

Tracing the Spectre of Death in Francis Webb's Last Poems

BERNADETTE BRENNAN
University of Sydney

In much of Francis Webb's poetry 'the tale brings death' ('A Drum for Ben Boyd', *CB* 47), but death largely remains off-stage. The poetry seeks to dramatise the arduous journey towards death rather than the moment of death itself. In 'A Death at Winson Green' (1953-54)¹ the repetitive drum of 'dead' closes every stanza and insistently drives the poem towards the moment of death. But the poem refuses to name that moment. It eschews the space of death and remains focused on the gaping bed:

Time crouches, watching, near his face of snows.
He is all life, thrown on the gaping bed,
Blind, silent, in a trance, and shortly, dead. (*CB* 160)

There is a significant shift, however, in Webb's last poems in which death is more deeply explored and, in 'Sturt and the Vultures' (1970), boldly named. A clear example of this development can be seen if one compares the stanza endings of two structurally similar poems: 'A Death at Winson Green' and 'Incident' (1970). Both poems record the goings on in a hospital ward at a time when the speaker contemplates the death of an inpatient. In the later poem the patient is dead; his name is McMurtrie. The 'lie as still as the dead', 'feast-day long since dead', 'almost dead', 'almost dead' and 'shortly, dead', which close the stanzas of the earlier poem give way to five insistent 'McMurtrie's dead' (*CB* 235). The tentative approach to death of the earlier poem is replaced with an almost brutal confrontation of the event. It is important to note, however, that in both poems the dying and the dead man are transfigured in and through their suffering. Elsewhere I have discussed how death and the void are explored in Webb's final poem 'Lament for St Maria Goretti' (1973).² I want, here, to trace how death and the space it occupies begin to be more fully confronted in the poetry, and then offer a reading of the relationship between poetry and death in 'Sturt and the Vultures'.

The death that informs Webb's poetry is a dying into eternal life, a dying that signifies a birth: 'towards birth he labours' ('A Death at Winson Green'). Webb's poetic engagement with the seemingly paradoxical movement whereby death signifies birth is more ambiguous and qualified than the conventional Catholic teaching of death and resurrection. Christ's death and resurrection, and their implication in terms of spiritual redemption and eternal life, are a central concern of the poetry but the poetry repeatedly veers towards resurrection and death rather than death and resurrection. The possibility of resurrection is most often suggested through the image of the sun, particularly the dawning sun. In 'A Death at Winson Green' the sun, one step removed from the drama unfolding on the bed, quietly counters the movement towards death. 'The dazed historic sunlight' gazes in through the window. 'Noon reddens', 'evening gropes out of colour', 'Twilight itself breaks up' to give way to 'dour night' and still the man 'holds his place'.

With the coming of the dawn, however, there is a shift in dynamics:

With every gasp at breath; his burden grows
Heavier as all earth lightens, and all sea. (CB 160)

In a characteristic twist the poem returns from the suggestion of transcendent possibility to the man's suffering and imminent death: 'thrown on the gaping bed,/Blind, silent . . . and shortly, dead'.

'The Stations' (1952) celebrates the integral nature of Christ's death and resurrection to everyday human life. Its closing image offers a rare example in Webb's work of unqualified, hopeful expectation:

Sunset hails a rising
The eve of the Resurrection is in this room
And playing round it the stormlights of knock-off time. (CB 125)

More often in Webb's poetry that anticipated rising remains always tied to the suffering of the Cross. As 'Beeston Regis' (1959-60) insists: 'In the arising is the Calvary' (CB 152). In 'Good Friday, Norfolk' (1958-59), Christ's resurrection is acknowledged but qualified by the positioning and cadence of the final word:

The time is propitious. Dawn in gardener's dress
Stands close to us:
Words of ploughed lands, of sunrise, and a Cross. (CB 203)

The poem locates the reader with Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday morning but in place of the risen Christ it offers his 'Cross'. Webb's poetry refuses any easy transcendence. It gestures towards resurrection but always returns to earth, to a figure on the road, to the gaping bed, to suffering. That is to say it dramatises a faith that recognises 'All beauty, all joy? Yes—and all pain and disfigurement', in that order. This poetic exploration of death signals an anxiety of faith in the possibility of human resurrection; an anxiety expressed by the poetry not necessarily by the poet. I am making no claims here about Francis Webb's personal beliefs. Indeed Webb's letters to his family affirm repeatedly the comfort he took from his Catholic faith.³

'Socrates', first published in 1957, marks an important milestone in Webb's journey towards naming death and confronting the void in which he situates it. Socrates is yet another of Webb's characters on a journey towards death which is to be a birth into eternal life. He is awoken from his final night of imprisonment to embrace death: 'Daylight calls me to birth' (CB 137). Again the sun charts his progress moving from dawn, through the glaring red of noon and into darkness. 'Socrates' simultaneously traces the journey not only of the philosopher's last day but also, through the stages of the *'returning immortal*

soul, the journey of his life from the 'light', 'pain', 'love' and 'sound' of birth through the world of language, 'laughter' and 'irony', out into 'silence'.⁴ Socrates is one of Webb's lesser-recognised explorers. He of 'the free foot, made for exploration and the road' (CB 140) has travelled the road of knowledge, the examined life. Like Webb's other explorers he too is ultimately absorbed into that 'field pitched beyond world and words' ('Leichhardt in Theatre', CB 71): a dark and silent space.

The ambiguous nature of that space is developed through the poem. Initially Socrates looks into it. He shares it for a brief moment with Sisyphus the man who, for trying to cheat death, must forever struggle with his punishment. Sisyphus 'heaves again at the sun', 'he is possessed/By the immense rolling tumbling ball of fire' (CB 137). Through this encounter Socrates knows that after death 'they wake, wander, are born; they know all, they ask no pity' (CB 137). Has he discovered the answer to Leichhardt's questions:

Has Gilbert found the source? or do his bones,
Forever at war with death,
Trudge nightly towards Port Essington? ('Leichhardt', CB 70)

Will Socrates, in death, find the source? Will he too, like the dead McMurtrie, know all?: '—he knows all, he is superhuman/And can trump the last tricks of space' ('Incident', CB 234). Are the silence and stillness that envelop him positive or negative forces? The poem resists any firm conclusions.

In the conclusion to *The Republic* Socrates mounts an argument, through the consideration of good and evil and through his 'doctrine of opposites', for the existence of the immortal soul (440-456). 'Socrates' does not question the existence of an immortal soul. It is the ambiguous destination of the soul that the poem explores. The ambiguity stems from the divergent sources that may have provided inspiration for this poem: Plato's *Phaedo* and Yeats's 'The Black Tower'. In the *Phaedo* Plato records Socrates' last day and final conversations:

'The lovers of learning understand', said he, 'that philosophy found their soul simply imprisoned in the body and welded to it, and compelled to survey through this as if through prison bars the things that are, not by itself through itself, but wallowing in all ignorance; and she saw the danger of this prison came through desire, so that the prisoner himself would be chief helper in his own imprisonment.'
(*Great Dialogues* 487)

Socrates goes on to explain that philosophy strives to free the soul, persuading it to withdraw from the senses and trust nothing but itself. In relation to Socrates' teaching, the stages of the soul in Webb's 'Socrates' can be read as tracking a positive journey on which silence and stillness signify an elevated state of freedom and understanding.

Plato also explains in the *Phaedo* how Socrates' friends began to weep when he 'cheerfully' drank the cup of poison:

Apollodoros . . . now burst into loud sobs, and by his weeping and lamentations completely broke down every man there except Socrates himself. He only said, 'What a scene! You amaze me. That's just why I sent the women away, to keep them from making a scene like this. I've heard that one ought to make an end in decent silence. Quiet yourselves and endure'. (*Great Dialogues* 521)

In 'Socrates' the faces and the 'tongues of love' are stilled and elided by 'a darkness'. These 'tongues of love' are both the voices of friends and the sign of the Spirit, the comforting tongues of fire sent by Jesus at Pentecost. They are the agent of speech and that of the Spirit, of flesh and metaphor, of word and Word. They are overpowered by darkness. Presence and presence give way to 'stillness' and '*silence*'.

The influence of Yeats's last poem, 'The Black Tower' (1939), can be seen in the powerful resonance between the italicised refrains of the two poems. The first refrain in 'Socrates' reads:

*Tight to the breast of cold dark upright night
Cleaves the immanence, the Form, of living light
As light is of the returning immortal soul.* (CB 137)

Webb alters a word in the final line of each refrain to suggest the different qualities of the returning soul. Yeats modifies the opening line of his:

*There in the tomb stand the dead upright,
But winds come up from the shore:
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.* (CB 396)⁵

The mood of 'The Black Tower' is one of heroic despair. The second refrain offers a glimmer of hope, '*There in the tomb drops the faint moonlight*', but the tone becomes increasingly pessimistic as the faithful soldiers wait for the arrival of their King. The King will not come. There will be no deliverance: '*There in the tomb the dark grows blacker*'. Webb's Socrates is also abandoned to the darkness:

And next the faces, the tongues of love, all, all
Withdraw into stillness, are elided by a darkness.

The encompassing nature of this darkness is emphasised by the line endings: 'all, all . . . darkness'. Yet, as the refrain reminds us, in darkness there may be light:

*Tight to the breast of cold dark upright night
Cleaves the immanence, the Form, of living light
As silence is of the returning immortal soul.*

Webb's ambiguous grammatical construction allows for the possibility that 'immanence,

the Form, of living light' both clings to and is cut asunder from the heart of this darkness. The 'living light', a term that in Webb's theology could refer to Christ, may be present in the darkness. This dependent relationship between light and darkness (resurrection and death) is woven throughout Webb's poetry. As 'Nessun Dorma' (1960-64) attests:

. . . the night
Will be all an abyss and depth of light between
Two shorelines in labour: birth and death. (CB 231)

Or as Peter declares in 'The Chalice' (1957): 'Light is the centre of our darkness. I am to tell you/Of all light, all love, fast to the Cross and bleeding' (CP 155). It is the depths of this darkness that three of Webb's last published poems—'Rondo Burleske: Mahler's Ninth' (1970), 'Sturt and the Vultures' and 'Lament for St Maria Goretti'—seek to probe. In these poems Webb extends the glimpse of the space of death offered by 'Socrates'.

Unlike Socrates, Gustav Mahler was deeply troubled by the thought of death. He converted to Catholicism in the hope that faith in an afterlife would provide him with comfort in the face of death. His attempt was in vain. Mahler's fear of death effectively destroyed the religious faith he had opposed to it. His ninth symphony, in the tradition of Beethoven and Bruckner, was to be his last. In the 'Rondo Burleske' of that symphony the confrontation with death is anguished and personal. It evokes horror and bitterness. The finale, with its dissolution of tonality, is one of heartbroken resignation. In 'Rondo Burleske: Mahler's Ninth' Webb captures Mahler's desperate confusion and that of his music:

You swim in a gulf, a void, out of creation:
Among nameless atonal amphibia in slickest motion
You (Austrian, Catholic, Jew) are floundering.
. . .
There are fiddles and choking woodwinds without number;
Leaderless, buttons showing, you near the Abyss . . . (CB 236)

He takes Mahler to the very edge of the 'Abyss' and, as the music climaxes, throws him into it. Again at this crucial moment there is creation and destruction, creation and crucifixion:

It's the climax takes us . . .
(Let there be light! Why hast thou forsaken Me?)
You, master of the verge, diving over to prod
The delighted but somewhat dilated eyeball of God.

It is in the feared void, in the midst of darkness, that Mahler comes face to face with God. In 'Sturt and the Vultures' the void and its inhabitants are more complexly imagined.

'Sturt and the Vultures' is, like all Webb's explorer poems, based on historical facts, in this

instance Charles Sturt's 1844-46 expedition into the central Australian desert in search of an inland sea. Sturt failed to find such a sea. He and his team were defeated by parching blasts of hot North-Easterly wind, unbearable heat and debilitating thirst. Webb's poem maps an equally arduous journey. It is a journey into language, more specifically into poetry, in search of some sustaining, spiritual inner core. The poem's search, like that of Charles Sturt, appears to admit of failure.

Sturt first appears in Webb's poetry in the *'Advertisement'* of *'Leichhardt in Theatre'*. Light has '[s]hrivelled' and 'consumed' him. It has 'rapped at his skull, flooded into his heart' (CB 61). He wonders if he should destroy the audience's illusions, 'open their veins with a bitter lancet of heat' by telling them 'of death' but he is not given the chance. He is left to 'burn' backstage, trapped in his desert hell, with no hope of rain. *'Sturt and the Vultures'* initially revisits the pantomime form of *'Leichhardt in Theatre'* as it weaves together a sense of farce with a menacing sense of fatigue and harassment:

MINCING, mincing we go. And it follows, follows,
This hot nor'-easter: sometimes even a little testy as us
So that these poor horses sprocketed to its whirring coils
Slew away, working at the bit. Browne may be dying.
Little hot tantrums of wind and tiny pebbles
Desiccate and annul the words I toss to him. (CB 236)

'MINCING, mincing', introduces an image of affectedly elegant explorers almost prancing across the desert. With their carousel-like horses they struggle against a juvenile wind. This wind, however, is destructive. It too is linked with *'mincing'*. It brings the possibility of death not only to Browne but also to the vitality of language. Sturt's words offer no lifeline to the dying Browne. They are dried out and shredded by the desert wind and pebbles. The use of *'annul'* suggests a cancellation of any sacramental benefit the words may have had. The desperate lack of water in the harsh, sandy desert was a physical reality that threatened Sturt and his men with failure and certain death. In *'Sturt and the Vultures'* it is a spiritual thirst for inner water, for *'words of water'* (*'Lament for St Maria Goretti'*, CB 240) that must be slaked. The God of the poem, however, is far removed from the unassuming figure of Jesus whose *'living water'* (John 4:1-16) will quench all thirst for all time.⁶

Like Eyre before him, Sturt recorded his trust in Providence and his abiding faith in a merciful God:

A second time had we been forced back from the interior, conquered alike by the difficulties of the country, the severity of the season and the scarcity of water . . . I had made no discovery to entitle me to credit or reward, and . . . therefore I should fail . . . Providence had denied that success to me with which it had been pleased to crown my former efforts . . . In vain had I prayed to the Almighty for success on this to me all important occasion. In vain had I implored a blessing on you and on my children, if not on myself. But my prayer had been rejected, my petition refused, and so far from any

ray of hope having ever crossed my path I felt that I had been contending against the very powers of Heaven, in the desperate show I had made against the seasons, and I now stood blighted and a blasted man over whose head the darkest destiny had settled.
(*Journal* 78-9)

Despite failure and a feeling of abandonment Sturt never seemed to doubt that his 'darkest destiny' was in keeping with the will of God. His journal entries for 19 October and 9 November 1845 read respectively: 'However, Dearest, we must leave our fate in the hands of the Almighty from whom whatever adversity may await me, I pray ever for a blessing upon you', and 'In this uncertainty I must close the proceedings of the week, placing everything in the hand of that Good Providence which altho' it has refused me success for which I prayed has yet been visible in my destinies' (85, 95). 'Sturt and the Vultures' parodies such a notion of divine will. The poem offers an image of the God of Calvinist teaching, not as an all-powerful, absolute Sovereign but as a pitiful 'old bearded Predestinator' imprisoned in and by his 'plan', a plan the poetry refuses to endorse. As Noel Rowe has argued, this God 'is subjected to a writing which dismantles sovereign schemes, whether of gods, fathers, soldiers or explorers'. Rowe suggests that the poem uses the Calvinistic theology of predestination as a metaphor 'for sovereign and ultimate purpose, so that its effect is not so much to expose the shortcomings of Calvinist theology, as to disassemble the very idea of theological exploration when the Void annuls so sovereign a God' (131-32).

Each morning Sturt hands this 'misunderstood' and 'moping' Predestinator 'His text' and leaves 'Him [to] sob over the dear sacred scheme of His dotage' (*CB* 237). He is little more than an old, emotional puppet, another incongruous character in this disturbing pantomime. It is significant, though to date unnoted in the published criticism, that this God is the God of unconscious memory. He exists only in a dream. The dream is punctuated, and eventually overcome, by the reality of the desert experience. This 'Grandsire' God disintegrates in the face of the crying birds:

Browne may be dying. *Water back at the Depot.*
—If only to rest His poor old hands a little . . . How it follows
This hot nor'-easter . . . the Void, the sand, the pebbles,
Little tattered pockets of the Void . . .

Browne is calling,

I was dreaming.

—The birds, the birds! Crying like children, (*CB* 237-8)

It is the birds, what they signify, and the Void from whence they come, that are sovereign in 'Sturt and the Vultures'.

These intensely ambiguous birds operate on a number of levels. They have a basis in an actual encounter between Charles Sturt and some of his men and 'a flight of large hawks' which swooped down upon the party 'from the upper sky in hundreds'. Sturt wrote: 'every part of the sky was alive with them. . . They flew right into our faces in such rapid

succession as to perplex one, but at length . . . they soared up aloft again and disappeared' (47). Webb translates this incident into a meditation on the spiritual vitality of poetry, the nature of the Void and the relationship between poetry and death.

The birds of 'ecstatic flight, rapturous as the Paraclete' gesture towards Hopkins' falcon in 'The Windhover', a poem addressed '*To Christ our Lord*': 'rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding/High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing/In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing . . . the hurl and gliding/Rebuffed the big wind'(30). The power, beauty and mastery of the bird offer unqualified praise to the greatness of Hopkins' God. Like Hopkins, Webb also uses birds to articulate a vision of ecstasy and pain, immanence and transcendence. Webb's desert birds also call to mind Yeats's 'indignant desert birds' and the sense of anxiety and menace expressed in 'The Second Coming' (210-11).⁷ They are also set against Yeats's falcon. Whereas the falcon turns in a 'widening gyre', the vultures operate in the reverse direction. In 'Sturt and the Vultures' it is not so much that 'the centre cannot hold' but that the birds will spiral into the centre and the centre will implode:

Closer, wheeling, wheeling, descending, closer!
They come in ecstatic flight, rapturous as the Paraclete,
Tongues of fire — it's a well of voices. Crying like children.
My horse props, makes to rear, shivers, and cannot move.
They come at us, begging, menacing, at eye level, above.
I lash at them with my hands, filled with terror and love. (CB 238)

Webb's use of 'rapturous' glances at the theological act of transporting believers up to heaven at the Second Coming of Christ.⁸ It is significant, therefore, that the line endings 'move', 'above', 'love', suggestive of an ascension, compete with and are cancelled by the downward thrust of the birds. Transcendence is denied.

The birds are a sign of the Holy Spirit, 'the Paraclete', sent by the risen Christ to the fearful Apostles at Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles (2:1-5) relates the coming of the Spirit:

When Pentecost day came round, they had all met in one room, when suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven . . . and something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak foreign languages as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech.

With that gift of speech, the Apostles left their room and addressed an assembled congregation:

Now there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven and at this sound they all assembled, each one bewildered to hear these men speaking his own language. They were amazed and astonished.

There were no barriers to linguistic communication. In 'Sturt and the Vultures' the power of the Spirit is reversed. Not only are Sturt's words 'desiccated and annulled', a 'well of voices' would be indecipherable.

The vultures fill Sturt with 'terror and love'. It is not the first time that birds in Webb's poetry have fulfilled this function. In 'Melville at Wood's Hole' (CB 77-79), written over twenty years earlier (1947-48), it is the seagulls, birds which hold within themselves the 'impulse of death and of life', who are the 'vision of terror and love'. The 'crazy captain' moves swiftly towards that vision as he approaches death. The oblique reference to Melville and Captain Ahab is not incidental.⁹ In *Moby Dick* the great white whale is a vision of terror and love, both the desired object of the quest and the harbinger of death. These seemingly contradictory impulses, of terror and love, desire and death, creation and destruction underpin Webb's poetic vision. As the narrator of 'A Drum for Ben Boyd' explains:

. . . all the poetry of a tower's ascent
Leaps out most powerfully in its rocking and fall. (CB 49)

For Webb, poetry, creativity, comes out of a space of cancellation, a space of nothing. 'Sturt and the Vultures', by identifying the birds as poets, dramatises this poetic vision. The birds/poets are lured down to earth from above but they belong neither to 'high Heaven/Nor the earth of statuesque stones'. They come from and return to the 'Void'.

The vultures, for all their theological and literary significance, are always already signifiers of death. What is it then that Webb is suggesting when he works a shift in which the vultures are identified as poets? Are poets birds of prey? Is poetry about praying? These birds are 'Poets of dry upper nothingness'. Are they intellectual poets bereft of passion and emotion? Is it that poets mince language, desiccate it so that it has no spiritual vitality, no life-giving water? If words are not life-sustaining, what role is there for poetry? 'Sturt and the Vultures' poses these questions but offers in reply only contradiction and uncertainty. At the same moment that Webb questions pessimistically the redemptive possibilities of poetry, he affirms, through the wealth of spiritual and literary allusion captured in the metaphor of the birds, the power, depth and eternal nature of poetry.

In the midst of the hellish desert, at the point where 'thirst' has wheeled 'into madness' within the explorers, the poetry entertains what appears to be the possibility of spiritual consolation:

Your immaculate Words, cryings (O hear the sweet nor'-easter)
Piping to us, see the lovely Madonna-faces in the gilt
Frameways of pure sand and pebbles! (CB 238)

These 'immaculate Words' may seem to counter the desiccated, annulled words tossed earlier to Browne and the undecipherable well of bird's voices but the poetry resists such an easy resolution. These words offer no sacramental benefit. They are tied to the 'lovely

Madonna-faces' framed by 'pure sand and pebbles'. Such a frame would, like so much else in this poem, disintegrate. The 'Madonna-faces' would, like the birds/poets, be 'lost, gone' into the Void. Indeed the Madonna-faces could be read as 'Little tattered pockets of the Void':

. . . the Void, the sand, the pebbles,
Little tattered pockets of the Void . . . (ellipses are Webb's)

As Rowe notes: 'There is a thread connecting "immaculate Words" to "lovely Madonna-faces" which might be said to encircle the poet's desire for a pure and elevated tongue with a vision of Mary. Yet Mary herself encircles 'cryings (O hear the sweet nor'-easter)/Piping to us', which means that the desert has taken up position within her image and that Mary is being herself evaporated' (137).

As 'Sturt and the Vultures' concludes someone, 'man - or is it God!', attempts to expel the vultures from earth, to drive them 'out of sight and mind like exhausted breath'. The attempt fails. The birds disappear upwards but they leave behind a trace of themselves. Unlike Webb's Boyd, Leichhardt or St Francis, that trace is not a shadowy suggestion of departed presence. It is rather the personified embodiment of what the birds represent, 'Death':

But neutralities or wrath
Of man — or is it God! — expel you again from earth
Driving you out of sight and mind like exhausted breath,
The wing whimper, the talon. Only something far beneath
Cowers away when you come.
And its name is Death. (CB 238)

Again the poetry has turned away from transcendence to focus on the figure 'far beneath'. Death 'cowers away' from the birds but is it really threatened by them and what they represent: poetry; the Holy Spirit; exploration? From the suggestion in the opening stanza that 'Browne may be dying' the poem builds towards the possibility of death. The closing line-endings affirm the presence and the inevitability of death: 'earth', 'breath', 'beneath', 'come', 'Death'. Death is awarded the final word. Is it not therefore as powerful as the birds/poets? But perhaps that is not the appropriate question to ask here because the birds, as signifiers of both poetry and death, challenge the suggestion of a contest between the two. Perhaps the poem is suggesting that somewhere between the ascendent birds and the cowering figure on the road there is a third way, another space.

Perhaps by naming death, in according death its due, Webb's poetry can move forward into that space. It is a space of nothing. It is 'the Void'. And in Webb's last poem, 'Lament for St Maria Goretti', written three years after 'Sturt and the Vultures', the dying girl eventually surrenders peacefully to the 'gasping void' and is embraced by '*the wash of space*'. That space holds within itself '*Meteorite, cherubim. Horseman*', her dead father Luigi and the suggestion, through the 'flight of birds . . . like a rosary', of the Virgin Mary

(CB 239-240). We can only speculate about the direction Webb's poetry may have taken but it is possible to trace a development in his poetry that recognizes, in these last published poems, a poetic acceptance of death and a readiness to face boldly the space of 'Nothing' (CB 240) that haunts his earlier work .

NOTES

- ¹ All dates refer to when the poem was written and have been taken from Peter and Leonie Meere, *Francis Webb: Poet and Brother*.
- ² See Bernadette Brennan, 'Death and the Woman: Looking at Francis Webb's 'Lament for St Maria Goretti''.
- ³ See Webb's letters to his family in *Francis Webb: Poet and Brother* where he writes of the 'consolations of Catholic teaching' (157).
- ⁴ For a reading of 'Socrates' in terms of the stages of the soul see Bill Ashcroft, *The Gimbals of Unease*, 49-50. See also Andrew Lynch's "'While I wrestled with the sum, the sun': Francis Webb's 'Socrates'" which reads the poem in dialogue with Greek thought and investigates how questions of faith and morality inform the poem.
- ⁵ This text is the most heavily annotated of any text in Webb's library.
- ⁶ For further discussion on the image of God offered in this poem and the sources used, see Robert Sellick, 'Francis Webb's 'Sturt and the Vultures': a Note on Sources', and Noel Rowe, "'Are you from the Void?' A Reading of Webb's 'Sturt and the Vultures'".
- ⁷ 'The Second Coming' and 'Sturt and the Vultures' both explore the play between destruction and illumination.
- ⁸ Matthew 24: 26-28 notes that Christ explained the coming of the Son of Man in the following terms: 'If then they say to you, 'Look, he is in the desert', do not go there . . . the coming of the Son of Man will be like lightning striking in the east and flashing far into the west. Wherever the corpse is, there will the vultures gather'.
- ⁹ The allusion to *Moby Dick* opens up another connection through which 'Sturt and the Vultures' engages with Calvinist teaching. Melville's text is a powerful allegory of the archetypes of good and evil struggling together within the tenets of eighteenth-century Calvinism. The 'pallid whale' also makes an appearance with Sturt in 'Advertisement', 'Leichhardt in Theatre'.

WORKS CITED

- Ashcroft, Bill. *The Gimbals of Unease: The Poetry of Francis Webb*. Nedlands: The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, 1996.
- Brennan, Bernadette. 'Death and the Woman: Looking at Francis Webb's 'Lament for St Maria Goretti''. *Australian Literary Studies* 21.3 (2004), 289-298.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Poems and Prose*. Ed. W. H. Gardner. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975 (1953).
- Lynch, Andrew. "'While I wrestled with the sum, the sun': Francis Webb's 'Socrates'". *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33.2 (1998): 39-53.
- Meere, Peter and Leonie Meere. *Francis Webb: Poet and Brother*. Pomona: Sage Old Books, 2001.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. Ed. Tony Tanner. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Ed. E. V. Rieu. Trans. H. D. P. Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955.
- . *Great Dialogues of Plato*. Eds. E. Warminster and P. G. Rouse. Trans. W. H. D. Rouse. New York: Mentor, 1959.
- Rowe, Noel. "'Are you from the Void?' A Reading of Webb's 'Sturt and the Vultures'". *Ethical Investigations: Essays on Australian Literature and Poetics*. Ed. Bernadette Brennan.

- Sydney: Vagabond, 2008. 126-139.
- Sellick, Robert. 'Francis Webb's 'Sturt and the Vultures': a Note on Sources'.
Australian Literary Studies 6.3 (1974): 310-314.
- Sturt, Charles. *Journal of the Central Australian Expedition 1844-5*. Ed. Jill Waterhouse. London: Caliban, 1984.
- The Jerusalem Bible*. Ed. Alexander Jones. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974.
- Webb, Francis. *Cap and Bells: The Poetry of Francis Webb*. Eds. Michael Griffith and James A. McGlade. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991.
- . *Collected Poems*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973.
- Yeats, W. B. *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1950.

