

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Meeting Syd Harrex

Gerhard Stilz

13 October 1983. Yesterday Syd Harrex, my colleague from Flinders University, picked me up and hauled me here in a University car. A reliable old Holden, he insisted. We arrived a few minutes before eleven, and I asked Syd whether he had something for me to do. Yes, he said, now, at eleven, I was to give a lecture. I searched my pockets for a script, a handout was quickly copied out, and at high noon I was through with my speech. Another visiting lecturer followed, and the two of us were introduced to the colleagues of the department. Brian Matthews, a lecturer who is busy with his dissertation on Henry Lawson, shared our lively reminiscences of Malta, that early ACLALS conference five years ago. Anne Brewster helped Syd in editing the review journal named CRNLE and immediately asked me to write a review or two for its pages. By mid-afternoon, the introduction had transformed into a lunch and finally developed into a drinking bout at the bar of the University, both spirited and inspiring.

Later in the afternoon, Syd took me to his 'cabin' in the woods and forests of the Adelaide Hills. His private Volkswagen Beetle, more than twenty years old, replaced the honourable University vehicle. Syd owns some twenty acres of land on top (and including parts) of a deep gully which abounds with Australian native grass and gum trees. He counters my romantic feelings with his complaints about the grunting and snorting sex life celebrated by the koalas, his animal neighbours. During summer, he says, the area falls dry, and water becomes scarce. He then relies on his own resources and those of his neighbours. He collects the rainfall of the winter months in huge tanks. His cabin expands into a wooden deck overhanging the cliff above the gully. It consists of a big room for living, cooking and eating, and several bedrooms with access to the terrace above the chasm.

Right on my arrival in Flinders I realised once again how small the world is. Syd surprised and indeed puzzled me by introducing Meenakshi Mukherjee, another of Syd's momentary guests, currently Professor of English at the University of Hyderabad. After all, she is on my itinerary on the way back to Tübingen in a couple of weeks. She has just returned from archival work in Sydney, is about to stay in Flinders for some more research and will only be back in Hyderabad a few days before we are scheduled to meet there for a few lectures and a good talk.

Meenakshi shared our dinner, commented on Syd's art of cooking but wisely refrained from interfering. Syd featured an unusual array of fish and chicken, amply spiced in the Indian manner and prepared in the midst of all of us on the central table cooktop of his living room. His big, round frying pan was surrounded and occasionally invaded by lecherous flames, red, white, blue, green and yellow, as new spices were added. Most of us admitted that they had eaten Indian food before in its country of origin. Therefore various kinds of chili were freely added, until the expectant assembly, under coughs and tears, pleaded for mercy. The heavy smoke gradually lifted and disappeared through the ceiling of the wooden house. After a good hour, dinner could be served. In spite of many highly commendable Australian wines consumed as antidote, the ingeniously spiced main courses left lasting effects and memories. Today I limit my lunch to a very small piece of pizza and some orange juice.

On leaving, Syd Harrex said that his beloved wife Jane was about to cook again today. I countered by inviting them to town for dinner – some Italian or Greek food, perhaps? But no

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way, we will have another round at Syd's place today. This time, Jane says, she has found smaller fish. Let's see what happens.

We approach Syd's cabin in his 1962 Beetle, the seats appropriately worn and torn, the floor bulging and almost complete (but not quite), the muffler noisy, but the engine runs and runs and runs, as should be ... unless it is stopped – as it is now. Syd has left the car in the midst of nowhere among the Adelaide Hills, in order to 'console a friend ... won't be long.' All around there the songbirds chant and the kookaburras laugh. Just now the sun has set, and the sky is aglow with hundreds of cushions of red clouds.

14 October 1983. As anticipated and well prepared, we had another dinner yesterday at Syd and Jane's cabin. Yet that was unexpectedly pleasant and peaceful. For Jane's fish was no warrior fish like the barracuda procured by Syd, but rather what distinguished people choose to call '*fruits de mèr*' – huge spiny lobsters, king crabs, prawns and shrimps, all fresh out of the sea near Adelaide. They tasted excellently well, next to a few bottles of superb and soothing Australian wine – which brought us to rest early, at Syd's place. No koala brawled after this delight. So we started today, Syd, Jane, Meenakshi and me, quite early, on a University tour, in the University Holden, on an instructive excursion into the fruitful south of South Australia. Ignoring wind and rain, we reached McLaren Vale, certainly not to ignore those big and well-known wineries, whose products cannot and should not be excluded from the cultural and regional studies which they are said to inspire. Some of those wineries have even resorted to their old German names which they had to disguise or dissimulate under the precautions and anxieties of two world wars. Philosophising on today's Australian multiculturalism, Syd suggested that we should taste the wines of no fewer than two wineries. Certainly we also bought some of them.

16 June 2015. Though the material substance of those wines has evaporated long ago (and though I had to recapitulate the lie of their land on a later visit), I well remember their tastes and their names. And to this day I remember Syd's charm which continued to inspire and make fruitful our mutual visits ever since – here or there.