

The Prodigal Daughter

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At the time of the publication of *Oscar and Lucinda* Peter Carey was asked where the idea for the novel came from. He replied that one day he had an image of a glass church floating down the Bellinger River, and he had to write a novel to explain how it got there! Perhaps he should have taken a longer break before drinking from that poisoned chalice—sudden inspiration. By contrast, Joyce Cary revealed that he quite frequently was struck by particular incidents, scenes, or people. He, wise man, wrote them down, and put them away in case he found a place for them in a novel. Peter Carey enjoys a very high reputation at present, whereas Joyce Cary has virtually disappeared from contemporary consideration in Australia, despite the remarkable range and foresight of his fiction.

Unfortunately, my title 'The Prodigal Daughter' smacks more of Peter Carey's flight of fancy than of Joyce Cary's careful hoarding of small treasures until an appropriate use for them has been found. So it calls for an explanation.

Before I had formulated the subject matter of this lecture the title appeared from nowhere, demanding to be noticed. I've come to the conclusion that it was inviting me to reflect on my return to my academic home, and even, perhaps, to explain why I left it, not for a peaceful retirement, but for the adventures, pleasures, variety, intense interest, successes, frustrations and lost causes of life on the Senate.

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So, 21 years as Professor of Australian Literature were, without any forethought on my part, followed by two years as Deputy to Sir Herman Black and ten years as Chancellor. I am now back in the Woolley Building, which became the English Department's 'new' home in 1974 while I was taking my turn as Head of Department. So, as it turns out, I have not gone into permanent exile, nor become a displaced person, thanks to the generosity of the Faculty of Arts. There was a moment when the prodigal son 'came to himself'. That, perhaps, is what I am doing.

A. D. Hope's best known (but not necessarily best) poem, 'Australia', also resurfaced in my memory. It was written in the late 1930s and reflects his time abroad at Oxford. His recovered Australia is a monotonous, empty land, 'without songs, architecture, history', and even lacking 'the emotions and superstitions of younger lands'.

The river of her immense stupidity
Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth.

And her

... second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.¹

Many years later (1962), as a result of his first visit to Rome in 1958, he wrote 'A Letter from Rome' in which he invents a visit from the Muse, who suggests that he write a letter home. He tells her:

'Australian poets, you recall, prefer
The packhorse and the slip-rail and the spur'
...

'High time they stopped it then', the Muse replied,
'I never liked that pioneering strain,
The tales of how those mountain horsemen ride—
Today they drive a truck or take a plane.
Australian poets, if they ever tried,
Might show at least a rudiment of brain ...'²

There is a curious resemblance between Hope's denunciatory tone in both poems and Patrick White's satirical savagery. Yet, Hope concedes in 'Australia', 'there are some like me turn gladly

home From the lush jungle of modern thought', hoping to find
'some spirit which escapes The learned doubt, the chatter of
cultured apes Which is called civilization over there'.

Some would say that 'the lush jungle of modern thought'
expands as the Amazon jungle shrinks daily.

Hope is just one of many Australian writers to have left home
to study in, or test themselves against, 'the old world'. I wonder
whether, in our desire to identify and describe 'Australianness',
and in our obsession with national identity, we have not overlooked
the much more powerful and complex experience of exile reflected
in the poem.

But before amplifying this statement which is, in a way, the
text of this lecture, let's remind ourselves of the parable of the
prodigal son. He was the younger son of a prosperous landowner.
He asked for and received from his father his share of the
inheritance and left home on a long journey. Wherever it was he
went, he 'wasted his substance with riotous living'. (A. D. Hope
explained that he took third class honours at Oxford because he
got drunk the night before his Gothic exam.)

A great famine devastated the land and the prodigal son became
a swineherd, envying the pigs the husks he fed them. Destitution
drove him to return home, and he even prepared a repentant
speech for his arrival. But his father got in first 'and had
compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him'. The
elder son's anger at this preferential treatment of his delinquent
brother prompted his father to say 'it was meet that we should
make merry and be glad; for this thy brother was dead and is alive
again; and was lost, and is found'.

This parable is directed to Jesus's audience of 'publicans and
sinners', and a murmuring group of scribes and Pharisees
complaining that Jesus received sinners and ate with them. It
contains some intriguing mysteries, for it is a moral and spiritual
tale as well as an historical record. Of course, it's idle to ask why
it's not the story of a prodigal daughter. At that time no daughter
would be in line for an inheritance, least of all for a travel grant to
an unknown destination, and licence to leave home without
supervision.

The journey is a self-imposed exile. Why did the young man leave home? Where did he go? Was he lured away by the bright lights of a city where he could enjoy the bustle and taste the temptations of urban life? What did he do? Did he, as his aggrieved brother insisted, 'devour his father's living with harlots'? This possibility is not referred to in the son's confession, but replicates the accusations of the Pharisees against Jesus. What did he do with the rest of his life? That's a forbidden speculation for the critic, who must be content to keep within the time scale of the narrative and its boundaries.

Then there is the word 'prodigal', which has obscure etymological origins, first found in thirteenth-century French and then in later Latin. It is defined as 'Given to extravagant expenditure and recklessly wasteful of one's property'. When defined as 'lavishness, profuseness', however, it takes on a less pejorative tone, as in the prodigality of nature. Rolf Boldrewood uses it in this sense in his novel *A Colonial Reformer* (1890):

It was a superb night—one of the units of that wondrous wealth and prodigality of perfect weather by which we should set greater store were we compelled to undergo a quarter of the austerity of northern Europe.³

Yet it is precisely toward that austerity that many Australians have aspired, and to which some have become acclimatised.

Expatriate Australians, returning home, or even visiting, have not always been received with open arms. When Malcolm Williamson, the Master of the Queen's Music, visited Australia in the early '70s after many years in London he was met by the press somewhat resentfully. Why didn't he live here? What's so good about London? It was made to seem that he had betrayed his country by leaving it. (At that time he and James McAuley composed a new national anthem which used a theme from Williamson's opera *Our Man in Havana*.) Some time later, on at least two occasions, the *Australian* spelt expatriate with an 'o' and without the 'e'. Was it merely ignorance or a deliberate gibe?

It would hardly be worth mentioning these petty matters were it not for the fact that there is a long history of debate about what constitutes Australian writing (or painting, or composing). In recent

years this has been channelled into obsessive preoccupation with Australian identity, at the very time when Australia has become a harmonious society of people of many races, languages and beliefs. 'If you want to know who we are', sings the male chorus in *The Mikado*, flapping its fans, 'we are gentlemen of Japan'—Gilbert's wonderfully absurd statement of the obvious. If you want to know who *we* are, simply ask us to speak. It's now clear that our accent is just as infectious as the American, and as lasting as the Scottish.

The persistence of this debate is not surprising, despite H. M. Green's exhaustive treatment of the subject in the chapter on Henry Handel Richardson in *A History of Australian Literature*. He regards her as 'a curious phenomenon', in that 'her work has no Australian literary relationships', and declares that while its subject matter is Australian, 'none of it is Australian in tone'. It would be a pity if Green's account were set aside because he writes literary history in what is now regarded as an old-fashioned way, and even assumes that qualitative judgments can be made. While she was 'not usually thought of' as an Australian, she always considered herself to be one, and he makes the astute observation that

from her early twenties her life lay almost entirely in her books, and her doors seem to have been almost closed to that direct, continuous experience of the world without which its realistic representation becomes impossible ... Hence she was thrown back upon what store of experience had been already gained.⁴

She understood her father's irritation at the familiarity (which we'd now describe as friendliness) of Australians. Green asserts that the scenes she describes are 'far from typical' and that 'there is not one person in any of Richardson's books of whom an Australian reader would be likely to say "that is certainly an Australian"'. These criticisms, however, do not undermine Green's view that *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is 'one of the great novels of the world'.

The Miles Franklin Award is another forum for the continuing debate about Australian subject matter. In her Will it is the phrase 'Australian Life in any of its phases' which causes the trouble. It's possible, of course, for this condition to confuse the question

of the quality of the writing. Is an excellent novel excluded if it does not exactly conform to the Will? This was an issue in the discussion of Nicholas Jose's novel, *The Avenue of Heavenly Peace*, as it was with Frank Moorhouse's *Grand Days*. The latter has now been compensated for his loss in 1998 by winning with the companion novel, *Dark Palaces*, in 2000. (Oddly enough, this was not an issue in the Demidenko affair, which is partly explained by the fact that, while the main action takes place in Central Europe, it was framed by an Australian narrative centred upon the tropical north and Surfers Paradise.)

The experience of exile common to so many of the first settlers has now become the experience, as it was for the prodigal son, and now for many prodigal daughters, of living away from home—a voluntary act. When David Malouf received an honorary degree from the University of Sydney in 1998, the headline in the *Australian* report announced 'Once unrecognised talent returns as prodigal son',⁵ the conferring of the degree presumably being the modern equivalent of the fatted calf. Almost twenty years before, the *Sydney Morning Herald* headline read 'Malouf Returns only to Leave', when he came to celebrate the publication of *An Imaginary Life*, based on Ovid's banishment from Rome by the Emperor Augustus. At that time he commented, 'The most difficult thing for a writer here is how he can push himself forward all the time ... Isolation is a kind of pressure'. But he also said, 'I don't think of myself as being an expatriate or going into exile—that's all too dramatic. People who talk about expatriates are still living in the nineteenth century.'⁶

I believe that Malouf is correct, and that dramatising the notion of expatriation is at the expense of examining what the experience of living and working abroad means to the writer and how it might be reflected in his or her writing. Even Richardson's *Maurice Guest*, set and written abroad, has a central character from Queensland. Why?

It is ironic that Miles Franklin has conferred, it seems, everlasting life on the nationalist debate, given her own history. She spent approximately one third of her 75 years in the USA and England, but *My Brilliant Career* was published five years before

she left for the USA, and most of the *Brent of Bin Bin* series and her other works after her permanent return to Australia. Henry Handel Richardson left for Leipzig when she was eighteen, and remained abroad except for a two-month visit in 1912 to check facts for *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Christina Stead left when she was 26, and made it clear that she was not trying to escape but to satisfy her desire to wander. She returned 'home' to live in 1974, with all her major works behind her, including those which most directly recall her Australian experience. In 1967 the Britannica-Australia award was denied her because it was determined that she was no longer an Australian writer!

Martin Boyd brings a double perspective to his fiction, drawn from his acute consciousness of living in two worlds—England and Australia. The relative neglect of his novels in Australia seems largely to be due to a misreading of the satirical, whimsical tone of his writing, and to prejudices about the world of which he writes. It's significant therefore that a Chinese scholar who became interested in Boyd's work while he was a student in the University of Sydney, and who has just finished translating *Lucinda Brayford*, has come to the conclusion that 'it is one of the greatest novels Australian writers have ever produced'. Many critics would challenge that judgment, and it is an astonishing conclusion, given the enormous cultural and experiential gulf between translator and author. But it should make us rethink some of our assumptions about cultural differences.

Boyd had hoped to die in Australia. Would critics have been kinder to him had he done so? White has been very generously treated despite the very sharp (often cruel) edge to his criticism of people who possess 'inauthentic objects' (made of plastic) or who are vulgar in appearance and habits. 'Ordinary' Australians are the targets of his satire. Is he accepted because of his intense focus on Australia, his mythologising of the land and creation of mystery and myth?

White was long ago forgiven for some thirteen years abroad (including service in World War II). He, like Hope, was critical of 'the Great Australian emptiness in which the mind is the last of possessions' and of 'the most sterile of beings, a London

intellectual'. Yet he decided to return home 'to the stimulus of time remembered'.⁷ The prodigal son, by contrast, returned home because the money ran out, and he began to envy his father's servants, who had security and a wage.

These brief histories raise more questions than they answer. Could Richardson, Franklin, Stead and Jill Ker Conway have written with such prodigality of detail about their birthplace if they had not left home? Their work bears witness to the ineradicable stamp of childhood and youthful experience, sensations both crystallised and distanced by the force of separation and the impact of the foreign and remote. Could Patrick White have poured such passion into his fictional representation of Australian life, from exploration to rural settlement and the growth of suburbia, the surrealism of the landscape, treatment of the artist, suspicion of the alien and the aboriginal fringe-dweller, had he not explored the great world? Did his sense of alienation in his *own* country give him the power to represent the isolation of his creations?

To this brief summary of the variety of expatriate experience must be added the accomplishments of Barry Humphries and Clive James, both of whom illustrate the complexity of the interaction between individual responses to leaving home and the literary and artistic results of doing so. Trying to understand the interplay between these forces takes one into the mysteries of creativity, which can range from the seemingly improbable to the sublime. One would not expect a composer who was influenced by Messiaen and Stravinsky, and who discovered in his twenties the music of Boulez, to describe his own compositions as fundamentally Australian. Yet in 1992 Malcolm Williamson said, 'Most of my music is Australian. Not the bush or the deserts, but the brashness of the cities. The sort of brashness that makes Australians go through life pushing doors marked pull.'⁸ That is a crisp summary of a view he expressed in 1965 at a conference on Music and Education in the Commonwealth at the University of Liverpool:

... when I think about it I am certain that my music is characteristically Australian although I have never tried to make it so. We Australians have to offer the world a persona compounded

of forcefulness, brashness, a direct warmth of approach, sincerity which is not ashamed, and more of what the Americans call 'get-up-and-go' than the Americans themselves possess.⁹

Whatever else might be said about this statement—which could simply be facetious—it can hardly be dismissed without allowing it to be another piece of evidence in the case to be made for the persistence of impressions of 'home' into later life and their emergence in surprising ways. It also raises the question as to whether critical opinions in Australia have moved with the times, or whether they are still trapped within a concept of Australia which, like expatriation itself, belongs to the past.

When I returned to the English Department this year I was not sure what to expect. From inside and outside the University there were rumours that the study of English had been sabotaged from within by borrowed theoretical fashions and the abandonment of any notion of a canon of essential reading. What I found was an undergraduate handbook, no longer a sober description of what was available, but a colourful and dauntingly detailed document, containing (for English) a strong representation of so-called traditional authors from Early English to the present day, acknowledgment of new writers, and emphasis in some areas on thematic treatment of texts. I confess to a prejudice against thematic teaching, because it can deprive students of access to alternative ways of reading literature. An outbreak of inverted commas in some of the course descriptions I suppose signals avoidance of prescriptive certainty, but when I see inverted commas round the word 'reality', the ground trembles, especially when it seems likely that not all students of English will be studying philosophy, or will be familiar with philosophical uses of language. Inverted commas can also imply avoidance or even rejection of logical analysis in favour of speculative indecisiveness.

There are, of course, absences from contemporary reading lists of writers who were once considered to be essential reading, and that is to be expected. But there is one whose absence is a loss to our understanding of the subject I've been pursuing—Australian writers and the great world. Shirley Hazzard is a world traveller, and a mental traveller in a special sense. I know that her remarkable

novel, *The Transit of Venus*, reprinted in 1996, is now difficult to obtain, but that does not explain its absence from contemporary critical discussion, nor does it explain the meagre and sometimes hostile critical response to her work in Australia. Even *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*¹⁰ is ambivalent in claiming that 'she has not drawn *heavily* on her experience of Australia', as though to do so is a requirement, and weight a measure of value. *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* comments:

For some expatriate Australian writers the connection between their writing and their national allegiance is irrelevant. Shirley Hazzard has lived outside Australia, mostly in the USA and Italy, since her late adolescence; still she is claimed, uneasily, as an Australian writer.... *The Transit of Venus* is her only major work to use Australian as well as other settings and characters.¹¹

She deserves to be welcomed back into our literary world, however, for the range, sensitivity, depth and quality of her writing. She was born and educated in Sydney, and from the age of 16 lived abroad. Her output, over some 35 years, has not been large—two works of non-fiction, three novels—the first set in Rome, the second in Naples—two small collections of short stories, and many uncollected stories and reviews. She has visited Australia on several occasions from New York. In 1984 I invited her to take a seminar in Australian literature. Someone asked her why she wrote Mills and Boon novels; and I spent some time trying to explain the question to her. The author of *The Transit of Venus* was, fortunately, mystified, and not offended, as I was.

From 1952 to 1962 she worked as a clerk in the United Nations Organisation, and that decade of close scrutiny of its operations resulted in *Defeat of an Ideal*, which is a detailed account of its failures, and the reasons for them. It is a record of overstaffing, complex bureaucratic processes, lack of authority to deal with critical issues, over-expenditure on administration at the expense of aid programmes, and a language of discourse familiar to us in papers given at conferences on governance and business administration. Underlying the detailed critique are statements of principle which, in various ways, are implicit in her fiction. The defeat of the ideal of the United Nations is a matter of deep

disappointment to her and also the subject of severe criticism. She believes that

The entertainment of high hopes is essential to human life. Human beings must believe their species capable of *disinterested* goodness, even if they look for proof of this in others ... For the United Nations to come into existence, it was necessary for a large body of persons to believe in the human capacity for good, and to feel that their hopes might be justified. Maturity might be said to be an understanding of the conditions in which hope can be sustained and fulfilled.¹²

An example of her concern for principled behaviour is a situation where a group of dismissed staff members took their case to the UN Administrative Tribunal during the first Secretary General, Trygvie Lie's, administration. A 1951 brief on the case stated,

The civilized legal order does not exist which does not insist upon the right to defend an appeal against specific charges and facts Not only did the Secretary General cloak the true *reasons* for the actions, but he acted on the basis of charges and conclusions *wholly unsupported by the facts*.¹³

Hazard's stand throughout this book reflects her conviction that institutional morality, like personal morality, is an indispensable principle of civil life. *People in Glass Houses* is a small collection of short stories based on her UN experience. In these, her satirical skills in characterising those who work for the UN, and her exposé of the evasive language of the bureaucracy translate the record of organisational failure into the weakness and self-importance of human beings. The story 'Nothing in excess' introduces a minor official asserting his incompetent authority:

'The aim of the Organisation', Mr Bekkus dictated, leaning back in his chair and casting up his eyes to the perforations in the sound-proof ceiling; 'The *aim* of the Organisation', he repeated with emphasis, as though he were directing a firing-squad,—and then, 'the *long-range* aim', narrowing his eyes to this more distant target, 'is to fully utilize the resources of the staff and hopefully by the end of the fiscal year to have laid stress—'

Mr Bekkus frequently misused the word 'hopefully'. He also made a point of saying, 'locate' instead of 'find', 'utilize' instead of

'use', and never lost an opportunity to indicate or communicate; and would slip in a 'basically' when he felt unsure of his ground.¹⁴

Mr Bekkus's intellectual bankruptcy is exposed by his impoverished language, and the petty-minded evasiveness which besets the organisation is captured in the book's epigraph from *Othello*:

... and in such cases
Men's natures wrangle with inferior things,
Though great ones are their subject.

Great subjects demand attention to the finest shades of meaning, and the nuances of pace and tone.

By this measure *The Transit of Venus* is an outstanding novel, which takes our exploration of the complex interaction between Australian experience and 'the great world' far beyond the search for the obvious. Outdated stereotypes of character and landscape are banished, and this might be why *The Transit of Venus* has escaped, in Australia, the critical acclaim it deserves. Samuel Johnson defined the word prodigality as 'this invisible riot of the mind, this secret prodigality of being'. He used it to describe a state of which he disapproved, because it seemed to him to denote a mind not in charge of its own creative processes. But the phrase 'secret prodigality of being' seems to me to approximate the sense of the delicate intimations of mortality that characterise Hazzard's insights into character and emotions. Only that 'secret prodigality of being' could create the profundity, subtlety and clarity of this novel, without losing narrative drive and the drama of shifting personal relationships. A discreet process of definition—a poetic logic—is the fine thread holding the narrative together. References and nuances in both action and dialogue disclose its presence.

The same power infuses her distilled recollections of the Australian experience. Early in the novel Hazzard gives an account of the Australian childhood of the sisters Caroline and Grace Bell, seen through the consciousness of Caroline. It recalls their early education and its emphasis on European and British history, with

only one lesson a week on Australian history's

shrivelled chronicle—meagre, shameful, uninspired ... History itself proceeded, gorgeous, spiritualized, without a downward glance at Australia ... Australia could only pretend to be part of all that and hope no one would spot the truth.¹⁵

She identifies the moment when the influence of American culture arrived in Australia. 'Down was no longer to Kew.' The talk was of Chattanooga and the San Fernando Valley. 'The power of Kew was passing like an Empire', even as she left Australia.

Early memories, evoked more formally in the first of her Boyer lectures in 1984, sharpen her initial perceptions of England, and soon after her arrival she is made acutely aware of English misconceptions about Australia:

Mr Collins from Kenya, seated in a leather armchair recalled a joke about Australia, or Orstrylia; which he said was from the recent war, giving the setting as Tobruk, which in fact went back to the Great War and the campaign in the Dardanelles. The story was as follows:

A wounded soldier asks an Australian nurse at his bedside, 'Was I brought here to die?' and 'No', she answers, 'yesterdie'. That was the joke.

Caroline and Grace Bell were familiar with this story, which was often told to them when they were introduced. Later in the novel an elderly Major retells it, claiming to know the soldier concerned.¹⁶

By such simple means is ignorance preserved. All three observations—about history, culture and the Australian accent—are accurate recollections of her childhood experience. But the sense of the inferiority of Australian life which they convey does not destroy her ability to express her deeper consciousness of growing up in Australia. The superficial clichés of bush legends criticised by A. D. Hope in 'A Letter from Rome' and ignorant perceptions of Australianness have no place in her reflective understanding of her past. It is said that Caro 'from ignorance had an unobstructed view of knowledge', and her loss of innocence and rapid acquisition of experience in England include consciousness of her past, expressed not by superficial

recollections, but by small, subtle nuances such as sitting on a warm stone wall in the English countryside, observing that 'in a southern country there might have been a lizard'.¹⁷

The design of the novel encompasses 'the great world', and its range of reference illuminates the delicate details of personal relationships. The exploration of individual characters and their interactions places them on a very large stage, where science, art, literature, politics, philosophy, history, archaeology and astronomy are reference points for the understanding of people, and for the inner life of Caro in particular. The title itself refers, of course, to Cook's voyage to witness the transit of Venus, to astronomy and the discovery of Australia, to the experience and passing of love, to loss of innocence, rejection and acceptance, to chance, coincidence and conjunction. 'Things come around so strangely', says Caro, and in response comes the speculation that 'maybe the element of coincidence is played down in literature because it seems like cheating or can't be made believable. Whereas life itself doesn't have to be fair, or convincing.'¹⁸

The novel presents the sense of the variety and diversity of life itself, as Hazzard makes her way from her starting-point, through some of the major events of the twentieth century, people and places, focused by the stillness at the heart of her central character. The presence of Australia is not, however, a minor part of a travelogue, but a deep consciousness, as, for example, when, in South America, Caro dreams of

... flying over mountains and coming, at last, not to this fertile valley, but to a long, flat land, an arid interior, boundless. Far below, occasional oblongs and squares of difficult cultivation tilted like paintings askew on a blank wall. Small depressions were neuritic with cracked mud She woke in relief that she had done nothing wrong, at least in her dreams'.¹⁹

Or, later in the novel, walking with Grace down the corridor of an institution for the dying, Caro remembers 'these two had walked by the salt sea after school. Now it was mortality that expanded, an immensity, at their side.'²⁰ Here, recollection illuminates maturity and understanding, and the mystery of the mind's associative processes. Later still, Caro says:

'I'm considering a trip to Australia ... I find I remember it more these days. That seems to create a reason to go there ... I'd like to see what I was incapable of seeing then ...'. Of all she had been blind to, at least that much might be retrieved.²¹

These are not the words, nor the tone of an expatriate who has forgotten where she came from.

The associations in those passages which reflect Australian experience are deeply felt. They are not mere references back to an earlier phase of Caro's life. Nor are they simply memories. They are an expression of the whole human being, formed initially in a now distant country, but thoroughly absorbed into all she has lived through. The precision and versatility of Hazzard's language and, in particular, its finely tuned tonal variations, create a clear surface through which depths of meaning can be discerned .

In her most recent book, *Greene on Capri*, an account of the friendship she and her husband enjoyed with Graham Greene from the 1960s onwards, Hazzard comments on a book of essays whose authors she describes as

practitioners of the first rank—'creative writers', as they would be designated today. The wool of obsessive theory and deconstructive jargon had not yet been pulled over the reader's eyes and senses.²²

She quotes with approval Elizabeth Bowen's comment that it would be 'sad to regard as lecture-room subjects books that were meant to be part of life'. It is even sadder to report that Australian critics have neglected her work and even quite recently misrepresented it. In his review of *Greene on Capri* John Docker refers to her 'imperturbable provinciality, conformity, imitativeness',²³ a view fortunately contradicted by other reviews here and abroad. This comment is reminiscent of the reaction to her Boyer lectures of 1984. Laurie Clancy, who is an admirer of her work, has said that these 'were widely perceived as being out-of-touch with contemporary Australia, superstitious and patronising'.²⁴

It is true that the Boyer lectures are critical of aspects of Australian life. Their theme is the importance of knowledge, and Hazzard is puzzled that for so long Australians 'accustomed

themselves to an existence so little varied by knowledge', and wonders why, for the many Australians who were readers of 'stories and poetry, histories and lives, by the best writers', this experience 'failed to generate wider eagerness for information and for exigent intellectual standards'. It is, in a way, a familiar argument—namely that in Australia, we still do not sufficiently recognise the life of the mind, nor appreciate the value to the whole community of intellectual and cultural activity. She also makes the observation that we waste time 'with the little private wars we are forever declaring among ourselves'. She invites her audience 'to have thoughts in which we have no enemies'. Surely the fact that she speaks to us as 'we' and not 'you' should have made it clear that she is not a glib foreigner come to upbraid us? In any case, a writer's personal views should not be used, especially nearly 20 years later, as a weapon against her notable achievements, not least of which is presenting Australian experience as a deep and permanent influence upon the formation of character.

There is a long history of conflict between critics of Australian writing which could easily lead one to take a cynical view of their achievements.²⁵ My sense is that the critics most worth reading are those who have also been (and are) writers, for they understand, as perhaps critics can never fully do, what it is like to invent a poem, a play or a story. Yet even a critic, by listening for the tone and thematic connections of a novel or poem, can approximate the writer's intuition and messages.

Hazzard is right about 'the little private wars' if we inspect *our* attitudes to, and practice of, criticism, which are far removed from Dryden's definition of criticism as 'the art of judging well'. The absence of a strong critical tradition, and the superficial treatment accorded our writers outside the literary journals, is undeniable. It seems that at present there is a resurgence of aggressive nationalism, despite the expansion of our diverse migrant population. The bad Australian habit of knocking before thinking is still with us. Yet constructive and learned critics are an essential stimulus to a flourishing literature. They need to be citizens of the world, recognising that the best literature crosses national borders, and finds its place in 'the great world', and that

a narrow definition of Australian writing is in nobody's best interests.

The beginning of this reflective journey was the end of a very different one. I have not been welcomed back from my travels and travails by a forgiving father, but I have been given a home by distinguished scholars, both women and men. We have made a great deal of progress since Biblical times; and we are certainly in a position to repatriate a gifted novelist with a strong social conscience and a belief in 'the human capacity for good'.

Notes

- 1 A. D. Hope, *Collected Poems 1930–1965*, Sydney, 1966, p.13.
- 2 Hope, p.144.
- 3 Rolf Boldrewood, *A Colonial Reformer*, London, 1890, p.144.
- 4 H. M. Green, *A History of Australian Literature*, Vol. I: *Third Period 1890–1923*, Sydney, 1961, p.84 ff.
- 5 *Australian*, 11 March 1998.
- 6 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 1979.
- 7 Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', in *Patrick White Speaks*, eds David Brennan and Christine Flynn, Sydney, 1989, p.14. First published in *Australian Letters*, 1958.
- 8 Malcolm Williamson, *West Australian*, 27 January 1992.
- 9 Malcolm Williamson—a 70th Birthday Tribute by Paul Conway—MusicWeb(UK)', <http://www.musicweb.uk.net/Williamson/>.
- 10 *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, eds William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews, Oxford, 1985.
- 11 Delys Bird, 'New Narration: Contemporary Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Webby, Cambridge, 2000, p.184.
- 12 *Defeat of an Ideal*, Boston-Toronto, 1973, p.4.
- 13 Cited in *Defeat of an Ideal*, p.21.
- 14 *People in Glass Houses*, Harmondsworth, 1970, p.9. First published 1967.
- 15 *The Transit of Venus*, Harmondsworth, 1980, p.48.
- 16 *The Transit of Venus*, p.83.
- 17 *The Transit of Venus*, p.58.
- 18 *The Transit of Venus*, p.62.
- 19 *The Transit of Venus*, p.250.
- 20 *The Transit of Venus*, p.317.

- 21 *The Transit of Venus*, p.325.
- 22 Shirley Hazzard, *Greene on Capri*, New York, 2000, pp.67–68.
- 23 *Australian Book Review*, October 2000.
- 24 *Australian Book Review*, November, 2000.
- 25 See Robert Ross, 'The Recurring Conflicts in Australian Literary Criticism since 1945', 1 ANZSC (*Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*), 1989.