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Negative Antipodes

Australian Literature and Planetary Seascapes

Abstract: This paper will consider the relationship between Australian Literature and World Literature through the figures of the antipodes and the planet. It will suggest that a planetary configuration – two-thirds water, one-third land – changes the relationship between human constructions and natural entities. This introduces into discourse a kind of apophasis, a variant of negative theology, in which social meaning is always liable to be transposed or inverted. The ocean, in other words, enters into the dynamic of Australian literature and culture within form and language as well as through more overt environmental themes. This paper will consider how this complex aesthetic plays out in the representation of seascapes across a range of Australian painters (e.g. Tom Roberts) and writers, from Ada Cambridge in the late-19th century through to Kenneth Slessor in the modernist period along with Alexis Wright and Les Murray in the contemporary era.

The notion of Australia as a country 'girt by sea' has been officially recognized in its national anthem, and in recent scholarship there has been considerable emphasis on both the environmental aspects of oceanography and the political implications of maritime borders. The latter issue has been highlighted by controversies over migration (particularly conflicts over the 'boatpeople'), and also by how the geographical position of Australia as an island nation materially affected its handling of the COVID pandemic. I want to put this question into a larger framework, however, by suggesting how the sea also carried significant purchase in both theology and classical mythology, and how these dynamics have continued to inflect understandings of Australian culture, albeit in a more oblique and indirect though no less significant fashion.

In his book 'The Sea. A Cultural History', John Mack described how many monastic settlements in Britain during the early Middle Ages were established around the coast: the Orkneys, the Shetland Islands, Lindisfarne, and so on. In part, this was because these peregrine monks liked to envisage themselves as on a journey from one world to the next, with the conjunction of land and water in the areas surrounding their monasteries epitomizing this unworldly state. A group of monks who washed up on the coast of Cornwall after drifting aimlessly at sea around the year 880 explained to King Alfred's court that they did not care where they ended up, since the disorientations of the sea and the move away from the illusory securities and worldly comforts of land brought them closer to God.[1] In this sense, my title 'Negative Antipodes' has some correlations with the conception of negative theology that was current throughout medieval times, a state of apophasis, to give it its technical term, which regarded God as unimaginable and incomprehensible, and thus sought to use mystical mediums rather than rational instruments as an approach to knowledge. As Barbara Babcock wrote

1 See John Mack: The Sea, p. 45.

in 1978,[2] whereas negative theology was once confined almost exclusively to hermetic traditions of mysticism, this idea has circulated much more widely since the dissemination of critical deconstruction, with Derrida's paradoxical notion of absence constituting presence having an important influence on intellectual discourse more widely. Hence Helen Blythe's observation of the mythical idea of accessing the Antipodes through the earth or the sea – the former (earth) synonymous with "darkness, death, and metempsychosis"; the latter (sea) with "mirrors, reflection, and reversal"[3] – comes to have a distinct contemporary relevance.

The sea has always carried this element of the unknown and unknowable, characteristics reinforced rather than refuted by contemporary scientific investigations that have unearthed a complex alternative world beneath the surface of the ocean. This includes not only marine ecosystems but also offshore submerged landscapes, where residues of human culture can be discovered beneath sea level. In a 2021 article published in the journal 'Australian Archaeology', Jerem Leach and a team of researchers described their recent discovery of underwater archaeological material at Murujuga at the Dampier Archipelago, off the coast of Western Australia. This work on a subtidal ancient Aboriginal site has the potential not only to modify contemporary narratives about ways in which seascapes should be considered as part of an integrated national culture, but also to reshape larger conceptions of how human civilization relates to time, along with ways in which sea and land can be seen as intertwined within a larger environmental circumference.

Leach's team argued that studies of submerged terrestrial landscapes have often been neglected because they fall midway between the interests of terrestrial and underwater archaeologists, but it is now important in Australian archaeology "to consider onshore terrestrial and offshore submerged landscapes as an integrated cultural whole".[4] This postulates a hybrid geological world where landscape and seascape intersect, with the likelihood that thousands of Indigenous sites are preserved on the continental shelf of the Australian continent foreshadowing a more expansive planetary condition where land and ocean can be construed as overlapping in significant ways. They concluded that "A similar approach is needed all around Australia's coastal margins and islands, where the transformative cultural processes associated with sea-level change during the Pleistocene-Holocene transition are sorely underrepresented in the terrestrial record".[5] This lends an additional dimension to the mythical idea of the buried civilization of Atlantis, celebrated in Edgar Allan Poe's 1845 poem 'The City in the Sea'[6] and in many other works, since such a legendary conception is given literal incarnation through the unusual landscape of Australia, where time scales are disproportionate in relation to Western norms. It also extends both the spatial and temporal boundaries of the country through its reclamation of Indigenous histories, bringing disparate cultures into juxtaposition.

2 Barbara A. Babcock: 'Introduction,' p. 14.
3 Helen Lucy Blythe: The Victorian Colonial Romance with the Antipodes, p. 9.
4 Jerem Leach et al.: The Integrated Cultural Landscape of North Gidley Island, p. 251.
5 Ibid., p. 265.
6 Edgar Allan Poe: The City in the Sea, pp. 71 f.

Such structural displacements are commensurate with how the alterity of the oceanic world has also been emphasized by cultural theorists from the Pacific region such as Epeli Hau'ofa, whose conception of the planet as a "sea of islands" conjoined primarily by water rather than land masses fits with the geophysical measurement of it as a spherical space that is two-thirds ocean and only one-third land.[7] This in turn is consistent with the recent theoretical work of historians such as Dipesh Chakbrabarty and Sujit Sivasundaram, who have tried to reposition global history as a phenomenon that extends beyond familiar Eurocentric and North American orbits. Sivasundaram's 'Waves Across the South' (2020) advertises itself in a prefatory note, with a nod to Hau'ofa, as "a book which considers world history from a 'sea of islands' in the global South",[8] claiming on its first page:

"There is a quarter of this planet which is often forgotten in the histories that are told in the West. This quarter is an oceanic one, pulsating with winds and waves, tides and coastlines, and islands and beaches; the Indian and Pacific Oceans – taken together as a collection of smaller seas, gulfs and bays – constitute that forgotten quarter".[9]

I am not altogether sure about whether this oceanic environment has until now been 'forgotten', in the implicitly triumphalist way Sivasundaram claims, but it is certainly true that this region, and particularly Australia, has been relatively neglected in relation to World Literature and Culture. A familiar sense of the country being separated from the rest of the world by an extensive sea voyage that took three to four months contributed to what Geoffrey Blainey famously called the "tyranny of distance"[10] that was a constituent feature of Australian history up until the mid-20th century.

Before regular air passenger routes were introduced, Australia was quite literally "girt by sea", with the country surrounded by oceans as if by a moat, designed to keep the rest of the world at bay. This was of course the rationale behind the transportation of convicts, since it was the sea that made Australia almost impossible to escape from in the first half of the 19th century, and it also informed some of the more drastic internal state policies of closed borders in Australia during the COVID pandemic, suggesting this investment in enforced enclosure and separation has never quite gone away. Yet this watery divide also operated for 19th-century emigrants as a liminal space, an opportunity for both economic and psychological transformation.

Such a transitional state is expressed in Tom Roberts's 1886 painting 'Coming South', where the long sea journey between Europe and Australia is represented as a site of limbo, with the passengers waiting to be carried into their next world, a vaguely metaphysical horizon emphasized here by the huddling of human characters in the foreground and the way they are set against the open grey

7 Epeli Hau'ofa: Our Sea of Islands, pp. 148-161.
8 Sujit Sivasundram: Waves across the South, p. vii.
9 Ibid., p. 1.
10 Geoffrey Blainey: The Tyranny of Distance, p. 4.

Fig. 1: Tom Roberts, 'Coming South', 1886

space of sea and sky in the top half of the painting (Fig. 1):[11]

Mack emphasized that it was an experience of the Mediterranean that coloured much writing about the sea in classical Greek and Roman times. But in the Mediterranean most journeys take place within the sight of land, or at least in sufficient proximity to the coast for sightings to be reasonably frequent, whereas the prominence of the Pacific Ocean within planetary geography from the 18th century onwards introduced a new element to cultural representations of the sea. Herman Melville uses this disjunction of scale to good effect in 'Moby-Dick', published in 1851, where the unfathomable nature of Pacific seascapes is linked to both the invisibility of the white whale of the title and to the challenges posed by the sea to regular social customs on land. Australia is depicted in 'Moby-Dick' as "that great America on the other side of the sphere",[12] and this association of Australia with a sense of ontological alterity and difference has played a formative part in the construction of the country's identity.

Such an emphasis on seascapes has been common to both Indigenous and colonial cultures. Thomas Hervey's epic poem "Australia", written at Cambridge University and published in London in 1824, envisages a mercantile empire growing from the islands of Australasia, talking of how his "far-off islets gemmed the sunny seas".[13] As Hervey spells out in his preface, his poem was inspired by "those vast tracts of country lately discovered in the Pacific, Indian and Southern Oceans".[14] It is of course easy enough to see how this involves a typically imperial vision transferred to an oceanic landscape, the idea of Britannia ruling the waves, as Thomas Arne and James Thomson put it in their famous song of 1740,

11 Tom Roberts: Coming South (1886). Oil on Canvas. 63.5 × 52.2 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Accession Number 1738-5.
12 Herman Melville: Moby-Dick, p. 110.
13 Thomas Kibble Hervey: Australia, p. 13.
14 Ibid. p. ix.

subsequently canonized as "Rule Britannia". But in the conclusion to his poem, Hervey also associates the growth of this marine empire with the formation of coral reefs and a gradual emergence of land masses in the southern oceans, arguing that the destiny of Australia will be consolidated by the amalgamation of millions of coral reefs into a new and mighty continent, surpassing Africa and shaping the cradle of a new world:

> "Far to the east – where once Aurora's smiles
> Looked on an archipelago of isles;
> And coral banks upreared their glittering forms,
> Like spots of azure in a sky of storms
> Where many a ship has sailed the foamy brine –
> Sits a vast continent upon the Line,
> Back from her strand assembled oceans rolls,
> And points, with either finger, to the poles!
> But where is Africa? I seek in vain
> Her swarthy form along its native main:
> Methinks I hear a wailing in the wild,
> As of a mother weeping o'er her child!
> Her fate lies buried in mysterious night,
> Where the wide waters of the globe unite;
> And, where the moon walked nightly o'er her hills,
> The billows moan amid a hundred isles!
> – I turn me from their knelling, with a sigh,
> To where a lovelier vision meets the eye;
> Where spreads the British name from sun to sun,
> And all the nations of the earth are One!"[15]

As Robert Dixon has observed, Hervey draws here upon an article written in 1824 by Alexander Dalrymple for the 'Encyclopaedia Britannica', where Dalrymple stated:

> The time will come, – it may be ten thousand or ten millions of years, but come it must, – when New Holland [the old name for Australia] and New Guinea and all the little groups of islets and reefs to the north and north-west of them, will either be united into one great continent, or be separated only with deep channels.[16]

It is a view of the history and geography of Australia being characterized by a differential relation between land and water, one that distinguishes it from the traditional world of the Northern Hemisphere.

This correlation between a changing political map of the Oceanic world and a geophysical process in a constant state of evolution suggests not only how the demarcation of the sea has systematically been politicized, but also how these narratives of the sea have been regulated according to different criteria, involving environmental as well as economic dimensions. The sea can be mapped culturally and politically as well as scientifically, and all of these social cartographies have helped to shape Australia's complex relation to the sea. Brian Russell Roberts's recent work on archipelagic formations has similarly combined environmental with social and political perspectives, to suggest how our understanding of the world would be radically different if civic populations were not so fixated on the idea of continental land masses. As Roberts remarked, the archipelago of

15 Thomas Kibble Hervey: Australia, pp. 40 f.
16 Robert Dixon: The Course of Empire, p. 143.

Indonesia is actually wider in its extent than the distance from the East to the West Coast of America, that "sea to shining sea" model so often celebrated in American song.[17] This anomaly also raises the question of how political divisions of the seas necessarily divide the world up in ways that do not allow any portion of the ocean to exist in an unmediated natural state. Roberts cited Rafi Segal and Yonatan Cohen's "Territorial Map of the World", where it is clear how from its base in American Samoa the United States borders Tonga and New Zealand across oceanic space, which is not a conjunction that would be obvious from any regular Mercator map. A chart produced by the U.S. government itself in 2020 claimed the Pacific islands situated to the north east of Australia – Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Baker Island and so on – as part of its "exclusive economic zone".[18] Oceans are thus far from being innocent locales, and though they retain elements of enigma and inscrutability, they have also been associated from time immemorial with political power and economic rivalries. Writing in 1848 of the paintings of J.M.W. Turner, John Ruskin described the sea as "an irreconcilable mixture of fury and formalism",[19] and that sense of incongruity between mutually incompatible elements is characteristic both of the sea and of Australia as a country, where its formal borders and boundaries appear to exist in an inherently provisional and conditional state.

In the context of Australian literature and culture, this brings the seascape into an ambiguous realm where it operates discursively as a counterbalance to assumptions of Western hegemony and authority. For example, Kenneth Slessor's famous poem 'Five Bells' (1939), which revolves around a man drowned in Sydney Harbour, is predicated more expansively on a world of inversion, where the "Deep and dissolving verticals of light"[20] serve effectively to dissolve the urban world into its watery correlative, so that the human built environment is always on the verge of being overwhelmed:

> Where have you gone? The tide is over you,
> The turn of midnight water's over you,
> As Time is over you, and mystery,
> And memory, the flood that does not flow.
> You have no suburb, like those easier dead
> In private berths of dissolution laid –
> The tide goes over, the waves ride over you
> And let their shadows down like shining hair[21]

Slessor's poem is different stylistically from, say, Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West", written five years earlier in 1934, where the mythopoeic imagination confronts and attempts to impose order on the "inhuman" ocean:

> Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
> Why, when the singing ended and we turned
> Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
> As the night descended, tilting in the air,

17 Brian Russell Roberts: Borderwaters, p. 130.
18 Ibid., p. 6.
19 John Ruskin: Modern Painters, p. 369.
20 Kenneth Slessor: Collected Poems, p. 120.
21 Ibid., p. 123.

Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.[22]

That phrase "portioned out the sea" is particularly interesting, for there is no portioning out of the sea in Slessor, or in most other Australian writers. As a generalization, the narratives of Australian literature tend to be more open to the constantly circulating and disruptive forces of the sea, and this is one reason it embodies a prehuman and perhaps posthuman aspect, one in which social coordinates can never fully fathom the ontological extent of the oceanic environment.

Alexis Wright's novel 'The Swan Book',[23] published in 2013 but set a hundred years in the future, also fits into this category, envisioning as it does a world where global warming has affected the whole planet, leading to multiple sites of flooding, with migrants seeking desperately to reach the safe haven of Australia from across the oceans. Obviously this is a novel addressing both climate change and the boat people, political issues of pressing concern in the second decade of the twenty-first century, but it is not just about a novel about environmental politics in a narrow or instrumental sense. Rather, 'The Swan Book' addresses the tenuous nature of civic organizations of all kinds when set against the power of nature, and in this way Wright is attracted again to an aesthetic of dissolution, a transgression of normative codes of behaviour, an impetus that links her work to a surreal dynamic and indicates how attempts to categorize her fiction merely within easy political categories turn out normally to be reductive. In her essay "Odyssey of the Horizon", written to accompany the exhibition 'My Horizon' by Australian Indigenous visual artist Tracey Moffatt at the 2017 Venice Biennale, Wright responded to Moffatt's visual sequence "The White Ghosts Sailed In" by commemorating, like Moffatt, the day in 1788 when, from the vantage point of Sydney Cove, "[W]hite ghosts arrived to break the boundary of a land that was not theirs to take".[24] At the end of her essay, however, Wright, as in 'The Swan Book', related this vanishing "horizon" to a planetary condition of displacement more generally: "those who are now roaming the planet in search of a haven, a place to be, to try to begin their lives again, or living in dreams of going home".[25] Starting from a position of how the Indigenous world has been disrupted by the sudden appearance of extraneous forces, Wright turns this around to imply ways in which "the planet" itself is coming to approximate an Indigenous condition of dispossession and exile. Indigenous displacement, in other words, becomes a synecdoche of wider planetary displacement, rather than simply an oppositional marker. Instead of merely deploying environmental politics to promulgate a polemical novel, Wright internalizes the dynamics of the planet, just as Toni Morrison a generation ago internalized the politics of race, to represent a world whose experiential coordinates have been entirely changed. In the same way as Morrison's 'Beloved'[26] took the genealogies of race to represent a map of the

22 Wallace Stevens: The Idea of Order at Key West, p. 130.
23 Alexis Wright: The Swan Book.
24 Alexis Wright: Odyssey of the Horizon, p. 114.
25 Ibid., p. 121.
26 Toni Morrison: Beloved.

entire United States, so 'The Swan Book'[27] uses its planetary dynamics to rotate the world on its axis, using its Australian landscape to evoke a necessarily interconnected sphere, one joined together by the circulation of the oceans, where antipodean space and planetary space have become co-terminous.[28]

'The Swan Book' also has interesting links to an aesthetics of shipwreck that have a long provenance in Australian literature. Wright's novel might be construed as a vision of extended shipwreck, where human institutions have become a fragile vessel liable to being overwhelmed by rising seas. Yet the monkey Rigoletto in 'The Swan Book' is not especially disturbed by witnessing "flooding on seaboard city states all over the world", since he regards it as a natural extension of "seeing water flooding in the lanes of Venice, Bangladesh or Pakistan".[29] Similarly, the overturning of flimsy social constructs and their submergence within currents of a vast natural world is a familiar theme of Australian literature, going back to the 19th century. In James Tucker's brilliant and woefully neglected novel 'Ralph Rashleigh; or, The Life of an Exile' (written in 1845),[30] the eponymous transported convict is shipwrecked while trying to escape from a penal settlement in New South Wales, and he finds himself living in an Aboriginal community for four and a half years, before being rediscovered by a Sydney vessel plying the trade route between Australia and the Fiji Islands. The hero's liminal position in between the land and the sea is reflected in the way he becomes assimilated into the Indigenous community, to such an extent that his former friends and colleagues no longer recognize him when they meet again. In Tucker's novel, the sea thus operates again as a site of transformation, a space in which conventional distinctions between social and racial categories become dissolved. 'The Swiss Family Robinson', the novel published in German in 1812 by John David Wyss about a Swiss family of immigrants whose ship goes off course en route to Sydney and is shipwrecked in the vicinity of the East Indies, also fits with this aesthetic of shipwreck that operates both literally and metaphorically and is endemic to the Australian literary environment. The first translation of this novel into English in 1816 was by William Godwin, husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and father of Mary Shelley, who was himself a highly influential figure in London radical circles at the turn of the 19th century.

This idea of shipwreck speaks in a wider sense to the fragility of the human condition that is one of the stylistic characteristics of 19th-century Australian poetry. In Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'Ulysses', published in 1842, the epic sea voyager, though as Tennyson says "made weak by time and fate", nevertheless remains "strong in will, | To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".[31] Australian poets a generation later, however, engage in dialogue with Tennyson, referring sometimes explicitly to his use of classical conventions, but taking both his patriotic and philosophical temper in a different direction. The Australian poet Henry

27 Alexis Wright: The Swan Book.
28 For a more detailed discussion of Wright's relation to racial and environmental issues, see Paul Giles: The Planetary Clock, p. 341.
29 Alexis Wright: The Swan Book, p. 284.
30 James Tucker: Ralph Rashleigh, or the Life of an Exile.
31 Alfred Lord Tennyson: Ulysses, p. 620.

Kendall, for example, responded directly to Tennyson's "Ulysses" in "The Voyage of Telegonus" (1866),[32] a poem recounting the unwitting slaying of Ulysses by Telegonus, his son by Circe, thereby foregrounding the theme of parricide that is a lurking presence throughout 19th-century Australian poetry. In 1869, Kendall also published his poem "Ogyges", based on a primeval mythological ruler in ancient Greece, which Kendall observed in a footnote to the poem was written "after the manner of Tennyson's 'Tithonus'",[33] a poem by Tennyson about a prince of Troy. But Kendall's work is not simply a colonial imitation, since it involves rather an intertextual reorientation of this Western tradition, another form of parricide at some level, where the epic hero is dissolved within the sea rather than standing steadfastly against it:

> So with the blustering tempest doth he find
> A stormy fellowship: for when the North
> Comes reeling downwards with a breath like spears,
> Where Dryope the lonely sits all night
> And holds her sorrow crushed betwixt her palms,
> He thinketh mostly of that time of times
> When Zeus the Thunderer – broadly-blazing King –
> Like some wild comet beautiful but fierce,
> Leapt out of cloud and fire and smote the tops
> Of black Ogygia with his red right hand,
> At which great fragments tumbled to the Deeps –
> The mighty fragments of a mountain-land –
> And all the World became an awful Sea![34]

Kendall was not treated particularly sympathetically by Australian critics of his own era or subsequently, who thought his poetry was often eccentric and self-indulgent, if not altogether masochistic and self-destructive. However, his poetic idiom is interesting in part because it evokes a world in which the sea is not something to be imperially resisted and conquered, but rather a natural element that always threatens to overwhelm human civilization, as in the lines from "Ogyges" quoted above, where fragments of mountains tumble down and the land itself dissolves into an "awful Sea". As Harry Heseltine noted, Kendall's poetry is shadowed by a "dream of obliteration",[35] and he often evokes a phantasmagorical notion of the inland sea as a metaphorical conception, a liminal space in between worlds, in a manner reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe. Kendall in other words takes Poe's mythological conceit of a city in the sea and embodies it more naturalistically within an Australian environment that fluctuates between different elements: landscape and seascape.

Kendall also has strong intellectual links with the English poet A.C. Swinburne, who was experimenting with similar aesthetic agendas around the same time, as well as with his fellow Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon, whose 1870 poem "The Swimmer" similarly represents the sea as a welcome escape from the burdens of individual resistance:

32 Henry Kendall: The Poetical Works of Henry Kendall, pp. 93-97.
33 Ibid, p. 103.
34 Ibid, p. 105.
35 Harry Heseltine: The Metamorphoses of Henry Kendall, p. 377.

I would that with sleepy, soft embraces
The sea would fold me – would find me rest,
In luminous shades of her secret places,
In depths where her marvels are manifest.[36]

But Kendall also produced sea poems in a more realistic vein, including for example 'Coogee', a lively evocation of the beachside suburb near his home in Sydney, where he often swam:

Sing the song of wave-worn Coogee, Coogee in the distance white,
With its jags and points disrupted, gaps and fractures fringed with light;
Haunt of gledes, and restless plovers of the melancholy wail
Ever lending deeper pathos to the melancholy gale.
There, my brothers, down the fissures, chasms deep and wan and wild,
Grows the sea-bloom, one that blushes like a shrinking, fair, blind child;
And amongst the oozing forelands many a glad, green rock-vine runs,
Getting ease on earthy ledges, sheltered from December suns.
Often, when a gusty morning, rising cold and grey and strange,
Lifts its face from watery spaces, vistas full with cloudy change.[37]

Despite the poem's charm, this is not just an evocation of a local scene, but rather an appropriation of marine landscapes to evoke a carefully calibrated and intellectually consistent projection of the world, one where "watery spaces" introduce a sense of perennial "change" within the everyday world. Tom Roberts, who as we saw produced the 'Coming South' seascape, also did a painting of Coogee Beach in 1888 that was inflected by the new styles of Impressionist painting then becoming popular in Paris (Fig. 2),[38] and both Kendall and Roberts were intent upon using the sea as a starting point for their ambitious artistic designs, using the fluctuating quality of light and water to hold up a quizzical mirror to the more solid Victorian apparatus of a built environment.

In a review of Kendall's book 'Leaves from Australian Forests' in the 'Colonial Monthly' of October 1869, critic George Oakley wrote of the "necessity" of alliteration in Kendall's style: "His prose rings with it as freely as his verse, and in it the remarkable power of his descriptions of Australian scenery chiefly lies".[39] Like Swinburne, whom he praised for his "material sensuality",[40] Kendall uses alliteration to mimic a rhythmic world where the human subject becomes caught up within a self-perpetuating motion, a wave-like movement to and fro that carries the poetic voice and often threatens to drown it. As Oakley astutely noted, "it is not so much he that speaks as Australia in him";[41] and this switch from an active to a passive voice should not be interpreted as a dereliction of poetic prowess, since it creatively repositions Kendall as a mediator of his environment rather than its authoritative begetter. Kendall, like Herman Melville, served in his youth on a whaling ship, where he spent eighteen months, and it is no surprise that among

36 Adam Lindsay Gordon: Poems of the Late Adam Lindsay Gordon, p. 38.
37 Henry Kendall: The Poetical Works of Henry Kendall, pp. 101 f.
38 Tom Roberts: Holiday Sketch at Coogee (1888). oil on canvas. 40.3 x 55.9 cm stretcher; 56.8 x 72.0 x 5.5 cm frame. Courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Accession Number 9078.
39 Michael Wilding: Wild Bleak Bohemia, p. 255.
40 Henry Kendall: Stray Thoughts about Tennyson, p. 346.
41 Michael Wilding: Wild Bleak Bohemia, p. 78.

Fig. 2: Tom Roberts, 'Holiday Sketch at Coogee', 1888

his final words on his deathbed in 1882 were: "Give me a drink from the sea".[42] In a famous essay of 1875, Marcus Clarke suggested that "the dominant note of Australian scenery" was "Weird Melancholy", with Clarke singling out Kendall as having "caught clearly the wild and grotesque spirit of his native forest".[43] Clarke was not necessarily wrong about the idea of weird melancholy, but it is arguable that the sea rather than the forest was Kendall's dominant intellectual landscape. He was attached not so much to land-based enclosures (even though he did work as an Inspector of State Forests late in his life) but rather to a broader sense of the human world being circumscribed by, and potentially vulnerable to, sea drift. Appropriately enough, Tom Roberts also painted a posthumous portrait of Kendall that now hangs in Parliament House in Canberra, and he could fairly be understood as an icon of this land 'girt by sea'.

In this context, the sea within the discursive framework of Australian literature does not just represent an environmental or scientific phenomenon, but

42 Ibid., p. 540.
43 Marcus Clarke: Country Leisure – II, p. 14.

also a metaphorical and philosophical dimension that challenges conventional Western models of domesticity, insularity and agency. In an essay entitled 'The Lonely Seas' that she wrote in 1911 for the American journal 'Atlantic Monthly', the novelist Ada Cambridge, who left England in 1870 and spent nearly all of her working life in Australia, represented the metaphor of the voyage away from home truths as an act of intellectual conscience, involving an interrogation of inherited nostrums in the light of transition and travel:

> It is the delusion of the unthinking, who have never slipped their moorings, that the deep-sea voyager is but a careless runaway from home and duty, a shirker of sacred obligations[44]
>
> […] my soul is at large on the Lonely Seas, and has been so long that now it could not breathe elsewhere[45]
>
> […] in this immensity you get out of yourself as well as out of other thralls. With such a sweep of vision, you perceive something of the relative proportions of things, and amongst them all your place.[46]

The language in Cambridge's essay revolves around not only oceanic travel, but also a move away from orthodox religion, while also invoking the divided or repressed selves being brought into play by the then new science of psychoanalysis so as to correlate this metaphor of the lonely seas with a voyage into intellectually uncharted territory. In this way, Cambridge presents the sea as a vehicle of transnational displacement, developing a metaphor of travel as conceptual transformation. Subsequently in her autobiography 'The Retrospect', Cambridge critiqued the provincial limitations of vision in Europe as "a medieval sort of business",[47] while commending what she calls "the sea-change my whole being had undergone" by her migration to Australia,[48] with these changes of scenery betokening the larger issues of transition and mutability that were central to Cambridge's fiction in general. Cambridge was an almost exact contemporary of Henry James – James lived from 1843 to 1915, Cambridge from 1844 to 1926 – and she had much in common with the American-born author in the way she combined narratives of genteel manners with darker themes of satiric comedy and the complications of sexual passion, as well as a focus on international themes. Cambridge traversed the Pacific Ocean in the same way James traversed the Atlantic, but of course the reputation of these two novelists today could hardly be more different: James is academically canonized and still widely read, while Cambridge is almost completely forgotten.

Having worked now for thirteen years in Australia after seventeen years in England and seven years in the United States, it remains something of a puzzle to me why Australian Literature is not more widely recognized as a compelling dynamic within World Literature. Cambridge and Kendall are major figures who certainly have not yet had their proper critical due, and there are many others. Lisa Lowe's influential book 'The Intimacy of Four Continents', for example, discussed literary, cultural and economic interactions among Europe, Asia, Africa

44 Ada Cambridge: The Lonely Seas, p. 96.
45 Ibid., p. 97.
46 Ibid., p. 100.
47 Ada Cambridge: The Retrospect, p. 42.
48 Ibid., p. 51.

and the Americas, but left out Australia and Oceania altogether. A dismissive attitude towards Australia as a colonial backwater among some of the more traditional critics in Europe and North America may be one reason for this neglect, but another I think has been the protectionist instincts of Australian literature specialists themselves, linked to their fear that the viability of their subject would be compromised if it were to become incorporated into a more amorphous larger entity such as World Literature. From this perspective, the global visibility of Australian literature has been chronically hindered by the reluctance of many scholars to regard Australian narratives as being of anything more than local concern. This is particularly unfortunate, I think, since it neglects not only the extraordinary range of Australian texts themselves, but also the broader planetary correlations between environmental perspectives and seascapes that have long been a feature of Australian literary scenarios.

Just to take one example of this, Les Murray's 1992 poem 'Kimberley Brief' uses the coastal landscape of Broome is Western Australia to describe how "the whole world is an archipelago, | each place an island in a void of travel".[49] But this is quite specifically not just a local portrait of Broome; Murray's point is precisely that "the whole *world* is an archipelago",[50] that the combination of islands and inlets on this Western Australian coast becomes a microcosm of the way in which planet Earth is intersected by oceans. And, zooming out still further, the poem's evocation of the "infinite dot-painting" associated with this town not only alludes to the dot-painting style of Indigenous art but also presents human habitation as a series of infinite dots within the much larger natural world:

> With modern transport, everywhere you go
> the whole world is an archipelago,
> each place an island in a void of travel.
> In our case, cloud obscured the continent's whole gravel
> of infinite dot-painting, as we overflew zones and degrees
> toward the great island of the Kimberleys.[51]

In this light, the Australian landscape comes to stand as a smaller synecdoche of the solar system, with Broome a tiny dot on the vast map, just as Earth is a tiny dot within cosmic space.

Another reason Western critics have found it difficult to assimilate Australian literature within the conventional rubrics of World Literature, I would suggest, is precisely because it evokes a disorienting style and scale of what we might call naturalized posthumanism. Such posthumanism displaces more familiar social and political categories into environmental and cosmic perspectives that effectively challenge humanist assumptions and turn Western preconceptions inside out. This is the same principle of reversal that Ruskin remarked on in his comment about the sea's "mixture of fury and formalism",[52] the way the sea remained always resistant to formal cartographies of a more traditional aesthetic kind. Writing of Hawai'i, Isaiah Helekunihi Walker argued that by "observing history

49 Les A. Murray: Collected Poems, p. 347.
50 Ibid., p. 347, emphasis added.
51 Ibid., p. 347.
52 John Ruskin: Modern Painters.

from the vantage point of the ocean, issues of colonialism, politics and resistance appear strikingly different",[53] and this is even more true of Australian literature in relation to the Western world. Seascapes are not just as an accidental element with Australian literature; they are ontologically embedded within its planetary contours. One of the advantages of the manifold new forms of environmental criticism is that they offer us the opportunity to reassess literary traditions of the past and to trace implicit continuities between the metaphorical representation of shipwreck in contemporary writers such as Alexis Wright and neglected 19th-century novelists such as James Tucker, or the extension of local seascapes into cosmic dioramas that we see in the poetry of Les Murray and Henry Kendall. Just as the Indo-Pacific is becoming more central every year to world politics, so a heightened consciousness of global forces combining land and water, human and non-human, is becoming increasingly visible within a framework of World Literature that has more traditionally been dominated by European and North American interests. Within that expanded orbit, the relation of Australian literature and culture to planetary seascapes will, over time, play an increasingly significant role.

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53 Isaiah Helekunihi Walker: Waves of Resistance, p. 3.

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