

POSTLUDE : # A colony of the mind,

Like the ^{nations} ~~countries~~ of ^{the American continent} ~~America~~, Australia is a culture of conquest. The first settlers destroyed the human understanding of the environment at the same time that they destroyed the people who had developed that understanding. Yet the culture that they brought with them from ~~Europe and~~ ^{and Europe} Great Britain did not work in the new environment. Not only was the social structure which underlies European culture partly dissolved and then set in new moulds, but the visible ^{symbols} ~~monuments~~ of man's long growth into the rhythms of the country⁺ side, and the monuments which he built within it to embody his ideals, were missing. So just as the settlers had to evolve new forms of agriculture, the writers have had to evolve new myths and legends which make sense of the new world. Their task has not been to ~~start~~ make a fresh start, but to refashion the ways of thought they have inherited, and the patterns of imagery in which they have been cast, to fit a changed reality. Until the physical environment has been thus mentally colonized it has remained alien. Only as the new myths have emerged have Australians been able to feel at home in their own land, and even now there is strong pressure to trust to sentimental romance rather than to accept reality. The sentimentality is present in much of the current wave of nostalgia for Australiana and ^{the outback} ~~outbackery~~, but exists also in the continuing reverence for a foreign monarchy and a naive belief in standards of purity and simplicity which belonged to a true Australia before it was swamped by foreign influences. It is partly in reaction to these ~~crudities~~ that serious Australian writers have tended to turn to comedy of manners,

We can discern the same development in Australian literature which Borges describes in that of South America. The early attempts to transplant English ideals and images distorted reality, just as the attempt to transplant English society failed. The earliest writers of the nationalist stream therefore had to seek to define the peculiarly Australian experience. This they did by taking their themes from the business of settlement, which gave rise to an imagery of defeat and despair, a mythology in which man had only himself to trust in amid st a hostile universe. Only when this reality had been explored and accepted was it possible for Australian writers to work freely again within the European tradition. This means that of the earlier writers, probably only Richardson and Lawson are completely acceptable ^{to} people not concerned with the particularity of Australia. This is because, ~~Richardson's case, she~~ ^{in Richardson's case, she} succeeds in fitting her material to a traditional form of the European novel, albeit a form which was ceasing to have relevance to the dark movements of the ~~spixitix~~ twentieth century. Lawson's experience of isolation, on the other hand, ~~shaped~~ ^{shaped} for him a form which, although it had its origins in the inconsequence of the bushman's yarn, ~~was~~ also proved an analogue for the new forms of the European short story. On the other hand, the sprawling masterpieces of Murphy and Herbert, for all their embodiment of the absurdity of the human condition, remain largely inaccessible, in my experience, to the non-Australian reader.

This brings us to the ^eperennial problem of whether Australian literature is to be judged by its own or by universal standards. To paraphrase Borges, this seems to me to be a rhetorical rather than a real question, but it is only by disposing of it that we can clear the way to seeing what a study of literature in Australia should be. In the first place, we must see that Australian writing is not independent, is ~~xxxxxxx~~ not even a tributary, but is a part of the ^{fact} ^{impressed on} main stream of English and European literature. This ^{has been} ~~born in~~ ^{abortive} on me by my ^uattempts to teach it as an independent subject, ~~whichxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~ Although this endeavor ^uhas been supported by the sound pedagogic principles of moving from the known to the unknown, from that which is at hand to that which is more distant, and although the teaching ^{has} ^{of} been with students who have placed a premium on supposed relevance, in practice those who have coped with the study have been precisely those who have been well read in ^{standard} works of English literature. From this we ^Ican draw the unsurprising conclusion that our thinking is shaped more by the whole body of the English tradition than it is by what is ~~xxxxxx~~ peculiarly our own. There are, however, two further deductions we may make. The first is that any study of literature in Australia must be a study of the Australian tradition, of its roots in the past and its adaptation to the changed circumstances of ~~the~~ a new land. This means that, for example, the study of English literature in Australia should not be the same as it is in England, where the countryside gives constant visual significance to the verbal imagery. The second is that Australian literature should be studied, not for itself and by its own standards, but for what it contributes to the whole.

This does not mean, however, that we must pursue some mythical notion of universal standards, a myth which has itself been born out of the social and political necessities of the twentieth century, when literature ^{for one} has had placed on it the burden of providing standards for living which were formally provided by the established religions. Rather, literature must be studied as an embodiment of man's attempts to make sense of the particular social and physical environments in which he has found himself. Where these attempts have continuity, so we also have a literary or cultural tradition. At any given time, the literature will represent man's attempts to make sense of the new in terms of the old, to adapt the language and images received from the past to the new circumstances of the present. At the heart of this endeavor ^u will be found the values which the writer celebrates as belonging to the world in which he finds himself. In studying these values, as embodied in language, we are enlarging our understanding both of man's possibilities and of the way in which every culture limits these possibilities for its particular generation. Seen in this perspective, the study of Australian literature is a study of man's attempts to adapt his ideas to a particular environment. There need therefore be no sense of condescension in giving our attention to works which we judge as making sense only within this environment. These works may be as important in their place and age as those of more universal significance, and as such will retain a significance which is as much literary as historical, for we still will study them as linguistic embodiments of ~~the~~ important human ~~and~~ experience and values. The most important works will, however, be those which, through the circumstances of their ^{creation} ~~time or~~ authorship, make generally accessible the experience of their own time,

Within these works, however, we will still recognize that which is local. Borges has pointed to the freedom which the ~~colonial~~ colonial writer has to move within his parent tradition. This freedom can be observed if we contrast post-war European novels with those emanating from America or Australia. In the former, there is a sense of an individual burdened by a society which no longer has room for the individual, which has become hostile to the human spirit. ~~The~~ ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Anthony Burgess ^{has} ~~has~~ described the theme of the works being read in England in the late nineteen/~~forties~~ forties as the idea of "man's impotence to be good or happy without cherishing the values the war nearly quelled for ever^{?"} But while the European writer seems overwhelmed by the past, a past which contains the values he must cherish but which has also bred the monstrous structures which now threaten him, the Australian and American writers ^{are} ~~is~~ ~~more~~ concerned, not with cherishing but with finding values ~~by~~ ^{they} on which he may construct an individual and social life which will give point to ^{their} ~~his~~ ^{lives} life. The figure who overshadows European writing is Kafka, who can be found even behind Burgess' Clockwork Orange, and whose castle has become the world in Mervyn Peake's strange trilogy. The image of American writing, however, remains the Mississippi, with its promises of freedom, or the builder, with his promise of purpose. In Australia, it is the desert, but even in a desert the quest is still possible.

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~~ket~~, while American ^{writing} ~~writing~~ may be described as cosmopolitan, Australian writing is ^{provincial.} ~~provincial.~~ The American is at home everywhere and nowhere, he is still trying to escape into a wilderness where his escape destroys his innocence. We can see this in the restless and rootless heroes of Kerouac, Bellow or Sallinger. Herzog, agonizingly aware of his own impotence, still carries on endless correspondence to reform the world, past and ^{future} ~~future~~. Henderson seeks in Africa what he cannot any longer find in America. Norman ~~Mailer~~ Mailer, hero, author and reporter at once, ~~Mailer~~ seeks to reform the world at the same time as he tries to define his own identity. In the opening pages of Advertisements for Myself he proclaims: "Like many another vain, empty, and bullying boy of our time, I have been running for President these last ten years in the privacy of my mind, and it occurs to me that I am less close now than when I began. . . . The sour truth is that I am imprisoned ~~within~~ with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time."³ The arrogance is checked, but not lessened, by the recognition of his personal inadequacy. The ~~immediate~~ dialectic is between his personal hollowness and ^{his} ~~the~~ need to reform the world ^{in order} to fill it. The further ^{gru} ~~reco~~gnition is that the task of ~~President~~, and of all Americans, is reforming the consciousness of the world.

This same dialectic and recognition, which Mailer pursues with frenetic energy through all his books, both his works of fiction and his chronicles of American achievements, from political conventions and police riots to Marilyn Monroe and astronauts on the moon, is the central theme of Saul Bellow's more introspective work. Although Bellow's novels appear to be private in the same sense that Mailer's are public, ~~Bellow's~~ in the sense that one could never imagine any of Bellow's characters, ~~even~~ even Henderson, running for ~~President~~ President, they too are occupied in making sense of their lives in a public, indeed international, context.

(This appears clearly in the title of one of Bellow's most recent works, Mr Sammler's Planet.⁴ The planet in question turns out to be the moon, but it ~~is~~ also ~~has~~ has the implication of being this planet earth, which is symbolized both by the New York which is the novel's present and by the gas ovens and cemeteries of Nazi Europe, from which Mr Sammler has escaped ^h physically, but which he brings with him as part of his being to America.

The ingredients of Bellow's novel are Mr ~~Sammler's~~ ^{Sammler's} experience with a ^{black} pickpocket, who ^{who} oppresses him at the beginning of the novel and ^{who} is beaten up by ~~his~~ Sammler's son-in-law at the end; his war ~~experience~~ ^{experience} being blinded, escaping from the grave by pushing aside the corpses of the slain and climbing over them to his own freedom, then surviving in a cemetery and finally winning freedom only by killing another man; the illness and ultimate death of his benefactor, Dr Gruner; the deaths of the Six-day War in Israel; and the eccentricity, or rather lack of any centre, of his relatives and acquaintances, all of whom are possessed either by the drive for money and success or by some less conventional drive.

Yet while these factors ~~constitute~~ ^{constitute} a world which is both personal and peculiar, they also between them offer images of the modern world. As Borges has remarked, ⁵ the Jew has the freedom to operate within Western culture without being committed to it. Sammler's Jewish relatives have this freedom within the American ^e culture, and they ~~thus~~ both epitomize it, with its ^{5/3} emphasis on the individual and denial of any social milieu to nourish his individuality, and criticize it. Sammler himself, however, has a commitment, by virtue of his experience of death, ^{made} personal by his slaying of the German soldier and national, or cultural, by his observation of the corpses of the Six-day War. He is obliged, therefore, not merely to observe, but to ~~partake~~ participate. He is partly the traditional intellectual, trying to make sense of a mad world, but he is also called on to bring actual, not merely physical, order.

The ~~inexpressible~~ figure of the negro pickpocket whom Sammler observes plying his trade on the bus is the agent of this demand on Sammler. The negro, like the Jew, is the outsider, but he is also the reverse side of western culture, the subterranean laborer who has provided the material base of our civilization, ~~Sammler~~ but who ~~retains~~ ^{retains} the physicality which this civilization denies. The denial of the ~~brute~~ animal has led to the upsurge of such horrors as the European war from which Sammler has escaped, and Sammler himself feels a sense of admiration for the negro, both for his physique and for his craftsmanship. Yet ~~the~~ ^{this} negro is also preying on others weaker than himself, and Sammler, for all that he ~~recognized~~ ^{recognizes} his fascination, feels obliged as a citizen to put an end to his deprivations. In this intent he is thwarted by the inability of the police bureaucracy to act, and so he himself becomes a victim, ~~not of~~ ^{not of} actual pickpocketing, but of the ~~negro's~~ physical dominance which the ~~negro~~ ^{negro} wordlessly imposes on him. ~~Sammler~~ unwillingly sees the pickpocket at work again, attempts to flee but is followed to the foyer of his ^apartment, where the negro corners him and exposes himself. "The man's expression was not directly menacing but oddly, serenely masterful. The thing was shown with mystifying certitude." This robs Sammler of both will and effectiveness, and leaves him with only the ^{wish} to divest himself of the earth, "to blow this great blue, white, green planet, or to be blown from it." Yet even in this abdication there is an appreciation of the wonder and beauty of the planet.

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It is not my purpose to analyse the way Bellow grapples with this dilemma, but rather to point out the way in which the personal issue is set uncompromisingly in ~~xxxxxxx~~ a universal context. The American novelist is unable to deal with any question less than the life and death of the human race. By contrast, the Australian writer, although dealing with universal issues, explores them in a personal context. The issue of the slave camps reappears in Patrick White's writings, most notably in Riders in the Chariot but also in The Eye of the Storm, in the person of the housekeeper. ^{Universal} ~~These~~ questions ^{such as this} are finally, however, resolved in terms of the personal vision of the people concerned. Himmelfarb ~~xxxxxxx~~ suffers his own crucifixion and ascendance, and lives on in the lives of his few fellow visionaries. Mrs Lippmann, her task of caring for Elizabeth Hunter finished, cuts her wrists with the vegetable knife which has been the instrument of her service. Sammler, on the other hand, dreams of colonizing the moon, and if he achieves no resolution, is at least restored to the mainstream of life. He is drawn to mysticism, he now reads only the work of Meister Eckhardt, but his actions are judged severely by their practical effect. The implication is that the world may need mysticism as a source of wisdom, but that ultimately man must save himself by practical action. There is an underlying faith in the reality of human achievement.

It is this faith which has been denied by the Australian experience. Our writers may share with Americans the freedom from a sense of the oppression of the past, but they have no confidence in the possibilities of the future. This is as true of those who see life as an absurd or brutal charade, like Peter Mathers or David Ireland, as of those who search for meaning on another plane. It is in this sense that they remain parochial, rooted in a particular time and place, rather than concerned with swelling the imperial theme of western conquest. This parochialism emphasizes the reality of a particular part of human experience, that which has occurred in Australia since the coming of the white man. As such, it is a part of the European experience and therefore ^{of the European} tradition. In its awareness of failure, its lack of pretension, it may in fact offer a truth which cannot be found elsewhere.