

Re-making the Middle Ages in Australia: Francis Webb's 'The Canticle' (1953)¹

We create God in our own image, and we impress the mark of our personality in places where we least expect to find it again. (Sabatier: xxiii)

I

Francis Webb's verse-sequence on St Francis of Assisi, 'The Canticle', from *Birthday* (1953) has been acknowledged as a watershed in his career (Griffith, 1991: 5, 76, 131) and as a major re-focussing of his art (Ashcroft: 15-19). I wish to re-read 'The Canticle' here, mainly as an important poem by an Australian writer still lacking sufficient scholarly attention, but also as an instance of what might be called Australian medievalism. I want to show how Webb's poetry, through its local inflection of a disputed European tradition, re-made the significance of a central medieval figure—St Francis—within an Australian context. In doing so, I hope to show how earlier European culture (in this instance, medieval culture) can be of importance to our understanding of Webb as a modern Australian writer.

In Australia, the middle ages have sometimes been seen as the first instalment of an Anglocentric's or Eurocentric's inheritance (Mead, 1994: 409); even worse, as an instalment no longer relevant.² At any rate, Australians reading earlier European literatures are now called on to consider what function their work performs here and how it is attached to their local situation. To quote Jenna Mead,

[Medieval and early modern] texts need to be part of a discursive formation that identifies its subject 'culture' as the intersection of ideology and critique in the everyday practices of both reader and text. (Mead, 1995: 389)

The project Mead outlines quickly raises a procedural difficulty, simply because of the shortage of knowledge about what possible uses Australians have ever had for the middle ages. Without knowing more about that history, we cannot properly understand what is involved in the Australian reception and construction of the European past. In this connection, an important missing study is the representation of the medieval in Australian literature and art. How much is there? What is it like? Whilst the English enjoy a 'middle ages' much influenced by Pugin, Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, do Australians simply internalise a pseudo-'metropolitan' medieval inheritance, 'both European and not European', ignoring local conditions, as John Docker once wrote about our English departments? (Docker: 443-45) If, as I think, a poem like Webb's 'Canticle' indicates otherwise,

¹ Thanks to John Muzzatti, Manager Reference Services, and the staff of Willoughby Municipal Library, Chatswood, N.S.W. for their assistance with research on this article.

² The official guide book to Vaucluse House in Sydney indicates that the name was taken from 'Petrarch (1304-1374), an important figure in the development of Italian literature', describing him as 'this now obscure fourteenth-century poet'. See *Vaucluse House* : 7-8.

then the local agenda of Australian responses to the medieval becomes of more general interest. It exists as an issue in Australian literature, as Tennyson's *Idylls* have made it exist in British literature.

The few approaches to the issue of Australian medievalism have so far focussed on the analysis of academic practice,³ but the academy has never had a monopoly on mediating Australian contact with the medieval past. Religion (especially Catholicism) through its liturgy, literature and art may have been of equal or greater influence. This is certainly the case with the work I shall examine here, which originated far from universities,⁴ but must rank amongst the major Australian literary responses to a medieval subject. Webb's 'Canticle' engages closely with the Australian scene, as I shall argue, but it is also to be understood in relation to a long line of popular and scholarly works on St. Francis of Assisi, and it is in that particular context that I shall examine it most closely.

II

It is a critical commonplace that Francis Webb (1925-1973) has high critical status but relatively few readers. That this is so is undoubtedly because of the elliptical, complex, highly-wrought nature of his poems, also partly because of their challenging range of reference, not only religious ('nakedly Catholic', he said about one poem),⁵ but literary, artistic, historical, philosophical and scientific. In the face of this difficult and not obviously 'Australian' work, there has been a shortage of readerly interest or nerve, and probably just too small a market, given that the poems are considered too hard for school students, and often even for undergraduates. For every one student who knows Webb, there must be at least fifty who know Wright, Dawe or Murray; generations of Australian university classes who have done battle with Eliot, Yeats and Lowell have rarely been asked to make the same effort on our own modernist dragon. In consequence, Webb has been left somewhat stranded in Australian literary history, in a way that matches his living removal from society within the locked wards of various mental asylums.

Webb's relative neglect is poignant in that he always tried, almost too self-consciously, to be an 'Australian' poet. Though he had many other poetic influences, from Shakespeare and Browning to Hopkins, Pound, Eliot, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas and Lowell, he grew up and remained filled with the idea of his fellowship with other Australian writers—Douglas Stewart, Kenneth Slessor, R. D. FitzGerald, Rosemary Dobson and David Campbell—as many of his letters show.

³ For some comments on this, see Mead, 1994; 1995, and Matthews. For the general history of university English studies in Australia, see Dale. She mentions, p. 87, the preference for appointing medievalist professors. G. H. Russell makes both an Irish Catholic and a Benedictine connection with his academic medieval studies, in Buckley (1986).

⁴ Webb was an unemployed labourer when he privately published *Birthday* in Adelaide.

⁵ Webb used this phrase in a letter to Rosemary Dobson, 3/11/1973, to describe his last poem on St. Maria Goretti. National Library of Australia MS 4955, Box 2, Folder 8.

He began writing poetry as a child, and while still at school in Sydney was published by Stewart in *The Bulletin*. At eighteen he first made contact with the editor of Brisbane's *Meanjin Papers*. In 1943, he deferred his tertiary studies to join the Australian Army, later the Air Force, serving mainly in Canada. In 1946 he left an Arts course at the University of Sydney (English, French, Latin, Ancient History) after only a few months, anxious to write full-time. Webb's surviving copy of Skeat's Oxford Chaucer (see footnote 7) is an emblem of that brief university period, seemingly unread, but the inside back cover scribbled with lecture notes on early Australian fiction. In the same year he left university, his long dramatic poem-sequence *A Drum for Ben Boyd*, was published in *The Bulletin*, followed by another long work on the explorer Leichhardt in 1947, with illustrations by his early mentor, Norman Lindsay. Both were later published as books by Angus and Robertson.

Against the 1940s background of explorer/pioneer poetry, which Douglas Stewart called 'a search for the basic myths of the nation' (Griffith, 1991: 46). Webb's choice in 1950 of St Francis of Assisi as the subject of his next long sequence, 'The Canticle' (published 1953), has attracted some critical attention. To Michael Griffith, in *God's Fool*, it was ultimately a choice made against the 'Nietzschean' 'heroic self-assertion' of Lindsay and Stewart (Griffith, 1991: 3) which 'loosened the hold of that romanticism which had characterised Australian art and literature in the forties'. Griffith writes of the poet's mental anguish after the war, and his break with Norman Lindsay (and hence Stewart) over Lindsay's anti-Semitism and his doctrine of the supreme authority of art, and Lindsay's and Stewart's anti-modernist views on poetry (Griffith, 1991: 81ff). It is clear that Webb's Catholicism focussed his critique of the cruelty and race-hatred he saw in Australian culture. ('The Canticle' is accompanied in *Birthday* by a radio-play on the death of Hitler.) Griffith quotes a statement from Webb's autobiographical document of 1966:

I knew now that my poetry must openly acknowledge God and the Resurrection.

...the everyday Australian...had come to seem to me the most insensible and unimaginative man on earth, with all his cults of physical power and so forth. (Griffith, 1991: 89)

According to Griffith, 'Webb found in St Francis the paradigm that would dominate the rest of his life' (Griffith, 1991: 211), a figure 'who 'embraced failure and the failure of others as a means towards personal liberation and real wisdom' (Griffith, 1991: 5).

Where Griffith treats the genesis of the poem in terms of Webb's personal development, Bill Ashcroft has recently shown how Webb's poetry is born out of a particular cultural situation:

... more than that of any other Australian poet, [Webb's poetry] embodies the kind of post-colonial tensions at the heart of Australian cultural experience. (Ashcroft, 1996: 3)

because

Webb's language has the lineaments of a particularly complex power relationship. Conceptually (and, we might say, emotionally) the poetry is grounded in European soil, and yet its language is conceived in the classic struggle of 'margin' over 'centre', the 'counter discourse' which constitutes his language as Australian (not in essence, but in practice and in its mode of conflict). (Ashcroft, 1996: 3)

With Ashcroft's words in mind, I shall look again at Webb's access, as a mid-century Australian, to the Franciscan story, and at the position 'The Canticle' adopted within that context. I hope to show here two things: Firstly, the European tradition of St Francis which Webb took on in 'The Canticle' (as both inheritor and interlocutor) was various and riven, a bequest that had deeply troubled, as well as inspired, its Catholic beneficiaries: to choose Francis was not nostalgia, an escape into the middle ages as 'The Age of Faith' with a monolithic 'Christendom' in the ascendant, but a plunge into the history of crisis and unresolved schism. Secondly, Webb aligned himself within and towards Franciscan tradition in a way that abrogated the saint for a critique of post-war Australian cultural norms, and did so by resisting the authority of the European centre, rejecting an imperialist and colonialist mentality fostered by church and state.⁶

Issues of authentication and authority have accompanied St. Francis from the beginning, for how could the most wealthy and powerful institution of Francis's time and place cope with the success of a figure dedicated to radical poverty and humility? Franciscan biography has always been a complex and politically contested area, from before the time that St Bonaventure's *New Legend* (1260-63), 'in keeping with accepted theories of sanctity' (Boase: 14), was adopted as the 'official account', and 'it was...ordered that all other previous legends should be destroyed' (Adderley: 155). The vision of Webb as former romantic national myth-maker and celebrant of Lindsayan 'vitalist' heroism, re-made into moralist of humility and Catholic orthodoxy, may also involve some simplification of 'The Canticle's' relation to its sources. References in the poem indicate that these included St Francis' own 'Canticle of the Sun', the 'Little Flowers', a collection of early Franciscan stories, and Bonaventure's *New Legend*. Other Franciscan influences can be found in Webb's library:⁷ James Adderley's *Francis: The Little Poor Man of Assisi*

⁶ See Ashcroft, pp. 29-30, where Webb is viewed as more apolitical, with a sense of 'the continuity of the sacred across cultural boundaries'.

⁷ The Webb collection is kept in Willoughby Municipal Library, Chatswood, N.S.W. For a discussion, see Griffith, 1980: 348-58. Griffith (1991) describes Webb's access to Franciscan materials in the library of the Franciscan monastery at Wahroonga.

(1900), which Webb had owned from childhood; the then recently translated biography by Omer Englebert (1950), and G. K. Chesterton's much reprinted *St Francis of Assisi* (1923), the source most cited by Michael Griffith. To these should probably be added, from internal evidence, Otto Karrer's *St Francis of Assisi: The Legends and Lauds* (1945; English edition, 1947).⁸

G. K. Chesterton was often held up to Australian Catholics of Webb's period as the type of the Catholic intellectual (Massam: 37, 198, 207, 218). He had combined some anti-imperialist and socialist sympathies with a defence of religious orthodoxy and papal authority (Orwell: 102-03). That combination understandably appealed to the Australian clergy during this volatile era in labour politics. The major themes of Chesterton's book are Francis as fool and as pre-sexual child—'the court fool of the King of Paradise' (Chesterton: 83)—in his 'inspired infancy' (Chesterton: 104) whose celebratory love of nature is only possible because the earlier medieval world has expiated through penance the sexual excess of late antiquity:

The flowers and stars have recovered their first innocence. Fire and water are felt worthy to be the brother and sister of a saint. The purge of paganism is complete at last...Man has stripped from his soul the last rag of nature-worship, and can return to nature. (Chesterton: 38-39)

Chesterton's conclusion is that

the coming of St Francis was like the birth of a child in a dark house, lifting its doom; a child that grows up unconscious of the tragedy and triumphs over it by his innocence....It was right enough that for such a child the world should be a large new nursery with blank white-washed walls, on which he should draw his own pictures in chalk in the childish fashion, crude in outline and gay in colour. (Chesterton: 178-79)

When Chesterton finally mentions the Franciscan example behind 'much that is loosely called Christian Socialist' (Chesterton: 184), the politics behind this patronising rhetoric of Francis's unworldly innocence become clearer. He has created a 'feel-good' St Francis whose example can offer no clearly defined critique of clerical or political conservatism. In addition, Chesterton plays down the importance of the rift between the Spiritual Franciscans, loyal to Francis's literal views on poverty, and the Conventuals, who accepted the later Rules permitting their use of wealth.

⁸ Karrer's 'Preface' has several suggestive parallels with 'The Canticle' and seems to highlight similar features, e.g., the city wall, the lepers, young Francis's wanderings on Monte Subasio and the theme of knighthood. The Franciscan sources overlap and parallel each other to such an extent that finding exact structures of influence is difficult.

Many idealists of a socialistic sort, notably of the school of Mr. Shaw and Mr. Wells, have treated this dispute as if it were merely a case of the tyranny of wealthy and wicked pontiffs crushing the true Christianity of Christian Socialists. (Chesterton: 179)

The Spiritual Franciscan challenge to papal practice, which had held radical appeal both in the thirteenth century and in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, is Chesterton's major preoccupation here, as he insists that the Spiritual Franciscans (read 'Socialists'), who followed Francis in opposition to the owning of property, inevitably 'rotted away' as a monomaniacal sect (Chesterton: 184-85), while the 'central and orthodox trunk' of Franciscanism flourished under papal protection (Chesterton: 186).

James Adderley and Omer Englebert, two of Webb's other sources, write in marked contrast to Chesterton. Each is strongly influenced by Paul Sabatier's *Life of St Francis of Assisi* (1894), the first to make use of surviving pre-Bonaventuran sources. (Adderley's book is basically a simplified condensation of Sabatier's.) Sabatier, though a Protestant minister, was a student of the free-thinker Renan, author of the celebrated *Life of Jesus*. In describing the effect of St. Francis, Sabatier had invoked the spirit of the French Revolution, speaking of 'a religious movement' that 'looks...at nothing less than wresting the sacred things from the hands of the clergy' (Sabatier: xii), and he had praised Francis for refusing ordination because 'he divined the superiority of the spiritual priesthood' (Sabatier: xvi)—

[In the thirteenth century] There was a genuine attempt at a religious revolution, which, if it had succeeded, would have ended in a universal priesthood, in the proclamation of the rights of the individual conscience.....[But] the effort failed....Politically emancipated, we are not morally or religiously free. (Sabatier: xiii)

Neither Adderley or Englebert goes so far in crossing papal and institutional authority, but they go some way. Each stresses what Bonaventure had hidden (Englebert: 31-32), Francis's absolute opposition to the wealth-enjoying and institutionalised Franciscanism that developed with papal approval after 1221, for which Chesterton is an active apologist. Each dwells on the pain of Francis's last years, with the original Franciscan ideal in decline, and himself marginalised by the order he had founded.⁹ Englebert, a Catholic priest, quotes with some irony as a 'scandalous assertion' Sabatier's view that Francis's imitation of Christ

was so definitely in opposition to the temporal preoccupations...of the court of Rome, that Rome did not hesitate to circumvent it, to turn it

⁹ See also Karrer's comment, *Saint Francis*: xi. 'St Francis suffered a veritable martyrdom for the sake of his ideal at the hands of his own followers during the last years of his life'.

from its goal, and finally to seize on the Franciscan institution for the profit of its own traditional politics. (Englebert: 30)

Within these disparate interpretations, the St. Francis Webb re-encountered in post-war Australia was not a timeless, transcendent metropolitan 'heritage', but an historically and politically vexed issue,¹⁰ which he took on in a complex form. 'The Canticle', like Webb's earlier long verse sequences, and in the manner of a radio play, is conceived for various voices. A leper, Francis's father, The Wolf of Gubbio, The Jongleur, The Serf, The Knight and 'Brother Ass' are heard before and after their contact with the saint, whose own speech is heard only in one short central section, Part II, and through the words of his 'Canticle', used as epigraphs in Parts III and IV. In such a text, the 'view' of history becomes an experiential, if not totally a relative, concept: in modernist fashion, we encounter 'St Francis' mainly through momentary perceptions projected from within the dialogue of each separate voice with itself. These epiphanies cluster around the saint like a kind of nimbus, or halo, but each remains itself, with a separate idiom and ideological outlook marked by relative wealth, class and profession. In this way, the saint provides the focus for a conspectus of social attitudes which itself becomes a vital issue in the poem. In the final fourth part, four shorter strophic utterances are written for hitherto silent voices: 'The Mother', 'The Companion'. 'St Clare' and 'The Sun'. These share one epigraph, (the first three share one verse form and rhyme scheme) and they speak, as it were, successive verses of one hymn, like rays of one light.

As Griffith has shown (Griffith, 1991: 132), 'The Canticle's opening line, '1210 A.D.—too much of that. Anno Domini', tersely undercuts any distancing historical approach. 'Anno Domini' spells out the continuing Christian significance which routine history abbreviates. The subject is announced as omnitemporal, not to be confined within a remote past. The poem goes on to realise and target another kind of barrier in 'the wall', alluding to the symbolic moment of 1199, when the *popolo grasso* (merchant citizens) tore down the Rocca, Assisi's castle and used it to fortify the town (Boase: 18-21). But the first speaker of the poem is 'the leper', a permanent refugee, for whom the denied wall demarcates his own social marginality and rotting body:

The wall, only the wall: I do not howl for spires,
For the Rocca: only the whence the height the sureness,
Neither within the town not outside it!
See, this high wall, tall oak, is mine by right -
Stone quartered to brace a crumbling skin, to appease
The festering, ravenous gully: for an eye closed

¹⁰ For its topicality in the post-war period, see, e.g., Karrer, *St. Francis, Writing in 1945*, Karrer speaks of 'the religious revival emanating from him [Francis]' (vi), and is at pains to rebut as an 'idle speculation' the claim of Giovanni Mestica, *S. Francesco, Dante e Giotto* (Rome: Tipografia Barbèra, 1881, rept. 1926), that 'If Francis had lived in our time, he would not only have been a great democrat, which he already was then, but possibly also a great socialist' (x).

And desire gasping, the wall!

It is almost a man speaking.

It is the first of many instances of social exclusion in the poem, which clearly relate to Webb's radical attack on the official image of post-war White Australia as a land of freedom, welcome and equal opportunity. *Birthday* also included poetry about unemployment ('Laid Off'), prejudice against immigrants ('The Song of a New Australian') and aboriginal dispossession by white settlement (Ball's Head Again'; 'End of the Picnic'). The colonial enterprise is read as exploitation. In the monologue of Francis's father, the cloth merchant, the 'clean' capitalist texture of Europe is shown to be woven from the 'undoing' of Africa and Asia.¹¹

I am the merchant Bernardone,
Also the weaver, artisan,
Full face, full pocket, everywhere known,
All this—and very much the man.

So polished natural sentiments
From my clean fibres coaxed a son;
News at a fair wove continents—
Africa, Asia were undone.

The Jongleur's (poet's/public broadcaster's) monologue disowns military ceremonial and the postwar propaganda of 'freedom', and his position as endorsed spokesman for the propaganda of nationhood:

All of this—harvest, warfare—a just peace;
Tree-vestured chapels, observe, always are hidden
Somewhere on brutal roads
And I sing, no score of belief prompting the modes.

....

Let the cheers of the crowd
—Lover, dotard, cripple, bawd—
Work within me as a prayer,
From my borrowed instruction instruct me. Noon session boils
Together monument and change. O receive, receive
What comes of your pot-stirring, soothsayer.
Believe, believe, believe.

Wide-open mouth and bunting and drum

¹¹ See Sabatier: 2-5, on medieval cloth-merchants, their huge trade fairs and the vast extent of their commercial interests: "'One meets...[in Montpellier] merchants from Africa, from Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Greece, Gaul, Spain and England"...Amongst all these merchants, the richest were those who dealt in textile stuffs. They were literally the bankers of the time.'

Endorse some momentary, tireless, militant maker.
I sing as that maker directs. May I speak only as a man.

The knight's (returned serviceman's) monologue similarly keeps breaking through the official mood of 'victory' and 'belief' to the 'unspoken' it occludes, including the victims of 'just' wars, whether in the Crusades, modern colonial expansion or the recent war.:

So trimly manorial, this gallant structure!
My flag's blue and white doctrine in the wind would lecture
Everything to its fief.
Things clumsy as cloud, the heathen, bloodshed, rapine, and grief
Ran tidily venturesome as the veins of a leaf.
....
Today, then, shall I be perplexed by the swarms
Of roadside images flung from the uncalendared dreams?
By this woman whose gaze is token
Of a passing, by this room's
Mud and wattle under my hooves, by this broken
Foeman's lisplings, word of what is unspoken?

Webb deploys these middle ages as a medium for confronting Australia and Catholicism with their 'uncalendared', repressed history, and the effect is far removed from Chesterton's apolitical, childishly innocent Francis. Instead, official propaganda (the newsreel, the radio) is shown seeking to infantilise its audience and demanding silence from dissenting memories.

In the Leper's monologue, Webb has already shown the complicity of the Church in social injustice: 'A scampering priest/Whose discreet senses dare not linger upon me./Nor can I credit the Love aloft in those hands.' He also offers a critique of Australian Catholic clerical values of the period in two other related areas: the severe and hierarchical distinction between the soul and body, the 'spiritual' and the 'lower' nature; and the heavy emphasis on the direction of the faithful by episcopal and papal authority. The hinge of the whole poem, Part II, on which all the speakers' transmutations turn, is a single short piece for Francis's voice: 'Brother Ass and The Saint'. Bonaventure relates that Francis 'would call the dumb animals...by the names of *brother* and *sister*, for as much as he recognised in them the same origins as himself' (Bonaventure: 85). 'He would call his own body 'brother ass', as though it were meant to be loaded with toilsome burdens, beaten with many stripes, and nourished on mean fare' (Bonaventure: 50), saying 'Ah, brother ass, Thus must thou be led, thus must thou submit unto the lash' (Bonaventure: 48). That phrase is specifically recalled in the bitter monologue of 'Brother Ass' which concludes Part I, but there, interestingly is not attributed to the saint himself, in autonomous self-mortification, but to an exploitative force which 'rides' and 'curses' the body.

Brother Ass, you must feel the whip—
Cobble and sludge, miles of it, come-by-chance fodder,
Stables welcoming the winds along with me;
For diversion, ship-board and the crush, for farrier
A snowman. There must be a rider, I am alive
And evening will not empty the stirrup, and the voice
Cursing above me must always seem the same
As my famished earthen-bray, and the lazar-houses
Off-side must always be my Eden—the genuine
Grasses, inveterate mildness...

Part II begins very differently. Webb introduces what could well pass for another early Franciscan legend—the saint dismounts and walks beside his donkey to give it a rest:

Come, Brother, turn your full pitiful sweep of nose
That flowers as a nostril, not at all as a rose,
And all your little un-asinine ten toes

Towards what is at last off your back and is standing by
To lead you home, to muster up Italy
For the rich greenfares of lady Poverty.

Prance, play up as you will - it is lovely weather
Frisking beside us, melting us truly together.
Off with the belly-band and the stirrup-leather.

The episode is, it seems, Webb's invention,¹² his own twentieth-century Franciscan legend in dialogue with Bonaventure's official one. An obviously human body, with its 'ten toes', is released from bondage to the internalised, repressive force that rides it, but is now 'at last off...[its] back'. The freed and 'forgiven'¹³ adult body then participates fully in Francis's sainthood, 'melting us truly together', as he (now 'both 'Brother Ass and 'The Saint') declares.

This pivotal part of the poem prepares the way for the sanctification of the elements (and hence of the human body which they compose) in Part III,¹⁴ and the embodied ecstasy and suffering (the stigmata) in the concluding Part IV, maintaining the continuing solar theme of the resurrection of the body. (The poem

¹² I have not been able to find a parallel in Franciscan sources. Rev. Cyprian J. Lynch OFM, of The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, New York, has kindly inquired, and writes: 'The closest episodes are Thomas of Celano's *Second Life of St. Francis*, 31; St. Bonaventure's *Legenda Major*, 11, 8; and *Legend of Perugia* 30. This incident concerns Francis dismounting and allowing Brother Leonard to take his place on the donkey.'

¹³ A major theme in this part of the poem. The Leper opens Part III with the words 'Forgiven forgiven./Forgiven by the road'.

¹⁴ See the Knight: 'Earth, air, fire and water rising up,/And a transmutation'.

runs 'east-to-west', from dawn to nightfall.) So the whole sequence of 'The Canticle' hinges on this effort in Part II to rehabilitate the body and the oppressed senses, after their long subservience within an oppressive religious culture. The effect seems neither medieval nor 1950s Australian Catholic in feeling. For whilst the ascetic model of St. Francis no doubt informs 'The Canticle's' rejection of Lindsayan 'vitalism' as sheer egotism, that does not make the poem a subscriber to standard notions of 'humility'. And even if Webb has begun with Chesterton's psychology of the post-penitential Franciscan moment (Chesterton: 38-39), the idea has nevertheless emerged transformed: the result is not a new infancy of the spirit which the adult church must then break to orthodoxy, but a self-liberating rejection of such imposed authority through the personally-mediated claim to a higher. As Sabatier wrote of Francis's 'Will' of 1226, this is a humility, which

wherever his mission is concerned, speaks with tranquil and serene assurance....The genesis of his thought here shows itself to be at once wholly divine and entirely personal. The individual conscience here proclaims its sovereign authority. 'No one showed me what I ought to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I ought to live conformably to his holy gospel'. (Sabatier: 334).

In keeping with Francis's rejection of and by the institutional centre, the poem's embracing of 'failure and the failure of others', which Griffith speaks of as Francis's individual model of 'self-liberation', necessarily operates by means of a critique of the social failure of various powerful discourses. The Franciscan vision to which each of Webb's speakers testifies is specifically the 'undoing' of an imperialist and colonialist mentality:

Praise be to thee, my Lord, for, our mother the Earth, which sustains us, nourishes us, and brings forth many-coloured herbs and flowers and every kind of fruit.

THE FATHER

Continents I claimed and charted against the Last Day
But to no avail: the needle-prows of a schism
Tormented my fabric, that dawn's riding-light
Concluded a treaty with urgent darkness,
Marrying my hand to the metal without law—
Creator declared journeyman of undoing.

....

But again one obstinate loitering thread
From dead twilight fibres coaxes a sun.
A continent is unbound,
Still of my fibres, but of countless fibres,
Still of my limits, but not of the mapping-pen's,
Still of my trademark,—but of daylight and vine.

The saint, now both 'sun'/Christ and 'man'/Pietro Bernadone's 'son',¹⁵ is refigured here metaphorically as a different centre of consciousness, around which the 'unbound' claims and 'limits'—patriarchal, territorial, mercantile—of the official centre are drawn into rays of new light, fibres of new text. In its radically personal form, the effect is not to transcend the local scene and its problems through an appeal to universal ('Catholic') authority, but to re-socialise it, for those who resist the old authoritarian mentality—political, economic, military and religious. Webb's modernist poetic, de-familiarising both medieval Assisi and contemporary Australia, is the means and the model of this re-vision and resistance. The Jongleur praises 'Time's gallant refusal to clear his throat/Before the old stories, the old omissions.' The alienated Knight, who has glimpsed 'sometimes, perhaps, the Centre—but rather as a face/Among the circling faces', at last dismounts and sees 'the many faces come closer:/When I was looking down, these were looking upward'.

There is no ensuing celebration of Francis triumphant. The concluding Part IV of 'The Canticle' locates the Franciscan spirit only within a minimal community, small and politically powerless (female or aged). There are four speakers, each of them alone, —'The Mother', 'The Companion', 'St. Clare' and 'The Sun'—a group which continues to suggest Sabatier's radical Francis,¹⁶ rather than Chesterton's apology for the 'central and orthodox' Franciscanism which operated under papal approval.¹⁷ Part IV begins with an epigraph taken from Bernadino of Siena, in which the saint is compared directly to Christ,¹⁸ but Webb sees this Christ as the Man of Sorrows. The Francis around which these isolate voices cohere is the marginalised figure of the last years, whose stigmata designate one 'despised and rejected'. Webb's emphasis on this wounded, human figure, whilst it employs common Christian motifs, refuses to subordinate the mortal sphere. Francis' 'resurrection', one might even say, is to live on in others' actions and consciousness:

THE MOTHER
I watch him again tonight,
One sure star there;
He is never out of sight

¹⁵ The doctrinal basis here is that of the 'dual nature' of Christ, fully divine and fully human.

¹⁶ See Sabatier: Chapters 19, 20, also 338, 446: In his Will, Francis forbade his followers to ask for papal indulgences.

¹⁷ Chesterton: 186. See, by contrast, Sabatier's attack on the Basilica di San Francesco: 345: 'Go and look upon it, proud, rich, powerful, then go down to Portiuncula, pass over to St. Damian, hasten to the Carceri, and you will understand the abyss that separates the ideal of Francis from that of the pontiff who canonised him'. This view is echoed, a little more discreetly, by Engleburt in the concluding sentence of *Saint Francis*: 314: 'And it is in this grandiose monument, so little like him, that we continue to venerate his dust'.

¹⁸ The term *Alter Christus* has also been applied to Francis in modern times, by Pope Pius XI.

Whatever fortune tinges
Breath and air.
Not from a golden breast
He drank, but it is consoled
Now; for its east-to-west
—So my colour changes—
Drinks of his faithful gold.

Webb's choice of speakers is also politically significant. Francis's mother figures in the legends as disobeying her husband's authority in order to free her son from house imprisonment (Karrer: 11); the 'Companion' reminds us of the long-suppressed 'Legend of the Three Companions' which relates those early years.¹⁹ St. Clare's special image of liberation and resurrection is 'The Door of the Dead', the exit for corpses through which she miraculously escaped from her own father's house to join Francis, according to legend (Karrer: 60-61). It was while visiting S. Damiano, St. Clare's religious establishment, that Francis composed 'The Canticle of the Sun', but his residence there caused scandal and was against Pope Gregory IX's direct command (Sabatier: 164-65). Webb re-constitutes this little group around the mortal Francis as an alternative, de-institutionalised congregation of the 'faithful', members of what Sabatier had called 'the spiritual priesthood'. The poem ends quietly with their voices.

III

I shall return briefly here to issues raised earlier in this essay, where I posited 'The Canticle' as a site of interaction between the modern and the medieval under Australian conditions. It should be clear that for all Webb's energy in adapting St. Francis to his particular vision, this one poem is not evidence that there is an important 'inheritance' or a crucial 'relevance' in Australia's contact with the middle ages. In any case, both medieval and Australian cultures, including Australian Catholic cultures, are too diverse for such an idea to be meaningful. There is no single homogeneous 'middle ages', nor even a single Australian 'middle ages'. As I hope to have shown, even a single strand, Franciscanism, can receive very different ideological formations. But although 'The Canticle' does not define the Australianness of the medieval, it is still, I would say, one instance of the potential permeability, or malleability, of the distinctions 'Australian'/'European' and 'modern'/'medieval' at particular historical moments. It shows, at least, that medieval and modern have been made to matter to each other in Australia.

As I read it, Webb's St. Francis *was* 'both European and not European', in Docker's phrase: he came accompanied by 'universal', indeed 'Catholic', claims, and it is clear that Catholicism was the driving force behind the interest in him, yet he could still be abrogated as partisan and local (Ashcroft: 29-30). Webb encountered a St. Francis (Chesterton's) who could be claimed for the conservative

¹⁹ See Karrer: viii, 1-3 for a discussion of the actual authorship of this legend.

centre, but, writing from the margin, he celebrated one from the margin. Whilst Webb's vision is highly personal, he obviously apprehended the medieval story as saturated with historical implications, and as one that required him to address his contemporary surroundings in representing it. To other Australians who ponder the European past, his work offers encouragement towards greater consciousness of the historical and cultural location of their own practice.

In terms of the slow reception of Webb's work in Australia, 'The Canticle' also shows, I think, that we need to breach 'the wall' and investigate a fairly broad range of cultural reference in order to engage more closely with this poetry and articulate its specificity. Webb's Catholic culture, as Ashcroft has said, was both 'committed and erudite' and 'European' (Ashcroft: 3). If that is so, it means that in learning to know Webb better as an Australian poet, readers must sometimes make far-ranging excursions into earlier European tradition and its various local mediations.

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