

Prelude to Leichhardt and the *Nymphæa*, or Longing to Let 1001 Blue Flowers Bloom

Jayson Althofer

The dreaming hero of Jean Paul Richter's *Die unsichtbare Loge* (*The Invisible Lodge*, 1793) feels as if "a blue flower-cup drank him up – then the swaying flower stretched itself up with him to a great height and landed him in a lofty, lofty chamber."¹

Leichhardt's literary remains include editions of Richter, Schiller and Goethe, a potpourri that exudes the *Urpflanze*'s (primal plant's) mystique and the ineffable fragrance of *die blaue Blume* (the Blue Flower) of German Romanticism.²

The Blue Flower – symbol of unquenchable desire, transcendence and homesickness – was seeded into German Romanticism by pickings from the Upanishads.

The philosopher Schopenhauer's pessimism – "there is nothing in life which has not some drawback" – grafted in Orientalist floriography: "in the words of an Indian proverb, *no lotus without a stalk*."³

Borne from swampy native soil, Leichhardt learns lofty things. Like his soul, those things stem from basic stuff. He studies "the lechery and beastliness in man, because, like Schiller, he [is] puzzled why God should plant in the heart of the same creature both a vision of His throne, and the insect of sensual lust. Nature certainly so mixed up the two elements in Leichhardt."⁴

"A vague longing for foreign lands" and "a yearning for a stable everyday family circle" are the 21-year-old student's divergent cravings. "I am for the first time in a fair way to grasp what Schiller is driving at. His concept of the fountain, his longing, his idea of the pilgrim." However, judging the object of Schiller's *Sehnsucht* (longing) to be an Otherworld rather than a woman or home, Leichhardt is edgy: "I almost gnashed my teeth with regret at realising that his prime poem was directed, not to the woman he loved, but to the great unknown, the Hereafter."⁵

The eponymous poet-pilgrim of Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) "lay restless on his bed, thinking of the stranger and his tales. 'It is not the treasures,' said he to himself, 'that have awakened in me such unutterable longings. Far from me is all avarice; but I long to behold the blue flower.'"⁶ The domestic and exotic blend in Heinrich's wishful dream-world, an uncanny blue flower bears the face of his unknown beloved.

'Novalis' – the pseudonym means 'clearer of new land' – was a polymath who also administered salt mines.

The lotus rhizome, umbilicus to transcendental consciousness, is lodged in the murk of this blue planet. Quoting Goethe's *Faust* (1808) in 1836, Leichhardt indicates his "Baconian thirst to drink from all the wells of knowledge."⁷ Amidst springs of literature, languages and metaphysics, a peat-inspector's son sinks shafts into the Earth and the natural sciences.

"I have followed Herbart's philosophical scheme with deep inward resolve to become an all-round naturalist," Leichhardt avows. Then he launches into the locus of his outward resolution – New Holland.⁸ The quintessence of his own schemes will be distilled in this New-World alembic: "The interior, the heart of this dark continent, is my goal, and I will never relinquish the quest for it until I get there."⁹

Leichhardt becomes a fount of Herbart's philosophy, Humboldt's ambition and Novalis's subjectivity.

In Sydney he copies Robert Lynd's "rather stiff" translation of Goethe's *Der Fischer* (1778) into his 1842 journal.¹⁰

„*Ein feuchtes Weib*“ ("A dripping woman") and „*Das feuchtverklärte Blau*“ ("dank transfigured blue") affect the fisher's fate; „*Und ward nicht mehr gesehn*“ ("And was not seen again").¹¹

For Goethe, Richter and Novalis, "the blue and the feminine share an active power of attraction." Goethe speculates, "we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it."¹² 'We' male metaphysicians, fishers of the infinite, are hooked.

New Holland's Inland Sea can only be a figment, Leichhardt deduces; still, oceanic blue beckons him on. He plans "a squatting expedition" beyond the "beautiful arc of blue mountains." Scopophilia, gratification, bruxism: "I was from the first moment I saw the blue distant hills, continually strifing [sic] to get to them and over them, and new ranges appeared then which excited only new desire! Poor miserable creature!"¹³

Early in 1844 Leichhardt regrets that "an unmarried man can hardly be virtuous through and through, since his eyes are constantly adding fuel to his desires." Stretching, tumescent stalks! Prospective conquests impel the roving bachelor, just as surmounting new peaks excites the concupiscent expeditioner. "My interest in science," he swears, "has been just strong enough to prevail over the promptings of the flesh." Serving science barely sublimates the longed-for deflowering of his "masculine maidenhood": "Thus does ambition seek to console me, when my dreams bring intimation of the joy of possessing a wife." Leichhardt cites Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1657): "What a delicious breath marriage

sends forth – the violet bed’s not sweeter”; vicariously he smells the conjugal bed’s wafts of perfume.¹⁴

Later in 1844, upon his squatting expedition to Port Essington, the reconnoiterer of blue hills and the blue rider of the Darling Downs savours the colour, shape and breath of flowers festooning His kingdom. “The flats most richly adorned by flowers of a great variety of colours: the yellow Senecios, scarlet Vetches, the large Xeranthemums, several species of Gnaphalium, white Anthemis-like compositæ.”¹⁵

Despite the infinite blooms of sundry hue surrounding it, Novalis’ dreamer sees alone the blue flower, gazing “long upon it with inexpressible tenderness.”¹⁶

Is a bed of “a species of Dampiera, with many blue flowers” an *imago amoris* in Leichhardt’s lovesick eyes?¹⁷ Do chivalric reveries console this “maiden man” who cherishes “a fine Brunonia, with its chaste blue blossoms” and esteems “the modest blue Ruellia so plentiful”?¹⁸

It is the Lotus that Leichhardt seizes upon. The Lotus that Indigenous people of the “Valley of Lagoons” – whom he calls “Lotophagians” – collect and eat. Will the lofty outlook onto lagoons veiled by beautiful blue *nymphæa* (Lotus) convulse the invisible lodge of Leichhardt’s unconscious? Will those “showy blossoms of nymphæa” transform him into a carnal insect?¹⁹

An Austral *Lorelei* lures Leichhardt into the ever-receding blue: hills, horizon, Hereafter.

Leichhardt’s outback odyssey and his come-hither prospectus about the “Country of the Lotophagians” – “fine country, well adapted for the breeding of cattle”– fire on rapacious squatters.²⁰ A German Romantic enables the epochal dispossession, exploitation and rape of the Indigenous Lotus-eaters by *de Novali*, a generation of “clearers of new land.”

Notes

¹ Richter, Jean Paul. *The Invisible Lodge. Die unsichtbare Loge*. 1793. Trans. Charles T. Brooks. New York: United States Book Company, 1883. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36353/36353-h/36353-h.htm>>. Accessed 19 June 2013.

² Stephens, Matthew. “From Lost Property to Explorer’s Relics: The Rediscovery of the Personal Library of Ludwig Leichhardt.” *Historical Records of Australian Science* 18.2 (2007): 191-227.

³ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Parerga and Paralipomena: A Collection of Philosophical Essays*. 1893. Trans. T. Bailey Saunders. New York: Cosimo, 2007, 36.

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- ⁴ Clark, C.M.H. *A History of Australia III. The Beginning of an Australian Civilization 1824–1851*. Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1973, 338.
- ⁵ Roderick, Colin. *Leichhardt, the Dauntless Explorer*. North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1988, 57.
- ⁶ Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg]. *Henry of Ofterdingen: A Romance*. Translation of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* 1802. Cambridge: John Owen, 1842, 23.
<<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31873/31873-h/31873-h.htm>>. Accessed 19 June 2013.
- ⁷ Arousseau, Marcel. *The Letters of F.W. Ludwig Leichhardt*. 3 vol. Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press, 1968, 409n.
- ⁸ Roderick, 151.
- ⁹ Arousseau, #48.
- ¹⁰ Arousseau, 800n.
- ¹¹ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Der Fischer*. Written 1778, published 1779. Trans. Edwin Zeydel, 1955. <http://germanstories.vcu.edu/goethe/fischer_dual.html>. Accessed 19 June 2013. For Robert Lynd's translation, *The Fisher*, see *The Leichhardt Diaries: Early Travels in Australia During 1842–1844*. Ed. Thomas A. Darragh and Roderick J. Fensham. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* 7.1 (2013), 24 (24 June 1842). This essay was written before the publication of these diaries, which offer a profusion of suggestive 'blue' references.
- ¹² Gage, John. *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999, 187.
- ¹³ Arousseau, #74.
- ¹⁴ Arousseau, #98.
- ¹⁵ Leichhardt, Ludwig. *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia, From Moreton Bay to Port Essington: A Distance of Upwards of 3,000 Miles, During the Years 1844–1845*. 1847. Australiana Facsimile Editions series No. 16. Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1964, 4 Oct. 1844.
- ¹⁶ Novalis, 26.
- ¹⁷ *Journal*, 22 Oct. 1844.
- ¹⁸ Arousseau, #98; *Journal*, 23 Oct. 1844; *Journal*, 30 Jan. 1845.
- ¹⁹ Leichhardt, Ludwig. "Report of the Expedition of L. Leichhardt, Esq., from Moreton Bay to Port Essington." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 26 March 1846, 2-3.
- ²⁰ Leichhardt, "Report."

Jayson Althofer works at Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, where he curated the exhibition *Leichhardt in Lotus Land* in 2004. His review of John Bailey's *Into the Unknown: The Tormented Life and Expeditions of Ludwig Leichhardt* (2011) appears in *Journal of Australian Studies* 36.4 (2012).