bovary or Hjalmar Ekdal, characters condemned by stern realism as mere dreamers and destructive to themselves and others. But Richardson does not always manage to stand outside her character and regard him as objectively as Flaubert and Ibsen manage to do with their characters. Indeed, it might be said that, allowances being made for the difference of some fifty years between the novelist and her protagonist, his intellectual situation rehearses her own. Both experience a sense of social alienation and profess a kind of fatalism on the one hand and yet are also aware on the other hand of a great longing for God and hope. If one sets aside for the moment the medical explanation of Mahony's fate, it might even be said that his story is essentially that of his battle for his soul, a battle which I am arguing is repeated by the author in the structure of the novel.

In its attempt to get whole and even account for the fate which overwhelmed her parents and herself as a child Richardson may have been influenced by her reading of Freud. But, like her hero, she might also acknowledge more metaphysical ambitions, “trying to pierce the secret of existence to rede the riddle that has never been solved—What am I? Whence have I come? Whither am I going? What meaning has the pain I suffer, the evil that men do? Can evil be included in God's scheme?” (A.F. p. 177). Certainly, there seems to be more sympathy with him in these longings than with the obsession with money and success which grips most people in colonial society. Moreover, in the last extended moment of self awareness before he lapses into insanity, in the scene in which he wrestles with the temptation to commit suicide, Richardson allows him to satisfy his ambition, at least to a certain extent, and to glimpse an answer to these questions. Whether the impartial reader or even the sceptical strain in the novel itself agrees with him and supports his feelings at this point is another matter, of course, a matter I shall discuss presently. But to my mind there is no doubt that another strain in the novel witnesses to a profound sympathy with this aspiration in him, the pressure towards some transcendent explanation.

The scene with Tangye dramatises the conflict between these two strains, significantly indicating that the novelist's emotional sympathies are with Richard, even if her intellect sides with Tangye. Summing up his despairing vision of the futility of an existence like theirs in a land like this where material concerns alone seem to matter, Tangye declares: “I'll tell you the only use I'll have been here, doctor, when my end comes. I'll dung some bit of land for 'em with my moulder and rot. That's all.” (A.F. p. 284) To which Richard retorts, “and pray, does it never occur to you, you fool, that flowers may spring from you?” (A.F. p. 285). In this context, this exchange serves to highlight the difference between the two men, Tangye the realist and Mahony the idealist whose ideals are ultimately the product of a kind of impotence before the facts. But in terms of the total structure of the trilogy, Mahony's words point towards the conclusion of the whole work, the description of the grave by the sea with the grasses growing over it and suggest that the novelist's feelings as distinct from her intelligence lie more with his point of view than with Tangye's. Despite the hard-headed realism which reaches its climax in the last volume of the trilogy in the unsparing account of Richard's disintegration and Mary's battle for survival, at the very end she relapses into a conclusion which can only be called sentimental since the facts do not justify the emotions the words attempt to generate. Suddenly renouncing the view of him as the pitiful victim of madness, “like Tom fool in ‘the King of Lear’” (U.T. p. 178) as she sees him at the end of the suicide scene, in these last moments Richardson presents him as triumphant, declaring in effect that his spirit has at last reached that transcendental realm to which it always aspired and therefore endorsing that aspiration which the sceptic in her has identified as mere illusion. More, she echoes the vision of light at the climactic point of struggle with the impulse to suicide. As there he saw himself as one with the Creator like “a drop of water in a wave, a note of music in a mighty cadence,” (U.T. p. 176) so here his spirit is one with “the rich and kindly earth” (U.T. p. 279). Clearly, then, something in Richardson would like to believe in the gods, and see human existence not so much as an end in itself but as a bridge to something more. But the intelligence which had given its allegiance to the world of Ibsen, Freud, Nietzsche and so on, insisted with them that the gods were dead. Instead, the task was to explain the world and the fate of people like Richard Mahony, renouncing all consolations and all illusions.

So it is then that Richardson set herself consciously to write the monumental naturalistic account of the rise and fall of the fortunes of Richard Mahony, an account as careful in its documentation and seeming to reflect the determination to eliminate all emotions, all delight for the senses which informs the scientific writer as the writer tells her story from the outside, mostly keeping her distance from her characters. Even the figure of Cuffy, obviously the surrogate of Richardson herself as a child, indicates this dubious triumph

of understanding over emotion, for the child never comes alive. His baby-talk is the calculated language of adults' convention and his responses to the most painful situations tend to undercut rather than intensify the feelings they arouse. Indeed, it is almost as if he is there to exorcise any ghosts which may still haunt Richardson recalling events she once lived through for, despite moments of passion, Cuffy appears as an essentially sensible child, mostly self-possessed and trying to make sense of his experience. Maybe, too, the fact that, rehearsing the past, the novelist casts herself as a boy instead of a girl, like her choice of a male pseudonym,⁶ indicates further this commitment to intelligence, this determination in the writer as in her character to make the *animus* the controlling intellect, prevail over the passionate, intuitive *anima*.

However, this triumph of understanding over emotion is dubious in its effects, mainly because, to repeat, Richardson is unable to sustain it completely, surrendering at times to the claims of intuition and feeling. The result is the curious uncertainty which becomes most evident precisely at those climactic points which demand steadiness of tone and purpose. Thus the concluding moments of the whole trilogy tend to falsify rather than bring to culmination the progress of the action. *Ultima Thule*, as we have said, represents the triumph of realism. Sparing neither herself nor her reader in her account, Richardson traces the progress of Richard's disease to childlike dependence on Mary. Correspondingly, while Mary might have been presented as a figure of valiant grief, the novelist stresses the practical, pragmatic nature of her heroism. As Richard fades out and she becomes the centre of the action, her values also tend to prevail, sheer survival becoming the most important if not the only good. So the change of tone in the last moments, and the reversion to a tragic perspective with its suggestions of the primacy of spirit, represents a kind of intrusion, as the author forces an interpretation which the facts will not really bear as if her nerve had failed and she is unable to sustain the full implications of that sceptical vision she has pursued so vigorously, especially in this last part of the trilogy. Even as far as the Proem is concerned, there is little justification for speaking of the "rich and kindly earth" of Australia. On the contrary, nearly everything in the novel, not only what happens to the Mahonys, but also to people like John Turnham, Purdie or Tully Beamish, insists upon its essential harshness. Equally, to say that "it would have been after [Richard's] own heart that his last bid was in sound of what he had perhaps loved best on earth—the open sea" (*U.T.* p. 278) is to oversimplify and distort in the interests of comfort rather than truth. It is true that Richard loved the sea, but mainly because it represented for him the possibility of escape, either back to England or, when he found he belonged there no more than elsewhere, back again to Australia. Far from being consoling, therefore, his affinity with the sea appears as part of that restlessness and love of illusion which worked so disastrously upon his own life and on those he loved. No doubt the intention here is to use the sea as a symbol of all that is unlimited and to remind the reader of Mahony's fascination with the "mystery of things". However, once again the naturalism of the novel as a whole contradicts these implications. Coming at the end of the last book which has documented Richard's illness so painfully and so convincingly, the suggestion of a triumph of spirit fails to ring true. On the contrary, the impression may be that his preoccupation with matters of spirit may have been merely a symptom of his disease. As for the thought that he has been taken up into infinity, resting there where "on all sides the eye can range, unhindered, to where the vast earth meets the infinitely vaster sky" (*U.T.* p. 278), he is represented in his last lucid moments struggling to keep control of his life and himself. As he realizes, his life has been characterised by an "iron determination to live untouched and untrammelled ... to preserve [his] liberty of body and mind ... to be sufficient unto oneself asking neither help nor regard, and spending none" (*U.T.* p. 274). Set against this determination which, incidentally, has some affinity with the naturalistic writer's heroic commitment to live without illusion, the conclusion rings very hollow indeed with its tired Romantic implications, its echoes of Shelley's Adonais whose spirit is made "part of that loveliness he once made more lovely".

On the other hand, if one allows the tragic impulse within the novel to work, this last scene can be supported by the crucial scene in which Richard rejects the thought of suicide. In this reading, in fact, this scene becomes the climax of the action, the point at which the hero makes a conscious choice of his destiny, determining to follow it through to the end, defying the suffering he knows to be in store for him. So this decision culminates in a moment of vision, the great light which overwhelms him, bringing with it the "beatific certainty that his pain ... his sufferings ... had their niche in God's scheme" (*U.T.* p. 176) and all that he is one with the rest of creation all pressing towards some mysterious fulfilment, "as surely contained in God as a drop of water in a wave, a note of music in a mighty cadence" (*U.T.* p. 176). In this vision Richardson seems to be preparing us for the kind of apotheosis which occurs to the tragic hero, as to

Oedipus when he is taken up by the gods at the end of all his sufferings. She is also presenting his decision not to commit suicide as a heroic moral action. As he wrestles with despair, it comes to him that his life is not his own to take, but belongs to his Creator. More, that Creator himself has known this same struggle and emerged triumphant from it. This example of Christ “the Great Martyr” who emerged from “the most famous agony known to history” (*U.T.* p. 174) spurs him then to see suicide as an act of cowardice. “What was he about to do? He a coward ... a deserter? ... abandoning his post when the fire was hottest?—leaving others to bear the onus of his flight, his disgrace?” (*U.T.* p. 175). But not only does his decision to go on living represent an act of heroic obedience, it also commits him to others. The “iron determination to live untouched and untrammelled” mentioned earlier figures in this perspective as pride, the deadliest of sins, and, as his vision of unity indicates, he is now determined to give himself rather than hold aloof. In this perspective, it is appropriate that at the end of his life he should be taken up into the larger harmony.

Unfortunately, however, the other impulse towards naturalistic explanation is also at work here. The meticulous way the novelist follows the movement of his thought in this scene from the initial sense of despair through the sheer horror as he waits, nerves at stretch, for the shriek of the mill whistle and then resolves to put an end to this agony by killing himself to the final decision to go on living and the vision of light which follows from it, summons the intelligence to work on the emotions recorded here. Moreover, it is clear that initially Mahony is at the point of mental breakdown. The description of him sitting in the surgery waiting for the mill-whistle lays stress on physical facts, noting that it is not merely his nerves but also his muscles which are “at stretch”, and presenting his mental agony in terms of stark bodily experience, “the slow torture ... the refined torture of physical inaction, the trail of which may be as surely blood-streaked as that from an open wound” (*U.T.* p. 171). Similarly, the stress on the beating of his pulses, the ticking of the pendulum and the oppressive silence of the room emphasises the physical basis of his mental distress. Even at the height of his moral struggle, when, looking back over his past life he convicts himself of “pride ... a fierce Lucifer like inhibition” (*U.T.* p. 174), there is a hint of another, more naturalistic explanation in the change from the word “pride” to “inhibition” indicating a movement from moral to psychological categories, a movement which is reflected also in the physical implications of the metaphors used to describe his revulsion from others as a “withdrawal of oneself because of rawness ... a skinlessness ... on which the touch of any rough hand could cause agony” (*U.T.* p. 174). The implications here are almost behaviouristic, confirming the naturalistic explanation of Mahony's fate that it was the result not of tragic hubris but the workings of the syphilitic bacteria which caused his disease. Even at the height of what a tragic reading would call his spiritual struggle, there is a suggestion that flinging the phial of poison away is less the result of heroic choice than a kind of reflex action “with a movement so precipitate that it seemed after all more than half involuntary, he lifted his hand and threw far from him the little bottle of chloroform, which he had clutched till his palm was cut and sore” (*U.T.* p. 176).

Throughout his life, Richard's feelings have tended to explode like this. Discontented with life in Australia and with himself, he suddenly decides to go back to England, for example, and then, just as suddenly, finding himself equally dissatisfied there, he returns to Australia. Hence, of course, the ironic force of the Latin tag Tangye quotes to him, “*coeli non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt*”, a tag whose implications echo throughout the length of Richard's restless life. So, his vision of light and his decision to go on living may be only another gesture typical of the man who tends to take refuge in illusion, preferring his subjective vision to the claims of reality.

Nevertheless, there is no denying the claims religious ideas as well as feelings are pressing upon the novelist here. Hitherto the novel has revealed her interest in the writings of mystics like St Theresa, Giordano Bruno, Glanville and Swedenborg, but this interest seems to be more a matter of emotion, a feeling that their vision corresponds to longings within Richard and perhaps also, by implication, within herself. So Richard, the man who prides himself on his intellect, is drawn to the “spirituality [which] outstripped intellect”, the “mysteries at once too deep and simple for learned brains to follow”.⁷ At this stage of the story, this interest only serves to increase the distance between his sense of reality and common sense, and most readers probably share Mary's exasperation with him here and earlier as he pursues his studies and neglects his family, friends and ordinary obligations. In the scene under discussion, however, his religious impulse operates rather to direct him back to others and to the claims of the actual. Similarly, the intellect begins to work upon instead of merely surrender to his feelings here as he attempts, in effect, to direct them and to construct a world-view which will account for and accommodate his situation, particularly the existence

of pain, not merely reject it as an obscenity as naturalistic explanations do. Significantly, this view seems to take up points made by Tangye in the scene of his meeting with Mahony which reveals so much of the novelist's thoughts and purposes. Notably, here Tangye offers a vision of God to match his grim philosophy of life as "the old Joker who sits grinnin' up aloft [waiting] to put his heel down—as you and me would squash a bull-ant or a scorpion" (*A.F.* p. 282). At this stage, Richard is both prosperous and conventional and will have nothing to do with such ideas. But at the point of despair, facing the knowledge of impending madness, he sees differently. For him now God is no impassable and remote being: in the person of Christ he is in some senses its victim himself. Moreover, going back upon his earlier thought that scientific evidence had discredited forever the "fable of the Eternal's personal mediation in the affairs of man" (*A.F.* p. 175), he now seems to believe that God is in a sense responsible for his pain, setting it up in fact as a "test—God's acid test ... failing to pass which a man might not attain to his full stature" (*U.T.* p. 175). It is this belief, of course, which accounts for the ecstatic vision of unity in which all things, pain as well as joy, are seen to be contained in God.

Seen from one point of view, as we have seen, this vision may be only the product of what Johnson called "the dangerous prevalence of Imagination", the desire to heal one's pain by retreating into an imaginary world in which the gap between reality and desire is miraculously closed. Yet viewed in another way, Mahony's position may be worth more respect. Indeed, read in the light of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Tangye may be offering Richard the kind of negative hierophany James speaks of there in chapter seven. He argues that what he calls "healthy-mindedness", a confident trust in the present order of thought and feeling and in the power of human beings to understand and control their destiny, is "inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses to account for are a genuine portion of reality. The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic's visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact. Our civilisation is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony".⁸ Unlike anyone else Richard meets, Tangye is prepared to face this truth, and here, when his own experience brings him to it, Richard in his turn is perhaps grappling with his kind of God, one whose monstrous aspect may be too much for a conventional morality though it is reflected in the *Book of Job* and in the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. Seen thus, Richard's desire "to pierce the secret of existence" (*A.F.* p. 177) may in fact be satisfied here, at least as far as he is concerned. More crucially to the present argument, if this is so, then the ambition of the novelist, hinted at at the beginning and end of the work as a whole, appears as similar to that of the American Transcendentalists "to free man from the delusions of a split universe which ... had reduced human life to a fragmented state".⁹

Richard's version of unity also throws new light on the working of scenes like the one in which the carter whom Richard has ruined despairingly slits up the bellies of his pet rabbits or where Cuffy has a nightmare of the drowning dog or where Richard, losing control, lashes the horse he is driving unmercifully. If the universe be unified, as Richard sees it in his vision, with each level of reality reflecting and bound up with all others, then the mutilated rabbits, the dog and the horse work as types of Richard's own fate. More, they establish more strongly within the action the structure of his fate for, as Erich Auerbach argues, a figural interpretation like this establishes a connection between events and persons in such a way that the first points ahead to the second, while the second involves and fulfils the first. The despairing carter in some sense prefigures Richard's fate, and it is significant that in the last stages before his final breakdown, he dreams once again of this man (*U.T.* pp. 164–8). So, too, when in Venice Mahony comforts Cuffy, overwhelmed by his nightmare about the drowning dog, telling him that cruelty like this is unusual and that in any case people like them must always act kindly, the scene is grimly ironical: very soon Mahony himself will be the victim of cruelty of a larger cosmic kind, and in no position to be merciful to anyone, even himself—hence, indeed, the fury of frustration which drives him to whip the horse in the other scene mentioned.

In effect, then, the suicide represents the crux of my argument that *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* contains the impulse to write two works, a naturalistic novel and a tragedy. In terms of a tragic action, this scene dramatises the moment in which the hero, having passed from the stage of autonomy now moves towards theomy to acknowledge the claims of the gods. Having learnt that he is not master of his fate, he now enlarges his spirit to move into another dimension, at once more terrible and more beautiful than man's. So here the link is forged between spiritual values and the natural world which accounts for the fusion

between them evident at the end of *Ultima Thule*. Unfortunately, however, although the potential is there, neither this scene nor the novel as a whole works at this tragic level. In fact, the main effect of Richard's vision at this stage the action has reached is perhaps to confirm the sense of his disintegration. Moreover, the novelist's conscious intention seems to confirm this reading since she ends the scene with Cuffy, switching her point of view from inside Richard's mind to the eyes of the child who stands at a distance, neither comprehending nor apparently even sympathising but seeing him rather with a strange detachment as "Tomfool in the King of Lear" (*U.T.* p. 178). Whatever else may be involved in bringing Cuffy's point of view to bear, it is clear that it ends the scene with a picture of Richard covered with mud, at the end of his tether and pitifully helpless, clinging to Mary for support and confessing to her what seems a failure when he says, "Oh Mary, I couldn't, I couldn't" (*U.T.* p. 178). Moreover, Cuffy cannot even understand what he is referring to, asking himself "What did it mean he said he *couldn't* be lost? Why not?" (p. 178), stressing on the one hand no doubt the child's incomprehension of his agony but also endorsing Mary's point of view which regards his conduct here as of a piece with what has gone before, exasperating, if also to be pitied and agonising.

Most of all, however, it is the style which refuses to support the tragic impulse within the novel and Richardson betrays some awareness of her problem here, as elsewhere, when she has Mahony reflect on a *Life of Jesus* he has read, retelling the story from a rationalistic standpoint, and condemn it as a "savagely unimaginative work" (*A.F.* p. 176). Nor is it just its scepticism which makes him uneasy but also its style. Laying "all too little weight on the deeps of poetry, the mysteries of symbols, and the power the human mind drew from these, to pierce to an ideal truth" (*A.F.* p. 176), the work begs the question it purports to face, the question of God. So Mahony resolves that "his own modest efforts would be of another kind" (*A.F.* p. 176). But if his intention here reflects Richardson's own, the style of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* represents the failure, not the fulfilment, of this intention. With the exception of scenes like those already discussed, the scenes in which the carter and his rabbits, the dog and the tormented horse work at a more or less symbolic level, there is little or no use of metaphor or symbol and descriptions are based on observation or on historical research rather than belief. By and large, as in most naturalistic novels, thought and emotion are registered mostly from the outside, in terms of physical objects, by descriptions of the weather, for example, as in the account of John Turham's death on a blazing summer day or of the external environment, in the emphasis on the cold and damp, and the precise documentation of social detail during the Mahony's time in England. To a large extent, it is by their reaction to their possessions, and to the fashions and customs of their society that we come to know the characters, Richard being characterised by withdrawal from them, Mary by acceptance, even at times delight in them, as for instance, in the party she gives in the early days of their prosperity in Ballarat. As a result, the scenes in which the novelist attempts to trace the movements of Richard's thought give an impression of weightlessness, of abstraction from reality, and the fact that it is only Richard's thoughts, very seldom anyone else's, confirms this impression. For the circumstantial documentation with which Richardson surrounds her characters allied with the matter-of-fact unemotional style, implies a distrust for speculation and a commitment to physical fact as to the only form of truth. Mary, not Richard, obviously lives by this commitment, and the style is not the least of the reasons which draw so many readers to regard her and not Richard as the centre of value in the novel.

By and large, then, her prose conveys the feeling that the social background against which the characters perform is perhaps the determining factor in their lives, and one might even interpret the Proem's insistence on the power the land exercises upon individuals in this way. However, for all its commitment to physical fact, the style also witnesses to the ambivalence we have been discussing. A strange feeling of strain also emerges. Many of her sentences are nervous, highly punctuated, moving with difficulty and pausing frequently to qualify or to allow what has been said to sink in as if the writer were unsure of herself or of her relations with her readers, unable to assume their agreement and trying to clear a space within which her imagination may move, released from this anxiety. Thus nouns tend to predominate over verbs, and verbs indicating states of being over verbs indicating positive action. In the crucial last moments of the whole trilogy, one sentence¹⁰ loses direction completely, lacking a main verb to carry it to its conclusion as if to witness, even here, to her inability to make connection between her ideal interpretation of Richard's fate with the real world. Essentially, that is to say, her vision is revealed as intransitive, self-enclosed. And this, to recur to the parallels between the novelist and her protagonist, is precisely the predicament in which Richard

Mahony also finds himself, overwhelmed by a consciousness of himself which little or nothing in the world outside him will support and bereft therefore of any standards of objectivity and generality.

To conclude, then, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* offers striking confirmation of Lucien Goldmann's proposition that a work cannot be understood fully "as long as we remain at the level of what he wrote or even of what he read and what influenced him. Ideas are only a partial aspect of a less abstract reality, that of the whole, living man, and in his turn, this man is only an element in a life made up of the social group to which he belongs".¹¹ The social group to which Richardson belonged, the people she met as an Australian expatriate in Leipzig, London and in her readings of Freud, Schopenhauer, Ibsen and so on, only tended to intensify the ambivalence we have been discussing between the impulse towards the transcendent and the contradictory impulse to trust only the evidence of sense and reason. Like her protagonist, however, she was unable to make a choice between them, clinging to the hope of some compromise between them as he clung to the conviction that there was no reason why "the evolutionary formula should be held utterly to rule out the transcendental formula" (*W.H.* p. 168). So on the one hand her novel invites a naturalistic explanation of Mahony's fate, providing the material which has led doctors to identify his disease as a form of secondary syphilis while on the other hand it poses metaphysical questions about the nature of the universe and of the individual's place in it, the conflict between values and the problem of God and of human suffering. Unlike Richardson, however, most of her readers opt for one or the other of these two approaches, the naturalistic reading being most popular, reflecting the prevalence of a one-dimensional sense of reality within present culture. Nevertheless, the attempt to force any such universal explanation upon the novel is to falsify what is in fact a monument to a painful state of dividedness, to the sense expressed by Heidegger of being suspended in time in a culture which exists "too late for the gods and too early for Being".

NOTES:

1. Edward W. Said, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism", *Contemporary Literature*, XVII, 3 (Summer 1976), p. 337.
2. I am aware that Richardson spent most of her adult life in England. Nevertheless, the presuppositions underlying English culture were and are substantially the same in Australia, even if they appear here in a vulgarised, less intellectually sophisticated form.
3. *Ultima Thule* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1971), p. 279. Hereafter referred to in the text as *U.T.*
4. Frank E. Manuel, *Utopias & Utopian Thought* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973).
5. *Australia Felix* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1971), p. 286. Hereafter cited in the text as *A.F.*
6. I am also aware, of course, of the other more practical reasons for this choice.
7. *The Way Home* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1971), p. 169. Hereafter cited in the text as *W.H.*
8. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Collins, 1975), p. 169.
9. Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism in American Literature*.
10. "But, those who had known and loved him passing, scattering, forgetting, rude weeds choked the flowers, the cross toppled over, fell to pieces and was removed, the ivy that entwined it uprooted." (*U.T.* pp. 278–9).
11. *The Hidden God* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 7.

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