

Excerpt from Jack Lindsay's autobiography *Life Rarely Tells*.
The letter from his father Norman dates from 1919
(i.e. Jack aged 19, not having seen his father for ten years)

One day Dudley came out of my boy-scout Sydney past. He was now a banana farmer down the coast from Brisbane, a good steady quiet young man whom I was overjoyed to meet again and to whom I had nothing to say. He had nothing to say either. We drifted about Brisbane for a couple of days and then he returned to his bananas, having failed to find whatever he had hoped to find in Brisbane. His visit seemed to ratify my break from the society around me, into which he had hardly fitted; but I still awaited a knock on the door from Life, the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony become flesh and blood.

Then one day as I went into the common room at the university I found a package addressed to me. Inside were a dozen etchings by Norman, with a letter. I had only time to push the opened package into a locker and glance over the letter before I rushed into a lecture on metaphysics. All through the hour I kept reading bits of the letter; but I was friendly with the lecturer, who had introduced me to Freud, and I didn't want to appear too rudely inattentive.

At last the hour was over and I could hurry back to the common room, tear off my gown and discard all ideas of work for the day. Terrified at the thought that someone might have carried off the etchings, I rescued the package from the locker and turned its contents over and over, unable to stop at any one of the sheets, wanting to see them all at once in a single superimposed image. The changing figures fell into a complex design composed of snippets from all the etchings; and then as I set off for my aunt's house I found that one work stood out sharply against all the others. *Who Comes?* A naked panic-stricken woman, surrounded with other shrinking revellers, turns to look beyond the curtain at something not depicted – what?

As I was leaving, I struck one of the arts students and hastily showed him the etchings. 'My father's work.'

'Eh?' he said, uninterested, 'Oh yes.'

Then, as I went across the river in the small chugging ferry that served the university, I hugged the etchings under my arm, afraid that they would fall in the water. And suddenly, horribly, I felt Death, not as an idea, but as a possibility

implicit in every pore and atom of my flesh. Someday I should have to die and lose these works of art. Death presented itself as a darkness of privation, a void in which the vital image of art was banished, not simply as my own fall headlong into nothingness. My life was in the art more richly than in my own body. Apart from books, precious but replaceable, I had never owned anything before, anything that I thought of as mine, utterly mine. I discovered the loss of self, the moment of sheer self-alienation, in discovering property.

The letter was charmingly placatory and suggested that the time had come for us to know one another. (Bertram Stevens, the well-meaning owl, had reported favourably and indeed done some nagging on my behalf. That I was making my way in education without any calls on the paternal purse also spoke in my favour.) I wrote back a long incoherent letter of delight. More etchings came, and a copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* with an account of what the book had meant for Norman.

I read it through. At first I was not much attracted. The attack on poets as liars who fished up bits of old gods from the sea affronted the Keatsian who held to the creed of Truth-Beauty. The attitude to war seemed the sheerest barbarism, vulgar as my aunt's snobbery. But after a while I began to warm to the idiom and found my ideas again falling into turmoil. Much of what I made out seemed to deny the positions that I had been reaching through Witherby and Quinton, my synthesis of Blake, Keats, Dostoevsky and the idea of revolution. And then at moments it seemed that here was a rich new viewpoint which I could work into my insecure concept of revolutionary poetry, adding something that that concept badly needed – a philosophy of history which would objectify the structure of Blake's prophetic books and then yield a revaluation of all values. An acceptance of tragedy as the highest yes-saying to life; an irreconcilable demand for joy. 'To have run through every chamber of the modern soul, to have eaten in each of its corners: my pride, my torture, and my joy. To transcend pessimism effectively, and in short a Goethean regard full of love and goodwill.' Above all, the conception of joy as the deepest creative dynamic won me over.

Norman did not want me to visit him at Springwood till

the newspaper office, and then put him out in the street, allowing him to keep the slippers and the flute.

Daily the boarding-house grew more like our casual rebellious thoughts. The proprietress, yawning at midday with her hair in curling papers, let the ground floor rooms, which opened direct on to George Street, to prostitutes. These latter, as a tribute to the higher moral status of the boarders, were not allowed into the dining-room. One of them had a striking deadly white appearance. Her hair was a pale straw-gold and she powdered her face rice-white and wore all white clothes and shoes; the only colour was her scarlet mouth. She walked with a bend, as if someone had kicked her in the stomach, and was extremely thin and bony. I once asked her if she had read Dostoevsky, but she merely stared at me. No doubt she had promised not to speak to any of the boarders.

Mrs W., the unlaced proprietress, dropped her hairpins on the stairs and said it wasn't worth while picking them up. Once she asked me to slit a pair of shoes, which had become too small for her. 'Why don't you all go?' she asked. 'I really can't give my time to running this place. After next Tuesday there's not going to be any more breakfasts.' But the breakfasts went on.

'Don't take any notice of her,' said Maisie. 'She just wants an easy life. I keep telling her she's stupid.'

I kissed her. 'No, you don't,' she said. 'Not that I mind it. But respect that mother of yours. Go on with you.'

I was reading Nietzsche, all of his books that I could lay hands on. There was much in him that I could not accept at all, much that seemed in accord with Norman's positions, but also much that supported my pre-Norman outlook.

True, there were many abstractions of blood and will and the like, which could be used for the system of *Creative Effort*; there were the places where Nietzsche parodied himself and seemed to identify will with violence; but there were also the places where he cried, 'My brothers, remain faithful to the earth, with all the force of your love. Let your great love and your knowledge be in accord with the meaning of the earth. . . Give a meaning to the earth, a human meaning.' He wrote at moments as if he preached only to an élite, but Zarathustra

with its deep grasp of the process of creation, was named a Book for All and None. 'I shall give back to men the serenity which is the condition of all culture.' He spoke of the future in which 'no highest good or highest joys exist that are not the common property of all. The odium attached to the word common shall be abolished.'

I did not at this time distinguish the contradictions inside Nietzsche's thought, nor did I see how much of him clashed with the positions now reached by Norman. I sought to find those elements which harmonized with *Creative Effort*, but at the same time I was absorbing willy-nilly the other elements; and in due time they were to assert themselves ever more strongly in my mind.

For the present the effect was to build an existentialist universe, in which the conflicts were resolved solely in and by the creative image; to seize on, to the dialectic of an agonized spiralling withdrawal into the lairs of the wounded self, echoing all the complex overtones of irony and bitterness thus educed, and yet at the same time affirming joy. Joy was the transcendent leap, the acceptance of all things, which moved qualitatively onto a level outside the sum total of the given universe, thus creating a new universe. I hesitated yet to embrace Norman's concept of the creative image as a transcendental unity outside the nexus of given relations and moving beyond this world, and yet I saw that by basing myself on his logic I must come to it.

I was torn by the intense conflict of my various universes, those of Keats and Shelley, Blake and Plato, Dostoevsky and Beethoven, Nietzsche and N.L. It seemed impossible to find the forms of poetry which could harmonize these conflicting universes and modes of thought. I read Baudelaire and Beardsley (his prose and verse).

*Amid the breakers now the starbuoy shakes
O Moreton Bay where gulls swoop down for pearls
of scattered foam, the sun-armada wakes
and waves go shelving on a reef of girls
under the clouds of silver bellying stone*

I composed a long poem on Moreton Bay in terza rima. I composed fables in alembicated prose.