

Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life*

Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903) opens simply and clearly enough with that memorable, sardonic initial declaration: 'Unemployed at last!'¹ The complex reaction of the relief from work, while at the same time the prospect of poverty and hunger; the sense of liberation, while at the same time the bitter reflection that it is only through unemployment that working men and women can ever attain the state of leisure and relaxation available to the upper classes: all this is succinctly implied. There is a lot said but not said, a lot of social observation and commentary on the economic situation.

This is not said, but it is implied. The line of full stops that immediately follows the opening sentence marks an excision. Already, after only three words, an excision, an absence is indicated. It is the clue that indicates that there is the unsaid, the unwritten (or unprinted), to be taken account of in this text, as well as the printed word. The row of full stops may proclaim the absent rather obviously, signposting the existence of the unsaid or the omitted. That there is an absence is not something concealed. A row of full stops often indicates an excision, a censorship authorial or editorial, moral or political or verbal. Proclaiming the existence of the excised indicates that this unwritten, this unexpressed, is no secret. It presupposes that the narrator and the readers know that a lot of things are continually suppressed and left unprinted or unsaid or unwritten. But this does not mean that they are not there. The absent is not the unknown of the Freudian unconscious: this is not an unknown whose very unknown existence is unknown and unknowable; rather, this is a public proclamation of absence, of the unprinted. It acknowledges the convention whereby certain things are not said or not written. At this point there is not any need to be more specific than that. 'Unemployed at last!' implies that the comment may be political, a comment on the economic organisation of society.

1 [Joseph Furphy], *Such is Life, Being Certain Extracts from the Diary of Tom Collins*, Sydney, 1903, p.1. All quotations are from this edition.

The other familiar excision of the sexual is also potentially implied, the huge taboo of sexual expression in print.

And then after the laconic opening and the line of full stops implying excision, certainly denoting absence, a lack of words, we are presented with the stiff, verbose, rather ponderous and portentous manner:

Scientifically, such a contingency can never have befallen of itself. According to one theory of the Universe, the momentum of Original Impress has been tending toward this far-off, divine event ever since a scrap of fire-mist flew from the solar centre to form our planet. Not this event alone, of course; but every occurrence, past and present, from the fall of captured Troy to the fall of a captured insect. According to another theory, I hold an independent diploma as one of the architects of our Social System, with a commission to use my own judgement, and take my own risks, like any other unit of humanity. This theory, unlike the first, entails frequent hitches and cross-purposes; and to some malign operation of these I should owe my present holiday. (1)

Many readers become discouraged at this point. The sheer wordiness of the narrator, the threat of continual philosophising, the introduction of a vocabulary signalling philosophising and abstraction rather than the expected vocabulary of fiction is unavoidable. It is an encounter with language that is promised, and not the sensuous language of literary seduction, but the abrasive, quasi-scientific, public speaking, essayist's vocabulary and structure and range of reference. It is not only this style that we encounter, however. A whole variety of dialects is recorded, rural English, German, Scots, Chinese-pidgin, and a whole range of essayistic, philosophizing reflection, together with a variety of narrative manners as the various bullockies tell anecdotes. The wealth of verbal expression confronts the reader.

At the same time there is a remarkable absence, an absence that is drawn attention to. This is the recurrent '(adj.)' used to mark a swear word not recorded. Sometimes the missing word is denoted by a bracketed substitute: '(irrelevant expletive)'. (5) Sometimes a ponderous, arch, facetious, literary periphrasis will be introduced, reminiscent of the transmutations of eighteenth century poetic diction. (Indeed at one point we are offered a classic piece of Augustan diction, 'the finny

multitudes'. [344]) Mosey's swearing is characterized in this way as 'deftly weaving into his address the thin red line of puissant adjective'. (5)

Hartley Grattan remarked of these absences:

Collins was a bit of a Victorian and could not bring himself to write—much less print, even had the police permitted—words which occur in the conversation of the “dinkum Aussie” hardly less frequently than commas and periods on the printed page: hell, bloody and bugger. His device for indicating their occurrence is rather amusing: “you're a (adj.) liar!” “Who the (adj. sheol) do you think you're talking to?” And a bugger is an “individual” or some other commonplace.²

But if Tom Collins was 'a bit of a Victorian' and 'could not bring himself to write—much less print' these words, why is attention drawn to them by these obtrusive devices? Attention is drawn to what is inexpressible. H. J. Oliver, remarking that 'Grattan completely misses the fun of the mock-modest (“adj.”), of the satire on literary convention, and of all the “elegant variation” that is so much more amusing than mere repetition of “hell” and “bloody” would have been',³ silently drops 'bugger' from Grattan's already brief list. The sexual suppression here suggests other suppressions. Barry Argyle has indicated another group.

'Irony' has been the word on most scholars' lips; it could equally well have been 'vulgarity'. There is, for instance, the water tank known as Faugh-a-ballogh, which is pronounced by one bullock-driver as 'Fog-a-bolla'—an approximation to what in Australian speech (lately called 'Strine') would be 'Fuck a bullock'. Under the influence of the same accent, the name of the noxious English aristocrat, Folkstone, would become 'Fuckson'; while the obsequious English peasant, 'old Sollicker', who believes

- 2 C. Hartley Grattan, 'About Tom Collins', afterword to *Such is Life*, Chicago, 1948, p.381. On Grattan's enthusiasm for Furphy, see the biography by L. T. Hergenhan, *No Casual Traveller: Hartley Grattan and Australia*, St Lucia, 1995.
- 3 H. J. Oliver, 'Lawson and Furphy', in Geoffrey Dutton, ed., *The Literature of Australia*, Ringwood, 1964, p.302.

that 'orders is orders', would be 'arse-'le licker.' These are isolated examples. There may well be others.⁴

Vulgarity may be Argyle's preferred term for what is happening. But there is also a literary subversion, a delight in slipping something past the editors and publishers that, had they realized it was there, they would have suppressed. The proclaimed suppressions in the '(adj.)' signal to the aware that these proclaimed upholdings of the decencies are strategic: decoys, even, so that elsewhere the constraints can be evaded.

The verbal taboos that Furphy foregrounds are examples of the huge and arbitrary system of social control embodied in language and literature. The class system with its inequalities in wealth and privilege is maintained, in part, by these verbal controls. Furphy meticulously records the varieties of spoken English. And the varieties type the speakers using them, label them, allow them to be placed in their social class: whether to be treated as swaggies and driven off or given a pannikin of flower, or admitted into the workers' shed to eat, or invited into the squatter's house. Language is directly related to social status, to work and food. Tom Collins remarks the significance of calling a meal lunch or dinner. It is as significant an ideological moment as Walter Scott's discussion of Saxon or Norman, serf or noble, in the usages of swine or pork, and ox or beef, in chapter one of *Ivanhoe* (1819).

The immediate point about the suppressed words is the sexual reference of many of them. It is the sexuality that causes their suppression. And a recognition of this feature directs the reader to the huge suppressions of sexuality in the novel. The relationship between the sexes is presented as one of absence; as absent as the absent words. Tom is trying to avoid Mrs Beaudesert; Warrigal Alf and Nosey are separated; what is foregrounded is a world of men alone, and of men meeting men.

It is a deformed picture, and a deformed society that is portrayed. Furphy was totally realistic in his depiction of the destruction of the family that such itinerant work as that of the bullock drivers involves. The circumstances for the development of sustained marital, sexual or familial relationships are prevented by the economic pressures, the nature of the available work. While perceptions of sexual possibility

4 Barry Argyle, *An Introduction to the Australian Novel*, Oxford, 1972, p.202.

are mediated through romantic novels such as those by Ouida. Tom, having been reading Ouida, becomes preoccupied with the erotic image of the 'tawny-haired tigress'. (212) The false image and suppression were the alternatives of sexual possibility. Emile Zola is mentioned, but Zola's works were regularly banned in the English-speaking world for their explosive mixture of sexuality and a sympathy for the exploited workers.

'When I first got my swapping-book, it was by Hannah More; now it's by Zola, and smutty enough at that; it has undergone about twenty intermediate metamorphoses, and it's still going remarkably strong—in both senses of the word. Therefore I can recommend it.'

'I don't think it does a person any good to read Zola,' remarked the boundary man gravely.

'Not the slightest, Alf—that is, in the works by which he is represented amongst us. But do you think it does a person any good to read Holmes? Zola has several phases; only one of them, I admit, blue as heaven's own tinct; but Holmes has only one phase, namely, pharasaism. Zola, even as we know him here in Riverina, has this advantage, that he gives you no rest for the sole of your foot—or rather, for the foot of your soul; whilst Holmes serenely seduces you to his own pinchbeck standard. Zola is honest; he never calls evil good; whilst Holmes is spurious all through. Mind you, each has a genuine literary merit of his own.

'But don't you like Holmes's poetry?' asked Alf.

'Well, his poems fill a little volume that the world would be sorry to lose; but why didn't he write one verse—just one—for the Abolitionists to quote?' (305–6)

Zola is recommended not despite but because of the sexuality: 'strong ... therefore I can recommend it'. From the sexuality Tom Collins moves immediately to politics. Oliver Wendell Holmes' failure to take a radical political stance is criticized. The 'genuine literary merit' that both Zola and Holmes both possess is not enough. What Zola's radical stance is, of course, is never mentioned. That is even more suppressed than sexuality. But the existence of a political component in Zola's work is drawn attention to.

However, to talk of the absent or of suppression here is to talk of something that is neither totally absent nor fully suppressed. What we have is the gesture of suppression, the substituted '(adj.)' that draws attention to itself. Sexuality is something that is presented to us as repressed or absent, yet it is always suggestively there. Chapter Three, in which Tom Collins runs through the Riverina like a naked Adam, is full of sexual innuendo.

'Over again,' said Harry calmly. 'You both cheated.'

The sounds were repeated.

'Over again. You'll have to alter your hand a bit—both of you—or we'll be here all night. Slower, this time.'

Once more the sounds were repeated; then the buggy started, and Harry's voice died away in the distance to an indistinct murmur, as he reviled the girls for this new exhibition of their shamelessness. (129)

The episodes are fragments of overheard conversation, with the visual detail left to the imagination; they are reported by Tom, the naked voyeur. The voyeur, who might be expected to be looking for nakedness, is himself the naked one here. It is one of the many role reversals and ambiguities in *Such is Life*.

The first impression of *Such is Life* is of the repression of sexuality. The characters seem primarily to be men alone. With chapter three we see that there is another world of couples, of constant sexual engagement, seductions and threats and lures. Yet this burgeoning sexuality transmutes into something else and the recurrent pattern of transexuality comes into play. An early indication of this theme is in the naming of Tom's horse, a male, Cleopatra. The horse-rider, 'Jim' that Tom so admires turns out to be Miss Jemima. (143) Nosey Alf is gradually revealed to be a woman. By recognizing the suppressions signaled in the verbal bowdlerizations of the '(adj.)', we are directed to the suppressed sexuality; only to find it not that suppressed at all but pervasive through the novel. Is there, then, perhaps another suppression? Is the allegedly suppressed sexuality a distraction from a deeper suppression? The very theme of suppression is foregrounded in the

language, or absent language. The theme of censorship and suppression is made conscious and demands our attention. What else is suppressed?

A. A. Phillips wrote that *Such is Life* covered 'all significant aspects of Riverina life' and that 'each rank in the hierarchy of Wool' was represented save for the shearer: which, he conceded, was a curious omission.⁵ Phillips attempted to explain this substantial omission by claiming 'the events in Furphy's narrative are supposed to take place between September and March—that is, after the Riverina shearing has finished'. But as John Barnes has pointed out, 'the narrative of *Such is Life* begins with Tom Collins's meeting with the wool teams; on Runnymede station it is then "the thick o' the shearin"', and the presence of the shearers on the station is mentioned in conversation.⁶

The absence of the shearers is indeed a curious, even an extraordinary, absence. And to Furphy's contemporaries the significance of the absence, the meaning resident in the omission, would have been readily apparent. During the 1890s the shearers were the radical unionists. Organised, militant, they engaged in massive strike action in 1891 in Queensland and were defeated by the introduction of non-union labour protected by armed troops and special constables.⁷ The strikes occurred in Queensland; the Riverina shearing season followed the Queensland season and the itinerant shearers moved through the country; but the strike was defeated before the Riverina season had begun. To say that there was no significant Riverina strike action does not explain the omission; the shearers were the same shearers. But the shearers' strike was in 1891. Furphy completed his manuscript in 1897, and placed the events back in 1883. He is writing about the period before the strikes, and writing from the later perspective of the defeat of the unions.

The absence of striking or politicised shearers can be explained through the historical setting of the novel. This raises the question, why did Furphy choose to set his novel before the strikes? Writing in the

5 A. A. Phillips, *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture*, Melbourne, 1958, p.20.

6 John Barnes, 'The Structure of "Such is Life"', *Meanjin* 15 iv (1956): 347–89, reprinted in C. B. Christesen, ed., *On Native Grounds*, Sydney, 1968, p.47.

7 H. Kenway, 'The Pastoral Strikes of 1891 and 1894,' in D. J. Murphy, R. B. Joyce and Colin A. Hughes, eds, *Prelude to Power: The Rise of the Labour Party in Queensland 1885–1915*, Brisbane, 1970; Stuart Svensen, *The Shearers' War: The Story of the 1891 Shearers' Strike*, St Lucia, 1989.

period of repression, the unions now defeated and demoralised, it would have been impossible to have found a publisher for a sympathetic portrayal of socialist shearers. Yet having set his novel in the pre-unionised period, Furphy then leaves the shearers out altogether. The exclusion is blatant, and directs us to speculate on the reasons for the absence. The implication is that since unionised, radicalised (and now defeated) shearers are inexpressible, then no shearers will be presented at all. It is an absence that forces us to a political point.

The absent political confrontation of 1891 is what the developing class feeling and resentment of exploitation of the 1880s is leading towards. That the unions had been defeated by the time of writing explains the pessimistic mood of the book's social vision. The opening 'Unemployed at last!' denotes, for all its comic irony, a reality of pauperisation.⁸ By setting the book in the 1880s Furphy could avoid the organized politics, the sense of co-operation and mateship, that was to form the militant unions. He presents the demoralized, pre-unionized, pre-socialist state of affairs of the 1880s: a state of affairs that had become the situation again in the days of defeat of the late 1890s. Although political ideas are occasionally tossed around in discussion, there is no political action. That is unthinkable. This is the portrayal of life when such political possibilities were yet to emerge, written from the standpoint of a time when they had yet again been repressed.

The absent shearers are a mark of an absence in political possibility. But this 'absent' radical politics that the absent shearers denote in *Such is Life* was originally complemented by the presence of a sustained exposition of socialism. However, the original manuscript of *Such is Life*—1125 pages, Furphy calculated—'made an impractical business proposal,' as A. G. Stephens put it:

Even in the low-cost days of 1897, such a book could not be

8 David Malouf offers a quite different reading in his introduction to the Hogarth Press reprint of the novel, London, 1986: 'That oddly cheerful exclamation with which *Such is Life opens* establishes idleness as the condition of the book's existence and, since it is the devil who finds work for idle hands, makes all that follows of doubtful provenance.' (vii).

9 A. G. Stephens, preface to the DeGaris edition of 1921, in Tom Collins [Joseph Furphy], *Rigby's Romance*, Sydney, 1946, pp.xi-xii. All quotations are from this edition.

produced without money losses; and, manager of the Bulletin's book-publications, I could not issue it as it lay.⁹

Stephens agreed to publish the novel if it was substantially reduced in size. Furphy set about abridging and revising. His largest single excision was to cut out the exposition of socialism delivered by Rigby, which formed chapter five of the original manuscript of *Such is Life*. He then later shaped this excised material into a volume on its own, called *Rigby's Romance*. 'Rigby's Romance is a juicy quarter of the mammoth uncovered by Joseph Furphy,' Stephens wrote. But Furphy was unable to get Stephens to publish *Rigby's Romance* as a volume in its own right. He then tried the Melbourne *Tocsin* and the Sydney *Worker*, without success. Finally it was serialized by the *Barrier Truth* under the editorship of Robert Ross in 1905. In 1921 it appeared in book form, but with the core of the exposition of socialism removed: chapters xxxi–xxxv, and xxxvii–xxxix were omitted. Not until 1946 was the full text published.

The demoralization and disorganization and atomised individualism of the bullock drivers and swagmen and other itinerants were originally presented by Furphy in the context of a socialist vision that offered comradeship, cooperation, and hope. Rigby's claims were challenged; he was argued with and interrupted; his remorseless speeches are punctuated by some sardonic comments by his listeners. In his readiness to hold forth he is no different from many of the other characters of *Such is Life*. Socialism is not presented as the miraculous solution that immediately eclipses every other possibility. Instead, socialism is presented as one of the various world views constantly proclaimed. But in its intellectual coherence, in its provision of hope, and in its clear-sighted analysis of the existing social-economic order, it offers a vision that none of the other world views can approach. Furphy offers the vision; he also presents the resistances and misunderstandings and ignorance that have to be overcome before it is accepted.

Rigby's analysis of the present social order is uncompromising and provocative.

I tell you that from the present social system of pastoral Australia—a patriarchal despotism, tempered by Bryant and May—to actual lordship and peonage, is an easy transition, and the only thing that

can prevent this broadening down is a vigorous rally of every man with a clear head and a heart in the right place. (98)

The uncritical reference to arson as a ready reprisal against the squatters—Bryant and Mays' matches 'tempering' the 'patriarchal despotism'—is as radical an account of the class war that will be found in Australian fiction. Equally clear-sighted and chilling, is Rigby's vision of the fate of socialist intellectuals:

Independent of the leaders, and apart from all organisation, there are men—intellectual giants, very frequently—behind the nefarious Socialistic movement, poisoning the public mind with aspirations for a state of things which would make life worth living. Our ancestors knew how to silence these fellows. If legal process seemed doubtful, or public execution appeared undesirable, there was a quieter way. You might have approached any one of my own Irish forefathers, furtively pointing out a superfluous individual of the Rigby type, whilst jingling a few shillings in your hand. (227)

Rigby himself is not summarily assassinated. But his political expositions make him a marked man.

I wrote to Milligan Brothers, offering my services again, and leaving the question of wages with themselves. I had their reply this afternoon, written as a memo. on the corner of my letter. They decline to employ an agitator.' (234)

Rigby's exposition of socialism is delivered in a wealth of wordiness; in this it is akin to the overall wordiness of *Such is Life*. But the relaxed and spacious manner allows Furphy to present the basic issues directly and clearly.

Here, at the very outset, you're confronted by the immovable fact that superfluous wealth in one class is always synchronised by corresponding poverty in another class. The fact, as a fact, is of neutral morality. But to bring the material and moral questions into relation you will now inquire whether this disparity is for the best

or for the worst. And to arrive at a true answer, you must imagine yourselves as gracing the very lowest walks of life, bearing in mind that the thing hostile to your own higher interests is equally hostile to the higher-interests of your fellow-weed. You have answered. (108)

Rigby is able to discourse on such basic issues as wealth, poverty and wage-slavery, elucidating and elaborating upon them, introducing them into the consciousness of his listeners: and so Furphy introduces them into the consciousness of his readers.

‘Now, Mr Rigby,’ protested the clergyman, rousing himself from the sorcerous spell of the Senator’s rhetoric, ‘pray remember that you are speaking to Englishmen. The distinction of master and servant we cheerfully recognise; but slavery is a different matter.’ ‘True,’ replied the Sheriff, gently. ‘And the grade of the ‘servant’ is, in reality, much lower than that of the ‘slave’. At a time when slavery was not the exclusive badge of inferior races, but stood fairly on its merits, the slave looked down on the wages man, and was entitled to do so. You will find this statement supported by all the evidence available. ‘Hireling’, or ‘hired servant’, in our translations of sacred and classical literature, is always a term of reproach; whilst ‘servant’—which, in every instance, means either bondman or vassal—carries the idea of servitude with ignominy....

We speak of the labor market, and rightly too; well, the vast majority of our fellow-citizens are chattels in that market. Playing it pretty low down on the reputed image of God—isn’t it?’ (114–115)

The socialism expounded is one that confronts and resists racism.¹⁰

‘One moment, Colonel,’ I interposed, ‘Are we to understand that you state Socialists would concede freedom of entry and terms of equality to the few million colored brothers named Sling Cat

10 This argument is called ‘ingenious’ and ‘sophistry’ in Julian Croft, *The Life and Opinions of Tom Collins: A Study of the Works of Joseph Furphy*, St Lucia, 1991, p.239.

and Jamsetjee Ramchunder, who would promptly avail themselves of your system?’

‘Avail themselves of our system, did you say?’ mused the Sheriff. ‘Do inveterate and self-satisfied drunkards seek membership in Rechabite Lodges? Heaven knows, we would welcome either Chow or Baboo, provided he left himself behind. We draw no color line, no educational line, not even an intellectual line, but we fix a very distinct standard of progress-potency. These Oriental gentlemen have sold their birthright.

“In the East,” says De Quincey, “man is a weed.” Now, man is not a weed by Nature’s purpose, nor is he a weed by compulsion. Collectively—but in the first place individually—he classifies himself. If his appraisal be low, the inevitable exploiter may be trusted to keep him down to his own valuation; if he holds himself to be the temple of the living God, he will vindicate that claim—he will vindicate it as a triumphant leader—if not as an effective democrat. Millions of pseudo-Christian whites are quite as objectionable as our colored brethren, but in point of accessibility there is all the difference. For the Chow has admitted finality; the Baboo has conceded despotism; and both have got down to the husks. Yet these prodigals’ manhood, though suspended, is inborn, and will assuredly assert itself at some future time. The first condition of restoration is that the prodigal must ‘come to himself’. But though propagandism is worse than useless here, I repeat my argument for the initial equality of Ah Sin and Juggernaut Gunga with the best of us—an equality which, rightly understood, has never been disturbed since the yesterday when their ancestors were civilized men, and ours were howling savages, barely able to grasp the scientific fact that two wolf-skins sewed together were wider than one by itself.’ (212–3)

The omission of the socialist core of Furphy’s vision from the text of *Such is Life* is one of the great scandals of Australian literature. That Furphy was constrained to make the omission himself, that it was in this sense ‘authorial’, in no way lessens the scandal. It provides further evidence of the power of manipulation and mind control of the publishing industry and its advisers, confirming the novel’s dark vision. But the great scandal has been the perpetuation of the exclusion; the

excised socialism rates hardly a mention in the critical commentary on *Such is Life*. The deed has been done and is now conveniently forgotten. *Such is Life* survives as a prescribed text for study; but *Rigby's Romance* is ignored—and the socialist vision along with it. It may now be impossible to reconstruct the original authorial *Such is Life*. And yet since we know that *Rigby's Romance* was the original chapter five of the novel, it is extraordinary that critical attention continues to evade its issues and implications.

Despite the excision of Rigby from *Such is Life*, there nonetheless remains a consistent political vision. For one of Furphy's recurrent themes is social class, and the economic exploitation of one class by another. It is in this context that we can most valuably interpret the endemic literary allusion to the colonial romances. The objection to these is not simply that they are the product of English writers, nor that they are 'unrealistic', as commentators have tended to assume. The point is that these colonial romances are written from a remorselessly patrician or bourgeois standpoint. Furphy's literary critique is at the same time a radical, political critique.

Furphy's vision of a class society is presented not from a ruling class perspective—as in the novel he especially kicks against, Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859)—but from a working class and lower middle class position. As A. A. Phillips wrote:

For the first time for centuries, Anglo-Saxon writing had broken out of the cage of the middle-class attitude. Dickens, Hardy and Bret Harte had, it is true, written sympathetically and knowledgably of the unpossessing; but they had written for a middle-class audience. They were the guides who conducted their middle-class audience on a Cook's Tour of the lower orders. But to Lawson and Furphy, it was the middle-class who were the foreigners.¹¹

Furphy is unmystified about the nature of the society. The inequalities of wealth are maintained by physical force; the police and military are

11 A. A. Phillips, p.38.

there to retain the privileges of property owners.

Without Vassal loyalty, or abject fear, the monopolist's sleep can never be secure. Domination, to be unassailable, must have some overwhelming force in reserve—moral force as in the feudal system, or physical force, as in our police system. (255)

But the situation has changed in the course of half a century:

The squatter of half-a-century ago dominated his immigrant servants by moral force—no difficult matter, with a 'gentleman' on one side and a squad of hereditary grovellers on the other. He dominated his convict servants by physical force—an equally easy task. But now the old squatter has gone to the mansions above; the immigrant and old hand to the kitchen below; and between the self-valuation of the latter-day squatter and that of his contemporary wage-slave, there is very little to choose. Hence the toe of the blucher treads on the heel of the tan boot, and galls its stitches. (255–6)

The class lines are now lines of conflict.

The reflections on class and property are prompted by the organization of Runnymede station. 'Social status, apart from all consideration of mind, manners, or even money, is more accurately weighed on a right-thinking Australian station than anywhere else in the world.' (254) There is no endorsement in Tom's use of 'right-thinking'; he has already told us that he is 'a little too exalted for the men's hut, and a great deal too vile for the boss's house'. (254) He offers an analogy for the class discriminations.

In the accurately-graded society of a proper station, you have a reproduction of the Temple economy under the old Jewish ritual. The manager's house is a Sanctum Sanctorum, wherein no one but the high priest enters; the barracks is an Inner Court, accessible to the priests only; the men's hut is an Outer Court, for the accommodation of lay worshippers; and the nearest pine-ridge, or perhaps one of the empty huts at the woolshed, is the Court of the Gentiles. And the restrictions of the Temple were never more rigid

than those of a self-respecting station. (255)

This, it hardly needs to be remarked, is not presented as a social ideal. But no social ideal is presented. The attempts to set up some European feudal-squirearchical social model in Australia are not presented for endorsement. And, as Brian Kiernan points out, ‘The other aspect of the immigrants’ dream, the hope of establishing a closely settled and self-sufficient yeoman class, is even more tellingly exposed as a delusion’.¹²

The social organization of the outback station is one subject inviting political analysis and we are provided with an anatomy of social inequality. But the action of *Such is Life* is also a political action. What consistent action is there? it might be asked; there are long conversations, disquisitions, evasions, but action seems consistently disrupted and fragmented. However, there is one consistent, recurrent, necessary daily action—finding grass and water. All flesh is grass, the Bible tells us. *Such is Life* records the daily struggle of flesh for survival. It is not a struggle against nature. The German explorers we encounter are ready for combat against the perils of the wild, and are presented as comic. They are out of touch with contemporary realities, and live in some never-never romantic historical past. The struggle Tom Collins records is the struggle for the means of survival in a world of private property. The grass is all owned by the squatters. The bullockies are necessary for carting supplies and produce, but no provision is made for the feeding of their bullocks. There is no social cooperation. All the arguments about land ownership had been rehearsed endlessly through the decade prior to Furphy’s writing his novel, but nothing had changed. For all the political activity of the early nineties, nothing has improved. The situation described in the novel’s setting of the 1880s was still the situation at the time of its publication twenty years later. As J. K. Ewers put it

The main theme of the book is the never-ending battle between bullock-drivers looking for grass for their teams, and the squatters who owned the grass and denied them access to it. It was out of

12 Brian Kiernan, *Images of Society and Nature: Seven Essays on Australian Novels*, Melbourne, 1971, p.14.

that simple situation of demand and denial that Furphy expanded and built his social philosophy....

A lesser writer might have confined himself to the immediate problem of his book—namely bullock-drivers versus squatters. Furphy took the problem into every aspect of national and international life when he ranged the men-of-no-property, the ‘have-nots’ against the ‘haves’. That is the eternal struggle.¹³

The continual, ongoing struggle for grass can be seen as a political struggle. But it is not a political gesture. It is a necessary struggle for survival, which we can interpret politically. But there is also an action of Tom’s which is an archetypal act of political protest, though in this instance apparently not political in intent. But in a novel of such consistent suppressions and evasions, the ambiguity of the act demands a political interpretation. The action is Tom’s venture in rick burning, in setting fire to the strawstack, in order to create a diversion so he can steal some clothes to clad his nakedness. ‘Few men, I think, have a healthier hatred of incendiarism than I have’ (146) Tom tells us, revealing indirectly that he had previously caused a bush-fire which cleaned the grass off half the county in ‘trying to smoke a bandicoot out of a hollow log’ (146) when a child. Again, the context was not political, not part of the class-war, not a revenge on the propertied by the unpropertied. But, as Julian Croft puts it,

The worst crime which could be committed in colonial times was rick-burning. Not only was it a threat to survival through bad seasons, but traditionally in England rick-burning was an act of political terrorism.¹⁴

Tom escapes punishment but an innocent swagman, Andrew Glover, is imprisoned for three months.

Just as the shearers are absent from the novel, and so the possibility of a politicized proletariat is absent, so the political is absent from

13 John K. Ewers, *Tell The People!* Sydney, 1943, p.19. See also Argyle, pp.183–4; Croft, pp.127–33.

14 Croft, p.101; he cites Alan Atkinson, ‘Four Patterns of Convict Protest’, *Labour History* 39 (1979): 28–51.

Tom's incendiarism. The shearers and union activists were accused of a number of incidents of arson in the 1891 strike—though again there is an ambiguity: at least some of these were the work of agents-provocateurs. To judge the motive from the action itself is to be liable to error: that is one of Furphy's points. But though the political motive is absent, its trace is present, and the class-war assumption serves to get Andrew Glover imprisoned. Obliquely, ambiguously, evasively, a classic act of political activism, of radical reprisal, is introduced into the novel. Even though the charge is 'altered to Careless Use o'Fire' (368) in order to push the case through rather than remanding a more serious charge to a higher court, the circumstantial evidence is clearly interpreted in the traditional way. 'The propertied classes is at the mercy of the thriftless classes' as Mr Q-, the J. P., puts it to Tom. And the sequence of events is damning for Andrew Glover.

'I was on his place, askin' him for work, as it might be this mornin'; an' he gives me rats for campin' so near his place, as it might be las' night. Seems, it was nex' mornin' his stack was burnt, jist after sunrise.' (368)

As for Tom's feelings about incendiarism, for all his earlier expressed healthy hatred of it (146), his encounter with Mr Q- allows the (silent) expression of a different attitude. Mr Q- declares,

'I been burnt out, r—p and stump, by an incendiary, when I was at Ballarat'—

'Ah!' said I sympathetically, but my sympathy was with the other party—(153–4)

Tom's nakedness in this episode is also politically significant. At one level it provides a connexion between the sexual repressions and the political suppressions: we have seen him as the naked voyeur, and have read his fragmentary, allusive account of the (unexpressed) sexual carryings on. The parallel between the inexpressible sexual and the inexpressible political is readily seen.

But the idea of the naked Adam is also a political idea. 'I'm replete with the leading trait of Adamic innocence; I want the sartorial concomitants of Adamic guilt,' (135) Tom says, demanding the trousers

of the draper's assistant. And in radical rhetoric, Adam represented primal innocence before the introduction of property ownership and social caste. 'When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?' was the provocative slogan of the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Tom's Adamic nakedness is a potentially political image; his strawstack burning is a potentially political act: the revenge of the unpropertied on the propertied. Amidst the oblique and elusive subtexts of *Such is Life*, we are offered here a powerful radical statement—no less powerful for its obliqueness, ambiguity and comedy.

In addition to the play with the Adamic, there is a further Furphyan joke that emphasizes the radical, indeed the revolutionary, political implications. In response to Mr Q-'s description of the suspect, Tom remarks,

'Your description's wonderfully correct, Mr Q-. You might, without libel, call him a sansculotte.' (153)

The literal meaning of sansculotte is someone without knee-breeches. It is usually taken to mean one who wears trousers (pantalons), not knee-breeches, and as such applied, in the French Revolution, to a republican of the poorer classes in Paris, and by extension to an extreme republican or revolutionary.¹⁵ In popular English usage the term is often misinterpreted as meaning someone without breeches at all. The implicit play on Tom's nakedness, and on the revolutionary act of rick burning are basic to Furphy's introduction of the term here.

The initial impression of *Such is Life* is of a novel of extraordinary ramshackleness. It consists of sprawling conversations, long disquisitions and meditations, and seemingly disconnected events. There are, of course, connections in the clues buried in various episodes, and part of the experience of *Such is Life* is in perceiving the way seemingly unconnected anecdotes and characters can be seen to interconnect. But the initial impression is one of disorder.

And it is a mental disorder. The range of ideas Tom Collins comes up with, on Shakespeare, on society, on the Old Testament, is not such

15 *Oxford English Dictionary*.

that suggests any integration; indeed, quite the opposite. The impression is of a fragmented knowledge. Tom may be proud of his erudition. But the reader has doubts: doubts about the accuracy of the information, about the extent of it, and about what Tom actually understands. At one level Furphy is stressing that the working men in the outback are not stupid. They have intelligence, they read, they exchange books and ideas. But at the same time he presents their confusions, misunderstandings, and pretensions. There is a discourse on human knowledge and ignorance early in the novel.

Human ignorance is, after all, more variable in character than in extent. Each sphere of life, each occupation, is burdened with its own special brand of this unhappy heritage. To remove one small section of inborn ignorance is a life-work for any man. 'Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance' was what betrayed the great lexicographer into defining 'pastern' as 'a horse's knee.' And the Doctor was right (in his admission, of course, not in his definition). Ignorance, reader, pure ignorance is what debars you from conversing fluently and intelligibly in several dialects of the Chinese language. Yet a friend of mine, named Yabby Pelham, can do so, though the same person knows as little of book-lore as William Shakespear of Stratford knew. But if you had been brought up in a Chinese camp, on a worn-out goldfield, your own special acquirements, and corresponding ignorance, might run in grooves similar to Yabby's. Let each of us keep himself behind the spikes on this question of restricted capability. (40)

Furphy expresses that traditional, radical, working class suspicion of the privileging of book knowledge over practical knowledge.¹⁶ He makes sure he demonstrates his own learned book knowledge with his anecdote of 'the great lexicographer,' 'the Doctor,' to show that he knows of Dr Johnson and that he can assume his readers will also know of him and will not need the name spelled out; the learned periphrasis will do. But the point is to show that even Dr Johnson could be ignorant.

16 Cf. *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1651), in Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, ed. Christopher Hill, Harmondsworth, 1973, pp.364-5.

Even the most learned can be ignorant in the area in which their reputation for knowledge lies; the great lexicographer misdefined a word. This serves to undercut all the established upholders of knowledge. Then Furphy moves to the unlettered, unlearned ignorant outback worker who nonetheless can speak 'fluently and intelligently in several dialects of the Chinese language'. And Shakespeare is brought in as the icon of the unlearned. Ben Jonson's comment that Shakespeare had small Latin and less Greek is now turned from a criticism to a validation of Shakespeare as democratic hero, natural poet. Shakespeare is cited here because he is the occasion of an ideological struggle between those who would see him as an establishment writer, embodying the ruling class vision of England; and those who would see him as a radical and questioning figure. It is a debate that still continues.

Yabby Pelham has developed a practical knowledge of Chinese. The working man has the potential for knowledge and intellectual attainment, given the appropriate context and situation. Intelligence, knowledge, understanding are not the preserve of the ruling classes, though they try to present it that way. Furphy is making a claim here for working class access to education. It is a highly politicised position. Nonetheless, the working class has like all classes of humanity its capacity for ignorance. Dan O'Connell, also known as Rory O'Halloran, is an example. The initial impression is of 'an extraordinary man':

'Speaking of Dan, as you call him,' said I; 'by the foot we recognize the Hercules; and if he knows as much about all other historical subjects as he does about Cawnpore and the American Presidents, he must have ripened into an extraordinary man. But then, an extraordinary man should have learned the difference between mallee and yarran in five years of solid scrub-observation.' (79)

The lack of practical knowledge about mallee and yarran is the clue that his other knowledge may be narrowly based. At the end of chapter two Tom Collins visits Rory O'Halloran's hut:

Then, not feeling sleepy, I took down one of four calico-covered books, which I had previously noticed on a corner shelf. It was my own old Shakespear, with the added interest of marginal marks,

in ink of three colours, neatly ordered, and as the sand by the sea-shore innumerable. I put it back with the impression that no book had ever been better placed. The next volume was a Bible, presented by the Reverend Miles Barton, M.A., Rector of Tanderagee, County Armagh, Ireland, to his beloved parishioner, Deborah Johnson, on the occasion of her departure for Melbourne, South Australia, June 16, 1875. The third book was a fairly good dictionary, appendix by a copious glossary of the Greek and Roman mythologies. The fourth was Vol. XII of Macmillan's Magazine, May to October, 1865.

Opening the latter book at random, I fell upon a sketch of Eyre's expedition along the shores of the Great Australian Bight. In another place was a contribution entitled 'A Gallery of American Presidents.' The next item of interest was an account of the Massacre of Cawnpore. And toward the end of the volume was a narrative of the Atlantic Telegraph Expedition. Of course, there were thirty or forty other articles in the book, but they were mostly strange to me, however familiar they might be to Rory.

Hopeless case! I thought, as I blew out the lamp and turned into my comfortable sofa-bed. If this morepoke's Irish love of knowledge was backed by one scrap of mental enterprise, he might have half a ton of chosen literature to come and go on. And here he is, with his pristine ignorance merely dislocated. (95-6)

Tom moralizes about the revealed limitations and boundaries of Rory O'Halloran's knowledge. But when Tom moralizes, we need to be aware. He may be seeing accurately in part, but there is a larger picture that he often misses. His failure to identify Nosey Alf as a woman is the striking example of this: he records with scrupulous realistic accuracy Nosey Alf's behaviour and living environment, fulfilling all the virtues of realistic observation, but he still misses the point.

The episode of Rory O'Halloran's fragmentary sources of information leaves us worrying about the basis of our own knowledge, and of human knowledge generally. Tom's range of reference is larger than Rory O'Halloran's; but is it any less ramshackle, fragmented, incoherent, arbitrary? Isn't one's own acquaintance with the records of human thought similarly glancing, partial and random in the context of the potential totality? Indeed, isn't the whole foundation of our cultural

tradition equally scrappy? How much of classical literature is lost, how much of Elizabethan literature has survived; and of what has survived, how much is forgotten or ignored or left inaccessible?

By the time Furphy was writing, the impossibility of comprehending all the world's knowledge had become apparent. The expansion of empire had meant that the entire cultural traditions of the east had come into view, shaking the assumed priority and uniqueness of the Greek and Roman classics. The developments in scientific and technological thought had gone far beyond the grasp of any one individual; and a practical knowledge now required an intense specialization. The pretence of comprehending and commanding a totality could no longer survive.

We can see this sense of collapse in *Such is Life*. All that survives and endures in practice consists of a few fragments. There is the well annotated Shakespeare, ever ready source of quotation. But the quotations are becoming trivial, like 'Go to 't'. The habit of quoting to adduce authority survives. But often what is quoted is marginal and the recurrent Shakespearean references create a sense of fragmentation rather than suggesting a cultural coherence.¹⁷

Such is Life portrays Australia in the making. But at the same time Australia in the making is part of the British empire, one of the outreaches of empire. And the emptiness, ramshackleness, randomness begin to evoke a sense of collapse. The centre cannot hold. As much as a picture of the making of a new society, Furphy presents a vision of cultural collapse.

Tom Collins certainly knows a lot. But a lot of the knowledge he has is pretty well useless baggage. It is the absurdity of factual 'general knowledge' and specialist information, random and disconnected for all his attempts at creating world encompassing totalities, that is our overall impression. It is inert knowledge, not applied to any theory, delivering nothing. It is the reified fact of master-mind quizzes, a travesty of true knowledge, a reduction of true knowledge to trivia. A distraction from true understanding, Tom's information serves to entrap him. Furphy clearly recognizes the trap, and the seductive appeal; the autodidactic impulse, and the wastefulness of a society that finds no place for the speculative intelligence of most of its members, preferring to leave them untrained, incoherent, impotent.

17 But see R. S. White, *Furphy's Shakespeare*, Perth, 1989.

The transcendent speculations on responsibility and destiny and fate are in large part evasions of reality. Chapter three offers a comic example. Having settled on a date in his diary that turns out to involve the embarrassing story of losing his clothes, Tom delays entering on the episode by launching into an eight page account of his thoughts while smoking a pipe; eight pages, a large part of the point of which is to mark the avoidance of entering into the embarrassing narrative. Here thought, reverie, is foregrounded as evasion. Tom's speculations serve as an ideology, an organizing scheme of explanation that evades the realities. The very transcendental impulse of his speculations—set amidst yet trying to transcend the mire and materiality, the realistic detail of Tom's daily experience—indicates their inadequacy. This is false, would-be bourgeois philosophy, as mystifying as the romantic bourgeois novels Tom sees through. The socialism expounded by Rigby marks the contrast with its applied theory and the relation of theory to practice—contrasted with the rambling speculations Tom offers.

What we are offered is a sustained vision of alienation. Tom Collins is the alienated intellectual. Neither one of the bullockies nor one of the landowning class, he is a member of the proletariat who has entered the *petit-bourgeoisie*, the world of the government official, and finds only competition and alienation; ultimately he loses his job altogether. His theories, his meditations, are desperately dissociated from life; his interpretations are consistently wrong. The very language of thought, of his philosophizing, is disconnected from the language of men, from the idiom of the bullock drivers. The tonal ruptures are huge, extraordinary, aesthetically subversive.

But the language of men is anyway presented as a tower of Babel. Furphy offers us meticulous transcriptions of the accents and dialects of Scots, Germans, English countryfolk, Chinese and Aboriginals. The incomprehensibility of much of this reported speech, the tedium of it, the reader's recoil from the effort of struggling to decode and understand it, the boredom of the passages, the recourse to skip-reading—these consequences of Furphy's laborious and minute details of representation establish a world of mutual incomprehensibility. Of course there is some communication; there is not total misunderstanding. But what is foregrounded is the confusing and obscuring factors in these varieties of speech. Division rather than solidarity is what is represented. The bullock drivers represent the process of accruing material wealth—not

for themselves, but for the squatters and merchants and shareholders. Yet at the same time the long treks, the empty tracks, the desultory campfire conversations, look forward to that vision of a wasteland in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* (1952), with metaphysical speculations and meaningless fragments representing humanity *in extremis*, a vision of crisis and collapse. This is the aspect of *Such is Life* that H. P. Heseltine stressed:

Society is an act, a decent bluff, which makes bearable the final emptiness, the nothingness of the honestly experienced inner life. 'Nothing' is the last word of one of the central classics of our literary heritage; and it is a word which echoes and re-echoes throughout our literature.¹⁸

And Heseltine went on explicitly to oppose this vision to any socialist reading:

The canon of our writing presents a façade of mateship, egalitarian democracy, landscape, nationalism, realistic toughness. But always behind the facade looms the fundamental concern of the Australian literary imagination. That concern, marked out by our national origins and given direction by geographic necessity, is to acknowledge the terror at the basis of being, to explore its uses, and to build defences against its dangers.¹⁹

This vision of fragmentation and alienation and confusion is not the final picture, however. Rigby's exposition of socialism, of a progressive and coherent account of the world, is there to stand against it. Out of the rubble and chaos and division emerges a visionary possibility. The portrayal of hopelessness and collapse is not the ultimate picture; that is the detritus of the old order from which the socialist future will emerge. Amidst the muddle and misunderstanding and ignorance and exploitation, stands the hopeful possibility of another way of life.

But the socialist exposition was excised from *Such is Life*, and what

18 H. P. Heseltine, 'The Literary Heritage', *Meanjin* 21 i (1962): 35-49, reprinted in *On Native Grounds*, p.15.

19 *On Native Grounds*, p.15.

we are left with is the analysis of collapse without the dialectic of renewal. Socialism is now an absence in the published text. There are still hints of a socialist vision; but the full exposition is excised. And so G. A. Wilkes can write,

The strongest 'philosophic' impression given by *Such is Life* is an impression of scepticism and stoicism. There is no positive view put forward which is not qualified in some way, humorously deflated, or exhibited ironically. One hypothesis conflicts with another, or is found to collide with the facts.²⁰

The positive that Wilkes fails to see is, of course, socialism. And though Rigby's socialist positive is subject to humorous deflation and irony from his audience, nonetheless it emerges as the only coherent position amidst the muddle and confusion. As R. G. Howarth wrote of the material issued as *Rigby's Romance*,

The book takes the form of a symposium, men of many shades of opinion, many varieties of experience, being gathered about a Master who expounds to them the doctrine of the time—and the future.²¹

And this symposium, this exposition, was in the contemporary mode of the novel of ideas. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1887), William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) and William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise* (1893) all contain this central exposition of socialist thought.²² This was the tradition in which Furphy wrote, and to which he properly belongs.

20 G. A. Wilkes, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn*, Melbourne, 1981, p.85.

21 Foreword to *Rigby's Romance* (1946), p.ix.

22 On Furphy's reading of the socialist classics, see John Barnes, *The Order of Things: A Life of Joseph Furphy*, Melbourne, 1991, pp.148–9. John K. Ewers' *Tell The People!* provides a convenient selection from Furphy's social philosophy.