

SHAUN BELL

Martin Boyd, *When Blackbirds Sing* (reprint)

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In the final moment of Martin Boyd's *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962), Helena Langton – the wife of “decorated” subaltern Dominic Langton – hears that Dominic has pitched the Military Cross he has just received into their farm dam. “You’re not serious?” Helena says, and so ends the final novel in Martin Boyd's Langton Tetralogy. Having brought readers halfway across the Western world (from the mansions of Toorak, the estates of country England, and the palazzos of Rome) back to Australia, it is strangely fitting that the finale of Boyd's Langton novels is played out in a paddock in rural New South Wales. Far removed from the machinations of a privileged colonial society predicated on social stratification, fashionable connections, and hereditary wealth, the novel also seems removed from the rest of Boyd's fiction and its characteristic treatment of this world. Continuing the story begun in *The Cardboard Crown* (1952) of the Langton dynasty and their lurch into modernity, *When Blackbirds Sing* also sees a departure: the typifying light and humorous tone is still present, though now accompanied by a hard edge of social and political critique. Focalised on Dominic and his transformative experience of military service during World War I, *When Blackbirds Sing* is in this sense a continuation of second novel in the series *A Difficult Young Man*. Now married to his cousin Helena and somewhat financially secure, the impetus of Boyd's interest in Dominic has changed. Dominic is still difficult, his family still rich, feckless and privileged – though here many of the similarities end. Transfigured by the horrors of the First World War, Dominic is clearly imbued with Boyd's own war experience and perspective. Now opposed to imperial and cultural-nationalist glorifications of war, the grand parlours, manors and townhouses of the society Boyd so adored and upheld in his work have in Dominic's words lost their “life-giving colour” (138). The “pattern” (29, 96, 97) of the grand civilisation of Europe that Boyd so extolled has also lost its coherence. Shocked into political consciousness by the war, Boyd through Dominic finally “sweats Europe out of his system” (173). All very serious and at the same time not at all, though isn't that the pleasure of reading Martin Boyd?

An anachronism in his own time, the 2014 republication of Martin Boyd's *When Blackbirds Sing* sees the final novel in his celebrated Langton Quartet in print in Australia for the first time in twenty-two years. Celebrated in a previous era as a purveyor of witty social comedies, there is an aspect to Boyd's prior significance that is jarring in its focus on and affection for a period aligned with colonial and racist coordinates of the national imaginary. This characterisation of Boyd and his writing would be familiar to many, yet the manner in which some accounts describe Boyd's oeuvre in a way that suggests John Galsworthy – or indeed any other writer in the social realist tradition of the nineteenth century – had written a series of novels set partly in Australia deserves closer examination. Long recognised as cannibalising life for fiction, the family history of the Boyd-á-Beckett clan provides much of the events and characters for Boyd's Langton novels and the earlier *Lucinda Brayford* (1946) (McKernan). Familiar tropes evocative of the comedies and social

realist novels of the nineteenth century pepper the series: from narratives of miscegenation and infidelity, to ill-begotten fortunes, déclassé aristocrats and conniving social schemers, it's easy to see why Boyd is often compared to canonical writers of "comedy of manners" like Jane Austen, Galsworthy, Henry James and E.M. Forster (Blain, *Deconstructing* 10).¹ Some critics have taken this suggested parallel further, observing that Boyd, like Forster, wrote novels sympathetic to homosexual characters in a period of illegality – yet, unlike Forster's belated *Maurice* (1913, published 1971), Boyd submitted for publication his "homosexual novel" *The Shepherd of Admentus* which was rejected, never published and the manuscript destroyed (Niall, 117). Others have remarked that Boyd's enduring value resides in his keen recall of a nostalgically viewed bygone era associated with Australian cultural nationalism: his novels' connections to a class of expatriate and cosmopolitan elite and their Anglo-Australian relations. This is an important element of Boyd's wider oeuvre and particularly *The Montforts* (1925-28), *Lucinda Brayford* (1946) and the first three Langton novels (1952, 55, 57), yet this view doesn't quite account for other dynamics in Boyd's literature, and this is made clear in *When Blackbirds Sing*.

One of the few romance-themed quartets written by a male author (considered the province of female romance writers), aspects of his novels once seen as contributing a needed urban counter to the pervading bush-focused novel are now viewed as somewhat kitschy.² The polemics on art and exhortations of aristocratic culture previously cited as evidence of Boyd's "seriousness" have dated the fiction in the extreme.³ Although well regarded, Boyd's fictions were always seen as belated and were more popular on publication in the United Kingdom and America (Hartnett 34).⁴ Written in disdain of the pervading culture in a similar vein to A.A. Philips *Cultural Cringe* (1958), there's a nuance related to aesthetics and visual culture more like that of his relative Robin Boyd, architect and author of *The Australian Ugliness* (1960). Boyd's representation of the ostensibly superior class of the Langtons has, up until this novel, been affectionately wry. There's also a capacity for occasional wicked invention, obscured by Boyd's supposed fidelity to real life: in *The Cardboard Crowd* he caricatures his grandfather, depicting him as a reckless man prone to bouts of licentiousness, who marries "beneath himself" socially to secure an income. Fabricating affairs for both his grandparents, the first Langton novel documents their personal lives alongside a riches-to-rags-to-riches saga of this generation in which Boyd skewers the crass materialism of select family members. Perhaps the most Austenian of his novels, Boyd's focus is firmly on matters of dynasty, family and the continuation of their vision of society, with a noted nostalgia for this privileged world (Boyd 1968). Tellingly, Boyd obscures his family's convict heritage and the foundation of their wealth in larceny (Niall 2012). Replacing a transported Irish convict forebear with a Spanish aristocrat, many of the worst traits of the Langtons are attributed to the Duque de Teba – famed for strangling altar boys with attendant insinuations of sexual perversity. Entirely invented, the implications of Boyd writing a genetic "perversity" into what is largely a semi-biographic work are telling.

In the first three Langton novels, Boyd depicts himself as Guy Langton – a sweet, "sexually indeterminate" and apparently guileless boy – and his brother Merric (a troubled young man, and celebrated potter in later life) as Dominic.⁵ Struggling with his life's purpose, Dominic is kicked out of school, fails agricultural college, makes a scandal of a milkmaid and a cousin, and forces the family to again flee to England. Dominic bears the burden of much of the Duque de Teba's legacy of "dark Mediterranean passion" and readers may struggle with warring feelings of sympathy and delight at the many tragic and bathetic events that befall him (*DYM* 25). Transitioning to Boyd's own generation in the

second novel, *A Difficult Young Man*, there is a clearer focus garnered from Boyd's personal experience of his subject matter. In the third and most romance-oriented of his novels, *Outbreak of Love* (1955), a series of failed marriages, abortive engagements and secret love affairs see the family return once again to Australia to escape scandal. While the life of Boyd provides the outline of these events, Susan Lever notes the recurrence of biographical topoi throughout the novels and suggests that this tendency to draw repeatedly on characters, locales, and events from his own life has contributed to and arguably sustained the view of Boyd as "social chronicler, not committed creative artist" (McKernan, 309). However, this self-complication in the de Teba legacy and its suggestion of inherited abject sexuality as attributed to Dominic sees Boyd deviate from previous correspondence to the life. Like *A Difficult Young Man*, *When Blackbirds Sing* focuses on the young Dominic – this time on his return to England to enlist – and in doing so evokes aspects of the traditional coming of age story or *Bildungsroman*. Unlike *A Difficult Young Man* there is a marked shift in tone and narration that create a departure for Boyd in style, narrative voice, and thematic concern from all the earlier novels. Connected to Boyd's rewriting of Dominic as a combination of himself and Merric, this is seen most profoundly in the narration which changes from a somewhat strange and not always successful second person voiced by second brother Guy (who corresponds with Martin in the first three novels), to a more conventional third person narration localised on Dominic – this also allows Boyd to forgo the somewhat clunky organising structure from the previous novels of the interspersed vignettes set in the "present" that worked to justify Merric's impossible omniscience through his reading of his grandmother's journals.

Many regard *When Black Birds Sing* as an anomaly in the series and unlike any of Boyd's other texts. Written in 1964, contemporary reviews remark that "the time is 1914 but it seems ever so much longer ago. The jacket will not correct the impression."⁶ Difficult to define in terms of genre and uneasily placed in canonical formations, the expected and characteristic nostalgia in Boyd's treatment of a belated anglo-Australianism aligned with British colonialism is curiously absent. The finale of four books, the novel conversely sees Boyd at his most politically engaged and focused on his own time. Sonya Hartnett has commented that Boyd's depiction of The Great War was an effort to present his opposition to Australian participation and conscription in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Boyd writes in his biography: "horrors beyond imagining outside the range of any crimes of history have been inflicted on humanity by its rulers, and what I say would be negligible in comparison. . . . I have put most of it into *When Blackbirds Sing*" (Boyd 1965, 53). Serving as a subaltern on the Western Front, Dominic is joyous at first, feeling he has found the acceptance in military sociality and regimental brotherhood. Yet Dominic's time on the front takes a toll on his psyche. He shoots and kills a young and nameless German conscript in a night time attack, spurred on by Colonel Rogers' indoctrination and glorification of violence and military combat as "the orgasm of killing..Pierce another man with a sword. Don't release the seed of life, but the blood of death" (121).⁷ The moment the bullet pierces the nameless German, Dominic's perspective is transformed by "a faint glance of recognition", a connection that breaches differences of language and allegiance (136). We see this marked change in attitude and tone, when wounded and suffering a form of shell-shock (what we now know as PTSD) the Great War is transmuted for Dominic Langton into a senseless theatre of nameless conscript killing nameless conscript; what he calls "the Moloch's jaw" (112). Reportedly an attempt by Boyd to combine and reconcile his war experience with the then shame of his brother Merric's famed conscientious objection, humour dissipates and the novel is written with pathos. Citing Aldous Huxley

throughout, the famed English public intellectual and anti-war campaigner is a man Boyd seems to aspire to and respect.⁸ The once anomalous and earnest appeals on the value of life, art and aesthetic beauty extolled by those characters corresponding to Boyd found throughout the oeuvre, are given new meaning, embodied and connected to Dominic and the events he experienced in World War I. Rather than celebrating the war as a triumph of civilisation over barbarity, it is a slaughter with the only redeeming aspect being scenes of homosocial connection between soldiers in the trenches. Through Dominic, Boyd rejects warfare as the apogee of political point-scoring, representing an alternative to populist narratives aligning national origins with the ANZACs and a glorification of war through an appropriation of Judeo-Christian symbolism of sacrifice.⁹

In this moment Dominic is drawn out of time and the German's now-crumpled form is merged in correspondence with that of his dear friend Hollis – who he believes has died in an earlier attack. Evocative of other literary treatments of platonic friendship in military sociality like that of George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964) or Sumner Locke Elliott's *Rusty Bugles* (1948), this homosociality borders on the ambivalently erotic in a manner reminiscent of David Malouf or Randolph Stow's writing of military life.¹⁰ This impression is compounded by an ambiguously described moment shared between Dominic and Hollis cavorting naked in a grove. This moment in an apple orchard near Bethune transforms this sociality and infuses it with a religious energy (Blain 2002). Drawing on classical allusion evoking the homoerotic, the difference in time, place and generation between the period Boyd depicts and our world today sees a shift in register related to the ageing of his work rendering some of the more poetic phrases and classical allusions as purple prose; and in Boyd's use of the eroticised male form of classical and renaissance art, the figurative pallet occasionally runs to camp. This religiosity focalised on an erotic devotion of the male form steeped in renaissance classicism embodied in Boyd's beloved "belvedere Hermes" has led to suggestions of closeted homosexuality (Darby).¹¹ Steeped in High Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, Boyd seems to actively endorse highly conservative attitudes (many considered outdated even during his lifetime) that are in tension, if not at odds, with his appeals to a classical worldview communicated through the ambiguously homoerotic, aligned with pagan naturism. This event is made all the more difficult and poignant for Dominic and comes to evoke notions of *Noblesse oblige* and the relationship between aristocratic officers and their servants or batmen; one of the best known popular examples being the relationship between Frodo and Sam found in J.R.R. Tolkien's allegorisation of the Great War in the *Lord of the Rings* (1954).

By the end of Boyd's Langton novels, Dominic becomes something of a tragic figure. Grappling with surges of violent emotion, traumatising visions of the past, homesickness, ennui, and depression, Dominic is once again in danger of being torn apart by his warring emotions. Convalescing in the converted home of a well-to-do acquaintance, lying in a drawing room turned ward, Dominic laments "the bleak room where there was no colour left on the walls" (138), this room being metonymic for the entire aristocratic tradition and way of life Dominic assumed he was part of and working to protect. Refusing to wear a uniform, he is invalided out of military service to avoid the disgrace of a celebrated veteran turned conscientious objector becoming public knowledge. Of course, Boyd's brother Merric never served, and in the final third of the novel Dominic's voice and that of Boyd seem to merge. Irrevocably transformed by Boyd's consideration of the apocalypse of the Great War, anyone who has read a Boyd novel will recognise those "fourth wall"-breaking moments where a character reminiscent of Boyd himself will sermonise on a worldview that is inherently privileged, and deeply connected to his unique beliefs and subjectivity.

Though fixated on a period some forty years prior to the time of writing (and 100 years removed from today), in speaking to Classical ideals, the almost overwhelming retrograde style and nostalgic subject matter apparent in reading any of Boyd's novels seems less irrevocably dated here, enhanced by a political position and a clearer alignment with the ideals of the Romantics and the formal features of the Modernist novel.¹² Expressed here through Dominic, Boyd almost recants on previously espoused positions on art, the human form and the divine. He becomes despondent and withdrawn, paralleling the novel's changing depiction of the anglo-Australian Langtons and the landed gentry: Boyd's emergent anti-war position, aligned with anti-industrial and anti-capital philosophies sees a rejection of statist warmongering.

I don't mention these facts to damn or absolve aspects of Martin Boyd's persona as recondite arch-conservative lurking in our literary past. Instead, what I want to suggest is the fascinating readability and enduring relevance of his complex and contradictory literary life. Noel Rowe proposes Boyd's *A Difficult Young Man* as a text that "include[s], need[s], perhaps recognise[s] and respect[s] [the] ugly and untidy, the irrational and repressed, the unspoken and unspeakable in [its] writing" (36-7). While Robert Darby suggests that critical accounts of Boyd religiosity fail to recognise that, "it is saturated with sexual desire and accompanied by a strong dose of classical paganism that makes it more Greek than Christian" (2008, 55). Jenny Blain's work in examining Boyd's texts alongside his biographic writing, reveals suggestive and sexualised depictions of homosociality and homosexual erotics that are veiled, examined at distance, and silenced through religion. These energies long subsumed in thematic signifiers of class and conventional faith that worked to normalise are given renewed meaning and significance. Martin Boyd was a complex individual, holding deeply anomalous and contradictory beliefs that are dissonant; yet the seemingly warring personas of recondite arch-conservative lurking in our literary past, and newly emergent image as pacifist and queer literary forebear can be reconciled. Any easy narrative of Boyd's life, whether it be as a cultural nationalist, conservative, Catholic, or as closeted queer is insufficient in light of the literature, just as any attempt to co-opt his literature into any ideological program becomes troubled and undone by the life. Boyd held seemingly radically opposed views, he wrote humorous novels deemed serious, later ignored, and revived with new insight into his particular and unique conception of human life as beautiful, sacred and worthy of dignity. Maintaining this position for the rest of his life, one of Martin Boyd's final literary acts was to self-publish a stirring anti-war polemic. In a cultural milieu where bygone Anglo-Australian connections are resuscitated to progress a neoconservative program, it is important to counter simplistic accounts of our national authors that work to affirm this reductive project.

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Notes

- ¹ Jenny Blain highlights that Boyd himself described *The Montforts* (1928) as “a pseudo-Galsworthian account of my mother’s family over five generations, full of thinly disguised portraits” (*A Single Flame*, London: J. M. Dent, 1939, 204)
- ² Dorothy Green first made this identification of Boyd as a counter to bush-focused literature in her ‘Introduction’ to *Outbreak of Love* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1957: v-xviii). Kenneth Moon takes this one step further, identifying Boyd’s reliance on coincidence as one aspect of pulp fiction conventions in *Lucinda Brayford* remarking “and he does at times write Mills and Boon style”.
- ³ “Seriousness” was a recurrent trope in the work of Boyd’s most vociferous champion, Leonie Kramer. Leonie Kramer, “The Seriousness of Martin Boyd”, *Southerly* 28.2 (1968).
- ⁴ *Lucinda Brayford* was easily Boyd’s most enduringly popular and best selling work. This success afforded him a sum substantial enough to relocated from his small country cottage “Plumstead”, near Cambridge, to the rundown family estate The Grange near Berwick, Victoria, in 1948. Spending a minor fortune rebuilding it and his memory of the families past, Boyd didn’t last long in Australia, returning to Europe in 1951. Niall, Brenda. *Martin Boyd: A Life*.

- ⁵ Brenda Niall highlights that: “In later years when ostensibly at least [Boyd] writes about his older brother, there is a sense of identification as well as of otherness. Dominic and Guy...at first appear to be versions of Merric and Martin, and to represent two very different personalities. The older brother is active, intense, passionate; the younger is amiable and ineffectual. But the portrait of Dominic is only superficially Merric’s; and one may conjecture that the qualities which define Dominic were suppressed from early childhood in Martin as a response to Minnie Boyd’s attitude towards her first two sons”. *Martin Boyd: A Life*, 7.
- ⁶ Unattributed review. ‘*When Blackbirds Sing*’. *Kirkus Review*, May 3 1963: Abelard-Schuman. <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/martin-boyd-6/when-blackbirds-sing/> Retrieved: 21, August 2015.
- ⁷ Something of a Francophile, Boyd’s texts are riddled with untranslated French and this could be a potential pun on the French idiom for orgasm ‘la petite mort’, the little death.
- ⁸ Boyd through Dominic also compares himself to D.H. Lawrence, and later casts derision at Franz Kafka, *Difficult Young Man*, 25.
- ⁹ The pietà is a notable religious symbol appropriated in the symbolism of the civic religiosity of ANZAC memorials. Referenced repeatedly in Boyd’s novels, he also draws on Christological configurations of suffering as revelatory and sacrificial. Later, this becomes invested with greater reference to Greco-Roman pantheons described through classical allusion to the bacchanalian and messianic capacities of Apollo and Dionysus. Blain, Jenny. “Martin Boyd : ‘Complicating the Deity with Erotic Impulse?’” *Southerly* 62.3 (2002): 82-92.
- ¹⁰ Stephen Garton highlights Boyd’s treatment of military homosocialities and places his work in a genealogy including: “David Malouf’s *The Great World* (Pantheon, 1990), Leonard Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* (Penguin, 1932), William Nagle’s *The Odd Angry Shot* (Angus & Robertson, 1975) and Alan Seymour’s play *The One Day of the Year* (1958)”.
- ¹¹ Brenda Niall notes in her introduction to the new edition of *The Cardboard Crown* that Boyd’s friends were divided on the issue of his sexuality. Darleen Bungey’s biography of *Arthur Boyd: A life* (2008), suggests Martin’s death – reported as bowel cancer – was a suicide coded as a “sudden death”. There’s further speculation that the cessation of his friendship with the young Luciano Trombini in Italy hastened Boyd’s decline.
- ¹² Being said, the work of Steven Yao documents a genealogy of modernist novels that invoke Classical texts, often read in modernist traditions to cite a neo-classical authority that is potentially profoundly conservative Yao, Steven G., *Translation and the Languages of Modernism: Gender, Politics, Language*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. I thank Dr. Fiona Morrison for this reference.