‘… why do we have to go to people's birthplaces?’

He hadn't answered that question before. ‘You're too questioning. You go to see where the magic started. You go to see if you can be touched by the magic. To see if there is any left.’

(Frank Moorhouse, Forty-Seventeen)

All Plots

YOU may remember that early chapter in White Noise where there’s one of those comic, unsettling episodes so characteristic of Don de Lillo's fiction. The narrator Jack Gladney, a senior academic, arrives at the Arts Duplex of his university to teach his one class of the week. It's the beginning of the academic year. The course he teaches is called ‘Advanced Nazism’: ‘a course of study designed to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms’ (25). Gladney is head of the Centre for Hitler Studies at his university, and every semester, as an introduction to his course, he arranges for a screening of an ‘impressionistic eighty-minute documentary’ of ‘propaganda films, scenes shot at party congresses, outtakes from mystical epics featuring parades of gymnasts and mountaineers’ (25). After the screening, one of his students asks Jack about the plot to kill Hitler. The discussion moves to plots in general:

I found myself saying to the assembled heads, “All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot.”

Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean? (26)

Neither Jack Gladney, nor de Lillo for that matter, attempts to answer these rhetorical and metafictional questions. They seem structurally emblematic of the novel as a whole, as it moves towards the death of Mink and the near death of Wilder. De Lillo's narrative has the same question-like shape as the episode in the lecture theatre: what does it mean? Is it true that all plots move deathward? What drives Jack to ask, especially since it is Jack, the narrator, who carefully plots the death of Mink? This essay doesn't attempt to answer such questions either, but I hope it works as a kind of extension and recontextualisation of them. For Henry Handel Richardson's The Fortunes of Richard Mahony in the guise of classic realism provides a powerful expression of similar questions, and with some deeply embedded strands of self-reflexivity as well. Richard Mahony, too, is subject to the foundational narrative equivocations endemic to all representations of death, determined as they are by conflictual absolutes of meaning or non-meaning, where death is both a sign of the fullness of transcendental meaning and of a material event that negates meanings of any kind (Schleifer 4). As well as this rhetorical formulation, the question of the origins of narrative in death has specific historical and national instances.

Readings of Richardson's fiction tend to deploy a mimetic historicism that maps the known events and documents of Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson's life on to her narratives. But I think that Richard Mahony is much more available to a psychorhetorical reading where the deconstructive apparatus of grammar and rhetoric corresponds, figuratively, to conscious and unconscious levels of narrative. This
is suggested initially by its obsessive vocabulary and thematics of ‘home’. This manifest content of the novel is in fact an expression of a latent tension that has its source in the conditions of possibility for fiction itself. There are a series of incidents, particularly Richard Mahony's return to his original home in Dublin and his mental breakdown at Barambogie, that can be read as ambivalent figurations of the a-originality of Richardson's fictional characters, and perhaps of all fictional characters. My emphasis here on the structure and rhetoric of ‘home’, its compulsive repetition across the trilogy and its relations to a cultural poetics of death as it is exemplified in Richardson's fiction, are related also to the outer frame of this reading. If I'm proposing a kind of chapter in the historiography of death in Australia, then this rhetorical reading of Richard Mahony is a recognition of the mode of historicity of my own reading (de Certeau xx). The order of knowledge I'm working within and against is one for which everything is knowable and speakable; it is a critical culture without an unconscious, and for that matter without any theories or models of the psyche. Australian literary criticism continues to be characterised by ‘idealized fantasies of wholeness we invent […] to give ourselves the comfort of believing in a Oneness of resolutions within consciousness’ (Ragland 82).

Epigraphs and Repetitions

On the second page of the first single-volume edition of Henry Handel Richardson's The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is an epigraph from Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici about how no man is an original. It is inserted between the dedication to one man — W.L.R., (Walter Lindesay Richardson, the author's father) — on the preceding page, and the beginning of the story of another man, the fictional Richard Mahony, on the page following. It reads:

‘Every man is not only himself; …
men are lived over again; the world is
now as it was in ages past; there was
none then, but there hath been some one
since, that parallels him, and is, as it
were, his revived self.’ (2)

The original passage from Religio Medici, which Richardson has abridged slightly, comes from Section 6, early on in Browne's disquisition, where he is writing about heresies and how they 'perish not with their authors', but like subterranean rivers disappear, only to reappear again later, in different places. The reason is that human beings, as well as their beliefs and opinions, keep repeating themselves:

For as though there were a metempsychosis, and the soul of one man passed into another, opinions do find, after certain revolutions, men and minds like those that first begat them. To see ourselves again, we need not look for Plato's year; every man is not only himself; there have been many Diogenes, and as many Timons, though but few of that name; men are lived over again; the world is now as it was in ages past — there was none then, but there hath been someone since that parallels him, and is, as it were, his revived self. (7–8)

Since the origins of man, individuals have been subject to repetition, as though ‘there were a metempsychosis’, a transference of souls from old, exhausted bodies over into new ones. According to Browne, the human race originated with a finite number of individuals, or types, and has been repeating them ever since, right down to the present day. Men are lived over and over again, revived in the literal sense of brought back to life. Browne implies perhaps that metempsychosis is not a completely accurate term — ‘as though there were a metempsychosis’ — because human beings are repeated in mind and body, as well as soul. As it turns out, the repetitions of The Fortunes of Richard Mahony are only ‘human’ at the level of the rhetoric of representation. It is in fact the formal and linguistic repetitions of fiction that determine all the surface varieties of recurrence; as if narratives were born with an innate and unique propensity for repetition coded into their genetic material. In her epigraph, then, Richardson is pointing as much to the repetitions of fiction, like those in the reading that follows, as to any putative mystery of actual human existence.

The epigraph seems to refer both backwards and forwards. Read back, in the direction of the dedication, it suggests that Walter Lindesay Richardson, her father, was not a unique and free individual, but rather,
as in Browne's determinist psychology, a mere repetition of a lost original, one in a series of near-clones. Epigraphs seem to have this kind of resonance, especially perhaps where realist fiction is concerned. They function like hinges: they refer out to the world beyond the fictional worlds they preface; they also seem to draw the real world closer into the fictional one, as though they were commenting in the same way on both the world of any novel and the actual world. The main force of Richardson's epigraph seems to point it forward though. Read in the light of the narrative to come, it suggests that not only is the reader going to encounter the story of a ‘type’, of a man who is not uniquely and only himself, but also that the fictional Richard Mahony is a kind of repetition (mimesis) of the historical W.L.R., because we know how heavily Richardson relied on the history of her own family, and particularly her father, for the raw material of her fiction. In that sense, the epigraph may be suggesting, not even fictional characters can be originals; indeed, they have the least chance of 'originality', since they are merely repetitions of repetitions.

The fictional Richard Mahony is, of course, a doctor, although he doesn't always practise as one, and obviously religio medici translates as 'the religion of a doctor'. Richardson can hardly have been unaware of the resonance of the Browne epigraph, in the way it invites comparison between what we know of Sir Thomas Browne's beliefs and practices as a doctor and those of the fictional Richard Mahony. One thing it might suggest is that Mahony's religion, in the broadest sense of his beliefs and opinions about this life and the next, can be characterised by the term metempsychosis; that is, like Sir Thomas Browne, an earlier doctor, his belief is in human repetition, or unoriginality. This turns out to be largely accurate, of Mahony at least, even if not ultimately of Browne, given his melancholy version of traditional Christianity. Mahony, on the other hand, is typical of a certain kind of late nineteenth-century scientific thinking that is both anti-Christian (because positivist) and metempsychotic in its fascination with spiritualism. As this epigraph suggests, The Fortunes of Richard Mahony might have been subtitled: Religio Medici.

What is more, the epigraph is by no means the sole allusion to Browne in Richard Mahony; Richardson recalls Browne's texts at other crucial points in her fictional biography of a doctor. Thus, one further suggestion of the epigraph, at one remove from the others, is that a novelist's work is analogous to a doctor's, for as Browne writes about his own profession in the dedicatory letter to Hydriotaphia (Urnb) it falls to doctors 'whose study is life and death', 'to preserve the living, and make the dead to live, to keep men out of their urns, and discourse of human fragments in them' (92). To write the fictional biography of Richard Mahony, then, is to keep W.L.R. out of his urn and, for Richardson, to discourse of the human fragments that remain of her father. Ultimately, of course, it is to enact the identification of doctor and writer, father and daughter, Richard and Richardson (Myself When Young 24).2

A consequence of a belief in metempsychosis is that there is no single, unique origin for individuals in their birth and early development. There is only an utterly distant and irrecoverable origin that is coeval with the (lost) origins of the human race. The human soul and personality, the lasting and transferable elements of being, are without an original resting-place or home in that sense; they go on through innumerable incarnations as a procession of simulacra, repetitions of a long-lost original. They are always abroad, in this sense; they are homeless, ultimately, even though they may be at home briefly in individual incarnations. The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is a novel which represses its own fundamental questions about life and death, and their relations to narrative, in the form of structures of repetition and thematics of home. And it is no surprise that repetitions should be linked in Richardson's narrative to the repression of death repeatedly marked by the word 'home' and its cognates. According to Lacan in his rereading of Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle, published as it happens in the middle of Richardson's writing of the trilogy, 'what the patient repeats is opposed to the pleasure principle; and second, [...] the compulsion to repeat lies at the heart of the death drive' (Ragland 85). The discursive hinge here lies in the analogous acts of repetition by analysand and writer: 'repetition serves as a crucial node between the discourse of prose fiction and that of the unconscious' (Bronfen 104). The lexical and structural repetitions of Richard Mahony are generated by means of the home-work of fiction (by analogy with the dream-work of the unconscious), as repetitions of home, or of home and its other, exile. Fiction, like reading, is an act of memory, and it relies on the need to 'reproduce and to work through'; the repetition compulsion of the Mahony trilogy is produced by the resistance to its contradictory origins, the double drive both to entomb and to disinter its hero Richard Mahony (Brooks 98–99). The final block that works so powerfully to produce this resistance is the massive one of elemental psychic entities, one positive, one negative: home and death. The psychogenesis of novels
in the consciousness of writers is a mystery, but in the end, to judge by the overdetermined text of Richard Mahony, death was the only subject Henry Handel Richardson had to write home about.

**Cruel Displacements**

The ‘Proem’ that begins the novel is both violent and sombre. In the first sentence of this prefatory chapter a miner is buried alive; the first paragraph describes his horrible, suffocating death. The remainder of this ‘Proem’ is a brooding meditation on economics and exile occasioned by the striking of that first narrative blow. The diggers on Ballarat are ‘ensorcelled’ (11) by a Circe-like Australian earth who has reduced them to the condition of bestial exploiters. The chance to snatch a golden fortune from the earth has lured them away from their original homes, until finally, the passion for gold ‘itself awoke in them, an almost sensual craving to touch and possess; and the glitter of a few specks at the bottom of pan or cradle, in time, to mean more to them than ‘ “home” or wife, or child’ (10–11). In the case of the dead miner — known only as Bill — the ‘primeval [female] monster’, the ‘barbaric’ country he has invaded with ‘loveless schemes of robbing and fleeing’, has taken her revenge and punished his rape with death (11).

What this Gothic scene of economic exploitation, loneliness, rape, violence and death signifies is in sharp ironic counterpoint to the positive valency of the two titles: the ‘Proem’ is prefatory to both the whole triptych of the novel and to the first part: to the *Fortunes* of Richard Mahony, and to Australia Felix. The irony lies in the fact that the ‘Proem’ is a brief tale of evil fortune; it describes not Australia Felix, but Australia Misera. But there is a counter in the ‘Proem’ to this scene of misfortune and death from the hellish El Dorado of Ballarat, and it takes the form of Long Jim's sentimental vision of home. Long Jim, the dead Bill's only friend, weeps for the absence of home his friend's death brings home to him. Long Jim had been a lamplighter in London and three years before the novel's action begins had been seduced into leaving the ‘old country’ (5), which meant leaving his wife and home, by tales of easily gained wealth on the Australian gold fields. The prospect of meeting a similar fate to Bill prompts in Long Jim a half-drunk bout of ‘desperate homesickness for the old country’:

> Why had he ever been fool enough to leave it? He shut his eyes, and all the well-known sights and sounds of the familiar streets came back to him. He saw himself on his rounds of a winter's afternoon, when each lamp had a halo in the foggy air; heard the pit-pat of his four-footer behind him, the bump of the ladder against the prong of the lamp-post. His friend the policeman's glazed stovepipe shone out at the corner; from the distance came the tinkle of the muffin-man's bell, the cries of the buy-a-brooms. [...] he sighed for the lights and jollity of the “Hare and Hounds” on a Saturday night. He would never see anything of the kind again. No; here, under bare blue skies, out of which the sun frizzled you alive; here, where it couldn't rain without at once being a flood; where the very winds blew contrarily, hot from the north and bitter-chill from the south [...] he was doomed to end his life [...] Thus he sat and brooded, all the hatred of the unwilling exile for the land that gives him house-room burning in his breast. (5–6)

Home and exile, then, are expressed as a polarity of landscapes: Australia, the malignant sorceress, is inhospitable, unpitying, extreme in climate, also dangerous, ugly, and a place of exile for all the people on Ballarat. The landscape of home is domestic and cozy; by contrast, the Australian landscape disfigures the exile, knotting and gnarling him with rheumatism. Long Jim forgets, in his self-pity, the harsh economic fact that drove him to Australia — irremediable poverty. Later, in a repetition of Mahony's own shuttling between home and exile, Mahony will pay for Long Jim's return 'home' and Jim will write back from there about how unhappy he is. The 'reality' or otherwise of Long Jim's reverie of home is not the sole point; Richardson is dramatising how one experience generates its other, how the fact of displacement creates the nostalgia for originary places, how exile turns from willing to unwilling.

The Proem, generated by the imagining of home and the forgetting of exile, is the beginning of Richardson's long, home-and-away game of fiction. And just as buried beneath this alternating polarity of the ‘Proem’ there is a harsher economy of home and its other, evident in the figures of the buried miner and the engulfing earth, so this novel will draw through a long repetitive chain of home and exile towards the explicit confluence of home with death and burial. Like Jack Gladney in the Arts Duplex, this opening scene
is a kind of *mise en abyme*. It functions, literally, as a *reflexion* of the work that follows (Dällenbach 8).

A homeless searcher after wealth is buried in the Australian earth, and as with the men of the Moura mine disaster, his workplace becomes his tomb. Just like the miner Bill, Mahony will try to snatch his fortune from the Australian earth, in the form of investments in gold-mining, and he also will be buried under the weight of failure in a foreign land. What enhances the suggestion of mirroring, or *mise en abyme*, in this scene of the miner's death, is the semantics of the French term ‘abyme’, with its suggestions of depth and engulfment. It is also, homophonically, a *mise en abyme*, given that the miner's death is caused by a collapse of foundations, of the shaft's ‘uprights and tailors’, or beams: the miner's death is the (de)mise of a beam. The figuration here, though, lies in the attempts of Richardson's psychoanalytic fiction to bury alive the entities it represses and that are focused on the figure of Mahony. For, as the live-burial scene suggests, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is a kind of monument. A well-recognised topos of the ‘origin of the text’, a monument or tomb, in fiction, signifies the equivocalness or lostness of foundations (Dällenbach 182). The ‘familiar, homely earth’ (9) of the ‘Proem’ will become, in the end, the last ‘resting place’, the permanent residency of Richard Mahony in the urn-burial of Richardson's fiction.

In this sense, Richardson has borrowed the authority for her story from death, as Walter Benjamin says any storyteller in fact does (94). What is strange (*unheimlich*) is that the often-quoted insights of Benjamin's into the origin of narrative and its relations in death, in the essay on ‘The Storyteller’, should hinge on a story about a buried miner. At the relevant point in *Illuminations* (Sections X and XI of ‘The Storyteller’) Benjamin illustrates his contention that ‘death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell’, by referring to a story of Johann Peter Hebel. This story

> begins with the betrothal of a young lad who works in the mines of Falun. On the eve of his wedding he dies a miner's death at the bottom of his tunnel. His bride keeps faith with him after his death, and she lives long enough to become a wizened old woman; one day a body is brought up from the abandoned tunnel which, saturated with iron vitriol, has escaped decay, and she recognises her betrothed. After this reunion she too is called away by death. (94)

Beginning and ending as it does with death and burial, it is as if in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* Richardson has kept faith with the long-buried body of her father and lived on to tell his story, preserving it from decay, by lasting long enough to complete the story, but all the same gaining her considerable authority as the teller of that story from his death.

**Home-units and Epitaphs**

When we first meet him, Richard Mahony doesn't think of Australia as home; he feels the general ‘unrest’ of the Ballarat gold fields which aren't home to anyone, where even the living spaces reflect the restlessness of the inhabitants: the ‘life one led out here was not calculated to tone down any innate restlessness of temperament: on the contrary, it directly hindered one from becoming fixed and settled. Its keynote was change’ (27). Home is the old country which Mahony would ‘joyfully depart for’ as soon as he prospers enough to do so (27). Mahony consoles himself with the knowledge that his residency in Australia is only alluvial, ‘an affair of the surface’ (33).

It is during his ride to Melbourne to untangle the affair of the lost dray of goods, that there occurs the first mention of Mahony's Dublin home and where we get a glimpse of his childhood. He and Purdy Smith, who is accompanying him down to Melbourne, reminisce about their boyhoods in Dublin. Purdy, with his English mother, had lived in a ‘common house in a side street’, while Mahony, ‘when he reached home, closed the door of one of the largest houses in the most exclusive square in Dublin’ (35). But the reader doesn't get past this front door for the moment and it turns out that Purdy's house feels more like home to the boy Mahony because of its friendliness and because there is more than enough to eat there, in contrast with his own home where ‘on the glossy damask of the big house, often not enough food was set to satisfy the growing appetites of himself and his sisters’ (35). In Mahony's displaced reminiscences of home on the Melbourne Road, then, there is revealed a further and original displacement where the Townshend-Mahony home appears not as home at all; it is the warm, generous, welcoming house of Mrs Smith and his friend Purdy that he remembers as home. And Mahony's attachment to ‘home’, Mrs Smith's that is, is in fact stronger than Purdy's: ‘Purdy laughed heartily at these and other incidents fished up by his friend from the
well of the years; but he did not take part in the sport himself. He had not Mahony's gift for recalling detail; to him past was past. He only became alive and eager when the talk turned, as it soon did, on his immediate prospects’ (35). Of the two, it is Mahony who appears, at this early stage of the novel, as the homebody.

It is the looming business failure of his store and the rejection he suffers from the diggers over his lack of sympathy for their cause at Eureka that prompt Mahony to think that Ballarat can never really be his home after all. And this occurs just when Polly is pregnant with their first child. Australia, Mahony rationalises, is unfit as the site of a family home: ‘“You know, love, I've always wished to get home again. And now there's an additional reason. I don't want my … our children to grow up in a place like this. Without companions — or refining influences. Who knows how they would turn out?” ’ (130). This is part of what Mahony feels, but an equal factor in his desire for a return to England is his sense of intellectual and cultural exile. Married to Polly, at home with her and her support, Mahony nevertheless turns to Europe as his mind’s home:

_On Ballarat not even a stationer's existed: nor were there more than a couple of shops in Melbourne itself that could be relied on to carry out your order. You perforce fell behind in the race, remained ignorant of what was being said and done — in science, letters, religious controversy — in the great world overseas._ (135)

But the end of Part III of _Australia Felix_ sees Mahony decided on remaining in Australia and about to embark on a medical practice in Ballarat. While he has been deluding himself with the possibility of selling up his meagre business and returning to England, Polly, after losing her first child and convalescing in Geelong with her former employer Mrs Beamish and in Melbourne with her brother John, has been thinking of ways to persuade her husband to make his home in the colony of Victoria. Appropriately enough, it is the word ‘home’ that occurs in the narrative precisely at the point where Polly's words have tipped the balance of Mahony's decision-making in favour of staying in Australia: ‘[t]he fact was, certain of his wife's words had struck home; and in the course of the past year he had learnt to put considerable faith in Polly's practical judgment’ (176).

The Mahonys' second home is the one they build in West Ballarat with a loan from Henry Ocock and on surety from John Turnham. After his success with the ‘Porepunkah’ shares, Mahony buys a grander residence in Webster Street, still in Ballarat, but before long he tears it down and rebuilds in brick, the ‘first brick house to be built on Ballarat’ (326). His investments allow him considerable material comfort and his practice makes giant strides. His home seems settled and secure; his fortunes are looking up. But at this stage of Mahony's life, two voices begin to unsettle him; one erupts from inside him while the other comes from outside. The interior voice is Mahony's questioning of his own spiritual and moral direction — ‘He was 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?’ (192). It comes to him very soon after moving to the new house in West Ballarat where he suddenly has a short period of enforced leisure while he is waiting for patients.

At the other end of his Ballarat success is the harsh, embittered voice of Tangye which, unlike the searching, idealistic questions of Mahony's interior monologue, is full of countervailing assertions about man's fate. Mahony is out walking at the uncertain hour before morning, after his and Mary's first large party for their friends and professional associates. Tangye just suddenly appears. Shadowy, driven, bitter, poor, Tangye is the articulate voice of colonial failure; he represents the polar opposite of the colonial success Mahony has recently been host to — brash, newly wealthy, oddly cultivated (musical entertainment as well as big school card games), ruthlessly self-serving. Tangye, a chemist and abortionist, is also a kind of dark double of Mahony the professional medical man. For Mahony, as much as for the reader, what Tangye has to say (and he is little more than a ghostly voice in the narrative) is seriously unsettling. Like a series of chords picking up and developing a much earlier motif, the sombre tones of Tangye's speech are back to that first sentence of the novel. If, as readers, we had forgotten the failure and violent death that lie just outside the rowdy, gaslit circle of colonial success, then Tangye's monologue reminds us:

‘Well, I say to you, think twice of it! If you have the chance of gettin' away, take it. It's no place this, doctor, for the likes of you and me. Haven't you never turned and asked yourself what the devil you were doin' here? And that reminds me. … There was a line we used to have drummed into us at school — it's often come back to me since. Coelum, non animum,
mutant, qui trans mare currunt. In our green days we gabbled that off by rote; then, it seemed just one more o’ the eel-sleek phrases the classics are full of. Now, I take off my hat to the man who wrote it. He knew what he was talkin’ about — by the Lord Harry, he did!’ (305)

This history of Australia Felix, then, as Richardson herself described it ‘this straightforward account of my country’s youth’, that had begun with a brief, but tragic moment, and then continued in a busily major key, suddenly turns sinister and minor once again (‘Some Notes on My Books’ 343). But for only a short space; Mahony hardly has more than a few hours to let the significance of the Tangye episode sink in, even though subconsciously he will remember his words for many years to come. By early morning he is caught up again in his busy medical practice.

Richardson’s own commentary on her novel bears a striking resemblance to Tangye’s speaking position for, as she writes, her aim was to present the pioneering community of Ballarat ‘not as it looked to a spectator of the present day but through the mind and senses of one who had formed part of it. And one of the unlucky ones. Other novelists had written successful adventures on the gold fields, of happy adaptation to the new country’ (Palmer 70–71):

But there was another and very different side of the picture, and one on which, to my knowledge, no writer had dwelt. What of the failures, to whose lot neither fortunes nor stirring adventures fell? The misfits who were physically and mentally incapable of adapting themselves to this hard new world? I knew of many such; and my plan was to tell the life-story of one of them, with the changing face of the country for background … (‘Some Notes on My Books’ 341–42)

The ‘premonitory figure’ of Tangye fades back into the night like an apparition; Mahony tells no-one of his conversation with him and the narrator leaves the incident uncommented on (Mares 65).

It is Mahony’s mid-life crisis towards the end of Australia Felix that leads to his plan to return ‘home’. In the midst of his spiritual and nervous unease Mahony recalls some words of Horace that ‘like a half-remembered tune … came floating into his mind’ (378), ‘whatever their source, words that fitted his case to a nicety. Coelum, non animum, mutant, qui trans mare currunt. “Non animum?” Ah! could he but have foreseen this — foreknown it’ (378–79). Mahony has forgotten where he last heard these words repeated — ‘those who change the sky above them, who journey across the sea, do not change their spirit’; they were quoted to him by Tangye, the ghostly prophet of colonial waste and disillusion and a proleptic figure of Mahony’s own future failure. The dream of the rich, green home country once again returns to Mahony at this crisis point in his career, and at the height of a fierce Australian summer. Mahony even jokes, with a mordant irony as it turns out: ‘ “I confess, If I’ve got to be buried I’d rather lie elsewhere — have good English earth atop me” ’ (382). But the dream of home (and of home burial), always incipient in Mahony, returns with its strongest insistence so far, ‘not till now did he grasp how sorely he had missed it. “Oh believe me, to talk of ‘going home’ is no mere figure of speech, Mary!” ’ (383). Mahony’s little whims, like the Indian clubs, the exercise machines and the renovating and extension of the house, end up in the ‘cemetery of dead fads’, but, as Mary recognises, they have been leading up to the really big whim of selling up and returning home.

It is home, then, that is at the centre of this conflict between Mahony and his wife, it will be repeatedly throughout their married lives. Mahony is too much deluded by the dream of a home elsewhere to rest in Australia, while Mary recognises Ballarat as their best chance of home. The stakes in the power struggle between husband and wife are raised, but in the end the patriarchy easily defeats Mary; Mahony’s dream of a utopian (European) home wins out over her love of an existing (domestic) home. The final scene of Australia Felix shows the Mahonys sailing through Port Phillip Heads, ‘heading for the dear old mother country — for home’ (405), with Mahony pacing about exultantly on deck while Mary is abandoned below in a poky cabin, too sick to witness their departure. It is now the old Ballarat home that has become ‘a mere figure of speech’ (397).

The second volume of the trilogy, The Way Home, was Richardson’s ‘favourite of the three’; the title, with all its ironic suggestions, seemed to her apter than most (‘Some Notes on My Books’ 346). Again,
without any acknowledgment to Tangye, his (repeated) words stand at the head of the Proem to *The Way Home*, in the form of part of the quotation from Horace: ‘… qui trans mare currunt’ (409), a repetition that ‘prolongs and formalizes the middle, and also prepares the end’ (Brooks 320).  

The rhetorical gestures of the Proem to *Australia Felix* were coolly oppositional and sombre. The Proem to this second volume is more buoyant and optimistic — Mahony after all has ‘heard and obeyed the home-call’ and sailed joyously for England (417) — although there is probably as much ambivalence in the writing. Where *Australia Felix* began with sad and violent scenes of displacement, *The Way Home* begins with the ambivalent desire for replacement; returning to England, Mahony hopes to repatriate himself and his family. But Mahony seems more at home during their westward voyage to England than he has anywhere else in the narrative so far. If you cannot change your spirit or self, no matter where or how far you travel, then it is only in the act of travelling that the possibility of a different self, of an unrepeatable existence, is realisable; the very moment you come to rest, even if the sky has changed — ‘Cross for Plough’ (409) — the fact of one’s *unchanged* self returns. In Mahony’s case especially, the dream of home, of a return to the Arcadian place of origin, is closest to reality during the process of travel, during, that is, the time and space of complete homelessness.

There are further ambivalences in this second Proem: amongst the small knot of colonials returning home either because they had amassed a fortune or because they had not, Mahony stands apart: ‘he himself was the only half-tint on the palette’ (411).

Not only is Mahony neither a colonial Croesus nor one of the ‘lean kine’ (411) who have failed in Australia, his opinions about his recent home are far less crude and ungrateful than his travelling companions: ‘so it came about that Mary was sometimes agreeably surprised to hear Richard, if not exactly standing up for the colony, at least not helping to swell the choir of its detractors’ (412). The differences between Mary’s and Richard’s first responses to the sight of the English coast are comically inflected:

> Quite so lovely as this, one had not dared to remember the homeland. There it lay, stretched like an emerald belt against its drab background, and was as grateful to sun-tired eyes as a draught of mountain water to a climber’s parched throat. Not a rood of this earth looked barren or unkempt: veritable lawns ran down to the brink of the cliffs; hedges ruled bosky lines about the meadows; the villages were bowers of trees — English trees. (414)

To Mary, it looks pretty and *tidy*, ‘… like’ — she hesitated, searching her memory for the trimmest spot she knew; and ended — “doesn’t it? … just like the Melbourne Botanical Gardens”’ (414–15). The fact that England appears to them in *miniature* — ‘this adorable littleness, this miniature perfection’ (415) — is significant; as a distantly-viewed miniature, ‘England’ can more than fulfil the Arcadian dream of home, it appears on the horizon as the *souvenir* of England Mahony in particular, but Mary as well, have kept packed away with them in their exile. This is precisely the point in the narrative of Mahony’s self, his sight of the Southern Downs from the rail of the returning clipper-ship, where the idea of home and the dream of ‘reunion and incorporation, for the repetition that is not a repetition’ are most forcefully and unambiguously coincident (Stewart xii).  

It’s therefore no surprise that the rhetorical figures of this passage, in the narrative’s seeking of identity of lost origin (home) and mother, should rely on a gendered chiasmus of the narrative of the prodigal son:

> his feelings were those of the nomad son who, weary of beating up and down the world, turns home at last to rest on the untravelled heart of his mother. Here the familiar atmosphere of his childhood laps him round; and he breathes it greedily — even while he marvels how time has stood still for the home-keepers, and asks himself if he can ever again be one of them. All the tempestuous years of his youth lie between. (415)

This mythical and overblown narrative of exile and return — ‘vapourings’ as the narrator describes them — generates momentarily a kind of meta-narrative to the narrative of Mahony’s self, once again, with a reliance on metaphors of home.

Mahony’s carefully planned return visit to Dublin is a crucial episode in *The Way Home*. It’s on this journey that Mahony learns something surprising about himself: ‘when he looked back on the weeks that
followed, he saw them solely in the light of a journey into the past’ (Clark 41). And now, too, he grasped why he had so long postponed embarking on it. He was, he discovered, ‘one of those who have a nervous aversion from returning on their traces’ (454). Mahony discovers in himself an aversion to his original home and to the process of homecoming; he is learning that he should have seen himself as an emigrant, not as an exile or expatriate. Condemned as he seems to be to repeat the establishment of a home, Mahony doesn’t even have the consolation of an original home where repetition ceases. And Mahony’s old home in Dublin is both unchanged and dying. Nothing about it has changed in the way he has, he feels, and yet at the same time his relatives ‘had made giant strides along the road to decay’ (454). Mahony spends merely three days in the gloomy, decaying, straitened atmosphere of his old home; the narrator likens it to a descent into the underworld, the home of the dead: ‘this experience [gave] him the sensation of a dream in which he, who was alive, went down among those who had ceased to live…’ (457). Dorothy Green quite rightly points out the dead flatness of the narration in this passage: ‘[i]n Richard’s home setting the atmosphere is even more arid [than in Mary’s]. There is no attempt to present his mother and sisters; the home-coming episode is reported rather than dramatised, a fact which contributes to the air of lifelessness evoked’ (Green 280). Mahony (and Green, too) has forgotten that it never really was home; Mahony doesn’t go looking for Mrs Smith’s house.

What happens is that Mahony and Mary have remained outszie colonial figures in a miniature landscape, unable to accommodate themselves to the Botanical Gardens that is England, a place of marked paths, controlled growth, introduced species, social and cultural hierarchies, set opening and closing times. How accurate, then, Mary’s initial (unconscious) joke analogy was: despite its appearance of genteel and smug homeliness, England is an artificial environment, where the public world dominates entirely the private world of selves. Nobody is at home in Botanical Gardens. At this point that the narrative turns back on the lyricism of its Proem, as Mahony realises that the thrill he had experienced on first beholding England, ‘… — his pleasure in its radiant greenness — was the sum total of the satisfaction he would ever get from it. No sooner ashore — and not even Mary had fathomed his passionate desire to stand well here — than he had felt himself outsider and alien. England had no welcome for her homing sons, or any need of them: their places were long since filled’ (494). The way home, now, is the return to Australia.

It is Mary who reasserts the possibility of a return to their antipodean home. To Mahony’s ‘ “What now?” ’ and ‘ “Where can I go?” ’ Mary answers squarely: ‘ “Why, home again!” ’ — words which first made Mahony wince, then snort with contempt’ (495–96). Having been cured of the dream of settling in England, Mahony declares at this point his utter homelessness, mostly, it must be said, out of self-pity. He may regret as deeply as he can displacing Mary from what she thinks of as home, but the deepest difference between them, as now becomes acutely apparent, has always been about home, for, as he thinks about Australia and their return, his unspoken request is ‘ “Only do not call it home” […] Short of a miracle that name would never, he believed, cross his lips again. No place could now be “home” to him as long as he lived’ (496).

Shortly after his return to Australia, Mahony builds a house in Melbourne, having decided against returning on his traces to Ballarat, as Mary would perhaps have preferred. He names the new house, in bayside Brighton, ‘Ultima Thule’ (540). With his new-found leisure, free of his ‘two old arch-enemies time and money’ (555) because of the success of his mining shares, Mahony resumes his intellectual and spiritual interest in questions about the origins of life. Mahony’s crisis of faith, though, is with science and philosophy, not with religion. He was a freethinker from the beginning, but now the knowledge his ‘soul craves’ (559) is a knowledge of the ‘continuity of existence; the nearness, the interwovenness of the spiritual world to the material’ (559). Thus Mahony’s constitutional restlessness seeks an outlet in his researches into spiritualism, into the possibility of an eternal life of the spirit. ‘For in the things of the spirit, too, Mahony is a restless seeker after new lands; but here,too, the “way home” — through natural science, religion, spiritualism — is blocked; the quest ends in disillusionment’ (Robertson 188).

After the death of John Turnham and in the face of Mary’s concern over his increasing obsession with spiritualism Mahony once again breaks up the family home, proposing to rent ‘Ultima Thule’ for a year while they take a grand tour of England and Europe. In the end, Mahony is responsible for selling what will have been their grandest home; ‘Ultima Thule’ turns out to be the farthest point of Mahony’s good fortune and the future home he promises Mary they will plan together, ‘every inch of it’, that will be more their own than any house they have lived in, will never be a reality (666). ‘Ultima Thule’ is Mahony’s ‘last earthly
“home”; after he leaves it, there is no other domicile in the world to which he becomes attached’ (Green 298). Somewhere in the second half of *The Way Home*, the reader starts to sense the ominousness of Mahony’s increasingly frenetic acts of settlement and home breaking. It becomes a kind of sickening pattern: return, setting up home, dismantling it, returning to Europe to discover homelessness, dissatisfied return to Australia.

Richardson takes ‘Ultima Thule’, the name of the home that Mahony has lost forever, as the bleakly ironic title for the last volume of the trilogy. The two words that had named the farthest point of Mahony’s good fortune now name the extremity of tragic misfortune and madness. "Ultima Thule" is dedicated (in earlier editions) to M.L.R., HHR’s mother, Mary Lindesay Richardson. In what is surely a conscious mirroring of the opening pages of the trilogy, this simple dedication is followed by another epigraph that seems to signify in more than one direction: ‘And some there be, which have no memorial…” *Ecclesiasticus*, xliv, 90’ (700). Read forward this suggests that the third section of the narrative is a memorial to Richardson’s mother; if this long novel is overall a memorial to W.L.R., as its first dedication suggests, then that has too easily obscured the importance of M.L.R.’s role and that of her fictional counterpart Mary Mahony. But it also suggests that the obscure failure of Richard Mahony, a failure that parallels, negatively, the progress of the Australian nation, leaves him with no memorial. The context of the biblical passage suggests strongly that Mahony is the one being memorialised in fiction. Ironically, Mahony has been, briefly, one of the famous colonial men, one of those ‘rich men furnished with resources, living peaceably in their habitations — all those were honoured in their generations, and were the glory of their times’ (*Bible* 162). In the end, though, he is one who has no memorial, who, in the words that immediately follow verse 9 of *Ecclesiasticus*

have perished as though they had not lived; they have become as though they had not been born, and so have their children after them. But these were men of mercy, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; their prosperity will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance to their children’s children. (*Bible* 162)

But whichever way one reads it, this epigraph suggests that the narrative which follows is in fact an enormously long epitaph, a lengthy inscription on the imaginary tomb of Richard Mahony, or the textual ‘life’ that keeps him out of his urn and fragments of human discourse in it. And when it comes to the closing words of *Ultima Thule*, it will be obvious how appropriate this reading of the narrative as epitaph appears. Like many narratives of self, the story of Richard Mahony’s life turns out to be epitaphic; Mahony’s final resting-place is not so much his grave, ‘indistinguishable from the common ground’ (990) as it is, but the inscription for his grave, the extended literary epitaph of Richardson’s fiction.

Mahony returns to the colony, financially ruined, and ‘at heart the stranger he had always been’ (702). He knows nothing of the home Australia will be ‘to a later generation … who with their mother’s milk, [will drink] in a love of sunlight and space; of inimitable blue distances and gentian-blue skies’ (701). Against what he knows would be Mary’s better judgement, Mahony builds an overly-grand house in Hawthorn. The medical practice that goes with it, though, needs building up in ways he can no longer manage. Once again Mahony flees, this time to a rumoured flourishing practice up country at Barambogie (Chiltern). Barambogie turns out to be a dying rather than a flourishing rural centre, and the practice Mahony believed was there, a mirage. After the death of Lallie, Mary takes the other children for a holiday to Lorne. Left alone in Barambogie Mahony enters on the long last chapter of his dementia. It begins as an exaggeration of traits that had always been present in him: a brooding detachment from all human contact, lacerating introspection, impracticality. At the beginning of this final descent into madness, Mahony once again recalls the words of Tangye, although he has long forgotten the Ballarat chemist and their meeting late one night outside Mahony’s home. Tangye’s disillusioned reflections on life had come down to a single material fact, the fact of a home:

‘there’s a lot of bunkum talked about life,’ returned Tangye dryly, and settled his glasses on his nose. ‘And as a man gets near the end of it, he sees just what bunkum it is. Life’s only got one meanin’, doctor; seen plain, there’s only one object in everything we do; and that’s to keep a sound roof over our heads and a bite in our mouths — and in those of helpless creatures who depend on us.’ (309)
These are among Tangye's last words to Mahony and he recalls them more than a decade later, just as he is beginning to realise how incapable he is of dealing with Tangye's fundamental human truth; for if life, at its extremes, is about providing a home for oneself and one's family, Mahony's life has been one long failure to do so.

At this furthest point of Gothic psychologising, in the 'coffin-like fastness' of the Barambogie house (another ‘Ultima Thule’), with Mary and the children away, Mahony probes the pathology of his recurrent flights from home (Sedgwick 97). Why the rending pain of human re-enactment? How is he arrived at the terrifying end of not being able to provide even material shelter for himself and those who depend on him?

Wherein lay the fault, the defect, that had made of him throughout his life a hunted man? … harried from place to place, from country to country. Other men set up a goal, achieved it, and remained content. He had always been in flight. — But from what? Who were his pursuers? From what shadows did he run? — And in these endless nights, when he lay and searched his heart as never before, he thought he read the answer to the riddle. Himself he was the hunter and the hunted: the merciless in pursuit and the panting prey. Within him, it would seem, lodged fears … strange fears. And at a given moment one of these, hitherto dormant and unsuspected, would suddenly begin to brew, and go on growing till he was all one senseless panic, blind flight the only catholicon. […] He believed that the instinct of self-preservation had, in his case, always been the primary one. And digging deeper still, he got, he thought, a further insight into his motives. If this were so, then what he fled must needs be the reverse of the security he ran to seek: in other words, annihilation. The plain truth was: the life-instinct had been too strong for him. Rather than face death and the death-fear, in an attempt to flee the unfleeable he had thrown every other consideration to the winds, and ridden tantivy into the unknown. (826–27)

The ‘strange fears’ that Mahony feels generate his restlessness are the object of this crucial episode of self-analysis. What he fears most, then, is death, annihilation; that is what he repeatedly tries to escape from, but the further question Mahony doesn't go on to ask himself is why this death fear should be so heightened in him. If the fear of death is a common enough human trait, then, psychoanalytically speaking, what has raised ‘the unfleeable’ in Mahony’s unconscious mind to such a pitch? Why is Mahony’s particular plot so determined by its headlong flight towards death? One answer is that the primal scene, in Mahony’s case, is a death scene; his original home — which we know his memory anxiously and conveniently sublimated into Purdy’s home — must have been the home of death. Or, more likely, that the originary memory of death is also a primal memory of home. Cuffy’s memory of his dead father, read as the transferred biographical source of Richardson’s displaced memory, might support this. And in the live-burial scenes of Mahony’s return to Dublin, where his original home appears as a mausoleum, we can see the traces of an earlier death, one that Mahony can’t allow himself to remember. Perhaps this is why Mahony feels that

below the surface here, under a lid which he never lifted, which nothing would have induced him to raise by a hair’s-breadth, lurked a darker fear than any, one he could not face and live; even though, with a part of his mind, a watchful part, a part that it was impossible to deceive, he knew what it was. (828)

The reader, though, is never to know what this last fear of Mahony’s is, what lies buried in the deepest container, under the last lid. The ultimate home-truth can’t be spoken. In this sense, the fiction of Richard Mahony is analogous to urn-burial. What is clear here, then, and from the involuntary memories of his childhood home in the paragraph that immediately follows this one, is that it is a coffin, whether literal or figurative that lies at the very bottom of Mahony’s mind. It is below the surface, buried that is, like a miner in a collapsed shaft; it has a lid which is not to be raised. It contains death in some shape or form.

At this furthest point in the analysis, understandably enough, Mahony swerves violently, laying the ‘onus of his terror on a side issue’ (828), on the issue, that is, of how he is to confess to Mary his ruinous debt, the mortgage on the Hawthorn house. He imagines briefly the agonies of having to tell her, but it isn’t long before the volatile psychic material he has tried to repress, returns. And true to the originary trajectory of Mahony’s psychoanalytic probing, it is a memory of childhood and home that emerges, for what is only the second time in the narrative:
once again the years fell away, and he was a little velvet-suited lad, paling and quivering under the lash of a caustic Irish tongue. But there also came times when some such vividly recalled emotion proved the way out. Then, one or other episode from the forty-year-old past would rise before him, with so amazing a reality that he re-lived it to its flimsiest details, hearing the ominous tick of the clock on the chimney-piece, smelling the scent of lavender that went out from his mother's garments. At others, the past failing in its grip, there was nothing for it but to fight to a finish. (828)

But the original memory of death in the first home remains repressed in the narrative, it survives only in the sketchy figure of the buried container with a lid which holds Mahony's first and last fear. Although perhaps it is obscurely suggested by the memory of the mantel-piece clock: a clock is a little house, a container for time, a miniature coffin of memory. For any psychoanalytic reading of the novel, this episode is the single most important one in the narrative.

It's also no coincidence that in this particular passage the mournful rhetoric of Browne's *Religio Medici* should again be recalled by Richardson. Blind flight, Mahony broods, is the only catholicon for the fears that drive him. A catholicon is a drug, a panacea for all bodily ills and distempers. For Browne, in a passage where he is reflecting on the physician's own ills, precisely as Dr Mahony is engaged here in psychoanalysis of his own sickening self, the only catholicon is not blind flight, but death:

> we all labour against our own cure: for death is the cure of all diseases. There is no catholicon or universal remedy I know but this, which though nauseous to queasy stomachs, yet to prepared appetites is nectar, and a pleasant potion of immortality. (Browne 78)

Thus the irony that underlies Mahony's tortured self-analysis here is the plain truth that death is the only cure for his homelessness.

After the case of young Nankivel's mis-set leg and Mahony's near-attempt at suicide, both Richard and Mary are thankful to leave Barambogie. Although Mary's heart is heavy, it is their first home to be closely associated with death:

> no matter how unhappy you had been in it, the dismantling of a home was a sorry business, and one to which she never grew accustomed. Besides, this time when they left, one of them had to stay behind. As long as they lived here, her child had not seemed wholly gone; so full was the house of memories of her. To the next, to any other house they occupied, little Lallie would be a stranger. (887)

At Shortlands Bluff (Queenscliff), where the Mahonys next make their home, the few patients there prefer the antediluvian Barker to the by now increasingly 'cranky' Richard Mahony. Practical Mary takes one of the most humbling actions of her life by preparing to take in boarders during the summer season. At this rearrangement of their home into a half-public space there is a scene with Richard 'the like of which she had never known' (924). Significantly, when under attack from the outside world, as he now feels himself to be, Mahony conjoins his sense of the sanctity and privacy of home with the original (unhappy) home of his childhood: ‘ “My mother … my sisters … the old home in Dublin — they would sooner have starved!” ’ (925). Mahony blames Mary, in his demented bitterness, for destroying his home, 'his poor home, his sole refuge' (927); he thinks she has done it for money alone, rather than as a last desperate attempt to repair their fortunes. It is out of a deranged revenge against Mary that Mahony burns his papers, scrip and securities at the apoplectic moment that signals the final stage of his dementia. From this point on, until his death, Mahony is literally without a home. Mary auctions many of their possessions in Shortlands, calls on Henry Ocock's charity to find herself a post-mistress's job up-country and consigns her mentally unsound husband to a genteel asylum in Toorak. With their two previous homes abandoned behind her — the Hawthorn house is being rented, the Shortlands house, with a lease to run, is awaiting tenants — Mary takes the children to Gymgurra (Koroit) where their 'new home', a semi-public building, is 'the “Postand Telegraph Office”, with a clock on its front by which the township told the time' (948).

Mary's funds run out and she is unable to keep Richard in the Toorak 'home', and so he is taken to a madhouse in Collingwood. When she visits, the ghastly irony Mary discovers about this 'home' is that it
is in fact a jail, the antithesis of home. This is the ultima Thule of Mahony's homelessness: stripped even of his name, now simply 97B, he is imprisoned in this zoo for the mentally ill, with a keeper who feeds him off tin plates (961). Henry Ocock, risen to a government minister, and whom Mary excoriates for his cruelty to Agnes, promises to help with Mahony's release: 'with this single straw to cling to, Mary travelled home' (967). Mahony is eventually returned to Gymgurra. The last sentence of this chapter (VIII, the third last of the novel), isolated as it is, makes an ambivalent point: 'And so Richard Mahony came home' (975). Actually, the post office at Gymgurra has never been his home, he has never seen it before; he returns to the home of Mary and the children, for the first time. It is also the first home that Mary has been responsible for providing and running, and Richard returns to it as a child.

Soon Mahony dies. If an approachable, but unopenable coffin had lain buried in the depths of Mahony's self, like a dead miner at the bottom of a shaft, then that will also be the image that Cuffy retains of the first home he really remembers. Cuffy's chief inheritance from his father is the memory of him lying in his open coffin:

> next day though, when Papa was put in and you couldn't help seeing him every time you went along the passage, it was different. And when Mamma got a large pocket-handkerchief and spread it over his face and hands (when you were dead you couldn't shoo the flies away, and they liked to walk on you), then he suddenly felt he wanted to see Papa again, most awfully much. So when nobody was about, he went and pulled the handkerchief off, and had a good long look at him: much longer than when he was alive; for then Papa wouldn't have liked it; besides him being too shy. Now he could stare and stare; and he did [...]. (986–87)

Mahony's final 'resting-place' (990) is the small graveyard by the sea on the outskirts of Gymgurra: ‘[i]t would have been after his own heart that his last bed was within sound of what he had perhaps loved best on earth — the open sea’ (990). For a time, his grave and the cross bearing his name are tended ‘by fond hands’, but thereafter his grave becomes, in a reprise of the miner's violent death, ‘indistinguishable from the common ground’ (990). Whereas the first sentences of the novel portray a violent burial, the last one sublimes that originally cruel, Australian mud into the ‘rich and kindly earth of [Mahony's] adopted country’ which absorbs 'his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, vagrant spirit’ (990). There are kindly burials as well as cruel ones: what was at the beginning of the Victorian colonial era a vengeful Australia Felix has become a restful plot of national ground. And Richard Mahony becomes only in death what he could never be in life, a homebody (Myself When Young 209).

**Nation and Narrative**

If we think of narratives, as Susan Stewart suggests, as objectifications of desire, as structures that reveal under analysis longings for their own origins, then the turn that Richard Mahony gives to the question of the monogenesis or polygenesis of its own origins obviously leads not just to a reading of figures of home and death in the text, but to a recognition of the *coincidence* of those figures (Stewart xii). Repeatedly in this novel, figures of home and death approach coincidence, swerving toward and away from each other, and when they coincide most exactly, as at the beginning and end, it is at a relatively safe remove from what, in other moments of the narrative — Mahony's self-analysis at Barambogie for instance — is an unspeakable knowledge of the identity of death with home. It's as if buried at the very centre of this fiction is a minor (miner) pun: figuratively, to go home is to be in the grave. As it turns out, etymology suggests this: the fourth entry under *Home* in the *OED* reads: 'fig. In various connexion, referring to the grave, or future state: the “long” or “last” home’ (349). Home is death; death is home. If narratives long for their place of origin, then the inordinately long epitaph of Richard Mahony longs for its home (its origins) in the place of death; hence its beginning: ‘In a shaft on the Gravel Pits, a man had been buried alive’ (3).

But if we also think about narrative as constitutive of the ‘fields of meanings and symbols associated with national life’, then *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is an epic of colonisation and failure (Bhabha 3). From the beginning Richard Mahony's fate is linked with the motley history of the colony and the nation:
from the goldrush of the 'fifties onwards; [Mahony] takes part in its first outstanding political happening, the affair at the Eureka Stockade; and he is carried forward by the stream of its rapid development. His fortunes and misfortunes are those of the average settler; at one time living from hand to mouth as a rough digger, then rising to affluence and social position by mining speculation, to be brought again, by the turn of the wheel, face to face with ruin. (Robertson 178)

Even though in narratives of nation the ‘moment of genesis is symbolised by sacrifice and death’ (Muecke 127), this story never develops into a saga of glorious colonisation; from the first sentence it is a narrative of failure and madness. This derangement and failure have to be read, as Richardson herself suggests, as an ironic comment on nation-building, where the symbolic achievement of the nation is radically incommensurate with any individual or even collectivity of individuals, one progressive, the other tragic. What we get in Richard Mahony is a narrative address to the project of history, rather than any imperial narrative of nation. Richardson — writing as a man actually — offers us a narrative address in which the nation can't provide a home for Mahony (Bhabha 3).

‘Epic of colonisation’ is also J.G. Robertson's term (179) and it signals the early emphases in the narrative on nation-building and homeland, but it also suggests the virtual absence of romance in the novel. True, there is a faint impression of a realist marriage plot in the early representation of Richard and Mary's relationship but, in fact, even though Richard's notion of the domestic is heavily invested in Mary, the novel resists almost altogether the identity of woman and home as a story of nation. Richard and Mary's relationship is a lifelong contestation about home, and where to live. Instead of a romance about home-making that sentimentalises the project of history, this story is about sacrifice and death. It ends with a narrative address in which an insane father dies and a widow survives who is barely able to provide for her children.

Writing as a historical subject, then, whose vantage point is socially and institutionally shaped, my interest is in the construction of historicity and in narratives of nation, but more closely, my interest in Richardson's novel is in the ways in which the institutions of nation are exposed by her long epitaph on an individual (Montrose 23), the way in which the ‘milieu falls away, and the individual human fates usurp its place’ (Myself When Young 180). For that epitaph, Richardson's resources are not a celebratory mythos of nation but a poetics of fiction. Equally Richardson is not writing only a kind of oedipal narrative here: her desire was never to kill her father, only to look at him in death. The desire for storytelling is not ruled by the Law of the Father, but by a dialectic of fear and tenderness (Barthes 47), in Richardson, of wanting to keep her father out of his urn and memorialised in fiction. ‘Death’, as Stephen Muecke argues, ‘is at the heart of the formation of nation […] A people recognise itself as a people, that is as a culture, through the symbolic treatment of its dead’ (127). The way in which this novel works is not simply to represent, to allegorise, to symbolise or to metaphorise the birth of a nation: the narrative poetics according to which it does all these things always tropes both institutions of nation (history) and the individual as relationally problematic. One lesson of this novel then, harshly against the grain of our contemporary cultural imaginings, is that there is no possible reconciliation between subject and nation.

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WORKS CITED


I am referring here to the first omnibus edition of Richard Mahony published in 1930, the last edition to be corrected by the author. Subsequent quotations from the novel will be cited in brackets, by page number. Later editions of the novel have dropped the epigraph from Browne and the dedications to W.L.R. and M.L.R.

In ‘Myself When Young’, Richardson writes: ‘the person who knew me best always maintained that, in my imaginery portrait of Richard Mahony, I had drawn no other than my own’ (Myself When Young 24). For HHR, then, fiction writing is a kind of medical practice.

Nettie Palmer notices part of this: the ‘title of the book, with the nineteenth-century tone (Mrs Oliphant, for instance, had written Sir Robert's Fortune) would seem to suggest one of those cheerful, sprawling romances of the Victorian era in which an errant younger son, after many ups and downs, many hazards by flood and field, achieves fulfilment and success, returning in the end to the peace of some quiet English backwater. But it was unlikely that the author of Maurice Guest would be attracted to such a theme. Perhaps it was some ironic twist in her nature that made her choose the title’ (67–68).

Long Jim's reverie of home is later echoed in Mahony's situation in Leicester, where the similarly snug elements of an urban English home turn out to be stifling and crabbed (448).

Mares's important article notices many of the repetitions of Richard Mahony, the importance of the Tangye figure, as well as some of the equations linking the repetitions (Tangye and burial [68], ‘burial alive = insanity’ [69]), but not the figure of ‘home’ and how it is related to other repetitions.

Richardson finished Australis Felix in 1912, and after her only return trip to Australia in 1912 she revised the manuscript of the novel and had it ready for the press in 1915: ‘[h]ad there been no war, “Australia Felix” would have appeared in the autumn of that year [1915], “The Way Home” probably some three years later, and the trilogy have been complete early in the ‘twenties. But the war did come: and who then had any thought to spare for Australia and its beginnings?’ Some Notes on My Books’ 343).

It is worth recalling, perhaps, that Richardson's attachment to a word like 'home' may very well have owed something to her and her husband's intense, lifelong, study of Germanic and Scandinavian literature. As Witold Rybczynski writes: ‘[t]his wonderful word, “home,” which connotes a physical “place” but also has the more abstract sense of “state of being,” has no equivalent in the Latin or Slavic European languages. German, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Dutch and English all have similar sounding words for “home,” all derived from the Old Norse “heima’’’ (62n).

Unless Tangye is meant to be misremembering the original, there is a misprint in the Latin of Horace's line on page 379 of the 1930 Heinemann edition, carried through to subsequent editions; it should read ‘Caelum, non animum, mutant qui trans mare currunt’. This line is from near the end of Horace's Xth Epistle, to Bullatus, a poem about the propriety of staying home as against the restlessness of the age (Wickham 264–67, Passage 279–80).

My description of the metaphoric significance in Richardson's narrative of England as miniature etc. owes a great deal to Susan Stewart's On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.

The main source for the concept ultima Thule in classical myth is in Seneca's Medea (based on Euripides’ play of the same name), a prophecy of the discovery of a New World. Richardson's Ultima Thule is a New World narrative, but of antipodean failure and madness, rather than northern hemisphere adventure and conquest. Richardson is likely to have come across the myth first in Longfellow's volume of poems, Ultima Thule of 1880 (Green 324–25).

The reference to Ecclesiasticus xliv, 90 is a misprint in the 1930 Heinemann volume; the quotation is from verse 9. 'Ecclesiasticus' is an Apocryphal book of the Old Testament, its full title being 'Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach'.