

CHAPTER 1

Ocean and the Antipodes

Like other settler colonies, Australia has a cultural ethos and national mythology which *appears* indifferent to its indigenous inhabitants, because their origins seem elsewhere and fantastic, even fabulous. However, non-Aboriginal Australian culture also brushes up against the fabulous. Living on the ‘other’ side of the world during a Eurocentric age, all Australians contain the trace of what ancient Aegean geographers called ‘Ocean’ (*Okeanos*), ‘the vast “river” thought to surround the landmass formed by Europe, Africa and Asia’.¹

James Romm described Ocean as ‘a vivid symbol of the gateway or barrier between inner and outer worlds’.² On the inner side, Ocean is the threshold of all that is solid and everyday; on the other outer side, it melts into the primal airy chaos (*apeiron*) of the beyond. While stories of limitless waters west of the Pillars of Heracles (Gibraltar) provided an actual basis for the ancient Greek idea of Ocean, its function was to conceptually secure an identity, a sense of self and place. For this reason some ancient writers, such as the much travelled and world-wise Herodotus, doubted its actual existence. However, the idea remained integral to classical geography, for it provided the symbolic means of imagining identity by making place an emblem of the self. It is, for example, evident in Ptolemy’s maps, which depict the known world surrounded by ocean. If, after Plato,³ Ptolemy imagined a large land mass on the other side of Ocean, it was an emblem of the unknown, of the non-identical. Thus Ptolemy named it *terra incognita*, a theoretical land which, at least since late Roman times, has also been called the Antipodes.

According to Yuri Lotman, ‘every culture’ divides ‘the world into “its own” internal space and “their” external space’ – it is ‘one of the human cultural universals’. Lotman’s boundaries are for crossing, they are

fertile luxuriant sites, a hybrid zone of multiple translations in which 'new information ... snowballs'.⁴ However, in its original conception, Ocean could not be crossed. It was the ultimate border that fenced off an absolute other that was untranslatable. If, as Romm says, in Ocean's watery substance land and air 'break down' into 'a murky undifferentiated welter of elements',⁵ it is not a hybrid zone, not a middle dialogical space in which differences are preserved and reconstituted. Rather, Ocean circulates at the ends of the earth where all the old antinomies are washed around until, at the outer edge, they break down into a primeval ether without difference. Ocean as threshold is a premonition of what Luce Irigaray called 'the immemorial inauterine abode', of what Jacques Derrida described as the 'radical trembling [that] can only come from the *outside*',⁶ and of what Freud called the uncanny. Ocean is the gateway to the imaginary, to the (pre-) origin and limit of identity where, 'submerged in . . . astonishment, wonder, and sometimes terror before that which surrounds it', we are 'returned to the evanescence of subject and object', 'to the lifting of all schemas by which the other is defined' (Irigaray).⁷

In its original conception, Ocean was a fearful place to be avoided. Even though the experiences of Greek colonialism eventually resulted in speculation about either a utopia or dystopia across this watery divide, Ocean remained a site of anxiety. However, within its terror was glimpsed the possibility of salvation. Following the ambitious expansions of Hellenistic and Roman times, Ocean was even made the site of sublime emotions.⁸ In the fifteenth century this ancient figure of fabulousness was revived by Portuguese and Spanish powers. Columbus believed that the Atlantic might, like the Aegean Sea, also be a 'watery divide between Europe and Asia'.⁹ Soon the Pacific and the possibility of a fabulous Antipodes, or *terra incognita*, also figured in this yearning. Reporting in 1503 on his third voyage to South America, Amerigo Vespucci asserted: 'I found myself in the Antipodes . . . often I believe myself to be in paradise'.¹⁰ Over the next few centuries, the Antipodes, *terra Australis* and Magallanica, as it was variously called by Europeans, was envisaged as a huge antarctic continent which almost touched the southern points of America and Asia (at Java). 'Never before', said Romm, 'had ancient geography seemed so potent, nor had fictional literature seemed so pregnant with truth'.¹¹

No matter how imaginary its origins, during the colonial period Ocean was objectified as a real ocean across which real people sailed. This mixing of reality with the imaginary was a potent alchemic brew which, for many, promised salvation and gold. In Oceania, Europeans fervently hoped, was a great austral land with untold riches. However, they discovered death, not gold. Ocean prevailed.

When, on 15 (or 27) September 1513, Vasco Nunez de Balboa ascended the heights of the isthmus of Darien in the New World and gazed westwards, he was the first European to spy the Pacific ocean. Believing he had discovered the fabled South Seas, no doubt he followed the custom of his times and looked skywards to ask for God's blessing and providence. But instead a curse descended upon him and those who repeated his gaze. Dying a few years later at the hands of a jealous rival, he did not live to hear of the incredible voyage by Ferdinand Magellan, and of its terrible fate. Magellan entered the South Seas after violently suppressing mutineers who balked at travelling any further from home. Perhaps their cries were a warning. He may have named this vast watery expanse the 'Pacific', but the peace he found there was not what he had imagined. Its inhabitants murdered him. Along with nearly all his crew, Magellan never made it home.

However, the lure of Oceania stilled all fears. The Portuguese came from the east and the Spanish from the west. In 1521, the year Magellan was killed, the Portuguese Cristóvão de Mendonça disappeared while searching for the austral 'Isles of Gold'. In 1537 Cortés dispatched two ships from Mexico to find the 'Isles of Gold' and *terra Australis*. After mutiny the ships were lost off New Guinea. If, over two hundred years later, French and English sea captains continued to pursue what Lancelot Voisin had called in 1583 'the third world', 'a situation wonderful in its pleasures, riches and other commodities of life',¹² the Pacific paradise reflected in their dreaming eyes was a fatal shore.

Death, after all, lurks in the garden. William Hodges knew this. In his paintings of Tahiti, the centre of the Enlightenment's utopian longing, paradise is already lost in its picturing. The serene, golden light and lazy ambience of Hodges' Tahitian sketches are suffused with a languorous melancholy that evokes a sense of loss and portent. This is also the principal theme of his larger, more traditionally composed paintings, done afterwards to commemorate the ethical scope of Cook's second voyage to the Pacific. *Monuments of Easter Island* (c. 1775), with its skull and bones in the foreground of menacing shadows, is a prophetic vision of Cook's own fate. In the Pacific, Bernard Smith persuasively argued, the European pastoral tradition first entered the dark night of romanticism.¹³

And the sun still has not risen. The non-European world is still a place upon which Westerners, including many who live in the Americas, Australia and the Pacific, project their desires and fears. Ocean has not ebbed. For example, the French poststructuralist, Jean Baudrillard, construes the 'original situation' of the USA as one which fundamentally lacks originality. 'America' has 'no origins', 'no past and no founding truth', but 'lives in perpetual simulation'. 'From the outset, from the

very dawn of their history', the USA was like Ocean: 'a culture of mixing, of national and racial mix, of rivalry and heterogeneity', its 'soft-mobile' 'networks and soft technologies' exhausting themselves 'in surfaces'. Consequently, 'America has no identity problem'. Like Japan, 'which to a certain extent has pulled off this trick better than the US itself', it too transforms 'the power of territorials' into that of 'deterritoriality and weightlessness'. If Baudrillard envies the USA its 'spatial, mobile' freedom set loose from the 'historical centrality' of Europe, this freedom is a witless, naive, mindless place, an endless space of collapsed binaries, a 'sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality'¹⁴ – in Baudrillard's word, a 'desert'. Here *America* is, like Ocean, a metaphor of absence used by Baudrillard to write about the presence of being European. Such metaphors still resound in Australian art criticism. For example, Edward Colless, who for some time has been enamoured by his melancholic abode in Hobart, wrote in 1993 that here 'art depends on a response to Tasmania as an antipodal limit where one's world borders on something unformed, illegible and intractable; an isolated outpost, if not frontier'.¹⁵ It is a view which has resonated in the ideas about 'Australia' for over 2000 years. The wild currents of river Ocean brought Englishmen to 'Botany Bay' over 200 years ago, but the myth of Ocean has not diminished.

If 'Botany Bay' sounds like another Pacific paradise, Joseph Banks recommended its golden meadows and fish-filled waters to the English government as an ideal site for a prison. Not that Banks envisaged Botany Bay as a place where the melancholic souls of criminals could be soothed in bucolic surroundings. Rather, it was a site where they might subsist without undue burden to Britain. More importantly, the English wanted an ocean and more between the fair fields of England and 'Botany Bay'. And this they got. To get there, the First Fleet sailed across all the oceans, the Atlantic, the Indian, the Southern, and then, on the final leg, into the Pacific. Robert Hughes quipped that if the Pacific was the cradle of eighteenth-century European utopianism, in Australia there was 'not Utopia, but Dystopia; not Rousseau's natural man moving in moral grace amid free social contracts, but man coerced, exiled, deracinated, in chains'.¹⁶ However, I will argue that the difference between utopia and dystopia is not what it seems. Certainly the English were uncertain which they had created. If Botany Bay was envisaged by its planners as a dystopia, as early as 1786 Alexander Dalrymple suggested that transportation to 'Botany Bay' might be a salubrious environment for the convict. He was not thinking of penal reform, but fearing that it 'will incite [English] men to become *Convicts*'.¹⁷

The irony that a land of thieves might be a place where the condemned could grow rich and free, a sort of Cockaigne (or antipodean)

utopia where traditional values were upturned, was a popular theme in nineteenth-century English literature – and indeed, entertained the popular imagination from the time the plan to make a prison in ‘Botany Bay’ was first announced.¹⁸ Such ideas were increasingly popularised in the nineteenth century. In 1827 Peter Cunningham reported that the children of convicts grew up in Australia ‘tall and slender’, ‘little tainted with the vices so prominent among their parents’.¹⁹ Cunningham’s point was that the ‘tyranny of distance’ is also a freedom. The oceans which guarantee both have always stood between Australia and its imperial genealogy, as if the ocean, not England, was Australia’s origin. And when Britain no longer ruled the waves, Australia quickly switched allegiance to those who now did.

If Ocean is no place, in practice it is a threshold between landfalls. Even Aphrodite, the goddess born of the Ocean after being nurtured in the foam of Uranus’s castrated testicles flung to the sea, is washed back to the beach. Yet, if Australia, like Aphrodite, was born of salt and foam, and if most Australians obsessively hug the sandy coastline and play amongst its waves, the beach appears rarely in their dominant mythologies of pioneer settlement and bush. In Adam Lindsay Gordon’s poetry, the first to be considered distinctly Australian, the ocean is a melancholy place, with the beach conjuring memories of shipwrecks and death – as was the fashion during the colonial era. If, contrary to this, Australia’s golden beaches have for the last 100 years been figured as an austral Eden, deadly sharks and stingers still patrol its waters, and lifesavers its sands. Ocean is a figure of the unconscious; it is displaced in the littoral flotsam which constitute the icons of Australian pleasures; it is condensed as an emblem of the tyranny of distance which marks the odyssey of Australian identity; and it is interiorised in the Australian psyche as the mythological inland sea, now the red Centre which waters the Australian imagination. The ocean may figure little in Australia’s formative myths of nationhood, but these myths run over with an oceanic feeling: stories of death and loss, in which the land is more like an ocean to be sailed than a soil in which things take root or a rock on which homes are built. As explorers headed inland on their camels, horses and mules they carried boats. What is repressed here?

Australia’s oceanic origins do not literally return us to the sea, but to a repressed genealogy which has taken refuge in the unconsciousness of a nation. Freud described the ‘oceanic’ feeling as a sublime emotion – a ‘sensation of “eternity” ... of something limitless, unbounded’,²⁰ and argued that as common as it might be in the religious longings of humankind, it was fundamentally pathological in nature. Oceanic feelings are defensive mechanisms that, in the wake of a weakened or traumatised symbolic order, revive memories of the mother’s nurturing

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Excerpt

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body which, in Elizabeth Grosz's words, is etched like a "watermark" ... on the child's body'.²¹

The non-Aboriginal Australian subject is launched upon a sea of repressions. Its origins are not the physical hardship of sea travel, but the psychological trauma of leaving home. While initially lost in the diaspora of Ocean, once in Australia the immigrant is overtaken by the desire for indigency. But the desire is not easily satisfied. The migrants' yearnings barely escaped their oceanic fate. There were no European or pilgrim fathers here, no ready-made oedipal triangle, only convicts, Aborigines and what seemed an unforgiving land. Captain Arthur Phillip sensed this even prior to arriving in New South Wales. 'I would not wish', he wrote, 'convicts to lay the foundation of an empire'. 'There can be no slavery in a free land, and consequently no slaves.'²² In 1836 Charles Darwin confirmed Phillip's fears, diagnosing a topsy-turvy politics of identity which made convicts 'outwardly honest', 'converting vagabonds, most useless in one hemisphere into active citizens of another, and thus giving birth to a new and splendid country – a grand centre of civilisation'. Darwin's point was that this sham redemption only condemned Australians to exile, to a vagabond and oceanic descent. In other words, Darwin pronounced it an Antipodes. He judged the new colony's prosperity a facade, and 'any real sense of reform' there a failure, with the possibility of 'any moral reform' being 'quite out of the question'.²³

Australia's antipodality is a sign of its oceanic origins. Like Ocean, the Antipodean never *becomes*, never *is*, but is condemned to a perpetual *becoming*,²⁴ a constitutional rootlessness and mobility, an 'in-betweenness'. But Australians are ordinary people. Most of them do not seek oceans to traverse, or fabulous quests, but only a destination, a place. Like all on the advent of subjectivity, Australians yearn to escape their watery origins and simply *be*. They want to arrive, to possess their own subjectivity, their own wealth, their own home.

While all the evidence suggests that Australia is a nation long-divided on the question of origin and identity, one must be careful not to mythologise this restless ambivalence as a unique mark of Australian-ness. The anxiety which supposedly characterises Australians is a manifestation of a more general anxiety of being – an anxiety which, said Derrida, will never be expelled. The moment of one's birth, of one's 'nameable identity' is never recoverable because, says Derrida, culture arranges it this way. 'Identification is a difference to itself, a difference with/of itself.' For Derrida, a male of Jewish heritage, this difference is symbolised by circumcision – the 'signature' of an 'other' forever written on his penis. His scarred penis is his ticket into a community or social identity. The scar witnesses an 'ineffaceable alliance: birth of the subject ... rather than biological birth'.²⁵

The scar Australians bear is antipodality, of having an identity founded in negativity rather than positivity, in migration rather than indigeneity. However, the anxiety of being antipodean is Western. Like Australians, Europeans also are not simply 'the accretion of indigenous material';²⁶ they, too, bristle with historical differences, both in terms of their many homelands (Irish, Basques, Serbs), and the postcolonial traffic of large-scale migrations that continue today. Second, the very homelessness which characterises the Australian (and colonial) condition is also the defining historical experience of Europeanness – or what Europeans call 'modernity'. Thus, while it has been usual to regard European modernity as the author of colonialism, the tropes of modernism and colonialism as they were played out in Australia during the last 200 years are difficult to disentangle. Both exhibit the same epistemological characteristics: nomadism, alienation and obsessive concern with their own historicity, origin and purity. What Michel Foucault said of European modernity was first expressed in colonialist art and writing: even 'words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things', 'the being of language itself became, as it were, fragmented', so that there was a 'dispersion of language', and a 'disappearance of discourse'.²⁷ Ocean is in their blood.

Australia in particular was a site of such disappearance, a vanguard of fragmentation. What is the modernist *flâneur* if not a type of exile, someone who seeks redemption in the oceania of alienation? In this respect Australia is an ideal site for modernists seeking subversive and liberatory texts. Perhaps, in being cast to the ocean, the ideological cement of the Old World was loosened and the very structures and semiological basis of identity were glimpsed. Lotman, whose work on the function of boundaries shows 'the processes whereby the periphery of culture moves into the centre', argues that 'in the frontier areas semiotic processes are intensified because here there are constant invasions from outside'. It 'is a place of incessant dialogue ... there is a constant exchange, a search for a common language, a *kione*, and of creolised semiotic systems'.²⁸ Perhaps the history of non-Aboriginal Australian painting exposes, in its upturning and reinvention of a Western identity in the antipodes, the very structures of semiological exchange which stage identity. However, if in deconstructing Australia we do uncover the semiological differences which define European identity, I argue that this deconstruction is also an affirmation which repeats European projections of identity and alterity. This was evident from day one. Paul Carter observed that as soon as the First Fleet dropped anchor in Botany Bay, it had to move on in order to maintain an Antipodes in the Antipodes. 'It was', argued Carter, 'precisely by removing from Botany Bay that [Captain Arthur] Phillip constituted

Botany Bay as a place, the first “other” place in the colony. It was in terms of, and in contrast with, this other place that Sydney Cove (and the authority of Phillip) was now, for the first time, defined.²⁹ That is, Phillip constituted Sydney Cove as an English place by keeping Botany Bay as the site of the other – as an anti-site. Between Botany Bay and Sydney was an ocean – or as Watkin Tench ironically called it in his early narrative of the penal colony, a ‘road’. There is, says Carter, a certain pathos in Tench’s road. If he longed for roads which, ‘like the highway of reason’, would order this antipodean space, the road to Botany Bay was more like the ocean, a palimpsest of rough watery tracks, ‘all thick, low woods or shrubberies, barren heaths, and swamps’, and it would only be navigable by intimates of its ways.

If the road to Botany Bay seemed to the newly arrived colonists like Ocean, there was an actual road consisting of Aboriginal tracks. ‘The road to Botany Bay’ said Carter, ‘leads back not only to the world of the convicts but also to Australia’s first inhabitants, the Aborigines’.³⁰ Botany Bay, which, according to Tench, comprised an Aboriginal settlement of perhaps sixty people, and was the meeting place of hundreds of Aborigines, was also the first other of Australia. To this day, Botany Bay remains a colloquial term for the penal colony as opposed to the free colony of Sydney, as if these two colonies in one had to be symbolically cleaved. Thus, Sydney quickly built its own penal colony at Norfolk Island, and then in Tasmania which, in turn, built its infamous hell on the west coast of the island, now the site of a Green Arcadia. And the creation of oceans was not stopped, as if once having successfully crossed Ocean, the European invaders had to preserve a space of absolute otherness within the continent. We see it in their conceptions of the inland sea, of an Empty Land and the Dead Heart of the Centre. In 1941, after 450 years of unparalleled global conquest by Europe, Charles Barrett, the Australian frontier journalist, could not see how civilisation, or history, would ever reach into the ‘wildest corners of the Untamed Territory’: ‘white men have ventured, alone, into Arnhem Land, and never been heard of again’.³¹ In this respect, Australian culture constructs within its very centre an absolute alterity that stubbornly refuses Lotman’s idealised border exchanges as redemptive spaces. In their refusal, in their stubborn antipodality, Australians preserve their origins as European. To be an Antipodean in Australia is to be a European.

Being Antipodean in Australia

Australian subjectivity is founded on age-old Western figures of otherness – the most significant being the notions of the Antipodes and an

austral utopia. This gives Australians a perverse claim to being European. Indeed, a common strategy of Australians who fear their perverse origins is to read the metaphors of an Antipodes and a southern utopia back into classical texts as evidence of an early Greek interest in Australia, as if this guarantees a golden genealogy. According to Arnold Wood (1922), the discovery of Australia ‘may begin in a Greek Utopia written by an author named Theopompous about 350 BC’, who envisaged a ‘Utopia of the South’:

‘certain islands named Europa, Asia, and Libia, which the Ocean sea circumscribeth and compasseth round about; and that without this world there is a continent or parcel of dry land which in greatness is infinite and immeasurable’; and he told of its ‘green meadows and pasture plots’, its ‘big and mighty beasts’, its gigantic men, ... its ‘many and divers cities, its laws and ordinances clean contrary to ours’.³²

Sixty years later, J. W. Johnson suggested that the origins of ‘Australia’ (as an idea) could be traced to classical sources:

It is strikingly apparent that from Homer on, writers most often turned toward the south to seek the sweet golden climes ... We can find in both the Iliad and Odyssey the precarious balance between the Doric Greek nostalgia for the harsh, demanding life of the past in the north and a yearning for a promising future life in the south ... Homer himself succumbed to the appeal of a remote southern land where perfection might well exist. The land, of course, was Ethiopia, a country geographically real but sufficiently fabled to qualify it as a true utopia.³³

In this way, Australia is no longer an ocean but is rooted in an heroic classical descent which mitigates, even exonerates the banality and horrors of its colonial origins.

The supposed classical descent of Australia, a mythology which pays scant attention to the actual aspirations of ancient Greeks, is the work of imperial historians who *forget* that neo-classicism was marshalled during the colonial era in the context of the imperatives and ambitions of the epoch of European colonialism (that is, since 1500), not antiquity. Like most genealogies, it is retrospective and fictitious. The Europeans who came to Australia may have imbued the Australian landscape with their education in the classics; but it was an appropriated classicism framed within an Enlightenment epistemology, not the classicism of antiquity. Indeed, the ‘austral’ trope did not enter Western discourses until the Renaissance period, its supposed privileged place in the classical imagination being wishful thinking on the part of Australian imperial historians. If the ancient Greek imagination located

fabulous and paradisaical communities over the horizon, it showed no preference for southern regions. Hesoid's Golden Age and the Blessed Isles were located nowhere in particular. Odyssey journeyed to both paradisaical and hellish places in a westerly direction, and Plato's fabled *Atlantis* was also situated in the west. Some of the oldest Greek accounts locate paradisaical places to the north.³⁴ The south was not absent from the early Greek imagination which, in its original Homeric form, envisaged the inner known world as a circular disc divided into northern (Europe) and southern (Asia and Africa) regions of equal sizes, with the south being the site of most fabulous creatures, including those with inverted feet. However, neither Asia or Africa were *terra incognita*, that mythical outer continent beyond the encircling ocean from whence *terra Australis* derives.

If the idea of a distant paradise was a significant concept in antiquity, that of a marvellous southern land was not. Theopompous's story (related by Wood above) is just one of what Frank and Fritzie Manuel called a 'large body of Hellenistic novel utopias'³⁵ whose sources are ancient myths of paradise and the Golden Age. Theopompous followed an age-old tradition that imagined a nether-continent beyond the seas which fenced the world of islands; just as Plato spoke of that 'opposite continent, which encircles the true outer Ocean' and to which, he said, seafarers from Atlantis could make 'their way' (*Timeaus* 24e–25a). This 'opposite continent' was antipodal, not southern. It lay 'without this world'. Being over the horizon it encircled 'the Ocean sea [which] circumscribeth and compasseth round about the globe'; an outer periphery of a centred cosmos 'which in greatness is infinite and immeasurable' (Theopompous). Even when Aristotle's speculation of a southern inaccessible hemisphere antipodal to the northern hemisphere entered general geographical discourse, antipodality rather than southernness was the main interest.³⁶ The Roman geographer, Ptolemy, called it *terra incognita*, and in his maps it wrapped around the outer edge of the globe. Hence, this opposite continent was, in all respects, a geographical *frame* for a classical politics of identity. Being an absence it could not be discovered, only imagined.

The great sea voyages of the Renaissance sailors left only one place for this great unknown land, the largely unexplored southern ocean. In Renaissance Ptolemaic maps *terra incognita* is named *terra Australis nondum cognita*, or simply *terra Australis*, an undiscovered land mass whose existence was not dispelled until Cook's second voyage of 1772. Such Renaissance formulations which were in the minds of European explorers who first sought Australia, can not be read back into Theopompous or Ptolemy in order to classicise 'Australia', or to australise the Antipodes.