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"Deep Digging": Henry Handel Richardson, Transnational Allegory, and the Unsettled Epic

> In a shaft on the Gravel Pits, a man had been buried alive. At work in a deep wet hole, he had recklessly omitted to slab the walls of a drive; uprights and tailors yielded under the lateral pressure, and the rotten earth collapsed, bringing down the roof in its train. The digger fell forward on his face, his ribs jammed across his pick, his arms pinned to his sides, nose and mouth pressed into the sticky mud as into a mask; and over his defenceless body, with a roar that burst his ear-drums, broke stupendous masses of earth.[1]

So begins the Proem of *Australia Felix* (1917), the first volume of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* trilogy by Henry Handel Richardson (1917-1929). Richardson commences her historical fiction of colonial fortunes (1854-1888) with a harrowing vision of a mining accident a month before the events of the Eureka rebellion in November 1854. This live burial provides the opening moment of the detailed panoramic vision of restless gold frenzy, alienated migrant workers, and ecological destruction that comprises Part I of Volume I. While Volume II, *The Way Home*, also opens with a Proem—one that that foregrounds the significance of the "dividing sea" in Mahony's colonial migrant story—the prefatory scene of earth and upheaval at the Gravel Pits of Ballarat has long been read as a governing frame for the trilogy as a whole. This purgatorial scene of the most famous colonial gold field unites the material and economic specificities of a key moment of invader settlement with the political and imaginative forces that are dramatised throughout this epic account of the unsettlement of Australia.

The absence of Indigenous people in this panorama is registered in a familiar codification of colonial-imperialist repression: the detailed account of the destruction of the original pastoral idyll around Ballarat receives elegiac attention. The crimes of environmental damage are freely identified, but behind and through

[1] Henry Handel Richardson, "Proem," in *Australia Felix*, ed. Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele (1917; Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2007), p. 7.

this elegy for pristine land untouched by the ravages of capital industry is a haunting refrain created by the use of the place names of Wadawarrung country. Against this refrain, then, the violent first event of Richardson's epic account of colonial Victoria (only newly a colony in 1851) signals not so much the threatening entombment of ill-equipped and greedy settler-invaders by an ancient and murderous mother earth, nor even the endless suffocation of being caught up-country in the remote provinces. Rather, the striking event of live burial inaugurates a melancholy allegory of colonial (and national) unsettlement, quintessentially related to the race for raw materials, rocky capital markets, and burgeoning migrant population on one hand and the unstable belonging of the genocidal settler-invader presence on the other.

This paper will explore the nature of Richardson's allegory of colonial unsettlement in light of contemporary discussions of the category of the national allegory. Frederic Jameson's latest contribution (2019) to this area of colonial and postcolonial literary criticism seems uncannily apt, not least because it thematises the shifting architecture of surface and depth in ways eminently useful for thinking about collective identity and history in Richardson's realist novel:

> allegory raises its head as a solution when beneath this or that seemingly stable or unified reality the tectonic plates of deeper contradictory levels of the Real shift and grate ominously against one another and demand representations, or at least an acknowledgement they are unable to find in the Schein or illusory surfaces of existential or social life. Allegory does not reunify these incommensurable forces, but it sets them in relationship with one another in a way which, as which all art, all aesthetic experience, can lead alternatively to ideological comfort or the restless anxieties of a more expansive knowledge.[2]

The contribution Jameson makes to contemporary discussions of allegory (especially with respect to the nation) rests on this extremely useful framing of allegory as that literary mode which does not unify "incommensurable forces" of contradiction as a symbol might seek to do, but rather sets them "in relationship with one another." Richardson's unstable earth announces the provocation and

[2] Frederic Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 34.

peril—the ominous shifting and grating—of contradiction and disjunction. The inhospitable ground of the settler-invader colony signals a range of incommensurable forces that demand representation, including the genocidal reality of invasion at one level and the personal griefwork for a lost father at another. Richardson's transnational allegory of the nation/colony, which she began less than a decade after the Federation of Australia in 1901, certainly enacts and inspires "the restless anxieties of a more expansive knowledge."

Rather than a synthesising symbol of the unity of federated states, it is the ambivalent figure of a live-dead body that electrifies the opening of Richardson's settler-invader allegory. Ensconced in a sound-proof room in Regent's Park, with the exception of one trip to Australia to check historical details in 1912, Henry Handel Richardson began the long labour of creating the story of Richard Mahony, the restless colonial doctor whose gradual untethering culminates in mental illness, premature death, and burial in country Victoria. Richard Mahony's literal and figurative unhousing is framed by Richardson as ostensibly a matter of Anglo-Irish temperament, colonial migrancy, and the fortunes/misfortunes of narrative structure correlated to unruly speculative capital. Based on her parents' letters and her mother's stories, this is a very particular story of colonial fortunes: Mahony's experiences memorialise the life of Richardson's father, the "W.L.-R" to whom *Australia Felix* is dedicated. That the narrative also seeks to represent a larger species of experience is indicated by the next paratextual element, an epigraph from Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (*The Religion of a Doctor*, 1643): "Every man is not only himself; … men are lived over again; the world is now as it was in ages past; there was none then but there hath been some one since, that parallel him, and is, as it were, his revived self." This figure of repetition, working through a double logic of revival and parallel, suggests the composition of a "type." The eponymous Mahony is a character who has been seen before and will be seen again—he is representative, or, indeed, characteristic, of the colonial story. This character is built from both the life story of Walter Lindesay Richardson, Anglo-Irish colonial doctor, and a type of man who will be "lived over again"—an indecisive and restless spirit who never finds himself at home. As the singular identity of the dedication is pluralised by the Browne epigraph (that "every man is not only himself"), we recognise the structuring element of personification essential to allegory before the Romantic period.

In tandem with the force of figure and trope, the role of personification in the colonial allegory is to expand representations for the collective. The great matters that allegory has traditionally been deployed to represent—love, faith, nation, empire—have worked with personification, though it is important to note the declining popularity of personification as the novel form, and particularly the realist novel, rose to prominence. The balance between the particular life and the larger scale of the colony or nation is strained into impossibility by the third volume of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony.* The challenges of and for personification are evident in the inexorable narrative movement away from the general (revived self) and toward an increasingly memorial account of specific individual suffering (Walter Lindesay Richardson's life). In this sense, the commemorative motivation of the singular dedication prevails over the collective gesture of the epigraph, though it is true that both elegy and allegory are strong forces for preservation of all kinds. Jameson has recently suggested that personification in modernity moves remorselessly toward affect because collective dimensions of experience are just so much greater than the scope of the life of individual characters. The critical difficulties which personification faced after the Romantic period certainly support Jameson's argument that allegory is the literary mode best suited to the representation of large collectivities. On the other hand, personification persists in the novel form, since, as Jameson argues, there are few if any other ways to name or conceptualise collectivity (nation or colony in this case).[3]

For critics in the field of colonial and postcolonial literatures who have long consulted Jameson's framing of the relationship between narrative aesthetics and ideology, one of the key interests of *Allegory and Ideology* (2019) is his chapter-length return to the question of national allegory, a topic that first appeared in his work on Wyndham Lewis in 1979. Forty years later, Jameson suggests the following:

> This is then the moment to offer a contemporary commentary on an older essay of mine that has raised a good deal of controversy: one dealing with national allegory as a form in which emergent groups find expression at the same time that they promote it. The central category here, and in a good

[3] Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, pp. 194-5.

> deal of my work generally, is […] group or collective consciousness. It is to my mind the most basic political concept of all, both theoretically and practically; and allegory is one of the vehicles by which it can be tested and measured.[4]

The controversy to which Jameson refers is Aijaz Ahmad's swift riposte in *Social Text* to Jameson's famous 1986 essay on national allegory and third-world literature.[5] Ahmad's critique was so effective that work on post-colonial allegory was stymied for decades. Jameson has Gayatri Spivak's criticisms of his 1986 essay in view as well, though this is not noted nearly as explicitly. In *Allegory and* Ideology (2019), Jameson proffers the tenacious "return of the national situation" (159) as a reason to revisit national allegory as a vehicle by which "group or collective consciousness" might be represented in literary texts. What Jameson wants to note in the globalised present is that nations as collectivities well and truly exceed the capacity of what novels might feasibly accommodate, although it seems as though he is still fundamentally working with allegory as a kind of narrative that reveals the political unconscious of texts, which is to reassert the central relationship between ideology, politics, and literary narrative. In the early 2000s critics such as Imre Szeman and Julie McGonegal undertook a considered re-reading of the Ahmad critique of Jameson in order to test their assessment that there had been a premature dismissal of Jameson's important attempt to theorise the relationship between the role of allegory and the representation of nation. For Szeman and McGonegal, "national allegory does not denote a singular, unchanging narrative about an all-pervasive and all-present totality named the nation."[6] As McGongegal argues, there are a "wide range of contradictory and multiple meanings that national allegories generate."[7] If allegory is a literary form that in fact avoids a mere series of rigid homologous correspondences, and actually produces instead different and discontinuous meanings, allegory is well

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[4] Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. xix.

[5] Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'," *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3-25.

[6] Julie McGonegal, "Postcolonial Metacritique: Jameson, Allegory and the Always-Already-Read Third World Text," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 7.2 (2005): 251-65 (p. 257).

[7] McGonegal, "Postcolonial Metacritique," p. 260.

suited to the matter of the nation. Further, national allegory thus allows for a critique of the unification of "the psychic and collective levels that the concrete historical situation of colonialism has facilitated."[8] With reference to Richardson's trilogy it is critical to reflect on the specifics of the historical situation in question, which Stephen Slemon has referred to as the shared matrix of colonial encounter and its aftermath.[9]

Though Richardson had been thinking about her colonial youth and schooldays for *The Getting of Wisdom* as early as 1903, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* represents a distinct shift in her *oeuvre* to the forms of historical fiction and the associated ambitions of epic scale. 1910 was the moment at which Richardson takes up the story of colonial Victoria "sixty years since," and this is an intriguing moment at which to begin to a national allegory of Australia. Addressing a hinge point between realism and modernism, between colonial childhood and European adulthood, between imperial colony and federated nation, between imperial North and colonial South, Richardson adopted and adapted the transnational and imperial authority of history and allegory. The long association of history and allegory is attested in a range of work, perhaps most importantly Paul de Man's work on the rhetoric of temporality in allegory. Hamish Dalley, citing James Chandler, points out that the historical novel is a permutation of the national tale.[10] It seems clear that allegorical modes of reading and writing are concerned with redeeming or recuperating the past because of structures of preservation but also because history (and the history of the nation, if Spenser is anything to go by) is the great abstraction or indefinably large matter for which allegory as a system of illustration and multivalent energy production seems uniquely suited. Richardson's response to the challenge of representing the historical reality of the fledging colony of Victoria was to turn for the first time to the cross-cultural authority and scalar capaciousness of allegory. Allegory is certainly a Eurocentric force in Richardson's hands: we can see this in the inclusion of the Browne quotation, and we can hear, as well, echoes of Dante's Purgatorio and, further

[8] McGonegal, "Postcolonial Metacritique," p. 263.

[9] Stephen Slemon, "Post-colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23.1 (1988): 157-69.

[10] Hamish Dalley, *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism: Allegory and the Representation of Contested Pasts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 25.

back, the wandering and narrative-generating figure of Homer's Odysseus. The geopolitical aesthetics of the historical epic ground Richardson's move to an allegorical mode, which demonstrates, in turn, an understanding of Eurocentric literary history and a desire for authority, complexity, and energy. Although not a third-world entity, colonial Australia was entirely defined by what Jameson calls the "experience of colonialism and imperialism."[11]

Given the scale of the undertaking and the need to unify matter and idea, the close alliance of realist historical fiction and allegory seemed inevitable, though metaphor and symbol were intimately involved in the suite of pieces that comprised the multiplicities of the allegorical project. For Jameson, as for Benjamin before him, allegory prevails in the great contest between allegory and symbol underway since the eighteenth century because allegory flouts the unity of the symbol with its ingenious multiplicity. Multiplicity, not unity, is the under-estimated aesthetic and political power of allegory, Jameson argues: "the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than homogeneous representation of the symbol."[12] From allegory's etymological origin as "speaking otherwise," multiplicity is in its genetic "master code."[13] While the capacity to deploy the double structure of encoding (allegorical writing) and decoding (allegoresis or allegorical reading) is trained through fundamental negotiations of the ideological *translatio* between base and superstructure, this progresses to complex dialectical reading in a more general way. In fact, Jameson insists that only a constant transversal scanning between the four levels of Augustine's *quadrifaria* (the four levels of meaning which according to Augustine were present in any text) is adequate to late modernity. In addition, these levels must also be read transversally. This recursive and dynamic reading system will not merely designate that the public sphere must be read across the private, or that the individual solely represent the moral elements of a literal event. Instead, allegoresis involves a "fourfold discovery process, which explores untheorised territory in familiar texts and finds in them new (as it were) electromagnetic

[11] Frederic Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 16 (1986): 65-88 (p. 67).

[12] Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. 165.

[13] McGonegal, "Postcolonial Metacritique," p. 257.

spectra thitherto inaccessible to the naked eye."[14] To make a start on this inaccessible spectra, I return to an example of the dynamic multivalence of the allegorical super-system: the figure of the miner entombed at the opening of *Australia Felix*.

Both dedication and epigraph of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* indicate allegorical purpose. In the first moment of the narration proper, Richardson declares the presence of allegory and the power of allegorical reading with some force. Here is a harrowing image; a young English miner entombed in a deep muddy grave after an attempt to ferry ore to the surface in an ever-accelerating hunt for gold in the colonial lottery. In a "deep wet hole" the hapless body is crushed by "rotten earth" that collapses in "stupendous masses" with "a roar that burst his ear-drums." The miner is "pinned," "jammed," and "pressed" into sticky mud; he is "defenceless," drowning and deafened. Buried face down, "nose and mouth pressed into the sticky mud as into a mask," he is, as later described, "swallowed." Later in the Proem, the identity of the miner is queried: who was this man "who now lay deep in a grave that fitted him as a glove fits the hand?" The man being masked and engloved, there is violent intimacy to this living death collocated to the idea of courtly or theatrical attire, though the miner is neither dead nor alive, human nor inhuman, inside nor outside. The vulnerability of the prone burial (historically a deviant's burial) implies the nature of his transgression and the scalar difference between individual young miner and the massive and ancient earth that closes over him. It is an intriguing image for the commencement of a narrative ostensibly about the emergence or birth of a colony into nationhood.

The opening burial signals a metacritical awareness of the structure and operation of allegory as such. For the Greeks, the earliest versions of allegory (understood as a metaphorical system and profoundly connected to the work of symbolisation) related to the function of hyponoia, or under meaning, which was an ornamental device or system involving double meaning that needed to be interpreted. Not surprisingly, the partner of hyponoia was aletheia, or the concealment of truth, which required something like philosophical work to be uncovered. Play of revelation and concealment was the motor of hyponoia, which engineered double meanings that became quickly multivalent. The function of under meaning, or, as

[14] Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. 45.

it was deployed by the Romans for oratorical purposes, "speaking otherwise," related to either dynamic illustration or effective satire. It is unsurprising that allegory better became associated with work on large matters and on questions of large-scale abstraction that challenged language and oratory. Richardson's inaugural image of live burial speaks both to the enigmatic proliferation and layering of meaning, and to the work of reading this proliferation. To read a figure of ambiguous suspension and indistinction is to read an enigma. This live burial declares the scene of allegory to be a scene of "under meaning" at several levels and for several purposes: one must try to read the ambivalent body of the past, of the colony, of allegory itself, with due caution for the unstable ground of proliferating meaning and spiralling abstraction. The opening is a cautionary tale for reading/unearthing the mysterious totality of History. That caution is required both by colonial looters and by the readers and writers of allegory is made clear: "thus the pale-eyed multitude worried the surface, and, at the risk and cost of their lives, probed the depths." [15] In addition, the "pale-eyed" invaders cannot themselves read country; their continued mining or "worrying" of the surface and their "probing" of the depths culminates in Gothic ends. Thus, the competitive lottery to extract colonial raw materials (the economic mode of production which subtends the chronicle of colonial rise and fall) and the work of the historical novelist are overlaid in this reflexive account of allegorical writing and reading. Greed, recklessness, and instability are the symptoms that the surface of the land and the surface of the narrative declare. Below the surface, shifting and grating ominously, haunting forces related to racial difference, colonial dispossession, and the psychic force of the father's encrypted ghost jostle and mix.

Richardson saw the novelist's work as a form of "deep digging": she was clear that her labour as a realist novelist was to unearth the interiorities of psychology and character. In extracting this interiority from the body of history in her first historical fiction, it is interesting to note the energetic illustrations garnered from this seminal moment in the Australian imaginary (the gold fields milieu of the Eureka rebellion) and the social and cultural anxieties of Richardson's own time. Freud's analysis of tapephobia, or fear of live burial, appeared in *Totem and Taboo* in 1913, followed first by drafts of "Mourning and Melancholia" in 1914 (published 1918) and then by the publication of the "The Uncanny" in 1919.

[15] Richardson, *Australia Felix*, p. 13.

Freud's work on tapephobia amounted to images of crypt or tomb straight from the playbook of uncanny Gothic tropes. In his work on Marcus Clarke, Andrew McCann has written succinctly about the dynamics of the Australian colonial Gothic. He comments that "the process by which the colonial subject struggles to master the ambivalence of the colony is also one which reproduces the tropes of Gothic literature."[16] The engulfing threat of unhomeliness, the enervations of melancholia, are familiar from the work of the Australian bush poets, of Joseph Furphy, and of others These Freudian set pieces pertain to Richardson's work as well, but I would argue that Richardson's specific colonial horror relates to indistinction, the threat of being neither one thing nor another nor both. McCann's argument is useful for this line of thought: "the Gothic text […] alludes to and reveals the object of repression, which becomes a locus of horror in it."[17] It is also worth noting that for Eve Sedgewick, whose early work centred on Gothic literary tropes, the trope of live burial in particular was "a structural name for the Gothic salience of 'within'."

Reading from the Gothic and through to Freud (and back again), the live burial offers an opening spectre, or ghost, one "that complicates a metaphysics of presence through a spectral figure that is neither present nor absent, dead nor alive; a temporality of the *contretemps*, of a time-out-of-joint."[18] The dedication to W L-R remains the cryptogram for this spectre buried within, and the alive-dead ambivalence is similarly supported by the phantasmatic logic of revival and return suggested in the "typing" suggested by Browne's epigraph. By drawing upon such figures as the crypt, the phantom, and the living-dead, Richardson is engaged in what Jodey Castricano calls cryptomimesis, a writing that utilises and foregrounds the dynamics of haunting and mourning:

> I propose the term *cryptomimesis* to describe a writing practice that, like certain Gothic conventions, generates its uncanny effects through the

[16] Andrew McCann, "Colonial Gothic: Morbid Anatomy, Commodification and Critique in Marcus Clarke's *The Mystery of Major Molineux*," *Australian Literary Studies* 19.4 (2000): 399-412 (p. 400).

[17] McCann, "Colonial Gothic," p. 400.

[18] Maria O'Connor, "Canopy of the Upturned Eye: Writing on Derrida's Crypt," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 44.4 (2011): 109-123 (p. 110).

> production of what Nicholas Rand might call a "contradictory 'topography of inside outside'."[19]

The term cryptomimesis draws attention to a writing predicated upon encryption, involving the play of revelation and concealment that has been the rhetorical heartbeat of allegory since its origin. Informing Castricano's formulation of cryptomimesis is Derrida's engagement with the work of Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham, Hungarian psychoanalysts who revised Freud's account of mourning and melancholia as part of their work on psychic fixation. Amongst other things, Torok and Abraham proposed that the ego has a crypt at its heart into which, through the impossibilities of trauma and failed mourning, the psyche incorporates the lost loved one as a shared shameful secret. Rather significantly for Richardson and W L-R, this work of the phantom in the unconscious is transgenerational—a preservative repression that is a shared family secret. Reading transversally for the larger collective scale to which allegory gives us access, we might also see that the original shame of colonial dispossession is also the constitutive national secret shame, carried at its cryptic heart.

The larger allegorical purpose of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* as an epic account of the emergence of nation pivots on the personification of Richard Mahony as both a convincingly detailed individual and as a type of man able to represent the colonial state of being caught in-between. This purpose is sustained in Volumes I and II but is overwhelmed by the growing narrative determination to memorialise a specific ghost in Volume III—the ghost of W L-R on whom Mahony is based. The ghostly Gothic figures of the harrowing secret of both colonial violence and dispossession are carried on in this work, but they jostle and collide with the work of mourning for Walter Lindesay Richardson, who is the phantom of a father's madness and disintegration that is incorporated in the crypt of the work, preserved as the figure within the land and narrative. Personification falls into affect,[20] and the plurality and collective reach of the restless type falls into the singularity of grief-work for a particular father. Nevertheless, this grief-work continues to relate in a rather substantial and wide-ranging sense to a

[19] Jodey Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), p. 6.

[20] Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, pp. 194ff.

collective colonial ambivalence about the possibilities of territorial fixity and stable ground. In the scene of desecration of country through extractive colonial capital, we do not witness the inaugural moment of ritual belonging of the settler-invader through the burial of their young. Richardson's historical novel mobilises the figures of her parents to dramatise the uneven and often torturous to-ing and fro-ing between metropole and colony, between centre and periphery, between identification and disidentification. It is apposite that she commences her trilogy with the declaration of epic allegorical intention bound up in the multivalent and elegiac announcement of unsettlement.