

The Dilemma of Australian Literature

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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 Australians. Their verses are made to be used to give their readers confidence in remaking their own identity. has concerned all

Yet this ~~has been the task 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 inseparably 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 Induits, Basques and Argentinians. It is a part of the response to the overriding imperative of the contemporary world, that we learn to live together and separately, maintaining our individuality only as we recognise 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 situations 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 adapting 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, formalism 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 continent for old cultures and to enlarge these cultures to accommodate the people at whose cost they were built.