RESEARCH PAPER

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HENRY LAWSON'S WOMANISH WAIL[1]

The article describes the formulation of the Henry Lawson author function (Foucault) and its placement, through cultural discourse, at the centre of the Australian Myth as established by Kay Schaffer in her seminal study *Women and the Bush*. Building on this contention, Christopher Lee ascertains that public discourse in the past century has formulated Lawson as an object epitomising the values of this Myth. Through them, Lawson is positioned as the main empowering element of the local rubric, which demands the right of the local to articulate the local (Lee, 2004). Consequently, Lawson came to signify (white, colonial) Australia. Within this process of formulating his "author-function" Lawson's stories were established as the paramount contribution to the construction of the Myth. However, since each piece of literature necessarily "gets away" from its author, points of divergence from the Myth in Lawson's work are identified and described. It is our contention that Lawson's greatness is revealed precisely in those points of departure from the Myth, which constitutes the most important *aporia* of Australian nationalism.

Key words: Henry Lawson, Australian Myth, father of Australian literature, points of divergence

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Henry Lawson is "the voice of the bush, and the bush is the heart of Australia" (Stephens qtd. in Roderick 1972: 4). Lawson is "the most characteristic literary product that Australia has yet achieved" (Stephens qtd. in Roderick 1972: 80). He was "the first of Australia's sons to speak in her own tone and language" (McKee Wright qtd. in Roderick 1972: 207). Lawson is "Australia writ large." (Manning Clark 1978, Preface)

As long ago as 1994, Donald Horne wrote that "there is one sense in which discussion on 'national identity' is fruitful" and it lies in constantly answering

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[1] In his essay "Art in Australia", published in Sydney in 1922, A.G. Stephens wrote: "Much of Lawson's work views Australia through the distorting glass of his own moody mind. 'My aunts said I should have been a girl,' he wrote. His womanish wail often needs a sturdy Australian backbone" (Roderick 1972: 217).

questions "such as: Where are we now? How are we changing? How are we reacting to changes in the rest of the world?". We need to do this because

> each society is in certain ways distinctive and each society in a modern world is in some ways changing. To say that there are some ways in which Australia is distinctive is not nationalistic […] There are some things that are distinctive about the Australian political system, its social mix, its physical environment, its demographic mix[;] […] its mix of faiths, habits, lifestyles and values – and what these are must necessarily be the basis for a continuing discussion" (Horne 1994: 15).

Nationalism, as a nineteenth-century invention, contains many contradictions, and the celebration of a country's distinctiveness has a homogenising effect; it gives people security, and a sense of belonging. As a result, nationalistic myths and images of older traditions and nature (such as the drover and the outback) or of progress (the buildings that in any era symbolise modernity) often discourage criticism. Their self-congratulatory quality nurtures a complacent disregard for unpleasant realities, from drought to unemployment. To the bland nationalist, "conformity not criticism is the true measure of patriotism" (Alomes 1988: 9–11). In this context, the questions Horne posed become pre-eminent and it is crucial to keep asking them, even in relation to formative, nineteenth-century nationalism. However, the fundamental question is: whose interest does such nationalism serve? It is with this in mind that we turn to the formulation of Henry Lawson the text and Henry Lawson the man, and his formulation within the Australian Myth.

Henry Lawson the text and Henry Lawson the man have been appropriated by different interest groups for different reasons since the *Bulletin* published his first poem "A Song of the Republic" in 1887. This process is best explained by Foucault's three principles of discursive formation: the author as the founding subject; commentary on the author; and the disciplines that support, reinforce, and confirm the field in which the author is an object (Foucault 2001: 1622–1635). The author is a function of criticism, as it is through criticism that an author is recognised, acknowledged, positioned and continuously validated. Criticism contemporary to Lawson, as well as in subsequent decades, defined him as the site of the Australian nation.

The dominant characteristic of early criticism of Lawson – that of focusing on the author rather than his work – began with the very first piece: Stephens' review of *Short Stories in Prose and Verse* published on 5 January 1895 in the *Bulletin*. From the beginning, "the 'meaning' of the

work is consistently produced as the 'meaning' of the man, the artist, or the Australian, that is its originating consciousness" (Lee 1992: 111). In his review, Stephens appealed to the public to purchase the publication for three reasons:

> firstly, because the book is well worth it; secondly, because it is a characteristically Australian book, one of the few really original attempts towards an Australian literature; and thirdly, because the author will be thereby encouraged to produce a bigger volume in a better form – a form more worthy of his genius (Stephens qtd. in Roderick 1972: 3).

Lee argues that the formulation of these three focal points (the work, the country and the artist) and the description of the points of their convergence, represents "a critical practice which is paradigmatic for the process of canon formation" (Lee 1992: 112). Hence, in this early criticism Lawson was already being formulated as the centre of the Australian literary canon.

Lee identifies discourse such as that exemplified in Stephens' early review of Lawson with the local rubric, and places it in opposition to the Imperial rubric, against which the writing of Lawson and his contemporaries was gauged. Namely, as Lee explains, by beginning his essay with Lawson's gender-based genealogy (whereby Lawson inherited traits of his father and his maternal grandfather), his physiognomy (Lawson is "a slight, but tall and muscular" man with "prominent features and large eloquent brown eyes"),[2] and his biography (Lawson's early itinerant lifestyle is used to establish authority over his subject, the bush), Stephens establishes "Henry Lawson" as an Australian bushman.

Next, he draws together Lawson the man and Lawson the artist: "Henry Lawson is the voice of the bush, and bush is the heart of Australia" (Roderick 1972: 4). As Lee perceptively observes, Stephens equates Lawson with the Bush, which is in turn equated with Australia. He thus returns to his initial idea of the value of the work being the result of the value of the artist, as well as that of his work and of the country. Lawson is an authentic bush artist, and as such an authentic Australian artist (see Lee 1992: 113).

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[2] In *Women and the Bush*, Kay Schaffer describes Lawson from Longstaff's famous portrait. She mentions his "rugged face, bushy eyebrows, familiar handlebar moustache, [and] curiously dark and deep-set eyes" all of which, she claims, gives a "visual sense of Australian identity". Yet these should be taken as "selectively reproduced images" of the man (Schaffer 1988: 38).

Lee argues that Lawson's " 'artless' objective style" in this context assists him in being the voice of the bush, and attaches artistic value to the realist aesthetic because

> "art" fails to come between him and his subject. His relationship to his subject is peculiarly local, and therefore peculiarly Australian. Lawson doesn't create what he writes. He merely reports what is there to be seen by those who have the local experience necessary to see it. This becomes the essential strength of Lawson for many of the reviewers. His is a direct and therefore unmediated relationship with his material. His authenticity thus becomes his knowledge of his subject; a knowledge which results from his experience of his object (Lee 1992: 113–114).

Other examples of this early criticism formulate the Lawson author function along the same lines. In a review of *While the Billy Boils* published in *Champion* of 5 September 1896, P. M. claims that Lawson's work is the result of his relationship with his country:

> It throws a strong and vivid flashlight upon Australian life, and the literary photographs […] which are thus presented to mind, must do much to correct false and create fresh impressions of Australian life[3] among all who are amiably or earnestly interested in learning what our National Characteristics are and toward what they may be tending (P. M. qtd. in Roderick 1972: 59–60).

Henry E. Boote, writing under the pseudonym Prometheus, reinforced the idea of Lawson as a writer who offered the Australian idiom in print,[4] when later that year in the *Worker* he wrote that Lawson

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[3] It was considered at the time that literature of the colonial (Anglo-Australian) period misrepresented Australia. This was a view held by, for example, Ada Cambridge, who came to Australia in 1870 as the new bride of Rev. George Frederick Cross. As she admits in her autobiography *Thirty Years in Australia*, she "knew nothing whatsoever of Australia" except what she had read in books, and those books were "mostly old ones, the tales the same. *Geoffrey Hamlyn* was my sheet anchor, but did not seem to be supported by the scraps of prosaic history obtainable; we could not verify those charming homes and social customs. On the other hand, cannibal blacks and convict bushrangers appeared to be grim facts. As for the physical characteristics of the country, there were but the scentless flowers, the songless birds, the cherries with their stones outside (none of which, actually, is the rule, and I have found nothing to resemble the description of the latter), and the kangaroo that carries its family in a breast-pocket, which we felt able to take for granted. These things we did believe in, because all our authorities mentioned them" (Cambridge 2006: 2). Thus it was a pleasant surprise to her to find that Melbourne "knew no more than we of the mysterious Bush" (2006: 3).

[4] Miles Franklin on Henry Lawson's writing of the 1890s, published in the *Bulletin*, which she read as a girl living upcountry. This was an excerpt from her address at the Outer Domain in Sydney on 5 December 1942, when Henry Lawson's statue was unveiled.

[c]auses men and women of the Australian bush to stand out before us, living, breathing personalities. As we read his wonderfully realistic sketches we seem to bound over creeks and gullies, to sit by the travelling swagman's fire under the sad stars, to listen to the wild oaths of boozy bushmen in lonely shanties, and to feel the wild weirdness of the western plains (Boote qtd. in Roderick 1972: 8).

Even though a year later, in 1896, Boote accused Lawson of lacking imagination and "writing Bulletinese", he did give him credit for giving expression to Sympathy with the his homeland and his fellow Australians "in language that goes straight home to the hearts of the People … For this he is beloved of the People, and this is the secret of his widespread popularity" (Roderick 1972: 38).

In the same year, Stephens declared Lawson and Paterson the founders of "a national school of poetry" (Roderick 1972: 12). R. Stewart, writing in *Australian Light* in June that year contributed to the formulation of Lawson as a singer of the Australian land and values, when he proclaimed that Lawson "championed the cause of democracy with effect in this country. The people have listened to his voice, and have felt their blood quicken at his song". Moreover, he stated that there are "songs to be sung that inspire a national sentiment, and Lawson has sounded no unmistakable notes" (Roderick 1972: 42). Stewart claimed that "no poet has cared to 'hold the mirror up to nature' in the drought-stricken regions of Australia, and to give reflections as faithfully as Lawson has done" (Roderick 1972: 43).

Reviewing *While the Billy Boils* in 1896, Stephens pinpointed the reason for Lawson's popularity, and for his crucial role in the formulation of the Australian Myth. This was the same reason that Boote had sensed when he referred to Sympathy, although he did not clearly verbalise it in his review:

> But what others merely know, Lawson feels. He is indeed abnormally sensitive: the trifles which make evanescent impression on ordinary minds draw blood (and ink) from his. Then ordinary minds with pleasure recognise his own impressions. "Why, these are *our* thoughts; these people are *our* people; these scenes and places are the scenes and places we have known for all our lives." Precisely; yet until Lawson pictured, revealed, and vitalised them, those thoughts, those people, those ordinary places and scenes never really existed for ordinary minds (Roderick 1972: 52).

In the *Australian Workman* in 1896 Fred Broomfield asked:

> Do YOU know Australia? – not the Australia of the city of Sydney, the Australia of the cosmopolitan, the globe-trotter, and the town-bred trader

or artisan – but the genuine Australia: the Australia of the sheep station and the cattle run; the Australia of the miner, the selector, the fossicker, the rouseabout, the seaman, the sundowner, the Murrumbidgee whaler – in short, that dear old Australia, with the weird fatalistic charm for those whose feet have worn graves for their owners while trudging along for weary leagues, for hopeless years, the wallaby-track which ends only in the Never Never Land – the Australia whose spirit and tutelary genius is the siren of the wilderness. Of this Australia Henry Lawson is the poet, the prophet, the singer, and the portal-keeper of its temple (Roderick 1972: 61).

John Oxberry strengthened Lawson's authority by claiming that "he had lived the life he sings about" (Roderick 1972: 71). The myth that Lawson was an "ordinary bloke," living a typical Australian life was created by critics like his contemporary, David McKee Wright:

> Lawson has lived the life he sings, and seen the places of which he writes; there is not one word in all his work which is not instantly recognised by his readers as honest Australian. The drover, the stockman, the shearer, the rider on the skyline, the girl waiting on the sliprails, the big bush funeral, the coach with flashing lamps passing at night along the ranges, the man to whom home is a bitter memory and his future a long despair; the troops marching to the beat of the drum, the coasting vessel struggling through blinding gales, the great grey plain, the wilderness of the Never Never – in long procession the pictures pass, and every picture a true one because Henry Lawson has been there to see with his eyes and heart (Schaffer 1988: 114).

In 1902 Stephens, reviewing the *Children of the Bush*, strengthened the myth of Lawson being an ordinary man who "writes Australia", thus deeming his country worthy of being translated into literature. He claimed that Lawson's strength lay in "his marvellous insight into the life and character of the bush and its inhabitants: it is not so much imagination, but clear mental vision". Stephens further stated that this collection of stories stood "as a masterly interpretation of Australian bush life by a writer whose skill is still unchallengeable" (Roderick 1972: 126–127).

This rhetoric of the local rubric, to use Lee's term, enabled the Democratic Nationalist movement, as it formulated the belief that conventional criticism could not recognise the local worth of the material, and therefore a different critical practice should be established (Lee 1992: 118).

Stephens establishes this new set of critical tools in his first review of Lawson's work. In this new context, Lawson's work is no longer "artless", but rather a method that "produces material which establishes the right of the local to name the local". It does this "by allowing the object of the

work to be translated directly into the medium (poetry or prose) of the work within the interference of aesthetic devices which … [are] constitutive of a romantic aesthetic which empowers imperial interests" (Lee 1992: 118).

Advertising him thus, this early criticism established Henry Lawson as the centre of the Australian Myth. Lawson was formulated as the true voice of Australia, and "posited at the origin of the national culture" (Schaffer 1988: 35), becoming "the founding father, the imagined site of origin". Thus Lawson now "stands in the place of origin. He marks the beginning as the living source that animates the reality of Australian nationalism through his presence" (Schaffer 1988: 35). As Derrida points out, structure presupposes a centre of meaning, but a centre analysed only reveals another centre. However, people desire a structure and a centre as a promise of presence and meaning, and Henry Lawson's position at the centre of the Australian literary canon, and as the father of Australian literature in the centre of the Australian Myth, created a cultural tradition so strong it took decades before alternative voices could be heard.

So positioned, Henry Lawson, "himself […] a portent" (Vance Palmer 1980: 11), was appropriated by various interest groups which have, by the nature of the application of Lawson's oeuvre, contributed to the formulation of the Australian Myth. As two important elements of the Myth were Lawson's "democratic humanism" as an aspect of the Great Australian Dream (T. Inglis Moore), and egalitarian democracy, Lawson's oeuvre was, in his lifetime, appropriated by William Lane, who published his stories in the Brisbane *Boomerang* and in the *Worker*. Lane used both papers to promote socialism and the new unionism within the labour movement of the young country.

The scramble to appropriate the reputation and fictional world of the "People's Poet" continued in the events surrounding his burial in September 1922. Lawson was awarded a state funeral "for his services to the national literature and the development of an Australian *mentalité*" (Lee 2004: 53–54). However, this was an honour first denied him by the President of New South Wales, Sir George Fuller of the conservative Nationalist Party. Consequently, Prime Minister Billy Hughes of the opposing Labour Party cunningly seized the opportunity "to draft the national poet into the service of his own political mythology" (Lee 2004: 51). In his eulogy, long-time friend of Lawson R. J. Cassidy contributed to the construction of the former's place within the Myth:

> Lawson carried his swag. He tramped […] He knew the sundowners. He
> knew the discomforts of steerage, and the mining tracks of west Australia,

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also the lives of the gum-diggers and timber-getters of New Zealand. He also knew London and the hells of London East. With such a philosophy and experience what wonder he wrote ["Too Old to Rat"] […] Lawson was one of The Worker's early editors […] he interpreted the true spirit of the old outback Unionism […] he was a Poet of the People, a teller of their tales, and an inspired interpreter of their desires and dreams (Lee 2004: 61).

The eulogies recited over the hearth reveal "the seductive power of the narrative", giving Lawson an important position in the building of the national identity. With his State funeral and the subsequent erection of a monument at the Sydney Domain, Lawson became larger than Literature (Lee 2004: 60).

In 1924 the Teacher's Federation organised a Henry Lawson Day, and published the *Henry Lawson Souvenir*:

> Its threefold strategy of representing Australian literature – as a record of the nation's pioneering history, a celebration of the Australian environment, and an endorsement of race sentiment and imperial loyalty – established expectations of the *Souvenir*. The "Waratah and Wattle," "The Star of Australasia" and "England Yet" were presented as celebrations of a national patriotism consistent with imperial loyalty. "The Sliprails and the Spur," with the final stanza's revelation of the bushwoman's madness and death omitted, is read as a nostalgic recognition of the hardships faced by the heroic pioneers who brought Christian civilisation to a wild continent. While "On the Night Train" expresses the ambivalent and yet compelling bond formed between Australians and the "Mother-Bush" (Lee 2004: 78).

The education system thus fashioned Henry Lawson to fit its conservative aims for the "young, white, wholesome and happy" (White 1984: 110) citizenship of the 1930s and 1940s. In this conservative phase critics challenged Lawson's bush, claiming it was "unrepresentative, morbid and brooding" (Schaffer 1988: 129). At a time when "the bohemian outlook was reduced to wattle, sunshine and 'White Australia' ", (Schaffer 1988: 129) Fred Davison complained that

> Lawson's view was wrong. Australia is not the country he saw, but something very different, and certainly deserves a singer whose songs contain more truth than do this. In the little sense, they are true – in the larger sense, they are false. […] His outlook on life was too narrow. He saw – not the things that really mattered, but the mean and petty things, and he used his talent to give these mean and petty things a mischievous prominence. Not that he did so wilfully – but because he saw only the molehills, and missed the mountains. Australia, seen through Lawson's eyes, as described in his writings, would

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be a very good place from which to keep away ("The Henry Lawson Myth" published in *Australia*, Sydney, February 1924, qtd. in Roderick 1972: 230).

In another surge of nationalism after the world wars, the image of the noble bushman, in whose creation Lawson's stories were paramount, was merged with that of the Anzac and the working lad. As the interests of the nation fused with those of the working class, Lawson's ideas became the building blocks of the national identity.

It was during this period in the 1950s that Henry Lawson's work was appropriated by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). Lawson's "lack of socialist theory" and his ambivalent attitude toward the labour movement entering parliament "ideally fitted him for the role of a people's poet who had been desperately in need of the guidance of an informed and active communist party" (Lee 2004: 125). Literature was seen as "an important weapon in the class struggle because it represented a powerful institution for the development of revolutionary subjects" (Lee 2004: 130). Therefore, in 1952 Frank Hardy presented "a detailed argument for the centrality of literature to the socialist movement" (Lee 2004: 131), stating that the Communist Party of Australia

> needed to develop worker readers, worker writers and worker critics, and the realist writers groups, the Australasia Book Society and the party newspapers and newsletters were crucial to this. Hardy stressed the value of a literary-based program for the education of the working class. […] Lawson was key to Hardy's strategy because he provided an example of an authentic working-class writer who was undeniably popular and authoritatively Australian (Lee 2004: 131).

In spite of Hardy's enthusiastic support of this use of Lawson, some within the Party had reservations. Specifically, Jack Beasley "saw Lawson as a democratic-humanist who, having been appropriated and edited by the bourgeoisie, had moved away from the working class after Federation" (Lee 2004: 131). Still, Beasley recognised Lawson as a useful means to

> inspire in the workers a simple honest pride in their occupation, in the fact that they are moulders, fitters, ironworkers, poultry farmers, wharf labourers, wheat growers, etc. This pride in being useful people will hasten the process of contrasting the workers with the parasites and so develop class-consciousness (Beasley qtd. in Lee 2004: 131).

However, Beasley's writings revealed a concern within the Party that Party Secretary L. L. Sharkey addressed in 1954, when he "insisted on

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the need to work towards close ties with liberal cultural workers outside the party" (Lee 2004: 132). Thus Frank Hardy devoted much of his life to amending the picture the bourgeois Nationalist Democratic Myth had painted of Lawson. Hardy was unimpressed with the establishment's depoliticising of the radical Lawson, and with the fact that they kept him from the public eye. In his 1963 essay "The Genius of Henry Lawson: Time, Place and Circumstances," Hardy welcomed "Lawson's postwar popularity and the attention in schools," but criticised the way the "school and university were erasing his radical significance as well as […] the labour movement's tendency to forget his militarism and racism" (Lee 2004: 136). It is precisely for its radical socialist qualities that Lawson's work is most Australian: as A. A. Phillips claimed in his famous 1966 essay "The Democratic Theme", Lawson's "writing discovered a set of formal techniques […] which set Australian writing free from middle-class conventions and values" (Lee 2004: 136). These techniques enabled him to capture the Australian character: "the staunchness in time of need, the egalitarianism, the hatred of tyranny and militarism, the contempt for the foibles and posturings of the rich and powerful, the oblique expression of sincere, deep feeling and camaraderie" (Hardy qtd. in Lee 2004: 136).[5]

An increasing academic interest in Henry Lawson's oeuvre also contributed to his canonisation. In the same decade, A. A. Phillips, Nettie and Vance Palmer, Russel Ward, and Stephen Murray-Smith introduced Lawson, as the pillar of the Australian Myth, into Australian universities. The incorporation of Lawson into the Australian literary canon became academia's chief concern, since at the moment of the canon's formation,

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[5] In 1972, Frank Hardy won a Commonwealth grant to write a novel on the subject of Lawson's artistic and personal decline. The subsequent years of research resulted in the play "Who was Henry Larson?" (Hardy insisted on calling Lawson "Larson" to differentiate between the persona of the Myth and the real man), performed by the New England Theatre Company in 1985, and again by the Everest Theatre at the Sydney Festival, during the bicentenary celebrations in 1988. Hardy wanted to affirm Lawson as a political figure, and "expose the effect of a capitalist system which failed to adequately remunerate him for his work". The play reveals Hardy's belief "that the establishment had distorted Australian history so as to conceal the Australian tradition and the national character it affirms. 'They are lying to the people about Anzac, about Eureka, about Lawson, about the nineties,' he wrote in his author's notes to the play, and 'they try to divert them onto pride in sportsmen, the Americas Cup, all that crap.' The literature and the cultural establishment played their own central role in the distortion of history, he argued, by failing to recognize Lawson's real value as well as neglecting Hardy's own contribution. 'I'm angry that this has happened to me,' he wrote, 'but above all I'm angry it's happened to Lawson' " (Lee 2004: 142–143).

"this popular national figure was perceived as belonging to the vulgar half of the binary that identifies literature" (Lee 2004: 151). Lawson already had the reputation of being the Poet of the People, and therein lay the problem: it was "not the usual high culture lament that the people do not read the best work; rather, it is that they do not read the best work in the best way" (Lee 2004: 151). Therefore, Lawson's canonisation was "an act of incorporation: he ha[d] to be won back from the people through a disciplined program of good reading, so that the Australian canon in which he [took] his place [could] successfully serve its institutional object" (Lee 2004: 151).[6]

The academic commentary complemented the effect of the discussed critical discourse. It began with the work of Nettie Palmer, who in her *Modern Australian Literature* (1924) identified Lawson as its founding father, although rather than relying on her own authority, she felt the need to invoke that of English critic Edward Garnett, who said that Lawson's stories "expressed a continent". Having positioned Lawson thus, Palmer proclaims his work to be "the most intimate revelation of our life in prose" (Schaffer 1988: 39).

Lawson's position was validated historically in W. K. Hancock's *Australia* (1930), a seminal history of the nation. In the final chapter "Art and Literature" Hancock argues that "Lawson's stories brought self-recognition", and concludes that through his stories and those of other writers of the *Bulletin* school, "Australian nationalism expressed itself as a repudiation of English conventions and standards, as a vindication of equality and democracy and an assertion of the supreme worth of the average man" (Schaffer 1988: 41). Schaffer argues that Hancock's *History* did

> at least three important things: it validated the code of Australian nationalism as anti-English, democratic, and egalitarian; located it primarily in the "authentic" works of Henry Lawson; and cited the dominant themes in his work as the dominant themes in Australian society (Schaffer 1988: 41).

This pattern was followed by a series of subsequent critiques. While Vance Palmer admits that Lawson's verse is of poorer quality ("belong[ing] to the world of platform oratory"), in *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954) he still claims that Lawson

> founded a tradition of democratic writing that has affected the work of nearly all who have come after him. The feature of it is a natural acceptance of

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6 For an overview of critical discourse on Lawson, see Lee 2004: 145–170.

human equality, a tendency to look at life through the eyes of the swagman as well as the squatter, and to take for granted the values people act upon in life rather than those they might be persuaded to accept as novel-readers (Palmer 1980: 117).

In 1958 A. A. Phillips added a crucial element to the Lawson Myth: in addition to being the authentic voice of Australia and the Poet of the People, Lawson's central place in the Australian literary tradition was well deserved, because he and Joseph Furphy founded "a strikingly original school of writing." Namely, "for the first time for centuries, Anglo-Saxon writing had broken out of the cage of the middle-class attitude." Lawson and Furphy "wrote of the people, for the people, and from the people" (Phillips 1966: 53). They did not choose

> this subject-matter in humble necessity, because they knew no other. They thought it thoroughly well worth writing about, and they were happy with the audience they addressed. Indeed, they confidently believed that they were writing for the aristocracy of the future – the strong men who were sailing clear of the decadence of Europe, and setting a course (by dead reckoning) for Utopia. The Prophets were addressing the Chosen People (Phillips 1966: 53).

In *A Literary History of Australia* (1961), H. M. Green qualifies Lawson as the "one peak" in the literature of the 1890s, stating:

> after all the changes, social and literary, of almost half a century, Lawson still remains the most representative, and of all representative Australian writers of prose and verse he is the most important, for neither Brennan nor Richardson is representative of Australia and they were in, not of, their age (Green 1961: 532–533).

At this point, Lawson the text and Lawson the man began to overlap unproblematically in the formulation of the Australian Myth, which was intended to fix the national identity in robust Australianness. This was an important move for the establishment of a young, supposedly ahistorical, nation, on the verge of formulating its cultural, and consequently literary, tradition.

Eventually the pendulum swung back, and the modernist critics of the 1960s and 1970s argued that the Australian Myth "was parochial, not universal; representative of the bush, not the city; the working class, and not the middle class; the ignorant common man, and not his educated brother; the raw experience of many, and not his metaphysical soul" (Schaffer 1988:

130). However, the dispute was never about the place Lawson's fiction occupied in the Australian self-imagination, or even its position within the Myth, but rather about the extent to which a nationalist myth can define a modern nation.

Lee argues that Lawson has been a source of civic pride as the people's poet and the central element of the Australian Myth since the 1920s, independently of literary and cultural criticism. He has been appropriated by various municipal societies and civil organisations, which have organised festivals in his name, erected museums and statues nationwide, remodelled buildings in his home town, and founded the Henry Lawson Society of New South Wales. This proves that Henry Lawson's reputation as the major proponent of the Australian Myth has survived the onslaught wrought on that Myth in the 1970s and 1980s. Both the man and the Myth are rooted in the nation's pedagogical, as much as they live in the performative (Bhabha 2000: 297) of its everyday. As Christopher Lee writes, "in some places and at some times the celebration of Lawson has served as a portal to 'ordinary' Australians" in formulating their "idea of the nation which makes them feel empowered and affirmed as good citizens" (Lee 2004: 233).

As a result of a conscious effort by the colonial Australian intelligentsia, a set of values intended to define Australianness was brought forth. These values have since become known as the Australian Tradition (A. A. Phillips, subsequently Kay Schaffer) or the Australian Legend (Russel Ward).

In the 1966 Preface to his *Australian Tradition* (1958), A. A. Phillips justifies his choice of terminology before the culturally cringing and hostile academia, stating that "[c]ertainly our culture lacked mellowness; but to infer that it was therefore not influenced by indigenous traditions was to ignore plain facts" (Phillips 1966: viii).

Russel Ward had apparently intended to use the same title for his book, but as Phillips' was first through the press, Ward changed his to *The Australian Legend* (1958). What both Phillips and Russel formulated in their works is best summarised by Phillips himself: "I meant it to refer to a social tradition: to those directions of thought and outlook which help to give the Australian community its distinctive character, and which are expressed in much of our writing" (Phillips 1966: ix).

These elements have since been recognised as the result of discursive strategies (Foucault, Bhabha), and have become, as Kay Schaffer puts it, "a kind of a ghost tradition […] one that is easily recognized, sometimes seriously and with sense of pride, but more often with a gamut of emotions which run from amusement, to embarrassment, to hostile rejection"

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(Schaffer 1988: 4). However, Schaffer, as well as a host of other critics both nationalist and modernist[7] (Phillips, Palmer, Ward, Serle; Graeme Turner, White) admit that "a nationalist code" exists, which we argue is rooted in the pedagogical of the Australian national identity. The Australian people perform this code in their everyday acts of enunciation, even as we write (for examples see Graeme Turner's *National Fictions*). It is so deeply rooted in the nation's pedagogical that, in the words of Beverly Kingston, its history "has largely been confused with the history and significance of Australian nationalism […]" (Sheridan 1995: 5). For decades, the Tradition/Legend as conceived by the Australian nationalists was (mis)taken for the Australian national identity. This spanned its formulation in the 1890s and its subsequent solidification by the critics of the 1930s and 1950s (Vance Palmer, A. A. Phillips, Russel Ward, and Geoffrey Serle), and lasted until the 1970s. The 1930s and 1950s were periods of "conservative political retreat after involvement in international wars on the side of Great Britain" (Schaffer 1988:29), which provoked a withdrawal into the national lore in the hope that it would provide a sense of identity and security in a rapidly changing world.

Keeping the discussed nature of the story of a nation in mind, we have opted for the term Australian Myth in our attempt to define the "nationalist code" at the core of the Australian national identity. We define the Australian Myth as the nation's metanarrative. It was produced within the nationalist movement of the 1890s, and is as such an attempt to produce a unified, homogenous national identity. We contend that the Australian Myth, this nationalist element at the core of the Australian national identity, was formulated in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, and comprises the following elements: the Great Australian Dream; the Australian type; the spell of the bush; mateship; and egalitarian democracy. Its negative aspects are that it develops racist tendencies, and excludes women.

Lawson's oeuvre, by consent of the critics,[8] fits the model of representation of Australia formulated by the Australian nationalist Myth. However, since

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[7] In his *In a Critical Condition*, John Docker proposed this distinction and it has stuck ever since. Docker defined the radical nationalist tradition as that promoted by critics Nettie and Vance Palmer, A. A. Phillips, Russel Ward, Geoffrey Serle and Ian Turner, and the social realist writers Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and Miles Franklin. The modernist critics (he called them metaphysicals) included G. A. Wilkes, Vincent Buckley, Harry Heseltine, Leonie Kramer and Leon Cantrell, and the modernist writers were poets Christopher Brennan, Kenneth Slessor, A. D. Hope, Douglas Stewart and James McAuley, and novelists H. H. Richardson, Patrick White and Martin Boyd (Schaffer 1988: 17).

[8] See Clark 1995; Matthews 1972; Prout 1973; Kiernan 1982; Roderick 1985; Phillips 1966.

we are seeking insight we shall, to paraphrase de Man, focus here on the point of Lawson's divergence from the Myth: his "womanish wail" (Stephens), the segment of Lawson's writing that refuses to be illuminated by the model of the nationalist metanarrative.

We shall now apply a deconstructionist technique to the languages and structures of Henry Lawson's texts, in order to investigate how they subvert the project of systematic knowledge as defined within the national metanarrative, or the Australian Myth.

As Culler explains with the example of the flying arrow, the reality of things is not only what is present at any given instant, because the motion of the arrow "is never present at any moment of presence". Rather, "every instant is already marked with the traces of the past and future" (Culler 1983: 95). Therefore,

> if motion is to be present, presence must already be marked by difference and deferral. We must, Derrida says, "penser le présent à partir du temps comme différance" [think of the present as starting from/in relation to time as difference, differing, and deferral] (*De la grammatologie*, p. 237/166). The notion of presence and of the present is derived: an effect of differences. 'We thus come,' Derrida writes, 'to posit presence […] no longer as the absolute matrix form of being but rather as a 'particularization' and 'effect.' A determination and effect within a system that is no longer that of presence but of différance (*Marges*, p. 17/ "Differance," p. 147) (Culler 1983: 94–95).

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Différance, defined as "a structure and a movement […] cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing [*espacement*] by which elements relate to one another" (Derrida 1981: 27). It discloses the inherent instability of the dyadic unity of the sign, and reveals that every system of signs is based on the play of differences within that system. That is, "no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element' – phoneme or grapheme – being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system" (Derrida 1981: 26). According to Derrida, the theory of traces ultimately undermines presence and identity, since

> the trace is not only the disappearance of origin – within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin (Lucy 2005: 145).

Presence and origin satisfy the inherent human need for identity and belonging, a need partially assuaged by creating myths. An insight into the key rhetoric of the Australian Myth and Lawson the text (as opposed to Lawson the man) hints at nonorigin. Accordingly, we shall now seek traces of opinions that diverge from the dominant rhetoric of the Myth and the divergent paths taken by Lawson, pointing if not to nonorigin, at least to the alternative myths of origin.

Lawson diverges from the Australian Myth at many points, the first of which is his style. Declaratively, Lawson wrote realistic sketches and stories and refused to diverge from realistic representation, even for literary reasons. His ambition was to "paint Australia as it is, and as it changes" (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 462). However, Lawson the man was by temperament "very much of a romantic, and from the start his romantic inclination jarred with his striving after realism" (Pons 1984: 256). Drawing from Rene Wellek's "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History", "romantic" is understood here as a specific type of literary expression characterised by imagination (regarding the romantic view of poetry), nature (relating to worldview), and symbol and myth (when considering poetic style) (Wellek 1949: 147).

Referring to Keats, Clarence D. Thorpe summarised the theories of imagination of the romantic poets: "Such is the power of creative imagination, a seeing, reconciling, combining force that seizes the old, penetrates beneath its surface, disengages the truth slumbering there, and, building afresh, bodies forth anew a reconstructed universe in fair forms of artistic power and beauty" (Wellek 1949: 161).

As far as nature is concerned, there are individual differences among the great romantic poets, "but all of them share a common objection to the mechanistic universe of the eighteenth century" (Wellek 1949: 161). Finally, such a

> conception of the nature of poetic imagination and of the universe has obvious consequences for poetic practice. All the great romantic poets are mythopoeic, are symbolists whose practice must be understood in terms of their attempt to give a total mythic interpretation of the world to which the poet holds the key (Wellek 1949: 165).

Thus in a thoroughly Romantic fashion, Lawson's impulse to write was activated by a strong emotional reaction: "I had to write or burst." He later "described himself as writing 'with his heart's blood' " and with this "subscribed to Wordsworth's definition of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' " (Pons 1984: 256).

His romantic streak is evident in his treatment of landscapes, which is generally "associated with the mood of the narrator or character, and becomes one of those 'paysages-états d'âime' of which French romantic poets were fond" (Pons 1984: 256). Lawson was not interested in the Australian landscape in the sense of its flora, fauna and geology. Rather, he described landscapes that he found particularly touching "because they evoked memories" (Pons 1984: 257). Pons compares the "Reedy River" to Lamartine's poem "Le Lac" [The Lake]:

> Just as in his poem "Le Lac" Lamartine came to nature to be reminded of the happy days he had known in the company of his loved one and to lament her loss, Lawson turned to the familiar landscape of Eurunderee to meditate on "the days that are lost", on the sweeping changes which signify the irreparable loss of paradise. Sometimes, as in "Reedy River", the permanence of nature underlines the precarious and temporary nature of human happiness: while nature remains unchanged, love comes and goes, man and woman pass away. Only memories linger, for ever associated, in the poet's melancholy meditation, with the landscape which witnessed happiness (Pons 1984: 257).

The "association of a landscape with memories of happiness of yore is a romantic theme *par excellence*" (Pons 1984: 257), or as A. A. Phillips put it "he was not merely delineating the New South Wales plains; he was projecting on to them the landscape of his own soul" (Phillips 1966: 22). It is for this Romantic melancholy that the proponents of the Myth criticised Lawson, since they felt that his "pessimism betrayed the self-confident Australianness of which he was an admired representative" (Phillips 1966: 25).

The nature-culture dichotomy is much discussed in Lawson's writing, and can be described as an "assertion of moral and aesthetic superiority of unspoiled nature over the artificially constructed environments of man, and the corresponding superiority of the bush dweller over the inhabitants of the cities"; it is "an Australian manifestation of Rousseauistic romanticism" (Heseltine qtd. in Roderick 1972: 345).

Lawson brooded upon his fate and searched his soul in his works. In the poem "In the Days When the World Was Wide", Lawson writes that in the past, "all was wonderful, new and strange", unlike his present day, in which "The world is narrow and ways are short, and our lives are dull and slow, / For little is new where the crowds resort, and less where the wanderers go" (Lawson 1896). This nostalgia for past happiness is also a Romantic trait.

A sense of loss and disillusionment with the present is evident in a number of stories: "For Auld Lang Syne"; "The Songs They Used to Sing";

"Meeting Old Mates"; and perhaps most of all in "An Old Mate of Your Father's". In the latter, the narrator deems our fathers' old mates to have been kinder than the mates of the rising generation.

One character type that is representative of the Romantic tradition, and is by far the most prevalent in Lawson's work, is that of the bushman burdened by his past. Lawson's Bush is replete with men exiled, either voluntarily or by circumstance: "There is no place in the world where a man's silence is respected so much […] as in the Australian Bush, where every man has a past more or less sad, and every man a ghost – perhaps from other lands that we know nothing of, and speaking in a foreign tongue" (Lawson 1896: 487). The stories of these characters are the shy revelations of men yarning with their mates: thus music from the neighbouring surveyor's camp tricks Peter M'Laughlan, the generous Christ-like figure in the bush, into speaking of his ingratitude to his parents ("The Story of Gentleman-Once"); Mitchell gets into sentimental mood on a moonlit night yarning with a mate over a campfire, and tells of the eighteen-year-old girl who cried after him as he left for work on an upcountry station ("A Camp Fire Yarn"); and "damned old songs" played on the fiddle induce Oracle to talk of an old aunt dressed like a fright, with whom he hated being seen in public, although the sight of her waving her handkerchief at the wharf as she saw him off to work in New Zealand so overwhelmed him with emotion that he had to hide in the bar until the boat departed ("Seeing the Last of You").

The (Romantic) concept of the "nobility of failure" is closely related to that of the bushman with a past, and is depicted in "The Lost Souls Hotel". Mitchell refers to it when he tells his mate Harry what he would do if he won the lottery:

> I wouldn't bother much about a respectable medical practitioner from the city. I'd get a medical wreck who had a brilliant career before him once in England and got into disgrace […] If an applicant came with the highest testimonials of character, and especially if one was signed by a parson, I'd tell him to call again next week […] I'd sooner trust some poor old devil of a clerk who'd got into the hands of a woman or racing men when he was young, and went wrong, and served his time for embezzlement […] (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 153–154).

A female character type straight from the Romantic repository is the girl withering away after losing the love of her life, and ultimately dying of "brain fever" (Bertha Bredt in "The Story of the Oracle", qtd. in Roderick 1972: 278).

Furthermore, Lawson shamelessly exploits Romantic elements in a number of other stories, such as "Send Round the Hat", "That Pretty Girl in the Army", and "Lord Douglas", in which he depicts

> various combinations of misunderstandings, enforced or needless separations, martyred loneliness and happy endings; all of this is played out against a background of shearers and rouseabouts whose alienation is constantly made to appear romantically hopeless, self-pitying and self-dramatizing (Matthews 1972: 92).

Their "superficially realistic references become obvious preparations […] for later redemptions that are almost always romantic" (Matthews 1972: 94).

Carefully studied, these stories also reveal melodramatic elements, exemplified by this tableau "straight from the melodramatic stage" (Kiernan 1972: 95), towards the end of "Send Round the Hat":

> They stood by the fence on the opposite side of the street, a bit up towards the railway station, with their portmanteaux and bundles at their feet. One girl leant with her arms on the fence rail and her face buried in them, another was trying to comfort her. The third girl and the woman stood facing our way. The woman was good-looking: she had a hard face, but it might have been made hard. The third girl seemed half defiant, half inclined to cry. Presently she went to the other side of the girl who was crying on the fence and put her arm round her shoulder. The woman suddenly turned her back on us and stood looking away over the paddocks (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 475).

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Another melodramatic tableau is given in "They Wait on the Wharf in Black":

> There was no mistaking them – the little group that stood apart near the end of the wharf, dressed in cheap black. There was the eldest single sister – thin, pale, haggard-looking – that had all the hard worry in the family till her temper was spoilt […] She had to be the mother of them all now. […] There was the baby, that he saw now for the first time crowing and jumping at the sight of the boat coming in; there was the eldest boy, looking awkward and out of place in his new slop-suit of black […] But the little girl was the worst, […] she never took her streaming eyes off her father's face the whole time. You could see that her little heart was bursting, and with pity for him (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 281).

Finally, melodrama is present in the women's existence, which is characterised by "sickness, and innocent, dependent children" (Matthews 1972: 95). It is evident in "The Drover's Wife" when Tommy, upon seeing tears in

his mother's eyes after she kills a snake, promises that he "won't never go drovin' " (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 52), and throws his arms around his mother's neck. It is there in Mrs. Spicer's instruction to her daughter Annie to "water them geraniums" (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 573), although the water refuses to soak into the stone-dry soil. And it is there when the selector's daughter Mary Wylie throws herself off a cliff, after being turned out by her father and stepmother:

> "I'm going away! Mother's gone. I'm going now! – Good-bye! – Good-bye! I'm going away from the bush!"
> The she ran through the trees toward the foot of Long Gully. Bob and his mate followed; but, being unacquainted with the locality, they lost her.
> She ran to the edge of a granite cliff on the higher side of the deepest rocky waterholes. There was a heavy splash, and three startled kangaroos, who had been drinking, leapt back and sped away, like three grey ghosts, up the ridge towards the moonlit peak (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1972: 66).

This blending of romantic and realistic elements appealed to Lawson's sentiment, but was executed much more successfully by his role model, Charles Dickens. This may have resulted from the fact that Lawson was unacquainted with the literary realism of, for example, Zola, who hoped to achieve in his novels what scientists were achieving in the laboratory:

> […] with characters and passions, with human and social facts we must proceed as the chemist and the physicist do with brute matter, as the physiologist does with living bodies. Determinism dominates everything. It is scientific investigation and experimental reasoning which challenge, one after the other, the hypotheses of the idealists, and which replace the novels of pure imaginations with novels of observation and experimentation (Pons 1984: 249).

Although these ideas are debatable today, they provided a "supportive framework" to Zola. Lawson, however, wrote with "fire-brand in [his] blood" ("Pursuing Literature in Australia" in Roderick 1972: 618), as his heart directed him, and did not care for the "pedant's diction", as his lyrical subject in the eponymous poem "An Uncultured Rhymer to His Cultured Critics" states.

Some elements were incorporated into the Myth over time, despite belonging to the Romantic tradition. These include: the stoically enduring bushman with a past, who fits perfectly into the Australian type;[9] the static

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[9] For more on the Australian type, see Ward 1995.

female locked in the drudgery of the domestic sphere; the nobility of failure, which was a comfort to the thousands who lost the fight with the land and the system; and the nature-culture dichotomy, wherein nature/the Bush fared most favourably. There were two reasons for this: the first was Lawson's central position within the Myth, formulated at the beginning of his career, which authoritatively rejected doubts about his work. Second was the recognition that, as F. W. Bateson put it, "The Victorians spoke two languages, reflecting the divided aims and origins of their civilization: a language of the heart, and a language of the head". The former related to the "inner world of the spirit and poetic imagination," while the latter referred to the "external world of material fact and urban industrialisation" (Bateson qtd. in Forsyth 1964: 225). To bridge the gap between the inner and outer worlds, a peculiar combination of Romantic and Victorian elements emerged, as previously discussed.

While this robust masculine Myth could rearrange its structure to incorporate the romantic elements in Lawson's stories, there was one romantic element it could not subsume: that of melancholy, sentimentality, melodrama, and tenderness. This is despite the fact that it, as Forsyth claims, bridged the Victorian gap in the same way as the aforementioned Romantic elements in Victorian culture.

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The element was deemed weak and un-Australian, and was dealt with by the critics in one of three ways: "it is muted, […] it is attributed to heredity and blamed on the instability of his maternal ancestors; or it is attributed to his environment and traced to the unsympathetic attitudes of his mother and wife" (Schaffer 1988: 116). In all cases, the "weak" and un-Australian element was attributed to the feminine.

A. G. Stephens was the first to explain Lawson's writing in this fashion. He characterised it as a "womanish wail" in need of "a sturdy Australian backbone", and found support for his statement in Lawson's own autobiographical writings: "My aunts said I should have been a girl" (Roderick 1972: 217). Stephens argues that Lawson saw Australia "through the distorting glass of his own moody mind" (Roderick 1972: 217), and describes the tone of his works as melancholy (Roderick 1972: 222), claiming that he deals with emotions rather than ideas. Further, he argues that Lawson received his literary genius from his mother, from whom he also inherited "nervous excess" and a "bent to books and writing" (Roderick 1972: 219). He does not refute Lawson's genius, saying that it produced "a gallery of literary pictures of Australian persons and scenes", namely Lawson's "chuckling humour, […] sympathy with the downtrodden […] a passionate love of

Australia the nation, a noble enthusiasm for the humanity he understood" (Roderick 1972: 222), but he does associate it with feminine characteristics.

Stephens believed that "writers should be – like himself – 'red blooded' " (Lawson 2006: 281), and attributed the "extinction of early promise" in women writers to a "sheer want of red corpuscles". He described the work of these writers in terms of emotions and moodiness – the "bubbling of the heart," "vibrations and intangible fragrance" (Lawson 2006: 218).[10] It is safe to say that Stephens drew on the theory of bodily humours, whereby "the balance of the ideal humoral body is constantly challenged by the ebbs and flows of the menstrual cycle and of child-bearing" (Hodgkin 2011: 2). Subjected to those humours, women were "constructed as the unruly sex at the level of the body" (Hodgkin 2011: 2), suffering from melancholy, moodiness, and being overemotional.

Women writers within the Australian nineteen-century nationalist tradition were considered un-Australian, not only for their inherent instability, but for various other reasons detected and explicated by Susan Sheridan. Sheridan makes a plausible argument, claiming that the association of women writers with the aristocracy and British colonials (as opposed to egalitarian Australian nationalism), emotions (as opposed to vigour and action), and romances (as opposed to realist fiction executed in the vernacular) (Sheridan 1995: 28), constructs them as un-Australian. Women writers were accused of writing for the English audience because, after publishing Australian serialisations in the weeklies of the period, which were designed for country readers, their books were published in Britain. This is how they made their way to large circulating libraries and reached a wider market. Sheridan, however, equates "English" with "ruling class" (Sheridan 1995: 29), while country readers and the middle-class family papers represented a conservative country squattocracy in the eyes of the *Bulletin* in its "bid for literary sovereignty" (Sheridan 1995: 30). An editorial in the *Bulletin* took an accusative tone towards women: "Tories champion the alleged cause of women because the women today are, as a rule, Tories; almost every woman is a queen-worshipper, a prince-worshiper, a parson worshiper" (Sheridan 1995: 33). Moreover, instead of writing "short stories, or ballads, especially on bush, mining, sporting, social or dramatic themes",

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[10] It should be noted, however, that Stephens offered a much fairer description of a small number of female writers: "How many bright aspirations, hopes of progress, mental triumphs, glorious poems, are trampled under the little pink feet of the army of babies […]" (Lawson 2006: 218).

which the *Bulletin* welcomed (Lawson 2006: 195), they wrote romances dealing with "social life and relations between sexes – after all, this was woman's domain; and (it was implied) fiction was after all a lower branch of literature, providing edification and entertainment but making no claims to art" (Sheridan 1995: 30). It was thought that sturdy Australian realism stood in opposition to this.

Therefore, when Australian scholarship discursively formulated Lawson as the site of the Nation in the mid-twentieth century, it simultaneously created an *aporia* in the nationalist myth. Instead of a writer whose sturdy realism, preferably executed in novels, described the egalitarian working class of the nation, the centre of the masculine nationalist metanarrative became one whose often convoluted, melancholy stories dealt "with emotions rather than with ideas" (Stephens qtd. in Roderick 1972: 222).

It took A. A. Phillips to "revisit Lawson" in a 1965 *Meanjin* article to finally come to grips with Lawson's sentimentality. In his essay "Lawson Revisited" Phillips defines sentiment as "the expression of a scale of values which *prefers the tenderness of human response to the virilities*, the softness to the strengths" (Phillips 1966: 18, emphasis mine). Sentimentality is "the indulgence in the pleasure of that emotionalism for its own sake and at the expense of truth" (Phillips 1966: 19), and Lawson was "a man of sentiment", and "often a sentimentalist" (Phillips 1966: 19). He found it increasingly difficult to control his sentimental streak as he aged. In the Joe Wilson series, for example, "there is scarcely a moment of sentimentality, scarcely a touch that is not controlled by a rigorous sense of truth. It is a masterly feat of tight-rope walking" (Phillips 1966: 19). Phillips argued that sentimentality is a valid component of the "life-as-it-is" that Lawson set out to depict, and it is in the melancholy and sentimentality of Lawson's stoic bushmen that their triumph lies. Numerous examples testify to that:

> One of the clearest is "Going Blind." Sentimental as it seems, it is precisely true, and it admirably declares the triumph of the bushman's stoicism in maintaining the supremacy of tenderness. Or one might instance Andy of "Telling Mrs Baker", who could "keep a promise and nothing else", and who endured the – for him – repulsive task of telling a pack of lies, because that is what loyalty and human decency demand. […] let me remind you of a detail of the symbolism of "On the Edge of the Plain". On Mitchell's swag, there rides a puppy (Phillips 1966: 29–30).

Sentimentality is evident in "His Father's Mate" when, following the death of little Isley in a mining shaft, Bob Sawkins brings Mason's older son to

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the goldfield. When the two enter Mason's tent, the young man lays a hand on his father's shoulder and asks him if he wants another mate. "But the sleeper did not – at least, not in this world" (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1972: 10). The father was dead. Sentimentality is also evident in the description of Mrs. Spicer's children in "Water Them Geraniums":

> And I think the saddest and most pathetic sight on the face of God's earth is the children of very poor people made to appear well: the broken worn-out boots polished or greased, the blackened (inked) pieces of string for laces; the clean patched pinafores over the wretched threadbare frocks. Behind the little row of children hand-in-hand – and no matter where they are – I always see the worn face of the mother (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1972: 581).

The stoicism of the people of the bush is most impressively expressed in the symbolism of the double-buggy in the Joe Wilson series: "Life is a painful business: marriage, even with love, is a difficult relationship: loneliness is inescapable; but there is an insecure triumph when Joe Wilson buys his wife a double-buggy" (Phillips 1966: 31). Here, "against all odds, they maintain the value of the tenderness. Under the pain, the loneliness and the burden of guilt, they summon their strength, and preserve unhardened hearts" (Phillips 1966: 29).

Lawson also diverges from the Myth in his treatment of mateship.[11] In his 1960 *Quadrant* essay, H. P. Heseltine referred to Lawson as "Saint Henry – Our Apostle of Mateship," and detected three forms in which mateship manifests itself in Lawson's works:

> First, as the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, a vision of future perfection to be striven after, and perhaps, ultimately to be achieved. […] Second, mateship appears as a remembered or imagined Paradise, a dream, achingly recalled, of an unspoiled life that probably never was […] Third, and most important, mateship may be represented as part of Man's various, contradictory, incomplete existence in the fallen world. It is only a pity that the first of these versions of mateship has been admired almost to the obliteration of the other two. It is only a pity that it has been too little realized that Lawson's imagination most successfully lays hold on the principle of mateship when he contemplates it as a condition of man's existence, not of his salvation (Roderick 1972: 349).

Lawson's mateship was not only man's "fragile armour in […] [the] battle against the bush" (Schaffer 1988: 122), but also a condition of his

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[11] For a definition of mateship, see Inglis Moore 1968, and Dyrenfurth 2015.

existence, as Brereton correctly detected when he characterised it as "the mateship of human beings [...] so unrestricted and universal, that to meet a man or a woman would be at once to recognize a mate" (Brereton qtd. in Lawson and Brereton 1931: 11).

However, when it is treated in this first sense, as a refuge from the threatening bush, in the words of Ward, mateship can be discussed as a "sublimated homosexual relationship" (Ward 1995: 100). Accepting this definition,[12] Pons notes that:

> A number of historians have observed that it might hide latent homosexual tendencies redirected into socially acceptable attitudes. For Lawson's heroes it is far preferable to feminine companionship. They have for the most part unsatisfactory relationships with their wives or girl friends – quite a number have no women at all in their life – and only with their mates they can feel truly at ease (Pons 1984: 125).

Thus in "Meeting Old Mates", Tom and Joe go through the motions of a courtesy call to Tom's wife, but when they are out drinking together at the pub, the "old smile spreads over [...] [Tom's] face, and it makes you glad – you could swear to Tom's grin in a hundred years [...] Oh, there's no smile like the smile that old mates favour each other with over the tops of their glasses when they meet again after years" (Pons 1984: 167). In "For Auld Lang Syne", mateship is likened to a love affair in which you share good and bad times over the course of years, and "the little thoughtful attentions" that make you recite poetry or "otherwise make a fool of yourself" (Pons 1984: 267). "Mateship is indeed a form of love, whose homosexual connotations cannot be overlooked" (Pons 1984: 125),[13] and its manifestations are attributed to Lawson's "weak", feminine streak.

However, when understood as Heseltine's second and third manifestations, the mateship described in Lawson's works extends to the Chinese population, and to women (though not the Aboriginals). In "The Romance of the Swag", the Chinese are depicted tramping the outback tracks, carrying an Australian swag. Once incorporated into this class of men they are also included in mateship as a condition of man's existence.

In his Elder Man's Lane stories, Lawson treats Ah Dam, a Chinese seed merchant who has fallen victim to an opium habit, with the sympathy deserving of a mate. "Ah Dam is what Lawson humorously classes elsewhere a

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12 For the same interpretation, see Coad 2002.

13 For analysis of homosexual elements in Lawson, see Pons 1984.

fellow felon" (Roderick 1985: 378). Describing Ah Dam to his acquaintances, the narrator paints him as his mate: he has a "humorously doleful smile, or grin, which is common to white, black, yellow, brown, and brindle when they have gone under badly while working some little game". To save Ah Dam's reputation, he then adds that the game is "not criminal, as the Public understands the term," only "contrary to Australian law" (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 839). As he tells Ah Dam's story the narrator empathises with him as a member of the human race often found in familiar situations: "He blames himself for smoking that night. He should, on that occasion, of all occasions, have kept his senses unclouded until the next day. How many of us have failed to do the same!" Or a few lines down: "The spirit of opium-cloud, in which he was enveloped, knew better than he did. Same as our drink fumes know better than we" (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 840). "Send Round the Hat" extends the category of mateship to women, as Giraffe collects money in his hat for the four women who cannot afford the railway fare to Bourke:

> I don't know anything about them women. […] All I know is that there's four women turned out, without any stuff, and every woman in Bourke, an' the police, an' the law agen 'em. An' the fact that they is women is agenst 'em most of all. You don't expect 'em to hump their swags to Sydney! Why, only I ain't got the stuff I wouldn't trouble yer. I'd pay their fares myself" (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 475).

A few paragraphs down, Giraffe is again collecting money for a woman, this time a "poor washerwoman that scalded her legs liftin' the boiler of clothes off the fire" (Lawson qtd. in Roderick 1984: 479).

The creators and the proponents of the Myth considered Lawson's inclusive tendency a "weak" element, a feminine streak, and hence un-Australian. However, Phillips was right to argue that this tenderness is the triumph of Lawson's bushmen, as Stephens admitted in 1896:

> Lawson's keen sympathy, his knack of observation, are characteristically feminine. His sense of humour, his talent for vivid portrayal, are as characteristically masculine. Yet it is the woman in him, as in others, that makes his talent glow to the white heat of genius. Intellect is great; emotion is great; but, for a poet, the greater of them is emotion. This is it which fires dull words, turns ore into gold, and, Pygmalion-like, draws with passionate ardour from cold stone warm, pulsating life. This
> *adds the gleam,*
> *The light that never was, on sea or land,*

The consecration, and the Poet's dream.
His capacity for emotion is Lawson's best gift. It is because he feels so deeply that he writes so strongly (Stephens qtd. in Roderick 1972: 14).

Critics discovered and established Lawson as the centre of the Australian Myth in two successive waves of Australian nationalism, the first at the end of the nineteenth century, and the second in the 1950s. In his oeuvre, they recognised the potential to empower the local or nationalist authority. In Lawson's treatment of the Great Australian Dream, the Australian type, the spell of the bush, the myth of mateship, egalitarian democracy, and in his presentation of women and of other cultures, they recognised material that established the right of the local to name and formulate the local in an act of self-representation.

We should be aware of this process, of its constructedness and artificiality, as well as of the different interest groups involved therein, and their uses and abuses of Lawson the text and Lawson the man. Moreover, it is important to realise and remain alert to the fact that when criticism placed Lawson at the centre of the robust, masculine nationalist myth, it intentionally muted and even disregarded those characteristics of his writing that did not conform to the message they wanted him to convey. However, these muted characteristics, which formulate his feminine streak, his "womanish wail", are precisely those crucial to Lawson's greatness as a writer. When Stephens praises Lawson for his vivid and forcible pictures of people, things and emotions, for his sense of pathos, and his generous sympathy for the downtrodden (Stephens qtd. in Roderick 1972: 222), he is actually praising Lawson's feminine streak. And this feminine streak at the heart of the oeuvre of a personality "central to the code of Australian nationalism" (Schaffer 1988: 39) formulates the most important *aporia* of the Australian nationalist myth. Being aware of the process, and of its creation and its problematic points, leads to a better understanding of the nation's contemporary position: how it got here, how it is changing, and how it is reacting to changes in the rest of the world.

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