Australian writers have always felt themselves uncomfortably impaled on the horns of a dilemma. If they write for a local audience and about their own experience they restrict their scope, but if they unashamedly seek to write for the world they risk losing their own roots. Martin Boyd's novels express this problem as his characters move between England and Australia. Henry Handel Richardson solved it by living in England but writing in detail about Australia. Patrick White does the opposite, staying at home but writing for the world, while Christina Stead lived and wrote around the world but retained an Australian perspective. Many of the most recent generation of Australian writers seem to solve the problem by declaring themselves international and writing without any attempt to relate to specifically Australian experience. On the other hand, migrant writers of this generation have continued to feel the necessity of exploring the conflict between their native traditions and Australian reality. This contrasts with the attitudes of the Aboriginal poets gathered in Kevin Gilbert's collection Inside Black Australia (Penguin Australia, Ringwood, 1988). These poets write for their own people, expressing their anger and defiance at their treatment by white Australia. Their verses are made to be used to give their readers confidence in reclaiming their own identity. Yet this has been the lot of Australian writers from the beginning. Those who wrote for an audience at "home" in England, and defined the new colony by its lack of comfort and gentility, were defining themselves as a continuing element in English
society, but they were also extending the meaning of English 
society and making it a universal standard of civilisation... In 
challenging this assumption, nationalist writers from Lawson to 
Prichard not only made a new image in which Australians could 
recognise themselves, but also asserted the validity of this 
image as an integral part of all human experience. The writers 
who have subsequently challenged the partiality and exclusions of 
these images by offering their own have by their writing forced 
us to recognize different realities of the experience of 
colonising Australia. Those who now insist on their 
international context confront us with one result of this 
colonisation, which has replaced an indigenous culture with a 
constructed nation, and at the same time has joined this nation 
ineseparably into a global economy and culture. The assertion of 
local difference and identity is a part of this global culture 
that we share with peoples as diverse as Inuits, Basques and 
Argentinians. It is a part of the response to the over-riding 
imperative of the contemporary world, that we learn to live 
together and separately, maintaining our individuality only as we 
recognize our commonality.

It is easy to point to a tradition which has now been 
established in Australian literature. The idea of a tradition 
is, however, hostile to the understanding of any literature. It 
necessarily excludes work which does not fit its assumptions, and 
so inhibits the freedom of writers to tell the truth as they see 
it, and of readers to use writing as they choose. By suggesting 
standards and criteria of judgement, it inhibits freedom of
response. It is the opposite of an understanding of the past, a recognition that all writing is a response to a particular situation and that through it we can understand the struggles which have brought our present consciousness into being and choose the areas of meaning that we need to work for now.

In one sense, all Australian writing is a part of new world literature, the literature of displaced peoples and cultures. Aboriginal writers represent a people displaced in their own land; migrant writers adapt the forms and language of their homelands to their antipodes; the internationalists recolonise the old world, denying its exclusive ownership of any culture and forcing it to admit to the global reality of its own history.

Yet the new world literatures do not themselves constitute a harmonious whole. There are distinctions between the settler literatures of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, the literatures of displaced and subject peoples in the West Indies, and the literatures of indigenous peoples in Africa, India and the Pacific. Within Australian literature, there are conflicts of power and ownership, between high and popular cultures, between male and female writers, between generations and between metaphor and metonymy, fiction and realism. These conflicts finally are not literary but political. They represent contending claims for legitimacy, for ownership not just of the right to speak but of the right to live according to our own choices. The traditionalists assert that literature provides universal standards of values on which alone a safe and secure society can be built. It provides readers with access to a
tradition which guarantees their humanity. The opposite view is that literature provides a framework which controls and directs the sexuality and the drive for power and autonomy which determine our personal and communal lives. Every literary work is an attempt to free these desires from some constraints so that they can build new orders of individuality or communality. Conservative literature attempts to build orders which will maintain established values, radical writers try to topple old oppressions and incorporate new values in their structures, to make new, but they are alike in constituting struggles for power. Australian literature constitutes a struggle to find room in an old content for old cultures and to enlarge these cultures to accommodate the people at whose cost they were built.