

Simon West's *The Ladder*: Space and Its Historical Dimension in Italy and in Australia

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Abstract

Simon West's collection of poems *The Ladder* (2015), with its multilayered places, mirrors West's travel to Italy from Australia, his journeying into the Italian past and at the same time his ties with his own country. The focus of the essay is the historical dimension of space in West's poems. The images of Italian and Australian places, both landscapes and cityscapes, evoke forms through which Italian and Australian nature and culture declare their presence through multiple layers of time. The poems deal with the relationship between past and space, the movement between past and present, and between the physical and the metaphysical. In the evocations of such crossings Australia and Italy meet in an in-between space that the reader is invited to share.

Keywords: *Australian poetry, historical dimension of space, in betweenness, Italy and Australia*

1. Simon West and the Australian Travel to Italy

For centuries Italy has been a fabled, greatly anticipated destination for pilgrims and travellers of every kind. In the nineteenth century, affluent travellers from Australia added to the flow of visitors that for centuries had journeyed to Italy. We have already offered a periodisation of Australian travel to Italy which, after the three by now widely-recognised phases, envisaged the emergence of a fourth one (Trape 2011, 1-17; 165-169).

In the first phase, ending by the 1890s, Britain was the longed-for goal of the trip and the continental tour was a popular addition; in the second phase, lasting from the 1890s up to the 1950s, the number of Australians going "overseas" increased, due to the rapid demographic and economic growth of Australia and the rise of a prosperous middle class. At the beginning of the 1950s, a new stage began in Australian travel to Italy, characterised by a consistent increase in the number of travellers; among them was a notable number of writers, painters and intellectuals, who were rejecting and fleeing from an

overwhelmingly Anglophile and conservative Australia¹. Their Italianate works “project traditional British images of Italy as well as images that correspond to the new awareness of Australia’s European cultural roots in the nineteen-fifties, as expressed in A.D. Hope’s ‘A Letter from Rome’” (Bader 1992, 277):

The source is Italy, and hers is Rome
The *fons* and *origo* of Western man;
[...] Here the great venture of the heart began.
Here simply with a sense of coming home
I have returned with no explicit plan
 [...] to find
Something once dear, long lost and left behind.
(Hope 1966 [1958], 129)

In this third phase, a powerful recognition of Italy as the source of Western European culture – which was, by default, also Australian culture – generates a longing for return. By choosing to “go overseas” after World War II, Australian artists and writers hoped to escape what they resented as Australia’s remoteness, provincialism, and conformism. When that generation of travellers arrived in Italy, they already possessed a fine knowledge of Italian culture. In Italy they acquired a greater understanding of themselves as human beings, and as writers. For these writers, Italy continued to be the source of an aesthetic experience not to be found anywhere else. Jeffrey Smart and Shirley Hazzard can be considered two of the major representatives of this Australian attitude toward Italy.

The 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s saw other writers and artists significantly affected by their journeys in Italy². In 1989 Gaetano Prampolini and Marie-Christine Hubert organised the conference “An Antipodean Connection: Australian Writers, Artists and Travellers in Tuscany” in Florence. This event

¹ Martin Boyd (1893-1972), A.D. Hope (1907-2000), Morris West (1916-1999), Shirley Hazzard (b. 1931) and David Malouf (b. 1934) travelled to or resided in Italy since the 1950s. Having moved to London in 1951, Peter Porter (1929-2010) also travelled to Italy in the 1960s and continued to visit frequently. In 1958 Patrick White was staying in Italy as well.

² At the end of 1964 Jeffrey Smart (1921-2013), widely acclaimed as one of Australia’s greatest painters, moved to Italy, and resided until his death in 2013 in the house he bought in 1971 in Posticcia Nuova, near Cortona. Tom Shapcott (b. 1935), poet, novelist, playwright, librettist and editor, visited Italy for the first time in 1975. Judith Rodriguez (b. 1936) travelled to Italy in the early 1960s as a student, and went back in 1977. Other writers who went to Italy in the 1970s and 1980s are: Janine Burke (b. 1952), the author of *Second Sight* (1986); Leon Trainor (b. 1945), the author of the novel *Livio* (1988); Kate Grenville (b. 1950) who resided in a Tuscan farmhouse where she set her novel *Dreamhouse* (1986); David Foster (1944) who, inspired by his first visit to Venice in 1986, wrote the comic novel *Testostero* (1987); poet Diane Fahey (b. 1945); Peter Robb (b. 1946), who travelled to Italy in 1974, returned in 1978 and lived in Naples for almost fifteen years.

foregrounded the literary connections between Australia and Italy, and more specifically Tuscany. It represented a pioneering treatment of the theme of “Australians in Italy”, while also marking a peak in the cultural relations between these two countries.

Although Australian writers and artists kept visiting Italy in the 1990s, and continue to do so in the twenty-first century, they no longer represent the major component of the flow of visitors from Australia. However, their Italianate writings continue to witness their interest in and attraction to Italy³. These writers do not necessarily consider the country as the dreamed-of goal of a pilgrimage to discover their roots, nor do they see it as the final destination in an attempt to re-connect with “the source” of Australian culture. In contemporary Australian poetry, irony is used to create a critical distance from the past and from European traditions, which are rejected and even spurned⁴. The image of Italy that emerges from these works is starkly different from that which prevailed in previous writing⁵. So different, indeed, that one is led to see the Australian writing published from the 1990s onwards as constituting the beginning of a new – a fourth – phase.

Of the many possible causes for this change of attitude in the Australians' relationship with Italy, a doubtlessly important one, although less immediately evident than others, can be identified in the changes in curricular studies that were introduced in the Australian school system around the second half of the 1950s. Up to the mid-1940s, the influence of Great Britain over Australia was still strong enough to inform the aims of Australia's educational system: one of these was that no literate Australian should go without some awareness of Australia's European cultural roots. Accordingly, room was reserved for the study of classical antiquity and the subsequent Western cultural tradition,

³ From the beginning of the 1990s onwards there has been a sizeable output of books set in or having to do with Italy: novels by Paul Carter (*Baroque Memories*, 1994) and Robert Dessaix (*Night Letters*, 1996); David Malouf's short story “Around Midnight” (in *Every Move You Make*, 2007), but also Jeffrey Smart's autobiography (*Not Quite Straight*, 1996); Peter Robb's *Midnight in Sicily* (1996), *M* (1998) and *Street Fight in Naples* (2010); Shirley Hazzard's *Greene on Capri, A Memoir* (2000) and *The Ancient Shore: Dispatches from Naples* (2008). In the same period there has been a spate of best sellers mainly by Australian journalists who have spent time in Italy. Basically meant to serve as guidebooks for tourists, these works focus on the pleasures of living in Italy, whether they are describing Italian life in a village in Tuscany or Umbria or in one of the main Italian cities; their favourite topics are love, food, and wine.

⁴ It is so, for instance, in John Forbes' poem “Admonition”: “Be still, my beating heart, & you, body / Don't go banging into that tree – / The one the girl turned into, back / When the gods were like they are / In the Collected Poems of A.D. Hope. / & arms stop waving and legs don't dance / A Fitzroy version of ‘Picture This’. / Consider instead this cool Melbourne / Morning & the iconic self it suggests; / [...] / That's Grace enough this mild autumn day, so / Like I say, Oh palpitations, go away!” (2001, 181).

⁵ See the chapters dedicated to Robert Dessaix and Peter Robb in Trapè (2011, 71-164).

and – needless to say – this made a very good preparation for the would-be traveller to Italy. In the 1950s, radical revisions began to be made in the Australian school system. Also owing to the post-World War II influx of large numbers of immigrants from all over the world, a new emphasis on Australian studies shifted interest away from British and classical subjects such as Latin and Ancient History. The dream of an Arcadia that had once charmed older generations of Australian writers and artists was no longer being kindled by studies of mythology or classical texts in the schools.

However, Italian experiences continue to have vital repercussions on the work of contemporary Australian writers such as Robert Dessaix, Peter Robb, Paul Carter, and Michelle de Kretser.

What place does Simon West have in the tradition of Australian travel to Italy, and how does he relate to his predecessors? West mediates between the third and the new phase of Australian travel to Italy, stressing the importance of referring to and also struggling with the past in order to transform its heritage into new forms of art. West thinks that Australian contemporary poets do have strong ties to European traditions: “we cannot help but avoid them if we write in English. Our language, our tropes, our aesthetic sensibilities are all tied up with that inheritance”⁶. He believes that it is a complex inheritance, but also that the weighty presence of the past cannot be ignored.

2. *Simon West's Italy*

West was born in Melbourne in 1974 and grew up in Shepparton, a relatively small town in Victoria. In 1996, while an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne, he decided to take a year off to travel around Europe. Before leaving Australia, West came upon a list of organisations that facilitated voluntary work around the world; he found work in Northern Italy, outside Turin, in one of the *valli valdesi*, the valleys in the Cottian Alps where Waldensians settled in the thirteenth century. This is how Italy became his first destination for the year overseas. Before leaving, having never studied Italian at school, he attended a four-week intensive course in the language at the University of Melbourne. That he “felt an immediate affinity with Italy” is proved by the fact that he ended by spending most of that year there. “I fell in love with the language”, he recalls,

I felt that there was so much to see and to try to understand. This was stronger than the desire to travel to other places. It is difficult to describe, I felt there was a

⁶The information on West's life, career and ideas derive all from an unpublished interview that took place in Turin, on 18 July 2017, which is the source of all of West's statements quoted henceforth. We are grateful to him for granting us the interview as well as for letting us have four unpublished poems (cfr. *infra*).

sense of the historical dimension of space which is visible not only in the cityscapes but also in the landscape, and which I found very appealing. To learn another language was very important to me. I became interested in the way we use language to represent reality and understand ourselves. I was very motivated to learn Italian as well as I could. And I started to explore this different language to express a different aspect of myself. In time I found that through Italian I wanted to reinvent myself to some extent. To learn another language was important also for me as a poet, and important to gain some perspective on my own language. (Trapè 2017)

West points out that having comparatively little awareness of other cultures and languages was typical of his generation in Australia, especially because languages were not taught at school, and the benefits of second language study were widely underappreciated. Furthermore, he grew up in a provincial town in a monolingual context. Australia could be multicultural in the large cities, but it was monocultural in towns such as Shepparton. For these reasons, before 1996 West had had limited interaction with Italy or other cultures, but, once he found himself in Italy, he felt stimulated to study Italian and invest himself in the Italian cultural heritage. Having written poems since he was sixteen, he included in his first book of verse, *First Names* (2006), some of those he wrote during his first stay in Italy.

Back to Australia, West re-enrolled at the University of Melbourne, attending courses in Italian language and literature for two years, before getting a Bachelor of Letters degree in English. Later, he obtained a PhD in Italian Literature. Entitled “È tant’è dritta e simigliante cosa’: Translating the Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti”, his dissertation developed into *The Selected Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti* (2009), a critical edition as well as a translation of the poems included in the selection.

From 2007 to 2010 West was a lecturer in Italian Studies at Monash University. After publishing his second book of poetry *The Yellow Gum’s Conversion* (2011), he was awarded the Australian Council Fellowship as the poet-in-residence at the B.R. Whiting Studio in Rome, where he spent six months in 2012 and wrote some of the poems of *The Ladder* (2015).

At present, West lives in Melbourne, working as a translator, but returns frequently to Italy. He has also been over the years the author of essays and reviews on poetry⁷.

Speaking about the two different environments in which he grew up, the city and the country, West refers to the debate in Australian poetry, which

⁷“Ezra Pound’s Cavalcanti: Fidelity and the Masculine Spirit” (2005); “Translating the Ideal Lady: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Treatment of Guido Cavalcanti” (2008a); “Keep the word translation out of it” (2008b); “Hautes Fenêtres: Thoughts on the Place of Translation in Recent Australian Poetry” (2011); “As if We were God’s Spies: Poetry out of Nothing” (2013); “Australian poetry: Emery, Cahill, McNerney, Leigh Keates” (2017).

since the 1960s and 1970s was built around the dichotomy city-country. West affirms that the time he spent in Italy during his first trip overseas helped him to see the limits of this dichotomy. He was attracted both to cityscape and landscape:

In the country I strongly felt the historical dimension of space. I lived for three months in the Alps. Even in the mountains there is a strong sense of the human presence in the landscape going back centuries, even millennia. Somehow that presence felt more like a coexistence, where the human dwelt within the natural world, and culture had developed organically and locally. Previously I had lived in places where the human and natural world seemed to be in opposition, where culture had been imported wholesale from the other side of the world, while the Australian indigenous communities and the landscape itself had had to make way. The protestant Valdese community I was in touch with during my voluntary work in Italy had a proud history of their presence in the Cottian Alps. In the nearby Val di Susa there were traces of the Roman presence, not only in the arch of Augustus, but in walking paths like the Sentiero dei Franchi, which people had been using for millennia. In the mountains and in the valleys there are walking trails dotted with tabernacles and way-side shrines. (Trapè 2017)

West was also fascinated by the strong tradition of language he found in the mountains. He noticed that different sites in the valleys corresponded to different dialects, and was impressed by the strong sense of local identity and culture – harder to find in Australia.

Another aspect that I found appealing is that the spiritual dimension to life was more visible, tangible in Italy; all the churches in towns and cities, little shrines along the paths. In my experience in Australia this was lacking. I remember I entered one of the churches in Palestrina, and felt overwhelmed by being unable to understand, to read all the symbols – [while] wanting to understand. Churches gave a different dimension to reality. (*Ibidem*)

Profoundly impressed by the millennial history of Italy and enchanted by the language, he felt he had to engage with classical tradition in his creative practice, and so he does in his three books. In “Volatiles”, a poem in *The Yellow Gum's Conversion*, there is a reference to a Sibyl:

Strange for the season, but there it was,
 a cold wind from the south. Dead or insect-
 ravaged leaves were shaken off rivergums
 and whirled hard across a tract where the Goulburn
 opened the bush like a furrow. It pulled me up,
 as if a Sibyl's scattered forecasts
 were there for the grabbing.
 (West 2011, 31)

Following publication, a commentator observed that that classical reference was out of place in today's Australia: as an Italianist and a poet, West has faced indifference and even hostility from members of the Australian literary community. He is fully aware that from the 1960s onwards there has been in Australia a growing pride in creating and celebrating local culture, which influenced school curricula in favor of cultural sources and works that were "home-grown" and new, and that, in time, this growing confidence has sometimes brought about a rejection of the past in favour of "the new" and the use of irony to mark a distance from the past. The poem by John Forbes from which we have quoted the passage where Hope is aggressively dismissed as a representative of the tradition, evidences a rejection shared by other contemporary Australian poets as well. Dissatisfied with the nihilism that underlies this kind of irony, West has reflected on his engagement with Australia's cultural past, namely, the work of previous generations of artists and the sum of Australia's inherited culture and language:

I don't see myself as reacting against this attitude of creating an autochthonous culture. I am foremost an Australian poet, with all the complications that label entails. I believe in the need to root poetry in the local, to help create a literature that grows out of local humus. In this sense I like the idea of being provincial and in touch with place, rather than international and anodine. I am reminded of Patrick Kavanagh who turned parochialism into a positive term by revealing its universality. But at the same time I was skeptical of and I reacted against the idea that in order to create a new culture one has to abandon the previous tradition. This is a superficial understanding of what culture is. I wouldn't consider myself culturally or politically conservative, but I think that a new culture can only be created by engaging with the past. An image that I often use with my students is taken from the *Aeneid*; it is the image of Aeneas's flight from burning Troy. Aeneas takes with him three things: his son, the family gods and his father Anchises, who will serve as a wise counselor to him while making his way toward Italy.

Why does Aeneas take his father? The father is a link with the past. He will be a burden, and indeed Aeneas must shoulder Anchises, but it is a necessary burden. A vital link for any new creation. (Trapè 2017)

In a recently given presentation⁸, West confirmed these views through an effective metaphor: Christine O'Loughlin's sculpture "Cultural Rubble" (1993), incorporated into the facade of the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne, consists of four panels, each representing fragments from European Classical art, made with plaster-like parts that imitate sculpture and architecture and so placed as to block four windows. The artist's intention

⁸ "Empires in a Stanza: Histories and Traditions in Contemporary Australian Poetry" was presented at the 9th Biennial Australasian Centre for Italian Studies (ACIS) conference at Monash Prato Centre in July 2017.

was to have the fragments seem to burst out from the windows to convey a feeling of distance from that past, and indicate that the rooms behind them are being used for contemporary Australian art.

“This act of defenestration”, said West,

is a dramatic enactment of a dynamic which has played a prominent role in twentieth-century literature, the rejection of the past in favour of the new. In this dichotomy our subservience to the past is a hindrance. [Those fragments are] decontextualised and re-incorporated through irony and parody in the multi-vocal surface play of the new art work. I would argue that “Cultural Rubble” exemplifies a widespread attitude to the European cultural heritage by Australian artists and writers – that is as something to throw off or to plunder. I have come to see my own work in opposition to these attitudes. (Trapè 2017)

In trying to find meaningful ways to engage with the past, the aim of his poetry is “to preserve and to make it new”. Unsurprisingly, then, in West’s creative practice the engagement with the Italian poetic tradition, as well as with Greek and Latin cultural models is strong. West does not consider the ties with the past as a subservience, and he sees the engagement with the past as a means of transforming that inheritance into new forms of arts.

As we all know, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T.S. Eliot discussed the idea of tradition in English writing, affirming that when we praise poets there is a tendency to insist upon the poets’ distance from their predecessors. If we, instead, approach poets without this prejudice, we will often find that the most individual aspects of their works may be those in which the dead poets, their ancestors, assert their immortality more vigorously: “[Tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place the historical sense [... which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Eliot 1920 [1919], 43). The difference between the present and the past is that “the conscious present is an awareness of the past”. Poets must develop or acquire the consciousness of the past and they should continue to develop this consciousness throughout.

Such consciousness of the past and the necessity of a historical awareness are clearly manifest in West’s poetry. Premised on a dialectical relationship between past and present, the poems in *The Ladder* pay homage to the past through recognition, recuperation, and adaptation, while also subtly exploring matters of the present world as lived in, and revealing the past.

Characterised by the presence of both the Australian and the Italian landscapes, West’s work is focused on creating new imagery that often presents a powerful juxtaposition of past and present, in Italy as well as in Australia:

The criticism which is often made in reference to that kind of poetry which looks back at the past, the poetry of Hope for example, is that it represents a refusal to face the difficult task of creating a new culture, as if being interested in the past

were a refuge from the present. I'm aware of that dynamic: the past for me is not a refuge from the contemporary world in Australia. My poetry wants to bring those two worlds together. Australia has a much more prominent presence in my more recent work, but I think it's always been there. (Trapè 2017)

West is seeking a balance, in which Italy and Australia, old and new can be in dialogue. Indeed, West's poetry emphasises a twofold attitude towards Italy: the poet is interested in the past as expressed in landscapes and cityscapes; he is also interested in the Italian language and contemporary culture. On arrival in Italy his intense desire to learn the language arose from his interest in the Italian living culture:

For travellers on the Grand Tour, and for many tourists today Rome is primarily a huge museum, whereas for me Italy had this double meaning, the interest in the past, but also in the present. What I find fascinating is also the way contemporary Italy continues to live and to engage with its cultural tradition. The engagement with these past models gives me creative stimulus for my own production and is a means for an understanding of myself. In the past I see archetypes, or manifestations of archetypes, as the story of Aeneas. It interests me as a story, and the way in which through archetypes we re-enact aspects of that story. (*Ibidem*)

The poet's gaze on the past, on its richness, is counterbalanced by a desire to move forwards. "The artistic work, my own creative work is a homage to the past, offerings to my forebears, to the poets of the past, but also a prayer for the children of the future".

In reference to the long tradition of Australian artists and writers taking inspiration from their experience in Italy, we can conclude that, in his fascination with Italian history and the traces it has left in the landscape, West descends from his predecessors of the late 1950s and the 1960s, so deeply fascinated by the Italian cultural heritage. What is peculiar in his poetry is the attempt to keep history and present, the old and the new in a vital relationship.

The insistence on the interrelatedness of past and present unveils West's concern with the relationship between the past and space. A sustained focus of his poetry is the historical dimension of space, in both Italy and Australia. West's images evoke forms through which Italian and Australian nature and culture declare their presence through multiple layers of time – bridges and *tabernacoli* in Italy, gum trees and fences in Australia. The land across which West's eye travels discloses its historical forms, in which time and being are ineluctably unfolding. His excursions into these forms dwell on the effects of time and reveal a "storied land" (Strehlow 1971, 218)⁹. His poetry constitutes

⁹In *Songs of Central Australia* Strehlow found a way to celebrate the conjunctions between Arrernte culture and Homer.

an invitation to read such land with attention and respect, as seeing is not quite the same as looking.

In the poems of *The Ladder* the poet's "travels through time" highlight the crossing between past and present, and also between the physical and the metaphysical. Australia and Italy meet in the movement in-between that constitutes this crossing, and come into contact in a dynamic space that the reader is invited to share.

3. "In-betweenness" in *The Ladder*

The poems in *The Ladder* are characterised by multilayered places, and manifold voices and sounds. It is so that they reflect West's journeying into the Italian past as well his strong ties with his own country.

Taken together, they focus on the natural environment, Italian art, the dimension of space, artistic responsibility, and a fascination with "being in-between". At the heart of the collection are Italian and Australian places, the town of Shepparton and the city of Rome.

Importantly, the image of "the ladder" chosen as the title of the book does not represent a unidirectional movement, but suggests movement both up and down, and also implies the position of being in-between – the inclusion of multiple perspectives. To climb a ladder to a point of height is to gain a wider perspective on the world; to descend a ladder to examine the details is equally revealing. In these poems, West is concerned with putting these two perspectives together and discovering what this double vision can offer. The minute details are as important as the overview.

The image of the ladder also evokes a desire to bring together the physical and the metaphysical. The epigraph of the book is drawn from *Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy), from *Paradiso* XXII, when, after Saint Benedict's speech about Jacob's ladder, Dante and Beatrice are about to ascend to the eighth heaven:

L'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci,
volgendom'io con li eterni Gemelli,
tutta m'apparve da' colli a le foci;
poscia rivolsi li occhi a li occhi
belli.

(Dante 1967, 151-154, 373)

The little threshing-floor which makes us so fierce,
was all revealed to me from hills to river-mouths,
as I circled with the eternal Twins.

Then to the beauteous eyes I turned my eyes
again.

(Trans. by Singleton in Dante 1991 [1975], 255)

In his review of *The Ladder*, Martin Duwell noticed "a fascination with the vertical axis which moves from the under-soil – the word 'humus' kept appearing as a kind of talisman – to the surface of the earth or on to the celestial view, re-enacting Dante's three zones" (2015, n.p.). And this vertical axis is continually at play in West's imagination. Charles Singleton's astute

translation of “aiuola” with “threshing-floor” already hints at a passage between two different worlds¹⁰. Seeing the little human world from a cosmic perspective, as in the quoted passage from *Paradiso*, is also a reminder that everything is seen from somewhere, thereby underlining the importance of a point of view (or lack of it).

The epigraph points to “Speckled World”, a poem which offers a view of the earth from above, whether in a dream or on a transcontinental flight:

By night we sailed over deserts and the lights
of towns clustered against the dark. By day
we crossed waters and wooded lands I could not name.
We pushed against currents, climbing further from colours,
giddy with the clean form of our wings.
I was a passenger, and bowed to dreams
unwinding in frames before us. I might have grown old
amid such images and words. But then
I was taken with *fear* at the thought of drifting so far
I might lose *the smell of soil* on a frosty morning
when the sun refracts through dew on grass blades
and the tops of hills float in a layer of fog.
With longing I looked down on the speckled world
and knew *my betrayal of Gravity* could not last.
She would tug me back once more from this mad *flight*,
and I would return to plot my *Res Gestae* thus –
in my thirty-fifth year, after a long struggle,
I conquered my mistrust of life. [...] ¹¹
(West 2015, 22)

During the flight the loss of the feeling of earth, the fear of losing the smell of its rich humus is experienced with intensity. Focussing back on “the horizontal dimension of this world” (Duwell 2015), many of the poems of *The Ladder* develop into speculations on the nature and the potentialities of this “speckled world”. A word that recurs throughout the collection is “gravity”. “My betrayal of Gravity could not last” expresses the idea that any “mad flight” can only be temporary, that one will be pulled back to the earth by the force of attraction that acts upon all matter and controls the trajectories of all bodies, tugged back to the little “speckled world” one was looking upon “with longing”, back to fortuitous deeds and circumstances, struggling to

¹⁰In 1867 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in his translation of the *Divine Comedy*, rendered “aiuola” as “threshing-floor” for the first time in *Paradiso* XXII and XXXVII (1902, 102; 121). The rendering of “aiuola” as “threshing floor” is found since then in numerous translations, among them Charles Singleton’s; see Scott 2003.

¹¹Henceforth italics in the quoted poems mark our own emphases.

conquer one's "mistrust of life". The poet wishes then that his achievements (his "triumph") might resemble a stream:

[...] May my triumph
resemble a stream whose waters, drawing forward,
catch the light on rippling scales.
(West 2015, 22)

Soon afterwards the image of water is reiterated and conveys the idea of the respect with which different places, where boundaries are porous, must be trespassed:

Henceforth *I will give thanks and wash my hands*
before I wade across such boundaries, or covet
altitudes without the breathlessness
and awe that comes of trudging up a mountain.
(*Ibidem*)

The grateful respect felt while moving between these two dimensions is beautifully expressed through the image of washing hands in the halfway world where the poet lingers. The same idea is in "Outside on a Warm Evening":

[...]
Too restless to abide, I've mostly lingered
round *the threshold* which the senses keep.
Outside there is so much to contemplate.
Some talk of depth and things as they are. Others
see layered surfaces alive with light.
Is it right to hold a tree up like a mirror
as if looking out were a way of looking in?
[...]

In the poetry of mountains and waters
a path meanders through vast landscapes. Sometimes
it is hard to distinguish a man from a cloud or tree.
Here too, I imagine, before *crossing* a stream
it is wise to wash one's hands and offer a prayer
while gazing into the flood. And so the earth
echoes with Hesiod – a Greek from long ago.
Have I made progress? For *a moment*
my lungs billow like curtains. [...]
(West 2015, 20)

A prayer is offered to show respect and gratitude in recognition of the nourishment tradition yields for growth in the present.

The Ladder opens with "Roman Bridges". The image of the bridge is of something that manages to defy gravity and maintain its existence for a time. As a

symbol, it conveys the idea of crossing and in-betweenness. The theme of crossing between two worlds or dimensions is at the core of *The Ladder*. It is the crossing between Italy and Australia, between past and present, between the physical and the metaphysical, as well as the idea of occupying an in-between space:

The springing point was where they lifted off,
where the impost, set down on good footings,
joined the arch to ensure its leap and span
of water's being there and flowing on.

And though the weight of *flight* thrust back
so that each ounce of stone knew pull,
still to the eye the curve sprang free
and satisfied. And does yet. As if

there were grace in *holding gravity at bay*
and a certain poise in being in between.
My ideal landscape has room for bridges and hills,
spires, birds and echoes: halfway things.
(West 2015, 13)

“The Go-Between” evokes another bridge in Northern Italy. According to local folklore, this bridge was built across a gorge by the Devil in exchange for the soul of its first user:

And then of course, the Devil's bridges,
like the one across the Stura outside Lanzo.
Its arch spans a gorge so sheer
it must have taken a devil to build.

An old woman, you see, had made a pact.
Lucifer's price: to guide below the first
soul over. But when in a single day it was done
a dog went racing across in pursuit of a bone.

And the Spirit of Despair was so enraged
his stomping formed great portholes in the nearby rocks,
while *his bridge, that marvellous*
go-between, still leads us somewhere else.
(West 2015, 51)

In “An Exile Writes a Letter Home”, after introducing from the past the image of “quick-eyed augurs” the poet says “I, too, would contemplate the sky, divining bridges” (West 2015, p. 39).

Other poems relate the contents of dreams. As the title suggests, such might be the case of

“Meeting with Morpheus”

I

In the middle of *a walled city*
I was waiting on a *sloping square*
surrounded by *concentric lanes* which long ago
that child, *Time*, surveyed absent-mindedly,

dragging a stick behind her as she played.
How *crooked and congested* they had become!
A preacher was calling and the swell of believers
made me afraid. The first flames

of a bonfire flickered in the corner of my eye.
Quick! You need to hide! But can't,
for *here* the boisterous youth march in
with drums and swirling coloured flags.
(West 2015, 25)

Through the dream the poet journeys through time. The images of space with which this poem opens recall an Italian medieval town; events past in Time are evoked in connection with present time and space (“here”).

II

I *dreamt* one night there was a quake
[...]

I saw you drift through shade a break
of *red gums* cast towards the town.
I saw the empty paddocks make
no stand as all the sky pressed down.

I tried to speak, but you were startled
by the shrill voice of a cock. You said
you'd never wanted the realm unveiled.
You were afraid of me, and fled.

III

After years there'd come a sizing-up.
Finally I'd found my confidence, and it swayed me,
me alone, to dance a jig across the floor.
They all looked on, but I couldn't stop. A weight
had lifted. I was sheathed in what, at first,

was like a tongue of flame – lambent, playful –
and then thin chains that climbed on air, *heedless*
of gravity, linking far beyond myself.
[...]

This was my means of being with people *now*.
(West 2015, 26-27)

This halfway world, holding “gravity at bay”, is where the poet finds his way of “being with people” in the present. It is in this in-between space that the Italian and the Australian landscapes meet. “An Encounter” opens the section entitled “Roman Dozen”:

Unreal city, still. By default. And then
the jolt of recognition hitting home –
a gum broke the shade of holm oaks.
Its exhortation – remember, make known.

It was how light sifted through those swinging leaves –
you looked at and beyond it all in one.
Scruffy as hair-shirted John the Baptist
striding from the wilderness. Imposing

as your accent *half a world away*.
Intimate, drab and tragic, the branches curved
like Christ's limbs in a deposition scene.
And *having paid heed*, you turned to move on.
(West 2015, 40)

The quotation from Eliot's “The Waste Land”, “Unreal city”, refers to a feeling of being out of place. From this starting point the poem leaps into another dimension. The gum tree, the eucalypt, seen among the Roman *quercus ilexes* has a particular quality that the poem wishes to celebrate. Because of its thin and curved branches and thin leaves, to look at this tree is also to look through it, and see what is beyond. Furthermore, through the simile with “Christ's limbs in a deposition scene”, the gum tree is connected and overlaps with Christian iconography in European visual arts. In *The Ladder*, the Australian landscape is subsumed in the powerful and recurrent image of gum trees: “the gum”, West says, “comes from that sense of responsibility to give voice to the uniquely Australian perspective”.

In “Hail Guns in the Goulburn Valley”, the valley where Shepparton is located and whence the poet had long thought he needed to escape, is worthy of poetry and juxtaposed to Italian places. In the poem the two worlds of Australia and Italy are dramatically brought together:

On summer evenings storms brewed over orchards'
lucrative fruit and the Valley lulled

to a militant accompaniment.
 Home's rhythmic thuds – the cloud-aimed shock waves
 you liked to snub,
 eager to make your impact elsewhere.

Well, they resounded years later,
 as if you weren't a world away,
 in a photo from Casale Monferrato
 1899 – First International
 Congress of Anti-Hail Cannons.

It's said that meeting put to rest
 the ringing of church bells, but weren't these still
 Seneca's squall guards, mechanized now?
 Now?... with the front having passed,
 and the starkness of damage all yours,
 and defiance gone in a flood of meekness.
 (West 2015, 28)

West's continued concern with “in-betweenness” is never “simply” a matter of geography; there are brief, important moments in which a quick, sudden movement can be a step into a new world. The image of the leap dominates “Nothing Ventured”, growing from a childhood recollection:

Past rows of houses and *a wire fence*
 no man's land began, all the more
 remote for being always overlooked
 and free from reason to be trespassed on.

I was where high-voltage lines crossed into town
 on pylons towering over empty ground.
 My orbit's edge, eerie like the depths
 beneath the surface of the sea.

Something came of nothing, though, when first
I leapt that fence alone. Giddy with lag,
 my head raced to catch where my feet *now* stood. And did,
 and was pledged, like saying to a mirror, *here I am*.
 (West 2015, 34)

The mind and the body, the metaphysical and the physical, are united in the seminal movement of crossing and going forward. The poet dares to leap; the leap is an act of faith, a plunge into the unknown, and entails a danger of losing something familiar, but it must be done. The leap of the fence, a kind of emblem of the Australian countryside, symbolises a leap into a new world, a halfway world. It requires something miraculous. When asked about the recurrence of the

word “leap” in *The Ladder* West answers: “The leap can’t be expressed rationally, a work of art defies time. It can continue on into the future or into the past”.

The process of making poetry from experience can be symbolised by the leap, a leap that, if but briefly, defies the force of gravity, and simultaneously defamiliarises and refreshes the reader’s “sense” of things – especially, in *The Ladder*, so many “halfway things”, such as “spires, birds and echoes” (“Roman Bridges”, 13), hills, mountains and rivers, doorsills and bridges. West’s sophisticated poetry points to the rewards of such leaps, and of being richly in relationship with Italy and Australia, “as if there were [...] a certain poise in being in between”.

Shepparton and Rome – which is to say Australia and Italy – are juxtaposed in the yet unpublished poem “The Turtle and the Fountain”¹²:

I stand outside the family home in Shep
thinking on what over time has nourished me,
[...]

Old friends arrive and fill the lawn. We need
more chairs. I search outside the shuttered house,
for there were many chairs last week,
lent for my father’s wake. But now the grounds
are wide and paths wind past giant oak trees,
pools and pock-marked torsos. I stop to mount
a toppled column whose flutes gleam with rain.
But each chair I find has a broken frame.

I wander and my wondering is a key
until I fear my guests have been ignored.
I turn but turning see a cairn
and at its peak a mouth where water pours
down to a pool. Here turtles swim and climb
the cataract, rock-climbing to its source.
And I child-like man of forty-five
clutch at this vision, enchanted, terrified.

And now I’m standing in that square in Rome
where four bronze turtles climb the fountain rim,
stubborn as salmon to get home.

[...]
But here the four long-limbed ephebes keep
a timeless eye on time and never sleep.
(West, *infra*)

¹²Together with three other unpublished poems, “The Turtle and the Fountain” can be read in this issue of *LEA*. The poems were translated into Italian by Tomaso Kemeny.

In the countryside of Shepparton, the poet is reflecting in a dream-like sequence on what has nourished him over time. He has a sudden and sublime vision – he is “enchanted, terrified” – of turtles climbing to a source of water, and then a glimpse of himself in Rome in the harmonious little piazza Mattei in the Ghetto looking at the fountain, “where four bronze turtles climb the fountain rim”. Shepparton, the living landscape of Australia of his youth, and Italy, where statues “keep a timeless eye on time, and never sleep”, both past and present, are sources from which West finds nourishment for himself and for his poetry.

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