

Is Australia funny? Well, let me put it this way:
There I was, about a fortnight or so back, broke,
unemployed, selling records and books and all kinds
of things to pay the rent and feed the cat, and at
the same time planning to make a grand entrance
into FAPA with the first issue of "Bundalohn Quarterly".
Like any neofan, I was so anxious to see how the
first few pages would look that I ran them off and
sat for hours admiring their beauty &c. I especially
liked the way I had anticipated some possible future
change of address in the second paragraph of page 1.

At about the same time, a senior public servant in
Canberra was deciding my immediate future for me.
Today is Monday, 28th February 1972. On Thursday
I shake the dust of Melbourne from my moustache
and point the VW at Canberra. On Monday next I start
as a journalist (Grade A, if you please!) with the
Parliamentary Reporting Staff - my duties, editing
transcripts of Senate Committee meetings. My flat
is in a "state of chassis" (if you'll pardon the lit'ry
reference), about 95% of my furniture, books and
things unlikely to reach me for maybe a month or so.
A cultural siege awaits me: whatever I need for fanac
or spiritual nourishment must go with me in the VW.
A mighty little car, that same VW, but it will not
accommodate a Roneo 865. Stencils, yes. This IBM
typer, sure. A duplicator, no.

So, with great reluctance, I send you "Bundalohn
Quarterly" just as it is. Perhaps one day I will publish
the great stuff referred to on page 1, perhaps not.

Peace:

JB

IS AUSTRALIA FUNNY?

What is funny? said earnest Pilate, and stayed so long for an answer he missed the last tram.

I refer, of course, to old Fred Pilate of Noarlunga (who is noarlunga with us, poor bugger), not that ancient clean-handed bridge-player well known to us from Holy Writ, the Essays of the late Viscount St Albans and other doughty tomes.

On the other hand: what is Australia? - and I pause hastily to remark that if you have lost the thread of this discourse it's only analytical philosophy systematic logic stuff like that and you're still on the right tram sport now read on.

Define your terms, said Socrates in a long dead tongue.

Whaddaya mean "terms"? said Big Jim Thanatos.

Whaddaya mean "mean"? said Socrates.

Aw, shut up and get that hemlock inter yer, said Big Jim Thanatos.

As I said, philosophy. Great stuff, if you have the stomach for it

Stay friend! - bare with me (as the bishop said to the choirboy) - we're getting to the point.

Is Australia funny? - that's the point.

Told you we were getting to it, didn't I. Now, what shall we do with it? That, as His Late Royal Highness the Prince of Denmark said in a long dead soliloquy, is the question. Whether to - you know - or take the plunge, bare the bodkin, bury the hatchet, splice the mainbrace, or quaff the hemlock, hook, line and syntax. Then again. Or perhaps! Or even!! But no. On! - regardless - sans fear nor favour - but with due cognizance of the Landlords & Tenants Act, naturally.

You do not, you say - and I stay a moment to allow you to reconsider - you do not recall a Landlords & Tenants Act in HAMLET? Read no further. All of Shakespeare is a landlords-and-tenants act, and so is (please uncover and be upstanding) Life Itself. Go away and read Foyster's latest list of stars, planets and other celestial rocks known to the early astronomers of Boggley-Wallah (with footnotes): that's the department you're after. Go on! Out!!

Now, either I am talking to myself or you are a compulsive reader, the kind of person who will read a tram ticket or a cigarette packet if there's nothing else in sight - even, if you are in the final, clinical stage of anagnoskomania, "Readers Digest" or "Riverside Quarterly". Whichever, at least one of us is sick, so we know roughly where we stand and I'll have no backchat or snide remarks until this is over, right? Right. (Movement of the lips while reading shall not be construed by either party to prejudice this or subsequent clauses, unless specifically in contravention of any part or provision of the Un-natural Acts Act 1724-1913 as amended, et passim, ibid and patents pending, DV.)

'Ow's yer granma, orright?

Orright, 'ow's yours?

Orright.

Another point resolved. Are you sure you can stand the pace?

Meanwhile, we must ask ourselves: is Australia funny?

Let's put it another way: Australia? funny is

You see? Of course you did, immediately! The difference between philosophy and dogmatism, in a nutshell. "Australia? funny is" is dogmatic, splenetic, slightly paranoid, and worst of all, ungrammatical.

'Ow's yer grammar?

Declining.

Jeez, mate, sorry to 'ear it. Great old scout, yer grammar. Wotsa trouble?

Hardening of the apostrophes, subjunctivitis, displacement of the colon and spasms of acute diaeresis.

Jeez, could 'appen to anyone, couldn't it? Never know, do yer?

True. All things parse.

It is a mistake to think that every question has two sides. Worthwhile questions have a minimum of fourteen, and the really stimulating ones start at twenty-three. But this is nothing new: the Etruscans, as long ago as way back, knew of at least one question with more than twenty-three sides. (See: Foyster, J. - "Stars, planets, lumps of chalk and many-sided questions known to early Etruscan astronomers (with asterisks, daggers, double daggers, section marks, parallels, blind Ps and contemporary wood-carvings in the text)"; pp 43 et seq, but especially seq.)

Nevertheless: is Australia funny?

The first recorded side we possess to this question lasts for 24 minutes 32 seconds, but is not available in stereo. Tradition ascribes it to Dirk Hartog - or was it Groote Eylandt? Some bloody dago, anyway; they all look the same to me. He...

I submit, Your Honour, that the author should not have used that expression.

Which expression?

I could not repeat it, Your Honour.

Well, write it down and show it to me.

Write, Your Honour?

Pardon me, I keep on forgetting. Whisper it to me, then.

(Counsel whispers to His Honour, whose countenance betrays nothing. Judgement is swift, final. No correspondence is entered into, nor seen to be entered into.)

I rule the submission invalid. The author might have confined his remarks to the learned obscurity of a decent tongue: for example, "fliegende Hollander" might have served in this instance; but "bloody dago", I believe, and so rule, is not offensive to anyone but a bloody dago.

Your Honour!!

Case dismissed, Mr Theopompodopoloski, or whatever yer stupid name is.

He - Dirk Eylandt, that is, or possibly Groote Hartog - fell off his boat in the Gulf of Carpentaria, waded ashore, looked around, scratched his head, armpit and kneecap, and said: Cogito ergo sum! This, as every schoolboy knows, means: Crikey! - I thought this was Borneo, but it ain't, it's Australia, or New Holland as some do say; that's funny! For the next twenty-four minutes he muttered to himself in a long dead monotone, then an Arunta tribesman speared him. (Australians don't like odd-coloured people, and this fellow was decidedly off-colour. That's funny, too, but understandable - if you speak Arunta.)

A certain manufacturer of biscuits uses as his trademark a picture of a parrot, perched on a T-shaped structure and in the act of consuming a cracker. Rather pretty, if you have the stomach for it. Originally the picture also bore a slogan: "On his T is the best Poll, I see!"

They don't write biscuits like that any more.

Then there was the famous aboriginal, clothed only in an immaculate white Pelaco shirt and saying, "Mine tinkit dey fit!" And the grimy labourer in the brewery ad, who "allus has one at eleven".

Used to kill ourselves laughing at those, until the racial and social equality push started making us feel guilty about such things. Then the advertisers decided to modernize their graven image, and now those old advertisements are nostalgic reminders of our ignorant, unjust past. And collector's items, of course.

We do not feel guilty about nostalgia for ignorance and injustice. Is that funny?

Maybe it is, maybe it isn't: but is it Australia?

It is.

So is ten o'clock closing, and nudes without nipples on the front page of "Truth". (Yes, I did say "Truth". I believe in newspapers, and am sure they have no end of trouble finding these nipple-less females, but they find them! If they ever run out, which Heaven forfend, we'll be into the Permissive Society before we know it, and you know what that would mean: rampant nipples shamelessly thrusting their insidious wickedness at us from every news-stand!)

Women's Lib? Well, we know it's screamingly funny, since the whole movement is engineered by male chauvinist pigs, but it's not peculiarly Australian. It will be, one day, when everyone else has gone on to something different, but not yet.

Trams are funny, perhaps.

Mike Horvat visited Melbourne a couple of years ago. Mike came from Oregon, via Viet Nam, Sydney and other outposts of empire. The taxi-driver remarked that the trip from the airport into town was much quicker since they opened the freeway and he didn't have to worry about the trams. Mike wondered uneasily whether "the trams" was some dread antipodean disease, until we showed him one. He laughed. "Oh, you mean cable-cars!"

Americans just don't understand. Not cable-cars, trams. Cable-cars are an efficient and/or decorative form of urban public transport. Trams are a dread antipodean disease.

So is poetry. Everyone and his dog writes the stuff. The dog is generally conceded to write better poetry than just about anyone, but it loses something in translation. Poetry, as someone once said, is what is lost in translation - but, funny or not, that's not Australian, so it doesn't count.

Bernard O'Dowd was very Australian. (The most interesting Australians usually turn out to be Irish or Jewish, or both.) (And that subversive opinion is especially advanced for John Foyster to denounce in two volumes of closely-reasoned arguments, critical, historical, sociological and philosophico-geographical, supported by charts, tables, graphs, addenda and corrigenda, many figs in the text, and two dubious words from the Phoenician said to mean "Irish", "Jewish" or possibly both. Order your copy now! \$235.27 plus postage, offer expires 1st April 1972, all proceeds Freedom from Angst Campaign.)

Bernard O'Dowd, like Joe Fogg, lived in Northcote - the suburb of Melbourne in which I was born and more or less lived and moved and had my dull being for twenty-four years or thereabouts - so he can't be all bad. He wrote a sonnet, entitled "Australia":

Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space,
Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West
In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?
Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?
Are you for Light, and trimmed, with oil in place,
Or but a Will o' Wisp on marshy quest?
A new demesne for Mammon to infest?
Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face?

The cenotaphs of species dead elsewhere
That in your limits leap and swim and fly,
Or trail uncanny harp-strings from your trees,
Mix omens with the auguries that dare
To plant the Cross upon your forehead sky,
A virgin helpmate Ocean at your knees.

Now you know why Australians tend to have water on the knees, anyway.

But is Australia the "fatal nest" or "millennial Eden"? We have never really decided which we want, let alone how to achieve it.

But she'll be right, sport.

Or will she?

Take Hope. A. D. Hope, I mean. A superb poet, and this is his "Australia":

A Nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey
In the field uniform of modern wars,
Darkens her hills, those endless, outstretched paws
Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.

They call her a young country, but they lie:
She is the last of lands, the emptiest,
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast
Still tender but within the womb is dry.

Without songs, architecture, history:
The emotions and superstitions of younger lands.
Her rivers of water drown among inland sands,
The river of her immense stupidity

Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth.
In them at last the ultimate men arrive
Whose boast is not "we live" but "we survive",
A type who will inhabit the dying earth.

And her five cities, like five teeming sores,
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilization over there.

Fifty years or so separate the two poems. In that time O'Dowd's millennial Eden ceased lurking and went away somewhere else: emigrated to Cuba, it is rumoured. Mammon took over; the Cross upon your forehead sky faded in the smog; the species dead elsewhere started disappearing here, too; and a Freudian glance at the offshore oil rigs is enough to reveal the fate of our virgin helpmate Ocean.

A few uncanny harp-strings survive: now and then you may hear them, softly humming "Advance Australia Fair!" in a disconsolate minor key. A. D. Hope obviously hears them still, despite the chatter of cultured apes and the increasingly rowdy pullulation of second-hand Europeans.

A great future lies behind us.

Surely here, in this Utopia which never was, this prison colony which never quite produced a Sun-God's race, is the stuff of tragedy - and of high comedy.

Which brings us more or less back to the subject of this essay. But if you have been watching closely you will have observed the following:

- (i) I have not for a moment strayed from the subject;
- (ii) I have barely begun to sidle up to tackling the subject;
- (iv) (a) Section (iii) has been rescinded; OR
(b) I can't count in Latin.

Of course Australia is funny. Everything is, depending on how you look at it. Funny, sad, ugly, beautiful, stimulating, dull: any of these things, or all of them - and more. If you find Australia or anything or anyone only funny, or only one of those other adjectives, I am sorry for you. In Australia, in the universe, in all life, I find all of those things - and more - simultaneously.

And even as I do so, I choose most often to see things the funny way.

I have used the word "comedy", but I have carefully not offered a definition of "funny". When I am talking or writing in an un-funny manner, as I do occasionally, I tend to use the word "absurd" rather frequently. If you have read Albert Camus you will know roughly what I mean by that word.

"The world is a stage, and life is a farce, and he that laughs most has most profit of the performance. The worst thing is good enough to be laughed at, though it be good for nothing else; and the best thing, though it be good for something else, is good for nothing better."

Not, as you recognized immediately, a quote from Albert Camus, but from Thomas Love Peacock. Camus was an outstanding thinker, who painstakingly worked out his own philosophy of the Absurd, and I thank him for it. Peacock did the same thing a century before him, but chose to illustrate the Absurd in a brilliantly funny way, rather than define and expound it.

"There are many ways, but only one Way."

(Damned clever, those Chinese. Don't spend all their time playing table tennis, you know.)

My way is more Peacock's way than Camus's; and gradually it is becoming more my way than anyone else's. Like it or lump it.

And so: I find for the appellant.

Australia, I believe and so rule, is funny. And may the Lord have mercy on its soul.

