

## **The Challenge of the Meta-Contextual: Henry Lawson's 'Telling Mrs Baker' (1901) and some Animal Questions for Australia**

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Most literary and cultural criticism today is contextual. Thus a contemporary reading of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) will place the novel within the cultural politics of the early Victorian period, its determinations of class and gender, the history of publishing, changing make-ups of readership etc. Yet culture itself has a context – the biosphere, air, water, plant and animal life – and the more radical work in environmental criticism tends to be, so to speak, 'meta-contextual.' That is, it opens on issues that may involve perspectives for which given practices of mapping out the cultural politics of a text seem limited and enclosed, questions which may involve time-spans of centuries or millennia, that do not fit given political categories of left and right and which may concern injustice to those not yet born. The ethical challenge of non-human lives adds itself to this list. The term meta-contextual also seems worth coining here to embrace one of the most exciting but also inherently problematic and unstable features of environmental criticism: that it must in some way, implicitly or otherwise, engage itself with an issue so huge as the overall stance humanity should take in relation to the rest of the natural world.

An increasing attention to the ethical and socio-political questions posed by the human treatment of animals is part of what is now perceived as a general environmental crisis. Derrida observed in *For What Tomorrow* (2004) that 'A large-scale disorganization-reorganisation of the human earth is under way.'<sup>1</sup> He might have omitted 'human.' In fact, awareness of other issues, such as carbon emissions, has been intensifying so fast that even a recently dead thinker who spent so much time flying across the world to conferences begins to look changed. If even the more conservative forecasts of climate change are accurate, it could be that, just as the name 'Martin

Heidegger' immediately and unjustly conjures the word 'Nazi,' Derrida will sometimes need to be defended as the thinker of 'incalculable responsibility' who was yet associated with more pollution than any other philosopher in history.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the meta-contextual questions posed by the environmental crisis itself entail, crudely speaking, an active 'deconstruction' of many fundamental philosophical, juridical and ethical concepts on which the West is based, and hence to a large degree the globalised world. Much of this means, as any reader of *Of Grammatology*<sup>3</sup> will know, not the collapse of old ways of thinking and practice in the wake of new ones, but a general and perplexing sense of the closure and finitude of inherited forms, akin at times to paralysis. While it seems to be clearer all the time that 'It is as if Western society has deliberately set out to destroy the integrity of the ecosystem' (Robert J. Brulle),<sup>4</sup> the conceptual, legal, economic, social and political bases of such destruction remain almost impossible to escape, budge or sometimes even perceive. Tell many people that you are working on an article about animals and they will smile slightly, as if they wanted to give you a pat on the head.

Critical thought about the human/animal borderline must be immediately meta-contextual. However, this challenge is frequently unmanageable and seems often to be resisted, either consciously or unconsciously. For instance, if there were as straightforward an analogy as some claim between human rights and putative animal rights then one might expect there to be numerous literary readings equivalent to common schools of interpretation elsewhere, viz. we would have readings of classical texts highlighting in them elements of prejudice or of the systematic misrepresentation of animal life. A demystification of the civilised sphere would take the form of demonstrating its basis in modes of food production requiring mass servitude, imprisonment and slaughter. There would be widespread arguments that 'the canon' itself needs to be overhauled in view of its systematic endorsement of pastoral, hunting and religious practices implicated in animal suffering. There would be a broad questioning of the general association of animals with 'mere' children's books, leading perhaps to new evaluations of books such as Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* (1927) or Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903). Might not even Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* (1976) find itself

re-categorised as an instance of 'speciesism' together with subgenres of writing on hunting and fishing?

However, apart from a few essays in scattered places, no literary movement with such modes of reading exists.<sup>5</sup> Even the *Ecocriticism Reader* of 1996, a landmark for the emerging school of 'ecocriticism,' contained not one essay devoted to the issue of an animal or animals. Why is engaging with animals so difficult?

The work of Cary Wolfe stands out here for putting to detailed work an understanding of the animal/human distinction that draws on Derrida's depth of questioning.<sup>6</sup> Wolfe's sophistication lies mainly in the engagement with the 'speciesist' assumptions at work in the depth structure of even the most 'progressive' critical methodologies. However, if the issue becomes instead one of simply tracing the work of the human/animal divide in a primary text, the critical work involved can seem less demanding. For instance, one can take a canonical text in which animal concerns seem at first to play no part at all, say *David Copperfield* once more, and then trace in it the fault lines of the animal/human distinction. In this case we might move from consideration of the lap dog 'Jip' who serves as a kind of double to David's decoratively genteel first wife, Dora (dog and mistress even dying at the same time), or his aunt Betsey's phobia of donkeys (and men), and the ubiquity of horses and animal imagery and metaphors. Once removed from its customary blind spot, the place of animals in the work of human self-imaging, representation and work becomes peculiarly and even disturbingly obvious. However, as David Wood observes, 'Once we have seen through our self-serving, anthropocentric thinking about other animals, we are and should be left disarmed, ill-equipped to calculate our proper response.'<sup>7</sup> For instance a literary critic can say 'What would *War and Peace* be without horses?' – but then what?

### **'...keep travelling for grass.'**

The issue of animals poses imponderable questions on the unstable border between 'the contextual,' treating animals entirely as facets of human culture (e.g. studying different attitudes to the horse in different places and times) and 'the meta-contextual,' such as attempts to consider the animal 'in its own right.' To make these issues more legible, and to give a sense of their immense stakes, I would like to

offer an experimental reading of the Australian Henry Lawson's famous short story 'Telling Mrs Baker' ?<sup>8</sup> This was first published in *Blackwood's Magazine* for October 1901, during Lawson's brief stay in England. 1901 also happens to be the year of 'federation,' that is the year in which the separate British colonies came together to form the country still called 'The Commonwealth of Australia.'

'Telling Mrs Baker' is the story of two drovers who return to lie to one Mrs Baker about the supposedly brave and noble death by fever of her husband, Bob Baker, nicknamed 'the Boss,' droving cattle across the Australian bush – he actually died from alcohol poisoning. Baker's death is grotesque and sordid (at one point he strips naked in despair to try to hang himself in the scrub) and his posthumous effects expose him as a sexual predator on the wives of friends. Nevertheless, his two mates, Andy M'Culloch and the narrator, believe that 'it isn't Bush religion to desert a mate in a hole' (p. 198). Having stuck with Baker in life, they now contrive to tell a massive and exonerating lie about his death to Mrs Baker when they return to the small town of Solong, towards Sydney. This confrontation of the sexes makes up most of the narrative.

My reading experiment falls into two parts, the first approaching the text with the tools of a relatively familiar kind of contextual reading, the second trying to engage with how the issues of nonhuman ethics force one to go beyond that.

(A) An environmental hatred marks 'Telling Mrs Baker' and many of Lawson's stories about 'the Out Back Hell' that helps Bob Baker destroy himself. The Bush and the Outback seem to deride any given associations of 'nature.' Lawson's sketch-story 'Hungerford' mocks that genre of travel journalism that depicts the scenery and amenities of a destination with a view to enticing the reader to visit it. Lawson turns the genre on its head to detail all the reasons *not* to visit Hungerford, New South Wales.<sup>9</sup> Lawson's nightmare images help legitimate what was almost universally felt to be the duty of colonial society to redeem the land by making it fit for various forms of agriculture and settlement:

Somebody told me that the country was very dry on the other side of Nevertire. It is. I wouldn't like to sit down on it anywhere. The least horrible spot in the bush, in a dry

season, is where the bush isn't – where it has been cleared away and a green crop is trying to grow.<sup>10</sup>

Lawson shows little effort to grasp the specific ecology of these places, seeing mostly similarities between wild Australia and landscapes that have been ruined by human waste or mistreatment. Australian nature is not 'natural' in any recognisable sense but a kind of waste dump: 'We crossed the Macquarrie – a narrow, muddy gutter with a dog swimming across, and three goats interested' ;<sup>11</sup> 'The country looks as though a great ash-heap had been spread out there, and mulga scrub and firewood planted – and neglected.'<sup>12</sup> One story indulges the geological fiction that the very rock is rotting.<sup>13</sup>

Such a land seems good only for changing into something more recognisably European, pastoral, pretty and profitable. In Lawson the denigration of the Australian environment and exaggerations of its 'weirdness' became part of an idealization of the shearers and settlers that faced such realities, the new supposedly (masculine) Australian types, stoical, loyal, egalitarian (at least with fellow Europeans), taciturn and even sardonic, resourceful, tough. The form that such cultural nationalism took may be marked by the contingency that the 1890s were both a time of drought and of economic depression.

Bob Baker is introduced at the opening of the story as a former 'squatter',<sup>14</sup> or landowner, in the business of keeping sheep and breeding race horses. However, he fell into ruin by spending too much time in Sydney in 'swell hotels' (p. 196), following up the horse racing side of his interests. 'So after a pretty severe drought, when the sheep died by the thousands on his runs, Bob Baker went under, and the bank took over his station and put a manager in charge' (p. 196). He seems to take to excess drinking when he becomes a drover (p. 197), and maybe even 'hadn't been quite right in his head before he started drinking – he had acted queer sometimes . . . maybe he'd got a touch of sunstroke or got brooding over his troubles' (p. 198).

Baker's new job, joined by Andy M'Culloch and the narrator, does not seem to be routine cattle droving. It is an unspecified long-distance enterprise that will need two years in all, travelling inland and north west for over 1,500 miles towards '*new country* round by the Gulf of Carpentaria with a big mob of cattle' (p. 196, emphasis added). This reads like the use of the cattle mob to open up the continent, either

to enlarge already existing runs or to try to establish new pastoral businesses in Northern Queensland. This would put Baker and his friends within a recognised 'pioneering' tradition. Eric Rolls writes: 'So many Australian explorers went, or were sent, chasing rainbows: inland seas or good stock routes where there was only desert.'<sup>15</sup>

Graham Huggan's *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (2007) offers a new overview of Lawson's career.<sup>16</sup> Huggan tries to rescue Lawson from his dubious status as a (white) nationalist Australian icon by stressing modern readings that 'focus on racial exclusionism, spurious appeals to solidarity, and a sexual division of labour that highlights the vanities and insufficiencies of men' (p. 56). All three points immediately suggest a reading of 'Telling Mrs Baker.' Lawson's work is thus recuperated in a qualified way through being retrospectively gauged against modern notions of equity:

While it would be optimistic, to say the least, to convert Lawson into a surreptitious champion for Aborigines, stories like 'The Bush Undertaker' suggest that he was certainly aware, like most of his contemporaries, of the racialized anxieties underlying white-settler claims upon the land they selected for their own. (p. 58)

'Telling Mrs Baker,' however, is more explicitly about the 'constructions' of gender that the colonial situation sets up. The domestic Mrs Baker, 'with nothing particular about her in the way of brains' (pp. 202-3), is lied to in ways that help her sustain a self-image as the loving wife of a brave man who heroically succumbed to the perils of the frontier. She also consents to her husband's invented 'last wish' (p. 201) that she return to Sydney. That city appears here as the place of domestic security and illusion, of a willing ignorance about the real hardships of the land on which it depends. An earlier passage in the story has the narrator mock his presumed urban readership – 'Sounds queer to you city people don't it?' (p. 199).

Like the famous lie to the intended that ends Joseph Conrad's contemporary novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the lie to Mrs Baker does more than cast her in a protected and patronised feminine role. Her being kept in that role also helps sustain the lie of the man's heroism and self-sacrifice. Whereas Conrad's Kurtz seems to succumb

to what is controversially depicted as the barbarism of indigenous Africans, Baker's antagonist was the Australian environment, its droughts and emptiness, and his own lack of the strength of character to resist it, a strength, however that Lawson is quick to attribute to other men, such as the two mates.

Any comparison with the end of *Heart of Darkness* is complicated by a kind of doubling. Bob Baker has a brother, Ned, and Mrs Baker a sister, a Miss Standish from Sydney (no first names are given for the women). Both siblings are counterparts. Ned Baker is like his brother in being the victim of an environment that refuses to support for long his particular mode of exploiting it. He is 'fighting the drought, the rabbit-pest, and the banks, on a small [sheep] station back on the [New South Wales/Queensland] border' (p. 198), set in hopeless 'God-forsaken scrubs' (p. 199). But Ned Baker is also unlike his alcoholic brother in being reliable, honourable and hard-working. He helps clear up the mess of his brother's death, avenging himself on a publican who exploited Bob's infatuation with a girl employed in his pub to lure men to buy her drinks. Miss Standish is a counterpart to Mrs Baker. Whereas Mrs Baker seems happy to be stupid, Miss Standish is pictured as intelligent, a good looking young woman, dressed in a city style. She also writes short stories for the *Sydney Bulletin*. Miss Standish soon sees through the lie being told her sister and has to be silenced by a carefully aimed wink. Later she follows the men as they leave, thanks them and kisses them warmly on the mouth.

'Telling Mrs Baker' pivots around a dichotomy between those who know the truth but require others who need to be lied to and those who need to be lied to, Mrs Baker, city people on the whole. Miss Standish seems set to write for the *Sydney Bulletin* along the already rather trite lines of 'I like the Bushmen! They are grand men – they are noble' (p. 208), an odd thing to say given what she knows about her brother-in-law. It certainly seems a double-edged compliment to the *Bulletin*, the journal with which Lawson was most associated, especially in a story published in the year 1901.

A loosely eco-feminist of reading of 'Telling Mrs Baker' might focus on the way an environmentally destructive colonial situation both perpetuates and depends on certain gender roles. Lawson could then be said to demonstrate the contingency or constructed nature of those roles, highlighting what might now be seen as the demeaning

cost of the whole enterprise. In dying in the bush Baker anticipates the series of white male pioneer figures in Australian literature whose death somehow sanctifies and appropriates the land – except that here, ambivalently, it is only the idealistic loyalty with which that myth is maintained as an known fiction that seems to justify it. At the same time, by perpetuating their mutually supporting lies, both the two mates and Miss Standish can also be said to evade the environmental issues that the story must raise. If Miss Standish's readership in the *Sydney Bulletin* will feel inclined to admire the loyalty and endurance of the Bushmen, her kissing them at the end of Lawson's text also seems an evasion and eclipse of what had after all been the tale of one man's sordid defeat in farming practices that seem at odds with the actual landscape and climate. Australian if not British readers of 'Telling Mrs Baker' in 1901 would have recognised in the reference to the *Bulletin* a leading organ of the Australian cultural nationalism of the 1890s, one that helped set up a (masculinist) image of the 'Australian' as defined and distinguished by a relationship to the Bush, with many of the selective egalitarian values associated with Lawson himself.<sup>17</sup>

(B) How far does this take us? So far this reading has been within familiar critical parameters. It has taken the human cultural sphere as its object and studied it as a field of power relations that pose various kinds of identity in various ways, in this case in terms of gender stereotypes that help legitimate the brutal colonization and settlement of Australia. So far the environment itself, and any non-human animals, have been considered only as adjuncts of the human story, like the thousands of sheep that helped ruin Baker's livelihood by dying of thirst. This has all been a matter of cultural political contexts, but not of the meta-contextual as defined earlier.

A first complication or refinement of this reading, then, might concern some of the stakes of the notion of the human and human identity implicit in the text, emulating Cary Wolfe's attention to a pervading speciesism. Wolfe follows Derrida in finding some advocates of animal 'rights' problematic because such 'rights' already rest on a specific understanding of the human which is heavily compromised and already deeply implicated in modes of exploitation.<sup>18</sup> It remains a limitation even of many ecocritical essays concerned with environmental justice that they still rest on the assumptions of a liberal justice model that takes human agents as the sole concern, granting



value to the non-human only derivatively. Secondly, that human 'right' is understood on the model of a utility- and power-maximizing rational individual, and justice as a matter of the adjudication of competing areas of self-interest, and of the equitable allocation of limited natural resources or assets, such as animals. Derrida writes of the absurdity of applying such a concept to non-human creatures: 'to confer or to recognize rights for "animals" is a surreptitious or implicit way of confirming a certain interpretation of the human subject, which itself will have been the very lever of the worst violence carried out against nonhuman living beings.'<sup>19</sup> So an eco-feminist reading of 'Telling Mrs Baker' would want to consider how far its issues would be compromised by any argument that confined itself to protesting the way women were excluded from full entry into such a model of personhood. Secondly, if environmental justice is only defined as 'the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment'<sup>20</sup> then the ethical challenge of non-human animals, as putative victims of such people's 'rights,' must also reassert the exciting but unstable meta-contextual element of environmentalist thinking.

A more meta-contextual reading of 'Telling Mrs Baker' might test the implications of the fact that human beings have always existed as part of a community of animals. Human beings could not exist and cannot be understood without other species, whatever the tendency of modern societies to keep livestock hidden away in factory-like enclosures while people yet live as if red meat were on tap, like water from a reservoir. Modern Australian history is legibly not just a history of human beings. Many of its victims, and some of its winners, are non-human. The European settlement was a matter of the partial but often extensively destructive supplanting of one biota by another, partly by human intent, as with wheat crops and cattle, but often without it, as with infestations of rabbits and cane toads. Not in any country, but perhaps least of all Australia, should one continue to write history as if it were a matter of human agency alone. It would like trying to understand the cuckoo without making reference to other birds.

No indigenous animals appear in 'Telling Mrs Baker.' All the animals named are introductions, sheep, rabbits, horses, cattle, dogs. No aboriginal people appear either. The invisibility of indigenous life is appropriate in its sinister way. The defeat of the Aborigines was to a significant degree owing to the least visible members of

the European biota, viruses and bacteria, including some ultimately derived from domesticated animals. Europeans arrived on the shore of Australia, as they did North America, in ships stacked with livestock and after centuries of living with domestic animals and birds, sharing both their diseases and immunities. In effect settlers and their animals formed a kind of social unit, one whose members were to a degree mutually intelligible through each other's signals. Wherever the cattle ran, even over wide areas, they brought with them the jurisdiction of their human owners. Deborah Bird Rose even suggests: 'the conquest of Australia did not begin in 1788. It began about 10,000 years ago when our ancestors domesticated cattle.'<sup>21</sup> British settlers and transported convicts arrived on the shore of a continent inhabited by hunter gatherers with little or no resistance even to chickenpox or other 'minor' ailments. The stoicism and toughness of some of Lawson's figures is undercut by the way in which the European conquest of much of the world was to a large degree an accident of European microlife.

This meta-contextual dimension is missing from such modern studies as Huggan's *Australian Literature* (2007) or the collection *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (1995).<sup>22</sup> In meeting this lacuna an indispensable resource is Alfred W. Crosby's frightening book *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (1986).<sup>23</sup> Crosby studies the large, mainly acultural and meaninglessly biological forces behind the extraordinary fact that it was people of European descent who came to inhabit and dominate large areas of the earth, especially most of the temperate zones. This suggests an over-view that places Lawson's story in a global context of colonial ecocide. Crosby also presents his readers with the challenge that these 'Neo-Europes' are now responsible for a large proportion of the world's food production, in both grain and meat. 'The regions that today export more foodstuffs of European provenance – grains and meats – than any other lands on earth had no wheat, barley, rye, cattle, pigs, sheep, or goats whatsoever five hundred years ago' (p. 7).

Consideration of animals makes it seem problematic to see the culture of 1901 Australia solely in terms of the post-Foucauldian notion of discourse used in Huggan's *Australian Literature*, that is 'the sum of "available ways of speaking [and] writing in which social power operates to produce certain objects and effects" (Susan Sheridan).'<sup>24</sup>

This is an overly anthropocentric methodology that gives a curtailed view of something that was actually matter of numerous species and the accidents of their interaction. The catastrophe of the rabbit infestation demonstrates just how far the role of people 'was less a matter of judgement and choice than of being downstream of a bursting dam' (Crosby p. 192). Critics need to find ways of describing animals and natural features as themselves agents, rather than as passive functions of some moulding social discourse, 'constructed' as they like to say – as if any human culture could ever really form an enormous construction site in that self-contained way.

A further reading of Lawson's story might pivot upon the following passage, which it is perhaps easy to skim over in the exclusively human interest of tracing the decline of the Boss and the reaction of his mates:

We had two other men with us, but had the devil's own bother on account of the cattle. It was a mixed-up job all-round. You see it was all big runs round there, and we had to keep the bullocks moving along the route all the time, or else get into trouble for trespass. The agent wasn't going to go to the expense of putting the cattle in a paddock until the Boss sobered up; there was very little grass on the route or the travelling-stock reserves or camps, so we had to keep travelling for grass. (p. 197)

What Lawson does not write is that in passing across and obliterating numerous boundaries of the traditional inhabitants, such high-pressure pastoralism also drove out many native animals as it displaced or destroyed Aboriginal societies. Ecological disaster became the chief agent of rapid colonization and conquest. Even the native grasses were lost. Eric Rolls writes of the first years of the British colony:

The only things not thriving in the Colony were Australian grasses. Their roots had run in a spongy soil full of humus. They were accustomed to fire, to drought, and flood, to deficiency of nitrogen and phosphorus, to the gentle feeding of sharp-toothed kangaroos at the clumped butts, and the picking of their seeds of parrots and pigeons and rats. They had never had their whole seed heads snatched in one

mouthful; they had never been trampled by cloven hooves;  
their surface roots had never had to run in hard ground.<sup>25</sup>

The very weeds were introductions, like dandelions, or like 'plantain, the Englishman's foot.'<sup>26</sup>

Derrida envisages a massive shift in the way human beings engage with the non-human and the challenge of understanding differently the 'history of law and of the concept of right.'<sup>27</sup> This must be especially intractable in the case of nation-states like Australia, founded for a large part on the basis of the eradication of indigenous biota for the benefit of the narrow, fragile eco-system of an originally European agriculture. With early Twenty-First Century Australia now suffering under a long, unprecedented and sometimes catastrophic drought, with increasing calls for modes of agriculture there less at odds with its natural context,<sup>28</sup> Lawson becomes newly fascinating not as an Australian icon but as a writer of environmental conflict and degradation. His characters already live in what Ulrich Beck calls 'the age of unintended consequences.'<sup>29</sup>

One possible way in which the contemporary rereading of Lawson might work is through the arguments of the bioregionalism movement. Associated with Kirkpatrick Sale, Gary Snyder and Jim Dodge,<sup>30</sup> this advocates modes of life, work and thought geared sensitively and for the long term to natural bio-regions, as opposed to modes of life forcibly defined within the often arbitrary or violently imposed boundaries of the modern nation state, with its associated and often over-centralized imposition of agricultural practices geared only to short term profit. Whereas older generations took for granted a basic fluency in the flora and fauna of their place – 'what is taught by plants and weather'<sup>31</sup> – '[m]any contemporary Americans,' Snyder writes, 'don't even *know* that they don't "know the plants".'<sup>32</sup> Seen in terms of the long-term chances for such a society to survive, such loss of local knowledge begins to look disastrous: 'The United States, Canada, Mexico, are passing political entities; they have their legitimacies, to be sure, but they will lose their mandate if they continue to abuse the land.'<sup>33</sup> In effect bio-regional readings and practices, sensitive to issues concerning local fauna and flora, can form an intelligent subversion of the institutions and economics of the modern nation state. They also, I suggest, returning to the Australian example, can induce revised readings of the

social, cultural and identity politics which such a nation state induces and sustains.

A bioregional focus can also undo what has been called the 'methodological nationalism'<sup>34</sup> of dominant ways of reading cultures and texts, i.e readings that take the exclusively human society defined by the boundaries of a nation state as its sole stage, and which will study *David Copperfield* or 'Telling Mrs Baker' solely within the terms of the emerging and conflicting identities and human interests with that national culture's development and vicissitudes. In Lawson's case, implicit ways of being 'Australian' are given a double-edged celebration in their very vulnerability, while dubious models of gender are posed within the framework of nation-building. Against this, Snyder's ascription of agency to the non-human (to 'what is taught by plants and weather' (p. 41)) may serve to underline the narrowness of any critical method that reads 'Telling Mrs Baker' solely in terms of categories of the social construction of identity. This short story could in fact be described as explicitly dramatising a lie that seeks to contain all the action it depicts to the stage of an culturally bounded human identity politics.

As Australia becomes 'arguably the first developed nation to feel the impact of climate change at a visceral level,'<sup>35</sup> its current 'millennium drought' alters, in a long term perspective, the significance of Lawson's work from out of the 'federation drought' (1895-1902). As a text of lies and environmental degradation published in the year of Australia's federation, 'Telling Mrs Baker' already fulfils Beck's sense that the environmental crisis will erode both the bases and legitimacy of the modern nation state.

The crisis also patently disregards and effectively deconstructs the distinction of animal and human. A farmer like Ned Baker, trying to survive on a farm devastated by lack of water and by rabbits his own society introduced, is a figure for whom Beck's 'the risk society' is already a valid term. Beck shows how the demands of 'environmental justice' metamorphose in such a society in drastic, unprecedented ways incompatible with the modern state's administration of distributive justice. Modern environmental risks – with CO2 emissions, radiation, GM plants, particulates, desertification, etc. – all exceed the normal operation of established systems of insurance or of possible litigation for damages, systems capable only of dealing with calculable and

quantifiable risks to a specific and limited number of people (it cannot for instance cover the majority of the victims of the Chernobyl disaster, for they are yet to be born). The current state of the world seems equivalent to that of elements of pastoral Australia Lawson struggled to see, an intensifying agricultural/industrial accident, one whose exact consequences cannot be gauged, for which insurance is meaningless and which touches all living things in some way or another. Beck writes:

In terms of social politics . . . the ecological crisis involves a systematic violation of basic rights, a crisis of basic rights, whose long-term effect in weakening society can scarcely be underestimated. For dangers are being produced by industry, externalised by economics, individualized by the legal system, legitimised by the natural sciences and made to appear harmless by politics. That this is breaking down the power and credibility of institutions only becomes clear when the system is put on the spot, as Greenpeace, for example, has tried to do.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, the human population of Australia will as eligible for 'compensation' for long term climate change as a dead sheep. A massive and fatal discrepancy opens up between the norms of law ('human rights'), government and economics and the realities over which they rule, a world in which all people may increasingly come to share the vulnerability of non-human animals. Bob Baker may not be the first to drink himself to death in an arid land unable to sustain for long his kind of farming. 'Sounds queer to you city people don't it?' (p. 199).

### **A New International?**

Derrida advocated a 'new international' between the human and the living more generally.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps this is not hard to describe in the abstract at least. If 'justice' is said to be the undeconstructible horizon of deconstruction, that in the 'name of' which one thinks and works, then the claim of the non-human to ethical attention obviously demands a continuous reconsideration and revision of given law. Talking, as it happened, in Australia, Derrida advocated in 1999 that that part of the idea of justice he calls 'unconditional hospitality' be extended beyond

the human.<sup>38</sup> What this actually means in practice, though, is far more difficult to envisage.

Some points can at least be made about aporias in current thinking and practice, focusing the dubious ways in which the putative science of 'ecology' functions in environmental writing and in culture more generally as a source of moral guidance.

References to 'ecology' in the spheres of resource and environmental management often use its assumed status as science to mask major political and social decisions: assumptions about 'what we value' are both expressed and 'obscured by the language of biological conservation' (Matthew Oates).<sup>39</sup> Such decisions come to the surface as soon as one starts to analyse efforts in modern Australia to restore indigenous eco-systems and eradicate or at least control such introductions as foxes or the feral cat. Such programmes usually take 1788, the first date of European settlement, as kind of benchmark for restoration. Adrian Franklin writes:

the orthodoxy in Australia holds that native animals are those that were here at the time of the *white settlement*. However, this traps environmental action in the enigma of an eco-system they can never aspire to restore: the extensively burned pre-colonial landscape of Aboriginal Australia, or indeed the dominance of acacias on the continent before they were displaced by eucalypts. By this logic the dingo that came before the whites visited Australia is a native animal but the brumby [a local breed of horse gone feral] is not because it came just after.<sup>40</sup>

Environmental culture often appropriates 'ecology' to rather tired romantic arguments along the lines of 'human nature' refinding its essence through a renewed contact with 'nature,' overcoming supposedly alienating dualisms of mind and body, consciousness and object etc. But, as Franklin's point shows, what that 'nature' actually *is* is harder to gauge.

References to 'ecology' also function lazily as a kind of eco-moralism. In literary and cultural criticism this turns many readings into kinds of allegory of human transgression, as in Keith Tester's statement: 'So long as we *civilized men* imagine ourselves to be apart from the land,

and from our fellow creatures, we shall attempt to exploit them for our private gain, and the attempt will kill us.<sup>41</sup> 'Telling Mrs Baker' would read in such a framework as an implicit green parable, one that reasserted a norm of human re-integration into the natural world. References to the truths of 'ecology' may be often a hidden desire for a kind of providence.

Ecological restoration programmes are often a valuable response to the devastation wrought by settlement, as must be calls for more suitable kinds of farming practice and water use coming from campaigners such as Michael Archer and Bob Beale.<sup>42</sup> However, they can also indulge an unacknowledged and problematic kind of eco-nationalism or even eco-cleansing (indigenous = good, introduced = bad), a policy dubious in itself for its dogmatism and with uncomfortable overtones in a country often torn by debates about human immigration. Franklin shows that the people who might be imagined most to support such eco-cleansing, the Aborigines, are in fact most often against it.<sup>43</sup> For instance, they value and exploit the introduced cats and have in some cases made them part of their culture. While the monstrous damage done to Australian environments is incontestable, programmes for a restored ecology can also serve the cultural nationalism of a white majority anxious to 'belong to' or more legitimately appropriate the continent, assuaging a legacy of guilt by cutting down elm trees and exterminating cats. Tim Low argues that Australia's now hybrid fauna and flora need sometimes to be accepted and celebrated for what they are.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, environmental politics cannot be decided for us by the science of ecology. It must be more like politics elsewhere, the art of making the least bad decision in the face of incompatible, singular claims. As the Australian example shows, even those who wish to reserve moral importance to the human species alone cannot coherently do so without regard to the ethical claims of the non-human.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 71.

<sup>2</sup> The few years since Derrida's death have already altered the resonance of such a passage as the following: 'I have no right to abandon my responsibility under



the pretext that this responsibility is modest, under the pretext that its effects are incalculable; one cannot calculate one's responsibility, so its effects may well be nothing, almost nothing. In response to an emergency, I do what I can. I may well be able to do a lot, I may well be able to do very little, even nothing – whatever, I have no right to withdraw from doing something, under the pretext that it will be done in vain. This is irresponsibility itself. Imagine a fire emergency and a fireman who under a pretext that he is unlikely to douse the fire with ten buckets of water, may think of giving up. Does he? No, of course not.' ('Nietzsche and the Machine,' *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001*, ed., trans. Elizabeth Roudinesco (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 215–56, 255).

<sup>3</sup> *Of Grammatology*, trans. C.G.Spivak (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> *Agency, Democracy, and Nature: The U.S. Environmental Movement from a Critical Theory Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Rare examples would be Jean Hochman's chapter 'The Lambs in *The Silence of the Lambs*,' in *Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Films, Novel, and Theory* (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1998); Chen Hong, 'To Set the Wild Free: Changing Images of Animals in English Poetry of the Pre-Romantic and Romantic Periods,' *ISLE* 13.2 (Summer 2006), 129–49.

<sup>6</sup> See especially *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> 'Comment ne pas manger – Deconstruction and Humanism,' in *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology, and Animal Life*, ed. H. Peter Steeves (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 15–35, 32.

<sup>8</sup> In *The Penguin Henry Lawson Short Stories*, ed. John Barnes (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Australia, 1986), 196–209. All page references will be to this edition. The story also first appeared in the collection *Joe Wilson and His Mates* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1901).

<sup>9</sup> 'Hungerford,' in *The Penguin Henry Lawson*, 45–8.

<sup>10</sup> 'In A Dry Season,' in *The Penguin Henry Lawson* 37–9, 38

<sup>11</sup> 'In A Dry Season,' 38.

<sup>12</sup> 'Hungerford,' p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Geological Spieler,' *Henry Lawson*, Portable Australian Authors, ed. Brian Kieran (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1976), 168–75.

<sup>14</sup> A 'squatter' here means specifically a large landholder of acres first wrongfully seized in the great outward grab of first colonization, an appropriation that was usually legalised in retrospect ('Where else [but Australia] are criminal records the only

record of land settlement?’ (Eric Rolls, *A Million Wild Acres* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Australia, 1981), 72).

<sup>15</sup> *A Million Wild Acres*, 97.

<sup>16</sup> *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 55–8.

<sup>17</sup> See A.A. Phillips, *Henry Lawson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), 11–26.

<sup>18</sup> *Animal Rites*, 33–46.

<sup>19</sup> *For What Tomorrow*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, Introduction to *The Environmental Justice Reader* eds. Adamson, Evans, and Stein (Tucson AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2002), pp. 3–14, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2004), 74.

<sup>22</sup> *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*, ed. Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis (London: Sage, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> *Australian Literature*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> *A Million Wild Acres*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ecological Imperialism*, 169.

<sup>27</sup> *For What Tomorrow*, 74.

<sup>28</sup> See Michael Archer and Bob Beale, *Going Native: Living in the Australian Environment* (Sydney: Hodder, 2004). More than a decade ago, Ian Anderson wrote,

Agriculture is one of the mainstays of Australia’s economy. But ironically, the country is not well suited to the European styles of farming that are practised. ‘That Australia’s agriculture has been as productive as it has is a testament to Australians’ innovation, technical skill and determination over two centuries,’ say government scientists in a paper prepared for a meeting of the Prime Minister’s Science Council last month. The country’s soils are thin – most are less than 10 centimetres deep – and contain little organic matter. The weather is not dependable either, often fluctuating between prolonged drought and severe flooding. Added to this, Australia’s native mammals have padded feet that do minimal damage to soil. By comparison, the hooves of imported animals are far more destructive. (p. 12)

‘According to Jason Alexandra of the ACF, this list of woes is evidence that Australia is depleting its resources by trading agricultural

commodities for manufactured imports. In effect, it sells topsoil for technologies that will be worn out or redundant in a few years. The country needs to get away from the 'colonial mentality' of exploiting resources and adopt agricultural practices suited to Australian conditions, he says.' ('Australia's Growing Disaster,' *New Scientist* 29 July 1995. pp. 12–3.)

<sup>29</sup> *World Risk Society* (London: Polity Press, 1999), 119.

<sup>30</sup> See Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985); Gary Snyder, *The Place of the Wild: Essays* (Washington DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1990); Jim Dodge, 'Living By Life: Some Bioregional Theory and Practice,' *CoEvolution Quarterly* (Winter 1991), pp. 6–12.

<sup>31</sup> *The Place of the Wild*, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> *The Place of the Wild*, p. 43

<sup>33</sup> *The Place of the Wild*, p. 44

<sup>34</sup> A.D. Smith as quoted in Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000), p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> '... While a Country Bakes,' *New Scientist* 22nd/29th December 2007, 15.

<sup>36</sup> *World Risk Society*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> *For What Tomorrow*, 98.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars*, ed. Paul Patton and Terry Smith (Sydney: Power Publications, 2001), 111–2. Derrida's earlier formulations of this 'new international' had been hazy on the topic of non-human animals: see Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 245, 249.

<sup>39</sup> 'The Dying of the Light: Values in Nature and the Environment,' *British Wildlife* 18.2 (December 2006), 88–93, 91.

Ecological arguments applied to animal management instantiate an anthropocentric divide between the human as manager, exempt from the policies administered, and the rest of the biosphere as managed. There is also a direct clash between the claims of animal ethics, attentive to issues of cruelty to individual creatures, and an ecological concern with eco-systems as a whole and their biodiversity. An 'ecological' appeal to 'biodiversity' works in effect as a crude kind of utilitarian calculus, unable to function as a universally applicable rule without individual injustice. The difficulty can be stressed simply by turning such ecological thinking on the human species itself: 'A large scale cull is urgently needed to save the environment. Humans are in no danger of extinction, and their population would remain healthy and sustainable.'

For more on the split between mainstream environmentalist writing and the literature of animal advocacy see Rebecca Raglon and Marian Sholtmejer, 'Animals are not believers in ecology': Mapping Critical Differences between Environmental and Animal Advocacy Literatures,' in *ISLE* 14.2 (2007), pp. 121–40.

<sup>40</sup> *Animal Nation: The True Story of Animals and Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 147.

<sup>41</sup> *Animals and Society* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Going Native: Living in the Australian Environment*.

<sup>43</sup> *Animal Nation*, 166–92.

<sup>44</sup> *The New Nature* (Ringwood Victoria: Penguin Australia, 2002).