

# Long Paddock

## DAVID MUSGRAVE

reviews Susan Lever *David Foster: The Satirist of Australia* (New York: Cambria, 2008 246pp, ISBN 9781934043981)

*“Under the sixth century Irish monastic rule of Cummean, ‘satirizing’—along with murder, perjury, heresy, adultery, brigandage, incest and druidism—was an irremissible sin” (25)’. So writes David Foster in one of his many, often entertaining and always informative author’s notes incorporated into Susan Lever’s *David Foster: The Satirist of Australia*. That this book was written with the active cooperation of its subject is one reason that will make it one of the more important monographs on a major Australian writer. The relative paucity of works such as this is deplorable, but that such a comprehensive study has been devoted to Foster, who “feels ‘ostracised’ by the literary community” (204) and whose popularity, despite having won the Miles Franklin Award in 1997 for *The Glade Within the Grove* (1996), remains marginal at best, is more than welcome: it is vital. Another reason why this is a landmark book is that through its subject matter it grapples effectively with the often elusive subject of satire, especially in its Australian manifestations. Prose satires in Australian literature are thin on the ground, and good critical studies of them even rarer. Thankfully, Lever’s book is a major addition to the study of satire in Australia.*

Lever suggests that Foster is a Menippean satirist and is careful to distinguish between the two major strands in the genre. Foster’s earliest publications, the novella *North South West* (1973) and his novel *Escape to Reality* (1977) constitute Menippean satire in the short form, which flourished during the Renaissance and was inspired by the rediscovery of Lucian’s Menippean satires and comic dialogues and their translation and imitation by humanists

such as Erasmus and More, among many others. This strand of the form is characterised by outlandish plot, free invention and often a crude, but heterogeneous diction and is often contradictory and self-satirising. Later novels, such as *The Glade Within the Grove* belong to the longer form, which is often seen as the typical form of the genre, and is more common in the modern era. This “hybrid form of novel and anatomy,” (23) according to Northrop Frye’s often misleading term for the longer Menippean form, is usually encyclopaedic, digressive and derives mainly from Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*. In this form there is a tendency to digress and list, a mode inextricably entwined with a general ridicule or distrust of philosophical systems or orthodoxies.

In many modern Menippean satires the longer has fused with the shorter form so that the result is often bewilderingly encyclopaedic, rough, digressive, crude and fanciful and difficult in that it denies one single valid world view. Menippean satire is, unfortunately, a relatively rare form in Australian literature. I can only think of a handful of works which could accurately be labelled as such: Furphy’s *Such is Life*, Bail’s *Homesickness*, White’s *Memoirs of Many in One*, and Lindsay’s *The Magic Pudding*, although there are others. This is a surprising state of affairs given the potential for the genre as a mode of exploring post-colonial tension, as is evident in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr* or the works of Cabrera Infante. Lever has correctly identified “an oppositional tradition of the English novel”, which “proposes an ambivalent relationship between the colonised colonisers (like the Scottish highlanders in Australia [of Foster’s novel *Moonlite*]) and British Culture,” (74) and which would seem to work against one of the observations of post-colonial thought, that the English Novel is one of the tools of colonialism and imperial rule. That this is the case seems instinctively true, although the puzzling question remains why novels of this sort are comparatively rare in Australian literature.

It is interesting to note that the form of this book, with Foster’s interpolations in italics, resembles the heterogeneity of the Menippean form, and is not that far away from Foster’s observation about the satirist who must ‘split himself down the middle with one half laughing at the other.’ Foster’s

intercalations range between being informative, quirky, boastful and funny: for example, we learn that Foster's father, "George Foster reconfigured his convent-educated virgin first wife (in a total of four) as the vaudeville soubrette 'Miss McGerkhinsquirer'" (9) and that David Foster's teenage daughters' boyfriends "have included two Kangaroo International Rugby League footballers, an Australian shearing champion, an Australian bullriding champion and a Northern prawn fishery trawler skipper" (121). Their presence in this book is proof of the tendency of thinkers who engage with the Menippean form, or a Menippean author, to drift towards that form themselves: think of Frye's own *Anatomy*, Bakhtin's masks, Kierkegaard's personae (among others too obscure to mention here).

Lever's treatment of Foster as a theorist of satire sheds light on Foster's own practice, occasionally in unexpected ways. For example, Foster's article "Satire", originally published in *Phoenix Review* and later included in his book of essays *Studs and Nogs* (1999), indicates that Foster's own research on the genre is at once conventional and idiosyncratic. He approves of Gilbert Highet's definition of Roman Satire, which is worth repeating:

the free use of conversational language, the frequent intrusion of the author's personality, a predilection for wit, humour and irony, great vividness and concreteness of description, shocking obscenity in theme and language, an improvisatory tone, topical subjects. (Lever (18) ref. to Foster quoting Highet's *Anatomy of Satire* in *Studs & Nogs*, (78))

However, he excludes Highet's conventional statement of the aims of satire, which is "improving society by exposing its vices and follies" (18). By pointedly denying the normativity or moral utility of satire, Foster declares himself as the most Menippean of Australian satirists, and therein may lie the problem of his wider reception.

Howard Weinbrot's *Menippean Satire Reconsidered* (2005) is a recent, dissenting work on Menippean satire which argues (misguidedly, I think) against the possibility of a continuous Menippean tradition. One of his key arguments concerns the reputation of, and the iconography associated with Menippus himself. In the eighteenth century, according to Weinbrot, Menippus was an egregious example of what was disreputable in any 'republic of letters': a sneering misanthrope, a scoffer with nothing positive to offer, a suicide and a nihilist: in short, a dangerous entity who could not have been used as a positive model for imitation in that period. Velazquez's portrait of Menippus from 1639/41 would seem to conform with this argument, with the miserly, almost grotesque figure posing with his back half turned to the viewer, grimacing rather than smiling seriously. Weinbrot is correct to identify a negative, darker version of Menippean Satire (see also Michael André Bernstein's *Bitter Carnival. Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*. (1992) against the more festive, optimistic version promoted by Bakhtin: both forms exist, and Foster belongs to the latter. It is the mark of the 'immaturity of Australian cultural life' (xiii), as Andrew Riemer notes in his Foreword, that such a powerful critique cannot be celebrated by a wider audience, both within the literary establishment and beyond it.

Interestingly, Foster's engagement with Highet may offer a clue to the subject, or mode, of his most recent novel, *Sons of the Rumour* (2009), which is, according to James Ley, a reworking of *The Thousand Nights and One Night* and *Ulysses*. Highet noted in his *The Anatomy of Satire* (1962) that Menippean satire may be semitic in origin (a view uncorroborated by any other researcher into satire), citing Moses Hadas's *Ancilla to Classical Reading* (1954), which explains that there is an Arabic form of humorous philosophical discussion in prose mingled with verse, called the *maqama* or 'session' (251n). Perhaps it was this incidental observation of Highet's which spurred Foster to explore the possibilities of adapting the Arabic form to a modern Australian context. And the very fact that this possibility might be entertained is tribute to Foster's wide reading and energetic engagement with many modes of thought.

Satirists often get the rough end of the critical pineapple, as if critics really would rather that their novels were something else: more sincere perhaps, or concerned with sentiment, or more realist, perhaps. To be serious and comic at

the same time, as is the case with Menippean satire in general, seems beyond most critics, who find such work not as engaging, in some cases, as less clever comic fiction, or more serious (dare I say earnest?) literary fiction. It is refreshing, therefore, to find in the pages of Lever's study of Foster's work a thoughtful engagement not only with the work, but in relation to its generic context – what exactly is the kind of satire which Foster practices? – and in the broad context of Australian literature, how can Foster be placed? How far is he really in front of his contemporaries? (The answer, according to James Ley and to this reviewer, is a lot). For Lever, Foster is one of that generation of Australian writers who were determined to “move on from the conservative attitudes they saw as endemic to Australia”(195) in the years following World War Two. Initial responses to his work confused a radical aesthetic with radical politics. As his work has developed, it is clear that Foster's politics are largely subordinate to his intellectual concerns, which remain deeply rooted in his individuality: concerns with rationalism, masculinity, indigeneity (we learn, in Lever's pages, that Foster considers that he may be of indigenous descent) and religiosity.

The picture that emerges of Foster is of a restless and powerful intellect who utilises the novelistic form to inquire into those themes which appear to deeply concern him: the possibility of one truth, as evidenced in his recurrent exploration of alchemical and Gnostic themes, the unsatisfactory state of Australia's colonial status and its cultural failures, which at times extends to a savage critique of all civilized culture, and the place of masculinity, of aboriginality, of women and of homosexuality. At times these ideas seem to lead to exhilarating fictional places; at others, to the strangely uncomfortable territory of idiosyncrasy. Foster appears to be not that different from his *Quadrant* stablemate, Les A. Murray, positioning himself against a 'politically correct majoritarian position' and sometimes speaking for a 'disenfranchised rural minority in Australia' (202). As such, he is a modernist individualist, possibly like Murray anti-humanist, but certainly a more profound thinker than Murray and, it would seem, his peculiar ideas have not been developed at the expense of his art. Foster does not exclude himself from the pessimistic toughness with which he confronts the world he sees through the prism of satire, and the result is an exhilarating, and tenaciously complex mix of modes, ideas

and styles. Yet some of his ideas make even as ardent an admirer as Lever baulk: Foster's seeking out of a Queanbeyan man who castrated himself is, Lever suspects, an instance of 'ratbaggery' (172). Foster's greatest achievement is, in Lever's eyes, *Mates of Mars* (1991), although it would be interesting to see how the recent *Sons of the Rumour* (2009) might compare. There is little doubt in this reviewer's mind that Foster is the greatest of Australia's living novelist. It is only to be hoped that this book will convert more to the same opinion.

#### Works Cited

- Bernstein, Michael André. *Bitter Carnival. Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.
- Hadas, Moses. *Ancilla to Classical Reading*. New York: Columbia UP, 1954.
- Hight, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962.
- Weinbrot, Howard. *Menippean Satire Reconsidered*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.