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The Task of Australian Poetry

There are at least two angles of view from which we can look at Australian poetry - roughly definable as, first, Australian poetry, a special case in a special country, and second, poetry in Australia, a continuing human activity much the same here as elsewhere, limited by a few special conditions, but comparable to, and interacting with, poetry everywhere. If, until recently, we have taken refuge in the first way of looking at it, as a defence and an excuse for its shortcomings or sometimes as a reason for patronising and denigrating it, we have now begun to switch to the opposite attitude and to feel that we are on equal poetic terms with the rest of the world and ought to take our stand on higher grounds than those of excuse or apology.

This is good - real poetry is universal as well as local - but before we can stand on that ground with real freedom, we have to recognise that a great deal of what has been written here has in fact been limited by special conditions, and that those conditions still influence us today. Poets cannot help knowing that whatever they write must take its place, not wholly on its own merits, but within a continuing and changing hierarchy of poems, as wide as the whole of what is being written today and as deep as poetry's whole historical past; but poetry is also written by and for people and within a society whose influence on the poet is often crucial.

So students and critics of poetry today, I think, have a responsibility towards our past as well as our present, and ought to have a clear sense of what we have inherited and what kind of historical factors have been at work in our literature, as well as of what we are doing, writing and thinking in the present. Our poetry has roots in the past, as we ourselves have; we draw nourishment from them even when we know little about them; and we live in a world where cause leads to effect, even in the sphere of art which we sometimes regard as subject to its own laws only.

It follows that before we can ask what sort of poetry we have produced, and why it is not different to or better than it is, we ought to ask what kind of society our poets have lived in, what it has done for them, or even to them, and what its limitations have been as far as poets have been concerned, since the time of the first settlement.

To begin with, it is clear that Australia was not born out of any very high notions of the responsibilities of Empire, or even with any hope that she would one day become a nation of importance. A convict colony established for sordid and expedient reasons, she remained such for years. Only the character of her first Governor, Phillip, and of a later Governor, Lachlan Macquarie, introduced anything beyond the immediate view, ameliorated the misery, mental as well as physical, of the transportees, or softened the harshness of the relationship between authority and those subject to it. Phillip's idealism gave hope for the establishment of an enlightened attitude in the dealings of the whites with the Aborigines and with their country, but this was soon over-ruled by the immediate necessities of the situation and by the cupidity and ignorance of early settlers.

The tone was established - Australia was henceforth to be, in the main, a society interested more in what poor Charles Harpur rebelliously called "money's-worth" than in eighteenth-century enlightenment and the rule of sensibility and compassion. I suggest that, in some respects, it has remained so.



Nevertheless, this has been mitigated very considerably by two facts - the first, that the very convict-colony origin of Australia inspired a few idealists to imagine Australia as a new Utopia in which the old rule of force and the establishment of a hierarchy of social classes must not be allowed to take hold; the second that at the level of the convicts themselves, and later of the bush-workers moving through the inland as drovers, teamsters, station-hands or itinerant tradesmen, a kind of free-masonry arose that implied real equality and real co-operation, rather than the principle of individualism and every-man-for-himself which had established itself in the much wealthier and securer early settlement of North America. It is not surprising that writers such as Harpur and, later, Lawson and others seized on these manifestations of co-operation and independence of English and European tradition and values, and used them to point the way to the establishment of a free and compassionate society.

However, there have been many other modifying factors in what might be called the climate of feeling here. One of the most important has been that, as our population increased and the continent was explored and settled, the technological revolution in Western culture was progressing faster and faster. This has meant that, almost from the beginning, we have been enabled to master an intractable environment with machines and technical advances in methods and materials, most of which we have had little if anything to do with inventing or developing. We are^a comparatively rootless society, as compared with European races which have lived for thousands of years in contact with the same soil, serving and learning to understand a country. Our attitude to this continent has always been that of the master, intent on profit and the quick dollar; our emotional homeland was for very many years not here at all, but thousands of miles overseas, and hence we have usually regarded this country as a property to be exploited, rather than an inheritance to be cherished.

This fact is probably one of the most important in considering the whole attitude of our society. An exploitive relationship with one's environment is bound to have its effect on every aspect of human feeling towards that environment, and even to extend towards one's relationship with one's fellow-men. Visitors often comment on the emptiness of Australian life, its emphasis on externals and its lack of inner direction. I suggest that the root of this may easily lie largely in our relationship with the country itself, and that there is not much sign yet of a change in our attitude, in the direction of respectful recognition of the needs of the country as opposed to our own immediate advantage, except where our exploitation has already gone so far as to have obvious and serious results for our won comfort and profit.

This may all seem to have little bearing on the state of poetry in our society. I think it has a great deal of bearing. For one thing, the progress of the technological revolution has meant that Australian conditions have changed almost from year to year; that change, rather than consolidation, has been the condition of the Australian's life. This passion for the new, the just-invented, and this discarding of the old as outworn, has meant that Australians have never been particularly interested in their own history, literary or otherwise. Just as hoes and horse-ploughs have been dropped in favour of more and more modern agricultural machinery, so poets like Harpur were forgotten or discredited early.

The fact that our nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century poets were facing life and its conditions here, just as we today are, has been submerged

in a somewhat patronising attitude towards them, as though they were a kind of old-model machine long superseded by something smarter. Harpur was totally ignored by publishers and critics alike, for very many years; Brennan remained out of print from 1913 to 1964; poets like Neilson and "Furnley Maurice" suffered much the same fate. Moreover, the outer-directedness, the emphasis on action and the impatience with contemplation that make themselves obvious in our society, find their expression in our poetry as well; "serious poets" like Brennan and even Neilson have been neglected in favour of a more popular and immediately-intelligible current of verse in the "Bulletin bards" and their followers, and this particular current shows its influence even today in the work of poets like Douglas Stewart and David Campbell, Ray Mathew and others. Contemplation and elaboration of thought have not been a mark of Australian poetry, and their rare practitioners could not expect much appreciation even from more leisured critics.

In fact, as Australians have been a physically active race, they have been on the whole a mentally and emotionally lazy one, distrusting those who move easily in the spheres of thought and feeling. On the other hand, being anxious to excel in such matters as sport and technological progress, they have often felt it time that their writers and poets were also recognised on an international level. This has meant that we have looked for large, important, memorable figures in our literature, figures to whom we could point with pride as representative of Australian literature, noticed abroad and (frankly) not too demanding to live with at home. (Naturally, when they did arrive we have not always been happy with them - no-one, or extremely few people, understood what Brennan was driving at or thought him likely to represent us suitably in the interantional literary competition, as it were and today it is probably only the fact that Patrick White actually has won recognition overseas that makes us buy his books, which expose us so uncomfortably or drag us into regions we do seldom enter willingly.)

This search for importance - the Great Australian Novelist, the Great Australian Poet - has been another factor in our unwillingness to accept and thoroughly examine what has already been done to help solve our problems. Harpur, for various reasons, was rejected; Kendall was acclaimed for, on the whole, reasons which were non-critical and did not take proper account of his real problems as a poet, (and incidentally, the way in which he was received, as a national rather than a personal poet, I think forced him too often from his proper bent into the kind of verse which he himself recognised as the poems of "blind occasions"). Brennan was neglected as making demands which we were unable to meet, and because he operated in too high an intellectual sphere for us; Neilson was regarded rather patronisingly as a rustic phenomenon; and I think that even today we are apt to prefer "poetry of occasion" and poetry of immediately intelligible bearing, and the poetry of action and description and narration, to the work of poets who insist on contemplation and on the development of their own personal bent and values.

Perhaps this cannot help having its effect on poets themselves; since after all, though poetry is a matter of moving from the personal to the universal, and finally addresses, not the immediate audience but the immortal audience, if I may put it that way, there is always the reaction of the immediate audience to throw the poet out of his real path.

Today, too, new problems are beginning to emerge at the same time as new possibilities of appreciation and a new kind of audience are becoming available to Australian poets. For the first time, poetry in Australia is being written by a body of men and women with a university background and often even a university environment; it is being studied in schools and in universities, it is becoming a subject for theses and articles, learned journals are beginning to take account of - even to be established to take account of - our literature on high critical levels.

Until the Second War, our poetry, except for Brennan, was on the whole a product of non-academic and non-professional writers, sometimes even of writers without much education at all. Now the situation is quite different; poets are expected to be also critics and even reviewers, their poems are "set" in schools, they are requested to clarify and explain them for examination candidates, their "influences" are examined and discussed; theory, for the first time, is beginning to take precedence over practice, and the poet is beginning to become as self-conscious as a debutante who is not quite sure that her lipstick is on straight.

This, I suggest, is an important and even a crucial alteration in the position of poets in Australia today, and represents an added pressure, for good or ill, on poets themselves. All such pressures are bound to have an effect, one way or another, on every writer, and I think every writer ought therefore to consider their dangers and their possible advantages, and to clarify his own attitude towards them.

For of course, however pleasant it may be to find oneself with a captive audience of students and an established critical industry beginning to turn its attention to one's work, there are dangers in this, especially perhaps for poets. Poetry is essentially a matter of personal honesty towards one's own experience, of faithfulness, so to speak, to oneself and one's personal vision, of refusal to be side-tracked by other people's notions of what one ought to be writing or by criticism of what one has already written. This attitude is hard enough to maintain, goodness knows, in any social milieu; perhaps neglect and lack of interest in what one is doing are better for the poet than too clamorous and immediate an interest. The poet of twenty years ago in Australia might complain with justice that he had not enough appreciation, not enough people who cared to listen to what he was saying; but that did not prevent him, as a rule, from being able to say it in whatever way he chose. "Silence, exile and cunning", as Joyce put it, have always been the most favourable conditions for producing one's best work; few poets of course are tough enough to be wholly indifferent to their immediate audience, whatever it may be, but their responsibility is not to be fashionable and to belong to some recognized school, but to be above all themselves and to hope that recognition, if it comes at all, will come on their own terms and not on those of anybody else.

However, since there is now, at last, a subject called Aust. Lit. and a body of criticism relating to it, and since teachers are teaching it and students are studying it and theses are being written on it, the rather small number of what might be called "primary producers" of the material to be studied are naturally beginning to feel certain effects. Today, perhaps more than ever, we need to be aware of what poetry in Australia has been, what it is, and what it can be, and of the factors which are altering it.

Historically, as I said, Australian writing has on the whole been

the product of non-professionals and usually of solitary workers. Our poetry grew up sporadically; we have had no patrons, few critics of importance, small and rather uninterested audiences. There has been no important literary centre, except for a few eddies of influence in the capital cities. Universities, libraries, even 'little magazines' to publish poetry, have not been until recently important factors in the growth of our literature. This lack of a focus, of any central point of reference, has meant that writers here have been more isolated and more self-centred than in countries where a tradition was established and literature was honoured. A couple of publishers of foresight, one or two magazines and journals, one or two critics of enthusiasm and intelligence, were the midwives of Australian writing.

Moreover, until very recently and to some extent even today, our chief reference-points have been abroad, rather than at home; we have not asked of our literature, "Will this poem, or this book, help us to understand and find ourselves; what significance has this writer for us here and now?", but rather, "Is this the kind of thing that will be praised by English or American critics?"

This attitude is obviously not at all helpful to writers struggling with immediate and unique problems such as Australia has from the very first presented. The surprising thing is that so many writers have been able to remain unaffected by it, and to make real and important contributions to the growth of an indigenous literature. One of the obvious dangers, however, in the new critical industry which has lately sprung up, is that these contributions may be overvalued - that we may find ourselves trapped in a rather narrow notion of Australian literature in which certain conventions are expected of us; another is, of course, that they may be valued in the wrong way, that because Australian writers have had large problems to deal with in the process of becoming articulately Australian, these problems may be seen as the most important factor in Australian writing, instead of as something incidental to its growth, and that poems or novels which do not in fact deal with or refer to them, but transcend or ignore them, may not seem as important as those which do.

This of course works both ways; one contemporary critic has praised a certain poet's work as containing "no reference to wallabies", while others regard wallaby-less poems as somehow not quite Australian; but the point about poems ought not to be whether they are or are not obviously aware of the existence of wallabies, but whether they are or are not poems. And this question, I am afraid, is one which is not asked often enough, or with enough basic knowledge of what poems are and what they do.

This, I think, is just the crux of the present problems of Australian writers. We have reached the stage at which we can now, or ought now to be able to, write of anything and everything without self-consciousness about our subjects; anything, internal or external, can after all be a starting-point for art. We have not, of course, produced the Great Australian Poet for whom everyone has been, rather foolishly I think, looking for so long; but we have solved our immediate environmental problems, and our problems of isolation have been solved for us by modern communications. We belong to the community of the world, whether we like it or not, and to the community of art; and we ought to be, and are, contributing to both in whatever we write.

But, in another way, we are still caught up in the smaller and more immediate community and its pressures and attitudes, to which also we have been and still are contributing; and it is not a community which regards art very highly or has a very clear notion of what art is. So it is a community which is still apt to value poetry for what it says, for its ostensible subject, rather than for what it is, for its degree of artistic organisation and its success as a poem. Therefore, it is almost as difficult as ever to be, here, a poet rather than specifically an Australian poet.

This is what makes me feel that the new critical and academic industry of Aust. Lit. is something to be watched warily, as well as, of course, something to be welcomed. It is going to generate - in fact, it is already generating - a good deal of pressure on writers; if it is sensible, informed and tolerant in its attitudes, accepting what we are and what we are doing as writers, as well as demanding; asking high standards but doing so with an intelligent recognition of the place, condition, and problems of writers here; knowing clearly what art is and can be, and putting its emphases in the right places, it will be a force in our favour. If it gets its emphasis wrong, however, it will only add to our difficulties as writers. We do not want to be valued for writing poems about wallabies, or for soaring far above wallabies to more universal levels; we want to be valued for writing poems which are good poems, whether or not we take wallabies as our starting-point; and after all, sub specie aeternitatis the wallaby is, if I may put it so, as good a jumping-off point as the airfield or the suburban garden. It is the poem we make that matters, not the point we start from when we make it.

This, however, is not the only point of pressure at which the study of Aust. Lit. is affecting poetry. The poet himself, as I said before, is now more likely to be academically trained, and even to be himself a critic of other poets' work, a reviewer, an analyst of poetry, or a journalist. He is not only an object of the critic, but usually himself one of the moulders of critical opinion. This is partly due to the spread of university education today over a wider field of society; but also to the fact that there are not many professional critics in Australia, and there is plenty of opportunity nowadays for the publication of reviews and critical articles, which indeed are often a good deal more lucrative than the production of the work of art itself. Poets have to live, and if they live to some extent by taking in each other's washing, it is not necessarily a worse way of making a living than driving a transport trailer or working in an office or a factory.

However, it does mean that there is a new emphasis on the intellect in Australian poetry, that poems are being written rather out of intellectual experience than out of physical experience, that poets are more apt to have a background of academic or city life than before, even that poems are being written about writing poetry. This is, again, a new thing in Australia, which has not yet produced an urban literature, and it certainly makes for a new kind of self-consciousness and consciousness of literariness as a thing rather apart from ordinary life. There are dangers in it, too, unless the poet is quite sure of himself and of his path; to listen to too many conflicting voices, to be both an object and a part of the current of academic criticism, can mean that one loses touch with immediate reality and with one's own inner responses, and defers too much to influence.

This is not to say that intellect and a development of the critical faculty are in themselves a danger to poetry: obviously they are not. But it is worth while remembering that our most intellectual poet, Brennan, and our least intellectual, Shaw Neilson, are and ought to be valued for the poetry they produced, and that while Neilson did not find his almost total lack of education any great handicap in writing poetry, Brennan's intellectualism is, poetically speaking, one of his worst faults. The intellect is not to be denigrated, but it is the imagination that works in poetry; and too strong an intellectual control can be an actual bar to its operation. Poetry is poetry is poetry, and this is a truth that the critical attitude can easily lose sight of. Development of the intellect cannot in itself, of course, "make a stone of the heart", but it can interfere with the perception and development of feeling, by which in the end all poetry lives. Moreover it can impose its own conventions, and there is a good deal of truth in J.M. Synge's observation that "all theory is bad for the artist, because it makes him live in the intelligence."

Nevertheless, there are some important advantages for our poetry in the new concentration of attention on the Australian field and what has been done here. Where before we too easily and shallowly dismissed our early poets as weak and imitative of their English congeners, we are now beginning to see rather more in them than we once did, to realise their special problems (which to some extent are still also our problems) and to see ourselves as their successors and inheritors, rather than as new improved models with most of the bugs ironed out (as the technological jargon has it). This is going to help us a good deal, for we need to understand our own situation in relation to theirs, as well as to know our own place and work in our much widened and complicated situation.

For we do face very considerable, and new, problems in writing poetry today. First there is the question of the place of poetry in the world itself: whether poetry really has anything to say in a materialist and technological society - that is, what audience we are hoping to touch among people who spend most of their time among machines or in banks and insurance offices and mines and factories, or whether we can only hope to be read by students and specialists nowadays; but more importantly, we have to think of what we are ourselves to say and how best we can say it. Both these questions find one immediate and obvious answer: that, as always, it is not the bank clerk or the engineer we are addressing, but the person, the continuing core of man, his feeling, and his desire to be a whole and rounded personality (even if he does not know that he desires it). It is still true, and will always be true, that, as Graham Hough says in The Moral Censor, "the poem is a world of its own that we must enter on its own terms, but there is no danger that by this we cut the poem off from all connections with the rest of our experience, for what enters into the poem is you or me... in a state of ideal imaginative freedom - freedom to enter into lives that we could otherwise never know, to entertain experiences that we should otherwise shrink from or reject. This is one of the most important services literature can perform."

So it is true that the best kind of poetry being written today is personal poetry, written by poets who insist on being completely faithful to their own experience, on listening to inner rather than outer fact, on being themselves in the face of all distractions and following the line dictated by personality rather than by theory. But it is just here that difficulty lies, in a world which is getting noisier and more insistent and less interested in the personal from year to year, and in

which it gets harder and harder to find time to be a person and to discover one's own integrity. It is much easier to find a formula, develop a technique, and write according to a theory, than to trust the inner dictation of a daemon whose voice is now so faint against the much more audible shouting outside.

Still, it is after all a much pleasanter job to keep trying to be human and humane and to emphasise the role of feeling in the world, than to serve the machine, even if it is much harder. Poetry is one of the last subjective tasks in a time devoted to the object, and as such it is probably the most important; even in a space-ship man is still man, and needs to remember his roots and know his real limitations and glories; the chief of the latter being, of course, that he can and does produce art, which outlasts satellites, although the launching of satellites makes much more noise in the world than the production of a new poem, painting or symphony.

All this is of course only the re-statement of the obvious; I re-state it now, not just to comfort and console, but because this is a time when it needs re-stating over and over, and a society where it has been stated too seldom. Poets, and students of poetry, in Australia, are forced to think a good deal about the special problems of poetry, but ought to remember that finally the poetry transcends the problems and exists in its own right.

Also, I state it because, with the increasing academic concentration on our so far rather meagre production, there is a tendency, which also seems to be increasing, to promulgate prescriptions for poetry here and to condemn or dismiss poems which do not fit into the "right" categories. I think this is always dangerous. In the eighteenth century in England it led to the dismissal of the Elizabethan lyricism and variety; in the nineteenth century it led in turn to the dismissal of classicism in poetry. Poetry, however, is large; it has room for everything, and for all ways of looking at the world and dealing with experience. It demands nothing except unflinching honesty and perceptiveness, but it does not like the ascendancy of formulas and fashions, because it is a matter, not only of inheritance, but of discovery.

Meanwhile, there is the teaching of Australian poetry to be considered; the teaching, as a rule, that is, of the appreciation of certain isolated anthology-pieces of Australian poetry, of a short story or two, possibly more, and possibly of a novel - usually a novel of action and description, suitable for the fourteen or fifteen-year-old. (Here I don't really know what is being prescribed as Australian literature in other States; some syllabi, of course, are much fuller than others.) I think it is relevant to wonder just what is happening, in this teaching, and what is likely to be the basic attitude of teachers and taught to this new and relatively untouched field.

To begin with, of course, poetry is a subject extremely difficult to teach, because (as perhaps with mathematics) some minds are receptive to it and some are decidedly not so, and the latter will probably stay that way in spite of the teacher's best efforts. But with the study of English literature, there are certain advantages for the teacher. Shakespeare, Keats, Tennyson et al. are fixed stars against an alien background; everything has been said about them that the teacher needs to know, they are there, solid, and if the child is not interested in reading them, he still has

a critical textbook which he can learn off by heart and he may still pass his examination. So far, this is not the case with Australian poetry, about which not much has been said, and which is not a "recognised subject" anywhere but in Australia.

However, the kind of poetry that is usually set for examinations in schools does refer to a background the student knows, or knows of, and this may interest him more, or excite him more to contradiction, than English poetry can do. So the teaching of Australian poetry is still perhaps rather controversial, rather in flux; teachers are not always quite sure that what they are saying is right, or their interpretations are the accepted ones. Sometimes this is a good thing - the class can argue out a meaning amongst themselves, and perhaps be aroused to real interest by doing so - but if the teacher is unconfident or - as does occasionally happen - not really interested in the question himself, it may merely result in a bored class which has gained the general impression that Australian literature is a pretty minor kind of subject anyway and not worth bothering about.

In fact, the problems which apply in the teaching of Australian literature are apt to be very much the same as some of those which arise in the writing of it: just how much emphasis do we give to the indigenous, and how much to the universal? Is Australian poetry a specialist field, or must it take its tone and colour from the poetry of the world and merge with that instead? Shall we set Harpur against Wordsworth, Kendall against Tennyson, or shall we merely match them against each other? How much emphasis do we give to their special problems? Today, is A.D. Hope to be compared, say, with his contemporary Dylan Thomas, and if so, in heaven's name, how? The problems of the teacher of a new and indigenous literature, whose canons are not yet fixed and accepted, and whose critics are apt to be opposed to one another and to speak in a variety of voices, are many and difficult.

He may end up, simply for lack of guidance, by teaching only the poems set in his particular anthology and giving the children the misty impression that these are the only poems worth studying or reading in the whole of Australian literature and they need not bother with it in the future; he may over-emphasise its particularly Australian qualities and give them the impression that poems written in Australia ought to do this too and those which don't are not properly Australian, or he may, by comparing the Australian writers too patronisingly with the English poets set, end by implicitly denigrating them and so reinforcing the attitude described by A.A. Phillips as "the cultural cringe".

These problems are inseparable from the beginning of a local study, of course, and they are certainly made up for by the chance of making poetry itself come much more alive by showing the child that poetry is something living, vital and immediate to himself and his own environment and something which he can share in at his own level; that it is not past and done with, but a growing thing. (I myself, to be personal, have been surprised at the number of letters I have had recently from schoolchildren who seemed startled and delighted that I was actually alive and still writing - which seems to me to indicate that it is all too easy to give children the impression that poetry is a matter of the past, rather than the present, a school subject rather than a living art.)

This brings me back, after rather a long detour, to the immediate subject of this talk, the task of Australian poetry. All poetry, of course, is a matter

of inheritance as well as of discovery - inheritance of method and technique, of an art and a culture and a way of looking at the world, but also discovery of ways of applying them, and adding to that inheritance by doing so, and through this of discovering ourselves and our powers and possibilities, of communicating our experience in the form of art, which partakes of the eternal as well as the temporal, and lifts the individual to "a state of ideal imaginative freedom". If, in Australia, our inheritance is confusingly double - a European background an Australian foreground, - and our perspectives are difficult to get right in proportion, at least we are making a start towards finding that proportion, and hence making sense of ourselves as well as of our art.

- Judith Wright.

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