

Strangers in the House of the Mind

Martin Edmond

To see something new, we must make something new. (Lichtenberg)

I

In the sixty odd years since the publication of his poems, the story of Ern Malley has assumed increasing complexity. What seemed at first to be a simple case of an obscure poet submitting his work to an editor, and that editor accepting the work, has developed layer upon layer of meaning in such a way as to call into question any and all of the certainties with which such processes were previously and perhaps still sometimes are understood. The recent discovery in Sydney of what purports to be an autobiographical manuscript from the hand of Ern Malley—someone who presumably did not exist—has added another twist to the tale.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this is that the said memoir is, like the poems themselves, a hoax—yet this raises further questions. If it is another hoax, who perpetrated it? And if it is not, what then is it? I'm not in a position to solve these problems at this time, but have been fortunate enough, through someone who was once a friend, to read a transcription of the alleged memoir. (It was a disagreement over the status of this document that led to our falling out; of which more later.) What I want to do now is summarise it as if it

were true. However, I would ask you to remember that it may not be. What you are about to read is, most likely, the summary of an autobiography of a fiction.

II

Ernest Lalor Malley was born on March 14, 1918, in Liverpool, England. His father, Albert George Malley, an Englishman and a coachbuilder by trade, was gassed and wounded in the neck at Ypres in 1917 and died in 1920 from complications from his war injuries; he never really recovered from the horrors of the trenches and may have spent time in the immediate post war period in an institution of some kind. The circumstances of the poet's conception are thus obscure but it is probable this event occurred before his father went—or returned—to the Front in time for the beginning of the Third Battle of Ypres on July 31, 1917. It may also be the case that Ern's history of ill health had its inception in the blighted fate of his father.

The memoir does not give much more information about Albert George Malley. Ern Malley acknowledges his birth in Liverpool but states he has no memory of his father. Indeed, he relates only one childhood memory of that time, a memory, moreover, he explicitly denies, saying it is not his own recall, but a piece of family history he learned from its constant rehearsal by his mother and his sister. It is the kind of thing a family would not easily forget: as a child in his cradle, the young Ern was once bitten by a rat.

Emma Millicent Malley, called Milly, the poet's mother, maiden name Lalor (pronounced Lawler), was an Irishwoman from the south of the country who had come, like so many of the Irish, to Liverpool in search of work. Little is said of her immediate family either, apart from the fact that they were poor relations. We do not know under what circumstances she met and married her husband, nor if the union was happy or otherwise. Her daughter, Ethel, three years older than Ern, must have been conceived pre-war or early in the war and, we surmise, raised mostly by her mother alone. After the death of her husband, Milly Malley emigrated with her two children, Ethel and Ernest, to Australia, where she had a

brother, Francis, called Frank. Reference is made in the memoir to a unique photograph of Frank and Ernest Malley but no actual print is reproduced therein.

Lalor is a famous Australian name: Peter Lalor, an Irishman from County Laois, south and west of Dublin, was one of the leaders of the rebellion at the Eureka Stockade, during which he lost an arm. Lalor subsequently represented Ballarat in the Victorian parliament, of which he was for many years the Speaker. He was not, as has sometimes been claimed, a radical left-winger. In an 1856 speech to the parliament, he clarified his life-long position: *I would ask these gentlemen what they mean by the term 'democracy'. Do they mean Chartism or Communism or Republicanism? If so, I never was, I am not now, nor do I ever intend to be a democrat. But if a democrat means opposition to a tyrannical press, a tyrannical people, or a tyrannical government, then I have been, I am still, and will ever remain a democrat.* This is still a political position many Australians take, even if their overt behaviour contradicts it. Peter's grandson, Joseph, who'd been in the French Foreign Legion, was one of the heroes of Gallipoli, carrying the family sword ashore at Anzac Cove on the 25th and, later that day, dying somewhere beyond the hill called Baby 700. His Memorial there carries the inscription: *Lord Thou Knowest Best.* The precise relationship between the Malleys and these Lalors is unknown, if indeed there was any direct family connection.

Upon their arrival by ship in Sydney, the Malley family moved into Frank Lalor's place at 20 Terminus Street, Petersham, near the railway station. When Frank died about a year later, of malaria contracted during wartime service in New Guinea, they inherited the house, freehold. Terminus Street which, oddly, has in it no odd numbers (the houses on the south side of the road were apparently demolished to make way for the train line) runs parallel to the tracks from Crystal Street west to Palace Street. The house, which is still there, is a small one storey terrace with, like so many in the inner west, an asymmetrically placed miniaturised Italianate tower, with battlements, over the front door.

Milly initially supported herself and her two young children by taking in washing; later, after the children were both in school, she was employed at

Sunlight Laundries in nearby Summer Hill; later still, ill health forced her retirement. She is a grotesque figure in the memory of her son: alcoholic, choleric, diabetic, she dominates her daughter and conducts an incessant guerilla war against Ern, beating him with a belt at the least excuse. Ern never gives in to her but he never openly confronts her either, preferring a secretive—and characteristic—passive resistance.

It cannot have been an easy life for a solo mother with two young children. Ern relates the bare facts about the circumstances in which he grew up in a tone of oblique yearning and incipient shame that passes over the detail of what must have been an exacting childhood. He does, however, describe a series of mildly incestuous pre-pubescent episodes with his sister, initiated on an occasion when she rescued him from one of the violent persecutions he suffered daily at the hands of his school mates. He would put this experience to good use later on.

The memoir consists of a number of intensely written vignettes, as the poet, looking back towards the end of his short life, records impressionistically those events that most shaped him. Amongst these was his mother's habit of going out to Rookwood Necropolis every Sunday to visit her brother Frank's grave. Ern writes vividly and nostalgically about the graveyard itself which was, to him, an enormous playground. Not surprisingly, it was here that he first conceived his vocation as a poet.

This was a specific occasion. He was, he writes, about eight years old. It was spring, a hot blue day. Bored, he wandered off to look for lizards in the long brown grass growing over the stones in the old part of the graveyard. He found a bee hive in a crack in an old tree and describes how, as he peered into the dark aperture, returning workers banged into the back of his head. He set a hare running from nearly under his feet. Instead of lizards, he startled a full grown red-bellied black snake which hissed at him before sliding away among the bones. And then, after crossing a small creek via a stone bridge and entering another part of that vast city of the dead, he came upon a woman.

She was, he wrote, beautiful and distraught, tear-stained, carrying an arm-load of freshly picked daisies. At first he did not know what she was doing and simply watched, a small boy half hidden in the dappled light of gum trees, as she placed the flowers one by one on the bare red cemetery earth near a fresh grave, evidently that of a child. It was the understanding that the daisies made a pattern that drew the boy out from under the gums. He realised the flowers on the ground spelt out a word. That word began with the letters C – H – R – I – S – T ... but we should not attach too much significance to this, since it is clear from Ern's account that he interrupted the young woman and there was more to come.

They sat together in the shade of the gums and talked. He does not say much about this conversation, only that it was the seminal event in his young life, determining all that came after. The elements are clear: grief, its commemoration, words standing in for that which is lost, the making over of enduring sorrow into something evanescent which will yet outlast the dead. And so on. When the young woman surrendered Ern to his family she said: *Look after this boy. He is one who can remember paradise* before limping away to resume her memorial.

Time and space may be infinitely malleable, but there isn't enough of either right now for me to go into as much detail about other episodes of Ern's growing up. I can't linger over his sustained, hilarious polemic against the game of cricket, which he hated, inspired by a chance encounter with the young Don Bradman at Petersham Oval, on the occasion of the great man's first century in club cricket, made on that ground in the summer of 1926. I can't explore his fascination with birds, particularly the pet magpie he kept in a coop out the back of the house at 20 Terminus Street, which he taught to speak and which in many ways became the friend and confidante he never really had. There isn't time to talk about the loss of his virginity to his childhood sweetheart, Lizzie Sedgewick, on a flowery bank above Hawthorne Canal in Summer Hill, and how she betrayed him for another, his best friend, Tan Dann.

No, for now I'm stuck with a bare recital of the facts. Ern Malley attended Petersham Public School and Summer Hill Intermediate High. He was an average student, but with a degree of mechanical aptitude rare in a poet and, when not reading, spent a great deal of his spare time dismantling and re-assembling various devices. A neighbour, a Mr Saxon, procured for him some watch-making tools and by the time he was twelve he could take apart and put back together in less than two hours the pocket watch that was his only inheritance from his father.

When his mother died in August 1933, of complications attendant upon her diabetes, Ern, aged 15 and against his sister's advice, left school. He found himself a job at Harry Palmer's Garage on Taverner's Hill, where he worked for two years; it was during this period that another chance meeting occurred, one that decided the shape of the rest of his life. It was with a young woman who gave him a ticket to the gala opening of the new Luna Park at Milsons Point.

The young poet describes in detail his visit to Luna Park with his sweetheart Lizzie who is, he finds out on the night, pregnant with Tan Dann's baby. On the rebound, he meets again the young woman, Lois Lidden, who is, it turns out, married to a rich young man with shares in two Luna Parks, both the one in Sydney and the one at St. Kilda in Melbourne. Ern and Lois smoke cigarettes—Craven A—together down by the water and she confesses that her marriage is unhappy. In the aftermath, Ern determines to follow her to Melbourne, where she lives.

Ern Malley's time in Melbourne is poorly documented and the memoir does not add much to the story in terms of objective fact. In this final third of the manuscript, the poet's reminiscences are almost entirely interior: he meditates upon his own experiences without necessarily describing what those experiences were. Many of them are not real world encounters at all, but the fruit of his reading, of his thought, of his struggles within his own intellect.

This was a period of almost appalling solitude for the poet—I say *almost* because nowhere in it do we find the accents of self-pity—during which he

attempted to educate himself so as to make himself worthy of the woman with whom he had fallen in love. Meanwhile, he lived in a single room in a boarding house in South Melbourne, employed by his landlady as a cleaner in lieu of rent. Lamentably, he fell into the habit of visiting the prostitutes in Fitzroy Street in St. Kilda; and also became adept at winning small amounts of money from gambling, mostly, it seems, at cards.

These were of course the immediate pre-war and war years and Ern Malley, like every other young man of his generation, faced the call-up. He refers only in passing to his exemption on grounds of ill-health—it was not Graves Disease he suffered from, but the then fatal auto-immune condition, Goodpasture's Syndrome—and does not have a great deal to say about the war itself or his attitude to it. He seems to have viewed the hostilities in Europe and, later, the Pacific, as a development that should surprise no-one. It is almost as if he believed war were a natural state of man.

To take the point a little further, it may be that he largely ignores the war raging in the world because he knows that same war is also going on, not just within his own psyche but literally within his own body. By now, Ern Malley, under a sentence of death, was deeply involved in the experiences that would lead to the composition of *The Darkening Ecliptic* and he probably thought the only place he could now make a difference was in the verse itself.

This brings us to a question that has exercised many critics: how did an unremarkable motor mechanic, insurance salesman, watch-repairer, petty gambler—albeit one who was very well read and of independent mind—make the leap into the incomparable poetry of *The Darkening Ecliptic*? The answer is clear in the memoir: at some time during his Melbourne sojourn, just about the time war broke out in September, 1939, Ern's long period of solitude came to an end: he won the woman of his dreams, the love of his life; and his poetic flowering is consequent upon this relationship. Or, more precisely, upon its demise.

This woman remains a shadowy figure. Her name—Lois Lidden—is soon revealed to be a pseudonym. The surname was her husband's and the Christian

name assumed; at one point she tells Ern her real name but we have only his word for that. Their relationship was obsessive, fugitive, clandestine; it took place while her husband, Ralph Lidden, was away at war. At first they would meet out, in some pub, dance hall, movie theatre, coffee shop or tearooms. They often walked together in the park. Later, Lois would take Ern back to her place, at the famous Kia Ora Flats in St. Kilda Road, pretending to the neighbours that he was her long lost half brother.

Their relationship was also passionately sexual, but that was not all it was. Lois was an experienced woman, an intelligent woman, a woman of great sensitivity. She was older than Ern. And she was not free—given that she had come off the streets herself, her circumstances simply did not allow her to contemplate abandoning herself to life with an itinerant and indigent poet. In his poems, Ern suggests that it was he who ended the affair, the better to devote himself to his work; but in the memoir it is clear that the situation was more complex than this. The choice of work over love was in fact forced upon the poet, and he subsequently made a version of it that, poetically, dignified the choice as his own.

Nevertheless, this affair of the heart was certainly the inspiration for the poems, as the memoir makes clear. And it may also have had one other unexpected consequence. Almost at the very end of his account, the author mentions receiving a postcard from Lois, with a cryptic message on the back. He does not quote this message nor say what it means but he does, soon afterwards, speculate thus: *It's possible, he writes, that she was with child when we parted; it's possible that she has given birth to a son or daughter of ours, and that my peculiar trace is repeated, modified by its entanglement with hers, in another ...*

It is of course fascinating to think there might be, however occluded, a Malley dynasty. On the other hand, this possibility should not obscure the verifiable progeny of the union of the of Ern and Lois: the poems. We cannot derive from the memoir, alas, a precise chronology for them. Nor do we have, beyond tantalizing glimpses here and there, any idea of the work that must have

preceded them: Ern destroyed his juvenilia, and the work of his middle period, before he left Melbourne for Sydney. What we do now know is that this return home was for a specific purpose. Ern had decided to attempt publication of his poems.

I've come now to the portion of the story that is well known, and will not rehearse its details here, beyond observing that the memoir confirms that Ern secured, by blackmail, the complicity of his sister in the successful attempt to publish the allegedly posthumous poems: he threatened to reveal their youthful follies to a certain Reverend Tooke, of whom she was fond, if Ethel did not do what he wanted. It is curious to think of Ern Malley as a silent witness to all that followed: Max Harris's delirious acceptance of the work, its publication in *Angry Penguins*, the exposure of the hoax, the obscenity trial that followed ... and yet it seems these public events were not Ern's primary focus at this time. He hardly mentions them.

I've written about the memoir mostly in literary terms, because that is the context in which we know Ern Malley. However, a unique feature of it, what makes it so poignant, is how little concerned it is with literariness. It is something else: a sustained, philosophical reflection upon identity, made in the person of one who felt he had none. To put it another way, Ern Malley found that publication of his poems, rather than confirming in him the sense of who he was, in fact leached him of his sense of self. He had, as it were, disappeared into the work and yet some kind of entity remained behind. It is this entity he interrogates in his memoir.

His remark in the preface to *The Darkening Ecliptic*—*There is no biographical data*—clearly came back to haunt him once the poems were on their way into the world. Thus the memoir is not so much the creation of a poet *per se* as it is of someone who was once a poet—there are analogies here with Rimbaud—but, at the end of his life discovered himself to be something completely different: a human being. The paradoxical force of the memoir arises

from the fact that it delivers an anonymous voice out of the past, whose concerns are not with literature, or literariness, but with life itself.

Nothing is known of the circumstances of Ern Malley's second death, beyond a fugitive date—11/11/44—inscribed on the last sheet of the copy I read. The memoir concludes with a poem—the finished version of the unfinished draft, called *So Long*, that Ethel had sent to Max Harris, but which Harris did not publish. This unique and unexpected addition to the Malley corpus, his 17th and last poem, is immediately followed by these last, enigmatic words: *And now, I'm going back to Rookwood*. Given that two of the three previous sections of the memoir also end at the Necropolis, the repetition suggests that the narrator of this strange work has been, like the figure of Fernando Pessoa in José Saramago's *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, on leave from the graveyard for the duration. In other words, that Ern Malley was dead all along.

III

After reading the copy my friend—call him M—had forwarded to me, I rang him at his place of work. He had told me almost nothing about the document in question, presumably so that I could approach it without preconceptions. Now, when I asked about its provenance he said, somewhat implausibly, that he'd transcribed the typescript from a holograph document found in a vestigial cellar or basement—I had an impression of a priests hole—reached via a trapdoor in the floor of a wardrobe in a flat in Summer Hill where he used to live. I passed over this improbability without comment.

I did, however, have a number of other questions, particularly with regard to the mysterious woman the eight year old Ern meets in Rookwood Necropolis. She is named Iris and I thought I knew who she was. A quick check in one of the likely suspect's best known books confirmed that the memoir quoted—or rather slightly misquoted—from it. This seemed to me to prove that M must himself have been the author of the work: it was just too unlikely that one of New Zealand's best and most prolific writers and poets of the era between the wars

should have encountered the young Ern Malley in Rookwood in 1926. Never mind that such a meeting (with *someone*) is at least possible, given her documented trip to Sydney during that year and the fact that she probably—although not certainly—buried a child stillborn during that visit.

When I asked M about her, he said she was just a name to him. I told him who she was and pointed out that the passage about *a stranger sitting down in the house of the mind* is taken from one of her pseudonymous books. He remained silent. I did not know then if it was a silence of denial or assent. We seemed suddenly trembling at the brink of some catastrophe. I recalled M's history of psychiatric problems, his diagnosis of multiple personality disorder, recently revised down (or up?) to that of paranoid schizophrenia, his sometimes heavy use of medication, his propensity, at other times, to dispense with it. I remembered his anxiety about tenure, which he was up for that year (in the event it was not granted him). And his paucity of recent publications. I should have had the sense to pass on to other things, but I was too caught up in the matter at hand.

For the thought had occurred to me that, if M's ignorance was unfeigned, then my assumption that the presence of Iris Wilkinson in the memoir was proof of its fictional nature, might in fact mean the opposite: proof that it is, if not exactly genuine, then of genuinely unknown authorship. But when I recklessly advanced this proposition M took offence, I think at the implied questioning of his integrity; my attempts to reassure him only made matters worse; and, in the ensuing argument, he demanded I return the copy of the manuscript forthwith. In fact, he came round that very afternoon in his car to get it. Of course I gave it to him.

It is a peculiar danger of Malley studies, that we might mistake the unreal for the real; nevertheless, in this instance, when the possibility that the work is genuine is almost unthinkable (unless the memoir was written by James McAuley and/or Harold Stewart—or indeed by Max Harris: all options that strain any ordinary sense of the word 'genuine'), we are yet faced with its seeming authenticity. I mean that what Malley or his surrogate(s) wrote, like the poems,

does seem to carry traces of real events, however unlikely that may sound. It is tantalising to think that this mystery might yet find a solution. Perhaps sometime in the future we will find out what really happened that spring afternoon in Rookwood when, in a ghostly meeting, the lines of influence in Antipodean poetry became weirdly crossed.

Meanwhile I continue to wonder about my falling out with M in this almost inadvertent manner. Apart from the possible end to a long, if sometimes fraught, friendship, there were other consequences: I missed the opportunity to ask M for a chance to view the holograph he said he transcribed from; and I failed to secure a copy of the memoir. All I have left is the memory of my reading and the few notes I took at the time. Worse still, perhaps, I do not know exactly how I offended. Was it the accusation that he had written the work himself? The implication that he lied about or invented its provenance? Or some other insult, actual or supposed? Perhaps I should not have remarked, in passing, that any new contribution to the Malley debate really needed to show more wit, novelty and significance than this one did.

That M is a native Australian and I one only by adoption, may have had something to do with it, as it certainly did with regard to the Wilkinson misunderstanding. That we are contemporaries, perhaps rivals, may have been a factor as well. Then there is the circumstance that he has taken the path of the scholar, while I remain a freelance writer, with all of the precarious liberties and deficits involved in that choice. But there is surely something more.

If M did author the memoir himself, which still seems to me the most likely scenario, then it is a gamble on a Malleyesque scale, one that will either make his reputation or ruin him. It is therefore possible that, for reasons of confidentiality, he thought better of his decision to show it to me and that was why he took it so precipitately back. He may have felt painfully exposed. Or perhaps he suspected that I might rush into print with a description before he had the chance to publish himself. From a certain point of view it may even be thought that, in writing this paper, I am doing just that. However, I don't think so:

this account is not intended to obscure M's work but to prepare the way for it. Indeed, I wish him well and hope that the manuscript I was lucky enough to read—whether it prove to be fiction, non-fiction or something else entirely—does in time take its equivocal place along with all the other dubious texts in the Malley opus.

In conclusion, let me return briefly to 20 Terminus Street. Bereft of both memoir and friend, still under the spell of the tale, I decided to visit this house for myself—why, I don't certainly know, only that I was drawn irresistibly to do so. It is, curiously, both derelict-seeming and inhabited. Long grass, rioting vines, sagging wooden fence, rubbish-strewn yard, the letter box stuffed with uncollected junk mail—and yet, day and night (I have been back several times), a light burns behind the brown curtains hung haphazardly before the windows of the front room. Someone lives there, I am convinced someone labours within, in the very place where the young Ern dreamed his first dreams, poised over a desk lamp perhaps, or under the dim gleam of a forty watt bulb—doing what? Reading? Writing? Or remembering paradise.

NB When this talk was delivered at Te Rau Aroha marae in Bluff on the afternoon of April 23, 2006, some in the audience assumed it refers to an imaginary text. This is not the case: the ms, while it may be fiction, is certainly not fictive. I have seen it, held it in my hands. Not only does it exist, it may now be with a publisher: I heard recently, on the grapevine, that M has forwarded a copy to his agent. We may yet see it in the world.

Martin Edmond lives in Sydney. His *Luca Antara: Passages in Search of Australia* is due from East Street Publications, Adelaide, in November 2006. *Chronicles of the Unsung* (Auckland UP) won the biography section of the Montana New Zealand Book Awards in 2005.

