

Literature Board -- Australia Council

Review of Magazines Program

Submission from Overland -- 20 March 95

As editor of Overland, I welcome the review by the Literature Board of its program of support for Australian literary magazines. I must however again state my concern that the consultant's report commissioned as a basis for this review has not been released for comment, and that the questions raised by the Board for comment represent a very limited agenda that fails to show any consideration for the editorial function of individual literary journals.

Literary journals are not merely vehicles for creative writing, whether this is defined as poetry, fiction and criticism or, as I would hope, more widely, to include all the genres of writing that interpret experience to society as it is lived in a particular place, time and culture. The journals themselves also contribute directly to this interpretation, as they provide a context for the writing and set up a particular kind of conversation between their readers and contributors. The conversations of individual journals are no more interchangeable than are the works of particular writers, even though an outside observer may be as aware of similarities, induced by a common culture as of differences induced by separate personalities. The medium is still to a large extent the message, and as each journal is a distinct medium it provides a distinct message, an individual voice within our national conversation. I would therefore contend that a primary aim of the review of the magazine program should be to maintain a diversity of voices.

The need for diversity is not merely a matter of catering for distinct consumer tastes. Rather, the value of the literary magazines and literary publishing, like the value of film, television and music, which are also of major economic significance, is based on a use value that goes beyond their immediate consumption as commodities to their function in preserving the cultural health of the community as a whole. At its simplest, this argument can be based on a need for cultural diversity that is as important as biological diversity. At a higher level, a variety of cultural institutions, including literary magazines can be recognised as contributing essentially to what Jurgen Habermas has designated as the "communicative competence" of the national community.

Habermas distinguishes between the analysis of societies as systems needing steering or managing, and their analysis as "life-worlds" that are "symbolically structured" and can be understood only as subjects developing and maintaining their own identities. This latter function is the central task of cultural maintenance performed by literary and cultural performance and discussion. While the test of management is efficiency, the test of cultural maintenance is the continuing ability of members of society to recognise themselves within cultural traditions and structures. If this recognition fails, society disintegrates.

Habermas argues that communicative competence requires the ability to listen as well as to speak, and is embedded in society as the discourse that takes account of all perceptions of experience as a necessary part of the process of establishing truth. He accepts a dualist view of truth, distinguishing between

"theoretic discourse" that establishes the "truth" of the nature of things as they are, and "practical discourse" that establishes the "correctness of the problematic norm". Both forms of discourse require what his translator paraphrases as

a "suspension of the constraints of action," a putting out of play of all motives except that of a willingness to come to an understanding and a "bracketing of validity claims"--that is, a willingness to suspend judgement as to the existence of certain states of affairs (that may or may not exist) and as to the rightness of certain norms (that may or may not be correct).¹

These are exactly the forms of discourse that are supported by our present literary magazines, which give readers and writers the opportunity to engage in conversations that break the boundaries of habitual thought, perception and feeling and to re-orient themselves within a society constantly being shaped by the pressures of economic, technological and cultural change.

The argument for diversity is not of course an argument that precisely the journals that are being supported today should be supported for all time -- quite the opposite. However, all of the present journals have proved themselves capable of re-inventing themselves continuously in response to the changing nature of the cultural dialogue and as a part of their unchanging responsibility of cultural interpretation. This quality of change within continuity is too precious to be lightly abandoned in favour of any policy of unbridled innovation, let alone consolidation or centralisation. The journals at present are required to provide annual statements of their philosophy and intended direction. At present, the Board fails to give any indication of how these statements affect its decisions on the allocation of funds for their support. I would suggest that these statements could in fact be used to determine performance indicators for each journal, which in turn could be used to allow a transparent method of allotting funds in response to performance, rather than the present lottery.

Overland provides a blend of the popular and the academic, of fiction, poetry and essays, of the innovative and the traditional, of creative and analytical, of comment, reportage and analysis, which is firmly grounded in the radical nationalist tradition yet committed to an international perspective, and is not matched by any other Australian literary magazine. The wide range of its readership reflects this particular blend, which could not be maintained if we were forced into amalgamation, and which could be lost entirely, under the current economies of publishing and distribution, were subsidies to be curtailed. Its combination of the creative and the scholarly provides a basis for venturing into multimedia publishing, a form we are currently investigating, but this would be as a complement to our present activities. It is not a substitute for them, and could not be attempted without the present print activities and organisation.

The suggestion that the Board should fund "large distribution magazines" through contributors' fees is distasteful. By definition, these journals already have the capacity to fund distribution, and therefore to pay professional rates to contributors. If they do not now do so, it is because creative writing does not fit their editorial policies. If they were to be subsidised to publish some, it would have to be tailored to fit existing policies, and would therefore exclude the new, the innovative, the shocking and the challenging writing that can at

present find a place in the little magazines.

The problem with poetry, and with finding a place for newer and experimental writing, is that these writers on the whole do not have money to pay for journals, and write for a similar audience. Overland meets their needs, as well as by publishing their work, by reading some 3000 poems a year, by providing editorial advice to many of these contributors, and by supporting readings through the distribution of free copies. As a consequence, we have a wide readership in poetry reading venues, particular in Melbourne, and among those who frequent them, but this readership does not appear in our sales analysis.

There is a whole literature on the role of literary criticism and literary journalism -- see, for example, Ken Stewart in ALS, May, 1993 -- which I am unable to go into here. In brief, however, I would argue that a healthy body of criticism and reviewing is a necessary condition of a healthy literature, that, as with every other form of writing, it requires a great diversity of outlets, and that some of the best of it will continue to be published alongside the other genres of writing, including the literary essay that Overland has been promoting.

Australian literary magazines have always promoted new writing, and continue to do so. Among writers to whom Overland has offered publication while they have still been unknown have been Georgia Savage, Peter Carey, James McQueen, Eric Beach, Fiona McGregor, Danny Calegari, Rosaleen Love, Jurate Sasnaitis, Odette Snellen, Dorothy Porter, Michael Crane, Andy Kissane, Shane McCauley, Peter Murphy, Tom Petsinis, David Reiter and Amanda Wilson. Some of these have gone on to fame; others have published their first books, and still others are still establishing themselves.

In the present state of public institutions, there are virtually no other avenues of support for literary magazines, other than volunteer labour. Advertisers are not interested in small audiences, universities have no spare resources and are being pushed towards managerial efficiency rather than cultural development, state governments have competing claims on their resources. Fundamentally, the problem of the Literature Board is that, compared with other art forms, too little support is available for all forms of literature. It seems that as a minimum the Board's funds should be increased to allow full professional support for the major magazines, as is done with theatre companies. This support should allow proper payment to contributors and editors, just as actors and directors receive professional payments. An incidental advantage would be that the journals could then provide an alternative form of support, through contributors' fees, for younger writers and others who have not been able to qualify for direct grants.

The Board needs also to address the major problems confronting all the journals -- distribution and publicity. By working with other government cultural institutions, such as the ABC and SBS, it could generate a publicity program for funded publications similar to that provided for ABC publications -- this alone could increase the circulation of journals by several hundred percent. It could also work with the AGPS and ABC to provide a national system of distribution that would at least ensure that subsidised publications were available in all AGPS and ABC shops.

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