SEX AND THE SYDNEY CONTEXT OF MICHAEL WILDING’S EARLY FICTION

Ian Harold Jamieson

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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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ABSTRACT

Since his arrival in Australia in 1963 Michael Wilding has been extremely active in academia, publishing and the writing of fiction. He has been industrious and prolific in all spheres. During the 1960s and 1970s he held a central position in the intellectual and cultural life of Sydney. He was a significant figure who produced a significant body of work. He is still very active in publishing and the writing of fiction. Despite this, Michael Wilding is a figure who has been marginalized and largely ignored. This thesis strives to redress this situation, focusing on the context, content and impact of some of Wilding’s early fiction: Aspects of the Dying Process, Living Together and Scenic Drive.

The early fiction of Michael Wilding was not only reflective of the changes taking place in Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s, but also contributive to those changes. His early fiction gave an imprimatur to the social changes taking place, encouraging readers to accept and adopt a participatory role in the countercultural zeitgeist. Most specifically, Wilding’s early fiction achieved this via its positive and realistic rendering of the sexual behaviour of the young, urban dwelling people of Sydney of the period. A close reading of three of Wilding’s early books of fiction, with an emphasis on their portrayal of sex, evidences this. New approaches to sex were one of the most efficacious agents for countercultural change during the period and Wilding’s fiction facilitates the effectiveness of that agency. Wilding’s portrayal of sex is a subversive act.

Cultural materialism, and to a lesser extent new historicism, have provided the theoretical framework for this thesis. This approach has promoted the contextualizing of Wilding’s early fiction in the Sydney of the period, as well as in the broader context of the countercultural events that were taking place throughout the world. Cultural materialist belief in the agency of texts as being contributive to the social and cultural conditions of a period, either as reinforcers of the status quo, but more importantly as agents of change, is a tenet of this thesis. A theoretical debt is owed to Raymond Williams and his concept of dominant, residual and emergent cultures. Given the vitality
of emergent practices of the time, this thesis has sought to introduce the additional concept of assertive practices. Wilding’s early fiction is viewed as an emergent and assertive practice. New historicist Catherine Gallagher has suggested that the 1960s saw a form of subversive activism that eschewed old-style politics as a means of change. Instead there was a belief that a variety of sites and local contests would lead to a systemic crisis or revolutionary conjunction which would be productive of countercultural change. This thesis accepts Gallagher’s argument: Wilding’s early fiction constitutes such a site and is a contributing factor to that revolutionary conjunction.

Part of the process of contextualizing Wilding’s fiction is achieved by a selective, but detailed, review of the literature on the 1960s. Critical assessments are made of some of the leading accounts of the period: positive and negative responses to the 1960s are analysed. Texts dealing with Australia during this time are included.

Placing Wilding in the more specific context of Sydney is realised by a detailed treatment of the Push. Central to the Push philosophy and lifestyle was an attitude to sex that was counter to the morality and behaviour of the dominant culture of Sydney of the time. Wilding’s arrival in Sydney coincides with the heyday of the Push and it is into the milieu of the Push that he chooses to move. The sexual attitudes of the Push segue easily with the emerging sexual philosophy and practices of the counterculture. Wilding moved in a part of Sydney where an emergent and assertive approach to sex was foregrounded and valorized. His early fiction reflects and promotes these new practices. A close reading of the representation of sex in Aspects of the Dying Process, Living Together and Scenic Drive supports this assertion.

Michael Wilding is a significant figure in the cultural landscape of Sydney who has been much overlooked. This thesis is an attempt to register that significance by analyzing a small part of his prodigious and ongoing output.
CHAPTER 1

Getting Bearings and Setting a Course

“But our hardest task, theoretically, is to find a non-metaphysical and non-subjectivist explanation of emergent cultural practice.” Raymond Williams.\(^1\)

“There must be someway out of here.” Bob Dylan.\(^2\)

The Great Hall of Sydney University is an imposing building. It is one of the centrepieces of the “sandstone gothic”\(^3\); it is of another time and place, replete with gargoyles to ward off evil forces. Inside, its high-ceilinged walls connote seriousness, solidity and tradition. In 1969 the Chancellor’s Orientation Week speech of welcome was attended by academic staff, dressed in their academic robes, enhancing the overall aura. During the speech a young man completely naked, except for a gorilla mask, interrupted the proceedings. On his chest were the words, “The more I make love, the more I make revolution.”\(^4\) So much for the gargoyles.

In 1970 Wendy Bacon was a joint editor of Tharunka, the student newspaper of the University of New South Wales. Among other things, Tharunka was of a high standard and sexually explicit. Some other papers of the time (Kings Cross Whisper, for example) were also sexually explicit. Wendy Bacon said, “What upset people about ours was that it was also political.”\(^5\) Publishing the poem ‘Cunt is a Christian Word’ assaulted accepted standards of decency and landed Wendy Bacon in court.\(^6\) She turned up wearing

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2 Bob Dylan, ‘All Along the Watchtower.’ From the album John Wesley Harding. 1968.
6 Ibid.p. 243.
the black habit of a nun with the words, “I’ve been fucked by God’s steel prick”\textsuperscript{7} clearly visible. So much for accepted standards.

There is agency in these anecdotes\textsuperscript{8}: agency to maintain a status quo and agency to confront it. And there is sex as an aspect of that agency for change. Both anecdotes align the forces of established authority against a mode of behaviour intent on disrupting that authority. In the first anecdote authority clearly manifests itself in the intentional formality of the setting and the occasion. In the second it is overtly present in the backdrop of court buildings and the legal and judicial forces they represent. Both manifestations of authority powerfully exert a controlling influence over people - it is staid, serious, formidable and palpable. Even what could be seen as amusingly anachronistic about both manifestations only functioned to lend each authority a sense of mystique associated with revered and time honoured institutions.

Ranged against this authority is what must have appeared to be a joke - two individuals in provocative dress, or lack of, displaying slogans. It would appear to be a no contest situation. However, it doesn’t turn out that way. Both individuals use sex to confront the authority. Once sex ceases to be controlled, under the guise that it is private, sacred and unmentionable in public, authority finds it difficult to react effectively. At the university the man uses his nakedness, his sex, to disrupt, while his slogan emphatically connects sex with overthrowing that authority. Outside the court the weapon is again sex. The woman is there because of sex, and her slogan uses the language of sex, a language highlighted by its juxtaposition with her attire. Both individuals are certainly iconoclastic, but both go beyond mere iconoclasm and actively seek to confront, disrupt, subvert and to change.

Both these anecdotes exist outside of the mainstream histories, except perhaps as colourful footnotes. But what these anecdotes signify deserves to be more than a footnote. They provide a template that connects sex with social change. This thesis explores an aspect of that connection. Sometimes footnotes can make for the most interesting reading.

Sex is central to the countercultural practices of the 1960s and it is of central concern to this thesis. However, defining just what is meant by the term sex is often problematic. It’s one of those terms that everyone apparently knows the meaning of, but when asked to define it have some difficulty in pinning it down. John Heidenry in his What Wild Ecstasy: The Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution becomes quite lyrical in his definition: “Sex is the convulsive fiat that brings us into the world, is the force that through the hormonal fuse drives our flowering…. predetermines our destiny, molds our personality…. Through sex we both discover and transcend ourselves, bond with and cherish others in the most deeply human way possible, and perpetuate the species.”

Camille Paglia in her Sexual Personae sees “sex and nature as brutal pagan forces” and “sex is a subset of nature. Sex is the natural in man.” She says, “Sexuality and eroticism are the intricate intersection of nature and culture.”

There is a lot of value in both these definitions, but neither appears to be very helpful or specific when it comes to the task of understanding what sex, or sexual relations, means in the day to day behaviour of young people as they go about their lives. Timothy Miller in The Hippies and American Values isn’t a great deal more helpful: “sex was, rather, a range of powerful and wonderful feelings and activities which one should feel free to enjoy at will…. Sex was good. Sex was fun. Sex was healthy.”

David Allyn in Make Love, Not War chooses not to offer any set definition, despite the obvious concerns of his text. This omission doesn’t harm the value of Allyn’s study and is perhaps indicative, as mentioned above, of just how hard it is to categorically define sex. For some the definition may have even become a little more cloudy around the time of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler in their A Feminist Dictionary provide a wide variety of opinions and definitions, but one pertinent to this thesis cites how in “most male literature sex has meant heterosexual, genital contact, male erection, penetration, and male

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satisfaction”. This is pretty much correct for the writing of the 60s, including the early fiction of Michael Wilding. Maggie Humm succinctly defines sexual relations as “those activities where sensual aims and objectives are integrated into relations… with other people.” Feminist theory has made it adequately clear just how problematic and ideologically loaded any discussion of sex and sexual relations is. For the purposes of this thesis it isn’t necessary to enter into this contested area. But short of taking David Allyn’s option, attractive as it is, suffice it to say that both definitions put forward by the feminist dictionaries would seem to serve the purpose of this study. Sex in this thesis is to be the heterosexual act of aroused physical intimacy involving a variety of actions whose desired aim is to culminate in penetration and orgasm. Such a definition would seem to be simple and general enough for this thesis: after all, everyone knows what sex is, it’s just a little hard to define it.

Julie Stephens has described the 60s as “this chameleon-like object”. She believes that in terms of periodizing, “the sixties is a nebulous and elastic concept.” This should be viewed as a positive, rather than some intellectual vagueness. The 60s need to be approached with a degree of intellectual flexibility that enables it to be viewed as a series of cultural, ideological and political events. It is in this sense that the term the 60s is used in this thesis which is concerned with cultural phenomena, rather than a series of different historical events starting in 1960 and ending in 1969. The artificiality of the latter is apparent. The 60s in this thesis is to be used as a sort of shorthand for the vast variety of activities which sought, consciously or otherwise, to disrupt the dominant culture in an attempt to replace it with a series of practices which were thought to be more liberating and life affirming. Stephens points out how the 60s “refers directly to a historical epoch while at the same time defying a precise correspondence to the decade itself.” Not surprisingly, commentators on the 60s “not only disagree about the what and the why of the sixties, but also about the when”. Stephens points out that some position the start of

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the 60s in 1955 with the start of the first organized black civil rights movement. However, 1955 would appear to be a little removed from the widespread ethos that is understood to constitute the 60s. A better case can be made for 1964 with the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Mark Kitchell’s documentary *Berkeley in the ’60s* analyses the Free Speech Movement, focusing on the main participants’ role in that movement, but also their subsequent importance in the counterculture. The documentary makes it clear how countercultural issues of lifestyles, as well as politics, were beginning to take form and be addressed during this time at Berkeley: Mario Savio’s famous “operation of the machine” speech being but one indicator of the early countercultural critique of established society which was believed to mechanistically treat students like “products”, with all the alienating and life denying force this entailed.

In Australia Shane Homan makes a case for 1955 being seen as the start of the 60s with live rock and roll performances by the likes of Johnny O’Keefe being a precursor of what was to come. When the Mayor of Parramatta banned O’Keefe’s performances O’Keefe called him a “square” and the mayor had no idea what O’Keefe meant; an indication of a gap that was to only widen. However, as with the United States, 1955 would seem to be a little early to speak of an ethos widespread enough to be called the start of the 60s. Certainly, the nascent civil rights movement in the United States and Johnny O’Keefe’s behaviour and statements in Australia may be seen as harbingers of what was to ensue, but not the general start to the 60s. Billy Thorpe’s autobiographical *Sex and Thugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll* gives a date that is a little more plausible for Australia: “The baby boomers were going to have their say…. In late 1963 the word forming in the minds of everyone between the ages of twelve to twenty was ‘US’ …. There seemed to be an electricity to everything …. ‘The times they were definitely a-changin’”. Having said this, Thorpe is still aware that the full force of the 60s was yet to be realized: “The wave was nowhere near ready to peak and miles from some unknown future beach where it

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16 Ibid.
18 Shane Homan, *The Mayor’s a Square: Live Music and Law and Order in Sydney*. Local consumption Publications, Newtown, 2003. pp.1 and 37. It seemed that O’Keefe was also able to experience the linkage between rock and roll and sex: “… the early days of rock and roll. There was a lot of sex … It often seemed to me that all the girls wanted to do was fuck.” p.35. And O’Keefe’s later involvement with drugs gives him the 60s trifecta!
must eventually crash in a spectacular display of violent energy and beauty”. 19 Nevertheless, 1963 to 1964 would appear be a reasonable time to start talking about the 60s in Australia. 1964 was when conscription commenced for twenty year old men, an action that was to bring Vietnam into the minds and homes of most Australian families and setting in train what was to become one of the central features of the 60s. Gerster and Bassett quote Robert Hughes who believed the conscription decision made 1964 for Australia “the last year of its political virginity”.20 To this one might add the concomitant cultural changes that were to also follow. 1964 was also the year of the Beatles’ tour of Australia. For “the epochal myth of the Australian sixties … the Beatles visit is a primary legend …. The group and its entourage ‘conquered’ the country as completely as if it had stormed into the place aboard Sherman tanks.”21 The Beatles may have been just another group of entertainers on some promotional tour, but their reception indicated something more significant for young Australians: ten thousand teenagers packed outside the Beatles’ Melbourne hotel, something unheard of, especially considering it was a Sunday. It was “bigger than any Royal visit”.22 The Beatles’ youthful and irreverent style when interviewed, their hair and their music made for a reception in Australia that indicated that things were changing.23

Similarly, the 60s refuses to be abruptly guillotined by the end of 1969. Some, however, do argue for 1969 being seen as the symbolic end of the dream of the 60s, and cite the Tate-La Bianca killings by the Manson family and the Hell’s Angels killing at Altamont as evidence.24 Symbolically charged as these two events are it would still seem a little premature to declare the 60s dead. Todd Gitlin says that “by the early Seventies the upheaval was over”, but his book The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage25 deals with the 60s well beyond the ending of this “upheaval”. Fredric Jameson, in his essay ‘Periodizing the 60s’, defines the 60s as a world-wide phenomenon: “The simplest yet

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20 Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, op. cit. p.21.
21 Ibid. pp. 6-7.
22 Ibid.
24 Ibid. p.22.
most universal formulation surely remains the widely shared feeling that in the 60s, for a time, everything was possible: that this period, in other words, was a moment of a universal liberation, a global unbinding of energies.”\(^{26}\) As a global phenomenon, Jameson places “the definitive end of the ‘60s’ in the general area of 1972-1974.”\(^{27}\) Julie Stephen’s quotes Ron Verzuh who chooses 1973 as marking the end of the 60s on the solid historical basis that it’s “‘as good a cut off date as any’.”\(^{28}\)

Settling on a date for the end of the 60s in Australia is, quite rightly, equally inconclusive. Donald Horne set his period of analysis of “those strange times – threatening to some, hopeful to others – (to) particularly the period from 1966 to 1972”\(^{29}\), consciously limiting himself to what he saw as a period of heightened activity. Given the election of the Whitlam government in 1972 Horne’s timeframe is of no help in establishing what could be seen as the end of the 60s in Australia. Patricia Dobrez, in her *Michael Dransfield’s Lives: a Sixties Biography*, argues that in “Australia the years 1968 to 1973 were the watershed years marked by political and cultural change.” Dobrez’s choice of 1973 would still seem to be a little premature, and is a date no doubt influenced by Dransfield’s death that year. Nevertheless, Dobrez is talking about “watershed” years and willingly acknowledges that the 60s is a “critical period of recent and still influential history.”\(^{30}\) Andrew Milner sees the sacking of the Whitlam government in 1975, with its associated sense of disillusionment and frustration exacerbated by the result of the ensuing election, as the cut off date for the 60s.\(^{31}\)

These interpretations as to what constitutes the end of the 60s in Australia seem to search for some dramatic occurrence that loudly proclaims the end of the era. But of course periods like the 60s refuse to end abruptly, and no matter how convenient cut-off dates may be they fail to take into account how the cultural impact on the way people live may continue beyond the occurrence of some significant historical event. This thesis

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\(^{27}\) Ibid. p.205.

\(^{28}\) Julie Stephens, op. cit. p.11.


argues that the cultural aims and impact of the 60s continued well into the second half of the 70s in Australia. Discussion of a text, such as Wilding’s Scenic Drive\textsuperscript{32} from 1976, should occur in the context of it being a cultural product of the 60s: Wilding’s early fiction should be viewed as an assertive practice of the 60s.\textsuperscript{33} This is not to say that Wilding’s texts had belatedly caught the 60s zeitgeist and are fictional anachronisms. Rather it is to say that at the time of their publication Australia (and other parts of the world, but perhaps most especially a country like Australia) was still actively experiencing the 60s. In this way it would seem to make sense to talk about something being a product of the 60s, rather than having one text from 1969 and another from 1971 being described as coming from the 60s or the 70s. There is no denying the significance of 1975 for Australia: it saw the abrupt end to the political hopes of many Australians and disillusionment and disappointment may have been widespread. Many may have seen it as the end of traditional politics as a means for change. However, there is no reason to see 1975 as the abrupt end of the cultural/lifestyle aspects of the countercultural project to replace the dominant: there may have been some loss of enthusiasm and impetus after 1975, but not an abrupt cessation. In many ways the 70s was still the 60s in Australia. A case in point is Alison Pressley’s book about the 60s in Australia. The numerous contributors to Pressley’s book use the terms the 60s and the 70s as if they were easily interchangeable: indeed, her book is called Living in the 70s: Being Young in Australia in an Extraordinary Decade. Pressley’s book is a compilation of people’s recollections of the period: “The 70s were extraordinary. It was a time of such possibilities”; “The 70s here were as heady, as exciting and full of change as the 60s had been in Britain”; “The spirit of the 60s was really starting to have an impact here in that early 70s period”.\textsuperscript{34} Such evidence may be anecdotal and perhaps coloured by time, but it would appear to be a common recollection of what people were thinking and feeling at the time and given who some of the people doing the recollecting are it must at least be given some credence.\textsuperscript{35} Cumulatively, there is considerable opinion to support the periodizing of the

\textsuperscript{32} Michael Wilding, Scenic Drive. Wild and Wooley, Marrickville, 1976.
\textsuperscript{33} The term “assertive practice” will be discussed a little later in this chapter.
\textsuperscript{35} People such as Craig McGregor, Richard Neville, Graeme Blundell, Kathy Lette, Charles Waterstreet, Pat Woolley et al. Further evidence of this kind was to be found on Richard Glover’s ‘Drive’ on ABC’s
cultural phenomena of the 60s well into the years of the 1970s. To quote one of Michael Wilding’s characters from his 2007 novel, National Treasure: “Sixties, seventies, what’s the difference?”

Great changes took place in Australian society during the 60s. There was a shift in the zeitgeist that not only altered society in the 60s, but whose legacy can still be discerned today. There is consensus that in many parts of the world it was an unusually efficacious period. John Lichfield from The Independent, quoted in the article ‘Close-Up: The Legacy of 1968’ from May, 2008 in the Weekend Australian argues that 1968 was primarily a cultural and sexual revolution and that “France needed six weeks of mayhem to go from… the social and sexual repression of the 1950s to the social and sexual freedom, and confusion, of the 1970s (and afterwards).” Even those from the more conservative side have acknowledged the impact of the 60s. On the 17th June 2002, the Sydney Morning Herald ran an article headlined ‘Youth Still Paying for Sexy ’60s.’ In the article John Anderson, the then leader of the National Party, was quoted as believing that the “swinging ’60s have a lot to answer for”, including “soaring crime and suicide rates.” Anderson argued that the “permissive ’60s and everything that flowed from it has seen a massive erosion of traditional family values.”

Again in the Sydney Morning Herald, March 2003, an article headlined ‘Kids Drawn Into Vile Web Porn As 60s Generation Sits On Its Hands’ argued that with regards to the problem of pornography “adults influenced by the liberal 1960s have refused to confront the issue through fear of being labelled wowsers … the 60s generation have refused to look the problem in the face.”

More recently Hall Greenland in his article ‘In Defence of May 1968’, from ‘Review’ in May/June’s Weekend Australian, has sought to defend the 60s against “the blame-it-all-on-1968 school”. He takes issue with the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, who in his last pre-election speech in 2007, “charged the ’68ers with moral degeneracy”, blaming them with everything from “moral relativism to corporate...

702. Glover was interviewing American singer, songwriter Jackson Browne and in the flow of conversation Glover told Browne, “When you talk about the 60s in Australia we mean the early 70s” to which Browne replied, “That was one of the great things about coming to Australia: a friend told me, ‘They’re ten years behind there – it’s still the 60s.’” 20th February, 2009.
fraudsters”. For Sarkozy, many of the world’s current problems “‘grew out of May 1968, because there were to be no more rules, no more norms, no morality, no more respect, no authority.’” However, for recent uncompromising indictments of the 60s one doesn’t have to go all the way to France to find evidence of the most gruesome aspects of the 60s crime. Australian journalist Greg Sheridan is quite happy to enthusiastically attack the 60s as he does in 2008’s January ‘Review’ from the Weekend Australian. The title of his piece, ‘Era of the Unhinged’, tells you where he’s coming from: “Culturally, the ‘60s were very toxic…. Marriage was patriarchal oppression…. Sexual exploitation was freedom.” For Sheridan a decade like the 30s was able to produce writers like “Graham Greene, George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell” who were “great artists”. He then dares readers to “name me a similar list from the ’60s. You can’t. Very little work of any artistic consequence emerged from the ’60s.” In terms of writers I would have thought the likes of Edward Albee, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Allen Ginsberg, Phillip Larkin, Gore Vidal, Joseph Heller, Tom Wolfe, Ken Kesey, Truman Capote and Patrick White would rate a mention, but I guess Sheridan knows his 60s.

Apparently the “key idea of the ’60s was to abandon all restraint.” There was “madness abroad… a “willful, self-indulgent, nihilistic and destructive madness.” Little wonder then that Sheridan concludes: “The ’60s are dead at last. Let’s dance on their grave.” That would appear to be a fair amount of excitement over a corpse.

These articles attest to the ongoing debate over the 60s and how forty years on strong emotions are still being aroused. These articles clearly identify the perceived nexus between events in the 60s and their legacy in the present. Often the legacy is seen to be a negative one, especially with regards to the shifts in attitudes towards morality and sex that took place in the 60s. Sex is often, if not always, at the centre.

The issue is not the accuracy, or otherwise, of some homespun personal belief or the findings of some study, but rather how we should view the events of the 60s, and then by deduction what sort of society we wish to live in today. What is at stake here is an interpretation of the past in order to promulgate a concept of our present and future. The 60s is a site of fierce contest. There are sections of our present society whose agenda sees the 60s as anathema to the sort of society they envisage. As such it is in their interest to demonize the 60s and to portray it as the source of so many of the ills of
present day society. Alternatively, it could be in their interest to negate the serious influence of the 60s by rendering that decade as frivolous, the product of the baby-boomers’ extended adolescence, a gaudy fashion extravaganza replete with the posturing, noise and colour of time-honoured youthful rebellion, with all its sound and fury.

This thesis does not concur with these points of view. This thesis argues that dramatic and effective changes took place in Australia during the 60s and that the most far reaching of these changes did not take place in the areas most usually associated with facilitating change. The greatest changes did not take place in the Federal Parliament, including those ushered in by the Whitlam government, 1972-1975. Nor was change mainly brought about by left wing groups, even the New Left. This is not to say that the broad spectrum of more traditional, overtly political groupings was completely ineffectual in bringing about change, but rather to see such groups as responding to the altered zeitgeist, fanning it, rather than giving it breath.

The most effective site of change lay in the area of culture, of lifestyles, in the places and spaces of what Raymond Williams called the “ordinary things.” It is here that subversion of the old conservative orthodoxy took place. It is in the realm of cultural dissonance, cultural resistance, and then cultural assertion, that the most emancipatory, liberating advances were made. It is what Julie Stevens called the “anti-disciplinary protest” of the 60s. Change in the 60s grew out of the countercultural context of the period.

In understanding the process of change during this period Raymond Williams’ essay ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’ offers a theory of change in bourgeois society that I intend to use to underpin my analysis of the 60s. Williams believed that there was a certain clumsiness about some Marxist cultural analysis which may be effective for looking at “epochal” changes, (say between feudal and bourgeois) but which was far less effective with “historical” changes, at distinguishing between different phases of bourgeois society, and moments within these phases. He felt the need for a theory of “greater precision and delicacy of analysis.” Williams formulated an

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38 Julie Stephens, op. cit. p.viii.
39 Raymond Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.’op. cit.
40 Ibid. p. 38.
account which acknowledged elements of real and ongoing change. Hegemony has highly complex internal structures, but these structures have to be continually revisited, renewed, defended and made to accommodate: consequently these structures can be challenged and in certain ways modified.41

At any one time there is a central system of values and practices which is generally seen as being the accepted and established order of things. Williams called this the “dominant”. This dominant system is not theoretical or abstract, but is “organized and lived.”42 Though Williams does not stress this point, it is because the dominant culture is lived and not abstract that it is at the one time so resistant to change, yet paradoxically also open to change. If people are reasonably happy with their lived lives (or if they can see no feasible alternative or means for changing their lives), then they are often disinterested in, or resistant to, change. Yet, when there is perceived discontent with people’s social existence large numbers of people may be apt to alter aspects of their lived lives, given a conducive environment. Ironically, this occurred in the 1960s, a time of unprecedented affluence.

Within the dominant culture there are always processes of incorporation. But not everything is incorporated. Generally, there is what Williams called the “selective tradition,” a process whereby the dominant culture selects from the past and present certain aspects, meanings and practices for emphasis and incorporation, whilst others are excluded. Some of these meanings and practices become “reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture.”43 This process is taking place now with regards to the 60s and is what I earlier referred to when describing the 60s as a site of fierce contest.

Sometimes, however, the dominant culture is forced to change in ways that it would otherwise find unacceptable. Sometimes there are certain forces and pressures at work that effectively preclude the usual functioning of the selective tradition, when the selective tradition is unable to have it all its own way. This can lead to a remaking of the dominant culture. The dominant culture is able to recognize, tolerate and even willingly accept a host of alternatives within its midst. It is in its interest to appear to be

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid. p.39.
reasonable, flexible and malleable. These alternatives are even able to affect degrees of change. The dominant culture willingly accepts internal conflict and variation as long as “they do not in practice go beyond the limits of the central effective and dominant definitions … and … not in the end exceed the limits of the central corporate definitions.”

To account for these forces within the dominant, effective culture Williams discerns between alternative and oppositional forms. The alternative is most easily accommodated within the dominant. This doesn’t only mean alternative political parties within a democratic society but also, say, people leading alternative lifestyles, as long as the alternative groups do not exceed the boundaries of the dominant culture and as long as those leading alternative lifestyles do not exist in numbers large enough to impact upon the dominant. The distinction between alternative and oppositional is partly explained by Williams as being “between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change society in its light.”

Numbers are important here. Sometimes those leading an alternative lifestyle can be completely subsumed and ignored because their numbers are so insignificant. At other times their numerical weakness may invite condemnation, criticism, ridicule and even persecution from the dominant society. Either way it won’t threaten to alter the nature of the dominant. A household of bohemians can quaintly exist, and the surrounding society can maintain its status quo. But when there is something of a critical mass then the dominant may quite rightly feel threatened and find the need to resist or accommodate. How, why and when this critical mass occurs is a moot point. It is clear, however, that the baby boomers achieved this critical mass. The 60s was a time when oppositional practices were widespread and significant enough to challenge the dominant culture, when large numbers of people moved, in practice and in various forms of representation, beyond the accepted limits of the dominant. The line between alternative and oppositional is not always clear-cut. This is especially true of the 60s where those adopting alternative practices may very well have wished to be left alone, but the nature

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44 Ibid. p.40.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid. pp. 41-42.
of these practices, their high profile and presence, along with the numbers practising these alternatives may have led them to function in a way that was clearly oppositional. Take the rise and popularity of communes as a case in point. Indeed, by the 60s members of the counterculture, as well as the public at large, would not have seen a clear distinction between the terms alternative and oppositional.

Williams further nuanced his argument about the dominant culture by introducing a distinction between “residual” and “emergent”. As the name suggests residual culture may be lived and practised on the residue of some previous culture.\textsuperscript{47} In the 60s Australia’s residual culture was made up of values and practices coming out of the 1930s and 40s, values and practices forged by the Depression, World War Two and ties with Great Britain, and productive of attitudes focusing on economic survival and well-being, loyalty and the acceptance of a social hierarchy and one’s functioning place in it. The dominant culture was forged in the post World War Two years, during the optimism of the 1950s. It was composed of a largely Anglo-Celtic population whose values valorized hard work, materialism, conformity, marriage, the family and a conservative approach to alternative lifestyles, censorship, politics and sex.\textsuperscript{48}

The emergent culture of the 60s was both alternative and oppositional. By far the more important component was the oppositional – it was a time of countercultural practices which sought to alter the dominant culture. Commentators on the 60s have often defined the term counterculture in different ways.\textsuperscript{49} Craig McGregor argues that the “existence of a counter-culture is one of the dominant myths of our time” and that it seems more realistic to recognize “that there are a number of alternative cultures and that these are sometimes more opposed to each other than to the established culture.” He concludes that it is “meaningless, therefore, to say we are part of, or support, the counter-

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid p.40.
\textsuperscript{48} See, for example, Frank Crowley (ed.), A New History of Australia. William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1974. Chapters 9-12.
\textsuperscript{49} When first thinking and writing about the counterculture my inclination was to use the term as a proper noun and to write about the Counterculture. My line of thinking was that despite its diverse components it was not unreasonable to see the counterculture as a broad and easily identifiable movement. There was precedence with most writers seeing the Push and the Beats as deserving of capital letters. Yet I could find no writer who gave the counterculture the same treatment. So despite my inclination I have kept to the lower case.
culture, because there isn’t any such thing.”\textsuperscript{50} McGregor is correct in recognizing the diversity that makes up the counterculture and that there are times when aspects of the counterculture are in opposition, but this doesn’t perforce mean an umbrella term like counterculture isn’t still valid. There is still much that connects, albeit somewhat loosely at times, the concept of the counterculture. To argue against a collective noun for a group on the grounds of diversity and oppositionality would deny Australians names for their major political parties. Indeed, this diversity and lack of consensus is an aspect of the counterculture which Julie Stephens chooses to foreground as an integral feature of the “hybrid and wholly multi-dimensional” counterculture. Stephens says the counterculture “instead of feeling compelled to iron out inconsistencies in their approach or analysis, paraded and celebrated contradiction.” Countercultural groups, such as the Yippies, intentionally promoted “incongruity, incoherence and contradiction (and a) rejection of ideology and political program (‘there is no program… that would make our movement sterile’)
\textsuperscript{51}.

Nevertheless, McGregor’s point is given some support when Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle suggest that the term counterculture “falsely reifies what should never properly be construed as a social movement.” Having said this, Braunstein and Doyle immediately describe the counterculture in terms that most would understand as constituting a social movement, though not in the traditional and formal sense: the counterculture “was an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies postures, gestures, ‘lifestyles,’ ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations.” Despite this varied collection, a sense of unity and cohesion was achieved when people “defined themselves first by what they were not, and then, only after having cleared that essential ground of identity, began to conceive anew what they were.” The counterculture believed that to achieve change one must “shift the culture, and the culture would be moved one person at a time.” Change was to be “epiphenomenal” and “when enough people had transformed themselves …. The dominant culture could hardly help

\textsuperscript{51} Julie Stephens, op. cit. pp.30-32.
but be changed”. This thesis argues that texts, such as the early fiction of Michael Wilding, were one of a myriad of factors that sought to create such a shift in culture.

Often commentators define the counterculture in the briefest and most general manner. Theodore Roszak, who popularised the term counterculture in 1970 with the publication of his The Making of a Counterculture, said the counterculture was made up of “youth who are profoundly, even frantically, alienated from the parental generation” who had become “a major lever of radical social change.” This dissenting youth opposed “the sluggish consensus-and-coalition politics of their middle-class elders.” They were against “the technocracy”, striving to alter “the total cultural context”. Peter Doggett briefly defines the counterculture as “running in opposition to the prevailing orthodoxy of capitalism, imperialism, sexism, racism and emotional repression.” Even more general is Timothy Miller, for whom the “counterculture was a romantic social movement … mainly composed of teenagers and persons in their early twenties, who through their flamboyant lifestyle expressed their alienation from mainstream American life.” All of these definitions have much in common and, McGregor aside, readily see the counterculture as a movement that sought to change the dominant culture. It is in the broadest sense of the definition that this thesis will employ the term counterculture: the counterculture is a loose and informal coalition of groups and individuals who rejected the values of the status quo and who then sought to resist, alter and replace those values through a variety of methods. In this way the sexual values put forward in Wilding’s early fiction are to be viewed as a countercultural practice that sought to undermine and replace the moral and sexual values of the dominant. The counterculture was a 60s phenomenon and Wilding’s fiction played its part in it.

The practices of the counterculture were so varied, widespread, virulent and efficacious that it would seem to be necessary to move beyond Williams’ term of emergent. To this end it would seem appropriate to talk about culturally assertive

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55 Timothy Miller, op. cit. p.6.
practices. These practices had the intention of remaking the dominant culture in such far reaching ways that the dominant was forced into an extended period of heightened activity to resist, reject, commodify and accommodate the impact of these countercultural practices. “It depends very much whether it is in an area in which the dominant class and the dominant culture have an interest and a stake. If the interest and the stake are explicit, many new practices will be reached for, and if possible incorporated, or else extirpated with extraordinary vigour.” In many ways the dominant culture was very successful in resisting unwanted change, whilst in other ways, some of them surprising and unexpected, it was forced to change under the pressure of the countercultural practices of the period. The emergent practices of the 60s were culturally assertive, characterised by their vigorous oppositionality and intent to create change. These practices took numerous diverse forms during the 60s, some separate, most interconnected. Born of discontent with the dominant culture, fostered by the numerical strength and affluence of the baby-boomer generation and catalysed by the Vietnam war, the countercultural forms ran the gamut of practices such as taking drugs, listening to rock and roll, attending concerts, protests, communes, to different fashions in hair and clothes, to a new approach to sex.

The efficacy of these culturally assertive practices individually, but especially cumulatively, gives concrete expression to the cultural materialist belief that the dominant can undergo change. Hegemony is not some immutable monolith, but is vulnerable and subject to assertive forces beyond its complete control. The strength of the dominant, in fact, lies in its ability to be mutable, but mutable within certain bounds. The dominant is resilient and often attempts to extirpate assertive practices, but far more effective, and far more acceptable to the dominant as an ongoing practice, is to be malleable, to accommodate and to coopt. Paradoxically, this most effective practice of the dominant is arguably its most vulnerable. It is possible that there comes a point when after ongoing significant cooptation the dominant is rendered significantly different to its original, and closer to aspects of those assertive practices that sought to alter it. The Western world of 1950 was not the same in 1970. In two decades a lot had changed.

56 Raymond Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.’ op. cit. p.43.
This thesis explores some of the reasons behind these changes. The 60s saw an explosion of dramatic social events in many countries around the world. There is a tendency to concentrate on the United States, France and Great Britain, and this is understandable as many headline making events occurred in these countries, but this is to neglect the fact that the disruptive forces of the 60s impacted on other parts of the world. This thesis will focus on Australia, specifically Sydney. Even so the events in Sydney were so diverse and numerous that it will be necessary to further concentrate that focus, avoiding the risk of getting a blurred glimpse of everything, yet seeing nothing clearly or in detail. I will focus on sex during this period and the integral oppositional role it played in the countercultural events of the time. Of necessity even this will be within certain parameters, most specifically the treatment of sex in the early published fiction of Michael Wilding.

This thesis will seek to provide a theoretical framework that can account, at least partially, for dramatic change. In accounting for this change it will follow that ongoing change is still possible, that the sense of ennui, resignation and capitulation to an unpalatable status quo felt by some on the left is not inevitable or inescapable.

Firstly, the conditions that best foster and promote the development of emergent and assertive practices are facilitated by the existence of enclaves and subgroups whose modus operandi is alternative, leading to varying degrees of active oppositionality to the dominant culture. For example, in the 1950s in San Francisco this purpose was served by the University of California, Berkeley and members of the Beat generation. In Paris it was Left Bank intellectuals and the Sorbonne, while in Melbourne it was the Drift and the University of Melbourne. In Sydney it was the Push and its concomitant and interactive relationships with Sydney University and later the University of New South Wales. The Push provided the environment where emergent oppositionality could be fostered and later exported to the dominant society. On its own the Push could not have created the
oppositional forces of the 60s, but it did have a catalytic impact on the dissemination and acceptance of the countercultural ideas of that decade. Countercultural ideas found receptive ground in areas the Push had influenced and this in turn led to an accelerated and more widespread acceptance and efficacy of oppositional 60s thinking, attitudes and lifestyles.

The Push was integral to creating the complexion of oppositional forces in Sydney in the 60s. Like other vibrant subgroups it provided a milieu where radical ideas and attitudes could circulate in an environment that was mutually supportive. It provided an area for its members where not only could oppositional ideas be articulated, but where these ideas could be given palpable form, where their culture could be lived out. During the 1950s the practices of the Push were in Williams’ terms, “emergent” and “alternative”, made up of people “who simply find a different way to live and wish to be left alone.”\(^\text{57}\) In the 1960s and 1970s these practices of the Push became assertive as they were actively used as an oppositional maneuver designed to disrupt and change the status quo.

Much of the thinking of the Push was diffuse and anarchic, yet the dominant philosophy within the Push was that of the Sydney Libertarians – and in turn sex was at the core of the Libertarian philosophy and code of behaviour. This focus on sex was present from the early days of the Push when, though it was concerned with “permanent protest”, it resiled from active and overt engagement with politics or the mores of mainstream society. This eschewal of political engagement altered when the Push was in decline and when, in contrast, younger Push members actively used sex as a means to engage in open confrontation with the dominant.

The Push approach to sex found confirmation with the arrival of the 60s, where the countercultural attitude reinforced and further promoted these Push beliefs and lifestyles. For assertive cultural practices, for sex in particular, this was fortuitous. Push attitudes to sex had much in common with the counterculture’s, and as such there was a beneficial reciprocity between the two with the Push approach being bolstered and given wider currency, while the countercultural approach found that it came into a very receptive environment predisposed to accept, disseminate and live out its ideas. One

\(^{57}\) Ibid. p.41.
member of the Push, Johnny Earls, left Sydney in the 60s and went to Ayacucho, Peru, a place removed from the countercultural changes taking place elsewhere. When Earls visited the US in 1968 he said: “it was like seeing tens of thousands of people from the Royal George spread all over … the late 1960s and the early 1970s were like a Libertarian dream come true: we are gonna change the world!”

This thesis will look at Sydney in the 60s, seeking to find a template to explore what creates an environment conducive to change, what factors enable assertive practices to achieve radical social change. The 60s saw a movement away from believing that radical change could occur through aligning oneself to some universal class and that protest had ultimately to be aimed at one monolithic, hegemonic power. In the 60s emergent and assertive practices valorized the connection between individual and group action and societal change. These individual and group sites of contest were, in Catherine Gallagher’s words, “joined to the general interest through a logic of de-centred distribution, in which each group, in speaking for itself, spoke against a ‘system’ that was oppressing all.” There was still a general solidarity amongst the diverse components of the assertive practices of the counterculture, but this solidarity was no longer premised on believing one belonged to an oppressed class. Certainly there was still a criticism of, and a resiling from, accepted middle-class values, but this criticism had more to do with that class’ perceived stifling, monochromatic conventionality than any Marxist analysis. What took place in the 60s was a plethora of assertive practices, each contesting in its own arena and cumulatively disrupting the dominant in almost all of its de-centred sites. These assertive practices involved the way a person lived, behaved and thought – they involved self-realisation, self-transformation, liberation and gaining a consciousness that led to a different way of living. Gallagher sees this as a “profoundly anti-representational form of political activism”, while, as already mentioned, Julie Stephens calls it “anti-

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58 Anne Coombs, op. cit. p.175.
60 Ibid. p.48.
disciplinary politics.”61 It was believed that these diverse, numerous sites could lead to “a systemic crisis, a revolutionary conjunction.”62 The outcome envisaged need not be some apocalyptic moment when the ‘system’ collapsed, but an ongoing series of changes that would ultimately result in a much changed and better society.

Many argue that these changes were superficial and transient, that the course of the ship may have been briefly altered, but that the ship had not been sunk and that after a while it was pretty much full steam ahead and business as usual for all those on board from the A deck to those below the Plimsoll line. Though not referring to the 60s specifically, Williams argued that “in this process, of course, the dominant culture itself changes, not in its central formation, but in many of its articulated features.”63 Just how much the dominant changes before it becomes something different is moot. How many “articulated features” can change before the “central formation” is changed? It would seem that the changes in the 60s did not completely alter the dominant – after the 60s there was still a capitalist system, a military-industrial complex, rich and powerful elites and entrenched systems of inequality. Yet at the same time the impetus of the 60s caused the “central formation” to respond in ways that had a profound effect on the way large numbers of people thought and lived. 1968 was not 1958.

Just what the central formation of the dominant was to be changed into may not have overly concerned many in the counterculture. They were emphatic that they wanted things to be different, but as to what that difference would be they were less certain. And probably not greatly perturbed with that lack of a blueprint. Such blueprints smacked of an old left that had failed to deliver the goods. Waiting for Lefty had proven to be the same as waiting for Godot. Rather, there was an emphasis on oppositionality, an “indeterminant negativity,”64 and this in turn was seen as a positive in that it was difficult to coopt what was as yet unseen and unstated.

This “indeterminant negativity” was not wholly the case with all countercultural assertive practices. Many of these practices lived out an alternative vision, albeit one that may not have been detailed, thoroughgoing or replete with a cogent internal logic. This

61 Julie Stephens, op. cit. p.4.
62 Catherine Gallagher, op. cit. p.48.
63 Raymond Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, op. cit. p.45.
64 Catherine Gallagher, op. cit. p.49.
was the case with sex, where practiced, lived, symbolic and oppositional components merged. Personal behaviour was seen to have a political dimension. There was no belief in a new metanarrative, but rather a belief that new and varied narratives could constitute a new society, whatever that was to be. In a Foucaultian gesture of prescient postmodernity different and concurrent sites of opposition were valorized: established power manifested itself in numerous sites and therefore opposition needed to take place in these various sites, in the “micro-politics of daily life.”65 Traditional sites of left protest (unions, the economy, for example) were replaced by new ones: music, drugs, hairstyles, clothes, anti-war protests, feminism, communal living, attitudinal changes to work and the environment, amongst numerous others. This is a tenet of new historicist and cultural materialist thinking which seeks to foreground the ubiquitousness of agency. Individuals and their society are conditioned by the multiplicity of forces that surround them. “Agency is virtually inescapable” and “every form of behaviour, in this view, is a strategy that produces an effect.”66 In this view agency is pervasive.

Of course some of these sites of resistance or subversion would fail, peter out, be coopted or even serve to legitimize and reinforce the dominant. Agency may be inescapable, but its intended efficacy is not. However, it is to be overly pessimistic to believe that each site of resistance or subversion must ultimately fail to achieve any part of its aims, that all sites are coopted. “Some are, some aren’t.”67 Most importantly for the efficacy of the countercultures’s assertive practices, and of most interest for this thesis, is the site of sex.

It is the huge variety of assertive sites that makes the 60s a period of such extraordinary social change – it was the cumulative impact of these practices that wrought changes more far-reaching than anything achieved through the modes of traditional politics or protest. Normally the dominant is able to modify, incorporate or extirpate these oppositional forces which usually “do not in practice go beyond the limits of the central effective and dominant definitions.”68 During the 60s the dominant was not able to coopt, incorporate or extirpate all the assertive practices that worked against it.

65 Catherine Gallagher, op. cit. p. 50.
67 Ibid. p.56.
The dominant was forced to make concessions that it would otherwise have refused. Such a confluence of assertive practices as occurred in the 60s created a revolutionary juncture where social change appeared to be a realizable goal. There was a climate conducive to oppositionality, and this climate was palpable and as such it encouraged others to join in, and for those already in opposition to go even further: the oppositionality of the assertive practices spread and deepened. It became a self-perpetuating situation.

Certainly, given the vitality of the 60s capitalist economy, there would be ongoing commodification. It too would be virtually inescapable.

“The revolution will not go better with Coke.
The revolution will not fight germs that may cause bad breath.
The revolution will not put you in the driver’s seat.
The revolution will not be televised.”

Despite these lines from Gil Scott Heron there was heavy commodification of many of the assertive practices. This, however, was not seen by all 60s radicals as an entirely negative process that blunted any effective gesture towards change. What commodification in the 60s may have achieved was the dissemination and popularization of the counterculture’s stance. Commodification can lend a legitimacy to aspects of the counterculture – when countercultural mores find expression in, say, advertising it suggests that these attitudes have a currency which it is acceptable to mimic and take on. Ironically, it is possible that aspects of the dominant, such as advertising, its virulent proselytizing arm, could result in subverting and altering the shape and dimensions of that same dominant. Coca Cola may use countercultural images in its advertising campaigns to better allow its executives more spending power on Rodeo Drive or a better view of Central Park (or a more expansive view of Sydney Harbour for that matter), but there is also a point where the conscripted images of the long hair, laid-back style, jeans

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and stances antipathetical to the work ethic may become effective in altering the very
dominant the ad was created to serve. Such ads could create an interesting and
problematic dichotomy: sales of Coke might rise, but the people buying it might have an
altered mindset. Cooptation and commodification was not a one way street, ending in a
cul de sac, draining emergent and assertive practices of disruptive efficacy. There is truth
in the view that cooption and commodification will blunt, perhaps even completely
negate at times, disruptive gestures. However, it isn’t all true all the time. Again, agency
is inescapable and the ideas and attitudes coopted by the dominant could reverberate,
touching and influencing a wider group of people.

If sex was central to the Push, so too was it central to the counterculture. Sex
was at the forefront of the 60s trinity of sex, drugs and rock and roll. Sex was arguably
the most feared disruptive force of the period. It was feared that the emergent and
assertive practices of the new sexuality would undermine the status quo of Western
society through destroying the bedrock institutions of the 1950s and indeed capitalism
itself. Countercultural approaches to sex not only flouted the old taboos, they were
blatantly antipathetical to them.

Cumulatively the new approach threatened marriage, monogamy, the nuclear
family and the belief that sex must be the hushed thing behind closed bedroom doors. The
counterculture believed the old approach to sex was limiting, restrictive and even
destructive to individuals and to the community at large; it was the cause of so many of
the ills of society. For the counterculture sex was not only seen as a fun and natural
impulse (the time honoured libidinal cry of all young people), but as a necessary
prerequisite for creating new individuals and a new world. The old approach to sex was
seen as physically and psychologically damaging, creating cramped and twisted
individuals who were full of the angst, anger and frustration that would not exist amongst
those of the counterculture. The new approach was seen as having panacean qualities; it
could usher in a true counterculture. The new approach to sex would not only see the
creation of satisfied, happy individuals, it also had the power to end the ongoing abuses

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72 David Allyn, op. cit. p.4.
of the dominant culture. Nobody was exhorted to ‘make petitions, not war,’ but millions enticed each other to ‘make love, not war.’

Attitudes to sex during the 60s deserve foregrounding because they proved to be one of the most efficacious facets of the assertive practices of the time. The countercultural approach went far beyond an act of defiance towards the dominant. Its threat to undermine and destroy the dominant was why it was so vigorously resisted in the 60s, as indeed it still is today.

Given that sex is at the core of a person’s identity and integral to all modes of social organization then it is clear why so many in the counterculture placed such emphasis on sex as a modus operandi for change. Many in the counterculture not only believed that a repressed sexuality was in the interest of the dominant and essential for its success, but that it was responsible for a whole battery of wrongs, ranging from unhappiness to war. A sexually liberated person and a sexually liberated society would create a better world.

There is a sexual resonance in the 60s catch cry ‘the personal is political.’ At a simplistic level, if the central tenets of the 1950s could be threatened and overthrown by assertive practices, and replaced with the new and different approach to sex, then it was believed the very complexion of the dominant would change. Old attitudes to sex highlighted the nexus between the individual and the social constraints laid down by the dominant. Once, however, the tenets of the dominant’s prescriptive approach to sex were transgressed, and transgressed by large numbers of people, then it made other transgressions all the more easy. If sex ceased to be controlled by the dominant and was no longer perceived to be an area of taboo, constraint, fear and ignorance, then there must be a sense of liberation, albeit tentative at first. Once this deeply personal transgression occurred then how much easier, indeed inevitable, it would be to question other practices of the dominant. Once feeling liberated sexually it would be a matter of course to participate in some other assertive practices of the counterculture and call into question other cornerstones of the dominant, such as its work ethic, materialism, capitalism, the nuclear family, living arrangements, politics, religion, drugs, war … in fact maybe all aspects of the dominant.
In the assertive practices of the 60s there was a conflation of the terms sex, liberation and change.\textsuperscript{73} Transgressive sex (transgressive of the mores of the dominant, but still largely heterosexual) equalled liberation, equalled revolution. Revolution was one of the most popular words of the 60s and for most in the counterculture it meant cultural revolution, not one brought about by violence. Sex became an indispensable component of the 60s, holding “a very important place as a symbolic determinant of the counterculture identity”.\textsuperscript{74} More than that, it was believed that “experiences with sex or drugs or music were far more likely to alter the worldview of America’s young than were all the earnest speeches and political exhortations”.\textsuperscript{75} As in America, so in Australia. New attitudes to sex created a sense of membership, a sense of belonging and being part of a countercultural movement. There were many symbolic badges that could be worn (for example, the type of clothes, long hair, the music listened to and the drugs taken) to identify your allegiance, and the new approach to sex was preeminent and generally indispensable.

As mentioned, the processes of cooptation and commodification might unwittingly be complicit with the assertive practices of the counterculture. This would be true for some forms of music, movies and theatre. For example, Hair the musical may be seen as commodifying the counterculture, whilst at the same time valorizing and popularizing its stance. It is in this way that the early fiction of Michael Wilding may be viewed. Wilding was influenced by the ethos and ideas of the Push, not the least of which was the Libertarian attitude to sex. However, Wilding’s writing went beyond chronicling the times. When speaking of Frank Moorhouse, Donald Horne described him as “the projector in literary form of a new world of the young … (of) the romantic revolutionary libertarians, women’s libbers and gays of the inner city terraces.”\textsuperscript{76} This was also true of Wilding. Yet such writing was more than the projector of the times: such writing concretized and disseminated the new approaches to sex.

John Brannigan in his book New Historicism and Cultural Materialism stresses how new historicism and cultural materialism “share an understanding of texts of all

\textsuperscript{73} Beth Bailey, ‘Sex as a Weapon: Underground Comix and the Paradox of Liberation’ in Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (eds), op. cit. p. 307.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. p. 306.
\textsuperscript{76} Donald Horne, op. cit. p.39.
kinds as both products and functional components of social and political formations.” For example, they view “literature as a constitutive and inseparable part of history in the making…. (with) powerful effects on history, and vice versa”.  

There is reciprocity between history and texts: cultural materialists emphasise “the importance of history as a shaping force of literary texts, and the importance of literary texts in shaping history.”

Preeminent in new historicist thinking is Stephen Greenblatt who has often been taken to task for his pessimistic view that subversion can never ultimately succeed. The conclusion to his 1981 essay, ‘Invisible Bullets’, is quoted as evidence: “there is subversion, no end of subversion, just not for us.”

It is an accusation that Greenblatt refutes in his 1990 essay ‘Resonance and Wonder’. He argues that new historicists don’t believe that all sites of resistance will ultimately be coopted. It’s a case of: “Some are, some aren’t.” In ‘Resonance and Wonder’ he argues that there may be forces of containment, but there is still the distinct possibility of successful agency, though it should be understood that such change will not be without its attendant difficulties: “Everything can be different than it is…. But it will not do to imagine that this alteration is easy, automatic, without cost or obligation.”

Alan Sinfield, in Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading, looks at some texts from the canon, analyzing “the modes by which they produce plausible stories and construct subjectivities, and the faultlines and breaking points through which they enable dissident reading.”

The central task for the cultural materialist is “to read the canon against the grain” in order to undermine the “legitimation of the status quo.” For Sinfield, the cultural materialist “seeks to discern the scope for dissident politics of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, both within texts and in their roles in cultures.” The cultural materialist project is an attempt to give texts, such as those from the canon, some agency for change. How much more potential for change is there then in texts where the reader

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78 Ibid. p.94.
79 Ibid. p.65.
80 Ibid. p.109.
need not search for “faultlines” or “discern the scope for dissident politics”, but where the reader is presented with a text that openly renders oppositional ideas? Such is the case with the early fiction of Michael Wilding.

Many of the texts of the 60s did openly present oppositional ideas and the potential of these texts to promote countercultural change is a point strongly made in Philip D. Beidler’s *Scriptures for a Generation: What We Were Reading in the ’60s*. Beidler suggests that in the 60s there was “a proliferation of particular texts bought, read or read about, borrowed and loaned, discussed, and often acted upon as instruments of self and social awareness.” He believes that in the 60s there was “a belief that acts of imagination, inspired modes of thinking and doing, might truly change the world.”85 The 60s saw “a functioning revolutionary politics of discourse, a breaking of the signs in the name of genuine cultural revision.” Such writing replaced “pious euphemism with words previously unspeakable and unprintable” as part of the process of “founding a culture on a new canon of youth-scriptures.”86 One needn’t fully agree with Beidler and see key 60s texts as such efficacious agents of change, but his point that texts can be productive of a climate of change needs acknowledgement. Of course, the types of texts that Beidler talks about were not the only ones in circulation in the 60s. That rock and roll fits into this category is something Peter Doggett argues in *There’s a Riot Going On*: “All along the route, the soundtrack of popular music reflects and sometimes propels the action. Musicians and revolutionaries intertwine.”87 Doggett argues that many rock and roll musicians “believed that they were striking blows for liberation (sexual, political, conceptual) and the revolution.”88 The ability of texts, like rock and roll, to affect change is supported by James Miller in his book *Flowers in the Dustbin* when he asks: “How did such a distinctively youthful form of music come to play a defining role in the global culture of the postwar period?”89 One doesn’t have to agree with the hyperbole of actor

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86 Ibid. p.8. Beidler’s survey of 60s texts is very extensive, ranging from Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Joseph Heller’s Catch 22, Tom Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test to Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice and Robert Pirsig’s Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.
87 Peter Doggett, op. cit. p.11.
88 Ibid. p.4.
Jack Black’s character in the teen oriented movie School of Rock when he declares, “One great rock show can change the world”, but there is certainly a case for seeing some of the texts circulating in the 60s as possessing the potential to create change. 60s radicals certainly believed in the revolutionary potential of rock and roll, as is clear, for example, from Jerry Rubin’s statements about early rock: “Music to free the spirit. Music to bring us together …. gave us the life/beat and set us free …. Rock ’n’ roll marked the beginning of the revolution.”\textsuperscript{90} The early fiction of Michael Wilding didn’t start the revolution or “truly change the world”, but it represents one of the numerous texts that circulated in the 60s which in their own way contributed to the undermining of the dominant culture. His early fiction was part of the process, like other relevant works of fiction or rock music, that functioned as an “instrument of self and social awareness” that could change the way people led their lives and in turn the very culture they lived in. Unlike Jack Black’s character, Wilding was undoubtedly never under the illusion that one good short story or novel could change the world, but, to use Catherine Gallagher’s words again, his fiction represented one of the “local contests (that) would condense into a systemic crisis, a revolutionary conjunction.”\textsuperscript{91}

Wilding’s fiction disseminated ideas and attitudes commensurate with the broad project of the counterculture. His writing chronicled the new zeitgeist and this chronicling reinforced and further promoted that very zeitgeist. His fiction rendered the new attitudes and lifestyles of the 60s and at the same time gave those emergent and assertive practices a greater degree of legitimacy amongst those who were even marginally predisposed to those practices. The reading of Wilding’s fiction made the lived culture it described appear to be more acceptable, even desirable. In this sense his writing was a vibrant nexus of creating the drama and documenting its performance. Wilding’s writing coopted and commodified the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s, whilst at the same time promoting the wider currency of these practices. For many young people the act of reading Wilding’s fiction made them complicit with the forces of change in the 60s.

\textsuperscript{91} Catherine Gallagher, op. cit. p.48.
This is not to suggest that Wilding’s writing was an exemplar of countercultural values. No writing could be. Firstly, this is because the counterculture, like all complex movements, didn’t magically arrive complete and fully formed - it evolved and mutated throughout the 60s. Secondly, the counterculture was always a vastly heterogeneous movement marked by its diversity of forms, defying any single representation. Nevertheless, the ideas and attitudes his fiction put forward were in general agreement with the aims and objectives of most of the counterculture.

Central to the early fiction of Wilding is sex. His fiction seeks to render the new approaches to sex and to explore the ramifications of this new sexuality. Very often the situations that arise from the new approach to sex are problematic, fraught with embarrassment. Yet there is also a sense of excitement and that new, different and important territory is not only being explored, but carefully mapped. For Australians it was important that this map was of Australia, that they could recognize the country and the city. And even if they were not familiar with Sydney they could still recognize the people, their voices, their houses, their lifestyles and their engagement with some of the assertive practices of the time. Readers could see the new sexuality rendered in Wilding’s fiction and feel that not only were these things going on, but that they were exciting and were being traveled and experienced by others. It somehow made it easier and more desirable to travel there too – these things were going on, you could join in.

The Push’s Libertarian ethos promoted sex as a pleasure to be left untrammeled by softer emotions. In this respect much of the early fiction of Wilding reflects this; there is more fucking than there is love making. The counterculture, whilst having no problem with the idea of sex as pleasure, generally wished to include the idea of love. Love for the counterculture became imbued with all sorts of regenerative and creative powers – for many in the counterculture fucking was fine, but making love was a whole lot better. Love, like sex, was given a tall order to fill: it would end the stifling emotional and psychological sterility of the dominant and usher in a better world where love would create fulfilling relationships, allow communes to run smoothly, stop wars and change the world. “Sex is a temporary thing: sex isn’t love” Bob Dylan pointed out in 1966.92

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“Love was the central tenet of the counterculture” and in this sense the early fiction of Wilding tentatively begins to reflect this.

Whilst many in the counterculture saw themselves as sexually liberated, they were not necessarily promiscuous in the sense of having sex with anyone at anytime. There was still the desire for attachment and stability - there was a sort of monogamy, albeit an open, flexible and often serial monogamy. All of this is, of course, a gross generalization about the counterculture’s approach to sex – there were a variety of approaches, all of which only had in common their turning away from the mores and practices of the dominant. Michael Wilding’s fiction shows an empathy with this aspect of the counterculture. Wilding is still clearly influenced by the thinking of the Push, but there is a clear sense of his trying to explore beyond the sexual parameters laid down by Push philosophy. Certainly there is a great deal of fucking, but there is also an attempt to explore the new situations brought about by the new sexuality – an attempt to explore the ramifications of sex and its impact on relationships. There is an attempt to negotiate the changing times. This move towards a general countercultural empathy extends beyond the timeframe and fiction considered in this thesis, yet its presence is already apparent by the time Scenic Drive is published. After Scenic Drive it becomes more noticeable. As a rule, a book should not be judged by its cover, but what self-respecting thesis about the 60s shouldn’t follow the urge to break the rules? The semiotics of the covers of two of Wilding’s books trace this trajectory from the Push to the counterculture. The front and back cover of Scenic Drive shows four photos of a completely naked woman, breasts and pubic hair clearly on display. The front cover of The Phallic Forest shows a nude man and woman pictured side on, embracing and kissing, their genitals hidden by the embrace. Unlike the stark, revealing black and white photos of Scenic Drive the photo of The Phallic Forest is in colour and the embracing couple is framed by lush natural vegetation. One cover is more redolent of the Push, the other of the counterculture.

As stated at the opening of this chapter, the 60s is still an area of violent contestation with the combatants trying to establish their hold on the present by

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93 Ibid. p.100.
94 Ibid.
interpreting the past. This thesis enters the fray. The 60s changed Western society, they changed Australia and Sydney. An exploration of how and why these changes occurred in Sydney may suggest an explanation for social change. Sex is one of the most important strands in the narrative of the 60s and it is essential to understanding the changes that took place. In its own small way the early fiction of Michael Wilding, with its concentration on sex, was part of this process of change. His fiction interacted with the times and added to the multiplicity of emergent and assertive practices that created a confluence, a juncture whereby the dominant was forced to change. A close reading of Wilding’s Aspects of the Dying Process\textsuperscript{97}, Living Together\textsuperscript{98} and Scenic Drive, with their focus on sex, supports these assertions. Wilding’s The West Midland Underground\textsuperscript{99} and The Short Story Embassy\textsuperscript{100}, though their publication dates coincide with the period under scrutiny, are not considered as the sex in these books is not of central importance. Sex is a central concern in The Phallic Forest, but its publication in 1978 places it beyond the period this thesis wishes to discuss. Additionally, it is to be hoped that the discussion of the three selected books of Wilding’s is more than adequate to substantiate the thesis and that to continue would be to labour a point already well made.

\textsuperscript{100} Michael Wilding, The Short Story Embassy. Wild and Wooley, Glebe, 1975.
CHAPTER 2

Surveying Some Terrain: A Selective Literature Review

“The lesson of the ’60s is that people who cared enough to do right could change history. We didn’t end racism but we ended legal segregation. We ended the idea that you could send half a million soldiers around the world to fight a war that people do not support. We ended the idea that women are second-class citizens. We made the environment an issue that couldn’t be avoided. The big battles that we won cannot be reversed.

We were young, self-righteous, reckless, hypocritical, brave, silly, headstrong and scared half to death. And we were right. Abbie Hoffman.101

“It’s not overstating things to say that there was a kind of madness abroad in the culture in those days, not a whimsical eccentricity but a willful, self-indulgent, nihilistic and destructive madness.” Greg Sheridan.102

“The Age of Rubbish.” Richard Hofstader.103

“It would be difficult to think of a more depressing piece of news, but there you have it: The 1960s are back.” Jonathan Yardley.104

“Nostalgic commemoration of the glories of the 60s or abject public confession of the decade’s many failures and missed opportunities are two errors which cannot be avoided by some middle path that threads its way in between.” Fredric Jameson.105

102 Greg Sheridan, op. cit. p.10 of this thesis.
103 Richard Hofstader quoted in Terry H. Anderson, op. cit. p.XIV
104 Jonathan Yardley quoted in ibid  p. X111.
105 Fredric Jameson, op. cit. p.178.
Writing about the 60s might reasonably be considered something of an industry. Analytical, biographical, autobiographical and narrative treatments of the period are so numerous that reading them all becomes an impossibility. And production shows no sign of abating. See Peter Doggett’s *There’s a Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, Rock Stars and the Rise and Fall of the ’60s Counter-Culture* or Tom Brokaw’s *Boom: Personal Reflections on the ’60s and Today* as examples of some recent additions. Clearly there is still a huge amount of interest in events from forty years ago and for many commentators temperatures still run hot about the 60s, which may partially explain the ongoing proliferation of writing. The 60s has a blame industry and a praise industry. There is even *The ’60s for Dummies*. A detailed historiographical survey would be to add at least several volumes to the ever expanding list. Writing about the 60s is by no means confined to academic and critical accounts: one need only look at the newspapers, watch television, go to the movies, or listen to radio, where without too much time passing there will be something about the 60s. Novelists have also found the 60s to be fertile ground. Very recently there has been a series of novels from well known and accomplished writers: there’s Zachary Lazar’s *Sway*, Peter Carey’s *His Illegal Self*, Tim Winton’s *Breath*, Hari Kunzru’s *My Revolutions* and Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice*.

Of choice and necessity I have limited my survey of the critical work on the 60s. Terry Anderson’s *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* and Todd Gitlin’s *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* have been chosen because of their exhaustive treatment of the 60s, but also because they seem to me to be key texts that treat the period in a generally favourable light. Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and*

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106 Peter Doggett, op. cit.
114 Terry H. Anderson, op. cit.
115 Todd Gitlin, op. cit.
Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students\textsuperscript{116} has been chosen because of the balance it provides, but mainly because it offers the most thoroughgoing indictment of the 60s. As such this chapter spends a deal of time explaining and engaging with the arguments Bloom puts forward. A discussion of Mark Kurlansky’s 1968: The Year That Rocked the World\textsuperscript{117} is included because of its concentration on that iconic year from a world-wide perspective and partly because of the Kurlansky’s popular renown for bringing some focus and insight into unusual areas.\textsuperscript{118} Books that deal with Australia during the 60s are somewhat limited in numbers. Nevertheless, I have still been selective here. Donald Horne’s 1980 book Time of Hope: Australia 1966-72\textsuperscript{119} is an early and important contribution to the study of the 60s in Australia and though written quite some time ago still warrants consideration. Seizures of Youth: The Sixties and Australia by Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett\textsuperscript{120} is another important text which attempts to cover a vast amount of territory, often in ways critical of the 60s: as such it is a text that deserves consideration. The most recent book on Australia in the 60s is Eoin Cameron’s The Sixties.\textsuperscript{121} An account of it is included not because of its recentness or topicality, but as an indulgent pleasure which was gained from savaging the book.

Todd Gitlin’s The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage is a seminal work that is generally sympathetic to the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. It is detailed and exhaustive in the areas it deals with. This is the book’s strength and weakness: it is particularly strong on critically analyzing the role of student political movements, especially the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), whilst being relatively weak on those aspects of the 60s not usually seen as being political. It is strong on the political, weak on the cultural. Nevertheless, there is a great deal about The Sixties to recommend it.

\textsuperscript{118} For example, other areas Kurlansky has explored can be seen in: Salt: A World History and Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World.
\textsuperscript{119} Donald Horne, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{120} Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{121} Eoin Cameron, The Sixties. Freemantle Arts Centre Press, Freemantle, 2004.
Part of the attraction of Gitlin’s book is the broadness and openness of his approach which is “part historical reconstruction, part analysis, part memoir, part criticism, part celebration, part meditation.” Gitlin exhibits “pride” in much of what he recounts about the oppositional 60s, but there is the balancing input of “chagrin” and “embarrassment” to prevent “succumbing to the hallucinatory giddiness of the late Sixties”.122 Such an attempt at a reasoned and balanced treatment from one so close to the political centre of the 60s protest movement is not without the insight and value afforded by such intimate proximity to events, especially since it has been distilled and tempered by the passing of over three decades.

Gitlin is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, a campus synonymous with the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s ever since the Free Speech Movement in the early 60s.123 Gitlin was actively and closely involved with the events of the 60s, especially the New Left. In 1963 he became president of the SDS, organized and protested against the Vietnam War, visited Cuba in 1967, and was in the streets of Chicago for the Democratic Convention in 1968: Gitlin has a very impressive pedigree of leadership and involvement in the oppositional politics of the period. Gitlin’s personal story is emblematic of many in the 60s who moved from reformist politics, from wanting to tinker with the system, to a more thoroughgoing and radical indictment of, and action against, what America appeared to represent.124

Despite such complete immersion in the politics of the time The Sixties is a largely successful attempt at objective analysis, discriminating between the achievements and failures, the realizable hopes and the impossible dreams and excesses of the 60s. For example, when summing up the 60s Gitlin is aware of the successes as well as the limitations: “As an impossible revolution it had failed – how could it have succeeded? – but as an amalgam of reform efforts … it had been a formidable success.”125 For Gitlin the 60s were a deeply flawed, but indispensable period of unprecedented political and cultural activity. “Say what we will about the Sixties’ failures, limits, disasters, America’s political and cultural space would probably not have opened up as much as it

122 Todd Gitlin, op cit. p.4.
125 Ibid. p.433.
did without the movement’s divine delirium…. The changes wrought by the Sixties, however beleaguered, averted some of the worst abuses of power, and made life more decent for millions.”126 That the successes of the 60s were limited and never thoroughgoing is a political and cultural reality that need surprise no one. Gitlin is aware that the possibility of a revolution as envisaged by many activists in the 60s was largely illusory.127 “The idea of a unitary Left destined to save the world because it was born on the side of the angels is grotesque blindness.”128 For all the fervour, idealism and energy of the 60s Gitlin knows that naivete was the other ingredient that was plentiful at the time. But then perhaps all movements for radical change have an element of naivete about them, which is only identified as such when they fall short of something like complete success. If successful, naivete is renamed as something idealistic, courageous and visionary. Whilst not overly sanguine about the legacy of the 60s (it was “an incomplete Reformation”129) Gitlin still feels “the genies that the Sixties loosed are still abroad in the land, inspiring and unsettling and offending, making trouble.”130 The Sixties looks at how those genies came into being, where they came from, and what they did once they got out of the lamp. Whilst doing this Gitlin is aware that no history is ever exclusively definitive, that all history is contingent, “that assessments of the meaning and impact of the past are always provisional, always colored by intervening history.”131 This may be especially true for the 60s, given the heat still generated by that period. “The outcome and meaning of the movements of the Sixties are not treasures to be unearthed with an exultant Aha!, but sand paintings, something provisional, both created and revised in historical time.”132

As with other accounts, Gitlin commences his analysis of the 60s by looking at the 1950s. He succinctly summarises his approach to the 50s, saying it is “a seedbed as well as a cemetery”, a period where some dominant and residual practices faded away

126 Ibid. pp. 435-456. Though from the standpoint of the present one would have to ask if the new century has not already seen its fair share of “abuses of power” in America.
127 Ibid. pp.377-408.
128 Ibid. p.437.
129 Ibid. p.xxii.
130 Ibid. p.xiv. Though, once again, from the standpoint of the present it looks as if some of those genies have been shoved back into the lamp.
131 Ibid. p.xv.
132 Ibid. p.433.
and where some new emergent practices tentatively took root. Part One of The Sixties, titled ‘Affluence and Undertow’, as well as the title of the first two chapters, ‘Cornucopia and its Discontents’ and ‘Underground Channels’, signpost the direction of Gitlin’s analysis. Clearly the 60s did not mysteriously and spontaneously just appear out of nowhere. One “seedbed” point was that amidst the affluence and plenitude of the 50s there were some discontents and in most histories it is commonplace to single out these suspects as being the Beats. The Beats were discontents. This much is true. But, important as they were, they were not the whole picture. Had they been the whole picture they would have faded away like some irrelevant bohemian sideshow. A strength of Gitlin’s approach to the 50s is that he attempts to identify a more comprehensive range of factors that might account for the genesis of the 60s. Unfortunately, Gitlin is not always successful in making the linkage between these discontents and the events of the 60s. For example, he argues that despite the affluence of the 50s, especially when juxtaposed to the Depression and World War Two, many of the middle class felt “insecure” and suffered from “maladjustment”. This is evidenced, he suggests, by such things as noting that while disposable family income rose by 49 percent between 1950 and 1960 life insurance policies rose by more than 200 percent in dollar value. Gitlin also notes that the number of psychiatrists increased sixfold from 1940 to 1964 and, though there is no statistical evidence, concludes that patient numbers must have risen accordingly. These points are interesting, but Gitlin fails to establish the linkage between this “insecurity” and “maladjustment” and the events of the 60s; he fails to explain how these factors could have impacted on those young participants in the 60s. How did the supposed “insecurity” and “maladjustment” turn their children into dissidents? Did the parents’ dissatisfaction manifest itself as an inherent critique of the system, thereby inclining their children to be likewise critical, later actively so? Did it create an environment where the middle class children could sense that not all was so well in their parents’ materialistic world? These are interesting and possible lines of argument that Gitlin doesn’t really explore. Nor does he develop a counter explanation for the increase in life insurance and the numbers of psychiatrists. Namely, that the affluence of the 50s enabled the parents to purchase an insurance against the reoccurrence of the hard times they had experienced

133 Ibid. p.17.
and that visiting the psychiatrist was an indulgence they could now afford and that both these trends were heavily promoted and advertised as yet another desirable component of the affluent life.

Another “seedbed” point, perhaps indicative of ‘discontent with cornucopia’, that Gitlin cites is the reading matter of the 50s. For example, Sloan Wilson’s The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1955) was a best seller about a man who grapples with the conflict of work and family, and who finally realises that success has a negative which is incommensurate with self-fulfilment.\textsuperscript{134} Consensus about the American way of life was also challenged in the intellectual writing of the 50s. Certainly intellectual, oppositional voices were most strident and numerous in the 60s, but to a degree these voices owed a debt to the dissident writing of the 50s. Of the “bestselling Fifties polemics” Gitlin lists David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1950), C. Wright Mills’ White Collar (1951), William H. Whyte’s The Organization Man (1956), C. Wright Mills’ The Power Elite (1956), Robert Lindner’s Must You Conform? (1956), Vance Packard’s The Hidden Persuaders (1957), John Keats’ The Crack in the Picture Window (1957) and The Insolent Chariots (1958) and John Kenneth Galbraith’s The Affluent Society (1958). The individual or cumulative impact of texts like these must have been of some consequence, not only at the time of their publication, but on into the 60s. Yet this is a theme that Gitlin chooses not to pursue. To say the “point is that some critical mass of readers wanted to be warned…. these books were lying on the coffee tables of many a curious adolescent”\textsuperscript{135} falls far short of analyzing the impact of these texts on the 50s and 60s. Nevertheless, the point is made that these texts were in circulation and that there was in existence a broad body of thought that indicted aspects of 50s America, thereby providing a foundation and springboard for the ideas that developed, mutated and spread in the 60s. Indeed, many of the families that would have had these books in the 50s, indeed the types of families that had coffee tables, were, stereotypically or not, the type of white middle class families whose children went on to the universities, wrote the Port Huron Statement, protested the Vietnam War and joined the counterculture. It is a pity that solid texts, like The Sixties, fail to explore the nexus between texts and the society that produces them, and the society

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.p.18.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.p.19.
that is in turn influenced by them. What the impact of such texts was on the 50s and 60s would, admittedly, be impossible to categorically quantify, but this should not preclude more thoughtful and suggestive hypotheses.

The supposed dangers of communism and the threat of nuclear annihilation were other factors that unsettled the complacency of the 50s. “Popular culture and politics ran rife with foreboding.”\textsuperscript{136} The communist threat to the American way of life, however, may have had a greater effect on creating the dissident youth of the 60s by not the supposed threat per se, but by the way American politics responded with irrational paranoia and the extremes of McCarthyism. The ominousness of the Cold War was greatly exacerbated by the pervasive threat of nuclear war. “The Bomb was the shadow hanging over all human endeavor.”\textsuperscript{137} These dual threats of communism and the bomb served to put in the minds of many of the young people growing up in the 50s that all was far from perfect in booming post war America.

It is here that Gitlin puts forward an interesting argument. In the 50s there were no real alternatives put forward by the left, and it was ironically this dearth that favourably impacted on the creation of oppositional forces in the 60s. “The Old Left had been shattered by McCarthyism, the Cold War, the postwar consensus, and its own moral obtuseness vis-a-vis the Soviet Union”.\textsuperscript{138} There was also the appeal of the rewards of conformity in such a prosperous time, especially when non-conformity could cost so much. When there was a burgeoning of activity on the left in the 60s, it was the New Left, which “when it erupted, insisted that above all it was new, tailored to a new time, exempt from the vices that afflicted the various factions of the Old Left.” For the New Left it was a “self-flattering idea of a virgin birth”.\textsuperscript{139} Of course, outside of some religious circles, ideas of virgin births and immaculate conceptions can be a little contentious, and Gitlin is aware of this. “But the heady truth in this image of self-creation also concealed continuities. The movers and shakers of the Sixties did not invent a new political culture from scratch.”\textsuperscript{140} There were continuities with the past and many members of the New Left came out of families with left wing and communist affiliations:

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.p.22.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.p.23.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.p.27.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
many so-called “red diaper babies” became actively involved in oppositional politics in the 60s.\textsuperscript{141} Nevertheless, the fact that they believed they were new would provide them with a huge amount of freedom and energy.

Gitlin continues, arguing that with “left-wing politics in a state of collapse, most of these oppositional spaces were cultural – ways of living, thinking, and fighting oneself free of the affluent consensus.”\textsuperscript{142} A lot of these spaces were taken up by groups who were apolitical or antipolitical, yet they still provided models of opposition that could encourage, or provide an imprimatur of sorts, to the numerically stronger emerging countercultural practices of the ensuing decade.

This scenario of a 50s largely devoid of effective oppositional forces ironically giving impetus to those very forces in the 60s is one that resonates in Australia, where the Menzies era was replaced by a 60s that was starkly different. This broadly outlined scenario is all the more attractive because it begins to account for the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s in countries apart from the United States (such as Australia) where the civil rights movement did not exist. This is not to say that Gitlin ignores the integral role of the civil rights movement (in fact he discusses it at length later in the book), but to show that he is acutely aware that the 60s was a far more complex creation than the linear cause and effect of civil rights begets the oppositional 60s.

Gitlin, like other analysts of the 60s, sees the Beats as the most visible and effective force in opposition to the dominant values of the 50s. Again there are useful parallels in Gitlin’s treatment of the Beats and events in Australia, especially in Sydney with the Push. Overall, Gitlin has nothing new to say about the Beats, but the value in his treatment is how he places them as precursors, exemplars and catalysts for the 60s. Covering familiar Beat territory Gitlin describes them as “hostile to the postwar bargain of workaday routine in exchange for material acquisition, they devoted themselves to principled poverty, indulged their taste for sexual libertinism, and looked eastward for enlightenment.”\textsuperscript{143} The consensus of post war America was anathema to the Beats and they rejected the dominant’s attitude to work, family, sex, dress, public behaviour and

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. pp.66-77, 84.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.p.28.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.p.28.
language, and any other of the mainstream tenets held by 1950s America.\textsuperscript{144} The Beats did, however, hold some things to be of value and importance, and sex was one these. “Real life was sexual…. This was the area of ultimate adventure, where you would dare or not dare”, said Joyce Johnston, whose affair with Jack Kerouac gives the comment an added element of veracity.\textsuperscript{145} Inherent in the comment is the notion that “real life” was not that of an artificial, mainstream America and that sex was a very significant act of adventure and daring. Sex was a transgressive act that was an integral part of the emergent practices of the Beats. And this transgressive act, although subject to changing perceptions and significance, continued to be a key component of the assertive practices in the 60s.

None of this is to suggest that the Beats were even remotely interested in changing mainstream America. Beat distaste for the dominant, rather than galvanizing reformist or revolutionary endeavours, manifested itself in efforts to ignore and elude that society. They “didn’t want to change society so much as sidestep it.”\textsuperscript{146} Gitlin points out that this lack of interest in altering mainstream America was not without important exceptions. For example, there had always been a political dimension to some of Ginsberg’s poetry, such as when he decried the role of Moloch in Howl, or in America where he found America unworthy of its Trotskyites and expressed no regrets at having been a communist.\textsuperscript{147} More importantly was the ability of some of the central figures in the Beat movement to segue very comfortably into the political and countercultural 60s. Gitlin cites Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti as prime examples.\textsuperscript{148} And there are numerous other examples: think of Neal Cassady who drove the bus, called Furthur, with Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters across America and back.\textsuperscript{149} It is a little strange then that Gitlin says that by the late 50s and early 60s “as a cultural insurgency the beat scene was finished.”\textsuperscript{150} Certainly the Beat movement had

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\item[\textsuperscript{144}] Ibid.p.46.
\item[\textsuperscript{145}] Ibid.p.48.
\item[\textsuperscript{146}] Ibid.p.51.
\item[\textsuperscript{148}] Todd Gitlin, op.cit. p.51.
\item[\textsuperscript{149}] Tom Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. Bantam Books, New York, 1972, is probably the best known account of the journey. It is an account that highlights just how well a Beat and members of the counterculture could get on together and what attitudes and approaches they had in common.
\item[\textsuperscript{150}] Todd Gitlin, op. cit. p.53.
\end{itemize}
been widely publicized and commodified, but this of itself need not suggest that its influence had completely dissipated. Gitlin’s view ignores the appropriation of ideas and attitudes that took place during the 60s, how the iconography of the Beats functioned as a template, or at least an introduction, for the possibility of an oppositional force. Commodification, commercialisation’s supposedly effective method of diffusing oppositional forces, may have been of unwitting assistance here. Commodification could serve to spread Beat attitudes and approaches, even if it was only the Beat paraphernalia of dress and appearance that was the first alluring entree for those growing up in the 50s and early 60s. The appropriation of an emergent culture’s dress and appearance may very often just be superficial posturing or empty trendiness. But this may not always be the case. Some may sense an affinity and are drawn there for support and validation. It is also just possible that a person may start out affecting the appearance and dress of the Beats, and to then find themselves in the company of others like them, some of whom might speak, and even think, like Beats. Then the next thing you know, that person is taking on the ideas and attitudes of the Beats. The dominant might deprive the Beats of their authenticity, but not necessarily their efficacy to be seen by many of the young as an attractive and viable alternative to mainstream society. Besides, it is a little hard to imagine the likes of Ginsberg, Snyder, Ferlinghetti and Cassady having no significant impact as they maintained their high profiles on into the 60s.

When Gitlin attempts to show how the ethos of the Beats spread, his case is underdeveloped and a little unconvincing. What “happened in the mid-Fifties is that the normal teenage culture borrowed the mystique of the subterraneans in order to express its own uneasy and ambivalent relation to the society of parents.” Then later these “shallower channels of the Fifties’ teenage culture marked the territory for the far larger youth upheaval of the late Sixties.”151 It is not that these suggestions are wrong, but rather that they are left unexplored and undeveloped. Gitlin is right to say the Beats profoundly impacted on the 60s, but he needs, however tentatively, to explore the possible mechanisms whereby this took place. What aspects of Beat lifestyle and ideas were appropriated by the youth in the late 50s and early 60s? Why did these things prove attractive? How were they transmitted and taken up? How were they transmuted in the

151 Ibid.p.29.
60s? If an account of the genesis and nature of the 60s is to be thorough, then questions such as these need to be explicitly addressed in greater detail. Perhaps Gitlin’s treatment is a result, as suggested at the outset of this discussion of The Sixties, of his being more interested in the political than the cultural. With regards to this thesis interest in the Beats is of importance; there are numerous similarities (and significant differences) between the Beats of America and the Push of Sydney.

The real focus and strength of The Sixties is Gitlin’s treatment of the oppositional politics of the time. His treatment is exhaustive and he provides what is probably the most detailed analysis of the New Left and the SDS. Gitlin traces the rise of the New Left, providing a detailed account of all its main activities. He delves into the minutiae of the workings, the successes and failures of this oppositional politics. The vast majority of The Sixties is given over to this treatment and whilst a lot of this is a narrative of what happened there is still a lot of critical analysis. Gitlin’s involvement in the SDS renders that treatment especially insightful and detailed: it is an involvement that has not blinkered Gitlin to the mistakes and limitations of that movement. All the salient political events are dealt with in detail: the civil rights movement; the Port Huron Statement; the Free Speech Movement; organizing against the Vietnam War; and the various political conventions, including Chicago in 1968. It is this sort of politics that Gitlin is most comfortable with.

Such politics were undeniably critical to the oppositional forces of the 60s, giving focus, impetus and support to the emergent and assertive practices of the time: they broadly defined what was wrong, what had to be changed, and the targets ranged from the very specific to, later on, a general indictment of the American way of life. However, it is generally a sort of politics that is similar to the politics of the establishment mainstream. It is a politics of organizations, of negotiating, maneuvering, applying pressures in order to win concessions, a politics of playing the system in order to alter it. Such a politics tends to exclude much that is not traditionally seen as political, and as such it tends to marginalize a lot of what the counterculture was about. It tends to relegate to a position of less importance the countercultural insistence that lifestyle and culture have a political dimension, and that living a different lifestyle and being a part of a different culture could, given a numerical strength, alter the way society was run.
Gitlin is not unaware that there was a conflation between lifestyle and politics. It is just not the main concern of The Sixties. However, when Gitlin does touch on the confluence of lifestyle and politics he shows that he is indeed alert to its significance, and what he has to say is interesting, albeit not strikingly new. Gitlin notes how in 1965 the then SDS president Paul Potter in his ‘Name the System Speech’ urged people to “change your life, ‘build a movement.’”152 By 1967, according to Gitlin, the “main battalions of the counterculture” believed you could “change consciousness, change life!” Ultimately, many believed you could “change the world by changing your life!” Gitlin identifies “a direct line from the expressive politics of the New Left to the counterculture’s let-it-all-hang-out way of life.” And by the ‘Summer of Love’ in 1967 “many were the radicals and cultural revolutionaries in search of convergence, trying to nudge the New Left and the counterculture together, to imagine them as yin and yang of the same epochal transformation.”153 There was belief in a “grand fusion between radical politics and counterculture – drugs, sex, rock ‘n’ roll, smash the state.”154 These are important generalizations that clearly indicate Gitlin’s awareness of the widespread belief in a symbiosis of politics and lifestyle. He is even aware of the possible process by which this belief may have occurred. The movement began altruistically, seeking to help others, like the black Americans, the Cubans and the Vietnamese. The movement then began to act for itself, with people seeking to take control of their own lives, attempting to alter and shape the society in which they were to live. This “search for a confluence was like the search for a Holy Grail.”155 Perhaps it is because finding the Holy Grail proved to be so elusive Gitlin chooses not to explore fully the possible nexus of radical politics and emergent lifestyles. This ignores what could be achieved in the process of searching, irrespective of whether or not some grail is found. Indeed, many would stridently argue that in the 60s, with the ‘personal being the political’, any differentiating between lifestyles and politics is not only artificial, but ignoring the cultural reality of the time.

Sex is one of the central themes of the 60s. Gitlin’s index indicates that he deals with sex on thirty three pages. The index also says he deals with the SDS on over two

152 Ibid.p.184.
154 Ibid.p.287.
hundred pages. It’s that kind of book. Yet even within the ranks of the SDS Gitlin is aware of the pivotal position held by sex. As early as 1962 Gitlin had been told, “The movement hangs together on the head of a penis.” Precise anatomical meaning aside the import of the comment is precisely clear: sex was an acknowledged and integral component to the goings on within the SDS. It was this phallocentric sex that produced an environment where the “sexual intensity matched the political and intellectual”. SDS meetings were places where the sexual norms of the dominant were ignored and where the “sex was less motive than cement” in a group “whose bonds were intellectual and moral, political and sexual at once.” Gitlin began to understand “the sense of possibility which sex can stand for.” Clearly, part of the reason behind the centrality of sex is it “was the decade of the Pill, after all; we were young; the so-called sexual revolution was not simply media hype.”

What isn’t so clear is how Gitlin can make such statements as those above, yet fail to fully explore their implications.

Gitlin’s treatment of rock and roll, another frame of the best known triptych about the 60s, is similarly less than completely satisfactory. At times Gitlin sees rock and roll as a catalyst for change, as contributing to the emergent and assertive practices of the times. He opens ‘Part Three: The Surge’ with a two page discussion of the 1965 hit single ‘Eve of Destruction’ by Barry McGuire. In the opening sentence Gitlin says, “Nothing put the category youth on my own political map more resoundingly than a song called ‘Eve of Destruction.’” The song critiques the state of the world with its violence, inequalities and hypocrisies; it appeals directly to the idealism and the sense of injustice and urgency of the young. Gitlin’s opening sentence suggests the song had agency, that it was a factor in forming his worldview. It helped set his agenda. However, Gitlin doesn’t go much further in his treatment of the possible contribution of rock and roll. He makes repeated reference to many of the groups and artists of the 60s: The Beatles, The Byrds, The Doors, The Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones et cetera. He knows that music was a key component of the 60s, but doesn’t fully explore the possibility that it could have functioned as a liberating and radicalising force.

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157 Ibid.p.195.
The Sixties goes on to provide detailed treatment of 1968, the year foremost in people’s imagining of the 60s, including a close look at the Democratic Convention in Chicago. Gitlin spends time describing how liberalism was, as Tom Hayden described it, “decapitated” with the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy and the effect these deaths had on young idealistic Americans. Gitlin devotes a deal of time to the rise of the women’s movement in the chapter titled ‘Women: Revolution in the Revolution” and is especially insightful about their position and evolution within the SDS. Concluding chapters deal with the end of the 60s, while the final chapter provides an overview of what Gitlin sees as the legacy of the 60s. The Sixties is a large book, running to over 500 pages, and despite the reservations made in this review it still stands as one of the best accounts of the 60s in America. The terrain that Gitlin elects to survey is vast and varied and his treatment is exhaustive. There isn’t much about that decade in America that the book doesn’t deal with. His assessment of the 60s is largely a positive one, though not one blind to the faults and failures of those years. As an insightful and analytical treatment of the 60s The Sixties is a seminal general text.

Terry H. Anderson’s The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee is an important contribution to understanding the 60s. Though his sole focus is the United States, Anderson’s task is still a huge one; as he says at the conclusion of his book, this “history is about social activism”, and the scope is from the 1960 sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, to 1973 at Wounded Knee in South Dakota. That’s a lot of “social activism” to cover; a task not made any less wide-ranging by Anderson wanting to explore the “kaleidoscope of activity” undertaken by the “movement”. Anderson’s approach is to be all inclusive, defining the movement as that which “connotes all activists who demonstrated for social change. Anyone could participate. There were no membership cards. Activists usually appeared at the protest

158 Ibid. Chapters 12 and 14.
159 Ibid. Chapter 13.
160 Ibid. Chapter 16.
161 Ibid. Chapters 17, 18 and 19.
162 Terry H. Anderson, op. cit.
163 Ibid. p425.
because they held similar positions on an issue.” At this stage Anderson’s scope risks becoming too general, to the point that it is a vague and nebulous concept that can include any sort of activity. Fire bombing black churches at the height of the civil rights movement could be part of the “kaleidoscope” of “social activism”, though this is clearly not something Anderson would wish to see included. Strictly and precisely defining the movement, or the counterculture, is a sort minefield, an occupational dilemma for those studying the 60s, and, as discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis, it is one that is difficult to avoid or comprehensively solve. It’s a tightrope act that tries precariously to get the right balance between including some and excluding others. Anderson tightens his definition: “Movement, then, was an amorphous term that changed throughout the decade, but nevertheless there were some common aspects about it and its participants. Activists questioned the status quo, usually feeling it was unjust, and then they responded…. the movement rejected what they considered was a flawed establishment.” Finding fault with the status quo and responding to it by either protest, or the “‘the great refusal,’ repudiating the values and morals of the older generation”, goes some way towards a more discerning definition, though it would be a shame if it were still possible to include, say, Charles Manson and The Family. At the risk of being restrictive and limiting it may sometimes be useful to spell out what the movement does not include. However, it must be admitted, no definition of the movement (or the counterculture) can be hermetic.

The advantage, as Anderson sees it, of working with this broad, fluid definition of the movement lies in enabling him to challenge previous histories which stressed leaders, ideologies and organizations. Anderson sees previous accounts as valuable, but limited in that they concentrated on leaders, like Tom Hayden or Abbie Hoffman, or ideologies, like that of the New Left, or organizations, like the SDS or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. There is also a tendency for other histories to focus on certain flashpoints, like Berkeley 1964 or Chicago 1968, to the detriment of analyzing the processes that brought them about.

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164 Ibid. pxv.
165 Ibid. p.vvi.
166 Ibid. p.xviii.
Anderson is correct when he identifies the need for a broad umbrella term that encompasses the diverse numbers of individuals and groups who were heading in roughly the same direction, though often travelling by different routes. What you opposed, what you were for, and your general trajectory were important features of membership. However, there are some reservations about Anderson’s use and definition of the term movement. Use of the term movement to designate the diverse anti-establishment groups of the 60s is commonplace enough, yet the term has connotations of belonging to a coherent, organized group whose concerns and modus operandi were most often in the political arena. The movement often used the techniques of the establishment (protests, marches, involvement in establishment politics, legal actions) in order to change some part of the establishment. Whilst this is an integral aspect of the 60s it also excludes that other integral aspect which chose not to belong to any organized process and to which using the techniques of the establishment was anathema. Not that a person needed to be compartmentalized in one group or another; you could be a hippie living on a commune and participate in the local council. Nor is the term “movement” completely inappropriate, just that it does seem a little ill fitting at times; whereas counterculture seems tailored to include a greater variety of what was going on in the 60s. Indeed, much of Anderson’s The Movement does end up being concerned with the political aspects of the 60s that employed the techniques of the establishment in order to change it. Yet with regard to the 60s it would appear be somewhat limiting to attempt to separate the political from those actions of the counterculture not normally viewed as political. In a time when the personal was political, wearing long hair or making love could be seen as political acts; the difference is these aren’t seen as the techniques of the establishment. When Anderson does deal with the counterculture it is in a separate chapter¹⁶⁷, as if it were some different, discrete component that requires a separate treatment, a smaller part of the bigger, more important political events taking place. When explaining the counterculture he says it “must be defined broadly. The movement developed as a counter to the political establishment: the counterculture was a counter to the dominant cold war culture.” The “counterculture included everyone, excluded no one” and there

were “no membership cards… no meetings, no age limits”. Such a definition sounds remarkably like the one he put forward for the movement.\textsuperscript{168}

Predictably and appropriately Anderson begins his account of the 60s by looking at the 1950s and the dominant Cold War culture. After the Depression and World War Two “the good life in the 1950s ultimately meant security.”\textsuperscript{169} It was a time of post war affluence, growing material comfort and job security. It was also a time where security meant being safe from the outside forces that sought to end the now prosperous, capitalist, democratic way of life. If there was a price to be paid then the 50s juxtaposition to the horrors of World War Two made most people only too happy to pay. And as it was in America, so it was in Australia.

In both America and Australia views of the 50s acknowledge the positives of that decade which stand in stark contrast to the war years. However, in both countries the 50s is largely perceived to be a decade of stultifying conformity in all areas of lived experience – it was a time when emergent and assertive practices, where and if they even existed, needed to lie very low or exist in enclaves under tolerant, if critical, eyes. “The message was clear: fit in, be part of the team. Most citizens embraced the eventual result – a culture of consensus and conformity, one which aimed to uphold the status quo.”\textsuperscript{170}

Attitudes to sex and gender roles reflected and reinforced the dominant culture of the 50s. “America embraced the traditional role”\textsuperscript{171} and few, if any, questioned the straight-jacketing such stereotyping brought. The husband was in charge, he went to work, he earnt the money, and as head of the family he expected his wife to keep the house, bring up the children and have dinner and a drink ready for him when he got home. While women were restricted to the home, men, though their cells were bigger and maybe nicer, were still prisoners. “Men had responsibilities, and they dutifully marched to their anointed role. As one recalled: ‘Those of us who came of age in the fifties had no choice. You had to be a husband, a provider, and a success!’”\textsuperscript{172} On television Americans watched I Love Lucy, Leave it to Beaver, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet and

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid. p.244.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid. p.15.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid. p.16.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid. p.21.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid. p.21.
Father Knows Best (and so did Australians after 1956), all programs that reinforced and perpetuated the stereotypes of the cultural dominant. During this time sexual relationships were to be heterosexual, monogamous and within marriage. Before marriage good girls said no, and those who said yes were clearly sluts. “This moral code was supported by the vast majority of Americans.” It was no different in Australia.

Rock and roll is often seen as disrupting the moral tone of the 50s. The usual account argues that the very beat and volume of rock and roll embodied the rhythm of sex, a sex breaking free of societal restraints. Anderson is astute enough here to not succumb to this neat simplification. As elsewhere in The Movement Anderson’s argument is nuanced to recognise that the early sound of rock and roll may have been innovative, yet the lyrics of early rock and roll functioned to reinforce the status quo: young people, those who just wanted to have fun, could ‘Rock Around the Clock’ or do ‘The Twist’, whilst in the majority of songs young people were looking for true love with that special, right person. Neil Sedaka could warn them that ‘Breaking Up is Hard to Do’, Elvis could plead for his girl to ‘Love Me Tender’ and The Beatles ‘Love Me Do’... and if Cupid’s aim was true then the young man and woman would end up in the ‘Chapel of Love.’ The majority of rock and roll from the late 50s and early 60s, Anderson suggests, spoke of having good, clean fun and of romantic, heterosexual love culminating in blissful marriage – all values sanctioned and fostered by the dominant. However, though Anderson’s point about how early rock and roll reinforced the dominant is interesting and has a degree of validity, it may not have had that effect on everyone. Jerry Rubin, for example, speaking about the 1950s said that “Elvis Presley killed Ike Eisenhower” and that youthful rebellion “sprang, a pre-destined pissed-off child, from Elvis’ gyrating pelvis.” And when Rubin lists some of the music he and others were listening to, it’s hard not to see the disruptive potential: Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bill Haley and the Comets, Little Richard.

Of course, any view of rock and roll being a benign force could not be maintained further along into the 60s. At the outset Elvis may not have been allowed to be filmed
from below the waist lest some primal forces should be unleashed by that thrusting pelvis. But such futile censorship could not stop the disruptive and assertive force that rock and roll was to be as it became installed in the countercultural triumvirate alongside sex and drugs. Images of the music, along with the hair, the clothes, the drugs and the sex, are integral to most cultural perceptions of the 60s. Yet Anderson chooses to not provide any detailed consideration of these components, as if they represent the more frivolous manifestations, the loud and gaudy attire that could eclipse the more serious body of work that is the 60s. This is a mistake. With the music, for example, Anderson makes numerous references (the index lists just under one hundred!), but the references are glancing and the analysis non-existent, as if it was just a series of catchy tunes providing the soundtrack to the decade. For Anderson music is reflective of the events and moods of the time and there is no consideration of it being productive of the period, no consideration of the validating, energising and proselytising role music played. With Bob Dylan, for example, Anderson notes the content and popularity of some of the songs from the album *Freewheelin*’: “The album featured the first popular protest song about the military-industrial complex, ‘Masters of War’.”\(^{178}\) There is no analysis beyond this observation, no attempt to suggest a possible nexus between the production of 60s music and the emergent and assertive practices of the time. This is at odds not only with common perceptions of the 60s, but also with the views of many historians. Timothy Miller argues that rock and roll “influenced the feelings and behavior of its devotees” and was “pivotal to the generational rebellion…. Rock fueled the cultural revolution.”\(^{179}\) Suze Rotolo notes in her account of her time with Dylan: “Upharaval was inevitable. Talk made music, and music made talk.”\(^{180}\) It’s a connection Anderson never explores. Even when looking at 1967 and saying, “More than ever, the music was becoming the message”, Anderson still doesn’t investigate the possibility that such cultural production could have contributed to the impetus of the assertive practices. Anderson can quote a hippie who argued that “Rock music is responsible more than any other factor in spreading the good

\(^{178}\) Terry Anderson, op. cit. p.94.

\(^{179}\) Timothy Miller, op. cit. pp.73 and 75.

news”, yet fail to look at the possibilities such a comment suggests.\textsuperscript{181} Perhaps it may be impossible to categorically establish a direct causal link between music and the broader spectrum of countercultural activities, and even between literature and the promotion of changes sought by the counterculture, but that should not result in an academic timidity that refuses to explore and hypothesise.

Also central to the iconography of the 60s are the festivals, like Monterey and especially Woodstock, yet these too only merit a passing reference in The Movement.\textsuperscript{182} Clearly Anderson is not greatly concerned with the cultural manifestations of the 60s. His treatment is chronological and descriptive, rather than analytical, in that he is reluctant to venture into the admittedly problematic area of analyzing the emergent and assertive cultural practices. Anderson is a lot more concerned with the narrative than the formative forces behind it.

During much of the closing years of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and the opening ones of the 21\textsuperscript{st} the political climate in the United States led many conservatives to question the view that the 1950s had been a time of stultifying conformity.\textsuperscript{183} They may not have seen the 50s as being halcyon, but it was viewed as a period of satisfying social stability with the cornerstone being the stereotypical nuclear family. For these people the social structure and moral values of the 50s needed to be reasserted. Anderson points out that the accuracy of either view about the 50s was largely academic, if not irrelevant, to the activists of the time. “What needs to be emphasized here is not the historical debate on the 1950s – but the future activist’s perception of that decade” and their perception was one of “conformity and consensus, rules and regulations”.\textsuperscript{184} And it is clear that even during the 50s not everyone was quiescent and accepting of the dominant culture. While Anderson notes the importance of the Beats he devotes very little space to considering their role (less than two pages in a text of over four hundred). Anderson says, “Life to the

\textsuperscript{181} Terry Anderson, op. cit. p.245.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid. pp.277-278. Of Woodstock Anderson says, “In a vague way, most leaving the rainy festival felt warm, and they sang along with Joni Mitchell, ‘We are stardust/We are golden/And we got to get ourselves/Back to the garden.’” Not that Anderson meant people were literally singing along with, and in the presence of, Joni Mitchell, but it is an interesting sidenote that Joni Mitchell’s quintessential song was written by her despite the fact that she was unable to make it to the festival. SBS television program Joni Mitchell October 24, 2003.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid. p.32.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
beats was not the complacent suburbs, the organization man, the silent generation, for these young men wore black, grew beards, talked lingo, and frantically hitchhiked around the nation, smoking marijuana, reading poetry, having orgies.”\textsuperscript{185} Anderson would seem to be fully aware of the oppositional potential of the Beats: “As they opted out of contemporary society they viciously attacked cold war culture…. Beats ridiculed society; they dented the chrome 1950s. They provided a style of rebellion that lent momentum to the idea that a person could question and reject society.”\textsuperscript{186} This is a pretty big claim: denting the 50s and giving impetus to the questioning and rejecting of the dominant. Yet Anderson’s final comment on the Beats is anti-climactic: “They probably influenced some future activists”.\textsuperscript{187} This is to consign the role of the Beats to being some sort of iconoclastic curiosity, an interesting, but largely insignificant sideshow. The Beats did not create the 60s, but their impact stretched beyond influencing “some future activists”. The very existence of the Beats and the high public profile the media gave them established the point in many young people’s minds that cultural opposition to the dominant was not only possible, but also very cool. The Beats offered a seductive template with iconoclastic manifestations ranging from hair and dress to art, sexuality and philosophy: they showed that there was a completely different way of living. Nor did the Beats become extinct with the rise of the counterculture. Rather their influence and presence segued very nicely into the counterculture.\textsuperscript{188} As mentioned above, one need only think of the ongoing influence of Beats such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady on 60s icons such as Bob Dylan and Ken Kesey.\textsuperscript{189} Similarly Gerry Garcia, leader of the rock group ‘The Grateful Dead’ and one of the central figures of the counterculture, owed a great deal to the Beats.\textsuperscript{190} Nor was Ginsberg an anachronistic irrelevancy when he visited Australia in 1973: Ginsberg could

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid. p.36.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{188} Todd Gitlin, op. cit. pp. 45-56.
\textsuperscript{189} See, for example, D. A. Pennebaker’s film \textit{Don’t Look Back} 65 Tour Deluxe Edition, which also includes the ‘flipbook’ which provides the frame by frame cue card sequence for Dylan’s ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’ where Ginsberg displays a series of cards. See also Tom Wolfe, op. cit. for the relationship between Kerouac, Cassady and Kesey.
sit on the lawn outside the University of New South Wales library and read William Blake and chant “OM” to a large, appreciative and sympathetic crowd of students.¹⁹¹

Anderson attempts to place a construct over the 60s and he breaks the period into “two waves”. He sees the first wave as the rapidly crescendoing period of 1960 to 1968, while the second wave crests and ultimately spends itself from 1968 to the early 1970s.¹⁹² The first wave was made up of children of the 1950s who were born in the late 1930s and early 40s. “They usually were intellectual, idealistic, and ideological.” It was this wave that criticised the status quo and began to drag America out of the 50s. The second wave was made up of baby boomers who attended college from the mid 60s, graduating after 1968. The first wave organised and wrote platforms, seeking to right the wrongs of an America that could still realise its dream. The second wave moved beyond this towards “empowerment and liberation”. The second wave was more strident in its indictments of America, “plunging into a sea of counterculture, attempting to bring about a New America.”¹⁹³

There is always the desire to try to impose some theoretical order over any huge and varied phenomenon and there is much in Anderson’s attempt to do this. Certainly, the early part of the 60s differed to the closing years and it is relatively easy to differentiate between those early years where protest took a more traditional political form and the later years which were more alternative and countercultural. Yet there is always the danger that such theories create an artificial rigidity that denies the fluidity, diversity and constant flux that constituted the 60s. Anderson’s theory also risks compartmentalizing the 60s when perhaps there is more to be gained in seeing it as a single phenomenon, a continuum that develops and mutates. In addition there was much overlapping between the two waves. For example, Anderson describes an anti-Vietnam demonstration in San Francisco in 1965, a time that firmly places it within Anderson’s first wave. Ken Kesey, countercultural icon and author of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, addressed the crowd at the protest. Along with Kesey there also appeared the black comedian Dick Gregory and Zen Buddhist scholar and elder spokesman of the counterculture, Alan Gregory and Zen Buddhist scholar and elder spokesman of the counterculture, Alan

¹⁹¹ The author was a student and present at the time. Ginsberg’s reading and chanting was reflective of countercultural interest in the visionary, the mystical and Eastern religion.
¹⁹² Terry Anderson, op.cit. p.xi.
¹⁹³ Ibid. pp.xvii-xviii.
Watts. Country Joe McDonald sang his anthemic ‘Fixin’-to-Die-Rag’. Allen Ginsberg played cymbals and chanted. Lawrence Ferlinghetti read Beat poetry. When Kesey arrived (stoned) it was with the Merry Pranksters in their psychedelic painted bus called Further. The Merry Pranksters were an intentionally outrageous and provocative group, completely iconoclastic, who toured the country promoting ‘acid tests’. Kesey and the Pranksters were what Abbie Hoffman would have called cultural revolutionaries. When Kesey took the stage he intermittently played ‘Home on the Range’ on his harmonica, before advising the crowd what to do about the war: “‘There’s only one thing to do… and that’s everybody just look at it, look at the war, and turn your backs and say… fuck it.’”

The episode highlights one of the difficulties associated with Anderson’s two wave theory. The events with Kesey and the others are redolent of Anderson’s second wave, not the first wave where 1965 places it. The episode suggests Anderson’s demarcation to be problematic at times and that it needs to be approached with flexibility and seen for the broad generalisation that it is.

Just as Anderson’s treatment of rock and roll is found to be a little wanting, so too is his treatment of sex. Certainly, he acknowledges the importance of the sexual revolution, but fails to really do this beyond making some generalized statements. A majority of young people “attempted to liberate themselves from the older generation’s sexual mores” whilst “freaks expanded the idea so sex seemed freer than at any time in memory.” Comments such as these are made and left to stand largely on their own without any exploration as to what the implications and consequences of such changes in sexual mores could mean. Anderson quotes the White Panther Party’s aim to destroy mainstream American culture “by any means necessary, including rock and roll, dope, and fucking in the streets”, but refuses to explore what is meant by “fucking in the streets”, what it symbolizes and what were its effects, if any.

Despite reservations, such as those above, Anderson’s The Movement, is still a balanced, thorough, and generally sympathetic treatment of much of the 60s in the United States. He is extremely thorough on the political character of the movement and the breadth and variety of the sources he employs is quite remarkable. Whilst not as an

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194 Ibid. p.142.
195 Ibid. p.260.
196 Ibid. p.274.
impressive text as Todd Gitlin’s The Sixties there is still a great deal to Anderson’s work that recommends it as a means for gaining a broad understanding of the 60s.

Mark Kurlansky is a popular writer known for picking somewhat esoteric topics and writing books about them. He is the successful author of Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World, The Basque History of the World, and Salt: A World History. One might then expect an interesting, different take on the 60s when such an author writes 1968: The Year That Rocked the World. And indeed the book does have much that is interesting, but ultimately it is somewhat disappointing.

From the outset Kurlansky makes his attitude to the 60s clear, when in the dedication he says: “To my beautiful Talia Feiga; so that she will know truth from lies, love life, hate war, and always believe she can change the world.” Then the last sentence of his acknowledgements: “And to everyone who said ‘No!’ and most especially all those who are still saying it.”

So it is very early on that Kurlansky nails his colours to the mast, clearly stating his belief in the positive nature of the project of the 60s. In the dedication he tacitly identifies the thematic tenets of the era, pointing out its idealistic, humanist aims and the nexus of these aims with a grand design to change the world. The quote from the acknowledgement clearly identifies the anti-establishment 60s theme of refusal and how the irony of ‘no’ being such a positive still resonates today.

Clearly Kurlansky’s treatment is to be a positive one, yet he never surrenders to a nostalgic romanticization, and though he has heroes (Robert Kennedy, for example) he stops short of apotheosizing them. However, what is most admirable about Kurlansky’s book is the enormity of the task he takes on. Most histories of the 60s are centred on the United States, with scant attention, if any, paid to other countries. Though to be fair Paris, 1968, often rates a mention. 1968 was certainly the year of Chicago and Berkeley and the year of the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, but it is important
to be reminded that it was also the year of Paris, Warsaw, Prague and Mexico City and that people like Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Alexander Dubcek were important players in the events of that year. Given the global dominance of American culture, an aspect of which is the output of American writers and academics, it is essential to have perspectives that enable us to interpret the 60s as something that was not solely an American phenomenon. This is possibly even more important in a relatively small country like Australia where the number of books that critically analyse the 60s is very limited indeed. This is a pity as there is a real need for us to have our own histories of that time.

Kurlansky limits the parameters of his work by concentrating on the year that is seen as the acme and symbol of what the 60s in general stood for. Kurlansky is acutely aware that there were years before and after, and that these years respectively generated and responded to 1968. “In history it is always imprecise to attribute fundamental shifts to one exact moment. There was a 1967 and 1969 and all the earlier years that made 1968 what it was. But 1968 was the epicenter of a shift, of a fundamental change, the birth of our postmodern media-driven world.”

So whilst the focus of Kurlansky’s book may be the watershed year of 1968 what he has to say can be applied to the 60s in general. It is a ploy that makes the breadth of Kurlansky’s task a little more manageable.

Kurlansky is good in his treatment of Europe and though he of course treats France, he also looks at events in Poland and Germany and is particularly good in his treatment of Czechoslovakia, with its attendant student protests during the slow demise of Alexander Dubcek, culminating in the Prague Spring.

Cuba has always played an important part in the iconography of the 60s, whether by the example of its revolution or in the widespread commodification of the face of Che Guevara. Kurlansky is not only good on treating the Cuban revolution itself, but is also strong on analyzing the impact this had on radicalizing other participants of the 60s. “Fidel Castro is a seducer,” and in the early years of the revolution he seduced the American press, and in sponsored tours of Cuba he was able to influence many young

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200 Ibid. p. 378.
201 Ibid. pp.287-305.
203 Ibid. p.166.
Americans. Kurlansky is able to suggest a strong causal link between events in Cuba and the New Left in the United States. “To the youth of the New Left in 1968 – Americans, Western Europeans, Latin Americans – Cuba was the most exciting country in the world.” American SDS member Todd Gitlin wrote, “Here apparently was the model of a revolution led, not by a communist party – indeed, in many ways against it.”\textsuperscript{204} It would be almost impossible to see how “Gitlin, Tom Hayden, other SDS leaders, and David Dellinger were there analyzing the revolution in between conversations about what to do in Chicago during the Democratic convention coming up in the summer” and not recognize the catalyzing effect Cuba must have had.\textsuperscript{205}

Similarly Kurlansky acknowledges the contributive role played by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (indeed, the whole civil rights movement in general) and the Free Speech Movement in radicalizing American youth. “Freedom Summer probably did more to develop radical campus leadership than all the efforts of SDS.”\textsuperscript{206} But this is oft covered territory and adds nothing new to our understanding of the 60s.

It is the global perspective that Kurlansky brings to the 60s that ends up being his most significant contribution to our understanding of the 60s. In the opening paragraph of his introduction he speaks of a “spontaneous combustion of rebellious spirits around the world.”\textsuperscript{207} The word “spontaneous” is a little problematic and off-putting here. To describe any historical event as “spontaneous” seems to deny any sort of agency responsible for bringing about that event. Historical phenomena do not just occur, there is a causality at work, albeit one that may be difficult to identify, multi-faceted and contentious. That similar events took place at similar times does not mean that resorting to describing them as a “spontaneous” is the only possible explanation. In fact it is ahistorical and smacks of taking the simplistic way out when dealing with events from a daunting global perspective.

Nevertheless, it is in his short introduction that Kurlansky is at his most analytical. He says, “What was unique about 1968 was that people were rebelling over disparate issues and had in common only that desire to rebel, ideas about how to do it, a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[204] Ibid. p.175.
\item[205] Ibid. p.177.
\item[206] Ibid. p.91.
\item[207] Ibid. p. xvii.
\end{footnotes}
sense of alienation from the established order, and a profound distaste for authoritarianism in any form.” There is some broad accuracy in this statement, even if it is a somewhat simplistic and cliched rendering of the character of the 60s. People were “rebelling over disparate issues” and there was “a sense of alienation” and “distaste for authoritarianism”. However, even here Kurlansky’s generalization becomes a little problematic. For example, it is not accurate to cite those common factors as being the “only” ones. Nor is it certain that there was any common agreement “about how to do it”.

Kurlansky then goes on to argue how “four historic factors merged to create 1968” and that these factors were: the civil rights movement; an alienated generation that rejected authority; the Vietnam War; and the coming of age of television, especially the advent of same-day broadcasts from all around the world. It is here that Kurlansky promises much. Sure there is the suspected anomaly of the civil rights movement being a formative influence on 1968 in countries outside the United States, but you assume this will be addressed. It isn’t. More disappointing is the fact that Kurlansky fails to analyse the four factors he identifies as creating 1968. Certainly he does make some good use of looking at the part played by television: he is right in bringing to the fore the efficacy of television, but he really doesn’t move much beyond saying how footage of the Vietnam War radicalized people or how the televising of protests fostered emulation. These are good points, but they need elaboration.

This failure to be analytical is the major disappointment with Kurlansky’s book. In the end it is only in the three page introduction that Kurlansky comes close to being analytical. His book ends up being heavy on recounting events from a world perspective, but light on analysis and interpretation. For example, in Kurlansky’s brief treatment of sex he quotes how Jim Morrison, lead singer of The Doors, described himself as “an erotic politician” and how singer Janis Joplin said, “My music isn’t supposed to make you riot, it’s supposed to make you fuck.” Such quotes are tantalizing and clearly suggest the connection between music, sex and rebellion, but again Kurlansky fails to explore this connection, beyond telling us that’s it’s there. He cites the popular catch cry of “Make Love Not War” and how students would protest against the war, then “not

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208 Ibid.
209 Ibid. p. xviii.
210 Ibid. p. 189.
uncommonly go off and make love.”\textsuperscript{211} Once again the connection between sex and protest is made, but the dynamic of that connection is left unexplored. He points out how Ed Sanders, of the rock group ‘The Fugs’, described the 60s, in his novel Shards of God, as “the Golden Age of fucking”\textsuperscript{212}. And that’s it. There’s no discussion of the accuracy of the quote, no discussion of the possible implications of this being at least partially true. In a summative statement Kurlansky says how the press reflected the common belief that, “the things youth were doing represented nothing less than a complete alteration in the values and mores of society with the far-reaching ramifications.”\textsuperscript{213} Clearly Kurlansky is aware of the pivotal role sex played during the 60s and the quotes he employs strongly indicate that he sees it as a rich and important area to explore. It is a pity that this is as far as he goes. He describes events, provides quotes, but never really attempts to explore the mechanism that operated to connect sex with the countercultural aspects of the 60s.

This sort of cursory treatment is not just confined to sex. The role of music or drugs, for example, is similarly given scant treatment. So ultimately we have a readable book on the 60s, aimed at a popular audience, which fails to explore fully the place of sex, drugs and rock and roll. This would have been acceptable if Kurlansky had clearly spelled out the parameters of his book as being concerned with describing the key events of the period. But he doesn’t do this, and in the end he has surveyed much interesting territory, without really exploring it. This is perhaps an unavoidable byproduct of the sources Kurlansky has relied upon. Despite the huge amount of written material produced by members of the counterculture at the time, and despite the large number of participants still alive, there is a strange reliance on mainstream, or Establishment, media. Even a quick glance shows heavy use of quotes from The New York Times, Time, Life, Le Monde and Paris Match to cite just a few. Little wonder then that we have an interesting book that very effectively reminds us of the global nature of 1968, a book big on the political upheaval, but thin on the cultural and social components.

One of the most strident and influential critiques of the countercultural events and consequences of the 60s is Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind: How

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid. p. 190.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid. p.191.
Higher Education Has *Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*.\textsuperscript{214} The book is at the forefront of the blaming the 60s industry and as such it demands a detailed treatment. It is certainly attention-getting in its near apocalyptic claims for the destructive force of the 60s: the very title indicts the 60s as having closed the American mind (Bloom’s excluded), let democracy down and impoverished nothing less than the souls of American students. In Bloom’s view the 60s has a lot to answer for and he is most vigorous in his prosecution.

In the preface of *The Closing of the American Mind* Bloom sets out his intellectual position. Bloom believes “that there is a human nature”, and taking Plato’s cave image he says, “that man is not a creature of accident, chained to and formed by the particular cave in which he is born.” Bloom goes on to say that the task of the “real teacher” is to “assist his pupil to fulfill human nature against all the deforming forces of convention and prejudice…. Moreover there is no real teacher who in practice does not believe in the existence of the soul.”\textsuperscript{215} Whilst this is as yet not an overt attack on the values of the 60s, it is clearly one that is at odds with the tenets of cultural materialist and new historicist thinking. Cultural materialists and new historicists are very uncomfortable with the concept of some sort of innate, immutable “human nature”\textsuperscript{216}, preferring to believe that “man” is “formed by the particular cave in which he is born”, though neither, but cultural materialists especially, would see people as being “chained”: there is always the possibility of agency, albeit agency that may not always succeed.

Later in the book it is made clear that it is the 60s that has unleashed these “deforming forces”, unnatural and almost demonic forces that pervert “human nature” and destroy “souls.” Nowhere does Bloom attempt to define or establish the concepts of “human nature” or the “soul”. This is understandable and probably a good tactic as these things can be a little tricky to nail down. It appears to be enough for Bloom to say they exist, therefore they must exist. It is a given. To bolster his case he cites names from the pantheon like Plato and Socrates. And you can’t possibly argue against authorities like that, they are unassailable. Bloom uses terms such as “human nature” and the “soul” like

\textsuperscript{214} Allan Bloom, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.p.20.
\textsuperscript{216} The “very idea of a ‘defining human essence’ is precisely what critics like me find vacuous and untenable”. Stephen Greenblatt, op. cit. p.56.
some talisman to ward off the horrors of the 60s, a talisman replete with panacean qualities. A large task is placed on the shoulders of “real teachers”, those teachers who understand “human nature” and who know all about the “soul”; wherever and whoever they are.

“Fascination with one’s students leads to an awareness of the various kinds of soul and their various capacities for truth and error as well as learning. Such experience is a condition of investigating the question, ‘What is man?’ in relation to his highest aspirations as opposed to his low and common need.”\(^{217}\) There is an anachronistic and annoying sexism about Bloom’s language. As well there is the use of quaint archaisms, such as “one’s students” and “highest aspirations”, that are included to perhaps convey a sense of formal solidity to his argument, but which for many readers results in an alienating stiffness. Bloom goes on to extol the virtues of “book learning”, which is necessary “particularly in ages when there is a poverty of living examples of the high human types.”\(^{218}\) There is an arrogance and elitism about such comments; it is an aloof judgement passed by someone who sees themselves as high enough to be able to focus on those below. And, contrary to Bloom, surely it must still be possible to throw up enough names of those “high human types.”

Bloom tells us that a lot of what he has to say is based on a sample of students, “concentrating on those who are most likely to take advantage of a liberal education and to have the greatest moral and intellectual effect upon the nation.”\(^{219}\) The attitude here is elitist, with Bloom identifying a type of student who supposedly possesses the moral and intellectual sensibilities to affect the nation in a manner Bloom would concur with, a sort of student aristocracy imbued with a sense of noblesse oblige. You could be certain that these students would be the sort to be found in the Ivy League universities, or those like them. These students will be “of comparatively high intelligence, materially and spiritually free to do pretty much what they want with the few years of college they are privileged to have”. Rich Americans in other words. “There are other kinds of students whom circumstances of one sort or another prevent from having the freedom required to

\(^{217}\) Allan Bloom, op. cit. p.20-21.
\(^{218}\) Ibid. p.21.
\(^{219}\) Ibid. p.22.
pursue a liberal education. They have their own needs ….”  

So far all of this is from the five short pages of Bloom’s preface. As mentioned, nowhere as yet has Bloom explicitly singled out the 60s as being the period most culpable. However, it is clear that he is antagonistic to the broad project of the 60s. Both Bloom and the counterculture believed in the potential of people. Bloom believed this to be best achieved through “real teaching” and “book learning” to develop the “soul” and “human nature”. The counterculture believed in a diversity of possibilities for teaching and learning, and if this involved “book learning” it was likely to be often from a very different set of books. Indeed, the impact of the learning the counterculture envisaged would be completely antithetical to what Bloom would want.

Another reason for Bloom’s abhorrence to the 60s that is suggested in his preface is his apparent distaste for feminism, as revealed by his exclusive use of the masculine pronoun. Later in the book, as Bloom warms to the topic of feminism, it becomes clear that his use of that pronoun is more than an anachronism.

Finally, the Preface displays an elitism that is in stark contrast to the democratic, participatory temper of the 60s which eschewed the notion of elite, privileged groups and leaders. That the counterculture was largely made up of white, middle class students is an irony, but not one that negates their philosophical stand.

If the preface illustrates Bloom’s antipathy to the 60s, then the rest of the book is given over to extending and expanding upon the list of grievances. Bloom commences with an attack on the social and moral relativism that became one of the philosophical tenets of the counterculture. This is not to suggest that relativism was the creation of the countercultural 60s, but rather that the period readily embraced the concept of relativism, making it a dominant philosophical position of the period as well as succeeding decades. This is one of Bloom’s major gripes against the 60s. Bloom believes relativism makes people “open to everything” and that this openness leads to a lack of discernment, the denigration of one’s own culture and a sort of moral and intellectual paralysis that results in an anything goes way of thinking. Sarcastically Bloom says, “Openness – and the

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220 Ibid.
221 Ibid. p.27.
relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings – is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger.” Bloom believes this openness, this relativism, harms social cohesion, and, given the lack of belief in the primacy of one’s own culture, he wonders “is the social contract any longer possible?” The outcome is a clear lack of decisive social direction. Bloom longs for the supposed cultural and moral absolutes of the past, those certainties that provided a guidance that was clear and right. The 60s called into question these absolutes, whether they were sexual and social mores or blind allegiance and belief in the superiority and rectitude of one’s own culture and government. The cultural flux of the 60s would have been anathema to Bloom. And, of course, those proponents of relativism, the students, would be totally incapable of defending their position. “The students, of course, cannot defend their position.” So the students, the vanguard of much of the 60s, are naively culpable. According to Bloom all that young Americans have is an “insubstantial awareness” and a “saccharine moral drawn from that awareness: We should all get along. Why fight?” These “saccharine” injunctions, with the terse simplicity of the Commandments, may be made light of by Bloom, but they would also have had a lot of appeal to the counterculture, to whom getting along and not fighting would have sounded just fine.

Employing a personal anecdote to illustrate relativism’s untenability Bloom relates how in his college years he lodged with a student from Mississippi who argued the case for the inferiority of Black Americans and justified the existence of Jim Crow. Clearly such an issue brings up the problematic nature of the 60s valorisation of relativism. It is an issue that still plagues debates about Postmodernism. As is often the case with Bloom, he tends to take to the extreme the position he is attempting to invalidate. For example, the 60s embracing of relativism must mean that they accept as equally valid all other cultures and all other points of view. Anything and everything goes. Therefore, they must necessarily be accepting of child labour, the immolation of widows, clitoridectomies and the general subjugation of women, to mention just a few.

223Ibid. p.27.
225Ibid. p.35.
226Ibid.
controversial points. Bloom’s method may be the rigorous philosophical one, but it is not the one by which most people live their lives. Most people take a general philosophical position and live their lives with a degree of inconsistency, live their lives without taking each stance to the nth degree. It is not some sort of logic that must be inexorably followed ad absurdum. Taking and pointing out an extreme example does not stop people from approaching life from that philosophical stance. There are always contradictions and anomalies. The 60s could take the relativist approach and without too much difficulty be against clitoridectomies, or the immolation of widows. Bloom’s absolutist, ethnocentric, anti-relativist approach cannot entertain this possibility.

Indeed, the 60s relativist approach often stopped short of being all inclusive. For example, those expressing hard-line right-wing conservative values would not have been accepted as part of the counterculture; the anti-Vietnam movement would not accept right-wing hawks. So much is obvious. Though the 60s approach was relativist, it was never a case of anything goes. Within the counterculture there was a general acceptance of individuals and groups who were anti-establishment, though this was never interpreted to include such individuals or groups as white supremacists or fascists. Whenever the counterculture included individuals or groups that did not fit comfortably within its ethos then the result was at best a feeling of being ill at ease and at worst the occurrence of events contrary to that ethos. In 1969 in Altamont, California, a rock concert in the style of Woodstock had been planned. Security was to be taken care of by the Hell’s Angels. Hell’s Angels, despite their association with the rock group The Grateful Dead and the writer Ken Kesey, had always been a problematic inclusion in countercultural events: their rebellious anti-authoritarianism may have been admired, but not their violence. And at the concert the Angels were involved in a lot of violence, against the audience and even some of the performers, which culminated in the stabbing death of a member of the audience, just after the Rolling Stones had performed ‘Sympathy for the Devil’.

Another example, though less dramatic, was in Sydney where a violent, intimidating character, redolent of fascism, called the Skull, was always strangely, dangerously on the periphery of the Moratorium marches: to most participants he was never really part of the

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peace movement, but never overtly excluded either. The Skull was always associated with aggression and violence. His presence was anomalous and people felt ill at ease.\textsuperscript{228} Both these examples are illustrative of the dilemma of the counterculture’s inclusion of individuals and groups at odds with the overall ethos of the counterculture. But these examples of inclusion are the exception rather than the rule. The 60s relativist approach never meant a mindless anything and everything goes.

The 60s approach to relativism was always within certain parameters. It is just that Bloom doesn’t much like what is within those parameters. The 60s is denigrated because of its “Be free, be happy, do whatever you want”\textsuperscript{229} attitude, which is seen as reflective of a simplistic, frivolous hedonism where relativism’s anything goes is the guiding principle, so long as it culminates in self-gratification. It is, however, often forgotten, or omitted, that the rest of the quote from Hair is “So long as you don’t hurt anyone.” This is a rider that would exclude many groups and practices that Bloom believes relativism would force to be included. It would exclude the student from Mississippi: believing in the inferiority of Black Americans and favouring the existence of Jim Crow would definitely hurt people.

Bloom is aware of the problems of relativism, but fails to mention the possible concomitant problems associated with his absolutist view, with believing you are right. If you are right, does it mean other cultures are wrong, or at least inferior? And if they are wrong, do you move to make them right? Numerous examples exist to show that making others right can be seen as justifiable. For example, slavery, child labour, the civil rights movement, ruthless dictatorships. But less extreme examples prove more problematic. What do you do about nations whose systems of government are different to yours? What about different religions, different sexualities, different moralities? The countercultural 60s saw what it believed were wrongs and sought to right them: it saw much that was not only positive in other practices, but markedly better, and therefore sought to appropriate them. If Bloom sees anything positive in contemporary cultures apart from his own then he doesn’t mention it. Perhaps his ideal is a world homogenized in the form of his imagined conservative America. For Bloom, of course, relativism can result in no such

\textsuperscript{228} Author’s personal recollection.
\textsuperscript{229} This quote is from the hugely successful rock-musical Hair, which was first performed in 1967 in the USA and in 1969 in Kings Cross, Australia.
positive outcome. “Cultural relativism succeeds in destroying the West’s universal or intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving it to be just another culture. So there is equality in the republic of cultures. Unfortunately the West is defined by its need for justification of its ways or values, by its need for discovery of nature, by its need for philosophy and science. This is its cultural imperative. Deprived of that it will collapse.”

The work of Margaret Mead provided an important basis for the assertions of cultural relativists, in that her 1928 Coming of Age in Samoa, despite what is now recognized as its manifold and manifest flaws and inaccuracies, was thought to provide empirical evidence that values are relative to each culture and that it is narrow-mindedly ethnocentric to see one’s own culture in absolute terms of it being superior. That Mead’s book posited an easy going, casual attitude to life, especially sex, would not have harmed its popularity as a piece of evidence in the 60s. It is not surprising then that Bloom also has Mead in his sights.

“ Sexual adventurers like Margaret Mead and others who found America too narrow told us that not only must we know other cultures and learn to respect them, but we could also profit from them.” Additionally, Bloom suggests: “We could follow their lead and loosen up, liberating ourselves from the opinion that our taboos are anything other than social restraints. We could go to the bazaar of cultures and find reinforcement for inclinations that are repressed by puritanical guilt feelings.” These quotes, with their sarcasm and mock incredulity, clearly outline Bloom’s attitude to the 60s approach to sex. All that Bloom is against, the countercultural 60s was strongly in favour of; their approaches are antithetical. Those people involved in the emergent and assertive practices did find America “too narrow”, and they did feel repressed by “puritanical guilt”. Indeed, identifying these restraints, resisting and breaking away from them was very much what most of the 60s was about. Bloom’s denigrating description of Mead as a “sexual adventurer” would have been interpreted as a real positive in the 60s and her adventures would not be seen as an immoral and frivolous discarding of time honoured, sensible restraints. The countercultural 60s would also place a high premium on appreciating and

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231 Ibid. p.33.
borrowing from the “bazaar of cultures”, with widespread appropriation of different approaches to sex, family, social structure, work, drugs and religion being taken from cultures as diverse as Native American, Indian and Asian.

Bloom is at pains to stress the destructive effects of the 60s attitude to sex. He is keenly aware of the sexual revolution, but fails to see any good coming out of it. “Sexual liberation presented itself as a bold affirmation of the senses and of undeniable impulse against our puritanical heritage, society’s conventions and repressions…. From the early sixties on there was a gradual testing of the limits on sexual expression”. For Bloom, the “disapproval of parents and teachers of youngsters sleeping or living together was easily overcome.” And the result of all this was that “moral inhibitions, the fear of disease, the risk of pregnancy, the family and social consequences of premarital intercourse and the difficulty of finding places in which to have it – everything that stood in its way suddenly was no longer there.”

Bloom correctly sees the enormity of the changes wrought by the sexual revolution; it’s just that he doesn’t like what he sees. He sees the sexual revolution as the transgressing of the sensible and reasonable restraints, as monitored by those time-honoured guardians of what is right for “youngsters”. Bloom usually refers to the young as students, though is not averse to using the more emotive “youngsters” when it serves a purpose. Nor is Bloom accurate when he says the sexual attitudes of the past were “easily overcome”. This is a sweeping generalization that is unsupported. Maybe it was easy for some; maybe not so easy for others. Maybe just easy sex for some; maybe a significant act of personal and social transgression for others.

Bloom doesn’t attempt to analyse how or why this revolution came about; his main concern is to point out its destructive consequences. “Students, particularly the girls, were no longer ashamed to give public evidence of sexual attraction or of its fulfillment. The kind of cohabitations that were dangerous in the twenties, and risqué or bohemian in the thirties or forties became as normal as membership of the Girl Scouts.” This, for Bloom, is something of the reverse of seeing history as signifying progress: there is the seemingly inexorable plunge into the abyss of unrestrained sex and

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232 Ibid. p.98.
233 Ibid.
the decline in membership of the Girl Scouts, due I assume to girls being involved in other activities.

One quality that could have arrested this drift to sexual promiscuity was “modesty”. Sounding almost Biblical, an imprimatur he believes he has on his side, Bloom argues, “Modesty… was the female virtue, because it governed the powerful desire that related men to women, providing a gratification in harmony with the procreation and rearing of children.”\textsuperscript{234} So modesty forbids, except for good, wholesome reasons. “Although modesty impeded sexual intercourse, its result was to make such gratification central to a serious life and to enhance the delicate interplay between the sexes.”\textsuperscript{235} Modesty was a moral concept that never received popular currency amongst young people in the 60s. It was viewed as an anachronistic concept, seen as more befitting Victorian times than the 60s, redolent of the repressive, uptight morality of parents. Bloom imbues modesty with guardian, protective powers that could stave off sexual chaos and barbarism, whilst at the same time rewarding its practitioners with a deeper, more meaningful satisfaction. However, nobody in the counterculture was really buying this; anything that “impeded sexual intercourse” was to be resiled from, and not just because it limited sexual pleasure, but also because it represented an inhibiting practice when personal and social liberation was at a premium. Sexual, personal and social liberation, however, was not how Bloom viewed this “great continuous Bacchanalia.” For Bloom, the sexual revolution culminated in a lack of passion: “This passionlessness is the most striking effect, or revelation, of the sexual revolution, and it makes the younger generation more or less incomprehensible to older folks.”\textsuperscript{236} This is a variant on the old theme that covering up makes it all the more exciting, leaving more to the imagination; that is, modesty helps foster passion. Still, even with the warm, homely appeal to the wisdom of “older folks”, the counterculture would argue that modesty was yet another aspect of an outmoded and repressive moral code, designed to control people within acceptable social parameters.

\textsuperscript{234}Ibid. p.101.
\textsuperscript{235}Ibid. pp.101-102.
\textsuperscript{236}Ibid. p.99.
Finally, Bloom throws in the highly emotive and contentious issue of pornography. “These were the days when pornography slipped its leash.” Bloom delivers this brief one sentence accusation, designed to condemn the sexual revolution, but he doesn’t trace how this occurred, how the two are connected. There is no line of causality; the reader is apparently supposed to blithely concur that the liberalising of sexual behaviour must ipso facto have led to pornography. Some could reasonably argue the opposite, stating how the freeing up of sexual attitudes and behaviour negated the need for pornography. Or perhaps it could be argued that it is entrepreneurial capitalism that has cashed in on the sexual revolution, and that it is the nature of modern capitalism that is to blame, not the sexual revolution per se. The nexus Bloom would have us believe is unproven and problematic. Bloom drops the short, incendiary sentence in the belief that most people would at best find pornography a highly questionable mode of sexual expression and that tracing its increase and wider exposure back to the sexual revolution would in turn poison people’s perspective on that revolution.

The sexual revolution was aided and abetted by rock music. Rock music was a dominant mode of creative expression for the young people of the 60s. As such it was sure to raise the ire of Bloom, and not just for aesthetic reasons. As with sexuality, Bloom harks back to a past that he recalls as being a lot better, to a past that was without rock music and therefore all the more wholesome for that absence. “Thirty years ago, most middle-class families made some of the old European music a part of the home, partly because they liked it, partly because they thought it was good for the kids.”

But no longer those good old days of family, kids, caring parents and classical music! Like modesty, classical music has gone out the window, while a monster has been welcomed in to replace it.

The main problem with rock music, for Bloom, is not that it replaced classical music, but rather what it provokes in its audience. Rock music does not soothe the savage beast; it unleashes it. “But rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire – not love, not eros, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored.” Bloom believes

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237 Ibid.
238 Ibid. p.69.
239 Thirty, forty, fifty years ago my middle-class friends and I must have been moving in the wrong circles! There just weren’t a lot of families sitting around listening to some “old European music”. It must have been different in America for Bloom.
that rock “acknowledges the first emanations of children’s emerging sensuality and addresses them seriously, eliciting them and legitimating them, not as little sprouts that must be carefully tended in order to grow into gorgeous flowers, but as the real thing.” Rock provides “on a silver platter … everything their parents always used to tell them they had to wait for until they grew up and would understand later.” These young people “know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse.”

In many ways Bloom’s observations are extremely accurate: it is the subjective conclusions that he draws from them that are highly contentious. Rock music does appeal to sexual desire; it does have a sexual rhythm and often the lyrics are sexually suggestive or explicit. Contrary to what Bloom would have us believe, rock does not have “one appeal only”. Rock contains a huge variety of music, a lot of which certainly appealed to sexual desire, but there was also a great deal that did not. Think of the protest songs of Bob Dylan, the hits of Joe McDonald, Barry McGuire, Scott McKenzie, The Mamas and the Papas … the list is endless. The point is that not all rock whetted sexual appetites: there were a host of other things song writers and performers were concerned with in the 60s. Bloom is attempting an intellectual sleight of hand by saying this is “only” what rock appeals to, therefore all rock should be condemned. Though should Bloom be convinced that rock does have other appeals it is unlikely he would change his overall negative view: he would still employ the highly subjective and emotive adjective “barbaric”. For Bloom, rock is the monster intent on inciting innocent young virgins to go about deflowering one another.

Nor is it necessarily true that rock did not sometimes speak about and appeal to Eros. Rock songs about love are in their thousands. What would have been of greater interest to the counterculture is Bloom’s artificial separation of love and sex. Sometimes you get sex, sometimes love and sometimes you get sex and love. It is possible for the two to go together. Bloom, however, countenances none of this. His intractable position is that sex outside of some rose-coloured view of wedlock, and disconnected from “procreation”, is not a good thing.

Bloom also has this idealized picture of parents who always know best, treating their children like puppies not yet ready to be let off the lead unless they are certain to

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240Allan Bloom, op. cit. p.73.
head in the same predictable direction as those holding the lead. This, of course, makes sense if you believe “little sprouts” must be carefully tended in order to bloom into “gorgeous flowers”. The counterculture would have been highly resistant to such a view of parenting (the generational conflict looms large in the 60s) and would have objected to such a patronizing view of their generation as “children” to be grown in their parent’s image. They mightn’t have liked the horticultural imagery either.

However, Bloom is correct when he says how rock music is responsible for “eliciting” and “legitimating” sexual desires. This thesis argues that all forms of public expression that present the transgressive nature of emergent and assertive practices have the potential to legitimize, intensify and disseminate those practices.

The crux of Bloom’s case against the 60s unleashing of sexual desire lies in his belief that the “inevitable corollary of such sexual interest is the rebellion against the parental authority that represses it…. The sexual revolution must overthrow all the forces of domination, the enemies of nature and happiness.” Young people’s “worldview is balanced on the sexual fulcrum…. And then comes the longing for the classless, prejudice-free, conflictless, universal society that necessarily results from liberated consciousness … the fulfillment of which has been inhibited by the political equivalents of Mom and Dad.” All this results in “the three great lyrical themes: sex, hate and a smarmy, hypocritical version of brotherly love. Such polluted sources issue in a muddy stream where only monsters can swim.”

Bloom expresses his view with real stridency. There is anger and bitterness there. His view of the nexus between the sexual liberation and the cultural and social revolution of the 60s is accurate, albeit not finely nuanced. It is a little simplistic to suggest the linkage between the two was one way. Rather there would inevitably have been an interplay between sexual liberation and cultural and social change: sexual liberation facilitated cultural and social change, and in turn changes in culture and society encouraged sexual liberation. It is too easy for Bloom to make a bogeyman out of the sexual revolution – a bogeyman who pollutes, whose progeny are monsters. Not that the argument doesn’t have a simplistic, conservative appeal to it: the monogamous, nuclear family is the cornerstone of a ‘good society’ and all the good old values associated with

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241 Ibid. p.74.
it; the sexual revolution seeks to shake this cornerstone; ergo, the sexual revolution is the root of all evil. At no stage is Bloom willing to even remotely consider the possibility that one iota of good could have resulted from the countercultural approach to sex, or the possibility that the previous attitude to sex had anything negative about it. Bloom’s sexual worldview is either black or white. And the 60s with its rock music and sexual revolution is very black indeed. “In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy.”

The current malaise, Bloom believes, could have been partially prevented or cured by “the old Great Books conviction” which would help create moral, thinking citizens. But apparently, alas, it may be too late: “I fear that spiritual entropy or an evaporation of the soul’s boiling blood is taking place”, facilitated by the likes of the “culture leeches” and high school teachers “who are products of the sixties and reflecting the pallor of university-level humanities.” Of all the “Great Books” it is the Bible, not surprisingly, that Bloom puts most store in. For Bloom, “a life based on the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things.” Bloom acknowledges that “the Book” is not the only means whereby a person can be suitably educated, but a book of “similar gravity” is required. A lot of reading was being done during the countercultural 60s, but very little of it would have been recommended by Bloom. However, Bloom is right when he believes reading (and more importantly talking and thinking about that reading), has a formative function. This thesis argues that 60s writing interacted with 60s culture: it is once again the case that Bloom is simply at odds with what the countercultural 60s was reading, talking and thinking about. At this juncture it is clear that a lot of what Bloom is complaining about could be remedied if the young people just turned off the rock music, stopped fucking and read a great book. But none of this happened.

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242 Ibid. p.75.
243 Ibid. p.51.
244 Ibid. p.65.
245 Ibid. p.60.
246 Philip D. Beidler’s Scriptures for a Generation. What We Were Reading in the ‘60s, op. cit. provides an extensive overview of what Americans were reading in the 60s contains few, if any, books that Bloom would see as valued reading. These books had an impact on their readership that was antithetical to what Bloom would have wanted.
Any indictment of the 60s would be remiss not to consider feminism. Whilst not remiss, Bloom is surprisingly brief in his treatment of feminism. Additionally, his criticisms of feminism are more circumspect. Perhaps this is the result of the thorough-going changes wrought by feminism, perhaps by the fact that many of his sympathetic readers would be women, and perhaps by the general perception that to be against the overall gains of feminism would be to appear all too conservative and completely anachronistic. Bloom argues that feminism was, “to the extent it presented itself as liberation, much more a liberation from nature than from convention or society.”\textsuperscript{247} This contentious premise is at odds with new historicist and cultural materialist thinking which sees convention and society constitutive of people’s attitude and behaviour, rather than some nebulous concept of nature. Certainly the counterculture would have seen women’s liberation as breaking away from the patriarchal confines of convention and society rather than nature. If they did believe in the concept of nature then it would be a nature very different to that envisaged by Bloom.

Bloom acknowledges that feminism is in accord with aspects of the sexual revolution. “But in making sex easy, it can trivialize, de-eroticize and demystify sexual relations.” This is a contentious value judgement, one usually made by the more sexually conservative and one that is difficult to validate beyond what some people reckon could be true. It is just as easy to say making sex easy made it more pleasurable and guilt free and that it does not have a de-eroticizing effect at all. And after all what is wrong with demystification? Apparently feminism had an ulterior motive here. “A woman who can easily satisfy her desires and does not invest her emotions in exclusive relationships is liberated from the psychological tyranny of men, to do more important things.”\textsuperscript{248} What a cold, calculating lot those feminists were and are! Bloom’s view is very limited in that he can only envisage feminists who serially satisfy their sexual desires in a manner devoid of anything beyond the physical level. Bloom’s image conjures up a stereotype of some corporate woman who gets to the top, to the “more important things”, but who is efficiently clinical about sex. This, of course, may be true for some feminists. It could even be true for some men! Bloom seems unwilling to consider that a feminist could “do

\textsuperscript{247} Allan Bloom, op.cit. pp.99-100.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid. p.100.
more important things” and “invest her emotions in exclusive relationships”. Is it only men who can have both, or are all people limited to choosing one or the other? Bloom seems unaware that feminism seeks to alter the nature of relationships, creating the sort that will facilitate having other “important things”. (Other is a much better word to use than “more”.)

“Feminism acted as a depressant on the Bacchanalian mood of the sexual revolution….” Initially, it might be thought that Bloom would applaud this effect of feminism, until we learn that it “led not to great indulgences but to an unromantic regulation of sexual desire for public purposes.”249 There goes love and romance again. Additionally, “Male sexual passion has become sinful because it culminates in sexism.”250 This is yet another example of the sweeping generalizations that Bloom likes to make in the guise that they are truths. It could just as easily be said that male sexual passion has been released from the expectations of machismo, placing sexual relations on a more realistic, equal and honest level.

There is of course a great deal more in Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind, but nothing at all that he has to say about the 60s is remotely positive, whether it be the macro effects of the sexual revolution and feminism or the micro effects of events on his campus at Cornell University. There is a blinkered intractability about his approach that prevents him from glimpsing anything positive about the period. Bloom is given to the emotive phrase, and often to hyperbole: “Whether it be Nuremburg or Woodstock, the principle is the same…. Enlightenment in America came close to breathing its last during the sixties.”251 The book is sometimes a jeremiad, sometimes spirited invective, ranging from the lugubrious to the strident and powerfully felt argument. Clearly, I have felt his argument to be conservative and reactionary, a harking back to halcyon days that never existed. Yet it is admirable to see someone so openly nail their colours to the mast and to argue their case with passion and vigour. Ultimately, you can be in disagreement with Bloom, but you have to admit it makes for interesting reading. The Closing of the American Mind is an important addition to the literature on the 60s, and whilst it may be totally negative it is an essential component in the ongoing discussion about the nature

\[^{249}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{250}\text{Ibid. p.101.}\]
\[^{251}\text{Ibid. p.314.}\]
and legacy of that time: it asks difficult questions that must be responded to by those who view the 60s in a different light.

Although Donald Horne’s Time of Hope: Australia 1966-1972\textsuperscript{252} came out almost thirty years ago it still warrants attention, if for no other reason than it is one of the few histories of the period that attempt to deal with Australia. The title signals Horne’s positive view of the period as being one of idealism where many Australians became energized and hopeful that the conservative Australia of Menzies could change into something different and better. Horne has picked some of the watershed years of the period, though he stops short of going into the time of the Whitlam government, perhaps not wishing to bite off so much that is so close to his time of writing. In a brief comment Horne suggests that his reason for stopping in 1972 is because with 1966 to 1972 you have the “seven years, not the three Whitlam years, (which) were the time of critical change.”\textsuperscript{253} Perhaps this is so, but Horne doesn’t offer any justification beyond this statement. Certainly 1972 is a very neat historical cut-off point, but cultural change, which this period must perforce be largely about, often refuses to start or stop on political cue.

The front inside flap of the dustcover promises a panoramic overview of the time with an exploration as to “how and why had the changes occurred?” We get the panorama, but not really the hows and whys. Panorama is always good, indeed often essential at the outset, and in this sense A Time of Hope is useful in providing a very detailed chronicle of the time: it is excellent background. The ‘Introduction: A Time of Hope, a Time of Threat’ presents the contrasting attitudes to this period and anecdotesly establishes just how dramatically different 1966 was to 1972.\textsuperscript{254} Changes in the mood and ethos of Australia are highlighted by drawing on newspaper editorials, approaches to censorship and Morgan Gallup polls. Menzies’ retirement speech in Kooyong in 1966 is contrasted to Whitlam’s ‘It’s Time’ speech in 1972 in order to emphasis the point that by “the time of the 1972 election it was another country.”\textsuperscript{255}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Donald Horne, op. cit.
\item Ibid. p.7.
\item Ibid. pp. 1-12.
\item Ibid. p.11.
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Chapter one is ‘The Permissive Society’. Not only is it the first chapter in A Time of Hope, but is also the longest; perhaps an indication that Horne sees the different approaches to morality and sex as the focal point for change during the period. Horne commences by stating how by 1971 male and female pubic hair could be seen on the movie screen, whilst bare breasts and bottoms were on television, and in Playboy very explicit photos of pin-up girls could be seen. There were streakers at sporting events and nudity was common at pop festivals. Horne notes the widespread “use of four-letter words had become a necessary demonstration of sincerity… they could be as an essential demonstration of naturalness as the electric guitar.”\textsuperscript{256} Horne is correct in that these are some of the things that signify the changes taking place during the period and that many people “saw themselves as witnessing a great drama – the final challenge to the puritanism that had prevailed in Britain, the United States… and Australia.”\textsuperscript{257} However, I am a lot less certain about how many young people would have felt natural with an electric guitar in their hands. Additionally, Horne never attempts to explore whether actions such as these are simply indicative and reflective of change or if they might be in some way causative and contributive towards these changes. If they were simply the signs of changing times, then what theory is Horne going to suggest as a means of explaining the reasons behind the changes? Despite the promise of the dustcover to tell us “how and why” it is something he never really does.\textsuperscript{258} Yet, when briefly discussing the distribution in 1972 of The Little Red Schoolbook (“a guide to the permissive society for school children”) Horne readily quotes The Catholic Weekly describing the schoolbook as being “subversive of legitimate authority”.\textsuperscript{259} Apparently, some groups were able to identify what they believed to be an agency of transformation and to see some connection between the distribution of a text and subversion.

‘The Permissive Society’ goes on to describe some of the other key indicators of the changing approach to morality and sex. There is the quite detailed account of the changes in Australia’s censorship laws and the consequent availability of books and plays

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid. p.13.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{258} This could result in a calling into question what is written about books on their dustcovers or back covers… shock!
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid. p. 16.
that would have previously been banned.\textsuperscript{260} As an aspect of the “disintegration of censorship” Horne spends a paragraph on Richard Walsh’s, Richard Neville’s and Martin Sharp’s Australian Oz magazine and how it was part of a process that “enacted important dramas, particularly in extending boundaries and in providing sacrificial victims.”\textsuperscript{261} It can be easily understood how Neville and the others provided “sacrificial victims” (and indeed how they must have enjoyed it so much that they went on to London to do it all again, though on a bigger and better scale\textsuperscript{262}), but it may not be clear to all of Horne’s readers how the process of “extending boundaries” operated: and Horne chooses not to elaborate.

Horne spends a little more time (almost two pages) discussing Wendy Bacon and Tharunka. Horne points out that Tharunka concentrated on sex (upwards of forty percent per issue) and this was because Bacon and others believed “the sexual structure of society upheld the establishment; the censoring of obscene and erotic material was therefore political, upholding taboos necessary to ‘the state and the Australian way of life’.” This is interesting territory, where the possible nexus between aims, actions and results is suggested, but it is as far as Horne is willing to venture theoretically: it is much safer to list the things that happened, simply concluding that with Bacon the “authorities were reduced to despair”. Well, maybe.

Interestingly, in the entire chapter that deals with public morality and sex, much of which is centred on Sydney, Horne feels it necessary to only mention John Anderson, Andersonianism and Libertarianism on three separate pages, and indeed only on one other page in all of Time of Hope. Nor does he once mention the Push, or any groups or events prior to 1966 that may have contributed to the changes that took place in the period he focuses on. Of course, Horne would never suggest that the things that happened from 1966 to 1972 just happened, a spontaneous series of phenomena resulting in a complete change in the zeitgeist; but nor does he provide even a tentative suggestion as to the “how and why”.

\textsuperscript{260} Ibid. pp. 14-23.  
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid. p. 18.  
The remainder of Time of Hope is much like its first chapter: important issues and events are presented, but there is little detailed analysis beyond the general descriptive account. In the chapter ‘Youth Power’ Horne describes what happened with regards to film, music, the New Left and drugs. In following chapters he looks at key developments such as the protest movement and Vietnam, the rise of the middle class, green bans and the environmental movement, the emergence of feminism and the end of the Liberal hegemony and the arrival of Whitlam. These are just some of the aspects of 1966 to 1972 that Horne touches on, and indeed it is a huge and varied amount of ground for anyone to cover. Despite Time of Hope’s not really attempting to provide an analysis of the “hows and why” the book is still of value in that it does present a broad picture of Australia during this period and as such it is perhaps not a bad jumping off point for getting into the 60s in Australia. And given that it was published in 1980, and was one of the earliest extended treatments that sought to deal with such a complex period of rapid and unprecedented change, Time of Hope still has some things about it that are to be commended.

Seizures of Youth: The Sixties and Australia, by Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett is another important study of the 60s with the focus on Australia. Like Horne’s Time of Hope its scope is detailed and far-ranging: as studies of the 60s in the United States, such as Gitlin’s The Sixties, have been impressive in their command of a vast amount of diverse detail, one has to likewise be impressed by the sheer volume and variety of details from Australia to which Seizures of Youth makes reference. However, unlike Gitlin and Anderson, Gerster and Bassett interpret the 60s in a far less positive and more skeptical manner. The very title of their book may flag this. For an individual a ‘seizure’ is something over which they have no control, which will invariably be an unpleasant to life threatening experience, resulting in nothing good. If ‘seizure’ is to be construed to mean the taking over of something by illegitimate or unfair means, something that is forced

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263 Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, op. cit. Though Jan Bassett is cited as the co-author on the book’s cover and title page, Robin Gerster in the ‘Acknowledgements’ thanks Bassett for her “research input from the book’s earliest stages and particularly her work on the first chapter”, yet in that first chapter (p.23.) Gerster refers to himself as the “present writer”.

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upon others, then again it is something negative. No person would willingly wish to experience a seizure. Thus from the outset Gerster and Bassett state their position. Notwithstanding, Gerster and Bassett’s approach is still a welcome, interesting and lively addition to the ongoing debate over the nature of the 60s and its legacy.

The first indictment Gerster and Bassett level against the decade is that those who experienced it are held in its thrall, locked in some sort of time warp. These “veterans of the sixties” are unable to look forward and “remembrance is an act of becoming”. They may “wear the decade like cultural armour”, but any protection this has offered has been offset by its stunting their growth: they “have invested so much emotional and intellectual energy into staying young that they have left no space for anything else but nostalgia.” This rear-view mirror driving means that “their inheritance has been bewilderment, ineffectuality, and remorseless reminders of their mortality.”

All this is just from the first paragraph of their book; you certainly can’t say they don’t make clear the direction they’re coming from. Yet such subjective, emotive and empirical statements are sometimes impossible to validate and end up being little more than authorial bias.

Despite existing in this “state of frozen adolescence” Germaine Greer is one of the few “who got on with their lives”. She has been “afflicted” by this “state of frozen adolescence” and is “enslaved to an obsolete image”. The proof of this, Gerster and Bassett believe, is revealed in Greer’s 1989 article for the English Vogue where she explains how she felt she was “‘growing old without ever having grown up’”, whilst “wistfully paying homage to the sixties generation and its ‘holy fire’, the flames of which she insists continue to flicker.” Perhaps this interview is indicative of Greer’s overall attitude, though an expression of nostalgia for an exciting period of one’s youth might incriminate quite a large number of people, baby boomers or not. And whether you love or loathe Greer you would have to say she has indeed “got on” with her life, found “emotional and intellectual energy” way beyond mere “nostalgia” and that her “inheritance” has proved to be something more than “bewilderment” and “ineffectuality”.

Of course such praise of Greer could be seen by Gerster and Bassett as yet another

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264 Ibid. p.1.
265 Of course a lot of us are guilty as charged on that account; and Gerster and Bassett do ultimately go quite some way towards trying to justify their stance.
266 Ibid. p. 2.
example of how the “decade has been plundered relentlessly for its mythopoetic associations, peddled as sort of tonic for wilting flower children suffering post-sixties neurosis". 267

Let Gerster and Bassett’s approach to the rock musical Hair stand as another example of their attitude to the 60s. They point out that in the two years Hair ran in Sydney, 1969-1970, an estimated 750,000 people saw the rock musical, a figure that is suggestive of some social importance. Dennis Altman, “homosexual activist and theorist” 268, had seen the play in 1968 in New York and thought it to be “a remarkable piece of social protest… that convulsed America and faint echoes of which are disturbing even the somnambulant complacency of Australia.” But Gerster and Bassett argue that “for most people the musical’s political import was secondary to its daring, if agonisingly fleeting, nudity….Hair soon became synonymous with exhibitionism.” Admittedly there would have been people who went to see Hair in order to be doing the ‘in’ thing or because of the titillation that nudity on stage could offer, but there isn’t any consideration from Gerster and Bassett about the disruptive possibilities that the play may have presented. Alternatively, it is possible to see the play as an example of an emergent and assertive practice which explores, valorizes and popularizes different approaches to war, race, drugs and sex: Hair can be viewed as one of the counterculture’s most successful expressions in the commercial world of mainstream society. Yet for Gerster and Bassett even revivals of Hair are denigrated as the cast’s biographical details are “expressed in sixties gibberish.” 269 Strangely, Gerster and Bassett see the play as devoid of political and social import, yet they cite how an outraged management of Sydney radio station 2SM banned any mention of the show and how Queensland politician, Russell Hinze, saw it as a play for those at odds with the mores of the dominant, though he described them as the “sexually depraved… homosexuals, lesbians, wifeswappers and spivs”. 270 Clearly some

267 Ibid. p.3. I hadn’t really been aware of my neurosis. I just hope the tonic of my thesis makes me better. (If such approaches to the 60s, as Gerster and Bassett are critical of, are symptomatic of a neurosis, then I wonder what the antithesis could be.)
268 “Activist and theorist” seem relevant points to bring up here. I’m a little less certain about the adjective.
269 Gerster and Bassett seem particularly fond of these sort of off the cuff dismissive comments. For example, the iconic hit single, ‘The Real Thing’ by Australian Russell Morris, becomes “portentous cacophony”. Ibid. p. 3.
felt Hair to be a threat to mainstream values (though I’d be reluctant to use Russell Hinze as a key witness to prosecute my case).

It is always a little subjective and dangerous to seek to privilege one historical period over another, it being difficult to qualitatively prove that ‘my decade is bigger and better than yours.’ However, most commentators of the 60s see it as a period of unprecedented political and social change, a watershed period of unusual activity, outstripping that which took place in other decades. In their attempt to lessen the import and impact of the 60s Gerster and Bassett argue that there is in fact nothing unique or new about the youth and student upheavals of the 60s. Apparently the “so-called ‘student sixties’ is a cultural myth propagated by terminally nostalgic veteran protesters and by a media which packages history for mass consumption.” In order to reveal the myth of it all they attempt to show how “long before anyone had heard of Daniel (‘Danny the Red’) Cohn-Bendit, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin… or Tariq Ali… students were behaving outrageously and subversively.” Indeed, “youthful rebellion is a natural phenomenon” and to prove it Gerster and Bassett cite examples going back to before the First World War: for example they mention the German Neue Schar (New Crowd) from around 1919 who were just like hippies in that they were long-haired, wore sandals, read Hermann Hesse and Indian philosophy, danced and practised free love. And what better example than the student activities of Gavrilo Princip who “managed to create a cataclysm which would ‘change the world’.”

However, I’m not certain that finding a small group that exhibited similar traits to the hippies is quite the same thing as the cultural phenomena that occurred throughout the world in the 60s, and suggesting Princip created “a cataclysm which would ‘change the world’” just looks like bad history.

Gerster and Bassett are on more solid, even if oft trod, ground when they start to consider the importance of Vietnam to the 60s. “In some ways the quintessential sixties event, Vietnam brought together several of the forces of rebellion that surfaced during the decade and helped fashion the counter-cultures”. These countercultures “for all their indulgences, absurdities and excesses, were to register a significant impact on Australian society….Vietnam united young people, particularly students, both within Australia and

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internationally.”\textsuperscript{272} Though choosing to list “indulgences, absurdities and excesses”, without mentioning other possible traits such as commitment, seriousness and courage, Gerster and Bassett have still acknowledged the centrality and catalysing role of the war; protesting may have been fun and exciting for many and may have involved strange and confrontational aspects, but this should not enable Gerster and Bassett to relegate the movement to “indulgences, absurdities and excesses”. Having acknowledged the importance of Vietnam, Gerster and Bassett seek to undercut its role as creating a mass movement that genuinely engaged the young. “Years of myth-making have created the impression that students were engaged in subversive political activity en masse.” This is, apparently, partly because “few people want to read a sixties memoir entitled ‘I Was Not An Anti-War Demonstrator’” and because “(R)ebellion was always the province of a highly vocal, highly visible student minority.”\textsuperscript{273} They cite a poll taken at the University of New South Wales in March 1969, “the height of the anti-war protests”, that “revealed that 50 per cent of students ‘favoured’ the Liberal Party.”\textsuperscript{274} It’s clearly a statistic that would lend support to their case, yet all we are told about the poll is in the footnote and that it was from the Sun-Herald, 2 March 1969.\textsuperscript{275} We are not told of the questions asked, the number of students polled, or their profiles; for all we know fifty students from Engineering may have comprised the sample. Gerster and Bassett put forward the unsubstantiated generalization: “(M)any students were simply too apathetic to get involved”, yet they can also suggest that the activities of that “student minority…often received broad, if tacit, campus support.”\textsuperscript{276} So whilst acknowledging the importance of Vietnam, Gerster and Bassett are at pains to lessen its impact as an emergent and assertive practice, wishing to present the war as important, but definitely not as having a widespread radicalizing effect. This would seem to be a narrow and limited view of the impact of this war on the young people of Australia.

When looking at the values of the counterculture Gerster and Bassett accurately outline the most salient features. There was the preference for the bohemian lifestyle of the inner-city at one end, whilst a retreat to the countryside for life on a commune at the

\textsuperscript{272} Ibid. p.43.  
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid. p.196.  
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid. p.44.
other: there was a movement away from the perceived monotony and stifling conformity of the suburban sprawl. There was also “the celebration of promiscuity over monogamy; and, importantly, the use of herbal or chemical stimulants over traditional intoxicants”277. The choice of the term “promiscuity” is yet another example of how Gerster and Bassett are positioned with regards to the 60s and how they make an ongoing effort to likewise position the reader: it may not be that the term “promiscuity” is inherently inaccurate, but it does seem to carry less serious import than, say, sexual freedom or sexual liberation. Similarly, this chapter of their book, Chapter 2, is called ‘The Disobedient Age’, and again whilst the term “disobedient” is not totally inaccurate it is suggestive of naughty children and has the overall effect of diminishing the seriousness of the 60s. In a brief discussion of such naughty children in secondary schools Gerster and Bassett argue that a “dreary conformity underpinned the mass individualism” and that high school protests represented “more of a treadmill than a spontaneous overflow of rebellion.” If high school students protested the Vietnam War then it must have been a case of how politics “could be exploited to infuse natural manifestations of teenage discontent with a spurious ideological credibility.”278 It appears that not only were these children naughty, but they were mindless followers of conformity who either unwittingly duped themselves or were duped by others.

Gerster and Bassett spend some time considering the censorship debate, the sexual revolution and then go on to relate its impact on women. It would seem that these are some of the more important focal points of the decade, yet their treatment doesn’t go far beyond a cursory cataloguing of some key characteristics. They make the nexus between a “brand of experiential, individualized politics and uninhibited sexual expression” and they cite Dennis Altman, that “homosexual activist”, to support their view: “‘personal politics… one’s personal relationships… foreshadowed the social transformation one sought through political activity.’” And from this they somehow extrapolate that “each failed act of love-making (was) rationalised as an act of defiance against hegemonic moral structures.” Beyond this Gerster and Bassett have little of import to say about the sexual behaviour of young people: there is no consideration of the

277 Ibid. p.52.
278 Ibid. p.102.
subversive impact such behaviour could have had on these young people and Australian society at large. They quote Abbie Hoffman’s parody of Churchillian rhetoric from the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968: “‘We will fuck on the beaches!’” They mention a placard from the 1970 Melbourne moratorium that declared, “‘Fighting for peace is like fucking for chastity.’”\(^{279}\) It is as if the sexual behaviour of young people was a series of almost amusing aberrations rather than a significant emergent and assertive practice.

Gerster and Bassett’s discussion of the position of women during the 60s accurately highlights women’s secondary role and status to that of men. There was an “acceptance of the male-oriented radical sex/politics” and how “the new politics, so publicly identified with charismatic male personalities and imbued with an essentially masculinist insurrectionary ethos, was to consolidate oppression of women.”\(^{280}\) Gerster and Bassett argue that “(M)ale counter-culturalists and politicos, for all their professed belief in ‘freedom’, constructed a rigidly defined set of gender role expectations in which women were either idealised as ‘earth mothers’ or encouraged to shed their ‘inhibitions’ by assiduously unleashing their sexual energies.”\(^{281}\) This is rough painting with a very broad brush which fails to differentiate or detail the changing gender and sexual roles of women during the 60s. Women were not confined to being “‘either… ‘earth mothers’”\(^{282}\) or the assiduous unleashes of “sexual energies.” That these stereotypes did not exist is not argued, but rather that women did not have to fit into either one; they may have moved from one role to another, or played countless variations upon these and other roles. Nor do Gerster and Bassett attempt to differentiate the changing role of women during the 60s; as young people moved from a more political orientation, towards one that was more interested in countercultural lifestyles, the role of women also changed. Their interpretation just isn’t that finely nuanced and goes for the broad generalization at the cost of accuracy. Their take on the 60s is always sceptical and negative. But if you are coming from the standpoint where you believe the counterculture only had a “professed

\(^{279}\) Ibid. p.54.
\(^{280}\) Ibid. pp.60-61.
\(^{281}\) Ibid. p.62.
\(^{282}\) My italics.
belief in ‘freedom’” then this is probably what you end up with. It is perhaps also not surprising that they concur with a view that Charles Manson “seemed to clarify the perniciously masculinist tendency of the entire counter-cultural experiment.” There is no mention that many commentators on the 60s argue that “the counterculture disclaimed Manson, saying that he had not ‘had anything at all to do with the hippie culture.’” Indeed, in a series of articles Rolling Stone used Manson as an example whereby to gauge how dangerous and counter countercultural other groups were. If Gerster and Bassett are attempting the sort of sleight hand whereby the “entire counter-cultural experiment” is to be found guilty by association then I guess the name of Charles Manson is the one to conjure up.

Towards the conclusion of their book Gerster and Bassett acknowledge how the male dominated position of women ironically led to their striving for liberation. For women the anti-war movement had put them in “shackles” and “cemented old structures of male dominance. Women had to say ‘goodbye’ to the male-dominated counterculture”. Again there is no consideration that the position of women was in any way preferable to that which they had held in previous decades: if they wore ‘shackles’ they may have been a lot less restrictive to those of their mothers. Nor do Gerster and Bassett explain to what extent “old structures” were reinforced, to what extent they were “cemented”. It would seem that whilst male dominance continued during the 60s it is also apparent that a great deal had changed for women, such as a move away from the restrictions of marriage, monogamy and a career as a housewife. Gerster and Bassett are probably quite right when they argue that “feminists rebelled against the chauvinism of the New Left while learning the craft of consciousness-raising and the tactic of direct action from the movement itself.” They conclude that “feminism is therefore both ‘a product and a rejection’ of the New Left radicalism of the sixties.” They point out how sexual freedom for women put the “in a buyer’s market where the main customers were men” and they quote American feminist Robin Morgan who said in 1970 “the ‘theory’ of

283 My italics.
284 Ibid. p.184.
286 Ibid.
287 Gerster and Bassett, op. cit. p.183.
‘free sexuality’ meant ‘sex on demand for males.’” 288 What Gerster and Bassett seem to be saying here is that despite the male dominance of the counterculture the position of women was one that catalysed them into seeking a more thoroughgoing form of liberation. In this respect the 60s functioned as a necessary transitional period where the glimpses of relative freedom enabled women to see not only the distance they had traveled, but also how far they had yet to go. This would seem to be an obvious line of argument, but it’s one that Gerster and Bassett don’t pursue to any real extent: perhaps because this would be to imbue the 60s with a degree and type of agency they don’t wish to give it. Lest anyone should see the 60s as unique in regard to the development of the women’s movement Gerster and Bassett point out that such things as “the alliance of Australian feminism with anti-war activism was nothing new” and that it could be traced back to the First World War. Finally, they can’t resist taking a snipe at Donald Horne and John Docker who apparently seem “to think that feminism somehow ‘began’ in the sixties.” 289 That Gerster and Bassett believe not much is new is reflected in the title of their concluding chapter: ‘Revolution? What Revolution?’ It was just a seizure.

Of the legacy of the 60s Gerster and Bassett argue how “the revolution’s aberrations have been deeply regretted”, but that, nevertheless, “the diversification and liberalisation of Australia as a result of the sixties has been both profound and irreversible.” Though many “radical ambitions of the 1960s remain unfulfilled” they still see much that indicates “the redirection of broadly ‘counter-cultural’ energies into orthodox social endeavour”, such as environmentalism, equal opportunity, feminism and education. 290

As stated at the outset of this discussion there is much to be praised in Seizures of Youth. Gerster and Bassett cover a great deal of varied territory and despite the fact that this thesis is clearly at odds with their overall approach to the 60s, their text should still be seen as a provocative and welcome addition to the limited number of texts that deal with Australia during this watershed period.

288 Ibid. p.184.
289 Ibid. p.61.
New books by Australian authors about Australia in the 60s are not legion, so when there is an addition to the list, especially one with the all-encompassing title of The Sixties, it is understandably approached with some enthusiasm by those interested in that period. With regards to The Sixties that enthusiasm is short-lived.

The opening sentence of Eoin Cameron’s The Sixties describes Timothy Leary as “US psychologist and all-round weirdo.” It is a somewhat flippant comment that is indicative of the approach Cameron is to take. He notices things about the sixties, the outward appearance of things at least, and then makes a superficial comment about that person or event. And that’s it! Whether you like or loathe Timothy Leary is not the issue – either way it is a little foolish to dismiss a central and iconic figure of the 60s in such an offhand manner. Perhaps it is meant to be endearing, in that it is supposed to be reflective of a laid back, laconic ‘Aussieness’ some people see as a positive national trait.

Of course it is unfair to judge a book by its opening sentence, so you read on. Cameron does appear to redeem himself on the following page where he clearly shows his awareness of the historical importance of the 60s: “The sixties were not without problems, but compared to what went before, and what has come since, they were ten magical years. Ten years which changed the world forever.” These are not unusual claims to make about the 60s, but the disappointing aspect of The Sixties is that it fails to provide any critical analysis of the decade in an attempt to validate or invalidate such broad claims. Cameron is happy to say the 60s were “the best decade in history.” Again that is it, a broad generalization left to stand on its own; and “best” is such a problematic adjective, a vague, relative adjective, completely coloured by a limiting subjectivism and void of any significant meaning.

Another limiting weakness of The Sixties, exposed in the opening pages, is Cameron’s demarcation as to what constitutes that period of time. He literally takes the 60s to be from 1960 to 1969, as if all that the 60s epitomized could somehow be neatly compartmentalized, magically starting and ending on two special midnights.

\[291\] Eoin Cameron, op. cit. p.11.
\[292\] Ibid. p.12.
\[293\] Ibid.
\[294\] Ibid. p. 11.
Clearly the real problem with Cameron’s book is that it fails to be analytical to any significant degree. He’s happy to be judgemental and to make broad generalizations, like those mentioned above, but unwilling to provide any foundation upon which they could reasonably rest. He doesn’t have any thesis; there is just the retelling of some fond memories and anecdotes, enthusiasm for which is occasionally tempered by what he sees as taste and wisdom brought on by hindsight. The book is clearly meant to be a warm, nostalgic walk down a colourful memory lane. Even here there is no sense of connection, no sense of emotional or ideological engagement with the zeitgeist. So what we get is the paraphernalia and outward appearance of the 60s as if it was little more than a time of interesting clothes, hairstyles and music. We get observations that are superficial and cliched, devoid of passion and meaning.

For example, his analysis of the hippies: “The hippies scared the living daylights out of the grown-ups, but soon fizzled out on their own excesses.” Surviving hippies were those “few who whacked their brains so hard they’ve remained in a 1966 state of mind and can still be found tootling around in Volkswagen kombis, gazing at their navels on Indian mountains, or staring blankly into the distance in places like Nimbin and Byron Bay.” 295

Hippies probably did “scare the living daylights out of the grown-ups”, but the rest of it is a thoughtless surrendering to the most banal of stereotyping.

Cameron is equally critical and dismissive of the precursors of the hippies. The Beats, or “the folkie thing”, apparently consisted of “pale and not very interesting spotty youths with lank hair and marginally grubby personal hygiene” who strummed guitars and analysed Ginsberg and Kerouac. 296 Cameron’s skills of literary analysis come into play when he is readily able to pronounce that the “deeper and more obscure the poetry, the more admiration the poet attracted, when in fact ninety-nine point nine percent of what they were spouting was meaningless shit.” 297 It is perhaps a pity that Cameron didn’t bring these skills to bear a little closer to home.

It is often observed that women’s liberation, or second wave feminism, was one of the most important things to come out of the 60s. Cameron devotes two whole pages to

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295 Ibid. p.58.
296 Ibid. p180.
297 Ibid. p181.
this, with the heading Not Having A Bra Of It. Cameron relates how at the time he “formed a view that the ringleaders of the feminist movement were all so bloody ugly that no bloke would want them anyway. Betty Friedman, who was often arguing the cause on our TV screens was living proof that all feminists had been hit with the ugly stick, but then along came Gloria Steinem.”

Such comments are anathema to any of the tenets of feminism, and betray a way of thinking that is Ocker and sexist. Had the comments been put forward as those of a young boy still under the influence of the anachronistic thoughts of his parents and teachers, then it would perhaps be seen as understandable. But there is no resiling from the comments, no mitigating contextualization. Rather the comments stand as some sort of an attempt at a blokey joke.

For someone who seems to be so completely at odds with the 60s it seems strange that he should choose to recollect them. Cameron is attracted to the colourful superficialities of the period and in so doing he misses the bigger and more important aspects. It is hard to imagine writing about the 60s without considering the impact of the Vietnam War. Yet Cameron almost manages to do just this. Of the Moratorium marches in Australia he says: “The Vietnam War moratorium marches, which rapidly grew in size through the latter half of the sixties, saw thousands upon thousands of people taking to the streets all over Australia to protest our involvement in the war.” And this is the full extent of his consideration on one of Australia’s largest, most significant and divisive protest movements.

The Sixties, however, is very strong on lists. There are lists of the top ten songs for each year from 1961 to 1969. There are lists of movies: Elvis Presley movies; Carry On movies; The Man From Uncle movies; top grossing movies; lists of horror movies from Britain’s Hammer studio. Sometimes within these lists there are lists. For example, with the list of the Elvis movies you get a list of all his female co-stars. There is also a list of Eurovision Song Contest winners. Lists of television programs.

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299 Ibid. p286.
300 Ibid. pp283-284.
303 Ibid. p47, p75-76 and pp91-92.
a good thing, Cameron devotes the last forty pages of The Sixties to lists; his top forty favourite hit songs; his worst twenty hit songs; his top thirty “flicks”; his ten worst “flicks”; then as his coup de grace, a totally unconnected and meaningless list of people who were born in the 60s and a list of those who died in the 60s.\textsuperscript{304} All these lists are presented without any meaningful comment or analysis; there is never any attempt to contextualize these endless, and largely ad hoc, lists, no attempt to scrutinize their significance beyond ‘these are some things I remember, or have found out.’

If The Sixties was designed to trigger a few memories in some people, then I suppose there has been a modicum of success. Perhaps this is all Cameron had intended. If he intended the book to be more, then he has failed miserably, for The Sixties provides no insights, no revisions or reformulations or perspectives. It adds nothing to our understanding of the 60s.

\textsuperscript{304} Ibid. pp295-334.
CHAPTER 3

An Encouraging Push

“The Push rejected everything that Menzies stood for – respect for authority and family values, hard work and sobriety …. they stepped outside the conventional parameters of both social and political life.” Anne Coombs.\(^{305}\)

“We saw what we thought was a correspondence between freedom in one area and freedom in another and we came to the view that sexual freedom was somehow central to all the others.” Roelof Smilde.\(^{306}\)

“According to some … the Sydney Push was a drunken gang of logorrhoeac poseurs, that no-one could take seriously …. The reason why they are still of more interest than the many other cliques of Bohemian loudmouths that have infested Sydney pubs since the Rum Corps is that they have some claim in bringing about ‘the Sixties’.” James Franklin.\(^{307}\)

It is a truism that different cities manifest and foster different cultural identities. This would seem to still be largely true, despite the impact of globalization. It is also true of different cities within the same country: to live in London is not the same as living in Manchester and living in New York is not the same as living in San Francisco, nor is Melbourne the same as Sydney. Without a doubt sex was a preeminent factor in all cities that witnessed the countercultural practices of the 60s. Yet it is possible to argue that in the case of Sydney there were certain factors that predisposed many young people to valorize and foreground sex. This is not to argue that sex was not important as an emergent and assertive practice in other cities (this would be blatantly incorrect), but that there existed in Sydney a set of circumstances, including an active, if small, subculture, which helped produce an environment conducive to using sex as a countercultural

\(^{305}\) Anne Coombs, op. cit. p.viii.
practice to assault, disrupt and replace those structures being upheld by the dominant. These circumstances cannot be fully accounted for by the glib line that connects Sydney’s weather and proximity to the harbour and beaches to its so-called easy lifestyle and hedonism. That this is a factor cannot be discounted: warm weather and welcoming water are facilitative of the impulse to the sensuous and the sensual. It is certainly something Wilding was aware of when, “surrendering the old world”, he arrived in Sydney: “The sun, that was what he always remembered, the sun, the warmth.” With “the sun, the warmth” comes a sense of ease and freedom: “the sun, the beaches, the parties, the bars, the restaurants. Living in Sydney was what in England you would save up for a year to experience.” And the perceived link between that warm sun and sex would have appeared all the more poignant to the newly acquainted observer and participant: “The sun. The sensuality. Certainly all exotic. Just the body was exotic after England. Here there was a perpetual golden tawniness.” For Wilding “the sun and the distance away from the old world had bleached away sexual inhibitions. Here people drank and made love and felt the sun on their pores with a freedom that he could never imagine could be attempted in England.” Clearly Wilding felt there to be a productive nexus between Sydney’s weather and sexual freedom. But other cities have warm weather and water, but not necessarily the focus on sex that Sydney had in the 60s. With Sydney, however, it is possible to identify a series of factors that provide a better explanation for the prominent role given to sex. And yes other cities during the 60s saw sex play a preeminent role, and yes the focus on sex in Sydney may still have occurred without the existence of these other factors. However, it is hard to deny some causal link between these factors and the centrality of sex in Sydney in the 60s, and in turn sex’s preeminent position in that city’s countercultural practices, not the least of which was the early fiction of Michael Wilding.

John Anderson came from Scotland to Australia in 1927. He took up the Challis Chair in Philosophy at the University of Sydney in that year and held the position until his retirement in 1958. Longevity of tenure isn’t always commensurate with creating an

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310 Michael Wilding, Wildest Dreams. pp.54-55.
impact and leaving a legacy. However, with Anderson there is unanimity that he was a forceful, charismatic and influential figure who profoundly influenced those he came in contact with, though that unanimity doesn’t extend to everyone viewing his impact as being a positive one. In their introduction to their 1982 collection of Anderson’s theoretical papers and critical studies, Graham Cullum and Kimon Lycos describe Anderson as a “legendary figure hovering over the intellectual history of the university” who exerted “a remarkable influence over colleagues and students alike.”

But of course “colleagues and students” don’t remain hermetically sealed within the grounds of the university, forever limited to lecture theatres or around the jacaranda tree in the quadrangle where Anderson could often be seen talking and arguing with students.

John Docker believes Anderson’s influence “was pervasive in Sydney intellectual history” and that he “provided a total cultural stance … and offered an alternative mode of living.” Christine Wallace expresses and accepts David Armstrong’s view that the “fiery Scot dominated the intellectual life of Sydney for decades”.

It would seem that in John Anderson we have a figure who was able to deeply influence the intellectual and cultural life of Sydney. However, his influence is not what we might have expected to come from some professor working in Sydney in the thirties, forties and fifties. Andersonianism comprised, among other things, a critical mode of thinking that advocated a questioning of all aspects of society: religion, morality, nationalism, sexuality, censorship, education, aesthetics … anything and everything was to be questioned. In an exchange with the Chancellor of the university, during a special meeting of the Senate, Anderson stated: “There should be no limit to discussion in any matter … I consider that good must come from criticism …. A philosophical person should be prepared to discuss any matter.” Anderson had said this in 1931 and it was a position he came to hold more stridently over the next twenty or so years. As the title of

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312 Many exciting discussions took place beneath that iconic jacaranda tree…. As they say, the people it’s seen and the stories it’s heard! Given the central importance of the tree, it’s mildly amusing to have one author call it a “frangipani”. However, that author is better on biography than botany. See Robert Milliken, Lillian Roxon: Mother of Rock. Black Inc. Melbourne, 2002. p.63.


314 Armstrong studied under Anderson, became a member of the Push and later occupied Sydney’s Chair of Philosophy. Christine Wallace, op.cit. p.75.
Brian Kennedy’s biography of Anderson highlights, he had “a passion to oppose.” For Anderson such questioning and opposition weren’t to be limited to specific goals; protest and opposition were to be permanent. Anderson was also critical of all attempts to reform society and in 1943 he wrote that the “well-intentioned reformer always produces results which he did not anticipate, helps on tendencies to which he is avowedly opposed.”

Eugene Kamenka recalls how it “was a life of permanent opposition, of unending struggle against powerful social forces that could never be ultimately and finally defeated.” David Armstrong explained how Anderson believed, “Every icon was to be smashed: God, immortality, free will, moralism, the common good of society …. The smasher of traditional icons is often quick to set up other icons in their place. Anderson was just as keen to smash the smasher of icons.” The point for Anderson was to be ruthlessly realistic and to be in an intellectual state that realized the impossibility of achieving some ideal society, but to be constantly aware, critical and in a state of sentient opposition. It was this ongoing criticism of the status quo, coupled with the feeling that attempting to change the status quo was ultimately futile, that became one of the central tenets of Push philosophy, resulting in their choosing to exist as a subculture at a critical remove from mainstream society.

The other salient aspect of Anderson’s philosophy that deeply impacted on those around him, and in turn the Push, was his approach to sex. Anderson’s approach was the antithesis of that held by mainstream society and it was an approach whose advocacy he repeatedly expressed loudly and publicly. As Brian Kennedy notes: “Such frankness and courage, when applied to sexual matters and their open and public discussion, were unusual in a professor in the 1920s and 1930s”. There was “Anderson’s blunt assertion that man is a sexual animal, and in this as in other activities can only learn by ‘trial and error’”.

Indeed, such “frankness and courage” would have been unusual in most people in the 20s and 30s, professors or not, and such an attitude would continue to be unusual well into the 40s and 50s, and even into the early 60s. It was a position Anderson had long held. In 1917 he wrote to Jenny Baillie (who became his wife): “I have no use for

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316 John Docker, op. cit. p.133.
317 Brian Kennedy, op. cit. pp.151-152.
318 Ibid. p.94.
religion - and very little for morality….all ideals, ultimates, symbols, agencies and the
like are to be rejected …. There are only facts.”\textsuperscript{319} For Anderson one of these facts was:
“Repression may prevent motives from operating in certain ways, but it cannot put them
out of existence. It can force them to adapt themselves to it, but this only means that they
find some clandestine and insidious mode of operation, while they remain ready to break
out in the original direction at the first favourable moment.”\textsuperscript{320} And, as with all forms of
repression, sexual repression was not only detrimental, but also futile, just waiting for
that “favourable moment” which would begin with the Push and extend into that
‘favourable decade’ of the 60s.

One of Anderson’s most influential essays was written in response to the
“prohibition of the importation of James Joyce’s Ulysses into Australia. ‘Art and
Morality’\textsuperscript{321} not only presented Anderson’s cogently argued attack against the banning of
the novel, but also contained some of his most powerful arguments for a more liberated
sexual lifestyle. The case against banning Ulysses and the case for sexual freedom were
linked. According to Anderson Joyce’s position “is above all a refusal to serve, a
rejection of despotism… a rejection of the master-servant relationship”. Central to the
maintenance of a “master-servant relationship”, to a position of “servitude”, is the
repression of sexuality. “Servile” people “are shocked by it (Ulysses) because it confronts
them with a freedom they have lost … because it attacks the ceremonial and fetishistic
system by which they conceal these things from themselves.” The “guardians are
anxious” because they don’t wish the servile to “learn that anything but the ceremonial
system exists.” And, for Anderson, it is most “noteworthy that what they are not to hear
about is above all sexual transgression” whereas other “transgressions” such as
“spite…tyranny and greed” are not censored because “they are not taken to be contagious
in the way that sexual impropriety is supposed to be.” Anderson is then led to ask: “Is the
position, then, that sexual freedom has a particularly secularising tendency, that it cuts
more sharply than other ‘transgressions’ across the hierarchical system?” Anderson
concludes: “thus it is demanded that sexual enjoyment be subordinated to reproduction,

\textsuperscript{319} Ibid. p.65.
\textsuperscript{320} Ibid. p.94.
\textsuperscript{321} ‘Art and Morality’ in Janet Anderson, Graham Cullum and Kimon Lycos, op cit.
and the independent pursuit of it is regarded as a grievous sin.” 322 The overall effect of such sexual repression is not only to limit the individual, but to control society at large: “it may be that, without exercising some command over the sexual life of the lower orders, authorities could never keep them docile.” 323

For Anderson sexual freedom is a prerequisite to an escape from docility and servitude. Important as this is, Anderson goes on to prosecute the case for an even more crucial role to be played by sexual freedom: “it may be argued, along these lines, that freedom in love is the condition of other freedoms, that while in itself it does not constitute culture, there can be no culture without it, that it continually enriches and is enriched by various forms of productive (enterprising) activity – Science, Art, Industry.” 324 Repression of sexuality is to separate it from “the active life which it would fructify.” Religion, and its “mysteries” is one means whereby this is achieved, yet there had always been the attempt to break out of these restraints and “one of the earliest exercises in freethought, is to explode the mysteries by completing the earthly parallel.” So the dominant’s repression of sexual freedom is not only a means of social control, but also a denial of the life force, and the act of sex, the “earthly parallel”, is an act of rebellion. For Anderson, sexual repression held “the central place … in any repressive system” and that “fear of sexuality carries over into fear of social disorder”. The absence of a sexual life, “which can never be other than distorted sexuality”, results in “quietism.” 325

At the conclusion of ‘Art and Morality’ Anderson preempts the centrality of sexual freedom in the work and actions of some of the younger associates of the Push, such as Michael Wilding, Frank Moorhouse and Wendy Bacon. Though with Ulysses “the sexual side of the book is only incidental” it can still serve a liberating purpose: “Even its printing of the ‘unprintable’ is to be taken mainly as an intellectual rejection of the customary”. The sexual side of Ulysses reveals “the hell of bourgeois existence” and “the crux of the matter is servitude and the escape from servitude.” And one of the best facilitators for achieving this “escape” is fiction: “the artistic attack is more effective… 

322 Ibid. pp.88-89.
323 Ibid. pp.89-90.
324 Ibid.p.90.
the work of art is more pointed, it particularizes, and so can bite through the defences of
those whom mere argument would leave unaroused.” Good art, like Ulysses, is
“diametrically opposed to perceptual morality”. The “literary artist … describes …
classifies … correlates” and “art occurs in society, in history; it has conditions and
consequences”. One of those consequences is to affect liberation in the lives of readers.
“In brief, the struggle between art and moralism is the struggle between innovation and
conservation in society… it (art) must still seek to discover and to push its discoveries as
hard as it can against the inertia of custom”. In keeping with Anderson’s concept of
permanent protest and the impossibility of complete success he concluded that with art
and the status quo “neither can conquer”, but nor is “compromise” an option for the artist
because “that way lies artistic death and social stagnation”. 326 There is much here in what
Anderson has to say about sex and the role of writing that the author of Aspects of the
Dying Process, Living Together and Scenic Drive would be in agreement with.

In John Anderson we have a charismatic figure whose strong impact was to create
an intellectual milieu where authority could, indeed must, be questioned and challenged
and where protest was to be permanent. He left a philosophical framework that provided
not only a way of thinking, but also a way of living and behaving. Central to
Andersonianism was the strong belief in the rebellious efficacy of striving for sexual
liberation, the benefits of which were not only for the individual, but society at large.

Whilst the Andersonian philosophical legacy was to continue for many years
Anderson’s personal influence was to wane rapidly in the late 1940s and early 1950s. By
1949 many of Anderson’s student followers were becoming disillusioned with him as he
became “virulently anti-communist” and “increasingly elitist”. Anderson’s support for
Prime Minister Chifley’s use of troops to break the miners’ strike “shocked” his
followers. In 1950 in a meeting of Anderson’s Freethought Society, which met regularly
at the university, a crowd of 250 people gathered. Students were against Prime Minister
Menzies’ conscription for the Korean War. Anderson argued that the main battle was
against the encroachment of Russia and that anti-conscription was a distraction. Out of all
the people there, not one person supported Anderson. “By 1951 it was obvious to
everyone that the Freethought Society was finished” and along with it Anderson’s

326 Ibid. pp.91-93.
personal sway: he was no longer the pluralist, determined to question everything, taking on authority in the spirit of permanent protest.\footnote{327} Much had changed about Anderson, who seemed to be living out the cliched trajectory of the young radical who ages into a conservative. By 1951 Anderson was critical that “an active sexual life might help students to liberate themselves from their sexual illusions.”\footnote{328} The Push would take on the philosophical position of the younger Anderson, but would have nothing to do with the older and more reactionary Anderson.

This disenchantment with Anderson and his Freethought Society saw the creation of the Libertarian Society which chose to move away from the university campus, first meeting in the Ironworkers’ Hall, and later in the cafes and pubs of the inner city, such as the Lincoln coffee shop and the Tudor Inn.\footnote{329} “The Libertarians continued the chief interests of pre-1950s Andersonianism”: moralism and authoritarianism were to be constantly subject to critical enquiry.\footnote{330} Out of preference, rather than necessity, the Libertarians retreated from society; like other sub-cultures they were happy to lead their lifestyles away from the mainstream society’s pressures of conformity and censure. Libertarianism became a way of life for its members. Libertarianism was not to be just some debating and drinking society, though plenty of this was done, but a mutually supportive and self-endorsing group of people whose lifestyle was at odds with that of the dominant. The Libertarians were “the heart of the Push”; they were the “central group” who provided the philosophy that informed the Push.\footnote{331} The Libertarians and many within the wider and more encompassing Push had come into contact with Anderson and so when they moved away from the campus they not surprisingly appropriated and adapted those aspects of his philosophy they found attractive. Push luminaries ranging from Jim Baker, George Molnar, Darcy Waters, Roelof Smilde, Paddy McGuinness to Lillian Roxon influenced the philosophy and behaviour of the Push, and this philosophy and behaviour was in turn to have its impact on those later arrivals into the Push milieu,

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\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{327}{Anne Coombs, op cit. pp.11-12.}
\item \footnote{328}{Brian Kennedy, op cit. p.167.}
\item \footnote{329}{Anne Coombs, op cit. pp.13 and 16.}
\item \footnote{330}{John Docker, op cit. p.150.}
\item \footnote{331}{Anne Coombs, op cit. pp. vii-ix.}
\end{itemize}
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such as Wendy Bacon, Germaine Greer, Frank Moorhouse, and Michael Wilding. The Push was “retreatist and heavily inner-urban” with an anarchistic lifestyle, though in keeping with Andersonianism it was “pessimistic anarchism”, or “anarchism without ends”, rather than anything remotely positive like utopian anarchism. Their anarchism was expressed in their pursuit of personal freedoms and group lifestyle with an eschewal of any impulse to social activism. Only towards the declining days of the Push would this refusal to engage in social activism change.

Again, taking the lead from Anderson, the Push “insisted on hedonism and sexual freedom”: they stressed that “intellectual values can be integrated with life-styles.” Anderson’s philosophy towards sexual freedom was reinforced for the Push by their reading, discussion and acceptance of the writing of Wilhelm Reich. Reich’s writing reinforced and gave depth and detail to what the Push believed about sex: it provided an up to date, philosophical and ‘scientific’ imprimatur to the sexual lifestyle of the Push. Reich believed that “sexual pleasure is the ultimate measure of human happiness” and was openly hostile to the “repressiveness of modern civilization.” He regarded “sexual repression as one of the principal mechanisms of political domination.” Reich was to support his views on sex in a more specific and detailed manner than Anderson ever did. His books, such as The Function of the Orgasm, The Mass Psychology of Fascism and The Sexual Revolution, were readily available (though somewhat less than accessible to most readers) and whilst they may not have been read by many, those who had read them, whether in part or whole, would discuss the key ideas with others in the Push. Reich argued that the orgasm was the key to sexual, individual and societal health. He spoke of “orgastic potency”, which meant that the “true orgasm had to result in the complete release of dammed-up libido.” Additionally, orgasm had to be “heterosexual, without irrelevant fantasies, and of appropriate duration.” Reich was specific in his definition of the term ‘sexual’; he meant the sexual act of intercourse, rather the broader application

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332 Anne Coombs, op cit., Robert Milliken, op cit. and Christine Wallace, op. cit. all provide an exhaustive treatment of the various and varied members of the Push.
335 Ibid. p.151 and Christine Wallace, op cit. p.79.
337 Ibid. p.17.
of the term to include a variety of other acts. Instead of the term ‘sexual’ he preferred to use ‘genital’; sex was the full penetration of the penis into the vagina and for women their orgasm had to be vaginal, a fact that would not have perturbed too many men in the Push. 338 Push thinking was in full accord with what Reich was saying, though many of the women would later question the definition of “appropriate duration”. 339

For the individual the “very repressiveness of bourgeois sexual mores brought about an intensification of neurotic disorders” 340 and certainly nobody in the Push would want to be “bourgeois” or “neurotic”. The main culprit responsible for sexual repression was the patriarchal family which demanded monogamous marriage and whose “raison d’etre was sexual repression.” Marriage was “a factory for authoritarian ideologies”. 341 A sexual revolution was needed for the individual and society: Reich believed there was the “crucial interdependence of social and sexual liberation.” He was highly critical of marital fidelity, believing that “every individual had the right to seek a new partner whenever his sexual happiness so demanded.” 342

The philosophical framework provided by Anderson and Reich gave the Push a way of thinking and a way of living. It was clearly at odds with mainstream society, but for the members of the Push this was an indication that they were right. In any event the Push intentionally chose to keep well away from contact with the dominant and as individuals and a group they were well insulated from any censure that should come their way. Employment, except of the casual kind necessitated by the need for some ready money, and living in the suburbs was anathema to the push lifestyle. Indeed, they were too busy drinking, arguing and leading the sexually liberated lifestyle. Anne Coombs has remarked how the Push lived “out their ideas and forged ahead with the sexual revolution a good fifteen years before the rest of society…. They were counter-culture before the

339 This is a point made in several recollections by Push women. See for example, Anne Coombs, op cit. pp. 262 and 270. “You had to try to have them (ie. vaginal orgasms), but with these men it was hard because it was all over so quickly.” “Sexual performance…. of core Libertarians (male) was described as ‘workmanlike’, ‘threadbare’ and with a ‘lack of foreplay’. ” It is also a point made in Judy Ogilvie, The Push: An Impressionist Memoir. Primavera Press. Sydney, 1995. p. 93. A female member of the Push mocks: “…two inches of ecstasy, satisfaction guaranteed in five seconds or not at all.”
340 Paul Robinson, op cit p.42.
341 Ibid. p.49.
342 Ibid. pp. 52-53.
term existed.” However, not all members of the Push recall its heyday as being constituted by rampant sexuality. Grahame Harrison, whose memoir Night Train To Granada recounts his experiences as a member of the Push in the early 1950s, believes life in the Push “was not one of Rabelaisian promiscuity.” He recalls how there was “a great deal of talk at Push parties, a lot of singing, a lot of drinking, and some sex”.

Such a view about sexual activity within the Push is an isolated one, though Harrison does go on to say that the sexual activity of the Push may seem tame by contemporary standards, but that in the 50s it was anything but “staid and unadventurous” and that “feminists who now attack the Push of that era for the alleged chauvinism of its males (and we were certainly not free of it) forget what the alternative was like.”

Whilst Harrison may be alone in thinking that there wasn’t much sex going on around the Push, it doesn’t mean that all now fondly recall the Push lifestyle as halcyon days of joyous sex. This is true with some of the women, as their already noted comments about male performance indicate. 1950s Push was pre-pill days and pregnancy was an issue and abortions, somewhat less than romantically called “scrapes”, were common enough. The women were to take care of these “scrapes”, though the men would magnanimously collect the money to pay for it. Yet compared to the gender roles prescribed by the dominant it is difficult not to see life as a member of the Push as being relatively liberated. It is a point Christine Wallace makes: “The Push assumed a certain equality between the sexes, symbolized by its male and female participants’ unconventional practice of drinking together in the bars of favoured Sydney’s hotels.” More importantly Wallace points out that “the most important symbol of sexual equality was acknowledgement of the fact that women had sexual appetites of their own, and were free to initiate liaisons with men instead of being asked.” Of course it is easy to see how such freedoms for women liberated them right into the hands of the Push men. Women, being the ones most likely to be in steady employment, were also now liberated to buy the men drinks in the bars. However, with this sexual freedom there was a

343 Anne Coombs, op cit. p.viii and x.
345 Ibid. p.76.
347 Christine Wallace, op cit. pp. 82-83.
“hierarchy of fucks” and women who wanted a sense of prestige would be involved in the “Push equivalent of power-fucking.”

Judy Ogilvie concurs when she says for a woman, “Whom you slept with was of overwhelming importance.” Ogilvie goes on to point out another inequity in that it became difficult for the women as they aged, but the men, even if they showed their age, still held the positions of prestige and power, therefore the raison d’etre for women wanting to have sex with them still resided with them. The men “stayed together, growing older, while the women were continually being replaced by younger ones.”

If a woman could fuck an important male member of the Push, and the more times the better in order to lay claim to a privileged position, then ergo the woman would be important. In this way the Push was ironically mimicking the patriarchal gender stereotyping of mainstream society where a woman who could ‘catch’ a banker or doctor would gain the associated prestige; though admittedly there is probably some difference between fucking Darcy or Roelof and marrying a banker or doctor. It was difficult to avoid an irony: “to be the exception to the rule that even groups flouting conventional mores share some of the attitudes of the dominant culture.”

John Docker concludes: “In general, Libertarian sexual activity and theory reflected their particular Australian society, in its heterosexuality, and in its anti-feminism…. Male and female relations were socially conditioned.”

One woman recalls her time in the Push and talks of the tremendous pressure on women to be available for sex and that “free love was free, in that men didn’t have to pay”. There was a feeling that men wanted to notch up as many conquests as possible.

Eva Cox is in agreement: “I thought the object of free love was to fuck who you wanted to, not to fuck anything that moved…. I think to a certain degree the women were conned.”

Indeed the trenchant criticism of second wave feminism finds fertile soil in the Push. The freedom of Push women was transitional and conditional; none of them could have been expected to step outside of their particular cultural moment in history anymore than they had already done. Despite this transitional and conditional nature of women’s freedom within the Push most saw the Push as an escape from the restrictions of the dominant and more than willingly

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348 Ibid. p.83.
349 Judy Ogilvie, op cit. p.114.
352 Anne Coombs, op cit. p. 100.
embraced its mores and lifestyle. All these traits of the Push and a woman’s place in it are rendered in Julia Lawrinson’s The Push. Stylistically the novel may be a little pedestrian and the plot predictable, nevertheless the life of the young female protagonist, Erica, does touch on the aspects of a woman’s time in the Push: the excitement of the escape from conformity at home and work to the freedom and exhilaration of the Push; the ‘charisma’ of the Push leaders; the privileged position of the men; the talk and the ideas; the drinking and the sex and the horror of a “scrape” gone wrong.

For many of the individuals in the Push another negative issue that had to be dealt with was jealousy. When people break away from the constraints of the dominant, with its credo of monogamy and possessiveness, and move in a milieu of free sex it is difficult, maybe impossible, to not feel the residual impact of jealousy. “One of the biggest demons of all for Libertarians was jealousy…. Both men and women suffered from jealousy, and from guilt about the jealousy.” Roelof Smilde later conceded that in “eliminating jealousy we were not successful at all… it was a constant battle.” And it was a battle, he admits, where they couldn’t really expect to gain an unequivocal victory. Reich had said that seeing a loved one in bed with someone else was a painful experience and the thing to do was to recognize what was going on and to struggle with it. One woman of the Push recalls when her ‘partner’ brought someone home “and fucked her in the other room…. It was an indescribable feeling of pain…. And I’ve never really forgiven him – it was fucking vicious.”

Yet for all its ability to inflict pain and hardship the Push remained an attractive phenomena and the vast majority of those who were drawn to it willingly maintained the connection, finding that the lifestyle it offered was far preferable to anything else going on in Sydney at the time. Of course, not everyone was enamoured with the Push. Barry Humphries first had contact with the Push in the late 1950s and described them as “a fraternity of middle-class desperates, journalists, drop out academics, gamblers and poets manques, and their doxies.” These doxies were “mostly suburban girls; primary school

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358 Ibid. p.123.
teachers and art students, who each night after working hours exchanged their irksome respectability for a little liberating profanity, drunkenness and sex”. In his Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia, James Franklin is essentially in agreement with Humphries. For Franklin the Push was a clique of “Bohemian loudmouths” who “infested Sydney pubs”. He cites how some view the Push as “a drunken gang of logorrhoeac poseurs, that no-one could take seriously” and finds such opinions “all close to the truth.” The likes of Germaine Greer and Richard Neville are “late hangers-on”. Franklin believed Push philosophy was “simplistic and self-serving tripe”. Given this attitude to the Push, Franklin tries to account for its appeal by providing five broad reasons: the Push was “an island of excitement in a sea of dullness”; it was a substitute family: it provided an outlet for youthful rebellion; penicillin, and later the pill, made sexual freedom less risky; and the Push “actually took ideas and argument seriously.” Whether or not these five points fully account for the attractiveness of the Push is arguable, yet it would seem that each point, at least hypothetically, provides a pretty good explanation as to why people were drawn to the Push. And given that these seem to be pretty good reasons, it is a pity that Franklin doesn’t link them to his clearly stated antipathy to the Push: we are left to conclude that there were good reasons for people joining, but once in the Push they became naughty people and bad things were done.

This brief account of the characteristics of the Push and its genesis with regards to Anderson and Reich is to set the scene for Michael Wilding’s arrival in Australia. Anne Coombs has concluded that in “some respects, 1963 was the high point of the Push.” Michael Wilding arrived in Australia in 1963. He came from England to take up a position at Sydney University where his trajectory would bring him into contact with the Push, but see him fail to become one of Barry Humphries’ “dropout academics”. This thesis strives to explore the contribution Wilding’s early fiction makes, via its portrayal of sex, to the countercultural changes occurring during the 60s. This thesis attempts not

359 Christine Wallace, op. cit. p.69.
362 Anne Coombs, op. cit. p.145.
only to contextualize these early works of Wilding’s, but also to establish the reciprocal relationship of cause and effect between those texts and their historical context. Wilding would be in agreement with such a project: in his own work of literary criticism Wilding says he has “increasingly tried to restore that absent historical and social context. I do not believe that formal issues can properly be understood in isolation from the social context in which the work was produced.” Moreover, Wilding continues, “without a historical background, we are left in no position to understand what is happening now and without the means to evaluate and criticize and confront the present.”

And whilst this thesis makes no attempt to be a biography of Wilding it is, nevertheless, germane to consider some very brief aspects of Wilding’s personal history in order to better contextualize the impulse and aims of his early fiction.

Wilding was born in Worcester in the English midlands in 1942. His father was an ironmoulder whose dirty job could reasonably be seen as being responsible for his death from emphysema. His mother came from a “family of servants to the aristocracy”. She was very conservative whilst his father, coming from the “English oppositional puritan tradition, was “more critical of the social order.” However, his father later “became totally committed to the capitalist system’ and Michael Wilding recalls how this “made for conflict between us, between his commitment to the system and my opposition to it”. Even when Wilding gained a scholarship to the local grammar school, and then onto university at Oxford, gaining “a privileged education”, he “always felt conscious of being on the outside of that world of privilege.” In Wild Amazement Wilding recalls an episode from his “privileged education” where the school’s motto of sperno mutare had been changed on the prize giving program by some students with access to the duplicating machine to spermo mutare. Typical schoolboy high jinks no doubt, but perhaps an introduction to something a little more for Wilding: “I was not a natural anarchist though I was beginning to recognise the appeals of subversion.”

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Ian Syson has noted related character traits manifesting in Wilding’s early fiction. He cites the story ‘Canal Run’ from The West Midland Underground where Wilding talks of his loathing for those runs which he saw as “instruments of taming and torture”, an attitude that revealed his “separateness from the bulk of people… and the attitudes I hated.” Syson points out Wilding’s “introspection, impotent anti-authoritarianism, suspicion and separateness”. Some good qualities here for a writer, maybe even essential ones, though I’m less sure that Wilding’s anti-authoritarianism has been all that impotent. Even as a young boy Wilding actively began to participate in “struggles and resistances”: he refused to join the school cadet force, telling his father, “I’m a pacifist.” He told the cadet’s commanding officer that he was against militarism and when the officer said the cadets weren’t militarism Wilding’s response was a simple “I think it is.” It’s a response indicative of Wilding’s individualism and resistance to the status quo and it’s a trait that only seemed to intensify over the years: Andrew Riemer recalls Wilding at the University of Sydney as someone “who had struck (him) as fierce in his nonconformism”. However, his early nonconformism, his refusal to join the cadets, didn’t put him with like-minded idealists, but in the “work gang of the marginalized, the malingerers, the delinquent, not officer-material.” If Wilding wondered at this stage if it might not have been an easier option to join the cadets, to toe the line, he doesn’t say, though it is certainly something he thought about later as reflected upon the actions of his adult life. That he believes his actions were productive of negative personal consequences never leads Wilding to resile or recant. Of course such actions of the young Wilding reveal a predisposition and not some imperative, though his lifelong trajectory may call this statement into question.

So in 1963 we have the arrival in Sydney of a young writer and academic who is willing to question things about how the dominant functions. He is a young man who will

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367 Andrew Riemer, op. cit. p.154.
368 Michael Wilding, Wild Amazement. pp.11-12.
369 Wilding writes about this at length in Wildest Dreams. See especially Chapter 12 ‘Nigredo’ where he talks about the surveillance, the blacklisting and lack of advancement. “Your career was going fine till you announced you were a marxist,’ laughed Peter.” To which Wilding replied, “‘I don’t see any point in writing unless it’s going to effect change, it’s got to be political otherwise I can’t be bothered to write it.’” p.179. In a lunch I had with Wilding, and several others, Wilding revealed that Peter was Peter Carey. Meeting in Leichhardt, Sydney, 15th October, 1998.
not only refuse to participate, but who will also actively engage in the emergent and assertive practices of the time. In 1963 we have the arrival of Wilding into the milieu of the Push whose ethos and lifestyle was coloured and reinforced by the philosophy of John Anderson and Wilhelm Reich. There was the sun and water too. It was a confluence of factors that would see Wilding’s early fiction foreground sex as an emergent and assertive practice designed to confront the dominant, seeking to subvert and replace its practices. In Wild Amazement Wilding recalls just how extraordinary this new world was that he found himself in: “Even to have imagined that the push, the world of the Libertarians, as they called themselves, was a site of the exotic seems, from this distance, something in which the search for the appropriate word can only fail.” He found it all “absurd, bizarre, comic, daft, extraordinary, an alphabet of possibilities”. And into those “possibilities” Wilding willingly and enthusiastically immersed himself: “So there I was. Amongst it, amidst it, or at least on the periphery. Regretting nothing.” The Push provided a world of drinking, of debating and arguing, a world of mutually supportive people who were at odds with mainstream Sydney culture and who lived out their ideas. The most salient “appeal of course was sexuality” and unlike mainstream society’s attitude to sex “within the push there was a proclaimed openness.”

It was all very different to England: “But it was the practice of libertarianism that was the lure. Here people didn’t just debate freedom and morality, they fuck... Well, people no doubt fucked in England; but never, it seemed … with the same gusto, the same ease and readiness.”

Not only did people fuck, but the role of the male as sexual initiator, or predator, seemed open to variation: “Women could come up to men and ask for a fuck. This was not normative in those times, but it was part of the idiom of the push.”

Germaine Greer is perhaps the highest profile person to be part of the Push. When Wilding took up his position in the University of Sydney in 1963 Germaine Greer was already part of the English Department. Wilding must have gotten to know her early on (perhaps nonconformists are attracted to each other) as it was Greer who helped

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370 Michael Wilding, Wild Amazement. p.57.
371 Michael Wilding, Wildest Dreams. p. 54.
372 Michael Wilding, Wild Amazement. p.57.
373 Both Anne Coombs op. cit and Christine Wallace op. cit. deal quite extensively with Greer’s participation in the life of the Push.
Wilding in those days of house hunting in Sydney, getting him away from the university college which he found to be “hideous”: “Germaine rescued him…. Germaine took him to Newtown and organised a kettle and teapot and saucepan and mugs and instant coffee”.  

The Newcastle was a popular meeting place for the Push from around 1965 till it closed in 1973. It attracted not only the Libertarians, but also “arty bohemians”, executives and journalists; the Newcastle didn’t have the “toughness” of that other Push meeting place, the Royal George. It was at the Newcastle that Wilding preferred to drink; it is the pub that is mentioned on numerous occasions in the autobiographical Wildest Dreams and Wild Amazement. Wilding was fully aware of the hedonistic allure of the pubs and how they were central to the cultural, philosophical and sexual life of the Push: “The pub. That exchange of ideas and touch. That transit lounge for sexual travellers. Critical drinkers.” Wilding recalls how his “privileged life of the university”, would give him a free morning, “indeed many mornings free, and afternoons and evenings too, in which I could stand at the Newcastle bar drinking beers at eleven or twelve or two or five”. The Newcastle was where Wilding drank and talked with members of the Push, including the likes of Frank Moorhouse and Wendy Bacon. Anne Coombs describes Moorhouse as “spouting Libertarian theory with the best of them” and such “spouting” would have constituted much of the conversation (and indeed the fiction) of Wilding and Moorhouse: “I used to see Frank down in the old bohemian milieu of the Newcastle Hotel.” The centrality of the Newcastle to Wilding’s lifestyle and early fiction is evidenced by his getting a photograph taken of the bar of the Newcastle to use for the front cover of Aspects of the Dying Process. It’s a photograph complete with Wilding at the bar: “The photograph shows a high ceiling, open windows, something that looks like

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375 Michael Wilding, Wildest Dreams, p. 2.
376 See, for example, Wildest Dreams, pp. 61, 63, 102 and Wild Amazement, pp.25-27, 28, 29, 67 and 83.
377 Michael Wilding, Wildest Dreams, p.54.
378 Michael Wilding, Wild Amazement, p.26. There is certainly a great deal of drinking in Wildest Dreams and Wild Amazement, but both books also see Wilding partaking of a great deal of dope and sex. Such were the times of course, but one really has to wonder how he found time to do all this and to teach and research at the university, be politically active and to write so prolifically. It makes all us other baby boomers wonder if we were really trying at all.
379 Anne Coombs, op. cit. p.124.
a street lantern on a post at the corner of the bar…. I think I see myself, partially obscured.”

Given that Wilding arrived in a city conducive to the life of the body and given that much of his time and interest was spent in the milieu of the Push it is hardly surprising that his early fiction is reflective, and in turn supportive and encouraging, of the Push approach to sex. Wilding was shown around by Germaine Greer, he spent a lot of time drinking and talking in the Newcastle and mixing with members of the Push, albeit often fringe Push members, and he taught at a university where John Anderson and the Libertarians had held forth and philosophically held sway. And given that the young Wilding had arrived from England with a predisposition to nonconformity it would be a lot more surprising if his writing was not concerned with the sexual values of the Push. It was an influence Wilding was fully aware of: “At the time I wrote Living Together, around 1970, I had a general leftist position, but I wouldn’t call it a Marxist one. I’d spent a lot of time hanging around the Sydney push and that really was a premature post-Marxist grouping. Some of those values, that cynical libertarian bohemianism, probably crept into some of the characters in Living Together.”

The early fiction of Wilding certainly represents the Push’s liberated attitude to sex, yet it is a representation that is not simply a straightforward mirroring of that position. Rather it is a rendering that is coloured and modified by the broader influence of the emerging and assertive countercultural forces of the time. The ensuing analysis of Wilding’s early fiction will reveal a more detailed, nuanced and problematic approach to sex than may have been suggested by the Push espousal of sex as an untrammelled series of free sexual liaisons. For example, in Wilding’s work we will see not only the free expression of sexual desire and its satiation, but also the myriad difficulties young people navigate as they lead sexually liberated lives. Wilding’s fiction is not simply a rendering of free and open fucking (though there is this) as experienced by some subculture, rather it is a rendering of a complete lifestyle that was being lived by large numbers of young people in Sydney as they went about setting up relationships and living arrangements and as they confronted feelings of desire, love, loathing and jealousy that go beyond the brief sexual

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381 Michael Wilding, Wild Amazement. p. 29. The Newcastle wasn’t of central importance to only Wilding: Wendy Bacon cried when it closed its doors. Anne Coombs, op. cit. p.280.
encounter. Characters in Wilding’s work establish relationships, conclude relationships, set up home, live together and separate.

In this sense Wilding has taken on the values of the Push, but these values have been altered in the crucible of the 60s. Perhaps without his exposure to the world of the Push Wilding’s attitude to the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s would have been less receptive and positive. Ian Syson sees these values of the Push as being so pervasive that there is “a libertarian streak that runs throughout Wilding’s work, a streak with which he is still trying to come to terms.”  

Wilding was of course fully aware, and appreciative, that the lifestyle of the Push was not the lifestyle shared by mainstream society in Sydney, or mainstream Western society for that matter: “Australia inherited some very repressive attitudes, and when I arrived in Australia it was the time of conflict between those older repressive values and the new emerging sexual openness. So sexuality was one of the themes that came to characterize the new writing emerging in Australia in the sixties and seventies.”

Wilding recalls: “At the time Australia was politically very conservative but the actual lifestyle of the city was very liberated. There was a discrepancy between the way people were living and what was being written in the literary record.”

It has to be understood that this liberated urban lifestyle would not have encompassed the vast majority of people in the city, but refers to those circles that Wilding chose to move in. Wilding’s moving in those circles and his writing about those times may not be recalled as the halcyon days of youth, but they are recalled in generally positive terms: “I’m glad to have been able to represent that world of the sixties and seventies. They are celebrations of happier times.” Of course there were the “contradictions in behaviour” of these liberated people and there were the “problems that were generated”, but all this would be added grist for the writer’s mill: the “experiences I recorded were generally problematic; that was why they were material suitable for stories and novels.”

That these “happier times” may have been constituted by a series of distractions is a concept that later troubles Wilding: he wonders if there was a “political agenda” to

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383 Ian Syson, ‘Michael Wilding’s Three Centres of Value.’ p.273.
384 Nadezda Obradovic, op. cit. p.12.
386 Nadezda Obradovic, op. cit. p.12.
“promote the right to write ‘fuck’ and ‘cunt’, mobilize anti-censorship activities to privilege the word” in order to “divert attention from the substantial issues of the anti-war left.”  

The struggle to use “this four-letter word or that four-letter word” got Wilding and others “so caught up that we didn’t see what was going on politically, the way the multi-nationals were positioning themselves.” Wilding notes how the “war raged on, the bombing escalated, and the Libertarians fought the fight to print four letter words.”

There may have been a revolution with sex and drugs, and sex and drugs may have been the “best part” of the 60s, but “it suited the system to have us spending all our energy on this sort of activity and not paying attention to the social and economic problems.”

In Wildest Dreams Wilding wonders why the “four times larger than before baby-boom population suddenly takes to dope”, especially given the anti-racism and anti-war movement was at its peak. He concludes “it has to have been organised to narcotize a radicalised youth culture. Get them stoned and they’ll stop rioting.” It isn’t only drugs that Wilding sees as undermining the radical impulse of the time. As the baby-boomers came to voting age, with “four times as many kids reaching adulthood with a widespread progressive set of values”, some “smart people in some social research institute or intelligence agency basement” come up with the idea of dividing the movement on “gender grounds.” The women’s movement “was a co-ordinated strategy, like a marketing campaign. And what it served to do was to divide the left. It fractured all the progressive forces” and what “better way of destroying the left than dividing it into two?”

Even 1968 is seen as a “burning off to prevent a revolution” which resulted in flushing out “potential radicals”, making the left and students appear to be on the rampage and thereby providing “the excuse for repression, for more controls, for stronger security services, for more police.”

Conspiracy theories are always attractive and interesting and in this instance seem to constitute Wilding’s attempt to account for what he sees as the discrepancy between what the 60s could have potentially achieved and what we have been left with after “the

389 Ibid. p.140.
391 Michael Wilding, Wildest Dreams. pp. 252-256. This view of feminism was something Wilding also mentioned during the lunch meeting with him in 1998.
392 Ibid. pp. 257-258.
years of the big repression, the roll back when all over the world the forces of reaction came to explicit power.” Part of this is Wilding’s sense of paranoia, justified or not, that he explores in the chapter ‘Nigredo’ from Wildest Dreams and in numerous other places, but it is also the expression of a participant in the 60s who is genuinely disappointed with what has ultimately been achieved. Interestingly, Wilding has refused to follow the cliched trajectory of the young radical activist who becomes the curmudgeonly reactionary intent on recanting the errors of his earlier life. Despite his reservations about his early fiction and its concerns with sex and “that word” he still believes in the critical and liberating role to be performed by writers: as recently as December, 2008, writing in the Weekend Australian, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Milton’s birth, Wilding describes how Wordsworth in 1802 had wished Milton could still be living “during one of Britain’s more reactionary periods”, as Wilding describes it. The final paragraph of the article is: “He had a point.”

These reservations that Wilding now has about that word and the role of feminism and dope shouldn’t entice us to negate the impact his early fiction may have had. It’s another case of it being prudent to believe the story not the storyteller, especially one commenting forty or so years after telling the story. A close reading of Wilding’s early fiction should lead us to conclude: He had a point.

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393 Ibid. p.183.
CHAPTER 4

Seeing the Sites

“And what was fiction but the unsatisfied sexual yearnings of the diary and what were they but the congelations of reverie, displacement of the erotic imagination onto the lined sheets.” Michael Wilding.\(^{395}\)

“I don’t see any point in writing unless it’s going to effect change, it’s got to be political otherwise I can’t be bothered to write it.” Michael Wilding.\(^{396}\)

Aspects of the Dying Process

Aspects of the Dying Process\(^{397}\) is Michael Wilding’s first published collection of short stories. The opening story, ‘Somewhere New’, centres on the narrator’s relationship with the somewhat enigmatic character of Gavin Mulgrave. The story is firmly located in Sydney; it is the somewhere new for the narrator, an academic from England, now working in Australia. The reader is made aware of the setting less so by the mentioning of places like King’s Cross, Paddington, Rushcutters Bay, the Harbour and so forth than by the descriptions of weather, people and the general ethos and mood of the place. The opening paragraph describes “one of those painfully hot mornings” and the ensuing expectations of discomfort that will only be alleviated by the arrival of a “southerly”. The character of Mulgrave is largely responsible for the appeal of the story. He is an interesting character, albeit an annoying and eccentric compilation of contradictions and inconsistencies. One moment it is “‘absurd writing books in Australia’”\(^{398}\), then soon after he is rising at five to do three hours writing before breakfast. Or maybe he rises at five, writes a chapter, then swims at Redleaf pool. Perhaps he walks along Camp Cove and starts writing at six-thirty … the permutations are endless and the truth unknowable.\(^{399}\) At one point he sees poetry and culture as anathema in Australia, yet he

\(^{395}\) Michael Wilding, Wildest Dreams, pp.94.
\(^{396}\) Ibid. p.179.
\(^{397}\) Ibid. p.179.
\(^{398}\) Ibid. p.6.
\(^{399}\) Ibid. pp.11-13.
intends producing a radio program on new and underground poetry, only to think later such an idea “nonsense” and certainly not one of his making. How the narrator, who works on some radio presentations with Mulgrave, as well as spending considerable social time with him, can put up with such inconsistencies is all the more curious when Mulgrave fails to turn up for a dinner invitation or when the narrator and his girlfriend are invited to dinner at Mulgrave’s place only to leave without ever seeing any sign of food.

‘Somewhere New’ doesn’t deal overtly with sex. It is set around the inner city and beaches of Sydney, a locale Wilding will continue to delineate and explore. This doesn’t mean that sex doesn’t in some way permeate the story. Aspects of the Dying Process first appeared in 1972 and as such the figuring of sex, overt or otherwise, is not surprising. After all the sexual revolution had been underway for some time and sex as a matter for public discussion was nothing new; traditional attitudes and approaches to sex had long been an aspect of the dominant that emergent and assertive practices were seeking to subvert and replace with new values and approaches. This much seems patently true for the 60s in general, a broad view that is perhaps a by-product of the fact that the most widely circulated and read histories are of the United States and Great Britain. It may hold less true for Australia where much of the 60s, as has been discussed above, took place in the 70s. Thus, though Wilding’s Aspects of the Dying Process appeared in 1972 it does not function as a mere chronicler of the times. Certainly it does attempt to negotiate the times and to render them in the short stories, but Aspects of the Dying Process is more than an impassive mirror. This holds true for all of Wilding’s fiction during the period under consideration. So whilst Aspects of the Dying Process does reflect the times it also interacts with the emergent and assertive practices, presenting these new practices in a way that promotes their acceptability and wider currency. The stories are never polemical or overtly didactic, but they do provide an imprimatur to the new practices in that they portray the new approach to sex as the youthful, exciting alternative to the stifling sexual approach of the dominant.

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400 Ibid.p.8.
401 Ibid.p.11.
402 Ibid.p.8. and pp.11-12.
Sydney is the background to the story of the relationship between Mulgrave and the narrator and it is a city that is portrayed as sensual, hedonistic, youthful and indulgent. It is a city where the potential, if not the experiencing, of sex is palpable and unavoidable. If Mulgrave is unequivocal about anything it is this sensual nature of Sydney’s culture, where the “‘hedonism of the beaches is one of the truly unique qualities of Australia….No one agonizes about culture or class or religion here, they get on with living with their bodies. The body is culture and religion here.’” It is a place where you “‘couldn’t regiment anyone… the sun prevents it. The sun encourages spontaneity and independence.’” Things in Sydney are “‘fresh, young, vital.’” Hedonism, resistance to regimentation, spontaneity, independence, freshness, vitality and youth; all together they sound like a roll call of the salient features of the 60s. Valorising these traits of the 60s is one of the few things that Mulgrave remains constant to, and it is something that the narrator not only doesn’t question, but finds himself beginning to revel in. Walking round the beach the narrator notes the “bronzed figures in trunks and bikinis” that “glistened with the sun, the sea, sweat, sunburn oil.” This sensual description becomes more sexual, more suggestively erotic, in the following paragraph where the narrator notes, as he picks his way amongst the bodies, “The firmness of the flesh, the taut stomachs, the just covered nipples on the full breasts, the clean undulant lines of throat and breast, belly and crutch, the mascara’d eyes and open mouths, the emanations of warmth and content.”

There is an engagement on the part of the narrator here, a voyeuristic intensity which mirrors the crescendoing actions of having sex, as his observations move from the “firmness of the flesh” to “nipples on the full breasts”, to “belly”, “crutch” and “open mouths”, concluding with the post-coital “emanations of warmth and content.”

This writing, whilst clearly sexual, does not appear to present an overt threat to the dominant, it does not appear to brazenly subvert the moral code of the status quo: the writing does not posit a completely alternative sexual approach whose emergent and assertive tenets seek to replace those of the dominant. After all it could be read as the ogling Englishman enjoying the view along the primrose path. Indeed, at this stage in Wilding’s stories viewing is as far as it gets, but given the level of sexual intensity in the

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403 Ibid.p.6.
404 Ibid.p.7.
description one suspects that some dalliance may not be too far off. However, it would be
an underestimation to argue that such writing is completely devoid of any subversive
significance. Certainly the gaze here is male and heterosexual and as such is in accord
with the sexual orientation of the dominant. Indeed the male, heterosexual gaze will
continue to be the most common one throughout the majority of the 60s. What is different
is how the attitudes and morality behind the gaze begin to be altered, altered to the extent
that they may ultimately subvert the dominant. What the writing does is present sex in an
open and uninhibited manner, free from any restrictions. There is no sense here of a
furtively salacious approach to sex that is redolent of the dominant. It is openly indulgent
in and celebratory of sex. Not that such writing was unavailable in Sydney at the time:
people could read D.H. Lawrence or Henry Miller, but this sort of reading made such
approaches to sex appear removed, almost alien, something that was going on in the real
happening places of the world like England and America. And thinking about sex at such
a far remove, as something others did, could only maintain the mores of the dominant or
condemn a generation to living out some version of Portnoy’s Complaint. Rather,
Wilding’s early fiction firmly locates these new attitudes about sex in Australia, in
Sydney. To the readers it said that the new approaches to sex don’t just happen in other
places, in the Londons or San Franciscos, far removed and therefore unattainable in
antipodean Sydney. It said to the readers that the new approaches to sex are very much of
their here and now. For the young people of Sydney the scene and the people were
recognizable, and such immediacy engendered a belief in accessibility. Reading about
new attitudes to sex contributed to the belief that not only were such things happening in
their part of the world, but that the taboos of the dominant were no longer unassailable
and that the newer, more open attitudes to sex were the active currency of the young in
Sydney. It meant that it was OK to act in this way, or to at least tacitly condone such
behaviour in those around you. Indeed, for many such writing could quietly contribute to
the breaking down of inhibitions and even subtly encourage the acting out of a new
approach to sex. There would have been a psychological reasoning, which may very well
have been sub-conscious, and possibly all the more pervasive for it, that said others are
thinking and behaving in this way so it must be all right. Difficult to act alone, easier in
concert, especially if those others are young and happening and very much like you, or as you would wish to be seen.

The sensual, hedonistic nature of Sydney is further highlighted when contrasted to Mulgrave’s descriptions of England. England, the antithesis of Sydney, is where “the very weather encourages regimentation” and where people suffer an “unhealthy introversion”. In Sydney people “don’t sit round in damp basements and drafty pubs.”

This portrayal of Sydney and the attitudes of its young people is given greater depth and detail in the second story in the anthology. If ‘Somewhere New’ has presented a Sydney that is sensual and hedonistic, then it is only fitting that ‘The Sybarites’ explores some of the ramifications of such a lifestyle. ‘Somewhere New’ delineated an aspect of Sydney’s culture without really exploring the possible consequences that living and experiencing such a culture could have on those people directly involved. ‘The Sybarites’ intensifies and personalises the focus on those people living in the Sydney described in ‘Somewhere New’. As suggested by the title, ‘The Sybarites’ explores the lives of those given over to a lifestyle of indulgence and pleasure. Changes in social values and lifestyles brought about in the 60s by the emergent and assertive practices sought to create lifestyles that were liberated, free of inhibitions and free of the tired old limitations of the dominant. Such times will always create situations fraught with difficulties. Times of social change may be exhilarating, but they can also be problematic. ‘The Sybarites’ seeks to navigate this tricky, new territory.

‘The Sybarites’ deals with the interrelationship between four young people: Andrew, Ian, Pat and Helen. However, the focus is on Ian, a person who is recently arrived in Sydney, and possibly Australia, and who is “cautiously trying out for the first time the idioms that now he felt he had caught.” Idioms he may have caught, but Helen, the object of his desire, was proving to be far more elusive, and his imaginings can only possibly satisfy him in a very limited way. “He watched Helen, soft and undulant and flowing, and fantasized lying naked against her, and her limbs and belly and breasts warming him.” Once again the writing is openly sexual and the gaze male and heterosexual, but in ‘The Sybarites’ it is not the explicit sexual nature of the writing per

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405 Ibid.p.6.
406 Ibid.p.33.
407 Ibid.p.25.
se that seeks to undermine the moral tenets of the dominant. Despite Ian’s desire for Helen, it is Andrew that the first half of the story strongly points to as having a relationship with her. Andrew’s suggestive and easy intimacy with Helen is conveyed in such scenes as when they are on the beach and he rubs her with oil, the cold splash of which caused her to pull her shoulders back which “emphasized her breasts… But he pushed her down on to the sand as he rubbed the oil all over her and into her open pores, massaging her deeper into the beach.” Helen, obliging Andrew, “lay back, her eyes shut and her lower arms across them, smiling.”

This intimacy is reinforced with a sort of domesticity that comes close to irritation when Andrew mildly rebukes Helen for getting too burnt or smoking too much.

It is half way through the story, with Andrew’s suggested intimacy and Ian’s sexual desire firmly established, that the reader’s expectation is destabilized when we learn that Helen is married to Mark, a person who is disdainful of the sybaritic lifestyle and who is separate to the life the other four characters lead. “God knows how you stand it,” Mark says when he arrives at a crowded pub, the Newcastle, one evening.

Ian is surprised that Helen is married, but far from deterred. The following evening sees the four of them out together and very drunk, with Ian and Helen in close conversation as Ian’s jokes become “more explicitly sexual”. Soon after this Ian feels “his hope was renewed.”

Indeed there is a sort of indeterminacy about the interrelationship between the four characters: Andrew “did not seem aggressively possessive of Helen, nor resentful of Ian’s monopolizing her, and Ian wondered if Andrew had broken with her, if he had ever begun with her; or maybe transferred to Pat, whom after all he had driven off with that night.” Andrew, Ian, Pat and Helen return to Helen’s flat to “grog on”. Mark is there sipping whisky, working and wishing to not be disturbed. They decide to go on to the roof and in the lift Andrew asks, “Wasn’t this the lift Mark was stuck in screwing Marie-Louise?”

More significant than this information is the way it is treated by the four. None react as if some taboo has been broken, as if something discreet has inappropriately been mentioned in public. Rather Pat and Andrew, who had no

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408 Ibid.p.24.
409 Ibid.p.24 and p.28.
410 Ibid.p.32.
411 Ibid.p.30 and p.32.
412 Ibid.p.30.
compunction in bringing the topic up and commenting on it, see it as a source of comedy as they ridicule Marie-Louise as being “‘not exactly dainty…. The pneumatic bag’".\textsuperscript{413} It is simply a matter of no serious consequence.

What ‘The Sybarites’ attempts to explore then is the territory inhabited by young people living in Sydney during a time of social change. It is a time when the moral imperatives of the dominant were being supplanted by the sexual and moral freedoms brought about by the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. The story doesn’t posit any ideal existence brought about by some sexual utopia. Indeed Helen’s ennui may partly be put down to the difficulties inherent in such changes in sexual and moral values. Not that her predicament would have been any better had the tenets of the dominant still held sway; in fact it could more readily be argued that her sense of being trapped by the public face of the dominant’s moral and sexual code could only exacerbate her dilemma. “The Sybarites” looks at the behaviour of young people during a time of social and sexual fluidity. The four main characters in the story are no longer restrained by the tired conventions of the dominant. The old rules simply don’t apply anymore. Despite the infidelity of Mark and despite Helen’s marriage the characters are free to continue a hedonistic lifestyle where pleasure and the frisson of desire still offer the potential for some sort of fulfillment. Without the 60s this potential may not have been so readily accessible: Helen would have been trapped by her marriage, and the relationship of Helen and Andrew and the possibility of Helen and Ian would not realistically exist. The 60s provided a freedom to choose. Of course it could be argued that this freedom also gave Mark the imprimatur to be in the lift with Marie-Louise. Possibly, but some men may have been doing such things well before the 60s!

Such freedoms, as provided by the 60s, were not without their difficulties and problems. No panaceas are on offer. Symbolically the story concludes with Mark, Helen, Ian and Pat leaving the Newcastle drunk, and once out in the fresh air (facing the world so to speak) Pat groans and turns pale, Ian falls down and feels dizzy, while Helen vomits. Clearly the territory explored by ‘The Sybarites’ is not some idealized world of free love, but a world of real people negotiating a new morality and sexuality tentatively and uncertainly, people beyond the pale of the values of the dominant. The old barriers

\textsuperscript{413} Ibid.
just don’t stand up anymore: when Helen, Ian, Andrew and Pat want to go onto the roof of the flats, but find themselves prevented by a door locked by those in charge, Andrew says, “We’ll break it down”. And he does. They get the freedom of the roof. But of course there is some damage done.

The extent of the differences rendered in ‘The Sybarites’, the distance travelled from the values of the dominant, the values of the 50s, is highlighted when read in conjunction with the succeeding story in the anthology. The juxtaposition of ‘The Altar of the Family’ with ‘The Sybarites’ emphasises the extent of the changes in attitudes to morality and sexuality that occurred in the 60s, changes that now seem so totally unremarkable.

Set in Birrendulee, a fictional “small country town”, the reader is immediately tempted to set up a thematic polarity with urban equaling liberal while country equals conservative. This dichotomy breaks down in other stories and novels by Wilding, though it could be easily argued that the stereotypical portrayal of the country as conservative, a bastion of the values of the dominant, only breaks down because Wilding writes about young people from the urban centres who visit or move into the country. The Murray family live in Birrendulee in their country home called Bredon. The Murrays are a traditional nuclear family of father, mother, son and daughter and their morality and values are emphatically those of the dominant. The father is in the mould of the family patriarch: he is domineering, insensitive and bigoted. Irishmen have no honour, or even family, a “pack of thieves all of them.”

The mother is acquiescent throughout the story, and it is the children who react to the ethos that the father imposes upon the family. “The Altar of the Family” focuses on the family’s attitude to sexuality and the consequences these values of the dominant can have on the two young people in the family. When the children collect feathers and “attire themselves as Indians” the father’s response is intolerant and furious: “Damned if I bred a son to go and cover himself with white feathers, take them off you fool.”

When the boy was playing with his sister and her dolls the father “snorted in disgust. ‘Damn grown boy playing with dolls.’” There were “reverberations of his father’s shock at night as his parents talked with raised

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414 Ibid.p.35.  
415 Ibid.p.36.
voices.”\footnote{Ibid.p.35.} Having most impact on the boy is his father’s comment, “At least I’m not a lily-livered pofter.” The son is deeply puzzled and worried by the comment. Without fully understanding the image of livers and lilies, the boy is clearly aware of what the overall meaning of the accusation is. This meaning is made all the more clear when the boy asks to go and play with his sister and her friends. The father is “appalled; ‘What, want to fiddle around with dolls with them?’” The father’s accusation crushes his son and forces him into a line of behaviour that is at odds with his character and inclination. In order to fit the stereotype that the boy’s father inflicts upon him the boy sets out to shoot a possum that visits their kitchen. He has been emotionally and psychologically coerced into acting out a role; he feels compelled to act out the aggressive machismo and intolerance of the family’s patriarch. The ethos of the dominant, as transmitted through the father, tells the boy how he must act. There is no real choice here, no freedom to act outside the strictures of the dominant. The cost the boy pays is high. Before shooting the possum he is “stiff with terror, the horror of shooting it convulsed his stomach, his bowels,” and after firing the gun “he lay in bed shivering…. Nauseated, numbed; he was paralyzed by the awfulness of his deed, the guilt of taking a life.”\footnote{Ibid.p.37.} The unnatural and empty posturing of the boy proves to be a futile exercise when Wilding concludes his story with the boy being unable to find any sign of the dead possum: the acting out of character, the forced aggressive machismo achieves nothing apart from the emotional and psychological consternation of a young boy. ‘The Altar of the Family’ explores an aspect of the morality of the dominant. Their family home of Bredon was built in the time of Queen Victoria, but the building itself is clearly not the only thing to have survived from that era. As stated earlier, the world portrayed in ‘The Sybarites’ is not without its limitations and drawbacks, but it is a world where new freedoms exist, a world where it is possible to not be railroaded by the conventions of the dominant, a world where sacrifices on the altar of the dominant’s cornerstone of the family need not be unwillingly made.

This disparity between the practices of the dominant and the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s is further highlighted in the succeeding story, ‘Joe’s Absence’. Joe and Graham are two writers. As with many of the stories of Michael
Wilding, and for that matter Frank Moorhouse as well, there is often a large component of the autobiographical. Joe is the fictional name Wilding gives to Frank Moorhouse, while Graham is Wilding.⁴¹⁸ Beyond providing a sort of in-crowd titillation for those who know who’s who, the autobiographical element serves to add an authenticity and verisimilitude to the stories; real people moving in places that are recognizably real to Australians, especially those from Sydney. This verisimilitude in turn assists in presenting the emergent and assertive practices’ approach to sex as nothing exceptional, rather just a rendering of sexual mores as they really are for young people in the 60s. This point is quite an important one. The unexceptional nature of sex in Wilding’s stories, their rendering of sex as if it were no big deal, the very day to day ordinariness of it all, function to make it seem an integral, yet unremarkable, part of life as it is lived. To present it in a more confrontational manner, to use it as a shock, assault weapon, would still attack the dominant, and both approaches would serve their subversive purpose, but the former is a sort of lifestyle subversion by stealth, an unnoticed and unremarkable inclusion into people’s concept of what makes up their lived culture. A sort of, ‘Well, this is how it is.’ The not so out of the ordinary often finds an easier, more widespread acceptance than the outrageous. But of course ‘The Altar of the Family’ is there to positively remind us that these approaches are very different to the ordinariness of the dominant.

In ‘Joe’s Absence’ Joe often spends time writing and swimming at his small place down the coast. He invites Graham to come down there for a while, but when Graham arrives Joe is not there. However, Joe’s girlfriend Margot is. That Graham and Margot are alone leads, quite predictably, to a sexual tension between the two, though somewhat unpredictably this does not culminate in the two of them having sex. Graham is aware of the possibility of having sex with Margot even though she is going with Joe: earlier, when drinking at a pub, Joe tells Graham that he and Margot “‘have a free relationship’” and that Margot isn’t there at the moment as she has “‘gone off to screw some old friend.’”⁴¹⁹ The sexual tension between Graham and Margot is most acute after the two have been swimming naked and are lying beside each other on the beach. Graham

⁴¹⁸ Lunch meeting with Wilding, and several others: Leichhardt, Sydney, 15th October, 1998.
⁴¹⁹ Ibid.p.40.
“watched her lying there, her breasts firm, her nipples taut, her stomach flowing in gentle curves to the triangle of her pubic hair, to her open legs.” Margot suggests they could “do a Lady Chatterley in the storm… or go back to the shack.”

Back at the shack Graham is less sure about having sex with Margot. The irony of the story’s title becomes apparent when it is Graham and Margot’s thinking and talking about Joe that stalls their having sex; Joe’s absence only serves to intensify his presence. Graham and Margot drink, feast and fondle each other, but that is as far as their sensual pleasures go.

Though Graham and Margot don’t have sex, ‘Joe’s Absence’ can still be read as a subversive text that promotes the sexual values of the emergent and assertive practices. Sexual freedom was certainly valorized in the 60s, with free love often seen as an essential component of the new, liberated person. However, this wasn’t to be construed to mean that everyone must have sex at every single opportunity, though doubtless many young people willfully and willingly accepted such a construction. ‘Joe’s Absence’ is another attempt by Wilding to navigate the new and relatively uncharted territory of the sexual attitudes of the 60s. Graham and Margot are not prevented from having sex because of any of the outmoded rules of the dominant. There is no taboo about pre-marital sex or some moral moratorium because Margot is going with Joe. The decision is an individual one that is premised on the personalities involved and the circumstances they find themselves in. Individuals have the freedom to make decisions themselves without the restraints imposed by the sexual orthodoxies of the dominant. Graham and Margot negotiate the sexual terrain according to what they think and feel, rather than being told how to behave by the imposition of the forces of the dominant. This is not to suggest that Graham and Margot have complete freedom to choose: no person functions in a cultural vacuum, it is just that the cultural parameters of the 60s differed to those preceding it and those parameters gave an imprimatur to greater sexual licence. This doesn’t mean that sex outside of marriage didn’t exist before the 60s. Sex was not the invention of the youth of the 60s, but a newfound freedom, whereby large numbers of young people could express their sexuality, albeit a sexuality with a strong and almost exclusive heterosexual bias, was new.

\[420\] Ibid.pp.46-47.
Nicole Moore in an Overland article titled ‘Lessons on Biting the Tongue in Your Cheek’ reviews Michael Wilding’s Somewhere New; New and Selected Stories and Studies in Classic Australian Fiction. The short article is tightly argued and makes some stinging, poignant accusations about Wilding’s fiction. This juncture is a good time to address some of what Moore has to say, because ‘Joe’s Absence’, the second story in Somewhere New; New and Selected Stories, contains the elements of which Moore is so sharply critical. Certainly Somewhere New’s selection of stories is weighted in favour of Wilding’s later stories and these later stories, as Moore points out, are “somewhat more thoughtful and more self-critical” and there is “an apparently ongoing self-consciousness about the politics of masculine sexuality.” However, it is the earlier stories, such as ‘Joe’s Absence’, that raise Moore’s ire.

The trenchancy of Moore’s criticism peaks when, altering tone for a moment as if to reflect honest irritation that can’t be contained, she poses the question: “I mean, he and his mates pondering the attributes and fuckability of each other’s girlfriends, or whether they’ve written more stories or drunk more whisky – I’m sorry but is this interesting to some people?” Leaving aside whether or not this is interesting to some people, it is difficult to argue against the accuracy of Moore’s comments – quite a bit of ‘Joe’s Absence’ is about the “attributes and fuckability” of Joe’s girlfriend, Margot. Indeed, some of the attitudes expressed in 1972 are a lot less palatable when read thirty plus years later. In fact it is possible to be a great deal more critical of Wilding’s treatment of male attitudes to women than Moore is in her article. For example, in ‘Joe’s Absence’ Graham is often seen to be looking at women as if at an auction where it is necessary to weigh up the value of each object before deciding to make a bid. When Graham meets Margot at the beach he recalls Joe’s previous girlfriend and compares the two, concluding the former to be “much more attractive than this one”, though as if to compensate he finds Margot “didn’t seem as frigid”. There would seem to be a real male dilemma here: one women being desirable but not so easily ‘fuckable’, whilst the other is more easily

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422 Ibid.p.88. Nothing really surprising here: Wilding’s stories could be expected to develop over the years, though it is perhaps a little presumptuously critical to assume he was being less “thoughtful” than was possible when he wrote those earlier stories.
423 Ibid.
424 Indeed, it is interesting to some people, though probably not for the reasons Moore would seem to be suggesting here.
‘fuckable’, but less desirable. Graham is “evaluating the curve of her hips, the flow of her legs” and only stops the “evaluating” when he thinks of Margot’s connection to Joe.\footnote{Michael Wilding, Aspects of the Dying Process. p.41.} But honour (if that’s what it is) among writers doesn’t last long in this story and Graham is soon back to the task of “evaluating”. Graham “couldn’t decide how less attractive she was. Her breasts were fuller than he’d remembered. He liked full breasts….\footnote{Ibid.p.42.} In fact Graham seems to like breasts so much that he feels compelled to use the phrase “her breasts” a mere ten times in just over four pages. “(H)er breasts lifted… her breasts rose… leaning her breasts… over her breasts… with her breast… her breasts firm….” and so on.\footnote{Ibid.pp.42-47.} Not that Graham is blind to Margot’s other attributes. He notices her nipples “pink” and “taut”: but nipples being part of the breast it is just as well that he goes on to notice “her stomach flowing in gentle curves to the triangle of her pubic hair, to her open legs.” Little wonder then that Graham’s “penis grew stiff and tumescent”\footnote{Ibid.pp.46-47.} “Stiff” and “tumescent”, which I suppose is meant to suggest that he is really going to give it to her, a sort of double whammy. This is perhaps understandable as Margot represents one aspect of the perfect woman for young male writers in the 60s, as symbolized by her when she is described lying on the beach “her legs spread apart, a book propped in front of her”.\footnote{Ibid.p41.}

Perhaps this brief, frivolous, yet critical, treatment of ‘Joe’s Absence’ is a little unfair to Wilding. After all it was 1972 when Aspects of the Dying Process came out and feminism was yet to have its full impact on attitudes of male sexuality. In 1964 black activist Stokely Carmichael could reply when asked about the role of women in the SNCC, “The only position for women in SNCC is prone.”\footnote{Quoted in David Allyn, op.cit.p.90.} Some accounts have tried to explain Carmichael’s comment as that of a “compulsive entertainer” who delivered the comment as a joke that left listeners, including the women, “doubled over with laughter.”\footnote{Mark Kurlansky, op.cit.p.p.315-316.} Intended as a joke, or retrospectively defended as one, the comment still
“provoked outrage from women in the movement”\(^{432}\) and was reflective of widespread male attitudes to women and sex at the time.

An SDS brochure promoted radical change with the lines, “The system is like a woman. You’ve got to fuck it to make it change.”\(^{433}\) In 1968 the White Panthers (one of the most radical of the white radical movements) issued a manifesto with the call to “Fuck your woman so hard till she can’t stand up.”\(^{434}\) The line was later removed, but probably not the sentiment. With the growth of the women’s movement women became aware of the explicit sexism and chauvinism reflected in these statements. Some, like Bettina Aptheker of the SDS, only recognized this after the fact: “‘Women did most of the clerical work and fund-raising and provided food. None of this was particularly recognized as work, and I never questioned this division of labor or even saw it as an issue!’”\(^{435}\) Other women noticed the situation when the movement was at its peak. “We were still the movement secretaries and shit-workers… the sex-objects for the movement men…. We were the free movement ‘chicks’ – free to screw any man who demanded it, or if we chose not to – free to be called hung-up, middle class and up-tight…. We were dependent on the male elite…. free, finally, to marry and raise liberated babies and clean liberated diapers….”\(^{436}\)

Though these examples are from America, things were probably not a whole lot more sexually progressive in Australia. The dust jacket of Barry Oakley’s 1970 novel, *Let’s Hear It For Prendergast*\(^{437}\) describes the main character, Prendergast, as a “rebel” who is involved in “guerrilla attacks on conformity” that shake “lawnmowerland to its grassroots”. However, there doesn’t appear to be a whole lot of rebelling taking place and the sexual mores of “lawnmowerland” still look pretty much intact by the novel’s conclusion. In fact the patriarchal values of the dominant are reinforced, albeit in the guise of jokey-blokey, bawdy escapades. Morley, the book’s narrator, repeatedly

\(^{432}\) David Allyn, op.cit.p.90.  
\(^{433}\) Mark Kurlansky, op.cit.p.314.  
\(^{434}\) Todd Gitlin, op.cit.p.372.  
\(^{435}\) Quoted in Mark Kurlansky, op.cit.p.314.  
\(^{437}\) Barry Oakley, *Let’s Hear It For Prendergast*. Heinemann, Melbourne, 1970.
describes a woman as having “boobs…melons…norks”\footnote{Ibid.pp.64-65 and 71.}, a series of terms that makes Graham’s “her breasts” seem sensitive and enlightened. \textit{Let’s Hear It For Prendergast} is comedy in the same vein as the Barry MacKenzie movies, which in turn are somewhat redolent of the British Carry On movies, and though readers may have laughed at the crude ribaldry of the ockerish humour there is still the clear portrayal of women as objects for leering, lecherous men. The one woman in \textit{Let’s Hear It For Prendergast} who is sexually assertive is relegated to being seen as someone to be feared, someone who “crawls” and “grope(s) for genitalia, anyone’s, so long as it’s male.” Such an aberrant person must be “high on something, amphetamines, acid, Relaxatabs.” The woman may be intelligent, but she could really only be concentrating on one thing: “‘She’s at Latrobe, majoring in nymphomania.’”\footnote{Ibid.p.46.}

Even in Australian Richard Neville’s 1970 book, \textit{Playpower}\footnote{Richard Neville, \textit{Playpower}.Paladin, St Albans, 1973.}, there is the sexist objectification of women. \textit{Playpower} was an extremely influential and popular book that vigorously praised and promoted the assertive practices of the counterculture. In the book women are “chicks”, a term common during the 60s, but still not a term aimed to empower women. In terms of sex women are to be fucked, rather than to be fucked with in the sense that they are equal partners in the act of sex; men are most often dominant and exploitative. Neville quotes Paul Krassner, a leading countercultural figure, who says, “I’m only in the Movement to meet chicks and get laid anyway.”\footnote{Ibid.p.61.} A friend of Neville’s recalls his experience on the barricades in France in 1968: “In one afternoon I fucked fifteen girls.” Some of the things Neville has to say are even more questionable by today’s standards.\footnote{To be fair it should be admitted at the outset that the following ‘negative’ examples are not reflective of the book as a whole: much of \textit{Playpower} is given to treating women as participating partners in countercultural activities including sex (though not always completely equal partners).} He recounts meeting a “moderately attractive” fourteen year old, asking her home, sharing a joint, then a “hurricane fuck” before she “rushes off to finish her homework.”\footnote{Ibid.p.60.} In a footnote Neville relates an incident where in Central Park, New York, a young girl is raped “in an animal frenzy” by a dozen young men. Her clothes get stolen and all she wears is the word “love” painted on her forehead as she “stagger(s)
around dazed and muddy”. Then in the spirit of free love, male predatory style, Neville concludes with the question, “Raped?”\footnote{Ibid.pp.60-61.} Given the description of this girl it might still be some time before she is able to arrive at the same general conclusion that Neville does when he concludes the chapter ‘Group Grope’ with, “One way to a girl’s mind is through her cunt.”\footnote{Ibid.p.74.}

The Adventures of Barry MacKenzie, Alvin Purple and Stork were popular and commercially successful movies that came out in the 1970s which unabashedly deal with the issue of sex, but in a manner that is very different to the treatment given by Wilding. It is not too difficult to guess what Nicole Moore would make of these movies. But these movies proved popular and had wide circulation, as is evidenced by their having sequels with titles such as Alvin Rides Again and Barry MacKenzie Holds His Own. Audiences were no doubt attracted by the rich suggestiveness of the double entendres of their titles. But perhaps this is being too dismissive of these movies: they were after all the products of people like Bruce Beresford, Barry Humphries, Tim Burstall, David Williamson and Philip Adams. Tony Moore in an article in The Weekend Australian titled ‘True Blue’\footnote{Tony Moore, ‘True Blue.’ Review, Weekend Australian, September 30-October 1, 2006. pp.6-7. I suspect Tony is not related to Nicole.} strongly attempts to defend the importance of this group of films. Moore sees the films as “celebration and critique of the Australian masculine national character.” He believes they “satirise a host of anxieties confronting Australians in a time of rapid social change, over sex roles, race, colonialism, national identity, suburbia, philistinism and politics.” This is a lot of ground for Barry MacKenzie et al to cover! Moore further argues that “(R)unning through the ocker films is an immensely entertaining, visceral and subversive style of Australian comedy I call the larrikin carnivalesque.” On its own Moore sees The Adventures of Barry MacKenzie as a catalyst for dramatic social change as “it became a flagship of the ‘new nationalism’ and the Australian cultural renaissance it mocked.” The apparent efficacy of this movie is given further clarification when it is explained how “Bazza, sporting his ‘one-eyed trouser snake’ and the new R certificate, also played his part in the permissive sex ’n’ sin atmosphere of the early ‘70s media as a leading

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\footnote{Ibid.pp.60-61.}
\footnote{Ibid.p.74.}
boundary breaker, helping free up what could be said and shown as public art.”

“Immensely entertaining…subversive… flagship…boundary breaker” are all highly suggestive of a film, or films, of great social significance. The introduction to this thesis briefly discussed how the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s occupied numerous and diverse sites and how it was believed that it was the cumulative effect of these sites that brought about changes in the dominant, and even how they sought to replace the dominant. To what extent films like these contributed to the process of change is moot, but even more problematic is to try and gauge their contribution to the countercultural concept of change.

The purpose of these examples from America and Australia is to place Wilding’s attitude to women and male sexuality in some sort of context. It is not an attempt at exoneration by placing him in the company of those who are worse. Some of the examples chosen are from those associated with being at the forefront of countercultural activities and they provide a reminder of the necessity to contextualize. Indeed, these examples tend to soften criticism of Wilding’s treatment and take a little of the sting out of what Moore has to say in ‘Lessons on Biting the Tongue in Your Cheek.’ Not all of the sting, however, just a little. Wilding’s fiction displays an attitude to male sexuality, and sex in general, that is more complex and nuanced than a great deal of the other popular texts of the time. But such selective contextualising can only go so far; it is a sleight of hand played successfully only on the historically ignorant. The opening chapter of this thesis included an anecdote about a forceful, confrontational Wendy Bacon. She didn’t seem to be acting much like a ‘chick’. Nor was Kate Jennings behaving much like an easily dominated and exploited ‘chick’ when in 1970, as an English Honours student at Sydney University, she gave a seminar paper titled ‘Cunty Kate Can Have Epiphanies Too.’ For those still unclear as to Jennings’ attitude and position clarification came when she addressed a Vietnam Moratorium Rally that same year. “And I say to every woman that every time you’ve been put down or fucked over… tell every man that walks by, every one of them a male chauvinist by virtue of HIS birthright, tell them all to go suck

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447 Ibid.p.6.
their own cocks…. ALL POWER TO WOMEN”\(^\text{448}\) Nor were Wendy Bacon and Kate Jennings isolated by this sort of independent, aggressive, assertive behaviour. Cassandra Pybus is another case in point. In 1968, when Pybus was nineteen, she experienced the “erotic intoxication of love” with a lover “with whom (she) had explored the dizzying reaches of sexual pleasure”\(^\text{449}\). No sense of being the sexually exploited here. Directly at odds with Stokely Carmichael and Bettina Aptheker, Pybus felt it was time men “understood that we were not put on this earth just to lick envelopes, operate the roneo machine and spread our legs.”\(^\text{450}\) And though Pybus says it was their “energy and effrontery, rather than our ideas, which were impressive” there was a definite ideological reason behind their attitudes and behaviour, even if those “ideas came off the peg” and were “mostly American imports”. Pybus and others wanted “to overcome a bourgeois and phallocentric world view.” A cultural revolution was the way to change things; “transcend this social conditioning…. And there would be no more Vietnams.” To change this “social conditioning”, to change the way people lived their lives, became Pybus’ “mission – a social revolution.” She was acutely aware that “patriarchy limited our options.”\(^\text{451}\) Pybus believed there were no impediments preventing her realising her potential: “to be a young woman in Sydney in the late sixties was to believe you could do anything, be anything, your heart desired.”\(^\text{452}\) It was around this time that Germaine Greer made a bit of an impact with The Female Eunuch. Though the White Panthers might urge men to “fuck your woman so hard till she can’t stand up” it must be pretty clear that women like Wendy Bacon, Kate Jennings, Cassandra Pybus and Germaine Greer may have willingly participated in the fucking, but in a broader sense there was no way that they would not stand up.

The purpose of all these examples, both the negative and the positive, is to highlight the huge diversity of attitudes about women and sex that were in circulation amongst those involved in the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. There was no confluence of attitudes and approaches, though there was a clear common belief that the

\(^{449}\) Ibid. pp.12 and 18.
\(^{450}\) Ibid. p.54.
\(^{451}\) Ibid.p.52.
\(^{452}\) Ibid.p.40.
role of sex and women in the 60s was very different to that put forward by the dominant. Clearly there was the belief that women and sex constituted one of the main agencies for change during the 60s. Some men saw their open and free fucking of women as a prerequisite for social change. That this involved the objectification of women was something they did not really consider: they saw women as being free from the restraints of the dominant that held popular sway in the 50s and into the early 60s, free to have sex and to be helpful assistants, but never on an equal footing. Some women viewed sex and the role of women in a far more assertive way, seeing themselves as equal partners in the process of rapid social change. This is suggestive of a divided attitude and approach between men and women, and whilst there is truth in this dichotomy it is a truth that is not complete and absolute.

It was in this countercultural environment that Wilding wrote ‘Joe’s Absence’. There is never any clarity, certainty or unanimity in times of rapid social change and, to an extent, Wilding’s writing is reflective of this. However, despite the validity of what Nicole Moore has to say about Wilding’s treatment of male attitudes to women and sex, it is not completely certain that this is the whole truth. His approach lies somewhere between the two approaches anecdotally outlined above. Certainly his story reveals an objectification of women, an assessment of their “fuckability” and much of what I have had to say about “Joe’s Absence” supports Moore’s critique. Yet there are elements in ‘Joe’s Absence’ which mitigate against the complete validity of Moore’s indictment. The first time we meet Margot in ‘Joe’s Absence’ is when she is going to see a ‘friend’. Joe knows she is going to “screw some old friend.” Joe’s construction here has placed Margot in the controlling, active role: Margot is to do the ‘screwing’, a position different to that implied in the examples from the SDS and the White Panthers. Though Joe’s description of Margot going off to “screw some old friend” shouldn’t be imbued with too much significance (it could be just a turn of phrase, or a comment reflective of Joe’s annoyance), it is also interesting to note that she voluntarily broached the subject with Joe, an action suggestion of a woman in control of the situation. Margot’s approach to sex is an open one, in that she doesn’t feel she must be monogamously faithful to Joe, or if not faithful then not driven to cheat behind his back. When Margot goes to be with her
friend she is assured and confident: “She smiled at (Joe) and went out, waving.” Margot’s attitude may not be as strident as Cassandra Pybus’ or Kate Jennings’, but it is a lot closer to them than it is to the sentiments of the SDS or White Panthers.

When Graham is with Margot it is Margot who suggests they go for a swim naked. In some ways this could be construed as Margot naively playing into the hands of male attitudes to sex (Graham certainly notices “her breasts”), but it seems pretty clear that in this case Margot is fully aware and knows what she is doing. “I like the feel of the water against me.” Margot is uninhibited and drawn to the sensual pleasure of the swim, while Graham is “not sure of her still.” Margot is at ease, while Graham is uncomfortable, “sweating” and a little out of place: Graham “grunted, making slow flailing motions in the sand like a turtle, struggling to pull off his shirt.” Perhaps the race on the sand that Margot challenges Graham to is emblematic: “Before he could refuse, she had begun running, so he padded after her, the gap between them widening at every gasp.” After the swim Margot lies unabashedly naked on her back, and when it begins to rain it is Margot who takes the initiative and suggests, “We could do a Lady Chatterley in the storm… or go back to the shack.”

The allusion, while not overly learned, is apt, considering the relative sexual explicitness of the unconventional relationship in Lawrence’s novel. Is there also a suggestion that we should draw a parallel between Margot and Graham and Lady Chatterley and Mellors?

Back at the shack Graham would have “steered her to the bed, hoping by haste to forestall thought”, but while Graham is attempting to “forestall thought” Margot is doing the opposite. Margot mentions Joe, an almost sure-fire foreplay stopper. She mentions Joe not for herself but for Graham; she knows Joe will leave her soon enough, “but you’re both good friends” she tells Graham. Graham becomes unsure about having sex with Margot and he wonders if Margot is the same. She replies, “I’m always sure,” and to give Graham time to consider she goes to “make an orgiastic meal”. As they draw close to having sex it is Graham who procrastinates, saying let’s eat first. Margot’s response is to stand up “sadly” and Graham is “afraid he had now made her annoyed”, especially after Margot has said, “but it would be nice”. All this is not the portrait of a

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454 Ibid.p.46.
woman who is the manipulated sex victim of opportunistic male predation. Rather it is the portrait of a woman who is in charge of the situation, a woman more in control than the male.

The act of writing and writers are a central concern in the story; writing is seen to be of great importance and both Joe and Graham have the attendant kudos associated with their being writers, but in the sexual arena it is Margot who seems to have the greater degree of control. In ‘Lessons on Biting the Tongue in Your Cheek’ Moore also argued that in Wilding’s writing “some of the fiction’s factors don’t change at all: the peripheral but abiding presence of women as silent witnesses, the persistent preoccupation with the identity of the male artist.” Part of the function of Margot’s character is to provide a focus, or a situation, that allows Wilding to explore the sexual dilemma that Graham finds himself in. ‘Joe’s Absence’ is clearly an exploration of the male artist as well as an attempt to explore male attitudes to women and sex. Margot may not be the central concern of the story, but nor is she “a silent witness” who is “peripheral” to the story. Wilding’s portrayal of Margot is more positive than Moore’s description would have us believe.

There is another point Moore’s article makes that needs to be addressed. In connection with Wilding’s “ongoing self-consciousness about the politics of male sexuality” Moore comments on a sentence from the New York Times Book Review, quoted on the front cover of Somewhere New, which says, “He’s so good you’re willing to forgive him anything.” Moore says this “seems to me just a bit too dependent on the adequacy of irony.” She goes on to question the “role of women as ironic critique for Wilding’s own antics in his fiction”. It is a question also succinctly posed by Ian Syson in his article ‘Michael Wilding’s Three Centres of Value.’ In a brief section on feminist criticism of Wilding (or lack thereof) Syson addresses the question of irony raised by Moore. “(D)oes Michael Wilding endorse the various kinds of sexual politics represented across his fiction, or is he merely a self-mocking teller of ironic erotic tales?” That irony is a technique Wilding makes much use of is not in dispute. The

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456 Nicole Moore, op. cit. p.88.
457 Ibid.
458 Ian Syson, ‘Michael Wilding’s Three Centres of Value.’ pp. 269-297.
459 Ibid.p.277.
very title of ‘Joe’s Absence’ ironically stresses the very opposite. However, it is different to suggest that Wilding is presenting an ironic treatment of male sexuality and the attendant attitudes to women. The gift of hindsight might dispose some to exempt Wilding from criticism by arguing that he was being ironic, that his stance was a wryly aware one that manifested itself in an ironic rendering. This would make Wilding a very prescient writer, someone who could be putting pen to paper in 1972, yet able to express the qualms and reservations of more than three decades later, all in a knowingly ironic way. A nice trick if you can do it. Not impossible, but not very probable. What seems more probable is that Wilding’s fiction is not ironic in its treatment of male attitudes to sex and women, but that his writing is an attempt to grapple with, understand and render these attitudes in a period of accelerated social change. Emergent and assertive practices threw into question the old certainties of the dominant and finding new and completely successful ways of negotiating these new times was probably more than could reasonably be expected.

Presenting these new practices in his fiction may also not automatically constitute Wilding’s endorsement. Sometimes such a linkage may be a non sequitur. This is not to backtrack and to now countenance an irony in Wilding’s treatment. Nor does it mean he disendorses them. Sounds as if there is not much room left to maneuver here. If this looks like an uncomfortable position, it is because Wilding doesn’t fit comfortably into either camp of approval or disapproval, though it is quite clear he is far more comfortable in the former. Though Wilding’s attitude to the emergent and assertive practices does heavily lean towards endorsement, that endorsement is not unequivocal. He is certainly more likely to look favourably on these new practices than to valorize the restrictive and outmoded ones of the dominant. Wilding’s endorsement is tentative and there are qualifications and reservations. Wilding’s treatment is more concerned to present the reality of the new practices, a warts and all type of honesty, rather than some idealized and unrealistic version. The new practices offer no panaceas and are often fraught with difficulties that cannot always be manoeuvred without some damage being done. At least with the new practices there is room to manoeuvre, space where individuals can negotiate the terrain themselves rather than being told where to go according to the strictures of the dominant. That the terrain is new and relatively unexplored makes the going sometimes a
little uncertain and difficult. There is always the sense of trying to work out just how to
behave. Wilding’s characters (most especially, but not exclusively, the males) take on
these new practices with energy and enthusiasm, but there is always the realistic chance
that things will not, and cannot, always work out well. New freedoms are liberating and
exhilarating, but not always amenable to a happy ending for all involved.

Moore’s broader point is to suggest the one-sided nature of seeing writers like
Wilding as typifying what was going on amidst the emergent and assertive practices of
the times. “Reading Moorhouse and Wilding as the abiding geist of the new liberated
writing of the seventies makes a strange history”.460 This point can be momentarily
circumvented by suggesting that Moorhouse and Wilding not be read as “the abiding
geist”, but rather as a component of the geist. But this is to ignore the reality that most
people see certain figures as being representatives or spokesmen (and it is usually men)
for a particular period, and that it is easier to see a period in broad general terms with a
large element of simplifying uniformity. Of course historical truth, if such a thing should
exist, is always far more varied and nuanced than to be nailed down by the fiction of a
couple of writers. The zeitgeist of the 60s was made up of a multiplicity of factors, and
that many of them were blowing in roughly the same direction at roughly the same time
is one of the reasons for the accelerated social change that occurred during the period.
Therefore, Moore’s point is well made when she is “forced to ask what happened to the
women writers of the seventies, why aren’t collections of their work returning to the
shelves, so we can read Vicki Viidikas-style satires of this stuff?”461 It’s not a bad
question. Our ongoing ability to read Wilding is only partially accounted for by his
involvement in publishing (one of his three centres of value) and the fact that he is still
actively writing. Moore then asks, “How can Wilding continue to get away with being his
own and only feminist critic?”462 That this is a question of some moment is shown by Ian
Syson’s initial response of, “Indeed”, which I take to be indicative of an element of
surprise (perhaps at the audacity, yet fairness, of the question) and that it is a question
that justifiably needs some consideration. Syson admits it’s a question that “is difficult to
answer”, but goes on to hypothesise how in the 70s and 80s a crucial task for feminist

460 Nicole Moore, op. cit. p.88.
461 Ibid.
462 Ibid.
critics was the “recuperation and reassessment of Australian women’s writing across historical periods” (though this won’t help explain to Moore what has happened to Vicki Viidikas) and that this has resulted in those who are most qualified to offer a feminist critique of Wilding’s work being involved in other tasks. Syson goes on to wonder if “in moments of backlash, like the present, (do) male literary figures get to be their own literary biographers and so avoid answering the hard feminist questions?”

Now, for someone like Wilding, who is given to irony, that would be ironic: Wilding aided by a time of backlash! So, if Wilding is ‘getting away with it’, he may be doing so by default. In the 70s Wilding was a central figure in a variety of areas: he held a high profile in the academy, the publishing industry, political activism and, especially, in the area of short stories. Wilding has moved from this position of centrality to a position on the margin, only faintly heard from time to time because of his continued ability to get published. Why this is the case is an interesting and important question. Syson suggests “Wilding is marginalised because of what he says” and because he is “easier to ignore than accommodate.”

Of course, neither reason is a particularly good one. There is something a little amiss when a central figure from a watershed is largely ignored.

That Wilding is critical of the code of behaviour prescribed by the dominant, and that the lifestyle of the emergent and assertive practices is preferable by far, is made clear in the story that follows ‘Joe’s Absence.’ The ‘Odour of Eucalyptus’ is an exploration of the inhibiting morality of the dominant. As with the previously discussed ‘The Altar of the Family’, the function of including ‘Odour of Eucalyptus’ is to emphasise the relative preferability of the new values associated with the 60s. ‘The Sybarites’ and ‘Joe’s Absence’ are explorations of the sexual mores of the 60s, an attempt to work out how a thinking, young person should behave, and as part of such a realistic exploration there are bound to be difficulties, frustrations and failures amidst the pleasures to be found in the new freedoms. Wilding’s stories lay out the positives and the negatives associated with these new freedoms. Such is the case with ‘Joe’s Absence.’ But a reading of ‘Odour of Eucalyptus’ reinforces the belief that though the new sexual freedom of the 60s may be

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463 Ian Syson, ‘Michael Wilding’s Three Centres of Value.’ p.276.
464 Ibid.p.270.
replete with difficulties it is very much preferable to the code of behaviour prescribed by the dominant.

‘Odour of Eucalyptus’ traces the relationship between Peter and the aptly named Miss Thorn, two English people who have travelled by ship to Sydney. It is Miss Thorn who typifies the code of behaviour of the dominant; she is a product of the dominant and is therefore forced to lead her life within its clearly set boundaries. The daughter of a “schoolmaster”, she attended teachers’ training college “for Church of England girls only”, a placing typical of the dominant’s vision of the position of middle class women and a placing somewhat portentous of future failings to naturally and easily mix with the opposite sex. The way Miss Thorn carries herself is indicative of her morality and code of behaviour. She has a “stiffness and lack of soft pliancy” and she walks “her back held, after all those deportment lessons she had not forgotten, too stiffly”. After dinner on the ship Miss Thorn would have one sherry, and definitely only the one. Peter would try to make her “less formal”, but all to no avail. When the Beatles come to Sydney she refuses Peter’s invitation to see them, “because not liking the Beatles herself…. She could not face the mass of screaming teenagers in the Stadium.” Whilst liking the Beatles is not obligatory it is yet another indication of how removed from the tenor of the times Miss Thorn is.

Of course, Miss Thorn did not like King’s Cross. “The Cross, after all, wasn’t pleasant, wasn’t except for this once, a place she really wanted to see except for her duty of discovering Sydney.” “Duty”! As if the whole journey was something prescribed by the dominant for single women to do. There is no relaxed, easy-going giving into pleasure, no spontaneity, no sense of being set free in a sensuous, sensual city on the other side of the world; there is an aloofness from all that is representative of the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. The Cross was synonymous with sex, with its “strip clubs, glossy photos of bosomy girls and transvestite men”. This isn’t the sort of sex the emergent and assertive practices of the counterculture would have had in mind –

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466 Ibid.p.61.
467 Ibid.p.56.
468 Ibid.p.55.
469 Ibid.p.61.
470 Ibid. p.62.
too commercialized, too redolent of sideshow alley exhibitionism, tolerated by the dominant as an interesting aberration and source of indulgence for some, all neatly confined in the precincts of The Cross. But it isn’t just the type of the sex on display in The Cross that Miss Thorn has disdain for. When Peter takes Miss Thorn to show her the flat he shares with his friend Derek, she is aware that Derek takes girls back there and sleeps with them. Derek thinks Australian girls are “prettier, browner, easier”. When Peter shows Miss Thorn the flat with its white walls designed to make it feel clean and cool she says, “Painted that colour for the activities that go on here, I suppose.” The sarcasm and moral distaste borne of the assault to the dominant’s moral code is unmistakable. Given that Peter’s relationship with Miss Thorn is completely devoid of any physical, sexual contact it is little wonder that he doesn’t want to hear “Derek’s sexual successes being recounted.” While Peter is trying to be “dissuasive” of Derek’s recounting they both look across to the fountain in The Cross which “rose and burst and spread and they watched it from their silence.” Not the subtlest of phallic imagery, but the point being, I suppose, that the energy of sex is out there, it’s part of the landscape of the 60s, and it can’t be avoided “because it sprays people.”

In spite of these characteristics Peter must still be attracted to Miss Thorn, for he persists in trying to alter those aspects of her behaviour produced by her upbringing within the confines of the dominant. Peter tries “to loosen her up, make her bend and unbend, massage, in a manner of speaking, her.” He fails. “But he poked his fingers nowhere, not even to her hands. They walked demurely and sat at restaurants…tete a tete indeed, but correctly.” When Peter walks her back to her hotel he is told, “I’d ask you in for coffee, but you know what people might think.” Miss Thorn is prevented from what she may wish to do, restricted by the code of sexual behaviour set down by the dominant.

Not surprisingly the relationship between Peter and Miss Thorn fails to progress and as Miss Thorn continues to travel around Australia the relationship is reduced to an exchange of letters. The narrator at the conclusion of the story accurately speculates that

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471 Ibid.p.58.
472 Ibid.p.62.
473 Ibid.p.58.
474 Ibid.p.61.
475 Ibid.p.64.
Peter “had tired of treating her as the English lady, pure, unmolested, untouched by human hand” and perhaps Peter was influenced by the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s and “scattering the rocks and pebbles of morality aside, had lowered his head and charged.”\textsuperscript{476} For some the moral code of the dominant proved to be a little more difficult to scatter than rocks and pebbles. For Miss Thorn the prescriptions of the dominant were so ingrained that to scatter them, let alone ignore or remove them, proved an impossibility and thus the possibility of a developing relationship with Peter also became an impossibility. ‘Odour of Eucalyptus’ is an exploration of the morality of the dominant that clearly outlines just how restrictive and limiting that code is. In this story, adherence to the dominant is to live a life without realising the potential that was possible for other young people in the 60s. The world of ‘The Sybarites’ and ‘Joe’s Absence’ may not be perfect, but it had to be preferable to that of ‘Odour of Eucalyptus’.

The second last story in the collection, ‘And Did Henry Miller Walk in Our Tropical Garden’, is another exploration of the sexual code of behaviour of the new practices of the 60s. In this story the unnamed narrator is a young writer living in Sydney in the “bohemian quarter”, though he’d “got to dislike the arty push aspect of it”.\textsuperscript{477} The narrator lives with Judy, but wants “to get it off with Jo”.\textsuperscript{478} In this regard the story is an exploration of how to behave when a young man is living with someone, but sexually desires someone else. It is a situation Miss Thorn would never find herself in. The emergent and assertive practices have brought freedoms: freedom to live with someone outside of marriage and the freedom to desire someone else and to attempt “to get it off” with that someone else. Such freedoms do not come unencumbered. Certainly there is the freedom to leave a relationship that you are no longer happy in, in order to pursue a better one. No longer can the dominant prescribe marriage before sex, and no longer is marriage a situation that is extremely difficult to extricate yourself from. But amidst the emergent and assertive practices just how does one go about getting out of one relationship and into another? Unless a person is completely unthinking and unfeeling then there are predicaments to be negotiated. ‘And Did Henry Miller Walk in Our Garden’ explores these new freedoms and their attendant ramifications. Again, Wilding’s story offers no

\textsuperscript{476} Ibid.p.69.
\textsuperscript{477} Ibid.p.83.
\textsuperscript{478} Ibid.p.85.
sexual utopia, but rather new and welcomed freedoms that can prove very difficult to negotiate. Emergent and assertive practices do not guarantee perfect happiness.

At a party the narrator and Jo, “after a perfunctory touch of footy footy”, go to the narrator’s car to be alone, and Judy, who sees this, is naturally “a bit shat off”. Jo tries to assuage any worries that the narrator has, telling him that Judy is “rejection prone” and “why worry about it?”479 Despite this the narrator still feels “as guilty as ever; and deprived too.” It’s one of the 60s archetypal dilemmas, and one the narrator seems incapable of consciously resolving. Jo says she wants to go to bed with him, but that he’d end up feeling bad about it and “resent her and bugger up things with Judy.” He can’t even secretly have sex with Jo because he “wouldn’t be capable of getting off with her and saying nothing”. Hoping an abnegation of his responsibility in the situation would somehow result in a resolution, the narrator is in bed under a blanket with Jo, but she “still wouldn’t make any decision for me.” In an attempt to separate mind and body he hopes his “brain would make its own decision.” He thinks, “Perhaps if I induced a trance I would act spontaneously, and come to actually warm inside her, those rich warm breasts snuggling my head, the long fine fingers clasped deep into my buttocks.” You’d think that given that the narrator is in bed with Jo, albeit both of them fully dressed, and given Jo’s compliance and the narrator’s erotic desires, then he would be able to actually have sex with Jo. But no, all he gets is “an erection which was uncomfortable inside (his) jeans”.480

Of all the stories in Aspects of the Dying Process it is in ‘And Did Henry Miller Walk in Our Tropical Garden’ where Wilding’s portrayal of the male protagonist is the most ironic. Wilding, however, is not ironising male attitudes to sex and women. The story is not critical of the sexual predicament the narrator finds himself in per se; such a situation is a reality of the new practices of the 60s and is a relevant area for Wilding to explore. The story, however, does not succumb to any neat stereotyped conclusions: the narrator doesn’t bravely and honestly break with Judy and then go off with Jo for some mutually intense and liberating fucking. Not a chance. There is too much incompetence and ineptitude surrounding the narrator to allow him to be able to think and act

479 Ibid.p.83.
480 Ibid.p.84.
independently. There is a whinging self-indulgence about the narrator, a childish dependency on others. The narrator may move in the milieu of the new freedoms of the 60s, but he has not got the concomitant wherewithal to negotiate these new freedoms. When woken by some kids playing in the street he must wake Judy up in order to ask her if they woke her too, when clearly if she is still sleeping they did not. When he hypochondriacally moans at different times to Judy and Jo about an ache down his right side he is given no indulgent sympathy, so he stops mentioning it and it goes away.\textsuperscript{481} These are not endearing foibles, but part of a list of characteristics that cumulatively define the narrator. When a girlfriend of Judy’s propositions the narrator “seven times, ‘Well, darling, I’ll love you and leave you’” he “couldn’t come at it” because of the drinking the night before and what “can you do when your gut’s all raw from retching?”\textsuperscript{482} The narrator’s excuses are consistently unconvincing. When he decides to go visit Jo he goes to tell Judy what he is doing, but she is in the shower and he doesn’t tell her because he didn’t want to shout and he “can’t stand talking with all that water everywhere”. Self-deluding can be added to the narrator’s list of character traits. His constantly waiting for others to decide things for him culminates in his final visit to Jo’s. Having quietly entered Jo’s place uninvited he sees a man wearing nothing but a white sweat-shirt, which reached to the top of his buttocks, doing his hair in the mirror. Clearly Jo has taken another lover and the narrator sneaks away unnoticed. The decision has been made for him and he is of course “exhilarated at the neatness of it” and his main thought now is of the man’s white buttocks and whether or not he saw his “hairy balls”, because, as he says, “it is possible I suppose, anatomically.”\textsuperscript{483} Even his attitude to writing is dilettantish. He seems more in love with the idea of writing than being actively engaged in doing it. The closest we get is, “I went upstairs and wrote a bit and decided bugger it”.\textsuperscript{484} After the “hairy balls” episode he makes notes in order to later “write the buttock image up”, which is apparently a lot more attractive to him than any fictional exploration of the overall import of the episode. In the end the narrator’s immediate future has been decided for him and he moves house with Judy. But it is Judy who does the packing for

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid.p.82.}
\footnote{Ibid.p.83.}
\footnote{Ibid.p.87.}
\footnote{Ibid.p.84.}
\end{footnotes}
the move, just as it has always been her doing things around the house, such as getting lunch and dinner, the narrator obviously incapable of even feeding himself.\(^{485}\)

Such a portrayal of the narrator would not result in readers rejecting the emergent and assertive practices he fails to negotiate. Rather they would see his predicament as one of the consequences of these new freedoms, one that gives agency to individuals rather than to some overarching morality of the dominant’s prescriptive code of behaviour. Ultimately readers’ censure would be against the narrator and his irritating incompetence.

‘Aspects of the Dying Process’ is the longest and last story in the book. Set in the inner suburbs of Sydney, the characters are from the creative, semi-bohemian milieu that Wilding has previously drawn on: there’s the protagonist, Graham Coburn, who is a writer and lecturer, and Jacquie the actor to whom he is attracted, as well as Fowler, the film maker, with whom Jacquie is living. The parameters are clearly drawn and this is familiar territory for Wilding’s fiction: the creation of a tricky predicament involving people living together, sexual attraction, issues of fidelity and infidelity all set amidst a time of rapid social change. It’s a story that catches “the authentic idiom of today’s post-permissive generation, together with its unspoken undercurrents of sexual needs, desires and frustrations and the games that conceal or give form to these forces.”\(^{486}\) Again Wilding is trying to negotiate this terrain, and again there are no easy resolutions on offer. The 60s are better times of freedom, and with these new freedoms there are the attendant positives and negatives.

“It was like any other party after any other evening at the pub and the sameness of it pressed on Graham”. This pressing sameness is relieved when Graham sees Jacquie arrive at the party with Fowler. Graham is struck with Jacquie’s beauty, and as he “watch(es) her undisturbed” his initial description of her verges close to cliche with “her long blonde hair falling over her shoulders, over her white shirt, the whiteness, the clarity, the immediate attractiveness…. And her bright blue eyes, her sweet naive lips, her wide-eyed innocent eager expression”.\(^{487}\) It’s not quite the cliched eyes-meeting-across-the-crowded-room love-at-first-sight-encounter, but it’s working on it. However, any expectation that the story will move within these safe, known walls of cliche are soon

\(^{485}\) Ibid., pp. 84, 86 and 88.
\(^{487}\) Michael Wilding, Aspects of the Dying Process, p. 89.
dispelled. Graham and Jacque engage in conversation and it is a conversation that quickly takes on a sexual nature. This is initially prompted by Jacque taking out of Graham’s pocket a copy of Sire, the sort of magazine that does nudes (female) and articles, and to which Graham is a contributing writer. Graham is embarrassed about having the magazine, with its “simple perviness….every mammary joke, all the grainy nudes.” Graham’s embarrassment is repeated later in the story when the serendipity of meeting Jacque again is spoiled for Graham when she finds him once more in possession of a copy of Sire.

Graham has expressed some of the consternation Wilding himself felt when he contributed to magazines like Sire. This issue of writing for magazines devoted to printing nude photographs of women is relevant to a reading of Wilding’s fiction which centres on that writing’s engagement in the disruptive and liberating practices of the 60s. Some people no doubt purchased these magazines for the writing, though most, despite denials, would have purchased the magazines for the ‘tits and bums’ and not the stories written by Sydney’s new, young writers. It is the ethics of writing for these magazines versus the pragmatism of getting into print that Wilding addresses in Frank Moorhouse’s Days of Wine and Rage. In the section ‘The Literary Life’ Wilding contributes the chapter ‘The Tabloid Story Story’ and it is here he discusses his contribution to magazines like Sire. Impetus for writing for these magazines (such as Squire, Casual, Chance International and Man) came from dissatisfaction with the literary quarterlies which Wilding and others felt were out of touch with the new fiction. The literary quarterlies and their editors expected traditional short stories and the “new writing – with its different idioms, its abandonment of the beginning-middle-end linear narrative, its search for new forms and its use of new experiences – they found shapeless, inept, unintelligible, pointless.” Of this “use of new experiences” sex was prominent and as such any portrayal of sex outside of that prescribed by the dominant would find it almost impossible to get into print in magazines that functioned as guardians and apparatchiks of the dominant. Wilding was acutely aware of the dilemma. “New writing often deals with

488 Ibid.pp.91-92.
489 Ibid.p.97.
490 Frank Moorhouse, op. cit. ‘The Tabloid Story Story’ is pp.145-155.
491 Ibid.p.145.
sex. Not always, not compulsively, not inevitably – but often; and this was getting us into problems with the straight papers that were potential host magazines.” Accommodating the “straight papers” wasn’t on the agenda. “We had no intention of censoring or of rejecting material because of its sexual component – if you do that you don’t have any new writing.” Thus Wilding and others decided to be published in magazines like Sire. But there is a little more to this decision than just finding a home for the unexpurgated stories of the new writers, and this reason is yet a further example of how sex was seen as being a predominant agent for change in the 60s. Wilding argued that although few purchasers of the “girlie magazines” would read the stories, the editors of these magazines would read and appreciate their writing because “they had a wider, non-academic, non-establishment taste”. Presumably, though Wilding doesn’t state this, the new writers believed this would lead to other opportunities to be presented to a wider readership; otherwise we are left to think of reasons such as remuneration (not to be scoffed at by new writers) and vanity.

The main ideological reason that Wilding puts forward is the “girlie magazines were the first onslaught on bourgeois sexual repression” and “(B)efore the girlie magazines began, the total expression of sexuality in writing, with a huge list of banned books prohibited entry to Australia, served as a form of social and political control.” Again there is the acute awareness of the role of sex as an integral component of the emergent and assertive practices’ assault on the hegemony of the dominant, both socially and politically. As with the chauvinistic attitudes of many men in the counterculture (as cited above when discussing ‘Joe’s Absence’), the point is a highly problematic one. Do the “girlie magazines” undermine or bolster the dominant? They could easily be seen as reinforcing the male patriarchal gaze of the dominant which objectifies women as well as providing a voyeuristic safety-valve. The nude pictures of “girlies”, naughty “girlies” at that, would be viewed in private or amongst other males, and being found with them or buying them would sometimes induce embarrassment. “I was simply always terribly embarrassed going to newsagents and looking to see if the latest issue had run a story of

492 Ibid.p.151.
493 Ibid.p.146.
494 Ibid.
mine." Is this embarrassment the product of being worried about being thought to be complicit with the dominant, being seen as a leering, furtive male member of the dominant, or is it an awkwardness brought about by a self-justifying appropriation of these magazines when you know their content and raison d’etre is questionable? Even the term “girlie magazine” is a little problematic with its connotations of condescension, exploitation and power imbalance, all exerted in favour of the dominant’s patriarchal values. But as I said, the role played by these magazines is problematic and their complicity with the dominant is clearly not the way Wilding sees it. He sees them as being an “onslaught on bourgeois sexual repression” because they helped break down the taboos in society and after “the taboos had been broken down, then the values embodied in sexuality could be verbalized, expressed – and examined.” These “girlie magazines” helped produce strange progeny; Wilding argues that “the women’s movement critique of sexism could only operate after sexism had at least become explicit in the society.”

So Wilding’s argument is that he wrote stories, which few if any purchasers read, for inclusion in magazines, which most, if not all, purchasers looked at and ogled over, and the upshot of all this was liberating for young people and galvanizing for the women’s movement. Suspect and tenuous though the linkage may first appear, there is something in Wilding’s line of argument. Sometimes you need to see the violence inherent in the system in order to get on with the search for the Holy Grail. In much the same way it could be argued that the sexism of the early counterculture, as decried by Kate Jennings and others, and as exhibited by the likes of The White Panthers and Richard Neville, was an essential transitional phase for sexual equality and women’s liberation. Once women were taken out of the kitchens and parlours they may have then made the coffee and licked the stamps and been fucked by the men, but there was no getting them to demurely return to those kitchens and parlours. And given this new freedom it wasn’t long before these women would look around and see not so much how far they had traveled, but how far they still had to go. Not only was this genie out of the bottle, but no way was she going to obey her new master. So the sexism and chauvinism of the earlier phase of the emergent and assertive practices served as a transitional

495 Ibid.p.145.
496 Ibid.p.146.
prerequisite for the striving for and the gaining of further freedoms. And so it may have been with the “girlie magazines.” These magazines and the sexism and chauvinism, all of which seem so outdated and unacceptable now, may not have been viewed as such at the time. These magazines brought sex into the public arena and even if this sex took a form that was questionable by the standards of the later phases of the counterculture, as well as the present, they were at least part of the process that made sex an open and public issue. And once it was on the agenda it became less amenable to control by the dominant and more open to mutating into forms that the emergent and assertive practices could use to subvert and replace the culture of the dominant. This more positive interpretation of the role of the “girlie magazines” does not entirely negate the view that they may have also simultaneously reinforced the dominant’s mores such as the sexist objectification of women. The two functions are not mutually exclusive. For some the magazines would have reinforced the values of the dominant, while for others they functioned as part of the process towards a freer and more open approach. Like that other genie, once sex was out of the strict confines in which the dominant liked to keep and control it, then there was no telling what would happen.

Graham and Wilding may have been embarrassed by their connection with these types of magazines, but in ‘Aspects of the Dying Process’ Jacquie is merely curious about these magazines and the interest they hold for men. She tries to place herself in the position of the men who buy the magazines and this effort at transposition is tempered by a very pragmatic enquiry. “I can’t imagine I’d enjoy looking at photographs of grotty men without any clothes on,’ she said. ‘I wonder how much they get.’”

There is no moral outrage here; it is simply aesthetics and money. In fact throughout the story the attitude to sex is consistent; it is of central importance in the way people relate to each other, a part of the fabric of people’s lived culture and not something extraordinary and out of the normal. At the party Graham leaves Jacquie to find another bottle of beer and he is “set upon by Marianne” who suggests “that they should go off for a fuck somewhere”. Clearly Marianne has moved some distance from the maternal strictures of the 50s which said a girl should never call a boy or ask him out, let alone would you like to “go off for a fuck”. Marianne is a very minor character in the story (this is her only

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appearance) but she is quite significant in that she is a woman totally and unabashedly in control of her sexuality. Graham admits to Jacquie, “‘She terrifies me, that rampant sexuality.’”

In the brief exchange between Graham and Marianne it is Marianne who is the most assertive, the one who clearly knows what she wants and who openly sets about trying to attain it. It is a refreshing corrective to the stereotype. That Graham is uncomfortable with this is reflected in his choice of adjectives when describing Marianne’s sexuality. When he describes it as “rampant” it is a term that, whilst not completely pejorative, does connote something that is excessive and unchecked and as such it is a negative that is unlikely to be leveled at a male. This is partly reflective of a double standard, but is additionally an aspect of Graham’s timidity as previously seen in his embarrassment at being caught with Sire. However, Jacquie is not at all taken aback by Marianne’s sexual behaviour; rather she seems to take it as a given, as an acceptable and somewhat unremarkable mode of female behaviour. When Graham tells Jacquie that Marianne “‘wanted me to fuck her’” Jacquie’s unfazed response is “‘And did you?...You were away long enough.’” For Graham, Marianne is a “‘monster’”, but for Jacquie she is “‘very pretty.’”

This is not to suggest that Graham is the sexual counterbalance to the openness of the two women. He is not so coy that he is unable to tell Jacquie quite openly that Marianne wanted a fuck, and he is comfortable enough to be able to say how Marianne’s sexual appetite scares him. Indeed, the entire conversation at the party between Graham and Jacquie is largely focused on sex, which is discussed in a relaxed and uninhibited fashion. Both characters are fully alert to the nature and possible implications of their conversation and there is no sense that one character is being taken advantage of by another. It is an exchange that largely appears unremarkable: it is an exchange that is free from the control of the dominant and only responsive to the dynamic of personalities, time and place. Compared to the 50s this unremarkable exchange does have something quietly remarkable about it.

Graham’s desire for Jacquie continues and he is “eager to encounter her further.” At another party he finds himself standing next to her, and he wants “to hold her thighs,
reach his hands across her belly and down over her hips, up to press her breasts.” 500 But sexual desire, even in a time of relative sexual freedom, is no guarantee of consummation and happiness. These things can be a little difficult to achieve, especially if both are required at the one time. And sexual desire can be a fickle thing. When Graham sees her again it is at a reception for a “distinguished writer” and this time Jacquie is different; her relationship with Fowler, the filmmaker she lives with, is a little troubled and she is listless and quietly upset. But for Graham there is no allure here of the damsel in distress. Nor is there any attempt at opportunistic sexual predation. What Graham sees and feels is something very different. “Without her enthusiasm she was nothing…. She had not read anything by the distinguished writer…she seemed not to have read anything…” None too soon Graham seems to be realising that beauty is only skin deep, though skin deep beauty may be more than adequate for most, most of the time. “She existed there like a human form preserved on ice, ready for an alien consciousness to assume her shape and suspended personality. And come, it was to be hoped, with a richer information stock than she was equipped with.” Just before he leaves the reception Graham sees Jacquie slumped on a couch and “she no longer seemed attractive.” 501 Graham’s critique of Jacquie is scathing and definite. That is until she visits him the next time.

When Jacquie visits Graham he is teaching at the university, but she is able to take him away from his class and it is not long before Graham thinks she is “so bright, so lively, so happy (and) all that first attraction for her flooded back.” 502 Jacquie tells Graham that she has just been “judging a stupid beauty competition”, to which Graham replies, “I can imagine a lot of things worse.” 503 Graham is at risk here of not only appearing to not know his own emotions with regards to Jacquie, but to also be somewhat anachronistically chauvinistic. Jacquie’s involvement in the beauty contest is partially exonerated by the fact that nobody has ever commented on, nor has she ever exhibited, her intelligence. Presumably the same can’t be said about Graham. Especially since his self-image is one of nonconformity, a refusal to follow the dictates of the dominant; “he

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500 Ibid.p.98 and p.99.
501 Ibid. p.103 and p. 104.
502 Ibid.p.106.
503 Ibid.p.107.
was committed to a life style of spontaneity; he resisted the gray-suited norm”. Uncritical admiration for beauty contests smacks of the “gray-suited norm”. Does the rationale that Wilding used to justify his writing for “girlie magazines” hold equally true for beauty contests, that is do they also function as part of the “onslaught on bourgeois sexual oppression,” helping reveal sexism to be “explicit in the society”? Any such support that attempts to be validated here on countercultural grounds seems pretty implausible. Beauty contests so clearly epitomized the patriarchal values of the dominant that any complicity with them to serve the purposes of the emergent and assertive practices seems somewhat gratuitous. And it isn’t as if Graham could plead ignorance. Criticism of beauty contests, especially by women’s liberationists, had been widespread and highly visible. In 1968, four years before Aspects of the Dying Process, there was the much publicized protest at the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City. Just outside the pageant about one hundred women crowned a sheep, then threw into a ‘freedom trashcan’ bras, girdles, curlers, false eyelashes and other ‘beauty products’, while shouting, “Freedom for women!” The women were protesting “the degrading, mindless boob-girlie symbol” of the pageant. While no bras were ever burnt, the press nevertheless created the image of these women being bra burners and it was an image that was to synecdochically stand for the women’s movement in the minds of many people. Perhaps Jacquie is not the only character “not to have read anything”, or are we to assume Graham has read, but is unredeemed? What we have here in the character of Graham is partly the product of Wilding’s ironic rendering, his refusal to portray characters without the anomalies and inconsistencies that constitute a lifestyle lived amid the emergent and assertive practices. It is as if Graham is a sort of work in progress: he is clearly influenced by the values of the emergent and assertive practices, but as with so many others he is incapable of taking on each and every aspect of these practices, which from our present standpoint may have appeared to have arrived all at once and fully actualized. Rather the 60s was an evolving process and Graham is representative of the inconsistencies that this evolution may produce.

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504 Ibid. p.108.
It is in the 60s spirit of sexual liberation that Graham goes to a party being held by Jacq"uie and Fowler. He goes to the party with one girl from their “joint household”, Nina, but after dancing a while they both get “mildly bored with each other” and both go to look “for fresh diversions.”\textsuperscript{506} The brief portrayal of Nina here is interesting; she is as equally empowered in the dynamic of the open relationship as Graham is. Evidence of Nina’s social and sexual independence occurs when Nina simply leaves Graham and goes off with Fowler and Graham casually wonders “if Fowler were going to get off with Nina”.\textsuperscript{507} Graham finds his “fresh diversion” in Kate, another member of the joint household. He finds Kate’s “soft glowing warmth… very sexy” and soon “his hands (are) feeling the contours of her buttocks, her breasts”. A suggestion of the availability of sex and the openness of sexual attitudes in the household occurs when Graham wonders if he should leave with Kate, but doesn’t do so because he feels “tired” and “altogether too content to initiate anything.”\textsuperscript{508} But as Wilding’s stories repeatedly point out sexual freedom does not always automatically equate with happiness. The closing scenes of ‘Aspects of the Dying Process’ see a confrontation between Jacq"uie and Fowler over the issue of sex. Sexual freedom may have given Graham ‘contentment’, but for Jacq"uie there is jealousy. In a time of sexual freedom it is essential that the ramifications of jealousy be addressed; feelings of possessiveness and questions of infidelity will be unavoidable for some and the strain and pain that some will feel will be inevitable. In the penultimate scene Jacq"uie accuses Fowler of trying to be with Nina, whom she sees as Graham’s girl, “’(J)ust so as you can try and fuck his lousy girl.’”\textsuperscript{509} The issue of possession implied in Jacq"uie’s description of “his” girl could just be an innocent expression, but this is not supported by the way Jacq"uie sees her relationship with Fowler. Graham, Nina and Kate may be open in their sexual relations, but this is not the case with Jacq"uie. The final scene of ‘Aspects of the Dying Process’ is a reprise of the confrontation between Jacq"uie and Fowler. The loud argument climaxes when Fowler is pushed to name all the women he’s slept with: “’A complete list, or just the last twelve months?’” Fowler taunts Jacq"uie and when Fowler begins the list she is devastated.

\textsuperscript{506} Michael Wilding, Aspects of the Dying Process. p.113.
\textsuperscript{507} Ibid.p.114.
\textsuperscript{508} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{509} Ibid.p.115.
Jacquie had been faithful to Fowler and had expected, and believed she had, faithfulness from him. Graham, Nina and Kate leave the party “embarrassed at having intruded so far.” The music had stopped and the only sound they hear as they leave is Jacquie’s “sobbing”. Graham, Nina and Kate are affected by the argument, but their sexual world is different to Jacquie’s. “And they walked on into silence, and in the car the silence gave way to Kate and Nina singing, softly, in unison, as Graham sat between them.”

‘Aspects of the Dying Process’ explores the problematic nature of the sexual mores of the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. Wilding is concerned to valorize aspects of these practices, while at the same time refusing to ignore the detrimental impact it can have on some people. There are some casualties and it would be disingenuous to ignore them. The emergent and assertive practices seem to have delivered a degree of sexual freedom to Graham, Nina and Kate and in this they appear happy and in control. The type of sexual freedom given to Fowler is a little different in that he is not open and honest about it, and his sexual duplicity ultimately serves as a weapon to annihilate Jacquie. Such sexual duplicity has been part of the male domain well before 60s, and if the stereotype of film directors is accurate then Fowler will not be the first to take advantage of women. Again Wilding’s readers have the sexual mores of the 60s presented to them in a way that incorporates them as part of the culture as it is lived by young people. There is the freedom from the restraints of the dominant, but it is a freedom that may be fraught with uncertainties and difficulties; as the characters negotiate the new sexual terrain Graham seems in constant flux about his feelings for Jacquie, while ultimately for Jacquie the conclusion is disastrous, though it seems that culpability for Jacquie’s pain lies more with Fowler’s character and duplicity than with the emergent and assertive practices.

Early in ‘Aspects of the Dying Process’, when Graham first speaks to Jacquie, he asks her how she got the faded look to her jeans, and she tells him in some detail about the “dyeing process” The process alters the original jeans to give an “appearance of fadedness, the current necessity, as well as…evidence of a complex and time-consuming process”.

On the concluding page of the story we are reminded of the title when

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510 Ibid.p.116.
511 Ibid.p.90.
Jacquie says to Fowler, “Go on, tell me more; you’re obviously dying to announce all your conquests.”

Certainly the characters in the story live under the “current necessity”, and relationships, sexual and otherwise, involve a “complex and time-consuming process”. There is the “dying” of Graham’s attraction to Jacquie and the “dying” of her feelings for, and relationship with, Fowler. And does the image of a “fadedness” of things new (or young) connote an up to the minute trendiness or are there suggestions of tiredness, of being washed out? Either way it is all part of a “complex and time-consuming process” that constitutes Wilding’s area of exploration.

Overall, Aspects of the Dying Process functions to reinforce the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. Bruce Bennett sees the stories as not only bearing “the unmistakeable stamp of the here and now”, but as also presenting “a remarkable amount of emotional friction (and) intensity of feeling.”

Graeme Curtis sees the lives of Wilding’s characters as being rendered with such verisimilitude that he suggests instead of buying one of the spate of “pop-sociological studies of Australian life” you’d be better advised to “spend your dollar on a jug of beer or Aspects of the Dying Process. That way you’ll get the real thing.”

Yet Wilding’s characters “are no mere recorders of Sydney’s mores; instead they emerge as awkward participants in the difficult and often deluding process of assimilation and communication.”

Certainly the stories reflect what was going on in the 60s, but at the same time they encourage acceptance and participation in such practices. This encouragement is facilitated by the stories appearing to sanction such approaches, in that they are put forward to readers not as something outrageous and confrontationist, but are matter of factly presented as just how things are for young people in Sydney in the 60s. On the back cover of Aspects of the Dying Process it is related how Wilding was going to initially call the anthology Somewhere New, but felt this “sounded too positive” and opted for calling it after the longest and last story. Certainly not everything about the new practices is completely positive, but the inclusion of ‘The Altar of the Family’ and ‘Odour of Eucalyptus’ makes it clear to

512 Ibid. p.116.
513 Bruce Bennett, op. cit. p.67.
readers just how positive the new practices are in relation to those of the dominant. The inclusion of these two stories also makes it apparent just how different the practices of the 60s were to those of the dominant in the preceding years. In this respect I think Somewhere New would have been a better title.

Living Together

Michael Wilding’s novel Living Together\textsuperscript{516} was first published in 1974. Its very title signifies the distance Wilding’s thematic concerns have traveled. He has not embarked on a new direction, but has chosen to give a closer and more detailed treatment of the social behaviour and sexual mores of those involved in the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. Certainly Aspects of the Dying Process, with its portrayal of the sexual attitudes of a variety of individuals who are relatively liberated, was also involved in this discussion and analysis. However, in Aspects of the Dying Process the characters are unattached or uncommitted to any one relationship; they have the space and mobility of free agents who spend much of their time and energy negotiating sexual desire. A lot of their time is spent trying to establish a sexual relationship. Living Together looks at what can happen if they succeed. In Aspects of the Dying Process sex is an important issue, but in Living Together it has moved to a position of centrality; it is integral to the concerns of the novel and accordingly the treatment is more comprehensive and explicit.

The title and content of the novel would have been totally unacceptable during the 50s: indeed the type of lifestyle the novel reflects and encourages would still have been anathema to the dominant at the time of its publication. Of course people had been living together before the 60s, but such arrangements were censured and more likely to be described as ‘living in sin’ than the far less derogatory term of living together. By the 60s the arrangement of people living together was no longer some form of social aberration, but had become a widespread and acceptable phenomenon amongst young, urban people. Living together involved a great many things that go along with moving into and sharing a house, but the central and most important aspect of living together was sex. Allocating the household chores or paying the rent are important aspects of living together, but as

emergent and assertive practices they are far less significant than sharing a bed. Freedom from parents and social restraints was an important reason for living together, but at the core of it all was the freedom to have sex. Sex was integral to the transgressive and disruptive efficacy of living together. Without the sex you have an accommodation arrangement that may have aroused the suspicion of mainstream society, but not its ire, as without the sex living together presented much less of a real threat. Living Together deals with young people who have chosen to ignore the institution of marriage and who have decided to live together in a sexual relationship. The very term living together denoted a heterosexual sexual relationship, with at least a degree of commitment and permanence attached to that relationship; though not being bound by the dominant’s rules of marriage meant that the extent of that commitment and permanence was variable. Most often living together meant that the couple was involved in a monogamous relationship, though even this was not always the case as houses existed where sexual relationships among the people living there was open and fluid with no real binding sense of commitment or permanence to one particular person. That the monogamous relationship was the most common form of living together did not mean ‘till death you do part’; serial monogamy was common. The duration of couples living together was dependent on the internal dynamic of the relationship and not the external forces, societal and legal, explicit and implicit, in marriage. Living together was an essential feature of the countercultural practices of the time and was seen as part of the process of undermining one of the central tenets of the dominant culture which broadly viewed marriage as an essential component in the economic and moral structure of mainstream society. Living together was one of those sites that Catherine Gallagher, amongst numerous others of the time, saw as contributing to “a systemic crisis, a revolutionary conjunction” that would see the demise of the dominant.  

The monogamous, nuclear and patriarchal family of the dominant fostered an approach to sex that meant it had to be private and solely within the bounds of the marriage. It also facilitated the continuation of a wide disparity in the role and status of men and women. Young people viewed marriage as a form of control whose function was the maintenance of the sexual and cultural status quo in order for the dominant to

517 Catherine Gallagher, op. cit. p.48.
perpetuate itself. Marriage was seen as an archaic institution whose legal and social force inhibited freedom and restricted people from moving in and out of relationships. It was seen as a legal institution which you no longer had to sign up for. That it was a legal institution probably made it all the more suspect; young people had only to think of the laws associated with drugs and the draft. Marriage was seen as little more than a state sponsored scrap of paper. But having said this, the act of living together still constituted a serious and significant choice for a lot of young people, which often involved going against the strictures of the dominant, an important part of which was the expectations, conditioning and demands of parents. And, as with the very act of sex outside the moral parameters of mainstream society, once the choice of living together had been acted upon its effect could be an emboldening and liberating one, which in turn could easily and naturally lead to the questioning of other assumptions that underpinned the hegemony of the dominant. Living together provided the possibility of being free of these restraints, though as Living Together illustrates, such freedoms do not guarantee an automatic and easy access to happiness.

Living Together seeks to explore the ramifications that occur when young, educated, urban dwelling people in Sydney choose to live together. For D. Gilbey it “is a comic document of suburban life” where the characters are “relatively realistic” and the exploration is of the “social and sexual mores in the Balmain of 1970s”.

Douglas Stewart may place the action in Paddington, but concurs with Gilbey as to the novel’s central concern: “people casually drifting in and out of each other’s houses… and in and out of each other’s beds.”

Living Together offers an account of the practicalities of moving into a house with the plastering, sandpapering, painting, arranging furniture, washing and cleaning that go towards making a place habitable. It deals with having other young people sharing the house (yet another assault on the nuclear family) and the relationship these people share, not only amongst themselves, but with neighbours and other friends. It looks at people’s aspirations as to the sort of ambience they want their household to have. There is the cooking and washing and the allocation of jobs. The inclusion of all these mundane, but essential, practicalities serves to ground the novel in

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the real world, and in turn this verisimilitude lends an authenticity to the novel’s thematic concerns, the most important of which is to provide an extended and detailed treatment of sex and sexual relationships in a time of relative sexual freedom. The social structure and moral code of the dominant no longer holds sway over these young people and the old certainties no longer tell people how they should behave. It is a time of freedom and uncertainty and again it is this terrain that Wilding attempts to navigate, seeking to explore the options of just how to go about living in such times. And as with Aspects of the Dying Process Wilding refuses to offer a glib and superficial treatment that portrays the emergent and assertive practices in an idealized manner. There are no neat conclusions in Living Together. For Wilding the Counterculture will not be able to fuck its way to utopia.

Martin and Ann are the couple living together and it is Paul who shares the house with them. Living Together takes these three characters and explores the “melange of sexual partnerships and insecurities, and their territorial claims on each other”.

For these three characters, as well as the others in the novel, “the challenge is a sexual one” and their “world becomes a heaving sexual challenge.”

Given that there are three people sharing the one house some might think it must have been a temptation for Wilding to develop a triangle of sexual tension, perhaps resolving itself in the delights and disasters of some menage a trois. Wilding, however, doesn’t succumb to such a sexual cliche, preferring instead to explore a series of scenarios closer to the more realistic and common possibilities that could be experienced by people embarking on living together. Wilding doesn’t describe sex in Living Together in a manner that is extreme and designed to loudly and aggressively assault the dominant; sex is not used as a weapon in the armoury of shock tactics. Wilding’s treatment of sex is nonetheless an aspect of the emergent and assertive practices that actively sought to subvert the dominant. His rendering of sex is not extreme or extravagant in the sense that it is not beyond what could reasonably be experienced by young people. The writing about sex is explicit without being particularly erotic or ever pornographic. Wilding chooses to portray a culture and lifestyle that is attractive to, and being lived by, increasing numbers

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520 Rod McConchie, ‘The Trendy and the True’ in Overland Number 60, 1975. p.84.
of young people, rather than describing some sexual lifestyles that may exist, but which
are beyond the possible experience of most young people. Wilding explores likely
scenarios rather than hypothetical ones. Wilding’s writing is made up of the stuff that
constituted the way many young people were living their lives. Such a portrayal of sex
seemed a realistic possibility for young people to experience. In Living Together sex,
with all its complications, is presented as an essential and unremarkable part of how
young people live and not as something extraordinary, or as part of some fantastic
lifestyle lived by other people in other places and relatively impossible to emulate. Sex in
Living Together is described as an integrated part of a lifestyle and not as an event, or
series of events, disconnected from the lived culture of young people. As such more
extreme and outrageous portrayals of sex may have the capacity to shock the dominant,
but sex as rendered in Living Together possesses the greater potential to subvert and
replace the dominant in that it is far more likely to be adopted by large numbers of young
people as part of their lived culture. Additionally, the dominant has always had the
capacity to tolerate more extreme and outrageous portrayals of sex, especially when
practised by small numbers of people. It’s a different matter when sex, as portrayed in
Living Together, becomes part of a lifestyle taken up by large numbers of young people.

Although the opening pages of Living Together may contain some of the
practicalities of moving into a new house it isn’t too long before it becomes apparent that
this novel is not to be some antipodean Whole Earth Catalog devoted to providing a how-
to manual for those choosing to live together. As early as page two the entrance to Martin
and Ann’s bedroom is described as “the door of bliss.” When two friends, Nina and Kate,
visit, Kate is described sensually, in a scene that is replete with phallic suggestiveness, as
“sunwarmed and glowing, soft, swinging round on the newel post”, while looking
“suggestively” at Martin and “taunting him”. At the same time Nina wants to know if
there has been, or if there will be, “‘(S)ome kind of group sex scene?’”522 When Paul
goes out to dinner with Kate and Nina, Martin suggests that they’ll “‘probably pack rape
him’”.523 Ann is described as “a big girl who slept naked” and “Martin could bury
himself in her folds. Between her breasts, against her belly, within her arms, in her

523 Ibid. p.11.
vagina, her legs wrapped around him. They both slept naked, healthily.”

In a clear allusion to John Donne’s ‘The Sunne Rising’, with its portrayal of the melding of sexual and emotional bliss, Wilding describes Ann’s happiness and how “love needs no more than its single room” and “her shared room with Martin, truly was her everywhere. In the mornings it was bright with the light sun”. Both morning and night Martin and Ann’s room is a place of bliss: “their gilded pavlova in this their hour of awaking together; and in the evenings it was soft and warm, the soft red light beside their bed showering them with roses.”

But in these descriptions there is already the suggestion that such a state of euphoria may be transient. Pavlova may be light, sweet and attractive, but hardly the stuff of long term sustenance. And pavlovas break and crumble quite easily, while roses dry and fade. In most anthologies ‘The Sunne Rising’ is never too far away from ‘The Apparition’. These early suggestions that the novel is to be largely about sex are not misleading.

Ann’s attitude to living together may be imbued with feelings of warmth and satisfaction, but Martin’s approach is somewhat different. When Martin is talking to Paul about Paul’s lack of competence in the handyman skills involved in setting up a home, Paul replies that he has never thought about setting up a home. Martin’s immediate response is, “‘You’re just going to pull yourself off for the rest of your life?’”

Even if an element of this comment is the product of macho banter between two blokes, it would still seem to be reflective of Martin’s approach. For Martin the main reason for setting up house, for living together, is the prospect of regular sex. Martin and Ann’s different approaches follow gender stereotypes, but are also suggestive of an aspect of Wilding’s portrayal of sex. Living Together makes plenty of references to fucking, to screwing and couplings, but very rarely to making love. Ann spoke of love only requiring a single room, and though it would seem here that the use of the word love is reflective of gender differences it is not the whole story. Later in the novel Martin wonders to himself, “Paul, what do you feel when you make love?”

Apart from these instances the term making love is very rarely used. It’s a pattern that is reflected at large in Wilding’s writing where

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524 Ibid. p.19.
525 Ibid. p.21.
526 Ibid. p.24.
527 Ibid. p.94.
there is a lot of fucking, but very little making love. The idea of sex as a physical act without any consideration to an emotional dimension is redolent of the Push approach to sex. The idea of sex as ideally encompassing more than just the physical, sex as making love, is more an idea associated with the counterculture. In this respect Wilding’s approach has more in common with the Push than it does with the counterculture. Push sex was male dominated in that men were able to sleep with a variety of women of their choosing, but there was not meant to be any emotional attachment resulting from the sex. For the counterculture making love became imbued with almost spiritual significance and was seen as a refuge from and antidote to a world where the dominant’s values of materialism, callousness and aggression held sway. Of course Wilding’s treatment of sex is not unequivocally that of the Push: Wilding has couples living together and there is a serious level of emotional commitment, though there is also the freedom to move from one committed relationship to another. This aspect has more in common with the counterculture. As such Wilding’s writing displays a confluence of approaches: he is still influenced by the Push ethos, but clearly is not, and has no wish to be, immune to the influence of the emergent and assertive practices of the counterculture.

Martin and Ann’s different attitude to sex or love is not the only instance where gender stereotyping manifests itself. If traditional marriage often resulted in an inequitable and sexist approach to tasks around the house then Living Together makes it clear that the very act of flouting the institution of marriage is no guarantee that old sexist attitudes to work will cease to exist. New sexual freedom may exist alongside old domestic patterns. Of a morning Martin loudly demands his breakfast of Ann. “I want my breakfast”, he tells Ann twice, and when it does not magically and instantly appear he Wants to know, “‘Where’s breakfast?”528 Apparently he is capable of renovating a house, but cooking toast or eggs is beyond his area of expertise. Martin’s attitude is boorish and sexist, an attitude which he would appear to be blissfully unaware of. Martin wishes to establish the house as a “cultural centre” a “gathering place. Where music played and books were always read and discussion always raged.”529 It’s a fair supposition, however, that the books would not be of the ilk of The Female Eunuch, nor

528 Ibid. p.5.
529 Ibid. p.3.
the raging discussion be about women’s liberation. If Martin is some sort of 60s work in progress then it is obvious that there are aspects of the project that are way behind schedule. Of a morning, when not demanding breakfast, Martin listens to the radio for half an hour in order to get “his daily session of the other culture: keeping him in touch with the pop scene, the rock scene, the mass media. He felt it important not to become culturally isolated.”530 Readers cannot fail to note that there is a pompous arrogance and condescension about Martin’s approach as he goes about attempting to acquire the veneer necessary for all successful poseurs. It is important that Wilding positions his readers in this way, lest he be accused of tacitly endorsing Martin’s sexist attitudes. If Martin’s character were rendered in an almost completely positive way then readers could be tempted to see his sexist approach to work as a minor flaw in his character. However, Martin’s approach to culture and his boorish demands for breakfast make it clear that Wilding doesn’t want us to sanction this character and his attitudes. Nor, as the novel progresses, does Wilding want readers to be completely condemnatory of Martin; rather he wants us to be critical with a benign tolerance of his character and a wry amusement at his goings on. This attitude of the reader is maintained to the end of the novel as Martin doesn’t really develop or evolve: he undergoes a great many things, but essentially emerges unredeemed.

When Martin demands his breakfast he is met with complete compliance on Ann’s part. Ann is no weak and cowed woman, yet she fails to object to Martin’s gender demarcation of roles. “She made breakfast” and in the process “Ann sang.”531 Indeed, Ann is happy in the kitchen. “Ann wanted a glistening kitchen” where the “materials and implements of cooking were beautiful in themselves.” She revels in the kitchen and all that it contains and connotes.532 And it’s not that she’s exclusively subservient to Martin as there seems to be this almost obsessive compulsion to extend her stereotyped role towards Paul as she repeatedly insists on doing his laundry, despite his protestations.533 Nor is her domestic role confined to the kitchen or the washing. There’s the vacuuming too, which she does around Paul who sits reading and listening to the record player, but

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530 Ibid. p.4.
531 Ibid. p.5.
532 Ibid. pp.5-6.
533 Ibid. p.35.
who is still helpful and thoughtful enough to lift his feet for Ann and not to complain about the noise. Wilding’s ensuing comment, critical and ironising of the moment, clearly reflects his awareness of the untenable, anachronous and inequitable nature of the roles: “his gesture spoke too of his stolid self-satisfied masculinity, that household good in woman was the highest virtue, the proper place, that her destined role was to sweep beneath his feet and around his chair; never raising a finger to help her, just feet to accept her service.” When Paul ventures to help around the kitchen his incompetence is obvious. His “gesture to the domestic community” is to copy Ann’s practice of simmering the knives gently in a saucepan to sterilize them. The gesture ends with a “bonfire” as the plastic handles of the knives burn and flames lick the cupboards. Clearly it’s an area Paul shouldn’t venture into.

Both Martin and Ann, despite the liberating move of living together, are still enacting the stereotypical gender roles that the dominant had exacted upon their parents. Wilding’s portrayal of Martin and Ann’s situation may be suggestive of ideological hypocrisy or the brief coexistence of contradictions on the part of the characters themselves, but more salient is to see it as Wilding’s refusal once again to idealise a situation. Living Together tells it like it is, not how it should be. In the best of all possible countercultural worlds Martin and Ann’s emergent and assertive practices would include a different approach to work around their house. But in Sydney in 1973 the best of countercultural worlds may not have existed in every case, or even most cases, of living together. As pointed out in the discussion of ‘Joe’s Absence’, the existence side by side of assertive and sexist practices was not uncommon, as is indicated by re-citing Bettina Aptheker of the SDS who recalled, ““Women did most of the clerical work and fund-raising and provided food. None of this was particularly recognized as work, and I never questioned this division of labor or even saw it as an issue!” As mentioned, Ann is not a weak or dependent woman. When she senses Martin’s lack of interest and infidelity she has the strength to pack and leave. Ann may take all her cooking and domestic paraphernalia with her, but she is exercising a freedom that would have been a lot more daunting, if not impossible, had the strictures of the dominant’s institution of marriage

534 Ibid. p.85.
535 Ibid. pp.32-33.
536 Quoted in Mark Kurlansky, op. cit. p.314.
still held sway over her. Living together provided for young people a sexual freedom as well as the freedom to extricate oneself from a failed or failing relationship. It was part of the 60s that you could have sex with someone and if you chose you could live with that someone, and the freer nature of the sex and the living together meant that you were also free to move in and out of relationships. Sexual freedom had an enabling and liberating effect well beyond the physical action of fucking.

To a certain extent the trajectory of Ann’s decisions and behaviour is reflective of many young women in the 60s. When she is with Martin she experiences a degree of freedom that was simply not possible for women in the 1950s. But as evidenced by the demarcation of household work her freedom was still limited, not only by Martin’s sexist expectations, but also by her own conditioning. Of course when a degree of freedom is experienced it can make a person aware of those limitations: a degree of freedom can catalyse a person’s awareness of just how much freer they could be. Away from Martin Ann “had confirmed her capacity for independence.”537 On her return to Martin, at his instigation, she is self-assured and free of jealousy about the affairs Martin has had in the interim. While Martin is in agony, lest Paul mention some of the people he has slept with, Ann takes complete control when she says, “I think the best thing is that all the past we leave taboo. We don’t ask questions about it or get obsessive about it or recriminate about it or anything. Whatever might have happened is over now.” When Martin disingenuously replies, “Nothing has happened”, he is firmly told by Ann, “You’re breaking the agreement already.”538 Ann is now in charge of a great deal more than the cooking and cleaning: she is in calm control of the emotional situation and is the one who is setting the ground rules for the future conduct of their relationship. It could be argued that Ann’s role here inadvertently plays into Martin’s hands as he is very unlikely to ever want to bring up his affairs. Martin’s response to his affairs is a somewhat traditional one, in that having had them he is at nervous pains to keep them hidden. Despite their living together there is in Martin’s behaviour an element of the cheating husband, whereas Ann’s response has more in common with the countercultural concept of free love, in that she ungrudgingly accepts Martin sexual encounters without jealousy or hurt. “Yet what

538 Ibid. p.172.
had happened before did not upset her, nor would she let it, believing repression wrong, rationally insisting on facing realities.”

Wilding symbolically emphasizes the metamorphosis in Ann when he describes how she “went over to him at that and put her arms round him.” Ann’s role may still be the stereotypical maternal one, but it is one that she has willingly initiated. More suggestive of the change in Ann is the ensuing sentence: “And with her back to the shelves for pots and pans and herbs and jars, the kitchen was as it always had been.” Ann has reestablished her order, but is to a degree turning her back on a life limited to the sexist demarcation of jobs.

Martin is forcefully made aware of the changes in Ann when she informs him that she will need a study in order to work on her Masters. “‘I’m going to do a master’s in sociology,’ she said. ‘I don’t intend to get categorized into a maternal role again; for you or for Paul.’” Martin, the person who repeatedly demanded his breakfast, makes a comment that reveals a less than astute understanding of his approach to women: “‘What’s this maternal role bit? I’ve never categorized you as that or anything else.’” In contrast Ann is totally aware and calmly in control. “‘You might never have said anything,’ she said, ‘but your concept of me was a crude maternal one. No, don’t interrupt, just listen. I’m not going to get put into the role of existing just to do your washing and cook your meals again…. From now on we share freedoms and duties.’” Martin can’t even see the connection between the changes in Ann and her choice to do a Masters. For Ann, it is a decision based on what she wants to do; it is an act of independence that threatens the “‘neat masculine preserve’”.

Clearly Ann has greatly changed in her time away from Martin, whereas during that time Martin simply duplicated his behaviour towards Ann in the relationship he had with Natalie. “‘Martin stayed with Natalie. And accepted gladly her compulsion to feed him, clothe him, wash and iron, and fuck him; and clean his teeth.’” There is apparently no shortage of women willing to take up the stereotypical role. The derisory comment about Martin’s time with Natalie highlights Martin’s ineptitude; he may be being mothered, but this in turn puts him in a position of childlike incompetence.

539 Ibid. p.174.
540 Ibid. p.172.
541 Ibid. p.175.
542 Ibid. p.107.
Ann is by no means the strongest, most assertive and independent woman in the novel. There is Mrs Bilham and Gretel, two characters whose portrayal will be discussed in greater detail later on. When Gretel learns that Ann is again living with Martin, she is perhaps unaware of the changes in Ann, but feels that she must comment on what she believes must be the reestablishment of the male dominated way things were. “I’ve never known so willing and ready a victim for the white slave traffic; you positively prostrate yourself into humiliation and prostitution.” When Ann demurs Gretel amplifies her point: “Of course it’s prostitution; why else did he want you back; because the house had got out of control and no one would fuck him.” Hoping to deflect the discussion Martin offers Gretel a coffee and when she accepts it is Ann who moves to get it. Some old habits just refuse to die. Nevertheless, Gretel helps their demise when she wants to know why it’s Ann going to get the coffee. “(Y)ou’re ridiculous Ann, the way you get yourself cast into roles…. He’s only rolling a cigarette as a cue for you to have to make the coffee: I am rolling a cigarette so cannot make the coffee; my woman will do that since it is her function.” Gretel then asks if in Ann’s absence did Martin and Paul’s various women look after them “till the charm wore off and they all deserted you.” At this point Martin goes to the kitchen, more to avoid discussion of other women than to get the coffee. He could have just left the room or even the house, but he does indeed come back with the coffee. He could have just left the room or even the house, but he does indeed come back with the coffee. This, I suppose, is a small victory for Ann and Gretel, but one that is somewhat mitigated by his bringing with the coffee a cake. It is a cake that has been cooked by Ann.\footnote{Ibid. pp.182-184.} Real life is rarely neat. Change is often piecemeal and not always complete and thoroughgoing. People respond differently to periods of social change and whilst none of Wilding’s characters actively resist or resent the social changes of the 60s (in fact most seem to happily accept or embrace the emergent and assertive practices) it doesn’t follow that living with these changes will be without some difficulties, variations, inconsistencies and accommodations.

Martin believes that he is more worldly and experienced than Paul and as such he feels that it is his duty to educate Paul. Since sex and relationships are the essence of living together, indeed of the 60s, it is not surprising that Paul’s education will largely be comprised of these topics. Paul’s education will be “an education in its broadest, most
liberal sense. It included sex instruction.” Despite the inherent arrogance in Martin’s positioning of himself as self-confessed capable teacher instructing the uninitiated, Paul happily acquiesces into the role of attentive student. Paul is to have “revealed” the “mysteries of the relationships” and the “delicate, subtle, oblique, yet so meaningful, so intimate filaments of human connexion” which tends to make it sound a little ethereal and lacking in the practicalities that Paul may prefer. Martin is, however, quite astute when, in his somewhat verbose manner, he recognizes the potential supremacy of language to convey the nature of relationships and sex. We shouldn’t be surprised that Wilding, a writer, should have Martin make such a claim, albeit in his pompous manner. What he then has Martin say is a little more interesting: he speaks about the process of change, whereby “language itself, bearing in it all the associations and judgments of the past and redefining itself in the conditions of the time, not under dictation from above but by the total of all acts of communication.”

This quote goes someway towards explaining Wilding’s concern with ‘that word’ and other aspects of the language used to openly and explicitly describe sex, language that hitherto was seen as obscene and a taboo. In this sense Wilding’s free use of this ‘obscene’ language is more than just a confronting of the censorship laws. Open and frequent use of the language was not only an attempt to free that language from “all the associations and judgments of the past”, but was in turn an attempt to endow the language with a new set of denotative and especially connotative meanings; “a redefining itself in the conditions of the time”. This change was to be brought about as part of the social movement of the young, as an integral component of the emergent and assertive practices of the time and not “under dictation from above”, but by “the total of all acts of communication.” Concomitant with this redefining of the language there would be, it was hoped, a freeing up of attitudes to sex: if the restrictive and inhibiting meanings and associations of the words could be removed then it followed that if the words could be set free then so could the very acts themselves. This then could lead onto a breaking down of other restrictive and inhibiting aspects of the dominant, until finally the dominant became no longer recognizable or had been completely

544 Ibid. p.42.
545 Frank Moorhouse, op. cit. See ‘Rebellion of Words’ pp.1-28 for a general account of the belief in the subversive and liberating effect of using explicit language. It is a belief that Wilding now questions. See Wildest Dreams, p. 71. Wilding wonders if the fight to “forcefully promote the right to write ‘fuck’ and ‘cunt’” was to in effect “divert attention from the substantial issues of the anti-war left.”
supplanted by new cultural practices. It was the 60s and the belief was that it really could and would happen. It wasn’t quite a belief that if you trumpeted the word ‘fuck’ loud enough, long enough and often enough then the walls would tumble down; not quite, but language was certainly an important note, a refrain, in the sounds that added to the cacophony and symphony of the 60s. To add to the effectiveness of the trumpeting it was thought that it would be helpful if young people could not only say the word ‘fuck’, but also fuck loud, long and often. But it was also important that this openness about sex be accompanied by other disruptive practices, such as living together.

Martin’s comment about language then functions as a template for how radical social change could take place in the 60s: actions and behaviour had to be redefined and these in turn could alter society and culture. This was best done by living the new lifestyles, breaking away from the past so that actions could be redefined in the present. Martin continues to educate Paul in the details of living this new lifestyle. Much, though not all, of what Martin has to say broadly coincides with the countercultural practices of the time and readers would find that what he has to say encourages them to either take up these practices or reinforces their current participation in them. The overall effect of Wilding’s account of living together is to portray such lifestyles as the natural order of things for young people in the 60s; reading about these lifestyles in the matter of fact way they are presented makes them appear to be not only what people are doing, but also acceptable and no big deal, it is just how things are for young people in Sydney. By not making such lifestyle choices appear to be brave, subversive and momentous decisions on the part of young people makes the participation of large numbers of young people a lot more likely than had it been portrayed as a defiant and courageous action taken by small numbers of people. There is not only safety in numbers, but an enticement and suggestion of ease in joining their numbers. And large numbers, rather than the dramatic stand of a few (though this is the stuff of vicarious pleasure and countercultural myth) are what constitute a shift in cultural practice and a threat to the hegemony of the dominant.

In terms almost identical to the cliches of a parent to their child on the eve of marriage Martin tells Paul, “It is not easy to live with someone. It is not a simple thing. It is a complex, constantly changing thing. It requires constant acts of judgment and
redefinition, readjustment and flexibility.”546 That these platitudes are redolent of marriage advice only serves to highlight the fact that the times have changed and that there are to be no marriage vows. The interesting aspect of Martin’s talk, and indeed all subsequent discussions by Martin, and any other character for that matter, is how marriage and the sexual mores of mainstream society simply do not enter into the discussion: living with someone in a sexual relationship is de rigueur for young people and not something shocking and out of the ordinary. And again the result of portraying living together and sex outside of marriage in this manner is to suggest to readers that it is no big deal, it is the way young people live their lives, and indeed it is the way they should choose to live their lives too.

Martin’s credibility as lifestyle and sexual guru is somewhat undermined as the novel progresses by his inability to live up to his own teachings: too often this doctor needs to minister to himself. This irony, and even hypocrisy, in Martin’s behaviour doesn’t function to discredit the sentiments he espouses. The discrepancy between what he says and what he does reflects on his character and not the ideas he expresses, and his inability to live out these ideas is the fault of his character and not the ideas. No reader would want to jettison both baby and bathwater. That there is a degree of weakness in his character, a sense that he is not the self-aware person he believes himself to be, is quickly made clear when he tells Paul, “‘You don’t simply hang your clothes up in the wardrobe and shout for your breakfast and leave it at that.’”547 No, of course not.

In some respects Martin’s account of how to establish a relationship lacks the freedom and naturalness favoured by the counterculture. He uses words that would resonate with young people, words like “‘natural’” and “‘spontaneous’”, but the context in which he uses them is at odds with the connotations many young people would place on them. “‘For a harmonious relationship, one must be ever ready to adjust, to change, to concede.’” So far so good, in a vague general way. Then there’s the simile: “‘It’s like riding a bicycle…You fall off at first. But gradually you learn to make these subtle adjustments, these continual reassessments of your balance and direction and speed, and adjust them correspondingly.’” Whether or not Martin is aware of it, (and he probably

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547 Ibid.
isn’t) the bike analogy isn’t one that is likely to appeal to those involved in women’s liberation: men are in charge and they do the steering and women are the objects under their control, bikes to be ridden. “‘You establish a relationship between yourself and the bicycle.’” Techniques for this mastery become “‘lodged in the cerebellum’”, which is apparently a necessary outcome for living in a relationship without really thinking about it. It’s “‘a period of programming’” that means “‘(Y)ou don’t consciously ride a bicycle once you’ve learnt, once you’ve developed the habit.’” After this period of programming, when it is a habit you don’t have to consciously think about, then living with a compliant bike becomes “‘spontaneous’” and “‘natural’”. It is a pity for Paul’s sake, and any future women in his life, that all Martin’s good teaching seems to be wasted: “‘I can’t even ride a bicycle.’” Paul tells Martin.548

Sex is an integral part of living together and Martin’s lecture soon moves in that direction. He is aware of the difficulties inherent in living with the new sexual freedoms and there is at least an attempt to chart these difficulties, even if he is unable to plot a course around them. Like many young people Martin embraces the new freedoms, but the embrace is not a naive one. It is in spaces like this that Wilding explores the new sexuality: there is no unrealistic valorizing of the new sexual values, no suggestion that free fucking has panacean qualities. Certainly the freer and more open approach to sex is to be welcomed (and this is a given in Living Together), but in order for it to become an accepted and integrated part of young people’s lived culture, rather than some exciting but passing novelty, then it is equally important that possible difficulties be broached. “‘It is not easy to live the sexually free life. It is not a simple thing.’”549 There is no question that the sexually free life is preferable. It is never considered that the sexual mores of the dominant should be taken up and that young people should live their lives as their parents had done. There is no weighing up of the relative merits of both sexual lifestyles; it is not an issue. Martin’s premise, indeed the premise of Living Together, is that living the sexually free life may have some difficulties, but living that life is never questioned, it is just how young people should live their lives. Presenting the sexually free life in this manner makes an emergent and assertive practice appear to be the new dominant one, at

549 Ibid. p.44.
least amongst the young people of Sydney, and to live a life that is not sexually free is to make a young person seem out of step with their peers. The only hesitation Martin shows is when he tells Paul, “I sometimes wonder, not if it’s worth it, it’s certainly that, but whether I am strong enough. I sometimes wonder if I’m able to respond to all the challenges correctly.” Any hesitation here is the result of his character and not the sexually free lifestyle. Indeed in an uncharacteristic gesture Martin acknowledges Ann’s superiority here: “Ann now, she is able to. She is so adjusted, so assured…. She has this marvelous tranquility. But I am not made like that.”

Martin’s lecture to Paul about sexual freedom allows us to see what he broadly understands to be the nature of that freedom. It also shows us that he tacitly understands that there are limits to that freedom. Certainly the free sexual life means the freedom to have sex outside of marriage and to enter into relationships that may result in living together. It is also understood that these relationships may end and that without any general recrimination new ones can be entered into. So much is clear. Martin says Ann “decides on a relationship and then there is nothing to prevent its acceptance; and she gives it such a full acceptance. She isn’t worried by jealousies of the past or uncertainties of the present. Or fears of the future.” There is an understanding here that there has been a past and there may very well be a future where people will be involved with other people, but in the present there is an expectation that there will be commitment and ‘certainty’ and that the main constituent of this ‘certainty’ is most likely sexual fidelity. If this is what Martin is saying about the sexually free life then his understanding is one that is held in common with the majority of young people in the 60s: you could move in and out of sexual relationships and even if you lived with someone you could move out of that relationship and commence a new one. This freedom then was largely comprised of the ability to have serial monogamous relationships, and even if you felt that a relationship was permanent there was always the feeling that should things go wrong there was the freedom to move on. By this definition young people had freedom in their past and freedom in their future, but in the present there was the expectation that sexual freedom would ironically be like in marriage. Of course this sense of freedom, both in the

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550 Ibid. p.44.
551 Ibid.
past and in the future, must have impacted greatly on how young people lived their lives at any one moment, so that any passing resemblance of young people living together like that of the married couples of the dominant is just that, a passing resemblance.

Another difficulty of living a sexually free lifestyle that Martin addresses is jealousy. The core of this jealousy is sexual jealousy, jealousy about who a partner has slept with, who else they may also be sleeping with, or who they may sleep with in the future. Of all the types of jealousy sexual jealousy is perhaps the most virulent. Ideally it was thought by some in the counterculture that jealousy was an outmoded emotion built on a sense of restrictive possessiveness that belonged more to the dominant than to the new sexual practices. It was believed that one should be open and honest about relationships and that jealousy functioned to inhibit that freedom and honesty. But jealousy is a hard monster to kill and despite best hopes and intentions it still coloured many of the relationships between young people. Jealousy may have been baggage from the patriarchal marriages of the dominant, and many young people may have liked to be rid of it, but it often proved difficult baggage to jettison. And if that baggage defiantly refused to be left in the 50s, then it needed to be put in an inconspicuous spot as possible. How to do that, however, was another issue. Young people tried to live new lifestyles, but some aspects of mainstream society were more deeply conditioned than others. Martin acknowledges “jealousy and fears are a challenge in their way”, but is unable to provide any real means whereby jealousy can be negated. Not surprising considering the central position of possessiveness, possessions and their attendant jealousies in the pantheon of the dominant’s values and how young people of the 60s had been so completely conditioned by these values as they grew up in the late 40s and 50s. It was somewhat inevitable that sexual jealousy should be an issue in the 60s: if you were raised in the late 40s and 50s, yet attempted to live the sexually free lifestyle of the 60s, then it is difficult to see how there wouldn’t be a confrontation between the two cultural modes. The 60s valorized the sexual revolution and was at pains to highlight is liberating effects on the individual and society at large. As such it was not in the interests of emergent and assertive practices to foreground any attendant difficulties associated with that sexual revolution. Not that Wilding foregrounds jealousy (he is too much in favour of the sexually free lifestyle to do that) but the important thing that Wilding does is to
acknowledge the ongoing existence of jealousy, noting its destructive effects on free sexual relationships. There are no quick fixes here, but it would be disingenuous to simply ignore jealousy as if it were not a factor for young people. Again Wilding has chosen not to idealise a situation, but to render young people’s lived culture as it really is, albeit in generally favourable terms, even if this means including some of the trickier bits. One means of coping with jealousy and fear is to “either ignore them or close your mind to them; which is what most people do, they pretend they don’t exist, they don’t rise to the challenges. In a sort of way they are cowardly. They achieve their tranquility by cowardice.” Tranquility by cowardice seems to be a perfectly good option, but apparently not one that Martin would choose. “But I can’t live like that. I take the other course…. You live much more richly, responding to everything. You experience the full range of human emotion…. To cut yourself off from some of them just because they are unpleasant or disturbing is such a limitation of your emotional potential.”

It’s unclear if Paul accepts that he can enrich his life by embracing the pains of jealousy, but for most young people it was probably the path less traveled. And ultimately it’s not the path Martin travels as he becomes less enamoured with things “unpleasant or disturbing”. Wilding’s irony is at work here once more, for as the novel progresses we see again a discrepancy between what Martin pronounces and how he behaves. Perhaps it is just deserts that his ‘tranquility’ decreases as his ‘cowardice’ increases. Again this irony, or hypocrisy, in Martin doesn’t function to discredit what he has to say. It certainly discredits his character and it is possible that there is some slippage away from positive and uncritical acceptance of the ideas and attitudes he expresses, but not to the extent that the ideas and attitudes themselves are discredited. In the end Wilding has put jealousy on the agenda and the upshot of Martin’s talk is that jealousy is an unavoidable by-product of living the sexually free life, and one can either choose to try to ignore it or painfully accept it. However, no matter how painful jealousy may be it is never brought into question that the sexual revolution is not worth it, and that it would be preferable to return to the sexual morality of the 50s.

Needless to say Martin is not able to face jealousy with the philosophical equanimity that he suggested to Paul. In this Wilding again strives for verisimilitude.

552 Ibid. p.44.
Sometimes it is the petty sexual jealousies that people have to live with in their day to day lives, the sort of jealousies that permeate and corrode relationships with a cumulative effect as destructive as a partner caught in flagrante delicto. Annoyed at Ann’s attention to Paul, Martin uses his petty jealousy to force Ann to be more circumspect in her dealings with Paul. “I wish you wouldn’t leave your underclothes strung across the bathroom”. Ann, whose tranquility seems a little less admired by Martin at this time, is a little nonplussed and asks, “What do you mean?” Repeating, rather than clarifying, Martin tells Ann “I can’t be any clearer. The way you drape the entire bathroom with your underwear” and when Ann says it is only Paul who sees it, and that he must have seen ladies’ underwear before, Martin replies, “I’ve no doubt he has. I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t dress up in it or go round tearing it off washing lines to sniff at.” In an act of tranquility, or subservience, Ann says, “I’m sorry…. I didn’t realize it upset you.” Martin’s final comment is “Sometimes I wonder if you realize anything.”

Martin must conclude that if one petulant fit of petty jealousy can receive a satisfying apology then a repeat performance is definitely an option. One weekend later Ann (naturally) is doing the washing and is wearing a shirt with the sleeves rolled up and unbuttoned at the neck in order to keep cool. “Do your shirt up,’ Martin suddenly said; and again she was surprised.” It is said with a “peremptory note”, which Ann cannot fail to notice. She says, “It’s hot…why on earth should I do it up?” With exaggeration borne of irrational and petty jealousy Martin tells her “(B)ecause you’re indecent”.

When Ann makes to undo every button and reveal her breasts to Martin and Paul Martin simply says, “Ann”. Though the tone in which this is said isn’t stated, little imagination is needed to deduce what that tone would be. Ann acquiesces, or makes a mistake and surrenders, and buttons the shirt up to her neck. That such jealousies are counter productive and may come to no good for those involved is seen when Ann buttons the shirt so that it “clung tight to her and its slight dampness from the steam of the washing pressed round and delineated the firm form of her nipples.”

One wonders if Martin still views all this as part of living “much more richly” and essential to experiencing “the full range of human emotions” in order for him to not limit his “emotional potential.”

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553 Ibid. p.89.
554 Ibid. p.90.
Martin isn’t alone in his considering Paul’s sexual life. In fact discussing sex and the sex lives of others is presented as a natural part of young people’s everyday conversation. Wilding’s writing inclines the reader to see sex as an integral component of the lived culture of young people’s lives and as such open discussions about sex are only to be expected. This is another way in which Wilding positions the reader to accept the new attitudes to sex. Sex itself is not only freer in the 60s, but so too are discussions about it: there is uninhibited sex and uninhibited discussion. And again it is the unremarkableness of the way Wilding presents sex and discussions about it that make it seem the natural order of things which should be adopted by all young people, if they have not already done so. When Martin and Ann are in bed Martin wonders what Paul is doing when he is out at night. Martin feels sure that Paul couldn’t be “‘fucking anyone’”, but doubt begins to creep in when Ann asks, “‘Who is there he’d be fucking?’” Curiosity is briefly assuaged when Ann points out that he never stays out all night, but it’s only a moment until Martin notes, “‘He might be fucking in the afternoons anyway.’” Martin’s curiosity is not entirely altruistic, as is seen when incipient jealousy begins to creep in; an exciting, successful and secret sex life for Martin’s recent pupil might inspire a bit of envy from the teacher. Consoling himself, Martin broods and says, “‘He wouldn’t be fucking Mrs. Bilham’”. However, Ann’s “‘Why not?’” isn’t too helpful in the consoling process. “‘What do you mean, why not? I thought you said you were sure he wasn’t fucking?’” Ann says Paul would have “‘more taste’” than to be having sex with Mrs. Bilham. Martin “inadvertently” defends Mrs. Bilham: “‘She’s not that bad….And he only ever seems to speak to her over the fence.’” Taking it all less seriously than Martin, Ann says, “‘They could be fucking through the knot holes’”. Reluctantly Martin accepts the possibility of Paul fucking Mrs. Bilham, but any lessening of his angst is short lived. In a fall back position of sexual consolation Martin says, “‘I mean, he wouldn’t be fucking Nina and Kate. Not together. And they always go around together.’” Ann suggests Paul “‘might be gang banging them’”. Martin’s fall back position has been routed: “‘He couldn’t be.’ The horror, the horror.” Whether he recognizes it or not, it is sexual envy, rather than the heart of darkness, that Martin has seen, and to now put his mind at ease, to put an end to his doubting, would require an act of Biblical and graphic proportions:
Martin was “eager to be shown, to place his fingers in the nail holes, to fuck the bullet
wound.”

Speculation about Paul’s sex life intensifies when Gretel calls around to their
house one evening. Whilst not a major character in the novel Gretel is representative of a
strong and independent woman and the differing responses of Martin and Ann provide
interesting reading. When Gretel calls in at their house there is no knocking on the front
door, but a “hammering” and “assault” like something made by someone “aggressively
drunk.” Already there is the suggestion of confidence, assertiveness and force
surrounding Gretel and when Martin opens the door he is met by her “towering there
before him, her fists ready for a further assault on a level with his face.” Clearly it is an in
your face confrontation as Gretel stands there having appropriated the attributes of male
machismo of “towering” with threatening “fists”. Gretel’s first words further remove her
from the female stereotype and define her character as uninhibited and brash: “‘Are you
too busy screwing that you can’t answer the door?’” Martin’s response is to say,
“‘Sorry’”. This exchange only partly defines the dynamic between the two; there is
more to Martin’s reaction than quiet deference. Martin is trepidatious around Gretel and
the cause of this trepidation is the product of Martin’s character and his male gaze which
sees Gretel in terms of her being sexually dominating and threatening. Martin’s reactions
become extreme and a parody of any reasonable degree of sexual fear and insecurity. It is
a reaction brought about by his not only being confronted by a personality and sexuality
more powerful and overt than his own, but also by the fact that it is possessed by a
woman. One male course of action could be to fuck Gretel and to assert sexual authority
over her or to fear her and render her qualities grotesque and aberrant. Martin must
choose the later.

What Wilding is exploring here has a comic element to it, but more important is
his willingness to explore aspects of sex in the 60s that don’t usually receive
consideration. In the 60s the stereotype of the liberated and willing woman, who is
happily seduced by the man, is integral to the emergent and assertive practices of the
time, but far more problematic is to explore reactions when a male is confronted by a

556 Ibid. p.58.
female whose appropriation of male characteristics places her in a position of ascendancy, an appropriation that Wilding has clearly signaled with Gretel’s surname being Mann. (Is there even a suggestion here in the spelling of her name of her being more than Man?) Gretel exemplifies some of the empowering aspects of feminism, but it is the ensuing shift in the balance of sexual power (a shift in power that has ramifications beyond just sex) that makes Martin so uncomfortable. These were sexually liberated times and it is possible that situations occurred where the woman’s sexual freedom moved beyond the parameters of being acquiescent and willingly submissive to the male sexual drive. Such assertive sexual behaviour in a woman must have been disconcerting for many men who clearly defined sexual freedom as their freedom to fuck various women at various times. Such men, still in the residue of the 50s, wanted to wear the pants and be fully in charge of when and where they would be taken off. It is difficult, different and interesting territory for Wilding to explore: just how does a young man react to a woman who behaves as Gretel does.

Martin’s exaggerated and manic reactions provide the reader with not only amusement, but also with a clear message that the response, whilst possibly understandable, is clearly untenable given the changes taking place in the 60s. That Martin’s reaction is not the only one possible is made clear the first time the reader meets Gretel: “Yet others were drawn to her, sought after her.” But this was not Martin’s reaction as Gretel “strode, driving him before her, threatening him with impalement” on her breasts which were “thrust towards him like sharpened buffers on a shunting engine”. Martin notes her “fierce aspects: the strong jaw, the glaring eyes, the thighs like the steel handles of a nutcracker.” Martin is “terrified” of Gretel and always imagined her as “gargantuan and ungainly in her physical form and appetites. His dream of her was of some colossus, striding over him, and his eyes held open and upwards.” It’s obvious that the source of Martin’s fear and insecurity is sexual; he feels threatened and overpowered by a brazen sexuality that he is unable to control or channel into a more conventional, sexist and patriarchal form. Martin fears he will be impaled on her breasts, while her steel, nutcracker thighs impose a dominating and crushing sexuality on him.

557 Ibid. p.59.
558 Ibid.
which he feels incapable of escaping from. He has little choice but to imagine himself
lying prone and defeated beneath the striding colossus and forced to stare directly
upwards at the source of the power over him.

Lying prone and being forced to stare at the source of the insecurity and power
over you, even if it is metaphorically speaking, can produce fits of impotent rage. And
rage Martin does. In a virulent diatribe about the supposed connection between Paul and
Gretel Martin manically rants how Paul is “capable of getting his own fucks” and doesn’t
need assistance in “sniffing out well worn cunts” such as Gretel’s. If Gretel wants “to
perch Paul astride her nipples” then Martin is emphatic that he and Ann should not help
her achieve this, as her “cavernous appetite could be satisfied elsewhere, as it continually
has been and is being and will be.” Martin concludes that with Paul it would be better “to
save him from ingestion (sic) by the woman than ram him into her.” And with very
suspect altruism Martin says his antipathy to Gretel is because her “glutching crasping
evil will destroy him (Paul), using sex as starter cartridge for her larger strategy; her
need, pockmarked and lined, for some slender gigolo to lead her syphilitically blind steps
through the city streets, pimping on her behalf”, leaving Paul “like some mange scabbed
monkey”, a “tumescent wreck”. And all to satisfy Gretel’s “grotesque excess.”559 There’s
no doubt that Martin has now encountered what constitutes “grotesque excess”, though
the case in point is more likely to be his impotent rage and language than Gretel’s
character.

All this is no aberrant reaction, a case of Martin getting it off his chest to then
come to grips with and then accept Gretel’s overt sexuality. His fear of her sexual
prowess and his insecurity prevent this from occurring. The following evening, when
Martin returns home, he finds that Gretel and Paul have been there together and on his
telling them that he is going to bed Gretel asks why doesn’t he stay and join them. Paul
and Gretel had been talking and drinking brandy, but Martin immediately assumes that
joining them is for sex, not the talk and brandy. “And it was the effrontery of it, the
blatant way she paraded the perversions of her sexuality, that he recoiled from.” He
“shuddered” as he got into bed, thinking of the “grotesque physicality that she displayed,

559 Ibid. pp.74-75. I take it that the spoonerism of “glutching, crasping” is reflective of rage, rather than a
typo.
pissing, flushing the lavatory, blocking his ascent of the stairs with her wide hips.” Once more the clear acknowledgement here is that the cause of Martin’s reaction is his fear of Gretel’s sexual power and how she is not afraid to flaunt it: she is “blatant” and has the “effrontery” to use her “physicality” and “sexuality” to stop Martin in his steps “with her wide hips.” He feels and fears that she is “inviting him and inciting him to gang bang, soixante neuf, fellatio, cunnilingus; or was it cunnilingus; like some dreadful cough medicine.” There’s a lot of protesting here, and perhaps Martin is protesting too much. Indeed, at the conclusion of the novel Martin finds himself taking up the invitation and reacting to the incitement. In the interim, however, his main fear is that Gretel’s sexuality will overpower any inferior and “fragile” defense that he possesses. “He felt menaced in his bed, that she might rend open the fragile door and leap on him like some slavering alsatian.”

Martin seems to have forgotten the dictum about fear that he not so long ago gave to Paul, about how it is cowardly not to face those fears and that the very act of responding to them is enriching and adding to a person’s emotional potential. If the intensity of the reaction is any sort of indicator, then Martin must be feeling very enriched.

Martin is at a complete loss as to how to respond to Gretel, apart from these manic outbursts that involuntarily reveal his insecurities. How does a self-professed liberated man cope with the presence of a person more overtly sexual, more liberated than they are, most especially when that person is a woman? Clearly Gretel has not read the rules as laid down by liberated men like Martin. Yet, as mentioned before, Martin’s reaction is not the universal young male one. Paul and others have apparently been quite happy to have a sexual relationship with Gretel and have lived to tell the tale. There is, however, a difference between Martin and Paul that could possibly account for their opposite reactions to Gretel. Certainly there are differences in character to take into account, with Paul being seen by both Martin and Ann as being a “naïve and innocent and likeable, lovable, amenable youth”. The singular and cumulative import of these adjectives would suggest how Paul should live in abject fear of a sexual force that would wreak havoc upon his vulnerable, gentle and virginal character. But apparently not,

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560 Ibid. p.76.
561 Ibid. p.44.
562 Ibid. p.76.
because Paul seems quite at ease with Gretel: as well as the sex, Paul and Gretel go out together; they sit on cushions involved in friendly talk; they go to wine bars and the movies. Wilding doesn’t reveal the ages of Martin and Paul, but we can reasonably assume that Martin is the older of the two, even if the age difference doesn’t amount to all that much: Martin is at the stage where he can move into a house in a living together situation with Ann and it is he who sees himself as the wise elder statesman of sexual politics to Paul, a position readily acceded to by Paul. The probable disparity in ages (which may only be three or so years) may go some way towards accounting for the differing responses of Paul and Martin to Gretel. Paul is described as a “youth” and this could mean that his young adult formative years would have been during the late 60s and very early 70s (Living Together was published in 1974). These were the years of the counterculture where the mode of resistance, where the emergent and assertive practices, were centred on alternative lifestyles and where the new sexual mores, including the breaking down of gender stereotypes, had experienced the impact of feminism. Whereas Martin’s formative years of young adulthood would perhaps be the earlier and mid 60s, a time of transition where the sexual values were rapidly changing but were yet to completely separate from the influence of the dominant. There is something in Martin’s attitude and approach that is in debt to the Push. It is an attitude that endorses and promotes sexual freedom, but it is a sexual freedom that is male centred and where patriarchal values of macho sexual ascendancy still dominate; men and women had the freedom of having different sexual partners, usually serially rather than concurrently, but it was the male who still held the position of power. Women had the freedom to fuck, but men were in charge of the fucking and it was unusual, if not intolerable, to have a situation where that male position of privilege was threatened. 1968 is a different world to say 1963. Such are the possible differing backgrounds of Martin and Paul and if such contextualizing doesn’t fully explain their different approaches to Gretel it must at least be considered a significant contributing factor.

Martin feels that in the end he is left with only one viable alternative in how to respond to Gretel and her relationship with Paul. “And he seized on the only available

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563 Ibid. p.66.
564 Ibid. pp.68 and 70.
approach he could reach, all that he saw offering to him, drawn from a few hints from Gretel and his own inner resources of imagination. Which was a certain hale and hearty jocularity, a loud return to the days” of before. For Martin this means a retreat into stereotypical macho bluster and bravado of overt sexual references. He tells Paul not to use Vaseline as a lubricant on his “‘prick…it lubricates but petroleum jelly’s inflammable.’” Becoming comfortable in this traditional male territory Martin feels “the joy, the happiness, the great delight.” Such a tactic is his “Eureka. The return from his nadir” and his rediscovering the “way, truth, and life.” 565 Another tactic Martin enthusiastically embraces is to talk to Paul about his having sex with Gretel in terms of driving a new car. And what can be more stereotypically male than that? Such a talk is of course delivered with the male portrayed as the driver with the woman as the inanimate object that is to be “run…in” and treated gently at first because “if you force it on the gears… the big end’ll go suddenly.” Nor should Paul “stay too long at one speed” or he’ll “wear a groove.” It’s also essential that Paul get insurance for all other drivers: “You might end up pissed at a party and want someone else to drive for you”. Yes, pissed at a party and giving your car to your mate: the camaraderie of the male gaze doesn’t get much better than this. And of course if someone is having sex with someone like Gretel, someone you can’t countenance or control, it must mean that that person is sexually aberrant. So in a strange act, only made understandable by grasping the irrationality of all Martin’s reactions to Gretel and Paul, Martin fills in coupons and replies to advertisements for gay men and has them all sent to Paul: he sends off to “Stallion Enterprises” for gay male products, he replies to “good looking 21 yr male” who “offers services” and to “Camp male, 23, interested erotic correspondence (factual/fanciful) with similars.” 566 This explains it all: Gretel and Paul are able to have sex together because both of them diverge so far from the norm, as Martin sees it.

As mentioned above the different reactions of Martin and Ann make for interesting reading. If we can assume that Martin and Ann are around the same age, then we might see reactions that are similar, but with Ann’s reaction being coloured by her gender. And such is the case. Like Martin, Ann is critical of Gretel’s sexual appetite, but

565 Ibid. pp.77-78.
566 Ibid. pp.78-79.
it is a criticism without the unmitigated vitriol that Martin injects into his attacks. Ann thinks about Gretel’s “cavernous appetite” and how her “prodigality of consumption was only equaled by her proximity of retailing.” This amounts to little more than Gretel being a woman who likes sex and knows how to go about getting it. Ann’s reaction is more centred on the impact that the sexual liaison is having on Paul. She is worried about his “soft vulnerabilities” and how he is like “a frightened rabbit in the folds of a python.” Like Martin, Ann appears to be uncomfortable with Gretel’s sexual appetite and the assertive way she goes about satisfying it: like Martin she is an advocate of sexual freedom but within certain parameters and those parameters don’t include a woman who sleeps around with a variety of men, possibly concurrently, and who is sexually assertive. Like Martin she is a product of the early stages of the sexual revolution and is uncomfortable about Gretel’s unrestrained approach to sex. But since her reaction to Gretel is without the sexual fear and insecurity that is felt by Martin we have less of an intense and unbridled response. Ann’s response is also a product of gender stereotyping; she is protective and maternal towards Paul, traits which are not extended to Gretel as her character and behaviour put her beyond the pale where such motherly succour is deserving. At this stage Ann is not completely positive that Paul has lost his innocence to Gretel, that Gretel has “torn through that veil of innocence”, and she contemplates various scenarios as to how she could get Paul to tell her. But nothing seems to provide the answer and it’s just not the sort of blunt question a mother can ask. “How strange, she mused, are our social conventions, that I cannot just enter and ask; but we have constructed these barriers…. Yet for whom? Who benefited by the mysteries they created, who gained from the misunderstandings?” Unlike Martin she has the equanimity to question “social conventions” and the “barriers” they construct, but not quite the wherewithal to see herself as partly the product and prisoner of them.

All of this is not to deny that there are times when Gretel’s behaviour can be seen as a little intimidating. She may not be the haridan Martin makes her out to be, but nor is she given to the maternal compliance we see in Ann. The closing scene of the novel has Martin and Ann back living together when Gretel calls around and is in need of a place to stay for the night. Not surprisingly Ann is willing to be a little more accommodating than

Martin, and since Paul is away she allows Gretel to stay the night in Paul’s bed. Unfortunately Paul returns later that night with his most recent girlfriend, Marianne. Since Paul used to have a sexual relationship with Gretel, returning to his room with Marianne and finding Gretel in his bed is the stuff of awkwardness at the very least. But Gretel is just not the type to succumb to awkwardness. Marianne’s immediate reaction to finding Gretel is to shriek and then to shriek some more. Her incoherent, hysterical reaction, a stereotype of her gender where a woman confronted with such a situation must be reduced to a screaming emotional mess, culminates with her most emphatic act which is to run to the bedroom window and to vomit over the footpath. It is the antithesis of Gretel’s reaction. When Martin reluctantly leaves his room along with Ann to see what all the fuss is about his immediate reaction is to turn away “his stomach heaving, terror in his bowels, his belly.” The “heaving” may be in response to the smell of vomit, but the source of all the “terror” belongs to Gretel. Gretel confronts the four confused and outraged people, standing in front of them completely naked. There, clearly on display is the physical source of all Martin’s fears and sense of sexual insecurity. Martin says to Gretel, “Why don’t you put some clothes on?” which is akin to asking an adversary at the start of a confrontation to put down their most potent weapon. It’s something that Gretel is unlikely to do. “(H)aven’t you seen a naked body before, do you and Ann fuck in shirt and dressing gown?... What’s so shameful about the naked body, anyway?” Apart from the timing and Gretel’s presentation these are possibly not bad general questions, but they fail to elicit any response and Gretel decides to elaborate. “‘You came out of one of these,’ she said, pointing to her cunt; and moved towards him, and he had visions of her seizing him and trying to ram him feet first back inside her.” Such a scenario must be the ultimate fear for Martin: to be consumed by the centre of Gretel’s female power, to be forcefully rammed up Gretel’s cunt, where resistance is futile, and where the final outcome is to be imprisoned under the control of, and totally dependent on, the victorious woman. But Gretel isn’t quite finished yet and as she continues the assault Marianne’s response is to vomit again and to then appear on the stairs “smelling

568 Ibid. pp.187-188.
569 Ibid. p. 188.
570 Ibid.
571 Ibid. pp.188-189.
of vomit, her face stained with tears, mucus, vomit.” Martin’s response is to be a little
different. “Why are you all so ashamed of your bodies here?” Gretel asks. “What’s
your hang up, why are you all so frightened? Haven’t you ever touched a breast or
stroked a body, haven’t you ever had a fuck, don’t you enjoy your bodies?” These are
confronting words, but they are just the script without the actions and it is Gretel’s
accompanying actions that allow her to deliver the coup de grace. “And she touched and
carressed her body as she stood there amongst them, stroking her breasts, hardening her
nipples, fingerling her cunt.” This is Gretel using sex as a blunt assault weapon,
designed to destroy opposition, not to win them over with persuasion. However, Gretel
may never know the full extent of her victory. “And Martin found growing an awful
attraction to her, she began to transform there before him, take new meaning, a new
presence; and his penis began to swell and harden, appear through, oh god if he didn’t
turn away, the folds of his dressing gown.” It’s a siren song Martin seems unable to resist
and he is only saved from the rocks this time by Ann’s “proprietorial gesture of her hand
on his head”. This is the ultimate defeat for Martin, for no matter how stridently he has
ranted against Gretel it all comes to naught when he finds himself involuntarily aroused.
At least when he vociferated against her he was to a degree insulated from her by the
distancing effects of his tirade. But when his penis displays such appalling timing it
becomes just a little difficult for Martin to successfully rail against the horrors of Gretel’s
sexuality. But now he feels that he is in her thrall, and it is not as if his sexual arousal will
provide him with sexual power over Gretel or even place him on an equal sexual footing.
Sexual liberation can be such a problematic freedom.

This episode with Gretel is an example of how Wilding not only reinforces sex as
part of the cultural agenda of the 60s, but how he places it under the lens of a critical
microscope, one that brings into close and sharp focus not only the pleasures of sexual
freedom, but also the difficulties, dilemmas and possible disasters. As comical as the
scene may be, readers of Living Together are still clearly informed that the espousal of
sexual freedom and the attendant attempt to live out its tenets does not guarantee
unadulterated sexual, emotional, psychological and social bliss; there will always be

572 Ibid. p.189.
573 Ibid. p.190.
inconsistencies and failures amidst the positives. Indeed Living Together can largely be read as strongly promoting these positives; it’s just that Wilding believes it to be a little disingenuous to only dwell on those positives. He is after all attempting to render and encourage a lifestyle that is happening in a real place at a real time with real people.

Gretel Mann is not the only strong, self-assured and sexually liberated woman in Living Together. Mrs. Bilham lives next door to Martin and Ann’s house and though she is sexually liberated Martin doesn’t find in her the same daunting features he found in Gretel: Martin is often a little in awe of Mrs. Bilham, but never does he really suffer the abject fear he did with Gretel. This is not to suggest that Mrs. Bilham fits more closely to Martin’s concept of a liberated young woman: she is not maternal and compliant like Ann; nor is she as easily used and taken advantage of and dismissed as Natalie, a woman he later has a relationship with, is. What Gretel and Mrs. Bilham have in common is conveying to Martin not only their strength and sexual liberation, but also a genuine sense of independence. It is a sense of independence that conveys to Martin that he can never be certain about them and that he is unable to know and control them. These women are different to those Martin usually encounters, certainly different to those he usually sleeps with, and he just isn’t certain how to react or behave around them. Certainly his experiences with Gretel have left him none the wiser in this regard. All of this is uncharted territory for a lot of young men in the 60s, young men who may have embraced the sexual revolution if it meant embracing a lot of obliging women all the way to bed. These men would have been delighted by the sexual revolution as long as it was on their terms and within parameters they felt comfortable about. And comfort here usually means being the one who knows what’s going on and being the one who’s in control. Take away that power and some men could be decidedly uncomfortable.

Martin’s and Paul’s uncertainty about Mrs. Bilham is established early in the novel when of an evening they would sit on their front door step sipping coffee or beer and they would see Mrs. Bilham returning home. She would be “half smiling, half combative” and they would feel she was about to make some “destructive thrust” which was never delivered, but “hung there, a penumbra, a crowded hinterland of assembled troops that never paraded.” And Mrs. Bilham’s “sexuality was similarly ambivalent….Yet they felt it over there, around her half smile, at the casually loosened
The sexual attraction of “loosened buttons” and “hips” and “buttocks” is easy for Martin and Paul to understand and respond to, but the power and potential control of things “combative” such as a “destructive thrust” makes it all a different matter, especially if supported by the collective force of “assembled troops”. This sense of awe and of just not being certain is conveyed in the way they address Mrs. Bilham, both publicly and privately. Martin and Paul know her given name is Susan, yet they always call her Mrs. Bilham. They continue to do this though they know she is separated from her “rotten husband” and that she never has or never will be sexually faithful to his name or the institution. It is as if Martin and Paul have unconsciously put themselves in the position of children who sense not to talk to big people using their first name. And it is only Martin and Paul (the only significant male characters in the novel) who feel compelled to always call her Mrs. Bilham: Ann usually refers to her as “her” and once as “old bag” (which admittedly is not a big improvement towards friendly familiarity), while Gretel simply calls her “Susan Bilham.”

The next time Martin and Paul see Mrs. Bilham she is smiling at them from her bedroom window where the “ledge was roughly level with her nipples. She seemed to be naked.” Martin and Paul’s response to seeing Mrs. Bilham is not to be titillated at the prospect of seeing her naked or even of glimpsing those breasts, a response that would have been stereotypically male and one which at first appearance would seem to be encouraged by the nature of Mrs. Bilham’s appearance. However, given the nature of Martin and Paul’s attitude towards Mrs. Bilham it is more likely that she is playing them like little boys who will be flustered and intimidated by the sexuality of a more mature and worldly woman. Accordingly, Martin and Paul “waved and rushed inside the kitchen.”

Maybe once inside the kitchen they blushed and giggled or even peeked out; but we are not told.

A later meeting between Martin and Mrs. Bilham suggests that Martin may very well be justified to be a little in awe of her. Martin can pontificate to Paul at length about leading the “sexually free life” but Martin’s understanding of this sort of life is a lot

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574 Ibid. p.29.
575 Ibid. pp. 34,52 and 184.
576 Ibid. p.31.
577 Ibid. p.44.
more limited than Mrs. Bilham’s. For Martin it means the ability to move in and out of relationships, a serial monogamy whose construction, at least with Ann, resembles the moral code and gender stereotyping of a traditional marriage. For Mrs. Bilham sexual freedom means the ability to engage concurrently in different sexual relationships; she has the freedom to have different lovers at different times or different lovers at the same time. Her sexual relationships with different people are without any sense of guilt and without any consideration that such behaviour could engender in one of her lovers a jealousy borne out that lover feeling he has proprietary claims on her. It is an idea of sexual freedom that is at the farthest remove from a sexual life as prescribed by the dominant. It is a lifestyle that has some things in common with Martin’s, but unlike Martin’s it removes any consideration of monogamy, serial or not, and of jealousy. It is a lifestyle well suited to Mrs. Bilham and one that she seemed attracted to at an early time in her life. When talking to Martin she tells him that she has noticed that Paul now has “companionship” and when this appears to be news to Martin she wonders if Paul hadn’t told him because he’d be “(A)fraid you’d disapprove or something.” For Mrs. Bilham fear and disapproval are two feelings she will not countenance: “I used to be like that,” she said; ‘I never dared take any of my boyfriends home in case my parents disapproved and threw them out; and me too; which mightn’t have been such a bad thing, come to think of it, but…you don’t think of these things at thirteen.’” But Mrs. Bilham’s urge towards sexual freedom wasn’t just some aspect of adolescent parental rebellion: “And then just the same thing happened when I got married; I never could bring anyone home for Ross would throw them out; which he did once or twice, when he came home unexpectedly”. Not only was Mrs. Bilham sexually precocious, but her ongoing attitude and behaviour exemplifies some of the more prominent features of the countercultural 60s: she was in rebellion against the authority of her parents; she shows complete disregard for the traditional concept of marriage; she has consistently striven to be unrestricted and completely liberated in her sexual life; and is also in rebellion against the authority of patriarchy, as when her husband sought to limit her sexual freedom she concludes to Martin, “‘Jesus, that was a bastard for you.’”

578 Ibid. p.67.
The nature of Mrs. Bilham’s sexual freedom is far more thoroughgoing than Martin’s; however, it is a difference of degree rather than kind, where Mrs. Bilham’s sexual freedom, though considerably further along the continuum of emergent and assertive practices, is not completely at odds with Martin’s beliefs. Yet it is clear that Mrs. Bilham’s sexual freedom has a lot more in common with the beliefs of the counterculture than does Martin’s and it is also clear that not only does she hold these beliefs but that she also lives them out. In addition she is acutely aware of what this sort of lifestyle has to offer her. “It’s a great relief to be liberated, I can tell you. The amount of domestic fascism relations exercise on you is fearful. Don’t you think?” Martin’s reply is to say, “I’d not really thought about it.” Quite clearly he’s being honest here. Mrs. Bilham then goes on to say that at first she thought Martin and Paul were living together in a sexual relationship and when Martin tells her no she suggests, “Maybe you ought to give it a go; it would probably do you good. It’s crazy having all these hang-ups.” This is a degree of sexual liberation that is not even considered by Martin. It is a sexual freedom that countenances gay relationships and as such it is also ahead of what much of the counterculture was suggesting at the time. Gay and lesbian liberation was certainly on the agenda around this time, but it was still in its embryonic stages and heterosexuality was still very much the dominant form of sexuality. Countercultural thought, although largely sympathetic to all movements towards sexual freedom, was still overwhelmingly concerned with sexual freedom as practiced between men and women. Mrs. Bilham’s concept of sexual freedom is more all encompassing in that she wants any and all “hang-ups” to be discarded, as the maintenance of any is just “crazy”. Trying to not “sound offended” Martin lamely says, “I don’t feel I have any hang-ups”. But saying this doesn’t make it so, and Mrs. Bilham knows this: “That’s what they all say. Bloody men.” Mrs. Bilham then dismisses Martin saying he must return to his “good lady…it never does to cross one’s neighbours’ wives.” Martin’s parting comment is something of an attempt to assert his cleverness and to undermine Mrs. Bilham’s statements on sexual freedom: “I thought you were liberated” he accuses, but the

579 Ibid.
580 See, for example, Denis Altman, Coming Out in the Seventies: Sexual Politics and Culture. Penguin, Ringwood, 1980, for a detailed account of the gay movement and how “it was in the seventies that a homosexual identity was widely recognised and to some extent accepted”, p. 15.
accusation falls flat when Mrs. Bilham simply says, “‘Try me’”. Martin’s attempt to find inconsistency in Mrs. Bilham’s stand, his attempt to find limits to her idea of sexual freedom and to show her that indeed she does have a “hang-up”, is quickly nullified as Mrs. Bilham throws the sexual gauntlet down to Martin.581

For all of Martin’s faults, for all his sexual insecurities and, later, appalling behaviour, there is still a side to him that is thoughtful and which elicits a degree of sympathy from readers. Maybe empathy from some. In the end Martin is a character who, like him or not, is caught up in the emergent and assertive practices of the time and who is simply trying to work out, consciously or unconsciously, how to behave. In the process he sometimes behaves well and sometimes badly, and sometimes he means well for others and sometimes he thinks only of himself and uses others. And such stuff sounds true to life, which is very much what Wilding is trying to capture.

When Martin begins his affair with Natalie and he is in bed with her he is given to some introspective post-coital thoughts that are not of the swaggering, macho bravado sort. These will come a little later. When thinking to himself he is understandably a lot more honest than when he is posturing in public. Lying with Natalie he contemplates “whether he was delighted to find someone different.”582 Such a thought is at remove from the stereotypical male response which would see this sex as a real positive, as a new sexual conquest to be proud of. This may be the stuff of later bragging, but for the moment it gives rise to a train of thought that represents an attempt to understand some of the deeper implications of sexual freedom. Martin in his own way tries to explore the nexus between the freedom to have different sexual partners and its effects on a person’s thoughts and emotions. It is an exploration that says to Wilding’s readers that there are sometimes implications and ramifications to having sex that go beyond the mere physical. Martin even attempts to define the nature of the sexual experience, as apparently a fuck is not always just a fuck, thank you very much, end of story. Of Natalie Martin wonders, “Did her different figure, her different hair, create a different sexuality? What was the difference? Was she sexually any different? Did she feel different? What did he feel?” Martin is attempting understand what constitutes the act of sex and if and

582 Ibid. p.93.
how it is different with a different person. Martin thinks about the role of his penis, but it is a contemplation that goes beyond seeing it as just a penetrating and ejaculating appendage: “Wasn’t the penis the most insensitive organ of the body, hadn’t he read that somewhere, that it was without sensation? … If the penis was sensitive, wouldn’t it be sheathed like finger tips by nails, as a protection?” Whilst Martin’s suppositions may not be biologically sound they do represent a questioning of the role of sexual organs in the act of sex. “Did he feel his penis tender and quivering and sensitive to the slightest light, slightest quiver, slightest thought? He would know if he did. How cruel an irony to make the finger tips more sensitive than the penis.”

This may all appear to be little more than male, self-indulgent penis gazing, but it does lead Martin to further consider the significance of the sexual experience and the correlation between the actual act and the recollection of that act. “For all he felt now, he might never have entered her; physiologically, perhaps physiologically they could take smears and find traces of her on him, of him in her. But that was no more than the tread of a tyre on a road. What more had there been in that passage?”

Clearly Martin’s view is phallocentric. Nevertheless, his thoughts do have an applicability to both genders as he considers the nature of sex with a different person and the general meaning and significance of that act. Martin finds an element of intangibility, a certain insubstantiality about the act of sex; it is an act that is difficult to define beyond descriptions of physical action, which in themselves often prove awkward, inadequate and sometimes farcical. “With a dream you can never establish, never solidify what it might have been; and what you think you might have been experiencing might be only your dream of what it might have been.”

And dreams, nice as they are, are sometimes a little hard to pin down and to establish their meaning, if any. Martin continues to wrestle with the nature of sex and the connection of that act with the person it is done with. He tries to establish that component of sex that is more than the physical act. “He could look at her, see her, touch her. But he could look at or see or touch anyone. And why was this so different to Ann?” Although Martin can’t establish the essential difference, he feels that there must be a difference: “And if it wasn’t, why was he here, having done what he

583 Ibid.
584 Ibid.
585 Ibid. pp.93-94.
couldn’t remember?” Martin can’t answer this question: he doesn’t venture into some puerile account of the male’s natural libido which inexorably drives them to have sex with as many people as possible; nor does he explore whether he is responding to the sort of social conditioning that he was subject to. Yet he is not happy to just resign himself to blissful ignorance. “Yet with Ann, with Ann was it as unestablishable as this? With her did he not know whether they’d felt anything?” Some feelings he is able to identify, but they are not the ones he is striving to quantify and qualify. “Was it just because he was with someone else, with Natalie, he felt fear, shame, guilt, anxiety, and was prevented from feeling anything else?” Questions lead onto further questions. “Or was it that before he had never known he had felt nothing? Was it only now, perhaps expecting something different, and he must have expected something different to have come here, to be here, that he realized not only that it was nothing different, but nothing at all.” There is a searching in Martin’s thoughts that interrogates the very premise of the 60s sexual revolution, an enquiry into the very value of the freedom to have different sexual relationships. It was a freedom that was meant to set people free from the taboos and inhibitions of the dominant, a freedom that was meant to give individuals access to psychological and physical satisfaction that would in turn work its magic on the society at large. Martin wonders if perhaps this quandary is peculiar to him: “Yet why did Paul keep on, surely there must be something Paul felt in his enthusiastic couplings, with Gretel, with the other girl, with the other nameless ones? There must have been qualitative differences for Paul to continue as he did; and objective experience for him to establish the differences.” Martin wonders if he could ask Paul what he feels about having sex, not his individual feeling, but what Paul thinks it means in general for most people. Martin then thinks that perhaps this is the wrong line of enquiry: “And yet wasn’t that perhaps the error, expecting an abstraction? Perhaps the only question there could be was what do you feel, perhaps there could be only a series of individual experiences.”

In the end Martin’s soliloquizing about the nature of sex has failed to produce anything definitive. And, unless he is to delude himself, how could it be otherwise? For Wilding’s readers Martin’s thoughts continue to foreground the importance of sex in people’s lives, they present to his readers a quiet, thoughtful discussion of some of the

586 Ibid. p.94.
implications of leading a sexually free life. Perhaps the answer is that there are no hard and fast empirical generalizations to be made; sex is not to be an easily defined experience common to everyone. In fact Martin’s tentative conclusion that sex may be “a series of individual experiences” is in accord with 60s countercultural thought which valorized individuality above uniformity and conformity. Sex was seen as a means whereby the strictures of the dominant, which sought to impose conformity, could be undermined and replaced with experiences grounded in freedom and individuality. Emergent and assertive practices were not about replacing one conforming code of behaviour with another, and having it accepted just because it was different. The new tenets were to be freedom and the individuality and uniqueness of the sexual experience. Of course there is often a discrepancy between the ideal and actuality. And there is certainly a discrepancy between Martin’s thoughts and statements on the sexually free life. Martin’s having sex with Natalie is an aspect of this freedom, but more problematic is that he is doing it behind Ann’s back. This is a sexual freedom not completely unlike some adulterous affair from the 50s. Perhaps it is this way for Martin because he is still partially caught by the rules of the dominant while at the same time being attracted to and influenced by the new sexual practices. These are tricky times for many and Wilding’s exploration of just how do you behave exposes the predicament, but is unable to offer definitive answers simply because there weren’t any. When Natalie is talking to Martin about different careers she should do she asks, “What is there for a woman to do?” In response Martin thinks, “What is there for any of us to do?” Yes, indeed.

Martin doesn’t take long to move away from his uncharacteristically honest introspection. He begins to place blame away from himself: any failure or any short comings must clearly be the fault of the person he’s having sex with. “And his problem now? With someone else perhaps he would feel something; it was only the individual occasion, the particular partner, that was at fault.” Despite apportioning blame to anyone but himself Martin is still left with a residual sense of questioning and emptiness: “Yet what had he felt with Ann, had he ever felt? He recoiled from the great insensate gulfs before him only to survive the bland desert he had been inhabiting.”587 Such introspection is completely gone by the time Natalie asks him, “Why does no one I talk to ever have

587 Ibid.
any ideas?” Without much post-coital warmth, and diving right into those “great insensate gulfs”, Martin thinks to himself, “Because all they want to do is screw you, and your mouth is but another orifice, an inlet. You may use your arse and cunt and mouth for outlets, but no one else cares about that.” 588

Wilding now explores the predicament of Martin trying to leave Natalie’s place in order to return to his home with Ann: Martin now has a new lover, but is still involved with his old lover. It’s not a situation confined to the sexual revolution of the 60s, but probably one made more common by it. Martin has felt that he has the freedom to have sex with Natalie, but that freedom does not come with an easy option to openly tell Ann all about it. Once a new sexual relationship is entered into a new dynamic is also brought into play. Martin needs to return to his and Ann’s house, but understandably Natalie now feels she is deserving of at least a modicum of commitment. Webs become tangled and Martin must either navigate or extricate. Or alternatively, if stymied into indecisiveness, just let things happen. Martin will choose the last option. After the first time Martin and Natalie have sex, and while he is still in bed with Natalie, Martin says, “‘I have to go’”. But it isn’t that easy. Consciously or unconsciously Natalie attempts to stake her claim to Martin by trying to impose a degree of possessiveness over him. This is done by her not only suggesting that it’s early and that Martin doesn’t have to go just yet, but by her wanting to get him something to eat and drink. To an offer of coffee Martin tells her not to bother. Natalie bothers anyway. He doesn’t want a sandwich, but again she bothers. The line between hospitality and the creation of a territoriality via domesticity can become blurred. Clearly Martin would have preferred to have had sex, said thanks and left. These different reactions reflect aspects of gender stereotyping: just sex for the male and sex and the other things for the woman. This tableau takes place at the very outset of Martin and Natalie’s relationship when “he managed to see for the first time her nakedness, her full nakedness” and when Martin had to “put his arms round her, to feel the shape of her waist, her breasts, to ensure that she was there, that he had touched her.” Eating the sandwich and drinking the coffee Martin wants to know why Natalie isn’t joining him. Acting out another scene of gender stereotyping Natalie says it’s because she’s too fat, to which Martin of course replies that she isn’t. So far this little cliche is

588 Ibid. p95.
following the script, until Martin reaches out to touch her and her response is, “You can keep your greasy hands off my tits, too.”” Martin then “looked so genuinely startled, she leant over and kissed him.” Perhaps Natalie’s little outburst reveals that beneath the pleasant provision of food and sex there lurks a harridan. But much more probable is that she is resentful and angry at Martin’s attempts to get away as soon as he can after sex. It is clear that Natalie would like some purchase on Martin beyond the sex. Martin says he feels funny eating as she watches. Natalie replies, “It’ll do you good, you need looking after.” Now that sentence, especially the last four words, says a lot about Natalie’s thoughts and intentions. Playing out the cliche side of the encounter Martin says, “I don’t really want to go, but -” to which Natalie helpfully adds, “But you have to.”” Once away from Natalie Martin is self-satisfied and pretty chuffed with himself: “He lit his cigar and puffed with the easy contentment of the Canadian Pacific crossing the Rockies along its shining tracks.” Of course such train trips can take you to different places, but they can be expensive.

This episode between Martin and Natalie makes it clear to Wilding’s readers that even at the commencement of a new sexual relationship a wide range of forces come into play. Wilding isn’t telling his readers how to behave here, but he is telling them that things can get complicated and that in the real world of the emergent and assertive practices sex is often not just sex and that it can involve other factors. There is never any suggestion that acts of sexual freedom are not to be entered into; in fact their existence and the desirability of being involved in them is simply a given. It is clear from this scene between Martin and Natalie that Natalie has certain needs and intentions and that these needs and intentions do not coincide with Martin’s. It is a situation that could lead to trouble. Wilding may also be suggesting that Martin’s behaviour may be at odds with the idea of sexual freedom in that sexual freedom may not mean the freedom to have sex behind the back of someone you are already involved with. Perhaps there is the tacit suggestion to Wilding’s readers that the way for Martin to circumvent any difficulties is to either tell Ann or to break it off with Ann, though the former would probably result in the latter. And perhaps this suggestion is tacitly made, because honourable as it sounds it probably isn’t the stuff of the real world or the way people go about their lives.

589 Ibid. pp.97-98.
Once away from Natalie Martin feels a sense of bravado; he is after all the conquering sexual hero and is therefore fully entitled to some macho strutting. “Back home Martin strode with a new assurance, a feeling of an easy carriage over the roughness of life, cushioned like a hovercraft or hydraulic suspension system.” Ah, the euphoria of a new sexual relationship! All the more is the pity that he can’t really tell people all about it. “He could not say to Paul, ‘I have found a new contentment in the cunt of Natalie Ehrensaft, who has eased me from the toils of the here and now.’” All this makes Natalie sound like some balm to ease the pain of long suffering Martin’s harsh, mechanical existence. Martin’s mood prompts another round of philosophical thinking where he tries to extrapolate from his personal situation generalizations that will hold true for society in general. “It is too easy for mid-twentieth century man to become entrapped in systems to which he gives his adherence from a misguided pre-industrial morality; take sexual relationships, for instance, why do we persist in this system of monogamy when all our best thinkers have argued and demonstrated its impossibility and undesirability”.590 Given Martin’s difficulty in leaving Natalie and his oversight in telling Ann all about it you’d think he’d have an inkling about some of the reasons for being “entrapped” and how it may not be all “too easy”. Oblivious to his own predicament he wonders why so many of his “contemporaries are unable to detach themselves from the oppressive detail of the day-to-day continuities… they remain entrapped by outdated systems”. Despite being “entrapped” by aspects of those “outdated systems” Martin believes “I now have freed myself; the bed of Natalie Ehrensaft is my calm raft from which to withdraw from the turbulent currents of life”. Despite the less than imaginative metaphor Martin employs he seems to not consider how a “raft” may not be the most reliable and safe spot in “turbulent currents”. However, Martin’s linkage between sexual freedom and happiness is in accord with one of the central tenets of the 60s. That Martin is unable to fully lead the sexually free life is perhaps Wilding’s way of suggesting that the path to happiness via sexual freedom can become mired in the actuality of people’s real lives. Indeed, as Martin expresses it, “One has to be strong enough to take the decisive steps, clear sighted enough to survey the entire scene, and to realize one’s

590 Ibid. p.103.
happiest place in it.” Of course it isn’t really clear that Martin is in possession of any of these characteristics. As is often the case with Martin there is the discrepancy between what he espouses and the reality of his daily existence. Again there is the issue as to whether this discrepancy, between what Martin says and what Martin does, functions to discredit the ideas themselves: does the baby get thrown out with the bath water? And yet again the end result may be that there is some slippage of support away from the belief in sexual freedom, but that it is likely to be very negligible. Wilding’s readers would be astute enough to believe that the flaws are to be found in the character and not the ideas. Indeed this is the way that Wilding positions his readers: he makes it repeatedly clear that Martin is a character whose behaviour is riddled with irony and even hypocrisy, that he is a character more given to posturing than a thoroughgoing living out of the practices of the Counterculture. Against this rendering of character there is the prevalence of the belief in sexual freedom and how it is essential for the betterment of individuals and society at large. This belief in the positive efficacy of sexual freedom would have been almost impossible to discredit or shift in the 60s; there would have been as much chance of convincing those young people in the counterculture that drugs and rock and roll were bad for you.

Martin continues to contemplate his current situation and though what he has to say functions as a self-serving justification for his relationship with Natalie it nevertheless is still in accord with the beliefs of many young people. “Happiness is not a static thing…. One must be carried along by happiness, not try to peg her down. To stay where one found past happiness is not to secure her but to see her waft past one and recede, withdraw. We found happiness, Ann and I, but happiness is not to be confined in one place, one relationship”. This provides Martin with the reason for going to Natalie, but it’s a little thin on explaining why he doesn’t tell Ann about it. Perhaps it’s because “one must surrender oneself to the flow. That way one finds both the new happiness and preserves the old.” Well, maybe in theory. And this theory would have had support from young people who certainly did not see happiness as some permanent state that was enshrined in marriage. Rather they believed in being able to move between relationships

591 Ibid.
592 Ibid. pp.103-104.
and that happiness, that sometimes elusive and nebulous quality, should be pursued. And it was also believed that new relationships should be entered into without any recriminations, regrets or sense of guilt and jealousy. This was a big order to fill for a lot of young people so it’s not surprising that Martin asks, “Why should guilty dishonest shame afflict him?”

It would be churlish to suggest to Martin that this could be because he is being dishonest. Martin’s guilt, such as it is, is soon assuaged with Ann’s moving out. Ann’s decisiveness is made without any discussion with Martin; she is astute enough to read the signs and the 60s has given her the freedom to simply pack up her things and leave. The sexual freedom of the 60s has not insulated Ann from any of the messiness of sexual relationships, but it has empowered her to be able to move out and to not be mired in a situation that is simply not working. And she does this in just a nick of time as far as Martin is concerned. Not that he was about to become proactive, but because he “suspected (Natalie) was putting obligations and commitments on to him.” Martin is aware that “each night she would demand that he stayed longer and ate more and fucked more frequently” and he “was suspicious of her demands that he could stay all night.” Then coming home early one morning Martin finds that Ann has gone. Thus his problem is solved. With a fine sense of priorities Martin expresses how he “resented the way she had assumed all the household objects were hers.” He resents the removal of the kettle and curtains, but that’s about it. There is nothing for it but to move, at least temporarily, in with Natalie. Martin does this while still keeping the house he shared with Ann and sometimes going back to that house where he spends time talking to Paul.

For Martin this apparent new injection of sexual freedom doesn’t mean an opportunity to explore sexual relations with the aim of finding some sort of meaning and deep satisfaction. Rather his new found freedom seems to license him to behave badly. It as if he is the stereotype of some adolescent boy suddenly set free from all parental restraints. And like a little boy Natalie mothers him and feeds him, cleans the house and does his laundry. It is a position that also sees a complete reversal of roles where it is

593 Ibid. p.105.
594 Ibid. p.106.
595 Ibid. pp.110-111.
now Paul who gives advice to Martin.\textsuperscript{596} Martin is at his old house with Paul one evening when Nina and Kate come visiting. It is a visit that sees the commencement of an evening that results in a sort of Bacchanalian romp replete with wine, women and drugs. Nina and Kate come “bearing drugs, excitement, new worlds, the old dolce vita.” Kate asks Martin if he smokes a lot of dope, to which Martin replies, “‘Not a lot’”, which is a surprise to Paul who didn’t know he smoked any at all. Martin’s attempt at an enigmatic reply (“‘There are a lot of things you don’t know’”). is really an attempt to conceal his sense of uncertainty and unfamiliarity with the lifestyle of Paul, Nina and Kate. Earlier in this thesis an explanation for the differing approaches of Martin and Paul towards women and sex was offered. It was suggested that whilst both characters had been influenced by the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s there existed a difference between the nature of these influences and their effect on each character. It was suggested that Martin’s important formative young adult years were the early to mid 60s, whereas Paul’s were the late 60s to the very early 70s and that these few years had made all the difference in their attitudes towards Gretel. These few years may also go some way towards explaining Martin’s awkwardness at fitting in with the lifestyle and attitudes of Paul, Nina and Kate. As Paul smokes his dope, inhaling deeply and holding his breath, Martin looks “with caution, suspicion…. Though he was not hostile. More than anything he was curious”. Martin’s position is not quite that of the outsider, but nor is it one of comfortable belonging. He is just a little ill at ease, but there is the interest and desire to join the group. “He envied Paul’s ease. He felt almost anthropological, observing their culture, so different from the cultural centre he would have established in the house.” However, this anthropologist has no desire for objective distance, rather he wants to “find a closeness to them” and like a good anthropologist he “waited carefully to find the new idioms before trusting himself to these new experiences.”\textsuperscript{597} And new experiences are what he gets when the four of them go out.

The evening out commences with Nina and Kate cavorting through some fountains amid the titans, tritons and salmon. Their romp, no doubt fueled by their dope, is uninhibited and sexually suggestive. These are two women who intend to have fun,

\textsuperscript{596} Ibid. p.112.
\textsuperscript{597} Ibid. p.115.
who intend to do what they want, even if it is to be in a public fountain. Nina and Kate “clamber over the feet and thighs of the titans: those swelling muscles; those magnificent genitalia”. They work together as a team with “Kate lapping the testicular excesses, Nina probing the anal declivities”. The cumulative effect of their actions would seem “enough to enliven the petrified wrestler into some startling embrace, grabbing them there amongst the flowing waters and entering them with huge marbled erection or concrete spasm, stoned between the thighs.”\(^{598}\) It may not be going to be a night of mythical proportions, but there are those overtones. Interestingly there is no mention of the reactions of people passing by; it is as if they simply don’t exist or at least don’t matter to Nina and Kate because in a true 60s gesture they will do what they want to do and break society’s rules for the decorous behaviour of young women. To again paraphrase a line from Hair; they are being free, happy and doing whatever they want and not hurting anybody. It also seems they are a lot more uninhibited and spontaneous than either Martin or Paul who are apparently happy to be spectators, albeit perhaps voyeuristic ones viewing what they later hope to experience.

They then decide to go to the pub, “despite Martin’s ‘I thought you shouldn’t smoke and drink together.’” Underlining the difference between Martin and the others, they reply to him, “‘We have no shoulds’”. In the pub Nina and Kate, replete with 60s paraphernalia of “rings and bracelets and bells chiming and ringing and their clothes flowing; like a kaleidoscope” sit and drink coloured drinks and overwhelm Martin who feels “constantly shaken” as he tries to “settle in one permanent combination, to partner either”.\(^{599}\)

It is after the pub that Martin gets some “new experiences”, but it’s also where he begins to behave badly, not in the sense of bad manners or the breaking of social conventions, though there is this too, but rather in the way he treats people around him: unlike Nina and Kate, Martin may strive to be free and happy and to do whatever he wants, but he may also hurt somebody along the way. At a restaurant they order some soup so as to be able to continue to drink after the pubs have shut. Intentionally or otherwise the restaurant they have gone to is the one where Natalie does her “weekend

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\(^{598}\) Ibid. p.116.
\(^{599}\) Ibid. pp.116-117.
waitressing”. Ordering bottles of wine from Natalie they knock over and spill the second bottle. They order a third bottle as Paul scrambles to get salt from a nearby table to soak up the spillage and in the process spills what remains in the second bottle. Paul then upsets the salt cellar and proceeds to inexplicably pour wine all over it. At this stage Natalie says to Martin in passing, “Don’t you think maybe you’re a little drunk.” It’s hardly an astute observation, but it is a sort of plea on Natalie’s behalf to get some restraint from Martin and the others, especially, if not solely, because this is where she works. But Martin is in no mood to settle down and his reply emphasizes this: “‘My oath,’ he said, ‘a little? Smasheroo?’” Paul then comes to Martin’s assistance: “‘Natalie,’ said Paul, ‘you’re getting more and more like a psychiatric nurse every day. Let him alone. He needs the release; the escape from all his tensions.’” Yes indeed, poor Martin agrees, though the sort of tension he’s thinking about probably differs to what Paul was thinking. “My God, I need the release. He wondered whether to press his arm or hand or leg or foot or thigh against Kate or Nina or both would be deemed too uncool.”\footnote{Ibid. p.117.} Decisions, decisions are just part of Martin’s predicament: drunk in the workplace of his newest girlfriend, with whom he has been living, and his biggest problem is who to feel up and with what part of his body he should do the feeling up with. That Martin has to gauge the coolness or uncoolness of his actions tells us that he is still some distance from fitting in naturally with the others.

Things don’t really improve in the restaurant. “It was when Kate began to roll another joint that Natalie became really upset.” When Natalie points out that they’ll get arrested and she’ll lose her job, Martin’s response is to say, “‘Ha! The economic base breaks through.’” Dilettantish Marxism as an attempt at witty repartee becomes less than effective when Martin and the others leave the restaurant: Martin has to take the bill to Natalie and say, “‘Look, love, we seem to have lost some money somehow. Do you think we could pay this later? Or could you fix it? I mean I’ll pay you back. But I just don’t have enough.’”\footnote{Ibid. pp.117-118.} It’s that nasty economic base breaking through again, but it’s apparently all right to let it do so if it’s to your advantage. Natalie says she doesn’t care what they do so long as they leave; perhaps Martin’s calling her “love” won her over.
The connection between Natalie and love doesn’t exist for much longer in Martin’s mind. Back at his home, “turning on without complaint”, Martin regrets having maligned Nina and Kate, which must have been because of the influence of Ann. Martin now “rejoiced that he could at last see clearly”, a clarity of vision no doubt facilitated by his finding “a new closeness, Kate, Nina, beside him, against him, enwrapping him, carrying him, embracing him, lying down with him in bed there to sleep entwined with him, Nina, Kate.” But lots of dope and alcohol don’t always mix well with the hope of having sex and there is to be no menage a trois for Martin, or any sex at all for that matter. In the morning with a painful head Martin cautiously opens his eyes, perhaps hoping to “see clearly” again, only to find himself disappointingly alone in bed, and even more disappointingly “clothed.” But he is soon to find that his disappointment is to be thoroughgoing: “Zipped.” Martin’s regrets seem to have more to do with the fact that he appears to have no evidence of a sexual encounter rather than regreting that sex didn’t happen or that he can’t recall the experience. In other words it seems to be more important for Martin to be able to say he had sex with Nina and Kate, than to actually have had sex with them and to have a clear recollection of that sex. This is uncomfortably close to macho another-notch-on-the-belt territory, where bragging of conquests can be more important than the sex itself. Martin’s disappointment is slightly assuaged when the “awful possibility” that Nina and Kate could be with Paul in his room proves to be untrue. In order to prove it Martin prepares coffee and with four cups on a tray simply opens Paul’s door and walks in unannounced. When he walks in he tries to adopt an aloof appearance of calm superiority that says ‘it doesn’t matter to me at all’, which is often the stance adopted by those who wanted something, but got refused. He enters Paul’s room “to give them awakening sustenance from his own stronger security”. He wants to give them the “benediction of tolerance, uncensorious of their chosen life”, having it seems quickly forgotten it was a chosen life he was recently very keen to be part of. He now wants to be “above the lesser human involvements.”

However, it is clear that things can change quickly with Martin and after he has showered and returned to bed there is a knock on the door. He goes downstairs

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602 Ibid. pp.118-119.
603 Ibid. p.120.
“hopefully” that either Nina or Kate had been “found supernumary (sic)” and “had returned for him.” He puts on his red silk dressing gown, “planning as he descended the stairs how to let it slip loose and apart and display his ready genitalia to the waiting Nina; or Kate.” Hope, among other things, seems to spring eternal and Martin no longer wants to be “above the lesser human involvements.” But alas it’s Natalie at the door and the payer of bills and “love” of the night before is told to variously “piss off” or “fuck off” as she tries to help Martin and to tidy up the mess that had been made.⁶⁰⁴ Soon after Natalie fails to follow either of Martin’s requests Natalie and Martin have sex and almost immediately Martin is filled with a dread that Paul, Nina and Kate might return and there he’d be in bed with Natalie. But Natalie is quite happy to stay in bed and Martin tells her, “‘Oh come on, don’t fuck around. I don’t want to stay in bed all day’”, even though that is exactly what he had wanted to do. When Natalie gets out of bed her badly timed cliche of “‘Do you think my bottom’s too big?’” is meet with less than post-coital sensitivity: “‘I’ve no special wish to look at your arse.’” Martin finds himself “impaled on the alternatives”: he thinks about showering, thus exposing himself to the return of Paul, Nina and Kate, “or spending the day with her conscious of their sweats and juices tacky against her.” He decides against showering: “there was less need for a man. And he had turned over against the sheets, rubbing against them.”⁶⁰⁵ This is writing about sex in detail, the gritty and the grotty details of sexual life which generally fail to be mentioned. They are also details that, along with the entire night, fail to portray Martin in any sort of positive way. It seems that trying to lead the sexually free life in a happy and satisfying way may involve more than Martin was able to provide. Again the failure is one of character rather than a failure of a mode of lifestyle: the notion that leading the sexually free life is a positive remains intact and Martin has failed not because of some inherent flaw in the lifestyle but because he has moved into an area where he was uncertain and in the end all he has achieved is a night of bad behaviour.

Later Martin is aware that he was a little out of step with the others on that night out. “He didn’t know their vocabulary. He feared to blunder with his alien’s language, the mispronunciations, the solecisms, the total misapprehensions.” Martin still doesn’t

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid. p.120.
⁶⁰⁵ Ibid. p.124.
understand that there is more to leading the sexually free lifestyle than getting the lingo down pat. He can’t even discuss it with Paul; it’s as if some “spontaneous taboo” exists. But there are some things he feels he can discuss with Paul. Martin has tried to slowly separate himself from Natalie but his technique is to feign tiredness or the need to go and do some work, rather than to broach the subject in any open and honest way. As we have seen with Ann, Martin is not adept at acting to end relationships. However, he is able to discuss with Paul an aspect of his relationship with Natalie. He asks Paul if he should “‘go round and fuck Natalie or not?’” Paul is of little assistance, so Martin feels he must elaborate: “‘I mean, it’s not as if I desperately do want to. I half want to.’” But he’s uncertain if he has “‘sufficient impulse to get there.’” Martin resolves the dilemma himself: “‘Why not after all? I mean, there might be a time in the future when there won’t be any Natalie, or anyone.’” It’s a case of eating even if you have no appetite because you never know there could be a famine in the near future. Martin’s view is clearly a sexist one which objectifies Natalie as if she were some commodity to be consumed in some lacklustre way, without any consideration as to whether the commodity itself wishes to be party to the consumption. No wonder Paul’s response is to say, “‘Your sexual insensitivity is incredible.’”

That there is this element of the notch-on-the-belt competitive mentality about Martin is made even clearer a little later in the conversation he is having with Paul. He wants to know if Paul was ever “on with” Nina or Kate and when Paul answers in the affirmative he wants to know which one. Paul, however, is aware of what is going on in Martin’s mind: “‘(W)e’ll be comparing notes on who’s been on with who, soon, who we’ve had in common, what the time differentials were, who had whom first…. There’ll be a graph on the wall. It’ll end up a race; the first to quadruple figures.’” Paul then presents a scenario to Martin: “‘(Y)ou’ll be out in the street waving your prick at every woman who comes past saying: I’m only up to number 666, please come and give me one, quickly, then I’ll only have 333 to go.’” The scenario may be ridiculous and humorous, but the issue of sexual competitiveness and jealousy would have been a real

\[\text{\tiny 606} \text{ Ibid. p.129.} \]
\[\text{\tiny 607} \text{ Ibid. p.125.} \]
\[\text{\tiny 608} \text{ Ibid. p.133.} \]
issue for some people.\textsuperscript{609} Sexual freedom without competitiveness or jealousy was simply not possible for people like Martin (and again this may be a factor of his age and background), though it doesn’t seem to be any sort of a problem for other characters like Nina, Kate, Paul, Gretel and especially Mrs. Bilham, as we shall soon see. But Martin can’t let go of questioning Paul and wants to know if Paul was “screwing” Nina or Kate. Unfortunately, Paul’s final response doesn’t ease Martin’s concerns: “Both.”

It must be clear, even to Martin himself, that he has not found “contentment in the cunt of Natalie Ehrensaft”\textsuperscript{610} and it isn’t long before Martin tactfully ends their relationship, telling Natalie, “Go fuck yourself.”\textsuperscript{611} Paul had indeed suggested to Martin that he should “try somebody else for a while” and that “change is the only aphrodisiac.”\textsuperscript{612} It is advice that Martin inadvertently follows, though not in any way that either Martin or Paul would have envisaged. Martin is sunbathing in his backyard when his neighbour, Mrs. Bilham, says she’ll join him and they can share a flagon of wine. So she passes the wine over the fence and then climbs over herself. She’s “clad in some huge towel or poncho” and Martin remarks that he thought she was going to join him sunbathing. Mrs. Bilham then takes off what she is wearing and is standing there naked. “Jesus” is all Martin can say at this point. His other response is to immediately get an erection. He throws himself to the ground in an attempt to hide it and “bruising it probably with the force of his impact.” Martin’s next main concern is to worry about whom could be watching from the houses nearby: it is not something that perturbs Mrs. Bilham in the slightest. As Mrs.Bilham lowers herself to the ground Martin looks at her and wonders, “Was that arse hair or cunt hair? Or his imagination?” He becomes, “Fevered; mad; he could feel his heart beating against the concrete yard.” It is a reaction that is in stark contrast to the calm nonchalance of Mrs. Bilham who simply says to Martin, “I do believe you’re embarrassed.”\textsuperscript{613}

Martin goes into the house to get some glasses for the wine, which Mrs. Bilham says will put “some colour in your cheeks.” However, the wine may not be required for that purpose. It isn’t long before the imbalance in clothing being worn is addressed:

\textsuperscript{609} See, for example, Anne Coombs, op. cit. pp. 209-214, 263, 281 and David Allyn, op. cit. p.216.
\textsuperscript{610} Ibid. p.103.
\textsuperscript{611} Ibid. p.152.
\textsuperscript{612} Ibid. p.134.
\textsuperscript{613} Ibid. pp.136-138.
“Why don’t you take your trunks off?” Mrs. Bilham asks Martin whose response is to smile and bite on his wine glass. Perhaps he is now recalling what he told Paul earlier in the novel: “It is not easy to live the sexually free life. It is not a simple thing. It requires continual adjustments, continual compromises.” And perhaps Martin needs convincing to adjust, to compromise. “No one will see you,” she said; ‘you’re not chicken are you? They talk about women’s liberation but what they need for Godsake is men’s liberation.” It’s a point well made and one well illustrated given the relatively liberated approach Nina, Kate, Gretel, Ann and Mrs. Bilham. Martin takes off his trunks, but this liberation brings its own problems. Mrs. Bilham rolls towards him and lays on her back, smiling at him. Martin “watched her, his erection growing huge, pressing, urgent, painful – what were those flowers that cracked rock, saxifrage. He waited for the concrete of the yard to fracture across.” It must have been some smile.

When Mrs. Bilham spills her wine it runs over her throat, breasts and belly. She tells Martin to lick it up so as to not waste it. Martin obliges, showing an enthusiasm to tidy up a mess he never exhibited with either Ann or Natalie. Then suddenly, but perhaps not surprisingly, Martin finds “his heart thumping and their skins touching and her legs opening and her arms round him and suddenly, oh lord, oh no, oh yes, there he was, on top of Mrs. Bilham, fucking her in the backyard, in broad daylight, in the full naked heat and light of noon”. This is a scene, with its naked bodies, the heat and sweat, the frisson of being out in the open, the wine, the sexual tension, the desire and then frantic fucking, which seems to be the precursor for some explicit and erotic writing about sex. Given the central concern of the novel, and indeed of the author and the time, this would seem to be option difficult to pass up. Another alternative for Wilding would be to simply end the scene there, leaving the rest of the sex up to the readers’ imagination. A little surprisingly he chooses neither of these options, but instead opts for rendering the remainder of the scene as farce. This could be seen as constituting a loss nerve to write about sex in explicit detail, but it is more likely, especially given Wilding’s track record of having a lot of nerve, a decision to suggest that sexual encounters are not always the

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614 Ibid. pp. 138-139.  
615 Ibid. p.45.  
616 Ibid. pp.139-140.  
617 Ibid. p.140.
stuff of sexual fantasy and that sometimes sex can go horribly and comically wrong. Again this is the way things sometimes are, it is part of life as lived by young people where each sexual encounter, even if it is outside, may not have the intensity experienced by Lady Chatterley and Mellors.

That the writing is heading towards farce has already been signaled with the image of Martin’s concrete-cracking erection, but this direction becomes all the more apparent as the writing progresses. As they have sex Martin imagines how they are “exposed to every neighbour in the street, every passerby looking over the fence, every dog, cat, sparrow, and aircraft pilot that might pass” 618. As quickly and as surprisingly as Martin had entered Mrs. Bilham “he was pitched off; in mid stroke flung to the ground, as pirates hurl down virgins they have deflowered”. The reason for Martin’s abrupt and ignominious expulsion is that Mrs. Bilham has seen that her kitchen is on fire, a sight clearly dire enough to warrant her not allowing the sex to come to its usual conclusion. Mrs. Bilham asks for Martin to cup his hands to help her over the fence: “’Don’t step on my prick,’ he said, moving away in alarm, afraid of her using it as a rung.” As she climbs over the fence there is the brief moment of stasis as Mrs. Bilham “stood poised there, illuminated golden in the sun before the background of black smoke, huge, dominating, glistening with sweat and semen and claret, a great naked vision, before plunging down into her yard.” 619. Now Mrs. Bilham has appropriated a few male characteristics such as her strength and independence, her sexual independence and assertiveness, but the ability to produce semen is perhaps a little trick that is too difficult to do. That it wasn’t Martin’s semen is indicated by his saying he was interrupted “mid stroke” and reinforced later when he ponders whether or not orgasm is a prerequisite for being able to say you’ve had sex with someone, or if penetration is sufficient. It’s possible the semen is from some other lover of Mrs. Bilham, but this is never suggested and seems most unlikely. More likely is the explanation that the small oops has been in Wilding’s writing.

Once Martin himself is over the fence he joins Mrs. Bilham in her kitchen and when the fire is put out they stand there still naked and covered in soot. Martin suggests that they “resume”. Mrs. Bilham is keen to go back outside, but Martin suggests they use

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618 Ibid.
619 Ibid. p.141.
Mrs. Bilham’s bed. “‘Can’t use that,’ she said; ‘what if my boyfriend noticed the stains on the sheets? What would I say then?’” When Martin tells her that he didn’t know she had a boyfriend Mrs. Bilham says, “‘I don’t know that I do. But one might turn up.’” Martin opts to “resume there, between the washing machine and the refrigerator” and he starts to again grow erect. He wonders whether to enter her here and now and to then draw her to the floor, “risking some twists and strains and wrenchings of his member”, or to “fling her down first and mount her as she lay there”. Before he can decide the door bell rings. Martin is in favour of ignoring it, but this isn’t an option for Mrs. Bilham. Martin sees her need to answer the door as being “unliberated”, presumably because it would appear she is prioritizing the mundane over the sexual. Mrs. Bilham tells Martin that it’s probably the people she’s going away on holiday with and then unabashedly answers the door still completely naked. “‘I’ll get dressed’”, she calmly tells the person at the door. “‘Why bother?’ a male voice said; you look lovely as you are.” This is followed by “the slap of a hand on a buttock.” So much for thoughts of Mrs. Bilham being “unliberated”. In the interim Martin, apparently a bit less liberated, has gone and hidden in the shower. “‘Fuck me dead…. There was a man here a moment ago’”, says Mrs. Bilham on her return to the kitchen. Eventually Martin is found hiding in the shower and his lame excuse to Mrs. Bilham and Herbie, the person who has called, is that “‘I was having a piss’”, which he soon needs to change to looking for a place to go to the toilet. And there he stands naked in front of Mrs. Bilham and Herbie, wishing that Herbie was a women, because being there “naked before a man he felt humiliated, exposed, trying to keep both penis and anus turned away; which resulted only in odd crab-like movements and stances, and the concealment of neither.”

This humiliation must have something to do with that male thing about size as Martin doesn’t seem to have much of a problem about showing his penis to any number of women; it was only a short time ago he was working out how to arrange his dressing gown to display his penis to the person, hopefully Nina or Kate, knocking at his door. For the moment Martin is stranded there with “the woman he had been fucking exposed to the man’s gaze before him, his woman naked before another man.” But Martin’s response is not to feel sexual jealousy; he “felt

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620 Ibid. pp.142-145.
621 Ibid. p.120.
himself growing erect at the horror of it.” Getting an erection seems to be Martin’s unique response to situations of stress.

It’s time for Martin to make an exit and he decides to return over the fence, despite Mrs. Bilham suggesting that the front is a lot easier. In fact Martin says he likes climbing the fence; “‘The ways of pleasure are infinite,’ says Herbie. Balancing naked on top of the fence he hears Kate call out, “Nina, come and see Martin doing naked handstands against the fence’”. With Mrs. Bilham, Herbie and now Nina and Kate watching him jump the fence Martin grabs Mrs. Bilham’s discarded poncho and wraps it “across his arse” while using his towel to “thrust it against his genitals”. Nina tells Martin that it’s a lovely poncho that he has while Kate tells her she “should have seen the rest”.

Martin runs quickly to his shower only to find Paul in there who screams, “Knock it off, fucking rape, help sodomy.” Nina and Kate hear the screams and respond: “‘An orgy! Shall we get our gear off too?’” Martin retreats to his bed, clearly exhausted after his exploration of those infinite ways of pleasure.\(^{623}\) No, “‘It is not easy to live the sexually free life. It is not a simple thing.’”\(^{624}\)

In the morning it is not the “full horror” that presses on Martin, but rather the “uncertainty of whether he could claim to have slept with Mrs. Bilham or not.” It’s that sexual conquest, notch-on-the-belt mentality from Martin again. He wonders “about the action whose incompleteness could hardly merit full recognition” and “whether screwing someone meant just penetration, or orgasm”. It’s difficult for Martin to be conclusive about the issue: “Perhaps if he allowed one point for penetration, one for friction, and one for orgasm, then of the possible three he had scored two; over half way there; but, I have two-thirds fucked Mrs. Bilham: was that something that could be ever said?”\(^{625}\) I wonder if Martin had been able to discuss the matter with Bill Clinton would it have been possible for the two of them to arrive at some sort of mutually satisfactory conclusion, even though one would want the affirmation that sex took place whilst the other would prefer the opposite.

\(^{622}\) Ibid. p.145.  
\(^{623}\) Ibid. pp.145-146.  
\(^{624}\) Ibid. p.44.  
\(^{625}\) Ibid. p.147.
Awkwardness associated with sexual encounters is not confined to Martin. Even someone like Paul who seems sexually liberated and self-assured can be subject to these moments of awkwardness. Paul seems to be able to avoid feelings of sexual jealousy and competitiveness, but that is not always enough to exempt him from those occasions when the paths of new lovers cross those of old lovers. Indeed, Paul now feels that he is in a position to reverse the previous roles of sexual mentor and pupil. Whilst not formally instituting a program of sexual instruction Paul does plan to assist Martin. He will place him “on the road to sexual happiness” via “a liberalizing process; not a sustained pedagogic process…. putting Martin into situations rather than telling him about them.” Paul thinks he will do this with Mrs. Bilham “by responding to her amplitudes while Martin was with them; what better puncturing of the bourgeois sexual absurdities could there be?” Paul is certain that this is the best course: “And Martin’s very aggressions demonstrated more clearly than any statement the depth and tenacity of those assumptions.” If only Paul knew.

Soon after the institution of this program it is Paul who returns home and is in need of some sexual advice from Martin. Paul had met this girl called Marianne “who would not fuck him.” Martin is astounded. “Fuck me dead,’ said Martin; he didn’t quite know what to say; alarm, horror admiration.” Martin wants to know, “Is she some kind of virgin or something?” The explanation turns out to be that Marianne wants to know Paul better first, to know him for three weeks. It won’t be long before Martin wishes it had been three years, not weeks. But for the moment he is astounded: “Where on earth did you find someone like that?” This short exchange between Martin and Paul is another aspect of Wilding’s writing that seeks to portray the liberated sexual life of young people not just as some possibility lived by some people some of the time. Rather it is portrayed as the normal lifestyle lived by all young people and to not be a participant in this sexually liberated lifestyle is to be apart from the majority, to be a strange and almost aberrant phenomenon. Initially, the reader may think that Marianne doesn’t want to fuck Paul on the grounds that she simply doesn’t fancy doing it with Paul and that his consternation is the product of male sexual arrogance which can’t conceive of the

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626 Ibid. p.160.
627 Ibid. pp.161-162.
possibility of someone not wishing to fuck him. We then learn that she has chosen to wait in order to know Paul. Even this explanation dumbfounds Martin and Paul, because their premise seems to be that sex and sexual freedom is pervasive and that sexual gratification should be immediate and spontaneous. It’s not that Marianne is not sexually liberated, it’s just that she seems to want to endow the act of sex with something more than Paul does. Is it simply a case Paul wanting to know the body, while Marianne wants to know the person and the body? There are gender lines here again.

But three weeks quickly passes and as mentioned Martin will soon wish it had been three years. Paul and Marianne have sex in Paul’s room while Martin is forced to “lay awake hearing them fucking, the rattles of the bed, the coos of delight, the viscous, tacky sounds of flesh adhering to flesh, like frogs in a marsh; clicks, plops, clucks; sliding, sucking noises, the utmost obscenities, sounds for which no words had been allowed to exist.”628 Martin finds the sound of Marianne’s orgasm “distasteful, bestial” and when he sees her wrapped in a towel he finds it “particularly offensive; it suggested the mopping up of all sorts of emissions”. When Marianne asks Martin what he has been doing Martin thinks to himself with the same psychological composure that we’ve seen on other occasions: “He could have grabbed the towel from her and poured the orange juice she was squeezing all over her, held her upside down and poured it into her cunt.”629 This is yet another example of Wilding’s willingness to explore that side of the sexually liberated lifestyle that can result in jealousy, frustration and anger. At this particular point in the novel Martin finds himself without a lover and the constant and unavoidable evidence that this state of celibacy is not shared by Paul and Marianne is all too much for him. Thus the sounds of sex become “the utmost obscenities” and he’d love to turn Marianne upside down and pour juice “into her cunt.” And it’s not as if Marianne is an asset to the household, with her being a “lazy slut.”630 Again it is interesting that the vehemence of Martin’s reaction is aimed solely at the woman; presumably Paul has made a reasonable contribution to all those obscene and bestial sounds and that some of those emissions were his. Perhaps it really isn’t all that surprising that the object of Martin’s jealousy, whether he is conscious of it or not, should be the recipient of his vitriol. But as

628 Ibid. p.164.
629 Ibid. pp.165-166.
630 Ibid. p.166.
mentioned above Martin is not the only one to behave poorly in certain predicaments, though the irrational intensity he puts into his outbursts is his alone.

It is when Martin begins having sex with Kate that Paul shows that he too is able to react in a manner that is less than cool and collected, in a manner that is at odds with the ideals of sexual liberation. Paul, who has had a sexual relationship with Kate, accuses Martin of intentionally bringing Kate to the house when he and Marianne are there. Martin’s response is: “Of course I did, I didn’t sort of fuck her by accident; we’re not all utterly randomly trying to stick it into anything.” Paul still wants to know, “Why did you do it?” Martin is a little unclear as to what Paul is talking about. “I’m not sure I know what you mean,” Martin said. ‘Like: to have a fuck: for enjoyment.’” However, Martin’s having sex with an ex-girlfriend of Paul’s isn’t Paul’s problem: “You can fuck her into diced mincemeat for all I care.” Paul’s problem isn’t sexual jealousy, but the associated awkwardness that comes with having an old lover fucking in the same house where he is fucking with his new lover. “Marianne doesn’t like having to come across people I’ve been screwing, see? She especially doesn’t like having them in the same house, see? Particularly screwing someone else in the next bedroom.” Martin, who should be acutely aware of such situations, seems oblivious to Paul’s complaint: “I mean if you were screwing them in the same bedroom I could see it would be a bit rough. Or is she afraid it sets a precedent? I mean, like having screwed Kate I’m likely to whip round and slip it into Marianne, some sort of specialty of the house.” But Paul will not be easily put at ease: “If you didn’t do it deliberately I’ll bet Kate did. Fatherfucking bitch.” Paul and Martin then attempt to organize a sort of schedule so as to prevent clashes of Kate and Marianne being in the house at the same time. It seems that some of the consequences of sexual liberation (lovers meeting ex-lovers) don’t prove to be amenable to easy resolution, and that it becomes necessary to resort to an old fashioned technique of careful timetabling so as to avoid the problem. Ideally the concept of sexual liberation, as posited by the counterculture, would view negative and counter-productive feelings such as awkwardness and jealousy as belonging more to the morality and hypocrisy of the 50s than to the 60s. But there is often some discrepancy between the ideal and the real. Then again proponents of sexual liberation would argue that the failure lies in Martin and

Paul’s inability to understand and take on board the full spirit of the countercultural approach to free sex. When Martin and Paul are decorating the house they purchase all sorts of objects to go around the place: “they bought posters which they pinned to the wall, poster-poems, erotica, insignia of the revolution”. Perhaps this approach to decorating is emblematic of their overall approach to the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. They are caught up in the zeitgeist. They are swept along by its energy and freedom, rather than willingly and knowingly running with it, and in this running consciously creating a draught to help sweep others along. Rather than really being part of the revolution they simply, and fashionably, wear its insignia. And proponents of sexual liberation might suggest that Martin and Paul wear the very comfortable insignia of sexual freedom without making any thoroughgoing commitment to all its ideals; as with their decorating the house they have only ‘purchased’ the bits that they like.

A different and more measured approach to sex than either Martin’s or Paul’s can be seen in Ann’s discussion with Paul. This takes place while she is still with Martin, who has just commenced his affair with Natalie. Martin and Paul’s approach to sex places it as a priority; it is central to their lifestyles and they pursue it relentlessly with energy and vigor. Ann, however, sees it in a different perspective. Ann wonders where Paul gets all his energy from for “all those ladies.” Paul tries to explain his recent burst of sexual activity by suggesting it is because he started later than Ann, but Ann is trying to explore an aspect of sexual freedom a little more difficult to fathom than a young man’s initial enthusiasm for sex. “I wonder if it makes any difference,” she said. ‘I wonder if there’s a sort of span, you know, five years or seven years. Then you get bored.’” Paul is horrified at the thought and though there may be the element of sexual ennui about Ann’s approach she has still not broached her central point. “I think you get it more in perspective,” she said. ‘You don’t feel the need to keep on screwing just to prove to yourself you can do.’” At this point Paul’s sexual experience, compared to Ann’s, may find him to be a little incredulous. Ann says, “It’s hard to believe it at first, after all those years; a lot of people seem to need to prove that they have broken through, and keep on screwing away to prove it; but you get over that, and then it’s no hang-up any more.” Paul says that he has never thought of sex as a hang-up, but Ann is not suggesting that sex per se is a hang-up, but that the empty and mindless compulsion to
keep on fucking is. “‘Sex isn’t, but one’s attitude to it can be.’” Ann’s main point is that
“‘for a while it was all mad and exciting and compulsive; and that’s the worst part, the
compulsiveness, feeling you sort of have to. I don’t know who you think you’re proving
something to. I suppose it’s all right as long as you get out of it. I mean, it’s probably
even an inevitable stage. Like from a caterpillar to a butterfly or something.”’

These are not the thoughts of someone dismissive of sex, nor are they the product
of someone disdainful of it because of a history of sexual failure and ineptitude. “She had
known those closenesses, those couplings, those tangential contacts; and in her own way
had been good at them; it wasn’t that her report card had given her Ds for carnal
knowledge and sexual play. She had succeeded there as in all things. But matured beyond
that.” Ann is the one person in the entire novel to offer a critique of the sexual
revolution. It is not a critique that makes a negative judgement; she is clearly saying that
the freedom to have sex is something of great importance, but that it may also be
something that a person’s attitude towards can change. The 60s valorized sexual
liberation and the freedom of individuals to engage in a series of sexual encounters and
Ann is in total agreement with these tenets. However, she would like to add the rider that
this ongoing finding and fucking of new partners is not something that must be
compulsorily undertaken by all young people. This idea, which may sound like the
product of some jaded elder statesperson of sexual freedom who believes free sex is only
good for a while, offers a new perspective. And this new perspective suggests that it is
not compulsory to continue having different partners ad infinitum and that it is perfectly
all right to reach a point where you no longer feel compelled to meet new people with the
view of having sex with them. This in itself is a sexual freedom. It’s not one yet thought
about by the likes of Martin and Paul, but it is one they may eventually be confronted
with and if by that stage they have not thought about it then the drive to go on having sex
with different people will be no freedom at all.

Living Together has a great deal to say about sex. It is not the only concern of the
novel, but it is by far and away the major one: all other concerns are peripheral. Sex, and
the ramifications of sex, is rendered in variety of ways. Living Together attempts to

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633 Ibid. p.102.
provide a detailed exploration of the sexual world young people inhabited in Sydney in the 60s. It may not be a completely exhaustive exploration of this new sexual territory, but it is equally clear that most of the significant topography has been mapped in some detail. The impact of this mapping has been to not only show a lot of people where they are, but to suggest to others that this is a place where they should be. Some readers of the novel would see the text as being a reasonable facsimile of how they are going about their lives and such a reading would function as a sort of sanctioning of this lifestyle. Other readers would see the text as presenting a lifestyle that is the natural one for young people and its generally positive portrayal of that lifestyle would encourage their taking it up. Living Together reflects what is for many young people, and encourages what should be for others. Either way the novel functions to valorize the idea of a sexuality that is free and open. It is an approach to sex that is at odds with the concept of sex as put forward by the dominant; it is an approach that seeks to undermine and then supplant the dominant. The idea being that once the dominant’s restrictions and taboos associated with sex have been swept aside, by individuals and collectively, then there is no telling what else may be called into question and in turn rejected and replaced.

Walter Billeter in his less than glowing review of Living Together identified the “basic theme” as being “the sexual hang-ups of the trendy middle-class ‘intellectual’.” This would seem to be a bias: let “sexual hang-ups” be replaced by ‘problematic nature of the new sexual freedoms’ and let “trendy middle-class intellectual” be balanced by the many characters in Living Together who simply aren’t ‘trendy, middle-class and intellectual’. But then Billeter has found the novel “a bit of a bore… suitable for a dentist’s waiting room.” He suggests that if Wilding is considered to be at the forefront of contemporary writing, “then good luck to Australian prose!” It would seem that Billeter is in no mood to see anything positive about the novel or what it has to say about sexual liberation. Not that Living Together looks at sexual liberation with an uncritical eye. It tries to realistically cover as much territory as possible, highlighting the mundane, the practical and the philosophical, the positives and the negatives. Wilding has covered the hurt and jealousy that can be a by-product of leading the sexually free life. He’s rendered those moments of embarrassment and awkwardness that can veer towards the

634 Walter Billeter, ‘Review of Living Together’ in Etymspheres, Series 1, Number 2, 1975. p.56.
farcical. He’s tried to look at the psychology of a so-called liberated male whose reactions, when confronted by a stronger sexual power in a woman, become irrational and extreme. There’s been an account of the attendant difficulties of starting a new relationship and trying to end an old one. There’s male sexual competitiveness. There’s even a contemplation as to what constitutes sex. Then there are the extended sections where both Ann and Martin on different occasions try to discuss thoughtfully the nature and meaning of sexual freedom. Wilding portrays characters who are drawn towards leading the sexually free life, but who are often at a loss as to how to go about doing this, at a loss sometimes to know just how to behave. Wilding also portrays characters who are apparently completely happy and at ease leading a sexually free lifestyle, and interestingly these characters are predominantly the women: it is Mrs. Bilham, Gretel, Nina, Kate and Ann who seem to move most comfortably in this lifestyle.

Despite having said that Living Together deals with both the positives and the negatives of sexual liberation there can be no doubt that the overall judgement of the novel is in favour of leading the sexually free life. Despite difficulties, moments of hurt and awkwardness, the sexual world of Living Together is relatively free of really significant problems; it is a world where the pursuit of sex is seen as a natural part of the fun of living. Perhaps, somewhat unrealistically it is a world where there are simply no pregnancies, abortions or sexually transmitted diseases: to dwell on such things as these would be to partially impair Wilding’s promotion of sexual freedom. Yes, there are the difficulties and problems, but a return to the morality of marriage and the 50s is never countenanced, it is never thought of even as a remotely desirable possibility from some fabled halcyon past. No, as mentioned, for Wilding the counterculture will not be able to fuck its way to utopia, but it is also clear that the counterculture sees itself as being able to fuck its way to a better world and out of the mess of the dominant.

Scenic Drive
Scenic Drive\textsuperscript{635} was first published in 1976 and unlike Aspects of the Dying Process and Living Together its rendering of sex is far more problematic. These earlier texts are fairly traditional in that they employ a linear narrative and present their themes in an accessible manner. Aspects of the Dying Process and Living Together valorize sex as an essential and desirable part of the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s; it is a portrayal that is designed to supplant the sexual practices of the dominant and as such these texts contribute to the forces of change that were circulating at the time. Having acknowledged the intention of Aspects of the Dying Process and Living Together as vehicles for change it is also to be understood that part of their efficacy lay in the way these texts presented sex. Certainly they sought to disrupt and replace the practices of the dominant, but they did so by presenting sex as an attractive and viable lifestyle that could be emulated by large numbers of young people. Sex in these texts may sometimes be a little difficult and awkward, and even at times the stuff of farce, but it is always presented as very much the sort of lifestyle young people could easily and comfortably lead. In the eyes of young people there is nothing outrageous or terribly brave and confronting about taking up this sexually free lifestyle, though for the dominant such a lifestyle is both outrageous and confronting. Aspects of the Dying Process and Living Together provide a realistic reflection of a lifestyle that is being lived by young people in Sydney in the 60s and in holding up this reflection for others to see it in turn provides an imprimatur to those living that lifestyle as well as encouraging others to join it. This encouragement needn’t necessarily result in young people taking up the sexually free lifestyle completely. For example, some may take up only aspects of it, such as leading a more sexually uninhibited life, whilst not yet feeling quite ready to live together. Others may in theory happily agree with the principles of the new lifestyle, but feel unable as yet to put those principles into practice. There will be an evolving continuum of responses, the cultural upshot of which will be an undermining of the dominant and a freeing up of sexual mores: spaces will be created where new attitudes and lifestyles can exist. Approaches to leading the sexually free lifestyle were a little like people’s approaches to being a hippie: you could drop out completely and live on a commune, or you could be a weekend hippie, or you could simply admire and sympathise with what they were doing.

\textsuperscript{635} Michael Wilding, Scenic Drive. Wild and Woolley. Sydney. 1976.
Again, either way, minds were being changed and new spaces were being opened up where the components of a new culture could be formed.

To reflect a lifestyle that is being lived and to encourage others to take it up is not the main technique used by Wilding in Scenic Drive. The overall desire to create a more sexually free society may be the same as in Aspects of the Dying Process and Living Together, but the method employed to achieve it is different. And this new approach has something of a good pedigree. It’s a loud, confronting and assertive approach that gets seen and heard; it gets people’s attention. Of course there may be a lot of difference between getting noticed and affecting change.

Many countercultural practices aimed to bring about cultural change by directly confronting and assaulting the dominant by the use of shock tactics. The tactic of defiantly confronting and seeking to shock is an iconoclastic tactic that was widely employed during the 60s, as the very briefest of historical scans indicates. The early stages of the counterculture had seen the use of politics, as traditionally understood, as a way of achieving change. When this appeared to either fail or produce only meagre results many then opted to bring about change by altering themselves and other people, in the belief this would ultimately produce a different culture; there would be a cultural revolution. Many “concluded that the act of liberating young people from traditional societal inhibitions would bring about a new culture.” 636 In 1968, “The revolution is about our lives” was a popular slogan among the white left in the United States. It was essential to challenge the tenets of mainstream society: “it’s the end of people’s belief in a way of life that brings revolution”. 637 “The real meaning of revolution is not a change in management, but a change in man”. 638 To help bring about this cultural revolution many in the Counterculture believed that the emergent and assertive practices should be as outrageous and as confrontational as possible. They wanted maximum impact. They wanted to create shock waves that would cause the old to crack and crumble, leaving a new terrain.

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In 1969 Abbie Hoffman was on trial as one of the Chicago Seven. He, along with the others, was charged with conspiracy as a result of their actions in Chicago in 1968. During questioning Abbie Hoffman had said, “My name is Abbie. I am an orphan of America…. I live in Woodstock Nation…. My age is 33. I am a child of the 60’s…. I am a cultural revolutionary.” 639 Nothing needs to be known about Abbie Hoffman to realize that his stand is a dramatic and radical one. He sees himself as completely alienated from his country; he is an “orphan” who is now trying to create a new world in “Woodstock Nation”. He is willing to confront and shock the legal forces that established society is bringing to bear against him. He is “a child of the 60’s” who recognizes that the dominant must be replaced by emergent and assertive practices and that this will amount to cultural revolution. To realize these changes in the dominant culture Abbie Hoffman and others never intended to use the gentle powers of suggestion and persuasion. Rather it would involve a direct confrontation with the status quo: the lines had been drawn some time ago and it was now time to jump on the barricades and to scream ‘fuck’, and to then graphically illustrate exactly what you meant.

There is something of this jumping on the barricades in Scenic Drive. And Wilding was certainly not alone in doing this; he was in the company of innumerable others. In the United States in 1968 the White Panther party was formed and central to their platform was the call for “Total assault on the culture by any means necessary, including rock and roll, dope, and fucking in the streets.” 640 Invoking the power of the countercultural trinity of sex and drugs and rock and roll is not at all surprising. However, the slight addition the White Panthers make is interesting. They suggest that sexual freedom, the freedom to fuck, is no longer enough on its own to bring about cultural change: sex now needs to be a confrontational and subversive act carried out right under the eyes of the dominant; there needs to be “fucking in the street.” Scenic Drive may not be a “total assault on the culture”, but there is much in it that amounts to “fucking in the street.”

Timothy Leary coined the much quoted slogan “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out”, a slogan which the dominant interpreted as “get stoned and abandon all constructive

640 Jeff A. Hale op. cit. p.125 and p.128.
activity.” However, what Leary meant was “interact harmoniously with the world around you… [pursue] an active, selective and graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments.”

Part of acting “harmoniously with the world” would involve a new approach to sex: people had to throw off the conditioning the dominant had inculcated in them. People had to be rid of those “involuntary or unconscious commitments” that unnaturally inhibited their lives and they had to be freed to lead new lives, not the least important aspect of which was the sexual dimension. For Leary LSD was the way to achieve this. It would enable people to “rethink social norms and life patterns” which would in turn “change individual lives and, by extension, society.”

Leary’s proselytizing efforts on behalf of LSD were in direct conflict with the established mores of society. That LSD’s acolytes could point out the incredible hypocrisy of the establishment’s total antipathy to the drug altered nothing. Western society might be addicted to alcohol, nicotine and a variety of tranquilisers, but in the eyes of the dominant culture these drugs offered no threat: indeed part of their purpose was to facilitate the ongoing smooth functioning of people to fulfill their roles within the status quo. And the real fear was that the drugs of choice for the young people of the 60s did exactly the opposite. Established society was afraid of what the use of LSD and marijuana might unleash. Leary was able express some of their worst fears when he clearly made the connection between young people’s use of drugs and sex: “The key energy for our revolution is erotic. A free person is one whose erotic energy has been liberated and can be expressed in increasingly more beautiful, complex ways. The sexual revolution is just not part of the atmosphere of freedom that is generating within the kids. I think it is the centre of it. The reason psychedelic drugs… are so popular is because they turn on the body.”

The cumulative intent of Leary’s description to endorse the new sexuality would have been lost on older readers who could only envision the horrors of their children indulging in unrestrained fucking. To unequivocally make the point Leary went on: “I’ll say flatly that the meaning and central issue of the psychedelic experience is the erotic exhilaration.” And it was feared (and hoped) that such altered states could

641 David Farber ‘The Intoxicated State/ Illegal Nation. Drugs in the Sixties Counterculture.’ in Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle op. cit. p32.
642 Leary quoted in Ibid.
643 Ibid. p.23.
bring down the dominant, a process Leary believed was already underway: “The increased freedom in sexual expression in art and mass media is symptom number one of our victory.” We might add that such expressions are not only symptoms, but also causes.

Jim Morrison, lead singer of the rock group the Doors, clearly recognized the revolutionary potential of using sex as a shock tactic. When “making out” backstage with some woman, a policeman saw Morrison and told him to stop. Morrison “grabbed his own crotch and told the cop to ‘eat it!’” This symbolic encounter between established authority and overt and liberated sexuality sees Morrison defend himself, or counter-attack, using sex as an aggressive weapon. Unfortunately for Morrison the policeman also had another weapon and maced him. Morrison said his role was that of an “erotic politician” and when “we perform, we’re participating in the creation of a world…. That’s politics, but our power is sexual. We make concerts sexual politics.” In one concert Morrison told the audience, “Man, I’d love to see a little nakedness around here… grab your friend and love him. Take your clothes off and love each other.” Then in the spirit of participation he asked, “ You wanna see my cock, don’t you? That’s what you came for, isn’t it?” Cleary Morrison is acting out the role of the highly sexualized rock star, but it’s equally clear that he sees a causal link between sex and social change and that he is using sex as an assertive weapon to shock and to bring about that change. “My music isn’t supposed to make you riot, it’s supposed to make you fuck”, Janis Joplin told her audience, and Ed Sanders of the group the Fugs, a group that “sang much about fugging”, described the 60s as “the Golden Age of fucking”. Well before, and long after, Elvis had moved those hips rock and roll had been associated with sex. The very name, rock and roll, says this all so clearly. Yet never before had rock and roll presented sex in such a transgressive and intentionally confrontational way. And Scenic Drive attempts to do very much the same.

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646 Morrison quoted in Ibid.
647 Quoted in Mark Kurlansky op. cit. pp.189-190.
Scenic Drive takes the form of a series of loosely connected chapters. Unlike Living Together, which has the form and structure of a conventional novel with its linear progression of start, middle and conclusion, Scenic Drive doesn’t develop a traditional narrative. Rather Scenic Drive presents the reader with an ongoing series of scenes which are partly connected by the novel’s three main characters (Dexter, J. W. Holmes and the central figure of the narrator), but most importantly the text is connected by its thematic insistence on dealing with sex. The opening chapter, ‘My Magazine Lady’, makes a clear and emphatic statement as to what the main concerns of this novel are to be. The scenario is that a young female journalist, the magazine lady, visits a writer, the novel’s narrator, in his office at the university. The magazine lady brings with her a series of photos of naked people in groups of three or five. The task for the writer is to tell a story about these people, “say who the people are, what they are doing, and what’s going to happen next.” Giving himself time to think the narrator makes coffee. It’s an interesting opening scenario where any mundane elements, such as coffee making and a journalist interviewing for a story, are completely subsumed by the type of photos provided. The photo the writer concentrates on has two naked men and one naked woman. There is a “bowl of small brown objects” which the narrator is aware is meant to be “shit” or “designed symbolically to represent or simulate or imply shit.” The woman in the photo is offering the shit to the men. The writer says to the magazine lady that the photo seems to be suggesting “coprophilia”. Apart from the use of an interesting word, it’s a pretty lame response and the writer knows it: “I feel absurd at this verbal gentility.” What worries him even more is should the photos be given to a “clinical psychologist”, along with his response, then what “repressions will be interpreted from this?” And the 60s is clearly not the time to have “repressions”. This concern over being able to express oneself in complete freedom, without any repression, recurs in this chapter. In fact this concern starts to mutate “Am I being sensational enough?” he asks, and then later, “I still

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648 Michael Wilding Scenic Drive. p.7.
649 Ibid. p.8.
worry that I should have been more outrageous."650 If Wilding shared these concerns with his narrator he needn’t have worried.

The magazine lady sits passively with her shorthand pad; her task is to record reactions, not to provoke anything. But “her non-provocation provokes me more than any picture”, says the narrator as the chapter segues into an exploration of his sexual and erotic thoughts. The journalist’s notepad comes to symbolize the writer’s thoughts about the journalist: the “blank sheet of future potential, the turned pages of recorded past, offer infinite possibilities; she is not three or five people posed in erotic relationships for me to describe in specific erotic fantasies. She is in no position, no relationship, she is there for any and every erotic fantasy, she is three and five and three hundred and five hundred people.” The woman is viewed as possessing an erotic potential that exceeds anything that can be graphically represented in a photo and this potential is largely due to the complete and absolute freedom that is enjoyed by the writer’s erotic imaginings. There are no “positions” or “relationships” and the erotic fantasy is to have no restraints or conditions put upon it. “Nothing is determined, nothing is predicted, nothing is disallowed.” This is not the place for the limiting morality of the dominant. Soon the energy of the narrator’s erotic imaginings makes him think the journalist’s “pictures are irrelevant, they are merely the symbolic statement of the offerer herself.” As the writer’s erotic fantasy becomes rampant, he moves well beyond the prosaic task of responding to “visual structures” with his “verbal structures” and like any good writer of the 60s his imagination is not to be limited by any societal proprieties of the dominant. The narrator says that the magazine lady’s assignment is really a sexual imperative: “Seize me, screw me, rape me, bind me, beat me, whip me, fuck oh fuck me.”651 This sentence clearly privileges the sexual imagination over the mundane activities of the workaday world. It is the first sign that Scenic Drive is going to be an assault on the morality of established society and that the novel is going to push the limits in an attempt to expand the space in which sexual freedom can exist. If restrictions are eroded, and portrayals and discussions of sex given greater currency, then it was hoped that this would in turn result in people living out a lifestyle that was itself sexually free. And should young people do this in

650 Ibid. p.10 and 12.
651 Ibid. p.10.
significant numbers then a cornerstone of the dominant would be under serious threat and the beginnings of a new society could begin to be built.

The use of such shock tactics to assault the dominant in order to weaken its position as the sole dictator of young people’s morality was perhaps the most important site in the counterculture’s attempt to create a “systemic crisis” and a “revolutionary conjunction” whereby the dominant culture would ultimately be completely altered.\footnote{Catherine Gallagher op.cit. p.48.} Mainstream society didn’t like to see sex taken out of the bedrooms of married couples, let alone see it so brazenly rendered in the music young people listened to and the books they read and talked about. Of course such an attempt to use language to an emancipative effect is not without its problems, complications and drawbacks. Let the sentence, “Seize me, screw me, rape me, bind me, beat me, whip me, fuck oh fuck me.” stand as being representative of the problematic nature of using sex as a weapon of shock tactics. Certainly the language is an expression of crescendoing sexual urgency commencing with the demanding foreplay of “seize me” and culminating in the orgasmic cries of “fuck oh fuck me.” The language is uninhibited and openly assertive in its expression of raw sexual desire. It is an affront to the moral code of the dominant and such examples would have indeed contributed to the 60s project of liberating attitudes towards sex, though to what extent is something that will remain difficult to gauge. As such this sentence works in a positive way towards realising the aims of the 60s. Part of the problem with such an approach has nothing to do with it being a raw expression of sexual demand, even if it is a sexuality apparently devoid of love, and even if its demands skirt close to suggestions of bondage and sadomasochism; after all it is there to shock, not to fit in nicely with convention.

It is this sort of writing that could expose Wilding to feminist criticism. Feminist criticism could look at such writing and the position it places women in. This is not a problem confined to the fiction of Michael Wilding; it is one shared by many involved in the emergent and assertive practices of the time. Feminists could argue that the language, and the attitude it reveals, is unequivocally male and sexist and that this completely phallocentric gaze positions the woman as the passive recipient of male sexual aggression which demands complete submission during a series of male administered acts. Even if
the woman is not to be passive there is no suggestion that resistance to male dominance could be anything but futile. In fact there is no interrogation of the female position; it is of no consequence in this uneven equation. The woman is to be seized, screwed, bound, beaten, whipped, fucked and perhaps most worryingly raped; all these verbs heavily denote an unbridled male violence and sexual aggression that dehumanizes and objectifies the woman. There is no question of the woman’s willingness to participate as she is given no role other than to be the victim of male domination and conquest by irresistible male force. Not only is the woman to be fucked, but she is to subjugated by the preceding series of actions that equate her with some slave or lesser being who will be treated in any way the master sees fit. After all, the chapter is called ‘My Magazine Lady.’

Feminists could go on to argue that this use of assertive and aggressive male sexuality as a means of assault on the dominant ultimately places women in exactly the same position as they would be with the dominant – in both instances women are to be on the receiving end, whether they like it or not. Part of the project of the 60s was for the sexual liberation of all young people, and this was to include women, and it seems a little paradoxical that the means to achieving this should require the even more forceful and unrelenting subjugation of half of those young people. Nor would feminists be disposed to see this as a case of women knowingly sacrificed for the greater good, of women killed by friendly fire so as to achieve the ultimate victory. Feminist criticism would point out that there doesn’t seem to be a good reason why the attempt to shock established society with writing that explicitly dealt with sex couldn’t be writing that included at least some elements that empowered women and presented them as willing, aware and equal participants in the sexual revolution. Certainly Stokely Carmichael had said, “The only position for women…is prone.” and the White Panthers exhorted men to, “Fuck your woman so hard till she can’t stand up.” and Richard Neville in Playpower and Barry Oakley in Let’s Hear it For Prendergast could write in a way that was clearly sexist. But Stokely Carmichael said those words in 1964 and the White Panthers in 1968, whilst Richard Neville and Barry Oakley were writing in 1970. However, Scenic Drive came out in 1976. That’s at least six years of rapid social change, including, most significantly, the growth of the women’s movement, which makes it impossible for Wilding to claim
that his position was a product of the times and that he was simply unaware of his fictional treatment of women. And of course Wilding would claim no such defense; one need only think of the strong, assertive, independent and sexually liberated women in Living Together. Donald Horne makes a relevant point about this sort of predicament: he is commenting about the action of “women’s libbers”, but the point is a general one and holds true for our discussion. “For a process as fundamental as a change in the values and bodies of knowledge that had underpinned male dominance there was no way of avoiding emotionally charged symbolic dramas: these are the methods of the breakthrough.” Wilding too wants to change “values and bodies of knowledge” and he employs “charged symbolic dramas” to achieve a “breakthrough”. Horne goes on to comment about the techniques of women’s liberation and how “they also showed the special paradox of the breakthrough: attention can be gained only by unorthodox stunts but the unorthodoxy of the stunts will then become an issue in itself, belittling the cause to which it gave publicity.”653 This is not totally applicable to the technique that Wilding and others employ, but there is definitely that paradoxical element whereby the tactics employed simultaneously provide a positive breakthrough and a negative reaction: the parameters of sexual freedom are expanded at the expense of women. It should also be strongly noted that the fantasies the narrator has represent a realistic rendering of male fantasies and that they are not be palatable to all people does not cause Wilding to censor them: the censorship of the reality of sexual desire is simply not on Wilding’s agenda.

In 1975, a year before Scenic Drive was published, Wilding was interviewed by Rudi Krausman and some of what Wilding has to say is directly relevant to possible feminist criticism. Wilding makes the obvious point that just because “you write about male chauvinist characters it doesn’t mean you endorse the stands they take.” He admits that “a lot of my characters have been unliberated male chauvinists. That doesn’t mean I like them.” Indeed, Wilding gets “annoyed… with people who can’t see a separation between the writer’s own position and what his characters do.” With disarming honesty Wilding admits that he may be “externalising aspects of my own character, but you have to externalise aspects of your character to understand and change it.” When asked, “What do you think of the Women’s Liberation movement?” Wilding’s simple response is: “I

653 Donald Horne, op. cit. p. 29.
think it is good. I believe in it. I support it.” In 1979, in an interview with David Albahari, Wilding further explains his writing in Scenic Drive. He wanted to explore “taboo material” and to go “deeper into the social paranoias, exploring sexuality in the soft pornography areas”. Therefore with Scenic Drive the “manner here was more alienated, dealing with the human alienations of the city” and the writing was consequently “more mechanical, harder, sharper sentences.” Wilding’s explanations may yet be another case of Wilding getting away “with being his own and only feminist critic” and what he argues may not be enough to silence all possible feminist criticism. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a great deal in what Wilding has said that explains this sort of writing from Scenic Drive. In the end such writing is likely to remain contentious, but that is something Wilding has never resiled from.

As Scenic Drive progresses the narrator’s erotic fantasy about the magazine lady intensifies and becomes more detailed and explicit. They look at the photos together, checking to see if there is a scratch on one of the transparencies, and their bodies touch and the writer looks down the open neck of her shirt at her breasts. “I undo the top button of her shirt and reach in my hand to finger her nipples. I undo all the buttons of her shirt. With my other hand I caress her arse. I slide my hand up her skirt. I reach my hand beneath her legs, and with my fingers I enter her arse, her cunt.” Again the woman is the compliant and passive recipient of the male’s sexual actions, though this time she should perhaps be grateful that these actions no longer contain the sadomasochistic elements. It is a scene of stereotypical male fantasy: a first time meeting with a strange woman which quickly results in an intense sexual encounter.

The reader can never be certain whether these encounters actually take place or if they are solely the product of the narrator’s erotic imagination. No sooner has he entered “her arse, her cunt” than the magazine lady says, as if nothing out of the ordinary has occurred, “I think it’s just a scratch on the transparency”. But then the reader is told that the magazine lady “puts the transparency down on the desk and buttons up her shirt”. Either the magazine lady has been part of the narrator’s sexual fantasy or she is in

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656 Nicole Moore, op. cit. p.88.
657 Michael Wilding Scenic Drive. p.11.
possession of some very impressive sexual sangfroid. Adding to the reader’s uncertainty, the writing soon shifts from first person to third, from “I” to “he” and “his”, only to quickly return to the first person.658 Some time later the narrator is sure that he again sees the magazine lady. She is sitting in the sun, writing at a bench and the narrator thinks, “I am sure this is her again…. I think she is wearing the same dress. It is not a dress you can look down the front of. It is not a dress you could slide your hands up under; not unless you lay on the ground, since it reaches to the ground.” The narrator leaves, but returns shortly after to find that the magazine lady has disappeared, just as people (or fantasies) sometimes will.659

This blurring of the line between what is supposed to be real or fantasy is continued with the inclusion of a section that initially appears to have nothing to do with the narrative. A room, with bookshelves eight feet high and filled with the “world’s literature”, is described. The walls extend another eight above the shelves to the ceiling. Clothes “lie scattered on the red carpet, red signifying defloration, menstruation, violence.” A naked man and woman “are climbing to the flat top of the bookshelves where they will screw amongst the dust, forgotten magazines, anti-war posters and dead birds that have flown into the room”. A young woman of student age enters the room with “her arms outstretched, her breasts bared. She is either calling to them to help her up there to screw them both, or shouting at one or the other to come down and either screw her or leave the other one.” The reader’s inability to be certain about things is exacerbated as we are told, “Only tits are shown in this picture”. How can it be a picture, if there is this constant movement of people? Then like the magazine lady the “girl has the shorthand pad in her hand.” It is the shorthand pad, not a shorthand pad, yet it cannot be anything to do with the magazine lady for it is “not clear whether she can read shorthand; but it is clear that if she can, it will not make things any clearer.” 660 And things are not to be a lot clearer for the reader. This scene ends and the narrator is in his office: “I look up at the eight feet of wall above my eight feet of bookshelves.” This blurring of what is real and what is imagined continues as the narrator moves from matter of fact observation to sexual fantasy: “We could put in a mezzanine. On the mezzanine a

658 Ibid.
660 Ibid. p.12.
girl would be sitting at a desk typing. She would be wearing a skirt but no pants. On the original floor below her a man would be touch typing. His eyes would be lifted up to the girl typing above. His eyes are fixed on her cunt. He is naked.” The strangeness of the scene increases: “In a corner of the room a creature of indeterminate sex is preparing a meal of coffee and nuts. What is the relationship of these people? What is going on? What is going to happen next?” 661 Good questions.

It is this blurring of the lines between reality and fantasy which John McLaren has taken issue with when reviewing Scenic Drive. He says the novel “is presented as a fantasy in which neither reader nor narrator can be sure of which events or people are to be taken as literally true…. Instead, however, of interweaving inner and outer realities, all he does is to blur all distinctions and thus destroy any interest in what he is telling us.” For McLaren, the narrator’s “friends and colleagues and women may be figures from a dream or people who affect the course of his life, but we are unable to take any serious interest in this”. 662 It’s pretty damning criticism for any writer to be told that not only are their readers confused, but also completely uninterested in what they have to say. McLaren certainly has a point that Scenic Drive can be confusing, but I’m less certain that this culminates in the more subjective assertion of readers not being interested; indeed it’s possible that elements of confusion, uncertainty and never knowing for sure can have the opposite effect. McLaren sees Wilding’s novel as “crude masturbatory male chauvinism” and perhaps this complete antipathy to Scenic Drive precludes him from seeing any purpose in the blurring of the distinction between reality and fantasy other than to create confusion and apathy for the reader. As such McLaren sees this as a failure of writing, rather than an attempt to realise something else. What Wilding achieves with this blurring of the distinctions is to foreground the importance of the erotic in people’s lives and how an active erotic imagination or fantasy is an integral component of these lives. It suggests how erotic fantasy permeates all aspects of people’s daily lives. Erotic fantasy is part of reality. Wilding’s writing presents the conflation of the two in order to suggest the in separability of the two and that reality is unrealistic without the dimension of the erotic imagination. It is to suggest that the erotic imagination should be

661 Ibid. p.13.
acknowledged as part of people’s lived culture; Scenic Drive argues for the liberation and celebration of erotic desire, putting it forward, not as something separate which should be hidden, but as an essential component of the new liberated person which the 60s sought to bring into existence. To not openly acknowledge the centrality of the erotic imagination was to repress and limit people’s potential and to surrender to the morality of the dominant. Wilding’s portrayal of the character of the narrator serves to further emphasise the pervasiveness of the erotic imagination into the corners of people’s lives. Wilding’s narrator may not be some prosaic everyman, but nor is he some revolutionary member of the counterculture who is completely immune to and dismissive of the mores of the dominant. The latter type of person may interest readers, but may not speak to Wilding’s readers about the possibility of the erotic imagination becoming a part of their lives; Wilding is interested in portraying the existence of the erotic dimension amidst the lived culture of the ordinary young people of Sydney. The narrator works in a university and his character appears to be a little tentative and timid at times. He responds to the magazine lady’s photos with “verbal gentility” and worries if he is being “outrageous” enough and what “repressions” they would reveal about himself.\footnote{663} When he types up his “fantasies about a journalist” he posts these stories at the post office, because he does not feel he can get it through the “official mail” of the university. The narrator embraces the erotic imagination, but is a little uncertain and at times uncomfortable about the public expression of it. Such a psychological state is to be expected when new practices are being brought into people’s lives: the contrast between the new and the old is bound to produce some sense of being uncomfortable. To emphasise this tension, the world in which the narrator and his erotic fantasies exist is by contrast a staid and conservative one; it is the world of the dominant into which the erotic imagination has sought to establish a beachhead. It is a place of “mullioned windows” that give a view to the “tower outside”: there is “the sunbathed quadrangle, the mown lawns, the swallows gliding in and out of the cloisters, the sound of an organ from the Great Hall.”\footnote{664} This world may be calm and tranquil in its trappings, which are themselves redolent of England, of the Old World, but it is also suggestive of tradition and its attendant repressive approach to

\footnote{663} Michael Wilding Scenic Drive. p.8 and 12. 
\footnote{664} Ibid. pp.10 and 14.
sexuality. Certainly there is the warmth of the “sunbathed quadrangle”, but the “mown lawns”, the “cloisters” and an “organ from the Great Hall” all connote aspects of a past that is trimmed into shape, hidden or suppressed, regulated and dominated. Nothing could be more indicative of the difference between the values of the dominant and the counterculture than juxtaposing this brief description of the setting with the erotic fantasies of the narrator.

The magazine lady and the narrator are together once more in the chapter ‘A Night at the Orgy’. In this chapter the relative timidity of the narrator is further explored, but with the magazine lady we see a new and different dimension. The narrator has decided to go to an orgy. J.W.Holmes has failed to get a grant to go to Vietnam to write “an action novel” and this has prompted the narrator to think of “nearer fields of action to go to.” And not only are orgies an ideal field of action, but they are also a “serious contemporary phenomena.” There is, however, a small hitch for the narrator: “Now I have to find a partner to take, you cannot go to orgies alone.” This, we take it, must be akin to being expected to take food and/or drink to a party; it’s etiquette to bring something to share with others. It is a small hitch that is easily gotten around. The magazine lady facetiously suggests “‘hire a partner along with your Roman toga.’” The narrator’s attempted riposte is to ask the magazine lady to go with him. “She said yes immediately.”

The chapter then moves to the early hours of the morning, after the orgy is over, and the narrator and the magazine lady are leaving. Wilding has chosen not to venture into a detailed description of the sex that could have taken place at the orgy, instead deciding to explore the different behaviour, and reactions to the night, of the narrator and the magazine lady. When the narrator and the magazine lady meet again, most of the people at the orgy have either left or “‘are bedded down for the night’”. The magazine lady’s first assessment of the night is a completely unabashed one, reflective not only of her full involvement in the orgy, but also of her sense of confidence and security in her sexual freedom. She is a sexually assured woman who can say, “‘Some lousy fucks, eh?’” The narrator doesn’t reply to this and we soon learn why. As they prepare to leave, the magazine lady asks if the narrator would like to say goodbye to anyone: “‘A quick,
fleeting farewell kiss or blow job.”” The narrator declines the suggestion, saying that he’d just rather go. 666

As soon as they drive off the magazine lady asks, “‘So, how many people did you get to fuck?’” The narrator avoids the question by telling her he was mainly making notes, but the avoidance doesn’t quite work. The magazine lady repeats the question: “‘So how many people did you get to fuck, tell me while you still remember. That’s half the fun of an orgy, comparing notes afterwards.’” The narrator finally admits, “‘I didn’t actually fuck anybody.’” Naturally the magazine lady would like to know how he intends to write about fucking at an orgy when he didn’t actually do any. The narrator says, “‘I have fucked before.’” But this doesn’t seem the point and the magazine lady expresses this: “‘But that isn’t really the point. Fucking at an orgy is different.’” This is the voice of experience here interrogating the uninitiated. The narrator says he can’t see how it could be any different, to which the magazine lady neatly replies, “‘Well that’s what you would have found out, isn’t it?’” In an attempt to gain some control over the conversation the narrator asks, “‘Why, did you fuck people?’” The magazine lady clearly infers that this is a given: “‘It was an orgy, it wasn’t a press conference.’” The narrator then wonders if she felt obliged to have sex with people because he had invited her to an orgy and he tells her “‘I wasn’t expecting you to; expecting as in the sense of requiring you to.’” How much the narrator has misjudged and underestimated the magazine lady is soon made clear: “‘Too right you weren’t. I don’t fuck people just because some stray writer requires me to.’” And had it been otherwise and he expected, or required, her to have sex then she tells him, “‘(Y)ou’d probably have got a knife through your ribs. Or your balls bitten off.’” 667 It’s a little hard to reconcile this magazine lady with the magazine lady who was the object of the narrator’s fantasies in the opening chapter; she just doesn’t seem to be the sort to passively accept being seized, screwed, raped, bound, beaten, whipped and fucked. Nor does the narrator look to be in the position to administer these things.

It is obvious at this stage that the magazine lady is more sexually brazen and assertive than the narrator who may have attended the orgy, but only to view it objectively and to write about it with a sort of voyeuristic curiosity. Perhaps it is the

666 Ibid. pp.33-34.
667 Ibid.pp.34-35.
narrator’s relative sexual timidity that puts him more in the realm of sociology than of New Journalism. However, on the drive home, like a good researcher, he continues to ask questions, though one suspects that this is to satisfy his personal curiosity rather than some journalistic enquiry. “But you still screwed someone”, and when he asks how many the magazine lady replies, “Oh, I don’t know. About four or five. That’s about as many as you can handle.” The nonchalance and indeterminacy of her response is perhaps a good indication of her sexual experience and liberation. When the narrator asks why, she bluntly tells him, “Because your cunt gets sore, that’s why.” No coy reserve there. However, the narrator meant why did she have sex with four or five people and not why couldn’t she handle more. The misunderstanding, however, allows the magazine lady to elaborate: “I just said, you get a bit sore and don’t feel you can handle any more. It must be the different sizes or something. You don’t seem to get that sore just screwing that number of times with only one man.” When the narrator wants to know why she had sex with that many people she says, “It doesn’t seem especially many to me…. It’s like saying, why did you talk to four or five people instead of six or seven people at a party? I guess because you want to or something.”

For the magazine lady there is simply nothing out of the ordinary about her sexual appetite and she feels free and secure enough in her sexual identity to openly discuss how she has had sex with consecutive men, or how she has had consecutive sex with one man: it is all part of her sexual life and it is no big deal or something that should be repressed. This portrayal of the magazine lady goes some way towards redressing the portrayal of women that was given to us in the opening chapter, ‘My Magazine Lady’. This portrayal of women as sexually liberated and self-assured is not one that occurs very often in Scenic Drive; it is more the exception and this in itself begs the question as to why Wilding has chosen to explore sexual fantasy in an almost exclusively phallocentric manner.

The magazine lady is an epitome of a sexually liberated woman; not everyone’s epitome, but certainly one. By contrast she makes the narrator seem at best a timid participant in the sexual revolution. Unlike the narrator whose sexual energy in the opening chapter, ‘My Magazine Lady’, seems largely expended on creating erotic fantasies, the magazine lady spends her energy on living out these fantasies. In the

668 Ibid. p.35.
opening chapter the magazine lady seemed little more than the demure and passive recipient of male sexual fantasies that placed her in a powerless and very subservient role. Certainly the narrator is in no way condemnatory towards the magazine lady’s behaviour and his whole attitude seems to valorize complete sexual freedom, but in ‘A Night at the Orgy’ he is at a remove from the actual behaviour that constitutes sexual freedom; it’s certainly good to believe in an idea, but it is also a little more credible to live out the idea. However, at this stage he is still more interested in who the magazine lady has had sex with and why she is uncertain about the number: “‘Why four or five…. You must know if it was one or the other.’” We learn that her inability to be certain was because, “‘One of them was pretty marginal. I mean, if you’d fallen asleep for a couple of seconds you might have missed it altogether.”’\textsuperscript{669} The magazine lady seems confident enough to comment on the male sexual performance, a prerogative that is most often associated with men and their leering accounts of how they rate different women.

The “‘pretty marginal’” one was J.W. Holmes, the writer, who was there “‘trying to screw as many people as possible… to get a sociological cross section’”. Another, whom the magazine lady had sex with, was that other acquaintance of the narrator, Dexter, the magazine publisher, who was there to get “‘material for a book too.’” A third, the narrator is told, was “‘some bikie who drinks down at the same pub as you, he claims.’” It seems that in the world of the orgy there are a lot of connections between the characters, apart from the obvious sexual ones. A little disconcertingly the magazine lady says of the bikie that he has “‘sold his memoirs to one of the evening papers after that pack rape case.’” And perhaps a little more worrying is how the magazine lady can with complete equanimity tell the narrator how the bikie “‘was refreshing his memory for when he had to see his ghost writer later on tonight.’”\textsuperscript{670} Interestingly this information elicits no response from the narrator; it’s as if for these people rape doesn’t have any opprobrium associated with it, and some readers could be forgiven for thinking that the world these characters inhabit may not only be a sexually liberated one, but also an amoral one. After all, an aspect of the narrator’s sexual fantasy about the magazine lady

\\textsuperscript{669} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{670} Ibid. pp.35-36.
did involve “screw me, rape me, bind me”.\textsuperscript{671} Counting the magazine lady, J.W. Holmes, Dexter, the narrator and the bikie, even though the latter uses a ghost writer, gives the orgy quite a literary feel. If the magazine lady is correct, is to be hoped that these men are able to write well about the orgy because in her opinion they are “all much better talking about sex than doing it.” For the magazine lady they were all “just fucks’”, though she does conclude, somewhat anomalously, “‘It was a good orgy’”, which only repeated experience could enable her to make such a comparative assessment. Even at the end of the chapter the narrator’s concern differs to the magazine lady: he is still worried because there “were still two she hadn’t told me about.” Clearly the narrator is more concerned with the dynamics of other people’s fucking, than being involved in the act himself. This point is reinforced when the narrator having driven the magazine lady back to her place and she asks if he’d like to come in: “‘No, I think I’ll go, I’m tired, and you’re too sore anyway.’” But the narrator is not to be excused so easily: “‘I’m not too sore for you…. It would make a round number.’” Despite the magazine lady’s appeal to the personal and the mathematical the narrator still says no. To think of all the energy expended on his erotic fantasies about the magazine lady in the opening chapter and to then be offered an erotic reality only to decline it with an emphatic “‘No.’”\textsuperscript{672}  

In ‘A Night at the Orgy’ there is never any questioning or criticism of the sex that the characters take part in; they are free agents who have completely jettisoned the morality of the dominant. The chapter suggests that there should be no restraints when it comes to sex and although most readers in the 60s may never want to participate in an orgy the acceptance of such a sexual event functions as part of the process of freeing up people’s ways of thinking about sex. Of course orgies have always been an aspect of the social landscape where people who were, for whatever reason, exempt from the rules that regulated the majority of the population could indulge themselves; orgies were the domain of the minority whose behaviour was thought to be somewhat socially aberrant, albeit titillating. By the 60s, even though most young people may never have attended one, orgies came to symbolize the ultimate affront to monogamy while simultaneously providing a dramatic representation of complete sexual freedom. Orgies represented the

\textsuperscript{671} Ibid. p.10.  
\textsuperscript{672} Ibid. p.36.
complete antithesis of the morality of the dominant and even if their function was largely symbolic they still served as a point of consensual antagonism to the dominant culture. The dominant would have preferred that its young people never ever attend a night at the orgy, but rather, say, the theatre or even the opera. Orgies, or at least the idea of them, were part of the process that worked to free up sexual behaviour: people may not have attended an orgy but they never tended to condemn their existence, even if many tales about them were exaggerated in the number of them that occurred and what actually took place at them. In fact it could be argued that the definition as to what constituted an orgy became a lot more elastic and general in the 60s, in that a lot of sexual behaviour amongst young people was often described as an orgy and when used in this way the connotations of the term were all positive. Young people may not have gone to an orgy, but there was certainly a lot more open display of sexual behaviour amongst young people when they got together at parties, pop festivals and the like than would have occurred under the restraints of the dominant. Indeed the idea of an orgy was probably more important than its actual existence.

As mentioned, the portrayal of women in Scenic Drive as independent, assertive and sexually liberated individuals who are free from male exploitation is more the exception than the rule. As well as the magazine lady in ‘A Night at the Orgy’ there is the woman in the chapter ‘The Girl Behind the Bar is Reading Jack Kerouac’. There could even be a suggestion in her reading matter that this may be the case. The narrator is drinking in a bar and he sees that the girl behind the bar is reading Kerouac; he sees this as an “omen”. The narrator, who seems to be forever on a quest for sex, asks her what time she finishes work, to which the girl replies that she is a writer, so she never gets off work. Why this woman is called a girl, as with other women (though by no means all) in Scenic Drive seems a little odd and is probably a symptom of lingering chauvinism whereby the status of women is limited by a variety of processes, one of which is the calling of women by a diminutive title. She is certainly going to behave more like a woman than a girl. I don’t recall Holmes, Dexter or the narrator being called boys. Despite being called a girl, this woman is a writer: this is a little unusual in Wilding’s work where writing is real work and is more important than almost anything else, except perhaps sex and the pursuit of more sex, which then fuels more writing about sex. The
narrator goes back to the girl’s place to give her help with her stories and “advice on the markets”. Lying “on the bed side by side” is apparently the optimum place for giving this advice: sex, or at least the palpable possibility of it, is never too far away from writing in Wilding’s fiction.673

The first story the narrator reads is about a girl working behind a bar who is picked up by a Scandinavian (and we all know their reputation with sex) and they “screw for a few pages.” Later in the story the girl behind the bar visits the Scandinavian and finds that he is there with his other girl. The Scandinavian tells the other girl “this is just a writer who roams around visiting people, nothing sexual, and the other girlfriend believes him.” When the Scandinavian meets the girl behind the bar again he is expecting jealousy and anger, “but she is delighted, she has been accepted as a writer.”674 Clearly the story reflects the reality of the girl behind the bar’s life, as well as expressing a sexual freedom without its usual hang ups, at the same time positing the primacy of writing. The narrator says he likes the story, but its author wants a little more than some glib generalization and she wants to know what it is that he liked. The narrator tells her, “‘I like the idea of it. It’s nice and ironical. And sexy too. The screwing’s very erotic. It’s hard to do that well.’” In order to show him that it isn’t that hard she takes off her clothes, and is then “undressing me and screwing me” the narrator says.675 Another story the narrator reads is about a girl who went to a seminar about writing and ends up having sex with each member of the panel. “The story related their different screwing patterns to their different writing styles…. then we went back to the beginning and had a screw every time she made it with a new panellist.”676 There is clearly a conflation between the girl in the story and the girl the narrator is with. More interesting is the way that the girl’s fiction is starting to preempt the actions of the girl behind the bar and the narrator, but at this stage the connection could be interpreted as the power of fiction to suggest and encourage behaviour. However, the suggested nexus between fiction and reality becomes increasingly causal and poignant.

673 Ibid. p.73.
674 Ibid.
675 Ibid. p.74.
676 Ibid.
The narrator asks for some coffee and an “interlude”, more from the screwing than the reading one suspects, though that depends on how many panellists there were in the last story read. The girl behind the bar is less interested in an interlude than getting her stories read. The narrator is here to serve a purpose and the sex is not the most important component of that purpose: “She put her hand round the back of my neck and twisted my head round to read the next story.” The narrator says that the girl behind the bar wasn’t really being serious in doing this, but he sounds very much like he is really trying to convince himself of something he knows isn’t true: “But that was really by way of a joke. She was basically considerate.” Nevertheless, he reads the next story forthwith. This next story is about a woman writer who was so dedicated to her writing that she never had time to go out and pick up men. However, she has an immense sex drive which she satisfies “with bananas and coke bottles and chocolate bars and such like.” It’s a story of a woman’s unabashed sexual appetite and how she accommodates it whilst still devoting herself completely to her writing. The most surprising part of the story for the narrator is probably when the girl from behind the bar takes a banana from the fruit bowl and shows him. This is getting closer to real life mimicking fiction, or is it fiction dictating the actions of real life? The next story the narrator reads clears this up a little. It’s “about a jaded writer who could only get a hard on after watching someone make it with bananas, coke bottles, chocolate bars and the like.” That it is the narrator who is the “jaded writer” (and there must be a slight cringe in reading this) who is “watching someone make it with bananas” is inescapable when he says, “She smiled at me and pulled me into her.”

This is a woman eerily in control in areas that matter most to the male narrator: she is in control of the sex; she is the writer whose writing is the centre of attention; and she seems to be able to organize reality to suit her own purposes. This is something of an inversion of the world people like the narrator, Holmes and Dexter are used to functioning in: their world is one where they call the shots, they dictate the terms of sex and they are the writers, the creators of fictions. Their fictions may tell truths, but not the future. This is another power the girl behind the bar might possess. When it is time for

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677 Ibid.
678 Ibid. pp.74-75.
her to return to work she showers and dresses, with the narrator watching. She leaves him with another story. It is a story about a man who kept coming to a pub where this girl worked. They talked about writing while he was “eyeing off her tits”. She takes him back to her place and she shows him her stories “and they re-enacted the fucks in them all afternoon till she had to go back to work.” Then he watched her shower and dress. When she had gone to work “he thought about how she was standing there in the bar being watched by all these men looking at her tits and cunt, and his semen all trickling around in her cunt as they watched her there and he got himself so turned on by thinking about it all he spent the rest of the time she was away playing with himself and pulling himself off till he fell asleep.” Fiction and reality converge when the girl behind the bar returns: “‘Have a good time?’ she asked when she got back in, switching on the bedroom light and taking off her clothes.”

When she is behind the bar this girl’s job is to serve men, but once out from behind that bar she is a woman who will get men to serve her. Clearly the narrator is out of his depth here. It is as if he is in the thrall of a woman whose powers are beyond his comprehension, yet he cannot choose but stay and read and fuck until he is given stories that are the script of what will be. ‘The Girl Behind the Bar is Reading Jack Kerouac’ not only posits the idea of a connection between fiction and reality, but goes so far as to suggest that fiction may have the power to shape reality. It is a suggestion that this thesis, in general, has no problem in accepting, though of course not to the extent put forward in ‘The Girl Behind the Bar is Reading Jack Kerouac’. However, exaggeration does have the benefit of making the point abundantly clear. Yet the magazine lady and the girl behind the bar are the exceptions; Scenic Drive isn’t equally populated by strong, independent and liberated men and women. Which in itself isn’t a problem (all texts can’t contain all things) but the concern is that the majority of the women are sex objects to be manipulated to facilitate the gaining of men’s sexual satisfaction. In this respect ‘The Girl Behind the Bar is Reading Jack Kerouac’, on its own, does function as a liberating force, especially in conjunction with its explicit use of language and its descriptions of sex. The problem, of course, not only for feminists, is that ‘The Girl Behind the Bar is Reading Jack Kerouac’ doesn’t stand on its own, but is part of the larger Scenic Drive.

679 Ibid. p.75.
Scenic Drive’s use of sex as an assault weapon, as well as the intentional blurring of the lines between erotic fantasy and reality, is continued in the chapter ‘Dexter Has Been Sending Me His Books’. In this chapter the point of view is exclusively male and at times the portrayal of women amounts to little more than an accumulation of female genitalia. The narrator is a little concerned about the magazines that Dexter has been sending him; magazines such as 2 plus 1 = Orgy, The Professional, A Song for the Rapist and Headmaster’s Wife. The narrator’s concern is not over the contents of the magazines per se, or even their very titles, which are the stuff of school boy titillation, but that other people see them, no matter how hard he tries to hide them.\footnote{Ibid. p.15.} One of Dexter’s books, one that isn’t out yet, is called Launching Party and Dexter is showing the narrator the series of negatives that will make up the book. Dexter hands the negatives to the narrator saying, “Look at these. They’re really beautiful quality. These have really got class.” In the negatives Dexter appears to be a novelist attending a party to launch his book. There “A topless waitress hands round drinks and chocolates to the guests. The lids of the chocolate boxes portray the topless waitress.” The reader can already see what Dexter meant by “quality” and “class”, and this is just the beginning! Dexter mills amongst the crowd, “toupeed, bearded, dinner-jacketed”, but he is soon surrounded by the “socialite ladies” and “(E)verything is ripped away. Dinner jacket, beard, toupee are hurled out of frame.” The socialite ladies beg the author for “favours”, holding out autograph books and copies of his book for him to sign. “One holds out her tits. He grabs them. Licks them. Sucks them.”\footnote{Ibid. p.18.} The negatives then reveal a frenzied spiraling of sexual excess that encapsulates an erotic scene that is exclusively male in its gaze: it is a scene that represents the sort of male fantasy that comprises not the unrestrained sexual offering of one woman, but of numerous ones. It is a fantasy that places the male as the object of complete female adoration. The women simply cannot control themselves, they must give themselves up to the male. Dexter is the author, the creator of things, who is to be devoured in an act of sexual frenzy and gluttony. In the chapter ‘The Death of Fiction Cemetery’ writers are described as the “givers of status and makers of dreams.”\footnote{Ibid. p.21.} And in ‘Dexter Has Been Sending Me His Books’ the negatives create a male fantasy where
Dexter is in possession of these Godlike, mythical qualities; it is therefore incumbent, in this fantasy, that the women enthusiastically play the role of totally besotted handmaidens. The women fight over the man, and Dexter can do little but accept their inundation of sexual offerings. It is a phallocentric scene where the role of the women is to fight over the man and the only way they can do this is to mindlessly offer up their bodies, giving their physical all (and what else does the phallocentric fantasy desire but the complete surrender of the female body in an act of adoration and as an unconditional sexual offering?) in order to win the male’s attention. Desperate for Dexter’s attention, one of the ladies “rips off her dress completely.” Ever attentive, and not one to ignore the offerings of supplication, “Dexter turns to her, gazes at her pubic hair, reaches out to her cunt.” Not to be outdone all the other ladies take off their clothes until there is “naked flesh every where.” To remind us that this is after all a literary event one “frame artfully balances a pyramidal pile of the author’s books with a pyramidal pile of naked ladies.” The naked ladies “are sitting on top of Dexter. He is struggling. He has cunt over his prick, his tongue, his nose, his toes, his kneecaps, his nipples, his hands. Everywhere the naked ladies are wrapping their cunts over whatever of him they can find.” This must be the quality and class Dexter was referring to. Dexter’s response to these offerings reveals the stereotypical male response: the “initial protographs (sic) in the sequence show his eyes sparkling, bliss his full expression.” Not even literature can withstand the rumbling brought on by rampant sexuality and soon the pyramid of books collapses “from the threshing motion of the ladies.” The final shots in the sequence show Dexter “spreadeagled on the floor, books scattered all over and around” and like some wonderful, teasing dream all the ladies have “vanished”. But this was no male Edenic dream and to prove its actual occurrence there is no exotic flower beside the dreamer, but there is the topless waitress, who is now, of course, also bottomless, though we’re not told if she too has used that part of her body.683

However, as with all good male fantasies, there is to be no end to the sexual offerings made by women. They may be different women, but when a man is irresistible they simply have no choice. The closing shots show the arrival of dawn and with it the “cleaning ladies in their scarf headbands and their aprons and their rolled stocking tops

683 Ibid. p.18.
arrive. When they see Dexter naked and prone on the floor their “eyes light up. They strip off their scarves, their aprons, their rolled stockings.” To complete the male fantasy, the sexual rapacity of the women is to be executed in an almost military fashion that would be futile to resist; the women must have Dexter and he must again be the recipient of their uncontrollable sexual desire. “They approach in a naked phalanx. They leap on him.” The final picture is of Dexter, a “close-up shot of horror before his face is again obliterated.” In the male fantasy this final look of “horror” doesn’t provide a salutary lesson about sexual excess and how it can only conclude in ‘horror’. Rather there is a male delight in such excess, a sort of protesting too much where the male, fully sated for the moment (though I’m not sure if the condition of being fully sated fits in with this sort of male fantasy) disingenuously calls out, Please, don’t let there be any more large numbers of different women who adore me, give me their bodies, and make me fuck them!

‘Dexter Has Been Sending Me His Books’ continues to intentionally blur the line between what is real and what is fantasy. This is the sort of stuff that annoyed John McLaren, and again I think we need to see that the purpose of this blurring is to convey a conflation of the everyday and the erotic, rather than concluding it to be some failure of writing. Dexter does two types of books: there are the “cheap series” which he says he does in order to do the ones he really cares about, such as the Launching Party. In another book, one that Dexter cares about, titled Call Girl the woman has “her hand on her telephone, on her breast, on her cunt” and her “client” arrives with “a big box of chocolates with a $50 bill tucked under the coloured twine.” In the photographs the client is Dexter and the narrator wants to know did he get to “screw” the girl. Dexter declines to answer, probably to convey an element of inscrutability about his sexual life, as it’s hard to believe he’d do it out of any sense of modesty. All Dexter will say is that it was some girl from an agency. That the narrator’s interest in the girl, or at least the opportunity to “screw” her, is revealed when he quickly asks, “What agency?” A little later a character, the narrator we presume, though he is spoken about in the third person, rings a woman up and says, “I’m writing a book about a character who makes

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684 Ibid. pp.18-19.  
685 Ibid. pp.15-16.  
686 Ibid. p.16.
porno-picture books. Can I come around and see you?” When he arrives he “is carrying
her a present wrapped in coloured cellophane, with a $50 bill tucked under the twine. It is
one of his books so that next time that she has nothing to read or next time she has to be
photographed reading a book, his will be on hand.”

The chapter concludes with a final blurring of the lines between fantasy and
reality. The narrator has picked up his mail and is returning to his office and outside the
door he sees there are mops and buckets. When he enters his office, “Dexter is lying on
the floor inside. So are the cleaning ladies. There is a girl on the phone, reading one of
my books, chewing chocolates.” It’s a little unclear if this is just part of the narrator’s
fantasy, part of his desire to be a participant, rather than just looking at a series of erotic
photographs, or if this is actually occurring. The final sentences of ‘Dexter Has Been
Sending Me His Books’ suggest the possibility of a coming together of fantasy and
reality, as well as suggesting that the narrator may be able to participate: “Flash lights
explode everywhere. I reach for my wallet. I hope this isn’t going to be the cheap
series.”

There may be lines separating sexual fantasy and reality and at times it may be
difficult to differentiate between the two. Ultimately what Wilding is showing here is that
it is an artificial demarcation that limits people from living out their sexual desires, and
like the narrator people should seek to live out their sexual fantasies and, again like the
narrator, they should “hope this isn’t going to be the cheap series.”

The women in ‘Dexter Has Been Sending Me His Books’ may seem to be little
more than an accumulation of “cunts” to be thrust at Dexter in a state of libidinal
intoxication that turns them into something little better than zombies mindlessly fulfilling
the sexual fantasies of their master. However, some may conclude that they fare
somewhat better than those in ‘The Great Past Age of the Girlie Magazines’. The use of
the term “girlie” may preempt this conclusion. The narrator visits J.W. Holmes and on
entering his house is asked to take off his shoes. We take it that this has never happened
before as the narrator doesn’t understand why. Holmes is also barefooted and as the
narrator goes into the house he is soon told the reason for no shoes: the floor of Holmes is
“covered with back copies of Sire, opened at their centre spreads” and Holmes doesn’t

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687 Ibid. p.17.
688 Ibid. p.19.
want them damaged as they are his ""file copies"". The narrator and Holmes look upon a "sea of tits. The nipples erect like a bed of nails." It’s already a scene to raise the ire of any feminist: the naked women are to be looked down upon, forever held naked and supine, as the men tower above them. It is a small gesture that the men have removed their shoes and don’t walk all over them.

Holmes has these magazines out so as to see if he can remember any of the girls, especially the ones he “screwed”. Holmes reaches out a toe and rests it on one of the girls. Whether he is aware of it or not, it is an action that may be designed to take dainty care of the centerfolds, but it is also an action akin to prodding some carcass, a lump of meat. Holmes wants to know if the narrator remembers any of the girls, but the narrator finds it hard to say and Holmes tells him, “‘That’s because they all look the same without any clothes on.’” Holmes’ comment is uncomfortably close to the sort of remark some bigot could make about a different race of people; both types of comments originating from a lack of care or willingness to look thoughtfully and to differentiate. And inherent in such a position is seeing oneself, consciously or not, as superior. But perhaps such a comparison is unwarranted by Holmes’ comment. The narrator, however, is able to find the women different “in some ways” and he says, “‘Sometimes they held their breasts up towards the camera, sometimes they lay back, sometimes they crouched on all fours, sometimes they stood stretching themselves… sometimes they lay on tiger skins’.” That’s some differentiation!

The narrator and Holmes were involved with these girls and the magazines because they wanted to see their stories published and “‘literary quarterlies rejected us at every mail’”, so whenever Dexter called “‘and said get him a woman, we knew that if we did he would run a story.’” Holmes says, and there is no dissenting from the narrator, “‘We were just pimps. We were so desperate to see our stories in print we would have done anything.’” It isn’t the act of pimping and manipulating others for one’s own benefit that Holmes now regrets. Indeed, he isn’t remotely sorry about using these women, but what he is sorry about is that he didn’t get to have sex with them. Holmes’ ongoing sorrow is brought about by the “‘forever renewed piquancy of having tits and

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689 Ibid. pp.22-23.
cunt offered, yet taken away and never revealed, offered instead to Dexter at my instigation. And while he sucked at their pubic hair or tied bows on their nipples, I would sit all day before my typewriter spelling out the agony of it, the loss, the pimping, the selling these girls into slavery”. Holmes may see his action as being similar to slavery, the trading in bodies, but again the remorse is not for the act of pimping itself. In the end Holmes is so bitter that he would write stories about these girls ““and rip the sheets from my typewriter and lie on the bed reading them, masturbating over them, weeping over them; stories I could not get into print except by sending more of these girls down to Dexter.’” Again the narrator doesn’t object or disagree and can only offer cold comfort: ““You wouldn’t have liked any of them.””

The methods the narrator and Holmes use to pimp the women doesn’t put either of them in any better light. Holmes reminds the narrator how he would call ““girls back after his lectures’” at the university and offer them a ““big break’” to become ““models or actresses or tv stars’” and then give them Dexter’s phone number. Apart from the offer being risible it relied upon a naivety and vulnerability of the young students who ““were so desperate for approval they’d do any thing…. and all they wanted was to pass those lousy exam papers you set.’” Holmes then tells the narrator how when these students had sex with Dexter ““they shut their eyes and imagined they were screwing you and imagining they were screwing you they would imagine their end of year results.’” All the narrator can ruefully say is, ““I never got to screw any of them.’” That’s because Dexter ““took their photos and fucked them, then he called them back next week and said the negatives hadn’t come out and could they come back, and got a second screw and a second session for the price of one.”” In what could be interpreted as the narrator’s attempt to assuage his conscience, except there is no sign of anything that remotely resembles conscience, the narrator says, ““They wouldn’t have fucked him if they hadn’t wanted to.’” But there is no comfort to be found here as Holmes says, ““Of course they would. They thought they had to. That’s why you never got to fuck them yourself, because he’d told them you’d done a deal with him. That’s why you never saw any of

692 Ibid. p.27.
them again. Except masturbating over their centre spreads when Sire came out with your story in it. ”

Of course Holmes’ method of getting women for Dexter is equally unconscionable. Holmes would be at the pub and women would come up to him, apparently knowing he is a writer and a person of some importance, and ask him to teach them how to write their own stories. But if Holmes is some sort of guru he is a protective one and gives away no suggestions about his craft. He does, however, suggest they do some modeling, and he gives them Dexter’s number. It’s a nice tactic that destroys potential competition whilst getting himself in print. When the women ask, “‘Do you think I should?’” Holmes uses his kudos, gained by association, and says, “‘I never use the word should… to let them know I belonged to the artistic wing of the libertarians and that they were amongst the elite, so that anything I suggested, they would have to do to remain in that elite.’” And like the narrator, any remorse Holmes has has nothing to do with how he has used these women. When the women say “‘yes’” to going to Dexter, Holmes tells the narrator, “‘That was all I needed to know. None of them could ever be trusted with any friend of mine. They could not discriminate. Fuck me, fuck my friend; it was all one and the same.’” It seems a little ironic that Holmes should be placing a premium on trust, given that his dealings with the women have been a little shy of honest. It also seems that Holmes is somewhat equivocal about his friends. As Holmes continues to reflect on the situation his bitterness and resentment build: “‘By fucking my friends they felt they were closer to fucking me. Middle-class girls. Didn’t they know that every fuck with a friend of mine just widened the gaping chasm between us further, between me and my friends, between me and them.’” Assuming the girls were fucking Holmes’ friends in an attempt to get closer to him is quite a leap to make and one that requires a fair amount of narcissism. Indeed, it would have been impossible for the girls to know what it was that Holmes wanted (assuming they’d care): Holmes tells them to go off to Dexter, as he wants his stories published: so the girls go off to Dexter, but he resents their doing so. A little hard for the girls to come out winners here. But of course the girls had got it all wrong. “‘And they never knew. They thought that by bearing their tits to Dexter, by lying back in his office chair and opening their legs and welcoming his lapping

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693 Ibid. p.24.
anteater’s tongue into their open cunt, they were getting closer to me.” 694 In the end Holmes indulges in convincing himself that the girls were horrible; it’s a version of the childish tantrum where the denied child bleats how they never wanted the thing and that it wasn’t any good any way. “‘They’re all so dirty,’ said Holmes. ‘Look at that one, look at her feet. If her feet are like that, imagine what the rest of her’s like…. What a squalid, seedy, dirty lot of girls.’” Holmes ends up “making himself nauseous. Beads of sweat broke out across his forehead, his complexion was turning a ghastly pallor.” 695 Those girls have got a lot to answer for.

It is difficult to gauge what contribution ‘The Great Past Age of the Girlie Magazines’ makes to the overall project of the emergent and assertive practices. It’s hard to argue with certainty that the chapter makes a positive contribution towards the acceptance and putting into practice the values of the 60s. Certainly the language and treatment of sex is explicit and confrontational and as such it represents part of the process that assaulted the mores of the dominant; it pushed the limits of what the dominant saw as mainstream values and in doing so it can be seen as opening, or at least reinforcing, spaces that had hitherto been off limits as far as established society was concerned. However, there doesn’t seem to be a great deal to admire about the character of either the narrator or Holmes. With Machiavellian unconscionableness both strive for the end result of publication, and they repeatedly appear none too fussy about the means they employ to achieve it: if it means falsely leading astray young students or admirers, then so be it. The only regret seems to be their having to give away the cake and not still being able to eat: they cannot fuck their pawns and are reduced to bitter masturbation over the centre folds.

The portrayal of women in ‘The Great Past Age of the Girlie Magazines’ is also a negative one. The women are easily fooled and manipulated; they have only to vaguely believe they will pass their yearly exams or get closer to Holmes the writer and they become more than willing to pose as centre folds and to sleep with Dexter in the process. The women may be liberated to the extent that they have no qualms about taking their clothes off or sleeping with Dexter, but it is the type of liberation that plays straight into

695 Ibid. p.28.
the hands of the men, without leaving the women empowered in any significant way. In the end the women fare no better than commodities traded in a market place run for the sole benefit of the male traders. It is not as if the narrator, Holmes and Dexter, or Wilding for that matter, are unaware of the sexism inherent in their attitude to women. Certainly sexist attitudes were rife amongst a lot of Countercultural practices, especially in the early stages where women were largely subservient to the demands of men in matters sexual and domestic, as well as in the work place. Abbie Hoffman was aware of the sexism of the movement and that it would be essential for the Counterculture’s ongoing success that this sexism be removed. Hoffman wrote Revolution For The Hell Of It in 1968 and in his introduction to the 1970 edition he wrote: “Women’s Liberation, more than any other movement to emerge during the last two years, forces us to examine our style of living. To enter the twenty-first century, to have revolution in our lifetime, male supremacy must be smashed, including the chauvinism in this book.” Hoffman wrote this six years before Wilding wrote Scenic Drive and even given the fact that cultural change in the United States was in advance of Australia, six years does seem more than long enough to address the issue of sexism. And it’s not as if Wilding and his characters are unaware of these things. When the narrator is asked to take part in a women’s film he says, “I cannot think why around the concept of a women’s film hovers hopefully the idea of a pornographic film. It is quite unjustified I know. As well as being unreconstructed sexism.” But of course knowing something is wrong isn’t quite the same as acting to avoid it, or to correct it. Perhaps this moment should stand for the behaviour of the characters in the novel as a whole: the sexism is bad, but we can’t quite help ourselves, so let’s do it any way. There could even be an element of, yes sexism is bad, but we quite like it, so we’ll knowingly continue to do it.

There may be an irony at work in ‘The Great Past Age of the Girlie Magazines’ and that we are meant to look at the narrator and Holmes with a sardonic smile because we see them as humorous, yet sad and pathetic, cases of frustrated men portrayed in a ridiculous scenario. Admittedly there is this element in their portrayal; there is a way of reading the chapter that sees it as an ironic critique of these two male writers. This issue

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697 Ibid. p.3.
698 Michael Wilding, Scenic Drive. p.64.
reminds us of Nicole Moore’s article, ‘Lessons on Biting the Tongue in Your Cheek’, in Overland which we looked at in some detail earlier in this thesis. In her article Moore wonders about “Wilding’s ability to get away with it”; and some of the things Moore thinks he gets away with include his characters “pondering the attributes and fuckability of each other’s girlfriends” and the “role of women as ironic critique for Wilding’s own antics in his fiction”. For Moore, Wilding’s “ability to get away with it … [is] just a bit too dependent on the adequacy of irony.” And in the case of ‘The Great Past Age of the Girlie Magazines’ it doesn’t seem that the irony is adequate and that ultimately the dominant reading of the chapter for most readers is an unflattering picture of two characters. Moore quotes Wilding’s comment about the use of irony in Lawson: “Of course there is irony, but irony does not cancel the signification, only reinstate it.” 699 It’s a well made point. The attitude of both the narrator and Holmes is dismissive and sexist towards the women and is a little out of place in 1976: perhaps it is not only the girlie magazines that are of a past age.

Male attitudes to women are seen at their most extreme when the issue of rape arises. Rape is by no means a central concern in Scenic Drive, but when it is mentioned it provides an interesting and significant insight into male attitudes. This thesis has already drawn attention to the mentioning of rape on three separate occasions in the novel: one in the chapter ‘My Magazine Lady’ when the narrator fantasises that the magazine lady wants him to rape her and a second time in ‘A Night at the Orgy’ where the magazine lady tells the narrator how she has had sex with a bikie who was at the orgy to refresh his memory of a pack rape he was in. The third time was when a list of books were sent to the narrator, one of which was A Song for the Rapist. On all these occasions rape is mentioned with complete equanimity, as if it is no big deal, as if it is an unremarkable aspect of the sexual mores of the time. That such equanimity is once expressed by a woman doesn’t negate the argument that such an approach is essentially a male one: it can be argued that the magazine lady may be sexually liberated, but her attitude and her expression of it is essentially a male one that refuses to have any empathy for a victim of rape. As a character, although she is female, she is expressing what men believe a woman should think about rape. And a woman mouthing male attitudes doesn’t make those

699 Nicole Moore op. cit. p.88.
attitudes women’s. Unless of course we are to assume a level of stupidity, or gross callousness at best, that would enable us to see the pack rape of a woman by a gang of bikies as nothing to get excited about.

The narrator and Holmes show a little more concern over the pack rape. Indeed, when they meet the bikie they are “excited”, but their concern and excitement has nothing to do with sympathy for the victim and disdain for the perpetrators. As the narrator says, “I would like to talk to him about it…. I would like to win his confidence so that he would admit me to their brotherhood and to rites that I could write about… gang-bangs, pack rapes”.\textsuperscript{700} Again we see the positioning of writing in front of everything else: scruples are not to stand in the way of writing and publication. Certainly this episode with the bikie and the narrator and Holmes lapses into irony and humour when the narrator adds that he hopes to participate in “drinking menstrual blood from petrol cans, taking part in battles with rival gangs and capturing their slave women and doing our will with them on deserted beaches, on sunny heathlands, in the steamy valleys of tropical rainforests.”\textsuperscript{701} The intention of the irony here may be to parody the narrator and Holmes, a parody made stronger when we recall the fear they had when they first saw the bikie, and though this may be achieved to a certain degree, the overall effect would seem to be to make light of the whole issue of rape. Even the narrator’s ludicrous fantasies see women as “slaves” to be captured and sexually used by men.

When the narrator has Dexter staying at his house he receives a “circular” which says how one of their neighbours’ daughters has been raped in their street and how there is to be a meeting to get more police protection. Clearly some people must see rape differently. However, the narrator’s response to the neighbourhood rape is to wish Dexter were gone because he is “afraid the neighbours will burn the house down if they work out he is living here.” The narrator’s final comment on the neighbourhood rape is a lament for his and Dexter’s predicament: “We are such natural suspects, such natural victims.”\textsuperscript{702}

It’s a comment that says a lot about male attitudes. These male attitudes have been expressed by a number of different characters and the common view is to marginalize the negative associations of rape. The equanimity with which it is treated is indicative of a

\textsuperscript{700}Michael Wilding, Scenic Drive. p.51.
\textsuperscript{701}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{702}Ibid. p.45.
particular mindset that was not completely aberrant in the 60s. As such, one begins to wonder to what extent the attitudes of the characters in Scenic Drive are expressions of what the author felt at the time. Suggesting this may contribute to an end of Wilding’s ‘getting away with it’, as Nicole Moore would have it.

In the chapter ‘Business Lunch’ the male approach to sex is clearly, if briefly, spelt out. Holmes has gone to lunch with the magazine lady and after the restaurant she suggests they go back to her place for a drink. This of course can only mean one thing: that the magazine lady must want to have sex with Holmes. And since the magazine lady’s invitation can’t possibly be interpreted in any other way Holmes makes his move immediately on arrival: ‘As soon as they were inside her room, before she’d even put the key down, he reached an arm around her, drew her towards him, and clamped his lips to hers.’ But the magazine lady seems less than taken by Holmes’ ‘clamping’ and wants to know, ‘“What’s that supposed to mean? Affection?”’ Holmes is ‘puzzled’, a puzzlement no doubt premised on the clear meaning of the magazine lady’s invitation as well as Holmes’ thinking who wouldn’t want to have sex with him anyway. Additionally, in the minds of the narrator, Dexter and Holmes, affection has had little, if anything, to do with sex. Holmes tells the magazine lady what it means: ‘“Just sex,”’ he said. The magazine lady asks Holmes to leave and the ignominy of his departure is complete when he walks down the corridor and takes the first available door which happens to be a storage cupboard. This dichotomy between sex and affection holds true for Scenic Drive as a whole and one is tempted to see this separation as being clearly demarcated along gender lines: men want sex, whilst women want affection. Such a demarcation comes a little too close to the stereotyping of gender and sex roles of the dominant, whereas the Counterculture would refuse to separate love and sex along gender lines, as well as arguing that if sex is to be just sex then it should not be the sole prerogative of men.

This episode between the magazine lady and Holmes isn’t quite the wham bam that Holmes would have been expecting, and as a rendering of male sexual fantasy it is simply unacceptable. Once again blurring the lines between fantasy and reality the

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703 See, for example, Richard Neville’s comment from Playpower pp. 60-61 (discussed earlier in Chapter 4) where he questions whether twelve men raping a young woman was indeed rape or somehow the unbridled expression of free love. See also John Heidenry, op. cit. p. 222 “Many rapists did expect their victims to enjoy the act and to be grateful for the attention”.

704 Ibid. pp. 70-71.
narrator steps in to put things right and to make Holmes happy. The narrator writes and sends Holmes a “happy ending to cheer him up”, and this “happy ending” may be a fantasy, or it may be an account of what occurs next. Either way it provides a much more male oriented account that satisfies both male fantasy and reality. In the “happy ending” Holmes walks down the corridor after being rebuffed by the magazine lady. He takes the next door and then the firestairs all the way down to the basement carpark where he finds the magazine lady waiting for him. “I love that coarse honesty,” she said, and reached out and took his hand and pushed it inside her shirt and clamped it onto her breast. The initiative is now with the magazine lady and all the active verbs in the description are hers and even the act of ‘clamping’ has become something she desires. “Let’s make love now,” she said. ‘Right away.’” Interestingly, though fucking is clearly what she has in mind, the magazine lady has used the term “love”; it is a term rarely used by any of Wilding’s male characters. However, of more interest is Holmes’ response to the magazine lady when she has taken the initiative and has become the one who is assertive and in control. Holmes reaches out for her other breast ‘to squeeze another nipple to confirm his sexual interest’, but the main reason for his doing this is “to gain time.” It seems that the urgency he felt when he first entered her apartment has been replaced. Holmes’ reticence can only be put down to his reluctance or inability to cope in a sexual situation where the woman is in charge. He procrastinates: “Won’t we graze our knees?” he said, looking at the concrete floor of the car park.” But the magazine lady is not to be so easily put off: “It depends which way we do it whether we graze yours or I graze mine. We’re unlikely both to graze them at the same time.” No hesitation here on the magazine lady’s part, it’s not a matter of if they have sex for her. In any case the magazine lady doesn’t intend to have sex on the concrete of the carpark: it appears that all that remains to be resolved is which car in the basement parking lot they should make use of. Times must have been more trusting in 1976 as their choice of cars (Porsche, Honda Civic, VW et cetera) is not complicated by their being locked. Holmes goes to a Falcon panel van and opens the back door. He favours this vehicle because, “It’s private at least”, but the magazine lady doesn’t share his modesty: “What are you hiding from?” she asked, lowering the hood of a Mercedes convertible.” She was never going to choose
the panel van anyway, because as she says, “‘I hate purple, and I’ve never enjoyed surfie gang bangs.’”\textsuperscript{705}

In the “happy ending” the magazine lady’s display of sexual control and experience can be interpreted as the woman being liberated and no longer the object and plaything of male sexual desire. And certainly she is the one calling the shots and the one exhibiting an enthusiastic sexual bravado, but at the same time her position of control ironically places her in a position that fulfills a version of male sexual desire. Indeed, the position she places the male in is to define him as the object of raw sexual desire, the acting out of which will be intensified with the added frisson of it taking place in a car park in some strange car. The magazine lady may be in control in the “happy ending”, but it is the sort of control that more than satisfies male sexual desire. It is female control that accommodates patriarchal desire and it is the sort of control that male desire has no objection to; well, no objection in the occasional instance such as this, and so long as it doesn’t signify an overall pattern. It is after all Holmes’ “happy ending” sent to him by the male narrator and a business lunch is stereotypically the indulgent domain of those males in charge. This sexual scenario, as presented in ‘Business Lunch’, is highly problematic for women; there is the conundrum of how a woman is to be in control without that control resulting in her acceding to the desires of men. There is however another construction that can be placed upon this chapter and that is to concede that the woman’s behaviour may play into the hands of the man, but to also see that this may not be the real issue for many women. The issue may be to acknowledge that a woman can have a sexual desire, just as a man has, and when she acts upon that desire she is using the man just as much as the man feels he is using her. The other alternative for the woman to have control occurs when she rebuffs Holmes and tells him to leave, but this type of control deprives the woman of the sexual encounter she may desire. It would seem that in ‘Business Lunch’ perceptions of the power relationship between Holmes and the magazine lady are problematic and may be gender dependent, but importantly there is at least the potential for both the man and the woman to exercise a degree of control over their sexual lives.

\textsuperscript{705} Ibid. pp.71-72.
The magazine lady continues to exert a sexual fascination over the male characters in Scenic Drive, as is seen with the impact she is able to have on the narrator. The chapter ‘Our Lady of the Magazines’ sees the narrator sitting at his typewriter and thinking “oh our lady of the magazines” and looking at his “cancelled paragraphs” and “continual corrections”. Perhaps the language of the chapter’s title, and of the narrator’s address to the magazine lady herself, is an indication that the problems of the narrator’s writing may be assisted by some sort of spiritual intervention. Beside the narrator there is a copy of the magazine that the magazine lady writes for. On the cover there is a naked woman who has her hand on the head of a man in the foreground. It is just the head of the man on the cover and the woman’s “red fingernailed hand is clamped on top of it.” “Clamped” seems a popular word in Scenic Drive; perhaps meant to signpost that something sexual is soon to ensue. The woman is a little out of focus, but the narrator is able to see both her nipples. The woman is skinny and has red hair. The whole cover is tinted an orange-red colour and the woman sits there “impassive, slim, poised in that golden glow.” Despite the narrator once thinking that the magazine lady “seemed almost dowdy” he now starts to believe that the naked woman on the cover must be the magazine lady: “It must be you.” The narrator imagines her breasts seen by “the magazine’s 100,000 buyers, for the 400,000 readers, for the 4,000,000 casual viewers” and is “suddenly swept through with admiration for this fulfillment, that for you there are no dichotomies in your work, that the style of what you write is the style of what you do.” The narrator’s close attention to the cover fuels his fantasy about the magazine lady. Only one of the magazine lady’s hands is shown and the narrator wonders what her other hand is doing. The immediacy of his fantasy has him directly addressing the photo as if the magazine lady were actually present: “Is it playing with your clitoris, a private masturbation the magazine readers will never know? Is it holding onto the man you seem to be sitting on, clutching his balls as he lies there, probing his anus, playing with his prick, hence his fatuous expression?” Fantasy and reality blur as the intensity and immediacy of the narrator’s imaginings increase. His “prick grows hard” now that he believes he knows “the secret of the missing hand”. As the narrator sits at his desk that same missing hand “reaches along beneath the table and clutches my balls, fondles my swelling prick, probes my anus”. The narrator is entranced: “I keep my eyes fixed on
your steady, wide-eyed gaze, looking at me.” The magazine lady then functions as a muse and those “cancelled paragraphs” and “continual corrections” disappear under her sexual spell and the narrator says, “My fingers touch the keys, my eyes hold yours, if I do not look away, if only I trust and feel, the spell will be preserved.” No stranger from Porlock, or a Dexter, or a Holmes, interrupts to thwart the chemistry of writer and his muse and like some slow waking from a vision the narrator begins to hear the sounds of Beethoven on the record player, the sounds of barking dogs and boats on the harbour. “But for that moment we had been together, my morning quota has been fulfilled.”

This episode between the narrator and the magazine lady not only explores how the lines between reality and fantasy can be blurred and how sexual imaginings can be productive of sexual pleasure, but it also suggests a productive nexus between heightened sexuality and creative output. Sexual fantasy can meld into sexual reality and the freeing of these forces can in turn liberate other creative forces: the episode between the narrator and the magazine lady not only valorizes sexual fantasizing, but goes on to concretise it in positing its outcome to be not only sexual pleasure but also other tangibles, such as the narrator’s writing. This nexus between sex and art and reality is also explored in ‘Reading Axel’s Art Book’. Axel, a friend of the narrator, has given the narrator an art book he has produced. Axel wants the narrator’s response to his book and the narrator is enthusiastic about this request because the last work of Axel’s that he saw had quite an effect on him. This previous work of Axel’s was at an art show where the narrator and others read their stories, where poetry was read and where wine and dope were consumed in quantity: “More dope. More wine. More lust.” It is almost a given that the milieu for an art show in the 60s should comprise of a blending of writing, alcohol, dope and sex, much the same way that the trinity of sex and drugs and rock and roll was the hallmark of many other Countercultural events in that decade. At the art show Axel and two women perform a poem about identities and part of their performance, to emphasise the theme, is to swap each other’s clothes: “Off, off come the tops. Tits. Tits tits tits tits tits”, calls the narrator. It seems to be a performance for the voyeuristic delight of the males in the audience as there doesn’t seem to be any display of, or calls for, ‘dicks dicks dicks.’ The narrator says, “I call out for more. More. I beat the floor with my feet”, which would

706 Ibid. pp. 77-78.
seem to be the sort of behaviour some drunken male might indulge in on some visit to King’s Cross when he briefly escapes the restraints of the dominant, rather than the behaviour of some writer at an art show. Not that a form of social decorum would have been expected, or wanted, in the 60s, just that the narrator’s behaviour is redolent of some stag party from the 50s, rather than the emergent and assertive practices of the time. At the art show the “air is pervaded with lust, a thick soft scent like orange blossom trees. Or lilac. The pollen clogs your lungs. You wheeze. It is like a perfumed asthma attack, a blissful way of death, a romantic agony.” The oxymoronic pleasures that Axel’s art evokes continue to impact on the narrator. Clearly that impact is not to elicit some reasoned and objective response, but rather a more immediate, libidinal and subjective one. The narrator tells us: “Art is not distant and framed. I respond to living art. The heavy perfume clogs my lungs. I hyperventilate. My blood is charged with adrenalin and alcohol. Oh art.” And respond the narrator does: “We rush home, this female person and me, and fuck. I am excited by all those tits. Exposed to us all. I am over excited. I vomit in the bed. The female person does not complain.” Again the view here is exclusively male, where the narrator’s sexual urgency is easily taken care of by a readily available woman. The narrator’s disconnectedness from, and objectification of, the woman is conveyed in her being called the “female person”, as if she has no name or identity; her only agency is to be taken and fucked and to not complain of vomiting. As efficacious as Axel’s art may be, there is still some disappointment; yet even in this disappointment there is the hope of a better future: “No cunts. No cunts. Ah well. Next year perhaps. As art advances, next year maybe we will have cunts.” And such “advances” are defined in terms that are exclusively male: women reveal all as the men stand fully clothed judging and appreciating, and perhaps selecting for closer inspection.

These events in ‘Reading Axel’s Art Book’ may be interpreted as symbolizing part of Wilding’s overall intention in Scenic Drive. The intention of Scenic Drive is to alter people’s attitudes and behaviour, to create a text that impacts on the readers in a manner that breaks down the sexual inhibitions that underpin the dominant. The art of Scenic Drive may reflect the life of some, but more significant is the intention of the art in Scenic Drive to affect life, to alter modes of behaviour. The narrator says that Axel’s
art is, “Sexual. Arousing. Affecting my mode of behaviour.” Let this stand for the overall intention of Scenic Drive.
CONCLUSION

“They’re terrified that anyone who was around in the sixties and seventies still has an agenda of reform. So they want to clear us all out….”

“‘Your day was a long time ago,’ they told him, ‘and now it is over.’ And indeed his day had passed. His publications dropped off. It wasn’t that he wasn’t still productive.”

In 1977 Brian Kiernan edited The Most Beautiful Lies, a collection of some of the stories by five of Australia’s major contemporary fiction writers. Kiernan described Wilding as “a most energetic sponsor of the ‘new’ fiction” who was a “university teacher, scholarly critic and editor, anthologist, general editor of an Asian and Pacific writers’ series, Australian editor for the English quarterly Stand, avant-garde publisher under his Wild and Woolley imprint, reviewer in newspapers and periodicals, member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council (briefly), and much else besides.” That’s quite an impressive list, but what is more impressive is Wilding’s ongoing activity in the more than thirty years after Kiernan’s summation. The inside page of Wild Amazement lists Wilding’s involvement in forty one books of fiction, non-fiction and as editor. That was in 2005 and Wilding has continued to publish after that date. He is nothing else if not prolific.

Some might argue that being prolific doesn’t immediately warrant critical attention and they may question whether or not Wilding is a great writer. Such a subjective question is difficult to answer. It is less difficult to conclude, as this thesis has done, that Wilding is without doubt a very significant and important writer. Given this, one is prompted to ask, along with Ian Syson, why Wilding is at “the outer margins of Australian literary culture” and why critics find him “easier to ignore than

708 Ibid. p.209.
710 It’s even difficult at times to establish just what constitutes being a great writer, beyond accepting the canon or valorising one’s own subjective taste.
accommodate.” Syson cites Bruce Clunies Ross’ 1986 article as being the last full length discussion of Wilding. And nothing of consequence has occurred since Syson made that observation in 1998. Syson wants to know why this should be. It’s an excellent question. Syson suggests that with criticism “Wilding goes in hard” and that this may account for the scant attention he receives. But one could reasonably argue that “going in hard” might be productive of hard responses in return instead of silence, though admittedly silence may be the hardest response for a writer to take. Syson argues that “Wilding is marginalised because of what he says.”

This thesis has attempted to redress this lack of attention that Wilding has received and, at least with regards to the 60s and his early fiction, to position him in a place of central importance in Australia. In order to achieve this this thesis has striven to place Wilding’s early fiction in the broader context of the 60s and to then sharpen the focus to Sydney. It has been stressed that sex was central to the countercultural project of the 60s and that there may have been factors about Sydney that predisposed it to be receptive and productive of this concentration on sex. Wilding’s early fiction has been interpreted as focusing on sex and as being one of the numerous practices that sought to disrupt the dominant. Perhaps it is partly this concentration on sex and the impulse to disrupt that has pushed Wilding almost out of sight, part of “what he says.” It is hoped that this thesis goes some way towards redressing this imbalance. It goes without saying that this treatment of Wilding is very limited: it was meant to be. It also goes without saying that only the surface has been scratched and that Michael Wilding offers a rich and important field that is yet to be explored. Indeed, such a comment holds true for much of the 60s in Australia, especially with regards to the writers. One need only think of people like Vicki Viidikis and Frank Moorhouse, either as individuals or as part of an interacting group, to realize just how much interesting and important work there is to do.

Wilding has always written about important things and one of those things has been sex. “I think it was good that sexuality was written about, was confronted.” The sexual mores of the dominant had to be replaced by the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s, “because the taboos are always so arbitrary and ridiculous that when you

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711 Ian Syson, op. cit. p.270.
712 Ibid.
confront them, things that are really repressive can just seem totally absurd.”

And there is certainly a lot of confronting in Aspects of the Dying Process, Living Together and Scenic Drive. Wilding’s writing promotes the new sexuality, but certainly not in any over idealized way: there is “a lot of hope, aspiration, failed conjunction” and very often the “stories are really about some of the edgier, or more bruising aspects of personal relationships.” He is unapologetic that this writing about sex has been from the male perspective; “I can’t deny that…. It’s hard enough to write anything honestly. I find the thought of men who write books in the persona of women very bizarre. Women in my work tend to be mediated through the male perception which may well be quite wrong.”

His writing is “mediated through a consciousness and that consciousness’ point of view of what’s going on.” And if “what’s going on” sometimes included “the grotesque misapprehensions of the paranoid males” then so be it.  

Wilding has never veered away from writing about difficult situations: “it is the problematic that often is the energy of the thing” and his writing is often “really a subterfuge to be able to talk about feelings or states of mind that have been taboo.” His early fiction is an attempt to “help people in a life situation” and this fiction reflected and promoted the emergent and assertive practices of the 60s. There was an attempt to help young people navigate this new and tricky terrain, to establish “what is tolerable behaviour, what is acceptable.” Spelling it out Wilding says, “I think writing is about finding out how to behave. I mean, one reads books to find models of private and public behaviour.” Not a bad contribution to make for the young people of Australia in the 60s.

When asked if he had become more conservative as he had gotten older Wilding’s simple response was, “I don’t know – I’m still trying.” When asked if he had “found the answers now” he replied, “No, no, I don’t think I ever will, I don’t think there’s any answer. It’s all a succession of questions.” It is to be hoped that for some time yet Wilding keeps on “still trying” and that he doesn’t stop pondering and asking “a

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714 Ibid.
715 Ibid. p.320
716 Ibid. p.318.
succession of questions.” It would be good if we could return the favour and start to fully assess what he has been trying to do and how successful he has been at posing and answering questions.
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