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Henry Lawson's Nihilism in "The Union Buries Its Dead"

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Henry Lawson's "The Union Buries Its Dead," one of the most anthologized Australian short stories but one that has received very scarce individual attention, breaks away from the traditional bush narrative as sponsored by the nationalist Sydney *Bulletin*. The reason, this paper argues, is in the author's nihilistic attitude to life that is distilled through the voice of his narrator. The nihilism depicted is of the "social" and passive type deranging both politics and religion, accepting the meaninglessness of both life and death and the impossibility to undertake any project into the future. Such an underlying attitude provides the story with a universal appeal that overcomes the limitations of its otherwise local character.

Key words: Australian literature, Henry Lawson, short story, bush literature, Sydney *Bulletin*, philosophy.

Henry Lawson, born on the Grenfell goldfields in New South Wales on June 17, 1867, was the son of a Norwegian seaman, Peter Hertzberg Larsen, who changed his name to Peter Lawson, and Louisa Albury, an activist for women's rights. Lawson lived on a poor selection at Eurunderee and suffered from deafness. His parents separated in 1883, and his mother departed to Sydney where she published the feminist newspaper *The Dawn* for many years. The separation and the return to Sydney deeply marked Lawson's later life which he tried to soothe with alcohol. He died in Sydney on September 2, 1922. He generally appears in the histories of Australian literature as one of the most emblematic poets and writers of short stories, popularly well-loved and politically respected because of his contribution to the nationalist type of literature fashionable at the time. Among his most anthologized short stories is "The Union Buries Its Dead" (1893). It appeared first in *While the Billy Boils* (1896), although for some arcane reason it has not received special attention by critics.[1]

The story tells of the encounter of a group of men with a young drover whose inexperience makes him prey of a billabong's treacherous waters in the borderland of the Australian frontier in the late 19th century. Without identity and without a relative or a friend to claim his body, he is buried by the General Labourers' Union because the deceased carries the same Union's ticket in his pocket. The issuing episodes of the lessening

1. In spite of its popularity I have not been able to find any specific critical work focusing exclusively on this story, while there are several articles on "the Bush Undertaker" or "The Drover's Wife." Adrian Mitchell devotes three paragraphs to it (1981: 71-72), while other critics make only occasional references.

funeral procession and of the ritual of the burial provide the backdrop for a harsh evaluation of the anonymous community that accompanies the corpse. By the end, the community and the narrator recognize the impossibility of sustaining the memory of the deceased.

As a poet and a writer of short stories, Lawson was politically affiliated with the *Bulletin*, which first published his work in 1887. A Sydney-based and highly influential magazine that remained at the forefront of Australian life from 1880–1961, the *Bulletin* baldly promoted egalitarianism, unionism, and Australianism. Soon after its inception, the publication "quickly became known as the 'bushman's bible' as much for the aggressive Australian tone of its writing as for its concentration on rural issues . . . The *Bulletin* took a republican political stance and cautioned against too enthusiastic a support for British causes" (Clarke 2002: 72). Yet, Leon Cantrell has already questioned the role of the periodical as "spearhead[ing] a decade of nationalism, democracy and literary achievement" (1976: 104), and argues that it was not as liberal as historians (and literary historians) suggest. In lieu of radicalism, Cantrell paints the *Bulletin* as a liberal but bourgeois publication with a considerable "dose of sectarian bigotry, racism, and xenophobic nationalism" (196: 105).[2]

In literary terms, and although Lawson criticized the magazine for offering "no scope, and . . . no hope of future material encouragement" and invited the younger writers to "swim, and seek London, Yankeeland, or Timbuctoo" (qtd. in Cantrell 1976: 99), the *Bulletin* proved to be the only means for publishing nationalist and bush literature. To Lawson's complaint (published paradoxically on the Red Page of the *Bulletin*), A. G. Stephens rejoined that Lawson's writings were only valuable in as far as they were Australian, and that "Lawson's pre-eminent Australian appeal lessens the force of his universal appeal. He is splendidly parochial. That increases his claim upon his country, but decreases his claim upon literature" (Roderick 1972: 80).[3] But it was the *Bulletin* through its literary editor that favoured "the sense of Australia as a closed community, white, anglo-saxon, and preferably protestant [sic]" (Cantrell 1976: 107).

Tony Moore, in his 1997 paper about bohemian culture, enumerates the traits propagated by the *Bulletin*: "mateship and blokey bonding to the exclusion of family life; hostility to religion, personified by the Protestant wowser; ironic humour; a fondness for alcohol, pubs and gambling; pre-occupation with a free-wheeling Australian identity (overlaid with francophilia and Irish nationalism) invariably opposed to a conservative Englishness; and an occasional flirtation with political causes such as socialism and republicanism" (Moore 1997:1). The distinctive nationalist genre was also characterized by additional recurrent features such as the influence of the land and climate upon the almost exclusively male characters, the use of the local idiom, a relative disdain for the city in favour of the bush, and the praise of mateship and solidarity necessary to survive loneliness.[4] According to Ken Goodwin, "the *Bulletin* of the 1890s imposed on its writers

2. Cantrell continues: "Its reputation as a radical, democratic weekly can only be understood in the context of a singularly undemocratic and un-radical society" (1976: 106).

3. A. G. Stephens' article "Lawson and Literature" was first published in the *Bookfellow* magazine, Sydney, on February 18, 1899.

4. Mateship involves a strong bond of loyalty and trust, although in practice it is not as chivalric as it may sound. Dennis Altman adds that "Mateship has both an individual, personal meaning,

a preferred formula . . . Short sketches, with some anecdotal narrative interest (often inconclusive), no words wasted in description or dialogue, no long speeches, a characterised story-teller, a setting among bush workers, and some humour or sentimentality as a formula that covers a good many of the *Bulletin* stories" (1986: 153). In general terms, Lawson's story fits Goodwin's description. Certainly there are elements of the traditional, realist kind: the chronological, natural sequence of events, the absence of long speeches, a highly characterised story-teller, the presence of bushmen and, one should add, the use of local (Australian) vocabulary, such as *billabong, swag, wattle, wattle-bark layman, shearer, drover, trap* or *outback*.[5] Yet the story, written in 1893, did not appear in the *Bulletin* but rather in *While the Billy Boils: First Part* (1896). The three-year delay in publication and the oddity of its source is even more striking if we consider that it was the weekly, through its literary editor at the time, F. J. Archibald, that paid for Lawson's trip to the north-west of Bourke in 1892–93 so that he might learn and write about bush life.

The story also departs from the model in that it is not exactly a bush yarn, at least as far as setting is concerned; most of the action takes place in a town. Although by the end of the 19th century most Australians lived in towns and bush-life belonged to the past, its manly values were mythologized in the new national literature. One of its types, the drover, that may be imagined as the Australian correlative to the American cowboy, was still common, because of the obvious social need to move cattle and sheep through the bush.[6] Because he risked encounters with robbers and escaped convicts, the drover is often found in literature in the company of swagmen, shearers and other personages of the bush, all marked by nobility and glorified—at least in opposition to the jackeroo. A large number of Lawson's characters belong to these types, and it can be reasonably claimed that bush literature found its most disseminating and popular author precisely in Henry Lawson. Yet, rather than to his exploitation of pre-established traits—from which the story departs—the popularity of "The Union Buries Its Dead" may be assigned to the author's philosophical

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signifying the close bonds between two men, and a larger social meaning or set of meanings, suggesting group or even class solidarity, as when the term is invoked to explain the relationships between strikers and prisoners of war" (1987: 163). In respect to the clash between city and bush, Frank Lewins writes that "the economic boom during the 1880s resulted in the growth of the journalistic trade and the emergence of a group of young, footloose idealistic journalists inspired by egalitarian ideals and radical literature. However, during the economic depression of the early 1890s, urban unemployment began to rise and Melbourne and Sydney were experiencing severe housing shortages. These conditions fashioned journalistic attitudes towards the city, fuelling an anti-urban sentiment, rooted in alienation and loneliness. Directly confronting the myth that Australia was a 'workingman's paradise,' the poet Henry Lawson wrote: 'They lie, the men who tell us for reasons of their own/That want is here a stranger, and that misery's unknown.' Lawson and other urban social commentators invented their own conception of the bush as a romantic realm of comradeship and community to contrast with urban reality, symbolised by alienation, human degradation and exploitation. According to Davison, the Australian bush ethos, with its egalitarian overtones, was born from an urban experience and projected onto the bush. It was an attempt to establish the bush as the negation of the city" (2003: 173).

5. A really interesting and huge collection of photographs that help visualize these terms is available at <http://www.pictureaustralia.org/>. "A wattlebark layman" (Lawson 1997: 62) is a bush lay preacher, or in fact, anyone capable of reading a burial service for a funeral.

6. The Great Northern Railway was built from Port Augusta to Quorn in 1879, and Oodnadatta in 1891; the completion of the Sydney-Perth standard gauge railway had to wait until 1970.

attitude towards life that oozes through the short story. After all, as Russel Ward in his *The Australian Legend* convincingly proves, by the 1890s the stereotypes of Australian nationalism and bush literature were so consolidated that authors had started satirizing them (1958: 256). Leon Cantrell adds that one of the "integral platforms has always been the notion of literary self-consciousness, of the awareness of the writers of the nineties of the myth they were ostensibly creating" (1976: 103–04). This consciousness makes Lawson break away with all these myths that he himself had contributed to glamorize. The point, obviously, was not to write one more bush yarn. Cantrell, commenting about this particular story, says that "Lawson, casting himself as Humphrey Bogart at the unionist's funeral, achieves such a degree of existential alienation that he is able to destroy even those hoary remnants of the past which so frequently provided solace elsewhere" (1976: 103). That is, the story's effectiveness does not rely upon its Australianness, but rather on a more universal kind of appeal, although few Australian readers at the time would recognize "existential alienation" as words with any reference in their culture. Yet, the nihilistic attitude to life, whether under this name or without one, is so old that one needs not be conscious of subscribing to it. For Simon Critchley, "philosophy . . . begins . . . in an experience of disappointment, that is both religious and political. That is to say, philosophy might be said to begin with two problems: (i) religious disappointment provokes the problem of meaning, namely, what is the meaning of life in the absence of religious belief?; and (ii) political disappointment provokes the problem of justice, namely, 'what is justice' and how might justice become effective in a violently unjust world?" (1997: 2).

The term "nihilism" had been used in the Middle Ages to refer to certain heretics and, of course, by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard whose writings about nihilism are helpful to define and discuss the notion. As a philosophical and political drift, nihilism originated in Russia during the reign of Czar Nicholas I (1825–55), and Ivan Turgenev's 1861 novel, *Fathers and Sons*, gave it a name, popularizing the term and the notions related to nihilism, thus turning it into a major concern of the European intelligentsia and citizenry in the second half of the 19th century.[7] Adrian Mitchell, like Cantrell, tries to describe the same general tone of Lawson's stories when he asserts that "[t]he sigh of fatalistic resignation, the 'ah well' of so many of Lawson's stories[,] is endemic" (1981: 69). While the generalization may hold true for many other short stories, it does not seem to fully apply here, not because of the description of the mood as "fatalistic," but rather because there is no "resignation." Stoicism is not the point in this story since the narrator rebels against institutions such as the church or the General Labourers' Union in his ironical remarks, although the final and overwhelming sense of stasis cancels even these attempts at revolt. The narrator's job recalls that of the two nihilist characters, Bazarov and Arkadi, as they are depicted in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*: they are to refute, not to act (2004: 128).

7. For convenience, existentialism and nihilism could be differentiated by recalling that the former is a category of philosophy that deals with the individual and his struggle to interact in life and define what is real; it concerns the difficulties of existence (and hence the name), but it constructs philosophical structures to conclude that everyone is isolated and life is mainly angst. While both share many similarities, such as their attempt and difficulty to define the real, the nature and purpose of existence, and the nature of individual goals, nihilism rejects those philosophical constructions, and if existentialism leaves an open door to happiness, nihilism would maintain that unhappiness is either inevitable or irrelevant.

One of the difficulties often considered an encumbrance to the short story's universal appeal is the variable position of the narrator. Lawson's narrators usually speak in a distinctively local idiom and fit the national stereotype: they are men, white, and working-class; they are laconic; they are aware of injustices of the world; and they are usually unpretentiously intelligent.[8] At least in part, Lawson's popularity as a working-class author of stories was built upon his ability to produce narrators that re-write or re-live the facts of Australian bush life, without associating ideas, without generalising, without commenting, but simply by describing people and scenes. But while most of Lawson's narrators become personally involved in the suffering of other characters, the one in "The Union Burries Its Dead" seems to respond with indifference to such suffering, fails in reportorial terms to record the drover's name, and tends to include poignant personal commentaries. Perhaps the slight problem with the narrator is due to Lawson's lack of sophistication (of which he has been often accused), or perhaps to a very conscious attempt to convey a feeling of spontaneity and truth. As Adrian Mitchell puts it, the story "begins with the collective 'we,' with the narrator accepting his common identity with the unionists; he is not distinguishable from them or their attitudes. At the graveside he steps back to a personal view of the proceedings, observing the behaviour of the other participants, and drawing attention to the emptiness of the ritual for him" (1981: 71). Mitchell also notices "The characteristic Lawsonian twist . . . with the narrator suddenly emerging as story-teller rather than as participant" (1981: 71).

David G. Ferguson, in his review of *While the Billy Boils* (in *Review of Reviews*, Melbourne, August 20, 1896), wrote that "[t]he author places the subject in an appropriate light, and then stands aside and lets you look at it. He has nothing to say about it, no comment to make; the thing must tell its own tale. Of course the comment is there all the same, only you must look for it not in what the author says, but in what he leaves out" (Roderick 1972: 47–48). I would argue that the author is present all the same, since the three different roles that the narrative voice plays in the story suggest too strong an awareness about the narrative act that underlines authorial presence. In fact, it can be detected in all three roles, in brief remarks that Lydia Wevers sees "as asides by the narrator . . . tiny digressions in which the reader is invited to consider the narrator as someone other than a mouthpiece" (1994: 19). These asides bring together author and reader on a common ground. Lawson's personality was of a fatalistic and at times depressive nature, which contributes to the identification with his narrator. Lawson and Banjo Paterson used the *Bulletin*, among other things, to attack each other's particular view of the Australian bush: Lawson claimed Paterson was too romantic and Paterson complained of the gloomy atmosphere of Lawson's narratives.[9] Desmond O'Grady notes

8. The story's vernacular diction and its detailed local colour aptly convey a sense of authenticity. Language, in the convention of bush literature, must be unadorned and laconic. Laurie Clancy insists that "in Lawson's best stories, the strength arises from the impassivity of the prose, its laconic understatements" (1992: 74).

9. He was not the only one. A. G. Stephens, the *Bulletin* editor, also did so; see, for instance, his articles "Lawson's Prose" or "Mother and Son" (Roderick 1972: 51–53 and 128–31, respectively), and especially his "Henry Lawson" (Roderick 1972: 215–22, first published in *Art in Australia*, Sydney, November 1922); an anonymous reviewer, in "A Voice from the Bush" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, August 29, 1896), wrote: "his landscapes are graphic pictures, but depressing to a degree in their

that "[t]owards the end of [Lawson's] autobiography . . . he saw his sufferings as fruitless; he, along with others, was a victim of fate; it was all wrong, all brutally unnecessary" and quotes Lawson's words: "There was hardship and poverty, squalor and misery, hatred and uncharitableness, and ignorance; there were many mistakes, but no one was to blame; it was Fate—it was Fate" (1971: 75). That there is "no one to blame" means there is no action to take since Fate, by its abstract nature, cannot be overcome.

The consequent passivity is also manifest in the lack of interest to convey a precise portrayal of the situation. In any standard history of Australian literature, Lawson is presented as a realist/naturalist author, and in fact most of his short stories are of this nature.[10] Lawson always held that the episode was true to life but "The Union Buries Its Dead" does not follow the expected documentary precision of data that conventionally contributes to verisimilitude in realist/naturalist literature. We learn that "when the hearse presently arrived, more than two thirds of the funeral were unable to follow" due to severe inebriation (1896: 60). Only after a short while, and for no explicit reason, the fourteen men who initially followed the corpse become six on foot walking in twos. The description in passing of the "Four or five" (60) boarders who went on the borrowed two-wheeled carriage and who remain unidentified is not very precise either. The number of pubs momentarily closing as the funeral procession drives by is either one or two, not so many as to make reckoning difficult for the narrator (although irony is no doubt at work here, in that allusions to drink and to drunkenness abound). Even the indefiniteness of the opening ("one Sunday" [60]) seems to become precise (in "last Sunday" [63]) towards the end of the story, but the reason for this may be that the narrator is influenced by the wording of the "brevity columns" in the "'Great Australian Dailies'" (63) he mentions. In any case, without a reference date it becomes inconclusive, adding to the mindset of imprecision and extreme relaxation. Indefiniteness in time goes along with indefiniteness in place. The landscape is scrupulously marked as Australian, but the name of the town (perhaps Bourke), and those of the streets along which the funeral proceeded, are absent.

The recurrent reportorial failure of an intelligent narrator relates to the purposelessness of the narrative itself. While these non-naturalistic touches universalize the story since its time and place can be easily extrapolated to other times and places, they also turn the commonality portrayed into an illusion. The anonymous existence of all the characters (including the narrator as character) amounts to a simple "being together" with others, not to any true coexistence. The characters do not share any knowledge, or experience or

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blankly monotonous effect. . . . His bush towns are wastes of roofs of galvanised iron. His roads are 'hungry', and so are his selections and so-called cultivation areas" (Roderick 1972: 55).

10. Besides the requirement of the *Bulletin*, that considered realism the appropriate technique for the authentic Australian literature, there are at least three reasons for these stories to be so: the first is that the untamed external circumstances of the Australian bush—which appears in most of his production—did not contribute to any type of fantastic literature; a second reason is that he was deeply influenced by Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, and the Americans Bret Harte and Mark Twain; a third one is that he has a tendency to veer toward naturalism because the realism in fashion at the time was of the anti-romantic type. He tried to go beyond the so-called realistic romance of his countrymen Ralph Boldrewood and Marcus Clarke and rejected what he called Anglo-Australian romance, of the kind directed at a predominantly English audience. Therefore, Lawson favoured scenes from provincial life, paid meticulous attention to detail, and discarded romance to favour the expression of "life-as-it-is."

emotion, but participate in their inability to identify the corpse and follow the hearse out of convention with no "feeling" ascribable to anyone. Action and behaviour at the communal level is reduced to the "official," the conventional and the insignificant. Reality is seen as that which "is there" and which "cares not" about any human intervention, and the narrator takes it "as it is." This attitude, devoid of the angst and fear of Nietzschean existentialism, accepts that nothing grounds and nothing legitimizes our existence. The narrator as the author's mouthpiece decisively abandons himself to the situation in which he finds himself and by being indifferent to any possible project of improvement or salvation, he is deciding to project no project.

Another consequence of this technique of imprecision and indefiniteness is that, by focusing on the effects (which are the ones narrated), it obliges the reader to grasp at the causes and to speculate about identity in order to make sense of the story. Consider the following case of indefiniteness: "The fall of lumps of clay on a stranger's coffin doesn't sound any different from the fall of the same things on an ordinary wooden box—at least I didn't notice anything awesome or unusual in the sound; but, perhaps, *one of us—the most sensitive*—might have been impressed by being reminded of a burial of long ago, when the thump of every sod jolted his heart" (emphasis added, 62). For Adrian Mitchell, "It's a criticism of what happens to men in the outback that they seem devoid of feeling, for what we discern in the narrator is not insensitivity but the pose of insensitivity, as though to guard himself against the impulse of true feeling" (1981: 72). Perhaps it is not that simple to solve the problem of identity here, but the conspicuous wink at the reader is double: the reader must decide (1) whether the sensitive one is either the narrator or some other character attending the burial, or, (2) if the narrator's attempt to create a commonality that would also include the author and the readers has succeeded, and if the appeal to the reader is as strong as it seems, whether it is the reader him/herself—no doubt "the most sensitive one of us"—who, through the act of reading "might have been impressed by being reminded of a burial of long ago, when the thump of every sod jolted his heart."

This is strongly suggested in the paragraph immediately following the one quoted above:

> I have left out the wattle—because it wasn't there. I have also neglected to mention the heartbroken old mate, with his grizzled head bowed and great pearly drops streaming down his rugged cheeks. He was absent—he was probably 'Out Back.' For similar reasons I have omitted reference to the suspicious moisture in the eyes of a bearded bush ruffian named Bill. Bill failed to turn up, and the only moisture was that which was induced by the heat. I have left out the 'sad Australian sunset' because the sun was not going down at the time. The burial took place exactly at mid-day. (62–63)

These lines, while rejecting any possibility for idealization, are altogether foreign to the assumed objectivity of realist/naturalist narrators because of the awareness of the act of writing. They also help Lawson reject sentimentality by means of a conspicuous metatextual gesture, they uncover the authorial need to invalidate the myths the paragraph enumerates, draw attention to the honesty of the account, and—because of the recurrence of preterition and the effort to justify the absences by using double explanations—they also disclose the real and the fictitious character of the story. The passage denies any possibility for any project and reinforces the implied reader's presence in the scene by assuming a

whole set of shared imaginative links between the speaker (now a conscious "story-teller") and his addressee. It is easy to equate the voice uttering this extract with one above (or behind, but different from) the narrator's. There has been a leap from a first person-narrative situation—following F. K. Stanzel's terminology—with a simultaneously narrating and experiencing "I" in the world of the characters, to an authorial narrative situation in which the "I" places itself outside the world of the characters and, as story-teller, closer to the author's and the reader's. By means of the recurrent shift in pronouns that changes the story's focal registry (from "we" to "I" and back to "we") and, as in other stories by Lawson, by "involving the reader in these turns of perspective, the text draws attention to the constructedness of the process of narration itself" (New 2001:412; see also Kiernan 1980: 298–308). This tension between the literary and the realistic is unresolved, leaving the reader in as much the same inane position to judge and take action as the rest of the characters in the story. Even if the reader wanted to react there is nothing he/she can do because of the inconclusiveness of the information, the cancelling effect of the narrator's asides, and the non-reversibility of the drover's fate.

The style of the explanations in the previous example ("—because it was't there," "—he was probably 'Out Back,'" "Bill failed to turn up," "The burial took place exactly at mid-day") is precisely that of similar commentaries throughout the story that point to authorial mediation in those instances in which irony is at stake. Irony is one of the modes through which nihilism relates to the world. Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power* (item 14) wrote: "Nihilism [is] an ideal of the supreme potential of the spirit, of the exuberance of life, partly destructive, partly ironic" (1932: 23; my translation). For Kierkegaard, irony accorded a comprehensive view of human existence, and its culmination took place in front of an incomprehensible death. Consider the following example: "The departed was a 'Roman,' and the majority of the town were otherwise—but unionism is stronger than creed. Drink, however, is stronger than unionism" (60). Here, as if in a progress from the collective to the narrating "I" and from here to the authorial evaluation, the first aside, an historically based explanation, could well belong to the narrator. However, the last part of the equation, distanced by a full stop and charged with strong irony on its forceful moral weight, has more of the authorial intervention.

In another example, "The procession numbered fifteen, fourteen souls following the broken shell of a soul. Perhaps not one of the fourteen possessed a soul any more than the corpse did—but that doesn't matter" (60), the tailed reflection cuts the narrator's commentary short of any further discussion of the matter and points in a different, and far more stringent, direction than the sheer irony on the possession of a soul does. Nihilism completely eliminates the traditional distinction between soul and body in the belief that there is no transcendence and, in one of its types, the usually called "social nihilism," presents a passive world view that manifests a sense of isolation, futility and the hopelessness of existence. If both death and life are meaningless, one cannot avoid moving into the cynical conformism and ironic refutative essence of passive nihilism.

By the time the reader reaches the next instance—"They closed their bar doors and the patrons went in and out through some side or back entrance for a few minutes. Bushmen seldom grumble at an inconvenience of this sort, when it is caused by a funeral. They have too much respect for the dead" (60–61)—the tripartite variation on the theme and the irony alert the reader on the authorial character of these commentaries. Much the same occurs with the following example: "The other two [shearers] covered their right ears with

their hats, out of respect of the departed—whoever he might have been—and one of them kicked the drunk and muttered something to him" (61). The explanation in between dashes is uttered in such a mode of dejection and unconcern that it makes the spiritual condition of the shearers and the narrator coincide. But the completely unnecessary repetition about the identity of the defunct is an over-conscious attempt on the part of the narrator to create an irritating effect of indeterminacy. Only two paragraphs above we learnt that the dead drover was "almost a stranger in town" (60) and in the previous paragraph the narrator reminded us that "We were all strangers to the corpse" (60).

The story includes many other hints that suggest a communality whose members have nothing or very little in common: "The secretary had little information to give" (60); the four or five boarders at the pub "were strangers to us who were on foot, and we to them" (60); "He [a horseman] was a stranger to the entire show" (60); "The fall of lumps of clay on a stranger's coffin doesn't sound any different from the fall of the same things on an ordinary wooden box" (62); "Most of us didn't know the name [of the drover] till we saw it on the coffin" (63). Such insistence sounds odd in a narrator that does not seem to care much about anything or anybody. The drover's death is used by the other characters as an excuse to boast about the individual "narrow escapes we had had ourselves" (61), as the collective narrator puts it. The sense of community—which hardship supposedly confers on bushmen—disintegrates in a meaningless contest to single out the greatest sufferer who might perhaps personify the myth of crude masculinity. The narrator seems to be satisfied by offering a diagnosis of the situation, knowing the world to be absurd, but also knowing that nothing one can do will change matters. Such an experience of spiritual recession and decline explains his political quietism.

By the time the narration of the burial service is over, the reader has learnt to apply the corresponding distance and to perform the leap in perspective. A passage such as the following one clearly assigns the nihilistic attitude to the authorial voice: "He also tried to steer the first few shovelfuls gently down against the end of the grave with the back of the shovel turned outwards, but the hard, dry Darling River clods rebounded and knocked all the same. It didn't matter much—nothing does" (62). Nihilism rejects the belief in faith and any teleology or final purpose. In its extreme scepticism, it undermines intellectual and moral hierarchies and destabilizes all claims to truth. Nihilism, as a philosophy of negation, rejects any form of aestheticism, revolts against the established social order including the family, negates the established church or religion and believes that all evils derive from one single source: ignorance.[11] Ignorance is the condition in which the characters in the story reside. Only the narrator seems to enjoy some special consciousness of the facts, a consciousness that makes him seek refuge in his deprecatory and caustic wit, distancing himself from "man's ignorance and vanity" (62). Even so, the reality he offers is so negatively rendered (the reader is left with that that is lacking or faulty or missing) that even the narrator's claim for any knowledge is void, especially in the final recognition of the impossibility to attain any such knowledge or to preserve it in his memory.

A. A. Philips ends his article "Lawson Revisited" arguing that the dismal and sombre character of Lawson's stories is counterbalanced by a tenderness that is "the more

11. The Russian Chernyshevsky attempted "to 'nihilize' traditional aesthetic values by arguing that art is not the expression of some absolute conception of beauty but rather represents the interests of a certain class at a certain point in history" (Critchley, 1997: 5).

convincing because of the rigour with which Lawson keeps within the scale of living-as-it-is" (1971: 99). However, the final tail-piece of "The Union Buries Its Dead" insists on the crudity of the loneliness and paralysis of the human condition if a chronicler cannot keep a record of the once learned name of the deceased drover: "We did hear, later on, what his real name was; but if we ever chance to read it in the 'Missing Friends Column,' we shall not be able to give any information to heart-broken Mother or Sister or Wife, nor to any one who could let him hear something to his advantage—for we have already forgotten the name" (63). The story has been charged with being fragmented, and Price Warung complained that "There is too much here of the ephemeral or the paltry" (Roderick 1972: 48). However, such fragmentation and accumulation of the ephemeral, along with the conscious paralysis of memory, reassert the impossibility of any logical knowledge of the world, as nihilism in one of its most radical forms proclaims. This denial of epistemology argues that the narrative is not, after all, about the report of an accident. It is difficult to assign this final slip in the narrator's memory to either a conscious or an unconscious desire to obliterate any responsibility or guilt in the death of the young man. The blame might equally fall either on the drover's inexperience or the treacherous backwaters of the billabongs of the Darling.

Thematically, the story focuses on two clear objects of satire—the General Labourers' Union and the service of the funeral—coinciding with the two major targets of nihilism: political institutions and religious belief. The critique is achieved through the narrator's humorous and ironic asides, but we should notice, with A. A. Philips, that "[i]t is quite false to equate the humorous with the optimistic" (1971: 88). I therefore disagree with Adrian Mitchell's comment that "[t]he dead-pan joke, the discovery that the man the union has buried was called James Tyson (Hungry Tyson was a famous pastoralist, and rumoured to be the richest man in Australia) takes the story away from the more sober ramifications of the episode, and returns it to the quiet farce of the narrative surface" (1981: 72). The joke is so ironic that the recognition that the poor and destitute have a greater chance than the rich to suffer a lonely and painful death by drowning deprives it from any comic effect and becomes a painful awareness. Rather than "quiet farce," the joke indulges in black humour, and is immediately cancelled four lines below because "it turned out, afterwards, that T. J. wasn't his real name" (63).[12]

Political satire starts by attacking the myth of solidarity, part of the myth of mateship that had long been linked to nationalism and working-class values. Lawson had elsewhere mythologised it, for example, in his poem "The Shearers."[13] Socialism and mateship go

12. In the same line, it might be significant that the "sentimental drover" quotes Byronic verses "cynically" and asks the question about the GLU ticket with "pathetic humour": this seems to me to be a conscious inversion to call attention to the evaluative character of authorial mediation. One would expect the Byronic verses to be "pathetically" quoted by the "sentimental drover," while his humour, like the rest of the humour in the story, is more properly qualified as "black" or "cynical."

13. Consider Lawson's idealization of mateship in the following lines: "They tramp in mateship side-by-side/—the Protestant and Roman—/They call no biped lord or sir,/—And touch their hat to no man!" (*When I was King* 1906: 23; ll. 21–24). Frank Lewins quotes K. Hancock when he writes that "this ideal of 'mateship' which appeals very strongly to the ordinary good-hearted Australian springs, not only from his eagerness to exalt the humble and meek, but also from his zeal to put down the mighty from their seat" (2003: 168). Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* describes Bazarov,

together here because their fusion gave rise to the new bush religion: "Socialism . . . is the desire to be mates, is the ideal of living together in harmony and brotherhood and loving kindness," declared *The Hummer*, a shearers' paper (as quoted in Turner 1976: 33). Lawson had also justified this myth of solidarity in 1890, when he published an article titled "The New Religion" in *The Albany Observer*: "[T]he surest and the shortest road to the great social reformation of the future lies through trades unionism . . . Trades unionism is a new and grand religion; it recognises no creed, sect, language or nationality . . . and a time will come when all the 'ists,' 'isms,' etc., will be merged and lost in one great 'ism'—the unionism of labor" (1972: 16–17).[14] Just three years after this hymn to Unionism (1893), however, while something very much like a civil war was raging in Outback Australia, Lawson seemed to have modified his initial dreams of a universal, white, male brotherhood through unionism. He was still a socialist advocating republicanism, secularism, universal suffrage, penal and land ownership reforms, and Australia for the Australians, which was the position of the *Bulletin*, but his candid belief in mankind had disappeared. In "Our Countrymen," an article published in *The Worker* in 1893, Lawson wrote that "The average Australian bushman is too selfish, narrow-minded, and fond of the booze to liberate his country" (1972: 21). The very accidental nature of the death of the young drover in "The Union Buries Its Dead" clearly deprives him of any claim to glory as a revolutionary. But if the defeat of speculative and political socialist theory made Lawson turn his hopes towards the single individual, "here he found how difficult it was for even two persons to love one another" (O'Grady 1971: 80). The narrator's position, then, can possibly be best illustrated at this point by quoting another definition for nihilism as an "unbelief carried to an extreme that rebounds in a feeling of estrangement" (Linzey 1995: 641).

The political protest against the passive acceptance of the status quo is present, but the story seems to suggest that the feeling of vacuity expressed by the group coincides with that of the individual narrator in front of death and that it is not different from the feelings that are aroused in front of everything else. The irony manifested in the contrast between the episode of the progress of the funeral party and the stasis that hangs over the whole story adds to this feeling of vacuity. This vacuity has been described as melancholy in the shape of irony rather than cynicism—among others by A. A. Philips (1971: 88), and Lydia Wevers (1994:19). But "paralysing melancholy," or sheer nihilism, would be perhaps a better description. Lawson is making a point on "[t]he radical ungraspability of finitude, our inability to lay hold of death and make of it a work and to make that work the basis for an affirmation of life" (Critchley 1997: 26). I cannot but disagree with Lydia Wevers when,

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the young nihilist, as "a person who does not bow down to any kind of authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much he may revere that principle" (2004: 96; the translation from the Spanish is mine). Lawson's narrator recalls Bazarov as both mistrust their own thoughts, are reflexive, doubtful and ironic and their attitude to life can paralyze any impulse to act. Yet, it cannot be asserted that Lawson's narrator lacks principles and morality. Another feature common to both texts is that at times Turgenev speaks in the voice of Bazarov: Turgenev himself recognized that he shared some of his character's beliefs ("Apropos of *Fathers and Sons*" [1958: 162n]).

14. Judith Womersley reminds us that "The trade union movement was well established when the depression of 1890 began, and the rights of shearers, wharf-labourers and other manual workers were protected by unions, with discussion already beginning on the issue of a minimum wage. However, the great strikes of the time were defeated" (2001: 212).

talking about the collective history of bushmen, she affirms that "it is this history which constructs the bush as a place of common identity and even when a body turns up which isn't identified it is claimed by collective interest—'The Union Buries Its Dead'" (1994: 23). I would argue that in this story it is the institution, not the people identified as belonging to it (therefore the "Its" in the title), that takes care of the corpse. The impersonality of both the drover and the institution are evident, and the only common interest manifest in the story is drink. This is not a story about mateship and political or class solidarity, but about the metaphysical loneliness of the human condition and the paralysing effect of human indifference. The narrator's personal isolation from the rest of the characters countenances this idea. Social nihilism, like drink, the story argues, is stronger than any political, religious, social, communal, or literary creed. Although nowhere stated in the text, it is not difficult to equate drink and drunkenness with the ideal state of ataraxia, which, for the sceptics, is one in which a person willing to suspend judgement is relieved of the frustration of not knowing reality and lives, without being dogmatic, according to appearances, customs, and natural inclination. This is a precise description of the behaviour of the men in and outside the funeral procession.

Religious belief is also neutralized. The religious ceremony of the funeral is turned into an empty ritual when attended by non-believers. Moreover, the narrator's tendency to focus on the farcical behaviour of the publican, and his preoccupation about the size of the grave hole, displace everyone's attention from any possible transcendental meaning. Again, the personal and communal sense of "spirituality," if there is any to be found, depends very much on spirits, that is, on hard drink. Finally, in contrast to the many other literary instances of the myth of the virgin land (always a land of promise and hope), emptiness and "unknownness" in the short story do not promise anything. After all, it has been the environment, not yet under the control of Australians, which has killed the young man. Bush literature includes a large corpus of what is essentially a literature of survival, and one in which optimism for the future is usually asserted to provide the struggle for survival with some sense of purpose. Optimism and a sense of purpose, however, are clearly undermined in this story. This is not a narrative of survival because there is no valid ritual to project meaning upon that process of endurance. This is a story in which nothingness and the great Australian emptiness of the landscape seem to have been projected upon all its victims, including the narrator. As Simon Critchley would say of modern philosophy, "[t]he great metaphysical comfort of religion, its existential balm . . . has decisively broken down" (1997: 2), and "[f]or Nietzsche, nihilism as a psychological state is attained when we realize that the categories by means of which we had tried to give meaning to the universe are meaningless" (Critchley 1997: 8). Historically, pre-Nietzschean nihilism is the product of a disappointment in religious belief in an attempt to rationalize an explanation for the meaning of life. The political consequences of this attitude to life seem to be a derivative, or side effects of a deeper metaphysical preoccupation of the author. This explains why the story focuses on the burial and religious services surrounding the death of the drover, rather than on any political vindication of the status of the workers.

In common with other existentialist doctrines, one of the focal issues of nihilism is the contrast between the modality of existence, which is possibility (and then existence precedes essence), and the modality of being, which is reality. As a result of this contrast, existence as possibility appears as the nothingness of being, as the negation of every reality. Essence is an ideal that can be rationalized and mediated through language. Existence is

ineffable. For Kierkegaard existence is possibility and "the sentiment of the possible" he calls "dread" (Abbagnnano 1985: 622). Nicola Abbagnnano explains dread as "the feeling of what can happen to a man even when he has made all of his calculation and taken every precaution" (1985: 622), and explains that "[t]he possibility of death, unlike the possibilities that relate him to other things and to other men, isolates [man]. It is a certain possibility, not through its apodictic evidence but because it continuously weighs upon existence" (1985: 625). The narrator's detachment from the group in the burial episode marks this stage. To understand death would mean to acknowledge the possibility of the absence of existence. Thus, dread as "the emotive understanding of the nullity of the possible," or of the possibility of the nothingness, "is not fear in the face of specific danger" (Abbagnnano 1985: 625) but man's feeling when he is, in Kierkegaard's words, "face to face with the 'nothing' of the possible impossibility of [his] existence" (as quoted in Abbagnnano 1985: 625). And dread, in this Kierkegaardian usage, is the emotive tonality that the short story successfully conveys.

Authorities of the stature of Manning Clark affirm that Lawson "never probed into metaphysical questions" (1976: 325). I would contend, on the contrary, that he has done so in "The Union Buries Its Dead." It is not only that the narrator is apparently an atheist like the others attending the funeral. More comprehensively, major nihilistic premises are upheld, not only politically but philosophically, and these are distilled into the story because of the author's personal attitude to life. The narrator, as a nihilist character, believes in nothing, has no loyalties and no purpose in his acting, and is a sceptic regarding the communicability of emotion or any other knowledge. He could well be accompanying the corpse out of working-mate sympathy, but it may also be because that was what other people were doing when he happened to be there. He seems to accept meaninglessness passively, and this justifies irony and fragmentation. The story, as a result of the narrator's commentaries, shakes the foundations of the myths of mateship and Unionism, while favouring individualism to the detriment of human association. "The Union Buries Its Dead," then, seems to go beyond questions of religion and nationalism, not so as to transcend them, but to prove that when all is said and done, the funeral is what it is, and the mourners, already paid with drink, most likely by the Union, are as numb as everybody else, including the reader, when confronted with death. Since neither the religious nor the political myths hold tight any moral interpretation of the world any longer, they cannot redeem the brute ugliness of actual existence the story portrays.

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