

The Beast in the Machine: Modernity, Aviation and the Legacies of Colonialism in Roger McDonald's *Slipstream*

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Abstract

The expectation that a novel about a celebrity aviator will romanticise flight and glorify the pilot is a product of the mythologisation of aviation, which this essay understands is a response to the threat of technology and the alienating conditions of modernity. Roger McDonald's novel *Slipstream* refuses to reproduce this mythology, expressing a literary aspiration to use the form of the modern novel to explore the entanglement of the subject under the conditions of postcolonial modernity. My argument will develop through three parts. The first section will explore the mythologisation of aviation as a symptom of modernity. The second will examine the ways in which the novel uses its modernist form to call into question the celebrity of the aviator and the spectacle of flight. This part of my argument is indebted to the critique by German philosopher Martin Heidegger of the technological mode of Being. Finally, I take up the postcolonial implications of the Heideggerian critique in a country in which many of modernism's standard antidotes to the problems of its century are compromised by the legacies of colonialism.

Keywords

modernism, modernity, postcolonialism, aviation, technology, celebrity, Kingsford Smith, Lindbergh, Heidegger

Biography

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The Beast in the Machine: Modernity, Aviation and the Legacies of Colonialism in Roger McDonald's *Slipstream*

The Australian writer Roger McDonald is the author of ten novels, two novelisations from and for film scripts (1988 and 1992), two television scripts, two memoirs and two volumes of poetry. His oeuvre includes a significant number of works that have won Australian literary awards and he has been shortlisted in the major international prizes that distinguish the international careers of other contemporary Australian writers such as Peter Carey, David Malouf and, more recently, Kate Grenville. His work has been published in London and New York as well as in the key metropolitan markets of his native Australia, and it has been translated into Spanish, German and Swedish. *Slipstream*, his second novel, was published by University of Queensland Press in the same year that the ABC television series based on his first novel was broadcast on Australian television. The television series boosted sales of *1915* and it may have helped the reception of *Slipstream*, which was widely reviewed. However, the public seemed to have bought the former rather than the latter, and, despite being picked up by Faber and Faber in Britain and Little Brown in the United States, *Slipstream* appeared to make little impact at home. Fontana brought out a paperback edition the following year in the United Kingdom and their commissioning editor Robert McCrum told the author that the press was pleased with its reception and sales and looked forward to the next book. Little Brown sold 3,000 copies in North America but neither they nor the Australian

publisher were prepared to follow up their hardbacks with a softcover run.¹ For a time, Michael Edgley showed interest in the film and television rights, but *Slipstream* failed to repeat the cross-media success of the debut novel. In this essay, I want to develop a way of reading McDonald's second novel in the context of its mixed reception as a pilot for a larger study of his major novels. Both this essay and the longer study are interested in the ways in which his work seeks to understand the conditions of postcolonial modernity while seeking a form capable of delivering that interest to a sustainable reading public.

The international reviews for *Slipstream* establish a set of public expectations for a novel about a famous aviator in the Golden Age of Flight.² Though most reviews were appreciative, the enigmatic character of the pioneering aviator consistently puzzled readers.³ Some were also disappointed at the failure of the author to wax lyrical about adventurous experience and the wonders of human flight.⁴ Others were bewildered by a departure from the

¹ That is until Picador released a paperback along with a reissue of McDonald's work a decade later.

² Roger McDonald, *Slipstream* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982).

³ See, for example, C. K. Stead, "Perhaps the Novelist is Lost at Sea," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 1982, 42; Robert Gordon, "Pursuing the Idea of Heroism in the Form of an Egoistic Pilot," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, Baltimore, *News American*, 27 March 1983, 2; Review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Kirkus Library Journal*, 15 November, 1982, *Slipstream* Series 6 Box 18 Notebooks, Roger McDonald Papers NLA MS 5612; Richard Langford, "Slipstream Not a Pleasant Novel to Read," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Volusia*, 20 February 1983; Elisabeth Sifton, editor-in-chief, Viking Press, New York, correspondence to Ms Pearl Bowman, 310 West St. New York, 25 Nov 1981, *Slipstream* Series 6 Box 18 Notebooks, Roger McDonald Papers NLA MS 5612; J. M. Fox, editor, Random House, New York, correspondence to Ms Pearl Bowman, 5 February 1982, *Slipstream* Series 6 Box 18 Notebooks, Roger McDonald Papers NLA MS 5612.

⁴ See, for example, Geoffrey Dutton, "A Novel with Little Sense of Delight," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Bulletin*, 25 May 1982, 71; Dinny O'Hearn, review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Australian Book Review*, June 1982, 7–

apparent subject of the heroic aviator to follow the fortunes of lesser characters—most particularly in an idyll that concentrates on a couple of lovers whom the hero's wife, Olga, visits in the Snowy Mountains.⁵ I want to address these expectations and develop an argument about why they arise and why they were questioned in the novel. My argument is that the expectation that a novel about a celebrity aviator will romanticise flight and glorify the pilot is a product of the mythologisation of aviation, which I understand as a direct response to the alienating conditions of modernity and the threat of technology in the twentieth century. *Slipstream's* refusal to reproduce this mythology expresses a literary aspiration to use the form of the modern novel to explore the historical experience of postcolonial modernity.

The novel uses recognisable events from the life of the celebrated Australian aviator Sir Charles Kingsford Smith (1897–1935) and yet it does not reprise the conventions that represented his achievements as markers of the success of Australian modernity. *Slipstream* does not celebrate its aviator, Roy Hilman, as an adventurous Australian hero. Nor does it romanticise or embellish

8; Clement Semmler, "A Great Novel Slips Up," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Weekend Australian Magazine*, May 1982, 12; Jennifer Jameson, "This Flight's a Flop," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Chronicle*, 17 June 1982, 23; Marion Halligan, "Australians, Heroes and Flying: A Novel to Change Perceptions," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Canberra Times*, 14 August 1982, 19; David Rowbotham, "More Than Just a Hint of Smithy," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Courier-Mail*, 29 May 1982, 24; Carol Major, "Between the Lovers," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, Radio 2 SER-FM, Public Broadcasting Sydney Education Broadcaster Ltd. n.d.; James Idema, "Four Novels Start the Year Off on a Happy Note," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Chicago Tribune*, 23 Jan 1983. For a curious exception, see John W. Otis, "A Provocative Tale with Wings," review of *Slipstream*, by Roger McDonald, *Minneapolis Tribune*, 1 May 1983.

⁵ See J. M. Fox and other correspondence in *Slipstream* Series 6 Box 18 Notebooks, Roger McDonald Papers NLA MS 5612.

the experience or spectacle of flight. It is interested, as is much of McDonald's fiction, in the influence of biology and psychology on behaviour, the contingency of human relationships—negotiated as they are within different fields of power—and the representation of history as an equivocal context for understanding the complexities of human Being. The novel eschews the opportunities that aviation offers modernity for transcendence and redemption, and reveals them as deceptions that fall short of a considered appreciation of the challenges of modern life.

The Condition of Modernity and the Myth of Aviation

Slipstream engages with aviation mythology by closely following the biographical details of the legendary Australian aviator Sir Charles Kingsford Smith. The permanent Smithsonian exhibition on the Golden Age of Flight describes it as a period spanning the 1920s and 1930s in which “Americans were wild about aviation. ... Air races and daring record-setting flights dominated the news. Airplanes evolved from wood-and-fabric biplanes to streamlined metal monoplanes. The military services embraced air power. Aviation came of age.”⁶

Kingsford Smith's flying career spans this period and it includes most of the key moments. He served as a dispatch rider and runner during the Gallipoli campaign of World War I. Following the evacuation of the Dardanelles, he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps and saw combat as a fighter pilot over the Western Front. One victory short of ace status, he was shot down and repatriated

⁶ *Exhibitions: Golden Age of Flight*, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum 2016, <http://airandspace.si.edu/exhibitions/golden-age/>, 11 May 2016. See also Robert Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1920–1950* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

to England with serious though non-life-threatening wounds. After the war, he was barred, on the basis of experience, from competing in a high-profile, long-distance air race from London to Australia. He pursued barnstorming and stunt flying for movie studios in the United States for a short period prior to his return to Australia to establish a commercial airline. This he promoted after the fashion of the time with a series of long-distance demonstration flights. He flew across and around Australia, over the Tasman Sea to New Zealand and back, and, most famously, all the way across the Pacific from California through Hawaii and Fiji to Australia. The Pacific trip was later repeated in the opposite direction using an American-built Lockheed aircraft. Kingsford Smith was the first aviator to successfully reprise Charles Lindbergh's legendary Atlantic feat in the return direction against the prevailing winds, and he broke several speed records during his career—most notably those between England and Australia. It was the daring 1928 crossing of the Pacific along with Charles Ulm and the Americans James Warner and Harry Lyon, however, that ensured his enduring international acclaim. Lindbergh himself considered the Pacific crossing a greater feat than his own trans-Atlantic leap.⁷

The Golden Age of Flight was Kingsford Smith's moment and it left a cultural legacy later in the century that clearly cues *Slipstream's* production, distribution and reception. The science and technology historian A. Bowdoin Van Riper argues that pilots in the period between the wars were uniquely situated to achieve hero status, not merely on the basis of virtues such as courage,

⁷ The definitive biography is Ian Mackersley, *Smithy: The Life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998; London: Warner, 1999).

resourcefulness or self-sacrifice but also in the original classical sense as men (and women) who transcended mortal limitations and entered the world of the gods.⁸ Lindbergh understood this distinction between aviators and the public in terms of the distance he discerned between the embodied grandeur of flight and the disciplined confinement of modern work:

The life of an aviator seemed to me ideal. It involved skill. It commanded adventure. It made use of the latest developments of science. I was glad I had failed my college courses. Mechanical engineers were fettered to factories and drafting boards, while pilots had the freedom of wind in the expanse of sky. I could spiral the desolation of a mountain peak, explore caverns of a cloud, or land on a city flying field and there convince others of aviation's future. There were times in an airplane when it seemed I had partially escaped mortality, to look down on earth like a god.⁹

In the first half of the twentieth century, aviation was aestheticized and made sacred as an alternative to materialism, mass culture and the long littleness of modern life. Powered flight was presented as practice, ritual, and sacrifice in the noble service of a higher ideal. The combination of aviator and airplane could embody an aesthetic sensibility with a philosophical temperament in a modern technology that might pass as a work of art. "In the bright sunlight of a perfect morning I first saw the Lockheed Altair," wrote Kingsford Smith's navigator, P. G. Taylor. "Her taped wings glistening below her blue streamlined fuselage, a real thoroughbred: no contraption of wires and

⁸ A. Bowdoin Van Riper, *Imagining Flight: Aviation and Popular Culture*, Centennial of Flight Series (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2004).

⁹ Charles A Lindbergh, *Autobiography of Values*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 63–64.

struts and gadgets hanging everywhere; just a wing, a body and a tail of perfect form, like a beautiful blue bird poised for flight”.¹⁰ Aviation’s mind-body-machine complex was available to the modern century as a techno-moral exemplar—what Freud referred to as a prosthetic god—and between the wars it offered a particularly attractive narrative for fascism.¹¹ Lindbergh certainly understood the “fascination” of aviation: “I have felt the godlike power man derives from his machines – the strength of a thousand horses at one’s fingertips; the conquest of distance through mercurial speed; the immortal viewpoint of the higher air. I have sensed the harmony of muscle, mind and mechanism which gives the illusion of life to substance until levers move with thought as hand or foot, until the rhythm of an engine is geared to the beat of one’s own heart, and the wing in turning flight seems an extension of one’s own body.”¹²

Fernando Esposito argues that aviation played an important role in the emergence of fascist ideology in Italy between the wars because it is ideally suited to its mythologisation of history and aestheticisation of politics. He sees these transcendent forms of representation as symptoms of a need to restore order in response to what the distinguished sociologist of modernity,

¹⁰ P. G. Taylor, *Pacific Flight: The Story of the Lady Southern Cross* (London: John Hamilton, 1936), 5. Note that this passage is transcribed in McDonald’s research notes: *Slipstream* Series 6 Box 18 Notebooks, Roger McDonald Papers NLA MS 5612.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, “Civilisation and Its Discontents,” *Civilisation, Society and Religion*, vol. 12, The Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 243–340. See also Robert Dixon, *Prosthetic Gods: Travel, Representation and Colonial Governance* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001).

¹² Charles A. Lindbergh, *Of Flight and Life* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 49–50.

Zygmunt Bauman, calls the “liquefaction” of pre-modern authorities or “solids”.¹³ “Mythical modernity” reconstitutes a profane world in the forms of a sacred ideal that binds the people following the lapse of more traditional authorities such as religion or a binding system of social class. According to Esposito, this “mythical order was *modern* because it was borne out of an understanding of *order as task*. It was *mythical* because it legitimized the constitution of society by anchoring its *nomos* in a supreme and allegedly uncontested sacred entity or value”.¹⁴

Modernity is characterised in this formulation as an unresolvable tension between two powerful opposing demands. One is a sceptical, often institutionalised rationality that desacralizes and debunks transcendent ideals. The other is a related, insistent need for a new set of ideals capable of restoring a sense of purpose and connection lost to the alienating rule of reason and its disenchantment of the world. Aviation provided the twentieth century with a spectacular opportunity for the assertion of a set of ideals enshrined in a mythology that offered purpose, connection, and the prospect of a successful transition into a technological future.

Aviation was a useful symbol for fascism and other imperialist movements, but the discourse of aviation was marked by the tensions between atomising reason and the transcendent ideals necessary for social connection. There is a distinction to be made in writing about aviation between the scientific man of action concerned with the mastery of a technology and the man of imagination and feeling who communicates inspirational affect, philosophical

¹³ Fernando Esposito, “In ‘the Shadow of the Winged Machine ...’: The Esposizione Dell’aeronautica Italiana and the Ascension of Myth in the Slipstream of Modernity,” *Modernism/Modernity* 19, no. 1 (2012): 148.

¹⁴ Esposito, 147.

reflection and a grand narrative of manifest destiny. This distinction marks different ways in which the subject is predisposed to the phenomenon of aviation, and one of the ways it is played out in literature is at the level of style. There it marks a discursive separation between engineers interested in function and design and poets who plumb the phenomenological experience of human flight in allusive registers that claim metaphysical significance. Laurence Goldstein calls the one a language of fact and the other a language of affect, and he aligns them with distinctions between science and art, history and mythology, reason and the imagination.¹⁵

For some modernist writers, the objective language of aviation science represents what Martin Heidegger calls a technological mode of Being and it facilitates an instrumental approach to the world that fails to reassure us now that we have the technology to rain destruction upon one another from the skies.¹⁶ As a spokesperson for Donald Trump famously put it during the 2016 United States presidential election, “What is the point in having a good nuclear triad if you are afraid to use it?”¹⁷ For others, the romanticisation of the pilot as an extraordinary sensibility enraptured by the wonders of flight is also a mistake that encourages an impulsive, narcissistic temperament that “gradually harrows and empties the soul of loyalty to those people and those places that make

¹⁵ Laurence Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 207.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977).

¹⁷ “Trump Spokeswoman Under Fire for Suggesting the US ‘Should Not Be Afraid To Use Nuclear Weapons’.” <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3366752/Trump-spokeswoman-fire-suggesting-not-afraid-use-nuclear-weapons.html>.

‘courage’ meaningful”.¹⁸ Aviation and nuclear weapons technology urgently pose the following question: to what nature of Being can we entrust the power to destroy all things?

Antidotes to Modernity: The Aviator as Beast, Man of Action and Technologist

Slipstream’s hero, Roy Hilman, displays an “impulsive, narcissistic temperament” but this is associated with animal instinct, vital action and technological involvement rather than “an extraordinary sensibility”. By different degrees, he manages to invest in a number of the identifying features that Umberto Eco associates with fascism. These include the superficial worship of technology; an unreflexive and ill-considered commitment to action for action’s sake; a hostile response to criticism and difference; social frustration; the lack of a clear social identity; a commitment to life as a perpetual struggle or war; a popular elitism that scorns its subordinates; a cult of heroism associated with the valourisation of an early death; a slippery slope of masculine conquest from war to sex to the fetishisation of phallic toys; an authoritarian populism that claims to speak for the “People”, and a highly restrictive and impoverished language of communication for doing so.¹⁹ It is therefore tempting to read Roy Hilman as a simple fascist, but, through him and those around him, the novel considers a wider set of responses to the pressures of modernity.

The multi-character perspectives through which the narrative unfolds allow Roy Hilman to be represented in different ways by different people and marked by the modern institutions each of them represents. The novel seeks out

¹⁸ Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature*, 168–69.

¹⁹ Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism,” *The New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>.

its aviator in the lives of those who form his personal (lovers and family), social (friends and acquaintances), and professional (aviators, lawyers, politicians, businessmen, journalists) networks. The hero is introduced through an account of the annual memorial gathering of the men who knew and flew with Roy Hilman and the commemorative rituals that they had developed to memorialise him as a national hero. But it is a contrary account from the beginning, for the narrator immediately establishes an interest in the alternative perspectives of some of his forgotten associates. McDonald's novels typically deploy multiple characters and a mobile narrative perspective that enables access to competing points of view. This makes him an extremely difficult writer to summarise because almost everything that is may also be other. In this way, he is able to suggest the contingent unfolding of an uncertain subject both in its fluid social relationships and in its reception by a public assembled by the institutions of modernity.

Slipstream's retrospective narrator develops the story through a chronologically organised set of episodes. After the first of nine parts principally dealing with the aviator, these episodes are presented from the perspectives of characters caught up in his turbulent slipstream. A mobile perspective encourages attention to character as it is expressed through action and social relation. The writing style is pared back to the point of instrumental reason, however, notably eschewing lyrical embellishment of adventurous experience and the splendours of aviation. Structure and style are designed to query heroic fascination and memorialisation rather than pursue historic achievement, public celebrity or romantic distinction. Roy Hilman, as a result, is a rather disappointing hero. Immanent, instinctive and technological, he lacks the deep

interiority normally associated with the ethical, psychological and metaphysical projects of modernist fiction. The Viking Press saw this as a terminal issue. They rejected the manuscript because its “readers were bothered by the unconvincingly laconic mystery of Hilman’s real character”.²⁰ J. M. Fox from Random House expressed a similar view: “Roy is such an enigma, as he clearly is intended to be by the author, that it is hard to feel any empathy for him; conversely, one is so puzzled by the other characters’ fascination with him that it is equally hard to be attracted to them.”²¹

The novel does not present its hero conventionally, as a rapturous romantic or an anxious modernist, and he is certainly more than a simple exemplar of muscular fascism. An important part of Hilman’s mystery is his ability to mean more to those who follow him than either the narrator’s account of his achievements or his own comprehension of his actions appear to merit. At different times and for different characters, Hilman comes to stand in for a number of modernism’s vain responses to the disenchantment of modernity. He is variously the immanent, instinctive, bare forked animal; the vital, primitive man of pure action; and also the instrumental master of a powerful new technology.

When Hilman’s wife, Olga, briefly leaves him, for example, he quickly moves on to his mechanic’s wife, Kitty Tandy. Kitty “was one of those frantic, partly intelligent, burning-up small town creatures who had married the wrong man and would never find the right one”.²² The journalist, Claude McKechnie,

²⁰ Elisabeth Sifton to Ms Pearl Bowman, 25 Nov 1981.

²¹ J. M. Fox to Ms Pearl Bowman, 5 February 1982.

²² McDonald, *Slipstream*, 148.

despised her for wearing Olga's cast-off clothes and aspiring to take her place beside his hero. Kitty's aspirations and Hilman's infidelities are threats to the public reputation that both McKechnie and Roy's business partner, Harold Pembroke, work hard to cultivate. The novel seeks to expose what they labour to conceal, however, and Roy's relationships are often observed through the eyes of those he uses and then discards. We see Roy and Kitty through her view of their lovemaking and this takes the form of a lament for the social complications of physical desire: "[Here]... sensations intermingled. Abruptly, the two partly clothed bodies were not there at all, or if they were, then they existed to permit the telegraphing of impulses. No wonder the aftermath is sad, when all this hope is denied. ... Oh this was warm magic. Kitty thought of the bath she would run back at the house. If only touch and warmth were everything, and as Roy wanted there were no questions!"²³

The tone suggests that both the reader and narrator are aware of considerations denied to "the heat-radiating animal" (Roy) and "the small town creature" (Kitty), but there remains something to be said about *jouissance*.²⁴ If there is a mystery to Roy Hilman, then it is played out ambivalently over the question of whether he is best construed as a bare forked animal acting on instinct, a vital man of action charismatically immersed in a pressing task, and/or a technological modernist demonstrating a species ending mode of Being. *Jouissance* may be understood as a transgressive pleasure that disassociates the sovereign subject and, in the process, liberating it from the disciplined address of

²³ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 216.

²⁴ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 216.

institutionalised modernity. Here it reads more like a moment of forbidden animal pleasure than an emancipation of the subject from society or culture.

Kitty Tandy desires the physical animal in Hilman. McKechnie, the journalist, is captivated by the technologist. Tommy, Kitty's cuckolded husband and Roy's dutiful mechanic, for example, is envied for his complete involvement in mechanical work:

[Tommy could] ignore the world of insinuations that ensnared people like Kitty and Claude himself. Claude envied Tommy's ability to lose himself in the intricacies of valve clearances, electrical circuits, fuel pumps and the like. Roy shared this gift of involvement, which could bury time for weeks on end. People like Tommy and Roy were never bored. Their love of work often carried them beyond a concern for their own bodily safety. ... It was as if an eternity of bits and pieces awaited to absorb their talent for fitting things together: as if God owned a machine shop reserved for their use in the afterlife.²⁵

McKechnie fashions Hilman's public reputation but he cannot quite explain him to his own satisfaction. Hilman's social and spiritual deficits suggest a poverty of Being but there is also a hankering here after a form of existence free from the entanglements of culture and society. McDonald made the dangerous point about the "poetry" of action to his American publisher: "There have been works of biography about Kingsford Smith and other flyers of his generation, but the novel allows a more intense speculation, and I'd hope an interestingly dramatic – and therefore readable – approach to a life that is in

²⁵ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 150–51.

most senses unsympathetic, that is somehow literal, even cruel, and yet which speaks (or might speak, if the reader can listen) in the voice of action, which has its own poetry, which as the novel somewhere says, 'is the ultimate speech of the universe'.²⁶

Charles Coulter, the American financier who funds the Pacific flight, sees this as characteristically Australian: "The Australians are a direct people ... but there is something elusive about them. Their vision is all energy. Can that truly be called vision?"²⁷ The communist Victoria Grant, the only character with an Indigenous heritage in the novel, is also captivated by Hilman's commitment to the moment: "Tommy tossed the spanner high into the air. In order to catch it, Roy skipped backwards a half-dozen paces. He seemed to dance on his toes, arching. He missed. The spanner clattered and skidded on the polished, grassless earth. As Roy turned he failed to notice Victoria standing there, not ten feet away. The look on his face was one of concentrated delight."²⁸

According to Victoria, "Roy and Tommy were artisans" who humbly "attended to matters of fact". For her "there was nothing famous about Roy Hilman except in this respect".²⁹ The immanence of the beast, the vitality of unselfconscious action and the mechanical involvement of the technologist all receive consideration as each of the lesser characters seek something to guide and motivate them in an uncertain world in which they are responsible for their own destinies.

²⁶ Roger McDonald to Dick McDonough, *Little Brown & Co.* 3 May 1982, *Slipstream* Series 6, Roger McDonald Papers NLA MS 5612.

²⁷ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 79.

²⁸ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 280.

²⁹ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 279.

Martin Heidegger saw the technological mode of Being as the dominant disposition of the modern period, and the fourfold safeguarding of Being that he associated with the poiesis of “dwelling” as a response to its limitations. The organisation of *Slipstream* around the responses of people to the aviator foregrounds the issue of their disposition to him and his disposition towards others, and that places the question of Being at the centre of McDonald’s creative project. In what way is Hilman intelligible to others; in what way are others intelligible to him? And as a celebrated public figure, how might his reception be read as a symptom of modernity? Heidegger characterises technological Being as a disposition to see *things* as instruments to be used, objects to be categorised and resources to be consumed. This is the essence of technology. There is nothing necessarily wrong with technology per se but, as the dominant mode of Being in modernity, it threatens to restrict the scope of human action, thought, and feeling to a narrow utility. Once things are everywhere reduced to what Heidegger calls “standing-reserve”, then “everything man encounters exists only in so far as it is his construct ... and man everywhere and always encounters only himself”.³⁰ Technological Being is therefore a limitation of the wider possibilities of Being and, as a total or dominant disposition, it represents an impoverished version of what human beings might be in the world. Most importantly in respect to aviation, technological Being cannot offer assurances that those who master the heavens will always have our or anything else’s best interests at heart.

Hilman’s elusive character is pathologically technological since his encounters with men, women, and machines seem to be motivated purely in

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 27.

terms of their immediate readiness to hand. Claude McKechnie offers what is clearly a compromised journalistic account of the possibility that Hilman might represent some grand national destiny, but whatever that might have been is lost in the journalist's aspiration after something more profound: something that is perhaps beyond the limits of journalism and a public whose sense of connection is dependent upon the glamour and spectacle of aviation.³¹

Hilman's historical achievements are understated in the novel and his irresponsibility relentlessly exposed. Heroic action takes place out of the narrative frame and, when it does receive attention, it often ends in confusion, disappointment or failure. His talents controlling machines and seducing women are traced back to an unshakable confidence associated with his lack of feeling and imagination. Aeroplanes and women momentarily curb his instinctive desires but his attitudes to both are utilitarian. Numerous affairs expose him as a cruel, exploitative and ruthlessly unfaithful man. In the air, this carelessness fatally endangers the lives of passengers whose fate he avoids without any redeeming sense of guilt or responsibility. Roy seems unaffected by the feelings of others. A passion for something beyond himself is conspicuously absent from the novel's account of his personal life and his professional achievements.

The heroic stature of Hilman is troubled by his social behaviour and compromised by his associations with the representatives of politics, commerce and the media. Harold Pembroke, for example, is the son of an affluent Catholic doctor and an alumnus of the prestigious Riverview College.³² He introduces Roy

³¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 1995).

³² Distinguished alumni of Riverview College include Tony Abbott (Australian prime minister 2013–2015), Barnaby Joyce (Australian deputy prime minister

to flying before the war and they enlist together, fighting in the Dardenelles prior to the flight training, which takes them both to England. After the war, Pembroke practises law and enters the airline business with Hilman, whom he opportunistically promotes as a patriotic hero of the Great War in “Diggers with Wings” (1925). Pembroke is a calculating lawyer whose sly appropriation of Hilman’s public celebrity provides a flipside to McKechnie’s populist idealisation, although both are involved in commodifying history for a susceptible public:

It seemed to Claude that Harold had sacrificed something precious in order to obtain what he might have had anyway. He had been a hero in the war, and next to Roy the country’s most skilled flyer. But he had gone into law, into business, maintaining a connection with Roy just to suit himself, seeming modest on the occasions of Roy’s successes but possibly just to divorce himself from the failures. ... Being airborne with Harold was never the same as flying with Roy. Harold talked about the romance of the air but business was the thing that thrilled him. With his bright possum-like eyes and air of being able to penetrate great distances, Harold profited from a contradiction. He used the romance of flying as an enticement for investors to enter areas that had nothing to do with it: real estate, meatworks, iron foundries. Harold’s lack of charm, his coldness, now came to his aid as something greater than affability. “That was

2016–), Robert Hughes (art critic), Christopher Brennan (poet and academic), Tom Bathurst (chief justice of the NSW Supreme Court), Anthony Fisher (archbishop of Sydney), Nick Greiner (former premier of NSW) and Paul Scully-Power (the first Australian-born man in space).

romance but this is the world,” he seemed to say, yet romance was offered.³³

As a journalist, McKechnie understands publicity but he longs after a story of greater moment. He might have been a figure like C. E. W. Bean, who shapes his “facts” according to some grand ideal that was sufficient to bind and motivate a people, but the novel pulls him up short.³⁴ Ultimately, the Hilman quality that captivates our witnesses is his immanence in technology and his enviable commitment to action:

Claude knew how Roy thought. His mind would be harmonising with the engines, his palms cupped firmly over the control wheel, his eyes rapidly, habitually scanning the instruments. That done, a quick glance around the horizon. Everything was so very different in the air. Claude found the difference inexpressible – which perhaps was why he continued writing about it. He did not think of Roy’s time in the air as a way of shutting off the complexities of the world. Not abandonment, but concentration was the key. At the end of the flight path, on a paddock of grass, earthbound harmony would be Roy’s eventual reward ... These were Claude’s thoughts. They were what he meant by the “inexpressible”. He was never able to set them down on paper.³⁵

³³ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 241.

³⁴ Bean, the official correspondent and historian of Australia’s role in the First World War, produced an account that was intended to motivate a commitment to binding national ideals sanctified by the sacrifices of those who volunteered for war service. McDonald made extensive use of his work as a source for his preceding novel, *1915*.

³⁵ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 146.

McDonald uses what Genette calls zero focalisation, and the characters' different points of view are always framed by a third-person perspective that exceeds them.³⁶ So McKechnie's journalism is framed by this wry, knowing (but not omniscient) point of view; he is never allowed the apparent independence of an intradiegetic story. In this account of Claude reaching after Roy's significance, the journalist is aware of two different narratives. One is a story of facts and generalisations prepared for a paying public conjured with jingoistic patriotism and the modern spectacle of aviation; the other is a more elusive tale, perhaps the subject of a novel, which *he* is never able to set down on paper. The different accounts distinguish between a journalist who writes for a public and a writer who writes in order to satisfy subtle and perhaps profound interests. The journalism celebrates heroic masculinity "as a serene progress upwards into glory" while the novel exposes a shallow celebrity who "was full of angry terminations".³⁷ The journalism is a commodity and might be seen as a form of utility, or, as Heidegger would have it, "standing-reserve", while "the other—which is the tale continuing time presents to all of us and which Claude understood according to his lights—a story of contradiction, confusion, and unresolved forces striving for dominance. Each smack of the keys released this underlying story into Claude's mind but nothing he wrote would ever reflect it."³⁸

Dwelling as Safeguarding: The Idyll as an Ambiguous Response to Postcolonial Modernity

³⁶ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

³⁷ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 157.

³⁸ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 154.

One character whom it is tempting to see as equal to the complications he springs from is Leonard Baxter, a Cambridge-educated war veteran who enlisted in England and served in the Royal Artillery. After the war, he reappears as a pastoralist and parliamentarian who represents the talismanic frontier region of the Snowy Mountains. Though someone who appears to be a member of the Establishment, Baxter elects to defy public opinion by leaving his socially ambitious and suicidal wife to “rescue” a younger neighbour, Coralie MacBean. Coralie is confined by her husband Andrew and his menacing, fascist brother, Guy. Baxter is ready to sacrifice his reputation, property and profession for this forbidden love. He is also the only character to clearly articulate a critique of Hilman’s claim to public distinction.

Hilman’s tall poppy lament is that people resent the achievements of others: “I bored a hole in the air for the first time. I did something first. They hate that here”.³⁹ It is a familiar critical recognition of the homosocial character of masculinity, which Linzi Murrie identifies as a distinguishing (but not exclusive) feature of Australian social relations. “The ‘typical Australian’,” she argues, “must not deviate too much from his mates.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Baxter rejects Hilman’s criticism and disapproves of his connections with the fascist New Guard, whose “Neanderthal” supporters are attracted by the glories of his flying achievements.

³⁹ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 113.

⁴⁰ “The bushman masculinity is distinguished by the centrality of the homosocial as a masculine value. The heroic individualism, so important in representations of other frontier masculinities, is absent here. In its place is the egalitarianism of mateship which functions as a strategy of legitimation within the male homosocial group.” Linzi Murrie, “The Australian Legend: Writing Australian masculinity/writing ‘Australian’ masculine,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 22, no. 56 (1998): 74, doi:10.1080/14443059809387361.

In spite of his resentments, Hilman is determined to go on proving himself to people like the MacBeans and the Pembrokes, prompting Baxter to remark upon “the emptiness of proving yourself over and over”. To Len, “it was like a man waking up every day and forgetting who he was”:⁴¹ “You should not goad a man like Hilman into thought ... because the result always diminishes him. If we stand here much longer he’ll move on to stage two, which is the elevation of occupation into destiny. Talk of ‘air transport’ will climb to talk of soul and spirit. Men like Hilman are best left to the realm of action, otherwise they flounder.”⁴²

Baxter’s critical response to Hilman makes his perspective important in the novel, but the interlude in the Snowy Mountains when he and Coralie MacBean provide refuge to Olga divided readers. For some it was the most attractive writing in the novel; others could not see the point of such a long diversion. Baxter attempts to safeguard Coralie and Olga at Petra, their refuge high in the Snowy Mountains. The view that the section contains the best writing in the book may be a recognition of the way in which the narrative register shifts to admit a metonymic appreciation of character and environment. Petra is named after the ancient Jordanian city which was carved into the sandstone cliffs of a desert as a site of refuge, sanctuary and trade. It is an outstation of Baxter’s Snowy Mountains property established during the 1830s by his English grandfather. The house is set into a rocky bank by a mountain stream that ran “over rounded stones that were many shades of grey and brown. ... ‘coloured like Leonard’s eyes.’”⁴³ An encounter with a reddish bull allows Olga to contemplate

⁴¹ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 116.

⁴² McDonald, *Slipstream*, 117.

⁴³ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 163.

the qualities it shared with the landowner who was protecting her: “Leonard, whose neck like the bull’s was thick, whose eyes too, Olga observed, were set in muscular cheekbones, who was also a sire tasting his freedom in the bush”.⁴⁴ And when they finally arrived at the house in the High Country, “it gazed at them from its setting of red stone with a deep, friendly stare not unlike Leonard’s”.⁴⁵

When Coralie and Olga go riding higher into the mountains they encounter “a large shearing shed, its shape like a grey-covered book splayed face-downwards. The roof consisted of iron sheets almost meeting the ground. Man seemed more obedient to extremes here, Olga thought. What was man-made hugged the earth”.⁴⁶

Baxter is a man who draws strength from environmental associations that ground him beyond modern society. The house, the stream, the mountains and the animals place him on the earth and he is also represented under the sky:

A star – it would be Arcturus⁴⁷ – extinguished itself on the brow of the western ranges. Another seemed to hang like a midget arc lamp on a nearby twig. This effect of near and far seemed to place Leonard at the centre of space. Nothing was beyond his reach. He had never believed that surrender could be so fulfilling. People said he had lost everything, but only the MacBeans – if they had the will – could really hurt him.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 169.

⁴⁵ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 170.

⁴⁶ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 177.

⁴⁷ Arcturus is the fourth brightest star in the night sky. From the Greek, it means “guardian of the bear” because it is proximate to Ursa Major and Minor. It also forms part of the constellation Bootes, which means herdsman.

⁴⁸ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 170.

The conventions here resemble those organising the alternative to technological modernity that Heidegger draws out of an enquiry into the etymology of “building” and “dwelling”. The German philosopher develops his account of dwelling from the Old High German word for build: *buan*. By teasing out lapsed historical associations, he recovers a sense of dwelling that imagines “the manner in which we humans are on earth”: “to remain, to stay in a place ... to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil and cultivate the vine ... [to be] constructing ... cultivating”⁴⁹ When Baxter takes his rabbit-hunting kelpie, Woodrow, on “nocturnal hunts”, the animal is accustomed to a ritual where “little was said, no work was done, and nothing was taken home”.⁵⁰ Everything appears in its place at Petra and, although it is a working station, things there are allowed to be.

For Heidegger “to save the earth, to receive the sky, to await the divinities, to initiate mortals—this fourfold preserving is the simple essence of dwelling”.⁵¹ As Julian Young puts it, the “late Heidegger’s account of Being-in-the-world is given in terms of four ‘existential’ elements: as humans, we live our lives on (a part of) the planet (‘earth’), in a particular climate (‘sky’), among human beings (‘mortals’) and under the (appropriated or unappropriated) guidance of a particular heritage (‘gods’).”⁵²

Integral to this notion of dwelling is a commitment to protecting or safeguarding the integrity of things. The essence of things includes a relation to

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 348–49.

⁵⁰ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 171.

⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” 360.

⁵² Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 98.

human beings but it exceeds that relation and cannot be reduced to it. That excess serves as a mystery that prompts a thinking in relation to dwelling that reaches beyond human beings. Thus, dwelling is a mode of Being that allows other things to appear in their difference.⁵³ For Heidegger, dwelling is a poetic mode of habitation in which an allusive sense of language enables a safeguarding of the world by preserving its mystery and allowing the imagination to open the subject to wider possibilities of Being. The stylistic shift to a more poetic register in representing the relationship between character and environment in the Petra episode of McDonald's novel is symptomatic of a reaching after the disclosure of a world that exceeds human use. By comparison, Hilman and the mythology of aviation fail to supply the replacement values necessary to bind a society. As a prosthetic god, he is a false god incapable of supplying the sense of the sacred necessary if people are to dwell well together.

It is tempting to see Baxter's idyll with Coralie as an expression of dwelling that counters the technological mode of Being represented by Hilman, Pembroke and McKechnie. But dwelling in what Raewyn Connell has called the Southern tier has complications of its own.⁵⁴ Australia is a postcolonial society in which the notion of a localised heritage, a sense of place, and the care of the other necessary to dwelling are compromised by the historical fact of Indigenous dispossession—itself a product of technological Being. The postcolonial theme is a faint thread in the novel but sufficient to trouble any character's claim to dwell. When the Baxters drive Olga up into the ranges, for example, she reflects upon

⁵³ Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," 363.

⁵⁴ Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

the ideological differences behind subtle variations of diction: “In Europe or America an elevated saddle in the ranges would have been called a pass. Here it was a gap. Perhaps there were similar ‘gaps’ in the northern part of the world but to Olga she had at last come upon the real mark of the southern hemisphere -- the heart wrenching placement of possibility back to back with despair. They might have been standing at the head of a valley in Patagonia, or on the rim of the Boer veldt.”⁵⁵

As Olga begins to feel excluded from Len and Coralie’s pastoral retreat, she begins to find fault with a man who turns his back on a wider and more complex world. Leonard’s political ambitions are now confined to private study of the Restoration and rumination on his country’s ongoing colonial deference to London.⁵⁶ When Baxter takes his kelpie, Woodrow, on their nocturnal hunts, the rabbits that the dog ceases to pursue are, after all, vermin introduced by an invasive people bent on use.

This slender postcolonial note is picked up again in the character of Victoria, the daughter of Baxter’s station manager, Tony Grant, who is identified as descended in some unknown way from an Indigenous line. Victoria is also a communist who quite astonishingly agrees to marry the vengeful fascist Guy MacBean on the condition that he cease his vindictive pursuit of Len and Coralie. While travelling with Guy to Sydney, she draws the unwanted attentions of a young couple who resent her presence in the railway carriage. The encounter is presented from MacBean’s offensive eugenic perspective:

⁵⁵ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 167.

⁵⁶ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 200.

Guy was uncertain of his precise relation to Victoria. Do you call someone a cousin whose father has been sired by your father's father? All the district's blacks had died from influenza well back in the last century. Where the shadow on Victoria's bones fell from was a mystery. Like a silent figure moving through the trees, this aboriginality came and went, skipping a generation and then staring at Guy and his family through Victoria's jewel of a face. Though his views on racial intermixture were extreme, Guy was proud of Victoria. Her intelligence, her spirit, even the flush of her superb complexion represented a triumph of the white proportion.⁵⁷

The engagement to Guy is presented equivocally as either a form of surrender to instinctive choice and/or as a form of suicide linked to Hilman's disappearance: for both found their end on "a black night while enclosed in a small cabin ... with a sound of wind streaming past [and] whatever she was offering to Guy had come to her from Roy".⁵⁸

The last character to see Roy Hilman is another outcast native. Hilman fails to return from an impromptu long-distance flight and though most of his associates are involved in the search, the only person to discover his decaying remains in the jungle is a faceless, speechless, orphaned native boy. Cheng loots the wreckage of the aeroplane and retrieves the empty morphine bottles, which suggest that the injured aviator ended his own life. He tells no one of his find and, when Olga questions him, she fails to recognise the material objects that reveal his discovery. Robert Dixon has documented the fragility of technological

⁵⁷ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 195–96.

⁵⁸ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 287.

modernity by tracing a recurring anxiety that the technological mastery of the prosthetic god might rapidly succumb to the dissolution of the colonial body under the mysterious influence of native conditions.⁵⁹ But here, the dissolution of the aviator's body and the disappearance of his wrecked machine into the Malaysian jungle are seen as appropriate, even desirable, returns to nature. The association of Hilman with the grotesque native may even side with Simon Ryan's argument that the Gothic does not always confound colonial modernity. That the Gothic might also serve to buttress instrumental rationality by magically excusing its failures is a suggestive point from which to contemplate both the conclusion of McDonald's novel and the split discourses of aviation:⁶⁰ "People said about Cheng you could never tell whether his head contained any thoughts at all. In surveying the last remains of Roy Hilman he tried to do him justice. He viewed [Hilman] as he viewed himself — as someone who sought shelter in another world, a world that accepted him".⁶¹ Hilman's body decomposes into the jungle, taking him back to a primal condition, and this is both a sign of the failure of technological modernity and the condition for its mythologisation as a binding social value.

When Mr Bannerjee describes Cheng to those who came in search of Hilman, this connection between the native boy and the dead aviator is clear: "What would we do without our Cheng? I sometimes wonder. He's plain ugly,

⁵⁹ Robert Dixon, *Prosthetic Gods: Travel, Representation and Colonial Governance* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001).

⁶⁰ Simon Ryan, "Lasseter's Last Ride and the Gothic Narrative of Failure," *Journal of Australian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2015): 381–95, doi:10.1080/14443058.2015.1051084.

⁶¹ McDonald, *Slipstream*, 317.

Mrs Hilman, and not a specially kind chap. Soon he'll go off on his own. Then we'll all talk about him, and say what a good fellow he was. We'll even say, ha! He wasn't so ugly."⁶²

The challenge of attracting an audience and creating a public for a work of modern fiction that aspires to investigate postcolonial disenchantment is a recurring preoccupation of McDonald's work. His oeuvre explores the ways in which the human-animal is both inspired and confounded by its entanglement in history, politics and society. In societies such as those found in the Southern tier, this complicated and contingent process is as much a question of politics and history as Being. Grant Farred's Heideggerian reading of David Malouf's work insists that it recognises but does not solve the challenges of dwelling in a postcolonial country. He poses the question, "How does the postcolonial build a dwelling capable of addressing, and, of course, finally, overcoming radical homelessness? What will it mean, what will it take, to build a dwelling There where *blut* is everywhere, is everything?"⁶³ In *Slipstream* the instinctive drive of the beast, the vitality of the primitive, the technological immersion of the scientist, and the (un)settling of the provincials are all symptoms of postcolonial modernity. Disappearing into a jungle, reassembling a magneto or marrying a fascist solves nothing. And if action has its own poetry, then it is a dangerous

⁶² McDonald, *Slipstream*, 305.

⁶³ Grant Farred, "Radical Homelessness: David Malouf Writing in the 'Blut' of Martin Heidegger," in *Postcolonial Theory in the Global Age: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Om Prakash Dwivedi and Martin Kich (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013), 189. It is clear from Farred's discussion that Malouf has been influenced by Heidegger. McDonald has been influenced by the conditions that prompted him. His response is a product of his own method of working through disparate and shared resources and common preoccupations.

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aesthetic in a world where the legacies of colonialism have ably demonstrated the destructive potential of a technological Being who has finally conjured the means of ending all things.