ROUTLEDGE

The Novels of ALEX MILLER

An Introduction

Edited by Robert Dixon

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CHRONOLOGY

1936 Birth of Alexander McPhee Miller, 27 December, to Winifred Mary Millar (née Croft) and Alexander McPhee Millar. (The surname Miller is incorrectly entered into the records.) Lives at 32 Cumberland Street, London SW1 with parents and one sibling, Kathy.

1938 Moves with parents and two siblings, Kathy and Ruth, to 101 Pendragon Road, Downham, SE6.

1948 Birth of brother, Ross.

1951 Leaves home and works as a farm labourer in Somerset.

1952 Travels alone to Australia.
Works as a farm hand near Gympie; as a stockman at Goathlands Station near Springsure; then as a ringer on Augustus Downs in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

1957 Works in New Zealand breaking in horses.

1958 Arrives in Melbourne.
Meets Max Kelly, historian, who encourages Alex to go to university.

1959 Begins evening study to gain entry to university.
Meets Max and Ruth Blatt. Max becomes a close friend and mentor.

1961 Marries Anne Neil, social worker and artist in her later life. They separate for the last time in 1970 and divorce in 1983. Anne remains a close friend until her death in 2004.

1965 Completes Bachelor of Arts in history and English, University of Melbourne. Travels to Italy for three months and returns to England for one year, where he works for the Japanese Trade Commission.

1966 Works as research officer, Department of External Territories then Department of Trade and Industry, Canberra.

1969 Purchases farm at Araluen. Raises beef cattle while writing novels.

1974 Sells farm and travels to Paris to write and to learn French.

1975 Publishes 'Comrade Pawel' in *Meanjin* and meets Jim Davidson, historian and editor of *Meanjin*.
Meets lifelong partner Stephanie Pullin.
Completes Diploma of Education and commences teaching humanities at Brunswick Technical School. Develops a close friendship with Alan O'Hoy, art teacher, artist, art collector and the inspiration for Lang Tzu in *The Ancestor Game*.

1977 Travels to England with Stephanie.

1978 Returns to Melbourne for performance of *Kitty Howard* by the Melbourne Theatre Company.
Birth of Alex and Stephanie's son, Ross.

1980 Works as emergency humanities teacher.
Moves with Stephanie and Ross to Port Melbourne, their home for the next twenty-one years.
Founds Anthill Theatre with Jean-Pierre Mignon and ex-Pram Factory people. Meets playwright and novelist Ray Mooney.

1981 Performance of *Exiles* at Anthill.

1982 Encouraged by the poet Kris Hemensley, Alex abandons the theatre and returns to novel writing.
Begins teaching English at Glenroy Technical School.

1983 Marries Stephanie in Melbourne with his parents present.

1984 Death of Alex's father.
Negotiates half-time teaching position at Glenroy Technical School.
Works on *The Tivington Nott.*

1986 Teaches professional writing half-time, Holmesglen College of TAFE.
Meets Peter Davis, writer and photographer, and Liz Hatte, teacher and archaeologist.

1987 Visits Shanghai and Hangzhou with Stephanie and Ross while writing *The Ancestor Game*. Meets Ouyang Yu, poet and novelist.

1988 Publishes *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain*.

1989 Publishes *The Tivington Nott*.
Birth of Alex and Stephanie's daughter, Kate.

1990 Meets Barrett Reid, poet, and Paul Carter, writer and intellectual, at the Braille Award for *The Tivington Nott.* Is invited to Barrie Reid's home at Heide. At Heide he meets the artist Rick Amor and later sits for a portrait by Amor.

1992 Publishes *The Ancestor Game*.

1993 Receives his first major awards for *The Ancestor Game*: the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Barbara Ramsden Award.
Travels to London for a private audience with the Queen, then on to Toronto and New York for literary festivals.

1994 Death of Alex's mother.
Invited to teach creative writing at La Trobe University.

1995 Publishes *The Sitters*. Visits Tunisia and Rome for work on *Conditions of Faith*.

1997 Visits Liz Hatte in Townsville and meets Col McLennan, the models for Bo and Annabelle in *Journey to the Stone Country*.

2000 Publishes *Conditions of Faith* and begins an ongoing relationship with Allen & Unwin.
Spends six weeks in Paris with Stephanie and family.
Travels from Townsville to Mount Coolon with Liz Hatte and Col McLennan, elder of the Jangga. Meets Frank Budby, elder of the Barada, at Nebo. The friendships that follow lead to the novels *Journey to the Stone Country* and *Landscape of Farewell*.

2001 Wins the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards for *Conditions of Faith.*
Awarded the Centenary Medal.
Moves from Port Melbourne to Castlemaine with Stephanie and Kate.

2002 Publishes *Journey to the Stone Country*.
Opens *Sanctuary* at Herring Island, an exhibition of work by artists Lyndell Brown, Charles Green and Patrick Pound. This experience informs the novel *Prochownik's Dream*.

Begins an important literary friendship with the biographer Hazel Rowley.

2003 Wins second Miles Franklin Literary Award for *Journey to the Stone Country.*

2005 Publishes *Prochownik's Dream*.

Meets writer, academic and Aboriginal activist Anita Heiss at an Australian literature conference in Hamburg.

2007 Publishes *Landscape of Farewell*.

2008 Travels to Beijing to accept the 2008 Weishanhu Award for Best Foreign Novel in the 21st Century from the People's Literature Publishing House in China for *Landscape of Farewell*.

Awarded the Manning Clark House National Cultural Award for an outstanding contribution to the quality of Australian cultural life.

2009 Publishes *Lovesong*.

2010 Travels to Kilkenny in Ireland and to Scotland with Stephanie, visits London and while there finds the voice for Autumn in *Autumn Laing*.

2011 Wins the *Age* Fiction Award, the *Age* Book of the Year and the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, as well as the People's Choice Award, for *Lovesong*.

Symposium on 'The Novels of Alex Miller', University of Sydney, 13–14 May.

Publishes his tenth novel, *Autumn Laing*.

In late 2011 Alex learned of the extraordinary coincidence that his great-great-aunt Jane Miller was married in Castlemaine in 1871—the country town where Alex lives with his wife Stephanie—and that Jane Miller died in South Yarra in 1900. It now seems Alex has several generations of family connections in Castlemaine and Melbourne.

Until he received this information, Alex believed himself to be the sole representative of his family's line in Australia.

DISESTABLISHED WORLDS:
An Introduction to the Novels of Alex Miller

ROBERT DIXON

Critic and novelist Brenda Walker begins her essay in this volume by suggesting that 'Alex Miller may be Australia's greatest living writer' (42). The purpose of *The Novels of Alex Miller* is to begin the work of testing that claim. Miller has now published ten novels. He has won the Miles Franklin Literary Award (twice), the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award; his novels have been warmly embraced by Australian readers and translated into other languages, most notably into Chinese; and in 2001 he was awarded the Centenary Medal. Surprisingly, though, for a writer of this stature, there has yet been no major study of his life and work. One reason for this may simply be the reluctance of Australian publishers to take on serious, evaluative works of literary criticism: it has been many years now since the *Oxford Australian Writers* and the *UQP Australian Authors* series were wound up, and one consequence has been that an entire generation of Australian writers, including Miller, has not been accorded the critical appreciation that was routinely given to our major writers prior to the late 1980s.

A second reason may be that Miller has come upon us relatively quickly as a major writer. His first novel, *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain*, was published as recently as the Bicentennial year, 1988. Major national and international recognition came with the publication of his third novel, *The*

Ancestor Game, in 1992. As I write in August 2011, that is only nineteen years ago, yet Miller's tenth novel, *Autumn Laing*, is now in press and due for publication in October 2011. This is an extraordinary rate of production—on average, a major novel every two years—although, as we will see, Miller's commitment to the vocation of writing was made early, and the novels were sometimes long in gestation. His novels are by and large accessible to the general reading public yet manifestly of high literary seriousness—substantial, technically masterly and assured, intricately interconnected, and of great imaginative, intellectual and ethical weight.

A third reason may be that Miller's novels have often drawn upon and imaginatively transformed the details of his own life and the lives of his friends in ways that we are only now beginning to understand. We might recall how much our understanding of Patrick White, for example, was enhanced by the publication of his own memoir, *Flaws in the Glass*, in 1981, and by David Marr's biography and edition of the letters in 1991 and 1994. No wonder, then, that Australian readers and critics are still coming to terms with Miller's body of work. *The Novels of Alex Miller* has been designed to provide foundational information about Miller's life and the sources of his art that will further help readers to appreciate the richness and complexity of his achievement in fiction: to that end, it includes a memoir, 'The Mask of Fiction', freshly written for this collection, a chronology, a selection of photographs, and a series of essays in which nineteen contributors—including leading academic critics, novelists, writers and literary journalists—begin the work of exploring Miller's achievement across the entire range of his novels, from *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain* (1988) to *Autumn Laing* (2011).

Alexander McPhee Miller was born in London on 27 December 1936, the son of a Scottish father and an Irish mother. The family lived initially at 32 Cumberland Street, London SW1, and in 1938 moved to 101 Pendragon Road in the Downham council estate in Bromley SE6. His mother, Winifred, had been in private service before her marriage to his father, Alexander McPhee. His father was a cook at Crockford's Club and later at the Grosvenor Hotel in London. There were three other children: sisters Kathy and Ruth, and brother Ross. Miller has said that it was made 'very clear' to him that the

family were not part of England's 'ruling culture', and that this made it difficult for him to find 'meaning and purpose' in his early life (Van Teeseling, interview). His sense of unsettlement was perhaps exacerbated by the effects of the war on his father's personality and behaviour, to which Miller refers discreetly in a number of essays and interviews. Increasingly estranged from his family and with no strong feelings of belonging to local or national communities, Miller sensed the need to get away, and at the age of fifteen he left school in London to work as a farm labourer on Exmoor in Somerset. There is an echo here—or perhaps it is an inverted echo, given their different family backgrounds and expatriate directions—of the young Patrick White, who at the same age also felt himself to be 'a stranger in my own country' (*Flaws*, 46). At this time, as he explains in 'The Mask of Fiction', Miller was shown a collection of black and white photographs of the Australian outback, the work—as he would learn many years later—of Sidney Nolan. These images had an intense impact on his burgeoning artistic sensibility and led him to formulate a plan of escape from the austerity of post-war Britain by emigration to a new country that he was coming to see in near-mythical terms. In *The Ancestor Game*, the young Lang Tzu, who is establishing the grounds of his own freedom by severing his ties with his ancestors, is advised to 'Long for something you can't name . . . and call it Australia' (259). Despite Miller's sense of displacement, this image of place as a site of almost utopian possibility would recur in the novels that began to germinate in his memory and imagination from this time. It is what Bill Ashcroft, drawing on the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch, describes as '*Heimat*', 'that "home" that we all sense but have never experienced', and which is fundamental to literature's role in producing those moments of 'anticipatory illumination' by which we begin to imagine a different world ('Australian Transnation', 1).

Miller arrived in Australia alone in 1952 at the age of sixteen. It was to be his 'land of fresh beginnings', and he immediately hitchhiked north from Sydney in search of Nolan's outback. Despite the uncertainties of his childhood, photographs taken at this time show a young man whose physical strength and youthful grace are suggestive of an inner strength: a growing sense of purpose and self-presence. For the next six years he would work in a variety of rural jobs, initially as a farm hand near Gympie in southeast Queensland,

then as a stockman at Goathlands Station near Springsure in Queensland's Central Highlands, and later as a ringer on Augustus Downs, a cattle station in the Gulf of Carpentaria. In 1957 there was a spell as a horse breaker in New Zealand. He recalls that the dramatic escarpments of the Central Queensland ranges were not quite Nolan's outback, 'but I fell in love with the country', and when he returned to it as a successful writer in 2000, it would inspire the settings of his Central Queensland novels, *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002) and *Landscape of Farewell* (2007).

Miller 'came out of the bush' when he was twenty-one, arriving in Melbourne in 1958. Recognising his artistic and intellectual aspirations, a group of friends—including Polish Jewish émigrés Max and Ruth Blatt, and the historian Max Kelly—encouraged him to undertake the evening studies that would allow him to qualify for university entrance. Miller was an arts student at the University of Melbourne in the early 1960s, graduating in 1965 with majors in history and English. At this time he met Anne Neil, a social worker and painter, whom he married in 1961. The marriage failed, but after their final separation in 1970 and until her death from a stroke in 2004, Anne remained a close friend to Miller and his second wife, Stephanie. After graduation, Miller spent some months travelling in Italy and returned to England, where he worked for the Japanese Trade Commission and began to heal the breach with his first family. Returning to Australia in 1966, he worked as a research officer for the Department of External Territories and then for the Department of Trade and Industry in Canberra, but in 1969 he left the public service and bought a farm in the Araluen Valley west of Goulburn, where he raised beef cattle and began his apprenticeship as a novelist.

Miller has said that while he had been a storyteller from early childhood, it took many years before he found his 'authentic material' ('Waxing', 24). A key to this process was the wise counsel of his friend, Max Blatt, whom Miller recalls as 'a central European intellectual of the kind JP Stern and WG Sebald write about with such beautiful nostalgic elegance' ('Waxing', 25). Max interpreted European literature and philosophy to him in a way that he had not encountered at university, and helped him find his vocation as a writer. At Araluen, between 1969 and 1974, Miller wrote three manuscripts which he describes as his 'pre-novels' ('Waxing', 25). Max would

come up to visit by train from Melbourne, staying for a week at a time. On one such visit, Miller presented him with a 400-page novel in manuscript, which Max read through the day and into the early evening. Miller recalls: 'I was woken by the thump of the 400 pages landing beside my head. I sprang up. Max was lighting a cigarette. With a mixture of disappointment, frustration and regret, he said, "Why don't you write about something you *love*?"' ('Waxing', 25). And then an exchange took place between the two men that resonates throughout Miller's mature novels. That night, Max Blatt told Miller the story of his own escape from an anti-Semitic attack in Poland at the beginning of the war: 'He told me the simple bones of the story in a few sentences. I did not sleep that night but wrote the story in detail and in the morning I gave it to him to read . . . When he finished reading it, he said with feeling, "You could have been there", and embraced me' ('Waxing', 25). The result was Miller's first published piece of fiction, the short story 'Comrade Pawel' (1975), which is set in Poland in 1939. This sharing of a personal story foreshadows the way Steven Muir, in *The Ancestor Game*, reworks Gertrude Spiess's own fictionalisation of her father's diaries; it foreshadows the way the artist's memory is reinvigorated by his encounter with Jessica Keal in *The Sitters*, and again when Toni Powlett first speaks of his father's death to Marina Golding in *Prochownik's Dream* (2005); it prefigures Professor Max Otto's writing up of Dougald Gnapun's account of his ancestor's military leadership in *Landscape of Farewell*; and it is echoed nearly forty years later in the novelist's appropriation of John Patterner's story in *Lovesong* (2009). In recalling this foundational moment with Max Blatt, Miller asks, 'Why did I believe, and why do I still believe, that this story was mine? What made it mine?' ('Waxing', 25).

There is much here that illuminates the novelist's craft and preoccupations. These include, as Peter Pierce remarked in a pioneering article on Miller, the essential 'solitariness' of the writer who nonetheless enters into deeply empathic engagements with other people and other cultures; the sharing of a private experience or place or event that triggers the memory and imagination of both teller and listener; and the simultaneously imaginative and ethical nature of both interpersonal engagements, and the equally intimate acts of writing and reading: 'He told me the story so that I would

understand . . . anti-Semitism' and 'I took him to mean . . . that my account of the events that happened to him . . . conveyed the truth of his experience' ('Waxing', 25). Miller therefore shares with Jacques Derrida a concern with the ethics of friendship as a force for our own becoming, which nonetheless honours the essential difference of the other person. And he shares with Martha Nussbaum a belief that the novel is peerless among modern forms of communication for dealing with the affective and ethical dimension of human relationships, both intimate and social. Writing, Miller has said, is his way of 'locating connections' in what has otherwise been a life characterised by a series of disconnections—'plural selves, worlds and cultures' ('The Mask of Fiction', 30). Those three 'pre-novels' had been too self-absorbed to interest a publisher. The exchange with Max Blatt and the writing of 'Comrade Pawel', however, awakened the relationship between the self and the other that is not only a hallmark of Miller's novels, but also of his mode of writing as an imaginative and ethical practice. As he puts it so simply and directly, 'In this preoccupation with the self I was mistaken, and it was not until I ceased writing directly about myself and began to write imaginatively of the people and the places most dear to me that my writing began to . . . gain me a readership' ('The Mask of Fiction').

After the sale of the Araluen property in 1974, and following a period in Paris, Miller moved back to Melbourne where he completed a Diploma of Education and began a new career as a humanities teacher at Brunswick Technical School. He there developed a close friendship with Alan O'Hoy, an art teacher, artist and art collector who would be the inspiration for Lang Tzu in *The Ancestor Game*. Also in 1975, Miller met Stephanie Pullin, whom he married in 1983. In 'The Mask of Fiction', he confesses that meeting Stephanie and creating their family finally made sense of his life (30): their son Ross was born in 1978 and their daughter Kate in 1989. In 1980, the family moved to Port Melbourne, where they lived for the next twenty-one years until the move to Castlemaine in central Victoria in 2001.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Miller was active in Melbourne theatre circles and focused on writing plays. *Kitty Howard* was performed by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1978, and in 1980 he co-founded the Anthill Theatre with Jean-Pierre Mignon and others from the Pram Factory.

His play *Exiles* was performed there the following year. In 1982, encouraged by the poet Kris Hemensley, Miller abandoned the theatre and returned to novel writing. Supporting himself and his young family by a series of teaching positions—full-time at Glenroy Technical School from 1982 and then half-time from 1984, and half-time at Holmesglen College of TAFE from 1986—Miller set about making the difficult transition to being a professional writer. He was working on a large manuscript that would become his first two published novels, *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain* and *The Tivington Nott*. They were originally conceived as a single work drawing on Miller's experience as a farm hand on Exmoor, his subsequent emigration to Australia, and his years in Central Queensland and the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was to be called *Jimmy Diamond*, in memory of an Aboriginal ringer with whom he had worked in the Gulf Country in the mid 1950s. As he explains in 'The Mask of Fiction', 'this book was going to bridge the two lives, the two worlds, and their apparently unconnected realities' (32), but when he reached the end of the Exmoor section, he realised that the first novel had emerged from his re-creative imagination whole and complete. It was a novel about English rural life, and Miller was unable to find a publisher for it in Australia, and so the second novel to be written, *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain*, which is set in Central Queensland, was published first, in Sydney in 1988. The Exmoor novel, *The Tivington Nott*, was published in London in 1989. In these first two novels, we find in their earliest form many of the themes of Miller's later work. As Brenda Walker observes, *The Tivington Nott* 'is centrally concerned with the situation of the outsider' (48); it is 'a meditation on issues of territory and intrusion' (49). And despite their different settings, their shared gestation is readily apparent in the many structural and thematic connections between them. As Peter Pierce says of *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain*, 'a hemisphere away, but we are again with a closed rural community, as in *The Tivington Nott*, one that is about to be disrupted by an outsider' (59).

Miller was now in his early fifties, and in drawing upon his earlier experiences for fiction, he has said that he felt like an archaeologist who had only just begun to excavate 'a buried city of great complexity' ('This Is How', 30). Those metaphors he uses to describe the original project of *Jimmy Diamond*—the

novel as a bridge between lives, between worlds, between 'apparently unconnected realities'—appear casual enough, but as we get to know Miller's work and become accustomed to his voice, we learn that he never utters a lightly considered phrase. Typically, these are leitmotifs that signal his lifelong aesthetic and ethical preoccupations; they are meant to reveal to us the profound interconnections between his novels, whose architecture is indeed, we come to see, like some 'buried city of great complexity'. In *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain*, for example, Ward Rankin's library anticipates the library at Ranna in *Journey to the Stone Country*, while Ida Rankin's climbing of Mount Mooloolong as a young girl gives her a 'sacred place' and a private story that she will later share with the young stockman, Robert Crofts, anticipating the sharing of places and stories in the later novels. Typically for Miller, these are acts of both giving and taking, of love and betrayal, of guilt and redemption. They include Huang's journey with his daughter Lien to the shrine of their ancestors in *The Ancestor Game*, Bo Rennie and Annabelle Beck's plan, later abandoned, to travel together to the ritual sites of the old people in *Journey to the Stone Country*, and Max Otto and Dougald Gnapun's journey to find the burial site of his ancestor, the warrior Gnapun, in *Landscape of Farewell*. These recurring patterns and motifs between the early and late works signal that Miller's novels are part of a continuing and connected project that demands synoptic reading.

Miller's third novel, *The Ancestor Game*, brought national and international recognition. In 1993, it won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Barbara Ramsden Award, and he was feted at literary events in Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, where he was granted a private audience with the Queen. The seed of that novel lay in another friendship, in this case with the artist Alan O'Hoy, whom Miller had met while teaching at Brunswick Tech in the mid 1970s. It began as an impulse to honour the life of his Chinese-Australian friend, whose suicide is evoked subtly by Lang Tzu's unexplained disappearance in the final pages of the novel. While writing it in 1987, Miller also visited Shanghai and Hangzhou, and his understanding of Chinese history and culture was deepened by a number of people, including Professor Bao Chien-hsing of the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute, the painter Yehching, Nicholas Jose,

who was then cultural attaché at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, and the writer Ouyang Yu. The novel is dedicated to Max and Ruth Blatt, and its cover features the painting *Celestial Lane* (1989) by Rick Amor, whom Miller had met at Heide, the home of the poet Barrett Reid, in 1990.

Miller writes in 'The Mask of Fiction' that *The Ancestor Game* was 'my attempt to make sense of my friend's life and death, to see his alienation from his community and culture as something of exceptional value' (33). At the heart of the novel is Miller's conviction that the modern artist is an exile in his own country. This is conveyed by the book's introductory citation from Kierkegaard: 'Our age has lost all the substantial categories of family, state and race. It must leave the individual entirely to himself, so that in a stricter sense he becomes his own creator.' *The Ancestor Game* begins with Melbourne writer Steven Muir returning briefly to England, where he remains estranged from his mother and unreconciled to the memory of his father. Back in Melbourne in 1976—the year of Mao's death—he is writing a book called *The Chronicle of the Fengs*, and is drawn into friendships with Lang Tzu, an art teacher, artist and collector, and Lang's friend, the artist and writer Gertrude Spiess. Gertrude's father, August Spiess, was an expatriate German doctor working in the international community in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, who delivered Lang and became his tutor, later accompanying him to Melbourne when he was sent abroad by his wealthy industrialist father, CH Feng, to avoid the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. As Elizabeth Webby observes, these themes of dislocation and diaspora, and also the manner of the novel's construction, built up through a nested series of perspectives on the stories of the Feng and Spiess families across several generations and in several locations, make it one of Miller's most postmodern works (117).

Each of the traditional cultures described in *The Ancestor Game*, including those of Germany, China, and both Anglo and Indigenous Australia, has been severed from the apparent plenitude of its past by the globalising forces of colonialism, war and commerce. In China in 1927, Lang is born into 'a disintegrating world' (290). The forces at play are represented by his (traditional) maternal inheritance—his grandfather's crumbling home in Hangzhou and his vocation as a scholar and literary painter—and his (modern) paternal inheritance—his father's house in Shanghai, which 'mimics' European styles

and expresses Feng's 'commitment to internationalism' (29). Lang's conflicted relation to these historical forces is expressed by the trauma of his breech birth and the asymmetrical features of his damaged face. In choosing to destroy Huang's ancient book of the ancestors, Lang cuts the taproot of tradition and from this point he must live as a modern person, 'at home while travelling' (193). Yet there is no simple division here between past and present, between tradition and modernity, for what appears to be the authenticity of the past is often an effect of nostalgia and retrospection. Lang's fall into modernity is not simply caused by his destruction of a still-living, authentic culture, since the past has already been subject to change—as is evident in the earlier events, including the First Opium Wars and the Victorian gold rush of the 1850s, which caused his paternal great-grandfather, the first Feng, to live between worlds, with families in both Melbourne and Amoy.

This massive canvas of cultural dislocation provides a rich context for Miller's reflections on the nature of fiction and the artistic sensibility. As Huang attempts to fend off the modern world by undertaking a pilgrimage to the tomb of his ancestors, Lang is destroying the book of the ancestors and accepting 'the precious gift of dimorphism' (193). Like his tutor, Dr Spiess, Lang is a traveller, a pilgrim, an extraterritorial, a prodigal son: 'Lang Tzu; two characters which in Mandarin signify the son who goes away' (116). Spiess helps him to see that this condition of becoming, and not the illusory timelessness of his grandfather's house, is the true legacy of the modern artist: 'Art belongs to no nation. Art is the displaced. It is not validated by nationality' (260). As a son who also went away, Miller's own biographical displacement is visibly braided into his fictionalisation of Alan O'Hoy's story.

In Spiess's diaries, Miller pursues a series of associations between the colonist, the invader, the parasite and the artist that are among his central preoccupations as a writer. On his visit to Huang's home in 1927, Spiess is dressed in a fur coat and served ceremonial meals, likening his appearance to 'a lava of one of their famous silkworms . . . waiting to be fed my due apportionment of mulberry leaves' (119). Realising that as a foreign invader he presents a theatrical spectacle to the resentful Chinese servants, he speculates on the etymological link between 'lava' and 'mask': 'in Latin it signifies a mask or spectre whose true form is hidden, a form yet to be revealed . . . It was but

a short step from this . . . to the full-blown idea of the fantastic and motley character of the masque itself' (120). As an invader, Spiess is like the writer who hides behind what Miller tellingly calls 'The Mask of Fiction', partly for the purposes of storytelling, partly so that he can plunder the stories of others, and partly to mask his own metamorphosis.

These associations are developed further when Steven comes upon the work table of Lang's Melbourne relative, Victoria Feng, also a writer, in a gazebo in the grounds of Coppin Grove. The gazebo has a military origin: it is a place of vantage where one keeps a look out for the enemy. Steven's discovery of the gazebo is a fable about the artist both as an observer and as an invader in the homeland of the other. As he approaches, he parts 'the tremulous mask of aspen leaves' that shields it from observation, and realises that he has become a parasite: 'I had found my way there . . . by the instinctive homing intuitions of a true parasite . . . I was delighted by the extension of my metaphor, of myself as a parasite, as "one who eats at the table of another"' (153–4). Earlier, this metaphor is rendered literal when Steven is given access to the palimpsest of Lang's family archive, which is piled upon and beneath the dining table at Coppin Grove: 'Occupying the centre of this room was a mahogany table of magisterial proportions . . . Completely covering the ample surface of the table, to a depth of half a metre or more, was a disordered heap of unstretched oils and watercolours and sketches and books and catalogues and other marginalia . . . a collection, a hoard' (66). Steven's parasitic relation to his material is paralleled in Gertrude and Victoria's own, earlier plundering of their ancestors' stories. Like Steven Muir—and Alex Miller—Victoria writes 'with a desire to make the material of her scrutiny her own, to possess it by means of the location of herself at its centre. She enters it by degrees. She insinuates herself' (159).

The idea that the artist is an 'extraterritorial' is explored in Spiess's reflections on the imaginary landscapes of the painter Claude Lorrain, who was himself neither German, French nor Italian. Nor was he a mapmaker (274) because his landscapes are imaginary places that anyone can inhabit by imagination rather than by right of citizenship. The international settlement at Shanghai is just such a Claudian landscape and Spiess sees himself as one of its 'extraterritorials', 'beings not from present reality', 'inhabitants of a

No-land' (93). In such phrases, Miller appears to celebrate extraterritoriality, and has spoken positively of the ambiguities bestowed on artists and writers by cultural displacement ('The Mask of Fiction', 32). This is certainly the fate that Lang chooses. Having violated his grandfather's study, he plays the ancestor game, a process of self-invention in which he is free to make up the rules as he goes along. If art is beyond nation, then Lang has no place in China, but Spiess suggests that he may find a home in Australia: 'You are literally un-familiar here. But in Australia, which is I believe a kind of phantom country lying invisibly somewhere between the West and the East, you may find a few of your own displaced and hybrid kind to welcome you' (260). As a place of exile and migration, Miller's Australia therefore anticipates the postmodern condition from the moment of its foundation. The painting to which Elizabeth Webby refers in her chapter—once owned by Alan O'Hoy and now in the Art Gallery of Ballarat—is of a Chinaman, an Irishman and an Aborigine—corresponding to Miller's characters Feng, Nunan and Dorset—each of whom is forcibly liberated from his ancestral ties. Miller might therefore be seen as espousing ideas of hybridity, diaspora and indeterminacy that were popular in postcolonial and postmodern theory in the 1980s. Yet these ideas at play in Spiess's diaries are also subject to narrative irony. The extraterritorial is not, after all, immune from reality—as Dorset discovers when he is killed by white settlers—and the colonist or invader is locked in a two-way relation of power with the other, its host—as Spiess discovers when he is attacked by a mob of Chinese workers and is then forced to witness their torture and execution in a Shanghai police cell. 'For twenty blissful years,' Spiess writes, 'I had lived as if the condition of extraterritoriality were a kind of literary conceit' (268).

The Sitters (1995) was the next in a sequence of Miller's novels, including *The Ancestor Game* and *Prochownik's Dream*, that together constitute one of the most sustained examples of ekphrasis (or writing about art) in Australian literature. Miller once had aspirations to be a painter, and has many connections with the art world among his family and friends. Like the unnamed artist's father in *The Sitters*, Miller's father was an amateur watercolourist. His first wife, Anne Neil, was a painter, and there are a number of painters among his Melbourne friends, including Alan O'Hoy and Rick Amor. The

studio practices described in these novels—including Lindner's Gallery in *The Ancestor Game* and Toni Powlett's studio in *Prochownik's Dream*—are informed by Miller's knowledge of Rick Amor's studio, while the friendship with Reid provided a link with the legendary period at Heide, and with Sidney Nolan whose work, as we have seen, Miller has long admired.

In *The Sitters*, Miller continues to explore the issues of ethics and aesthetics initiated in *The Ancestor Game*. Ronald Sharp argues that it is a novel that 'foregrounds the connections between literary and visual art, between a novelist creating a character and a painter creating a portrait' (78). *The Sitters* also exemplifies Miller's view that 'The novel . . . is always the story of the isolated self seeking to transcend its isolation by becoming the other' ('Chasing', 6). Brigitta Olubas gets to the heart of these matters in her discussion, drawing on Veronica Brady's original review, of the artist's first charged encounter with Jessica Keal: 'It points us to the real subject, a ceremonious introspection, at once profoundly intimate and yet paradoxically impersonal, as the artist pursues her in himself and himself in her through labyrinthine ways of memory as well as of the unfolding of ambiguous relationships' (92). The artist's quest for understanding of himself through the practice of portraiture is made all the more poignant when it is revealed, finally, that Jessica Keal is absent, having died before the commencement of the present narrative. There are affinities here with Maurice Blanchot's concern with the intimate relation between writing and death, or writing and absence, as both Sharp and Olubas demonstrate. In retrospect, the presence of this absence can be felt in the novel's powerful opening sentences: 'When I was old and could no longer hope for new friendships, one of the saddest episodes of my life began to come back to me and to offer me the greatest joy. Under the influence of this memory, revisiting me in its new guise, I was able to paint again . . . And that is what she gave me, Jessica Keal, the subject of this altered memory' (1).

In *Prochownik's Dream*, Miller explores the roles of friendship and collaboration in the creation of art, but also, as Adrian Caesar argues, its potentially damaging effects on friendships and families. 'We are all collaborators,' Marina Golding says to Toni Powlett. 'All of us. None of us does this completely on our own' (156). When Toni is reluctant to give Marina his drawing of her she realises, 'You did it for yourself, not for me' (55), and when he looks

at an earlier sketch, made while he was a student, he is aware of 'the trace of himself at the edge of the drawing' (67). This echoes the artist's initial refusal, in *The Sitters*, to let Jessica Keal see his portrait of her, which Olubas recognises as 'a dispute over ownership of the likeness' (97). Collaboration, then, is central to Miller's thinking about artistic practice and yet, as his comparison of the artist to an invader and a parasite suggests, that word has darker meanings in the sense of betrayal of one's friends and family, either by destroying something that belongs to them or through complicity with outsiders. These positive and negative meanings are explored together in the complex knot of collaborations that link the Schwartz/Golding and Powlett/Prochownik families. The collaboration between Robert Schwartz, who is an academic and writes essays for *Art and Text*, and his partner Marina Golding, is one in which he provides the theories and subjects that she then realises in paint. Marina's instinctive sense of Robert's constraint of her creativity is one contributing factor leading to her collaboration, in a very different way, with Toni Powlett, Robert's former student, which bristles with Oedipal motives. But as Caesar astutely observes, it is the transformation of 'human mystery' and the 'libidinous energy' of relationships that make art, not academic theories (104). Like Steven Muir, Toni Powlett rediscovers his artistic energies by 'insinuating' himself into Robert and Marina's lives, drawing parasitically on the tensions that hold them together and push them apart as a couple: he 'mines their intimacies' (132). Toni's studio, like Victoria's gazebo at Coppin Grove, is set apart from his own family home, a place from which to look out for the enemy—in one sense his wife, Teresa, whose dedication to their domestic life supports Toni's professional career, making her, too, a collaborator, but at the same time preventing her from being his muse. One register of the novel's language, relating art to war and the hunt, reveals the moral ambivalence of these energies that produce art, perhaps recalling Patrick White's idea of the artist as a vivisector.

With the publication of *Conditions of Faith* in 2000, Miller moved from Penguin, who had published both *The Ancestor Game* and *The Sitters*, to Allen & Unwin, where he began what has been an ongoing relationship with publisher Annette Barlow. The novel had an unusually difficult birth, as Miller explains in 'The Mask of Fiction', having been interrupted by his work on *The*

Sitters. Its inspiration was a diary of his mother's that came into his possession after her death, which allowed him to imagine her hopes and aspirations as a young woman. In 1995, while researching the novel, Miller also visited Tunisia and Rome. As always, behind the mask of fiction, the novelist was looking not only into the life of another person, but 'chiastically', as Brigid Rooney puts it, into the life of the self: 'While I wrote,' he recalls, 'I did so with my love of my mother foremost in my mind masking the deeper impulse to tell my own story, indeed to conflate her story and my own' (34).

Like Lang Tzu, Miller's young Australian heroine, Emily Stanton, embraces her future by divesting herself of a series of possible identities laid out for her in advance. Her challenge, like Lang's in playing the ancestor game, is to reinvent 'the conditions of faith' under which she can conduct a meaningful life after the old absolutes of home, family, patriarchy, religious faith and national identity have been abandoned. While Spiess describes Lang's condition as 'dimorphic', Emily's might be thought of as 'cosmopolitan' in the sense that Amanda Anderson uses the term: that is, 'the capacious inclusion of multiple forms of affiliation, disaffiliation, and reaffiliation, simultaneously insisting on the need for informing principles of self-reflexivity, critique, and common humanity' (*The Powers of Distance*, 30–1).

The events of the novel unfold across a single year, 1923, during which Emily not only marries, moves from Melbourne to Paris with her husband Georges and gives birth to a daughter, but also gives birth to a new self, fashioned in response to new and exotic cultures. The beginnings of this reaffiliation lie in her friendship with Antoine Carpeaux, a homosexual friend of Georges's, who introduces her to modes of living beyond her inherited ideas of home and family, and to cultures and ways of life that carry her beyond her own nation and the Anglophone world in which it remains embedded. It is this ability to create convincing characters from a wide range of different periods and cultures that has earned Miller his well-deserved reputation for sympathetic characterisation. Emily writes to her father, 'I could not imagine meeting such a man in Melbourne' (58–9). Antoine's father was a French landowner in Tunisia, and during Emily's difficult pregnancy, while Georges is preoccupied with his work in Paris, he takes Emily to convalesce at Sidi bou-Saïd, his family's home near the ancient Roman amphitheatre