Everybody in Australia knows, loves, hates Robert Hughes. We love him because he is eminent, global; perhaps because he is like us, or some of us. We may not speak like him, but when we hear his voice we recognise it. We hate him because he left, because he left Australia in the sixties and yet insists that he remains connected to us, and might even know something about us, or our place.

On the closing page of his first book, *The Art of Australia*, Hughes claimed in exit to quote an unnamed painter who, he states, said to him at the time, “The fact is, you can’t begin to grow up until you’ve left the place!” The temptation for us, in our shared sense of injury, is to read this as an act of ventriloquism, as though Hughes is hiding from or playing with us, as though this is his own view. Australia is an awful place; you have to flee, you’d be stupid to stay. A more useful way to approach this issue is to generalise it. Some of us have a strong need to leave; but this is a need to leave home, wherever it may be. Travel expands the mind; to live elsewhere is to be compelled to confront difference in a way that can enable you to read the conventions of everyday life at home as though they, too, are peculiar, at least arbitrary or incidental.

Robert Hughes had good reason to leave. The medium of his activity, paint, painting is as he is given to remark beyond reproduction, even with megapixels. Bernard Smith, in contrast, could leave for England in the forties and return, for his archives were largely antipodean, and his texts, both those he read and those he wrote, were readily transmissible. His via media was print. For Hughes, the art critic, you have to be able

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to smell the paint, get up close to the pictures themselves. You had to seek out the wealth of culture in the centres, even if, as Hughes also is given to insist, those centres began to decline and pluralise at the very moment of his arrival in New York in 1970.

In this paper I revisit Hughes' writing in order to address, again, some of these problems, which often go under the title of provincialism or the provincialism problem. The idea of Provincialism, famously, cuts both ways — it is both a condition, or a geography, and a stigma, or a culture; it can even be made into a virtue, or a politics. My sense is that Hughes has profoundly suggestive things to say about provincialism. He may, later, have spat at the antipodes in pain and anger, but his way of thinking about the provincial, not least with reference to Australia and to Barcelona, is evocative in the extreme.

But let's begin at the beginning, with provincialism itself. The immediate associations are evident. The victim of isolation and detachment, convict settlement and harsh climate, Australia is the arse-end of the earth, Europe's antipodes, the rude bits, downunder, the place the imperialists send their detritus, dispose of cretinous relations in Oscar Wilde or Virginia Woolf, a laughing stock, crude, unrefined. Ours is a backwater, the sticks, the paddocks and fields that feed only the baser appetites of imperial desire in the north. The provinces are insular, as we are, vulgar, narrow, self-absorbed, idiotic, parochial, closed, dependent, infantile. Ours is parallel to what Marx called the idiocy of rural life — idiotic because closed, self-referential, or just too far away.

Give this house of cards a conceptual poke, and it collapses. This was exactly Bernard Smith's gesture, when he observed in 1962 that provincialism was also a metropolitan phenomenon. Like the New York gallery worker who was nonplussed by me — "Oh, you have art in Australia?" — Manhattan is notoriously buzzy, but it is also prone to self-absorption; even Brooklyn is made to look like the sticks, let alone Chicago or Boston, Ohio or Iowa. Without the stigma, perhaps, Manhattan is also insular, so that we might, again, generalise, and wonder here about the cognitive limits of the fields available to be known by humans. Even my own city, perhaps especially my own city, Melbourne, is one I really do not know, though I can navigate it reasonably successfully without a map, or without thinking. This is to speak of the limits of knowledge anthropologically, to value habit, the
local, the vernacular. There are, in fact, significant cultural limits to our spheres of reference, and these are also environmental. Think only of university cultures — all different, all constituted around different local enthusiasms and theoretical preferences. Many aspects of our everyday lives do indeed seem to be acted out in microclimates. To speak of the phenomenon differently, in the language of psychoanalysis, it might alternatively be said that provincialism is another word for narcissism, self-love or self-absorption. Provincialism turns inward, away from other worlds, hopes, fears.

The issue of provincialism, in the case of the antipodes, is plainly imperial, and this is a constant theme in Hughes’ work. Provinces, in the sense of physical geography, do not choose themselves; they are constituted as provincial by the world system. The language of empires and colonies later gave way in the seventies to standard talk about centres and peripheries. Here again the implications of this nomenclature were multiple — the centres were not only geographical, but based on claims to culture and power, money and violence as well as galleries, museums and opera. Cultures of the periphery were bound to be inferior, cheap copies of the real European, then American, then international style modernist thing.

Art historians such as Bernard Smith, and critics like Robert Hughes, have always known this to be nonsense. The point, put too crudely, is rather that the centres feed on the peripheries. Picasso and African art, Gauguin and Tahiti, Matisse and Morocco, Australian actors in Los Angeles — now, Australian art critics in New York then — we all know the stories, even if we do not sufficiently contemplate what they mean, that culture is mobile, that great things happen in the centres because they are magnets of money and opportunity, power and influence. There are simply more gigs in Manhattan than in Melbourne (though sometimes I wonder).

In nineteenth century Australia it simply made sense that we were provincial, of British dominion, and this persists into Federation. Leading Australians like H. B. Higgins sought what they imagined as a New Province for Law and Order. Canberra later becomes the utopian symbol of this national project. Only by the sixties does national culture, and national chauvinism, insinuate itself into teaching curricula. Arthur Phillips famously anticipated the issues by speaking of “The Cultural Cringe” in 1958. Were we as good as our masters? By their own criteria,
never. Either, as Phillips understood, they make us feel inferior (‘oh, you have art in Australia?’) or we do it for ourselves (the best is always made in England, then America). Phillips’ vernacular typology captured the essential ingredients. He differentiated between what he called Cringe Direct and Cringe Inverted. Cringe Direct is explicit — we cower before the other. Cringe Inverted always bites back, even when no offence has been committed. Cringe Inverted reverses the earlier prejudice; the best is always local, whether cultural or natural. It results in the arrogance of nativism or cultural chauvinism, a prejudice in no way morally superior to the haughtiness of our superiors in London, New York or Paris. This is something we should stand against. Phillips’ diagnosis retains a charming period sense that attitude is like bearing, or stature, how we (as Australians) hold or carry ourselves. His conclusion was that the Cringe was a bigger problem than isolation, and that the solution to Cringe was not the Strut, but a “relaxed erectness of carriage.” Provincialism, its enemy, could also be a complex. provincials could only too easily lurch from an unwarranted sense of superiority to a horrible anxiety that we are always missing out. Whatever the case, the politics of inversion never achieves more than reversal.

The intellectual dimensions of these anxieties ran, and run deep. Phillips was writing in the same moment that James McAuley penned _The End of Modernity_. At least since D. H. Lawrence left _Kangaroo_ here in 1923, Australian intellectuals had been searching for genius loci, for the spirit of place that made us special or exceptional in the face of European decline and the rise of mechanical civilization in America. Romanticism, a powerfully European cultural impulse, was translated into the primitivism of place. We in the antipodes were not the city, but the bush, later the desert or the beach. The great contribution of Bernard Smith, in this setting, was to insist that Australian identity was neither just cultural (European) or environmental (local), but both, constituted by the traffic between places and the influence of those places on localities and other places.

Pondering the Australian “myth of isolation” in 1962, Smith took up these provincial perennials. Were the provinces merely the waiting rooms of history, where nothing was fated to happen, the eternal sticks to the northern big smoke? Smith defines the irony of the moment as one

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2 James McAuley, _The End of Modernity_ (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1959).
in which local artists discover that it is their difference rather than their derivation which makes them interesting to the centres. Historically, the problem later has precisely been provincialism, the desire to keep up with the international Joneses by second guessing northern tastes. Smith connects this to what the calls the myth of isolation. We may be physically distant from the cities of the centres, but our cultures have been co-constituted through the empires. To put it differently, what we call Australian culture ("oh, you have art in Australia?") is constituted by cultural traffic, literally by the routine intercourse and maritime contact that was formally opened in 1770. Here Smith engages with Hughes, and in particular contests the claim that Australian painting might be defined by an absence — the absence of the Renaissance tradition, where it now (in the sixties) offers a presence in which the landscape of gum tree painting is broken by deserts and banditti, bushrangers. Smith dislikes this approach, for it smells, he says, of exceptionalism.

Any hint of the Jindyworobaks makes Bernard Smith twitch. He is opposed to the need to make any culture especially unique, whether to seek especially to value or to devalue it. Smith's alternative explanation is to say that what appears at first sight to be isolation or ignorance might turn out, rather, to be a process of selection and rejection. Artists have their prejudices, or blindnesses as well as insights; they are also operators, and they have historical repertoires on which to draw. In any case, negative definition is always unwittingly confessional. The colonial artists were European artists in Australia. The first school of Australian painting was neither just the environmental result of heat and eucalypt; French plein air painting, Whistler, impressionism and art nouveau were also there. As Smith argues, the secret is in the mix, and it is this which makes it ineffable. Acceptance of the metropolitan culture without question, he says, is the essence of provincialism. With the expansion of European culture over the globe it is the exotic frontier cultures which have to a large extent determined taste and the movement of style. For us, as those positioned externally as provincials by the centres, the resonances miss our actual location and experience. And here Smith agrees with Hughes, that to think of Australia as a jardin exotique is a fashionable way of missing the point, for to its painters Australia is not an exotic garden; it is the place where we live.

At this point, in 1962, Hughes was still living in Australia; Smith has travelled out ten years earlier, but returned and has always worked
here. As Smith put it elsewhere, on the occasion of the 1956 Olympics, Australian intellectuals were migratory birds, as ours is a migratory culture. But then, they all are.

Bernard Smith's student, Terry Smith, picked up on these issues in 1974, when he was living in New York, before returning to Sydney to direct the Power Institute and relocating, again, to Pittsburgh, migrating, as we differently do, responding to push and to pull. Terry Smith's paper reads more like a manifesto, if for a lost cause. "The Provincialism Problem" seems here to consume us. Terry Smith's prose was as clear as it was powerful. To identify provincialism a problem in this way was to beg the question of its definition. Smith defined it as an attitude, with a history and geography of its own. He wrote that "Provincialism appears primarily as an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values. It is not simply the product of a colonialist history; nor is it merely a function of geographic location." The phrasing echoes that of Marx, as it opens the first volume of *Capital* (1867): "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities." Terry Smith, like Bernard before him, was indeed a Marxist, for whom imperialism was a first historical principle, as capital was the first concept. Terry followed Bernard in insisting that provincialism was, however, also universal. The projection of the New York art world upon every other scene was itself also provincial — this both in centre and in periphery. The problem is, as Terry Smith argues, that we can all see this, on a moment's reflection, and know it is culturally relative or constructed, yet it is also real. Distinctions like metropolitan versus provincial still prevail, even after we expose or denounce them as arbitrary or stigmatic.

The development of Australian art, for Terry Smith in the seventies, is typified by variations on the theme of dependence. Inasmuch as the centres behave as though they are the leaders, the natural culture heroes, so do we then follow. The resulting tensions are beyond resolution; either we seek creatively to adapt, or we go local, seeking to make good, original art right here. Provincialism does not escape from this bind, but expresses it through the obsession with local identity. Who are we,

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in the provinces? Not you, in the centres. But please, can we play with you? New York, in this understanding, becomes a kind of brand name, a place or an image which authorises work as implicitly avant-garde. The logic of provincialism, as Bernard Smith also knew, then worked by relay. In order for, say, an art historian to receive recognition at home, it would first have to be granted overseas and then fed back. Centres like New York then depend vitally on the input of foreign artists. But this will always involve the politics of the one-way mirror, to use an image a Dutch sociologist once used with me; we can see them, but they never see us, except more recently in Hollywood speaking tongues. Cultural creation works through cultural traffic, but cultural transmission of the avant-garde is one-way; Australians know Jackson Pollock but New Yorkers will not know Sidney Nolan, let alone Gordon Bennett ("Oh, you have art in Australia?"). But here, for Terry Smith in 1974, there was no apparent exit: "As the situation stands, the provincial artist cannot choose not to be provincial." Expatriation results in assimilation, followed by return home to proselytise for antipodean artists. There are, of course, provincial or regional artists in the USA, as well; but turning our backs on provincialism will not make it go away.

Is there, then, no escaping these hard choices, avant-garde or dependency, metropolitanism or provincialism, cosmopolitanism or introspection, internationalism versus regionalism, universal or particular, Paris or the bush? Or to put it differently, thirty years after Terry Smith’s essay, is provincialism always such a bad thing? Is provincialism necessarily a problem?

Some signs suggest a shift in the available perspectives on these matters. An influential postcolonial critic like Dipesh Chakrabarty, himself a commuter, can now call for what he advocates as Provincializing Europe. Provincial cuisine, provincial or place based writing, Tuscany, Provence, Tim Winton, Stefano di Pieri, all the hip signs of consumption point out, away. The romantic critique of modernity has always pointed out, and back, away from the metropolis and its cities, even as these fantasies and consuming desires gobble up our early evenings in television and novel. Even the cop shows have left Manhattan.

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Long have moderns lusted for the past. Karl Marx, and differently Ferdinand Tönnies, harboured implicit or explicit desires to return to the community-image of the world before capitalism, before modernity. Oswald Spengler marked this way with his *Decline of the West*.⁵ Martin Heidegger rearticulated this sensibility into the thirties, where wisdom and balance come of isolation or solitude; cities corrupt, distract, overstimulate, generate herd mentalities, stimulate outer rather than inner direction. Yet this desire also evokes the lust for an authenticity we never knew. Put differently, again, in our times praise for the particular has been pitted against the abstract universalism of Enlightenment. What makes me real, in this way of thinking, is local, vernacular, that which grounds me, or puts my ear to the earth, which is small, modest and silent rather than bustling, restless and insatiable. The appeal of this view is as evident as is its danger. It is the argument for roots. As another antipodean in New York, Ken Wark, used to say, however, these days we have aerials, not roots. The limit of Wark's aphorism is also apparent. Not everyone can afford aerials, or voluntary mobility; and there remains a sense in which place, as we choose it, is constitutive of those senses of home or belonging which are the apparent precondition of love, loyalty, of the capacity to care for the locale and to engage in civic and political activity.

Another line into this labyrinth, then, would be to think of the pastoral rather than the provincial. Love of the pastoral is as British as it is German, and this British lineage has always been powerfully evident in the antipodes, even more so in New Zealand. New Zealand is the green and pleasant land, Ruskin, Tolkien. Australian pastoralism is distinct, known, as in Arthur Streeton's painting, "Golden Summer"; these are different tectonic plates. Arguably all moderns, metropolitans included, still have elements of the pastoral in their minds. That is what Frederick Olmsted set out to achieve, in Central Park and elsewhere, not the garden city but the city in the garden. As Raymond Williams reminds us in *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), these are very powerful words, county and city, both in fact brimming with ambivalence or contradiction. If we are in the city, we

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remain, in this field, somehow not of it. Modernity brings with it a sense of alienation. We become addicted to the stimuli, but they never quite satisfy us. In result, we become romantic again, nostalgic for times imagined if not remembered, and seek out the provincial, now to consume it, as diners or tourists, in passive rather than active mode.

_Budhi Ornament_

This was never the case for Robert Hughes, who set out to consume modernity even if he started in Italy and England before settling in New York. The young Hughes set out to conquer world culture. He already knew some of it; he knew about the pastoral, about antiquity and not only about modern painting. This he makes most apparent when, on television shows like _American Visions_, he looks straight down the barrel of the camera, sunburnt and tieless, to feed you some allusion to Cincinattus in American period painting. The newest world civilization, that of the United States, of course drank deep of Roman and classical antiquity as it invented its own republican traditions. Hughes knows all this, and this is what enables the mastery of his televisual control and capacity to condense across cultures and epochs.

But if he looks Australian, and appearances deceive, then surely Hughes is the kind of bitter expat and empty cosmopolitan who fled in despair; you can't begin to grow up until you've left the place. The detail of all those years of criticism in the _Time_ magazine columns suggest something else, a sense of detail and engagement as befits his trade and his commitment. Was Hughes ever, then, provincial, and what does his writing tell us about the provincialism problem? My suggestion here is that Hughes' work throws significant light on provincialism, because of the self-consciousness of his path and because of its doubly antipodean basis, one foot in the antipodes as we know them, one foot (or his heart) in Barcelona. To begin with his beginning, Hughes tells us something of these issues in _The Art of Australia._

_The Art of Australia_ is a young man's book, completed before he was 25, and published in Australia in 1965, by which time Hughes was in Italy, painting and discovering other worlds. The young man knew his purpose. It was supplementary to Bernard Smith's, from _Place, Taste_
and Tradition,\textsuperscript{6} to European Vision and the South Pacific,\textsuperscript{7} and Australian Painting (1962). Bernard Smith always stopped short of the present; that was his own art, or craft, that of the historian, for which distance and detachment are vital. This is the fundamental methodological and stylistic difference between Smith and Hughes. Smith is, as he says, a cultural historian with a primary interest in the visual. Hughes is an art critic, a writer rather than a scholar, though the depth of his work is clearly scholarly, or civilizational in scope. But the critic is in and of the present, reactive, in the moment, in the gallery or the studio; the energy is different, and the result reads with the distinction of the tradition more like Carlyle than Ruskin. Hughes stamps his critic's foot. When he sees crap, he says so.

So Hughes' purpose in The Art of Australia was to update Smith, and he achieves his result. The work is more descriptive and analytical than sweeping and sociological in the way a later project like American Visions is. Yet a sociological residue remains, as Hughes understands. As he writes in opening, "the most interesting issue raised by Australian painting is the complex, partly sociological, issue of its pendant relationship to the European tradition, both old and new. A history of Australian art should be written in terms of its overseas prototypes." Hughes' use of language, occasionally florid over the path of his work, is invariably evocative. Pendant could be illustrious, or simply in suspension. Certainly Hughes is right that a nationalist history of Australian painting would never work; this indeed, is one of the few limits to the more recent separation of the Australian collection from European work in the newer arrangements in Melbourne's two national galleries. As you follow the trajectory of colonial painting, from Glover through to Fred Williams in the Potter Gallery, you get a clear sense of movement, attraction and distance, but no sense of the cultural traffic and precedents which helped enable Australian painting. Hughes tell us here, in 1965, that he himself eschews the prototypes out of ignorance; what we need here, he says, is a scholarly sequel to Bernard Smith's European Vision for the period since 1880. Now prototype is too hard.

\textsuperscript{6} Bernard Smith, Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art since 1788 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1945).

\textsuperscript{7} Bernard Smith, European Vision and the South Pacific (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).
a word, but it fits the period. The point, rather, following Smith in "The Myth of Isolation," was that culture works through selection and adaptation, so that what would be called for here rather would be some kind of comparative history of colonial art, say, across settlers capitalisms, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, or the South American experiences across the Pacific.

But the young man already knows his terrain, and so deals in opening his book with the provincialism problem. At this point, he deals with it mentally. Ours is a provincial culture, constituted as such by the waves of world history. The question for Hughes, in the wake of Smith, would be to study what uses this provincial culture finds for the art it produces in period circumstances of sixties conservatism and high economic boom. What Hughes still characterises here as Australia's lamentable isolation from the mainstream is, he says, diminishing by 1969, when he closes the preface to the second edition of the book.

Hughes opens his tour by acknowledging the significance of Smith's work, while setting his own against it. I have written extensively about Smith's work, for example in Imagining the Antipodes, and am working towards a future project which will more fully catalogue Hughes' achievement, which will necessarily involve sorting out their interrelations. For the moment, I will only say that it seems to me on early encounter that The Art of Australia may be less set against Smith's work than the subliminal rivalry between the two men set in Sydney in the sixties might at first suggest. Hughes sets out, like Smith, to work within the relationships between art and environment. Like Smith, he has an instructive scepticism towards bullshit, nationalism included. He has no patience for the you-beaut cultural heromaking which enthrones Streeton, Lambert, Dobell and Drysdale in the pantheon. The results of this desire, as Hughes characteristically puts it, are hilarious; but the desire says much more about us, or them, then, than it does about the paintings.

In self-reflective register, he continues, he had imagined later in the fifties that Australian painting was purely a product of isolation, and that this isolation had conferred some mysterious vitality upon it. But this was before he travelled out, to Italy. The limit of Australian experience,
in this period, is in the limits of its Galleries, apart from the National Gallery of Victoria. Apart from the NGV, Australian galleries are 'provincial to a fault', both in space and time. Each individual artwork is presented as though it were a relic, revered but not understood, all aura, or awe, no context or history.

One difference of emphasis between Hughes and Smith is already apparent, or at least suggested here. Hughes' emphasis is on the gallery as the site of the appreciation, or consumption of art. This is the figure or persona we know so well, standing in front of a picture on TV, or eliciting a similar presence in his magazine columns. Smith's emphasis, as in "The Myth of Isolation," is on the creation or production of the images, on the painters rather than the public. It is a fitting approach for a Marxist, which Hughes never was, though the question of patronage becomes more and more palpable, for example, by American Visions; and perhaps this was inevitable as Hughes' view shifted to the Hudson, where money shouts, and patronage is everything, even if the art becomes entropic in result. It's a long way to the top, and a longer way from Joshua Reynolds to Jeff Koons.

So Hughes begins The Art of Australia with this fundamental curiosity about the relationship of Australian painting to Europe, and his sentiments anticipate those later followed through in Smith's Modernisms's History (Modernism's History: A. Study in Twentieth Century Art and Ideas (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), where the stories of the peripheries would always necessarily also tell us something of the stories of the centres. For Hughes, in The Art of Australia, no other country in the modern world provides so good a laboratory for the study of foreign schemata on a provincial culture as Australia.

The text of The Art of Australia opens, of course, in Botany Bay, and here we see a pattern in Hughes' work; most of that to which he returns is first posited in passing. The contemporary reader is immediately transported to The Fatal Shore, though in the fibre of Hughes' own project, there are also echoes into Heaven and Hell in Western Art, his

10 Robert Hughes, Heaven and Hell in Western Art (New York: Stein and Day, 1968)
wonderful and unjustly neglected book of 1968. For there are demons in the European imagination, and they are also transported to Botany Bay, as it is the antipodes from which they hail. Here we have antipodean creatures, with the feet pointing elsewhere, but we also meet Goya, a doppelganger who will return later.

Where there is hell, there is heaven. Hughes deals with the images of the antipodes as arcadia. As he puts it, the vision of arcadia in the antipodes, despite its croaking, stinging and gargling inhabitants, was not easily to be put down. Early painters, like Augustus Earle, combined romanticism, frontier lore and topography in their work. Hughes' language becomes harsher as he proceeds. The lineaments of colonial art, he concludes, are patchy. "No country in the West during the nineteenth century, with the possible exception of Patagonia, was less endowed with talent." This is the magisterial voice of the critic in the making. Hughes' young tongue is lacerative. But what is often missed, as we provincials recoil from the severity of the judgement, is that the certainty of its delivery also invites dissent or disagreement ("sez who?"). Hughes possesses authority, which invites dissent.

Hughes' judgement, at this point, was that in consequence there was little in the history of Australian art between 1788 and 1885 that would interest an historian (take that! Dr Smith!) except the way that painters accommodated environment and European forms. The young Hughes did not relish from identifying Australian painting negatively, by its absence — the problem here was that there was no Australian Delacroix.

After 1880 things picked up. In 1883 four young Australians were on a walking tour up north — not in Italy, but in Spain. Spain: outside Madrid, not yet Barcelona. In Spain, they got the gossip from Paris, on Gerôme. They adapted and selected, especially their leading light, Tom Roberts. Such is the way of cultural traffic. Provincialism however persisted, later in Norman Lindsay, who suffered to an appalling degree from provincialism in time as well as space. Some painters disappeared into the bush; others fled out, like Albert Tucker in 1947: "I am a refugee from Australian culture." Those who stayed in the cities just copped it sweet, following perhaps what Max Harris called the Camus streak, playing along, avoiding grand gestures. Some simply copped provincialism, while others struggled against it, or fled to the centres. Still, provincialism prevailed. Hughes quotes Jacques Barzun, to the
effect that it is the provincial belief in centre and extremity that makes Paris and London rule; only the adventurous travelled out and sideways. Provincialism looks up and down, not sideways.

Hughes dances around *The Antipodean Manifesto*, Bernard Smith's 1959 choreography with the Boyds, Perceval, Pugh, Black, Dickerson and Blackman. Often then taken to be advocacy of a national, and figurative tradition against the abstraction of international style, the *Manifesto* viewed in retrospect was unable to escape from period standoffs between Sydney and Melbourne and abstraction and realism in its reception. The remaining point was that the antipodean was less an Australian, than a figure caught in between, or a migratory bird. Like Smith, Hughes was unhappy with the false choice between Dobell’s portraiture and empty abstraction. The line out, for Hughes, was apparent in Ian Fairweather’s work, or in Brett Whitely’s. An image of Whitely’s made the cover of the second edition of *The Art of Australia*, indicative both of results and of beginnings. Whitely had also travelled out, and shared something of Hughes’ cultural universe, where America was the background image, even as the British rock invasion opened the next brilliant phase of cultural traffic. Their soundtrack was Dylan, and Cream; its icon, momentarily, was Jagger, rather than Marilyn Monroe, but never quite Warhol. *Gimme Shelter* then became an island.

*The Art of Australia* seems, necessarily, to become more reportive the closer it gets to its own present. Its personnel seems busier, sweater, their paintings wet and dripping, disallowing the kind of critical distance that Bernard Smith insisted upon. Yet Hughes was bound, in conclusion, to seek to make sense of it all, or at least of the present and its impasse. Or was it an impasse? For Hughes also succeeds in conveying the sense by the end of the sixties that new movement is discernable, in centre and in periphery. Historically, the tendency has been to think regionally and to seek out *genius loci*; and like Smith, Robert Hughes twitches at the kind of interwar nationalism which looks to land and soil for inspiration, whether in Germany or in Australia. Hughes complains that Australians tend to presume that place has some kind of special influence over art and culture, even if it is weaker than this kind of nazi or chauvinist enthusiasm. Problem is, as Hughes concludes, the nature

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of this influence is never defined; and yet, we continue to feel it, now perhaps more than ever, as we revalue nature over culture in what is again a significantly provincial turn (culture we lack, but have we got nature!)

Now, towards the end of the sixties, Hughes anticipates globalization, or at least something like it. Now we live in what he calls a linear culture, where images are mechanically reproduced and globally transmitted, to the extent that it may henceforth be pointless to speak of isolated cultural pockets where regional styles may develop in nostalgically admired purity. Australian painting, on this way of thinking, should really be conceived as painting in Australia; the whole possibility of national style is placed under question. Hughes’ anticipations look prophetic, forty years later; the only difference in what we watch today is that while globalism indeed undermines the nation it also strengthens it, in different ways, and regionalism in turn thrives, both within and across nations. As for the painters themselves, Hughes’ sense in 1965 is that they remain caught within D.H. Lawrence’s problematic, in Kangaroo. “They are afflicted with a sense of inferiority — of being constantly left behind; and their occasional truculence about decadent Europe is their obvious mask.” They still carry Phillips’ Cultural Cringe, in both forms; they lust after the unattainable, and they despise it. To ignore this problem, and paint as if nothing existed north of Cape York or east of Christchurch is to succumb at once to provincialism, as he puts it. But painters need not feel or carry the responsibility to articulate national identity or collective imagination. Hughes slips behind the screen, together with the black swan of trespass: “I had read in books that art was not easy / But nobody told me that the mind repeats / In its ignorance the vision of others.”

Twenty years later he was back in Sydney, researching The Fatal Shore. That book became an airport bookshop blockbuster, one of the few books about Australia in my experience known to most of my friends overseas, though again it is much more than that. By 1987 Hughes’ style is ripe, visual and as shocking as its object is, thick with mobile adjectives whose purpose it is to catch this place or what the convicts and their governors might have seen in it two hundred years earlier. This first colony, of course, is a province, a little bit of England caricatured by its relocation in the land of weird melancholy. For its opponents at one remove, like Jeremy Bentham, transportation was a
way to evacuate British refuse. As for the earliest painters, their heads were elsewhere, or at least their habits and templates were too pastoral to register the specificities around Botany Bay. Cultural traffic worked its way, as when for example the invaders gave back to the indigenes a word they thought was theirs, but was actually introduced: Kangaroo. D. H. Lawrence unwittingly reproduced the gesture by giving back to Australians the provincialism they had also invented.

More powerfully, for those of us who come after Freud, Hughes describes the experience for Europe as its geographical unconscious. The antipodes served as the other of Empire, never as the equal or balance of the centre except in the most antique sense, as object to its subject. This was to play out as the great antipodean time lag. Yet Australian democracy also supplanted its Gulag. Australians were capable of innovative democracy, but less so of original cultural creation. Some, like Samuel Sidney, dreamed of the antipodes in the nineteenth century as Arcadia, as a way out of modernity. Hughes charts rather the political arrival of modernity via democracy, together with its maintenance of a culture that remains provincial. The broader theme worked by Hughes here is that so central later to American Visions. It is the question of foundations, of the myths within which peoples or their leaders constructed modern cultures, puritan yet hedonistic in America, the convict stain, then the egalitarianism of gold in Australia. The Australian encounter with the continent was different. The Americans went west with the same enthusiasm that took them elsewhere, where whereas the Australians hugged the coastline, and themselves, stuck to the east, stayed with Camus rather than travelling with Tocqueville. "In Australian terms" he writes with gut-wrenching personal prophecy in The Fatal Shore, "to go west was to die and the space itself was the jail."

In the nineteenth century, each new proclamation of renewal or Australian arrival enclosed a longing for amnesia, Hughes wrote, or at least for nostalgia, for images of the other's past, Arcadia, the green and pleasant land. Ours was, he said, at first a chronicle of provincial misery, a minor episode in English imperial policy, best forgotten. What was distant in time and space was real; what was close had been sublimated into the substance of bad social dreams, this at least for our superiors and educators. It was, finally, the sea which imprisoned us; but there were always ways out, means of traffic both individual and cultural as...
the tyranny of distance became navigable by those with the means, first
the sailboat and steamer, then the Constellation and the 747.

Australia, thus, has always been Robert Hughes’ antipodes. He was
both antipodean, to end living the majority of his years in New York,
with Australia as his other referent, and metropolitan. There is a third
leg here, for Hughes, and it is chosen in Barcelona.

These days the image of Barcelona is cool, hip, a third way, away
from well trod centres. It was not so long ago that Barcelona was viewed
in the centres as was Barry McKenzie. Manuel, in Fawlty Towers, comes
from Barcelona, and we — here in league with the British — laughed,
as though it were self-evidently funny or hopeless. Hughes discovered
Barcelona, as Italy, by definition an innocent; all he had on Italy was
de Chirico on a postcard. Barcelona he has come to love enough to
write on thrice: Barcelona (1992)\(^{12}\); Barcelona — The Great Enchantress
(2004)\(^{13}\); and in between, the biography that precedes his biography,
Goya (2003)\(^{14}\).

The first volume of the trilogy, Barcelona, maps it out. In its preface,
the optic opens again with provincialism — this time, with somebody
else’s. The vista for Barcelona opens with a sense of postimperial shift.
Hughes anticipates that the coming decade, the nineties, will see the
winding up of a model of cultural activity that served modernism so well.
It is, in fact, an older model, inherited from papal Rome and then Paris
at its height. It rests on the idea of the central city dictating its norms to
the provinces and colonies. Probably the last city to assume this role,
according to Hughes, was New York, circa 1925-1975. Barcelona, on
this view, was plainly provincial, and this would echo “on a none-too-
subliminal level, with the fact that I am a provincial, an Australian.”
But more. This is Catalan. Australian is not quite a dialect; and with a few
exceptions from the west, Australia has no specific tradition of proud
separatism.

Hughes tells us that he fell in love with Barcelona in 1966. He talks
us through history, city emergence and design, decline and recovery.
The contrast with New York, a city he then viewed in civilizational
terms as entropic, is striking. Barcelona is a metropolis; it has long been

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\(^{13}\) Robert Hughes, Barcelona: The Great Enchantress (National Geographic, 2004).

an intensely provincial place as well. Regionalism can strut, as well as
cringe. Hughes the historian cannot help himself. What began in his
head as a city architecture guidebook is soon back with the Romans.
Which is, of course, where the story of provincialism begins, with the
Romans in Provence, and in Catalunya. The spirit of this provincialism
was less proudly independent, and more emphatically egalitarian, with
a touch of Camus. Thus the famous and unique oath of allegiance
sworn by Catalans and Aragonese to the Spanish monarch in Madrid:
“We, who are as good as you, swear to you, who are no better than us,
to accept you as our king and sovereign lord, provided you observe all
our liberties and laws – but if not, not.”

Hughes’ love of Barcelona runs deep. He also loves Gaudi, and la
Sagrada Familia, but he is at pains to avoid tokenising the place, as in
the Opera House to Sydney. Instead he traverses a contested culture of
experimentalism, modernisme, tradition, and Catholicism, socialism,
class struggle, planning and chaos. Catalan modernism, in result, is
that wonderful hybrid closer to Art Nouveau than to Bauhaus. This
is the context in which Gaudi arrives. Hughes describes Gaudi’s
architecture as the delayed baroque that Barcelona never had. But it
is in the detail of his analysis that Hughes reminds us of his earliest
interest in architecture, and it is in the sense of wonderment that
Hughes best conveys the fantastic impossibility of these nevertheless
highly tactile traditionalist experiments. Gaudi is both a regionalist and
an essentialist; there is nothing here of international style. And this is
its brilliance.

Hughes closes Barcelona with the line from Maragall, which
becomes the prompt for his return in 2004 — “Our Barcelona, the great
enchantress!” He returns in the little book called just that, Barcelona
– The Great Enchantress. Much has changed, in those twelve years. He
has fought off the black dog, with American Visions in 1996. Hughes
has almost been killed, in his Northwest Australian car accident of 1999.
This would be enough to stop most, but writing works as his Jacob’s
ladder. And the register becomes more personal, if not confessional,
in these little books like The Enchantress and his book on fishing and
nature, A Jerk On One End (1999)\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{15} Robert Hughes, A Jerk On One End (Los Angeles, Calif.: Library of Contemporary
Thought, 1999).
The narrative returns to 1966, to first sighting, but only momentarily. It shifts rapidly to Barcelona as the site of Hughes’ third wedding, to the painter Doris Downes. Third time lucky was in the third city. And the echo, again, is with Sydney rather than Manhattan, for Barcelona also has the vitality of provincialism. Hughes remembers the oath of allegiance sworn by the Catalans and Aragonese to the Spanish monarch in Madrid, and views it as an admirable template for modern marriage. If not, not. Hughes’ description of the wedding is touching, if not moving. And the stretch and pace of the book is incredible, not least in this more closely personal register. Hughes speaks with feeling of love, of food and markets, of dance, of Catalan submarines; there is an “I want” here which is refreshingly direct after a decade of ‘I want to argue’ as the dominant voice in postmodern criticism.

Yet the provincialism problem also persists. Hughes observes that one response to provincialism, an internal response, is to adopt a personal centre as an alternative — New York, London, Paris. America appealed to Hughes rather than Britain as a way to side step the awful cringe. But as Hughes says here, to sign up with the USA, for an Australian, might also be an act of colonial capitulation (though it might also mean anything else, including choosing where you want to die). Hughes would rather be an adoptive or short-stay Catalan instead. Plainly Barcelona was a relief from New York, less suffocating, less given to endless ratification and starfucking. Yet Barcelona had a long settled history, was a province rather than a colony as, say Sydney was: these are not the same story. The legacy of Barcelona, looking out, is that a strong regional culture is not fated to be provincial, in Spain or anywhere else.

The power of Hughes’ own voice, in closing this little scan, is in its directness. Hughes refuses tribalism. His view is sympathetic with that of Agnes Heller, that (within limits, and given good fortune) we can choose ourselves. To choose Barcelona, or Melbourne, is to embrace it with some sense of comfort. Melbourne, for me, is not New York; it is the place I was born, and where I have chosen to stay, to work, to live. I do not have to love it, though I might choose to. Nor do I have to feel shame for it. It is simply my city. For his part, Hughes insists on the right to choose what he loves, cities included. Identity, here, is not traditional or prescriptive: it is modern, and optional. And it is less than obsessive, demanding endless justification. Life is too short.
The exit from Barcelona is, again, touching, a plain little story, the couple watching the Catalan national dance, the *Sardona*, from their hotel window. The dance is stately, minimal, democratic, spontaneous. Hughes knows how to watch. He has the voice and the eye. And he has other companions. His life has been ghosted by various figures, but the one he persists with is the last in this survey: Goya. Hughes' *Goya* is dedicated to Doris Downes, and her sons, and laments the loss of his own son, Danton. The pain goes on, for it now includes Hughes' own, after that near-fatal car crash, and the dozen operations that followed. The extent of Hughes' suffering is difficult to fathom. Only it can explain his lapse into the bitter language of provincialism, as his Acknowledgements proceed to blast Western Australia ('West Australian justice is to justice what West Australian culture is to culture'). Hughes' experience in Western Australia was Hell. It took him closer than he had been before to the pain, fear and despair that would more fully open Goya's lifeworld to him.

Hughes' writerly frame in introducing Goya is at once historical and cultural. Provinces, like empires, are historically formed; Spain was once the world. The horror that Goya painted evoked a world unknown to white Australians, even Catholics like Hughes in the sixties. In America, in contrast, the pain of Vietnam bit deeper, reaching back into earlier fundamental splits like those of the American Civil War. But the roots go back further. Goya was also a provincial. The Spanish Enlightenment was slow to emerge; it had significant enemies. Provincialism is, as Hughes hints, as much to do with time as with place or space; provincials feel as though they are behind. As Johannes Fabian argues in *Time and the Other*, the world leaders in the centres place themselves ahead of provincials and others in time, therefore in history, but also in the present. Whether rich and conservative or avant garde and radical, the leaders of the west see themselves as bearing the spearhead of time as progress. To suffer censorship, for example, whether in Madrid or in Melbourne across those centuries, was to be held back, pronounced backward, to be placed backwards in time.

Yet from the provinces, prophets also come. Sometimes they cultivate the local mythology, the Spanish majo or macho, or maja, the natural and vulgar voice against the refined and artificial. Goya, like Hughes, innovates but is vernacular in voice. Like Gaudi, to follow, there was something strikingly distinct in the result. Hughes shares
Goya's fascination with the grotesque and the macabre; remember only the visuals in *Heaven and Hell in Western Art*, as scary as anything in Tarantino, scarier even for the absence of the photographic clarity of film. More, the artistic image appeals endlessly, empirical, sceptical, seeking to enlighten, to illustrate but fully aware of the monsters that come with the sleep of reason, the *caprichos* adding captions themselves elusive or else full of paradox. Goya is provincial and modern at the same time. Like Hughes, he takes to exile, this time to Bordeaux via Paris. Goya suffers a stroke, which paralyses the right side of his body, the same side which Hughes shatters in the car crash. So the sleep of reason brings Goya to Hughes, in the chaos, and Hughes travels through to the other side with Goya as his psychic companion.

Hughes' local reception, in the meantime, had been marred by the TV series *Return to the Fatal Shore*. The title was good humoured; the series had to build around his accident. If the result was disappointing, we should hardly be surprised. The magisterial presence of *American Visions* is not there. The themes suggested seem reminiscent of earlier, provincial days, wowserism and class; this was the kind of stuff that made some Australians feel that he no longer knew us. Nevertheless, the local response to Hughes was often cruel, unable to see his pain. Most appalling of all, a West Australian performer purchased the squashed metal cube of the car wreck in order to present it garnished with green cans as the most vindictive art work imaginable in the antipodes. Even Beckett, in his gloom, would do no more than alliterate critic with cretin. To set out to crucify the critic symbolically in this way was beyond awful. Goya had Saturn devouring his son. We had rather set out to cut up the messenger. Art had become payback.

If modernity is about speed, then provincialism is anxiety about missing out. What Hughes forces upon us is something we already know, but often fail to recognise. The centres suffer from an abundance of riches. We, who live further away, are sometimes compelled to innovate not *ex nihilo*, but with what comes to hand. Innovation comes also of distance, of other circumstances. The anxiety of missing out, after all, comes of the fear of being in the wrong place. But there is no right place. Cultural innovation happens everywhere, anywhere. These days, even as the global rush to the urban edge becomes pluralised to that of various world cities, the hinterlands risk dropping off the canvas. The provincialism problem persists. If Robert Hughes is ahead
of us, it may be to do with the quality of his provincial insight, rather than the fact that he left us behind. We should celebrate him, and his achievement.

Is provincialism, then, always a problem? Perhaps Terry Smith's 1974 maxim still stands: we have no choice but to be provincial. This has its advantages, if we also think like migratory creatures. There is no especial privilege in being outsiders; anyway, here is no outside to the world-system. The perspective of the provincial might still expand the horizon. The issue here is rather that the relationship between centre and periphery is generally constructed internally, as master to slave, or oedipally, as father (or mother) to child. The limit of provincial vision, in consequence, is that it is unilateral. In terms of perspective, the peripheral vision of provincialism remains underdeveloped. There is light outside the provincial tunnel. Other optics, traditions and possibilities for creation might open, if we look sideways.