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## INTRODUCTION

I first discovered Xavier Herbert in 1978, a year after my arrival in Australia. Recruited to teach English, and knowing next to nothing about Australian literature, I embarked, during my first year, on a somewhat chaotic form of self-education. Seeking guidance from no-one, I simply picked Australian books at random off the library shelves and read as many as I had time for. Thus it was that I came to *Poor Fellow My Country* with no preconceptions at all. I had, to that point, read nothing else by Herbert. I knew nothing at all about the author or the reception his books had received and, after my year's reading of Australian novels, I wasn't expecting a momentous experience. I had found plenty of interest in reading the work of writers like Richardson and Clarke, Prichard and Franklin, White and Stow, but nothing up to that point had affected me very profoundly. Thus it was that I opened *Poor Fellow My Country* with no very great expectations—and was bowled over!

I was caught from the first page: that marvellous scene by the waterhole. It was magical. It was exhilarating. It had, a quality different from any other Australian book I had read. The characters and themes seemed to be working on a richer level of creative complexity. My reading till then had, to some extent, been duty. This was obsession. This was a book I could not put down. I loved its size. The longer, the better, as far as I was concerned. I enjoyed it all: the melodrama and Delacy's pontificating as much as the numinous scenes involving Prindy and the Australian bush. I knew this was a book I would read again and again, whatever its length. I had never read a novel quite like it, one that, as well as telling a great story, caught within its pages so full, so complex and so illuminating a picture of a whole culture. The

novels it brought to mind were Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Hugo's *Les Miserables* and it bore comparison with both.

Its capacity to illuminate the culture was, perhaps, even more evident to a newcomer than it might have been to Australians of longer standing. It is Alice, the recent arrival, who sees the strangeness of Wonderland. For those who have always lived there, the strange has become normal, as indeed it has for me after twenty-five years in Australia. I no longer see things with the fresh eyes of an immigrant. Back in the seventies I did, and there were many things I found hard to understand until the day I started reading *Poor Fellow My Country*. To give just one example, at first sight the Australian approach to life seemed attractively tough and independent-minded, and the cheerfully aggressive attitude to 'bloody poms' seemed to indicate a belligerent rejection of the former colonial master. Gradually, though, I began to notice perplexing anomalies. I followed a debate in the letters pages of the local paper over proposals for an Australian flag minus the Union Jack, and was mystified to find dyed-in-the-wool patriots supporting retention of the British symbol, those who wanted a wholly Australian flag stigmatised as unpatriotic. I went to an international hockey tournament and watched in disbelief as an Australian audience rose for the British national anthem in stark contrast to my memory of English cinemas where we all rushed for the exits to avoid the national anthem at the end of a film. Involved in helping to plan conferences, I found it hard to understand why third-rate British and American academics were routinely preferred as keynote speakers to first-rate locals. Turning to party politics, my confusion grew. How to understand the veneration of Menzies, with his unabashed preference for England over Australia? How to explain the rejection of Whitlam, with his confident assertion of Australian independence? How to comprehend the deep-rooted assumption that Australia could not survive if it

did anything to irritate its ‘great and powerful friends’? Those brought up in the country seemed to find none of this strange. To an outsider it was like straying through the looking glass. There were, and still are, strange contradictions here whose nature, causes and effects are expressed and explored better through the narrative of *Poor Fellow My Country* than in anything I have since read.

Impressed as I was by the novel, it came as a surprise to discover how mixed a response it had received. Highly praised by a few, it was mercilessly treated by others: a ‘botch’ according to one academic<sup>1</sup>, a ‘literary brontosaurus, Poor Bugger My Book’ according to another.<sup>2</sup> Puzzled by what seemed an inexplicable injustice, I began reading the rest of Herbert’s work and soon had something else to puzzle over—its strangely mixed quality. It was strange for two reasons: first, because the variations were so extreme, from very good to embarrassingly bad; second, because the movement was up and down, not, as one would expect in a developing writer, up and up. It was hard to understand how the man whose early short stories were crudely written, stereotypical tales written for popular magazines suddenly produced, in his first published novel, something of the calibre of *Capricornia*. It was even harder to understand how, having written something as good as *Capricornia*, he followed it up with two novels as downright bad as *Soldiers’ Women* and *The Little Widow*. Why was it that, instead of steady development of the talent evident in *Capricornia*, the thirty years that followed its publication produced nothing but regression? And how was it that, after thirty years of failure, he finally moved forward again and produced something as marvellous as *Poor Fellow My Country*?

The impetus, then, for this book of mine was twofold. The primary motivation was a desire to enter the lists on behalf of *Poor Fellow My Country*. The secondary motivation was an interest in finding explanations for the strangeness of Herbert’s

total output. The result, many years later, is a book with three aims. The first is to explore the nature of Herbert's achievements in *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country*. The second is to examine Herbert's oeuvre as a series of steps along the road to *Poor Fellow My Country*, seeing how in writing each of the earlier books he developed practices that had significant effects, some good and some bad, on the form of his final novel. The third aim is to attempt to find explanations for what happened to Herbert's writing in the second half of his career—why it took the direction it did, why that direction caused him problems in the fifties and how he overcame those problems in the sixties.

In pursuit of the third aim, I soon found myself considering the relationship between Herbert's personality and his writing. While any conclusions drawn could only be speculative, the more I read the biographical evidence, the more it seemed that such speculation would, at the least, be interesting, and at best might provide useful insights into why Herbert's writing developed as it did. One question, for instance, that began to fascinate me as I learned more and more about Herbert was the fundamental question of how he ever managed to become as good as he did, since he seemed, in a number of ways, temperamentally unsuited to novel writing.

For one thing, he was utterly self-absorbed and showed little interest in anyone else. On at least one occasion he admitted he found other people boring, and while renowned for his habit of talking relentlessly and endlessly to anyone willing to listen, he was not himself a good listener.<sup>3</sup> He liked conversations—but only if he could monopolise them. In the second half of his life, even one-sided conversations must have become few and far between, since he opted, more and more, to live in solitary fashion with few social contacts. All this helps to explain why the dialogue is often bad and the characterisation often weak in the books of the fifties. What is harder to

fathom is how Herbert ever managed to create the successful characters of *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country*.

Another obvious handicap was that Herbert was a limited thinker, with an inflated view of the importance of his ideas, and a more and more insistent urge to use fiction for didactic purposes. It was a dangerous combination. Even when the ideas are profound, didacticism rarely produces good novels. Since Herbert's thinking was anything but profound, the failures of the didactic novels of the fifties are easy to understand. The difficulty is to explain the success of the equally didactic *Poor Fellow My Country*.

A further handicap was the fallibility of Herbert's taste. He thought everything he wrote superb—the stereotypical short stories, the seriously flawed *Soldiers' Women* and the mercifully unpublished *The Little Widow* as much as *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country*. The mannered and cumbersome new style he 'invented' in the fifties in a foolish attempt to prove his 'originality' provides a good illustration of the fallibility of his taste.<sup>4</sup> The style he fondly believed would prove his 'mastery' of the novel was, in fact, an unmitigated disaster, as his editor, Beatrice Davis, did her best to make him see. She had no success, however, since, as well as finding it impossible to judge the quality of his own work accurately, Herbert also found it impossible to respond sensibly to criticism, however friendly and constructive. It was, again, a dangerous mix for an author.

Given his handicaps, it is all too easy to understand why Herbert sometimes wrote bad books. The difficulty is to understand how he ever wrote good ones. How can that be explained? How did a man of very average intelligence and very real weaknesses as a writer manage to write a book as ambitious, original and successful as *Poor Fellow My Country*?

He managed it partly, I think, by sheer persistence. William Blake once wrote, ‘If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise’<sup>5</sup>, and Herbert was proof of that dictum. Despite his less than obvious qualifications for the task, he managed in the end to write a great novel simply by keeping at it until he found the way to do so. And he kept at it because he had what Arthur Miller, in a different context, once described as ‘a fanatic insistence on his self-conceived role’.<sup>6</sup> In Herbert’s case, the role he conceived was to be the writer of great novels. *Soldiers’ Women*, he believed, would ‘have as great an effect upon mankind as had “The Origin of the Species”’.<sup>7</sup> As for *Poor Fellow My Country*, in that book, he said, ‘I am building a monument out of the truths I have collected. [...]’<sup>8</sup> I can smile when I die looking up at that monument, knowing that I have contributed to the advancement of my species’.<sup>9</sup>

As he believed it was his destiny to write great novels, so he believed he had the talent to fulfil that destiny. Though the critical establishment’s refusal to acknowledge the fact always bothered him, he persisted in regarding himself as one of the giants of literature. Among modern Australian writers only Patrick White, he said, could ‘truly claim to be my equal’.<sup>10</sup> Nor did he hesitate to match himself with older masters. As he worked on one scene from *Poor Fellow My Country*, he said to his wife, ‘Shakespeare made a masterpiece of the “Rape of Lucrece”—I’ve got to make a better one’.<sup>11</sup> As he worked on another, he mused, ‘Am I a squib that I will avoid difficulties like Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*?’ He continued with sublime certainty, ‘This piece is a superb one. Imagine me trying to squib it! [...] I can’t help but do it superbly. It is my existence, my purpose’.<sup>12</sup>

All this explains why Herbert persevered. It does not explain why he succeeded. A clue to that is found in something Gore Vidal once wrote:

Dostoevsky, Conrad and Tolstoy [...] were not much concerned with laboratory experiments. Their interest was in what Miss Sontag calls ‘The subject’; and though it is true they did not leave the form of the novel as they found it, their art was not the product of calculated experiments with form so much as it was the result of their ability, by virtue of what they were, to transmute the familiar and make it rare. They were men of genius unobsessed by what Goethe once referred to as ‘an eccentric desire for originality’. Or as Saul Bellow puts it: ‘Genius is always, without strain, avant-garde. Its departure from tradition is not the result of caprice or of policy but of an inner necessity.’ Absorbed by his subject, the genius is a natural innovator—a fact which must be maddening to the ordinary writer.<sup>13</sup>

In Herbert’s career we find evidence of both kinds of writing. It was a thoroughly ‘eccentric desire for originality’ that led Herbert in the fifties to embark on the calculated experiment with style whose unhappy results can be seen in *Soldiers’ Women* and ‘The Little Widow’. In contrast, the writer of *Capricornia*, unconcerned with originality and so absorbed in his subject that he wrote in a kind of ‘trance’<sup>14</sup>, produced a novel whose genuine originality the author himself never properly recognised. In *Poor Fellow My Country* the natural innovation of a writer absorbed in his subject becomes even more evident. It is in that book that he demonstrates most clearly the ability to ‘transmute the familiar and make it rare’ by virtue simply of the kind of man he was—a dreamer, a romancer, a symbol thinker, a natural allegorist. These are not qualities commonly associated with Herbert, but they are qualities he reveals again and again in his letters and novels, and they were central to his success as a writer. Also important to his success was the one subject that always brought out

the best in him—Australia. It was the only subject he ever dealt with effectively. When, in the fifties, he attempted others, he failed. But, absorbed in writing about Australia, he did indeed become ‘a natural innovator’, unfettered by the constraints of tradition and driven by some ‘inner necessity’ to find new ways to express all he wanted to say.

It is, I believe, because Herbert was an innovator, particularly in his use of genre, that his achievements have still not been properly recognised. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, explains why generic experiments of the kind found in Herbert’s novels are often poorly understood. The root of the problem, he suggests, is ‘the sloppy habit of identifying fiction with [...] the novel’. The term ‘novel’, he argues, which ‘up to about 1900 was still the name of a more or less recognizable form, has since expanded into a catchall term which can be applied to practically any prose book that is not “on” something’. We must, he says, ‘start to think seriously about the novel, not as fiction, but as a form of fiction’ and recognise that there are other forms, equally valid, with their own features and conventions.<sup>15</sup> In place of the catch-all term ‘novel’, Frye proposed a division of prose fiction into four genres, which he called ‘anatomy’, ‘confession’, ‘romance’ and ‘novel’. Three of these will already be familiar to readers. Frye’s more narrowly and precisely defined ‘novel’ is the genre found in the work of writers like Jane Austen and Henry James. His ‘romance’ includes both the popular romance of modern thrillers, adventures and love stories and the high romance of classical and medieval periods. His ‘confession’ is the genre more commonly called ‘autobiography’. His fourth genre, ‘anatomy’, is a genre that is less often recognised. Books in which this genre plays a major part include *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, *The Compleat Angler*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Erewhon*, *The Water Babies*, *Les Miserables*, *Brave New World*

and *Such is Life*. Distinguishing features of the genre are its didacticism, its lengthy intellectual discussions, its willingness to digress from the narrative in order to explore ideas, and its connection with satire and the comedy of humours.

Frye's taxonomy is particularly useful in studying the achievement of writers who make extensive use of genres that are unfashionable or unrecognised. 'In nearly every period of literature', Frye points out, 'there are many romances, confessions, and anatomies that are neglected only because the categories to which they belong are unrecognised'.<sup>16</sup> Nor is it only neglect writers of such books suffer. They also tend to be unfairly criticised not for doing badly what they have set out to do but for not doing what they never intended to do in the first place. They are blamed, as Herbert has all too often been blamed, for offending against the conventions of the 'novel'<sup>17</sup>, rather than judged on the effectiveness of their use of the conventions of romance, confession and anatomy.

It is in *Poor Fellow My Country* that Herbert's use of genre is most original and most successful, and it is *Poor Fellow My Country* that suffers most when criticism fails to understand quite what is going on generically. One problem is that the book's central genre, romance, tends to be undervalued nowadays in comparison with 'novel'. It was predictable, for instance, that early criticism paid so much attention to Delacy, the 'novel' anti-hero, and so little to Prindy, the romance hero. Many commentators found it hard to see past the voluble, opinionated, active white male to the passive, silent Aboriginal boy. They found it hard to understand that Prindy is at least as important as Delacy. Concentrating not on the symbol and allegory of romance but on the social history and psychology of 'novel', they sometimes failed even to recognise, let alone explore, Prindy's complexity.

A second problem is that the anatomy elements in *Poor Fellow My Country* are rarely recognised as the conventions of a perfectly valid prose fiction genre, and are therefore almost never judged on their own terms. Instead of being examined for what they achieve and how well they achieve it, the anatomy elements are more often seen as failed attempts to utilise ‘novel’ conventions and criticised accordingly. The *Oxford History of Australian Literature*’s criticism is typical. ‘Too much of the narration’, it complains, ‘is flat dialogue or prosy exposition. The social anthropology is explained, not dramatised’.<sup>18</sup> The problem with this is that the standards applied are inappropriate to anatomy. It is the ‘novel’ in which the convention of ‘naturalistic dialogue’ is preferred to the didactic dialogue of anatomy. And it is the ‘novel’ in which, as Frye says, an ‘interest in ideas and theoretical statements is alien’ and the ‘technical problem is to dissolve all theory into personal relationships’.<sup>19</sup> To criticise *Poor Fellow My Country* for explaining rather than dramatising ideas is, in effect, to criticise it for selecting the conventions of anatomy over those of ‘novel’. It is only when the genre of anatomy is recognised for what it is, and when its conventions are accepted as perfectly appropriate for use in prose fiction, that it becomes possible to see how well Herbert uses those conventions and how effectively they achieve his purposes.

I began writing this book in the belief that Herbert deserved better than he had received in the way of critical acknowledgment. Nothing I have learned during the course of studying his work has changed that view. Flawed though he was even in his best books, capable though he was of serious errors of judgment and very bad writing, at his best he wrote with a power matched by few, and an originality that is startling. *Poor Fellow My Country* is, I believe, one of the great novels of world literature, and

the neglect it has suffered in recent years will not, I hope, continue for too much longer. Describing similar cases of neglect, Frye comments:

A great romancer should be examined in terms of the conventions he chose. William Morris should not be left on the side lines of prose fiction merely because the critic has not learned to take the romance form seriously. [...] If Scott has any claims to be a romancer, it is not good criticism to deal only with his defects as a novelist.<sup>20</sup>

For 'Scott' and 'Morris' read 'Herbert', and to 'romance' add 'anatomy'. It was as romancer and anatomist that, against the odds, and from the least promising of beginnings, Herbert achieved greatness.