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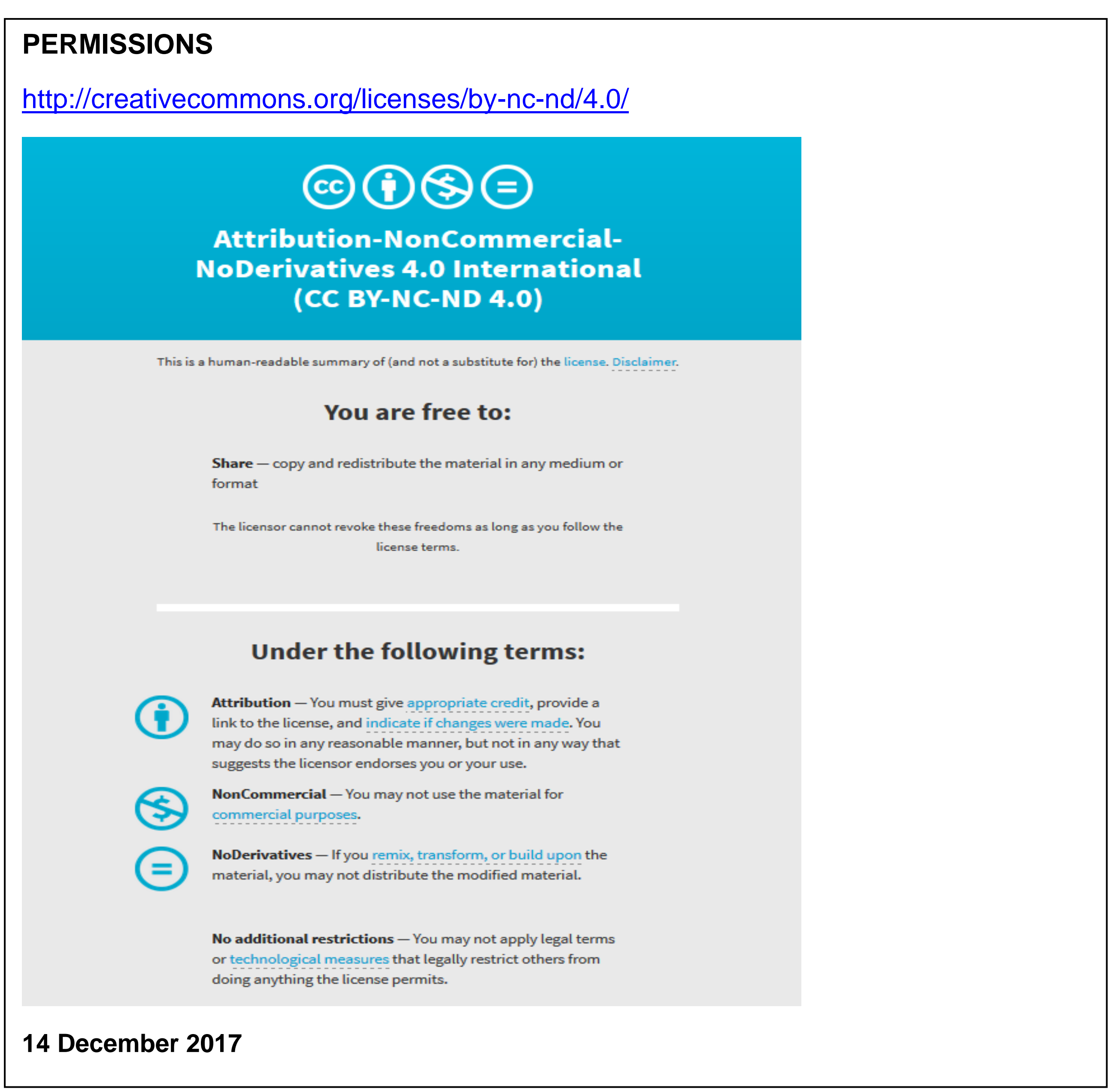

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10 Geoffrey Dutton: Little Adelaide and *New York Nowhere*[1]

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It ought to be impossible to talk about literary Adelaide without due mention of Geoffrey Dutton (1922-98). As a prime mover of Writers' Week and the Adelaide Festival of Arts, and founding co-editor of *Australian Letters* (1957–68) and *Australian Book Review* (1961-), both magazines based in Adelaide, Dutton was central to the city's post-war cultural initiatives. He was associated with the University of Adelaide, where he studied for a year before enlisting (another magazine, *Angry Penguins*, appeared controversially there that same year, 1940) and later taught. He was one of the English Department's lively cohort of writers and scholars who were enthusiastic about Australian and other 'new' literatures.

From Adelaide, Dutton played important national roles too, as editor at the newly formed Penguin Australia, co-founder of Sun Books, publisher at Macmillan and editor of the *Bulletin*'s literary supplement. He served on

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influential committees and boards, including the Commonwealth Literary Fund and the inaugural Australia Council. Dutton was a bold and astute editor, as shown in the commemorative volume he co-edited with his Adelaide friend and colleague Max Harris to showcase the achievements of *Australian Letters*. That book, *The Vital Decade: Ten years of Australian art and letters* (Sun Books, 1968), includes pairings of work by leading artists and poets of the day, Sidney Nolan with Randolph Stow, for example, and Clifton Pugh with Judith Wright. It also includes the famous piece Patrick White wrote for the magazine, 'The Prodigal Son', one of the best of all Australian essays. Christina Stead's novella *The Puzzleheaded Girl* first appeared there, as did Peter Carey's first published story. Another success in those years was *The Literature of Australia* (1964), a multi-authored survey under Dutton's editorship that sold some 60,000 copies for Penguin Australia.

Dutton was writing all this time too. In the course of his life he published more than 40 volumes of poetry, biography, criticism, fiction and non-fiction. In an obituary for the UK *Independent* the critic Clement Semmler suggested that Dutton's 'contribution to Australian letters was probably unrivalled in his generation' (Semmler). 'It was thanks to the inspiration of great editors like Geoffrey Dutton that book publishing truly came of age in this country,' concurred University of Queensland Press editor Craig Munro in *Southerly* (7). Such claims are well-justified.

Yet generations come and go, and Dutton's reputation has fallen into the shadow that can immediately follow a literary life, as neglect prepares the way for eventual reassessment. It would therefore be more than possible in 2013, fifteen years after his death, to talk about Australian literature, and even literary Adelaide, without much more than a passing reference to Geoffrey Dutton.

The sheer scope and variety of Dutton's activities complicate the task of evaluating his contribution, both as cultural figure and as writer. Dutton's autobiography *Out in the Open* (1994) provides much useful

material, but complicates even further the intersections of life and art. Dutton's life is also inextricably linked to Patrick White's, which we know largely through the filter of David Marr's magisterial biography (1991) and follow-up edition of White's selected letters (1994). In that reconstruction, after White's break with him in 1982, Dutton becomes a warning negative example. Dutton's informed assessment of White's behaviour, based on years of close contact, has been overshadowed by Marr's White's bilious purging of Dutton and what he called 'Duttonry'. 'You're vile, vile, vile', Nin Dutton (Dutton's first wife) remembers White saying when she rang around this time to help with a housekeeper (Marr, 'Life', 615; 'Letters', 562; Dutton, 'Out', 456). It was a pattern for White to repudiate old friends—Barry Humphries, Lawrence Daws, Brett Whitely among them—especially if they had a new partner.

A different approach to reconsidering Dutton can be found by looking to what he does best as a writer—his poetry. Dutton was first and last a poet (Jose; Munro). In this chapter I draw attention to an important missing piece in that body of work by discussing Dutton's last substantial poem, *New York Nowhere*, which was published posthumously a few weeks after his death in 1998. It appeared in a limited collector's edition of 175 copies with etchings by John Olsen, photographs by publisher Robert Littlewood and a CD of the poet reading the work. It has not been reprinted since. The volume was expensive to buy. Only a few libraries purchased copies. The Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide has a copy presented by then Vice-Chancellor Mary O'Kane in 1999 as the Library's 2,000,000th book: one of the 20 extra deluxe copies bound in emu skin (!) that sold for $3800. While the book may be consulted in the library, photocopying and scanning are made difficult by its size and value, not to mention copyright issues. This evidently desirable rare volume has seldom surfaced on the secondary market—perhaps more because of the value of Olsen's etchings than the mystique of Dutton's poem. A more accessible edition of *New York Nowhere* was originally envisaged, but it didn't happen for a range of reasons, including the author's demise.

The painter Jeffrey Smart commented when the poem was published that his friend would need no monument because he had already written his own (Barclay). Dutton died of a final stroke in Canberra on 1 November 1998. This last book was posthumously launched at the Olsen Carr Gallery in Sydney on 9 December that year. At the time critics suggested that the poem would 'lead to a re-evaluation of Dutton's output' (Usher). A similar enthusiasm hailed the work as 'possibly the longest poem in Australian literature' (McCulloch, 'Testament'). At some 900 lines, it is longer than Bernard O'Dowd's *The Bush* (1912) but not as long as *The Great South Land* (1951) by Rex Ingamells, *Captain Quiros* (1964) by James McAuley or *The Dunciad Minor* (1971) by A.D. Hope, to name some other outlandish creations. It is also modest compared to the proliferating verse novels of the 1990s, including works such as Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* (1994) and Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune* (1998) that use poetic personae with a sophisticated ambition quite unlike Dutton's. 'Some thirty verse novels [were] published in Australia since the mid 1970s, the number accelerating through the nineties into the turn of the millennia', notes critic Christopher Pollnitz, who discusses Murray and Porter in this verse fictional context (229). But *New York Nowhere* is decidedly not fiction.

A limited edition has limited reach. Today, in a changed technological era, a poem that is unavailable in digital form may as well not exist. That has been the fate of *New York Nowhere*, which does not appear in Sydney University's online Poetry Library with Dutton's other poems, and has minimal citation on the AustLit database. This may be an effect of Dutton's faded reputation, or it may be a contributing factor to that eclipse. Its absence makes the arc of the poet's work incomplete. For the poets of Dutton's generation, late style was often radically different from early and middle, reflecting marked personal, social and artistic shifts. The end reveals a trajectory of new starts in the work of David Campbell and Rosemary Dobson, for example. In Dutton's case, such understanding has been denied. Only now as *New York Nowhere* becomes accessible to a

new audience can it take its place in a re-reading of Dutton's poetry as a whole, as a recapitulation, a lost key.

* * *

The book's full title is *New York Nowhere: Meditations and Celebrations, Neurology Ward, The New York Hospital*. Dutton found himself there in mid-1995 after he had a stroke while travelling with his wife Robin Lucas by train to New York from Toronto, where he had been invited to read at the prestigious Harbourfront Readings. He suffered hallucinations, partial loss of vision and other temporary disabilities, but, in the words of his medical specialist, he 'dodged the bullet', partly thanks to a mini-stroke a year earlier. With recovery underway, he was discharged and able to return to Australia. In a letter of 23 July 1995 from his home in the Glasshouse Mountains, he wrote to his daughter Tisi of ideas for poems coming out of the episode. Two years later he got together with Melbourne art publisher Robert Littlewood and the special edition eventuated. John Olsen offered to contribute etchings as a kindness to an old friend. Littlewood's photographs document the making of the book and the people involved, as the publisher came to know the older writer and his zest for life, though Dutton was still suffering some effects of the stroke. Lucas, identified in the book only as 'she who comes', plays an important role in the poem. Her daily presence at Dutton's bedside in New York had helped the patient's recovery. She had played a life-saving role, and Dutton intended to dedicate the poem to her.

It is hard not to agree with John Olsen's remarks at the launch that the experience in New York 'enabled [Dutton] to review his life in quite an extraordinary way' (McCulloch). Media attention at the time concentrated on the personal circumstances that enveloped Dutton's life after the poem was written—like 'something out of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', according to Olsen—and may have clouded its reception

(McCulloch, 'Testament', 'Poet'). A new approach begins by reading the poem on its own terms as a work of literature.

* * *

New York Nowhere is in 47 free verse sections of varying length, a discontinuous monologue set in the New York hospital ward that dramatises the goings-on around the poet in the present, and also inside the poet's mind as he tries to make sense of what is happening, ranging back over his life, to other scrapes with death, other moments of extremity, other places and times, even as he moves forward to partial healing and an eventual, tentative release back into the world.

The characters in the drama are deftly, vividly present: Richard and Danny, the young fellow inmates; the doctor; the nurse; and 'she who comes'. The speaker is a biographically recognisable Geoffrey Dutton, and key incidents from the autobiography *Out in the Open* that he published the year before this stroke, in 1994, and in other earlier poems, recur in epitome, stripped to expressive essentials. The speaker is a literary man who weaves his text through with literary allusions, personalised and sometimes hermetic: his 'silent anthology of dead friends' (*New York Nowhere*, XXI; hereafter cited by section number only).

'It came out of nowhere,' says young Richard at the start, referring to his brain tumour (I). The poet takes up the idea of 'nowhere', the blackness or chaos from which life is created and destroyed, and develops it in an extended set of metaphors with knotted, even confused, variations, as it becomes a therapeutic process: 'The healing is slowly coming out of nowhere' too (XLVI). Along the way the darkness proves 'fertile', but not without humiliation and vulnerability. The poem is fractured, characterised by lateral association and oblique connection, a chequerboard, a crossword, a game of snakes and ladders that nonetheless holds to a determination to communicate. Accordingly, its idiom is

mostly plain-spoken. This 'nowhere', contrasted with 'somewhere', takes form through a set of contrapuntal oppositions: the present with the past (a childhood memory of working with a blacksmith; a plane crash in wartime Papua New Guinea); here (a clean white hospital/prison) and there (remembered natural environments); inside and out on the street; the self and the world; black and white; death and life; the Black Prince and a White Angel. It is ironic that New York, the ultimate cosmopolitan city, should here be the Nowhere, while distant Australia is this man's Somewhere, though also another kind of nowhere, as he notes, when it is conceived as *terra nullius* (XXXVIII). The poem follows the elliptical lines of such traverses, which are the speaker's way of seeing and being. As with the stroke, strange pathways occur in the brain. Often he returns to rustic lore for understanding: in XVI he compares himself to a white gum that suddenly falls from eminence, a widow-maker with the telltale line of termite dust where the branch has dropped from the trunk. 'You could say it had designs on me, then spared me,' he muses, seeking pattern in the apparent randomness of things.

The poem is conscious of its literary avatars in its quest for meaning in extremis: the poet Rilke, writing in terminal illness; Robert Lowell, institutionalised and confessional. Francis Webb's 'Ward Two', an earlier Australian hospital sequence, provides a close covert intertext. In his introduction to *The Literature of Australia* Dutton had written that Webb 'seems to have become central to Australian poetic consciousness' ('Literature', 9). There are those seekers of self-knowledge in prose, Montaigne and Johnson, both afflicted with ills of the flesh. At times Winnie in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* comes to mind, immured in sand as she searches for 'that memorable line', except that Dutton's memory is good, his literary fragments betoken survival, and his tone, surprisingly, is one of winnowed optimism:

> Maiden in the mor, Merry Margerete, midsomer flowre,
> Piers and Harry, the ploughmen, the shearer with the bony hands,
> She who walks in beauty, or the one in the barge's throne,

> Or that dusky woman, so ancient hardly human, or Cook's officers,
> Yawning languidly on deck, right by the reef,
> Or Andy gone with the cattle, or the colt from old Regret,
> Or cruel girls mocking with their mother's eyes.
>
> Fragments that are not ruins, even if I am. (XXI)

A note glosses the collage of allusion in these few lines: Anon, Skelton, Langland, Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Click Go the Shears', Byron, Shakespeare, Rider Haggard, Kenneth Slessor, Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, David Campbell. And, not necessary to reference, line 430 of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins'. It all comes back.

One of the work's most intriguing aspects is the way it at once disables and enables itself: 'Here I am, a writer, who cannot read or write' (XII). This condition licenses a concentrated, disrupted, circling approach, with apparent false starts and indirections that nonetheless eventuate in a shapely story, from arrival at to departure from the hospital, across a few days and nights—a persistent argument, a new expressive synthesis.

The argument is about the power of the imagination to create the world from 'fertile chaos', as contrasted with the capacity of hallucinations out of nowhere to occupy that same darkness with distorting or deceiving effect. An old literary debate between 'fancy' and 'imagination', primary and secondary (in Coleridge's usage), is given a new twist. The hallucinations induced by the stroke torment the poet, getting in the way of both the generative blackness of nowhere and any hope of seeing clearly, again or for the first time. These hallucinations are conveyed in the language of a 1940s apocalyptic poem in section I. In section III the poet invokes Blake's 'vegetative eye' as a way of trying to distinguish hallucinogenic vision from true sight. Although Max Harris is not mentioned by name, *The Vegetative Eye* is the title Harris gave to his first novel, written in an overwrought surrealist vein that Dutton finally rejects.

* * *

The discipline of actuality, of fact, as grounding for imagination is a pervasive concern through Dutton's writing, as he seeks the writer he truly is. His biographies of Adelaide's founder William Light and the explorer Edward John Eyre bring out this strength, as do those fine poems about the world outside himself, such as 'Theberton Hall, 1955', about Light's childhood home in England. *Founder of a City* (1960) is a sympathetic account of Light (1786–1839) as a genius who must continuously battle the odds, and the mixed hand fate has dealt him. Dutton appreciates Light as a Regency figure, part Romantic, part rationalist, whose defeats are part of a larger triumph. The biography defends Light through a persistent winnowing of fact and speculation. Such balance, wryly acknowledging failure and compromise in near-impossible situations, characterises Dutton's affection not only for Light but for Light's legacy in Adelaide, compromised as it is, for South Australia, for Australia. Light named his Adelaide property Theberton in memory of the peaceful place in rural England where he spent his boyhood. Thanks to a misprint the name was spelled wrongly on subsequent maps. For Dutton that epitomises the shifts that inevitably occur, not a tragedy, but an irony for the historian to savour:

> And William Light would laugh to find misspelt
> The name of Theberton he gave his hut,
> — Now rows of houses with their front doors shut,
> A respectable suburb known as Thebarton,
> In Adelaide, a city he had begun
> Three years before his death, and got no thanks.
> ('New', 37)

Light was philosophical, sure of his own rightness: 'I leave it to posterity … to decide whether I am entitled to praise or blame' for siting the city as he did ('Founder', 288). The biographer is no less sure in his critique: 'Theberton Cottage [Light's house] was demolished in 1926, despite the

protests of the few South Australians who cared about one of the precious relics of their history' ('Founder', 280). Light's fight for his vision of an improved, even ideal society and his realism about the degree by which that vision would fall short are emblematic, in Dutton's version, of the lot of all Australians who, like himself, take on the burden of building and enhancing their world. The ambiguity of actuality is necessary to the task, in the same way that the facts of Australia will always resist the fiction.

That became a seam of tension between Dutton and Patrick White. When he read and liked *Founder of a City*, White speculated on a possible play about Light and the other personalities involved in establishing Adelaide. He asked Dutton: 'Have you anything of the theatre in you, or aren't you sufficiently dishonest?' (Dutton,'Out', 241-2). White was on to something. The answer is that Dutton's work explores the relationship between actuality and fancy, the world and the individual, in a way that gives weight to honesty. Plays were about the only literary genre Dutton didn't attempt, and he came to think that the dishonesty of theatre had corrupted White and his work. Dutton had moved to have White's *The Ham Funeral* produced in Adelaide in 1961 after it was rejected by everyone else, including the Adelaide Festival committee. He was less happy when the success of that production launched White into a career as a playwright at the expense of other, better things. 'I have often wished that I had never asked him to send me that script of *The Ham Funeral*; the theatre, as he had told me before we met, is a dishonest business', Dutton later wrote ('Out', 248). In the unsparing exchanges when they fell out in 1982, it was White's seduction by the young and charming theatre crowd and the gratification of opening night applause that Dutton most deplored: 'the theatre gave him warmth but dishonesty to his own artistic conscience' ('Out', 458). In relation to the publication of White's discarded novel fragment *The Hanging Garden* (2012), David Marr puts a similar argument, blaming Adelaide, with Dutton as its agent, for luring White into the theatre to the detriment of major new fiction. 'Now we can

see *Signal Driver* [the play commissioned by Jim Sharman for the 1982 Adelaide Festival, the same year White and Dutton fell out] for what it is: consolation of a kind for a fine novel lost' ('So much', 16).

When Dutton and White first met, White thought they might have been related—fellow Australian aristocrats. White was tempted to move to Adelaide with Manoly Lascaris to live with the Duttons, as family. But this was a version of himself that White later sloughed off. When Dutton, encouraged by Murray Bail, published a tribute on White's seventieth birthday that revealed their shared past and background, it was the last straw. The offending piece is relatively innocuous, but it touched a nerve. It embarrassed White, exposing the sentimentality behind the author's savagely satirical mask and showing up his recent memoir *Flaws in the Glass* as artfully selective. White protests too much: Dutton emerges as the truth teller in the relationship.

No less than White, Dutton was publicly courageous in his stances: his republicanism; and his embrace of Soviet poets, such as Yevgeny Yevtushenko, at the height of the Cold War. He was proud of his Jewish ancestry, and regretted the way White had cast off his Jewish friends ('Out', 28, 458). 'In recent years it has been painful to observe you becoming ever more vain, intolerant and authoritarian, even descending into rabid anti-Semitism', Dutton wrote to White the year they broke off relations ('Out', 456-7). A wounded White complained to composer Richard Meale: he 'says I am swollen with vanity … anti-semitic into the bargain … it's a relief to be free of Duttonry' (Marr, 'Letters', 563-4).

* * *

If his deepest impulse was to praise, Dutton did so weighing the negatives. 'The biographer must ask, "What is the truth?" and stay for an answer', he writes ('Out', 192), though his own autobiography does not always do so.

By *New York Nowhere*, he is able to ask himself Montaigne's question, '*Que sçais-je*' ('What do I know?'), and quote Yeats on choosing 'perfection of the life, or of the work', knowing that flaws in one can reflect flaws in the other, while final judgment hangs in the balance (XXIV, XXXV).

Dutton's poetry gains from being grounded and disciplined. It finds its best idiom when it incorporates qualities from prose, when it is observant, considered and conversational. In *New York Nowhere*, where any praise must overcome extremes of negativity, matters of form and style press with new urgency, as the poet expresses his own disintegration. Utterance breaks apart and is reforged.

Francis Dutton, the poet's eldest son, shrewdly observes that 'even though he was in his 70s when it was written … the autobiography was premature' (McCulloch, 'Poet', 3). Key incidents in *Out in the Open* recur in *New York Nowhere* in abbreviated, abstracted form, as distilled metaphor. The autobiography is an attempt to put things on the record. It provides rich material for cultural history and some personal stuff that is embarrassing in its seeming candour and its unexamined omissions. Exculpatory arguments run throughout, with the author's mother and with other women in his life, with 'little Adelaide', and with White, all entangling proxies for the writer himself, his worse or better angels: Australian Republican vs Queen Adelaide. As apologia, *Out in the Open* comes with a perplexed sense of emancipation, before the even more perplexing twists and turns of the journey to New York's nowhere and back.

The poem, by contrast, convincingly generalises, by compression and self-reflexivity, from the personal to the metaphysical and broadly human. In the autobiography, for example, the poet recalls an image 'out of my mother's readings to me from the myths of ancient Greece' of 'Pallas Athene coming down from the sky with her robes streaming, spear in hand and the Gorgon's head on her shield. When I heard of her severe beauty and her blue eyes I identified her with my mother, who could

be very severe' ('Out', 32). Dutton's attitude towards women is one of the uncomfortable things in the autobiography. In the later poem this image is transmuted into an evocation of the hallucinations induced by the stroke:

> Flies Athene … the severe sword warrior, fully armed …
> Widening from black nowhere to black nowhere,
> With the resolute Gorgon's head on her shield …
> … leaping now in the sight behind my closed eyelids.
>
> Exquisite tyranny which needs no eyes to see. (I)

Mother, *ewig-weiblich*, the eternal feminine, knowing and powerful, becomes a form of oppressive illusion within the self.

Other scarring experiences are similarly transmuted: hymn-singing at boarding school, where Dutton felt his mother had abandoned him (VII); a wartime stint in jail that taught existential lessons (V); and the multiple miracle of surviving that plane crash in the New Guinea jungle at the end of the war when 'some invisible trap in the clear sky … hit us' ('Out', 127; *New York Nowhere*, IV; also 'The Volcano'; 'New', 34-36). Near-death is answered by saving love, where love remains an ambiguous mystery.

New York Nowhere is a last love poem for the unnamed 'she who comes'. An unnamed White surfaces here too. *Out in the Open* tells a story of White's near death by drowning at Rocky Point on Kangaroo Island in 1968, when his gumboots, the wrong footwear for the occasion, filled with water and he was sucked into the blowhole at a favourite fishing spot. Nin Dutton plunged in to save White, and Dutton and a male friend hauled him out: 'Above his mute mouth his blue eyes, alarming at any time, had the look of a man being buried alive. … From then on, that spot was known as Patrick's Hole' ('Out', 359). The resistless, saving love evoked in *New York Nowhere* awakens that distant memory as pure image:

> Love in the spring between the black rocks,
> Love in the stream homing to the sea. (XIV)

Rocky Point was a touchstone of 'purity and honesty' in a slippery world for Dutton ('Out', 273). It inspired White's story 'Dead Roses' that appeared in *The Burnt Ones* (1964), dedicated 'to Nin and Geoffrey Dutton'.

If Dutton's writing is at its best when it rests on the prosaic ground of actuality, it is especially strong when it engages with the particular places to which he is so deeply, if resistantly, attached. His poem 'An Australian Childhood' (1967) records an upbeat overcoming of any melancholy of alienation from the more glittering centres of culture that his privileged kind might once have felt:

> And when my mother played Chopin, the door
> Let out the notes to sing where they were born,
> Paris, Majorca, Vienna or Warsaw;
> Not a grace-note fell on Booleroo or Quorn.
>
> But now, far off, doing eighty down the freeway,
> I wait at memory's lightning for the thunder
> Of names I grew from, my roots then as today
> In Nuriootpa, Tanunda, Eudunda and Kapunda.
> ('New', 80-1)

This good-humoured engagement with the ground in which he had grown, including his family, especially his mother, and the property at Anlaby where he grew up and later lived, and, at a more distant tangent, Adelaide, continued after he got away to Queensland, in apologetics and reassessment in prose and verse as his perspective changed. Yet he could only keep going, finally to New York where the closeness of death took him all the way back to 'little Adelaide', where fear had been a frisson, a creative pulse:

> I'm a student again, in little Adelaide,
> And the beaky, humorous Professor's lecture
> Suddenly becomes sonorous in the hushed theatre,
> As he begins to read Dunbar in his native Scots, with the Latin
> Refrain: '*Timor mortis conturbat me ...*'

> At seventeen, it meant more to me than cemeteries,
> Even more than the war, some ten years old ... (XXXIV)

New York Nowhere is the accomplished last work of a rare poet. It can be understood in terms of the limitations, and the struggle against limitation, that shape Dutton's best art. Part of that is a way of making his own experience emblematic while keeping it ordinary. Without that honest discipline, which can perhaps be thought of in terms of the flat grids and long clear vistas of the places of his beginnings, he was nothing.

Geoffrey Dutton was a wanderer, a promiscuous litterateur, a friend to too many, a public figure who wore too many hats, and a distinguished poet. In the last decade of his life, after leaving South Australia, he happily occupied a string of different habitats with Robin Lucas. *Out in the Open* concludes with a section called 'To the Glasshouse Mountains, 1983–93'. The *New and Selected Poems* he published in 1993 concludes with the sequence 'Moving to the Glasshouse Mountains'. Ending both books is the poem 'Little Testament' (the title is Villon's), written in 'the sixty-ninth year of [the poet's] age': 'I go north and say farewell to frost' ('New', 225). He didn't know then that a journey much further north lay ahead, to New York Nowhere, which would intensify the poetic renewal that is already evident in the 1993 selection, in 'Aboriginal Dance, Hooker Creek', for example, where Dutton writes: 'we are a continent of dust/ And not until we learn to live with dust/ Will our skins be clean' ('New', 199). *New York Nowhere* is a poem of determined, roundabout return to life.

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