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Communicative Clashes in Australian Culture and Autobiography

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Some life-writing critics have pointed to a paradox in Australian autobiography: that of memoir writers paying tribute to their subjects in ways which those subjects would not understand or agree with. In this article, I focus on one facet of this paradox, looking at how various styles of communication are represented in autobiographies. What happens when a highly articulate autobiographer attempts to represent the communicative style of a subject who does not share or value the autobiographer's discursive style? This article surveys a variety of strategies which autobiographers have used, some of which are open to the possibility of valuing a minimalist style of communication, while others condemn it as inarticulate and inexpressive. These varying attitudes connect to a broader cultural debate in Australia. In this debate, an older rural style of communication, which values minimal verbal communication and emotional inexpressivity, is pitted against a more recent urban-based style of communication, which values emotional expressivity and expansive commentary. Intriguingly, this rural speech style (seemingly the antithesis of the autobiographer's art) is represented and valued as an art form by some Australian autobiographers.

Paradoxical claims

Australian autobiographer often claim they are paying 'tribute' to their subjects, even in narratives which reveal that their subjects would not understand or agree with their approach. In a searching analysis of Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father*, Alex Segal has pointed to just such a paradox, noting that Gaita's father would not be able to recognize the kind of ethical ideals which Gaita is describing and valuing (and sees as derived from his

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father's example) (Segal, 2002: 17–18). Segal says that Gaita's descriptions give 'sensuous embodiment' to his father's values – 'but with reference to a beauty to which he is blind' (2002: 15). Segal's analysis deals with broader problems of representation; I want to restrict my analysis to just one facet of this, paradoxes surrounding communication. These include ways in which writers may transform an 'inarticulate' mode of communication into one which is fully articulated; or use narrative elaboration to elucidate an older rural speech style which relies on minimal prosody and little overt emotional expression. In other cases, where a writer attempts to pay tribute to an emotionally reticent subject through an exploration of the subject's psyche, the potential for paradox is even stronger.

Anecdotes and autobiography

In this article, I explore these paradoxes through several Australian autobiographies, and also through an anecdote of Australian rural life. All of these, arguably, are Australian forms of life narrative, of memoir: each reflects on what the autobiographer/storyteller sees as patterns of behaviour in Australia. The autobiographies have an authority here which the anecdote lacks: anecdotes have a much more ambivalent status, as an oral, unpublished form. None the less, anecdotes can be suggestive in indicating the existence of a particular cultural phenomena, and Cliff Goddard opens his linguistic analysis of Australian irony with an anecdote.[1] One of the aspects of Australian culture which anecdotes can illustrate concerns the ways in which communication may take place. As a result, I would also like to start with an anecdote. This is a tale told to me by someone lucky enough to overhear it, a conversation in a small general store in rural Australia about 10 years ago. Changed by the hearer, it will be changed again as I attempt to write it down. Yet I still feel it is 'lucky', so there is still the sense of experience here, something fortuitously encountered.

This conversation was recounted by an accomplished oral story teller, a gift which implies powers of shaping, selecting and expression. In retelling, I am shifting from the expressivity of the oral form to the fixed form of written words – a form which Plato suggests can betray, precisely because of that fixity.[2] I include it for what it illustrates about patterns of communication (or non-communication) in Australia, and I write it as if it were a playscript, trying to copy the story's oral form. Despite this attempt to be faithful, as I write it I am aware of loss, the loss of the enacted, embodied form of the oral story, as the story teller takes on the part of each actor in the conversation.

The conversation, the story teller said, took place between an elderly farmer, a storekeeper (newly arrived in this country district, a district

of small independent farms) and another farmer. It went something like this:

> Elderly Farmer (speaking to Storekeeper): Saw that dog this morning.
>
> Storekeeper: Did you! Was it at your place? Look, is it giving you trouble? It's a menace you know. It killed some calves on Bill's place the other day, and it scared those kids when they were going home. Look, I've got some of the new guys together from town – they're in the gun club you know. That's the trouble – all the farmers round here just have those old-fashioned single shot .22s, you can't do anything with a gun like that. You need something high-powered, like an automatic with telescopic sights. But these guys, they've all said they'll help, and Ernie's got a four-wheel-drive, he can go anywhere. Look, you just ring us next time, next time you see that dog. And I'll ring them, and we'll come over, and we'll sort it out. You just ring me.
>
> Elderly Farmer: (leaving store) I'll do that.
>
> Second farmer: (speaking to Elder Farmer as he leaves): Thanks for that, Jeff.
>
> Elderly Farmer: No trouble.
>
> Storekeeper: (speaking to second farmer) So, what were you thanking Jeff for then?
>
> Second farmer: He shot that dog, you know.
>
> Storekeeper: What?! But he never said anything! He never said . . .
>
> Second farmer: What did you think he mentioned the dog *for*? He'd have never *said* anything about the dog unless he'd *done* something about it.
>
> Storekeeper: But how was I to know, how was I supposed to know . . .

(And at this point my story teller left the store, so the rest of the conversation is lost.) The incident this anecdote records is a very rare occurrence: one in which the ideals of minimal communication, of speaking no more than is necessary, are fully explained to a cultural outsider. Perhaps paradoxically, these ideals of minimal communication have been best treated by the wordsmiths of Australia, Australian autobiographers.

Critical accounts

Patterns of communication are social as well as individual, influenced by gender as well as geography and generation. The paradoxes with which I am concerned are an important aspect of many works by male Australian autobiographers: sometimes appearing as an unresolved tension in the text, while at other times they are explicitly recognized and discussed. Female autobiographers tend to treat these concerns in rather different

ways. These other ways of seeing and different voices fall outside the scope of this article, which concentrates on what is (not incidentally) a male-centred, Anglo-centric world.

Unsurprisingly, this world is seen in unflattering terms by those whose gender or culture give them an outsider's vantage point on it. When Fay Zwicky says 'Growing up in this country has been an exercise in repression', neither her gender nor her awareness of an alternative cultural ideal, a Jewish culture, are incidental to her judgement.[3] Nor is her age irrelevant, for it is arguable that aspects of the Anglo-Australian culture which Zwicky experienced as a repressive norm are now marginal to mainstream Australian culture. We can see evidence of this marginalization process in the anecdote, where the storekeeper completely misunderstands the elderly farmer's oblique reference to his actions. If the minimalist mode of speech shown in the anecdote is becoming unintelligible to many urban Australians, the role of autobiographers who can explore these ways of speech becomes more important.

If Zwicky arguably over-generalizes about Australian culture, her comments are none the less valuable as a highly critical account of it. Zwicky emphasizes the way in which feelings are not communicated, seeing Australia as 'a culture whose norm is emotional repression' (Zwicky, 1993: 26). Zwicky's phrase 'emotional repression' appears to refer to the phenomenon of emotional inexpressivity, which other commentators on Australian culture see as linked to the economical verbal style of some modes of Australian speech (John Thornhill refers to a 'severe economy' of both 'language' and 'emotional expression' (Thornhill, 1992: 137)).

As Mary Besemeres has perceptively analysed, Andrew Riemer's view of these issues is rather more complicated than Zwicky's, at once critical yet implicated (Besemeres, 2002: 223–24, 227). Riemer (who came from a Hungarian Jewish family and arrived as a child migrant in Australia during the 1940s) speaks of a 'aggressively practical-minded, exclusively male society', one which 'allowed no scope for emotions'. He writes:

> Being the child of a culture where feelings and affection are expressed far more readily than they were in that pragmatic middle-class boys' high school, I suffered (as I now realise) from the suppression of life-sustaining emotional energies – no matter how bizarre their manifestions might have been among the gesticulating patrons of the expresso-bars.
>
> (Riemer, 1992: 146)

Besemeres notes that although Riemer appears on the verge of criticizing this emotionally repressive Anglo-Australian culture, he has imbibed enough of its ideals to see his parents and their friends through (and only through) those ideals, so they are 'bizarre' in their 'gesticulating'.

Zwicky's critique of these ideals is sharper. Ruminating on Australian characteristics, she writes: 'The pointed contrast between Australian outward bonhomie and deep private reserve is a characteristic of our culture, and it's difficult to determine whether it masks a great indifference or is a more genuine apathy'. (Zwicky, 1993: 14–15). For Zwicky, 'James McAuley's poem, 'Envoi', catches something of the deprivation'. The key lines she cites from 'Envoi' are these, McAuley's depiction of outback Australia:

> The people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them.
> The men are independent but you could not call them free.[4]

Zwicky's endorsement of this marks the extremity of her alienation from a particular cultural ideal, for there can be few poems in which 'people' are more thoroughly condemned in the service of an ideal which they would not accept.

The people, the poem tells us, are imaginatively narrow. They cannot visualize a different way of being. In the hands of a different Australian writer, narrowness can be registered as the cost of an ideal which remains valuable.[5] In 'Envoi', however, only the ideals which the poem itself espouses are depicted. In other words, it is not just 'the people' condemned in 'Envoi' who cannot visualize alternative ethical ideals; it is the poem itself which cannot visualize them. Indeed, arguably some of the poem's rhetorical force and effectiveness come from its imaginative narrowness, where each quality of the community is referred to in belittling terms ('kindly'), or is instantly undercut by an apparently greater good: independence being immediately undercut by the lack of freedom. We might recall, here, the comment of the younger farmer: 'He wouldn't have *said* anything unless he'd *done* something.' The self of the elderly farmer in the anecdote is a Homeric self, the self best expressed in action, as Simon Haines has described it (Haines, 2005: 15, 70). McAuley, however, is here assuming another model of the self, the Romantic self. In this model, the best, most authentic part of the self is 'inside'. David Parker points to a chain of imagery in Romantic literature and in D.H. Lawrence's work in particular, noting the Romantic imperative to 'courageously foster the unique unfolding of your own being', rather than withering 'like a pea in its shell'. The 'inside' is to be fostered, the outside (established social roles and conventions) should be broken through. Hence, that the people portrayed in 'Envoi' have 'nothing inside them' is an utter condemnation, for the outside (on the Romantic view of the self) is only a shell, a husk to be discarded or ignored (Parker, 1994: 54). What good could the fact that 'the men are independent' be on the Romantic view? For that would merely mean that the men are independent in action, in behaviour. On the Romantic view of the self (the view McAuley and Zwicky are upholding) such independence is weighed lightly against the fact that these men are not 'free'.

For Zwicky, Australia is 'an environment favouring grey reticence' (1993: 23). In another essay, Zwicky turns gratefully to D.H. Lawrence for a diagnosis of the failings of the Australian male. She writes:

> If Lawrence was right about Australia (and I believe he was nearer the mark about Australian male identity than anyone else has ever been) and if we accept his premise that an Australian is 'always aware of the big empty spaces of his consciousness, like his country, a vast empty 'desert' at the centre of him',[6] then what happens to language from such seemingly deprived sources?
>
> (Zwicky, 1993: 24–25)

And she turns to Lawrence's depiction of this in his work *Kangaroo* (a work which is as much a piece of travel writing as it is a novel):

> The communication flows like waves from person to person, and each one knows: *unless he is foiled by speech.* Each one knows in silence, reciprocates in silence, and the talk as a rule just babbles on, on the surface … Each individual seems to feel himself pledged to put himself aside, to keep himself at least half out of count. The whole geniality is based on a sort of code of 'You put yourself aside and I'll put myself aside' This is done with a watchful will: a sort of duel. And above this, a great geniality. But the continual holding most of himself aside, out of count, makes a man go blank in his withheld self.
>
> (Lawrence, 1950: 43; my italics)

Lawrence's description shows the double movement characteristic of so much of *Kangaroo*, at least in so far as this work engages with Australian culture: engaged attention to detail, followed by prescriptive rejection.

EXPLORATIONS: APPRECIATION AND CRITIQUE

For Lawrence, what he sees has to be seen as a failure. These people are 'foiled by words'. Is there any other way of seeing this communicative pattern? Strangely enough, those who have most successfully described it are the writers whose communicative patterns are opposed to this, who create through words. Some of these autobiographers have attended closely enough to these communicative patterns to see something which Lawrence could not. They see not failure, but an ideal, not breakdown but an artistry, a skill and a pride in communicating in minimal words. Brian Matthews' description of 'the Australian habit of irony' (2001: 18) in his memoir *A fine and private place* is a case in point. He writes that:

> irony was a way of coping with life which did not adjust the intensity of the external reaction to the quality of the stimulus. It provided the same reaction,

> varied only by minuscule gradations of voice and glance, to no matter what crisis … I was reminded of this ironic habit years later when, forced by a temporarily strangled cash flow and an empty petrol tank to ask a service station attendant for 'Two bobs worth of super', I evoked the utterly deadpan, monotone reply, 'Whaddya tryin' to do, mate, wean the bastard?'
>
> (2001: 19)

Matthews sees the attendant's comment as the work of a craftsman, worthy of recording and valuing. We are a long way from Lawrence's assumptions about the intuitive knowledge of the working class.

Yet in the penultimate, and very moving chapter of Matthews' memoir, we see that he is in partial agreement with Zwicky's and Riemer's perception of Australian culture as one which discourages the expression of emotions, sometimes at great cost. The costs, though, are seen differently. Lawrence is critiquing what he sees as a refusal to live fully. What Matthews is describing is ways of living with pain. The pain in this case is unbearable: the death of Matthews' daughter, Genevieve, at only three weeks of age. Matthews depicts the way in which he and his wife felt they had to bear this grief, in the silence demanded by stoicism:

> We wait, holding hands now and then; once, unaccountably drawing close together and kissing for a moment passionately and then guiltily drawing apart. As if to comfort each other, by whatever means, was wrong … One morning about a week after the funeral my wife and I woke early and clung together and sobbed … But that was the only time we wept together (she had been stony-faced and tearless at the funeral and I, with some mad 1950s version of masculine endurance stuck in my head, had remained *in control*) and this was probably the only time we grieved together.
>
> (2001: 267)

Stoicism, enduring but not expressing pain, is often seen as one of the most admirable aspects of the 'bush ethos' which inflects the patterns of communication and emotional expression we are exploring. Although Matthews's memoir is set in urban Melbourne, this 'bush ethos' would have been an influence on him while he was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. Richard Freadman, whose memoir is also centred on Melbourne, picks out the 'bush ethos' as an identifiable influence on ideals of Australian masculinity in this time period (Freadman, 2003: 178). Matthews is here suggesting that the adoption of this ideal of stoicism made these events even worse, because this ideal suggests that unbearable grief can and should be borne without expression. This lack of expression is seen as eventually contributing to the breakdown of his marriage.

Matthews is unsparing of his earlier self in depicting what he now sees as his failures of understanding. He points to communication as a

possible way out of unbearable pain, a way of making sense of experience which is very different to the Stoic ideal:

> my solicitude, I now realise, was comfortless. It was always, 'Don't think about it', or 'Don't cry' or 'Try not to be upset'… I should have expressed my own desperate sense of emptiness … instead of remaining locked in that awkward, vaguely loving but inadequate toughness with which I had grown up and which had been impressed upon me … as a value, a way of behaving which was superior to the alternative of emotional nakedness and revelation.
>
> (2001: 271)

He tells us that he did just one thing, writing a poem, and that he can still feel 'the desperation, the longing, the dread that is locked into the uncertain and inexperienced discipline of those inadequate words'. As a depiction of the need to express and thereby endure grief, this is all the more effective for being unexpected: for in earlier chapters, Matthews shows a deep appreciation of minimal and indirect communication, of feelings conveyed indirectly and obliquely, through acceptable filters, such as football.

In his memoir *Shadow of doubt*, Richard Freadman reflects frequently on his decision to write a memoir, to articulate what earlier generations had left unsaid (where what was left unsaid was based on a matter of principle, the ideal of not speaking about certain issues). He represents his internal arguments between the ideals of reticence and psychological exploration (' "Stop probing, prying. Respect other people's privacy…" But it's the way I am. The story demands to be told' (2003: 77)), though it is unclear if his conclusion here is an appeal to to a cultural ideal of openness or to psychological or artistic necessity. At other times, however, the debate between different cultural ideals, centred round different ways of communicating, becomes quite explicit. Freadman notes that some Australian autobiographies may have been fueled by reactions against earlier ideals of minimal communication or of emotional reticence:

> Australian autobiography has produced a disproportionate number of examples of the Son's Book of the Father – an indication that this culture has rendered father – son relationships complex, perhaps unusually problematical. Various strands of cultural influence are at work here: the British 'stiff upper lip' ethos of emotional diffidence and inhibition; the bush ethos with its insistence on masculine self-sufficiency, stoicism, physical endurance, loyal but incurious styles of mateship … an edgy mistrust of emotional self-analysis … a 'knockabout' laconicism that secures emotional ease at the cost of an openness to the inner life.
>
> (2003: 178)

Although Freadman distances himself from these cultural ideals, we do not find here the accusation of cowardice, hypocrisy ('a great geniality') or failure which is evident in the passage from Lawrence's *Kangaroo*. Instead Freadman suggests that there is a limitation here, even in mateship, which is 'loyal *but* incurious' (my italics). The implication is that a more probing relationship can also offer more emotional support. Although, like Lawrence, the 'inner life' is seen as valuable, other goods, such as stoicism and physical endurance, are registered without undercutting. Only in Freadman's comment that a mistrust of self-analysis is 'edgy' does a recognizably psychoanalytic affiliation become evident – on a psychoanalytic reading, such mistrust is always indicative of defensiveness, rather seen as sound or justified.

One of the strengths of *Shadow of doubt* is that Freadman sets out *both* ideals, that of communicative analysis and that of minimal communication and emotional reticence. An account he gives of a set of tapes about his grandfather Roy's life is a case in point:

> Back in England I wrote to ask Paul if he'd interview one of Roy's old friends, Peter … I wanted to know as much as I could about the young Roy … Peter Mason, a good-natured and funny man, who generally prefaced a new sentence with a verbal mannerism that sounds like 'Num', is happy to talk … but isn't about to spill the beans on any aspect of Roy's life that might be regarded as private …
>
> Peter: Num, Richard, your father thinks that if he pours me another whisky I'll tell you that your grandfather was the greatest woman-getter of all time, or as pure as the Pope. But he was a mate, and some things you don't say.
>
> Paul: … Picture the man at the other end of this tape. Richard's hungry to know everything he can about his beloved grandfather …
>
> Peter: Num, I'll tell you what Richard. Next time you're in Melbourne, you take me to lunch and maybe after a few glasses of wine I'll tell you a few things, and maybe I won't …
>
> And so it went on, with Peter revealing little about the inner Roy, but, inadvertently, a lot about the ethos of loyal and affectionate mateship they shared.
>
> (2003: 198, 203)

Freadman's allegiance to disclosure is not in doubt here, but his appreciation of a contrary ideal enriches the book. As Freadman is openly oppositional towards (although also appreciative of) ideals of minimal communication and emotional reticence, the paradox which Segal has identified does not come into play in his work.[7] It appears instead in its strongest form in works which make articulate what was unspoken.

Alan Marshall, responding to a letter commenting on his memoir *I can jump puddles*, shows his full awareness of the paradox:

> Re Father. I *was* over-anxious to make his attitude clear to the reader. As you suggest this is revealed in some of his dialogue. But I was faced with this problem. My father was not a particularly articulate man … How was I to put his character across to the reader? I had to make him express in words what in reality he felt but did not express … It is true that he is at times 'falsely articulate' but I doubt whether I could have given you the man without making him so.[8]

Marshall sums up here concisely the problem of rendering an 'inarticulate' character in words – by making the character articulate, the writer may nullify the characteristic he/she is striving to represent. Marshall's terms also suggest a fault in the character which the writer needs to rectify. The father is 'not particularly articulate'; that is, articulacy is seen as a quality he lacks. As we have seen, however, minimalist communication may be a positive ideal which is purposefully adopted. Speaking at length, speaking explicitly about feelings, or revealing feelings by facial expression or gesture are all at odds with what some observers have argued are traditional cultural ideals in Australia.[9]

Marshall's representational strategies on this issue are complicated by other factors which he does not mention. His wish to present the young Alan as often unaware of adult motives means that a greater communicative burden is thrown on to the character of the father. Thus, the young Alan cannot be seen to know the reasons for his father's actions, which means Marshall must utilise an explanation from the father to communicate them to the reader. The attitude of the father which Marshall is most concerned to communicate centres around the father's decision to allow Alan to take physical risks, rather than trying to protect his crippled son. The following dialogue is typical:

> That night, through the open door of my bedroom, I saw father talking to mother … and I heard him say to her 'We've just got to toughen him, Mary. You know that. He's got to learn to take it on the chin no matter how it's dished out. Save him from this and he's going to get it fair in the neck later on. It's a cow, but there you are. We got to cut out working for the kid; we got to work for the man. I want him to try the lot no matter what the risk. Half the time it's a matter of risking his neck or breaking his heart; I choose to risk his neck. That's how I see it anyway. I may be wrong, but I'm staking all I've got, I'm right.
>
> (Marshall, 1955: 120)

Here the child can overhear his father's reasons, but does not take on the narrative burden of knowing them beforehand and articulating them in advance. It is not just the need to render unspoken attitudes into words which is driving Marshall's strategy of representation, it is also the wish

to present the perspective of the child as unknowing. Of course, the narrator could have been employed here to comment on the young Alan's lack of knowledge, but Marshall might have decided against this, feeling it would drive too great a wedge between the narrating and the narrated self.

In contrast, the narrator can take on some of the explanatory burden of Joe's attitudes. Joe and the young Alan share the solidarity of being children. It is thus easier for the narrator to explain Joe's attitude without significant distancing from this solidarity, as if speaking to an external, adult audience:

> Joe developed a philosophical attitude towards the falls I had when walking with him … We never mentioned the fall … It was part of my walking … If I had a 'bad' fall Joe sat down just the same. He never made the mistake of coming to my aid unless I called him. He would sit on the grass, give one glance at me rolling in pain, then look resolutely away and say, 'It's a cow!'
>
> (Marshall, 1955: 134–35)

Joe's dialogue can adhere to the ideals of minimal communication and of resolutely limited emotional expressivity, because the narrator has taken on the burden of explanation.

Other Australian autobiographers have used different strategies. David Malouf uses the radical one of silence, of highlighting what he does not know. He says of his father 'I can't speak for his feelings. He never expressed them. He didn't show them either'. His father had 'an inner life that was not declared … I didn't know him' (Malouf, 1999: 8, 149). This negative approach – refusing to fill in what is not known – takes a certain amount of courage and discipline on the part of an autobiographer in a psychoanalytic age. In a published dialogue, David Parker and Raimond Gaita argue over a similar strategy of silence in *Romulus, my father*, though in this instance the narrative silence concerns Gaita's mother. Parker pushes for a fuller, more psychologically probing portrait, saying that Tolstoy would have known what to do with such a character (Parker, 2001: 52–53). Gaita responds:

> 'What the narrative doesn't face squarely is the question of … [h]ow the world appeared to her', Parker says. It's true the book doesn't describe how things looked from my mother's point of view. That is partly because no one knows … Parker says Tolstoy, would know what to do with '*such* a character' [my italics]. Perhaps, but whatever Tolstoy did with 'such a character', the result would not be my mother … Some memoirs are novelistic, not only because the characters are alive in them, but also because the reason they are alive is that the memoir probes them psychologically. *Romulus, My Father* resists psychological probing – I mean its narrative style resists it, not merely that as a matter of fact I didn't go in for it.
>
> (Gaita, 2001: 64)

In the sense which Gaita is using, Malouf's *12 Edmonstone Street* is also not novelistic, especially in regard to his father. This anti-novelistic approach is one of the strategies which an autobiographer can adopt when portraying non-communication (especially of feelings), but it is rare.

Yet another strategy is employed by Colin Thiele, who sets up a comic contrast between an urban tendency to elaborate in speech and to reveal feelings by both word and gesture, and a rural ideal of minimal communication and emotional inexpressivity. He begins by noting that the incident he describes could have been an episode in a Henry Lawson story. The strategy he uses, however, is very different, for it employs both the narrated and narrating self as a comic foil. Out on the Nullarbor Plain (a landscape so harsh and desolate that a car breakdown brings the risk of death), he and two friends slow their car down to stare incredulously at a man walking towards them.

> When we were within four or five metres of him Mike slowed down and stopped. The man also stopped while we looked each other over. We, being the intruders into his domain, were obviously responsible for making the first move.
>
> 'G'day,' Mike said.
>
> The stranger considered this for a couple of seconds, which was mandatory protocol in the bush, and answered noncommittally. 'G'day.'
>
> 'Where you heading?' Mike asked.
>
> Another slight pause before the answer. 'Mundrabilla.'
>
> We were flabbergasted. Mundrabilla? He was *walking* to Mundrabilla. In this country. Alone.
>
> (Thiele, 2002: 255–56)

Thiele here throws the burden of narration on the narrator, letting him act as a foil against the monosyllabic style of dialogue. The narrator makes the stranger's actions intelligible to urban readers ('this was mandatory protocol in the bush'), but in a style of diction which is so formal that it makes the narrator a slightly comic character. The juxtaposition of the language of diplomacy and the language of the stranger sets off the latter to advantage. Meanwhile the emotional inexpressivity of the stranger (which is so central to this form of speech) is highlighted by the narrator revealing the attitudes he and his companions shared: 'We were flabbergasted.'

The narrative continues:

> Mike hazarded a laconic observation. 'Fair way.'
>
> The man seemed surprised that we should think so. 'Not far,' he said.

> I was inclined to say 'You could have fooled me', but thought better of it. As he was still an unconscionable distance from his destination Mike made the obvious offer. 'Give you a lift.' …
>
> It required a further interchange of one line suggestions and one word answers before he could be persuaded to accept the lift … As he climbed aboard it was impossible not to notice a long gash that ran from his wrist up the length of his arm. It looked brutal, the more so for having been stitched up with black cotton and doused with yellow antiseptic.
>
> Mike inclined his head towards it. 'Hurt your arm?' If ever there was an understatement that was it.
>
> The man glanced at it fleetingly. 'Yeah, bit of a scratch. Done it fencing.'
>
> Evidently he had been straining steel wire when it had snapped under tension and the end had whipped away viciously, gouging the flesh of his arm. But as far as he was concerned it was simply the sort of thing that happened in everyday life. He had stitched it up himself.
>
> (Thiele, 2002: 256–57)

The shocked (non-stoical) attitude of the narrated self highlights both the emotional inexpressivity and the stoicism of the fencer. At the same time, the formal, elaborate diction of the narrating self ('unconscionable'), acts as a foil to the fencer's minimalist form of speech. The dialogue attributed to Mike helps here too. There is a suggestion that although Mike is conforming sufficiently to country protocol to be an acceptable interlocutor, the stranger can manage this minimalist form of conversation with greater ease. Where Mike uses 'one line suggestions' the fencer can use 'one word answers'. Meanwhile Thiele (in his role as narrated self), conscious of insufficient mastery of this form of minimalist communication and emotional inexpressivity, quells an impulse to comment.

Thiele's generosity, in making himself a comic foil, is very marked in comparison to Patrick White's treatment of social interactions in *Flaws in the glass.* White recounts the interactions between himself and the stockmen he worked with while acting as a jackaroo on a country station. He sees a limit in what they see as acceptable, what 'we could share':

> water played a leading part in my developing sexuality. I was always throwing off my clothes to bathe … in the river flowing between the trunks of the great flesh-coloured gums … or at night in the hollow below the homestead if a good season had turned it into a lagoon. Here I was joined by the men who worked about the place, whose company I enjoyed without quite becoming their equal.
>
> The way to the lagoon was stony. I once found a pair of old high-heeled shoes amongst the junk dumped in the bathroom. I wore them, tottering

> across the stones till reaching the aquiescent mud, the tepid water. My companions turned the shoes into a ribald joke, acceptable because it was something we could share. We continued joking, to hold more serious thoughts at bay, while we plunged, turning on our backs after surfacing, spouting water, exposing our sex, lolling or erect, diving again to swim beneath the archways made by open legs, ribs and flanks slithering against other forms in the fishy school, as a flamingo moon rose above the ashen crown of the surrounding trees.
>
> (White, 1981: 51–52)

While the focus of the passage is on White's 'developing sexuality' and his inability to share it, the passage also points to other failures of communication, factors which prevent the group moving beyond joking. White's depiction of the verbal encounter between himself and the other men is too brief and allusive to leave the reader with any certainty of which communicative pattern he is alluding to, though clearly he is pointing to a disparity in communicative styles. What emerges clearly, however, is that it is White who is the hero of this occasion: more receptive, more responsive, more aware, able to reflect upon the encounter and reshape it. His supple manipulation of words, the seemingly effortless shaping of description to action, establishes White as the hero here. It is almost impossible not to be seduced: the kingdom of words belongs to him, and unlike some of the other autobiographers we have seen, he will not give their glory to anyone else.

White seems assured here, but other Australian autobiographers have portrayed their exclusion from a cultural ideal of emotional inexpressivity and minimal communication as painful. In *Inside outside*, Andrew Riemer portrays his first day at an Australian school as a newly arrived immigrant child. He writes:

> I was a garish parrot amidst a flock of drab swallows … The bemused boys who surrounded me … were all lean and sinewy, their faces old for their years … Small eyes looked suspiciously out of freckled faces; thin lips were pursed in disapproval … It was then, I think, that I began to recognise an aspect of Australian culture which I did not acknowledge fully until many years later … It was this: Australians, at least the children and adults of the inner western and southern suburbs of Sydney in the 1940s, employed a very restricted repertoire of gestures … The faces staring at me … were impassive, their hands immobile. You could not 'read' their intentions, especially if you were the product of a culture which habitually used exaggerated gestures, smiles and other facial expressions.
>
> (Riemer, 1993: 90–92)

As Besemeres has noted, Riemer has internalized the norms of this Anglo-Australian culture to such an extent that the gestures of his Hungarian

Jewish culture now seem 'exaggerated' (Besemeres, 2002: 217). None the less, Riemer's observations here are acute: especially the connections he makes between gestures and communication. If, in Zwicky's words, Australia is a country of emotional repression, the expression of feelings is prohibited not only in speech but also in non-verbal forms.

In concentrating on the Australian autobiographies which portray clashes or contrasts between emotional expressivity and verbal elaboration on the one hand, and emotional inexpressivity and and minimalist communication on the other, I may seem to be eliding all those autobiographies in which this is not a theme. So perhaps it might be as well to conclude with the words of Donald Horne, for whom this is evidently not a central concern.

> A 'real boy' . . . asserted his toughness with his whole body . . . scorning even to speak except to mangle the language in a jargon of his own. In this sense I was not a real boy . . . I chattered all day, priding myself on my command of language and collecting new words with more enthusiasm than I collected stamps and, on the whole, unlike a 'real boy', I preferred conversation with some of the girls. Fortunately there were only two real boys in the class and the rest of us tried to keep clear of them . . . because their surliness and taciturnity prevented them even entering into our games. The rest of us could not parallel their standards of masculinity.
>
> (Horne, 1988: 201)

Horne is a world away from Riemer's perception of himself as an outsider in an inexpressive masculine world. For Riemer, his status as a 'parrot' in this Anglo-Australian culture is painfully obvious; for Horne, his awareness of himself as someone who 'chattered all day' is something which can be carried lightly. After all, as Horne notes comically, there were only two boys who actually met the standard of masculine taciturnity. Riemer, however, is more vulnerable, for he is a child migrant in an assimilationist society. As Besemeres has noted, the migrant child often has a fierce need to conform in such a society (Besemeres, 2002: 207), whereas someone at home in the culture may perceive more space for alternative cultural ideals. Despite the paradoxes which Segal has identified, I would argue that it is in Australian autobiographies that we see these alternatives displayed most fully.

NOTES

1 Goddard (in press), n.p.

2 Plato, 1993: 88–89.

3 Zwicky was born in Melbourne, but frequently ruminates on her links to and affiliation with Jewish culture, especially Jewish writers, and the counter-cultural perspective this gives her on Australia (see Zwicky, 1993: 91–92).

4 McAuley, 1994: 7, 'Envoi'.

5 In *Romulus, my father*, Gaita discusses the value which the rural Anglo-Australian community of Baringhup placed upon 'character' in the 1950s (1998: 101–04). He notes its 'limitations' but also notes that it 'nourished distinctively Australian decency' (1998: 104).

6 Lawrence, 1950: 48.

7 Freadman also discusses his oppositional attitude to this ideal of avoiding probing 'the dark psychological places' and the 'inner life' in an essay ('Decent and indecent: writing my father's Life') on the ethics of writing his memoir. See Freadman, 2004, especially pp. 122–23.

8 Quoted by Marks, 1976: 256–57. No reference given; Marshall is responding to a letter by A.A. Phillips.

9 Goddard (in press), n.p. (See section 'Understatement' and 'flat emotionality'.)

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