ROBIN GERSTER

A Bellyful of Bali: Travel, Writing and Australia/Asia Relationships

WHEN in the late thirteenth century the peripatetic Venetian Marco Polo complained about the heat in India, he began a long tradition of Western tourists whingeing about Asia. Polo could be the most equable and tolerant of globetrotters, but southern India must have affected his mind. The sun in the southern coastal region of Quilon, he assures his readers, is so intensely powerful that 'if you put an egg into one of the rivers you would not have long to wait before it boiled' (287). Centuries later, the heat — dryly catastrophised as the 'Hot Weather' — was the principal bugbear of the British in India. Sahibs and memsahibs in novels from Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) to Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975) revile it obsessively. The heat of the Indian sun in these novels is a gauge of more than mere temperature; it provides a metaphor, in the finest romantic traditions of the Purple East, for the simmering human passions generated in the Oriental context. The notorious 'rape' in *A Passage to India* is presaged when Adela Quested experiences a frisson of frustration at the disappointingly humdrum Indian sunrise, viewed from the train as she travels toward the Marabar Caves and her imagined encounter with the attractive Dr Aziz. With sly suggestion, Forster addresses both the personal particulars of the unhappily affianced Adela's situation and the psychology of the British imperial traveller in India:

> Colour throbbed and mounted behind a pattern of trees, grew in intensity, was yet brighter, incredibly brighter, strained from without against the globe of the air ... But at the supreme moment, when night should have died and day lived, nothing occurred ... Why, when the chamber was prepared, did the bridegroom not enter with trumpets and shawms, as humanity expects? The sun rose without splendour. (136-37)

Anticlimax of a different but not unrelated kind marks the responses of many contemporary Australian literary travellers to Asia. Marriage with 'Asia' has for twenty and more years been held up to Australians as a promise and an aspiration, as the national future. But the honeymoon is over. Critics of the 'Asianisation' of the country are cropping up in numbers, disdaining intimate ties with the region with the vehemence of disenchanted lovers. And while since the late 1960s the Asian journey has been naturalised as one of life's essential adventures, just as young Australians once felt compelled to make the long haul to Britain, more and more literary visits to the region produce the finding that Asia needs redefining in Australian eyes. Increasingly, the inflated estimation of Eastern societies in the late twentieth century is being seen to be as specious as the demonisation of the 'yellow hordes' of a century before. Enthusiasm is being replaced by a neocolonial anxiety and distaste. The warm embrace is turning into a new form of the old cold shoulder.

The island of Bali, saddled with its oxymoronic reputation as a 'tourist paradise', has borne much of the Australian backlash against Asia. Lamenting Bali is of course hardly new. In his definitive descriptive account *Island of Bali* (1937) the Mexican