

FOREWORD

One dilemma in particular exercised the generation of Australian writers who came into prominence during the 1970s: how to escape from the large shadow cast by Patrick White's fame and achievement. By the middle of the decade, White had emerged as a figure of international literary standing. Almost single-handedly, it seemed, he had led Australian fiction out of the ghetto of colonial, provincial, and regional writing. At the time, the only novelist who might have challenged that preeminence, Christina Stead, was generally overlooked by the reading public and even by most academic and professional critics. Besides, by far the greater part of her creative life had been spent as an expatriate who had turned her back on Australian concerns and preoccupations. White, by contrast, had made the difficult decision of returning to Australia to explore his tormented and paradoxical reactions to Australian life, to a world where he felt increasingly out of place and out of sympathy with the temper of the age. The novels and short stories he wrote in self-imposed semi-isolation in Castle Hill and later in Centennial Park determined the contours of the landscape of Australian fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century. His influence was all-pervasive; younger writers

were inevitably drawn to following in his footsteps, yet all felt the imperative to avoid the stigma of imitation and derivativeness and to find their own individual and characteristic voices.

Of the writers of that generation, David Foster—who was born in 1944, thirty-two years after White—resolved that conundrum with the greatest originality and panache. His outrageous fables chronicle the lives of men and women (though mostly men), and are wholly remote from White's patrician background and inclinations, despite the elder writer's attempts to enter into the minds and souls of outcasts, the flotsam and jetsam of modern Australian society. Foster writes about rock musicians and the exponents of martial arts, and about country postmen and petty criminals; his diction is colloquial, vulgar, and frequently obscene; his prose lacks the high-modernist intricacy and rhetorical elevation of the notorious purple passages scattered throughout White's fiction. For all that, the two writers have much in common, particularly their dismay at the world they inhabit—White by choice, Foster by the accident of birth—and the shadowy and ambiguous possibilities of other worlds and other ways of life that each had glimpsed. Both addressed time and again the same riddle: does this mysterious land, populated by the refuse of the British Empire and by those who had fled Europe's brutality, embody values or ideals worthy of respect and allegiance? The answer for both writers seems to be largely negative: only the landscape and those of the continent's original inhabitants who had not been corrupted by the newcomers—the colonisers or invaders—offer a glimmer of something that might be of value and worthy of preservation. Otherwise, both writers could glimpse only bleakness, corruption, and decadence in the rituals of domestic, cultural, and political Australian life. Inevitably, therefore, both turned to satire in order to articulate their anguish; this satire was tempered by the appeal of a visionary Gnosticism in White's case, and Foster's satire was rendered vicious by a similarly Gnostic inclination, which has led him to explore a bizarre species of quasi-theological mysticism.

Susan Lever's comprehensive study of Foster's work and career rightly emphasises the fundamental source of Foster's satire: not the

grace and urbanity of Horace, but Juvenal's fierce diatribes. She is also correct in pointing out that in Foster's work—as in Juvenal's—there is no suggestion, not even a hint, that the purpose of satire is to improve or reform society. Instead, in a series of novels, novellas, short stories, poems, and occasional essays, Foster has raged against the stupidity, folly, venality, and spiritual emptiness of his fellow Australians by exploiting the traditional modes of the most savage kind of satire: invective, hyperbole, obscenity, grotesque (generally inarticulate) characters, and outrageously intricate narrative structures. In short, in most of his works Foster has set out to offend and discomfort; more often than not, he has succeeded in bringing off that not inconsiderable feat.

Pointing the blowtorch at one's compatriots is a risky business. Satirical excess may itself prove excessive. The kind of satire Foster practises is always in danger of dissolving into rant and incoherence. And, above all, offending everyone almost indiscriminately and upsetting all manner of ethical, social, cultural, and political applegarts can have unhappy consequences for a writer's career. Accordingly, Foster has never been a popular or fashionable writer. Even winning the Miles Franklin award (the nation's most prestigious literary prize) for *The Glade Within The Grove* produced only a small and temporary improvement in his fortunes. Such relative lack of success—despite enthusiastic support by some (though by no means all) members of what is sometimes referred to as the literary community—has proved irksome for Foster. In recent years he (along with many others) has been prone to blame the neglect of serious writing on two factors: the decline in cultural literacy among the reading public and the mindless pursuit of easy profits by publishers. Equally—and this may prove just as significant a source of frustration—he has failed to provoke the scandalous notoriety that contemporary exponents of satirical invective have achieved in other parts of the world.

The careers of the French writer Michel Houellebecq and of the Austrian poet, novelist, and playwright Elfriede Jelinek provide a poignant contrast to Foster's. Each of these writers has travelled

down what is essentially the same path. Houellebecq has scandalised the French literary establishment, not merely on account of his outrageous subject matter that constantly mocks and pillories the cant and hypocrisy of contemporary social and cultural life in France, but equally through his contempt for the preoccupation with fine style that still dominates most of French literary culture. Like her notorious predecessor Thomas Bernhard, Elfriede Jelinek has, in work after work, poured bucketsful of scorn over her compatriots' refusal to acknowledge their shameful past, their persisting dedication to Nazism, and their cynically sentimental investment in images of Austrian charm and civilisation which mingle adulation for great cultural icons (Mozart and Bruckner for instance) with the saccharine clichés of *The Sound of Music*. Both Houellebecq and Jelinek, like Bernhard before them, have been subjected to vicious attacks by politicians and by the conservative press. They have been hounded and reviled. Whenever a new work by either of these writers appears, a noisy public debate is conducted in the media for weeks, sometimes for months. They are, in short, celebrities, even if their fame is of a negative kind. Besides, both Houellebecq and Jelinek have been awarded some of the world's leading literary awards. Houellebecq won the lucrative international IMPAC literary prize for *Platform*, the novel first published (with ghastly prescience) a few days before 11 September 2001. In 2004 Jelinek was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, thus provoking even more outrage and teeth-gnashing among conservative Austrians—the majority, it would seem, of that small nation's population.

Such *succès d'estime et de scandale* has eluded Foster. For better or worse, literature does not play a central role in Australian public and political life. Literary scandals rarely hit the headlines unless as a matter of fraud, alleged plagiarism, or similar misdemeanours. It is true that Foster has come in for a fair share of adverse criticism from every point of the literary and cultural compass: from conservatives as much as from left-leaning critics and commentators, from feminists and from members of almost every ethnic or religious minority. The debate has been vituperative at times, and Foster has been known

to give as good as he received. Yet, by and large, all this has been confined to the academy, to the pages of literary journals, to discussions at writers' festivals, and to late-night radio programs. For the public at large, Foster's work is mostly a source of tedium and irritation. They much prefer the relative simplicities of his more popular contemporaries. Susan Lever records a university student's reaction to *The Glade Within The Grove*: 'It's a beaut book...Why isn't this bloke as famous as Peter Carey?'

The reason for that is the immaturity of Australian cultural life. In this country at least, prophets remain generally unheeded. Gresham's Law holds true in matters literary and cultural. Where Foster is concerned, that is very much our loss. What he says about us may not be palatable. The only glimmer of hope he seems capable of offering, the weird self-castrating theology jokingly embodied in several of his works (anticipating by some years Houellebecq's burlesque admiration for the Raelians), is unlikely to attract many adherents. Yet, in generations to come, his writing will be remembered (if anything is remembered) when other, more fashionable writers will be represented by mouldering, unwanted volumes on the shelves of second-hand bookshops or languishing in supermarket cartons at charity bazaars. Susan Lever's sympathetic study of a difficult but rewarding writer will do much, I trust, to rekindle interest in this most individual and challenging of our contemporaries, Patrick White's worthy successor.

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INTRODUCTION

David Foster is the most original, challenging, contradictory, risk-taking, and infuriating Australian novelist of his generation. He has written at least three novels—*Moonlite* (1981), *Mates of Mars* (1991) and *The Glade Within the Grove* (1996)—that offer grand and sweeping visions of the state of Australia and its place in the world, and they deserve to be read alongside the finest work of Patrick White, Xavier Herbert, and Joseph Furphy. To date he has published twelve novels, three collections of novellas and short stories, two books of poetry, and a collection of essays, and he has also written several produced radio plays. Four of Foster's novels have won major literary awards in Australia: his first novel, *The Pure Land* (1974), shared the first *Age* Book of the Year award (with volume three of Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*) in 1975; his second novel, *Moonlite* (1981), was the National Book Council Book of the Year for 1981; *The Glade Within the Grove* (1996) won the Miles Franklin award in 1997; and *In the New Country* (1999) was the inaugural Brisbane *Courier-Mail* Book of the Year in 1999. Foster's novels have attracted the admiration of many other writers and critics, including White, Geoffrey Dutton, Randolph Stow, and Annie Proulx, and his contribution to Australian writing has been recognised by

several Australia Council grants and a prestigious 'Keating' Creative Fellowship in 1991.

Foster writes in an Australian tradition of idiosyncratic satire and comedy that may be traced through the work of Joseph Furphy, Miles Franklin, Xavier Herbert, and David Ireland. His novels are the most wide-ranging and fearless of the Australian novels that have contributed to the late twentieth-century re-examination of Western ideologies and the literary forms in which they are expressed. *Moonlite*, *Plumbum* (1983), *Mates of Mars*, and *The Glade Within the Grove* offer panoramic considerations of the state of humanity in a world propelled into chaos.

Despite the originality and importance of this fiction, Foster's writing is relatively unknown beyond Australia, and in Australia not much beyond a group of loyal readers. He has never acquired the international following of contemporaries such as Peter Carey or David Malouf, or the Australian readerships of Helen Garner or Elizabeth Jolley. By and large, he has defeated translators.¹ His novels are rarely set on university courses, and never on high school curricula. They do not express respectable social attitudes, and they are difficult to read and to classify.

While a degree of critical neglect may account for part of this situation, there are other clear reasons for Foster's lack of fame. Firstly, he is a satirist; his writing sets itself deliberately against the favourite beliefs of the educated readers who are most likely to read it. His work is opinionated, misanthropic, obsessive, and sometimes tedious. Secondly, he is a committed modernist, pursuing linguistic experiment and convinced that writing remains, at least partly, an improvisatory performance. Thirdly, his writing mixes genres, modes, and language registers; his work combines low humour and high cultural seriousness. Foster is a novelist of ideas rather than of character; readers cannot slip into sympathetic identification with his characters because they exist to express ideas rather than individual psychologies. One could go on to list Foster's toughness of mind and his spiritual obsessions as if they were negatives, but the qualities

that make Foster difficult are, of course, also those that make his books rewarding to read.

Foster claims not to consider his readers when he writes; his novels certainly demand persistence and a willingness to enjoy the unexpected. They reward this persistence with a wealth of complex and exciting ideas and the inventive use of language and laughter. Foster's writing is brilliantly witty and often revelatory. It is committed to presenting an Australian perspective on the particular dilemmas of our times. Three of his novels in particular—*Moonlite*, *Mates of Mars*, and *The Glade Within the Grove*—speculate about the place of Australians in history and the prospects for their future. These novels express a complex engagement with the paradoxes of contemporary Australia and with the fundamental ideology and theology behind the assumptions of Australian society. They also engage with the place of Australia in the world, finding absurdity, stupidity, and hilarity in human failing.

This study will attempt to penetrate the mysteries of Foster's fiction, as well as provide some guidance to those readers who are willing to approach them. It will examine the contradictory nature of his commitments and interests as expressed mainly in his novels. Foster is driven by a romantic impulse to seek the creative source within himself; he attributes a sacred and spiritual status to this creativity, and at times his writing proposes that language itself may offer a key to spiritual knowledge. This romanticism emerges in a commitment to improvisation of expression—to the kind of modernism that Foster admires in James Joyce's experimental novels and practised in the improvisatory jazz groups in which Foster once played as drummer.² Foster has committed himself to modernist experiment as being essential to the writer's claim to be an artist. None of his novels work to a formula, nor abide by conventions of narrative or style. Each moves in different directions to the previous novel as he seeks out new material and new possibilities for writing.

Though Foster changes genres and subjects frequently, an attentive reader will identify his writing immediately, be it a comic riff

on an Australian country town, a burlesque of history, or a fairy story. He has that 'originality of literary style which constitutes the only real honesty of a writer', as Vladimir Nabokov's narrator claims in *Ada* (377). Foster's personality dominates his fiction, and his excessive, sometimes angry, and often hilarious extemporisations create a voice that readers will hear as satirical. Yet Foster's fiction does not conform to the standard expectation of satire: that it mocks folly and vice in order to reform it. He has no stable political or social targets, nor any program for reform. Most often he declares his interests to be spiritual and even lyrical, and it may be that he is a satirist by temperament rather than choice. If the source of his art is a commitment to an individual, unfettered creativity, and an attempt to seek out spiritual enlightenment through this creativity, then satire emerges from the way that this unfettered individual expresses himself. Foster's habit of mind is critical and inclined to seek the alternative or contrary view to any assumption; he sees himself as 'the sceptical chymist' of the celebrated work by the Anglo-Irish physical chemist, Robert Boyle. In his novels he creates a writing persona that questions, subverts, or turns over the subject of his attention. This persona is also inclined to pursue ideas to their limits.

Readers may enjoy the sharpness of Foster's social observations and value his novels for asking questions about the state of Australian life at the turn of the twenty-first century. They may admire the disrespect for colonial history in *Moonlite*, the derision of popular music culture in *Plumbum*, the affectionate small-town comedy of the Dog Rock novels, the mockery of masculinity and feminism in *Mates of Mars*, and the comic observation of the MacAnaspie family in *The Glade Within the Grove*. But it is difficult to ignore the author's interest in spiritual enlightenment and religion. This interest is apparent in his accounts of the pagan lives of the islanders of *Moonlite*, of life on the Calcutta streets in *Plumbum*, and, most of all, of the experiences of the hippie communards and the accompanying poem of *The Glade*. Spirituality and religion are central to *The Adventures of Christian Rosy Cross* (1986) and *The Land Where*

Stories End (2001). His readers may respond most enthusiastically to his satiric commentaries on contemporary Australia, but Foster writes in the interest of his own ‘immortal soul’;³ ‘Readers? Fellow writers? For the most part, I wish them well, but in the end, it is to my god, the god of the literary novel, that I offer up my literary art’ (‘Like Spinoza’ 74).

Any disjunction between the interests of author and readers may be exacerbated by the divisions in the author’s own allegiances. Foster’s training as a scientist provided him with a careful eye for detail and a sense of the complexity of the observed world. At the same time, he seeks an understanding beyond the limits of the rational; he moves from the order of the known world to the chaos beyond. In his fiction, the rational logic and critical habit of the scientist meets a quest for spiritual enlightenment. His satirical savagery confronts a lyrical impulse that sometimes emerges in poetry. This struggle for enlightenment through a tough and unsentimental vision of the world gives his work a depth and complexity beyond the conventional expectations of social satire.

Foster’s personality and his experience of the world directly inform his fiction, so some understanding of his background helps in the appreciation of his work. His interest in a range of philosophical traditions (particularly those outside Christianity), his training as a scientist, and his artistic commitment to improvisation are not only elements of his idiosyncratic approach to fiction, but they are also part of the main intellectual debates of his times. While committing himself to his own peculiar path to art, Foster has absorbed many of Western society’s fundamental concerns about the damage caused by technology and progress, and about the possibility for a human future.

In the following chapters I discuss each of his works of fiction and poetry in the order of publication (except for *The Adventures of Christian Rosy Cross* and *The Pale Blue Crochet Coathanger Cover*, which are discussed alongside similar novels), and I pursue the development of Foster’s philosophical ideas and technique as a novelist over the thirty-five years of his writing life to date. Foster’s

letters to Geoffrey Dutton early in his career and his interviews and essays provide some of the background to these novels, and my study attempts to give a sense of the Australian context for his work. In order to do this, I will begin with a brief biography of Foster's early life and a discussion of his approach to satire, before discussing the novels in detail.