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Life, Love and Art: Representations of the Artist in the Novels of Alex Miller

Love is like faith. It does you good to have it, but it usually has a price to it.

Alex Miller, *Coal Creek*

In most Australian fictions of previous decades, romantic love is a glaring and deliberate absence. In 1981, Chris Wallace-Crabbe observed that “when we cast an eye back over our most significant works of fiction we find in the first place remarkably few treatments of passionate or romantic love” (2). Instead, we see “a capacity to stick on, bear up, bustle around and hold things together” (2). Relevant examples include Christina Stead, Katherine Susannah Pritchard and Miles Franklin. Christina Thompson argues in a similar vein, observing that though the Australian exploration narrative “is a romantic narrative . . . there is certainly little that looks like love.” Instead there is “desire protracted, fulfilment denied” and “success in the form of surrender or death” (163). Recent years, however, have seen a resurgence of interest in romantic love amongst several leading Australian authors as the valuable contributions of Peter Carey’s *The Chemistry of Tears* (2012), Kate Grenville’s *Sarah Thornhill* (2011) and Elliot Perlman’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (2003) can attest. This emerging trend signifies a new and gentler aspect of the Australian literary character that is less focussed on individual endurance and independent achievement and instead promotes collaborative effort. Alex Miller’s work pertaining to the subject of love is one of the most wide-ranging with regard to both culture and placement in time and space. As Brenda Walker observes, Miller approaches questions of love across a variety of cultural backgrounds and this “illuminates what is foundational in love while respecting diversity in the most intimate of human connections” (42). Miller’s vision and definition of romantic love in its ideal form can be derived from his aptly titled novel *Lovesong* (2009). The novel’s principal lovers, the Australian John Patterner

and his Tunisian wife Sabiha exist within a confluence of differences and thrive on a continual reciprocal learning process. Her Arabic remains alien to him as English presents difficulties for her and so they communicate in French. The two are inseparable but as John acknowledges to himself even years after their first meeting: "What strangers they really were to each other. Strangers to each other's language. To each other's childhood. Strangers to each other's tribe. He loved her helplessly" (192-193). There is a bond between them that runs deeper than cultural differences. Indeed, though never cloying, an atmosphere of warm good-natured humanity pervades much of the novel. It is towards love of this kind, this infrangible bond deepened by continual learning and acceptance of difference, that many of Miller's characters aspire. However, the romantic aspect of Miller's work is yet to receive extensive critical attention in an exemplary study. Miller's representations of love are widely various but a salient feature is his consistent conjoining of love and artistic expression. The aim of this article is to draw out Miller's dynamic force of love between life and art in the novels where it is most prevalent and to discuss his concept of this relationship according to the current state of research. It is a case study in which 'love' is defined as a profound affection or passion for another person which is often, but not always, accompanied by sexual attraction. 'Art' is defined as an expression of creativity in a painting, sketch or sculpture.

Though his treatment of love has been neglected, Miller's questioning of the divide between art and 'real' life, a divide which is often complex and unfixed, have generated significant critical interest. As Geordie Williamson observes, Miller has "spent the last twenty-five years pondering the relationship between art and life" (2012: 233). Robert Dixon has contributed an invaluable wealth of scholarship to this aspect of Miller's work which he contends is "one of the most sustained examples of ekphrasis (or writing about art) in Australian literature" (2012: 12). Dixon expounds at length upon Miller's depictions of the personal aspects of artistic creation such as "friendship" and "hospitality" (2014: xi), particularly the friendships entwined within artistic collaborations. Of equal importance,

however, is the role of romantic and familial love within and across the divide between art and life and the striving to find a point of balance between the two that occurs across the majority of Miller's novels. There is no instance of artistic aspiration that is not inextricably linked with the secrets of love and emotion. These themes appear in several of Miller's novels but are dominant in *The Sitters* (1995), *Prochownik's Dream* (2005) and most recently in *Autumn Laing* (2011). New love burgeons or wanes according to the fluctuations of artistic inspiration as children are nurtured or shunned. Several marriages are made or broken on the altar of art. Unless an artistic sympathy is established within the marriage, the artist's creative inspirations will invariably lead him or her to seek love and passion elsewhere. Furthermore, the technical aspects observable in each artist's oeuvre are mirrored in the nature of the protagonist's personal relationship. Thus Pat Donlon's competitive aspect incites Autumn Laing to compete with his wife for his affections. In *Prochownik's Dream*, Toni Powlett's collaborator in art is also his partner in an illicit love affair and Jessica Keal becomes as absent in life as she is in the principal portrait of *The Sitters*. In each of these novels, love potentially enables the artist to compromise and merge his or her artistic independence with the modern concept of collaboration. This theme will form the core of the analyses in this article. On a deeper level, as this article will further demonstrate, the desired compromise between fierce independence and loving collaboration is reminiscent of the need for a postcolonial nation that has established cultural independence, to form new political and cultural alliances with an ancestral country loved by a new generation of responsible-minded Australians. This analogy is progressively evident, it is complicated by Powlett's more complex heritage and it culminates in *Autumn Laing*.

To achieve compromise between love and art involves a struggle which few are able to overcome. Few couples are as fortunate as *Lovesong's* John and Sabiha. Love is presented as a form of art in itself and therefore while often beautiful, is rarely pure or perfect, open always to interpretation and is liable to be as destructive as it is creative. Though few fail entirely, the greatest artists, and those

with the potential to become great, are those who achieve a centre point between life, art and the gentler forms of love. *The Sitters*, *Prochownik's Dream* and *Autumn Laing* do not advocate the view that the creative individuality of an artist requires that he or she be as experimental and unrestricted in romance and marriage as in art, a view recently espoused as typical of many of the more romantically inclined artists in modern history (Bullen 16). Instead, while in the throes of romantic love, each artist turns to his or her family and cultural heritage, lovingly acknowledges its worth and collaborates with it.

The Sitters

The Sitters investigates the complex and ambiguous relationships that may form between an artist and the subject of his portrait. As the artist says: "It takes two to make a portrait. And one of them's always yourself" (40). Contrarily though, much of the novel is preoccupied by the dilemmas of solitude. Peter Pierce notes that "the inescapability of aloneness" is a common preoccupation across Miller's work (310) and indeed, the unnamed protagonist of *The Sitters* is, for the most part, a solitary man having been rejected by his father, estranged from his wife and son and having drifted from contact with a much loved sister. It has also been argued that the bereft characters in Miller's novels harness their solitariness to drive their artistic endeavours. Bernadette Brennan writes of "the creative power of loss" (107) in *The Sitters* and argues that "death is represented through the unsaid, the absent" (103). Certainly, as the narrator muses: "We paint portraits from our alienation from people. It's nostalgia for company we don't have and can't have. Absence and loss" (110). However, the advent of Jessica Keal into the life of the protagonist heralds a renewal of creative effort clearly demonstrating that love or even the beginnings of an attraction that will never come to fruition are equally powerful agents in the creative process. The narrator, who is commissioned to make a series of sketches featuring the staff at a nearby university, offers to paint Jessica's portrait as a private project. As she sits for him, confidences are exchanged and childhoods are revisited. In the

process, the artist learns more of himself than he does of his subject. Nevertheless, an unspoken bond forms between them, both wanted and mistrusted, which will resonate in the memories of the artist for many years to come. As Veronica Brady cogently argues:

It points us to the real subject, a ceremonious introspection, at once profoundly intimate and yet paradoxically impersonal, as the artist pursues her in himself and himself in her through the labyrinthine ways of memory as well as of the unfolding of ambiguous relationships. (43)

Despite numerous preliminary sketches, when the portrait is complete, the figure of Jessica is missing. It seems that the artist's incipient and partially suppressed love for Jessica, while providing the inspiration and the motivation for the work, renders him incapable of representing the object of his love in art. Though his urge is to continue his partnership with her by including her in the painting, the artist cannot compromise. Rather than balancing his technical skill with his burgeoning tenderness he is silently overwhelmed by a love he never communicates and, as a result, he cannot complete the painting that may have been his greatest work. For him, love is accompanied always by the knowledge of pending loss and therefore, he creates a study of Jessica's "absence" (107). Love, as well as what Brennan intuits as death and loss, is represented through the absent in this novel. At some level, Jessica seems to understand and shortly afterwards, artist and muse part for many years. The absence in art becomes an absence in life with love as the proximate cause.

Earlier Australian authors have explored the division between art and life and the interconnectedness of artistic pursuit and the personal lives of the artists. Perhaps most notably, in Patrick White's *The Vivisector* (1970), Hurtle Duffield's paintings make manifest the agonies and imperfections of others as cruelly and for as little purpose as the vivisectionists in the novel eviscerate animals for public display. As Duffield's adoptive mother cries despairingly: "You were born with a knife . . . in your eye" (146). Similarly, in David Malouf's *Harland's Half Acre* (1984), a hermetic but not unfeeling

artist creates scenes of “traffic accidents, small wars, marriages, deaths, perverse gropings and slashings and assaults” (189) and thereby reveals his incomprehension of the suffering he conveys. Harland is neither insensate nor unaffected by the tragedies marring his own life, many of which inspire his paintings but he is incapable of incorporating such feeling into his painting. From the first, he is aware of this lack and declares: “People do suffer, it’s terrible. Only it’s not all . . . we were meant to be happy” (83). Similarly, the artist in *The Sitters* has a history of creating unconventional and deliberately disturbing portraits. Following the sudden death of a close friend, he captures “the likeness of a dead man” (61) to the consternation of the man’s family. Similarly, despite her absence in the original picture, the painter will eventually portray Jessica in art. Years later, as Jessica lies dying, “crippled in mind and body” (129), her portrait is painted. Where before the artist painted Jessica’s absence in fear of collaborating with her presence, now he captures her in death as he feared to depict her in life. The first portrait of Jessica is technically accomplished but bereft of obvious feeling and the second is equally suggestive of cowardice. Like the paintings of White’s Duffield and Malouf’s Harland, this work is clinical. This approach to art was briefly explored and derided in Miller’s *Lovesong*. The narrator’s wife, Marie, both as a social worker and as an artist, scorns “professional detachment” arguing that “it’s just a way of refusing to feel” (110).

Despite his troubled history, the protagonist’s path towards enlightenment as an artist has not yet ended. The family life the artist endured in England before departing to his Australian wife and son was disjointed and often acidic. His earliest memories are tainted by a father suffering the ravages of war trauma. He must nonetheless affirm and consolidate his intrinsic connection to it and his latent love for his English family before he can build upon his Australian loves and connections. At the beginning of the novel, he is incapable of painting portraits of family members and acknowledges it as a terrible shortcoming:

This blindness with regard to my intimates always struck me as a severe limitation of my vision, a real handicap, and even as

something that might finally cripple me and invalidate altogether my entire work as a painter of portraits. (8)

Ultimately, he is able to attempt likenesses of some of his relatives on canvas but, true to his usual form, only of those who are dead, namely his father and sister. Only in this way can he attempt reconciliation with them. Sadly, this old man is unlikely to rise to the challenges he has set himself. This is an artist of extremes whose activities on canvas reflect precisely the turmoil in his heart. He is unlikely ever to achieve resolution or balance in either and consequently, his art will remain punctuated by absence and loss. However, that he becomes an artist of note is not to be gainsaid. Even when the journey remains incomplete, art that has been touched by love retains its own resonance.

Prochownik's Dream

In contrast to the secluded atmosphere of *The Sitters*, *Prochownik's Dream* is a novel deeply immersed in family life. The novel centres on the artist Toni Powlett and Teresa, his volatile and fiercely maternal wife. Procreation is to Teresa what artistic creation is to Toni. Family pervades every aspect of Teresa's world: "Everyone needs a family" (189). Toni's home is, at least at first, peaceful and contented. However, Toni has been suffering a dearth of artistic inspiration since the death of his father. He has been reduced to constructing installations in memory of him and is otherwise content simply to assist in the home and to care for Nada, his little daughter. Always though, Toni yearns to reconnect with something beyond his newly established family and he turns to its antecedents. Artistic inspiration returns abruptly and simultaneously with the return of former instructors and fellow artists Marina Golding and Robert Schwarz to the district. Spurred also by the promise of inclusion in his friends' exhibition, Toni is motivated to paint not only Marina but also her entire family; his "Other Family" as the portrait is titled.

Miller's artists are unable to work productively in isolation. Marina is vociferous on the subject: "We're all collaborators. All of us. None of us does this completely on our own" (156). Like John and Sabiha,

Toni and Marina advance together. Marina poses for Toni, proffers advice and ultimately finishes the principal painting for him, a tremendous concession on the part of Toni, an artist accustomed to working alone. Marina becomes, in effect, Toni's muse (Ley). Collaboration in art swiftly becomes collaboration in love. Toni and Marina's artistic alliance is satisfactory to both and as Adrian Caesar observes, "the erotic consummation of Toni's relationship with Marina follows the artistic consummation" (111). For Toni, it is open to question whether this is an act of betrayal. It is as though he loves Marina in furtherance of his art and in a sphere entirely separate from his life with his wife and daughter. It is his wish at this moment to isolate his art entirely from his life:

Did he feel he had betrayed Teresa? He was not sure. Surely it had been something beyond those ordinary things, betrayal and trust, something belonging to another realm, to another dimension altogether. (239)

Nevertheless, an element of doubt remains. Marina's status as a former mentor also adds an oedipal aspect to Toni's dilemma. The protégé becomes intimate with the nurturer, raising the spectres of unnaturalness and sterility. For these reasons, the connection is transitory, but the seeds of Toni's inspiration have in fact been sown. He has absorbed the lessons bequeathed by his 'parents' in the world of Australian art. He must now make his peace with the legacy of his beloved Polish father whose injunction to "paint what you love" (236) resonates within him. Toni undergoes an introspection similar to that which was begun in *The Sitters*: he must find his father in himself and himself in his father. Toni now realises that as an artist he is "a stranger to himself" and so must paint a self-portrait to "satisfy his sense of his own moral worth" (224). As he gazes into his own reflection, he sees himself both narcissistically and objectively, thus distinguishing between his artistic persona and his practical perception of himself. At this juncture, Toni makes the decision to paint under the name Prochownik the name which his father feared to use in Australia. In the eyes of his father's former employers, the Prochowniks were refugees and not immigrants. The Polish were not 'parents' of Australian culture and therefore worthy

of at least a grudging respect. They were barely tolerated cuckoo brothers within the new Australian culture, easy to dislodge, dismiss and despise: "*Prochownik is not a name in Australia*" (226). In assuming the name Prochownik, Tony acknowledges "the deepest level of his identity" (Riemer). He experiences doubleness: it "was as if he had become two people" (226). He will continue to seek an identity which is neither Australian nor Polish but something broader, something new. Furthermore, Tony will live the dream of the elder Prochownik, to pursue a form of art destined to "give meaning to a man's life" (Modjeska 72).

As Miller wishes to demonstrate, life and art cannot be separated nor can they merge. They are interdependent and entwined by the dictates of the heart. Toni has progressed far further than the narrator of *The Sitters*. He is able to see, appreciate and capture in art the constantly fluctuating natures of his loved ones where his predecessor in *The Sitters* restricted himself to the passivity of form and feeling imposed by death. Toni has achieved the requisite compromise and duality of perception and is ready, now, to paint portraits of Teresa and Nada, a task he feared until this moment. Unlike the artist of *The Sitters*, Toni now has the courage to execute portraits of such intimacy, baring his new and affectionate interpretation of others.

Though Toni has found his way and his affair with Marina has been concluded, family life is as intrusive into the world of art as it is inspirational to it. While still in the throes of passion, Toni works on a painting of Marina in a state of undress which is masterly in technical terms and strikingly sensual. Teresa later discovers this painting and attempts to destroy it in a scene reminiscent of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The artwork reveals the truth of Toni's relationship with Marina as Toni's living face and manner did not. Under Teresa's assault, the still wet paint becomes "slewed and creamed across Marina's likeness, streaked across her features and twisted into a vivid carmine and yellow candy spiral down her back" (281) but Toni acknowledges the change as another truth, another compromise to be made, and retains it. Just as Toni accepts the

irreparable marring of his painting so too does Teresa write eventually to Toni: "Our love is not as simple or as nice or as straightforward and perfect as I thought it was, but it is still real and it is still love" (296). Compromise invariably incurs loss. Within Miller's representations, collaboration between love and art may leave neither unscathed, yet both will be wiser for the merging.

Autumn Laing

The most recent of Miller's novels featuring artists explores love, or more specifically lust, in its most damaging form. *Autumn Laing* investigates the absolute, exclusive imperatives of sexual passion. Much of the novel is a fictional recreation of Sidney Nolan's affair with Sunday Reed. Sunday was Nolan's "muse, patron, lover, mentor, artistic collaborator and studio assistant" (Burke 186). However, as Miller has stated in his article, the "real" Reed and Nolan are not to be found in his novel (2011: 120). He is interested rather in the representation of "private intimacy", specifically the "absurd and irrational behaviours driven by the almost hallucinatory power of lust" (121), representations which may be wrought only through fiction. Nonetheless, despite significant differences in the lives and characters of Autumn and Sunday, Sunday's biographer, Janine Burke, discerns in her subject a capacity to love that was "demanding and possessive, even destructive in its imperiousness" (298), the same as that which may be found in Autumn.

The novel is narrated retrospectively by Autumn as she suffers the torments and debilitations of advanced age. As such, hers is the voice of wisdom in hindsight as she recounts the story of the young artist, Pat Donlon, whom she and her husband, as patrons of the arts, fatefully took under their wing. Her tale is in effect two love stories, one of constancy and stability and one of tempestuousness. Autumn's love for her husband Arthur, whom she loves simultaneously with Donlon, is gentle and tender, he is her "refuge" (20) and remarkably, he remains so despite the ricochets flung by Autumn's other, more passionate encounters. In contrast, from its inception, her relationship with Donlon is marked by violence and

envy, even “hatred” (361). The pair are ill matched; their passion is refracted towards Donlon’s art but it remains unfocused and ungovernable. As Autumn later acknowledges: “Love and art combined in Pat and me to make each of us greater than either of us had ever been or ever would be again. And neither he nor I understood it” (174). Similarly, though progressive and in truth at the avant-garde of a new era of Australian art, Autumn comes to realise that their philosophies of art are as limited as their understanding of each other: “Our view of life and art required a narrowing of everything to the single dimension of our own orthodoxies” (102). This narrowness is reflected in Donlon’s work. Autumn, Donlon and several of their compatriots are protagonists of modernism. However, Donlon’s striving for innovation and thereby the complete displacement of traditional art is viewed coldly even by his fellow artists. His creations, like his relationship with Autumn, are perceived as juvenile, vacuous and needlessly competitive. Unlike Miller’s ideal couple in *Lovesong*, Autumn and Pat will learn nothing from each other. There will be no maturation whether personal or professional. Similarly, Donlon resists the teachings of his artistic forebears. It is in Donlon that the underlying struggle for compromise between Australian and British values becomes overt and it is made clear that he is an unworthy combatant:

You’ve rejected the conventional training of the artist not from some high disciplined principle as you seem to claim . . . but from the commonplace need of youth to effect some kind of revolt against the elders. What you are doing is utterly traditional . . . You have nothing with which to replace what you’ve rejected. (301)

Donlon is portrayed as notorious and controversial rather than famous. Albeit commercially successful, his work is portrayed as lacking in important respects.

Donlon’s work is contrasted with that of his wife, Edith, whom Autumn once sought to displace having imbibed Donlon’s competitive spirit. Retrospectively however, Autumn acknowledges the fact that Edith possessed the makings “of the very few truly gifted women artists of her time” (118). Unlike her husband, Edith is

dismissive neither of traditionalism nor modernism. Her goal is to be "liberated from prejudice" (329). In this, she emulates her Scottish grandfather for whom the world of art was "large and generous and warm, embracing all the strong and good feelings of what it is to be human" (329). The old man aspires to the "cosmopolitan" (329). Love for her grandfather and for her Australian husband as well as her sense of calm amidst various perceptions of life combine to make her achievement the greater. However, Edith's artistic career is abruptly curtailed. Immediately upon discovering her husband's affair with Autumn, Edith flees with her unborn, unnamed daughter whom Donlon apparently never sees. Where Autumn fights to retain Donlon, Edith, though deeply hurt, will not engage in futile competition.

Throughout the descriptions of Edith's life, recurrent allusions are made to Guy de Maupassant's *A Woman's Life* (1883) which Edith is reading even as her own dramas unfold. The allusions invite the reader to compare and contrast Edith with Maupassant's heroine. Jeanne, a young French woman of the nineteenth century enters the novel as an innocent young girl brimming with hope for love and fulfilment. However, immediately upon her early marriage the "long, weary evenings and the dull monotonous days" (131) and then the unrelenting treacheries of her philandering husband soon reduce her to a state "almost indifferent" (136) to life. Edith has a greater resilience. She will find love again, she is in fact the only one of Miller's principal characters definitively to do so, and its comfort and permanence will salve the wounds rent by Donlon's betrayal. Sadly though, her creative urge dies with her first love. There is a poignant parallel between her life and Jeanne's. Jeanne remains unfulfilled because she is denied a partner in life. Similarly, circumstance robs Edith of a collaborator in art. At the last, she herself admits that if her friendship with Arthur had "matured" (435) both might have pursued their own artistic endeavours. An accord was evident between Arthur and Edith that lacked the brashness of Donlon's insularity. Edith remains no more or less than the artist with the greatest potential in the entirety of *Autumn Laing*.

In conclusion, love plays a consistently pivotal role in the complex interplay between art and life in the novels of Alex Miller. Many of the paintings intrinsic to the novels represent life as perceived by love. Love is examined in various forms. *The Sitters* investigates unconsummated love and the pain of absence, *Prochownik's Dream* is concerned principally with family while the life of Autumn Laing is dictated by the extremes of sexual energy. No form of love is idealised but its more destructive manifestations are censured. Though only Prochownik can ultimately be defined as successful, each artist is driven by love with its myriad complexities, obligations, tragedies and fulfilments, to find a point of balance with the uncertainties, torments and raptures of art. This occurs on two levels. Firstly, the artist must balance technique and individuality with the call to collaborate with a loved subject or fellow artist. Secondly, the issue of inheritance is entangled in the interplay between love and art, most often in the form of a philosophy of art that is inherited from a loved immigrant parent or grandparent. Across Miller's work, Australian artists are enjoined to produce work that is conglomerate, art that encapsulates the creative individuality of the artist within his or her Australian milieu but which also acknowledges with love the deeper cultural inspirations from which the work has germinated. In these ways, the 'ancient phenomenon' of love, and the often neglected relationship between love and art, is given a particular significance in the work of Alex Miller.

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